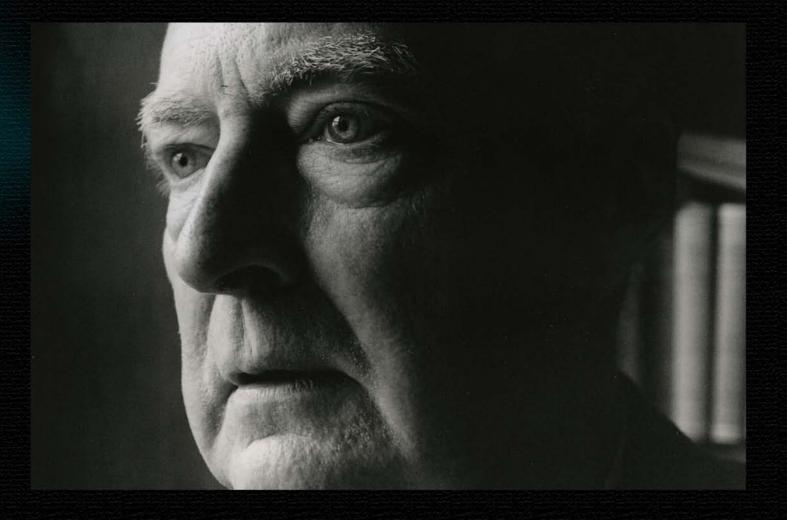
On the future of aesthetics

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

Special Issue



James Purdy

July 17, 1914 - March 13, 2009

published by the Nietzsche Circle

On the future of aesthetics

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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.



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Senior Editor: Mark Daniel Cohen

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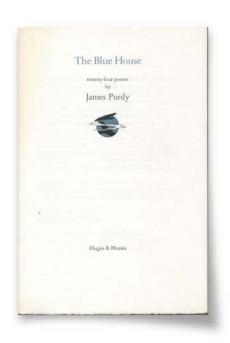
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Fine Printing First Editions of James Purdy

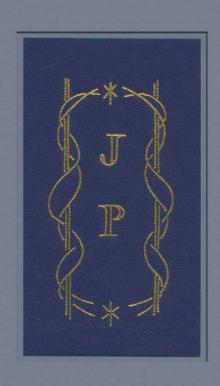
James Purdy, *The Blue House. Twenty-four poems*. Utrecht: Hugin & Munin, 2004, 1st ed., wrappers, 39 p., 22,5 x 15 cm., 80 copies, numbered and signed. 21 poems, mainly written between 1988 and 2001, and 3 poems from an earlier publication (1959) in the Italian quarterly *Botteghe Oscure*. *One of 62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

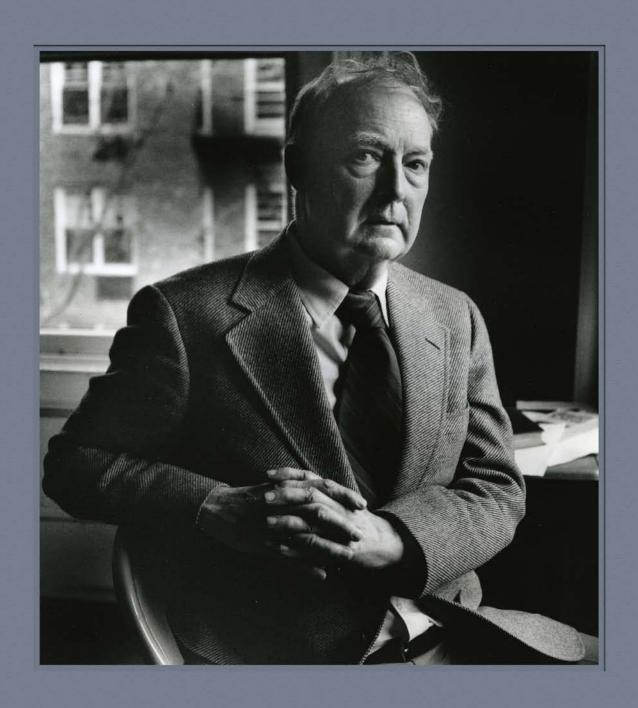
James Purdy, *Kitty Blue*, a fairy tale. Utrecht: From the Ballroom, 1993, 1e dr., cloth, 40 p., 24 x 18 cm., 111 numbered signed copies, signed by the author. Binding decorated with an illustration by the author. Two folding pages with music of a song written by James Purdy and set to music by Joost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

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On the future of aesthetics



FROM THE



TO THE COSMOS

JAMES PURDY OR THE RETURN OF AN UNSEEN STAR

by Rainer J. Hanshe

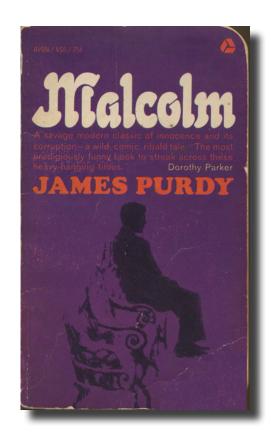
Our artists are American Ishmaels doomed to be cut away from the human vineyard. "Call me Ishmael," prophetically utters Herman Melville in the first line of *Moby Dick*. We are brute, giant pathfinders, without a remembrance of the past or tradition, discoverers of brand-new nostrums for sex, life,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

-Edward Dahlberg, Can These Bones Live

n "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 reverenced. 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." 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.

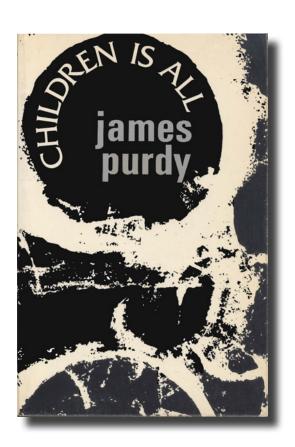
In more ways than one, Purdy is a fixed star, and an eerie one at that, for the last two books published while he was alive² tragically echoed in a peculiar way his very first two published books, drawing his life to an uncanny circle. Purdy's novella 63: Dream Palace and his collection of short stories 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 Ioneliness. 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 be to 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 neoimpressionistic, 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." 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

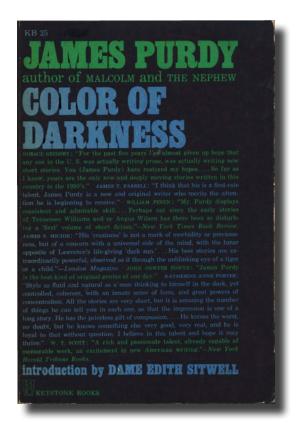
element of homophobia that has distanced many readers from Purdy, who also generally refused to identify himself as homosexual, partly since it was a categorization he thought meaningless. 18 In seeing subjectivity in more mythic and archetypal terms, Purdy refused to pay heed to the trend of identity 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

picaresque and the plays of Marivaux. Canning examines the ways in which Purdy insists on the formal strategies of transformation, which Canning uses to reveal what Purdy deems the ephemerality of contemporary concerns and characterizations. Canning also gives an exegesis of Purdy's notion of 'just letting go,' a kind of unconscious eruption or unleashing of erotic and other forces and the correlation between inarticulateness and violent urges as enacted in Purdy's novels. Adapting Peter Brooks's notion of "desiring machines" to Purdy's prose and dramatic method, Canning deftly elucidates the often destructive force of eros as it figures in Purdy's fiction. In this, he illuminates Purdy's distinctly ancient Greek ethos, that it is not psychological forces but the inscrutable laws of fate which Purdy gives figuration to in his novels. Finally, Canning analyses the theatricality of conversation in Purdy's work and its often absurd effects, while he shows how the interplay between speech and action plays itself out in complex and myriad ways in Purdy's later novels.

In The Nephew, Eustace Chisholm and the Works, and In a Shallow Grave, esteemed Purdy scholar Donald Pease locates notions of the unheimlich and how it is experienced by the figure of the combat veteran, who for Pease is an archetypical transient indicative of one of Purdy's central concerns. In addition, Pease reflects on the role letters play in articulating homelessness or disorientation and the absolute impossibility of returning home, how attempts at acculturation only magnify how alienated the combat veteran is from his culture. This schism is rendered symbolic in the object of the disrupted letter, a rupturing of logos itself, the failure of official narratives to convey the complexity of experience. Purdy's archetypical transient is not only an exile from the social order, but an exile from his own lived experiences. Through his fiction then, Pease shows how Purdy offers incisive analyses of psychic and corporeal estrangement in his portrayal of alienation and disembodiment. For Pease, the body in Purdy's novels is a topos of the (damaged) American psyche itself. He also explores the intricate connection between the desire to know and the simultaneous need to remain ignorant of both erotic and ontological knowledge, which Pease considers a signature narrative idiom of Purdy's. That which the characters disavow becomes for Purdy material out of which to construct narrative itself, even if splintered narratives. Pease also offers insight into the spaces in which Purdy's characters exist, are dislocated from, and which they personally seek to escape from, showing how narrative frames fail to encompass our stories and how Purdy illustrates this through the frequent disruption of narrative coherence. Pease also addresses the way in which Purdy complicates the construction of identity out of pre-existing norms as well as conceptions of ceremony and ritual, both of which remain empty rites characters generally lack the means to endow with sufficient value or perform with any genuineness.

Christopher Lane's essay is both philosophical and psychological, analyzing

the paradox of identity and notions of desire in *Eustace Chisholm and the Works*, *In a Shallow Grave*, and *In the Hollow of His Hand*. He also elaborates on Reed Woodhouse's observation that Purdy sought not to normalize abject modes of sexuality but to rupture the general normativity of the reader, to shatter orthodox modes of feeling and thinking and thus to cast the reader into an indeterminate and anxious space. One might subtitle Lane's "Purdy's Family Poetics" a modern or secular demonology, for he makes surprising uses of Freud's essay on the Bavarian painter Christoph Haizmann to examine the myriad ways in which Purdy's characters are haunted beings. Purdy does not believe that we are haunted by demons but by *familial* spectres. Through his inventive adaptation of Freud's essay, Lane outlines Purdy's view of humanity as a 20th century House of Atreus, with each person suffering from the afflictions and contagions passed on through the psyche of their individual family lineage.

In "James Purdy's VIA NEGATIVA," Don Adams views Purdy as an allegorical realist who envisions his own entirely singular worlds, a point which Adams says many critics of Purdy's work have neglected to realize. Adams emphasizes the archetypal symbolic structure of Purdy's work, which he claims most critics have also neglected to understand, thus missing the 'instruction' through revelation that Purdy offers in his fiction. Reading In a Shallow Grave as a religious novel and Purdy as a visionary and prophetic writer, Adams situates In a Shallow Grave in the apophatic tradition, asserting that religiousness is the key to comprehending Purdy's novel, if not his fiction in general. Too, Adams addresses Purdy's representation of the deliberate schism between the physical and the spiritual and substance and significance, which is something he claims unconsciously disturbs readers and is perhaps one of the reasons why Purdy's fiction is found to be so unsettling, leading to his obscurity or general neglect by readers and critics.

Kevin Arnold presents a deconstructive reading of Purdy's novel *Narrow Rooms*, using a derogatory review of the novel as a vantage point from which to reveal that what one critic interprets as a weakness is actually an unrecognized aesthetic and formal strength. How one reads Purdy's referents alters one's very understanding of the novel; in misreading them, one's comprehension of Purdy's technique and aesthetic achievement is impeded and therefore one's experience of the novel. Arnold also examines the topos of the body and desire and how the body and sexuality are conceived in *Narrow Rooms*, elaborating on an aesthetics of desire and writing's very instability, of the *impossibility* of articulating desire in its fullest dimension. Thus, there are intriguing crossings between this essay and Canning's, which were written without foreknowledge of each other. Arnold also addresses how Purdy unsettles the signifying logic that positions the body and language in a particular relationship to desire as well as the spatio-temporal context of *Narrow Rooms*, which stretches beyond the realist locale in which it

supposedly occurs into another dimension.

In my interview with composer Richard Hundley, I delve into his long-term collaborative relationship with Purdy, which to date has never been addressed by any Purdy scholar. The interview is both personal and historical, exploring not only their longstanding friendship but more, their creative processes and methodology, with Hundley giving rare and privileged insight into the interrelationship between himself and Purdy and the development of Purdy's poems and Hundley's adaptations of them. Although this collaboration has received but extremely minor attention in the annals of music history, it has hardly if at all ever figured in the annals of literary criticism and this interview redresses that lacuna, giving much due notice to a significant but little known artistic collaboration of the 20th century.

Daniel T. O'Hara's offering is a lengthy review-essay of Purdy's final book of short stories, Moe's Villa, which, surprisingly, has only received one review to date as far as I am aware.30 In contradistinction to Adams, O'Hara views Purdy as a ceremonial writer in both style and content, but one who is distinctly irreligious, for, according to O'Hara, it is ceremony without transcendence that Purdy explores in his fiction, ceremony that is in the age of nihilism. Adopting Badiou's guestion of whether a modern ceremony is possible in the postontotheological epoch and applying it to Purdy's fiction, O'Hara analyzes the key stories of Purdy's final collection and examines how ceremonies, such as celebrations and rituals, are structured, asking what meaning and value they can possess in a nihilistic era. If the magnitude of the ritual actions in *Moe's* Villa are minor, O'Hara argues that, symbolically, they supersede the stakes of the fiction and are indicative of larger, more serious moral and ethical if not religious and philosophical questions germane to our time. O'Hara sees Moe's Villa as savagely comic and implies that the seeming lightness of much of the book is deceptive, for its critique is incisive, an excoriating lance cutting into the body of a blasted and myopic America which has been severed from its roots. Purdy reveals the moral bankruptcy and decadence of a nihilistic age unable to reconstruct itself, one which has largely still yet to learn from Nietzsche how to give sense to the earth and configure itself.

NOTES

- ¹ Arthur Schopenhauer, *The Art of Literature*, tr. by T. Bailey Saunders (London: Swan Sonnenschein & Co., 1891), 105.
- ² Several months after Purdy's death in 2009, Ivan R. Dee published a volume of four of his plays titled *James Purdy: Selected Plays*. It contains the plays *Brice*, *The Paradise Circus*, *Where Quentin Goes*, and *Ruthanna Elder*. This same collection was originally to be published by Northwestern in 2007 and include a foreword by Michael Feingold, but, due to complications, it was discontinued.
- ³ Purdy's assistant also wrote the introduction to the aforementioned volume of Purdy's plays. See John Uecker, "Two Visionaries," Purdy, *Ibid.*, ix-xii.
- ⁴ See the bibliography within this special issue for a list of these translations. All of Purdy's novels and short stories have been translated into other languages with the exception of his epic novel *The House of the Solitary Maggot*.
- ⁵ See for instance Purdy's comments on the adaptation in Profit's interview with Purdy included herein.
- ⁶ The first two plays Purdy published, *Children Is All* and *Cracks*, were included in *Children Is All* (New York: New Directions, 1961), a collection that also featured 10 short stories. Subsequent private editions of Purdy's plays were published, such as the beautiful limited edition *Scrap of Paper and The Berry Picker* (Los Angeles: Sylvester & Orphanos, 1981), while the first collected edition of Purdy's full length plays, *In the Night of Time & Four Other Plays* (Amsterdam: Athenaeum-Polak & Van Gennep, 1992), was published outside the United States, instigated by Purdy's friend and champion, Jan Erik Bouman. This includes three plays that the aforementioned Ivan R. Dee collection does not: *Enduring Zeal, The Rivalry of Dolls*, and *In the Night of Time*.
- ⁷ For a portrait of Purdy's brother by Chicago painter Gertrude Abercrombie, see page 137 of this issue. Abercrombie was fictionalized by Purdy in the novels *Malcolm*, *Eustace Chisholm and the Works*, and *Gertrude of Stony Island Ave*.
- See a postcard of the play here: http://www.flickr.com/photos/42196233@N07/3897360080/
- ⁹ Michael Feingold, "Waking Dreams," Village Voice 34, April 4, 1989, 81-82.
- ¹⁰ To see several images from the opera and a brief statement about it by the composer, visit this website: http://www.muenchenerbiennale.de/standard/en/archive/1990/63-dream-palace/ And for von Bose's personal site: http://www.musikerportrait.de/hansjuergenvonbose/
- ¹¹ The entirety of Strauch's opera can be heard here: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=moC001IA 4bl&playnext=1&list=PL14D6C2B79B004C92
- ¹² On the collaboration between Purdy and Hundley, see my interview with Hundley in this issue.
- ¹³ See Paul Sperry, *Paul Sperry Sings Romantic American Songs* (New York: Albany Records, 1995), and Robert Jorgensen and Janeanne Houston, *So Much Beauty* (Washington: Elmgrove Productions, 2004). There are other recordings of the Hundley-Purdy songs, as well.
- ¹⁴ "Gossamer Noons" is the final line of the second poem (there are a total of nine untitled poems in the book) from Purdy's *Sunshine is an Only Child* (New York: Aloe Editions, 1973). The first three movements of "Gossamer Noons" can be heard here: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XOqfcf9ihnk and the fourth here: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wT9u7STZ7A4&feat ure=related

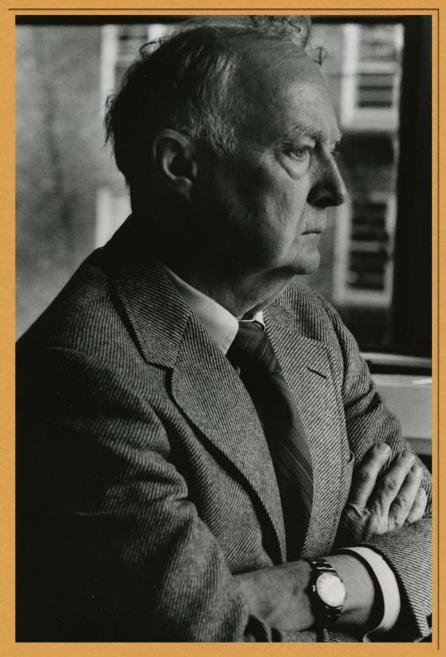
An excerpt of "The Running Sun" can be heard here: http://helpsweb.free.fr/Composer/opuscatalogue.php?page=16

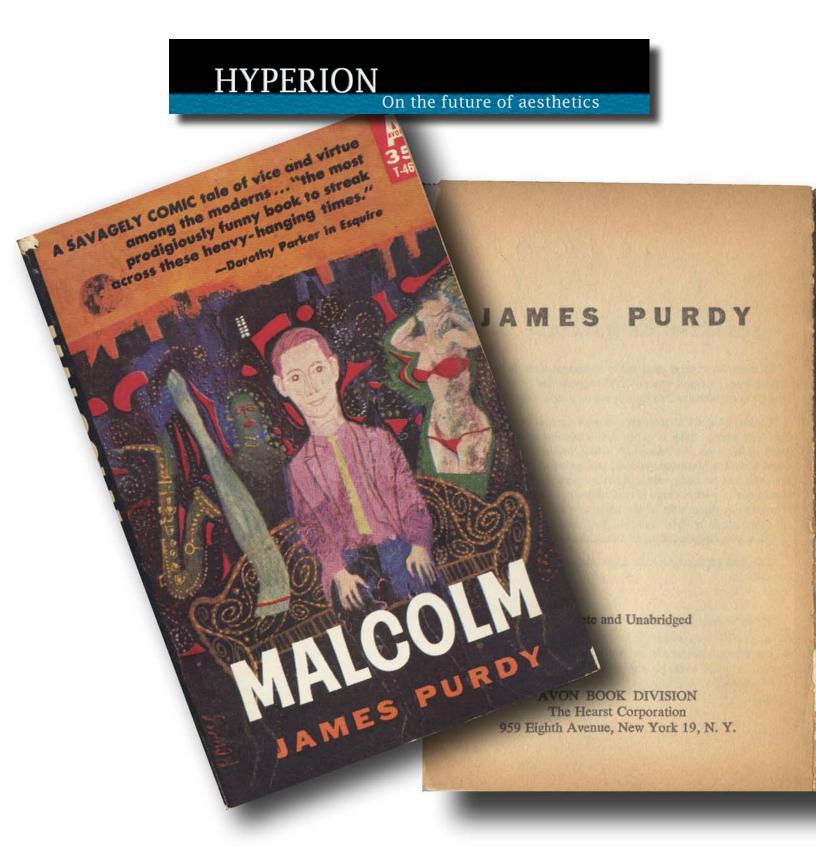
For info on Toovey: http://www.boosey.com/composer/Andrew+Toovey

- ¹⁵ In addition, Purdy's poem, "Song: To the Master of the Ballroom," was also set to music (for high male voice and accompaniment) by the Dutch composer Joost Kleppe. The poem first appeared in James Purdy, *Kitty Blue* (Utrecht: From The Ballroom, 1993), the first book edition of Purdy's fairy tale of the same name, along with Kleppe's sheet music with calligraphy by Ulrike Mix. "Song" was published anew, sans the sheet music, in James Purdy, *The Blue House: Forbidden Poems* (Utrecht: Hugin & Munin, 2004). Jan Erik Bouman, to whom this issue is dedicated, is the subject of Purdy's poem and was rumored to live in a large ballroom full of black tulips.
- ¹⁶ Michael Feingold, "The Basic Questions: James Purdy's Plays," *The James White Review*, Vol. 17, No. 1 (winter 2000): 41. This issue of the James White Review was devoted in its entirety to Purdy and quest edited by novelist Matthew Stadler.
- ¹⁷ Nonetheless, this novel was praised in a magazine as mainstream and sanitized as *Life*. See Angus Wilson, "Purdy Pushes Comedy Past Blackness," *Life*, June 2, 1967, 9.
- ¹⁸ One such refusal was made by Purdy when he was interviewed on Dutch television. When asked if he distinguished between homosexuality and heterosexuality, Purdy asserted that he didn't think either existed. "That has been invade—invented by *mechanists*, uh, psychologists, who have never understood human nature. There is no such thing." Interview by Adriaan van Dis on "De ijsbreker," Amsterdam, March 1990. In another interview, Purdy noted that "what's beneath a homosexual and a black is something that's neither homosexual or black. There's something archetypal that goes back thousands of years. But we have seized on these other things now as the sole reality." See the interview "James Purdy," in Richard Canning, *Gay Fiction Speaks: Conversations with Gay Novelists* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 6.
- ¹⁹ In 1974, when asked if he considered himself a gay writer Purdy replied, "No. I'm just a monster. Gay writers are too conservative for me. Actually, I think the only gay writer was Hemingway. 'Gay' has become a household word now, so it's meaningless. . ." See Fred Barron, "James Purdy," *Penthouse*, July 1974, 91. And nearly 30 years later, Purdy claimed that he "had the most vicious reviews from gay people" and that despite *The New York Times* becoming pro-gay, even its gay reviewers give him terrible reviews. Canning, *Ibid.*, 7-8. Later in the same interview he asserted that "the gays attack me all the time."
- ²⁰ See Bettina Schwarzschild, *The Not-Right House: Essays on James Purdy* (Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 1968), Henry Chupack, *James Purdy* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1975), and Stephen Adams, *James Purdy* (London: Vision Press, 1976). For the most recent monograph on Purdy, see the study in French by Marie-Claude Profit, *James Purdy: Les cauchemars de papier* (Paris: Belin, 1998). This special issue features an essay by Profit on Purdy's *Malcolm* as well as an interview she conducted with him in 1977. Several dissertations have been written on Purdy since 1998, or feature chapters on Purdy, but no monograph devoted to his work has been published in English since the book by Adams in 1976.
- ²¹ Matthew Stadler, "The Theater of Real Speech," *The James White Review*, Vol. 17, No. 1 (winter 2000): 12.
- ²² Although Purdy is not included in the standard short story anthologies typically read in high schools and colleges, he is included in more eclectic ones. His short story "Why Can't They Tell You Why" is featured in Alberto Manguel, *Evening Games: Tales of Parents and Children* (New York: C.N. Potter, 1987), "Summer Tidings" is featured in Albert Manguel, Craig Stephenson, *Meanwhile, In Another Part of the Forest: Gay Stories from Alice Munro to Yukio Mishima* (New York: Knopf, 1994), and "Mrs. Benson" is featured in Alberto Manguel, *Mothers & Daughters: An Anthology* (California: Chronicle Books, 1998). His short story "Eventide" is also included in *The Penguin Book of International Short Stories*, ed. Daniel Halpern (New York: Penguin, 1989), 813-820.
- ²³ For a recent appreciation of Purdy by Gore Vidal, see his "James Purdy: The Novelist as Outlaw," *The New York Times*, February 27, 2005.
- ²⁴ An electronic version of most of the first newsletter is available online through the James Purdy Society website: http://www.wright.edu/~martin.kich/PurdySoc/Print%20Newsletter.htm

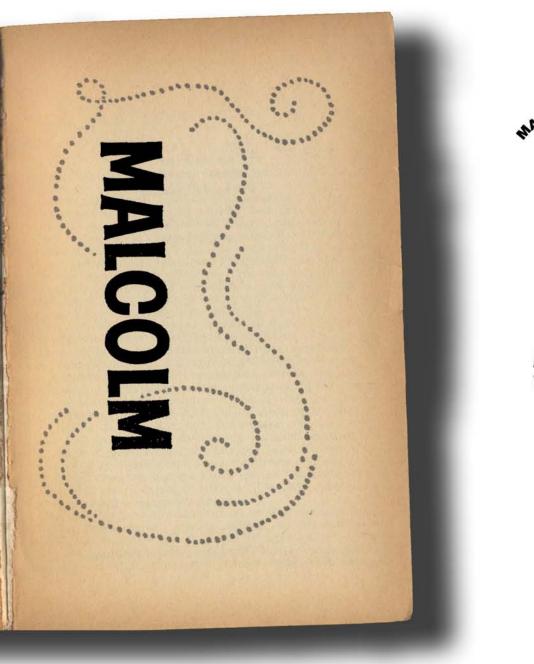
- ²⁵ Other elements contributed to the "Melville Revival," such as the publication of several biographies and critical studies, including D.H. Lawrence's *Studies in Classic American Literature* (1923), but the formation of the literary society devoted to Melville's work was a critical force aiding the recuperation of his texts. A formula cannot of course be devised from this, but similar efforts could contribute to instigating a "Purdy Revival." Oddly enough, Purdy often identified with Melville.
- ²⁶ For information on Hoogstins and his music, visit this website: http://www.hoogstins.com/
- ²⁷ Susan Sontag, "Laughter in the Dark," *The New York Times*, October 25, 1964.
- ²⁸ Purdy was born on July 17, 1914, and he died on March 13, 2009. Since his death, no public memorial has been held in his honor. Originally, this issue was to be published on the first anniversary of Purdy's death, but due to a hiatus in the publication of *Hyperion* it was delayed.
- ²⁹ Dame Edith Sitwell, "Introduction," in James Purdy, *Color of Darkness* (Philadelphia and New York: Lippincott, 1961), 9.
- ³⁰ See John Strausbaugh, "Clever Cats & Opaque Snakes," *New York Press*, November 22-28, 2000, 24. For a brief article on Purdy by Strausbaugh, see his "Pure Purdy," *New York Press*, March 19-25, 1997, 41-42. This article was written on the occasion of the American premiere of Purdy's play *Foment*, which was performed at the Greenwich Street Theater and produced by the Running Sun Theater Company. It was directed by John Uecker and it opened on March 21 and ran through April 5, 1997.







by Marie-Claude Profit



MALCOLM MALCOL

or the charmed life of books

alcolm¹ is a remarkable comic novel. One of the best. It belongs with Huckleberry Finn and Voltaire's Candide. Its main character, Malcolm, shares with Huck and Candide an unshakeable innocence, which gets him unscathed out of impossible situations and brings out the absurdity of the world. He meets a wide range of grotesque people, ill-assorted couples, black or white, young or mature, poor or millionaires, an astrologer, two painters, an ex-con, a tattooer, a singer, a policeman ... who all fall for him, as does the reader.

Malcolm, first published in 1959, belongs to what can be considered. retrospectively, as the first period of Purdy's work, a period when he showed his concern for the act of writing by giving prominent parts in his novels to one or several characters of writers or would-be writers, and building his plots around a writing enterprise. This he had already done in 63: Dream Palace, published in 1956, and he would do so again in The Nephew, Cabot Wright Begins, Eustace Chisholm and the Works, Jeremy's Version and I Am Elijah Thrush, all published between 1960 and 1972. How does Malcolm find its place among these novels? At first sight, it does not seem to belong to the same vein. Here, no character is formally charged with telling Malcolm's adventures (or takes upon himself or herself to tell them), nor do these adventures explicitly center on a writing enterprise: apparently, every character's exertions aim at introducing Malcolm, a solitary orphan, into society. And yet, Malcolm himself is twice said to start recording his "conversations" with others. This may be taken as an encouragement to the reader to look further for references to writing, and indeed many arguments can be found to confirm that the problematic of fiction underpins the structure of Malcolm in ways that are not always apparent. This is the aspect of the novel I intend to discuss in this essay.

A brief summary of the novel will point to a dissymmetry in its structure, and apparent weakness in plot and characterization, which can only be accounted for by reference to fiction in the making.

A very young man, Malcolm, spends his time waiting on a golden bench in front of a sumptuous hotel. What he is waiting for is indeterminate. An astrologer, Mr. Cox, who is "the greatest walker" of his period (1), notices him, comes up to him and decides to help him out of his inaction. He will send Malcolm to call on people whose addresses he gives him, one at a time. Thus the first meeting determines a series of other meetings: Malcolm gets a first

address, a second, etc; he meets a first couple, a second, four in all. No new attempt at launching him into life succeeds. Mr. Cox finally gives up. By that time, three quarters of the book has already transpired. Malcolm finds himself in the street, alone once more, and is now rescued by Gus, a motorcyclist. Gus brings Malcolm to Melba, a young jazz singer. The two young people fall in love at first sight. This time, Malcolm is irreversibly projected from one episode to the next, gets married, and declines to his and the novel's speedy end.

If this dissymmetry is examined more closely, we see that the presence first of Mr. Cox, then of Gus, determine two opposite parts in the story. In the first part, Mr. Cox controls the action; in the second, Gus does. As mentioned, the two parts are of very unequal length: 159 pages including 15 chapters, as opposed to 48 pages including five chapters, which creates a surprising lack of balance. Mr. Cox starts a linear, repetitive narrative development: the structure is open. Gus starts a vector-like development: the structure is closed. Both of them are provided with characteristics befitting the part they play: a great walker, a motorcyclist, their mobility is useful for establishing connections, and the difference of speed between walking and motorcycling corresponds to the difference of rhythm between the actions they start.

Under Mr. Cox's supervision, there is no progress in action concerning Malcolm. A few plots develop, but among the other characters only. All attempts at animating him fail, which is unexpected and may be considered awkward since he is the hero. However, the characters present in that part of the story disappear from the second, "all swallowed up in the past" (162) except for a hurried round-up at the end. Only the character of Malcolm links the two parts, and he is a most unusual and apparently unsatisfactory character.

A "NON USUAL" CHARACTER

Malcolm is the "hero" of the book. His name is used for the title. He is present in all the chapters but one. His oxymoronic "short long life" is the proclaimed subject. Still, Malcolm is an unusual hero. He is merely sketched out. He has no surname, no birth certificate, no family, no friends, no character, no social status, no connections, no education, no talents, no memory. His age is uncertain: "about" fifteen; he does not know when he was born and seems to have always been the same age. "I have nothing. I can do nothing" he says (43), and further on: "I hardly feel I exist" (60). The end of the story confirms this surprising vacuum: when he dies, the coroner and the undertaker insist "that there had been no corpse at all, and that nobody was buried in the ceremony" (205).

He is passive, but full of goodwill. At the beginning of the book he admits: "I

suppose if somebody would tell me what to do, I would do it" (5). Yet, during the first part, he repeatedly falls asleep during conversations or shows himself inattentive. On the few occasions when he is about to take initiatives, he is "rudely" pushed back into a corner, told to sit down, not interrupt, "be silent or leave the room" (138). Every episode stops with his being either dismissed or forgotten.

This series of failures is reversed in the second part. Malcolm and Melba fall in love and decide to get married. The episodes that follow come in logical sequence as the development of this decision: virility ordeal (tattooing), sexual initiation (at Madame Rosita's), experience of loss (Gus dies), reunion and marriage, Malcolm's illness (leading to Melba's betrayal), his death. The plot unfolds smoothly—too smoothly, suspiciously so.

Such unusual treatment of the main character leads us to another reading of the text, underlying the surface reading. On a superficial level, Malcolm is simply another character in a conventional narrative, just like Mr. Cox and Gus; on a deeper level, however, he is a "character in the making," part of a work in progress, and the two intermediaries who animate him, Mr. Cox and Gus, are comic figures of would-be writers. At the beginning, Mr. Cox, as would-be "author." is haunted with the idea of a character not yet clearly defined in his mind: a Shakespearean name, a princely orphan, an engaging youth, altogether a promising character—hence the sumptuous surroundings. For the moment, either the "author" has no idea of a plot, or he is in no hurry to spoil his pleasure, so he toys with the possibilities opened to him by this fresh new character he has conjured up in his mind—hence the golden bench and the boy's "waiting" look, the lack of precision concerning him, his ageless look, "as if he had always been this height and would continue to be" (7). We understand that he has always been what he is now, he has a "charmed" life, which is not subject to the laws of nature but to the requirements of art.

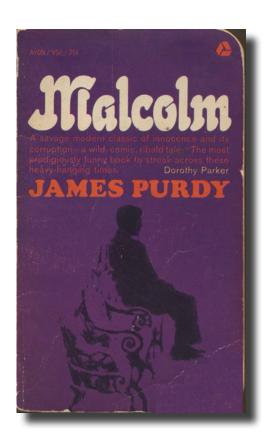
"HIGHLY CRITICAL"

Cox and Gus correspond to different stages of artistic creation, the drafts and the definitive version. They also serve as warnings against opposite pitfalls of fiction writing. Behind Mr. Cox and Gus, the real narrator may have an ulterior motivation.

Mr. Cox is presented as "the most famous astrologer of his period" (1). We are not told *what* period that is, and even if the following developments ascertain that Mr. Cox is not to be relegated to remote times, the choice of the words "his period," the choice of the profession attributed to him ("People still study the ... *stars!*" Malcolm exclaims, surprised, p. 5), all this contributes to associating him with obsolete practices. Under his patronage, ambitious literary projects are launched. *Malcolm* begins as a romance and goes on

as a picaresque novel, with a few prose poems included.² Such types of fiction, together with the princely character of Malcolm, are "too expensive for the depleted epoch" they are in (5).

A representative of tradition, Mr. Cox is treated as a comic character, a caricature of a writer, omniscient, omnipresent, omnipotent—"Mr. Cox knows everything" (64), "Mr. Cox is everywhere" (82), "the wires were (...) in the hands only of Mr. Cox" (84)—yet harassed by his paper and ink creatures who tend to fret and grow defiant: "You have played God long enough" says Kermit (72). It is well known that writers sometimes feel that their characters get out of control. This happens in Malcolm: "He [Mr. Cox] had set the ball rolling, and it had rolled further than he had ever dreamed or contemplated" (70). In reaction to their ill will, Mr. Cox's moods vary. He expresses anger, defiance, frustration, despair ... as becomes an author in the throes of creation: "Everything you have (...) you owe to me. Try to remember that when you feel proud and free" (67), "the only real talking I will do" (87). He complains: "I have arranged all the situations (...) Why can't they act? I have brought the right



people together and the right situations. I am not such a fool as not to know *right people* and *right situations* when they are together. But nothing happens. Nothing at all" (88). The characters are moved, dropped, reintroduced in new configurations, the parts are redistributed, the drafts get longer and more complex, all to no avail. The abrupt dismissals are metaphors of an author's failing inspiration and tearing up one draft after another. The repetition of the same pattern of failure creates a comic effect.

The function attributed to Mr. Cox and Gus is similar, but they are given opposite personalities, which correspond to the different turns of their literary attempts. Gus is resolutely contemporary: he has been to "[o]ne war and then Korea" (175 - the only explicit reference to a historical event found in the novel), and he is so used to riding that he can no longer walk. His name is a weakened form of "Cox," the one who steers.³ He is black, friendly, smiling, easy going, and, as a figure of an "author," he *does* show weakness. The characters belonging to his part of the novel easily usurp his responsibility: Melba decides to marry Malcolm in spite of Gus's protests. She is "highly critical" (166) of him. The word AUTHORITY, which should go with authorship, is written on the door *she* opens (170). Even when it is Malcolm who, to his own wonder, takes initiatives, Gus yields: "Do you know what you are?" Gus inquired (...). "Persuasive, that's what" (174). When Malcolm comments on the tattooing, he points in fact to the dangerous irreversibility of the narrative enterprise in which they are involved: "The only thing about a tattoo is, once

it's done, I don't suppose you can undo it away again" (175). A plot is indeed built up and brought to its denouement, a denouement widely approved of: "after it was all over, everybody agreed that it was almost the only way he [Malcolm] could have gone from them" (199).

We must bear in mind, however, that Gus dies in the process. This should disqualify him for the part of successful author we claim for him. Still, it is worth noting that, just after the episode of his (unexplained) death, a new chapter begins with the words: "Malcolm's adventures might have been continued indefinitely had it not so happened by chance that ..." (187). Placed in a prominent position in the chapter, this phrase stands out:



Its main clause is in the passive voice, and reminds us of the formula that comes at the end of each episode in a serial story, "(to be continued)". This suggests that Malcolm's "adventures," under the guidance of someone like Gus, have been turning into cheap literature. It is a "highly critical" statement, in which the ironic impersonal voice of the real narrator can be heard. He "kills" Gus as part of his debunking of the stereotyped plot Gus has been guilty of producing. It is so conventional that it can unfold without apparent authorial help.

The next clause corroborates this interpretation. Once Gus is removed, the link with Melba should be broken; the new plot should peter out. Not so with *this* kind of plot, the implicit critic hints. A very obvious trick is enough to put it back on its tracks: "Malcolm's adventures might have been continued indefinitely *had it not so happened by chance* ..." The coincidence is heavily underlined: it demonstrates that anything will do that allows the predictable denouement to take place.

So, ironically, Gus may stand for the figure of the popular writer, easily successful with the general public. "Everybody" approves of the end given to Malcolm's adventures—but what is "everybody" is judgment worth? Purdy is hard on the American public: "A public only knows what it's told to like, and it can't remember week to week what it liked last." Success of this sort is another form of failure in terms of art.

In retrospect, Gus's failure also explains why, in the first part, Mr. Cox is held up to ridicule. Gus speedily knocks off a plot, Mr. Cox despairs because, try as he may, he can't do it. The conclusion seems to be that both of them are wrong in believing that the worth of a book lies in its plot.

OTHER CLUES

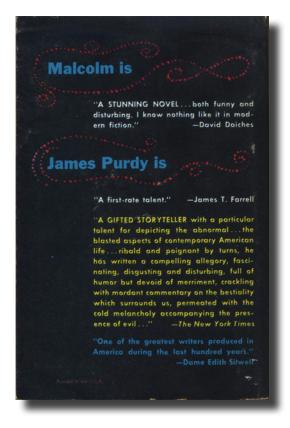
So far, this analysis has considered the book as a whole. But many details can be read on two levels, in their context, and as metatextual comments. I am now going to examine a few of these clues, which hint at what really matters to make a good book.

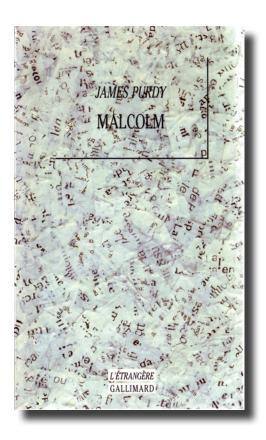
The phrase: "Texture is all, substance nothing" (81) apparently refers to a very light subject, Madame Girard's veil. It can also be taken as an artistic principle, illustrated by the *text* we are reading. The *substance*—familiar plots, conventional characters of artists and millionaires—does not matter. "Millions of men look like millions of men" (196). The interest lies in the treatment of them, the caricatures, the exaggerations, the ironic distortions of the techniques of fiction writing. The same message is conveyed by the statement: "Whoever the subject, it is the picture that matters" (138). Here, painting is a metaphor for writing.

Another message to the reader pushes the paradox one step further. Mr. Cox has told Kermit all about Malcolm. Malcolm protests that there is nothing to tell. "There is a great deal to tell, *always*" says Kermit "somewhat gravely" (24). Not only does substance not matter, but it even does not matter if there is no substance. A novel can be written, and is often written in Purdy's case, about and starting from a void. It is demonstrated here. Malcolm defines himself as "a cypher and a blank" (29).

When Girard Girard calls on Malcolm, he finds him listening to his sea-shells (58). Malcolm offers Girard one of them, "one of the larger shells" (presumably in homage to Girard's social status!), but Girard refuses to listen to it. A futile activity, at first sight —at least, so Girard thinks. Yet the sea-shell is an appropriate image since the fascination of the shell lies, not in its actual substance, but in the impalpable sound that issues from it. Here the stress is put on orality. The reader is encouraged to wave aside subject matter (the shell) and enjoy yet another aspect of the book that makes it worth reading, namely the variety of voices heard in the dialogues, the prose poems woven into the descriptions. By refusing to listen to the music of the shell, Girard, the millionaire, a man of substance, betrays his incomprehension of the intrinsic value of a good book.

The keyword is "language." Phrases encourage the reader to look further, see the pretty face under all the melted make-up (52), look up *words* in the dictionary (195). Malcolm's lack of education comes in useful to force the





word, this minimal unit of text, on the reader's attention. A slight discrepancy between the expected word and the one actually placed in the character's mouth revives it, gives it a sometimes disturbing, sometimes ironic flavor (the word *Abyssinian* for instance, the words *ex-con*, *pederast*, *marriage* ...). The Girards are not 'friends' of Malcolm's, they are his favorite *address* (155), which reminds us of the printed nature of what we read.

Words acquire a dynamic power: they generate text. For instance (Purdy chooses *names* carefully), Eloisa *Brace* is a strong woman who *braces* herself for boxing and hits Madame Girard who falls, has to be picked up, etc. (122). The best example is to be found in the enigmatic use, by Gus and Melba, of the word "a contemporary," which first appears in the chapter title, then, in the course of the dialogue, in different types of clauses, grammatical and ungrammatical. "Malcolm meets a contemporary" (title), "You one of the contemporaries? / If you one of the contemporaries... / You *is* a contemporary? / Another contemporary! / Meet a contemporary, / What if you hadn't been a contemporary, huh? / Malcolm was about to ask

what a contemporary was... / How did you know he was a contemporary? / I don't even care if you are a contemporary or not" (160-168). The word serves several purposes. It underlines the break with the first part of the book. It feeds the dialogue. It contributes to the process of building up the new characters, Gus and Melba. It serves as a password that triggers the whole set of Malcolm's last adventures. It becomes a "non usual," pungent word, rich in new connotations.

TEXTS WITHIN THE TEXT

Within *Malcolm*, the narrative we are given to read, allusions to other writing attempts are included: Jerome's published book "about" his experience in prison, Mr. Cox's notebook, and Malcolm's record of his "conversations," which is by far the most significant.

We are given little information about Jerome's book: its topic, its title (*They Could Have Me Back*), its cover. The book is promptly dismissed with Malcolm's purposely naive question, "Is that you naked on the cover?" and his equally purposely inappropriate comment on its "nice" title. Malcolm politely returns it to its author ("I don't read very much", 93). Jerome's book obviously belongs to the category that will tempt a publisher—a flashy subject, factual experience, a hint of scandal. All this provides substance enough, but the

reader knows by now that "substance [is] nothing," (81). What matters is not what to tell but how to tell it. There is no hint that Jerome is at all conscious of the demands that turn experience into art, into a text worth reading.

When Mr. Cox takes out his notebook, we are not directly told what he writes. We are told that, true to his part as astrologer, he makes a prediction concerning one of his characters ("the day will come when he will have to ...") and just then, he writes down something "hurriedly" (37). Two pages later, we learn that an important change has taken place in the character's "life." Laureen has gone off with a Japanese wrestler. The juxtaposition suggests more than a coincidence: it suggests that Mr. Cox has brought about this change, and that what we read now finds its source in the hurried note he wrote. When Malcolm mentions this elopement, much later, Girard waves it aside: "Oh, that old story. An invention of Mr. Cox" (155). Unless we choose a psychological explanation for Girard's denial, since he is an interested party, we'll conclude that coherence in the plot does not worry the narrator. He uses the material that fits the scene, the minimal unit for narrative, and shifts to other material when suitable for another scene. There are no transitions, no effort to justify changes by cause and effect or other realistic devices.



"Now that Malcolm was going out into the great world, so to speak, he felt compelled to write down some of the things, at least, which happened to him (...) But (...) he had very little command of language, and could seldom do more than copy down some of the things which his new friends, especially Professor Cox, said." (35).

This announcement comes as early as the opening of the fourth chapter. The text will mention Malcolm's writing enterprise again, but we'll never read more than one line of it: "Married love is the strangest thing there is" (35), a remarkable statement, we are told, because "original to him".

So Malcolm's version (to use Purdy's word for Jeremy's) is a shadow double of the text we read, and one of the fictitious sources for it. We have already noticed that Malcolm is a "character in the making." We must add that he takes his place among the avatars of the writer. His text, however, is not on the same level as Mr. Cox and Gus's scenarios. It is one degree further from the actual book. There are three layers of text, the real ink and paper book, the fictitious text imagined by Mr. Cox and Gus, and Malcolm's text, which reflects what the real narrator imagines that his pseudo-narrators (Cox and Gus) imagine for his character of Malcolm, whom he makes their character. The text we read is ironically founded on a complex mass of non-existent material.

Considering the character's difficulties with language, it seems paradoxical to choose Malcolm for the part of writer. The one sample of his "Conversations" that we are given to read would not strike us as worth quoting if the narrator had not highlighted it by quotation marks and commentaries, and pretended to justify himself for quoting it. A humorous touch, of course, but the humor covers, or rather uncovers, a vindication of the kind of statements Malcolm is said to have produced. Malcolm's innocence gives him a fresh look at the world/word and a capacity to *wonder* not unlike a writer's vision. The minimalist sentence "Married love is the strangest thing there is" corresponds to Malcolm's limited means of expression, but also to Purdy's exacting pruning of language for the most disturbing result.

"ALMOST THE ONLY WAY"

Malcolm's function as narrator is reactivated in the last chapter.



"(...) Malcolm found himself too weak ever to be out of bed, and in this state the happy thought hit him to write down all his conversations with Mr. Cox, Girard Girard, Kermit, and others in English, but shortly after he began this, he caught an extremely bad cold which his Cuban valet said was really pneumonia, and after that, Malcolm wrote down everything in French, as this seemed the easier language in his increased weakness" (200). "He spent all his time now recording his 'conversations' with his former friends" (201).

In the fourth chapter, Malcolm had felt compelled to write when he started going out into the world. He was beginning life. There is no allusion here to that previous impulse, but this time, a narrator's intrusion approves of the decision to write: "the *happy* thought hit him." When he begins to write now, in the final chapter, it is a different decision, a different enterprise, in a different context. Now Malcolm is dying. Writing is linked to desire and death. Before he fell ill, Malcolm had answered to the policeman who advised him to consult the dictionary, that he had no time for that. "I'm awfully busy now that I'm married" (195). But desire proves sterile: "after so many weeks of incessant marriage" Melba is still not pregnant and Malcolm dies of "too frequent conjugal duties" (201). Now that he can no longer make love to Melba, who abandons him, he turns to words. The death of desire awakens the urge to write. He'll leave 300 pages of manuscript behind him. Malcolm's fictitious text remains after Malcolm's fictitious death. Only ink on paper survives.

Why in French? Malcolm has learned French with his father. French is the

language of the dead father, the language of an ossified cultural tradition, by opposition to the living language in which he had been able to write his one original sentence. As Malcolm's infatuation with his father has occasioned many comic effects. The father image has been playfully discredited, together with the cultural values it stood for and the language that conveyed them. Moreover, we may have doubts about Malcolm's fluency in French, since the one French word introduced into the conversation (the word largesse) puzzles him (8). So the narrator's approval of his character's "happy thought" may also be taken ironically. The recourse to French in absentia as the final language of Malcolm's "conversations" is, as many other devices, ambiguous. It may be an oblique reference to absence and death, deliberately glossed over.

