

AL PURDY: THE CURABLE ROMANTIC

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BY

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## **ABSTRACT**

The poetry of Al Purdy is simultaneously informed by the contrary perspectives of realism and romanticism. This duality of perspective is necessary in order to satisfy both his involvement with direct, modern experience and his intuition of profound, continuous existence. Realism and romanticism provide the divergent means by which he can support seemingly contradictory possibilities, such as transience and permanence, inconsequence and significance, failure and redemption. The realistic poetic persona intellectually challenges those traditional, social ideals which precipitate a sense of exclusion, failure, and futility. Through the deflation of ideals, he repudiates the conventional assumption of Canadian limitation and suggests failure is the product of a defeatist mentality, rather than an inescapable, modern reality. His characteristic self-deprecation and ironic stance become the subversive means by which he contests societal ideals and the notion of failure as that which falls short of those standards. His intellectual transcendence of failure does not, however, satisfy his emotional and spiritual faculties. His romantic impulse, by contrast, yields the means of emotionally transforming the harshness of realistic experience. He hypothesizes that there is a transcendental continuum of existence which guarantees eternal meaning and significance, substantially eclipsing past and present failures. For Purdy, failure can be most effectively transformed through a synthesis of realism and romanticism which advances, as

an absolute, a commitment to the dignity of life itself. However, in his urgency to redeem humankind from dismal, modern reality, he neglects certain social and political considerations, particularly in those poems which concern Canada's native peoples and their historical displacement. While the conventional romantic persona and style virtually disappear as Purdy matures as a poet, romanticism itself never ceases to be an integral influence in his poetic cosmos. Purdy's romanticism evolves primarily in its structural expression, rather than in its idealistic intensity and manifestation. The romantic ideals of the mature poet are those which can be consummated within daily experience and encourage human fraternity, rather than precipitating a sense of inadequacy and failure. In the poetry of Al Purdy, realistic awareness and romantic reflection can yield a lavish image of human existence.

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For my wonderful parents

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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION: THE PARADOXICAL PERSPECTIVE OF AL PURDY'S POETRY

Alfred Wellington Purdy, best known as Al Purdy, has been and continues to be a significant contributor to the development of modern Canadian literature. This poet-of-all-literary-trades has been a prominent figure in the Canadian literati since the popular reception of his Poems for All the Annettes in 1962. The corpus of Purdy's work is substantial and diverse. While continuously producing poems, he freelanced for nearly three decades, contributing a myriad of book reviews and articles to literary journals and magazines. He has written drama for both radio and television and has served several Writer-in-Residencies in Canadian universities. Purdy has himself managed the editor's pen for one compilation of Canadian writings on the United States,<sup>1</sup> three anthologies of Canadian poetry,<sup>2</sup> and two collections of selected poems by Milton Acorn.<sup>3</sup> His own poetry has been widely anthologized, particularly such poems as "Trees at the Arctic Circle," "Wilderness Gothic," and "The Country North of Belleville." To date, thirty-two volumes of his poetry and prose have been published,<sup>4</sup> including a Selected Poems that has been translated into Russian and a Collected Poems that represents thirty-seven years of his evolving voice and style. For his contributions to Canadian poetry and culture, this Ontario-born writer has been awarded two Governor General's Literary Awards, the A. J. M. Smith Prize, the

Canadian Authors Association Award, and the Order of Canada. In the 1956 Emu, Remember!, Purdy, a then amateur poet, announced his ambition "to write one novel" (inside back cover). In 1990, at the age of seventy-two, he finally realized this dream, publishing his first and only novel to date, A Splinter in the Heart. Purdy is currently writing his autobiography, and one can only speculate on future developments in the literary career of this prominent Canadian poet.

Much of the criticism written on Al Purdy attempts to locate and promote his poetry in the context of English-Canadian literature as a whole. Dennis Lee ranks him as a founding father of North American Literature, equating his accomplishments with those of Walt Whitman. In "Running and Dwelling: Homage to Al Purdy," Lee declares, "Purdy is our Whitman, as Whitman was America's Purdy" (16). Lee appropriately distinguishes between Whitman's poetic approach and that of Purdy, contending that the latter is distinctively "Canadian" in his "native mapping of North America" (16). "Canadian" is a primary adjective used by the critics in their descriptions of his poetry. In "Purdy: Man and Poet," George Bowering labels him "the world's most Canadian poet" (24). George Woodcock expands upon this characterization, maintaining that "Al Purdy's writing fits Canada like a glove; you can feel the fingers of the land working through his poems" ("On the Poetry of Al Purdy" 8). Clara Thomas likewise claims, "To hear him read is to hear the country speak" (144). In the pursuit and production of poetry, Purdy has doggedly traversed the physical landscape and psychological being of his country and its

inhabitants, attempting to discern what it, in fact, means to be Canadian. He has created a literary topography of the Canadian expanse, from "The North West Passage" to "The Road to Newfoundland" and "Victoria, B.C.," always returning to rural Ontario. He has consistently focused on Canadian history, voices, and experience as poetic source and stimulus. Such poems as "Boundaries," "Joint Account," and "My Grandfather's Country," as well as his prose volume, No Other Country, exist as testimony to Purdy's persistent involvement with Canada and Canadian identity.

In the early 1960s, after several unsuccessful publishing efforts, Purdy finally came into his own as a seasoned poet, and his presence within the Canadian literary milieu could no longer be slighted. Peter Stevens, in his 1966 article, "In the Raw: The Poetry of Al Purdy," announced, "One of the best of our raw poets is Alfred Purdy" (22). With his fresh and seemingly spontaneous poetic style, Purdy found his niche in the Canadian literati, being compared to such prominent modern poets as Irving Layton. At the end of that decade, Louis Dudek recognized Purdy's developing audience, ranking him as one of the three most popular Canadian poets of the period ("Poetry in English" 113). Writing in the early 1970s, Frank Davey marked his evolving influence within the sphere of Canadian literature:

Al Purdy's colloquial and self-deprecating poetry has been one of the most popular in the past fifteen years. Like that of Layton, it has been indirectly rather than directly influential on the work of

other writers. The uniquely homespun wit of Purdy has been uncapturable by imitators, although his dominant subject matter -- the everyday experiences of an ordinary man wandering through the small towns, farms, and tourist stops of the nation -- has reappeared in the work of numerous younger writers, among them Pat Lane, Sid Marty, Tom Wayman, and Ken Belford. ("Al Purdy" 236)

In 1979, Tom Marshall further appraised the influence of Purdy's poetry on younger Canadian writers in "Space and Ancestors: Al Purdy" in Part Three of his Harsh and Lovely Land. Into the 1990s, critics continue analyze his poetry and its influence in the context of modern Canadian literature. Louis K. MacKendrick's comprehensive survey of Purdy's poetic evolution through to 1990, published in Canadian Writers and their Works, signifies the persistent critical interest in his work.

Many critics have alluded to the underlying darkness of Purdy's poetry. One of the primary implications of their analyses is that this poet can be both a romantic and a realist, often exhibiting a dual perspective within the one poem. Stevens writes of his 1965 publication, The Cariboo Horses:

Purdy has won his way to a medium which will include both realism and romanticism, so that the poet's oscillation comes across not as a wavering indecisive attitude but as a consistent though varied voice, illustrating his personal concerns and his



individuality. It is a volume which holds and synthesises opposites and variants. ("In the Raw: The Poetry of Al Purdy" 27)

Though the conventionally romantic persona and style dominant in Purdy's earliest publications virtually disappears after Poems for All the Annettes, romanticism itself never ceases to be an integral influence and presence throughout his literary career. His romanticism evolves from being blatantly imitative and traditional in its expressions and conventions to later embodying a transcendental philosophy of human continuation and loose poetic forms in which such liberal romantic notions are appropriately expressed. The younger poet of the 1949 "Rattlesnake" sonnet foreshadows little of the informal and resourceful reflection which characterizes his mature poetry:

An ominous length uncoiling and thin.  
A sliver of Satan annoyed by the din  
Of six berry-pickers, bare-legged and intent  
On stripping red treasure like rubies from Ghent. (7)<sup>5</sup>

In Purdy's earliest collections, romanticism is fostered for its own sake and sound, whereas that manifest in later publications purposes to transform stark, modern perceptions of reality. The innovated and invigorated romanticism is evident in "Archeology of Snow," in which his vision of continuation is allowed unrestrained expression, balancing and transforming his recognition of tormented existence:

there's no end of humans

My god what an agony to be sub-divided like  
 this and to be continuous and to be every-  
 where like a bunch of children's blocks  
 disappearing inside each other my god  
 and not being also migawd  
 also what grandeur (26)

While the mature Purdy is primarily concerned with direct, realistic experience, his reflections upon such experience are often of romantic proportions.

Though he may indulge in the romantic impulse, Purdy is never a naive idealist. In his mature poetry, he recognizes the presence of both light and darkness, life and death, meaning and insignificance. Margaret Atwood appropriately describes him as a "semi-Romantic" ("Love is Ambiguous... Sex is a Bully" 72). Davey further elucidates the paradoxical perspective which is conspicuous in many of his poems:

In Purdy we are made to see the fate of the romantic in our materialistic society, and allowed to laugh at the humiliations anyone who values beauty, love, and heroism is made to face in an insistently mundane world. ("Al Purdy" 238)

Realism, for Purdy, is an awareness that does not and cannot exclude the recognition of failure, transience, and even the possibility of human insignificance. As he writes, in "The Horseman of Agawa," "I mistrust the mind-quality that tempts me / to embroider and exaggerate things" (177).

Paradoxically, Purdy's realistic awareness does not deny the influence and possibilities of the romantic imagination. As he writes in "For Her in Sunlight":

These are life's gifts  
 and in the loopholes and catacombs of time  
 travel we pass thru glance back  
 to see far-distant replicas of ourselves  
 waving to us  
 surprised to find us still alive  
 as if both had imagined the other  
 as the seed imagines the flower  
 beyond death.... (172)

In Purdy's poetry, the aspirations of the romantic, though they may remain unrealized, can colour mundane reality with dignity, beauty, and the consoling illusion (or possible truth) of continuous significance.

Purdy's realism can, however, be thoroughly bleak, denouncing the traditional, romantic ideals of "beauty, love, and heroism." When the influence of romanticism is completely lacking in his poetry, the vision conveyed can be notably dismal and barren. In "Remembering Hiroshima," perhaps the bleakest of his poems, he sombrely postulates:

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  
 nor that human justice is more than a name  
 or the guilty will ever acknowledge guilt  
 All these opinions arrived at in years past  
 by men whose wisdom consisted of saying things  
 they knew might be admired but not practised.... (161)

This poem is an explicit defence of the cynical perspective and is, as such, a suitable vehicle for understanding the tension between the realistic awareness and the more idealistic expectations of romanticism which underlies Purdy's poetic vision. "Remembering Hiroshima" illustrates the poet's rational disbelief in the conception of certainty within human experience and his concomitant emotional anticipation that there are benevolent forces, though vague, undefined, and of no religious manifestation, which might provide greater meaning and security. His resolve to transcend his own rational disbelief and accept idealistic possibilities is obvious:

... I expect the morning  
 always I expect the sunlight  
 and search for justice in my own mind  
 abstracted from mercy and kindness and truth  
 but also involved in the human situation.... (161)

Conventional, romantic ideals are constantly challenged in Purdy's poetry, and only those absolutes determined to be realistically involved in "the human

situation" are advanced within his paradoxical poetic cosmos. He promotes those ideals or principles, such as respect and dignity, which can be viably consummated within daily experience and which will, when practised, foster human fraternity, rather than competition or animosity.

At the basis of Purdy's romanticism is his intuitive anticipation of profound and empathetic forces, such as an eternal continuum of time and place, which guide the human experience.<sup>6</sup> By contrast, his recognition of modern failure and weakness constitutes the basis of his realism. These paradoxical perspectives do not necessarily contradict one another; in their most effective and resourceful interaction, they can actually complement each other. It is the marriage of realism and romanticism which yields the lavish image of existence seen in "Roblin's Mills":

Those old ones  
 you can hear them on a rural party line  
 sometimes  
 when the copper wires  
 sing before the number is dialed and  
 then your own words stall some distance  
 from the house you said them in  
 lost in the 4th concession  
 or dimension of wherever  
 what happened still happens.... (60)

"Remembering Hiroshima," however, ends in stark realism; here, Purdy's romantic expectations are completely defied and undermined by his own cynicism:

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  
 and it will and he's wrong (162)

Purdy's vision of human existence can, at times, seem hopelessly pessimistic, yet something does remain which "any man can offer the world," despite the possible rejection of this offering. The offering to which he refers is the individual's passionate beliefs and convictions which, though they may not profoundly or permanently transform the human condition, are of consequence to individual existence and, potentially, to the lives of those the idealism touches. The cause-and-effect nature of human experience is a primary concern of Purdy's poetry; as he writes, in "Method for Calling up Ghosts," "everything we do or say has an effect somewhere" (74). While the ambitions of the idealist or visionary may never be fully realized, they can be the means of emotional emancipation from a sense of futility. In Purdy's cosmos, those ideals which raise humankind above the acceptance and consequent indignity of



dismal, modern reality are significant in and of themselves. In "Hombre," he writes:

Guevara is dead now and whether the world  
is any closer to freedom because  
of Che's enormous dream is not to be known  
the bearded Argentine doctor who translated  
that dream to a handshake among Bolivian peasants  
and gave himself away free to those who wanted him.... (118)

Poetry and art, for Purdy, similarly constitute such offerings of self and vision; they can add a certain dignity and grandeur to the otherwise mundane and degrading modern condition.

Although notably absent in "Remembering Hiroshima," Purdy's lighter and more romantic persona -- for this poet can be, as he declares in "Love Song," two men if he has to be -- often intervenes in his contemplation of human failure and insignificance, sparing many of his poems from complete pessimism and despair. His desire to transform the pessimistic perspective is manifest in "Metrics":

And I think to the other side of that sound  
I have to  
because it gathers everything  
all my self-deception and phoniness  
of my lifetime into an empty place

. . . . .

I think to the other side of that sound

"ouw-ouw-ouw"

to the point where I know some damfool ducks

are having a ball out there

far out

there

where I can't join them

and really it isn't really it isn't

the echo of cosmic emptiness at all

(really it isn't!)

and start typing (87-8)

Though the poet protests too much, he does support the impulse and necessity of transforming "cosmic emptiness." He counteracts the prospect of human insignificance by creating a poem. For Purdy, it is necessary to be two men, maybe even more, in order to survive emotionally and spiritually in the physical world.

