

# ON W. W. E. ROSS

*Peter Stevens*

THE DEDICATION of *New Wave Canada* by its editor, Raymond Souster, to W. W. E. Ross as Canada's first modern poet confirms to a large extent the recognition of Ross as a pioneer in Canadian poetry, a fact which was recognized by Souster in 1956 when he published some of Ross's early work in the volume, *Experiment*. With the renewed interest in imagism by the younger poets of the 1960's it is obvious that any Canadian poet who seems to grow out of imagist ideas and apparently uses the American rather than the English voice-box will be hailed as a hero and fore-runner. Frank Davey's article in a recent *Tamarack Review* (Spring 1965) assembles a glorious and very mixed array of Canadian poets whose careers have been influenced by Black Mountain, a movement arising in part from imagism, W. C. Williams, Ezra Pound and, latterly, Creeley, Olson and Duncan. Davey casts a wide net and lands many strange fish in the Black Mountain catch; Daryl Hine, Milton Acorn and Alfred Purdy all apparently have fallen under its influence. Davey's chronology seems sadly misplaced, for he also includes the careers of F. R. Scott and W. W. E. Ross.

Both of these poets, of course, have used imagist techniques, and Scott has been receptive recently to new ideas in poetics. Ross's contribution to Canadian poetry, when he has been "placed", has nearly always been in the field of imagism; only in this sense can Ross be linked with the Black Mountain movement, and we shall see that Ross attempted many different things in his poetic career. *Experiment*, although an important collection of his work, is misleading, as Ross maintained that Souster was only interested in his "native" side. Time and again, Ross states that those poets now revered by the younger poets of Canada, were never real influences on his work. "I felt hostile to, and irritated by William Carlos Williams".<sup>1</sup> The patterns of verse he uses in *Laconics* he himself "felt consciously . . . as antagonistic to the tone and form — if any — of the poems by William Carlos Williams I saw in *The Dial*," so that any influence came from "Williams somewhat adversely, Pound quite adversely."

However, Ross insists on things in his poetry; a hard straight look at things around him as part of a search for reality is present in many of his poems. He was really the first poet in Canada to use real factual things unadorned by metaphor. The 1914-18 War taught some poets to look objectively at the facts of war but according to most text-books and anthologies Canada managed to produce only the Brooke-ish "In Flanders Fields" and a few patriotic poems by F. G. Scott. Certain English poets managed to look at landscapes ravaged by war in an objective and factual way; it can be seen in some poems by Edmund Blunden, Robert Nichols and Robert Graves. The nearest approach to this kind of writing by a Canadian was "The Village 1915" by H. Smalley Sarson which appeared in *Soldier Poets* (1916):

The nave, choked with charred rafters from the roof,  
Pleads untended to the wind and rain  
Mutely; shelter even bats despise.

Standing stricken, the weary shrapnelled houses  
Seem skeletons, grim and ghastly shapes  
Beckoning with scraggy fingers to the sky

Ross wrote a poem of this kind, "Poperinghe 1917", indicating his early search for a hard reality in his poetry:

Night in the town  
and not a light,  
but a glimmering  
behind drawn blinds  
and gleams for a moment  
from opened doors . . .

The street paved  
with cobblestones  
winds narrowly  
across the town;  
this street leads  
up to the line  
to Passchendaele,  
and the battle in mud.

One characteristic tone runs through this piece; the scene is pared down to its basic simplicities. Each line is self-contained, yet each line elaborates, or qualifies the preceding line so that although on the surface the poem is presenting a static

scene, it, in fact, is a constantly shifting pattern with the focus moving in to pick up a detail, then altering to a different viewpoint, in order to show a wider panorama, making the poem specific and general at the same time. The movement of this poem is also characteristic of Ross. Essentially each line has two beats but the stresses are variable, appropriate to the changing perspectives within the poem.

