TRANSLATION, ORALITY AND THE HUMANITIES: ROBERT BRINGHURST AND HAIDA POETRY

LEONOR MARÍA MARTÍNEZ SERRANO
Universidad de Córdoba

RESUMEN

En septiembre de 1900 el lingüista y etnógrafo John Reed Swanton llegó a Haida Gwaii, un archipiélago situado frente a las costas del noroeste de Canadá, con la intención de aprender cuanto estuviese en su mano sobre los haida, el pueblo indígena de aquellas islas, sobre su cultura y organización social, sus tradiciones, lengua y manifestaciones artísticas. Lo que no esperaba encontrarse era el magnífico corpus de una literatura oral cuyos autores fueron víctimas de un holocausto desencadenado por la llegada de los europeos a sus tierras, armados de la viruela y las paperas, la pólvora y una indecible avaricia colonizadora. De septiembre de 1900 a agosto de 1901, Swanton no hizo otra cosa que transcribir un total de 250 historias y canciones que le narraron o cantaron algunos de los contadores de mitos más brillantes. A comienzos de la década de los ochenta, el poeta, traductor, tipógrafo, filósofo, lingüista e historiador cultural Robert Bringhurst se propuso la doble tarea de aprender haida como lengua literaria y vindicar el preciado valor de una literatura oral que es comparable a las grandes literaturas de todo el mundo. Durante años, Bringhurst trabajó incansablemente con manuscritos antiguos custodiados en distintas bibliotecas para tratar de aunar los restos de una literatura oral magistral. Su fuerzo sostenido en el tiempo culminó en la publicación de una ambiciosa trilogía que constaba de un extenso volumen introductorio acerca de la literatura haida clásica y de dos volúmenes más que reunían sus traducciones de lo mejor de la obra de Ghandl y Skaay, respectivamente. Este ensayo explora la fascinante historia de varios hombres irrepetibles que coincidieron con tanta fortuna en el tiempo y en el espacio, así como el pensamiento crítico del propio Bringhurst acerca de la traducción y del valor intrínseco e innegable de las literaturas orales, al tiempo que analiza

el papel esencial que desempeña la traducción como práctica cultural que salva abismos entre las distintas comunidades humanas de la Tierra. Como tal, la traducción es una parte fundamental de las denominadas Humanidades, que están llamadas a jugar un rol primordial en la construcción de una ciudadanía responsable, políglota y cosmopolita en los albores del siglo XXI.

Palabras clave: Robert Bringhurst, Ghandl, John Reed Swanton, literatura oral haida, literaturas orales de Norteamérica, Humanidades, traducción.

ABSTRACT

In September 1900 a linguist and ethnographer called John Reed Swanton arrived in Haida Gwaii, an archipelago off the Northwest coast of Canada. He planned to stay in these islands for a time, learning as much as he could about the Haida, the population native to the place, their culture and social organization, their traditions, language and art forms. What he did not expect to find was an impressive body of oral literature whose authors were the victims of a holocaust brought about by Europeans' measles and smallpox, gunpowder and colonial avarice. From September 1900 to August 1901 Swanton did nothing but transcribe a corpus of roughly 250 narratives and songs that were told or sung to him by some of the finest Haida mythtellers. In the early 1980s Canadian poet, translator, philosopher, linguist, typographer and cultural historian Robert Bringhurst set himself the task of learning Haida as a literary language and to vindicate the precious value of an oral literature that is on a par with the great literatures from all over the world. For many years Bringhurst worked on century-old manuscripts in a number of libraries, trying to collect and fully understand the remnants of a superb oral literature. His sustained effort over time culminated in the publication of an ambitious Haida trilogy, consisting of a book-length introduction to Classical Haida literature, and two more volumes containing the English translation of the best work by Ghandl and Skaay. This paper explores the fascinating story of several unique men who fruitfully collided in time and in space, as well as Bringhurst's own critical thinking about translation and the value inherent in oral literatures, while not forgetting the essential role translation plays as a cultural practice aimed at bridging the abyss between human communities across the globe. Translation is an essential part of the so-called Humanities, which are called on to play a decisive role in the construction of a truly responsible, plurilingual, cosmopolitan citizenship in the 21st century.

Keywords: Robert Bringhurst, Ghandl, John Reed Swanton, Haida oral literature, native American oral literatures, Humanities, translation.

1. THE UNSTOPPABLE STILLNESS OF WISDOM: LISTENING TO OUR ANCESTORS

Communication is a universal and irresistible compulsion. As man is *homo loquens* and a symbolical creature, human beings have never stopped trying to apprehend the sense hidden beneath every little thing around them. Since ancient times, communication has been *multimodal*, which is to say that it takes place in a wide range of manners, both verbal and non-verbal, because human beings are *standing signifiers*, or signs from which sense springs into a world populated by things and objects that seek to mean something too. In the early days of the 21st century, in a plurilingual and multicultural world, the nature of human communication is of an unprecedented complexity, for we live in the so-called Knowledge Society, where the construction of knowledge is a collective enterprise and a never-ending work in progress of cosmic proportions. And speech – and languages as its natural embodiment – is the *corpus* or body of human knowledge. However, knowledge finds embodiments other than languages. Paths as different as art, science, politics or love lead us to knowledge and to truth, or so claims French philosopher Alain Badiou in his *Manifeste pour la philosophie*[1] and *Deuxième manifeste pour la philosophie*. We spend our lives communicating ideas and thoughts, findings and brilliant insights, feelings and universal emotions, trying to make sense of our experience of reality, as well as of the human and nonhuman beings living in it.

In this wider sociological context, translation as a cultural practice is called on to play a crucial role in the construction and transmission of knowledge at a global scale. Thus, this paper deals with the role of literary translation and its relationship with the Humanities and with orality, as embodied in the work of Canadian poet, translator, philosopher, linguist, typographer and cultural historian Robert Bringhurst. Disregarding the traditional boundaries separating academic disciplines, Bringhurst has studied the literatures of the native peoples of North America and has translated Haida poetry, following the teachings of his Modernist master, Ezra Pound, who also translated works from Greek, Latin, Provençal and Chinese. In his ground-breaking volume *Nine Visits to the Mythworld. Ghandl of*

the Qayahl Llaanas (2000), Robert Bringhurst translated into English nine stories by Ghandl of the Qayahl Llaanas, a Haida poet who lived in Qaysun, in Haida Gwaii, an archipelago off the coast of British Columbia, in the second half of the 19th century. Like Homer a handful of centuries earlier, in 1900 the blind mythteller Ghandl dictated a series of narrative poems to linguist John Reed Swanton and his Haida bilingual colleague Henry Moody. Moody listened and repeated what Ghandl said word for word, so as to give Swanton enough time to record the mythteller's performance in writing. These poems were forgotten for a long time, until Robert Bringhurst rescued them from oblivion and translated them into English so as to widen the limits of the literary canon. In actual fact, Bringhurst vindicates the immense, precious legacy of the oral literatures of North America, as well as the literary mastery and artistry of poets who preserved the uniqueness of their now largely extinct indigenous cultures to the benefit of posterity. It was all made possible by the patient effort of linguists and anthropologists sensitive to the deep knowledge embodied in mythological stories that were superb, well-wrought works of art.

