

# Alfred in Baffin Land: Carnival Traces in Purdy's *North of Summer*

by John Van Rys

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*I am but mad north-northwest: when the wind is southerly I know a hawk from a handsaw.* Hamlet, II, ii, 387-388.

## I

In his lengthy study of the voluminous works of François Rabelais, and in reference to the voyages of the illustrious Pantegruel, Mikhail Bakhtin comments on the seventeenth-century voyages of Jacques Cartier to the New World. "Cartier's itinerary," he writes, "was also the famous legendary route to hell and paradise. This northwestern route was enveloped in Celtic lore."<sup>1</sup> Bakhtin's reference to Old World exploration of the northwestern New is a telling one. For the many voyagers who sought the Northwest Passage to Cathay, visions of paradise were exchanged for the reality of a frozen Arctic hell. What is now known as Canada was for them the land God gave to Cain, a world whose name translated from the Portuguese means 'Nobody is here.'<sup>2</sup> In July and August of 1965, Al Purdy journeyed to the Arctic in search of poems. Purdy's trip resulted in the 1967 publication of *North of Summer: Poems from Baffin Island*. These poems trace the poet's voyage to a Bakhtinian carnival world both hell and paradise. The volume is filled with forms and tropes deriving from carnival culture as Bakhtin describes it, a culture embodying a serio-comical vision of the world. These Arctic poems create an upside down and inside out world where protean shape changes become possible. Baffin Land becomes a site of renewal and revision, revision of accepted cultural norms and of the poet himself.

Bakhtin's discussions of carnival, found predominantly in *Rabelais and His World* but also in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* and the essays of *The Dialogic Imagination*, rival in length his discussions of dialogism. Carnival culture, in fact, offers Bakhtin an historical example of the forces of dialogism at work. The following passage from *Rabelais and His World* encapsulates Bakhtin's much broader thinking concerning carnival:

During the century-long development of medieval carnival, prepared by thousands of years of ancient comic ritual, including the primitive Saturnalia, a special idiom of forms and symbols was evolved—an extremely rich idiom that expressed the unique complex carnival experience of

the people. This experience, opposed to all that was ready-made and completed, to all pretense at immutability, sought a dynamic expression; it demanded ever changing, playful, undefined forms. All the symbols of the carnival idiom are filled with this pathos of change and renewal, with the sense of the gay relativity of prevailing truths and authorities. We find here a characteristic logic, the peculiar logic of the 'inside out' (*a l'envers*), of the 'turnabout,' of a continual shifting from top to bottom, from front to rear, of numerous parodies and travesties, humiliations, profanations, comic crownings and uncrownings. A second life, a second world of folk culture is thus constructed; it is to a certain extent a parody of the extracarnival life, a 'world inside out.' We must stress, however, that the carnival is far distant from the negative and formal parody of modern times. Folk humor denies, but it revives and renews at the same time. Bare negation is completely alien to folk culture.'<sup>3</sup>

Bakhtin emphasizes that carnival as an expression of folk consciousness is unofficial, and such unofficial expression seeks continually to dialogize official thought and culture, all that is sanctioned by various forms of power and authority. Debasing and renewing laughter, a world upside down and continually in the act of becoming, the overturning of all that is monologic and static—these underlie the carnival idiom that writers have for centuries appropriated for literary purposes.

The margins of *North of Summer* reveal Purdy's participation in this folk culture. The thirty-two poems found here are prefaced by eight A.Y. Jackson oil sketches of Baffin Island and are followed by a prose postscript and explanatory notes to the poems. On the surface, these indicators suggest a somewhat official volume of poetry, but a second look at these texts as well as at letters and a longer prose piece ("North of Summer: Arctic Poems and Prose by A.W. Purdy") published in the Hudson Bay Company journal *Beaver* hint at the carnival undercurrents flowing through the volume. In the postscript to the volume, Purdy reveals his initial carnival intentions, admitting, "At one time I intended to call the book 'Dogsong.' But I changed my mind. After the way those dogs treated me I wouldn't give them the satisfaction."<sup>4</sup> Purdy's first impulse is to label the volume with a very unpoetic title; he wishes to suggest with the title *Dogsong* the unofficial quality of these northern poems, their upside down and inside out logic, their participation in and exploration of life's underside: the poems, the proposed title indicates, are infected with the song of these carnival brutes. Moreover, the treatment to which Purdy refers suggests his own degradation and comic carnival uncrowning in the poems. In the *Beaver* article, Purdy makes

explicit the debasing activities of these Arctic huskies:

Dogs congregated around the tent, fought major wars and minor battles, whined and cried like people. At intervals the dogs all howled together, beginning with a tentative wavering tremolo, rapidly swelling into Tom O'Bedlam's song of an arctic madhouse. I'd wake in the night thinking they were trying to get into the tent. The sound of running circling footsteps, thudding against the canvas, breaking two guy ropes on one occasion, urinating over the entrance flaps. . .

I didn't appreciate it. When I saw the dark dog bodies inside the white canvas, I'd scream and howl with calculated rage in an effort to discourage them. And couldn't. I think they must have loved me.<sup>5</sup>

Purdy's carnival humiliation, his uncrowning at the hands (or paws) of these dogs (suggested by the shower of urine and the howling as a serio-comical expression of love), foregrounds an inversion of poetic expectations and norms, a reversal central to the volume as a whole. Indeed, this Bedlam song sung in a northern madhouse, this "vibrating lunacy" of these "hungry howling crapping huskies of Kikastan"<sup>6</sup> offers a carnival paradigm for the poems themselves, a paradigm where truths are played with by comical madness, where the official view of the Canadian Arctic is redefined from the perspective of its parodic and profane underside.

