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Review Article

Presiding Voices: Purdy, Layton and Gustafson

In Search of Owen Roblin. By Alfred Purdy. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1974. Unpaginated. \$12.95

The Pole-Vaulter. By Irving Layton. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1974. Pp. 94. Paper \$3.95.

Fire on Stone. By Ralph Gustafson. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1974. Pp. 90. Paper \$3.95.

Poetry as a form of speech requires a speaker and an audience. The speaker is almost always an imagined one as poetic discourse is an imagined form, a form involving imaginative invention. The imagined speaker requires an imagined audience, and the real audience may or may not imagine itself as one and the same. Distances between imagined speaker, often the poet's persona, and the poet, and between imagined audience and reader are finally incalculable, although they are clearly important to a poem's effectiveness. Faced with three recent books by three fully mature and sure-footed Canadian poets, I decided to read them with these questions in mind.

The books themselves differ in substantial ways. Purdy's *In Search of Owen Roblin* is a single long poem, documentary, and clearly intended for oral performance. It is the work of a man who in making this poem has travelled much in Roblin's Mills. Layton's *The Pole-Vaulter* and Gustafson's *Fire on Stone* consist of short poems, most of which take their subject matter from travels abroad. The kinds of travels represented as well as the sensibilities of the travellers are, of course, grounds enough for distinctions. What the poets have in common besides their assured voices, their mastery of means, is an adherence to the conventions of free or open verse. All three work within the frames of conventional discourse, and all three follow patterns that, while open, are those of speech rather than those of action. All three use masks. None writes what can be called confessional verse.

Purdy's persona is the most immediately ingratiating and most openly self-revealing. One might call his a natural voice, certainly a speaking voice, one often

not much differentiated from the poet's own speaking voice. But the voice in this long poem, as it needs to be, is a varied voice, varied in intensity and the degree of rhythmic relaxation, and these variations affect matters of distance and modify the character of the persona. The poem begins with an imperative:

Open the album
it is a cage of ancestors
locked in by metal clasps and stiff cardboard
released by my own careless fingers

(ISOR, unpaginated)

The question arises immediately: Who is the you addressed here? Is it the reader or an imaginary audience? Is it the poet himself or his persona? In poetry, the answer to such questions is hardly ever one thing or another, and here it is quite possibly all three of the above. As the poem moves on, however, the speaker more openly addresses himself or some part of himself:

Seeing those frozen faces again
opaque bulging eyes once more
beards like mormon elders
bosoms resembling the prows of sailing ships
rumps like overloaded barges
knowing these are your ancestors
but refusing to believe it

(ISOR)

But the speaker is including his audience with himself. His frank reactions are not unmasked. The humour of his hyperbolic similes insures a genial distance. But the imperative of the opening and the continuing second-person address are no accident. The speaker is clearly directing himself to a task, the search which constitutes the poem. His audience is being asked to accompany him. The poet has already set up for the poem an audience and a dual persona. The dual persona clearly accounts for the self-contradictory passage that closes the opening section — and yet leaves it open:

Close the book again — but gently
seeing your own unformed face
twisting and leaping at you
from a dozen different directions
reaching back again to them
and ahead
for the book is not closed

(ISOR)

The open book and the open face indicate directions for the poem both inward and outward.

The quest proper begins with a portrait of Ridley Neville Purdy, the poet's grandfather:

With only a short plunge back
 thru time I can locate him
 just before 1930
 the year he died age 90
 standing in my mother's living room
 a giant among the knick-knacks
 a monster among the lace doilies
 his moustache like the ram on a bulldozer

(ISOR)

From an opening which keeps continuity of voice with the poem's opening, the speaker moves toward his object, allowing the larger-than-life figure to occupy the foreground. The process is complete when the "Old Man" becomes speaker. The filtering imagination and consequent distancing are apparent in the hyperbolic, mock-heroic images. The poet is clearly hitting his stride. But the portrait has its frame:

No, my grandfather was decidedly unbeautiful
 carved and gnarled like a weathered tree
 blackened by time
 that seems dead every winter
 an equivalent to three score years and ten
 in spring buds sprout like green candles
 And I've somehow become his memory
 taking on flesh and blood again
 the way he imagined me

(ISOR)

The fanciful simile serves to shrink and place at a distance the figure of the grandfather. It prepares for the reassertion of the dual persona and the long passage of self-exploration and self-deprecation which follows. This in turn becomes another apology for the poem and leads directly on to more objective material:

And I got interested in the place
 I mean what the hell else could I do
 being a little too stupid to ever admit
 I was a lousy carpenter and a worse writer?
 —Late 19th-century houses in the village
 more scattered thru the countryside

(ISOR)

The poem's pattern has been laid down. It continues to move from self-questionings to objective materials, the stuff of history and the stuff of observation, and on to the dramatic closeness of other voices. But the framing, distancing voice always returns and clearly presides.

