Al Purdy, Marius Barbeau, and the Poetry of Myth: A Bibliographical Note on a Forgotten Manuscript

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Al Purdy was a phenomenally prolific author. From the 1960s until the end of the century, it was unusual if more than a few years passed without the arrival of a substantial volume of his poems, and the results of his sustained productivity are milestones in the history of Canadian poetry: *Poems for All the Annettes* (1962), *The Cariboo Horses* (1965), *North of Summer* (1967), *Wild Grape Wine* (1968), *Sex and Death* (1973), *In Search of Owen Roblin* (1974), *Sundance at Dusk* (1976), and so on.¹ The list only concludes with *Beyond Remembering: The Collected Poems of Al Purdy*, a retrospective anthology published shortly after his death in 2000. Purdy's works appeared frequently in literary journals, popular magazines, and newspapers, and only a small number of Canadian authors, poets or otherwise, matched his public reputation. From 1965 until 1994, his major collections of poetry were issued by McClelland and Stewart, the country's most prominent literary publisher.² Readers of the *Globe and Mail* might have noticed "The Horseman of Agawa" or "A Handful of Earth" in the newspaper's pages, and subscribers to *Maclean's* magazine could have followed Purdy's dispatches from his travels across Canada.³

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¹ Milestones, but not necessarily monuments. Purdy revised and recycled his poems routinely, and not every book was wholly original. For instance, "The Quarrel," "Remains of an Indian Village," and "Spring Song," from the first edition of *Poems for All the Annettes*, reappeared in altered form years later in *Wild Grape Wine*. His major volumes, however, represent significant moments in Canadian literary history.

² Books, broadsides, and other rarities by Purdy were published by small presses throughout his career. He travelled in the moonless, ephemeral world inhabited by most poets, but the works for which he is best known circulated in the mainstream of Canadian letters; his poetry was uncommonly visible.

³ "The Horseman of Agawa" was published in the *Globe Magazine* (25 July 1970) and "A Handful of Earth" in the *Globe and Mail* (26 November 1977). For a partial list of his magazine articles, see Al Purdy, *Starting from Ameliasburgh: The*

Few Canadian cultural institutions, it seems, escaped Purdy's gravity, or he theirs; he was involved at various times with the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, the National Film Board, and even the Hudson's Bay Company.⁴ His works have been treated relatively often and in some cases thoroughly: George Bowering's *Al Purdy* (1970) was the first long study; Sam Solecki's *The Last Canadian Poet: An Essay on Al Purdy* (1999) is the most comprehensive account of the poetry; and *The Ivory Thought: Essays on Al Purdy* (2008), edited by Gerald Lynch, Shoshannah Ganz, and Josephene T. M. Kealey, offers a range of interpretations. Although Purdy's titanic oeuvre has not been examined exhaustively, no little attention has been devoted by commentators to his poetry – and to his permanent place in Canadian letters.

Given his record of publication and the scholarly reception of his works, it is somewhat surprising that any of Purdy's literary efforts remain to be discovered. His archives have been explored, but they nonetheless conceal a host of unnoticed compositions in addition to an immense amount of biographical information. Several volumes could be assembled of his unpublished poems, and his correspondence and writing in other genres (essays and radio plays, for instance) await critical scrutiny, editorial care, and compilation. Any serious author would be expected, over the course of a long career, to abandon projects – not every image leads to an immortal lyric, nor every thought to an insightful meditation – and Purdy's papers divulge innumerable failed poems. But one forsaken manuscript stands apart because of its divergence from his habitual style and subjects: "Yehl the Raven and Other Creation Myths of the Haida." The unpublished sequence of poems illustrates Purdy's ethnographic interests and represents a point of contact between modern Canadian literature and mid-century anthropology. Early in the 1960s, Purdy wrote his "Creation Myths" by adapting narratives found in the studies of Marius Barbeau (1883–1969), the Canadian folklorist and ethnographer. He attempted to publish the resultant

Collected Prose of Al Purdy, edited by Sam Solecki (Madeira Park, BC: Harbour Publishing, 1995), 391.

