

## **Al Purdy, Sam Solecki, and the Poetics of the 1960s**

**By Frank Davey**

In Canadian criticism there are at least three mythologies about English-language poetry in the 1960s. One is that it led what George Woodcock called “an enormous quantitative expansion” of Canadian writing (13): a democratization of writing and publishing that saw the number of poetry books published annually multiply dramatically throughout the decade, and the location of poetry production move significantly from the academy to the street. A second is that marked a shift from the print poetry of high modernism to the oral and performance poetry of postmodernism. A third is that it marked an Americanization of Canadian poetry: the introduction of individualist poetics that threatened what Robin Mathews has theorized as Canadian consensual continuities.

As with most mythologies, these have some factual grounds. There was institutional expansion. The number of English-language poetry books which the *University of Toronto Quarterly* could locate for its annual “Letters in Canada” review increased from eleven in 1961 to several hundred by 1969. The average press run of an English-language poetry title increased from around two hundred at the beginning of the decade to almost a thousand by its end. At the beginning of the 1960s almost all poetry titles were published in only three of the ten Canadian provinces: Ontario, Quebec, and New Brunswick; by the end poetry books or chapbooks were being produced in all ten. More writers and more publishers, from more regions of the country, and from a wider range of ages, were contributing to publicly circulating verse. But was this expansion ‘democratizing’? In part, the 1960s expansion was mandated by the Canadian federal government, through the recently founded Canada Council, which by offering subsidies for small press publishing aided the growth of regional poetry publication. The Council and its juries were beginning to set rules, both explicit and implicit, about what could qualify as a book—a minimum of forty-eight pages, printed to a ‘professional standard,’ in dimensions suitable for bookstore shelves. The pamphlets of bpNichol’s GrOnk press did not qualify; the irregularly mimeographed booklets of bill bissett’s blewointment press were eventually disqualified.

In part also the expansion was shaped and contained ideologically in the late 1960s and early 1970s by the poetry discourses that the mass media<sup>1</sup> and academic anthologies (principally Geddes's *15 Canadian Poets*) encouraged to circulate: romantic documentaries of Canadian difference, such as Al Purdy's *North of Summer* (1967) or Dennis Lee's *Civil Elegies* (1968); inquiries into poetic mystery, such as Leonard Cohen's *The Spice Box of Earth* (1961), Gwendolyn MacEwen's *The Shadow Maker* (1969), or Michael Ondaatje's *The Dainty Monsters* (1967), celebrations of alternate heroisms, such as John Newlove's "The Pride" (1969), or Margaret Atwood's *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* (1970). During the 1960s proper there were no academic anthologies of the new poetry (the Colombo/Godbout *Poetry 64* was a trade publication, as was the Souster *New Wave Canada*; neither was kept in print). The first academic anthologies of 1960s poetry were Geddes' *15 Canadian Poets* (1970) and Mandel's *Poets of Contemporary Canada* (1972). The more successful Geddes anthology was the more conservative project. Although packaged as a contemporary collection, it was in fact a postwar anthology that collected Birney, Layton, Souster, Avison, Purdy, Nowlan, D.G. Jones, and Mandel, as well as the much younger Atwood, Bowering, Cohen, Coleman, MacEwen, Newlove, and Ondaatje. Apart from Coleman (who was dropped in the second edition), it ignored the more radical 1960s poetries such as those of Nichol, Wah, Marlatt, Rosenblatt, and Bissett, and excluded visual poetry. The Mandel also excluded visual poetry, and managed through its typography to make the work of all its poets look visually similar, but did offer the more radical list—to Purdy, Atwood, Bowering, MacEwen, Newlove, Ondaatje, and Cohen adding Acorn, Bissett and Rosenblatt. However, it was never revised, and never displaced the Geddes as the contemporary anthology of academic choice. The latter went through several editions (1978, 1988, 2001) but only added Marlatt and Wah after the cultural changes of the 1980s and 90s had re-identified them as lesbian-feminist and Chinese-Canadian respectively, and Nichol after he was dead.

The mythology that the 1960s marked a shift from high modernism to postmodernism is similarly difficult to substantiate. While the dominant mode in Canadian poetry at the beginning of the period was a variant of high modernism (see Milton Wilson's anthology *Poetry of Mid-Century 1940/60*)—the poem as a complex, allusive, aesthetic object, that attested to the skill and Eurocentric erudition of the writer, and marked discursively by a nostalgia for a period before industrialization and its multiplying of the power of mass culture—this changed only slightly during the decade. Eliot's understandings of poetry continued in Canada through the influ-

ence of Northrop Frye, who taught generations of students—not entirely inaccurately—that literature is created less out of experience and testimony than out of earlier literature. His focusing on archetypal mythology, and on the Bible as the ‘great code’ of literature, meant that much of what passed as ‘new’ in the Canadian 1960s—the poetics of MacEwen, Cohen, D.G. Jones, and Daryll Hine—was high modernism in new clothing: poetry that ideologically continued to view social events as recurrences within a closed mythological system (even if, as in the case of Cohen, the poetry appeared to have cultural influence).<sup>2</sup> These were poetics that in general held political process and attempts at political action in high suspicion, often creating a dichotomy between the allegedly dehumanizing processes of social system and the ‘mysteries’ of poetry. The proposition that art is somehow beyond social system, and incomprehensible to it, linked these poetics to poems like Yeats’ “A Prayer for my Daughter,” and “Sailing to Byzantium.” It underlay other 1960s Canadian poetics of very different rhetorics, such as that of Bill Bissett, and his 1968 poem “Prayers for the One Habitation,” which begins with a spectacularly overdetermined dichotomy between mind and flesh, between “logik” and song:

oh baby i don't need th logik nuclear war head or th united  
states, baby can yu believe i don't need  
the white race.