His early verse arose out of an admiration for E. E. Cummings and Marianne Moore: "it was these two that really excited me most keenly among contemporary poets (though I was already acquainted with Lindsay, Frost, Pound (a little), Amy Lowell and Sandburg, not to mention the Untermeyers and Sara Teasdale!)" He first submitted poems to *The Dial* as a result of seeing some Cummings poems in that magazine in January 1926, and his poems appeared in the April and August issues of 1928. At first, there seems to be little connection between the verse of Cummings and Ross but perhaps Robert Graves' and Laura Riding's phrase about Cummings — "a deadly accuracy"<sup>2</sup> — helps to show the connection. Many of Ross's early poems have a kind of exactitude, centred in unfrilled reality and they are expressed in strict patterns of variable metre. Graves and Riding illustrate in their book that Marianne Moore's concern in poetry is with discipline, an attempt to reduce poetry's mystery: "enigmas are not poetry." This must have been why her poetry appealed to him. Ross's poems, then, are statements of hard accuracy rigidly disciplined. Time and again, in his attitudes to poetry, he maintains he is looking for "cleanliness (aesthetically speaking) from the Canadian poetry mess." He objects to "prettified" verse and finds it a "disheartening experience" to read through the collected poems of Sir Charles Roberts. Of his own contemporaries in the 20's he liked only Raymond Knister and in recent years he seems to have admired Daryl Hine and Jay Macpherson. Of the older poets he thought Heavyside underrated, for in him he found the "sharpness" and "cleanness" he himself reached in some of his poems:

Tree tops move  
to and fro in the afternoon breeze,  
delicately covered  
with small new green leaves,

against the white  
of rounded clouds, slow-passing  
across the great blue  
expanse of the sky

sunlight-filled  
and filled with moving air  
invisible  
yet strong to sway the tree-tops.

This poem uses the method of self-containment within each line, and yet each line is adding a further detail to the one preceding. We have noted this method in the poem, "Poperinghe 1917", but this poem also shows an extension of this technique. The poem is circular in its movement, for the same detail opens and closes the poem. The movement of the tree tops has been set in relation to different segments of the motion: the breeze turns the leaves, the colour of the leaves is set against the white of the clouds which in turn move across the blue sky, bright with sun, an indefinite brightness contained in the invisible air which is causing the movement of the tree-tops. Each separate word carries an equal amount of weight within the meaning of the poem, although the rhythm of the poem varies between two- and three-beat lines to suggest the rocking motion of the trees. Our attention is fixed in the first stanza by the equally heavy stresses on all the syllables of the opening line and those in the last line of the stanza in "small new green leaves." These stand out against the other details in the poem until they are caught in the sense of flux of the whole scene and the trees' motion is "placed" by the more regular rhythm of the closing line. Thus, it is not a mere return to the same detail but a coherent extension to make us see the whole simultaneously. Here again we can see the connection between Ross and Cummings in their search for simultaneity, Cummings by fragmenting syntactical elements, Ross by fragmenting the scene itself to re-assemble it in a new presentation to the reader. This is obviously connected with part of the technique of the Black Mountain group, but Ross was already doing this in the 1920's. Many of Ross's poems in *Experiment* and *Laconics* use this method including such anthologized pieces as "The Fish" (*Penguin*) and "Pine Gum" (*Oxford*), and such a poem as "A Night":

A summer night,  
a tall pine  
black against  
the cold starlight . . .

After these opening lines the poem adds details of the tree outlined against the sky. Silence and cold prevail and the scene is reflected in the quiet lake. These details then lead into the closing stanza:

The sky, star-brilliant,  
 is doubled below  
 in the still water  
 of the lake;  
 the pine-tree stands  
 against the sky;  
 through its branches  
 are seen the stars.

