

## A POETICS OF PLACE, THE POETRY OF RALPH GUSTAFSON

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by Dermot McCarthy

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On the whole the poems of Ralph Gustafson do not encourage comfortable reading or casual assimilation. Rhythm and syntax make few concessions to the half-attentive reader or to those too accustomed to the easy if not facile vernaculars of the contemporary poetic voice. His diction is often rare and cerebral (prebendary, acquiescent, arrogations); it can also be downright colloquial (wham, boob, bare-assed). He likes sharp, odd juxtapositions ("slops, jade and Jesus," "God and Gallup"). His obvious delight in the muscularity of words can lead him to some very unpretty mouthfuls: "stubtoe agglomerations," "consanguinities of great green," "coition's daredown doter." Besides these immediately apparent effects, there are less evident sound patterns. In "The Sun in the Garden," for example, a poem which uses a quotation from Wallace Stevens and the image of a slug in a teacup as departure points for a meditation on the nature and value of poetic meaning, the following words deliver a sibilant and plosive undertone: protusion, peristalsis, repugnance, protuberances, imperceptibly, propensities, punctured, probables, perception, impatiens, and path, the sequence moving, appropriately, to the last two most concrete words. Such craft requires a reader prepared to give the poems time to work their cunning; but many, I suspect, give up at the first gnarled phrase or reference to Scriabin or Quasimodo.

For nearly all of his poetic life Gustafson has been applying his distinctive torque to the English sentence, chopping off subjects in the manner of Auden, reordering adjectives and nouns in the manner of Milton ("There in umbrageous alcove safe"), and compressing his insights into the luminous bit in the manner of Pound. The result has been a voice which cuts across the grain of

contemporary poetic discourse in Canada — elided, oblique, laconic, wry, scholarly, self-deprecating and too often, by his own admission, hortative. Those poems which have surfaced in the public consciousness like “Quebec Winterscene” and “In the Yukon” have been those which have broken free from the heavy verbal and allusive undertow.

Yet Gustafson’s work, as Dermot McCarthy’s study amply demonstrates, contains riches which have been too long ignored by the Canadian literary establishment. At the outset of his book McCarthy observes that the poet has never been a joiner, has not belonged to a “busy Department of Poetry, whose members review, explicate, preface, praise, and otherwise boost their own and each other’s works.” Nor anthologize he might have added. Even after the publication of *Rocky Mountain Poems* in 1960, a volume which McCarthy argues is an important work in the history of modern Canadian poetry, anthologists did not leap to include Gustafson. He was absent from Gary Geddes’ first edition of *15 Canadian Poets* (1970), and from Robert Weaver and William Toye’s *Oxford Anthology of Canadian Literature* (1973). Although these omissions have been corrected in more recent publications, Gustafson can still fall through the anthologist’s net. Robert Lecker and Jack David omit his work from their recent *The New Canadian Anthology*. The critics as well have had trouble fitting Gustafson into their thematic paradigms. Neither Margaret Atwood in *Survival* nor D.G. Jones in *Butterfly on Rock* has anything to say about Gustafson’s poetry. He is seldom interviewed; McCarthy finds himself drawing nearly exclusively on Damien Pettigrew’s excellent *CV/II* interview in 1979.

Is Ralph Gustafson to be relegated to some remote canonical status, acknowledged vaguely but unread and unexamined? McCarthy’s study sets out heroically to prevent this from occurring. “My words,” he writes in his Introduction, “I hope, will move the reader to attend more to the poet’s. I do not aspire to be the master of another man’s ceremonies.” This sensible declaration indicates the restraint with which McCarthy has chosen to proceed and announces a praiseworthy attempt to avoid thematics in favour of poetics. He appears to have heeded Frank Davey’s call in *Surviving the Paraphrase* (1983) for a criticism which concerns itself with the language, forms and technical assumptions of Canadian writing, and which is not simply an attempt to translate literature into sociology.

