Men with Guts: Al Purdy, Robinson Jeffers, and Geopoetic Influence

by Nicholas Bradley

In *Deactivated West 100* (2005), a collection of essays, Don McKay ponders the poetic and philosophical value of rock, praising not only limestone but also basalt, granite, and sandstone. He suggests that trying to fathom the almost incomprehensible age of the earth and the scale on which the geological processes of fossilization, erosion, and plate tectonics occur places us at the limits of imagination and language: "To think the connection between my introspective black companion"—a basalt rubbing stone—"and those outcrop rocks taking the brunt of ocean—this requires a stretch of the imagination, including what is perhaps the supreme stretch test—geologic time" (16). The imaginative exercise precipitates both terror and fascination in the geologist-poet. "It isn't just the fear of earthquakes that makes the idea of a fault zone frightening," McKay writes, "but the evidence it gives that earth forms and re-forms itself, that its basic *m.o.* is slow catastrophe, not calm" (41). The "evidence" of the earth's continual reforming is for McKay an existential concern with which poets and other reflective observers of the world must contend. The "geopoet," to use his term (42), is compelled to recognize the relative brevity of human existence, both individual and collective: pondering geologic time requires the geopoet "to countenance our own erasures without rage or despair" (25).[1]

The poetic works of Al Purdy and Robinson Jeffers haunt this discussion of geology, although McKay does not refer specifically to either poet: the poems of Purdy and Jeffers explore the geological themes and existential concerns that so fascinate McKay in ways that prefigure *Deactivated West 100*. Jeffers looks for moral truth in the physical world, turning to "things and things and no more thoughts" for relief from the corruption and pettiness that he sees in the contemporary human world ("Return" [1935], *Collected* 2.409). His works focus on the captivating, inhuman beauty of the rocky Big Sur coastline. Poems such as "To the Stone-Cutters" (1924), "Rock and Hawk" (1935), and "Carmel Point" (1954) reveal a profound attraction to what Jeffers terms, in his signature poem, the "Mysticism of stone" ("Rock and Hawk," *Collected* 2.416). An admirer of the American poet, Purdy similarly searches for ways to understand the place of humanity in the world and in time, writing about fossils and rocks in an effort to

discern a connection between the present and the prehistoric past. He demonstrates throughout his body of work a deep curiosity about the vastness of geologic time. The rocks and fossils in poems such as "The Horseman of Agawa" (1973) and "Glacier Spell" (1994) prompt him to contemplate an imagined past with which he has no other direct contact. He uses these tangible but mute links to the past to speculate about the origins of human history, the importance of the past to the present, and the possibility of order in the universe; his visionary impulse, greatly indebted to that of Jeffers, is grounded in the physical world.

Purdy's geological concerns, especially prominent in a series of poems based on his travels in the Galápagos Islands in 1980, are strikingly similar to those expressed much later by McKay in *Deactivated West 100*. George Woodcock points to "a preoccupation with the implications of one sub-science, palaeontology" as one of the most notable characteristics of Purdy's Galápagos poems ("Purdy's" 180) and Sam Solecki suggests that the "visit to the Galápagos Islands…may have been as important to the development of Purdy's later poetry as the 1965 stay on Baffin Island was to the work of the decade that followed it" (*Last* 113). These two statements are closely linked: what Woodcock identifies as the "preoccupation" of these poems is precisely what makes the Galápagos visit so important to Purdy's "later poetry." Purdy uses his experiences in the Galápagos as starting points for poems in his typically anecdotal mode, such as "Moses at Darwin Station" (1981), "Iguana," and "Adam and No Eve" (both 1984), but an attraction to geology and the fossil record also leads him to contemplate the philosophical and metaphysical significance of the long history of the planet. As Solecki notes, "The almost unimaginable age of rock…offers the temptation of an origin that is also a substantial presence, while the fossil record and our ability to map a movement of the continental plates…create the illusion that there may be not only patterns and designs but an ultimate designer and *telos*" (205). The allure of this illusion, as well as the rocks and fossils themselves, becomes one of Purdy's principal subjects.

Jeffers, Purdy, and McKay are linked by their common fascination with geology and with the glimpses of our erasure that it offers. McKay ascribes intellectual and ecological value to the study of geology, suggesting that by thinking about the relative ephemerality of human life, we might develop greater respect for the non-human world: "I thought such practice…an antidote to our tendency to make places into permanent memorials of ourselves, whether by monumental construction or unforgettable destruction" (*Deactivated* 25). But he also suggests, characteristically, that the poet-observer cannot turn away entirely from the human world. "I'm under no

illusion," he writes, "that we can dwell in that moment or even rest very long in those icy waters, unless we're candidates for some version of saint-hood." McKay's remarks provide a fitting way into a discussion of Purdy's relation to Jeffers. (As a poet, too, he has something in common with both of the earlier writers. His poems share the ecological orientation of Jeffers's poems, but they are related tonally to Purdy's. Although they are distinguished by elaborate metaphors, their speaking voice owes much to Purdy's distinctively Canadian vernacular.) Because his essays pursue many of the ideas with which the earlier poets grapple, the geopoetic concerns that he raises hover over my analysis of the connection between Jeffers and Purdy. McKay's writing, in other words, represents an extension of the related poetic projects in which Jeffers and Purdy were engaged. There is also another major figure in this essay, Czesław Miłosz, whose relatively sympathetic understanding of Jeffers's poetics and his belief that "the poet dwells at the very limits of where human consciousness can reach" are instrumental to my analysis of the geopoetic influence of Jeffers on Purdy (*Beginning* 190). The four poets are each concerned in similar ways with the function of poetry and with the relation of poetry to the world. I will thus attempt to place them in conversation with each other; the commentaries of Miłosz and McKay offer insight into Jeffers's influence on Purdy as it manifests itself in a shared interest in geological formations and geologic time.

