THE CONSTRUCTED VISION: THE FICTION OF JOHN HAWKES

Since the appearance of his first novel, *The Cannibal,* in 1949, the work of John Hawkes has proven him to be a writer whose technical control, poetic imagery and content demand critical recognition. His novels challenge the reader's imagination and force him to read them with the care necessary in reading most modern poetry. The variety of experimental techniques in dealing with time and space in his fiction, the use of fantasy and dream and the pervasive, naturalistic theme of the determinacy of history and myth over men's lives suggest the influence in his work of naturalism and symbolism. In this he belongs to a tradition which combines the Gothic fiction of Charles Brockden Brown and Poe with the compressed symbolism and ironic view of Crane, Bierce and, on occasion, Hemingway. In Hawkes's particular view of the novel and the function of the novelist, the imagination dominates the fact:

> ... 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.
> ... But I too believe in fiction — hard, ruthless, comic — and I myself believe very much in the sack of the past slung around our necks, in all the recurrent ancestral fears and abortive births we find in dreams as well as literature. The constructed vision, the excitement of the undersea life of the inner man, a language appropriate to the delicate malicious knowledge of us all as poor, forked, corruptible, the feeling of pleasure and pain that comes

when something pure and contemptible lodges in the imagination — I believe in the « singular and terrible attraction » of all this.[1]

Because of his « detached » approach, Hawkes achieves sympathy without sentimentality. His credo might be shared by Djuna Barnes, Nathanael West, Bernard Malamud, James Purdy, and Flannery O'Connor[2] among contemporary writers. Certainly the comic, ironic view of their novels has assumed a predominant place in American fiction. Where Hawkes excels over the tried-and-true « realistic » writers is in the uses of imagination and the power to excite that faculty in the reader.

His first published piece was « Charivari » in *New Directions* 11, in which the Prufrock-like hero, Henry, a parson's son, and Emily, a general's daughter (« forty-year-old jackdaws in negative contemplation of one another ») go through the business of courtship and marriage surrounded by the sterile neurotic world of Eliot's poem. But the imagination is Hawkes's, especially in the descriptions of the wedding party and of the collier and his dressmaker wife. The strong reliance on dream sequences in « Charivari » in not as much in evidence in Hawkes's later work where he relies more on reworking myths to convey his perspective of modern man.

This technique is most evident in *The Beatle Leg* (1951), a novel set in the American desert near the site of a dam. The dry season and the figure of the fisherman at the dam are not unfamiliar images from T. S. Eliot's *Waste Land*. Beyond these, Hawkes's concept of the buried Christ-Osiris in the

1. JOHN HAWKES, « Notes on the *Wild Goose Chase* », « Symposium: Fiction Today », *Massachusetts Review*, Vol. III, Summer, 1962, p. 787.

2. JOHN HAWKES, « Flannery O'Connor's Devil », *Sewanee Review*, LXXI, Summer, 1962, pp. 395-407. An article which reveals as much about Hawkes's opinions on fiction and the influence of Nathanael West on his work as it does about Flannery O'Connor. Both writers, says Hawkes, set about demolishing man's image of himself as a rational creature, but O'Connor's « diabolism » places her apart from West's scepticism.

slowly sliding wall of the dam (« the sarcophagus of mud ») is a prime example of his mythopoiesis. The imperceptible movement of the retaining wall becomes the inevitable force and movement of the universe and the small absurd heroes, whether their activity is directed towards the wall or the fields, below, cannot check the cosmic flux.

> It moved. The needles, cylinder and ink lines blurring on the heat smeared graph in the slight shade of evening, tended by the old watchman in the power house, detected a creeping, downstream motion in the dam. Leaned against by the weight of water, it was pushing southward on a calendar of branding, brushfires and centuries to come, toward the gulf. Visitors hung their mouths and would not believe, and yet the hill eased down the rotting shale a beetle's leg each several anniversaries, the pride of the men of Gov City who would have to move fast to keep up with it. But if this same machine, teletyping the journey into town, was turned upon the fields, the dry range, the badlands themselves, the same trembling and worry would perhaps be seen in the point of the hapless needle, the same discouraging pulse encountered, the flux, the same activity. It might measure the extinction of the snake or a dry finger widening in erosion.[3]

Images of sacrifice, particularly horses and chickens, occur as a motif and the elaborations on the theme of the buried fertility god are skillfully worked into the novel. These recognizable myths are combined with Hawkes's own creations, the Red Devil Cyclists and the characterizations parodying Western types, Camper, Doc Leech, Ma and the Sheriff.

