

JAMES PURDY'S SHORT STORIES

In « Color of Darkness » (*Color of Darkness*, New Directions, 1957), a young father admires the placid serenity of Mrs. Zilke, the housekeeper: « He envied in a way Mrs. Zilke's command over everything. She understood, it seemed, everything she dealt with, and she remembered and could identify all the things which came into her view and under her jurisdiction. The world for her, he was sure, was round, firm, and perfectly illuminated » (p. 33)¹. The old man in « Home by Dark » (*Children is All*, New Directions, 1961) tells his grandson that birds « are really strange creatures... They remember always where to go, where to build their nests, where to return to » (p. 14)². Mrs. Zilke and the birds are exceptions in James Purdy's fiction. The world they see around them is ordered and comprehensible; with everything in its place there can be no problems of orientation. But their perception of reality is distorted: Mrs. Zilke's view of the world soon proves to be anachronistic, her understanding is, after all, inadequate and at the end of the story she wearily admits: « I don't know what's happening to people » (p. 39). The stories included in the *Color of Darkness* and *Children is All* collections — as indeed in all Purdy's production up to the present time — present a world that is out of joint, where the dominating feeling is of « everything being not quite right », of being in the wrong place: « you do not belong here, as I said earlier. Nobody belongs here. It has all been a mistake your coming here » (« Sermon », *Children is All*, p. 82).

1. Page numbers refer to the Doubleday & Company 1974 edition of *Color of Darkness and Malcolm*.

2. Page numbers refer to the New Directions Paperback edition of 1971.

The main image used to express « not quite rightness » is the « not right house », symbolizing human relationships that have gone wrong, a human condition based on homelessness and exclusion. Purdy's characters never feel at home in their surroundings; even their own homes are alienating, escaping their control, expressing only part of their personality, so that when they seek a solution that will in some way satisfy their innermost needs they are forced to subdivide their houses, leaving one part for their contacts with society, the outside world, reserving the other for their secret, « different », inner selves (« Mrs. Benson », « About Jessie Mae », *Children is All*). Yet the refuge offered by such « other rooms » is illusory, serving in fact to aggravate the characters' estrangement, cutting them even more sharply off from the rest of the world.

The comforting, reassuring world of middle class society, whose natural symbol was the house, the emblem of private property, status symbol *par excellence*, has disappeared, submerged by the mass society denounced by Purdy both in his fiction, letters and statements. And with the collapse of the « round », « firm », « perfectly illuminated » and governable world Mrs. Zilke obstinately tries to recognize in her surroundings, the house also has fallen, reduced to a mere ruin of its former shape. Instead of representing security and protection, the assurance of having a place of one's own in the world, a recognized position in society, as was its traditional function, the home has become a prison, its door locked, its windows boarded up, its walls acting as barriers to shut the inhabitant off from all communication with society outside¹. The barriers, real or imaginary, that keep Purdy's characters apart, the closed doors and walls of partition that are represented most strikingly in the metaphor of the divided house (« Mrs. Benson », « About Jessie Mae »),

3. See IRVING MALIN'S, *New American Gothic*, Southern Illinois University Press, 1962, for an analysis of how the « castle » has been used by contemporary authors to express the « prison of the psyche ».

are one of the most characteristic features of Purdy's stories. In « 63: Dream Palace », *Color of Darkness*, for example, the connection between the house and the difficulties of communication is made explicit in the encounter between Grainger and Fenton, when Grainger, seeking to establish Fenton's identity, puts « her hand on his face as one might touch what is perhaps a door in a dark house » (p. 160) or in the passage where Fenton compares himself to the dark, dilapidated house on Sixty-third Street: « That was why the big old house with tall rooms was getting more ghostly for him, it was so much like the way he was inside himself, the house didn't work at all, and he was all stopped inside himself too, just like the house. That was why it was like a trap, he said » (p. 153). Another particularly transparent use of the parallel is to be found in « Goodnight Sweetheart » (*Children is all*, p. 108) where, even after Winston has « cautiously » opened the door of his house to Miss Miranda, permitting the removal of the first, physical barrier between them, no real communication is possible, so that at the end of the story « they both lay there close to one another, and they both muttered to themselves in the darkness as if they were separated by different rooms from one another ».