- ⁴ Purdy's "Arctic Rhododendrons" (a poem collected in *North of Summer*) and "Whoever You Are" (a poem collected in the second edition of *Poems for All the Annettes* [1968]) were purchased by the Bay as part of a literary patronage scheme. See Michael Ross and Lorraine York, "Imperial Commerce and the Canadian Muse: The Hudson's Bay Company's Poetic Advertising Campaign of 1966–1972," *Canadian Literature* 220 (Spring 2014): 37–53 (37, 46–47, 50–51).

poems as a short book. “Yehl the Raven” never appeared in print, however, and although the manuscript has not been utterly invisible to Purdy’s colleagues and critics, it has been mischaracterized, unappreciated, and essentially overlooked. Nor have its origins and virtual disappearance yet been explained. In the pages that follow, I aim to describe the manuscript and to suggest why it merits perusal. Purdy’s enormous body of published poetry beggars the synoptic reader’s efforts to understand his literary life as a whole, and the unpublished papers only compound the critical problems engendered by seemingly limitless words. But “Yehl the Raven,” an obscurity of dubious aesthetic accomplishment, offers to elucidate aspects of Purdy’s creative life that have been all but ignored, including certain incipient intellectual passions and artistic false starts. At the same time, “Yehl the Raven” shows that at the outset of his career as a mature writer, Purdy was determined to render his poetry a means of exploring Canadian history and geography, broadly understood – even if doing so took him away from personal experience and his home in southern Ontario.

In *Al Purdy*, Bowering announced – with customary irreverence – his subject’s early interest in Barbeau:

In 1960 Purdy received his first Canada Council fellowship, and typically he decided not to live off the money in Spain or France, but rather to head for the Cariboo, which he had visited while he was in the air force. He had all kinds of grandiose ideas about his project, such as writing an opera about the life of the Indians, and it was around this time that he was often reported to be writing an epic based on Haida myths as described in the works of Marius Barbeau and published by the Canadian government. Very Canadian stuff. All that has surfaced from this time are Purdy’s poems about the northern interior of British Columbia, but they are enough to pay off the Canada Council investment.⁵

Bowering gave no indication that the “epic” was anything more than an unfulfilled ambition – evidence, that is, of Purdy’s wayward fascinations. Concentrating instead on Purdy’s published works, he did not mention the “Haida myths” again, and the possible or actual existence of the epic – to say nothing of the opera – has not been taken seriously by later commentators.

In *The Last Canadian Poet*, Solecki referred in passing to Purdy’s “unpublished translations of Haida myths,” and the correspondence

⁵ George Bowering, *Al Purdy* (Toronto: Copp Clark, 1970), 8.

gathered in Purdy's *Collected Letters* (2004) includes two partially clarifying passages.⁶ In 1990 Purdy wrote, in a letter to the author Steven Heighton, that he had found among his own papers "a manuscript of Indian myths adapted from Marius Barbeau in 1963," which he newly wanted to publish.⁷ Solecki observed in his editorial note that the "versions of Barbeau's transcriptions of 'Indian myths' have not been published."⁸ And in 1991 Purdy conveyed to George Woodcock – the Canadian man of letters was an influential supporter of Purdy's writing – that the unearthed manuscript, having been sent to the Oberon Press to no avail, was soon to be brought out by Harbour Publishing.⁹ Evidently he revised the manuscript between July 1990 and the following April. Yet no book was published, as Solecki wrote again, and the adaptations have not to my knowledge been noted elsewhere.¹⁰ The documents that provide the necessary explanatory details have languished unread. The poet's archive, made up of collections at several Canadian universities, is so extensive and labyrinthine that an accurate picture of the complete corpus is vexingly difficult to obtain. Purdy was an idiosyncratic organizer of his papers (literary, financial, and personal). In 1969 he wrote, in a letter to Douglas O. Spettigue, a professor of English at Queen's University involved in the acquisition of Purdy's files, that "the papers themselves are contained in seven cardboard cartons, each approximately the size of a liquor case."¹¹ (Decades later he included, in a similar message to the archivist Shirley Spragge, an important consideration: "The boxes I mentioned are mostly whiskey boxes, not from my drinking I hasten to assure you. One picks them up free at the Belleville liquor store.")¹² Over time, the seven cartons became a vast, nearly chaotic accumulation of documents at Queen's, and the challenge of discerning order in that collection and the others has

⁶ Sam Solecki, *The Last Canadian Poet: An Essay on Al Purdy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), 43.

⁷ Al Purdy, *Yours, Al: The Collected Letters of Al Purdy*, edited by Sam Solecki (Madeira Park, BC: Harbour Publishing, 2004), 453. The date of the letter is 5 July 1990.

⁸ Ibid., 453n2.

⁹ Ibid., 460. The date of Purdy's letter to Woodcock is 9 April 1991.

¹⁰ Ibid., 460n1.

¹¹ Qtd. in Jeremy M. Heil, "The Procrustean Bed: A History of the Arrangement of the Al Purdy Fonds," *Archivaria* 76 (Fall 2013): 27–54 (32). Purdy's papers are not held exclusively by Queen's, but the principles of archival collection and organization that Heil examines are broadly relevant.