mind creatures trying to influence nature,  
telling the tree it is beautiful then cutting it down,  
Pouring concrete on its roots, more parking lots

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baby mind creatures trying to destroy earth,  
so that it becomes a thot pattern th fear of

mind creatures trying to end all growth

mind trying to kill all th flesh

mind wanting only mind

but we all need each othr th  
pebbul th orchard oh the sweet song ...

(70)

It underlay as well much of the 1970s and 80s feminist poetry of Bronwen Wallace, such as her often anthologized “Thinking with the Heart,” in which she characterizes a policeman as someone who “thinks with his brain / as if it were safe up there / in its helmet of bone / away from all that messy business of his stomach or his lungs” and contrasts him with a female victim of domestic violence, reluctant to bring criminal charges against her husband because “of her heart, which goes on / its slow, dark way, wanting whatever it is that hearts want, when they think like this; / a change in his, probably, / a way to hold what the heart can’t / without breaking: how the man who beats her / is also the man she loves” (59-60). ‘Love’ is a problematical and socially constructed word, and partly problematical because so often discursively restricted to the heart, but there’s little room for such an idea in Wallace’s dichotomy.

The belief that Canadian poetry became ‘Americanized’ during the 1960s also has some factual basis. The popularity of the poetry reading, and the development of the poetry reading as a publicly funded institution, and the consequent encouragement of rhetorics suitable for public performance all had roots in the coffee houses, bookstores, and universities of the United States in the 1950s. Canadian poets of the 1940s and 1950s that I have interviewed, including Souster and A.J.M. Smith, spoke of having to train themselves to give readings in the late 1950s and early 1960s in order to compete with the oral skills of visiting American poets. There were also cross-border contacts between Canadian and American poets in the 1960s—most famously the Black Mountain group’s contacts with the *Tish* group, but also Creeley’s with Layton, Cid Corman’s with Souster, John Gill’s with Earle Birney, D. Alexander’s with Daphne Marlatt, d.a. levy’s and Dick Higgins’ with bpNichol. What is problematical about this belief, however, particularly in its equation of ‘American’ with ‘individualist’, is the homogeneity it assumes in the United States. Pound’s ‘American’ poetry is considerably different aesthetically and ideologically from that of Ginsberg; Anne Sexton’s from that of Ferlinghetti or Snyder; Olson’s from that of Robert Lowell, Amiri Baraka, or Denise Levertov. Similarly problematical for this belief is the fact that English-language poetic practice has been cosmopolitan at least since Chaucer, and that Canadian poetry has been learning from American as well as British poetries at least since the Confederation group.

In considering these myths about the Canadian 1960s I am led to wonder how much we understand in either country about that decade as a context for poetics. Do we remember the residual dominance of high modernism and high modernist ideology in review journals, university

quarterlies and established literary presses?—a dominance that made Corman's *Origin* and Dudek's *Delta* such necessary magazines and a few turbulent years of *Northwest Review* such a *cause celebre*. And yet high modernism in the universities was still so new that it was not yet critically taught. Partly influenced by the notions of critical detachment popularized by the New Criticism, critical writing on Eliot and Yeats was still mostly explanatory and uncritical.<sup>3</sup> It took for granted the importance of the texts studied, and the implicit unimportance of writers like Williams, Stein, HD, and Zukofsky. Do we also understand the role that Continental European literature played in the 1960s resistances to high modernism?—specifically the New York centred project to turn attention to the works of Dostoevsky, Kafka, Rilke, Mann, Sartre, Gide, Camus, and Genet as socially and politically provocative—a project that extended from *The New York Review of Books* and *Evergreen Review* in the 1960s to *Boundary 2* in the 1970s, whose first issue in 1972 began with Edward Said writing on Foucault and included essays on the Nouveau Roman, Marshal McLuhan and French structuralism, and a review of Poggioli's *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*. Often in the 1950s and 60s continental Europe was regarded as a source of ideas that could counter the hegemony of Anglo-American high modernism—in Canada one sees this in Louis Dudek's *Delta* and long poems *Europe* and *Atlantis*, in Phyllis Webb's homages to Rilke and Dostoevsky, in Eli Mandel's citations of Malraux, Dostoevsky, Buber, Jung, and Maritain in his explorations of creativity and madness in his 1966 book *Criticism: the Silent-Speaking Words*.

