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THE CITY AS METAPHOR IN SELECTED NOVELS  
OF JAMES PURDY AND SAUL BELLOW

by

Yashoda Nandan Singh

A Dissertation Submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School  
of Loyola University of Chicago in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

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1979

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## VITA

The author, Yashoda Nandan Singh, is the son of Krishna Nandan Singh and Rasheshwari Singh. He was born June 6, 1943, in Raghapur Deorhi, Bihar, India.

His elementary and secondary education were obtained at St. Xavier's in Patna, India, where he was graduated in 1960.

In July, 1960, he entered St. Stephen's College in Delhi, India, where he received the degree of Bachelor of Arts, cum laude, in June of 1963. In June, 1965, he was awarded the Master of Arts in English.

Between January, 1966, and December, 1972, he taught English in the Humanities Division of the Indian Institute of Technology, New Delhi.

In 1973, he was granted an assistantship in English at Loyola University of Chicago. He was awarded a University Dissertation Fellowship for 1976-77. Since September, 1976, he has been an instructor in the English Department at Bowling Green State University, Bowling Green, Ohio, where he and his wife, Bibha Singh, are currently living.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Modern criticism, says Mark Schorer,

has shown us that to speak of content as such is not to speak of art at all, but of experience; and that it is only when we speak of the achieved content, the form, the work of art as a work of art, that we speak as critics. The difference between content, or experience, and achieved content, or art, is technique. . . . The novel is still read as though . . . technique were not a primary but supplementary element . . . Or technique is thought of in blunter terms . . . as such relatively obvious matters as the arrangement of events to create plot, of suspense and climax; or as the means of revealing character motivation, relationship, and development; or as the use of point of view, but point of view as some arbitrary device for the heightening of dramatic interest through the narrowing or broadening of perspective upon the material, rather than as a means toward the positive definition of theme. As for the resources of language, these, somehow, we almost never think of as a part of the technique of fiction--language as used to create a certain texture and tone which in themselves state and define themes and meaning . . .<sup>1</sup>

I quote Schorer at some length because the motivation for writing this dissertation came initially from an awareness that there was considerably less critical interest in the novelist's technique and use of language to explore and define his vision of the world than in his themes or content, particularly in regard to Bellow and Purdy. By "vision of the world" I mean a writer's mode of seeing, conceiving, and ordering experiential reality or evaluation of the quality of life. Criticism almost entirely has concentrated on subjects or themes, combined, at times, with an examination of plot structure (mainly as a

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<sup>1</sup>Mark Schorer, "Technique as Discovery," in The Theory of the Novel, ed. Philip Stevick (New York: The Free Press, 1967; rpt. from the Hudson Review I, 1948), p. 66.

vehicle of character) and remarks about "style" and imagery.

Even though for over a hundred years now the city has been "the controlling center of economic, political, and cultural life that draws the most remote parts of the world into its orbit,"<sup>2</sup> and has offered literary artists ~~with~~ a rich source of material, most critics of the novel have never considered the urban novel as a separate literary genre, and the fictional city-environment, not surprisingly, has received scant attention. Critics have been conscious of the urban setting only because the characters are shown to be struggling against the external forces around them. Until about the middle of the twentieth century the American city novel generally had for its protagonist a migrant from a rural area, a young man or woman who experienced the city's excitement and freedom as well as its corruption.<sup>3</sup> The protagonist held the center of the fictional stage, and, if we are to believe the critics, the writer's technique was important only insofar as it revealed character motivation and development. The urban setting was seen as an unchanging, inimical, or indifferent force to be overcome by the hero.

Furthermore, even though we are repeatedly told by Gelfant, Weimer, and others that the city in the fictions of contemporary novelists such as Bellow and Purdy is a metaphor for the human condition, we seldom find analyses of how the city in contemporary novels acts as

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<sup>2</sup>Louis Wirth, "Urbanism as a Way of Life," in Cities and Society, ed. Paul K. Hatt and Albert J. Reiss, Jr. (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1957), p. 46.

<sup>3</sup>Blanche H. Gelfant, The American City Novel (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1954), pp. 64, 120-22; Alan H. Rose, "Sin and the City; The Uses of Disorder in the Urban Novel," Centennial Review 16 (1972): 203-4.

a reality metaphor.<sup>4</sup> It is erroneously assumed that the fictional city "stands for" reality or the human condition because it reveals, in realistic terms, what evils the outside world shares with those of the fictional city; that is, the depiction of the city is literal and acquires "metaphoric" or symbolic" force by virtue of the recurrence of certain types of characters, events, scenes, and images. In an effort to redress the imbalance, I have attempted in this dissertation to explore and define the urban vision of Bellow and Purdy by examining their fictional technique, especially their use of language, and to determine precisely how the fictional city acts as a reality metaphor.

City fiction is not new in American literature, having appeared since the 1780's when many novels were published describing life in Philadelphia, Boston, and New York. It was, however, only in the late 1880's and 1890's that the rapid, unprecedented growth of American cities led to the publication of a great number of significant urban novels such as those by William Dean Howells, Stephen Crane, and Hamlin Garland.<sup>5</sup> Twentieth-century literature is said to belong to the city,

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<sup>4</sup>Gelfant, p. 119; David R. Weimer, The City as Metaphor (New York: Random House, 1966), p. 6; Lucy Frost, "Violence in the Eternal City: 'Catch-22' as a Critique of American Culture," Meanjin Quarterly 30 (1971): 447-53 passim; David D. Anderson, "Chicago as Metaphor," Great Lakes Review 1 (Summer 1974): 3-15 passim; Prescott S. Nichols, "Paris as Subjectivity in Sartre's Roads to Freedom," Modern Fiction Studies 24 (Spring 1978): 3-21 passim; Marilyn S. Fries, "The City as Metaphor for the Human Condition: Alfred Döblin's Berlin Alexanderplatz (1929)," Modern Fiction Studies 24 (Spring 1978): 41-64 passim; Hana Wirth-Nesher, "The Modern Jewish Novel and the City: Franz Kafka, Henry Roth, and Amos Oz," Modern Fiction Studies 24 (Spring 1978): 91-109 passim.

<sup>5</sup>George A. Dunlap, The City in the American Novel, 1789-1900 (New York: Russell and Russell, Inc., 1965), pp. 7-9.



for the city, in the words of Gelfant, "epitomizes the twentieth-century and focalizes the main themes of twentieth-century life."<sup>6</sup>

If the urban novel itself is old, criticism of the urban novel is relatively new.<sup>7</sup> An examination of the literature reveals that American writers have held two diametrically opposed visions of the city, which Eugene Arden, Gelfant, Irving Howe, and others variously label as, on the one hand, "optimistic," "romantic," or "pastoral," and on the other hand as "pessimistic," "apocalyptic," or "evil." Arden, for example, says apropos the New York novel that he found two chief types, one which celebrated the city and the other which condemned it.<sup>8</sup> Of the two visions the dominant vision of the city is evil,<sup>9</sup> the product of a

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<sup>6</sup>Gelfant, p. 442.

<sup>7</sup>Before George A. Dunlap wrote his dissertation in 1934, there were only two "studies" of the urban novel: Arthur B. Maurice's New York in Fiction (1901) and Charles Hemstreet's Literary New York (1903), neither of which is a critical work. They deal with the city of New York and its literary associations.

<sup>8</sup>Eugene Arden, "The New York Novel: A Study in Urban Fiction" (Ph.D. dissertation, the Ohio State University Press, 1953), p. 2. See also Gelfant, p. 228. She divides recent urban fiction into the novel of "sentiment" and the novel of "violence." Robert E. Fleming, "The Chicago Naturalistic Novel: 1930-1966" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Illinois, Urbana, 1967), pp. 1-2. Fleming divides the Chicago novels between 1930 and 1966 into the "naturalistic" and the "unrealistic success story." Irving Howe, "The City in Literature," in his The Critical Point on Literature and Culture (New York: Horizon Press, 1973), p. 52; Adrienne Siegel, "When Cities Were Fun: The Image of the American City in Popular Books, 1840-1870," Journal of Popular Culture 9 (Winter 1975): 573.

<sup>9</sup>Critics are nearly unanimous in their opinion that the dominant vision of the American city is evil. See Dunlap, p. 8; Gelfant, pp. 21-4; Leo Marx, The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), pp. 364-68; Fleming, p. 1; Howe, p. 52; Morton White and Lucia White, The Intellectual Versus the City (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1962), p. 1; John H. Raleigh, "The Novel and the City: England

deep-seated rural or pastoral bias of American writers and thinkers going back to the founding fathers.<sup>10</sup> While rural life represented peace, harmony, and close-knit family, social, and religious life, the city in the opinion of these writers and thinkers was infernal, as evidenced by its physical squalor and poverty, its alcoholism, its violence and organized crime, its political corruption, its prostitution, its materialism, greed, ambition, and the breakdown of family, communal and religious bonds. The innocent hero who arrived in the city, believing it to be "a land of milk and honey," soon discovered its harsh realities. He had to struggle to overcome great obstacles and in the process was corrupted and forced to compromise. More often than not, he was defeated by the inhuman environment and forced to withdraw. His career ended in either death or failure.

Arden, Gelfant, and others hold that novels which depicted the city as evil were invariably superior to those which depicted the city as exciting, full of promise and opportunity; city fiction in the hands of both the realists and the naturalists presented only the horrors of urban life, with its chaos, hectic pace, and crime.<sup>11</sup>

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and America in the Nineteenth Century," Victorian Studies 11 (1968); 319; Robert J. Nadon, "Urban Values in Recent American Fiction: A Study of the City in the Fiction of Bellow, Updike, Roth, Malamud, and Mailer" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Minnesota, 1969), Chap. 1; Rose, pp. 203-04.

<sup>10</sup>White and White, p. 1; Arden, p. 16.

<sup>11</sup>Arden, p. 2; Gelfant, p. 230; Fleming, p. 2; Raleigh, p. 328. Raleigh makes the perceptive observation that the novel which presents the city as evil is necessarily superior because "literature as a human instrument must react much more sensitively to inhumanity than the good."

Recent critics have noticed yet another attitude toward the city in American fiction, describing this vision as "ambivalent." Speaking of the Chicago writers of the post-1880 period, Sarah Cohen, for example, observes that "The corruption and dynamism of Chicago both fascinated and repelled them."<sup>12</sup> Discussing the urban landscape in Sister Carrie, Guy A. Szuberla says that Dreiser found that

Chicago's skyscraper architecture and its long, sweeping vistas provoked a feeling that . . . might best be called the urban or technological sublime . . . To Dreiser this sense of the infinite in the city streets and space offered a glimpse of a void, the meaninglessness of urban life, and alternately, sometimes simultaneously, a vision of the perfect harmony of man and this new machine-made environment.<sup>13</sup>

In Nadon's opinion, writers like Bellow and Mailer move toward an affirmation of the city and accommodation with its realities in their occasional portrayal of the city in all its "variety, excitement, and power," but their cityscapes "are predominantly negative, containing images of filth, debris, noise, and heat that contribute to a symbolic view of the city as either a wasteland or inferno."<sup>14</sup>

The bulk of criticism on the urban novelists, including that on Bellow and Purdy, is a mixture of thematic, sociological, historical, and philosophical analyses. These analyses generally show the urban setting as a static environment against which protagonists either succeed or fail.<sup>15</sup> Even the analysis of a novel in terms of techniques such

<sup>12</sup>Sarah B. Cohen, "Saul Bellow's Chicago," Modern Fiction Studies 24 (Spring 1978): 140.

<sup>13</sup>Guy A. Szuberla, "Dreiser at the World's Fair: The City Without Limits," Modern Fiction Studies 23 (Autumn 1977): 371.

<sup>14</sup>Nadon, p. 406.

<sup>15</sup>Raleigh, p. 1.

as plot structure is invariably done in terms of the "encounter-withdrawal" progress of the hero. Very little has been said about the vision of the city per se in the novels of Bellow and Purdy, and whatever criticism there is about their urban vision suffers from a paucity of detail. Critics have made broad generalizations unsupported by any kind of close analysis.

The most frequent comment made about Bellow's urban vision is that the city is vividly and naturalistically rendered. Gilbert M. Porter, for instance, dismisses the subject of Bellow's urban vision by saying that in Bellow's novels we find "vivid renderings of city life," though behind the realism lies a descriptive level that is "clearly demonic."<sup>16</sup> Robert R. Dutton observes that in Bellow's world "society is rendered in an almost naturalistic manner . . . [an] unchanging, indifferent, yet powerful background against which his protagonists in all of their sensitive awareness, their vitality, their frustrating absurdities, are seen."<sup>17</sup> Later he clarifies: "Bellow sees nothing inherently evil about the city."<sup>18</sup> Keith Michael Opdahl, Tony Tanner, Yves LePellec, and Marcus Klein make similar pronouncements.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup>Gilbert M. Porter, Whence the Power? The Artistry and Humanity of Saul Bellow (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1974), p. 50.

<sup>17</sup>Robert R. Dutton, Saul Bellow (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1971), p. 13.

<sup>18</sup>Dutton, p. 153.

<sup>19</sup>Keith M. Opdahl, The Novels of Saul Bellow: An Introduction (University Park and London: The Pennsylvania University Press, 1967), p. 81; Tony Tanner, Saul Bellow (New York: Barnes and Noble, Inc., 1965), p. 30; Yves LePellec, "New York in Summer: Its Symbolical Function in The Victim," Caliban 8 (1969), pp. 101-10 passim; Marcus Klein,

It is generally acknowledged that Bellow's city is a metaphor for reality or the modern human condition. Dutton, for example, says of Sammler's Planet that

Bellow's settings are consistently symbolic . . . New York is a mad city, filled with hippies, muggings, mini-skirts, wild business enterprises, obscenities, riots, rallies, and determined sexual somersaults. Yet, we are not too many pages into the novel before it becomes apparent that New York is only a symbol for a world-wide condition.<sup>20</sup>

LePellec believes that Bellow has transplanted New York from its "occidental setting to a new context of world geography and civilization."<sup>21</sup> Nadon observes that

Bellow is the only one who raises the city to the level of symbol. The city seems to stand for reality itself. In addition, it is also society, the modern world, and a reflection of the modern human condition.<sup>22</sup>

Even less attention has been paid to Purdy's vision of the city than to Bellow's. Those who have paid some attention see Purdy's urban vision as hellish or nihilistic.<sup>23</sup> There is scarcely any extended

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After Alienation: American Novels in Mid-Century (Cleveland and New York: The World Publishing Co., 1962), p. 47.

<sup>20</sup>Dutton, p. 156.

<sup>21</sup>LePellec, p. 103.

<sup>22</sup>Nadon, pp. 406-07.

<sup>23</sup>When critics comment on Purdy's vision they make no distinction between his urban vision and non-urban vision. In "James Purdy's Fictions: The Quality of Despair," Critique 4 (Spring 1963): 107, Saul Maloff says that Purdy's world evolves out of "an exacerbated sense of life as grotesque and painful, anguished, incoherent, void--almost entirely--of meaning, save for the meanings art may be able to wrest from it." See also Paul Herr, "The Small, Sad World of James Purdy," in Recent American Fiction: Some Critical Views, ed. Joseph J. Waldmeir (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1963), p. 246; Sidney Finkelstein, Existentialism and Alienation in American Literature (New York: International Publishers, 1965), p. 248; Thomas M. Lorch, "Purdy's Malcolm: A Unique Vision of Radical Emptiness," Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature 6 (Summer 1965): 204.

analysis of Purdy's technique or language. Only Tony Tanner has examined Purdy's style as an effort to define his vision of the world. In his "Introduction" to Purdy's works, Tanner speaks of the incongruity or dissonance between the speech of the characters and their gestures, facial expressions, movements, and feelings, pointing out particularly their use of clichés expressive of an "emotionally depleted" age.<sup>24</sup> Paul Herr notes the "rigorous exclusion and distortion" of Purdy's descriptions;<sup>25</sup> Lorch notes the "stylized quality" of his characters' actions,<sup>26</sup> and McNamara observes the "cartoon-like surreality" of Purdy's scenes.<sup>27</sup>

The conclusion is inescapable: the urban vision of Bellow and Purdy or the technique they use to create or define that vision has received very little attention.<sup>28</sup> The only adequate treatment of the

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<sup>24</sup>Tony Tanner, "Introduction" to James Purdy's Color of Darkness and Malcolm: Eleven Stories, one Novella, and a Novel (Garden City: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1974), pp. 9-11.

<sup>25</sup>Herr, p. 247.

<sup>26</sup>Lorch, p. 212.

<sup>27</sup>Eugene McNamara, "The Post-Modern American Novel," Queen's Quarterly 69 (Summer 1962): 273.