The transformation of the house into a prison can also be seen as an aspect of the upheaval of all the normal space relations that appears to have occurred in Purdy's world, where everything is out of proportion, becoming stiflingly cramped or terrifyingly vast. Dwarfed by an immensity they will never be able to know, understand and control, or confined in a tiny, suffocating room, Purdy's characters are lost in a never ending waste land (the big city, the lobby of « one of the world's largest, perhaps the largest » hotels, the various « mansions ») or trapped in a prison from which there is no escape. In the most harrowing of these « not-right-kind of place(s) », the rotten house on Sixty-third Street, shut in by its « fence of sharp iron, cut like spears » (p. 145), the huge and the tiny co-exist as

in a nightmare in a scene that appears to be the direct opposite of Mrs. Zilke's solid but inexistent world: « They went through a hall-way as *long as a half city block* to a *small* room in which there was a *dwarf-like* cot with a *large* mattress clinging to it and a crippled *immense* chest of drawers supported by only three legs. The window was boarded up and there was *almost no* light coming from a dying electric bulb hung from the *high* ceiling » (p. 145, my italics). The application of terms normally associated with a desperate, suffering humanity (« dwarf », « clinging », « crippled », « dying ») to inanimate objects adds to the oppressive quality of the setting and is a further reflection of a mechanized, dehumanized world, where man's position in society has been called into question and where mass production, the Author seems to imply, has turned man into an object among objects.

But Purdy's prisons are not only built with the walls of a room. In some of his stories (« Sound of Talking » and « You Reach for Your Hat » in *Color of Darkness* and « About Jessie Mae » in *Children is All*), the state of confinement is produced by the presence of another person. In « Why Can't They Tell You Why » (*Color of Darkness*), the invalid child, Paul, is imprisoned not so much by the close, suffocating walls of the apartment — « His crying redoubled in fury, some of his spit flying out onto the cold calcimine of the walls. He kept turning the while to look at the close confines of the staircase as though to find some place where he could see things outside » (p. 73) — as by his mother's cruel, terrifying presence — « Her sweet fake awful voice and the stale awful smell of the bathrobe stifling as she drew nearer » (p. 71) ... « he began to cry with panicky terror, for it seemed to him then that in the whole world there were just the two of them, him and Ethel » (p. 73) — a presence that, drawing nearer and nearer, with a claustrophobic effect reminiscent almost of Poe, compels him at last into an inhuman, animal state (and it should be remembered that Poe's sense of oppression

and constriction often appears to be connected — in « The Pit and the Pendulum », for example — with his fear of the advancing mechanization of American society, then only at the initial stage of industrialization, a fear that is not, after all, dissimilar to that voiced by Purdy, over a century later). The physical nearness corresponds to a spiritual distance, for the nearer the mother gets to her child, the less she is able to recognize him as her son or even as a human being.

Similar « human » prisons are evident in the small towns — with the incomprehensive curiosity of their inhabitants, ready to pounce on any irregularity, any deviation from the mechanical norm — that provide the setting in « You Reach for Your Hat », « About Jessie Mae », « Goodnight Sweetheart » and in several of Purdy's novels. The contrast to the general indifference of the big city, the Chicago of « 63: Dream Palace » or the New York of « Daddy Wolf » (*Children is All*), is only superficial, for the basic condition, of incommunicability, of the absence of any valid human relationship in contemporary society, is the same.

As we proceed in the analysis of the topography of Purdy's world it becomes evident that all its features, its space relationships, its sounds and silences, its objects, plants and animals, its light, colour and darkness, contribute, each in its specific way, to the general sense of void and desolation. Thus both colour and the absence of colour, despite the apparent antithesis, reflect the same condition. In « A Good Woman » (*Color of Darkness*) the garishly colourful « exotic » objects, costume jewellery and cosmetics accumulated by the inhabitants of Martinsville in their desperate attempt to escape the dull squalor of their lives, represent the synthetic cheapness of the mass culture Purdy abominates. Elsewhere colour is invariably the « color of darkness »: only Mrs. Zilke, who can remember the colour of all her relations' eyes, is able to see the world as « perfectly illuminated ». An abundance of objects is similarly deceptive, a totally

inadequate veil, unable to mask the desolate emptiness that lies beneath the surface.