Like *Gilgamesh*, the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey* or *Beowulf*, like Giotto's frescoes or J. S. Bach's fugues, Ghandl's stories are part of a timeless and endless constellation of works of the human spirit that shed light on our experience of the world and our place in it. In the 21st century, an age when we are to cope with the challenges of multimodal communication, in the face of the immediacy of the so-called new information and communication technologies, it makes perfect sense to listen to the distant voices of ancestors who wrote nothing and whose very words were recorded or transcribed by linguists and anthropologists who were well aware of the transcendental value of myths that illuminated areas of reality that reason could not grasp at all. Hence, the objectives of this paper are: (1) to demonstrate that one of the greatest and most fascinating challenges translation is being faced with nowadays as a cultural practice that bridges the abyss separating cultures is precisely to rescue a huge corpus of texts from the native oral literatures of North America, which are to be carefully edited and translated into other languages in the European context, thoroughly studied and valued *per se* as an essential part of a

multilingual *Weltliteratur*, (2) to analyze Robert Bringhurst's own critical thinking about translation and the oral literatures of North America in such seminal works as the monumental *A Story as Sharp as a Knife: The Classical Haida Mythtellers and Their World* (1999) and the essays "Native American Oral Literatures and the Unity of the Humanities", "Prosodies of Meaning: Literary Form in Native North America", "Jumping from a Train: How and Why to Read a Work of Oral Haida Literature" and "The Humanity of Speaking: The Place of the Individual in the Making of Oral Culture", and (3) to briefly look at Bringhurst's contribution as a translator of Haida poetry, most specifically at his translation of Ghandl's poem "In His Father's Village, Someone Was Just About to Go Out Hunting Birds", included in *Nine Visits to the Mythworld*, as a prototypical example of Haida mythology and of Bringhurst's masterly command of translation. The final result will be a demonstration that the oral literatures of North America are worthy of attention, that they should be translated, edited and studied in the European context, and that literary translation is to play a decisive role in highlighting the intimate connection between such oral literatures and the so-called Humanities.

2. A STORY AS SHARP AS A KNIFE: HOW CLASSICAL HAIDA LITERATURE GOT TO BE PRESERVED

Canadian poet, philosopher, linguist, translator, typographer and cultural historian Robert Bringhurst knows what it means to make the most of the linguistic resources of the English language to efficiently convey relevant messages to humankind with utmost simplicity and profundity of thought. Some 600 years after the Renaissance, which represents a true peak of creativity in the progression of the imagination, Robert Bringhurst is the true embodiment of a humanist. He knows how to pursue creative writing, literary criticism and deep thinking with intellectual integrity, honesty and rigour. A consummate orator, Bringhurst is also the author of a prolific work that encompasses poetry, translation and essays on a whole array of topics. Among his main interests are not just poetry and language, but also the oral literatures of the First Nations of North America, the Pre-

Socratics and Oriental philosophers, and typography, which he eloquently defines as being "the sound of one hand speaking, vivid in the mind's eye, vivid in the mind's ear, and silent as a prayer."[2]

The origins of Bringhurst's life-long passion for Haida literature must be traced back to the early 1980s, when he met Bill Reid, a Haida master artist with whom he would produce an impressive collection of Haida myths entitled *The Raven Steals the Light* (1984), a set of stories on Raven, the widespread trickster figure that is at the very centre of indigenous mythologies along the Northwest Coast. He started learning Haida as a literary language[3] under his own steam in 1982, making his own dictionary, and since then his translations of Haida oral poetry have appeared in major scholarly journals and in Brian Swann's groundbreaking anthology *Coming to Light: Contemporary Translations of the Native Literatures of North America* (1994). But, why should a poet of cosmopolitan, European and classical vocation take an interest in the poetry of a culture on the verge of extinction in a remote corner of the world, far away from common civilization? Why should he take the trouble to learn, and, what is more, to master, an isolated language (which constitutes a family all its own) of which there are few native speakers left and translate its oral texts into beautifully-wrought poems in English? I have got the hunch that it was the intellectual integrity, the mythological stamina, the lyric honesty, the philosophical outlook upon reality and the non-anthropocentric worldview embraced by the Haida that attracted Bringhurst's attention to this little corner of the world.[4] After all, any place on Earth might serve as the centre of the universe. On the remoteness of Haida Gwaii, Bringhurst says that "it is not remote at all. In fact, like every place where birds sing and people pause to listen and a storyteller speaks, it is the center of the world."[5]

The Haida world is an archipelago a hundred miles off the coasts of British Columbia and Alaska. According to modern cartography, these islands are called the Queen Charlotte Islands, but nowadays the English-speaking Haida call them Haida Gwaii, the Islands of the People. In classical Haida they were called "Xhaaydla Gwaayaay", the Islands on the Boundary between Worlds.[6] They are a tangle of vast sky, blue sea and rugged earth populated by flora and fauna

indigenous to this part of our Earth.[7] For a thousand years or more, before the Europeans arrived in the New World, a great culture flourished in these islands. Upon closer inspection, the range of Classical Haida literature is simply amazing: it comprises tiny jewel-like poems by master songmakers and also complex mythic cycles by master mythtellers lasting many hours. We should be grateful for the simple fact that many of these songs and stories were recorded by one man called John Reed Swanton from September 1900 to August 1901. About a hundred years later, poet and linguist Robert Bringhurst, a lover of everything human, came along to bring these works to life in the English language and set them in the broader context of native American oral literatures and the mythtelling traditions around the globe. In actual fact, Bringhurst has worked for many years on these century-old manuscripts, which have been waiting – silently forgotten in American libraries[8] – for the broad recognition they deserve. Classical Haida literature belongs precisely where Bringhurst himself sees it: among the great traditions of the world, for the Haida mythic cycles are comparable to the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey*, *Gilgamesh*, *Beowulf* or *Poema de Mío Cid*. It is a rich and powerful tradition that the world has long ignored, and undeservedly so, as it has much to teach of value to humankind. Let us return to the beginning, though, for this is truly *a story as sharp as a knife*, as Bringhurst's book testifies. *A Story as Sharp as a Knife: The Classical Haida Mythtellers and Their World* (1999), the first book in an ambitious trilogy, is indeed another gigantic accomplishment by one man and a major work of scholarly research on the entire body of Classical Haida literature. Volumes 2 and 3 in the trilogy are translations of the best work by Ghandl and Skaay, the finest poets Swanton met over a century ago.

