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Fish hooks and desert places: Space and the reader in the fiction of John Hawkes

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Rice University, 1989

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FISH HOOKS AND DESERT PLACES:
SPACE AND THE READER IN THE FICTION OF JOHN HAWKES

by

WINIFRED JEAN HAMILTON

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IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
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Abstract

The novels of contemporary American fiction writer John Hawkes are commonly labeled experimental, postmodern, surrealistic. While they share characteristics with each of these loosely defined categories, what really distinguishes Hawkes's fictions is their radical humanism. Hawkes's fictions seek to be experienced by the reader and in so doing expose and expand who we are. In these concerns Hawkes is more easily associated with such writers as Flannery O'Connor, Nathaneal West and William Faulkner. While each of Hawkes's novels is significantly different, all actively encourage the reader into the text—without the benefit of a magnetic plot or characters with whom it is easy to identify. Hawkes uses empty space—areas of "not knowing"—much as Faulkner uses character and O'Connor plot to draw the reader into his fictions where the violence and beauty of the images and prose assail, exhaust and affirm the reader. Four types of empty
space are examined: textual gaps and blanks, landscapes of desolation, silence, and sexual and ethical assault. While these ideas are discussed with reference to all of Hawkes's fiction and to other contemporary novels as well, extended discussion is given only to four of Hawkes's novels: *Death, Sleep & the Traveler, Whistlejacket, Travesty*, and *Virginie: her two lives*. Reader-response and psychoanalytic criticism, and several philosophical approaches to space are explored in the process of delineating those ideas which link physical, philosophical and ethical "holes" in Hawkes's texts to provocation, response, and vulnerability. Ultimately the center of the argument rests on vulnerability--how Hawkes's fictions render us unusually vulnerable, and how such vulnerability is vital to the intensity and satisfaction of the reading experience.
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We are stimulated to emotional response not by works that confirm our sense of the world, but by works that challenge it.

Joyce Carol Oates\(^1\)

Text of bliss: the text that imposes a state of loss, the text that discomforts . . ., unsettles the reader's historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistency of his tastes, values, memories, brings to a crisis his relation with language.

Roland Barthes\(^2\)

Introduction

Risking Hawkes

Despite the marvelous prose, the novels of John Hawkes are frequently if not nearly always unsettling. In the introduction to Hawkes's *Humors of Blood & Skin*, William Gass quotes a sentence from one of Hawkes's novels which he finds exquisite. And he says, "there are thousands of them--thousands," and each one creates not a new world so much as a special and very alert awareness of one; and that awareness is so controlled, so precise, so intense, so angular while remaining uncomfortably direct, so comic too, as if a smile has been sliced by a knife, that many readers have recoiled as though from reality itself, and pretended to be running from a nightmare, from something sur- or un- real, restoring the disguise
which Hawkes' prose has torn away.\textsuperscript{3}

It is this feeling of exposure, of vulnerability, that is the core of my study. Hawkes's prose, with its nearly merciless precision and daring, opens into some of the most fabulous and unexpected and yes, sometimes frightening and sordid as well, vistas in all of contemporary literature. His prose is not particularly easy to read nor is it readily entertaining, not, that is, entertaining in the sense of "losing oneself" in a story and its characters. On the contrary, Hawkes's novels are unusually dependent upon the reader and his or her willingness to let the rhythms and the images of the prose reflect outward and into the depths of the reader's individual experience and most private feelings.

While this is of course to some extent true of all fiction, Hawkes's novels push their way into these often guarded psychic stores as do the fictions of few other contemporary novelists. To give you a better idea of the effect I am attempting to describe, here are a few examples, taken nearly at random, from several of Hawkes's novels. This first passage is from Death, Sleep & the Traveler. In it, the book's narrator, Allert, is sitting at dinner with a table of strangers, on a cruise ship, and attempts, awkwardly, to begin some sort of conversation:

"This consomme," I said quietly, "has been siphoned from the backs of lumbering tortoises whose pathetic shells have been drilled for the tubes."

The silence, the singing of the crystal, the
plash of water filling the goblets, the bent head, the sun on the naked shoulders of the girl who was wearing pants and a halter, all this told me that I should not have spoken, should not have revealed in hyperbole my loneliness, my distaste for travel, my ambiguous feelings about the girl.4

In this passage note particularly the eerily quiet unease, and how Hawkes rushes Allert's confused self-consciousness, self-flagellation, isolation, and sexual desire together in the second paragraph, how he makes us feel it. And this only after Allert's quiet and vulnerable, and somewhat disorienting, offering is laid out in the first.

This next passage is from The Beetle Leg. In it, one member of a motorcycle gang called the Red Devils has become separated from the rest and now is barely escaping a pack of dogs:

Now and then a short claw tugged at the strap around the neck, the knees bent rapidly up and down as if the heels were about to shoot in all directions and he twitched, pulled at the chipped and battered motorcycle and lifted his nose toward the freshly scented path. Behind him the scampering dogs with rough fur and winded ribs, jaws clamped on hanging tongues in the over-country race, drew near with forced cries and shaggy heads, bewildered in the sudden opportunity to run.5

In this passage Hawkes focuses our visual sense on an
intricately drawn scene, an escape scene packed full of rich, 
provoking and largely unexpected images: the pumping knees 
about to discharge the heels; the dogs with "winded ribs" and 
jaws "clamped on hanging tongues." Note too how the expected 
roles of the motorcyclist and the dogs become strangely 
commingled, even inverted: the man flees from the dogs and yet 
it is he who lifts "his nose to the freshly scented path"; the 
dogs are the aggressors yet their cries are "forced" (forced by 
what?) and they are described as "scampering" and "bewildered." 
And, one might wonder, is it the cyclist or a dog that tugs at 
the strap of the helmet with a "short claw"? Hawkes's prose 
encourages these ambiguities, these question marks; it 
challenges us to consider not only the images, but to 
reconsider our experience as well, the fragments of remembering 
through which we necessarily filter the images. We are asked 
to pull up unexpected emotions and associations...to re-see, 
re-feel our experience, our knowing.

One more example. This time an omniscient narrator tracks 
the dark, obsessive thinking of Konrad Vost, the protagonist of 
The Passion Artist, as he recalls a scene from childhood:

In a corner of the room, in a large square of 
sand contained by a wooden border, stood the large 
white glistening ceramic stove, a fearful beautiful 
monster as tall as himself, the only child, with its 
thick white candylke surface decorated with little 
flowers and in its middle bellying outward in the 
shape of a great white egg. When cold it was
something he could secretly approach and touch with his hands, his face. In front of this stove his mother gave singing lessons to the village children; in front of it his father waited patiently in a wooden chair; in front of it he himself sat alone and holding on his lap his silent horn. Slowly the white stove would begin its discoloration, sending out through its iron chimney the smoke that smelled like burning leaves, burning trees, on the night air that was waiting to be filled with snow.

Now, if he could, he would destroy that stove with a hammer. 6

In this scene note the virulent and sexual potency of the engorging stove, juxtaposed with the measured, tight precision with which Konrad recalls the image. To a large extent the stove mirrors the novel, and Konrad as well, all three pulsating with a kind of terrible but contained inner violence, a violence held at bay, largely, by the skin or shell of its own, or its imagined, form. The passage too presses upon us repeating images of aloneness and fear: the boy alone with his silent horn, the snow, the fearful stove cordoned off in its bed of sand, the whiteness, the secrecy. And then the violently juxtaposed "now," aimed at destroying the stove, the memory. The boy/man also, as the stove is somehow himself, Konrad Vost...the contained aloneness, the "fearful beautiful monster." Unexpected, and yet the spat-out bitterness, in retrospect, feels right, is indeed imbedded in the terse
enumeration offered in the previous paragraph.

Even in these fragments shorn from their stories, Hawkes's prose, to borrow a phrase from William Gass, "breathe what it sees." And it encourages, perhaps even requires, that the reader do the same, that is, breathe what is seen. And what is seen in these novels is only accessible through language. In an interview with John Kuehl, Hawkes talks of the power of language:

For me, everything depends on language. The beauty of language is that in its very utterance it is nothing but intelligence being turned into sound, so that in one sense it doesn't exist at all. In another sense, it's the most powerful kind of actuality, so that the paradox of a man behaving through language means that the behavior both exists and does not exist. We can do things with language that we can never do with other forms of action. To enter into the intensity of a John Hawkes vision demands much of a reader. Not only must one read attentively,--hearing, seeing and feeling the words and images--but one must contend with novels which are often structurally difficult to decipher, and with subject matter which regularly assaults the senses and one's sense of order. John Barth, reflecting on the power of Hawkes's prose, speaks of the "unforgettable scenes refracted through a lens of rhetoric that transfigures them into something as strange and beautiful as anything I know in our contemporary literature." Then he adds, "They wear me out, Hawkes's books;
they hurt my head."9

While Hawkes's fiction has a strong and loyal following of readers, his work has not yet attracted the wide readership that many think it deserves. While his novels astound and delight some readers, they deeply offend others. Still other readers find his novels too structurally foreign and unpredictable to warrant the effort of reading them. Or, a reader may like one of his novels, and then hate the next. Hawkes's novels insistently defy classification, and just as insistently refuse to repeat themselves. They are psychological, and they are experimental. They have been labeled as "experimental," "surrealistic," "grotesque," "comic,"...even "pornographic." Nevertheless there is one common theme or preoccupation in Hawkes's work. While the novels often reflect a brilliant sense of comic timing, and contain some of the most ridiculous--and beautiful--scenes in all of literature, there is nevertheless a darkness that pulses through all of Hawkes's work. In a Hawkesian vision, suicide, frank and often "deviant" sexuality, corpses, exquisitely protracted pain, hideous murders and miscellaneous nightmarish scenes present themselves so repeatedly as to appear to be the underlying warp and woof of all his fictions. This darkness, however, is somehow intimately tied to the very energy and hope that his fictions never fail to offer. For Hawkes, language and the imagination can gain access to parts of ourselves accessible in no other fashion. In a conversation with Patrick O'Donnell, Hawkes remarks:
I want to find the underground conduit or river in which all the dead and living dwell. I want to find all the fluid, germinal, pestilential "stuff" of life itself as it exists in the unconscious. The writing of each fiction is a taking of a psychic journey; the fictions, themselves, are a form of journey.\textsuperscript{10}

His language aims to open into the realms of our deepest psychic life, to expose our innermost selves. "Exposure," he says, "facing, knowing, experiencing the worst as well as best of our inner impulses--these are the things that I'm concerned with."\textsuperscript{11} Gass describes the effect beautifully. He compares the effect of Hawkes's fictions to a passage, an image rather, in Rilke's \textit{The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge}. In it, an old woman stands, her hands covering her face. She pulls her hands away from her face; her face adheres to her hands and she looks at the inside of herself as one might the inner side of a mask. Gass writes:

This is the effect of Hawkes' fiction: it sees the world from just inside its surface, a surface at which it looks back the way Orpheus so dangerously did. ... It is as if a wall were examining, from its steadfastly upright side, the slow peel of its paint.\textsuperscript{12}

Leslie Fielder writes that "Hawkes gives us ... reason's last desperate attempt to know what unreason is."\textsuperscript{13} Webster Schott writes that, through "creation more astonishing than any representation of 'reality,' he [Hawkes] has caught the rhythm
of our secret processes."14

Because Hawkes's novels are idiosyncratic in style, often highly fragmented, and place a great deal of importance on language, critics have sometimes linked his prose with that called "metafiction" or "postmodern" fiction. These terms, coined and promulgated by Robert Scholes, Ihab Hassan and others, refer in general to much of contemporary, experimental fiction and, as delineated, denote a prose which takes great delight in its own design and surface elaborations, and which is generally about itself, that is, about the process of writing. While the terms do identify an important concern of contemporary writing, that is, the interest in the possibilities of language itself, the categories too easily "desex" much of contemporary literature by suggesting that it has few concerns beyond language. It also obscures or ignores individual works by such "postmodern" authors as John Barth, Donald Barthelme, and Robert Coover who, in works like Sabbatical and Paradise and The Universal Baseball Association, Inc. J. Henry Waugh, Prop., probe complexly into such psychologically filled subject matter as maintaining relationships, growing old, and the need for emotional sustenance. With Hawkes the distinction is even clearer, for his work has always purposefully aimed for an inner psychic core that is not only potentially dark and violent but filled with possibilities of love and compassion as well.15 This underlying and articulated focus of all of Hawkes's fiction links his work more easily with the work of Flannery O'Connor,
Nathaneal West, and William Faulkner than with that of Barth, Barthelme, Gass and Coover. While Hawkes links himself as a contemporary experimental writer with these latter writers, each of whom he greatly admires, when he speaks of his own work and of techniques, such as detachment and the use of cathedted patterns of physical detail, which are central to the effects he attempts to draw from his fiction, he repeatedly turns to the work of O'Connor, West, and Faulkner in attempting to explain these concerns.¹⁶

For Hawkes, experimentation with language and form is important because it challenges the limits of our knowledge and the ability of language to expand and release that knowledge. The function of an "experimental writer," he writes, "is to keep prose alive and to test in the sharpest way possible the range of our human sympathies and constantly to destroy mere surface morality."¹⁷ His fictions attempt "to dislodge," he says, "ordinary expectations so that the horror of the moment has to be perceived in a more complex way."¹⁸ Elsewhere Hawkes writes, again revealing the risk-filled aims he sets for his fiction:

I think of the art of writing as an act of rebellion because it is so single and it dares to presume to create the world. I enjoy a sense of violation, a criminal resistance to safety, to the security provided by laws or systems. I'm trying to find the essential human experiences when we are unhinged or alienated from familiar, secure life.¹⁹
In these concerns, Hawkes's affinity to Faulkner, and to a lesser extent O'Connor and West, is especially apparent. All share a fascination with rich, often dark worlds, an affinity for the comic and the grotesque, a passionate love of words and rhythms, a need to innovate style and structure, a dual attraction to chaos and control. Hawkes has written probing and admiring critical prose on both O'Connor and West, singling out O'Connor for her terse control and wry wit and West for his marvelous use of detachment. And he has named Faulkner as the "American writer I most admire." Each of these writers is vitally interested in the emotional effect of fiction on the reader, but each focuses on a slightly different narrative approach in order to involve the reader in their fictive worlds: O'Connor seduces the reader largely with her intricately crafted plots; West uses superficially unassuming yet deeply cathedated details; and Faulkner focuses on the complexities of character.

Flannery O'Connor, especially when contrasted with Faulkner, is the master of deceptive simplicity. Her plots—a typical family going on a vacation, a father taking his son to the city for the first time, a young girl's first love—and the homely detail which she uses to develop these "simple people" create a lulling sense of false security and encourage the reader to enter her fictive realms where, violently and suddenly, she inverts and upturns all expectations: the typical family is gunned down, the father refuses to "recognize" his own son on the streets of Atlanta, the young girl's "beau" runs
off with her wooden leg to add to his collection of "special things." These violent epiphanies shock and force the reader to re-evaluate not only the trajectory and intent of the fiction, but his or her own experience and feelings as well.

Nathaneal West's fictions are deceptive as well but render the reader vulnerable in quite a different way. West's fictions seem, initially at least, considerably looser than O'Conner's and simpler than Faulkner's. It is easy to relax into their apparent ease. In his fiction a tension slowly and nearly imperceptibly accrues. West uses details cathected with incredible energy and secreted meaning—details like the Saragasso dump of dreams or Homer's unruly hands—to develop an uneasiness in his fictions. Often it is only later that one realizes the extent to which West's emotional intensity has been growing. The best example may be the crowd scene at the end of The Day of the Locust. The violence of this scene seems strangely necessary, cathartic, as if there were no other way to release the tension of the pages...and in the reader.

Faulkner focuses largely on character to pull the reader into the spaces of his fictions. In Faulkner's novels, despite his bold experiments with language and with the structure of his novels, his characters are rendered quite traditionally. They are full, complex, and knowable people, set into landscapes that seem real, possible. Thomas Sutpen, Darl Bundren, Joe Christmas, Benji can be, from Faulkner's portraits, imagined into a full, complexly faceted existence. While the reader must actively participate in a Faulkner novel
in order to piece together and understand the narrative and its characters, one senses that understanding, or at least a degree of understanding, will be revealed from the process itself. As one assembles the perspectives in *As I Lay Dying*, for example, one begins to "know" Cash's reliability and to "know" the tortured, fractured sensibility that is Darl. One delves into the fluid, pestilential stuff of Faulkner's novels largely through empathy with characters who, though superficially quite different from oneself, are psychologically "one of our own."
Through this identification, Faulkner's fictions assault and pry open the reader's psychological and ontological foundations, expanding these realms, provoking an enriched sense of sympathy and compassion by which to know oneself and connect to the surrounding world.

Hawkes's fictions aim for the same psychic stores, and they too aim to "challenge us in every way possible in order to cause us to know ourselves better and to live with more compassion."22 In an interview with Robert Scholes, Hawkes rephrases this aim of his fiction:

> I happen to believe that it is only by traveling those dark tunnels, perhaps not literally but psychically, that one can learn in any sense what it means to be compassionate.23

To transport the reader into these tunnels, however, Hawkes's fictions emphasize somewhat different narrative techniques and strategies than do O'Connor, West and Faulkner. While the fictions of these three authors seem to gradually draw the
reader into their landscapes and stories, Hawkes's fictions seem, at least at first, to develop a degree of detachment. Hawkes's fractured structures often seem more concerned with preventing understanding than facilitating it. In addition, his characters keep their distances. They remain curiously fictionalized, fleshless. "I began to write fiction," Hawkes once said, in an interview with John Enck, "on the assumption that the true enemies of the novel were plot, character, setting, and theme." Elsewhere he has said that he is not interested "in portraying the psychic states of characters." His characters lack histories. Whereas the characters of Faulkner and West, and to a lesser extent O'Connor, are developed into complex psychological beings, Hawkes's characters seldom, if ever, struggle with feelings or decisions; they nearly universally deny us their inner thoughts and motivations. In novels like The Cannibal and The Beetle Leg, for example, the characters--Zizendorf, Jutta, Ernst, Stella Snow, Luke Lampson, Ma and others--move somnolently like pawns on some giant and slightly out-of-focus, decaying chessboard. In The Lime Twig, the first-person narrator, Hencher, an apparently sympathetically drawn character, is killed off early in the novel.

Hawkes's more recent novels have tended to concentrate on a single character: Konrad Vost in The Passion Artist, Allert in Death, Sleep & the Traveler, Papa in Travesty, Cyril in The Blood Oranges, Skipper in Second Skin, Virginie in Virginie: her two lives, Sunny in Adventures in the Alaskan Skin Trade,
and Michael in *Whistlejacket*. Although most of these novels are told in the first person, the characters nevertheless actively resist our entering their worlds. Allert, as a number of critics have suggested, is quite possibly schizophrenic, possibly even institutionalized as he tells his story. His novel is alternately straight-forward and dream-like, and both tellings are riddled with contradictions. Eventually one questions the very existence of the cruise ship and the sea and everything else in the novel. Konrad, whom Hawkes has called his "most loathsome male character," moves in violent and sexual starts and stops through a brooding novel that feels much like a bad dream. Cyril, Skipper and Virginie are too clearly figments of the imagination to be "believable": Cyril, a self-styled "sex-singer," manipulates a *menage à quatre* in a hot mythical Mediterranean world called Illyria; Skipper tells his story from an imaginary island where he inseminates cows; Virginie traverses centuries to tell the two halves of her story. As a person, Sunny is perhaps the most accessible of all Hawkes's characters and yet she too remains distant. Not only does her occupation—she runs a quite liberated brothel in Alaska—distance her from many readers, but her story is an amalgam of patches of remembered stories, vivid dreams and tentative hopes, assembled with a voice that looks at itself rather than emanating from within itself. This tendency is concretized in Hawkes's most recent novel, *Whistlejacket*, in which the narrative voice belongs (primarily) to a young fashion photographer, Michael, who describes the world, and
tells his story, in a series of photographic tableaux. As in the majority of Hawkes's novels, the reader has the sense of looking at highly visual, stylized "scenes" projected on a screen.

But despite the disorienting structural techniques employed in his novels and the lack of characters with whom we can identify, the novels are still powerfully affecting, and do somehow manage to pull us into their interiors. Robert Penn Warren writes that Hawkes has "his own vision of things . . . and knows how to compel us to enter the world of that vision." Flannery O'Connor writes, of The Lime Twig, "It seems to be something that is happening to you, that you want to escape from but can't. The reader even has that slight feeling of suffocation that you have when you can't wake up and some evil is being worked on you."

Certainly a good deal of this power can be attributed to the range and command of the prose. But, as a good deal of experimental prose amply demonstrates,—I'm thinking just now of works like Giles Goat-Boy or Snow White or Willie Master's Lonesome Wife—brilliant prose is not necessarily emotionally compelling prose. It can and often wishes to crackle along the surface only, holding us safely in admiration of its words, its sentences. Is it perhaps, then, the subject matter of Hawkes's fiction that draws us into its interiors, sometimes even as we resist? Is it the promise of forays into forbidden realms of violence and potent sexuality? Or the lure of our own dream-
worlds suddenly made manifest? These aspects are components of the power Hawkes's fictions often wield. But there is another aspect which I think particularly characterizes his novels and which is central to how they work. And that is, how Hawkes uses space in his novels and how he uses that space to nurture and expand the reader's vulnerability. The reader is uncommonly alone in a Hawkes novel. Hawkes continually thwarts attempts to displace our emotions onto a character, to be subsumed by a plot, or even to grasp the underlying issues addressed. At the same time his fictions feel to probe our deepest, often most private, instincts, fantasies and terrors. Repeatedly we are left by ourselves, with ourselves, with selves with whom we are often quite uncomfortable. As Gass has commented, "The position is unprecedented." 29

It is within these "spaces," these areas or spots of aloneness, that I think much of the power and danger of Hawkes's fiction lies. By space, or spaces, I mean not only the distance between the text and the reader, and the "gaps" within the text, but also the curiously empty, desolate landscapes and the eerie quiet that pervade so much of Hawkes's fiction. Hawkes's fictions resist—but also demand—participation. In order to encourage the reader to participate by imaginatively connecting his or her own psychic recesses to the worlds and experiences presented on the pages, Hawkes works to prevent the reader from believing in and relinquishing one's self to his fictional worlds. "I knew," he says, "that I wanted to keep the reader out of the fictional experience,
wanted to resist the reader so that he would participate more fully. This statement succinctly captures the pivotal narrative strategy of Hawkes's fictions. To participate in the archetypal Hawkesian fictional experience requires a willingness, a willingness to visualize unfamiliar landscapes, to hear unfamiliar cadences and to experience the attendant feelings. His fictions do not sweep one away with mesmerizing stories and deeply etched characterizations. In this sense reading Hawkes's novels is more akin to reading poetry than to reading the typical novel. Hawkes's novels, like poetry, require making oneself unusually vulnerable, extending oneself into the spaces of the language and the images evoked by that language.

The aspect of space most useful in examining Hawkes's fiction from the perspective of the reader and vulnerability is one which in painting and sculpture is referred to as "negative space." It is the background, as opposed to the foreground. It is absence; it is the openness that surrounds that which is there, and which is used in the visual arts to lead the eye into the body of the work itself. In Hawkes's fictions there is an unusual amount of this so-called negative space. It occurs between juxtaposed but otherwise unconnected sections of text, in the violent recenterings effected by unexpected metaphors, in unusual syntactical groupings that slow and re-orient one's reading. It is the space which surrounds the often scantily-drawn and hard-to-believe-in characters. We move into the text as we move into the desolate landscapes and
the silent realms of Hawkes's fictions--other aspects of Hawkes's emphasis on open spaces--and try to understand. We gain access to a Hawkes fiction in large part by what is not there. But in these spaces the reader is unnaturally alone, and vulnerable. Hawkes's fictions encourage a kind of inner, tremulous silence, a silence that forces us to look into ourselves. It is a dangerous, exhausting--but ultimately richly satisfying--activity. This study attempts to define and demonstrate how these spaces work in Hawkes's fictions, how these fictions use physical and psychological space to encourage the reader to enter these fictive realms where, without reliable moorings, the reader is unnaturally vulnerable to the violence and magic of the images and events of the prose.

This work is divided into five chapters. The first chapter, the most theoretical, is primarily concerned with defining "space" and showing how this space, in a general way, functions in literature. This chapter also presents some basic ideas about the act of reading, how one connects, so to speak, with a work that is fundamentally spatial in structure and relatively unfamiliar. The subsequent four chapters, chapters two through five, explore four aspects of space which seem to me especially important in Hawkes's work, and which function to lead the reader into the fictions but, because these aspects of space and openness are also unsettling, render the reader particularly vulnerable to the effects of the fictions. Chapter two looks at textual "gaps" in Hawkes's fiction,
focusing particularly on *Death, Sleep & the Traveler*. Chapter three explores the sterile, desolate landscapes which appear so regularly in Hawkes's fiction and the effect of such lonely dehumanized worlds on the reader. These ideas are explored in Hawkes's most recent novel, *Whistlejacket*. Chapter four focuses on Hawkes's 1976 novel, *Travesty*, and on silence, that unsettling quiet that reverberates in the monologues and dream-like reveries of Hawkes's fictive realms. And chapter five explores the interior, private realms of sex and violence that Hawkes's fictions regularly bring to the foreground, and the effect of having one's private sexual fears and desires so publically displayed. This chapter examines *Virginie: her two lives* with these ideas in mind. Each of these four chapters is, ultimately, about vulnerability. The conclusion is titled "Erotics of Reading." It talks about pleasure...of feeling, of experiencing, and of words. It looks at different kinds of contemporary fiction with these ideas in mind, attempting to place Hawkes's fiction and the concept of vulnerability into this wider context.

While the ideas I develop are explored using examples from all of Hawkes's novels, I explore in detail only the four novels listed in the previous paragraph. This decision was based on the nature of Hawkes's prose, prose that encourages, even demands, lingering over passages and images in order to feel one's way into the fabric of the fiction. The novels I chose to examine are somewhat arbitrary despite the fact that Hawkes's novels are uncommonly different from one another (my
different conceptions of space grew largely out of an appreciation of these differences). Nevertheless I could have used, for example, *The Beetle Leg* to examine desolate landscapes and *The Passion Artist* to discuss silence, rather than *Whistlejacket* and *Travesty*, respectively. Or I could have examined *The Cannibal* in terms of its narrative gaps rather than *Death, Sleep & the Traveler*. My choices in these instances were primarily selfish: I merely enjoy certain of Hawkes's novels more than others and wanted the opportunity to delve into them in detail. Also, the novels I chose tended to be his more recent work. I did this for several reasons. First, I think a writer develops his or her range of fictional techniques in the process of writing and so an author's later works might be expected to reflect a more fine-tuned sense of narrative strategy. And second, I thought it would be more fun, and possibly more useful, to write on works which, for the most part, have received little critical attention.

Nevertheless the ideas I develop in my discussions of these four novels can be, I think, profitably applied to all of Hawkes's novels and, I hope, to fiction by other authors as well.

The title, "Fish Hooks and Desert Places," isolates the two primary modes I see working in Hawkes's fiction which make it both dangerous and profoundly satisfying. "Desert Places" denotes the vulnerability of the anxiety-ridden chambers of ambiguity and openness his fictions relentlessly present to us; "Fish Hooks" refers to the hooks of imagination and language
which seek to plumb those reverberatingly open spaces and, in
pure humanistic tradition, drag to the surface a bit more of
who we are. "Desert Places" also recalls another writer
vitaly interested in space, Robert Frost. In his poem titled
"Desert Places," Frost foregrounds the images of cold and dark
and loneliness that create the tremulous resonance in so many
of his poems. In this poem the narrator looks at a field,
early covered with snow, and at the surrounding woods with the
animals all safe in their lairs. The narrator comments that he
is too "absent-spirited to count," then concluding:

They cannot scare me with their empty spaces
Between stars---on stars where no human race is.
I have it in me so much nearer home
To scare myself with my own desert places.31

But whereas Frost leads us into and leaves us in resonating
chambers of emptiness and ambiguity, Hawkes's fictions aim
ultimately to fish us out of these empty, terrifying worlds.
In 1962, in an essay on the nature of experimental fiction,
Hawkes writes:

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.32

More than twenty years later, in an interview with Patrick
O'Donnell, Hawkes repeats the metaphor. The artist's job is,
he says,

one of catching, capturing, snaring, using a
dangerous and unpleasant weapon, a hook, knowing that
his subject matter is himself or his own imagination
which he has had to find himself and capture
ruthlessly.\textsuperscript{33}

Hawkes's fictions encourage the same activity in the reader.
They pry open our worlds; they stir to life new levels of love
and possibility. His is a "healing art," writes William Gass,
an art created with the "attention one lover has for
another."\textsuperscript{34} To read his work demands a similar commitment and
trust, a willingness to risk. Arnold Weinstein writes, on
reading,:

Love may well be the proper mode for our intercourse
with art. I mean love as an opening rather than a
finalizing mode of response, love as a widening
perception of art's fullness and our need.\textsuperscript{35}
NOTES


11. Kuehl, 164.


15. Paul Rosenweig argues convincingly that Hawkes's novels are about language, about how man imposes his fictions on the raw forces of sexuality and death in order to control and order them. See "Aesthetics and the Psychology of Control in John Hawkes's Triad" in _Novel: A Forum on Fiction_ 15 (Winter 1982), 146-162. While I agree that Hawkes's fictions do stress the power of imagination as a way to both create and live one's life, Rosenweig's emphasis on control ignores the emphasis Hawkes's repeatedly places on leading the reader into those primal, organizing impulses, exposing them so they can be understood and used. See Kuehl, 164.


in *Contemporary Literature* 6 (Summer 1965), 143.


19. Kuehl, 162.


24. Enck, 149.


32. John Hawkes, "Notes on the *Wild Goose Chase*," in *The
Massachusetts Review 3 (Summer 1962), 788.

33. O'Donnell, 22.

34. Gass, xvi.

35. Arnold L. Weinstein, Vision and Response in Modern Fiction
Space reaches out of us and translates the world: in order to succeed with the being of a tree, cast inner space around it, out of that space which lives in you. Surround it with restraint. It has no bounds. Only in the form-field of your renouncing does it grow truly tree.

Rainer Maria Rilke¹

What is laid upon us to accomplish is the negative; the positive is already given.

Franz Kafka²

O God, I could be bounded in a nutshell, and count myself a king of infinite space—were it not that I have bad dreams.

William Shakespeare³

Chapter 1

Space, Fiction, and the Reader

Early in the second volume of Don Quixote, Don Quixote learns of the existence of the first volume, detailing, he hopes, "my thoughts, my sighs, my fears, my lofty purposes, and my undertakings."⁴ He is concerned, however, not having seen the volume, that it may not reflect well of him, may perhaps not properly emphasize his courage, his patience, his virtue. He is assured, however, that the book is splendidly written, full of veracious detail depicting his good name and reputation. In response to which Don Quixote relaxes, basking in the idea of his life "spread abroad . . . by means of the printing press, through translations into the languages of the various peoples," basking in the idea of living in the minds
of all—the young children, the aged, the adults, the pages—who will read of his exploits, his joys and sorrows. "It [he] will live for ages," he says.  

Readers give fiction its life. It is what we imaginatively see, hear, feel...and incorporate into our deepest selves...that gives the words, the characters, the landscapes their individual existences. Don Quixote's comical grace, the arch of a tree, the length and color of a young girl's hair, the particular edge and depth of sorrow, are nothing until imagined into existence. Our individual perspectives color and define every word we read. Physicist Niels Bohr once wrote that "the meaning of every concept, or rather every word...[is dependent] upon our arbitrary choice of viewpoint." Reading is, in one sense, totally arbitrary and, at the same time, the quintessential enterprise of intimate complicity. It is a coming together of outer and inner realities. It is out of this convergence that we imaginatively construct and "watch" the stories of the fictions we read unfold on our own, so to speak, private monitors. It is here, on these "private monitors," that the worlds of book and reader meet, engendering a transitional construct, not unlike those transitional objects and fantasies of which child psychologist D. W. Winnicott has written, objects through which the developing ego tests and expands his or her ideas of self and otherness. Often it is not until our version, our "construct" of a novel, clashes with someone else's that we are forced to acknowledge the richness,
intricacy and concreteness of our interpretation, as when we see a film version of a novel we've read, and "know" that is wrong: the actor's too tall, the setting too opulent, the subtle tension of the prose lost.

In *The Implied Reader*, phenomenologist and reader-response critic Wolfgang Iser writes about this phenomenon, using the example of seeing a film after having read the book--and feeling cheated. He cites the example of the film *Tom Jones*. With the novel, he writes,

> the reader must use his imagination to synthesize the information given him, and so his perception is simultaneously richer and more private; with the film he is confined merely to physical perception, and so whatever he remembers of the world he had pictured is brutally cancelled out.⁹

The reverse situation also occurs. Recently I saw *Ironweed* with Jack Nicholson and Meryl Streep. Later I attempted to read the novel. But the novel was now transfused with someone else's imagination. There was the feeling that the director's images cancelled mine out, and I could not break the grasp of the sounds and images of the movie to reclaim the novel, make it mine. While a comparison of a book and its rendering on film undoubtedly entails many other critical judgments, one important, and seldom addressed, aspect is the differing imagined constructions that different readings of a novel produce. Often, when the imagined world is "translated" into the necessary specific choices--the voices and clothes, for
example--of a film or other concrete rendering, there is a feeling of dissonance and of loss.

