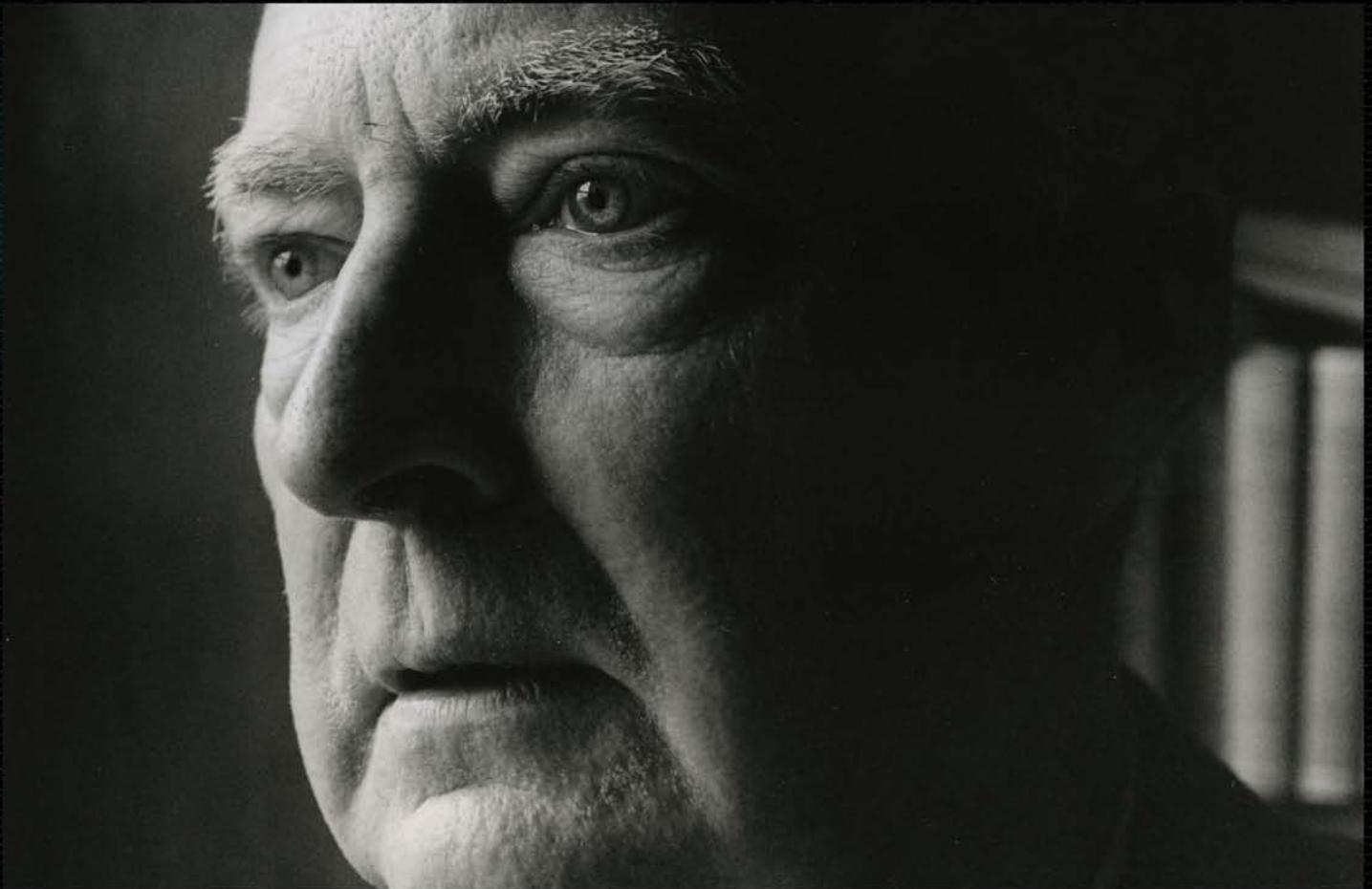


HYPERION

On the future of aesthetics

Volume • VI • • • • • Issue • 1 • • • • • March • 2011

Special Issue



James Purdy

July 17, 1914 – March 13, 2009

published by the Nietzsche Circle

Volume • VI • • • • • Issue • 1 • • • • • March • 2011**B o a r d • o f • A d v i s o r s**

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**SPECIAL ISSUE: JAMES PURDY
JULY 17, 1914 – MARCH 13, 2009**