On 25 September 1900, John Reed Swanton, a 27-year-old linguist and ethnographer with a fresh Doctorate from the University of Harvard and a bundle of instructions from his mentor, the renowned American anthropologist Franz Boas, arrived in Haida Gwaii, planning to stay half a year to learn as much as he could about the Haida language, Haida life, thought and social structure, and to acquire certain artworks and objects of anthropological interest for the American Museum of Anthropology. He found himself "confronted by great art, great devastation and great literature. His teacher had

forewarned him to expect the devastation and the visual art as well. It was the literature that took him by surprise."[9] He was determined to listen to and record one of the world's richer classical literatures, embodying one of the world's great mythologies. From the autumn of 1900 through the summer of 1901 he took dictation from the last great Haida-speaking storytellers, poets and historians. His Haida hosts and colleagues had been raised in a wholly oral world where the mythic and the personal interpenetrate completely. They joined forces with their visitor, consciously creating a great treasury of Haida oral literature in written form. Swanton's stay in Haida Gwaii was a genuine turning point in his life indeed. Thus, "for three and a half years he did nothing but transcribe, translate and study Haida mythtexts, stories, histories and songs."[10] From the outset, Swanton had a strong sense of mission, a passionate calling about what he was doing, and the determination to transcribe as many oral narratives as possible in such a short space of time. As Robert Bringhurst himself points out, "Everything we have in the way of Classical Haida literature comes through the transcriptions of one man. […] It is one specific phase of one specific oral literature, shrunk now to only about 40,000 lines of written text."[11]

When Swanton arrived in Haida Gwaii, the traditional way of living of the Haida had undergone profound changes: they lived in two mission villages (Skidegate and Masset), as the several dozen villages of the past were now vacant sites facing the immensity of the Pacific Ocean. The Europeans had been visiting the islands for more than a century and had caused much havoc and destruction. They were more interested in taking things from the Haida or in changing them according to European standards than in learning from them. They brought to the islands the Bible, money and gunpowder, but also European diseases such as smallpox and measles, influenza and typhoid, which took more than 90% of the Haida population over the course of the 19th century.[12] Unlike such barbarians, Swanton, a small and attentive man, was willing to listen to the Haida mythtellers and songmakers, and he put all his energy into transcribing a whole oral literature that he sensed from the very start was one of astonishing artistry and intellectual complexity. The world he was intent on interrogating was largely intangible now: "The world he was seeking

was the real world of Haida memory and imagination. Swanton was not wrong in thinking he would find this world more vividly alive in Haida art and oral literature than in mission-village routine."[13] And evidently he was perfectly equipped to fulfill his mission, as he had the right training, the passion, the time and the patience for taking dictation and transcribing the corpus of texts that nowadays makes up Classical Haida literature. In August 1901, when leaving Haida Gwaii, "he had filled over three thousand pages of field notebooks with the texts of Haida songs and stories. He spent the next two years typing up those Haida texts and refining the English translations. In 1905, he published English versions of all the stories he'd heard at Skidegate – over seventy in all, told by fourteen different people."[14]

3. THE CANON OF CLASSICAL HAIDA LITERATURE: POETRY, MYTH AND NOETIC PROSODY

All literature is oral at its root.[15] We read classics because they still *speak* to us in spite of the relentless passage of time. Classical Haida literature is oral by definition, and so translation has to cope with evident constraints that are hard to wade around. In the composition of his monumental Haida trilogy, Bringhurst set himself the two-fold task of creating three impressive books "in homage to the intellectual richness of a world where no written books exist"[16] and of understanding "how myths think themselves in people and how people think themselves in myths."[17] Therefore, from the very outset Bringhurst, an accomplished typographer himself, insists on the supremacy of the spoken word, the live performance of mythic cycles on the part of the Haida mythtellers, which is now lost for good: "All classical Haida literature is oral. By definition, therefore, it is something printed books cannot contain. […] Every healthy, living culture holds its stories to heart, and so *the book*, in the fundamental yet intangible sense, is a cultural universal."[18]

Classical Haida literature is on a par with the great literatures worldwide, Bringhurst says. They are part of the gigantic legacy humanity has been treasuring around the globe and over time. Bringhurst himself reminds us of a fundamental fact: "It remains the

case that all human languages are related – and all human literatures too – because all human beings are related; and all human languages are born, bear their fruit and die in the minds and mouths of human beings."[19] The size of the human mind is endless; and the mind, like speech, resembles a forest where complex interrelationships are set up among its elements. The mind is made out of all the human and nonhuman beings, living or inert, that populate the Earth, but also out of all the ideas, thoughts, feelings, emotions and perceptions it has nourished within itself when confronted with the world at large. Bringhurst puts it in a lucid manner:

> Every language and its literature – written or oral – is also a world, linked to other worlds, of which the speakers of that language are often unaware. Every language and its literature form an intellectual bioregion, an ecosystem of ideas and perceptions, a watershed of thought. The several hundred oral literatures indigenous to North America – though constantly remade in the mouths of oral poets and new to every listener who comes from somewhere else – are parts of the old-growth forest of the human mind.[20]

The complete preserved *intellectual bioregion* or body of Classical Haida literature consists of roughly 250 narratives and songs that Swanton transcribed during a single year, first in Skidegate and then in Masset. To be more precise, during five months at Skidegate Mission he managed to transcribe about 60 narratives from a dozen mythtellers, and more than 50 short songs from an unknown number of singers. At Masset Mission, he transcribed 90 more stories told by five storytellers and transcribed another 50 songs. As to the songs, he could not record the music, but he did at least transcribe the lyrics the best he could, armed as he was only with pencil and paper. The finest authors he recorded in Skidegate were the blind poet Ghandl and the crippled Skaay – visionary men and outsiders in their own world –, but there were others of lesser skill or with a smaller corpus, such as Sghiidagits, Sghaagya, Gumsiiwa, Tlaajang Quuna, Xhaaydakuns, Kilxhawgins and Xhyuu.[21] In Masset he listened to two more major mythtellers, Kingagwaaw and Haayas, and to other minor authors too. All of them were individual artists, irreplaceable human beings conscious of their art, endowed with a personal style and an

astonishing command of the art of mythtelling and storytelling. Even if Swanton could not understand the words he was taking down at the beginning, he was well aware of the singularity and idiosyncrasy of the individual artists that were performing their poems for him to record.[22]

What is even more interesting is that there are no signs of authorial self-importance in these mythological stories and narrative poems, as if the authors themselves were willing to efface their presence and let the world shine in all its splendor. Like classical authors from other literary traditions, capable of going beyond the spatio-temporal constraints on their works, Haida artists are "more interested in what they can perceive than in perceptions they create. They ask not *Who am I?* but *What is this?*"[23] It is the world as a whole that Haida literature is all about and, as such, it is simply inexhaustible, for there is no end to the world or to its capacity to surprise us. Haida poets and mythtellers all seem to speak a language of utter and beautiful simplicity, devoid of unnecessary ornamentation, pervaded by an intrinsic musicality which is based on patterns of thought rather than on patterns of sound. However, there is an important gap in the whole corpus of texts that Swanton recorded: he did not transcribe any narrative poems or stories told by a woman; all his informants were men. If he had, we would now have a different picture of Classical Haida literature.[24] And yet, Swanton did what he had to do: he recorded what the poets actually said, the actual words they uttered; he preserved the original texts, and we must be thankful for that gesture.[25]

According to Robert Bringhurst, the whole corpus of classical Haida literature falls into several distinct categories. The three main literary genres are as follows: (1) *qqaygaang* or myths, which constitute the primary genre, featuring dogfish, whales and geese, shamans and spirit beings, and humans living at the interface between sea, forest and sky (Skaay and Ghandl loved to weave individual myths into rich tapestries, larger compositions or cycles lasting several hours); (2) *qqayaagaang* or traditions, which are prototypically traditional stories of families or lineages, "frequently recording the formation of bonds between ancestors and places";[26] and (3) *gyaahlghalang* or historical or personal accounts of adventures and

notable events, often involving disputes, raids or wars. Haida authors were aware of the distinction between *mythtime* and *historical time*, and of the fact that the former surrounds the latter. In this respect, Bringhurst, who has written an enlightening broadside entitled *First Meditation on Time* (2008), draws a most interesting distinction between *wild time* and *domesticated time*:

> Mythtime is wild time; historical time is domesticated time. Ghandl, as a trained and skillful mythteller, is well acquainted with both. He also knows that mythtime surrounds historical time, much the way the forest and the ocean and the sky surround the village or the camp. *Wild* does not, of course, mean *disordered*. It means *ecologically ordered*: self-sustaining, alive and quite independent of human control.[27]

One of the most outstanding features of Haida Classical literature is what Bringhurst calls *noetic prosody*. In Haida poems, patterns are made of ideas and of images, and only secondarily of sounds. This is *noetic prosody*: a prosody based on potent patterns made of thought or vision, rather than patterns of sound. These are primarily semantic or conceptual patterns rather than acoustic patterns. "This is music of the mind more than music of the ear. This priority of imagery and syntax over sound is typical of classical Haida literature. It is typical, in fact, of the literature of hunting and gathering peoples all throughout the world."[28] Haida poems are thus a kind of *free verse* or *associative prose* in which, if we know how to listen with care, we will hear "the silent music of their images and themes."[29] They contain fractal patterns like the ones one is likely to find in the real world (in trees, minerals or snowflakes), because Haida literature is ultimately concerned with looking intently at that real world, not at the subjective geographies of the self. And the patterns are fractal in the sense that "they repeat at varying scales" and are "something like the nervous system of the story. Branching and rebranching as they do, they multiply the story's information-bearing capacity."[30] At any rate, in his rendering into English of the Haida narratives, Bringhurst chooses the verse line as the primary unit of thought. Each line in his translation corresponds to a clause, and each clause normally coincides with a verb in the original Haida text. And yet, faithfully

imitating the Haida patterns in English is impossible, for Haida verbs are of extreme complexity. There is no way of capturing "the shifting cantus firmus of the breath" and there is no typographic notation that "can represent the web of language fully" or the *patterned movement of thought* that is part of the essence of Haida oral poetry.[31]

From a thematic point of view, many of the 150 narratives transcribed by Swanton dwell on *the shape and structure of the universe*. The world as a whole is the real subject matter of Classical Haida literature, and the world always remains larger and more sublime than whatever literature may manage to say about it. According to Bringhurst, "The subject of classical Native American literature is nothing more or less than the nature of the world. It is a literature concerned with fundamental questions. At its best, it is as nourishing and beautiful and wise as any poetry that exists."[32] Music and deep thought appear to coalesce in Haida literature, but the language used by the master mythtellers is always one of utter simplicity and elegance, of objectivity and austerity, of gnomic beauty and lyric cadence. Bringhurst says:

> In many of these stories, we meet a repeating cast of characters: […] the Raven, Voicehandler, Sea Dweller, Fairweather Woman… […] The breadth and depth of thought in those stories is enormous. But this thought is almost always expressed in terse and concrete terms. It takes the form of images and events which can be painted, carved or danced as well as spoken.[33]

There is deep philosophical thinking going on in Classical Haida literature. Like language, philosophy and poetry are human universals.[34] Myth is, in fact, the Haida mode of thinking and unveiling the inner logic of the world. Like scientists, mythtellers seek "to elucidate the structure and workings of the world. Myths are stories that investigate the nature of the world" and a genuine mythology is "a kind of science in narrative form."[35] Knowing and mythtelling go hand in hand in the traditional Haida world. Far from being a frozen monolith or a fixed body of stories, a mythology is an open set, "a narrative ecology: a watershed, a forest, a community of stories that are born and die and breed with one another and with

stories from the outside."[36] And this accounts for the fact that there are no canonical versions of the stories, as well as for the constant metamorphosis that stories undergo in wholly oral cultures, where there appears to be a reservoir of themes and motifs, characters and plots, which are revisited time and again by the unique voices of unique mythtellers who think them and tell them differently depending on changing circumstances. Hence, the vital role of individual creativity cannot be underestimated in the context of Native American literatures, where there are major works of art, major voices and an undeniable tradition from which individual artists draw inspiration to make their own poems, narratives and songs. To put it differently, anonymity is not inherent in oral tradition.

4. GHANDL: LOST LOVE AND THE MUTABILITY OF JOY

Ghandl of the Qayahl Llanas of Qaysun was one of the two finest mythtellers Swanton listened to in Skidegate in 1900. Ghandl means *creek water* or *spring water*,[37] though he was baptized and given a Christian name (Walter McGregor) by a Methodist missionary. He was born in Qaysun Llanagaay, or Sealion Town, around 1851, and he belonged to "a family called the Qayahl Llaanas, the Sealion People, of the Eagle side or moiety. Because inheritance is matrilineal in the Haida world, all children, male and female, take the family name of their mother."[38] Obviously, his father belonged to a family of the Raven side, but Ghandl himself was an Eagle. About 1875, Ghandl and his people had to leave their village after a series of smallpox epidemics had caused many deaths in Haida Gwaii. They moved first to Xayna and then, in the 1890s, "after more bouts of smallpox, measles and other disease", to Skidegate, a mission town "displacing the old Haida village of Hlghagilda."[39] Before moving to Skidegate, a bout of smallpox or measles cost Ghandl his sight in early manhood. The curious thing is that Swanton never mentions this important fact. From that point in time on, he could not pursue any of the traditional professions a male Haida was expected to pursue, such as fishing, hunting, trading or woodworking, but he had astounding skills as an oral poet. He possessed an extraordinary, beautiful mind. So much so

that, amid so much death and destruction, he was able to collect the remnants of his culture and rebuild a civilization. He used Swanton's skills as a listener and as a writer to keep a record of his mythic understanding of the world for the sake of posterity. What we get from his work is a fragmentary glimpse of his vision of the universe, a mind at work, weaving a reservoir of themes and motifs, characters and plots, that constitute the whole of Haida mythology. In actual fact, myth is the dominant genre in Classical Haida literature:

> The largest and most complex works of classical Haida literature belong to a genre known as *qqaygaang*. [...] The word is often rendered in English as *story*, *myth* or *tale*. [...] Like all works of literature, the *qqaygaang* are constructed from inherited materials and filled with shared ideas, but they are made, in every case, by individuals. How they are built is a matter of personal skill and sensitivity and style. The best transcriptions that we have of classical Haida myth [...] are works of art, like the finest pieces of Haida weaving, painting and sculpture. The *qqaygaang* are what people fond of literature call oral narrative poems.[40]

Like Homer, Ghandl could not write or read, as he lived in a wholly oral tradition, and he was sightless, an outcast or an outsider within his own community. He was an accomplished author of extreme artistry and sensibility, though. Bringhurst admits that he ignores why Ghandl has not "been adopted with full honors into the polylingual canon of North American literary history" and insists that he knows of "no one writing in any language, anywhere in North America toward the end of the nineteenth century, who uses words with greater sensitivity and skill." Ghandl is, in short, "a figure of durable importance in the history of literature."[41] About 5,000 lines of his poetry have survived thanks to Swanton's painstaking and patient transcription. Ghandl spent about three weeks in November 1900 dictating his literary legacy to this avid, quiet listener, and to his bilingual colleague Henry Moody, working six hours a day, six days a week. Moody[42] listened to the master mythteller and repeated his words in the pauses, giving Swanton enough time to transcribe what he heard in accurate phonetic script. Then both Swanton and Moody would go over the transcripts word by word to make a literal interlinear translation. The whole process was time-consuming, but not without its rewards.[43] Most importantly, they managed to preserve

the actual words that Ghandl uttered at that moment in time – words of beauty and lasting literary value.