Hawkes returned to a European locale in his next works, *The Owl* and *The Goose on the Grave* (1954).[4] These complementary novellas set in Italy, have received more adverse criticism than his other fiction, mostly because they rely more on religious imagery and historical fact than on characterization. The ritual sacrifice of the prisoner proscribed by the hangman-

3. JOHN HAWKES, *The Beetle Leg*, New Directions (1951), pp. 67-68.
4. JOHN HAWKES, *The Owl* and *The Goose on the Grave*, New Directions, (1954).

dictator of the principality of Sasso Fetore reenacts the death of Christ. But the sacrifice is of a human being, not a god; the unnamed prisoner in his Icarian failure to escape and his execution becomes a symbol of Twentieth Century man. The *mise en scene* is the political, historical world of the Italian past—ghostly Roman lictors, shapes of skeletons dressed in Renaissance military gear pass across the World War II battlefield at the foot of the dictator's castle. While the religious symbolism of the sacrificed geese on the prisoner's grave and the image of the destroyed Madonna link the two novellas, the second novella is more concerned with the end of innocence. The child, Adeppi, in the wasteland of wartime Italy, is first protected by the soldier, Nino, and then falls into the hands of the roué, Edouard, witnessing his death in a corrupt Venetian Café. Fleeing the knowledge of evil, the boy seeks Nino. In a series of incidents Adeppi undergoes a purgatorial journey including the ascent of a seven-tiered mountain and ending with a final scene in Nino's dream suggesting the renewal of the human spirit. Following a more direct narrative line and using the dream as a basis for connecting incidents, Hawkes indicates here the changes in method apparent in his latest novel, *The Lime Twig* (1961).[5] This novel fulfills the prediction of Albert Guerard in the introduction to *The Cannibal* that « Hawkes will move still further toward realism ». Along with a closer adherence to a chronological development, Hawkes has shifted gears in his use of time. Instead of scanning the cultural history in the context of the everpresent past, Hawkes in a method slightly similar to Robbe-Grillet and Nathalie Sarraute arrests time to present a situation through the emotional, irrational acts or gestures of his characters. What Hawkes does in *The Lime Twig* is to present us with his superreal characters, victims of the ironic mesh of human affairs. Michael Banks's orgiastic night is a prelude to the end of his futile attempt to outwit the racetrack mob. The next day he is crushed beneath the hooves of the racehorses. *The*

5. John Hawkes, *The Lime Twig*, New Directions (1961).

Lime Twig finds Hawkes's technique directed more towards characterization, although his view of man as victim has not changed.

Hawkes's technique is that of the modern poet. His language and images are modes of dramatic delimitation, condensed flashes of action which convey intellectualized emotions. Characters and incidents operate on several strata, much in the way that they do in Dante's *Divine Comedy* where the situation can be viewed realistically and allegorically at the same time. Not that Hawkes's work is solely allegorical in nature — it is not fixed to a sharply defined view in that sense — but he is able to free the reader's imagination to range over the cultural past of a nation, and always with a comprehension of the pastness of the present. The influence of Yeats and Eliot is evidenced by his use of personal symbols, his sense of history, his objective view of contemporay society, and his compressive technique. However, it would be unfair to consider him solely as a derivative writer. He is an experimental writer and his challenge to the reader's imagination, his use of symbol, psychology and language mark him as a writer who does not accept the limitations placed on fiction by traditionalists.

Because of his experimentation, Hawkes has been mistakenly cast as a surrealist by most critics. The nightmare events in his novels do appear as expansions rather than evasions of reality but his objective technique, his deterministic themes, and his control of imagery are not part of the surrealist manifesto. Like Nathanael West, Hawkes's imagery resembles the products of automatic writing but his conscious themes and use of symbols invalidate the view that his work is autistic. Instead of the freedom from the past and present that the surrealists aspire to, he projects his symbols and the myths of the past on the modern world to give an original view of reality. This approach can ben determined by a closer look at his first novel, *The Cannibal* (1949).[6]

6. JOHN HAWKES, *The Cannibal*, New Directions (1949).

In *The Cannibal* the three part narration moves from Germany, 1954, to 1914 and back; the main action is roughly based on the assassination of the faceless, one-man army of occupation, Leevey, by the neo-Nazi and sometime narrator, Zizendorf. In the interval between the description of the town at the end of World War II and the death of Leevey, Hawkes presents a diorama of German life between the two wars.

