

# James Purdy's *Via Negativa*

by Don Adams

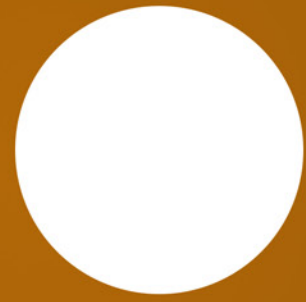
*Hyperion*, Volume VI, issue 1, March 2011

# HYPERION

On the future of aesthetics



JAMES PURDY'S  
**VIA NEGATIVA**



**by Don Adams**

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

In his spirited introduction to the City Lights reprint of Purdy's 1975 novel, *In a Shallow Grave*, Jerome Charyn alerts us to the novel's essentially religious nature, describing it as "a modern Book of Revelation, filled with prophecies, visions and demonic landscapes."<sup>1</sup> In a 1997 interview with British literary critic Richard Canning, Purdy himself referred to the novel as "a religious book," and he related a telling anecdote about a reading he gave at Oral Roberts University, where the students were inclined to interpret his novels as "religious allegory . . . like Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* or Spenser's *Faerie Queene*," and when they asked him outright,

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

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

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

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

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

Dionysius argued that our human senses and intellect are innately limited in their ability to approach and know God, whom he refers to, in Neo-Platonic fashion, as “the cause of the universe”<sup>6</sup> and “the Transcendent one.”<sup>7</sup> However, through persistent and concentrated negation of both sense and reason, “renouncing all that the mind may conceive,” we may prepare ourselves to be “supremely united to the completely unknown.”<sup>8</sup> In addition to the practice of the negation of our senses and intellect, we can prepare ourselves for the mystic experience of complete unknowing by contemplating mystical symbols given to us by inspired prophets, and by experiencing the sacraments not merely as religious observances but as essentially mysterious, yet real, transformations within ourselves and our worlds.

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

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

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

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

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

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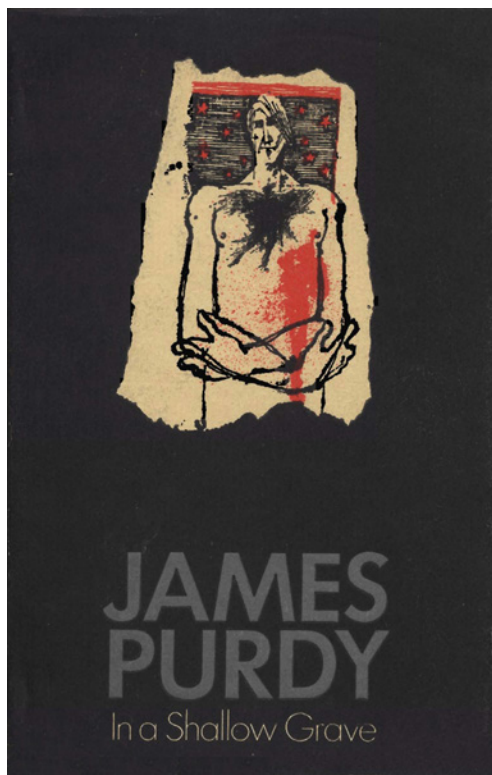
Even if *eros* is at first mainly covetous and ascending, a fascination for the great promise of happiness, in drawing near to the other, it is less and less concerned with itself, increasingly seeks the happiness of the other, is concerned more and more with the beloved, bestows itself and wants to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

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

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

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In Jesus Christ, it is God himself who goes in search of the "stray sheep," a suffering and lost humanity. . . . His death on the Cross is the culmination of that turning of God against himself in which he gives himself in order to raise man up and save him. This is love in its most radical form.<sup>13</sup>



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

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

killed by being driven by a freak wind from a hurricane into

a pine tree, saves Garnet with a last-supper-like ceremony in which Garnet is made to drink from a tin cup filled with Daventry's blood mixed with wine. Garnet Montrose's name is also fitting. Garnet means dark red, appropriate for a man whose war wounds make him look the color of "mulberry wine,"<sup>17</sup> and Montrose means high and mighty, which is indicative of Garnet's general attitude toward others and also, by contrast, of his injured condition, for with his grievous war wounds and threatened loss of his ancestral home, Garnet has come down significantly in the world and seems on the edge of losing the will to live. Indeed, he feels that his wounds have made him into a walking corpse, a mockery of life and death, "I do not even believe in death because what I am is emptier than death itself."<sup>18</sup> Garnet is in a very shallow grave indeed, that of his own body, and in this sense he emblemizes the death and corruption that is implicit in all living things.