The different and divergent personae of Al Purdy have been characterized by John Lye in "The Road to Ameliasburg." In his insightful analysis, Lye marks the distinctive polyphony of Purdy's poetry:

The common-man persona is the base persona, the one on which his style stands.... The boisterous persona, lecherous, rowdy,

drunken [who] accounts for some of his liveliest poetry (and much of his worst), and provides much of his humour.... In opposition to this persona is that of the sensitive man, who is characterized well in "Night Song for a Woman".... Through this persona Purdy reaches some of the finest moments in his poetry.... (242-43)

To make his portraiture complete, Lye might have included a fourth persona, the dark and despairing Purdy, who is dominant in "Remembering Hiroshima" and manifest in such poems as "One Rural Winter" and "Interruption." Lye's "sensitive" Purdy is the romantic poet who believes in love, beauty, and continuously meaningful experience. For the romantic poet, "Everything is part of everything else; all meanings are simultaneous, and must be honoured at once" (Lee, "The Poetry of Al Purdy: An Afterword" 380). This persona draws upon personal intuition and transcendental philosophy in his theory of a greater, unified cosmos in which the harshness of human failure and mundane existence is substantially eclipsed. Purdy's other personae -- the "common-man" and rowdy comic -- embrace certain cynical stances, yet these are most often obviously deliberate reactions to the gloom which the despairing Purdy recognizes and justifies. Such counterbalancing cynicism and satire are embodied in "Shopping at Loblaws," in which the tongue-in-cheek, chauvinistic poet fails to capture his female prey and concludes:

Well it might have been amor  
or some rare emotional disorder

doctors have no cure for anyway  
 but the fur piece  
 looked well worth trapping (124)

Unlike the romantic or sensitive poet who proposes eternal meaning, the common-man and comic personae rarely come to any real conclusions or convictions. They are most often, as Purdy writes in "At the Movies," left "feeling stupid / rejecting the obvious" (101). The "obvious" here seems to be the hostile reality and futility of human existence as recognized and supported by the despairing Purdy. The common-man takes refuge in the superficiality of human existence and the security of the mundane world; the boisterous Purdy escapes his own sense of futility through humour, while the sensitive poet transforms physical reality through a philosophy of transcendentalism. These personae often distract the probing, pessimistic poet who is "mad for an answer who nevertheless finds no answer, except in peculiarities and particularities and who doesn't know often whether it is fit to whisper or shout" (Jones 169). As such, the common-man, boisterous, and sensitive personae provide the divergent means by which Purdy temporarily evades the darker reality of human experience, as well as the grim speculations of his own poetic world.

Several critics have supposed that Purdy's projected continuum of time and space is a deliberate counteraction to his fear of meaningless human existence. He envisions an alternate cosmos in which eternal meaning and existence are possible, thereby redeeming humankind from transience and

insignificance. Ofelia Cohn-Sfetcu observes:

Yet, fully aware of the distinction which exists between time in nature and time in human experience, Purdy resists the temptation of nihilistic despair....

What he discovers is that the concomitant existence of the objective and the subjective makes each present moment more meaningful, that an experiential depth denied to the merely sensory perception can be achieved by the imposition on each "now" of an additional dimension which, though not objective, is no less authentic. ("The Privilege of Finding an Opening in the Past" 264)

Purdy's occasional treatment of reason as the ultimate authority is perhaps reflective of his own place in time, the era of modernism. Purdy's rationalism -- the basis of his pessimism -- might inform him of the possibility of human insignificance, but his intuition -- the root of his romantic impulse -- informs him of the possibility of a greater, more expansive and luminous reality. Charged by an awareness of romantic possibilities, Purdy's meditations often enable him to transcend the bleaker reality of failure, despite his recognition that his philosophy of continuation might be simply his own desperate attempt to glorify the human condition. Purdy occasionally questions the validity of his own ideals, as is evident in "Postscript[1956]":

I say the stanza ends, but it never does,

There being something continual  
 Apart from the blaze of a man, in a woman,  
 At least he somehow thinks there is. (8)

Although the redemption which the romantic Purdy accords to the human condition is itself questionable, it imparts the illusion of significance and endurance, and such a transformation of perception can itself alter dismal rationality and reality.

In further inquiry into the paradoxes which inform Purdy's poetic vision, the following chapter explores his involvement with human failure and the darker perceptions of reality. His poetic interpretation of historical Canadian limitation corresponds to that of other modern Canadian poets, such as F. R. Scott and Robert Kroetsch, who defy traditional assumptions of cultural inadequacy. Purdy suggests that failure is the product of a defeatist mentality, rather than being an inescapable, modern reality. Through his self-deprecating voice, he challenges societal ideals and the notion of failure as that which falls short of those ideals. While promoting the realistic consolations of human experience, he deflates those traditional ideals or precepts which precipitate a sense of personal, social, and cultural inadequacy. In devaluing ideals, he makes failure itself redundant. While chapter two examines Purdy's intellectual transcendence of defeatism, the third chapter focuses on his emotional resistance to failure and the reactions of his different personae, particularly those of his romantic persona, which offer redemption from the modern sense



of futility and perceptions of a hostile universe. For Purdy, failure can be most productively transformed through a synthesis of realism and romanticism which advances, as an absolute, a commitment to the dignity of life itself. However, in his efforts to evade the potential desolation of failure, he overlooks certain social and political considerations, particularly in those poems which concern Canada's native peoples and their historical dispossession. The fourth chapter focuses on Purdy's romantic impulse and its evolution throughout his literary career. In his corpus of poetry and prose, the romantic impulse has evolved primarily in its structural expression, rather than in its idealistic intensity and manifestation. Comparative analyses of various revisions of Purdy's early poems, "Elegy for a Grandfather" and "Postscript," provide appropriate vehicles for elucidating the development of the romantic voice in his poetry. In conclusion, A Splinter in the Heart, is explored as an appropriate allegory of the development of the dual perspective within the poetic cosmos of Al Purdy.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **AL PURDY'S DEFLATION OF IDEALS AND TRANSCENDENCE OF FAILURE**

#### **I. MODERN CANADIAN POETRY: A CHALLENGE TO FAILURE**

Failure is a familiar spectre in the corpus of English-Canadian poetry, prose, and literary criticism. The very notion of failure immediately suggests its contraries -- success and power -- and, for the pioneers of Canada and Canadian literature, the perceived centre of affluence and power was outside the Canadian compass. For colonial settlers, Britain was the paradigm of power; later, the United States seemingly epitomized success within the North American setting. Canada's own vast and inhospitable geography may have further encouraged a sense of human inadequacy among its peoples. The Canadian heritage of failure, however, might itself be a myth, a misconception of the country's early literati who devalued their own culture by deferring to foreign literary traditions and may have misinterpreted Canadian self-deprecation as signifying a sense of insufficiency. Although the themes of cultural inadequacy and geographical domination are commonly present only in the country's colonial literature, modern Canadian critics have frequently hypothesized that there is a continuing Canadian sense of limitation. David Stouck, in his "Notes on the Canadian Imagination," writes:

While it has been the special function of the imagination to make us more fully aware of life's potentialities, the Canadian imagination has traditionally been obsessed with the limitations

rather than the possibilities of human experience. (9)

A more accurate generalization might be that the conservative canonizers of Canadian literature themselves have traditionally been preoccupied with cultural insufficiency. Many modern Canadian poets -- F. R. Scott, Al Purdy, and Robert Kroetsch, to name a few -- have explicitly addressed the supposed shortcomings of their cultural existence and imagination. They have challenged the traditional or colonial standards by which Canadians have historically been judged and by which they may have judged themselves. In Purdy's A Splinter in the Heart, Red McPherson explains:

Them settlers who got sent to the new country, they started feelin  
at home. And they said, Home is here. They said, Now is here.  
They got to like the place. But all the time they kept grumbling  
and grouching, how awful it was, how terrible it was. And you  
know what, after a while no place at all got to be just fine. (152)

Purdy's McPherson voices the essential paradox of Canadian self-assertion; many modern Canadian writers have affirmed their distinctiveness and culture (or cultures) through ironic self-deprecation.<sup>7</sup>

Though E. J. Pratt's "Towards the Last Spike" is often considered to be a 'modern' epic, it might be more appropriately perceived as a remnant of earlier, colonial affectation. This poem is based upon 'heroic' subject matter intended to defy the supposed Canadian predisposition to failure and domination by geography. In suggesting that the physical realization of a national railway is heroic subject matter, Pratt may be simply fostering the assumptions of

Canadian limitation as advanced by the contemporaneous literati; this focus may not have been of epic proportions to the popular Canadian reading audience. In Canadian Literature in English, W. J. Keith contends that, in "Towards the Last Spike," "Pratt recognized a uniquely Canadian epic subject" (87). Pratt and Keith may be overly presumptuous in their implicit hypothesis of a Canadian sense of limitation; both poet and critic tacitly acknowledge that the making of a national railway should be of heroic proportions to a Canadian audience with humble potential and expectations. They both apparently accept the colonial view of cultural inadequacy and weakness, despite Canada's substantial modern developments, such as the railway itself.

In contrast to Pratt's colonial views, F. R. Scott signifies the emergence of Canadian modernism with his rejection of the colonial precepts advanced by such poems as "Towards the Last Spike" which colour the Canadian identity with failure and frustration. In "All the Spikes but the Last," Scott rebukes the seemingly racist perspective of Pratt, evidenced in his failure to properly credit the contributions of the immigrant population to the national railway. For Scott, the Canadian literati's preoccupation with colonial notions of insufficiency had eclipsed the realistic acknowledgement and depiction of Canada's unique cultural or, more appropriately, multi-cultural identity. In "The Canadian Authors Meet," Scott criticizes the Canadian literati for failing to forge a relevant cultural vision:

O Canada, O Canada, Oh can

A day go by without new authors springing

To paint the native maple, and to plan

More ways to set the selfsame welkin ringing. (70)

Scott saw contemporaneous Canadian writers as fostering the traditional, clichéd version of their own culture and its supposed limitations. In his satires of passé colonial ideas and pretensions, Scott heralded the age of modernism in Canadian poetry, encouraging the advancement of unaffected expressions of individual and social existence.

In the early 1940s, the Canadian literati began to respond to such calls as that of Scott, becoming increasingly committed to the advancement of a national literary tradition and identity. Although this tradition and its canonization process is now subject to critical censure,<sup>8</sup> the directives of the First Statement Press and other such literary manifestoes then appeared to be effectual repudiations of traditional assumptions of colonial dependency. In the ensuing canonization of English-Canadian literature, certain texts and themes were highlighted, and failure, traditionally conceived to be a major Canadian concern, became recognized as a primary component of Canadian literature and identity. In Butterfly on Rock, D. G. Jones speculates:

... it may be possible to trace in the literature certain elements of a Canadian view of life, a view of man and his relationship to the universe of a fundamental kind, which is surely what we must mean by a Canadian identity if it is to be anything more than a parochial difference in accent or in the details of economic and political organization. (31)

A survey of any anthology of modern Canadian poetry reveals various interpretations of the influence of failure or the threat of failure upon the individual or collective psyche. Al Purdy, Earle Birney, John Newlove, Margaret Atwood, Gary Geddes, and Michael Ondaatje, to name a few, have all explored failure within their own poetry. Many of their depictions of failure, however, do not extend to collective Canadian culture or identity, instead involving more specific failures. For instance, it is frustrated female psyche plagued by patriarchal influences that is the focus of metamorphosis in Atwood's The Circle Game. While many modern Canadian poets do display a "preoccupation with history and historical placement" in their poetic renderings of failure (Lecker 657), they, ironically, challenge the historical preoccupation with Canadian limitation and inadequacy. Robert Kroetsch's Seed Catalogue, for instance, defies notions of colonial dependency in its depiction of emerging Canadian culture and traditions in the early days of settling the Prairies. Many modern Canadian poets who have challenged notions of cultural failure have done so through an ironic self-deprecation which should not be mistaken for a sense of inadequacy or limitation. As Linda Hutcheon writes, in Splitting Images:

Although usually seen as either a defensive or an offensive rhetorical weapon, irony... is also a mode of 'speech' (in any medium) that allows speakers to address and at the same time slyly confront an 'official' discourse; that is, to work within a dominant tradition but also to challenge it -- without being utterly co-opted by it. (1-2)



It is by such means that the modern treatment of cultural failure by such poets as Scott, Kroetsch, and Purdy attempts to transform the literary tradition of Canadian inferiority. As Al Purdy's McPherson contends, "this is no place and nowhere, and to hell with them that don't like it" (152).

## II. THE MANIFESTATION OF FAILURE IN AL PURDY'S POETIC COSMOS

Failure is a central presence in the poetry of Al Purdy; the poetic vision and personae of this modern Canadian poet have evolved around meditations on human defeat and inadequacy. Purdy's common-man and boisterous personae are his voices of failure. They are entrenched in the world of realistic experience, and a sense of failure is inherent in their modern consciousness. In the context of Purdy's poetry, failure is not generally that which is overtly realized, but is primarily manifest as a sense of inadequacy, passivity, or self-deprecation. Purdy poetically manipulates the human experience of failure to suggest that defeat is most often a mental or emotional condition, rather than a physical reality. As Purdy writes in "Metrics":

I'm not a computer with built-in defects  
but a man  
with heavy loneliness included  
for which there seems no answer.... (86)

As Purdy develops as a poet and integrates his realistic personae with his sensitive, romantic stance, he does indeed offer alternatives to the sense of loneliness and inadequacy which vex modern man. In "Dog Song 2," Purdy

writes:

suddenly I find myself singing  
 and I can't sing worth a damn  
 which doesn't matter anyway  
 standing on the stony shoreline  
 of an arctic island watching icebergs  
 drifting in white night of Cumberland Sound  
 like ghost ships of lost explorers  
 trying to find safe passage  
 thru the ice trying to get home  
 and without awareness of doing it  
 I began to hum deep in my throat  
 then burst out singing with voice cracking.... (306)

Purdy's offering of redemption from failure is the focus of the third chapter of this thesis.

