Coils and combinations Second skin and the later novels of John Hawkes.

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COILS AND COMBINATIONS:

"SECOND SKIN" AND THE LATER NOVELS OF JOHN HAWKES

by

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A Thesis
submitted to the
Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research
through the Department of
English in Partial Fulfillment
of the requirements for the Degree
of Master of Arts at
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Even beyond, where the flesh is no more,
the word is carnal

Edmond Jabes, "Aely"
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PREFACE

As prefaces go, I intend to make this one very brief—a mere note: a narrow keyhole offering a tiny but promising glimpse of a cornucopia.

Let me say it as plainly as I can, then. Part I ("Introduction and Theoretical Preliminaries") opens with something of a reverie on John Hawkes’s "mannerism." The point is to situate Hawkes, not biographically, but stylistically and rhetorically, and thus throw into question his status (any author’s) as guarantor and ironic (or not) manipulator of a text’s meaning. From this point on, Part I is an elaboration of theoretical schemas. By the time one has reached the end of it, such terms and premises as define the contours of the rest of the thesis will have been set forth. Key among these are imagination, revisionism, voice, and performance. Necessary terms, the whole lot of them, but specifically so when used in relation to the author/narrator.

Part II ("Coils and Combinations, or Eros") is a survey of cross-hatched erotic/neurotic image patterns appearing in novels from Second Skin onward, but excluding Hawkes’s latest, Adventures in the Alaskan Skin Trade. This section familiarizes the reader with recurring figural strategies governing the monologues of the later œuvre, with my emphasis falling on the discursive but involuted idiom of texts which openly...
revel in, as well as privilege, the acute visionary capabilities of their own rhetorical mode.

Part III ("Second Skin") then completes the downward spiral from generality. I trace out and discuss the configuration of points, prickings, incisions, and inscriptions that literally bristle throughout Skipper's chronicling of his "naked history." The implicit design underlying the close reading I subject Second Skin to is this: I would hope to have dissolved Hawkes, as author "proper," into Skipper as author/narrator; and Skipper, in turn, into a voice with enough facility and suppleness to awaken the excitement of a reader strong enough to confront, decipher, and ultimately consummate the pure intricacies of its rhetoric.

I want to make it very clear that the considerable attention I assign to theoretical matters in Part I, and the conclusions I draw, are thereafter wholly assumed in Parts II and III. In this case, both the episodic survey of erotic figuration in Part II, and the more concerted, yet still non-systematic, discussion of 'points and prickings' in Part III, presuppose (quite silently) all the paraphernalia so painstakingly arranged in Part I.

The connection between the theoretical section and the rest of the paper is this: figuration, as a 'natural' product of the reading and writing activity, is
anti-mimetic the moment we recognize it as the primary disposition of all writing. That is, to name something is always to trans-figure it, to assert its existence as only epistemologically possible within a constellation of concepts and within a system of language which, from then on, has appropriated the 'real' or 'exterior' object and, situating it within discourse, shows it to have only become approachable within a system of signification. Thus, even mimeticism (which discussions of figuration can never completely do without) is a metaphorical stance (albeit a strong one) by which writing 'thinks' about itself.

My assumption, then, is that writing is end-to-end figurative and unnatural. Unnatural in the sense that there is no naturally absolute connection between a significand and its signifier, a word and its object. Following from this, and keeping in mind the important notion of figuration as translation, I link figuration to performance, while noting, in the same breath, that writing also effects a disappearance: the disappearance of the author-as-puppeteer; his vanishing into an activity I generally refer to as 'voice.'

In Hawkes's case, this is a voice he has lushly modulated and carefully moulded into a dazzling manneristic text that is, in the best sense of both words, purely aesthetic.
PART I: INTRODUCTION AND THEORETICAL PRELIMINARIES
Considering the expatriate range of his imagination, the use of diverse landscapes, the continental spirit which informs his most mature fiction, it would almost seem unnecessary to say that John Hawkes is an American writer with a difference. The degree of this difference is hardly the most pressing of my concerns in this study, but simply taking note of it is a good way to start, especially as it involves a paraphrase of Leslie Fiedler: to write on the novels of John Hawkes is to at least conceive of the appropriation of certain European voices in a world of alien experience. ¹

