

# **“THANKSGIVING AND SNOW IN THEIR POCKETS”: RALPH GUSTAFSON’S TOWNSHIPS’ POETRY**

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You all know that Ralph Gustafson has a penchant for traveling to faraway places, particularly in Europe. And you know that he has spent many years residing abroad, in Oxford, London, and New York. Midlife madness, call it; for Ralph and his poems belong to the Townships.

Lime Ridge is where he was born, in 1909; Sherbrooke is where he grew up; Lennoxville is where he went to university in the 1920s — here at Bishop’s; the Townships is where he and Betty honeymooned; and North Hatley has been his home since the mid 1960s, when he was appointed to the faculty of the Department of English at Bishop’s. Place of birth, place of upbringing and education, and home for approximately 60 of his 83 years, the Townships are inseparable from the man and his poetry.

So central is this connection between artist and environment that I offer you the following analogies. What the English Lake District is to William Wordsworth, what the West Coast of Canada is to Emily Carr, what rural New England is to Robert Frost, or what the West Indies are to Derek Walcott, this the Townships are to Ralph Gustafson. Put another way: you can get the man out of the Townships, but you can’t get the Townships out of the man.

This analysis holds true for Ralph’s poetry, which is my subject today. Were I to be speaking about his early life or his short stories of mid-career, however, I would offer a different set of comparisons. I would tell you that what Orillia was to Stephen Leacock, or St. Urbain Street to Mordecai Richler, or Dublin to James Joyce, this the **society** of the Townships was to Ralph Gustafson. While the beauty of the natural environment throughout his career

inspires him to poetry, the Mrs. Grundyism of the small-town social environment in which he spent his youth provoked him to irony and exile. But that would be the subject of another talk, one that I am less likely to be invited to deliver in the Townships.

A brief word about family: Ralph's mother, of Loyalist descent, was an accomplished pianist and, during their years in Sherbrooke, she was a devoted member of Saint Peter's Anglican Church; his father, a Swedish immigrant, was a photographer who specialized in producing artistic regional photographs—in much the same vein as Bartlett prints. (Some of these photographs, Betty tells me, still hang in Lebaron's store and the community hall in North Hatley.) Like mother and like father, Ralph became an accomplished pianist and artist. The medium of Gustafson *films*, of course, is words—neither pure sound (like music), nor direct visual images (like photographs); but Ralph's finest works, like his father's, are regional: his poems of place.

Ralph's poems of place or nature poems actually fall into two main categories: Rocky Mountain poems, and Eastern Townships poems. His 18 published Rocky Mountain poems were written in the space of three months in 1959 as he and Betty travelled through Alberta and British Columbia; they were published in Vancouver in 1960 in a book with the title *Rocky Mountain Poems* and have been included in later selected and collected works. The Townships poems, by contrast, number close to 100 and do not date to a single, isolated phase of Ralph's career. The Townships is a region — a place and a feeling — which has a deep and abiding importance for his life and his art. He writes about this region throughout his career, and with increasing centrality and profundity in his later work, work which this past summer earned him membership in the Order of Canada. My plan is to walk you quickly through a sampling of Ralph's Townships poems, selected from different periods, pausing long enough at a few places for Ralph to read some all-time favorites.

As a student at Bishop's, Ralph greatly admired the poetry of the nineteenth century English Romantic poets. He wrote his M.A. thesis on the imagery of Shelley and Keats and confesses he longed to be "another Johnny Keats without the consumption." The Romantic poets' aesthetic which equates beauty with truth, and their faith in the restorative potential of the contemplation and enjoyment of nature, I would venture to say he largely shares to this day. Holding these values in the 1920s was a sign of conservatism, not innovation, however progressive they may sound now

in the context of the new environmentalism. While Ralph, the latter-day Romantic, was writing about nature, many of his contemporaries — the McGill Movement poets, for example — were kicking poetry out into the streets to deal with urban realities. Setting himself deliberately apart from what he termed this “age of grovelling cynicism,” Ralph painted this rural “Winter Scene” in his first book of poetry, *The Golden Chalice* (1935):

Between long silences the river-ice  
Suddenly cracks and moves with winter’s might;  
And from a lonely farm-house seen afar,  
A lazy smoke uncurls across the night. (36)

In his next book, *Flight into Darkness* (1944), there are several more depictions of what he calls in the title poem the “marvels in the township.” Despite the Depression and World War II, which do register in a central way in this collection, Ralph can still report that “that year the tamarack was green” and can happily recall “the grateful turning-out of lamps at night.” The poem “Rebus” suggests where a young man’s thoughts turn in spring — in the Townships as in England — to his “daffodils” (where else?) which are “stiff” with love:

Daffodils stiff against the amorous wind,  
Fooling the bee with sweet illusion—  
God! how the damp earth smells  
And Marchwind slaps the cheek with cold! (83)

Ralph’s engagement with the simple beauty of unspoiled nature becomes much more significant in the poems of place collected in *Rivers among Rocks* (1960). He describes his country now as “A field without myth or rhetoric” (“Armorial”). He writes from the “local heart” (poem 32) in poems such as “Quebec Winterscene,” “Quebec, Late Autumn,” “Quebec Night,” “The Blizzard,” and “The Blue Lake.” These poems explore the geography of the Townships in various seasons. In “Quebec, Late Autumn” (poem 43) he speaks of how “Suddenly now the ragged oak /And maple overnight are fire.” “Than Zion is, /This autumn’s more persuasion, /This maple, more,” he writes in “All That Is In the World” (poem 7), a philosophical poem which presents his now less Christian, more secular, religion, which celebrates love and nature.

One of his own favorites is “Quebec Winterscene” which revisits his boyhood, farm life, and the nostalgic era of trains linking up the vastness Canada:

### Quebec Winterscene

And the snow trodden round the yard,  
 Soiled with boots and fetched cordwood,  
 Straw ravelled near the barn —  
 The long snow of the fourfold land.  
 At dusk, acres clamped cold,  
 Threshold and clearing everywhere white  
 To the distant scribble of alders, across  
 The frozen field snakefence  
 Like charred music; sky only harvest  
 Helps over, buckled, with taste of tin  
 Dipper icy a man drinks gasping,  
 Sweat of warm barn-work a hazard  
 Once out, door-to, headed for house.

At eight, night now pitch, the train,  
 Halted for mailsacks at the swung  
 Lantern—the far horizontals  
 A moment, a history happening  
 The hills—alongside, pants, monstrous,  
 Pistons poised. Then pulls past.

At the cutting, heard warning

whose only

Answer is the local heart. (poem 32)

In 1957, writing his introduction to the *Penguin Book of Canadian Verse*, Ralph had noted a different intimacy with nature in comparing English or American poets with fellow Canadians such as Pratt, Smith, or Birney, for in Canada “there are no places for yearlong thought in green shade ... We are hitched to the seasons — four sharp ones with no south to melt into. After ice-lockings, we dive into spring. Conditions are good for spare lyricism, metaphysical wit” (30–31). These last words adequately describe Ralph’s style; and his language is direct, solid, “Like field-rock brown/Against the turning blade” (poem 20).

In 1966, when *Sift in an Hourglass* appears, Ralph is in his mid 50s and has settled in North Hatley, I am his student, and his depictions of the Townships tend to be focussed closer-up on present realities — hearth, home, garden, and self — rather than on rivers, hills, and distant or long-ago farms. Gardens and graves

recur, and love and death are central themes. "A Row of Geraniums," is an example of what might be called Ralph's home poems, domestic landscapes; it concerns potted flowers:

a row of geraniums  
laid out on the  
windowsill  
for the  
sun and the  
wind  
and the  
rain... (42)

"To My Love: Death's Pithy Paradox" imagines the figure of Death limping on a crutch that is "bound with birth- / rags," as being jealous of "what we have, / True love / In bed and afterward." Love, sex, the pagan and phallic "green stick" (rather than the cross of Christianity) are presented as a mortal's best defence against Death: "He comes quicker? / Cross him! Take / That green stick!" (47). The "green stick" here, like geraniums, forsythia branches, Compton's clay, or snow in other poems in *Sift in an Hourglass*, are elements of nature, but they also function as symbols of life or death.

"And in that Winter Night" is again about understanding death. It juxtaposes two memories: one of a winter night in 1922 in Sherbrooke, which is the subject also of Gustafson's short story "Snow"; the other of a visit 40 years later, in 1962, to the mausoleum of Empress Galla Placidia in Ravenna, Italy. Death may be contemplated in a European context within the artful contours of a tomb decorated with mosaics which have outlasted centuries (Ravenna's mosaics conjured up thoughts of eternity in W.B. Yeats's "Sailing to Byzantium," too, you may recall). But death assumes less manageable, indeed overwhelming, proportions in the open spaces of the Canadian landscape. No longer can the poet structure reality neatly as

eight Beatitudes, Death  
the ninth, and crossed into four,  
north, south, east, west,  
the arch of the kingdom  
eternal. (34)

In the falling snow, dimensions scarcely exist; certainly reason cannot comprehend them. The poem continues:

the north broken with crystal,  
 sleeve-broken, in winter,  
 tumbling from that sky,  
 myriad, the snow falling,  
 light ineffable and death  
 ineffable, the moment determining,  
 understanding death, death  
 understood under that winter night. (34–35)

By its structural parallelism, “And in that Winter Night” sets up an ostensible identity of the two experiences of death; but one is comprehensible in human terms (in the first section of the poem dealing with Europe, “Death” is personified), while the other appears to be mysterious and almost incommunicable.