Amid contemporary post-poststructuralist epistemological uncertainties, do we recall the 1960s as also a period of epistemological instability and of both searches and rushes for belief? My personal construction of the 1960s interest in continental European writers is that it marked the belated impact of the Holocaust, and of the doubt that the Second World War in Europe cast on the reliability of Western civilization, on rationalism, and on the usefulness of 'art'—Yeats' golden bird finally beginning to dissolve from its collision with Adorno's prosaic assertion that after Auschwitz there could be no poetry. Yet the response of most writers in the 1960s to this crisis was not the more recent one of acceptance of contingency and undecidability—although that model was certainly articulated and available in Creeley's work and, more problematically, in Olson's work in the late 1950s on ecology. What I think is now most visible in the 1960s was a search for a new plenitude—for the breath line which not only might operate as a superconductor to transfer the poem, as Olson had predicted, without loss from poet to reader, but which also promised the poet, in the

words of Olson's prediction, "secrets objects share"<sup>4</sup>; or a search for the 'way' of Zen Buddhism offered by Alan Watts and Gary Snyder, or for the dictating voices of Jack Spicer, or for the enlightenments promised by Timothy Leary, or for all the various pop culture plenitudes offered by the Mystic Arts Book Club, reprints of the writings of Aleister Crowley, musicals like *Hair*, rock groups like the Beatles and Jefferson Airplane.

It seems to me also that what were some of the most useful ideas of 1960s poetics—that language and literature transcend individual accomplishment, that poetic discourse is a social discourse embedded within general linguistic practice, and that ecology offers a model not only for understanding contemporary social issues but also language and history, that to study poetics one begins by studying linguistics and the social history of language—were often lost within the pervasive 1960s weakness for binarism, phenomenology, irrationality, and mysticism. Linguistics was too often assigned to the bureaucratic and systematic side of the rational/irrational split; the *Tish* writers, for example, were accused by many of their critics of being 'too theoretical' and technical. At the other extreme language was regarded as a transcendent and inspirational system beyond human agency, as in the *Tish* poet David Dawson's reverential *Where the Orders Are*, with its indebtedness to Robert Duncan's "The Structure of Rime" poems. The 'great writer' concept survived ideas of collectivity, communalism, aleatoric composition, and group accomplishment, often ironically, as when Leonard Cohen's self-presentations as weak, humble, and only a voice earned him cult-hero status. Ecological theory often led to a mystification of the natural world, a path which took Olson from the research of the early ecologist Carl Sauer in his *Mayan Letters* to the "diorite stone" in the later *Maximus Poems*. Awareness of the need to recognize historical materialities, so evident in Bowering's *Rocky Mountain Foot* (1968) and later in his novel *Caprice* and in Wah's intergenre *Diamond Grill*, too often dissolved into aestheticizings of history, as they have throughout Michael Ondaatje's poetry and fiction.

What was potentially a period of enormous potential for change in poetic discourse and in the cultural role of poetry—about this potential many of the early 1960s poets were certainly correct—was often lost. Somewhat like F.R. Scott's Mackenzie King, the various 'radical' poetics of the 1960s seem often to have "led us back to where we were before" ("W.L.M.K." 61). Although they slightly altered poetic discourse toward the vernacular, they eventually reified poetry's binary antagonistic relationship to politics, rationality, and civil discourse, and may have led to the low cultural relevance poetry suffers in Canada today. Some of the most

publicly respected writers in Canada at the moment are those who aestheticize politics and implicitly sentimentalize or mythologize the individual's estrangement within society—more often in fiction than poetry. (Stephen Henighan's recent arguments about Ondaatje, Anne Michaels, and Anne-Marie Macdonald in his *When Words Deny the World* are persuasive.) This regression occurred despite the declared desire among new writers in the 1960s to overthrow old poetics and their ideologies, as in bpNichol's life vs. death declaration "poetry being at a dead end poetry is dead. . . . Having accepted this fact we are free to live the poem." Poets of the Canadian 1960s repeatedly argued against high modernism and what they saw as its closed, privileged, and anglophile views of history and culture. Dennis Lee developed his critique as one of colonialism, arguing in his essay "Cadence, Country, Silence" that the prominent works of other cultures left Canadians effectively mute and rendered what appeared to be original work a mere miming of foreign words. Robert Kroetsch climaxed two decades of iconoclastic writing with his long poem *Seed Catalogue*, in which he effectively replaces the absent Tiber, Thames, and Danube rivers with the stream of urine the local Strauss boy could launch over the high school principal's car. Raymond Souster called for poets to "Get the poem outdoors" away from "the puny whimpering" and "silent cursing at midnight" of modernist despair (66). Other poets followed Robert Duncan in arguing not only against masterworks<sup>5</sup> but also against celebrity and the aestheticizing of language and literary objects. The sixties were the time that many young poets adopted the lower case 'i' and lower case names as if this would somehow limit pride and fame.<sup>6</sup> Louis Dudek aimed for a "functional poetry", one which could not be aestheticized and rendered non-political by critics; *Tish* magazine, Pat Lane's Very Stone House, bill bissett's blue ointment press, Nelson Ball's weed/flower press, and bpNichol's *grOnk* and *5-cent review* all prided themselves on their functional low-cost mimeograph publications.