A letter to George Woodcock, written in the Arctic and dated 21 August 1965, indicates in more detail Purdy's initial plans concerning the volume that would appear two years later: "At Pang I had an old Eskimo do a bunch of drawings with the idea of including them in a prospective book of northern poems, called: DOGSONG—Poems from Baffin Land. I prefer 'Baffin Land' to the customary 'Baffin Island'."<sup>7</sup> Purdy does not explain his preference for "Baffin Land" over "Baffin Island," but his yoking of this preference with "Dogsong" in the title does suggest a carnival impulse behind his choice. Baffin Island for Purdy is a poetic Wonderland, a world governed by gay (ambivalent) relativity, by shape changes and illogic; travelling to Baffin Land at the top of the world, the poet participates in the alternate life of this inside out underworld. Moreover, Purdy's desire to use the Eskimo drawings in conjunction with the poems indicates that his motivations centre around the people native to the north, around the cultural forms and idiom indigenous to Baffin Land. His impulses propel him to shape the volume into an expression of folk consciousness. In another letter to Woodcock, Purdy expresses his hesitation about the Jackson sketches. 'They don't fit,' he

writes, "not the way I feel or talk," but the often broke poet adds resignedly, "what the hell, they'll sell books I guess."<sup>8</sup> Sometime between August 1965 and late 1966, the Eskimo drawings were replaced by the Jackson oil sketches, Baffin Land returned to Baffin Island, and *Dogsong* became the more poetic *North of Summer*. Purdy never fully explains the reasons for these changes: a tension between poetic and carnival elements is apparent in the volume's very publication.

If we turn to the poems themselves, we discover that the contents of the volume constitute a poetic journey in carnival form. The poet's voyage takes him from an urban to a hinterland world. Travelling from Montreal to Frobisher, Frobisher to Pangnirtung, Pangnirtung to Brown's Harbour and on to the Kikastan Islands in Cumberland Sound, Purdy moves consistently further to the world's edge and further away from his own cultural matrix.

The poet drops down onto a Baffin Island once named Meta Incognita, the world beyond even the unknown. Through this carnival voyage, we enter with the poet a world of the strange and marvellous, a Baffin Island repeatedly seen as Baffin Land. With the poet, we cross a carnival threshold into an upside down underworld, a world where our rightside up southern attitudes, our essentially Old World monologisms, are uncrowned and laughed at, exposed as arbitrary, limited, and static. Official laws are swept aside to make way for change and renewal. The prevailing southern ethos of poet and reader alike is put to the test by this fluid Wonderland. Like Alice, Alfred falls into a world where he struggles to locate himself, where his wonder and confusion are mixed. The poet discovers dwarf trees above the tree line, rhododendrons in the Arctic, "the court of the Seal-King."<sup>9</sup> He inhabits an in between world, one "north of the treeline south of the pole"(41) where "Ice castles drift by in the sunlight! blue and turquoise magic! moulded and shaped by water"(40). He travels "a luring Hyperborean ocean"(73), both of the extreme north and of a race living in a land of sunshine and plenty beyond the north wind.

Indeed, the poet's journey to Baffin Land renews his childhood wonder; book knowledge takes on flesh and blood, and long held preconceptions are dialogized by actual experience. He writes in the volume's postscript, "I enjoyed myself tremendously. Everything about the north was new and strange to me, despite having read about it in books beforehand."<sup>10</sup> Purdy emphasizes repeatedly his sense of dislocation alongside his elation, a dislocation which opens him to the inverted wisdom of the Arctic, and he enacts this dislocation in poem after poem. "The Turning Point" initiates this journey with the poet's plane trip into a reversed world: "Over northern Canada! daylight ahead and growing!

behind only darkness! at 2:30 in the morning"(18). He proceeds in the poem to further map this journey into a carnivalized world:

The full shape of the Arctic moves  
under us and flows  
into quiet islands and swinging coastlines  
blue seas reflecting our tiny aeroplane  
the runaway world upside down  
and no god of chaos to lift one hand  
and make the place behave (18)

Entering an inverted world, the southern poet finds himself dwarfed by a landscape in continual flux, a world embodying in its very geography change and playful relativity. The poet comes to inhabit a fluid landscape, moving and flowing and swinging, an upside down world that like a child refuses to be bounded and ordered.

Moreover, Purdy repeatedly models his own journey on the centuries long search for the Northwest Passage. The poet's New World journey takes the shape of the Old World's search for paradise and repeated discovery of hell, but in the poet's carnival version hell and paradise become reversed and conjoined. The voyages of Martin Frobisher and William Baffin, of Edward Parry and John Franklin were all driven by the search for Cathay; these men were "moored to a China-vision"(79). In these poems, the poet joins Cathay and hell in his own exploration, If we return to "The Turning Point," we sense this voyage as a search for the Northwest Passage:

we're lost  
entombed in wool blankets  
and go whispering thru nothingness  
without sun or moon  
human instruments haywire  
But we find another world  
a few minutes later  
with snow-streaked hills down there  
that must be Baffin Island

A club-shaped word  
a land most unlike Cathay or Paradise  
but a place the birds return to  
a name I've remembered since childhood  
in the first books I've read (19)

Descending into an underworld, the poet discovers a Cathay of childhood imagination. He enters a world where human instruments malfunction, where technology cannot follow. Furthermore, he dares to suggest in these lines that this Arctic world that proved a

hell for explorers is in fact paradise, the Cathay sought for centuries. Rethinking official accounts of Arctic exploration, the poet discovers an inside out world instead of an Arctic wasteland.