“Concretions” is a poem which commemorates a day that Betty and Ralph Gustafson, together with Marian and fellow poet Frank Scott, went to Compton to hunt down the clay shapes a river can produce. Seeing “the cast /Of the worm,” he is moved to celebrate love:

Through my love,  
 Through my love,  
 I invite the grass  
 And dewy worm. (46)

This paradox is explored again in the poem “In a Quebec Field” which bears the transparent subtitle “An Accolade for Death who Makes Beauty Beauty.”

Ralph’s defiant attitude links him to the Anglo-Saxon poet of the *Battle of Maldon*, to Yeats (“and louder sing /For every tatter in its mortal dress”), and to Auden (“we must love one another or die”). It also suggests that he is to be listed among Canadian writers such as Pratt, Smith, Layton, and Avison — all of whom express, in D.G. Jones’s words, “a view of life that not only comprehends suffering and death but sees in them the conditions that make possible the highest human values” (*Butterfly on Rock*, 139).

“Aspects of Some Forsythia Branches” suggests the unity of all forms of life and the inevitability of these cyclical processes of generation and ruin. Cut from bushes which appear dead during winter, the forsythia branches are expected to flower, to “yellow” with bloom, in the spring. But the term “yellow” is ambiguous, for the “sear, the yellow leaf” in Shakespearean terms is symbolic of aging and death, and in Canadian terms yellow is a colour of autumn as

well as of spring. Ralph records that "Somewhere death's in it"; as a result, flowerbeds become "deathbeds." The final lines are powerfully moving:

So we cut branches two  
Days ago. Take great precautions.  
Go carefully through a door. Stand  
Among deathbeds as though among heroes,  
Pausing in winter along windy corridors  
With the knowledge ahead of us, to wrap our throats. (13)

The fragile, flowering shrubs which seem to contain within themselves the principle of their own renewal assume almost heroic proportions. The vulnerability of human life and its even greater dependencies are suggested by the inadequate yet defiant gesture of looping a scarf around the neck against the winds of winter, death.

Ralph once explained to an Australian audience that "despite our cold Yukon, notice, too, that despite all our groanings and driftings, we really love our winter and its solitude. Lampman in the 1890's was loving it. Like Robert Frost having to make up his mind in a New England winter, the Canadian in the Eastern Townships where I live only thirty miles from the Vermont border, he too has to make terrible decisions. But not all the time. Sometimes our winters are as cosy as a Quebec stove" ("Canada in a Word," published in the *New Mitre*, 1973, 9).

Possibly this different attitude to nature in the Townships arises because parts of this region, unlike the Rockies, afford rounded and limited perspectives — not totally unlike those of the English Lake District — where the human figure is less of an anomaly. Or perhaps it is because this quiet and pastoral terrain is associated with his childhood that the region around Lake Massawippi often functions in Ralph's poetry as a symbol of peace and innocence. In the midst of the cold war and the military invasion which ended Dubcek's Prague spring of 1968, the Townships are an oasis described in terms reminiscent of Dylan Thomas naming his boyhood happiness. Ralph speaks of "This territory green and lovely."

The Townships are not, of course, in the end, wholly removed from the ravages and violence of the twentieth century. This is clear in *Theme and Variations for Sounding Brass* (1972), particularly in "Aubade: Quebec" which concerns the era of the War Measures Act and the murder of Quebec Cabinet Minister Pierre Laporte. Yet scores of Ralph's poems of the last twenty years, from *Fire on Stone* (1974) on, are inspired by the beauty, peace, and continuity of

Ralph and Betty's own corner of the world. *Corners in the Glass*, published in 1977, the year of Ralph's retirement from teaching, for instance, contains numerous poems set happily in North Hatley. Like the artist Pissarro, once persuaded by Degas to paint cabbages, Ralph focusses on everyday events and commonplace activities in the immediate environment.

