

PROTEUS AT ROBLIN LAKE

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RECENT COMMENTATORS have suggested that Al (or A.W., Alfred, Alfred W.) Purdy is, in Margaret Atwood's phrase, a poet of "many over-lapping self-created versions". George Bowering, in his Purdy monograph, says of the earliest version, perpetrator of *The Enchanted Echo* (1944), "he seemed to think that the poet had to be a sort of Emily Dickinson, maybe with a moustache". Mention of Emily Dickinson in the same breath as *The Enchanted Echo* is gross flattery to that jejune conglomeration of verses, yet Bowering has a point. He cites a quatrain which does *sound* like Emily Dickinson, the resemblance deriving from the fact that Purdy, too, seemed to need to make poems in fixed stanza forms, many of them standard in nineteenth-century hymnology. *The Enchanted Echo* demonstrates two things about Purdy, both crucial. First, even in the formal strait-jacket he provides himself, he has an ear. Second, perceptible when *The Enchanted Echo* takes its place in the Purdy *œuvre*, this is the initial promulgation of poet Purdy, Purdy Mark One (so to speak, since we are in the Air Force) at "a sort of moral attention".

The last phrase comes from the narrator of *The Great Gatsby*. Scott Fitzgerald told us that Jimmy Gatz (i.e., Jay Gatsby, earlier version) derived from "his Platonic conception of himself". *The Enchanted Echo* reveals what conception of "the poet", and himself as poet, Purdy developed from the age of thirteen, when he began to write the stuff, up to his mid-twenties when he was unwittingly (unDuchampishly) a moustachioed Emily Dickinson. One can think of numerous examples of poets whose first books are awkward or amateur beyond belief (two well-known examples: John Crowe Ransom, William Carlos Williams). Closest parallel to Purdy among "colonial" poets is his New Zealand near-contemporary Louis Johnson, whose *Stanza and Scene* (1945) bears the same relationship to Johnson's mature work as *The Enchanted Echo* does to Purdy's. Some poets, from their beginnings, produce highly developed and beautifully finished work, usually in small quantities. Dylan Thomas is a fine example. Others, and Johnson

and Purdy are two, grow and metamorphose in public. Such poets are more available to negative criticism, often known for their mistakes and limitations, but they seem to need publication for growth. Today, Purdy rejects that first public version of himself, regarding the work of that phase as “crap”. No wonder! for both technique and substance are routine, mechanical, stock-response. The large gestures of the verse bear no relation to Purdy’s day-to-day life. They introduce us to someone apparently plugged in to the whole range of “king and country” clichés.

We know today that Purdy was never really like that. Part of him was, of course, if *The Enchanted Echo* has any truth to it at all, but all of him, no! He did not even begin to get all the possibilities of himself into that early book, which was an act of homage to an outdated and extremely provincial conception of “the poet”, and which shows only that (like Jay Gatsby) he had to begin somewhere. Seemingly, he began from a position of extreme cultural poverty and met the need to externalize his sense of vocation in a book, an echo because of a sense, perhaps, that he was talking only to himself.

What happened next may seem surprising. As far as book publication goes, nothing happened for more than a decade. A first book, apparently, rid Purdy’s ego system of a need. He submerged. A restlessness, physical and psychological, showed itself in his way of life: running a taxi business in Belleville, Ont., and working in various factory jobs, just as in the thirties he had ridden the freights across the country. That, says Bowering, is “the stuff literary legends . . . are made of”, but such a legend had already been pre-empted at least a generation earlier by the old Georgian poet, W. H. Davies, who told us about it in *The Autobiography of a Supertramp*, fifty years ago.