The narrator begins by describing the empty horror of Spitzen-on-the-Dein before its liberation from Leevey; since then the town, under Zizendorf's tutelage, has become a « garden spot: all of our memories are there and people continually seek it out ». On a small hill beyond the town is the institution whose insane inmates have been freed and which is occupied by displaced persons whose « dances » become a re-enactment of the movement of peoples in Europe after World War II. The madhouse overlooking the valley wasteland of gravel and cinder, the images of the streets with book-leaves turning in the wind, the smashed presses, and the movie projector showing films to no one are mute representations of the death of communication and of intellect. Correlated descriptions of the returning half-men, the sexless children, the young child pursued by the degenerate aristocrat, and the mechanical copulations of the major characters exemplify the frozen life in naturalistic terms.

Stella Snow, a central character, represents the aristocratic and barbaric German past as well as the overfed, decadent present. She is « capable of anything with a cold heart » even to impassivity at her mother's death in an air raid, « and she sits with crossed barbaric swords hung over her head sweeping through ironclad centuries ». Representative of the sterile present is the movie projectionist « showing the same blurred picture to no audience », Madame Snow's son, Balamir. Finally, the figure of the degenerate Duke, a third representative of the German ruling class, relentlessly pursuing the young child provides a recurring image of Germany's future. He is the cannibal who ends by devouring his victim.

Hawkes, like Faulkner, only gradually reveals the significance of these characters by giving fragmentary views which integrate as the novel develops. Thus, Zizendorf's plot, which will restore the Reich, Stella's « ancestral fears » and « undersea life », or the Duke's pursuit of the child, continue a suspenseful line through the book, representing the corruptibility of the future in Germany, to give us a current action. Interspersed with the main action of Parts I and III set in 1945 are the related incidents from the inescapable « sack of the past » presented in Part II, 1914.

The imaginative incidents of the 1914 section of *The Cannibal* range through the pre-and postwar periods and are divided into four sections: « love », « Stella », « Ernst », and « lust ». The private lives of Stella and Ernst, her husband, including her relationship with the Englishman, Cromwell, are connected to the political and social changes in Germany. Thus, Stella's ride with Cromwell down the Heldenstrasse to be ambushed by Ernst is seen as an enactment of Sarajevo with Cromwell as the Archduke Ferdinand and Ernst as Gavrilo Principe. Hawkes here is viewing the personal lives of man, their involvements and passions, within a simultaneous setting of historical determinism which far more affects their lives. Again in the section ironically entitled « Love » the lives of these characters are representatives of life in prewar Germany. In an atmosphere of heavy, gross sexuality, the Bavarian orchestra plays at the Sportswelt Brauhaus while Stella sings to the future carrion of the war.

> She moved as if she had a sunflower just beneath her bosom, as if she could draw them sailing on a sacred lake, and first a crackling chicken, then a duckling, then a head of cheese fell under her swoop. But always she looked directly over into their eyes startled from eating, or eyes large from some private imagination.
>
> ... They clapped, chuckled, and slowly the undecorated chests slid open, the lights swirled about in the fog, while Stella, arm around the accordion player, sang anything at all that came to

mind. Her ancestors had gone berserk, cloaked themselves in animal skins, carved valorous battles on their shields, and several old men, related thinly in blood from a distant past, had jumped from a rock in Norway to their death in the sea. Stella, with such a history running thickly in her veins, caught her breath and flung herself at the feet of her horned and helmeted kinsmen, while the Bavarians schnitzled back and forth in a drunken trio. (pp. 60-61).

This is the kind of comic-grotesque description at which Hawkes is adept. It is quite different from his allegedly surrealist scenes, such as the descriptions of the landscape in the opening section of the novel. Yet the sense of deterministic past is clear here. Or as later in the Sarajevo scene Hawkes pictures Ernst, the duel-scarred son of the Brauhaus owner, fleeing down the Heldenstrasse toward his fateful meeting with Stella Snow and Cromwell, the English Germanophile. The comic grotesquery of Ernst's running through the rain, passing the line of statues (« each Hero gave him a word to harden his heart: love, Stella, Ernst, lust, tonight, leader, land »), and then having to stop to relieve himself is not only a commentary on the absurdity of the German military *heldensinn* but also presents us with the pathetic figure of humanity caught in its rigidity.

