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The World Upstaged in James Purdy's *I Am Elijah Thrush*

Douglass Bolling

The unexpected appearance of *I Am Elijah Thrush* in the midst of James Purdy's ambitious *Sleepers in Moon-Crowned Valleys* project evidences the writer's vitality and abundance. Where *Jeremy's Version*, the first volume of the project, reminds chiefly of *The Nephew* and *Eustace Chisholm and the Works*, *Elijah Thrush* takes us back more nearly to *63: Dream Palace* and *Malcolm*; clearly Purdy's genius demands expression in more than a single direction. The abrasiveness, the uncompromising postmodern quality, the very difficulty of *Elijah Thrush* may for a time work against its acceptance. One reviewer has attacked the novella for its "shallowness" and "complicated designs," for example.¹ But given an understanding of the aesthetic and underlying philosophy at work, *Elijah Thrush* should win a wide readership among those willing to expose themselves to the vigorous and important new fiction increasingly on the American scene. The thematic center of the novella lies in its evocation of the sterility and vacuity inherent in false mythologizing and self-dramatizing ploys of those unable or unwilling to relate themselves authentically to "reality"—to the sheer otherness and indifference of the world beyond the human. The principal characters attempt to "domesticate" reality by enclosing it within myths and images deriving from their own choice, from their own desperation and failures. The world becomes a mere backdrop or is reduced to the status of a minor actor inevitably to be "upstaged" by the would-be stars of the drama.

Authenticity is replaced by the histrionic, the eccentric, the solipsistic. Rather than anything resembling psychic depth, one finds in major characters such as Elijah Thrush and Millicent De Frayne something very near the "virtuoso exhibitionism" an art critic has associated with the decadent side of art nouveau.² And appropriately enough Elijah Thrush is a painter of art nouveau (and a poet and mime). The principals' behavior suggests the "radical emptiness" that afflicts their counterparts in *Malcolm*.³ Richard Wasson's discussion of *The End of the Road* helps to clarify the central issues of *Elijah Thrush*; for Millicent and Elijah are in effect "mythotherapists" in Barth's sense of the term, and the novella operates so as to evoke the horror and dehumanization of such a death-in-life. As Wasson notes, "Mythotherapy tries to force the whole world into the self and the self into the world, to make everything in the world subordinate to the drama of the self." In contrast the "mythoplastic" stance "turns ironically on itself, works to recognize the separate and mysterious difference between self and other, artifice and reality."⁴ One should note that the latter posture is not represented in *Elijah*

Thrush; the emphasis is upon the ruinous effects of Mythotherapy as these reveal themselves in Millicent and Elijah and as they begin to corrupt the narrator-protagonist Albert Peggs into an inauthenticity almost as monstrous as that of his maddened patrons. Peggs' devolution from sufferer to role-player, from "knower" of the Golden Eagle to mere imitator of a "thrush," and from being a person in touch with the real to one encapsulated in unreality constitutes the major pattern of the novella.

Elijah Thrush's role-playing on stage is but an extension of his unvarying histrionic life style. We know that role-playing and masking are intimately bound up with the very notion of personal identity,⁵ but in Thrush, as in Millicent, these are carried to the extreme. References to Thrush as the "Mime" point both to his presentations at the Arcturus Gardens (his private theater) and his own "personal" imitation of an identity. "Elijah Thrush" is less a substantive self or personality than an ambulatory performance, an act that goes on continuously whether on or off stage. When Thrush renders a performance of mime at the theater, he in effect is presenting an "act" within an actor within an act within an acting house—and reality recedes accordingly. To ensure that the real world will be further disarmed or upstaged, the audience itself is incorporated into the action, responding "as in a rehearsed play."⁶ Not surprisingly the "memoirist" of the action, Albert Peggs, finds the audience to be "insubstantial and incomprehensible" (70) and begins to suspect that his own unreality is as great as those about him in the chairs. In Thrush's theater the proscenium arch does not so much separate the real from the illusive as bring together degrees of unreality; the audience exists chiefly to further the illusion and is itself a dramaturgic agent.

