

# Purdy's Family Poetics

by Christopher Lane

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# HYPERION

On the future of aesthetics



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*“Man is little more than a glyph which punctuates space,  
but once gone is as uncollectable  
as smoke or clouds.”*

**M**an is little more than a glyph which punctuates space, but once gone is as unrecollectable as smoke or clouds.” When Garnet Montrose reads aloud this strange, haunting sentence in Purdy’s *In a Shallow Grave* (1975), he voices a paradox about identity that characterizes most of the author’s fiction. The desires that goad Purdy’s protagonists into being, tormenting them with longing, tend later to shatter their ontology, leaving them ill equipped for life and barely able to function.<sup>1</sup> Purdy’s stress on the damage that desire wreaks and the tension that it generates with identity helps explain why his characters and communities often unravel into their formless parts. As those seeking relationships in his fiction are frequently ciphers ventriloquizing imposed social roles, little actually confirms their identities or stops them from turning into someone else.

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

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

Like several other critics, Tanner ties these effects to Purdy’s interest in “what has gone wrong, in every sense, with the modern family.”<sup>3</sup> By contrast, I want to address the formal, psychic, and philosophical ramifications of this detachment in Purdy’s fiction, including the light that it sheds on his “poetics of the family.”<sup>4</sup> As the critic Reed Woodhouse once observed when describing those poetics, Purdy tries “to unnormalize the reader, to break us out of the prisons of conventional thought and feeling.”<sup>5</sup> Approaching Purdy’s fiction in this way means doing so aslant, to capture his unusual perspective on family relations, and relationality more generally.

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

imagined worlds. It helps us notice what escapes his characters' identities, but also draws attention to the symbols our culture uses to sustain and normalize family life. In Purdy's works this social fabric is full of tears; it is overdetermined by longed-for completion but also impossible to realize or keep in place. Garnet's statement indicates, too, that such holes perforate forms of parenthood and family life—forms that nonetheless shadow Purdy's protagonists, tormenting them with doubt and anxiety about attachments, impossible ideals, and unrecoverable losses.<sup>6</sup> Such tenuous connections are especially piercing when described by a man, like Garnet, who is so disfigured by war and so alienated from his former life in the U.S. that he hovers fitfully between life and death, as if prone to the latter but unable to disjoin himself completely from the former.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“

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

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

"*Never*, Daddy, *never*?"

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

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

"Will you stop calling me with that appellation, when you know I'm not your dad, your granddaddy or your great-granddad."

(189-90; original emphases)

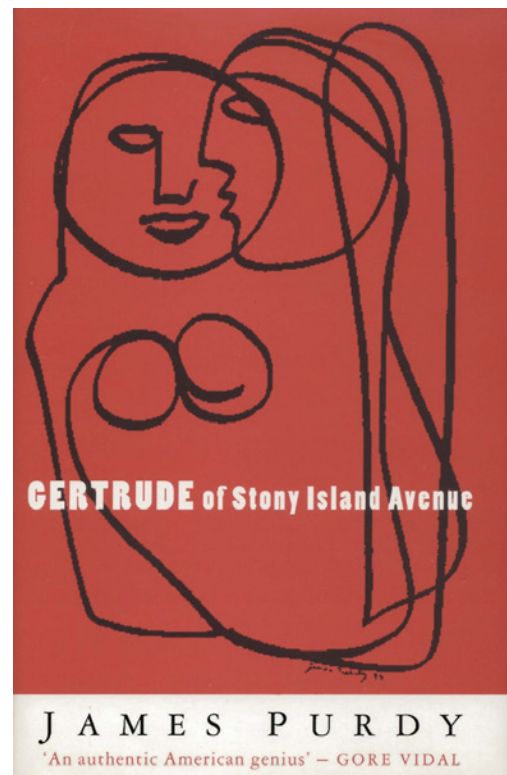
Here the communication splits between a husband and wife whose marriage crumbles partly because they can't seem to align, or agree upon, their cross-generational fantasies. The husband's prevail, with infantilizing results. But whether his and others' imaginary extremes literalize Oedipal fantasies or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

The interpretive dilemma facing us at such moments depends on whether

we view Purdy's family poetics as copying social forms, undermining them, or as wanting partly to make up for their deficiencies. Certainly, given this last possibility, the above examples signal how doubtfully Purdy's surrogate structures could be considered compensatory or reparative. As Frank Baldanza observed, "Solid, head-on treatment of family life in [a] breezy manner . . . is inconceivable for Purdy; on the other hand, the absolute loners in his works are very few."<sup>11</sup> In the terms of Purdy's fiction, this holds equally for gay families and their nuclear counterparts. And though Baldanza and Tanner don't elaborate on Purdy's same-sex, cross-generational tangles, the latter, I want to suggest, are inseparable from the "poetics of the family" that he creates and complicates.