It is this kind of writing which led Raymond Souster, quite correctly, in his remarks "About The Author" in *Experiment*, to link Ross with W. C. Williams, for as a later critic has suggested about Williams: "Many actions are going on at once in a perpetual present, the poetic space, and though the images are necessarily sequential they form a chord which exists in a single moment."<sup>3</sup>

**B**UT ROSS ARRIVED at these ideas independently and through a reading of other poets. He mentions in a letter that he had been influenced to some extent by a minor French poet, Fernand Divoire, who is described in a survey of modern French poetry as working with the principles of "simultaneism," which had been formulated by Martin Barzun in 1912.<sup>4</sup> Ross also tried other methods of achieving simultaneity by fragmenting the lines themselves, building delaying pauses into the structure of the poem, as can be seen in various poems from *Experiment*: "Flowers", "Lions", "Spring", "Stars", "Death" "The End", "In The Ravine" (*Penguin*) and a few others. In two poems in *Experiment* he split his poem into two distinct columns: "Good Angels" and "Spring Song". Both of these poems can be read in separate columns, but each column adds a further detail when read side by side, apparently in an effort to break down the sequential nature of poetry. This method works particularly well in "Spring Song" which opens:

One day	in the spring
walking	walking
along	the railroad track
the track	near the town
I passed	looking at
a pond	a pond
slimy	of greenish water
greenish	a large pond.

Another technical aspect of Ross's search for cleanness and accuracy is his deliberate lining in one or two poems to give equal weight to all words, for, he seems to suggest by this method, if all aspects of a scene are of equal importance in presenting the whole experience, then every word must have equal value. Thus, lines can end with prepositions and definite articles for they must have the same emphasis as all the naming and acting words. Such a method also involves the reader more in the poem as an action itself, running the sense of the words from line to line, opening a moment into a larger poetic space: Ross tries to capture sound, not by alliteration, but by this method in "Pines." It can be seen at a relatively simple level in "The Creek"; it is used well in *Experiment* in "Wandering", "Winter Scene" and "Butterfly." It is particularly suited to the subject of this last poem:

Butterfly  
 making for  
 flowers to  
 suck the sweet  
 juice of the  
 blossom

how great  
 then is your  
 pleasure in  
 all your  
 wandering

course among  
 colors and  
 greenery  
 through the sweet-  
 scented  
 aerial

path of your fluttering  
 wings —  
 now in the  
 languorous  
 summer!

He also uses a longer-lined pattern to present his view of certain scenes. Again there is an element of splitting by a kind of staggering of the lines, perhaps slightly similar to the staggering of lines we find in some of the later poems of Williams.

There are several poems of this nature in *Experiment*, including his presentation of Sunnyside:

A train goes rumbling on along  
 the viaduct. Across the bridge  
 of gaunt black iron people pass  
 in autos or in streetcars, packed,  
 for this is Sunday afternoon  
 and everybody out of doors.

Not all of Ross's poems of this early period are concerned with simultaneity of experience. Sometimes the sequence of events is a necessary part of the experience. His most-anthologized poem, "The Diver" (*Penguin and Oxford*), falls into this category and he has written several others like it. He was an admirer of Wallace Stevens and perhaps this method of writing is related in some way to Stevens's insistence on continuing change and fluidity. In "The Diver" the poet searches the various levels, "into the green" the "strange light", drifting "among the cooler zones" finally breaking

from the green glimmer  
 Into the light,  
 White and ordinary of the day.

This insistence on colour is also reminiscent of Stevens, and in his search for reality, Ross uses similar images to Stevens: the moon, water, mirror — reflections, clouds, and sky among others. Ross seems to sense other worlds beneath the intensely factual world of much of his poetry and this may explain the change that comes over his verse after *Experiment* and *Laconics*.

Before examining that later verse, however, there are still other things to be said about these two volumes. I have already indicated that it is a simplification to label Ross an imagist, because of the experimental nature of his verse, particularly in the direction of technical innovation. Most of his anthologized poems tend to be what could be called scenic or descriptive pieces and indeed many of the poems of interest technically speaking can be classed in this way. But the two volumes under discussion contain other material. There are one or two reflections on mankind in a Stephen Crane manner:

It appears  
 that our fears  
 are well placed,  
 are well based;

we must now  
kill one another  
because Cain killed  
Abel his brother.