Who knows what inner reasons Purdy had for his courses of action? But the “legend”, when matched up against the poetry of the late 1950s (such things as the pervasive archaisms and “poetical” language of *Emu, Remember!*) gives a distinctly schizoid impression. As far as the craft of poetry is concerned, Purdy had simply gone further into the British tradition. He had exchanged the Quiller Couch schoolboy stereotype of the poet for another and livelier one, but still a stereotype. Yet there are signs of growth: a developing consciousness of sound, language, a sense of the immediate environment — of what is actually and physically around him, and of the poem as part (an important part for him) of the process of being alive. He has begun to choose better models, in particular Hopkins, whose device of hyphenated phrases he adopts in (as Bowering acutely observes) a “striving for openness and the natural motion in freedom”.

During the late 1950s, the new influence of William Carlos Williams was being felt among Canadian poets. Up to this point Purdy had shown himself to be a typical colonial poet (easily matchable with poets in Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and elsewhere) but now he, too, began to show signs of Williams's influence — in his explicitly-stated concern with particular objects, in the run of his lines, and in his conscious concern with craft (though he labelled it, less than happily in the circumstances, “the craft so longe to lerne”):

I forget whether I ever loved you
in the past — when you enter the room
your climate is the mood
of living, the hinge of now,
in time the present tense.
Certainly you are the world
I am not done with
until I dispense with words —

Yet Purdy was already too much himself to be confined by another artist's conception of reality and the poet's relation to it, even one as seminal as Williams's. Purdy's eclecticism, his protean personality, first shows itself markedly in *The Craft So Longe to Lerne* (1959), sometimes destroying the particular poem, as in “Whoever You Are”, with its metamorphic sentiments, which curdle at the end into “romantic” melancholy. Underlying a number of the poems of this period is a strange fear of disintegration (see “Whoever You Are”, “After the Rats”, “Vestigia”, “At Evergreen Cemetery” and even “On the Decipherment of Linear B”, which portrays the work of Michael Ventris as a threat to a cherished perception of history. A half-submerged “romantic” nostalgia is betrayed here both by the theme and the poem's closing cadences.) In contrast, Purdy shows himself as Alfred W. Purdy, somewhat learned but tongue-in-cheek, in “Gilgamesh and Friend”, where he uses controlled lightness of tone to interfuse condensed mythology with contemporary details and tone of voice. Equally successful, and more important, is “At Roblin Lake”, introducing the locus of so many future poems, which was to give Purdy a central fixed point in the local. Several facets, versions, of Purdy merge — the bookish Alfred W., the self-observer, the punster, the vulnerable:

. . . wondering at myself, experiencing
for this bit of green costume jewellery
the beginning of understanding,
the remoteness of alien love —

From some poems in this volume one has a sense of disintegration — already mentioned, from others “the beginnings of understanding”. Seen in the long perspective of three decades of published work, perhaps the key moment of *The Crafte So Longe To Lerne* is in the conclusion of “At Evergreen Cemetery”:

Myself, having the sense of something going
on without my knowledge, changes taking place
that I should be concerned with,
sit motionless in the black car behind the hearse
waiting to re-enter a different world.

AN ADMIRER of Purdy has described him as being “very Canadian without being provincial”, offering an unconsciously backhanded compliment. Why has Purdy become so significant a poet for Canada today? To an outsider Canada must present a somewhat puzzling international image: innocent yet canny, straightforward yet oblique, open and yet shut in, eclectic and yet groping for a single image of itself. Some or all of these characteristics apply to Purdy, who seems as much as anyone writing today to sense what it is, the Canadian thing, the local thing, and whose work may be seen as a slow unpeeling, a groping towards the core of that thing.

Years ago, reviewing *The Crafte So Longe to Lerne*, Milton Wilson suggested that, “Purdy has to find his directions by indirections; poetically he needs to be devious.” Part of the explanation may be in Purdy’s intuition of the gap between his fellow Canadians’ daily experience and his own vocation (“Canadian without being provincial”):

Now I am a sensitive man
so I say to him mildly as hell
‘You shouldn’ta knocked over that good beer
with them beautiful flowers in it’
So he says to me ‘Come on’
so I Come On
like a rabbit with weak kidneys I guess
like a yellow streak charging
on flower power I suppose
& knock the shit outa him & sit on him
(he is just a little guy)
and say reprovingly
‘Violence will get you nowhere this time chum