¹² Qtd. in *ibid.*, 33n9.

literary-historical consequences: even Purdy's most loyal readers do not know the extent of his writing.

Alex Widen was a friend of the poet's in the early 1990s, and for a time he served as an unofficial researcher on Purdy's behalf. Widen edited Purdy's *Reaching for the Beaufort Sea: An Autobiography* (1993) and collaborated with him on the publication of *Cougar Hunter: A Memoir of Roderick Haig-Brown* (1992); financial matters related to the latter book led to disagreement and brought the relationship to an unhappy close. Correspondence between Widen and Eurithe Purdy, Al Purdy's widow, indicates that Widen found "Yehl the Raven" in the Queen's University Archives in 1990, and that Purdy had him send a revised version of the poetic sequence to Harbour Publishing the following year.¹³ Widen also stumbled upon a version of "Yehl the Raven" at the University of British Columbia.¹⁴ Although in 1990 Purdy drafted a new preface and made minor alterations to the poems, the manuscript was not published by Harbour – nor by any other press – and for more than twenty-five years it has lingered quietly and undisturbed amid his archived papers. Because Purdy revised the poems that Widen exhumed, "Yehl the Raven" now exists in several versions – two from the 1960s and a third from 1990–91.

The University of Saskatchewan holds a typescript sent by Purdy (from Ameliasburgh, Ontario) to Barbeau (in Ottawa), who returned it; that copy is, I believe, the oldest surviving version of "Yehl the Raven." It is composed of Purdy's preface, on which he wrote by hand a brief note to Barbeau, and eighteen typewritten pages of poetry. It is accompanied by a perfunctory letter, dated 5 August 1963, from Barbeau to Purdy.¹⁵ The manuscript at the University of British Columbia was revised by Purdy in 1966.¹⁶ Various copies of "Yehl the Raven" are held at Queen's. One file contains a copy of the Saskatchewan manuscript and the letter from Barbeau.¹⁷ Another file

¹³ Alex Widen, letter to Eurithe Purdy, 12 September 2011. Al Purdy Fonds, Queen's University Archives: Location 2210.4, Box 1, Folder 8.

¹⁴ Alex Widen, letter to Al Purdy and Eurithe Purdy, n.d. [1990]. Al Purdy Fonds, Queen's University Archives: Location 5002.5, Box 2, Folder 6.

¹⁵ Al Purdy, "Yehl the Raven and Other [Creation] Myths of the Haida." Al Purdy Papers, University Archives and Special Collections, University of Saskatchewan: Mss 4, Box 5, Folder 15.

¹⁶ Alfred Purdy Fonds, University of British Columbia Rare Books and Special Collections: RBSC-ARC-1452, File 1.

¹⁷ Al Purdy Fonds, Queen's University Archives: Location 2210.4, Box 1, Folder 8.

includes a copy of the Saskatchewan manuscript without the letter.¹⁸ A third file includes a copy of Barbeau's letter, the revised preface of 1990, twenty-five pages of revised and retyped poems, and the same poems composed on a computer, as opposed to Purdy's typewriter.¹⁹ Yet another file contains what I assume to be the original typewritten pages of the revised poems of 1990.²⁰ The confusing existence of numerous documents – both originals and duplicates – is due to the many hands engaged in the manuscript's near-publication – first Purdy, and then Purdy and Widen, and then, after Al Purdy's death, Widen and Eurithe Purdy. Additional copies of Purdy's renderings of the "Creation Myths" may yet be located at Queen's or elsewhere.

The early version of "Yehl the Raven" – the Saskatchewan typescript and the copies of it – bears the typewritten title "Yehl the Raven and Other Myths of the Haida": Purdy added the word *Creation* by hand before "Myths."²¹ In addition to the brief preface in prose, there are thirteen poems:

1. "Prologue"
2. "Haida Genesis"
3. "How Yehl Stole the Sun and Moon"
4. "How Yehl Brought Water to the People"
5. "How Yehl Gave the People Salmon"
6. "Bear-Mother"
7. "Strong-Man"
8. "Nanasimgat"
9. "Salmon-Eater"
10. "The Woodworm of Masset"
11. "Thunderbird"
12. "Dzelarhons"
13. "Epilogue"

The "Prologue" concerns the revelation of Yehl the Raven to Charles Edenshaw – called "Charley" in the poem – a Haida carver about whom Barbeau wrote. (Purdy and Barbeau used the spelling *Edensaw*.)

