



The Art of Disturbance: On the Novels of James Purdy

Daniel Green

The Art of Disturbance: On the Novels of James Purdy

When James Purdy died in 2009 at the age of 94, most people who still recognized his name surely judged that he had long outlived whatever relevance he and his books might once have had. Although he published almost 30 books, according to the James Purdy Society website only 9 of them remained in print, and these did not include the novels that won Purdy an early reputation among them *Malcolm*, *The Nephew*, and *Cabot Wright Begins*. That these books were at the time of his death apparently not much valued highly by publishers seems compelling evidence either that the American cultural memory cannot sustain a writer without at least one book that made it "big" or caused some notable scandal, or that Purdy's work doesn't deserve continued recognition.

While the first explanation is unfortunately probably true enough, it doesn't satisfactorily account for the neglect of James Purdy, whose novels during the 1960s, at least, were reviewed by prominent critics and remain sufficiently provocative in subject and theme that readers might still find them controversial—as did some contemporaneous reviewers who dismissed them as sensational, or even immoral. As to the second explanation, no one who has been intrigued to read deeply into Purdy's singularly disturbing stories or novels would be able to say this work might just as well be forgotten. However, after reading more of Purdy's fiction, we can perhaps begin to understand why it was never entirely welcomed by the critical gatekeepers—popular and academic—who by default keep a writer's reputation alive in book reviews and scholarly journals and on course syllabi, and why it was never likely to appeal to a large audience. At the same time, we can also begin to recognize that the very qualities of Purdy's work that might explain its failure to maintain greater cultural visibility are also the qualities that make his work so remarkable—and that should win it a future audience.

Although in some ways Purdy was altogether attuned to the literary spirit of his time, especially in the 1950s and 60s, he gradually and increasingly became much less so. However, the

way in which he remained true to the vision, style, and assumptions animating his fiction from the beginning in my view will only make that fiction more valuable to future readers, as I hope my analysis of Purdy's most representative books will show. Looking at Purdy's most representative books shows why Purdy's fiction was at first difficult simply to ignore but increasingly was ignored, in part, no doubt, because Purdy was a prolific writer, but also precisely because Purdy consistently adhered to core stylistic and formal assumptions and explore recurring themes. If readers and critics (particularly the latter) found this a convenient excuse to dismiss Purdy's books, especially the later ones, as repetitive, the underlying resistance to Purdy's work, I would argue, is a resistance not so much to repetition as to overly familiar methods and subjects but to the challenge his fiction poses to passive or inattentive reading. On the one hand, it is as devoted to telling the truth about human existence as any body of work by an American writer, while on the other it relentlessly questions fiction's capacity to reveal the truth. Further, Purdy's fiction can seem straightforward and transparent, quite immediate in its visceral power, while at the same time frequently working quite subtly and indirectly, which an inattentive reader can miss. These are not the only challenges Purdy's work presents, but in my opinion they most immediately explain its gradual loss of favor.

Purdy's alienation from the dominant literary culture as represented by both publishers and reviewers ultimately became quite profound, prompted, no doubt, by his acknowledgment of the perceived irrelevance of his books, although publishers had demonstrated indifference, if not outright hostility, to his earliest fiction as well. (His first important work, *63: Dream Palace*, was published in Great Britain after it could find no publisher in the United States.) Yet it is also the case that Purdy did very little on his part to ameliorate the situation. He gave few friendly interviews, did not participate in any efforts to better "position" his work in the literary marketplace, and above all never tried to write differently in order to make his fiction more commercial or more amenable to conventional expectations of "literary fiction." For readers, journalists, or critics who are more interested in writers than writing, more concerned about business than literature, Purdy's attitude might have understandably been frustrating—although his refusal to curry favor or to reduce the writer's ambition simply to selling books might also seem commendable. Similarly, those readers and critics who might have found Purdy's fiction too stubbornly idiosyncratic were not necessarily misperceiving its aesthetic character, but dismissing

it as idiosyncratic before reading more carefully to determine if those idiosyncrasies actually amount to a sustained artistic vision doesn't seem a very serious response.

Indeed, those of us who have read deeply into Purdy's fiction quickly enough realize that what could be called its idiosyncrasies are in fact its greatest strengths and that Purdy didn't merely write one or two individually adventurous, original stories or novels but instead created a comprehensively original body of work as a whole, each separate work providing a variation on Purdy's themes and methods but also exemplifying his larger achievement. Purdy wrote few, if any, really weak books, and so almost all of them are equally good introductions to his work. In many ways, a reader who first approaches Purdy through one of his last novels will encounter the same Purdy one will find in his earliest novels, but an uninitiated reader might still want to start at the beginning to best see how he develops his distinctive fictional world. The terms and contours of that world are in fact remarkably apparent in Purdy's first extended work of fiction, the novella *63: Dream Palace*.

Here, the reader will find several prototypical Purdy characters. The main character, Fenton Riddleway, is a young man who has migrated with his younger brother, Claire, to an unnamed city from West Virginia. He is perhaps the first of Purdy's "innocent" young men who are both appalled by and attracted to the morally degraded world they encounter. These characters are as of yet uncorrupted by modern social existence, but this does not mean they are free of the inherent contamination of being human. Fenton Riddleway is more impatient to join in on the morally compromising behavior he sees in most of the people he meets than he is wary of it, and this leads him to commit a horrific act that could be regarded as a product either of his willing corruption or of his innocence (the latter of which only makes the act more disturbing). He kills Claire, who has accompanied him to the city on the death of their mother, and is gravely ill, making Fenton's action at least plausibly an act of mercy, although this ambiguity of motive might make Claire's death even more disturbing. Both Fenton and Claire find themselves inhabiting a world so permeated with moral and spiritual chaos that Fenton can't even begin to navigate his way through it, while Claire is simply its helpless victim.

The novella begins by introducing us to two other characters, Parkhearst Cratty—*63* : *Dream Palace* is also an early example of Purdy's penchant for giving his characters outrageous names—a failed writer and social parasite, and Grainger, referred to most often as “the

greatwoman,” a lady of fading beauty and respectability to whom Cratty has attached himself. It is Cratty who first encounters Fenton Riddleway, and he is simultaneously attracted to and repulsed by Fenton, feeling upon their first meeting an “acute sickness” at the impression of “wildness and freedom Fenton had.” These are characteristics that Cratty both admires and wants to take away from Fenton, as what he feels most acutely is the contrast between Fenton and himself. He even admits this, considering Fenton’s “wildness and freedom held against his own shut-in locked life,” but this does not prevent him from working to consign Fenton to a “shut-in locked life,” most immediately by pairing him with the greatwoman.

Parkhearst Cratty is a type of character that will reappear in Purdy’s fiction, both in the guise of the failed writer and of the worldly but jaded figure projecting his own self-hatred on more vulnerable others. The former appears frequently in Purdy’s subsequent work, and even when such characters are not explicitly identified as writers, the act of writing and more generally of trying to impose on intractable reality a more satisfying order becomes a persistent motif. The latter type of character is perhaps most provocatively described by Stephen P. Adams in discussing *Malcolm's* Mr. Cox, where the story of the corruption of innocence is even more intensified: Cox has “arrogantly substituted patterns of chance for the natural bonds of mutual responsibility. A tyrannous figure, he has mushroomed into the void of a godless world like some magician or satanic guru. He thrives on the exercise of power over people as if this were the only remaining absolute in an otherwise vacant world” (*James Purdy*, 1976). Many of Purdy’s characters, in fact, can be understood as motivated by their inability to come to terms with the “vacancy” both in themselves and in the world at large.

The greatwoman Grainger is also a character type that variations on which will reappear in much of Purdy’s work: an aging beauty suffering an emotional wound inflicted in the past that causes her to live dysfunctionally in the present. Grainger is an especially pathetic version of this character: she subsists in a state of almost perpetual drunkenness, tended to by Cratty in what Fenton Riddleway calls a “not-right house,” where she presides in her decaying, falsely festive grandeur. Cratty is determined to “give” Fenton Riddleway to Grainger as a replacement for her late husband, a fate that will complete his degradation of Fenton, subjecting him to the forces of nihilism that are the most palpable effects of her presence. Although Grainger is a rather grotesque

figure, made to seem especially pronounced in her voluntary debasement, the “greatwoman” comes to play a prominent, if more recognizably human, role in Purdy’s novels.

Part of Fenton Riddleway’s education in the ways of the nightmarish world portrayed in *63: Dream Palace* occurs in his encounter with Bruno Korsawski, who is also taken with the bumpkinish Fenton but for reasons that are less existential. After treating him to a night of theatrical entertainment, Bruno

sat down beside Fenton. He began kissing his hair, and then slowly unbuttoning his shirt. He took off all his clothes, as from a doll, piece by piece, without resistance or aid, but left on at the last the privately manufactured shoes [given to Fenton by Grainger]. . . .

The ellipsis marks indicate an immediate passage of time, because

[t]he 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.

This episode precipitates Fenton’s ultimate act of fratricide. For Fenton it “shattered everything he had been or known; it marked the limits of a line, not ending his youth but making his youth superfluous, as age to a god.” We cannot finally know whether he reacts as he does out of sheer disgust, a kind of outrage that someone like Bruno Korsawski is allowed to exist, or an instinctive revulsion at the revelation of his own nature, a realization that he actually welcomed Bruno’s advances. From the perspective of Purdy’s work as a whole, the last possibility is perhaps the most compelling, as his characters often either do not recognize or will not acknowledge their deepest emotional impulses.

It is appropriate to refer to these characters’ emotional states rather than their specifically sexual desires because, while homosexuality is undeniably a frequent presence in Purdy’s fiction, it is hardly his primary subject or even portrayed in such an emphatic way, as if simply including homosexual characters should be regarded as an implicitly meaningful gesture, that we would be encouraged to think of Purdy as a “gay writer,” a category that as we now know it really only emerged during the later stages of Purdy’s career. In interviews Purdy himself frequently resisted

being called a gay writer, fearing that such an identification would unnecessarily circumscribe the scope of his concerns. Few of his novels (*Narrow Rooms* is a prominent exception) focus insistently on the fact of homosexuality or feature characters defined by their sexuality, or whose fate is determined by it. They do focus on characters unable to feel freely, to let themselves experience love, characters whose dominant desire toward other people is the desire to exploit them. To the extent that this entails a denial of homosexual love or a refusal of homosexual inclinations, Purdy's work is obviously relevant enough to the consideration of gay-themed writing, but the emotional debilitation depicted in Purdy's fiction, including *63: Dream Palace*, is one suffered, indeed is ultimately caused, by American culture at large.

In his book *The Homosexual as Hero in American Fiction*, Stephen Adams describes Purdy's uncertain status as a gay writer:

. . .his disregard for the literary conventions of social realism and strict psychological verisimilitude has never earned him the approval of liberal critics interested in topical relevance or the documentation of a subculture. Similarly, his tragic view of life would not endear him to the freedom-fighters of the gay movement. Whilst he is concerned for the individual's liberation, the obstacles to self-fulfillment are, in his analysis, more deeply entrenched in human nature than political or minority pressure groups would care to admit.

Purdy's fiction is certainly important for the way in which, perhaps for the first time in American fiction, it incorporates homosexuality freely and without apology, although it is featured not as a special problem that needs to be addressed but simply as a characteristic possessed by some people (maybe even, to one degree or another, by more people than is commonly assumed), a characteristic that affects actions and behavior as any human characteristic might but doesn't otherwise change human nature. While Fenton Riddleway approaches the homosexual Bruno as freakish and sensationalized, he merely exemplifies the (then) common ignorance and fear of homosexuals pervasive in American society; moreover, Purdy seldom exploits homophobia for dramatic purposes following *63: Dream Palace*. Even here, of course, homophobia is really a form of self-denial, and this is an encompassing human weakness.

