

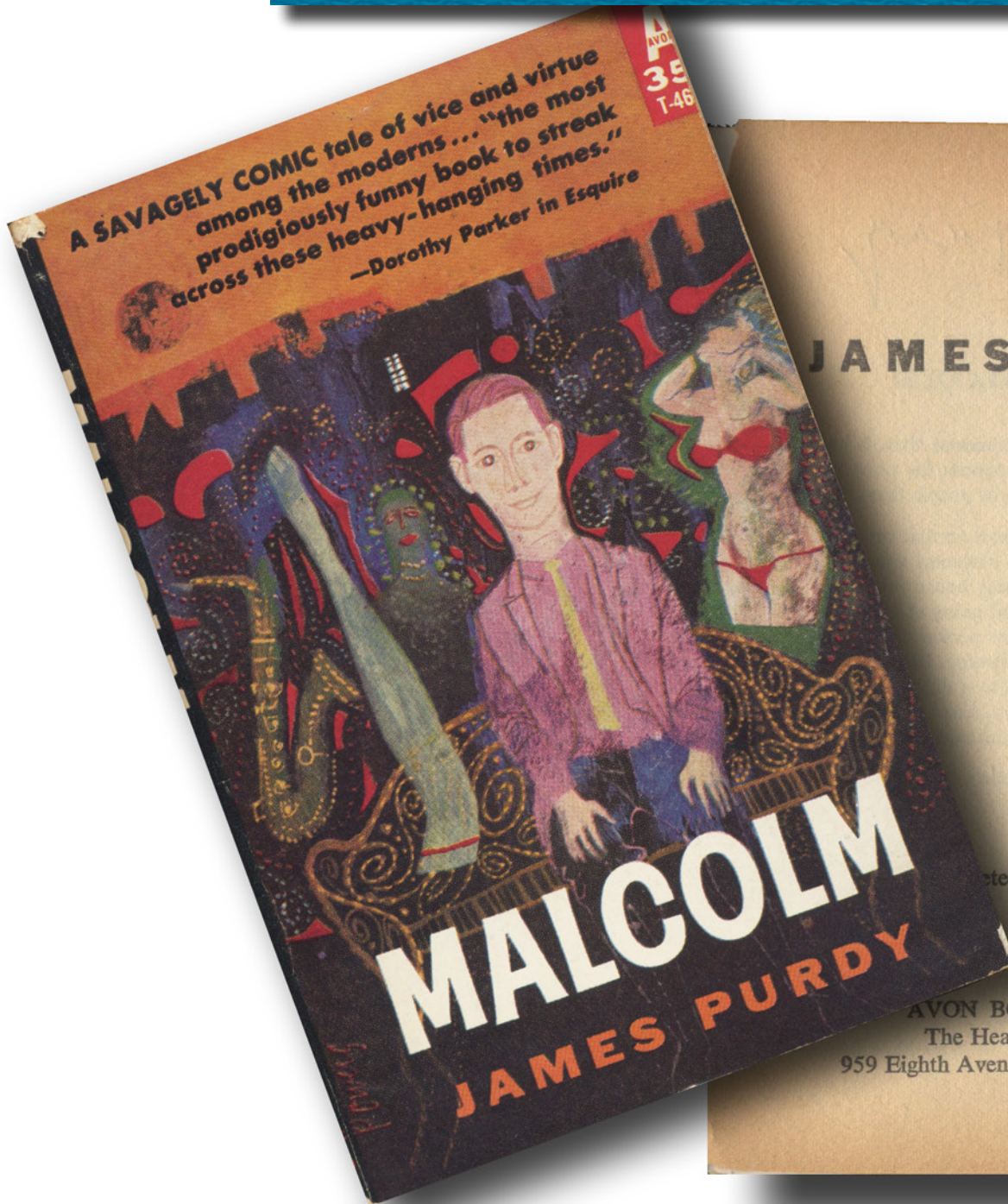
Malcolm, or the Charmed Life of Books

by Marie-Claude Profit

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HYPERION

On the future of aesthetics



JAMES PURDY

ete and Unabridged

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29 *Hyperion*—Malcolm, or the Charmed Life of Books