While describing the psychic traumas of the Hawkesian author/narrator (throughout I will be dealing primarily, though not exclusively, with the first-person monologue novels), I think “the world of alien experience” may also allude to the transmutation of European voices and certain European (as well as American) landscapes into an absolutely aesthetized novelistic vision which largely dispenses of any determining socio-historical context. Hawkes’s focus, and, as we shall see, the focus of this study, is on the inventive sense of self and the potential doom that eats it. I take a cautionary approach with the phrase “inventive sense of self.” Innocence, power, and
imagination comprise that 'self': a self that turns out cruelly, or coldly, or comically, not to be an ontological fixture at all, but the lush dissembling image of authorial presence: voice. Thus, Part III consists of a close reading of Second Skin, with the emphasis placed on voice-as-authorial-presence-and-figural-theatre. This reading will be prefaced in preceding sections by a complex interpenetration of theoretical preliminaries which, I suffer to say, will deal with both the "metaphysics" of voice and the figural tissues that comprise its performance.

There remains much to be done with the idea of narratorial voice, but I will leave the development of this crucial issue for later. I would now rather turn to my estimation of Hawkes as the great mannerist of American post-war fiction. I say this only because his innovations within the realm of conventional technique, genre, or the history of the novel (his freely spun mergings of the picaresque and the troubled pastoral rhapsody; his Dostoyevskian fixation on violence and his Faulknerian treatment of it) are, at once, as demanding and inbred as they are extravagant, so that he has sometimes been read as being too aesthetic, too preponderantly nimble, to be a major writer—having none of Pynchon's epic miasma and remaining too dark even in his eccentric kinship with Nabokov's pungent literary
Though criticisms of this type may be leveled against him in regard to such difficult narratives as "Charivari" or "The Beetle Leg," Hawkes remains a laureate of the uncanny at the level of figure and conceit. In all the novels, but especially in the matured rhythms of "The Lime Twig" and the work that follows, it is precisely the sheen of stylistic finesse and calmly administered psychic shock therapy (with the 1961 fiction Albert Guerard notes the emergence of "a more controlled and more sinister accent" that flaunts the demonics of style. While involving various mythic elements (the casual survey of mythological projections in Skipper's discourse on self: the shadow of Pan in Cyril's character) or drawing on literary sources and fecund allegorical associations (the pastoral, including Shakespearean highlights in "Second Skin" and "The Blood Oranges: a Camusian existential mythos" in "Travesty: Sade and the literature of pornography in "Virginitie"), the narratives read like extended lyrics and the clear pulse of prose seems neither to conceal nor to offer up any discernibly transcendent vantage point from which to conceptualize the moral priorities of its well-wrought structural symmetries. In "Travesty," Hawkes declares his aesthetic at the same time that he addresses the reader and parodies himself and his critics: "But vol
are already familiar with the pleasure I take in these alignments which to me are the lifeblood of form without meaning." Yet these alignments, mannered to ends so aesthetically absolute and self-enclosed that it seems that the very act of reading also entails a walk on the wild side of theoretical criticism, are not themselves bloodless. For they do not designate structural principles, but circulate meaning through figures: that is, through the myriad forms, patterns, rhetorical devices, and elements that are not merely working to generate the suspense of a discontinuous plot (for in Hawkes the suspense is almost always secondary to the voice that relates it), but are calling attention to the peculiar lyric suspension we call a Hawkesian narrative.

Indeed, as any close reader of Hawkes will testify, narrative coherence and linearity cannot exist except that they are rhetorized, exploded into a constellation of tropes pointing conspicuously to both the performative action of, and the critical predicament posed by, voice. Why predicament? Simply because examining both the polysemy and rhetorical plurality of such a constellation, as I do in a long, close look at Second Skin, involves an interpretative cunning, a rhetorical imperialism gaining its (fatal) strength from the very blindness, deafness, or forgetfulness with which it evades other ('lesser') readings in order to produce a
sublime misreading of its own."