Now you take me
 I am a sensitive man
 and would you believe I write poems?'
 But I could see the doubt in his upside down face
 in fact in all the faces
 'What kinda poems?'
 'Flower poems'
 'So tell us a poem'
 I got off the little guy but reluctantly
 for he was comfortable
 and told them this poem
 They crowded around me with tears
 in their eyes and wrung my hands feelingly
 for my pockets for
 it was a heart-warming moment for Literature
 and moved by the demonstrable effect
 of great Art and the brotherhood of people I remarked
 '— the poem oughta be worth some beer'
 It was a mistake of terminology
 for silence came
 and it was brought home to me in the tavern
 that poems will not really buy beer or flowers
 or a goddam thing

First, an aside on provincialism. I do not believe a poem such as this could have been written by an English poet until the rise, in recent years, of live poetry in centres such as Liverpool and Newcastle. It could, however, have been written by any number of Australian or New Zealand poets in the last forty years. More to our present point: the energy with which this incident is portrayed locates the great advance of Purdy's work in the early 1960s. At its worst such energy and self-mockery results in a leer, a display of knowingness, but the best work in *Poems for all the Annettes*, for example, is due to a tension between energy and watchfulness, energy and diffidence, energy and scepticism. An earlier introversion has been superseded by something more positive. Sometimes the new energy is manifest in sweeping declarations, catalogues of whole masses, but in such instances the energy is largely of the surface and largely lost. Where it really counts is in the exploring of a relationship with one other person, a situation at once open and closed, tentative and yet assured. This is why the whole notional framework of *Poems for all the Annettes* is a happy one.

Simultaneously Purdy seems to grapple with the shape of a human exchange and the shape of a poem, as in "Encounter", a (finally unsuccessful) piece about

loosening a screw in a pantry door which had been fixed in place by another man a hundred years earlier. The poem's very occasion demonstrates Purdy's sensitivity and alertness, but he lets it diffuse into stridency, first betrayed by a verbose elongating of the line and finally by capitalization. Yet there has been an encounter and it is precisely revealing of Purdy's strength that he can realize he is talking about "the metaphysical notion about how we're all interconnected", but makes us feel the palpable human reality of his nineteenth-century counterpart. (This poem too, incidentally, has its provincialist element: the poet imagining what others must think of his being a poet — "a phony".)

With recurring amazement and admiration one meets Purdy's sensitivity to "the one important thing among so much meaningless trivia/ the one thing that always eludes you," of which he meanwhile professes, "Nothing is said or can be said." Elusiveness is directly related to life's limitless possibilities, the quality of experience, the process, painful enough and yet open :

every decision, word, thought, positive act,
causes the sum of the parts of a man's self to change
and he betrays himself into the future day after day

But this is "talking about it", one reason why this poem, "Collecting the Square Root of Minus One", appeals to me less than the finely realized concreteness of "House Guest", where Purdy combines the texture of a two-way relationship with the fabric of his own mental interests and experiences. Technically hardly more than a list, an enumeration, much may be learnt from "House Guest" about Purdy's skill in handling his materials, his adroit use of line breaks and conjunctions, his laconic eloquence, and the absurdity and yet appropriateness of detail:

Every night the house shook from his snoring
a great motor driving us on into daylight
and the vibration was terrible
Every morning I'd get up and say 'Look at the nails —
you snored them out half an inch in the night —'
He'd believe me at first and look and get mad and glare
and stare angrily out the window while I watched 10 minutes
of irritation
drain from his eyes onto fields and farms and miles and
miles of snow

Since the guest spent so much time there pounding nails, the psychology of this

is acute, and, indirectly, is a strong expression of affection for the guest, who is close enough to the poet to be included in his characteristic self-mockery.

As its title suggests, many of the two-way relationships in *Poems for all the Annettes* centre on women. "The Old Woman and the Mayflowers" epitomizes what Gary Geddes (in a recent article on Purdy) calls Canadian "ornerness", portraying the end of a woman who, "after almost 80 years of bitchiness", had died in a field:

She'd picked maybe a dozen mayflowers
before dying, and a goat ate them
out of her hand.