Does the quest succeed? Clearly it does enough to allow for affirmations, affirmations rhetorically and tonally modified by the presiding voice:

For it wasn't only Owen Roblin I was looking for
 but myself thru him always myself....
 I am the sum total of all I know
 all I have experienced and loved
 and if that makes me a monster of egotism
 bring on your Doctor Freud and Doctor Jung

(ISOR)

The poem does not end, however, with such tentative and ambivalent affirmations, but with a strongly lyrical passage, in which the questioner stands apart and allows the clearly loved details to make their own less qualified statement:

And white dust floating
 above the watery mumble
 and bright human sounds
 to shimmer among the pollen
 where bees dance now

(ISOR)

In passing from Purdy's to Layton's book, I find the ruminative quality, so characteristic of Purdy's dominant persona, totally absent. With it go too the rhythms and idioms characteristic of Purdy's voice. A radical change in persona makes for comparable changes in tones and textures. Layton's outward stance is almost always clear and his persona certain of itself. The stance is a moral one and there is no mistaking its intention:

Unchanged
 as the weatherstained gables
 in their chartered banks
 in their sleek pleasure boats

 But where
 are gone the grizzled ecstatic
 faces
 of the vehement crazy men
 who dreamed and prayed?

(PV p. 13)

Layton's appeal stems from this certainty and from the eloquence of his declarations. Questions that do occur are rhetorical, containing their answers. There is no questioning process and seldom any self-questioning. The language is heightened and strong. When vulgarities enter, they gain shock force from the formality and eloquence, particularly in the rhythms:

Noble Sartre is mute
 not knowing what to do with his dirty hands
 and Simone de Beauvoir numb
 from staring too long at her mildewing crotch

(PV p. 27)

Layton is a poet of several personae, each distinct but each clearly a facet of the whole sensibility. The forcefulness, the declarative mood that dominates most of the verse, give credibility to the voices. But one cannot measure their truth or their distance from the actual man, the poet. One can only feel and intimate such matters.

When Layton uses the second person, there is no doubt about whom he is addressing:

the strong thighed and arrogant
 never have wanted reasons
 to seek
 an end to us

Dear intrepid heart
 dear chatterbox
 you have given them
 one more reason
 —you and Jesus

(PV p. 14)

Here he is addressing Anne Frank, the subject of the poem. The form of address is within the conventions of such a poem. His imagined audience, however, is not Anne, but the Jew-haters. The tenderness expressed by the elder in Israel is not for them, and another persona, the really presiding persona of the angry prophet, is clearly speaking through the outer mask.

A similar interplay of masks occurs in "The Final Solution". The concluding lines from each of the last two stanzas show clearly enough how the voice of lament is swallowed up in the voice of anger, yet still necessarily there:

They will never return, these wild extravagant
 souls:
 mediocrity stopped up their witty mouths,
 envy salted the ground with their own sweet blood

.....
 The nickelodeon grinds on like fate, six fatties
 play cards:
 the day is too ordinary for ghosts or griefs

(PV pp. 16-17)

The interplay accounts for a good deal of the poem's effectiveness, sorrow and rage enhancing one another as they so often do in Layton's work. But what is significant if one looks back to Purdy is the finality and completeness of the poem's statement. The feelings expressed are mixed, but that fact and what else the poem has to say are placed eloquently and unreservedly before the reader. This quality in the voice is reinforced, if not created, in the formal patterning of this and most of the other poems. The effect is of roundedness without any forcing of the poem into a mould.