There are translations from Greek and Latin that, without being outstanding, stand up well in comparison with other translations appearing in anthologies. These translations are related to his interest in classical themes and there is a section of poems in *Laconics* concerned with classical figures. Ross had always tried to adapt classical metres to his own verse; the movement of his poems does not necessarily come out of the imagist demand "to compose in the sequence of the musical phrase," although he always kept in mind the oral rhythms within poetry. He always read "poems simply by the natural rhythm, or stresses, of the language." I remember him, when I visited him in July 1966, getting heated about stress in verse and demonstrating what he meant by making me read a poem by Goethe, then reading it himself. Many of his metrical experiments are based on Greek metrics. The series of poems, of which "Sunnyside" (quoted earlier) is a part, was written in 1925 as a "middle stage between Greek metres — Aristophanes, I think, and the 'Laconics' form which I have always called 'Two-beat'." He also wrote a series of about a hundred poems he called "Allegro" in an adaptation of Greek hexameters which he called "light sixes". The poem, "Narcissus", is one of the poems in this series and although it is printed in short lines in *Experiment*, each stanza an approximate hexameter, I will print it here in hexameter form :

Now you are reaching to grasp it, now touching the unruffled water.  
Ah! but the image is gone and the water lies ruffled and broken.  
Where, where now is the image that held you thus silent in rapture?  
Gone is that vision. You could not attain to the joy of its capture  
Know now that image was only your own face Narcissus.

There are other sections in *Laconics* devoted to the city and machinery, including "The Saws Were Shrieking" (*Penguin*), a poem arising out of his experience in a sawmill when he was a student in his last year of high school, and a section he later named "Garden" (in copies of *Laconics*, the last section is called "Various", but Ross asked booksellers to ink in the title "Garden" in its place) which contains his view of art, and presumably his view of poetry :

What is it, then,  
a work of art?

A work of art  
 is a consistency  
 among incommensurables,  
 or it is that  
 which remains equal  
 to itself.

But it is probably the opening section of *Laconics*, entitled "North", which most readers in Canada accept as the truly Canadian note in Ross. It is this opening section that seems to fit his concern with "North American" style and "the sharper tang of Canada" that he mentions in the Foreword to the volume. These poems are full of rocky and wind-swept landscapes, akin to A. J. M. Smith's "The Lonely Land":

The iron rocks  
 slope sharply down  
 into the gleaming  
 of northern water

and

Harsh, stern this tree  
 whose branches are bare  
 and twisted by the  
 savage wind  
 of northern winter.

Ross's knowledge of northern Ontario was gained on two surveying trips in the summers of 1912 and 1913. The first trip took him to Algonquin, to the area from which Tom Thomson had started his first canoe trip into the wilderness the year before. In 1913 Ross went to the area to be made famous in the paintings of the Group of Seven — the northern shore of Lake Huron in the Algoma district. The poems themselves were written, according to Ross, on a single night in April 1928, after he had had a long conversation about Canadianism with some friends. However, it is obvious that he found this subject-matter congenial to the kind of verse he was trying to write at that time. The hardness and cleanliness of landscape fitted his conception of verse, free but controlled, close to natural speech rhythms but "deliberately patterned" on Greek metrical systems. In fact, the first poem in this series of northern poems is at one and the same time an invitation to the reader into this new clean world of both poetry and the north,

to be accepted for what it is, devoid of romanticism and enjoyed as a novel venture into undiscovered realms:

Plunging into  
the shining water  
one will feel  
a shock of coldness,  
sudden, striking  
his body's every  
part, with the coldness  
of northern water.

