

A. W. PURDY

An Interview

*Conducted by
Gary Geddes*

- G**EDDES: Somehow your poetry manages to be domestic and historical at the same time. Is this what critics mean by calling it epic?
- PURDY: "Rooms for rent in the outer planets." Yes, but I don't think it's epic. Epic sounds grandiose to me; and I don't think I'm grandiose. I certainly hope I'm not.
- GEDDES: In "The Country North of Belleville" there is a sense of beauty and terror in the description. Do you find the Canadian landscape hostile?
- PURDY: Landscapes hostile to man? I think man is hostile to himself. Landscapes, I think, are essentially neutral.
- GEDDES: But you travel a lot, as do many Canadian writers, and write about the places you visit. Is this because it is easier to control the elements of a newer, smaller area?
- PURDY: Easier than Canada, you mean? No, it isn't that. I have the feeling that — before I worked at jobs and described the places where I was and the people that I met, etc. — that somehow or other one uses up one's past. It isn't that when one goes to another country one is consciously seeking for new poems, because it would get to sounding as goddam self-conscious as hell. For instance, if you go to Baffin Island to write poems (which I did, incidentally) . . . well, I don't like to look at it that way. I'm interested in going to Baffin Island because I'm interested in Baffin Island.
- GEDDES: And the poems just happen.
- PURDY: I write poems like spiders spin webs, and perhaps for much the same reason: to support my existence. I talk, I eat, I write poems, I make love — I do all these things self-consciously. The "new area" bit . . . well, unless one is a stone one doesn't sit still. And perhaps new areas of landscape awake old areas

of one's self. One has seen the familiar landscape (perhaps) so many times that one ceases to really see it. Maybe it's like the expatriate writers, Joyce and so on, who went to foreign countries in order to see their own.

GEDDES: You have been called the great Canadian realist (to drag one from the bottom of the bag). Do you write any poems which *don't* have some base in actual experience?

PURDY: Aren't you talking about poets like Mallarmé? Very few poets do that. I've written poems about things, even doorknobs, but generally speaking it's out of my own life.

GEDDES: Do you feel at ease to "cook" your experiences for the sake of a poem?

PURDY: After you've lived your whole life writing poetry (and I started writing at thirteen), I think you've always got one ear cocked, listening to know if you're good enough to put it into a poem. Do you mean, to be wholly involved in the experience without seeing it as something else? No, I don't think so, if that's what you mean. I always know what I'm doing or feeling or seeing. I'm self-conscious about being self-conscious about being self-conscious.

GEDDES: In your "Lament for Robert Kennedy" there seems to be a qualitative difference between the first part of the poem, where you are dependent for the most part upon rhetoric and abstraction, and the second part, where the images and language become personal and concrete. Do you think that your poetry is strongest when it is attached to images from your own landscape?

PURDY: Yes, I think so. I was being pretty propagandist in the early part of that poem; but, also, when you say there's nothing concrete in it, how about the skidrow losers with the bottle of good booze in their hands like a lily? Yes, I generally stick to the concrete or get to it pretty quick. You can start from the concrete, but I don't think you can take off from no stance at all.

GEDDES: I especially like your poem, "Portrait", about Irving Layton. What did you mean in the last line?

PURDY: I don't remember the last line, frankly. What is it?

GEDDES: "And then again I'm a bit disappointed."

PURDY: Well, I think the thought on my mind was that somebody had fixed themselves, pinned themselves down, taken a stance, identified themselves far too fully. I don't think . . . in my own case I like to think of a continual becoming and a changing and a moving. I feel that Irving takes such positive stances that I'm a little disappointed, because I think he could have done much better. For instance, now he's writing poems in *The Shattered Plinths* about various new events, about violence. Violence is a damned interesting subject, but not

the way he's treated it somehow. Everything about Irving is positive; if you were to argue with him on any of these points, he'd defend them all vehemently. You wouldn't be able to win the argument, but he'd still be wrong.

GEDDES: Is it a general characteristic of modern poets to *find* themselves too quickly? Creeley, for example, seems to have established a voice or a style which he exploits; one wonders whether the style reflects or *directs* the life-rhythms.

PURDY: I only know a bit about Creeley. I don't *like* his style very much; I don't like the deliberate ambiguities at the ends of his poems. But style is something that I was very hung up on a few years ago, when I kept noticing, or thought I did, that all the critics were insisting that you find your voice, that you find *a* consistency, and that you stick to it. Now this, of course, is what Creeley has done; and it's apparently something the critics still approve of. I disagree with it all along the line. I don't think that a man is consistent; he contradicts himself at every turn. Housman, for instance, takes a very dim view of life for the most part, is very depressing — but human life isn't like that *all* of the time. You wake up in the morning, the sun is shining and you feel good; this also is a time when Housman could have written a poem. I can't believe he never felt good once in his life. Anyway, I disagree with this consistency bit very strongly.