Ernst and Stella's honeymoon and the symbolic incidents and setting which surrounds it parallel the war. Their « fortress » hotel looks out over a fantastic landscape covered with mustard gas dew. In a nearby shack a woodcarver carves Christs which he sells to the hotel guests.

> ... Tourists paid well for these figures that were usually more human than holy, more pained than miraculous. Up went the shoulder, the knife rested, and he was pointing to the nearness of the cliffs. After the first week, Ernie bought one of the crucifixes, a terrible little demon with bitter pain curling about the mouth no larger than a bead, drawing tight the small outward-turning hands. Then he began to collect them, and every afternoon a new Christ would peer from his pocket through the tufts of fur. (pp. 107-108).

And through these carvings, symbolic of war dead, Ernst undergoes a religious conversion.

... He waited, peering quickly, expecting the messenger, sure of the dark journey. « Look over the plains », he thought, « and you will see no light. No figures, no men, no birds, and yet He waits above the vast sea. Thine enemy will come, sweeping old ties together, bright as the moon ».

Ernst had given up the sword; though his wounds were healed, the Heavens gaped, and he had lost the thread of the war's virus. (p. 110).

Finally, the arrival of Cromwell with news of German victories (« No nation has the history of ours. ») is sharply juxtaposed with the figure of the Merchant.

The hotel manager was shaving and soon would come downstairs. A nurse, ruddy and young, behaved like a mother, smiling at the child in the darkness. In the neighborhood of Cambrai where an Allied flanking movement had failed to turn the German extreme right, a farmhouse at a fork in the clay roads, demolished by artillery fire, lay half-covered in leaves and snow. There the Merchant, without thoughts of trade, dressed only in grey, still fat, had died on his first day at the front and was wedged, standing upright, between two beams, his face knocked backwards, angry, disturbed. In his open mouth there rested a large cocoon, protruding and white, which moved sometimes as if it were alive. The trousers, dropped about his ankles were filled with rust and tufts of hair. (p. 115).

The chaotic image of the dog pack running wild through the German postwar night provides a chorus effect to the last section. Here the decline and fall of the Snows is recounted in a series of grotesque incidents which take place in their home. Old Herman Snow's copulation with Gerta, the Snow's former nurse, turned prostitute; Jutta's experiences in the nunnery, recollections of which remain « high and safe within the meek heart » in sharp opposition to the crudities of the Ober-Leutenant with whom she is sleeping; and finally the death of Ernst attended by Stella and the diabolic old

Snow, who with Gerta steals Stella's child. Again the decay of personal human relations mirrors the corruptibility and destruction of society.

The latter third of Hawkes's novel returns to 1945 and the final action of the neo-Nazi plot to destroy Leevey. Along the embankment of the autobahn, Zizendorf and his two comic assistants, Stumpfegle and Fegelein, await Leevey, who is to pass them on his motorbike. In the surrounding air is the smell of burned flesh and hair, the strange odor of gas and black cheese, and goat dung, all of which suggests the incinerators, the smell of death permeating the atmosphere of Germany, 1945. Here, the narrator, dreaming of the « liberation » from Leevey, speculates on his discovery of the great power of Madame Snow as representative of German *Kultur:*

> You can ask no man to give up his civilization, which is his nation. The old must go, stagger over the failing drawbridge, fall down before the last coat of arms. I thought she should wither away and die, with her long, false flaxen hair, because I thought she would run rattletattle through the night for preservation. Here I was wrong, since she was the very hangman, the eater, the greatest leader of us all. Death is as unimportant as life; but the struggle, the piling of bricks, the desperate attempts of the tenant; that is the man of youth, the old woman of calm, the nation of certainty. (p. 155)

His adulation for Madame Snow, the emblem now of national spirit, hardened by her youthful experiences, and his intense feeling about the land demonstrate Zizendorf's acceptance of « the sack of the past » and also exemplifies his hatred of the future. « The nation of certainty » is a nation of dead spirits and it is no place for honest men.