In recent years the poetry of Jeffers and McKay has frequently been examined in ecocritical terms; the poets respectively occupy central positions in the American and Canadian canons of ecologically oriented poetry.[2] The same does not hold true for Purdy.[3] By grouping the three poets together, I hope to suggest that Purdy's poems, like those of Jeffers and McKay, can be illuminated by ecocriticism, a rubric defined by Lawrence Buell as the "study of the relation between literature and environment conducted in a spirit of commitment to environmentalist praxis" (*Environmental* 430) but understood more generally as a critical approach that asserts as fundamentally important the relevance of the physical environment and of ecological awareness to literary meaning.[4] As Glen A. Love claims in *Practical Ecocriticism*, "Ecological thinking about literature requires us to take the nonhuman world as seriously as previous modes of criticism have taken the human realm of society and culture" (47). Love observes that "A wave of new nature poetry has been a response to the age of ecology, as the concept of an inexhaustible and constant nature is replaced by one of vulnerability and of recognition that our cultural identity rests uneasily upon deeper responsibilities" (33); his examples of the

"new" nature poets include A.R. Ammons, Pattiann Rogers, and W.S. Merwin. In his celebrated essay entitled "Baler Twine: Thoughts on Ravens, Home, and Nature Poetry" (1993), McKay similarly suggests that his relation to the romantic tradition of nature poetry epitomized by Wordsworth is highly ambivalent.[5] Although Purdy's poems do not typically respond to environmental crisis—a useful but limited way of defining environmental writing—his preoccupation with his place in space, geological time, and evolutionary history marks him as essentially concerned with the question of environment in its broadest sense.

Environmental criticism insists upon the importance of place as a vital aspect of literary texts and as a significant critical category, often conceiving of place in regional, local, or biogeographical terms, as in Buell's "watershed aesthetics" (*Writing* 243) or Laurie Ricou's mapping of the Pacific Northwest as a literary region defined by the distribution of botanical species—*Arbutus menziesii* in *The Arbutus/Madrone Files: Reading the Pacific Northwest* (1) and *Gaultheria shallon* in *Salal: Listening for the Northwest Understory* (1). Purdy's poetry, like McKay's, demonstrates that place is important not only for writers who are linked primarily to a single region, as with Jeffers, but also for writers who roam widely: Purdy's sensitive poetic eye envisions the relation of the self to place in various locales. His poems also show that an identification with place derives not only from observation of the landscape but from literary models as well: Purdy writes about the Galápagos the way he does in part because of his understanding of Jeffers's poetry. His works suggest that ecological attentiveness is not a capacity acquired exclusively by the observer in the field, as it were, but instead one that can also be learned by the poet through the careful study of his predecessors. Purdy's environmental imagination, to borrow Buell's phrase, is inseparable from his literary inheritance.[6] In what follows, I hope not simply to remark upon the extent to which Purdy was an avid reader of Jeffers's poetry, but rather to bring him into the purview of environmental criticism by emphasizing the geopoetic lessons he learned from the earlier writer.

A discussion of the geopoetics of Jeffers, Purdy, and McKay thus links the Galápagos, Prince Edward County, the Big Sur, and southern Vancouver Island. Purdy's geological poems in turn invite comparisons to other Canadian poems that take geology as a primary subjects or as a source of figurative language. Purdy belongs to a diverse group of poets who are concerned with geology and evolutionary theory as ways of comprehending the world and their place in it. Although such comparisons lie beyond the scope of the present essay, I would point to works as different from

each other as Earle Birney's "David" (1940), E.J. Pratt's *Towards the Last Spike* (1952), and Christopher Dewdney's *A Palaeozoic Geology of London, Ontario* (1973) as texts that also evince geological curiosity; certainly there are also many romantic and Victorian antecedents to these poems, such as, among others, sections XXV and CXXIII of Tennyson's *In Memoriam* (1850), Erasmus Darwin's *The Temple of Nature* (1803), or William Blake's *Jerusalem* (c.1804-15).

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Jeffers provided Purdy with a model of poetic contemplation of the universe and of the place of humanity within it. If, as Russell Morton Brown suggests (802-04), Purdy belongs to a tradition of visionary writing in Canada, then Jeffers might well be recognized as a formative influence on Purdy's visionary tendency. Both poets link existential concerns to a near-obsession with the physical matter of the natural world. But the relation between the two poets is not suggested simply by similar themes in their works. Although Purdy never wrote substantially about Jeffers—as he did about D.H. Lawrence, for example—his writing contains several significant references to the Californian poet.[7] In particular, Purdy's letters reveal both his great admiration of Jeffers and a sense that his appreciation waned over time. "I once thought that Robinson Jeffers was God, and felt the same about Dylan Thomas," he wrote in 1996 (*Yours* 513). The next sentence in the letter confirms the pastness of this sentiment: "I've changed my mind in both cases, leaving me with a residue of only three or four poems." He likewise wrote in 2000 that "Jeffers was always rather smug. I liked him but with reservations. But that's true of everyone I like. You can't be perfect all the time" (*Yours* 546). Earlier, however, Purdy was not reluctant to praise Jeffers profusely. In 1965, he wrote to Charles Bukowski that "To me he's one, or perhaps the only, great poet in the last American 50-60 years" and that "when I think of a poet, I think of one who has something to say to ME…And none of them mean a goddam thing to me except Jeffers" (*Yours* 106).[8] In 1973, Purdy indicated that it was Jeffers's tragic vision that appealed to him: "many of Jeffers [sic] poems—which contain a very black view of the world—hold a feeling of magnificence, of terrible pity because this is the way things are, like Greek tragedy" (*Yours* 225). And in 1982, he wrote that "Jeffers was a Cassandra, a disliker of the actions and results of the worst side of human nature…to me, [he] is the great American poet. A man with guts I'd like to have…I'd like to feel anything the way he felt things" (*Yours* 350-51).