The poem entitled "The North West Passage" provides us with the poet's fullest treatment of these carnival juxtapositions. Here, the poet's voyage takes shape as a parody of historical exploration. We find the bored poet in Frobisher lounging before dinner and poring over a map of the Arctic, finding in place names the residue of exploration. The poet's first words suggest that the passage "is found! needs no more searching"(20). He himself is a latecomer, an after-the-fact explorer. The poem enacts instead his carnival journey for the passage. He goes ". . . rocking thru history! in search of dead sailors! suspended from Ariadne's quivering cord"(20). The poet's passage is imaginative and involves an inversion of accepted laws of space and time. He fuses discourses of past and present:

Locate the Terror and Erebus that way  
Franklin's ships preserved in ice  
with no place-names for them  
it'd be much too 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 (20-2 1)

Franklin's ships, significantly named Terror and Erebus, suggest to the poet a hellish world, but at the same time the poet fears the destruction of this illusion of paradise by modern technology. Purdy uses the search for the Northwest Passage as a model for his own imaginative search; he plays with the similarities in order to suggest the differences. Again, the poet dares to reverse the common version of the Arctic as wasteland. Indeed, in the volume's final poem, "The Country of the Young," Purdy makes this variation on a theme explicit. The poem invites us to see the Arctic wonderland anew, to see what others with their Old World perspective have missed. Explorers, ". . . . boozy traders! lost in a dream of money" and "homesick seamen," failed to make the poet's discovery, namely his discovery of northern colours, ". . . the original colour-matrix! that after a giant's heartbeat! lighted the maple forests! in the country south"(79). In a country both old and young, the poet discovers origins; he discovers an unofficial Arctic in the carnival yoking of Cathay and hell at this northern edge of the world.

The poems in *North of Summer*, moreover, offer what Bakhtin would call a parodic reprocessing of Homeric epic, a

carnivalization of epic forms and conventions. The poet's search for the passage simultaneously reproduces an epic world and turns that world upside down. Broadly conceived, these poems pick and choose from all elements in Homer; more narrowly, however, they focus on *The Odyssey*, the travels of Odysseus, and specifically his journey into the underworld. These carnival parallels are wide sweeping. As in *The Odyssey*, the poet is concerned with questions of wandering and homecoming, of exile and return. Like Odysseus, the poet hops from island to island meeting strange peoples: we inhabit a world of the sea's depths and the shore where life itself depends on conventions of hospitality. Specific references and parallels are extant in the poems. We hear repeatedly the poet's tongue-in-cheek references to the Arctic being cold as hell, references to Franklin's ship *Erebus* and others with names such as *Fury*, *Hecla*, and *Terror*. These northern poems emphasize the poet's descent into an underworld of Inuit cemeteries, rock cairns, and tent rings, of vanished Dorsets, Skraelings, and Thules. The "noble eskimo youth" of the mock-epic "When I sat down to Play the Piano" is for the poet an "avatar of Olympian excellence," "Zeus in the Arctic dog pound"(44). In "Canso," one-eyed Sedna, "mother of all sea mammals"(34), offers a carnival parallel to the Cyclops. Moreover, the poet's tent home is repeatedly likened to a cave, offering a parallel to the caves of the Cyclops and Calypso. "Still Life in a Tent" finds the poet "In a cave hollowed out in the rain] near a pile of ghostly groceries"(47); in his feverish state, he contemplates the "seal towns! of Erewhon and Atlantis"(47) and journeys to the Seal-King's court; when the fever leaves his body, "the huskies bark like hell"(49). The elements of Homeric epic are loosely knit together in this fantastic imaginative journey there and back again.

Purdy's poems constitute, in addition, a carnivalized version of epic heroism. Rather than Odysseus of the nimble wits we have the confused poet. While Odysseus' disguises allow him to test people and gain his revenge, the poet's masks cover instead a fully ambivalent identity. The poet *is* Nobody, but a carnivalized version of the clever Odyssean Nobody. He is continually caught in unheroic, debasing postures: lounging before dinner, defecating among hungry huskies, washing clothes, urinating into the ocean. "Odysseus in Kikastan" provides a paradigm of this carnival overturning of epic heroism and specifically of Odyssean travel. Written as Purdy journeyed from Brown's Harbour, which he had mentally renamed "Slaughter Beach,"<sup>11</sup> to the Kikastan Islands, it provides an immediate parallel for Odysseus' many escapes from horrific experiences. Punctuated with reversals of epic voyaging and hospitality, the poem exposes the comical underside of Odyssean heroism. We find the mariner poet between islands, leaving behind slaughter "with 3 days beard and a hangover! from

drinking so much hot tea! and being hospitable if it chokes me"(40). When offered yet another cup, the poet refuses by making a carnival grimace; everybody shares in the laughter. "And for some sad reason I'm happy," says the poet, "lounging lazily on the gunwales! a sort of creative doing nothing! that I make a specialty of"(40). Here we find a very un-Odyssean poet indeed, both sad and happy, inactive but creative. He goes on in the poem to flip flop any pretense at epic seriousness in his contemplation of icebergs:

And you almost expect a sign  
    'Castles for Sale  
        Apply at Circe's Island'  
They come equipped with obsolete plumbing  
and Franklin's ghost behind the stairs  
but the most delicate dripping music  
mermaids dreaming of being human  
an all-girl orchestra's tinkling flutes  
on Jonesee's Mediterranean Cruises maybe  
What do you say Odysseus  
    what do you say?  
If sirens sing on the Arctic islands  
they come equipped with a pair of flippers  
blubber lips for drinking tea  
they sport a set of real false whiskers  
and a cold cold bed on the floor of the sea  
but they're shy of strangers  
and their singing teacher  
never taught them to hit high C (41)

Epic seriousness is deflated by carnival laughter; the epic world is thoroughly domesticated as the Odyssean travels are transformed into the tourist cruise and real estate scheme. Epic nymphs and goddesses take on carnival flesh; the enchanting song of the sirens becomes the oinking of seals. As the poet shifts from these thoughts, he offers a fully carnivalized version of the many arrivals and homecomings in *The Odyssey*:

        But we haul our freight to Kikastan Harbour  
        north of the treeline south of the pole  
        the lord mayor dressed in his best new parka  
        come down to the beach with a big hello  
        six white whales dance through a seaweed  
    harbour  
        and several thousand cordial dogs  
        plus an Eskimo official greeter  
        (it must be old home week by god)  
        and a guy with a CBC loudspeaker  
        who wants me to say a few words but not  
        unless I happen to be John Diefenbaker



— which is rather confusing so I explain  
that I'm only Odysseus after all  
only Odysseus after all

Well I join the Eskimo Stevedore's Union  
we pack our luggage up from the sea  
Now I'm hard at work on a new translation  
of Homer's Odyssey Arctic-fashion  
but Jonesee invites me over for tea

— and that's what happened (41-42)

*North of Summer* translates *The Odyssey* into an Arctic carnival double, as is suggested in these very lines where the return of the epic hero, undercut by comic rhyme, takes the form of a canine greeting and mistaken identity, of dancing whales and the news event. The un-Odyssean poet hauls his loot up from the sea, sets to work on his translation, and breaks for tea. Such epic turn-arounds consistently transform the poet's journey into a carnival voyage.

## II

The carnival traces in this individual poem suggest the carnival idiom at work more largely in the volume. Carnival forms weaken the strict boundaries and conventions defining high genres. As Bakhtin says of literary history, "carnivalization constantly assisted in the destruction of all barriers between genres, between self-enclosed systems of thought, between various styles. . . it brought closer what was distant and united what had been sundered."<sup>12</sup> Essentially, Purdy dialogizes poetic genres by infecting them with low and sub-literary genres. His ostensibly lyrical observations are in fact carnival dramas, anecdotes recounted by a carnival character. Carnival elements dialogize the personal lyric, undercutting the primacy of subjectivity and the wholeness of vocal monologue, with the result that the voices we hear are objectified, turned into objects of representation themselves. Moreover, the volume offers a consistent play with concepts of the travel book. As the title indicates, these are poems *from* Baffin Island, poems sent from afar; they comprise a personal journey, a diary, and an explorer's journal in the vein of Samuel Hearne. Purdy consistently plays with the idea of poems as postcards or letters, as the prose postscript to the volume suggests. Each poem is postmarked with its place of origin. In addition, Purdy plays with the very low genre of doggerel. As we previously noted, his initial title choice for the volume was *Dogsong*. Moreover, Purdy invokes in his prose postscript the ghost of Robert Service, suggesting that in the back of his mind lies this north of popular verse, tall tales, and whiskey.<sup>13</sup> Purdy

purposefully plays with humour and burlesque in order to lower high poetic genres and mold them to a carnival experience of the Arctic. Carnival genres infect high genres with the life of the present moment and the present person, with the debasing and renewing energy of laughter. We sense continually a play with speech genres, soliloquy and diatribe, travesty and decrowning parody.

Purdy's Arctic volume combines high and low, the serious and the comic, in a carnival embrace. "Carnival brings together," writes Bakhtin, "unifies, weds, and combines the sacred with the profane, the lofty with the low, the great with the insignificant, the wise with the stupid."<sup>14</sup> Carnival unites what is traditionally kept separate and separates what we wish to keep together. This serio-comical combination is fundamental to the poems in *North of Summer*. Purdy is a master of juxtaposition, of placing side by side pedestrian details and poetic vision. We find this combination in "South" with its joining of physiological function, contemplation, and self-parody, and in "Still Life in a Tent," a poem whose title clearly emphasizes artistic discourse but whose subtitle "Tenting tonight in the old camp ground" offers in juxtaposition a comical understanding of being alive. "When I sat down to Play the Piano" offers this carnival mixture, with its juxtaposition of music and defecation, inflated heroic discourse and cursing. Indeed, such poems suggest that traces of ancient menippea (as Bakhtin describes it) are to be found in the volume. In a 1969 letter to Woodcock, Purdy speaks of the "great Philosophy" he has "regurgitated ass-backwards into poems."<sup>15</sup> Such a trope reveals the thinking at the heart of menippea, with its testing of ideas in the world, of philosophy in the trenches, with what Bakhtin calls its "organic combination . . . of the free fantastic, the symbolic, at times even a mystical-religious element with an extreme and . . . crude *slum naturalism*."<sup>16</sup> Purdy's poems carry traces of ancient menippea in that they enact this carnival testing of philosophy; in poem after northern poem, the poet puts his ontological and cultural assumptions to the test through an engagement with life's underside. Central to this mixing of high and low in the volume as well are those Arctic huskies who appear in eleven of the volume's thirty-two poems, fighting and howling, running and eating, defecating and urinating.<sup>17</sup> Their song, called "Arctic opera" (52), provides a paradigm of the serio-comical yoking of the elevated and degraded. Infected with this Bedlam dogsong, Purdy's northern poems themselves constitute a comic Arctic opera.

At the base of this mixture of high and low is carnival laughter. Such laughter functions to disrobe and dialogize, lower and uncrown; it frees from dogmatism and mysticism by attacking the borders sealing off the official and sanctioned. Carnival

laughter operates as a liberating force, philosophically, ontologically, culturally, and textually. If we return to "When I sat down to Play the Piano" for a moment, we sense this carnival humour at work. The following lines constitute the poem's musical first movement, its prelude or theme:

He cometh forth hurriedly from his tent  
and looketh for a quiet sequestered vale  
he carrieth a roll of violet toilet tissue  
and a forerunner goeth ahead to do him honour  
yclept a snotty-nosed Eskimo kid (43)

The poem begins with this highly parodic version of the procession of the king or entrance of the hero. The lofty edge of the poet's vision continues to decline into mock-heroic defecation in the midst of a plague of huskies, into shrieking and cursing juxtaposed to inflated heroic discourse. The poem winds down with a mixing of the religious and the ridiculous in a parody of the twenty-third Psalm:

'Lo tho I walk thru the valley of  
  the shadowy kennels  
in the land of permanent ice cream  
  I will fear no huskies  
  for thou art with me  
and slingeth thy stones forever and ever  
  thou veritable David

Amen'

P.S. Next time I'm gonna take a gun (45)

Carnival comedy completes one-sided seriousness, offers the corrective of the low and bodily and open to the tragic and lofty and finished.