Purdy's thematic involvement with failure is most consistently manifest in Poems for All the Annettes(1962), The Cariboo Horses(1965), and Wild Grape Wine(1968), and in these volumes, he is primarily concerned with specific failures from direct experience. In "Song of the Impermanent Husband," "Home-Made Beer," and "Helping my Wife Get Supper," the poet's own sense of personal failure is highlighted. His later poems, however, tend to inquire beyond the personal particulars, instead considering the influence of failure upon the self and society. In "Piling Blood," for instance, he depicts the

sense of futility which the modern world and its common, yet odious deeds can precipitate:

... I heard the screams  
of dying cattle  
and I wrote no poems  
there were no poems  
to exclude the screams  
which boarded the streetcar  
and travelled with me  
till I reached home  
turned on the record player  
and faintly  
in the last century  
heard Beethoven weeping (288)

The poet here implies that the modern attitude of defeatism can stifle creation and culture; for Purdy, beauty cannot have free expression in art until the weaknesses of modern experience are transcended. While Purdy's earlier meditations on failure commonly expose the discrepancy between traditional ideals and his own realistic existence, his focus evolves to a revaluation of those very same ideals by which failure, generally a negation of idealistic experience, has been traditionally and culturally judged. As he deflates those ideals which precipitate a sense of inadequacy, he must likewise devalue failure itself; as he claims in a relatively early poem, he can never be satisfied with

"telling phrase or easy pessimism, syllogism or denouement" ("Evergreen Cemetery" 33). Purdy's poetry increasingly challenges the ideologically and geographically centrist notions which precipitate a sense of personal or societal inferiority.<sup>9</sup> In "Home Thoughts," he censures Canadians for their disbelief in the natural value of their own country; they overlook the inherent beauties of Canadian geography and culture in their naive acceptance and exaltation of foreign traditions:

Sometimes it seems that people of nations  
outside my own country's boundaries are dancing  
and shouting in the streets for joy  
at their good fortune in being citizens  
of whatever it is they are citizens of --  
And at other times it seems we are the only  
country in the world whose people  
do not dance in the streets very much.... (361)

Purdy's poetry defies cultural insufficiency, while it criticizes the mentality which presupposes defeat and inadequacy.

In Purdy's poetry, particularly in those volumes published during the 1960s, failure and inadequacy seem to be chronic conditions of human existence, plaguing everyday life, love, and aspiration. The life work of a man, his convictions, and even his "more easily kept illusions" appear to be inescapably shattered through the natural course of time and progress ("The Country North of Belleville" 61). However, Purdy suggests that a sense of

futility is generated through the individual's own defeatist attitude and mentality, rather than failure itself being an inherent aspect of the natural universe. In "Wilderness Gothic," for instance, the poet's own pessimism dramatically influences the perceptions and conclusion of the poem itself. He writes:

That picture is incomplete, part left out  
 that might alter the whole Dürer landscape:  
 . . . . .  
 Something is about to happen. Leaves are still.  
 Two shores away, a man hammering in the sky.  
 Perhaps he will fall. (134)

The dramatic tension of this and many other Purdy poems lies in his explicit suggestion of failure -- for death can be, for Purdy, the ultimate negation of mortal achievement. Yet, in "Wilderness Gothic," there is no actual realization of falling or failure, simply the poet's own perception and alarm. The scene might merely be, as he tells us, a "Dürer landscape" (134). Yet, the landscape and perspective are notably cast by his own consciousness of failure, and the imminent failure with which he culminates his observations suggests how such a mentality can transform possibilities, vision, and imagination. However, Purdy generally spares himself and his audience from such thorough pessimism by doctoring his depictions of failure with humour or tempering his perceptions with irony. Linda Hutcheon's observation that Canadian irony is a technique appropriate "to launch a challenge but also to admit a loss" is particularly

relevant to Purdy's poetic stance (15). This brand of irony is blatantly manifest in "Attempt," in which he writes:

Man's sole gesture of defiance  
at a hostile or indifferent universe  
is standing outside at night  
after the requisite number of beers  
and with a graceful enormous parabola  
trying to piss on the stars  
failing magnificently (126)

The "graceful enormous parabola" is perhaps a rather droll example of Purdy's ironic self-deprecation.

### III. THE POETRY OF AL PURDY: A VOICE OF FAILURE

The characteristic self-deprecation of Purdy's poetic voice is the most obvious manifestation of his personal reflection on failure and inadequacy. By his own constant confession or, more appropriately, insistence, he is and represents the failed social being, lover, intellect, and poet -- that is, a failure as judged by traditional, societal ideals. John Lye aptly observes that

Al Purdy as poet is person and persona; there is no escaping the  
earthy cynical unselfconfident egotistical balding paunching  
middleaged man deliberately common and secular. (242)

In his autobiographical discourse, Purdy consistently emphasizes his affiliation and fraternity with the outcast or social failure. In doing so, he subversively

encourages his audience to likewise disregard social ideals and supposed norms. In Morning and its Summer: A Memoir, for instance, he considers the social displacement of his childhood:

I was a stranger in that world. Other people acted in such a way as would allow them to be comfortable and at ease while getting used to human existence. Some learned very quickly, others haven't even now. (11)

Purdy presumably belongs to the latter company, ill-at-ease within the established codes and customs of society. His personal sense of social discomfort might well correspond to that of unselfconfident Canadians in the international community. However, the ironic self-deprecation of Purdy's poetic voice becomes the subversive means by which he confronts and challenges culturally sanctioned notions of success and conformity. As Linda Hutcheon suggests, ironic deprecation of self and society does not validate a predisposition to inadequacy:

... it involves taking a position, however open to divergent interpretations that position might appear to be. Its power depends on the twin conditions of context and community of belief. (2)

Purdy's irony and self-deprecation challenge exclusive social ideals and the notion that one must participate in social norms to achieve personal success and happiness within the Canadian community. Purdy himself has attained a certain success without being a paragon of social ideals and norms.

In his poetry and prose, Purdy conspicuously highlights those aspects of his own existence which an ideologically centrist community would likely judge as unproductive experience or outright personal failure. In a correspondence with George Woodcock, for instance, Purdy thus characterizes his early adulthood:

Grade 10 dropout, rode the freights during depression, in jail a few times, R.C.A.F. six years during war, up to sergeant and down to L.A.C. again, working in factories.... (Galt 97)

These seemingly atypical social experiences have become the content base for much of Purdy's poetry, as in "Riding West," "Drunk Tank," "About Being a Member of Our Armed Forces," and "Percy Lawson." Purdy has been openly attentive to those life experiences which might not, on the surface, appear to (yet do) yield the stuff of which poems are made. Woodcock suggests the importance of his eclectic social experiences to his poetry and style:

Purdy is unusual in the strongly academic world of Canadian poetry in his lack of a university background which has probably been an advantage, since it has led him to wander far and freely, to work at many callings, and to bring a wide down-to-earth experience to his writing. On the technical side, it has liberated him from ordered disciplines and from the literary fashions that sweep North American campuses, so that he has been able to spend many years working out his own poetic goals.... ("Al Purdy" 1225)



Purdy himself claims, "I reject nothing" (Geddes, "A. W. Purdy: An Interview" 70). As such, the poet is diverse and expansive in his subjects and themes, a "kind of poet-reporter, 'covering' places and situations" (Fulford 8). Purdy's assorted experiences and subject matter likewise become accessible to a diverse audience. As Purdy writes in "Place of Fire," any and all life experiences can be developed into poetry:

Of course what I'm actually doing, or seeming to,  
is telling anyone reading this how to write a poem:  
so build your fireplace, raise your stone tower,  
fall in love, live a life, smell a flower,  
throw a football, date a blonde, dig a grave  
-- in fact, do any damn thing, but act quickly!  
Go ahead. You've got the kit. (229)

The failure of poetry, for Purdy, is generally a result of the failure to fully appreciate one's own life experiences, whether or not society might judge them as mundane, insufficient, or anti-social.

As a poet, Purdy never seems certain that his fulfilment or communication of meaning will succeed and often leaves a poem inconclusive. With his apparent discernment that value judgments are a conservative, centric device which precipitate a sense of inadequacy, it might be speculated that the poet has adopted such an open-ended style to avoid falling into the centrist trap of being judgmental and conclusive. In "Trees at the Arctic Circle," Purdy is explicit<sup>1</sup> aware of the general inadequacies of definitive judgement. In this

poem, conclusive judgement is shown to be a misleading and limiting concept, preventing the appreciation of unique beauty and dignity, particularly within the humble Canadian landscape. Purdy writes:

I see that I've been carried away  
 in my scorn of the dwarf trees  
 most foolish in my judgement  
 To take away the dignity  
                                 of any living thing  
 even tho it cannot understand  
                                 the scornful words  
 is to make life itself trivial  
 and yourself the Pontifex Maximus  
                                 of nullity.... (85)

Purdy's comparison of traditional or mainstream beauty -- the "great Douglas firs... tall maples waving green and oaks like gods in autumn gold" (84) -- with the atypical beauty of the Baffin Island dwarf trees initially leads him to a short-sighted conclusion. Likewise, it seems, the comparison of other countries and traditions with those native to Canada can unjustly take away the dignity of the latter. Purdy may sometimes fail to gain comprehensive poetic perspective on a subject, yet he is not loath to expose this apparent failure within the poem itself. As he writes in "At the Movies":

But the point I'd hoped to separate  
 from all these factual things stubbornly

resists me and I walk home slowly feeling stupid  
 rejecting the obvious  
 threading my way between stones in the mud  
 with the beginnings of a headache. (101)

Many inconclusive Purdy poems suggest the weakness of ideals and definitive judgement. Purdy maintains that, "the open-endedness [of his poetry] is both device and philosophy" (Geddes 70). Might we then conclude that this philosophy of Al Purdy involves a questioning of traditional ideals and social standards, and the encouragement of contemplation, rather than conclusion? The poet can satisfactorily leave a poem, as he does in "My '48 Pontiac," "puzzled by things" (131), aware that a poet can and should not always be conclusive.

#### IV. AL PURDY'S DEVALUATION OF IDEALS AND FAILURE

Many of Purdy's poems from the 1960s onwards are anti-heroic and anti-idealistic. This poet only accepts and advances those ideals which survive his relentless process of discrimination; as he tells Geddes, "the absolutes must be attacked again and again, until you find something that will stand up" (69). Purdy's poetry often questions rather than advances absolutes, and the failures which he recurrently addresses are those which arise from the antagonism between ideals and experience. In "Hockey Players," for instance, Purdy depicts the sense of inadequacy and alienation that the idealization of a physical activity can precipitate:

(and out in the suburbs  
 there's a six-year-old kid  
 whose reflexes were all wrong  
 who always fell down and hurt himself and cried  
 and never learned to skate  
 with his friends) (56)

To depict only the failure would, for Purdy, be to validate that defeat. He must deflate those very same ideals by which a particular failure is judged. In "Hockey Players," for instance, he asks:

And what's the essence of a game like this  
 which takes a ten-year fragment of a man's life  
 replaced with love that lodges in his brain  
 and substitutes for reason?  
 Besides the fear of injuries  
 is it the difficulty of ever really overtaking  
 a hard black disc? (55-6)

In devaluing the idealized experience of professional hockey, he challenges the sense of failure suffered by those who fall short of the ideal. If the ideal itself is shown to be a travesty, then the failed ideal becomes irrelevant and redundant. Purdy's devaluation of ideals and the consequent devaluation of failure itself characterize his poetry from the 1960s onwards.

Few ideals escape Purdy's process of devaluation. As poetic theme, love can boast a rich heritage, but in the poetry of Al Purdy, the idealism and

romance of love are consistently contested and depreciated. By contrast to the traditional, glorified treatment of lovers in poetry, Purdy's lovers are often unheroic fools, inhibited by the mundane circumstances of daily life, unable to achieve the sublimity of romance even when they might try, as does the poet himself in the rather absurd "Archeology of Snow." At his cynical extreme, he states and demonstrates that "Love is ambiguous and sex is a bully" ("Love Song" 14). His love poetry is most often involved with "the pettiness of day-to-day living and getting thousands of meals" ("The Horseman of Agawa" 177). A Purdy love poem is frequently the antithesis of traditional romance, generally involving a middle-aged, married man, namely the poet himself, who cannot

... manage to get out of it  
   be warned beforehand  
 you were liable to be somebody's husband  
   but nobody ever is  
   ("Helping my Wife Get Supper" 72)

Rather than being involved with the heightened exceptions of love, Purdy depicts the commonplace complexities and failings of relationships. His love poems tend to expose the falsity of traditional, romantic ideals, while emphasizing the commonplace, realistic bonds of marriage. This does not mean that Purdy devalues marriage itself, but rather, he deflates the ideals and illusions surrounding human relationships and advances a realistic vision of marital connection and satisfaction.

In the romantically titled, "Over the Hills in the Rain, My Dear," Purdy

and his wife, Eurithe, become stripped of their humanity, sexuality, and dignity  
and, due to the discomfort of their circumstance, become

... like white shrivelled slugs  
waving snail horns at each other  
cold sexless antennae  
assessing the other ridiculous creature.... (141)

Any illusions of the idealism of long-term relationships and sexual harmony are  
here quickly defeated, shown to be absurd. The more realistic bonds of human  
relationships, such as companionship and empathy, are instead highlighted, for  
the pitiful poet realizes that his only saving grace is that

she's sorry for me  
and I don't know why:  
but to be a fool  
is sometimes  
my own good luck. (141)

In his "Song of the Impermanent Husband," Purdy's deflation of ideals is again  
prominently displayed. He declares:

Oh I would  
I would in a minute  
if the cusswords and bitter anger couldn't --  
if the either/or quarrel didn't --  
and the fat around my middle wasn't --  
if I was young if

I wasn't so damn sure  
 I couldn't find another maddening bitch  
 like you holding on for dear life to  
 all the different parts of me for  
 twenty or twenty  
 thousand years  
 I'd leave in the night like  
 a disgraced caviar salesman.... (45)

The negative diction and constructions in "The Song of the Impermanent Husband" emphasize the resonance of the failed ideal upon the individual's perceptions of self and circumstance. As Margaret Atwood aptly observes, "Purdy's love poems demonstrate the self divided against itself to perhaps an even greater extent than do his poems on other subjects" ("Love is Ambiguous... Sex is a Bully" 73). However, it is only through the negation of ideals -- the discrimination between romantic illusions and realistic expectations -- that the poet can reconcile himself to "an unrolling lifetime here/ between your rocking thighs//and the semblance of motion" (46). While a "semblance of motion" falls short of idealized love, it does imply the security and comfort of realistic union. The Purdyean process that deflates ideals often, as in his love poems, provides alternate ideals, which are not actually "ideals" since they are the commonplace consolations of realistic experience.

