

IN THE RAW

The Poetry of A. W. Purdy

Peter Stevens

TWO POETRIES are now competing, a cooked and a raw. . . . There is poetry that can only be studied, and a poetry that can only be declaimed, a poetry of pedantry, and a poetry of scandal." So said Robert Lowell of the state of American poetry in 1960 and these remarks might also apply to the state of Canadian poetry, except that sometimes the raw poets become too involved in dogma and theory, justifying their poetic outbursts ("the raw, huge blood-dripping gobbets of unseasoned experience" as Lowell puts it) by sweeping critical judgments and discursive accounts of the ways in which they control their spontaneity, implying that their kind of spontaneity is the only and best way to write poetry. It is as if they want to show us that their raw poetry is really cooked as well; in fact, all we get is often half-baked poetry.

One of the best of our raw poets is Alfred Purdy, and he, at least, does not justify his poetry in long articles. There is a fresh no-nonsense approach to poetry in most of what Purdy has written recently and his latest volume, *The Cariboo Horses*, is one of the best collections of Canadian poetry for some time. It is the result of a long struggle on Purdy's part to hammer out for himself a poetic idiom, which is used in his latest volume with telling effect.

It has not always been so. There has been steady development in Purdy's work over the last ten years, and now is the time to assess it. His career falls into three main stages: a beginning and exploratory stage (*Pressed on Sand*, 1955, *Emu*, *Remember*, 1957, *The Craft So Long To Lerne*, 1959 — I shall deal only with the first and last volumes to show the beginning and early tentative stages of the exploration), a central poetic upheaval still retaining some unresolved uncertainties (*Poems for all The Annettes*, 1962 and *The Blur In Between*, 1962), and the emergence of a truly individual poet (*The Cariboo Horses*, 1965). I realize there is a very early volume *The Enchanted Echo*, published in 1944, but I have been

unable to trace a copy. In any case, I believe the poet wishes this volume to remain forgotten.

Pressed on Sand was published in 1955. At first reading there does not seem much connection between the poet of this volume and the poet in 1965. This is particularly true of the technique; most of the poems are written in fairly regular stanzas with rhyme or half-rhyme. The themes in this volume, however, are the ones Purdy develops throughout his career and so it is particularly relevant to study some of the poems in order to see how Purdy has developed his methods over the years in dealing with his basic themes.

The title poem is concerned with the transitory nature of human life. Individual man may be temporary, but the past may give some permanence. Man has a place, however small, in the universe and he must try to see himself in relation to the past. But as the poet remarks in "Chiaroscuro", the past does not seem very relevant to life: "the past is a dark country of statues". Art and the artist try to grasp meaning, and we see Purdy wrestling in many poems with the problems of his own art of poetry: "it becomes a bright danger/To search among the statues." An attempt must be made but it is painful and very often doomed to failure:

And words are trapped like odd, dead animals
Where dusty villages stand

The theme of permanence and art's relation to it, then, is a main theme in this volume, and it is a theme Purdy returns to time and again in his poetry. He places it against love, "Lovers in the Park", and this becomes an increasing preoccupation with him. There is a constant reference to older civilization and particularly their faded glories; for instance, the Indian civilization in "Onomatopoeic People". This theme enables Purdy to indulge his romantic nature, in such poems as "Far Traveller" and "Mary The Allan", but there is evidence in this last poem that he is going to set this romanticism against the realism of the modern world. He will set the "giant axmen in scarlet cloaks" against "the scientific men in smoky hotel rooms."

It is the balancing of these opposing forces of romanticism and realism that governs Purdy's development as a poet. In the early volumes the emphasis is on the romantic; from *Poems for all the Annettes* Purdy the realist tends to be to the fore. There is a just equilibrium in *The Cariboo Horses*.

In *Pressed on Sand* Purdy was obviously aware that traditional metres would swamp him, would commit him, perhaps, too whole-heartedly to a romantic view,

so that, although many of the poems are written in regular metre and stanza, they tend to break down. Exact rhyme gives way to half-rhyme and even when rhyme is used, its unifying force is pushed aside by enjambement (“Seasonal Malady”, “Barriers”). This conflict gives a rather artificial air to some of the poems which, in fact, emphasizes the contrast between romanticism and realism.