Yet absence is at the core of the novel. An absence that haunts all of Purdy's works. The missing father, the vacant hero, the characters challenging each other's existence, criticism, contradiction or denial destroying every progress all point to a central blank, void, nothingness. There is nobody beyond the characters on the blank page. Far from discrediting fiction, this makes of it the only elegant and efficient *presence* in an inconsistent world. The book mirrors what it demonstrates: there is no life beyond the "charmed life" of words, no substance under the many interwoven layers of text. Writing is the beginning and the end. The writer is the only Creator.8

The novel opens with Malcolm persistently sitting on a golden bench.9 An ornamental piece, so everybody sees it, a useless ornament. Thus, by sitting on it, Malcolm shocks the passers-by, or, symbolically, breaks a taboo. "No one had really ever sat on it at all before" (2). Together with Malcolm's "royal" aloofness and indifference to public opinion, what is heard here is the writer's voice, quietly asserting, in his dry, humorous manner, his independence and demiurgic transgression.

NOTES

- ¹ Malcolm was first published in September 1959 by Farrar, Strauss & Giroux. All page references are to the Bantam edition, 1971.
- ² For prose poems, see for instance the description of Eloisa's house, p. 110 (the only descriptive passage in the novel, written in two long periods of carefully balanced rhythm including regular verse) or the beginning of the chapter "Leave me <u>Madame Girard</u>," p. 143.
- ³ Many other details oppose Mr. Cox and Gus, for instance Gus's *watch* and Mr. Cox's sidereal time; Mr. Cox's elegant calling cards and the placards and neon lights advertising Melba or Professor Robinolte; the *palatial* hotel in front of which Mr. Cox finds Malcolm, and the Tattoo *Palace...*
- ⁴ James Purdy interviewed by Adriaan van Dis. From the television program "De ijsbreker" (Amsterdam, March 1990).
- ⁵ For instance, Madame Girard « giving the oration » (131), Eloisa « harumphing OK's » after every few words she utters (120), Gus speaking in « code words » (172)... Each character has his or her specific voice.
- ⁶ See note 2.
- ⁷ The reader, for his greater enjoyment, comes to expect Malcolm's referring to his father in all circumstances, as do the exasperated characters. For instance: "'It's girls we are talking about,' the midget proceeded. 'Well, you see, my father —' Malcolm began. 'I thought we would come to that,' the midget said" (113).
- ⁸ The Scriptures are appropriated. See the very free use of the theme of the Fall: Malcolm, Adamlike, has no mother: "'You motherless bastard,' Gus complained (…). 'My father is the one who is missing!' Malcolm shouted to Gus through the wind" (171). He is expelled from a garden of Eden where he lived in innocence and prolonged youth: "(…) he heard from behind the closing of the tall gates of the horticultural gardens, and the snap as they locked themselves against him" (161). He falls into "marriage" and mortality… The writer is not "playing God," he is in earnest. See in *Eustace Chisholm and the Works* a similar affirmation: "God's got his lamp lit and is waiting for me" (ch. 4). God, here, is Eustace, another writer.
- ⁹ In French, the meaning of the bench as founding block of the written edifice could be summed up by the words "point d'encrage."



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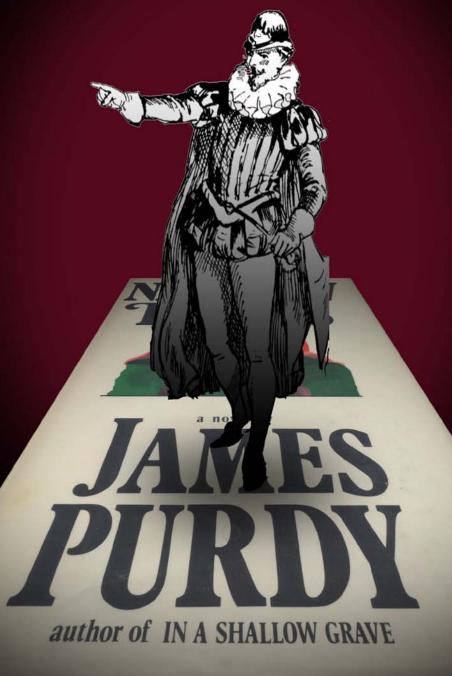
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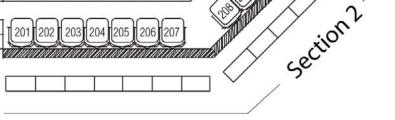
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HYPERION

On the future of aesthetics





Aisle 3

'They just let go':

James Purdy's 'Desiring Machines'

and the Dramatic Sense of his Fiction

Written by Dr Richard Canning

**S. Eliot wrote in 1937 of Djuna Barnes's novel *Nightwood* that it had 'a quality of horror and doom very nearly related to that of Elizabethan tragedy.' I shall not be outlining the many plausible connections to be made between Barnes's idiosyncratic work of high modernism and Purdy's prose or dramatic writings though such a study would surely prove fruitful. Barnes and Purdy belong, for one, to that small minority of twentieth-century authors to have, in a sense, refused to adopt a specialism; that is, they both wrote, published, and saw staged works of poetry, prose, and theatre. Purdy began his writing career as a dramatist, as John Uecker has pointed out in his introduction to Purdy's *Selected Plays*, and much that is dramatic in his fiction is indebted to these origins.²

Several critics have drawn comparisons between Purdy's *oeuvre* and the priorities and instincts of authors of Elizabethan and Jacobean tragedy, perhaps encouraged by Purdy's own citation of the genre—and various well-known examples of it—as amongst the literature he revered and learnt from. In a 1997 interview, Purdy poured perhaps predictable scorn on the inability of literary critics to 'approach my books,' as well as more generally on the literary *Zeitgeist*, characteristically using the opportunity to define his writing against that which prevails in our culture.³

Specifically addressing both fiction and the stage, Purdy described contemporary writing as 'all subject; no content': 'They're all just: "This is the way it is." The characters aren't real.' His distinction—between two apparently analogous terms, 'subject' and 'content,' betrays the ways in which Purdy insisted on the formal strategies of transformation, by which the ephemerality of present-day concerns and characterizations (which lack 'real' substance) might become, in literary terms, resonant, symbolic, or even mythical (and thus laden with enduring 'content'). Purdy's terminology is far from exact, characteristically, and in following it thus far, I am aware that I risk being accused of Purdyesque imprecision. However, earlier in the same interview Purdy had offered a certain amplification of the subject/content distinction. According to this logic, the 'subject' matter in a Rembrandt painting has been identified by—and celebrated for—surface considerations, such as the accurate detailing of (now) historical costume. Its 'content,' contrastingly, amounts to Purdy to something innately spiritual (and implicitly pan-historical): the matter of the human 'soul.' Moreover, he implicitly and imaginatively compared himself to the painter, who was 'scolded . . . for doing studies of blacks and old women':



Those things he painted of Negroes are the most wonderful things I've ever seen. He really got their souls. But they wanted him to paint people in lovely costumes with beautiful ruffs—like 'The Nightwatch.' I thought: 'That's the problem today; you're supposed to please people.'4

Purdy later described himself having a 'relationship' with Jacobean tragedy, claiming to read works by Thomas Middleton and John Webster and others 'all the time.'5 Of his own books, Narrow Rooms (1978) he specifically described as 'Jacobean,' going on to mention its closeness to Middleton's Women Beware Women, a 'brilliant' play. Of Webster's The Duchess of Malfi, Purdy praised its language, saying of the Jacobeans: 'they just let go.'6 Of course, any attempt to link Jacobean literature with any painterly world view, including that of Rembrandt, active some decades later and in a quite different cultural milieu, must be a strain. There is no easy way of eliding the artistic processes of an oil painter with those of the wordsmith. What Purdy is celebrating, I take it, in the integrity of a Rembrandt canvas, with what critics understand as its coherence of visual symbolism, approximated, nevertheless—to Purdy at least—to the rhetorical fluency of playwrights such as Middleton and Webster. In unleashing a set of recurrent motifs, imagery and symbols, these playwrights did indeed—notwithstanding the method beneath their linguistic inventiveness—appear to 'just let go.' John Uecker comparably recalled Purdy's love of the Elizabethan dramatist Christopher Marlowe's 'hypnotic structures ... where the play rests on a singular driving force throughout.'7

It may seem paradoxical, then, that some critics, such as Tony Tanner, have focused upon the awkwardness with which Purdy's characters express themselves—'not letting go' would be a better summation of their invariably flawed self-expression, however vital the urge. Indeed, though Tanner did not make the connection, I would argue that there is, in Purdy's most brutal narratives, a correlation between inarticulateness and an urge to violence perhaps previously only so forcefully evident in a story I often think of in relation to Purdy, Melville's Billy Budd—itself a work of innate dramatic potency, as Benjamin Britten perceived.

However, Purdy was arguing for the expressiveness and attention to design of playwright or author, not the character, of course. Driving the latter's actions is, fundamentally, a series of states of desire, a collective 'desiringness,' if you like, which can be seen as another of Purdy's strong links to the Renaissance dramatic world. Peter Brooks, in Reading for the Plot, provides helpful commentary here; accounting for the extraordinary power of Balzac as a storyteller, Brooks coined the phrase 'desiring machines' to describe

his protagonists, who motor plots that veer between drama and melodrama. that seduce each other, and the reader, with storytelling guile.8 It is all too evident from Brooks's focus on works of narrative prose that there is nothing essentially dramatic about such dedication. This is precisely why I have found the term 'desiring machines' so useful, however, in considering Purdy's prose in the context of dramatic method. When Amos Ratcliffe and Daniel Haws come together in Eustace Chisholm and the Works (1967), for instance, Purdy expressly figures their love as born of something other than their conscious selves: 'Awake, he [Daniel] not only never made a single pass at Amos Ratcliffe, but seemed to keep a gulf between them all the time.'9 Daniel approaches Amos sexually only by way of his inveterate sleepwalking, a state in which he is 'as different from the daytime Daniel Haws as a dream is from everyday reality.'10 In a 1993 interview with Christopher Lane, Purdy helpfully and simply glossed the attraction Daniel felt for Amos as stemming from 'what the Greeks call Eros, which you couldn't do anything about; if you resisted, you would be destroyed in Greek mythology.'11

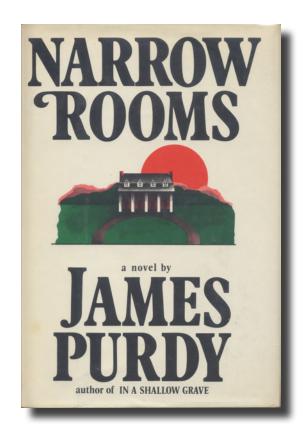
Later in that novel, Daniel finds himself drawn to Captain Stadger, executor of baleful physical punishment, in a comparably fatalistic way—rather as Billy Budd accepts the wrongheaded steering of the Court Martial by Captain Vere in Melville's tale, which will lead to his execution. Haws's embrace of Stadger's vicious assault on him, moreover, has clear echoes of Edward II's end, murdered with a red hot spit thrust into his anus, as first detailed in Holinshed's *Chronicles* (1577/87). Although Christopher Marlowe in his play *Edward II* has his protagonist killed by nothing more shocking than a table, the story of the monarch's dispatch has wide enough currency to invite comparison to Haws's unconditional desire for the 'hideous pain' Stadger will inflict upon him in the novel's last pages:



At first Daniel thought he was being attacked with the billy club which in the captain's powerful hands was being used for this new excruciating torment, but looking back against his orders, before he felt the correcting pistol whip his face, he saw an iron instrument of unbelievable medieval shape and monstrous design, held in the captain's other hand and thrusting itself now in Daniel's body, the first of the "real" instruments, he supposed, to be used in breaking him down to "submission." 12

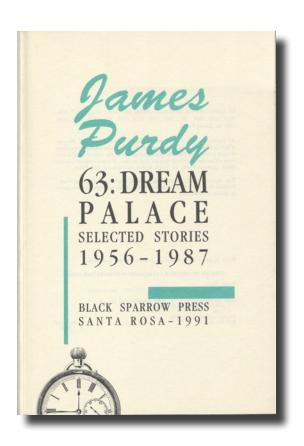
Certainly Daniel's "desiring" of this brutal attack shocks; it is a shock, however, replicated in other Purdy novels, such as *Narrow Rooms* (1978), in which exconvict Sidney anticipates fatalistically his appointment with Destiny in the form of "the Renderer."

As a summary of human motives—or rather, those pronounced and defined in certain works of literature— Brooks's notion of 'desiring machines' stretches, I believe, to absorb readily at least one other genre and one distinct writer, both of which have inspired Purdy in his writings. First is the picaresque, a genre whose literary method invariably deploys desire, or desiringness, as a means—sometimes subtle, sometimes brutal—of moving along the picaresque hero. In the 1997 interview, Purdy admitted to a reverence for what he called Cervantes's 'stories about young boys,' as well as for the anonymously authored staple Lazarillo de Tormes and the Spanish picaresque novel in general.¹³ Desire, in Cervantes's Don Quixote, might be sated on occasion. But in the tragic-comic fictional world of the picaresque, so often reminiscent of Purdy's own, it is more likely to be thwarted, ridiculed, countered, refused, or transformed. The picaresque equally and naturally renders with unequalled clarity the dependency of literary works not only upon language but the physical act of oration. As anyone who witnessed Madrid's staged readings of



the entirety of Cervantes's novel to commemorate the book's anniversary in 2005 can testify, such dependency likewise solicits a state of pronounced, voluble 'desiringness' in a reader. The result is a narrative compact or mutual dependency or contingency we feel routinely in Purdy too, the best analogy for which seems to me to be an equable, even absurd suspension of disbelief entered into by the theatergoer, and the equally requisite affectiveness of the stagebound actor-as-character.

The author I want to mention is eighteenth-century French playwright Pierre Carlet de Chamblain de Marivaux. Purdy has never, to my knowledge, expressed an admiration for Marivaux, but the analogies are impossible to ignore. No dramatist in history can so precisely be accounted for by Brooks's notion of characters as 'desiring machines,' and the extreme ruthlessness and textual economy with which Marivaux cuts his figures free from anything other than the primacy of their desires urges the comparison further. Equally suggestive is the fluency with which Marivaux transgressed the boundary between conventional dramatic idioms of tragedy and comedy in plays such as *The Double Inconstancy, The False Servant,* and *The Game of Love and Chance*. Billed as comedies, these are works which invariably make us tense, confused, wretched, and perhaps sickly as fast as they could make us laugh. In his time, Marivaux was mocked for the perceived smallness of his interests and literary ambition, as well as suspected for the ease with which



he routinely inverted normative assumptions regarding both sexual desire and gendered performance and self-presentation, further analogies to the "shock value" of Purdy's stories about explicitly homosexual characters, from *Eustace Chisholm and the Works* on. Marivaux's heroes are commonly seen on the brink of, or in the moment of acting on, inappropriate and culturally unintelligible erotic urges; naturally, this being comedy, all finally proves well. By stepping out of what is socially and culturally respectable, they wittily and confoundedly end up reinforcing the very values they threaten to contradict. Still, as with Shakespeare's "problem plays," there is a tragic element to, and an individual dramatic pathos in, Marivaux's protagonist's drivenness, their 'desiringness.'

A plausible, if indirect act of literary linkage might posit Jean Genet as the link between Marivaux and Purdy. Purdy's writing has been compared to many examples of existential literature, as well as to writers associated with the school of the 'Theatre of the Absurd'—Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco, Jean Genet, Edward Albee.

The match may be less appropriate than may first appear; when Albee himself was encouraged by this assumed commonality to turn Purdy's first novel *Malcolm* into a play, the result was what Purdy called 'terrible. Awful.'¹⁴ With typical perversity he then conceded: 'I'm glad he did it. It had moments, but I don't know that anyone could put *Malcolm* on the stage.'¹⁵

Purdy's oft-stated enthusiasm for Jean Genet certainly does make sense, if we consider that author's masterpiece of dramatic condensation, *The Balcony* (*Le Balcon*), a study in the bleak prescription and fatalism of the basically natural human state of 'desiringness.' Looking backwards, *The Balcony* resembles a Marivaux comedy for a modern age of cynical, Godless despair; looking forwards, it foreshadows, loosely, the brutal awareness of a shared sense of imposition and abandonment with which Purdy's characters in fiction and on stage conduct themselves.

It was not on stage, however, but in the film *Un Chant d'Amour* and in fictions such as *Our Lady of the Flowers* and *Querelle of Brest* that Genet himself brought together a broadly existentialist world-view with a grimly fatalistic view of the "acting out" of sexual desires between men. Purdy has always vociferously argued against both the Balkanisation of literary analysis— against, explicitly, the very idea of a gay fictional tradition—and indeed of sexual archetypes themselves. In the 1997 interview, he quoted the Roman comic dramatist Terence: "Homo sum"—"I am a human being; I count nothing

human foreign to me."17 Still, the relationship between the tragic selfhood of many of his characters and their sexual desires is, of course, specific to every case. It may be stretching the point, but, like Barnes's Nightwood, Purdy's novelistic containment of the inalienably tragic status of the figure of the homosexual coincides with a personal incomprehension at the very idea of identity formations, identity politics or 'liberation.' Late in life, Barnes would tell enquirers sharply: 'I never was a lesbian. I just loved Thelma.'18 Purdy commented to me that 'for most of us, being gay was a very heavy burden. I think it still is . . . It's still very tragic to be gay.'19 Defaulting, as it were, on the need to reflect the tragic status of the sexual minority amounts for Purdy to committing the greatest sin a writer can commit—dishonesty:



There's this book . . . where the son found out his ratner was gay. They just had this lark together. That's fantasy! When you think of the suffering most gays have suffered through the centuries: they've been burned at the stake; mistreated by the literary establishment.20

The sense of personal injury—if not of being 'burned at the stake'—was reiterated in a reference to his 'mistreatment' by The New York Times: 'When you're hit with a brick, your body knows it. You can forget it, but you're going to have a wound there.'21

Not only there. Purdy announced in the interview a sort of mutual empathy between himself as author and his readers. Critics had condemned the brutality of some of his novels' endings, such as Eustace Chisholm and Narrow Rooms. But, Purdy argued, did these people think he as author had been any less disturbed by what he had written?: 'Well, I had to go to hospital. Those endings made me sick.'22 Wounded or not, Purdy was not cowed. His sense was of subjects and stories finding him—or rather, lodging themselves into his consciousness and refusing to leave: The drama of inspiration and composition is one which this author at any rate has always talked up; just as boxing prints adorned the walls of his apartment, he considers the profession of writing to be akin to the sport. One tactical aspect which Purdy also glossed relates to the reading public's assumption—to Purdy, misunderstanding concerning literary genre and classification. Just as his own 'desire' for stories precludes consideration of sexual type, class, race—according to his own estimate—the form in which he will write them up likewise remained beyond his control, or accessed at the level of the unconscious. In 1993, Purdy embraced this Romantic, vatic concept of inspiration outright:



I don't really think my work is fantasy so much as it's unconscious; everyone has an unconscious, even the politically correct. The politically correct must be very upset by their own dreams because they don't believe in the unconscious; they think everything is conscious.23

Of his plays, Purdy commented:



They won't do them... suitable for Broadway. Then again, the plays aren't ge, puzzles my gay friends. But I know these stories from my great-grandmother. I like them. I'm queer for stories! It doe matter to me what kind of people are in them. If I like their They won't do them here. They say Midwestern speech isn't suitable for Broadway. Then again, the plays aren't gay. That great-grandmother. I like them. I'm queer for stories! It doesn't

Once the genre is determined, Purdy proceeds; the way he described doing so sounding, like so much of his writing, at first self-evident or obvious:



Very different, because all the work has to be done by an actor.

A big load's taken off your chest in a way, because in a novel you're talking to someone. You're telling them: "This is the way it happened."25

This comment is in fact highly revealing, however, since it directly compares the contingent dynamic of the actor-audience relationship to that of the fiction writer-reader one. The performance, or 'work' involved in novel writing, to Purdy, involved something just as intimate, immediate, direct, and dependent upon a mutual desiringness—a mutual wish for the tale to be offered up and received—and a mutual awareness of the partial, particular use of language to effect this. Purdy may feel that the specific elements of the stories dictated their substance—the burden of the tragic, or the capacity for levity—but, like Marivaux, he retains the right to cross-pollinate. He is proud of deploying humour, for example, where it might be deemed unfit. Of Malcolm's circumstances, Purdy said:



They [the critics] don't see why it's funny, because it's so terrible. Well, it's both. We often laugh at tragic things. It's a

In a comic yet absurd opinionated moment, Purdy reacted to the complimentary approaches of one revered playwright after a performance of one of Purdy's own plays by turning some self-evidently positive comments into something he felt obliged to reject:



Tennessee Williams came to all my off-Broadway plays and said: "You're a playwright." I said: "Excuse me—do you mean that I'm not a novelist?" He said: "I think you're more of a playwright." I don't believe that.27

Of course, Williams had mined his own shorter fiction extensively, reworking it methodically into theatre—some works becoming more dramatic than others. The close relationship between Williams' prose writing and his renowned stage pieces, however, stands in contrast to the distinctness of Purdy's novels and his plays; this might also help us to understand his need to reject Williams's apparent compliment.

If confluence between works of drama and fiction—themes, forms, aims—is something Purdy has long eschewed, it is worth considering his early writing, and the novella 63: Dream Palace and novel Malcolm in particular in light of this. It has been noted that one aspect of Purdy's characters' struggle toward expression is their tendency to be frustrated authors. Cabot Wright Begins (1964) concerns not one but several struggles toward the writing of a rapist's life story. Central is the Carrie/Bernie relationship, predicated on Carrie's belief that Bernie has 'a great book inside of him.'28 Like Bernie, Eustace Chisholm will have his literary aspirations thwarted; his 'failed attempt to combine marriage with the calling of narrative poet' absurdly being reflected in his inability to afford proper paper on which to write his epic poem about America.29

Notably absent, however, from the series of aspirational authors in Purdy's novels is any dramatist; indeed the world of the theatre is one which passes out of Purdy's fictional horizons after these early works. It may be that he had successfully "bifurcated" his creativity, given that his second novel, The Nephew (1961) has an extremely cinematic non-theatrical mise en scène, compared to its predecessor. This evidently coincided with some success on Purdy's part in writing drama; he would have been working on *The Nephew*

at the same time as the plays 'Children is All' and 'Cracks.'³⁰ In the perhaps over-literal sense of finding the world of the theatre a useful canvas within his novels, Purdy presents us with little at all beyond this point—though, I maintain that in consequence the fictions retain their theatricality.

Still, funerals, dance-rooms, occasional musical concerts and even Ku Klux Klan marches more commonly allow for the presence of ritual, self-staging, and performative self-invention and reinvention in novels such as *Eustace Chisholm and the Works, In a Shallow Grave*, and *Narrow Rooms*. The sense is that, as Purdy established himself as a writer of the first rank, the performance of his narration—or his implied author's narration—is less marked by echoes or nods toward actual theatrical performance in the tales themselves. I will return to *63: Dream Palace* and *Malcolm* in a moment, but want to mention in passing one possible exception to this claim.

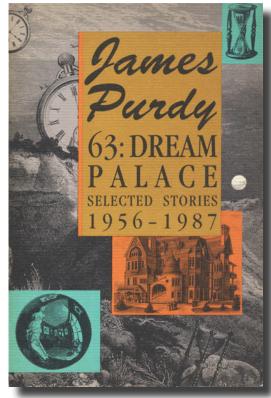
The figure of Dr. Ulric in *Narrow Rooms* begs for comparison with Djuna Barnes's almost all-orating surrogate narrator and cabaret performer manqué, Dr. Matthew O'Connor. Barnes allows for most of the body of *Nightwood* to be orated by this figure, who turns out to be complicit as well as suspect in terms of the book's accounts of sexual deviance. Purdy gives his doctor much less dramatic space, but in the following paragraph, the similarity to the solipsistic, story bound O'Connor is uncanny:



Dr. Ulric's one pleasure in life outside of his dark imported cigarettes was, once he got started, talking—talking not so much to you as around you, it didn't matter who the patient was when he got started. He had been known also to talk to his cat, and these lengthy speeches usually touched on medicine, and came helped by his having read most of the 5,000 books in his library which spilled all over his fifteen-room pillared house.³¹

As in *Nightwood*, Purdy plays this scene for comedy, though we are expressly told that those who encountered Ulric tended to think of him wearing that other dramatic mask: 'he was almost never seen to smile. His face was ... disappointed in aspect.'32 (One thinks here too of *Malcolm*: 'There is a great deal to tell, *always*, Malcolm.' Kermit spoke somewhat gravely now.')33 Ulric, another of Purdy's feted talkers, is unlikely to be as unlucky as those others in the novel condemned, by their inability to articulate in part, to act, since their actions are brutal and self-defeating by turns. Still, in the theatrical environment of the consultation room, Ulric derives 'pleasure' from his own logorrhea as surely as Beckett's Pozzo in *Waiting for Godot* (1953), or his mouth in *Not I* (1972).

The theatricality of conversation in Purdy can have other absurd effects. Tony Tanner has stressed Purdy's characters' common inflexibility or ignorance in respect of those hearing them in the fictions. 63: Dream Palace (1956) contains the chief—sole?—example of Purdy literally placing one of his logorrheic protagonists on the stage. If the performance itself is announced—a 'tent production of Othello ... to take place that night near Sixty-third Street' – and, as Bruno Korsawski alleges, in talking it up to the hapless Fenton, widely anticipated, Purdy nonetheless insists upon the accidental nature of Fenton's own brush with the theatre.34 The friendship with Bruno is as performative and opportunistic as that between Shakespeare's tragic hero and lago, the villain. lago, it is implied in the play, longs for Othello's 'company and protection'; Bruno 'welcome[s]' the very same in respect of Fenton. It goes without saying that Purdy gives no quarter to notions of historical difference or incongruity between the two pairs of characters.



Given Purdy's tendency to offer up culture—of whatever quality—for the American masses to devour, distort, and destroy (as in *Cabot Wright Begins*), it is unsurprising that Bruno, in talking of Hayden Banks, the actor playing Othello, reflects the values of celebrity and personality which have replaced a purer cultural engagement. Hayden Banks—aptly named—may or may not be 'one of the greatest living actors.' In any case, Bruno proceeds to explain just how such formulations have come to eclipse more rounded and nuanced critical judgments; his is an economics of desire, grounded not on a particular response to a specific achievement, but to market-driven understandings of who is now fashionable:³⁵



"You are probably seeing him just before he is to gain his international reputation. London is already asking for him. Few actors can touch him. He is playing, of course, Othello himself. The costumes are by a friend of mine, and I will introduce you to a good many of the cast, if you like."

"I don't know if I want that," Fenton said.

"You will go with me to the performance," the young man said.

Fenton did not say anything. He had to go somewhere, of course, there could be no doubt about that.³⁶

It transpires that Bruno's interest in the theatre coincides suspiciously with a desire to avoid bumping into a Mexican man, unaccountably following him (this, then, the real drama of the episode). He also wants to point out his own closeness to the production. When they take their seats, therefore, he tells Fenton: "You see what influence can do for you." Bruno pointed. "The best seats: compliments of Hayden Banks." 37

Bruno fears Fenton's lack of interest—'maybe you don't like Shakespeare'—but is coerced by circumstance to act upon the opportunity of seeing the play, if for perverse reasons.³⁸ On reaching the site, the pair find that, instead of any reference to the author, there are 'banners reading HAYDEN BANKS THE GENIUS OF THE SPOKEN WORD IN OTHELLO.' The 'rather old looking young man dressed . . . like a devil you might expect to see in an old Valentine' will, worryingly, be playing lago.³⁹

Fenton's anticipations concerning the play further reflect the distorting power exerted by contemporary values upon literary works; at the same time, he witnesses not the manic enthusiasm talked up by Bruno, but the presumably more probable phenomenon of general torpor:



Fenton remembered vaguely of having read *The Merchant of Venice* and he had heard from someplace that *Othello* had to do with a black man who tortured a white woman to death. He felt a vague curiosity to see Hayden Banks, however. There was nobody around the huge empty tent tonight, and the whole scene reminded him of the conclusion of a county fair which he had seen in West Virginia.⁴⁰

The omen is not good. Naturally Purdy has positioned Fenton so as to allow for the maximum comic potential in his behavior, and, mischievously, then, the biggest incursion of the comic into the tragedy of the Moor:



Whether it was the nearness of the actors or the oppressive heat of the tent or the general unintelligibility of both what the actors said and what they did, Fenton became sleepy, and he could not control a weakness he had for breaking wind, which considerably upset Bruno, although nobody else in the small audience seemed to hear...

When Hayden Banks made his appearance, there was a tremendous ovation from the first few rows of the tent, and

for a while Fenton watched this tall bony man beat his chest with complete lack of restraint and such uncalled-for fury that Fenton was amazed at such enormous energy. He could think of nothing in his own life that would have allowed him to pace. strut and howl like this. He supposed it belonged to an entirely different world where such things were perhaps done. The more, however, the great Moor shouted and complained about his wife's whoring, the more sleepy Fenton became. It was, however, something of a surprise to hear him fret so much about a whore and have so many rich-looking people nodding and approving of the whole improbable situation . . . 41

Our sympathies here are nicely complex. The play is both 'unintelligible,' either as written or delivered, and evidently 'improbable,' a charge to which Othello has indeed long been held especially vulnerable (in part because of the plot device of the dropped handkerchief). Fenton gets tired at all the language—as Purdy's Malcolm similarly comments, 'Conversation makes me guite sleepy.'42 Doubtless he behaves discourteously in breaking wind, but no more so, arguably, than the performers who are hamming up the play relentlessly especially Banks, in pursuit of his reputation as 'GENIUS OF THE SPOKEN WORD.' He offends only the manipulative Bruno.

Again, there is an analogous moment in *Malcolm*; after one argument, we hear: 'What a ridiculous play of pretended emotion,' Kermit cried, addressing his wife.43 "Real" argument here has come to seem as fallacious as gimcrack theatre. As deserved as Fenton's interventions in 63: Dream Palace may be, however, they stem from his own incapacity to appreciate the piece in any respect. Notwithstanding his concern at its improbable element, he engages with the drama only when it reaches its violent, 'rather frighteningly good' zenith:



Hayden Banks seemed to murder the woman named Desdemona (Aurelia Wilcox in real life) with such satisfaction and enjoyment that he felt it stood with some of the better murder shows he had seen at the ALL NIGHT THEATER. He applauded quite loudly and Bruno, smiling, finally held his hand and said, "Don't overdo it."44

Fittingly then—notwithstanding the histrionics on stage—Fenton is berated for overacting in life. Bruno, it transpires, has other uses for Fenton's passion; quite suddenly, at the after-show party, Fenton finds himself in a sexually

aggressive encounter not unlike that he had seen on stage, except that it involves two men—himself and the predatory Bruno. Fenton resorts to an honest violence, thus triggering a dramatic climax as staged and improbable as anything in Hayden Banks's powers:



The next thing Fenton remembered he was standing naked in the middle of the room, boxing; he was boxing the chandelier and had knocked down all the lamps, he had split open Bruno's face and Bruno was weeping and held ice packs to his mouth.

Then the next thing he remembered was Bruno standing before him with Hayden Banks who looked exactly like the murdered Desdemona. Bruno had a gun in his hand and was ordering him to leave.⁴⁵

As Purdy enthusiasts may suspect, the incident, if it eclipses the play, in fact unlocks something in Fenton which will lead to further tragedy; he, like Othello, will become unlike himself and turn murderer. Stephen Adams's comment upon the complex way in which Purdy deploys the Shakespeare episode is worth quoting in full:



It is unfortunate that Fenton is not more selective in his suspicions of language for the substance of the play has an urgent bearing upon his situation. It is significant that Othello's tragedy stems from the destructive power of false words and culminates in the murder of the person he most cherished, in a travesty of his former self. Although the play is grossly overacted, there is, for once, evidence of words serving a deeply human purpose.⁴⁶

Fenton, however—either because of his lack of refinement or because of a similar lack in the production—has entirely neglected the one lesson that might be of some use: that of the treachery of language. Instead, Purdy notes that Fenton's revival of interest in the second half came out of a sense that the actors 'seemed to talk less and do more.' Talking, however, in Purdy's fiction constitutes tangible dramatic power, whereas action, perversely, more commonly—as in *Othello*'s tragic ending—connotes a sort of failure.

This interplay between speech and act plays itself out complexly and in myriad ways in Purdy's later novels. Space prevents me from undertaking here the

substantial study which Purdy's dexterous counterpointing of speech and act deserves; it must suffice here to offer one further example: the summative exchange between the ever-yawning 'audience,' Malcolm, and Mr. Cox, railing like a God, or an author, against the weaknesses of '[a]II the people whom I stir to action':48



'I don't care how much they talk against me, or how much they talk with one another—though the only real talking I will do. But I want them to act out the parts they are meant to act out with one another!'

'And what parts would those ever be?' Malcolm wondered, not able at that moment to smother a wide yawn.

Mr. Cox waited for Malcolm to close his mouth.

'I have arranged all the situations.' Mr. Cox spoke without his usual optimism. 'Why can't they act?' I have brought the right people together, and the right situations. I'm not such a fool as not to know right people and right situations when they're together. But nothing happens. Nothing at all.'49

Still, Cox's exasperation is as nothing next to the discomfort experienced by the most overtly theatrical figure in *Malcolm*, Madame Girard, who notes, on hearing of her imminent divorce, that she is not prepared to abandon her title. John Webster's character, similarly reduced, rallied memorably, if ineffectually, in pursuit of desires lost: 'I am Duchess of Malfi still.' Purdy's character even loosely recalls Webster's phrasing: "I am Madame Girard," she went on. "The whole world has always known me as she, the whole world will not so quickly lose its memory."50 Her husband's exhausted retort—'It has been a week of melodrama,' he said, fatigued. 'A lifetime of melodrama' may feel exaggerated.⁵¹ But we should consider the final scene in *Malcolm*. Its protagonist's funeral, as arranged by Madame Girard, is the supreme expression of solipsistic theatre, from which the requirements of other attendees have helpfully been entirely banished. In Purdy's words, it was 'a command performance, with herself as the only audience.'52

It is a truism that Elizabethan and Jacobean stagings exhibited an oscillation between speech (including soliloguy) and act which can strike contemporary audiences as-well, theatrical or mannered. Shakespeare's Hamlet's delay in enacting revenge is generally considered today by way of his predisposition for philosophical excursus. A far leap as it may seem, Barnes's Nightwood equally divides between those who do not articulate but simply enact their

sexual hunting: Nora pursuing Robin by stealth, for instance. Dr O'Connor, repository of current sexual wisdoms as he may seem, is, perversely, punished for his loquaciousness by solitude. Purdy's embrace of a striking, often gothic and always contrapuntal sense of speech and act may draw—consciously or otherwise—on a wide range of literature, and equally break new ground in embracing his characters' 'desiringness' in autotelic, even self-absorbed ways. In his finest fiction, Purdy sculpts characters as resonant and figurative as any found in the historical dramas he loved, or in works of any of his peer authors. The very singularity of Purdy's baroque embrace of an extreme speech/act contrapuntalism may have been—as he himself announced—one reason why his latter critics—the 'politically correct'—could not see the deeper truth in his stories. Conversely, this singularity is precisely what we can come to acknowledge is what will make these novels prosper in terms of critical renown.

Dr Richard Canning is author or editor of nine books, most recently an edition of Ronald Firbank's Vainglory for Penguin Classics.

NOTES

¹ T. S. Eliot, 'Introduction' to Djuna Barnes, *Nightwood* (New York: New Directions, 2006), xxii. ² John Uecker, 'Two Visionaries,' in James Purdy, Selected Plays (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2009), ix. ³ Richard Canning, interview with James Purdy, Gay Fiction Speaks (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 7. 4 Ibid., 4. ⁵ Ibid., 35. 6 Ibid., 35. 7 Uecker, x-xi. ⁸ Peter Brooks, Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992). ⁹ James Purdy, Eustace Chisholm and the Works (London: Gay Men's Press, 1987), 31. 10 Ibid., 32. ¹¹ Christopher Lane, 'Out with James Purdy' (1993), at: http://www.wright.edu/~martin.kich/ PurdySoc/Lane.htm (accessed 12th March 2011). 12 Ibid., 214. ¹³ Canning, 26. 14 Ibid., 24. 15 Ibid., 24. ¹⁶ Genet is mentioned in Christopher Lane's interview with Purdy: http://www.wright.edu/~martin. kich/PurdySoc/Lane.htm (accessed 12th March 2011). ¹⁷ Canning, 5. ¹⁸ See writer and artist Charles Henri Ford's reference to this statement in an undated interview with the Journal of Contemporary Art at: http://www.jca-online.com/ford.html (accessed 12th March 2011). Ford—also a lover of Barnes—quotes her as follows: "I'm not a lesbian," said Djuna. "I just love Thelma. Thelma's a boy!" 19 Canning, 8. 20 Ibid., 8. ²¹ *Ibid.*, 9. 22 Ibid., 27. ²³ Lane, 'Out with James Purdy,' op.cit. ²⁴ Canning, 15. 25 Ibid., 16. ²⁶ Ibid., 23. 27 Ibid., 16.

- ²⁸ James Purdy, Cabot Wright Begins (New York: Carroll & Graf, 1985), 4.
- ²⁹ Purdy, Eustace Chisholm and the Works, op. cit., 3.
- ³⁰ Collected in Purdy, *Children is All* (New York: New Directions, 1961).
- ³¹ Purdy, Narrow Rooms (London: Gay Men's Press, 1985), 7.
- ³² Ibid., 7.
- ³³ Purdy, *Malcolm*, (New York: Farrar, Straus & Cudahy, 1959), 26.
- ³⁴ Purdy, *63: Dream Palace*, this edition is in his *Color of Darkness* (Philadelphia/New York: Lippincott's, 1961), 177.
- 35 Ibid., 177.
- ³⁶ *Ibid*., 177.
- 37 Ibid., 180.
- 38 Ibid., 178.
- ³⁹ *Ibid.*, 179.
- ⁴⁰ *Ibid*., 179.
- ⁴¹ *Ibid*., 181.
- 42 Purdy, Malcolm, 30.
- 43 Ibid., 26.
- 44 Purdy, 63: Dream Palace, op. cit., 182.
- ⁴⁵ *Ibid*., 184.
- ⁴⁶ Stephen Adams, James Purdy (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1976), 24.
- ⁴⁷ Purdy, 63: Dream Palace, op. cit. 182.
- 48 Purdy, Malcolm, 84.
- ⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 84-85.
- ⁵⁰ Ibid., 142.
- ⁵¹ *Ibid*., 143.
- 52 Ibid., 193.



ANTIGONE'S RETURN AND SELECTED POEMS

A VERSE DRAMA AND LYRIC POETRY BY MARK DANIEL COHEN INTRODUCTION BY CAMELIA ELIAS

"In this sense, one can contend that what Cohen has achieved here is simply to have written a classic. The text speaks to us all.

It speaks everything, and lets everything itself speak."

— Camelia Elias, from her introduction, "A Touch of Tongues"

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HYPERION On the future of aesthetics

James Purdy

Storyteller of the Unhomed Imagination

by Donald Pease



Throughout the half century of his literary career, James Purdy returned obsessively to the figure of the transient. Exiles, outcasts, renegades, fugitives, displaced and homeless persons, grifters on the lam, criminals on the run, migrants, outlaws, and refugees wander through Purdy's work in search of some kind of shelter. They pass through the social order but without becoming accommodated to its arrangements. Efforts to acculturate them only intensify their feeling of disconnection.

In several novels, Purdy produces formal correlatives between the disorientation of his hapless dislocatees and the vicissitudes of letters addressed to or sent by them. Neither the dispossessed nor the letters follow the official routings through which persons and their messages are supposed to circulate. The plots of *Malcolm*, *Jeremy's Version*, and *On Glory's Course* are organized around breakdowns in the relays connecting the senders of letters to their addressees. In *Mourners Below*, "Brawith," and *In the Hollow of His Hand* Purdy's characters despair of their messages ever reaching their intended destination.

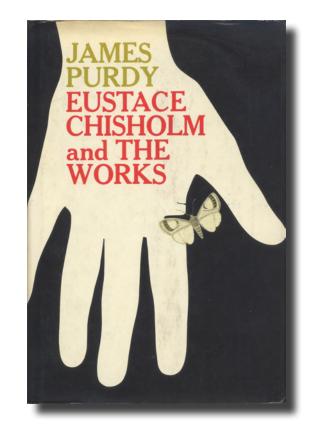
A trilogy of novels that Purdy published over a sixteen-year span—*The Nephew* (1960), *Eustace Chisholm and the Works* (1968), and *In a Shallow Grave* (1976)—elevated the combat veteran into an archetypical transient. Each of these novels included accounts of combat veterans who were either missing in action or involved in actions that undermined the possibility of their returning home. In the experiences they underwent in between going away and returning from combat, all of Purdy's veterans underwent disconnections from homes to which they could never return. They could not return home without violating the bonds that reproduced home-feeling.

These novels also brought the combat soldiers' feelings of disorientation into conjunction with the erratic trajectories of letters addressed to or sent by them. In each of these novels, Purdy conveyed the soldier's anxious sense of transience through letters that were either undeliverable, as was Alma Mason's correspondence in *The Nephew*, or were intercepted by an unintended addressee, as Daniel Haws's missives were in *Eustace Chisholm and the Works*, or that required an alternative courier service for their delivery, as did the love letters Garnet Montrose sent to Georgina Rance in *In a Shallow Grave*.

Of course the difficulties combat veterans confronted upon returning home

from war did not originate with Purdy. The recovery from war was the defining theme of the generation of novelists with whose work Purdy's has been affiliated. The difficulties returning veterans experienced in adjusting to a postwar environment marked by social as well as sexual upheaval became the preferred subject matter of soldier novelists like Norman Mailer and Gore Vidal, whose readers scrutinized their subsequent novels for indications of what would count as a successful transition from military to civilian life. Representations of the war veteran enjoyed such immense popularity in the post-World War II era that the figure was elevated to the standing of a national archetype in Leslie Fiedler's Love and Death in the American Novel.

The stories these soldiers brought back from the battlefields played a crucial role in defining masculinity. Citizen soldiers played crucial roles in articulating gender norms to the emerging typology—the corporation man, the dutiful suburban husband and father—of postwar culture. Having survived the



nightmare of war, they were compensated with the opportunities of a booming economy that benefited from the international marketplace to which the battlefield had sutured the nation. The GI bill gave returning veterans access to liberal arts colleges and universities and the assurance that their service in the military chain of command prepared them for work in comparably hierarchical corporations.

Construed as efforts to shape the nation's postwar response to social tensions, veterans' efforts at readjustment were interpreted within the context of a more pervasive form of psycho-social engineering known as the cold war. The cold war supervised the postwar recovery by securing the nation's willingness in peacetime to submit to wartime discipline. When functioning as a dynamic structure internal to a veteran's (or any other citizen's) psychology, the cold war described the ideological threat to the national security as an alien psychosexual force: in quite insidious ways "becoming communist" and "becoming homosexual" came to refer to more or less interchangeable fears.

In the short story "You Reach for Your Hat," Purdy explored the relationship between the anxieties of combat veterans who returned home after the Second World War and the predicament confronting women who were expected to conform to the role of suburban housewife. The story consists of a dialogue between two war widows who turn the idioms through which

they are supposed to mourn their husbands' deaths into vehicles for giving expression to their ambivalent reaction to their soldier-husbands' sexual performances: "He never was a real lively one," Lafe's widow observed of the deceased, "but he had a kind of hard, enduring quality in him that must have been hard to put out. He must have died slow, hard and knowing to the end."

In addition to the war-time heroes who underwent effortless transitions from the battlefield to the board room, there were combat veterans who could not accommodate themselves to the cold war mentality. The cold war required returning veterans to remove from their memories of war experiences and events that were incompatible with the themes and representations of the cold war's narrative. Veterans who were either unwilling or unable to disavow their wartime experiences felt disconnected from the social order to which they returned. As long as they remained exiled from their own lived experiences, these combat veterans also felt exiled within the postwar social order.

Jim Willard, the protagonist of Gore Vidal's *The City and the Pillar*, returned home with the expectation that he would resume the homoerotic relationship with Bob Ford that he began before he entered the military. But Vidal's story of Willard's relationship violated the constraints controlling what was and what was not representable in the novels about the men engaged in US military campaigns. Indeed Gore Vidal's account of Willard's resumption of the erotic relations between two all-American men after the war became the grounds for critics to deprive him of the right to continue to bear the mantle of the soldier novelist.

In his trilogy, Purdy linked the theme of the unaddressable or undeliverable or unwriteable letter to the difficulties that war veterans confronted in their efforts to return home. When he connected the stories of disoriented war veterans to the topos of the disrupted letter, Purdy located the dimensions of the veterans' stories that could not be adequately conveyed within official or unofficial narratives. Each of the novels in his trilogy represented military action itself as having undermined the possibility of the veteran's successfully returning home. Each novel also disconfirmed the American home as an adequate site of social integration. The combat actions in which Purdy's veterans participated were peculiar in that they either took place in settings—Korea in *The Nephew*, Vietnam in *In a Shallow Grave*—that did not corroborate the nation's self-representation as a victory culture, or, as in the case of the World War II setting of *Eustace Chisholm and the Works*, the combat action described could not take place on a battlefield.

Missing in Action

The Nephew opens with Alma Mason's discovery that the letters she and her widower brother Cliff Mason were used to receiving from their nephew Cliff while he was serving a tour of military duty on Korea were no longer getting delivered. Cliff was raised by Boyd and Alma from the age of 14 after his parents were killed in a plane crash. Upon receiving word that their nephew was missing in action, Alma and her brother remarked comparable lacunae in his letters: "there's nothing in what he writes now, and never has been," Boyd explained of what he found missing from his nephew's correspondence.

Cliff's having gone missing causes Alma to lose track of the narrative thread through which she made sense of the world:



After the letters from Cliff had stopped, Alma found it more and more difficult to remember the definite order of events. Things seemed to be happening without sequence, and all at once. There was no longer an orderly progression: Korea, hydrogen bombs, the conquest of outer space—all suddenly came to mean to her merely an interruption or postponement of regular and coherent daily events which could no longer be remembered conveniently. (53)

The Nephew recounts Alma's attempt to recover her bearings by composing a memoir that would replace Cliff's absence with a chain of causally interconnected memories. Alma's search for facts with which to remember him was part of a more pervasive structure of denial that Alma had erected to prevent her from knowing her nephew.

When her brother Boyd reminded her of the fact that Cliff's letters were nondescript to the point of being devoid of content, he aroused anxieties in Alma about what was missing from her own life. Alma in fact knew nothing of substance about her nephew, and the fact that Alma now knew that she knew nothing about him became a mirror that revealed her own life as comparably vacant. In reaction, Alma picked a fight with Boyd over whether he or she would be the first to disbelieve that Cliff would return alive. "Of course *missing*, she told herself each hour of the day, was not the same as *will not return*." After Boyd responded that he just didn't know whether Cliff would return, Alma cried "I *know* he'll return . . . in the same tone she employed in her religious and political arguments" (15-16).

Before receiving the news that Cliff was missing in action in Korea, Alma had divided her time between planning a gift shop and competing with her

brother over who would receive more letters from their nephew. But after the government reported him missing, Alma fantasized herself and Boyd embroiled in a more rudimentary struggle:



She had not understood it, but after he had been reported missing, she came for the first time to acknowledge to herself, if not to others, the fundamental, if indefinable, importance he had assumed in her life, and she was often sure that it was she and not Boyd who felt Cliff would never come back. (28)

In this reverie, Alma has imagined the superiority of her intimacy with their nephew as the result of her privileged foreboding of his absolute loss.

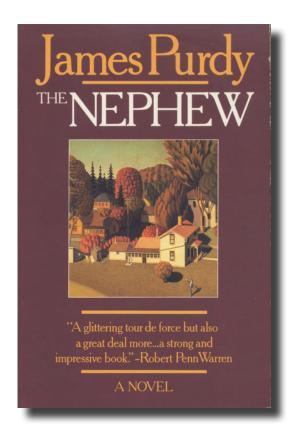
In the wake of this revelation, Alma decided that her memoir would secure the primacy of her affection for Cliff. But Alma's need to write Cliff's memoir did not arise from the intensity of her bereavement. What Cliff meant to her was lost on Alma while he was alive. The bits and pieces of information she gathered did not result in a coherent story about her nephew. Writing the memoir instead became Alma's way of recovering the loss of Cliff's significance—by recording it.

The memoir included an inventory of the facts that the people in their hometown told Alma of what they knew about her nephew. Alma wanted the detailed facts about his comings and goings in Rainbow Center to make up for the perceived deficiencies of her nephew's letters. The memories of him supplied to her by the townspeople enabled Alma to continue to receive new messages about her nephew, even after the United States government declared him missing in action. Choosing to interpret his disappearance as the effect of a breakdown in the operations of the postal service, Alma attempted to continue her correspondence with him along the relays of her neighbors' memories rather than the postal system. However Alma's very efforts to ward off knowledge of Cliff's death instead caused her to discover the unsurpassable distance separating Cliff's Rainbow Center from hers.