Purdy uses the same term, "Cassandra," to describe Jeffers in "Bestiary [II]" (1984), his abecedarium of influential poets and one of his two published poems that refer to Jeffers by name. Solecki describes "Bestiary [II]" as "a combination of poetic homage, breviary, and a paying off of literary debts by a poet sufficiently established and confident of his own stature and authority to acknowledge them. It is also, as a handwritten note in his papers indicates, an 'ABC of Poets I've Loved'" (*Last* 61); Purdy's note echoes the ardour of the letters that praise Jeffers. In the stanza of "Bestiary [II]" pertaining to Jeffers, Purdy describes the earlier poet as a true visionary: "Jeffers, who was America's Cassandra / …glimpsed another reality" (*Beyond* 395). Jeffers's attempts to observe and understand the world from a non-human perspective, Purdy suggests, grant the reader a powerful, prophetic "glimpse" of the physical world that will survive humanity. Purdy's characterization of Jeffers as Cassandra presumably has its origins in Jeffers's poem of the same name (1948), which denounces the "religion- / Vendors and political men" who "Pour…new lies on the old, and are praised for kindly / Wisdom" (*Collected* 3.121). "Cassandra" concludes with a note of sympathy for, and solidarity with, the titular figure and a defiant assertion of the speaker's role as a truth-teller who, like the Greek prophet, can foretell the future but whose prophecies are ignored: "Poor bitch…you'll still mumble in a corner a crust of truth, to men / And gods disgusting. —You and I, Cassandra" (3.121).

In the other poem that refers specifically to Jeffers, "Planet of Fire" (1976), Purdy casts himself as an inheritor of a tradition represented by both Jeffers and W.B. Yeats. Solecki points out that Purdy's manuscripts contain two additional references to Jeffers: an unpublished poem entitled "Recommended Reading: Joe Hill and Robinson Jeffers" (*Last* 225) and a "'proposed dedication'" of *The Cariboo Horses* (1965) to "'Charles Bukowski, A.E. Housman, W.H. Auden, Robinson Jeffers, Catullus and Callimachus of Alexandria'" (232). As the "proposed dedication" suggests, Purdy frequently thought of Jeffers and Housman together. In an essay on Leonard Cohen (1965), he briefly compares Jeffers to Housman and refers to Jeffers's "nihilistic view of mankind" (*Starting* 200-01). He links Jeffers and Housman again in a review (1973) of John Newlove's *Lies* (1972), writing that "Newlove is allied to all the verse pessimists who ever lived because of [his] black outlook" (*Starting* 343). And in his autobiography (1993), Purdy compares John Glassco to Jeffers and Housman (*Reaching* 273), making the claim that "There are no *great* poets in this era, but many who are excellent. Despite abiding pessimism, I think Housman

and Jeffers came close with their large vision just slightly before our time" (288).

Purdy's considerable allusiveness has been well noted by his critics. D.M.R. Bentley, for example, describes Purdy as "a scholarly poet and a master of allusion whose poems are rich in deliberate echoes of writers as diverse as G.K. Chesterton and D.H. Lawrence, T.S. Eliot and William Carlos Williams" (5). And Solecki notes Purdy's literary relations to, among others, Yeats, Rainer Maria Rilke, Bliss Carman, Archibald MacLeish, Earle Birney, Irving Layton, Milton Acorn, and, most notably, Lawrence—"the single most important literary figure in his work and life" ("Al Purdy" 123). Solecki observes, too, that "In Purdy's revisionist account of modernist poetry," Yeats, Lawrence, Jeffers, Auden, and Dylan Thomas "are the key figures" (*Last* 63). The poetic and epistolary references leave no doubt that Purdy valued Jeffers's poetry, his tragic sensibility, and his visionary imagination. But the significance of the link between Jeffers and Purdy has gone largely unexplored. And because Purdy himself did little to point the way, the critic who would take seriously Purdy's multiple references to Jeffers as an indication of influence is left to speculate about the character of the example that Purdy saw in Jeffers. It is no doubt impossible to ascertain the precise nature of Purdy's inheritance, but it is my contention that a significant aspect of the poetic influence can be seen in Purdy's recurrent interests in geology and oblivion.