His recurring gardener-persona is no untutored country bumpkin, of course; but what concerns him above all is not speculation but sensation, not history but geography, not the foreign but the local — the realities of flowers, bird song, and even the antics of midges at the corner of his patio on a summer afternoon. In a poem entitled "In Dispraise of Great Happenings," he confesses that he is content to remain in his own backyard "Oblivious of Agamemnon and a thousand ships" (17).

"Of Green Steps and Laundry," like the slightly earlier "O Mud, Thou Vile Sublime," also celebrates tranquil, unselfconscious moments in the local routines of day-to-day living: a man's hammering a silver nail in a crooked green step, a woman's hanging blue and white shirts and a patched quilt on a squeaky line, a bird's coming to an overhead bough. These small details are important; out of moments such as these, life is strung.

neither

She nor the man pounding the clear air  
 Fixing the green step with another nail,  
 Will be aware of the importance, twenty  
 Years later thought of by him  
 Who drove nails and saw laundry,  
 Who thought little of cardinals and clothespins  
 And now loves life, loves life. (16)

Again in "Philosophy of Cutting Petunias," Gustafson suggests that the seemingly ordinary and even trivial activity of cutting petunias to save them from frost provides adequate "Compensations for days given to large/Enterprise" (19). His later poems are rich in depictions of local flora and fauna: poplars, maples, peonies, petunias, lilacs, daisies, redpolls, cardinals, orioles, grosbeaks, spiders, squirrels, and ants.

These home poems are mainly set, for the most part, in the Townships in wintertime; they explore the Canadian psyche, the context of northness, and the anagogic equivalent of winter, age. The opening poem, "Wednesday at North Hatley," one of the best reflective lyrics Ralph has ever written, illustrates these inter-



twined motifs:

**Wednesday at North Hatley**

It snows on this place  
And a gentleness obtains.  
The garden fills with white,  
Last summer's hedgerow  
Bears a burden and birds  
Are scarce. The grosbeak  
Fights for seeds, the squirrel  
Walks his slender wire.  
There is a victory;  
The heart endures, the house  
Achieves its warmth and where  
He needs to, man in woolen  
Mitts, in muffler, without  
A deathwish, northern, walks.  
Except he stop at drifts  
He cannot hear this snow,  
The wind has fallen, and where  
The lake awaits, the road  
Is his. Softly the snow  
Falls. Chance is against him.  
But softly the snow falls. (13)

The setting in winter suggests difficult times. The grosbeak "fights" for seeds; the squirrel's wire is "slender"; birds are "scarce"; and the lone walker finds "Chance ... against him." To this extent, the northern landscape is associated with struggle and death; but what Ralph stresses is not the harshness as much as the beauty and even the gentleness of the snow sculpted scene, drawing attention to the facts that "The wind has fallen," "softly the snow falls," "a gentleness obtains," and that there is "victory" for "The heart endures, the house/Achieves its warmth."

This poem is characteristic of Gusafson's Townships landscapes. Diverging from Frye, Jones, and Atwood, Gustafson's vision highlights neither terror nor bare survival but rather the meeting of challenge with strength, grace, and acceptance of loneliness and, ultimately, even of death. In an interview in 1975 Ralph elaborated on some of "those loved/ Contradictions peculiar to people/ Of seasons" that he mentions in "Airborne Thanksgiving," the poem which gives me my title today, the poem which describes Canadians as holding both "thanksgiving and snow in their pock-

ets." First he alludes to the experience behind "Quebec Winterscene," then he generalizes:

I write about Quebec winter scenes. Compton. A little village where I used to play with a boy friend. We used to hang on freight trains as they came through ... A mile or two from any habitation, and yet to me that symbolized Canada. Waiting for the train to come through, and those parallels of the tracks which went into the horizon, that I wanted to go down. That whole thing was a longing, a loneliness, and yet a great love of having the source of those emotions....

Margaret Atwood writes about survival. I have no sense of that cliffhanging from the Eastern Townships. And in my poetry I almost unconsciously oppose the idea that all Canadians do is cliff hang. In the Eastern Townships the winters are severe, there are blizzards, and I've written about that, but also it's very beautiful. And the challenge isn't so severe as it would be freezing in the muskeg or in the Laurentian Shield ... What you've got is a sense of challenge which requires a certain amount of fortitude if it's thirty below zero, as it often is, but also a gentleness. My memories of winter are of a snow-fall rather than a blizzard. I suppose you subsume that and you express it in your poetry as your Canada.