Ending in an understatement and diminution, Purdy yet has made a local myth, thereby giving Ameliasburg Township a meaningful name. Once again the reader is aware of a closeness, poet to subject, and perhaps the old woman is even a surrogate for the poet.

A woman is also focus of "Archaeology of Snow", frequently seen as centre-piece of *Poems for all the Annettes*, with its complementary statements:

we encounter the entire race
of men just by being
 alive here

and

a few more moments
to hang in a private gallery
of permanent imaginings

Here we perceive another element of the tension which gives Purdy's work its vitality. He is public, he is the globetrotting Canadian who makes pronouncements about public events, but one feels in the texture of his work that he is also intensely private and that, in the end, may be the more interesting thing about him. Of course, encountering "the entire" human race is not, of itself, just public. Again, the poet feels himself part of a vast process; but the meat of the poem is a human encounter and its reverberations.

Open form, particularly the fragmented beginning, establishes the poem's exploratory nature. The protagonist has lost his girl-friend, Anna, laments the loss, but does not romanticize it. Something, at once comical and beautiful, ephemeral and tangible, remains with him:

Day after next day
 I found her
 heavy buttocks
 in the snow
 printed there
 like a Cambrian trilobite
 Except the girl was not there
 but was there also somehow

Later he refers to her as “Helen of Illyria with the big behind”, at once humanizing the myth and mythifying the human. Chill weather helps retain the lost girl’s imprint, as though in some sense she is invisibly there; but with warmer weather, new season, spring, she will disappear inevitably, because the large process of the universe continues. But has she gone? Purdy’s “Platonism” intervenes to save her:

the form is HERE
 has to be
 must be
 As if we were all immortal
 in some way I’ve not fathomed

and the poem resolves itself into a sense of the “grandeur” of the interpenetration of all things into one, including the humans, of whom “there’s no end.”

Purdy’s strength shows here in his correlation of a sense of the immensity of flux and the fleetingly possessed and mock-heroic human, in the antithesis implied by the title — “Archaeology of Snow” — that man leaves traces though almost everything melts away. One thing I have not perhaps sufficiently stressed may be indicated in these opposites: Purdy’s inclusiveness, his capacity to bring to bear many facets of his personality. This, as much as anything, serves to make *Poems for all the Annettes* a landmark in his career and in Canadian poetry.

WHEN *The Cariboo Horses* was published in 1965 it confirmed Purdy’s public status, but more than one commentator remarked that no poem in the volume is the kind of “finished structure which focuses and holds attention”. Mercurial as Purdy is, that is not surprising. The most significant pieces in *The Cariboo Horses* have not a memorable facade but a presence, a texture, which permeates. Some features of Purdy’s craftsmanship at this stage will show what I mean.

My first-year English grammar text informs me that, in verbal structure, “The

continuous forms denote an action, an event, or a condition that is incomplete and still continuing”:

At 100 Mile House the cowboys ride in rolling
stagey cigarettes with one hand reining
restive equine rebels on a morning grey as stone
— so much like riding dangerous women
with whiskey coloured eyes —

Purdy is attached to objects, particularly what Williams once called “the raw beauty of ugliness”:

the football players
ride in colourless convertibles their
upholstery worn down
to foam rubber quivering tho it
is still
quite beautiful —

But, despite this, he is a poet of the verb and many poems in *The Cariboo Horses* gain their immediacy and emotional force from the verb-form (responding to Heidegger’s dictum that the human condition is *to be there*.) Poem after poem moves in the continuous form; even (“My Grandfather Talking — 30 Years Ago”) remembered incidents, are recreated as if happening now.

Such technique is one index of Purdy’s sophistication, but other methods also contribute to the poems’ momentum. In many instances the poem is a continuum, its forward pressure developed through the deployment of verbs, on the one hand, and link words, conjunctions, transitions, on the other. Used at line ends or beginnings, such devices can control the pace:

dreaming not of houris and other men’s wives
but his potash works and the sawmill hearing
only the hard tusked music of wheels turning
and hardly ever heard anything soft he
did not know one March that June was early . . .

