

THE MECHANICS OF BEING ALIVE: MAJOR THEMES IN THE  
POETRY AND PROSE OF AL PURDY



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## ABSTRACT

Al Purdy once said that the poet writes about "the mechanics of being alive".<sup>1</sup> "Being alive" is a very large and therefore somewhat vague subject, and Purdy's writing, in keeping with this focus, covers a wide variety of subjects. This thesis is an examination of Purdy's poetry and prose aimed at showing that there are thematic patterns and a unity of vision consistent throughout his wide range of subjects and interests.

Purdy's central point, found in Poems for All the Annettes (1962) to the present, is that to be alive as humans means we must live in full knowledge of the fact of our own inevitable dying. The first chapter of this thesis, entitled "The Season of Man", points out the prevalence of the theme of impermanence in both early and recent poems and in Purdy's one prose work, No Other Country.

Subsequent chapters show that there are other consistent themes in Purdy's writing that grow out of this first and ultimate concern and have to do with how Purdy manages to find peace and enjoyment in being alive, alongside a full acceptance of the processes of time and decay. The chapter "Running" deals with Purdy's belief that such peace is won by active involvement in life, in being truly alive. The next chapter, "This Is a Map of Myself", shows how both Purdy's nationalism and his response to the landscape are shaped by his need to combat the sense of alienation generated by the knowledge of mortality.

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1 George Bowering, Al Purdy (Toronto: Copp Clark, 1970), p. 77.

Purdy's use of the imagination to create a sense of interconnectedness between people of the past, present and future is discussed in "The Long Misty Chain". Again, Purdy's interest in finding continuity in life grows out of his struggle for personal validation and survival. The final chapter, a brief consideration of Purdy's aesthetic purposes and style, shows that he often uses his gift of poetic vision as a means of coming to terms with what he understands to be the realities of life.

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## INTRODUCTION

Al Purdy has written many poems about many subjects in many places, but under the apparent diversity of topics are thematic patterns and a unity of vision. This thesis is an examination of the major themes that form Purdy's vision.

The thesis begins with a discussion, entitled "The Season of Man", of Purdy's central point that being alive as humans means we live essentially alone on an indifferent landscape beneath an empty sky. The only certainty is that we ultimately face extinction without memory. All other themes in Purdy's writing grow out of this first and ultimate awareness, and present various ways by which he has, or has attempted to come to terms with it.

The subsequent chapters present three of these themes in detail. "The Runner" is Purdy's symbol for the individual who, refusing to be paralysed by a sense of futility and/or rage, struggles on bravely into the unknown and is rewarded by moments when the landscape becomes familiar, even welcoming. "This Is a Map of Myself" continues the metaphor of running and presents Purdy's belief and theme that the more we get to know of the unfamiliar landscape the more we will feel a sense of belonging. This chapter also deals with Purdy's nationalism because it is the place of one's birth, for him and for us --Canada--, that should be explored first and most extensively. "The Long Misty Chain" is a discussion of Purdy's imaginative response to history. In memory and in the re-creation of the past Purdy intuits a sense of continuity that enables him to transcend the impermanence

associated with a present unconnected with past and future. The last chapter, "Why Write This Poem", is a brief consideration of Purdy's aesthetic purposes and his style.

This thesis examines Purdy's one prose work, No Other Country, and the poems included in and written after Poems for All the Annettes, published in 1962. It was around this time that Purdy says he found a voice "in which he could say many more things".<sup>1</sup> No attempt has been made here to decide whether or not this voice is a "Canadian" voice. As Purdy himself asks, could a few authors "contain in their writings the hopes and aspirations of 23,000,000 Canadians?"<sup>2</sup> Having realized that static definitions of personal and national identity are rendered useless by the variety and mutability of life, Purdy concentrates on and writes about those moments in his own life which have given him insights into both mortality and permanence. And perhaps such a vision, one that "balances dizzily on the moment"<sup>3</sup> between life and death, is the only authentic one, no matter what the nationality.

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1 Tom Marshall, A Harsh and Lovely Land (Vancouver: U.B.C. Press, 1979), p. 89.

2 Al Purdy, No Other Country (Toronto: McLelland and Stewart, 1977), p. 112.

3 Al Purdy, "The Jackhammer Syndrome", Being Alive (Toronto: M & S., 1978), p. 176.

## THE SEASON OF MAN

"To be alive", writes Al Purdy, "is to have the skin prickle, the genitals cringe at what happens to all of us".<sup>1</sup> At the centre of Purdy's main theme, being alive, is the bitter knowledge that all must die. Nothing human or humanly created survives in time. As Purdy describes it, the whole of human history is just a momentary noise in the "silence unending and elemental, leaked from a billion year period before and after the season of man".<sup>2</sup> The paradox is that we are creatures with the passion to remain permanent yet with the knowledge that we cannot do so.

Such a vision is neither new nor unique to Purdy, and he knows this:

--and here I ask all the oldest questions  
of myself  
the reasons for being alive  
the way to spend the gift and thank the giver<sup>3</sup>  
but there is no way

However, that the questions are old and without answer does not mean that they can be avoided. The hell of being alive is knowing that one is finally alone and forgotten in an immense silence, and that there can be no peace "but that must pay full toll to hell".<sup>4</sup> "Hell must be mapped

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1 Al Purdy, No Other Country (Toronto: M & S, 1977), p. 60.

2 Ibid., p. 17.

3 Al Purdy, "A Handful of Earth", A Handful of Earth (Coatsworth, Ontario: Blackmoss Press, 1977), p. 37.

4 No Other Country, p. 57.



and named".<sup>5</sup> Whatever may be affirmed as meaningful will only be able to exist authentically alongside a full acceptance of the reality of this hell. Purdy's poetry begins, but does not end with the mapping of hell, a clear-eyed examination of the "concept",

beyond animal understanding  
over the darkening pasturelands  
that stops all meetings  
and halts all travellers  
halfway home

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Hell has three different sources: the cycles of the earth, people, and the evolution of time. First, the changing seasons of the earth, and the forces of nature bring all living things to destruction. The simplest, most obvious manifestation of this is autumn:

Uneasily the leaves fall at this season,  
forgetting what to do or where to go;  
the red amnesiacs of autumn  
drifting thru the graveyard forest.

What they have forgotten, they have forgotten:  
What they meant to do instead of fall  
is not in earth or time recoverable - -  
the fossils of intention, the shapes of rot.

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The slow, quiet dying of autumn shows the hand of the larger-than-life force that is ineluctably controlling us all. Eventually, no matter how burning the desire to accomplish something, the life dies, and the desire is not "recoverable". What a person made, decays; what he was, rots. The comparison of the leaves to "amnesiacs", and the slow,

5 Ibid., p. 61.

6 "Skeleton by an Old Cedar", Being Alive, p. 124.

7 "Pause", Being Alive, p. 25.

somnolent pace of the poem suggest both the inevitability and the non-violence of decay and death. Purdy does not attribute death at any time to the willful act of a malevolent god who might be railed at. Death, rather, is the concept beyond animal understanding that democratically overtakes all life.

One of Purdy's best known poems, "The Country North of Belleville", also shows earth's slow overtaking of its inhabitants. Looking at the sparsely populated ruggedness of rural Ontario, Purdy sees the "fossils" of someone's life's work: a collapsing farm, some rusting machinery, a sinking fence. This, Purdy concludes, is the "country of our defeat":

And where the farms have gone back  
to forest  
    are only soft outlines  
    shadowy differences --  
Old fences drift vaguely among the trees  
    a pile of moss-covered stones  
gathered for some ghost purpose  
has lost meaning under the meaningless sky  
    --they are like cities under water  
and the undulating green waves of time 8  
    are laid on them

Again, the defeat has more a passive than a violent nature. As in the poem "Pause", the significance of a man's life, his purposes and goals and their manufactured counterparts, have "drift[ed] vaguely" away. The reason for doing anything has been forgotten, a "ghost purpose". This process of earth unthinkingly, indifferently and inevitably breaks down what a person has deliberately spent "backbreaking days/in the sun and rain" building up.

The younger people have left to avoid finding out what this defeat means for them:

And this is a country where the young  
     leave quickly  
 unwilling to know what their fathers know<sup>9</sup>  
 or think the words their mothers do not say

We are unwilling to know that the struggle to hold back "the undulating waves of time" is pointless. Whatever we do to assert ourselves against the laws of time and space is doomed to failure, and the setting of this poem is one where our certain defeat is obvious.

Purdy emphasizes this point again in "Elegy for a Grandfather". For a long time it seemed to Purdy that his grandfather was, if not winning, at least maintaining a hold in the battle against time. Grandfather Purdy lived to be 90 years old, and according to his grandson for whom he became a personal legend, lived a life so full "he couldn't include one more thing":

Just the same he's dead  
 . . . . .  
 And earth takes him as it takes more beautiful things  
 populations of whole countries,  
 museums and works of art,  
 and women with such a glow  
 it makes their background vanish<sup>10</sup>  
     they vanish too

The blunt tone of the line, "Just the same he's dead", emphasizes the reality that not only the weak and insignificant people vanish, but also living legends die and are forgotten. Recorded history itself is eventually obliterated by time, which, in Purdy's imagery, is like the

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9 Ibid. 8

10 "Elegy for a Grandfather", Being Alive, p. 54.

"undulating waves"<sup>11</sup> of the sea in its continual and powerful motion. What can a person do, then, to survive, to prevent time's erosion of his life? Purdy answers, "There is no way".<sup>12</sup> All we are and have is summed up in the humble image of a "handful of earth" which we can lay claim to only for a short time:

--limestone houses  
 lean-tos and sheds our fathers built  
 in which our mothers died  
 before the forests tumbled down  
 ghost inhabitations  
 only this handful of earth  
 for a time at least  
 I have no other place to go 13

Purdy suggests, in "The Country North of Belleville", that the young and hopeful have fled the beautiful yet threatening landscape of the country north of Belleville for civilization. In cities signs of decay are rapidly effaced and re-faced. The inevitable process of change and decay is masked in the challenge it stimulates to be 'modern'. Yet Purdy suggests "we may go back there/to the country of our defeat". Purdy himself has gone back because the rural landscape presents an unclouded picture of a truth about being alive, and provides a necessary corrective to human self-deception possible in cities. Here "realization seeps slow in the mind/without grandeur or self-deception."<sup>14</sup> Although we are by instinct unwilling to know what we will learn here about the futility of our own efforts, this knowledge is a

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11 "The Country North of Belleville".

12 "A Handful of Earth", Being Alive, p. 150.

13 Ibid.

14 "The Country North of Belleville".

part of hell that must be mapped before peace is achieved. It will be people who have stayed on or returned to such landscapes, Purdy believes, who will survive after "the cities die, one by one, drowned in their own garbage." <sup>15</sup> Men and women who live "non-fiction lives", "who can whittle survival from a piece of driftwood may still be living in villages beside the sea", <sup>16</sup> or in the country north of Belleville.