There are of course exceptions to such a generalization. Sometimes an interpretation infuses new life and vitality into a form or image, expands the imaginative possibilities available to us as "readers." For me, a recent production of Uncle Vanya illustrates this well. In this interpretation of Chekhov's play, directed and staged by Eimuntas Nekrosius of the Vilnius Theater, the servants slide about the stage; Yelena's attraction to the doctor is made overt as she rushes to him with declarations of love after he feigns suicide; Yelena, not Sonya, mouths the what-if-a-friend-were-in-love-with-you speech; and Yelena compulsively collects perfume bottles which are then pilfered one by one by the other members of the cast. None of this is in the script and yet, as one reviewer remarked, it was as if it was in the script but no one had fleshed it out before. It was as if one watched the white space of the play made manifest.

Yet hasn't Nekrosius done (perhaps with a bit more perseverance and courage) what we all do when we read a text, that is, bring it to life by filling in the blank spaces, the white spaces of the text? So that, to a large extent, we make the text ours by what is not there. At the same time we assert our presence, our images, our way of thinking into the text. To do so, however, is to make ourselves, to varying degrees, vulnerable, vulnerable to outside criticism, vulnerable to clashes with other interpretations, vulnerable
to our own unease of unfamiliar territory, vulnerable to emotions and ideas that the text itself has fostered, elicited, exposed. The director of *Ironwood*, Hector Babenco, produced a sensitive and cleanly assembled production. He risked little by getting the author of the book, William Kennedy, to write the screenplay, by choosing two actors with known "audience appeal," and by sticking to the script. His production is safe, even comforting. But Nekrosius exposed his most private fantasies, the very way he thinks and sees the world, on a stage for all to see and respond to when he attenuated Yelena's sloth and apathy, turned scholarliness into buffoonery, and pushed servitude into power and the mockery of those who rule. The text supports such an interpretation but because his interpretation is so personal and independently incisive, it is particularly alone, exhausting, vulnerable. But also enriching, provoking, and satisfying in a way that conventionality purposefully eschews.

In a letter to his wife, Ranier Maria Rilke writes of the intimate connection between vulnerability and enrichment:

> Works of art always spring from those who have faced the danger, gone to the very end of an experience, to the point beyond which no human being can go. The further one dares to go, the more decent, the more personal, the more unique a life becomes.¹⁰

This statement is true, I think, for readers as well. For readers seeking this kind of experience the responsibility is then to choose and attempt the works of authors who push and
expand experience, participating as fully as possible in the images and in the interstices of the work. To a large extent then, it is the white space of the text, both the extent to which it invites the participation of the reader/interpreter and the degree to which the reader/interpreter is willing to engage that space, that ultimately determines the experience. The text guides but does not determine the experience. As the measurements depicting the position and velocity of a particle in space have been found to be substantially influenced by the process of measuring itself, so too is the experience of a novel significantly altered by the reader and the reading.

This approach to reading asks much of the reader. The reading of fiction becomes an ethical activity by which we can expand our vistas of thought and imagination and humanity. Literary critics have, somewhat surprisingly, written little about space and its relationship to the emotional and ethical dimensions of reading. In fact, what novelists and poets themselves have written about how they use empty space or "holes" within their texts makes an important point that critics who write on textual indeterminacy and the response of readers to texts often ignore, that is, that writers, especially of fiction, consciously create and leave empty spaces, windows, ambiguities in their texts in order to more fully engage their readers and to expand the experience of their texts. In this well known passage from the preface to The Portrait of a Lady, Henry James writes of the infinite viewpoints, or ports of entry, into a fiction, and of
fiction's receptivity:

The house of fiction has in short not one window, but a million—a number of possible windows not to be reckoned, rather; every one of which has been pierced, or is still piercable, in its vast front, by the need of the individual vision and by the presence of the individual will.11

This passage, written in approximately 1881, significantly predates deconstructionist theory and its concern with finding openings into the text, and reader-response theory with its emphasis on the role of the reader in the textual experience. Yet note how indeterminately open ("windows not to be reckoned") James regards his own text, and how he specifically addresses the reader, that need of the individual's "vision" and "will" to penetrate fiction's "vast front." It is also an intimate and sexual image—house/fiction as receptor/vagina, reader as aggressor/penis. The act of reading is seen as an act of penetration, of reciprocity, an image which is made more concrete in a contemporary novel by William Gass, Willie Master's Lonesome Wife, in which "book" and "wife" become strongly commingled, and which asks the reader to enter as in sexual intercourse.12

The need is not only that of the reader for his or her own imaginatively engendered experience, but that of the fiction for completion, life. It is an interpenetrating, mirroring activity. The narrator, the wife/book "Babs," speaks:

I feel sometimes as if I were imagination (that
spider goddess and threadspinning muse)—imagination imagining itself imagine. Then I am as it is, reflecting on my own revolving, as though a record might take down its turning and in that self-responsive way compromise a song which sings its singing back upon its notes as purely as a mirror, and like a mirror endlessly unimages itself, yet is none the less an image (just as much a woman, gauzy muse and hot-pants goddess quite the same), for all that generosity—for all that giving of itself and flowing constantly away.13

This passage is about seeing and feeling, about connecting (to art? to life?) by way of the imagination, imagination stimulated and expanded through words. As a corollary, the passage is about writing and reading. It is about becoming and un-becoming, how through the imagination a book continually recreates itself, through unceasing mirror images, as Babs re-images herself, and as we "see" ourselves, as we feel ourselves in the images we construct from the words on the page. It is also about an ineffable, ungraspable, fluctuating "somethingness" there, like a book, like a woman, embedded within the multiplicity of reflecting images which it engenders and by which it is perceived. These are the words and images which are not "us," not reflections of ourselves but rather the possibilities from another imagination and intellect which prod us to envision and consider our outer worlds and inner recesses from new and extended perspectives.
The above passage from Gass's novel describes a space-world, a spatial construct, embroidered by perception and its engendered objects. Hemingway once said that you could omit anything if you knew that you omitted and the omitted part would strengthen the story and make people feel something more than they understood.14 Hemingway is more confident than most authors about knowing with any certainty what "you omitted," but he makes an important point concerning how an author can consciously use omission to involve the reader on an affective level. The concept, with regard to omission, corresponds to Yeat's belief in the power of symbols, that is, if you elicited the rhythms and described the colors and smells with precision, and brought it all into sensitive relation with one another that they would evoke in the reader "indefinable yet precise emotions, . . . call down among us certain disembodied powers, whose footsteps over our hearts we call emotions."15 These are emotions which, as any fan of Hemingway's novels can attest, are often most powerfully evoked by their conspicuous absence or, as one of his characters says, by "talking around them."16 Into this ineffable but circumscribed space, the reader places himself and feels the moment in the fullness of the particularity of one's own experience.

In her Diary Virginia Woolf reinforces, from a slightly different perspective, the critical importance of space, of what is left unsaid, to the power and resonance of a successful fiction. The power, she says, is in how the spaces
come together in the present, in the reading. She has made a
discovery about her writing, she writes...

how I dig out beautiful caves behind my characters:
I think that gives exactly what I want; humanity,
humour, depth. The idea is that the caves shall
connect and each comes to daylight at the present
moment.¹⁷

In this moment of becoming, in this moment of correspondence
between the author's and the reader's consciousnesses in the
"caves" embedded within the fiction, there is an infusion of
energy that not only enervates and expands the work but,
reciprocally and similarly, transforms the reader.

This process of opening to the reader "caves" of what
might be described as the ontologically present yet
undescribable thingness behind objects is a subject and
 technique of particular importance to the work of Ranier Maria
Rilke. Edward Snow, in the introduction to his translation of
Rilke's New Poems [1907], writes that the "great theme" of the
New Poems is the "interanimation of objects and consciousness,"
that, at their most radical, the poems seek
to open the dimensions . . . of the "lived world"
where subject and object are inseparable aspects of
an imaginatively engendered unity.¹⁸

A recurring activity of Rilke's poems is that of probing and
delineating the edges of the ineffable "inner space"
(Innerraum) of things themselves. It is akin to the space
that Gaston Bachelard calls "intimate space."¹⁹ These are the
"caves," so to speak, which lie behind and within shells, roses, individuals, pathways, sculptures and which, when infused with the intimacy and energy of perception, give these objects their resonance and being. This is the space Rilke describes in the epigraph to this chapter when he writes that, to "achieve the existence of a tree," one must "invest it with an inner space, this space which has its being in you." This process of corroboration and, in the most personal and private sense, recognition, underlies as well the image presented in the introduction, "Risking Hawkes," of the old woman suddenly confronted with and "seeing" the inside of her face. This is the "interanimation" of which Snow writes, the mirroring activity through which object and self are reflexively expanded through the process of perception. Rilke's poems, especially those which focus on particular "things"—a bowl of roses, a flamingo dancer, a bed, a black cat—repeatedly reach, in words, to pry open for a fleeting moment the layers which encircle and blunt their "thingness," to allow us a glimpse into their space-interiors. 20

In certain ways, the activity can be compared to the peeling away of the layers of an onion, an image which Roland Barthes has used to describe the method of a deconstructionist reading of a text. But in the deconstructionist onion analogy, the onion's center is empty. The fields of force which hold the onion together are in the layers themselves, and the exploration aims not at the absent center but at the substance of and relationships within the layers themselves.
In the Rilkean model the center, while fundamentally indescribable and ungraspable, nevertheless commands the inquiry, and is filled with an ontological force which reverberates outward, through layer upon layer of viewpoints, perceptions and words. In this model perception is aimed at this center, at an unknowable space which only gains presence when, by investing this space-interior with individual memories and emotions, the object's "thingness" is elicited. Grossly simplified, the deconstructionist model focuses on process; the Rilkean model on "meaning." This is meaning, however, not as a universal agreement as to thingness, but meaning as a highly individual and momentary insight into ideas, or emotions, or things themselves. Combining both models, one may regard the book as word-defined edifice, and reading as looking for those holes or loose bricks that will allow us access into the interior, into the spaces behind the novel, the poem. And reflexively, into ourselves.

Marcel Proust writes of the reflexive action of reading when he says, speaking of Remembrance of Time Past, that it would be incorrect to say even that I was thinking of those who might read it as "my readers." For, as I have already shown, they would not be my readers but readers of themselves . . . so that through my book I would give them the means of reading their own selves.21

So that, in some sense, the "book" is not the printed pages but rather the reader. Like Hemingway, Woolf and Rilke, Proust
emphasizes his awareness of the critical interdependence of author and reader and the degree to which writers work to encourage the reader to enter their texts and, to a very large extent, to give the texts their life.

In *For A New Novel*, the contemporary novelist and critic Alain Robbe-Grillet writes specifically about the importance of the reader in the design of experimental fiction, fiction which is often particularly open and space-filled, unfamiliar and difficult to negotiate. In the following passage he responds to the accusation that such fiction neglects the reader:

> Far from neglecting him, the author today proclaims his absolute need of the reader's cooperation, an active, conscious, *creative* assistance. What he asks of him is no longer to receive ready-made a world completed, full, closed upon itself, but on the contrary to participate in a creation, to invent in his turn the work—and the world—and thus learn to invent his own life.\(^{22}\)

Robbe-Grillet is, in effect, saying that it is through or because of "not knowing" that the reader is forced to really read, that it is in the spaces of the novel that the reader engages and energizes the form. Contemporary fiction writer Donald Barthelme, writing on the seemingly endless reverberations and possibilities of one of John Hawkes's sentences, says, of writing in general:

> Not knowing, most wonderful of our cheap tricks,
binds him [the reader] into the story as a screw binds wood to wood.  

Space, in various forms, is the single largest progenitor of "not knowing." When novelists and poets speak of the space or pockets of openness within their works, they usually concentrate on its unknowable nature and its critical role in forging an affective bond or bridge between the words on the page and the reader. It appears also to be essential in some way to the richness and resonance of a successful work, this, in turn, measured by the multiplicity of "interpretations" that such works appear to be able to sustain.  

Literary critics interested in space are apt to try to locate and define these areas of "not knowing" within the text, or within the space between the reader and the text. These spaces, depending on the critical approach, have been labeled "gaps," "blanks," "symbols," "spots of indeterminacy," "interiority," "fault lines," and "forepleasure." They are often explicated by looking at narrative techniques, such as circularity, juxtaposition, fragmentation, unreliable narrators, silent narrators, and multiple plot lines, which are often associated with relatively open and indeterminate texts. When physicists look at a particle they are aware that the beam of light used to "see" the particle alters inescapably the particle and, conversely, the beam of light has been altered: there has been a transfer of energy between subject and object. When readers interact with literary space there is a similar transfer of energy. Nevertheless, space as approached by literary
criticism is more often discussed in terms of narrative structure. While this approach can be very useful in helping one conceptualize and "understand" a text, it largely defers the question of how space and openness, or the feeling of empty space, affects the reader.

Before examining various critical approaches to space and the reader, I wish to temporarily backtrack and discuss physical space, space in the "real" world. This I think will eventually lead us to some important and somewhat neglected ways that the feelings attached to "not knowing" are elicited in fiction. Physical, "objective" space can, for our purposes of distinction, be measured. It is Euclidean space. It is defined by certain parameters, whether in one, two, three or four dimensions, and we use these spatial relationships to locate ourselves and objects within these dimensions. Thus I can speak of the space between Houston and New York as the line connecting these two points, or 1,435 miles. Or the distance between you and me across a small table in a crowded cafe as 29 inches. This is space in one dimension. In two dimensions we speak of space as area. Multiply the length of two adjoining sides of a rectangle and you get area. A house, for example, is in part defined by its area, its number of square feet, the amount of space it occupies on a two-dimensional grid we may choose to define as lot or block or city...whatever.

If we add a third dimension, height, to describe our house, we can talk about volume. We can talk about how much
air or water the house can hold. Which brings us to a consideration of \textit{negative space}.\textsuperscript{28} Negative space is that which is left over. It is the opposite of "thingness." Think, for example, of a living room. Think of it entirely empty, just before the painters come, and then think of it on December 22, with a Christmas tree and a buffet table and thirty or so people. Now, imagine filling both rooms with water and measuring the amount each room will accept. This measures the available or negative space. In the second situation there is considerably less "space," even though the room itself is exactly the same size.

This is a crucial distinction. Because from our concepts of physical space we extrapolate to "perceived space," or what is called "psychological space," or what Cassirer calls "perceptual space." It is also, in the mathematical world, referred to as "hyperbolic space."\textsuperscript{29} It is, most simply, a perceptually distorted sense of physical space. It is dependent not only on our senses, such as smell, sight, touch and hearing which, as the drawings of Escher brilliantly testify, can perceive a world quite different than "measured" reality, but also on our individual concepts of self and its connectiveness to the perceived world. In general, the more negative space which surrounds an individual, the more alone he or she will feel. With fewer "things" to connect or orient to, the feeling of space is attenuated, exaggerated.

Painters as disparate as Mark Rothko and Hieronymous Bosch have used the concept of hyperbolic or psychological
space in their works to increase the sense of aloneness and vulnerability of the individual. Rothko does so, especially in his later paintings, by painting dark-hued, cavernous, fuzzy-edged rectangles, spaces in which the viewer reverberates, with no subject matter or other activity to which to grab hold (Figure 1). Bosch, on the other hand, paints cosmic canvases vastly populated with little, faceless people (Figure 2). His people seem overwhelmed by the scope of the canvas, vulnerable to their curious anonymity, to their uncontrollable passions, and to the very largeness and unknowableness of the world they inhabit. In both instances the viewer is met with profoundly sensual experiences, and with unfamiliar and unsettling scenes. Both artists use space in its objective and hyperbolic evocations to manifest feelings of alienation, and to communicate with the psychic recesses of the viewer.

Note now, before we continue, that we have discussed two kinds of space, physical and psychological, and that psychological space philosophically takes two forms. First, there is the "space-interior" of characters and objects. It is absence in its most positive and ontologically present sense. It is, in all its ultimate unknowableness, the fullest sense of thingness. Every flower, person, chair has about it its own space, its own inner existence. It is evoked, however, only through perception and further, in literature, through words. The second kind of space is more closely associated with what is termed negative space. It is, in
Figure 1. Mark Rothko's *Number 10* (1958). Collection of Lelila and Melville Struse. Photograph from The Tate Gallery, London.
Figure 2. Hieronymous Bosch's The Garden of Delights [central panel] (approximately 1500). The Prado, Madrid.
contrast, empty. It is the "not knowing" evoked in literature by breaks in the plot line, multiple and unreliable narrators, confusing fragmentation and juxtapositions, and a multitude of other narrative techniques which challenge one's ability to connect with, to feel, to "know" a text. It is also, negative space, evoked by texts which, through their subject matter, description and voice, foster a sense, as in the paintings of Rothko and Bosch, ofaloneness and vulnerability, of uncertainty. It is a delicate and yet important distinction because most writers who write about space are inclined to be primarily interested in one or the other of these two types of spaces, and yet the vocabulary used to discuss both is fundamentally the same, and the distinctions are often blurred. Rilke, Bachelard, Woolf and Yeats are primarily interested in the space embedded in things, while James, Barthelme and Robbe-Grillet are primarily interested in the space between and surrounding things.

In paintings and literature both spatial realms are necessarily at work but there is generally an emphasis on one or the other. In Rothko's painting one has little negative space with which to contend, the rectangular shapes commanding nearly all of the canvas. While one is tempted to say that Rothko's canvas is full of negative space, a closer look reveals quite the opposite. The viewer instead is met with a deep emptiness of thingness itself. His spaces are in the depths in and beyond the haunting presence of the shapes themselves. Space in Bosch's painting, despite the densely
populated canvas, focuses on negative space, the space around his many characters, the sky and landscape that surround and dwarf his people. His "things" are fundamentally flat, unknowable, ask not to be penetrated but rather take their place in the larger scope of relationships and scale. The eye uses the negative space to lead one through the events of Bosch's painting, to explore and attempt to make sense of the canvas. This distinction between inner space and negative space and their different realms is nicely illustrated as well by comparing self-portraits by Rembrandt and Egon Schiele. In the self-portrait by Rembrandt (Figure 3), the head and shoulders use nearly all of the canvas; they command the canvas with their presence. The viewer is encouraged to look into the eyes, to feel the "caves" behind the face. Egon Schiele, on the other hand, presents us with a semi-nude, twisted body that largely floats on the canvas (Figure 4). In this portrait, there is as much background, or negative space, as figure. The background strangely commands. It assaults the figure, pressing against the orange robe and, where possible, penetrating the anguished figure like shards of broken glass, pushing its way up between the open legs, down between the spread fingers. We are not encouraged to "know" the figure; rather our knowledge and empathy, or emotional response, come largely from its relationship to the space which surrounds and defines it. The psychological effect of such use of space is to project a feeling of impotence and vulnerability and aloneness. As in literature, both kinds of
Figure 3. Rembrandt's Self-Portrait (1655). Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum.
Figure 4. Egon Schiele's *Self-Portrait with Arms Raised* (c1914). Collection of Viktor Fagarassy, Graz.
space demand that the viewer respond to the relationship of the subjects to the space they inhabit in order to "read" the work.

Since reading is such an idiosyncratic and personal endeavor, it is not surprising that many literary critics interested in space have focused their inquiries not on the experience of space but rather on defining the various kinds of spaces found within fiction. These critics concentrate on the structural aspects of the work or of the reading experience. There appear to be basically three approaches: 1) the deconstruction-oriented critics who approach novels as infinitely layered constructs whose edifices the reader/tec critic teases apart and descends into by discovering the naturally occurring "holes" or inconsistencies of the work; 2) the critics who differentiate what they call spatial or "architectonic" novels from plot-based or temporal novels and regard the "spatial" novel as a kind a architectural "building" of layers of frames and digressions which in various ways thwart temporality; and 3) the reader-response critics who concentrate on the role of the reader in "building" the reading experience and, by extrapolation, the meaning, of a work.

The deconstructionists, such as Paul de Man and Jacques Derrida, I shall approach only obliquely by appropriating for my own uses some of their methodology. While their critical concerns do indeed hinge on the "gaps" or, to use Geoffrey Hartman's phrase, the "fault lines" of a text, these critics
are not particularly interested in differentiating between various types of space but rather concentrate on the critical activity itself, the process of prying open, as if with a crowbar, the text. More importantly, the deconstructionists are not particularly interested in how space affects the reader, their approach being more concerned with cognition and how one navigates a text rather than how a text makes one feel. Their concerns with absent centers, with layers of signification and verticality of structure, and their careful and detailed efforts at what was once was called "close reading" are, however, extremely useful to and in some fundamental way underlie my study.31 The spaces that the deconstructionists locate and expand in their inquiries, whether nestled in the infinite shades and reverberations of a metaphor or in the ambiguities presented by subtle shifts in a narrator's voice, constitute and define those areas of "not knowing" which, on a less cerebral level, the reader inevitably feels and to which he or she responds. While it is the effect of these spaces, not their existence, which is the focus of my inquiry, the deconstructionist method itself focuses on and splendidly "sees" these areas of "not knowing" which constitute the foundation on which my ideas linking space and vulnerability depend.

Discussion of what is called the "spatial novel" largely began with Joseph Frank's essay, "Spatial Form in Modern Literature," published in 1945. This essay arose, as Frank has noted, as an attempt to better understand the power of
Djuna Barne's *Nightwood*. In the course of a detailed study of this novel and its effects on him, Frank posits that the novel works its "magic" more like a poem, vertically, through associations, than like a traditional plot-based novel. This observation leads him to suggest that much of modern fiction is spatially rather than temporally organized. He then discusses various ways in which such "spatial" novels thwart our conventional sense of temporality to create, in the reader, a feeling of simultaneity rather than one of progression. Frank sees the spatial novel as one in which "word groups" are juxtaposed, layered on top of one another, as one layers paint or objects in a painting. He uses poetry to attempt to describe this new form of novel. Of "The Waste Land," for example, he says,

> syntactical sequence is given up for a structure depending on the perception of relationships between disconnected word-groups. To be properly understood, these word-groups must be juxtaposed with one another and perceived simultaneously. Only when this is done can they be adequately grasped.\(^2\)

This, he says, is how one must approach the new form of the novel.

Subsequent critics interested in the spatial dimensions of recent fiction have tended to elaborate on the basic tenets set forth by Frank. Thus they have tended to focus on the structuring techniques of novelists whose prose seems to defy temporal progression. These studies have generally focused on
narrative techniques, such as repetition, circularity, intercalation, framing devices, broken syntax, fragmentation, multiple and often unreliable narrators, juxtaposition, and the use of hallucinogenic and dream-like sequences, which can be used to thwart temporality and achieve a work that approaches an experience of simultaneity. Thus, fifteen or so years after Frank's seminal essay, Roger Shattuck would write, in *The Banquet Years*, of how "the mutually conflicting elements . . . are to be conceived not successively but simultaneously, to converge in our minds as contemporaneous events."\(^{33}\) This he notes, reflects a change in the sensibility of the twentieth century, "The twentieth century," he continues, "has addressed itself to the arts of juxtaposition as opposed to earlier works of transition."\(^{34}\)

Ten years later, in 1971, Sharon Spencer, in *Space, Time and Structure in the Modern Novel*, defines what she calls the "architectonic" novel. The architectonic novel, she argues, is based on juxtaposition. Its essential feature is neither thematic nor stylistic, but structural. Its goal is the evocation of the illusion of a spatial entity, either representational or abstract, constructed from prose fragments of diverse types and lengths and arranged by means of the principle of juxtaposition so as to include a comprehensive view of the book's subject.\(^{35}\)

Spencer examines the prose of such authors as Julio Cortázar, John Hawkes, Anais Nin and Jorge Luis Borges and attempts to
show how these authors use techniques such as fragmentation, multiple perspectives and rejection of the novel's frame to undermine the more traditional forms of narration in which there is a plot which moves forward in time and in which richly drawn characters move and respond.

These studies link "space" with structure, and then, to the synchronous experience of that structure or form. This linking of the concept of space with that of structure, while it expands considerably the vocabulary with which to regard and decipher various narrative strategies, does at the same time, because of its emphasis on structure, tend to limit the ways in which space itself can function in fiction. Not only does this linkage largely deny space value within a time-oriented or plotted fiction, but it also encourages critics to regularly confuse what I believe is an important distinction: the difference between what I would call "positive or filled space" (volume, presence, space-interior), and "negative space" (empty space, background, gaps, blanks, absence). For example, critics who discuss the spatial or architectonic novel associate richly drawn characters and detailed descriptions with spatial structures both because of their three-dimensional or volumetric spatial presence, and because characterization and detailed pockets of description create relatively a-temporal moments within the text. While it is true that such descriptive prose focuses on moments within the novel which are relatively static and which might be considered to be layered vertically on a single point of time,
these moments also fundamentally deny space, or at least its open reverberations, by attempting to fill these moments with more and more words and explanations. These moments not only reduce the amount of negative space and thereby the role of the reader, but reduce the possible reverberations within the space embedded in and around the events and characters by the elaborate completeness of their descriptions. These moments, while they are clearly "spatial structures," are thus also curiously lacking in space itself--both that within and surrounding the objects, events, and words themselves.

This structural approach to space also necessarily discounts and routinely ignores the space-filled openness that scantily drawn characters and scenes present to us and the importance of these negative, or empty, spaces in the reader's reaction to the characters and to the narrative. This does in no way undermine their observations, but it is curious that Frank, Spencer, Shattuck and others fail to address this distinction and end up treating both types of space as if they affected the reader similarly. Another problem which these critics encounter but fail to address, is that they discuss space and spatial as grammatical variants of the same meaning, and pit both against time and temporal. Space and spaces then become the subunits out of which spatial constructs are built. Unfortunately, not only is the word "space" many times richer in meanings than is the word "spatial," but because of this working hypothesis the word "space" is denied a role in temporal structures. It is ironic that the first meaning of
the word "space" listed in Webster's Third International Dictionary is "a duration of time."

If one compares Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* and Kafka's *The Trial*, the distinction may become clearer. Both novels are essentially "spatial" in that they resist forward progression, both ending essentially where they began. While in *Vanity Fair* people do marry and die and otherwise live out their lives, in many ways nothing changes, the novel being primarily a reflection of eternal forces and rhythms in which characters act out predestined parts. This sense of verticality or atemporality is, to a large extent, created by the novel's heavy use of elaborate descriptions, emblems and character portraits. *Vanity Fair* also resists time by enclosing itself in the frame of a puppet show, by using fragmented and multiple narratives, and by liberal use of authorial asides and digressions. The novel continually turns back into itself. It reaches primarily for the "knowing" embedded within itself, for the space-interiors within its characters and emblems. Kafka's protagonist, K, however, unlike Amelia Thorpe and Becky Sharp, lives in a denuded fictional realm. K and K's world are fundamentally unknowable. There are very few clues to guide K or the reader. Whereas *Vanity Fair* may be approached intellectually, assembling clues and piecing the parts together, *The Trial* demands that the reader enter emotionally into its negative spaces, that he or she feel the vulnerability and aloneness of the protagonist. *The Trial* is more straight-forwardly temporal than is *Vanity Fair*; *Vanity
Fair is more structurally "spatial." Yet The Trial is many
time more space-filled, focusing on space through its sparse
syntax, its lack of knowable characters and scenery. Its
fictive realm reverberates in negative space, and it is by
entering this space that we experience the novel. More recent
novels, such as Robbe-Grillet's Jealousy and Hawkes's
Travesty, similarly depend on the inexorable march of time for
much of their primary meaning, while at the same time
depending on their space-filled recesses for much of their
effect. These novels demand emotional participation in a way
that Vanity Fair or Giles Goat-Boy does not.

While Arnold Weinstein, in Vision and Response in Modern
Fiction, does not use the term "spatial," at least not as a
category, he nevertheless concentrates on many of the same
novels and narrative techniques that Spencer, Shattuck, and
other proponents of the spatial or architectonic novel do.
Nevertheless he resists being listed with this group because
of the importance he places on the affective, subjective
dimensions of reading. Weinstein discusses various narrative
device such as repetition, fulfillment, mystery, circularity
and voice in selected works including Faulkner's Absalom,
Absalom!, Ford's The Good Soldier, Kafka's The Castle, and
Robbe-Grillet's In the Labyrinth, and notes how such devices
turn the novels back into themselves, denying forward
progression, and thus create circumscribed fictional spatial
realms that reflect in complex ways their places in the world.
Because the novel, he writes,
reveals, willy-nilly, how the self perceives and adjusts to its environment, a study of vision and response records not only how men make sense of the world, but how much space they take up, what balance they achieve, how they use (or are used by) their fictional universes. 

Thus Weinstein views the spatial novel as a reflection of how the individual views his or her place in the world. Weinstein also perceives an evolution in novelistic form from "solvable mysteries" to "alienation," a change which he views as reflecting changes in the individual's perception of the self in the world. Thus, in the world of solvable mysteries, temporal structures were appropriate while in the realm of alienation, the arts of juxtaposition are more appropriate. Like Spencer and Shattuck, Weinstein regards spatial form as a reflection of a world in which cause and effect, and therefore temporality, no longer work. But whereas Spencer and Shattuck see this as reflecting an increasingly dehumanized and relativistic world, Weinstein sees within the form a challenge to the form itself and to the reader to discover meaning in the outer world, through the struggle reflected on the pages.

Among the critics particularly interested in spatial structure, only a few have attempted with any perseverance to examine the nature of the spaces found within the so-called spatial novels. Among these few are Ricardo Gullón, in "On Space in the Novel," and Joseph Kestner, in The Spatiality of the Novel. Gullón, perhaps more than any other critic, has
attempted to conceptualize how space, different kinds of space, might function in novels. Gullón discusses ways of thinking about literary space, approaching literary space primarily by way of different mathematical and philosophical models. He concentrates in particular on four theorists: Ernst Cassirer and his conception of "perceptual space," emanating from individual sensorial experience; Pascal and the vast space-silence anguish which he has described; Gaston Bachelard's phenomenological inquiries into the vital spatial essences of things; and George Poulet's description of the psychic space in which man situates himself relative to the outer world. Gullón does not argue any particular idea or thesis which might link concepts of space and the novel. Rather, he uses the ideas others have formulated about space to probe and question the form and experience of the novel.

Kestner, on the other hand, creates and defines a hierarchy of purely novelistic space. He uses the term secondary spatial illusion to describe all forms of spatiality in the novel and then defines three specific kinds of literary space: geometric, virtual and genidentic. Geometric spatiality, according to Kestner, concerns Euclidean spatial elements like point, plane and line in the novel. Virtual spatiality defines the relation of the novel to the spatial arts of painting, sculpture, and architecture; and genidentic spatiality is the dynamic spatial field existing between the reader and the text. Kestner illustrates and defends his classifications with numerous specific examples from
architecture, linguistic theory and other discourses, but ultimately seems mechanistic and somewhat reductive in his attempt to fit whole novels and aspects of novels into the categories he has defined. Nevertheless, Kestner attempts to view the novel from the perspective of space as it is defined in other disciplines and, in so doing, he reveals some relatively unexplored and, I think, potentially illuminating aspects of the novel itself. Neither Gullón nor Kestner does, however, except incidentally, explore how these spaces work on the reader, nor do they distinguish between positive and negative space, discussing both as if they affected the reader similarly.

To talk about the experience of space shifts the focus from the structural uses of space in the text to how space facilitates or hinders interactions between the text and the reader. This entails a shift from thinking about the text and relatively measurable objective space, to thinking about the reader and subjective, psychological space. This is the space Cassirer has described as organic or perceptual space, and which we earlier used the term "hyperbolic space" to describe as well. Psychological space is not fundamentally different than perceived, physical space, but it is, by definition, more subjective, more mutable. Also, when talking about psychological space there is a shift away from describing the space itself, such as the size of a room or the length of a narrative digression or the number of fragments out of which a story is composed, to describing how the space feels:
confining, open, scary, freeing. With regard to fiction one can describe, from a psychological perspective, essentially three kinds of space: 1) the spaces or gaps within the text, 2) the space between reader and text, and 3) evoked space, that is, spatial realms which are imaginatively described or otherwise reflected by the text.

Reader-response critics have tended to concentrate on the first two categories of space. These critics, with regard to space, fall broadly into two camps: those like Roman Ingarden, Wolfgang Iser, Stanley Fish, and Jonathan Culler who are primarily interested in the text and how it affects the reader; and the psychoanalytically oriented critics such as Norman Holland, David Bleich, Peter Brooks, and Meredith Skura who are more interested in the reader and how he or she perceives or affects the text.