There is some imagery from this period, particularly that of the stars, the sun and moon, which remains a part of Purdy’s poetic equipment. Some individual phrases are reminiscent of Dylan Thomas (this kind of thing is to turn up again in *The Cariboo Horses*): “weed-forged letter,” “no men in the tide-walking town of time”, “the cupped pooled reservoir of their blood”, “that spend/Gusto like a miser’s purse”, “boomerang-sure in the dusk/Of our fate,” “all the delicate, shining, dark-vowelled designations.”

One poem in *Pressed On Sand*, “Meander”, is highly personal and discusses Purdy’s ideas about what he would like to do in his poetry. “Meander” uses rhyme, but the movement of the poem is more colloquial than that of most of the poems in the book. The poet suggests he wants to write about small things truthfully to show their importance (“The minutiae and trivia that people think/ So unimportant”) and he gives us a portrait of the artist as

a dirty, unkempt, old man,
Creating a drunken row
For no good reason, and chuckling now
And then beneath a greasy coat of tan.

HE GIVES US another poetic manifesto, “Villanelle (plus 1)”, in *The Crafte So Long To Lerne*. It is a statement about being a realist; the traditional form is broken down, again emphasizing Purdy’s fight to break away from the constraints of tradition and accepted modes. However, the poem is spoilt by the apparent contradiction between theory and practice. The poem begins:

Embrace, my verse, the language of the age

but continues with words which do not really fit in with the sentiment expressed in the opening line:

Coeval sewers of speech that make a poem
Live argot for the vermifuge of rage.

The same problem of balancing romanticism and realism runs through this volume, but I think it is more fully realized here and sometimes tempered by a note of humour which is to become more important later in Purdy's development. We find romanticism versus realism and some humour in "On The Decipherment of Linear B" and "Olympic Room (Toronto Hotel)" and humour on its own in "Canadian New Year Resolutions".

But the problems are still there. Some poems are too romantic and become somewhat obscure:

Outside, the slow rain
Which I transmute
Variously, open with its blade
Correlatives, equivalents, vaults. . . .

There is an admirable conciseness and directness in some of the poems ("From the Chin P'ing Mei") and some excruciating puns: "Oedi-puss", "any whore-weary Ulysses", "men or pause". The poems about love seem to come off best, particularly "Where The Moment Is", for here the poet equates love in a sense with one side of his poetic temperament:

Your climate is the mood
Of living, the hinge of now,
In time the present tense.

This volume, then, repeats some of Purdy's concerns but it is still in general written in regular forms with some rhyme. The discrepancy between theme and manner is probably best illustrated by the poem, "Short History of X County". In one sense, this is a poem similar to later Purdy poems, a laconic narrative full of realistic detail, but here it is fatally flawed by a failure of language because it is governed too rigidly by rhyme and structure. It contains some puns ("men or pause", "pollen and polling") and suddenly there is an archaic word, "yclept". It is not used for shock effect but for the sake of rhyme, but I wonder why Purdy felt the necessity for rhyme here. "Yclept" is on the fifth line of the stanza and it rhymes with the second line. Here are the other second and fifth line endings: middle-puddle, Toronto-long, there-air, land-that, 96-fixed, agreeably-flees, guilty-I. This shows, I think, the intrinsic disadvantage of the method for a poet like Purdy and he obviously felt dissatisfied himself, for his next volume, *Poems For All The Annettes* (1962) shows a major break with the method, even though the themes remain basically the same.

Love is a dominant theme in this collection and it is very often linked with

poetry. Love is temporary, just as other experiences in life are. Can poetry fix it or any other experience? As Phyllis Webb pointed out in a review, the poem, "Archaeology of Snow", "appears on first reading an incredibly clumsy, even redundant, work. Closer study produced my present opinion that it is the central poem in the collection." Purdy is not yet in full control of his method and some of the poems are indeed redundant and clumsy. "Poem for One of the Annettes" makes its point in spite of, not because of its technique. The poem is a clutter of fragments not fully realized. The lining is generally arbitrary. Too many prepositions dangle at the ends of lines, but it is full of a language alive with kicking, not deadened by rigid structure.

