

‘Impossibly Narrow Rooms’

by Kevin Arnold

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HYPERION

On the future of aesthetics

NARROW ROOMS



a novel by

JAMES PURDY

author of *INA SUE*

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“Don’t you believe in death?’ I yelled at him. ‘No,’ he answers, ‘and I don’t believe in time neither’”

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

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

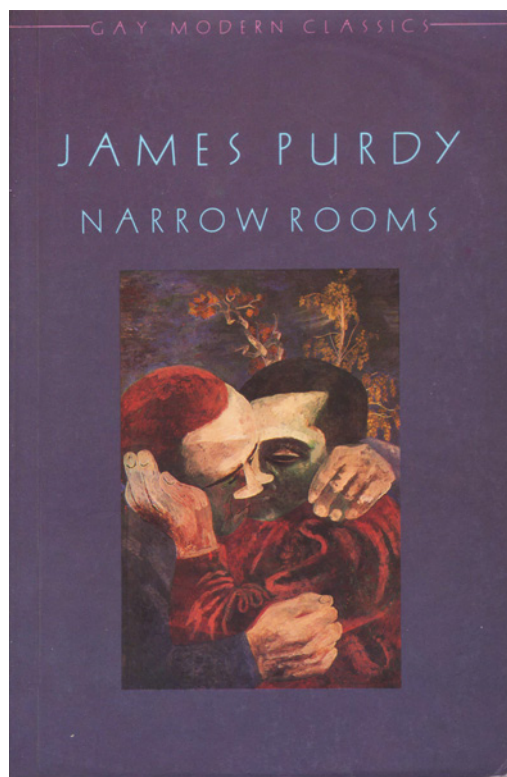
Purdy's novel *Narrow Rooms* is paradigmatic of this aesthetic mode. In a somewhat less than enthusiastic review for *The New York Times* in 1978, Katha Pollitt criticizes *Narrow Rooms* for its "strangely bodiless" characters ("almost no characterization") and "the complete absence of a sense of place."¹ The effect of this "lackluster" performance is what Pollitt describes as a "general aura of implausibility and thinness," that for her becomes an enervating deficiency in Purdy's novel. Indeed, the characters and setting for the novel do seem somewhat out-of-joint: difficult to imagine and slippery to pin down, not people or locations you can really find either on the map or in lived experience. As I started to write about this book, I found myself trying to imagine West Virginia in 1978, what it would have looked like, what certain words might have meant, etc. Finding Pollitt's assessment to be accurate, I quickly realized that the particular spatio-temporal site of 1978 West Virginia was not necessarily the referent for Purdy's novel.

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

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

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

The questions of desire and of the body, when both are construed as sexual, are always inseparable as they demarcate both the content and the limits of sexual identity. Identity politics tends to think of a sexual act as constitutive of the absolute definition of a sexual identity: a sexual act represents the truth of a subject's identity and exemplifies what that subject really is. But at the same time, the ephemerality and transience of the sexual act as referent presents a problem for signification in its lack. Desire in relation to the sexual act is a relatively recent phenomenon that comes to stand in for this bodily lack or the "identity" that the body is lacking. When it is supplemented by the confessional discourse through which it is socialized, desire becomes the enveloping material for the sexual act that also invests it and remains long past its "climax." This was what Foucault had in mind when he discussed the substitution of discourse for the sexual act in defining the contours of the sexual economy.² According to Foucault desire functions as a transcendental



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

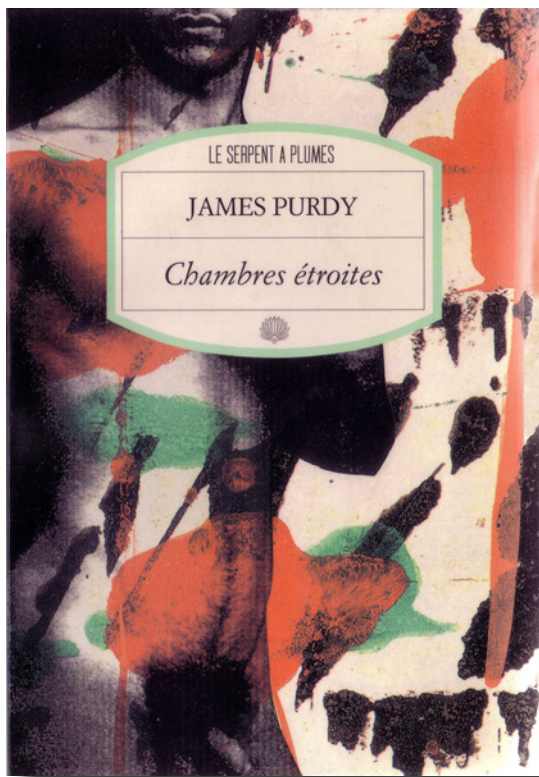
Purdy's *Narrow Rooms* dramatizes this problematic as the theoretical impasse between signifier and signified and between nature and nurturer in which we often find ourselves theoretically, by mimetically producing this problem as a textual impasse that haunts the novel's characters. The lack of any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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

“Oh Vance, Vance . . . I am, I am, I am.” (41)

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

Judith Butler has argued that one of the dominant homophobic tropes is to “make homosexuality seem unlivable”⁷ and Vance’s reference to the horrors of the exterior space of the prison as the source of his homosexuality here seems an obvious instantiation of this trope. However in suggesting that Sidney be straight or “something else,” Vance also recasts the social sphere of the town as a space in which heterosexuality and homosexuality are equally unlivable. The essential word in Butler’s formulation is that in homophobic discourse

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

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

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

At the end of the novel, the question of referentiality/materiality and its relationship to desire moves to the forefront as Sidney eventually realizes his love for Roy in the gruesome act of nailing him to a barn door under Roy’s calm but intensely passionate encouragement. Significantly, this relationship is not linguistically recognizable through stable identities/desires, as Sidney is

only able to comprehend this relationship indirectly through a metaphor—that of his relationship with his high school diving coach. Though Sidney had hated both diving and the water, through the accomplishment of the difficult task of becoming a champion diver under the encouragement of his coach, Sidney “discovered he loved not the sport but the coach” himself. It is through this relationship with his coach that Sidney is able to metaphorically understand his relationship with Roy, who likewise encouraged and “commanded him to accomplish the impossible” in the grisly act of crucifixion.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

NOTES

¹ Katha Pollitt, "Ovid and his Boys," *The New York Times*, April 23, 1978.

² Michel Foucault, tr. Robert Hurley, *History of Sexuality, Vol. I: An Introduction* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990).

³ Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (New York: Verso, 1989).

⁴ For a thoroughly compelling and detailed discussion of this problem, see Eve Sedgwick's introduction to *The Epistemology of the Closet* (California: University of California Press, 1990).

⁵ Jacques-Alain Miller, "Extimité," *Lacanian Theory of Discourse: Subject, Structure, and Society*, ed. Mark Bracher *et al* (New York and London: New York University Press, 1994), 74-87.

⁶ Jacques Lacan, "Agency of the Letter in the Unconscious," in *Écrits* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1982).

⁷ Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

⁸ I hesitate to describe this statement as a performative, as the category of the performative is, I think, itself under erasure here. I hope that it is clear from my argument that the language with which Sidney speaks here and elsewhere is non-iterable or illegible because it cannot reify any structure of desiring or identificatory relations. The repetition of the phrase "I am" points as much to the failure of that phrase to elicit a stable subject position as it does to any potentially performative work the phrase might accomplish.