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THE CANADIAN LANDSCAPE THROUGH POETRY

VOLUM I



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N E L A B U R E U i R A M O S

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*She had lain there before bivalves began
To catacomb their shells on western mountains. (*9)*

Then, with the humour that T.S. Eliot recommended should be included in every piece of writing however serious its theme might be, E.J. Pratt says that, at first, the 'horde of bipeds that could toil like ants' only 'tickled her with shovels'. However, when dynamite perturbed the monster's sleep that 'had lasted a few seconds of her time', (*10) this dragon awoke in rage and warned the intruders with a trial of her strength:

*(...) the trestles tottered;
Abutments, bridges, broke; her rivers flooded:
She summoned snow and ice, and then fell back
On the last weapon in her armory. (*11)*

But the 'bipeds' continued to move west ignoring her warnings, so the dragon that, by then, was 'in sanguinary mood':

*(...) took three engines, sank them
With seven tracks down through the hidden lake
To the rock bed, then over them she spread
A counterpane of leather- leaf and slime
A warning, that was all for now. 'Twas sleep
She wanted, sleep, for drowsing was her passtime. (*12)*

Like the Laurentian Shield, the mountains with their massive chunks of rock, impressive falls and abysmal canyons, all of them 'leagued against invasion', were a severe challenge that only men who had turned into rock themselves could successfully meet. (*13)

It is in this kind of environment, hard, northern and vital that Pratt places his characters endowing them with almost superhuman faith and courage. Pratt's heroes never shrink back in fear of danger and, in this, he is more Romantic than modern because he is essentially optimistic about man's potential and celebrates progress, strength and resilience instead of brooding on life-destructing forces.

At the risk of digression, it must be pointed out that Pratt belonged to a generation of artists who witnessed two world wars and who, as a result of this appalling experience, set aside the youthful enthusiasm of the Romantics to voice the pessimism of the new age. In Europe, the echoes of the old faith in man's ability to achieve a

more meaningful existence could still be heard, but the dominant mood was one of scepticism about the progress and future of mankind. Romantic poets had generally adopted the role of guides who could provide the right orientation for existence. The most influential modern artists, on the contrary, chose to highlight man's decadence and frustration.

Against this, Pratt's vitality and optimism may seem an anachronism if we do not analyse the social and political climate that dominated Canadian life in the first decades of this century. In an article entitled "The 1920s: E.J. Pratt, Transitional Modern" Sandra Djwa contrasts the aftermath of World War I in Europe and the United States with the effects that the conflict produced in Canada and explains the reasons for the wave of optimism that pervaded Canadian society when peace was restored:

In Europe and in the United States, the reaction to the war had been one of profound disillusionment. But in Canada, despite the appalling casualties of the war, the mood of the post-war years was buoyant. In effect, the war represented a political coming of age. For some of the returning soldiers, there was a sense of

*optimism and hope; and this hope for the future was centered in that which distinguished Canada from older Europe - in the land itself. In effect, they were leaving behind the waste lands of the battlefields of Europe for the fresh, clear, northernland of Canada. (*14)*

Sandra Djwa goes on to say that in this social context poems such as "The Lonely Land"(*15) by A.J.M. Smith (1902-1980), which is a celebration of Canada's rugged beauty, were resonant symbols whereas "The Waste Land" found little or no echo among Canadians. Indeed, Eliot's view that he lived in an age of decline did not reflect the Canadian reality. Canada was rapidly changing from a pioneer to a technological society and the sense of nationhood was stronger than ever. In the literary sphere this wave of nationalism brought with it, as in the times of Confederation, a desire for a truly Canadian literature that would confirm the existence of the new nation. The country demanded a new and virile art worthy of the young and powerful Canadian nationality.