M*alcolm*¹ is a remarkable comic novel. One of the best. It belongs with *Huckleberry Finn* and Voltaire's *Candide*. Its main character, Malcolm, shares with Huck and Candide an unshakeable innocence, which gets him unscathed out of impossible situations and brings out the absurdity of the world. He meets a wide range of grotesque people, ill-assorted couples, black or white, young or mature, poor or millionaires, an astrologer, two painters, an ex-con, a tattooer, a singer, a policeman ... who all fall for him, as does the reader.

Malcolm, first published in 1959, belongs to what can be considered, retrospectively, as the first period of Purdy's work, a period when he showed his concern for the act of writing by giving prominent parts in his novels to one or several characters of writers or would-be writers, and building his plots around a writing enterprise. This he had already done in 63: *Dream Palace*, published in 1956, and he would do so again in *The Nephew*, *Cabot Wright Begins*, *Eustace Chisholm and the Works*, *Jeremy's Version* and *I Am Elijah Thrush*, all published between 1960 and 1972. How does *Malcolm* find its place among these novels? At first sight, it does not seem to belong to the same vein. Here, no character is formally charged with telling Malcolm's adventures (or takes upon himself or herself to tell them), nor do these adventures explicitly center on a writing enterprise: apparently, every character's exertions aim at introducing Malcolm, a solitary orphan, into society. And yet, Malcolm himself is twice said to start recording his "conversations" with others. This may be taken as an encouragement to the reader to look further for references to writing, and indeed many arguments can be found to confirm that the problematic of fiction underpins the structure of *Malcolm* in ways that are not always apparent. This is the aspect of the novel I intend to discuss in this essay.

A brief summary of the novel will point to a dissymmetry in its structure, and apparent weakness in plot and characterization, which can only be accounted for by reference to fiction in the making.

A very young man, Malcolm, spends his time waiting on a golden bench in front of a sumptuous hotel. What he is waiting for is indeterminate. An astrologer, Mr. Cox, who is "the greatest walker" of his period (1), notices him, comes up to him and decides to help him out of his inaction. He will send Malcolm to call on people whose addresses he gives him, one at a time. Thus the first meeting determines a series of other meetings: Malcolm gets a first

address, a second, etc; he meets a first couple, a second, four in all. No new attempt at launching him into life succeeds. Mr. Cox finally gives up. By that time, three quarters of the book has already transpired. Malcolm finds himself in the street, alone once more, and is now rescued by Gus, a motorcyclist. Gus brings Malcolm to Melba, a young jazz singer. The two young people fall in love at first sight. This time, Malcolm is irreversibly projected from one episode to the next, gets married, and declines to his and the novel's speedy end.

If this dissymmetry is examined more closely, we see that the presence first of Mr. Cox, then of Gus, determine two opposite parts in the story. In the first part, Mr. Cox controls the action; in the second, Gus does. As mentioned, the two parts are of very unequal length: 159 pages including 15 chapters, as opposed to 48 pages including five chapters, which creates a surprising lack of balance. Mr. Cox starts a linear, repetitive narrative development: the structure is open. Gus starts a vector-like development: the structure is closed. Both of them are provided with characteristics befitting the part they play: a great walker, a motorcyclist, their mobility is useful for establishing connections, and the difference of speed between walking and motorcycling corresponds to the difference of rhythm between the actions they start.

Under Mr. Cox's supervision, there is no progress in action concerning Malcolm. A few plots develop, but among the other characters only. All attempts at animating *him* fail, which is unexpected and may be considered awkward since he is the hero. However, the characters present in that part of the story disappear from the second, "all swallowed up in the past" (162)—except for a hurried round-up at the end. Only the character of Malcolm links the two parts, and he is a most unusual and apparently unsatisfactory character.