At yet another remove from the real, the outside world is sucked into a role-playing function. Millicent breaks into the theater and "disrupts" the Mime's performance of *Bacchanal in the Sahara Desert* not because the building is in danger of burning but rather as a further gambit in her war of masks with Thrush; the young fireman is not a "real" fireman but merely an actor (48). Similarly the police raid is less an action in the real world than another piece of contrivance and manipulation (51); Peggs discovers later that the policemen are Millicent's retainers (91). One sees in all this the underlying point that "law and order" in American society are the creatures of a profound disorder, of a delusional system fed by a combination of unrestrained wealth and power and a disintegrating rationale. Millicent's enormous wealth permits her to indulge her fantasies in a virtually unrestricted manner.

The surrealist "escape" of Albert Peggs and Thrush's greatgrandson, the "Bird of Heaven," carries on the dialectic of real and unreal; for even though the pursuing bluecoats are in a sense but projections of Millicent's fantasies, they fire bullets real enough to wound the fleeing Peggs. Real bullets in an "unreal" America is the message at one level (95).⁷ One should add that not only the world but art itself is distorted by Thrush's approach. His use of mime implies a betrayal of the discipline and self-restraint crucial to the genuine artist; his performances are typically

exercises in narcissism and self-dramatization; appropriately one of the numbers is entitled *Narcissus Drinks His Last Glass of Joy*. Unlike Thrush, the mime truly in touch with his art creates a "poetic reality" and acknowledges the "mysterious silence of life."⁸ As well the true mime develops the capacity to "impart life and define existence."⁹ Both Thrush's perversions of mime and Peggs' role of memoirist reflect Purdy's continuing interest in the subtleties, ironies, and limits of mimesis.

The flight from and distortion of the real as practiced by Elijah and Millicent at times suggests an ironic refraction of the tactics employed by the underground man as this figure has been variously conceived in the works of Kafka, Genet, and Beckett, for example; the ultimate effect is much the same: the profound reduction and contraction of the self.¹⁰ Peggs' introduction to Thrush establishes the mask-like and deathly qualities of the Mime: "I had the feeling a painting rather than a person was uttering sounds. There seemed to be no bone structure, indeed no skin, for what uttered the words was a kind of swimming agglutination of mascara, rouge, green tinting, black teeth, and hair like the plumage in a deserted crow's nest" (17). On the same page Thrush invokes the notion of "destiny" to explain his encounter with Peggs; and this, together with allusions to heaven, hell, perfection, and the eternal symbolize the Mime's (and Millicent's) resort to the "mythic" as a way of escaping the opacity and indifference of reality. Similarly Thrush's use of cosmetics, almond meal, and other aids permits him to appear youthful at times, to seem to overcome temporal reality by entry into the "timeless," but it also serves to accentuate his fragility and vulnerability; in Millicent's "withdrawing room," for example, we find a Thrush unable to rise without assistance from Albert (65).

Thrush's pursuit of youthfulness and "innocence" is seen principally in his wooing of the Bird of Heaven. The inaccessibility of the young boy to the Mime's advances (He is imprisoned and taken away by Millicent.), the fact that he is a mute and thus cannot easily communicate with Elijah, and the generally ethereal and implausible nature of his appearances point to the hopelessness of the Mime's "passion"—a frustration which parallels the unrequited "love" of Millicent for the Mime. Thrush "loves" the boy chiefly as an image of his own lost youth; and because he cannot in fact reclaim the lost years, he necessarily loves what he cannot win. Bird's "flowing raven locks, haunting wild Indian eyes, and a mouth of brilliant vermilion" gives him a "striking family resemblance" to his ancient lover (26); the hint of inversion in the Thrush-Bird relationship as well as the endogamy alleged of both Thrush and Millicent point to the sterile nature of the love involved. The Mime's self-dramatizing behavior is seen in his projection of himself as the "Shepherd of the Flock" and the boy as the "Lamb of the Flock"; Thrush reminds Peggs of a "Spanish lover of ages past" (26-7). The Mime's role-playing is seen again in his use of a horse-drawn carriage, lantern, and words spoken in Parisian French in the "escape" attempt; so unreal is this withdrawal into the past that the policemen remain "oblivious" to the passing carriage (97). Ironically the escape leads not to freedom but to virtual incarceration aboard the *Queen Dick*.