Purdy does not succumb to self-pity because of his own mortality. Having accepted impermanence as a fact of his life, he sets out to find what there may be of value within the limits of mortality. In "The Country North of Belleville" Purdy suggests that by relinquishing the 'pride of life' which wants to defy the process of time, we free ourselves from an obsession with death to <sup>take</sup> an interest in our lives. We can then join in the "noble struggle", like Sisyphus, "of being a fool". <sup>17</sup> The goal of the struggle is to find meaning in one's life, and is foolish in that the farms and fences, the efforts of a life, will be lost under "the undulating green waves of time". <sup>18</sup> Yet grandeur, dignity, humanity, and the essentials of identity, will be found, not in a blind, pointless defiance of the facts, but in the wisdom which accepts what cannot be changed.

In the sacrifice of the ambition to be permanent to the commitment to activity, a fellowship with the earth is achieved:

This is the country of our defeat  
and yet  
during the fall plowing a man

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15 & 16 No Other Country, p. 160.

17 "The Country North of Belleville".

18 Ibid.

might stop and stand in a brown valley of the furrows  
 and shade his eyes to watch for the same  
 red patch mixed with gold  
 that appears on the same  
 spot in the hills  
 year after year  
 and grow old  
 plowing and plowing a ten-acre field until  
 the convolutions run parallel with his own brain 19

In the repetitiveness of his actions the farmer joins himself to the rhythms of the earth and is rewarded by moments where beauty and continuity are seen. To defy the process, here to flee to cities, is to lose the possibility of such redemptive glimpses and to isolate oneself from a sense of belonging to the earth. Because the man embraces the process willingly and with effort he becomes a part of the silence and the rhythms that ultimately outlast individual lives.

The second source of individual defeat in time and space is humanity itself. In the name of progress and in the quest for betterment of our lives through technology, whose by-products, ironically, threaten to kill us, we run rough-shod over the lives of others. The poem "My Grandfather Talking --30 Years Ago" shows the effects of realizing that one's life is being overtaken by the recognizable force of progress. The occasion of the poem seems to be a conversation, real or imagined, between the younger Al Purdy and his grandfather about what it used to be like 'in the old days'. The old man begins to talk quite lucidly, if querulously. At the time spoken of at the beginning of his reminiscences things were familiar, recognizable and simple:

without no streets  
 or names or places here  
 nothin but moonlight boy 20  
 nothin but woods

As his memory begins to take in the changes, his speaking becomes incoherent and fragmented, reflecting the confusion he must have felt as his familiar turf became alien.

Why ain't there woods no more?  
 I lived in the trees an  
 how far was anywhere was  
 as far as the trees went  
 . . . . .  
 They put a road there 21  
 where the trees was

The plaintive question "Why ain't there woods no more?" shows the combined fear and indignation of the old man as the signs of home were erased. His sense of identity was bolstered by his surroundings and the trees were the boundaries of his life. The woods were also the place of sexual encounter, freedom and security. But now there is:

a house in the way  
 a wall in the way  
 a stone in the way  
 that got there quick as hell  
 an a man shouting stop  
 but you don't dast stop 22  
 or everything would fall down

The things that buttressed his idea of himself have disappeared. Although someone yelled, "Stop", the cry was pointless. The process cannot be stopped, and we watch, as the old man has watched, our

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20 "My Grandfather Talking -- 30 Years Ago", Being Alive,  
 p 58.

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid.

landscapes change, by the actions of our own children, into something we never imagined.

Purdy suggests without sentimentality that it is as natural for civilization to change as it is for seasons to change. Possibly, in his more vigorous years, the old man, like the farmer, had the strength to cope, but, now he is old and weaker, and too tired to struggle. This change has had the same effect on him as it does on leaves; he has become a shuffling, wandering "amnesiac" whose intentions have been forgotten:

You low it's time boy  
 when you can't tell anyone  
 when there ain't none to tell  
 about whatever it was I was sayin  
 what I was talkin about  
 what I was thinking -? 23

He can no longer make sense of his life and his speech reflects this fragmentation.

The old man's identity has been destroyed, not maliciously, but inevitably. Progress cannot stop or "everything would fall down",<sup>24</sup> as the old man himself realizes. Change is the very nature of life and it is only in death that change ends. Yet the old man wanted stability in his surroundings, despite what reason taught him, for a sense of personal identity. He failed to realize that identity must be created by the individual from within himself. Identity includes responses to one's surroundings, but cannot be dependent on them

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23 Ibid.

24 Ibid.



Nor should a sense of selfhood ever be declared complete. We must be open to change both in ourselves and in our surroundings. As Purdy writes in "Mind Process Re a Faucet", "for myself continuous discovery/else in the midst of somnolence: defeat after defeat".<sup>25</sup>

The only permanence in life is that which may be glimpsed when, by surrender to the "continual process",<sup>26</sup> the objective world of time and space is transcended. Then, like the man plowing a field, we see ourselves as part of the rhythm of change, and part of the "long stammering repetition of humanity".<sup>27</sup>

"Interview" presents a similar situation. The poet is talking to a man who is so old he remembers what it was like before the Canadian west was tamed. The old man speaks of his youth, again, as a time when things were recognizable, when there appeared to be an order to his world. Such order was an illusion, of course, as it always is. There are only times of apparent alignment in a world of continuous change. The comfort of believing there is stability is shown in the old man's reminiscing:

When I was young so few things  
in the world they were all numbered  
only just so many unmistakably  
everything was earth water fire air  
and a giant cut his toenails  
to make sun moon stars

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<sup>25</sup> Al Purdy, "Mind Process Re a Faucet", Poems for all the Annettes (Toronto: Anansi, 1973), p. 89-90.

<sup>26</sup> "Starlings", Being Alive, p. 154.

<sup>27</sup> No Other Country, p. 143.

--at night on the plains you counted them  
 and knew they were friends  
 and told you where you were going 28

The world of his youth could be "numbered" or contained in human concepts. There were limits and boundaries and categories one could discover, name and rely on as constants. The world was a simple combination of the four elements. There were friendly legends to explain the more difficult aspects of the universe, and most important there was a sense of belonging derived from the belief that "the stars" were interested enough to show you "where you were going". Such perceptions represent the naive self-deception of the time before the realization, which "seeps slowly in the brain" that life is defeat.

The old man once lived happily with these illusions, but now he too, like the old grandfather, sees his world as a strange and unfamiliar place. He is old, and every morning, as the dream world of the night vanishes, he is reminded again that his certainties have vanished:

What it's like to be old every morning  
 I'm 18 for ten minutes  
 before I notice the chest of drawers  
 running on all fours to the doorway 29  
 as the nurse brings tea

The suddenness of the eclipse of life is summarized in the poem "Of Course You Can't":

I breathed  
 my breath close  
 on a flower

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28 "Interview", A Handful of Earth, p. 27.

29 Ibid.



sacrifice pride, ambition and human dignity, the poem suggests, to the will to live.

The third source of defeat is the process of evolution by which whole civilizations are overtaken by famine, disaster, or by another, more powerful group. Purdy attributes the fierce insistence of René Lévesque and the Separatists that Quebec not lose its individual identity, to the fear of such a future:

And that fear is the fear we all have: that when we die and our bones rot, our unimportant lives forgotten, even our descendants will harbour no trace in themselves of what we were. The ongoing wave of time will not carry us with it: we will be what we are in our most spiritually depressed moments --nothing. (And of course, this passion for personal survival is a salient characteristic of the entire human race.) 33

In Purdy's world, such a fear is not unfounded, because several cultures in our country have suffered this fate.

"Lament for the Dorsets", for example, presents the plight of an Eskimo tribe who became extinct in the fourteenth century A.D. In their prime the Dorsets were "giants" so strong they "drove the Vikings back to their long ships." 34 All that remains now are a few bits and pieces, some "scrapers and spearheads". What they were like as people has been buried under centuries of rubble and forgetful silence.

"What happened?" 35 This is the question Purdy imagines the Dorsets asked each other when they saw their seals vanish and with them the means of survival. We assume today either that they were

33 "Monastery of the Caves", Being Alive, p. 163

34 No Other Country, pp. 136-137.

35 "Lament for the Dorsets", Being Alive, p. 50

robbed of their seals by other, more proficient hunters, or that the seals themselves migrated for climatic reasons. However, the Dorsets probably did not realize why their extinction was taking place, if they realized at all what was happening to them:

and the puzzled Dorsets scratched their heads  
 with hairy thumbs around 1350 A.D  
 --couldn't figure it out  
 went around saying to each other  
 plaintively  
 "What's wrong? What happened?  
 Where are the seals gone?" 36  
 And died

We now can surmise how the Dorsets died, but we are never sure by what decree or accident the process of extinction begins. Whether it be a well-known and powerful nation like Rome or a lesser-known, relatively obscure culture like the Dorsets, we know that whole civilizations have vanished in the gradual, larger-than-life cycle of strengthening and crumbling made apparent in recorded history. For Purdy the knowledge of such a cycle carries with it the threatening possibility that we too are moving inexorably towards a similar decline and fall.

In "Remains of an Indian Village" Purdy writes about another lost tribe. He is exploring, as the title indicates, the "rotten boards, forest rubble, bones"<sup>37</sup> that are the few remains of a once-vibrant Indian village. Again, how the tribe died is known. a plague of smallpox killed the people. But why they died is one of the "oldest

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36 "Lament for the Dorsets".

37 "Remains of an Indian Village". Being Alive. p 124.

questions" which, tragically, we are never able to answer. We are controlled by rhythms and cycles and concepts "beyond animal understanding", <sup>38</sup> which, in this poem, Purdy imagines to be "gods of decay/[who] acknowledge aid from any quarter":

But everything fades  
and wavers into something else  
the seasonal cycle and the planet's rhythm      39  
vary imperceptibly into the other

Behind a variety of superficial causes for this evolution, there is what Purdy simply calls a "continual process" by which "human bodies are shovelled quickly in the ground". <sup>40</sup>

What Purdy discovers, then, in his investigation of the rise and fall of a man's life is a simple truth about the nature of the universe. Ours is a universe of continuous change, a fact seen not only in the cycles of the moon, the seasons, the ebb and flow of the sea, but also in the "long, stammering repetition" of human lives. Where some would say there is divine control of life, Purdy sees only the mindless, repetitive rhythms of change. Peace is won, not by a faith in the beyond that there is a greater purpose to our lives, but by sacrificing such a hope to an acceptance of the spiritual ambiguity of the universe and by joining ourselves to these rhythms. There is always the possibility expressed in "Wilderness Gothic", that "Something is about to happen", <sup>41</sup> but we cannot predict what it will be. We can only do

38 "Skeleton by an Old Cedar", Being Alive, p. 124.