**This issue is dedicated to the memory of Jan Erik Bouman,
friend to and supporter of James Purdy.**



***Hyperion* is published by the Nietzsche Circle**

Senior Editor: Rainer J. Hanshe

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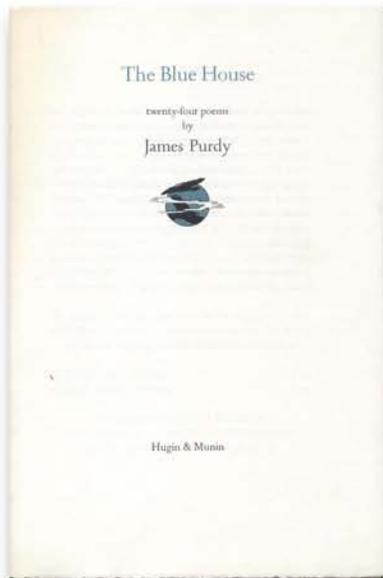
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Left: James Purdy and Jan Erik Bouman
Right: James Purdy photographed by Jan Erik Bouman



Fine Printing First Editions of James Purdy

James Purdy, *The Blue House. Twenty-four poems*. Utrecht: Hugin & Munin, 2004, 1st ed., wrappers, 39 p., 22,5 x 15 cm., 80 copies, numbered and signed. 21 poems, mainly written between 1988 and 2001, and 3 poems from an earlier publication (1959) in the Italian quarterly *Botteghe Oscure*. One of 62 copies in wrappers. € 50,00

James Purdy, *Brawith. A Story*. Utrecht-Netherlands: Hugin & Munin, 1999, first ed., orig. wrappers, 30 p., 24 x 16 cm., 75 copies. One of 57 sewn copies. Handset in Walbaum and printed in red and black on Zerkall-Edelweiss by Jan Erik Bouman. € 45,00

James Purdy, *Kitty Blue, a fairy tale*. Utrecht: From the Ballroom, 1993, 1^e dr., cloth, 40 p., 24 x 18 cm., 111 numbered signed copies, signed by the author. Binding decorated with an illustration by the author. Two folding pages with music of a song written by James Purdy and set to music by Joost Kleppe, calligraphed by Ulrike Mix. € 48,00

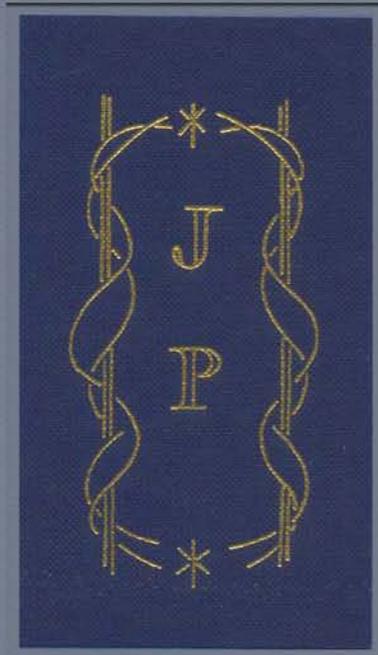
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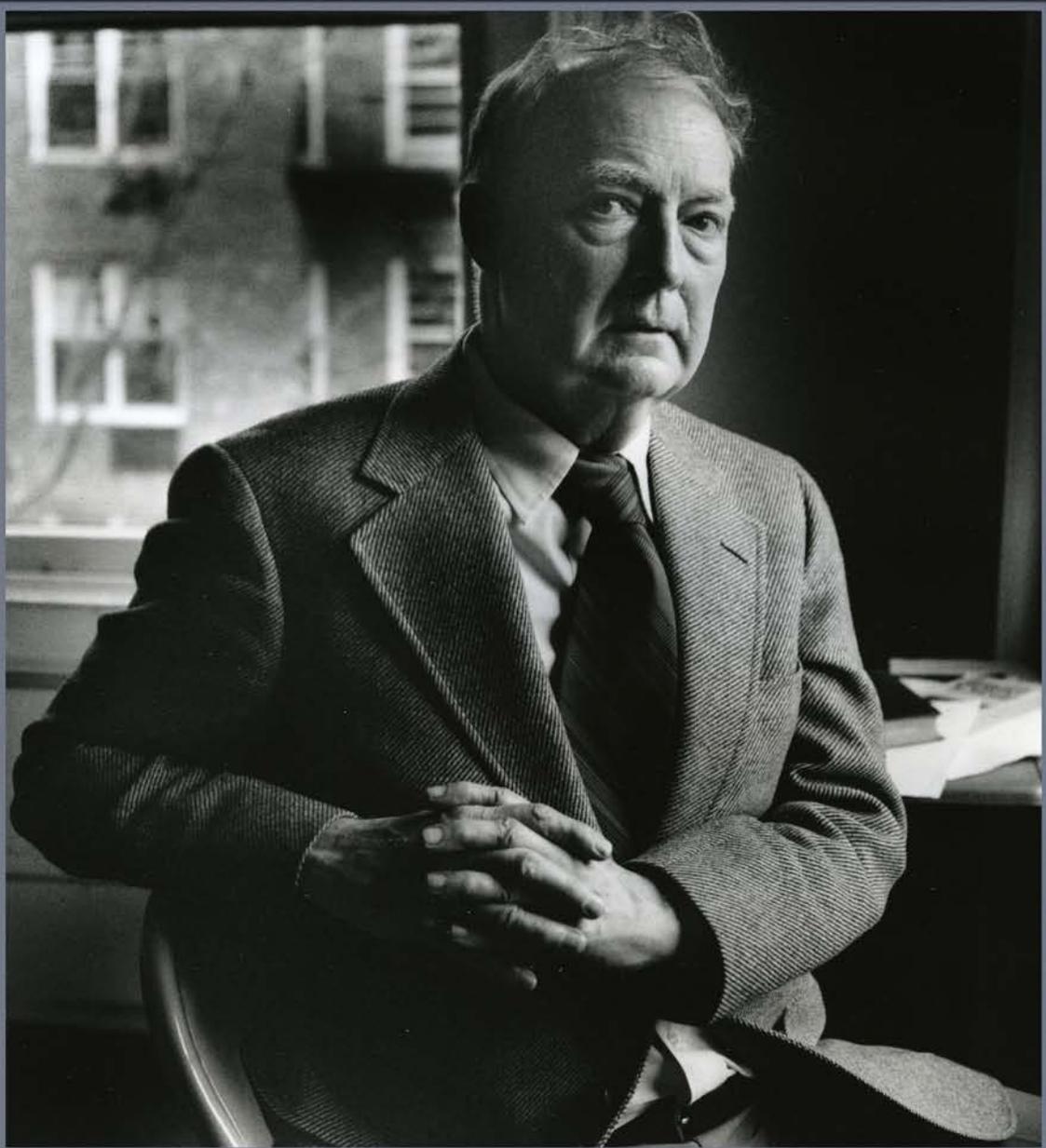
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HYPERION

