

Out Beyond Satire: James Purdy and Black Humor

Although the term was certainly not new (a book about French fiction exhibiting it had appeared in the 1930s) and had already been used to describe some of the writers included in the anthology, “black humor” as an apt designation for a kind of American fiction being written in the late 1950s and early 1960s arguably can be attributed to a collection of representative selections called, unsurprisingly, *Black Humor*, published in 1965 and edited by Bruce Jay Friedman (himself a black humorist). The book presents writers other than American, including Celine and J.P. Donleavy, presumably as a way of reinforcing Friedman’s own contention in his Foreword that black humor is not a recent or provincial phenomenon, even if the term itself primarily names a movement in recent American fiction. Nevertheless, Friedman’s book is now most notable for establishing “black humor” as the critical marker of choice for the increasingly prominent comic novels of the 60s that seemed to gravitate toward a particularly dark, unrelenting kind of comedy.

Certainly Friedman is not prescriptive in his definition of black humor. Indeed, he begins his Foreword by admitting he “would have more luck defining an elbow or a corned-beef sandwich.” Friedman does believe that the immediate context for the rise of black humor in fiction is the increasing extremity of social and cultural conditions in the United States in the

1960s (he is writing before the even more extreme developments of the later 1960s), agreeing with the idea that in modern America there is a “fading line between fantasy and reality.”

‘How does it feel,’ the TV boys ask Mrs. Malcolm X when her husband is assassinated. We send our planes off for nice, easygoing, not-too-tough bombing raids on North Vietnam. Sixteen U.S. officers in Germany fly through the night in Klansmen robes and are hauled before their commanding officer to be reprimanded for “poor judgment.” It confirms your belief that a new Jack Derbysque chord of absurdity has been struck in the land, that there is a new mutative style of behavior afoot, one that can only be dealt with by a new, one-foot-in-the-asylum style of fiction.

These conditions defeat the satirist, Friedman argues, so that the comic novelist “has had to sail into darker waters somewhere out beyond satire,” and this more adventurous kind of comedy is what Friedman takes to be “black humor.”

Friedman’s account of black humor as a mode “somewhere out beyond satire” seems to me a perfectly sound way to think about the “black humor fiction of the sixties,” as Max Schulz called it in his 1973 book of that title, as does Friedman’s sense that black humor fiction is ultimately something you recognize when you see it, not something that needs to be pinned down to the specimen board. Readers today, however, looking back at his collection from a historical perspective that regards Black Humor as a period-specific phenomenon that in hindsight can be delineated more specifically and authoritatively, are likely to find the selection of authors in *Black Humor* something less than definitive. Heller and Pynchon are certainly appropriate choices, since their work arguably still stands as quintessential black humor. Terry Southern is also correctly included, as is Donleavy, even if his fiction is actually atypical of Irish/British writers of the time. John Barth seems more of a stretch, although the excerpt Friedman chooses is from the one Barth novel that does plausibly exhibit black humor, *The Sot-Weed Factor*, while Nabokov fits even more uncomfortably, however much we do remember the disturbing humor in *Lolita*. The current reputations of Charles Simmons and John Rechy are sufficiently removed from the black humor of Heller and Pynchon as to make their appearance in the table of contents seem almost a curiosity, especially given the absence of both Vonnegut and Thomas Berger, perhaps the two most serious omissions from the anthology. And who is Conrad Knickerbocker?

Given the relaxed vigilance with which Friedman patrols the border separating black humor from other forms of adventurous new fiction, it is not exactly surprising to find James Purdy's name in the table of contents as well. Certainly we find in Purdy's early work—the first short stories, the novella *63: Dream Palace*, and *Malcolm*—an often grim humor that is dark and disturbing enough. *Malcolm* in particular could still credibly be classified as black humor. Still, Purdy's subsequent work clearly came to seem much less appropriately categorized as black humor per se (he is not mentioned in Schulz's book), as the term doesn't seem accurate at all in describing *The Nephew* or *Eustace Chisholm and Works*, and while *Cabot Wright Begins* is undeniably a comic novel, with a premise that in some ways could not be a more outrageous one in which to find "humor," the comedy in this novel does not really exist "somewhere out beyond satire" but is in fact unmistakably satirical in a straightforward kind of way that black humor usually avoids. The satire in this novel is unremittingly savage, but finally this reflects the intensity of Purdy's satirical purpose, which is to point out the folly of just about every social and cultural assumption governing postwar American life.

It is also understandable why Friedman chose the story representing Purdy in the anthology, "Don't Call Me by My Right Name." This story, if not exactly humorous, introduces an immediate incongruity the effects of which produce an escalating series of apparent misunderstandings. Mrs. Klein, formerly Lois McBane, can no longer conceal the fact that "She liked everything about her husband except his name and that had never pleased her."