As this poem further suggests, *North of Summer* contains the forms, symbols, and carnival ethos of grotesque realism. Popular-festive culture is filled with ritual degradations and inversions, with curses and abuses, blows and uncrownings. Drawing on and born out of this culture, grotesque realism participates in this process of materializing the world. Bakhtin relates that "the essence of the grotesque is precisely to present a contradictory and double-faced fullness of life."<sup>18</sup> The grotesque degrades in order to renew; it is profoundly Janus-faced in that it both praises and abuses. Traces of grotesque realism can be mapped and followed in Purdy's Arctic poems. Repeatedly, Purdy emphasizes his visceral experience of the Arctic, a double experience. He recalls in the preface to his *Collected Poems* his landing at Brown's Harbour twenty years before:

Rancid pieces of fat, gnawed bones, and dogshit littered the gravel beach. The sea surrounding our island was like the concentrated essence of all the blue that ever was; I could feel that blue seep into me, and all my innards change colour. And the icebergs! They were shimmery lace and white brocade, and they became my standard for the word *beauty*.<sup>19</sup>

Beauty is mixed with ugliness, vibrant life with material death in this carnival world uncharted by government maps. The landscape itself is described as a grotesque body littered with grotesque debris: bones and partial carcasses, blubber and blood, dog excrement, "glacial litter" and "frost boils"(26). Even place names contain grotesque overtones; in "The North West Passage," the poet thinks of Ellef and Amund Ringnes, "heroic Norwegian brewers whose names! cling alcoholically to islands up there"(21). He sees continually the Janus face of the Arctic, the intimate interconnection of life and death. He finds it in "Dead Seal":

He looks like a fat little old man  
an 'Old Bill' sort of face  
both wise and senile at the same time  
with an anxious to please expression  
in fact a clown  
which is belied on account of the dark slow  
worm  
of blood crawling down his forehead  
that precludes laughter  
or being anything but a dead animal  
(58)

Everywhere the poet finds indications of life and death in a grotesque embrace, of an ambivalent play with masks and disguises.

Purdy continually peoples this Arctic landscape with grotesque figures, with images of the grotesque body. The poet amuses himself in "The North West Passage" thinking of Martin Frobisher, "'Admiral of the Ocean-Sea' who was! 'hurte . . . in the Buttocke with an Arrowe' "(20). Similarly, in "Canso" the poet contemplates Toonjiks, Asian giants "who crossed the Bering swing bridge! and built houses of whale ribs! buttocks in cloud country"(34), legendary carnival figures who used death to remain alive. The grotesque body is defined by its viscera, its active internal organs, and its various orifices. Speaking of this body, Bakhtin relates that "these convexities and orifices have a common characteristic; it is within them that the confines between bodies and between the body and the world are overcome: there is an interchange and an interorientation."<sup>20</sup> The grotesque body takes the world in and simultaneously imposes itself on the world. This

body eats and drinks, is liberated by food and wine; conversely, it defecates and urinates. And in grotesque realism, excrement and urine serve to remind humanity of its bodily existence, of its intimate connection with the earth. As Bakhtin maintains, "We must not forget that urine (as well as dung) is gay matter, which degrades and relieves at the same time, transforming fear into laughter. If dung is a link between body and earth (the laughter that unites them), urine is a link between body and sea."<sup>21</sup> The open grotesque body supplies a variety of tropes indicative of life's carnival ambivalence, and Purdy makes frequent use of these images.

The poet's grotesque bodily vision continually works to degrade and lower the self. The poet grounds his poetic vision in an awareness of his own bodily existence, hints of which we have already gathered from "When I sat down to Play the Piano" and "South." In the first poem, the poet is lowered to the excremental level. We find the poet squatting among boulders; here he ". . . beginneth the most natural of natural functions! buttocks balanced above the boulders"(43). The poem comically establishes the link between excrement and earth, between the poet and material existence; he flees the huskies "sans dignity! sans intellect! sans Win. Barrett! and damn near sans anus"(44). He finds himself stripped of his clothing, intellectual systems, and pride. He is degraded and turned upside down to enable a new understanding of the world and the self to take shape. The second poem enacts pure carnival; the poem's emphasis lies on the poet's mouth, kidney, and bladder as he offers an ambivalent carnival blessing to the world. Eating whale sandwiches in a boat with Jonesee, the poet drinks a toast to the world with "fermented blubber juice"(62). As time passes within the poem, this toast works its way to the poet's left kidney, and the poem ends with his urinating into the Arctic Ocean:

reverse blessing on the world  
from a sacriligious well-wisher  
impure joy and powerful impulse  
love and hate together  
a libation from the Arctic  
blood of a most experienced lambkin  
stand up in the boat rocking gently  
in all directions South

and say  
'Look out

down there!' (63)

The poet showers the earth with a carnival blessing; his connection of urine and sea provides an ambivalent degradation and renewal in the form of a parodic religious ritual. While establishing the poet's material connection with both earth and

sea, images of the grotesque body and its functions further serve to demonstrate the poet's open carnival being.