On the future of aesthetics



FROM
THE
CHOIR INVISIBLE

TO THE COSMOS

JAMES PURDY
OR THE RETURN OF
AN UNSEEN STAR

by Rainer J. Hanshe

Our artists are American Ishmaels doomed to be cut away from the human vineyard. "Call me Ishmael," prophetically utters Herman Melville in the first line of *Moby Dick*. We are brute, giant pathfinders, without a remembrance of the past or tradition, discoverers of brand-new nostrums for sex, life, science, art and religion. We are the infant aboriginals.

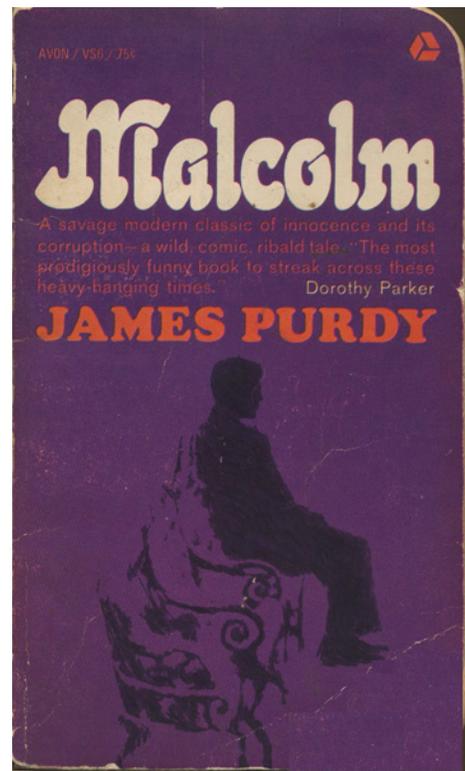
—Edward Dahlberg, *Can These Bones Live*

