American Studies in Scandinavia, Vol. 11, 1979: 61-46

Our Universal Fears: An Essay on a Story by John Hawkes

By
Michael Bass
University of Århus

I

John Hawkes has been one of the front figures of American innovative fiction for three decades now. His audience has always been relatively small, however, and reviewers are not sure whether to call him a prophet or a pervert. On afterthought, to describe him as a pervert may not be so much out of place and proportion as it first may seem. For, in the literal sense of the word, a pervert is a person who turns things around and who shows us a world turned upside down. This is the essence of the grotesque; and John Hawkes is the master of such, besides being one of the most intelligent and originally artistic of the fictionists of the post-war period.

Hawkes belongs to a group of writers – among whom I count, primarily, Kosinski, Vonnegut, and Bowles – whose books must be regarded from the perspective of the Second World War, often, but not necessarily, depending for their material and motifs directly on the war experience. But always for their attitudes. For them, the war was not just a war but the war, a *typos* of the desolation of the human condition, the folly of human conduct, and the futility of all hopes for a meaningful existence.

The often neglected writings of Ambrose Bierce are anticipatory of this view of life and its artistic expression. Especially Bierce's sketches from the American Civil War bear a strong resemblance to much of Kawkes' work. Here we also hear the voice that we know from *The* Devil's *Dictionary*: it is one of Hawkes' favorite roles to play the devil's advocate in order to exorcise his readers. Evil must be purged by evil, immorality by immorality. "The point is that in the most vigorously moral of writers the actual creation of fiction seems often to depend on immoral impulse."[1] Vigorously moral himself, Hawkes' nightmare descriptions of violence, cru-

elty, pain, and distortion are actually meant to point out evil and make us crave for the purity, innocence, truth, and ethical strength that escape us.

But for this higher purpose, Hawkes also uses another device, namely that of grotesque humor and weird, black comedy. For, as he claimed in an interview in 1966, the pathetically or grotesquely humorous pulls us back into a realm "not of mere conventional values but of the lasting values, the one or two really deep permanent human values."[2] A year earlier, he had told another interviewer:

> I think that the comic method functions in several ways: on the one hand it serves to create sympathy, compassion, and on the other it's a means for judging human failings as severely as possible; it's a way of exposing evil (one of the pure words I mean to preserve) and of persuading the reader that even he may not be exempt from evil; and of course comic distortion tells us that anything is possible and hence expands the limits of our imaginations. Comic vision always suggests futurity, I think, always suggests a certain hope in the limitless energies of life itself.[3]

Honesty and detachment are two of the most important qualities for the writer/artist who must be prepared to confront the enormities of ugliness and failure within himself and in the world around him. His role in society is crucial insoiar as it is one of his obligations "constantly to test in the sharpest way possible the range of our human sympathies and constantly destroy mere surface morality."[4]

The "limitless energies of life itself," according to Hawkes, are the fountains from which materials flow to the artist, provided he is capable of liberating them from the grip of the unconscious. The creative process, then, is the constant effort to control and shape the visions and suggestions that call attention to themselves during the act of creation.

Hawkes is a strongly "picturesque" writer who records with detailed and almost photographic precision. He has, however, contributed significantly to the disruption of the mimetic conception of literature which has been taking place for a couple of decades now. "I want to create a world, not represent it," he says.[5] He is an inventor of new imaginary worlds, landscapes, and interiors – visions that come to his mind without his knowing the full impact or the ultimate scope of their meaning.

His fiction is unique, but also traditional: he identifies himself with the picaresque and baroque traditions in European and American literature (Quevedo, Nashe, Céline, Faulkner, West, O'Con-

nor), with its artistic interest in distortion, ugliness, perversion, inversion, and violence – and the belief that the only truth which holds is the "truth of the fractured picture."[6]

Many readers have serious difficulties in reading Hawkes, whose fiction is, at times, full of obscure symbolism and loose ends, even though he states himself that his fiction "is not merely eccentric and private and is not nearly so difficult as it's been made out to be."[7] But not even sympathising critics seem to agree with him on this point.[8] His short fiction is considerably more easily accessible than his novels for the mere reason of length: Hawkes shares with other post-modernist writers the failure to keep the reader's attention bound until the last twist of an already illusive plot throughout a multi-page prose work. He is more successful with his short novels and stories like "The Universal Fears," with which I shall be dealing for the rest of this article.