In conducting interviews for her memoir, Alma encountered close acquaintances that her nephew never permitted her to know. In looking for facts with which to remember him Alma discovered insuperable impasses. Alma's efforts to record her neighbors' recollections of her nephew led to revelations about other members of the community that Alma either had not known or could not bring herself to admit knowing.

Alma increasingly learned that the meaning-giving framework organizing her memoir could not include crucial aspects of her nephew's character. Because the activities and townspeople with whom Cliff was involved could not be represented within Alma's interior map, she lacked the affective cognitive coordinates with which to make sense of his world. She and Cliff belonged to sections of Rainbow Center that did not converge. Alma could not get to where Cliff had been from where she herself was living. When she retraced Cliff's itinerary in Rainbow Center, Alma entered places where she felt herself a stranger.

The differences between her neighbors' accounts of her nephew and her own recollections left Alma frightened and disoriented. She caught glimpses of a spectral figure that emerged out of the difference between her memories of her nephew and accounts of him that were utterly incompatible with her recollections. The most disorienting revelations concerning her nephew were communicated by Vernon Miller, the lover of Alma's next door neighbor, Willard Baker. Alma's conversations with Vernon were notable for the absence from them of euphemisms and half-truths. When she asked whether her nephew truly loved her, Vernon replied forthrightly.



"Cliff hated Rainbow . . . He hated taking your and his uncle's charity. He hated being without parents and thinking he was unwanted. He hated for you to feel you had to love him. He never wanted to come back here and to hear from anybody . . . He was too proud to think anyone felt they wanted to love him. He thought nobody could love him or wanted him to stay with them." Vernon concluded the interview with the observation that "He only knew that he wanted to run off" (130-131).



Vernon's news of her nephew's need to get away aroused a compulsive need in Alma to establish the indissolubility of her bond to him.

"You told me the truth and I believe it," Alma finally responded to Vernon, "but if you think I don't love Cliff all the more for hearing it, you're mistaken. Because I see how much more he needed the little love anyone can give."

Alma wanted to prove that she harbored memories of Cliff that were more intimate than Vernon's. Although Alma and Vernon each possessed revealing photographs of Cliff, they depicted utterly incompatible images of him. These

photographs brought what was utterly incompatible in their memories into stark visibility.

When Alma began writing Cliff's memoir, she had her favorite photograph of him retouched so that he would look as if he'd just emerged from a pool of Platonic water. Shortly after Alma and Boyd received the news that Cliff was dead and that there were no remains to be sent home, they were awakened by a blazing fire at Vernon Miller and Willard Baker's house. After breaking in, Alma discovered a series of life-sized photographs of her nephew strung along Vernon Miller's bedroom walls just as the room and the all of its contents were about to be consumed by flames. "Together with the flames and the hour of the night, Cliff seemed, burning in the conflagration of the room, about to speak, his one hand extended to them, as if in life, in an eloquent orator's gesture" (109).

Vernon said that Cliff did not love Alma, and that he wanted to escape from her. But it was the nephew's separation from her that brought Alma into communication with previously unknown facets of Rainbow Center and herself. Ironically it was not until she was driven out of the world in which she felt at home that Alma discovered a self who could truly care.

Vernon's observations enabled Alma to obey the moral imperative "let the dead bury the dead." Before Alma could come to terms with the nephew's death she had to let the self through whom she would remember him be buried along with him. In place of Cliff's remains, Alma acquired affective memories that her home was structured out of excluding. Alma's household became unhomely after Alma lost the capacity to repress the differences between her home and "the nephew."

The news of her nephew's actual death conferred a kind of finality on Alma's labors. But once the news finally took, her resourceful mind turned the information into one more memory for the book. After his death, the nephew first became Boyd's son: "Boyd told himself that he would have liked—he would have given anything—for Cliff to be his son"(107). Then this prodigal son in death returns home: "I am glad it is over, and Cliff, too, can come home now in one way or another. We will now know where he is" (113). Finally, he becomes their son: "Our boy is dead" (121).

Purdy's novel delivered the unclaimable knowledge that Alma had acquired in place of her nephew's remains. It also disclosed Alma's fear of the knowledge she has taken such pains to acquire. In gathering materials for her memoir, Alma discovered that her love was borne by her unacknowledged knowledge of Cliff to which *The Nephew* bears witness. Her nephew was thereby translated into the material relays for the delivery of messages about him and herself Alma would have preferred to disavow.

In the concluding conversation between Alma and her new best friend Faye

Baird, Alma found the words with which she simultaneously claimed and disclaimed the truth about her neighbors and herself.



"You know of course, everybody has always said Willard and Vernon were homosexuals," Faye said in ringing tones.

"I'm afraid I didn't," Alma said.

Faye stared at her for a good minute and then she saw indeed that Alma did not know . . .

"You weren't aware of their reputations," Faye said weakly.

"No, Faye, I was not," Alma said, an insipid smile playing about her mouth, "I don't know homosexuals," she added.

"I'm sorry then I told you."

"Don't be sorry about telling me anything," Alma came back at her. "I'm afraid I don't know a great many things."

Then in an almost childish, supplicating voice Alma said: Those reports about Willard and Vernon weren't . . . true."

When Faye did not reply, Alma cried:

"Those reports, Faye, were not true!"

"I don't know," Fave replied. "And I don't care."

"You don't care," Alma repeated, and she turned away again.

"When he asked me to marry him, I felt the decision to say yes had been given to me. It was not my decision. But it was something I felt I had to do."

"It's your life, Faye, and you must do what you should do." (117)

In this dialogue, Alma and Faye have communicated knowledge about Vernon and Willard along with the structures of disavowal that suppress their recognition that it is knowledge they are communicating. Throughout their conversation, the assertion of the truth became so intertwined with its suppression that it was impossible to distinguish truth from its denial. Their mutual suppression of this knowledge sustained Alma's and Faye's capacity to remain recognizable to each other and themselves.

In *The Nephew* Purdy composed his signature narrative idiom out of the intricate connection between the desire to know the most intimate dimensions of those one loves and the simultaneous need to remain completely ignorant of them. Purdy's art differed from Alma's memoir in that it entwined the knowledge she would disclaim so thoroughly with the forces through which she disclaimed this knowledge that his readers could not know what it was they were disclaiming. *The Nephew* conveyed this undeliverable knowledge by relaying it through the very structures of disavowal through which it was otherwise suppressed.

Not only Alma, but all of Purdy's characters embody affective intensities that are at once beyond telling yet uncannily familiar. Purdy might be described as having written *The Nephew* at the site of the difference between the memoir that would convert Cliff into a series of retrievable images and Alma's recognition of the impossibility of remembering him in those terms. *The Nephew* is expressive of an anti-memory that works by undoing the images through which Cliff remained unrecognizable to Alma while he was alive. Purdy's anti-memoir accomplished this undoing by translating Alma's strategies of denial into the means through which the novelist revealed the most intimate dimensions of her character. Indeed when we consider that Alma's inability to complete the memoir resulted from her need to disavow what she learned in preparing to write it, we discover that Purdy has quite literally composed *The Nephew* out of Alma's disavowals. *The Nephew* delivered the letters Alma perforce left out of her memoir.

The Missing Action

The news that their nephew was missing in action did not result in the inclusion of what remained of him within the community of Rainbow Center. Alma's unsuccessful attempt to integrate the community's heterogeneous memories of her nephew into her memoir produced knowledge about the community and herself that she had previously foreclosed. The combat veteran who was missing in action thereby became the matrix for the production of an alternative kinship system whose conditions of belonging comprised the formerly disavowed aspects of Alma and the other members of Rainbow Center.

But whereas *The Nephew* inaugurated the founding of an alternative community out of the unclaimable remains of an MIA, in *Eustace Chisholm* and the *Works*, Purdy went about representing the missing action upon which the American social order was founded. In that novel, Purdy turned his narrative attention away from socially prevalent structures of repression and refocused it upon a writer, Eustace Chisholm, whose friends were mutilated by these structures. Eustace Chisholm's circle of friends resembled Purdy's fugitives in that they did not construct their identities out of pre-existing norms.

The prostitutes, bastards, and impoverished artists who crash at Eustace Chisholm's pad all shared the experience of the unworkability of existing social arrangements. Eustace calls the shelter he provided these transients "the clearing house for busted dreams."²

The "works" in the title refer to the epic poem Eustace Chisholm tried to write about the circle of transients who gathered around him. Eustace Chisholm wrote his works over the *fait divers* of city newspapers. His epic displaced the daily newspaper with stories that could not appear within its narrative frame. Eustace composed these stories out of the letters that the transients who crashed at his place either addressed to Eustace or left behind when they departed.

Eustace "pored over found letters, whose messages were not meant for him. To him they were treasures that spoke fully. Paradise to Eustace might have been reading the love letters of every writer, no matter how inconsequential or even illiterate, who had written a *real* one. What made the pursuit exciting was to come on that rare thing: the authentic, naked, unconcealed voice of *love*" (149). The most gifted letter writer in Eustace's circle was the landlord hero of his epic poem, Daniel Haws.

Daniel Haws shared feelings of complete estrangement from the order of things with the other members of Eustace's household. But unlike them, he had internalized the gender norms regulative of the social order during his military service.



Daniel Haws life had come to a full halt, almost an end, when he had been separated under obscure circumstances from the regular US army. Everything for him since had been sleepwalking in one form or another. It was Army ceremonies and routines that he seemed to be re-enacting at many times of the day. Both Daniel and his roomers seemed to be under the distant but certain jurisdiction of the military, whose ceremonies and rituals reappeared at every moment of the day from breakfast to bedcheck. (72-73)

Daniel Haws discovered that he could not remain within Eustace's circle because one of its members, Amos Ratcliffe, awakened erotic feelings that his military training had compelled him to suppress.

A Greek scholar specializing in the works of Xenophon, Amos Ratcliffe embodied the Platonic homo-erotic ideal out of which Purdy had constructed many of his boy runaways. Amos Ratcliffe's radical innocence and dazzling

beauty made him appear celestial. After he suddenly fell in love with the half-Indian, coal miner's son, Daniel Haws, they enacted one of the primal scenes within Purdy's fiction. When Amos moved into his building, Daniel felt that they were in the army together, and that he was Amos's drill sergeant. So long as he was awake Daniel violently repudiated his love for Amos. But each night Daniel walked through his sleep into Amos Ratcliffe's bedroom.

Daniel's waking state was structured in the forcible exclusion of Amos Ratcliffe from consciousness. But the desire for Amos that Haws violently repudiated while awake entered Haws's sleeping state like a love letter delivered to its addressee by way of a relay of disavowals comparable to those at work in *The Nephew*. Amos Ratcliffe knew that his night visitor was as different from the daytime Daniel as a dream. Sleepwalkers as his Cousin Ida had informed him "don't remember a thing, especially where they have walked" (29). But one evening Amos wakened Daniel from out of the sleep through which he walked and confronted him with the fact of his love: "Don't leave me," the boy said; "I need for you to stay" (53). When Amos acknowledged the truth of their love, Haws vomited so violently that it appeared "as if now he would part with his guts" (77). But this disallowed desire was in him more than himself.

During his previous stay in the military Daniel Haws had internalized the gender norms of the social order. He decided to re-enlist in the Army at the discovery of his nocturnal breach of those norms. But at 2:30 AM of his very first night back, Daniel sleepwalked into the tent of Captain Stadger, a man who had identified himself so thoroughly with military discipline that he personified its strictures.

Daniel wrote Eustace that when Stadger disciplined him, "he is not looking at my face, he is gazing around me, as if he thought he might spy me wearing side-arms. Looking at some part of my body he can't seem to find." Rather than instructing him in how to act like a man, Captain Stadger initiated a relationship with Daniel Haws that brought both men into intimate relations with the parts of themselves that could not be contained within those norms.



Now with Captain Stadger he was already in death's kingdom. He knew he would never get out of the captain's hands unless he allowed him to take some part of his body as the price of severance, and a wild animal will dismember its own leg from the trap to go loose. He knew from the first time he saw Captain Stadger watching him, as though he had seen him years ago in some ancient dream that he would have to surrender part of his flesh or go down forever to the realm the captain ruled. (161)

The ritualized relationship between Stadger and Daniel Haws brought into visibility the foundational act of violence—the annihilation of the homoerotic bond—formative of the postwar social order. The ritual was expressive of their courage to confront the most subversive of the enemies that American men confronted during the 50 years of imaginary combat known as the cold war. After the Second World War, homosexuality's putative psychological association with communism led to its demonization as a deadly threat to American masculinity. In his representation of this ritual, Purdy depicted Stadger's mutilations of Haws's body as a displaced form of battlefield combat. This combat operation involved each man in a deadly struggle with parts of himself that military discipline had forcibly dissociated. As Stadger confronted the homosexual specter that lurked within Daniel Haws, his means of ferreting out and then attacking this invisible enemy expressed the homo-erotic basis for their bonds.

Homo-erotic love and its homo-phobic annulment were thereby conflated into a combat ritual in which the expression of love took the form of destroying the agent who might act upon it. This extraneous military ritual involved both men in the forcible and violent exclusion of the parts of both of them that was not amenable to military discipline. Stadger was the man who knew what Haws wanted. That very knowledge was a sign of his love. The consummation of their love perforce assumed the form of destroying the figure who aroused it. But under the guise of destroying this figure, Stadger delivered Haws to the most intimate secrets of his being.

Captain Stadger inaugurated these rituals after intercepting a letter in which Haws confessed his love for Amos Ratcliffe to Eustace Chisholm. "How did you show Amos your love," Captain Stadger wanted to know.



I never loved Amos with my body, sir! That's what I wanted to say, I never loved him so, sir!

How did you love the cocksucker? . . .

I loved him as myself . . .

Captain Stadger then struck the private with all the accumulated force of a man made criminal by all the hard years behind him and the hate and the need.

"You'll love who you're told to love, you fucking bastard, and you'll talk about what we decide to talk about!" (169).

Whereas Daniel wanted to be punished for never having given bodily expression to his love, Captain Stadger wanted to replace the forbidden lover. Haws could only repudiate Amos by having his insides quite literally taken out of him. In extirpating the homosexual specter inhabiting Haws, Captain Stadger also confronted the most subversive of the cold war's enemies. But Stadger could not engage this enemy without acting upon the homo-erotic desire he was hell-bent on annihilating in Haws.

In the horrific scene that followed Haws's confession, Captain Stadger ritualistically disemboweled him. Haws could only give complete expression to his love for Amos through its complete destruction, and that destruction could only be accomplished by a man who loved Daniel Haws enough to know that it was love he needed to destroy. Homoerotic love and its homophobic annihilation were thus quite literally conflated in a ritual that destroyed both participants.

The Missing

Purdy concluded *The Nephew* with the reassuring maxim that caring is "a reality, even if the caring and the cared-for lack the gift to say it or write it" (95). Alma's inability supplied Purdy with the rationale for writing *The Nephew*: he wrote it in the place of Alma who lacked the gift. Purdy concluded *Eustace Chisholm and the Works* with Eustace's prayer that he be disburdened of this gift: "I'm not a writer" Eustace protests, "That's my news; I never was and never will be." The difference between Alma's declaration of her incapacity and Eustace's was that Alma stated the truth while Eustace disavowed it. In the final novel of what I've called the returning veteran trilogy, *In a Shallow Grave*, Purdy took up characters who were irretrievably excluded from the social order, and who turned to one another rather than a memoirist for care. This novel provided Purdy with the occasion to remake the world out of the relations between persons who were quite literally missing from the social order.

Purdy's *In a Shallow Grave* correlated the theme of undeliverable letter with the plight of an inassimilable war veteran by depicting the latter as a psyche whose corporeal envelope was mutilated beyond recognition. *In a Shallow Grave* recounted the plight of Purdy's most macabre creations. Garnet Montrose is a soldier who, after having been buried under a pile of dead comrades, miraculously survived. He has returned from Vietnam. But the body in which he returns is so disfigured with all the veins and arteries exposed on the mulberry surface of his skin that Montrose considers himself a corpse trapped within an envelope of mutilated skin and compelled to relive his own death.

The Nephew and Eustace Chisholm and the Works included characters

who aspired to reclaim experiences that the combat veteran felt compelled to disavow, like Garnet Montrose, who could not be assimilated to any pre-existing category of identity. Unlike most of Purdy's characters, who disavow the experiences that disfigure them, Garnet Montrose is composed out of the breakdown of these structures of foreclosure. Daniel Haws could only be released from the pain of unacted upon love by having his insides taken outside of him. But Garnet Montrose inhabits a body that the war has quite literally turned inside out.

Tony Tanner, who has written what is perhaps the most insightful commentary on Purdy's novels, has asked apropos of his radically inassimilable characters: "But if you do manage to elude all of society's imposed definitions and are free of the world, where do you then go from there?" The setting of *In a Shallow Grave* might be imagined as Purdy's way of providing an answer to Tanner's question. This novel, which portrays a Vietnam veteran who fears that he is either about to pass over into non-being or has already done so would appear to have been set quite literally at the edge of doom.

The characteristic setting for Purdy's novels is composed of two intersecting yet incompatible spaces—the one from which his characters have become dislocated and the one from which they must escape. *In a Shallow Grave* melds these two spaces into one. If Garnet Montrose were not excluded from accepted social arrangements, he would have tried to escape from them. Here the experiences that Purdy's characters would disclaim and the structures through which they would disclaim them converge into a place of no return that requires the storyteller of the unhomed to imagine.

NOTES

¹ James Purdy, *The Nephew* (New York: Avon, 1960), 9. All further references to this book will be made parenthetically.

² James Purdy, *Eustace Chisholm and the Works* (New York: Bantam, 1967). All further references to this book will be made parenthetically.

³ Tony Tanner, *The City of Words: American Fiction 1950-1970* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), 92



Purdy's Family Poetics by Christopher Lane



"Man is little more than a glyph which punctuates space, but once gone is as unrecollectable as smoke or clouds." an is little more than a glyph which punctuates space, but once gone is as unrecollectable as smoke or clouds." When Garnet Montrose reads aloud this strange, haunting sentence in Purdy's *In a Shallow Grave* (1975), he voices a paradox about identity that characterizes most of the author's fiction. The desires that goad Purdy's protagonists into being, tormenting them with longing, tend later to shatter their ontology, leaving them ill equipped for life and barely able to function. Purdy's stress on the damage that desire wreaks and the tension that it generates with identity helps explain why his characters and communities often unravel into their formless parts. As those seeking relationships in his fiction are frequently ciphers ventriloquizing imposed social roles, little actually confirms their identities or stops them from turning into someone else.

Purdy's fascination with wandering, almost otherworldly foundlings intensifies these concerns: Most of his works feature enigmatic young men who drift among lovers of both sexes with almost preternatural detachment. To ask who these orphans are—as they themselves often do with combined poignancy and futility—is not to find answers in how they begin, where they go, or whom they encounter on the way.

Erotic attachments are thus, for Purdy, neither a mark of certain preference nor a guide to essence, an unusual key to his fiction that I want to pursue. As Tony Tanner once observed, Purdy grants these figures such "extreme ontological uncertainty" that their identities, allegedly beginning as "pure blankness[, are] unavoidably stained by experience." "In this inverted world," Tanner continues, "apparent nourishment actually empties the recipient."²

Like several other critics, Tanner ties these effects to Purdy's interest in "what has gone wrong, in every sense, with the modern family." By contrast, I want to address the formal, psychic, and philosophical ramifications of this detachment in Purdy's fiction, including the light that it sheds on his "poetics of the family." As the critic Reed Woodhouse once observed when describing those poetics, Purdy tries "to unnormalize the reader, to break us out of the prisons of conventional thought and feeling." Approaching Purdy's fiction in this way means doing so aslant, to capture his unusual perspective on family relations, and relationality more generally.

The statement that Garnet reads, in which man resembles a glyph, has the odd effect of highlighting both too much and not enough meaning in Purdy's

imagined worlds. It helps us notice what escapes his characters' identities, but also draws attention to the symbols our culture uses to sustain and normalize family life. In Purdy's works this social fabric is full of tears; it is overdetermined by longed-for completion but also impossible to realize or keep in place. Garnet's statement indicates, too, that such holes perforate forms of parenthood and family life—forms that nonetheless shadow Purdy's protagonists, tormenting them with doubt and anxiety about attachments, impossible ideals, and unrecoverable losses. Such tenuous connections are especially piercing when described by a man, like Garnet, who is so disfigured by war and so alienated from his former life in the U.S. that he hovers fitfully between life and death, as if prone to the latter but unable to disjoin himself completely from the former.

Since in every sense Garnet lives a liminal existence, he is best able to represent the blind spots, comic delusions, and traumas that Purdy's societies try to veil. These points of tension—troubled family history, the loss or death of parents, thwarted love, and so on—not only isolate his full and half-orphans but also drive them to seek "ersatz substitute[s] for family affection and security."⁷ This exacerbates their vulnerability, especially to unscrupulous, predatory figures; it also generates fresh entanglements, creating new kinship structures that even the most accommodating relational forms cannot integrate.

Garnet's triangle with Potter Daventry and Quintus Perch, inadvertently solidified by Widow Rance, is but one example of such altered kinship patterns. Others include Duane Bledsoe's erotic rivalry with Duke La Roche, his teacher, for Estelle Dumont in Mourners Below; Jared Wakeman's and his lover Des Cantrell's complex sexual entanglements with Edward Hennings, Peg Sawbridge, and the enigmatic Estrellita in *Garments the Living Wear*; and Malcolm's oddly adhesive function for several heterosexual couples in Malcolm. Similar dynamics recur in Purdy's other novels, but for several reasons the ensuing relational forms are difficult to pin down. "In almost the blinking of an eye," the narrator of *Narrow Rooms* tells us, "Roy Sturtevant," Sid De Lakes's avowed enemy, "had become his coach."8

These imperceptible but dramatic transformations ensure a fascinating melding of object of desire and ego ideal, though the melding rarely lasts. While antagonism between men can in Purdy's fiction break open some of the longing that it has hitherto concealed, the ensuing desire tends to fork chiastically, often transfiguring the object before interest in him (occasionally her) wanes and the attraction sours into contempt, repulsion, and often violence.

In Eustace Chisholm and the Works (1967), a novel published in Britain as a "Gay Modern Classic," what propels the narrative is Captain Stadger's

contorted, largely unrequited desire for Private Daniel Haws. Denied a sexual outlet for his longing, the Captain finds release only in the shocking, almost frenzied disemboweling of his military subordinate. In Stadger's delirious logic. Haws must die because he won't end his previous attachment to Amos Ratcliffe and love him just as ardently. However, Haws is not without his own fantasies about the Captain, which transform the latter from a persecutor into a lover and back again; the murderer, we're told, ends up perceptually "com[ing] out of [Haws's] worst expectations and dreams."9

Purdy is clearly drawn to—even obsessed by—these psychic switch-points, where two individuals' fantasies briefly converge around the roles that they adopt, turning otherwise ordinary men into figures of intense longing and rage. In one case, he titles a short story "Daddy Wolf"; in another, the novel Gertrude of Stony Island Avenue (1997), Carrie calls her husband "Daddy." 10 And In the Hollow of His Hand, Purdy's 1986 novel, to which I'll return shortly, slants this fantasy to hilarious effect:



"I only fear you don't love me, Daddy dear."

"I never loved you," the old man spoke without a trace of humor.

"Never, Daddy, never?"

"It never crossed my mind that I loved you . . . I loved Gabrielle," Mr. Harkey recalled, "though she cheated on me constantly. But she cared for me in all other aspects, tucking me in at night . . . But as to you, Emma Lou, my dear, no, I never thought of love in connection with you!"

"But, Daddy, dear!" his wife protested.

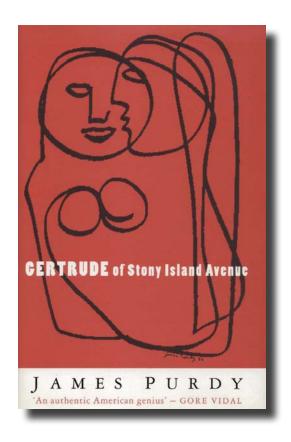
"Will you stop calling me with that appellation, when you know I'm not your dad, your granddaddy or your great-granddad." (189-90; original emphases)

Here the communication splits between a husband and wife whose marriage crumbles partly because they can't seem to align, or agree upon, their crossgenerational fantasies. The husband's prevail, with infantilizing results. But whether his and others' imaginary extremes literalize Oedipal fantasies or turn inward in self-imposed violence, in Purdy's fiction the turbulent coalescence of object and ideal is now practically a trademark.

The interpretive dilemma facing us at such moments depends on whether

we view Purdy's family poetics as copying social forms, undermining them, or as wanting partly to make up for their deficiencies. Certainly, given this last possibility, the above examples signal how doubtfully Purdy's surrogate structures could be considered compensatory or reparative. As Frank Baldanza observed, "Solid, head-on treatment of family life in [a] breezy manner . . . is inconceivable for Purdy; on the other hand, the absolute loners in his works are very few." In the terms of Purdy's fiction, this holds equally for gay families and their nuclear counterparts. And though Baldanza and Tanner don't elaborate on Purdy's same-sex, cross-generational tangles, the latter, I want to suggest, are inseparable from the "poetics of the family" that he creates and complicates.

The guardian or ersatz parent is thus a pivotal but critically neglected figure in Purdy's fiction: He (rarely she) gestures to kinship structures that are impossible to either repair or redeem. Generally, these surrogates help troubled young men—Malcolm, Daventry, Amos, Fenton Riddleway in 63: Dream Palace, and Chad in



Hollow of His Hand—form relationships without too much initial cost. The stand-in for a missing and generally unrealizable love, the guardian elicits an ardor that often is explicitly meant for someone else (a dead or absent parent), which ultimately creates attachments that bind Purdy's foundlings loosely, impersonally, to the world. Instead of idealizing these figures or downplaying the erotic confusions they cause, Purdy's writing makes us heed aspects of the family that exceed meaning: he probes what "fits into no groups—whether sexual, intellectual, political, or artistic," to alter one of Woodhouse's observations on the author himself. And in doing so, his works meditate on aspects of the family and of personhood that are not just inchoate, but sexually and ontologically unclassifiable.¹²

One consequence of this emphasis is that Purdy rejects academic orthodoxy and identity politics, a position—he was the first to admit—that cost him many readers. "They want everything topical," he once lamented of his harshest critics, and for fiction to be a prototype for coexistence, but the imagination rarely toes such lines and is anyway a realm that most "people don't like." Put another way, his commitment to "follow[ing his] unconscious" and to parsing its fantasies, however unpleasant or unethical, easily caused offense. "What they don't always admit," he observed of his relatively large and loyal gay male and black female following, "is that . . . beneath a homosexual and a black is something that's neither homosexual nor black."

By insisting bluntly that all identities lack a bedrock or anchor, Purdy wanted fiction to concentrate on something less straightforward than the roles conferred on us socially. Within his terms, identity is never equal to the forms of desire and antagonism that surround and undermine it. The immolation scene in *Eustace Chisholm* is but one extreme example of this, because the novel gets bound up violently, contortedly, with the same-sex desire that its characters try—and fail—to repudiate. In its violence, however, the scene makes sexuality almost unrecognizable. Like the novel as a whole, it unravels secondary identifications and brings to the fore all the amorphous fantasies that underwrite them, pressing sexuality, object choice, and the subject itself into a psychic register in which these factors no longer make much sense.

One consequence of this is that Purdy's fiction encourages readers to escape identity effects by exposing what is beneath them. That doesn't mean that he uncovers an essence capable of accessing a deeper truth—one that might reunite an eqo-less humanity. Nor, one should add, was Purdy especially interested in trying to maintain the collective identity of marginalized groups. Less reassuring and far-more provocative, his approach to identity was closer to the plaintive idea in Shallow Grave—that man, leaning upon nothingness, is a replaceable, easily forgotten glyph. Partly divested of identity, Purdy's reader, he told me several years ago, in a memorable interview, 15 is encouraged to acquiesce to life in all its multiple, impersonal forms. That's because his fiction often makes conventional divisions between love and hostility—and between the persons that experience them—almost meaningless.¹⁶ In another interview, he alluded admiringly to the Roman Terence's insistence, "I count nothing human foreign to me."17 Since by contrast the ego assents complacently to endless fictions about itself and society, what's needed, Purdy implies, is a form of writing adept at getting around the distortion: "Tell[ing] what you don't want to tell" requires a "gibberish method," he once said, to shake out the status quo and so reveal the tenor—and poetics—of social forms.¹⁸

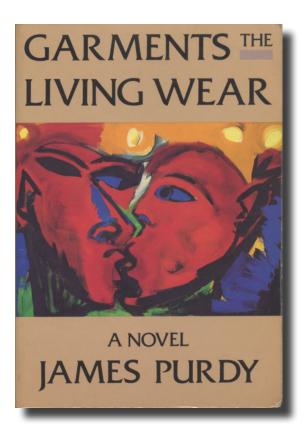
Purdy's insistence that "beneath a homosexual and a black is something that's neither" may look as if it yokes his fiction to recent debates about gender's contingent, performative, and melancholic effects—effects that Judith Butler, for one, has powerfully described. But Purdy's and Butler's perspectives don't in the end mesh very tidily. True, novels like *Garments the Living Wear* showcase the false morphology of gender; and Purdy's use of fantasy, satire, and parody greatly unsettles the intricacies of kinship. If one also heeds his obsession with quotation—that his characters frequently echo statements they neither identify nor understand—then he'd surely seem to be a dream for scholars committed to anti-essentialist models of sexuality, including arguments that gender is a type of mimicry. Such angles make his neglect today all the more surprising. Still, to read Purdy in this way could easily ignore or simplify what's so disturbing about his work. Put starkly, it is desire—not personhood—that is generally the more-reliable guide to truth in his fiction,

in terms of what arouses and inspires. Woodhouse is thus closer to the mark when describing Purdy's unusual message: "Trust your passions, sleepwalk if necessary to what you love [as Haws does in *Eustace Chisholm*], and do not listen to what others call your sleepwalking. Do not expect love to make you happy. Savor, and suffer, your abnormality."²⁰

If we extrapolate from such statements, Purdy's understanding of the desire and identification ultimately seems to be quite close to Freud's, as well as to one of his best contemporary readers, Leo Bersani. Bersani builds a strong ethical case around the need for "inaccurate replications, or a modified sameness," a claim that is strikingly similar to Purdy's interest in links between surrogates and the family's empty forms. ²¹ For Purdy, indeed, the adjective "archetypal" refers to a skeletal structure that supports—and just as often punctures—his narratives. ²² "Behind this story," the narrator of *Narrow Rooms* tells us, "is another story, as behind the girders of an ancient bridge is the skeleton of a child which superstition says keeps the bridge standing. ²³ So constructed, the novel resembles Freud's description of the unconscious functioning as "another scene" [ein andere Schauplatz] positioned somewhere between perception and consciousness. ²⁴

Archetypes may rest on myth and even ignorance, including myths about harmonious family life. But when archetypes are shown to be shot through with unappeasable passions and memories, their resilience—in helping to maintain an array of empty familial forms—seems in Purdy's fiction to evade any simple attempt at demystification. What's behind the cipher or glyph in Purdy's fiction is perhaps best grasped by heeding what binds his characters to mythic elements they can neither perceive nor understand. This emphasis, perhaps closest in spirit to Jean Genet's (a near-contemporary of Purdy's), differs strongly from what many theorists have recently contended: that such figures are bound to scraps of ideology that, once discarded, free characters to redefine themselves. Purdy advances the bleaker idea that they have crossed out—for the most part, voided—their pregiven role, and can't always imagine what can or should replace it.²⁵

Within these terms, it's possible to return to my opening quotation: "Man is little more than a glyph which punctuates space . . ." Bearing hideous physical scars and raw psychological wounds from war in the South China Sea (clearly, Vietnam), Garnet reads a definition of man in a *Guide to Phrenology*. This is one of Purdy's many interesting jokes, for phrenology—a quack science acquiring limited influence in the 1820s and 1830s—tried to gauge and judge character by emphasizing the shape and contours of the head: it claimed that these matters gave substance to such vague, ineffable qualities as benevolence, veneration, firmness, and cautiousness. ²⁶ Phrenology's elemental belief was that these emotions—in effect, transparently embodied behavioral characteristics—expose a person's hidden traits. Purdy ends up



reversing that idea: what's inside Garnett's head is generally unfathomable, but his wounds and scars are so visibly disturbing to his community—and so off-putting to others meeting him—that he withdraws in shame. Tilting phrenology in this direction, Purdy implies (as did Lacan) that the unconscious isn't something we own, but that floats outside us.

Since Garnett's copy of the *Guide to Phrenology* is dog-eared, its spine broken and shedding pages, the book assumes strong metaphorical significance, extending Purdy's wry thoughts on the impersonal quality of such definitions and the numberless readers that clearly have consulted them for their apparently practical answers to the enigmas of human behavior and motivation.

Still, it is by reading aloud—almost re-enacting—the *Guide*'s definition of "man as a glyph" that Garnet comes to symbolize his burgeoning love for Daventry, an enigmatic younger man who moves in with him partly to help repair the veteran's broken relationship to the world.

Part of Daventry's role, which Garnet encourages, is to shuttle back and forth between him and Georgina Rance, ostensibly Garnet's object of desire, though she keeps her distance in revulsion of his scars and wounds. Yet Daventry, too, seems almost hollow, akin to a cipher: After he assumes his role as a vanishing mediator, he's asked to write and deliver love letters to the widow in Garnet's place. He becomes a prop, in that sense, for a desire that evolves and switches tracks the moment it's expressed. In line with the novel's stress on love's transformative effects, the widow finds the messenger as seductive as his message, especially as the latter veers from one man to the next. The same is also true of Garnet, whose spirits lift as his affection swerves from the woman to the younger man.

Delightfully unattached and promiscuous in his affections, Daventry completes this hapless triangle by acquiescing entirely to the advances of others. He's one of Purdy's amiably polymorphous characters, his passion so free-ranging that it seems to bypass secondary identifications determining gender, and thus to hover over more primal matters such as blood, semen, and saliva. "A *glyph*," cries Daventry, "must mean judging by the context of the sentence you have your finger on, a sign standing for something else" (70). The same is doubtless true of the drifter himself and the type of relationships that his openness and wandering make possible.²⁷

As in most of Purdy's fiction, then, passions and persons change abruptly in *Shallow Grave*. They find new objects, often within the space of a few lines. As Purdy once declared amusingly, "Cupid is liable to shoot anyone!"²⁸ By underscoring the haunting effects of archetypes, too, he downplays the importance we attach to the gender of objects of desire. Engaging more with the pleasure and havoc arising from sudden shifts in the drive's intensity and direction, he brings to mind Freud's distinction between modern and classical arguments about the object. "The most striking distinction between the erotic life of antiquity and our own," Freud explained in a terse, defensible generalization, "no doubt lies in the fact that the ancients laid the stress upon the instinct itself, whereas we emphasize its object."²⁹

When coupled with his tendency to give characters more than one object, Purdy's emphasis on his characters' intense drives tends to explode category assumptions about sexuality. Men that at first glance seem gay, because homoerotically involved (as Jared is with Des in Garments) sometimes wind up infatuated with women, as both soon are with Peg Sawbridge, their own partnership reforming itself after such bisexual—or chastely maternal attachments have waned. By that point, Peg and her daughter Cleo have competed for Jared's affection, while Des and Jared have slept separately with the nearly century-old patron Mr. Hennings, himself married to Estrellita, the latter's ravishing bride/groom. But even after Estrellita has had sex with almost all the novel's key characters, male and female, s/he remains the biggest enigma of all. The curiosity propelling Peg into an affair with her or him, based on whether Mr. Hennings knows that "she" has a penis, vanishes at the end, however, when the narrator claims the appendage is a trail of pubic hair.³⁰ One struggles to reconcile this pronouncement with earlier accounts of how Estrellita's "sex rose . . . in vast angry threshing movements" (46), but that seems to be Purdy's point: If gender is a formal convenience, it's also a mental snare, taxing Purdy's protagonists and reducing their receptivity until all efforts at openness finally exhaust them. By unraveling rather than completing identity, Purdy's sense of gender points to what Jane Flax once called "the ineradicable persistence of [its] unintelligibility."31 His narrators meditate at some length on what constitutes infidelity among those experiencing these attachments. In doing so, Purdy seems also to be playing with what it means to be faithful to readers while offering sequences of narratives that, logically and conceptually, belie both principles.

In light of the interviews he gave, Purdy's interest in wandering desire is probably best seen as whimsical uninterest in what might constrain his characters' desires. True, he sometimes voiced an almost old-fashioned insistence that his gay characters not get too comfortable with each other. But, overall, his protagonists cultivate a type of openness to experience and to others that, like the unconscious itself, does not know negation, does not say "no," but affirms everything that is serene and violent, oriented to

life and helplessly committed to its own destruction. The same principle of availability helps us gauge what happens to Chad, in the second half of *Hollow of His Hand*, and to Malcolm, the foundling wandering through Purdy's first novel. Indeed, rather than accepting Tanner's claim that "the more [Malcolm] imbibes or generally takes in from his surroundings, the less real he seems to become," Malcolm's picaresque encounters with others, including with surrogates, could as easily be said to teach us how to be available to experience without being too fettered by attachment.³²

That desire for extended, somewhat elastic kinship flourishes in Purdy's fiction in proportion to his protagonists' distance from conventional family life. Most surrogates in his fiction are father figures—often, though not exclusively, taken as lovers—who set his orphans and strays on hitherto stalled paths. Malcolm is discovered on a bench by Mr. Cox, an astrologer and well-known pederast, yet while the latter appoints himself the teenager's guardian and propels him into society by encouraging him to form unusual, almost Rabelaisian encounters—including with fighting artists, a spurned midget, and a black undertaker—Mr. Cox withdraws chastely from the scene, as if his astrological skill turned him into a ministering angel or gay representative of providence. Abandoned by his real father, Malcolm nonetheless stays torn between waiting for him and expecting nothing in return.

If in the sense of Daventry's definition of "glyph" Malcolm, Mr. Cox, and almost every other character in Purdy's first novel could be said to be "sign[s] standing for something else" (70), then Purdy also uses that emphasis to make fatherhood diffuse, even though in his fiction it remains a category or role that he refuses to lay entirely to one side. Indeed, that Mr. Cox and Girard Girard briefly occupy, before vacating, a symbolic role as fathers ensures that paternity functions as an absent cause of desire, shuttling Malcolm from one man or couple to the next, while the processes of identification that could halt those displacements are either missing or shown to be ineffectual.

Ironically, it's when his marriage to Melba begins unraveling that Malcolm sees—or thinks he sees—his father. He follows the man into a public restroom, but in a misreading both fascinating and tragicomic the man assumes he's coming on to him, calls him a pederast, and knocks him to the floor (369). Even so, the man's identity remains mysterious. Melba tells her husband, "Look, kiddy. . . . That wasn't your father. I've known that old pot since I was ten. He's nobody's father. And what's this *idée* unfix about your father. Who wants a father? It's been old hat for years. That old pot, I repeat, was nobody's father" (371). But Melba's in no position to judge the man's history, and Malcolm intriguingly dies before the riddle is solved.

What, though, is an "idée unfix"? Is this but a solecism on Melba's part or does the idea of free-ranging obsession indicate, importantly for Purdy, that the

yearning propelling Malcolm through most of this novel can dissipate under the weight of endless frustration?

Whether as *idée fixe* or "*idée* unfix," the patterns intriguing Purdy closely resemble Freud's accounts of the "negative" Oedipus complex, where "negative" importantly describes a position rather than an implied value or lack of it. Like the empty forms that haunt Purdy's orthodox relationships, this "complex" shadows—and sometimes overshadows—the dramas of identification and affiliation affecting every son: it represents the father as an object of desire, not (as more commonly) the obstacle that blocks desire's expression. Indeed, when this shadow drama is predominant, it's the mother who is shown to intercede between the son and the object of his homoerotic yearning. Small wonder, perhaps, that Freud—after giving limited conceptual heft to this complex—declared, in a fairly normalizing stroke, that it tends to fall under the sway of conventional Oedipal hostility, solidifying a son's deeroticized identification with his father.

Aspects of Freud's argument nonetheless deserve revisiting, not least because of its timing relative to his other claims about masculine identification. The model of homosexuality for which he became best-known stems from his reflections on Leonardo da Vinci, advanced in 1910, in which the boy allegedly identifies with his mother and thereafter desires other men narcissistically, as substitutes for *himself*.³³ Less well-known is that Freud's argument about the negative oedipal complex accompanied his attempt, the following year, to interpret Daniel Paul Schreber's delirious fantasies of bearing God a child. In light of Schreber's psychotic belief that God was trying to impregnate him, Freud argued that Schreber had projected his "feminine attitude" onto God from a perception that the latter was omnisexual.³⁴

Writing intermittently on the negative Oedipal complex throughout the 1910s and early 1920s, Freud's essay on Schreber informs his most intriguing essay on masculinity, "A Seventeenth-Century Demonological Neurosis," written in 1922 and published the following year. As baroque as the scenarios flourishing in Purdy's fiction, the essay focuses on Christoph Haizmann, a Bavarian painter who in 1669 allegedly made two bonds with the Devil, both detailed in Father Adalbert Eremiasch's 1677 Latin manuscript, *Trophaeum Mariano-Cellense*, supposedly a report on demoniacal possession or madness, but one that points, Freud thought, to a fascinating complex about the father and his psychical meaning.

Alternating detail with speculation, Freud's interpretation of Haizmann dwells on the painter's fantasies of the Devil as a "father-substitute" because Haizmann represented Satan with "two pairs of female breasts" and "a large penis ending in a snake." As such, Haizmann's image of the Devil as father, Freud thought, combines "two sets of emotional impulses that [are] opposed to

each other: . . . not only impulses of an affectionate and submissive nature, but also hostile and defiant ones." "It is our view," Freud continued, extending an argument he made earlier in *Totem and Taboo*, that "the same ambivalence"— 'the unresolved conflict between . . . a longing for the father and . . . a fear of him'—governs the relations of mankind to its Deity." 36

Since Purdy, a secular writer, tends to satirize Christianity, especially in its evangelical forms, Freud's analysis of religion would seem to have little bearing on his fiction.³⁷ But the essay on Haizmann is different, connecting with my earlier claims about Purdy when Freud examines the painter's imaginary "foster-father,"³⁸ an ideational surrogate that elicits Haizmann's intense struggle between erotic submission and retaliatory cruelty.

When Freud tried to extrapolate from Haizmann's fantasies, to grant them generic rather than pathological significance for all young boys and men, he inadvertently challenged a powerful cultural belief that masculinity is self-evident as a psychological phenomenon, because bound irrevocably to identification with the father. One consequence of the negative Oedipal complex, after all, is that both parents become sexualized objects—an idea that, developed fully, would collide with Freud's overarching claims about gender, making clear why he stopped short of that undertaking. Nevertheless, what remains of the negative Oedipal complex de-biologizes masculinity by signaling, as elsewhere in psychoanalysis, where anatomy is *not* destiny. Connections aren't inevitable, Freud's essay implies, when (as in Purdy's fiction) we encounter the gap separating a man's body from the fantasies that he attaches to it.

Freud's broader claims about Haizmann's psychic dilemma dovetail with the reading of Purdy offered here in showing how they both develop and amplify shared fantasies about real and imagined fathers. Rather than serving as an explanatory schema for Purdy's fiction, that is, Freud reveals parallel interests, fascinations, and anxieties in his earlier essay on Haizmann. In doing so, he, like Purdy, helpfully rejects any lingering hint of pathology over the negative Oedipal relation.

"We don't choose our parents or our destiny," explains Wilma Trowt, owner of a "Home for Runaway and Incorrigible Boys," in the second half of Purdy's 1986 novel *In the Hollow of His Hand* (220). But like several characters in his picaresque narrative, she isn't quite right in asserting that—at least according to the logic of the novel. Chad, the young man she's addressing, experiences something closer to a forced choice when deciding with which of his fathers he'll identify, a decision (based on both social coercion and perceived necessity) that affects whether he'll live as a white man or as a Native American. Lewis Coultas, whom Chad grows up believing is his father,

is a handsome playboy who runs from the law after being "the architect of [his wife's and family's] ruin!" (52, 238). Decatur, by contrast, is an Ojibwa Indian who, in returning to Yellow Brook, Ohio, from combat in World War I, claims Chad as his son. Fourteen years earlier, Eva Coultas and he had had an affair while she was under the influence of her mother's homemade headache elixir.

Because of suspicion and racism the small town tries to shun the returning soldier, and does so despite his military service and medals, in scenes reminiscent of Garnet Montrose's dejection in Shallow Grave. Prevented from seeing his son, Decatur decides to kidnap him and tries to form a hasty bond, all the while fearing, as he puts it, that "I have committed a crime for you, . . . but I wonder if you are worth it" (86). Soon after the law catches up with Decatur, ensuring that Chad is brought back to Yellow Brook, Lewis abducts him, launching the boy on a series of adventures with characters whose "Diane Arbus grotesquerie" (as one Washington Post reviewer put it)39 recall the fantastic nomadic theater episodes in Dickens's Nicholas Nickleby. But what's lawful here is rendered doubtful, not least because Decatur abducts his own son, whereas the police (allegorical "law-men" in this work [90]) uphold a fiction of paternity that drives a wedge between Coultas's ersatz family and the deeper "family poetics" that the novel tries to express and forge. 40

Torn between initial hatred for Decatur and aversion for Lewis, Chad's wandering bears some resemblance to that of *Malcolm*, as both young men experience—then try to resolve—their uncertain relationship to the world:

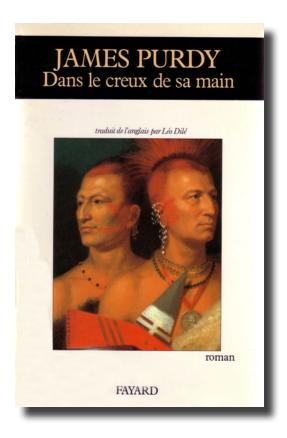


Decatur said, "I am your dad."

"My dad," Chad repeated desperately, vertiginously. "If you are him," he began, wheeling about and facing Decatur. "If you are my father, I think it will kill me!" (89)

Adding to Chad's ontological uncertainty is the sense that he's "two boys in one," because his biracial status ensures, miraculously, that while one of his eyes is "a rich, deep pool-like black[,] . . . the other was roving lovely sky-blue" (208). Although this splitting of identity is clearly metaphorical, highlighting a deeper rift between Chad and his origins, it forces him to assess whether he should identify with the socially denigrated Ojibwa tribe. Malcolm, in the earlier novel, forms a disastrous marriage before dying, but Chad—safely returned to Yellow Brook, near the end of the novel—decides he must live—and perhaps even elope—with Decatur, his real father.

Soon after the novel appeared, the Post claimed that Chad's "odyssey of trials and initiations . . . serve as stage sets for the author's contempt for



American family life, racial attitudes and jurisprudence."41 This assessment strikes me as painfully inaccurate, not least because it greatly overstates the novel's ambitions and ignores the comedy and poignancy that it draws from Chad's misadventures. Since the novel prizes fatherhood, Purdy's thoughts on this phenomenon are not contemptuous. Yet in asking implicitly, "What is a father?" and, even more, "What is parenting?," the novel makes us consider where the forms of intimacy that children and adolescents often favor collide with social prejudices; where kinship might best be viewed as elastic rather than rigidly enforced; and where the ties that truly influence the young are not, at times, biological after all.

As in *Malcolm*, then, with its chiastic forking of desire, a gap opens in *In the Hollow of His Hand* between fatherhood and the man or men briefly designated as occupying that role. "Mr. Lewis Coultas was the antipodes, in every way, of Decatur" (44), the narrator insists, recalling Freud's use of the adjective "negative" to denote position rather than value. Unmasked as a surrogate, moreover, Lewis sparks erotic fantasies in

Chad, who's suddenly free to think about his "father" with more detachment. The novel's interest in Lewis's libertinism and handsome physique correspondingly increases. As Chad has grown up believing that another man is his father, for different reasons he also finds himself sexualizing Decatur, his actual father, as if transfiguring him into a lover. At the end of the novel, for instance, Chad and Decatur are reunited in ways that Eva, Chad's mother, grasps is decisive: They "held to one another convulsively like men condemned by the spectators to death. They clung to one another indeed finally like prisoners already perhaps executed and holding to one another in the tight embrace of death itself" (246). The hyperbole marks the strength of feeling that Purdy attaches to this scene, itself clearly the novel's climax.

That Purdy endlessly blurs distinctions between fathers and lovers may be threatening, even repellent, to readers still coming to terms with Lawrence's and others' depiction of comparable heterosexual fantasies, almost a century earlier, in *Sons and Lovers, Women in Love,* and elsewhere. But such affect (in the fiction, as for reviewers) is greatly owing to Purdy's depicting scenes that draw out the negative Oedipal complex, which unravels and re-eroticizes identification, in fantasy imbuing the father with strong interest and exceptional potency.