GEDDES: Would you not say that the success of *The Cariboo Horses* has something to do with *your* having finally found some kind of voice or consistency?

PURDY: As far as I'm concerned, I found *a* voice (not necessarily a consistent one), but I thought that I was at my best beginning about 1961-62, when *Poems for all the Annettes* was first published; I was sure I had hit a vein in which I could say many more things. I'd been looking for ways and means of doing it; and finally, it got to the point that I didn't care what I said — I'd say anything — as long as it worked for me.

GEDDES: How consciously are you concerned with technique? Do you share the recent technical interests of Williams and Olson, such as concern for the line, the syllable, the process of breathing?

PURDY: My technique, I suppose, takes a bit from Williams, a bit from Olson; for instance, I agree for the most part with using the contemporary, the modern, idiom. On the other hand, if I were writing a certain kind of poem I might avoid colloquialisms, idiosyncrasies, slang, and so on. It just depends; it all has to do with the poem. No, I pay no attention to the breathing bit; and I never compose on a typewriter, as Olson is supposed to do. Most of the time when

I'm writing I don't think of how to write the thing at all, consciously; sometimes I do. When I wrote a poem about hockey players, I deliberately put in swift rhythms to simulate the players going down the ice. And there are times when I've mixed up rhythms deliberately. But other times, whatever rhythm you get in there seems accidental; though I don't suppose it is, because a poet writes a lot of poems. I'm concerned with techniques, yes, but I don't consciously spend so much time thinking of them as Williams and Olson do.

GEDDES: What is it that makes a poem work?

PURDY: Technique? The language itself is part of that, also the various methods used to write a poem. But somehow saying that is not enough. There ought to be a quality in a good poet beyond any analysis, the part of his mind that leaps from one point to another, sideways, backwards, ass-over-the-electric-kettle. This quality is not logic, and the result may not be consistent with the rest of the poem when it happens, though it may be. I believe it is said by medicos that much of the human mind has no known function. Perhaps the leap sideways and backwards comes from there. At any rate, it seems to me the demands made on it cause the mind to stretch, to do more than it is capable of under ordinary and different circumstances. And when this happens, or when you think it does, that time is joyous, and you experience something beyond experience. Like discovering you can fly, or that relative truth may blossom into an absolute. And the absolute must be attacked again and again, until you find something that will stand up, may not be denied, which becomes a compass point by which to move somewhere else. I think that when you put such things into words they are liable to sound like pretentious jargon. Such things exist in your mind without conscious thought, perhaps in that unknown area. And sometimes — if you're lucky — a coloured fragment may slip through into the light when you're writing a poem.

GEDDES: How do your poems generally take shape?

PURDY: Well, that's tough. I wrote the title poem of *The Cariboo Horses* in about twenty minutes, revised it a little, and that was about it; and I took about eight years to write another poem in the same book, which still isn't as good as it ought to be. In the hockey player poem, I wanted a strong contrast between the metrics and prose; and I tried to make several passages about as prosy as possible in order to contrast with the swift metrical rhythms.

GEDDES: Could you describe the evolution of a single poem?

PURDY: Well, there used to be an old grist mill in Ameliasburg village — four stories high with three-foot-thick walls of grey stone. In 1957-58 I explored that

mill from top to bottom, trying to visualize the people who used to operate it. Marvelling at the 24-inch wide boards from nineteenth-century pine forests; peering curiously at wooden cogs and hand-carved gears, flour-sifting apparatus, bits of rotting silk-screens, and so on.

My interest in the mill grew to a strong curiosity about the people who built it — what were they like? — those old farmers, pioneers, dwellers in deep woods, men who worked from dawn to day's end, so tired the whole world wavered and reeled in their home-going vision. Most of the old ones were United Empire Loyalists, come here to the wilderness after the American Revolution because they had no other place to go. The man who built the village mill in 1842 was Owen Roblin. He lived to be 97, and lies buried in Ameliasburg graveyard near the black millpond, with wife and scattered brood of sons nearby.

I questioned the old people in the village about Owen Roblin. It seems . . . well, out of it all came my poem, "Roblin's Mills".

GEDDES: More than 30 poems in *The Cariboo Horses* are open-ended, concluding with a dash or some other punctuation suggesting incompleteness. Is this simply a device?

PURDY: The open-endedness is both device and philosophy, but it doesn't bar formalism if I feel like it: i.e., I reject nothing. No form, that is, *if* I feel like it and the poem agrees. I was doing it a good deal at the time; maybe that owes something to Olson's "in the field" bit — a line is as long as it's right for it to be. But I don't like periods very much; if I can work a lot using commas and semi-colons I will. It should just be taken as the reader takes it: I don't attach much more to it than just dispensing with punctuation. Its effect, of course, is different from punctuation, but I haven't gone into that. My own poems *without* this give me a peculiar feeling I can't explain.