Like the Confederation poets and the painters of the Group of Seven with whom he was associated,

E.J. Pratt realized that Canadian history was an important chapter in a distinct and even a unique human endeavour, the civilisation of northern and Arctic lands and that it was from this landscape that Canadian artists had to make their myths in order to forge a national consciousness. Besides, Pratt was acutely aware of the fact that Canada as a young country lacked the epic phase that enriched older cultures, so he attempted to fill this gap by producing extended treatments of two epic stories- one going back three centuries and involving the physical endurance and religious fervour of the French missionaries martyred by the Iroquois in 1649, and the other belonging to the most immediate past and exploring a secular, even technological subject such as the building of the Canadian Pacific Railway.

However different these subjects may seem, they both recount the battle between man and brute nature which is a central theme in Pratt's poetry. These poems also illustrate the artist's belief that the Canadian landscape offers greater opportunities for living on a grander scale. Like

"Towards the Last Spike", "Brébeuf and his Brethren" is ultimately a celebration of the idealism, martial courage and ancestral honour of the founding fathers of the Canadian nation. However, since religion is a major issue in this narrative there has been much critical discussion over Pratt's view of Brébeuf's faith and martyrdom. Vincent Sharman, for example, has interpreted "Brébeuf and His Brethren" as a veiled attack on a religion that denies the humanity of men by urging its followers to attain salvation through suffering and death. According to Sharman:

*The proper business of men, in Pratt, is the pursuit of life, not death. Brébeuf dies in ignorance of the futility of his ideal. (*16)*

Sharman illustrates his words by highlighting the natives' hostile response to the teachings of the missionaries. For the Indians, the idea of a paradise without game, feasts and tobacco and where friends and enemies must live together, was far from being attractive. Thus, unable to convert the natives with the promise of a Christian heaven, the priests resorted to the concept of

eternal damnation though this threat only increased the hostility of the Indians who became aware of the Jesuits' destructive power and blamed them for whatever misfortune befell the tribe. "Ironically", Sharman says, "the priests' flaming zeal brings forth not warmth from the Indians, but the cold death from burning, pitch, blazing forts and fires at the stake".(*17)

Peter Hunt, on the contrary, argues that Sharman's view "cannot be reconciled with the tone and feeling of the lines in the poem, and it reveals a blindness to Pratt's habitually reverent approach to the Christian ideal".(*18) For Hunt, Pratt's decription of the natives' savagery and the tragic end of the priests must not be seen as "a Prattian barb aimed at Christian missionaries", but simply as a faithful rendering of the sources the poet used and as a means of evoking the religious fervour inspired by the Counter-Reformation.(*19) Hunt also remarks that the task of the Jesuits was not a futile one in spite of their death for new missions were built and the courage and endurance of the martyrs lived in the

minds and hearts of the survivors who continued to tame and humanize the land for future generations.

However meaningful and enlightening these interpretations might be, I believe they distract the reader from what I consider to be the main impulse behind Pratt's poetry. As has already been suggested, Pratt is first and foremost concerned with the affirmation of the land and of its people through the dramatisation of the struggle between Canadians and their physical environment. In "Brébeuf and His Brethern" the destructive power of the natural world is intensified by the brutality of the natives who symbolise the element of risk, danger and destruction of the Canadian wilderness as well as its amoral nature. A letter that Brébeuf sent to France is pithy enough:

*This country is the breeding place of vermin.
Sandflies, mosquitoes haunt the summer months.
In France you may have been a theologian,
A scholar, master, preacher, but out here
You must attend a savage school; for months
Will pass before you learn even to lisp
The language. Here barbarians shall be
Your Aristotle and Saint Thomas. Mute
Before those teachers you shall take your lessons.
What of the winter? Half the year is winter.
Inside your cabins will be smoke so thick*

*You may not read your Breviary for days.
Around your fireplace at mealtime arrive
The uninvited guests with whom you share
Your stint of food. And in the fall and winter,
You tramp unbeaten trails to reach the missions,
Carrying your luggage on your back. Your life
Hangs by a thread. (*20)*

These last words were indeed a premonition for the Iroquois captured the missionaries and tortured them to death:

*Now three o'clock, and capping the height of the passion
Confusing the sacraments under the pines of the forest,
Under the incense of balsam, under the smoke
Of the pitch, was offered the rite of the font. On the head,
The breast, the loins and the legs, the boiling water!
While the mocking paraphrase of the symbols was hurled
At their faces like shards of flint from the arrow heads-
(*21)*

If we set aside religious considerations we may say that, as in "The Shark", "The Titanic" and "Towards the Last Spike", Pratt exults at the spectacle of the awesome beauty and vitality of the wilderness which in "Brébeuf and his Brethren" is represented by the Indians. But the country had to be tamed, its face changed from a non-human to a human face and its energy and fertility directed towards productive good for a community of

peaceful, hard-working men who would mutually help and respect each other. This was the task initiated by the French missionaries and continued by the builders of the transcontinental railway. The former symbolize the spiritual values upon which Canada was built, the latter represent the great achievement of rational man shaping his environment. The history of Canada is condensed and raised to the status of myth in these two narratives which are also important because they reveal the personality and concerns of the author. Pratt was a Christian humanist, in other words, he had a strong faith in man's ability to achieve a more prosperous and meaningful existence, but he also believed that the Christian concept of love was the underlying foundation for action. As Robert Collins remarks:

*Pratt was not a religious poet as such, and his whole hearted admiration for the mission of the Jesuit priests three centuries earlier was based on things other than complaisance with religious orthodoxy. Pratt believed in the central message of Christianity - the love of man for mankind - but he cherished it in its workings, in the nurture and shaping of a civilised society, in the deeds that it inspired of quiet valor. (*22)*

Hence the dynamism and religious overtones in Pratt's narratives. In "Brébeuf and his Brethren" Pratt contrasts the bestiality of the natives with the idealism of the missionaries to suggest that it is through the values displayed by the priests that civilization will progress. Significantly, the emphasis is not on quiet contemplation but on daring activity ennobled by love and sacrifice. "The Titanic" also contains the same message. It bespeaks an artist who is enthusiastic about technological progress but worried about the risk that ethics may not evolve at the same pace so as to control the use man makes of his scientific achievements. Pratt implicitly warns man of his excessive confidence in technology. He also accuses him of superficiality and arrogance by drawing our attention to the luxury of the liner and the pride of its crew who ignore the many radio signals from all around warning of ice. However, Pratt sounds a positive note by stressing the heroism of some men and women who risk their lives to save other passengers. As in "Brébeuf and his Brethren", this suggests that, for Pratt, the ethical sense must be the propelling force of

civilisation even though, sometimes, the ethical act is not compatible with the struggle for survival. For all these reasons, we may say that E.J. Pratt is the voice of the Canadian nation in action, a nation which is moved by high ideals and aspires to become an example to be followed by other peoples.

Significantly, in Pratt's work the Canadian wilderness does not breed sloth and complacency but determination and moral excellence. Pratt's heroes, whether of French or British origin, display these qualities and belong to a race of men ennobled by heroic deeds. Brébeuf was a man of noble ancestry whose extraordinary courage and endurance did not only spring from religious fervour and the wilderness experience but also from racial origins:

*The oath Brébeuf was taking had its root
Firm in his generations of descent.
The family name was known to chivalry-
In the Crusades; at Hastings; through the blood
of the English Howards; called out on the rungs
Of the siege ladders; at the castle breaches;
Proclaimed by heralds at the lists, and heard
In Council Halls:- the coat-of-arms a bull
In black with horns of gold on a silver shield.
So on that toughened pedigree of fibre
Were strung the pledges. From the novice stage*

*To the vow-day he passed on to the priesthood,
And on the anniversary of his birth
He celebrated his first mass at Rouen...(*23)*