Several of Purdy's poems, particularly his "Poem for One of the Annettes" and "Poem for Eda," might be censured for sharing the ideology of

patriarchy. However, in other seemingly sexist poems, Purdy manipulates his persona to illustrate the failures inherent in the patriarchal posture. In "Shopping at Loblaws," for instance, the poet suggests that the posture of the virile male is one of confused self-identity and treachery. All of the poet's humanity falls to the wayside as he attempts to trap his female prey in a supermarket. Although an enthusiastic participant in this clichéd, sexist scenario, he openly confesses to his barbaric attitude and actions. Purdy has fallen into the trappings of the stereotypical "Itus Pickipus Emasculus Promiscuous," and he and his sexist posture are deflated at the conclusion of the poem:

I lope to the tavern intending  
to repackage myself better  
or worse as "alcoholic".... (124)

Here, Purdy implies that the predator male mentality must be amended in order to spare humanity itself. The poet, through participating in such a sexist mentality, has failed his own self, humanity, and the realistic objectives of gender equality. In "Married Man's Song," he similarly exposes the confusion and ignorance inherent in the stereotypical middle-aged male who pursues extramarital affairs expecting to avoid aging and death. He writes:

When he makes love to the young girl  
what does the middle-aged long-married  
man say to himself and the girl?  
-- that lovers live and desk clerks perish? (157)



He challenges and deflates the illusions of romance and power claimed by the middle-aged patriarch and exposes the failures of identity and humanity generally inherent in his identity. Purdy devalues the stereotypical, patriarchal posture, which might itself be perceived by those who share that ideology as being a modern, social ideal.

The traditional ideal of poetic genius is likewise challenged in Purdy's poetry. In his preface to his Collected Poems, which might be thought to mark certain artistic maturation, Purdy expresses a sense of creative inadequacy, remarking that "Even after writing poems all my life, I'm never entirely confident that the next poem will find its way into being" (xviii). In his deflation of such conceptions as poetic genius and mastery, he affirms the accessibility of the poetic text. For Purdy, poets and poetry are not infallible. A reader of a Purdy poem is not expected to naively accept the sentiments expressed, but rather to question them, as the poet himself often does. In "Postscript," for instance, he suspects his own position:

I say the stanza ends, but it never does,  
 There being something continual  
 Apart from the blaze of a man, in a woman,  
 At least he somehow thinks there is. (8)

Purdy frequently universalizes his own defeated ideals and extends his personal failures to be applicable to the development of any individual's life and career. In the volume, In Search of Owen Roblin, he writes:

Now I'm talking about myself

there is a time of defeat in any man's life  
 any woman's too  
 If he's a writer that time  
 is when he's hanging on better writers' coattails  
 saying or thinking their reputations are inflated and  
 he's just as good or much better than they are.... (20)

Here, Purdy intimates that an individual's own self-created ideals and his or her attempt to reach those ideals inevitably generate a sense of inadequacy. Once the idealism itself is deflated, however, the individual may freely develop without his or her growth being impeded by comparing it to that of others.

According to Purdy's poetry, Canadians are particularly vulnerable to judging themselves according to foreign standards. Although Canadians have always created and maintained their own traditions, many tend to disbelieve in the value and distinctiveness of their identity (or identities). In "Shot Glass Made from a Bull's Horn," Purdy claims that "Canada is a country ending at the beginning... a mythic country that disbelieves in itself" (271). In similar sentiment, he creates the character, "Man Without a Country," who declares:

"Look at them  
 their pride their art and science  
 and above all they have not sold out  
 to the highest bidder  
 No I will not stay  
 I am no man here

because this is not a country" (313)

Purdy criticizes such a view of Canada; he suggests that the supposed Canadian lack of self-identity is itself a myth. There is indeed identity or identities within the Canadian context, for "I am the land and the land becomes me" (314). There is no failure of culture, for Purdy, but a failure of the people to acknowledge and appreciate the traditions which they themselves have forged and continue, however unconsciously, to forge. In the comic "At the Quinte Hotel," Purdy illustrates how an apathy towards one's own culture can actually hamper contemporary culture in the making. The poet must "knock the shit outa" a man in order to gain his audience's attention and have his poetry heard (110). Ironically, the tavern-dwellers do appreciate the poem itself, though they do not recognize its value or the value of art to their culture. Purdy concludes:

... it was brought home to me in the tavern  
 that poems will not really buy beers or flowers  
 or a goddamn thing  
 and I was sad  
 for I am a sensitive man (110)

Purdy suggests that the idealization of other cultures and legacies can actually thwart the development of Canada's own traditions.

While Purdy denies that the geographical centre of existence is outside Canada's own boundaries, his poems further challenge any conceptions of the geographical centre of Canada being found in its metropolitan cities. For Purdy,

the idea of any one centre of existence within Canada is a ludicrous concept in a country so geographically and culturally diverse. In "Boundaries," he contemplates the paradox of what Canadians perceive as being the centre of their contemporary existence and those places which have instead captivated their historical and contemporary imaginations. He writes,

In all these southern counties

with English names

York      Dufferin      Hastings      Northumberland

stood the great trees

gone for a hundred years now

and the mannered expressionless urban names

mark the boundaries

insert themselves like worn silver shillings

in mouths of city peoples

to spend on tiny vistas

in parking lots

fenced backyards

## Far north the still-rich vulgarity

to match

a man-breaking country

## "The Torngat Mountains"

east of nowhere

**westerly**

"Telegraph Creek"

"100 Mile House"

northerly

"Arctic Red River"

"Tuktoyaktuk"

Nobody speaks those names without feeling.... (134)

The non-traditional form of this poem emphasizes the poet's rejection of foreign tradition and his attempt to forge a poetic structure appropriate to the divergent centre or centres of Canadian existence. By devaluing notions of cultural centrism, Canadians can affirm their particular successes of self and tradition within the expansive Canadian context. For Purdy, the Canadian consciousness of failure does not necessarily manifest an adverse influence upon what Atwood has termed "spiritual survival... life as anything more than a minimally human being" (*Survival* 33). The consideration of personal and cultural negations in Purdy's poetic cosmos can, paradoxically, stimulate affirmations of self-worth and identity. As Purdy writes, in "Yes and No":

No is not a negative  
exercise in rhetoric  
and reverse self-glorification  
-- it clears a little space  
in the forest where yes may live  
blissfully in positive ignorance.... (357)

### **CHAPTER THREE**

#### **DIVERGENT MEANS: AL PURDY'S PARADOXICAL VISION OF REDEMPTION FROM FAILURE**

##### **I. RESISTANCE AND REDEMPTION: THE PURDY ABSOLUTES**

In the poetry of Al Purdy, the realistic recognition of human despair and defeatism can inspire a devaluation of such traditional ideals as success and power, social status and centrality. Such rejection of modern Western idealism is, however, only one of several possible responses to presumed failure, transience, and insignificance in Purdy's poetic cosmos. The deflation of idealism is this poet's means of vindicating assumed failures through intellectual or theoretical argument. However, such reasoning holds insufficient emotional appeal to satisfy his intense involvement with direct, personal reality. While devaluation of social ideals might intellectually satisfy his concern with failure, it does not appease his emotional and spiritual faculties. For Purdy, theoretical argument can only vindicate supposed inadequacy; it cannot alter or redeem the immediate emotional reality of humankind. His poems which openly challenge preconceived standards often descend into didacticism, such being the circumstance of "The Country of the Young" in which Purdy instructs:

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.... (106)

Such didacticism aspires to alter perception through intellectual, rather than

imaginative or emotional appeal. Moral instruction generally concludes such poems, as in "Interruption," in which Purdy writes, "We have set traps, / and must always remember / to avoid them ourselves" (129-30). Such didacticism and closure are at odds with the structural and philosophical open-endedness of most Purdy poems.<sup>10</sup> His cynical and theoretical involvement with human failure, explored in chapter two of this thesis, signifies only one of the seemingly diverse ideologies, being in this case what might be considered reductionist realism, which inform and influence his vision of existence and experience. Such realism is notably in much of modern English literature, and Purdy's own involvement with this perspective is undoubtedly influenced by the contemporaneous literary milieu.

In contrast to or, more appropriately it seems, in reaction to such awareness of bleak corporeal reality, Purdy does propose emotional and spiritual redemption from the modern sense of defeat and futility. In his poetic cosmos, redemption is realized through divergent means. Purdy is a paradox -- a romantic and realist, dreamer and cynic -- and his literary reactions to failure correspond to his mutable personae. While he can indeed give certain credence to defeat and transience or, by contrast, challenge traditional conceptions of success and significance, he can also promote his own ideals or absolutes, depending upon the persona of the individual work. His absolutes are neither ideologically consistent nor do they, together, constitute any coherent philosophy of human redemption. As ideals or absolutes, the realistic Purdy personae advance the consolations of everyday experience or promote

hedonistic indulgence, while the sensitive poet champions eternal significance and fraternity. His absolutes can be informed by realistic experience, romantic aspirations, or elements of both ideologies. John Lye's characterization of the different Purdy personae, as outlined in the introduction to this thesis, provides an effective vehicle for an inquiry into his different absolutes and his paradoxical means of conferring value on human life and achievement. The common-man and boisterous personae are informed by immediate, realistic experience and, as such, propose what might be considered mundane, everyday goals, such as contentment and acceptance of one's circumstance. The sensitive persona proposes absolutes which are romantically charged and sweeping in their transcendental applications. In the case of Purdy's common-man and boisterous personae, the redemption offered is limited; the individual simply resists and survives bleak modern reality and failure. For the sensitive poet, redemption is more than resistance and survival; this persona transforms barren experience into eternal, valuable existence.

Manifest in Purdy's corpus of poetry and prose is a vigorous internal debate over the means of human redemption from failure and defeatism. His intense and persistent involvement with redemption is perhaps due to the divergent, sometimes even contradictory ideologies of realism and romanticism which inform his poetry. He does not fall prey to fixed, unequivocal vision, which he himself maintains is a major misfortune of Irving Layton's poetry. When asked about his "Portrait" of Layton, Purdy tells interviewer, Gary Geddes:



... I think the thought on my mind was that somebody had fixed themselves, pinned themselves down, taken a stance, identified themselves far too fully... in my own case I like to think of a continual becoming and a changing and a moving. I feel that Irving takes such positive stances that I'm a little disappointed, because I think he could have done much better. (67)

For Purdy, the continual variance of perspective within his own work is a vehicle for reflection, argument, and, ultimately, development. As Tom Marshall has noted, in "Space and Ancestors: Al Purdy," "He articulates both isolation and connectedness. Ancestral voices both human and natural are heard; a multiple perspective is achieved" (91). It is this expansive perspective, what Mike Doyle has called the "protean personality," that has developed as a primary characteristic of Purdy's voice and poetry (9). Though his vision of redemption is inconsistent, his will to transcend failure and transience within his own literary work is sure and confident. As Purdy writes in what is perhaps the bleakest of his poems, "Remembering Hiroshima," "I always expect the sunlight" (161).

Purdy's proposed redemption from failure can be informed by a seemingly casual spirituality and sensitivity which identifies all of human life, effort, and opinion as being intricately interwoven and eternally accessible. The poet's perceptions of continuity and an 'eternal now' completely override such possibilities as transience and insignificance; the finality of death itself, which might be perceived as the ultimate human failure, is transformed through his

vision of eternal community. As Dennis Lee writes, in "The Poetry of Al Purdy: An Afterword," "Continuity in time may not remove the scandal of transience and death. But it qualifies them in an important, nourishing way" (376). When acknowledged and accessed, the spiritual continuity of time and place immediately confers meaning and effectuality upon all the poet perceives and articulates. Purdy voices such a transcendental view of existence in "Method for Calling up Ghosts," proposing that

... everything we do or say has an effect somewhere  
passes outward from itself in widening circles  
a sort of human magic by which  
a word moves outside the nature of a word  
as side effect of itself

the nature of a word being

that when it's been said it will always be said

-- a recording exists in the main deep of sound. (74)

This continuity of communication and community has been extensively considered by Purdy critics and, as such, will be briefly explored here. It is noteworthy, in the context of this thesis, that continuity is the absolute of the sensitive Purdy, and that it is through the individual imagination that such redemption can be offered. It is the individual -- the poet himself -- who perceives the continuity of life and is ultimately redeemed from a sense of barren effort and the burden of past defeats. As Ofelia Cohn-Sfetcu writes, in "The Privilege of Finding an Opening in the Past: Al Purdy and the Tree of



a bright thread connecting my brain  
 to savage brains in the Bearpaw Sea  
 but with an eerie feeling  
 in the backbone of being  
 observed myself (36-37)

The dignity and significance of Albert, the "vegetarian / duckbill dinosaur," are affirmed through Purdy's proposed continuum of existence which unites the past with the present (5).

The poet's affirmations of enduring experience, however, do not always reach such romantic and transcendental surety; Purdy cannot always surmount the mundane and oppressive reality of the present moment and circumstance. When his poetic stance is governed by realism, the redemption offered -- if any is offered at all -- is limited in scope, emphasizing the heightened, yet commonplace experience and the simple security of the here-and-now. This is resistance rather than redemption. Such a restrained assertion of a sure and steady now is seen in "After Rain":

Of course there's death  
 cruelty and corruption  
 likewise shit in the world  
 to hell with that  
 one day at least stands  
 indomitable as a potato.... (252-53)

The common-man must recognize and appreciate those moments of being

which influence or rise above the rest; to not acknowledge the realistically influential moments in one's life is to precipitate failure. As Purdy writes in "What it Was --":

Of course other problems exist here now  
 the necessity for pattern 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  
 this is the wind-blown instant of time  
  
 that swings you into the future.... (64-65)

The lining of "What it Was --" suggests how the recognition of the consequence of one's own realistic experiences can alter the perception of meaning and purpose; the acknowledgement of "this is the moment" frees the poet's imagination, as illustrated by the liberated structure of the poem's conclusion. For Purdy, simply acknowledging the value of experience itself can redeem the individual from a sense of insignificant being and inconsequential existence. As he writes in "The Jackhammer Syndrome":

There are moments of such elation  
 in a man's life it's like being struck  
 alive on the street by the first

god one meets at an intersection  
 whom one must believe in a second  
 time after twenty years of atheism.... (168)

These "moments of elation" are, for Purdy, innately meaningful, allowing the individual a glimpse of the value of his or her existence, giving the individual seeming evidence that there is something more noble and magnificent in life than the mundane, day-to-day reality.