II

To account for our universal fears on barely fiften pages may, at first, seem a little presumptuous for a writer. But the title of Hawkes' story is quite indicative of his constant concern to draw a picture of the *universal structures* of the human mind: the unconscious desires, deep urgencies, and eternal fears of the ordinary human being, solitary and dislocated in a hostile, or, at best, alien, enviroment. "The Universal Fears," thus, could be said to capture the essential theme of all of Hawkes' work.

The story, cast in a school for delinquent girls situated in a bleak industrial landscape, a modern-day Valley of Ashes, describes the violent confrontation between a group of twenty-seven institutional girls and their middled-aged, thin-haired, belly-fat teacher on his first day on the job. After a few minutes of tense silence, they attack him and are partly successful in castrating this pitiable caricature of a father figure. Jones – which we are informed, through a newspaper clipping, to be his name – is brought to hospital, where it turns out, to his and our surprise, that he is most seriously injured not in his *groin* but in his *head.* After a brief interval (during which he first decides to pay a visit to his father, Old Jack, but then, suddenly, changes his plans after an imaginary conversation with him), he returns to the school and to the very same class of girls that made him the personal object of their hate and revenge. For: now they know who he is,

and he in turn knew all about their silence game and actually was counting on the ugliness, the surprise, of the fully bandaged head to put them off, to serve as a measure of what they had done and all he had forgiven even before they had struck, to serve them as the first sign of courage and trust.[9]

Hawkes manages through his metaphorical language to render plausible a description of the "ecology" of violence: the victimization of these girls – "homeless, bad-off, unloved, semi-literate" (p. 113) – bred in the desolate landscape of iron cranes, dockyards, and coal heaps:

> It made him think of a prison within a prison. No doubt the docks were considered the most suitable context for a school, so-called, for girls like these. Yes, the smells of brine and tar and buckets of oil that rode faintly in on the knifing light were only complementary to the stench of the room, to the thick shellac, the breath of the girls, the smell of the hair. (p. 114)

The waste land of the visible environment in Hawkes' fiction is only another metaphor for the waste land of the human mind, the potential cruelty of the individual psychology, and the invisible drives towards violence and absurdity. But it is noticeable how strikingly close these surrealist settings come to the descriptions of a naturalist writer such as Stephen Crane, especially in ***Maggie*** (which, of course is saying more about certain aspects of some naturalist fiction than about the literary heritage of John Hawkes).

The defiance of the girls is directed toward Jones, whose own social background seems to be as twisted as his psychology: dominated by the memory of his dead mother and the Oedipal antagonism towards his knife-brandishing bum of a father, he is caught in the spidery web of contradictory urges towards love and lovelessness: between a need for "small soft hands to press against him" (p. 123) and a drive towards self-annihilation, "to be at the bottom where those girls are. Without romance" (p. 127).

The latent need for tenderness and love is perverted into expressions of violence – for the girls – and masochism – for Jones. But the sexual definitions of both parties are "vague and bleak" (p. 113. To them, his "maleness meant nothing more than pants and jacket and belted belly and thin hair blacked with a cheap dye and brushed flat to the skull" (p. 113). To him, reluctantly admitting to himself that he had been hoping for some "easy sex" with the "juicy rough," they are an unattractive, "sexless lot of girls" (pp. 126; 114).