The Polish critic, Roman Ingarden, and the German critic, Wolfgang Iser, have focused their theories, more than any other critics, on the function of areas of "not knowing," of uncertainty, on the experience of reading. In 1931 Ingarden published *The Literary Work of Art,*39 followed a few years later by *The Cognition of the Literary Work of Art.*40 In these two fascinatingly complex and original companion works, Ingarden attempts, first, to distinguish what differentiates the "literary work of art" from other kinds of writing and, second, to explore and perhaps come to a better understanding of how a reader responds to such a work. It is in the second volume that Ingarden puts forth his theory of "konkretization,"
variously translated "concretization" or "realization." A work is "realized," according to Ingarden, only in the mind of the reader. "Realization" involves a complex filling-in of various "places, or spots, of indeterminacy" (Unbestimmtheitsstellen) which exist within the actual text (Ingarden at one point uses, as a simple example, the imagined color of an old man's hair). "Realization" also entails a synthesis in the reader's mind between various ontological levels within the text. Ingarden distinguishes four such levels: word-sounds, meaning-units, presented objects, and schematized aspects. Through the energy of the reader's emotional and empathic relationship to the work (this Ingarden refers to as "original emotion"), and through his or her cognitive abilities, the reader fills in or removes these "places of indeterminacy," eventually creating a kind of polyphonic harmony which appears to coincide with Ingarden's meaning of the "realization" of the text.

The problem with Ingarden's theories, particularly with reference to modern and experimental literature, appears to be linked to his attachment to the ideas of classical harmony. Ingarden himself was quite aware of this, and talks of, in The Cognition of the Literary Work of Art, the "incomprehensibilities" of modern literature, particularly where the indeterminacies are the clear result of the intentional withholding of information. Ingarden's search for harmony seems not able to accommodate the discord and tension so integral to many experimental works. According to Ingarden these acts must, in the process of interpreting the text, reconcile in various ways the gaps and
discordances of the text.

Wolfgang Iser's work is grounded in and expands that done by Ingarden, but goes considerably further in recognizing the inherent value of gaps and blanks in creating a valuable reading experience. The best authors, he argues, deliberately leave their texts open and incomplete. "If the reader were given the whole story," he writes, "and there were nothing left for him to do, then his imagination would not enter the field, and the result would be the boredom which inevitably arises when everything is laid out cut and dried before us."41 Iser emphasizes the importance of areas of "not knowing" within and behind the text which arise from such narrative techniques as fragmentation, negation and the unfulfilled expectations of the reader, and which encourage a dialectical exchange between the reader and the text. It is these spaces, argues Iser, which induce and guide the reader to formulate his or her own connections, thereby, in effect, "constructing" the text.

Iser criticizes Ingarden primarily for two things: 1) that "he is unable to accept the possibility that a work may be concretized in different, equally valid, ways," and 2) that "the reception of many works of art would be simply blocked if they could only be concretized according to the norms of classical aesthetics."42 While I feel that Ingarden's writings are more sensitive to different readings, primarily through his ideas of individual affective dynamism as a "realizing" force, than Iser does, Ingarden's emphasis on the creation of
an actualized and harmonic "object" as the result of the reader's constitutive acts fails give the process of reading the importance it has since come to have. For Iser, these "places of indeterminacy" are no longer "gaps" to be negotiated and conformed to a totality of structure, but rather,

by impeding textual coherence, the blanks transform themselves into stimuli for acts of ideation.\(^{43}\)

This entails a major shift of thinking from the importance of a work of art, to the importance of the experience of a work of art. Thus gaps and blanks can be viewed as narrative techniques aimed at expanding the literary experience. The Russian formalist critic, Victor Shklovsky, writes:

The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects "unfamiliar," to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself for art and must be prolonged.\(^{44}\)

Iser, more than any other reader-response critic, focuses on the process of reading as an end in itself, and it is his ideas regarding the function of blanks in a text which I have found most useful in thinking about how spots of empty space might function in a text.

While Ingarden and Iser are interested in the affective connections which energize and guide the constitutive
activities of reading, reader-response critic Stanley Fish is primarily interested in the cognitive activity of reading, of how the reader comes to understand the text. Fish's primary focus is on the "developing responses of the reader in relation to the words as they succeed in time" [the italics are Fish's]. Fish focuses his attention on the decisions, reversals, and recoveries of the reader who negotiates a text. While Fish locates the "meaning" of a text in the experience of the reader, his reader is not just any reader but rather an ideal or implied reader, a special hypothetical reader (or readers) who has the right literary tools to read the text, it is implied, correctly. Fish is interested in the omissions, fragmentation and such within the text to the extent that they "slow down the reading experience so that 'events' one does not notice in normal time, but which do occur, are brought before our attention." While Fish sees meaning as existing not in the text but in the reader's mind, Fish's approach is in many ways essentially structural as it looks for rules in the text and in language in general which govern the acts of cognition in the reader. The role Fish gives to space, primarily conceived as textual gaps and omissions, is one of delaying or thwarting or even teasing his idealized reader in his or her search for "meaning." Fish differs from Iser and Ingarden in that he envisions a single meaning encoded in each text. According to Fish, different readers understand the text differently because of their unequal experiential and cognitive abilities to find the actual meaning. While Fish's
close readings reveal in brilliant detail how a reader negotiates many of the gaps and omissions on which Iser concentrates, Fish ultimately largely denies the reader the value of his or her subjective interpretation, focusing rather on the importance of the role of the reader in properly uncovering the meaning or sense encoded within the novel itself.

Jonathan Culler, in *Structuralist Poetics*, shares with Fish a desire to uncover the underlying rules which govern the reading process but, interestingly, ultimately gives the reader's individual interpretation of the text more validity than does Fish, even though Culler is generally lumped with critics interested in the rules which govern texts, that is, the structuralists, while Fish is an acknowledged champion of the reader's role. Fish, however, is firmly grounded in hermeneutics, the rules which lead to meaning, while Culler is more interested in the individual adaptations readers make in order to come to grips with unfamiliar texts. Culler looks to society and the literary readiness, or "competence," with which it prepares its readers. Depending upon the degree of competence which a reader has with regard to a particular text, readers try to "naturalize" or make sense of elements of texts which are unfamiliar by comparing them to other more familiar aspects of their reading experience and general knowledge. While Culler's theories do address how repeated readings of the same text result in different interpretations, and the effect of culture and education on one's readings, he
does not take into account the emotions and experiences a reader brings to a text, as do Ingarden and Iser, and to a lesser extent Fish.

Both Iser and Culler see the reader/text relationship as a kind of confrontation in which some sort of acceptable meeting ground is negotiated. It is interesting to note, however, that they regard this confrontation in nearly antithetical ways. Iser emphasizes the reader as one who expands and completes the text, while Culler sees the reader's role as one of "naturalizing" or taming the text into a form which can be understood at one's level of competence as a reader. In one model the text is viewed primarily as possibility, in the other, threat. Particularly when confronted with experimental fiction, it is probably safe to say that both processes are at work, the interplay largely dependent upon what the reader brings to the experience.

This dialectic between possibility and threat meshes nicely with a psychoanalytic model, explored to some extent in writings by Peter Brooks and Meredith Skura, which views the reader-text relationship as a form of transference. This model is of particular interest and use to me in that it sees literature as an instrument through which the reader is changed. This concept of reading is very much in keeping with ideas John Hawkes has articulated concerning the intentions of his fictions, whereby reading is seen as an activity through which we learn more about ourselves and learn to live with more compassion. In psychoanalytic transference, the patient
projects onto the analyst his or her fears and expectations, and reacts to the imagined situation with a stock of defenses largely based on these projections. Through successful therapy the patient not only learns to recognize these projections and how they limit one's perceptions of the world but, because of the controlled environment in which these fears and expectations are experienced, adds new responses and perceptions to one's repertoire. "The transference," writes Brooks, "actualizes the past in symbolic form so that it can be repeated, replayed, worked through to another outcome."49 Literature too allows us to imaginatively explore and act in ways we never could in real life. Our responses to subject matter, to voice, and to organization say things about how we envision the world and help to define our boundaries between what is regarded as safe (and possibly boring) and what is threatening, but possibly expanding and energizing as well.

While much of traditional psychoanalytic literary criticism has attempted to "analyze" fictional characters or authors in terms of Freudian psychoanalytic models such as the Oedipal complex and wish fulfillment, two critics, Norman Holland and David Bleich, have written extensively on the reading process and the reader from the perspectives of psychoanalytic theory. Norman Holland writes on how readers idiosyncratically resist and are drawn to certain aspects of any text, depending on their personal experience which he calls an "identity theme." According to Holland, all texts are filtered through this identity theme, a complex amalgam of
defense mechanisms, wishes, fears, methods of coping, symbols, and values. The text is, to a very large degree, "re-created" by this identity theme, in the reader's own image of himself or herself and his or her strategies of coping with the world. "The point is," writes Holland,

to recognize that stories . . . do not "mean," in
and of themselves, . . . people do, using stories as
the occasion . . . for a certain theme, fantasy, or transformation.\(^5\)

Holland is primarily interested in the mechanisms by which we interpret texts and the world around us, and suggests, similarly to Culler, that readers "de-toxify" literature as a precondition to reading it. In Holland's schema, literature is detoxified by re-creating it in one's own image, whereas for Culler it is "naturalized" by defining it in terms of known societal models and conditioning. While Holland does briefly note that, in the reading process, self and object are brought together in a way which he compares to Winnicott's transitional spaces,\(^5\) in which self and other meet and are changed in the process of psychic growth, the primary thrust and interest of Holland's argument posits that individuals avoid threatening or new situations whenever and however possible.

While Holland's detailed studies of individual readers interpreting differently the same text has given the critical community valuable empirical data demonstrating the variability of response, his theorizing seems ultimately
reductive and strangely dehumanizing. David Bleich's work, best laid forth in his volume titled *Subjective Criticism*, responds to some of the problems inherent in Holland's theory. Bleich regards reading as a particular kind of encounter with the world, one which is entirely symbolic. Bleich sees reading as essentially a two-tiered response, the first which represents the initial identification or symbolization of the text and a second, which he calls "interpretation," which is a re-symbolization of the initial response. Through this two-tiered approach Bleich is able to respond to a major criticism of Holland's theorizing, that is, that it avoids, possibly even negates, the idea of self-enhancement. If, as Holland would have us believe, "the act of self-enlightenment is only an act of self-replication, the idea that the consciousness is an organ of self-enhancement has to be discarded."52 Holland's theory of reading as a form of self-replication, argues Bleich, is of value only in the therapeutic environment, in psychotherapy, not in the real world. He continues:

> But the ordinary engagement of self in new experiences has not such a therapeutic motive; it proceeds from the natural impulse to articulate a new sense of self more commensurate with the most recent life circumstances. Style seeking itself, like the identity theme, cannot be a principle that explains response.53

Bleich's argument attempts to acknowledge and perhaps to begin to explain the impulse to attempt new experiences, despite the
uneasiness of unfamiliar territory. While this is an area
that psychoanalysis as a whole has not examined, the impulse
which leads one into uncharted realms is, nevertheless, of
critical importance to any discussion of the affective
dimensions of reading.

The reader-response critics and the psychoanalytically
oriented critics, with regard to space, are primarily
interested in, respectively, 1) the gaps and blanks within the
text, and 2) the space between the reader and the text. There
is one last kind of space I'd like to discuss, which I call
"evoked space." This is a symbolic representation, in words,
of perceptual space. It is the images and sounds evoked in
the reader by descriptions and through the sound and pacing
and organization of the prose. This kind of space is not
often discussed as a separate category by literary or other
critics, although the language of its evocations is an
important aspect of our "close readings" of texts and other
forms of art. Thus we may speak of the sparse desolation of
Kafka's works or of a play like Waiting for Godot, or of the
dark thickness of the fetid rooms of Dostoyevsky. Or of the
entrapping walls and body that seal Gregor Samsa's fate, or
the desert spaces and aloneness that populate the work of Juan
Rulfo and Robert Frost. These are mental landscapes which are
elicited in the mind of the reader. They are subjective in
part—no two readers will have the same visualization—but
they are nevertheless tied to the text as well. To see broken
china and dust balls and mildewing rags in Emma is not
supported by the descriptions in the text, nor by the clear
delicate and impeccably precise language which renders them.

To some extent, one can view an entire fiction as a
space, a realm, a fictive world which defines certain overall
parameters which circumscribe how it is to be perceived.\textsuperscript{54}
Within this world there are smaller landscapes: rooms,
backyards, villages, city streets, and these landscapes have
their own described particulars and sounds and voice which
evoke pictures and feelings in the reader. The evocation of
relatively barren spaces, whether through description, or
broken syntax, or sparse prose or images and voices of
alienation, or all of these, tends to increase the sense of
uncomfortableness and vulnerability in the reader. Of
critics, Tony Tanner, in \textit{City of Words}, has written eloquently
and with great sensitivity about verbal landscapes and the
pictures and feelings they circumscribe, and Ihab Hassan, in
\textit{The Dismemberment of Orpheus} and other works, has explored the
functions and manifestations of silence in literature.
Neither has addressed the issue of space as related to
feelings of desolation and alienation directly, but both
explore issues central to my inquiries. In addition,
discussions of paintings and sculpture address spatial
dimensions and effects in ways which can be very profitably
applied to literature. Chapters three and four, "Landscapes
of Desolation," and "Silence," respectively, explore these
manifestations and effects of such "evoked space" in the
fiction of John Hawkes.
Almost no critical work appears to have been done which attempts to link the spatially conceived and space-filled structures of much of contemporary fiction with an interest in probing the individual psyche. Critics interested in "architectonic" and "postmodern" fiction have tended to view such literature as somehow a reflection of a fragmented and dehumanized world and therefore fundamentally in opposition to concerns with the intensity and idiosyncrasy of human emotion and the need to know oneself better and, to quote Hawkes, "to live life more fully." In addition, few American critics have been interested in exploring what might be called the "humanistic" side of contemporary fiction. Tzvetan Todorov recently commented that "the dominant tendency of American criticism is anti-humanism." His comments are a response to critics who, working out of perspectives emanating from deconstructionist and Marxist theory, have objected to the privileged status that humanism tends to accord the individual, arguing that such egocentrism has distorted our view of literature and of the world. Their theories have therefore almost entirely avoided the issue of affective individual response with regard to reading contemporary fiction. This is, I think, unfortunate because, as I hope to show, the concerns and effects of experimental fiction are considerably more complex and diverse and emotionally challenging than such categories and descriptors would suggest.

My study of space and the reader concentrates on the work of John Hawkes. I have chosen Hawkes because of the beauty of
his prose, and because his work, more than any other contemporary, experimental writer of whom I am aware, resonates with space, physical and psychological. And because his prose is challenging and unsettling in ways which, as Hawkes acknowledges, are meant to disturb, to "dislodge ordinary expectation so that the horror of the moment has to be perceived in a more complex way." 57 This sense of vulnerability is a critical aspect of how I see space facilitating emotionally challenging interactions between text and reader. Also, Hawkes's novels are each uncommonly different from one another, in style, in structure, and in subject, so they provide a particularly fecund working ground in which to test my ideas. These are ideas, however, which I feel might be profitably applied to other authors' fiction as well, particularly fiction toward which one feels some resistance or uneasiness—whether Faulkner, or DeLillo, or Calvino, or Brecht. In the next four chapters I explore four specific aspects of space which I think are of particular importance in Hawkes's novels: gaps and blanks within the text, landscapes of desolation, silence, and sexual/ethical assault, focusing particularly, but not exclusively, on one novel in each chapter.
NOTES

1. Ranier Maria Rilke. This untitled poem, of which I quote only the second of its two stanzas, appears in a letter to Muzot dated June 16, 1924 (Brief aus Muzot, 1921-1926 [Leipzig: Insel Verlag, 1937]). It was first published in English in Maria Jolas's translation of Gaston Bachelard's, The Poetics of Space (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964). Bachelard's source was a version of the poem which had been translated into French by Claude Vigée and published in the review Les Lettres, 4th year, Nos. 14,15,16, p. 13. The poem was later translated into English by Stephen Mitchell and appears in his book, The Selected Poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke, (New York: Random House, 1982), 262. The significant differences between the two English translations led me to review the original German poem with another translator of Rilke, Edward A. Snow. It is his translation of the poem which I have used. The translation is unpublished.


5. *Don Quixote*, 527, 531.


8. See D. W. Winnicott's "Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena," *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 34 (1053), 89-97. Winnicott discusses the use of objects and fantasy to accommodate changes in the individual psyche. While Winnicott is primarily interested in children and ego development, it does not seem far-fetched to suggest that the images and events and ideas of a text might also act as transitional objects, allowing one to "try on" new roles and ideas in a safe environment in the process of emotional and cognitive growth.


20. Terrence Doody recently shared with me a paper he had
presented at a 1987 symposium at Rice University. The paper is about intimacy—intimacy as a verb, as an experience. In Doody's argument, which might be called "thoughts on Roland Barthes's conception of bliss," he contends that the term "intimacy" would be a better word than bliss as it delineates more exactly that intensely private and cathedected space where reader and text meet. Doody's conception is, I think, remarkably similar to Woolf's "caves," to Rilke's "inner space," and to Bachelard's "intimate space." One should note, however, that for Doody, Rilke and Woolf, these spaces are not necessarily pleasant places, while Bachelard's sense of these places defines them as somehow safe and comforting.


24. Bachelard, 7. See also Roland Barthes's S/Z, 6-7, 15-16, 29-30, for his ideas on multivalent or polyphonic texts.

"cognition," rather than "feeling," despite their purported interest in the idiosyncratic response of the reader. Culler notes that "the experiences or responses that modern reader-oriented critics invoke are generally cognitive rather than affective: not feeling shivers along the spine, weeping in sympathy, or being transported with awe, but having one's expectations proved false, struggling with an irresolvable ambiguity, or questioning the assumptions on which one had relied."

26. As we have already seen, our experience and knowledge of space are a function of perception, which is a form of measuring, and that perception itself alters space. Yet the distinction between the relatively objective statement, "My house has 1200 square feet of space," and the radically more subjective statement, "The silence of eternal space terrifies me" (Pascal), nevertheless makes the distinction, practically speaking, useful.

27. While Kant sees Euclidean space as psychological, in that it exists as the result of mathematical/philosophical axioms, and distinct from what he calls the algebraic space of physics, most theorists regard Euclidean space as the closest thing we have to objective space since we do have agreed upon rules by which to measure it.

28. While negative space is used in describing two-dimensional spaces, especially paintings, where it is often equated
with "background" (versus foreground), the term as it is used in describing literary and emotional space (openness, emptiness) is best envisioned in a three-dimensional realm. Even in paintings and other two-dimensional art, the emotional response to the work is often dependent on the illusion of three-dimensional space as it is depicted or felt within the drawing or painting.

29. See Patrick A. Heelan's *Space-Perception and the Philosophy of Science* (Berkeley, CA: Univ. of California, 1983) for creative and provoking perspectives on space which draw not only from science, but strongly from philosophy and art history as well. Part I is about hyperbolic space.

30. For a quite wonderful and imminently lucid discussion which works its way through the field of possible deconstructionists (Are, for example, Harold Bloom and Roland Barthes deconstructionists?), see Culler's introduction to his volume, *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism*. See also his first chapter, "Readers and Reading," which subtly discusses shifts in regarding the reading process and how they are reflected in the structuralist and post-structuralist ideologies.

31. For discussions of some of the techniques used in "deconstructing" a text, see especially Roland Barthes's,


34. Shattuck, 332.


article is fundamentally the long first chapter, "Conceptos de las Espacialidad," of Espacio y Novela (Barcelona: Antoni Bosch, 1980). The chapter builds the foundation of ideas on space which Gullón applies to various novels in the subsequent chapters of his book.


43. Iser, 194.


46. Fish, 74.


51. See note 8.

53. Bleich, 112.

54. See Carl Darryl Malmgren's *Fictional Space in the Modernist and Postmodernist Novel* (Lewisberg, PA: Bucknell Univ. Press, 1985) for an examination of space from this perspective. This conception of fictional space, however, has often been discussed in literary criticism, although generally using different terminology. Terms such as "fictional world," "cultural milieu," "realm of the novel," "historical setting," and "narrative point of view" have been used to describe essentially the same "fictional spaces" Malmgren explores.

55. Several critics have recently responded to what might be called the reductiveness of much of the criticism which has been written about so-called "postmodern fiction" and "metafiction." These critics, each in a different way, create thoughtful nuanced arguments for the richness and complexity of contemporary fiction. See in particular Charles Caramello's *Silverless Mirrors: Book, Self, and Postmodern Fiction* (Tallahassee, FL: Univ. Presses of Florida, 1983); Patrick O'Donnell's *Passionate Doubts: Designs of Interpretation in Contemporary American Fiction* (Iowa City, IO: Univ. of Iowa Press, 1986); and Alan Wilde's *Middle Grounds: Studies in Contemporary American


There would be gaps. There must be. And I had never liked all those natural, graceful transitions. I accepted gaps. Was I confusing form with its chaotic subject? Almost but not quite.

Joseph McElroy

Chapter 2

Textual Gaps and Blanks:
Death, Sleep & the Traveler

By the phrase, textual gaps and blanks, I mean, to use again Donald Barthelme's apt phrase, areas or spots of "not knowing" within a text. The words themselves, "gaps" and "blanks," I have appropriated, respectively, from the writings of reader-response critics Roman Ingarden and Wolfgang Iser, both of whom were discussed in the last chapter. A number of quite different narrative techniques can be found in literature, especially postmodern or experimental literature, which produce textual gaps and blanks. Before discussing some of these techniques, however, I wish to reassert a distinction which I attempted to make in the previous chapter, that is, the difference between "filled" and "empty" spaces. When we talk about gaps and blanks within a text, we are necessarily talking about empty spaces. A number of critics who have discussed space in modern and postmodern fiction list techniques such as circularity, repetition, description, and various framing devices as narrative strategies which lead to
the experience of space in a novel. This is true, but it is a
different kind of space than I am addressing just now. These
techniques circumscribe an area, whether it is the fictional
realm of a book, or of a landscape, or the perimeters of a
character, and so do denote a spatial realm. As such they do
impede or slow temporal progression. But they are filled.
They do not, categorically, invite or demand the reader's
participation in order to fill the space. On the contrary,
they very often function to describe, to explain, to answer
questions a reader might have. However, these circumscribed
areas may denote areas or landscapes of emptiness and
vulnerability either or both by what they describe and how
they convey that description. This approach to empty space is
explored in the next two chapters.

Narrative techniques which create decipherable gaps and
blanks in the textual fabric include multiple plot lines,
fragmentation of the text, postponement and withholding of
information, unreliable narrators, flat and fundamentally
unknowable characters, unexpected metaphors and words, encoded
symbols and emblems, and negation. Each of these techniques
creates an area of "not knowing" within the text which the
reader must negotiate in some manner. Every time a new plot
line begins, or another fragment is presented, or a narrator
fails to make sense or contradicts himself or herself, the
reader encounters an empty space, a blank, an area of not
knowing, which temporarily halts the reading as the reader
acknowledges the break and tries to re-orient to the new
situation. In the case of a novel such as Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*, which is largely an amalgam of multiple plot lines, textual fragments, and unreliable narrators (seven in all), a number of re-readings of the novel will eventually lead to a degree of understanding with respect to who the narrators are and the sort of beliefs, concerns, and abilities which give them their individual voices. The experience of the novel is largely the process of experiencing its fragments: trying to come to know the characters, their preoccupations and relative reliability as narrators, and trying to piece together the events into some coherent whole. *As I Lay Dying* also demonstrates the technique of withholding or postponing information. Our initial understanding of, let's say, Darl or Jewel, is very different from that understanding at the end of the novel. In each monologue a little bit more information is given, and we gather, bit by bit, our knowledge of the characters. Characters about whom we are given extremely little information, such as Zisendorf in *The Cannibal* or Tyrone Slothrop in *Gravity's Rainbow*, create vast caverns of unknowing behind them, which the reader often tries to fill by expanding whatever scraps of information the author gives, drawing desperately from one's own experience. Unfortunately, this is a particularly risk-filled endeavor since these thinly sketched characters seldom do what we might expect. Emma Bovary is predictable in a way that Hugh of *The Blood Oranges* will never be. Thus our expectations of characters about whom we are given no descriptions, histories or motivations for
their actions, are constantly being thwarted, creating additional spaces within the novels they inhabit.

Unexpected metaphors and words jolt the reader, impede the process of reading. They make us stop and look again and try to make sense of the language. In The Blood Oranges, for example, at one point, as Cyril, Catherine, Hugh and Fiona explore a dungeon in a burnt and deserted old fortress, the narrator comments, "The voices echoed in the waxon blackness." Why waxon? The word stops the reading as one tries to understand waxon. Is it the air that's waxon, sort of cool and clammy, maybe a bit sticky? Or does it relate to the sound of the voices and how they echo, not full and bell-like as between mountains or in great caves, but sort of muffled as if each voice plunked into thick wax covering the walls? But then, wait, the phrase is waxon blackness, so perhaps it is the blackness that is somehow waxon, and yet how can blackness be waxon? Thick and sticky perhaps? Obviously there is no one right answer, or even question. The point is that such use of unexpected language, even in such a relatively small example, breaks the text, creates a pocket of "not knowing" around the phrase or comparison.

Two more techniques need to be quickly addressed: encoded symbols and emblems, and negation. Of the first there is a wonderful "definition," of sorts, in Pynchon's The Crying of Lot 49. The emblem, or symbol, is a mattress. Oedipa Maas is looking for clues to help her unravel the will of Pierce Inverarity, an old lover who has died and named her as executor
of his will. During a long night wandering through San Francisco, she encounters an old man, a drunk, who asks her to mail an ancient letter encoded with a mysterious stamp that is somehow tied to an underground mailing system that is, in turn, a clue to Inverarity's will. She helps the old man to a mattress he calls home. She thinks of all the experiences somehow held in that mattress, the secret salts held all those years by the insatiable stuffing of a mattress that could keep vestiges of every nightmare sweat, helpless overflowing bladder, viciously, tearfully consummated wet dream, like the memory bank to a computer of the lost.³

Such emblems, whether old buttons or pipes or rituals, are layered vertically with an aggregated memory. In some ways they function like description; they stop the text. Each holds a vast history, of which we are often unaware. We only know that through repetition it is a privileged symbol within the text, and as such it reverberates in its own space.

The last technique I wish to mention before exploring Death, Sleep & the Traveler with these techniques in mind, is negation. Negation is the very process of creating empty spaces, empty forms. Negation cannot exist without displacing its positive form, without leaving the shadow of the empty form of what it was before it was negated. Negation is a form of displacement, whereby the "thing" is replaced with its empty outline. There can be no negation without calling to mind what was.⁴ This is a very common technique in modern
literature, particularly for creating a feeling of emptiness and longing. It too impedes the text, by forcing us to stop, create the negation's positive form, and then cancel it out. Thus we linger on negations, both because of their empty forms which we try to fill (If it is "not windy" is it then still, or breezy, or eerily quiet?), and because their convoluted presentations confuse us, stop us, force us to sort through the phrase.

All of John Hawkes's novels depend heavily on textual gaps and blanks for their effect and, I would argue, power. While *Death, Sleep & the Traveler* is not, perhaps, as textually fragmented as, let's say, *The Cannibal* or *The Lime Twig*, it does, I think, offer a wider range of the more subtler narrative techniques which result in areas of "not knowing" within the text. In his introduction to an excerpt from the novel which is included in *Humors of Blood & Skin: A John Hawkes Reader*, Hawkes summarizes the "plot":

The book's narrator, Allert, is a fat, middle-aged Dutchman who tells the story of two love triangles: one involving himself, his wife Ursula, and her psychiatrist lover [Peter] who is Allert's best friend; a second that occurs on shipboard and involves himself, a wireless officer [Olaf], and a young woman, Ariane, who is an habitué of pleasure cruises and generally the lover of ship's officers and men alike. The psychiatrist dies in a sauna; Ariane disappears over the side of the ship and is
thought to have been murdered by Allert. Ursula testifies successfully on Allert's behalf at his trial and then leaves him; Allert survives with the guilt he cannot admit into consciousness, and the memories of the only pure love he had known in his life, that given him by Ariane.5

While this underlying "plot" may appear quite straightforward when reduced to this cryptic summary, the actual presentation of the story is no where near so easily deciphered when one reads the novel, especially for the first time.

The 179-page novel is organized in 115 fragments, each fragment distinctly separated from the next by a small typographical design. Some of the fragments are as short as a single sentence; others continue for five or six pages. Such fragmentation of the text constantly undermines any comfortable sense of temporal progression in the novel. While each fragment is spoken by our narrator, Allert Vanderveenan, each requires a re-orientation to a new place, a new time, a new situation. The effect of such constant undermining of one's expectations of a story that progressive unfolds is confusion and uneasiness. Thus the "gaps" are not only the physical space between the fragments, but the "unknowing" and confusion produced by the technique itself.

Nevertheless, while the fragments are not in any recognizable temporal sequence, they do tightly circle around the situations and events enumerated in Hawkes's plot summary. The fragments themselves generally describe an event or
conversation that occurs within one of the two sexual triangles, or a dream of Allert's. Many events are approached more than once, usually with some discrepancy between the tellings. While it is obvious that the novel is not plotted in any traditional sense, it is also readily apparent that there is an underlying story that can be assembled, at least in part, from the fragments. The construction itself is very tight; one senses that any unnecessary words have long since been edited out. And, while the narrative lacks any real beginning, middle or end, it feels extremely coherent and there is the sense, as in Faulkner's work, that understanding might be possible if one read it enough times, or had more experience. In fact there is the sense in this novel, more than in his earlier novels, that Hawkes is actually using, not just parodying (as in The Lime Twig) traditional notions of plot and character. Hawkes's most often, and I think unfairly, reproduced quote is that "the true enemies of the novel [are] plot, character, setting, and theme,"6 This has encouraged critics to assume that his novels do not have stories, do not have a plan or an underlying development. But they do, of course, although perhaps not in the strictly traditional sense. Hawkes has himself commented on his use of traditional forms, saying that he is "interested in the conventions of the novel and in novelistic methods," such as the first-person narrator,7 and that he believes "that no form, no kind of fiction has been exhausted.8 And on plot, that "plot is of course necessary even though I cannot create
a plot and still do not know what a plot is."\(^9\) Elsewhere Hawkes expands this comment:

My novels are not highly plotted, but certainly they're elaborately structured, . . . [S]tructure--
verbal and psychological coherence--is still my largest concern as a writer. Related or corresponding event, recurring image and recurring action, these constitute the essential substance or meaningful density of my writing.\(^{10}\)

Thus it it fair to say that *Death, Sleep & the Traveler* is "structured," not plotted. And it is how the novel is structured, how "not knowing" is developed nearly as an art in itself, that largely accounts for the thick richness of this novel. From the very beginning, in the title and in the opening lines of the novel, the complex interweavings of knowing and not knowing are discernible. Hawkes tells us, in the acknowledgements on the reverse side of the title page, that *Death, Sleep & the Traveler* is "titled after a work of sculpture by Aristides Stavrolakes, who died in 1962 at the age of thirty-five."\(^{11}\) In an interview with Patrick O'Donnell Hawkes describes the sculpture, which is not accessible for public viewing, as containing

two figures leaning away from each other, with a third figure, suspended, like a hammock, in the middle. . . So death and sleep are carrying the traveler."\(^{12}\)

The title, and the information about its origin, establish
parameters that essentially define the novel, at its onset, in
terms of space, especially in terms of empty space. First,
the title draws an analogy between a sculpture and the novel.
This foregrounds the sense of the novel as a shaped aesthetic
object, and not just any "art object" but a sculpture, one
that defines its form against space, one that actively uses
negative space to lead the viewer into the form and, lastly, a
form that continually changes depending upon the relationship
of the viewer to the sculpture. The words of the title
suggest empty forms and an unstable aesthetic realm. "Death"
and "sleep" describe loss of thereeness, loss of conscious
life. Sleep also suggests the confusion of the sleep/dream
world. Both are negations of living, shadows of active,
participatory life. And, not only does the image of the
"traveler" suggests a lack of mooring, but we discover that it
is death and sleep who carry the traveler. All three words--
death, sleep, and traveler--are descriptive of Allert, our
narrator, a man described by his wife as "already dead" (129),
"emotionally annihilated" (46), as a man who "dream[s] rather
than live[s]" his life (75). Ursula asserts that there is no
difference between his life and his dreams. "It seems to me,"
she says, "that they are identical" (62). Allert describes
himself, with curious detachment, with images that richly
associate with the title:

My life has always been uncensored, overexposed.
Each event, each situation, each image stands before
me like a piece of film blackened from overexposure
to intense light. The figures within my photographic frames are slick but charred. In the middle of the dark wood I am a golden horse lying dead on its side across the path and rotting. (36) Here the ideas of death and sleep and travel are powerfully brought together in the image of the golden horse/traveler, an image of painfully failed passion and isolation—the horse dead, on its path, alone in the dark wood, rotting. The title also prefigures the tri-part organization of the two lives that Allert lives, one with Ursula and Peter; the other with Ariane and Olaf. Allert is the traveler in both. In the first triangle Allert focuses on traveling into what he calls "psyche's slime," without which, he notes, "I could not survive" (75). In the cruise-ship realm Allert is more of a real-world traveler, traveling not only with the ship itself, but visiting islands, a zoo. But here too, he drifts somnolently through the pages, sensitive, articulate, but curiously "not there."