What went wrong? One thing was that most of these resistances were founded on binary models, like Nichol's life/death, Souster's indoors/outdoors, Kroetsch's high/low, Lee's imperial US/colonial Canada, or bissett's lower case/upper case. In the Cold War 1960s there were no politicians talking about a "Third Way"; but there was Levy-Strauss's *The Raw and the Cooked*, Roland Barthes' *S/Z*, and Anthony Burgess's mappings of oscillating Pelagian and Augustinian historical phases in his 1962 novel *The Wanting Seed*. Many of the binary models led back, like Scott's Mackenzie King, to where culture had been before, indirectly validating Frye's archetypal patterns. Peter Quartermain would describe the *Tish*

group under the punning title “Romantic Offensive,” linking the group at one stroke to the English Romantics, Baudelaire’s *Fleurs du mal*, and Wyndham Lewis’s *Blasting and Bombardiering*. The potentially oscillating value of binary pairs like high/low, tradition/innovation, closed/open, rational/irrational; Apollonian/Dionysian; center/margin legitimates both terms and in the long term renders static the tension between them.

The romantic/classical dichotomy led many of the new poetics to be associated, or to confusedly associate themselves, with a kind of generalized irrationalism, evident in the titles of many of their works—Gwendolyn MacEwen’s *A Breakfast for Barbarians* (1966), Eli Mandel’s *An Idiot Joy* (1967), Ondaatje’s *The Dainty Monsters* (1967), Purdy’s *Wild Grape Wine* (1968); Susan Musgrave’s *Songs of a Sea Witch* (1970), and Atwood’s *Procedures for Underground* (1970). Two effects of this reaffirmation of an older literary dominant have been (1) the continued representation of the 1960s and 70s poetry as inspired, mysterious, spontaneous or ‘natural’ discourses, and its poets as spooky or folksy voices of earth and transcendent insight, and thus a presenting of the decades as primarily ones that produced Purdy, Cohen, MacEwen, Atwood, and Ondaatje; and (2) the continued representation of poetries based on various notions of poetry as social discourse, or as the co-production of random material event as eccentric or experimental.

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Three years ago Al Purdy died, a man born in 1921, who published early work in the 1940s and 50s, but whose ‘breakthrough’ poetry is generally regarded as having been published in the early 60s—*Poems for all the Annettes* (1962), *The Cariboo Horses* (1965), and *North of Summer* (1967). Purdy had been most definitely a poet of public visibility, gained partly through his identification with Canadian nationalism and through his many poems that ironically or playfully romanticized widely scattered areas of Canada. His death was the lead story on Canadian network television news, a front-page story in the nationally published newspaper the *Globe and Mail*, and the subject of a full-page obituary by journalist Val Ross in the *Globe* two days following. The front page story was titled “Canadian master poet succumbs to cancer” (April 22, 2000: A1) and Ross’s somewhat longer obituary “National icon was larger than life” (April 24, 2000, R8). Interestingly, these naive constructions were not merely part of newspaper rhetoric. Below the obituary the *Globe* printed statements by four poets under the title “Canadian Poets Pay Tribute to the



late Al Purdy.” Robert Bringhurst led off by declaring Purdy “the very epitome of Canadian poetry.” Dennis Lee wrote “He was without a doubt the greatest poet English Canada has produced.” Patrick Lane added “There is no question he was the greatest Canadian poet of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. I don’t think anyone could even begin to argue that point. . . . What you have is one of the most enduring poets of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.” Susan Musgrave expanded the *Globe*’s larger-than-life theme by exclaiming “he is like a god,” and added a self-serving poem, printed to the side of the obituary, “Thirty-two uses for Al Purdy’s Ashes.” Despite Robert Duncan’s 1961 prognostication, the age of the masterpiece was definitely not dead, at least not in Canada.

A second theme these statements emphasized was the authenticity and Canadianness of Purdy’s voice. Lee offered the most astute comment here—that Purdy “created an English Canadian voice.” Lane praised him for being able to appeal to numerous generations and “still keep his voice intact.” Musgrave added that “There was a great lack of pretentiousness in his voice on the page.”

A third theme emphasized by the obituary itself was transgression. Purdy, Ross’s obituary stated, “was one of the rowdymen of Canadian literature.” His childhood was dominated “by his cussing, whisky-drinking, poker-playing grandfather.” At 17 he left home on a freight train, “brawling and writing poetry . . . as he rode.” While the transgression was implicitly equated with poetry—“brawling and writing poetry”—it appeared to have no social focus; both brawling and writing were made by Ross to seem self-expressive and intrinsically rewarding. The reader was asked to admire and be entertained.

While these obituary comments might have been readable as merely the polite excesses that public mourning can produce, they appeared only months after the publication of Sam Solecki’s book-length ‘essay’ on Purdy, *The Last Canadian Poet*, in which Solecki made almost identical characterizations of Purdy, arguing specifically that he was “the best Canadian poet to have yet appeared” (216). In the course of this study he reached back to Schiller to define ‘poet’ as a person of “vision” and “genius,” the producer of “masterpieces,” and “the orphic voice . . . of his community” (36). He praised the typical Purdy poem as one that creates the illusion that the reader is “almost participating in the imagined or real experiences described by the first-person speaker,” one that “enacts, usually in the present tense, the contours of an experience rather than simply offering an experience of it” (98). Purdy’s “best poems . . . convince and move us *as* poems spoken in an inimitable voice” (216).