Purdy's objects reflect and accentuate the alienation of their environment. Their relationship with both their surroundings and society is abnormal: no longer fulfilling their usual functions (the seats in the All Night Theater of «63: Dream Palace», for example, «did not act as though they were required to hold you off the floor»), they have lost their normal proportions (as in Fenton's room in «63: Dream Palace» — see p. 348 above — and not just his room, for «everything about him was too large for him, the speech, the terrible clothes, the ragged hair, the possible gun, the outlandish accent», p. 139) and are too many or too few, as in «Home by Dark», where it is the absence of certain necessary objects — the loss of the little boy's tooth and the lack of the flashlight which might have helped to find it — that leads to the climax of the story and hints at all the more vital elements that are also missing in the tragic condition of the little orphan and his grandfather. The contrast between the deadness of manufactured objects and the vigour of animals and natural life implied in some of the stories is also more apparent than real, for the artificial, manufactured zone encroaches upon and gradually eliminates the natural, animal area, until even a human being is seen and presented as an object, and the animals and animal qualities survive only in inadequate man-made imitations, or lose their positive, regenerative powers to become hostile and menacing.

At the same time, a different world, a world that no longer exists, begins to take shape and acquire a certain consistency through the vague and fragmentary memories, dreams and regrets that haunt Purdy's characters, even those who are least aware of their alienated condition. Common to all of them is the nostalgia for a pre-industrial world, an organic, «natural» society. Animals, and particularly birds and wild animals, represent the aspiration to a freer,

instinctive and more human existence. In « Home by Dark » we have already seen how birds represent a different way of being, with their sense of security, their ability to keep their bearings and their relative freedom: unlike the Grandfather and the little boy, the birds « know to go South when it's cold » (p. 14) and the child's first wish when he gets his « pot of gold » is to « turn into a bird and go South then » (p. 15). But the world of birds and forests remains a dream in Purdy's stories. The only vegetable life present in reality is the philodendron plant in « Color of Darkness » and the « dead »-looking potted palms in « Mrs. Benson ». The animals are not birds (except in « Sound of Talking » where the bird, a raven, is able only to pronounce a message of death and in « Home by Dark » where their function is to underline the static, hopeless and insecure nature of human life in contrast with their own confidence and mobility) but rats, insects (« Daddy Wolf », « A Good Woman », « Sound of Talking », « 63: Dream Palace ») and the « small mongrel with a pitifully long tail » that Mrs. Zilke ingenuously believes will be the answer to the child's loneliness in « Color of Darkness ». Nothing is left, therefore, but to turn to surrogate forms of natural life: skeletons of pre-historic animals in « 63: Dream Palace », Baxter's toy crocodile or the brown paper bird he sails through the air until it « hit a philodendron plant and stuck there in it, as though it were a conscious addition » (« Color of Darkness », p. 32), the wild animals painted on the wall in unnatural and ridiculous positions in « Night and Day » (*Children is All*), the beard in « Cutting Edge » (*Color of Darkness*) and the tattoos in « Everything Under the Sun » (*Children is All*).

The characters themselves tend, moreover, to lose their human attributes, resembling or even identifying themselves with animals or objects (« The Lesson » in *Children is All*, « Sermon », « Color of Darkness » and « Man and Wife » in *Color of Darkness*. In « Man and Wife », the title is already indicative: « Man and Wife », not « Husband and

Wife » or « Man and Woman » as might more readily be expected. Lufe is in fact a man who is incapable of fulfilling his role of husband, while Peaches Maud, in ironic contrast with her name, is more a function than a complete human being, her very emotions described as if they were some kind of mechanical phenomenon: « 'Was it a boy you were stuck on?' Peaches Maud said, making her voice both empty and quiet, and at the same time all the tears came onto her face as though sprayed there by a tiny machine in one second » (p. 83), similar in nature to the noisy, broken down refrigerator, whose presence dominates the story.