There are some good poems in this manner beside the two already mentioned: "Collecting the Square Root of Minus One", "O Recruiting Sergeants", "The Widower", "Remains of an Indian Village" and "Rural Henhouse". Some others are unbalanced by throw-away lines or dead-pan humour, as if Purdy is afraid to allow his lyric impulse free rein. It seems as if he is trying to consign his lyricism to the shorter, more orthodox poems in the book, and it is true some of these poems work well — "Hokusai at Roblin Lake", "Jade Stag", "Elegy" and "Mind Process Re A Faucet".

One could not expect that all the poems would be successful, and there are faults in *Poems For All The Annettes*. Some of the anecdotes gain nothing from being put into poetic form. Humour and words for shock effect too often become a double-headed sledge-hammer destroying some of the delicacy of the observation. Such a poem as "Cantos" is a strange mixture of the new method clinging to some regularity and half-rhyme and injected with archaic language. As a result, there is too much going on in the poem.

Nonetheless, generally speaking, the language is dynamic and an individual voice is beginning to emerge. These poems are Purdy's first real attempt to catch the here-and-now of life and place it in some context of permanence. They are his re-definitions of what things are and what they were previously thought to be. He sees the relation of *now* to *then*. This obviously means that his romanticism (things as they ought to be or as they might be) plays no significant part:

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

co-exists in so many forms
 we encounter the entire race
 of men just by being
 alive here
 Ourselves amorous
 ourselves surly
 ourselves smiling
 and immortal as hell

The poems written immediately after *Poems For All The Annettes* and collected in *The Blur In Between* are somewhat disappointing, for the exuberance of structure is replaced by much more staid forms. Only in one or two poems do the language and structure have the vitality towards which Purdy had been working in the years from 1955 to 1962. But Purdy dates the poems in *The Blur In Between* as 1960-61. Were these poems, then, written at the same time as *Poems For All The Annettes*? Did Purdy see where his poetic strength lay and deliberately exclude them from *Poems For All The Annettes*? There is still variety in the tone and attitudes of the *Blur* poems but there is not the free-wheeling rambunctious mixture of moods Purdy achieves in the *Annettes* volume. In this volume we can read poems of self-deprecation, humour and coolly austere objectivity; the best poems are those that most nearly approach the forms and mixtures of moods of the *Annettes* volume: "Biography", "Twin-Heads", and "Bullfrogs".

The poems in this volume seem to me generally uncertain. They contain most of the elements of Purdy's individuality, but there is something lacking. The liveliness of his previous volume is in some way buried, threatening to break out every now and then, yet lying too coolly within itself except for occasional spurts. But his poetic energies leap to life in his latest volume, *The Cariboo Horses*.

The Cariboo Horses contains poetry that is open in form but rigorously controlled. Purdy has won his way to a medium which will include both realism and romanticism, so that the poet's oscillation comes across not as a wavering indecisive attitude but as a consistent though varied voice, illustrating his personal concerns and his individuality. It is a volume which holds and synthesises opposites and variants. It is poetry that makes:

 a jewelled baldric from a sweat shirt
 and simmering flesh imperishable as grass roots
 and a silver bugle from a jalopy's horn.

Purdy shows all his dissatisfaction with what poetry can and cannot do, and yet he still indulges in "this madman's frenzy/ that wants to make pretty patterns".

This creates the tension in his poetry, and *The Cariboo Horses* is the most mature handling and balancing for these elements that Purdy has ever achieved. Take the title poem, for instance. Here are the first three lines:

At 100 Mile House the cowboys ride in rolling
stagey cigarettes with one hand reining
restive equine rebels on a morning grey as stone . . .