The guardian or ersatz parent is thus a pivotal but critically neglected figure in Purdy's fiction: He (rarely she) gestures to kinship structures that are impossible to either repair or redeem. Generally, these surrogates help troubled young men—Malcolm, Daventry, Amos, Fenton Riddleway in *63: Dream Palace*, and Chad in *Hollow of His Hand*—form relationships without too much initial cost. The stand-in for a missing and generally unrealizable love, the guardian elicits an ardor that often is explicitly meant for someone else (a dead or absent parent), which ultimately creates attachments that bind Purdy's foundlings loosely, impersonally, to the world. Instead of idealizing these figures or downplaying the erotic confusions they cause, Purdy's writing makes us heed aspects of the family that exceed meaning: he probes what "fits into no groups—whether sexual, intellectual, political, or artistic," to alter one of Woodhouse's observations on the author himself. And in doing so, his works meditate on aspects of the family and of personhood that are not just inchoate, but sexually and ontologically unclassifiable.<sup>12</sup>

One consequence of this emphasis is that Purdy rejects academic orthodoxy and identity politics, a position—he was the first to admit—that cost him many readers. "They want everything topical," he once lamented of his harshest critics, and for fiction to be a prototype for coexistence, but the imagination rarely toes such lines and is anyway a realm that most "people don't like."<sup>13</sup> Put another way, his commitment to "follow[ing his] unconscious" and to parsing its fantasies, however unpleasant or unethical, easily caused offense. "What they don't always admit," he observed of his relatively large and loyal gay male and black female following, "is that . . . beneath a homosexual and a black is something that's neither homosexual nor black."<sup>14</sup>



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

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

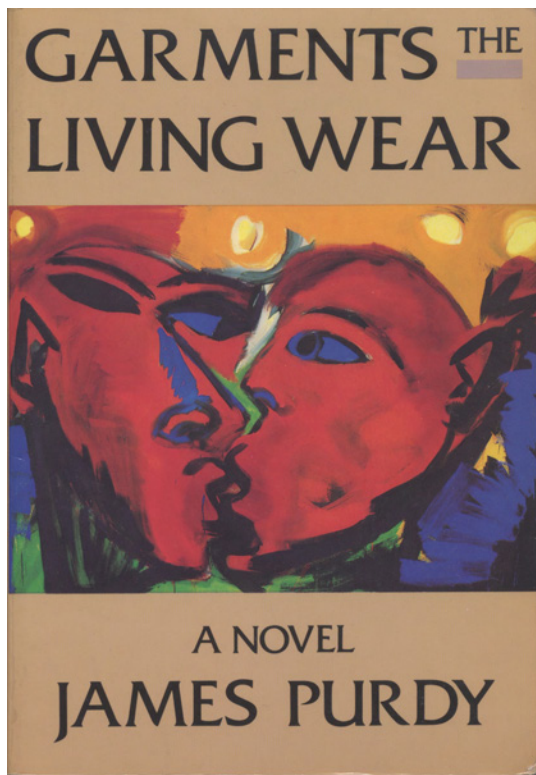
Purdy's insistence that "beneath a homosexual and a black is something that's neither" may look as if it yokes his fiction to recent debates about gender's contingent, performative, and melancholic effects—effects that Judith Butler, for one, has powerfully described.<sup>19</sup> But Purdy's and Butler's perspectives don't in the end mesh very tidily. True, novels like *Garments the Living Wear* showcase the false morphology of gender; and Purdy's use of fantasy, satire, and parody greatly unsettles the intricacies of kinship. If one also heeds his obsession with quotation—that his characters frequently echo statements they neither identify nor understand—then he'd surely seem to be a dream for scholars committed to anti-essentialist models of sexuality, including arguments that gender is a type of mimicry. Such angles make his neglect today all the more surprising. Still, to read Purdy in this way could easily ignore or simplify what's so disturbing about his work. Put starkly, it is desire—not personhood—that is generally the more-reliable guide to truth in his fiction,