A "NON USUAL" CHARACTER

Malcolm is the "hero" of the book. His name is used for the title. He is present in all the chapters but one. His oxymoronic "short long life" is the proclaimed subject. Still, Malcolm is an unusual hero. He is merely sketched out. He has no surname, no birth certificate, no family, no friends, no character, no social status, no connections, no education, no talents, no memory. His age is uncertain: "about" fifteen; he does not know when he was born and seems to have always been the same age. "I have nothing. I can do nothing" he says (43), and further on: "I hardly feel I exist" (60). The end of the story confirms this surprising vacuum: when he dies, the coroner and the undertaker insist "that there had been no corpse at all, and that nobody was buried in the ceremony" (205).

He is passive, but full of goodwill. At the beginning of the book he admits: "I

suppose if somebody would tell me what to do, I would do it" (5). Yet, during the first part, he repeatedly falls asleep during conversations or shows himself inattentive. On the few occasions when he is about to take initiatives, he is "rudely" pushed back into a corner, told to sit down, not interrupt, "be silent or leave the room" (138). Every episode stops with his being either dismissed or forgotten.

This series of failures is reversed in the second part. Malcolm and Melba fall in love and decide to get married. The episodes that follow come in logical sequence as the development of this decision: virility ordeal (tattooing), sexual initiation (at Madame Rosita's), experience of loss (Gus dies), reunion and marriage, Malcolm's illness (leading to Melba's betrayal), his death. The plot unfolds smoothly—too smoothly, suspiciously so.

Such unusual treatment of the main character leads us to another reading of the text, underlying the surface reading. On a superficial level, Malcolm is simply another character in a conventional narrative, just like Mr. Cox and Gus; on a deeper level, however, he is a "character in the making," part of a work in progress, and the two intermediaries who animate him, Mr. Cox and Gus, are comic figures of would-be writers. At the beginning, Mr. Cox, as would-be "author," is haunted with the idea of a character not yet clearly defined in his mind: a Shakespearean name, a princely orphan, an engaging youth, altogether a promising character—hence the sumptuous surroundings. For the moment, either the "author" has no idea of a plot, or he is in no hurry to spoil his pleasure, so he toys with the possibilities opened to him by this fresh new character he has conjured up in his mind—hence the golden bench and the boy's "waiting" look, the lack of precision concerning him, his ageless look, "as if he had always been this height and would continue to be" (7). We understand that he *has* always been what he is now, he has a "charmed" life, which is not subject to the laws of nature but to the requirements of art.

"HIGHLY CRITICAL"

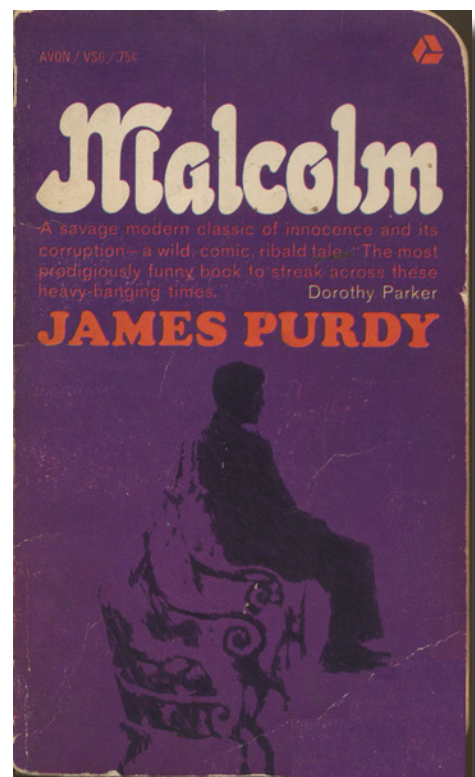
Cox and Gus correspond to different stages of artistic creation, the drafts and the definitive version. They also serve as warnings against opposite pitfalls of fiction writing. Behind Mr. Cox and Gus, the real narrator may have an ulterior motivation.