Ghandl's finest work (an oeuvre consisting of 12 stories) is translated into English in Bringhurst's *Nine Visits to the Mythworld*, an impressive collection of nine stories, eight of which are myths or narrative poems set in mythtime.[44] A myth is "a richly complex piece of knowledge, like a theorem or a language or a genome"[45] and also "a way of honouring time and the world, and not a device with which to synthesize or replace them."[46] What myths do is precisely interrogate and celebrate the world, not the self and its subjective idiosyncrasies. One of them is precisely "In His Father's Village, Someone Was Just About to Go Out Hunting Birds", an ancient story which seems to be part of the human gene pool worldwide. These are the opening lines in Bringhurst's rendering of a story in which a man marries a creature that looks like a woman to him because she has taken off her goose skin:

> There was a child of good family, they say.
> He wore two marten-skin blankets.
> After he took up the shooting of birds,
> he went inland, uphill from the village, they say.
>
> Going through the pines,
> just to where the ponds lay,
> he heard geese calling.
> Then he went in that direction.
>
> There were two women bathing in a lake.
> Something lay there on the shore.
> Two goose skins were thrown over it.
> Under their tails were patches of white.
>
> After watching for a while,
> he swooped in.
> He sat on the two skins.
> The women asked to have them back.
>
> He asked the better-looking one to marry him.
> The other one replied.

"Don't marry my younger sister.
I am smarter. Marry me."[47]

This is the beginning of the Swan Maiden tale, a widely travelled story that might be 100,000 years old and is found under a number of disguises or incarnations in hundreds of human languages and cultural traditions around the world. It is the story of a bird hunter who falls in love with a woman who is herself a bird. It is a poignant story of lost love and a tale of transformation: a goose is transposed to a woman and a man is transposed to a seagull. The plot is simple enough to be summarized in schematic form. In the opening lines of Ghandl's narrative, a young man wearing two marten-skin blankets who is the son of a village headman goes out hunting birds, which in the Haida world entails going on a vision quest or undergoing a rite of passage. He hears two geese calling and, to his surprise, he discovers two goose girls bathing in a lake who have left their goose skins on the shore. He asks the younger sister to marry him in return for her goose skin. At last he wins the supernatural maiden for wife and takes her to his village. She refuses to eat human food, so at night she puts on her skin and flies away to find appropriate goose food by the sea. The people in the village nearly starve, but the goose wife's father sends them goose food from up above. She is insulted by the village people because she will not eat human food and so she reluctantly abandons her husband. The husband goes on quest for her, follows her into the sky, but the path is long and perilous. On his way to the sky, the young man will have to climb a gigantic pole, wear a mouse skin, and encounter several helpers along the way (Lice Man, Mouse Woman, a woman holding up the mountains of the Islands on the Boundary between Worlds, Half Man spearing salmon in the river, and two old men chopping firewood). They are reunited for a while, but the son of the human village headman is homesick, dislikes the place and decides to return home. At the end of the story, the young man who reached too far is brought back to earth by Raven, a common trickster figure in Northwest Coast mythology. Back on earth, the son of the village headman becomes a squawking seagull. The pattern of winning, losing and regaining the wife is thus completed, but the hero's metamorphosis into a seagull comes as something of a shock.

As an ending, it keeps resonating in the echo-chamber of our minds for the rest of time.

As Gary Snyder explains in his book-length essay *He Who Hunted Birds in His Father's Village. The Dimensions of a Haida Myth*, the marriage of men to animals or supernatural beings is a common theme in Haida mythology: "numerous Haida myths recount marriages of human beings with supernatural or animal people."[48] In actual fact,

> The Haida believe both animals and people had souls, which were essentially the same. The bodies of different animals were merely their "canoes" and all were capable of assuming other forms at will; "or better, they possessed a human form, and assumed their other forms when consorting with men." The killer whales were believed to be the most powerful of all living beings, inhabiting villages under the sea. There were, in this fashion, sea-otter people, salmon people, grizzly people, geese people, etc.[49]

Ghandl's story of a hunter who married a bird he had come to kill is a story on "the mutability of joy"[50] and "a poignant story of love and loss", a story "grounded in a world where perfection is perceived but imperfection rules, and where humans and nonhumans sometimes both want more than they can have."[51] It teaches us that, in the Haida world at least, the world is sacred, that spirit beings are pervasive (in the sea, in the sky and in the forest) and that "man is not the manager and measure of all things."[52] And Ghandl's poem about the man who married a goose and then became himself a seagull is a superb example of spoken music. Bringhurst highlights the existence of notorious symmetries and thematic echoes, as well as a fugal structure in this myth. Although Ghandl spoke his poems, they are musical poems indeed: "It is a work of music built from silent images, sounding down the years. It is a vision painted indelibly in the air with words that disappear the moment they are spoken."[53]

5. NATIVE AMERICAN ORAL LITERATURES AND THE HUMANITIES

Like love, learning is the ultimate vocation of all human beings. This may sound like a truism, but from time to time we need to be reminded that this is the case. The ultimate goal of knowledge is to guarantee the survival of the human species on Earth. In ancient Greece, about 24 centuries ago to be more precise, Aristotle claimed in the opening lines of his *Metaphysics* that all men and women want to know and to understand. He pointed to a basic intellectual necessity that has continued unabated over thousands of years. About three centuries later, somewhere else, in Rome, Seneca affirmed in his treatise *De vita beata* that the true vocation of human beings was the pursuit of happiness, which he defined as being a *cupiditas naturalis* (that is, a natural, inescapable desire). Thus, the true vocation of the human beings from all ages and geographies is to know and to be happy, which is to say to love the world and, by loving it, to understand it and to let themselves be changed by the world. The Humanities play a decisive role in this process of learning to interpret and understand reality.

In 1333, during a journey to Belgium, Petrarch found in the library of Liège a lost manuscript containing a speech by Cicero entitled *Oratio pro Archia* (62 BCE). His defence of Archias was an enlightening essay on the place of the poet in society. It remains a central work in the Western canon, as it is the first Latin text that highlights the personal and social importance of the study of the Humanities as a fundamental tool for the ethical education of human beings. Impressed by the awe-inspiring truth contained in the text, Petrarch did not hesitate to copy it by hand. From that moment in time, Cicero's brief but fascinating text had a decisive impact on the Italian poet's mind. *The bonae litterae* were conceptualized as being a powerful weapon for the ethical fashioning of humans, a means to cultivate a virtuous nature in men and women: learning, knowledge and wisdom made man a more benevolent, noble and sublime creature. The palpitating heart of Cicero's *Pro Archia* is thus a passionate *laudatio humanitatis*, that is to say an enthusiastic apology of humanistic culture, conceived of as being not just mere erudition, but as the genuine cultivation of humanity itself, as the integral (i.e., both intellectual and moral) education of human beings who are capable of the greatest feats in life, to the benefit of themselves and of

others. The implicit message was that he/she who knows what goodness is cannot but be good. This is Socratic thinking. Knowledge is an instrument of ethical fashioning and it leads to the true perfection of human character.

