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The Embroidery of Things— “Objective Imagism” In the Poetry of Al Purdy

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The Embroidery of Things—

“Objective Imagism” In the Poetry of Al Purdy

In the opening of his book, *Solid Objects—Modernism and the Test of Production*, Douglas Mao relates an exchange wherein Sigmund Freud writes modernist H. D. (Hilda Doolittle), thanking her for flowers sent “to greet the return of the Gods” (3). The Gods the note refers to would actually be better termed “goods”, they were reliquary statues Freud had been forced to abandon in his escape from Vienna. Mao describes how H.D. and Freud's reversal of the physical objects—goods—and reliquary artifacts—Gods—is exemplary of a modernist obsession with objects. Through the course of his book, Mao describes how modernists found themselves obsessed with objects and physical things; not only in the role reversal of spiritual relic and physical commodity in Freud's note, but in the manner wherein objects are seen literally as “object”—something not-subject, and not-self, yet still a “fragment of being” (4), a portion of our selfhood which contributes to our understanding of it in its entirety. One of Mao's ultimate points is that in creating objects, modernists found not just an understanding of self, but the ability to turn the personal self into an object through artistic expression. To the modernist, Mao dictates, this process is turning both self and object into something “enduring and monumental” (15). Mao's idea of modernist objectification is fulfilled completely in the poetry of Al Purdy. In Purdy's poetry, objects inform the imaginative process through a technique I am terming “Objective Imagism”, which follows from the idea of T.S. Eliot's Objective Correlative, and Ezra Pound's Imagism.

Other critics have found physical objects, termed “artifacts” by Sandra Djwa (60), or “relics” by Tim Heath (191), to be important in understanding the work of Purdy as well; but while Heath and Djwa are on the right track insofar as examining Purdy's use of objects, their analyses ignore both the influence of objects on modernists and the ample references within the text Purdy makes through his poetic persona as to how physical objects inform his poetic processes. These references occur throughout his work, but are most relevant in poems like “The Horseman of Agawa”, “Hockey”, and

“Lament for the Dorsets”, wherein the physical objects Al Purdy's persona interacts with most overtly guide his thought processes and inform his poetics. The goal of this paper is to explain first how Objective Imagism follows out of Eliot's Objective Correlative and Pound's Imagism, and second to lay out how Objective Imagism functions in Purdy's work; specifically how the speaker's poetic inspiration comes from physical objects described within the poem, and leads to these objects becoming images within the speaker's imagination before finally describing how through the process of writing, the images become physical objects once again—re-created in the text the author produces.

Al Purdy was considered “unofficial Canadian poet laureate” from the early 1960's until his death in 2000 (Ivory Thought 1), and was considered by some to be the Canadian Walt Whitman, a label he detested, disparaging Whitman in “Whose Mother?” as “out of the cradle endlessly metrical” (6). Purdy instead avowed a more Bukowski-esque aesthetic—writing of barroom brawls, nights spent in the drunk tank, and detestable menial labor jobs. Despite this rough-around-the-edges persona, Purdy was a voracious reader and autodidact, his poetry containing a wealth of allusions to, and musings on, history, ancient myth, and contemporary politics. Purdy's most distinguishing feature, though, is the geographic and geological breadth of his work—his poetry often blurs the notions of time and space, and takes inspiration from Purdy's world travels through the Americas to the Arctic, to various European locales, even into a then recently post-revolution Cuba, and a recently post-war Japan, devastated by nuclear weaponry.