39 "Remains of an Indian Village".

40 "Starlings", Being Alive, p. 154

41 "Wilderness Gothic", Being Alive, p. 81.

as the speaker does in "News Reports at Ameliasburg": "I have unbuckled my sword and lie there beside them".<sup>42</sup>

In several other poems Purdy explores the possibility that every race, the whole of human civilization, could "waver into something else". In "Fiddleheads", for example, Purdy comments on the primitive appearance and taste of fiddlehead greens. Eating them, he imagines a similarity between himself and a dinosaur who also once ate them. At one time these "long-necked reptiles/thought they were emperors/of the trembling earth",<sup>43</sup> just as we assume ourselves to be now. The parallel is humbling:

We shall arrive there too  
wherever they are going  
.....  
in the long on-going game  
we have been told is important 44  
that no one wins

In Purdy's vision of things, it is only a talent for a self-deception that makes us believe humans are the rightful and final heirs of the earth. As he writes in "Prince Edward County", "we --the late comers.../no voice told us to stay/but we did for a lifetime".<sup>45</sup>

"In the Forest" takes the form of a series of entries in a diary which chronicle the progressive take-over by machines of the civilization around Ameliasburg, Ontario --Purdy's home. Purdy has

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42 "News Reports at Ameliasburg", Being Alive, p. 84.

43 & 44 "Fiddleheads", A Handful of Earth, pp.43-44.

45 "Prince Edward County", A Handful of Earth, pp.59-60.

placed himself in the role of the last survivor. In the first entry of the diary, the speaker confesses his suspicion that machines are "dominating and controlling the country roads". He is able to quell his fear by blaming such suspicions on his being alone, on drinking too much, or on incipient madness. By the end of the poem, however, the suspicion has become inescapable fact. Terror mounts as he finds his food has run out, his friends and neighbours have vanished and his phone is dead. His panic becomes a physical illness. In a final burst of combined fear and rage he tries to dynamite the machines, but cannot light the fuse because he has lost his lighter. Now

there is nothing to do but laugh  
and I laugh  
No doubt it is being recorded 46

The situation of the poem is fantasy, but the point is real. The lost tribes and cities of history are proof that there are processes at work beyond the understanding of the finite mind. At this moment, the agents of the process could be slowly creeping in around us, sealing off all escape routes. Perhaps the poem is, in part, an indictment of the dehumanization of the machine age, but more important, it is Purdy's imaginative presentation of how individuals respond when they realize their lives are being overtaken:

Rage in me rises above the sickness  
knowing I am mad but with an immense sanity  
as side-effect of madness  
while sweat soaks my clothes  
and the thought comes that this is one accident  
I will experience myself



but it will not be accidental  
nothing is . 47

Common to each kind of disintegration discussed is a cancer-  
like , slow inevitability,

and some uneasy awareness  
of what we are slowly becoming  
which is not aware of us 48

Insignificance, death and oblivion: these are the legacies of being  
alive. Purdy, in what D.G. Jones calls a "sacrificial embrace",<sup>49</sup>  
investigates death and what death will be like for him in order to stand  
cleansed and ready for whatever peace life may offer. Such a sacrifice,  
paradoxically, is filled with possibility:

There is no choice except the grave  
but a little prior to that  
shortly before what happens happens  
a prelude so to speak  
of something drumming in the blood  
of something roaring in the silence  
that holds such triumph  
it sounds like an overture 50

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47 Ibid.

48 "On the Altiplano", A Handful of Earth, p. 42.

49 D.G. Jones, Butterfly on Rock (Toronto: U. of T. Press, 1970), p. 139-162.

50 Al Purdy, In Search of Owen Roblin (Toronto: M. & S., 1974). (No page numbers used.)

## THE RUNNER

Purdy has convinced us that our unembellished situation as humans is grim. Thankfully, this point is a beginning, not a final position, in his poetry. There are long periods of depression, but there are also moments of great faith in life, a "mindless faith that presumes a future".<sup>1</sup>

Purdy uses one of his own poetic subjects as the image for the person who searches for, expects, and sometimes finds moments of great promise. He compares himself and anyone who joins him in the quest to the Scots runners he has imaginatively recreated in the poem "The Runners":

There is a tireless runner in my blood that encircles the borderlands of Canada through the night hours, and sleeps when day arrives. Then my mind awakes and the race continues.<sup>2</sup>

Purdy sees a parallel between ourselves and the two sent ashore to investigate the New World: we are all aliens, unprotected and vulnerable, in an unfamiliar and essentially inhospitable landscape. Running is associated with survival. If the runners had stopped they would have failed to reach the ship and safety. We must continue running for the reason Purdy's grandfather pointed out: ".....you don't dast stop/or everything would fall down"<sup>3</sup> The runners of

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1 Al Purdy, "My Grandfather's Country", Being Alive (Toronto: M. & S., 1978), p. 125.

2 Al Purdy, No Other Country (Toronto M. & S. 1977), p. 18.

3 "My Grandfather Talking --30 Years Ago", Being Alive, p. 58.

Purdy's imagining choose to stay in this "dark land" in spite of their fears:

and another silence inside silence. . .  
 But there are berries and fish here  
 and small animals by the sea's edge  
 that crouch and tremble and listen. . .  
 If we join our thoughts to the silence,  
 if our trails join the animal trails,  
 and the sun remembers what the moon forgets. . .  
 Brother it comes to me now,  
 the long ship must sail without us,  
 we stay here --

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← They continue to run unto the land and not back to the ship because in this land there is the possibility of freedom and a life together without masters.

It seems unlikely that Erick the Red's saga could chronicle the reasons why two runners would choose to stay alone in the New World. The choice to stay is Purdy's imaginative response to the challenge their story demonstrates. The suggestion here is that, for Purdy, life must consist of continuous discovery, a continuous pushing back of the darkness until more and more of the landscape becomes familiar. As the woman instinctively understands, our fear of the unknown holds us to a confining world as small as the ship. But if we subordinate our fear to a willing embrace of the silence ("if we join our thoughts to the silence"), then we will find both the physical and spiritual necessities for sustaining life ("berries and fish", "my hand in your hand"). The decision to stay and to run further is an act of faith, a "mindless faith" in that it is a leap into a darkness which the rational mind would caution

against. Running becomes a metaphor for the courageous act of participation in, and integration with, the ongoing process of the earth ("our trails join the animal trails").

The runner is also an appropriate metaphor for a man's relationship with the process in a less positive sense. In "What Do the Birds Think?" Purdy wonders about the feelings of migrating birds. The birds are constantly 'in transit', and Purdy questions whether or not they have somewhere that is home. He feels a certain sympathy for these birds because he imagines they must get weary travelling and long for a favourite place to rest:

And do they ever  
 an arrow leader pointing the way  
 touch wearily down on ships passing?     5  
 --"Rest here a while and go on!"

Like the runners, the birds cannot stop moving and stay in one place. Survival demands that they always be exiles.

People, too, are in bondage to a process which propels them through life. We cannot stop the process of aging, for instance, but if we throw ourselves into the effort of moving with the 'process', there is a kind of elation and victory to be reached. The soaring tone of Purdy's description of the migration is unmistakable

And being south do they think sometimes  
 of the rain and mists of Baffin  
 and long migrations wingtip to wingtip  
 a mile high  
 and mate to mate in the lift and tremble  
 of windy muscles pushing them     6

We must run, must keep moving, and sometimes we are able to achieve a sense of belonging and fellowship ("wingtip to wingtip" and "mate to mate").

Purdy portrays himself, in In Search of Owen Roblin, as a Ulysses figure.<sup>7</sup> In a paraphrase of Tennyson's "Ulysses," Purdy says of himself, "I am the sum total of all I know/all I have experienced".<sup>8</sup> Two poems, "Transient" and "A Tourist Itinerary" illustrate Purdy's belief that a sense of identity depends on running, on absorbing as much as one can of life.

"Transient" is an 'old' poem of Purdy's, obviously important to him because it appears in every collection of his poetry. At age 17, Purdy rode the freight trains from Trenton to Vancouver. On the same day as he arrived, he boarded another train moving back east. It seems to have been on this trip that Purdy first felt both the necessity for, and the joy of travelling:

For the first time I realized how big this country was. And, naively, because I was only seventeen years old, I felt a tremendous exaltation at the sight. How marvelous to be alive and to ride a barebacked train through such a country. And, naively, forty years later, I've not changed my mind.<sup>9</sup>

"Transient" shows the triumph of travel over isolation. After standing in a swaying boxcar for miles, "so close to/the violent sway of fields it's like running and running", what was formerly unknown and strange becomes familiar to Purdy. This knowledge is gained more through the

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7 & 8 In Search of Owen Roblin

9 No Other Country, p. 25.

senses than the intellect, a difference which suggests the complete absorption of the surroundings into the self:

after a while the eyes digest a country and  
 the belly perceives a mapmaker's vision  
 in dust and dirt on the face and hands here  
 its smell drawn deep thru the nostrils down  
 to the lungs and spurts thru blood stream  
 campaigns in the lower intestine  
 and chants love songs to the kidneys 10

The physical images, ("the eyes digest", "drawn deep thru the nostrils"), emphasize the receptivity required to facilitate the identification of self with landscape. The body is not hidden, garrisoned in a club car, but exposed, if only imaginatively, on a "barebacked train". Purdy allows sensations to wash over him, and the difference between him and the land disappears. The country "spurts thru blood stream".

The triumph of travel is paradoxical:

After a while there is no arrival and  
 no departure possible any more  
 you are where you were always going  
 and the shape of home is under your fingernails  
 the borders of yourself grown into certainty  
 the identity of forests that were always nameless  
 the selfhood of rivers that are changing always 11

One's own personal boundaries become as large as the boundaries of the landscape that has been experienced. The places that were only names become a part of the traveller's identity. The act of running, here carried out in actual travel, is not only active participation in life, but is also the creation of identity.

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10 "Transient", Being Alive, pp.13-14

11 Ibid

Purdy's impressions of a trip through Northern Ontario in "Tourist Itinerary" show that the goal of travel is to see, to taste, to sense more and more of the world in order to decrease the consciousness of estrangement. In his itinerary Purdy logs raspberries north of Kirkland Lake, a bear crossing the road, rocks and shabby settlements as important sights. None of these is likely to be listed in an actual tourist guide, but they have gained significance for Purdy because they are indigenous to this part of the world. To notice these things is to know more intimately the character of the land:

I know what the place looks like  
tasted the food and touched the land  
which is as much as any of us can do

12

Such gestures seem small in comparison with the enormity of the land, and there is a note of quiet defeat in Purdy's admission of his inadequacy. Yet, in the surrender of the need to form a collective definition of the land, Purdy is freed to enjoy such delicate beauty as "raspberries like red earrings".<sup>13</sup>

In the recognition of his own inabilities, Purdy has also learned a compassion for others who do not measure up to conventional standards. Seeing Indians "with closed faces" selling toy boats for a living in Moose Factory, Purdy understands that the Indians know theirs is not a very good way to make a living, but also know "it's the best there is"<sup>14</sup> Touching a rock seems scarcely adequate as a means

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12 "Tourist Itinerary", Being Alive, p 148.