Lois Klein, she often thought as she lay next to her husband in bed. It is not the name of a woman like myself. It does not reflect my character.

After drinking too much at a party, Lois confides to her husband that she would like him to change his name:

He did not understand. He thought that it was a remark she was making in drink which did not refer to anything concrete, just as once she had said to him, "I want you to begin by taking your head off regularly."

Mrs. Klein can never quite explain, either to her fellow partygoers or to herself, exactly why she doesn't want to be called by her right name, except that "If you all were called Mrs. Klein. . . you would not like to be Mrs. Klein either." Although his immediate response is to

disregard his wife's words as the product of drink, Mr. Klein turns very quickly from annoyance to anger and taking her drink from her, he "struck her not too gently over the mouth." That the story erupts suddenly into outright violence after initially establishing a faintly absurdist tone is perhaps what led Bruce Jay Friedman to include this story, as the turn of events is decidedly "black," although these days we are not likely to find either Lois Klein's ambivalence about her marital status or her husband's physical abuse to be appropriate sources of laughter. And indeed, it is not likely that Purdy wanted us ultimately to find the story's developments very funny, as Mr. Klein later hits Lois hard enough to send her to the pavement. "You have hurt something in my head, I think," she tells him, and the story concludes with Lois striking her husband back and cursing him.

Read in isolation in 1965, "Don't Call Me By My Right Name" might have seemed at the least to have a kinship with other works being classified as black humor, but read now in the context of Purdy's later fiction we can see more its consistencies with Purdy's body of work as a whole than any allegiance to the black humor movement. Lois Klein will certainly not be the last woman in Purdy's fiction to suffer from a man's lack of comprehension or concern for her emotional well-being (although few of those men will resort to fisticuffs), and Lois's grappling with her sense of identity is of course a common theme in Purdy's work, to be taken up again as soon as *Malcolm*. The shocking resort to violence will also be featured in some of Purdy's most notorious works as well, most graphically perhaps in *Eustace Chisholm and the Works* and *Narrow Rooms*. And surely Lois Klein joins that very long list of Purdy characters who know that things are "not quite right" with themselves and the world they inhabit but can't (in some cases won't) quite express what's wrong and don't exactly know what to do about it. Formally as well, "Don't Call Me by My Right Name" turns out to be quite typical of Purdy's approach to fiction, with its preference for dialogue and a generally restrained kind of narrative exposition, together working to emphasize showing over telling (a method that Purdy pursues in an even more direct way in his concurrent career as a playwright).

Probably even by 1965, discerning readers of his fiction realized that James Purdy could not easily be categorized or labeled, even if he seemed to share with other writers of the 60s a focus on extreme situations and states of being and an often disturbing vision. It might have been the case, however, that the very fact Purdy's work eludes available classifications helps in part to

explain why Purdy's work after the 1960s gradually but inexorably lost both readers and critical attention, to the point that by his final years it was justified to say he had been forgotten. If in the 60s and 70s being known as a black humorist was to some extent a way to retain some visibility as representative of a still significant literary movement, when Purdy's work lost salience as black humor, literally knowing how to read it became less certain. Since Purdy could not comfortably be called a postmodernist (while some of his fiction could loosely be called metafictional, including *Cabot Wright*, much of it could also plausibly qualify as straightforward realism and naturalism), or a magic realist, or a surrealist, or a minimalist, and since neither could Purdy's novels be identified as mainstream "literary fiction," his novels consequently had increasingly weaker appeal to book marketers and reviewers (in Purdy's last years, to publishers as well).

To say that James Purdy's fiction is ultimately truly singular, unclassifiable when considered against the "main currents" of postwar American fiction, is not to insist that his novels and stories cannot among themselves be described in ways that help us assimilate their broadest formal features or grouped together according to shared characteristics and assumptions. In my view, the most enlightening taxonomical scheme is the one proposed by Don Adams, by which he sorts Purdy's fiction into satires, allegorical tragedies, and pastoral romances ("James Purdy's Allegories of Love"). These categories encompass much of Purdy's work from the 1950s and 60s, with *63: Dream Palace* and *Eustace Chisholm and the Works* belonging to the tragedies, *Cabot Wright Begins* exemplifying satire, and *The Nephew* representing the first pastoral romance. (Adams discusses *In a Shallow Grave* as his representative romance, but in my view *The Nephew* has more than a little in common with this later novel.) An immediate proviso to accepting this typology is that almost all of Purdy's novels incorporate, to one degree or another, all of these modes—the tragedies laced with satire, the romances touched with tragedy, the satires extending to the reader, if not always to the characters, the chance for redemption that is offered to some of the characters in the romances. As Adams puts it, "Purdy's satires attempt to jolt us out of our daze"—being thus jolted an apt description of the condition to which, say, Alma arrives at the conclusion of *The Nephew*.