In the Hollow of His Hand forms erotic and identificatory comparisons between Chad's two fathers, in part by indicating that Chad's affection for Decatur

obtains from seeing his father naked; thereafter, he tries shielding Decatur from the police by insisting that he agreed to their journey in the first place. Significantly, Chad can't "remember whether he had seen Decatur coming out of the river dripping from his swim or whether he had first seen the police holding him all naked as he was, and putting the handcuffs on him." Nevertheless, he's haunted by the sight and fights an impulse to tell the police, in words easily misconstrued as adult abuse rather than childhood fantasy, "I have never seen a grown man all undressed before. I never seen my own dad, I mean I never seen Lewis Coultas without no clothes on [sic]" (90; original emphasis).

Retroactively, this incident becomes a primal scene for the novel, colliding in Chad's mind with a later episode in which he accidentally sees Lewis lying naked and aroused between two women, "all immersed in a kind of militant slumber which also resembled the piled-up bodies of corpses" (124). Contrasting radically with the earlier scene, the later one causes Chad to gag violently since in that "dazed state . . . [t]he horror of seeing [Lewis Coultas] stripped naked between the two women . . . made him acutely ill" (125). In rejecting—almost throwing up over—the imago of his father he formerly had attached to Lewis, Chad is able to reattach it benignly, erotically, to Decatur.

One reason we cannot—and in Purdy's case should not—consider this process conclusive, in terms of identification or desire, is that it keeps recurring in the novel, assuming new forms that modify Chad's relation to his past and, of course, his future. Just one later example is when Chad sleeps in Viola Franey's home. He's ushered then "into a room every bit as large as the bedroom his Dad and his two lady companions had spent the night in" (187). Sure enough, an "inaccurate replication" of the scene ensues, to echo Bersani, in which Viola's mute and deaf daughters climb into bed beside Chad and have sex with him, while "memories of Minnie and Cora and his dad descend. . . on him" (187).

Granted, this episode—the only explicitly sexual one that Chad experiences in the novel—precedes his decision to live with Decatur near the conclusion. but Purdy gives primacy to neither scene, so preventing us from viewing Chad as either straight or gay. In other words, just when we think, as readers, that we can predict his characters' behavior and desires. Purdy throws a wrench in that fantasy, rendering "sexual identity" a misnomer and even a contradiction in terms. We recall Woodhouse's observation that Purdy is writing not "to normalize homosexuality, or indeed any sexuality, but to unnormalize the reader, to break us out of the prisons of conventional thought and feeling." He does so, I hope to have shown via Freud, by unraveling his characters' attachments, to cast new light on kinship and his foundlings' tenuous membership in families, biological or chosen.

A final sign of this indeterminacy is a fascinating shift in the similes that Purdy uses to join fathers and sons. The narrator of Hollow early on declares: "Had Decatur been fourteen years old again, and had Chad come into the kitchen and stood beside him, they would be as like as peas in a pod except for the blue cast in Chad's right eye" (31). Thereafter the relationship becomes formless and inchoate, open to new fantasies and possibilities: "Put us two together," Decatur adds just a few pages later, "and take a long look. We're as like as . . ." (35). The simile is never finished and the reader—like the characters themselves—must guess what should fill that space.

At such moments, everyone is partly in the dark. We cannot know whether in completing such sentences we're elaborating or betraying Purdy's vision, or, indeed, whether Purdy himself formed the same, consistent ending each time he reimagined it. Like his narrator's incomplete simile, however, patterns of resemblance recur in his fiction, swirling around orphaned and detached figures whose lives, always precarious and subtly mangled, haunt us, as they do Purdy's novels, like "glyph[s that] punctuate . . . space."

NOTES

The author thanks various readers, commentators, and interlocutors, including Don Pease, Richard Canning, Rainer J. Hanshe, and, for an earlier interview and conversation, James Purdy.

- ¹ James Purdy, *In a Shallow Grave* (1975; San Francisco: City Lights, 1988), 68. Subsequent references give pagination in main text.
- ² Tony Tanner, "Introduction" to Purdy, *Color of Darkness and Malcolm: Eleven Stories, One Novella, and a Novel* (1956-59; New York: Doubleday, 1974), 13, 17.
- ³ *Ibid.*, 6.
- 4 Ibid., 6.
- ⁵ Reed Woodhouse, "James Purdy's Escape from the Wasteland," *Harvard Gay and Lesbian Review* 1.3 (1994): 24.
- ⁶ In Purdy's novel *In the Hollow of His Hand* (New York: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1986), for instance, Viola Franey commiserates with Chad Coultas, a boy kidnapped first by his unknown but real father, then by his known but actually surrogate one: "We none of us ever get the parents we feel we deserve" (186). Subsequent references give pagination in main text.
- ⁷ Frank Baldanza, "James Purdy's Half-Orphans," Centennial Review 18 (1974): 255.
- ⁸ Purdy, Narrow Rooms (New York: Arbor House, 1978), 152.
- ⁹ Purdy, Eustace Chisholm and the Works (1967; London: Gay Men's Press, 1984), 229. Subsequent references give pagination in main text.
- ¹⁰ Purdy, "Daddy Wolf," *63: Dream Palace: Selected Stories, 1956-1987* (California: Black Sparrow, 1991), 183-91; Purdy, *Gertrude of Stony Island Avenue* (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1997).
- ¹¹ Baldanza, "James Purdy's Half-Orphans," 255. See also Baldanza, "The Paradoxes of Patronage in Purdy," *American Literature* 46.3 (1974): esp. 347.
- ¹² Woodhouse, "James Purdy (Re)visited," Harvard Gay and Lesbian Review 2.2 (1995): 16.
- ¹³ Purdy, qtd. in Richard Canning, "Following the Unconscious: An Interview with James Purdy," *The James White Review*, Vol. 17, No. 1 (winter 2000): 22.
- 14 Purdy, qtd. in *ibid*., 19, 15.
- ¹⁵ Purdy, conversation with the author on January 6, 2003. See also Woodhouse, who argues in "James Purdy's Escape from the Wasteland" that Purdy "is a sort of Calvinist, though his god is not Jehovah, but Eros" (24).
- ¹⁶ Joseph Conrad, Lord Jim (1899-1900; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1989), 200.
- ¹⁷ Purdy, qtd. in Canning, "Following the Unconscious: An Interview with James Purdy," 14.
- ¹⁸ Purdy, qtd. in Woodhouse, "James Purdy (Re)visited," 17.
- ¹⁹ See especially Judith Butler, "Melancholy Gender / Refused Identification," *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 132-50.
- ²⁰ Woodhouse, "James Purdy's Escape from the Wasteland," 24.
- ²¹ Leo Bersani, "Against Monogamy," *Oxford Literary Review* 20.1-2 (1998): 5; Bersani, "Genital Chastity," *Homosexuality and Psychoanalysis*, ed. Tim Dean and Christopher Lane (Chicago:

University of Chicago Press, 2001), 361.

- ²² Purdy, qtd. in Canning, "Following the Unconscious: An Interview with James Purdy," 15.
- ²³ Purdy, Narrow Rooms, 58.
- ²⁴ Sigmund Freud, The Interpretation of Dreams (1900), The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, ed. and trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth, 1953-74), 24 vols.
- ²⁵ For elaboration, see Christopher Lane, "The Voided Role: On Genet." MLN 112.4 (1997): 876-908.
- ²⁶ See George Combe, *The Constitution of Man Considered in Relation to External Objects* (1828; Boston: Allen and Ticknor, 1834), 3d ed., 47-51.
- ²⁷ In *Narrow Rooms*, this connective role is adopted by Gareth Vaisey, who describes himself as a "makeweight" between Sid De Lakes and Roy Sturtevant (181).
- ²⁸ Purdy, qtd. in Woodhouse, "James Purdy (Re)visited," 17.
- ²⁹ Freud, Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality (1905), Standard Edition 7:149n.
- ³⁰ Purdy, *Garments the Living Wear* (San Francisco: City Lights, 1989), 149. Subsequent references give pagination in main text.
- ³¹ Jane Flax, qtd. in Tim Dean and Cynthia Dyess, "Gender: The Impossibility of Meaning," *Psychoanalytic Dialogues* 10.5 (2000): 750.
- ³² Tanner, Introduction to Purdy, *Color of Darkness and Malcolm*, 17; Purdy, qtd. in Canning, "Following the Unconscious: An Interview with James Purdy," 20.
- 33 Freud, Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of His Childhood (1910), Standard Edition 11:57-138.
- ³⁴ Freud, "Psychoanalytic Notes on an Autobiographical Account of a Case of Paranoia (Dementia Paranoides)" (1911), *Standard Edition* 12, esp. 57-58 and 69. For elaboration on the boy's "feminine attitude," see Lane, "Freud on Group Psychology: Shattering the Dream of a Common Culture," *Homosexuality and Psychoanalysis*, 147-67.
- 35 Freud, "A Seventeenth-Century Demonological Neurosis" (1923 [1922]), Standard Edition 19:83, 89.
- 36 Ibid., 85.
- ³⁷ Here, I disagree with Bettina Schwarzschild, who begins *The Not-Right House: Essays on James Purdy* (Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 1968) by invoking Purdy's "Christian vision of love" (1). Even when based on Purdy's early works, the comment is surprising and arguably difficult to support. Schwarzschild wrote her study long before Purdy published *Garments the Living Wear*, perhaps his most extended satire of evangelical Christianity and its susceptibility to producing false prophets. See, however, the narrator's satirical representation of the religious cult in the second half of *In the Hollow of His Hand*, as well as Purdy's own bemused statements about these and other pietistic phenomena in Lane, "Out with James Purdy: An Interview," *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 40.1 (1998): 86.
- 38 Freud, "A Seventeenth-Century Demonological Neurosis," 102.
- ³⁹ Hilary Masters, "American Odysseys and Oddities: The Dark Landscape in James Purdy's Fiction," *Washington Post* (December 16, 1986): C9.
- ⁴⁰ When Decatur tries to see Chad, Bess Lytle uses the same phrase, insisting: "You cannot drive a wedge into this family!" (31) What one views as a "wedge" here depends, ultimately, on the perspective one adopts relative to paternity and the family.
- ⁴¹ Masters, "American Odysseys and Oddities" C9.



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HYPERION

On the future of aesthetics



James Purdy's VIA NEGATIVA



by Don Adams

hen I have taught James Purdy's novel In a Shallow Grave to my undergraduate literature students, they initially have responded with a mixture of incredulity and incomprehension, in a manner that echoes the troubled reception history of Purdy's fiction in general. The most common complaint of the students is that the novel's plot is not realistic and that the characters do not seem like normal people. But their most significant criticism is that they cannot figure out the point of the novel; they sense that it means something specific and particular, but that meaning is unclear to them. My response to the students is that we must approach Purdy not as a conventional realist writer, one who is attempting to copy the world that we know and live in, but as a writer of allegorical realism, one who is attempting to challenge the assumptions of the conventional reality we know and to envision a different world altogether. When reading a novel that works allegorically, as I tell them, we must learn to recognize and reveal the argument implicit in the story's archetypal symbol structure, rather than focus on the typical novelistic issues of plot progression and character development in their relation to the actual world, which will only lead to frustration with an allegorical work. And I assure the students that they are absolutely correct in assuming that the novel is attempting to tell them something specific and particular, for instruction through revelation is the ultimate aim of all allegory, but I insist that they must have patience as we attempt to discover the novel's message and meaning. which is far from obvious. *In a Shallow Grave* presents a further challenge, in that its allegorical instruction is implicitly religious in a manner that we are unused to encountering in modern fiction. But it is that very religiousness, rightly understood, that is the key to our understanding of this novel, and of Purdy's fiction in general.

In his spirited introduction to the City Lights reprint of Purdy's 1975 novel, In a Shallow Grave, Jerome Charyn alerts us to the novel's essentially religious nature, describing it as "a modern Book of Revelation, filled with prophecies, visions and demonic landscapes." In a 1997 interview with British literary critic Richard Canning, Purdy himself referred to the novel as "a religious book," and he related a telling anecdote about a reading he gave at Oral Roberts University, where the students were inclined to interpret his novels as "religious allegory . . . like Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress or Spenser's Faerie Queene," and when they asked him outright,



"Are you a religious person?" I said, "Yes, in the sense that I believe there are mysteries we will never fathom." I feel very comfortable with people like that, though I know I couldn't go and live with them. But it shows again what one of my publishers said: my work appeals to such a heterogeneous audience that they don't know how to market them.2

Towards the end of the interview, Purdy returned to the heterogeneous theme in regards to the distinguishing characteristics of his own personality and sexuality, saying, "I am too hopeless to be categorized," whereupon Canning prompted, "I've heard you described as a 'visionary writer,' which is a kind of category," to which Purdy responded, "Well, it's true in a way, because I'm not a conscious writer."3

In this essay, I want to consider In a Shallow Grave as a religious novel and to discuss Purdy as a visionary and prophetic writer. I will explore the essentially allegorical manner in which In a Shallow Grave operates within the apophatic tradition of negative theology (the via negativa), negating human sense and reason in preparation for contact with the unknowable and unfathomable mystery of the divine, and I will describe Purdy's prophetic envisioning of a pastoral world of brotherly love that both recalls and questions Walt Whitman's prediction of an American democracy suffused with comradely affection, while exemplifying Christ's dictum that the greatest love is self-sacrificing.4 I also will consider the manner in which Purdy's pastoral envisioning implicitly critiques religious and societal prohibition and persecution of same-sex love relations. I will conclude with a further discussion of the critical challenge that a work of religious allegory such as In a Shallow Grave presents to the contemporary reader, while considering the allegorical import of Purdy's work as a whole.

The apophatic tradition of negative theology originated with the sixth-century theologian known as Pseudo-Dionysius, whom the current Pope, Benedict, a noted and in some respects surprisingly liberal theologian, credits with creating



the first great mystic theology. Moreover, the word "mystic" acquires with him a new meaning. Until this epoch, for Christians, this word was equivalent to the word "sacramental," that is, that which pertains to the "mysterion," sacrament. With him, the word "mystic" becomes more personal, more intimate: It expresses the path of the soul toward God.5

Dionysius argued that our human senses and intellect are innately limited in their ability to approach and know God, whom he refers to, in Neo-Platonic fashion, as "the cause of the universe" and "the Transcendent one." However, through persistent and concentrated negation of both sense and reason, "renouncing all that the mind may conceive," we may prepare ourselves to be "supremely united to the completely unknown."8 In addition to the practice of the negation of our senses and intellect, we can prepare ourselves for the mystic experience of complete unknowing by contemplating mystical symbols given to us by inspired prophets, and by experiencing the sacraments not merely as religious observances but as essentially mysterious, yet real, transformations within ourselves and our worlds.

Ultimately, though, the success of believers' efforts to reach God is dependent upon God being willing to reach out to them in His loving-goodness, the process of which Dionysius describes in a remarkable passage in which he first explains how eros (which the translator renders as "yearning") binds God's creation to itself and to God:



This divine yearning brings ecstasy so that the lover belongs not to self but to the beloved. This is shown by the providence lavished by the superior on the subordinate. It is shown by the regard for one another demonstrated by those of equal status. And it is shown by the subordinates in their divine return toward what is higher.9

It is not remarkable that Dionysius uses eros, or "yearning," to describe the creation's love for itself and its creator on high, as eros is the Greek form of love that is acquisitive and ascending in nature, as opposed to the descending and caring love of agape. But Dionysius goes on to insist that such erotic yearning also characterizes God's relationship to His creation, in regards to which He is both lover and beloved:



The very cause of the universe in the beautiful, good superabundance of his benign yearning for all is also carried outside of himself in the loving care that he has for everything. He is, as it were, beguiled by goodness, by love (agape), and by yearning (eros) and is enticed from his transcendent dwelling place and comes to abide within all things. . . . This is why those possessed of spiritual insight describe him as "zealous" because his good yearning for things is so great. 10

Dionysius in this passage was participating in a Christian theological debate, still ongoing, as to whether erotic love is in essence divine in nature or a falling away from the pure agape of God's loving goodness. Pope Benedict, whose respect for Dionysius already has been shown, came down firmly on the side of interpreting erotic love as a form of divine love in his 2005 encyclical, "God is Love," in which he argued that erotic love participates in the goodness of God. But he qualified this assertion by emphasizing that eros does not come fully into its own until, in and through its "ecstasy," it moves out of its selfcenteredness and is transformed into a caring and self-sacrificing agape:



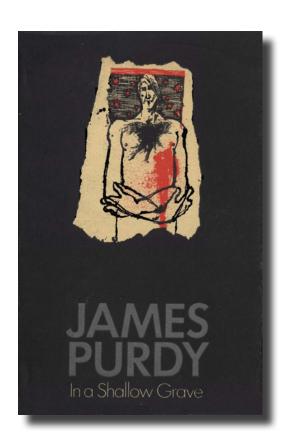
Even if eros is at first mainly covetous and ascending, a fascination for the great promise of happiness, in drawing near to the other, it is less and less concerned with itself, increasingly seeks the happiness of the other, is concerned more and more with the beloved, bestows itself and wants to "be there for" the other. The element of agape thus enters into this love, for otherwise eros is impoverished and even loses its own nature.11

Echoing Dionysius, Benedict goes on to emphasize that God's love for man is itself not only caring (agapistic) but yearning (erotic), and he cites the erotic poetry of *The Song of Songs* as an inspired allegorical expression of the love that operates between God and man, in which man is not subsumed within divinity, but participates in a love relationship "in which both God and man remain themselves and yet become fully one."12

Benedict sums up this part of his argument by asserting that Jesus Christ is the emblematic embodiment of both God's yearning for man and his selfsacrificing care of man, and he refers to God's intervention as Christ within human history as "an unprecedented realism" in which "divine activity takes on dramatic form":



"stray sheep," a suffering and lost humanity. . . . rus document on the Cross is the culmination of that turning of God against himself in which he gives himself in order to raise man up and the love in its most radical form. 13 himself in which he gives himself in order to raise man up and



It is a dramatic act of love that was presaged by Christ himself in teaching his disciples, "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends."¹⁴

In a Shallow Grave is Purdy's remarkably audacious and original re-telling of the Christ story of erotic yearning and agapistic self-sacrifice, which is itself an example of what Northrop Frye argued is the central narrative in the mythology of the divine, "The incarnation and withdrawal of a god."15 In Purdy's version, Potter Daventry is the god figure who intervenes in the life history of the everyman figure of Garnet Montrose, saving his health and home, and perhaps his soul, and then withdrawing into the non-historical world from which he came, but not before promising to be with Garnet always. 16 Purdy's names are often telling, and such is the case in this novel. Potter Daventry's name is emblematic of his figure and purpose. "Potter" means a maker of drinking vessels, and Daventry means "fitting with the tree." So it is that Daventry, who is first seen leaning on a pine tree and is killed by being driven by a freak wind from a hurricane into

a pine tree, saves Garnet with a last-supper-like ceremony in which Garnet is made to drink from a tin cup filled with Daventry's blood mixed with wine. Garnet Montrose's name is also fitting. Garnet means dark red, appropriate for a man whose war wounds make him look the color of "mulberry wine," and Montrose means high and mighty, which is indicative of Garnet's general attitude toward others and also, by contrast, of his injured condition, for with his grievous war wounds and threatened loss of his ancestral home, Garnet has come down significantly in the world and seems on the edge of losing the will to live. Indeed, he feels that his wounds have made him into a walking corpse, a mockery of life and death, "I do not even believe in death because what I am is emptier than death itself." Garnet is in a very shallow grave indeed, that of his own body, and in this sense he emblematizes the death and corruption that is implicit in all living things.

Daventry's arrival is anticipated and prepared for in various ways by Garnet's condition and behavior, ways that are expressive and emblematic of the *via negativa* outlined by Dionysius, for the *via negativa* is not so much theory as practice. The two major movements in the *via negativa* are the negation of sensation and the negation of thought. Negation in this context, however, does not imply privation. Rather negation is an active going against the grain, running counter to the natural inclination of sensation and thought. To negate sensation, then, is not to prevent or deaden perception or feeling, but is to confound them by flouting their expectations and surprising their habitual

conditions. Likewise to negate thought is not to enter into a mental stupor, but is to subvert the mind in its working and to force it into unfamiliar paths and channels so as to disrupt familiar logic and to question all wisdom and knowledge.

Garnet's war wounds ensure that his habitual sensations are flouted and disrupted, for his body has been turned into a sort of negative image of itself, as he explains, "When I was blown up, all my veins and arteries moved from the inside where they belong to the outside so that as the army doc put it. I have been turned inside out in all respects."19 In his altered state, Garnet almost literally (and allegorically) wears his heart on his sleeve, making him all too vulnerable to both sensation and feeling. And yet his natural responses have been stymied by the shock of his experience, so that, while he wants to weep more than ever in pain and self-pity, he finds himself unable to do so:



My doc says my man glands, but I think on this score, as on many outcoo, have blundered, for I cannot weep, and if I start to I feel a great pain in these said glands, like there were sharp rock My doc says my injuries have not really damaged my lachrymal glands, but I think on this score, as on many others, he must great pain in these said glands, like there were sharp rocks or

Garnet, whose wounded condition necessitates that he have physical assistance in his daily living, also finds his habitual self-image as a young and handsome man from an old and respected Virginia family negated, as his physical wounds are so grossly evident as to make his person—respected or not—nauseating to others, making it very difficult for him to find the help that he needs, "I thought once, and wrote it out on a scrap sheet from a ledger, The lowest slave in the world wouldn't accept the job of tending me if he was to starve to death."21 And indeed, when Daventry first gets a good look at Garnet, he cannot control his instinctive physical revulsion, as Garnet relates:



Then for the first time he looked me straight in the face with his merciless wide-open sky-blue eyes, and then making a terrible sound ... he retched fearfully, bending down trying desperately to vomit, but nothing come up but a few strands of phlegm and water.

I left the kitchen and stumbled into the big front sitting room, and sat down under an old floor lamp with a shade decorated with tassels. I often played with these tassels when I was upset, but I was too upset now to have the strength to touch

one. In fact I felt then I was going to die. I felt again somehow like the day I and my buddies was all exploded together and we rose into the air like birds, and then fell to the erupting earth and the flames and the screams of aircraft and sirens and men calling through punctured bowels and brains. My face was bathed in a film like tears, but it wasn't tears, it was the sweat of death.22

At this point in the narrative Daventry first intervenes to save Garnet by helping him to bear his pain and showing him the love and pity he is so desperately in need of. But to do so, Daventry must actively negate his instinctive aversion.

The reader is in a similar position in regards to the flat-on, unashamed, and, at times, brutal physicality of Garnet's narrative, which is typical of Purdy's fiction, with its unusual combination of intense lyricism—"we rose into the air like birds, and then fell to the erupting earth"—and disturbing actuality: "and men calling through punctured bowels and brains."23 In his introduction to the novel, Charyn noted of Purdy's arresting fictive style, "There have always been briers in his voice, as if he meant to tear at his readers with a kind of harsh music."24

It is not only the harsh music of Purdy's prose, however, that disturbs us as readers. It is also the sense of disconnection between physical objects and spiritual subjects in his stories, and between substance and significance in general. Garnet's physical condition is intensely pitiful and pathetic. And yet Garnet in his narrative, rather than evoking his physical pain and discomfort in ways that would make us instinctively ego-identify with him in sympathy and terror, behaves in such a manner as to make his alarming physical state seem so obvious as to be almost beside the point in contrast to his emotional and spiritual drama and distress—a distress that is difficult for the reader to relate to, as it is so remarkably personal and idiosyncratic in its subjectivity, and so hyperbolic in its telling. The fact that the physical and emotional melodramas in the story run on separate but parallel lines serves both to problematize and to intensify the narrative's overall realism, so that Garnet's story is made to seem oddly unreal and super-real at once, like incidents in a dream. And indeed, the typical distinction between dreaming and waking states does not readily apply to this world in which reality itself seems suspended in a psychic and fictive boundary-land, emblematized by the story's title, and expressed in the fluid movement of the narrative in and out of Garnet's consciousness:



I don't know what time Daventry came home that night, I had drifted out to dreamland. . . . Then gradually out of this dream I felt the warmth of a human presence next to me, and not

opening my eyes for fear—well, yes, just for fear—I gradually moved my fingers, which by the way had burst open again owing to my injuries, revealing, if one cared to look, the bones, anyhow my fingers moved over and found a hand on my coverlet, and the hand closed over my fingers. I did not need to open my eyes to know it was Daventry.²⁵

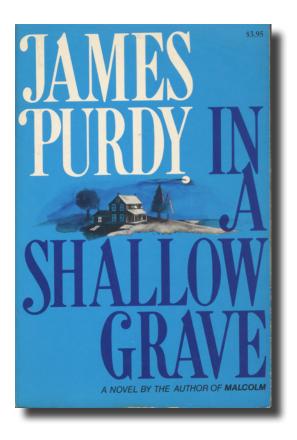
With a more typical modern novelist, the disconcerting disconnection between Garnet's acute physical distress and his ongoing spiritual-emotional drama would be handled with an appropriate irony. But Purdy is no typical modern or post-modern ironist, or perhaps one should say that the irony in Purdy's fictive world is so comprehensive and absolute as to have moved the work into a different generic category altogether, that of the rarefied realm of modern allegory, in which substance and sense are radically disjoined.

In his sensitive and insightful 1982 essay on the allegorical nature of Purdy's fiction, Donald Pease noted that, "Unlike the symbol, which utterly unites subject and significance, an allegory presupposes their separation," and he remarked that, far from lamenting this separation "of object and spirit," which is the typical modern-ironist response, Purdy seemed determined "to perfect it." Purdy's allegorical instinct to emphasize and enforce the separation between object and spirit in his work—his overall insistence upon non-sense—is entirely fitting with the *via negativa*, as illustrated by Dionysius when he lists the many things the "Divine Cause of all" *is* not, *has* not, and *does* not:



It is not immovable, moving, or at rest. It has no power, it is not power, nor is it light. It does not live nor is it life. It is not a substance, nor is it eternity or time. It cannot be grasped by the understanding since it is neither knowledge nor truth. It is not kingship. It is not wisdom. It is neither one nor oneness, divinity nor goodness. . . . It falls neither within the predicate of nonbeing nor of being. There is no speaking of it, nor name nor knowledge of it.²⁸

Such a litany fits implicitly with the innate contrariness evident in Purdy's creative temperament, for he is an instinctive and natural *negator*—which is *not* to label him a nihilist. The nihilist would claim that the world is without purpose and that to presuppose a God as creator would be to presuppose such purpose, which is why God for the nihilist is nonexistent or dead. Purdy, however, is not content to contend that the world is without purpose. He goes one step further in his negation, arguing that "Whatever is, is wrong." ²⁹ But one



step further even than such a blanket condemnation, metaphysically speaking, is his statement to the Oral Roberts students that there are mysteries we will never fathom, which is a different kind of negation, one that abandons the judgment of "whatever is, is wrong" in favor of an ultimate unknowing. Negation is closer than affirmation to such unknowing, according to Dionysius, because it paradoxically affirms the mystery. But negation itself ultimately must be overcome through faith, emblematized by the mystery of the sacraments and by prayer, both of which bring us closer to the ultimate unknowing, and both of which are a part of the essentially religious drama of *In a Shallow Grave*.

Preparing the way for the efficacy of prayer and sacrament is the *via negativa*. We have discussed the negation of physical sensation in Purdy's work, emblematized in the allegorical separation between substance and significance. But the necessary second movement of the *via negativa* is the negation of thought, or "conception," both emotional and intellectual. In his interviews, Purdy repeatedly and insistently affirmed

such negation, as when he told Richard Canning, "I think all my works are lies but in the lies are the real truths." One of the most fascinating aspects of his lively and revealing interview with Christopher Lane is the manner in which Lane attempts to nudge Purdy to acknowledge the creative and political limitations implicit in his fiction's insistent negations, and Purdy's stalwart refusal to do so. Responding to a statement in which Purdy asserted that Garnet Montrose and Quintus Perch in *In a Shallow Grave* are "desperate people," holding onto one another as those from a sinking ship hold onto a life raft, Lane prompted:



Lane: A lot of your characters are on boats that are sinking.

Purdy: Almost all of them. I think humanity is always on a sinking ship. . . .

Lane: Is there a fascination for you about this sinking?

Purdy: I'm certainly concerned because it's everywhere. . . .

Lane: I'd like to focus on some of the desperation you're talking about because it seems to produce a kind of emotional dependency in the novels we've discussed. . . .

Purdy: ... I think if you look at anyone's life, their life is not correct. They're making one mistake after another. They're blundering, they're falling, they're hurting people.

Lane: Are you saying that intimacy with someone is also about a nonrelation with a person one apparently is involved with?

Purdy: I think we may never know whom we're loving, and they don't know who is being loved.

Lane: That theme comes across very powerfully in your books.³¹

The active negation of emotional knowledge and certainty in Purdy's fiction parallels his insistent negation of intellectual knowledge and certainty, which is emblematized in *In a Shallow Grave* by Garnet's reading, and being read to, from books he doesn't begin to understand:



My education had stopped at the eighth grade because I was incorrigible, but I had what my mother said was the bad habit of reading, but I always read books nobody else would turn more than a page of, and my knowledge is and was all disconnected, unrelated, but the main book I always kept to even after my explosion-accident was an old, old one called *Book of Prophecies*. From it comes my only knowledge of mankind now. I have read and have read to me, however, nearly everything. My house is all books and emptiness.³²

As Garnet's favorite book is the *Book of Prophecies*, which bespeaks of hidden and unconscious mysteries, so his "least favorite" book is *History of the Papacy*,³³ which represents the conscious categorization and political institutionalization of the divine mysteries, against which Garnet (like Christ) instinctively protests.

While Garnet negates intellectual knowledge and certainty through the reading of books he "doesn't understand a jot or tittle of,"³⁴ he is actively praying for divine intervention in the tragic and pathetic history of his life by writing love letters to the Widow Rance, who lives several miles down the road. When Daventry first arrives on Garnet's property, he agrees to act as stenographer and deliverer of Garnet's pathetic, lovelorn letters to his old high school sweetheart, and it is while taking down his first dictation of one of Garnet's touchingly wistful but humorously inept letters that Daventry's instinctive

aversion toward Garnet begins to transform into love, as he looks at him "with amazed wonder":



"What is it?" Daventry, I inquired.

"Nothing, Garnet."

"Yes, there is something. You think I'm crazy, don't you . . . ?"

"No I don't," Daventry countered. "I don't think that."

"Well . . ."

"I just wonder at it all," he spoke after a while in a whisper. Then all of a sudden he swatted a daytime mosquito that had settled on his cheek, and having swatted it his cheek was all covered with blood, for it must have been biting us all night. I walked over to him, and almost without thinking I was going to do it, took out a clean pocket handkerchief and wiped the blood from off his face. He looked at me with more wonder.³⁵

When Daventry goes off to deliver the letter, Garnet is actually able to shed a few tears in his happiness at having been "looked at" for the first time since his accident "like I was another man."³⁶ The shedding of Daventry's blood from the swatted mosquito is a foreshadowing of the further blood he will shed in the sacramental ceremony he performs in order to save Garnet from losing his repossessed home, and of the life Daventry will give in order to save Garnet's own.

The figure of Daventry in this novel embodies an amalgam of sacrificial love figures from animistic, Classical, and Judeo-Christian mythical traditions. He is a shepherd (or at least the son of one), born and raised on a sheep ranch in the grazing lands of the West. He is also a prodigal son who has run away from his father's ranch after murdering two marauders who attempted to kill him in a seeming case of mistaken identity. We have discussed his animistic association with the pine tree (recalling burnt offerings and the crucifixion), out of which he seems to have emerged and into which he is driven by the freak hurricane wind. In addition, Daventry's "hillbilly, sort of goat voice," and remarkable talent with the harmonica—"He made it sound almost like a flute" would seem to ally him with the Great God Pan and the pastoral tradition that embraces and embodies the sacrificial love myths. Garnet himself gradually becomes convinced of Daventry's immortal origins, "When he played the harmonica I knew he was not human," and he concludes, "I knew then there was god, and that Daventry had been sent for me, and I

knew also he would leave me . . . but he wished me to be left in a safe guiet place."39 The difficulty is that Garnet, like the forlorn shepherd in Virgil's Ninth Eclogue, is about to be forced off of his land, which, like the fields and forests of Arcadia, border the ocean; but he is saved at the last minute by Daventry's shedding and sharing of his blood, at which point "time stopped,"⁴⁰ only to start again after the day fixed for dispossession had passed.

The mythical figure of Daventry also embodies a combination of the erotic, courtly lover with the caring and self-sacrificing (agapistic) brotherly lover. As Garnet is physically and emotionally disabled, Daventry serves in his stead as the lover and eventual husband of the "luscious beautiful" Widow Rance,41 whose dubious history of having buried two young husbands and two infant sons by the age of twenty-eight indicates her own mythical embodiment as the fertile but fatal Mother Nature. By allying himself in Garnet's stead with the Widow Rance through sex and marriage, Daventry signs his own mythical death warrant, but it is a death that he both invites and accepts, as his sacrifice will save and protect his brother in love.

Daventry is not Garnet's only suitor in brotherly love, although he is the only one to embody the divine and mythical nature of eros/agape. Garnet's other brother in love, Quintus Perch, embodies, in contrast and complement, the political and historical nature of what Whitman labeled "comradely affection," and indeed the relationship between Garnet and Quintus, two old-family "Virginians," one white and one black, seems almost a test case of Whitman's prophecy concerning "adhesive" (as distinct from "amative") same-sex love in the American society of the future:



Many will say it is a dream, and will not follow my inferences: but I confidently expect a time when there will be seen, running like a half-hid warp through all the myriad audible and visible worldly interests of America, threads of manly friendship, fond and loving, pure and sweet, strong and life-long, carried to degrees hitherto unknown.42

Throughout his fiction, Purdy dramatizes same-sex love relations, some sexual and some not, but the adhesive, homosocial relationship between Garnet and Quintus is perhaps unique in Purdy's fiction in the full range of its political-historical resonances and implications. In some respects, the relationship between Garnet and Quintus is like that of an old married couple. and in other respects, it is like that of young suitors:



"Quintus, why do you stay with me?" . . .

"Don't have nobody else to choose to stay with, guess," he mumbled.

"You don't feel look down to and abused by me, like those newspapers you used to read against white people."

"Oh, I suppose I do. I suppose you're an enemy deep down and under, but I believe I told you the truth, there ain't nobody else to choose"

"You stay with me then because I don't mean nothing to you one way or another."

"You mean a thing to me or so . . ." It took him a long time to get this said "I don't confess my love to folks, though," Quintus began like he was going to give a short speech, but then he stopped and said no more right then.

"Well, I care about you anyhow, Quintus That's something Daventry taught me, I guess. I don't know what love means, but I think I am getting to have an inkling about it sometimes "43

In a Shallow Grave is not only the story of Garnet's salvation by love, dramatized in his melodramatic and mythical high-stakes relationship with the semi-divine Eros figure of Daventry; it is also the story of his education in love, which is played out in Garnet's comical, but tender and delicate, down-home courtship with his brotherly lover, Quintus.

In his interview with Richard Canning, Purdy noted that the film that was made of In a Shallow Grave is in some respects a failure because of the filmmakers' unwillingness to deal with the homosexuality implicit in the book, but then he qualified himself:



Still, I don't think the book is about that. There's a kind of loneliness that's like death, then someone comes along and touches you. That isn't homosexual. That brings you to life. That's what In a Shallow Grave is about: a young boy that brings you to life. If you want to call it homosexual, go ahead.44

Daventry's coming along is, for Garnet, a divine intervention that transforms

both his self and his world. Northrop Frye once observed that, in each of Shakespeare's late romances—which Purdy's magical-pastoral novel generically resembles—there is an "Eros figure" who brings about the play's happy ending by effecting a positive transformation in the characters that is mirrored in a positive transformation of their world, from one characterized by competition and manipulation, to one characterized by harmony and love. 45 In a Shallow Grave is the first and perhaps greatest of Purdy's remarkable production of his own late romances, which include Out with the Stars and Garments the Living Wear. The promise of love in each of these novels is opposed by oppressive elements in the world at large, which are overcome in miraculous fashion with the aid of a human but divine Eros. In In a Shallow Grave, Daventry's sacrificial overcoming of the oppressing state that is poised to dispossess Garnet of his ancestral home is paralleled by his healing of Garnet through the sharing of his shed blood, all of which prepares the way for the scene of harmonious and loving domesticity between Garnet and Quintus with which the novel concludes.

In In a Shallow Grave, Purdy's via negativa leads us to a dramatic vision of the power of love to change our lives, a power that overcomes all obstacles, including negation. In his ultimate affirmation of love through the arduous process of negation, Purdy is following in the footsteps of previous prophetic visionaries like Dionysius, who, according to Pope Benedict, was the first Christian theologian to demonstrate that it is only "by entering into" the "experience of 'no" that one may open "the eye of love" and experience a "vision" of "a great cosmic harmony," which is a vision, Benedict concluded, that can "inspire our efforts to work for unity, reconciliation and peace in our world."46 It is of course a bitter irony that the impassioned theologian who could speak so convincingly of the power of erotic-agapistic love to transform ourselves and our world should be allied as a pastor with the forces of religious and societal prohibition and persecution that oppress those given to expressions of such love in same-sex love relations.

The inevitable result of such resistance of love's power is violence against both self and other, for Eros admits of no negation—as James Purdy repeatedly and emphatically warns us throughout his prophetic fiction. In tragic and harrowing novels such as Eustace Chisholm and the Works and Narrow Rooms, Purdy offers an unblinking vision of a love denied that turns vindictive and violent. Such novels document a world literally sick with hatred. In a Shallow Grave offers to such a suffering world the solace of hope in the power of love to make right what the denial of love has made wrong. The war-shattered, self-pitying, and living-dead figure of Garnet Montrose is the embodied victim of a hard-hearted world suffused with hatred and violence, but his tragic history has transformed him into an allegorically poignant and potent figure, whose own hard heart has been all too obviously "outed," turning him the color of shed blood and making him available to be "touched" by the

miracle of love, which comes in the intercession of Eros himself. By novel's end, this hard case who began by doubting whether "anybody" had "known joy in this world,"47 is beginning to "have an inkling sometimes" of "what love means,"48 which is this pastoral prophecy's promise of deliverance.

In conducting my analysis and interpretation of this novel, I have made two working assumptions that are not normally made by contemporary readers and critics of literary fiction, but which are necessary for recognizing and comprehending a work of religious allegory such as In a Shallow Grave. First, I assumed that the meaning of a fictive narrative that appears on the surface to be more or less naturalistic might be almost wholly hidden within a symbolic and allegorical argument; and second, I assumed that the novel's meaning might be in essence religious and metaphysical, albeit with social and political ramifications. The first and primary challenge of reading any fictive allegory is to recognize that it is working allegorically. With Purdy, this challenge is intensified by the fact that he presents his allegories in the guise of realistic fiction, as he himself noted:



My writing is both realistic and symbolic. The outer texture is realistic, but the actual story has a symbolic, almost mythic quality. The characters are being moved by forces, which they don't understand.49

Purdy's final comment concerning his characters' ignorance in regards to their fates is telling as it points to the overarching argument of his fiction as a whole, which is that our lives, selves, and worlds are ultimately unfathomable mysteries. This is, in essence, a religious and metaphysical argument, one that flies in the face of our intellectual culture's predilection to believe that human nature and experience may be accounted for rationally in terms of the behavioral sciences. According to such theories, human nature is a series of hard-wired drives and impulses, genetic encodings and cultural adaptations, that may be thoroughly explored and explained, given a limited social and cultural context. Conventional mimetic fiction, in its representations of psychologically explicable characters inhabiting delimited and recognizable realities, is innately complicit in this project. Purdy's entire effort as a fictive creator is to counter such assumptions regarding our ability to account rationally and exhaustively for human nature and experience as a whole. In his interview with Christopher Lane, Purdy bemoaned the failure of critics to comprehend his counter-conventional fiction, noting that, "Intellectuals are the worst sinners because they want everything clear and life is not clear."50

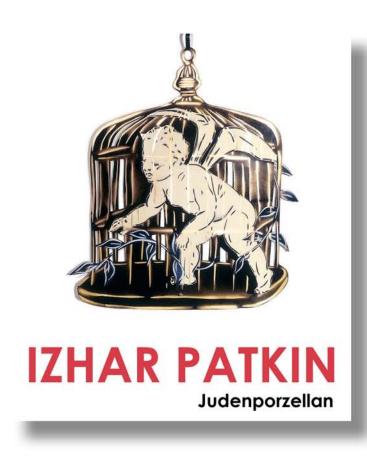
Purdy's fictive contrariness and negations, his creation of characters and

worlds that are inexplicable in and through the behavioralist thought systems by which we typically account for our realities, is that against which readers habituated to mimetic realism often instinctively rebel when first encountering his fiction, as my experience with my students demonstrated. But readers who are willing to engage the text's alternative realism on its symbolic and archetypal terms eventually come to understand that Purdy's multipleramifying allegorized world, which refuses the consolations of the conventional in affirming the unfathomable mysteries of being, is paradoxically more true to life and more respecting of the real than the fictive mimicries of actuality we are more accustomed to encountering and consuming. For these willing initiates, Purdy's unconscious allegories—so frustrating to the conventional consumer—serve as fictive revelations, prompting them to discover the affirming power and purpose of negation for their own lives and worlds.

NOTES

- ¹ Jerome Charyn, Introduction to *In a Shallow Grave* (San Francisco: City Lights, 1988), 7.
- ² Richard Canning, *Gay Fiction Speaks: Conversations with Gay Novelists* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 17-18.
- 3 Ibid., 32.
- ⁴ Holy Bible: King James Version, John 15:13.
- ⁵ Benedict XVI, *On Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite*, accessed June 2, 2010, http://www.zenit.org/article-22588?I=English.
- ⁶ Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibheid (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 82
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, 137.
- 8 Ibid., 137.
- 9 Ibid., 82.
- 10 Ibid., 82.
- ¹¹ Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, Encyclical, accessed June 2, 2010, http://www.zenit.org/article-22588?I=English.
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 Ibid.
- ¹⁴ Holy Bible: King James Version, John 15:13.
- ¹⁵ Northrop Frye, Anatomy of Criticism (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1957), 158.
- ¹⁶ James Purdy, *In a Shallow Grave* (San Francisco: City Lights, 1988), 120.
- ¹⁷ Ibid., 58.
- 18 Ibid., 49.
- ¹⁹ Ibid., 73.
- ²⁰ *Ibid*., 14.
- ²¹ *Ibid*., 15.
- ²² Ibid., 36.
- 23 Ibid., 36.
- ²⁴ Charyn, *Ibid.*, Introduction, 7.
- ²⁵ Purdy, Shallow Grave, 55-6.
- ²⁶ Donald Pease, "False Starts and Wounded Allegories in the Abandoned House of Fiction of James Purdy," *Twentieth Century Literature* 28, no. 3 (1982): 343.
- ²⁷ Ibid., 343.
- ²⁸ Pseudo-Dionysius, Works, 141.

- ²⁹ Christopher Lane, "Out with James Purdy: An Interview," Studies in Contemporary Fiction, Vol. 40, No. 1 (1998), http://infotrac.galegroup.com.
- ³⁰ Canning, Conversations with Gay Novelists, 19.
- ³¹ Lane, "Interview," http://infotrac.galegroup.com.
- 32 Purdy, Shallow Grave, 25.
- 33 Ibid., 26.
- ³⁴ *Ibid.*, 41.
- 35 Ibid., 44.
- ³⁶ *Ibid*., 45.
- 37 Ibid., 36.
- 38 Ibid., 96.
- ³⁹ *Ibid.*, 97.
- ⁴⁰ *Ibid*., 103.
- ⁴¹ Ibid., 57.
- ⁴² Walt Whitman, *Poetry and Prose*, ed. Justin Kaplan (New York: Library of America, 1982), 982.
- ⁴³ Purdy, Shallow Grave, 115-16.
- ⁴⁴ Canning, Conversations with Gay Novelists, 16.
- ⁴⁵ Northrop Frye, A Natural Perspective (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 82.
- ⁴⁶ Benedict XVI, On Pseudo-Dionysius, http://www.zenit.org/article-22588?l=English.
- ⁴⁷ Purdy, Shallow Grave, 20.
- ⁴⁸ *Ibid*., 116.
- ⁴⁹ Purdy, "Artistic Statement," *The James Purdy Society*, http://www.jamespurdysociety.org
- 50 Lane, "Interview," http://infotrac.galegroup.com



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text by Mark Daniel Cohen

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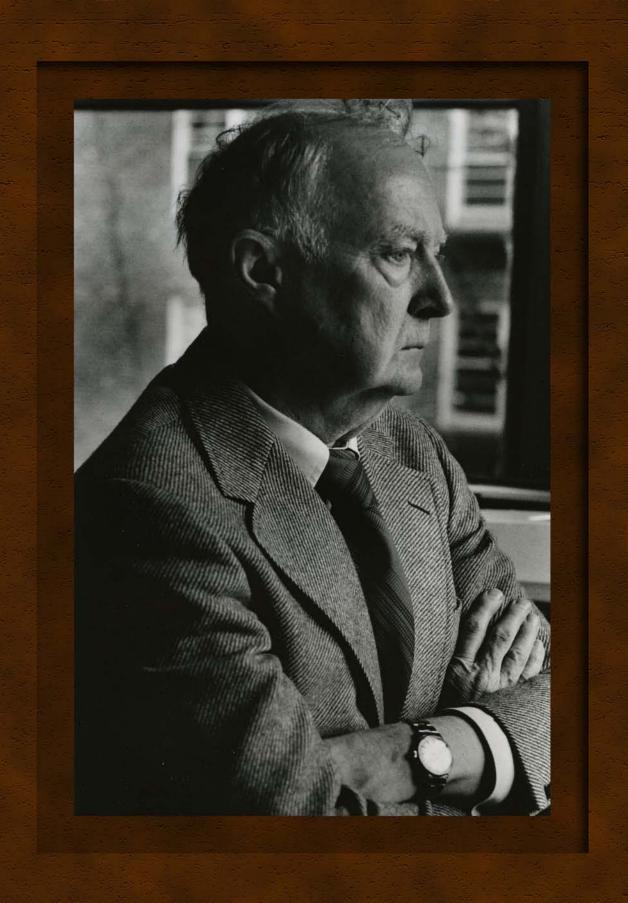
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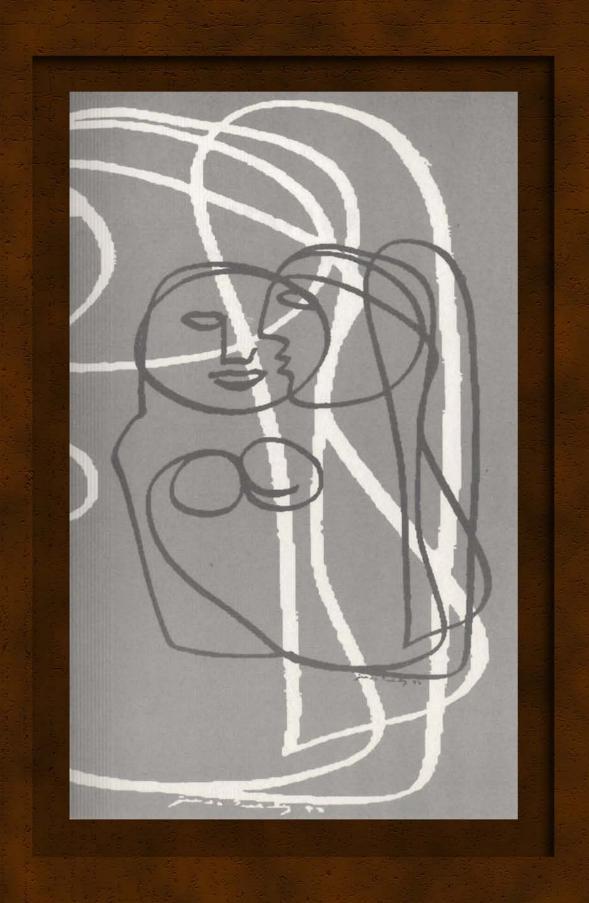
HYPERION

On the future of aesthetics

An Interview

by Marie-Claude Profit





Previous Page: Photograph of James Purdy is by Stathis Orphanos.

James Purdy: An Interview

MCP. Would you say that personal experience plays an important part in your work?

P. Yes, completely.

MCP. The biography I have of you is very . . .

P. skimpy?

MCP. Yes.