The opening lines of the novel establish the foundation—an uneasy one—of the novel:

Ursula is leaving. Dressed in her severe gray suit, her gardening hat, her girdle, her negligee, her sullen silk dress, her black blouse, her stockings, her red pumps, and carrying a carefully packed straw suitcase in either hand, thus she is leaving me.

She is going at last not because of what
occurred on the ship or because of the trial, which has long since been swallowed into the wet coils of its own conclusion, but because I am, after all, a Hollander. (1)

What a marvelous opening. In it are embedded all of the techniques for creating textual spots of "not knowing" which I enumerated earlier. A number of critics who have discussed this novel point to the discrepancy between Allert's description of Ursula as she leaves him which he gives us here, and that which he gives us again at the novel's end, as evidence of Allert's unreliability as a narrator.13 At the novel's end, Ursula is described as

wearing white slacks, a red knitted top, a red kerchief to protect her hair in the little open car, and driving gloves the same color as the luggage.

(177-178)

However, it is hardly necessary to read more than the opening paragraph to deduce that Allert's telling of the story will be filled with discrepancies and other "holes."

First, note the distance and detachment from which Allert observes an emotionally loaded event--being left by his wife. Note the nearly clinical precision with which he describes her and why she is leaving. This is one kind of textual space, the space between the narrator and what he or she is relating which, in this instance, tremors with a need for distance and control. It is a technique often used by writers working with terror and surrealistic scenes, writers such as Nathaneal West
and Flannery O'Connor. Hawkes has often spoken about the necessity for detachment in fiction, for the voice of detachment. Of Flannery O'Connor and Nathaneal West he says:

Both of these writers maintain incredible distance in their work, both explode the reality around us into meaningful new patterns . . . and use deceptively simple language in such a way as to achieve fantastic verbal surprise and remarkable poetic expression.\(^{14}\)

Acknowledging his "affinities" with Kafka, Robbe-Grillet and Günter Grass,\(^{15}\) Hawkes writes that detachment "is at the center of the novelist's experiment." He continues:

The writer who maintains most successfully a consistent cold detachment toward physical violence . . . is likely to generate the deepest sympathy of all, a sympathy which is a humbling before the terrible and a quickening in the presence of degradation.\(^{16}\)

In *Death, Sleep & the Traveler* the violence is primarily psychic, I think, although there is an "off-stage" murder involved. The terror of the novel exists within the mind of Allert; it is powerfully affective. Donald Greiner, who has sensitively written on nearly all of Hawkes's novels, calls *Death, Sleep & the Traveler* a "truly terrifying book."\(^{17}\) In an article published in 1974, approximately the same time that *Death, Sleep & the Traveler* was published, Hawkes discusses *Second Skin*, a novel published ten years before *Death, Sleep &
the traveler and the first novel in which he was "explicitly attempting to write comic fiction." Parenthetically Hawkes notes that he is

no longer interested in writing comic novels, that I'm wary now of the "safety" inherent in the comic form, that from now on I want to come still closer to terror, which I think I'm doing in the short novel I'm trying to write at the moment. 18

The novel to which Hawkes refers is almost certainly Death. Sleep & the Traveler.

The sense of detachment, of psychic distance between the narrative voice and the words on the page is part of what makes Death. Sleep & the Traveler so unsettling, from the beginning. Note too, in the opening paragraph, the strange points of observation and subtle contradictions within Allert's tightly controlled enumeration of Ursula's items of dress. Why is she wearing a gardening hat with her suit? Doesn't that seem a bit peculiar? Doesn't it slow one's reading a bit? Note too that she is dressed in her "severe gray suit" and her "sullen silk dress." Are we to believe that she was dressed in both at the same time? Are "severe" and "sullen" descriptors of the clothing? Or, as seems more likely, do they reflect Allert's feelings, possibly feelings of child-like anger and fear of being abandoned. Allert is, after all, repeatedly described by Ursula as a child, a child with the face of a fetus, and who describes himself, his name at least, as a
thousand-year-old clay receptacle with paranoia
curled in the shape of a child's skeleton inside. (3)

This interpretation is supported on the following page, in the
same fragment, when Allert asks why did Ursula do this, why,
in that voice of a frightened, angry child:

Why did she refuse to join me on the white ship and
so abandon me to death, sleep and the anguish of
lonely travel? (2)

If Allert's opening description is in part describing himself
then these words are opening points of unknowing and
uncertainty around Allert and everything he says. At the same
time we can no longer be certain what Ursula is wearing or
doing. Note too that Allert describes not only what he might
see her wearing, but what he cannot see, we presume, as well:
girdle, negligee, and how her suitcase is packed. In this
sense the description begins to feel not like a confused
"objective" picture of Ursula leaving, but rather like a
psychic projection of all the bits and pieces Allert
associates with "Ursula" and possibly with a recurring fantasy
that she will leave, will abandon him. This is reinforced by
the repetition of phrases denoting her leaving, three times in
as many sentences: "Ursula is leaving," "thus she is leaving
me," "she is going at last." These uncertainties and
reverberations complicate and slow the reading.

Three other kinds of narrative space are opened as well
in these few lines. First, negation. One declaration after
another Allert tells us why Ursula is not leaving: not because
of "what happened" of the trip; not because of the trial.
Here Hawkes has done two things. First he has created the
positive forms of what is then negated: something that
happened on a boat, and a trial. And second, the narrative
teases the reader because it gives no more. Information is
deliberately withheld, answers (if there are any) are
postponed. These create blanks within the text. And then
there is the unexpected and somewhat strange assertion,
especially after the suggestion that there are some quite
powerful reasons why Ursula might be leaving, but no, she is
leaving Allert because he is "a Hollander." Huh? But she
married a Hollander, didn't she? The statement breaks the
sentence, undermines one's expectations for a mighty reason
for her leaving, but no, and with a tone that suggests it is
so obvious, anyone will understand, she left because he is,
"after all, a Hollander." This sentence breaks open in
another way as well, that is, with the unexpected metaphor
which describes, with attempted nonchalance, the
inconsequentiality of the trial, the trial which has, Allert
tells us, "long since been swallowed into the wet coils of its
own conclusion." Listen to the shift of diction. This is
crafted "adult" language in the midst of language which is, on
the surface at least, that of petulant simplicity. Listen to
the alliteration: since, swallowed; coils, conclusion. And
what does it mean? That the trial no longer matters? Of
course it matters. Why else would Allert negate it in the
opening sentences. It underlies the entire novel, is embedded
in the guilt that prompts the powerful negations: this question (another textual blank) of whether or not Allert killed Ariane. In fact, it is purposefully kept open at the novel's end, which closes with "I am not guilty," which again, turns us back into the question. 19

I have spent quite a few pages on only the first few lines because I think Hawkes's fiction not only invites and rewards such lingering, but requires it. 20 The prose is packed. And these techniques of "not knowing" recur and recur, throughout the novel. Take, for example, the deliberate withholding of information. Not only do the fragments continually postpone "understanding" but the text itself continues to raise questions, some which it answers and some which it does not. In addition to whether or not Allert did murder Ariane, and why Ursula is leaving, the text plays with the idea that Allert may be or may have been a mental patient at Acres Wild. Not only does Allert continue to refer in his dreams and conversations to "rubber sheets" (78, 79, 128) that apparently were used in a treatment at the hospital (143), but Peter makes a number of suggestive references: to Allert, "But of course . . . the schizophrenic has his romantic nature like anyone else" (133); and, "You should not be so hostile to Acres Wild" (134); and, "What do you think of my theory that a man remains a virgin until he has committed a murder? "(26, 145); and, "Has it ever occurred to you that perhaps you were once a patient in Acres Wild?" (115).

There are smaller postponements and questions embroidered
into the text as well, as when Allert, Ariane and Olaf visit a 
nudist colony and, nude, one of the two men becomes badly 
sunburned. Ariane walks up the beach, 
followed, as she knew full well, by her two naked 
companions, one of whom was already the color of 
sickening red. 

"You ought to see yourself," came the voice at 
my back, "if you could see yourself you'd leave 
Ariane and me alone. A man like you shouldn't go 
around without his clothes." (104) 

One assumes that it is Allert who has become sunburnt. But, 
some two paragraphs later, almost as an afterthought, our 
narrator comments, the comment tucked in after a description 
of a naked family, "But it was the naked wireless operator, 
not I, who was turning red" (105). In this instance 
particularly, it is apparent and even somewhat amusing, that 
the reader has been "set up."

The novel is full too of repeated images and motifs which 
take on additional felt importance, as symbols and emblems, as 
they accrue additional layers of use and meaning. In addition 
to the image of rubber sheets and that of Ursula leaving, the 
sea, pornographic photographs, ejaculation, Peter's genitals, 
cold water, fetuses, Allert's rash, the porthole in Ariane's 
cabin, and tortoises--to name a few of the motifs--all take 
on heightened significance through repetition. One is 
encouraged to think that these "emblems" have special meaning 
to the narrator and to the book and, if one could somehow
understand their individual significances, could somehow plumb their recesses, one might in turn be led to a deeper and more complete understanding of Allert, of the novel, and possibly of oneself as well.

The motif of the sea is critical to the novel and to some extent underlies the entire novel. It is the sea on which the cruise takes place, but it is even more the psychic sea through which Allert, and the reader, seek their way. All three, the ship, Allert and the reader are in various ways adrift on uncharted seas. It is both pleasurable and fear-filled. At one point Allert describes a dream in which he finds himself walking across a field blanketed with enormous soft round pads of cow manure. They are crusted over and able to support the weight of a man, yet there is always the possibility of "sinking into the slime within." But then he realizes that it is a field of "congealed blood . . . [and that he is] walking somehow backward in time. . . . [that he has] no history, no recollection of the past" (72-73). Elsewhere Allert talks of his body "drowning in its own breath" (79), of feeling that he does "not exist" (92), that he is "in the midst of a dream that [he] could not remember" (94). In another fragment Allert postulates, on his sense of unreality, unconnectiveness,: 

Sooner or later the young child discovers that he cannot account for himself. As soon as he becomes inexplicable he becomes unreal. Immediately everything else becomes unreal as one might expect. The rest is puzzlement. Or terror. (91)
Elsewhere, when Allert fears the ship is not moving, he notes that he is "utterly conscious of [his] total identification with the dead ship" (8). Like the reader, Allert drifts through his fragments, trying to make sense.

Pornographic photographs are another open receptacle for felt but ungraspable meaning within the novel. While we do not "see" the majority of the photographs, they appear repeatedly throughout the novel. We know, for example, that Allert has an extensive collection, "the work of a lifetime," comments Ursula (150). During the first dinner on the cruise, Olaf cradles a pornographic photograph in the palm of his hand, under the table, in such a way that Allert can see it (12). Later another photograph, presumably left by Olaf, showing "two small white figures . . . devouring each other sexually with carnivorous joy" (39), is found lying on top of Allert's yet unopened valise. Allert keeps the photograph. Allert also tells of a dream in which he is a little boy getting a haircut and, in the corner of the mirror, there is a "large black and white photograph of a smiling girl who wears no clothes. . . . [and a small boy] staring down at her" (49–50). Allert, in the dream, has an erection, and, prompted by the photo which grows larger and larger and the whispering of the barber, ejaculates.

Genitals in general have an important place in the novel, and are often described in such a fashion as to suggest a kind of frozen photographic quality. At one point Allert describes Peter's genitals as "some kind of excreted pile of waste fired
in a blazing kiln and then varnished" (37). At another point he has a vision of Peter in his coffin "with his penis bursting through the roof of the box like an angry asphodel" (31). On a trip to the zoo with Ariane and Olaf, Allert describes two bats engaged in autofellatio whose penises, "each one perhaps the size of a child's little finger, looked like slender overlung back mushrooms, leaping out of all proportion from the tiny loins" (123).

Another image which recurs frequently is that of the packed suitcase, or valise. Not only does it occur repeatedly in the descriptions of Ursula's leaving, but packed valises sit in the entryway of Peter's house, and the valise which Allert has with him on the cruise, apparently packed by Ursula, takes on special meaning as he repeatedly refuses to open it and, when he finally does, says that he felt "as if [he] had violated the coffin of some unknown child" (40). Then there is the rash which is slowly engulfing Allert's navel, velvet and thick like the "flesh of the pink-lipped strawberry" (146, also described on 5, 70). It too accrues importance through its repetition, suggesting, perhaps, a kind of oozing psychic sore that is slowly engulfing Allert. The point is that these foci, and there are others, become, through their repetition, open-ended receptacles of intensity and implied but unknown significance within the novel, resonating and reflecting onto other layers of thought, feeling, and experience.

The use of negation similarly "opens" the novel. There
are nearly endless examples throughout the novel; I will quote only two. About the cruise Ursula suggested he take, Allert says:

I had no interest in boarding that ship. I did not want to sit beside Ursula and drive to the pier. I was not attracted to severance, sun, the geography of separation and islands and unexpected encounters in cabins like mausoleums. I did not want to float in the ship's pool which was a parody of the sea it traveled on. I did not want to sail. But the return was worst of all since by then the girl was gone. I plan never again to look at the rough sea though I am filled with it, like a sewn-up skin with salt. (16) [The italics are mine.]

In another passage, in response to Ursula's question, "Did you push her through the porthole as they accused you of doing?" Allert responds:

I could not bear the question. I could not believe the question. I could not answer the question. I could not believe that my wife could ever ask me that question. I could not bring myself to answer that question. (61) [The italics are, again, mine.]

Note in both passages the incredible use of negation and emptied forms. Eventually it is through negation, and death (the ultimate negation), that Allert defines himself. In this sense Death, Sleep & the Traveler may be the most terrifying
of Hawkes's novels because Allert ultimately is locked into
his mask of himself, as a slightly comic, paunchy, middle-aged
Hollander. But he and the reader know there is so much more:
the sensuality, the vividness of his dream life, the
sensitivity and precision of his descriptions. But he is
ultimately unable to connect with the richness of his
underground psychic life. The best he can do is offer his
dreams, like gifts, to Ursula, as if to prove that he has
emotion, is not, like Ursula claims, a "psychic invalid." But
he is, of course. He chooses emotional suicide, but "chooses"
as a victim does, one incapable of making another choice,
because he is too afraid of his inner self, unable to make
that journey. One hears the fear in the pulsing negations--
no, no, I can't, I can't--on which the novel floats. One
imagines that Allert did throw Ariane overboard and that he
did also try to save her. With Ariane, in isolated moments,
he "feels," feels that she penetrates his mask and likes the
inner man, feels jealousy, feels his own erections. He is no
longer just a voyeur, a man who watches and "records" Peter
and Ursula in sex, who watches his life in dream-like frames,
who records and packages his own dreams, whose whole life is a
series of photographic tableaux.

Allert wants more, is terrified of being left. We feel
the struggle in his sweating, tortured struggles within his
dreams and fantasies. Maybe, as Peter suggests, Allert kills
Ariane in a misguided but desperate effort to psychically
"grow up," to no longer be a "virgin." But it seems more
likely that it is because he did love her, and that this connectiveness to his inner self was so terrifying that his only alternative was to destroy, negate, that which caused him to feel. Peter talks of a "cure" once used in his hospital that involved subjecting the patient to deeper and deeper states of coma, the patient descending inside himself and in a kind of sexual agony . . . sinking into the depths of psychic darkness, drowning in the sea of self, submerging into the long slow chaos of the dreamer on the edge of extinction. The closer such a patient came to death the greater his cure. The whiter and wetter he became in his grave of rubber sheets, my friend, and the deeper his breathing, the slower his pulse, the more he felt himself consumed as in liquid lead, the greater the agony with which he approached oblivion, then the greater and more profound and more joyous his recovery, his rebirth. (143)

Allert begins but ultimately rejects the journey. Instead, he says, ending the novel,

I shall simply think and dream, think and dream. I shall dream of she who guided me to the end of the journey, whoever she is, and I shall think of porridge, leeks, tobacco, white clay, and water coursing through a Roman aqueduct. (179)

The terrible beauty of this novel is that it never, as Hawkes has said good fiction never should, lets the reader off
the hook. To engage this novel, perhaps more than any of Hawkes's other novels, the reader must engage its empty psychic spaces, its questions, its challenges. It asks, ultimately, how deeply, and how subtly, into the psychic journey of this novel one is willing to go. As with most of Hawkes's novels, readers engage the text on vastly different levels, leading to antithetical and seldom any moderate responses. Thus critical response to this novel has ranged from denouncing the novel as a depthless "academic exercise," as a "bloodless, mannered and laconic piece of writing," and as a novel which "in the morass of coma and soma only sense is the loser," to the highest levels of praise, critics praising the novel's psychic depths, pervaded by the "polyvalence of the imagination," and the novel's "dizzying brilliance." It has been called Hawkes's "most brilliant achievement," and as "tightly made as a diamond." Calvin Bedient says this novel, cat-footed, makes the first five seem heavy. It walks on psychic eggs, sucks them, leaps off. Not a whit too much or too little, nothing too violent or tame, almost nothing too obscure or obvious. . . . sophistication could not go further. . . . a brilliant achievement, unique and elegant in form, brilliantly judged and likely to endure as a small classic.

The novel has been described as well as enigmatic, risible, cold and ugly, magnificent, supple, exquisite, sensual and evocative, pathetic, unfathomable, thin, vaporous, dazzling,
pointless, pompous, and compelling. Readers of a Hawkes novel seldom, if ever, simply "enjoy" the novel. His novels are built out of complications and contradictions, and each enters the world from a different perspective, with a different landscape and a different voice. With each novel Hawkes gains a few readers, and loses a few. Death, Sleep & the Traveler is no exception. It is subtle and tough, and leaves much unsaid. However, for those who are willing to close some of its gaps and blanks, and to expand others, the novel is a rare experience.
NOTES


4. See in particular Wolfgang Iser's discussion of negation and negativity in The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1978), 212-231, and Sigmund Freud's essay, "Negation," in The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, vol. 18, trans. by James Strachey (London: Hogarth, 1961), 234-239. Freud writes that negation is a way of distinguishing the intellectual function from the affective function, that there is no such thing as negation in the unconscious and that some material can only be brought into consciousness "on condition that it be negated" (15). While I think
negation can work on a much smaller scale in literary
texts, this does point out the incredible potential
potency of the "empty forms" created by negation.

with autobiographical notes by the author and an
introduction by William H. Gass (New York: New Directions,

Contemporary Literature* 6 (Summer 1965), 149.

7. "John Hawkes On His Novels," *Massachusetts Review* 7 (Summer
1966), 459.

Conflict* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1975),
182.

Review* 84 (1 April 1979), 13.

10. Enck, 149.

Directions, 1974). Page numbers of passages cited in this
chapter are cited parenthetically within the text.

155.

13. Donald J. Greiner, in his excellent discussion of the
psychological depths of the novel in *Death, Sleep & the
Traveler: John Hawkes' Return to Terror" in Critique: studies in modern fiction 17(1976), 26-38, notes this as an example of the novel's "drift toward illusion," and posits that Allert may be a mental patient at Peter's Wild Acres, and the entire novel the ramblings of his broken but potent mind. While this interpretation, which has been entertained by other critics as well, can be supported, at least in part, by certain recurring motifs in the novel, it does seem to me that such a reading may well be a reader's attempt to make what Greiner calls "a truly terrifying book" (27) more acceptable, less emotionally trying.


15. Enck, 141.


17. Greiner, 27.


19. Elizabeth Kraus, in "Psychic Sores in Search of Compassion: Hawkes' Death, Sleep & the Traveler" (Critique: studies in modern fiction 17[1976], 39-52), assumes that we all know know "that he [Allert] has thrown Ariane overboard," and attempts to understand Allert
through a slightly veiled psychoanalytic, and I think, ultimately reductive reading of the novel which attempts to understand why Allert murdered Ariane, searching largely for signs of homosexuality and deviant behavior. That the novel, however, is not so easily deciphered is evidenced by the many different interpretations of the novel which have been suggested. In addition to Greiner's suggestion that the entire novel is Allert's imaginings, as least one critic has suggested that Olaf murdered Ariane and that Allert's considerable guilt is the guilt he feels about everything, including his being a Hollander.

20. Read Donald Barthelme's "The Most Wonderful Trick" (The New York Times Book Review [25 November 1984], 3) which, in wonderful detail, analyzes the "not-knowing" in one and one-half of Hawkes's sentences, concluding that "Mr. Hawkes's sentences, like the larger designs they advance, are splendidly not-simple."


5-6.


Space that has been seized upon by the imagination cannot remain indifferent space subject to the measures and estimates of the surveyor. It has been lived in, not in its positivity, but with all the partiality of the imagination.

Gaston Bachelard\textsuperscript{1}

I felt for a moment that the whole Wilcox family was a fraud, just a wall of newspapers and motor-cars and golf-clubs, and that if it fell I should find nothing behind it but panic and emptiness.

E. M. Forster\textsuperscript{2}

Chapter 3

**Landscapes of Desolation:**

*Whistlejacket*

In the last chapter the spaces I discussed were small, not in their effect, because they are essential to and in some ways constitute the reading experience, but in size they were like pinpricks puncturing and breaking the text, and like depressions carved around images and behind personalities. Appropriately they were labeled gaps and blanks. The spaces of this chapter are much grander and more elaborate: they are "landscapes." They are visual, the landscapes to which I refer, pictures evoked by the text. Every text creates a world-space, a fictive space, of places, characters, and voice, that is circumscribed by the beginning and end of the text. But some texts, and some authors, rely more on visual images and landscapes than do others, and some fictive realms
attempt to be more fictionally autonomous than do others. In contrast, some authors consciously tie their fictions to the "real" world and its events. The worlds created by John Barth, for example, in such novels as The Sot-Weed Factor and Sabbatical, make obvious gestures to attach themselves at various points throughout the narrative to the "real world," through references to historical and current events. In each of these two novels, the history and geography of Maryland are "characters" which play an important part in generating the effect and meaning intended. The fictive worlds created by Thomas Pynchon, for all their strangeness, are curiously dependent for their existences on the interconnections to the "real" historical, scientific, and pop culture worlds, the interplay with which is responsible for much of the energy of Pynchon's realms.

The fictive realms created by John Hawkes, however, are intensely autonomous, and visual. Faulkner, Robbe-Grillet, Kafka, and O'Connor are other authors who depend largely on such tightly circumscribed, self-sufficient realms, rendered in great detail, to effect the power of their narratives. Hawkes has responded in interviews and written on the importance of landscapes and "pictures" to his creative thinking and to what it is he is trying to achieve with his fictions:

I write out of a series of pictures that literally do come to mind, but I've never seen before. . . . I don't know what they mean, but I feel and know that
they have meaning.3

Elsewhere he talks about having found the ideas for several of his novels in newspaper stories:

What appealed to me was a landscape or world, and in each case I began with something immediately and intensely visual—a room, a few objects, an object, something prompted by the initial idea and then literally seen.4

He talks of how these scenes which present themselves to his mind open to him new vistas of language and creativity:

I'm simply trying to create a new world, a new landscape in order to use the language in some newly necessary way.5

And of the necessity of such separate, created worlds in order to both generate and control the energy of his intensely imagined visions: He says, if one could find a landscape which, in some way or other, without the writer necessarily being conscious of it, could touch off psychological themes, that would provide the energy and even the subject matter of a fiction. I was trying to find, or happened to be exposed to such landscapes... I knew that what I was writing about was so emotionally charged or cathexed, that only considerable detachment would make it possible to write the fiction in the first place... In a sense, my writing is a real life acting out of a theory or a metaphor—the metaphor
of distance. Thus the use of landscape is in part a way to create the kind of
detachment which would allow one to explore areas too charged to be approached in any other fashion. This kind of fiction Hawkes calls "visionary fiction." "I think of the writing of fiction," he says, "as the creation of vision." In an interview with Anthony C. Santore and Michael Poccalpyo Hawkes says that "the only kind of novel that interests me is a visionary novel." He continues:

Visionary fiction is a unique world, separate and different from the world we live in despite surface semblances. Visionary fiction is a fish bowl in which the clarity of the bowl is unique and you see the stream of the fish, the glem of fins--it is a fish bowl different from any other.

In 1979, at a Fiction Festival at the University of Cincinnati, someone in the audience asked Hawkes if he could describe the difference between creating reality and representing reality. Hawkes replied:

It's a question of mind, temperament and vision. ... Fiction that insists on created actuality is its own reality; has its own vitality and energy.

Two things occur to me as I read these quotes. The first is that, loosed from the ties of "reality," these visionary landscapes become fields of intense psychic exploration, letting the fictions [and the landscapes] "work their magic on you." These landscapes are full of energy and possibility,
but require intense listening and looking. There is the sense that one of the things Hawkes enjoys about this approach to fiction is that it allows him to explore new and uncharted psychic and linguistic realms. Also, because of their uncensored and unknowable nature they are dangerous. This is an important aspect of a Hawkes fiction, danger and risk. "As a writer," he says,

I'm concerned with innovation in the novel, and obviously I'm committed to nightmare, violence, meaningful distortion, to the whole panorama of dislocation and desolation in human experience.¹⁰

In a conversation with John Barth, in which they are discussing risk in writing fiction, Hawkes self-reflectively comments that, while he had for a long time inwardly considered himself a comic writer and had consciously attempted a comic novel in Second Skin, he had slowly come to the realization that, for him, comedy was too comforting. For me, he says,

everything is dangerous, everything is tentative, nothing is certain. I think the writing of fiction involves enormous anxiety and enormous risk. And I want fiction always to situate us in the psychic and literal spot where life is most difficult, most dangerous, most beautiful.¹¹

It is in large part through his use of visually circumscribed imaginary worlds, worlds invariably bereft of most of the obvious stabilizing, life-giving features that
energize, let's say, the fictional landscapes of Lawrence, Marquez, and Faulkner, that Hawkes "situates" us "where life is most difficult, most dangerous, most beautiful." The radicalness of this approach is exposed by comparing Hawkes's fictional landscapes with those of the three authors listed above. The fictions of Lawrence, Marquez and Faulkner are, like those of Hawkes, vitally shaped by a belief in the powers of sexuality, by a fear of various forms of repression and their destruction capabilities, and by a deep faith in the regenerative capabilities of man—particularly those that rise from sexuality, from death, and from the imagination. In reading, for example, The Rainbow, One Hundred Years of Solitude, and Light in August, one is very much aware of these concerns and of the highly visual realms in which the novels unfold. But in these novels the landscapes burgeon with promise of a kind of life-giving sexuality. Things grow: fields of wheat, overhanging trees, plants that seek to reclaim households, horses and parrots and pregnant women that refuse to be stifled. While eruptions of distorted sexuality and fear threaten and complicate each of the novels, each is filled with the thickness and contradictions of life, simultaneously fetid and full of possibility.

These fictive realms are very different from those of John Hawkes. Hawkes's landscapes are curiously empty, desolate. Not, as one finds in Beckett's landscapes which are denuded, stripped to their bare essentials, no. Hawkes is a master of the detailed evocation of things and places.
Rather, it is because what his fictions regularly evoke are scenes of violence, dissolution, barrenness, entropy, disconnectiveness. They often have the feeling of bad dreams or hallucinations. These are not scenes which welcome the reader into their interiors. In his essay, "Necessary Landscapes and Luminous Deteriorations," Tony Tanner writes of the scenes of destruction and violence in Hawkes's fiction, and of their strange beauty. "Violence under glass," he says. For Tanner, the tension and power of Hawkes's fictions are a result of the juxtaposition of these landscapes of desolation and destruction, and the uncommonly rich and unexpected language and syntax which "force us to pause at every word" and through which Hawkes "maintains 'the truth of the fractured picture' and causes the whole book to hang in our minds like a pervading atmosphere, an unforgettable hallucination."¹²

Carol MacCurdy has studied the evolution of Hawkes's fictional landscapes, and describes four different kinds: 1) visionary landscapes tied to specific locals, such as postwar Germany in The Cannibal and the American West in The Beetle Leg; 2) landscapes projected out of first-person narratives, such as Cyril's mythical Illyria in The Blood Oranges and Skipper's floating tropical island in Second Skin; 3) landscapes totally contained by psyches, such as Allert's drifting, dream-bound interior realm in Death, Sleep & the Traveler and Papa's car-bound monologue on suicide and artistic control in Travesty; and 4) visionary landscapes
engaged by an individual character, such as Konrad Vost's penetration of the prison in *The Passion Artist*, and the effect of Virginie's innocence and gaze into the sex-filled interiors of her novel, *Virginie: her two lives*.13 MacCurdy's last category would seem to apply to the last two novels as well, *Adventures in the Alaskan Skin Trade* in which Sunny confronts her father and her past through dreams and the Alaskan landscape, and *Whistlejacket* in which the narrative, assisted by the photographer Michael, resists its story through the photographs that describe it. Each of these landscapes, while significantly different in its particulars, shares an intense feeling of isolation, violence, and helplessness. MacCurdy writes that Hawkes's fictional landscapes "ultimately all move toward death,"14 that they are "apocalyptic landscapes bereft of life-sustaining energies" where the characters are "caught in nightmares of sex and violence."15 She concludes her article, however, by arguing for the redemptive quality of such landscapes, arguing that for Hawkes it is only through exploring our irrational unconscious selves that harmony and serenity can reached.

In their discussions of Hawkes's use of fictional landscapes Tanner and MacCurdy illuminate, from different perspectives, two aspects of space in the narrative that contribute to a reader's uneasiness and vulnerability when negotiating a Hawkes fiction. The first, to which Tanner so sensitively responds, has to do with the gaps and blanks in the text, with how the the text slows and holds the reader,
not only in appreciation of the words and sentences, but of the images as well. Tanner calls this "semantic retardation. . . . [sentences] which force us to pause at every word, to ponder and appreciate each 'isolate' in the 'set.'"¹⁶ As I argued in the last chapter, such dislocations increase the vulnerability and sense of unease in the reader, but also encourage the reader to make sense of these indeterminacies by imaginatively "completing" the text. In the visual realm of Hawkes's fictions, this generally means not only imaginatively "seeing" the the scene described, but also pausing and letting the scene be "felt." Hawkes's language draws us into the interiors of his landscapes, often even as we emotionally resist, or attempt to, the violence or confusion or loss they portray.

While not the focus of MacCurdy's analysis, her description of the changing relationships in Hawkes's novels of the different narrative voices to their individual fictive landscapes reflects not only Hawkes's changing world view (which is the underlying thesis of her argument), but virtually prescribes the primary relationship of the reader to the texts. Stanley Fish has argued that, within every work of fiction, one will find imbedded the ideal reader for that text.¹⁷ While I think this is too restrictive and only defines one of many stances a reader can profitably take toward a text, I do nevertheless think that the most potentially enlarging and interesting perspective to a text is that which attempts to "see" the world through the persona of the
narrative voice, to "become" the narrator so to speak. This is also probably the most difficult, emotionally at least, perspective as it requires setting aside those judgments (for example, "Allert is insane;" "Hawkes is all artifice and no content.") by which we can tame, intellectualize, or "naturalize" a fiction.\textsuperscript{18}

Beginning with \textit{Second Skin} in 1964, all of Hawkes's novels have had a single narrative voice through which most, and usually all, of the narrative is visualized.\textsuperscript{19} The information and scenes presented to us are filtered through the eyes of this narrator.\textsuperscript{20} It is on this level, experiencing and "seeing" the fictional world through the persona of this narrator, that Hawkes's fictions are most terrifying. On this level one is regularly presented with landscapes which disorient and alienate, and which encourage feelings of aloneness, confusion...even repulsion. And at the same time these landscapes probe into our deepest secret instincts. One such scene which comes to mind is a scene toward the end of \textit{Death, Sleep & the Traveler} in which Peter, Ursula and Allert are in Peter's sauna and suddenly, unexpectedly, Peter grips his chest—and we listen to him die, "the faint popping sound of the tubes...parting inside Peter's chest." Then Peter defecates and Allert, using his "flat hand as a trowel," removes the "offending excrement...the last evidence of Peter's life," from the body.\textsuperscript{21} If one tries to feel the scene from within Allert's psyche, the emotional richness of the scene lingers—the foggy sauna, the terrible loss of one of
Allert's few contacts with "reality," the sense of helplessness, of horror. All this juxtaposed with the look, smell and feel of Peter's feces, and the defiling of the one person in the novel who seemed to have some order and perspective on life. To which Allert responds immediately with a major role reversal: he cleanses Peter's body, becoming the protective parent of the man who had always played the role of parent to Allert. Imbedded within the emotional complexity of the moment are vibrations of satisfaction (Allert has now killed his "father" and his wife's lover), and of fear—for Allert senses that Peter has been crucial to holding together their "family." Thus Peter's death not only foreshadows but largely necessitates Ursula's departure.

Hawkes's use of landscapes of desolation and loss pull the reader into their interiors in ways that are unexpected, intense, and often frightening. To work one's way through a scene such as that above, one pulls from one's own psychic recesses in order to experience the text. In Hawkes's novels I find four somewhat different types of fictive landscapes which lead the reader into areas of desolation, areas in which the reader is particularly alone. These are: fictive landscapes of 1) destruction, 2) emptiness, 3) alienation, and 4) vulnerability.