<sup>28</sup>There have been two extended studies of Bellow's imagery: Irving Malin's Saul Bellow's Fiction (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1969), Chap. 4, and LePellec's "New York in Summer: Its Symbolical Function in The Victim." Malin catalogs the dominant images in Bellow's fictions, but a cursory examination of his study reveals that the imagery is character or theme centered. It has only a tangential relationship to the city-setting. For example, Malin says that Bellow uses the image of "weight" to express the pains of existence. In Dangling Man, Iva "supports" Joseph; for Joseph, however, life continues to be "a loathesome burden." LePellec says apropos The Victim that New York as an infernal chaos is suggested by images of glaring sun, the heat, the juxtaposition of red, black, and white, "cannibalistic" things or "the jungle." LePellec's analysis of imagery once again is character-centered. The analysis is important insofar as "the climatic element" is "contrapuntal to the feelings of the hero."

city as a metaphor is the study by David R. Weimer who advances the thesis that the cities imagined by American writers are "not historical, sociological, or epistemological but metaphoric."<sup>29</sup> But, unfortunately, Weimer's study brings us only to the end of the second World War, though in his epilogue he suggests that Bellow's city should be looked at symbolically.

In chapter four of my dissertation I have argued that the city in the fictions of Purdy and Bellow acts as a metaphor for the contemporary human condition. It is important, therefore, to describe the sense in which I use the term metaphor and how precisely the fictional city acts as a reality metaphor.

As David Weimer has noted, the fictional or literary city is primarily an imaginative entity even though it may bear certain physical resemblances to the phenomenal city. In other words, the city in fiction is not intended to be reportorial or literal; it is a writer's perception or an imaginative portrayal.<sup>30</sup> Viewed as an imaginative entity, the literal city "stands for" something other than itself; that is, it is metaphoric.

What a metaphor is and how it works or achieves its effect has been discussed since Aristotle. Basically, however, the definition of a metaphor has remained the same: it is an implied analogy where we identify one object with another and ascribe to the first one or more of the qualities of the second or invest the first with emotional or

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<sup>29</sup>Weimer, p. 6. See also Leo Marx, "Pastoral Ideals and City Troubles," Journal of General Education 20 (1968): 270.

<sup>30</sup>Weimer, p. 2.

imaginative qualities associated with the second. Without going into the Classical-Romantic debate on whether a metaphor is purely ornamental or is integral to our thought processes, let me turn to the theory of metaphor that has, in my view, the greatest applicability to an analysis of fiction, namely, that of I. A. Richards.

Richards espouses the modern view that metaphor is not ornamental or a deviation from the normal use of language but the "omnipresent principle" of language and thought.<sup>31</sup> He claims that "When we use a metaphor we have two thoughts of different things active together and supplied by a single word, or phrase, whose meaning is a resultant of their interaction."<sup>32</sup> Richards then introduces two technical terms to distinguish the two thoughts: vehicle and tenor. Such a distinction is advantageous in any discussion of literary metaphor, because, as Richards suggests, there need not be any one-to-one correspondence between vehicle and tenor, especially in terms of "copies or duplicates of sense perceptions."<sup>33</sup> Furthermore, just as a word or phrase may be both literal and metaphoric simultaneously (for instance, the word "leg" in the expression "man with a wooden leg"), the vehicle may be both, too, but not necessarily. In fact, the interaction between vehicle and tenor, according to Richards, does not work through resemblances alone but depends upon other relations such as some common attitude we may take toward them both, or even disparities.

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<sup>31</sup>Ivor A. Richards, The Philosophy of Rhetoric (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), p. 90.

<sup>32</sup>Richards, p. 93.

<sup>33</sup>Richards, p. 98.



Richards supports his contention that a metaphor may work through a common attitude we take toward its component parts by pointing to metaphors like "giddy brink," "jovial wine," and "daring wound," in which the adjectives "cannot be made to signify any quality of the substantives to which they are joined . . ." And yet, they work because the poet can "at pleasure . . . bestow attributes upon a subject to which they do not belong."<sup>34</sup> To demonstrate the truth of his observation that metaphors work equally through disparities, Richards uses lines from Hamlet: "What should such fellows as I do crawling between earth and heaven?" Richards says:

When Hamlet uses the word crawling its force comes not only from whatever resemblances to vermin it brings in but at least equally from the differences that resist and control the influences of their resemblances. The implication there is that man should not so crawl.<sup>35</sup>

To avoid the dangers of paraphrasing a work of fiction or treating it as a simile, one valid way of looking at the literary city is to consider it (using Richards' terms) one part of the metaphor, the vehicle or figure, which reveals the principal subject--the tenor--namely, the human condition. In other words, one may look upon the entire portrayal of the city, inclusive of the resemblances and the disparities, as constituting the vehicle that interacts with the tenor, the experiential reality of twentieth-century life, to give us the writer's vision of the world.

In the chapters that follow I have tried to reveal the urban visions of Purdy and Bellow by examining their fictional techniques,

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<sup>34</sup>Richards, pp. 106-07.

<sup>35</sup>Richards, p. 127.

including style. We find that Purdy evokes or creates a hellish vision of life in the modern city, that his fictional city is a metaphor for the evil reality he sees in contemporary life. I also suggest that Purdy is a satirist who castigates the world but at the same time points toward those positive human values that would help to alleviate the misery of our lives such as compassion, friendship, loyalty, courage, and the open expression of feelings.

Bellow's vision of life as revealed through the four novels I have analyzed--Dangling Man, The Adventures of Augie March, Seize the Day, and Humboldt's Gift--is ambivalently optimistic. Even though Bellow's vision of the modern American city may be dark, as so many critics have said, an analysis of his language reveals the city environment to be paradoxically one of beauty, vitality, and energy. Bellow transmutes the ugliness and brutality of the city into beauty by the exuberant language in which he describes the experiences of the protagonist. Bellow thus has a double vision of the city. As in Purdy, the fictional city is a metaphor for the contemporary world, a complex, ambiguous reality in constant flux. In this sense Bellow affirms life and proves an optimist.

My choice of these two city writers, Purdy and Bellow, was influenced by several considerations. First, both Purdy and Bellow are important contemporary American novelists, although Bellow is influential while Purdy is neglected by the public. The principal setting of all of Bellow's novels, except Henderson the Rain King (1959), is the modern American city. Bellow's urban settings are vividly rendered, and are, consequently, strongly felt as "a physical place" and atmosphere.

Bellow himself, having been born and raised in a modern city, acknowledges the effect of the city context on his fiction. Like him, all his protagonists are city-born and bred and so view the city from the inside, as it were.

Five of Purdy's novels have urban settings, and even though we may not be able to identify the cities in two of them--63: Dream Palace and Malcolm--the urban landscape and atmosphere are unmistakable. Although Bellow and Purdy write about the same two cities, New York and Chicago, their visions of life or the city, as I have suggested, are diametrically opposed. Furthermore, their technique is different, almost antithetical, for Purdy achieves his effects through surrealism while Bellow is a realist. One portrays the city in distorted, exaggerated, and exclusive terms; the other portrays it using a wealth of verisimilar or sensuous surface detail, balance, and inclusiveness.

While I have chosen to examine all of the five novels of Purdy which have urban settings, I am compelled by certain considerations to select only four of Bellow's novels for analysis. Dangling Man (1944) is Bellow's first novel; Augie March was published a decade later, and this novel, along with Seize the Day (1956), may be said to mark the mid-point of Bellow's development as a novelist; and Humboldt's Gift (1975) is his most recent work. The four novels represent important stages of his career, but are also successful in their own right. The modern city as background or setting emerges most strongly in these novels, that is, we are shown much more of the urban environment in these than in others. The protagonist in each of these novels is conscious of the environment and reacts against it. The city that

exists "out there" is of considerable interest in itself and does not merely serve as a colorful or incidental background to an intense personal drama as in Herzog. It must be admitted that the city environment has a strong presence in both The Victim and Sammler's Planet. Even though in all of Bellow's novels the city is filtered through a central consciousness, in The Victim it is almost in its entirety the construct or projection of a tortured consciousness. Also, the relationship between the environment and the mental condition of the protagonist has been discussed extensively. Sammler's Planet is marred by didacticism, and the narrative revolves around the theft of an Indian scientist's manuscript and its eventual recovery, something unrelated to the city environment as such.

## CHAPTER II

### THE CITY IN PURDY'S FICTION

Like Saul Bellow, Norman Mailer and James Baldwin, James Purdy uses the modern city as a setting for many of his novels. But perhaps because of the strangeness of his technique and his grotesque or non-realistic portrayal of the city and its life, he is generally ignored in any discussion of urban fiction even though he has written five novels which use the modern city as background. The locale for all of Purdy's city novels--63: Dream Palace (1956), Malcolm (1959), Cabot Wright Begins (1964), Eustace Chisholm and The Works (1967), and I Am Elijah Thrush (1972)--is either Chicago or New York, or both, as in Cabot Wright. The action in these novels sometimes moves out of the city into country houses or a roadside tavern but on only two occasions does an important part of the action take place in a non-urban setting. An essential incident of Eustace Chisholm is set in an army camp in Mississippi, and an illuminating conversation in the same novel between a mother and her friend takes place in a small town near Cobden, Illinois.

63: Dream Palace is set in a slum. Though there is no clear evidence in the text itself, one critic thinks the setting is Chicago.<sup>1</sup> The novel's central character is Fenton Riddleway, a handsome, orphaned

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<sup>1</sup>Gerald Rosen, "James Purdy's World of Black Humor" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 1969), p. 4. Rosen says it can be established from Purdy's liner notes for his recording of the novel (Spoken Arts, JP-4, 1968) that the city is indeed Chicago.

teenager from West Virginia, who arrives in Chicago in search of work and moves into a condemned, deserted rooming-house on 63rd Street. With him is his younger brother, Claire [Clair > Fr. Clear therefore innocent], who is dying. While wandering one evening through a dimly-lit and deserted park (in all probability, Jackson Park) Fenton comes across an unsuccessful writer by the name of Cratty Parkhearst who is trying to escape his nightmarish married life but is also in search of new material for his books. They strike up a friendship immediately, and Parkhearst volunteers to introduce Fenton to a rich widow who will help him. For a moment Fenton is suspicious of Parkhearst, fearing he will be used, but the latter is quick to reassure him. Before they visit the widow Grainger, Fenton spends his time aimlessly wandering through empty streets, drinking in seedy taverns and watching movies in a dingy, foul-smelling all night theater, feeling as empty and "stopped inside" himself as the rooming house on 63rd Street. Fenton's first sight of Grainger is ominous. He finds her slouching in a huge chair as though she were dead. The mansion itself is immense, dark, and deathly. After a short space of time charged with hostility, Grainger greets Fenton in her usual imperious voice and takes possession of him at once. We learn that Grainger's life, since the death of her husband whom she did not love, has been one long drinking bout. Parkhearst instinctively knows that he has lost Fenton to the imperious, castrating Grainger, and Fenton in turn becomes aware that Parkhearst is sexually attracted to him.

While wandering through the streets next day, Fenton meets with a young, handsome drug-peddler who seeks his protection and company at a

tent production of Othello near 63rd Street. Bruno Korsawski, the handsome stranger, introduces him to Hayden Banks, a decadent artist, who plays the title role in Othello. After the performance they all meet in Banks' marijuana-smoke filled apartment where Bruno attempts to seduce Fenton. There ensues a scuffle and Fenton later recalls running away. That same night Fenton chokes his brother to death. For a good many days he wanders all over the city, riding street cars, drinking in taverns, listening to fanatics and revivalists at street corners, and finally decides to hide the corpse of his brother in a rotten cedar chest in the dark, rat-infested attic of the rooming house.

From the very beginning Fenton has been aware of Claire's strong moral aversion to Parkhearst and Grainger, and Claire repeatedly urges his brother to return to West Virginia. Fenton, on the other hand, sees his patron-protégé relationship with Grainger as the beginning of a new life, and Claire as a hindrance to its realization. Consequently, he murders him.

Sidney Finkelstein is of the opinion that the setting of Malcolm is New York.<sup>2</sup> The text of Malcolm itself gives us no clue to its setting though it states that Melba, a nightclub performer in her late twenties, and Malcolm, a fifteen-year-old orphan, are married in Chicago.<sup>3</sup> Unlike Purdy's other novels where the city is realistically mapped, Malcolm presents the city with only indeterminate, isolated

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<sup>2</sup>Finkelstein, p. 248.

<sup>3</sup>James Purdy, Color of Darkness & Malcolm: Eleven Stories, One Novella, and a Novel (New York: Doubleday & Co., Inc., 1974), p. 366. All page references to 63: Dream Palace and Malcolm are to this edition.

places. The narrative opens with Malcolm sitting quietly on a bench in front of a palatial hotel, "waiting" for the return of his "missing" father. Mr. Cox, an astrologer, to whom he gives this piece of information, suggests that instead of wasting his time he should experience life by meeting people. Cox promises to provide Malcolm with several addresses. On his advice Malcolm first goes to meet Estel Blanc, a Negro undertaker, and his white singer-wife, Cora Naldi, in their tomb-like Victorian house. As soon as Blanc learns Malcolm's predicament he sends him away. Next Malcolm visits the seedy apartment of a couple on the verge of divorce. Kermit, the husband, is a midget and an unsuccessful artist, and his wife, Laureen, is a stenographer who is forced by poverty to prostitute herself. The third address from Cox directs Malcolm to the chateau of the Girards. Madame Girard, an imperious and loveless figure like Grainger, is preparing to make a settlement with her timid husband when Malcolm arrives. She advises Malcolm to forget Cox and attach himself to her.

Subsequently, Malcolm goes to meet another unsuccessful and decadent artist couple. Eloisa is a painter and her ex-convict husband, Jerome, a third-rate writer who, like Kermit, is a homosexual. Eloisa decides to draw a portrait of Malcolm, but no sooner does she begin than Madame Girard threatens to come and take Malcolm away. Eloisa's refusal to surrender Malcolm leads to a violent confrontation between them, much to the disadvantage of Madame Girard.

Shortly afterwards, Mr. Girard sends word to Malcolm that they should immediately meet in the Horticultural Gardens for very important business. But Girard fails to turn up for the rendezvous. As the gates



of the Gardens are being closed a Black motorcyclist suddenly appears and whisks off Malcolm to a dimly-lit, deserted roadhouse where Malcolm meets Melba for the first time. Without a moment's hesitation both pledge eternal fidelity to each other, and the wedding is set for the following Tuesday. Before the wedding can take place, however, Malcolm must be sexually matured. So Melba asks her ex-husband, the Black motorcyclist, to take Malcolm to Dr. Robinolte's Tattoo Palace and Madam Rosita's house of prostitution. At Rosita's, Malcolm's guide is murdered in mysterious circumstances. Malcolm and Melba are married in Chicago, and soon after their return from the Caribbean Malcolm begins to drink heavily and lose weight. One night, while eating in a nightclub, Malcolm suddenly "identifies" a stranger in the lavatory as his father. But the man knocks him down, calling him a pederast. As a result of this traumatic experience Malcolm gives up all hope of being reunited with his "missing" father. He starts to drink even more heavily and to engage in sexual intercourse more often. He soon falls sick from "acute alcoholism and sexual hyperaesthesia" and repeatedly calls for Madame Girard. When she arrives at his bedside Malcolm dies and Madame Girard has him buried in a private burial ground, the ceremony witnessed only by herself. Malcolm leaves behind him some three hundred pages of manuscript in English and French, a record of his "conversations" and thoughts.

New York, the counter magnet to Chicago in Purdy's works, is once again the setting for Purdy's next city novel, Cabot Wright Begins. We learn that Carrie Moore, a semi-retired miniature painter living on Dorchester Avenue on the south side of Chicago, has persuaded her unsuccessful novelist-husband, Bernie Gladhart, to come to New York to collect

facts about a well-known rapist recently released from prison and living anonymously somewhere in the city. Bernie takes up residence in a sprawling, dimly-lit and rotting "tenement palace" off Joralemon Street inside Brooklyn. A family friend of the Gladharts, Zoe Bickle, promises to use her influence with a publishing editor to get Bernie's book published. At her urging, Princeton Keith visits Bernie and encourages him to complete his book with or without the facts. In the meantime, Bernie accidentally discovers that Cabot Wright, the rapist, lives in the apartment below his. Zoe is let in on this momentous discovery, and when she meets with Keith and tells him about Bernie's discovery they both playfully conspire to use Bernie. Keith assigns the job of revising Bernie's manuscript to Zoe. Armed with the unfinished manuscript, Zoe arranges to interview Cabot. Her first meeting with Cabot is disappointing because the latter claims that he suffers from amnesia but will remember things if someone is able to reconstruct his past. As a possible remedy Zoe reads out to Cabot Bernie's imaginative reconstruction of Cabot's life. The manuscript traces his life from his short career at the Wall Street brokerage firm through the death of his wife and the sexual rampage in Brooklyn and Manhattan to his arrest and conviction. It is at the brokerage firm that Cabot first complains of chronic fatigue and boredom. He rapes his wife; she resists and then locks herself in the bedroom, and shortly afterwards goes mad while shopping at the grocery. She is committed to a mental institution where she later dies. According to the news media, Cabot is raping women--regardless of age--night and day.