P. I like it that way.

MCP. Well, you were born in a little town in Ohio.

P. In the country. It wasn't a town. It was right out in the country. It had no name. If you are born on a farm in France, does it have a name?

MCP. You went to the University of Chicago.

P. Very briefly.

MCP. And Puebla, Mexico.

P. Just, you know, a few months.

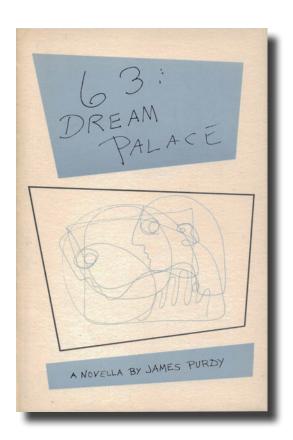
MCP. And Madrid.

P. That's wrong. I lived in Madrid. But I never went to school there. That's not correct. About six months. I went there in 1937. But I really don't like to talk about my biography. I wish now I had written anonymously.

MCP. Do you think there are some facts in your biography that are of some importance for your work?

P. No. I think it should all be just the work. I envy the Spanish picaresque novels because they don't know who wrote them.

MCP. I noticed that you published Jeremy's Version in 1970, as the first part of Sleepers in Moon Crowned Valleys, then I am Elijah Thrush, then the second part of Sleepers,² and then In a Shallow Grave. Also during the same



period, I counted 5 short stories and 2 plays published. All between the years 70-75. Do you keep working on several texts alternately or do you concentrate on one until you've finished that?

P. No, I do it all at once.

MCP. Do you draw a plan for a whole book?

P. Yes, sometimes. You use any method you can. It's so difficult. You try everything. If you are buried alive, you do anything to dig your way out.

MCP. Can you tell me specifically how you did for some books?

P. Well, I had lots of trouble with *Jeremy*. It was very difficult to write. The structure is so difficult. I couldn't tell it straight, because you're going way back in time—about seventy years. So in order to do that I had to have a narrator who is based on the present. So it would give it the proper distance. And that I found very difficult, to hold all the narrators together. It's like driving lots of horses with just one driver. I had less trouble with *The Maggot*.

But that was a very difficult book too.

MCP. Also from the point of view of the narrator?

P. Yes, but less so. I guess I had learnt. I usually use narrators. In a *Shallow Grave* there is a narrator, which is the boy, the young man.

MCP. And in Elijah.

P. Yes, the black boy, youth. There again, I could not tell the story straight. It was too outlandish. But when I had the black tell it, it worked. I started to write it straight. But it didn't work. It wouldn't move.

MCP. You had not thought of Albert at first?

P. Well, he was part of the story. But not the narrator. When I had him narrate it, it worked.

MCP. Malcolm?

P. First.

MCP. When you choose a title, do you choose the title to start with, do you choose it at the end or . . . ?

P. Sometimes to begin. Usually with a novel the title is there at the beginning.

Like the one I'm working on now is *Narrow Rooms*— "chambre etroite"—. It's about prison, a man who is in prison, and when he comes out, actually comes out. But I like the title.

MCP. So the title works as a sort of incentive?

P. Yes. But with the short stories sometimes the title comes last. Like "Everything Under The Sun" in *Children Is All*. I could not find a title for that until a long time later.

MCP. Elijah? when did it come?

P. I think that came first.

MCP. And Cabot Wright?

P. I have forgotten, but I think that was first.

MCP. Then the character grows out of his name a little?

P. Yes, I think so. The names are very important. If I don't have the name right I can't write the book. It has to first fit into your mouth, you know. The names have to be right.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR . . .

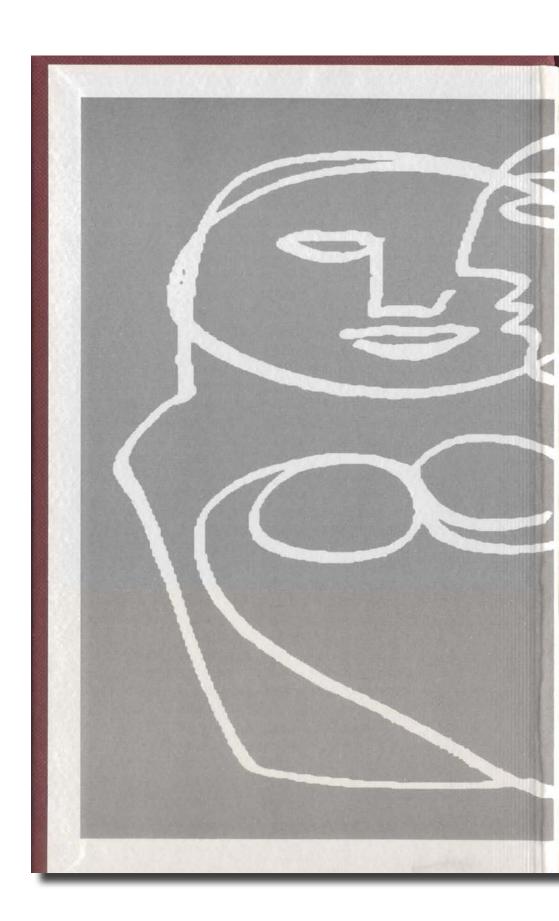
James Purdy was born in Ohio and attended the University of Chicago. He was employed in the Latin American Educational Division of the U.S. Office of Education and, has had many different jobs in Cuba, Mexico and in the United States. An artist as well as an author, he has exhibited his drawings in Chicago and in Washington, D.C. His collection of short pieces, Don't Call Me By My Right Name and Other Stories, was builtied earlier in 1956 and included a selection of his illustrations. At present Mr. Purdy is writing a play.

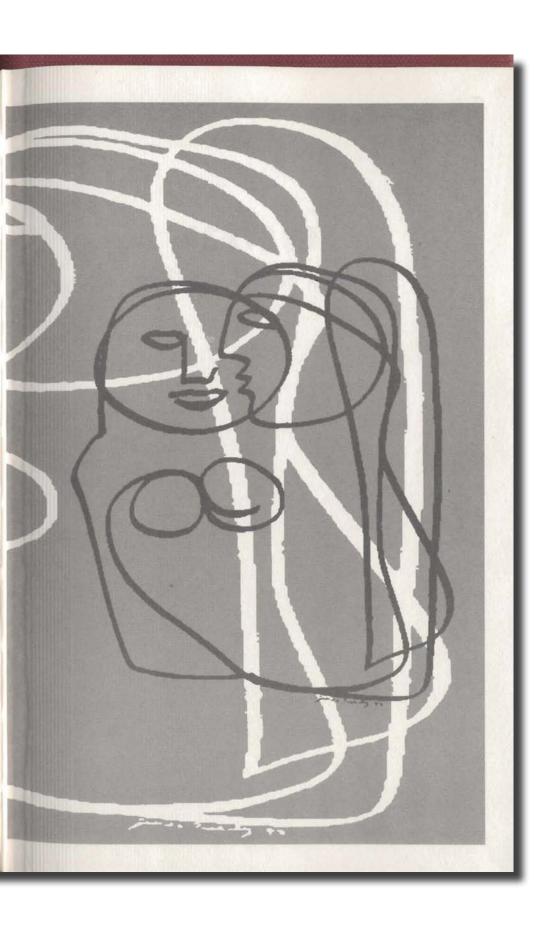
MCP. Narrow Rooms: when do you think you'll have finished it?

P. I don't know. I hope I'll be through with it this year. It's going to be about the size of *The Nephew* I think. It's about an old doctor in part. And the boy that comes out of prison. This doctor is an obstetrician. He's delivered all the babies around for fifty years, so he knows everybody's life in these small villages.³

MCP. I am interested in the relation there may be between those two aspects of your works—novels and plays. Would you say that being a playwright has an influence on your manner of writing novels?

P. Well, I think in a way everything I write is very oral—I'm speaking directly to you—which is like a drama, a play. And people who are interested in filming my work always say that I write like a scenario writer. Which is true. But it's important that it's dictated by the kind of world we live in. It's very difficult to write now as Balzac wrote—or Dickens. Because Balzac describes everything in great detail as does Dickens. And the attention of Balzac's audience was a very different kind of attention. They had much more patience to read lengthy descriptions. And I think today the attention span is so short that somehow I don't want to write long novels but actually even in something like *Dream Palace*, more happens in that than in a very long novel.





MCP. Some of them are long though, aren't they?

P. Yes, *Jeremy* is long, and *The Maggot* is very similar to those other books, but it's shorter. It could be part of that world, but it's not, primarily.

MCP. What part does the theatre play for you?

P. The plays have been performed of course. One in Yugoslavia—*Children Is All* was done in Yugoslavia, in whatever language that is, Slav, Russian. They didn't invite me! *Cracks* was done off-Broadway. *Malcolm* was done by Edward Albee.

MCP. Why didn't you do it yourself?

P. I didn't want to. When I have finished I have finished.

MCP. You didn't write it as a play.

P. No, I didn't want it as a play.

MCP. And did you like what he made of it?

P. No. It was sort of interesting. But it was not my work. It was rather gloomy. He cut out all the humor. And he changed all the blacks to whites and the musical score instead of being jazz was sort of avant-garde music of many years ago. It had a very ambitious score.⁴

MCP. I wonder about the names of places. In some cases, like Dream and Malcolm, I don't think you give names to the cities.

P. No.

MCP. Are they real or imaginary?

P. In *Malcolm*, it's Chicago. In *Dream Palace*, it's Chicago and West Virginia—it does say that.

MCP. If the towns are Chicago, why do you choose not to give their names?

P. I wanted to make it like any large city. But often critics say it's New York for *Dream Palace*, but it's not, it's Chicago. Because 63rd Street in Chicago is a very disreputable street—here it's not—of course everything is disreputable in New York—but it's not as sordid. 63rd Street in Chicago is very sordid. There's the elevated over it, it's dark, and very filthy.

MCP. Now for the places that have names but I couldn't locate them on maps. In The Nephew: Rainbow Center?

P. It's made up. There's lots of towns in the United States called Rainbow. Perhaps connected with the Gold Rush of 1849. I don't know why they called them Rainbow but if you get a large map of the United States, on lots of little

tiny towns you see "Rainbow."

MCP. You made up Rainbow Center thinking of some places?

P. Ohio.

MCP. But you had rather not give me names?

P. Actually they don't have names. In the United States you have very small towns, not even towns, villages—it's explained in *The Maggot*. A few years ago they took away the names, so now they have no names.

MCP. But yours are the old names?

P. Not precisely those names.

MCP. And the places that are mentioned by Albert and Millicent when they look at a map of Alabama?

P. Those are real names. Those are real towns.

MCP. Are they places you know, or did you just look them up on a map?

P. I've been through them. I've been through all the South. I lived in Virginia and West Virginia. And I've been through every southern state.

MCP. When did you live in Virginia?

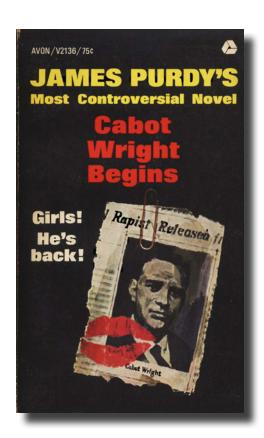
P. In the early nineteen forties. I've been back there many times too. Sometimes I go to colleges there, and read and so forth. I went to Lynchburg, Va., and to Richmond, Va... I know Virginia very well.

MCP. That's where Shallow Grave takes place. Were you thinking of a precise place?

P. Yes, more or less precise. But I'd rather not give the name because you can be sued by people. I can't tell you. I change the names to avoid notoriety. People can cause you lots of trouble. They write you terrible letters. They think they are in the books. It's a bit dangerous. If you told the right town, someone who was not in the book might think that was a portrait of him or her. *Elijah Thrush* is based on a real person—the old man. He was quite famous here. Paul Swan was his name. He's in the Oxford Dictionary of the Ballet, you'll find that.⁵

MCP. You can be haunted by a character for long before . . .

P. Yes. Before you write it. That happened with Elijah Thrush you know, people said, you should write about that terrible old man. I said, why, I couldn't because he's already so fictional. How would you, he's so unreal, how would you write about him, to outsiders, because he painted his face, wore jewels,



shocked, you know: "epater la bourgeoisie." They are horrified because to them he's a monster.

MCP. Did you call him Thrush because the real man was called Swan?

P. Yes, I thought I should take the name of a bird.

MCP. Has this something to do with all your bird mythology?

P. Yes, I think so. That stems from all . . . It's in "Sound of Talking" too.

MCP. Albert is not based on a real person.

P. Yes, he is. All my characters are based on real people.

MCP. But you transform them.

P. Oh yes—well, not a lot, you'd be surprised. Because people are very outrageous in America. Some blacks liked him and others didn't. The more political blacks didn't like him.

MCP. Albert is very hard on political blacks.

P. Yes! So they were offended. But then, political people, you never can please them. It's like the Marxists. You never can please them, because they are very hidebound. This one black man who thought I wrote about him in *Elijah Thrush*, he was very angry, and he said I was a racist. He said you have the young black man sweat—that means you are a racist. But I said the white people—they do worse things than sweat, but people don't condemn me for that. You have to treat the blacks just as bad as you treat the whites, in fiction. You can't be nice to them either, because you are telling what you know, which isn't going to be nice to anybody. If you tell the truth, you are not going to make people what they are not.

MCP. Anyway Albert is very likeable.

P. Yes, very human.

MCP. Well, dangerous.

P. You think he is dangerous?

MCP. I think he knows so much.

P. He knows everything about white people. And black. He has no illusions. I don't think he's dangerous though. But white people are dangerous, don't you think? to him?

MCP. At the end of course, he gets caught.

P. Since he turns into Elijah Thrush.

MCP. Well it's difficult to know if he turns into Elijah Thrush or if he is the successor.

P. Yes, I think he is the successor. He takes over.

MCP. He wants to profit by what his black "brothers" have gained but he does not want to . . .

P. be one.

MCP. So if he's going to be the future . . .

P. huh, huh.

MCP. he is recuperated in a way.

P. Yes. He becomes—white in a way.

MCP. So Millicent is the winner.

P. Yes, she captures everything.

MCP. About Elijah. Would you say that it's an allegory?

P. Well, I think if you sort of go to the bottom of any story, it has allegorical significance. If you write like a journalist, explaining, rather describing outside, there is never any allegory. But if you really catch the inside of people, everybody is really a myth—of one kind. Everybody's life is similar to a myth, either Greek or Christian. But I don't write consciously to make them allegories.

MCP. You say that Albert hides his eagle in something that's called "Chambers."

P. It's a subway stop in Wall Street. Where he probably had his rooms. And it also refers to, I believe, certain legal offices of the attorneys, Chambers. Near the subway stop called Chambers.

MCP. But that building is forbidden at night.

P. That's true of most buildings in New York. You cannot enter them at night without a key. No one lives there. You can't go into an office building at night.

MCP. So he's keeping that bird in an office building.

P. Well . . . , more or less, yes.

MCP. That building has got a first door, a second door, and a third violet door

with stars of silver on it. Has that got any kind of particular meaning for you?

P. But I don't know what it is! I just think it's right that way, you understand.

MCP. Yes, I know, but you really were not thinking of, well, anything?

P. Well, there are lots of doors in New York City that have them on in people's apartments, they have those stars.

MCP. You thought of that as a realistic detail?

P. Well, is interior decorating realistic? in New York, no. It's quite fantastic. If you go to people's apartments like Gloria Vanderbilt, she'll have a door like that, with purple stars.

MCP. And you think that people who have a door like that wouldn't be thinking of something like some sort of American flag?

P. The stars? I don't think so. It could be, since the Eagle . . . But this eagle is not the bald eagle. It's the golden eagle.

MCP. It's the wrong kind of eagle, but that might be on purpose.

P. It probably is, though, the American eagle. Ah! ha! ha! At least you can read it that way.

MCP. What does the substitution of Albert to Elijah mean?

P. Oh. Well, it can mean a lot of things. But I really don't think that's a problem for the writer to explain his symbols, I think it's for the critics.

But I've known so many blacks who had strange pets. Including, one of them, a hawk. So to me these things are not fantastic. And it's not at all unusual to see a purple door with stars on it, that is not fantastic, because American life is quite fantastic. I find it very fantastic.

MCP. But you feel it's fantastic, you don't feel it's natural.

P. Well, I feel it is what it is. But when I describe that, I'm not being fantastic, I am telling the truth. You see, the critics—and the critics in America are very bourgeois, in the worst sense—that is not the good word because it's Marxism, the Marxists used that—they cannot see. They don't ride the subways. If you get on the subway, you think you are taking a drug sometimes, because the people are dressed fantastically, the men, many of the men wear earrings, nose rings, it's very common. But the critics are never on the subways riding. So if you describe a man like that they say, "This author is very peculiar."

MCP. You are adding the jewels in the navel.

P. Yes, you see that. Oh yes.

MCP. Some of your novels are very precisely situated in a historical context with references to events—Eustace, for instance, is situated during the Depression. Others are more vaguely situated.

P. Well, you see, it's like someone giving me a slab of marble. You want to make David or something, but you're going to have trouble with the material, lots of trouble with it, and it's hard work physically too. How are you going to tell the story so that it will be most effective. And it's very difficult. You don't know just how to do it, always. Sometimes you feel that the subject requires this treatment . . .

MCP. How do you set about gathering material from the past?

P. I go and talk with people, yes. Old people. In the country. And letters. Old letters. You use any material you can find. I think a writer is always gathering material. I've all those notebooks just full of facts and comments.

MCP. In Cabot Wright Begins, Cabot goes to a public library and reads a book about Swimmers and Drifters. Does this book exist and did you copy out of it or did you invent the book?

P. Well, I read lots of books for that. This is more or less based on facts. I changed the texts but not the information. The facts are correct, in other words, they are not made up. Those are facts. There are such things in other words.

MCP. And you read the books on purpose for Cabot Wright?

P. Well, no. You see, I collect lots of material. So I had all this material collected already. So I used it.

MCP. You collected it out of personal interest?

P. In science. I read lots of books on medicine and science. I don't read much fiction today, unless it's old, because I don't really learn too much from fiction.

MCP. What science?

P. All kinds. I read about hunting crocodiles in Africa. I found that very interesting. And books on medicine, physiology, anatomy—and disease. I find all these very interesting—and animals—and geography. One of my favorite authors is Pliny—Natural History. Those are my real books.

MCP. I noticed also that some of your works give importance to things ... old furniture, old hand-painted china, etc. Does this correspond to a collector's interest of your own?

P. No. It's just what I remember from my family.

MCP. Like "Mr. Evening" for instance.

P. Yes. That happens in Brooklyn. But there are so many antique shops. I used to look in the windows and that interested me because . . . well, I don't collect them, I wouldn't want them myself, but it interests me especially in other people, the passion they have for antiques.

MCP. You feel it as a link with the past?

P. Yes, but I myself do not collect them.

MCP. You look at TV a lot?

P. No. Three or four hours a week is about all I can stand. For one thing it's so noisy that it makes me very nervous. I hate it. And it's detestable. It's all merchandized.

MCP. Something like Cabot Wright . . .

P. Yes, it's about television. Oh yes, I've looked at it a lot. But I've never really liked it. It's "dégoûtant." Seems worse every time I look at it.

MCP. Are you related at all to the Purdy who published a book called "Motor-Cars of the Golden Past"?

P. No. He's a journalist. I don't know anything about him. I don't really have any interest in old motor-cars. But I always read all kinds of books. When I wrote Jeremy's Version I had to read lots of books about motor-cars, old silent movies, old houses. Lots of books I have read and then I don't use too much of them. I can remember I read three books on the heart—how the heart operates—because that's in it, about systole and diastole and blood. It's all there mixed up. So I read an awful lot of books, on physiology and sexual things, to have the physiology right. My publisher got very annoyed with me. He said why are you so careful to have all these details right. I said they have to be right, it would be terrible if they were wrong. I'm not a doctor nor a scientist. In Eustace Chisholm there is an abortion. So I consulted with two women who had—one of them had had a miscarriage and the other had had a real abortion, so they were very nice to help me. They read the chapter and they corrected it where I'd made mistakes. But they both knew what it was to have an abortion. So it wasn't too hard to write. And I called a few doctors that I know and they read it. So I guess it's correct. Yes, it's horrible.

MCP. Do you find your facts in newspapers too?

P. Yes, often. But a lot of these stories were told to me. *Eustace Chisholm* was a story I heard, and *In a Shallow Grave*. The Vets' Hospital sent me these young men because they read my books. They wanted to visit with me. They were all disfigured. They had no hands. So that got me interested. Because

naturally I had nothing to do at the Vietnam War, but it is about Vietnam. But *after* Vietnam, you know.

MCP. When you say that Eustace Chisholm was told to you, you are referring to what part of the story? Eustace as a writer?

P. Yes, I knew a man like that.

MCP. And the Amos/Daniel story?

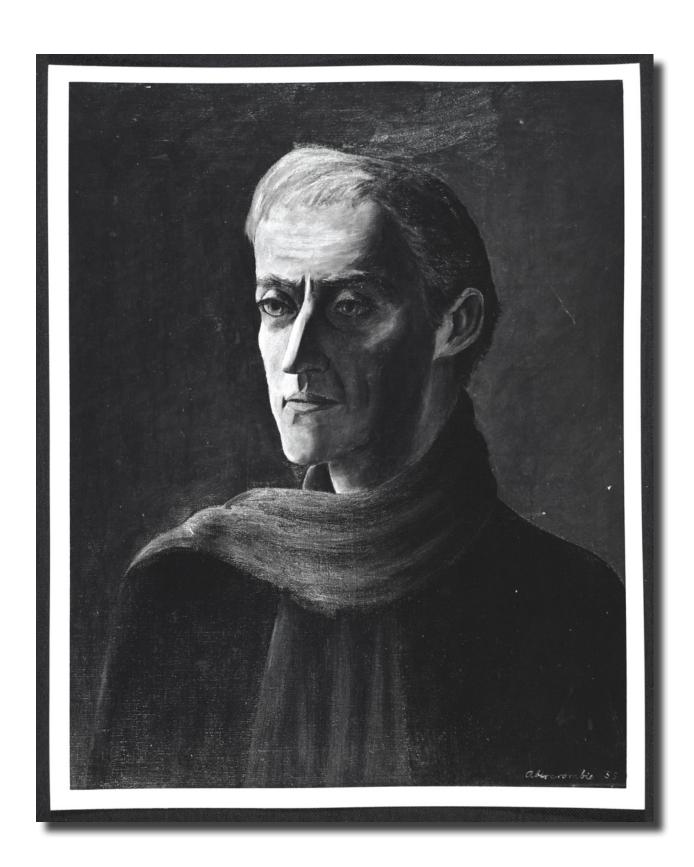
P. Yes. But I've known so many people like that, like Amos and Daniel. —This is what we call "hindsight": I never thought this up at the beginning, but one of the themes of my books—people point this out to me and I think about it and I think yes, that is one of the themes—but I don't write a book and say I am going to write a theme—because I am too unconscious a writer—but one of the themes of my books is the refusal of people to face who they are. They think they are somebody else. And I think that is a universal tragedy. In *Eustace Chisholm*, the Indian, Daniel, he cannot face that he is really in love with the young boy, he's too "macho," he's too much a favorite with women. He can't believe it. To me it is not so much



homosexuality as a universal tragedy: we can't accept our own emotions, we want to tear them out of us, rip them out: "I do not feel this. If I am a man I can't admire a flower. I destroy the flower." You see, that's a very American tragedy. A man like Hemingway could not be anything but a macho, so he is a very unimportant writer I think, because he never developed. He trod out all the feminine in him, all the sensitive. He is so afraid people would think he is something—homosexual. I think he was a very sensitive man but he ripped it all out. We are destroying our best gifts to please society, to please our family, to make money. You see the Americans in Vietnam, they were over there almost twenty years, they wouldn't, they couldn't accept the fact they'd failed. They had to be that great country that never lost a war. And of course every day they were over there they lost a war. So my books are really about people who won't face themselves, they'd like to be someone else. In a way that's what *King Lear* is about. King Lear wants to be someone he really is not. So he is leveled to the ground until he faces who he really is.

MCP. You are interested in Shakespeare.

P. Yes, I love him. And Marlowe. And Webster. But after that I am not too much interested in English literature. It's all very bourgeois. It's like the Greek. They had the Greek plays and then nothing, nothing after that. There are very few fiction writers I admire. I don't really like the English novel. I don't think the



English have any talent for the novel, with a few exceptions.

MCP. Contemporary, you mean?

P. No, all through. I think the English novel much inferior to the French novel or the Russian novel—or even the American novel. We have not written novels very long but I think France, Russia and America and Spain have much greater novelistic imagination. The only English novels that I think are really distinguished from the point of view of imagination are Emily Brontë's, Lawrence Sterne's. But I think the other English novels are really sociological. Dickens is much inferior to Dostoievski, I think, or Turgeniev, or Flaubert, or Proust. He's an entertainer. Of course he's wonderful, he's a wonderful writer, but I don't think he's a great writer like Flaubert. The English novel is very stodgy and middle class. The great Elizabethan plays are not that. The Victorians are the worst—Thackeray and George Eliot—I like George Eliot the best but I find her too parochial, in the worst sense. There is nothing wrong about writing about rural life but I don't find what they had in the plays.

MCP. What about French writers?

P. My favorite is Flaubert. And I like Rabelais—parts of him. I like him when he piles up word after word. The word play: I love that. Now I have the original French so I can look at that. Some of Balzac I like. But I don't admire Balzac so much as an artist. For me there is too much in it. But I greatly admire Les Illusions Perdues—that's very great. I think he's a very great writer. Much greater than Dickens. Because Dickens had that Victorian—there is no sex in Dickens, it's all disguised in very strange ways—and you feel that the sawdust is coming out of the characters. They are not flesh and blood characters. They're dolls. And George Eliot too. And I don't like Thackeray, ugh! The one English novelist I admire is Thomas Hardy. For me, there's Emily Brontë and Lawrence Sterne, and Thomas Hardy, and Samuel Butler's The Way of All Flesh. Those are great.

MCP. You would not say that you like a French writer like Voltaire?

P. No. There is too much reason. I used to like *Candide*. But for me it's too intellectual and rational.

MCP. Candide is a little like Malcolm.

P. Yes. Well I love that book. I've read it many many times. But among other French writers one I like is Rousseau: *The Confessions*—I love that—and Proust I admire greatly. I think he's a giant.

MCP. Gide?

P. No. I don't like him. He is too "bourgeois" too. I think I keep using that word for want of a better. But I don't like him at all. Some of Sartre and some of

unidentified photographer: photographic print: b&w; 25 x 20 cm Courtesy of the Gertrude Abercrombie papers, 1880-1986 Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution

Genet, but not really—because I don't think he's universal. I don't even think he understands homosexual men, because he's so like Dickens. He writes very beautifully at times. The best thing is Journal d'un Voleur. I think that's very great.

MCP. What about American writers?

P. Well, I admire Melville, and Hawthorne, and Mark Twain, and Stephen Crane. George's Mother: that's very great. And some of Faulkner, and just a little bit of—"un soupçon de"—Hemingway, and Sherwood Anderson. After that, nothing.

MCP. You don't like Fitzgerald?

P. No. Hate him. He liked the rich so much. You shouldn't like rich people like that. He wanted their money, don't you think? But he didn't really understand them—or he wouldn't envy them. Proust saw through those people and they are monsters, but they are human too. What he saw wasn't real. What he first admired later he rejected. But Fitzgerald never went through that. I think Fitzgerald really had problems with his sexual identity. Because he was always making fun of men who were not men, which is a giveaway, because a really strong man isn't bothered by weak men or women or children. He isn't bothered because he's strong, but if you're always making fun. It's like someone who makes fun of cripples. You know he is crippled too. So I don't like him at all. He has many of the detestable qualities of Hemingway. Walt Whitman—Walt Whitman is very great—Walt Whitman said a wonderful thing which I think made an impression. He said "I do not pity the wounded person, I become the wounded person." That's really what writing is about. It's not writing about anything, it's becoming what you write about. So in order to write a book you have to become the characters, and that's very painful. Because unless you have really eaten them up and digested them you can't become one. But I think the writers I most like are Whitman and Melville. They seem to have told everything.

MCP. But the manner of telling the story is equally important.

P. Yes, that's everything, because it's like a potato, you can't just pull it out of the earth and hand it to you with the mud on it. Of course everything comes out of the American speech. That's what I find missing in Henry James. He invented a rhetoric so thick that you can hardly see the story when you are looking through this thick cloth at the characters.

MCP. I am struck with the diversity of your work. I wonder if you feel it like that or if you feel that there is a sort of pattern.

P. I feel I never quite get to tell all I know yet. The first person to find out the diversity was Dame Edith Sitwell. She pointed that out in just my first book. She said there was so much variety. You see the other critics were complaining it was all the same thing. It shows, you know, they can't read. And they cannot feel. I keep coming back to the word "bourgeois," but that isn't a good enough word . . . They are dead. Of course "bourgeois" often makes people very dead emotionally and from the point of view of vision. You just see money and respectability and conformity. We have very poor critics in America, for imaginative writing, you know, like my writing. The critics are very poor. And we have an establishment here, the New York establishment, not interested in what I am doing. It's a closed circuit.

So it's very hard to be a writer here. Always has been. It's very political. If you don't belong to their "club," you're in bad. So an artist is very unhappy in that kind of environment, because you are not allowed to be yourself, express yourself, and a mass of the people in New York are really not critics, you see—the Establishment, which is just as stuffy as middle-class.

An American publisher only wants you if you make money. He does not care if you are Jesus. If you don't make money he'll hang you on a cross. They're just hucksters.

MCP. I saw there was a new book on you just out—by Stephen Adams.

P. Yes. This is very good. It's the best since Mrs. Schwartzchild's. She's Jewish. She had to leave Germany because of Hitler when she was 8 years old. She lives in Queens. She understands my work the best. Which is sort of strange because she comes from such a different background. Hitler killed a lot of her relatives and she came here as a young girl and had a very hard time because she said American Jews didn't really want to help her, they were sort of resentful that there was another mouth to feed. She found my book, *Color of Darkness*, and it haunted her. Her problem is that she has her essays and she can't have them published, because they are not written in this academic style. But they are much better than the articles that they have published about me.

MCP. There has been a book by Henry Chupack.

P. Terrible. He's an idiot. And he's stupid and vicious. He's a terrible man. He said I was an anti-Semite, which is ridiculous. He said I was an anti-Semite because I don't write about Jews. There is one in *The Nephew*. But nothing is made of his being Jewish. Mrs. Schwartzschild is a Jew and she writes about me and since the Nazis killed her family she would scarcely write about a Nazi if I was a Nazi. That's ridiculous. He's an idiot. It's like saying because you didn't marry a negro you don't like black people; I wrote about black people before they were fashionable. I don't write about them anymore. I don't think I'll ever write about them again probably. I might though. I wrote about them because I knew them.

MCP. Did you feel they were different from white people?

P. No. I just felt them, period. You know—they thought I was black for a long time. They thought I was a black writer because Color of Darkness has a story called "Eventide," about two black mothers. They felt only a black person could have written that. But I based those on people who lived near where I did because we didn't have segregation where I grew up. Those old black women lived near my mother's house in the country, and when my mother couldn't always bake she sent me down there to get cakes in a hurry. And so we talked with them. So that's where I got the material. But I didn't write about them as blacks but just as them. So it's not propaganda. Well, many black writers—it's propaganda. Like the Jews, they write about how marvelous Jews are. How marvelous black people. I don't like that because that's lots of lying, because nobody's wonderful really, there are no wonderful races.

That's one of my themes, you know, irresponsibility. Not being responsible leads to murder—and horror. If you just start being irresponsible it builds up and you kill somebody. But in America there is a lot of mass irresponsibility. While we were in Vietnam we were murdering people and didn't know it. So we can never condemn the Nazis again. The Nazis were not as bad as we were in Vietnam.

MCP. The Nazis had a system. I think that's worse.

P. I think Vietnam is worse than the Nazis. It's worse if you don't have a system. To me it's like—every night you are out to kill three people and you don't know it the next day. I'd rather deal with the Nazi who tells me in Mein Kampf what he is going to do than deal with someone who in the middle of the night does not know what he is doing and he might kill you. In the daytime he's nice like America was. I find that America did just as bad as the Nazis. Because we killed millions over there. And we didn't even know what it was about. I guess we can't compare the two. No. But anyhow it was so many years of irresponsibility. We'll never get over it. Never. We never got over the Civil War yet. But I don't think America realizes what she did in Vietnam. That'll cause more trouble eventually. Because if you do a thing right out, like a murder, it's easier to deal with than if you do it while you are drugged and you don't know what you are doing—do you follow me? And America did this. She didn't know what she was doing. And she still does not. She won't admit it. We have done . . . America has done terrible things, to Haiti, to Cuba, to Chili, to Panama—only it's all covered up. Same with the nineteenth century: the Americans still don't know what they did, because their government doesn't tell them.

New York, 1977.

NOTES

- ¹ Editor's note: Originally published in Trema No. 2: Fictions Américaines Contemporaines II: Transformations narratives et Intertextualité (Paris: Publications de l'UER des Pays Anglophones, 1977), 111-126. Transcribed by Rainer J. Hanshe.
- ² Editor's note: The second volume of Purdy's Sleepers in Moon-Crowned Valleys trilogy is his novel The House of the Solitary Maggot (New York: Double Day, 1974). The first paperback edition was published over 30 years later by Carroll & Graf in 2005. The third part of the trilogy is Mourners Below (New York: Viking Press, 1981)
- ³ Editor's note: Purdy did finish writing Narrow Rooms. It was published by Arbor House in 1978.
- ⁴ Editor's note: Albee's adaptation of Malcolm was performed at the Shubert Theatre in New York City. The first performance was on January 11, 1966. It featured Matthew Cowles as Malcolm, Henderson Forsythe as Mr. Cox, Estelle Parsons as Laureen, a streetwalker, and Madame Rosita, and numerous other actors. The play was directed by Alan Schneider, who is perhaps most wellknown for directing Beckett. The music was composed by William Flanagan.
- ⁵ Editor's note: Prior to Purdy's novel, Andy Warhol shot a documentary about Swan in 1965 called Paul Swan. See Matthew Tinkcom, Working Like a Homosexual: Camp, Capital, Cinema (North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2002), 90-92, for a description of the film and Warhol's working method. For a recent monograph on Swan, see Janis Londraville and Richard Londraville, The Most Beautiful Man in the World: Paul Swan, from Wilde to Warhol (Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 2006). Oddly, if not surprisingly, neither Purdy nor his novel I am Elijah Thrush is mentioned in this book on Swan.

HYPERION

On the future of aesthetics



'Impossibly Narrow Rooms'

by Kevin Arnold

"Don't you believe in death?' I yelled at him. 'No,' he answers, 'and I don't believe in time neither . . ."

James Purdy's graphic and often violent depictions of sex indicate the presence of something that is lacking in both the discursive space he creates in his novels as well as in the signification of sex and sexuality itself. Through writing, Purdy calls attention to this lack that is at the heart of desire as such, embodied in a form of violence, which also poses a challenge to received strategies for conceptualizing the body and sexual identity. For Purdy, the excesses of the body in violence and in sex become a means by which he can interrogate a profound absence within both sexual language and even sex itself. Ultimately, it is this form of desire, what underwrites language but which also remains irreducible to it, which is at stake in his

novels. In this way, Purdy offers us a form of aesthetics as desire, a mode of writing that calls writing itself into question.

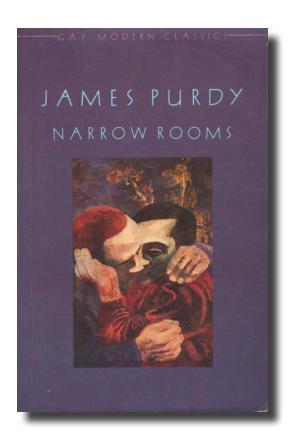
Purdy's novel *Narrow Rooms* is paradigmatic of this aesthetic mode. In a somewhat less than enthusiastic review for The New York Times in 1978, Katha Pollitt criticizes Narrow Rooms for its "strangely bodiless" characters ("almost no characterization") and "the complete absence of a sense of place." The effect of this "lackluster" performance is what Pollitt describes as a "general aura of implausibility and thinness," that for her becomes an enervating deficiency in Purdy's novel. Indeed, the characters and setting for the novel do seem somewhat out-of-joint: difficult to imagine and slippery to pin down, not people or locations you can really find either on the map or in lived experience. As I started to write about this book, I found myself trying to imagine West Virginia in 1978, what it would have looked like, what certain words might have meant, etc. Finding Pollitt's assessment to be accurate. I quickly realized that the particular spatio-temporal site of 1978 West Virginia was not necessarily the referent for Purdy's novel.

The sensation of reading Narrow Rooms is one of displacement: Purdy's referent, that hard materiality to which language and the novel refer, begins to slide all over the place, popping up everywhere but remaining locatable nowhere. Purdy frequently makes use of what might be taken as colloquial language and local flavor, but the attempt never quite seems to fit right or to meet its mark. The characters in the novel often will speak in a manner in which one might imagine a rural West Virginian to speak, for example, yet at other times they completely fail to do so. The scenes of the novel's action often seem in keeping with our fantasy of a remote mountain town, but other times this gesture of exposition doesn't seem quite right either. The sporadic instances in which Purdy situates us as readers in time and place seem not only inconsistent but also utterly unconvincing. The effect of this technique is to make the novel's referent move at such a rapid rate as to render it untraceable and ultimately meaningless. Purdy's problematization of the referent for his novel interrogates not only the trouble with this particular referential context, but becomes a means of problematizing the notion of referentiality as such. That is to say, Purdy's Narrow Rooms operates in a way that forces us to question the meaning behind the representation of meaning, of the relationship between language and the truth of what we think that language is supposed to represent.

Pollit's derogatory depiction of Purdy's exposition, of what she describes as a weakness of the novel, constitutes, I believe, its technical and stylistic strength. Purdy has deployed this technique to "make strange" both the completely plausible referent of West Virginia in 1978 as well as referentiality as such. The effect of this technique is not only to dazzle or mystify, but also to problematize the notion of referentiality as a stable context for anchoring the

novel and for anchoring language itself. Purdy's language, which constantly shifts its referent, is a means by which he is able to manage a larger crisis of representation that, by virtue of the very language that supports the novel, can never enter into the novel itself. This larger crisis embodies not only the relationship between language and its referent, but the very status of materiality and identity in contemporary linguistics and philosophy. Purdy's objective in Narrow Rooms is to represent, via a discourse that cannot represent, a traumatic site outside of language that is foreclosed by the very possibility of that language, by pointing to or referencing it indirectly. Narrow Rooms, plays with the signifying logic of desire by displacing one of its elements: the referent. Purdy refuses to ground his novel in any stable referential context in order to problematize the signifying logic that positions the body and language in a particular relationship to desire. This refusal produces a direct textual relationship between the problematization of referentiality in the novel's spatio-temporal context and the problematization of the materiality of bodily sex acts as the referent of and for sexual language. There is a connection in the text between the notion of West Virginia in 1978 as the referent for the events of the novel and the notion of the body as the referent of sexual acts, and I will show how Purdy uses each to address the other. In order to demonstrate the impossibility of this type of material referentiality, Purdy connects these two problematizations by dramatizing our desire as readers to locate the novel in a stable referential context within a novel in which the desire of the characters is also in question. As Purdy's novel demonstrates the impossibility of any kind of simple referentiality in its setting, it also displaces the body as the referential locus of sexual identity. I argue that this double problematization of referentiality in both the setting of the novel and the bodies of its characters constitutes the means by which Purdy calls attention to the troubled relationship between signifier and signified as it is mediated by the representational imperatives of desire.

The questions of desire and of the body, when both are construed as sexual, are always inseparable as they demarcate both the content and the limits of sexual identity. Identity politics tends to think of a sexual act as constitutive of the absolute definition of a sexual identity: a sexual act represents the truth of a subject's identity and exemplifies what that subject really is. But at the same time, the ephemerality and transience of the sexual act as referent presents a problem for signification in its lack. Desire in relation to the sexual act is a relatively recent phenomenon that comes to stand in for this bodily lack or the "identity" that the body is lacking. When it is supplemented by the confessional discourse through which it is socialized, desire becomes the enveloping material for the sexual act that also invests it and remains long past its "climax." This was what Foucault had in mind when he discussed the substitution of discourse for the sexual act in defining the contours of the sexual economy. According to Foucault desire functions as a transcendental



that is capable of signifying a phenomenological "type." Desires invariable signifying status makes it permanently available for articulation and in this way makes possible its contribution to the production of a recognizable sexual subject. So while the very unrepresentability of the sexual act may continue to hold significance in our culture as representing the so-called truth of sexual experience, desire functions as both a cause and a remainder of the sexual act, and in this way constitutes the precondition for signification.

Purdy's novel challenges this idea of the sexual act as the truth of sexual identity by demonstrating the absolute dependence and contingency of the *notion* of the sexual act upon a pre-existing signifying and desiring economy. But Purdy does not suggest that the signifying economy is itself constitutive of all of sexual relations. Rather, the relationship between the sexual act as referent and the sexual economy as a series of structuring signifiers are both conditioned in the novel, by a logic of desire that is itself neither signifier nor signified. Where conventional wisdom would see the sexual act as the truth of sexual

identity with desire as the causal truth that makes sexuality possible, Foucault has conversely posited sexual desire as an effect of the signifying logic of the sex/gender system. When desire is understood as both the signified content of sexual identity (as a cause) at the same time that it is also the mode of sexual representation (as an effect), I argue that it can be neither. Instead, desire becomes a silent and absent structuring principle for both sexuality and for signifying relations in a way that, as a hegemonic norm, poses unacknowledged problems.

Purdy highlights these problems by producing a social discursive space in *Narrow Rooms* that seems utterly void of any stable social identities. All of the boys are orphans, living mostly alone in enormous houses that do not seem to suit them at all. This leads to the frustrating attempts the characters make to identify themselves and/or each other: Roy is always referred to as the renderer or the scissors-grinder, one who renders the carcasses of dead animals into lard for soap, though we are constantly told that "he ain't in that occupation" and in fact he never was. Sidney is likewise improperly called "the football star" even though his short-lived glory as an athlete has long since passed. This difficulty the boys encounter in identifying their social roles is compounded by the difficulties that the boys find in producing the social identities that can adequately describe their relationships with one another. Each of Purdy's male protagonists experiences a difficulty in representing their desires as identities. I do not want to suggest that Purdy's meaning here is

that the backwoods mountain village the boys inhabit tragically fails to provide them with stable "gay" identities that would assimilate them to acceptable social positions. Such a reading would stabilize West Virginia of 1978 as the referential context for the novel rather than dramatize it as the site of the character's trauma. Instead Purdy's presentation of such an unlocatable socio-discursive environment supplies the means by which he is able to work through the problematics of desire in the absence of a sexual economy in which to articulate what might be called "yet-to-be" desires.

The loss of the referent of place, embodied in the lack of a sufficient discursive space for the production of identities and social relations, leads to a disturbing collapsing of bodies into one another. If in one sense Katha Pollitt's reading of Purdy's characters improperly values them, negatively, as "strangely bodiless," in another sense I would also argue that his characters simultaneously possess a correlative excess of bodiliness. It is as if the lack of articulable desiring and identificatory relations that would differentiate them causes the boys to implode into themselves and into one another: "Roy kissed Brian impudently, and drew him close to him, as if he would pull him all the way into his ribcage and imprison him there forever" (67). And when Sidney dreamingly recounts the time "I let him [Roy] suck me . . . I thought he would pull my guts and soul out of me he pulled so hard. I felt my cock had been swallowed by a shark" (88). The suffocating, claustrophobic proximity of the characters bodies results from the difficult and often impossible means they have for expressing their desires for one another, as well as the difficulties of orienting their identities around these desires. Moreover, the respiratory system as the shared location of these images (the ribcage and of the mouth sucking) tends to suggest that they are inadequate substitutes for spoken words, as the bodily remainders or placeholders of something that was never there. There are no words that could either stand in for, or be supplanted in favor of, what might be seen as a more intense bodily pleasure.

One of the questions that interests me here is the way that the account of the advent of a desiring economy of sexual relations, what might be called the production of desire itself, seems in various theories of representation always to intersect in some way with the problematics of the body. Judith Butler demonstrates the significance that this question has for feminism, queer theory, and social theories of subjectivity more generally. What is this connection between desire and the body in contemporary theories of representation and subjectivity? The lack of the body as referent in language represents not only a "deficiency" of language to evoke what it represents but that the lack of the body makes possible the very existence of language as a system of re-presentation. Because the body is not there as a stable reference, it can be re-presented and so we can say that language in itself always presumes the loss of the referent. Put another way, the instantiation of language in the utterance produces within that utterance a decisive break

with referentiality. This break instantiates the site at which the body has been foreclosed from the system of representation.

This foreclosure of the body as referent is what links the question of desire to the question of the body, as it is this loss as lack that opens up a desiring space between the signifier (language) and the signified (body). Language neither "re-presents" an already available body for signification any more than language is able to conjure up on its own the whole of materiality. This later proposition, that language dominates and singularly determines all of our encounters with materiality, has lately emerged as the privileged hermeneutic mode at the height of post-structuralism. The debate over both the plausibility, as well as the political utility, of this theory has by now been thoroughly exhausted by competing voices on both extremes: on the one hand, those who insist that any claims towards a material reality can lead only to an oppressive form of biologism that is always the product of an ideological fantasy; on the other hand, the charge of what Zizek calls an excessive linguisticism obscures the imperative of political engagement, which ironically enough is precisely what has made theoretical inquiry an attractive modality of political action for some time now.3

Seeing no merit in attempting to solve or re-solve this on-going and circular debate, I would simply like to demonstrate the correlation of this question of materiality with the question of desire within theories of representation and subjectivity. Within all of these theories, both signifier and signified are produced and conditioned by a logic of signification that operates under a schematic orientation of desire. Current theoretical debates about the status of the signifier and the signified, over whether or not the imperialism of the signifier can be undermined by something like a material referent or whether the thorough domination of the signifier is in itself a prerequisite (or necessary evil) for evading the ideological mandates of biologism, all set aside the question of what structures this relationship between signifier and signified in the first place. This theoretical foreclosure demonstrates a complicitous eagerness to take sides in a debate whose own ideological trap entails the insistence upon such a taking of sides. 4 What I am suggesting is that the ideologies of nature and the ideologies of nurturer, of privileging either the signifier or the signified, should be backgrounded in favor of an analysis that takes as its object the ideology that structures that debate itself.

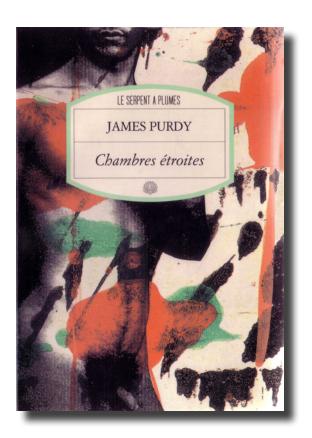
Purdy's Narrow Rooms dramatizes this problematic as the theoretical impasse between signifier and signified and between nature and nurturer in which we often find ourselves theoretically, by mimetically producing this problem as a textual impasse that haunts the novel's characters. The lack of any remnants of a signifying structure in Purdy's Narrow Rooms displaces both signifiers as identities and signifieds as the setting and the bodies of the characters in the utter absence of a feasible economy of desire to orient them. Both

signifier and signified fail to emerge as distinct entities because the structuring logic of desire is lacking, at the same time that it lacks a stable signifier/ signified relationship. If this seems paradoxical it is by virtue of a desiring logic that structures signification by positing a relationship between signifier and signified, a positing that produces the distinction between those terms, in terms of the relationship alone. It is this paradoxical proposition of desire as something that is neither signifier nor signified that masks it as an absent structuring principle within its own terms.

In Purdy's Narrow Rooms, both the signifier/signified relationship and desire are lacking and are the lack of each other. I want to emphasize that this lapsus within representation and within desire is reducible neither to a depraved socio-discursive environment in the signifier (attributable to homophobic ignorance), nor to the loss of the body as a stable referent (experienced in our so-called "postmodern" culture). Rather, the refusal to fall back on either the signifier or the signified represents Purdy's attempt to produce instead a representation of the dilemmas between the two and to interrogate instead what I have described as a troubling problematic associated with the paradoxical impossibilities of desire. Indeed Purdy manages his subject by highlighting rather than resolving these paradoxical impossibilities. Purdy "regulates" the impossibility of producing and maintaining the novel's desiring relations through the production of a liminal space outside the novel itself that indexes this as the disavowed structure of desire. This space within a space is the prison where Sidney had been incarcerated for the death of Brian McFee. Because the events that structure the narrative take place before and after it, the prison itself never enters into the novel. Nevertheless, like the structuring principle of desire, it seems to prop up the events and discourse of the novel in particular ways. Indeed, I would like to suggest that the space of the prison exists in what Lacan would call an "extimate" relationship, one that is excluded, but, in this way, also intrinsic to the discursive spaces of the novel. The prison then remains at once external to these spaces, while at the same time intimately connected with them.⁵ As the externality intricated within the novel's secret interior recesses, the prison demarcates the limits of the discourse of the novel that constantly implode back in on that discourse. unsettling it.