Gary Geddes asked Purdy, in an interview, whether the open-endedness of his poems is merely a “device”. Acknowledging some debt to Olson, Purdy agreed, but said it is also “a philosophy”. If so, it is indicative of one more version of Purdy. Casting our minds back, momentarily, to a phrase in “Archaeology of Snow”, I suggested that “the form is HERE” carries “Platonic” overtones (i.e., that one element behind Purdy’s experiences is a vision of an ideal experience), but more deeply felt is the sense of the leaving of human traces. Their qualities

of presentness and movement make Purdy's mature poems highly dramatic. We are immediately involved in the process of his responses. We may then ask: what is the nature of those responses? What answers does Purdy have? I tend to disagree with those who suggest that none is offered; gradually coming into the work is a feeling for the specific occasion, person, object. Instead of Plato's chair:

I see the myth of God
is a kitchen chair
full of wormholes
and fall down and worship

The flux itself is for Purdy an answer, and a sufficient answer. His grandfather tells him "you don't dast stop/ or everything would fall down" and all indications are that Purdy believes him, profoundly. Life is that and nothing more, the movement through, — though his imagination longs for it to be more, as he suggests in "Method for Calling up Ghosts", with its wish image of the dead leaving white-painted trails. Meanwhile, experience is of "fumbling to stay alive/ and always the listening." Stoppage is death for Purdy, as is revealed even in a casual phrase such as "television's awful semi-colon" (an informative side-light on his technique).

To return to the kitchen chair. Cast up in the flux, it has particularity, but it is also common, and representative — of what one lives with day by day, "full of wormholes". Such an attitude is movingly captured in "The Country North of Belleville", a poem of the harsh farmlands, which shares something with such "provincials" as Williams, and Patrick White in his great novel of pioneer farming, *The Tree of Man*. Deeply conscious as he is of the countryside in question, "the country of defeat", where "Old fences drift vaguely among the trees", Purdy speaks as one whose restlessness has drawn him away, but who is drawn back albeit reluctantly to "the same/ red patch mixed with gold".

Time and space, spartan time and empty — or snow-filled — space, predominate in *The Cariboo Horses*. If *Poems for all the Annettes* marks the moment when Purdy's creative energies gathered into a cohesiveness which comes through, at its high points, as fierce joy, *The Cariboo Horses* follows up by confirming that he is a *Canadian* poet. Purdy's answer to Northrop Frye's (and Margaret Atwood's) question, the Canadian question, "Where is Here?", is now in the *texture* of almost every poem. One could argue *ad nauseam* about the meaning of "provincialism" (as I would argue that, seen from London or Paris, Canada is "provincial", but then I do not consider "provincial" to be a term of deroga-

tion), but I note simply that many foremost Commonwealth writers continue to feel the need to come to terms with European culture. Purdy is manifestly Canadian partially because his consciousness is a link-point between past and present, between European (but also North American) history and “the country of defeat”:

Here we are
 Euclid and Ptolemy and I
 walking along the dusty road

From this point on Purdy will be much preoccupied with the question of how, in what manner, Canadians dwell in their homeland.

Something of that manner he offers in himself — a mixture of understatement, self-mockery, pathos and comedy, beautifully evident in the two poems “In the Wilderness” and “One Rural Winter”, both narrative in their basic thrust. In the first, his encounter with the Doukhobors at Agassiz is an encounter also with Canadian history. Admiring the spiritual strength of these people, he knows throughout that he is not one of them, but merely taking notes in “a steno’s notebook”. The resulting complex stance is fruitful and revealing. Objective and yet self-mocking, he perceives both the grandeur and comedy of “the nay-sayers and spirit-wrestlers of the Kootenay”.