But I don’t want to get bogged down here in the negative sublimities of self-reflexive theory. Reflecting on Papa in Travesty, or on any of the other first-person author/narrators, within the parameters of Shelleyan individualism (Hawkes, like almost every metafictionalist indebted to a genealogically luminous ‘degeneration’ of priority from Milton through Shelley, confesses, “It’s a romantic notion. I know. To conceive of the writer as a kind of Shelleyan, satanic figure, but I have often felt that way.”)* I consider Hawkes the most disciplined and ‘visionary’ writer to have emerged in America in the post-war era. By ‘disciplined’ I refer to both the paralyzing tautness of his structures and the rich refinements of his stylistic means; by ‘visionary’ I place him at the heart of all that’s romantic, or obsessed with eros (inevitably related to innocence), imagination, power, and death, as filtered through the commanding voice of an author/narrator."

I’ll also go a step further and say that Hawkes is the most subtle, the most theoretically self-effaced (just look at the flagrant metafictionalism of Barth and Coover) of the post-modern decadents. I use ‘decadent’ in the same sense as would apply to a virtuoso mannerist painter of the Italian late Renaissance, and do so since his elaborate—that is, visionary or ‘lyrically
distended—structurings partake of a certain
self-consciousness and insularity as may be invoked in
tracing the history of mannerism: the temptation and
inevitability of Western art to de-theologize the
effulgent hysteria of religious iconology and
reconstitute its spiritual values along the axis of
eccentric and hyperbolic figural fancies.

I call Hawkes a mannerist because, as Albert Guerard
says, he is anti-realistic: that is, anti-mimetic and
non-normative. His mannerism consists of an extreme
individualism of style, and an emphasis on
experimentation—an insidiously subversive
experimentation (with the parodic mode marking the first
'criminal' level) carried out in the very thickets of
conventionalist form. In this sense, Hawkes is shrewdly
aware of the classical form (i.e., the Ulysses motif, the
'twelve-chapter quasi-epical structure' in Second Skin,
for example: the pastoral romance in Second Skin
and in The Blood Oranges) but he violates its integrity
by appropriating its elements as they suit him,
adulterating them with, dissolving them in, modes and
forms developed in later periods of literature, and thus
finally proves himself unwilling to share in any
classical nostalgia for universals, unwilling to
subscribe to its sun-lit clarity of collective humanism.
Even with the knowledge that such art commits itself
consciously and from the first to an exaggerated illusion of representationalism, this notion of Hawkes's mannerism circles the whole question of style as the shaper of meaning and value, "the saving beauties of language."

Are 'saving beauties' salvation enough? I can't answer without deviating, and doing so excessively. I'm led to muse on the first of many dangerous polarities which have bracketed Hawkes's work and pinned it within a context of 'official' response: the complicated inter-relationship of style and content as negatively conceived in the accusation that he is an immemorial talented lyricist of no intellectual consequence and that the ambitions of his language mar but, at worst, the frightening moral emptiness of his preoccupations with sex and violence; at best, the erotic delusions of "contemptible imagination."

But what, exactly, is it that's contemptible? The plurality of love ("Need I insist that the only enemy of the mature marriage is monogamy? That anything less than sexual multiplicity [body upon body, voice on voice] is naive? That our sexual selves are merely covets in a vast wood?" [BO, 209]) and the moral paradoxes it poses? The plurality that erodes conventional unities of self, and so remains the seminal metaphor for certain erotic, narcissistic dispositions of writing, its voice? The choice deliberations of Hawkes's speakers certainly invite the
antithetical rigour of our own responses. It's what the fiction, any fiction, as a discontinuous insertion into the world's positivism, demands, sometimes by the metaphor of desire alone, as in Virginie where our voyeurism is augmented by a narrative so accomplished, so graceful beyond its years, that in belonging to an uncorrupted 11-year-old, it evokes, paradoxically, and in pure ungrieving tones, both the nostalgia for an impossible womanhood and the complicity of our erotic expectations with this the most rococo of Hawkes's texts.

But long before Virginie, Hawkes, immanently absent but somehow invisibly fixed in the language of his self-dramatized narrators, was already stimulating the intellectual appetite at a certain pitch of rhetorical and imaginative pleasure that left us with the supple, serrated surfaces of a textual body, its voluptuous positionings, but seemingly nothing more, nothing deeper. Yet, even if not condemnatory in the Roger Sale sense, the tendency to read Hawkes's novels as "cold, grand and all but empty," or as "dazzling performances on the edge of nothing," is both to acknowledge and undervalue the function of a text as performance, a site of investiture where the rhetorical dynamism of an author's vanishing is consummately and conjoinedly re-activated by a readerly performance. This latter comment by Michael Wood is neatly, if unwittingly,
post-structuralist (in the self-dramatizing, epoch-ending vocabulary of that theopoetics) in locating these novels "on the edge of nothing," and it leads me, in a later section, to attempt an elaboration of my use of "performance."