Purdy's attempt to represent the unrepresentability of the prison as an extimate space brings together the two strands I have described as central to the novel; namely, the correlation of the problems attending the representation of the bodily sex act as the referent of sexuality with the problematics of desire as a signifying logic or what I have called the paradoxical impossibilities of desire at work. Purdy's *Narrow Rooms* intertwines both of these problematics.

Lacan discusses the structuring principle of desire in terms of the castration complex. He relates castration to Saussure's model of the signifier/signified



relationship, identifying the mediating bar that puts signifier over signified as the law of the father. implemented through the threat of castration.6 This provocative formulation equates desire with the force of language itself, suggesting that all of language is structured by a logic of desire. But Lacan's formulation also suggests the obverse interpretation, i.e., that desire is at the same time structured by a signifying logic. In rendering the prohibiting "bar" of castration equivalent to Saussure's bar differentiating signifier and signified, "castration" couples the absent concept that in its foreclosure haunts the (w)hole of language itself: as the totality of language it represents the limits of language as representation as what can never properly enter into that representation. Lacan's observations on the castration complex therefore relate directly to Purdy's representation of desire as a structuring principle of language. Insofar as desire insists at the bar of castration, desire cannot be either signifier or signified. Desire and castration are neither simply linguistic effects as signifiers, nor do they authorize the correlation of bodily sex acts with

a signified content. Desire and castration indicate the paradoxical logic of signification that relocates both signifier and signified within representational dilemmas underpinning what I have called the impossibilities of desiring relations.

The space of the prison, in spite of its "lack," seems to be particularly formative of social relations in the novel in indirect ways. It is in prison that Sidney experiences "terrible things." These "terrible things" seem to make him realize something about who he is when he returns to the town and its discursive spaces. It also seems to form some type of bond (again, only indirectly) between Roy and Sidney. "As long as Sid was in jail, he [Roy] felt all right for he was safe in jail with him, so to speak, for that is what he felt, they were both imprisoned together . . ." (60). I emphasize the fact that these identifications and desiring relations are extimately related to its space and therefore can only haunt the events of the novel indirectly, from the outside (within). They cannot properly enter the discourse of the novel itself at the same time they support the discourse of the novel, much like the linguistically structuring principle of desire that in a similar way props up the language of the book.

Just as Purdy refuses to authorize the referentiality of signification in general, he resists confirming the "reality" of a utopian space outside of the novel to which the characters might one day escape. For example, when Brian goes to New York City where he "had been initiated into almost every experience

known there to men who love men," (67) the knowledge he gains in New York City does him little or no good in the discursive space of the novel. While his "schoolboy smile . . . had done such wonders for him in New York, he saw at once that cold and hard as Roy was he [Brian] was just the same a pushover for him." Eschewing fantasies of an external utopia like New York, Purdy's vision of utopia is instead one that rests within the novel yet remains extimate to its spaces. This unrepresentability of location, this literal no place, indirectly points to something that by definition cannot be thought inside the boundaries of representation.

A key example of the productive significance of the prison as a Real space occurs when Vance is concerned about Sidney's relationship to the boy Sidney is caring for, Gareth. Sidney questions his motives,



"Vance, don't say anymore . . . I think you are angry with me really because I told you I was . . . that way . . . "

"I'm not at all," Vance interrupted him passionately. "I don't believe you're queer anyhow, or gay, or whatever they call it... Prison made you think that . . . "

"Oh Vance, Vance . . . I am, I am, I am." (41)

The frequent pauses represented in the text as ellipses, the choppy breaks induced by repeated commas, and the rapid changes of subject and amalgamated information, do not merely point to a squeamishness for talking "openly" about homosexuality but disclose the inevitable failure of representation. It is Vance here who is speaking in the negative ("I am not . . ." "I don't believe. . . " etc.) and Sidney in the affirmative; we might have expected Vance to be the one doing the accusing and Sidney the one doing the denying. Vance's "I'm not at all." sounds oddly like the kind of denial we'd expect Sidney to be making. This reversal of expectation structures the exchange as one of "negative denegation." Vance's statement might be interpreted as "you're not gay and so you must be something else," but it has become clear through the novel that there is nothing else to be.

Judith Butler has argued that one of the dominant homophobic tropes is to "make homosexuality seem unlivable" and Vance's reference to the horrors of the exterior space of the prison as the source of his homosexuality here seems an obvious instantiation of this trope. However in suggesting that Sidney be straight or "something else," Vance also recasts the social sphere of the town as a space in which heterosexuality and homosexuality are equally unlivable. The essential word in Butler's formulation is that in homophobic discourse

homosexuality seems unlivable. This indicates that one of the functions of homophobic discourse is to represent homosexuality on some level, positing it as an alternative, albeit an unlivable one. If homophobic discourses make homosexuality unlivable, then according to the same representational logic these discourses suggest that it would be equally unlivable to be anything besides homosexual. The "anything else," spatially demarcated in the prison as the Real in Vance's accusation that "prison made you think that," seems to be an even more damning proposition than the unlivable prospect of assuming a gay identity within the town's discursive space. Purdy's radical notion of a non-positioned existence that "takes place" outside of either a spatially situated life or death is also "located" outside of time. The non-positionality of this figure comes alive at the exhuming of Brian's body during Roy's crucifixion when Sidney condemns Roy for suggesting he unearth Brian's body: "'Don't you believe in death?' I yelled at him. 'No,' he [Roy] answers, 'and I don't believe in time neither . . . "

The horrific trauma of this non-phenomenal place surrounds Brian's body insofar as it inhabits it outside of time, life, or death. This same trauma also haunts Sidney's non-subjectivity, rendering it neither gay nor straight but "something else." Significantly, Sidney's response to Vance's accusations does not negate Vance's skepticism about his homosexuality (he does not say he is gay), they simply re-affirm his status as being alive: "I am, I am, I am." Recognizing the impossibility of negation here (negating the negative of Vance's accusation), he cannot be straight and he cannot be gay, and unless he renounce being altogether can only assert his presence in the existential affirmation "I am."

The repetition of the phrase "I am" serves both to affirm the primordiality of his being anything at all and to make comprehensible some semblance of a relationship to Gareth.8 Vance would only understand Sidney as either a homosexual or as something else: a non-being, fit only for the prison. Indeed, although the prison can only haunt the outside as a Real space, it has, to some extent, made him who he is, in that the "terrible things" he experienced there as trauma prefigure the violent sexual connection he will have with Roy at the end of the novel. Sidney hangs precariously here on the edge between identification and desire, a site of un-decidability that can neither be sustained nor resolved. His insistence that "I am, I am, I am" is as much an attempt at identification with an impossible subject position as it is the expression of desire to simultaneously identify with Gareth and to desire him.

At the end of the novel, the question of referentiality/materiality and its relationship to desire moves to the forefront as Sidney eventually realizes his love for Roy in the gruesome act of nailing him to a barn door under Roy's calm but intensely passionate encouragement. Significantly, this relationship is not linguistically recognizable through stable identities/desires, as Sidney is only able to comprehend this relationship indirectly through a metaphor—that of his relationship with his high school diving coach. Though Sidney had hated both diving and the water, through the accomplishment of the difficult task of becoming a champion diver under the encouragement of his coach, Sidney "discovered he loved not the sport but the coach" himself. It is through this relationship with his coach that Sidney is able to metaphorically understand his relationship with Roy, who likewise encouraged and "commanded him to accomplish the impossible" in the grisly act of crucifixion.

Purdy describes the relationship between Sidney and his coach as a "closeness [that] completely satisfied his ambition." The use of the word "ambition" (rather than, say, desire) is ambiguous here: what object does his ambition take? Purdy uses the word "ambition" rather than desire because Sidney's feelings towards his coach do not comprise a signification in which reciprocal subject positions might be constituted. As "ambitions," Sidney's feelings about his coach cannot be expressed in the language of identification and desire. Sidney cannot emerge either from or from within this relationship as a sexual subject; he does not come out or identify as gay as a result of this memory, nor do his feelings motivate him to explore his "ambitions" toward men in general (for example, he does not think of Brian or Gareth, other boys with whom he has had sexual relationships, in these terms).

When Purdy represents Sidney's recalling of his relationship to his coach as he is thinking about his feelings for Roy, Purdy explores the paradoxes inherent to the signifying logic of desire. Purdy's substitution of one signifier for the other suggests that Roy is *like* Sidney's coach even as he cannot *be* Sidney's coach. The insufficiency of this substitution, the deferral of desire between signifiers means that this "ambition" will *always* be deferred and can never become desire as such. This sense of deferral differs from Derrida's idea of *différance* in that what is being deferred is both the signifier as well as *différance* itself. Purdy's use of metaphor confounds the logic of *différance* by problematizing the desire that would motivate this deferral of signifiers. It is a deferral of deferral, the *différance* of *différance*. At the same time, this problematization of desire exposes the way in which the identity of the signifier, understood to be transitive and multiple, is predicated on the very idea of difference that Derrida's theory of *différance* was devised to explain.

Purdy underscores this dynamic when he deploys "closeness" to describe the intimate relationships between his characters. "Closeness" indicates the physical proximity of the character's bodies in *Narrow Rooms*. "Closeness" is also the effect of Purdy's closing down the distinction between desire and identification and between signifier and signified. If language, according to Derrida, is governed by a logic of difference both between signs and within the identity of the sign, then the orienting principle of this relationship between and within signs is the uncertainty of *différance*. *Différance* as this absent,

structuring principle then in certain ways resembles Lacan's bar of castration that I have identified as the logic of desire, in the way that it structures language and subjectivity. On the one hand, the multiplicity of meaning in the identity of the sign is predicated on desiring's deferral of the significance of the difference between signs; on the other hand, Purdy's novel demonstrates the dependence of the desiring relation upon the availability of signifiers of sexuality that would constitute a language. The "identity" of the sign is based upon the logic of desire that is in turn itself based upon the identity of the sign. Again, this is something we might call the deferral of deferral or the différance of différance. The closeness of his characters' bodies refers to Purdy's closing down of the difference between signifier and signified, between identification and desire.

In its effecting the extreme proximity of bodies, "closeness" also contributes to the problematization of the referent, as I have been describing it. Purdy's depiction of diving and crucifixion as both impossible (sexual) acts indicates the impossibility of the desiring relationship that would structure these bodies within a stable discourse of sexuality. The impossible closeness of Sidney and Roy's bodies in this instance points to the impossibility of referentiality's serving as the structuring principle for their sexual relationship. The impossibility of what Roy commands Sidney to do refers as much to the articulation of desire to a sexual act, as it does to the grisly act of crucifixion itself. Although the crucifixion scene is decidedly sexual, the violent proximity of Sidney and Roy's bodies in this scene cannot provide either of them with a feasible sexual subjectivity or relational sexual identity. The unadulterated physicality of their bodily exchange in the crucifixion scene takes place despite the failure of this act to produce sexual subjectivity. The crucifixion scene also indicates that neither body present itself as the raw material available for pre-existing signifiers. Although I have been arguing that there can be no desire in the absence of a pre-constituted sexual language, Sidney's and Roy's eroticism presents an "ambition" whose very erotics is predicated on the impossibility of its existence. The eroticism of this scene is based on the fact that it cannot be sustained as a mode of sexual representation, a fact that emphasizes rather than diminishes the invulnerability of materiality to the domination of language.

The violence of the sexual encounters that take place at the end of the novel should not be read in terms of the pathology of sado-masochism. The violence instead gives expression to something that cannot be expressed: namely, Sidney's and Roy's impossible desires to completely close the circuitry between identification and desire that otherwise would structure social and discursive relations. This violence also bespeaks the impossibility of the body to speak for itself and of the independence of the body as something not entirely subject to the functioning of language alone. In the absence of a coherent sexual language to signify their "closeness," discourse cannot

produce a referent for Roy's body after it becomes thoroughly mutilated through the sexual act. There are no pre-existing referents that can securely anchor a sexual discourse in this scene. Sidney's violent and irreparable proximity to Roy in the crucifixion scene instead represents the zero-degree of their desire for one another: in the absence of representable desires, the collapsing of their bodies approximates both their desires for one another and their identifications with one another.

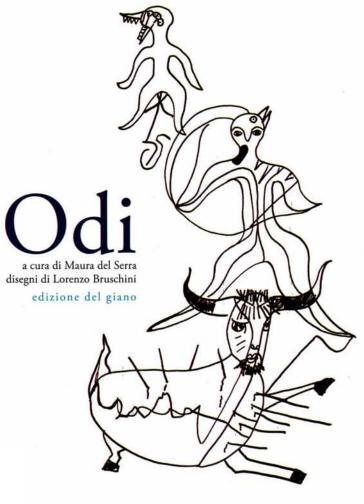
I would like to close with a brief discussion of the reception and legacy of Purdy's work in relation to my analysis and the theoretical problems with which I have been dealing. As I have suggested, the often lukewarm or ambivalent reception of Purdy's work has as much to do with the troubling theoretical problems it conveys as it does with his critics uncertainties over the strength of his work. Rather than continuing to lament the "under-appreciated" or "overlooked" aspects of his literary genius I wonder why so little has in fact been written about Purdy. It seems to me that there is a connection between the silence surrounding Purdy's work and the deliberate silences within it. The indignation directed against the critics who ignore Purdy's genius draws attention away from "the complex silence" it is attempting to communicate. We need to tune into these subtle rhythms of nuanced silences so as to listen and move to them rather than continuing to ignore them.

The multiple silences animating Purdy's novel Narrow Rooms address a complex set of theoretical questions in unsettling ways that resist assimilation into any contemporary interpretive framework. Purdy's novel is a quiet one. It speaks as much in what it doesn't say as much as in what it does. As what conveys the impossibility of desire in this novel, these silences are Purdy's means for articulating what cannot be articulated, what cannot be said and what cannot exist within the limits of the novel. When Katha Pollitt placed the reticent character of Purdy's Narrow Rooms in stark contrast to the loud violence at work in many of its scenes, she herself produced the negative characterizations that she thereafter assigned to Purdy's "mediocre" novel. But it is Pollitt's spectacular contrast that has dislocated the novel from its subtleties. The silences inhabiting Purdy's impossibly Narrow Rooms demarcate the limits of what Purdy is able to say within his own novel, and these limits should make his interpreters aware of the limitations of their accounts of it.

NOTES

- ¹ Katha Pollitt, "Ovid and his Boys," *The New York Times*, April 23, 1978.
- ² Michel Foucault, tr. Robert Hurley, *History of Sexuality, Vol. I: An Introduction* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990).
- ³ Slavoj Zizek, The Sublime Object of Ideology (New York: Verso, 1989).
- ⁴ For a thoroughly compelling and detailed discussion of this problem, see Eve Sedgwick's introduction to The Epistemology of the Closet (California: University of California Press, 1990).
- ⁵ Jacques-Alain Miller, "Extimité," Lacanian Theory of Discourse: Subject, Structure, and Society, ed. Mark Bracher et al (New York and London: New York University Press, 1994), 74-87.
- ⁶ Jacques Lacan, "Agency of the Letter in the Unconscious," in Écrits (New York: W. W. Norton, 1982).
- ⁷ Judith Butler, Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex" (New York: Routledge, 1993).
- ⁸ I hesitate to describe this statement as a performative, as the category of the performative is, I think, itself under erasure here. I hope that it is clear from my argument that the language with which Sidney speaks here and elsewhere is non-iterable or illegible because it cannot reify any structure of desiring or identificatory relations. The repetition of the phrase "I am" points as much to the failure of that phrase to elicit a stable subject position as it does to any potentially performative work the phrase might accomplish.

Victor Segalen



Odes
by Victor Segalen

translated into Italian by Maura del Serra illustrated by Lorenzo Bruschini

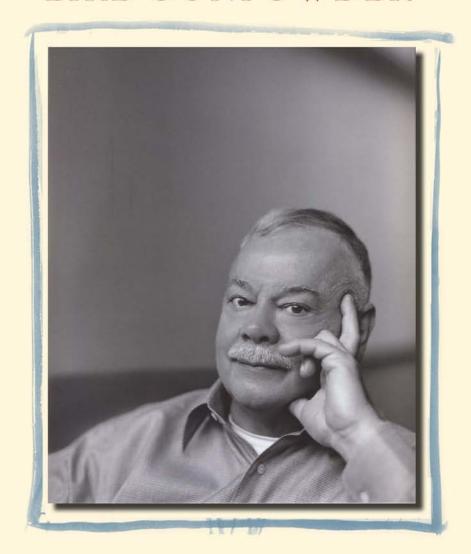
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ON COMPOSING SONGS WITH JAMES PURDY
AN INTERVIEW WITH RICHARD HUNDLEY

RICHARD HUNDLEY TEN SONGS

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INTRODUCTION

by Rainer J. Hanshe

The following interview examines Richard Hundley's long-time collaboration with James Purdy, who is the focus of this special issue of *Hyperion*. To date, although this collaboration has received minor attention in the annals of music history, it has not figured in the annals of literary criticism; that is, Purdy's role in it has not been addressed in any of the monographs written on him, or at any of the recent Purdy conferences, or in the one journal issue devoted to his work. Now, that lacuna has in part been addressed, but further detailed attention by both musicologists and literary scholars to this collaboration remains necessary, as such attention must necessarily be given to all of the other musical adaptations of Purdy's texts.²

Although Hundley may not be known to our regular readers since he is outside the scope of material generally considered in Hyperion, he is known to specific music circles around the world. An American pianist and composer of art songs for solo voice and piano, he has also written choral works, a piano sonata, some chamber music for winds, and several songs with orchestra. Hundley has been a MacDowell Fellow numerous times and his music has been performed at Carnegie Hall and in all the other major concert halls in Manhattan and at other prestigious concert venues in America and Europe, too. He is frequently invited to schools as a guest lecturer and has given lectures and master classes at the Juilliard School, Mannes School of Music. Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts, and the University of Michigan (Jessye Norman Masterclass Series), etc. In a competition sponsored by Carnegie Hall and the Rockefeller Foundation in 1982, Hundley's *Eight Songs* was chosen to be part of its repertory list, and in 1987 he was among only 12 American composers that Carnegie Hall designated as a standard composer for vocalists in its International American Music Competition. Five of the other composers chosen were Samuel Barber, Paul Bowles, Aaron Copland, Charles Ives, and Virgil Thomson. Of Hundley's musical identity, one critic referred to him as a "sort of American Poulenc, expert at creating characterful melodies and illuminating their corners with flashes of harmonic surprise."3 If his name is not as recognizable as Virgil Thomson's, he is as much an integral element of the American musical tradition, and his place in it is established.

Richard Albert Hundley was born on September 1, 1931, in Cincinnati, Ohio, and, much like Purdy, had an itinerant childhood after the divorce of his parents, finally living with his paternal grandmother in Covington, Kentucky, where he was reared. Some of Hundley's earliest performances were made at tea parties for his grandmother's friends, and during one such party, one

of the women, a self-proclaimed medium, declared that Hundley had been famous in another life, "like Chopin." Hundley's grandmother wasn't aware of who Chopin was but once she learned she always referred to her grandson as a "pee-an-ist and a composer." Such is not recounted to express awe or astonishment before so-called psychic gifts and their supposed veracity but because the scene could spring right out of Purdy's own fiction, making Hundley an almost readymade character fit for Purdy's fictive imaginings. Due to their regional and familial similarities, one can understand why Purdy and Hundley would have had such a close affinity, and since they seemed to exist in similar imaginative realms, were perhaps destined to meet. Certainly, to use a new eponym Hundley employed several times in the following interview, there is something distinctly *Purdyesque* about Hundley's first profound musical encounter, which occurred in the Cincinnati Zoological Gardens. It was there that he heard a performance of Verdi's II Trovatore, an aesthetic experience which had a formative impact upon the young composer. The aptitude of vocal music to render complex emotion deeply appealed to him and would remain a foundational aspect of his style. Other musical icons of Hundley's youth included Stravinsky, Beethoven, and Wagner, but when later in life he heard Samuel Barber's "Knoxville, Summer of 1915." he knew that he would focus on the voice as his characteristic medium of expression. Hundley's formal musical training began at the Cincinnati Conservatory of Music, where he studied under Ilona Voorm, a former assistant to Béla Bartok. Flourishing under her tutelage. Hundley had his first major performance at age 14, performing Mozart's Piano Concerto in D minor with the Northern Kentucky Symphony Orchestra. And later, he performed the solo of Mozart's Piano Concerto in A major with the Cincinnati Symphony under the direction of conductor Thor Johnson, a former pupil of Bruno Walter and others.

In 1950, Hundley moved to New York City and continued his studies at the Manhattan School of Music but soon after had to abandon his training there due to financial hardship. During the 50s, Hundley composed numerous pieces of music, including Softly the Summer, Epitaph on a Wife, and The Astronomers, all of which are still performed to this day. And in 1960 he was engaged by the Metropolitan Opera to sing tenor in their Chorus. This was an extremely fertile period for him. As he explained to me over the telephone, "I had four years in which I had three months of the year off. During that time, I was subsidized by unemployment insurance. It was like receiving a grant!" This free time enabled Hundley to study and to write a number of compositions, including Isaac Greentree, For Your Delight, I am not Lonely, Postcard from Spain, and Screw Spring. At the Metropolitan he developed friendships with some renowned singers, such as Rosalind Elias, Annaliese Rothenberger, Anna Moffo, Lili Chookasian, and Teresa Stratas, who began performing his compositions. In particular, Anna Moffo gained considerable renown for the young composer by including his songs in her long recital tours

in both the U.S. and Europe. In conversation, Hundley said to me, "When Anna sang my songs all the doors opened." He also was befriended by the composer Virgil Thomson in the early 60s and as Hundley recalled, they immediately took each other up with enthusiasm. "For 27 years, until his death, Virgil was my friend and mentor. He never denied me access to his store of knowledge. Among the things he taught me was the setting of abstract texts. Virgil said, 'Set the words for clarity and let the meaning take care of itself."4 During the spring tour of the Metropolitan Opera in 1964, the first concert entirely devoted to Hundley's music took place at Karamu House in Cleveland, Ohio, the oldest black settlement in America. The music was performed by soprano Jeanette Scovotti, tenor George Shirley, bass Ezio Flagello, and accompanied at the piano by Hundley. The printed program carried a note about the young composer by Carl Van Vechten. The concert was reviewed by the distinguished composer Herbert Elwell who reported that "Hundley's writing is melodious in the best sense. Obviously, he has a wide knowledge of how to employ the voice to its best advantage." 5 Another significant teacher of Hundley was the American composer William Flanagan, 6 with whom Hundley made a close analysis of Stravinsky's Persephone, an exploration the young composer found illuminating and profitable for it gave him insight into classical harmony and how it could be used to create novel and fresh sounds.

The late 60s were another prolific time for Hundley. He was invited to the MacDowell Colony and also began accompanying in the studio of the esteemed soprano Zinka Milanov, whose mastery of the art of bel canto was a major influence, further aiding Hundley's ability to write vocal music with greater proficiency and strength. Tenor Paul Sperry, the acclaimed art song recitalist, began performing and advancing Hundley's music at this time, and continues to do so. Sperry's long standing engagement with Hundley's music resulted in his recording 11 of Hundley's compositions for his Paul Sperry Sings Romantic American Songs.8 Despite Hundley's achievements and the merit he received, he was as much an anomaly in the musical world as Purdy was in the literary world. Because of his opposition to the serial trend that dominated the musical scene at that time, and it was a hegemony in its own right, critic Roger Dettmer referred to Hundley as a musical maverick and made this observation about the difficulty of his path and his wherewithal for continuing to pursue it:



Unless a young American composer is acknowledged, and sponsored, by the eastern Establishment—a tight circle of interbred cliques with headquarters on Manhattan Island—he is likely to find his professional life a Kafka-like sequence of closed doors and deaf ears. [. . .] It takes guts [and an outside income] to pursue a career in music without the blessing of

the Establishment. It takes a steady hand, as well as talent, to write music that is not serial neo-classicism, or left-over Satie. [. . .] [Hundley] has found a creative direction [and] he writes communicatively in our age of alienation[. . . .] He gives one fresh faith in mavericks.9

Hundley clearly persevered, his tenacity and musical inventiveness buoying him through the Kafkaesque castle of the serial establishment. If his compositions seem conventional in comparison to the serialists, they are daring and inventive in their own right, for when he uses "conventional harmonic and melodic material" he "rethinks it so that it comes across freshly in the contemporary spirit."10 And Hundley's music is hardly simplistic. Of his song "Softly the Summer," Ruth C. Friedberg points out that "the tessitura and expressive demands of the vocal line are not only totally foreign to the realm of 'popular' music, but [...] require the artistry of a highly trained singer."11 And Robert Offergeld said of Hundley's music that it "is fresh, vigorous, and above all vocally effective." His "vocal line is large, shapely, and venturesome, and his expressive resources include a remarkable lyric intensity as well as humor."12 Intriguingly enough, the composer once seen as conservative would be deemed almost precisely the opposite. As Robert Finn professed in the early 80s, with "the subsequent resurgence of romantic feeling, tonal harmony, and melody, conservative composers like [Hundley] are the new 'avant garde."13 Thus, Hundley is now ensconced in the castle, though really superior recordings of his songs have yet to be made and, still, he must work as an organist in churches and synagogues in order to earn his keep.

It was during the 70s that his collaboration with Purdy was most abundant. If there is any other collaboration it is perhaps akin to, or to which there is a close parallel, it is the one between Virgil Thomson and Gertrude Stein, though the Hundley-Purdy alliance lasted far longer. One might think of the collaborations between Barber and Agee, Bowles and Williams, or Rorem and Goodman, to focus on strictly American ones, for Weill and Brecht and Stravinsky and Auden also come to mind, but Stein is the closest equivalent to Purdy in terms of writing in a multiplicity of genres. And just as Thomson and Stein, Hundley and Purdy had their detractors, both in the musical and literary worlds. Yet, like Four Saints and other Thomson-Stein works, the works of Hundley and Purdy have their many champions and Hundley is frequently sought after and his music is continually performed, making his adaptations of Purdy's texts far more available and current than those of any other composer. Whatever history eventually proves, their work certainly deserves far more visibility outside the small circles in which it has been entrenched.

As Hundley explains in the interview below, their collaborative process

involved developing poems out of Purdy's early morning automatic writing exercises, copies of which Purdy mailed to Hundley on a regular basis. The poems were also often elaborated on in dialogues while Hundley and Purdy meandered through the Brooklyn Botanical Gardens and other haunts. Once refined, Purdy's poems served as texts for Hundley to score on his own, without Purdy's direct involvement in the development of the music. When the word "collaboration" is used throughout the interview, it should be understood in this way. Even though Purdy was not involved in the creation of Hundley's music, Hundley was involved in the shaping of Purdy's poetry. As Hundley explained to me in conversation, "There are places where my interest in James and my joy in his work and my constant building-up of his ego produced a lot of wonderful material. But he was the one who did it. Nobody else could write a Purdyesque story, or Purdyesque poems." Struck by the imagination, freshness, and sheer inventiveness of Purdy's poetry, Hundley found in it a corollary to his own songs, noting that although the lines of Purdy's poems "say exactly what it is they say, they imply so much more. My songs too are full of hidden meanings." Purdy hinted at such layers of signification when revealing that his "work is an exploration of the American soul conveyed in a style based on the rhythms and accents of American speech."¹⁴ Considering Purdy's affinity for rhythm and his possessing as Ned Rorem observed a keen musical ear it is not surprising that Hundley and Purdy's collaboration was so fruitful and prolific. During the decade of the 70s, Hundley wrote a plethora of pieces based on Purdy poems, including Come Ready and See Me, Lions Have Lain in Grasses Before, Vocal Quartets on Poems by James Purdy, Birds, U.S.A., I Do, Evening Hours, Bartholomew Green, Waterbird, and Jenny Wren, a grand duet for two sopranos. Vocal Quartets received its premiere at the Ram Island Arts Festival in Maine in the summer of 1971 and was given its New York premiere by the Metropolitan Opera Studio at the New York Cultural Center in February 1972, with one reviewer praising the originality of the poems and "the extraordinary feeling and mood that Mr. Hundley imparts to them with his style and elegance of vocal line . . . "15 And of Birds, U.S.A., Friedberg observed that it "takes place in a jazzy, heavily accented anapestic tetrameter. Even the disillusion of the penultimate line ("Aren't the songsters that delighted you at seven") doesn't seem to stop its rush of headlong gaiety." The song is a musical satire, which, as Friedberg argues, Hundley achieves through two principal devices: "one is the heavy use of syncopation in the vocal line over a 'four square' chordal accompaniment which recalls popular American ragtime roots" and the other is his paraphrasing of "certain patriotic songs." 16 There is also a sense of lightness to Purdy's poetry in general, and to Friedberg titles such as The Running Sun and Sunshine is an Only Child are "steeped in sunshine and the suggestion of increasing cheer."17 Although Purdy's poetry has those qualities. and is also often humorous, what Friedberg neglects to observe is the strong undercurrent of pain and desolation that suffuses many of the poems, of

loneliness (sunshine is an *only* child, if not possibly an orphan, like many of the characters in Purdy's fiction), and of the inherent, albeit extremely subtle critique in the satire of *Birds*, *U.S.A.*, which is not a strictly patriotic song. There is darkness in the running sun too, for in the concluding poem to Purdy's book, the sun is the object of thought of those "who are under the ground," "indians & voyagers & wilderness men," those who, one might say, America has swiftly destroyed. They are dead. If Purdy and Hundley are distinctly American artists, they are ones keenly sensitive to America's tragedies and to the sacrifices, violence, and monstrosity of which America is partly made. There is no empty nationalism here. A satire is a satire.

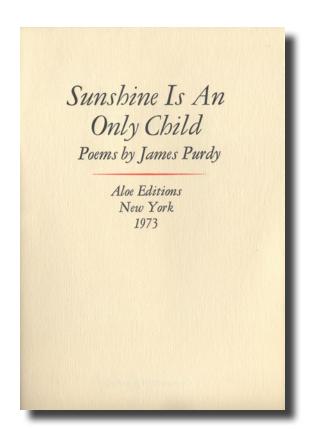
The Purdy-Hundley collaboration continued into the 80s, with premieres of their work at the Newport Music Festival, where Hundley was composer in residence for four seasons, and many other venues and recital halls. On February 2, 1982, the world premiere of *The Sea is Swimming Tonight* was given by conductor Newell Jenkins and the Clarion Music Society (CMS), which commissioned the work at Alice Tully Hall. The cantata based on poems by Purdy was commissioned to celebrate the 25th anniversary of the CMS. It is a 10-movement, choral-song cycle for chorus, four soloists, and four-hand piano. That time also saw the performance of Are They Shadows That We See?, Beverly, and the "Saint Stephen & Prince Antelope" scena, excerpted from Wedding Finger, an incomplete opera based on one of Purdy's plays. And in 1985, the conductor Robert Page commissioned a choral work from Hundley, "Ball," a setting of a poem written by Purdy for Hundley, which was premiered by the Robert Page Singers in Cleveland, Ohio. The piece is scored for four soloists, chorus, and four-hand piano. Of it, Robert Finn wrote that "Hundley's straightforward, squarely tonal and rhythmically regular music catches a kind of nostalgic air about the typical American picture of a group of boys tossing a ball into the air. But toward the end, when Purdy's text gets surreal and more profound meanings are at least suggested. Hundley's music follows suit, growing pensive, almost suggesting a small town American Ralph Vaughn Williams or Mahler in one of their reflective moods."19 But this is quintessential Purdy, and what Finn doesn't recognize is that this seemingly innocent choral work isn't merely a nostalgic game of ball playing. It is less surreal and more tragic and sublime, suggested by the imagery of jagged cliffs and crags and the sorrow of the frolicking boys. It is also unabashedly sensual and homoerotic, for Purdy describes the boys as playing "with their bare naked hands, ball," and keeps repeating the words "naked" and "ball," the innuendo subtle but clear enough. Finally, the poem concludes with the sorrowful, downcast, and glum, despairing boys pulling off their clothes and simultaneously jumping so high into the air that they vanish, just as have all of the balls that they've been playing with. Calling the poem nostalgic as Finn does seems naïve—it is clearly an instance of erotic transcendentalism, a kind of unexpected sensual apotheosis that is prototypical Purdy. And Hundley's

music is just as surprising as the text, with its startling shift from innocence to experience born of a simple ritual that turns an everyday act into something magical. Naked hands give birth to ecstasy. Robert Page believes it to be one of the major works of the 20th century.

The culmination of the Purdy-Hundley collaboration seemed to occur in 1990 when Hundley completed the song cycle Octaves and Sweet Sounds, a title suggested to the composer by Purdy. The cycle is comprised of five songs, each based on a modernist poem, including "Strings in the Earth and Air" by James Joyce, "Seashore Girls" by e.e. cummings, "Moonlight's Watermelon" by Jose Garcia Villa, "Straightway Beauty on Me Waits" by Purdy, and "Well Welcome" by Gertrude Stein. 20 Purdy also encouraged Hundley to set Garcia Villa's poem to music. The same year the song cycle was published by Boosey & Hawkes, Purdy published *Out with the Stars*, his satire of Virgil Thomson and Carl Van Vechten and the New York avant-garde scene, which also includes a character based on Hundley, Val Sturgis, the uncowed protégé to the Thomson-inspired Abner Blossom. Two of Purdy's most affecting short stories, "Mud Toe the Cannibal" and "Some of These Days," are also based on Hundley. These various works illustrate how Purdy and Hundley continually inspired one another, each transfiguring events or experiences of their lives into new works of art. What Hundley's oeuvre reveals in part is the rich and productive relationship he has with poets and with literary texts; aside from those already mentioned, he also set to music poetry by Shakespeare, John Fletcher, Samuel Daniel, D.H. Lawrence, Amy Lowell, Kenneth Patchen, James Schuyler, and unknown Elizabethan verses as well his own writings. Of Patchen's "Maiden Snow," which Hundley dedicated to Anna Moffo, Friedberg observed that Hundley's setting of the poem revealed "the composer's early mastery of serious, dramatic writing." In it, Hundley "combines the expressive intensity of a short Puccini aria with the subtle interweaving of voice and piano that is characteristic of art song."21 Hundley has said that his objective is to crystallize emotion. "I memorize a text and live with it, then set it according to how I feel about the poem." Primacy is given then to feeling, with Hundley incorporating texts via memorization, then transfiguring them through the different sensations and impressions they give rise to in his body and imagination. Purdy's poetry in particular greatly appealed to Hundley because of its emotional intensity, its prosody, rhythmic qualities, and its sense of surprise, what is surreal, or what Hundley dubbed the "Purdyesque." In opposition, the composer found much other poetry of the 20th century largely "unsuitable for setting to music because it is alien to nature."22 Some composers might prefer the alien; Hundley does not. And if Purdy and Hundley were not part of the avant-garde or counter-culture factions in both literature and music, at the same time they were not part of the status quo either, existing instead in some defile between both factions, making each of their lives and the reception of their work exponentially difficult. But they are as

much of the fabric of the history of American civilization as any other circle of artists, and their collaboration, which was sustained over a period of more than 20 years, as much as their individual works, is a testament to how steadfast they remained, how loyal to their visions, even if they had to be like Indians and voyagers and wilderness men and remain underground as they dreamed of the running sun, which they could still imagine despite the darkness that surrounded them. Perhaps in their darkness, they could see what others could not. Although two years have passed since Purdy's death, and although Hundley and Purdy ceased collaborating in the 90s, 23 their 48-year friendship suffering an unexpected if not forced rupture, Hundley remains keenly interested in his old friend's writing, and in the future, we may be privileged to receive yet another Hundley-Purdy musical work.24

The following interview began on May 28, 2010, at Hundley's residence in the West Village, with him frequently breaking into song, reciting verses. and performing fragments of his music at the piano, being in general a delightful, eccentric, and engaging host. Hundley also frequently interrupted our dialogues to retrieve from his voluminous informal archive miscellaneous Purdy and other ephemera, such as drawings, photographs, letters, poems, and sheet music, all of which sprang to mind spontaneously as Hundley sought to recall as precisely as possible the history of his life. Often, a guarter of a day would pass without notice while we were together, and months of continuous work would surely not exhaust Hundley's labyrinthine archive. which must one day be catalogued for posterity. Our initial session was done live and later transcribed, after which discussions continued during the stormy winter of 2010 into early 2011, with Hundley carefully refining his responses. He did this through textual revisions on his own, giving me pages to incorporate that he manually retyped, whiting out certain sections, expanding upon them, and making more additions in pencil, while his responses were also refined through yet further dialogues until they were as fluid and precise as Hundley felt they could be, even changing single words he felt just didn't sound right. How not heed the nuanced adjustments of a composer so keenly sensitive to language? The interview is equally personal and historical. touching upon both Hundley's friendship and collaborative relationship with Purdy. It has bearing not only upon American culture but both the history of literature and music, illuminating the interrelationship between composer and writer. In elaborating on his creative process and methodology, Hundley gives privileged insight into not only a significant if obscured artistic collaboration of the 20th century but into the workshop of an American composer who will eventually be as recognizable as Virgil Thomson, just as Purdy will finally be as recognizable as Gertrude Stein.



Q: What was the first work of Purdy's that you read?

A: Malcolm. In 1962 Virgil Thomson had sent me to Harold Knapik²⁵ to continue my musical studies. Harold was a composer, who, like James, had benefited from Chicago businessman Osborne Andreas's largesse (in different ways).26 Andreas had sponsored the publication of Purdy's privately printed short stories and novella at the very beginning of his career. One day when I went for a lesson, I noticed a large stack of the paperback edition of *Malcolm*, which had a colorful, eye-catching, jazzy cover. When I asked Knapik about the book he said, "This man comes from the same place as you do-Ohio. This is a delightful novel and I think you should read it. If you like it, tell me." A few days later I went to the beach, and I took Malcolm with me. I immediately became captivated by Malcolm's story—was so mesmerized by it that when I looked up to check where I was, I realized I had gone two stops beyond where I should have exited. Such a thing never happened to me before! I was considerably perplexed. Harold told James of

my experience and enthusiasm, and Jimmy was eager to meet me. At an elaborate dinner—Harold was a gourmet cook—I finally met Jimmy and his friend Jorma Sjoblom, and thereafter we became close.

Q: When did you finally begin collaborating?

A: Well, he started to send me some poems, but back then his focus was his novels. He didn't think of himself as a poet, and he had yet to publish any poetry.²⁷ What he sent me was things he had written earlier but never published or shared. They just didn't interest me.

Q: Why?

A: There was something Oscar Wilde-like about James, but most of the poems were dark and lacked the whimsical quality he often revealed in conversation. Edna St. Vincent Millay said all great poems are sad. Well, I wasn't interested in just 'great' poems, and I knew James wasn't either. I sensed that he was also capable of writing comic or witty poems, fable-like stuff. But the words of the early poems he sent me were very [makes chewing noises] . . . very [makes more chewing noises] . . . hard to pronounce; they were dense and didn't flow very well. The atmosphere or mood of the poems didn't strike me psychologically. Being a singer and a composer, I was interested in setting things to music, and I knew right away if the words would sing. Several years later, he started sending me pages of his automatic

writing, which contained often inventive couplings of words and images, rigmarole. When grouped together, many of the lines sounded like poems, but not in Millay's sense! I got very excited reading this work, which revealed an entirely different imaginative world. That particular summer he was vacationing in some bucolic place, and he was into the sounds of the woods, natural sounds, like frogs, and all sorts of insects and birds and all of that. These came out of his early morning spontaneous writing exercises. And one of the first things I read amongst that swirling mass of words was a description of frogs. [Recites from memory:



Wicked sounds haunt the glen tonight, voices from non-human throats, clear cries of splendid pain and after a bit more cries again — — Can you for one moment dare to doubt that frogs have echoes through the bog [Hundley spells out the word: b-o-g] and hear their own love songs under lily pads and immanent wet clouds

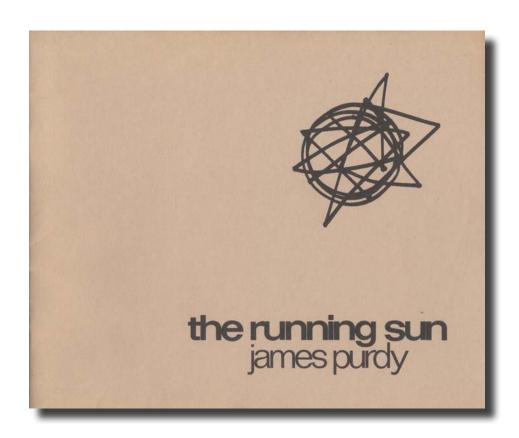
When I read that I thought, "That's the *perfect* description of frogs—that's brilliant." It was so unexpected and playful. Imagine: the erotic songs of frogs! Who would think of that? So I circled this, and other things, and sent them back to him and said, THIS IS POETRY!

Q: So there's a clear difference for you between when he consciously sought to write poems versus when he was writing automatically, unconsciously—

A: Well, he didn't think they were poems. He was just sounding off whatever thoughts came to his mind; in that burst of free-flowing and uninhibited imagination there was something truly inventive and unconventional. What was different in the automatic writing was that he was ready all the time like gunpowder! Since the passages I marked in the automatic writings were often short, later, he would sometimes add lines and then rework and shape them into verse. They're sort of like Mother Goose, but they're not, you see? They're Purdyesque.

Q: Since that's an eponym that's never been used, what exactly does it mean to you? How would you characterize the "Purdyesque"?

A: Well, James has this ability to truly astonish, in many different ways, and he does it with language as well as with his extraordinary imagination. His poems often shift from one dimension to another, have these sudden totally unexpected turns or twists, like when he shifts from the erotic to the strange, or vice versa. And his poems always touch you; touch the heart.



Q: What was the first poem of his you set to music?

A: I don't remember but almost everything he sent me stimulated a response of some sort. To make a good song you must have a good idea. Eventually, I was having performances of the songs I composed, which were also being published. His poems about the seashore and happenings at the sea were wonderful, and I gathered those lines and made a cantata out of them

called "The Sea is Swimming Tonight," which is the name of one of the poems. It was a perfect description of water, as you see it at the seashore. It's *swimming*. The waves are overlapping and I thought it was absolutely delightful. After a number of years—since I wrote the cantata, and after the individual songs were being performed, Jimmy decided that he would privately publish a book of the poems that I had been setting to music. So he put together about 20 of these and entitled it *The Running Sun*.²⁸ I introduced him to Paul Waner,²⁹ a young friend of mine who was an artist, and he designed and published the book for James.

Q: Purdy noted the significant impact you had on his writing poetry and said: "It was Richard Hundley who encouraged me to go on with writing poetry in the first place, and without his insistence that my verse was in its own way as important as my fiction and plays, I might have given up writing it." Aside from the private editions published in America, which are quite rare and difficult to locate, the only collected edition of Purdy's poems was published in Amsterdam by Purdy's friend Jan Erik Bouman.

A: Well, he had numerous small editions. And there was one in San Francisco that published—

Q: Black Sparrow.

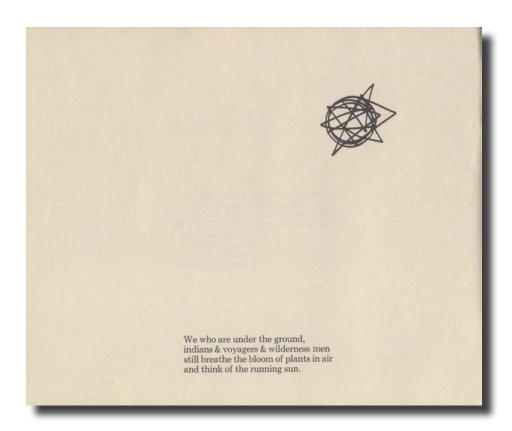
A: Right! It was quite a wonderful press at that time, publishing very fine

artists.

Q: The regional and artistic connections or roots that you and Purdy share—

A: You see, we escaped from Ohio.

Q: I see you as quintessential American artists in the best sense, and one thinks here not of what "America" is now, but of the America of Whitman and Melville, of Jelly Roll Morton and Charles Ives, of W.C. Fields and Buster Keaton, etc.



There are similar artistic sensibilities between you and Purdy too, especially regarding your relation to language. Purdy wrote in certain idioms and sought to preserve what he called the autochthonous qualities of speech, to which I see a corollary in your desire to "preserve the natural cadence of American speech" as you once said.

A: Well, of course, he was very conscious of language because he knew Latin, spoke Spanish, and read ancient Greek. All the Purdys were educated. Also, in the world Jimmy and I grew up in, everyone read the Bible. And children were named after Biblical figures: Abner, Obediah, Daniel, etc. He used to recite stories from the Bible to me by heart.

Q: Purdy noted that the King James Bible and Shakespeare were formative influences, that the language of such works was ingrained in his blood.—
Beyond that, did his interest in indigenous or regional speech make you more sensitive to it?

A: It's part of my heritage; I grew up with it, too. But he could use the American idioms the same way Virgil Thomson used to use them. Thomson was elaborately educated at Harvard and in Paris, but his speech was peppered with the American vernacular. In Purdy's language, there is an infinite variety, and that fascinated me. He would leave messages for me on the telephone nearly every day, and sometimes I would write down what he said; aside from

his incisive observations of the world, he would often recite these great idioms. like "locking the stable after the horse is stolen," and so forth. He was a master of the vernacular.

Q: There are Purdy settings in each of your song collections published by Boosey & Hawkes. Eight Songs features four by Purdy. Four Songs features two, as does Ten Songs, "Waterbirds" and "Lions." In Octaves & Sweet Sounds, one of the compositions is also based on a Purdy poem. The others are based on poems by Joyce, e.e. cummings, Garcia Villa, and Gertrude Stein. Is there a relation between the collection of poems in Octaves & Sweet Sounds for you?

A: Yes! my music! I always set what poetry I like and I put together song collections in a combination I find compelling. Octaves and Sweet Sounds was a title suggested to me by Purdy. I gave him a lot, but he gave me even more. I've known many great people, like Madame Zinka Milanov, who was one of the six greatest singers of this century, but James was a truly rare bird. He was something out of this world.

Q: And there was something in his automatic writings in particular that you really connected with and found stimulating?

A: James once said to me, "The only thing forbidden in America is quality. The standard is 'anything to make money.' It must make money!!!" Well, in those writings, as in all of Jimmy's writings, he was completely without reservation he had no desire to please anyone except himself. He was expressing himself shamelessly. He always said that the artist must be free of shame. I thought many of the passages in the automatic writings had a very fine rhythmic quality and could be made into songs. It was clear that he was writing them spontaneously and fast, often rhyming sentences to keep them flowing, and that's what I was really after. In Four Songs I set two poems by Purdy: "Come Ready and See Me." which became popular, and "Evening Hours." I discovered the opening four lines of "Evening Hours" in one of the pages of his automatic writing that he had sent me. [Recites from memory:



I miss you in the evening hours when all the perfume comes from the flowers again in the morning your presence I lack and the milkman rattles inside his hack

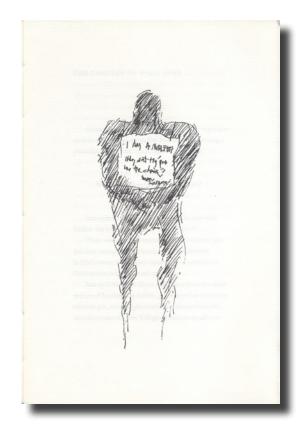
In the days when Jimmy grew up, and later when I grew up, a man delivered the milk to your home, first in a horse-drawn buggy and later in a truck. And, sometimes you were wakened from your sleep by the sound of rattling bottles. And that's where that comes from. But the poem was completed later. One day while he and I were walking to the Brooklyn Botanical Gardens (which he loved to visit), I began singing the words to the melody I composed for them, and James responded with additional fresh, new lines. We stimulated each other, you see. By the time he and I reached our destination, the poem had grown to include six more lines, which I wrote down as he invented them. [Sings the lines:



But starlight brings your face to me I'll never let you go

The rain that falls on the garden wall keeps me informed as if you had called drop by drop the rain tells me all I need to know

of the world and its trees



That shift at the end to the world and the trees, now that's "Purdyesque"! Hold on. [Goes to retrieve some books] Boosey and Hawkes put these out. What does the cover say?