Purdy's fiction, in fact, avoids all of the distorted images of homosexuality still much in evidence at the time Adams published his book (1980), distortions he describes as rising from the view of homosexuality as "a phenomenon in sexual pathology," from "prurient inquisitiveness" on the reader's part and "frantic confession" on the writer's. Purdy seldom offers very little in the way of sexually explicit scenes or imagery, and even less "confession." Readers expecting thinly veiled autobiographical reflections on Purdy's own sexual experiences would surely be much disappointed upon reading even those novels most directly concerned with homosexual characters or most explicitly "about" homosexuality. And while there is plenty of "pathology" in Purdy's fiction, it is a pathology exhibited by characters such as Captain Stadger in *Eustace Chisholm and the Works*, who is driven to sadistic violence through his denial of his own sexual desires. That these desires are homosexual is really only the most immediate, and perhaps even incidental, factor driving Stadger's behavior. On a deeper level, Stadger has repressed his same-sex desires in a way that excites his need for power, and ultimately he is a man who won't allow himself to be emotionally human more than he is a man who won't allow himself to be homosexual.

In a recent issue of the journal *Hyperion* dedicated to Purdy, Rainer J. Hanshe suggests 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." This is no doubt correct, another illustration of the way in which Purdy pursues the truth but on his own terms, in this case unwilling to settle for a reductive version of the truth that would please everyone—neither those who would rather that homosexuality be acknowledged obliquely if at all, nor those who would have the truth subsumed to a political agenda. But while this situation for too much of Purdy's career encouraged the perception that Purdy was not relevant to either "community" of readers, his very marginality to these groups ought to motivate a reversal of this perception, as his work becomes freshly relevant to readers less interested in fiction that either clings safely to the mainstream or that appeals just as timidly to therapeutic identity politics than in fiction that includes homosexuality and homosexual characters as acknowledged realities, requiring no overdramatizing or special pleading and just as rewarding a focus for the treatment of human behavior as any other human reality—but also no more, at least insofar as such a focus might suggest this particular form of human behavior somehow escapes the ordinary corruptions of human nature.

If there was a time when Purdy managed to be somewhat more visible in literary culture, it was the period immediately after he managed to get *63: Dream Palace* and his early short stories published in the United States (as *Color of Darkness*) and published his first proper novels, *Malcolm* (1959) and *The Nephew* (1961). *Malcolm* in particular may have come as close to gaining “acceptance” by the literary and cultural mainstream as any of Purdy’s books. It was often cited as an example of the “black humor” that increasingly came to prominence in the 1960s. (Purdy was included among the writers discussed in Bruce Jay Friedman’s *Black Humor*, which in 1965 arguably provided this movement its conceptual identity.) As such, it (as well as *Cabot Wright Begins*) was accorded the attention a work perceived to be part of an important new trend usually receives.

Purdy is now seldom considered a black humorist, which on the one hand is partly a consequence of his more general fading from view in contemporary literary culture, but on the other represents an accurate enough assessment of a novel like *Malcolm*. Purdy’s work does indeed blur the distinction between the “comic” and the “serious,” but it does not do so through the almost vaudevillian treatment of supposedly serious subjects as in the fiction of Friedman and Joseph Heller. Purdy more subtly blends the comic and the tragic, eventually undermining what could otherwise be regarded as tragic situations (or at least situations in which the characters suffer through misfortune) as almost equally ridiculous, through characters melodramatically aware of their misfortunes but not always self-aware enough of their own contributions to them, through outrageous or even shocking plot twists, or through revealing dialogue, as characters try to navigate a world they don’t entirely understand.

While novels such as *Cabot Wright Begins* and *I Am Elijah Thrush* could be described as explicitly satirical, Purdy’s more common sort of lower-key comedy is ultimately a matter of tone, producing more a simultaneous feeling of amusement and disquiet in the reader than outright laughter (although there certainly are scenes in Purdy’s fiction that are very funny). Further, in most of Purdy’s books, exposing the characters and situations to ridicule does not really result in satire of any conventional kind. While much of modern American life is clearly repugnant to Purdy (as expressed in many of the interviews he did grant), readers will not conclude from Purdy’s work that the flaws in human behavior and society it depicts can be corrected through the

powers of mockery. Even the more recognizable, less subtle satire of *Cabot Wright Begins* seems designed more to demolish than reform, leaving us little room to believe American culture is redeemable, but finally the comedy in James Purdy's fiction, arising from situations that often bring his characters to a reckoning with their mistakes and illusions, helps to establish the distinctively Purdyean tone, partly humorous, partly disturbing, that makes reading Purdy a compelling experience.

Nevertheless, it is still possible to loosely distinguish among Purdy's novels those that incline more to one of these poles (more humorous) than to the other (more disturbing), even to designate some of them comedies and some of them, if not tragedies, then stories incorporating the intensified atmosphere and terrible events associated with tragedy. (The series of historical novels that includes *Jeremy's Version* and *The House of the Solitary Maggot* perhaps constitute a separate category.) Early in his career this tendency has yet to assert itself, but *Malcolm* and *The Nephew* respectively do manifest an interest in more comic and more "serious" narratives and narrative strategies. Although neither of these books necessarily excludes the one in favor of the other, the two novels together do offer an opportunity to measure the twin poles of Purdy's literary strategy, while each separately is also one of his most important and successful works.

Malcolm again portrays innocence confronting a corrupt world, despite presenting that world as a rather absurd place full of characters more pathetic in their malignancy than frighteningly malevolent (although not less dangerous for that). If *63: Dream Palace* offers a protagonist who is "innocent" primarily because he literally lacks experience, however, *Malcolm* features a protagonist of a much more radical kind of innocence. Malcolm is essentially a cipher, an unformed personality with little discernible past and no idea what to do with the future. Introduced to us as "the boy on the bench," Malcolm has indeed been spending his time sitting on a bench outside a hotel, where he "seemed to belong nowhere and to nobody, and even his persistent waiting on the bench achieved evidently no purpose, for he seldom spoke to anybody and there was something about his elegant and untouched appearance that discouraged even those who were moved by his solitariness." Malcolm is discovered on his bench by the "famous astrologer" Mr. Cox, who queries Malcolm about his life but receives little tangible information in return. "I suppose if somebody would tell me what to do, I would do it," Malcolm tells Mr. Cox,

and thus begins Malcolm's journey to determine "what to do" through encounters with a succession of people who might be willing to tell him.

Malcolm is this novel's version of Fenton Riddleway, Mr. Cox of Parkhearst Cratty. But while Fenton actually has a very strong self-image and his struggle is a struggle to accommodate himself to the world as he finds it—or have it accommodate itself to him—Malcolm essentially lacks an identity. This allows the people he meets to project themselves onto him, to make of him what they will, but it also increases the sense of distance between reader and protagonist. We are allowed greater access to Fenton Riddleway's mental and emotional life than we can ever gain from Malcolm, who remains (quite deliberately) an enigma toward whom we can feel curiosity but little empathy. This increased distance is, of course, partly necessary precisely because *Malcolm* is a comedy, but its protagonist is especially impassive and detached, almost as if he is a parody of the prototypical innocent of American fiction, his story not so much chronicling the conflict between innocence and experience as revealing how wholly inadequate modern American experience is for an innocent who wants nothing more than appropriate guidance in discovering who he is and what he should do. If our interest in such works as *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* or *Catcher in the Rye* is focused on the developing personalities of their protagonists, in *Malcolm* our interest often focuses on the way its main character is unable to acquire a personality.

One might think this leaves something of a void in our engagement with the novel, but while it is true that *Malcolm* discourages the sort of reading by which we expect to identify with a novel's protagonist, or at least to take on the protagonist's perspective (not easy with a novel whose protagonist barely has a perspective), it fills the void with its larger cast of eccentric, if morally dubious, characters, to whom Malcolm is introduced by Mr. Cox after their encounter at Malcolm's bench. Mr. Cox is himself a bizarre and dubious enough character. The "circle" of people he wishes Malcolm to join includes those who have availed themselves of Mr. Cox's services as an astrologer, and they do not always seem satisfied with those services or with Mr. Cox himself. "Professor Cox commands people to be their worst," Malcolm is told by one member of this circle. Cox is quite cynical about marriage, and this is no doubt a reflection of his own marital unhappiness, but we are given reasons to believe that this unhappiness may have its source in the fact that "Professor" Cox is a pederast. He makes no overt sexual advances on Malcolm; instead, his effort to in effect ruin Malcolm by exposing him to people whose marriages are

dysfunctional may be his way of lashing out at Malcolm for being sexually unobtainable. It may be a reflection of his own self-contempt.

In the initial meeting between these two, Mr. Cox immediately observes that Malcolm has a “waiting look” about him, and in reply Malcolm informs him, “My father has disappeared.” Malcolm appears to be an orphan, but both he and Mr. Cox stress the absence of the father, that he has “disappeared.” Exactly what has happened to Malcolm’s father is never explained (Mr. Cox assumes he is dead), but this is not the question underlying Malcolm’s circumstances or motivating the narrative subsequently related after Mr. Cox provides Malcolm the addresses he directs him to visit. “You mean to tell me your father never talked with you about plans?” Mr. Cox asks incredulously. “Plans for when you were grown up.” The absent father is ultimately a conceit that bestows upon Malcolm and Mr. Cox a symbolic status, Malcolm the unformed soul in need of direction, Mr. Cox the substitute father providing Malcolm with “plans.” That Mr. Cox doesn’t necessarily have Malcolm’s best interests in mind is clear enough from the moment they meet, but over the course of the novel it becomes apparent that he is really the terrible father whose deepest intention is to destroy the son in the guise of providing him an “education” in the ways of the world.

The symbolic roles taken on by Malcolm and Mr. Cox in the novel’s introductory scene thus enable the novel’s distinctive structure, which is both tightly allegorical and loosely picaresque. Mr. Cox sends Malcolm on a journey that might at first seem a random series of contacts with people of Mr. Cox’s acquaintance, but it soon becomes apparent that Mr. Cox is very methodically subjecting Malcolm to experiences that will disabuse him of any idea that at the end of the journey he might have some firmer sense of himself or of his destiny. If as an astrologer Mr. Cox is unable to “read” Malcolm’s future, he will himself directly influence Malcolm such that the boy’s future does come into view: Malcolm’s fate is to be sacrificed to the predations of the world beyond his hotel bench and to Mr. Cox’s own self-hatred. Mr. Cox may not foresee Malcolm’s literal death as the conclusion to his journey, but surely a kind of spiritual death is the intent, so when Malcolm does in fact die as a result of his inability to withstand the exploitive treatment directed at him, we may still find it disturbing, but not exactly a surprise.

That death will be the unavoidable outcome of Malcolm’s story is immediately, if ironically, suggested by Malcolm’s visit to the first address given him by Mr. Cox. This turns out

to be the home of Estel Blanc, an undertaker wealthy enough to have retired at age 40 and who, because he has “always lived among mature, and, indeed, if I may say so, the over-ripe,” quickly sends the youthful Malcolm on his way. Malcolm stays long enough to be entertained by Cora Naldi, a former singer in Estel Blanc’s “funeral choir”:

Malcolm was never able to tell anybody later who or what Cora Naldi was. He was not even sure at times she was a woman, for she had a very deep voice, and he could never tell whether her hair was white, or merely platinum, or whether she was colored like Estel or white like himself. She both sang and danced in loose shawls, and gave a kind of recitative when her throat got tired from her singing numbers.

Although Malcolm’s visit with Estel Blanc is brief, it introduces us to the sort of people Malcolm is to meet. “Colorful” is a word for them (and in this way they only contrast with Malcolm’s own lack of definition), but increasingly it becomes clear that neither their behavior nor the environment they inhabit are in the least benign. Malcolm next visits an artist and his wife, Kermit and Laureen Raphaelson, whose marriage Malcolm is able to observe. The Raphaelsons’ circumstances are notably in contrast to Estel Blanc’s: they are in a state of penury, presumably through Kermit’s failures as an artist. It is not the contrast in circumstances that most occupies Malcolm’s attention, however. Upon meeting him, “Malcolm at first mistook [Kermit] for a child, but then realized that, limited though his experience in such matters was, the person was a man, and a midget.” Laureen, it turns out, is a former prostitute (Kermit intimates she still plies that trade in order to keep the household financially afloat), and when Malcolm makes a second visit to Kermit he discovers that Laureen has left for good—as Kermit himself puts it, “She’s gone on to the real equipment.”

