

THE FICTION OF JOHN HAWKES.  
THE STRUCTURED VISION

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If we accept the view that violence lies at the heart of John Hawkes's fiction, then the problem of categorizing him as a writer becomes nonessential. The critics that attach a tag to his work do so on the basis of foregrounding one of its aspects. This procedure automatically imprisons Hawkes's books within one perspective, disregarding relationships that sustain a balance of tension between their various elements. Thus to Tony Tanner Hawkes is primarily a stylist, too concerned with language for its own sake. Robert Scholes sees him as one of the picaresque fabulators — plotting his books carefully despite protestations to the contrary. Raymond Olderman finds his fictions ruled by imagery of the wasteland, and Donald Greiner emphasizes Hawkes's essentially comic vision placing him in the ranks of modern Black Humorists. The purpose of Hawkes's fiction, however, is most clearly expressed in the following statement:

If the true purpose of the novel is to assume a significant shape and to objectify the terrifying similarity between the unconscious desires of the solitary man and the disruptive needs of the visible world, then the satiric writer, running maliciously at the head of the mob and creating the shape of his meaningful psychic paradox as he goes, will serve best the novel's purpose...

Detachment, then, is at the center of the novelist's experiment... The writer who maintains most successfully a consistent cold detachment toward physical violence... is likely to generate the deepest novelistic sympathy of all...

For me, the writer should always serve as his own angleworm — and the sharper the barb with which he fishes himself out of the blackness, the better (Hawkes 1969: 250—251).

This preoccupation with violence as the predominating feature of our times makes for Ihab Hassan's recognition of Hawkes's works as novels of "outrage";

In *The cannibal* (1949) war provides John Hawkes with a still more cunning occasion of outrage. Malice is part of Hawkes's comic and poetic art (Hassan 1969:206).

Let us, however, examine more closely what Hassan means by "outrage" and how this outrage taken up as subject by many contemporary writers differs from the treatments it used to receive in the hands of more traditional ones:

Outrage is indeed the final threat to being, the enforced dissolution of the human form, it is both the threat and the response to it... Outrage is rage without measure but its secret rhythm is one of assault and protest, force and counterforce. The demonic and the absurd pervade this rhythm...

Outrage, then, unites opposites as a metaphor does; it is a kind of existential metaphor.

The violence I associate with contemporary fiction is not temporal but spatial; it is not historical but ontological; it is an inescapable part of a barren landscape...

It is not myth that provides them with the basis of a spatial form; it is terror; it is the threat of nothingness (Hassan 1969:197-199, 208).

If, then, we accept violence as the controlling metaphor underlying Hawkes's fictions, we will observe how skilfully all elements are organized to produce the effect of "totality of vision and structure — verbal and psychological coherence" (Scholes 1967: 68-69).

Thus, insofar as poetic rather than mimetic truth seems to be Hawkes's concern, his works are contained within the bounds of romance — a convention, as Richard Chase points out, more seriously developed on American soil than on its native English one:

...the best American novelists have found uses for romance far beyond the escapism, fantasy, and sentimentality often associated with it. They have found that in the very freedom of romance from the conditions of actuality there are certain potential virtues of the mind, which may be suggested by such words as rapidity, irony, abstraction, profundity. These qualities have made romance a suitable, even, as it seems, an inevitable vehicle for the intellectual and moral ideas of the American novelists...

The very abstractness and profundity of romance allow it to formulate moral truths of universal validity, although it perforce ignores home truths that may be equally or more important (Chase 1957:x-xi).

As for Chase's definition of romance itself:

...the word must signify, besides the more obvious qualities of the picturesque and the heroic, an assumed freedom from the ordinary novelistic requirements of verisimilitude, development and continuity; a tendency towards melodrama and idyl; a more or less formal abstractness and, on the other hand, a tendency to plunge into the underside of consciousness; a willingness to abandon moral questions or to ignore the spectacle of man in society, or to consider these things only indirectly or abstractly (Chase 1957: viii-ix).

Plunging into "the underside of consciousness" Hawkes comes up with grotesque, nightmare violence since to him "the unconscious desires of the solitary man and the disruptive needs of the visible world" coincide. That

is what Raymond Olderman meant by "conspiracy from without and within" — assailant and victim are both actors in a ritual of terror. Thus, for example, Margaret's beating and rape are an enacting of her loving nightmares, her prolonged and exquisite dwelling on her possible assailants:

Later, after he had pulled the light string, she would dream of the crostics and, in the dark, men with numbers wrapped round their fingers would feel her legs, or she would lie with an obscure member of the government on a leather couch, trying to remember and all the while begging for his name (Hawkes 1961:68).