Mr. Cox is presented as "the most famous astrologer of his period" (1). We are not told *what* period that is, and even if the following developments ascertain that Mr. Cox is not to be relegated to remote times, the choice of the words "his period," the choice of the profession attributed to him ("People still study the ... *stars!*" Malcolm exclaims, surprised, p. 5), all this contributes to associating him with obsolete practices. Under his patronage, ambitious literary projects are launched. *Malcolm* begins as a romance and goes on

as a picaresque novel, with a few prose poems included.² Such types of fiction, together with the princely character of Malcolm, are “too expensive for the depleted epoch” they are in (5).

A representative of tradition, Mr. Cox is treated as a comic character, a caricature of a writer, omniscient, omnipresent, omnipotent—“Mr. Cox knows everything” (64), “Mr. Cox is everywhere” (82), “the wires were (...) in the hands only of Mr. Cox” (84)—yet harassed by his paper and ink creatures who tend to fret and grow defiant: “You have played God long enough” says Kermit (72). It is well known that writers sometimes feel that their characters get out of control. This happens in *Malcolm*: “He [Mr. Cox] had set the ball rolling, and it had rolled further than he had ever dreamed or contemplated” (70). In reaction to their ill will, Mr. Cox’s moods vary. He expresses anger, defiance, frustration, despair ... as becomes an author in the throes of creation: “Everything you have (...) you owe to me. Try to remember that when you feel proud and free” (67), “the only real talking I will do” (87). He complains: “I have arranged all the situations (...) Why can’t *they* act? I have brought the right people together and the right situations. I am not such a fool as not to know *right people* and *right situations* when they are together. But nothing happens. Nothing at all” (88). The characters are moved, dropped, reintroduced in new configurations, the parts are redistributed, the drafts get longer and more complex, all to no avail. The abrupt dismissals are metaphors of an author’s failing inspiration and tearing up one draft after another. The repetition of the same pattern of failure creates a comic effect.

The function attributed to Mr. Cox and Gus is similar, but they are given opposite personalities, which correspond to the different turns of their literary attempts. Gus is resolutely contemporary: he has been to “[o]ne war and then Korea” (175 - the only explicit reference to a historical event found in the novel), and he is so used to riding that he can no longer walk. His name is a weakened form of “Cox,” the one who steers.³ He is black, friendly, smiling, easy going, and, as a figure of an “author,” he *does* show weakness. The characters belonging to his part of the novel easily usurp his responsibility: Melba decides to marry Malcolm in spite of Gus’s protests. She is “highly critical” (166) of him. The word AUTHORITY, which should go with authorship, is written on the door *she* opens (170). Even when it is Malcolm who, to his own wonder, takes initiatives, Gus yields: “Do you know what you are?” Gus inquired (...). “Persuasive, that’s what” (174). When Malcolm comments on the tattooing, he points in fact to the dangerous irreversibility of the narrative enterprise in which they are involved: “The only thing about a tattoo is, once



it's done, I don't suppose you can undo it away again" (175). A plot is indeed built up and brought to its denouement, a denouement widely approved of: "after it was all over, everybody agreed that it was almost the only way he [Malcolm] could have gone from them" (199).

We must bear in mind, however, that Gus dies in the process. This should disqualify him for the part of successful author we claim for him. Still, it is worth noting that, just after the episode of his (unexplained) death, a new chapter begins with the words: "Malcolm's adventures might have been continued indefinitely had it not so happened by chance that ..." (187). Placed in a prominent position in the chapter, this phrase stands out:



Its main clause is in the passive voice, and reminds us of the formula that comes at the end of each episode in a serial story, "(to be continued)". This suggests that Malcolm's "adventures," under the guidance of someone like Gus, have been turning into cheap literature. It is a "highly critical" statement, in which the ironic impersonal voice of the real narrator can be heard. *He* "kills" Gus as part of his debunking of the stereotyped plot Gus has been guilty of producing. It is so conventional that it can unfold without apparent authorial help.

