



ETCHINGS OF A CREEK: THE POETRY OF ROBERT M. GIANNETTI



Robert M. Giannetti (born in 1942) is an American poet. A 1963 graduate of Niagara University, he is also a former US Army officer who did his Ph.D. in English Renaissance literature at Duquesne University in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Later on he worked as a foundation executive and was a management consultant. He went back to education and concentrated on writing and collecting antiquarian books. An

adjunct professor at Niagara University, where he has taught creative writing, he is also the owner of Bob's Olde Books, an antiquarian bookshop in the bucolic village of Lewiston on the Niagara River in New York State. The author of Drawn by the Creek, a 2003 volume of poetry, and numerous magazine publications, he digs deeply into the essence, the core of things, as he tries to come to terms with the basic questions of our existence.

Especially in America where people are isolated, living widely apart in detached houses, there is a strong need for dialogue with one's inner self. Giannetti listens intently to his inner self and explores his own inner world. He is an American, but he is primarily a citizen of a planet orbiting in a larger universe, a planet with its own history, its tyrants and its heroes, its well-known and its forgot-



ten habitations, known only by explorers seeking the essence of things and philosophical truth. Thus, the poet's choice of a place to live seems to be intentional. He lives in the Great Lakes area on the American-Canadian border, near the majestic Niagara Falls, a historic landscape once forested and teeming with eagles, osprey, deer, raccoons and American opossums. This area today retains some of its bucolic character in the midst of tourism, industrial and farming activity, but it is the poet's frequent sojourns in the mountains of Georgia, where he stays in a cabin, that define the substantial role nature plays in his life. There his close contact with nature supplies him with creative inspiration and gives him the hard-won sense of unity he has sought throughout his life.

In a real sense, Giannetti's poetry sums up his own life's experience and his approach to the nature of existence, and in doing so, he exhibits the deep contemplation of a philosophical observer of human attitudes, rituals, ceremonies and behavior. In the midst of a fast-moving, civilized world, in the barrage of information and sensations, he dwells over a detail and the structure of events. And all this is to enable him to realize that happiness is in the natural world, in the plain and in the simple: " But now/ the sound/ of the/ stream/ slows/ the action/ of my mind/ and everything/ in the space/ of my senses./ I exchange/ my breath/ with the breeze/ and am living,/ not wishing/ to be/ anywhere else,/ or to do/ anything else." Such a conscious and interactive participation in the rhythms of reality becomes the key to knowledge and aligns the elements, placing being at the level of a stream and connecting it to the whole of nature. Nature has it all aligned, proceeding from growth to decline, from initiation to the final denouement of the cycle. In human life it is crucial to reach such a stage of awareness, a state of mind that reveals in the contour of a single life's fate the fate of many different lives, a sensibility that



reveals a vision of essential humanity. Giannetti explores his surroundings through his poems, reaching deeply into many dimensions, entering secret places and mysterious passageways. Such places are visible but remain unnoticed by many people, hidden under a cloak of sense impressions, revealing themselves, just for a moment, in the gleam of Giannetti's gaze. In everyday scenes, Giannetti's poems convey natural beauty in all its aspects and dimensions. He opens himself to the beauty of the world and absorbs it like the clear mountain air and the flow of a creek. The course of his life experience brought him to a unique sense of mission, one born of a keen sense of observation and a poignant sensitivity. His sense observations and depth of thoughtfulness produce amazing effects, creating a naturalistic and metaphysical poetry, a verbal art that reveals in every word the truth of the human condition, recognizing and comprehending "the texts of surrounding reality."

Giannetti perceives decline and oblivion in the fate of the world, but he also advances a refined sense of the possibility of revitalization. Thus, however frightening the observed condition of a solitary house in winter might seem, the poet sees hope for renewal, for a brand new beginning: "Anxiety is a house/ in the cold, holding warmth but/ surrounded by the old bite seeking bone,/ huddled, peering out/ through fogged windows,/ hoping the fuel lasts,/ the roof holds and that/ it will be possible/ to stand in the sun once more." This is an image of both a real and a surreal world, suggesting a dreamlike atmosphere through a haunting phantasm. It is uniquely both an image drawn from 17th Century Flemish painting and an evocation of Dali's surreal visions, giving the impression of a view through two opposing mirrors, one of Braque and one of Klimt. One view is of impending disintegration; the other suggests an attempt to marshal the details into a composition of supreme wholeness. The anxiety is