The study of the *bonae litterae* is the most privileged of ways to cultivate the plenitude and self-realization of the *homo humanus* – a human being that is aware of the common shared humanity, of the vulnerability of everything human, and of the sublime nature of everything related to humankind. This is the ideal of the *homo humanus et bonus*, a notion whose origins can be traced back to Socratic thought, and which can also be felt in the philosophical thinking of Seneca, for whom *homo res sacra homini* ('man is a sacred thing to men'), in the philosophical insights of Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations*, which contained a catalogue of the virtues Cicero had called *humanitas* (i.e., modesty, temperance, benevolence, generosity, tolerance, simplicity, obedience to the dictates of nature), and in the thought of the so-called *umanisti*, the humanists guided by Petrarch who were convinced that it is of the essence to cultivate humanity and to teach the human condition. According to Cicero, *humanitas* is defined in his *Oratio pro Archia* as follows: a human person is sensitive to the vulnerability and uniqueness of all human beings, aware of how vulnerable everything we love is. (On the contrary, inhumanity is the loss of our awareness of the human, of humanity itself.) Humanism is the knowledge of our own limits, it is the acknowledgement of our shared vulnerability. It is then much more than simple empathy.

As pointed out at the beginning of this paper, there is a major challenge for 21st-century literary translation: the urgent need to edit, translate and study the oral literatures of North America, as part of the canon of a global *Weltliteratur*, which is plurilingual and part of the heritage of the human species. If the Humanities entail learning to appreciate the intrinsic value of everything human, then literary translation is part of an ambitious enterprise: that of bringing together the scattered pieces of a huge puzzle, which is World Literature, into an organic whole accessible to all human beings around the globe. The study of languages is the palpitating heart of the Humanities, and so

translation as a cultural practice is inextricably linked to the Humanities.

Bringhurst himself is a widely-travelled erudite, a polyglot scholar, a multilingual polymath, and a tireless student of languages. In fact, he has been a lover of human languages all his life. Bearing in mind that he has spent a number of years in the Middle East, Europe, and Latin America, it is not surprising that he should read and translate from half a dozen ancient and modern languages, including Greek, Latin, Chinese, Arabic, French, German, and Spanish. He spent ten years mastering Arabic and, though he refers self-deprecatingly to his "little Greek and less Chinese"[54] he quotes and translates with ease from a wide array of classical and modern languages. As he points out in the prose statement in the foreword to *The Calling: Selected Poems 1970-1995* (1995), he began learning Haida with the further intention, "no matter how preposterous and impossible it might be – to learn all the words and all the grammars of the world." Since then, he has studied the indigenous languages and cultures of North America and learnt other native languages of North America, such as 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. He reads what he calls 'European and even colonial North American poets', but finds more real poetry in the work of biologists and anthropologists, the true poets of today in his view.

It comes as no surprise that Bringhurst should claim that there is an urgent need to learn those languages native to North America in which an oral literature survives in written form. It is a fact that there are a hundred major North American literatures still waiting for recognition, even if, as Bringhurst claims, "any healthy and sustainable human culture in North America has to rest, region by region and watershed by watershed, on indigenous foundations."[55] He knows of about 300 cases of brilliant Native American oral poets "in desperate need of editors, translators, biographers, readers, and once those basic needs are met, even in need of some literary critics."[56]

There is an urgent need to rescue from the mists of undeserved oblivion the oral literatures of the Native American languages:

> Because those literatures are parts of the human heritage, parts of the old-growth forest of the human mind. They came very close to being destroyed, and they are still being roundly ignored, but they're great human achievements. That's enough to make them relevant to every human being. And in North America, they're the indigenous intellectual flora and fauna: the old-growth forest of ideas native to the place. It's as vital to know the stories of your landscape as it is to know which way the river flows and where the sun comes up and where the whirlpools form.[57]

The lessons of the Haida world are relevant to the men and women of today, if only because Haida myths remind us that this is a being-centred, not a man-centred universe, and that the vulnerability of human and nonhuman beings is a shared universal. The finest Haida poet, Skaay, reminds us that "the world is not just a place to live; it is a web of living beings more intelligent and powerful than we are."[58] Haida mythtellers, who spend much more time exploring the connections between humans and non-humans, remind us that Earth is home, the only one we have for the time being, and that humans have much more in common than they might at first think, beyond linguistic and cultural barriers.

NOTES

[1] According to Alain Badiou, a truth 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." *Manifesto for Philosophy*, p. 36.

[2] Robert Bringhurst, *The Typographic Mind*, p. 5.

[3] In a chapbook entitled *On Translating Haida Poetry: An Interview with Robert Bringhurst*, by Thérèse Rigaud, the author dwells on the idea of Haida as being a literary language: "Haida to me is a literary language, like classical Chinese, classical Arabic, classical Greek. All of these are languages I was drawn to by things I found in books, and all of them are languages I've learned in some degree to read. None is a language I've ever learned to speak – or ever tried to learn to speak it." (p. 9)

[4] The corpus of Bringhurst's works devoted to the study of Haida literature and native American oral literatures is impressive in itself: it ranges from *The Raven Steals the Light* (1984), *The Black Canoe: Bill Reid and the Spirit of Haida Gwaii* (1991), *Part of the Land, Part of the Water: A History of the Yukon Indians* (1987), *Solitary Raven: The Selected Writings of Bill Reid* (2000) and *Solitary Raven: The Essential Writings of Bill Reid* (2009), to the monumental Haida trilogy – *A Story as Sharp as a Knife: The Classical Mythtellers and Their World* (1999), *Nine Visits to the Mythworld. Ghandl of the Qayahl Llaanas* (2000) and *Being in Being. The Collected Workds of a Master Haida Mythteller. Skaay of the Qquuna Qiighawaay* (2001) – and such ground-breaking lectures as *Native American Oral Literatures and the Unity of the Humanities* (1998) and *Prosodies of Meaning: Literary Form in Native North America* (2004), and other seminal essays such as "The Humanity of Speaking: The Place of the Individual in the Making of Oral Culture" or "Jumping from the Train: How and Why to Read a Work of Haida Oral Literature", included in *The Tree of Meaning: Thirteen Talks* (2006) and *Everywhere Being Is Dancing: Twenty Pieces of Thinking* (2007), and the limited-edition work *Skaay of the Qquuna Qiighawaay. Siixha / Floating Overhead: The Qquuna Cycle §3.3*, translated from the Haida by Robert Bringhurst (2007).

[5] Robert Bringhurst, *A Story as Sharp as a Knife*, p. 29.

[6] *A Story as Sharp as a Knife*, p. 28.

[7] Bringhurst describes the islands as follows: "Southern Haida Gwaii is an indissoluble tangle of land and sky and sea: in Swanton's words, "a ragged chain of mountains half submerged in the ocean." Northern Haida Gwaii is broad, full of muskeg, low hills and tall Sitka spruce." *A Story as Sharp as a Knife*, p. 340.