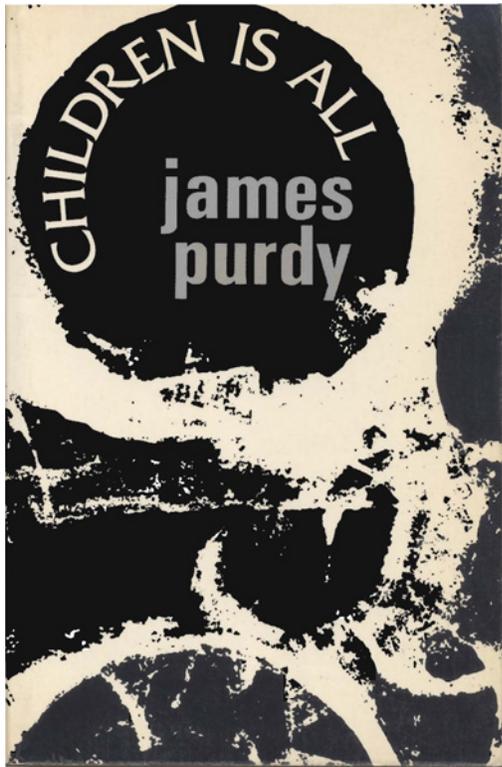
In “On Reputation,” a chapter from Schopenhauer’s book on literature, the philosopher classifies writers into four types, positing that there are meteors, planets, and both wandering and fixed stars. The meteoric writer is the most conspicuous and arresting, the type that seizes most people’s attention because its brilliance is alluring, but such writers are essentially ephemeral. Like meteors, while dazzling, they vanish quickly. The writers akin to planets and wandering stars seize the attention of the public for lengthier periods of time and are more formidable and scintillating than fixed stars. Although their impressive, clever, and witty qualities lead the public to mistake them for fixed stars, eventually, they cede their position to the fixed stars because the range of their impact is bound to the orbit of their contemporaries. Famed in their day, but later, less revered. The sole writers that Schopenhauer believes to be constant are the fixed stars. To him, “their position in the firmament is secure; they shine with a light of their own; and their effect today is the same as it was yesterday, because, having no parallax, their appearance does not alter with a difference in our standpoint. They belong not to *one* system, *one* nation only, but to the universe.”¹ However, due to their distance to the earth, it generally takes a significantly greater degree of time for their light to become visible to most, though other more astute observers have witnessed them and traced their locus in the cosmos, for their antennae have been directed not merely to the world but to the universe, to that which others have ignored. As we proceed forward out of the 20th century, with this new distance, some of the fixed stars that many overlooked will begin to shine forth. Of the writers of that century who do not belong to one system or one nation, of the writers who gleam with their very own light, among them is the American writer from Hicksville, Ohio, and once longtime resident of Brooklyn, New York—James Otis Purdy. Thinking of him within Schopenhauer’s typology, clearly, he is a *fixed* star. Over the coming decades, what has been clear to those more astute observers will be obvious to those who were dazzled by the flash of the passing meteors and planets.

In more ways than one, Purdy is a fixed star, and an eerie one at that, for the last two books published while he was alive² tragically echoed in a peculiar way his very first two published books, drawing his life to an uncanny circle. Purdy’s novella 63: *Dream Palace* and his collection of short stories *Don’t Call Me by My Right Name* were both rejected by numerous American publishers in the mid-50s. At the behest of Dame Edith Sitwell—who became Purdy’s first and most important champion after receiving from him privately printed

editions of his works—both books were finally published by Victor Gollancz under the title *63: Dream Palace* and featured an introduction by Sitwell, who deemed Purdy of “the very highest rank of contemporary American writers.” Subsequently, New Directions, which had originally rejected the same two works, published them under the title *Color of Darkness*. And here is the tragic echo: Towards the end of his life, despite his international reputation and despite having been translated into over 30 different languages, Purdy’s last novel, *Gertrude of Stony Island Avenue*, was first published in England by Peter Owen and only later published in America, just as was his first novella. Similarly, his last book of short stories, *Moe’s Villa & Other Stories*, was rejected by American publishers, released first in England by Avon in 2000, and then finally republished by Carroll & Graf under the auspices of Don Wiese in 2004. Once introduced by the likes of Sitwell, Paul Binding, Jerome Charyn, Edward Albee and other notable figures, Purdy became something of a cipher in his own country. Unlike his first book, *Moe’s Villa* did not contain an introduction by an internationally recognized author or literary critic of some stature. Instead, it was penned by Purdy’s longtime assistant, who is not known as a writer, has no publications to speak of, and is essentially unknown.³ Thus, at the end of his life, Purdy was oddly more obscure than ever, a fixed but occluded star.

If Purdy’s public presence in the literary world dwindled decade by decade, and so much so that most of his books were out of print by the late 90s, he always had his champions as well as his devoted circle of readers. Although he lacked during the twilight of his life a champion to help transform his stature the way James Grauerholz transformed Burroughs’s, his seeming obscurity appears largely limited to America. The fact that most of his works were translated into other languages soon after their publication in English testifies to his international renown and to watchful awareness of his work in Europe and elsewhere. Aside from being translated into the principal literary languages of Western culture (French, Italian, German, and Spanish), Purdy has also been translated into Hebrew, Portuguese, Danish, Swedish, Norwegian, Finnish, and, among other tongues, Chinese and Japanese.⁴ If relatively obscure, or existing on the periphery of what dominates the different cultural scenes in America, Purdy’s work also received considerable attention in the domains of theater, cinema, and music. Although Purdy found it a distortion and expressed dislike for it,⁵ Edward Albee adapted his novel *Malcolm* for the stage in 1966, and decades later in 1999 the Steppenwolf Theater Company adapted for the stage his novel *In a Shallow Grave*.