In the same way, "Towards the Last Spike" includes many references to the qualities of leadership and physical strength of the race of men who were behind the project of the Canadian railway. The poet chooses to stress the determination of people of Scottish origin such as Prime Minister Macdonald and his associates in spite of the fact that many nationalities were involved in the adventure. Throughout the poem, Pratt makes frequent allusions to the robustness of those who decided to conquer the sleeping dragon of the Canadian space and suggests that such an arduous task would never have been possible without the stamina of northern people. The first reference to their vigour appears in the second section of the poem entitled "The Gathering" which is full of images related to the human body intended to prove that men are made what they are by their food:

*Oatmeal was in their blood and in their names.
Thrift was the title of their catechism.
It governed all things but their mess of porridge
Which, when it struck the hydrochloric acid
With treacle and skim-milk, became a mash.
Entering the duodenum, it broke up
Into amino acids: then the liver
Took on its natural job as carpenter:
Foreheads grew into cliffs, jaws into juts.
The meal, so changed, engaged the follicles:
Eyebrows came out as gorse, the beards as thistles,
And the chest-hair the fell of Grampian rams.
It stretched and vulcanized the human span:
Nonagenarians worked and thrived upon it.
Out of such chemistry run through by genes,
The food released its fearsome racial products:-
The power to strike a bargain like a foe,
To win an argument upon a burr,
Invest the language with a Bannockburn (*24)*

Apart from adding another touch of fine humour to the story, the aim of this surprising description of the intestinal workings of the men who made the project possible is, as A.J.M. Smith remarks, to endow these people with the same qualities of the paleolithic beast they had to bring into subjection:

The images here are not mainly pictorial, nor are they intended to be decorative. They are functional and while they suggest forcefully the characters of the men whose interior workings are so vividly laid before us, they are means not ends. The analogies not only are, they act. What they do is powerfully create a metaphorical identity between these rock-like Scottish financiers and engineers and the

*hardness and toughness of their antagonist nature. (*25)*

Further references to the daring character of the Scottish Canadians who were involved in the construction of the railway appear in the poem when, after many parliamentary debates and sleepless nights, John Macdonald decided that 'there was enough strychnine in their names / to make flip a penny for the risk'.(*26) And when the last spike was finally laid after innumerable vicissitudes which included a rebellion of prairie Indians, Pratt concludes the narrative saying that 'The breed had triumphed after all'.(*27) The land route which united the Canadian provinces was completed and the protagonists of this epic enterprise were lifted to the stature of heroes by the power of poetry.

However, E.J. Pratt's decision to make the Scots the heroes of his story was criticised by other artists such as F.R. Scott who, in a poem entitled "All the Spikes but the Last", accused Pratt of having forgotten the numerous workers of

Asiatic origin who contributed to the success of the enterprise:

*Where are the coolies in your poem, Ned?
Where are the thousands from China who swung
their picks with bare hands at forty below?
(...)
Did they fare so well in the land they helped to
unite? Did they get one of the 25.000.000 acres? (*28)*

This accusation is well founded because Pratt only devotes a few lines to the Chinese labourers in the passage that describes the laying of tracks around the Fraser Canyon. However, Pratt's choice can be understood and justified if we bear in mind that he was first and foremost concerned with the stirring of national pride. This feeling could hardly have been elicited if he had made the Chinese the heroes of his story. Canada was founded by two nationalities, the French and the British, the two communities Pratt celebrates in his epic narratives. This is part of the poet's achievement; he fused the two Canadas imaginatively into one nation where the power of a northern landscape is matched by the stature of its people.

Pratt's fascination with force and magnitude, with extreme situations and heroism in the face of death, only make sense if we relate them to the country that inspired his poems. Like the Confederation poets, Pratt takes the wilderness with him when he writes and his poetry is marked by intense affirmation. However, he speaks with an idiom which is perhaps more appropriate to the Canadian landscape than the language used by the Confederation artists. Indeed, if the Canadian wilderness had a voice it would certainly sound like that of E.J. Pratt.