[8] As Bringhurst himself explains in *A Story as Sharp as a Knife*, Boas kept Swanton's Haida manuscript for about 40 years in a drawer. After his death, it "was shipped, with a vast number of other papers, to the American Philosophical Society Library, Philadelphia. There it remains – a document potentially as vital – or so I like to think – to the future of North American culture as any classical manuscript in the Marcian Library at Venice or the Laurentian Library at Florence is to the continuing self-renewal of the heritage of Europe. As vital and, of course, just as easy to forget." (pp. 195-196) Somewhere else, in an essay entitled "Jumping from the Train: How and Why to Read a Work of Haida Oral Literature", included in *Everywhere Being Is Dancing. Twenty Pieces of Thinking*, Bringhurst dwells on the same idea: "The best and most intensive work he [Swanton] ever did […] was at the start of his career, during the three years he devoted to studying Haida. He intended to publish his collection of Skidegate Haida stories in full bilingual form. […] In the end, his employer let him down, and most of the stories were published in English only. […] Even so, the Skidegate collection [published as *Haida Texts and Myths, Skidegate Dialect*, Bulletin 29 of the Bureau of American Ethnology] is one of the great books of Native American literature. It is the best book Swanton ever published, and represents only about a quarter of his Haida work as a whole." (p. 333)

[9] *A Story as Sharp as a Knife*, p. 13.
[10] *A Story as Sharp as a Knife*, p. 13.
[11] *A Story as Sharp as a Knife*, pp. 13-14.
[12] Robert Bringhurst gives a detailed account of the lethal impact the arrival of Europeans had on the native population of Haida Gwaii: "Over the course of 19th century smallpox, typhoid, measles, syphilis and gunshot took more than 90% of the Haida population. A century earlier, there were several dozen villages, and perhaps 12,000 Haida altogether. By the time Swanton arrived in Haida Gwaii on 25 September 1900, there were about 700 of them living in the two missions villages, Skidegate and Masset. Later, after visiting all the surviving Haida communities in Canada and Alaska, Swanton put the total at 850. If we add the absentees – Haida who had gone to the cannery towns and south to Vancouver Island in search of jobs – the total still cannot be much above 1000". *A Story as Sharp as a Knife*, p. 69.
[13] *A Story as Sharp as a Knife*, p. 70.
[14] "Jumping from the Train: How and Why to Read a Work of Haida Oral Literature", in *Everywhere Being Is Dancing. Twenty Pieces of Thinking*, pp. 330-331.
[15] Robert Bringhurst, "Native Americal Oral Literatures and the Unity of the Humanities", in *The Tree of Meaning: Thirteen Talks*: "In most written traditions, the oldest works of literature we have are examples of oral transcription. The *Iliad* and *Odyssey* are instances. So are the *Beowulf* and the *Seafarer*, the *Nibelungenlied*, the *Poema del Cid*, the old *Rāmāyana* from India, the *Kojiki* from Japan, the *Shī Jīng* from China, the *Táin Bó Cúailnge* from Ireland. […] Poets in oral traditions, like poets in literate traditions, are individuals with individual styles, tastes, abilities, and interests. Whether we learn their names or not, no two are interchangeable. No two are ever the same." (pp. 68-69) In another important essay entitled "The Humanity of Speaking: The Place of the Individual in the Marking of Oral Culture" (*The Tree of Meaning: Thirteen Talks*), Bringhurst dwells on the same idea: literature lives in the speaking voice and "All literature is oral. […] A transcript of an oral poem never captures the fullness of a living performance tradition." (p. 178) And also: "Literature has nothing necessarily to do with letters or writing. It has to do with *content* and with *voice*. In literature, these two are fused." (p. 182)
[16] *A Story as Sharp as a Knife*, p. 11.
[17] *A Story as Sharp as a Knife*, p. 16.
[18] *A Story as Sharp as a Knife*, p. 14.
[19] *A Story as Sharp as a Knife*, p. 164.
[20] *A Story as Sharp as a Knife*, p. 17.
[21] *A Story as Sharp as a Knife*, p. 209.
[22] *A Story as Sharp as a Knife*, p. 211. The same applies to such great American anthropologists and ethnographers as Edward Sapir, Paul Radin, Thomas Waterman and Melville Jacobs. According to Bringhurst, they "acknowledged no boundary or barrier whatsoever between scientific and humanistic studies, […] rarely wrote a bloodless sentence, and […] knew that their Native American teachers were not

mere "informants" but thinking, feeling, highly individual, and sometimes downright brilliant human beings." See Robert Bringhurst, "Jumping from the Train: How and Why to Read a Work of Haida Oral Literature", in *Everywhere Being Is Dancing. Twenty Pieces of Thinking*, p. 332.

[23] *A Story as Sharp as a Knife*, p. 295. There are here obvious echoes of T. S. Eliot's influential essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1919). Bringhurst praises the "impersonality", objectivity and non-pretentious austerity of Haida poetry, which is more intent on exploring the world than on mapping the subjective geographies of the self.

[24] *A Story as Sharp as a Knife*, p. 204. Bringhurst points out that he can think of "at least thirty Native North American women of literary importance whose works were transcribed, at length, in their own languages, during the intervening century." Ibid., p. 205.

[25] In several of his essays and writings on native American oral literatures, Bringhurst gives a detailed account of how the transcription of oral texts in northern North America has evolved over time. Thus, in "Prosodies of Meaning: Literary Form in Native North America, collected in *The Tree of Meaning: Thirteen Talks*, he outlines three different phases: (1) wordlist phase: "Early European students of Native American languages did two things, as a rule. They collected lists of words – not sentences, just words – […] leaving precious little room for any Native American thinking. Some of them also tried to learn enough vocabulary and grammar to translate songs and stories they'd brought with them – Bible stories and hymns – *into* the languages they were learning." (pp. 211-212); (2) translated-plot-summary phase: "The blind collection of standardized wordlists continued into the twentieth century, but before the end of the nineteenth century, another phase was clearly under way. […] The first Europeans to collect Native North American oral literature were […] generally content to collect translations." (p. 212 and p. 214); and (3) text transcription phase: "That half century – 1890, let us say, to 1939 – was the great age of text transcription in North America. Linguists were taking dictation from Native American oral poets whose worlds, in many cases, had been demolished by colonization but who had grown up in touch with a precolonial tradition. Repeatedly the magic worked: an oral poet with a voice and a scholar with an ear found a chance to work together." (p. 220) And in "Native American Oral Literatures and the Unity of the Humanities", the seminal essay included in *The Tree of Meaning: Thirteen Talks*, Bringhurst dwells on the third phase: "European linguists started to transcribe oral texts in northern North America only toward the end of the nineteenth century. The history from that point to the present is primarily a history of lucky intersections between generous and gifted Native American oral poets and patient, skillful scribes." (p. 72)

[26] *A Story as Sharp as a Knife*, p. 202.

[27] *Nine Visits to the Mythworld*, p. 25. In his *First Meditation on Time*, Bringhurst defines the fundamental concepts of space and time in these terms: "Space is a seemingly endless succession of places which we can in fact revisit, while time is a

sequence of places we have lost or not yet found, separated by the one and only, always changing, place where we seem to exist. In other words, it seems to be like this: space is the unfolding of Being out of itself, while time is the slippage of Being along itself."