None of these themes are surprising, although perhaps it is unfortunate they are not. All of them, more to the point, have their origins in the concerns of 1960s poetics. While Duncan was announcing the end of the masterpiece, and Dudek was seeking a “functional poetry,” readers were also confronted with Layton’s claims to have a persona authorized by prophecy, and by Ginsberg’s large and rhetorically expansive claim that he had seen the persecution and collapse of “the best minds” of his generation. Charles Olson’s “Projective Verse,” was being widely read, especially for its suggestions that prosody should be determined by the breathing of the poet during composition—thus guaranteeing authenticity of ‘voice’ and an implicit metaphysics of presence—and for its proposition that art should “re-enact” rather than describe—quite possibly the source of Solecki’s praise of Purdy above. Duncan himself had mixed his “end of masterpieces” remark, and his understanding of the discursive limitations within which individuals write, with romantic evocation of ‘natural’ freedoms:

The end of masterpieces . the beginning of testimony. Having their mastery obedient to the play of forms that makes a path between what is in the language and what is in their lives. In this light that has something to do with all flowering things together, a free association of living things . . . . . (61)

The concern with authentic voice, and the promise that the breath line, or Olson’s “projective verse,” could minimize the gap between the intended utterance and the one on the page, and eliminate the signs of literary conventions, rhetoric, and device in poetry, was often presented in the 1960s in a rhetoric of liberation, or as part of the binary opposition of freedom versus academic cleverness. Here is Pat Lane again, eulogizing Purdy: “[h]e wrote as a man of the people rather than as a high academic. He liberated a whole generation of poets. He had an ability to cross over generations and still keep his voice intact.” It is only in the last decades that it has been possible to observe that authenticity and sincerity in poetry are both the effects of rhetoric, and that someone like Purdy did not so much keep “his voice intact” as maintain consistency in his rhetoric, and create discursive simulacra of authenticity and sincerity.

The 1960s also gave readers macho poetry, as the masculine pronouns with which Olson recurrently indexes the word *poet* hint—and despite the decade’s concurrent resistance to militarism. Don Allen’s *The New American Poetry* anthology was primarily one of male poets; eighteen years later in 1978 Ekbert Faas’s *The New American Poetics* was entirely focussed on male writers—Olson, Duncan, Creeley, Bly, and Ginsberg. It apparently wasn’t only Ginsberg who had found the best minds of his gen-

eration to be exclusively male. Behind the brawling Al Purdy constructed by Val Ross in his obituary one can detect not only such gendered 1950s and 60s notions of creativity but also images of the virile homosocial poetry offered by Irving Layton's *Balls for a One-Armed Juggler* (1963) and *The Laughing Rooster* (1964), Milton Acorn's *I've Tasted my Blood* (1969), or in the United States by Bukowski's *Erections, Ejaculations, Exhibitions* (1972). Ross even wryly notes that Purdy's wife, Eurythe, remained "a shadow in Purdy's writings. Throughout his life, Purdy always sought other men with whom he could test his mettle, from his father-in-law with whom he once shared a taxi-driving company, to colleagues such as George Bowering, George Woodcock, Layton, and Acorn." For Purdy's eulogizers, his linguistic violence operated not as politics but as spectacle. "He didn't take poetry too seriously—he enjoyed it," Pat Lane commented.

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Solecki, however, disagreed with Lane that Purdy and his poetry are "most enduring," or even "enduring." He suggested that Purdy is already unjustly ignored by critics, and is losing his place in the teaching canon—along with Layton—to "new multicultural" poets who "write on the [currently] preferred topics (gender, homosexuality, language, postcolonialism, race, the native, etc.)" (xi). For Solecki, Purdy was, as he was for Bringhurst, Lee, Musgrave, and Lane, the major Canadian poet not only of the 1960s but also of the 1970s and 80s; however, his non-enduring choice of topics was limiting his relevance to more recent readers. The major problem with this argument is that Purdy indeed wrote about many of these topics—although not necessarily in the manner of Solecki's "new multicultural" poets. He wrote about gender in the "Song of the Impermanent Husband" and "Home-made Beer"; he wrote about "the native" in "The Cariboo Horses" and "The Last of the Dorsets." His fading from memory may have less to do with his topics than with his poetics and with the ideologies implicit in those poetics. For although Purdy's poetics were a part of the 1960s, they were arguably a rear-guard element—both part of the 1940s poets' revisiting of romanticism and part of the 1960s' confused romantic mixing of the occult, individual liberty, heroic masculine resistance to authority, and pure presence with various quite different interests in collaboration, the discursive construction of experience, textuality (as, for example, in found and concrete poetics), otherness, and performance.

In *The Montreal Forties: Modernist Poetry in Transition*, Brian Trehearne has suggested that the dominant problem in poetics for Canadian poets of the 1940s was to find a way out of the modernism's apparent proscription, through its doctrine of impersonality, of subjective ideological engagement. He argues that one of the more effective responses to this problem was Irving Layton's strategy of transforming his subjectivity into a consistent persona which became part of the displayed materiality of the poem—" [t]he motions of the poet's mind constitute the field of the poem" (224). The result is a "collapsing" of the poet's "subject and object worlds" (225), a collapsing understandable as a kind of imagist presentation of a poet's performance of subjectivity. "Such a fusion of subject and object worlds in the media of the poem and of the poet's mind permits a spectacular freedom of imagistic movement and a fine interpenetration of conscious thought and delicate sense," Trehearne writes (227). Layton's strategy in effect merges Wordsworth's autobiographical speaking subject of *The Prelude* with the modernist persona of Eliot's Prufrock, constructing a poetic self that is at the same time both 'objective' in being on display as a dramatic image and 'subjective' in its active interpretation of the world.