In a 1992 letter, Purdy notes that Jeffers was an exception to the rule that he "was influenced mostly by Br[itish] writers" (*Yours* 476) and in a letter from the following year he indicates that he was probably reading Jeffers as early as the 1950s (*Yours* 488). But this influence does not reveal itself in Purdy's style. His poems contain occasional lines that sound somewhat reminiscent of Jeffers, but it would be misleading to make too much of any similarity between, for example, a line from Jeffers's "Continent's End" (1924)—"It was long and long ago; we have grown proud since then and you have grown bitter" (*Collected* 1.16)—and a passage from Purdy's "The Country North of Belleville" (1965): "But it's been a long time since / and we must enquire the way / of strangers—" (*Beyond* 81).[9] For the most part, when Purdy takes up Jeffersian concerns, he does so in his own voice, one far removed from Jeffers's oratorical tone. And Purdy's lines are almost always shorter than the extended, capacious line that distinguishes Jeffers's verse, although both poets' works contain long sentences and extended verse paragraphs; neither poet is particularly concise. As Solecki observes, "Purdy's poems, like those of Whitman, Jeffers, and Lawrence, tend to flow" (*Last* xv). But Jeffers and Purdy do share a wariness of self-

consciously poetic devices and a regard for plain speech—they demonstrate the same urge to avoid "what is usually called poetic diction" and to write in "the very language of men" to which Wordsworth refers in his Preface to the 1800 edition of *Lyrical Ballads* (295). Jeffers writes, in the foreword to his *Selected Poetry* (1938), that good poetry and prose are not dissimilar, his claim that "poetry…must reclaim some of the power and reality that it [is] surrendering to prose" (*Selected* xiv; *Collected* 4.391) echoing Wordsworth's avowal that "the language of a large portion of every good poem…must necessarily, except with reference to the metre, in no respect differ from that of good prose" (297). These statements could apply equally to Purdy's poetry. Nonetheless, Jeffers is more obviously a philosophical influence on Purdy than a stylistic model. Just as Purdy stands behind McKay as an example of a precursor who dared to enter the "icy waters" of the contemplation of geologic time and "our own erasures" (25), Jeffers demonstrated for Purdy one way of responding to the physical landscape and to the existential crisis that landscape can provoke in the observer.

In his poems, Jeffers depicts himself as a self-marginalized figure, a solitary observer of the littoral wilderness of central California. The name that he gave to the philosophy that his poetry espouses, Inhumanism, is to some extent an expression of what McKay calls "anti-humanistic extremity" (25). In the preface to *The Double Axe and Other Poems* (1948), Jeffers explains the principles of Inhumanism, writing that the "burden" of *The Double Axe* "is to present a certain philosophical attitude, which might be called Inhumanism, a shifting of emphasis and significance from man to not-man; the rejection of human solipsism and recognition of the transhuman magnificence" (*Double* vii; *Collected* 4.428). (Jeffers insists that "This manner of thought and feeling is neither misanthropic nor pessimist." Purdy would seem to agree; he notes in a 1982 letter that "*The Double Axe*, in my view, doesn't make [Jeffers] look bad at all" [*Yours* 351].) The Inhumanist impulse is evident throughout Jeffers's works, more so than he himself suggests of his early poetry and certainly in the poetry that followed *The Double Axe*. In "Credo" (c. late 1926), for instance, Jeffers declares that "The beauty of things was born before eyes and sufficient to itself; the heart-breaking beauty / Will remain when there is no heart to break for it" (*Collected* 1.239). His body of work records his attempt to observe this beauty, to apprehend its inherent, essential value, and to reconcile himself to the fact that human achievements and failures are of no consequence to the non-human world. Jeffers's poetic persona is less concerned than Purdy's with a search for origins, but he keenly feels the sep-

aration of humans from the natural world, perceiving this alienation as a fall from grace. His poetry offers two principal solutions: death and the reverent appreciation of natural beauty. In "Original Sin" (1948), in which he claims that he "would rather / Be a worm in a wild apple than a son of man," Jeffers writes that "we might remember...not [to] fear death" because "it is the only way to be cleansed" (3.203-04). But in the richly musical lines of "Return," he suggests, in contrast, that we, "A little too abstract, a little too wise," can redeem our humanity by embracing the earth and immersing ourselves in its waters (2.409).

This prophetic mode held considerable allure for Purdy, whose letters indicate that Jeffers's "Hurt Hawks" (1928) was a favourite poem. In a 1964 letter to Glassco he cites it as an example of the "high magnificence" that Jeffers, like Housman, could display (*Yours* 77). And in a letter to Birney later that year, he mentions that "In the last five years I've developed a helluva respect for [Jeffers]. 'Hurt Hawks' for instance. That image about eagles wings as 'folded storms at their shoulders'" (*Yours* 92). Presumably quoting from memory, Purdy here confuses "Hurt Hawks" with "Fire on the Hills" (1932), a similar poem that describes an eagle "perched on the jag of a burnt pine, / Insolent and gorged, cloaked in the folded storms of his shoulders" (*Collected* 2.173). (In "Hurt Hawks," Jeffers describes "The broken pillar of the wing" as "trail[ing] like a banner in defeat" [1.377]). In both poems, Jeffers portrays encounters with birds and animals in order to assert that the apparent cruelty of the natural world is in fact beautiful and worthy of human admiration. "Hurt Hawks" contains Jeffers's infamous declaration that he would "sooner, except the penalties, kill a man than a hawk" (1.377). This apparent misanthropy forms part of his valorization of the "Intemperate and savage" hawk. The poem describes the speaker's attempt to rescue an injured hawk and claims that humankind has largely forsworn the wisdom of nature: "The wild God of the world is sometimes merciful to those / That ask mercy, not often to the arrogant. / You do not know him, you communal people, or you have forgotten him" (1.377). When it becomes evident that the hawk's wounded wing will not heal, the speaker shoots the bird, allowing "death the redeemer" to take its course. The hawk's spirit is set free in the final lines, which serve to justify the speaker's actions and to announce the hawk's greater glory. "Fire on the Hills" likewise claims that the natural order of things is just and proper, that "Beauty is not always lovely" (2.173). "[T]he roaring wave of the brushfire" is "beautiful," Jeffers writes, as is "the terror / Of the deer" and "the smaller [animals] that were caught" by the fire. The human observer, the poem suggests, should consider the workings of nature as a whole and