Despite Purdy's tendency towards these massive geographic, spatial, and temporal shifts, his poetry remains curiously grounded, even when his speaker transcends the physical and enters the murky realm of metaphysical description. This transcendence is exemplified in “Hockey Players” (1965) when spectating a game sends Purdy's persona's imagination:

skating thru the smoky end boards out
of sight and climbing up the appalacian highlands

and racing breast to breast across laurentian barrens

over hudson's diamond bay and down the treeless tundra. (30 – 37)

In finding his way back to the present, re-grounding himself in the spaces and physical objects which inspired the great imaginary journey in the first place, is shown in the lines where he remembers that his “opponent's never geography / or distance why / it's men / —just men?” (39 – 42). Here, the objectified hockey players he imagines send Purdy's persona racing across time and space, but also, in turn, bring him back—Purdy remembers that they are “just” human beings and is brought back to reality. Sandra Djwa describes Purdy's object obsession in her essay “Ivory Thots and the Last Romantic”, where she compares Purdy's treatment of “artifacts” to that of Keats describing his Grecian urn. Djwa was first to examine the “objects of former ages and their impact on [Purdy's] imagination” (60), but Tim Heath, in “Buried Bones and Ornaments and Stuff” was the first to describe what follows from Purdy's mental relation to these physical objects. In doing so, Heath describes in “religious and theological” (191) language how important physical objects are to Purdy's poetry. Heath believes that to Purdy's persona, objects resemble religious relics, and that in Purdy's “reliquary poetics ... a seemingly worthless object [can] possess special value, so much that the very idea of “precious refuse” troubles such binaries as worthless / invaluable, [or] sacred / profane” (192). While Heath and Djwa are on the right track as far as examining Purdy's use of objects, their analyses ignore the ample references Purdy makes through his poetic persona as to how physical objects inform his poetic processes, and contextualizing Purdy within the modernist movement.

In his 1920 essay on poetic theory, T.S. Eliot describes how Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is a literary failure due to the audience's inability to sympathize with Hamlet's character on an emotional level. Not actually the first person to use the term, Eliot reinterpreted the “objective correlative” in relating it to *Hamlet*, arguing that:

The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an “objective correlative”;

in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events, which shall be the formula of that *particular* emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked. (7)

Hamlet does not follow from Eliot's objective correlative because "Hamlet (the man) is dominated by an emotion which is inexpressible, because it is in excess of the facts as they appear" (7). Hamlet is, in a sense, too upset for the circumstances of the play, and so the audience cannot fully sympathize with him on an emotional level. Eliot argues that we have all felt a similarly "intense feeling, ecstatic or terrible" without a reason, "an object", but that "the ordinary person puts these feelings to sleep, or trims down his feelings to fit the business world" (8). The only person immune to the process of "trimming" these emotions, according to Eliot, is the artist, who intentionally "keeps them alive by his ability to intensify the world to his emotions" (7). This statement has its exceptions, notably in application to Purdy's poetry. If *Hamlet* is a failure for demonstrating emotion which is "in excess of the facts as they appear" then Purdy too is a failure by the standards of Eliot's Objective Correlative, not for excess emotion but its inverse.

Despite Purdy's refrain that he is "a sensitive man" in "At the Quinte Hotel" (1962), I would argue that in Purdy's work emotion is an underpinning, second to his real focus—poetic imagery. In reading Purdy's poetry, the reader may feel what they wish, as Purdy leaves no simple emotional trail in the style of Eliot's emotionally driven objective correlative. Instead, Purdy's poetry follows the three guidelines of Imagism laid out by Ezra Pound in "A Retrospect" and "A Few Don'ts". The guidelines being: (1) That the object or subject of the work must be treated directly. (2) That the writer must "use absolutely no word that does not contribute to the presentation" ("A Retrospect" 3) and or description of the object, meaning "no superfluous word, no adjective which does not reveal something" about the image ("A Few Don'ts" 201). Pound's third rule is that the writer must "compose in the sequence of the musical phrase, not in sequence of a metronome" ("A Retrospect" 3). To the Imagists, this rule meant

composing their images in free verse. Abrams' *Glossary of Literary Terms* defines the “image” in Imagism as the “impression made by an object on a particular poet in a particular situation” (43). Purdy's poetry, at least after 1962, follows all of Pound's guidelines. Take, for example, Purdy's “Trees at the Arctic Circle” (1967) in which the speaker describes the impression made on him by looking on the stunted, weather-beaten, trees of the North, which he finds antithetical to the immense southern trees he is inspired to imagine:

I call to mind great Douglas firs
 I see tall maples waving green
 and oaks like gods in autumn gold
 the whole horizon jungle dark
 and I crouched under that continual night
 but these
 even the dwarf shrubs of Ontario
 mock them
 coward trees. (17 – 25)

Purdy's length differentiates it from Pound's quintessential two-line Imagist poem “In A Station In the Metro” (1913):

The apparition of these faces in the crowd;
 Petals on a wet, black bough.

