

GUSTAFSON'S DOUBLE HOOK

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RALPH GUSTAFSON'S POETIC DEVELOPMENT recapitulates in miniature the general pattern of the growth of poetry in Canada: it begins with a typically colonial deference to "the Greats" of English literature with imitations of Spenser, Shakespeare, and the Romantics; passes through a transitional phase of dependency on newer but still foreign models, primarily Hopkins and Eliot; and culminates in the post-war period in a vigorous, distinctive maturity. The third phase of his career begins effectively in 1960 with the publication of *Rivers among Rocks*, a book which collects his poetry for the sixteen-year period 1944-1959, and it includes the eight books which have followed it to date in increasingly rapid succession: *Rocky Mountain Poems*, *Sift in an Hourglass*, and *Ixion's Wheel* in the 1960's; *Selected Poems*, *Theme and Variations for Sounding Brass*, *Fire on Stone*, *Corners in the Glass*, and *Soviet Poems* in the 1970's. This body of poetry — as all good poetry must, according to Eliot — creates the illusion of a view of life through its selected range of imagery, distinctive interrelationships between structure and content, and characteristic major themes: nature, love, ephemerality, unjustifiable death, and the conflict between time and space.

Gustafson's quest for meaning is conducted not in the terminology of rational discourse, Romantic aesthetics, or Christian dogma, in his final period, but primarily through love — love of woman, works of art, and natural beauty. That his ultimate religion (prophetic of Leonard Cohen's) is love is demonstrated from the time of *Rivers among Rocks* in a poem such as "Beach with White Cloud." Gustafson's fundamental conviction that the transcendent is attainable only through the sensuous is underscored by the use of Christian imagery of blood and bread in this love poem:

The rage touched
Your knees, thighs.
Blood broke, bread,
Stone, skies.

"Beach with White Cloud" is a passionate celebration of sexual communion, but frequently Gustafson's love poems move beyond simple joy to urgent defiance and even elegy. Gustafson typically writes with a double vision, bringing into focus simultaneously both the beauty and the brevity of life.

The persona of "Armorial," for example, ponders what colours and images might compose his heraldic arms. He and his lover could be represented by "gules" and "leopards/ Passant on bars of gold." The contrasting colours of red and gold, like the two discrete strands of imagery on which the tapestry of this poem is woven — one based on English history and the other on Canadian geography — highlight this characteristic doubleness of vision.

The imagery in "Armorial" includes flowers ("roses," "lilies," "rod and blood-red weed and rush"), and other living creatures ("leopards," "larks," and "porcupine") or embodiments of the life force ("water," "field"). But the lover persona feels stalked by death: roses remind him of the Wars of the Roses; the porcupine strikes an image of the arrow-riddled Richard III killed at Bosworth Field; and the lily is also ambiguous, having Lawrencean overtones of sexuality ("She lay down with love and my hand/ Was gold with dust of lily") and equally of death — Richard falls twisted in a ditch, "His hand wristdeep in lily." This elegiac love poem ends with the poignant line, "My love wept." Love and death are counterpointed; so, too, are Europe, with its historical pageantry and famous monuments, and Canada, a country "Far from kingdoms, which regal grew," "a field without myth or rhetoric." Gustafson's coat-of-arms, like his vision of life, combines several fundamental contraries.

The dichotomy between what Eli Mandel, in *Contemporary Canadian Poets*, has termed a "cultivated literary awareness" and an "almost primitive feeling for place" — a dichotomy Mandel finds in several contemporary Canadian poets — is one of the chief characteristics of Ralph Gustafson's poetry. Alternately, he is a hoary traditionalist and a new Canadian Adam taking his green inventory. In the sense in which Northrop Frye used these terms in his famous terror review, Gustafson's poetry is sometimes "original" — returning to cultural origins through study and imitation of poets and other artists of the past — and at other times "aboriginal" — drawing its inspiration from the land. Gustafson uses the sensuous to reach the transcendent, but this contact with physical realities may be made either directly with things in nature or indirectly with their recreations in works of art — poems, paintings, tapestry, music, sculpture, and so on. Furthermore, it is notable that in so far as he depicts the natural world, Gustafson writes almost exclusively about Canada; while in so far as he responds to the world of art, he writes almost entirely out of a European cultural context. Thus he has two basic sources of imagery around which he develops two distinctive poetic styles.