The next clause corroborates this interpretation. Once Gus is removed, the link with Melba should be broken; the new plot should peter out. Not so with *this* kind of plot, the implicit critic hints. A very obvious trick is enough to put it back on its tracks: "Malcolm's adventures might have been continued indefinitely *had it not so happened by chance* ..." The coincidence is heavily underlined: it demonstrates that anything will do that allows the predictable denouement to take place.

So, ironically, Gus may stand for the figure of the popular writer, easily successful with the general public. "Everybody" approves of the end given to Malcolm's adventures—but what is "everybody"'s judgment worth? Purdy is hard on the American public: "A public only knows what it's told to like, and it can't remember week to week what it liked last."⁴ Success of this sort is another form of failure in terms of art.

In retrospect, Gus's failure also explains why, in the first part, Mr. Cox is held up to ridicule. Gus speedily knocks off a plot, Mr. Cox despairs because, try as he may, he can't do it. The conclusion seems to be that both of them are wrong in believing that the worth of a book lies in its plot.

OTHER CLUES

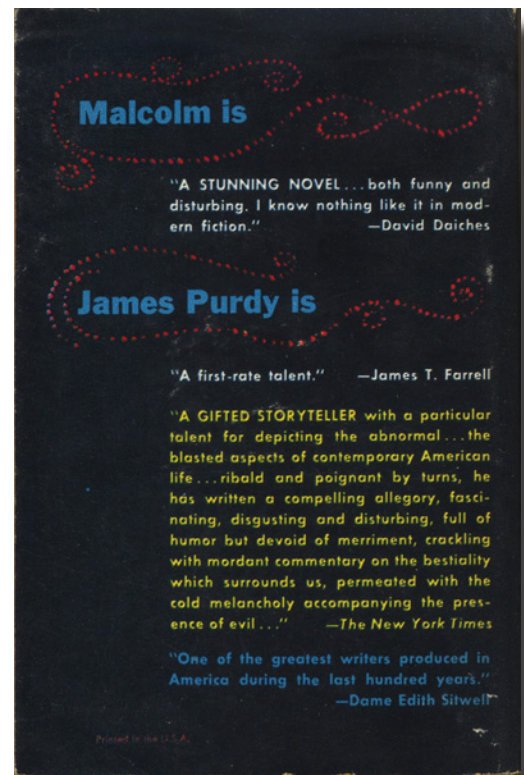
So far, this analysis has considered the book as a whole. But many details can be read on two levels, in their context, and as metatextual comments. I am now going to examine a few of these clues, which hint at what really matters to make a good book.

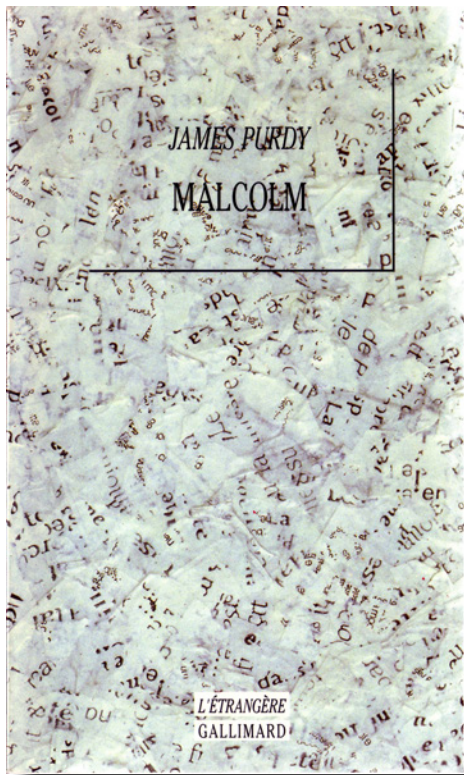
The phrase: “Texture is all, substance nothing” (81) apparently refers to a very light subject, Madame Girard’s veil. It can also be taken as an artistic principle, illustrated by the *text* we are reading. The *substance*—familiar plots, conventional characters of artists and millionaires—does not matter. “Millions of men look like millions of men” (196). The interest lies in the treatment of them, the caricatures, the exaggerations, the ironic distortions of the techniques of fiction writing. The same message is conveyed by the statement: “Whoever the subject, it is the picture that matters” (138). Here, painting is a metaphor for writing.