[28] *A Story as Sharp as a Knife*, p. 168. Bringhurst highlights this central concept of *noetic prosody* over and over again. Thus, he claims that "Thematic or visionary coherence is prominent in myth, acoustic coherence in verse, discursive or syntactical coherence in prose. Thematic patterns, like syntactic and acoustic ones, can be microscopic, macroscopic or both. But the patterns are primarily composed of things like predicates and images, not of things like syllables, pitches and stresses. In classical Haida poetry, as in the poetry of most preagricultural peoples, *what there is to count* is almost always *what there is to think about*, not *what there is to hear*. This is poetry in which noetic prosody underlies […] the prosody of sound." Ibid., p. 365.

[29] *A Story as Sharp as a Knife*, p. 366.

[30] *Nine Visits to the Mythworld*, p. 29. Bringhurst explains in further detail how a prototypical Haida myth is structured in this way: clauses form sentences, sentences form clusters that might be called *stanzas*, and the clusters form larger constellations that can be called *scenes* or *sections*. Scenes or sections form larger units called *acts* or *movements*. "Most often than not in Haida oral literature there are five such movements in a story. As a rule there are five (less often three, and still less often ten) sections in a movement, and five (less often three) subsections in a section." Ibid., pp. 27-28. According to Bringhurst, such narrative patterning is a universal and prominent feature of oral narrative all around the world, as has been demonstrated by Dell and Virginia Hymes. Ibid., p. 29.

[31] Robet Bringhurst, *Nine Visits to the Mythworld*, p. 30.

[32] "Native Americal Oral Literatures and the Unity of the Humanities", in *The Tree of Meaning: Thirteen Talks*, p. 78.

[33] *A Story as Sharp as a Knife*, p. 211.

[34] In "Prosodies of Meaning: Literary Form in Native North America", included in *The Tree of Meaning: Thirteen Talks*, Bringhurst puts forward the theory that "poetry *provokes* human language to exist, and that poetry is what language – even philosophical language – generally aspires to rejoin. Poetry, that is, is a characteristic of reality, echoing in every human tongue." (p. 210)

[35] *A Story as Sharp as a Knife*, p. 288.

[36] *A Story as Sharp as a Knife*, p. 288.

[37] "Jumping from the Train: How and Why to Read a Work of Haida Oral Literature", in *Everywhere Being Is Dancing. Twenty Pieces of Thinking*, p. 329.

[38] *A Story as Sharp as a Knife*, p. 28.

[39] *A Story as Sharp as a Knife*, p. 29. See pp. 27-29 and p. 31 for more details on Ghandl's biography.

[40] *A Story as Sharp as a Knife*, p. 27.

[41] *A Story as Sharp as a Knife*, pp. 66-67.

[42] Bringhurst explains that Moody, who was roughly 30 at the time when he worked as a bilingual interpreter for Swanton, was "handsomely connected with the village aristocracy that led the old regime. […] he was heir to his uncle Gidansta, headman of Qquuna, a large village south of Hlghagilda. His father was Gumsiiwa, headman of the village of Hlqiinul. […] So Henry Moody was entitled by his rank, as well as by his age and personal demeanor, to hear Ghandl's most sophisticated work." *Nine Visits to the Mythworld*, p. 18.

[43] "Jumping from the Train: How and Why to Read a Work of Haida Oral Literature", in *Everywhere Being Is Dancing. Twenty Pieces of Thinking*, p. 330. Bringhurst gives precise details on the whole process of dictation, transcription and literal translation: "Ghandl was telling his story carefully and slowly, pausing after almost every sentence. In these pauses, a man named Henry Moody repeated in Haida what Ghandl had just said. This gave Ghandl proof that Moody had heard him correctly, and it gave the other listener – a linguist and ethnographer named John Reed Swanton – time to write each sentence down in his precise phonetic script. Weeks later, Swanton went over the transcript with Moody, pronouncing the Haida phrases himself and relying on Moody to correct him. […] As he [Moody] checked and corrected Swanton's pronunciation, Moody also taught him the fundamentals of Haida grammar and translated Ghandl's words into English one by one." Ibid., p. 330.

[44] *Nine Visits to the Mythworld* consists of these nine stories: "The Way the Weather Chose to Be Born", "Spirit Being Living in the Little Finger", "In His Father's Village, Someone Wast Just About to Go Out Hunting Birds", "The Sealion Hunter", "The Myth of the One Who Got Rid of Nine of His Nephews", "Those Who Stay a Long Way Out to Sea", "Hlagwajiina and His Family", "The Names of Their Gambling Sticks" and "A Red Feather". They are sufficient proof of Bringhurst's contention that Haida poetry is great art and that Ghandl and Skaay, the finest Haida mythtellers, are on a par with Homer or the author of *Beowulf*. Eight out of the nine stories are myths; the exception is "The Names of Their Gambling Sticks", a story "in which mythtime coexists with historical time." Ibid., p. 23.

[45] *Nine Visits to the Mythworld*, p. 23.

[46] "Prosodies of Meaning: Literary Form in Native North America", in *The Tree of Meaning: Thirteen Talks*, p. 210.

[47] *Nine Visits to the Mythworld*, p. 83.

[48] Gary Snyder, *He Who Hunted Birds in his Father's Village. The Dimensions of a Haida Myth*, p. 31. Snyder's book is a detailed analysis of this myth by Ghandl. When he wrote the book as a thesis in 1951, he did not have access to John Swanton's original Haida transcription, so he had to rely on his faithful prose version in English for his analysis. His critical analysis of the multiple facets of this complex myth remains truly powerful to this day.

[49] *He Who Hunted Birds in his Father's Village*, p. 28.

[50] *A Story as Sharp as a Knife*, p. 220.

[51] *A Story as Sharp as a Knife*, p. 54.

[52] *A Story as Sharp as a Knife*, p. 48.
[53] *A Story as Sharp as a Knife*, p. 63. For Bringhurst's detailed analysis of the symmetries and fugal structure in this story, see Chapter 2 of *A Story as Sharp as a Knife*, "Spoken Music", in full (pp. 50-63), and also "The Blind Poet of Sunshine and Sealion Town", the introductory essay in *Nine Visits to the Mythworld* (pp. 13-14), where Bringhurst discusses the fractal patterns ("*fractal* in the sense that they repeat at varying scales", p. 27) in Ghandl's spoken and musical narratives.
[54] Robert Bringhurst, "Breathing Through the Feet: An Autobiographical Meditation", an autobiographical essay included in the poetry book *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music*, p. 104.
[55] "Jumping from the Train: How and Why to Read a Work of Haida Oral Literature", in *Everywhere Being Is Dancing. Twenty Pieces of Thinking*, p. 334.
[56] "Native Americal Oral Literatures and the Unity of the Humanities", in *The Tree of Meaning: Thirteen Talks*, pp. 77-78.
[57] *On Translating Haida Poetry: An Interview with Robert Bringhurst*, by Thérèse Rigaud, p. 10. At the end of his interview with Thérèse Rigaud, Bringhurst makes a moving wish: "I'd like to see those authors [the Haida poet Skaay and the Haida historian Kilxhawgins], and their peers in other native languages, studied and translated just as eagerly and shamelessly and freely as the Romans and the Greeks. By people anywhere and everywhere. […] They [Skaay and Ghandl] were artists living on earth. They made wonderful work. They were human. And I think it's time we treated them that way." (p. 23)
[58] *A Story as Sharp as a Knife*, pp. 305-306.

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