### III

Carnival grotesque debasings model the ontological turn arounds in these northern poems. Closely linked with the tropes of grotesque realism is the carnival ethos of foolish wisdom, for the consciousness that activates grotesque debasings and renewals is that of the clown. Indeed, the masks of the fool and clown lie at the heart of the carnival traces in Purdy's *North of Summer*. These northern poems provide us with the wisdom of the fool, a wisdom that offers a new understanding of the world based on upside down and inside out logic, polemic and misunderstanding, laughter and decrowning. The Inuit, in fact, offer the poet a paradigm of foolish wisdom. By conventional standards, their world view is nothing short of folly, and yet the poet sees in their hunting culture, their past, and their interrelations the wisdom of the fool; these Hyperborean people, these Inuit who are 'The People,' have their own insight into being alive.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, these northern poems loosely constitute a fool's pilgrimage, and in them the poet recounts the fool's adventures in a string of episodes and anecdotes which revise accepted truths with the mask of folly. "Folly is the opposite of wisdom," writes Bakhtin, "inverted wisdom, inverted truth. It is the other side, the lower stratum of official laws and conventions, derived from them. Folly is a form of gay festive wisdom."<sup>23</sup> Folly provides its own unofficial wisdom and generates its own ambivalent truth. In the postscript to the volume, Purdy relates how he set out to climb a 3,000 foot mountain near Pangnirtung, thinking it would take only an hour. As he climbed, however, it "stretched out like an accordion... including wide tundra meadows, fields paved with boulders, even a small ice-covered lake about halfway up."<sup>24</sup> This incident suggests the upsetting activity of folly, its participation in a process of discovery, and its implication in a poetics of revision.

Through the fool's misunderstanding and the privileged clown's logic, Purdy's Arctic poems enact fundamental revisions in world view. The poet encounters a strange world that threatens to topple his cherished systems. In his often comical efforts to overcome language and cultural barriers, the poet comes to both understand and misunderstand the Inuit. Cultural givens, preconceptions, stereotypes, and appearances are revised as the clown's wisdom goes to work. Purdy suggests this pattern of cultural revision in his Arctic Diary, in fact, where he notes that all he had read about the Arctic left him unprepared, where he insists that we must "throw away the preconceptions" fostered by books of the Arctic as a "barren alien place, unfriendly to man."<sup>25</sup> The poems in *North of Summer* and the volume itself enact

this discovery; they offer the poet's unofficial view of the Arctic, one contrary to books and preconceived notions. In the postscript to the volume, Purdy offers these poems to the reader as "a set of binoculars thru which you can view the Arctic from several thousand miles away," a poetic "optic glass" attempting to be an extension of the reader's eyes and mind.<sup>26</sup> The lens of the poem, shaped by carnival folly, allows the reader to experience the same discovery. These northern poems offer the poet's southern readers a communal celebration of foolish wisdom.

The poet's dialogic exposure to this 'other' culture continually revises his own cultural norms. "The Sculptors" (75-76) is one such poem that enacts a personal cultural revision. We find the poet bargain shopping, "Going thru cases and cases! of Eskimo sculpture" rejected by T. Eaton Co. Ltd. The poet is searching "for one good carving! one piece that says 'I AM'! to keep a southern promise," but he discovers only partial, broken, and malformed art. His search continues for "one piece that glows! one slap happy idiot seal! alien to the whole seal-nation," but he soon grows impatient. His cultural ethos, southern and Judeo-Christian, asks of these northern artists what they cannot possibly give. The poet sees "broken] bent! misshapen] failed animals! with vital parts missing," but these carvings lead to a sudden vision of the artists themselves, their pain and failures. The poem concludes with the poet's new understanding of them, of the old Inuit "who carve in their own image! of maimed animals." The poet's initial folly, his misunderstanding, allows for a deeply felt cultural revision. Again and again, these Arctic poems enact the clash of northern and southern culture through a carnival play with folly and wisdom.

These poems are, in fact, dramas of self-revision. Carnival folly and the clown's logic turn the static and bounded individual into an open and becoming person. The carnival fool and clown are masks over the face of Nobody that allow for transformations and metamorphoses; through a dialogic debate with himself and the world, the protean poet refuses to be pinned down and defined. Like Alice, the poet carries on a conversation with himself in order to explore the question, "Who in the world am I?"<sup>27</sup> Baffin Land facilitates such exploration. In Purdy's Arctic poems, these carnival forms quite simply open the poet to self-revision. In an interview with Gary Geddes, Purdy relates, "I like to think of a continual becoming and a changing and a moving," and he adds, "I don't think a man is consistent; he contradicts himself at every turn."<sup>28</sup> Selfhood, for Purdy, is clearly dialogic, and in the Arctic poems this strange and new landscape allows for self-discovery. The poems record carnival threshold experiences where the poet's self turns upside down and inside out. We find him in air lanes and sea lanes, on bloodied shores and in his cave tent

(also his creative heart, womb, and nursery), in the market and cemeteries and tent rings, all at the top of the world. In "Washday," the poet hears the Inuit woman Leah speak his name; he feels "breathed out! some of the 'me' I am! removed! the walled self! defenses down! altered"(66). These lines suggest the metamorphic process more largely at work in the poems, a process filled with ambivalence, as this poem itself goes on to suggest with its re establishment of those crumbled walls.