Scenes of destruction and death are present to some extent in all of Hawkes's novels but are particularly central to The Cannibal (1949), The Lime Twig (1961), and The Passion Artist (1978) which take place, respectively, in postwar
Germany, postwar England, and postwar France. The landscapes in all three are unrelentingly torn, beaten, gray, cold. The three sections of *The Cannibal* are set in two towns, the two 1945 sections in Spitzen-on-the-Dein, and the center 1914 section in "das Grab" (the grave), which may or may not be the same town as is portrayed in the 1945 sections. Spitzen-on-the-Dein is described as "shriveled in structure and as decomposed as an ox tongue black with ants," and das Grab as "roosting on charred earth, no longer ancient, the legs and head lopped from its only horse statue."22 Both settings grovel in death and violence, almost as if to save themselves from the decay and filth and stagnation that seem destined to consume the landscapes. These are landscapes in which experimental monkeys, escaped from the local insane asylum (the "institution"), lie mangled and frozen in the snow, and where the "odor of burned flesh and hair and biddy"23 settles over all the roads and fields, and where the neo-Nazi narrator Zizendorf murders the American "overseer," Leevey, and rolls his body into a surrealistic forest littered with the frozen remains of soldiers from some long-forgotten battle, and where the mad Duke stalks the faceless son of Jutta Snow to clumsily dissect the child and serve him to his grandmother for dinner, and where the image of a decomposed corpse hanging from a tree lingers and presides over the desiccated landscape. Death defines the scenes in *The Cannibal* and only the language and the confused perseverance of its characters hold total destruction at bay.
In *The Lime Twig* the central characters, Michael and Margaret Banks, seek to break out of their grey rooming house existence in dank, drab, postwar England by, in effect, tapping into the libidinal energies of their own fantasies. Both are violently destroyed in the process after sinking into the dark underworld of a brutal gang intent on disguising a famous race horse and running him as "long shot" in a big race: Margaret is bludgeoned to death in slow motion by her sadistic rapist, Larry; Michael is crushed to death by the race horse itself. *The Passion Artist*, which actually developed out of an incident in *The Cannibal*—the riot at the insane asylum which in turn found its origins in a story Hawkes's father once told him about joining the national guard to quell a riot at a women's prison—keeps much of the dark ominous sense of violence and degradation that pervades *The Cannibal* but now, instead of the multiple perspectives which approach the scenes of postwar Germany, the novel largely reflects the dark, angry and repressed mind-world of Konrad Vost. There are two landscapes in *The Passion Artist*, and both depict violence and destruction. One is the grey, drab, anonymous town without life, the city which was "without trees, without national monuments, without ponds or flower gardens, without even a single building to attract visitors from other parts of the world."24 The other is the prison in town, in which Konrad's mother is incarcerated for killing his father, commingled with the fetid swamp which extends from it. This second world burgeons with potent and confused violence
and sexuality, held at bay, temporarily at least, by the prison walls and the guards and the brutal forces of psychological repression. These two worlds come to clash in violent spasms in Konrad, as his repressed and denied sexuality and his own embitterment is eventually let loose by the riot of the women prisoners. In some ways it is Hawkes's most violent and death-filled novel; Hawkes has called it his most psychologically upsetting. Like *The Cannibal* and *The Lime Twig*, *The Passion Artist* presents the reader with an incredible sense of loss, of the seemingly hopeless condition of reconciling the embittered repressive side with the passionately violent and sexual side of human nature. In each of these three novels, the narrative makes motions toward some sort of reconciliation, but each attempt is ultimately undermined by the embedded and repeating urges toward annihilation. In each of these novels the main characters are assaulted by the landscapes they inhabit. The reader is as well: the stench, death, and brutality either sparking defensive tones of disgust, or leaving one entrapped in a state of exhausted darkness and questionable hope for one's own ability to persevere and reconcile one's own forces in such an unrelenting world.

Another "landscape of desolation" which appears in Hawkes's novels is that of emptiness. While the landscapes reflecting destruction and violence are largely incapable of supporting much in the way of life, these landscapes are generally littered with the remnants of life: with corpses and
murders and rotting flesh. The novels which focus upon relatively empty landscapes are considerably more barren. The grey city world of Konrad Vost superficially reflects this barren desert-scape but it is so clearly associated with the incredible repression with which Konrad holds at bay his sexuality and anger, that it becomes imbued with a potency and energy that the landscapes I am now describing lack. These are the barren states we find in Beckett, in Kafka, and in Robbe-Grillet. These are landscapes where the possibilities of love and passion, even violence, seem curiously unlikely. In Hawkes's work perhaps the best example of such a landscape is found in *The Beetle Leg* (1951). This novel takes place in the American West, in a desert, in a setting in which the buildings, the characters, and hope itself seem desiccated and beyond retrieval. As the great dam once crushed and now holds the body of Mulge Lampson and is thus a monument not to life but to negation, the landscape itself is a monument to sterility. Only passers-through, like the motorcycle gang, the Red Devils, and Cap. Leech, the itinerant "dentist," have any life force within them. The novel denies cause and effect, denies sexuality, turns marriage into a funereal rite. The spirit is just as arid. *The Beetle Leg* is a series of luminous set pieces, shimmering in the blinding, shriveling sun, producing ultimately only stupor. In such a landscape there is nothing to which the reader can attach; there is only wide arid expanses. One is vulnerable to the landscape as one is to a desert without water or shade.
The third fictive landscape that recurs in Hawkes's novels is one which reflects alienation. Alienation is an important theme in his novels. Nearly every major character and every narrator is curiously separated from his or her story and the other characters. These characters, for the most part, try to shape their novels, their landscapes. Each in his or her own way reflects the role of the artist, not quite understood, curiously alone. Zizendorf tries to remake his country; Skipper tries to understand his past, the dark island and its suicides, and to build a green island where he can affirm life; Cyril in The Blood Oranges tries to orchestrate a kind a free love among his friends. Other characters work primarily to put their inner lives together: Allert Vanderveenman and his dreams; Konrad Vost and his sexuality; Sunny and her father's legacy. Probably the most extreme example is Papa in Travesty who projects himself into the landscape of his own suicide, taking with him his daughter and her lover, and appears to see in that projected landscape of ultimate destruction a kind of bizarre yet potent beauty, a serenity rising out of the final created sculptural homage to his own alienation from his family, life, and from himself. Hawkes's use of photographs and photographic still lifes epitomizes this feeling of separation which deeply defines all of Hawkes's major characters. Allert and Olaf of Death, Sleep & the Traveler, and Hugh of The Blood Oranges have their collections of pornographic photographs; Sunny has the dream-image of her dead father in the plane; The Cannibal has the
strung-up corpse crawling with maggots; Whistlejacket filters most of its images through the eyes of a photographer. These images are "caught" in their frames, incarcerated, separated from life. Hawkes has talked about the need for detachment in his writing, to allow him to explore the very powerful psychic material with which his novels regularly contend. Photographs and photographic images--visual, detailed, and "out there"--allow life to be "handled." This is life in a bell jar, under glass, in a fish bowl. Life curiously disconnected from itself.

The final "desolate landscape" is that which reflects vulnerability. Here the landscape is seen as assailant, as aggressor.\textsuperscript{26} It pulses under the photographs and precise language. There is the feeling that only powerful, destructive and possibly overwhelming urges could necessitate such a desperate need for containment. A sense of confusion and fragility compounds the feeling. Fog, mist and darkness appear regularly in Hawkes's novels and generate a surreal atmosphere where things often are not as they appear. The need for secrecy increases the feeling of danger. Thus the horse of The Lime Twig and Michael's sexual fantasies are cloaked in mist and darkness; Allert's vulnerability is attenuated in his child-like innocence as he confusedly "observes" his life unfold in conflicting vignettes; and the fog of the swamp in The Passion Artist reflects Konrad's own emotional confusion which wraps and shields him, as the fog does the swamp, from his own ugly but life-filled interiors.
There is a potent image in West's *The Day of the Locust* which describes the feeling that much of Hawkes's landscapes evoke: the danger that is "out there" but which is, we somehow fundamentally know, really coming from the violence and fears within us, no matter how much we may pretend or project the danger to the things and landscapes which surround us. The image is Homer's hands. Homer is a character at the fringe of the novel who wants desperately to be a part of the action, but who has taken on the mask of a person whom nothing fazes, who is always there for others, a pacific man at peace with the world. Homer's hands, however, have a life of their own and require constant vigilance to contain the incredible violence and sexuality that writhe within them. Note the disembodied stare out of which Homer regards his own hands:

His hands kept his thoughts busy. They trembled and jerked, as though troubled by dreams. To hold them still he clasped them together. Their fingers twined like a tangle of thighs in miniature. He snatched them apart and sat on them. . . . They demanded special attention, had always demanded it. When he had been a child, he used to stick pins into them and once had even thrust them into a fire. Now he used only cold water. . . . [He] carried his hands into the bathroom. He turned on the cold water. When the basin was full, he plunged his hands in up to the wrists. They lie quietly on the bottom like a pair of strange aquatic animals.
Hawkes's novels tremor with the same kind of inner violence, a violence which is more terrifying because the possibility of love and experience is embedded there as well. So that fear and desire emanate from these landscapes of desolation, and the reader is both afraid of their empty spaces and yet drawn into their interiors.

The techniques used to create these desolate landscapes include detailed description of destruction and emptiness, a sparse prose style, a tone of detachment, an undermining of societal mores, the use of mental instability, and voyeurism. These techniques link Hawkes, in differing ways, with such authors as Kafka, Robbe-Grillet, O'Connor, Faulkner and West who are each vitally interested in the experience of the reader when the reader is most alone with himself or herself. Such techniques break the reader's connections to and expectations of the narrative which we as readers generally have come to rely upon, and force us to envision somewhat freshly this created world and to forge new and unsteady connections with that world.

*Whistlejacket* (1988) is Hawkes's most recent novel. In some ways, as critics have said of nearly each of Hawkes's novels as it appeared, *Whistlejacket* is his most accessible. The language is clean, almost simple in construction, and the organization relatively straightforward as well. There are fourteen chapters, usually broken into easily distinguishable fragments, which are organized into three sections. The first and last sections deal with the death of Harry Van Fleet, as
told through memory and the present through the eyes of a fashion photographer, Michael. This narrative unfolds the story of how Harry was killed. Interspersed throughout the fractured telling of this story are photographic "assignments" of Michael's, told, as he tells us, chronologically. The women of the novel—Hal's wife, mistress, and daughter (Alex, Buse, and Virgie respectively), and the models Michael employs—provide the moorings of the novel. They function as points of attachment for Michael and the story he relates: he sees his world through these women who he in turn sees as if they were photographic still lifes. To a large extent these two sections of the novel are seen as though through the lens of some hypothetical camera. The middle section of the novel tells the story of the 18th-century painter, George Stubbs, who painted the life-size painting of the horse, Whistlejacket, which hangs in the center of the Van Fleet household. This story describes in detail Stubbs's need to understand both the spiritual essence of each of his subjects and its underlying structure and anatomy as well. To this end Stubbs makes meticulous dissections of human cadavers and horses, sketching each layer deep into the night, his work lit by candles held by his faithful and supportive wife.

While the narrative does unravel the story of how Hal died (Alex arranged for his death), and pulls the reader through the text with an urgency which is unusual for a Hawkes novel, Whistlejacket is a disturbing book. The ending confirms the pervading sense that the murder is not what the
novel is about, at all. The novel ends with a chapter called "Coda-Carol." Carol is the favorite of Michael's models. In this final fragment, Michael tells Carol of an incident that happened that morning, in the dawn after a night of snow and rain. He saw a man, in an alley, drive an expensive car over to a cluster of trash cans:

Then quickly [the man] crossed over to one of the more conspicuous mountains of trash and junk, looked around him, took something from the briefcase and pushed it into a tilting can. Then back to his car and away.28

"One of those things of a lifetime," Michael says (192). Michael immediately goes to the can, and nearly as furtively and guiltily, retrieves the object—a magazine. It is a pornographic magazine:


"So you're pleased with yourself."

"Immensely. Think of the incongruity. The tricks of chance. The reliability of a hunch. The evidence you can't destroy. The fact that he'd have such a magazine in the first place and then be trying to get rid of it. You have to admit it's unusual."

"Oh, come on. You just like the blondes on the beach."
"Shall we look?" (194)

This is how the novel ends. The magazine is, in some sense, the novel. It is a novel about secrecy and guilt and controlled disclosure. It is about looking, with the scrutiny of a photographer or an anatomist or a painter or a voyeur. And finally it is a novel about presentation, about how we assemble parts to make some semblance of a coherent whole. While Whistlejacket is technically more fluid than most of Hawkes's fiction, it is also deviously foregrounds an ongoing concern of Hawkes, that is, how a reader engages a text. The entire novel is structured according to distinct moments of seeing, framed moments as seen through a camera, a photographer's eyes, or a painter's eyes. It is a novel preeminently about landscapes, about pictures, about how we assemble our "snapshots" of living into our own stories. The "glue" one expects within the white space between the projected scenes to tie the story together and explain relationships is most often consciously missing; these are the textual gaps which were explored in the last chapter.

But the pictures themselves in this novel denote another empty space as they are curiously denuded, despite the abundant visual detail offered to us. The visual landscapes through which this novel is told are like a scaffolding that surrounds and guards and walls off the forces of life and sexuality that one senses course beneath the surface but which are not allowed any straightforward expression. Michael's artistic and sensitive eye epitomizes in many ways this
complex process which "sees" with great particularity and penetration, but also protects itself by the circumscription of these landscapes and their separation from the creating self. Michael sees reality as a series of "waxed tableaux," as a series of carefully arranged and desexed set pieces. Like Allert, Michael seems curiously incapable of looking at himself. Instead he presents himself through his photographs, as Allert did through his dreams. But whereas Allert's presentation reflected in complex ways the rawness of his unconscious, Michael's offerings are filtered and refined and distanced through his aesthetic eye. While his photographs "see" with great sensitivity, Michael remains an enigma. He is a voyeur of his life, circling it, hungry perhaps, but ultimately unable to function in it. In fact, Michael often describes himself in the third person, the narrative easing back and forth between the first- and third-person pronouns. This intensifies the feeling of distance which Michael projects, and which he appears to need and treasure. This feeling impregnates the entire novel. This passage, which appears early in the novel, is from Hal's funeral. There are only the four of them—Alex, Buse, Virgie, and Michael—and the minister. Michael describes the scene:

Buse was wearing a burnt-brown knitted dress and a felt hat to match. Alex was dressed in gown and hat of a fresh, clear pond blue, one of the many shades of blue she wore when she was not wearing green for the sake of her auburn hair. Virgie wore black, the
cropped hair was uncovered. I couldn't have dressed or posed them more effectively had they been models. Even down to the tall, pale young man in their midst. Slender young man, gray suite, white shirt, oxfords, tie of many properly subdued colors. How different the picture would have been without me. (13)

Note how Michael's mode of seeing frames the scene and judges its aesthetic worth. Note the precise description and how everything, including himself, becomes part of the "picture."

He describes his need to see:

As for myself I want to see. I am a carnivorous watcher and I pursue them all. No one of them is uninteresting, no matter how much or little our subjects--for all of them are subjects, which is not the same as models--may think of themselves. But for me the pursuit quickens when I find myself among those who do not wish to be seen. They are the ones I most want to see. (16)

Note the language of hunting and stalking. One is reminded of the language that describes the Duke's stalking of Jutta's little boy in The Cannibal, relentless and obsessive and somehow necessary.

Michael's seeing is intimately tied to arranging, and to the relationship between arranging and secrets or hidden meanings. While Michael does look for particular features, such as young model's lips or knee, to emphasize, for the most part he does not try to elicit or discover some essence of his
subjects, but rather arranges objects and his models in keeping with his aesthetic sensibility. His aesthetic sense is particularly drawn to images which display some sort of tension in their surface appearances which would suggest that beneath that surface there lies a quite different story, a secret perhaps or a hidden and preferably dark imbedded message. About three weeks after the funeral Hal's widow, Alex, suggests that Michael prepare a photographic biography of Hal. She has a fully equipped darkroom built for him, and gives him the photographs she has already collected. He is to select from these, and take more as needed. He chooses three, each of which shows Hal in an enigmatic relation with women. One of the photos displays an uncrushed gardenia of a slightly overweight dancing partner at a sophomore dance; another a sideways look in a victory photo after a riding contest which Buse has won; and the third, a tangled arrangement of uncountable girls in bathing suits. Each photograph is chosen because it hints at some painful secret. At the youthful dance, Michael conjectures that Hal is humiliating his date, paying attention to another. In the photo of Buse He sees her future unfaithfulness to her husband; and, in the photo of the girls, Michael imagines that this is a contest to pick which of the girls will spend the night with Hal on his sailboat. In each of these photographs it is the mystery, the unstated, the unknowing, that makes the photograph special, prized. Michael seize on and enlarges any feeling of violation, of secrecy, of broken connections.
Later Michael photographs Hal's bedroom suite. He arranges the pieces, looking for something:

Later I made Hal's bed, cleaned up the bathroom, laid out his clothes. Tie, shirt, everything. I decided on a pepper-and-salt tightly woven suit that was the lightest in his wardrobe, and so changed the season. And a narrow blue silk knitted tie—he owned no ties that were not knitted—and dark blue socks. I folded a white linen handkerchief, put it in the breast pocket of the suitcoat. I spent a morning arranging all this on the foot of the bed and then changed the entire array to hunting clothes, the tall narrow boots with their tan tops standing toward the edge of the bedroom rug, a large silent oval whose borders fell into no recognizable design and which contained nothing as identifiable as, say, a lily. I spent a day and night on a portrait of the boots. (131)

This is seeing and arranging heightened nearly to malevolence. Suffused throughout Michael's description of photographing the dead man's room is not only an obsessive need to probe more and more deeply into the "things" of the room, but also an unsettling aura of guilt and secrecy. There are strong sexual tones, the emotion reminiscent of the story Michael tells of the "game" Toots (Virgie's sister), Virgie, and Molly (the family maid) played with him, locking him in the guest bedroom with Molly while she indoctrinates him in the feel of women
and sex, the two girls waiting breathlessly for reports of "what happened." Guilt, embarrassment...and excitement. Those same emotions color the photography session. Michael tries to "repair the damage wrecked by [his] ideas" but cannot. "Nothing was where I had found it," he says. "I had disturbed it all. Ruthless determination" (132). There is the sense that in Michael's world objects (in his realm, people are largely objects as well), and the placement or arrangement of these objects are so cathedeted with meaning as to overpower or render inconsequential any emotions, such as love or fear, which might result from direct relationships with other people. For Michael, all is filtered through his seeing.

The mystery of Hal's death gradually unfolds through photographs. Michael shoots two rolls of film of Hal's horse, Marcabru. When he develops the film, he finds that it is not his film but someone else's. The negatives have been scratched but the images are for the most part discernible nevertheless. They are of Hal and Marcabru and several other figures. They document Hal's death. It turns out that Harry, the stable manager, took these films and Virgie switched Harry's films with Michael's, disfiguring the ones detailing her father's murder. Alex admits to Michael, as we are led to believe she has been waiting and wanting to do, that she orchestrated her husband's murder. She relates his infidelities, how he insisted that Buse, his mistress and married to another, come to live with them, how he regularly
brought other women to Steepleton. Then she gives Michael what she calls her "love letters," a stack of Polaroids Hal took of her and Buse and one or more of the other women--whom he'd bring up and introduce to Buse and Alex after the rest of Steepleton was asleep. These photographs document the secret life--the murder, the hate, the late-night orgies--not only of Harry but of most of the Van Fleet household.

There is yet another "secret" photograph important to the story: one that sits on Hal's bureau. Alex has asked Michael to move into Hal's apartment. He removes all but a framed photograph on the bureau. It is a sepia print of Hal on a large horse. Then Michael discovers a slit in the paper backing the photograph, a secret compartment. There he finds another photograph, this one of an old car, two women and Hal...all naked and posed next to a dirt road. One of the women is Buse. The other? Perhaps Alex, Michael cannot be certain. He tells no one and keeps the secret photograph. Why? What is it about these photographs that gives Michael so much pleasure? It is not clear but it is certain that while these photographs are richly cathedeted with idiosyncratic meaning for him, they are also strangely safe, dehumanized. These images are detached from actual living, broken into tiny moments, tiny landscapes, imprisoned in their respective prints. They are somehow the fragments out of which Michael defines himself.

There are other unexplained mysteries, fragments, which help to create the curious sense of dislocation and unease
which pervades much of this novel. For example, what is Michael's role in this household? Is he now to become Alex's lover as is suggested, she who Michael has defined as "as much my mother" as any other woman? How did the other daughter, Toots, die? We are told only that she is dead after Michael returns from his first fox hunt and, later, that she was found in her closet. Why does Alex arrange for her husband's death, and why does she choose his horse to kill him? And why the fragments depicting the various fashion "shoots" that Michael does?

Ultimately, while entwined around an engrossing "murder mystery" with appropriate bits of sexual intrigue, this novel is about seeing. More consciously than in any of Hawkes's previous novels, Whistlejacket focuses on how we build our own realities, and juxtaposes two different ways of seeing: that of Michael, fashion photographer, and that of George Stubbs, painter. For Michael the world is made of discrete visual moments, each framed, each a potential photograph. Recognition and understanding are primarily gained by isolating these moments and studying them in detail. One looks for discrepancies and incongruities: a smile, a knee, an absence...whatever, which suggest that there is more than meets the eye. As Michael notes, he is interested particularly in people who don't want their photographs taken, in the secret discordances that energize, that reveal our inner urges. In this system of "landscapes" it is assumed that surfaces largely lie; they reflect our masks; they are arranged. In Michael's
world connections are illusory, dependable. Marriages are travesties, empty forms. Wives kill husbands, husbands flaunt lovers, daughters commit suicide. A character in one of Donald Barthelme's novels mouths Michael's attitude. He says, "Fragments are the only form I trust." Michael's world is one of visual moments, discrete, separate. Michael is a voyeur: he watches life as a series of photographs. He is curiously detached from everything, stalking life like a wolf does prey. Unlike Allert's confusion, one never senses any emotion in Michael. All is filtered through his camera lens. Everything becomes an object, a fragment. They are desolate landscapes because they are purposefully divorced from feeling. They shimmer with aloneness the way the landscapes in Celine's Journey to the End of the Night do, reflected through the eyes of Bardamu, or in Sartre's Nausea reflected through the eyes of Roquentin, or reflected in the lonely rooms inhabited by Dostoyevsky's "underground man." The landscapes themselves tremor with secrets, passion. Seeing, recording, framing makes them safer, more controllable. But it is an uneasy compromise, and the reader shares this uneasiness.

George Stubbs represents a different way of seeing. While Michael "stop-frames" life to contain it and to study it more closer, Stubbs dissects it. Stubbs procures human cadavers and horses in order to "anatomize" each, recording in his sketches each layer, all the muscles, the organs, the veins and arteries. The first dissection is of a young woman with an eight-month-old child in her uterus. He paints
portraits during the day, and dissects and records his
dissections at night, with his common-law wife, Mary Spencer,
holding candles so he can see to work, her nose and mouth
wrapped with length of material to help keep away the stench
of the rotting flesh. After the killing and dissection of the
first horse, Mary Spencer observes:

    She could not say which was the more oppressive to
    her, the animal's panic, scrutiny of a lateral view
    of a horse with only a portion of its skin and
    subcutaneous fat removed, fear of disease, or the
    signs of carnage in which they spent their days.
    But the more their work continued through the third
    horse, the fourth, the more she marveled at her
    Stubbs, who drew exactly what he had dissected and
    whose only emotion in their outbuilding was the
    pleasure of concentration. (93)

Out of his dissections, Stubbs produces a series of plates on
midwifery, a portrait of Lord and Lady Nelthorpe on horseback,
and of course the portrait of Whistlejacket, a majestic but
unpredictably violent stallion that shares affinities with
Marcabru, the horse that kills Hal. Stubbs chooses to make
"the grandeur of Whistlejacket's derangement" explicit and so
paints him

    rearing up in profile, its thick hindquarters borne
above the bent hind legs, the front legs dangling as
for some menacing purpose, the head, which was
nearly malformed in its closeness to the skull that
shaped it, turned partway toward the viewer as if
the viewer himself were the cause of the horse's
fear and rage. (99)

Stubbs delves down into the blood and guts, even into that
image of the fetus which so regularly recurs in Hawkes's
fiction and which seems to be associated with unformed
potential. Michael's world is much more concerned with
containment. Quite in keeping with these two ways of seeing
and responding to the world, the violent horse in Michael's
world, Marcabru, is castrated and made gentle "like a lamb"
(153), while the horse of Stubbs's world, Whistlejacket, is
enshrined on canvas in all its "derangement."

In Stubbs's world the scenes, the dissections, the
paintings, and his married life seem connected in a way that
the fragmented scenes of Michael's world are not. Both
artists, however, remake reality in their artistic creations.
Stubbs, for example, takes Lady Nelthorpe's image out of her
son's portrait, and adds "a small jagged blast of white" to
the forehead of his portrait of Whistlejacket, whose forehead,
in reality, is unmarked. Michael arranges "sets" for his
photographs, such as the illusion of a long-past dinner party
for his model, Sylvia, to slouch in (47), or the image of a
man about to dress as he photographs Hal's bedroom. Both
realms are about how we assemble and project our worlds. Both
are intensely visual and use landscapes, or scenes evoked with
words, to portray different ways of apprehending the world and
to draw the reader into these ways of seeing. Earlier I
argued that there are basically four kinds of landscapes of desolation in Hawkes's fiction: landscapes of destruction, emptiness, alienation, and vulnerability. To a large extent the landscapes of Stubbs's world are defined by destruction and vulnerability, and those of Michael's by emptiness and alienation. Stubbs deals with the dead, and with dissecting the dead. More than half of the scenes described in the section on George Stubbs have to do with darkness, candle light, dead bodies, killing, taking bodies apart. Some of the scenes are ghoulish in their effect, reminiscent of the death-filled scenes of The Cannibal:

The atomization of Mary Dyer was all but complete and, to Mary Spencer, had even been carried to unnecessary lengths, Stubbs having satisfied himself as to the full situation of the enlarged uterus, its relationship to the stomach and . . . which veins and arteries were fullest and what distortions had been imposed on the bladder; . . . But it was the infant she cared most about, the infant he studied, going so far as to seize it and turn it this way and that in the uterine space whose elasticity conformed to the infant's every impatient move. Candles burned out, light jumped and stuttered across what was now the shimmering formlessness of Mary Dyer's remains. (84-85)

Later the narrative describes the preparation of the first horse, an old gray mare called Nan, for dissection:

The old horse waited stock-still while they lit the
candles, donned their leather aprons, uncoiled the ropes. . . . Then she was lying flat on the stone, a statue indeed!

Stubbs had maneuvered the animal so that its neck lay across the trough he had cut into the stone of the floor, beneath the wall to the ground outside, where, thought the earth was frozen, he had dug a pit to receive the twenty gallons or more of the blood that he would now drain from the veins of the placid creature. . . . She moved! Nan might as well not have been tied, might as well not have had half her head covered like some prisoner facing execution. . . . She thrashed her tail, heaved her ribs for breath, rolled her eyes, and, worst of all, cried out in tones that suggested human strangulation. She sweated, her coat glowed. In all her ancient being Nan rebelled. (90-2)

These are painful scenes to watch. We see the blood, feel the terror, smell the thick stink of rotting flesh and excrement and death. They make us vulnerable because they expose our most primitive fears and sympathies. Nothing in Michael’s realm is anywhere near as visceral as these two scenes. The scenes that define Michael’s realm are aseptic, arranged, distanced. There is a sterility about Michael’s world which contrasts with Stubbs's world, a world fetid and thick with the possibilities that arise out of its violence.

Nevertheless Michael's part of the novel is, because of the incredible distance it creates between Michael and the events he
relates, eventually the more terrifying. His separateness, his emotional distance from all that is out there, incarcerates him in his own world no less than the things in his photographs are trapped by their paper borders. As a reader, one attempts to see the world that Michael describes and, in so doing, experiences the entrapment and sterility which so powerfully defines his fictive realm. Michael's photographs strangely negate life. Because the landscapes in Hawkes's fictions are so often born out of negation, whether through forms of destruction or alienation, the reader is left reverberating in the empty spaces that negation inevitably produces, left with the unease and vulnerability that regularly accompany such empty and desolate realms. Whistlejacket, although more conventionally "plotted" and superficially engaging than perhaps any of Hawkes's earlier novels is also, curiously, airless, lifeless. The connections to the blood-and-guts world which are reflected in the biographical sketch on Stubbs are, in the two sections narrated by Michael which ultimately dominate the novel, reduced to the crazed madness embedded in the portrait of Whistlejacket. While Whistlejacket teases us with the possibilities offered by Stubbs, the fictive landscape which lingers and in which the novel ends is one depicting furtive secretness and containment. The emotion with which we are left is that of the perverse pleasure Michael extracts from "catching" a total stranger and that person's "secret": a pornographic magazine. Michael's eyes collect appearances, the edges of things, while Stubbs's seek the unvarnished, bloodied essences of things. Whistlejacket,
more than any of Hawkes's earlier novels, not only creates visual landscapes, but is radically and consciously about the process itself...and what defines and underlies all of Hawkes's novels: seeing.
NOTES


8. "'A Trap to Catch Little Birds With': An Interview with John Hawkes," in *A John Hawkes Symposium: Design and


15. MacCurdy, 320, 332.


17. Stanley Fish, Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities (Cambridge, Ma: Harvard Univ. Press, 1980).

more affective reactions of the unconscious in order to make them acceptable, and allow them voice in the conscious mind. Includes references to other of his works dealing with judgment. See also Jonathon Culler's *Structural Poetics: Structuralism, Linguistics and the Study of Literature* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Press, 1975), especially his discussion of *vraisemblance*.

19. The center section of *Whistlejacket*, which expounds on the life of the painter George Stubbs, is told in a "biographical" style that suggests an outside, rather omniscient narrator--someone other than Michael.

20. Hawkes has related a critical experience for him that is reflected in all his writing, and especially in the relationship of his narrators to the narratives they relate. He talks about a writing exercise he was given as a freshman in Harvard that in some ways opened his world to fiction (he was writing poetry then). The exercise asks the student to "assume that you are someone else, real or made up, and then you write a character sketch of yourself in the voice of this assumed guise." Hawkes says the exercise was revelatory to him--he calls it his "first real fictive effort"--and that he's used the exercise ever since in the classes he teaches. See O'Donnell, 110.

Directions, 1974), 171.


26. Frederick Hoffman, in his chapter "Kafka's Trial: Assailant as Landscape" in *The Mortal No: Death and the Modern Imagination* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1964), writes sensitively on how Kafka's landscapes become central characters in his stories, largely creating and controlling the tension and development of Kafka's narratives. This concept, landscape as character, is important in Hawkes's fictions as well where carefully delineated images such as, for example, a speeding car, an erotic photograph, a women's prison, or a wrecked and partially submerged airplane, take on anthropomorphic intensity and energy as controlling and energizing forces in the fictional worlds they inhabit.


cited from this novel are noted parenthetically within the
text.

Things.
When I say that word (do you hear?), there is a silence; the silence which surrounds things. All movement subsides and becomes contour, and out of past and future time something permanent is formed; space, the great calm of objects which know no urge.
Rainer Maria Rilke

Hence the feeling that we are alone has double significance: on the one hand it is self-awareness, and on the other it is a longing to escape from ourselves. Solitude--the very condition of our lives--appears to us as a test and a purgation, at the conclusion of which our anguish and instability will vanish.
Octavio Paz

A horrid Stillness first invades the ear,
And in that silence Wee the Tempest fear.
John Dryden

Chapter 4
Silence: Travesty

Literary silence is not so much the absence of sound, although it is that too to some extent, as it is an attitude, an attitude expressed in the subjects and feelings explored and in the techniques used to render these subjects and feelings. Silence, as it is manifested in fiction, generally evokes feelings of isolation or emptiness. Techniques such as the stream of consciousness used in the novels of Camus and Dostoyevsky, or the sparse elliptical prose of Hemingway and Kafka, or the dislocations in time and place often found in the fiction of Pynchon and Calvino encourage the reader into his or her own silent, introspective spaces. In contrast,
techniques such as action-packed plots and quick-paced
dialogue encourage the reader to keep focused on the action
and characters in the text. Fiction which is interested in
portraying or reflecting feelings of silence usually nurtures
in the reader his or her own feelings, perhaps largely
unacknowledged, of alienation and confusion. In this sense
the silence reflects the "sound" of ontological emptiness.

This silence, in fiction, appears to take three different
forms. First, there is a movement that seeks to find, to
define, the potentially filled space-interiors behind and
beyond words, the ineffable silent centers of things and of
feelings. This is the Rilkean activity discussed in chapter
one. Detailed description is important to this approach to
and evocation of silence. In contemporary literature, Pynchon
and Barth particularly well reflect this voice which circles
its subjects with probing and often unexpected perspectives
and descriptions. The second manifestation of fictive silence
reaches in very nearly the opposite direction, toward a sense
of clarity or freedom obtained by a process of elimination or
purification which seeks to find universal patterns and
truths. Beckett, Kafka and Hemingway reflect this approach to
silence. The first approach, then, seeks meaning or clarity
through abundance, the second through simplification. The
alienated voice can respond in a third way as well, that is,
it can record the cadences and loneliness of the voice itself.
Poulet writes:

I am above all attracted by those for whom
literature is—by definition—a spiritual activity
which must be gone beyond in its own depths, or
which, in failing to be gone beyond, in being
condemned to the awareness of a non-transcendence,
affirms itself as the experience and verification of
a fundamental defeat.  