The grotesquerie continues in Malcolm’s visits with the Girards and the Braces. The Girards are a more conventional married couple, although no happier for that. Madame Girard is a version of the greatwoman, whom Malcolm first encounters drunk and in the company of her male “young beauties,” while her husband, Girard Girard, is a wealthy “magnate.” The Girards clearly enough despise one another, and are in fact in the process of divorce. Whatever interest they take in Malcolm comes from his potential value in their struggle against each other; gaining Malcolm’s allegiance is a way of trumping the hated spouse. Girard Girard appears to win this contest, only to finally abandon Malcolm to resume his wandering. Girard thus becomes another

failed father substitute who cannot or will not help Malcolm understand “what to do.” He is part of a procession joined by Jerome Bray, an ex-convict and author of a book called *They Could Have Me Back*, who debases Malcolm’s search further by making explicit sexual advances toward him. If allegorically Malcolm is seeking a father’s wisdom about finding one’s place in the world, what he actually finds is that no one he meets possesses such wisdom since they are all concerned exclusively with themselves; he can only be their object of manipulation or utility.

Malcolm’s degradation is complete when he succumbs to the charms of the singer Melba. At this point, Malcolm “did not care now what anything was. Too much had happened, too many people had come and gone in his life, and feeling a sudden warmth and pressure from Melba’s hand, he mechanically brought this hand to his lips and kissed it.” This act proves to be Malcolm’s undoing, as Melba responds favorably to Malcolm’s attention, so favorably she resolves to marry him. Malcolm is then introduced to a life of indulgence that simply overwhelms him, and in short order he is dead of “acute alcoholism and sexual hyperaesthesia.” By this time Melba has flown off to Mexico with the valet she had hired for Malcolm, leaving Madame Girard left to attend on Malcolm during his final hours. In what might seem a redeeming action on Madame Girard’s part, a faint sign at least that one human being might after all be capable of caring about another, or of feeling regret she has so far been incapable of caring, she arranges an expensive funeral service for Malcolm, but then invites no one: “It was completely private so far as she was concerned and, so to speak, a command performance with herself as the only audience.” Even this final gesture is essentially self-serving, an opportunity for Madame Girard to be impressed with her own “command performance.”

The degree to which anyone cared about Malcolm is captured in the narrator’s summation following on his protagonist’s burial:

Since that day, Malcolm’s grave, which has no marker beyond a stone bearing his name, has been poorly cared for, and fallen into complete neglect, though since it was purchased in perpetuity one can believe that his remains, if they are there, will be allowed to rest on for whatever portion of time may be reserved for the earth and the world.

If there is pathos in the matter-of-fact finality of these words, it is not so much on behalf of Malcolm himself, who has never developed a distinct enough personality for his death to be

tragic, but for Malcolm as a stand-in for all those who might seek to know “what to do” but face a reality in which innocence exists only to be preyed upon and sincerity is held in contempt. *Malcolm* depicts a world malevolent enough that it is probably the best memorial to someone like Malcolm that he actually be forgotten, his remains “allowed to rest,” no longer subject to its exploitations.

If Malcolm never manages to find his autonomy, never becomes for the other characters other than a victim of their own attempts to appropriate him to their own purposes, it could be said such limitations are imposed upon him by the narrative in which he serves as protagonist as well. Malcolm is used by James Purdy as a device for animating his allegory, and his very lack of an identity is Purdy’s deliberate manipulation of Malcolm as a character to achieve a larger artistic purpose. Purdy likely would not have denied such a charge, nor have viewed it as an angle on Malcolm he had himself somehow overlooked. The attempt to give shape to reality through writing (in some cases, through artistic expression in general) is a common motif throughout Purdy’s work, but where one might expect a writer of fiction (a writer of “artistic” fiction, in fact) to celebrate the possibilities of fiction as a way of finding aesthetic order at least in a chaotic and meaningless reality, Purdy instead exposes such aesthetic ordering to a withering critique. In *Malcolm*, this critique is directed not just at Mr. Cox, who is most immediately attempting to turn Malcolm’s life into a narrative of his own devising, but directly at his own practice as a novelist. This does not necessarily undermine the allegorical power or aesthetic achievement of *Malcolm*, although it certainly complicates our response to the novel. I would not go so far as Tony Tanner, who in also noting Purdy’s “aesthetic skepticism” suggests that he is asserting “the futility of his own undertaking” and that the novel “seems to cancel itself” (*City of Words*). Rather, I would argue that an underlying and habitual self-reflexivity in Purdy’s fiction, usually more subtle than overt, nevertheless cautions us that as products of human expression, art and writing are subject to the same limitations of insight evidenced in the characters portrayed.

This self-reflexivity is certainly to be found in *The Nephew*, in a way that is more direct than in *Malcolm* but not so obvious or insistent the novel could be called metafiction. The novel’s protagonist, Alma Mason, undertakes to write a memorial book about her nephew, Cliff, missing in Korea but presumed dead. (Alma thinks of the book as simply a biography of sorts, since at the

novel's beginning she is the only person who believes Cliff might yet return.) As she proceeds with this project, she realizes she will need to talk to other people in her town of Rainbow Center, as "she came more and more to the slow, conscious, and terribly clear feeling that *they* all knew a great deal more about Cliff—not to mention what they knew about things in general, about *life*—than she could ever know." Thus Alma sets out on a quest of her own to discover what they know. This quest also becomes one in which she discovers a great deal about herself as well as her nephew, knowledge she initially resists but ultimately comes to accept. She must also accept that because of what she learns she cannot complete the book.

In its way, then, *The Nephew* also assumes an allegorical structure, although in this case Alma Mason, unlike Malcolm, does indeed come to a firmer sense of herself at the end of the journey. The allegory extends, more explicitly than in *Malcolm*, to the act of writing itself: Alma must abandon her book because she sees that it pretends to give a definitive and authoritative account of her nephew's life, when, as Alma discovers, no final understanding of a human life is possible, only versions restricted by a limited perspective and inevitably in conflict with other versions. Purdy integrates Alma's story of self-discovery with the story of the failure of writing to adequately represent life as lived so seamlessly that the reader might not even perceive the second story to be separable from the first, and this sort of implicit self-reflexivity can thus be distinguished from the more explicit self-reflexivity of metafiction as practiced by other writers of the 1960s such as John Barth or Robert Coover. Furthermore, where these writers through self-reflexivity affirm the value of fiction as an alternative to a disappointing reality, Purdy warns of the dangers of cleaning up a messy reality through fiction, of aestheticizing it in conventional, pre-established forms.

Yet it is in the process of gathering material for her book by looking further into her nephew's life, and the lives of those in Rainbow Center who knew him, that Alma does reach a higher level of awareness. It is only the attempt to reduce what she learns to a finished product, a fixed form of writing, that she is forced to reject. Similarly, we might say of Purdy's fiction as a whole that it doesn't so much assert "the futility of [its] own undertaking" as caution against regarding literary/artistic forms as adequate representations of intractable human reality. This does not exclude the forms created in Purdy's own novels, but by reminding us of the fallibility of those forms Purdy perhaps preserves the credibility of his narratives. The narratives ultimately affirm

the effort of observation and inquiry they manifest, an effort that, like the one made by Alma Mason to discover the reality behind her illusions, is brought to greatest intensity in art. If Purdy's art is as subject to limits and omissions as any other human expression, if art itself is inevitably limited and incomplete, it can grant its limitations forthrightly and accomplish what it can. This may not seem a completely satisfying ambition, but it is probably the best we can do.

Such an approach is reflected in Purdy's use of plot and setting in *The Nephew*. If we can describe the plot as allegorical, it is so only in the loosest sense, as a chronicle of self-discovery. Alma Mason interacts with a large and vividly drawn cast of characters, but these characters are not as clearly assigned symbolic roles as Malcolm's acquaintances. They provide us with a sample of the sort of people who live in a place like Rainbow Center, but they are also simply the people with whom Alma and her brother Boyd, long-time residents of Rainbow Center, would naturally be acquainted. Rainbow Center itself plays a central role in the novel, and where setting in *Malcolm* is more or less generic (an unnamed city that needs no further specification), Rainbow Center is evoked in its particulars, so much so that the town and its inhabitants acquire a status comparable to the portrayal of small-town life in Faulkner or Sherwood Anderson, or even a local-color realist such as Willa Cather. In this way, *The Nephew* becomes the first of Purdy's novels set in a small Midwestern town or rural area (probably modeled after Purdy's own hometown in Ohio) that gives a social context to his individual and family dramas. Although these small-town settings are not necessarily more conducive to human flourishing than the urban settings of *Malcolm*, *Cabot Wright Begins*, or *I Am Elijah Thrush*, they do provide for a quieter, less nightmarish atmosphere and a smaller scale on which to measure his characters' difficulties in overcoming their self-delusions and their often destructive relationships with each other.

In *The Nephew*, the small-town setting also allows Purdy to explore the conflict between appearances and reality, as Alma's inquiries lead her to fresh perceptions not just of her nephew Cliff but of those she visits as well, among them her friend Faye Laird and Faye's colleague Professor Mannheim, both of them teachers at the local college, Mrs. Barrington, the town's richest resident and "old monarch," the Christian Scientist Clara Himbaugh, Alma's next-door neighbor Willard Baker, along with his young boarder Vernon Miller, and the alcoholic Minnie Clyde Hawke. Alma comes to think better of some of these people, some worse, but in each case what she learns brings her out of her self-willed ignorance of what goes on around her and toward

something closer to reality. Some of what she learns might even seem shocking, but because what is uncovered about Rainbow Center results from our adhering closely to Alma's perspective—we learn what she learns and in turn judge it through its impact on Alma—the revelations don't really have the feel of the "exposé" of small-town hypocrisies (although such are there, of course); rather, they accompany a process of recognizing, even accepting, human weakness, including one's own. If there is a critique of small-town America in *The Nephew* (and in such later novels as *Jeremy's Version* and *On Glory's Course*), it focuses more quietly on the enforced intolerance of human waywardness, making small-town culture in its way as hostile to the realization of individual potential as the urban environment confronted by Fenton Riddleway and Malcolm.

Alma is to some extent guilty of such intolerance herself (although less so than Clara Himbaugh, the religious enthusiast), but her weakness is really a kind of willful naïveté blinding her to the difficulties some of her fellow townspeople actually experience behind the social façade she too willingly accepts. Most importantly, she has been blind to the difficulties faced by Cliff, whom she and Boyd raised after the death of his parents and of whom they became especially fond. Alma comes to understand that, while Cliff did indeed love his aunt and uncle, he also felt the constraints of a place like Rainbow Center and wanted nothing more than to leave it—to the point that he enlisted "before he had to," as Alma observes early in the novel. She finds out as well that Cliff was much closer with Willard and Vernon than she was aware. In fact, Alma and Boyd discover that Vernon Miller was in love with Cliff. (Cliff was not himself a homosexual, but also among the things Alma comes to accept is that Willard and Vernon were homosexual lovers.) This is made evident to them in dramatic fashion when, after seeing that Willard's house has caught fire, they enter and find in Vernon's bedroom numerous photographs of Cliff displayed on the wall. This is a kind of culminating moment in *The Nephew*, as the shock of it causes Boyd to have a heart attack and ultimately leads Alma to her most important realization: "There's so much we can never know about everything and everybody," she tells Faye Laird after not just describing the photographs she's seen but being told by Faye that Vernon has asked Faye to marry him.

In some ways, Cliff is a curious reversal of Malcolm. Malcolm is ever-present in the narrative that bears his name but is essentially devoid of personality, never becomes much more than that name. Cliff is literally absent from the novel that is also named after him, but by its end we do acquire a more satisfying sense of who he was, as, of course, does Alma. And if Malcolm's

status as a kind of blank slate leaves a void in reader identification, Alma in her very efforts to reconstruct her nephew compensates for his absence and becomes the novel's protagonist, a character with whom we can identify, even like and admire. Although she is not the only such character in Purdy's fiction, Alma Mason perhaps travels the most conventional path from illusion to enlightenment. She is probably one of the few Purdy characters about whom it could plausibly be said, as Bettina Schwarzschild put it, that she is able "to gain that high form of consciousness necessary to self-knowledge and self-realization. Before she dies she knows who she is, she is at one with herself" (*The Not-Right House: Essays on James Purdy*). Purdy's work is partly an extended exploration of the obstacles to human self-realization, and *The Nephew* gives us the all-too-rare account of someone overcoming them.