Like his affirmations of an eternal now or his enthusiasm for the potent moment of being, much of Purdy's self-deprecation and humour can be understood in terms of resistance to failure and defeat. The common-man and boisterous personae can achieve limited redemption through the acknowledgement of their failures, as opposed to acknowledging their consequential moments of being. Simply by reacting to failure, though that reaction might be comic and absurd, Purdy can transcend the serious gloom of his own sense of inadequacy. In "House Guest," for instance, he depicts the failure of tolerance and understanding between himself and his friend, Milton Acorn. The sober reality of failed friendship is partially transformed through the humorous perspective of the poet himself who writes:

... one night we quarrelled over how to cook eggs  
 In the morning driving to town we hardly spoke  
 and water poured downhill outside all day for it was spring  
 when we were gone with frogs mentioning lyrically  
 Russian steel production figures on Roblin Lake which were almost

nil

I left him hitch hiking on #2 Highway to Montreal

and I guess I was wrong about those eggs (108-9)

Here, it is Purdy's comic handling and recognition of failure which redeems the poem itself from complete despair. The friendship in question will not be terminated since the poet has humorously accepted his own culpability. By maintaining a certain humour, the common-man and boisterous personae can evade a thoroughly dismal perspective on reality and can also avoid certain failures. It is dangerous in the Purdy cosmos to take oneself seriously, without allowing for humour and open possibilities, for as he writes in "About Being a Member of our Armed Forces":

Not that the war was funny

I took it and myself quite seriously

the way a squirrel in a treadmill does

too close to tears for tragedy

too far from the banana peel for laughter

and I didn't blame anyone for being there

that wars happened wasn't anybody's fault then

Now I think it is (143-44)

In taking himself and his circumstance seriously and without question, Purdy had become like a squirrel in a treadmill, having lost physical and mental control over the course of his experience. Through humouring oneself, reacting to and

questioning one's circumstance, present and future failures can be avoided and, as in the case of this poem, past failures can be better understood and partially transcended, at least within the individual's own perspective.

## II. REDEMPTION AND THE PURDYAN STATES OF INNOCENCE AND EXPERIENCE

While the common-man and boisterous Purdy personae react to failure, they seldom redeem themselves or humankind from the possibility of inadequacy, insignificance, and transience. Governed by realistic experience, they simply react to and, in a limited manner, transcend direct, personal failure through humour and self-recognition. At best, such reactions prevent the same mistake from being made twice. The common-man and boisterous personae are the voices of realistic experience, and the resistance or redemption which they generally propose is simple contentment with mundane reality. The common-man often takes solace in his own inability to alter reality and accepts the secure "semblance of motion" of his own life ("Song of the Impermanent Husband" 46). The buffoon poet transcends dismal situations through absurdity, alcohol, and the realization that, "to be a fool / is sometimes / my own good luck" ("Over the Hills in the Rain, My Dear" 141). These two personae might be equated to William Blake's bardic persona in his Songs of Experience; these Purdy personae are fully entrenched in modern reality and the perceptions of adult experience. Like Blake's bard, Purdy's voices of experience devalue the ideals of romanticism and criticize organized religion, rather than advance natural spirituality, as does the more sensitive Purdy persona. It is



the common-man persona who narrates "Funeral," writing caustically of his reaction to the United Church minister presiding over his mother's funeral:

being so damn furious  
 drunk and sober simultaneously  
 atheism seemed glorious  
 then changed my mind  
 wanted to be a believer  
 in order to render aid  
 and comfort to Satan.... (243)

If this poem had been narrated by the sensitive Purdy, the theme doubtlessly would be vastly different; instead of focusing on religious hypocrisy, the sensitive persona would likely concentrate on the continuity of life between himself and his recently deceased parent. The sensitive persona would likely redeem the seeming transience of his mother's existence, whereas the common-man can only offer his embittered reaction. Purdy's voices of experience seldom transcend the harshness and pain of immediate, realistic experience. These voices are governed by pessimism and pragmatism, yet Purdy can, through his sensitive persona, show the inadequacy of such a rigidly realistic ideology. While the common-man and boisterous Purdy personae simply resist failure and defeat, the sensitive Purdy offers redemption.

The sensitive Purdy promotes hope and sympathy, depicts connection and continuity, and proposes meaningful experience and existence. This Purdy persona may be equated to William Blake's piper-poet in Songs of Innocence,

depicting the simple, naive experiences and perceptions of childhood "when toads and frogs rain down the sky, / and night is velvety as under the skirts / of a goddess, where it's always summer" ("The Time of your Life" 192). Purdy, like Blake, can suspend his adult experiences and perceptions to again enter into the realm of innocent childhood. In "The Time of your Life," Purdy leaves the world of adult experience behind him to become completely involved with the enthusiasm and perceptions of the child:

On either side the river lie  
dark cubes of houses drowned in snow:  
the boy dashes excitedly to one  
of them, aching with news of an event  
real or imagined, bursts the  
door open, "Hey, mom (and forgets  
whatever it was) -- I'm hungry!" (194)

Redemption is never overtly offered in such Purdy poems, for such enthusiastic involvement with experience renders redemption unnecessary and redundant. By contrast, the experienced Purdy can absolutely deny the magic of childhood, as he does in "After Rain":

I am almost what I was  
a bored child again  
experiencing magic  
but that's a lie  
I never did experience magic.... (252)

Further to the involved depictions of childhood innocence which render redemption superfluous, the comparison of Purdy's sensitive persona with Blake's piper-poet is particularly apt in regard to their common advancement of natural spirituality. The 'holiness' or sanctity depicted by both Blake and Purdy transcends the structure and rigidity of organized religion, though there are overtones of organized religion which will likely be inferred by those readers from the world of experience. While Blake's Songs of Innocence allude to the Christian faith, Purdy's natural spirituality and his conception of an eternal now seems to borrow more from Eastern religions such as Taoism. For both Blake and Purdy, there is the possibility of a higher innocence, a state which can follow and transcend the perceptions of adult experience. Might it be this higher innocence which Purdy proposes when he encourages the imaginative accessing of continuous being and natural spirituality? The only prerequisite for access into Purdy's higher innocence is transcending the self-involvement and isolation of adult experience and arriving at the realization that

father and grandfathers are here

grandmothers and mother

farmers and horsebreakers

tangled in my flesh

. . . . .

and my being is theirs.... ("A Dream of Myself" 243-44)

The title of this poem is particularly appropriate to the altered states of perception and sensation which comprise Purdy's higher innocence. Higher

innocence, in Purdy's cosmos, involves a suspension of egotism and self-centered perceptions; one must realize one's being within the context of a greater continuum of existence. The sensitive persona can transcend the immediate experience and self-involved deprecation of the common-man and boisterous personae to stand "in no-time, / where sequence is tangled in creation, / before possible things converge" ("The Time of your Life" 193). It is through the sensitive Purdy persona that redemption from the mundane reality of the experienced, modern world can be achieved.

Purdy, like Blake, is a poet of contraries.<sup>11</sup> What can appear to be internal contradictions within both poets' bodies of work are simply diverse personae and perceptions. As Blake reconciled many of the concerns of innocence and experience in his later poetic mythologies, Purdy can likewise synthesize elements from all his personae to achieve yet another distinct poetic voice. For instance, the ideological difference between his common-man and sensitive personae becomes less distinct in his later collections of poetry and, particularly, in his only novel to date, A Splinter in the Heart. In his later works, the realism of the common-man and the romanticism of the sensitive persona somewhat synthesize to yield what might be thought of as yet another Purdy reaction to the fear of failure and insignificance; this integration of realism and romanticism promotes redemption through dignity. This particular reaction to failure is basically a compromise of all his personae and ideologies. The persona who is committed to the ideal of dignity suggests that redemption can be achieved through a certain virtue or morality, rather than through freedom of

the imagination, as in the earlier poems which propose continuous, imaginative existence. As such, the later Purdy stance on failure and redemption can be seen as maintaining the conservatism of the Canadian canonical process with the "valorization of the cautious, democratic, moral imagination before the liberal, inventive one" (Robert Lecker, "Canonization of Canadian Literature" 658). While Purdy's proposed redemption through corporeal dignity is dependent upon the connectedness of experience and is, thus, instilled with a vague spirituality, it is more highly informed by the heightened, yet realistic experience. It is such a vision of redemption which he proposes in "Dog and Hummingbird":

I remembered that blind dog  
and hopefully without undue moralizing  
thinking  
if life is never a shower of diamonds  
and rainbows avoid your own vicinity  
there is a "connectedness" about things.... (WOS 46)<sup>12</sup>

Here, the common-man and sensitive poet are both manifest, their divergent ideologies meeting to yield proposed redemption through dignity and realistic connection. Purdy's vision of dignity and connection between fellow beings is not a strictly moral vision, but does emphasize the principles of dignity and respect for the dignity of others. The foundation of such a view is seen in a much earlier Purdy poem, "Trees at the Arctic Circle," in which he arrives at the understanding that

To take away the dignity  
                                     of any living thing  
 even tho it cannot understand  
                                     the scornful words  
 is to make life itself trivial. (85)

Commitment to the dignity of all past and present is an obvious impetus of much of his poetry and prose and seemingly becomes the primary governing principle of the mature Purdy.

Purdy writes of those whose dignity he has admired and, in doing so, establishes a certain tradition of folk-heroes within the Canadian context -- heroes (notably, few heroines) who might redeem Canada itself from its traditional sense of insufficiency. It is such Canadian myth-making which he pursues in "Homage to Ree-shard":

... the real thing  
 honest-injun Rocket indubitable Maurice  
 mad mad Ree-shard in fact the first and only  
 berserker astronaut among the lesser  
 groundlings their necessary flyboy  
 who slapped a star along Décarie hellway  
 and rang a bell in Bonaparte's tomb  
 and knocked a crumb from Antoinette's pastry  
 waved his wand at Anglos Howe and Ezinicki  
 and made Quebec Canadian. (237-38)

In part, it is the self-assurance and natural dignity of the Rocket which raise him, in Purdy's eyes, to the stature of Canadian legend. For Purdy, such legendary dignity can infuse another individual's identity and even the collective Canadian identity with a sense of like dignity, redeeming Canadians from a sense of failure and dependency upon other cultures for traditions and heroes. He concludes this homage by wishing the Rocket the absolutes of his common-man persona, as well as those of the sensitive personae:

Rocket you'll never read this  
 but I wish for you all the best things  
 whatever those may be  
 grow fat drink beer live high off the hog  
 and may all your women be beautiful  
 as a black spot of light sailing among the planets  
 I wish it for just one reason  
 that watching you I know  
 all the things I knew I couldn't do  
 are unimportant (238)

As suggested in "Homage to Ree-shard," the distinction of one individual can be the means of redeeming another individual, even the nation itself, from a sense of inferiority and failure.

Dignity is the principal theme of A Splinter in the Heart, a novel which, having a distinct narrative persona and the voices of many characters, might be seen as the culmination of manifold Purdy concerns and voices. Purdy's young

hero, Patrick Cameron, is victim of the sense of failure and inadequacy which seems to be rampant in the modern identity, as well as in modern literature itself. Patrick is considered a failure as compared to that or whom, in this case, is considered to epitomize success -- the seemingly accomplished and self-assured Kevin Morris. Patrick might be seen as representing the victim of social ideals and judgement, a major Purdy concern as demonstrated in Chapter Two of this thesis. Despite his youth or perhaps due to his proximity to the realm of childhood innocence, Patrick recognizes his victimization:

Kevin was clever, of course. Patrick admired him, even wanted to be like him in some respects. But it was unfair of Mrs. Morris to force a comparison down his mother's throat. He felt a slight surge of resentment, a useless emotion that was nevertheless pleasurable. (3)

Patrick's journey toward self-knowledge culminates in the recognition of his own dignity, as well as that of Kevin Morris. With dignity and confidence, together, the boys can act as mature men during the crisis at the British Chemical Corporation. The necessity and value of dignity are made evident as Patrick Cameron becomes a minor hero in the rescue mission. In A Splinter in the Heart, Purdy is further concerned with the dignity of the aged peers of Portugee Cameron, Patrick's late grandfather. It is perhaps no coincidence that Purdy's focus on the natural dignity of Patrick, that of the elderly men, and the unaffected friendships between the youth and the aged corresponds to the Blakean depictions of the natural affiliation between innocence and higher



innocence. As Louis K. MacKendrick observes in his monograph, "Al Purdy," Purdy is acquainted with the work of William Blake (138). In "Flies in Amber," from Emu, Remember!, Purdy himself admits to attempting to "Court Blake" (16). The dignity which Purdy celebrates can be at odds with that which adult society upholds as the ideal. For instance, when the friend of the late Portugee, Red McPherson, begins to speak at his funeral, Purdy suggests the antagonism between natural dignity and the assumed ideal of dignity: "The church's dignity and his own were in danger, Mr. Hartwell felt. But McPherson's eyes were dangerous to both" (160). The dignity of Portugee's peers, as well as that of Patrick Cameron, is not tied to social conventions, and it is, ultimately, self-respecting dignity, rather than socialized dignity, which thematically prevails in A Splitter in the Heart. In Purdy's final portrayal of his hero,

The mind was keeping time with the same music that his body  
already knew. There was a mystery about himself that lured and  
beckoned, projecting above the apparent surface of himself. (257)

Patrick has regained or reaffirmed those ideals of innocence, such as enthusiasm, self-possession, and dignity, which, in Purdy's perspective, seem to be necessary to avoid the trappings and gloom of the world of modern, adult experience.

### III. DOES PURDY TRANSCEND TOO MUCH?

While Al Purdy may challenge traditional ideals and "mainstream" precepts in order to affirm the dignity of fellow human beings, it is a challenge

which may itself be considered mainstream and naive according to the standards of contemporary social argument. Purdy's vision of redeeming failure through sympathy and dignity is basically a conservative one; Purdy most often reacts against ideals, rather than reacting against the realistic causes of failure. John Lye aptly writes of Purdy's

... reaction against ideals which the harshness of the world stimulates... The governing sensibility or disposition of Purdy's poetry, however, is humane and sympathetic. The emphasis is on the individual, on the meaning of his life and of his sorrows. The world with which the sensibility is faced is flawed, full of pain; God is apparently absent; meaning is precarious, hard to reach and hold. Sympathy and history are the two strongest sources of value; Purdy exercises and demands the first and creates a metaphysic which ensures the meaningfulness and the accessibility of the second. (252-53)

While Purdy promotes the value of individual existence and encourages reaction against failure, he does not write, as Lye observes, protest literature. Neither does he promote revolution in any social or political sense. If he was to advocate any revolution, it would likely be a revolution of the imagination, rather than one of a physical or political nature. Is this not what Blake also proposed? In this present era of protest against racism and social discrimination, however, Purdy is vulnerable to criticism for evading the political aspects of the many social issues which he has peripherally addressed. For

instance, his "Beothuck Indian Skeleton in Glass Case," while being a sympathetic meditation on the native past, is open to criticism for its neglect of contemporary native dignity -- particularly, in hindsight, with the exhibition of such remains now prohibited. Further, the term "Indian" in the title makes the poem dated. While Purdy evokes the dispossession of the native peoples in this poem, this issue is tangential to his consideration of a continuum of life which links himself, the tourists, and the man from the past. In his article, "In Defence of North America," Dennis Duffy directly addresses Purdy's "Beothuck Indian Skeleton in Glass Case" in terms of dispossession:

The poem treats the theme of dispossession on more than a historical level alone. It shows the utter destruction of a native race and the reduction of its noblest products to a museum attraction, but it places everything in the perspective of things past and passing. (19)

Purdy recurrently avoids the political considerations of his subject, his focus instead being the physical and spiritual connections between the subjects within his frame of perception. His desire to redeem bleak, modern reality, as in this particular poem, suspends poetic attention to other, seemingly more realistic and relevant social issues -- issues which are immediately evoked by his choice of content and are often even peripherally considered within the work itself.