Both poems evoke imagery using free verse in concrete, colloquial language, and both poems treat their imagery in the direct manner Pound outlines—in this case through evocative descriptions of light and colour. The difference between the poems is in their imagery's inspiration. Pound's “Metro” is inspired by humanity. Its imagery comes out of a description of the human experience and implies the acute separation of the speaker from the “faces in the crowd”. The imagery of Purdy's “Arctic” is inspired by

physical objects—the trees, specifically the image the trees evoke: that of their “grand” opposites in the south. Pointing out that physical objects evoke imagery in the poetry is not meant to imply that the majority of Purdy's poetry ignores humanity in favour of things, or ignores emotion in favour of images. Rather, I would argue that Purdy's most metaphysically dense poetry, which is the most revealing of his imaginary and creative processes, exemplifies the tenets of Imagism while crediting objects as the inspiration for poetic imagery. In doing so, I believe Purdy synthesizes the processes of Pound's Imagism and Eliot's Objective Correlative into Objective Imagism.

Objective Imagism follows the model of Eliot's Objective Correlative; but in place of the emotional correlation Eliot lays out between writer, text, and reader, Objective Imagism creates an Imagistic correlation in the style of Pound. This Imagistic correlation stems from an “Object-Image” in the poem. The Object-Image is a physical “thing”, an object, or set of objects, in the poem which when vividly described create an image in the mind of the reader. Objective Imagism dictates that this sensory image is a visual the reader understands in the same manner as the writer who created it. This rule is not to imply that the reader will have the exact same picture-image as the writer, but that the reader will undergo a similar thought process to the writer, who guides them to the picture-image by exhibiting their own thought processes within the text. Purdy's poetics are perfect to demonstrate the Objective Imagist process for two reasons: (1) because of the manner in which objects are used to create images for the reader, and (2) how Purdy's persona elaborates on the process within the text.

The process of Objective Imagism begins with the discovery of the object. This discovery takes place in situations where the speaker of the work is searching for “connection” to, or understanding of, something broader than themselves. In Purdy's “Lament For The Dorsets”, the speaker finds himself dreaming of the Dorsets, whom, Purdy adds in a subtitle, were “eskimos extinct in the 14th century AD.” Purdy's persona treads their former land in his first stanza, which immediately grounds the importance of physical artifacts to the poem, describing:

Animal bones and some mossy tent rings
 scrapers and spearheads carved ivory swans
 all that remains of the Dorset Giants. (1 – 3)

Aside from the artifacts of everyday life—the tools found in the former Dorset camp, this stanza also introduces one of Purdy's most interesting objects. The space in the typeface prior to the mention of “carved ivory swans” suggests that they are a lingering thought in the speaker's mind. Indeed, he returns to them suggesting in the poem's final stanza that the “ivory thought / is still warm”. This quotation not only suggests life in the object/artifact, it suggests the transmission of thought and feeling Purdy's objects are capable of.

Another object, with similar power to the ivory swan, is the pictographic horseman painted in Purdy's “The Horseman of Agawa” (1973), where Purdy discovers yet another link to the past through a physical object. In this case the connection the speaker and his wife search for is to the Ojibway tribe north of Lake Superior, and the object discovered is an Aboriginal pictograph (rock painting) of a horseman. The pair knows the horseman is nearby, but before they can see it, they must reach it. Purdy's persona speaks of the difficulty of climbing down the “slanting stone ledges” (5) to reach the painting, a journey difficult enough that he must “abandon [his] beer and use both hands for safety” (3). Purdy's persona and his wife finally do make it to the pictograph, which is on a “tilted ledge / that slides off into deep water”, symbolic of the imaginative shift the object will soon inspire in the artist's mind.