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid.

of coming to terms with existence, yet, like the Indians, "it is as much as any of us can do." In this defeat, however, there is still a measure of content.

"Tourist Itinerary" ends with the same sort of paradox as "Transient" presented. There is no end to the travelling:

following a road map in the mind  
a memory of the place we came from  
and the way we are always returning 15

We are always returning, finally, to the "silence unending and elemental, leaked from a billion-year period before and after the season of man".<sup>16</sup> Unfortunately, we arrive at this terminal silence before we can become completely familiar with the landscape. Instead, we "encounter a concept" that "halts all travellers/halfway home".<sup>17</sup>

Although running allows moments of feeling at home here, there is always at work in the body that other kind of travel which eventually carries us off into the alien darkness forever. We store memories, we create moments, but always we "stand there growing older".<sup>18</sup> The moments of jubilation do not last forever, and Purdy does not ask the reader to believe that life can be wonderful if only one is enlightened enough. Times of boredom, frustration and defeat outnumber those when "things/[fall] into place with a plop audible/in ordinary ears". Purdy admits his own failure in "What It Was --".

15 "Tourist Itinerary", Being Alive, p 148.

16 No Other Country, p. 17.

17 "Skeleton by an Old Cedar", Being Alive, p 124

18 "Transient".



Of course other problems exist here now  
 the necessity for patterns and pattern-makers  
 deciding which are certainties and which variables  
 (and very few of the former and mostly latter)  
 and always making mistakes  
 . . . and sometimes the brain and heart's failure  
 to know say  
     this is the moment you'll always remember 19

The poem "Alive or Not" uses running as a metaphor for becoming familiar with another person, and shows as well that there is a threat inherent in running. The other person in "Alive or Not" is Purdy's wife. All his life he sees himself as running toward her in an attempt to meet her and to help her. In this poem, although Purdy continues to run, he gets to his wife too late:

I see this woman about to fall  
 . . . . .  
 and there just might be time  
 for me to reach her  
 running as fast as I can  
 before her head hits the sidewalk  
 Of course it's my wife  
 . . . . .  
 --and while I am thinking about this  
 her body splashes on the street  
 . . . . . 20  
 and she is probably dead too

The suggestion is that in relationships as in the rest of life there is the same need to keep striving to reach the other or else "everything will fall down". No one is ever completely understood or defined.

However, in a nightmarish dream he sees his wife falling to her death. By running "as fast as he can" he manages to catch her before

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19 "What It Was --", Being Alive, pp. 152-153.

20 "Alive or Not", Being Alive, pp. 129-130.

she falls and dies and the relationship is broken. Purdy interprets his dream as a forecast of their final separation by death:

As I grow older  
 my speed afoot increases  
 each time I am running and reach  
 the place before she falls every time  
 I am running too fast to stop  
 I run past her farther and farther  
 it's almost like a story  
 as an orchid dies in the Brazilian jungle  
 and there is a certain mount of horror

21

There is horror because the running that has been their life together, like the other two Scots runners or the birds flying "wingtip to wingtip", will eventually be the cause of their separation. We enter death alone and the others run on without us. Purdy cannot help his wife in the end because she has encountered the force beyond human control. The use of the present tense lends a sense of immediacy but also of impotence to the poem. What happens next is unknown. The poet can only watch and keep going as the brother and sister do in "The Runner", always anticipating that final moment of death.

In "Running", Purdy implies that when this last meeting arrives it will be in some ways a relief. Writing about the imminent slaughter of deer for food in a restaurant, Purdy notes that the steel knife will end their lives, but also their terror:

shy brown creatures  
 eating from hands of visitors  
 soon to be taken to the kitchen  
 after a steel knife ended their lives  
 ending as well terror and heat and forest running

22

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21 Ibid.

22 "Running", A Handful of Earth, pp.33-34.

In his best moments Purdy echoes the determination of Ulysses to run into such a meeting with all his strength and purpose, "pouring himself upward" like the running animals in "My Grandfather's Country".<sup>23</sup> In his worst moments, he can only "sit stupefied/waiting..."<sup>24</sup> If he or anyone fails to keep moving along with the rhythms of change that characterize the universe, he will become like the woman in "Vestigia":

crying bitterly over her lost childhood:  
that certain stasis against uncertain trembling  
into something unforeseen, uncomprehended....<sup>25</sup>

Truth, beauty, the fixed value are only "temporarily certain", and "never seen/but only remembered".<sup>26</sup> In Purdy's vision, then, we must run, at least to keep up with the 'process' and to avoid defeat, and at best to achieve moments of peace.

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23 "My Grandfather's Country", Being Alive, p. 125.

24 "Dark Landscape", Being Alive, p. 91.

25 Al Purdy, "Vestigia", Poems for All the Annettes (Toronto: Anansi, 1973), p. 47.

26 "Vestigia", Poems for All the Annettes, p. 47.

## THIS IS A MAP OF MYSELF

Integral to Purdy's idea of man as runner is the place where the running takes place. Although Purdy has travelled extensively outside Canada, it is domestic travel which interests him most. Purdy imagines the Canadian landscape to be a kind of parent who provides, if not always physical safety, at least a conceptual security for him in his explorations:

But there are a few other worthwhile things besides in human existence: like trying to find purpose and meaning in your own day-to-day living, or exploring someone else's personality in relation to your own. And a country, any country, ought to be a cocoon wrapped around each of us that permits such exploration, allows us to discover our own value, our own meaning as it relates to other people. <sup>1</sup>

Canada has provided Purdy with such a cocoon for many years. His first trip across Canada was made when he was 17 and "broke". He jumped in an open box car, but, unfortunately, was caught by railway police at a little town in northern Ontario called Hawk Junction, and jailed in a caboose. In desperation he escaped and found himself lost in the bush. Purdy didn't manage to find civilization for two days. One would think such an experience would have convinced him that this "cocoon" was not as safe as he had imagined. Yet the recognition of the size and wildness of the country filled him, he says, with a "tremendous exaltation":

I think my first sight of the mountains was worth all the hardships --waking early in the morning inside an empty boxcar and gazing down into a lake surrounded by forest stretching for miles and miles --cupped and cradled by the white peaks.

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<sup>1</sup> Al Purdy, No Other Country (Toronto: M. & S., 1977), p. 141.

And myself crawling round the side of a mountain like a fly in a sugar bowl. For the first time I realized how big this country was. And, naively, because I was only seventeen years old, I felt a tremendous exaltation at the sight.... And, naively, forty years later, I've not changed my mind. <sup>2</sup>

Apart from sheer delight in the beauty of the country, Purdy feels an intellectual enjoyment that Canada is larger and more various than any definition of it. Being exposed to the landscape on the "barebacked train" has stimulated both enthusiasm at the prospect of having so much more land to explore and great joy that this beautiful place is his by national right.

The prose work No Other Country is a collection of articles Purdy has written at various times and in various places during his extensive travels in Canada. One does not read far into this book before realizing these are the writings of a passionate lover of the Canadian landscape: "This was the first time I had been to the Arctic, and I was so excited that I could hardly sit still", <sup>3</sup> and "I love Vancouver". <sup>4</sup> Being Canadian has an intensely personal significance for Purdy. His identity has been formed by the things he has seen and known in this country. Purdy writes in the introduction to No Other Country: "This is the map of my country, the cartography of myself". <sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> No Other Country, p. 25.

<sup>3</sup> No Other Country, p. 15.

<sup>4</sup> No Other Country, p. 173.

<sup>5</sup> No Other Country, p. 18.

There is little that Purdy claims to know as typically Canadian, nor does he articulate a "Canadian identity" to which he sees himself conforming. There are lifestyles made possible and necessary by this landscape that Purdy admires as authentic, but the only concept of Canada that emerges from his travels and in his writing is that it is "home". This is not to say that the people and history of Canada are unimportant to him. On the contrary, Purdy claims that both land and country, both physical and spiritual geographies, are essential to him: "I think especially of people in connection with places".<sup>6</sup> Getting to know the people, especially those "survivors" who live close to the land, is always more important than sight-seeing.

One such hero of Purdy's is a fisherman in Harbour Deep, Newfoundland, named Joseph Cassell. One day while fishing with his brother Elijah, a whale smashed their boat and killed Elijah. Joseph survived and still lives in Harbour Deep. Purdy says of Joseph and those like him:

... all of them... live non-fiction lives in their village, like other people in town and country and city; they are human, they are born and they die. And we are involved with all of them, in ways I can't explain. But perhaps when the cities die, one by one, drowned in their own garbage, and when fresh-water lakes are choked with floating slime, men and women who can whittle survival from a piece of driftwood may still be living in villages beside the sea. Not idyllic lives, certainly; but they will survive as Joseph survived --close to the jaws of a monster whale. <sup>7</sup>

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6 No Other Country, p. 6.

7 No Other Country, p. 160.

In such Canadian outposts, and nowhere else the title No Other Country suggests, Purdy has found those who live "without grandeur or self-deception",<sup>8</sup> but with courage and authenticity. In their self-sufficiency and independence, like the runners, they project an enduring "calm and quiet"<sup>9</sup> to those around them. They have made peace with the landscape on its terms, and are rewarded occasionally by moments of great joy:

"I loves fishing," Ple says, "but I hates working in the woods." That's the bare gist of it, but doesn't convey Ple's hypnotic outport bravura, which leaves me genuinely spellbound, and also slightly humiliated that I can't join this paean of thanksgiving to sun and sea and being alive.<sup>10</sup>

Judging from their almost total absence in No Other Country, city dwellers interest Purdy much less, possibly because they are not encountering the landscape in such an obvious way. We are creatures of the earth, no matter how much steel and concrete we lay over it. We are both sustained and ruled by its natural laws. Purdy admires those who, like Ple, keep the fact of our continual dependence on the earth always before them, for it is in such people he sees peacefulness.

Purdy presents himself in No Other Country as the student who needs to learn what Joseph and Ple and the others understand about being and staying alive. He is humiliated by his inability to join the "paean of thanksgiving". Purdy sees something, "a quality I keep

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8 Al Purdy, "The Country North of Belleville", Being Alive (Toronto: M. & S., 1978), p. 22.

