

Voice of the Nation

Sam Solecki, *The Last Canadian Poet: an Essay on Al Purdy*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999. xvii + 316pp.

The Last Canadian Poet is Sam Solecki's lament for a nation. It is a scrupulous, elegiac essay in which he treats Al Purdy as at once the fulfilment and termination of a stirring but now discredited tradition of nationalist, Canadian Modernism. He is the best and last poet to speak as the "voice of the nation" (171), because he alone succeeded in inhabiting Canada poetically by encompassing its vastness within a generous, imaginative vision. He is "the major and central poet of our experience, the one who has given the strongest, most comprehensive, and most original voice to the country's cultural, historical, and political experiences and aspirations" (10). This judgment relies on an elaborate romantic tradition, as Solecki acknowledges by calling Walt Whitman and Martin Heidegger as witnesses, but its idealistic aspirations, which would knit a fractious country into a sociable whole, clash with the Modernist scepticism that Purdy learned from D.H. Lawrence and W.H. Auden, a scepticism that discovers fragmentation and relativism in the social fabric rather than organic unity. Purdy's main task, in Solecki's view, is to reconcile the Romantic and Modernist impulses in his writing by defining a flexible form of lyric in which the Wordsworthian egotistical sublime casts off first its sublimity, then its egotism, and winds up talking in Purdy's characteristic voice:

I don't mind in the least
being governed from Quebec City
by Canadiens instead of Canadians
in fact the fleur-de-lis
 and maple leaf
are only symbols
and our true language
speaks from inside
the land itself

(168)

Solecki shows that even a casual moment like this one derives from a complex intellectual and moral reckoning. Purdy renounces

national authenticity only to rediscover it as a reward for his humility. Only after we accept that nations are political fictions based on flimsy symbols do those same symbols gain the power to name us. Rejecting the maple leaf on the flag (the language of politics) allows us to hear the maple leaf on the tree (the language of nature: another Wordsworthian trope), but only because Purdy has tapped the tree poetically for us. For both him and Solecki, this is a peculiarly Canadian triumph, in contrast to the barbaric yawp of national destiny heard south of the border.

Yet *The Last Canadian Poet* is not triumphant, and it is sadly appropriate that Purdy should die so soon after the publication of a book that honours him as a Canadian master by consigning him to the past. In what might also serve as a typically Canadian gesture, Solecki snatches defeat from the jaws of victory. He announces that "Purdy's body of work in poetry is as close to a national poem or classic as we have in verse" (4), yet immediately frets that he is doomed to go unappreciated. Solecki follows Dennis Lee's pioneering essay "Running and Dwelling: Homage to Al Purdy" (1972), but he goes far beyond it historically and polemically. He is well aware that Purdy's poised but easygoing style, his kindly nationalism and manly reliance on endurance, reticence and commonsense are unfashionable in an age that prefers the disjunctions of multiculturalism, feminism and postcolonialism, an age that would cringe at the mere mention of a "national proprietorship or national patrimony to be articulated by a national poetic" (39). Purdy gave us a dwelling place that readers no longer care to furnish; now they prefer the "unheimlich." His assurance that the country and its people "are my history / the story of myself / for I am the land / and the land has become me" is far too earnest for postmodern sceptics, who would regard this conflation of self and place not as self-deprecating, but as rapacious. For example, confronted with his modest claim

As much as any place in the world
I claim this snake fence village
of A-burg as part of myself
its dusty roads and old houses
even the garbage dump sliding
its sleazy treasure chest of litter
and malodorous last year valuables
(174-5)

academic critics today would impugn the commanding gaze that takes possession everywhere, even of a garbage heap. Where Purdy seeks a destitute Modernist companionship with Wallace Stevens's man on the dump, who is content with the barest contact with reality as long as it is real, postmodern criticism regards the dump as a valuable site of cultural resistance, a place of rejection and abjection.

Solecki's response to this dilemma is to darken Purdy's hesitant affirmations even further by insisting that he is neither a "neo-Romantic" nor a high Modernist, but an inconclusive blend of the two. His poems "simultaneously express the desire for presence, unity, and totality and show their impossibility except in subjective terms. Almost every poem celebrating and accepting life as it is or enacting / embodying being, also contains a hint of doubt" (211). If this sounds vaguely like a postmodern sensibility (although it also sounds like Thomas Hardy), Solecki has no desire to prove that Purdy was always already postmodern. For Purdy, the pervasive hint of doubt can be redemptive, like the humility that enables him to hear the land talking, but Solecki finds no such redemption for his own argument. On the contrary, he seeks consolation in what Purdy so memorably called "the country of our defeat." In a provocative introductory chapter, he outlines the problem but refuses to solve it beyond noting that, for all their subtlety, Purdy's poetics and politics are no longer in vogue. I find it inconsistent that Solecki should criticize "the soft or postmodern multicultural attitude" for its desire "to politicize culture to make it do the work of identity politics" (24), yet a few pages later should praise Purdy's ability to poeticize politics by giving Canada a tenuous sense of identity. Solecki displays sufficient familiarity with post-structuralist theories but declines to work through or around them, to contest them on their own turf or to defend his own. Instead he briefly describes them at their worst—for which he blames Robert Kroetsch—and contrasts them with Purdy at his best. Given these alternatives, there should be no contest, but instead of proclaiming victory and offering Purdy as a corrective to the theoretical excesses of the last twenty-five years, Solecki unexpectedly concedes defeat. He gives the impression that cultural history unfortunately took a wrong turn, but there is nothing to be done about it, since the standards of Purdy's excellence ensure his eclipse. This was also George Grant's attitude in *Lament for a Nation*. Times have changed and left Purdy to linger in the old anthologies.