authentic, coming upon the reader all of a sudden, temporarily closing the door and throwing the lock, distancing itself and freezing into a symbolic pose. How many such houses have been built since the beginning of time; how many human beings have such an emotional investment in them; how many people ever succeeded in building even a single wall? The poet emphasizes the vital sheltering function of a house, with all its warmth and safety, but he also points to dangers -- pervasive decay and the fragility of its structural elements.

Everything lasts for just a while. Everything is tending toward disintegration, and what man manages to determine with his mind, and what he holds fast with iron and cement, is also subject to a host of accidental events with an obvious ending. "Not confined to the space and status/ that life's fortune/ assigns to the bound bodies/ in some hallowed ground." What grows up high and blossoms, a house or a human being, has the same destiny, and the earth engulfs everything, leveling it all, wiping out any trace of anything ever having been there, everything subject to the pain of the passing away of time in eternal entropy. A distinctive characteristic of Giannetti's outlook is a sense of emptiness and a certain conviction that nothingness is innate in each being, a fact of each creature's destiny, with inertia and a dead silence waiting at the end of the trail of human life. His poetry is inexorably eschatological in its blending of ashes in the urn of earth: "I'll be a cinder in your eye/ heir to the air/ found in the winds of the world/ sweeping from smokestacks/ raining like pollen/ sighing into sifting time/ and vanishing into the void/ whispering the wonder of ultimate silence." Nobody is capable of escaping his fate, the cycle of living and falling to ashes, as these are the elemental laws inculcated in the structure of the universe. Giannetti feels a human being should be able to enjoy his life, taking advantage of all the blessings of nature, but should perceive his fleeting and transitory



nature, understanding the arithmetic of the years passed and the years to come. Giannetti is a poet of astonishing ontological depth, focusing on simple things and ordinary events. He is a philosopher of the quotidian, constantly seeking reconciliation with nature. He prefers to contemplate his surroundings and the flow of a stream (*Drawn by the Creek*), to shut himself off in a cabin rather than challenge the evanescence of things and rebel against the order and direction of existence. Back in history, a Polish poet, Cyprian Norwid, having also been in America, pointed out that humanity is not in the position to conquer eternity and evade the path leading to the grave. His American friend also accepts the world as it is, trying to unflinchingly evoke the most authentic moments -- those that make him feel he is truly alive.

In Giannetti's majestic and straightforward lyricism you can recognize the poet's immersion in the world and its polyphony, its depth and its immediacy. Several poems disclose the subtle workings of Giannetti's mind, telling much more about the world than any other descriptions or explanations could. This is the self which tries to imitate the world's harmony and order, not overlooking the slightest glint of its beauty, mystery, its perennial flow of dark and bright impulses, the constant give-and-take: "In strange alchemy/ sinking moonlight meets/ the rising sun./ Radiant silver yields/ to bold, brightening gold/ and all becomes visible/ on the morning earth,/ the magic lost." For Giannetti, the very world itself is an alchemical process, and there is a constant, cyclic refinement of lightness and darkness, silver and gold, the Moon and the Sun. However, the cauldron of all the processes is the dynamic consciousness of the poet, where everything boils, changes its consistency and undergoes vital mental metamorphoses. This happens on a personal basis as well as within "the amazingly great mind of mankind." It is both individual