Modern Canadian poetry is also indebted to the work of Confederation artists and to the writings of those who, like Pratt, chose to highlight the savage beauty of the wilderness and the energy it injects into the mind and body of its dwellers. Part of John Newlove's poetic production and Miriam Waddington's prairie pieces have already been analysed as belonging to this positive vein in the body of Canadian literature. However, since we are here concerned with the North, I have chosen Al Purdy's work, especially

the poems contained in North of Summer, to illustrate the idea that the basic themes and philosophy of the Confederation poets and E.J. Pratt are still present in the work of modern writers. Al Purdy offers us the interesting experience of seeing the myth of the North from the perspective of a modern sensibility.

THE NORTH : CHAPTER FIVE. NOTES

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CHAPTER SIX

THE NORTH REVISITED: AL PURDY

Al Purdy's themes and attitudes are unmistakably Canadian. His concern for landscape and its effect on people, his interest in history as a means of achieving self-definition as well as his desire to offer a more positive vision of the relationship between Canadians and their physical environment prove that Canada is the home and inspirational source of this contemporary artist born in Wooler, Ontario in 1918.

Al Purdy is an autodidact and, as is true with most self-taught writers, he is also a voracious reader. The Canadian critic George Woodcock offers us an interesting insight into the poet's personality:

*I met him (...) and realised that we shared a total absence of any original connection with academe and all it meant. We were both autodidacts, omnivorous readers, furious generalists, restless travellers, maverick radicals, gluttons for variety of experience, interested in the assemblage of every kind of apparent irrelevancy. We were amateur historians, backyard philosophers, jacks-of-many-trades who had built houses with our own hands and learnt what we knew by our own efforts. (*1)*

Before turning to poetry for a living after the publication of The Enchanted Echo (1944), his first volume of poetry, Al Purdy drifted through occasional occupations such as running a little taxi business in Belleville, Ontario, working in various factory jobs and driving freight lorries across the country. This last job was especially enriching for the poet because his frequent trips to different regions of Canada as well as to Japan and South America have allowed him to write of many different places and people with the

authority of those writers who authenticate their work through a first-hand knowledge of the places they describe.

Prominent among Purdy's descriptions of places and of the people who inhabit them are those of the province of Ontario where the poet was born and where, after a period of travelling, he decided to settle. Some of his best-known poems are located in his birthplace near the eastern end of Lake Ontario and in the area around Ameliasburg, a small town on Roblin Lake where he and his wife built their home in 1957. The spartan landscapes of his native land constitute the heart of Purdy's emotional world as he explains in the the poem "My Grandfather's Country":

*and if I must commit myself to love
of any one thing
it will be here in the red glow
where failed farms sink back into earth
the clearings join and fences no longer divide
where the running animals gather their bodies together
and pour themselves upward
into the tips of falling leaves
with mindless faith that presumes future. (*2)*

His homeland is further described in "The Country North of Belleville" included in the volume The Cariboo Horses which won him the Governor General's Award in 1955. In this poem, the artist writes about 'A country of quiescence and still distance' where most of the original loyalist hamlets disappeared when their inhabitants moved south in search of better living conditions. The poet remembers the landscape of his childhood where farmers strove:

*to make room
enough between trees
for a wife
and maybe some cows and
room for some
of the more easily kept illusions*

and contrasts it with the present one where:

*Old fences drift vaguely away among the trees
a pile of moss-covered stones
gathered for some ghost purpose
has lost meaning under the meaningless sky
they are like cities under water
and the undulating green waves of time
are laid on them. (*3)*

The poem is pervaded by the sense of love and fear, of acceptance and rejection that characterises the Canadians' ambivalent response to nature. The harshness of the Ontario farmlands is conveyed through a detailed description of the place and also through references to the exodus of young people who, like the poet in his own youth, have left the land because they are 'unwilling to know what their fathers know/ or think the words their mothers do not say'. However, the emotional links between Al Purdy and this 'lakeland rockland and hill country/ a little adjacent to where the world is' are so deeply woven that he keeps on returning, both physically and imaginatively, to the world of his childhood which he describes as 'the same/ red patch mixed with gold'.(*4)