There is delight in the sudden awareness here, akin to the new realms expressed in "The Diver." It is close to D. H. Lawrence's remark in his essay "Making Pictures": "It is like diving into a pond — there you start frantically to swim. . . . being rather frightened and very thrilled . . . The knowing eye watches sharp as a needle; but the picture comes clean out of instinct, intuition and physical action." There is fear and thrill in these poems. His eye sharp as a needle is firmly on the object. His reactions are clean out of instinct, and the land holds within it, as the poems do by the nature of their technique, physical action:

As one plunges  
venturesome into,  
timorously into  
the beautiful water  
invitingly lying —  
the northern water —  
the water is chill,  
but what does it matter?

**R**OSS'S TRAINING AS A SCIENTIST helps him to avoid any discursive material. He is trying to gauge his own sensations to these external scenes as accurately as possible, so that the movement of the poems not only lends itself to direct and simple naming of things but also is sensuous enough to include personal reactions. He may have the eye of a scientist, but it is an eye which is also aware of itself and what it records. Marianne Moore's review of *Laconics* in *Poetry* (August 1931) contains several statements that best sum up Ross's work up to 1930: "these poems . . . are evidently disciplines in the art of poetic exactitude. . . . Science's method of attaining to originality by way of

veracity is pleasing, and it is here enhanced by the considering conscience which feels as well as sees; . . . The artist's tendency is always to be seeking better explicitness and simpler simplicities, and the studious imagination that Mr. Ross has gives pleasure, besides suggesting a method." (pp. 280-1).

Marianne Moore also reviewed Ross's next volume, *Sonnets* (1932), for *Poetry* (May 1933) and found it a good volume with just "an occasional defect." This is a very kind view of this volume; even Ross himself regarded it in later years as a mere series of technical exercises, although there are times when the language and movement of a poem retains some flavour from his earlier verse, as in "Andromeda":

The large sun sinks. Across the wide calm sea  
Its red reflection creeps toward the rock  
Where, pale as a narcissus on its stalk,  
Is bound the maiden gazing fearfully.

In "Sappho" there is a command of sonnet structure in the description of Sappho herself in the octave emphasized by the restlessness of the metre contrasted to the closing calm of the sextet. There are occasional arresting lines; when, for instance, the human soul is described as being "Soft-hidden deep in matter as in wool." Marianne Moore quoted the whole of "Prometheus" as an example of Ross's sonnet writing but this is the best sonnet in the volume. There are too many poems in it which are loose in structure, wordy, repetitious, full of strained inversions for the sake of rhyme, and sometimes heavy with tinkling adverbs.

It is interesting to note, however, that Ross was writing some of these poems at the time he was writing the "native" ones; obviously he was keeping his poetic mind open. The publishing history of *Sonnets* is a little unusual: in the early part of the Depression, the Heaton Publishing Co. kept on a few printers to do day-to-day jobs and to keep the machines in operation. A director of the company asked Ross for some poems to print as a book to keep his printers busy between ordinary printing jobs. Ross's decision to publish a selection of the sonnets at that time is illustrative of his character, quirky and slightly crabby in a good-natured way. He said the poems were "a sort of reaction from a 'North American' style after the Declaration of Westminster (in 1932?)."

One group of these sonnets, however, does give a clue about the direction Ross's poetry was taking in the early 1930's. This group is concerned with spiritualism (using the word in a very general sense) and it was this aspect of Ross's poetry that John Sutherland singled out for attention in his Preface to the projected publication of some of Ross's poems by Ryerson in 1953:

Mr. Ross thinks of the natural world, not as the embodiment of spirit, but as one medium through which spirit may make itself known. . . . His method is to combine motion with stillness, the melodic run with the hushed pause, in a kind of ritual of silence. In a spell of silence, enhanced by ripples of movement, we establish communion with the "kindly daemons" who are "ever near and ever real." And through silence we are led again to motion.

Ross himself did not agree with much of what Sutherland said about his poetry: "As an enthusiastic R.C. convert he almost sees me as one, which is quite wrong." The sonnets Sutherland is alluding to here were based on a drawing by Blake, but there is no doubt that Ross was intrigued by the relations between spiritual states and the world of reality, and the connections between the unconscious mind and what images emerge from it beyond our conscious control. He maintained that he was "much closer to the medicine man than Diderot." And indeed by 1932 he was intensely preoccupied with the movement of surrealism. He was indirectly associated with a surrealist magazine in the States, *Fifth Floor Window*, which only ran for four issues in 1932. It published two of his poems (translations from Max Jacob) in the May issue.