Ralph's outlook now is more mellow than in his earlier writing; his emphasis is not on defiance but on individual affirmation in the face of hardship, suffering, and reminders of death such as migration, seasonal change, and storm. Finally, Canada, and more specifically the Townships, becomes a microcosm and a metaphor for life: it contains both good and evil, joy and sorrow, birth and death.

"Of Beds and Manuscripts" concludes that the process of living means being "unfinished and hurt." Still, he speaks in the eloquently, achingly simple last lines of creativity and love, as well as of wretched limitation: "My love waters gardens so they grow./ My love, by herself. At half-past two" (46). Woman, the feminine principle, suggests fertility and continuity, if not transcendence. Again in "Of Cordwood and Carmen," it is woman — Betty — humming as the sun goes down, who symbolizes fulfillment and joy. Gestures such as hers lead Gustafson to conclude that even now "Life's/Heroic" ("Eclogue" 72).

"Ostinato" brings together two major motifs — northness and affirmation. The chromatic imagery paints a striking contrast between the processes of death and life. The white of the snow throws into relief the red of the birds: one is the colour of winter, death; the other, the colour of blood, the life force. The persona,

oblivious neither of the harshness of the season nor of war in Asia, rejoices in "this moment centred on /Itself, red polls and snow" (67) and their brief beauty which is equally real. His stoic, even tragically gay, meditations on the cycles of generation and ruin, yield the conclusion that, despite pollution and destruction by humankind, "the earth's grace will be left" ("The Concrete Shall Outlast Us" 76). Ralph's vision has a double hook which hauls in both the darkness and the glory.

I would like to conclude with two poems that illustrate the range of Ralph's response to the Townships. "Winter Prophecies" is a meditation that transcends particulars to become pure metaphor; "Of Indelible Water-Barrels" is a reminiscence about particulars never to be transcended.

### **Winter Prophecies**

Beyond all wisdom is the lonely heart.  
 Beware of love. It calls up winter prophecies.  
 The firewood is piled, the chimney solid...  
 And the hours are counted that leave  
 Belief of her astonished still.  
 Time is a harsh consultant. I warn  
 You. Without that love there is no hour.  
 With love are winter prophecies.

### **Of Indelible Water-Barrels**

One special water-barrel  
 Is what I was born to, hardwood slats  
 And iron hoops. It stood outside  
 The carriage shed, near the coop for turkeys  
 Daintily walking mesh above  
 The damp ground and where the chicken  
 Flew up with a squawk into the boy's  
 Face — that water-barrel. Cut off  
 From this, from first handlings, the heritage  
 Of what's our own, is fatal. Sixty  
 Years ago there in Quebec  
 Is my bequest. Wherever I go  
 Great elms by the front verandah  
 Reach all summer in the heat.  
 Their foliage shaded the driveway;  
 Then in autumn fell. Remembrance

Of that auburn is the air  
 I breathe. The hills were serenity.  
 Touched with March, sap in maples  
 Filled pails. Accidents of weather,  
 Grief and grace make the mind.  
 I still follow the casket of my grandmother  
 In immense tears down the aisle  
 And distance of the church. She pinned  
 Doilies on the chair-arms  
 To save the velvet. Consideration  
 Of wide relevance. Born to them,  
 That house, the Magog's chasm of waters,  
 Are the jewelled Ca' Foscari on the Grand  
 Canal. Othello's staircase is  
 A swept-up love, of course, whether  
 You are born to it or in Lime Ridge.  
 Art's promiscuous birthright.  
 And native to igloo, velvet parlour,  
 Still you can judge the three-thousand-  
 Year-old Tiryns a heap of rocks.  
 That's the advantage of being yourself,  
 Unless, that is, you're Mycenaean;  
 Then, you don't know that Magog  
 Growing-up but Mediterranean  
 Clarity which you'll never lose.  
 Having neither or half or nothing.  
 Discountenancing hooped barrels and parlours,  
 Isles and dusty olives or the elsewhere  
 Tug of what you knew, is fatal.

Ralph's poetry, then, is rooted in the forested mountains and rolling hills, the quiet lakes and abundant rivers, of the Townships, and the quasi-religious transcendence which they — like the English Lake District — evoke. In this, his work resembles that of other of his contemporary Quebec poets writing in English, such as Frank Scott, A.J.M. Smith, John Glassco, and Doug Jones. Over the span of his long and distinguished writing career, Ralph has been deeply influenced by the culture and the topography of this region, and he pays tribute to the Townships as "a community and a geography which has profoundly affected all our poetry" (*Ralph Gustafson*, 23). I look forward to reading his next book, *Configurations of Midnight*, which will be launched in Toronto next week.