Yet if it is not quite right to suggest Alma's imminent death at the conclusion of the novel, it is the case that Purdy allows Alma to reach the "high form of consciousness" only when she and Boyd are indeed quite old. The novel ends where it began, with Alma and Boyd in their home, and its last words evoke both the advances in understanding each of them has made and advancing time.

By their practice of sitting in the dark, only their white hair which at times shone almost like phosphorescence betokened each other's presence.

Through the open window there came the faint delicious perfume of azaleas. The court house struck ten.

The phosphorescent glow symbolizes the higher state of consciousness the two, especially Alma, have achieved, as well as an increase in sympathy between them ("I've been so glad you've been here," Alma says to Boyd. "It would be pretty all-alone by myself." To which Boyd replies, "I can say the same, Alma"). But at the same time it is the "only" sign of their presence in the abiding and encroaching darkness. The clock strikes ten—not so late they can't still appreciate the azaleas but getting late nevertheless. (Boyd, we are told, is "already seriously dozing" in his chair.) As much as Alma has achieved a transformed perspective, it has undoubtedly come so late it will have little more than consolatory value. Such value is not negligible, of course, but adding to the elegiac tone of the novel's conclusion is the knowledge that much has been lost through Alma's previous efforts to maintain her illusions, most painfully Cliff himself. The

Nephew affirms that it is possible to dispel one's illusions, but this only partially ameliorates the damage they do. In the projected world of James Purdy's fiction, such equivocal redemption may be the happiest outcome that can be expected.

The quiet cadences of the novel's final two brief paragraphs are about as close to conventionally "lyrical prose" as we get in Purdy's fiction, although that is certainly not to say that Purdy lacks a distinctive, at times even poetic, prose style. Both *Malcolm* and *The Nephew*, however, through their narrative structures encourage a reliance on dialogue, which will turn out to be perhaps Purdy's greatest strength as a writer (already prefigured in many of his early stories, as well as *63: Dream Palace*, and also to be found in the several plays Purdy wrote). Malcolm and Alma Mason necessarily speak with many people, and their conversations—what is said and what is implied—are most revelatory in our perception of both story and character. Purdy uses dialogue not just as ornamental devices or as a way to add color and depth to his characters (although it certainly does that as well). It actually performs much of the narrative work, forwarding action, introducing themes, as well as enhancing characterization, both of those speaking and those of whom they speak. At one point in *The Nephew*, Professor Mannheim is speaking to his wife about a previous conversation with Mrs. Barrington:

"Mrs. Barrington's harping on what anybody might know about Cliff finally flustered me as much as being there on trial in her house. And she saw what was flustering me, I think. She knew, I'm sure, that I knew something about Cliff. That old woman knows, in a dim way, everything about people, I believe. Her gaze is at times annihilating. Her knowledge hasn't made her any kinder, of course"

"And what did Mrs. Barrington know you knew about Cliff?" Rosa Mannheim asked, her sarcasm and bitterness faintly dissipated.

He puffed on his pipe, not looking at his wife. " 'Professor Mannheim,' I can still hear Cliff's voice, 'I think I've taken some money that doesn't belong to me while I was under the influence the other night. At the going-away party Willard Baker gave for me . . . ' "

"He had stolen some money" she asked with indifference.

“He had four thousand dollars on his person he could not account for. He offered to go get the money to show me, but I told him I was sure he hadn’t taken it voluntarily.

“His uncle had been away overnight on one of his real-estate deals, as often happened, and the boy was alone. Since he was to be inducted into the army in two days, Willard Baker, on the spur of the moment, thought it would be fun to give the boy a going-away party that night, his pre-induction shindig . . . Cliff went, and for the first time in his life got pie-eyed. He was still in bed drunk, with his clothes on, when his uncle returned the next afternoon from his deal. Even Boyd finally realized what had happened, for the boy’s clothes stank of alcohol and where he’d been sick. Then when the old man tried to help him into clean pajamas, the four thousand dollars fell out of his coat pocket. Both the uncle and Cliff were terrified . . .”

Here we are offered the chance to hear Cliff speak in his own voice, albeit only as filtered through Professor Mannheim’s re-presentation. Such re-presentations are a common occurrence in Purdy’s fiction, so that on the one hand we want to accept the account given (in this case complete with the subject’s own words), but on the other hand, we can’t entirely be sure the account is trustworthy. On the whole, the depiction of Professor Mannheim in *The Nephew* is positive enough (he suffers the puritanism and anti-intellectualism of his college administrators), so we can probably conclude that what he says of Cliff is relatively accurate. The portrait of Rosa Mannheim is less complimentary, however, an effect that again is partly created through what other people say about her, but also conveyed subtly in a passage like this one, for example in the way she asks “with indifference” about Cliff and the four thousand dollars, which in fact has not been stolen but nevertheless turns out to be a significant part of Cliff’s story. (Vernon gave Cliff the money to help him get out of Rainbow Center.) An exchange like this, itself part of a longer encounter between the husband and wife in which even more is revealed to us, asks us to pay close attention to what is said as well as what is not, and to consider the motives of those speaking. (Should we, for example, accept at face value Professor Mannheim’s rather condescending references to Boyd?) Information accumulates through these dialogue-based episodes, including narrative information, but the reader needs to continually assess the source and significance of the information along the way.

Purdy's approach could be labeled as the scenic method, of a sort more common perhaps in the English comedy of manners, but in novels like *Malcolm*, *The Nephew*, and his next two novels, *Cabot Wright Begins* and *Eustace Chisolm and the Works*, it is allied with a fabulist strategy closer in spirit to the American "Romance" as described by Hawthorne in his preface to *The House of the Seven Gables*, a form through which a writer claims a right to "manage his atmospherical medium as to bring out or mellow the lights and deepen and enrich the shadows of the picture." This blending of the realistic and the fabular (Hawthorne meets Edith Wharton) gives Purdy's work a singular formal quality in postwar American fiction. Scenes and dialogue are convincingly realistic (especially the dialogue, the authenticity of which is remarkably consistent from character to character), while the allegorical and, in some of the later novels, violent or shocking plots allow Purdy to "present [the] truth under circumstances, to a great extent, of the writer's own choosing or creation," as Hawthorne also puts it. *The Nephew* and the longer, small-town based historical novels can be described as works of realism, while others (*Malcolm*, *In a Shallow Grave*) take more advantage of that "certain latitude" Hawthorne asks for to manipulate atmosphere and plot in the name of the same kind of truth. The difference is one of degree, as all of Purdy's fiction recognizably bears his formal and stylistic signature.

Cabot Wright Begins displays that signature as well, and seems to return to the more artificial mode of *Malcolm*; however, this novel is more explicitly comic and satirical. Its reception in 1965 perhaps represents the apogee of Purdy's contemporaneous reputation. Even those reviews that accused it of being excessive, self-indulgent, or tasteless ultimately testified to its perceived status as an example of a new kind of iconoclastic, uninhibited fiction appearing in the 1960s. It brought Purdy enough prominence that Susan Sontag proclaimed him "indisputably one of the half dozen or so living American writers worth taking seriously" and pointed to "the deservedly high place he now holds in contemporary letters." Even in 1971, Tony Tanner in his book *City of Words* called *Cabot Wright Begins* "one of the most important American novels since the war."

It is probably not likely that anyone now reading *Cabot Wright Begins* for the first time would quite understand a claim like this, although certainly that reader might still find it a lively and provocative novel. Those features of the novel that at the time made it plausible for a

sympathetic critic to think it so important—its thematic daring, the extremity of its humor, its self-reflexivity—now seem less radical departures from established literary norms. It is more likely this reader will take *Cabot Wright Begins* not as black humor but as more conventional satire—outrageous and bitter satire, but satire of a recognizable kind. Sontag describes the targets: “a satire on pornographic fantasy, a satire on New York literary life, a satire on affluent eccentric mid-century America.” Satire is often limited by time and place.³ What is being mocked is historically or culturally specific, and the mockery frequently doesn’t withstand the passage of time—the details seem “dated,” too remote from present circumstances and sensibilities to maintain fully their power to anger or amuse. The strength of *Cabot Wright Begins* as a satirical work is that in many ways it doesn’t seem dated. Its dissection of an insipid media culture, rampant hucksterism, and predatory capitalism feels quite as relevant now as it was in 1965. When Mr. Warburton, himself a Wall Street financier, fulminates against his own profession, some of what he says might be spoken today at an Occupy Wall Street rally:

America, which began as a society of men with plans, confidence, and good blood in its veins, has ended in a shambles of scrofulous obscenity and barking half-breeds in which nothing worth selling or connecting is hawked, barked and exposed in its meretricious shine to a nation of uninterested buyers. Young and old have suffered and are suffering a series of consumer hemorrhages from a non-attendant civilization that has only noise, confusion, pumped up virility and pornography.

Warburton clearly has other accompanying attitudes which Purdy surely does not endorse, but the portrayal of American commercial culture in *Cabot Wright Begins* certainly bears out Mr. Warburton’s poor opinion of its overseers and of the “non-attendant culture” that enables them. Since Purdy creates no characters (aside from someone like Malcolm) without serious flaws in attitudes and behavior, there are no characters who can be considered mouthpieces for the author or as the representative of normative values, even in a satirical novel like *Cabot Wright Begins*. Mr. Warburton is morally compromised by his own kind of bigotry, and his Puritanism would hardly be an acceptable alternative to the tawdry capitalism he deplores (even as it does fuel his series of “sermons,” which make for rhetorically vigorous reading), but everyone in Purdy’s fictional world is morally compromised, and Warburton’s self-righteous sense of moral clarity allows him to view American culture with an appropriately

disabused acuity. Ultimately, all of the characters in *Cabot Wright Begins* are subject to satirical treatment, including Warburton, but the reader's response to these characters is likely to be more complicated than either simple amusement or outright contempt.

The character who inevitably invites the most complicated response is the novel's ostensible protagonist, Cabot Wright himself. We are not even sure he will in fact be the protagonist until well into the narrative, which is not directly the story of Cabot Wright but of the attempt by two different writers to "get" Cabot's story and to publish it as a novel. Cabot Wright is an infamous rapist whose deeds and subsequent conviction fascinate Carrie Moore, a "semi-retired miniature painter" who discovers that Cabot has just been released from prison. She suggests that her husband, Bernie Gladheart, a failed writer, go to New York and track down the rapist. "All you need do, Bernie," she tells him after realizing this could be Bernie's chance to find success as a writer, "is present the truth as fiction." Thus, we're led to believe Bernie Gladheart will be the protagonist, as we focus on his endeavor to find the truth about Cabot Wright and render it "as fiction."

But the task proves too elusive for Bernie, and after he writes only the beginnings of a manuscript based mostly on research, the project is taken over by Zoe Bickle, an ex-editor with connections to Princeton Keith, a New York publisher who has decided a book about a serial rapist has possibilities but doesn't think Bernie Gladheart is up to the job. Only after Zoe Bickle has taken over are we finally introduced to Cabot Wright, as opposed to the increasingly abstract, sensationalized figure he threatens to become (and that Princeton Keith wants him to be). At first even Cabot is involved in the effort to understand who he "really" is, to get a grasp on his own identity. Through the process of talking to Zoe Bickle and discovering what she may be writing about him, Cabot comes to perceive himself more clearly, as do we. If what we were expecting to find was a lurid tale of a sadistic monster, we instead get a strange story of someone who became a rapist as a consequence of confusion in his own sense of identity and as part of the process of clearing up that confusion—a misguided and disturbing part to be sure, but Cabot is still recognizably human and not simply a sociopath.

Postwar American fiction is replete with antihero protagonists, but Cabot Wright may be one of the most difficult to accept. Even if he is not a violent rapist, and some of his rapes are actually something closer to seductions, or if finally Cabot himself is unable to explain his

actions or understand his motives, it is still disconcerting at the least to read a satirical novel focusing on the crimes of a notorious rapist, even more disconcerting to increasingly find Cabot Wright a compelling character whose flaws, like those of most antihero protagonists, have largely been acquired through his troubled relationship with the society into which he cannot comfortably fit. However, to some extent the source of Cabot Wright's alienation is hidden from him; it manifests itself in a chronic lack of energy, of feeling always "tired" but being unable to pinpoint the cause. To identify the cause, Cabot Wright visits a psychologist whose eccentric methods have given him some notoriety in treating patients with "the tired feeling." Although those methods are clearly quackery (Cabot is hung, nearly naked, on a padded hook fixed to the wall of the psychologist's office), they have a galvanizing effect on Cabot nevertheless, who seems immediately to tap into some elemental force within. Shortly after his initial "treatments," Cabot perpetrates his first rape.