Against the negative implications of the products of an industrialized society, stand the memories and remnants of a more « human » past where individual handicrafts had not yet been ousted by mass-produced goods, hence the value attributed to elements such as handpainted china, written invitations instead of telephone calls, the gooseberry preserves and marmalades the « Good Woman » had helped her mother make when she was a schoolgirl instead of the drugstore fare that has become part of her dreary existence and that represents, in Purdy's world, yet another synthetic, repulsive aspect of consumer society. Yet the hand-made objects associated with a human, identifiable society, with production by individuals for other individuals or at least for a limited, knowable public in contrast to assembly-line production by anonymous workers with no contact either with the finished product or the unidentified mass of consumers to whom the product is destined⁴, when carried over into the anonymous, automatized world of the present, are unable to project their positive qualities. The domestic comforts, inherited from his mother, that surround Winston Cramer's lonely existence in « Goodnight Sweetheart » have lost their comforting, familial associations and make his solitude all the more apparent,

4. The kind of production illustrated in « Daddy Wolf », where the speaker's job is to « raise the lever that sews the inner lining to your mittens » (p. 9).

suggesting the pathetic and distorted preoccupation with the self of a man who is completely out of touch with the society of his time.

Sound has also been degraded in this «not-right» world. Positive, meaningful sound, the kind Peaches Maud waits for in vain («listening as though for any sound that might perhaps rescue them there both together», «Man and Wife», p. 84), exists only as an aspiration or a fantasy, or as a distant, idealized memory. Music, like nature, represents a different way of being, an «otherness» that is yearned for but is hardly attainable: «She saw the tenor sax only in her imagination because he had not shown it to her, she saw it curved and golden and heard it playing far-off melodies» («Eventide», *Color of Darkness*, p. 64); the «actual musicians» described by Mrs. Benson are in the «part of the house... that the others never saw», for the other guests, the rest of the world, may only hear the «strange little painted-glass player piano» (p. 72) that is associated with the shabbiness and depression of Mrs. Carlin's entertaining. Other music in Purdy's world is incomprehensible or disagreeable to its listeners, while the «sound of talking» has taken the place of conversation. Sensing that their talk will remain mere sound, never to be transformed into communication, the speakers express themselves in a meaningless, impersonal, «not right» language, strangely jolting and disjointed, made up of clichés and set phrases, words that are somehow external, not organically related to meaning («a whole whirlwind of words awaited» Mrs. Farebrother in «Sound of Talking») and seem almost to have materialized, becoming hostile objects («Man and Wife»).

Purdy's characters tend to «mutter», «whisper», «whine» or «grunt» rather than talk; their voices are distant, seeming to come «from under the floor», or mechanical («'that was so long ago' he said, as though quoting himself»), like a record played over and over again (reminding us of John Barth's *Lost in the Funhouse* stories, where the «narrative» in «Frame-tale», «Autobiography»,

«Eco», etc. consists in a recorded voice with «nothing to say», telling the «same old story» that can only end with some external interruption). Yet silence, expressing the definite breakdown of communication, can bring no relief. Ominous, oppressive to the point of being intolerable, it seems to partake of the general mechanical nature of Purdy's world: «the silence of the city night... is a silence in which although one cannot really say *this is a sound I am hearing now*, many little contractions and movements like the springs of a poorly constructed machine make one feel that something will break with a sudden crash and perhaps destroy everyone» («63: Dream Palace», p. 168). The danger of mechanical breakdown in a mechanized world, a recurrent fear, is given direct expression in some of the images — the clattering refrigerator in «Man and Wife», the «weak but prolonged explosion» in the short play «Cracks» included in the *Children is All* collection, the «damage to the machinery of the cosmos» in the novel *Malcolm* — used to denounce the precariousness of man's position in the modern world.

When the distractions and illusions offered by a consumer society have been exhausted, Purdy's characters are brought face to face with the hopelessness and emptiness of their condition in a moment of awareness that coincides with the climax of the story. A number of the stories («Sound of Talking», «You Reach for Your Hat», «Man and Wife», «Cutting Edge», «63: Dream Palace», «Home by Dark»), move towards a point where time in its historical dimension, time understood as an onward movement, a dynamic force implying a possibility of ripening and growth, comes to a halt: «She looked as though she had come to her permanent age, and he knew that though he was but twenty-eight, he might as well be sixty, and the something awful and permanent that comes to everybody had come at last to him. Everything had come to an end» («Man and Wife», p. 85). With the awareness of this situation, a feeling of

permanence sets in, the realization that nothing new can ever happen again. Life settles into a dreary monotony, an infinite stasis where night fades imperceptibly into day without anything changing (« 63: Dream Palace », p. 171) and where all distinctions, between past, present and future, even between people, between the old and young, begin to lose sense. Even the seasons no longer observe their natural sequence: life has become « a perpetual Autumn », as Purdy writes in *Malcolm*, « an Autumn that will pass into Winter owing to some damage perhaps to the machinery of the cosmos. It will go on being Autumn, go on being cool, but slowly, slowly everything will begin to fall piece by piece... » (p. 295).