This performed self is extremely similar to what Solecki finds in Purdy when, citing Richard Poirier, he describes Purdy's first-person speaker as "a performing self" discovering himself, as well as the limits of the self, in the complex, dramatic act of discovery that is the poem" (98). "[T]he representative Purdy lyric is held together primarily by its speaking subject—ostensibly the poet—and his narrative, which describes or enacts in an often characteristic voice an event encountered by the speaker" (97). However, while Solecki acknowledges thematic relationships between Layton and Purdy, he is willing to grant only minimal similarities in their poetics, attributing these mostly to their common interest in D.H. Lawrence and arguing that it is in Lawrence that Purdy discovered the possibility of a lyric persona.

For Purdy, Lawrence's example, like Layton's, sanctioned the use of a literary version of his own voice and allowed the shape of the sentence and stanza to be identical with the shape of the feeling-thought, whether in poems of reflection, description, dramatization, or statement. From the perspective of history, the ultimate debt may be to Coleridge's conversation poems, but Purdy learned it from Lawrence. (87)

Trehearne's research and readings of Layton would suggest not only that Solecki is overemphasizing this debt to Lawrence but also that he may be

exaggerating the originality of Purdy's contribution to poetics in Canada—and thus locating the poetics of the performed lyric persona in the wrong decade.

The contrast that Solecki develops between Purdy and the “new multicultural” poets, and the claim he makes that Purdy is now being unjustly neglected, depends in part on the above exaggeration and on whether Purdy's poetics were already somewhat anachronistic in the 1960s or whether they were mostly a new development. Were his “grand” poetry and self-identification with the Canadian nation characteristic of that decade or were they only a part of a decade that was already moving toward the poetries that Solecki sees now ascendant?

In the closing pages of his essay, Solecki argues that Purdy “stretched the boundaries of the Canadian lyric” in order to enable it to express “his particular Canadian way of being in the world” (217). He laments that Purdy's ““you”” with which he

invokes a community and a nation, as well as the inclusive ‘we’ that performs the same function, have been replaced in the work of younger poets by pronouns referring almost always only to a lover, a family member, or a personal relationship. This reduction in scope and ambition is particularly noticeable in the poetry of women, where politics and history have become gender specific. . . . (216)

Women poets and their readers, with their reduced ambition, Solecki hints, subscribe to an understanding of poetics that is both outside of that of Purdy and narrower than it. He also laments that the emergence of Canadian multiculturalism have reduced “the grand nationalist ambitions of Roberts, Pratt, and Purdy” to a “particular historical phase” (4). “We [currently] have diminished expectations of our poets, just as they have diminished expectations about their possible role in society.” Solecki's frequent use of words such as “reduction” and “diminished” indexes a recurrent masculinist fixation on size in his study, and inversely echoes the expansive phrases he deploys in praise of Purdy—“grand and ambitious” (178), “sheer variety” (97), “stretched the boundaries” (216) “nearly countless” (217)—which in turn evoke the expansive terms—“greatest,” “like a god,” “most enduring”—of the funerary words of Lee, Musgrave, and Lane.

The presumptuous “we,” moreover, for which Solecki praises Purdy, was under question, and a potential embarrassment for many poets, by the early 1960s. Earle Birney had already shifted from the “we” of his political poems of the 1940s to the contextualized “I” of “November Walk Near False Creek Mouth.” The *Tish* poets had struggled publicly with the

“stance” of a poet—a poet’s relationship to other subjects—adopting the ecological “field” theory of subjectivity outlined by Olson and his goal of “getting rid of the lyrical interference of the individual as ego, of the ‘subject’ and his soul, that peculiar presumption . . .” (59). bpNichol by 1965 had turned away from lyric self-expression, perceiving it to be an impediment to poetry, and to concrete poetry and comic-strip poems founded partly on linguistic theory. With bill bissett and David UU he was routinely attempting to subvert the implicitly asserted authority of the capitalized proper name and the capitalized first-person-singular pronoun. Daphne Marlatt’s two 1960s books, *Frames: of a Story* and *Leaf/leafs*, attempted phenomenological discourses in which the perceiving consciousness appeared much less authoritative than its perceptions. Margaret Atwood in this period was containing the first person-pronoun within various persona and within a collage stanzaic structure that prevented sustained lyricism. The 1960s were also a time of intense attention to the long poem or book-length poem as an alternative to lyric. That is, Purdy’s “stretching” of the lyric occurred at a moment when many other poets were perceiving it as an impasse—as a set of conventions that had lost opacity and credulity and that depend on a sharing of ideology between writer and reader. Solecki’s ‘reduced’ first-person pronouns are hardly a recent product of writing by usurping women.