Purdy is interested in redeeming the apparent failures and misfortunes of the past through a theory of metaphysics, rather than politics. Rather than meditating upon the realistic and repercussive antagonism between fellow

human beings, he proposes an eternal fraternity of action and thought. In "Remains of an Indian Village," for instance, Purdy notably does not consider the realistic causes -- physical, social, and political -- of the disappearance of the native peoples from the land upon which he walks. Instead, he romantically and imaginatively taps into their continued presence. Purdy writes:

But I come here as part of the process  
 in the pale morning light  
 thinking what has been thought by no one  
 for years of their absence,  
 in some way continuing them.... (37)

It could be contended that Purdy here illustrates a certain self-centred, anglo-centric stance with his pretensions of redeeming the native past through his own present, imaginative interpretation of the land. The past reality of the village, as conjured up by Purdy, is simply one interpretation -- the interpretation of a cultural outsider. Purdy, in these and other poetic representations of native being, such as are found in North of Summer, might be assuming undue authority and privilege in depicting a culture and voices outside his own anglophone, central Canadian background. While he is responsive to the emotional plight of the individual, both past and present, he is less sensitive to the political or social realities of the people and cultures which he portrays.

In his Hiroshima Poems, Purdy does indeed tackle the harshness of war, politics, and survival, yet, even in this comparably bleak collection of Purdy poems, the themes of dignity and redemption ultimately prevail. In "Survivors,"

he seems adamant when he writes:

It's difficult to be objective  
 or personally optimistic about life  
 when you see so much evidence of nothing  
 but death around you in the great mausoleum  
 the world is  
 or make pretty poems for joy  
 in the short space before departure  
 and at this moment I can't think of one  
 good reason for staying on earth at all.... (HP,5)<sup>13</sup>

Yet, only two poems later in Hiroshima Poems, he includes "One Thousand Cranes," a poem which pays homage to the dignity of a child dying from radiation. Following this particular poem, there is the charming "In Peace Memorial Park," again focusing upon the dignity of the individual. Purdy writes:

I prefer that little girl  
 asking the time and offering her hand  
 to shake like a 16th century lady  
 at a court ceremony honouring the Korean ambassador  
 . . . . .  
 I bow over that small hand  
 making a strange er-r-r sound in my throat  
 like when I was a shy stuttering child  
 afraid of dark blue policemen

and when I grow up I shall marry her (HP 9)

What is particularly evident in Hiroshima Poems and is a prevalent characteristic of Purdy's extensive corpus of poetry is that the absolute of the common-man poet -- acknowledgement of failure and circumstance -- is not enough. Purdy's poetry is continually infused with optimism, romance, and spirituality. His poetic purpose to transcend and redeem failure is self-evident. The poetry of Al Purdy grants the possibility of redemption and provides the diverse means of attaining deliverance from the modern sense of futility and defeatism.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### AL PURDY: A ROMANCE WITH ROMANTICISM

#### I. AL PURDY'S EARLY YEARS: THE LABOUR OF ROMANCE

In a literary career that spans more than forty years to date, Al Purdy's corpus of poetry and prose exhibits certain striking developments in voice, language, and style. The Alfred W. Purdy of such early publications as Emu, Remember! (1956) and The Crafts So Long to Lerne (1959) foreshadows little of the casual humour, candid address, and uninhibited style which characterize his developing style from Poems for All the Annettes (1962) onwards. A contemporary Purdy reader would not recognize the younger poet of "In Mid-Atlantic" who pompously emotes:

The ocean, battering at my aloneness,  
Creams into supplicating shapes, lifts arms,  
And whispers with the grey knowledge of the dead:  
Ours is the only true identity. (ER 8)<sup>14</sup>

While the Purdy of the sixties onwards fashions his poetry after direct, realistic event or intense, metaphysical experience (or a marriage of both), the earliest public Purdy was a substandard, romantic poet, commonly drawing upon the rhetoric and conventions of late romanticism as the basis of his verse. As Clara Thomas writes, in Our Nature -- Our Voices:

His first book, The Enchanted Echo (1944), serves no other purpose than to illustrate the crippling power of English Late

Romantic verse in Canada, since it could so effectively, and dreadfully, colonize the mind even of an Al Purdy. (145)

His early involvement with the historical literary tradition and his desire to commune poetically with certain figures of the romantic past are blatantly manifest in "Flies in Amber":

I stung by youth, stretch, reach, run,  
 Rotate round suns and tramp down time;  
 Court Blake and Marlowe, question Donne,  
 Think back hours, years, redeless dreame,  
 Grow lancke, soulle thinne, flesh weake, eyes blinde. (ER, 16)

As further testimony to the affectation and pretension that prevailed throughout his early verse, either A. W. Purdy or Alfred W. Purdy was the name then given on the book-jackets; the casual and colloquial "Al Purdy" was not to be adopted as pen name until the 1960s.

Though there is evolution of style and voice in Purdy's early publications, the seasoned poet does not become consistently manifest until Poems for All the Annettes.<sup>15</sup> The general impression conveyed to a reader of his earliest verse is that of a poet deliberately labouring to sound romantic and poetic, failing, at times miserably, because of his purposeful exertion. How else might we (and Purdy himself) account for such ostentatious poems as "Invocation," in which his affectation with conventional romanticism is all too apparent? He writes:

The horse-clopping, the bell-ringing time of earth,



The cloud-beaten, wind-bullied hammers of blood  
 Bursting in noiseless thunder -- no sound heard --  
 Only the sky emissaries slow going to bed.

Send snow! Send it white in this land of green trees  
 And small brown people -- comptroller of all my days. (ER 9)

The deliberately romantic diction of "Invocation" eclipses the meaning of the poem. In the context of modern Canadian poetry, many early Purdy poems, such as "Invocation," defy all modernity through their archaic language, conventionally romantic reflection, and unyielding style. As George Bowering writes of the younger poet, in Al Purdy:

... he seemed to think that a poet had to be a sort of Emily  
 Dickinson, maybe with a mustache, as in his title poem:

I caught an echo in my hands  
 With pollen mixed from leaven --  
 I gave it half my song to hold,  
 And sent it back to heaven. (EE, 11)

He may be guilty here of mixing his metaphors without coming back to sort them out, but more important is the evidence that he wanted to make them all "poetical," so that we'll be enchanted by echoes and pollen and song and heaven. (22)

The early Purdy, as illustrated in Bowering's selection from The Enchanted Echo, is crippled by conventional language and form. He has not yet achieved

the direct, natural tongue and expansive line which permit the "sideways, backwards, ass-over-the-electric-kettle" style which characterizes his mature poetry and constitutes the more directly meaningful and satisfying Purdyean logic (Geddes, "A. W. Purdy: An Interview" 69).

Purdy's early romantic posturing is not to be equated with the Blakean piper of innocence, as his later romanticism is so likened in the second chapter of this thesis. The early Purdy does not consistently evidence the liberal imagination and natural spirituality which are of paramount importance to the mature poet; the rigid, poetic forms seem to stifle the expression of imagination and spirituality. However, traces of these central Purdy concerns are indeed manifest in certain early poems, as in "The Cave Painters":

They knew the world was there,  
 having discovered an ache in the loins,  
 A clarity of colour, shores beyond their shores,  
 Become inhabitants of loneliness and applicants  
 To leave the mind-prison, be dissolved  
 In the myth's creation and absorbed. (ER 14)

Louis K. MacKendrick appropriately observes that, in the "The Cave Painters," "we can hear again Purdy's growing attraction to the co-existence of continuation and the erosions of mortality" (149). That his imagination is, however, still hampered by conventional poetic form is most evident when the structured poems from Emu, Remember! are compared to the loose, autobiographical prose which concludes the volume. Freed from poetic form

and diction, Purdy's prose note on "The Author" signifies more of his distinctive character and constitution than does any individual poem in the collection. He writes:

Born, once upon a time, in a mythological village called Wooller;  
 mythological because the same village could not now be found.  
 Height and weight, tall and heavy, but unlikely to cause a collapse  
 of athletic stadiums. Education from institutions, nil; from approx.  
 10,000 books, considerably more; from living, a great deal more.  
 Military career, checkered. Religion, show me. Marital status,  
 almost. Disposition, cloudy and variable. Present occupation,  
 scribbling. Hope for the future, to write one novel. (ER inside  
 back cover)

Here, the mature Purdy's concerns with the disappearance of the past and human failure are strongly evoked, whereas these concerns tend to be obscured by the laborious forms and language of his early poems. Likewise, his humour and self-deprecation are prominently displayed in this autobiographical note; in the midst of formal diction and structure, the self-deprecation that characterizes his mature voice is inappropriate. It is only when conventional diction and grammar are finally discarded that he can comfortably satirize his own circumstance and self, as he does in "Helping My Wife Get Supper":

Something basically satisfying real and valid  
 about being a husband  
 brandishing a knife and cutting

up soggy tomatoes

not just red

but red all through.... (72)

Notice the informality of expression in this poem, as compared with his earlier verse. The younger Purdy could not so directly and realistically manipulate the same content and satirical tone within stiff, formal structures; the immediacy and apparent spontaneity of the address would be lost.

Many critics have tended to treat the poetry of the younger Purdy quite severely, often dismissing it entirely for its romantic pretensions. However, as Mike Doyle empathetically observes, in "Proteus at Roblin Lake," he is a poet who has developed in the public eye, and "Such poets are more available to negative criticism, often known for their mistakes and limitations, but they seem to need publication for growth" (8). Purdy himself has openly dismissed much of his early published poetry; as evidence of this self-repudiation, he selected only fifteen poems that were originally published before the 1960s to be included in his Collected Poems. The early poems which are included therein are those, such as "After Rats" and the deceptively titled "Love Song," which exhibit a certain tough-guy stance and defy the prevailing romanticism of his pre-sixties poetry. The forerunning romantic impulse of his poetry is not legitimately conveyed through the early poems included in The Collected Poems of Al Purdy; likewise, his Selected Poems concentrates on those poems which were published in Poems for All the Annettes and subsequent volumes. It is, however, the romantic impulse manifest in his earliest publications which is of

particular interest in this thesis. Though the presence and influence of realism develops in his poetry from the 1960s onwards, the romantic impulse is sustained throughout his entire corpus of poetry and prose. As Peter Stevens writes, in his article "In the Raw":

It is the balancing of these opposing forces of romanticism and realism that governs Purdy's development as a poet. In the early volumes the emphasis is on the romantic; from Poems for All the Annettes Purdy the realist tends to be to the fore.

(23)

While realism is generally considered to be the governing authority of Purdy's mature poetry, it must be emphasized that the initial romantic impulse of the early collections continues to be evidenced throughout his sixties' poetry and often usurps the focus on realistic experience, as in "Archeology of Snow." In this poem, the realistic "Bawdy tale at first" (23) becomes a romantic contemplation of the community of life and experience:

As if we were all immortal  
in some way I've not fathomed  
as if all we were  
has only changed its shape  
as if all we are  
co-exists in so many forms  
we encounter the entire race  
of men just by being

alive here. (25)

This romantic transformation of realistic experience is common in mature Purdy poems and is what Dennis Lee calls "centrifugal focus, it whirls away from the initial here-and-now. And it moves out to infinity, rather than looping down again" ("On the Poetry of Al Purdy: An Afterword" 382). The difference between the early romanticism of Purdy's poetry and the romanticism of such ripe poems as "Archeology of Snow" is mainly of a stylistic nature. In his mature poetry, romantic meditation arises from the immediate, realistic experience of the poem itself, whereas, in the early collections, romantic rhetoric and convention often dominate an entire poem, overshadowing the initial experience on which the poem was founded. The evolution of a more casual, liberal romanticism in Purdy's poetry is evident through a comparative analysis of his revisions of "Elegy for a Grandfather" and "Postscript."<sup>16</sup>

Notably, the poet did preserve revisions of both these poems in his Collected Poems, suggesting his mature affinity with his initial romantic impulses. What is gleaned from his process of revision is that the original romantic impulse is sustained throughout his literary career, though its final expression is changed.

## II. THE REVISED PURDY: A NEW STYLE OF ROMANCE

The evolution of romantic expression in Purdy's poetry can be suitably traced through a comparison of parallel passages from the 1956 original version of "Elegy for a Grandfather" and the 1986 revision included under New Poems in The Collected Poems of Al Purdy. The third stanzas of the two versions,

published thirty years apart, exhibit significant differences, though, perhaps more surprisingly, many similarities in voice, style, and perspective. These differences and similarities are representative of Purdy's poetic evolution. The third stanza of Purdy's 1956 "Elegy for a Grandfather" reads:

No doubt at all that he's dead: a sadly virtuous voice  
 Folded tragedy sideways and glossed his glittering sins.  
 Old in his ancient barrow and no-one could ever guess  
 If the shy fox people play with his gnarled grey bones.  
 Or a green Glengarry river sluices his grave and sighs.  
 And earth has another tenant involved in her muttering plans,  
 With a deck of cards in his pocket and a Presbyterian grin. (9)

In this original version, the lines, "a green Glengarry river sluices his grave and sighs" and "earth has another tenant involved in her muttering plans," exemplify the overtly romantic phrasing and diction of Purdy's early poems. The phrase, "shy fox people," seems to be a deliberately sensitive and enigmatic attempt to add a mythic or legendary quality to the grandfather's death. The stanza form and grammar are rigid; the more cultivated poet would never observe the correct grammar of "No doubt at all that he's dead." His phrasing would be -- and is in the revision -- more off-hand and colloquial. This formality of structure and grammar characterizes many early Purdy poems, such as "Chiaroscuro," in which he stiffly writes:

Escape is possible then, but nearly  
 Always the roads close in behind,

And words are trapped like odd, dead animals,

Where dusty villages stand. (7)

Though the diction here is virtually unaffected by romantic pretension, the expression remains rigid and awkward due to Purdy's adherence to formal grammar. In "Chiaroscuro" and the original version of "Elegy for a Grandfather," the observed formal conventions allow for little of the casual, direct, and even absurd expression which characterizes later Purdy poems such as "Love at Roblin Lake," in which he enthusiastically declares:

My ambition as I remember and  
 I always remember was always  
 to make love vulgarly and immensely  
     as the vulgar elephant doth  
         & immense reptiles did  
     in the open air openly  
     sweating and grunting together  
     and going

"BOING BOING BOING".... (126)

Purdy's "Love at Roblin Lake" is at the opposite extreme in terms of form from his earlier, rigidly structured poems.