9 No Other Country, p. 183.

10 No Other Country, p. 159.

trying to define",<sup>11</sup> that he recognizes is what he has been looking for all his life:

Through the coastal wanderings, I've somehow caught up with some of my own life that should have been lived before... and George Woods, hauling his net aboard with the hydraulic gurdie, to remove eleven crabs, one empty milk carton and two salmon. "The way to make a living, boy," George says. . . .

The life I should have lived before has been lived for the first time --among people that I seem to have known for all my lives. <sup>12</sup>

This is Purdy's praise for his country. He loves the landscape, "so beautiful that nobody deserves to die without having seen it",<sup>13</sup> that makes necessary such lifestyles, and hence such insights. Here an affirmation of survival is made possible by the resolutely independent life of a man living in "barebacked" relation to the land. Purdy frequently reminds us that this life is not idyllic, as is made obvious in George Wood's paltry catch. Yet there is an integrity to this lifestyle that brings rewards beyond the tangible.

Purdy believes his affection for Canada is natural: "I think the man who is not affected at all by the map of himself that is his country of origin, that man is emotionally crippled".<sup>14</sup> Purdy usually refrains from such final judgements. In this bald statement is an implicit condemnation of anyone who does not feel an attachment to his/her country. In that Purdy's love has grown from his extensive travelling.

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11 No Other Country, p. 41.

12 No Other Country, p. 41.

13 No Other Country, p. 37.

14 No Other Country, p. 18.



however, those who are tied to one place by the necessities of jobs, family, or the lack of money or health, are denied a similar affection.

Purdy acknowledges his own idealism:

This [referring to the country as a "cocoon" that permits discovery] is idealistic, and we have no time for it, because of our lives' outer turmoil. Strikes, political quarrels and constitutional squabbles must be settled first, to provide at least a personal clearing in the human jungle. But they are never settled, and there is never time. 15

There is never time enough nor freedom enough for most of us to go exploring. Even these fishermen, whom Purdy so admires, are bound by the necessities of making ends meet and staying precariously alive in the elements.

In recognition of his own idealism, Purdy turns to Canadian artists, especially writers, to provide for Canadians a vicarious taste and sight of Canada, and hopefully a love for the people and the places that cannot be met face to face:

"Yes, Hugh Garner writes about Cabbagetown in Toronto... W.O. Mitchell writes about the Prairies, Jake and the kid, and Crocus, Sask. Margaret Laurence about Manawaka. But don't let that fool you, Manawaka is really Neepawa, Manitoba. And there is Ernest Buckler in the Annapolis Valley, Hugh MacLennan in Nova Scotia, and Quebec and its 'Two Solitudes'. Yes, they are real places. Yes, they are home-country.... " 16

In the works of Canadian writers we may find bits and pieces of the map of ourselves. Purdy is quick to comment, of course, that this suggestion, too, is more dream than reality: "And no one could refute

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15 No Other Country, p. 141.

16 No Other Country, p. 113.

the charge that only zero to one percent of the books in most of our bookstores [are] Canadian".<sup>17</sup> The textbook familiarity with Canada offered in history and geography courses is only a "dead parade of events".<sup>18</sup> If the necessary and important material offered in Canadian literature is disregarded, and if travel is impossible, then, in Purdy's opinion, there is no way to answer the question, "Who am I?" Canada becomes for most people simply, "the sort of place where anyone with the least vestige of ability leaves quickly to avoid contamination by their fellow nonentities".<sup>19</sup>

Such was the attitude of the younger people, in the poem "My Grandfather's Country", towards the "failed farms". And such, Purdy suggests, will be the typical impression about Canada until a commitment is made to stay, in order to become involved, and to observe closely the minute details of people and place. Only then will be seen the beauty of a "red-gold sunset". Taken as a whole, Canada eludes definition; but broken into small towns and individuals and the minutiae of "Tourist Itinerary", it becomes home and an extension of the self.

No Other Country is not a textbookish travelogue or history, but a series of encounters and comments about Canada told with humour and love. It is of utmost importance to Purdy that we who are Canadian

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17 No Other Country, p. 112.

18 No Other Country, p. 109.

19 No Other Country, p. 108.

by birth come to recognize this place as home, and this conviction is zealously presented in No Other Country. The unsettling sense of estrangement can only be alleviated, even temporarily, by individual commitment to making the alien face of the landscape familiar, making the country of one's origin the map of oneself. To be Canadian, then, is to feel at home here: and concomitantly, to feel at home depends on having given oneself to the discovery of more and more of the landscape.

The weakness in Purdy's nationalism is that it does not include everyone. Can one not achieve a sense of identity in an office, in a city, or a suburb? Must we all return to the land as Purdy has? Those he admires are those who have examined themselves as individuals in relation to the land, such as fishermen and hunters. The rest of us, however, are already several times removed from this relationship by several layers of concrete. If, as Purdy suggests, "Nationalism is the knowledge that we are here, and reality begins here",<sup>20</sup> then nationalism should also include those whose struggles are with the "monster whales" of strikes and unemployment and mortgages.

What is universal in Purdy's vision is the point that, no matter where we are or how we do it, we will only gain a sense of identity when we embrace the people and the places of the reality around us as he did on the "barebacked train". The "worthwhile things" like trying to find purpose and meaning in our own day-to-day living, or exploring

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20 No Other Country, p. 20.

someone else's personality" <sup>21</sup> can be achieved anywhere, provided one "commits oneself/to love" <sup>22</sup> without restraint wherever the "personal clearing" <sup>23</sup> happens to be found.

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21 No Other Country, p. 140.

22 "My Grandfather's Country", Being Alive, p. 125.

23 No Other Country, p. 140.

## THE LONG MISTY CHAIN

History is a frequent topic in Purdy's writing, and a familiarity with the past is as important to him and to his view of things as the familiarity with place. Purdy responds to the past in three ways. First, he uses history, or more specifically the characters he gets to know in the past, as a source of strength to him personally. Second, he sees a familiarity with a country's past as a necessary ingredient for nationalism. And third, Purdy has an intellectual fascination with the past, a kind of "conceit", that having once happened, an event in the past continues to happen forever. This he calls his "double view of history" which he explains simply: "then and now merge somewhat in my mind".<sup>1</sup>

Purdy's personal interest in the past began during a "time of defeat"<sup>2</sup> in his own life. By his own confession, in In Search of Owen Roblin, he had failed at "anything in Montreal/poems plays prose and just being a human being".<sup>3</sup> In Search of Owen Roblin is, in part, the poetic record of Purdy's progress from despair to affirmation. He begins with a feeling of powerlessness, having lost the "youth-burning faith in a unique self".<sup>4</sup> Through an imaginative identification with people in the past

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1 Al Purdy, No Other Country (Toronto: M. & S., 1977), p. 15.

2 Al Purdy, In Search of Owen Roblin (Toronto: M. & S., 1974). (No page numbers used.)

3 In Search of Owen Roblin.

4 In Search of Owen Roblin.

he gains the strength to come to terms with his own life. He discovers, as well, a thread of continuity linking people in the past, present and future that enables him to accept life as a whole.

For lack of money and the confidence to do anything else, Purdy became interested in the place where he was living (the Purdy-built A-frame on Roblin Lake): "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?"<sup>5</sup> Desperate to fill the long hours with more than brooding over his failures, Purdy began to explore the small village, "just outside the cloud of my own bleak despair",<sup>6</sup> that was once named Roblin's Mills after Owen Roblin who had built a grist mill there in 1842. Owen Roblin was a mystery, and Purdy decided to piece together ruined buildings, records and old people's memories, the fragments of Owen Roblin's life, into the man Owen Roblin. Almost immediately this man, during his lifetime so strong, tough and purposeful, became a legend to Purdy. He found in Owen Roblin both a personal hero and a brother in affliction, in that Owen Roblin's life, too, had deteriorated ultimately to a few "fossils of intention, the shapes of rot."<sup>7</sup> Although Owen Roblin had lived to be 97 years old, built a sawmill, a gristmill, eventually a whole town, he died, "and everything ended."<sup>8</sup>

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5 In Search of Owen Roblin.

6 In Search of Owen Roblin.

7 Al Purdy, "Pause", Being Alive (Toronto: M. & S., 1978), p. 25.

8 In Search of Owen Roblin.

Purdy writes that at this time he "stayed alive on Owen Roblin's coattails." <sup>9</sup> He worshipped both Owen Roblin and his own grandfather because they seemed to be everything he wanted to be, but had failed miserably to achieve:

Undoubtedly I made heroes of them  
men totally unlike myself  
and it never occurred to me  
that both were fallible  
human beings not entirely perfect  
not quite heroic not completely gods 10

Owen Roblin and Purdy's grandfather were men Purdy admired for their stubborn will to continue, but they were not yet loved as fellow human beings. At this point, although Purdy confesses to have felt a "fevered elation at knowing the privilege of finding a small opening/in the past", <sup>11</sup> the past is recognizable, but not yet more than intellectually meaningful.

After further investigation of the past, however, Purdy's perspective changes:

Then I went still farther back  
trying to enter the minds and bodies  
of the first settlers and pioneers here...  
I tried to feel as they felt and think as they did 12

Through his imagination, Purdy tries to enter into the past as a participant. He is successful in this exercise. He discovers both a continuous stream of life and a sense of connectedness with the people

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9 In Search of Owen Roblin.

10 In Search of Owen Roblin.

11 In Search of Owen Roblin.

12 In Search of Owen Roblin.

of the past that transcends time:

And now my mind zigzags back and forth  
 like the snake fences around Ameliasburg  
 from Owen Roblin to my grandfather  
 Time that tick-tocks always in my body  
 its deadly rhythm is only a toy of the mind  
 so that I leap back and forth  
 from the American Revolution to my grandfather 13  
 from Owen Roblin back to the Loyalists

The change of perspective comes about through Purdy's willingness to become involved in the past. Continuing the belief expressed in the metaphor of running, life will be characterized by a sense of defeat until the individual makes a conscious effort to explore the apparent blankness around himself despite fear or uncertainty. History will remain like the family album, "a cage of ancestors", "remote and unhuman", without such participation, and one will remain isolated in time, a "fly-speck in history".<sup>14</sup>

However, the effort to find something meaningful in "the dead parade of events"<sup>15</sup> that is recorded history, brought to life for Purdy a tremendous sense of the vitality of the people in the past: "Anyhow I feel related to them/by more than blood and just space they occupied."<sup>16</sup> Having previously felt cut off from the past and the future, and painfully unable to seize the present, the sense of relationship and continuity uncovered in his search for Owen Roblin

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13 In Search of Owen Roblin.