At the moment of their attack, however, Jones' potency fails him: he is incapable of defending himself with the phallos-like pointer

with which "he might have struck them, stabbed them, beaten them" (p. 116). After all, he is not so foreign to the pleasure that can be derived from pain and humiliation done to himself – "the special chemistry of pain that belongs to girls" (p. 114) – and soon he gives up fighting back, as the assault and the act of castration develops into a gruesome parody of a sexual intercourse, and, in a perverted sense, turns into a feast on love:

> In his welter of pain and humiliation he writhed but did not cry out, writhed but made no final effort to heave them off, to stop the knife. What was the use? And wasn't he aware at last that all his poor street girls were actually bent to an operation of love not murder? Mutilated, demeaned, room at shambles and teacher overcome, still he knew in his fluid and sinking consciousness that all his young maenads were trying only to feast on love. (p. 119)

Accepting his own victimization, he eventually returns to the school in order to prove that he can "handle the job" (p. 121). His head has been grotesquely transformed by white bandages not his groin, which is surprising since he was after all dismembered (p. 120). But similar *inversions* are not uncommon in Hawkes' grotesque fictions, and one may conclude, on this particular point, that the injury done to his sexual organ signifies the injury done to his self, his mind, which is being literally wrapped up into thick layers of insulating and mummifying gauze. Neither his dog nor the Caldwellian character of his old father recognize him. And his flat – with windows giving onto the same dockyard scene that he saw from the school-room – "no longer felt his own" (p. 123):

> A few minutes later, on hands and knees and with his heavy white head ready to sink to the floor, he suddenly realized that injury attacks identity, which was why, he now knew, that assault was a crime. (p. 123)

The universal fear of the loss of identity, thus, relates itself to the universal fear of castration, the dread of all the knives and scissors which threaten not only to cut off "the last of the male features hiding down there between his legs" (p. 118), but, moreover, to incapacitate him as a person.[10]

The prototype of all opposition is the contrariety of male and female. Hence, one may start out analyzing sexual antagonisms and sexual myths, and perhaps end up with revealing insights into social antagonisms and social myths. These institutional girls, for instance, who have been placed at St. Dunster's Training School, are prisoners of a man's world, and for them, their new teacher is only "another fat man in the mid-fifties," but he is also another

representative of the brutal paternal society that brought them to this dead end so early in their lives (p. 113).

The boyish girls in their grey workshirts are united in spite (p. 115), and their potential social violence expresses itself in sexual violence: after the suspended tension has been broken about three pages into the story, the bird-like amazons attack their object of prey under shrill shrieks of anger. Killing and fucking – as is common in contemporary American slang – become synonymous terms of violation. The unique effect of Hawkes' style relies on such inversions of accepted language and conceptions. In this case, the phallos symbol of the pointer, "lying on the old familiar desk like a sword in the light" (p. 128), is turned into a potential weapon of aggression or self-defense (Jones, though, cannot reach it). Eros is turned into Thanatos, as when Norman Mailer *(An American Dream)* describes the male sexual organ as an "avenger," or when Anthony Burgess *(A Clockwork Orange)* lets his sadistic roughs commit murder by means of a giant plastic phallos.

Hawkes' world is grotesque, deformed, and inverted. He attains his ends chiefly through a dense and heavily connotative prose. Form may be all, but without these devices much of his fiction, including "The Universal Fears," may appear as realistic reports of contemporary life. This is indeed the sinister aspect of Hawkes' work: the cruel and absurd *real* world is not so far beyond, after all, a fact which can be documented by the inserted newspaper clipping, however imaginary, which testifies to a sort of physical assault which is not unheard of in American urban schools today.

NOTES

1 John Hawkes, "Flannery O'Connor's Devil", *Sewanee* Review, LXX, Summer, 1962, p. 398.
2 "John Hawkes, On His Novels", Massachusetts Review, 7, Summer, 1966, p. 461.
3 "John Hawkes: An Interview", Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature, 6, Summer, 1965, p. 146.
4 Ibid., pp. 143–44.
5 Ibid., p. 154.
6 Ibid., p. 144.
7 Ibid., p. 143.
8 E.g., Donald James Greiner, Comic Terror: The *Novels* of John Hawkes, Memphis State University Press, 1973; and Frederick Busch, Hawkes: A Guide to His Fictions, Syracuse University Press, 1973.
9 "The Universal Fears", in *Superfiction*, or the American Story *Transformed*, ed. by Joe David Bellamy, New York, Vintage, 1975, p. 128. The story first appeared in The American *Review*, 16, February, 1973.
10 Cf. p. 116. Knives constitute, apart from the bird imagery, the most dominant set of metaphors in the story (cf. pp. 113, 114, 118, 119, 121, 126).