The poems "Metrics" and "Still Life in a Tent" enact such self-- revisions. In the first poem, the lonely and disoriented poet attempts to bring order to the Slaughter Beach in front of him. He sets up his typewriter in order to do so, and wonders what he himself represents, perhaps "some hustings of the soul"(39). In this strange context, however, he fails to create the desired order:

Old Squaw ducks are going

'ouw—

ouw—ouw'

And I think to the other side of that sound  
I have to

because it gathers everything  
all the self-deception and phoniness  
of my lifetime into an empty place  
and the RUNNER IN THE SKIES  
I invented

as symbol of the human spirit  
crashes like a housefly

(39)

The vertical aspirations of the poet plunge to earth; his personal myths are carnivalized by the world around him. The poem ends with the poet's ambivalent denial of cosmic emptiness and equally ambivalent typing. "Still Life in a Tent" enacts a similar carnival revision. Taking the form of a threshold feverish discourse, the poem explores a series of boundaries and their breaking, namely inside and outside the tent and inside and outside the self. Icebergs split both inside and outside; the poet sends his thoughts "in fevered fantasy! north of summer"(48). The poet's fevered discourse allows for normally accepted boundaries of selfhood and uncharted regions to be explored:

I'm so glad to be here  
with the chance that comes but once  
to any man in his lifetime  
to travel deep in himself  
to meet himself as a stranger  
at the northern end of the world (49)





the scornful words  
is to make life itself trivial  
and yourself the Pontifex Maximus  
of nullity

The poet exposes himself for the carnival fool he has been; his folly has made him the Pontifex Maximus of nullity, Nobody, and yet the expression of that folly and the poet's turning of it upside down allow for his radical revision. The poem enacts his metamorphosis from the oak god fool to the ground willow poet.

The final lines of "Trees at the Arctic Circle" suggest that just as the poem begins in paradox, so it ends. The poet vows to "let the stupidity remain permanent! as the trees are! in a poem! the dwarf trees of Baffin Island." In these lines we find both escape and entrapment, affirmation and denial, a concerted play with ambivalent permanence and equally ambivalent flux or even disappearance. The poet's folly, already revised and thus no longer present, will be enshrined by the poem; similarly, the trees, which he has already discovered to be engaged in a continual process of living and dying, death and life in a carnival embrace, will be made permanent *in the poem*. A double irony becomes plain: first, the irony of making permanent what is continually changing, and second, the irony of doing so in a poem, in words both static and fluid, dead on a page and alive in a reader. These lines usher us into a hall of mirrors, or to use more appropriately Bakhtinian tropes, they open a can of worms or expose the poet's 'innards.' Certainly, we find in these northern poems Purdy's New World revision of an Old World ethos through the use of carnival forms, his re-writing of official cultural and historical myths through poetic carnival. As Dennis Lee suggests in his afterword to Purdy's *Collected Poems*, Purdy has been a pioneer, one of the New World poets "who first broke through to indigenous articulacy, who subverted and recast the forms of the metropolitan imagination so as to utter the truths of the hinterland in native terms," who has done so moreover "with a rare fusion of high artistry and folk, even populist imagination."<sup>29</sup> In these Arctic poems, Purdy makes a large contribution to this carnival reprocessing of Old World imaginative givens. *North of Summer* establishes what he calls in his interview with Gary Geddes "a compass point"<sup>30</sup> for himself and for his culture, a compass point to which he returned again and again in subsequent volumes and individual poems.<sup>31</sup>

And yet these final lines of "Trees at the Arctic Circle," turning inward as they do and destabilizing the process of self-revision, force upon us central questions concerning these carnival traces in Purdy's poetry and the "*post-festum*" nature of literary carnival itself, as Michael Andr Bernstein describes it

in "When the Carnival Turns Bitter: Preliminary Reflections Upon the Abject Hero." Bernstein reminds us of the "bitter strand" to be found in liberating carnival forms, of the emergence in literature of "the image of a carnivalization of values during which it is no longer a question of breaking down ossified hierarchies and stale judgments but rather of being denied *any* vantage point from which a value can still be affirmed."<sup>32</sup> At the heart of Purdy's use of carnival lies an ambivalent play between these two options, the liberating force of laughter and the darker undercurrents revealing the ego facing a void. Purdy's carnivalized lyrics enact the ambivalent debate of the poetic ego with itself and the world. Repeatedly in these northern poems, the poet's ego is undercut only to be re established, even while cultural and communal norms are redefined into compass points from which to navigate. In "Bestiary," Purdy's abc of poets, the first poet listed is the unknown author of "Tom O'Bedlam," "the anonymous, the all-of-us,! enduring the pain of everyman,! perched on a throne in the gutter."<sup>33</sup> These initiatory lines return us to Nobody and the final lines of "Trees at the Arctic Circle," where the poet enacts both carnival liberation and containment, both self-abasement and self aggrandisement. The uncrowned poet enters an upside down kingdom, the court of the Seal-King; he is both king and clown in a kingdom of his own making, master of and slave to his own discourse; he is both Nobody and Everyman shaped by an ambivalent pattern of play at the heart of which lies the fundamental tension between self and community, poem and culture, ego and reality.

*North of Summer* as a volume, with its coherent shape and focussed subject, provides a paradigm for the work of carnival in Purdy's poetry. These Arctic poems give detailed expression to this poet's understanding of life's carnival underside. Indeed, Purdy's search for a New World passage establishes compass points from which to navigate, compass points as fluid and real as the Magnetic North Pole. The poet's journey into an Arctic underworld at the top of the globe, his upside down Odyssey and turned around exploration, establishes a carnival universe in which he the poet and we the readers can wander and dwell, a universe nonetheless problematic in the light of carnival culture's historical development and literature's complex appropriation of its forms. Bakhtin relates in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* that "artistic form, correctly understood, does not shape already prepared and found content, but rather permits content to be found and seen for the first time."<sup>34</sup> Carnival forms allow Purdy to find the Arctic and see it anew: the clown's logic and the fool's wisdom; grotesque realism's bodily images and debasing laughter; the multistyled mixing of high and low, serious and comic; and the parodic reprocessing of Homeric epic and Arctic exploration all give Purdy the artistic forms for understanding his experience as

hell and paradise. Al Purdy's different face of the Arctic is an ambivalent and continually transforming carnival mask.