Thrush's belief that the Bird of Heaven is "wilting away and won't last the voyage" (118) suggests his own imminent demise; for, deprived of the object of his (illusory) quest and unable to engage the real, he has only nothingness before him. The Mime's last words reach Peggs by means of an electric megaphone; and typically the conversation is a one-way affair, for Peggs' reply cannot span the distance. Thrush's appearance is totally "in character": his words are as unreal and histrionic as they have been throughout the novella, juxtaposing the hyperbolic, the sentimental, and the fatuous in predictable manner (117-20). Thrush professes to perceive the "preternatural greatness and sensitivity" of his disciple and understudy Peggs, but the reader cannot concede the validity of such claims (120); the words are to a degree mere rhetoric designed to coax Peggs into assuming the Mime's roles at the Arcturus Gardens and thus granting to the latter an "existence" beyond death, a "life"-in-death so to speak. The Mime dispatches Peggs shoreward with the exhortation to become in effect an imitation of his own imitation of personal identity.

Millicent De Frayne's lengthy and hopeless love for Elijah Thrush and her unremitting pursuit of the Mime provides another major pattern of the novella. An ironic debasement of romantic and Platonic notions of love, Millicent's passion is in part an exercise of will, in part an exercise in rhetoric and masking; above all perhaps it is an abstraction which has nothing to do with a fecund mutuality or mature accommodation to the realities of time and change. The reader learns that Millicent "had not actually grown any older since 1913, because in that year having fallen in love with Elijah Thrush . . . she had done nothing but think of the impossibility of their love. He had half-encouraged her to take up a lifetime devoted to unrequited passion, and this half-encouragement was more than any other human being had ever given her" (41). The falsely "eternal" nature of the pair's relationship emerges quickly as one perceives that Millicent does not so much seek consummation as the titillation of the pursuit itself, a pursuit both sterile and anfractuious. This together with Thrush's implicit need to be pursued but not caught and the efforts of the two to remain forever youthful suggest a perversion of the pursuit within stasis of Keats' sylvan tale—with Millicent and Elijah the frozen masks of their own cold pastoral. Millicent's "kidnapping" of the aged Thrush and their ensuing "wedding" may well be the beginning of the end for both: they would appear to have no viability apart from their long-nurtured polarity. Thrush's words to Peggs seem to indicate as much: "The thing that now afflicts me, so that I wonder if after all I am not running mad, is simply this: do I require her everlasting obsession with me, and her cruelty toward me for the sake of feeling I exist? . . . Now see here. Am I, do you attend me, Albert, really her?" (88)

Millicent's attempt to hold on to her youthfulness leads her to keep a retinue of young men about her so as to have a ready supply of seminal fluid (57). Her bizarre appropriation of her staff's semen symbolizes the sacrifice of youth, beauty, life itself to the rapacious and abstract "myth" by which the woman lives. Profoundly dead herself, Millicent seeks to feed parasitically off the life about her in

order to sustain her timeless image of herself. At another level Millicent's behavior points to the insidious pull of the dead past on the present and future; myths die slowly and take as much of the germinating future with them as possible, so to speak. The parasitism and hypocrisy at work in American society are also imaged in the behavior of Ted Maufritz, a "retired liberal-radical." Maufritz has a fondness for opening Peggs' veins and drinking his "black" blood (29).