Purdy also wrote plays and throughout the Seventies, whenever one of his plays was in production, Tennessee Williams made sure to attend.⁶ Williams said that many of Purdy's plays poignantly capture the subject of loneliness. One off-off Broadway run Williams attended was so powerful he was overcome by feelings of pain and desolation, so much so that he left the theater because the experience was simply unbearable. Williams later wrote to Purdy explaining what had occurred and told him that he was "a uniquely gifted man of the theater." Purdy's brother Richard was an actor, and he may have developed his feeling for the theater from him. Richard Purdy was en route to developing a name for himself, having performed on stage with the likes of Gielgud and other notable thespians, but he eventually succumbed to alcoholism and died young. Purdy fictionalized him as Maynard Ewing in his epic novel *The House of the Solitary Maggot*,⁷ a book which Fred Barron called "a profound tragedy of classical proportions that stands above current fictions like *Oedipus Rex* above a bedroom farce." While Purdy's plays were also performed in both Australia and Canada, over a period

of many years his assistant John Uecker staged several of them through the Running Sun Theater Company, which is named after Purdy's 1971 volume of privately published poetry and was largely dedicated to producing his plays. One of the first works of note that Uecker directed was *Sun of the Sleepless*, an evening of two short plays (*Heatstroke* and *Souvenirs*) by Purdy that featured Sheila Dabney and, as then named, Larry Fishburn.⁸ In his review of the plays, Michael Feingold said Purdy's language is that of an old master "whose simplicity of approach makes the dream seem as casual and riveting as an accident on the street." He noted too that both "violence and the more sordid reaches of the erotic" aren't evoked for their own sake but stem in Purdy "from love gone awry, hence the delicacy that makes the dialogue lilt and his action progress with the slow grace of a minuet."⁹ Uecker would go on to direct several other plays throughout the nineties but although a 1997 brochure for the company stated that Purdy's *Children is All* and *The Paradise Circus* were to be part of their following seasons, the last full production the company mounted, the American premiere of *Foment*, was nearly 20 years ago. To speak briefly of the cinematic encounters with Purdy's work, his third novel, *Cabot Wright Begins*, was optioned by MGM in the 60s, though it was never made into a film, and other directors, from Fellini to Bergman, Visconti, and Michael Cimino all expressed interest in his writing. The same year Bette Gordon directed *Variety* she made a film of the play *What is it, Zach?*, and Derek Jarman was to direct an adaptation of the novel *Narrow Rooms* before

he died, but the BBC revoked the funding when Jarman refused to capitulate to their demands to use a Hollywood “star” in the lead role. Scenarist and director James Bridges wrote a script of *In a Shallow Grave*, but it was eventually directed by the little known Kenneth Bowser. The tepidness, moral reserve, and general inadequacy of the latter’s film aside—who knows what the far superior Bridges would have made of it, if he was permitted to, all of this testifies to a keen and sustained interest in Purdy’s *oeuvre* in many different fields, a recognition of its merit, adaptability, and appeal.

The most promising, accomplished, and lasting adaptations of Purdy’s work have indisputably been the musical ones. Aside from Hans-Jürgen von Bose’s opera based on 63: *Dream Palace*, which premiered at the Munich Biennale in 1990 to critical acclaim,¹⁰ in 1996 Alexander Strauch created an opera based on Purdy’s controversial novel *Narrow Rooms*, a work that previously underwent obscenity charges in Germany.¹¹ Although Purdy is largely unknown as a poet by the literary establishment here in America, due to his collaboration with close friend composer Richard Hundley his poetry is well-known in the field of music, where in reviews of Hundley’s compositions Purdy was frequently characterized as a poet.¹² Purdy and Hundley met in 1962 through Virgil Thomson and later began collaborating on art songs, with Hundley fielding his friend’s automatic writings for material that Purdy would eventually refine into poems. It was through Hundley’s insistence that Purdy continued to write poetry, and several of their songs, including “Come Ready and See Me,” “Evening Hours,” and “Straightway Beauty on Me Waits,” are now staples of the American art song canon and frequently performed in America and around the world. Hundley’s sheet music for these songs has been reprinted at least three times by Boosey & Hawkes in the last two decades, in 1995 noted practitioner of American art songs Paul Sperry recorded each of these songs as well as two other Hundley-Purdy compositions, and in 2004 soprano Janeanne Houston recorded two of them.¹³ Purdy and Hundley also collaborated on an opera based on Purdy’s play *Wedding Finger*, part of which was performed at the Newport Music Festival in 1984, but that fantastical and apocalyptic work about the submersion and rebirth of Manhattan as a bird paradise was unfortunately never completed. Purdy also collaborated with composer Robert Helps, whose compositions based on Purdy texts include “Gossamer Noons” and *The Running Sun*, and English composer Andrew Toovey was considering using one of Purdy’s texts for an opera.¹⁴ And to speak of yet another musical field, Dutch bassist and composer Theo Hoogstins created a song cycle based on Purdy’s poetry, though Hoogstins died before being able to record it. From the various operatic interpretations to Hundley’s melodic art songs to Helps’s neo-impressionistic, atonal, and dissonant pieces and Hoogstins’s jazz renditions, Purdy’s material serves a wide and extensive gamut.¹⁵ This varied interest in his work outside the literary field reveals the breadth and scope of his vision, a