In the meantime, admitting the possibility that these are texts generated on the edge of, and often come close to, nothing, is to recognize in their discourse a particular kind of visionary intensity that's ahistorical, or makes history over as the visionary product of a speaking subject whose own identity—and we remember that identity is an essentialist concept—is always fragmented, adulterated by the formidable capabilities of language as the very voice of will and desire. Thus, also a fiction with no location ("unlocated in space and quite out of time" says Skipper. [SS, 46]; "In Illvria there are no Seasons" says Cyril. [BO, 271]), a fiction whose topographic mythos, unlike the more ontologically and epistemologically conceived Yoknapatawpha, remains a function in the field of figures. And it is specifically here, in a fiction (Second Skin, for example) where history and setting primarily serve the manneristic ends of an author/narrator's figurative intensity, that meaninglessness successfully resides, at least in the sense that the narrative would reveal itself as the pure
motion of voice and everything else—setting, character, plot—are the eloquently rhetorized faces of its performance.  

The complaint, then, that these are "performances on the edge of nothing," conceals (perhaps even unconsciously) an anti-visionary bias and holds to deep-rooted mimetic assumptions about fiction and the forms it may take. The complaint is literally a refusal to "take it." for the crude point may simply be that some scorn the effort necessary to take pleasure (intellectually or otherwise) in the theatrical vitality of such fiction. On the other hand, there is certainly an abundance of notoriously appreciative criticism, all too readily working within the polarities of theme and psycho-mythic terminology with which Hawkes sometimes conceptualizes his own view of the work. For an effort like mine, which was sparked by an almost naively affective response to *Virginie* before progressing obsessively toward *Second Skin*, reading the growing corpus of rag-tag, humanistic commentary which turns on catch-words, buried concepts amalgamating psychology, philosophy, literary history, and myth, was something of a morose delectation. 'Nightmare,' 'comic terror,' 'Eros-Thanatos' recur, becoming catch-words, convenient nets with which to domesticate texts self-consciously brilliantine with structural ambitions and lyric design.
I'll no doubt have recourse to such terms, though, as I hope to show in the course of this paper. I aim to interrogate and disband the context they form in the very moment I re-articulate, re-invent, and evolve it. I am especially sensitive to the powerful Eros-Thanatos polarity which has been invoked as much by Hawkes as by his critics and which I think may be coerced out of its rigid dialectic domination by dispersing, neglecting, evasively revising, or finally dissolving it into a constellation or serpentine interweaving of ideas, themes, and tropes: innocence, reading, writing, authorial presence/absence, and narrative voice as problematic concepts best approached along the axis of language-based criticism. To end here and begin anew, I would like, then, to survey the conceptual adjacency of these terms as they partake of 'imagination'.
IMAGINATION, REVISIONISM

I introduce imagination as a concept alongside the 'psychic life' appellation with which Hawkes's fictions have been approached, for it is explicitly referred to in the novels themselves (Papa's climactic moment when he cries out that "Imagined life is more exhilarating than remembered life" [T. T127]). Yet I introduce it with a desire to jettison the whole secularized theology of the imagination with all its possible occult offshoots ('inspiration' or any such metaphor of ex-nihilo transcendentalist causality), and call imagination the most ambitious configuration, design and drive of voice—voice being that which situates the appearance and indeed produces the complex activity of imagination as a worldly or inscriptive phenomenon.

To begin, then, is to begin with a debt. In discussing imagination I still find the strong post-Freudian occultist Harold Bloom enlightening when, trying to loose his theory of poetic influence and misprision (or evasion) in the essay "The Breaking of Form," he writes "of the aggression of reading and the transgression of writing" and makes, as far as I'm concerned, crucial note of the "psychic and linguistic cunning that energizes what most of us have over-idealized as the imagination." In Agon, Bloom
again ascends his sublimely perched theoretical eyrie from whence all texts are quoted "for their lustres or auras" (quotation as a violation of unity or context finally showing why unity and context are illusions) and from where he remarks on the fallacy or "indubitable idealism" of a "moving need of the mythology of creative imagination, and of the related sub-mythology of an "objective" scholarly criticism."  