14 In Search of Owen Roblin.

15 Al Purdy, No Other Country (Toronto: M. & S., 1977), p. 109.

16 In Search of Owen Roblin.



provides a welcome contrast:

In search of Owen Roblin  
 I discovered a whole era  
 that was really a backward extension of myself  
 built lines of communication across two centuries  
 recovered my own past my own people  
 a long misty chain stretched thru time  
 of which I am the last but not final link 17

The activity of running builds a sense of oneness with the landscape and its rhythms. Locating oneself in "the long misty chain" provides a measure of faith in the continuity of life: "I am the last but not final link."

In the image of the "chain" Purdy has created an antidote for the universal human fear:

And that fear is the fear we all have: that when we die and our bones rot, our unimportant lives forgotten, even our descendants will harbour no trace in themselves of what we were. The ongoing wave of time will not carry us with it: we will be what we are in our most spiritually depressed moments--nothing. 18

To ignore history is to confirm our biggest fear, but to locate oneself in the chain is to ensure survival in the future, at least imaginatively. Writing of his grandfather and of the relationship he has forged between them, Purdy states first that he has "somehow become his memory/and my survival is the only real trace of his own." In In Search of Owen Roblin Purdy changes the tone of finality of "Elegy for a Grandfather" to this:

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17 In Search of Owen Roblin.

18 No Other Country, p. 136.

But that part of the elegy is inaccurate  
 actually he survives a little longer  
 and goes with me into the future 19

The immersion in history paradoxically bolsters one's identity in the present. In search of Owen Roblin, Purdy found interest and importance in his own life. Knowing where he has come from, the type of people whose flesh and blood formed his own, gives him a sense of belonging, "a place to stand on":

And yet as a result of my curiosity  
 or call it an obsession if you like  
 certain small rooms in my head are lighted up  
 . . . . .  
 I enter them unafraid of darkness or failure 20

In Search of Owen Roblin is in part an autobiography and Purdy's victory is a personal one. What is universal, however, is Purdy's point that confidence and contentment, even joy, may be found by removing the boundaries of the discrete self in favour of being a part of the collective identity symbolized by the historical "chain". One must become as open, in Purdy's words, as "a screen thru which the world passes."<sup>21</sup> The shift in perspective from egotism to self-denial prevents what Purdy calls "solipsistic navel watching".<sup>22</sup>

Purdy uses several images in In Search of Owen Roblin to emphasize the nature of the move from self-centredness to participation in the process of history. Time is a "swift-slow elevator" and this connection he has discovered is "a long misty chain". At first sight,

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19 In Search of Owen Roblin.

20 In Search of Owen Roblin.

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid.

Ameliasburg and the everyday, ordinary but important events that happened there are just dusty ruins. Yet sometimes in the millpond, "that weed-grown eye", which at one time reflected "departures and morning rumours", Purdy sees the people of the past taking form. In the instant before a telephone call connects he hears a singing in the wires that could be voices from the past. The millpond and the telephone wires symbolize for Purdy the idea that once something has happened it continues to happen: "in some mysterious way, that which has existed truly once does last forever."<sup>23</sup> The images also emphasize the availability and closeness of history to us. The past is not a closed book, a "cage of ancestors", but in a dream-like way something that perpetually surrounds us. In getting to know the people in the past our minds come to contain them. When we stand by a pond we see not only our own reflections, but all who were once reflected there:

the camera eye reversed and turned backwards  
 showing even myself a man from another time  
 walking thru the 19th-century village      24  
 with a kind of jubilation

In No Other Country and in the poem "Scott Hutcheson's Boat" Purdy writes about Angus Mowat's rebuilding of an old fishing boat. Angus undertook to reconstruct this relic using original tools and methods. The job became a tangible communication with the past, and Angus entered into it for precisely that purpose: to make concrete an

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<sup>23</sup> Al Purdy, Love in a Burning Building (Toronto: M. & S., 1970), author's preface, p. 10.

<sup>24</sup> In Search of Owen Roblin.

ephemeral link with history. During a difficult step in the rebuilding Angus thought he heard Scott Hutcheson, long dead, telling him what to do:

"Dammit," said Angus, "I knew he was there! In my mind, in the earth, in the water, and all around me. Don't tell me I'm crazy. I know that already. But Scott knew I needed help, because after all he did have some small interest in the reconstruction of what had been something nearly perfect, the shape of a boat married to water. Or thought married to substance, if you want to call it that." 25

Purdy, of course, became fascinated by Angus, delighted that someone else wanted to make the past continuous in the present. For Purdy the boat became a symbol of "continuity and survival": "For me that boat is a survival from the past." 26 But caught up in his own fervor, the same kind of deep conviction about the importance of the past that he presents in In Search of Owen Roblin, he forgets the links of "continuity and survival" are as elusive as the reflections in the pond. At the end of In Search of Owen Roblin, for example, he reminds himself and us that "Of all these things/no outline remains." Purdy also suggests this in the story about Angus and Scott Hutcheson's boat: "But only yesterday Scott Hutcheson had the last word: 'That deck beam is all wrong. It ain't worth a pinch of coonshit!'" 27 An awareness of continuity with the past (and the future) comes only in momentary flashes. The "process" never ceases:

and here I am

.....  
 trying to figure it out too late for  
 someone breathed or sighed or spoke

25 No Other Country, p. 92.

26 Ibid.

27 No Other Country, p. 96.

and everything rearranged itself 28  
 from is to was

Purdy's interest in history is primarily personal, but in No Other Country he examines the importance of a sense of history, or the lack of it, to our national identity. It is Purdy's opinion that in Canada our short history is largely ignored, and our nation's literature and art are studied as obligations. As a result, there is nowhere for people to turn for an answer to the questions, "Who are we? What are we like?"<sup>29</sup>

Purdy believes, of course, that it is difficult for anyone to find a deep sense of belonging by simply joining him/herself to a fixed identity. Our lack of a legendary past is probably a point in our favour, in Purdy's view, because it denies the kind of hero-worship he forsook for a sense of brotherhood with the past. As well, in the metaphor of running, he points out that a sense of identity depends first on the relationship forged by the individual between self and surroundings. Yet, without a familiarity with the history of one's country, one will never gain "the consciousness of self as the last link in a long line of selves, a knowledge of what those others did in the past before the present self fades and rejoins the past".<sup>30</sup> National history, like personal history, is important for faith in the continuity of life.

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28 "Spring Song", Being Alive, p. 32.

29 No Other Country, p. 109.

30 Ibid.



involvement in the situation, but in the personal history poems he is more cerebral and remote. According to Purdy's own comments about Irving Layton, poetry should present situations, ideas, feelings that all members of the human race may share. He criticizes Layton for being inaccessible, "a little off to one side of the way I think things actually are." <sup>33</sup> Such a criticism could be directed at Purdy in the poems where he attempts to convince us that his intellectual notion that "what happened still happens," <sup>34</sup> is essential: "this method must be used to think of them," <sup>35</sup> and:

Of course any writer can do this  
 at least he ought to be able to  
 his mind switching identities  
 he enters bodies of long-vanished people 36  
 the relay race reversed

However, Purdy's sympathetic sensitivity to history in a poem such as "The Horseman of Agawa" is readily accessible. In the Indian rock paintings it seems that Purdy sees the elusiveness of his own theorizing about the past:

I have too many thoughts about the horseman  
 I might select one and say this is a signpost this painting  
 . . . . .  
 But I mistrust the mind-quality that tempts me 37  
 to embroider and exaggerate things

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<sup>33</sup> Al Purdy, in Irving Layton: The Poet and His Critics, Seymour Mayne, ed. (Toronto: McGraw-Hill, 1978), p. 149.

<sup>34</sup> In Search of Owen Roblin.

<sup>35</sup> "Method for Calling Up Ghosts".

<sup>36</sup> In Search of Owen Roblin.

<sup>37</sup> "The Horseman of Agawa", Being Alive, pp. 144-147.

It is his wife who, without the need to prove theories or to articulate the experience in words, enters fully into communion with the past:

all other thoughts laid aside in her brain...  
 he speaks to her as I could not  
 in pictures without handles of words  
 into feeling into being here by direct transmission 38  
 from the stranded Ojibway horsemen

His wife brings only herself to the meeting, and in her quiet surrender to whatever might take place receives a direct communication from the past. Purdy comes to the experience less spontaneously, more intellectually, and remains isolated from the past. What he does gain is understanding of the difference between himself and his wife that makes possible her moment of connection with the past. She does not try to confine a non-rational experience to words and methods. As Purdy writes in "Artifact", "Words end helpless/unable to follow the thing farther."<sup>39</sup> Words and theories are inflexible and not always capable of containing the continuous change of the process of life. Only by "running", by relinquishing all patterns, all established order and the need for it, can one locate oneself in "the long misty chain."

Purdy, then, in trying to elucidate his "double view" of history, realizes, at least in "The Horseman of Agawa", that although moments of connection between past and present are possible, they cannot be planned. One waits, listens, treads carefully, as his wife did, and perhaps the meeting will take place. As Purdy writes in "The Country of the Young",

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38 "The Horseman of Agawa", Being Alive, p. 144-147.

39 Al Purdy, "Artifact", Sundance at Dusk (Toronto: M. & S., 1976), p. 80-81.



And you can't be looking for something else  
money or a night's lodging on earth  
a stepping stone to death maybe  
or you'll never find the place 40

## WHY WRITE THIS POEM?

When asked by a well-meaning lady at a poetry reading why he wrote poetry, Purdy simply replied, "If you have to ask, you'll never understand." Why he has the urge and ability to write is a mystery even to himself:

And I do not know why  
whether because I cannot hunt with the others  
and they laugh  
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

1

To write is to follow an inner imperative that may be considered useless or ridiculous by society, but which he finds essential for his own survival. As the quotation suggests, following this instinct becomes a personal quest, the goal of which is a relationship between the self and the world, the "inside myself" and the "outside myself". Like the old man, Hokusai, in "Old Man Mad About Painting", and the failed hunter-turned-artist of "In the Caves", Purdy is compelled to forsake other, more respectable jobs, to risk ridicule and failure as an artist. He is cheered by Hokusai's courage in painting on a "fifty-foot framework of bamboo and red tissue paper" that toppled almost immediately:

It kind of cheers me  
during my Hour of Despond  
when I've failed at everything  
scribbling poems on the reverse side  
of cost schedules scrounged from garbage  
to think of Hokusai in bleak poverty  
.....  
to think of that earlier idiotic painting

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1 Al Purdy, "In the Caves", Being Alive (Toronto: M. & S., 1978), p. 200.

nobody understood but Hokusai himself

without money value or the least permanence <sup>2</sup>  
 but the fractional god of now defeated

Purdy identifies himself also with the hunter who never learns to hunt or to do any of the things necessary for survival, who "remains alive on sufferance". <sup>3</sup> Disturbed both by the horror of killing and his own failure because of this to become a part of the group, the hunter withdraws to the caves where he scratches "with flint at the soft rock face". <sup>4</sup> In these drawings he makes articulate the things that cannot be understood any other way: the scream of the beast when it died, the meaning of killing, and an elusive, as yet inarticulate something, "a meaning I do not know/and perhaps should not" <sup>5</sup> that seems to be a truth about the nature of life.