Suspended in an eternal present, Purdy's characters tend, like the father in « Color of Darkness », to forget what has happened in the past, or to see it as practically identical to the present, a proof that the passing of time brings no substantial development or progress (Graitop is like « a statue in a museum, looking very young still and at the same time ancient, as though he had never been new », his « face had not changed in twenty years », « Plan Now to Attend », *Color of Darkness*, p. 107; while in « Cutting Edge » Bobby sees his parents as « both young people who had learned nothing from life, were stopped and drifting where they were twenty years before with Ellen Whitelaw. Only *she*, the son thought, must have learned from life, must have gone on to some development in her character, while they had been tied to the shore where she had left them », p. 128, but even Ellen's « development » is illusory, for the reader already knows — p. 126 — that she is dead). The future, except as an endless repetition of the present, is equally inconceivable, as Purdy's children are all too well aware: « 'Soon you will be all grown up », the father said one night... 'I don't think so, the boy replied' (« Color of Darkness », p. 27; see also « Home by Dark », p. 18). Fenton, the young protagonist of « 63: Dream Palace », desperately trying to grow up in a not-right world, uses the

word «lateness» to describe his suspended condition: «He knew now (he began all over again) that Kincaid was not coming to find them in the house. And as he went on with his drink he knew that nobody was ever coming to the house because it was the 'latest' time in his life and maybe the 'latest' in the world» (p. 152). Despite the attempt to illude himself with the possibility of a «new life», he is fully conscious of the hopelessness of his situation: «'Things don't go anywhere in our lives', he wrote. 'Sometimes somebody like Mama dies and the whole world stops or begins to move backwards, but nothing happens to us, even her dying don't get us anywhere except maybe back. Yet you have to go on waiting, it's the one thing nobody lets up on you for. Like now we're doing for Kincaid and what?'» (p. 153), for Kincaid, like Godot, will never come. Life, for Purdy's characters, is an endless continuity, history a «continuous error» («Sermon», p. 82).

At this point Purdy's indictment of contemporary society, of what he calls «our cigarette-beer-TV culture», the «stupidest cultural era in American history»⁵, begins to appear under a different light. Statements of the following kind: «All of my work is a criticism of the United States, implicit not explicit. This is a culture based on money and competition. It is inhuman, terrified of love, sexual and other, and obsessed with homosexuality and brutality. Our entire moral life is pestiferous and we live in a completely immoral atmosphere. I believe the human being under capitalism is a stilted, depressed, sick creature»⁶, seem rather to be the rationalization *a posteriori* of a man who is not condemning capitalism as such, nor even its present degeneration, its lamentable consequences, as his nostalgia for an idyllic, mythified, decidedly irrecoverable past would seem to suggest. The indication of capitalism as the specific

5. Quoted by WEBSTER SCHOTT in «James Purdy: American Dreams», *The Nation*, March 23, 1964.

6. *Ibid.*

historical motive for the plight of modern man is belied on the one hand by the scale of values that is implicit in Purdy's work (through the symbol of the « not right » house, for example), on the other, at a deeper level, by the implication that the condition described is the eternal condition of man, a condition to which solutions of a socio-political nature are clearly inapplicable. As « God » tells his audience in « Sermon »: « You are wrong, and I am powerless to add or subtract from that fact. You came originally wrong, and you have been getting worse in every way since that day. There is, in fact, no hope for you, and there never was » (p. 80).