At this point in Bernie's narrative, the real Cabot admits that

the facts are all there but that the story still reads wrong. Zoe resumes her reading. Mr. Warburton, Cabot's superior at the firm, proposes that Cabot take a vacation to get rid of his tiredness. About this time Cabot's parents are drowned while pleasure-cruising in the troubled waters of the Caribbean. Warburton is quick to console Cabot and act fatherly towards him now that Cabot has come into great fortune. He appoints him Vice President and admits him into the select group. To demonstrate his affection, Warburton arranges for him to have lunch with his wife, Gilda. When Cabot arrives at her richly furnished Fifth Avenue apartment overlooking Central Park, he finds a woman of indeterminate age, gaudily dressed and half-drunk. After lunch Cabot (according to Gilda) rapes her. A short time later, though, she withdraws the charge. Mr. Warburton, however, is unsure, and when he overhears his wife's intimate words to the Negro man-servant he is terribly disturbed and seeks psychiatric help. In a comic development, Gilda (wanting to find out whether or not Cabot raped her) arranges for him to see her friend Zenda Stuyvesant. Cabot rapes both the mother and her daughter, Goldie. When Mr. Warburton learns of this he commits suicide, convinced that Cabot must have raped his wife after all. Cabot is credited with having raped over three hundred women, and is finally arrested on the evidence of a Puerto Rican girl.

Bernie has not been slow to realize that Keith and Zoe have used him, and his tragedy is deepened by his knowledge that his wife is living with an ex-boyfriend. In despair he takes to drinking and later seeks the sexual comfort of a Black Nigerian stranger. Cabot's prediction that his life history will not be published becomes reality when

Keith informs Zoe that his company has decided not to publish the book. According to the leading reviewer-critics, rape is passé and unsaleable. Bernie returns to Chicago to say goodbye to his wife. Zoe returns to Chicago, having decided not to complete the book. Cabot himself leaves New York, laughing contemptuously at the world.

With Eustace Chisholm we are back in a slum on the south side of Chicago during the Depression years, along Fifty-fifth Street and its vicinity. The story revolves around Amos Ratcliffe, a handsome university student from a small town in Illinois, and his landlord in Chicago, Daniel Hawes. They are deeply in love with each other but are too ashamed to acknowledge the mutual attraction. A common friend by the name of Ace Chisholm, a narrative poet and a homosexual whose marriage is in shambles, advises Amos to act out his feelings, even though Ace knows by virtue of his prophetic powers that the boy's beauty will ultimately destroy him. Before Amos can take a step in that direction, Hawes' girl friend who is pregnant with Daniel's child asks Amos to accompany her to an abortion clinic, and later arranges for Amos to meet a degenerate millionaire from the North Shore. Reuben Masterson, the millionaire, falls in love with Amos and wants to marry him. Naturally, Hawes is jealous. In order to forget his pain, Hawes leaves Chicago and rejoins the army. At the army camp in Mississippi his superior officer, Captain Stadger, discovers his secret and orders Hawes to disavow his love for Amos and succumb to his will. Hawes is adamant, and Stadger, consequently, repeatedly tortures him. Sexually abused again and again, Hawes is finally disembowelled by Stadger in the most gruesome scene in

the novel. Stadger commits suicide, and shortly afterwards Hawes succumbs to his injuries.

All this occurs while Amos and Reuben have been living together. It is noticed that Ace Chisholm is rapidly losing his sanity as a result of the prophetic powers bestowed on him by a Negro psychic. When Eustace cannot stand the horror of his foreknowledge of the fates of Amos and Hawes, he asks Amos to get him a hundred dollars which he needs to "pray off" the prophetic powers. While coming out of the Negro psychic's house Amos is killed by a policeman who mistakes him for a burglar. Ace gives up his writing career and accidentally sets fire to all his work. The novel ends on a curiously optimistic note when Ace and Carla, his estranged wife, warmly embrace each other in a dramatic gesture of reconciliation.

Elijah Thrush is set in New York, chiefly on the island of Manhattan. An immensely rich heiress by the name of Millicent De Frayne hires a black man from Alabama to become her memoirist and spy. Millicent is in love with a mime who plays in the theater at the Arcturus Gardens but who does not return her love. Millicent's paid spy, Albert Peggs, the narrator of the novel, pays a visit to Thrush in his studio under the pretence of wanting his portrait painted, and falls in love with the actor. During the course of his duty, Peggs follows Thrush to an orphanage on West Street where the latter has gone to meet with his beautiful but mute great-grandson. Thrush loves his great-grandson to distraction. After Millicent suddenly appears at the theater one evening and tries to stab Thrush, both are arrested but later released. Millicent does manage to win legal custody of the boy and refuses to give

him up till Thrush consents to marry her. Thrush plans to have the boy abducted with Peggs' assistance and escape by sea. But when they reach the Brooklyn docks where a ship is awaiting them, they come face to face with Millicent who is there before them. Thrush is forced to marry her in the boat. Peggs is given his freedom and a large sum of money for his pains. Just then Eugene Bellamy, the pianist, suddenly appears on the docks to take Peggs to the theater. Peggs announces himself there by saying "I am . . . Elijah Thrush."

All of his work, said Purdy in a vehement letter to a friend, is

A criticism of the United States, implicit not explicit. This is a culture based on money and competition, is inhuman, terrified of love, sexual and other, obsessed with homosexuality and brutality. Our entire moral life is pestiferous and we live in a completely immoral atmosphere . . . I believe the human being under capitalism is<sup>v</sup>stilted, depressed, sick creature, that marriage in the United States is homosexuality, and homosexuality is a real disease, that we toil and enjoy and live for all the wrong reasons, and that our national life is a nightmare of noise, ugliness, filth and confusion . . . I don't believe America has any future.<sup>4</sup>

Purdy's pessimistic view of twentieth-century man and his civilization, particularly in the United States, leads him to present the modern American city in a light that will reveal the ugliness, brutality and hellishness of urban existence. To Purdy the city epitomizes the values and life-style of twentieth-century man, the city being both the cause and effect of his malaise. Life in the city does not show even the faintest glimmer of joy; it is diseased, meaningless, chaotic and uniformly black, an unrelieved hell from which there is no escape because the ganglion roots of urban America have spread far beyond its borders.

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<sup>4</sup>Quoted in Webster Schott, "James Purdy: American Dream," Nation (March 1964), 148: 300.

Purdy portrays the city as large and sprawling with slum or ghetto at its very heart and core. The city is always under a pall of darkness and death: the streets are dark, empty and seething with violence, the houses dark, vacant, sordidly furnished, rotten and death-dealing, the inhabitants faceless, hostile and inscrutable. The Purdian city, in effect, is an underworld seething with violence and peopled by outcasts from society--orphans and half-orphans, homosexuals and bisexuals, rapists and murderers, drug peddlers, unsuccessful writers and artists, drunkards and adulteresses, prostitutes, abortionists, psychics, imperious, castrating patrons, and innocent or incipiently corrupt protégés.<sup>5</sup> Theirs is a world of suppressed agony, never-ending, quiet despair, unpredictable violence, with no hope of remedy or epiphany to justify or vindicate their suffering. The physical elements of the urban setting express inner suffering from aloneness and alienation, lack of communication, collapse of marriage and family life, ineffectuality of love, neuroses and spiritual atrophy.

Purdy evokes or creates this Dantesque vision of the modern American city using a fictional technique that is notable for three elements: a calculated, rigorous selectivity in describing urban landscapes and atmosphere (the background) and domestic interiors (the foreground); surrealistic treatment of settings and events; and a highly specialized speech used by characters. Purdy's description of the urban landscape, atmosphere and domestic interiors excludes much surface or

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<sup>5</sup>At least two of the protégé protagonists are, what I have called, "incipiently corrupt"--Amos and Fenton. Amos is guilty of having stabbed his runaway father and slept with his own mother and Fenton had desired the death of his mother.

realistic detail that might be expected. His descriptions emphasize such features as darkness, facelessness and emptiness, and an atmosphere of violence, decay and death, features which function as key-motifs. Settings are severely limited--a dark, empty apartment or a deserted park, a seedy nightclub or a dingy theater, an abortion clinic or house of prostitution, seldom the open, well-lit street or crowded public building.

The rooming house on 63rd Street where Fenton and Claire live is a typical part of the Purdian cityscape. Situated at the end of a seemingly endless row of vacant lots, it is

. . . one of those early twentieth-century houses that have survived by oversight but which look so rotten and devoured that you can't believe they were ever built but that they rotted and mushroomed into existence and that their rot was their first and last growth.

There was no number. It was a color like green and yellow. Around the premises was a fence of sharp iron, cut like spears (p. 145).

Here we have a typical slum rooming-house in south Chicago, among wind-swept and never-ending empty streets. If such houses are any indication of the people who build or inhabit them, then this rooming house necessarily reflects the tedious uniformity, rottenness and death wish characteristic of the Purdian urban world.

The city streets seethe with violence. Fenton's chance encounter with Bruno and his actor friend, Banks, is illustrative of this unpredictable violence in the urban atmosphere. Bruno is a drug-peddling homosexual who approaches Fenton in the streets to "seek his company and protection" from an unidentified pursuer. He invites him to see Banks' acting in Othello (an appropriate play considering the imminent violence that overwhelms Fenton), and later induces him to



visit Banks in his marijuana-smoke filled apartment. There both Bruno and Banks make sexual advances toward Fenton. Fenton intuits that "something decisive and irrevocable [is] about to happen." Minutes later Bruno begins to undress Fenton, without resistance or aid. But suddenly Fenton flares up, and, standing naked in the middle of the room, he begins boxing the chandelier, knocking down the lamps, and splits open Bruno's face. Recovering from his surprise, Bruno pulls a gun on Fenton and orders him to leave.

The typical Purdian cityscape reappears in Malcolm. At one point the Girards and Malcolm, having unsuccessfully tried to coax Kermit out of his apartment, finally leave at dusk: "Then, as the night was beginning to show itself in all its black city completeness, the engine of the Rolls started and his splendid visitors motored off into the void" [italics mine]. The description suggests the city is a nullity, devoid of illumination and activity, severed from the rest of the country. In addition, Professor Robinolte's tattoo clinic is starkly lighted, bare, exhibiting signs of violence and death, the electric tattooing-needles and the bloody rags. Madam Rosita's house of prostitution appears peaceable and harmless until morning when Malcolm finds his black guide, Gus, murdered under mysterious circumstances. He himself is thrust out unceremoniously.

At the beginning of Cabot Wright we are once again in the familiar Purdian night-time world as we are told that

Early Saturday night Bernie Gladhart paced the Promenade in Brooklyn and looked across the river at the skyline of Wall Street, now like a series of extinct craters, unlit and uninhabited, by reason of the weekend departure of charwomen and the thousands of

other cleaners who keep the skyscrapers ablaze all the evenings of the work week.<sup>6</sup>

The city is shown as unlit and uninhabited, to emphasize the darkness and emptiness of the urban world. New York, like Chicago, is an immense slum, and the "antique tenement palace" off Joralemon Street called the See-River-Manor (nicknamed the Cockroach House), where Bernie and Cabot have rented rooms, is "a monster hive buzzing with Puerto Ricans, ruined Cubans, native whites and mulattoes ending their days on relief checks and handouts from friends and relatives." It is significant to notice that though the rooming-house is called a buzzing hive, Purdy does not describe a single face, for the renters are left faceless, transient beings, more ghostly than real. Outside, the streets are seething with violence and sordid activity. Although Bernie's room has a flimsy lock which can be easily forced open by burglars, "many scavengers . . . roamed the streets of Brooklyn at all odd hours--odd men and queer ladies propelled not by their need for treasures but by some obscure person's discarded things."

In Eustace Chisholm we observe a south Chicago street during the Depression, "amidst the industrial whirlwind of America's economic burn-out," and right in the heart of the city is the "fuck-roost" of Daniel Hawes, a red brick building whose front entrance, permanently boarded up for unexplained reasons, bears the erection date 1887. Ace at one point tells Hawes, who is contemplating running away with Amos to a far away place, that "You couldn't get any farther away than when you're living

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<sup>6</sup>James Purdy, Cabot Wright Begins (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1964), p. 3. All page references to Cabot Wright are to this edition.

with Amos. You're in the asshole of the universe . . ."7 We are given a fleeting glimpse of the outside world as Ace says:

. . . I had walked as if in my sleep to South Parkway. There I was alone with 233, 903 Negroes, having emerged unscathed from the 371 acres of the largest inland black park in the city, with the Poro College Negro School of Beauty sign staring me in the face (p. 200).

It is in this neighborhood that Amos is accidentally shot by a policeman who mistakes him for a housebreaker. Dr. Beaufort Vance's abortion clinic on the corner of Lake Park and 47th, visited by Maureen and Amos, is inside a "dingy slate-colored eight-story structure, entirely vacant except for a half-dozen rooms used for obscure purposes, distributed haphazardly throughout the building."

In Elijah Thrush we glimpse New York when Millicent confides to her paid spy and memoirist, Peggs, that "New York is over" and "Has been over actually since 1917." Peggs confesses on one occasion that "I hardly noticed the falling snow outside, or the sad black faces of those around me, who, having chosen New York as their goal, had lost everything they had ever been before."<sup>8</sup> West Street is representative of the kind of world these sad black faces inhabit. Peggs tells us that

All that summer, from deserted warehouses and other empty buildings near ghastly grisly West Street, with its rotting refuse and dying derelicts wearing burlap shoes, with the green facade of old pier entrances in the distance, I followed Elijah Thrush in his nocturnal and diurnal wanderings . . . to a huge granite building with a sign of crumbling gold: The Alimentary Foundation: A Home for the Unwanted (pp. 24-5).

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<sup>7</sup>James Purdy, Eustace Chisholm and The Works (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1967), p. 85. All page references to Eustace Chisholm are to this edition.

<sup>8</sup>James Purdy, I Am Elijah Thrush (Garden City: Doubleday & Co., Inc., 1972), p. 62. All page references to Elijah Thrush are to this edition.

The quick, broad strokes Purdy uses to describe the external city (the background) are paralleled, with few exceptions, by his portrayal of domestic interiors (the foreground). The interior of Fenton's rooming house is dark, empty and death-dealing. Fenton and Claire are its only occupants. We discover the single window in Fenton's room boarded up and there is "almost no light coming from a dying bulb hung from the high ceiling." The room itself contains "a dwarf-like cot with a large mattress clinging to it and a crippled immense chest of drawers supported by only three legs." The cedar-chest--an old white box with broken hinges--in which Fenton places the corpse of his brother lies in an "immense and vacant attic with its suffocating smell of rotting wood," rodents and the "imperceptible sounds of disintegration and rot."

Kermit's apartment in Malcolm has a buzzer that hasn't worked for years and contains a large chair "whose stuffing had come off through age onto the floor beneath it." Amos Ratcliffe's six-by-nine cell "Down an interminable hall lighted by a 7-1/2 watt bulb [is] furnished with an old Army cot and stool." The building in which Dr. Beaufort has his abortion clinic is also dimly lit, and the clinic itself has an operating table of two high, rough kitchen tables pushed together, a small cart with wheels to hold instruments, and an open garbage can into which the abortionist throws the fetuses. Perhaps the most telling description we have of domestic interiors in Purdy is that of Eloisa's 3-story house. Malcolm observes that the basement is not unlike Estel Blanc's mortuary--"only, if anything, gloomier." The basement is furnished with old and worn furniture and has a "great display of stuffed birds, especially owls sitting on varnished perches." The pall of decay

and mortality lies heavy on the empty house:

Everywhere in the house, no matter at what hour, one felt it was afternoon, late afternoon breaking into twilight, with a coolness, too, like perpetual autumn, an autumn that will not pass into winter owing to some damage perhaps to the machinery of the cosmos. It will go on being autumn, go on being cool, but slowly, slowly everything will begin to fall piece by piece, the walls will slip down ever so little, the strange pictures will warp, the mythological animals will move their eyes slightly for the last time as they fade into indistinction, the strings of the bass will loosen and fall, the piano keys wrinkle and disappear into the wood of the instrument, and the beautiful alto sax shrivel into foil (p. 295).

Even though the principal setting in Purdy's city fiction is the urban slum or ghetto, his works use the affluent sections of the city as background also. These settings do not share the physical squalor or poverty of the ghetto or slum, but they are, nevertheless, equally empty, faceless and moribund. For example, darkness and an atmosphere of decay are noticeable features of Grainger's mansion. Parkhearst and Fenton enter an "immense" room. At the far end of the room, on a slightly raised platform almost hidden from view by her dress, Grainger hangs over one arm of her mammoth chair, quite drunk and maudlin. Fenton becomes aware that the mansion itself is not unlike the all-night theater or the city park or even Banks' marijuana-smoke filled apartment. Upstairs is a memorial room, a shrine to the memory of Grainger's late, unloved husband, filled with hundreds of photographs, mementos, clothes and fresh flowers. Grainger herself is referred to as the "Queen of Hell."

