

John Lye

The Road to Ameliaburg

Al Purdy as poet is person and *persona*; there is no escaping the earthy cynical unselfconfident egotistical balding paunching middleaged man, deliberately common and secular. He is also by turns sensitive, boisterous, ironical, whimsical, sentimental, and sententious. I would like here to investigate the world-view, the disposition and "philosophy", behind the whirligig. Despite the vivacity, the bluster, and the ironic mask, Purdy's essential stance is sentimental and conservative.

Purdy is a personal poet, and his style depends for its effectiveness on an apt use of the speaking voice. He who is speaking is often one of Purdy's three main *personae* — the common man, the boisterous man, or the sensitive man. The common-man *persona* is the base *persona*, the one on which his style stands. This *persona* is "a greyish drunkish largeish anguished man/ with unsung children and tone-deaf wife" ("Mr. Greenhalgh's Love Poem") who drinks his coffee from a thick white mug, "the kind I always get/ being an ordinary customer" ("Bells").¹ The subjects of Purdy's poetry are common and ostensibly unpretentious — personal experiences, people he has known, domestic scenes. His poetic "place" is not a tower or a grove but a hand-built house out in nowhere. He has debarred himself from the role of "Poet", and we find him on his back under his old Pontiac (horny), grubbing around a ruined house (chased off), defecating near the Pole (savaged by dogs). His poetry when bad is just broken-lined prose, and the faults of his poetry otherwise — triviality, pretention, discursiveness, bathos, bad metaphors — similarly reflect the image of the common man. At one point he laments "But I'm a pedestrian this is pedestrian verse/ without insights and I don't like that either" ("A Walk on Wellington Street"). Much of Purdy's power as a poet, however, rests in this identification.

The boisterous *persona*, lecherous, rowdy, drunken, accounts for some of his liveliest poetry (and most of his worst), and provides much of his humour. This *persona* is a blusterer and a great debunker, given to

an amused deprecation of sensitive poets. In opposition to this *persona* is that of the sensitive man, who is characterized well in "Night Song for a Woman"²:

All things enter
 into me so softly I am
 aware of them
 not myself
 the mind is sensuous
 as the body
 I am

Through this *persona* Purdy reaches some of the finest moments in his poetry; he reaches too "the still centre,/ an involvement in silences" ("Winter Walking"), the religious centre of his world. A telling encounter between these two *personae* occurs in "Observer"; here the sensitive Purdy sees patterns of beauty in nature, and the boisterous Purdy reacts against such idealization:

I curse myself for this madman's frenzy
 that wants to make pretty patterns
 cut from life
 Tomorrow I'll get roaring drunk
 and tell tremendous lies to myself
 for an hour
 and wistfully yearn for the sober truth
 of these
 polygonal dichotomous rectangular hexametric
 —trees
 and myself
 for an hour

It is obvious that the boisterous *persona* does not hold the day, that regret, wistfulness, sensitivity creep back in. The opposition between these two roles represents a conflict basic to Purdy's poetry. The sensitive rather than the tough voice is the one that predominates.

"Poem for One of the Annettes" is an apt introduction to Purdy's world. Here are the deserted and sad women, crying "the common sickness with ordinary tears". The dilemma they face is the dilemma of the world. As Purdy writes in "Mr. Greenhalgh's Love Poem",

Nothing is said or can be said. Music
 screeches and dies and everyone gets gypped
 sooner or later by death or disease or
 what's inside them because the world
 is that sort of place . . .

Purdy's solution to the women's dilemma is, typically, neither sociological nor moral; it is a solution of sentiment, an extension of sympathy. The tears of the woman are said to run, finally, to "the sea/ the shapeless mothering one-celled sea— / Oh, Anita, they do," Such a proposition cannot be reduced; it is like an assurance that there really is a home. The poem "Sculptors" betrays even more clearly this tender anguish of Purdy's (much as his defenses would hate that term.). Going through cases of returned, flawed carvings, he has a vision of the carvers themselves:

the losers and failures
 who never do anything right
 and never will
 the unlucky ones
 always on the verge
 of a tremendous discovery
 who finally fail to deceive
 even themselves as time begins
 to hover around them
 the old the old the old
 who carve in their own image
 of maimed animals
 And I'd like to buy every damned case

This sentimentality, this care for the hurt and the flawed, for "the inconsolable/ walkers in the storm/ cursing at the locked gates of fact" ("Nine Bean-Rows on the Moon"), is the ground of Purdy's stance.

