

## 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*

### Anacrusis

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-Aristotleian 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*<sup>1</sup>

she enters briefly from the wings

crazed murderess

with a phobia for cleanliness

and a gift for birthing

she is present in the water

as mother Amazon who is nurtured by her children:

*this mother of rivers has thousands of rivers for mothers*<sup>2</sup>

but she is no warrior

has no partner

no mate

alone

a ghostly after-

image

a forgotten shadow

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<sup>3</sup>*

Vision  
*in their sharp loveliness  
like lovers to follow*

but in these callings her tongue is fixed

when she opens her mouth the wings of song

*fly away*

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

Antigone is agoraphobic in a postscript

as an afterthought

while even cursèd Creon is namelessly remembered

where is electrifying Electra in her murderous rage?

Clytemnestra?

off stage

awaiting the scis sors 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  
from their fragmentary pages

of that other philosophy  
of attraction and repulsion

who sing of love  
through the margins of

silence

listen:

*I say that whatever one loves is<sup>4</sup>*

Sappho sings softly  
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

not a warble of song





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 ?<sup>8</sup>)*  
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...<sup>9</sup>*

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



these

spaces

punctuate

her words

like

sparks

she is                    i   n   a   r   t   i   c   u   l   a   t   e

she is                    sev

ered

*from the well-springs of eloquence*

*but not from the sources of meaning<sup>11</sup>*

she is

here

Listening



## 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.

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