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Alternating detail with speculation, Freud’s interpretation of Haizmann dwells on the painter’s fantasies of the Devil as a “father-substitute” because Haizmann represented Satan with “two pairs of female breasts” and “a large penis ending in a snake.”<sup>35</sup> As such, Haizmann’s image of the Devil as father, Freud thought, combines “two sets of emotional impulses that [are] opposed to

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

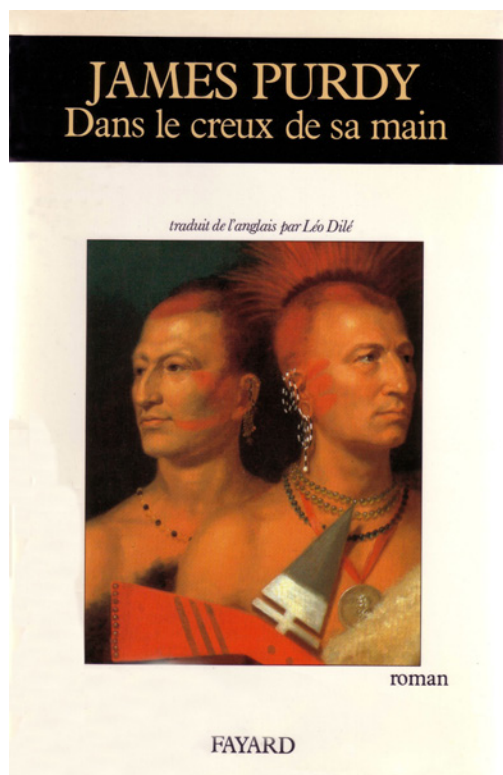


Decatur said, “I am your dad.”

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## NOTES

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

<sup>1</sup> James Purdy, *In a Shallow Grave* (1975; San Francisco: City Lights, 1988), 68. Subsequent references give pagination in main text.

<sup>2</sup> Tony Tanner, "Introduction" to Purdy, *Color of Darkness and Malcolm: Eleven Stories, One Novella, and a Novel* (1956-59; New York: Doubleday, 1974), 13, 17.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>5</sup> Reed Woodhouse, "James Purdy's Escape from the Wasteland," *Harvard Gay and Lesbian Review* 1.3 (1994): 24.

<sup>6</sup> In Purdy's novel *In the Hollow of His Hand* (New York: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1986), for instance, Viola Franey commiserates with Chad Coultas, a boy kidnapped first by his unknown but real father, then by his known but actually surrogate one: "We none of us ever get the parents we feel we deserve" (186). Subsequent references give pagination in main text.

<sup>7</sup> Frank Baldanza, "James Purdy's Half-Orphans," *Centennial Review* 18 (1974): 255.

<sup>8</sup> Purdy, *Narrow Rooms* (New York: Arbor House, 1978), 152.

<sup>9</sup> Purdy, *Eustace Chisholm and the Works* (1967; London: Gay Men's Press, 1984), 229. Subsequent references give pagination in main text.

<sup>10</sup> Purdy, "Daddy Wolf," 63: *Dream Palace: Selected Stories, 1956-1987* (California: Black Sparrow, 1991), 183-91; Purdy, *Gertrude of Stony Island Avenue* (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1997).

<sup>11</sup> Baldanza, "James Purdy's Half-Orphans," 255. See also Baldanza, "The Paradoxes of Patronage in Purdy," *American Literature* 46.3 (1974): esp. 347.

<sup>12</sup> Woodhouse, "James Purdy (Re)visited," *Harvard Gay and Lesbian Review* 2.2 (1995): 16.

<sup>13</sup> Purdy, qtd. in Richard Canning, "Following the Unconscious: An Interview with James Purdy," *The James White Review*, Vol. 17, No. 1 (winter 2000): 22.

<sup>14</sup> Purdy, qtd. in *ibid.*, 19, 15.

<sup>15</sup> Purdy, conversation with the author on January 6, 2003. See also Woodhouse, who argues in "James Purdy's Escape from the Wasteland" that Purdy "is a sort of Calvinist, though his god is not Jehovah, but Eros" (24).