The apartment of the Warburtons overlooking Central Park in Cabot's New York is essentially indistinguishable from the suite of Zenda Stuyvesant or Mdm. Girard's mansion. It has a hallway with a chandelier, a huge anteroom, "and a cavernous parlor" where Cabot slouches into a "creamy gold divan." But Cabot is surprised by the "lonesome silence of

the mansion," expressive of the emptiness of Gilda's life. We recall her complaints to Cabot about her husband who, she says, is "a troll, a mammoth mummy with a motor, but no soul." Madam Girard's patchouli- and rose-water-smelling chateau is charged with hostility, always on the brink of open violence.<sup>9</sup>

Purdy reminds us, if we need reminding, that the American city, which we like to think of as lively, prosperous and the center of culture, is actually deserted, empty, faceless, rotting, dying, and devoured. The "Alimentary Foundation" on West Street is, indeed, the "asshole of the universe" and the city is a home for the crippled and the orphaned. There are in Purdy's city fictions certain recognizable pictures--the vacant, rotting houses without sunlight or fresh breeze; the dimly-lit and paradoxically empty streets, bars, theaters and parks, inscrutable, uncanny and seething with violence; the sprawling, immense tomb-like houses, barely furnished and dimly lit; plush but empty Fifth Avenue apartments. Seldom do we learn their physical dimensions or the kinds of furnishings they contain except in exaggerated or distorted terms. Descriptions are highly selective and non-representational; settings are as barren and stark as possible. Darkness, filth, artificial light, boarded windows, rotten smells, and broken furniture are the permanent features of Purdy's city and interiors.

Another important technique which Purdy employs to create his unique vision of urban life is the surrealistic treatment of settings

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<sup>9</sup>The nearly complete absence of descriptions of domestic interiors in Elijah Thrush may be once again expressive of the emptiness in the lives of its characters. Millicent's house is also immense and has a 13-foot tall door.

and events. Surrealism as a movement in art and literature has emphasized "the expression of the imagination as realized in dreams and presented without conscious control."<sup>10</sup> Without engaging in a debate over what precisely surrealism's large--ontological and metaphysical--concerns are or how valid its mode of investigation into reality is, let us delineate what surrealistic techniques Purdy does use in his fictions, since my purpose is not to demonstrate whether or not Purdy is a surrealist or espouses the cause or movement.<sup>11</sup>

Purdy combines chiefly three elements to create his surrealistic effect: one, marvelous or privileged locales where his characters can wear grotesque masks, literally and figuratively, and act in relative freedom from the socio-political milieu of the city; two, baffling juxtapositions of disparate images and objects which we associate with the irrational world of dream and nightmare; three, sequences of events or scenes often not explicable by any logical principle or tests of natural authenticity or Aristotelian law of probability.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>C. Hugh Holman, William Flint Thrall, and Addison Hubbard, A Handbook to Literature, 3rd ed. (Indianapolis, N.Y.: Odyssey Press, 1972), p. 517.

<sup>11</sup>J. H. Matthews, Surrealism and the Novel (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1966), p. 1. J. H. Matthews, in his introduction to Surrealism and the Novel, says that "If one sets aside isolated texts like André Breton's preface to Fourré's La Nuit du Rose-Hôtel, little enough remains from which to deduce an aesthetic of the surrealist novel." One may safely say that surrealism is an attack on the "realist attitude" according to which fidelity to observable facts in immediate experience and shaped habits of association constitutes reality. Surrealism attempts to replace this mode with one that rejects rationality and normal sensory perception and rearranges the observable facts and experiences of the world according to an "inner model" that must necessarily appear highly arbitrary.

<sup>12</sup>For elements of surrealism see J. H. Matthews, Surrealism and the Novel, and The Imagery of Surrealism (Syracuse University Press, 1977).

By "marvellous or privileged" locale I mean any locale which is shown to be physically isolated from the socio-political intrusions of the outside world. That is, it is a self-contained world, something corresponding to a gothic castle where strange activities are made to take place without outside interference, where characters act in relative freedom from the restraints that people are subject to in real life. Furthermore, such a locale possesses a certain fantastic quality we associate with the dreams and pure inventions, or fairy tales or horror stories. With Robert Morris we may speak of Purdy's characters as misfits "sealed in their private hell."<sup>13</sup> In a sense, these privileged locales are the private hells of these individuals.

We have already seen how Purdy sets the action of his novels in isolated locations within the city such as an empty, dark apartment or bar where life seems to flow independent of the events in the outside world. The physical isolation of the locales is indicative of the communal isolation of the characters. The rooming house on 63rd Street, for example, is an isolated and deserted building among vacant lots on an endless street, without a number. It is "a not-right-kind of place"--dark and threatening. Nobody lives in it except Fenton and Claire, who are its temporary occupants. With its high ceiling and immense doors it is like the charmed locale of a Walt Disney mystery house, and appropriately called the "Dream Palace." It provides the setting for a strangely violent event, Fenton's murder of his sick brother, Claire. Claire's neck is broken like a small bird's, a poor bird which no one

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<sup>13</sup>Robert K. Morris, "James Purdy and The Works," Nation (October 9, 1967), 205: 342.



will notice or hear about in the city outside. Fenton is free to indulge himself, offering bread and coffee to the corpse and weeping over it, then wandering aimlessly all over town for several days and returning finally to the rooming-house to conceal his brother's corpse in the attic.

Grainger's mansion is located in an unspecified part of the city, absolutely cut off from its surroundings as though it were a Gothic castle or Victorian mansion in some spooky corner of the world. Grainger herself, like a queen bee, never stirs out of the house, and nobody comes to visit her except Parkhearst. She is constantly drunk, either slouched in her mammoth chair resting on a platform in the center of the immense room or in her huge silver bed with red coverings, wearing a frightening white and soft dress "as a princess in old books might have worn." As a memorial to her husband she has built a shrine upstairs, a room filled with photographs, mementos, and fresh flowers.

The young protagonist in Malcolm, induced by a passing astrologer into a meaningless adventure, travels from one address to another, meeting Bohemian artists and wealthy dilettantes. The opening sentence of the novel, as David Daiches notes, has the "beautifully matter-of-fact clarity of a fairy tale":<sup>14</sup> as Purdy explains that "In front of one of the most palatial hotels in the world, a very young man was accustomed to sit on a bench which, when the light fell in a certain way, shone like gold." The setting, by its very fantastic quality enables us to suspend our disbelief and accept the absurd developments in Malcolm's life.

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<sup>14</sup>David Daiches, "A Preface to James Purdy's Malcolm," Antioch Review (Spring, 1962), 22: 122.

Estel Blanc's mortuary and residence is "an unremodeled Victorian house with oversize shutters, twenty-five foot ceilings, and marble-topped tables everywhere." The walls of the house are covered with unusual paintings, hanging loose for lack of proper support.

Like the hotel, Madam Girard's chateau is palatial and located in an unspecified part of the city. A footman opens a white door and Malcolm is taken upwards in a green and gold elevator "which smelled strongly of patchouli and rose water." The footman directs Malcolm through a "very narrow but very tall door" and into a room "almost as large as a cathedral." Such a marvelous locale is an appropriate setting for the strange evening performance. The inebriated Madame Girard, outfitted in a riding dress, wearing thick make-up on her face and surrounded by a bevy of ten handsome young men, is conducting divorce proceedings against her husband, as if in her world the realities of society and law did not exist. Eloisa's house has "castle-like high ceilings" and the walls are plastered with self-portraits of herself and the drawings of Negroes "looking out from their pale eyes, of strange perhaps non-existent animals gazing . . . from canvases everywhere." The interior of the house, as we have already seen, is invested with an unusual deathly light.

Within such marvelous or privileged locales Purdy creates scenes that juxtapose normally disparate objects and images--a sort of collage that, to borrow Matthews' words, "releases the mind from reason's control" and serves "to free expression from the tyranny of realistic representation." The surface or realistic details of the scene are continually dissolving into dream and the reader is compelled to enter

a world where the boundary between waking reality and that of dream and nightmare are forever shifting.

The funeral scene in Malcolm is a classic instance of a surrealist collage. Following Malcolm's death at the close of the narrative, Madam Girard orders a quarter ton of roses and an equal amount of violets, but the fragrance of the green foliage is vitiated by the burned saccharine smell of tomatoes from a nearby ketchup factory--one struggling desperately with the other. The funeral procession itself consists of a single participant, Madame Girard herself, and the cortège is drawn by horses with black plumes and a trumpet voluntary. The realistic impressions in this scene--such as they are--are further diluted by the fact that according to the local coroner and the undertaker there was no corpse, and that nobody was buried. Madame Girard is full of evasions on the subject.

In Elijah Thrush the narrator, Albert Peggs, possesses "a perfect physique," and carries a collection of jewellery on his naked body, including a huge protective stone in his navel. Peggs has been in the habit of offering his blood to be sucked by a retired liberal-radical, Ted Maufritz, who makes Peggs lie down on a velvet couch protected by goat skin and plastic throws and then opens one of his best veins and drinks a large amount of blood in the hope of being worthy of a noble race. As though these juxtapositions were not enough to bewilder the mind, we learn that Peggs owns a rare eagle pet which, according to him, feeds on his raw flesh. He reveals the secret of the open wound on his side to prove he is speaking the truth. Such surrealist touches are liberally sprinkled in Purdy's fictions.

In addition to the juxtaposition of disparate images, Purdy's surrealist collages are notable for three other elements. In his "Introduction" to some of Purdy's works, Tony Tanner speaks of the lack of control that Purdy's characters have over their voices, the complete lack of syntax in the language of their faces, and their stylized gestures and movements.<sup>15</sup> In the opening section of 63: Dream Palace, for example, Parkhearst and Grainger are talking about Fenton. Parkhearst's voice "would rise a bit, only to die away again as he told her everything he could remember." Grainger recalls the time she had called her husband long distance, when his voice "had wavered, then had grown, then had sunk into indistinguishable sounds." Grainger, Madame Girard, and De Frayne are constantly commanding people around them, including their closest friends. In the midst of a supposedly confidential conversation where Millicent is explaining to Peggs what his duties are, she suddenly breaks off. Her voice changes to one of peevish command and she says: "Have a dish of tea with me." During the divorce proceedings in her chateau, Madame Girard asks her husband for a favor in characteristic language and tone: "Wipe my face free of any blemishes." Accepting Malcolm into her inner circle of admirers, she cries out: "Royalty!"

These characters, like defective or rundown robots and mechanisms, also lack control over their gestures and movements. Tanner observes that "suddenly" is a favorite word in Purdy. His characters suddenly stand up or sit down, suddenly retreat or advance, suddenly begin talking or stop talking, suddenly begin to laugh at the most inappropriate moments, are suddenly galvanized into action or subside as

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<sup>15</sup>Tanner, "Introduction," pp. 18-9.

suddenly, or fall asleep suddenly at the most critical times. In short, Purdy makes the gestures, expressions and speech of his characters "totally arbitrary, unpredictable, and discontinuous."<sup>16</sup>

Often, in addition, there is no congruity between what the characters say, the expressions they wear, and what they feel. In one scene, for example, Parkhearst has been drawing Grainger's attention to Fenton, but she seems oblivious of his presence. Suddenly she begins to laugh, takes Parkhearst's hand, then settles her eyes slowly and gloomily upon Fenton. At first her eyes express hostility or a kind of sullen anger. She looks away to take a deep drink. When she turns to Fenton again she expresses the same hostility and suspicion, then calms down. When Parkhearst is finally able to get her attention, she suddenly enquires of Parkhearst what he thinks of the musicians. As the scene progresses, Grainger flares up and calms down alternately. Just before losing consciousness she throws Fenton a "brief oversweet smile," reaches out, takes his hand, laughing quietly, and kisses it in "a strange manner." A similar treatment is meted out to Malcolm by Madame Girard. When her husband brings Malcolm in her presence, she is at first angry and beside herself to see an intruder in their midst. She accuses Malcolm of spying for Mr. Cox and orders he be thrown out. Suddenly she begins to weep, calling upon her young lovers to comfort her. Recovering her composure, she berates the audience. "'Why,' says she, 'must we have a paid informer in the shape of this brainless, mindless, but'--and here Madame Girard paused as if seeing Malcolm for the very first time--'this

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<sup>16</sup>Tanner, "Introduction," p. 18.

very beautiful young boy?" (p. 245). We are as much astonished as Malcolm is at her lightning change of attitude. On another occasion, while upbraiding Eloisa, she suddenly demands: "'Who has stolen my parasol?' in a low voice like an actress breaking off at rehearsal." Prior to this she had been lecturing Eloisa when she suddenly went over to Kermit and "delivered a resounding kiss, as stooping, she bent over his mouth." Gilda Warburton and Cabot are talking of the marital tragedy that has overtaken Cabot. Cabot informs her that his wife, Cynthia, has gone mad. Both Cabot and Gilda burst into a paroxysm of laughter and "Life is so terrible!" Gilda announces, still laughing.

Why is there such dissonance, such incongruity between characters' speech, facial expressions and gestures? Purdy is showing his characters to be incapable of genuine human feelings or of communicating the intimacies of the heart. This lack of affect results in what Tanner calls "unsupervised pantomime of fragments of manners." Personages speak and behave as though they were old gramophone machines whose governors had lost their resilience. The dissonance is a perfect index of the fragmentation of their inner selves and their loss of human qualities.

The third element of Purdy's surrealistic technique is the use of coincidence, chance, and surprise in the development of plot. A whole sequence of events may occur for which there is no logical explanation. For instance, the entire plot of 63: Dream Palace revolves around the chance encounter between Fenton and Parkhearst and later Fenton's meeting with Grainger, Bruno, and Banks. Certainly, these chance encounters can be explained away by suggesting that the rapacious women-patrons and

underworld figures are constantly in search of victims and Fenton's aimless walks bring him into their fatal snare. However, it fails to explain the larger plan which accepts coincidence and chance as routine principles of plot development.

Malcolm has been called a fairy tale or myth. From another vantage point the novel is an extended dream or nightmare of its protagonist. Malcolm sits on a bench outside a palatial hotel day after day waiting for his "runaway father" to return. We soon learn the father is merely a figment of the boy's imagination. What follows is a bizarre coincidence when Mr. Cox, a passerby, spots Malcolm and is intrigued by his "waiting look." He induces Malcolm to visit certain addresses, those of a mortician, a midget and his artist wife, a wealthy, imperious patroness, and a bohemian painter-artist. Why Malcolm should allow himself to be induced by a perfect stranger to visit these people for so vague a goal as giving one's self "up to things" and "life"? Malcolm moves from one address to another as though in a dream, dozing off just when his attention is most required. He meets a bizarre set of people, witnesses strange relationships and is embroiled in incredible situations, which includes his uncalled-for arrest outside Blanc's mortuary and his meeting with his future wife, Melba, in a roadside bar.

The meeting with Melba, the chanteuse, is attended by circumstances which could come straight out of a dream. As Malcolm stands outside the Horticultural Gardens waiting for Girard, a Negro motorcyclist suddenly appears, and without so much as a word of explanation whisks Malcolm off to the roadside bar. That same evening, within a few minutes of their meeting, Malcolm happily accepts his engagement to

Melba and promises to marry her the following Tuesday.

Again, we have no logically or psychologically valid explanation for Cabot's power over his victims. He rapes them without effort; they are instinctively drawn to him. One of his victims goes so far as to write to him thanking him for the experience and telling him how it has helped her to find her true self and happiness in marriage. Bernie Gladhart's fictitious account of Cabot's exploits, incredibly enough, turns out to be facts about Cabot's history. The only objection Cabot has to the account is that it does not cohere. "The facts," he tells Zoe Bickle, "are put together, the beads are all strung along like they were mine, but there's no necklace." Nevertheless, it is highly improbable that Bernie should have intuited all the separate facts exactly as they occurred. Bernie's fortuitous discovery of Cabot is itself a coincidence. We are told that when Bernie steps into his clothes closet to hang his coat, he notices a loose board in the floor. Driven by curiosity, he removes the board to find that the room below him is occupied by Cabot. Cabot is living in the same building, just as the greatest task facing Bernie in New York is to find Cabot.