The masculinism implicit in the terms of Solecki’s praise of Purdy has a long history in Western poetry that it is unnecessary to outline here. The general assumptions of the lyric at the beginning of the 1960s were still those of the courtly love tradition—men wrote or recited, as in Bowering’s “Inside the Tulip” (*The Man in the Yellow Boots*, 1965:16), women read or listened. The lyric was at once an instrument of courtship—and it was men who did the courting—and one of reflection. Purdy’s “Song of the Impermanent Husband” is a poem which both parodies heroic masculinity and reifies it through its extravagant performance of that parody. With its speculative list of fantasy women to whom the poet might make exotic love, it both reduces women to stereotypes, and also functions performatively as a courtship dance—the male poet strutting his peacock measures. The relatively few women in Purdy’s reflective lyrics are often similarly dehumanized, such as the native women, “Beaver or Carrier women maybe / or Blackfoot squaws” he ‘celebrates’ in “The Cariboo Horses” for having had “whiskey-coloured eyes” and having been sexually ridden like “equine rebels”—

such women as once fell dead with their lovers  
with fire in their heads and slippery froth on thighs  
(7)

Here the collocation of native women with animals, whiskey, and reckless passion is as extreme and lamentable as any in our literature. This is the title poem of the collection for which Purdy was given his first Governor-General's Award.

However, in general, masculinism in Purdy is presented both by his lyric performing of the itinerant semi-Odyssean male self, usually in male contexts such as the drivers seat of a car or beer parlour ("My 1948 Pontiac," "At the Quinte Hotel") and by his poems' focussing on male subjects. Most of the people of Purdy's poetry are male—from Kudluk of "The Last of the Dorsets," to the mill-building Owen Roblin, to the epiphany-experiencing farmer of "The Country North of Belleville." Often the effect of such poems is to locate art production, whether of an ivory swan or of a poetic moment, inside the gender that is also producing the admirable verbal performance that the reader or listener is experiencing. Perhaps there is a connection here to the care, noted by Solecki, of contemporary women poets to portray "politics and history" as "gender specific."

Solecki spends some time examining what he calls Purdy's "opening up" of the lyric, his search for a "transparent poetry" (92) that "mimics" (97)—or at least appears to mimic—the creative process. In a footnote that cites Marjorie Perloff, he suggests that Purdy's poems are part of the 1960s search for a "process" poetry that will replace poems that appear to be "products" (279, n1). Although he notes Purdy's mistrust of the ability of language to be anything more than a "second-order" representation of things" (129), he correctly observes that he attempts to make his poems at least appear to be something of an index of his inner life—to create "a poetic form to mirror the play of form and formlessness we find in our minds and in our lives" (103), as well as to create poems that appear to be spontaneously composed and unedited, as in "Trees at the Arctic Circle." Here we find the 1960s concern with fullness and presence, which in Purdy's case leads him to seek the immediacy of apparently unedited speech at the same time as he acknowledges thematically the gap between the word and its referent.

While Solecki posits the cultural shift against nationalism as the main cause of the decline of interest in Purdy's work, it is worth noting that all of the 1960s poets who attempted in their prosody only to achieve the illusion of immediacy have suffered declines in reputation and scholarly attention, whereas most of those who made recurrent metatextual reference to

the constructedness of their writing, such as Nichol, or who wrote in modes that foregrounded or thematized artifice, such as Bowering or Atwood, have not. The illusion of presence—in the academy coming out of Husserl and Merleau-Ponty and the persistence in North America of phenomenology—coexisted in the muddled 1960s with both doctrines of inspiration or dictation by ‘Martians’ (in the theories of Jack Spicer) and with materialist linguistic understandings of language derived from Saussure through structuralism. Solecki argues persuasively that the basic metaphysics of Purdy’s poetic came to him through Wordsworth and D.H. Lawrence, which effectively attributes them to nineteenth-century German idealism.

Solecki’s understanding of Purdy’s nationalism is also that it comes from a similar period. In fact, his argument that Purdy is the “last” Canadian poet rests on his adopting an extremely narrow understanding of nation, and an understanding the relationship between poetry and the nation-state as being functionally non-political. Purdy’s “words are a record of our sense of being in the world as Canadians, of being rooted in a particular landscape, way of life, and history. His writing is simultaneously an autobiography, an engagement with the national past, and a search for a personal and national voice—both a record and a vision” (10-11). Elsewhere he remarks that Purdy remained sceptical that poetry could have any leverage on the social or political—that society “even notices poetry” (133). The relationship between this modernist view (most famously expressed in Auden’s “poetry makes nothing happen”) and his poetics is evident in Purdy’s understanding his relationship to both his nation and his audience as a “marginal” one—an understanding which Solecki convincingly locates in “At the Quinte Hotel.” While more sanguine views of poetry’s social efficacy during the 1960s may be naive, they indeed characterized some of the poetry of that decade, especially its anti-war poetry and anti-capitalist poetry such as that of Milton Acorn. Much of the poetry of the period appeared in publications dedicated to social change such as *blewointment*, *The Georgia Straight*, *Alive*, or *This Magazine is About Schools*.