not merely the lives of individual creatures, for which an observer might feel pity. Jeffers's ecological metaphor, "the whole mind," assigns an intelligence to nature; the speaker in the poem recognizes this coherent intelligence, even though he thinks "painfully" about the "sky...merciless / Blue, and the hills merciless black, [and] / The sombre-feathered great bird sleepily merciless between them."

The dispassionate observation in these poems is typical of Jeffers's poetry. He admires the stark coastline because it is most immune to time and physical forces. Contemplating the physical world compels him to attempt to adopt a non-anthropocentric perspective that recognizes the absolute inconsequentiality of human history. Jeffers's geopoetry, like his nature poetry more generally, contains a moral dimension. In "Carmel Point," for instance, he urges us to "uncenter our minds from ourselves" and to "become confident / As the rock and ocean that we were made from" (*Collected* 3.399). Doing so, he suggests, will lead to newfound wisdom and peace. Czesław Miłosz—who translated some of Jeffers's poems, included a selection in an anthology (*A Book of Luminous Things,* 1996), and wrote several essays on Jeffers, notably "Carmel" in *Visions from San Francisco Bay* (1969)—admired the seeming objectivity of Jeffers's point of view, his unwavering attention to the world, and his efforts to investigate the meaning of existence.[10] In "Jeffers: An Attempt at Disclosure" (1962), Miłosz writes that Jeffers was engaged in an unfashionable but vital poetic project in which "the artist confronts *what is*, armed with his craft, and this craft must be good. He knows that he will never exhaust reality and that his defeat is inevitable, but his work is defined not by the closed systems of verse form or a canvas's dimensions but by the eye directed at...the object, being, *être*" (*Beginning* 194). He acknowledges the "unpleasant" quality of this poetic task, writing that although Jeffers was "Courageous and truthful" in his "non-acceptance of the haziness of beliefs that are universally held only because they are a source of consolation," the rejection of Christianity and secular humanism alike leaves him in a "repellent" state of spiritual exhaustion (198).

When McKay claims that "anti-humanistic extremity" (25) is an essentially untenable poetic position, he effectively recapitulates Miłosz's assessment of Jeffers's works. Miłosz perceives in Jeffers a brave example but also a poetic dead end, "a model and an example in one thing only: the stubbornness with which he strove to give poetry the greatest possible intellectual objectivity, to fill it with his own worldview" (195). In order for poetry to fulfill its functions of serving as "a lantern dispelling the darkness" (190) and of "participat[ing] in man's struggle with the meaning of

the verb *to be*" (201), Miłosz contends, it must turn away from Jeffersian Inhumanism, which he decries in his poem "To Robinson Jeffers" (1963), an apostrophe warning that "No one with impunity / gives himself the eyes of a god" (*Visions* 96).[11] McKay's claim that he is "under no illusion that we can dwell in that moment or even rest very long in those icy waters" can be understood as a secular, contemporary expression of Miłosz's position. In an overview of "Fifty Years of American Poetry" (1963), Randall Jarrell (who did not especially care for Jeffers's works) writes that Jeffers's "heart goes out to animals rather than to human beings, to minerals rather than to animals, since he despises the bonds and qualifications of existence" (322). Miłosz and McKay might be expected to believe that a follower of Jeffers should instead extend his—or her—heart to animals *and* to human beings, to minerals *and* to animals. This is the direction that Purdy's geopoetics takes. Like Jeffers, Purdy is a poet of ontological inquiry. But unlike Jeffers, he is explicitly self-conscious about this role, his comic, self-deprecating turns allowing him to create an ironic, humane alternative to Jeffers's vision of oblivion.[12]

Purdy's "Place of Fire" acknowledges his debt to Jeffers but turns away from Inhumanism by insisting upon the artifice of the poem, which links the Canadian poet to the American, and both of them to Yeats, on the basis of similar biographical details. In his autobiography (*Reaching* 156-60) Purdy describes his cobbling together a chimney from, as he puts it in "Place of Fire," "limestone," "historic stone," "anonymous stone," and "some pickup loads from Point Anne quarry" (*Beyond* 293). The poem finds its point of departure in Purdy's actual experience of this construction, not unlike a passage from *In Search of Owen Roblin* (1974) that describes Purdy's building, in 1957, a house near Ameliasburg, one "so flagrantly noticeable" that "it seemed an act of despair / like the condemned man's bravado on the gallows" (*Beyond* 244-45). The labour involved in building the chimney leads the ironic speaker to invoke the names of earlier stone-worker poets and to compare stonework to writing poetry:

> you must agree it's the hard way
> to gather ingredients for a poem?
> —lugging tons of $CaCO_2$, stone plus fossils?
> Symbolic as hell too: you can't beat limestone,
> which Auden said was very important stuff;
> W. Yeats and R. Jeffers kept building towers as well,
> so they could write great poems about it.
> I'm just the latest heir of the hearth-warming
> tradition, eh?
>
> (293)