¹⁸ Al Purdy Fonds, Queen's University Archives: Location 2071, Box 11, Folder 3 [marked 89].

¹⁹ Al Purdy Fonds, Queen's University Archives: Location 5002.5, Box 2, Folder 25.

²⁰ Al Purdy Fonds, Queen's University Archives: Location 5147, Box 10, Folder 4. Copies of the documents herein are found in another file (Location 5002.5, Box 2, Folder 25).

²¹ Purdy, "Yehl the Raven," University of Saskatchewan: Mss 4, Box 5, Folder 15. Subsequent quotations of "Yehl the Raven" are drawn from this manuscript.

The following eleven poems are, as the preface suggests, adaptations of myths that Purdy encountered in Barbeau's books, which he did not name. (The poems are not translations, as Solecki stated in a pardonable slip.)²² The "Epilogue" depicts the sordid skid row of contemporary Vancouver and the grim reality of "the last carver"; the poem is comparable to Purdy's other works of the time, which often attend to urban extremity in a hard-boiled manner:

In the streets of Vancouver
 there is a last Edensaw,
 the last carver become a garage mechanic,
 listening to the missing innards of a Chevrolet,
 grease on his fingers, grained in his marvellous old fingers –

...

There is a time of ending for the last Edensaw²³

Although there is more to the "Epilogue" than the stereotype of the vanishing Indian, the poem is likely to strike readers today as, if not an outright *bêtise*, an objectionable expression of the misconception that traditional cultures were on the verge of disappearance. But if Purdy imagined Haida culture to exist in a state of decline as a consequence of colonization, he also allowed, in his fashion, for the possibility of revival. The poem concludes by suggesting that "Yehl the Raven" was "waiting to be alive again – [.]"

The preface to "Yehl the Raven" provides some indication of Purdy's ambitions, his anthropological interests, and his method of adaptation:

My intention in this book is to relate the Haida myths as simply and entertainingly as possible. Also by intention, I've left my own fingerprints on each of them. Such an obvious anomaly as "from the sea bottom ooze of human beginnings" in the Salmon Eater myth must be forgiven. For "human beginnings" stemmed from a clam shell in one of the creation myths of Yehl the Raven.

All of these myths are taken from books by Marius Barbeau, published by the National Museum of Canada. And I think there are no other books that can in any way match those of Barbeau for the richness and detail of their information. Any farther [*sic*] study must inevitably send the reader back to this admirable source.

²² Solecki, *Last Canadian Poet*, 43.

²³ "Urban extremity": "The Machines" and "Towns" are illustrative. Both poems were gathered in *The Blur in Between: Poems 1960–61* (1962).

Among my reasons for re-telling these myths at all is their own multiplicity. Some of them are given in a dozen versions, like bewildering palimpsests with slight variations of incident and language. To add to the general confusion the Haida myths are mostly borrowed from other tribes on the mainland, principally Tsimshyan. The Haida carvers appropriated these old stories and embodie[d] them in scrimshawed argillite, a slate-like stone found in a mountain quarry near Skidegate in the Queen Charlottes. Charley Edensaw was one of the best of these carvers in argillite. Barbeau regards him as a master, and what can I do but concur in that judgment. Edensaw was a chief among his people. He died at the age of 85 in 1924 –

One more thing: the Prologue and Epilogue of this volume are entirely my own invention. And again, may I say to Marius Barbeau: thank you.

The remarkable nature of the manuscript is immediately apparent: the contents show that in the years before his first true literary successes and his concomitant celebrity, Purdy wrote a series of poems altogether different, in topic and style alike, from his other works. “Yehl the Raven” reveals him to have been a more attentive reader of ethnographic literature than has been acknowledged, and a more enthusiastic student of the mythology of the Northwest Coast – even if he struggled to transform his source material into consistently satisfying poetry.

Although his preface refers only generally to “books by Marius Barbeau, published by the National Museum of Canada,” Purdy’s discussion of argillite suggests that his primary source was Barbeau’s *Haida Myths Illustrated in Argillite Carvings* (1953). The poems correspond closely to sections of that book, their similarities lexical as well as narrative and thematic; Barbeau’s *Haida Carvers in Argillite* (1957) is also clearly relevant. Both volumes were published by the National Museum of Canada – “[v]ery Canadian stuff” indeed.²⁴ *Haida Myths* is at once a catalogue, commentary, and compendium of myths both in the author’s paraphrase and as related by ethnographic informants. Barbeau used photographs of Haida sculptures to illustrate myths narrated, in large measure, not on the Queen Charlotte Islands (as Haida Gwaii was then known) but on the mainland of British Columbia by storytellers who were not themselves Haida. He wrote that carving in argillite was a recently developed practice that originated in coastal trade, and proposed

²⁴ Bowering, *Al Purdy*, 8.