Among others, there are two scenes in Elijah Thrush which stand out for their bizarre and illogical development. Frustrated by Thrush's neglect of her, Millicent storms into the theater preceded by a young man dressed as a fireman and carrying an ax. Thrush is in the midst of a number but Millicent demands to be heard. She and Thrush exchange recriminations. Suddenly Millicent rushes at him with a "large fantastically long knife." While this is going on, the young man sitting next to Peggs tries to undress him, and, in Peggs' own words, "Thinking he was



about to enjoy my body, I tried to question him but he had of course disappeared." The scene takes on the quality of a grotesque film run at incredible speed, dissolving all semblance of logic and natural authenticity. Millicent begins to perform a series of solo dances, wearing under her opera cloak a complete suit of armor. All the while Thrush boos and catcalls from the wings. At the end of her dance Millicent begins to sing a ballad; then Thrush leaps out and seizes her for his partner, and, to the fresh enthusiasm of the audience, starts a two-step. As they glide into a tango, the police arrive and put them under arrest for disturbing the peace.

A similar illogical chain of events occurs shortly later. In his attempt to abduct the Bird of Heaven at Elijah's behest, Peggs is chased by two policemen through pouring rain and under moonlight, through alleys and over roof tops. Joined by Thrush, the party arrives at the Brooklyn docks where Thrush's rented boat is waiting to take them away. But they suddenly find themselves face to face with the crafty, imperious dowager herself. She has, strangely enough, anticipated Elijah's move, taken command of the boat and now forces him to marry her on the high seas. Just as the boat is about to sail, the pianist from the theater, Bellamy, suddenly appears on the docks with a large delegation to take Peggs away to the theater as a replacement for Thrush. Arriving there, Peggs walks to the stage and announces himself, saying "I . . . I am Elijah Thrush." Surely, we are unprepared for such illogical concatenation of events. We are as much surprised by it as Peggs himself. Malcolm, says McNamara, "has the quality of a film--not only in its cartoon like superreality, but in the scenic presentation of the visible,

with swift montaging from scene to scene and with furiously speeded up motion in the style of a Mack Sennet chase."<sup>17</sup>

One important after-effect of the creation of surrealistic collage and illogical plot development is what can best be described as a flat tone. The author or narrator in Purdy's fictions reports on scenes and events matter-of-factly. That is to say, he reports the most bizarre and at times monstrous sights and events without showing surprise or alarm. He appears to accept both the monstrous and the routine with equal equanimity or dispassion.

The third characteristic element of Purdy's fictional technique, as I have suggested, is a highly specialized speech he gives his characters. It consists of out-of-date styles of discourse characterized by bookish, hyperformal, Latinate or ~~artificial~~ archaic diction. Characters also use hackneyed expressions and platitudes, fragmentary quotations, artificial, almost hysterical emphasis, and hyperbolic and extravagant diction. To understand why Purdy makes his personages employ such a bewildering variety of speaking styles we need to look inward. An inordinately great number of Purdy's characters, especially the protagonists such as Fenton, Malcolm, Amos and Cabot, are literally orphans or half-orphans and all of them are rootless, suffering from alienation and loss of identity. They have no intellectual, social or religious life, and are failures as husbands, wives and lovers. They are either homosexuals, divorced or about to be divorced. They suffer from neurosis, alcoholism, boredom and ennui. Self-centered, possessive and demanding, they victimize and corrupt their protégés and often drive

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<sup>17</sup>McNamara, p. 273.

them to suicide. Lacking any genuine emotional promptings, Purdy's characters find it impossible to feel or communicate. They talk past each other, never to each other, so that while they harangue or speak in monologues their listeners doze off or wander, as Malcolm and Cabot so often do.

We observe that Purdy's fictions center on the sound of talking--the "unsemantic buzz," Tanner notes--without communication. The specialized speech of the characters is perfectly attuned to their mental condition, their fragmentary psyche and tortured, dislocated personalities. Their heavy dependence on factitious speech is a perfect index of their confused, tortured, discontinuous mode of being. In their lives, as Madame Girard muses, "Texture is all, substance nothing." Even the letters or diaries they write (many of Purdy's characters keep diaries and one of them writes a stack of letters) are verbose, rambling, fragmentary, and often written in a foreign language as though their own were somehow inadequate or ~~that~~ their need of secrecy were a necessary condition for their mode of existence.

The somnolent conversation between Grainger and Parkhearst which opens the narrative of 63: Dream Palace exemplifies forcefully the impossibility of communication in Purdy's world. The two characters are sitting in the garden reminiscing about Fenton. In response to Grainger's demand that he write down all he knows about Fenton for her to read and reread at her leisure, Parkhearst replies: "I can't write down what Fenton did because I never found out who he was" (p. 133). This is a significant remark, for Parkhearst has been complaining that he has had to repeat himself countless times, compelled to give the same reply to

Grainger's repeated "rhetorical and idle" questions. Such daily meetings between them for the purpose of "reviewing" their lives together take on the quality of a Beckett play where characters are endlessly exchanging banalities, waiting for an "outcome" that will never come to pass. It is evident that Parkhearst and Grainger are not communicating and never have communicated. Neither listens to the other; perhaps neither can have faith in the other's spoken words. Parkhearst's remark is significant in another sense: despite his professed abilities as a writer, he has failed to establish rapport with Fenton or to communicate with him. That is why he feels unable to write about Fenton.

Both Grainger and Parkhearst are fond of extravagant diction and unnecessary emphasis as though they were either trying to compensate for their woeful lack of genuine feeling or making an effort to bestow meaning and significance on things inherently impoverished and absurd, as people do on TV talk shows or at social gatherings. Parkhearst, for example, savors calling Grainger the "great woman" even though nobody knows why she is great, least of all Parkhearst. He refers to the memorial room in Grainger's house as the "church." Both speak of Fenton as "that mover and shaker Fenton." Grainger is constantly overworking words at random, as she lays emphasis on words whose importance is either clear from the context and so need no emphasis or carry no recognizable significance. She refutes Parkhearst's assertion that she asked for Fenton by snapping: "I never ordered for him." By common consent, as it were, all the characters--Parkhearst, his wife Bella, and Fenton--all use eccentric emphasis.

Like Grainger, all of Purdy's women patrons are addicted to

accentuated words. In their effort to communicate they harangue their listeners with long, tiresome monologues, or cower them with commands and demagoguery. For example, there is the scene in Malcolm in which Madame Girard, surrounded by a flock of handsome young men and weeping profusely because she cannot brook Malcolm's presence, implores: "All my young beauties on their uncomfortable straight chairs--see how I am suffering! . . . Come and comfort me, beauties" (p. 244). She continues, a few lines later:

Oh, I've been through so much. . . . Nobody knows what I have suffered! That is why I feel so often I must start proceedings. There ought to be a reckoning for such suffering (p. 244).

The scene in which Madame Girard confronts Eloisa and demands Malcolm's return is also representative:

"Too close to what?" a deep feminine voice cried from the entrance to the room.

All eyes looked up to see Madame Girard coming into the center of the room, a sun parasol in her hand.

Madame Girard cleared her throat, but she did not need to wait for silence: She had created the deepest kind possible.

Addressing again now her auditors, she said: "I have only come here to claim what is my own. A reasonable request. I am, of course, a reasonable woman. Let there be no interruptions, please!" Madame Girard turned to Malcolm, who had stood up only, as a matter of fact, to hear her better, but she had construed his movement as an attempt to interpolate.

"Sit down," Madame Girard commanded Malcolm sotto voce.

She continued, closing her eyes again:

"Why should the rest of the world know plenty, happiness, domestic satisfaction, love--while I am shut out from all these things, deprived of a woman's human station in life, turned in upon my own devices, and saddled--" here she opened her eyes directly and immediately upon the tray with the wine bottle, then closed them again--"saddled with a husband who knows not whether I am alive or dead, and cares, yes, cares--dear Eloisa, I can feel you are shaking your head, so stop!--cares LESS" (pp. 301-02).

Madame Girard is also in the habit of cluttering up her speech with bookish diction, French phrases and hyperbolic expressions. On one occasion she warns her husband that she has "a great mind to take

proceedings against you, with reference to the matter which we discussed earlier in the evening!" (p. 241). She silences Eloisa with "Will you be quiet, lady, while I am delivering my speech?" A page later she tells Eloisa: "You are eternally de trop." Accepting Malcolm into her inner coterie of admirers, she cries: "You are a real prince, Malcolm . . . Oh, forgive me. An authentic--" and then, "'Royalty!' she cried pointing out Malcolm to the other guests staring anxiously at them both. 'Royalty'" (p. 247).

Most of Purdy's characters employ such specialized speech in varying degrees but in Malcolm it is most pervasive and pronounced, appropriately since Malcolm is the most surreal of Purdy's works. Like Madame Girard, other characters indulge in the act of using extravagant diction and fatuous emphasis. Even so staid a person as Mr. Cox, the astrologer, speaks of Malcolm as "wedded to this bench." He is conscious of himself as representing "the city and civilization" of his time. Malcolm quickly begins to imitate his mentor and accents words at random. Mr. Girard, Kermit the midget, Estel Blanc the mortician, and even the anonymous cab driver who takes Malcolm to the Girard chateau make liberal use of emphases and extravagant diction. Mr. Girard always implores his wife with "Doddy, dear." Kermit begs Eloisa for "some modicum" of her wine and speaks of being "anointed" when recognized by Madame Girard. When Malcolm asks the cab driver if he knows Madame Girard's address, he calls it the "best address, perhaps the only real address in the city."

Gilda Warburton's speech in Cabot Wright is indistinguishable from that of Millicent and Grainger. She is rich and married to a

husband she does not love. Bored and drunk for most of the day, she is a woman of indeterminate age, "with a popular wig of the hour, a breast alight with jewels, flashing in cadence with bracelets of gold and platinum, and a stale dank gin breath." She is all flash and no substance. Her speech is replete with clichés, hyperboles and bookish expressions. She complains to Cabot that "dressing up and getting there takes the day," and that "our sterling adored friends [the Blacks] are noble people with a grand tomorrow." While she drones on, Cabot stops listening, for which she pulls him up short: "But you're not concentrating!"

In Elijah Thrush Millicent's instructions to her memoirist and spy, Albert Peggs, is characteristic of her speech. It is overlaid with archaisms, bookish diction, clichés and hysterical emphasis on words. She confides to Peggs that she has a kind of "frayed hope" in him and that there is something about him that "almost kindles optimism." "I'd have you go and spy on him [Thrush]," she instructs Peggs who is hardly listening, because his great-grandson is "our bone of contention." Thrush she describes as "too interesting, someone who will "ply you with questions," and be "too intimate." She warns Peggs not to go over to his side since she is the one "paying the piper, and 'twon't do a-tall for you to take his part, or soldier for him." Her support of Thrush in the theater she describes as carrying "the cross of caring for him" and insists that for her pains he hates her "to within an inch of my life." She refers to her projected memoir as her "chronicle."

Thrush, too, speaks in clichés and makes use of archaic diction, hyperbolic expressions and foreign vocabulary. In his farewell speech

from the deck of the boat he thanks Peggs for "opening a new continent to me," and fears he will "go under the waves" (meaning he will die from sexual activity) and that Millicent will "cut me to mincemeat." He goes on to tell Peggs to "harken well," because Millicent has annulled their marriage and belittled his "membrum virile."

Albert Peggs himself narrates the story of Millicent and Thrush in a prose style suited, as he tells us, to the subject. He confesses that this story "neither in vocabulary or meaning, will be in the taste of the present epoch . . ." Peggs' narrative prose is sprinkled with affected, Latinate diction, interspersed with clichés, snatches of quotations, and hyperbolic expressions. He even makes use of French expressions to provide his prose with a veneer of foreign grace. But insofar as he is aware of his outdated style of discourse, we may suppose that he is deliberately mimicking the speech of Millicent and Thrush and parodying them:

Millicent De Frayne, who was young in 1913, the sole possessor of an immense oil fortune, languished of an incurable ailment, her willful, hopeless love for Elijah Thrush, "the mime, poet, painter of art nouveau," who, after ruining the lives of countless men and women, was finally himself in love, "incorrectly, if not indecently," with his great-grandson. . . . Although my constitution is hardy, my nerves are delicate, and I had never been adept either at crime or at gainful daily employment. Nor was I gifted as a defender of my own people, although I live now and will, I suppose, continue to live at the Father Divine Fairgroves Hotel (p. 9).

We know Millicent has hired Peggs as a memoirist, but we are not told whether he can write well or has had any formal education. Apparently not, since his only qualification is that he is black. A white writer, according to Peggs, "straining for nobility, for current coin, would not dare stoop to pick up." Peggs tells us that he enjoyed himself by listening and feigning attention to Millicent and Thrush, and that these



two "came near doing the trick. As the square world would have found them beyond the pale, I found them almost up to suiting me to a T." Characteristically, when Eugene Bellamy tries to bar his way to Thrush's room in the theater, Peggs warns him: "I will not state my business to an intermediary, and I immediately demand to be given a seat and to be announced" (p. 16).

The speech of Purdy's characters is an unnatural form of communication, one far removed from the ordinary human discourse, at odds with natural rhythm, and completely lacking the intimate tone of genuine communication. Their contrived, highly stylized language and speech meant to conceal inhumanity and emptiness merely lays bare their stupidity, enui, pretentiousness and spiritual atrophy. Moreover, no communication is possible when people habitually talk loudly, in piercing, hysterical or threatening voices, commanding and perorating.

Purdy's urban world, then, is dark, rotten and faceless, or dreary and vacant, or seething with violence. His characters themselves are simultaneously the victims and cause of urban malaise. No one in Purdy's works is blessed with Joycean epiphany: Zoe Bickle can barely face reality ("I won't be a writer in a place and time like the present") and Cabot can only defy the world by an ineffectual dark laughter. Patrons are users, and protégés are incipiently corrupt; wives are un-manning adulteresses. Purdy's sympathy, despite his "deadpan reporting" style, tilts in favor of the "insulted and the injured," the Cabots and Aces of the world.

Critics have been at pains to define the quality of Purdy's fiction, and they have variously labeled it as surrealistic, fabulist,

or parodic. All agree that the vision he presents of modern man and his civilization is horrible to contemplate, since it is totally nihilistic. Purdy achieves his effect by calculated, rigorous selectivity in his portrayal of cityscape by the use of surrealist settings and events, and by giving his characters a highly specialized speech. Inasmuch as the city focalizes the predicaments of modern man, the apocalyptic vision of the city that emerges from his works becomes that of the whole country. As Lorch perceptively observes:

Purdy's dislocated, grotesque world has a distinct quality all its own. It is a world inhabited by stylized, artificial masks and behavior, exaggerated, even ridiculous conventions and clichés, which imperfectly conceal a terrifying emptiness within which all familiar logic and meaning has been perverted or destroyed.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup>Lorch, p. 204.

## CHAPTER III

### THE CITY IN BELLOW'S FICTION

Unlike Purdy, Bellow is wholly a city novelist. Responding to a question by an interviewer, Bellow said:

I don't know how I could possibly separate my knowledge of life, such as it is, from the city. I could no more tell you how deeply its gotten into my bones than the lady who paints radium dials in the clock factory can tell you.<sup>1</sup>

With the exception of Henderson the Rain King, all of Bellow's novels have the modern city as their principal setting, and all of his protagonists are city-born and city-bred.

Bellow's first novel, Dangling Man (1944), is set in a slum in south Chicago. It is written in the form of a diary kept by a 27-year-old History graduate, Joseph, who is waiting the Army's call for induction. Joseph has resigned his job with a travel bureau and now spends most of his time alone in a single-room apartment in a rooming house full of "cooking odors, roaches, and peculiar neighbors." He never ventures out beyond three blocks. Iva, his wife, to whom he's been married for five years, is supporting him, and Joseph is both resentful and guilt-ridden. His differences with Iva progressively drive him into the arms of Kitty Daumler with whom he has a brief sexual relationship.

Joseph is disliked by his in-laws and held in contempt by his

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<sup>1</sup>Gordon Lloyd Harper, "Saul Bellow--The Art of Fiction: An Interview," The Paris Review (Sept.-Oct., 1965) 36: 65.

wealthy and successful brother. Joseph resents the protective attitude of his brother and cannot tolerate the arrogance and complacency of his in-laws. In one scene Joseph chastises his niece, Etta, for not showing enough respect towards him, and is saddened to find that his brother and his wife defend their spoiled daughter.

Joseph's one-time comrade in the communist party, of which he had been a member, refuses to recognize him, and his girl friend Kitty takes another lover when Joseph refuses to divorce his wife. His sister-in-law suspects him of being a deviate. All his friends, now dispersed to the four corners of the world, have gained recognition and are successful. Mr. Vanaker, the fellow-tenant, a partly alcoholic, nervous kleptomaniac with filthy toilet manners, fuels Joseph's frustrations and depression. Locked up in his room, Joseph carries on a dialogue with himself. He broods night and day over his alienation, his surroundings, and questions of freedom, death, and man's fate. Finally, on March 31st, 1943, he receives his draft orders, and is relieved to submit himself to a life of regimentation which he believes is far more preferable to his present existence of waiting, dangling.