Solecki’s two persistent argument in *The Last Canadian Poet* are that Purdy was the inheritor of “the grand nationalistic ambitions” of Roberts and Pratt (4), and that he was the most nationalist poet of the most nationalist decade:

Purdy came to prominence and wrote much of his strongest and most original work in the decade surrounding the centennial celebrations of Confederation. The optimism of the period, from John Diefenbaker’s northern vision to



Trudeaumania, as well as the nearly euphoric cultural nationalism are reflected in his poetic discovery of the country. (12)

While this may be an accurate account of one aspect of Canadian popular culture during the decade, it is again arguable whether this has much bearing on its poetics. Euphoric nationalism is not the only kind of nationalism. There was a profound concern evident with the ideologies that constitute the nation in 1960s poetry collections that appeared, at best, to focus only on parts of the nation, such as Birney's *Ice Cod Bell and Stone* (1962), Newlove's *Moving in Alone* (1966), Bowering's *Rocky Mountain Foot* (1968), Kearns' *Listen, George* (1966), or Atwood's *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* (1970). Moreover the critiques of romantic nationalism which also occurred in 1960s poetry were arguably contributions to the nation's politics. Of special note in this regard are the scepticisms of Atwood's "At the Tourist Centre in Boston" (*The Animals in that Country*, 1968: 18-19), or the critique of nationalist territorialization in her "Migration: CPR" (*The Circle Game*—a collection reprinted by the 'nationalist' House of Anansi Press in the centennial year—52-56) and her "Progressive Insanities of a Pioneer" (*Animals* 36-39), both of which hinted at the feminist critiques of the patriarchal state which are commonplace in women's poetry today.

One could even argue that Atwood and later "multicultural" poets are more "national" than Purdy in their viewing poetry as one of the discourses in which the politics of the nation are conducted. While these politics may be constituency politics, and their texts may circulate and have influence mostly within these constituencies, these are still the politics that collectively constitute and negotiate the nation. Atwood's poems and those of later women poets such as Daphne Marlatt, and Erin Mouré have had wide circulation among particular communities, as have those of such "multiculturalists" as Dionne Brand, Nourbese Philip, Jim Wong-Chu, Fred Wah, and Roy Miki. Most of this poetry has been received as 'activist' in ways that Purdy's poetry was not. Al Purdy was a remarkable poet, but it would be reductive indeed, to use Solecki's word, if his work were to be remembered as summing up the 1960s, or to be used to obscure the nation-altering debates conducted in and through contemporary poetry, or the extent to which current Canadian poetics—whether feminist, language-based, deterritorializing, or multinational—was a significant part of 1960s contentions.

## Notes

- 1 Articles about Purdy appeared in *Time* (Canadian edition) in May 1965, in *The Montreal Star* in July 1965, in *Saturday Night* in August 1971 and July 1972, and in the *Financial Post* in March 1972. Articles on Cohen appeared in *Maclean's* in October 1966, in *Saturday Night* in February 1968 and June 1969, and in *The Montreal Star* in June 1969. Articles on Atwood appeared in *Saturday Night* in June 1967, March 1971, and November 1972 (the issue's cover story), in the *Montreal Star* in November 1968, in *Maclean's* in August 1969 and September 1972, in *Chatelaine* in October 1972, in *Mademoiselle* in July 1972 and May 1974, in *The Financial Post* in April 1973, in *Toronto Life* in June 1972, in the *Toronto Star* in October 1972, and in *The Globe and Mail* in April 1973. An article about Ondaatje appeared in *Saturday Night* in February 1971. Purdy published poems in *Saturday Night* eight times between February 1967 and September 1973, as well as in *Maclean's* (August 1969) and *Arts/Canada* (December 1971/January 1972). Atwood published poems in *Saturday Night* in June 1967 and October 1968, and in *Maclean's* in August 1969. A selection of Newlove's poems was published in *Maclean's* in April 1968; his "The Pride," first published in *Tamarack Review* in 1965, was re-printed in an expanded version in *Weekend Magazine* in December 1974.
- 2 This was a common paradox in 1960s poetry. A poet such as MacEwen or bissett was politically activist in attempting to persuade the reader of the futility of organized politics.
- 3 Characteristic of Eliot criticism in the 1960s were Hugh Kenner's *The Invisible Poet* (1959, 1960), Herbert Howarth's *Notes on Some Figures behind T.S. Eliot* (1964), George Williams' *A Readers Guide to T.S. Eliot* (1957, 1966), Leonard Unger's *Moments and Patterns in T.S. Eliot* (1966), and various short monographs such as Frye's *T.S. Eliot* (1963). With the exception of Balachandra Rajan's *W.B. Yeats: a Critical Introduction* (1965), Yeats criticism was similarly focused on explication: Jon Stallworthy's *Between the Lines: Yeats' Poetry in the Making* (1963), Amy Stock's *W.B. Yeats: His Poetry and Thought* (1961), and various centennial collections such as Denis Donoghue and J.R. Mulryne's collection *An Honoured Guest: New Essays on W.B. Yeats* (1965).
- 4 "Projective Verse," in *Human Universe* 60. One of the causes of the confused and often contradictory poetics of the decade was the widespread influence of this essay, which variously and conflictingly offered a poetics based on linguistics, on ecology, on a mystification of otherness, and on the metaphysical proposition that art could be the "twin" of life.
- 5 See "Ideas of the Meaning of Form," *Kulchur* I:4 (1961): 61.
- 6 It is against this 1960s background that one should read George Bowering's recent lamenting of the popularity of poetry slams and performance poetries—see the Alexandra Gill, "A Little the Verse for Wear," *Globe and Mail*, 1 January 2003: R1.

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