It is perhaps worth noting that this sense of hopelessness, expressing not only profound dissatisfaction with the « American way of life » but connected to a general distrust in history, or even the rejection of the historical process, is by no means limited to Purdy alone. A « flight from reality » (see Marisa Bulgheroni, *Il nuovo romanzo americano 1945-1959*, Milan, 1960 and Agostino Lombardo, *La ricerca del vero*, Rome, 1961) has characterized the post-war novel in America. A new, free-floating symbolism, on the one hand, associated with the predominance of New Criticism concepts and the return to myth, the search for archetypes, as the latest variety of a transcendental vision of life, and the emergence of a clowning, apparently carefree nihilism, on the other (see Ihab Hassan, *Radical Innocence*, Princeton 1961), are but different aspects of the same reality. Even authors whose work is still grounded on realism, such as Bernard Malamud, show their doubts in the very structure of their novels (more than the explicit statements by Martin Brober, who passes his time « waiting » in the store — a prison/refuge like the house in Purdy's stories — that « entombs » him and for whom « time died as he waited, stinking in his nose », and by Helen, waiting for a Spring she fears will never come, it is the circular structure of *The Assistant* that renders Frank Alpine's redemption ambiguous, for Frank finishes by assuming Brober's fate upon

himself and repeating at the end of the book the same activities Brober had performed in the opening pages).

In « Sermon » Purdy gives us his most explicit illustration of his view of the human condition: « by being infinitely repulsive you have continued continuity and what more could any speaker ask. What if you had become while I was talking. The whole world would have changed, of course. You would have all become alive, But the truth of the continuum is that it is continuous. You have not failed History, the continuous error. You have gone on with it, but continuing » (p. 82), but all his stories are pervaded by the feeling of continuity, by a timeless flux, expressed in a series of images and situations. Life is variously described as an oft-seen, « too long and overacted » movie (« You Reach for your Hat », p. 86; « 63: Dream Palace », p. 183), a « rehearsal » (« 63: Dream Palace », pp. 137 and 141) or a nightmare: Purdy's characters seem to feel they are living in a dream world, sleeping or sleepwalking (as the title of the trilogy *Sleepers in Moon-Crowned Valleys* also suggests), while the onirical quality of « 63: *Dream Palace* » (my italics) stems from its surreal sequence of scene: one scene merging into another in a strange, atemporal dimension. The most complete expression of the eternal continuity of life, however, is the feeling that there is no difference between life and death, that we are not only « practicing for death », like Mr. Farebrother in « Sound of Talking » (p. 121), but that we are all dead already, as Parwhearst and Grainger take for granted in « 63: Dream Palace » (p. 134, see also « Color of Darkness », p. 31). Death no longer constitutes the end of human existence, but in its infinitude represents and comprehends the « endlessness » and « nothingness » of life. Similar sensations, expressed in a similar form, may be found in the work of several contemporary American novelists (see Jonathan Baumbach's *The Landscape of Nightmare*, New York University Press, 1965), particularly John Hawkes and Truman Capote — Cousin Randolph's remark in Capote's *Other Voices, Other Rooms*, p. 130, could equally well

have been made by one of Purdy's characters: « There is no daytime in this room, nor night; the seasons are changeless here, and the years, and when I die, if indeed I haven't already, then let me be dead drunk and curled, as in my mother's womb, in the warm blood of darkness » — with the difference that the onirical element in Purdy's work is an inseparable part of a convincingly realistic setting, delineated with a scrupulous, almost photographic attention to detail, with images that are all the more horrifying in that they derive from ordinary, everyday experience.

Death, in such a world, has consequently lost its traditional implications and is even desired as the only possible way out from the dilemma of human existence (see « 63: Dream Palace », p. 143) for, as Eustace Chisholm observes bitterly in the novel *Eustace Chisholm and the Works*, « All our Presidents are killers, but they can't stop us from dying when the day for us to die comes. It's a good thing Dame Nature thought up death after the mistake of inventing life, otherwise we'd all go on being forever under some immortal captain or other in timeless slavery » (p. 182). Yet in a similarly « infinite » situation, even this solution is an illusion. Purdy's world recalls the hell of Sartre's *Huis Clos*, which « concludes » with the invitation to « continue »; as Purdy's « God » — like the voice in John Barth's « NightSea Journey » — tells his congregation, « There is no escape from it. That is why we are all so repulsive to one another: infinitely so. Life is immortal. Its eggs are too numerous for it but to spawn at the mere touch » (p. 83), after warning them that « there is no hope for you even when things get so impossibly terrible that you will kill yourself. For that is no solution. In death you will only begin where you left off, but naturally, in worse shape » (p. 81; compare also the conclusions in « Home by Dark », « Sound of Talking », etc. to Todd Andrew's final words in Barth's *The Floating Opera*, pp. 245 and 246: « V. There's no final reason for living (or

for suicide) » and « the truth is that nothing makes any difference »).