Another message to the reader pushes the paradox one step further. Mr. Cox has told Kermit all about Malcolm. Malcolm protests that there is nothing to tell. “There is a great deal to tell, *always*” says Kermit “somewhat gravely” (24). Not only does substance not matter, but it even does not matter if there is no substance. A novel can be written, and is often written in Purdy’s case, about and starting from a void. It is demonstrated here. Malcolm defines himself as “a cypher and a blank” (29).

When Girard Girard calls on Malcolm, he finds him listening to his sea-shells (58). Malcolm offers Girard one of them, “one of the larger shells” (presumably in homage to Girard’s social status!), but Girard refuses to listen to it. A futile activity, at first sight—at least, so Girard thinks. Yet the sea-shell is an appropriate image since the fascination of the shell lies, not in its actual substance, but in the impalpable sound that issues from it. Here the stress is put on orality. The reader is encouraged to wave aside subject matter (the shell) and enjoy yet another aspect of the book that makes it worth reading, namely the variety of voices heard in the dialogues,⁵ the prose poems woven into the descriptions.⁶ By refusing to listen to the music of the shell, Girard, the millionaire, a man of substance, betrays his incomprehension of the intrinsic value of a good book.

The keyword is “language.” Phrases encourage the reader to look further, see the pretty face under all the melted make-up (52), look up *words* in the dictionary (195). Malcolm’s lack of education comes in useful to force the





word, this minimal unit of text, on the reader's attention. A slight discrepancy between the expected word and the one actually placed in the character's mouth revives it, gives it a sometimes disturbing, sometimes ironic flavor (the word *Abyssinian* for instance, the words *ex-con*, *pederast*, *marriage* ...). The Girards are not 'friends' of Malcolm's, they are his favorite *address* (155), which reminds us of the printed nature of what we read.

Words acquire a dynamic power: they generate text. For instance (Purdy chooses *names* carefully), Eloisa *Brace* is a strong woman who *braces* herself for boxing and hits Madame Girard who falls, has to be picked up, etc. (122). The best example is to be found in the enigmatic use, by Gus and Melba, of the word "a contemporary," which first appears in the chapter title, then, in the course of the dialogue, in different types of clauses, grammatical and ungrammatical. "Malcolm meets a contemporary" (title), "You one of the contemporaries? / If you one of the contemporaries... / You *is* a contemporary? / Another contemporary! / Meet a contemporary, / What if you hadn't been a contemporary, huh? / Malcolm was about to ask

what a contemporary was... / How did you know he was a contemporary? / I don't even care if you are a contemporary or not" (160-168). The word serves several purposes. It underlines the break with the first part of the book. It feeds the dialogue. It contributes to the process of building up the new characters, Gus and Melba. It serves as a password that triggers the whole set of Malcolm's last adventures. It becomes a "non usual," pungent word, rich in new connotations.

TEXTS WITHIN THE TEXT

Within *Malcolm*, the narrative we are given to read, allusions to other writing attempts are included: Jerome's published book "about" his experience in prison, Mr. Cox's notebook, and Malcolm's record of his "conversations," which is by far the most significant.

We are given little information about Jerome's book: its topic, its title (*They Could Have Me Back*), its cover. The book is promptly dismissed with Malcolm's purposely naive question, "Is that you naked on the cover?" and his equally purposely inappropriate comment on its "nice" title. Malcolm politely returns it to its author ("I don't read very much", 93). Jerome's book obviously belongs to the category that will tempt a publisher—a flashy subject, factual experience, a hint of scandal. All this provides substance enough, but the

reader knows by now that “substance [is] nothing,” (81). What matters is not *what* to tell but *how* to tell it. There is no hint that Jerome is at all conscious of the demands that turn experience into art, into a *text* worth reading.