In counterpoint to the original version of "Elegy for a Grandfather," Purdy's 1986 revision avoids affected, pretentious language, formal grammar and lining, as well as manufactured romantic allusions. The mature poet writes:

Just the same he's dead. A sticky religious voice



folded his century sideways to get it out of sight,  
and lowered him into the ground like someone still alive  
who had to be handled very carefully,  
even after death he made people nervous;  
and earth takes him as it takes more beautiful things:  
populations of whole countries,  
museums and works of art,  
and women with such glow  
it makes their background vanish  
  
                                they vanish too,  
and Lesbos' singer in her sunny islands  
stopped when the sun went down -- (362)

The elastic lining of the revised "Elegy" suggests the structurally informal character of later Purdy poems, as well as their illusion of spontaneity, the lining having been deliberately crafted to convey an impression of immediacy and reflex. This expansive line becomes highly manifest in Poems for All the Annettes onwards, and as George Woodcock observes, in "On the Poetry of Al Purdy":

It is in the way he can manipulate the long line to create a variety of moods that Purdy has shown his growing power to fit the form exactly to the thought and thing, which is the sign of ultimate poetic craftsmanship. This is not to say that his poems are entirely linear in their overall structure, for often the juxtaposition

of jarring or contrasting elements is an essential part of the effect he is seeking, and there are times when he uses the moderately short line very effectively to achieve a cumulative emotive effect.

(13)

This "cumulative emotive effect" is apparent in the conclusion to the third stanza of the revised "Elegy for a Grandfather," in which the short line signifies the transition from realistic commentary to romantic reflex. Purdy likewise manipulates his voice through the juxtaposition of the long and short line; the structural change at the conclusion to this stanza parallels the change in voice from the common-man to sensitive, romantic poet. The evolving devaluation of Purdy's poetic perspective is likewise elucidated through the slight modifications of the revised "Elegy for a Grandfather"; for instance, the "sadly virtuous voice" of the minister is deflated to a "sticky religious voice."

Although the hypocrisy of the minister is suggested in the original version, it is brought more to the fore in the revision through direct, unambiguous diction. Much of the meaning of the original poem is confused, seemingly eclipsed by Purdy's concern with sounding poetic. After all, what does "folded tragedy sideways" really mean? What is its purpose other than to sound poetic? By contrast, the revised depiction of the minister folding the grandfather's "century sideways to get it out of sight" conveys the animosity between modern, religious pretensions and natural, historical dignity. The mature Purdy has developed an intense, persistent interest in the relationship between the present and past, while the younger poet can only touch upon such considerations with

his tight, glib description of his grandfather's "bad century" (8). As MacKendrick notes, in the original version of the poem, "the motifs of religion, virtue, power, hypocrisy, and nature are in place" (150).<sup>17</sup> However, these motifs have yet to be developed into any clear, unambiguous vision; the stanza and line forms prevent the expansion and maturation of ideas. The voice in the original poem is uncertain and, therefore, the motifs advanced lack immediacy and intensity. As MacKendrick further notes, "the portrait sounds literary, and there is no particular conviction of personal emotion" (150). In the revision, however, the powerful presence of the grandfather is potently evoked -- "even after death he made people nervous" -- and the personality and warmth of the poet himself is likewise more prominently displayed. Purdy writes of his relationship with his grandfather:

He scared the hell out of me sometimes,  
 but sometimes I caught myself, fascinated,  
 overhearing him curse God in my own arteries:  
 even after death I would never dare  
 admit to loving him, which he'd despise,  
 and his ghost haunt the poem forever  
 (which is an exaggeration of course,  
 but he liked those) -- (362-63)

It is an unpretentious voice and realistic perspective that is dominant in the 1986 revision of "Elegy for a Grandfather." Only traces of such direct realism are evident in the original version, such as might be marked in such phrases as

"With a deck of cards in his pocket and a Presbyterian grin" -- a phrase which was carried over into the revision. Purdy's earnest, mature interest in the realistic depiction of human character is further evidenced in such poems as "Percy Lawson," "Old Alex," and "Joe Barr." While romanticism is the dominant influence in the original version of "Elegy for a Grandfather," the voice and perspective of realism is more prominent in the revision.

Romanticism, however, is not completely purged in the 1986 version of Purdy's "Elegy for a Grandfather," as evidenced in the conclusion to the third stanza when the grandfather is equated to "women with such a glow" and "Lesbos's singer in her sunny islands." The romanticism of the revision, however, arises from the poem itself, appearing as after-thought or counterbalance to the poet's harshly realistic commentary on his grandfather's death in the first stanzas of the poem. In regards to diction and structure, the romantic expression here is more modest and unadorned than any such expression seen in the original version. Such obscure references as the "shy fox people" have been replaced with direct, unambiguous symbols of beauty. Mythology, in Purdy's later poems, tends to be more directly and dramatically manifest, as in his empathetic rendition of the legend of Troy in "Menelaus and Helen." Purdy's Menelaus narrates:

Briefly, all was heroic,

Helen a goddess, poets dreamed their nonsense

. . . . .

She is 58 years old, and forgets my name;

She dyes her hair yellow. Her eyes are faded;  
 shortsighted, she sees me as a vague blur,  
 complains unendingly of bedroom dampness,  
 totters the parapets to bother my guardsmen  
 with questions of when the Greeks will rescue her. (291-92)

Purdy's mature involvement with mythology and legend is not necessarily governed by romanticism, as illustrated in his rendering of Menelaus and Helen.

The romance of the revised "Elegy for a Grandfather" is strategically placed to transform the cynical realism of the initial section of the poem, seemingly signifying that even the mature poet deems it necessary to redeem dismal reality through the redemption offered by romance. In the revision, the grandfather is redeemed through the continuity of time and his spiritual relationship with his grandson, the poet himself. Such romantic redemption of the grandfather is more transcendent and profound than that offered in the original version of the poem. In the 1956 "Elegy for a Grandfather," Purdy's primary means of redeeming his grandfather from transience is through his own romanticized childhood vision of the man whom he later, it seems, discovers to be less deserving of such hero-worship:

The man knows and the whimsical tale is told  
 Of a lying lumberjack with a fist like a piece of suet,  
 A temper like toppling timber and splintering words to scald  
 The holy ears of an angel -- and a beautiful man in a riot:  
 But a bright, bragging boy's hero with a pocket full of gold.

Like a neolith swear word from the opposite end of time. (8-9)

In this early reflection on his relationship with his grandfather, the poetic perspective seems to be slightly confused; Purdy both venerates and deflates his own romantic account of the man. He seems uncertain whether such a rough and vulgar character is worthy of such romantic treatment and homage. The ideals of the mature Purdy are, however, more certain; he is a champion of such scandals and sins as those in his grandfather's past. It is a type of anti-romanticism that is manifest in this revision and in Purdy's mature poetry. The grandfather becomes the hero of the mature poet because, paradoxically, he defies modern social ideals, graces, and even society itself:

No, my grandfather was decidedly unbeautiful  
 260 pounds of scarred slag,  
 barnraiser and backwoods farmer:  
 become an old man in a one-room apartment  
 over a drygoods store,  
 become anonymous as a dead animal  
 whose chemicals cannot be reconstituted. (362)

Ironically, such an anti-romantic character becomes the prototypical romantic hero in Purdy's developed perspective and ideology; he is worthy of homage because of his unconventional power and vigour, as is Rocket Richard in "Homage to Ree-shard." It is the grandfather's rough, unpretentious dignity, his irreverence, and intensity which become the romantic ideals of the mature Purdy. Therefore, romantic idealism is indeed manifest in the revision of "Elegy

for a Grandfather," though, due to the conventionally romantic diction, its presence is more blatantly displayed in the original version. It might then be asked, should we dismiss the early romanticism of Purdy's poetry as being irrelevant to his evolving voice, style, and conception of realism? Might Purdy's involvement with romanticism be responsible for his expansive vision of a reality overlaid by the metaphysical and spiritual? Though the conventions of traditional romanticism, evidenced in early Purdy poems, are abandoned as he develops his own mature voice and style, the romantic impulse and the redemption of bleak reality through romanticism remains a governing force throughout his corpus of poetry and prose.

The revisions of "Postscript," preserved in The Collected Poems of Al Purdy, further demonstrate that Purdy's romantic impulse is sustained throughout his development from imitative romantic to reporter of direct experience, though its initially formal expression is changed. The conventional trappings of romanticism disappear during the three revisions of "Postscript," yet the intense romantic impulse itself is sustained, if not indeed developed. During revision, the structural rigidity of the original version is dispelled, as is the pretentious language and overtly fanciful expression. The last stanza of the original "Postscript" with its allusiveness and affected diction is virtually obliterated in the later versions of the poem:

But she is nothing imagined; the green shimmer  
Of mind-evergreens, the liquid insomnia  
Of pre-natal memories in day-sky,

Being perishable and flesh; but in her was clamour  
 Of voices, the structure of music, the diamond flaw  
 Of regret that intricate irreplaceable things must die. (8)

As the poem is revised, the rigid poetics give way to more direct address and immediate meaning. The notion of continuity is, however, introduced in the original and is increasingly expanded as the poem is revised. The root idea remains the same from the original through the revisions, only being slightly modified in its structure:

I say the stanza ends, but it never does  
 There being something continual  
 Apart from the blaze of a man, in a woman,  
 At least he somehow thinks there is. (8)

While perceiving the promise of the mature Purdy in the original "Postscript," MacKendrick marks the remaining affectation with romanticism:

Purdy's images are not completely and comfortably digested; the portrait is too various and arty, and only beautifully concentrated at its opening and closing. The stanza concept is cryptic, and the relative lushness of much of the diction does not complement the magnificent expressive simplicity of the initial lines. (149)

In the final revision of the poem, the diction and lining are liberated so that the Purdyean logic can indeed leap ass-over-the-electric-kettle to reach a truly sublime and modestly romantic conclusion with "the new and continually arriving hardly-able-to-stand things / that live here / in the trees and the woods



and the green fields of summer --" (76). It is significant that the final revision, published in the mid-sixties when Purdy was at the peak of his involvement with realistic perspective and experience, continues to be governed by the romantic impulse. The 1965 version of "Postscript," though it avoids pretension and affectation, defies the confines of realistic experience to an even greater degree than does the original poem. If Purdy, then, is to be considered a poet of direct, realistic experience, our notions of reality must be expanded to include metaphysics, spiritual experience, and the redemptive transformation of barren reality through romance.

## CONCLUSION

### AL PURDY: THE REALITY OF ROMANCE

The antagonism between conventional, romantic illusions and productive, realistic perspective is dramatically displayed in Al Purdy's A Splinter in the Heart. Likewise, the significance and status of romance in the Purdyean cosmos is therein demonstrated. The teenage hero of the novel, Patrick Cameron, is constantly lured by the escape offered by conventional romantic fantasies. Might Patrick represent the younger poet himself, his perspective affected by notions of romance? Purdy tells the reader that, "At school, often Patrick dreamed the classroom time away" (13). Patrick feigns illness so that he might temporarily retreat from the mundane routine of daily life and escape into the fictitious world and wonderment of the clichéd Frank Merriwell in which:

... Frank rose above everything. Or else, if there was a setback, it didn't last long; virtue always triumphed in the end.

Frank's girlfriend was Inza Burriage, very beautiful, as was to be expected. She was always up there in the stands cheering for him wildly. That is, she was there if she wasn't kidnapped or being carried away down a raging river in a canoe or run away with on a horse -- waiting to be rescued by Frank, wherever she was. (46)

Feeling persecuted by those around him and alienated by the social and physical

changes of puberty, Patrick is drawn deeper and deeper into an imaginary world of romantic dreams. As he sexually awakens and falls in love with school-mate, Jean Tomkins, his life is governed by "the reality of fantasy" (95). Now, rather than finding it necessary to escape realistic circumstance, Patrick finds it difficult to escape the grip of romantic illusions and fantastic dreams. Again, does this not sound familiar in relation to Purdy's early poetry and obsession with romantic conventions? Jean contributes to Patrick's romantic illusions about love, perceiving him to be "Launcelot... my Launcelot" (81). On the verge of adulthood, the Blakean realm of experience, Patrick and Jean have inflated, romantic expectations of life and love, expectations which must be necessarily deflated in the world of mature, realistic experience.

In A Splinter in the Heart, the disillusionment with romantic idealism takes different paths for Patrick and Jean; the two characters represent the different effects and possibilities of obsession with fantasy or romance. In his final depiction of Jean, Purdy intimates that she has completely lost her grip on reality; she is crazed, misled by her own romantic illusions. She, with certain melodramatic effect, insists Patrick leave her when he does not, due to urgent, realistic circumstance, fulfil her fantasy of him as her Launcelot. Here, the tension between romanticism and realism is dramatically manifest. As Mrs. Tomkins explains to Patrick:

She [Jean] thinks she's a heroine in somebody's novel...

She was reading the Morte D'Arthur last year, about the Knights of the Round Table. Sometimes she thinks she's

Guinevere. That makes things difficult if you're not Launcelot or Arthur. (249-50)

Ironically, Jean is not the heroine of Purdy's novel because she cannot suspend her self-involved fantasies to become actively involved in the crisis at the British Chemical Corporation, as does Patrick. With his reference to Jean's obsession with the Morte D'Arthur, Purdy seems to suggest that over-exposure to conventional romantic ideals may actually endanger the individual psyche, distorting or inflating expectations and perceptions of reality. Purdy has likely made his two fictitious teenagers drawn to the romance of Frank Merriwell and King Arthur to depict the dangers of not discriminating between fantasy and reality, the youths being particularly vulnerable in their developing selfhoods. Patrick, unlike Jean, chooses reality and becomes a minor hero in the aftermath of the TNT explosion. In A Splinter in the Heart, Purdy depicts the development of Patrick's self-confidence and self-knowledge and implies that, for the mature Patrick, the escape of romance is no longer a necessity for psychological survival. Yet, even with his endorsement of productive, realistic experience at the conclusion of the novel, Purdy must likewise affirm the parallel value of romanticism. Purdy's final portrait of Patrick suggests the dual importance of realistic and romantic perspectives in the individual's life:

The mind was keeping time with the same music that his body already knew. There was a mystery about himself that lured and beckoned, projecting above the apparent surface of himself. And all this last summer, the white-gowned figure of Guinevere as

Jean paraded across his mind into the bedroom, with a swagger of hips that reality could not equal.