The principal setting of The Adventures of Augie March (1954) is Chicago, between the Depression and the outbreak of the second World War. The story is told to us in the first person. The narrative opens with Augie as a nine-year-old boy living in a slum in south Chicago with his half-blind mother and two brothers, Simon and the half-witted George. An imperious Russian widow whom everybody calls Grandma Lausch also lives with the family. She is only a boarder and no relation to the March family, but has great influence over the mother and rules over the

household like a tyrant. Augie is a person with a checkered career. He distributes handbills, sells newspapers and shoes, works in department stores, and steals books for university students.

When Augie is grown, he becomes assistant to a crippled real estate broker by the name of William Einhorn. Augie becomes his closest aide and is inordinately fascinated by Einhorn's personality. When the Einhorn family goes bankrupt during the Depression, Augie leaves its service to accompany a rich widow to the mineral baths near Benton Harbor in Michigan. There he meets two sisters and falls madly in love with the younger of the two. But his love is unrequited. Disappointed, Augie travels to Buffalo with an ex-convict friend to run immigrants over the border from Canada. Pursued by the police, Augie is forced to return to Chicago where he works for a time in a dog-grooming parlor.

Augie's brother, Simon, is now independent and wealthy. He induces Augie to become an assistant in his coal business. Shortly afterwards, Thea, the older of the two sisters he had met at the mineral baths, turns up at his apartment and persuades him to accompany her to Mexico where she plans to divorce her husband and hunt iguanas. The iguana hunt is a disaster. The eagle Thea has brought with her refuses to attack the animals. Augie and Thea fall out with each other, and Thea leaves for Acatla with a young Mexican lover. Augie follows her to Acatla, but Thea is adamant. It is here that Augie meets Stella and decides to marry her. Before the wedding, however, he goes to Chicago to see his mother and George. After Augie and Stella are married in New York, Augie joins the Merchant Marines. On a routine voyage across the Atlantic he survives shipwreck, is rescued, and taken to Naples. He

and Stella settle in Europe where Augie establishes himself as a dealer in pharmaceutical goods, hoping to have a peaceful life with a loving wife and beautiful children. In an epilog of sorts, Augie confesses:

I said when I started to make the record that I would be plain and heed the knocks as they came, and also that a man's character was his fate. Well, then it is obvious that this fate, or what he settles for, is also his character. And since I never had any place of rest, it should follow that I have trouble being still, and furthermore my hope is based upon getting to be still so that the axial lines can be found.<sup>2</sup>

Seize the Day (1956) is set in New York. The novel describes one crucial day in the life of its protagonist, Tommy Wilhelm. Tommy is a Jew in his early forties, who now lives in a hotel on Broadway Avenue in the West Seventies, estranged from his wife and father, unable to marry the girl he loves, without a job, and without money to support himself or pay alimony to his ex-wife. His father, an octogenerian medical practitioner now retired, lives in the same hotel, and the father and son, though distrustful of each other, usually have breakfast together in the hotel dining-room.

The narrative opens with Wilhelm coming down from his hotel room one early summer morning and going out to buy the daily newspaper at the corner cigar store before joining his father for breakfast. We learn that early in the nineteen-thirties, because of his good looks, Wilhelm had gone to Hollywood to become a film star. He had abandoned school, married his wife Margaret, and changed his name, all much against the advice of his father. Hollywood had disillusioned him, and now when he

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<sup>2</sup>Saul Bellow, The Adventures of Augie March (New York: The Viking Press, 1953), p. 514. All page references to Augie March are to this edition.

needs his father's moral support and financial help, Dr. Adler scorns him.

Returning from the cigar store, Wilhelm collects his mail only to be reminded that his rent is overdue and he is late in paying his alimony. Margaret has threatened to initiate action in court if he delays his payments. At breakfast he implores his father to help him. Dr. Adler is adamant and refuses to concern himself with his son's problems. Instead, he uses the opportunity to berate his son, accusing him of sordid habits, self-indulgence, laziness, and the many unfilial actions he had committed in the past. He goes so far as to tease and humiliate his son in the presence of a fellow-tenant by the name of Mr. Perls, a retired hosiery wholesaler.

In desperation, and anticipating trouble, Wilhelm had, three days earlier, decided to speculate with his last seven hundred dollars on the commodities market. He had been persuaded to take this gamble by a fellow-tenant and friend by the name of Tamkin, a psychologist by profession but more famous for his glib talk and charlatanism. They buy the lard futures together and Tamkin assures Wilhelm that they will be rich if he will only "seize the day." Tamkin, meanwhile, sells Wilhelm's part of the lard and buys rye without the latter's knowledge. By noon that fateful day, rye drops so low that Wilhelm is unable to sell it and so loses all his money. Enraged, he begins looking for Tamkin who has conveniently disappeared from his hotel. Wilhelm rushes out of the stock exchange and searches for Tamkin in his room and all through the hotel building. While searching for Tamkin, he runs into his father in the massage room and once again begs him for help, and, once again, Dr.

Adler refuses to have anything to do with his son. Meanwhile, Wilhelm receives a threatening phone call from his ex-wife. Crushed and completely broken in spirit, Wilhelm rushes out of the hotel and runs through the street shouting for Tamkin. He thinks he has seen Tamkin in a crowd just ahead but never manages to catch up with him. The pressure of the crowd and the baton-wielding policeman force him into a chapel where a funeral is in progress. Moments later Wilhelm forgets Tamkin and begins to study the corpse lying peacefully in its coffin amidst flowers. Suddenly, he gives full vent to his pent-up emotions and frustrations and begins to weep uncontrollably.

Humboldt's Gift (1975) is Bellow's most recent novel. Set in New York and Chicago, it is a first-person account of the protagonist's love and hate relationship over a period of three decades with an older writer, Von Humboldt Fleisher. Charles Citrine, the narrator-protagonist, is a famous, successful writer and is recalling the life and times of his idol who had his successes in the 30's. Humboldt's reputation had begun to sink in the late 40's and he had become suspicious, distrustful, frenzied, and a pauper when Citrine's star was on the rise.

Citrine recalls how he had travelled all the way from Madison, Wisconsin, to meet with his inspiration, Humboldt, in New York. Later he had helped Humboldt obtain a chair in Modern Literature at Princeton. Subsequently, the two friends had fallen out with each other. Humboldt had become jealous of his pupil's success on Broadway and had cashed nearly seven thousand dollars on a blank check that Citrine had given him as a gesture of good faith. When Humboldt, destitute and unsuccessful, died of a heart attack in a flop-house in the West Forties, he left



Citrine a legacy of two movie scenarios, one of which Citrine and Humboldt had written jointly. Citrine is able to sell both the scenarios to a movie company for a great sum of money which he generously shares with an aged uncle of Humboldt.

Citrine recalls the episodes of their life together in flashbacks. After the death of Humboldt, Citrine is, so to speak, putting his own house in order. His constant companion is a beautiful but whimsical and insensitive woman by the name of Renata. Her one passion in life is to travel to Europe in search of her father. Citrine's ex-wife, Denise, is once again in court asking for a greater share of his earnings. Citrine's closest friend is mismanaging their joint literary venture. At this time Citrine becomes involved in a bizarre comedy featuring a small-time hoodlum, Rinaldo Cantabile, who had cheated him at poker. Citrine had stopped payment on his check of four hundred dollars. Rinaldo wrecks his classic Mercedes and threatens him with dire consequences if he will not settle the account. They meet in the Russian bath on Division Street to settle their differences. Rinaldo, in an effort to frighten Citrine into submission, forces him at gun point to watch him defecate in the lavatory, then orders Citrine to accompany him to a skyscraper still under construction on Michigan Boulevard, forces him into the elevator, and they go up to the highest floor where Rinaldo tears up all the dollar bills and scatters them into the wind.

Meanwhile Citrine is embroiled in a legal battle with his castrating ex-wife, and frustrated in his plans by a deceitful lawyer and a harsh judge. Renata is able to persuade him to leave for Europe. As Citrine is about to leave for Europe he gets custody of Humboldt's movie

scenarios. He negotiates their sale in Paris with the help of Rinaldo. While Citrine is busy negotiating the deal, Renata tires of waiting for him and leaves for Italy to marry her ex-boyfriend.

The novel is Citrine's testimony to posterity. He ponders over the present state of civilization, its life-style, values, and art. Humboldt's rise and fall as an artist symbolizes the impoverishment of the times. Humboldt is not appreciated in his life time; his serious works are dismissed out-of-hand, and his inferior creations are immediate successes. Citrine himself wastes his creative energy fighting against his own meteoric success and a host of greedy, possessive, deceitful men and women.

Whatever we observe of the American city in the novels of Bellow is filtered through a central consciousness. Although it is difficult to separate the author's vision of the city from that of his protagonists, on the basis of what Bellow himself has said about the American city and his urban settings in fictions we can conclude that there is very little divergence, if any, between his vision and that of his protagonists. For example, in 1977 Bellow spoke of the "mixture of desolation and vitality" he saw in Chicago.

If one is to judge by bulk, Chicago's real culture is about retail advertising. . . . We may enjoy a rich but painful freedom of spirit. It is painful because the setting is one of ugliness, cruelty and suffering.<sup>3</sup>

Elsewhere Bellow condemns the acceptance by writers of a theory of modern civilization which says that "modern mass society is frightful,

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<sup>3</sup>Milt Freudenheim, "Bellow Has Hope for the City," Chicago Daily News, April 2, 1977.

brutal, hostile to whatever is pure in the human spirit, a waste land and a horror," and insists that "To its ugliness, its bureaucratic regiments, its thefts, its lies, its wars, and its cruelties, the artist can never be reconciled."<sup>4</sup> We notice that on the one hand Bellow is aware of and revolted by the ugliness of urban life, and on the other hand can confess, "I thrive on a certain amount of smoke, gloom and cold stone."<sup>5</sup> Like Bellow, his protagonists recognize the threatening aspect of the city, with its chaos, ugliness, squalor, and brutality, but at the same time they see the city's protean vitality and restless energy. Like Bellow they enjoy its "gloom and cold stone" and thrive in the city environment. We observe that even though the city environment per se is inimical, the language in which Bellow presents the reactions and experiences of his protagonists negate or undercut the ugliness of urban reality and give the city its protean vitality and restless energy. The city comes through as alive and exciting: the ugly features of urban life are transformed or transmuted by Bellow's verbal art. The verbal exuberance, like the sunlight in Bellow's fictional city, gives "an air of innocence to . . . common objects . . . liberating them from ugliness."<sup>6</sup>

In an illuminating essay on the literary art of Balzac and Dickens, Robert Alter says of Balzac's vision of the city that "for all

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<sup>4</sup>Saul Bellow, "The Thinking Man's Waste Land," Saturday Review (April 1965), 48: 20.

<sup>5</sup>Quoted by Jane Howard in her article, "Mr. Bellow Considers His Planet," Life (April 3, 1970), 68: 59.

<sup>6</sup>Saul Bellow, Dangling Man (New York: The Vanguard Press, Inc., 1944), p. 119. All page references to Dangling Man are to this edition.

its Dantesque gloom," Paris is the city of "endless, restless energy." "The perceived energy of the city," he continues, "has been transmuted into the asserted energy of artful language," and concludes that Balzac's rhetorical art attests to a conquest of the urban chaos by the creation of a "rival reality." Alter observes that Dickens' descriptions of nineteenth century London show the city to be "dreary, dismal, disheartening," but the hideousness of the landscape is an occasion for Dickens to exercise his fantastic imagination so that the city takes on a "paradoxical exuberance."<sup>7</sup> Bellow's verbal art has the same effect on the chaos of the modern American city. The city's evil is not denied, but its somber, brutal quality is transmuted.

Bellow has his protagonists see the city for themselves, with their own eyes and ears. What they see has solidity: the Bellowian heroes are intensely conscious of their surroundings, always aware of city noises, odors, colors, movements and texture of landscape, whether they are shut up in their rooms, walking in the street, or travelling on the El. They painstakingly observe the city under different conditions, in different seasons, and at different times of the day. In a typical description of the urban landscape and atmosphere in Dangling Man, Bellow's first novel, the scene is evoked in rich, sensuous detail. Joseph is visiting his in-laws on the northwest side of Chicago and sets off with a prescription that his father-in-law has asked him to take to the neighborhood drug store. Going out, he notices that

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<sup>7</sup>Robert Alter, Partial Magic (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), pp. 94-6.

There was a sharp wind outside; the sun, low and raw in a field of course clouds, ruddied the bricks and windows. The street had been blown dry (it had rained the day before), and it presented itself in one of its winter aspects, creased and with thin sidelocks of snow, all but deserted. A block-long gap lay between me and the nearest walker--out on some unfathomable business--a man in a long, soldierly coat which the sun had converted to its own color. And then the pharmacy where I waited, sipping a cup of coffee under the crepe-paper lattice till my parcel, wrapped in green Christmas paper, was handed to me.

As I was going back, an exhibit in a barbershop attracted me: "Fancy articles from kitchen odds and ends by Mrs. J. Kowalski, 3538 Pierce Avenue." And there were laid out mosaic pictures, bits of matchstick on mats of leaf from old cigar butts, ash trays cut from tin cans and shellacked grapefruit rind, a braided cellophane belt, a letter opener inlaid with bits of glass, and two hand-painted religious pictures. In its glass case the striped pole turned smoothly, the Lucky Tiger watched from a thicket of bottles, the barber read a magazine. Turning with my parcel, I went on and, through the gray pillars and the ungainly door which clanked on the mailboxes, entered the sad cavern of the hall (pp. 22-3).

As Joseph prepares to leave his in-laws' house, he looks out of the window--

The sun had been covered up; snow was beginning to fall. It was sprinkled over the black pores of the gravel and was lying in thin slips on the slanting roofs. I could see a long way from this third-floor height. Not far off there were chimneys, their smoke a lighter gray than the gray of the sky, and, straight before me, ranges of poor dwellings, warehouses, billboards, culverts, electric signs blandly burning, parked cars and moving cars, and the occasional bare plane of a tree. These I surveyed, pressing my forehead on the glass (p. 24).

The urban scene on this January afternoon, thus evocatively presented, is, literally speaking, rather dismal. Joseph himself acknowledges as much when he says: "It was my painful obligation to look and submit to myself the invariable question: Where was there a particle of what, elsewhere, or in the past, had spoken in man's favor?" (p. 24). The scene's buildings are uniformly dreary and lifeless. The street is deserted, the sky is gray, and thin slips of dirty snow lie on the black gravel. Whatever we observe in the barbershop window is also perishable,

trivial and sordid. Bellow gives this dreary, ugly landscape a proto-plasmic vitality and restless energy by his use of warm colors, varied sounds, action verbs, verbals and other motion words. In the long passage above, "ruddy" is an important word. The setting sun "ruddies" the bricks and windows and converts the passerby's coat "into its own color." The effect of the otherwise gray or black and depressing landscape--the gray sky, gray smoke and gray pillars--is softened by the sunlight and words denoting warm colors such as "striped." The harshness of the landscape is mellowed, the chill in the weather made tolerable, perhaps even bracing and invigorating.

Bellow's use of sounds and action verbs and verbals has the same effect. They infuse the city environment with movement, life and restless energy. Joseph sits in the cafe "sipping" his coffee; the ungainly door of the hall "clanks" on the mailbox. The street is "blown" dry; the electric signs are "burning"; the striped pole "turns"; and Joseph observes the landscape while "pressing" his forehead against the window. The snow lies "sprinkled" over the gravel.

The passage is also notable for Bellow's favorite technique of cataloguing objects and people. Here Bellow presents a mixture of sordid, bland, and beautiful objects in rich, sensuous detail. Consider the shiny items in the window: handpainted and mosaic pictures compete with bits of matchstick and a braided cellophane belt; there are the tobacco-leaf mats, the letter-opener inlaid with bits of glass, the Lucky Tiger among a thicket of bottles, and a striped pole. Soon after, Joseph observes "ranges of poor dwellings, warehouses, billboards, culverts, electric signs . . . parked cars and moving cars, and the

occasional bare plan of a tree." Normally we would see the items in the window and the surrounding buildings as typical products of man's commercial spirit and greed. They are unartistic, functional, and perishable. In fact, Joseph is saddened to see how man could tolerate such impoverished surroundings. However, the technique of cataloguing not only gives the illusion of authenticity but also a teeming quality, a sort of vitality.

Bellow makes the urban scene attractive not only by his use of warm colors and catalogues but also by the rich, sensuous detail he provides. Because the scene is depicted in rich, sensuous detail, it has a verisimilar quality that we cannot have failed to recognize. The act of recognition itself, as we all know, is aesthetically pleasurable, and serves to attenuate the sordidness of a scene. The reader feels the pleasure of having seen and known the discrete elements of such reality.