If this is indeed a useful perspective from which to consider Purdy's practice as a writer of fiction, surely his work in these three modes is altogether distinctive. If *Eustace Chisholm and*

the Works is a tragedy, its source lies in the violence of Jacobean drama rather than in Shakespeare, and readers could be forgiven if they register less Daniel Haws's role as a tragic hero whose inability to acknowledge his genuine feelings leads to his downfall than the horrific details of Daniel's victimization at the hand of Captain Stadger, himself pathologically self-destructive and in denial of his own nature. Perhaps these readers would find Stadger's actions a graphic demonstration of the consequences of self-denial, although it is likely to seem a bitter lesson that Daniel does not live to apply. *Eustace Chisholm* may draw on the narrative tradition bequeathed by Greek and Jacobean tragedy, but the way it is used to depict the human propensity to emotional degradation and sadism is pure Purdy. Similarly, readers may have trouble identifying *Cabot Wright Begins* as satire if they expect the kind of "prescriptive" satire that characterizes the mainstream satirical tradition, which asks us to laugh at human folly in the name of correcting it. Purdy ridicules his characters' folly, but doesn't encourage us to believe it can be corrected. As Susan Sontag wrote in her review of *Cabot Wright*, "the particularities of social satire [in the novel] are not so particular as they might seem, but rather the vehicle for a universal comic vision. It is a bitter comic vision, in which the flesh is a source of endless grotesqueries, in which happiness and disaster are equally arbitrary and equally unfelt."

Sontag's explication of Purdy's "universal comic vision" indicates that Purdy could at the time still be perceived as at least inhabiting the same literary neighborhood with the black humorists, who also could be said to express such a vision, although the "bitter" comedy of *Cabot Wright Begins* contrasts with the almost vaudevillian comedy of Heller, Pynchon, or Friedman. Still, the publication of *The Nephew* four years earlier should certainly have signaled that Purdy had no plans to settle in that neighborhood. "Pastoral romance" in some ways could not be farther removed from "black humor fiction," and *The Nephew* in fact may be, with the possible exception of *In a Shallow Grave*, Purdy's gentlest, most hopeful and forgiving novel. The trajectory of Alma Mason's story is toward greater self-understanding, exactly the state that for so many of Purdy's characters is impossible to reach. Alma comes to recognize her own illusions, although the strongest illusion she must learn to see through is the belief that it is possible to genuinely know another human being, even when (perhaps especially when) the "other" is someone like a family member with whom a close relationship is taken for granted. "There's so much we can never know about everything and everybody" Alma confesses near the end of the novel. Alma finally comes to accept this kind of ignorance about her missing-in-action

and presumed dead nephew, and if this a difficult acceptance, it does bring Alma a measure of equanimity by the novel's conclusion, one tinged with melancholy, to be sure, as Alma's enlightenment has come late, and she and her brother Boyd are left peacefully to contemplate the encroaching darkness (even while through the window catching the scent of "the faint delicious perfume of azaleas").

I can think of few, if any, other postwar American writers whose work ranges as freely, and as successfully, over all three of these literary modes as does James Purdy's fiction. What makes Purdy's fiction even more singular, however, is that despite the real tonal and formal differences among his novels, they are still of a piece, immediately recognizable as the work of James Purdy. Purdy's novels from *63: Dream Palace* to *Eustace Chisholm* introduce character types—the great lady, the orphan, the failed writer—that will recur throughout his fiction, introducing as well the alternating setting in the predatory city and the deceptively placid countryside, which harbors its own secrets and unleashes its own tempests, and the alternation between past and present (with the former increasingly prominent in the later work). Regardless of setting, the characters suffer from the effects of isolation and abandonment, are driven by needs that are felt but can't be acknowledged or expressed, the latter because language itself is unable to articulate those needs, serving as much to hinder self-comprehension as encourage it and stifling communication between people as much as enabling it. These inadequacies of language (or at least the habitual abuse of it) are literally enacted in the failed writers and failed writing depicted in *The Nephew*, *Cabot Wright Begins*, and *Eustace Chisholm and the Works*, the role of which in linking these novels despite their other differences is examined closely by Tony Tanner in his book, *City of Words*.

Perhaps the continuities in Purdy's work are easier to see in retrospect, or required a contemporaneous critic especially attuned to Purdy's methods. Certainly the apparently quite radical shift represented by *Eustace Chisholm and the Works* as the follow-up to *Cabot Wright Begins*—shifts in mode (satire to allegorical tragedy), setting (from present-day New York to depression-era Chicago), milieu (from the affluent classes and trendy New York publishing to the seedy side of town and its less respectable residents), and, most of all, tenor (from outrageous satirical comedy to a much more muted humor that gradually edges into grim realism and ultimately outright horror) could have seemed so radical—as *Cabot Wright* was a radical shift

from *The Nephew*—that some readers and critics were led to conclude that Purdy was a mercurial or inconsistent writer whose moves were too elusive to anticipate. The reviewer for the *Saturday Review* confessed his expectations had been set by *Malcolm* and *The Nephew* and that “where we have once found it we want and expect it again and again,” finding the “rare experience” he was after in neither *Cabot Wright* nor *Eustace Chisholm*. Other reviewers echoed the preference for the earlier books, particularly *The Nephew*, judging *Eustace Chisholm* “too baroque” in comparison.