Though it adds to the writer's imaginative process, not every object Purdy's persona examines must be a piece of art like the ivory swan or the rock painting. In fact, it can be an everyday object, or even objectified human beings, like those on the ice in Purdy's “Hockey Players”. In the poem, the speaker notes briefly that what players “worry about most is injuries” (1), and does describe the feeling of playing the sport—temporarily being “a hero” but “knowing / that everything ends in a pot-belly”

(62 – 63). Purdy's persona pessimistically argues that the game is only “played for passionate stockbrokers” to make money from (10), but the crux of Purdy's imagery is in his depiction of what watching the game does to a fan. When “suddenly three men / break down the ice in roaring feverish speed” (25 – 26) the audience becomes psychically intertwined with the players they have objectified, and Purdy's persona describes how the simple action of pulling ahead in the game brings the audience “up in our seats” (27), and sends them “exploding out of self to join” the players on the ice (28). This quotation is characteristic of the second part of the process of Objective Imagism, wherein the object changes the speaker's imaginative thought process after they have begun to examine its physical characteristics.

After an object has been discovered, the speaker's examination of its physical characteristics and presence informs the mental imagery in the speaker's imagination, creating the object image of earlier. In “Lament for The Dorsets”, the speaker's examination of the ivory swan's physical characteristics leads him to imagine “Kudluk”, the last Dorset tribesman. Kudluk is “some old hunter with one lame leg” (47), who has become a talented ivory carver. In the lines, Purdy's persona outlines Kudluk's creative process, and notably, how the physical characteristics of the ivory swan are created.

Let's say his name was Kudluk
 and watch him sitting there
 carving 2-inch ivory swans
 for a dead grand-daughter
 taking them out of his mind
 the places in his mind
 where pictures are
 he selects a sharp stone tool
 to gouge a parallel pattern of lines

on both sides of the swan
 holding it with his left hand
 bearing down and transmitting
 his body's weight
 from brain to arm and right hand
 and one of his thoughts
 turns to ivory. (51 – 66)

The manner in which Kudluk's thought turns to ivory is the second part of Objective Imagism. Kudluk has an image, from “the place in his mind / where pictures are” of a swan, the object of his creative process. He takes this object-image, and focusing on it, carves a new physical object, the poem's physical manifestation of the object-image, into being. For Purdy's persona, imagining the physical characteristics of the swan is the same creation process as Kudluk's carving. His focus on the swan's physical details, like the “parallel pattern of lines / on both sides” inspires and informs the image of Kudluk carving, creating it in “the place in [Purdy's] mind where pictures are”.

In “The Horseman of Agawa” the horseman's object-image inhabits the same inspirational place in the imaginative process as Kudluk's swan, but inspires Purdy's persona to articulate more about the imaginative process than the ivory swan does. Initially examining the “red iron oxide faded from Lake Superior storms” (17), the only truly material aspect of the object, inspires Purdy's persona to thoughts of how the unnamed artist:

drew with his fingers on the stone canvas
 with fish eggs or bear grease to make the painting permanent
 pitting fish eggs and bear grease against eternity. (21 – 23)

Purdy's persona is overwhelmed by the amount of ideas this thought inspires, saying that he has “too many thoughts about the horseman” and must struggle to select only one (25 – 26). Soon after, Purdy's