Despite its stylistic shortcomings, "Place of Fire" is important as an expression of Purdy's sense of place, his understanding of his relation to earlier poets, and the process of poetic creation. The tower-building links him to Ameliasburg—he has literally changed the landscape. Although he locates many of his poems in Ontario's Prince Edward County, Purdy is not strictly a regional writer if that designation is understood to suggest an affiliation with only one region. Purdy is a poet of many regions, his sensitivity of observation and description placing him in a middle ground between native and naïve tourist. He relies on careful descriptions of local geography and geology to ground his poems in the particularities of place. Northrop Frye could claim in 1943 that "few really good Canadian poets have thought that getting out of cities into God's great outdoors really brings one closer to the sources of inspiration" (138-39), but Purdy relies on "the outdoors" for his sense of place and for the occasion of many of his poems. Purdy does not find nature inspirational in a Wordsworthian sense, yet he discovers in nature the artifacts and phenomena that serve as the material subjects of many of his poems. If, as Woodcock claims, "Purdy is…defined by the nature of his historical vision" (*Northern* 159), the landscape provides the basis for his approach to history, which is deeply concerned with the survival of the land despite the passage of time and with the persistence and disappearance of humans, animals, fossils, ghosts, and artifacts. Building the house and the stone chimney—creating his own artifacts—establishes for him a connection to place, just as Thoor Ballylee and Tor House linked Yeats and Jeffers, respectively, to their local landscapes.

Solecki suggests that "Place of Fire" also "makes it clear that poetry is dependent on" activities such as chimney-building "because it is *about* them" (*Last* 136). In other words, Solecki maintains, there are in the poem unmistakable "intimations of the links between the building of a house and the making of a poem." Yeats and his wife purchased the tower at Ballylee, in County Galway, in June 1917. As A. Norman Jeffares attests in his biography of Yeats, the process by which the poet renovated the tower was decidedly prosaic: "In June [the Yeatses] visited Coole and Lady Gregory lent them Ballinamantane House near Ballylee from which they supervised the alterations to the tower" (198). In verse, however, the work of building the tower assumes vital significance: the poet is associated with the worker and the poem is made analogous to the tower itself. The lines "To Be Carved on a Stone at Thoor Ballylee" (1921) emphasize the contrast

between the impermanence of the tower and the hoped-for permanence of the words themselves, committed to paper and inscribed in rock: "I, the poet William Yeats, / With old mill boards and sea-green slates, / And smithy work from the Gort forge / Restored this tower for my wife George" (238). In a much earlier poem, "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" (1890), Yeats similarly imagines himself as builder of "a small cabin," again implying that *poesis* and physical construction are symbolically linked (60). He makes the association between poet and tower most explicit in "Blood and the Moon" (1928), asserting that the tower, "This winding, gyring, spiring treadmill of a stair," represents him, his literary antecedents, and his aspirations alike (287).

Jeffers similarly made his having built Hawk Tower central to his poetic persona. His home, Tor House, was built in 1919, but Jeffers contributed little to its construction. A new hand even at simple physical labour, he was merely an assistant to the skilled workers (Bennett 87). But he did learn the skills necessary to build Hawk Tower himself, which was completed in 1924—he gained, as he writes in "Tor House" (1928), "the art / To make stone love stone" (*Collected* 1.408). Jeffers built the tower at his wife's request—she loved the towers she had seen while visiting Ireland (Bennett 98)—just as Yeats restored the tower at Ballylee "for his wife George"; "For Una" (1941) is Jeffers's uncanny equivalent of "To Be Carved on a Stone at Thoor Ballylee." Like Yeats's poem, it begins with a testament to the poet's constructive powers: "I built her a tower when I was young / …I built it with my hands, I hung / Stones in the sky" (3.33).

Jeffers certainly belongs to Purdy's "hearth-warming / tradition," but his poems recognize the impossibility of erecting monuments that are impervious to environmental forces. "Tor House" suggests that despite "the art" that enables the poet "To make stone love stone," the house and the tower will not survive the millennia that separate him from an imagined future reader (1.408). Even if it takes "ten thousand years," the stones used to create Tor House will be weathered by wind and ocean to the extent that the house itself will cease to exist. What will survive, Jeffers claims, are the basic elements of the landscape: the "granite knoll on the granite / And lava tongue in the midst of the bay," the bay itself, "the mouth of the Carmel / River-valley," the constellations, the moon, and the "white gulls / Weaving a dance over blue water." The poet's ghost, too, might endure, but the future observer will not see it: "My ghost you needn't look for; it is probably / Here, but a dark one, deep in the granite." Just as stone housed Jeffers in life, in death it will house his spirit; yet in death the barrier

between the human and the terrestrial is dissolved, so that the ghost becomes wholly part of the landscape.