He smiled and fell asleep again. (257)

That romanticism can complement mundane reality and enrich the emotional existence of the individual seems to constitute the Purdyean moral at the conclusion of A Splinter in the Heart.

Many of the subjects and themes previously highlighted in Purdy's poetry are illustrated in A Splinter in the Heart. Red McPherson, an important minor character, voices Purdy's persistent concern with Canadian identity and denial of the traditional assumption of cultural failure. McPherson explains:

What happened in the new country -- the old country wanted its furs, its minerals, wanted its timber for ships to help fight faraway wars. And the new country said, I need the money for those things to help make myself what I'm going to be. The new country said, Thank you very much for all the help you've been up to now. Then the two of them looked each other straight in the eye and both said, I'm me and who're you to complain? But both of'em knew by that time who they were. (153)

McPherson, himself being a relic of the past, challenges the assumption of colonial dependency and historical weakness. Purdy's involvement with the realms of innocence and higher innocence is also dramatically manifest in the novel, in his depictions of the natural friendship and mutual respect of Patrick and the aged peers of his late grandfather. Patrick reflects:

McPherson was different every time he saw him. The old man tailored his speech to his audience. With Phil Wright and Sideways Smith, he talked like a logger in a cambuse shanty at Palmer Rapids or on the Madawaska. With Dr. Johnson, he had been an amateur historian of the cholera epidemic in early nineteenth-century Canada. With Patrick, he had been a gentle replacement for Portugee. With Kevin, a biology instructor.

A tide of affection for Red McPherson overwhelmed him, and he slept. (256)

Though Patrick, at the conclusion of the novel, has entered into the realm of adult experience, the natural respect and dignity which he has discovered through his relationship with McPherson will likely ensure that he does not fall prey to the limiting and despairing perceptions of modern experience. Purdy's involvement with the social outsider or outcast is further manifest in A Splinter in the Heart. Joe Barr, living alone in the town's dump, is shown to be an "idiot, who wasn't an idiot" and content in his circumstance, despite society's conclusion that he is miserable and in need of their help (239). Through Joe Barr, Purdy challenges the notion of social conformity and devalues the idea that one who falls short of societal ideals and standards is a failure.

A Splinter in the Heart is an appropriate allegory for the evolution of the romantic impulse in Al Purdy's literary career and cosmos. Patrick's initial obsession with conventional romanticism, his developing self-confidence, increasing involvement with mature, realistic experience, and his recognition

that, although romance cannot override reality, it can enhance and enrich the world of experience -- all these developments in A Splinter in the Heart are paralleled in the evolution of Purdy's poetry. For the mature Purdy, romance cannot be founded upon conventions, but rather must arise from realistic experience. In "Voyeur," from his 1990 collection The Woman on the Shore, the mature Purdy writes:

What have we lost  
 -- or did we ever have it?  
 -- the otter's squirming explosion of joy  
 at being so alive champagne bubbles  
 pop in his birthday whiskers  
 But I think: who in his right mind  
 would want to be an otter? (WOS, 14)

The influence and presence of romanticism, in Al Purdy's poetry, allows us to recapture what we have lost in the modern world of experience. Purdy's sustained romantic impulse allows him and his readers to occasionally become otter-like, to transcend the 'right brain' mentality of the modern era and participate in an alternative cosmos where the romantic ideals of joy, beauty, and eternity are essential components of reality.

## NOTES

### CHAPTER ONE

1. See The New Romans: Candid Canadian Opinions of the U.S. (Edmonton: Hurtig, 1968).
2. See Fifteen Winds: A Selection of Modern Canadian Poems (Toronto: Ryerson, 1969), Storm Warning: The New Canadian Poets (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1971), and Storm Warning 2: The New Canadian Poets (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1976).
3. See Milton Acorn's I've Tasted My Own Blood: Poems 1956 to 1968 (Toronto: Ryerson, 1969) and Dig Up My Heart: Selected Poems 1952-83 (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1983).
4. This does not include the two publications of Purdy's correspondence with fellow writers, Charles Bukowski and George Woodcock: The Bukowski/Purdy Letters: A Decade of Dialogue, ed. Seamus Cooney (Sutton West and Santa Barbara: Paget, 1983) and The Purdy-Woodcock Letters: Selected Correspondence from 1964-1984, ed. George Galt (Toronto: ECW, 1988).
5. Unless otherwise specified in the parenthetical reference, quotations of Purdy's poetry are taken from The Collected Poems of Al Purdy, ed. Russell Brown (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1986).
6. For an interesting inquiry into the principles which guide Purdy's proposed continuum of time and place, see Dennis Lee's "The Poetry of Al Purdy: An Afterword," The Collected Poems of Al Purdy, ed. Russell Brown (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1986) 371-91. Lee explores those poems in which the sense of continuity goes beyond the normal process of time altogether. These are poems of ecstasy; they intuit an eternal now in which every moment of the past, present, and future participates, in some unfathomable way surviving its own disappearance. (376)

### CHAPTER TWO

7. For a stimulating analysis of irony in Canadian art, see Linda Hutcheon's



Splitting Images: Contemporary Canadian Ironies (Toronto: Oxford UP, 1991).

8. For an interesting debate on the canonization of Canadian literature, see articles by Robert Lecker and Frank Davey in Critical Inquiry 16.3 (Spring 1990): 656-89.

9. In the context of this thesis, centricity is the conservative position which presupposes a mainstream or norm and tends to exclude that or those that deviate from its supposed standards. Within the Canadian context, geographical centricity would advance the idea that Ontario or 'Upper Canada' is the centre of existence for Canadians. Ideological centricity would advance those political and social doctrines or practices which uphold mainstream, middle-to-upper-class ideals.

### CHAPTER THREE

10. As quoted in chapter two of this thesis, Purdy maintains, "The open-endedness is both device and philosophy" (Geddes, "A. W. Purdy: An Interview" 70).

11. While in Blake's Songs of Innocence and of Experience, the contraries are separately depicted, both perspectives seldom being presented within a single poem, Purdy's contrary perspectives are often manifest within the one poem. Blake's Songs are deliberately separate and each autonomous to present the distinct states of human experience, whereas Purdy's contraries seem to arise from the tension between the romantic impulse and realistic acknowledgement inherent in his own developing perspective.

12. WOS denotes The Woman on the Shore (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1990).

13. HP denotes Hiroshima Poems (Trumansburg, N.Y.: Crossing, 1972).

### CHAPTER FOUR

14. ER denotes Emu, Remember! (Fredericton: U of New Brunswick, 1956).

15. For in-depth analyses of Purdy's early poems and evolution, see George Bowering's Al Purdy (Toronto: Copp Clark, 1970) and Louis K. MacKendrick's "Al Purdy," Canadian Writers and their Works, Poetry 7 (Toronto: ECW, 1990).

16. See appendix 1 for the two versions of Purdy's "Elegy for a Grandfather" and appendix 2 for the three versions of "Postscript" discussed in the succeeding section of this chapter. While other versions of Purdy's "Elegy for a Grandfather" do exist, though are not included in his Collected Poems, they will not be considered here. The two versions which are considered have been selected to demonstrate the striking contrasts and similarities between Purdy's early romanticism and evolved poetic voice and style.

17. In his extensive survey of Purdy's poetry, MacKendrick considers Purdy's versions of "Elegy for a Grandfather" and "Postscript" in terms of his poetic evolution. The present comparative analysis expands upon some of MacKendrick's insightful observations, though it arrives at many of its own specific conclusions, particularly in regard to the structural development of romanticism in these poems.

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## APPENDIX 1

**"Elegy for a Grandfather [1956]"**

Well, he died, didn't he? They said he did.  
 His wide whalebone hips will make a prehistoric barrow,  
 A kitchen midden for mice under the rough sod,  
 Where relatives stood in real and pretended sorrow  
 For the dearly beloved gone at last to God,  
 After a bad century -- a tough, turbulent Pharaoh  
 With a deck of cards in his pocket and a Presbyterian grin.

Well, maybe he did die, but the boy didn't see it;  
 The man knows now and the whimsical tale is told  
 Of a lying lumberjack with a fist like a piece of suet,  
 A temper like toppling timber and splintering words to scald  
 The holy ears of an angel -- and a beautiful man in a riot:  
 But a bright, bragging boy's hero with a pocket full of gold.  
 Like a neolith swear word from the opposite end of time.

No doubt at all that he's dead: a sadly virtuous voice  
 Folded tragedy sideways and glossed his glittering sins.  
 Old in his ancient barrow and no-one could ever guess  
 If the shy fox people play with his gnarled grey bones,  
 Or a green Glengarry river sluices his grave and sighs.  
 And earth has another tenant involved in her muttering plans,  
 With a deck of cards in his pocket and a Presbyterian grin. (8-9)

**"Elegy for a Grandfather [1986]"**

Well, he died I guess. They said he did.  
 His wide whalebone hips will make a prehistoric barrow  
 men of the future may find or maybe not:  
 where this man's relatives ducked their heads  
 in real and pretended sorrow  
 for the dearly beloved gone thank Christ to God,  
 after a bad century, a tough big-bellied Pharaoh,  
 with a deck of cards in his pocket and a Presbyterian grin --

Maybe he did die, but the boy didn't understand it; the man knows now and the scandal never grows old of a happy lumberjack who lived on rotten whisky, and died of sin and Quaker oats age 90 or so. But all he was was too much for any man to be, a life so full he couldn't include one more thing, nor tell the same story twice if he'd wanted to, and didn't and didn't --

Just the same he's dead. A sticky religious voice  
folded his century sideways to get it out of sight,  
and lowered him into the ground like someone still alive  
who had to be handled very carefully,  
even after death he made people nervous:  
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  
they vanish too,  
and Lesbos' singer in her sunny islands  
stopped when the sun went down --

No, my grandfather was decidedly unbeautiful,  
260 pounds of scarred slag,  
barnraiser and backwoods farmer:  
become an old man in a one-room apartment  
over a drygoods store,  
become anonymous as a dead animal  
whose chemicals may not be reconstituted.  
There is little doubt that I am the sole  
repository of his remains: which consist of  
these flashing pictures in my mind,  
which I can't bequeath to anyone,  
which stop here: juice and flavour  
of the old ones, whose blood runs thin  
in us: mustard, cayenne, ammonia,  
brimstone (trace only above his grave)  
-- a dying soup-stained giant  
I will never let go of -- not yet.  
He scared hell out of me sometimes,  
but sometimes I caught myself, fascinated,  
overhearing him curse God in my own arteries:

even after death I would never dare  
admit to loving him, which he'd despise,  
and his ghost haunt the poem forever  
(which is an exaggeration of course,  
but he liked those) -- (361-63)



## APPENDIX 2

**"Postscript [1956]"**

I say the stanza ends, but it never does,  
 There being something continual  
 Apart from the blaze of a man, in a woman,  
 At least he somehow thinks there is.  
 After a parting grimly convivial  
 Nostalgia comes like an old shaman,

Says "alley-oop," and there like a proud queen  
 An obscure Flemish painter did,  
 And never forgot -- her slow fire burns  
 At Valladolid in drizzling rain  
 Hissing like a cat, the rich blood  
 Smouldering, the black eyes like storms.

But she is nothing imagined: the green shimmer  
 Of mind-evergreens, the liquid insomnia  
 Of pre-natal memories in day-sky,  
 Being perishable and flesh; but in her was clamour  
 Of voices, the structure of music, the diamond flaw  
 Of regret that intricate irreplaceable things must die. (8)

**"Postscript [1962]"**

I say the stanza ends, but it never does,  
 there being something continual,  
 apart from the blaze of a man, in a woman --  
 at least he somehow thinks there is.  
 After a parting grimly convivial  
 nostalgia comes like an old shaman,  
 crossing Cote des Neiges in the rush hour --  
 But she is far from here is another city,  
 smiles there, sleeps with another man and  
 bites in bed, likes sad music about  
 unfaithful lovers, old faces, burnt toast --  
 Nothing I do not recognize and love

again but recurs monotonously as tho  
 even this long silence was metrically  
 arranged and

soon there will be words --  
 I say the stanza ends  
 and it never does. (22)

"Postscript [1965]"

I say the stanza ends  
 but it never does  
 there being something continual,  
 apart from the blaze of man, in a woman --  
 At least he somehow thinks there is.  
 After a parting grimly convivial  
 nostalgia comes like an old shaman,  
 you travel backward in time and finally  
 come to a place she never was to  
 some small town with desolate streets and  
 yourself inside yourself  
 unable to get out or  
 a city sheerly grey with a child's ennui --  
 You come to a place she never was and  
 everything that happened happened  
 without her:  
 tho blindly in darkness  
 lovers were coming together  
 the gilled foetus formed  
 the flippered thing  
 climbing the long climb up from animal  
 changing from it to her and you  
 the bundle of instincts and appetites becoming  
 a small girl crying on her way home from school  
 pig-tailed teenager necking in parked cars  
 hearing about incest rape sodomy and Jesus  
 lover of your soul and body and  
 your strawberry innocence  
 stereotypes and approximates  
 of you you you  
 in deep tombs of memory --

You travel backward in time and come  
to the double rorschach bedsheet blot and  
the silvery look she had in the bathtub and  
the double standard of pain in the guts  
of love that was always much less than freedom  
can never be freedom exactly --  
And you come to the power struggle and quarrelling  
over the deed and title  
of whatever shone thru your eyes at each other  
whatever was given whatever was owed  
the debt of flesh that is non-material  
and you come to the sweating  
welded flesh in stormy bedsheet sea until  
morning comes  
the shivering landlocked awakening comes  
that morning or later on --

(The snail has lost its shell and toothless lion  
grumbles alone in dangerous country --  
The rhino's horns have fallen along a trail  
deep in dark woods crowded with big-game hunters --  
The eagle has left its claws in the blood-red sky  
the antelopes have all gone lame and  
the lover has no luck at all --)

You come to a place she never was  
    or will be in time that circles  
 around behind and traps you here and now and you  
    weep because you do not weep  
    for each other  
    but sentimentally  
    and vicariously  
 in an absence of self you are hardly aware of  
 for all young things  
 the new and continually arriving hardly-able-to-stand things  
    that live here  
 in the tree and the woods and the green fields of summer -- (76-7)