These lines seem to me to be a dynamic beginning to a poem. Notice how “rolling” is placed at the end of a line, so that it gives a sense of the riding movement of the cowboys in the first line and then adds the second action of rolling cigarettes to it in the second. “With one hand” becomes important, emphasizing their nonchalant treatment of both the horses and the skill of cigarette-making, thus throwing weight on their control of the horses in the word “reining”. But their nonchalance is dramatic; their rolling of cigarettes is “stagey”. Nonetheless, their control of the horses is firm; they are reining them with one hand even though the horses are not simply quiet; they are “restive equine rebels”. With these straightforward elements placed significantly Purdy has managed to show opposites held in tension: nonchalance with drama, and control with underlying rebellion. He has set them against “a morning grey as stone”. Notice how that short simile fits the whole context of tension and control — the unbroken greyness of the day against which the horses act in their restlessness and the control of the cowboys over them, firm as stone.

In the same poem the horses and cowboys are seen against a natural background, “clopping in silence under the toy mountains” in contrast to the “jeeps and fords and chevvy’s” in the familiar land of “the safe known roads of the ranchers”. The reader then expects the horses to be seen in a romantic landscape — even the horses’ dung is described as “golden orange” — and indeed there is a section giving a romantic view of horses:

Only horses
no stopwatch memories or palace ancestors
not Kiangs hauling undressed stone in the Nile Valley
and having stubborn Egyptian tantrums or
Onagers racing thru Hither Asia.

But it is a rejection of that romantic and nostalgic view that we get, for instance, in the two poems about horses by Larkin and Hughes quoted by Alvarez in his introduction to *The New Poetry* (Penguin, 1962). Although Purdy’s horses are related to these different horses of the past, they are “real” horses:

arriving here at chilly noon
 in the gasoline smell of the
 dust and waiting 15 minutes
 at the grocer's —

Even this ending, at first seemingly over-prosaic, gathers the tension together. The horses are “here” and actual; there is a continuation of the grey morning “at chilly noon”. They are in the familiar world of “the gasoline smell” belonging to “jeeps and fords and chevvy’s” and “the grocer’s”. But they are not quite of this world; they are kept waiting.

I have dealt with this poem in some detail to show that, although it has the deceptive surface of rather conversational prose, it is a poem firmly rooted in Purdy’s poetic technique. There are other poems that yield this kind of meaning and pleasure on close scrutiny. “Old Alex” seems a realistic portrayal of an old man using tough language. But its meaning is gathered up in a very apt simile at the end:

Well, who remembers a small purple and yellow bruise long?
 But when he was here he was a sunset.

Sometimes the tension topples because of an indulgence in fantasy, sentiment or toughness for their own sakes. This is true of a few poems, but generally the poems are not disastrously harmed.

THERE IS a tremendous variety here — humour, tenderness, social comment, personal reminiscence, and descriptions of nature and people. There is variation in the actual forms of the poems, even though the technique and attitude remain generally the same. For instance, there is a series of poems about Roblin Lake and Roblin Mills which for the most part use no punctuation (this is true of most of the poems) to give subtle connections between various ideas, enabling the poet to emphasize simultaneity of experience and time. This is particularly effective in “Late Rising at Roblin Lake”. The poem deals with the different ways a day can begin for a sleeper waking at different times:

at dawn with bird cries
 streaking light to sound to song
 to coloured silence wake with
 sun stream shuttle threading thru
 curtains

and so on. The poem closes

one August afternoon once why
stumbling yawning nude to front
window there on the dock
 in noon fog lit
with his own slow self-strangeness
stood a tall blue heron
 and the day began with him —

Purdy has reached a poetic maturity in this volume after a long and deliberate struggle to find a method for his own poetic purposes. It owes something to Williams and his followers, but it is distinctively his own. It is mature and controlled and yet shows that it can be developed further. In the poem, "Mice in the House", Purdy describes a meeting between man and mouse:

I have the feeling watching that
representatives of two powerful races
are meeting here calmly as equals —
But the mouse will not be damn fool enough
 to go away and write a poem

We should be grateful that Purdy has been damn fool enough to go away and write poetry. Let us hope he continues.