After the forty-two page Introduction, Solecki turns with real affection and a fine display of scholarly expertise to Purdy's writing. He offers a clearly-drawn account of Purdy's career based partly on biographical and personal information, but mostly on the testimony of his poems and their developing style, which cumulatively form "an evolving vision, a single poem recording moments of affirmation and questioning, of faith and celebration as well as doubt and near despair" (211). The "Al Purdy" depicted in these pages is thus a projection of his writing as it takes shape through the joint efforts of Purdy the author and Solecki the reader. To regard all of an author's writing as a single poem, and to treat his life as an quest that finds fulfilment in that same grand poem, which simultaneously provides a vision of Canada as a whole, is to get caught up in the mythopoeic imagination that Purdy is so careful to debunk. On the contrary, he refuses to be the hero of his own life, and often presents himself as stumbling unexpectedly, and often undeservedly, into illumination:

I have been stupid in a poem
I will not alter the poem
but let the stupidity remain permanent
as the trees are
in a poem
the dwarf trees of Baffin Island

(101)

Consequently, Solecki must temper his own enthusiasm, for instance when he warns: "to be blunt, many poems simply do not merit serious critical engagement" (47). Nevertheless, *The Last Canadian Poet* tells a remarkable tale about a lanky, self-taught, omnivorous reader from rural Ontario who roams across the country until, after an apprenticeship consisting of "twenty years of failure" (52) during which he is besotted by Bliss Carman but redeemed by D.H. Lawrence—"the single most important literary figure in his work *and* life" (83)—he develops his own "voice" and composes a poetic oeuvre that is "as close to a national poem or classic as we have in verse" (47). The turning point occurs dramatically in 1957 when Purdy and his wife return to Ameliasburg, Ontario, and build their famous A-frame cottage in a creative effort that symbolically also permits "the creation of a poetic voice—an entire prosody—that is almost an echo of his real one, and an aware-

ness that he could write, that he *had* to write, out of his own life, especially his past" (145-6). This is as close as Solecki comes to invoking destiny or succumbing to the Romantic strain in his own sensibility. By balancing British and American influences, and assimilating what he needed from both, Purdy made himself—to adopt a comment that Philip Larkin made of Hardy—Modern but not too Modern. The character that emerges from the poems is also exemplary of the Canadian compromise: he is "eccentric-conventional" (38), a moderate pessimist, a believer who doubts in the midst of belief, a sceptic who believes in the midst of doubt. According to the Canadian conceit, we deserve to be rewarded for our self-effacement.

It is safe to say that *The Last Canadian Poet* is the finest work on Purdy so far, although there is not too much competition—a fact confirming Solecki's claim that Purdy is unfairly neglected. Solecki writes in a clear, fluent style that is a pleasure to read, if we can forgive him the occasional flurry of name-dropping. He has immersed himself in Purdy's words by consulting journals, archives, letters, drafts, and unpublished poems, to all of which he applies a wide knowledge of Modern poetics, ranging from the peculiarities of Canadian publishing; to American influences; to minor writers like G.K. Chesterton, Alfred Noyes and Rudyard Kipling, who continued to impress Purdy; to an international literary setting that extends into eastern Europe. Solecki insists that Purdy is an important Canadian poet because he is also a "first-rate" poet, indeed "the best Canadian poet to have yet appeared," who "can enter without embarrassment the imaginary anthology of international contemporary poetry" (216). Solecki vigorously defends evaluative criticism. He is confident about what makes a poem good ("This is competent but undistinguished"), better ("The poem simply goes soft in style and thought"), or great ("This gem of a poem"), although sometimes it is hard to be sure exactly by what standards he reaches these judgments. He is a sensitive reader who tries to get in tune with a poem rather than to read against the grain. He trusts that a well-crafted poem will reveal "[v]alue, hierarchy, and vision," which are "precisely what the national poet establishes" (35); but he is also attuned to the rhetorical and tonal dissonances through which Purdy "offers nearly contradictory impulses, attitudes, perspective, and philosophies" (103). In a useful Appendix, he annotates the poems for quotations, allusions and echoes, demonstrating

that Purdy has a far greater range than his offhand manner and his public statements might suggest. He was a highly literate man who believed intensely in the power of literature to stir us morally and to join us socially.

Solecki worries that we have lost faith in that humanistic power, and his final statement is a gloomy prediction: "I'm not sure that we will be here as Canadians. A Canadian state may still exist, but it won't be a nation" (218). Much as I admire the art of worrying in Canadian literature, I find that the overall effect of *The Last Canadian Poet* is not so desperate, because it depicts a robust, wise and dedicated writer, who stimulated a lively literary culture, who inspired generations of younger writers, who left a legacy of poems to which we can always return, and who has charmed more than one critic.

Jon Kertzer