The existential monologues of Sartre, Camus and Dostoyevsky
reflect this approach, the "recording" of the sounds of
silence and despair.

Ihab Hassan has probably explored the function of silence
in fiction, particularly in contemporary fiction, more than
any other critic. In The Dismemberment of Orpheus he argues
that the voice of modern and postmodern literature sings in
silence or, to use the metaphor underlying his title, plays a
lyre with no strings. Hassan is primarily interested in the
silence of negation. The Romantic sense of silence, he
argues, was sacramental, was a silence of fullness. That of
avant-garde literature is about negation, about alienation,
separation, repudiation, subversion, death; it is a silence
that "de-realizes the world." The alienated self of the
Romantic vision was heroic, Hassan says, aimed at opening the
outer world, while the alienated postmodern self is felt to be
tragic, pathetic. From this introversion, he says, emerge the
arts of silence. For Hassan, Kafka stands at the center of
the postmodern quest for silence. For it is Kafka, he argues,
who concentrates our gaze on our "clinging antinomies—hope
and despair, union and solitude, health and disease, power and
impotence, eternity and death—" with such perseverance as to lead us to "the scrupulous and holy art of ambiguity, on the far side of silence where all is pure meaning."  

Susan Sontag writes, similarly, of the ascetic tendencies of much of contemporary art. In her essay, "The Aesthetics of Silence," she writes that art is

   a theology of God's absence, a craving for the cloud of unknowing beyond knowledge and for the silence beyond speech, so art must tend toward anti-art, the elimination of the "subject" (the "object," the "image"), the substitution of chance for intention, and the pursuit of silence.  

For Sontag, these processes are reflected in a new relationship between the artist and the reader (observer, listener). There is a shift from explanation and understanding, to bare-bones literalness. She cites Beckett and Kafka as examples. The effect of this bareness, she says, is anxiety. For Kafka, Sontag argues, individual potential is rooted in facing the terror of our own inner silences, facing our own ambiguous and incongruent and often violent urges. Albert Camus has written that "the whole art of Kafka consists in forcing the reader to reread."  

Rereading, lingering over the landscapes, the gaps and incongruities, pushes us into the tensions, the ambiguities, the silent spaces of the text.

In the fiction of such writers as Kafka and Hawkes, this tension is intricately commingled with silence, expressed in the uncertainties and ambiguities which echo outward and
connect to the images and experiences played in the mind of the reader. In works in which silence is an important feature, the author does not explain. Ambiguity predominates. All three kinds of silence—that of abundance, that of elimination, and that which records the feeling itself—rely on ambiguity, rely on the space and spaces within and beyond the text to portray the essential characteristics of silence and to evoke the feelings of alienation, isolation, yearning and unease which are generally associated with silence in fiction. Ihab Hassan writes that "literature strives for silence by accepting chance and improvisation; its principle becomes indeterminacy." In chapter two, "Textual Gaps and Blanks," the emphasis was on how these areas of "not knowing" both engage the reader and make him or her more vulnerable to the images and events of the text. From a slightly different perspective, one can see that these gaps and blanks are also pockets of silence within the text. They create echoes and reverberations of uncertainty within the text and within the reader.

The use of what Wayne Booth has called the "unreliable narrator" adds to this silence of ambiguity and uncertainty. In novels such as As I Lay Dying, Death, Sleep & the Traveler, Notes from the Underground, Miss Lonelyhearts and Travesty, everything we see or hear is filtered through a narrative voice (or voices) which is developed in such a way that perceptual distortion becomes an important aspect of the story presented. The word "insane" has been used to describe at least two of the narrators in Faulkner's As I Lay Dying, Addie
and Darl Bundren, and each of the narrators in the other novels. Critics have even suggested that Allert and Papa, in *Death, Sleep & the Traveler* and *Travesty* respectively, may be telling their stories from mental institutions. When confronted with stories told by such narrators, everything they say must be viewed with skepticism. Allert says he is not guilty, but is he capable of knowing? This means, in effect, that everything we see through the eyes of such narrators is thrown into question. Such novels have no firm foundation; they hover and shimmer out of the world of distortion and irrationality. In one sense, such narrators negate their own novels and what remain are the tracks and patterns of mental space.

Such a collapse from "outer reality" and its relative reliability, to "inner reality" and subjectivity, creates a violent shift from attachment and connectiveness to the things of "out there" to the silent aloneness of isolated inwardness. When perceiving the world through the eyes of such a narrator one is necessarily taken into the world of the narrator's silent isolation. When we read part of ourselves becomes the narrator, and we feel his or her tremulous inner silences, and connect these to our own irrational fears of and vulnerability before our personal realities. Poulet writes, of reading,:  

I am on loan to another, and this other thinks, feels, and suffers, and acts within me.\(^{11}\)

The power that such "unreliable" narrators yield is paradoxically considerable, often more than so-called
trustworthy narrators. "Unreliable" narrators force us, in order to see the world through their eyes, to utilize parts of ourselves that are often our most anxiety-producing. To read and "be" Papa in *Travesty*, or Darl or Addie in *As I Lay Dying*, one must reach into one's own pockets of instability and fear and irrationality. In so doing, we enter some of our most private and vulnerable spaces.

No other form of writing or art dares to attempt to do with such completeness what the novel routinely does, that is, to create an imagined world. As Hawkes has pointed out, one can do in fiction what one can do in no other form of action. Fiction allows us to test our limits and our beliefs. It allows one to explore and push, for example, feelings of alienation to their limits and even beyond. In this particular quest, silence is the subject and the goal. One can describe the silence, as does the narrator in *Notes from the Underground* or Bardamu in *Journey to the End of the Night*. One can explore the ideas of self-negation, of auto-destruction and suicide, as does Lawrence in *Jude the Obscure* or Kirollov in *Crime and Punishment*. Both are acts of transcendence in that they seek, as the novel always does, to redefine the world. Camus once said that life comes down to one question, "Why not suicide?" The movement toward this ultimate question can be, as John Barth has pointed out, a frenetic filling of the spaces to keep the question at bay, to create "a shore against that silence" (think of *Gravity's Rainbow*) or a gradual simplification, a divestment of other concerns which gradually leads to a
clarification of the question (think of _Jealousy_). It is the question which lies embedded in the terse prose of Hemingway, and in the wandering disembodied soul who wanders through the silent pages of _Nausea_.

Mondrian, who spent his entire life simplifying his forms and colors, looking for the essential purity and life-giving correspondences that could define his art, writes that plastic art, which is what he termed this rarefaction process, is the "liberation of life and art from all obstacles toward a clearer manifestation of their real content. This is not," he continues, "merely a reduction or elimination but it is an intensification."13 Elsewhere he writes that the "reduction of form and color—a freeing of form and color from their particular appearance in nature—is necessary to free rhythm, and consequently art."14 In a similar sense the novel, or the activity of writing a novel, can be seen as an attempt to get beyond words, beyond the dull worn surface of appearances. In this sense the novel functions as a tool of discovery. The novel itself becomes a quest for that fulfilling silence on the other side of words. From this perspective the writer uses words and form and rhythm and sound—the tools—to probe and purify and clarify his or her ideas and, perhaps, to push these ideas and the experience of these ideas onto a new plane of awareness. Eliot's _Four Quartets_ focuses on this quest:

Words, after speech, reach

Into the silence. Only by the form, the pattern

Can words or music read
The stillness.\textsuperscript{15}

It is a quest to find that pure form or pattern that exists beyond words and perhaps conveys better than the words themselves the ideas that they (the words) strive to locate.

Thus the movement toward silence is not only a move toward the silence of nothingness but also toward a kind of transcendence. In \textit{The Dismemberment of Orpheus} Ihab Hassan writes that "the language of silence conjoins the need both of autodestruction and self-transcendence."\textsuperscript{16} It strives both toward absolute silence—a negative self-reflexive movement toward increasing isolation and nothingness—and toward something that opens outward beyond language and through which it can, perhaps, revitalize itself. In the positive sense it seeks to transcend the easy narrative paradigms of yesterday. The contemporary Mexican novelist, Juan Rulfo, speaking of the writing of his novel \textit{Pedro Páramo}, talks of how he had the characters and the ambience of the novel in mind well before he was able to write the novel because, he says, he could not find the proper form in which to express the elements. It was "a question of style,"\textsuperscript{17} he tells us. And he found it in a city of the dead,

where all the persons were dead, and even who narrates was dead. Then there was no limit between space and time. The dead have neither time nor space.\textsuperscript{18}

This decision created, in the novel, the silence of the eternal present. Meaning, conclusion, plot have little if any
significance in this novel. In which case the experience itself becomes the focus of the work. And the "silence" of the novel functions as a challenge--a challenge to enter into and expand and re-energize one's conceptions of what constitutes the reality of fiction (and, conversely, of life).

In the fiction of John Hawkes, the quest for silence--in all its dimensions--is nowhere more apparent, or more chillingly evoked, than in his novel *Travesty*. To gain some initial perspective on this novel, it is revealing, I think, to pause momentarily and consider *Travesty* and *The Passion Artist*, published in 1976 and 1978 respectively, together. Both novels are about "dead passion," to use a phrase created by the narrator of *Travesty*, about, in a detailed and yet confused rendering, what happens when the passions are repressed. The male narrator of each of these novels comes to make a last gasp effort to reunite his surface self with his inner, but repressed urgings. Konrad Vost seeks his other self in the violence and sexuality of a riot in a women's prison, a prison where his mother is incarcerated for murdering his father. Papa, or "the privileged man" as he is known in his novel, *Travesty*, seeks his "private apocalypse," as he calls it, in a violent and intricately planned suicide and murder that will take not only himself, but his daughter and his poet friend (who is also the lover of his wife and daughter). Both narrators have lived outwardly relatively proper and structured existences--job, wife, children--and now, through their own intense and fulminating need, break out
of that existence through an act of calculated, destructive violence, an act which is, for each of these narrators, also and fundamentally a purgation.

As have all of Hawkes's novels, *Travesty* has met with varied and even antithetical responses. On one hand, reviewers have called it "a tensely terrifying tour de force,"\(^{19}\) a work of "marvelous and seductive virtuosity"\(^ {20}\) and overwhelming in the "magnitude and artistry of his [Hawkes's] communicated vision."\(^ {21}\) Tony Tanner, in his review for *The New York Times*, writes that "there is no doubt that he [Hawkes] is one of the very best living American writers, and *Travesty* one of his most remarkable fictions."\(^ {22}\) On the other hand, it has been called "an empty, foolish imitation of a serious novel,"\(^ {23}\) and criticized for lacking the "vicious surrealism" and "stylistic density" of his earlier novels, for creating a landscape "too airless to sustain life."\(^ {24}\) Hawkes himself has commented that he thinks "that *Travesty* is probably the purist fiction I've written, and probably the most powerful."\(^ {25}\)

Some of this discrepancy is due to the fact that this novel is, structurally, a clear departure from his earlier works. It is concise to the point of austerity, with clear reverberations of the French novelists, especially Camus and Robbe-Grillet. It is spoken by a single narrator—no one else speaks at all—and unfolds linearly in about the time it takes the read the novel. Quoting Hawkes, this is the "plot":

My monologuist, who is known only as the "privileged man," is accompanied on a suicidal night drive over
a dangerous stretch of road in the south of France by Chantal, his nineteen-year-old daughter, who crouches terrified in the back seat, and by his best friend, a poet named Henri. The privileged man is driving at the highest possible speed and intends to crash his elegant sports car into the three-foot-thick wall of an abandoned farmhouse, thus committing suicide and murdering both friend and daughter. The privileged man's monologue, "impossibly" spoken in the last minutes before the crash, is a discussion of Henri's love affairs with Chantal and also with Honorine, the privileged man's wife, and is an argument stating that no effort of the imagination could be greater than trying to imagine one's own death—which is what the privileged man is attempting to help Henri and even Chantal do. It is this effort, the ultimate exercising of the imagination, that reveals the privileged man as more of a poet than Henri, and that justifies, to him at least, the horror he causes.

Hawkes has also related the genesis of the novel. He and his wife, Sophie, spent the summer of 1974 in an old house on the edge of a village on the Brittany coast of France, and in that house Hawkes found an English translation of Camus' The Fall. He talks of reading it for the first time, savoring the "superbly ironic voice of Camus' anonymous lawyer."
novel, and the stories of near-by residents detailing a recent catastrophic automobile accident, led Hawkes to reformulate Camus' question, why not suicide?, to ask: what might possibly justify the act of suicide? The resultant novel, Travesty, is, in one sense, a travesty of Camus' The Fall; in another, an homage to Camus himself.

Every impulse of this novel reaches for silence. It is a novel about purification--through suicide--and it is a novel about imagining the silence beyond living; and it is a novel about recording the sounds of silence and despair themselves. Initially at least, Travesty seems to be primarily a novel about negation, about the "void" of death. It is a novel depicting and rationalizing self-annihilation. And murder. The novel also, strangely enough, negates itself. It does, after all, define itself as a travesty--a parody, a burlesque, a cheap imitation. So that, in some sense, it does not exist; it is the marginalia or subtext or mirror image of The Fall. It is also, perhaps, a parody of the pornographic novel, especially in the sadomasochistic spanking and whipping scene with Monique, and of the highly intellectual French novel. It is also, in part, a parody of itself. The narrative voice of Travesty undermines itself. It is a voice of radical irony. Hawkes has called this novel his "most ironic narrative";29 Albert Guerard has commented on "the narrator's suave, chill irony."30 Irony is a form of negation. The ironic voice is tinged with sarcasm, ridicule. The narrative voice of Travesty continually responds, with a sense of deprecation, to
the (silent) protests of the two others trapped in the
speeding car, and to those of the reader as well. The opening
sets the tone:

   No, no, Henri. Hands off the wheel. Please.
   It is too late. After all, at one hundred and
forty-nine kilometers per hour on a country road in
the darkest quarter of the night, surely it is
obvious that your slightest effort to wrench away
the wheel will pitch us into the toneless world of
highway tragedy even more quickly than I have
planned. And, you will not believe it, but we are
still accelerating. (11)

The novel negates, one by one, the arguments of common sense,
replacing them, in tones of brilliant lucidity, with arguments
justifying suicide. The ease with which Papa pulls us into
his nihilistic vision is largely dependent upon the tight
control of the narrative, a narrative voice which, on one
hand, is clearly that of a madman, and on the other the voice
of intense rationality and intelligence. The brilliance of
the prose and of the arguments it posits demand the reader's
attention. Ultimately, one is forced to at least consider the
ethics of suicide based on the argument the narrator offers.

   The silence of suicide, of death, of nothingness, is the
center around which the entire novel is fabricated. One of
the epigraphs for the novel highlights this. It is from
Michel Leiris's Manhood. The passage compares poetic
structure to a cannon, which is, it says, only a hole
surrounded by steel. Thus, poetic structure
can be based only on what it does not have; and that
ultimately one can write only to fill a void or at
least to situate, in relation to the most lucid part
of ourselves, the place where this incommensurable
abyss yawns within us.

Hawkes's privileged man does both: he circles the silence with
his specious arguments, and he dares to situate himself and
his rationalizations on the edge of his own ultimate abyss,
death.

While the novel is organized in perhaps the simplest
possible manner, that is, a single narrator talks for about
two hours, the narrative is nevertheless peppered with gaps
and silences. The most obvious silence is that of the other
two passengers in the car. We never hear their voices. What
we hear, instead, is the privileged man responding to their
voices and actions. As in the opening paragraph we imagine
that Henri has indeed attempted or made some movement
suggesting an attempt to wrestle the wheel away from the
narrator. The narrator also responds to Chantal's crying,
Henri smoking cigarettes, and numerous real or hypothetical
questions and arguments posed by the passengers of imagined by
the narrator. But Chantal and Henri themselves remain, in the
novel, absolutely silent. The form of the novel negates their
presence. They are seen only through Papa's eyes. This has
led several critics to suggest that perhaps Papa is alone in
the car, perhaps intent on suicide, perhaps not, but
nevertheless using the imagined counterparts of Chantal and Henri to justify his own death. Donald Greiner has even suggested that perhaps Papa is in a mental institution and imagines the entire episode.31 Regardless, the maniacal voice of the narrator cannot, will not, allow these other voices presence. Thus, when Papa responds to them, as he regularly does throughout the novel, what we hear is a gap, a silence, an imagined space where we posit or imagine that, for example, Chantal has crawled down onto the floor of the back seat. In the following example, one assumes that Papa has either asked if they would like some music, or has turned the radio on to which they have protested:

Very well. No radio. Music, no music, it is all the same to me, though had the thought been agreeable to you, I suppose I might have preferred the gentlest background of some score prepared for melodrama. . . .

But Chantal is not listening. . . . But of course from you [Henri] I expect total attention. We are grown men, after all, and have eaten from the same bowl often enough. As for me, in this instance I respect your wishes. My beautiful high-fidelity radio stays dead. (21–22)

This shortened passage represents the opening and ending lines of one segment. There are 56 segments, each separated from the next by a space, in the 128-page novel. Each space represents another silence, a connection that we imagine
occurs in the mind of our narrator but to which we are not privy. Each segment is about something different, although we do return to several topics again and again. Sometimes the short pieces seem prompted by something Chantal or Henri does or says: "Murder, Henri?" (13); or "Another cigarette. I approve." (37); or "Of course I am not joking." (18). Papa responds to Henri's asthma attack, and Chantal's vomiting. Other times he remembers, as when he recounts his affair with Monique, or talks of his young son, Pascal, who died. He describes in detail the night, the village they will pass through; he tells anecdotes of Chantal's childhood; he imagines Honorine, his wife, asleep in their chateau, Tara, which they will pass shortly before the accident. And of course, he explains the necessity of this act. In all this the voice is intelligent, carefully modulated, distant.

And yet somehow the entire fictional world tremors with violence and anger and jealousy and revenge just beneath the carefully controlled surface. It is not so much the terror of the two passengers, despite the tendency to imagine how one would feel in their places. It is, rather, embedded in the incredible need for this monologue, and in the confused pain that is woven delicately but powerfully throughout the text. Listen again to the passage concerning the radio. Note the barely concealed anger and petulance at not having any music, as Papa protests overly strongly that "it is all the same to me," which it is obviously not. Here as elsewhere, Papa notes that Henri and he "have eaten from the same bowl often
enough," that is, have shared the same women, Honorine and to some extent, at least figuratively, Chantal. It is clear, although Papa argues the converse, that Papa wants deeply to hurt Chantal and Henri, not so much by their death, which could have been done painlessly in some other fashion, but by the torture of this ride, by a sadistic enjoyment of their (and the reader's) squirming. It is also clear that in some way Papa wants to hurt, maybe punish, Honorine by killing all the important people in her life. He often talks, with a kind of perverse pleasure, of passing Tara in the night, with Honorine there asleep, ignorant of this drama, and of her reaction when she is told, the next morning more than likely, of this terrible inexplicable (Papa has planned the accident to raise questions as to how, why) accident.

This sadomasochism (he is, of course, torturing himself as well) is brought into high relief in an episode he recounts concerning his one, we are led to believe, adulterous affair. Monique is in many ways Chantal and Honorine. She is exactly the same age as Chantal at the time, petite like Chantal, and yet with skin "whiter even than Honorine's fair skin" (66). While Papa vigorously protests that Monique is not a substitute for Chantal and Honorine (see 65), the force of Papa's negations suggest otherwise. In the encounter Papa relates, he talks with pleasure of often hitting Monique "with the edge of my heavy fork on her fragile wrist" while they were at dinner, and how she bore her "quivering fury" (66-67). The central episode, when he "fell so close to being the
sadistic villain lurking everywhere" in Monique's pornography collection (68), is when he spanks her. He says that never before has he done something like this but that suddenly he knew he had to spank "as hard and as long as possible. . . . [and not] to spare Monique one trace of humiliation or one grain of pain." He says:

I could not bring the flat of my hand into hurtful contact with the soft, private world of her buttocks often enough or hard enough, so that I increased my efforts and gave myself total consciousness of touch and sound and enjoyed to the fullest the agitation of her helplessness. (70)

Afterwards he talks of feeling "breathless, delighted," "smiling," and "filled with vigor," and has a powerful erection. This illustrates, Papa tells us, "that I am indeed a specialist on the subject of dead passion" (74).

This "dead passion," this usually unarticulated sexual energy and anger, is like a black bolus of silence that in some way shapes the entire novel, as if it, not the suicide, is the "hole" of the cannon, so to speak, which shapes the narrative which surrounds it. In the spanking incident and in the planned suicide/murder Papa takes great pleasure in inflicting pain and humiliation on his victims. It appears to be, for him, a kind of private purgation. The narrator seeks to destroy, much as does Konrad Vost in The Passion Artist when he calls the police and tells them to arrest his daughter for prostitution, everything around him related to his guilt,
anger, jealousy, fear, sexuality, sense of betrayal. He argues that jealousy and cruelty do not underlie his plan of destruction, but his arguments contradict themselves. He refutes the possibility of being jealous of Henri by noting that 1) Henri is "not a very good poet", and 2) that he is "an emotional parasite" (106). He notes that he refused to use his favorite fountain pen for a week after Henri used it to autograph Honorine's copy of Henri's most recent book of poetry (which Honorine refused to show Papa, preferring rather "to guard it selfishly" [108] from Papa's eyes). And that the book of poetry Henri eventually inscribed for Papa, "no longer exists" (109). To the charge of cruelty, which Papa himself raises, he argues that his act is cruel but not motivated by cruelty, that rather it is all for Honorine. That, "just as she was the source of [Henri's] poems, so too was she the source of [his] private apocalypse" (125). Of guilt, he says he has none but the last anecdote which he shares, and which he shares with a kind of urgency and nonchalance that suggests that it is somehow pivotally important, is what he calls "the formative event of my early manhood" (125). "It was nothing, really," he says, merely that he may have, purposefully it would seem, run down a young child walking with an old man, an old poet, on the highway, "exactly as if the child had been one of tonight's rabbits" (a recurring motif in the soliloquy). "At any rate," he continues, "I shall never forget the face of the child" (127). Earlier in the novel he alludes to this event, calling it the "moment of creativity"
of his early manhood, and saying that it determined the life he would lead, noting its correspondence to the moment at hand: a car, an old poet. Again, as in the spanking incident and in the suicide/murder plan now in progress, one is aware of the twisted and intense pleasure Papa extracts from controlling and, yes, punishing others, how these moments of unleashed "passion" in some way constitute the very pinnacles of his existence. There is thus the sense that Papa's life has primarily been one of repressed feelings, "dead passion" as he says, and that only during these three pivotal moments of his life—the running down of the child and old man, the spanking of Monique, and the suicide/murder which constitutes the novel—when he allowed his anger to erupt has he felt fully alive. From a slightly different perspective, one can postulate that there is a deeply seated guilt associated with the memory of killing the young child which has somehow been expanding in the years since that killing and now has erupted in the intense need to destroy everything associated with his overwhelming guilt. In this sense the guilt is the silence, the silent center of the cannon which compels the suicide/murder and the story which is the novel.

This tremulous, barely contained violence of "dead passion" is beautifully reflected as well in the shimmering unreality of the landscapes which Papa sees and describes, or imagines. In this passage Papa describes one of these "spent" landscapes, its emptiness, its silence,...and its inherent eroticism:
Our villages carved out of old bone, our forests shimmering with leaves the color of dried tobacco, our village walls over which the dead vines are draped like fishing nets, the weight of the stones that occupy the slopes of our barren hills like sculpted sheep, the smell of wood smoke, the ruby color of wine held to the natural light, the white pigeon drawn to the spit even as he becomes aroused on the rim of the fountain—surely there is no eroticism to match the landscape of spent passion. There is nothing like an empty grave to betray the presence of a dead king in all his lechery. The blasted tree contains its heart of amber, you can smell the wild roses in the sterile crevices of ancient cliffs, suddenly you find the whitened limb of a tree sleeved in green. Yes, ours is a landscape of indifferent hunters and vanished lovers, cher ami, so that but to exist on such a terrain, aware of blood and manure, of the little paper sacks of poison placed side by side with bowls of flowers on the window ledges of each village street, or aware of the unshaven faces of our local pharmacists or of the untended pubescence of the girls who work in our markets and confess their fantasies in our darkened churches—yes, simply to exist in such a world is to be filled with a pessimism indistinguishable from the most obvious
state of sexual excitation. (62-63)

I have quoted this fairly long passage for a number of reasons. First, it is an exquisite example of the kind of desolate landscapes in which so many of Hawkes's characters wander, some in actuality, some just in their minds. It also points to another important dimension of the violence of this novel.

In my last argument, I tried to focus on the bolus of repressed anger and sexuality embedded in Papa which is in many ways controlled by the clean, hard and even elegant prose and arguments of his narrative. That repression is a kind a battered silence, a wall of silence that keeps these inner not particularly pleasant thoughts and urgings—jealousy, sadism, incest, guilt—at bay. While alluded to off-handedly throughout the text, the violence truly only breaks through twice: in the spanking of Monique, and in the suicide plan and its telling which is the narrative (the "accident" involving the child and poet seems to predate or do be less engineered than these later incidents). Papa's description of the "spent landscape" represents a different but equally important silent center for the novel. It is a malevolent (sacks of poison, the dead king's lechery), desiccated (brown leaves, barren hills, dead vines), and worn-out realm. It is a world of indifference, pessimism, and vanished lovers. This is a silent, empty, and lonely world. It is described out of a voice of detachment, distance. The line about the dead king in all his lechery seems somehow to define Papa, trapped in
the darkness of the spent landscape of his mind, where only a kind of desperate sexual excitation remains. Elsewhere Papa suggests that he is, in some way, his dead son, Pascal. He talks about his youthful loneliness, and how he was plagued by what he "defined as the fear of no response." He had the feeling, he says, that if "the world did not respond to me totally, immediately, in leaf, street sign, the expression of strangers, then I did not exist" (84-85). There is the sense that then, as now, Papa does not feel connected to the world, feels separated from life and from himself. Thus he speaks of himself and of the outer world in the dry, emotionless tone of the observer. His inner self is a void, a silence; he exists only to the extent that others respond to him. To inflict pain, to feel pain, makes him feel, temporarily, alive. In this realm sexual excitation and release ("spent passion") commingle with death. In this sense, the suicide/murder becomes the ultimate ejaculation which breaks through and silences the death-in-life pessimism of his day-to-day life; and the planning of the accident and the verbal torturing of Henri and Chantal become an exquisite game of foreplay.\textsuperscript{32}

My discussion of \textit{Travesty} has so far largely concentrated on the silence of negation, of annihilation. It is the silence of loss and repression that propels the narrative, projects it toward its final destruction. This silence is built upon a premise of tearing down, of negating what is, whether through irony or criticism or murder. It is both empty and filled with negativity—anger, jealousy, guilt. It
feeds on silent empty realms, and craves them as well.

But *Travesty* is also a novel about becoming. It is a novel about how the artist, in this case Papa, creates new moments, new life, through acts of the imagination. From this perspective the novel is about the incredible power and potential of an imagination that allows one to imagine one's own annihilation. The suicide becomes a beautiful, enigmatic sculpture, planned, created: a living work of art. The act of the narrative becomes a purgation, an emptying of secrets, a movement toward purity and clarity. "Guilt," says our privileged man, "is merely a pain that disappears as soon as we recognize the worst in us all" (36). This, this project, is his worst. It is also, to his way of thinking, his best "work." It is a conscious, designed, act. "Nothing," says Papa, "is more important than the existence of what does not exist." "It is this idea precisely," he stresses, "that lies at the dead center of our night together" (57). To Henri, he explains:

I would rather see two shadows flickering inside the head than all your flaming sunrises set end to end. There you have it, the theory to which I hold as does the wasp to his dart. Without it, we would have no choice but to diffuse the last of our time together by passing between us the fuming bottle of cognac bought and freshly opened for just this occasion. But thanks to my theory we are spared such an intolerable waste. There shall be no slow
maudlin loss of consciousness for you, for me.
After all, my theory tells us that ours is the power
to invent the very world we are quitting. Yes, the
power to invent the very world we are quitting. It
is as if the bird could die in flight. And unless
we exercise this power of ours we merely slide
toward the pit feet first, eyes closed, slack, and
smiling in our pathetic submission to an oblivion we
still hope to understand. But for us it will be
different, cher ami. Quite different. (57)

Literally, and figuratively, the novel revolves around this
point: the power to invent the very world we are quitting. It
is the ultimate act of control and creation: to determine how
and where and when one dies. The accident becomes the
ultimate in "performance art," a solemn testimony to the
artistic will. It is imagined and planned with great
particularity. In the ideal situation, untouched, without
fire and blue lights and ambulances, Papa draws for us an
exquisite picture of what we would see. At first, he says,
the physical disarray has not settled--

bits of metal expanding, contracting, tufts of
upholstery exposed to the air, an unsocketed dial
impossibly squeaking in a clump of thorns. . . . In
the course of the first day the gasoline evaporates,
the engine oil begins to fade into the earth, the
broken lens of a far-flung headlight reflects the
progress of the sun from a furrow in what was once a
field of corn. The birds do not sing, clouds pass, the wreckage is warmed, the human remains are integral with the remains of rubber, glass, steel. A stone has lodged in the engine block, the process of rusting has begun. And then darkness, a cold wind, a shred of clothing fluttering where it is snagged on one of the doors which, quite unscathed, lies flat in the grass. And then daylight, changing temperature, a night of cold rain, the short-lived presence of a scavenging rodent. And despite all this chemistry of time, nothing has disturbed the essential integrity of our tableau of chaos, the point being that if design inevitably surrenders to debris, debris inevitably reveals it innate design. (58-59)

This is Papa's homage to himself, his life. It is a kind of sculptured perfection, embodying in a catastrophically violent and yet strangely beautiful way all of who Papa is and how he envisions the world. This is his fullest conception of beauty, rendered with the kind of precision one only gives to what one loves. This "tableau of chaos" is Papa's parting gift, his legacy, his poem to the world. It will also be, Papa says, a "perfect overturning of ordinary expectation" (58). The accident is imagined to break upon the dull lives of the survivors, change them in appreciation of the violence and mystery of the accident. As such it has the potential to break the bonds of everyday repression, and so to open a new
level of experience and possibility, a silent yet uninformed realm that waits to be lived and explored.

Papa also talks of his narrative as a filling of the silence. He equates his narrative with his experience of the ticking of an old clock of Honorine's which he would regularly stuff to stop the ticking. The paradox was, he tells us, that when the clock was stopped he would hear the ticking most loudly. "The point is this," he says, "that our present situation is like my wife's old clock. The greater the silence, the louder the tick" (35). It is the noise of nothingness. It is a noise he cannot stand. The accident will put an end to the noise, and to the fear of death as well because, Papa argues, for some death's certainty fills "each future moment with an anguish so great that only the dreaded experience itself provides relief" (82-83). As such death becomes a calm, a welcome silence, a purity:

Silence. The bird in flight. Silence falling between driver and passenger who find themselves deadlocked on a lonely road, deadlocked in their purposes, deadlocked between love and hatred, memory and imagination. . . . Silence is what we are after, you and I. Silence. I long for it also. (102)

Travesty ends consciously in silence. Papa warns his passengers:

But now I must tell you that once we pass Tara I will say nothing more. And I warn you now that if you make a single movement or utter a single sound once we pass
Tara your death will not be an ironic triumph but a prolonged and hapless agony. (109-110)

And, just after having passed Tara, Papa's last words: "there shall be no survivors. None" (128). Thus the novel ends by projecting into silence, and into the reader's imagination.

The detailed precision of its prose and the tone it evokes, and the ease with which it reads makes Travesty an unusually seductive novel. We are drawn in, even as we resist its premise: the justification of suicide. It assaults all our notions about the sanctity of life, and yet Papa's arguments cannot just easily be dismissed. True, we can, as many critics have done, dismiss him as a madman. And yet the narrative examines feelings and justifications familiar to us all. Who hasn't, in child-like anger, imagined oneself dead and how sorry your parents/spouse/loved one would be for having so abused you. Or in a time or overwhelming sorrow and loneliness wished for nothingness, for mental and emotional silence to take away the pain. Travesty pushes these feelings, forces us to play out our fleeting thoughts, to explore and examine our innermost thoughts and feelings. It is an uncomfortable novel because it pushes us into difficult areas where we must attempt to experience the novel through the eyes of the narrator. To this experience we bring our inner realities and beliefs. Hawkes has said that his "concept of a fictive world means that it draws heavily on what Bernard Malamud once called 'psychic leakage'" Papa uses the same phrase. He talks about each moment of his life
being all of his life, each moment infiltrated by all the others he has experienced. "For me," he says, "the familiar and unfamiliar lie everywhere together, like two enormous faces back to back. I am always seeing the man in the child, the child in the grown man. [This is of course just a kind of] psychic slippage" (75-76). In this realm, time and causality are largely discarded. One experiences the moment, the now, in all its exquisite labyrinthine forms. Travesty is, to the extent that a novel can be, the evocation of such a moment. Mounted on a web of silence and loss, and projecting toward the silence of both transcendence and annihilation, it shimmers in its own chilling unreality. While it is superficially Hawkes's "simplest" novel, it may be his most complexly exhausting as well. Because ultimately the resonance of this novel is critically dependent upon the reader's "psychic slippage," by which one's own silent private realms expand and enter those of the narrative.
NOTES


8. Albert Camus, "Hope and the Absurd in the Work of Franz


17. "una búsqueda de estilo" [the translation into English is mine], in Joseph Sommers, "Los muertos no tienen tiempo ni espacio (un diálogo con Juan Rulfo)," in La Narrativa de Juan Rulfo: Interpretaciones críticas, ed. Joseph Sommers (Mexico: Sep/Septetias, 1974), 18.