In another representative passage from Dangling Man, Joseph and Iva have quarrelled and Joseph storms out of the house in frustration. Joseph, pulling his hat down against the rain, sees

Our windows, with their glowing shades, set two orange rectangles, trade-marks of warmth and comfort, against the downpour and the dark, the glitter of the trees, the armor of ice on the street. The intense cold of the past week had lifted. Fog had succeeded it, rising in spongy gray blooms from the soaked walks, hovering in the yards and over the hollows blinking with rain and changes of color from the muffled signal lights--green, amber, red, amber, green, shuttering down the street. Mr. Vanaker's window went up. He threw a bottle, using the neck as a hilt. It landed softly into the clay, beside the others; there were dozens of bottles among the bushes, their high shoulders streaming as though drops of mercury were falling on them from the withes. The window was run down hastily.

My shoes, their once neat points scuffed and turned up, squashed, as I walked, through half-a-dozen leaks. I moved toward the corner, inhaling the odors of wet clothes and of wet coal, wet paper, wet earth, drifting with the puffs of fog. Low, far out, a horn uttered a dull cry, subsided again. The street lamp bent over the curb like a woman who cannot turn homeward until she has found the ring or the

coin she dropped in the ice and gutter silt. I heard behind me the clicking of a feminine stride and, for a moment, thought that Iva had come after me, but it was a stranger who passed at the awning of the corner store, her face made bleary by the woolly light of the shadowy fur-piece at her throat. The awning heaved; twists of water ran through its rents. Once more the horn bawled over the water, warning the lake tugs from the headlands. It was not hard to imagine that there was no city here at all, and not even a lake but, instead, a swamp and that despairing bawl crossing it, wasting trees instead of dwellings, and runners of vine instead of telephone wires. The bell of an approaching streetcar drove this vision off. I hailed it and, paying my fare, remained on the platform. It was not far to Kitty's. If my shoes had been watertight, I would have walked (pp. 95-6).

Even a thoroughly "dark and burdensome" day is not without its sensory, pulsating appeal. Once again one becomes aware of warm colors, "orange," "green," "amber," "red," set against the downpour, the gray fog and the dark. One is conscious of sounds, "squashing," "inhaling," "clicking," "bawling," "shuttering," action verbs, "heaving," "rising," "hovering," "streaming," "blinking," and motion connoting nouns such as "glitter." All of these words, connoting warmth, motion, effort, energy and vitality, make the scene seductively beautiful. To be out in the streets on such a wet, dismal day is surely not comforting, but the ugliness of the environment has been by the magical power of language transmuted into a vibrant, paradoxical beauty.

Bellow's use of warm colors, sounds, action verbs, verbals and motion words to convey the city's vitality and restless energy is not unique to the passages we have just considered. With Joseph we see the "blue" stone, stems showing "sticky green" within and the trees breaking into "crude red" along its branches. With Joseph we hear the different sounds in his apartment building, of "splashing and frying," the "chiming" telephone, the "booming" radio; we watch the street cars



"crashing" forward, "rocking" on their tracks, "nicking" sparks from the "weaving" cable, the steel ring "whipping" loudly against the flagpole, the rat "scurrying" for cover, the pigeons "fluttering," and the water from the drinking fountain "flurrying" into the warm air. Among the dead and decaying things of nature and human endeavour the brown seed pods lie "mouldering," stems "crack" at the tip, and the tree "erupts" in color.

The Chicago landscape and atmosphere are of equally absorbing interest to Augie, who, perhaps because he is less reflective than Joseph, perceives the surroundings in more raw detail. He is describing the Harrison Street dispensary of his boyhood. The dispensary was, he tells us,

. . . like the dream of a multitude of dentists' chairs, hundreds of them in a space as enormous as an armory, and green owls with designs of glass grapes, drills lifted zig-zag as insects' legs, and gas flames of the porcelain swivel trays--a thundery gloom in Harrison Street of limestone county buildings and cumbersome red street-cars with metal grillwork on their windows and monarchical iron whiskers of cowcatchers front and rear. They lumbered and clanged, and their brake tanks panted in the slushy brown of a winter afternoon or the bare stone brown of a summer's, salted with ash, smoke, and prairie dust, with long stops at the clinics to let off clumpers, cripples, hunchbacks, brace-legs, crutch-wielders, tooth and eye sufferers, and all the rest.<sup>8</sup>

On this same street is the County Hospital building which Augie describes much later in the narrative. The hospital was

. . . mobbed and was like Lent and Carnival battling. This was Harrison Street, where Mama and I used to come for her specs, and not far from where I had to go once to identify that dead coal heaver, the thundery gloom, bare stone brown, while the red cars lumbered and clanged. Every bed, window, separate frame of accommodation, every corner was filled, like the walls of Troy or the streets of Clermont when Peter the Hermit was preaching. Shruggers,

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<sup>8</sup>Bellow, Augie March, pp. 7-8.

hobblers, truss and harness wearers, crutch-dancers, wall inspectors, wheelchair people in bandage helmets, wound smells and drug flowers blossoming from gauze, from colorful horrors and out of the deep sinks. Not far the booby-hatch voices would scream, sing, and chirp and sound like the tropical bird collection of Lincoln Park (p. 458).

The passage is rich in color imagery, with "green," "red," "slushy brown" and "stone brown" contrasting with the white of the County buildings and the gray of smoke, ash, and dust. The scene is full of sounds: "clanged," "scream," "lumber," "chirp" and "sing." Action verbs and verbals such as "blossoming," "mobbed" and "battling" reinforce the sense of effort and vitality. Even the description of the people is replete with motion or action words: "hobblers," "crutch-wielders," "clumpers," and "crutch-dancers."

The two passages are especially notable for their highly imaginative catalogues of people: there are altogether fourteen kinds among the sick and diseased. The Harrison Street dispensary and the County Hospital arouse in us unpleasant emotions, for they are overcrowded with the sick, the decrepit, and the poor. Hanging over them is an atmosphere of death and suffering. There is altogether too much dirt, stench, and congestion. Augie describes the effect of the surroundings as one of "thunderly gloom."

But the gloom of the environment is transmuted by Bellow's verbal art into a kind of grim beauty. Moreover, the cataloguing technique gives us the illusion of the richness of city life, its paradoxical vitality. The city is a place where, despite all the poverty, disease and deformity, people continue to labor and survive.

Another typical description of the Chicago landscape appears in

Augie March where the hero tells us that the day was

. . . frosty, windy, clear, the waves piled up, from the slugging green water, white over the rocks of the Outer Drive. And then we came to the proud class of the hotel and its Jupiter's heaviness and restless marble detail, seeking to be more and more, introducing another pot too huge for flowers, another carved figure, another white work of iron; and inside luxuriously warm--even the subterranean garage where I parked had this silky warmth. And coming out of the white elevator, you were in an Alhambra of roses and cellular ceilings, gilt and ivory, Florida feathering of plants and muffling of carpets, immense distances, and everywhere the pure purpose of supporting and encompassing the human creature in conveniences. Of doing unto the body; holding it precious; bathing, drying, powdering, preparing satin rest, conveying, feeding. (p. 237).

We are assaulted by a battery of pleasing, contrasting colors, the "green" against the "white," "rose" against "white," "gilt," and "ivory." Action verbs, verbals and motion words abound: "supporting," "encompassing," "holding," "bathing," "piled up," "drying," "powdering," "conveying," "feeding," "slugging," "feathering," "muffling," "restless." Directly as a result of Bellow's use of language the scene possesses vitality and energy despite the hotel interior's obviously decadent quality.

The great sweep of the Chicago landscape is of constant interest to Augie and he never fails to comment on it. Returning to Chicago from Muskegon, Michigan, where he has been promoting a boxing match, Augie notices the

. . . docks and dumps of sulphur and coal, the flames seen by their heat, not light, in the space of noon air among the black, huge Pasiphaë cows and other columnar animals, headless, rolling a rust of smoke and connected in an enormous statuary of hearths and mills --here and there an odd boiler or a hill of cinders in the bulrush spawning holes of frogs. If you've seen a winter London open thundering mouth in its awful last minutes of river light or have come with cold clanks from the Alps into Torino in December white steam then you've known like greatness of place. Thirty crowded miles of oil-spotted road, where the furnace, gas, and machine volcanoes cooked the Empedocles fundamentals into pig iron, girders,

and rails; another ten miles of loose city, five of tight--the tenements--and we got off the trailer not far from the Loop and went into Thompson's for a stew and spaghetti meal, near the Detective Bureau and in the midst of the movie-distributors' district of great posters (pp. 90-1).

On his return from the Mexico adventure Augie looks westward from his window at

. . . the gray snarled city with the hard black straps of rails, enormous industry cooking and its vapor shuddering to the air, the climb and fall of its stages in construction or demolition like mesas, and on these the different powers and sub-powers crouched and watched like sphinxes. Terrible dumbness covered it, like a judgment that would never find its word (p. 425).

On yet another occasion Augie looks at the city on a warm summer day. Chicago, says Augie,

. . . exhausted your imagination of details and units, more units than the cells of the brain and bricks of Babel. The Ezekiel caldron of wrath, stoked with bones. In time the caldron too would melt. A mysterious tremor, dust, vapor, emanation of stupendous effort traveled with the air, over me on top of the great establishment, so full as it was, and over the clinics, clinks, factories, flophouses, morgue, skid row. As before the work of Egypt and Assyria, as before a sea, you're nothing here. Nothing (pp. 458-59).

The whole dismal, disheartening scene, with its satanic gloom, its hills of cinder, coal and sulphur, its clouds of smoke and stacks of blackened chimneys--a terrestrial, man-made hell--is nonetheless bursting with energy (the "dreary begetting its own fire" as Bellow puts it). Set against the depressing colors of gray and black are those of the flame and smoke: "red" and "rust." We are conscious of the animistic energy of the city conveyed by words like "rolling," "cooked," "crouched," "shuddering," "watched," and "snarled." Other verbs and verbals reinforce the dynamic impression: "exhausted," "stoked," "snarled," and "spawning." Appropriately enough, Augie calls Chicago the "Ezekiel caldron of wrath." It is a seething caldron, the aesthetic impression

of vast energy and vitality further supported by Bellow's use of catalogue as in "clinics, clinks, factories, flophouses, morgue, skid row."

Seize the Day is primarily the intense personal drama of a protagonist set against the vivid, pulsating backdrop of New York city. Even though what engages us in this novel is Tommy Wilhelm's tortured relationship with his father and ex-wife and the attendant anguish, the city's presence is strongly felt both as a physical place and an atmosphere. Although Wilhelm spends most of his time inside the hotel on Broadway Avenue, he is nevertheless very acutely conscious of the bustling neighborhood. There are very few extended descriptions of the city in this novel, but brief ones appear frequently. Like Bellow's other protagonists, Wilhelm, too, condemns the modern city, especially New York, as "the end of the world," yet the city comes through the descriptions as rich and pulsating with life.

From inside Wilhelm's hotel dining-room, for example, we look across Broadway

. . . down to the Hudson and New Jersey. On the other side of the street was a supermodern cafeteria with gold and purple mosaic columns. On the second floor a private-eye school, a dental laboratory, a reducing parlor, a veteran's club, and a Hebrew school shared the space. The old man was sprinkling sugar on his strawberries. Small hoops of brilliance were cast by the water glasses on the white tablecloth, despite a faint murkiness in the sunshine. It was early summer, and the long window was turned inward; a moth was on the pane; the putty was broken and the white enamel on the frames was streaming with wrinkles.<sup>9</sup>

The above scene is rich in warm, contrasting colors: "gold," "purple," and colors suggested by "mosaic," "strawberries," and "hoops of

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<sup>9</sup>The Portable Saul Bellow, compiled by Edith Tarcov (New York: The Viking Press, 1974), p. 28. All page references to Seize the Day are to this edition.

brilliance." The "white" of the tablecloth and the enamel contrast with the "faint murkiness" of the sunshine. The teeming quality of the city is suggested by the clutter of offices and evinced by Bellow's use of catalogue as in "a private-eye school, a dental laboratory, a reducing parlor, a veteran's club, and a Hebrew school." The impression of urban density is further reinforced by the catalogue of objects inside the dining-room: the tablecloth, the window, the moth, the putty, and the frames. The restless energy of the scene is suggested by action or motion verbs: "cast," "streaming," and "sprinkling."

The interior of the cafeteria with the "gilded" front is later in the novel described to us in a wealth of sensuous detail. The food inside, we are told, looked

. . . sumptuous. Whole fishes were framed like pictures with carrots, and the salads were like terraced landscapes or like Mexican pyramids; slices of lemon and onion and radishes were like sun and moon and stars; the cream pies were about a foot thick and the cakes swollen as if sleepers had baked them in their dreams. . . . The old people idled and gossiped over their coffee. The elderly ladies were rouged and mascaraed and hennaed and used blue hair rinse and eye shadow and wore costume jewelry, and many of them were proud and stared at you with expressions that did not belong to their age (pp. 83-4).

The opulence and vitality of city life are reflected in the rich assortment of items and warm colors, either suggested or specified: "carrots," "radishes," "lemons," "onion," "cream pies," "blue hair rinse," "sun and moon and stars," and "eye shadow." The suffused color and vitality of the scene are further reinforced by the catalogue of foods and the string of verbs and verbals: "gossiped," "stared," "swollen," "rouged," "mascaraed," and "hennaed."

Similarly, the opulence and the mosaic-like quality of New York life is evident in Bellow's description of a fruit store, where a man

with a scoop

. . . spread crushed ice between his rows of vegetables. There were also Persian melons, lilacs, tulips with radiant black at the middle. The many street noises came back after a little while from the caves of the sky. . . . From the carnival of the street--pushcarts, accordion and fiddle, shoeshine, begging, the dust going round like a woman on stilts--they entered the narrow crowded theater of the brokerage office (p. 71).

Bellow's favorite technique of cataloguing is once again evident in the passage just cited. The description is rich in warm, satisfying colors suggested by the articles: melons, lilacs, tulips with "radiant black" markings at the middle. The vitality of urban life is conveyed by the verb and verbals and motion-connoting nouns: "spread," "crushed," "fiddle," "shoeshine," "pushcarts," and "begging."

At the close of the novel when Wilhelm hurries down the stairs and into the street to escape the stifling atmosphere of the hotel, it is bright afternoon, the "gassy" air

. . . almost motionless under the leaden spokes of sunlight, and sawdust footprints lay about the doorways of butcher shops and fruit stores. And the great, great crowd, the inexhaustible current of millions of every race and kind pouring out, pressing round, of every age, of every genius, possessors of every human secret, antique and future, in every face the refinement of one particular motive or essence--I labor, I spend, I strive, I design, I love, I cling, I uphold, I give way, I envy, I long, I scorn, I die, I hide, I want. Faster, much faster than any man could make the tally. The sidewalks were wider than any causeway; the street itself was immense, and it quaked and gleamed and it seemed to Wilhelm to throb at the last limit of endurance. And although the sunlight appeared like a broad tissue, its actual weight made him feel like a drunkard (pp. 105-06).

We notice that even though the air is still and the sun's rays oppressive, life in the city is full of restless energy. The crowds in the street are "pouring," and "pressing"; each one in the crowd seems to "labor," "spend," "strive," "love," "die," or "want." The street "quakes" and "gleams" and "throbs" under millions of feet. Bellow uses the

cataloguing technique to reinforce the teeming, vital quality of the urban scene as in his classification of the people who constitute the crowds: "of every race and kind," "of every age," "of every genius," and "possessors of every secret."

In Humboldt's Gift, once again, there are few extended descriptions of city landscape, but we observe that the central character's interest in the city environment, in colors, sounds, motion, are as intense as Joseph's or Augie's. Citrine ponders over the skyline of New York city and, like Joseph and Augie, sees its satanic quality. Citrine and Humboldt are driving out of New York. The car in which they are traveling

. . . walloped the pavement, charging toward the Holland Tunnel. . . snoring and squealing through the tunnel and came out in bright sunlight. Tall stacks, a filth artillery, fired silently into the Sunday sky with beautiful bursts of smoke. The acid smell of gas refineries went into your lungs like a spur. The rushes were as brown as onion soup. There were seagoing tankers stuck in the channels, the wind boomed, the great clouds were white. Far out, the massed bungalows had the look of a necropolis-to-be. Through the pale sun of the streets the living went to church. Under Humboldt's polo boot the carburetor gasped, the eccentric tires thumped fast on the slabs of the highway. The gusts were so strong that even the heavy Buick fluttered. We plunged over the Pulaski Skyway while the strips of girder shadows came as us through the shuddering windshield.<sup>10</sup>

Even though Citrine recognizes the infernal quality of the landscape (calling New York a "necropolis-to-be") the restless, vast energy of the city comes through in the action verbs and the associated sounds Bellow uses to describe the journey: "walloped," "charging," "snoring," "squealing," "fired," "boomed," "thumped," "gaspd," "fluttered"

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<sup>10</sup>Saul Bellow, Humboldt's Gift (New York: The Viking Press, 1975), pp. 21-2. All page references to Humboldt's Gift are to this edition.