In rediscovering this elemental part of himself, Cabot Wright is actually taking a positive step toward accepting natural impulses freed of their imprisonment in social corruptions (in this novel these include specifically economic corruptions, as Cabot is an employee of Mr. Warburton and is expected to make it good on Wall Street). To the extent that Purdy's characters are able to achieve something approaching a redemptive humanity, it is through casting aside their illusions and finding solidarity with other imperfect humans, as with Alma Mason, or through acknowledging their honest feelings and acting accordingly. Unfortunately, Cabot Wright connects with his natural impulses, but he allows himself to express them in exactly the wrong way. He exploits women for his own purposes, even if he only dimly understands those purposes himself and even if he does recognize that the Cabot Wright being groomed for a life on Wall Street and married to a woman of appropriate social rank is not who he is. (The wife winds up committed to a mental institution, partly in response to the changes in Cabot after his treatment.) His destructive behavior is only abetted by a society that sensationalizes his actions, and the group of people who have resolved to turn the "truth" of Cabot's life into "fiction" only further amplify his mistakes, even reinforce them for the sake of entertainment and personal gain. This additional exploitation is particularly exemplified by Princeton Keith, who as the potential publisher of the book would like the story to be as sordid as possible. The most unscrupulous and rapacious character in the book (he is ultimately the true predator), Keith is

also an emblematic figure whose venality is the venality of modern American culture the novel wants to expose.

The book project finally collapses, done in by the corporate media's need for the very latest in cheap sensationalism: by the time the book might be ready for publication, its subject has already become passé. The culture has moved on to the "the age of the black faggot and fellation," Bernie and Zoe are told. To make matters worse, the manuscript submitted actually has some merit, although not of the kind the powers-that-be appreciate. An assigned reader reports:

Nowhere has [the author] shown the relationship of the youthful rapist to happy older people whom we meet every day in offices and homes, and to a happy America. We are fed only on deviation and mordant thoughts without any higher note.

One can't help but suspect that here Purdy is also mocking some of the responses his own fiction had received, so that while the novel-within-the-novel (ultimately titled *Indelible Smudge*) doesn't really succeed in rendering "the truth" of Cabot's life "as fiction," the failure is in the belief that such a goal is possible in the first place. *Cabot Wright Begins* does not pretend to have offered us the truth about the soul or the psychology of a man like Cabot Wright, although it must be said that in the ferocity of its satire it does seem to insist it presents the truth about the crudity of mid-century American society. Submitting his life to the scrutiny, however incomplete, of the would-be authors of *Indelible Smudge* leads Cabot to a partial epiphany of sorts, perhaps the beginning of truth: he is able to laugh, "the first real laugh he had ever been able to bring off." Perhaps Cabot Wright's realization is also the one graspable truth with which the novel implies we can all begin to confront the world we have created for ourselves, even while a work of fiction might say no more: it is a world well-deserving of our laughter.

If it is possible to identify the beginning of James Purdy's long fall into neglect and disfavor, it is arguably in the publication and reception of *Eustace Chisholm and the Works* (1967), specifically in its open treatment of homosexuality and in the frankness of the characters' assumptions about sexual desire. This must have been an unsettling book for readers expecting Purdy's next novel to be another similarly extravagant comedy. Although this novel has its share

of odd and eccentric characters, the setting in which these characters are placed—Chicago in the midst of the Great Depression—hardly seems to promise hilarity. Indeed, this increasingly grave and somber novel, climaxing in scenes of brutal violence, comes as close to being describable as tragic as any of Purdy's narratives. Certainly the consequences of repression and self-deception are nowhere else dramatized more powerfully.

This novel seems a deliberate reversal of *Cabot Wright Begins* in other ways as well. Rather than confronting the cultural offenses of the present, it withdraws to the past. Purdy increasingly situates his stories in the past during the 1970s and 1980s, but while we might want to conclude that an historical narrative allows Purdy to trace the causes of American social decay, in *Eustace Chisholm and the Works* there is surprisingly little examination of the systemic failures that led to the Depression. (Nor do the later historical novels really seem like part of an attempt to pinpoint the reasons America went bad, although read together they do inevitably provide some insight into the nature of America's failure.) The flaws that lead to the novel's terrible outcome are flaws in the human personality, which won't be overcome merely through social improvements.

Perhaps the most significant reversal in *Eustace Chisholm* is formal. As in *Cabot Wright Begins*, we are here introduced to several characters that might become the novel's protagonist—in particular the title character—only to have the story veer in a different direction. But while “Ace” Chisholm is presented to us initially as yet another failed writer (in this case a poet) and we are perhaps prepared to take the story as again about the inadequacies of representation, that concern recedes into the background (although Eustace Chisholm does come to realize in the end that he really is not a poet). Writing is still an implicit formal device and a thematic motif in the novel (the dramatic events of the last third of the narrative are ostensibly conveyed to us through letters Ace receives), but if Purdy still doesn't ask us to take writing as simply the transparent means of telling a story about reality, the limitations of telling such stories are relatively de-emphasized in *Eustace Chisholm and the Works* in deference to the intrinsic interest of the story itself.

Ultimately, Ace Chisholm's role in this novel is to in a sense convene its cast of characters (his “works”), comment on their actions as the story proceeds, and to bring the narrative to an appropriately chastened conclusion after he has witnessed these actions and their

consequences. If Ace is not exploiting his friends by using them as the subjects of his “long narrative poem” (the actual subject of which remains rather vague throughout the novel), he nevertheless does at times regard them as characters whose fates he might be able to direct. Ace’s attempts to influence them certainly do not always work out well. His advice to one his friends, Maureen O’Dell, that in order to cast off the burdens of her upbringing and liberate herself to be an artist she “give herself unstintingly to the sexual experience . . . in order to discover its secrets” leads her to a life of some sexual recklessness. Not the least consequence of this is a pregnancy that leads to an abortion, the performance of which is described in gruesome detail. Eustace is certainly not alone to blame for Maureen’s predicament, but while he is not an unsympathetic character, Eustace Chisholm is at times remarkably tolerant of the pain and suffering of others, although the novel’s conclusion suggests he has come to realize this.

Maureen is made pregnant by a man named Daniel Haws, an apartment manager who has become part of Eustace Chisholm’s circle because he is the landlord of Amos “Rat” Ratcliffe, a young prodigy from whom Ace is taking Greek lessons. It is Daniel Haws who becomes the true protagonist of *Eustace Chisholm and the Works*, his troubled relationship with Amos the novel’s primary subject. By the time we are fully introduced to both Amos and Daniel, it has become unambiguously clear that homosexual relationships will play a prominent, fully acknowledged part in the story of these characters’ lives. Eustace himself, while married, is currently living in such a relationship, although it might be more accurate to say that sexual preference among these characters is somewhat in flux, and that most of the characters, including the characters who seem mostly heterosexual (the women, primarily), act as though they take such fluidity for granted. Attitudes toward sex in general seem decidedly uninhibited, although this hardly makes the milieu evoked in *Eustace Chisholm* some sort of sexual utopia, as illustrated in the case of Maureen O’Dell, or in the fact that Amos Ratcliffe reports committing an act of incest with his mother.

It was now undeniably clear that homosexuality was one of the chief subjects of Purdy’s work, and while *Eustace Chisholm* actually illustrates in an especially memorable way that Purdy’s concern is not homosexual love per se, sampling some of the critical reactions to the book shows that “serious” literary critics were not prepared to attend very closely to the novel in order to see that. In his *Twayne* book on Purdy, for example, Henry Chupak wonders “whether a

novel almost totally involved with [homosexuality] is not inflating an aspect of human existence that is at best only an abnormal sexual experience.” Chupak’s book was published in 1975, but it makes evident that even in the post-Stonewall era, such a critic (ostensibly writing a book in praise of James Purdy) found it difficult to view homosexual characters as other than “abnormal.” It could be argued that the characters in *Eustace Chisholm and the Works* do find themselves in “abnormal” circumstances, circumstances that keep them even more marginalized and isolated than they would ordinarily be, and that their subsistence on the margins of an economically debilitated society leaves them free to ignore social prohibitions, but this marginalization lets them feel more normal in their sexual desires. Here they can be experienced and expressed as natural, not culturally stigmatized or regulated.

Daniel Haws unfortunately is a character who is not able to express his natural desires. As someone from a working class background, he has especially internalized the social condemnation of homosexuality, and when he finds himself having a same-sex attraction to Amos Ratcliffe (which is reciprocated), he cannot accept it. At first, he even manages to prevent his attraction from rising to consciousness, so that it manifests itself in sleepwalking:

. . .at two o’clock in the morning of his first night Amos was awakened by the squeak of the opening door. In the feeble hallway light, he saw someone standing on his threshold. The man advanced toward Amos with his eyes open, but the expression in their pupils was so changed that Amos did not at once recognize his landlord. Daniel came directly to Amos’s cot, sat down in the manner of a regular visitor, lifted the boy’s head casually, touched his hair and, leaning over him close enough for Amos to feel the warmth of his breath, said, without expression or feeling: “Promise me you’ll want to stay.” A few seconds after saying this, he rose and returned to his own room, having closed the shell of a door behind him.

Eventually Amos makes Daniel aware of the sleepwalking, and although Daniel continues to resist the idea he could love a man, he ultimately concedes that he does (but not to Amos). However, he still cannot physically manifest his love in a relationship with Amos, so on the very day he finally admits he loves Amos, he re-enlists in the army. Daniel Haws can perhaps be regarded as the most compelling example of a character unwilling to assent to that part of himself, buried deep in the acquired layers of social conditioning and psychological confusion,

that is capable of both experiencing and expressing love without equivocation or preoccupation with self. Purdy's work at the least implies that this unwillingness is an ingrained human limitation, but it makes itself even more starkly visible, and its consequences are revealed most forcefully, when it is homosexual love that is simultaneously being recognized and resisted. Thus, while homosexuality is not treated as a "lifestyle" or "orientation" to be defended or deplored, in *Eustace Chisholm and the Works* and in Purdy's subsequent novels also featuring homosexual characters, it is depicted as a phenomenon that throws into particularly sharp relief the struggles and the successes of people attempting to understand and maintain their relationships with others.

Daniel Haws's struggle emphatically fails, and not just in his attempt to come to terms with his feelings for Amos Ratcliffe. After re-enlisting, Daniel continues his sleepwalking, and fatefully walks into Captain Stadger's tent. Stadger "looked up with unbelief and yet with an expression of recognition and fulfilled hope at the sight of the soldier standing stark naked with sightless eyes before him." The nature of the recognition and "fulfilled hope" in Stadger's reaction becomes clear enough very soon, as Stadger is himself a repressed homosexual, and also a sadist. The latter is largely the outcome of the former, as Stadger's sadism is the expression of his own self-hatred, his subsequent violence toward Daniel Haws directed at Daniel as one like himself, but also at his own perceived weakness in harboring unacceptable desires.

And Stadger's rage is fearsome, his violence, on the other hand, focused and determined:

As if maddened anew at the sight of his rich brown flesh, the captain now whipped him with the pistol across the shoulder blades and spine and buttocks.

After the first savage embraces with his own flesh and the satisfied hardly human outcry of relief from the captain, there was a pause. Then a strange sound came, as if from a whirring of metallic wings. 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 into Daniel's body, the first of the "real" instruments, he supposed, to be used in breaking him down to "submission."

For minutes of unendurable hell the soldier, impaled as it were by the iron piece and prevented from falling forward, tasted the most exquisite torment he could have ever imagined his body capable of in his wildest imaginings.

Later, Stadger produces his ultimate weapon:

“I’ve hunted for this particular piece here for a long endless time,” he pulled open Daniel’s eyes with his fingers, and looked longingly in his pupils.