vision which, as is evident, is plastic enough to accommodate opera, theater, cinema, jazz venues, and the recital hall. If theater directors have failed to achieve the same exceptional results as have the musicians, that is only indicative of their failure to live up to Purdy's vision, not the inadequacy of his material. Michael Feingold seemed to imply precisely that when he stated that Purdy's "scripts are so many sleeping beauties, waiting for the prince of some future civilization to come and kiss them into theatrical life."¹⁶ As of now, Purdy has not yet found his equal in the theater, nor in cinema—his work will test the wherewithal of even the most intrepid interpreters. Or it simply requires someone who actually possesses vision.

Despite being awarded numerous laurels, from two Guggenheim Fellowships to a Ford Fellowship (for drama), to the Pen Faulkner Award and a Rockefeller Foundation Grant (and there are others), many contemporaries of Purdy are far better known than he is. Yet few are as diverse and few have as manifold a vision, so manifold in fact that he has been deemed southern Gothic, satirist, parodist, surrealist, magical realist, gay writer, and modern Jacobean, among yet other things, and in the late 50s, Langston Hughes ceremoniously dubbed him "the last of the Niggers." What white contemporary of Purdy's can claim such an honorific? It is probably exactly because of this diverse, mercurial quality that he has eluded the grasp of many. He is too metamorphic to be codified and readily consumed. Others argue that it is in part the intensity of Purdy's work, the unrelenting extremities to which it often moves, and its dark exploration of homosexual desire which has led to his marginalization. When historically situated, the latter view is difficult to accept as wholly viable. While there are subtle homosexual or homoerotic elements to some of Purdy's early work, the first explicit and ferocious enunciation of such is in *Eustace Chisholm and the Works*, which was published in 1967.¹⁷ By that time, nearly all of Genet's work had been published and translated into English, as was Sartre's encyclopedic length study of the arch criminal and purveyor of 'evil,' *Saint Genet: Comedian and Martyr* (1952). Vidal's *The City and the Pillar* was published as early as 1948, Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room* in 1956, and Vidal's *Myra Breckinridge*—which was made into a mainstream Hollywood film—just one year after *Eustace*. Too, nearly all of Mishima's works were translated into English before *Eustace Chisholm* appeared. If Vidal and Baldwin are more tepid, Genet and Mishima are not for the fainthearted, not to mention Burroughs, and all have explored and given terrifying articulation to similarly dark and exacting experiences, but none of those writers suffered from the obscurity that Purdy sometimes has in America. Condemned and vilified, true, but widely known, in print, and visible elements of the cultural edifice. Although the works of Genet, Mishima *et al* received significant notice and were formative in breaking ground prior to the publication of Purdy's own harrowing material, undoubtedly, the theme or subject of homosexuality or homoeroticism was not palpable to mainstream America, and there is an

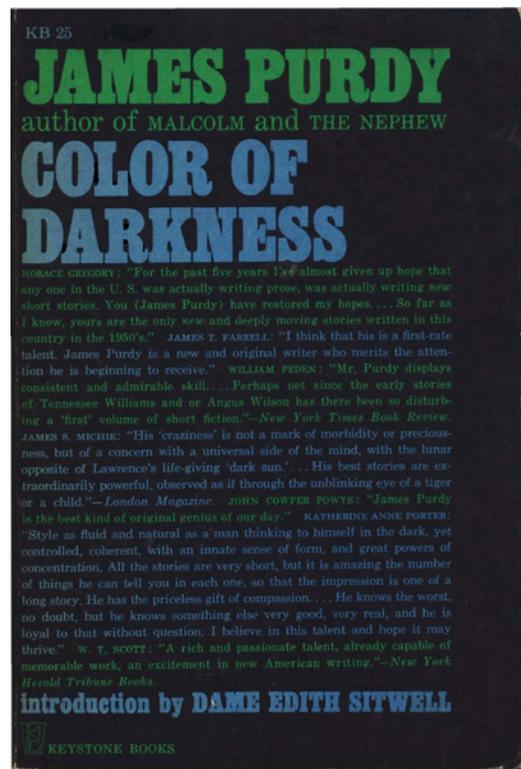
element of homophobia that has distanced many readers from Purdy, who also generally refused to identify himself as homosexual, partly since it was a categorization he thought meaningless.¹⁸ In seeing subjectivity in more mythic and archetypal terms, Purdy refused to pay heed to the trend of identity politics; thus, he was even marginalized within the gay community, as he was for his refusal to celebrate homosexuality in blithe and cheery terms for which parades are always in order.¹⁹ To him, homosexuality was far more tragic. The public performative gestures of Genet and Mishima, as well as their overt political gestures, are surely what made them in part more prominent cultural figures whereas Purdy preferred to remain isolated and in general kept his distance to the media, scorning public occasions and literary scenes. Existing then in an indeterminate realm, he was neither palatable to the status quo nor celebratory enough of queer identity politics to be taken up by that community, and it is this which probably led to Purdy's hovering between acceptance and condemnation and his being largely invisible in America after a certain period. Whatever the case, in the end, the exact cause of his obscurity, whether a result of his vision, his excoriating condemnation of the literary establishment, or yet something else, is ultimately inconsequential, for his writing seduces us to return to him again and again. And if America has been partially blind to Purdy's achievements, his place in world literature is clearly and firmly established in Europe.