When Mr. Cox takes out his notebook, we are not directly told what he writes. We are told that, true to his part as astrologer, he makes a prediction concerning one of his characters (“the day will come when he will have to ...”) and just then, he writes down something “hurriedly” (37). Two pages later, we learn that an important change has taken place in the character’s “life.” Laureen has gone off with a Japanese wrestler. The juxtaposition suggests more than a coincidence: it suggests that Mr. Cox has brought about this change, and that what we read now finds its source in the hurried note he wrote. When Malcolm mentions this elopement, much later, Girard waves it aside: “Oh, that old story. An invention of Mr. Cox” (155). Unless we choose a psychological explanation for Girard’s denial, since he is an interested party, we’ll conclude that coherence in the plot does not worry the narrator. He uses the material that fits the *scene*, the minimal unit for narrative, and shifts to other material when suitable for another scene. There are no transitions, no effort to justify changes by cause and effect or other realistic devices.



“Now that Malcolm was going out into the great world, so to speak, he felt compelled to write down some of the things, at least, which happened to him (...) But (...) he had very little command of language, and could seldom do more than copy down some of the things which his new friends, especially Professor Cox, said.” (35).

This announcement comes as early as the opening of the fourth chapter. The text will mention Malcolm’s writing enterprise again, but we’ll never read more than one line of it: “Married love is the strangest thing there is” (35), a remarkable statement, we are told, because “original to him”.

So Malcolm’s *version* (to use Purdy’s word for *Jeremy’s*) is a shadow double of the text we read, and one of the fictitious sources for it. We have already noticed that Malcolm is a “character in the making.” We must add that he takes his place among the avatars of the writer. His text, however, is not on the same level as Mr. Cox and Gus’s scenarios. It is one degree further from the actual book. There are three layers of text, the real ink and paper book, the fictitious text imagined by Mr. Cox and Gus, and Malcolm’s text, which reflects what the real narrator imagines that his pseudo-narrators (Cox and Gus) imagine for *his* character of Malcolm, whom he makes *their* character. The text we read is ironically founded on a complex mass of non-existent material.

Considering the character's difficulties with language, it seems paradoxical to choose Malcolm for the part of writer. The one sample of his "Conversations" that we are given to read would not strike us as worth quoting if the narrator had not highlighted it by quotation marks and commentaries, and pretended to justify himself for quoting it. A humorous touch, of course, but the humor covers, or rather uncovers, a vindication of the kind of statements Malcolm is said to have produced. Malcolm's innocence gives him a fresh look at the world/word and a capacity to *wonder* not unlike a writer's vision. The minimalist sentence "Married love is the strangest thing there is" corresponds to Malcolm's limited means of expression, but also to Purdy's exacting pruning of language for the most disturbing result.

"ALMOST THE ONLY WAY"

Malcolm's function as narrator is reactivated in the last chapter.



"(...) Malcolm found himself too weak ever to be out of bed, and in this state the happy thought hit him to write down all his conversations with Mr. Cox, Girard Girard, Kermit, and others in English, but shortly after he began this, he caught an extremely bad cold which his Cuban valet said was really pneumonia, and after that, Malcolm wrote down everything in French, as this seemed the easier language in his increased weakness" (200). "He spent all his time now recording his 'conversations' with his former friends" (201).

In the fourth chapter, Malcolm had felt compelled to write when he started going out into the world. He was beginning life. There is no allusion here to that previous impulse, but this time, a narrator's intrusion approves of the decision to write: "the *happy* thought hit him." When he begins to write now, in the final chapter, it is a different decision, a different enterprise, in a different context. Now Malcolm is dying. Writing is linked to desire and death. Before he fell ill, Malcolm had answered to the policeman who advised him to consult the dictionary, that he had no time for that. "I'm awfully busy now that I'm married" (195). But desire proves sterile: "after so many weeks of incessant marriage" Melba is still not pregnant and Malcolm dies of "too frequent conjugal duties" (201). Now that he can no longer make love to Melba, who abandons him, he turns to words. The death of desire awakens the urge to write. He'll leave 300 pages of manuscript behind him. Malcolm's fictitious text remains after Malcolm's fictitious death. Only ink on paper survives.