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## Notes

1. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: The M.I.T. Press, 1968), p. 398. [\[back\]](#)
2. Eli Mandel writes in an essay entitled "History and Literature" that "the etymology of the name, 'Canada,' is, in one version, Portuguese, 'Ca nada, — translating crudely as 'There is no one here' or 'Nothing here at all.'" Eli Mandel, *The Family Romance* (Winnipeg: Turnstone Press, 1986), p. 30. [\[back\]](#)
3. Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, pp. 10-11. [\[back\]](#)
4. Al Purdy, postscript, *North of Summer: Poems from Baffin Island* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1967), p. 84. [\[back\]](#)
5. Al Purdy, "North of Summer: Poems and Prose by A.W. Purdy," *Beaver*, Summer, 1966, p. 25. [\[back\]](#)
6. Purdy, postscript, *North of Summer*, pp. 82-83. [\[back\]](#)
7. Al Purdy, "To George Woodcock," 21 August 1965, *The Purdy-Woodcock Letters: Selected Correspondence 1964-1984*, ed. George Gait (Toronto: ECW Press, 1988), p. 6. [\[back\]](#)
8. Al Purdy, "To George Woodcock," late 1966/early 1967, *The Purdy-Woodcock Letters*, p. 19. [\[back\]](#)
9. Al Purdy, "Still Life in a Tent," *North of Summer: Poems from Baffin Island* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1967), p. 49. Further references to poems from this volume will be noted in the text by page numbers in parentheses. [\[back\]](#)
10. Purdy, postscript, *North of Summer*, p. 81. [\[back\]](#)
11. Al Purdy, "North of Summer", p 22 "I couldn't mistake the place for Toronto or Montreal. And thinking of the animal carcasses and dead white whale on the beach, I re-named it mentally: Slaughter Beach—which is not to be found on any of the government maps. A place of empty loneliness, an island born long ago when mountains were coming to birth." [\[back\]](#)
12. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, ed. and

trans. Caryl Emerson, intro. Wayne Booth, *Theory and History of Literature 8* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), pp. 134-135. [\[back\]](#)

13. Purdy, postscript, *North of Summer*, p. 81. "From Frobisher I flew to Pangnirtung near the Arctic Circle, taking along a full set of Arctic clothing and a forty-ounce bottle of liquor in case of snakebite. I had it stuffed up my sleeve along with an arm when we circled the mountains to land at Pang, not being sure that prohibition wasn't in effect thru the north. Times might have changed since Robert Service." [\[back\]](#)
14. Bakhtin, *Dostoevsky's Poetics*, p. 123. [\[back\]](#)
15. Al Purdy, "To George Woodcock," 13 January 1969, *The Purdy-Woodcock Letters*, p. 36. [\[back\]](#)
16. Bakhtin, *Dostoevsky's Poetics*, p. 115. [\[back\]](#)
17. It would be difficult to overemphasize the importance of these carnival brutes to the volume or to Purdy's imagination in general. Not only do they appear in the postscript, the Arctic Diary article, and the poems in the volume, but they also reappear in several poems found in subsequent Purdy volumes (for example, "Dog Song 2" in *Piling Blood*). [\[back\]](#)
18. Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, p. 62. [\[back\]](#)
19. Al Purdy, "To See the Shore: A Preface," *The Collected Poems of Al Purdy*, by Purdy, ed. Russell Brown (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1986), p. xvi. [\[back\]](#)
20. Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, p. 317. [\[back\]](#)
21. Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, p. 335. [\[back\]](#)
22. See in particular "Inuit," (32-33) where Purdy develops a parallel between these northern people and the Greeks (suggesting that both cultures offer world views that dialogize the monologisms of the Modern era), and "Track Meet at Pangnirtung," (70-71) where he portrays the Eskimos explicitly as wise fools, as a people of an "ancient youth" who laugh "with serious faces still! in the running." Each of these poems offers a foolish wisdom in answer to norms of Western thinking. [\[back\]](#)
23. Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, p. 260. [\[back\]](#)
24. Purdy, postscript, *North of Summer*, p. 81. [\[back\]](#)

25. Purdy, *North of Summer*, p. 26. [\[back\]](#)
26. Purdy, postscript, *North of Summer*, pp. 83-84. [\[back\]](#)
27. Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland & Through the Looking Glass* (New York: Bantam, 1981), p. 9. [\[back\]](#)
28. Al Purdy, "A.W. Purdy: An Interview," with Gary Geddes, *Canadian Literature*, 41 (Summer, 1969), p. 68. [\[back\]](#)
29. Dennis Lee, "The Poetry of Al Purdy: An Afterword," *The Collected Poems of Al Purdy*, by Al Purdy, ed. Russell Brown (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1986), p. 390. [\[back\]](#)
30. Purdy, "An Interview," p. 69. [\[back\]](#)
31. Purdy has returned to his Arctic experiences in both prose and poetry many times in the more than two decades since that 1965 journey, notably in the introduction to his collection of essays *No Other Country* "The Cartography of Myself," in the introduction to his *Collected Poems*, and in such poems as "Lament for the Dorsets" and a second poem entitled "The North West Passage" in *Wild Grape Wine*, in "The Stone Bird" and "Dog Song 2." Moreover, Homeric references and Odyssean parallels appear repeatedly, perhaps most strikingly in "Homer's Poem" in the *Collected Poems*, a poem Purdy uses to frame the entire volume. [\[back\]](#)
32. Michael Andr Bernstein, "When the Carnival Turns Bitter: Preliminary Reflections Upon the Abject Hero," *Bakhtin: Essays and Dialogues on His Work*, ed. Gary Saul Morson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), p. 100. [\[back\]](#)
33. Al Purdy, "Bestiary," *Piling Blood* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1984), p. 65. [\[back\]](#)
34. Bakhtin, *Dostoevsky's Poetics*, p. 43. [\[back\]](#)