GEDDES: The experience that goes into a poem is changing even as the poem is written; in fact, the poem *changes* the experience.

PURDY: You mean *fixes* it.

GEDDES: No, I mean that the open-endedness works against the final fixing of the experience.

PURDY: Well, yes, *you* said it. I have thought of that, but not in connection with these poems. One thinks of poems as little bits of life cut out, except that they are as one sees life with one's mind. You have the odd feeling that you can reach back and pick a poem that will take the place of that experience in the past. It does in one's life of course, but there are so many ifs and buts that when I say a thing I'm never sure if I'm right.

GEDDES: Is poetry a way of exploring experience for you?

PURDY: Jesus Christ, that's an awful question! I've no idea. I like to write poetry; I get a kick out of writing poems. I suppose to a limited degree it does explore my own experience; but if anybody else was looking, they would deny that the poem described it, I expect, particularly my wife. I write poetry because I *like* to write poetry. It's much like getting drunk once in a while, especially if you write something you like. Exploring one's experience sounds like such a terrible way to describe a simple thing like writing a poem. Doesn't it though?

GEDDES: As a descriptive poet, what is your response to external objects?

PURDY: In the first place, I don't consider myself any particular kind of poet. About objects in relation to myself, this is as subjective as hell. Any time any poet writes about an object, he's got to be subjective, no matter how objective he appears. I've sometimes thought that everybody sees the same colour differently. One isn't always able to express these differences in words, since words are so limited and have such large potential at the same time. No, I'm far more interested in objects in relation to something, in relation to people.

GEDDES: You once asked Stephen Spender what he thought of Kenneth Patchen. Is Patchen a favourite? And which of your contemporaries do you admire?

PURDY: Did I ask that? That's a tough one, there are so very few. No, Patchen is not a favourite of mine. I like his "Dirge"; that's about all I can think of. I like a lot of those poets who are producing in a consistent line, exactly as I said I would not like to do. Robert Bly has adopted a particular style and is writing pretty decent poems; but this style becomes very monotonous if he keeps it up — and he does keep it up. Charles Bukowski is writing in a style in which I also write; but that's just about his *only* style. I hope to get out of it once in a while.

There are so damned few. I like some of James Dickey, for instance, quite a bit; but somehow or other, he lives at such intense white heat so much of the time that I don't believe he can possibly exist; he must burn up. He keeps being confounded, rivers keep boiling through his veins, he keeps becoming exalted all of the time.

In Canada? I like Newlove; I think he might have a chance to do something pretty good. Ian Young, George Jonas, — maybe. Who else? They all seem to me — when they adopt some special way of writing, like bp nichol and the concrete boys, or the *Tish* imitators of the Black Mountain — to be travelling down a dead end.

But in the world there are several, some living some dead, that I like: I like

Pierre Supervielle very much and, of course, Pablo Neruda and Cesar Vallejo and one or two others. *Modern World Poetry* (in translation) is an awfully good book.

GEDDES: What about earlier writers?

PURDY: I hope to find other poets to expend the same enthusiasms on as I did on Dylan Thomas and, to a certain extent, Robinson Jeffers; and also John Donne at one time. But enthusiasms pass. I was tremendously enthused over Layton about 1955; that enthusiasm has pretty well passed. I agree with my own line on Layton, that words no sooner said become clichés, though Layton is not all cliché. Somehow the immortal claptrap of poetry is a cliché.

GEDDES: How much "research" went into your poems in *North of Summer*?

PURDY: Actually, I didn't do a helluva lot of research. In fact, when I was up there I was reading E. M. Forster's *Passage to India* and about fifteen other pocket books, including that one I mentioned in "When I sat down to play the Piano", William Barrett's *Irrational Man*. The point at which books you read, or information from books you read, comes into your head is not when you are reading them, but some time later. I always take off from any point or fact that seems relevant to the situation (in the North, say); I always take off on a personal expedition from there, though I may not know where I'm headed.

GEDDES: I think of your "In the Wilderness" as a Canadian "Easter 1916". Do other poems trigger you off to write?

PURDY: Yes, sometimes. Oddly enough, one poem called "Dark Landscape", which will be in *Wild Grape Wine*, I twisted around to mean something other than what Vachel Lindsay means in "Spring Comes on Forever". That was almost a direct steal, except that I used it differently. Most of the time, when you read someone else's poem, it will give you your own thoughts on the same subject, which is much more valid, I think. This is why and how I wrote the bird poem in *North of Summer*. I think it was some Cuban poet that had written a poem about birds, so I started thinking about birds. And, incidentally, "The Cariboo Horses" was written because I read in the Introduction to *New British Poetry* two quotes about horses by Ted Hughes and Philip Larkin and I thought they were terrible and that I could do better; so I started to write a poem. I think that if you write poems, your mind just knowingly or unknowingly casts around for subjects all of the time; I don't think a poet is ever not looking for subjects.