Self-mockery controls “One Rural Winter”, miniature mock-epic of a “journey”, to a distant outdoor john in the midst of snowbound winter:

The earth is frozen
 the beautiful trees are frozen
 even the mailbox is frozen
 & I’m getting a little chilly myself

He journeys between Muse and everyday reality, between the girl he goes out to meet (“my most delicate imagining”) and the dwelling held together by pounded thumbnails, his necessary haven (the journey too is necessary!) On his return:

the WIND
 steals all my internal heat
 my heavy body is doped with wind and cold
 and the house door
 drags me into the hall
 and the door knob
 is a handle I hold onto the sky with

Purdy is not a poet of “gems” (his discursiveness alone would make that diffi-

cult), but *The Cariboo Horses* is a rich book of which much more could be said. A grasp of the central image in "One Rural Winter", however, may convey the book's substance and the core of Purdy's work, the quality which endows the best of it with its peculiar excellence. A lone figure struggles with a harsh environment to reach the goal where he can commune with his imagination? Or is it just a guy answering the need to relieve himself, in difficult conditions? In entering Purdy's world it is hazardous to forget the necessary existence of either the shit-house or the sky.

TODAY, a common feature of Canadian poetry is the book with the single, explicit (usually factual) theme: Louis Riel, the mounties. Some good books have been produced this way, some very dull, but the interesting thing is the desire to shape a book of verse around a significant theme, often the pioneer quality of Canadian life in the not-too-distant past. Al Purdy, still in his fifties, anticipated much of this in the explorations of his own work, and perhaps his *North of Summer* (1967) started the whole trend.

Never particularly conscious of the poetry of epiphany or the lyric moment, he travels, steno's notebook at the ready, going after poems. The assumption seems to be that, given contact with his sensibility, there are poems everywhere. His task is to draw them forth. In *North of Summer*, using a familiar figure, he evokes his own role:

listening
 reaching under the stone
 to the far side of the world
 into space and beyond space

He is both maker and medium. In a "Postscript" to *North of Summer* he details the external circumstances of his 1965 Arctic visit, starting from Frobisher Bay, going north to the Arctic Circle, journeying by canoe to the Kikastan Islands in Cumberland Sound (merely recording the names here gives the project a degree of concreteness). Writing at every stage of the way, afterwards, as he tells us, he "worked on the poems for more than a year". Thus we may adduce at least two distinct stages of deliberateness, of calculation in working these poems, which have been described as "journalism". Yet there is a further element, in which,

On the country road these spring days
 odd things happen

brown men in mukluks climb
 the snake fences
 with Norris Whitney's sheep
 near Ameliasburg
 and I'm afraid to mention it
 at the village store

Purdy knows his facts, and carries them lightly, but his *attention*, concentration, does not stop there. He absorbs first the book information, next the on-the-spot details. He does not pretend to be other than what he is, a traveller come to look and listen, but his opening lines (above) should warn us that something more will emerge. When he ponders, "About the poems: they seem to me like a set of binoculars thru which you can view the Arctic . . . What I'm doing here is providing my own particular kind of optic glass," the remark has more range than may seem so at first, for everywhere he is conscious of the Arctic in the perspective of Western history, of "the InnuIt/The People/ these unknowable human beings/ who have endured 5000 years/ on the edge of the world," who yet fit into the world of Achilles, Picasso, Odysseus and Maple Leaf Gardens.

Purdy carries the book with ease, enabled by a verse-line which he handles consummately well. Capturing the bleak, brooding quality of the landscapes, he is never pretentious and his characteristic self-mockery does not desert him (see, for example, the witty "When I Sat Down to Play the Piano", another outhouse story). Notebook-carrying Purdy sees himself as one of the "white men/ who were also visitors/ and thought to be human", for better or worse bringing the twentieth-century to this arid outpost. If this were all the book has to offer it would be thin pickings indeed, but behind the cultural ambassador is another Purdy, the one whose vision may on occasion stretch to "the other side" of things:

the sea crowded with invisible animals
 the horizon full of vague white shapes
 of icebergs in whispering lagoons where
 Old Squaw ducks are going
 "ouw-ouw-ouw"
 And I think of the other side of that sound
 I have to
 because it gathers everything
 all the self-deception and phoniness
 of my lifetime into an empty place
 and the RUNNER IN THE SKIES