To the non-artist and the nonplussed lady at the poetry reading, the dedication of one's energies to a way of life barely understood, and the outpouring of one's energy into a creation that has no "money value or permanence", might need to be questioned. But it is people who have committed themselves to the artistic creation of meaning, regardless of how successful they have been, that are among Purdy's personal heroes. Imagining the sculptors of the cases of rejected Eskimo carvings in the poem, "The Sculptors", to be "those

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2 "Old Man Mad About Painting", Being Alive, pp.186-187.

3 "In the Caves".

4 "In the Caves".

5 "In the Caves".

losers and failures/who never do anything right", <sup>6</sup> Purdy exclaims he'd like to buy "every damn case". The flawed carvings are the inspiration for a moment of communion between the carvers and Purdy, and such moments are beyond price.

What distinguishes the artist from the non-artist in Purdy's view, apart from the inability to conform exhibited by the old painter and the hunter, is variously called by Purdy "a third eye", <sup>7</sup> a "third ear", <sup>8</sup> the "sensuous mind", <sup>9</sup> and "literary plastic man", <sup>10</sup> among others. What is suggested here is an ability to see from a different perspective, or to see more clearly into the essential nature of things. For Purdy this vision enables him to "pin down in words" the affirmative moments where "melancholy fuses with wonder.../as if something had been hinted at" as well as the many moments when all that is "brought home to one... is this continual process/-as human bodies are shovelled quickly into the ground". <sup>11</sup>

This insight is frequently signalled in Purdy's poetry by phrases such as, "I have a sudden vision", or "things waver", or "things swerve". In "The Sculptors", for example, while looking at the

6 "The Sculptors", Being Alive, pp. 44-45.

7 "Excess of Having", Being Alive, p. 185.

8 "What It Was-", Being Alive, p. 152.

9 "Night Song for a Woman", Being Alive, p. 24.

10 "Will McKenzie", Being Alive, p. 142.

11 "Starlings", Being Alive, p. 154.

"failed animals" created by "failed hunters", Purdy has "a sudden vision":

And I have a sudden vision  
of the carvers themselves  
in this broken sculpture  
as if the time and the place and me  
had clicked into brief alignment  
and a switch pulled  
so that I can see and feel  
what it was like to be them

12

The "sudden vision" is always expected and hoped for because of its power to join the "inside myself" to the "outside myself", but it does not always materialize. It cannot be forced. When he first looks at the case of carvings, for instance, he is ashamed of his own dissatisfaction with them, and gets tired of trying to find artistic value where there appears to be none. "There must be something", he half pleads. And in this situation there is: there is the swell of compassion for the failed hunters who "carved in their own image". This poem and another similar poem, "Trees at the Arctic Circle", suggest that it is the subduing of self that facilitates the vision, a willingness to suppress stereotypic expectations of good and bad in favour of honouring the dignity of effort.

In "Remains of an Indian Village" <sup>o</sup> another such connection takes place. "Everything fades/and wavers" and Purdy is able to see and to hear the life that once was in this place. Again, Purdy comes to the place humbly, not as a superior, but as a brother, aware of himself as "part of the process". At first the rubble is underfoot, but as the



Sometimes even the attempt to force an encounter into the shape of words, to "pin it down in words", <sup>16</sup> has a distancing effect. What is felt remains "untranslatable", <sup>17</sup> as the universe is untranslatable, and "can't be translated back". <sup>18</sup> What is required is a sacrifice of the urge to tame one's responses by changing them back into words, something Purdy is unable to do here. However, "the rock blazes into light" as he and his wife leave the place. The sudden brightness suggests a kind of blessing on what his wife has found in the painting and what he has found in his wife: "and my secret knowing is knowing what she knows/and can't say and I can only indicate". <sup>19</sup> While the moment of continuity with the past has been denied him here, Purdy has found proof in his wife's response that such moments are possible. In her "unshy honest encompassing" <sup>20</sup> that Purdy calls in "The Winemaker's Beat-Étude" the "feminine principle", <sup>21</sup> she has travelled beyond him, and he must "follow her". <sup>22</sup> The best he can do here is write of his personal failure that has been transformed into a further insight about how to understand life "by direct transmission".

There are many poems in which Purdy is successful in conquering by his "third eye" the boundaries of time and space, "the

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16 "Starlings", Being Alive, p. 154.

17 "A Graceful Little Verse", Being Alive, p. 182.

18 "Antenna", Being Alive, p. 183.

19 "The Horseman of Agawa".

20 & 21 "The Winemaker's Beat-Étude", Being Alive, p. 94.

22 "The Horseman of Agawa".

fractional god of now".<sup>23</sup> The extended poem "In Search of Owen Roblin" is the best example. Yet there are other poems where nothing is made clear. In "Rodeo" Purdy writes: "I am waiting with Marvin Paul for one of those/moments when all will be made plain to me",<sup>24</sup> but both are disappointed:

Nothing is fully made plain to me but I have  
 stated my intention set the scene  
 the same one in which a bored housewife  
 prays for a romantic lover and the bankrupt rancher  
 stares at his parched range and starving cattle and spits  
 Both settle for less than their dreams: the woman for a man  
 the rancher for one more year in the high Chilcotin  
 myself for something less tangible  
 hovering in my mind close to this poem 25

The much desired revelation of purpose or promise does not materialize. The wife, the rancher and the poet settle for second best, and go on. To write only of his successes would be to distort what Purdy believes is true of being alive. Living consists largely of forcing oneself to go on bravely into the unknown, like the runners, grateful for the times when the place looks familiar and welcoming, and continuing when it does not.

Purdy emphasizes his integrity in portraying life as it is in "On Realizing He Has Written Some Bad Poems". Here he criticizes his poems for failing to fulfill their obligation to him:

my poems  
 you have forgotten your duty  
 which is to make me important  
 your function in this life

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23 "Old Man Mad About Painting".

24 "Rodeo", Being Alive, p. 138.

25 "Rodeo".



to march ahead of me  
 with fife and drum and skirling pipes  
 to encourage my own halting steps  
 . . . . .  
 . . . [to] precede my dying  
 preclude my loving replace my actual living 26

Purdy is writing here about what his poetry cannot do for him, and that is to make meaning where there is none and to manufacture a protective dream for him to live in. His poetry, to be believable, can only reflect what he is and what he sees. Yet, at the end of the poem, he recovers from the disappointment that the intangible truths which 'hover' near his understanding cannot always be translated into the permanence of words. He "celebrates his own failure/transformed to something else".<sup>27</sup> As the misshapen Eskimo carvings are transformed to beauty, so also do the experiences that are related in "Rodeo" and "The Horsemen of Agawa" take on significance. The carvings are valuable for the effort and the measure of self given to them. The attempt to change back into words what his wife felt, though it may have failed, is valuable for the same reason. This is the Sisyphus-like effort of the farmers in "The Country North of Belleville" who have spent "backbreaking days/in the sun and rain" "in noble struggle/of being a fool".<sup>28</sup>

Purdy sums up the point in "Remembering Hiroshima".. He has made one of his few definite moral statements condemning the

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26 "On Realizing He Has Written Some Bad Poems", Being Alive, p. 188.

27 "On Realizing He Has Written Some Bad Poems", Being Alive, p. 188.

28 "The Country North of Belleville", Being Alive, pp.22-23.

devastation of Hiroshima as murder, realizing as he makes it the ineffectiveness of such convictions and such statements:

But it's all any man can offer the world  
 a part of himself not even original  
 the strength he uses to say it  
 the time spent writing it down  
 the will and the force of solemnity  
 are his life tho his life ends tomorrow 29  
 and it will and he's wrong

For Purdy, then, poetry grows out of the personal experiences and insights; to write is to follow an instinct that becomes his means of achieving, sometimes, the affirmative sense of "continuity and survival".<sup>30</sup> As a result, his writing is "a map of himself"<sup>31</sup> and is dominated by his voice and personality. But this does not mean there is no public purpose in his art. In fact, there are several goals. In the poem, "The Country of the Young", for example, Purdy writes about the painter A.Y. Jackson and about one of the functions of art for society. A.Y. Jackson has painted the Arctic landscape in such a way as to say:

"Look here  
 You've never seen this country  
 It's not the way you thought it was 32  
 Look again"

The Arctic landscape from a distant view is symbolic of the harshness and barrenness of existence, yet the artist sees something more and communicates this in his work. What is to be seen is not a sudden

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29 "Remembering Hiroshima", Being Alive, pp. 165-166.

30 No Other Country, p. 96.

31 No Other Country, p. 18.

32 "The Country of the Young", Being Alive, p. 48.

epiphany of vibrant colour, "not bright Gauguin/or blazing Vincent", but the elemental beauty of ruggedness and the delicate beauty of the life that manages to survive here. The apparently unrelieved harshness of the landscape is shown by the artist to be touched by colour and life:

--dull orange on a cliff face  
 that says iron deposits  
 olive leaves of the ground willow  
 with grey silver catkins  
 minute wild flower beacons  
 sea blue as the world's eye      33

It is the role of the artist who has been given deeper insight to point out such things to the rest of us. The artist, as well as filling his own life with redemptive insights, illuminates the darkness for us and helps us out of a kind of spiritual blindness by saying, "Look here".

This "consciousness raising" can have a moral goal as well. The failed hunter in "In the Caves" cannot hunt successfully because he is tormented by the memory of the beast's scream as it died. He identifies himself painfully with the hunted animal and not with the hunters. He withdraws from the group, and his separated life becomes a silent condemnation of theirs. He spends his time trying to communicate his different perspective through his paintings, but remains a solitary, unnoticed figure to the end of the poem.

Whether or not art and artists can make any improvement by their shared insights on the morality of their societies "is possibly an open question", writes Al Purdy in "For George Woodcock".<sup>34</sup>

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33 Ibid.