A group he published in *Poetry* (July 1934) bears the general title of "Irrealistic Verses", even though it contains poems to be printed later in *Experiment* or in anthologies: "Reciprocal", "If Ice" (*Oxford*), "The Flower" and "The Diver." The other three poems in this group are all related to the spiritual or surrealist side of Ross. The surrealism does not emerge in the form of these poems; two of them are, in fact, regular in rhythm and rhymed but, in a paradoxical way, this regularity tends to emphasize the strange states he is attempting to indicate in the poems. Two are very slight: "Love's Silver Bells" touches on mysteries in terms of music, but it is a kind of inner music, a music that appeals to something intuitive in man:

For, bound within a hollow cell  
And older custom's chain,  
He did not hear the silver bell —  
His deafness was in vain!

The poem, "A Death", however, is worth quoting in full. It has the simplicity of a Blake lyric and it is a poem that seemed to be important to Ross himself, for when he talked to me about spiritualism, he showed me a copy of this poem in one of his copybooks, explaining that he himself found it a very strange poem, implying that it was a kind of automatic poem and that he was not too sure of its meaning himself.

Often in times before  
 He wandered through that wood.  
 He entered it once more.  
 His path was red with blood.

Some mystery there must be —  
 Solution is not known.  
 He entered carelessly,  
 At set of sun, alone.

Mysterious things were seen  
 In the shadow of the night,  
 And leaves no longer green  
 In the feeble failing light;

While spirits from the tomb  
 Gathered around his way —  
 “You too will come to us soon,  
 And you have come today.”

No signs of life were seen  
 But signs of death were known.  
 The night came down between.  
 The hunter was alone.

His side was wet with blood  
 In the bitter chilling air,  
 And he lay with side all bare  
 In that murderous dark wood.

Ross has caught that indefinite sense of *déjà vu*, of repetitions in life carrying resonances into the inner life (or vice-versa). The place is perhaps like Blake's “forests of the night”. This is a poem like “The Diver” concerned with other zones but there is no breaking out into the white and ordinary light of day here. The figure in the poem accepts his place “in that murderous dark wood”; he has been there before but, this time, he dies into the wood. He has had glimpses before of this region, he has gained knowledge previously but darkness envelops him and the hunter has become the hunted, with “His side . . . wet with blood/In the bitter chilling air.”

**R**OSS WAS WRITING prose poems indebted to Max Jacob and Franz Kafka at this time. His method of writing prose poems was somewhat unusual. They started as ordinary poems in the Laconics manner but then he

wrote them out as prose. He gave them the general title of "Distillates" and it was under this name that they were published in *Canadian Accent* in 1944, although they actually date from 1932 and first appeared in *New Directions* in 1937. I have the original manuscript of "The Spring", "The Animals All", "The Boat Ride" and "The Tower" in their Laconics form, all dated February 1932. Here are the opening lines of "The Spring" as they appear in this form:

I watched the spring  
come flowing down  
the steep hillsides  
over the stones  
turning here  
and there among  
the masses of moss  
by the roots of trees

These "Distillates" still are recognizably written by Ross in the clarity of some of the images, most notably in "The Boat Ride", "The Spring", "The Voices" and occasionally in "The Fact":

The tree spreads itself in the sunlight  
unknowing. . . . Let us find if we may the  
philosopher's stone. Perhaps it is at  
the bottom of a mud-puddle somewhere  
along the road to the farthest country  
where the moon shines backward and  
the grass is black.