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

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

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

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My doc says my injuries have not really damaged my lachrymal glands, but I think on this score, as on many others, he must have blundered, for I cannot weep, and if I start to I feel a great pain in these said glands, like there were sharp rocks or millstones being drawn through raw nerves.<sup>20</sup>

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

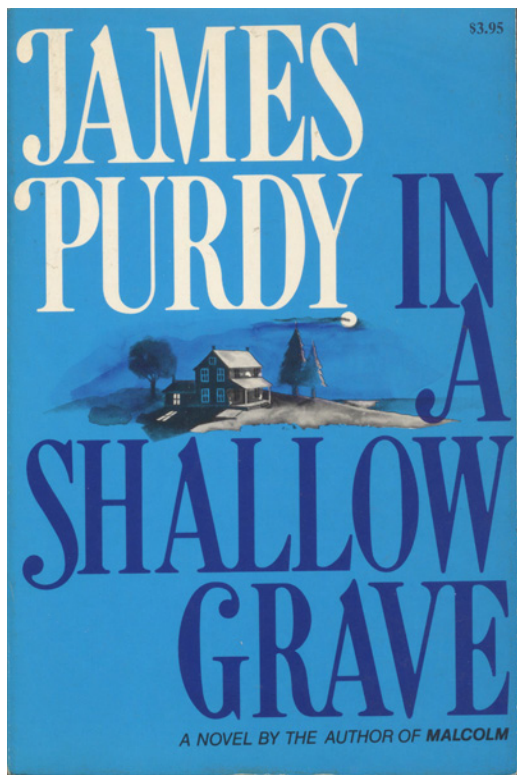
With a more typical modern novelist, the disconcerting disconnection between Garnet's acute physical distress and his ongoing spiritual-emotional drama would be handled with an appropriate irony. But Purdy is no typical modern or post-modern ironist, or perhaps one should say that the irony in Purdy's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

In his sensitive and insightful 1982 essay on the allegorical nature of Purdy's fiction, Donald Pease noted that, "Unlike the symbol, which utterly unites subject and significance, an allegory presupposes their separation,"<sup>26</sup> and he remarked that, far from lamenting this separation "of object and spirit," which is the typical modern-ironist response, Purdy seemed determined "to perfect it."<sup>27</sup> Purdy's allegorical instinct to emphasize and enforce the separation between object and spirit in his work—his overall insistence upon non-sense—is entirely fitting with the *via negativa*, as illustrated by Dionysius when he lists the many things the "Divine Cause of all" *is not*, *has not*, and *does not*:

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

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



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

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

such negation, as when he told Richard Canning, “I think all my works are lies but in the lies are the real truths.”<sup>30</sup> One of the most fascinating aspects of his lively and revealing interview with Christopher Lane is the manner in which Lane attempts to nudge Purdy to acknowledge the creative and political limitations implicit in his fiction’s insistent negations, and Purdy’s stalwart refusal to do so. Responding to a statement in which Purdy asserted that Garnet Montrose and Quintus Perch in *In a Shallow Grave* are “desperate people,” holding onto one another as those from a sinking ship hold onto a life raft, Lane prompted:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Lane: That theme comes across very powerfully in your books.<sup>31</sup>

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



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

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

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

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



“What is it?” Daventry, I inquired.

“Nothing, Garnet.”

“Yes, there is something. You think I’m crazy, don’t you . . . ?”

“No I don’t,” Daventry countered. “I don’t think that.”

“Well . . .”

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

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

The figure of Daventry in this novel embodies an amalgam of sacrificial love figures from animistic, Classical, and Judeo-Christian mythical traditions. He is a shepherd (or at least the son of one), born and raised on a sheep ranch in the grazing lands of the West. He is also a prodigal son who has run away from his father’s ranch after murdering two marauders who attempted to kill him in a seeming case of mistaken identity. We have discussed his animistic association with the pine tree (recalling burnt offerings and the crucifixion), out of which he seems to have emerged and into which he is driven by the freak hurricane wind. In addition, Daventry’s “hillbilly, sort of goat voice,”<sup>37</sup> and remarkable talent with the harmonica—“He made it sound almost like a flute”<sup>38</sup>—would seem to ally him with the Great God Pan and the pastoral tradition that embraces and embodies the sacrificial love myths. Garnet himself gradually becomes convinced of Daventry’s immortal origins, “When he played the harmonica I knew he was not human,” and he concludes, “I knew then there was god, and that Daventry had been sent for me, and I

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

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

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

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

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



“Quintus, why do you stay with me?” . . .

“Don’t have nobody else to choose to stay with, guess,” he mumbled.

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

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

“You stay with me then because I don’t mean nothing to you one way or another.”

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

“Well, I care about you anyhow, Quintus . . . . That’s something Daventry taught me, I guess. I don’t know what love means, but I think I am getting to have an inkling about it sometimes . . . .”<sup>43</sup>

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

## NOTES

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

<sup>29</sup> Christopher Lane, "Out with James Purdy: An Interview," *Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, Vol. 40, No. 1 (1998), <http://infotrac.galegroup.com>.

<sup>30</sup> Canning, *Conversations with Gay Novelists*, 19.

<sup>31</sup> Lane, "Interview," <http://infotrac.galegroup.com>.

<sup>32</sup> Purdy, *Shallow Grave*, 25.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 96.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>42</sup> Walt Whitman, *Poetry and Prose*, ed. Justin Kaplan (New York: Library of America, 1982), 982.

<sup>43</sup> Purdy, *Shallow Grave*, 115-16.

<sup>44</sup> Canning, *Conversations with Gay Novelists*, 16.

<sup>45</sup> Northrop Frye, *A Natural Perspective* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 82.

<sup>46</sup> Benedict XVI, *On Pseudo-Dionysius*, <http://www.zenit.org/article-22588?l=English>.

<sup>47</sup> Purdy, *Shallow Grave*, 20.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 116.

<sup>49</sup> Purdy, "Artistic Statement," *The James Purdy Society*, <http://www.jamespurdysociety.org>

<sup>50</sup> Lane, "Interview," <http://infotrac.galegroup.com>