34 Al Purdy, "For George Woodcock", A Handful of Earth (Coatsworth, Ont.: Blackmoss Press, 1977), p. 61.

However, Purdy himself continues to try, for, as has been noted before, "it's all any man can offer".<sup>35</sup> The poem "A Handful of Earth", for example, is an attempt to convince the Quebec Separatists, especially Lèvesque, that their efforts are misdirected and destructive.<sup>36</sup> In "The Children" Purdy writes to make us aware, in the midst of our comfort, of the terrible lives of the Chipewyan children in Churchill who "scavenge the garbage dump for food".<sup>37</sup> There are several other poems as well as sections of No Other Country that are statements of belief about "the dark intangibles"<sup>38</sup> of injustice and cruelty because "these are the constants of our lives."<sup>39</sup> Purdy is compelled to write about them to say, in effect, "Look here." These problems cloud the main issues of "trying to find purpose and meaning in [our] own day-to-day living".<sup>40</sup> The victims should be given help so that they are able to search for purpose, and the victimizers should realize the shallowness of their vision. However,

This is idealistic, and we have no time for it, because of our lives' outer turmoil. Strikes, political quarrels and constitutional squabbles must be settled first, to provide at least a personal clearing in the human jungle. But they are never settled, and there is never time. The sense of well-being when the sun shines is brief, the fixed instant of rapport with another person passes and it seems we have imagined the memory. 41

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35 "Remembering Hiroshima", Being Alive, p. 165.

36 "A Handful of Earth", A Handful of Earth, p. 37.

37 "The Children", Being Alive, pp. 139-141.

38 "What It Was".

39 No Other Country, p. 141.

40 & 41 Ibid.

That Purdy is able "to publish belief like personal fact/...in the absence of any god"<sup>42</sup> is a testimony to his effort to affirm the value of life in spite of everything that would appear to negate it. Purdy's purpose here is directly and unabashedly didactic; he believes we need to realize how important it is for each one of us to be able to capture, whenever we can, that brief sense of well-being.

Another, more subtle purpose in Purdy's writing is the use of the imagination to join in an inclusive vision apparently disparate elements of life. In the first section of "Starlings,"<sup>43</sup> for example, Purdy sees in the jaunty little swagger of starlings the promise and vitality of spring. In the second section, which begins "By contrast", he describes graphically the maggot infested, rotting bodies of three starlings that died in his shed, trapped by the neck in wire mesh. Here is the familiar dilemma: how does one reconcile life and death? Life is seen to be beautiful in the first section, but it is shown to be in the process of "festering onward" in the second section. In the third section, Purdy mentions human situations more horrible than the dead starlings: "decaying soldiers.../...a single maggot crawling from nostrils". The details he gives are repulsive and shocking because life is often repulsive and shocking, and there is really "No reason to write a poem." Such sights have become too familiar, and as Purdy asks about Old Alex, "why commemorate disease in a poem?"<sup>44</sup>

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42 "Remembering Hiroshima".

43 "Starlings", Being Alive, p. 154.

44 "Old Alex", Being Alive, p. 21.

Yet "the morning is bright/your breasts my dear are lovely". These promising and enjoyable things are here now. The fact that death is behind and ahead of us loses its stranglehold in the immediacy of this moment of sun and relationship, and "melancholy fuses with wonder". That one could possibly be happy when maggots are feasting on dead bodies is the wonder, yet Purdy believes that one can. The poem ends with the statement, "it is a bright day", an affirmation made possible by the surrender of the need to make things permanent to an openness to the moment. The poet then "pin[s] down by particular words" the "realization [that] is achievement". The reader follows the poet's process of thought and is then able to experience, vicariously at least, a similar fusion. The poet or artist is like the "runner" who, in pushing himself to the limits of his own understanding and beyond, blazes a path for others to follow. The poet is Adam, naming and thereby taming the unfamiliar.

Sometimes Purdy writes out of the sheer delight of being able to make permanent, through metaphor and imagery, things, people, places he notices. The apples still clinging to trees\* in winter are "little golden bells".<sup>45</sup> The Arctic rhododendrons are "small purple surprises" and the ocean a "purged green" that "boils to a white heart".<sup>46</sup> A D C 8 is a "thousand jet white horses" that "break loose from the corral".<sup>47</sup> It is this tendency in himself "to embroider" that

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45 "Detail", Being Alive, p. 86.

46 "Arctic Rhododendrons", Being Alive, p. 41.

47 "Eastbound from Vancouver", Being Alive, p. 178.

he laughingly points out in "Chronos at Quintana Roo". Purdy is disgusted at the lack of originality of his wife and another travelling companion, "John", as they "chant ecstatically/in unison 'Yea marvellous fantastic tremendous'" to describe the scenery. In a typically, self-deprecating conclusion, the poem ends with his "telepathic" wife exploding Purdy's sense of verbal superiority by telling him, "You're fulla shit".<sup>48</sup> Nevertheless, he is relieved that his wife understands his artist's belief that "birds so green they're aflame" deserve better than the feeble praise of "tremendous". In a similar way, No Other Country and In Search of Owen Roblin have been written, among other reasons, to create an identity in Canadian geography and history, to flesh out the "dead parade of events that recorded history does not bring to life --the record of occupied space and time without purpose or meaning".<sup>49</sup>

Why he writes determines how Purdy writes. His is an organic style in which there is a unity of form and content. In keeping with his belief that there is no point to living beyond the personal,<sup>50</sup> his poetry is personal. He is either writing about himself or is recognizable in the persona of the poem. Most of the time this voice is successful. Purdy's insight is keen and he avoids a tone of egotism and omnipotence by writing of his failures and his successes. As well, Purdy's "negative capability" to enter completely into the personality of another

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48 "Chronos at Quintana Roo", Being Alive, pp.156-157.

49 No Other Country, p. 109.

50 "Dark Landscape", Being Alive, p. 91.

or into an experience, relinquishing expectations and self to whatever may or may not be revealed, makes him a believable Everyman. Occasionally the voice becomes tedious, usually when he writes in an anecdotal manner about himself without withdrawing reflectively from the situation to see what is universal in it. Poems such as "When I sat Down to Play the Piano" and "Home-Made Beer" are humorous and witty, but lack the element of poetic vision that illuminates his better poems.

Purdy's equivalent of faith, the sense of continuity found in his "double view of history", appears in his writings in related recurring images of things that reflect or connect. The realities of life, such as death and decay, are described in concrete detail, as in "Starlings". But then something will "swerve" or the "mist will lift"<sup>51</sup> or the millpond will reveal everything ever reflected in it. The perspective changes from one limited by time and space to one that can transcend these boundaries momentarily. The "weed grown eye" (the millpond) in "Roblin's Mills (2)" "holds and contains" the lives of the past, and when the light changes sometimes these people can be glimpsed. In "Remains of an Indian Village" "everything fades/and wavers into something else" and the poet can "hear the broken consonants" of those who once lived here and are now alive again in him. In "Gateway" the "camera eye reverse[s]" to show the poet a "man from another time/walking thru the nineteenth-century village". In "Antenna", things simply "go Phutt" and a timelessness and universality of experience is glimpsed.

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51 "Power Failure in Disneyland", Being Alive, p. 190.



In "Starlings", the shift in perspective is shown by enjambement. In the first sections most lines are complete thoughts, but when "something is hinted at", the lines run on:

while the grass grows an eighth of an inch as the maggots  
converge like arrows labels on medicine bottles read backwards  
the colour of thoughts turns grey bacteria glimmer in the      52  
stars' experimental stations your breasts are lovely

Poems such as "Trees at the Arctic Circle", "The Sculptors", and "Dark Landscape" show the shift in perspective from an observer's isolation to a participant's belonging through a conscious and gradual change in the poet's attitude. These are less subtle, less evocative poems in which the reader is educated along with the "I" from one point of view to another. In other poems such as "Rodeo" and "Detail", Purdy simply describes what he sees and avoids the temptation to create conclusions. The poems end in deliberate vagueness to point out Purdy's belief that the universe remains "untranslatable"<sup>53</sup> much of the time.

As well as the unity between form and content, there are several other features of Purdy's writing that are part of his signature. He writes in a variety of moods, ranging through humour, disgust, despair, tenderness, humility, melancholy and jubilation. His vocabulary can switch from the learned to slang, from the most delicate description to four-letter words, in a single line ("the shithouse is a green dollhouse"),<sup>54</sup> a technique used deliberately to underline his

52 "Starlings".

53 "A Graceful Little Verse".

54 "After Rain", Being Alive, p. 193.

efforts to contain all aspects of life in a unified vision. His image of himself as poet is that of a "jewelled hunchback", a figure of both ugliness and beauty, because to be authentic the poet must write about everything "good and bad, painful and humiliating, libellous and offensive, whatever bites and explores deep into the mechanics of being alive." 55

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55 George Bowering (quoting Al Purdy), Al Purdy (Toronto: Copp Clark, 1970), p. 77.

## CONCLUSION

There are other themes in Purdy's writing that have been neglected here: there are poems about his personal heroes, those people with "an emotional blaze";<sup>1</sup> there are poems about the possibility of love and male-female relationships; there are travel poems and anecdotal poems about himself and his life. These themes, like the others discussed, have to do with various ways in which individuals, especially the poet himself, fail or succeed in making sense of being alive. All grow out of Purdy's central conviction that existence is horrifying in its negation of the individual, but can be transformed by moments of exhilarating personal connection made possible through the sacrifice of self and the effort of involvement in life.

Purdy quotes Irving Layton's accusation of him that his (Purdy's) writing suffered because he was non-religious.<sup>2</sup> The comment was made years ago, and perhaps prior to the time when Purdy says he found "his voice", for certainly there is no lack of religiousness in Purdy's writing since that time. Purdy is not conventionally religious in that he does not believe in any god, yet he is a man of great faith in life and its possibilities. Certainties about God and Justice and Divine Purpose are avoided because there is always something that eludes him and us or does not fit into a collective

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1 Al Purdy, No Other Country (Toronto: M. & S., 1977), p. 64.

2 No Other Country, p. 118.

definition of life. The sky is "empty of everything", a "great ambiguity"<sup>3</sup> for Purdy. There is always a reminder of mortality, like the small dead animal seen under Castro's car after an uplifting rally, to make us wonder whether or not the sense of continuity is an illusion. Yet in poem after poem, there is "the mindless faith that presumes a future" that can only be called religious.

In "Remembering Hiroshima" Purdy writes:

In the darkness is no certitude  
 that morning will ever come --  
 in dawn spreading pink from the east  
 is no guarantee that light will follow

.....  
 And yet I expect the morning  
 always I expect the sunlight

4

If anything should convince Purdy, or anyone, of the lack of hope for humanity, it would be the brutal destruction of Hiroshima. Yet Purdy expects life to continue, hope to be rekindled, and justice and love to be reborn "in the absence of any god" and in full knowledge of the savagery of mankind.

Hell has been "mapped and named" and in the brief prelude to infinity that is life Purdy has found and shared at least "brief content",<sup>5</sup> and at best "such triumph/it sounds like an overture".<sup>6</sup>

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3 Al Purdy, "Fidel Castro in Revolutionary Square", Being Alive (Toronto: M. & S., 1978), p. 108.

4 "Remembering Hiroshima", Being Alive, pp.165-166.

5 & 6 Al Purdy, In Search of Owen Roblin (Toronto: M. & S., 1974). (No page numbers used.)

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