Gustafson writes both intricate, refined, art poems inspired by foreign masterpieces (for example, the poems grouped in the "Music and Imagery" section of

Selected Poems), and also strikingly more direct nature poems depicting with authenticity the sharp, irrefutable details of Canadian rural life and landscape under the impact of swiftly changing seasons. In these explorations of the geography of his native land, Gustafson's style is hefty, solid, and exposed, "Like field-rock brown/ Against the turning blade."

Rocky Mountain Poems, a collection of descriptive and reflective nature poems, tests this thesis and draws out the implications for a writer of living in a post-colonial society, "a country without myths," a place without a long history of visible achievement where "all is a beginning" and where there are few historic national symbols and no "tapestry and coronations, kings crowned/ With weights of gold." Overpowered by the harsh, massive grandeur of the Rockies, Gustafson's persona searches out mankind's place in the universal scheme, attempting to comprehend his own relation to nature which, despite his metaphysical efforts to yoke it to human consciousness, remains vast, primal, and insurmountable. Quickly humbled by the mammoth landscape, the poet persona recognizes that the Rockies are "immeasurables" and that "On mountains/ One does not try out metaphors"; thus he turns his attention to smaller, more manageable portions of the landscape, closely observing small details: a hummingbird, a flower, strawberries, and pine needles. Ultimately, he suggests that this "elsewhere/ Crazy, nearer look" can and must replace borrowed myths altogether.

In the poem, "At Moraine Lake," which exposes a conflict between Canadian geography and Western tradition, Gustafson writes contradicting Wordsworth with an important pun on the key word "lie":

Myths
Lie about us in our infancy.
Take her of the foam somewhere where
It's warmer. Look, I am occupied with
The irrevocable decisions of the ants.

"At Moraine Lake" deposes European mythology and replaces it with an authentic spirit of place — an emphasis which links Ralph Gustafson, at least in his "aboriginal" poems, with other contemporary post-colonial writers.

In the Introduction to his *Penguin Book of Canadian Verse* written just two years earlier, Gustafson had pointed out already that "There are no Aphrodites in Canadian poetry — the seafoam is too cold. The Furies have to be imported. The Laurentian Shield is the intruder." Thus, he maintains, the Canadian poet ought to locate his symbols in the land — here the ants — something alive and indigenous.

The final poem of the Rocky Mountain collection, "In the Yukon," is structured again on the polarity between historic civilizations (European) and wilderness (Canadian). It begins: "In Europe you can't move without going down into history,/ Here, all is a beginning." What Canadians have instead of engulfments

by the past is geography, nature; the grandeur of this country, Gustafson suggests, lies in its natural pageantry of flora and fauna, rather than in the realm of social struggle and cultural achievement. Thematically and also stylistically in these nature poems, Gustafson thus has

pitched
glove off,
touched cleanly
the green ice
the green fire.

Just as the Group of Seven artists abandoned European conventions and techniques to portray adequately and authentically the vibrant, bold colours and lines of the northland, the McGill Movement poets, and later Ralph Gustafson, needed to develop a new poetic idiom honed down for recreating the jagged, uncivilized beauty of this country.

PERHAPS BECAUSE THE LAND as antagonist to the human figure lies at the core of the Canadian experience, failure and death assume special significance in our literature, even in the poetry of Ralph Gustafson who in certain respects still holds a Romantic view of nature. Death and oblivion need not be synonymous in countries with ancient and still viable cultural traditions. By contrast, for the relatively newer transplanted populations of Canada, there can be little confidence in continuity through history or art. Also, the four sharp seasons here are a constant reminder of the passage of time, and the alien beauty of this cold northern land presents striking objective correlatives for the state of mind of individuals confronting their own mortality. For example, in one of the poems from *Sift in an Hourglass*, inspired equally by Galla Placidia's mausoleum in Ravenna, Italy, and a crystal of snow in Sherbrooke, Quebec, Gustafson suggests that death, contemplated serenely in a European setting within the man-made contours of a tomb decorated with mosaics which have outlasted centuries, assumes less manageable proportions in the open spaces of the Canadian landscape. Here the persona cannot structure reality as

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

In the falling snow, dimensions scarcely exist; certainly reason cannot comprehend them. "And in that Winter Night" ends:

myriad, the snow falling,
 light ineffable and death
 ineffable, the moment determining,
 understanding death, death
 understood under that winter night.