Q: Art Song in English: 50 Songs by 21 American and British Composers.

A: This is a distinguished international collection. I am very proud to be included. In it, I have one song by Purdy, "Waterbird." It's based on the original choral version of "The Sea is Swimming Tonight."

Q: In terms of the music, because you've mentioned that Purdy used to improvise on the piano sometimes—

A: O yes. For years we would go to lunch at a little Italian restaurant which was near where I live in Manhattan, Casa di Pre, and James would come home with me and he usually went right to the piano and sat down and started improvising. And I would say, "Well, Jimmy, can you make snow?" And he would stop for a minute and he would sort of [Hundley tilts his head backwards in a kind of ecstatic gesture to simulate a kind of trance state] and then he would begin to simulate the sensation of snow. When I looked outside, I was startled because it actually started to snow . . . James was a sort of witch!

Q: Did he ever suggest musical passages to you?

A: No. *Never.* He would often say, "That's brilliant, Richard. That's just the way I think it should be."

Q: Would you literally work on them together?

A: NO! Never.

Q: After you made the first composition and you played it for Purdy, did—

A: He loved it. My experience is that most poets want to be set to music. But see, I was so lucky because James was my poet.

Q: Did you present him completed works most of the time, or did the songs go through alteration?

A: My songs often go through a lot of editing. The presentation of my music isn't in my control. It isn't like a painting that is always displayed right there in front of you. Music has to be reproduced. A page of music is really a blueprint. And they have to be—

Q: And you never know how it's going to turn out.

A: [Thoughtful silence.] Well, if you write it well enough you know how it should turn out. It's always different. I had to learn to write my pieces so they would hold up under bad performances. But when I was at the Metropolitan Opera, I began to have very fine singers sing my songs. They were brilliant artists with imaginations, so they put something into it, but most performers don't do that. Students don't do that. You have to instruct them. As Virgil Thomson said to me, "That's what you're going to get for most of your life: bad performance." [Dark, raucous laughter] That's what a page of music is—it's just a blueprint. It means one thing to one person and something else to another. But if it means the same to a great many people, then you've got it right. [Raucous laugh.] That's true! As a composer of songs (to art poetry), I always try to identify myself with the poet's feeling, or some aspect of it. I try to get inside the words. A good melody is not just a poem's new suit. It must be a new skin inseparable.

Q: At the Newport Musical Festival in the early 80s there was a performance of "St. Stephen & Prince Antelope Duet." from an incomplete opera. Wedding Finger, based on a play by Purdy. When did the two of you decide to create an opera? Is it something you'd ever consider completing?

A: There was no plan to write an opera; there was just one scene. He had already written that story. The premise of the scena was that once Manhattan was taken away or destroyed, then creation could begin all over again. [Laughter] It concerned Prince Antelope, who came to the United States to marry the Isle of Manhattan, and once she was taken in tow, away, to an unknown region above the Atmo, creation could begin all over. So I had this duet where St. Stephen was interviewing Prince Antelope when he got off the boat. And Prince Antelope said, "The Island will be restored to a tropical

paradise inhabited by birds and bird people who sing but never conquer." And I had pictured that Manhattan would be seen on a screen above the performer's heads—she'd be sinking into the waters and the great luscious vegetation sprouting up and the island transformed to a tropical paradise. And you know, after I worked on it we had this performance at Newport, I thought to myself, you know, Richard, you really love Manhattan. It's been a haven for you. To escape to from Kentucky and Ohio. Do you really want to do an opera where every community in Iowa or Kansas or Arkansas would stage a performance of this and everybody will be applauding when on the screen they see Manhattan sinking in the water and birds coming with Prince Antelope?! The music comes first of course but since Purdy was not willing to make concessions with his text on behalf of the opera, it wasn't possible to complete it. Neither of us were professional librettists so that created practical problems.

Q: It sounds more like Purdy's vision of Manhattan, or what he'd like to do to it, to eliminate it.

A: O YES! You see James was direct with his emotions at all times. He got inside what he wanted to say. It wasn't thought up; it was an irruption! His art was often an expression of his deepest fantasies, or a fantastical expression of his unconscious longings, though it was always far more than only that for everything was always transfigured. I was encouraged to be totally myself from watching James. He was *mad*. He used to complain about so many things to me, too. But he always encouraged me to go right to work. He turned me on. You see, everyone in academia is doing what they think and what they're told they should be doing. They're servile and correct whereas he was *completely* unbridled. James wrote what he wanted to write. I learned so much from him about being totally free with myself, to have no inhibitions, to write whatever I wanted to write instead of what I thought I should. Being around him was liberating.

Q: In 1985, the Robert Page³² Singers commissioned "Ball," a work of yours based on one of Purdy's long poems. What was the nature of the commission? Interest in your work alone, or in both yours and Purdy's work?

A: Page didn't know who Purdy was. In fact, the reviewer of the performance referred to Purdy as a poet, and that's by the leading music critic of The (Cleveland) Plain Dealer, who certainly should have known Purdy's work at that time.

Q: Almost all of his major novels were published by then.

A: Well, not all of them. Anyway, Robert Page was a very fine choral director and well known all across the United States. He had heard "The Sea is Swimming Tonight" and was a great admirer of it and he wanted to have a piece like that very much.

Q: Are there other compositions based on Purdy's poetry that you plan to write

in the future?

A: I have at least five or six songs that have never been published. I have more songs published of James' poetry than any other composer. James also suggested poems for me to set. I did "Maud Muller" by Whittier.33 And he brought it to me and said, "Now this is ideal for you; consider it." And when I got a commission from a school in Tarrytown, New York, I did it. It's one of my better pieces and it's ten minutes in length. [Recites from memory: "Maud Muller, on a summer's day, raked the meadow sweet with hay." And it ends with these lines: "Of all sad words of tongue or pen, the saddest are these: "It might have been.' "

Q: Did he suggest any other poems for you to set to music?

A: Well, he told me about Jose Garcia Villa, who lived up the street from me at that time, and I set his poem no. 98,34 which has commas after every word. It's an abstract text I chose to work on. It had no title but I named it "Moonlight's Watermelon" after the first two words of the text. [Gives me a copy of the poem. We recite some of it:



Moonlight's, watermelon, mellows, light, Mellowly. Water, mellows, moon, lightly. Water, mellows, melons, brightly. Moonlight's, mellow, to, water's, sight. Yes, and, water, mellows, soon, Quick, as, mellows, the, mellow, moon. Water, mellows, as, mellows, melody, Moon, has, its, mellow, secrecy.

Q: Is it unusual for you to write songs based on abstract texts?

A: No. Virgil Thomson taught me how to do that. He was a brilliant composer of abstract texts through Gertrude Stein. Anyway, I got that commission from the University of Minnesota. [Sings the first two lines of "Moonlight's Watermelon" This is the way it looks. [Shows the sheet music] I loved it right away because here I was writing this work for this school, and the audience was sitting there looking at poem number 98 thinking, "Yes, this must be modern music." As I said, the poem had commas after every word, the syntax had been ruptured. I invented a form and structure and set the words for clarity. And the last one is another abstract poem. It's the one by Gertrude Stein, which is from "Stanzas in Meditation." [Asks me to read it aloud.



Why am I if I am uncertain reasons may inclose.
Remain remain propose repose chose.
I call carelessly that the door is open
Which if they can refuse to open
No one can rush to close.
Let them be mine therefor.

[Repeats one phrase: Let them be mine, therefor [I continue:

Everybody knows that I chose.

Therefor if therefor before I close.
I will therefor offer therefor I offer This.
Which if I refuse to miss can be miss is mine.
I will be well welcome when I come.
Because I am coming.
Certainly I come having come.
These stanzas are done.³⁵

See, I thought that would be very good for the ending of the cycle, and it was all done.

Q: Are they meant to be performed all together?

A: Well, they don't have to be sung together. They can be sung individually.

Q: Didn't Paul Sperry³⁶ sing some of your music?

A: Yes. When "The Sea is Swimming Tonight" was premiered, Paul was there. He came back stage at the end of the performance and exclaimed, "That section, 'Waterbird,' I want you to make me a song out of that." I replied, "The poem is too short for a solo, it's only four lines." So I went to Purdy and I said, "I need an additional four lines. Paul wants to commission a solo arrangement from the original choral version." James declared, "I feel that it's *complete*." He thought for a moment and added the purely gratuitous statement: "It took me all my life to write those four lines." That's the way James was!

Well, time passed, every now and then for several years Paul would visit me under the pretext of hearing what I'd been recently working on and after listening to everything, he'd say, "You know, Richard, I keep remembering "Waterbird." I want you to make a setting of that music." And I said, "Paul, I can't do it because the poem's too short, but I'll look into it." Finally, after his last visit I suddenly realized, if you don't set it to music with only the four lines, Richard, you're going to lose the commission. So I decided on repeating the

text with musical variation. "Waterbird" turns out to be one of my more popular songs. It's included in an international collection, and I would never have written it were it not for Paul Sperry's persistence and constant enthusiasm.

Q: Aside from his place in American Arts and Letters then, through your settings of his poems, Purdy has a place in American music as well.

A: Yes, and that's from where some people know his name. In all the early reviews of my settings of Purdy poems they say: JAMES PURDY THE POET. [Shocked laughter] James was insulted by that, and rightfully so. It's not to just say the poet, you should not only say the poet, you should say the American writer. And this is strange because very little of Purdy's poetry was published at that time—it's no different today. His poetry is practically unknown. He called them his night children, his bastards. I was setting them to music as they materialized, before they were even known to a public. Purdy wrote them for me and I was giving them something of my own blood. We each brought one another things.

Q: This is intriguing, because it indicates that there's a greater degree of awareness of Purdy's poetry in some music circles whereas, generally, he's not recognized as a poet in literature circles, if he's known as a poet at all. What do you think of the other composer's adaptations of Purdy's poems, such as those of Robert Helps?37

A: Robert Helps was a superb pianist and a lovely man, but I set words entirely different than he did. Helps's setting of what became The Running Sun poems was done as though it was one continuous piece, and the poems are essentially recited in his work, not sung. They're not fused with the music but in discord with it. It's like *Pierrot Lunaire*. I went through a whole process to arrive at those poems with James. They were not written as a complete work, but developed through our collaboration on each poem. In my settings, the melody and the words are wedded together, and each poem is an individual song. [Goes to the piano and plays "Evening Hours."



I miss you in the evening hours When all the perfume comes from the flowers Again in the morning your presence I lack And the milkman rattles inside his hack But starlight brings your face to me I'll never let you go The rain that falls on the garden wall Keeps me informed as if you had called Drop by drop the rain tells me all I need to know Of the world and its trees

You see I made a whole song out of that. [Starts playing again:



I miss you in the evening hours When all the perfume comes from the flowers

Again in the morning your presence I lack And the milkman rattles inside his hack—

They all have melodies. The words *sing*. The words carry them; it's not just a sound. Or an *idea*.

Q: So Helps's approach was more modernist and less melodic than yours?

A: O, definitely. Definitely. But he was a very fine composer of what he did. And he used to take Jimmie to all those concerts where he played avant-garde music, like Roger Sessions. James hated Roger Sessions. He loved music, but he was idiosyncratic and he had his favorite composers: Dvorak, Grieg, Elgar, Glazunov———etc.

Q: He expressed particular distaste for Bach, didn't he?

A: He *hated* Bach. When he told me that and I gave him a frown and a questioning look, he said, "But I'm not in music. I don't *have* to love Bach. I like what *I* like."

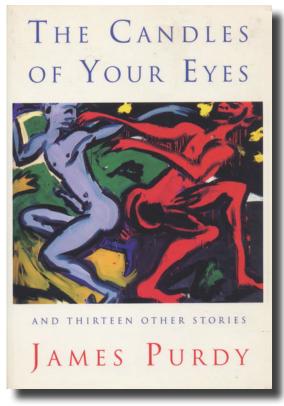
Q: What's perhaps even worse than the scarcity of the poems is that most of his books are now completely out of print, except for one or two by City Lights, but in the world of music, his work—

A: Is that the short stories?

Q: I'm not sure which are still in print, but they published Out with the Stars, The Candles of Your Eyes, and—.

A: Candles of Your Eyes is an American classic. Along with *Malcolm*, it should be as well-known as *Huckleberry Finn*.

Q: And those are the only ones that are in print now as far as I recall. Everything else is out of print—even all of the volumes that Carroll & Graf³⁸ reprinted just a few years ago. The last few times I visited St. Marks Books



and Book Culture, neither had any copies of Purdy's books. So, oddly, as his presence in the world of literature continues to fade, it is sustained in part in the world of music, because of your collaborations with him, as well as the collaborations other composers (Robert Helps, Hans-Jürgen von Bose, Alexander Strauch)39 made with him or his work. Do you see his poetry as fertile ground for other composers in the future?

A: Absolutely. For any talented composers. Those early poems are very different from the ones he wrote when he met Jan Erik Bouman, because through Jan Erik telling him stories about his life, he wrote those erotic poems. Everybody that came into his life served as material for his writing. He was using people as a creative stimulus all the time. Jan Erik was somebody who thought very highly of James and was responsible for publishing the collected edition of his poems. It's very difficult to find, but without him, we wouldn't even have that edition. I've read my copy so many times it's fallen to pieces! James was rather startled by its condition but I said to him, "I'm using your book all the time; I'm making songs of your poems!" If the books were ever destroyed, I could recite most of the poems from memory.

Q: So you would encourage up and coming composers of art songs to go to Purdy's poems for material?

A: Yes! And also established composers. I think some of them are so imaginative and fertile that they will. He believed in absolute, utter clarity, and that is beneficial to composers. I mean, they can look and see what I got out of them. Purdy's poetry can essentially be divided into two types, beginning with the early ones that I stimulated him to write—the passages of pure poetry which came from his automatic early morning writing exercises—and the later, mostly erotic ones that were provoked by his encounter with Jan Erik. Christopher Berg, the distinguished composer of many settings of Frank O'Hara's poems to music, has expressed interest in setting Purdy's poetry. 40

Q: Is there other recent work of yours that you'd like to mention?

A: In my latest collection *Ten Songs* I set a letter of Virgil Thomson's to music, and Purdy's "Lions have lain in grasses before." I simplified the title of that song to "Lions." I thought, well, his title is very nice and literary, but for this song it's better to just say: LIONS. James didn't like that. He thought the original title far more imaginative; I agreed with him, but for a song title it seemed too long. I said to him, "People are going to remember the song." [Plays the song:



Lions have lain in grasses before & pale hares in lonely lanes but the trees and the leaves

& the leaves and the trees are choicer and much more fair.

Abandon then lions ignore pale hares for with the trees and the leaves & the leaves and the trees You've found your choicest fair by far choicest and fair.

It's sort of mad. You have to have a good singer and pianist.

Q: It's almost Dadaesque.

A: Yes, well, I write different types of things too, not only sweet sounds.

NOTES

- ¹ I refer to the monographs by Chupack (1975), Adams (1976), and Profit (1998). The one by Schwarzschild (1968) was written too early to address this collaboration. Regarding the journal, see The James White Review, Vol. 17, No. 1 (winter 2000). The entirety of the issue is devoted to Purdy and quest edited by novelist Matthew Stadler, who explains in his note heading the issue that it "is meant as a small first step toward assessing the nature of [Purdy's] accomplishment and the reach of his influence, particularly among a generation of writers younger than Purdy who have discovered his work in recent years" (5).
- ² In the near future, composer Mahir Cetiz will write an essay on some of the musical adaptations of Purdy's texts for Hyperion.
- ³ James Keller, Musical America, May 1991, 52.
- ⁴ Hundley recounts what is obviously a basic principle of Thomson, for Thomson espouses almost precisely the same musical thought in his autobiography: "My theory was that if a text is set correctly for the sound of it, the meaning will take care of itself. And the Stein texts, for prosodizing in this way, were manna. With meanings already abstracted, or absent, or so multiplied that choice among them was impossible, there was no temptation toward tonal illustration, say, of birdie babbling by the brook or heavy hangs my heart. You could make a setting for sound and syntax only, then add, if needed, an accompaniment equally functional." Virgil Thomson, Virgil Thomson (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1966), 90.
- ⁵ Herbert Elwell, *The (Cleveland) Plain Dealer*, April 24, 1964.
- ⁶ This seems a tight-knit circle of its own, for Flanagan composed the music to Edward Albee's adaptation of Purdy's Malcolm. As Albee was working on the play, Ned Rorem wrote to Purdy to express interest in composing music for it, hoping that Purdy might advocate for him over Flanagan, despite Flanagan being Albee's official composer.
- ⁷ For Hundley's reflections on Milanov, see Richard Hundley, Opera Quarterly, Vol. 7, No. 1 (spring 1990): 108-111.
- ⁸ This record, which is also available on compact disc, features compositions by Richard Hundley, Paul Bowles, Virgil Thomson, Arthur Farwell, and Theodore Chanler. Five of the Hundley compositions are based on Purdy poems. The performers include Paul Sperry and pianist Irma Vallecillo. See Paul Sperry Sings Romantic American Songs (New York: Albany Records, 1995).
- ⁹ Roger Dettmer, Chicago American, July 19, 1964.
- 10 Ruth C. Friedberg, American Art Song and American Poetry, Vol. III: The Century Advances (New Jersey & London: The Scarecrow Press, 1987), 249.
- 11 Friedberg, Ibid., 250.
- ¹² Robert Offergeld, *The Diplomat*, January 1967.
- ¹³ Robert Finn, "Richard Hundley, non-conformist," The (Cleveland) Plain Dealer, June 3, 1983, 4.
- ¹⁴ James Vinson, ed., Contemporary Novelists: Second Edition (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1976), 1130.
- ¹⁵ R. Raymond Adams, Evening Express, July 28, 1971.
- 16 Friedberg, *Ibid.*, 261-262.
- 17 Ibid., 258.
- 18 James Purdy, The Running Sun (New York: n.p., 1971). This has no page numbers. I quote from

the title poem, the final poem in the book.

- 19 Finn, Ibid., 1983.
- ²⁰ These titles are all mostly devised by Hundley and reveal the degree of his inventiveness, the way he almost reconceives the poems he uses through such subtle changes. The cummings poem, while untitled, is known by its first line, "maggie and millie and molly and may," but Hundley changed it to "Seashore Girls" to distinguish it from other uses of the poem and because it sounded more provocative.
- ²¹ Friedberg, *Ibid.*, 254.
- 22 Ibid., 249.
- ²³ While Purdy's attention and energy was directed towards writing full length plays in the 90s, on his own Hundley continued to include Purdy poems when composing songs.
- ²⁴ For further material on Hundley's compositions, see Carol Kimball, Song: A Guide to Art Song Style and Literature (Wisconsin: Hal Leonard Corporation, 2006), and Victoria Etnier Villamil, A Singer's Guide to the American Art Song: 1870 - 1980 (Lanham, MD & London: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1993; 2004). Purdy mentions his collaboration with Hundley in Conversations with Writers II, Volume 1, eds. Stanley Ellin, John Baker (Michigan: Gale Research Co., 1978).
- ²⁵ Harold Knapik was an accomplished pianist and published several compositions, a book on musical style, Counterpoint (Chicago: Andreas Foundation, 1961), and a cookbook, Haute Cuisine without Help (New York: Galahad Books, 1971). He studied at the Ecole Normale de Musique in Paris. After moving there in the late 40s, he and his wife Virginia befriended Alice B. Toklas. When he returned to New York City, he opened Knapik Gallery. The manuscripts and other papers (1936-1979) of Harold and Virginia Knapik are held at Indiana University: http://www.indiana. edu/~liblilly/lilly/mss/html/knapik.html
- ²⁶ Aside from being a magnate of some stature, Osborn Andreas was also the author of at least two works of literary criticism: Henry James and the Expanding Horizon: A Study of the Meaning and Basic Themes of James's Fiction (Michigan: Greenwood Press, 1948), and Joseph Conrad: A Study in Non-Conformity (New York: Philosophical Library, 1959).
- ²⁷ Purdy published his poems for the first time in 1967; the book also included a short story. See James Purdy, An Oyster is a Wealthy Beast (Los Angeles: Black Sparrow Press, 1967). A selection of poems, each also accompanied by a short story, was published in the following two editions: Mr. Evening (Los Angeles: Black Sparrow Press, 1968), and On the Rebound (Los Angeles: Black Sparrow Press, 1970). The first book of Purdy's consisting solely of poems was his privately published limited edition, The Running Sun (New York: n.p., 1971).
- ²⁸ The Running Sun (New York: n.p., 1971).
- ²⁹ This of course is not "Big Poison," or Paul Glee Waner, the German-American right-fielder who played for the Pittsburgh Pirates, the Dodgers, the Braves, and the New York Yankees.
- ³⁰ Contemporary Authors Autobiography Series, Volume 1 (Michigan: Gale Research Company, The University of Michigan, 1984), 304.
- ³¹ I am referring here to James Purdy, Collected Poems (Amsterdam: Athenaeum—Polak & Van Gennep, 1990). This is out of print. Editions of it now run from between \$80 to nearly \$200 U.S. dollars. Jan Erik Bouman was born in Den Haag on 27 February 1947. He died last year in Utrecht on the 18th of September. Bouman was a close friend of Purdy's and printed several beautiful private editions of his work, including "Kitty Blue," "Brawith," The Forbidden House, etc.
- 32 Maestro Robert Page is a music director and conductor. He served as both for The Mendelssohn Choir for 26 years. He is the Director of Choral and Opera Studies and is the Paul Mellon University Professor of Music at Carnegie Mellon University. He has performed and recorded with The Cleveland Orchestra, the Pittsburgh Symphony, and the Philadelphia Orchestra amongst others.

- 33 John Greenleaf Whittier (December 17, 1807 September 7, 1892). American Quaker poet who supported the abolition of slavery in the United States.
- ³⁴ Jose Garcia Villa, Selected Poems and New, Introduction by Dame Edith Sitwell (New York: McDowell, Obolensky, 1958), 130.
- 35 Stanza LXXXIII. See Gertrude Stein, Stanzas in Meditation, and Other Poems, 1929-1933 (Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1956), 151.
- ³⁶ Paul Sperry is recognized as one of the finest interpreters of American music though his repertoire also includes everything from Monteverdi to Bach and Britten. He taught song interpretation and performance at Juilliard from 1984-2007. He also teaches at the Manhattan School of Music and at the Brooklyn College Conservatory of Music. Hundley regards Paul Sperry as the foremost authority on American art song. "He has sung more of it, launched more of it, and encouraged and commissioned more of it than any other artist." For more on Sperry, visit his website: http://www.paulsperry.net/
- ³⁷ Robert Helps (1928-2001) was an American composer and concert pianist who made recordings with the sopranos Bethany Beardslee and Phyllis Curtin and the violinists Isidore Cohen and Rudolf Kolisch. One of his most well known compositions is "Gossamer Noons," a work for soprano and orchestra that is based on Purdy's poem of the same name. For more info, see The Robert Helps web monument: http://helpsweb.free.fr/
- 38 Carroll & Graf reprinted Moe's Villa and Other Stories (2004), Eustace Chisholm and the Works (2004), Jeremy's Version (2005), Narrow Rooms (2005), and The House of the Solitary Maggot (2005). The latter was the first ever paperback edition. The cloth edition was published by Double Dav in 1974.
- ³⁹ Von Bose is a German composer from Munich who won numerous awards, including the Schneider-Schott Music Prize, Mainz (1988), the Ernst von Siemens Music Prize (1994), and others. He has written vocal and stage works, instrumental, chamber, and piano music. His opera based on Purdy's first novella, 63: Dream Palace, was performed at the Münchener Biennale on 6 May 1990. His homepage: http://www.musikerportrait.de/hansjuergenvonbose/home.php

Strauch is a German composer who has written works for orchestra and chamber orchestra, music-theater, as well as electronic and other music. Narrow Rooms, his opera based on Purdy's homonymous novel, was performed at the Akademietheater in the Prinzregententheater in Munich in the fall of 1996. His homepage: http://www.strauchcomposer.de/

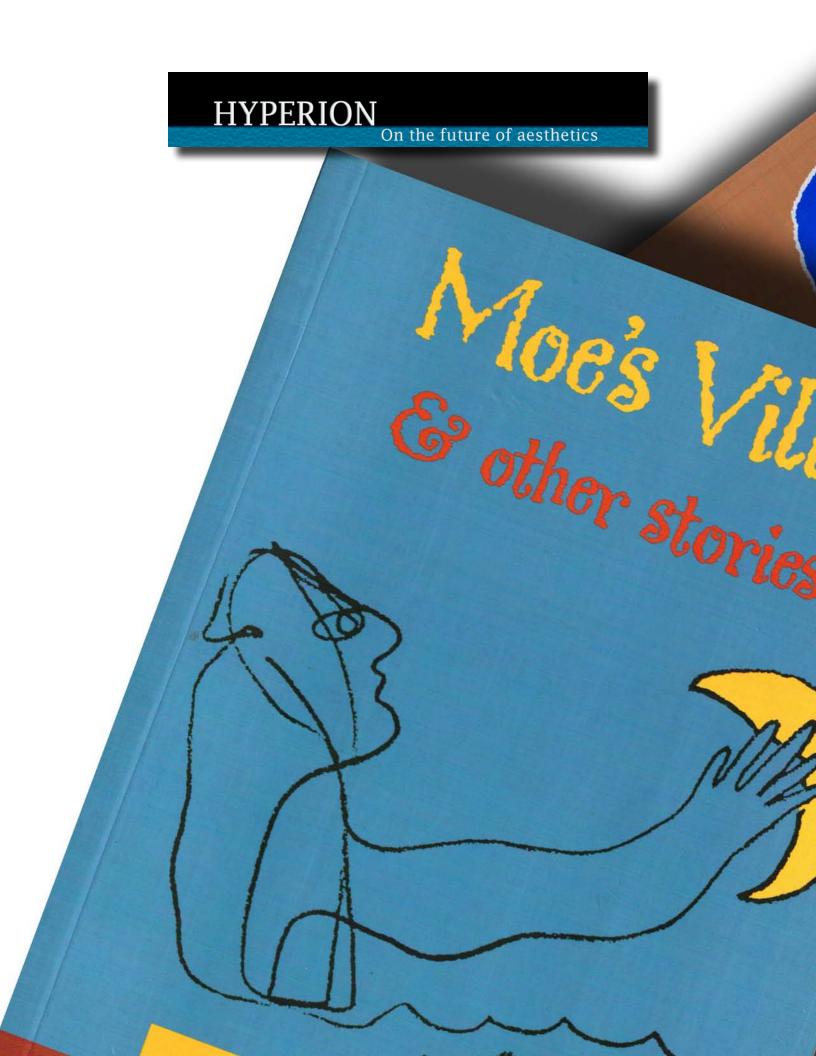
⁴⁰ For more info on composer Christopher Berg: http://www.liegnermanagement.com/berg.htm



Maura Del Serra Tentativi di certezza

Poems, 1999 – 2009 in Italian

available from the publisher, Marsilio: http://www.marsilioeditori.it/autori/libro/3170585-tentativi-di-certezza





lain Badiou, in Five Lessons on Wagner, argues that whatever else modernism may involve, it involves artistic experiments to see "whether a modern ceremony is possible." By this, Badiou means whether a community's mode of self-representation, without transcendence, can be successful, distinct from religion:



Why? Because a ceremony can be said to be a collectivity's or even a community's mode of self-representation, but transcendence is not an essential condition of it [in modernity]. In fact, we could say that the question posed [by modernism] is whether a ceremony without transcendence is possible . . . [W]hat is a ceremony without transcendence, a ceremony that is therefore not a means to something but the thing itself, the representation of the community in and of itself? (146).

Badiou never quite answers his question. But from what he does say I take "ceremony" to be the act of forming a field in which subjects-in-the making can repeatedly encounter and recognize one another as such. The stories and behaviors engaged in within the performative field, from symbolic and material exchanges and gift-giving, to dialogue or debate, to love-making, etc. arise from the structured field of ceremony. They function as explicit readings (like myths, legends, and folk tales) or implicit ones (like behaviors and passions). readings of the ceremonial field itself and the roles that are performed in it. We can think of ceremony then as the primordial basis for contemporaneous or later forms of representational and expressive media, such as celebrations, liturgy, music and dance, theater, literature, cinema, and so on. Purdy, like post-romantic writers generally, re-imagines this primordial scene of ceremony to create his fictional experiments, for the reason Badiou adduces, so that a community may come into being via its repeatedly performed self-recognitions.

Badiou has always accepted the idea that modernity is distinguished from traditional culture primarily by its lack of any comprehensive, generally acceptable world of the kind that religion, myth, and their ritual practices have made possible. Logics of Worlds, in its title and opening arguments, repeats this view.² Whether this is historically so for all cultures or even for western culture is not an issue for me here. Instead, I take it to be so for Purdy and

his generation of writers and artists in America. For, in this context, Purdy's final book of fiction can profitably be read as a collection of stories each and all of which test out possible answers to the question of what constitutes a ceremony without transcendence. The imaginary worlds of the stories emerging in the light of this question may be small, often limited to two, three or four people, but the real stakes inherent in their ritual interactions are symbolically large indeed.

What follows is a close and detailed reading of *Moe Villa's and Other Stories* specifically to trace the ceremonies that the stories enact in their minute particulars. Only by knowing and following the stories in their singular courses of development can they reveal just how Purdy is the master of ceremonies, a mastery he comes to share with his attentive readers. Moreover, because this final collection has not received the attention it deserves, I have accorded it, perhaps, more than what may be expected by some, for which I ask a bit of forbearance. My aim will be achieved if, as I rehearse the lineaments of his fictions, their performances of a ceremony without transcendence, a non-religious yet mythic ceremony, appropriate to modernity, emerges.

In "The White Blackbird," the near one-hundred-year-old Delia Matlock, one of three first-person narrators in the collection, characterizes the evening visits of her young godson, Clyde Furness, as a ritual bespeaking a bond they share over the secret that Delia's immensely valuable jewels have slowly disappeared over time, turning the inheritance she wants to bequeath him into a mere formality, without substance. Purdy's stories here and elsewhere often rely on this time-honored narrative convention. In fact, he uses traditional generic conventions the way a virtuoso performer uses once difficult classics, as run-through's for his really complex artistic intentions. Meanwhile, as Delia and Clyde talk, they drink wine, even though it is not particularly good and leaves a bitter aftertaste. Nonetheless, "it was the ceremony we both liked. We had to be doing something as we shared the secret."

This ceremonial dimension haunts the 12 stories in *Moe's Villa and Other Stories*. "Kitty Blue," the first fairy-tale-like story, tells of a cat with blue eyes who talks. After being lured away and pressed into performance in a circus, he returns to his owner, the greatest opera singer in the land. He sings to her and the prince each night one of the many songs he has learned that make up his "inexhaustible repertory" (25). Similarly, in "Easy Money," Mother Green, after being visited by a famous movie star, Bewick Freeth, who ends up staying with her and her attendant Viola, beings to live "in many different divisions of time" (50) when after Freeth's abandonment of her and his death, she inherits his wealth. The ritual of his goings and comings leads to this final glorious ascension to Easy Street.

If the first two stories have happy endings, "Reaching Rose" does not, to say

the least. Old Mr. Sendel's world has shrunk to a bar much like Hemingway's clean, well-lighted place, and Richard, the bartender, who serves his brandy to him every evening, like clockwork. Also, like clockwork, Mr. Sendel, at the same point in the evening, rises, walks solemnly and purposefully to the telephone booth, picks up the receiver, and pretends to dial and then talk to someone on the other end of the line. The sound of the dial tone is all that can be heard, if anyone were nearby or the door of the booth ever left open. As time goes on, Mr. Sendel comes to realize that this ceremony has more than the purpose of consoling his vanity in old age for the loss of virtually all connections:



As he talked into the phone he felt, if not quieter, more of one piece, whereas when he sat at the bar he would often feel like a pane of glass struck by an invisible hammer and so about to crash, not in one piece, but all over, so that the broken glass would fall into shimmering and tiny silver particles to the floor. Mr. Sendel now talked [into the phone] to prevent himself from collapsing like glass into smithereens. (54)

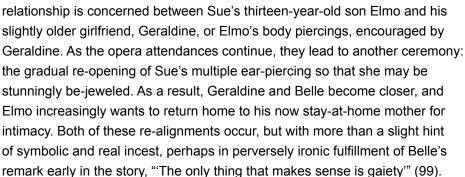
As long as he and Richard continue their routine, without commenting on it, all is right with this world, but as soon as Richard offers a sympathetic word and Mr. Sendel responds in kind, the ceremony has been ruined and nothing can restore it. Sendel ends by actually calling someone, a woman named Rose, with whom apparently he once had a relationship, and in the process, his world and his self suddenly at last disintegrate: "His head fell heavily against the pane of glass [of the phone booth] which all at once broke sickeningly into scattered bits and fragments" (64). One is tempted by the aptness of this image to say that Purdy's stories generally capture this moment of splintering, both in dread anticipation and in dire realization.

The next six stories ("Gertrude's Hand," "Entre Dos Luces," "Geraldine," "Bonnie," "No Stranger to Luke," and "A Little Variety, Please") for the most part trace the improvised, provisional, and extremely fragile nature of the ceremonies their characters invent and perform. Sonny, the apparent hand in "Gertrude's Hand," only bears repeated witness in fact to Alda, Gertrude's cook (another hand?), vainly attempt to rid herself of her dependent role vis-àvis her dead mistress, by giving away or spending all the wealth she inherited. As Alda reports about the archetypal attempt, the Church she gives it too, refuses the gift, "considering the source" (84), and neither she nor Sonny can figure out if Alda or Gertrude is meant.

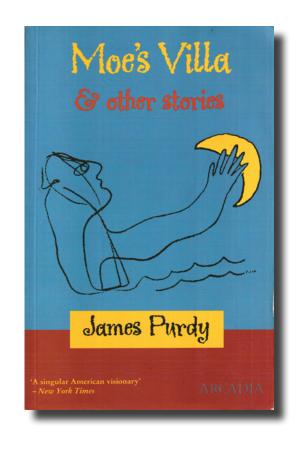
Meanwhile, "Entre Dos Luces" ("In the Twilight"), tells how Rico and Isidro

drive their landlord, Felipe, crazy through the best of intentions. Having killed Felipe's rare and expensive birds by inadvertence, they rob a local pet store and replace them as he sleeps. When Felipe awakes, he is sure that the devil has resurrected them, sending them back from hell, because soon his satanic majesty will bring them and their owner back to the eternal flames. Found with his throat cut, razor next to him on the floor, and the hapless Rico and Isidro on the run (due to their robbery stunt), the authorities file murder charges against them, as the narrator, Isidro, writes his letter denying they did the murder and offering extenuating circumstances for their act of theft. The writing of the letter ceremonially captures the macabre madcap antics of this well-meaning dynamic duo very well: [They like the birds or Felipe] "are crazier than the devil on Christmas" (93).

"Geraldine" tells of a foursome soon-to-become threesome that attends opera no matter what the weather or other circumstances might be. Sue is progressively estranged from her mother Belle, especially after the latter advises her to "let what will be be" (95) as far as the



"Bonnie" recounts the narrator Danny's once happy marriage to the title character, which leads to a bitter divorce and then to a new purpose in life. As Bonnie gains incredible amounts of weight, Danny seeks escape from this unsatisfying and distasteful union, so that this situation gives the lie to his initial avowal that even had she been "not a human being at all" (107), he would have loved her as greatly as anyone could be loved. Sometime after their divorce, Danny sees Bonnie looking even better than ever, sitting on a bench, with a small bird nearby. One day when he returns, Danny finds only the bird, which a passerby recognizes as a rare dove worth a great deal of money and wants to buy it. Danny refuses to sell this precious beauty, saying "This is a dove . . . placed in safekeeping with me against the owner's return" (114). The sound of this conclusion has a biblical ring, and marks the establishment of a new ceremony for Danny, replacing his marriage and its divorce.



"No Stranger to Luke" recounts how, bit by bit, Luke realizes that neither his younger brother Vance, nor some stranger has been stealing small sums of money from his mother's kitchen drawer, but it has been his best friend, Dan Schofield. The dramatic conversations about the thefts, which reminds us that Purdy is a playwright of considerable achievement, perform the ritual of discovery as a representative self-discovery of the rational limits of love, when Dan climactically blurts out: "I wished someone loved me enough to steal. . . from me" (130). Dan is telling Luke that his cozy situation with his family, especially with his mother, is too cozy, and Purdy is telling us that the thefts create the lack in the family unit which can lead Luke out into the world, looking for other than family members to love. Dan, with his financial riches—he doesn't need the money he steals—needs to need, in his way, as much as Luke or any of us does. Lacking lack he must steal from others who appear likewise.

Of course, as its title may suggest, "A Little Variety, Please," the last of this central group of stories, breaks this disheartening pattern, as it is about a big Green Dragon, whose only pleasure is in scaring little girls. The Green Dragon falls in love with Alice Drummond, an adopted waif, not treated well by her "family." When sulky or anxious, first the mother slaps her, then the father cuffs her, until after repetitions of this ritual, Alice is knocked out. Like "Kitty Blue," the first story in the collection, this centrally_placed tale, more serious in its details, ends happily, with Alice being rescued, the Green Dragon being reformed, and the new odd couple flying off to live in the Everglades after their infernal love has burnt down the Drummond house. Such "firecrackering about" (134), as they call it, is the new ceremony of their love.

Just as "The White Blackbird" defines such creatures (indicated by the title) as "sports of nature" (164), so, too, all fantastic phenomena (Green Dragons and ordinary little girls in love), or the other invented and performed ceremonies in these stories, sport with nature. Purdy in his style generally (as well as his content) is a most ceremonial writer. Despite the occasional longer, aria-like passages of hypotactic sentences (reminiscent more of Hawthorne than of Henry James), Purdy's style breaks into short paragraphs, usually of two or three sentences, sometimes even just one paratactic sentence long (or really, short), and the paragraphs also come usually in threes, as in this opening to "Reaching Rose."



Mr. Sendel in his late years spent the entire evening in his favorite saloon, seated in an imposing manner on the center barstool from where he could survey very close to Richard, the bartender, all that went on. After a few drinks which he sipped very slowly, Mr. Sendel would gaze absentmindedly at the telephone booth nearest him.

Then giving another taste to his drink, leaving it more than half full, he would make a rather stately progress to the booth, partly closing the door. He would take down the receiver and hesitantly begin speaking into the mouthpiece.

Actually, Mr. Sendel was talking only to himself. He would talk for a few minutes into the silent phone, explaining how worried he was and how despairing it was at his time of life when all or almost all those dear to him have departed. (53)

While the particularities of style here express and perform their subject Mr. Sendel pretty well, the overall triadic movement of the paragraphs accounts for the mock waltz-like feel of Purdy's writing generally. The first paragraph magisterially posits an entire world from its character's point of view, while the second paragraph qualifies; even as it elaborates that world but in a way that raises critical suspicion (why that "hesitantly"?),whereas the third paragraph negates that qualification or modifying negation, that is, it negates the negation, thereby affirming concrete reality over fantasy. Indeed, this paragraph discloses the false appearance of that world and its central subject, opening up the sad underlying reality of things. The pace of a Purdy fiction, short story or novel; is not solemn, but it is ceremonial, whether one wants to make any overt analogies with the progress of the dialectic or not.

The final three stories in Moe's Villa and Other Stories, "The White Blackbird," "Brawith," and the title story ("Moe's Villa" is really a short novel), flesh out to the full Purdy's imagination of ceremony. The first of these tales dramatizes how the loss of Delia Mattlock's jewels over time becomes a shameful secret for her that she willingly shares only with her godson, Clyde Furness, to whom she plans to leave whatever she has left of her once great wealth, if only she can get herself to sign her will. As Clyde and Delia grow close, making their evenings together into a rich ceremony of wine-drinking and secret-sharing. they finally get up the courage to check out the attic room, many steep flights up to where the jewels once were. There, they discover what they take to be a clue, a white feather of a large bird. Placing this feather on the music stand, it becomes the central symbol of their bond, veritably their shared fetish, which their ceremonial singing celebrates each night. Into this harmonious intimacy breaks Dr. Noddy, whose very presence and then accidental discovery of the secret of the missing jewels destroys this virtually sacred intimacy between Delia and Clyde. Now, Delia half-wonders aloud if Clyde has stolen the jewels. and Clyde can barely contain his anger at all at being accused. The presence of this male authority figure, as Freud or Lacan might predict, negates their symbolically incestuous union. Dr. Noddy, himself once accused of wrongdoing as a hypnotist, cannot believe that the white feather means a bird has

stolen the jewels.

In any event, Dr. Noddy determines that, in the middle of a terrible winter storm, on the edge of the Canadian Badlands, he will make his way to the Bell Tower, where Clyde, under Dr. Noddy's hypnotic spell, confesses he has seen large white birds circling against the looming darkness of this terrible monument to local suicide and accidental death. For, it must be at the Bell Tower, Dr. Noddy conjectures, these rare white blackbirds are to be found. These "sports of nature," as he has explained, are well-known for their fascination with jewels and other shiny objects, and so, concluding his speculation, may have taken the jewels from the dilapidated attic back to their roost in the Bell Tower. While they await the good doctor's return, Delia and Clyde have it out about the jewels, ruining what remains of their relationship, in three deft strokes:



But Clyde, for God in heaven's sake, you can't believe that I regard you as . . ." But I could not finish the sentence. Clyde finished it for me.

"That I am the white blackbird, Delia? For that is what you think in your inmost being."

Then I cried out, "Never, never has such a thought crossed my mind." (169)

When Dr. Noddy does return, all the jewels are returned, the existence of the white blackbirds confirmed, and Delia grieves for the lost ceremony of evenings with her godson. But then, a bit later, inexplicably, for a moment, she feels relief at the end of her tortuous doubt, as the jewels are locked up in "a famous safety fault in Montreal." As we last see her, she falls back into a renewed mourning for the lost ceremony of her love:



Then for the first time in years I felt a kind of relief that would have been, if not happiness, a kind of benediction or thanksgiving, had I not been so aware I had lost forever my evenings with my godson. (174)

"Brawith," the penultimate story about which I have previously written,4 evokes by its title character resonances of ancient heroes. He is a returned war veteran, but from what war we are never told. He has been severely wounded, suffering such massive internal injuries that his insides are constantly making sounds that absorb his attention; and that of anyone else within earshot. We are treated to a detailed, step-by-step anatomy of its deterioration, as his grandmother, Moira, living outside the village of Flempton, takes care of him, against the objections of the hospital doctors and her few relatives and acquaintances. So bad is he hurt that he must carry around a roll of toilet paper everywhere with him, as he leaks the different fluids his body can still barely contain. He attaches pieces of the toilet paper to the leaking spots, until by the end he is entirely covered with it.

As Brawith's suffering grows worse, she moves her bed near his, in the great room with the big fireplace, and then when she discovers he has lodged himself in its chimney, his loud moans escaping up it, she holds him in place, making sure as his strength ebbs, he obtains his wish to die there, for some inexplicable reason all his own. The last moment of his life combines in its bodily imagery life, death, birth, menstruation, miscarriage, excretion, and doubtless more, all of it radically abject and abjecting, in the extreme:



He was not so much hemorrhaging as bursting from inside

Then she heard him scream, but she realized that the many voices and sounds which had been audible within his body were moving up now to his larynx and causing his vocal chords to vibrate as if he were speaking. Then she fancied he did speak the one word or part of an unfinished phrase: 'Deliver! repeated again and again: 'Deliver.'

Then like a flock of birds the terrible noise seemed to rush over her head deafening her. She fell, losing her hold on his legs, and as she did so an immense shower of blood and intestines covered her, and his body entirely wrapped in toilet paper from head to toe fell heavily on her. (187-188)

That Moira is the recipient of this blood and mire must make us recall her own thought right before the final crisis that "she had never loved anybody with such complete absorption" (184). Such black humor truly trumps itself, confirming Brawith's last gesture of pointing toward the roll of toilet paper as the definitive manifestation of "a kind of queer majesty" (187), as much Purdy's own, as his character's, if not more.

Purdy's fiction overall, as here, etches repeated moments of such "queer

majesty," often fully in the sense of the word "queer" today, but as often, too, in the sense of this passage from "Brawith." From "smithereens" in "Reaching Rose" to multiple voices from all the stories summarily judged here, we recognize the performance of a last judgment in this final scene of total expenditure.

Whether we understand the quest for a modern ceremony, a ceremony without transcendence, in terms of psychoanalysis and the closeness of obsessive-compulsive behaviors and religious practices, or, in terms of the vision of mythic sources of present-day socially symbolic structures, or, in terms of ideological institutions attempting to suture subjects to their purposes, or, whatever framework you use to render ceremony that would be a self-representation of a community, however large or small, the formation of ceremony, its ritual repetitions, its veritable liturgical power, we also must remember, requires story to give an account of it. We understand from the anthropological studies of pre-modern peoples that patterns of behavior inspire stories to account for them, and in our modern world where traditional stories and long-established patterns have disintegrated or exploded over the last few centuries, each person or couple or small group must repeatedly create their stories for their practices while trying to decipher those of others, as well as their own. Purdy, in "Brawith," takes us to the ground-zero, the zero degree, of this modern situation, which the other stories in this collection reflect upon, adumbrate, critique, or perfect by performing the human understanding of ceremony, however fugitively.

"Moe's Villa," the short novel that concludes the collection, is ultimately a savagely comic version of the quest for modern ceremony and its many discontents. Vera Hawley and her son Rory live in a forty-room mansion outside of town, but she is without much financial support. Once presumably married, she and her son survive basically on the kindness of strangers. That is, Vera has many better-off gentleman friends, who supply her with gifts and other wherewithal to support herself and her son. Dr. Sherman Cooke, the prime local example of this clan of callers, though married to Mamie Resch, another but actually wealthy older woman, spends nearly 20 years calling on Vera. Unfortunately, more than once Rory, when a mere boy, discovers Vera in the arms of Dr. Cooke or another of her lovers.

Such original trauma in witnessing the primal scene, plus the subsequent pattern of indulgence and neglect that Vera puts Rory through, results in his being a behavioral problem in school and elsewhere, to say the least. At age fourteen, Rory leaves home to live with Moses Swearingen, the other wealthy scion in the area, who owns an even bigger, finer place, nicknamed "Moe's Villa" by the town folk, where gambling and drinking go on and many teenage boys like Rory are waiters and other kinds of workers. Moses, a handsome blond and blue-eyed man in his prime, has a dual reputation as both a good

man who takes in runaways and gives them jobs and not quite a gentleman, especially given his Shawnee blood. Moses, or Moe as he is alternatively called, is more of an older brother figure, than a surrogate symbolic father. The story details and dramatizes the various repetitive behaviors within each establishment and between them, all of which are familiar from other Purdy's tales, including those herein. What is most important, however, is not this summary power of "Moe's Villa" but how these patterns are temporarily interrupted.

In an attic room, Vera's faithful companion and attendant, Frau Storeholder, finds a gift from Vera's erstwhile husband Pete Driscoll sent long ago to his son Rory for his birthday. Looking in the package, everyone now believes that unlike what Vera thought it contained, mere marbles hurtfully reminiscent of their favorite father-son game, the package holds precious gems, rubies in fact.

Rory's presence eventually leads to the mysterious healing of Moe from an old gunshot wound (the deeply lodged slug finally works its way out, but almost causes Moe's death in the process), Dr. Cooke attempts to discern if the jewels are real. Failing to do so, Vera comes to Moe's Villa, an unheard of gesture, to ask Moe to take care of her son and to decide about the authenticity of the rubies. Moe calls in a half-blind Russian gem expert—as I said, this is savagely comic story—by the name of Alexander Oblonsky. "rich as Croesus" (260) and once a retainer to the late Tsarina. By the time he shows up, old and wheezing, as well has half blind, we know Oblonsky may or may not be who he says he is. Nonetheless, in an elaborately staged performance more like a magician act than a gem expert's analysis, Oblonsky proves, by eating one of them, that supposed jewels are no rubies: They are candies, which via the action of time, have hardened so that they require a little hot water to soften up, but can still be ingested now quite safely, if not so tastily. Since everyone in the story (and especially Rory) underscore as in a refrain how this or that aspect of the world has "eaten me up" (206), this climax is more than fitting, it is hilariously, albeit bitterly, funny. Though Vera wonders whether had the gems been real and had she given them at the time to Rory perhaps her relationship with her son would be different, that nostalgic illusion is dismissed as Rory's bond with Moses grows ever closer. "Time—the arbiter" (208) is a phrase passed between Frau Storeholder and Eli Jagua when, substituting for Vera, she meets with Rory's high school principal because of the boy's chronic truancy. It could fairly well serve as this story's and all the stories' definitive motto.