When Layton turns to himself in "The Shadow" in contemplation of his roles as prophet and teacher and husband and father, the interplay of personae becomes thicker, the texture of the poem, richer and more continuously ironic. The poem begins with intimations of self-doubt and self-betrayal:

I am a shadow. Everywhere in the house
 where I slip from my wife's embrace
 as if her daily kiss turns me
 inexplicably into vapour or a black cloud,
 at the university where I teach teenagers
 how to hide their emptiness and grow richer

(PV p. 18)

Whenever the speaker turns away from his own seeming irrelevance and fastens on something in the world outside himself, the mask of self-doubt gives way to that of the angry prophet, and the object of his address is clearly not his self but that same imagined audience seen in "For Anne Frank":

teach me your indifference to great events
 your boisterous pinkfaced affability as you slam
 down your cards on the table as if they were
 fists
 on an old Jew's skull...

(PV p. 19)

A more lyrical self-contemplation occurs in "Transfiguration". Here the poet questions, not so much his usefulness in an unregarding world, but his integration in the light of his many-sided imagination. This subject is closer to Purdy's preoccupation, but the poem's substance is totally unlike that of Purdy's ruminations. For one thing, the poem itself does not engage questions. The poet's thoughts, musings, speculations are fully translated into concrete, fanciful images. Compare Purdy's

First my grandfather, then Owen Roblin
 me hanging on their coattails
 gaining strength from them
 Then I went still farther back
 trying to enter the minds and bodies
 of the first settlers and pioneers here
 —how did they feel and what were their
 thoughts?

(ISOR)

with Layton's

I say it's hopeless. I shall tie a heavy stone
 to these anguished transcendental feelings
 of mine
 and drop the lot into the smiling bay;
 washed by the sea they will surface as white
 blossoms
 which the tide will present to me on bent knees

(PV p. 34)

Purdy's whole poem has been a process of integration — past into present, history and ancestors and surroundings into the self, the poem. Layton works not by absorption in process but by metamorphosis. His masks change as easily and rapidly as changing light on water. Purdy makes his poem out of the interval between the detached persona and the fully integrated poetic personality. Layton's pole-vaulting is his means of avoiding, on the surface of his poems at least, a painful coping with isolation and old age:

Ignorant trulls
 in a cold land;
 age will dry their flesh
 and wrinkle it with useless folds.
 Spry and drugged with love
 I pole-vault
 over my grave

(PV p. 94)

The vault is a literal hyperbole, and hyperbole, however forceful, creates distance, as I have already showed in looking at Purdy's use of it. Purdy's mask as hyperbolist is that of the teller of tall tales, the mythmaker of his people. It is by no means a sustained mask. Layton's self-assurance, whatever his mask, itself demands a rhetoric more continuously hyperbolic. The virtue of hyperbole well used is not to take itself totally seriously. The humour and liveliness in both these poets owe a good deal to it.

The first poem in Ralph Gustafson's *Fire on Stone* raises questions about closeness and distance very unlike those raised by Purdy or Layton:

No sunset here. She
 Shivers beside me in the
 Arctic sun, Porsanger
 Fjord the reach to Norway's
 End. Gulls congregate
 At the rubbish thrown.

(FOS p. 13)

A speaker is clearly present along with "she" (later identified as "my love"). The place is here, the time, now. Compression, packing in of detail with large vistas, clearly seeks to eliminate the seeing eye in favour of the seeing itself. The personal pronouns "she" and "my" do evoke human presences that heighten the dramatic effect. The movements are abrupt, the enjambments tight. The persona doesn't so much record experience as experience it in the poem. A stronger kinetic force than in either Purdy's or Layton's work is present, though not strong enough to break out of the conventional free-verse pattern. The quality of the verbal utterance comes closer to exclamation than to declaration or to question. Excitedness is often more overt than here. Take the poem, "Nails at Nijo", for instance:

Nightingales and plum blossoms.
 The cassette on the bed
 Plays Sibelius.
 Perversity!
 God of the northern forests,
 Tapio, at Nijo! lakes, cold
 Lakes listened-to,
 That key of B minor
 Relentless,
 Never turned from.
 An end, an end!

(FOS p. 17)

The voice is no less a speaking voice than Purdy's or Layton's, though the illusion is quite unlike that in either of those poets. There are abrupt breaks and asserted excitement in the discourse. The exclamations have to be visibly there to keep the excitement, which is an inner excitement, loud in the reader's ear. The effect is clearly that of dramatic monologue. The speaker is giving voice, not just to his awareness of the thisness of things, but to the whole explosive actuality of consciousness. The imperative is more urgent and less discriminating in its appeal than those found in Purdy or Layton. The speaker is calling for something, and the call issues as a spontaneous outburst of the excited mind. The poem ends with a more subdued but no less universal appeal:

Out of mud,
 More lotus, more lotus!