When the dreaded does happen, she can only submit resignedly to the brutal treatment, proving again by the comic incongruity of her reaction to pain and humiliation, how utterly she exists in her fantasy world:

...she was like a convent girl accepting the mysteries — and still Thick snored — and no matter how much she accepted she knew it now: something they couldn't show in films. What a sight if they flashed this view of herself on the screen of the old Victoria Hall... (Hawkes 1961:129).

Margaret's fate, however, is not only a kind of realization of her most secret, subconscious wishes but a punishment also for Michael's indulging in a sexual orgy during the same night. By giving the exact time of both parallel courses of action and, in the end, joining them by corresponding, complementary images of two oven tits, Hawkes points clearly to symbolic links of causality between the fates of the couple. He seems to imply that we are imprisoned within the vicious circle, not only of our own nightmares and fantasies, but of others' as well.

The dreaded worst happens also in *The cannibal*. We are forced to look upon every detail of the dismembering of Jutta's boy — repelled yet fascinated, owing to the suggestive imagery it is presented in. It seems that Hawkes unmasks here our own unconscious, unrealized need to dwell on violence, if only vicariously.

The romance form into which Hawkes shapes his novels assumes a Faulknerian or dreamlike, surrealistic vagueness in *The beetle leg*, where many incidents are rather hinted at than described directly, so in the end we are often uncertain whether or what exactly happened. Again we are confronted with violence, but a violence hinted at, hovering about rather than performed or felt; with results of it, such as the fishing out of a baby's corpse, the story of a man buried alive in a landslide, the eventually harmless but potentially menacing presence of a grotesquely-dressed motorcycle-riding group of teenagers. The violence is hinted at but left unmotivated by the course of the narrative culminating finally in the slaughter of the motorists. This final absurd, gratuitous outrage cannot be explained otherwise than as a structural element of the "western" genre which Hawkes here parodies.

Both *Second skin* and *Blood oranges* show shifts in perspective and in tone. They are more clearly fantasies with less interferences from the outside world.



Stilled and spatialized by the reminiscing voices of their respective narrators, more consistent in their clear structuring by their exclusively lyrical point of view, they are woven into tapestries, lifted beyond time and space. If the previous three novels could be received as nightmare grotesques, these are rather daydream fantasies. The structuring has changed; however, the aesthetic, metaphysical reaction to the given reality remains essentially the same, owing largely to the language it is transformed into.

Here we are able to note wherein lies the "dangerous" attractiveness of Hawkes's fiction. As John Barth would say: "It is in words that the magic is". Whether it is the narrative voice of insane Zizendorf in *The cannibal*, that of the inane sheriff of *The beetle leg*, fetishistic Hencher and smug Sidney Slyter in *The lime twig*, meddling Skipper in *Second skin* or self-satisfied Cyril in *Blood oranges* who supply the pretext for his telling the story, the quality of the vision remains basically the same. Every book possesses this disturbing manner of putting reality to essentially aesthetic uses; distancing the author and the reader from the sordidness of existence, yet somehow succeeding in making it felt with quite shocking and unexpected sharpness and palpability:

The village, as the days grew worse, became a dump for abandoned supplies, long lines of petrol tins along the streets, heaps of soiled torn stretchers and cases of defective prophylactics piled about doorways, thrown into cellars. Piles of worthless cow-pod Teller mines blocked the roads in places and a few looted armored cars still smelled of burned cloth and hair... Hatless children ran through the deepening snow and chased the few small birds still clinging to the stricken trees...

It snowed for nights on end, but every morning the monkeys appeared uncovered, exactly the same as the day they were tossed into the yard, wiry, mishapen, clutching in their hands and feet the dead rats (Hawkes 1949: 152).

Or as in *The lime twig* passages:

All about them was the stillness of the village: this watering place of cocaine and scent, beer and feather mattresses and the transient rooms of menservants, all deserted by sports and gypsies and platinum girls (Hawkes 1961: 81).

It was a heavy rain, the sort of rain that falls in prison yards and beats a little fire-wood smoke back down garret chimneys, that leaks across floors, into forgotten prams, into the slaughterhouse and pots on the stove. It... tore cobwebs off small panes of glass, filled wood and stone with the sound of forced rainwater. Timbers were already turning black and the whistling of far-off factory hooters was lost in the rain (Hawkes 1961: 173).