Given the world, a stance such as this is open to defeat, and Purdy, in trying to deal with the world as "that sort of place", reacts against his own idealism and sentimentality. The difficulty is stated in "I Guess a Poem", in which Purdy holds in his head, "a small bright area/ that speaks man/ along with a voice that says/ 'so what?'" Purdy cannot escape cynicism and doubt. "O! Recruiting Sergeants", for instance, is an overt rejection of idealism. Faced with a call to battle for justice, Purdy declines; he is inept, and the cause is hopeless. He finds that

I'm much too much
 a bungling little mechanic and
 dare not tinker among
 the blind engineers of the universe
 who work such cruelty and sorrow with
 levers extending all the way down here,
 and whose complaint dept. has
 a dead switchboard—

Although he acknowledges the heroism of the brave, and encourages them, he himself opts for a worldly cynicism:

Mine is the commonplace acceptance of good
or evil

(a Persian at Marathon,
a Turk at Lepanto),

the cynicism of

the defeated majority that

wickedly survives

virtue—

"News Reports at Ameliasburg" is an even more universal abdication. In that poem Purdy sees the centuries "roll onward like mass-produced coffins/ to carry the world wherever the world may be going." Great and violent events of history commingle in a blur, and only "behind the centuries" outside human history, is there "something near silence". Seeing the animal creatures of the earth lying down to sleep with no cares, Purdy decides to do the same, to retreat from man's world — "I have unbuckled my sword and lay there beside them/ the sun has gone down in my village." The reaction against sentimentality yields some fine and energetic poetry; but it remains a reaction. Whether by cynicism, retreat, or irony, it recognizes the pain of understanding that the world is a cruel place and that man is a flawed and a suffering thing.

The sense of man's impotence is accompanied by a sense of the transitory, of man's continual loss through time. In "After the Rats", Purdy dwells on the dwindling of his self both physically, as the body changes, and morally, as life wears him. In "Vestigia" he laments the passing away of a woman's beauty with the accretion of fat -- "this veritable temporary truth I mourn,/ this beauty/ which is never seen/ but only remembered."³ The sense of the transitory extends from the very personal to the elegiac, a sense of cultural loss closely associated with the individual's situation, found in poems such as "Country North of Belleville". Here, on abandoned farms, once the place of a simple but harsh life, "Old fences drift vaguely among trees" and "a pile of moss-covered stones/ gathered for some ghost purpose/ has lost meaning under the meaningless sky." Return is difficult to this "country of our defeat", for "it's been a long time since/ and we must enquire the way/ of strangers."

Against the dilemma of the world, men arm themselves with illusions. They are perhaps necessary, but regrettable; illusions dodge reality, and that is their sole usefulness as well as their danger. A case in point is

The poem proceeds to take itself more seriously, and finally to talk of the agony and the grandeur of being continuous and everywhere, subdivided through space and time. The conceit appears again in "Method for Calling up Ghosts"; here he suggests that if people painted white trails wherever they went, "it would be possible to see them now," for they are still where they were. "Remains of an Indian Village" demonstrates that this conceit is more than whimsy. In the rather haunting opening of the poem, there is a sense of decay and of eternal passing away — "everything fades/ and wavers into something else." By attuning himself to this sense, and by thinking of the Indians, Purdy establishes a contact with them:

But I come here as part of the process
in the pale morning light,
thinking what has been thought by no one
for years of their absence,
in some way continuing them—

As he imagines further, the sense increases, "What moves and lives/ occupying the same space"; standing there "knee-deep in the joined earth/ of their weightless bones", Purdy imagines that he hears "their broken consonants". The past is present; a certain physical juxtaposition and imagination or memory are necessary to make the connection complete. In "Elegy for a Grandfather" the idea of continued existence occurs in an altered form. Thinking of his dead grandfather, Purdy imagines that he has somehow become his grandfather's memory, that he exists in and as his grandfather thought of him, remembered him. Purdy then is

floating among the pictures in his mind
where his dead body is,
laid deep in the earth—

Purdy becomes, then, a "relayed picture", which "perhaps/ outlives any work of art,/ survives among its alternatives." The idea that memory continues to exist is an apt corollary to the idea that individuals exist eternally in the time continuum.

This sense of continuum is the basis of Purdy's humanist view of history. The continuum, history, has about it a certain stasis. Place is constant, time is not. Time does not move 'onward'; rather, it overlays itself, has depth— "everything seems one continuous thing/ that folds itself back in the past" ("Mr. Greenhalgh's Love Poem"). A man with

imagination can reach 'through' time and connect with previous men occupying the same place. Yet individuals themselves do not remain static, but in some senses move into the future — history connects both ways. It is important for Purdy that every individual retain his value through time; a continuity and a unity of human life results. In "Astronot" Purdy argues for "an understanding that is racial" of "the mystery of things", maintaining that it "must be else the millions dead inside the earth we live on/ are truly fuckall instead of fathers who made us/ each unique drinking coffee over last night's newspaper."