The inevitable conclusion to a similar condition appears to be silence: Purdy's characters explore every possible way of escape or of distraction, but to no avail. « God » warns his audience in « Sermon » against the futility of attempting any form of reaction: « You are hopeless and my words are spoken to tell you not to hope. You have nothing with which to win » (p. 83) in a monologue in which he openly admits to his own failure as redeemer. Religion, at least in its orthodox forms, has become meaningless interjection (« Man and Wife », « Goodnight Sweetheart ») and fraud, offering no way out to its followers (« Everything Under the Sun », « Daddy Wolf », « Plan Now to Attend »). Yet the inhabitants of Purdy's world are none the less nostalgic for something similar to a religious faith, for « God or something mythological », with which to give value to their lives (« Plan Now to Attend », p. 112), and the continuous adoption of a structure based on the pattern of rites of initiation, the appearance of mysterious Christ figures, clearly evident in « 63: Dream Palace » and *Malcolm*⁷, but present, to a greater or lesser extent, in all Purdy's novels, suggests the Author's constant preoccupation with the possibility of a solution of this kind.

Hence in « 63: Dream Palace », the unfinished story of Fenton, the « riddle », who appears suddenly in a park in answer, as it were, to Parkheast's plea for « a reward for life just as I have lived it » (p. 137), « come out of nothing to him » (p. 140), is on the one hand a possible Messiah and on the other an archetypal innocent, a candidate for

7. See BETTINA SHWARZCHILD'S, « The Forsaken: An Interpretive Essay on James Purdy's *Malcolm* », *Texas Quarterly* (Spring-Summer '67), or CHARLES STETLER, « Purdy's *Malcolm*: Allegory of No Man », *Critique*, where the novel is seen as a parody of initiation, « using the genre to satirize it ».

initiation, whose first question — unanswered — is: « Where do you get out? » (p. 137). But the youth's attempts at initiation are doomed to failure, as he himself, with his « complete and intuitive knowledge of the way things were and had to be » (p. 149), is aware from the start: « He thought of Parkhearst as a kind of magician who would show different magic tricks to him, but he knew not one would take on him » (p. 157).

An orphan in an alien world, friendless, except for Claire, his invalid brother — who represents the hopes and illusions Fenton must put behind him, the old life that must be destroyed — and Parkhearst, who has introduced him to Grainger, the « Queen of Hell », but seems unwilling to assist him in the fulfilment to this union, Fenton is having to face his initiation into manhood alone. Despite his offer to show the boy how to « get out », Parkhearst is no guiding father; he is himself « a child » in need of initiation and his interest in Fenton is that of a writer looking for « material » for a story that will never be written. Grainger is no symbol of life, but a « Queen of Hell » (p. 171), who has brought only death upon her previous partners, and it is in the memorial room to Russell, the « dead young Christ » (p. 164) that Fenton undergoes his first metamorphosis, donning one of Russell's suits. After the failure of this first attempt at initiation, Fenton's next encounter is with Bruno Korsawski, another totally inadequate guide, for his first words show that he too is seeking protection. Not only drunk, as on the previous occasion, but drugged, Fenton undergoes a second metamorphosis, going « out of the door dressed in clothes that did not look like his own » (p. 188). Both Fenton's attempts at initiation fail and even after murdering Claire, in a desperate effort to destroy his old self once and for all, he is unable to « get out ». After a vain attempt, through a travesty of the eucharist, to revive the child and after a period of vagabondage, listening to « the revivalists and the fanatics » (p. 191), he returns to the derelict house. In order for Claire — Fenton's old

concepts, ideals, emotional patterns — to be really dead, some new sacrament must be celebrated. Not until Claire is safely buried will he really be free. Significantly, the burial ceremony is associated with symbols of a wedding, mother love and sacrifice: Fenton will perhaps at last be able to celebrate the «sacred union»⁸ with the complex mother-destroyer figure, the life symbol that would complete his initiation. But the end of the story seems to confirm our doubts as to the success of the operation, for as he had already foreseen in a confession to Parkhearst: «then I will probably fly into a thousand pieces and disappear» (p. 168), Fenton vanishes and the story breaks off at the culmination of the rite.

