

Should a poet own a purple cow? Al Purdy has Wild Grape Wine

By BILL PASNAK

Al Purdy's new book, *Wild Grape Wine* should be a delight to those optimists who read Canadian literature, both as a Canadian pastime and as a simple pursuit of literature.

Mr. Purdy's poetry is distinctive-ly Canadian; that is, it could not have been written any place but

Canada. Take for example the poem "John Diefenbaker":

*Defeated now of course
another man elected to power
his ex-ministers wrangle among
themselves
slap hands on the desks in the
House of Commons
under the Peace Tower under the
carillon bells*

*hunched over the shoulders of
parliamentary clerks
brute-faced behind the little page
boys
the bright-thewed river and its
pulpwood burden
nudges its load to the shore and
moves eastward*

However, those who look to Purdy for a national poet will be disappointed. Although his subjects are primarily Canadian, the themes behind his work rise above such a narrow restriction into a realm at once more personal and more universal. We can see this in the last lines of "The Wine-Makers Beat-Etude":

*suddenly
I become the whole damn
feminine principle so
happily noticing little tendrils
of affection
steal out from each to each
unshy honest encompassing
golden calves in Israel and slum
babies in Canada and
a millionaire's brat left squalling
on the toilet seat in
Rockerfeller Center*

*O my sisters
I give purple milk!*

The reference to purple milk will be obscure to those who have not read the poem (Purdy is talking to a herd of cows while picking wild grapes to make wine, hence the title of the book) but the personal feeling is still there.

In fact, if there is a Purdy hallmark, it is this strong personality which comes through in all his work. After reading this book, one comes to know Mr. Purdy very well. He makes no attempt to create an image for himself, or to stand apart from his art. He writes what he is himself, and any effort to separate the man from the work is both pointless and futile.

This is a quality which many of today's poets would do well to emulate, if they could. As a result of this, these poems are appealingly unassuming. Unfortunately, this same quality of intense personal involvement is the cause of Mr. Purdy's major poetic downfall.

Inconsistency is a fault usually reserved for beginners or erratic geniuses. Mr. Purdy cannot be excused as a novice, nor has it been proven that he is a genius. Nevertheless, his work ranges wildly from excellent to merely mediocre. This is evident in the last lines of "Is This The Man?":



Al Purdy in Room at the Top—Photos by Jim Bratvold

*No doubt the Minister of Trade
and Commerce
and the Minister of External
Aff. & Transport
and the Minister of Economic
Integration with the u.s.
are all honest and some
bilingual
but the cost in time and money
comes high to find the man I'm
looking for
and none here seems remotely
capable
of running the affairs of my small
village of Ameliasburg
when the reeve retires next
month*

Now, understandably, these lines suffer. They have been taken out of context, but it is a context which I am afraid gives them little more value than they have here. Compare the above with the following lines, chosen at random from "My Grandfather's Country", one of the masterpieces of this book:

*Of course other things are also
marvellous
sunsets happen if the atmospheric
conditions are right
and the same goes for a blue sky
—there are deserts like great*

*yellow beds of flowers
where a man can walk and walk
into identical distance
like an arrow lost in its own
target*

One feels that Purdy is missing some editorial sense, that he cannot discriminate between the good and the bad when it comes to his own work.

This review would not be complete if I did not make some comment on Mr. Purdy's sense of humour. It is refreshingly ironic, as in this excerpt from "Love at Roblin Lake":

*My ambition as I remember and
I always remember was always
to make love vulgarly and
immensely
as the vulgar elephant doth
& immense reptiles did
in the open air openly
sweating and grunting
together
and going
"BOING BOING BOING"
making
every lunge a hole in the great
dark
for summer cottagers to fall into
at a later date*



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