18. "donde todos los personajes están muertos, y aun quien narra está muerto. Entonces no hay un limite entre el espacio y el tiempo. Los muertos no tienen tiempo ni espacio." In Sommers, 18.


26. Actually, Chantal is apparently older at the time of the accident. In the novel Hawkes describes her as "nearly twenty-five years old" (54). She is about nineteen, maybe twenty, when Papa begins his affair with Monique. Monique is described as "a few weeks into her twentieth year ... exactly Chantal's age" (65). All quotations are from John Hawkes, Travesty (New York: New Directions, 1976). Subsequent page numbers are noted parenthetically within the text.


32. See Peter Brooks's essay, "The Idea of a Psychoanalytic Literary Criticism," in Discourse in Psychoanalysis and
Literature, ed. by Schlomith Rimmon-Kenan (London and New York: Methuen, 1987), 1-18, in which he discusses, in part, how literature can be regarded as a form of foreplay, how withholding, teasing, taunting and other forms of stimulating and manipulating the reader's expectations, hopes and desires are congruent with Freud's ideas on forepleasure and lead to greater pleasure and involvement of the reader.

In the erotic art, truth . . . is experienced as pleasure, evaluated in terms of its intensity, its specific quality, its reverberations in the body and soul.

Michel Foucault\(^1\)

We can find no scar,
But internal difference,
Where the Meanings, are--

Emily Dickinson\(^2\)

Chapter 5

Sexual and Ethical Assault: Virginie: her two lives

Art is an assault. It seeks to provoke a response: affinity or aversion, knowledge or mystery, sadness or joy, harmony or confusion, anger or serenity. While all art assaults on some level, challenging us to respond to its form, its subject and the rhythms of its very existence, experimental art is more self-consciously combative since it is committed to redefining traditional forms and techniques in order to create works which provoke us to see new dimensions and perspectives of our individual realities. John Hawkes writes:

I think of the act of writing as an act of rebellion because it is so single and it dares to presume to create the world. I enjoy a sense of violation, a criminal resistance to safety, to the security provided by laws or systems. I'm trying to find the
essential human experiences when we are unhinged or
alienated from familiar, secure life.  

The last three chapters have focused on three aspects of
Hawkes's fictions which assault the reader, which unhinge and
alienate the reader from "familiar, secure life": textual gaps
and blanks, desolate landscapes, and silence. Each of these
techniques tends to increase the reader's vulnerability to the
text because it attacks or contradicts techniques or beliefs
with which we tend to be comfortable and to expect: a plot with
a beginning, middle and end; empathetic characters; dialogue
and descriptions which fill the pages and entertain us. By
assaulting, or at least redefining these conventions, a tension
develops between the expectation and the reality: plot-no plot,
knowable characters-unknowable characters, vital landscape-
desolate landscape, voices-silence. These tensions are the
result of contradictions, or paradoxes, woven into the text.
They are energizing, but also unsettling. The intensity of the
reading experience is in large part dependent upon the degree
to which the reader is willing to place himself or herself in
the center of the space between the polarities of these
paradoxes and discordances, and to the extent that he or she is
willing to enter into the push-and-pull of these forces.

From quite different perspectives, Jonathan Culler,
Stanley Fish, Wolfgang Iser and Norman Holland have focused
their, and our, attention on various ways readers respond to
these tensions and, in the process, define "meaning." In this
sense literature can be envisioned as a kind of combat, in
which the words and the reader take turns "assaulting" one another, compromising and experiencing one another until a "reading" emerges. Culler and Fish have concentrated on how the reader brings all of his or her cultural and literary experience to the process of entering into a provisional understanding of the text, while Holland has concentrated on the unconscious fears and desires of the reader and the extent to which the reader "remakes" the text by projecting and responding out of this highly individual psychological perspective. Iser largely breaks away from the somewhat fear-dominated perspectives of these critics, who tend to think in terms of "conquering" the text, by seeing these areas of tension (indeterminacy) as open fields, playgrounds (to borrow the Derridean term), white space, which offer exciting possibilities for the reader's imagination to enter into the text and, in the process, bridge the gap between the reader and the text.

While we can talk about the indeterminacies or tensions within the text itself, to some extent we are always talking about the distance or space between the reader and his or her literary and psychological "readiness," and the demands and preoccupations of the text at hand. A person with an affinity for and considerable experience in reading "realistic" fiction, such as that by Gustav Flaubert, Henry James, Saul Bellow, John Updike, Eudora Welty and Raymond Carver, will have a good deal more difficulty reading, let's say, Hawkes's The Passion Artist or Marquez's One Hundred Years of Solitude,
than will a person with an affinity for and experience in reading "surrealistic" fiction, such as that by Nathaneal West, Flannery O'Connor, Edgar Allen Poe, Franz Kafka and Donald Barthelme.

Another tension that the work of John Hawkes especially exploits is that between, let's say, conventional morality and the atypical morality of his fictional realms. Hawkes's regular use of characters who engage in what many readers would term deviant or even offensive sexual practices and violence, and his regular use of grotesque imagery are real stumbling blocks for some of his readers. This is what I am calling "sexual and ethical assault." His frequent use of such uncomfortable or nightmarish scenes and situations does, in effect, attack the relatively safe realms each of us creates for ourselves according to our personal beliefs, standards, and traditions. This personal set of beliefs with which we are comfortable (and the set is slightly different for each person) create a relatively predictable, comfortable space within which to function. Thus we can talk of the comfort of a well-defined ethical form-field or space much as Gaston Bachelard speaks of intimate physical spaces, such as nest and house and shell, that give a sense of comfort and safety. He has a general name for these kind of spaces: he calls them "felicitous space." When something, in this case Hawkes's fictions, challenges, defiles and seemingly upturns many of the concepts important to maintaining this comfortable space, the result is fear, anger, disgust...and vulnerability.
This is what Hawkes's fictions regularly do; they assault, on all fronts, this highly personal space.

This is probably the aspect of Hawkes's prose which "turns off" the most readers. While some readers may balk at assembling the fictional structures that his novels present to us, critics nearly always praise the prose itself and the intricate structures which contain it. The precision and care with which a Hawkes novel is crafted, and the beauty of its prose are apparent even to those critics who deeply dislike his fiction. Readers who dislike Hawkes's work often dislike it because of its subject matter, because it often appears to assault and challenge and ridicule ideas about sexuality, and decent behavior, and love and religion which are commonly cherished. Hawkes's fictions also sometimes attack, or at least appear to attack, some relatively treasured ideas regarding the function of fiction. For example, one fairly common view with regard to the function of fiction argues that literature should relate to life, and that works purely of the imagination are in some way morally irresponsible. Arthur C. Danto, in a review of Humors of Blood & Skin but commenting on all of Hawkes's fiction, writes from this perspective:

Indeed, they [Hawkes's fictions] are typically based on premises so impossible that there is no way they could be realized outside the precincts of imagination and so no way they could be utilized for anything except art. . . . [One] has the sense that despite the nightmare extremity of the episodes one
has been driven through—execution, torture, rape, cannibalism, dismemberment, to be sure, betrayal, incest, disappearance, suicide, incineration, madness, sickness, starvation, abandonment, ritual cruelty—and despite all the sex-shop gear of chains, chastity belts, whips, pincers, frilled panties, needles, ropes, pistols and dungeons, one has thought, most, about the marvelous prose. . . . [If] you prefer a little more, you must read elsewhere.5

Danto's position is a tangled one. While certainly Hawkes's prose, particularly his earlier prose, may be accused of verbal excess or at least of verbal preoccupation, Danto goes further. He begins by taking a position often aimed at "postmodern literature" and at its most easily defined attribute: a delight in words and structure as an end in itself. As discussed earlier, this is a difficult position to maintain toward Hawkes not only because of Hawkes's repeated emphasis on the aim of his fictions as psychic journeys, but because most readers appear to respond to his fictions not primarily in terms of the technique, but of the "experience," an experience often linked to nightmare. On closer reading, however, one sees that the real thrust of Danto's essay is aimed less at Hawkes's prose than at what underlies Hawkes's fictions: imagination. Somehow, for Danto, imagination is an evil, not unlike "imitation" which Plato derides in The Republic. Imagination, for Danto, can be used for nothing
except "art," and he spits this word out contemptuously. Like imitation, it distorts and, or so his argument reads, is dangerous. Ultimately then, for Danto, Hawkes's fiction--the subjects and scenes he imaginatively creates--is dangerously unsettling.

This review, quite brilliantly I think, demonstrates the effect of much of Hawkes's fiction. Ultimately, while Danto does clearly admire the prose he dismisses the fiction not because it is empty, despite his surface argument, but because it frightens him, because it comes from a place that filters and filters reality until it is no longer easily contained by his ideas of reality and literature. Certainly, if one is uneasy around works of the imagination, one will not be comfortable with Hawkes's fictions. Hawkes's fictional realms assault not only reality and its conventions, but most attempts by the reader to understand or experience his fictions in clear-cut terms of recognizable realities.

But even readers more fundamentally sympathetic to Hawkes's undertaking, often find him difficult to stomach. Of The Passion Artist, a reviewer writes that, while most readers stand in awe of Hawkes's powerful prose, few may wish to spend as much time "down in the slime pits" as this novel requires. Still another reviewer, James Wolcott, writes, in response to Virginie: her two lives, that there is something unclean about the workings of his [Hawkes's] mind. No matter what riotous coupling is taking place in barnyard or boudoir, one is always
aware of Hawkes conducting the action from the pit, at a sluggish tempo. A slogging, death-haunted determinism rules Hawkes's fiction--every kiss threatens to turn into an invitation to cannibalism, every caress a prelude to bondage.\(^7\)

Wolcott's comments reflect a fairly common criticism or reaction to Hawkes's fiction, that is, that his fiction is fundamentally unpleasant, that there is something putrid and sordid about the realms the fictions inhabit. Unstated but implied, Wolcott's response also suggests that Hawkes's fiction often makes the reader feel similarly: unclean, sullied.

Even among the staunchest admirers of his work, words such as "terrifying," "disgusting," "disturbing," and "exhausting" are regularly used to describe the fictions and their effects. Readers of Hawkes's novels are seldom unaffected. Either, with Danto and Wolcott, they reject, wholly or partially, his work and thereby increase the distance between the reader and the work, or they they become intricately commingled and even indistinguishable from the work as when Flannery O'Connor says, of The Lime Twig, "It seems to be something . . . you want to escape from but can't,"\(^8\) or when Joan Didion talks of Hawkes's nightmarish brilliance, that displays "every waking wish carried to its logical extreme."\(^9\) In terms of space, the space between the reader and text either increases, or collapses. Hawkes's fictions resist half-hearted bedtime browsing or obligatory
intellectual readings—the texts are too dependent upon an emotional commingling with and resistance to the text for their meaning and effect.

Texts that work along the edge of un-reality, or sur-reality, or anti-reality (all names which have been attached to Hawkes's fiction), resist the intellect, demand and implore to be experienced. In *The Metamorphosis* one must feel oneself to be Gregor Samsa; in *The Day of the Locust*, one must feel oneself to be Homer's writhing hands in the wash basin. To attempt "to understand" destroys the effect, the power. Such fiction concentrates on the effect of the now. Who gets killed or who marries who is not the point. The experience is. In an essay titled "The Relation of the Poet to Day-Dreaming," Freud talks of the effect of literary texts, equating literature in an intricate way with sexual fore-pleasure—the way texts seduce the reader, not only by offering voyeuristic and vicarious takes on the forbidden and inaccessible, but by the very techniques through which they tease and withhold, make visual, and incite the imagination. For Freud, quite unlike Danto, the imagination of the artist can help the reader overcome his or her own psychic barriers and thus release tension. The implication is that, through this process, man is somehow made a better human being:

The essential *ars poetica* lies in the technique by which our feeling of repulsion is overcome, and this has certainly to do with those barriers erected between every individual being and all others. We
can guess at two methods used in this technique. The writer softens the egotistical character of the day-dream by changes and disguises, and he bribes us by the offer of a purely formal, that is, aesthetic, pleasure in his presentation of his phantasies. The increment of pleasure that is offered us in order to release yet greater pleasure arising from deeper sources in the mind is called an "incitement premium" or technically "fore-pleasure." I am of the opinion that all the aesthetic pleasure we gain from the work of imaginative writers is of the same type as this "fore-pleasure," and that the true enjoyment of literature proceeds from the release of tensions in our minds. Perhaps much that brings about this result consists in the writer's putting us into a position in which we can enjoy our own day-dreams without reproach or shame.¹⁰

Freud's hypothesis is seductively provocative, and in many ways very much in keeping with the goals Hawkes has defined for his fictions. Hawkes has spoken of how he wants his "fiction to destroy conventional morality and conventional attitudes," of how he tries always to be "disruptive and honest" and so to break through our psychic barriers. In an interview with John Kuehl, Hawkes focuses on the disruptive intent of his fiction:

If the point is to discover true compassion, true sympathy, then clearly the task is to sympathize
with what we ordinarily take to be the truly repulsive in life—hence identification with the so-called criminal or rebellious mentality. . . . The writer who exploits his own psychic life reveals the inner lives of us all, the inner chaos, the negative aspects of personality in general. I'm appalled at violence, opposed to pain, terrified of actual destructiveness. . . . It's just that our deepest inner lives are largely organized around such impulses, which need to be exposed and understood and used. Even appreciated. . . . When we talk about the inner psychic life, certainly I'm trying to deal with childhood fears, fears of being devoured, overwhelmed, punished, and also, I suppose, desires to exert oneself toward freedom.11

In a later interview Hawkes talks again about the criminal element of his fiction, this time focusing on how he uses his fictional characters to expose our deeper psychic lives:

Every one of my characters is, in some way, a criminal character. The criminal character is an outcast, an alien in society, disabled in some way, sometimes a figure of enormous rank or authority. My fiction has always been concerned with reversed sympathy, and the whole point of it has been to help the reader expand his own capacities for compassion, to view these dangerous creatures exiled from human society, and to discover that he, the reader, is
every bit as vulnerable to unsocial behavior that
might result in his imprisonment or being
ostracized. Emotionally, that's one purpose of my
fiction, and in that sense, it's very Conradian in
its viewing of the conflict between between sympathy
and judgment.\textsuperscript{12}

These two passages make several important points
concerning Hawkes's fictions that bear directly on Freud's
ideas of how literature works on us, and on the relationship
of psychic space to the reading experience. For the most
part, Hawkes's statements support and even expand Freud's
contention that through the use of imagination and various
formal, aesthetic techniques, the writer can encourage the
reader to visit and experience parts of his or her inner
psychic life which are perhaps too dangerous to be approached
directly, without the "medium" of literature. Along with
Freud, Hawkes envisions a kind of freedom developing out of
this confrontation and acceptance of our true complexities,
and from this, a greater sense of compassion toward ourselves
and toward others. These views are very similar to Freud's
sense of breaking down psychic barriers which separate us from
other individuals, and in releasing some of the tensions of
repression.

In several aspects, however, Hawkes's views differ from
Freud's. In the first place, Freud seems to view the
experience of reading literature as "pleasurable," and in some
important way as a substitute, although life-enriching, for
encountering life and emotions more fully in the real world. For Hawkes, words and the imagination allow us access to parts of ourselves which are accessible in no other way. For him, reading is a form of action, a way of encountering the world, that is as "real," perhaps even more so because of the focus and precision of the encounter, than the other ways, in work and in our homes, through which we daily encounter "reality." Also, while Hawkes does see the possibilities of freedom and compassion as arising out of the process, fiction itself does not "release the tensions of our mind." On the contrary, fiction is envisioned as tearing apart our easy complacency and thereby cultivating, fostering, encouraging tensions to develop. Paradox is critical to all of Hawkes's fiction.

Perhaps the single most important paradox or tension that his fictions foster is that between sympathy and judgment. All of Hawkes's fictions are dependent for much of their effect upon presenting us with tableaux and characters and situations which assault our traditional ideas of order, of propriety, of decency, and then, perhaps by the intense sensitivity of the observations or the beauty of the prose, bringing us to a point or moment of begrudging sympathy when some glimmering beauty or possibility shines through what first seemed so irretrievably dark, perverse, even repulsive. Hawkes tells an anecdote about a man he met while visiting Kalamazoo College, an extraordinary man, he says, who loved fishing, a kind man with an extraordinary imagination. This man tells Hawkes about being in the South Pacific during the
war, on an island, and the island was covered with corpses. He tells Hawkes that he never appreciated life until confronted with death in that way, of how, at one moment he looked at a corpse and noticed that the maggots inhabiting the corpse were golden. Hawkes then relates how the man complimented Hawkes's work with, as Hawkes relates it, the highest compliment anyone could pay him. The man compared Hawkes's fiction with that moment, saying that Hawkes's "work uncovers that which we most fear or most dislike, and turns it into a kind of beauty that can be integrated into life as a whole."

This act of uncovering is also an act of assault, and the resultant tension is critical to all of Hawkes's work. A list of examples from his novels of incidents and arrangements which in various ways assault even the most liberal and open-minded sensibilities seems nearly endless. His novels present us with rape, suicide, maimed and rotting bodies, attacks on religion and marriage, incest, menage à trois and quatre, voyeurism, sadism, pornography, pederism, prostitution, and murder—to name but a few of the persistent themes. In The Cannibal we watch the Duke hunt down a young boy, and carve him up for dinner as if he were a chicken. In The Blood Oranges we see Hugh accidentally hang himself while trying to sexually arouse himself with pornographic photographs and a rope around his neck. In Whistlejacket we hear how Hal used to bring women to his wife in the middle of the night, and have her perform sexually with them or with himself, while he took pictures. In
**The Passion Artist** Konrad has sex with his daughter's schoolmate, and then reports his daughter to the police for prostitution. These are upsetting and unsettling images. Yet, on the other hand, they are strangely and perversely seductive as well. Our unconscious lives, our fantasies, our movies, our politics dwell on sex and violence, revenge and jealousy, voyeurism. And, despite our intellectual disavowals, we dwell on these extreme situations and images. We remember them. Every critic to write on Hawkes's work will more than likely at some point pause and focus on, typically, three incidents in Hawkes's fictions: the dismemberment of the boy, Margaret's sadistic death-by-beating in *The Lime Twig*, and the dead fetus which Luke Lampson pulls from the lake in *The Beetle Leg*. Why? Is it a test of our courage to be able to confront and report such instances? Perhaps. It is also certain that a part of us is drawn to such scenes, even as another part condemns. But to find oneself shocked or repulsed, or to hear oneself condemning the characters or Hawkes for misguided, destructive or cruel intentions says, in itself, that the image or situation has penetrated, has stimulated a response. The reader is no longer a passive observer; the reader has made herself or himself vulnerable.

While all of Hawkes's novels depend on such "assaults," *Virginie: her two lives* is the only one which not only bombards the reader unceasingly with episodes of explicit sex, but which is also about our appetite for such scenes. *Virginie* is, or at least pretends to be, a "pornographic
novel." In many ways it is, and has been called by Hawkes himself, a parody of a pornographic novel. But the issues and conflicts Virginie raises are ultimately a good deal more provocative and unsettling than can be fitted under the intellectual shield of "parody." Parody, one might say, is an intellectual response that, using wit and language and satire, imitates its subject in such a way as to ridicule or otherwise expose, usually judgmentally, the precepts of the subject. Virginie has all the appearances of being a parody, and yet it finally undermines itself, itself as parody that is, to assert the role of the "pornographic" text as life-enhancing, as intellectually, emotionally and physically freeing. It is out of this perspective that one can best appreciate the comparison that Hawkes has made between Virginie and the work of the Marquis de Sade.\textsuperscript{14} Hawkes has in fact called Virginie a "tribute" to de Sade. It is, I think, primarily this sense of potential freedom through liberation from the private and idiosyncratic forms of repression that can be seen to link Virginie and de Sade. And it is through assault, with words, that both authors attempt to dislodge and force the reader to define and perhaps redefine his or her moorings.

The "story" of Virginie: her two lives is, once one accepts the fictional stratagem, relatively simple. The novel consists of two storylines, one existing in 1740 in Venasque, France, and the other in 1945 in Paris. Alternating chapters move back and forth between these two locales and times, but both are told by the same narrator, an eleven-year-old girl,
Virginie. The chapters themselves are primarily accounts taken from her journals and recount various sexual encounters and pleasures which she observes in each of her two lives. In the 1740 story, a seventeenth-century aristocrat, Seigneur, spends his life selecting women and bringing them to his estate, Dédale, where he then transforms them into "worthy objects of passion." Seigneur is, Hawkes tells us, "an 'artist' of love," and Virginie is "Seigneur's Cinderella, his confidante and companion through a long series of sadistic, poetic lessons in eroticism." In the 1945 story Virginie is the sister of Bocage, a taxi cab driver in Paris who, after their mother, Maman, suffers a stroke and can no longer speak, brings five women to live in their apartment and initiates what he what he calls the "Sex Arcade," a house of various sexual delights.

The two stories share a number of characteristics. In both, there is a man who oversees the erotic activities: in 1740 it is Seigneur; in 1945 Bocage. In both "love chateaux" there are five women, and one of the women has a young male child. In both stories there is a dark mother-figure whose shadow hovers in the background of the novel. In 1740 it is La Comtesse, whom we discover at the end of the novel is the mother of both Seigneur and Virginie; and in 1945 it is the silent Maman. In both stories Virginie watches and comments on the activities. In many ways she is the same person in both. Not only is the language the same in both stories, despite the gap of 200 years, but she plays largely the same
role: a willing "slave" who takes breakfast to the women, attends to the young child, scrubs pots and pans, and sleeps by the hearth. In both stories she is curiously innocent and sexually pure. Only once does Seigneur touch her, and then only to help her out of a carriage, and the men that visit the Sex Arcade instinctively know that she is off limits. "Her innocence," says Hawkes, "as incorruptible as [de Sade's] Justine's, would lie at the center of the story." In both stories as well Virginie burns to death, and her story is told in the midst of the flames. In the 1740 story, Seigneur's women revolt and burn him at the stake, stirred to action by La Comtesse after Seigneur, her son, refuses to have sex with her. Virginie willingly joins Seigneur to burn to death. In the 1945 story, Virginie dies in an incestual but unconsummated embrace with Bocage in a fire begun by their mother.

While Virginie presents the reader with a relatively full range of sexual and ethical situations which assault or at least exploit society's schizoid responses (both promoting and damning) to these uncomfortable realms, it does at the same time very self-consciously define its perspective as different than that of "pornography." It does this by a number of artificial devices which act to distance the novel and the reading from the material it tackles. First, it cries out that it is made-up, a fiction. It is realistically impossible. The lines are spoken by a narrator who is in the process of burning to death along with her journal—which is our novel. "Mine is
an impossible story," she says.\textsuperscript{17} She continues:

My journal burns. My body burns. Child with no part, child forever denied her passing time, her maturation, her future realm of womanhood which justifies all our course of indentured innocence and is the golden glow that rewards the mere light of the female's purest youth: thus I lie asleep, awake, unmoving beneath Bocage on my little bed, bed from which I shall never arise, fixed as I am forever in the very center of my flaming nest, the true child poised once and for all, for a mere moment, in the throes of love while yet and always ignorant of that mysterious adult she too must have been destined to become. (9)

This is the voice of the novel, of both of its stories. The opening is spoken in 1945, but it is the language of 1740. Virginie is vaguely aware of this prior existence. She says:

I both know and do not know that in the most secret recess of my spirit my prior life exists. There too the imprinted memory of my first journal, though I cannot and shall not remember it. So I am the authoress not of one journal but of two, and am the child not of one life but of two. (18)

It is also a strangely disembodied voice that speaks quietly and philosophically while burning to death. It is a voice that moves easily between the first- and third-person pronouns when speaking of herself, again emphasizing its distance from
the events it portrays. It is also an archaic, adult and omniscient voice that constantly proclaims that a "real" eleven-year-old girl would not, could not, talk in this manner. That she is a fictional construct.

Hawkes calls attention to the parodic nature of this novel by writing, for him, an unprecedented forward to the novel in which he says that the subject of the novel is not Virginie's story but rather the "space shared . . . by the pornographic narrative (in color photographs) and the love lyric." Thus, he says, "parody, archaic tones, and an overall comic flavor were inevitable, as were sources and influences." This forward encourages the reader to attempt to read the novel from this perspective, as a somewhat playful intellectual reverie on literary depictions of love and lust. In addition, the novel does not actually begin with the story but rather with a poem, entitled "Her Poem," in which a young man, Michel, tells what appears to be a parable about love to two of his male friends. In the parable a lady has three lovers. She looks lovingly at one, squeezes the hand of another, and presses her foot against the foot of the third. Michel asks, which of the three is the lady's true love? Each of the men argue for one of the three displays of affection...and then the lady of the parable enters the poem and says no, she loves a fourth, "who each day receives my letter" (5). The "love lyric" focuses on the parodic nature of Hawkes's enterprise, on the games of love, and finally on the power of words in the game of love. From the lady's love letter we enter the novel, a novel subtitled
"Her Journal," that is to a very large extent Virginie's recordings of her innocent but powerful love of Bocage and of Seigneur. This archaic, epistolary structuring calls attention to itself and again enlarges the natural distance between the reader and the text.

The repeated emphasis on the artificiality of the novel denies us, as one critic has noted, much of "the right to be shocked." In the novel itself, both Bocage and Seigneur are presented not as exploiters of women, but rather as artists who help expose and nurture the erotic, sensual natures of the women who come under their tutelage. Early in the novel this attitude is made explicit. "'I must tell you, Virginie,'" Seigneur says after watching the departure of one of the women he has tutored,

"that the man who creates women is an artist clearly comparable to artists who create images or coerce solid matter into new and startling forms. . . .

There is no higher form of art than this, no greater responsibility." (24)

This emphasis on "artistry" works against the more gut-level effect of many of the sexual incidents depicted which tend to produce, depending on the reader, feelings of titillation and/or condemnation. Thus there emerge some fascinatingly complex interactions which center on that paradox so important to all of Hawkes's novels but especially highlighted in Virginie: sympathy and judgment.

Despite the conspicuous artificiality of the novel, it is
a novel which makes many readers distinctly uncomfortable. It is explicitly erotic, even perhaps pornographic if pornography is defined as a form which imaginatively attempts to sexually arouse, and the reader quickly becomes complicit in the novel. The reader is a voyeur, like Bocage or Seigneur, but sees the fictional world through the eyes of a sexually innocent little girl, Virginie, whose primary function in the novel is as a voyeur. It is an extremely complex entry into a novel. Most readers of Virginie: her two lives will be persons with complex sexual experience, desires and inhibitions which this novel fully exploits, and yet the perspective through which the sexuality is described is one of innocent detachment. Virginie has not yet felt lust, nor does she appear to have developed any indoctrinated sense of "right" and "wrong" when it comes to the episodes she so vividly describes. At the same time it is a little girl who, despite her obvious fictionality, is viewing these erotic scenes, scenes which our culture would generally protect children from observing. Thus the reader's relation to the text is complicated from the very beginning, as the narrative perspective encourages not only feelings of lust and innocence, but protective judgmental instincts as well. The potency of the "pornographic" episodes undermines much of the focus on the artificiality of Virginie, and yet the novel cannot be savored purely for its eroticism because of Virginie's innocence and open-ended love, no matter how contrived, and because of the reader's own ethical dilemma whether or not to enjoy or condemn the scenes presented.
Hawkes fully exploits these tensions.

*Virginie* plays with this space, the distance between reader and text, alternately expanding it with its emphasis on artificiality, and collapsing it by luring us into its blatant sexuality and the concomitant ethical questions that the novel challenges...and exploits. Several recurring themes are particularly potent in creating the uncomfortable and yet enticing tension that results: voyeurism, victimization, violence, and the flaunting of common sexual taboos.

The reader's role as voyeur is made explicit by Virginie's role in the novel. She watches but does not participate. We see through Virginie's eyes. But our voyeuristic role is complicated. First, while Hawkes relates the sexual incidents with a kind of curious innocence of a child, where penises are called zizis and tattoos are more arresting than the flesh beneath, it is clear that the incidents are intended for the reader. Thus the reader is forced to approach the novel dualistically: once through the eyes of innocence and once as an adult. The schizoid "reading" which results creates an ongoing dialectic between these two points of view that continues well after the last words are read.

Within the novel itself there is something nervously ominous about Virginie's role as voyeur. Virginie is not just a curious observer; she is required to watch. There is something unclean about her presence, despite her ever-present and convincing "innocence." In both stories her presence is
required in order to maximize the sexual pleasure of the others, particularly of Bocage and Seigneur. While she is physically, except for the closing embrace with Bocage, off limits, her presence is an integral part of the sexual experience. At one point, shortly before Bocage chooses her, in response to prodding by the others that he choose one of them for the night, and takes her to the bed on which she will die, Virginie realizes that Bocage's whole "Sex Arcade" may have been an elaborate plan to seduce her, his sister. She is nervous, but happily excited as well. Hawkes teases the reader's expectations, as all through the evening Virginie seems to know. "I knew," she says early in the evening, "that the night had tilted from its axis and that in my partial sleep I was sliding swiftly and feet first toward the edge of some blinding wakefulness" (192). Throughout the chapter the unease and burgeoning excitement grows. One of the other women, Yvonne, tells a story that ends with how she found her young, sexually uninitiated brother, Jean-Christopher, in the bathroom with his pants down, a pornographic magazine, and a flacid penis...and how she took his penis in her "waiting mouth...[and he] achieved his manhood" (199). The group cheers her story, and then urges Bocage to choose one of them. Virginie responds by saying she felt herself "quickening in fear and expectation, though [she] did not know why" (200). And then,

I saw his eyes; . . . Feigning sleep, I watched; feigning sleep, I listened; feigning sleep, I waited.
His smile was crooked. His brow was wet. (201)
Bocage does choose her. The chapter ends, Virginie speaking:

Dear self, who now can deny my childish desires?

The field is mine. (202)

Virginie senses the same lustful attention in her other life, in 1740, from Seigneur. At one point she reflects:

Though womanhood was not for me, sometimes I thought that everything Seigneur imparted to Magie and to Finesse, Volupté and Colére and Bel Esprit, he was imparting, actually, to me. Sometimes I thought that I, the child without past or future, was actually the object of his most severe and ardent interest. (49)

The entire novel shimmers in innuendo and half-revealed truths, in ambiguous uneasiness. Virginie is a voyeur, positioned on the edge of the action, watching and recording. Yet there is the sense that this catalog of sexual stories and episodes is being performed specifically for her, and, by extension, specifically for us. We, that is, Virginie and the reader, are the audience and the reason for this parade of sexual "lessons." On one occasion, returning from shooting a game bird, Seigneur turns to Virginie and says, "'Once I considered giving up my art. . . . Were it not for you I should have stopped. I am convinced of it!'" (136). The reason he gives is that created art, that is, his women, is reason enough for its creation. Virginie, he says, reminds him of that. Is it that she helps him focus on the present
and on its enjoyment, rather than on the ill feelings that his "art" often instills in others? Is it her innocence that allows events to be seen freshly, unencumbered with the trappings of repression and stiffened morality? Or is it the special bond that the two share, and the feelings of specialness that each engenders in the other? That the others don't matter? To the extent that the reader is or becomes Virginie, these possibilities exist for the reader as well.

In another episode which focuses on the importance of voyeurism to this novel, one of the women, Colère, is to seduce a pig and two whippets in the Salon of Dédale. Pére La Tour is there, as well as Seigneur. The apparent object of this lesson is detailed by Seigneur:

"No creature is too deformed to love. . . . No act is to unfamiliar, to indelicate to perform. Repugnance has no place in the heart of a woman such as you. By embracing an animal, or several animals, you do no more than embrace the very man, those very men, for whom you are now preparing yourself in the art of love. Adoration cannot live without debasement, which is his twin. I must ask you to disrobe." (109)

What is particularly curious about this encounter is the presence of Virginie. Virginie is always present and sometimes participates in the "lessons," but for this particular "test," tamer than many, Virginie is locked in a small black box that resembles "an upended coffin in
"miniature." No one except the Seigneur and Virginie knows she's there. She does not question, but does not understand. She says,

Seigneur assured me that my little confessional was intended to contribute to his own satisfaction and not to mine, and in ways which he preferred not to explain. (106)

In great detail, though she cannot not actually "see," Virginie describes the scene to us but, once the others leave, she again questions why she can't be visibly present like Seigneur and Pére La Tour. Seigneur answers:

"Virginie," came the familiar voice at last.