Ephemerality emerges as one of the dominant themes of *Sift in an Hourglass*, a collection which — by its title alone — reaffirms Gustafson's ties to British literary tradition; in fact, he becomes almost a poet's poet. Gustafson's "aboriginal" style — his spare lyricism and habit of stripped-down statement — is elicited almost exclusively by the Canadian terrain; when he writes of England, Greece, and other foreign countries or takes his inspiration from older works of art, his style consistently tends to be more allusive, complicated, and elaborate. Gustafson's "original" writing echoes and reverberates with references to a broad spectrum of English literature, as well as to European history and mythology. In several instances, borrowing diction from literary tradition reinforces the theme of transience at the level of style by showing that even language is subject to the processes of time.

The very mutability of things, however, in Gustafson's view, should make us treasure them the more fervently. One of his poems is subtitled, "An Accolade for Death who Makes Beauty Beauty"; another, "The Exhortation," begins with the premise that "Grief's love's origin." Echoing Yeats, Gustafson writes with Dionysian intensity:

Love
 Is the thing, is it not?
 To rage and sing, to thrust
 The grinning skull and grave
 And know the singing lust.

Unlike Christianity with its life-negating aspects, as Gustafson perceives it, the pagan religions of ancient Greece or Egypt come close to his own emphasis on sensuality. The persona in "The Valley of Kings" from *Ixion's Wheel* comments: "They weren't far wrong: / the body kept / to keep the soul." Again in "The Histiaean Poseidon: Athens," looking at the fifth-century B.C. bronze statue of the Greek god of the sea whose love affairs were almost as numerous if less celebrated than those of Zeus, the Christianized Gustafson persona is moved to a passionate identification with the primitive divinity:

I cry blasphemy.
 Cry,
 The hurl of the god
 Is my hurl,
 Hard, flung.

Repeatedly, his poems incorporate the belief that one reaches the highest meaning

of life through an affirmation, not a denial, of sensuous reality. Such affirmation is made, however, with full tragic awareness of the fleeting nature of all experience and frequently even of art. At the centre of Gustafson's poetry lie the twin facts of beauty and mutability; he contends that, despite injustice, violence, and death, only a full embrace of transience suffices. Paradoxically though, many of the poems on this theme in *Ixion's Wheel* and other collections are articulated in a highly elliptical and allusive style, leaving Gustafson vulnerable to charges of aestheticism or academicism, while his historical and foreign illustrative material has raised, for Canadian readers and critics, the question of his relevance.

By the end of the 1960's, Gustafson's two separate styles, one direct, the other allusive, hitherto elicited by two distinct orders of experience: one of Canadian nature and weather, the other of European art and myth, and conveyed by two different types of imagery: one geographical and the other historical, begin to merge. The mixed media protest poems of *Theme and Variations for Sounding Brass* (1972) — a striking contrast to *Ixion's Wheel* — focus on the victims of international as well as local violence and injustice, from Cambodia to Quebec, and, taking an engagé stance, use bold, plain, prose-like statements. Gustafson sets for himself the task to "Shock our hearts" into a realization of the extent and significance of monstrous current events, and the collection demonstrates his full mastery of the public poem. The general structure which contains these five witness poems — theme and variations — is borrowed, of course, from music; so, too, are each of the five individual structures: nocturne, fantasia, ricercare, aubade, and coda. The central theme is love — no longer just in individual but in enlarged socio-political terms — and the variations show, in a range of different national contexts, the grim, dehumanizing results of its distortion or ultimate absence.

Gustafson's vocabulary, syntax, and rhythm in these poems are close to prose; in fact, in some instances, patterns of reference are established by means of incorporating into the poetry snatches of prose, usually from political speeches. There is a very interesting connection, then, between Gustafson's response to the Rockies and to political events of the past decade: in both cases, he encounters realities for which parable and metaphor seem irrelevant and for which only "plain / Statement" is appropriate.