I invented
 as symbol of the human spirit
 crashes like a housefly
 my only strength is blind will
 to go on

A pity, perhaps, that the latter part of this passage is over-explicit to a degree, but the lines touch on something notable: first, Purdy's image of the spirit as "runner", second his puritanical conception of life as "blind will" pitted against "self-deception and phoniness". As ground for such a struggle he has a preference for spartan landscapes and there may be more than a touch of resemblance between this "empty place" at "the edge of the world" and the country around Belleville.

LIKE EARLE BIRNEY, to whom *Wild Grape Wine* (1968) is dedicated, Purdy has taken to travelling a great deal. In the interview first published in *Canadian Literature* 41, he told Gary Geddes "somehow or other one uses up one's past," and later added, "I like to think of a continual becoming and a changing and a moving." *Wild Grape Wine* (as its blurb tells us) includes poems on Mexican poverty and post-revolutionary Cuba, but the book's considerable strength derives largely from Ontario poems such as "Wilderness Gothic", "St Francis in Ameliasburg" or "Skeleton by an Old Cedar", or from the pre-history of the North American sub-continent in "The Runners".

Since 1968 four major Purdy collections have appeared. Two of these together, *Love in a Burning Building* (1970) and *Selected Poems* (1972), are a substantial retrospective. The others, *Wild Grape Wine* and the recent *Sex and Death*, are both extensive and wide-ranging. The moment seems propitious for a summing-up, but this is not easy since Purdy is both elusive and multi-faceted. Joker, traveller, mythographer, political commentator, wine-maker, common man, archaeologist, poet — all these versions of Purdy have been ably touched upon by McCallum, Bowering, Lee, Atwood, Gary Geddes and others. Something beyond these Purdy *personae* is at issue. Margaret Atwood perhaps located it when, reviewing *North of Summer*, she said, "One of Purdy's specialities is catching himself in the act."

Purdy has proved many things: among them, that a boy from Hicksville with the worst, most platitudinous and tum-ti-tum sense of poetry can become a subtle and sensitive craftsman, and that through the imagination it is possible to see

Canada clearly and see it whole (however spreadeagled and sectarian it may seem geographically and politically). To my sense, however, he has one major problem to solve before moving on.

Wallace Stevens put it that the distinctive characteristic of good poems is “the presence of the determining personality”. In that sense Purdy is very much present, but often *too much* and too self-consciously. Sometimes he is too obviously the succinct recorder: details with moral, as in “Beothuck Indian Skeleton in Glass Case (St. John’s Museum, Nfld.)”, which opens, flatly, “Six feet three inches/ a man of 40”. This kind of economy may easily be justified (and, in fact, is essential) but it can also have a certain air of banality, like the TV ads in which the husband lies beside his wife in bed at night after having taken his indigestion pill. Dialogue: *She*: “Feel good?” *He*: “Feel great!” Of course, thousands of dollars depend on the omission of those pronouns, etc., but the outcome is a travesty of honest conversation. When Purdy’s notebook is more evident than his spark, his efficiency more obvious than his insight, his work can resemble that ad. This plus a certain discursiveness prevents *Wild Grape Wine* from being as satisfying as *The Cariboo Horses*. Yet there is much excellence in the book: the almost uncanny depth and rightness of “The Runners” (a touchstone, as Dennis Lee notes in his eloquent response to the poem), the zest of “The Winemaker’s Beat-Etude” (with its “GREAT JEROBOAM/ that booms inside from the land beyond the world” — presumably the land of the Sky Runner, found in a moment of earthly release), and the crucial discovery of *a tone of voice* in such cornerstone poems as “Wilderness Gothic”, “Roblin Mills”, “The Runners” and “My Grandfather’s Country”, in which Purdy appears to be establishing Canada’s psychic bearings.