The captain was holding the weapon in front of Daniel now. When the soldier saw it, he recognized it as one of those immemorial instruments of destruction mentioned by his preacher reading from Scripture when as a boy he and his mother had attended the Disciples of Christ Church long ago.

In his own weak horror, he now held on to Captain Stadger’s arm as one might to an anaesthetician who must accompany one to the shadows of death.

“I’ve been hunting all my life for the right man, the right body and will, who could accept this perfect weapon,” Captain Stadger went on looking into the soldier’s eyes. “Now I have them all.”

The vengeance wreaked by Captain Stadger is indeed Biblical in scale, at least to Daniel, who by the time Stadger brandishes this awful instrument has conceded that the captain is only pronouncing the judgment Daniel deserves, and who passively allows Stadger to carry out his sentence. After killing Daniel (“pushing like flame with the instrument into Daniel’s groin upward and over”), Stadger shoots himself, leaving us wondering whether to view this as the ultimate act of a mythopoeic avenger dispensing final justice or just the pathetic conclusion to a psychopath’s contrived drama of orgiastic violence and self-destruction. Although Daniel Haws is certainly Stadger’s sacrificial victim, he is also the tragic victim of his own inability to be himself, thoroughly walled behind fear and shame. These final pages of *Eustace Chisholm and the Works*, depicting the culminating moments of this tragedy, are surely among the most harrowing in all of American fiction.

When in the novel’s epilogue Eustace Chisholm forsakes the vocation of writer, he does so because, after reading Daniel Haws’s letters and learning of his ultimate fate through a notice

from the army, he realizes that he is really just a dilettante, both in his attitudes toward the realities of other peoples' lives (toward reality in general) and in his understanding of the visionary power required of poetry. Indeed these twin realizations are probably reflections of each other, as Eustace recognizes while contemplating lines from Dryden's translation of Virgil, lines appropriately enough about the primeval savagery of love. Eustace knows he cannot represent emotions as consuming as those in which Daniel Haws and Captain Stadger are trapped because he has never experienced them, and he further knows his fondness for the "classics" has been nothing but affectation, a retreat into the past where overpowering emotions and frightful events can be safely contained by distance and by unreflective veneration. It is perhaps tempting to see Eustace Chisholm as another in the line of writers forced to acknowledge the insufficiencies of their undertaking, and thus the insufficiencies of writing in general, but what Eustace really confesses is that he could not have written a novel like *Eustace Chisholm and the Works*. Purdy, by contrast, magnificently evokes the engulfing emotional turmoil that motivates the contest between Stadger and Daniel Haws. If great tragedy depicts extraordinary figures struggling against their all-too-human flaws, Purdy similarly finds the tragic dimension among characters who, if only human to begin with, destructively struggle to keep their most human impulses at bay.

Purdy continues in most of the rest of his work to include writer/artist character presented as having a vexed relationship with reality, although in some of the novels the underlying critique of the distorting effects of representation is again more muted. This is especially true in the quartet of historical novels, *Jeremy's Version* (1970), *The House of the Solitary Maggot* (1974), *Mourners Below* (1981), and *On Glory's Course* (1984), in which the effort to reconstruct the past is implicitly assumed to be possible, resulting in novels that are probably Purdy's least self-reflexive, his most dedicated to "authenticity" in the details of manners and setting. If simply re-creating the past is ultimately not really the point of these novels, also the longest of Purdy's books, they could readily enough appeal to most readers of historical fiction—even if some of their characters are eccentric at the least and some of the plot turns are likely to seem shocking.

The first of these books (and immediate follow-up to *Eustace Chisholm and the Works*), *Jeremy's Version*, however, does draw more attention to the mode of its own composition. The story told is indeed the "version" assembled by the title character from conversations with his uncle, who is himself recalling events far into his own past. That the story is a version should not be forgotten in assessing and interpreting this novel, but that doesn't have to mean the narrative as filtered by Jeremy Cready has a doubtful relationship to the truth. It is unavoidably contingent on Jeremy's perspective, yet finally Purdy can't really be suggesting that his perspective for that reason alone is false, that any such perspective, including the novelist's, is evidence only of the "futility" of writing fiction. Purdy's work certainly does begin with the assumption that truth is contingent, but *Jeremy's Version* gives us reason to believe that Jeremy's version does offer a portion of the truth, perhaps a large portion, and that contingency and the possibility of error are inherent to both human reality and literature, which in both realms have to be accepted.

While some of Purdy's subsequent novels continue to use a framing device whereby the narrative is mediated by the circumstances of its narration (*The House of the Solitary Maggot* employs a framing device similar to that in *Jeremy's Version*, but to a less intensive degree), Purdy tones down his implicit critique of writing as a barrier to the perception of reality. The device as employed in *Jeremy's Version* is reminiscent of Hawthorne's "twice-told tale," helping create a sense of historical distance and investing the past with a kind of legendary aura, ways of managing the "atmospherical medium." If *Jeremy's Version* has more in common with *The Nephew* in its focus on family drama and its setting in small-town America (again convincingly evoked) than with *Cabot Wright Begins* or *Eustace Chisholm and the Works*, its realism is not primarily for the sake of bringing the past "back to life"; rather, it signifies a successful effort to bring coherence to the past, however second-hand such an account must be (and however incoherent the motives and behavior of some of the account's subjects).

Purdy initially wrote *Jeremy's Version* as the first in a projected series of novels to be called "Sleepers in Moon Crowned Valleys," an extended work in which the individual novels would be installments. Perhaps because of the commercial concerns of his publishers (which plagued Purdy throughout his career), the four novels were less and less prominently featured as parts of this larger whole. (Purdy himself increasingly spoke of them as individual works and less as the fulfillment of the initially planned project.) It is hard not to conclude that Purdy turned

to this ambitious venture into historical fiction to explore the roots of the social malaise portrayed in *Cabot Wright Begins*, heretofore consigned to a background role in *Eustace Chisholm and the Works* in favor of the more metaphysical, less socially specific confrontation between Daniel Haws and Captain Stadger. And while the past (predominantly rural) depicted in *Jeremy's Version* and its successors in some ways has more integrity and authenticity than the world of the present portrayed in *Malcolm* or *Cabot Wright*, few of the characters are less absorbed or more attuned to their finer impulses, and the circumstances of rural life impose restrictions and expectations of their own that encourage bad behavior and cause needless suffering.

It is possible to discern in these four novels a broader portrait of the social and cultural assumptions underlying earlier periods in American history because they share not just a similar, more stable structure but also themes and situations. Prominently featured are young men and boys—frequently an older and a younger brother—fighting against what they consider the oppressive conditions they must endure in their small-town, rural environment and, especially, against the tyrannical behavior of a parent. In *Mourners Below*, this tyrannical parent is a father (reversing the typical Purdy motif of absent father for a story of an absent mother), but in the other three novels it is a mother, all three of whom share the characteristics of being single mothers (practically if not literally) trying to raise their sons while also nursing their own frustrations (social, economic, sexual). One of these mothers, Lady Bythewaite of *Solitary Maggot*, is also a version of the “greatwoman” presiding in her ever-diminishing domain, while the other two are scraping by running boarding houses. These women love their sons intensely, but their love is allied with the need to control them, to have them love the mother in return in a way that enhances the mother’s own self-image, ameliorates her own feelings of failure.

Thus the love these women offer to their sons is not a mothering love but a smothering one, and the sons inevitably resist it. Their behavior is another, if different, illustration of the way the possibilities for human relationships to flourish are impeded by a preoccupation with self, exemplified further in the women's sexual relationships, which are partly the expression of their genuine passions but also partly a similar reinforcement of self-image and ego. As Stephen Adams say of Elvira Fergus of *Jeremy's Version*, Elvira “lives like a queen bee at the center of her male-populated territory, hoping to secure herself a constant flow of adulation.” Characters

like Elvira, Lady Bythewaite, and Elaine Cottrell of *On Glory's Course* collectively highlight the portrayal of women in Purdy's fiction, and, like his portrayal of humanity in general, it is an unsparing one, even as it also reveals the way in which women's lives are constricted and deformed by the attempt to find fulfillment in a male-centered world where the possibilities available to women have been determined by the needs of men. Purdy's gay male characters are also spiritually disfigured by their subjection to the conditions of this world suffused with the worst masculine traits—the will to dominate, a crude egocentrism willing to disregard the welfare of others, an extreme emotional reticence—but where it leads in someone like Captain Stadger to a psychotic break or in Daniel Haws (and later Sidney De Lakes in *Narrow Rooms*) to willing self-destruction, in these female characters it results in a desperate need to manage the lives of their (male) children or the equally desperate need for attention.

Although these women are not free of the their own kind of acquisitiveness, they do not exhibit the same kind of crass materialism afflicting some of the male characters, even in the rural environments in which they live. Wilders Fergus, Elvira's ne'er-do-well husband, has spent most of his life engaged in various crooked get-rich schemes, and his absence from the lives of his wife and children ultimately bears much of the blame for their problems. Mr. Skegg, the father of Nora Bythewaite's sons, will not acknowledge them as his sons and spends much of his time attempting to regain the wealth and stature he once enjoyed on Wall Street. Eugene Bledsoe, in *Mourners Below*, is a small-town lawyer whose preoccupation with his business affairs has resulted in a distant relationship with his sole surviving son, Duane, although Eugene perhaps even more palpably exemplifies the masculine reluctance to openly express emotion. Duane's inability to feel close to his father is partly responsible for his own preoccupation with his two dead brothers (both killed in World War II), a preoccupation that has resulted in his being "haunted" by the ghost of one of them.

It is interesting to turn from these novels examining a supposed age of American innocence back to *63: Dream Palace* and its portrait of Fenton Riddleway, an innocent arriving in the city, presumably from the sort of provincial environment depicted in the four later novels. Fenton is clearly unprepared for the "wider world" he encounters, but not because he is any less susceptible to the human weaknesses he finds there, or even because he is unfamiliar with venality and cruelty, but because he is overwhelmed by their presence on such a scale. He is all

the more easily overwhelmed because of the limitations particularly reinforced by these rural communities. These four novels could be called “family dramas,” but they are ultimately stories of young men who feel both isolated and dependent on the small core of important people in their lives, feelings that lead them to yearn to break away, or to engage in seemingly irrational behavior—the youngest of the Fergus sons, Jethro, attempts to kill his mother, Duane sees the ghost of his dead brother—caused by the pressures exerted on them by both family dysfunctions and by the oppressive atmosphere of small-town life. Jethro, for example, makes the attempt on his mother’s life because he thinks she’s a slut, an attitude influenced by the disapproval of others in his family and of the community.

Several of the young men in these novels attempt to escape from their oppressive environment by becoming actors. Theater, the performing arts in general, are featured prominently in Purdy’s fiction, beginning especially with *I Am Elijah Thrush*. On the one hand, this is not surprising, since not only has Purdy himself written plays, but other dramatists have made theatrical adaptations of his fiction (most famously Edward Albee’s adaptation of *Malcolm*), and, as well, composers have set his work to music, both as operas and as song cycles adapting his poems. Indeed, Purdy acknowledges in interviews that he spent more of his time involved in the theater/performing world than in the literary world of parties and readings. On the other hand, the theater motif is an especially appropriate device in a body of fiction that so often explores questions of identity, so that a convenient form of escape for the young men of Bartflour or Prince’s Crossing is an escape into the alternative selves offered through acting. Of course, theater can become just another one of the ways in which human beings flee from themselves and, like writing, can represent a willful distortion of reality that proves an obstacle to the truth about oneself and the world, and thus it hardly serves as simply a beneficent source of make-believe.