"Life's first principle is love. But the first principle of love is secrecy. In the salon," he said, and stood closer to me than he ever had before, "you are my secret." (113)

Elsewhere Seigneur has equated love and lust, and so her (and our) secret eyes and ears would seem to be part of Seigneur's (and our) pleasure.

Secrets are an important part of Virginie, and it often seems that three or four layers of stories are going on at once. Is Virginie's innocence being exploited? Who is La Comtesse, the stern woman in black who sometimes visits Dédale? Why is Virginie excluded from knowing who La Comtesse is, as well as from the Tapestry of Love—the sight of which is allowed the women only when they graduate from Dédale? Voyeurism implies seeing or watching things that are generally
done in private. Secret things. Virginie taunts us with and invites us into these private realms.

Another theme which is important in Virginie is victimization. While Virginie appears to watch and participate willingly, even with anticipation, one nevertheless has the feeling that she seldom has a choice. She cleans, scrubs pots and pans, takes breakfast to the women, babysits, and watches or participates, in various ways, in the sexual charades of 1945 and in the lessons of 1740. In many ways she is fashioned (and Hawkes has made this comparison as well) as a Cinderella-figure. Indeed, in the 1740 story Virginie sleeps in the hearth. And yet she does so out of apparent adoration of Seigneur because, as she says, "all my associations of the hearth signalled, for me, the presence of Seigneur. It was he I tended in sleep or in my waking hours" (49). There is a sense, in both of the stories, of a desperate need to please, respectively, Bocage and Seigneur. That she might disagree with or disobey either does not seem even a possibility.

While Seigneur and Bocage seem to love her, much is expected of her in each story. Both as necessary voyeur and as willing slave, one sometimes feels that she is being exploited. Despite her fictionality, sometimes the reader can't help but protest, "But she is only eleven years old!" Two incidents, one in each story, come to mind. In the first, in 1945, Bocage at one point lectures the women on not eating enough. Eventually, in light-hearted protest, the evening meal turns into a food orgy, with the women smearing their
faces and each other with food and knocking over wine and food in general. In the midst of this Virginie remembers that she must feed Maman. Part of Virginie's "job" is to feed and clean and otherwise attend to Maman every day. This particular evening Maman refuses to eat, the reason being that she is furious because a scanty piece of Sylvie's underwear, a cache-sexe, in which Sylvie had earlier been dancing, had found its way to the foot of Maman's bed. Virginie, knowing in her strangely omniscient way that this is the problem, removes the offending piece of clothing:

   Slowly, as if peering deliberately into the dark entrance to her own sepulcher, she [Maman] turned her head and stared at me and then without the slightest changes in her scowling face, slowly she opened her mouth and closed her eyes. Spoonful by spoonful I fed Maman, who opened and closed her mouth in perfect harmony with the rhythm of my efforts, though she did not open her eyes to watch me, until at last we were finished. (76)

Virginie then returns to the now-empty kitchen (the others are now laughing in the living room) that is "piled high with pots and pans and dishes and kettles that made [Virginie] think of dripping cliffs and shining castles" (76). She describes, in a particularly lovely passage of prose, washing the dishes:

   Fiercely I swept the field, swiftly I darted from table to stove trough to the moldy bucket into which, without a moment's thought, I flung the
scraps and tatters only faintly glued to white china and iron casserole which I hefted in both hands and held to my stomach as I sped like a trapped bird, like a bird that appreciates nothing so much as its captivity, back to the enormous sink filled with water so hot that it reddened my arms and made me grimace. The steam rose, the reflections of the hot flames multiplied. I wiped my brow, I rested my wet hands on hips that hardly gave them purchase, I glanced around me, frowning, then set once more to work. (76)

There is the sense that everyone expects her to take care of them. And she does, seemingly willingly and even with a sense of pride and yet there are worrisome undertones as well. There is often the sense of, commingled with her adoration of and desire to please her masters, deep insecurity. There is the sense that, were she not so willing to do and do, her place in each of the "families" might be jeopardized.

Virginie is curiously alone and history-less. She realizes this late in the novel just before she jumps into the flames to burn to death with Seigneur. She realizes that the women despise her as much as they despise Seigneur. She says:

It was then that I knew, in that cold room, how much they despised me, had in fact despised me during all our days at Dédale, for they did not come for me, had forgotten me. (211)

There is a tremulous fear throughout the novel that what
underlies much of what Virginie does is a pathological desire to please. Thus there is a strong underpinning of psychological exploitation upon which the novel rides. The imagery of the flames which opens the novel and reappears repeatedly, and in which we know both Virginies will eventually die, reinforces this sense of the danger that lurks just beyond Virginie's scope of vision, reinforces the precariousness of her position. Note in the dishwashing passage the image of how she "sped like a trapped bird." It is an image that recalls the frantic fear and confusion of a bird which has inadvertently flown through an open window into a house and now rams senselessly into wall and window, one after another, trying to find its way out. While she quickly appends to this image how she appreciates her captivity, the furious desperate energy of the first image remains.

In 1740 there are many images of her role as necessary confidant, accomplice, and servant. One particularly curious portrayal of her role occurs when she accompanies Seigneur hunting. In his usual perfectionistic way, Seigneur goes to a selected spot, a "sparse opening in a perfectly circular wall of rushes" (134). A rare great white bird suddenly takes to the air nearby, and then lingers over the opening, as if waiting for its predestined death. The blast from Seigneur's gun explodes the bird's head, and the headless bird falls, "a tangled heap of white feathers and dead flight there in the very center" (135) of the opening. Then, Virginie, as if she were a retriever dog, walks to the bird
and, as usual, managed to lift its sprawling formlessness, and holding its thick awkward length against my own, carefully rejoined Seigneur for our return.

Again he preceded me in silence. . . . Again I followed, struggling to carry our prize. Through all our serpentine way back to the carriage, accommodating myself as best I could to my burden, I felt and listened to the heart still living deep in the headless mass. (136)

Again, Virginie's role is unclear. Why must she carry the bloody bird nearly the size of her own body? Why must she walk in silence behind Seigneur? While the feelings which underlie this outing are carefully cloaked, it is clear that the roles of the two participants are rigidly defined: in this situation as in most portrayed in the novel, Seigneur is the "master" and Virginie the "slave." Is this a parent-daughter relationship? A male-female relationship? Is this another one of Seigneur's "lessons" on servitude or humility or some other supposed virtue which he is imparting to Virginie? It is unclear. But there is an arrogance in the portrayal of Seigneur and an awkward and unnaturally accepting feeling of submission in the portrayal of Virginie which impress upon this scene a quivering but difficult-to-articulate feeling that something is not quite right.

While it is Virginie's role which is most developed and most complexly troubling, the sense of victimization occurs
within the novel in other ways as well. It particularly plays an important role in many of the sexual episodes. The Seigneur's "women," while they come to Dédale willingly and under no apparent false illusions, are nevertheless victims. These are women with few options in society. One is found at the farm for orphans, another at the village inn, another behind a rotting haystack, another in the midst of being attacked by an anonymous male traveler, and one in an asylum for women. The women Bocage collects are prostitutes whom he finds on the streets and local bars. Both men offer the women shelter and food . . . in exchange for participating in various sexual "lessons" and "charades." Seigneur demands absolute obedience. He says:

"You will find me cruel, exacting, dogmatic, brutal, even from your point of view perverse, as well as inspiring. . . . There shall be punishments, both mild and to you unthinkable. . . . You shall have human intimate experience not with myself, ever, but with a partner or partners whom I shall designate; until through such long and difficult exertions devised by me, supervised by me, you shall attain at last that shape of womanhood which is art itself, and then, as Noblesse, become at last the prize of someone even higher in rank than Seigneur." (29)

There is a very strong sense that these women do not exist as individuals. They are to be remade, according to some sadomasochistic male ideal, into sexual toys for aristocratic
men. What greater victimization can there be than to deny the individual self? At the same time, it is clear that they are somehow pornographic objects for Seigneur's voyeuristic pleasure, a pleasure that is enhanced by explaining the "lessons" to his innocent accomplice, Virginie, in the most nonsexual terms possible, in phrases which use such words as "noble" and "self-sacrificing" but which ultimately seem to appropriate "art" as justification for exploitation. This feeling of exploitation, in fact, may be the most troubling emotion that the novel explores. Seigneur enjoys seeing these women grovel at his feet, enjoys the supreme power he wields. One watches him manipulate the women, and also Pére La Tour and Virginie, to get his way. Nearly every sexual "lesson" involves some humiliation. Slowly the women come to both hate and worship him. In one "test" Virginie demonstrates her prowess with bees. In this session, with Finesse and Seigneur in the locked garden, Virginie removes her clothes and then picks up a hive of bees. The bees swarm and soon blanket her body. She talks of the tickling and crowding of the bees, as they explore her orifices, of the sound, and of how they cluster in her armpits like "little pulsing clumps of grapes" (185). This is what Finesse is to do, terrified though she is of bees. We don't see the episode but apparently she does not do well because soon after, as Finesse undresses and drapes her body over a humped piece of furniture in order to receive a painful tatoo (the sign of Seigneur) on her buttocks, Seigneur remarks:
"Who would believe that this same white skin so recently revealed the anger of a thousand bees! And now nothing, not a sign of it." (188)

This episode points to the third theme that is ever-present in the novel: violence, or the possibility of violence. In this category I include the threat of pain and the darkness of condemnation that seems to always lurk just beyond the edges of these two circumscribed sexual worlds. Despite the emphasis on pleasure and the style that lends a humorous tone to much of the novel, Virginie is in many ways a terrifyingly dark novel about exploitation, entrapment, and repression, and about the complex ways in which these forces overlap and breed a violence which, while it appears to break through some of these nihilistic forces, ultimately destroys everything in its path. If one were to paraphrase the novel in the briefest terms, one might say that it is the story of two men, Bocage and Seigneur, who promote sexuality and are killed by their dark and vengeful mothers, Maman and La Comtesse, respectively. The stories are, from one point of view, about two mothers killing their children. In 1740 La Comtesse organizes the Seigneur's women to rape and burn him to death; in 1945 Maman purposely starts the fire and self-satisfyingly watches her two children burn to death. From the very beginning we are told, and throughout the stories reminded, of the raging fires. The reader is constantly aware, even while the stories seem to explore some simple walk in the woods or the pleasure of a meal, of the violence to
which both stories will succumb. In their individual stories Maman and La Comtesse loom as huge, dark shadows in the background, full of arrogance, vengefulness and, ultimately, tremendous power. They seem in many ways to represent the repression and condemnation of the people beyond the two fabricated families who are, we are led to believe, violently opposed to whatever it is that Bocage and Seigneur appear to champion...sexuality? love? pleasure? It is never quite clear but both Bocage and Seigneur comment upon the disapproval and ill feelings with which the outside world perceives them. Shortly before Bocage carries off Virginie he exclaims,

"Ladies, there are people who think we do not live solely by the sphinx and zizi! I despise them all! There are people who would destroy my Sex Arcade if they could, but they shall not! There is forbidden life enough for everyone!" (200)

Seigneur talks of the "disapproval of most of those in rude huts or elegant châteaux" (37). This dark violent judgmentalness presses upon the novel and strangely colors and distorts many of even the simplest and seemingly innocent pleasures.

At the same time a degree of pain and violence is part of much of the sexuality presented. In one incident Monsieur Malmort brings a massively constructed corset, described as one might some ancient form of torture, and challenges the women to put it on. Madame Pidou volunteers, and places her nakedness into the "menacing garment" in which Monsieur
Malmort proceeds to entrap and tie her, fighting "to stifle the loud breaths of Madame Pidou" (83) who then emerges as a proud but staggering creation who goes down on Malmort's "ripe and ruddy" penis as Madame Pidou's husband begs, "No Matilde. . . .no, no...." (85). In this scene violence, pain and pleasure--physical and psychological--become complexly commingled.

One of the most viscerally affecting scenes of violence in all of Hawkes's novels occurs in Virginie. It involves the pulling of a horse's tooth. That in itself does not sound too terribly ominous, but it is rendered in the most sadistic way possible. The terribleness of this event builds for pages before the actual "lesson" as Virginie busies herself with sweeping and gardening as "though my hurried efforts might somehow surprise me with time safely past and the fated end of that day avoided" (59). It is a difficult scene to quote from with any hope of preserving its gut-wrenching quality as the ominous expectation builds well before the actual tooth-pulling with Virginie's fear of the evening, with the heavy silence, and with the menacing cadences of Seigneur's voice as he talks to Magie, the object of tonight's lesson, about pain as the only measure of a woman's pride, of how he will spare her nothing, ever. The fear of the handsome desperate horse, the "bloodied flecks of terror in the animal's poor rolling eyes" (63), the anticipation of the screams, and the ominous "great cagelike iron mechanism" the attendants carry, further the night's expectant terror. Virginie describes the device
that was like a iron halter and yet different because
it housed a ratcheted device which, something in the
manner of the bit in a bridle, and something like a
skeletal duplication of the beast's own jaws, sat
inside the frothing mouth and compressed the tongue
and held apart the mammoth jaws to any degree of
openness desired. . . . Now I could not help but see
that the black horse's jaws were forced open to
their fullest extent and perhaps beyond. The locked
and gaping mouth, the chastened tongue, the large
and yellowed teeth still wet to the watching eye:
could there be any iron device more unnatural? any
intrusion into the animal world more cruel? any
spectacle more shameful to those compelled to see
it? For a moment I thought to close my eyes, but I
could not." (64-65)

Neither can the reader. Seigneur stands before the restrained
horse with a "long and slender pair of pincers all the more
malevolent for its simplicity, its thinness, its great length,
its sinister originality of design" (66). The actual event is
nearly anticlimactic—"the splintering of bone," the "high
protracted screech that issued once from the mouth of the
horse in tones that were human," the "prize" that would from
now hang from a silver chain around Magie's neck. It is a
violence more violent than any "reality," fed and nurtured
until the experience shakes the very cornerstone of one's
knowledge of violence. It is a glaring example of how we can
sometimes experience in prose that which can be experienced in no other way.

There is nevertheless yet still another aspect of violence in *Virginie*, one perhaps more common but perhaps, because of its commonness, even more frightening. This violence is not moralistic disapproval or the commingling of violence and pain with sexual arousal, and it is the final note, or at least one of the final notes, upon which the novel ends: hate-filled vengeance. The women of Dédaie come to hate Seigneur in part because of his exploitation of them but perhaps even more because he refuses to give himself to them sexually. That he arouses their sexuality, and takes pleasure from seeing their bodies and watching their sexual prowess, and uses their desire to please him to prod them in his endeavor—but then refuses their sexual advances, draws from them such vengeance that they are eventually compelled to hurt and destroy him. His mother, La Comtesse, leads the women. Her son has refused her sexual advances as well. On the day of the revolt, Seigneur explains to Virginie that La Comtesse is his mother, as well as hers, and that he is not only her brother, but her father as well. The revolt, he explains, is because

"I have denied Maman," he said, . . . "I have thus offended Maman. She has set the women of Dédaie against me. They are in revolt. Now I must die for my art, as I have long known I must." (206)

Before the women kill him, they use him sexually, in
bitterness and revenge. They hang him by his arms and remove their clothes. The last Noblesse, the name given to those who "graduate" from Dédale, speaks:

"There he hangs, mesdames, our prize! See how he breathes in our scent, and how his eyes are fixed on our nakedness, and how he cannot help himself and swells in his britches! Yes, mesdames, the lust he taught us, and inspired, and which he refused to appease or even acknowledge through the slightest reciprocity in his own flesh, our lust now comes home to him full score, and shall destroy the manhood he withheld from us! He is only a man, as we have always known: a man, a beast, and not a god. Yet not a man, or less than a man, in the abominable arrogance of his chaste being. But now we shall see what we have never been allowed to see: expose what until this moment he has so well concealed. Loose the britches, Madame, and let them fall. . . ." (210)

One by one the women rape him, abuse him, he who is, comments the last Noblesse, "'grossly exposed, doomed, a monument of pain brought down at last, not for his pleasure but for our revenge'" (210).

Exploitation, violence...the worst of ourselves? Or our depths which drive our efforts to use these forces? Hawkes has a way of plunging into these pits, of breaking open the boxes of emotions powerfully present but pushed out of the conscious foreground. Virginie: her two lives assaults and challenges
not just these quite private realms of the individual psyche
but also the more social institutions as well, the institutions
that say that marriage and religion are right, that sex is for
procreation, that parents love unconditionally their children.
Virginie flaunts and tests these values. The people who
triumph in this novel--Maman, Pére La Tour, La Comtesse, the
last Noblesse--are also the black, hate-filled forces in the
novel, people seemingly incapable of loving or caring for
anyone or anything, including themselves. They are driven by
self-seeking arrogant judgmentalness and vengeance. At the
same time, however, the novel presents us with some difficult-
to-live-with alternatives. It assaults many commonly held
religious and moral beliefs, beliefs which are commonly held to
reflect a kind of human decency. Marriage is held to be
"antithetical of love, since duty is the fundament of marriage,
and duty, by definition, destroys the free reciprocity which is
the heart of love" (174). Religion is ridiculed as Bel Esprit
is sent to "confess" and simultaneously seduce a village
priest. She masturbates and graphically describes anal sex,
and then performs oral sex on the priest. To pass this
"lesson," the priest must cry out as he comes--"moaning was not
enough, as Seigneur had said repeatedly" (150)--and the priest
does. In another lesson, Bel Esprit, Seigneur and Virginie
visit a local nunnery where one of the nuns, Sister Doucette,
sews feathers, and a claw, around the loins and buttocks, and
"in the darkness where the cloth must fit" (144), of Bel
Esprit.
The novel flaunts and exploits these and other sexual taboos. Dédale's women couple with animals; Virginie was conceived in incest between mother and son, and dies in an incestual embrace with her brother, Bocage. Group sex is the norm in the 1945 story, as are stories of infidelity and sexual "awakenings" of children which some might term sexual abuse as well. Buttocks are prominently displayed and fondled, and even Virginie finds herself exploring the buttocks and penis of the young boy, Deodot, she attends to (115, 131). Oral sex, anal sex, parental authority subverted--this is what Virginie traffics in. At the same time there is Virginie's curious innocence which sees the love and freedom and sense of "becoming" that infuses the novel as well. Because the sexuality in this novel is freely entered into, out of a sense of pleasure or of pleasing. No one is forced to do anything.

I have quoted long passages of Virginie because it is a novel desperately about experiencing, experiencing through words. The novel intends to arouse--sexually, emotionally. Whatever one's attitude toward pornography--those magazines in celluloid covers with bodies, leather and chains beckoning, pornography strives to elicit a response from its readers. It aims at visceral instincts as do few other pictorial or prose forms. Its goal is sexual arousal, and it uses whatever tools it determines to be effective. Indifference, in its readers, is failure. Virginie is much more multifaceted and complex than addressed by the narrow aims of pornography, but to intellectualize the novel and say that Virginie is purely
about language and literary forms and is a parody of pornography and the love lyric, is to seriously displace the experience of the novel.

Virginie is about indifference. During one noon-time meal, Seigneur describes the map of the Land of Love. We all begin, he says, on the "Plain of Indifference, a sterile landscape rolling from horizon to horizon and occupied by nothing except a strangely forbidding country fair" (98). Here people wear hoods and do not talk; the stalls sell resin and stones and cages of wasps. The listless crowd, admiring the wasps and buying stones, is composed of women who exemplify different kinds of indifference. Some are young and unawakened; others temporarily feign indifference. They will not stay long. "Then," Seigneur says, "we have that woman old or young who has feigned indifference for so long and so successfully that her mask has become the face it was once meant to hide, and thus hers is the face forever pocked and pitted with true indifference, which she now detests but cannot put off" (98). Virginie assaults that mask. One of its aims is to sexually arouse, to arouse those instincts of sexuality and violence and moral outrage which we all share but with which we sometimes lose touch. Virginie assaults not only with its prose and subject matter, but with its paradoxes: in imagination, one finds fullest experience; in swarming bees, love and surrender; in sexuality, innocence; in violence, compassion; in judgment, sympathy. Virginie opens with two epigraphs: "Paradox is beauty"; and "Death was the
birth of her." Paradox is, in a sense, willingness. It is about responding to and even embracing the paradoxes of human nature—which in Virginie might be sexual arousal at two buttocks up-ended in the air, or the goose bumps of an consummately gorgeous line of prose. The fire that snakes through Virginie is then not so much about death as it is about the intensity of experience and becoming. It is in some sense the liberation from the Plain of Indifference. Virginie speaks:

I have become the burning bird in a burning cage, bird and cage indistinguishable in that intensity which is the nature of fire and in which the light of the burning object becomes more real than the object disappearing in its own display. Cage to room, bird to flaming child: thus I have never been closer to extinction nor yet more real. (32)
NOTES


4. In several interviews Hawkes has expounded on the rigors of revision which each of his novels undergo. He spent four years revising The Lime Twig, Hawkes has said. Guerard did not like the first draft and then "Sophie [his wife] and I worked on it by cutting it apart and making charts, which we had also done with The Beetle Leg. . . . The reconceiving and revision of The Lime Twig were extensive: I took characters out, I took out scenes, I added Hencher. I had to revise it considerably, sentence by sentence." Quoted from an interview with Patrick
O'Donnell, a transcript of which was published as "Life and Art: An Interview with John Hawkes," in The Review of Contemporary Fiction 3 (Fall 1983), 114.


upon Freud's conception of literature as fore-pleasure.


15. Humors, 256.

16. Humors, 256.


18. Larry Oliver, "Voyeurism, as Cause and Effect," Fort Worth Star-Telegram (27 June 1982), E.
[in response to the anticipated question, "Why do you write?"] Because there is nothing new under the sun except its expression. Because art blows life into the lifeless, death into the deathless. Because, in its profanity, fiction sanctifies life. Because, in its terrible isolation, writing is a path to brotherhood.

Robert Coover

Imagination is, as Sam said, the unifying power, and the acts of the imagination are our most free and natural; they represent us at our best.

William Gass

Conclusion

The Erotics of Reading

In the five central chapters of this work, I have attempted to explore various ways space and openness are reflected in and, I would argue, used in Hawkes's fictions to connect the reader to the tensions, paradoxes and psychological violence of his stories and images. Hawkes's art is, in part, one of isolating the reader from his or her easy complacency, bringing the reader to a place of uncertainty and confusion where easy responses are lies, and perceived as such, and where life must necessarily be re-perceived, if only for a moment. In the best of Hawkes's prose, and with readers willing to approach reading in this fashion, the imagined world and its reflections into the world of "reality" are concomitantly energized with the richness and
eroticism of the unknown. This kind of reading, this kind of text, is what Roland Barthes has so cryptically attempted to label as *jouir*. *Jouir* is commonly translated as "bliss" but it is more than that as it implies not a state but an experience, an action, as Richard Howard has pointed out, that is more akin to "coming," as in an orgasm, but yet less confined, as in English, to the genitals and much more of some ineffable unknown place embedded in the soul/body. Such reading defies "meaning." Roland Barthes talks of the experience of these kinds of texts in terms of discomfort, loss and asocial solitude. "I am interested," he says in *The Pleasure of the Text*, "in language because it wounds or seduces me."³ It is a language, Barthes says, whose aim is not the clarity of messages, the theaters of emotions; what it searches for (in a perspective of bliss) are the pulsational incidents, the language lined with flesh, a text where we can hear the grain of the throat, the patina of consonants, the voluptuousness of vowels, a whole carnal stereophony: the articulation of the body, of tongue, not that of meaning, of language. . . . it granulates, it crackles, it caresses, it grates, it cuts, it comes: that is bliss.⁴

Hawkes's novels aim to discomfort. They are also very much concerned with evoking responses in unknown places. Hawkes recently commented that he feels erotically drawn to the unknown. . . . It has to do
with voyeurism, tremendous isolation and what happens in isolation. When we were young, if we were really isolated, did we or did we not imagine, try to get beyond where we were, try to conceive of the forbidden sight, the forbidden vision because if you can get there you can get to another one, and beyond and beyond, always trying to escape some horrible limitation.\textsuperscript{5}

Within a Hawkes fiction, the reader becomes strangely isolated and vulnerable. The absence of a reliable plot or sympathetic knowable characters with recognizable moral underpinings, and the presence of gaps and silence and visual distancing leave us, as readers, unnaturally alone, alone, as Frost would say, with our "desert places." For Hawkes and writers like O'Connor and West and Faulkner, all of whom are particularly interested in the emotional violence of language, isolating the reader, that is, disconnecting the reader from familiarity, is an essential component of the ultimate power of the fiction. For Hawkes, space isolates; it is a technique to create vulnerability, to create in the reader an opening in which the fiction can work.

The eroticism is in the imagination and language which define for us these spaces, and retrieve us from these echoing chambers. "My main interest has always been," Hawkes comments, "in the visual imagination and an intensity of language which in itself is erotic."\textsuperscript{6} The "fish hook" is Hawkes's visual symbol of the function of imagination and
language in the kind of fiction he writes. The artist's job, Hawkes says, is

one of catching, capturing, snaring, using a
dangerous and unpleasant weapon, a hook, knowing
that his subject matter is himself or his own
imagination which he has had to find himself and
capture ruthlessly.  

I quoted this passage in the introduction when I talked about the feeling of danger implicit in a Hawkes novel. But it also embodies and reflects a deep belief in the individual and his or her desire to experience that "bliss" of which Barthes speaks. This belief underlies all of Hawkes's fiction. The "artist's job" is also the "reader's job"; the artistic process is also the process of reading. The reader who is willing to surrender himself to the process can "use" art, in an undefinable way which can only be experienced, to capture or find the human self, using a "dangerous and unpleasant weapon, a hook."

The image of the hook, which Hawkes has used repeatedly in talking about the artistic process, originates in a scene in *The Beetle Leg*. In this scene, Luke Lampson is fishing in a reservoir created by a giant dam, under which his brother somewhere lies buried. Luke pulls a human fetus out of the water, removes it from the hook, and puts it back into the water. Hawkes has compared Luke's actions to that of the artistic process:

It's a very schizophrenic image, full of dangerous,
archetypal maneuvers in the deepest darkness within us. To me, the most horrifying object to touch would be a fetus, and I would be unable to touch one. But in The Beetle Leg, that action is a real paradigm of what the artistic process should be. The writer should undertake to do what he finds most difficult and most threatening, and then deal with these materials in such a way as to re-integrate them within human consciousness. When the protagonist of the novel seizes what he has caught, this aborted, fish-like form of dead human life, and removes the hook from the cauld that the hook has actually penetrated, then puts it back into the initial floodwaters of Noah's time—that, to me, is a parable of the artistic process.  

Hawkes's fictions encourage us to envision the fiction itself as a kind of weapon, a barb, a hook—with which to plumb our inner selves and retrieve a bit more of who and what we are. It is a radically individualistic endeavor...the fiction merely provides an opening.

This is a radical stance for fiction, even for experimental fiction. This becomes more apparent if one considers the general categories of contemporary fiction, acknowledging that such categorization obscures and distorts the very nuances that make fiction so exciting in the first place. There appear to be roughly four kinds of contemporary fiction. The first allows us to play out our Cinderella and
Superman fantasies. This category is the least "literary" of the four categories, and probably the most purely entertaining. It includes our romances, the murder mysteries, the Hollywood glamour stories, the sex and power stories. Authors who focus their efforts on this kind of fiction include Jackie Collins, Danielle Steele, Stephen King, and Ross MacDonald. These novels place a premium on plot; they are meant to entertain. Subtlety of emotion and language are minimized—they aim for action. Underlying these tales are but a few very basic myths and fantasies which Vladimir Propp has shown to be universal. These are the same stories of our fairy tales: boy meets girl (or vice versa) and lives happily ever after; the big bad villain is exposed and destroyed by innocent good-heartedness; hard work is rewarded by riches; and so on. Sex, murder, intrigue give spice to these age-old stories, but ultimately they appeal to our innermost, child-like fantasies. These novels allow us, simply, to live vicariously some of our most enduring fantasies and guiltily imagined pleasures.

The second category reflects upon who we are, how we feel our way through love, isolation, fear—the universal experiences of human living. This is our "realistic" fiction. This category is represented by some of our finest and most sensitive writers. These are authors who delicately and complexly explore the nuances of emotional life. They create mirrors of the self through which we, as readers, can experience the ambiguities and complexities of love, of
growing old, of isolation. We recognize in these characters ourselves, the nuances of our fears and satisfactions that, perhaps because we lack the skills with language to articulate so clearly, so precisely, enlarge a bit of who we are. This category includes such authors as Saul Bellow, John Updike, Joyce Carol Oates, Eudora Welty, Philip Roth, Raymond Carver and Ann Beattie.

The third category appeals to the intellect's quest for knowledge, setting its fiction in a milieu of carefully researched facts, often scientific or historical. This category includes science fiction, historical fiction, and fictionalized accounts of famous trials, murders and the lives of personalities. When we read this kind of fiction, not only are we often encouraged to imagine ourselves in another time and place, a time and place significantly different from our own, but we often have the satisfaction of feeling that we're learning something at the same time. Two of the most well-known and prolific authors in this category are James Michener and Isaac Asimov.

The fourth category actively uses its form to disrupt and thereby energize the kinds of seeing and believing upon which the first three categories of fiction are built. This category of fiction challenges, even assaults, either or both the conventions of fiction and the reader. This category is primarily the domain of experimental fiction, although surrealism and the grotesque would commonly belong here as well. This is generally the most difficult of the four
categories to read because it refuses to allow itself to have predictable conventions. Its guiding precept is the unexpected. Donald Barthelme, John Barth, John Hawkes, Robert Coover, William Gass, Don DeLillo, Thomas Pynchon, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Italo Calvino, Julio Cortázar, and Alain Robbe-Grillet are authors who would generally be included in this list. These are authors who are consistently unpredictable, who continually explore different ways to use fiction to energize the worlds they depict. Some, like Cortázar, Coover, and Barthelme, tend to concentrate their acts of disruption on language and form, while others, like Hawkes, Gass and Robbe-Grillet, tend to focus their disruptive techniques on the reader, focusing on "shocking" the psychological moorings of the reader. In various ways these fiction challenge the reader to "re-see," and thereby to energize old, perhaps tired forms, including the definition of the self.

Each of these categories focuses on a different aspect of the reading process: plot (action), character (emotion), information (intellect), and language (reader). Most fictions bridge categories. Then too, many writers try on different categories. Where, for example, do we place DeLillo's new book, Libra, which is about Lee Harvey Oswald (sort of)? Is this book historical fiction? Or, perhaps because of the complexity of its psychological portrayals "realistic"? And yet it is radically experimental as well. Or what about Gravity's Rainbow? Is it science fiction, or historical
fiction, or experimental fiction? Obviously any attempt to
categorize such, and most, novels denies them much of their
life blood. Categorization, like criticism in general, is
always a dangerous endeavor: it purports to expand meaning,
but it does so at the expense of experience. Susan Sontag, in
her attack on literary criticism in "Against Interpretation,"
writes that, "in place of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of
art."9

Nevertheless these categories are transiently useful,
primarily because of their ability to focus us once again on
"erotics." When experimental fiction is differentiated from
the other three categories, two things become clear: 1) that
experimental fiction is the most violent of the categories,
and 2) that it focuses more on the reader than any of the
other categories. Postmodern fiction has been accused of
being anti-reader, of not caring about the reader. The
argument is that experimental fiction is often unreadable—no
plot, words that sound like nonsense, characters so bizarre
they can't be imagined into existence. Robbe-Grillet has
countered this argument, that experimental fiction is anti-
reader, by saying that, on the contrary, such fiction requires
the reader to complete it, to make sense of it: "to
participate in a creation, to invent in his turn the work--and
the world--and thus learn to invent his own life."10

What Robbe-Grillet hints at but doesn't quite say is how
radically idealistic and humanistic experimental fiction is.
Robert Scholes, Ihab Hassan and other critics who have written
extensively about "postmodern" or experimental fiction have focused our attention on the surface manifestations of experimentation and change: language. We have accepted their definition of such fiction, that is, as fiction that is primarily interested in language and design and, by extension, somewhat superficial and lacking in "content," content generally being thought to consist, in various proportions, of plot, character and subtlety of emotional portrayal, and information. The first three categories of fiction, however, focus on these attributes and yet are, in many ways, life-denying. The first and the third categories are escapist, taking us as they do into our childhood fantasies and off to imagined worlds, while the second category, "contemporary realism," is strangely de-humanizing, solipsistically caught in depicting failed love, death, failure and frustration. One critic has called it "catatonic realism."11

In contrast, experimental fiction is idealistically humanistic and energizing. It takes risks. It believes in art and language as, to use Hawkes's metaphor, "weapons," by which and through which we can pry open walls and expose new possibilities of life and experience. It believes in the individual's desire and ability to expand one's life and perception of life. Of contemporary writers, John Hawkes is one of the most humanistic—violent and radical, innocent and idealistic. His art aims specifically into the recesses of the individual reader, and the possibilities which reside there.
NOTES


2. William Gass, *Willie Master's Lonesome Wife* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1971), 51. The novel does not have page numbers; for convenience in locating the quoted material I have added them.


8. O'Donnell, 123.


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