The points at which an individual can contact the past are physical, and are consecrated through use by men. Tent rings that have been used by men for ages change the character of the place; the rings come as close to hierophany as can be achieved in the secular world:

In some sense I think of them
 as still here in the circle
 the small brown men
 they lived so strongly
 with such a gift of laughter
 the morning sun touches
 and glances off
 their sparkling ghosts
 To enter these tent rings
 is mingling with the past
 being in two places
 having visions
 hearing voices
 sounding in your head
 almost like madness
 summoned by wizard anakoks
 a thousand year old spell
 relayed and handed down
 a legacy
 from dead to the living

("Tent Rings")

The pool at Roblin Mills contains the past within its dark eye; old party lines sing with dead voices; the cries of the dying in the battle of Fort Louisburg are heard between the crashing, like guns, of the sea rollers; Purdy sees 5,000 years of history in the eyes of an old Indian, The world is knit together. The scene of the repairing of a church steeple, complete with landscape and with natural and human elements, is not really complete until one figures in those who knew the church before, who saw it built, the gothic ancestors. This vision of unity seems a secular replace-

He moves back to the present with this perspective; the point of the janitor is that he had nothing to do with Lumumba at all, nor with that sort of effort. He laments that the negroes here lack just the perspective he has provided — “human history is meaningless/ on this non-involved mountain.” What bothers Purdy is not the economic and social conditions but the historical, psychological condition; cut off from a perspective on the past, the negroes here are unable to deal with the present, and are cut off from it too (the noise of the building of the cultural centre does not reach them). In “Bums and Brakies”, he is concerned not that the men have too little to eat but that they have too little to feel and that they have lost their sense of their humanity. He takes exploitation of the natives for granted in “H.B.C. Post”; he is interested not in the injustice but in the fall of high expectations — a more universal condition of the heart, and one calling for Purdy’s sympathy, for his sentimental sensitivity, rather than for his indignation.

Purdy’s political poems are likewise notable for this universalizing tendency. One of the most specific of these, “In the Wilderness”, a poem about the persecution of the Doukhobors, has at its core not this particular cause but a general (and personal) statement about human aspiration. This core is in parentheses and stands dead centre in the poem:

(Talking to Big Fanny
making notes for an article
I think of coeval saints and ascetics and
the ordinary people with such
bright illusions of extraordinary freedom those
troublemakers of God:

.....

—I wonder how it feels to have your plodding
pedestrian mind sprout wings and fly
handsome as an actor playing Icarus
toward the cold sun truth) —

The Ottawa poems are universalized by the introduction of the natural world, which has the function of minimizing the importance of the political. In “The Torn Country”, for instance, the pettiness and divisiveness of men is contrasted to nature’s eternal, beautiful, uniting process.⁵

Purdy’s attacks upon capitalism and upon the modern world in general are similarly motivated. Capitalism distorts human values, it robs life of its proper direction and it robs the individual of dignity. The

old (or is she young, life-in-death?) Indian woman in "On the Avenida Juarez", hoarse, splay-footed, shouting out lottery tickets for sale "like a deaf tomcat" is such a victim of capitalism:

She has certainly been sacrificed
 to Quetzacoatl
 God of Civilization
 whose lineal descendents are
 Imperial Oil Co.
 and Coco Cola
 but her ritual death is
 unreasonably prolonged

To the modern world in general is attributed a lack of manliness, of experience and appreciation of the reality of the world. In "Boundaries" he contrasts the soft names of well-settled areas — "the mannered expressionless urban names/ mark settled boundaries" — with those of the unsettled areas, which have "the still rich/ vulgarity to match/ a man-breaking country", in which one can feel "the edge of our loneliness". Modern culture breaks man off from the natural world, uproots him; it is as much a violation of the individual's integrity as capitalism is. The nostalgia, and the appeal simultaneously to the universal and to the value of the individual life, which characterize Purdy's political and social-protest poems, have the same sympathetic and philosophic base as the sensitive caring, the doubt, and the sense of desolation of such poems as "Poem for one of the Annettes" and "Nine Bean-Rows on the Moon".

I have used the words "sensitive", "sympathetic", "caring", and "sentimental" rather freely in reference to Purdy's stance; I do not mean to intimate that he is a panty-waist, or that he is weak-willed (his poetry seems to fear this interpretation). About most of Purdy's poetry there is a fine vigour, generated not only by the self-protective boisterous voice, but also by the reaction against ideals which the harshness of the world stimulates, by the image of the common man caught in the midst of his (slightly ludicrous) situation, by an agile imagination, by the enormous energy of history which Purdy taps so often, and by a style of poetry rhetorical rather than reflective. The governing sensibility or disposition of Purdy's poetry, however, is humane and sympathetic. The emphasis is on the individual, on the meaning of his life and of his sorrows. The world with which the sensibility is faced is flawed, full of pain; God is apparently absent; meaning is precarious, hard to reach and hold. Sym-

pathy and history are the two strongest sources of value; Purdy exercises and demands the first and creates a metaphysic which ensures the meaningfulness and the accessibility of the second. As history is accessible and provides value, and as the modern world apparently allows less value to the individual even than did past times, the poetry tends to be conservative and elegiac. As "The Country North of Belleville", one of his finest poems, has it, the land where value can best be contacted is also "the country of our defeat", to which we can return only with difficulty.

Notes

1. This paper deals with what I consider to be Purdy's mature canon, the poetry published after 1964 (including the revised *Poems for All the Annettes*).
2. Revised *Poems for All the Annettes* version.
3. Revised *Poems for All the Annettes* version.
4. Revised *Poems for All the Annettes* version.
5. Typically in Purdy's poetry imagery of the natural world does 'romantic' dog-work. It tends to be amorphous, and to be applied to situations which are to be universalized or at least are to be given a serious turn. Artifacts, particularly houses, are more important to him.