Purdy's poems often depart only slightly from Barbeau's texts. It is almost impossible to say whether he borrowed phrases deliberately or inadvertently, or whether he would have relinquished the loan words had he further revised the poems for publication in the 1960s; but there can be no doubt that the poetry in its unfinished state is highly derivative. Here, for example, are the somewhat repetitious first lines of "How Yehl Stole the Sun and Moon":

The Raven, in his wanderings among the islands,
heard of an old fisherman living with his daughter
on North Island – in a lodge on a rocky island.
The old man kept two bright balls of light
called the sun and moon
hidden away in a box beside his lodge by the sea:
a greater light and a lesser light,
of which one should rule the day
and the other rule the night.
These were marvellous tales to Yehl the Raven,
who loved all brightness.

Barbeau included in *Haida Myths* a précis of the story of “how the Raven stole the Sun or the Moon and cast it into the sky where it has stayed as a luminary ever since,” which he deemed a “crucial episode of the beginning of the world.”²⁶ Purdy’s verse is highly similar to the prose of Barbeau’s text, which was attributed to “‘Captain’ Andrew Brown of Massett.”²⁷ It begins: “One day Raven learned that the old fisherman living alone with his daughter at North Island kept a ball of bright light, called the moon, hidden in his lodge by the sea.

²⁵ Marius Barbeau, *Haida Myths Illustrated in Argillite Carvings* (Ottawa: National Museum of Canada, 1953), 178.

²⁶ Barbeau, *Haida Myths*, 167, 169.

²⁷ Ibid., 167.

He craved its possession.”²⁸ Purdy did not leave his source material unchanged, but neither is his adaptation especially original. If he was captivated by the myths, and if he sensed that the narratives could be told effectively in verse, it appears that he also failed to find his own idiom for their retelling.

Other anthropological works may have figured in Purdy’s reading. *The Indian Speaks* (1943), by Barbeau and Grace Melvin, includes texts related culturally and geographically to Purdy’s adaptations. Among them are “The Last Pagan,” derived “[f]rom songs and records of the Nass River”; “Ananai!,” adapted “[f]rom a story told in 1939, at Massett, Queen Charlotte Islands, by Peter Hill, a Haida”; and “The Owl,” derived “[f]rom a Gitksan song, recorded in 1920, on the upper Skeena River.”²⁹ Still other texts in the anthology are directly connected to Purdy’s poems: “Thunderbird,” derived “[f]rom rituals and songs of the Nass and Skeena River Indians”; “Yehl,” as “[t]old, in 1939, by Ot’iwans, Big-Eagle – whose surname [sic] is Captain Andrew Brown – of the Haida tribe of Massett”; and “Raven Steals the Moon,” derived “[f]rom a narrative recorded in 1939; narrator: Captain Andrew Brown, a Haida of the Queen Charlotte Islands.”³⁰ In the rendition of Barbeau and Melvin, “Yehl” begins in a mode that evokes the Book of Genesis: “Yehl – Raven, in the beginning, was like a god; he called things forth out of nothing, and many, many of them came to be.”³¹ Purdy may have drawn on this story in writing his “Haida Genesis,” in which the Biblical parallel is explicit, or he may simply have shared with Barbeau and Melvin the opinion that the stories of Raven deserved (or demanded) an exalted tone. (The poem’s Biblical title and motif may also stem from *Haida Myths*.)³² Other close correspondences occur. Barbeau and Melvin wrote in “Yehl” that “[a] tiny human face appeared in the center of the shell,” and Purdy wrote comparably in “Haida Genesis” that “a small human face appeared in the opening shell.”³³ The shared subject excuses a general sameness, but distinctly

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Marius Barbeau and Grace Melvin, *The Indian Speaks* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1943), 48, 53, 57. The italicized phrases appear here as they do in the original.

³⁰ Ibid., 56, 114, 117. “Raven Steals the Moon”: the passage from this story in *Haida Myths* – which I quoted earlier – is found in *The Indian Speaks* in a slightly different form (ibid., 115).

³¹ Ibid., 113.

³² Barbeau used the phrase “Haida Genesis” repeatedly. See, for example, Barbeau, *Haida Myths*, 158, 167.

³³ Barbeau and Melvin, *Indian Speaks*, 113.

similar phrasings – in this poem as elsewhere – intimate that Purdy read Barbeau's books not wisely but too well.