Fire on Stone, winner of the Governor General's Literary Award for 1974, marks a sharp return to a more personal and reflective lyric mode as Gustafson resumes his study of nature, his world travels, and his Pound-like journey through the past to find touchstones of relevance for citizens of the contemporary, polluted, war-torn world. In these poems, Gustafson blends or moves freely between his two styles and two quarries of images: the symbolic desire for light, illumination, is one of the principal motifs, but it is pursued by a process sometimes antithetical, sometimes parallel, to the ascent of Plato's mythic caveman. Acutely conscious of growing older, the Gustafson persona — almost always a nearly autobiographical

figure — wants “all/ Heart-saddening things resolved.” He feels that “Death ought to bring/ An answer to the questions.” Yet he knows, finally, that it will not, and in these poems the great antinomies — life and death, beauty and brevity, good and evil, time and eternity, nature and art — remain unreconciled.

“North Cape,” the opening poem, juxtaposes natural beauty — “midnight sun,” “fjord,” “gulls” — with man-made ugliness — “rubbish,” “napalm.” A fundamental opposition is suggested, too, between the persona and his lover on the one hand, and the engulfing natural and political environments on the other. Characteristic of Ralph Gustafson, reality is portrayed as the interplay of dualities. Several other poems — “Sunday Morning at Hammerfest,” “Nails at Nijo,” and “O Permanent Paean Periclean,” for example — underscore his vision of the world as a combination, metaphorically, of both debris and miracle, stone and fire. His antinominal view of reality and his unusually positive informing vision perhaps are given fullest expression in “O Mud, Thou Vile Sublime.” Here Gustafson confounds categories in lines which combine Elizabethan word play (“But what is grave? and quick? Life/ Itself’s a low-down buried pun”) with contemporary conversational rhythms (“Tuesday wasn’t it, we felt good?”). The persona concludes resolutely:

Something’s
True amid all this slither surely?
.....
Cock-crow surely dawn; this pulled
And washed-out line of intimate Monday,
A stretch of purest meanwhile briefs?

The pun on “briefs” and the almost parenthetical placing of “meanwhile” — a word choice which itself underscores temporariness — give this last line tragicomic possibilities, but the dominant note is celebration, for the satisfaction of Monday’s wash or for Tuesday’s health and happiness.

ULTIMATELY, IN GUSTAFSON’S UNIVERSE, “The moment-when is what pertains.” In “To Old Asclepius — Lyric at Epidaurus,” life is again documented as being both painful and beautiful, and this poem seems intended as a final statement. In manuscript draft, it is entitled “Summation at Epidaurus,” and the conclusion Gustafson reaches here is reiterated in many other poems which similarly rejoice in “the hour’s magnificence,” “that hour,” “the flashed instant.” Both are equally real, “Sting of wasp and swallow of moon,” and his poetry urgently recommends that life be lived fully moment by moment since joy balances grief.

Characteristically, and perhaps as a result of his musical background, Ralph

Gustafson structures experience in counterpoint. Life and death are brought into focus almost simultaneously by the speaking voice of the two-part "Bishop Erik Grave's Grave" and by the gardener persona of "Poem in April" and "Hyacinths with Brevity." Alluding in a veiled way to Shakespeare and Eliot, and also including homespun domestic details, the latter poem is both richly allusive and compellingly direct as the persona implores with passionate ambivalence:

these forty bulbs . . . should be
 Already in the ground so swift the wind
 Blows and brief the constituency
 Of sun.

The motif of light is an important strand in the intricately plaited imagery of the recent *Corners in the Glass*, too. As the sun, it symbolizes the life force itself; as reflected light, it suggests philosophical illumination, Joyce's *claritas*. But shunning abstract thought and pure speculation, Gustafson's intellectual grappling with the meaning of life here issues directly in joyous celebration of the tangible, audible, visible universe. The movement away from orthodox, religious, otherworldly solutions to the problems of the human condition, which was begun tentatively in the early *Flight into Darkness* and developed more fully in *Rivers among Rocks* and *Sift in an Hourglass*, culminates in readily accessible symbols and images and in pithy, direct language — a style which now illustrates the primary thesis: "I'll have the concrete." In "Argument," Gustafson proclaims:

Light, Erigina's Light
 (Capital L)'s
 An abstract absolute
 I'll have the sun
 On cranky crystal, corners in
 The glass, tablecloths and silver,
 Oranges with peels on them.