Such Bloomian sublimities as well as skepticisms run deep and devious throughout this study, but, in true agonistic fashion, they also give rise to antithetical perspectives. After all, imagination, like any other discourse, is always haunted by the demon of irony. In other words, by time's erosion of the moment of imaginative passion. And irony, as Nietzsche has taught, is always a retro-visionary demon, is a trope for the influx of contingency or the anxiety of indebtedness that undermines the 'unity' of otherwise 'pure' passion.  

Such is the irony that afflicts the romantic sensibility; virus that it is (often smuggled in in pure lyric splendour), it can undermine any imaginative whole merely by re-introducing time. It can, from another perspective, also be used to dismantle formalistic myths of organic closure by first exposing them as examples of imposed norms. In any case, irony is parasitic on, and an enemy of, all self-contained entities. To reiterate:
irony, that instance of skepticism, worldliness, memory, that undoes the illusion of aesthetic utopia. In The Blood Oranges it appears by way of Hugh's accidental suicide, the absurd, absolutely disruptive stroke that shatters Cyril's Illyrian harmony (though not his voice, which marks the extended elegiac neutralization of irony as nemesis and fateful agent of moral vengeance); in Second Skin its cutting edge is a powerful ambivalence, the "terrible fear and longing" excited in Skipper by a domination of black, a dark ship, "an ugly span of pointed iron," a "stark elongated brutal silhouette . . . standing suddenly on the horizon of the mind" (3-4). The ship is an image capable of jarring Skipper back into a contemplation of the devastating lessons of history, and it leaves us, as critically keen readers of a revisionist memory-narrative, to ponder the enigmatic power of time as it infiltrates the supposedly sovereign, self-determined Platonism of imagination.

Yet I suspect that irony, or parody for that matter, can never be a text's being. The best way to counter Hugh's death, or Skipper's ship with all its associations of a violent, lacerating past, is to insist on the potential innocence of voice and minimize irony or uncertainty by appropriating priority, making history over in your own image—yet doing so in the innocence of imagination where the self disperses itself into the
immanence of subjectivity: a subjectivity which, properly speaking, belongs to a character, but which, textually speaking (that is: rhetorically and hence improperly), cannot be anything but the text's voice since it is there that the semiology of desire and intention, the discourse of power, is brought to performance. Read enough of Hawkes's first-person narrators and it soon becomes more than subtly evident that we are not so much dealing with character as a self-validating ontological fixture, but with character as a textual act of revisionist performance. Again, this act, this performance carried off with brilliant rhetorical, figural maneuverings, is elsewhere in this essay known as 'voice.'

In paraphrasing and decontextualizing another of Findler's passages, this time his stirring cant on the great American romance in decay, I want to say that the Hawkesian author/narrator writes on the threshold of an endlessly undermined vision of innocence—writes on an imaginatively cathexed frontier, which is to say, on the narcissistic outreaches of a voice where the figurations of eros and the syntax of its vulnerability and demise invert and metamorphosize into each other. And since there are only outreaches, differential tensions, metamorphoses in the written field, there really is no essential psychic depth, no psychological or moral closure of character, only the voice and the energy of
Yet, for better or for worse, we do construe a character like Skipper psychically, as if his imagination (i.e., the text he writes) originates in some interior depth of being. I'm more than skeptical about terms implying original sources or interior life, and therefore I use a term like 'psychic' carefully and with a certain irrevocable necessity. The psychic is one of those detonating metaphor-concepts that work so well when discussing Hawkes and perhaps makes his oeuvre unthinkable without it. Yet the realm of the psychic can't show itself at face value, especially if its very existence depends on the signifier as a medium of transference and if it thus has no unified topography except perhaps that proposed by the figural field of a shaping language. In the realm of literature, this shaping language has, until recent linguistic insurrection from the French sector, been mythologized and mystified as the creativity of imagination.