The dangers of relinquishing self to “role” are at the center of *I Am Elijah Thrush* (1972). Elijah Thrush is a noted mime, the nature of whose “exploits” is the ostensible subject of the narrative, although the meaning of the title ultimately becomes more equivocal than we initially suspect. The novel is narrated by Albert Peggs, who has been hired by Millicent De Frayne to ghostwrite her memoirs, which will prominently include her lifelong love for “the Mime.” *Elijah*

Thrush is a return to the satirical mode of *Cabot Wright Begins*, although it is less sweeping in its scope and might more accurately be called a surrealistic farce focusing on the exploits of all three of these rather bizarre characters. The Mime, even at his current advanced age, performs with his “great rident smile of carmine lips, his hat, which resembled a large sewing basket, and his four strips of beads, beneath which he wore only a cache-sexe.” He is said to be in love with his own great-grandson, called the Bird of Heaven (he both dresses and sings like a bird), who is mute and lives in the custody of the “Alimentary Foundation.” Millicent De Frayne is perhaps the most formidable “greatwoman” in Purdy’s fiction. Unable to conquer Elijah Thrush, she nevertheless entertains her share of young lovers, at least according to Elijah Thrush, who further claims she “extracts their semen with a siphon, one extract after another. . . without tenderness, interest in their bodies—or minds—as coldly and as calculatedly as a surgeon, dismissing them afterwards with a huge sum of money, never to see them again.”

Albert Peggs tells us almost immediately that he is a black man who is “specially prized” by Millicent De Frayne because “many doors in New York would be opened to me which were closed to a white man.” Albert is sensitive to the condescension of white people, but also admits he is not “gifted as defender of my people” and “can only live and be what I am, a desperate man, but a comfortable one.” (This even though “I had never been adept either at crime or gainful daily employment.”) Despite his skepticism about the motives of white people, however, Albert proves unable to withstand the combined manipulations of Millicent and the Mime. His desire for comfort—and the anxiety this causes him about his racial identity—make him vulnerable to the attention provided him by both, attention that is offered through different ulterior motives but that is equally insincere on each side. Ultimately Albert is so inexorably drawn into the orbits of these two people who were initially to be the subjects of his book that his already uncertain identity dissolves: “I am Elijah Thrush” are Albert’s last words as he prepares to “substitute” onstage for an absent Mime.

Albert is arguably the most prominent African-American character who plays the most prominent role in Purdy’s fiction, but Purdy often incorporated African-American characters into his work, beginning with one of his earliest short stories, “Eventide.” Richard Canning, in his obituary essay on Purdy, went so far as to claim that “Purdy wrote frequently and with brilliance about black American lives when to do so was practically unheard of among white authors.”

(Purdy himself liked to remind interviewers that Langston Hughes had at first mistaken him for a black writer.) If by “brilliance” Canning means Purdy’s ability to create African-American characters who are neither caricatures nor idealizations, he is certainly correct. Characters such as Estel Blanc in *Malcolm* or Dr. Beaufort Vance in *Eustace Chisholm and the Works* (who performs Maureen O’Dell’s abortion) have the same strengths and weaknesses, the same eccentricities, as Purdy’s white characters, although as Joseph Skerritt observed in his essay on Purdy’s depiction of black characters (“James Purdy and the Black Mask of Humanity”), these characters “do not merely illustrate in racial disguise conflicts dealt with elsewhere in his work,” even as they also do not “rehash traditional images uncritically.” Albert Peggs is certainly viewed in “traditional images” by Millicent De Frayne and Elijah Thrush, but his problem is not so much their racism (which is nonetheless quite real) as it is his internal conflict between that part of himself pushing him to live as he wants and that part aware he is a black man circulating in a white society. Since this is an irresolvable conflict, the only way Albert Peggs can persuade himself he is accepted as an individual is to completely exchange the “traditional image” for a white man’s identity.

Purdy took a risk in making his most fully developed African-American character the protagonist of a broadly satirical novel whose plot is shaped by its protagonist’s ambivalent sense of racial identification. However, what *I Am Elijah Thrush* really satirizes is a culture whose ingrained racism makes a conflict such as the one faced by Albert Peggs possible in the first place. In this way, Albert’s fate is as much tragic as it is comic, although as usual in Purdy’s fiction the boundary distinguishing the two is not so distinct. Something similar could be said of Purdy’s later novel, *Garments the Living Wear* (1989), a satirical treatment of New York during the AIDS crisis (the only Purdy novel to directly address the effects of what in this novel is referred to as “the Pest”). Although this novel certainly does not minimize the severity of the epidemic (far from it), it is a reality that is embedded within a withering portrayal of New York City’s decline. *Out With the Stars* (1992) concludes what could be called a trilogy of short satirical novels that bear witness to the depredations of New York, in this case set again (like *Cabot Wright*) in the 1960s and also again including race relations as a theme in its story of a composer’s creation of an opera based on a famous novelist’s erotic attraction to black men. The mixed reviews given to all three of these novels (including *I Am Elijah Thrush*)—the latter two receiving few reviews at all—testify to the fact that Purdy never stopped taking risks. They also lead us to the inescapable conclusion that reviewers had long since given up trying to assess Purdy’s work in other than the most crudely

reductive terms that blunted its aesthetic edge. (Interestingly, Purdy's final novel, *Gertrude of Stony Brook Avenue*, received somewhat more and better reviews. However, while this novel could be taken as a suitable capstone to Purdy's career, it is primarily notable as a return of sorts to the formal and thematic concerns of *The Nephew*, presumably a more sedate and manageable approach for most reviewers.)

The two novels that in my view show James Purdy to be, if anything, an even more compelling and adventurous writer than he demonstrated in his brief period of prominence prior to *Eustace Chisholm and the Works* are *In a Shallow Grave* (1976) and *Narrow Rooms* (1978). Both of these novels are unlike anything else Purdy wrote, before or after, although *Narrow Rooms* is somewhat reminiscent of the final part of *Eustace Chisholm*. Both novels, it seems to me, lie somewhere outside the tragedy-comedy continuum in which Purdy's other novels might be placed (although they are perhaps the least explicitly comic, even when compared to the "Sleepers" series). In this way, they may not be the most representative of Purdy's books, but at the same time, in their combination of formal audacity and emotional power they may be his best books.

To say that these novels are distinctive is not to say they lack continuity with Purdy's work as a whole, which is itself among the most distinctive bodies of work in postwar fiction. Each of them presents characters only Purdy could create, characters involved in situations that force them to come to terms with themselves—in one case this is accomplished, in the other not until resisting it results in the sort of pain and violence to which Purdy's fiction has made us accustomed. Each of them belong to the pastoral group of Purdy's novels set in the countryside, but while neither of their settings could be called idyllic, *In a Shallow Grave* manages (despite its title) to make its rural setting into the backdrop for a story in which obstacles to happiness are to a degree overcome and the possibility of human solidarity affirmed. *Narrow Rooms*, on the other hand, converts the countryside into a desolate scene of uncontrolled rage and cruelty. Each novel as well is recognizably Purdy's in style, although considered together they particularly illustrate the strategy behind his use of language, a strategy that has often been misunderstood or undervalued by reviewers, even those otherwise appreciative of Purdy's accomplishments as a writer of fiction.

In a Shallow Grave is narrated by its protagonist, Garnet Montrose, a war veteran (probably Vietnam) who was gravely injured but is now living a secluded life in his native corner of coastal Virginia. His seclusion is enforced because of the nature of his injury, which resulted when “I was blown up for dead, and my buddies all killed and parts of their bodies blown over me, buried under them for some days. . .before I was found.” Surviving this horror but still recalling “the flames and the screams of aircraft and sirens and me calling through punctured bowels and brains,” Garnet is left in a condition in which “all my veins and arteries moved from inside where they belong to the outside so that as that army doc put it, I have been turned inside out in all respects.” Garnet thus finds himself in an extremely abject state of loneliness: most people are literally sickened by his appearance, and he chooses to avoid further trauma through seclusion. Loneliness and isolation are, of course, common conditions in Purdy’s fiction, but in addition to the metaphysical alienation suffered by many of his characters, Garnet must endure an alienation arising from a purely physical affliction. If almost all of Purdy’s characters have trouble transcending self to make connections with others, Garnet is practically imprisoned in self, making him the corporeal embodiment of the spiritual malaise so pervasive in Purdy’s work.

Despite the obstacles imposed by his condition, Garnet attempts to “court” the Widow Rance, his childhood sweetheart, by writing her letters professing his love but assuring her he will not force her to bear his presence. Garnet clearly still desires human connection, but the Widow does not answer his letters—he hears “secondhand” that the local minister had said to her, “Just keep the letters from him coming, he means you no harm.” Then two young men arrive, unbidden, into Garnet’s life. The first, Quintus Pearch, is a local African-American teenager Garnet hires as an “applicant” for the job of reading to him from Garnet’s his extensive collection of old books. If Quintus is disgusted by Garnet’s appearance, he shows no outward signs of it, and his friendship becomes the first stage of Garnet’s reemergence into the world of human relationships. The second comes when Garnet happens on a young drifter named Daventry (who, it turns out, is fleeing from an incident in Utah in which, during a fight, he had killed two men). Daventry begins living with Garnet, serving most immediately as a courier for Garnet’s letters to the Widow Rance. At first Daventry is repulsed by Garnet’s condition, but eventually he overcomes his weakness and is able to reciprocate the love Garnet quite clearly comes to feel for him.

This love is not consummated sexually (despite the fact that when Garnet first discovers Daventry the latter is lurking among a herd of goats, as if he is Pan heralding the arrival of Love). In fact, the Widow is herself powerfully attracted to Daventry when he begins delivering Garnet's letters, and Daventry agrees to marry her. Garnet is initially jealous (directed more toward Daventry than the Widow, however) but ultimately accepts the betrothal when Daventry expresses his devotion to Garnet in a mysterious blood-letting ceremony that Daventry claims will save Garnet's home from dispossession (it seems to work). This devotion is further declared explicitly in an equally unsettling scene inside an abandoned dance hall Garnet sometimes visits. These scenes reinforce the suggestion, articulated directly by Garnet himself, that Daventry is some sort of mystical presence, an otherworldly "messenger" in touch with unseen powers. This possibility seems confirmed when Garnet suddenly notices he is returning to a more normal color, his veins and arteries resituating themselves under his skin, and when shortly afterward Daventry is killed in a raging hurricane ("It lifted Daventry up and carried him. . .mashed into that tree as though he belonged in it"). It is as if Daventry has been sent as a sacrificial offering to help Garnet reclaim his humanity. This does not really involve on the part of either Garnet or Daventry a recognition that he is "gay," but rather a recognition that caring about another unconditionally is itself an act of self-transcendence by which such a category becomes meaningless. *In a Shallow Grave* may be Purdy's most affecting dramatization of this theme, perhaps the novel that most tellingly reveals that this theme lies behind the treatment of homosexuality in Purdy's work, as the difficulty of acknowledging and affirming same-sex attraction provides a tangible and especially pointed version of the more universal human failure to escape self-imposed emotional constraints.

Like *The Nephew*, *In a Shallow Grave* concludes with its protagonist overcoming such constraints, even being rewarded with some easing of his physical debility. Thus it fits even more uneasily into the comedy/tragedy classification that otherwise does help us interpret Purdy's body of work. As other commentators have suggested, it might be appropriate to call this novel a pastoral romance, but it is "romance" at least as much in the sense proposed by Hawthorne as in the European pastoral tradition (although of course Purdy has written numerous pastoral novels, and we are told that prior to arriving in Virginia Daventry had been a shepherd). It is even explicitly reminiscent of Hawthorne, both in its "atmospherical" departure from the probable (nothing in *In a Shallow Grave* really crosses the line separating

reality from fantasy, but, from Garnet's grotesque deformity to Daventry's death in the hurricane, it certainly does challenge strict credulity) and in its religious allegory. Purdy himself referred to *In a Shallow Grave* as a "religious novel," but while some critics have attempted to identify a discernible theology at work in Purdy's fiction, it seems to me that the religious overtones in his fiction, including this novel, remain nebulous, arising from no particular religious text or teaching and invoked more for their imagistic and symbolic power than for any literal meaning derived from a specific religious tradition. It may be true, as Don Adams has argued, that both Garnet and Daventry undergo a kind of ecstatic liberation from the body to achieve a spiritual union, but it is true as well, as Adams also points out, that Daventry "embodies an amalgam of sacrificial love figures from animistic, Classical, and Judeo-Christian mythical traditions" ("James Purdy's Via Negativa"). Religious motifs and images are used to reinforce a narrative of human struggle, the struggle to be fully human, not to illustrate religious doctrine.