In general, the poems in the "Yehl the Raven" manuscript betray Purdy's debts. In "How Yehl Brought Water to the People" and "How Yehl Gave the People Salmon" as well as in "Haida Genesis," he used the formulaic phrase that plainly suggests the Old Testament: "In the beginning ..." Other hints of Genesis are found throughout the sequence, and the "Epilogue" echoes Ecclesiastes 3:1–8:

There is a time of ending for the last Edensaw,
a time for not carving any more at all,
a time for not taking in marriage,
a time for not conceiving and not being born,
and not even living any longer,
a time for nothing.

Some of Purdy's possible borrowings are less obvious. The term "nightstars" (in "How Yehl Gave the People Salmon") resembles other compounds in the "Yehl the Raven" sequence, but the poeticism may originate in the literary past – in Shelley, for example: "Till the night-stars shone through the cloudless air."³⁴ Does the phrase "stones in a stopped throat" (in "Strong-Man") allude to Parmenides? Was "sea roads" (in "Nanasimgat") intended to summon up *whale-road*, the famous Anglo-Saxon kenning? Purdy probably did not recall lines from Robert Lowell's "The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket" – "This is the end of the whaleroad and the whale / Who spewed Nantucket bones on the thrashed swell"³⁵ – but conceivably he knew "sea-roads" from G.K. Chesterton's "Lepanto."³⁶ Earle Birney's "Mappemounde," which would seem a likely source because of Purdy's well-established appreciation of his poetry, does not contain the word, although it includes "whalehall."³⁷ Birney's "Beyond the Meadhall" does use

³⁴ Percy Bysshe Shelley, *The Complete Poetry of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, vol. 1, edited by Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 112. The line occurs in a poem ("Ballad") from *St. Irvyne; or, The Rosicrucian: A Romance*.

³⁵ Robert Lowell, *Lord Weary's Castle* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1946), 11.

³⁶ G. K. Chesterton, *Poems* (London: Burns and Oates, 1917), 17. Purdy was a great admirer of Chesterton's writing – an unfashionable influence, but important regardless. See Al Purdy, *Reaching for the Beaufort Sea: An Autobiography*, edited by Alex Widen (Madeira Park, BC: Harbour Publishing, 1993), 135, 215, 285–86; and Solecki, *Last Canadian Poet*, 57, 224, 232, 275n16.

³⁷ Earle Birney, *The Strait of Anian: Selected Poems* (Toronto: Ryerson, 1948), 4. "Appreciation": see Earle Birney and Al Purdy, *We Go Far Back in Time: The*

“whaleroad,” but the poem was written long after “Yehl the Raven.”³⁸ A thorough study or a critical edition will, in due course, explicate such resemblances, whether Biblical or secular.

At the time of the composition of “Yehl the Raven,” Barbeau was a venerable figure, and Purdy must have believed that he was drawing on the authoritative scholarship of an eminence. Readers today may be less accepting of Barbeau’s works, not least because of what they partly conceal. Although *Haida Myths Illustrated in Argillite Carvings* and related volumes were published under Barbeau’s name, they were not the result of his labours alone. “William Beynon, the author’s Tsimshyan assistant in the field since 1915,” Barbeau wrote in his acknowledgements in *Haida Myths*, “has either interpreted or recorded most of the narratives, unless they were from printed sources as quoted.”³⁹ Ralph Maud observed of *Haida Myths* that “Barbeau has seven stories to Beynon’s twenty-three”: Beynon (1888–1958) was a major contributor to the ethnography of the Northwest Coast, but his collaboration with Barbeau was consigned to the background in *Haida Myths* and other studies, even when his importance was granted.⁴⁰ Recent commentators have tended not to view him as a subordinate figure.⁴¹ An additional problem is ideological. Barbeau thought that Northwestern traditions formed part of a global store of ancient stories. That presumption suggests, at present, not a benign ecumenism but instead the dire history of anthropological salvage: “Although the myths or tales all belong to the Haida, they are not their

Letters of Earle Birney and Al Purdy, 1947–1987, edited by Nicholas Bradley (Madeira Park, BC: Harbour Publishing, 2014). Purdy’s friendship with Birney spanned decades.

³⁸ Earle Birney, *Last Makings* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1991), 3. In *Last Makings* the poem is dated 1985. See M.J. Toswell, “Earle Birney as Anglo-Saxon Scop: A Canadian ‘Shaper’ of Poetry?,” *Canadian Poetry: Studies, Documents, Reviews* 54 (Spring/Summer 2004): 12–36 (12–14, 30).

³⁹ Barbeau, *Haida Myths*, viii.