But, in concluding and in emphasizing a point I have already made, I want to say that imagination, in the sense used by critics, poets, and even characters such as Papa, is to me unthinkable (by 'unthinkable' I mean that which is not: that which is formless, is not disposed to representation of any kind, cannot be approached, glimpsed, apprehended, and allows no rational/irrational
point of entry; that non-entity before which all measures fall short and which can't possibly belong to any reflective or comparative mode of inquiry) except as a text: that is, that which needs to be actualized as textuality (in the widest sense of the word) in order that it may be recognized and reciprocally identified, come into being, under the name of imagination. Yet that which we so name is produced out of what Bloom calls "a psychic and linguistic cunning," and which I would thus situate as belonging to the realm of will, rather than deriving from any sort of ex-nihilo occultism known as inspiration. After all, isn't imagination actually the most romanticized name of will? Isn't it, in this sense, a trope for psychic necessities and certain "creative" predispositions: necessities and predispositions to perpetually re-invent the world and the self?

As we shall see in Part II with my discussion of Travesty, the Hawkesian author/narrator often speaks forth from the knowledge of such a necessity, and speaks boldly, slyly, softly, deviously, reveling in the exhilarating necessity of such a knowledge. Meanwhile, as readers, our mode of knowing is actually our way of reading the figures of his imagination as they, functioning within and establishing a dialectic metaphor of innocence and power (as expected of any speaking subject), comprise voice.
AUTHOR, IRONY, UNRELIABILITY

I am fixated by Hawkes's use of the author/narrator
because he is the appearance of Hawkes's effacement and,
paradoxically, also serves as the site of an authority
that seems that much more powerful (a veritable vacuum, 
especially if one is doing bibliographical criticism) for
being absent, being seamlessly absorbed into the
narratorial I. Indeed, an author is one who writes
himself out of 'existence' and into 'character' and so
initiates the reciprocal myth that behind the personae,
the characters, the fictional ciphers, behind any mask
our criticism may dramatically tear asunder; there stands
finally revealed authoritative being and not merely the
writer and those mechanisms of writerly chance and
strategy.

Yet instead of repeating Barthes and Foucault on the
death of the author, we should note that the author has
long been committing suicide, and he has been doing so
conventionally. One need look no further than the
convention of a narrator to note the disappearance of
being into the play of signification. For Hawkes, and
Second Skin in particular, I think of an author
collapsing his energies, his anxieties (and all those
echoes that make up a discourse of self), into the figure
of an author/narrator whose own imagination, in the image
of the author it consumes, is particularly privileged and self-reflexively disciplined.

Thus, the deflection of authorial being into an authorial functioning; the author's disappearance into a voice, or plurality of voices which we may anatomize and classify according to a vast, and perhaps infinite, system of silent, obsessed, perverse, sincere, dramatized, undramatized, unreliable, heroic-pastoral (etc.) narrators. Skipper, as author/narrator, is a voice in whose functioning the delimiting frame-referent, Hawkes, grows more silent, more ontologically enigmatic. the more Skipper (the presumed owner—as if a voice is first something one owns instead of what one uses) pursues his indefatigable lyric generosity. The value system of metaphor, meaning, and purpose centered by "the author" is necessary, useful, and as I show every time I have recourse to attributing causality and genius to him, absolutely indispensable; but relied on unquestioningly it only serves the formalism of textual totality and enforces a certain romanticism of creation, imagination, and the phenomenological mythology of recoverable intentionality; or at least anchors the paradigm of a well-engineered structural utopianism (as if an author could tuck in all his tropes, discipline their semantic capabilities, make a telos of his themes, confidently display his seamless web before the cross-textual
scannings of criticism).

However, my concern is not with debunking the author, his Platonic majesty. It is, rather, the task of forgetting him, which in itself is a way of saying that we would rather love him at an impersonal, agnostic distance. The author's disappearance is a functional necessity. "Hawkes" as a biographical or intentional pivot is of most use as an intra-textual figure eminently and immanently absent and thus imminently significant in his novels. And yet it is this everlasting imminence, this deferral of presence, which allows critical discourse to inhabit the space of an author's product, to read a writing which, thereby rendered devoid of (even a fictional) author and devoid (according to the idealism of pure textuality) of anything external to its status as writing and writing only, can "never," as Blanchot says, "be a man's writing, which is to say it [will] never be God's writing either, at most it is the writing of the other, of dying itself." How specifically this applies to Virginie, as Heide Ziegler has pointed out; and if it applies to Virginie, could it not apply to Hencher, or Cyril, or Skipper, or most diabolically to Papa--all of whose writings display a cruel and romantic innocence which insists on the pure necessity of its imaginative design?