Purdy follows the examples of Yeats and Jeffers, insisting, even in deeply skeptical poems, on the value of the poem as a record of an individual attempt to understand the world. "[P]oems will not really buy beer or flowers / or a goddamn thing," proclaims the speaker in "At the Quinte Hotel" (1968) (*Beyond* 132), adapting Auden's claim that "poetry makes nothing happen" to the setting of the rural hotel bar (248). "Place of Fire" suggests that poems instead exist as artifacts, much like towers, individual stones, and fossils. In this light, the fact that Yeats, Jeffers, and Purdy were all builders ceases to be mere biographical coincidence; stone-work becomes for Purdy a meaningful way of understanding his vocation and his poetics, which emphasizes the constructedness, the artifice of poetry. He combines Jeffers's high seriousness with his own suspicion of grand statements, but in recording his effort to make sense of the world, he makes a claim for the value of the human perspective and of poetry itself. He refers to particular poets in "Place of Fire" to delineate a tradition to which he belongs: Yeats and Jeffers, obviously, but also Auden (the reference is to "In Praise of Limestone" [1948]) and Shelley, whose "Defence of Poetry" (1821) he invokes by referring to himself as "a listening lowly high priest, / unacknowledged legislator or something" (294). But there is also a sense, created by his ironic tone, that he is shrugging off these influences and asserting his own importance and style. The technical notation, "$CaCO_2$," for example, is a deliberately unpoetic reminder that limestone is a physical as well as a poetic substance. It is also worth noting the contrast between Purdy's colloquial tone and straightforward phrasing in this passage and the formality and complexity of "In Praise of Limestone," which begins, hesitantly, in the subjunctive: "If it form the one landscape that we, the inconstant ones, / Are consistently homesick for, this is chiefly / Because it dissolves in water" (540). The sound of Purdy's poem is as different from Auden's as the land surrounding Ameliasburg is from the "rounded slopes / With their surface fragrance of thyme" that Auden observes in Italy. Purdy's synopsis of Auden's poem—limestone is "very important stuff" (*Beyond* 293)—reduces it to triviality. This *reductio* and his suggestion that, like him, Yeats and Jeffers built their towers expressly to write about the experience, because "lugging tons" of stone is "Symbolic as hell," demonstrate that Purdy is not cowed by his predecessors. He announces himself as their equal at the same time that he asserts their importance to him. The older poets represent the quarry from which Purdy lugs the stones he needs to build his own poems. His relation to these pre-

decessors is not characterized by what Harold Bloom terms "poetic misreading" (*Clinament*) (14) but rather, as Solecki notes of "Bestiary [II]," by a form of poetic conversation among peers (*Last* 222).

• • •

Purdy departs from Jeffers's model of ontological inquiry by pointing out the comedy of human existence. Typical of his poems is a hint of absurdity in predominantly serious poems about weighty subjects. "In the Early Cretaceous" (1984), an example of the artifact-poem, illustrates both Purdy's Jeffersian impulse and his tendency to make self-conscious gestures that create a more humane form of geopoetry. The poem's opening lines combine scientific accuracy with a sly acknowledgement of the impossibility of speaking precisely about events that can only be measured roughly even by sophisticated equipment: "They came overnight / a hundred million years ago / the first flowers ever" (*Beyond* 418). "[A] hundred million years ago" is essentially correct—the Cretaceous period extends from 144 to 98 million years before the present age—and "overnight" makes a certain logical sense: the first flowers might well have bloomed in the dawn's light, creating the impression that something new had appeared by night, when in fact the unopened buds, the reader supposes, already existed. But the attempt at specificity in the following supposition is ludicrous:

> It must have been around 7 a.m.
> when a shrew-like mammal stumbled
> out of its dark burrow
> and peered nearsightedly
> at the first flower[.]
>
> (418)

The incongruity between the particularity of "7 a.m." and the scarcely imaginable remove of "a hundred million years ago" suggests that Purdy is wholly aware of the poetic license required to describe the appearance of the first flowers. When he compares the flowers' "gleaming iridescence" to "god's earmuffs," the calculated folksiness of the simile is jarring, preventing the reader from being lulled into the belief that Purdy has direct access to the distant past. (In "Wilderness Gothic" [1968] Purdy similarly refers to a church spire as "God's belly-scratcher" [158].) In "Trees at the Arctic Circle" (1967), the comparison of the "veined and intricate" leaves of *Salix cordifolia* to "tiny parkas" performs a similar function: (103) the bathos of "parkas" and "earmuffs" disrupts the gravitas that

Purdy tends toward but that he ultimately distrusts. The effect is comparable later in "In the Early Cretaceous" when he employs the anachronistic image of "little drifting white parachutes" to describe the dispersal of seeds (419).

The next stanza contains further ironic gestures. Purdy appears to be parodying himself when he describes the "comic-looking duck-billed dinosaur" who lifts "his head / with mouth full of dripping herbage / and mutter[s] Great Scott / or something like it" (418). If the dinosaur's mouth is filled with "herbage," the poet's mouth is filled with the nearly rhyming *verbiage*, and "Great Scott" sounds as likely to have come from Purdy's mouth as the dinosaur's, just as the blue-footed booby in "Birdwatching at the Equator" (1981) sounds like Purdy when it "say[s] 'Friggit'" (332). And when the speaker imagines a triceratops having "gulped a township / of yellow blossoms" (419), his choice of words both forges a link between the imagined Cretaceous and the present world and reminds the reader that this description of the past is Purdy's reverie, not an objective representation. *Township* is a distinctive way of expressing a large quantity that, in Purdy's body of work, is particularly significant. Purdy's Ontario is dotted with "townships"—Ameliasburg Township ("One Rural Winter" [1965]), "the high townships of Cashel / McClure and Marmora" ("The Country North of Belleville" [1965], *Beyond* 81)—and the use of the term here connects the remote past to the contemporary world that Purdy knows and that readers have come to know from his other poems. It also illustrates the relative, and potentially terrifying, emptiness of the prehistoric world; an area the size of a township was simply grazing territory, Purdy suggests, for a single "duck-billed dinosaur," just as a diplodocus "sampled blue / for several horizons" and the fields of "blue flowers" extended for "hundreds of miles" (419). In a parody of the Gospel of John, the speaker claims that "colour became food" when the dinosaurs found the flowers "heavenly" to eat; the appearance of the word *glory* in the next line further suggests the biblical passage: "And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth" (John 1:14).