The scenes aboard the *Queen Dick* are among the most incisive in the novella, bringing to focus the major thematic lines and surrounding them with tonalities of the grotesque, the farcical, and the unreal (104-120). The implications of Elijah and Millicent's wedding cruise and "world tour" are clarified by the underlying philosophy: in encircling the globe the two mythotherapists seek implicitly to imprison the real world within a ring of delusion. The *Queen Dick* and its voyage become an updated version of the *stultifera navis*. The name of the ship hints at the epicene natures of the principals and suggests an ironic debasement of Ahab's pursuit of Moby Dick; in contrast to Ahab's efforts to strike through the mask of the great whale's mystery, Millicent and Elijah wish only to immure themselves within their diminished masks and myths.¹¹ The loss of a vitalizing myth of the sacramental and holy is imaged in Millicent's assumption of the role of priest for her wedding to Elijah (112-14). The ceremony is charged with parodic and ironic overtones, and these are superbly orchestrated by Purdy so as to redound against the major figures—and perhaps the reader himself. Millicent's need to destroy Peggs' link with the unplumbed, "outer" world manifests itself in her seizure of the Golden Eagle. At her command part of the Eagle is stuffed and placed in a glass case and the remainder is served at the wedding feast. Rendered thus harmless, the mastery and mystery symbolized in the great Eagle can no longer threaten the woman. Purdy's version of the Thyestean feast and recall of Itys and Procne drive home the pessimism of the novella: that man can so negate the reality beyond himself.

Millicent's employment of Albert Peggs as memoirist suggests in part her need to give a degree of substance to her hollow and deluded designs, as more generally, it symbolizes the effort of a maddened and enervated society to memorialize its corruptions and decline. Characteristically Millicent adopts a contradictory and dishonest attitude toward the matter; she wishes to "authenticate" her behavior but is willing to resort to forgery and deceit (12). For Millicent (and for much of current societal and media activity, one knows but too well) the recording of "facts," spying, and other forms of information gathering have become jumbled together in a moral and intellectual blur. Her willingness to corrupt Peggs—here specifically to corrupt the young black's racial identity—is evidenced in her allusion to his work for her as a "peeping-tom assignment" (13). By the work's end Millicent's deadly will has had its way with Peggs: his selling of himself and his "art" has brought not liberation or a saving detachment from the madness about him but a surrender to the limbo of unreality. Purdy's interest in the capacity of art to encompass the reality outside the mind of the artist or its lack of such a potency

comes into play chiefly through Peggs' role of memoirist. The difficulties and temptations embodied in his career remind strongly of the problems confronted by artist figures in Purdy's other fictions.¹² An important part of the aesthetic at work in *Elijah Thrush* has to do with the "reliability" of the narrator-protagonist; the reader must determine how much of Peggs' account he can trust, how much truth there is to the Mime's claim that the memoirist is on drugs (98), and how far the elegant, somewhat effete, somewhat bizarre style penetrates into the truth of matters.

Peggs' gradual withdrawal from the great *Aquila Chrysaëtus* in order to "peg" his identity on the Mime's and the fact that he is a black are thematically crucial. Purdy reminds us that black as well as white can surrender to inauthenticity and delusion, that the flight from anxiety (from *Angst* perhaps) knows no color or racial distinctions. To a degree *Elijah Thrush* emerges as a somewhat "unfashionable" work; that is it centers upon a black figure whose final stance is that of obliging servitude to the white man's delusions and equivocations. In this regard the novella calls for comparison with Malamud's *The Tenants*—and one feels that Purdy's work achieves a depth of insight lacking in the latter. Black is not beautiful in *Elijah Thrush*; rather, it is weak, vain, "inauthentic"; but so are we all—Albert Peggs is all of us. Peggs' offering of himself as a "living host" for the Eagle is undeniably bizarre and perverse, but it must be taken for what it is—a direct engagement of the natural and the real. Through his "knowing" of the Eagle, Peggs experiences the pain and pleasure which come to man as an incarnate being, as spirit within body (97). He takes the real into himself and becomes real, as it were; he acquires the authenticity of the sufferer, the bearer of finitude. Grotesque as Peggs' "habit" is, it nevertheless contrasts favorably with the ceremony in which Elijah and Millicent become "one flesh"; in the latter, one knows, there is no "exchange" whatsoever; the two have for too long sought to deny their incarnality. The dark implications of Peggs' plight should not be overlooked: Purdy appears to be saying that either man must prostrate himself before the real, holding on with the compulsiveness associated with a "habit" (note the further implication of religious garb), or else delude himself that he can find repose in solipsistic masking and false mythologizing. Peggs' grotesque immolation constitutes in part an ironic refraction of the Prometheus myth: man cannot really domesticate the real, cannot bring "home" a saving warmth or illumination—he can only suffer the darkness. The futility and vacuity implicit in Peggs' final appearance returns us to the hopelessness with which a novel such as *Malcolm* ends and suggests as well the narrator's ties with typical protagonists of the New Gothic.¹³