persona speaks of how the object-image affects not just his creative process, but his wife's. Here, Purdy's persona argues that the Ojibway horseman paints his wife with "red fingers" and that through this process the horseman can speak to her in a way he is unable to, through "pictures without handles of words" (images) and by a form of "direct transmission" (57 – 58). Purdy's persona hints that his wife and the artist communicate in a manner of thought which exists outside the Objective Imagism through which he himself communicates. Instead of communication in the purely Imagistic manner his wife and the artist communicate in, the poet must "change it all back into words again for that's the best I can do" (60). Purdy's persona seems capable of thinking and creating only in the terms of Objective Imagism—once he has been inspired by a physical object and created an object-image, he must change the object-image back into words to relate it and fully understand it—unlike his wife and the artist, who are able grasp meaning without this process. To Purdy's persona, the horseman is only "a signpost" (26), an object which leads to his imagining of an object-image. Yet in the process the pictograph inspires, the horseman is also "part of the spirit / a thought taken from inside the head and carefully left here" (29 – 30). Both Purdy's "chang[ing] it all back into words" and the unnamed artist's careful leaving are representative of the third part of Objective Imagism: how the artist, and in Purdy's case poet, reforms and immortalizes the object-image by changing it into a physical object once again.

Once the process of discovering and examining the object to create its object-image is finished, Purdy, as poet, writes about it. The writing process crystallizes his thoughts, and preserves the mental image, once a physical object, now physical words. In Purdy's "Trees at the Arctic Circle", after his harsh judgement of the small Arctic trees, Purdy's persona recognizes that he has "been carried away / in [his] scorn of the dwarf trees", and argues that he has "been stupid in a poem" (43 – 44). Instead of erasing, revising, or changing his stupidity, however, he decides that he will:

not alter the poem

but let the stupidity remain permanent

as the trees are

in a poem. (55 – 58)

Here is summed up the physical permanence that Purdy's persona invests in the written word. Once published, the poem is as solid an object as the rock face the horseman is painted on, or as the ivory swan Kudluk has left behind. For Purdy's persona, the word, in the same manner as the object, is capable of inspiring imagery, and is just as physical a thing as the objects which inspire the imagery in the first place. In "Lament For The Dorsets", this final part of Objective Imagism is shown in two ways—first in how the mental work of Kudluk, his "bearing down and transmitting ... from brain to arm and right hand" (63 – 65) becomes the physical object, the ivory swan, and second in how Purdy's imaginative thought process about Kudluk doing the work has been turned into the subject of the poem, into the physical object that was created because Purdy's persona examines the physical characteristics of the swan in the poem.

It is worth noting that Purdy's persona is fully aware of the effect the Objective Imagism has on his poetics. In "The Horseman of Agawa" the object-image of the horseman eventually inspires him to imagine the Horseman and "the ghosts of his friends in the tombs of their dust" (43), but the line breaks and Purdy's persona states that he "mistrust[s] the mind-quality that tempts me / to embroider and exaggerate things" (44 – 45). Coming out of his imagination, the speaker turns instead to his wife.

Examining her, he says:

I just watch my wife's face

she is quiet as she generally is because I do most of the talking

it is forty years old and has felt the pain of children

the pettiness of day-to-day living and getting thousands of meals

but standing on the rock face of Lake Superior

it is not lessened in any way

with a stillness of depth that reaches where I can't follow. (46 – 52)

I would argue that Purdy's persona mistrusts the “mind-quality”, Objective Imagism, because it is what demarcates him as artist—in this case the qualifier that separates him from his wife, whose face here becomes the physical object which informs the latter half of the poem. Her face's physical characteristics, “forty years old”, having lived through “pettiness” and childbirth, should inspire an object-image of a somewhat “weathered” face, and yet they do not necessarily. Instead, they remind Purdy's persona of the stillness and depth his wife possesses. Because he notices this, he is inspired by the object-image to see the Ojibway horseman painting within her mind in the Pound-esque Imagistic manner he can never attain, being forced to “change it all back into words” (60) to understand it himself. He must re-ground his object-image in the text, not only to elucidate the imaginative process, but to turn the entirety of that process into permanent poetry.

Though Purdy never wrote openly of the religious or spiritual connotations of “things” in his work—at least in the manner of Tim Heath's “Reliquary Poetics”, I believe that Purdy's “embroidery of things” has this connotation. After all, what is Objective Imagism, if not the process Freud and H.D. wrote about—the process wherein “Goods” are turned into “Gods”, the tangible and physical becoming imaginary and mental, and yet somehow permanent still?

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