Why in French? Malcolm has learned French with his father. French is the

language of the dead father, the language of an ossified cultural tradition, by opposition to the living language in which he had been able to write his one *original* sentence. As Malcolm's infatuation with his father has occasioned many comic effects,⁷ the father image has been playfully discredited, together with the cultural values it stood for *and* the language that conveyed them. Moreover, we may have doubts about Malcolm's fluency in French, since the one French word introduced into the conversation (the word *largesse*) puzzles him (8). So the narrator's approval of his character's "happy thought" may also be taken ironically. The recourse to French *in absentia* as the final language of Malcolm's "conversations" is, as many other devices, ambiguous. It may be an oblique reference to absence and death, deliberately glossed over.

Yet absence is at the core of the novel. An absence that haunts all of Purdy's works. The missing father, the vacant hero, the characters challenging each other's existence, criticism, contradiction or denial destroying every progress—all point to a central blank, void, nothingness. There is *nobody* beyond the *characters* on the *blank* page. Far from discrediting fiction, this makes of it the only elegant and efficient *presence* in an inconsistent world. The book mirrors what it demonstrates: there is no life beyond the "charmed life" of words, no substance under the many interwoven layers of text. Writing is the beginning and the end. The writer *is* the only Creator.⁸

The novel opens with Malcolm persistently sitting on a golden bench.⁹ An ornamental piece, so everybody sees it, a useless ornament. Thus, by sitting on it, Malcolm shocks the passers-by, or, symbolically, breaks a taboo. "*No one had really ever sat on it at all before*" (2). Together with Malcolm's "royal" aloofness and indifference to public opinion, what is heard here is the writer's voice, quietly asserting, in his dry, humorous manner, his independence and demiurgic transgression.

NOTES

¹ *Malcolm* was first published in September 1959 by Farrar, Strauss & Giroux. All page references are to the Bantam edition, 1971.

² For prose poems, see for instance the description of Eloisa's house, p. 110 (the only descriptive passage in the novel, written in two long periods of carefully balanced rhythm including regular verse) or the beginning of the chapter "Leave me Madame Girard," p. 143.

³ Many other details oppose Mr. Cox and Gus, for instance Gus's *watch* and Mr. Cox's sidereal time; Mr. Cox's elegant calling cards and the placards and neon lights advertising Melba or Professor Robinolte; the *palatial* hotel in front of which Mr. Cox finds Malcolm, and the *Tattoo Palace*...

⁴ James Purdy interviewed by Adriaan van Dis. From the television program "De ijsbreker" (Amsterdam, March 1990).

⁵ For instance, Madame Girard « giving the oration » (131), Eloisa « harumphing OK's » after every few words she utters (120), Gus speaking in « code words » (172)... Each character has his or her specific voice.

⁶ See note 2.

⁷ The reader, for his greater enjoyment, comes to expect Malcolm's referring to his father in all circumstances, as do the exasperated characters. For instance: " 'It's girls we are talking about,' the midget proceeded. 'Well, you see, my father —' Malcolm began. 'I thought we would come to that,' the midget said" (113).

⁸ The Scriptures are appropriated. See the very free use of the theme of the Fall: Malcolm, Adam-like, has no mother: " 'You motherless bastard,' Gus complained (...). 'My father is the one who is missing!' Malcolm shouted to Gus through the wind" (171). He is expelled from a garden of Eden where he lived in innocence and prolonged youth: "(...) he heard from behind the closing of the tall gates of the horticultural gardens, and the snap as they locked themselves against him" (161). He falls into "marriage" and mortality... The writer is not "playing God," he is in earnest. See in *Eustace Chisholm and the Works* a similar affirmation: "God's got his lamp lit and is waiting for me" (ch. 4). God, here, is Eustace, another writer.

⁹ In French, the meaning of the bench as founding block of the written edifice could be summed up by the words "point d'encrage."