> The honest man is the traitor to the State. The man with the voice only for those above him, not for citizens, tells all and spreads evil. His honesty is a hopeless misgiving. He makes the way intangible and petty, he hampers determination. (p. 197)

After Leevey's death, Zizendorf prints a proclamation of the German liberation from « Western slavery » and the re-

establishment of the « strongest of races, the Teutonic race ». In a parallel action, the Duke, who has come to invite Madame Snow to his cannibal feast (« The broth would last for weeks and months, his shelves would hold the bones for years ») frightens her, since at first she thinks that his footsteps are those of Ernst's ghost « with the Christ by his head ». Her joy at the « liberation » is compared with the mood of Jutta, who yawns and greets her lover, Zizendorf, both of them shutting their « eyes against the sun ». The cycle goes on, only the moment of revolution absorbs Zizendorf, who, irritated by the question of Jutta's child about the murders in the night, tells her to draw the blinds and go back to sleep. Sleep, bed, and the accompanying sexual episodes reflect the inability of most of the characters in Zizendorf's dead society to face the meaninglessness of their lives. They bury themselves in the sheets, either in a comatose state or in a slow-motion act of intercourse, disengaged from reality.

The dramatic quality of Hawkes's work lies only partially in his images; much of his strength comes from his characterization. Again this aspect of his work cannot be thought of as circumstantial realism but more in terms of the figural realism used by Dante. Although Hawkes's universe is the obverse of Dante's ordered cosmos, in their weaving of myth and history and in their characterization the two authors use parallel methods. Hawkes's futile world most resembles the *Inferno* and his characters appear as part of a sensuous, irrational reality which finds acceptance perhaps only in the imagination. This is evident in the two women who are central to the novel, Madame Snow, the aristocratic Brunhilde of the Teutonic past, and her sister, Jutta, a more natural creature who always remains that part of a nation which never surrenders to the state; or the two male characters, Ernst, the saber-scarred victim of the Prussian ideal who turns toward the ascetic life, and Zizendorf, duped by the bankrupt promise of Nazism. All four reflect not only their own personal betrayals and the lack of love, but also the betrayal of Germany itself to false ideals.

Here Zizendorf describes Jutta, revealing not only her character but also his frustration with her:

> ... She had never been quite able to allow a lover for her country to intrude within her four walls, had never been loyal, and though she gave herself like segments of a fruit, she never envisioned the loyalty due her State. Tears sometimes appeared on her cheeks after our long embrace which I was never able to recognize. Thirty years is not enough time to measure the complete crystalization of a nation, though partially lost; to measure the greatest advance of communal men, though partially destroyed, and Jutta, far removed from the rise, fall, and eventual rise, was far from being within the thirty years, far from being successful or adored. (p. 42)

Thus characters in *The Cannibal* exist, as do Dante's characters, Guido da Montefeltro and Francesca de Rimini, in the midst of life. Their hates, fears, follies and passions individualize and humanize them even when they are functioning in a de-humanized world. Instead of being embodiments of sin as Dante's creations are, Hawkes's figures, set in their landscape of dreams and death, are symbolic of the social and political forces at work in twentieth century Europe. Throughout his novels the dominance of history over men's lives and their inability to escape their past is reiterated. Trapped by their past, the Europeans in these novels and the Americans in *The Beetle Leg* are caught in inevitable forces too strong for them to overcome. A certain dignity belongs to those comic-ironic heroes who try, like Ernst, to break with the past and in turn are broken. Perhaps the idea of the lime twig can stand as a symbol for Hawkes's view of man's condition, for he sees humanity as trapped birds, victims of internal and external forces. One can see this in Zizendorf's recognition of the futility of his efforts reflected in his annoyed tone at the novel's end. Finally, there is a return to the matter of *The Cannibal* in a short story of Hawkes's, « The Grandmother ». The corruption of Mauschel (a derogatory German nickname for a Jew) by his Uncle Justus, the references to burning flesh, and the starvation in Germany after the war, presented in the

cold tone of Justus, expose the raw evil of German life as dramatically as any scene in *The Cannibal*.[7] Hawkes's work continues to reward the reader not only with revelations of individual characters but also with the wider meanings of their lives.

John Hawkes's economy of surreal effects, achieved by the juxtaposition of objects and incidents, his compressed poetic prose, not unlike the prose poems of the French symbolists, and his vaguely symbolic characterization similar to the figural realism of Dante all combine to achieve the intensity of the concentrated emotional moment of good modern poetry with the chronicling power of the novel. Hawkes opens to us the ironic vision of twentieth century man through the imagination of the poet and the objectivity of the novelist.

MARC RATNER

7. JOHN HAWKES, « The Grandmother », *New Directions* 17 (1961), pp. 51-64.