Indeed, the most satisfying outcome of Garnet's story may be his remaining relationship with Quintus Pearch. Quintus has accepted Garnet all along, but now Garnet can also accept himself. Not only has he crossed the barrier to self-acceptance, but he and Quintus together seem to have fully crossed the racial barrier, signaled on Garnet's part perhaps when he hears Quintus speak Garnet's name "as only a Virginian can say it." If Garnet and Quintus will continue in an ordinary companionability, this "ordinary" is still quite extraordinary given the time and place. Further, that something like an ordinary life might now be available to Garnet Montrose surely represents the happiest transformation his experiences could have achieved. We may be tempted to take Daventry as a Christ figure, but the fruit of his sacrifice is not everlasting life but just life, and a greater understanding of its value, something so many of Purdy's characters lack.

The iconography of Christian sacrifice is again prominently featured in *Narrow Rooms*, although it is employed to a very different purpose, its immediate effect horrific rather than redemptive. Nothing about the characters and their situation is ordinary in this novel, which stands out first of all as Purdy's most sustained and direct depiction of characters identifying as homosexuals. It is also perhaps even more shocking in its desolation and violence than *Eustace Chisholm and the Works*. This is a combination certainly makes *Narrow Rooms* a memorable novel, and it might ultimately make it the novel with which James Purdy is most identified.

Narrow Rooms especially distills Purdy's prevailing theme of self-denial and its destructive consequences, although it lacks the critique of representation so otherwise insistent in Purdy's fiction: it is probably the least self-reflexive, most unmediated narrative among Purdy's novels. Further, readers who might expect a sanguine or celebratory portrait of characters and milieu in a certifiably "gay" novel will quite likely be troubled, possibly even outraged, by what they find in the story Purdy wants to tell.

If Daniel Haws resists loving another man until it's too late, same-sex attraction is taken for granted in *Narrow Rooms*, but the course of true love is no less treacherous because it is homosexual. The protagonist, Sidney De Lakes, has at the novel's beginning just been released from prison, having been convicted for killing his lover, Brian McFee. The tale of how this happened is only the prologue to the further tale of Sidney's tormented relationship with Roy Sturtevant, known ominously as "the Renderer," a name passed down from his father and grandfather, who had indeed operated a rendering plant. While Sidney has long since reconciled himself to his homosexuality, he resisted acknowledging it as a popular high school athlete despite having sexual relations with Roy. The Renderer has never forgiven Sidney for this failure, which culminated in Sidney slapping Roy at their high school graduation rather than admit to their relationship. The Renderer continues to be savagely in love with Sidney but has dedicated himself to destroying Sidney for refusing his love on that graduation night.

The death of Brian McFee is part of that effort, although Brian's actual death was not part of the plan. The Renderer had brought Sidney and Brian together to inflict maximum emotional pain on Sidney, but the shooting incident had the added fortuitous outcome of sending Sidney to prison. Now that Sidney has returned, some kind of confrontation seems inevitable, as Sidney fears and the Renderer eagerly anticipates. When the confrontation takes place it is a violent one, if not in the way we are probably expecting. Ordering Sidney to go to the cemetery and dig up Brian McFee's body, the Renderer further directs him:

"After you gather up the picks and shovels and other tools, just before you go off to the cemetery, I want you to nail me to the barn door. Do you hear?"

The Renderer continues:

“The only way you can release yourself is to nail me fast to the barn door. I got to be nailed there, and you got to bring Brian to see me in the morning. Otherwise, you won’t never be free of me.

. . .Nail the son of the renderer to the barn door. You know you want to. A slap was not enough that night of the Graduation Exercises.”

“The first nail went through Roy’s wrist with more ease than Sidney had thought possible,” we are told, but “the renderer went pale, especially in the mouth, but no sound escaped from him. The blood perhaps spoke for him as it jetted about everywhere, staining Sidney’s shirt and hands, spurting even on his hair.”

Compounding the gruesome sadomasochism of this scene, once Sidney brings the corpse of Brian McFee, removes the Renderer from the barn door, and tries to treat his wounds, the two men declare their long-suppressed passion for one another. They are allowed little time for bliss, however, as further mayhem immediately ensues when Gareth Varsey, whom Sidney has been caring for and who is himself in love with Sidney, discovers him with the Renderer. Gareth has brought along his rifle, and, after starting a gunfight with state troopers arrived to investigate the robbery of Brian McFee’s grave, he shoots both Sidney and the Renderer. Gareth is himself dying at the novel’s conclusion, the horrors it has summoned well-encapsulated by the final image of Gareth on his deathbed: “The blood from Gareth’s eyes ran now in little rivulets across all the features of his face, and against his lips and chin, one rivulet being joined by another, that by still another, until his entire handsome face was nothing but rivulets of blood.”

The local doctor, Dr. Ulric, sums up the story we have been told:

“Our little mountain town here, in remote West Virginia, has had its veil torn away, and there have been revealed things just as terrible as those we read about in great seaports and immense metropolises the world over. Only more terrible, I do believe. . .In my day it was the story of Jesse and Ruthana Elder [recounted earlier by Dr. Ulric]. . .Now it’s these young men who have such strong passions. . .We’ve been brought up to date.”

This is surely an accurate statement of Dr. Ulric's perception of the terrible events that have occurred, but finally *Narrow Rooms* doesn't convey the impression it has ripped away the veil concealing the reality that such events do happen in a place like West Virginia. This is hardly because the novel fails to relate its story with sufficient force but rather because it doesn't really seem concerned with depicting the "little mountain town" in its concrete particulars (as Purdy does with the rural regions featured in the "Sleepers" books). "West Virginia" here is more a symbolic setting (as it was in 63: *Dream Palace*), a place that draws on the elemental and the primitive to intensify the narrative's dramatic force through incongruity and atmospheric heightening.

In his essay included in the 2011 *Hyperion* issued devoted to Purdy, Richard Canning reminds us of Purdy's affinities with Jacobean tragedy (affinities Purdy himself acknowledged), and we might indeed understand the intensified atmosphere of *Narrow Rooms* (the characters' emotions are always very close to the surface, unconcealed), as well as its gore, as influenced by such plays as *The Duchess of Malfi* or *The White Devil*. However, I would suggest it might also be illuminating to regard this story and its telling as *operatic*, the novel itself assuming the form of an opera adapted to prose. (Dr. Ulric's lament quoted above, for example, is easily imagined as an aria.) Since Purdy's work has been popular with composers—in particular some of his poems have been arranged into songs and other vocal works—it is not so far-fetched to think Purdy would have been influenced by the theatrical/musical assumptions of opera, but whether the florid intensity of *Narrow Rooms* should be taken as a conscious appropriation of opera as a formal strategy, or merely a variation on the already theatricalized form Purdy uses in much of his fiction, or as simply the inevitable effect produced by a narrative focused on characters pushed to a state of emotional extremity, the result is a novel that concentrates the essential Purdy theme of the dissociation of actions and feelings into an especially potent work of fiction.

Contributing as well to the overall effect achieved by both *In a Shallow Grave* and *Narrow Rooms* is a quality of Purdy's prose style (including in his dialogue) that critics have often highlighted and that is perhaps particularly noticeable in these two novels. These critics have pointed to what seems to be a curious combination of formality and informality, of both elevated, even archaic, diction and an uncultivated, demotic speech. Garnet Montrose displays these tendencies together in his first-person narrative, in which he mostly speaks to us in a rural-

inflected, half-educated language, intermixed with a more elevated vocabulary and oratorical sentence structure (perhaps both derived from his extensive reading):

None who came, then, as applicant could bear the sight of me, all turned aside to retch or to groan or to sit down too faint to stand, and would beg for a glass of water. The hired girl I had at this time used to let them in, and almost as quick let them out. One applicant who lingered a little longer than the others while the girl waited at the door to allow him to leave opined that when winter came he feared the house would be too skeletal and thin to keep the big winds and ocean blasts out.

Garnet's natural speech consistently falls back on the grammatically-challenged locutions ("almost as quick") but his narration just as consistently reaches for grander words and expressions ("opined," "too skeletal and thin").

In *Narrow Rooms*, the third-person narrator generally holds closely to the perspective of each of the characters (primarily to Sidney), but not so closely as to always mirror the character's their state of mind or own powers of expression:

A young man about twenty sat in a tall custom-made chair, his hands folded over his lap. For anything there was of expression in them, his eyes might have been made of glass. But his mouth moved convulsively as he took in Vance's brother.

This is Sidney encountering Gareth, but while we are ostensibly looking at Gareth from Sidney's perspective, that perspective becomes oddly detached in referring to him as "Vance's brother." Nor does it seem likely that the rather awkward construction, "For anything there was of expression in them," is quite Sidney's way of perceiving the situation. Sidney, like Gareth, more comfortably lapses into rustic speech habits, as when he replies to the Renderer's demand he supply proof of the latter's hostility, "I don't have no proof and don't require or need none. Least ways not for you, who knows it all." The Renderer himself often speaks in this homespun way, which is somewhat peculiar, since he was the smartest student in his high school class and often helped Sidney with his schoolwork.

It is fair to say that, although Purdy makes an effort to represent the speech patterns and vocal mannerisms in a "realistic" way, realism of this kind is not really the ultimate goal in

Purdy's fiction. The dialogue and the narrative voice provide a patina of realism to works of fiction that bend and embellish “ordinary” reality enough to reveal a version of the truth about human life we would prefer not to know, a version we would like at times to say is too disturbing or grotesque (sometimes grotesquely funny) to be true, but finally cannot. The embellishments in *Narrow Rooms* and *In a Shallow Grave* are perhaps even more pronounced, but we could say they are just among the more audacious extensions of a literary vision already more audacious than almost any to be found in postwar American fiction. The world as filtered through and transformed by this vision has been purged of our illusions about it, but we disclaim it at our peril.

I have, of course, not done full justice to all of James Purdy's work. Most obviously, I have said little about his short stories, preferring to characterize Purdy's achievement through his most accomplished or representative novels. Many of Purdy's stories are excellent, but few of them are as revealing of his recurrent themes and literary strategies as the novels, at least when considered individually—although many of them do again demonstrate Purdy's skill in forwarding narrative through dialogue, while others are able to be especially unsettling as they render Purdy's strategies of character creation and plot development in effectively concentrated ways. Further, Purdy's stories were collected in several volumes published across Purdy's career in a rather scattershot fashion, so that some of the stories in each volume are more recent, while others originally appeared much earlier, making the books less helpful in taking the measure of Purdy's development as a writer. What is really needed is a Collected stories, which would in turn encourage more commentary focused specifically on Purdy's work in the short story form.

I have also not been able to include discussions of Purdy's poetry or his plays. For one thing, these works are even more difficult to obtain than Purdy's novels, having long ago fallen out of print and, given Purdy's status as a largely forgotten writer, providing publishers little incentive to bring them back into print. (The novels have periodically been reprinted by smaller presses with some commitment to literary value.) Moreover, it is fair to say as well that, however much Purdy's poems appeal to composers, they work best in those musical settings and are not likely as a whole to stand separately as important works of postwar American literature, as I believe the fiction should. And while Purdy may have felt more welcome in the theatrical milieu

than in the literary, his adaptation of theatrical elements into prose fiction will be his literary legacy, not the plays he also wrote (some of which are adapted from the fiction). A complete appreciation of the work of James Purdy would of course include consideration of everything he wrote, if for no other reason than because the poems and plays might give us an enhanced perspective on the fiction—but for now it would be enough if Purdy's primary achievement as a novelist remains known.

To understand how that achievement became increasingly unknown, we could perhaps compare it to that of Melville or Nathanael West, writers whose fiction was also arguably too scrupulous in its depiction of human nature to be fully accepted during their own time, or to John Hawkes, a writer whose darker vision of the incorrigibility of human desire has much in common with Purdy's and who is similarly in danger of falling into obscurity. American culture is frequently unkind to writers who inexplicably forego the bland "optimism" supposedly characterizing the "American character," who do so by writing books that seem perversely to undermine that optimism. Melville and West so compellingly dramatized the folly of such hope, however, that their work forced itself back into acceptance. We can hope that the same thing will happen with James Purdy's fiction, a body of work that can appeal both to postmodernists, in its distrust of its own formal assumptions, and to more traditional readers, in its emotional impact. For all readers, Purdy's fiction will likely retain its power to disturb, but all readers might also affirm this is the ultimate realization of its art.