Not all of the reviews were negative, but all of them took note of the fact that this was Purdy’s most direct and extended treatment of homosexuality to date. Some of the responses to this aspect of the novel are now quite startling, although perhaps they shouldn’t be. Francis Hope, reviewing the novel in the *TLS*, quotes a line, “Amos adjusted the folds of his scrotum with deliberate ostentation,” immediately remarking that this line “might be an allegory of his creator’s literary method.” In his 1975 Twayne book on Purdy, which generally expresses admiration for Purdy’s work, Henry Chupak opines that “Publicity in the last few years has thrown much light on homosexuality and on the attendant circumstances and conditions from which it evolves. And, while thoughtful citizens may become more understanding and more aware of this sexual phenomenon, we query whether a novel almost totally involved with this subject is not inflating an aspect of human existence that is at best only an abnormal sexual experience.” It would seem that by 1975 Chupak realized he could not taunt Purdy in quite so brazenly a homophobic way as the *TLS* reviewer, but instead frames his objection as an aesthetic one, even though his way of voicing it still can’t seem to avoid the homophobic cultural assumptions of the time: “So distorted are the sexual relationships in the novel that never once is a normal love affair between a man and a woman portrayed as it might have been to serve as a contrast.”

This sort of queasiness about the now forthright portrayal of homosexual characters in his fiction no doubt contributed to the increasingly restricted coverage of new work by Purdy after *Eustace Chisholm and the Works*. Unfortunately, while it might have been expected that Purdy would receive added attention as a “gay writer” from gay-themed and gay-friendly publications, Purdy’s own refusal to identify himself as a gay writer, along with the tendency of gay characters in his fiction to have the same flaws and weaknesses as other human beings, and to sometimes

behave quite badly indeed, meant that his work did not exactly gain the approval of what would become the gay literary establishment and only recently has really received attention from gay and lesbian studies scholars. As Purdy's last editor wrote in *Lambda Literary* last December, "his books were sometimes considered too queer for straight people but not queer enough for gay people." Purdy coveted his status as an outsider, but he must have known that so steadfastly pursuing such an uncompromising vision for so long was going to leave his work far enough outside all official measures of acceptability that seeing it ignored and neglected was almost inevitable. If not all of Purdy's fiction after the 60s would focus on "abnormal sexual experience," it already had a sufficient reputation for emphasizing the perceived "abnormal" (not just regarding gay people) that this continued to be the primary legacy of Purdy's work of the 1960s, however inadequate such a perception is in appreciating the fictional world he creates. If "black humor" is finally not exactly true to the unsettling character of that world, to describe it as merely concerned with the aberrant or the freakish is not really to recognize it at all.

If I were teaching a course on "black humor fiction of the sixties," I would probably include *Malcolm* on my syllabus. Although Adams classifies it as a satire, it does nevertheless seem to me that here Purdy is working "somewhere out beyond satire." The satirical element in this novel is incidental to the thoroughly caustic portrayal of the characters, each of whom is introduced as someone who might help Malcolm find his "place" in the world in which he is the eternal orphan, but instead through their self-involved, predatory behavior exemplify why there can be no place in their world for one as radically innocent as Malcolm, except as prey. Stories of innocence lost depict innocence confronting the inherent corruptions of the world of human experience, but in *Malcolm* the corruption is pervasive, inflicted on Malcolm by the very people who would be providing him guidance in his journey of self-discovery. For all their surface eccentricities, none of these characters are portrayed as intrinsically evil, which would reduce the narrative to melodrama. They are, sadly, all-too-human.

The complicating factor in considering *Malcolm* is that if Malcolm is indeed on a journey of self-discovery, it is not finally certain that he truly has a self to discover. Malcolm is sufficiently a cipher that it is difficult to feel either pity for him or anger at him as his picaresque story unfolds and he fails to find either meaning or contentment in the relationships formed with the people he meets. Purdy deliberately induces this effect, putting us at a distance from a

character whose ultimate fate thus seems quite horrifying to be sure, but in another way the episodes chronicling Malcolm's progression toward his fate are also farcical, especially in retrospect. Malcolm is presented to us as a blank slate on which the world might write, but in the way James Purdy appears to refrain from inscribing very deeply on that slate himself, we are left unsure whether the world has simply defaced it with its chaotic script, or whether the slate actually remains blank, because finally it resists all efforts to fill it.