Even the rhythm of this piece is characteristic of the early Ross poems, yet the subject-matter has undergone change. He is dealing with "unreal" states, "the farthest country", so that, although these prose pieces contain straight-forward language and images usually associated with his verse, they also abound in deliberately and vaguely evocative scenes and descriptions: a ruined castle, a tower, a band of sufferers emerging "into the secrecy of the startling night and the stinging stars." They also contain cryptic, rather epigrammatic phrases in much more abstract terms, as if these unknown states cannot be correctly named but in some way can be fastened to abstractions, coloured perhaps by words carrying symbolic associations: "Water is a profound and secret thing," "Regret, regret will come and may return like old year's pain," "Yet death is a white night, a wide night," "Let the rope no longer hang suspended," "Be dutiful toward the demons of gloom and doubt" and

But there are some who may deny all  
 reality, even the plainest, preferring  
 to keep themselves within the rigid  
 contours of outmoded seats of  
 thought, where thought dwelt  
 once but no longer; where the  
 acute eye can perceive now  
 only remnants, dust, and a dullness  
 too.

These prose poems Ross labelled as "hypnogogisms," coming to him during the clairvoyant state between sleeping and waking. He wrote some (although, to my knowledge, these have never been published) which were pieces of automatic writing. The interest in these unrealistic states remained with him; five of a group of six of his poems published in *Northern Review* (April - May 1951) draw to a greater or lesser degree on this source. (These poems may have been written at roughly the same time as "Distillates," of course, but the fact that he chose to submit them for publication in 1951 suggests that his mind was still fascinated by these problems.) These poems I find more successful than the "Distillates" because he links the ideas to a more specific landscape; even in "The Creek" (*Oxford*) there is a glancing reference to these unknown states at the end of the poem. "View" is a poem which suggests that things exist "to the eye of man forbidden" but our other senses, in this poem our hearing, can take cognizance of those things. This same idea is taken up in "The Spring", perhaps the best of Ross's poems dealing with these states.

At the opening of the poem, the spring is invisible but in darkness and silence "The ear extends its view/Deep into regions not attained by day." However, these sources of unseen states do not come always unasked: the ear must be a "searching heedful ear." On such occasions a new world of possibilities opens; "the ear knows a flow begun/Under an earlier sun." This may lead to a further search, and the poem continues with a description of a boat-ride to find, in order to understand, the source of the sound. There is an obvious connection between this part of the poem and the search for the Naiad in the prose poem, "The Spring"; in that poem the spring may hold the answer but to the ear of man it is "obscure syllabification" and "confused utterance." In many ways both these pieces arise out of the same kind of experience, if not the same actual experience. In the poem in *Northern Review*, the sound is still not understood well, and what in the prose poem is expressed merely as the spring "striving" to communicate with man, here is developed and made more explicit:

Not understood well

As of some creature held in a spell and striving  
To be free of that bondage, impotent however,  
And uttering a complaint  
Although its means are faint,

As if attempting to speak and not succeeding  
But strangled in utterance, making that utterance vain;  
Yet only brief must be  
This disability

Of words enchanted to meaninglessness, yet once  
Filled with meaning, and perhaps once again  
These syllables of fire  
To meaning may aspire,

Be understood. Ours is the lack of hearing.

If we become really receptive to these messages from “the farthest country,”

We again may understand  
The springs beneath the land.

Ross once thought of writing a long study in verse, “On Dreams” but as far as I know, none of this has been published. I don’t know how much was completed, although I have a manuscript version of the opening, confusedly dated; one date, Fall ’36, has the ’36 crossed out and it has been replaced by ’45? Ross also sent me a legible copy of the original manuscript but dated it only Fall ’45? The poem begins:

Dreams are an  
inconvenient reminder  
of something that is being  
overlooked in  
the straight-line  
rationalistic view  
of things.

They seem to be  
on the edge  
of other regions  
that are of greater  
significance  
and depth.

Here is another poem, then, in the Laconics manner, and Ross might eventually have decided to write it out in rhythmic prose in the manner of "Distillates."