and universal, immortal and eternal: "It may be only till the end/ of a long, lingering day,/ or maybe a generation or more,/ till the sunset and darkness,/ and the fainter light/ of the rising moon again/ tell the elemental story/ of meaning in the darkness." Light and dark, vivid form and formlessness, all this has been ordained for earthly being and becomes a sense of final restraint. This is the framework and range of being's vibrations and the peaks it wants to scale. As in Rembrandt's painting of a girl leaning over the picture's frame and reaching out towards us, Giannetti's poetic vision, and he himself, are reaching out to eternity, contemplating and touching the enormous breadth of human experience with lyrical intensity. You can see the will to understand oneself; to try to add to the history of the earth's peoples over the centuries a scrap of one's own fortune as an integral and substantial part. For Giannetti it was extremely important to cut himself off from the world in a remote place in mountainous Georgia, but this confinement lies deeply inside him as well, somewhere underneath the surface, at the center of his profound lyrical awareness. This isolation can be singled out, stopped as in a film frame and clearly seen in the mirror of this poem: "Soft silver smudges/ leave the sky/ as the black visage/ of a bursting storm/ comes up behind/ and attacks like/ a beast, tearing and/ separating flesh from/ the bone of nature/ and heart from the/ mind of sanity./ The weeping rain/ remains/ and water flows.../ then stands still, soaks/ the earth, sinks and disappears./ Random horror has come and gone." Our earthly life is not free from existential anxiety, which appears all of a sudden, turning our careful plans to ruins.

Especially in the breathtaking mountains, in solitude, set against the monumentality of nature, we perceive our insignificance and the transitory nature of once-thought certainties and attempts to tame the natural elements. Being in the mountains, experiencing the mist



and glow of daily twilight, Giannetti takes the opportunity to contemplate the beauty and purity of his surroundings. But these are only passing moments. The thoughts and memories, his poetic reflection, must be written down, transmitted and retained in the minds of other generations. Beauty challenges decay and gives an illusory sense of stability and permanence; but the fallen branches of trees buffeted by the wind keep reminding him of what is imminent – the inescapability of the beginning and ending of all things over time, of birth and death, of temporary union and looming separation. Thus, there is good reason for the poet to confirm the observations of a painter of the finalities: “Vermeer was right./ The light bathes and warms/ all in its gaze./ The haze we peer through/ is the inexperience of years—/ fears waiting to fade/ so the promenade of color/ can dance in the clarity of age—/ dance with the penetrating insight/ of sudden vision that can turn from/ the balance point of/ blind justice/ weighing fore and aft,/ and let the blindfold drop/ with instant attention to the wonderful color/ of the numinous Now./ Let there be light.” This affirmative statement at the end is a compelling demonstration of the notion of balance at the heart of the poem, the kind of balance that appears in the consciousness of an artistic creator and that of a child. Passing through the world and contemplating all its phenomena, Giannetti realizes his connection to the great painter’s presentation of a kind of suspended gaze balanced at the edge of understanding. Back at that time and now, beauty and the sense of stopping time are reflected in the eyes of the poet and the artist who feel and see more than what others see.

As a teacher, Giannetti analyses and interprets poems with his students, teaching them how to look at the world in a poetic way, but he has also developed a passion for collecting antiquarian books, as evident in his bookshop in Lewiston. That is why in his poetry there



are important references to different volumes, all resulting in a broader reflection upon man and the world: "I am a book keeper./ Like a bee keeper/ I care for them./ They have never stung me./ I wear the mask and gloves/ of cultivation/ when I touch them,/ seeking the honeycomb,/ taking it from the hive./ I consume some of it,/ but most goes to others,/ sweetening their drinks/ and confections and dispositions./ Brought to a store in jars,/ it can sit on the shelf for a long time,/ but eventually finds/ its way to the spoon/ of the mind. Poured over/ madness or sadness,/ it sticks to the mouth,/ turning the corners/ of a smile with silent satisfaction." There are many in this world who relentlessly collect books, putting them on shelves and arranging them according to theme and subject matter. Ensnared in the space filled with this knowledge, they feel secure, enriched by the omnipotent power of words. They reach out with their hands to open a chapter, dip into a splashing stream of thoughts, find somebody telling them a story, teaching them something, only to find somebody else telling them about a slow passing away of time and of dying, and the inability to make things last forever. But the books also have their own history and fortune, which Giannetti tries to research and re-create. That is why he goes to estate sales, which are very popular in the U.S. People are constantly building things, starting and raising families, constructing houses, piling up property, and then -- what a Polish poet, Jan Twardowski says-- they leave, all too quickly. If they have any relatives, they take over their possessions, taking what might come in handy, and selling the rest of the goods at reduced prices. It very often happens that there is nobody to deal with these possessions because of long distances and expensive transport costs, and in this situation the goods all go to estate sales. The poet takes part in such estate sales. He is a book lover, an antiquarian, looking for elusive answers to questions about human existence.