<sup>16</sup> Joseph Conrad, *Lord Jim* (1899-1900; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1989), 200.

<sup>17</sup> Purdy, qtd. in Canning, "Following the Unconscious: An Interview with James Purdy," 14.

<sup>18</sup> Purdy, qtd. in Woodhouse, "James Purdy (Re)visited," 17.

<sup>19</sup> See especially Judith Butler, "Melancholy Gender / Refused Identification," *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 132-50.

<sup>20</sup> Woodhouse, "James Purdy's Escape from the Wasteland," 24.

<sup>21</sup> Leo Bersani, "Against Monogamy," *Oxford Literary Review* 20.1-2 (1998): 5; Bersani, "Genital Chastity," *Homosexuality and Psychoanalysis*, ed. Tim Dean and Christopher Lane (Chicago:

University of Chicago Press, 2001), 361.

<sup>22</sup> Purdy, qtd. in Canning, "Following the Unconscious: An Interview with James Purdy," 15.

<sup>23</sup> Purdy, *Narrow Rooms*, 58.

<sup>24</sup> Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. and trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth, 1953-74), 24 vols.

<sup>25</sup> For elaboration, see Christopher Lane, "The Voided Role: On Genet." *MLN* 112.4 (1997): 876-908.

<sup>26</sup> See George Combe, *The Constitution of Man Considered in Relation to External Objects* (1828; Boston: Allen and Ticknor, 1834), 3d ed., 47-51.

<sup>27</sup> In *Narrow Rooms*, this connective role is adopted by Gareth Vaisey, who describes himself as a "makeweight" between Sid De Lakes and Roy Sturtevant (181).

<sup>28</sup> Purdy, qtd. in Woodhouse, "James Purdy (Re)visited," 17.

<sup>29</sup> Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905), *Standard Edition* 7:149n.

<sup>30</sup> Purdy, *Garments the Living Wear* (San Francisco: City Lights, 1989), 149. Subsequent references give pagination in main text.

<sup>31</sup> Jane Flax, qtd. in Tim Dean and Cynthia Dyess, "Gender: The Impossibility of Meaning," *Psychoanalytic Dialogues* 10.5 (2000): 750.

<sup>32</sup> Tanner, Introduction to Purdy, *Color of Darkness and Malcolm*, 17; Purdy, qtd. in Canning, "Following the Unconscious: An Interview with James Purdy," 20.

<sup>33</sup> Freud, *Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of His Childhood* (1910), *Standard Edition* 11:57-138.

<sup>34</sup> Freud, "Psychoanalytic Notes on an Autobiographical Account of a Case of Paranoia (Dementia Paranoides)" (1911), *Standard Edition* 12, esp. 57-58 and 69. For elaboration on the boy's "feminine attitude," see Lane, "Freud on Group Psychology: Shattering the Dream of a Common Culture," *Homosexuality and Psychoanalysis*, 147-67.

<sup>35</sup> Freud, "A Seventeenth-Century Demonological Neurosis" (1923 [1922]), *Standard Edition* 19:83, 89.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.

<sup>37</sup> Here, I disagree with Bettina Schwarzschild, who begins *The Not-Right House: Essays on James Purdy* (Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 1968) by invoking Purdy's "Christian vision of love" (1). Even when based on Purdy's early works, the comment is surprising and arguably difficult to support. Schwarzschild wrote her study long before Purdy published *Garments the Living Wear*, perhaps his most extended satire of evangelical Christianity and its susceptibility to producing false prophets. See, however, the narrator's satirical representation of the religious cult in the second half of *In the Hollow of His Hand*, as well as Purdy's own bemused statements about these and other pietistic phenomena in Lane, "Out with James Purdy: An Interview," *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 40.1 (1998): 86.

<sup>38</sup> Freud, "A Seventeenth-Century Demonological Neurosis," 102.

<sup>39</sup> Hilary Masters, "American Odysseys and Oddities: The Dark Landscape in James Purdy's Fiction," *Washington Post* (December 16, 1986): C9.

<sup>40</sup> When Decatur tries to see Chad, Bess Lytle uses the same phrase, insisting: "You cannot drive a wedge into this family!" (31) What one views as a "wedge" here depends, ultimately, on the perspective one adopts relative to paternity and the family.

<sup>41</sup> Masters, "American Odysseys and Oddities" C9.