The complexities and ironies of the human condition, particularly those involved in sustaining an identity, are seen in Peggs' experiences. The young black finds himself entrapped in a no-man's-land separating the force of white cliché and insensitivity on the one side from that of his own self-doubts and defensiveness on the other. In a rare moment of lucidity Elijah says to him that "One minute you want me to praise your shoe-black ass, and the next I'm to speak of you as a

field of alabaster lilies. You can't have it both ways" (74). Peggs' inability to come to terms with himself, to create a viable identity, is seen as he brags at one point of his "perfect African physique" (16) and thinks elsewhere of himself as a "naked nigger" (35) and a "darky in a minstrel show" (72). The indecision is also reflected in the occasional lapses from the polished "white" style of much of the narration to a "sub-standard" mode, as in "that ain't my ticket" (62). Elijah Thrush's comment to Peggs that "no primitive person such as yourself can go authentically crazy" (88) reveals the dehumanized image of the black man held by the white. And the arrogance latent in the white perspective surfaces in the Mime's claim that Peggs "would be in the fields cutting cotton" had he not been "rescued" (102). One sees that the white notepaper used by Peggs for his notes appropriately suggests the bondage into which he has been drawn—a bondage even more insidious than that of the Southern cotton fields of his Alabama "heritage."

The lure of Millicent's offer of a job is expressed in Peggs' thought that "Although white men had offered me their lust before, nobody white had ever offered me illusion, together with dream courtesy, attention, and the entire backdrop of play-acting which was now poured out upon me" (19). Peggs' observation leads to the final words of the novella in which he announces to the audience at the Arcturus Gardens that "I am . . . Elijah Thrush" (120). His withdrawal into the multiple unrealities of the Mime's "identity" reverberates with ironies and implications. It reminds that the young man has betrayed his black identity, has turned away from the cry of the black freedom-marchers, for example (the moving "I AM . . . I AM"); it suggests a play on the Cartesian *cogito*—with the appropriate substitute being *ago ergo sum* perhaps; it hints at the temptations and false hopes of a life surrendered uncritically to "art"; it suggests the turn from eros to thanatos¹⁴ and a play on the phrase "giving up the ghost": in order to assume the ghostly mask of the "dead" Thrush, Peggs gives up (repudiates) his own ghost (his spirituality). In the latter connection the use of death imagery should be noted: the final trip to the theater moves "through the back streets, empty and black, with their casket-like warehouses" (120). And one may well think of another shadowy figure of withdrawal and alienation—Bartleby himself. Surely not by chance Peggs' "chambers" are in the scrivener's very haunts of Trinity Church and Wall Street.

The craftsmanship and finely sprung style of *Elijah Thrush* allied to significant philosophical statement win for the novella a place only slightly below *Malcolm*. Both works transcend the merely mannered. An art critic's distinction between "breaking up" and "breaking down" serves to elucidate Purdy's intentions: "The art of our century has been characterized by shattered surfaces, broken color, segmented compositions, dissolving forms and shredded images . . . However, dissolution today does not necessarily mean lack of discipline. It can also mean a new kind of discipline, for disintegration is often followed by reconstruction, the artist deliberately smashing his material only to reassemble it in new and unexpected relationships."¹⁵ The highly stylized and "fragmented" treatment of characterization in *Elijah Thrush* comes first to mind here. One might add that the

intellectualized quality and the pressure brought to bear on the reader as he strains between feelings of attraction and repugnance for the principal characters suggests in part Brecht's alienation effect.¹⁶