⁴⁰ Ralph Maud, *A Guide to B.C. Indian Myth and Legend: A Short History of Myth-Collecting and a Survey of Published Texts* (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1982), 129.

⁴¹ See, for example, Margery Fee, “Rewriting Anthropology and Identifications on the North Pacific Coast: The Work of George Hunt, William Beynon, Franz Boas, and Marius Barbeau,” *Australian Literary Studies* 25, no. 4 (2010): 17–32. Fee writes that although Beynon and George Hunt were “[r]ecruited as interpreters, both are now regarded as anthropologists in their own right” (17). Beynon’s distinctive significance as an ethnographer is made apparent in William Beynon, *Potlatch at Gitsegukla: William Beynon’s 1945 Field Notebooks*, edited by Margaret Anderson and Marjorie Halpin (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2000).

monopoly. They form only a minor branch on a huge mythological tree which belongs to most of humanity. This cultural growth at first germinated and developed in the Old World – Asia and Europe; then, during the last millenia [*sic*], it spread by oral transmission in migratory tribes to the New World at large, and then to the Haida on the Queen Charlotte Islands in the North Pacific.”⁴² “Yehl the Raven” is unquestionably a work of the 1960s, the poetry like all literature indisputably of its time. Yet Purdy’s writing, whatever its faults, implies that he understood well enough that Indigenous peoples had not disappeared from British Columbia or from Canada at large, and that he was forever a foreigner in the Haida and Tsimshian worlds, even if the mythology seemed to offer an enticing solution to a Canadian cultural “problem” that Birney identified in “Pacific Door”: “that there is no clear Strait of Anian / to lead us easy back to Europe.”⁴³ The manuscript in its miscellaneous forms may not accord with contemporary tastes and values, but “Yehl the Raven” evinces an interest and admiration that, if nothing else, show Purdy to have been attracted to the possibility of cross-cultural understanding.⁴⁴ (His licence to adapt the myths was assumed, although he did not claim to have anthropological expertise.)

As I noted, Purdy revised his preface in 1990. The poems themselves remained essentially the same as in the 1960s, but the new beginning emphasized his regard for his sources: “I hope the spirit of my intentions shows my respect for the Haida, as they respected

⁴² Barbeau, *Haida Myths*, vii. “Anthropological salvage”: see Pauline Wakeham, “Salvaging Sound at Last Sight: Marius Barbeau and the Anthropological ‘Rescue’ of *Nass River Indians*,” *English Studies in Canada* 30, no. 3 (September 2004): 57–88.

⁴³ Birney, *Strait of Anian*, 37.

⁴⁴ Bowering suggested that Purdy’s sympathy for “the Tsimshian Indians” – and by implication other Indigenous peoples – was tied to his characteristic resistance to authority: “He is deeply and habitually allied with the underdogs in a country and a world that allow bosses to ignore or suppress the underdogs. So Purdy is seen with the mattress workers, with the Tsimshian Indians of the British Columbia interior, with the Sons of Freedom on their freedom march to Agassiz prison, with the Eskimo hunters of Baffin Island” (*Al Purdy*, 7). A similar characterization was advanced in the cover copy of *The Cariboo Horses*, which likewise referred to “the Tsimshian Indians”: “Alfred Purdy has travelled widely in Canada and has published in many Canadian literary magazines. Born in Wooler, Ontario, he spent six years with the RCAF, owned a taxi business in Belleville, tried introducing a union into a Vancouver mattress factory, and lived with the Tsimshian Indians in the interior of British Columbia” (Alfred Purdy, *The Cariboo Horses* [Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1965]).

the bear spirit and the salmon spirit among the vast tribe of living creatures on the earth.”⁴⁵ Ultimately, however, “Yehl the Raven” was left incomplete and unpublished, and how the poems would have been received had they been issued, and what new creative endeavours might have succeeded them, can only be imagined. Purdy’s career ran in other directions instead. Students of his poetry will recall that he portrayed Barbeau in a late collection, *To Paris Never Again* (1997). “Marius Barbeau: 1883–1969” begins with a recollection that foregrounds the ethnographer’s eccentricity:

In 1968
a little old man dancing
at home near downtown Ottawa
demonstrating western Indian dances
out of courtesy to a visitor – :

wearing a feathered headdress
and beaded buckskin jacket
ducking his head and beating a drum
chanting *HI-yah HI-yah HI-yah*
the sound part animal part human
circling the dark dinner table
and old-fashioned sideboard