In the Summer of 1965 Purdy received his second Canada Council Fellowship (he obtained the first in 1960) and decided to spend some weeks among the Eskimos of Baffin Island. During an interview, Al Purdy explained to the poet Gary Geddes that he did not go to the Arctic in search

of inspiration to write poetry but simply because he was interested in the North, in its landscape and people. The poems came afterwards. However, later on, during the same interview the poet recognized:

*If you write poems, your mind just knowingly or unknowingly casts around for subjects all the time. I don't think a poet is ever not looking for subjects. (*5)*

Whatever his reasons were, Purdy's trip to the Arctic and his stay among the Eskimos crystallised in North of Summer (1967), a book of poems that offers an interesting and comprehensive poetic account of Canada's northern land and its inhabitants. (*6) In North of Summer Al Purdy reproduces the particulars of the Arctic landscape and unveils the land's historical and archeological deposits bringing the reader into sympathy with the people and culture that are native to the region. But, above all, Purdy recreates the myth of the North as a reservoir of spiritual and moral values and a departure point for mystical experience.

This combination of physicality and transcendence in Al Purdy's poetry accounts for the artist's frequent shifts of tone, subject and perspective that characterise the volume. Purdy is sometimes ironic and self-mocking when he describes his physical experiences in the North, but his idiom becomes serious and elevated whenever the limpid atmosphere of the Arctic becomes the subject of the poet's meditations. The critic Dennis Lee refers to Purdy's constant change of style in the following terms:

*Purdy gives us a day to day world that is unmistakably the cranky, suffering, shade-of gray place we inhabit. But at the same time he gives us a recurrent experience which keeps breaking through in moments of epiphany. It's what theologians call the "mysterious tremendum" the encounter with the holy otherness, to which an appropriate response is awe, joy, terror and gratitude. (*7)*

Al Purdy seems to move easily from one world to the other, but the reader has the impression that he continuously resists the impulse of mysticism and that he masks his moments of insight with defensive irony to warn those who are tempted to see his work through excessively serious

lenses. He seems to be reluctant to give special importance to his ecstatic moments as well as the exploratory nature of his work as if he felt embarrassed to acknowledge his interest in a dimension about which our mechanized and rationalistic society is apparently suspicious. During an interview and in answer to the question whether poetry was, in his case, a way of achieving self disclosure, Al Purdy answered:

*Jesus Christ, that's an awful question! I've no idea. I like to write poetry; I get a kick out of writing poems. I suppose to a limited degree it does explore my own experience, but if anybody else was looking, they would deny that the poem described it, I expect, particularly my wife. I write poetry because I like to write poetry. It's much like getting drunk once in a while, especially if you write something you like. Exploring one's own experience sounds like such a terrible way to describe a simple thing like writing a poem. Doesn't it though? (*8)*

One can't help suspecting that behind these words there is a desire on the part of the poet to minimize the introspective character of his work, a suspicion that becomes a conviction as we move deeper into his poetry and realise that he not only proposes self-revision but opens a window

into a luminous dimension which is far removed from the limits of the concrete reality to which he so stubbornly clings.

The poems in North of Summer should be analysed as a sequence, a progression that is indicative of the poet's transformation. For this reason, the first piece that must be brought into focus is "The North West Passage" because it constitutes the departure point of the poet's journey.