Despite this considerable interest, the dilemma of Purdy's obscurity remains, and he is virtually absent from the literary canon and from the shelves of book stores in America. There are merely three slim monographs on him in English, and the last was written in 1976.²⁰ In his overview of Purdy's *oeuvre*, Matthew Stadler made this astonishing observation: "What few literary histories we have of the 1970s and 80s bear little or no trace of [Purdy's books]. The 70s left to us by literary fashion—the decade of Purdy's most remarkable innovations—bears virtually no evidence that James Purdy ever wrote at all."²¹ He is rarely taught in high schools and universities, even though his first novel, *Malcolm*, is an American classic, as are his novels *The Nephew*, *I am Elijah Thrush*, and *Gertrude of Stony Island Ave*—each of them should be as widely known and as ubiquitous as *Huckleberry Finn* and *The Sound and the Fury*. Other works of his are equally valuable if not superior in vision, but they are more exacting, manna for the rarefied; the aforementioned works are privileged here because of their wider appeal, because they should be as common to every literate American and part of our regular curriculum, which has neglected them. In addition, and the omission is grievous, Purdy is conspicuously absent from numerous if not most standard collections of short stories, including those edited by Joyce Carol Oates and John Updike, two authors Purdy publicly upbraided.²² In histories, *noblesse oblige* should prevail; one cannot write Churchill out of history because of his caustic jeremiads, but it is far more difficult to ignore a political leader than a

writer. One can drop bombs and still be remembered, but, if one is a writer, dropping jeremiads is more precarious. However, new histories will be written, especially as we move into the next century and reassess those that have been established, or petrified. Writers as eminent and discerning as Richard Howard and Gore Vidal have attested to the significance of Purdy's short stories, many of which are considered by other writers to be masterpieces of the genre that should be widely known.²³ To that end, and to the greater end of increasing the visibility of Purdy's work overall, The James Purdy Society was formed in the fall of 2003 by Purdy scholars and aficionados such as Dennis Moore. It staged the first-ever symposium on Purdy at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, on 25 October 2003, while the second, spearheaded by Purdy scholar Donald Pease, was held in 2005 at Dartmouth College. The society published a newsletter, *James Purdy and the Works*,²⁴ and the first contained two new short works by Purdy as well as images of his drawings, but despite the existence of a website, the society seems defunct and the newsletter discontinued, which is unfortunate, for such societies are vital in part for sustaining a writer's visibility. When Melville suffered similar obscurity in the early part of the 20th century, it was largely due to the efforts of the Melville Society that his work gained a resurgence; now he is as ubiquitous as the moon.²⁵ Other efforts have been made to increase interest and bring much due attention to Purdy's work as well; in fact, in 2004, an event was planned that would have helped to do just that. Gordon Lish, Richard Howard, Amy Hempel, Edward Albee, and Allan Gurganus were but some of the writers set to join in a fete that was to occur at the New School's Tishman Auditorium. The fete was to feature a series of readings, discussions, and the world premiere of a jazz song cycle by Theo Hoogstins that was based on Purdy's poems *The Brooklyn Branding Parlors*.²⁶ Also planned was an exhibition of Purdy's drawings. Society matron Gloria Vanderbilt, a longtime fan and friend of Purdy's, was to attend too and insisted that she would bring Purdy to the affair in a golden carriage. Who would doubt her? Without question, the fete would have been front page news, and coming just prior to Carroll & Graf's republication of Purdy's novels, it would have lent them considerable publicity, propelling them from obscurity to prominence. But, strangely, the fete was cancelled, much to the chagrin of many and now, just over five years later, the five novels that Carroll & Graf republished are already out of print. And since Purdy's death two years ago, it seems that no celebration of his work has been organized; if there has been, it has been a private, closed affair, kept as obscure as Purdy has been kept, kept as private as the funeral of the character Malcolm in his first novel . . . The precariousness of his stature however demands that one not be misanthropic but philanthropic with his work. It should not be coveted, but shared openly with the world, as we wish to do here, revealing this secret gem as prominently as possible.