Hovering bird, hollow head of the lighthouse, a sudden strip of white sand between myself and the mud-colored base rock of the lighthouse, little sharp boulders spaced together closely and evenly in the sand, and then as white as a starfish and inert naked, caught amongst the boulders, I saw a woman lying midway between myself and the high rock. Vision from the widow's photography magazine. Woman who might have leaped from the lighthouse or rolled up only moments before on the tide. She was there, out there, triangulated by the hard cold points of the day, and it was she, not I, who was drawing down the eye of the bird... (Hawkes 1964: 58).

The crumbling cottage, the crumbling stone lean-to, the haystack shrunken and propped in position with pieces of fossilized wood, the small well without visible rope

or chain or bucket — at a glance the desolation of the farm was obvious, and already I knew that so much desolation aroused in Hugh at least a shade of my own crisp appreciation. It was all complete, down to the usual upright skeleton of a dog affixed to the tall stake driven through the center of the haystack (Hawkes 1971: 59).

Each of the quoted passages contains its governing image — of monkeys clutching dead rats, deserted racetrack restrooms, all-pervasive rain, a prostrate naked woman, white skeleton of a dog on a timeless archaic farm. Hawkes succeeds in making the familiar become menacing — as in dreams. The strange, evocative powers submerge us within the barren, cold, menacing or fantastically idyllic landscapes which dominate the atmosphere of each book. He finds words that spin an exquisite web of correspondences between various aspects of reality. All our senses are brought into play making it impossible to remain outside. It is an aesthetic experience that must be complete to be appreciated fully.

Our concentration is necessary also because the plots of the stories are discernible only when the works are considered as wholes — spatial constructions made complete and logical by recurring patterns of image and symbol that light up one another with meaning. The occurrence of the events is ordered by the narrators' associations rather than by temporal, logical sequences. These associations take the form of either mad fantasies such as Zizendorf's tale, the ramblings of the unstable mind of the sheriff (*The beetle leg*), as the surrealistic nightmares of Margaret and Michael or reminiscing "recollections in tranquility" of Skipper from *Second skin* and Cyril in *The blood oranges*.

To sum up the above observations — Hawkes's vision is not only expressed directly in his theoretical statements but implied in the mode of execution and his purpose is primarily aesthetic.

The romance form in which he chooses to express the violence underlying the consciousness of our times gives him freedom to construct his worlds into finished structures. This form is reinforced by the lyrical manner of filtering the events through the subjective consciousness of the narrative voice. The subjectivity, in turn, justifies both, the surrealistic, dreamlike fragmentation of reality, as well as the fact of the images becoming symbols owing to the context of their recurrence, generating a pattern of expectation. The spatiality of his structures is also the result of the lyrical mode of presentation, implying causality on associational rather than temporal basis, justified by dreamlike surrealistic imagery and the workings of an individual mind.

It is a fact worth noting that the violence Hawkes dwells on is of various kinds — the obvious physical kind, as found in *The cannibal*, *The beetle leg*, *The lime twig*, parts of *Second skin*, the more subdued, psychological kinds present in *The blood oranges* and violence exerted on the readers — the distance of their sensibilities.



Whatever shape it assumes, however, two effects are achieved. By intellectualizing pain Hawkes forces us to examine it closely, even minutely, making us observe at the same time the aesthetic possibilities afforded both by violence and by other aspects of reality — the one surrounding us and the ones within.

Somehow, Hawkes seems to imply that the only way of approaching, dealing with and enduring the undeniably excessive outrage and grotesqueness is to transform it into a work of art. A writer should be merciless in reaching for material of extreme sharpness — the stuff of our most intimate fears and desires, as well as in his satiric, unsentimental treatment of it. He is not to assure us that all will end well but push us over the cliff with unblinking, cold deliberateness, straining our sensibilities beyond endurance. His role is to force us to look with the unbearable lucidity of those rushing headlong towards destruction. His art is to make the pain and the horror of it palpable long before the oblivion of death. If we are to appreciate them fully we cannot afford to remain outside his structures. We must allow all our senses as well as our brains to become enclosed within the vicious circles of his inescapable wastelands.

If this analysis of Hawkes's treatment of violence is of any validity, then, keeping in mind Chase's theory of the American novel as romance, we can safely place him in the ongoing tradition of American novelists.

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