**Ross, W.W.E. (1894-1966)**

William Wrightson Eustace Ross was a pioneering modernist poet in Canada in the early-twentieth century. He experimented with free verse, Imagism, and Japanese poetic forms, and translated primarily avant-garde works from the original French, German, Greek, and Latin into English. His most famous and anthologized poems were sparse, clean articulations of a scene or image pared down to its most essential features. Ross also experimented with more abstract Surrealist writing techniques, including dream transcription, automatic writing (which he called “hypnagogic”, after André Breton), and paragraph-length sketches of analogical or anti-realist scenarios. His literary sketches in the 1930s are often said to be the first prose-poems published in Canada.

Ross was born in Peterborough, Ontario, and studied geology and geophysics at the University of Toronto. He served in the First World War with the Canadian Signal Corps, providing battlefield communications for advance troops. Afterwards, and for the rest of his career, he worked as a geophysicist in Agincourt, Ontario at the Dominion Magnetic Observatory. In 1930, he privately published *Laconics*, a short collection of Imagist poems. While selections of the poems in this collection had been previously published in Chicago’s *Poetry* magazine and New York’s *The Dial*, they were received in Canada as part of a rising modernist nationalism. As Ralph Gustafson wrote, Ross’ poems “captured precisely, with wonder and freshness, a distinct Canada” (Gustafson 47). Ross followed his first book up with *Sonnets*, in 1932, an attempt to combine the Imagist style of *Laconics* with the longer-lined form of the sonnet. The book was an unmitigated failure, however, and even with the likes of Marianne Moore championing it led Ezra Pound to excise Ross from all Imagist anthologies outside of Canada that he had a hand in. Wallace Stevens wrote a withering response poem to the book called “A Fading of the Sun” that cemented Ross’s neglect in international modernist circles (Filreis 147-50).

Though Ross continued to write and translate works, the publications that followed during his lifetime (including two books, and appearances in multiple anthologies) were all reprints, selections, or compendiums of his early Imagist works. Despite his pioneering experimentation in Surrealism and mystical modernism, Ross’s influence and reputation have rested primarily on his role as Canada’s preeminent Imagist poet. This role was firmly cemented in 1956 when Raymond Souster’s Contact Press published *Experiment 1923-1929*, an edition that exclusively selected Ross’s most Imagistic works. In 2003, however, Exile Editions published *Irrealities, Sonnets & Laconics*, a collection that combined his published work with many previously unpublished Surrealistic and mystical poems.

**List of Works**

*Laconics* (1930; self-published)

*Sonnets* (1932; self-published)

Experiment, 1923-1929. Toronto: Contact Press, 1956.

*Shapes & Sounds: Poems of W.W.E. Ross*. Edited by Raymond Souster and John Robert Colombo. Toronto: Longman’s, 1968.

*Irrealities, Sonnets & Laconics*. Edited by Barry Callaghan and Gregory Betts. Toronto: Exile Editions, 2003.

**References and Further Reading**

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Filreis, Alan. *Modernism from Right to Left: Wallace Stevens, the Thirties & Literary Radicalism*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994.

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