Although our position has shifted, that of the fixed star has not, but we at

last are finally able to see the star clearly. Purdy's *Cabot Wright Begins* is another American classic that remains lost before the glare of the meteors. When it was first published, although critical of some aspects of the novel, Sontag deemed it "a powerful vision of a very real America" and proclaimed that "anything Purdy writes is a literary event of importance. He is, to my mind, indisputably one of the half dozen or so living American writers worth taking seriously."²⁷ That's a small number. While this paean has been made by many, and from different parts of the globe at different points throughout Purdy's life, perhaps now is the moment for his renaissance to occur and for his work to be embraced anew, especially during an epoch when the country seems to have no clear identity and is on the brink of violent schisms, of splintering into divers factions. If we don't know who we are, our writers can help us see. In part, it is because of this ever growing obscurity from which Purdy suffers in America that *Hyperion* is devoting this special issue to him on the second anniversary of his death.²⁸ More, it is because we concur with the assessment that other discerning writers and critics have made of him, like John Cowper Powys, who deemed Purdy "the best kind of original genius of our day." What one recognizes when encountering Purdy's work in its entirety is a staggering variety not only in terms of its range of characters, alternating from blacks to whites to orphans, 'derelicts,' artists, musicians, would-be writers, failed theater directors, adolescents, and elder men and women, but in terms of style, too: from the picaresque to the realist to the parodic, from black humor and satire to the Gothic, the tragic, and the Aristophanic, from the epic and the visionary to the fable and the fantasy, Purdy displays a versatility both rare and astonishing, evidence of his ability to incarnate through imagination the psyche of nearly any and every thing, for he wrote of dragons and birds and hermaphrodites, too. Unlike most of his contemporaries, Purdy's vision was not predicated on or influenced by psychology; he was more Greek than Freudian, more Biblical than Jungian, and more Jacobean than modernist, but, as enough know, a contemporary all the same. As Cowper Powys so keenly noted, Purdy's "insight into the diabolical cruelties and horrors that lurk all the time under our conventional skin is as startling as his insight into the angelic tenderness and protectiveness that also exist in the same hiding-place. Few there be that recognize either of these things. But Purdy reveals them."²⁹ Purdy not only writes from under the skin, he gets under his reader's skin and enters them unawares, slowly, furtively, and once there, he can never be forgotten. But one has to welcome him. For those aware and for those unaware, we offer this



introduction to and exploration of Purdy's novels, short stories, and poems. This special issue features essays by established and younger American, British, and French Purdy scholars, providing Anglo-American as well as European views of his work. In the following essays, each writer explores different aspects of Purdy's fiction, of its value, of its scope, of the vision that informs it, of its moral gravity, and although several of the essays intersect in their examination of a few of the same texts, each approaches them from a different perspective, revealing together the interpretive richness of Purdy's work, that it is full of so many layers and dimensions that it is possible to continuously discover new things when returning to them and to find in them a panoply of dimensions. Through this immersion in Purdy's texts, one can only confirm Gore Vidal's proclamation that Purdy is "an authentic American genius."

In the first essay of this special issue, French Purdy scholar Marie-Claude Profit proclaims that Purdy's *Malcolm* is a remarkable comic novel of equal merit to *Huckleberry Finn* and *Candide*. Addressing Purdy's concern for the act of writing itself through his giving prominent parts to writers or would-be writers in his novels, Profit notes how Purdy often constructs plots around a writing endeavor of some kind, typically one never fully achieved. Retrospectively situating *Malcolm* within Purdy's *oeuvre*, Profit examines how the role of writing figures in that novel, since no character is formally charged with narrating Malcolm's adventures, as is the case in many other Purdy novels. Mapping out the numerous references and allusions to writing in *Malcolm*, Profit shows that the problematic of fiction actually does underpin that novel, though in ways not readily apparent, and how the endeavor of writing was a fundamental preoccupation of Purdy's from the beginning. In analyzing the dissymmetry of the novel's structure and the seeming weakness of its plot and characterization, she opens up a new way of reading the novel through seeing in those seeming flaws the very act of fiction itself in the making. Profit unveils the different narrative structures of the book and elucidates how Purdy renders narrative strategies themselves uncertain. In extrapolating the different textual layers of the novel, Profit clarifies the specific function of the narrative intrusions and the metatextual comments embedded in the narrative of *Malcolm*. "Texture is all, substance nothing," a phrase spoken in the novel, becomes a means for Profit to explore the power of language itself and the place of absence in *Malcolm*, which she recognizes as a predominant theme in Purdy's work in general, thereby elucidating through *Malcolm* one of Purdy's primary aesthetic tenets.

Richard Canning's complex, sprawling essay on Purdy begins with a comparison of Purdy and Djuna Barnes, who both belong for Canning to a small minority of idiosyncratic authors whose modes of writing are protean and heterogeneous. This leads into his comparison between Purdy's *oeuvre* and Elizabethan and Jacobean tragedy, as well as the genre of the