⁴⁵ Purdy dated the revised preface: 28 July 1990 (Al Purdy, “Yehl the Raven and Other Creation Myths of the Haida [1990].” Al Purdy Fonds, Queen’s University Archives: Location 5002.5, Box 2, Folder 6). The year before Purdy made his alterations, Mordecai Richler published the satirical novel *Solomon Gursky Was Here*, in which he drew on Haida mythology: “‘According to the Haidas, of the unfortunately named Queen Charlotte Islands, more properly Haida Gwaii [*sic*], the Islands of the People,’ Sir Hyman once said to Moses, ‘according to them, before there was anything, before the great flood had covered the earth and receded, before the animals walked the earth or the trees covered the land or the birds flew between the trees, there was the raven’” (Mordecai Richler, *Solomon Gursky Was Here* [Toronto: Penguin, 2005], 479). In his author’s note, Richler wrote that he was “indebted to *The Raven Steals the Light* [1984], by Bill Reid and Robert Bringhurst, for the Haida myths” (ibid., 540). The note appeared in the paperback edition of 1990, but not in the first edition of the novel (Mordecai Richler, *Solomon Gursky Was Here* [Markham, ON: Viking, 1989], 559). Whether Purdy and Alex Widen perceived the coincidence, or any unintended connection between “Yehl the Raven” and Richler’s novel, their correspondence does not disclose. On the Haida stories in *Solomon Gursky Was Here*, see Linda Morra, “The Anti-Trickster in the Work of Sheila Watson, Mordecai Richler, and Gail Anderson-Dargatz,” in *Troubling Tricksters: Revisioning Critical Conversations*, edited by Deanna Reder and Linda M. Morra (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2010), 77–91 (83–86).

his feet tremulous
age too much for him[.]⁴⁶

The performance was unorthodox – today it appears scandalously improper – and the speaker (a version of Purdy) remembers being “slightly embarrassed for him.”⁴⁷ But in the poem’s lyric present, the speaker admits to feeling “embarrassed that I was embarrassed,” for he realizes that Barbeau was profoundly moved, and even entranced, by the people and landscapes of Tsimshian and Gitksan country – as was the speaker himself: “faintly in my own lifetime / [I] have glimpsed the shining mountains.”⁴⁸ And here any distinction between poet and persona threatens to vanish. Purdy spent part of the Second World War stationed in northern British Columbia, and he returned as a tourist; his experiences of the region, on the evidence of his writing, stayed with him throughout his life.⁴⁹ If “Yehl the Raven” led away from what became his typical mode and his perennial subject, the manuscript and its ethnographic impulse were also entwined with that very theme – himself.

RÉSUMÉ

Les œuvres publiées du poète Al Purdy (1918–2000) sont bien connues des lecteurs assidus d’ouvrages littéraires canadiens. Toutefois, les archives de l’auteur, fort considérables, contiennent plusieurs autres textes qui n’ont pas été édités. Par conséquent, l’importance et l’étendue de la carrière littéraire de Purdy ne peuvent être appréhendées qu’en examinant de près ses écrits qui sont demeurés jusqu’à ce jour inédits. Un manuscrit datant du début des années 1960, « Yehl the Raven and Other Creation Myths of the Haida », illustre à quel point les archives représentent un apport essentiel à l’étude

⁴⁶ Al Purdy, *To Paris Never Again* (Madeira Park, BC: Harbour Publishing, 1997), 31.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid. Purdy’s poetic self-reproach will be recognized and appreciated by his faithful readers. The move from embarrassment to understanding in “Marius Barbeau: 1883–1969” is a variation on the celebrated self-criticism of “Trees at the Arctic Circle”: “I have been stupid in a poem / I will not alter the poem / but let the stupidity remain permanent” (Alfred Purdy, *North of Summer: Poems from Baffin Island* [Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1967], 30).

⁴⁹ See Purdy, *Reaching for the Beaufort Sea*, 98–99.

de l'œuvre de Purdy. Cette suite de poèmes témoigne des intérêts ethnographiques de l'auteur et représente un point de contact entre la littérature canadienne du xx^e siècle et l'anthropologie. Elle montre également que le poète se consacra pendant un certain temps à un type d'écriture complètement distinct de la veine autobiographique et anecdotique qui est représentative de l'ensemble de son œuvre et sur laquelle repose son entière réputation. Pour écrire «Yehl the Raven», Purdy adapta des récits de l'œuvre du folkloriste et ethnographe canadien Marius Barbeau (1883–1969). Il tenta ensuite de colliger ses poèmes dans un court recueil, mais «Yehl the Raven» ne fut jamais publié. Cet article décrit le manuscrit et suggère des pistes de réflexion quant à ces textes inédits, qui méritent l'attention des critiques et des chercheurs.