"plunged," "shuddering." Bellow makes use of colors--"onion-soup brown" and "white" and "gold"--and a verbal "massed." The verbal especially connotes the vast labor, ingenuity, and energy that must have gone into the creation of these concrete slabs and structures.

The landscape and atmosphere of Chicago are evoked when Citrine says that on hot nights

. . . Chicagoans feel the city body and soul. The stockyards are gone, Chicago is no longer slaughter-city, but the old smells revive in the night heat. Miles of railroad siding along the streets once were filled with red cattle cars, the animals waiting to enter the yards lowing and reeking. The old stink still haunts the place. It returns at times, suspiring from the vacated soil, to remind us all that Chicago had once led the world in butcher-technology and that billions of animals had died here. And that night the windows were open wide and the familiar depressing multilayered stink of meat, tallow, blood-meal, pulverized bones, hides, soap, smoked slabs, and burnt hair came back. Old Chicago breathed again through leaves and screens. I heard fire trucks and the gulp and whoop of ambulances, bowel-deep and hysterical. In the surrounding black slums incendiarism shoots up in summer, an index, some say, of psychopathology. Although the love of flames is also religious. However, Denise was sitting nude on the bed rapidly and strongly brushing her hair. Over the lake, steel mills twinkled. Lamplight showed the soot already fallen on the leaves of the wall ivy. We had an early drought that year. Chicago, this night, was panting, the big urban engines going, tenements blazing in Oakwood with great shawls of flame, the sirens weirdly yelping, the fire engines, ambulances, and police cars--mad-dog, gashing-knife weather, a rape and murder night, thousands of hydrants open, spraying water from both breasts. Engineers were staggered to see the level of Lake Michigan fall as these tons of water poured. Bands of kids prowled with handguns and knives (pp. 114-15).

The picture of Chicago is one of chaos and din, depression and brutality. But this depressing picture is transformed into a sort of demonic effulgence by Bellow's use of colors, sounds, and action verbs and verbals: colors such as "red" and associated words "flame" and "blazing"; sounds denoted by "lowing," "gulp" and "whoop," "panting" and "yelping"; action verbs and verbals like "revive," "reeking," "suspiring," "blazing,"

"spraying," "prowled," and "poured"; "pulverized," and "gashing." The familiar Bellovian technique of cataloguing re-emerges once again in "meat, tallow, blood-meal, pulverized bones, hides, soap, smoked slabs, and burnt hair."

It should be obvious, both from the descriptions of the city quoted and from what Bellow's protagonists have to say about their environment, that the city's ugliness, squalor and brutality are not ignored. However, the sheer exuberance of language in which Bellow presents the reactions and experiences of his protagonists gives the city its protoplasmic vitality and restless energy, a sense of continuity and permanence. The city comes through in all its iridescent colors, moods and facets, vitally alive and exciting, a seething, primeval sea. Bellow is perhaps voicing the feelings of one of his protagonists. I, too, says Citrine,

. . . am sentimental about urban ugliness. In the modern spirit of ransoming the commonplace, all this junk and wretchedness, through art and poetry, by the superior power of the soul. (p. 72),

The urban ugliness that he has just witnessed in the "old neighborhood" is shot with beauty: the "silvered" boiler-rivets and "blazing" Polish geraniums.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE CITY AS METAPHOR IN PURDY AND BELLOW

Even a cursory examination of Purdy's works reveals that his portrayal of the modern American city, whether New York or Chicago, is not a literal or realistic transcription of external reality. Purdy makes no pretension to giving us an accurate and balanced account; his city is a highly stylized version of external reality. In other words, the chief interest is not in the external city per se but how Purdy perceives the reality of modern life in the city.

Purdy's fictional city-environment, as we have seen, is characterized by certain physical and psychological qualities: darkness, emptiness, rottenness, and dreary uniformity; facelessness; an atmosphere of violence and death; irrationality and lack of communication among the inhabitants. The vision of the city that results from these physical and psychological qualities is one of Dantesque gloom, of an eternal hell on earth, peopled by despairing, loveless men and women with no hope of regeneration. Purdy's world, at first glance, appears to be a stultifying, soulless world where all human values have been either perverted or destroyed. Purdy's highly-stylized fictional city may be said to act as a metaphor for the modern human condition, for whatever he observes of the city constitutes a statement about life.

If the city acts as a metaphor for the human condition we must ask ourselves how. As I explained in the "Introduction," in a work of

fiction the entire portrayal of the fictional city may be said to be a metaphor. Using I. A. Richards' terms we may say the fictional city is one part of the metaphor--the vehicle--which reveals the principal subject--the tenor--namely, the human condition.

In Purdy's view, contemporary America is notable for certain unique physical and psychological phenomena which make life here a hellish experience. The modern landscape, whether of the cities or the towns, is the result of commercial and technological forces. Buildings are functional, inartistic, and uniformly dreary, without proportion or beauty. No city has a character of its own, as cities and towns become more and more alike. The urban dreariness, the pollution and physical squalor so characteristic of urban slums are not confined to the urban boundaries, for the city's ganglion roots have spread to and infected the towns and the remote countryside. Just as the city gives the appearance of a vast growing slum, the small town greets the visitor with the familiar scenes of decaying houses, badly-lit and poorly maintained streets, and pollution. While certain neighborhoods in cities and towns are like graveyards, silent and empty, others are overcrowded and noisy. To Purdy, such gloomy landscapes are the outward manifestation of the spiritually empty inner reality of man's life, that is, a physical equivalent of the spiritual state of modern man.

Contemporary American life, in Purdy's view, is notable for its mechanization, its competitive spirit and consumerism, and its hectic pace. Purdy would readily agree with those sociologists who say that the modern or urban life-style is dependent upon the machine and division of labor for survival and for material prosperity. Modern man

consumes vast amounts of machine-produced goods and, in turn, applies himself day and night to produce goods for others. He is busy "earning a living" and judges his life by standards wholly materialistic, bound up with changing fashions and the urge to possess more and more. In such a materialistic milieu he owes his survival and life's comforts to a competitive spirit rooted in aggression. Despite the great density and physical proximity of people in today's world, modern man is alone and alienated, anonymous and surrounded by predatory, impersonal forces. He is distrustful of others. With the rapid disintegration of social, family and religious ties, he can only forge relationships that are transitory. The life he leads is hectic, dull, routine and meaningless. He travels great distances to work, overstrains himself for petty gains, returns home fatigued, and has no time for family or friends. He is bored with his work, suffers from ennui and experiences victimization. His reactions, consequently, are robot-like. In short, the collection of physical conditions and psychological tensions inherent in modern life make him an unthinking, unfeeling puppet.

Human relationships, in Purdy's view, are based on power and money, not on love and compassion. This is true not only of the commercial world but family relationships, those between husbands and wives, parents and children. Relationships are never permanent, for each person wishes to possess the other and have power over him. People feel no responsibility toward society and act as though there were no constraints.

Contemporary life in the U.S., Purdy suggests, is notable for violence in its physical, sexual, and psychological forms. Purdy

suggests that the physical and psychological tensions to which we are prone in modern society make us aggressive, competitive, and violent in our dealings with others. This violence is all the more hateful because it is irrational: people kill and hurt without any overt material or psychological profit. Then there is the psychological violence of modern life. People misuse language, primarily meant to communicate the intimacy of the heart. Neighbors greet each other perfunctorily, and no one listens. Each person remains isolated, afraid to open his heart to another, not sure of the other's reactions. Purdy sees a faceless crowd, a predatory world of victims and victimizers.

The crucial question is: Is Purdy's vision of life totally pessimistic or nihilistic as many of his critics have complained? Patrick J. McCarthy and Burton Feldman, for example, say it is.<sup>1</sup> In my opinion Purdy is not totally nihilistic, for a close examination of his art reveals that he may be satirizing the contemporary state of things by distortion and exaggeration, at once shocking us into recognition of the hideous reality we have come to tolerate and accept as "natural" in our lives and trying to move us out of our lethargy.<sup>2</sup>

A satirist, to borrow James Sutherland's definition of him, is one who is "abnormally sensitive to the gap between what might be and

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<sup>1</sup>Patrick J. McCarthy, Review of Color of Darkness by James Purdy, Arizona Quarterly 14 (Summer 1958): 169. Burton Feldman, "Anatomy of Black Humor," in The American Novel Since World War II, ed. Marcus Klein (Greenwich, Conn.: Fawcett, 1969), pp. 224-25.

<sup>2</sup>Gerald Rosen, "James Purdy's World of Black Humor" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 1969), p. 74. My view differs from that of Rosen who says that Purdy "reject[s] all ethical absolutes. Especially [he] reject[s] the traditional satirists' faith in the efficacy of satire as a reforming instrument . . ."

what is," and his goal is to persuade his fellow human beings to re-examine their surroundings and the ugly reality, and their habitual assumptions.<sup>3</sup> In short, the satirist forces us to look beneath the surface of things and pleads with us not to accept or tolerate what is. Irrespective of what genre or technique a writer may select, if his purpose is to expose and make us despise what is, he has fulfilled his function. He may or may not supply the moral norm against which his fictional world is to be judged, as the norm is already known and shared by his society. That is to say, the reader must supply the norm whenever the writer does not.

Admittedly, Purdy's vision of life is hellish, but if we were to ask whether Purdy holds out hope of a better world or has any shred of faith in humanity we would be compelled to say, yes. In his novels Purdy does indirectly point toward or posit certain moral values by his portrayal of characters, especially of the orphans and the social outcasts: loyalty, compassion, courage, friendship, and love. For example, we are made to feel compassion for the repentant Fenton Riddleway, the protagonist of 63: Dream Palace, even though he is guilty of fratricide. Malcolm is wholly innocent, a Christ-like figure, and our hearts ache for him when we see him victimized by fellow human beings, including his rapacious wife. Madame Girard is, at first, a despicable character, but she commands our esteem and love when she abandons everything to go to Malcolm's sick bedside. She displays singular devotion and redeems herself in our eyes, so to speak. Another

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<sup>3</sup>James Sutherland, English Satire (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), p. 4.

character in Malcolm, a decadent, bohemian portrait-painter, is persuaded by her exconvict-husband to tear up the ten-thousand-dollar check given to her by Madame Girard as a bribe. She thereby proves her devotion to art and preserves her integrity as an artist. Daniel Hawes, the homosexual landlord in Eustace Chisholm, is prepared to suffer excruciating torture at the hands of his superior, Capt. Stadger, rather than disown his love for Amos Ratcliffe. In Cabot Wright, the despondent Bernie Gladhart befriends a perfect stranger from Nigeria in the streets of New York. Even though these positive acts by characters are in the minority in Purdy, by portraying such characters and scenes, Purdy is evidently making a positive statement about humanity, namely, that even among the poor and the outcasts there exist friendship, compassion, loyalty, courage, and the unceasing search for love and understanding.

In my study of Bellow's verbal art in portraying the cityscape in four of his novels--Dangling Man, Augie March, Seize the Day, and Humboldt's Gift--I have shown how, despite the squalor and ugliness, the city in Bellow's portrayal possesses a protean vitality and restless energy. Bellow ransoms or transmutes, so to speak, the commonplace and the sordid through the sheer exuberance of language in which he presents the reactions and experiences of his protagonists. However, as we have already seen, the infernal character of the city is fully acknowledged. Despite their intense faith in the "common humanity" of man, all of Bellow's protagonists voice serious doubts about the viability of the city and the world. Joseph, for example, says:

It was my painful obligation to look and submit to myself the invariable question: Where was there a particle of what, elsewhere, or in the past, had spoken in man's favor? There could be no



doubt that these billboards, streets, tracks, houses, ugly and blind, were related to interior life.(p. 17),

Augie and Citrine, too, repeatedly use images of doom and hell to describe their urban environment. It is also important to remember that three of the four protagonists leave Chicago, their native city, one for the army, and the other two for the Continent.

What all this means is that Bellow has a double or split vision of the American city. The phenomenal reality or the human condition for which his fictional city is the vehicle or figure is complex, ambiguous, and in flux. The vision is complex because Bellow recognizes that life or phenomenal reality is inherently mysterious, that life's experiences cannot be neatly divided into black and white or good and bad, that reality is elusive, inscrutable and often impalpable. Bellow's vision is ambiguous because he refuses to assign a single meaning or signification to the protagonist's experiences of the city. His protagonists perceive the contradictions in their environment where opposites exist side by side and no scene or object is wholly good or bad, ugly or beautiful. The evil and the good are inextricably bound together and constitute the very essence of experience or reality. Bellow's vision of life is one of flux because he sees the city environment as constantly changing. The city is neither uniformly ugly nor inert: it is continually falling and being rebuilt, decaying and growing.

The blight of the cityscapes in Bellow's novels invariably coexists with beauty and goodness. There is, in other words, a tension between the ugliness and the beauty in Bellow's depiction of the city. Bellow's view of life, perhaps typically Jewish, sees evil and good in

constant tension as equally permanent aspects of existence, the evil often enmeshed with the good and inseparable from it. Bellow's ambivalence toward the city and the human condition is succinctly expressed by one of his protagonists. In his introduction of himself, Joseph tells us he is

A sworn upholder of tout comprendre c'est tout pardonner. Theories of a wholly good or a wholly malevolent world strike him as foolish. Of those who believe in a wholly good world he says that they do not understand depravity. As for pessimists, the question he asks of them is, "Is that all they see, such people?" For him, the world is both, and therefore it is neither. (p. 20),

Bellow shows us the physical squalor, sickness, disease, death, dreariness and gloom of the urban environment coexisting with physical beauty, animistic energy, protean vitality, rejuvenation, and the sheer joy of being alive. Bellow has Joseph saying

. . . judgment is second to wonder. . . . In a sense everything is good because it exists. Or, good or not good, it exists, it is ineffable, and, for that reason, marvelous. (p. 21),

What are the sources of this joy and vitality that in Bellow's view pervade all creation? Bellow shows us that amidst the clutter of perishable things and distractions, "the unnatural, too-human deadness," there exists for men the primitive, almost sensual, pleasure in the changing seasons, the sunsets and the falling rain or snow, the resurgence of life in the midst of concrete and asphalt, the budding trees and the monarch butterfly in the wasteland, the joy of varied sensory perceptions, the passion for living and suffering and engaging in the daily human activities.

Bellow's world is one that has its full share of materialistic and hedonistic madness--violence and brutality, sexual perversion, greed

and victimization--but these coexist, with compassion, courage, and fortitude. We have merely to recall the fellow-tenant's expression of sorrow at Mrs. Keifer's death in Dangling Man, or Einhorn's contradictory personality, of hedonism on the one hand and his courage, loyalty, and generosity on the other. Grandma Lausch, the very embodiment of tyranny and nastiness, is also the weak, pitifully human being when she is sent off to the home for the aged. The worst and the best live side by side in inexplicable harmony.

It would not be true to say that Bellow's attitude toward the city or the human condition is unresolved. More precisely, it is ambivalent and has the resolution characteristic of life, which is full of contradictions. While Bellow shows us a world of absurdity and meaninglessness, he reveals at the same time the inherent worth of common objects and the routine, humdrum activities associated with everyday living. Bellow shows us a world teeming with people who are obsessed with originality and individuality, their place in history, and total freedom, but who are at the same time capable of suffering and accommodating themselves to the exigencies of life, of identifying themselves with the common man and sharing his small pleasures and preoccupations. It is in this sense that Bellow affirms life and expresses "the hope of an impossible rejuvenation."

It seems to me that both Purdy and Bellow have exhausted the modern city, at least as a reality metaphor. Purdy has written two novels since the publication of Elijah Thrush in 1972: In a Shallow Grave is set in a desolate part of the Virginia coastline, and Narrow Rooms is set in a small mountain town in a remote part of West Virginia.

One of the characters in Narrow Rooms says that the town "has had its veil torn away, and there have been revealed things just as terrible as those we read about in great seaports and metropolises the world over, only more terrible, I do believe." In a sense, then, the modern city is no special place: the whole world is a vast city seething with violence.

Bellow's future novels will probably continue to have the modern city as background, but then the urban and non-urban settings in his novels may be undifferentiated from one another as Bellow's interest centers more and more around individuals whose thoughts and actions are apparently independent of the forces of their environment. Charles Citrine, the narrator-protagonist of Humboldt's Gift is perhaps a prototype of such individuals.

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## APPROVAL SHEET

The dissertation submitted by Yashoda Nandan Singh has been read and approved by the following Committee:

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The final copies have been examined by the director of the dissertation and the signature which appears below verifies the fact that any necessary changes have been incorporated and that the dissertation is now given final approval by the Committee with reference to content and form.

The dissertation is therefore accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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