Gustafson’s formidable output — nearly thirty volumes of

poems — together with the intricacies of their language, form and thought, demand careful scholarship and well-honed analytical tools, both of which McCarthy possesses. His critical approach is “that of a biographically and historically tempered close reading” which takes him through Gustafson’s growth and development over the last sixty years and which settles upon certain landmark poems for in-depth explication, notably “Mythos” (1944), the *Rocky Mountain* sequence (1960), “To Give Intuition a Certitude” (1974) and his *summa poetica* (McCarthy’s label), *Gradations of Grandeur* (1979). In effect this is a traditional textual reading of poetry which involves a rigorous analysis of prosody, diction, imagery, allusion and structure. McCarthy’s interpretive discourse is meticulous, recapitulative and careful to avoid the crudities of binary thinking. With a poet like Gustafson, where meaning is on such a difficult slant, the interpreter-reader faces multiple options and an unfortunate obligation to hedge declarations with immediate howevers and buts, a verbal twitch which McCarthy has difficulty controlling. On the whole, McCarthy’s critical vocabulary keeps clear of the more irritating jargon of contemporary criticism, though he is given to the occasional Gustafsonian mouthful himself: “synechdochic transcription,” “isometric tensing,” and “bafflingly meaningful.”

This methodology allows McCarthy to weave from poem to poem accumulating strands of cross reference while at the same time looping out to the poetic context from which Gustafson is drawing nourishment. In a four page analysis of “The Sun in the Garden” McCarthy notes the echo of Louis MacNiece in the title, the disagreement with Wallace Stevens which inaugurates the poem, the literal and archetypal garden which is North Hatley. He then charts the process of Gustafson’s ironic meditation as it moves towards its resolution, discovering in an image of lilacs and rain echoes of previous poems, and in the movement of trees an image of Heraclitus. The poem ends when the speaker recalls plunging his hand into an icy mountain stream, a declaration of trust in immediate sensation, not mere faith, perhaps another reference to Heraclitus who claimed that one could not step into the same river twice, though McCarthy chooses not to speculate on this possibility.

Such a brief summary does not, of course, do justice to McCarthy’s method which is constantly agile and articulate, as if he were running an intellectual high hurdles in slow motion. The effort is undeniable and the achievement considerable, but some-

thing is lost in the process. So thoroughly does McCarthy immerse himself in the task of explication that he ceases to evaluate. As his text progresses his critical discourse gets so caught up in the challenge of deciphering and decoding that proportion is lost. Not all these poems deserve the attention they are getting; the commentary sometimes makes disproportionate claims. Does the poem "A Gentle Rain Persists" really convey a sense of the numinous and culminate in a transformation that is "tragic"? The last lines are hardly as tragic as McCarthy suggests:

The rain persists. Drops on the glass  
Refract the light, red in movement,  
Green, the impulse of music...

McCarthy seems to be caught up by the ingenuities of his exegesis. Perhaps he got carried away with discovering a barely perceptible echo of Portia's speech on mercy in *The Merchant of Venice* and is transferring the weight of those lines to a poem which, as a matter of fact, was left out of the Sono Nis Press edition of his *Collected Poems*, and from Don Coles' selection, *The Moment is All*, in 1983. "Coming across real poetry," writes Gustafson, "owls hoot,/Potatoes break ground, and the coffee smells." McCarthy, wise critic though he may be generally, at times hoots when he should remain silent.

Gustafson, says McCarthy, is essentially Romantic; that is, he possesses, like Keats, an immanentist sensibility, one which discovers beauty inherent in things and a corresponding reverence for the world lying immediately at hand, whether it be a hiking trail in the Rockies or a view of Lake Massawippi. From his early derivative poems to those of his maturity, Gustafson retains this sensibility while at the same time assimilating the changes of modernism and post-modernism, Gustafson has always been one of our most international of poets. Living outside of Canada for nearly thirty years, he responded to the world of modern poetry largely unmediated by Canadian contemporaries. Early poems show the heavy influence of Auden, Hopkins and even Dylan Thomas; Pound and Wallace Stevens continued to be influences throughout his maturity. It is principally in the context of this larger poetic universe that McCarthy places Gustafson, not in that of his Canadian contemporaries. He makes little attempt, for example, to relate Gustafson's version of pastoral to that of D.G. Jones or Margaret Atwood, nor to connect his witness poems to those of, say, Patrick Lane or Dennis Lee. Thus his claim that

Gustafson's mythopoeic vision of "new world Northern" is a major contribution to Canadian writing in the second half of the twentieth century lacks some of the context which would make it convincing.