Another little-noticed side of Ross also comes out in the prose poems. One of them is a rather bitter humourous parable called "The Animals All," and it is interesting to note that the last poems Ross had published in his lifetime were a set of humourous poems, including a parody of Robert Frost and a long sequence, "Air With Variations," (*Canadian Forum*, April 1957), a series of "squibs" (Ross's own term) based on versions of a stanza from "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" ("Water, water, everywhere" etc.) supposedly written by different poets. The range of his reading is well illustrated by this sequence, for the names include many contemporary Canadians as well as Pope and Wordsworth, Crabbe and Pound. This is his "version" by W. C. Williams:

I must show you  
 the ocean  
 salt  
 not seen but it's there  
 it is just what  
 it is  
                   salt.

He even parodies himself:

Day after day with weary eye  
 We searched the sea and searched the sky,  
 Fearing we'd made a bad mistake,  
 For this was no fresh water lake.

This element of humour is also apparent in a straightforward little poem, "The Hart House Theatre" in *Northern Review* (Summer 1956).

Ross submitted nothing to magazines from 1938 until about 1952, apart from material solicited for various anthologies and by John Sutherland for *Northern Review*, although he did write a few book reviews for *Canadian Forum* between 1944 and 1958 as well as two short essays on poetry for *Northern Review*. He confided to me in a letter that "I've done nothing (that I think of any value) at poetry since 1958 and completely lost touch with what is going on," and in another letter, "recently I've done nothing but satirical bits," the kind of thing that appeared in the last issue of *Delta* and this one he included in a letter last year:

With Lester's vacuous face  
 Plastered all over the place

I find it a relief  
To watch the demoniac Dief

I have tried to show that it is an over-simplification to label Ross a minor imagist. There is more in his poetry than a species of Canadian imagism, although his early work will still perhaps be his most important poetry. There is a mass of unpublished material, and it is very good news for Canadian poetry that Raymond Souster and John Colombo are preparing a selection of his poetry for future publication. This selection should give a much clearer insight into Ross's place in Canadian poetry.<sup>5</sup> It is time that not only the best of his unpublished poetry should be collected in book form but also those poems in periodicals, the majority of which I have tried to mention in this article, should be given a more permanent life. Copies of the short-lived *Here and Now* are fairly rare; one of Ross's best later (?) poems, "Cotton Mather," was published in this magazine and although he did record it for inclusion on a Folkways record of Canadian poetry, it has not been collected elsewhere. The second section of this poem reads:

Whenever he heard  
the wind rushing in the forest  
he muttered "The devil  
is abroad!"

He trembled at  
thought of this strange land  
and its strange  
dwellers among  
deep woods hiding  
from the white man's honesty.  
He longed to burn  
the forest and all within it  
where, thinking, he saw,  
driven by the wind  
witches flying  
like dried leaves.

It is this note of sharply defined clarity and non-discursive exactness that Ross bequeathed to Canadian poetry and that makes his work an example of his own definition of a work of art: "a consistency/among incommensurables."

FOOTNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Information about his poetic career and all prose quotations from Ross about his work (unless otherwise stated) are taken from letters written to me in 1966 or written to Ralph Gustafson over the period 1940 to 1957, in the Gustafson Literary Papers in the University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon. Where one of his poems has appeared in *The Penguin Anthology of Canadian Verse*, or *The Oxford Book of Canadian Verse*, I have indicated that fact by including the words *Penguin* or *Oxford* in parenthesis after the title of the poem.
- <sup>2</sup> *A Survey of Modernist Poetry*, p. 63.
- <sup>3</sup> J. Hillis Miller, *Poets of Reality*, p. 301.
- <sup>4</sup> Marcel Raymond, *Baudelaire to Surrealism*, p. 247.
- <sup>5</sup> Since this article was accepted for publication, the volume of selections from the poems of W. W. Ross has appeared. It is *Shapes and Sounds, Poems of W. W. E. Ross*, selected by Raymond Souster and John Robert Colombo. (Ed.).