The first lines defeat the expectations of those for whom the title announces mysterious and thrilling experiences or, perhaps, a romanticised account of the early explorers' deeds and fate. Instead of this, we find the poet bored in Frobisher waiting for the departure of the plane that will take him further north:

THE NORTH WEST PASSAGE

is found

*needs no more searching
and for lack of anything better to do
waiting the plane's departure north from Frobisher
I lounge on the bed poring over place names
on maps*

backwards in search of roots and self-definition. Like Robert Kroetsch, Eli Mandel and John Newlove, Purdy seems to need the past to fuel him forward, if only imaginatively. In "The North West Passage" he chooses the time dominated by the quest for a North Atlantic route to Asia, perhaps to remind the reader that some of the most daring episodes in Canadian history are related to the northern wilderness and that its exploration still constitutes the core of the Canadian experience. Perhaps Purdy's intention is also to assert his 'Canadianness' by journeying to a region that has a strong emotional appeal to all Canadians although the casual and ironic tone the artist adopts may sometimes deflate his intentions. Indeed, in "The North West Passage" the poet evokes the past with irony but also with tenderness and this attitude suggests that his humorous treatment of Canadian history is born out of love rather than bitterness or cynicism.

The other interesting idea contained in the first lines of "The North West Passage" is the comparison the poet establishes between his trip

and that of Martin Frobisher, William Baffin or Benjamin Franklin. We immediately perceive that Purdy is more interested in drawing our attention to the differences rather than the similarities between his own voyage and the expeditions of these explorers. Frobisher and Franklin had ventured into the polar region to find a way out of it, a passage that could take them to the riches of the Orient. For them, the Arctic was an impenetrable and mysterious land that ultimately defeated them. In another poem, Purdy refers to these people as:

*(...) boozy traders
lost in a dream of money
crews of homesick seamen
moored to a China vision
hunting the North West Passage (*10)*

For Purdy, however, the North is a destination and by no means a frightening one to judge by the poet's mood and thoughts as he waits for his flight. Al Purdy simply pores over a map of the Arctic and wonders what he will have to eat, thereby implying that his journey lacks the mystery and excitement that accompanied early

expeditions. He even goes further than this and suggests that the Arctic is no longer the treacherous enemy that wrought havoc on Franklin's crew but an environment threatened by modern technology. In the Arctic, man is no longer at the mercy of nature but nature is constantly menaced by man's intrusion as the following lines suggest:

*Locate the Terror and Erebus that way
Franklin's ships preserved in ice
with no place-names for them
it'd be much to close to hell
and the big jets might take a wrong turn
skimming over the top of the world
or the ICBM computers make a quarter inch error
and destroy the illusion of paradise by mistake. (*11)*

The explorers' experience of the Arctic as a frozen hell contrasts with Purdy's reference to powerful jets and ICBM computers that emphasize the fragility and vulnerability of the region. The roles are reversed.

This contrast between how things used to be and how they are now, together with the poet's frequent references to the prosaic nature of his

journey and the ironic stance he adopts towards his subject, might make us think that Al Purdy sets out to destroy the myth of the North as a land of promise instead of recreating it. However, the analysis of other poems included in North of Summer will reveal that Al Purdy's trip to the Arctic turned out to be far more enriching than he expected or led us to believe in this first composition.

The first signs that the northern wilderness is a catalyst of change that involves growth towards maturity and a sharpened understanding of self and other creatures appear in poems that describe the Arctic environment and its impact on the mind of the artist.

Al Purdy goes from Montreal to Frobisher, Frobisher to Pangnirtung, Pangnirtung to Brown's Harbour and the Kikastaan islands in Cumberland Sound. In other words, he moves from a familiar landscape to an alien one of encompassing silence and dimness. The exuberant vegetation of his native Ontario with tall 'maples waving green' and

elegant 'oaks in autumn gold' is replaced by a frozen desert with a few dwarf willows the poet sees as a base and grotesque manifestation of life. He is, at first, repelled by the sight of these trees:

*Crawling under rocks
grovelling among the lichens
bending and curling to escape
making themselves small*

and calls them:

*Coward trees
(...)
not proud of what they are
bowing to weather instead
careful of themselves
worried about the sky
afraid of exposing their limbs
like a Victorian married couple. (*12)*

This diatribe against the small and stunted Arctic willows may symbolize the arrogance of the traveller who refuses to see other lands and creatures on their own terms. The Arctic, however, soon dissipates this pride and the poet begins to observe the trees from a different and more