Badiou's theoretical focus, as presented briefly at the opening of this essay, is on the search for a viable form of modern ceremony so that a collective of whatever size or shape more than the mythical bare one can become a community—capacious, diverse, non-coercive—by recognizing itself

repeatedly and correctively in the critical clarity of the ceremony's artistic performances. This theoretical focus certainly does not pretend to exhaust the traits of modernism or modernity, but it has allowed us to see how Purdy, in his visionary turn, is a quintessential master of ceremonies in a major literary sense precisely because he so expertly creates them in all their ineradicable detail.

NOTES

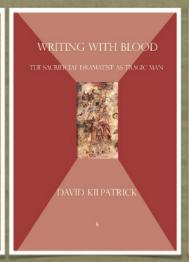
¹ Alain Badiou, Five Lessons on Wagner, tr. Susan Spitzer (New York and London: Verso, 2010), 146.

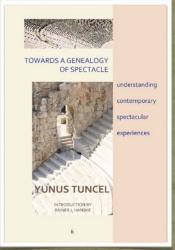
² Alain Badiou, Logics of Worlds, tr. Alberto Toscano (New York and London: Continuum, 2009).

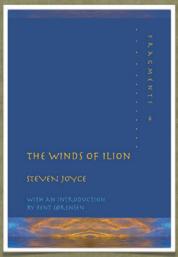
³ James Purdy, Moe's Villa and Other Stories (New York: Carroll & Graf Publishers, 2004), 145. All further citations to this text will be made parenthetically.

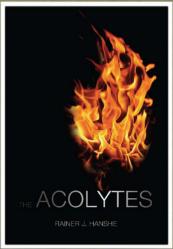
⁴ See the essay "Bringing Out the Terror: James Purdy and the Culture of Vision" in Daniel T. O'Hara, Visions of Global America and the Future of Critical Reading (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2009).





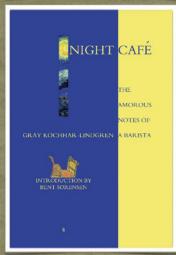


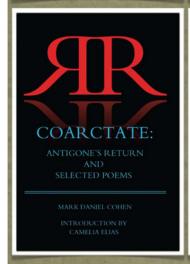


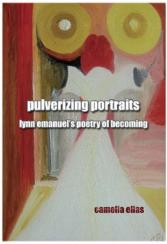


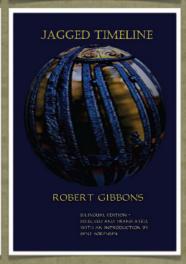


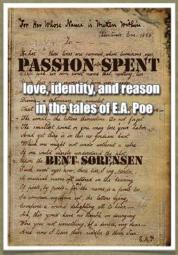












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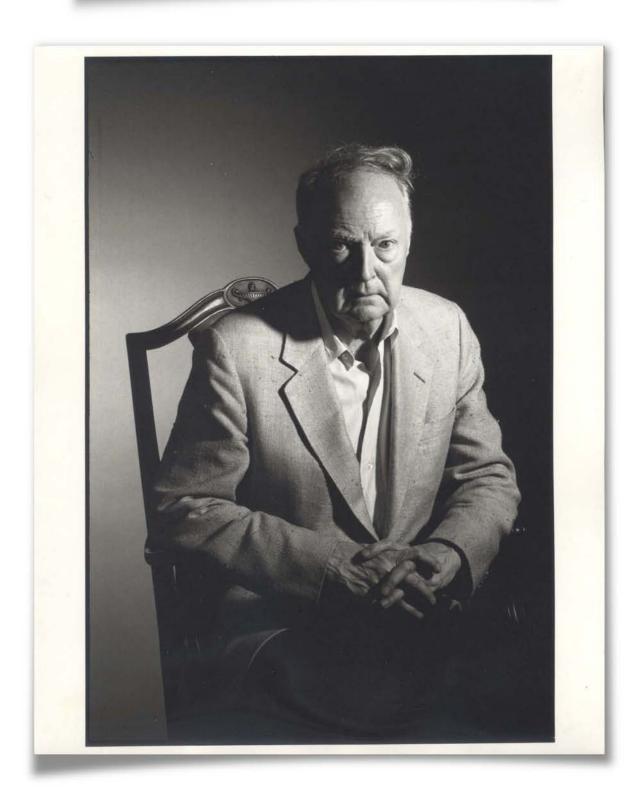
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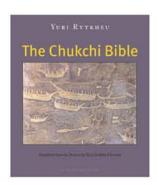
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Blue tears were oozing out
Through the cracks of his gaze.
His eyes,
The horizon waves,
Were contoured by an inner flood
With the high tides of his blood.
His pen was giggling in high altitude
Scratching the scab of a forgotten . . . .
Incising yet enticing . . .
Valleys were delicately engraved
Through the crumpled skin of his maze.
His hands,
The stalactites.
Were drawing the landscape of his faces
With the words peeling the fog off of his pages.
His river was dancing the endless waltz
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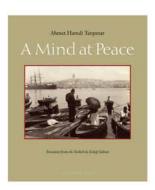
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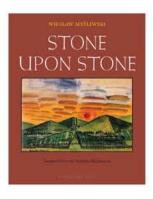
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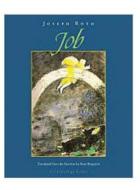
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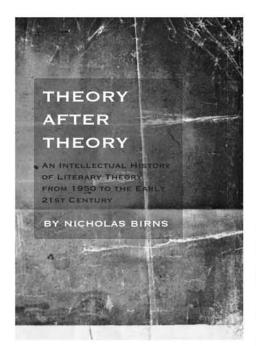


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"Theory After Theory is a beautifully organized, accessibly written, and helpful survey of a challenging body of material. Whether you are a newcomer to literary theory or a more seasoned reader looking to refresh your memory or connect the dots, this book offers generous assessments and valuable insights at every turn. With illuminating examples and useful summaries, the book sets out to explain why literary theory had the 'massive, seismic impact' upon the field that it had. Although it may be an impossible task to describe that impact in a single volume, Theory After Theory comes as close to doing so—and doing it admirably well—as any source I have yet encountered. That it does so with breathtaking clarity makes it an invaluable book." — Devoney Looser, University of Missouri - Columbia

Theory After Theory provides a global overview of developments in literary theory after 1950. It is intended both as a handbook for readers to learn about theory and an intellectual history of the recent past in literary criticism for those interested in seeing how it fits in with the broader culture. Accessible but rigorous, this book provides a wealth of historical and intellectual context that allows the reader to make sense of recent theoretical movements.

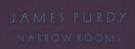
Nicholas Birns is Associate Teaching Professor of Literature at Eugene Lang College, The New School, New York. He has published widely on postcolonial and modernist literature.



MALCOLM













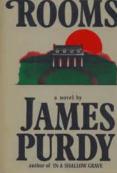


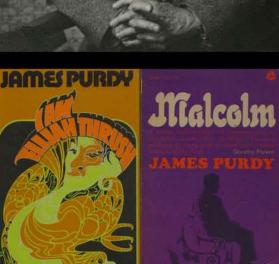


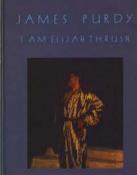










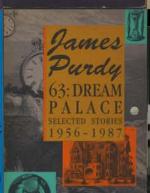






On the future of aesthetics





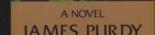












James Pulis V

Bidiography

Compiled by Rainer J. Hanshe

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NOVELS

Malcolm. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1959.

The Nephew. New York: Farrar, Straus & Cudahy, 1960.

Cabot Wright Begins. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1964.

Eustace Chisholm & the Works. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1967.

Jeremy's Version. New York: Doubleday & Company, 1970. Subtitled "Part One of Sleepers in Moon-Crowned Valleys."

I Am Elijah Thrush. New York: Doubleday & Company, 1972.

The House of the Solitary Maggot. New York: Doubleday, 1974. Sequel to Jeremy's Version; part two of the Sleepers in Moon-Crowned Valleys trilogy. First paperback edition, New York: Carroll & Graf, 2005.

In a Shallow Grave. New York: Arbor House, 1975.

Narrow Rooms. New York: Arbor House, 1978.

Mourner's Below. New York: Viking Press, 1981. Part three of the Sleepers in Moon-Crowned Valleys trilogy.

On Glory's Course. New York: Viking Press, 1984.

In the Hollow of His Hand. New York: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1986.

Garments the Living Wear. San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1989.

Out with the Stars. London: Peter Owen, 1992. San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1992.

Gertrude of Stony Island Ave. London: Peter Owen, 1997. New York: William Morrow & Company, 1998; 1999.

NOVELLAS & SHORT STORIES

63: Dream Palace: A Novella. New York: William-Frederick Press, 1956. First edition, privately published. Covers designed by James Purdy.

Don't Call Me by My Right Name and Other Stories. New York: William-Frederick Press, 1956. First edition, privately published. Illustrations by James Purdy.

63: Dream Palace. London: Victor Gollancz, 1957. First commercially published edition, which included the material from both editions above. Published by New Directions in 1957 as Color of Darkness.

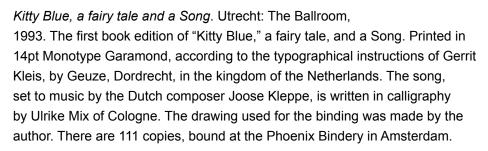
Children is All. New York: New Directions, 1961. Also contains two plays: Children is All and Cracks.

Sleep Tight. New York: Nadja Editions, 1979. Limited edition of the short story of 100 numbered copies of which 26 are lettered and reserved. This story would later appear in Candles of Your Eyes.

The Candles of Your Eyes. New York: Nadja Editions, 1985. Limited edition of 226 copies of the short story of the same name. Original illustration by Ed Colker.

The Candles of Your Eyes and Thirteen Other Stories. New York: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1987.

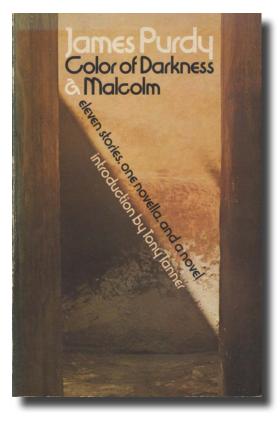
63: Dream Palace: Selected Stories 1956-1987. Los Angeles: Black Sparrow Press, 1991. Design by Barbara Martin. Edition is published in paper wrappers. There are 300 hardcover trade copies. 150 copies have been numbered and signed by the author and numbered copies have been hand-bound in boards by Earle Gray each with an original drawing by James Purdy.



Reaching Rose. New York: Avalon Press, 1994. Single short story in limited numbered edition, cloth with frontispiece by Purdy. Printed simultaneously with a Dutch translation.

Brawith. Utrecht: Hugin & Munin, 1999. Handset in Monotype Walbaum 16 pt. with 3pt. leading and printed for Hugin & Munin in the Ballroom on Zerkall Edelweiß in 75 numbered copies. Eighteen copies (I-XVIII) were bound and 57 (1-57) sewn by Philipp Janssen at the Phoenix Bindery. Limited edition of the short story that would later appear in the collection *Moe's Villa*.

Moe's Villa & Other Short Stories. London: Avon Books, 2000. New York: Carroll & Graf, 2004.



POEMS

An Oyster is a Wealthy Beast. Los Angeles: Black Sparrow Press, 1967. Limited edition of the short story "Scrap of Paper" and 11 poems of 250 copies; 50 copies numbered 1-50 bound in boards, each hand illustrated by the author, and 200 copies numbered 51-250 sewn in wrapper, all signed by the author. In addition, 4 special copies, for the publisher, author, printer, and binder.

Mr. Evening: A Story & Nine Poems. Los Angeles: Black Sparrow Press, 1968. Limited edition of 300 numbered copies sewn in wrappers and 75 numbered copies hand-bound in boards, each with an original drawing by James Purdy. In addition, 4 special copies, for the publisher, author, printer, and binder. Designed and printed by Saul and Lillian Marks at the Planten Press, Los Angeles.

On the Rebound: A Story & Nine Poems. Los Angeles: Black Sparrow Press, 1970. Limited edition of 300 copies hand-bound in boards by Earle Gray all numbered and signed by the author. 26 copies, lettered, signed by the author. In addition, 4 special copies, for the publisher, author, printer, and binder. Printed in Santa Barbara by Noel Young. Design by Barbara Martin.

The Running Sun. New York: n.p., 1971. A limited edition of 16 poems of 300 copies, each of which is signed and numbered by the author. Only around 200 copies exist as the remaining were spoiled.

Sunshine is an Only Child. New York: Aloe Editions, 1973. Limited edition consisting of 150 signed copies, of which 26 are lettered and reserved. Edition designed and printed by Ronald Gordon at The Oliphant Press in New York.

[She Came Out of the Mists of Morning]. New York: Bellevue Press, 1975. Printed at the Geryon Press. Poem published as a limited edition postcard.

Lessons & Complaints. New York: Nadja Editions, 1976. A limited edition of the poem of 174 numbered copies of which 26 are lettered and reserved. Also listed as 1978 in some bibliographies.

I Will Arrest the Bird that has No Light. Northridge: Santa Susana Press, 1977. Limited edition of the poem. Printed by Pall Bohne on the Shniedewend Washington hand-press. Edition of 100 copies, numbered and signed.

Did I Say Yes, Did I Say No. New York: Bellevue Press, 1978. Prose poem. Broadsides number 20. Printed by Stuart McCarty.

Don't Let the Snow Fall: a poem; Dawn: a story. Ed. by Andre Bernard. Utrecht: Sub Signo Libelli, 1985. A limited edition of 35 copies containing two original lithographs by Chris Buursen, bound in half Nigerian goat leather. 2 copies, containing the two lithographs and an etching by Chris Buursen, bound in full blue morocco. 38 copies hand-sewn in wrappers.

The Brooklyn Branding Parlors. New York: Contact II Publications, 1986. Limited edition of 1000 copies with 26 signed by author and artist. Contains seven poems by Purdy and accompanying art work by Vassilis Voglis.

Are You in the Winter Tree? Utrecht: Sub Signo Libelli, 1987. 14 copies, lettered A to N, printed on Imperial Japon. 16 copies, numbered 1 to 16, printed on Zerkall-Bütten. These 30 copies are bound and contain an original lithography by Chris Buursen. 35 sewn copies. numbered 17 to 51.

Collected Poems. Amsterdam: Athenaeum-Polak & Van Gennep, 1990. Published in both a hardback and paperback edition. The hardback has a painting of Purdy on the inside cover.

The Blue House: Forbidden Poems. Utrecht: Hugin & Munin, 2004. This book consists of 21 poems, mainly written between 1988 and 2001, and, in addition, three poems from an early publication in the Italian literary quarterly, Botteghe Oscure, spring 1959. Handset in Romanée 12 point and Cancelleresca Bastarda 16 point. In the autumn of 2004 80 copies were printed on Zerkall-Bütten by Jan Erik Bouman and René Hesselink. 18 copies were bound (I-XVIII), 62 (I-62) sewn by the Phoenix Bindery.



Mr. Cough Syrup and the Phantom Sex. december 8.1 (1966): 175-177.

Wedding Finger. New Directions in Prose and Poetry 28 (1974): 77-98.

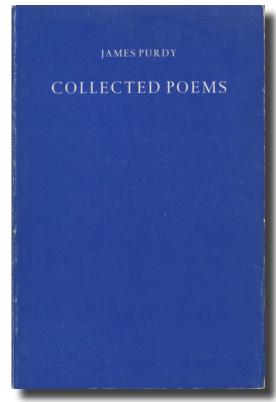
True. New Directions in Prose and Poetry 34 (1977): 140-145.

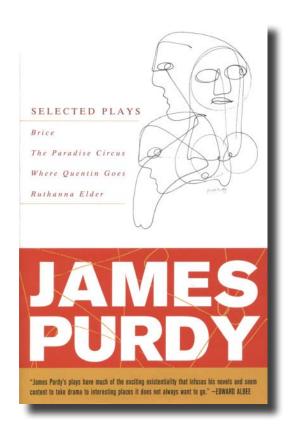
A Day After the Fair: A Collection of Plays and Short Stories. New York: Note of Hand Publishers, 1977. The three plays in this volume include A Day After the Fair, Wedding Finger, and True.

Now. New Directions in Prose and Poetry 41 (1980): 98-105.

Proud Flesh. Northridge, CA: Lord John Press, 1980. The four plays contained in this volume include Strong, Clearing in the Forest, Now, and What Is It, Zach?

Scrap of Paper and The Berry Picker. Los Angeles: Sylvester & Orphanos, 1981. Limited edition.





Adeline: A Short Play. Second Coming 10 (1-2) (1981): 6-20.

Adeline and Wonderful Happy Days. Conjunctions 2 (spring/summer 1982): 60-83.

The Berry-Picker. New Directions in Prose and Poetry 45 (1982): 157-165.

Heatstroke. Dirty Bum: A Magazine 1 (fall 1987): 14-26.

Immaculate Housekeeping. Dirty Bum: A Magazine 2 (winter 1987/1988): 22-25.

Souvenirs. City Lights Review 2 (1988): 64-70.

Joker in the Pack. Red Bass 13 (1988): 7-9.

Bright Summer Stars. Lord John Ten: 10: A Celebration. Ed. by Dennis Etchinson. North Ridge, CA: Lord John Press, 1988. 13-22.

Band Music. City Lights Review 9 (1990): 103-113. This one-act was performed at Theater for the New City in 1990 with Sheila Dabney and Crystal Field.

In the Night of Time & Four Other Plays. Amsterdam: Athenaeum-Polak & Van Gennep, 1992. The five plays contained in this volume included the title play, Ruthanna Elder, Enduring Zeal, The Rivalry of Dolls, and Paradise Circus.

Selected Plays. New York: Ivan R. Dee, 2009. The four plays contained in this volume include *Brice*, *The Paradise Circus*, *Where Quentin Goes*, and *Ruthanna Elder*.

ADAPTATIONS: THEATER, FILM, TV, RADIO & MUSIC

Albee, Edward. *Malcolm*. New York: Atheneum, 1966. A play adapted from the novel by Purdy.

Merrick, Gordon. *The Nephew*. 1968. An adaptation of Purdy's novel for BBC television.

Hundley, Richard. "Come Ready and See Me: Medium Voice and Piano." New York: n. p., 1971. A musical score based on Purdy's poem of the same name.

Purdy, James. *I am Elijah Thrush*. A dramatic rendering of the first 40 pages of Purdy's novel on WBAI radio (99.5 FM). Duration: 1:23:50. The cast included Purdy as Elijah Thrush, Stephen Varble as Eugene Bellamy, Robert Christian as Albert Peggs, and the special participation of Dame Hermione Gingold as

Millicent DeFrayne. Produced by Geoffry Hendricks with executive production by Mimi Anderson. Directed by Stephen Varble. Music composed by Robert Helps and performed by James Fennimore. Recording and technical production by David Rapkin. Broadcast on Friday 3 August 1973 at 10:30 AM. Rebroadcast on Monday the 6th at 2:00 PM.

Helps, Robert. "The Running Sun." New York: C.F. Peters, 1976. Soprano and piano. Based on Purdy's group of poems. Duration: 7:30. Available on the CD But Yesterday is Not Today. New World Records 80243-2, 1996. Bethany Beardslee, soprano, Robert Helps, piano.

Helps, Robert. "Gossamer Noons." New York: Composers Recordings, 1978. Music based on poems by James Purdy. Duration: 19:22. Available on the CD American Masters. CRI CD717, 1996. Bethany Beardslee, soprano, American Composer's Orchestra, Gunther Schuller, conductor.

Hundley, Richard. Eights Songs: Voice and Piano. New York: Boosey & Hawkes, 1981. A collection of eight songs for voice and piano that includes four songs based on poems by Purdy: "Birds, U.S.A.," "Come Ready and See Me," "I Do," and "Bartholomew Green."

Hundley, Richard. "The Sea is Swimming Tonight." Alice Tully Hall, 2 February 1982. Performed by conductor Newell Jenkins and the Clarion Music Society. The world premiere of a cantata based on poems by Purdy. A 10 movement, choral-song cycle for SATB chorus, four soloists, and four-hand piano. The cycle contains the original choral setting of "Waterbird." Tenor Paul Sperry would record an arrangement of "Waterbird" in 1988.

Gordon, Bette. What Is It, Zach? 1983. A film based on Purdy's play.

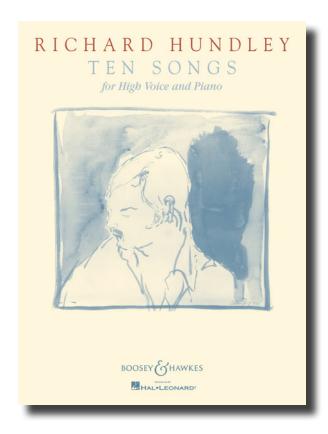
Hundley, Richard. "St. Stephen's Prince Antelope Duet." Newport Musical Festival, 1984. From the incomplete opera, Wedding Finger, based on a play by Purdy.

Hundley, Richard. "Ball." Premiered by the Robert Page Singers in Cleveland, Ohio, 1985. A work for four soloists, chorus, and four-hand piano based on a poem by Purdy. This work was commissioned by Robert Page.

Bowser, Kenneth. Sleep Tight. 1988. A film based on Purdy's short story.

Bowser, Kenneth. In a Shallow Grave. Los Angeles: Warner Home Video, 1989. Duration: 92 minutes. A film based on Purdy's novel of the same name.

Hundley, Richard. Four Songs. New York: Boosey & Hawkes, 1989. Includes Purdy's "Evening Hours" and "Come Ready and See Me" as well as Shakespeare's "When Orpheus Played" and an anonymous song, "Epitaph on a Wife."



Bose, Hans-Jürgen von. 63 Dream Palace = Traumpalast '63. Mainz: Schott, 1990. Opera based on the novella 63: Dream Palace by Purdy.

Jarman, Derek. *Narrow Rooms*. 1992. Screenplay based on Purdy's novel of the same name. Funding revoked by Britain's Channel Four; film never completed.

Hundley, Richard. *Octaves and Sweet Sounds: For Voice and Piano*. New York: Boosey & Hawkes, 1993. A collection of four songs based on work by James Joyce, Jose Garcia Villa, James Purdy ("Straightway Beauty on Me Waits"), and Gertrude Stein.

Sperry, Paul. Paul Sperry Sings Romantic American Songs. New York: Albany Records, 1995. Irma Vallecillo, piano, and Paul Sperry, vocals. Features compositions by Richard Hundley, Paul Bowles, Virgil Thomson, Arthur Farwell, and Theodore Chanler. Five of the Hundley compositions are based on poems by Purdy.

Strauch, Alexander. *Narrow Rooms*. Munich, Prinzregententheater, 1996. Music by Strauch, text by Marcus Hank. Conducted by Ekkehard Wagner and directed by Javier Andrade de Cordova. An opera based on Purdy's novel of the same name.

Hoogstins, Theo. *Brooklyn Branding Parlors*. Holland: Kollum, 1996-1997. A combination of composed and improvised music to be performed by a trio consisting of saxophone, double bass, percussion, a saxophone quartet, and a vocalist (tenor).

Steppenwolf Theater Company. *In a Shallow Grave*. Chicago, 1999. A stage adaptation of Purdy's novel.

Jorgensen, Robert, and Houston, Janeanne. *So Much Beauty*. Washington: Elmgrove Productions, 2004. Robert Jorgensen, piano, Janeanne Houston, soprano. Features compositions by Richard Hundley (two of which are based on Purdy poems), David Burge, Edwin Penhorwood, Carol Sams, Gerald Finzi *et al.*

Hundley, Richard. "Waterbird" and "Lions." *Ten Songs: For High Voice and Piano*. New York: Boosey & Hawkes, 2005.

Hundley, Richard. "Waterbird." Art Song in English: 50 Songs by 21 American

and British Composers. Ed. by Carol Kimball. New York: Boosey & Hawkes, 2007. Composition by Hundley based on Purdy's poem.

Graham, Gina. Garments the Living Wear. New York, spring 2009. Solo dance choreographed and performed in private by Gina Graham, one of the founders of the dance company Esse Aficionado. Graham created this piece in honor of Purdy after his death on March 13, 2009.

OTHER MEDIA

"Man and Wife." Los Angeles: Pacifica Radio Archive, 1965. Record: BC0312.04. Length: 1 reel (17 min.): 7 1/2 ips, mono. Jack Nessel reading Purdy's short story.

63: Dream Palace. New York: Spoken Arts, 1968. Record set of Purdy reading his novella.

Eventide and Other Stories. New York: Spoken Arts, 1970. Four record set of Purdy short stories, read by the author.

Malcolm. Florida: Everett/Edwards, 1970. Length: 1 cassette. Warren French discussing Malcolm.

The House of the Solitary Maggot. Los Angeles: Pacifica Radio Archive, 1975. Record: BC 2287. Length: I reel (32 min.): 7 1/2 ips, mono. Purdy reads from his novel and discusses his life and career with interviewer Fred Barron.

"James Purdy." New York: Full Track Press, 1979. Length: 1 cassette. Purdy reads his short story "Some of These Days." Includes an interview of Purdy by Joe Cuomo.

TRANSLATIONS

DENMARK

63, drømmeslottet. Fredensborg, Denmark: Arena Forfatternes, 1960. Danish translation of Color of Darkness (1957) by Elsa Gress Wright.

Nevøen. Fredensborg, Denmark: Arena Forfatternes, 1961. Danish translation of The Nephew (1960) by Elsa Gress Wright.

Malcolm. Fredensborg, Denmark: Arena Forfatternes, 1962. Danish translation by Elsa Gress Wright.

Børn Og Bestier. Fredensborg, Denmark: Arena Forfatternes, 1964. Danish translation of Children is All (1961) by Elsa Gress.

Cabot Wright Begyndes. Kobenhawn: Gylendals Bekkasinbogen, 1967.

Danish translation of *Cabot Wright Begins* (1964) by Poul Borum.

"From Rivers, and From the Earth Itself" and "The Axles Creaking Under the Wagons." Art Mag 10 (1988): 33. Two poems from Purdy's Collected Poems.

Ik ben Elijah Thrush. Amsterdam: Athenaeum-Polak & Van Gennep, 1994. Danish translation of I Am Elijah Thrush (1972) by Harm Damsma.

NETHERLANDS

Malcolm. Amsterdam: Uitgeverij Contact, 1967. Dutch translation by Katja Vranken.

Kleur van Duisternis. Amsterdam: Athenaeum-Polak & Van Gennep, 1973. Dutch translation of Color of Darkness (1957) by Hans Plomp.

"Color of Darkness." In A Pound of Prose: Een Bundel Engelse en Amerikaanse Verhalen Voor de Bovenbouw. Ed. by Cornelis Buddingh. Amsterdam: Meulenhoff Educatief, 1977. A collection of eighteen short stories including Purdy's 1957 story "Color of Darkness" (127-138). Each selection is preceded by a photograph of the writer, a brief biographical sketch and a short, select bibliography. In addition, each story has a black and white illustration. Mariet Numan illustrated the Purdy story.

Eustace Chisholm & Consorten. Amsterdam: Athenaeum-Polak & Van Gennap, 1979. Dutch translation by Thomas Graftdijk.

Malcolm. Amsterdam: Pranger, 1980. Dutch translation by Katja Vranken.

In een Ondiep Graf. Amsterdam: Athenaeum-Polak & Van Gennep, 1986. Dutch translation of In a Shallow Grave (1975) by Graa Boomsma.

"De Pest." In Dit Verval: Verhalen Rond een Grote Ziekte Met een Kleine Naam. Ed. by Ron Mooser. Amsterdam: De Woelrat, 1988. Purdy's story is on pages 117-131. One bibliography lists this as a translation of Purdy's story "The Pest" but no such story exists. It is most likely an excerpt from Purdy's novel Garments the Living Wear (1989) in which A.I.D.S. is referred to as "the Pest" throughout the book.

De Gewaden der Levenden. Amsterdam: Athenaeum-Polak & Van Gennep, 1990. Dutch translation of Garments the Living Wear (1989) by Graa Boomsma.

Nauwe ruimten. Amsterdam: Athenaeum-Polak & Van Gennep, 1991. Dutch translation of Narrow Rooms (1978) by Graa Boomsma.

Felicitas 1993. Utrecht: Sub Signo Libelli, 1992.

Donkere, melancholieke mannen. Utrecht: Sub Signo Libelli, 1993.

Terug naar Rose. New York: Avalon Press, 1994. Dutch translation of the short story "Reaching Rose" (1993), which is included in Purdy's Moe's Villa & Other Stories (2000). Also contains a letter to Jan Erik Bouman by the Dutch poet and novelist Kees Ouwens. The latter is translated into English by Jonathan Bragdon.

SWEDEN

Brorsonen. Stockholm: Bonnier, 1963. Swedish translation of The Nephew (1960) by Hakan Norlén.

Malcolm. Stockholm: Bonnier, 1966. Swedish translation by Olov Jonason.

Cabot Wright sätter igång. Stockholm: Bonnier, 1969. Swedish translation of Cabot Wright Begins (1964) by Olov Jonason.

Mister Evening. Stockholm: Carlssons, 1992. A collection of several stories in Swedish. Translation by Jan Broberg.

NORWAY

Brorsonen. Oslo: Gyldendal Norsk Forlag, 1964. Norwegian translation of The Nephew (1960) by Torborg Nedreaas.

Malcolm. Oslo: Gyldendal Norsk Forlag, 1966. Norwegian translation by Colbjørn Helander.

FINLAND

Malcolm. Helsinki: Arena, 1966. Finnish translation by Juhani Niskanen.

PORTUGAL | BRAZIL | ARGENTINA

Os Crimes de Cabot Wright. Rio de Janeiro: Civiliza Brasileira, 1967. Portuguese translation of Cabot Wright Begins (1964) by Luis César Barroso.

"Por Que No Pueden Decirte El Porque?" In Crónicas de Norteamerica. Buenos Aires: Editorial Jorge Alvarez, 1967. A short story anthology of twelve contemporary authors including Capote, Baldwin, Algren, Faulkner, Wolfe, Hemingway, and Updike. Portuguese translation of Purdy's short story "Why Can't They Tell You Why?" (1957) by Juan Godó Costa. Includes a biographical description of Purdy by Ricardo Piglia.

Malcolm. São Paulo: Siciliano, 1995. Portuguese translation by Joana Angelica d'Avila Melo.

SPAIN | CUBA | MEXICO

"No me llames por mi nombre." Lunes de Revolución. Núm. de Edición 56, Fecha de Edición (25 de abril, 1960): 10, 12. Traducción: Edmundo Desnoes. Illustración de Tony Évora. Spanish translation of "Don't Call Me by My Right Name" (1957).

El Sobrino. Buenos Aires: Editorial Sudamericana, 1962. Spanish translation of The Nephew (1960) by Luis Tobío.

Color de Oscuridad: one relatos y un cuento. Barcelona: Seix Barral, 1963. Spanish translation of Color of Darkness (1957) by Juan Godó Costa.

Malcolm. Buenos Aires: n. p., 1963. Spanish translation by Luis Tobío.

Comienza Cabot Wright. Mexico: Joaquin Mortiz, 1968. Spanish translation of Cabot Wright Begins (1964) by José Agustín and Juan Tovar.

"Buenas noches, Corazón." Revista de Occidente (Madrid), año VI, 2ª ép. nº 66 (septiembre 1968): 328-343.

La Versión de Jeremy. Buenos Aires: Ediciones Corregidor, 1977. Spanish translation of Jeremy's Version (1970).

Malcolm. Barcelona: Editorial Anagrama, 1984. Spanish translation by Luis Echávarri.

Camino de la Gloria. Barcelona: Versal, 1985. Spanish translation of On Glory's Course (1984) by Susana Constante.

Habitaciones Exiguas. Barcelona: Montesinos, 1985. Spanish translation of Narrow Rooms (1978) by Marcelo Cohen.

Cambres Estretes. Barcelona: Edicions 62, 1988. Spanish translation of Narrow Rooms (1978) by Jordi Ai-honès.

"Papito Lobo." El Cuento. No. 113-116 (1990): 46-52. Translation of "Daddy Wolf" (1961). Contains a bibliographical note on Purdy on p. xxxi.

Junto a las Estrellas. Barcelona: Península, 1995. Spanish translation of Out with the Stars (1992) by Roser Berdagué.

El Papa Llop i Deu Contes Més: Relats Escollits (1956-1987). Barcelona: Edicions Proa, S. A., 1996. Catalan edition of eleven short stories selected and translated by Ferrán Toutain from 63: Dream Palace (1956) and The Candles of Your Eyes and Thirteen Other Stories (1987).

FRANCE

Malcolm. Paris: Gallimard, 1961. French translation by Marie Canavaggia.

Le Neveu. Paris: Gallimard, 1964. French translation of The Nephew (1960) by Renée Villoteau.

Couleur de ténèbres. Paris: Gallimard, 1966. French translation of Color of Darkness (1957) by Jacqueline Péry and Pierre Chevrillon. Preface by Dame Edith Sitwell. This also includes the novella 63: Dream Palace. which is translated as Palais des rêves.

Le Satyre. Paris: Gallimard, 1967. French translation of Cabot Wright Begins (1964) by Suzanne Mayoux.

Les Enfants c'est tout. Paris: Gallimard, 1967. French translation of Children is All (1961) by Yvonne Davet.

Les Oeuvres d'Eustace. Paris: Gallimard, 1969. French translation of Eustace Chisholm and the Works (1967) by Suzanne Mayoux.

Ce que raconta Jeremy. Paris: Albin Michel, 1973. French translation of Jeremy's Version (1970) by Marie Tadié.

Je suis vivant dans ma tombe. Paris: Albin Michel, 1979. French translation of In a Shallow Grave (1975) by François Xavier Jaujard.

Chambres étroites. Paris: Persona, 1983. French translation of Narrow Rooms (1978) by Léo Dilé.

Les Inconsolés. Paris: Albin Michel, 1984. French translation of Mourners Below (1981) by Claire Malroux.

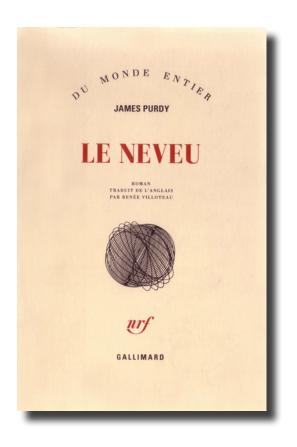
"Coup de Chaler." Le Journal Litteraire 25 (December 1987/January 1988): 36-38. French translation by Alain Wagneur of "Color of Darkness" (1957).

Dans le creux de sa main. Paris: Librairie Artheme Fayard, 1988. French translation of In the Hollow of His Hand (1986) by Léo Dilé.

La Tunique de Nessus. Paris: Librairie Artheme Fayard, 1990. French translation of Garments the Living Wear (1989) by Léo Dilé.

L'Oiseau de paradis. Paris: Librairie Artheme Fayard, 1992. French translation of I Am Elijah Thrush (1972) by François Xavier Jaujard.

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GERMANY

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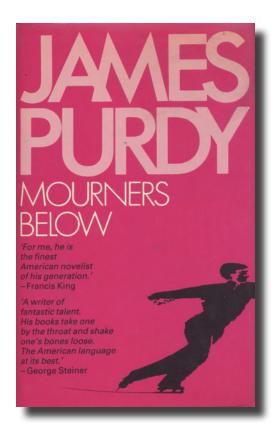
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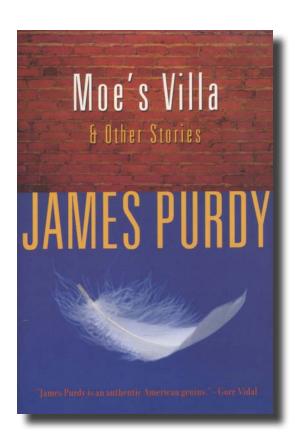
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ARCHIVES

1. James Purdy Papers

Dates: 1944 – 1973, but the bulk of the material dates from 1956 – 1963.

Yale University. Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

The papers document aspects of Purdy's early literary career. Major correspondents include Carl Van Vechten, John Cowper Powys, Edith Sitwell, Paul Bowles, and Gerald Brenan. The papers consist of four series: Correspondence, Writings, Other Papers, and Photographs by Carl Van Vechten.

LINK:

http://hdl.handle.net/10079/fa/beinecke.purdy

Images of Purdy, Bowles, Thomson, and Rorem as well as numerous Purdy drawings:

http://beinecke.library.yale.edu/dl_crosscollex/SearchExecXC.asp

2. James Purdy Papers

Dates: 1955 - 1978

University of Rochester. Department of Rare Books, Special Collections and Preservation.

The collection consists of manuscripts of Purdy's plays along with actor's prompts, books, and other items related to dramatic works. Also included are drawings by Purdy and correspondence. The collection was purchased from James Purdy in 1978.

LINK:

http://www.lib.rochester.edu/index.cfm?page=3126

3. James Purdy Manuscript Collection

Dates: 1961 - 1978

University of Deleware. Special Collections, University of Delaware Library.

The James Purdy Manuscript Collection spans the years 1961 to 1978 and contains three items: a short story, "Everything Under the Sun" (carbon typescript with corrections); and two novels, I am Elijah Thrush (contains extensive corrections and additions by the author), and Narrow Rooms (234page typescript (printer's final copy) that includes minor corrections by the author).

LINK:

http://www.lib.udel.edu/ud/spec/findaids/purdy.htm

4. James Purdy Papers

Dates: 1960 - 1990.

The Ohio State University. OSU Research Library.

These papers contain personal and literary correspondence (1960-1986), the tone-poem for men's chorus "On the Rebound," 12 poems by Purdy with notes by Jan Erik Bouman, "anonymous letters," and commonplace books of Purdy's. Also included are drafts and final typescripts with holograph revisions for Mourner's Below, "In This Corner," Garments the Living Wear, and an introduction to Cabot Wright Begins.

LINK:

http://library.ohio-state.edu/search~S7?/tjames+purdy/ tjames+purdy/1%2C11%2C365%2CB/frameset&FF=tjames+purdy+papers&1 %2C1%2C

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HYPERION

On the future of aesthetics

JAMES PURDY

by Stathis Orphanos, photographer

n 1981 I embarked on a photo odyssey that took me from Los Angeles into New England and the South. I had arranged to photograph authors I had recently published, or was about to publish, in limited-signed editions under the imprint of Sylvester & Orphanos, a new firm specializing in letterpress printing and fine, hand-bound books. The authors I contacted were John Cheever, Reynolds Price, James Purdy, Philip Roth, William Styron, John Updike, and Tennessee Williams. Each responded affirmatively to my photo requests and I embarked from Los Angeles mid-October with my friend Gyula Visnyei, (aka MISL soccer luminary Juli Veee), who assisted me during his off seasons. Crossing the country in a camper within three days, we succeeded in keeping our first appointment, which was with John Updike.

Photo sessions with William Styron and Philip Roth, both residing in Connecticut, were concluded within two days, followed by a spirited sitting with John Cheever in Ossining, New York. A City sitting with James Purdy was next. Reynolds Price, in Durham, North Carolina, was to be the final subject of this trip. A visit to Tennessee Williams in Key West had to be canceled. A change in my athlete friend's soccer schedule required him to be back in Los Angeles before the end of October, a week earlier than planned, and, therefore, I had to forgo photographing our most esteemed playwright.

Of all my encounters on this journey, my session with James Purdy was the most subdued. Though not guarded, he was reserved. From the first photograph to the last his mournful expression never changed. Preferring to work with natural sunlight, I was dismayed to discover that the only suitable available light within his dark apartment, a single room, emanated from one window. We began near that source and then proceeded to the center of the room where, utilizing a strobe, I photographed him before a fireplace, it's mantle cluttered with bric-a-brac. Framed vintage prints of handsome boxers hung above. As I paused to reload the cameras, I attempted to engage him in conversation. Though reticent, it was evident that he was eager to please, and welcomed all attempts to draw him into a dialogue. Aware that Dorothy

Parker had praised his novel "Malcolm," I informed him that Parker had been a guest teacher at a local college I had attended in Los Angeles in the '60s, and that I had taken her class, entitled "The Angry Young Men," a study of the plays of Albee, Osborne, and Pinter. I then revealed that she hated the school, the administration, and most of the students. When Parker was informed by a Los Angeles Times interviewer that the college was built above a tar pit, that its buildings were sinking a few millimeters a year, and that within a thousand years or so the entire institution would disappear into the bowels of the Los Angeles basin, her response was: "Not fast enough for me!"

After concluding our photo session, Purdy surprised us by suggesting that we dine with him at one of his favorite restaurants. He took us on a stroll through his Brooklyn Heights neighborhood, pausing at the Promenade for us to view the imposing NYC skyline before leading us to an African-American restaurant located near the base of the Brooklyn Bridge.

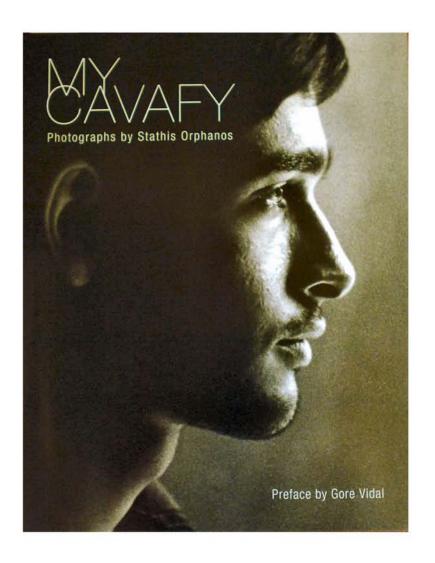
Conversation at dinner was brisk, a discussion mostly about photography; and, since I was aware of Purdy's close friendship with Carl Van Vechten I spoke about several of his portraits that I admired, images of Gore Vidal, William Faulkner, Jacqueline Kennedy, and a young sensual Marlon Brando. I mentioned that I was influenced by Van Vechten's use of ornately decorated cloths as backdrops, having recently photographed Julie Harris, dressed in one of her Charlotte Bronte costumes, posing before a paisley pattern reminiscent of a Carl Van Vechten backdrop.

When we finally departed several hours later, it was with hugs and kisses. It was an honor to have photographed this gentle giant of American Literature.

Editor's Note: Photographs of James Purdy by Stathis Orphanos also can be found on the cover and on pages 11, 28, 122, and 205.







MY CAVAFY, CHANCE ENCOUNTERS

Photographs by Stathis Orphanos (www.orphanos.com)
Poetry by Constantine Cavafy
Preface by Gore Vidal
Translations by Evangelos Sachperoglou

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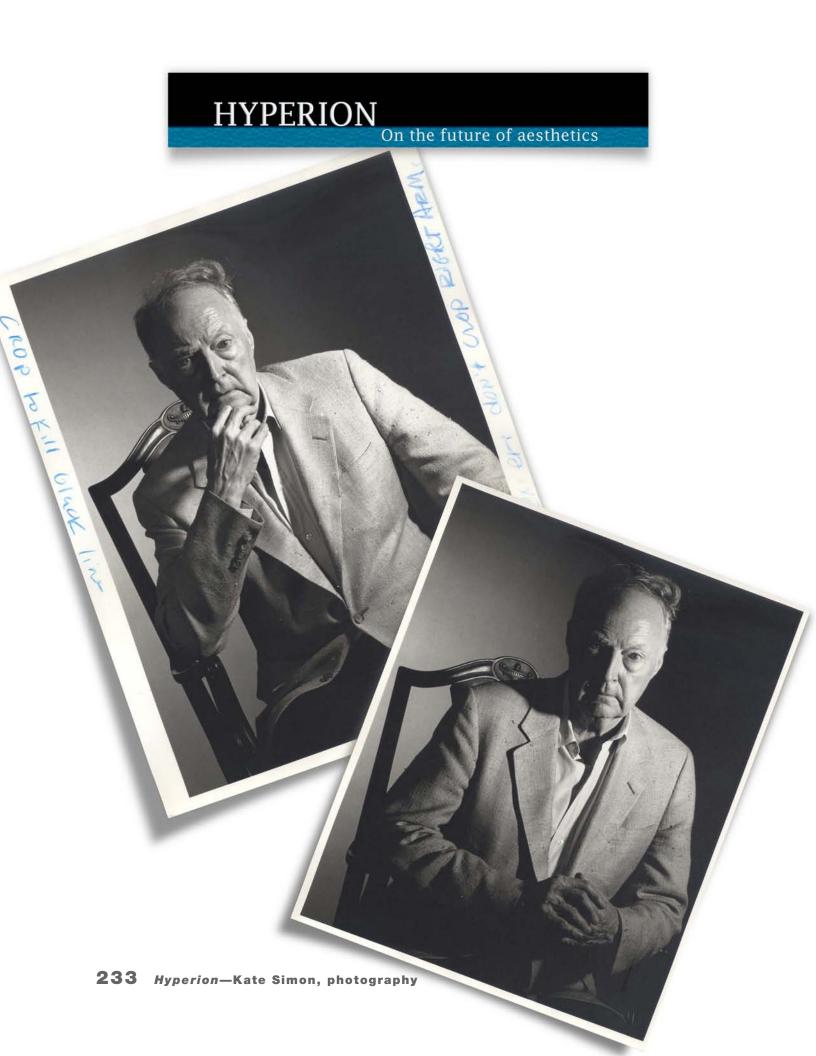
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Photographs of James Purdy (c) Kate Simon, NYC, 1986 \dditional photography by Kate Simon can be found on page xxxxx.



Call for Papers

INVESTIGATION OF A FILMMAKER ABOVE SUSPICION

THE CINEMA ART OF ELIO PETRI

Submission Deadline: April 30, 2012



Italian writer/director Elio Petri (1929-1981) is of the cinematic era of Bertolucci, Pasolini, and Bellocchio. Although recognized by Italian film scholars as one of the major figures of Italian cinema of the 60s and 70s, his work remains largely unknown outside Italy, where it has perhaps even been "repressed by the cultural and televised programming and mostly by the critical analysis of researchers and film critics," as Felice Laudadio, President of Cinecittà, asserts. To date, there are very few monographs on Petri in Italian and none in English. And in recent years, he seems largely forgotten even in Italy, a fact that prompted the 2005 documentary Elio Petri: Appunti Su Un Autore.

Petri's films are polemical interrogations of social, religious, and political phenomena as well as acute analyses of moral, psychological, and existential crises. He is generally characterized as a political filmmaker. Even though it is accurate to characterize his work as politicized, ultimately that is a reductive and limiting characterization. His films are also informed by a rich and profound understanding of and engagement with literature, philosophy, and art, evident for instance in his adaptations of Sciascia's novels, Miller's The American Clock (for the stage), and Sartre's Dirty Hands (RAI), as well as in his use of Pop and Abstract Art in The Tenth Victim, A Quiet Day in the Country, and other films.

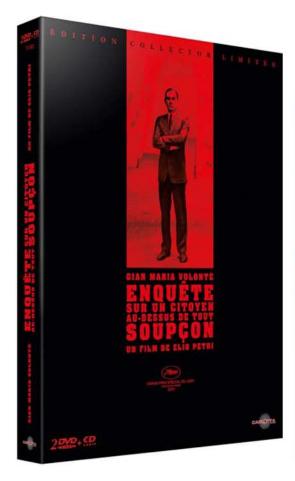
Thus, a more comprehensive, complex, and extensive analysis of all dimensions of Petri's cinematic art is imperative, from the thematic to the formal and beyond. To this end, Hyperion: On the Future of Aesthetics is seeking abstracts for a special issue devoted to Elio Petri in order to explore and examine all aspects of his films and present a more manifold view of them and of Petri's place in the history of Italian and world cinema. In-depth, critically minded interviews with Petri's collaborators (Tonino Guerra, Dante Ferretti, Ennio Morricone, etc.) as well as other notable cinema artists on Petri are also welcome. What are not invited are obeisant encomiums or any form of uncritical celebration. As in all the subjects it covers, Hyperion is seeking essays that explore the nature of art and of a specific art form through the critical examination of the work of one of the form's most ambitious and innovative practitioners. In the case of Petri, we are looking for essays that examine how Petri and his collaborators conceived or reconceived the very purpose of film, how he and they gave film a vision, and a mission.

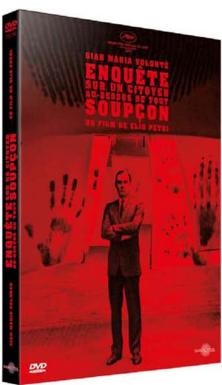
Abstracts of up to 350 words should be sent by April 30, 2012, to hyperion-future@nietzschecircle.com. English, as the primary language of the publication, is preferred. However, we also accept abstracts in Italian, German, and French and, once accepted, essays are welcome in the same languages. This project has the support of Paolo Petri, Elio Petri's widow, and will feature copious film stills and other Petri ephemera.



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