In fact, throughout *A Poetics of Place*, McCarthy tends to take a dim view of the Canadian literary scene, suggesting that literary coteries have inflated reputations, that thematic criticism has favoured nationalist values at the expense of poetic ones, and that our view of the landscape as a place of terror is an inaccurate and dishonest caricature. Even Bishop's University, to which Gustafson returned in 1963, and which McCarthy describes somewhat dismissively as "a small, rural campus in Eastern Quebec," is said to have probably delayed Gustafson's development after the publication of *Rocky Mountain Poems* in 1960. These views may have some truth in them, but their net effect is an unwarranted isolation of Gustafson from his immediate creative context. McCarthy seems too jealous of his subject at times, too ready to keep Gustafson isolated from Canadian cultural forces.

The *Rocky Mountain Poems* form an impressive sequence which, according to McCarthy, represents not only a "rediscovery of his romantic roots after this modernist interlude" but also "a major advance...towards his version of a postmodernist poetics." In a lengthy analysis which draws on earlier drafts, later revisions and Betty Gustafson's diary, McCarthy shows Gustafson confronting the temptations of naive romantic sublimity offered by the magnificence of the Rockies and creating out of that confrontation "a poetic form in which the poet stands concentric with word, experience, and world." This stance produces a poetry of great emotional intensity and "speculative scope," one which marks the triumph of Gustafson's "new world northern" poetic, an affirmation of his pragmatic, hardheaded humanism.

Whether *Rocky Mountain Poems* is as important a text to the history of modern Canadian poetry as McCarthy insists it is, remains, in my view, a still unanswered question. He says that the poem prefigures a shift in Canadian poetry towards postmodernism and clearly surpasses anything the Tish group (Davey, Bowering, Wah et al) achieved in Vancouver a little later. His definition of postmodernism, derived largely from critic Charles Altieri, as a strategy of "disclosure through description" employing self-conscious structures, playful ironies and a "charged attention to particulars" covers too many possible poems from too many times and places. Despite his disavowal of categories such as romantic, modernist

and postmodernist as only “crudely descriptive” of the individual poems, McCarthy wields them all again and again. The only one that seems to stick convincingly is romantic. His portrayal of Gustafson during the last ten years as in loving attendance on garden, house and wife creating poems which are expressions of his “sacral” world, somehow does not conform to the usually cited attributes of postmodernism: its parodic recycling of images from popular culture, its profound uncertainty, its wild mutations of form, its antipathy to any totalizing vision, its profound decenteredness. McCarthy is surely wrenching Gustafson unnecessarily into the postmodern jurisdiction. As a matter of fact, his own conclusions seem to undermine this very claim.

What emerges in spite of McCarthy’s dance among the labels, is the portrait of a poet as a whole person whose career has cycled upwards in a stately celebration of the natural world, of the endurance of personal love, and of the value of concerned witness to the to world beyond the Eastern Townships of Quebec. McCarthy’s conclusion is an eloquent and just summation:

Gustafson’s search for certitude has been predicated on his sensibility’s intuitive search for what is utterly real in experience. That search has taken him outward, throughout the world, only to end where he started; the real looms up from the world at his doorstep, what he discovers is what he has always known. Gustafson’s poetry hugs the ground of its being. It has grown, quietly and steadily, over the years, until now it presents a broad and full view to the beholder. What we see is a world of signs, totems more ceremonial than sacramental, personal yet offered up to us to share. Perhaps that is their greatest utility, their invitation to celebrate.

I think the community of poets and their readers should also celebrate the publication of *A Poetics of Place*. Very few studies of this magnitude and seriousness have been undertaken in the world of Canadian poetry. Although I have reservations about the book, I believe that it will prove to be an immensely helpful guide to the rich and complex music of one of Canada’s most important poets.