(FOS p. 17)

The subduing comes simply from the word "lotus" and its associations. One could argue that the speaker is calling on himself, the poet, to create more order, more beauty "out of mud". The making of poems is for Gustafson clearly a "lotus" act as the credo poem of the book, "To Give Intuition a Certitude", makes clear:

That is the thing: that the Light
 May become crystal; that the root
 Earth-covered, dusted with mud
 Trampled by centaurs, hoof in soil,
 That the root be yellow blossoms, petals;
 That she may touch you, fragile as flake

(FOS p. 54)

The opening, for all its abruptness, clearly sets the poem on the way of making a statement, and more than a statement, an affirmation. The overtones are religious, the syntax, liturgical. But as soon as images appear, the registering persona becomes very like that in the other poems, the voice of immediate and close and explosive experience. The process of moving away from statement to dramatic actualization is intensified in the poem's second section:

His pace visible, faith visible,
 Multifoliate stone, glass:
 Great pillars, vaulted, ambulatory,
 In the dark, windows set between,
 Crimson between, blue and ochre,
 Seasoned, pitted at back by rain,
 Colour shattered thus, light
 Whereby men walk at Chartres
 If not with Christ then that gravity
 Drawing men from continents....

(FOS p. 54)

The language is not that of conversation. The urgency of speech is still present, but now language is asked to contain as fully as it can the properties of stone and glass and the majestic rhythms of architecture. The persona becomes, as it were, lost in his homage. Out of the solidity built in this second section comes a reiteration of the poem's affirmation:

Thus the lover distils by movement
 The hidden charges of the heart.

(FOS p. 55)

Though this poem has a consistent voice, the illusion of one speaker as in dramatic monologue, it modulates musically from section to section. The texture of section 5, for instance, is very unlike that of section 2:

So Donatello cast
 Clay; Angelico kneeling moved his
 Brush; on his back there
 Michelangelo believing
 He did more than paint; Beethoven
 Not hearing, always on the move,
 No landlord in Vienna wanting
 More than a year of chamber pots;

.....

Thus have we altercations, sorts
 Illogicals that this love be made
 Imminent.

(FOS p. 55)

The tone is lighter, the speaking more relaxed, the humour closer to the surface. The final clause, echoing the syntax of the poem's opening, prepares for the final section:

That the desire
 Be without reason; that the logic be love.

(FOS p. 55)

What we have here is a poem of great eloquence, one which makes affirmations about art and love or art as love that are central to this book and to Gustafson's work generally. The form is essentially that of dramatic monologue, but there is musical elaboration and development that go well beyond the requirements of the form, though not beyond Browning in his use of it.

The buoyancy that characterizes these poems contrasts with the bitter note that so many of Layton's poems end with. Gustafson's persona is not a voice crying in the wilderness or, at least, not as consciously and bitterly irrelevant. The wilderness is not absent in Gustafson's poems, but the reaction to it by his speakers is generally one of wry bemusement rather than anger. The tone comes out of his forms. Monologues that register passing sensations, associations and feelings in all their waywardness would find it hard to maintain a single, strong tone or level of irony. Even where Layton's mask changes and his voice with it, the presiding voice is almost always still present and still presiding. One feels that shifts are most often tactical — to allow greater force to the angry voice when it returns. This tendency rises from the forms Layton uses, the strongly declarative mood of so many of his poems.

Voices inhere in verbal texture and in total forms. Detailed analysis of such things as vowel patterns would reinforce the observations I have made and refine them. Gustafson, for instance, can manage lightness, the buoyancy so characteristic, in spite of his compressed and packed forms. Often his means is that of sound patterns, short vowel sounds combined with light, explosive consonants or sibilants:

Ah we're in Time,
bottled,
corked in the
high-rise garden,
fizzling (stoppered
and praying),
mincemeat,
stiff and out.

(FOS p. 70)

Deliberate pauses and the distinctive sound patterns, cadences, create the unique voice.

As with all matters of poetic composition, those of voice and persona are finally inextricable. Analysis of them is an approach, a way of reading, which points to the distinctiveness that is the mark of mature craftsmanship and a whole sensibility at work. For poets as certain of their craft as Purdy, Layton and Gustafson, these are matters that invite further reading and point to other layers of significance.