One fine poem on the *carpe diem* theme is "The Moment Is Not Only Itself." Gustafson's familiar gardener persona is presented here as raking autumn leaves while listening to Chopin. The joy and beauty of this October day seem able, at least momentarily, to create a favourable equipoise of opposites and "make end / Of foliage, of summer, descendings, however / You finish it, not matter." The joy of the moment itself is of supreme importance, carrying significance for the future in providing what immortality there is on earth. Thinking of love, he concludes that "What is real is what the heart / Has."

Both literally as well as metaphorically, throughout *Corners in the Glass* Gustafson presents himself as a cultivator of his own garden, focussing attention on common details in the immediate environment. The majority of these poems is set in rural Canada, largely in the vicinity of Gustafson's own home in North Hatley, Quebec. Sharply criticized in the 1960's for being a Grand Tour poet, in recent

years Gustafson has become increasingly a regional poet, the Canadian equivalent, in some respects, of Robert Frost. His autobiographical 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 beauties of flowers, birdsong, and even the antics of midges at the corner of his patio on a summer afternoon. Enjoying the backyard scene, he confesses that he is content to remain “Oblivious of Agamemnon and a thousand ships.”

From the time of *Rivers among Rocks*, Gustafson's themes had begun to stress the value of the here and now. “A Candle for Pasch” had concluded with this-world emphasis: “Joy here, least: if none.” “Apologue” had underscored that “taken joy is all.” But Gustafson's medium at that stage did not always embody his message; in fact, it often worked at cross purposes. By the 1970's, style and theme reinforce each other, so that Gustafson's thoughts are articulated in sensuous terms. This is demonstrated succinctly in poems such as “The Overwhelming Green” or “Of Green Steps and Laundry” which notes:

she will hang
 Blue and white shirts and a patched quilt
 On the laundry line that runs from the kitchen
 Step to the yard telephone pole and sheets
 That smell of winter's cold, and the pulley
 Each time the line is launched will squeak,
 And that will be important.

These latest poems about Canada, furthermore, tend to be set in winter. They explore the Canadian psyche in the context of northness and against the anagogic equivalent of winter, age. Gustafson's Canada is no longer the angular, incisive, overpowering Rockies; the landscape is that of the Quebec Townships — harsh but gentle, lonely but powerfully beautiful. “Airborne Thanksgiving” speaks of “those loved/ Contradictions” and would seem to set Gustafson amongst those Canadians who hold “thanksgiving and snow in their pockets.” 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, of death.

Brevity and death, he concludes, assume significance only for those who are lovers of life; this is the theme of “Improvisations on Lines of Somebody Else.” That here Gustafson's inspiration comes from lines written by fellow Canadian poet George Johnston quietly underscores in another way both the dominant national theme of this collection and also the repatriation of Gustafson's style. Despite the fact that his very latest book, *Soviet Poems* (1978), is the diary of a trip outside Canada (his invited reading tour of the Soviet Union in the fall of 1976), what it stresses is that “unpolitical humanity is the same,” and it does not invalidate the judgment that, in his poetry of the 1970's considered as a whole, Ralph

Gustafson demonstrates not the bleak discovery of Thomas Wolfe that we can't go home again, but rather the felt truth of Margaret Laurence that we must go home again. In the life-long process of uncovering this truth in his own way, Ralph Gustafson has produced an impressive body of poetry which bears witness to a personal, as well as a national, struggle.

THE COLLECTOR

Claire E. Harrison

He arranged shells
in shallow drawers, in cabinets,
containing the lavishness of oceans
in neat and quiet rows.

My grandfather, of precarious
heartbeat and locked into deafness,
who spoke love with tiny mollusks
showing me brown limpets
with holes in the centers
like small volcanoes,
and angel wings, tender
white fans with scalloped edges.

I liked to stroke
the vitreous olives
the whorls of orange-dusted whelks,
too child-intent to notice

that his breaths were being gathered
arranged in their rhythmic sequence
and numbered, like the finite
chambers of a nautilus.