Purdy's magic in *I Am Elijah Thrush* is such that we cannot exhaust the fullness and presence of the whole through any easy attachment of constituents. The novella "devours its own allegories," as a critic has well said;¹⁷ yet it draws us back and back again in a felt need to know the center. Once again James Purdy has demonstrated a remarkable ability to fuse philosophical perception, a richly ironic and engaging texture, and stylistic subtlety without sacrifice of readability.

NOTES

- ¹ Robert Boyd, "A Fantasy out at Elbows," *The Nation*, 15 May 1972, p. 636.
- ² Sam Hunter, *Modern French Painting* (New York: Dell, 1956), p. 89.
- ³ Thomas M. Lorch, "Purdy's *Malcolm*: A Unique Vision of Radical Emptiness," *Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature*, 6 (1965), 204-213.
- ⁴ "Notes on a New Sensibility," *Partisan Review*, 36 (1969), p. 470. See also Robert Scholes, *The Fabulators* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1967).
- ⁵ See for example Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Garden City: Anchor Books, 1959).
- ⁶ James Purdy, *I Am Elijah Thrush* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1972), p. 49. Subsequent references are to this edition.
- ⁷ Frank Baldanza's discussion of the "virulently contradictory elements" and the "active frustration of rational analysis" in Purdy's work is relevant. See "Playing House for Keeps with James Purdy," *Contemporary Literature*, 11 (1970), 490-91. Paul Brodeur's novel *The Stunt Man* (Atheneum, 1970) explores the interplay of real and unreal in impressive depth.
- ⁸ Jean-Louis Barrault, "The Tragic Mime," in *The Mime*, Jean Darcy, et. al. trans. Robert Speller, Jr., and Pierre de Fontnouvelle (New York: Robert Speller & Sons, 1961), p. 99.
- ⁹ Richard Pearce, *Stages of the Clown: Perspectives on Modern Fiction from Dostoyevsky to Beckett* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois Univ. Press, 1970), p. 153. For a discussion of non-verbal forms of theater including the *mimus* see Martin Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd* (Garden City: Anchor Books, 1961), pp. 229-37.
- ¹¹ See for example Frederick J. Hoffman, *Samuel Beckett: The Language of Self* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois Univ. Press, 1962), p. 40 and foll.
- ¹¹ I am indebted to Jan Zlotnick for this idea.
- ¹² For a perceptive discussion of art and artist in Purdy's fiction see Tony Tanner, *City of Words: American Fiction 1950-1970* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), pp. 85-108.
- ¹³ Irving Malin, *New American Gothic* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois Univ. Press, 1962), p. 155.
- ¹⁴ One is often reminded in *Elijah Thrush* of Buber's distinction between the normative "Eros of dialogue" and the "lame-winged Eros" of monologue. Of the latter Buber writes that "There a lover stamps around and is in love only with his passion. There one is wearing his differentiated feelings like medal-ribbons. There one is enjoying the adventures of his own fascinating effect. There one is gazing enraptured at the spectacle of his own supposed surrender. There one is collecting excitement. There one is displaying his 'power'. There one is

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preening himself with borrowed vitality. There one is delighting to exist simultaneously as himself and as an idol very unlike himself." See "Dialogue," in *Between Man and Man*, trans. Ronald Gregor Smith (New York: Macmillan Paperback, 1965), pp. 29-30.

¹⁵ Katharine Kuh, *Break-Up: The Core of Modern Art* (New York: New York Graphic Society Ltd, 1969), p. 11.

¹⁶ See for example J. L. Styan, *The Dark Comedy: The Development of Modern Comic Tragedy* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1968), pp. 174-5.

¹⁷ Tony Tanner, "Birdsong," *Partisan Review*, 39 (1972), p. 610.