He reports on such events and their ambience in a lyrical context: “ I took many books from a dead man’s house./ An estate sale./ The man’s mind laid bare in his demise./ Books everywhere, more on the floors and in corners/ than on shelves. And in the closets, weed cutters,/ wrench sets, chess sets—/ a profusion principle repeated in the books./ Not one but five big beautiful Rembrandt/ art books, several of the same Dalis, Durers,/ Vermeers, Monets, Manets, Ernsts, Klimts./ Most unopened./ Lying there, like the wrenches,/ reiterating their statement./ Putting in stores for the winter, voraciously looking/ to a future that never came./ Unconsumed, this manic store of treasure.” At such moments the abandoned books suggest that human beings, who are continually acquiring things, will leave day-by-day a piece of their biographies behind, coming closer and closer to their “estate sales.” There is sadness and a deep knowledge of the ways of the world radiating from Giannetti’s poems which, in a sense, become small philosophical treatises. Disposing of the things belonging to the dead is as old a ceremony as the whole of human history, and you can describe the rituals in many different ways. What Giannetti is interested in is the eschatological symbolism contained in the dusty volumes and, on the other hand, their eligibility for adoption. If one can make a decision and pay the price, what was previously abandoned and orphaned, now has somebody else as its owner, wiping the dust off, putting it in the right place on the shelf and giving it continuity. The poet is as suffused with pain when he thinks of books being left behind as he is when he thinks about people themselves passing away. He keeps gazing at the stacks of volumes and that evokes reflections about survival: “Uncracked/ books, holding the spirit of man within their covers./ Never accessed, the accumulation/ merely closing upon the life/ and consuming the resources of the accumulator./ He died without getting to them,/ unable to



find or remember/ what he had, buying duplicates / and triplicates to make sure/ he would have them/ whenever it was he intended/ to get to them./ His house was an eerie emblem of all possession./ Profusion, waste,/ redistribution, disintegration./ In buying, he attempted to purchase the future./ But the weight of accumulation/ squeezed the breath from the present./ Garbage heaps at least express/ some joy of utilization./ Untouched goods in closets and in corners/ gather the dust of desperation and death.”

Giannetti's poetry is a struggle to describe and render the world in its momentary transformations and in its cyclical stabilities, but it is also a commentary on his own way of life and the life of mankind. Nobody has ever gone beyond the human condition and ever will, and our consciousness will always be deeply rooted in birth, growth and the ultimate wasting away of a feeble, emaciated and suffering human body. Accepting his corporeal condition, man must live in harmony with the laws of the whole of nature. He protects himself from cold, frost, and rain, shelters himself in a house or a small cottage, provides himself with food and drink – all this only to be able to reflect for a while upon himself and the time allotted for him, and to reflect upon the fortune of others in their beginnings and endings, and take part in some final sale. Giannetti achieves amazing effects by combining in his lyricism the delight and admiration of natural beauty with primeval eschatological realizations. Here he is akin to authors such as Edgar Lee Masters and Carl Sandburg, and there is also something in common with Billy Collins's touch of lightness and sense of transitoriness. Collins claims that poetry should be an important and integral part of our everyday life, and that poems should inspire people to think about the human condition and their belonging to the human race, renewing the world with new dimensions of perception. In Giannetti's case, we need to mention the



prominence of epiphany, which reveals to us the beauty and charm of everyday surroundings, but at the same time does not overlook human entanglements and dependencies. Death and finality describe life to the fullest; emptiness and nothingness best sum up what is the content of our days. The passing of a person points to the inevitability and imminence of human destiny. So Giannetti looks to the lessons of his and other lives, and to the etchings of a stream running in front of his cabin to reveal the true innate structure of the world, and the symbolic closing of a book becomes a real dot at the end of the original sentence. His mind soars high above the world, and he is suspended somewhere in non-being and endlessness trying to synthesize and integrate all into one. Giannetti creates a vision of endless unity and endless separation, and all the time he keeps on dreaming, never losing beauty and never dying. Although he gives up a part of himself every moment....he does not pass away.... he lives on in the revelation of his words.

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