That he could not do with vague generalizations and he achieves his tone partly by knowing a great deal, factually. Avid bookstore browser and collector of Canadiana, Purdy has grounding in Canadian history, ancient history, world affairs, art, myth, psychology. Since the basis of most of his verse now is story-telling (note how, in recent books, the characteristic poem length is two to three pages) he can deploy a great deal of *information*. A resulting journalistic element in the poems is an added dimension of self-consciousness. Self-admittedly, he goes looking for poems the way another man would go on safari. *Sex and Death* contains great slabs of poems got from a trip to South Africa. Nothing wrong with that, except that it presents a paradigm case of the risks involved. Going to South Africa one is, inevitably, the liberal visiting fascist/racist stronghold. From such a preconception, the poems can begin to write themselves.

Purdy's Ontario poems *feel* (I, as immigrant, can suggest no more) as if they have a deep rightness not present in his South Africa/Cuba/Etcetera "trips". In *Sex and Death* particularly one encounters the journalist who goes to the places he writes about in order to authenticate his "literary product" ("At Acayucan we stopped/ to water and feed/ the engine's horses").

Deliberately sought "experience" has as its corollary in this instance the poet as observer at a distance, able to throw in an occasional knowing aside ("I'm being too clever about it of course"). Purdy seems to have given up, for the most part, the participatory verb-forms of *The Cariboo Horses*. Often a static, ponderous quality has seeped into the verse. One cannot but admire "Hiroshima Poems", for example, for their competence and unexceptionable sentiments, as a man's offering of "a part of himself not even original" but necessary. Necessary obeisances to the horrors of our world, such poems are not the true depths of Purdy. Rather the essential tone of voice (the voice as essence), the equally essential participation, reach us again in, say, "The Horseman of Agawa". Here we are not buzzed by overt reference to "identity questions", but watch a reaching out for a "secret knowing" beyond words. Purdy is beginning to grope not only with the problem of "Where is Here?", but the ontology of selfhood.

What I am saying, I suppose, is that many poems *display* too much Al and Co., but *reveal* too little Purdy. Perhaps it is churlish, however, to ask for an artist attributes he does not wish for himself? Purdy ends the main part of *Sex and Death*:

And we the third persons
are a kind of privileged children
suspend judgment sometimes
and not loving ourselves
love the mystery
and do not understand it

The poem is called "Observing Persons". But what mystery is this? As I have worked with Purdy's poems, ranging from doubt as to their value, to the excitement of fully discovering a zestfully genuine poet, to the sense of some elusive element in the work (a depth glimpsed, fleetingly, occasionally, then gone, gone) I have been reading also the new edition of Merton's *Seeds of Contemplation*: "Contemplation . . . is the experiential grasp of reality as *subjective*, not so much 'mine' (which would signify 'belonging to the external self') but 'myself' in existential mystery." What has this to do with Purdy?

Here and there in his work of the past few years are poems in which Purdy the

personality and pundit is completely submerged, where the sense of subject is totally empathetic:

And I do not know why
 whether because I cannot hunt with the others
 or because the things I have done are useless
 as I may be useless
 but there is something here I must follow
 into myself to find
 outside myself in the mammoth
 beyond the scorn of my people
 who are still my people
 my own pain and theirs
 joining the shriek that does not end
 that is inside me now
 The shriek flows back into the mammoth
 returning from sky and stars
 finds the cave and its dark entrance
 brushes by where I stand on tip-toes
 to scratch the mountain body on stone
 moves past me into the body itself
 toward a meaning I do not know
 and perhaps should not . . .

Far deeper than surface coruscations, fluid in movement and of the exact tonal essence, in such poetry participation and self-definition merge in a way which suggests (through vibrations as much as words) that Purdy may yet take us to realms unexplored. Thoreau once said, "I have travelled much in Concord". Purdy may have the means to do likewise around Ameliasburg. A year or two ago he professed to be "running out of places" to travel to. But then he was referring only to places *out there*.