Thus, throughout Purdy's fiction, his adolescents are initiated not into life but into death: «Marriage, which users most people into life, in Malcolm's case, therefore, ushered him into happiness — and death» (*Malcolm*, p. 375). Cliff's attempt to break free from the oppressive charity of his aunt and uncle, enlisting in the army, ends in his death in Korea (*The Nephew*); Amos and Daniel both meet tragic and violent deaths in *Eustace Chisholm and the Works*, and the same pattern is repeated by Jethro in *Jeremy's Version* and by the three brothers in *The House of the Solitary Maggot*. Like Fenton, these are no ordinary American youths. Their appearance is surrounded by an aura of mystery and they are seized upon by the desperate inhabitants of Purdy's world as if they were the bearers of much needed salvation, Grail Knights come to redeem the waste land, yet their sacrifice is not long remembered: «Malcolm, in the interim, had been almost entirely forgotten, and was no longer a subject of conversation anywhere»

8. See JOSEPH CAMPBELL, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, for a detailed description of the phases through which the child must go before achieving initiation. Comparison with «63: Dream Palace» will show how nearly all Fenton's experiences (only the most significant of which are mentioned above) correspond to moments in the initiation rites described by Campbell.

(*Malcolm*, p. 382). The Messiah is a blank, his death brings no redemption, even his memory is short-lived.

Yet there is a further aspect of Purdy's fiction that indicates an ultimate possibility of survival and even development in his not right world. The tale of his Christ figures is presented through the eyes or voice of a narrator. The « story » in his novels and novellas is indeed not so much the story actually presented as the story of the story-telling, the story, nearly always, of the impossibility of story-telling, for just as the initiate fails to be initiated, so the story-teller fails to complete his narrative; his tale dwindling into « nothing-ness », like Mrs. Benson's money in what is surely an embryonic example of Purdy's later « versions »:

Mrs. Benson did not answer. She had taken some francs out of her purse and was staring at them.

'Some of this money', she pointed out, 'have you noticed? It comes to pieces in one's hands. I hardly know what to do with some of the smaller notes'. (« Mrs. Benson », p. 77).

Thus Mrs. Bickle, the principal narrator in *Cabot Wright Begins*, declares at the end of the novel: « I won't be a writer in a place and time like the present » (p. 228); Alma, in *The Nephew*, sets aside the memorial she has been writing about her dead nephew when she begins to learn more about his true nature; Eustace Chisholm (*Eustace Chisholm and the Works*) burns his poem and tells his wife: « You see how calm I am about the poem burning. I'm not a writer, that's my news, never was, and never will be » (p. 241).

The failure of the narrator, his reiterated decision to abandon his task, should not, however, be taken entirely at face value. Through his writing, his impossible attempt to fix the identity of another person, to know another human being (« Of course we never know any other human being, do we » the father asks in « Color of Darkness », p. 29) and the question, which is purely rhetorical, is put again and again throughout Purdy's work), the narrator has acquired a degree of understanding and maturity. By « pick(ing) up

the rotten » which is what Fenton warns Claire is what one has to do « when there ain't nothing else » (« 63: Dream Palace », p. 178), by accepting the sadness and littleness of his condition, he is able to accept and perhaps develop the human relationships within his reach, instead of pining for a great love or redeeming Christ figure that has proved to be an illusion. Instead of the silence to which the narrator's decision appears to lead, the writer continues. Purdy, the « God » behind the mask of the narrator (and « Sermon » may be interpreted as the manifesto of Purdy's conception of the author and his relation to his public), continues writing his stories of the impossibility of storytelling, replacing Mrs. Bickle's declaration « I won't be a writer in a place and time like the present », with the conclusion that he can *only* be a writer « in a place and time like the present »: « I am not even writing novels, I am writing me. I go on writing to tell myself at least what I have been through »⁹.

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9. Quoted by WEBSTER SCHOTT, *op. cit.*