Such gestures suggest that Purdy can only make his serious observations about the unknowability of the past after demonstrating his reluctance to make grand pronouncements or to assume an uncomplicated visionary role. He repeatedly insists that whatever events took place in the Early Cretaceous occurred prior to human language. The flowers bloomed "before Genesis was written" (418); "you couldn't put a name to" the feeling they provoked; and an imagined "creature" goes "unnamed" (419).

These acknowledgements of the prehistoricity of the Cretaceous anticipate the claims of the poem's final stanza that "no one will ever know / what it was like / that first time on primordial earth" and that

> no one can ever know
> even when someone is given
> the gift of a single rose
> and behind that one rose
> are the ancestors of all roses
> and all flowers and all the springtimes
> for a hundred million years
> of summer and for a moment
> in her eyes an echo
> of the first tenderness[.]
>
> (419)

These claims turn the poem against itself. If we accept the premise that "no one will ever know / what it was like / that first time," then the poem's first four stanzas become somewhat like "the gift of a single rose" and "an echo / of the first tenderness": they give us some sense, no matter how faint or scientifically inaccurate, of what prehistoric times might have been like. As Solecki remarks, "Whenever…the poems dealing with prehistory and origins refer to language or naming or creativity they remind us that the poem or poetry in general could not exist had we not 'fallen' into language and self-consciousness" (*Last* 117-18). The poet's ability to describe in language a vision of what predates language creates a glimpse of the past, even if, as the poem's ironic moments suggest, this glimpse is the poet's artifice. "In the Early Cretaceous" and other poems demonstrate that Purdy learned from Jeffers the importance of geopoetics—manifest in his desire to understand the physical world and the distant past as part of his existential inquiry—but his self-reflexiveness and his faith in the value of artifacts prevent him from following Jeffers into a tragic mode. The trace of the Jeffersian influence remains, but Purdy adopts his own investigative strategies, turning away from the severity of Inhumanism even as he struggles to make sense of geologic time and the earth's mysterious forces. In *Practical Ecocriticism* Glen A. Love notes that "What *is*, in terms of our concept of what it means to be human, was forever altered by Darwin and by subsequent scientific discoveries" (153; the emphasis is Love's). Purdy's geopoetry confirms the truth of this observation, but also suggests that Charles Lyell's *Principles of Geology* (1830-1833) ranks with *On the Origin of Species* (1859) as a scientific work with a tremendous, if indirect, bearing on the poetic imagination.[13]

Notes

1 McKay indicates that the term *geopoetry* originates with the geologists J.H.F. Umbgrove and Harry H. Hess (*Deactivated* 42).

2 On Jeffers, see, for example, Buell, *Writing* 153-56, 166; Elder 7-24; Quigley. As Peter Quigley notes, "the recent traction gained and won by scholars wanting to study environmental literature is hard to imagine without Jeffers" (47). On McKay, see Bondar, Dickinson, Fisher, and Forster.

3 But see Jones for an important pre-ecocritical analysis of Purdy's poetry in the context of nature poetry.

4 I follow Buell's suggestion that "environmental criticism" is a more useful term than "ecocriticism": "'environmental' approximates better than 'eco' the hybridity of the subject at issue—all 'environments' in practice involving fusions of 'natural' and 'constructed' elements—as well as the movement's increasingly heterogeneous foci" (*Future* viii).

5 The essay appears in revised form in *Vis à Vis: Field Notes on Poetry and Wilderness* (2001).

6 See Buell, *Environmental Imagination*.

7 See, in particular, *No One Else is Lawrence!* (1998), by Purdy and Doug Beardsley.

8 George Bowering refers to Jeffers and Bukowski in a letter written to the deceased Purdy largely about the influence of American poets on Canadian writers, Purdy included (67-68). He suggests that Purdy's appreciation of Bukowski's poetry was a calculated way of announcing his poetic taste, "anti-intellectual, expressive, manly in a barroom kind of way" (68), but does not address the role that Jeffers's works played in Purdy's poetry.

9 Notable examples of Jeffersian moments in Purdy's poetry occur in "Spring Song" (1962), "Still Life in a Tent" (1967), "Dark Landscape" (1968), and "The Others" (1990). Tim Heath also hears an evocation of Jeffers's "Signpost" in Purdy's "The Stone Bird" (1981, rev. 1997) (199).

10 For a more detailed analysis of Miłosz's interest in Jeffers, see Soldofsky, Zaller.

11 The translation from the Polish is by Miłosz and Richard Lourie.

12 See Heath 199-200 for further commentary on the differences between Jeffers and Purdy as they consist in tone and Purdy's "refusal to enable a distinction between the divine and the earthly" (199). Tim Heath distinguishes Purdy from Jeffers, after identifying a shared interest in the material and spiritual aspects of things, on the grounds that Purdy "is fascinated not just by nature but also by "junk, junkyards, and…debris of virtually any kind" (193).

13 I would like to thank the anonymous readers for *Canadian Poetry* for their insightful suggestions.

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