But one of the much-travelled routes leading back
into the kingdom of authorially framed formalism is the ironic way. When one reads, as I am doing, with the notion of making a segue from author to voice, one treads carefully and one inevitably desires two things: to challenge the notion of an unreliable narrator; and, co-extensive with this, to undermine irony as the sustaining being of a textual meaning. Irony lends itself to totalization or, to flip the coin, to a reductive, abysmal indeterminacy; when affiliated with theme or presumed authorial intention, it completes, or tends to imply a resignation from, the complex polysemy available in any doggedly pursued and rhetorically sophisticated process of reading. And, as anyone who reads rigorously through meaning and beyond it into the more meaningful climes of will-as-a-serious pleasure, knows: irony just isn’t enough.

A generally ironic approach to narrator, narrative, or voice tends to imply "mere victory," as Skipper would have it; however, what’s more important is virtue: the marvels of imagination (figuration) as it produces the very image of subjectivity and so shows that subjectivity is not a pure language, is always a text, is a voice with no ultimate source of self-present being but rather a play of performative dispersions. To read the writing of such as voice—which is the same as reading the writing in which such a voice is produced—is to read
(unknowingly or not) alongside, within or without, the
margins of Derrida's observation: "Constituting and
dislocating it at the same time, writing is other than
the subject, in whatever sense the latter is
understood."

Having momentarily ascended this height, one must
still look onward and downward to trace out, from a
position of apparently panoramic superiority, the
occasionally occluded but endless and serpentine
meanderings of the ironic way. To be sure, irony is most
acutely felt in the fixation on the unreliability of a
narrator—a fixation which, from the first, locates
itself within a shady (precisely because the unreliable
narrator is never wholly unreliable: is indeed the only
narrator one has) ontology of character and traces the
play of figures that a text offers back to a writer, a
speaker (especially a fictional one), blind to the
effects of his intention.

Yet what is most obvious to me, and provides much in
the way of anti-formalist skepticism, is that any
critical reliance on the unreliable narrator (let Booth
rest), his blindness and insight, must inevitably be
reduced and put to use as a conventionalist tool of deep
phenomenological formalism, seeing as any measure of
unreliability derives solely from an ironic sensitivity
to tone and presumed intention. For if the materia of
voice cannot itself be subjective according to the innocence or, less colourfully, the sheer neutrality of langue, then an unreliable subjectivity is only discoverable in the parole insofar as that is where, so to speak, style takes place and the invisible author is perceived as having designs on us. Yet a question remains: perhaps the subjectivity of voice, and indeed voice itself, is activated only in the anxiety of reading, the moment that the Other, apprehended in discourse, generates, throws into relief, or is perceived as mimicking, dramatizing, one's own subjectivity?

It follows, then, that the absurdity of the unreliable narrator in The Good Soldier or the Blood Oranges arises from the notion that we can't believe that someone so capable of fine writing, someone so versed in the delicate and allusive ways of writing, would remain so fundamentally blind to the facts of what he perceives. That we should stop appeasing our incredulity with various reductive critical strategies, and that we should take the chance of deconstructing the rhetoric of our own incredulity as we discover it in reading, is perhaps the polemic subtext of this whole thesis. After all, what's obvious in the very incredulity that gives rise to suspicions of unreliability is that there are necessarily strong moral valuations implicit in any reading from unreliability.
especially insofar as this type of reading is a framing manoeuvre, a type of retroactive fore-structuring in which (ironically) the reading against unreliability is trapped within it.

However, one begins subverting unreliability by turning to the very rhetoric which would seem to produce it; for, as it turns out, there are no facts, only the writing, and to hound the unreliable narrator inevitably means not so much his story as his voice. One soon realizes that the real subject of such a story is not plot, or the blindness of character, but the staged voice, the supple tapestry of visionary evocations, which, in one sense, reads me and catches my own critical strategies at multiple cross-purposes.

The staged voice, the tapestry of allusions and evocations that's guaranteed to send critics scurrying, is perhaps best displayed in Second Skin. Here, Hawkes transposes loose, occasional allusions to The Tempest or to the quest romance/pastoral. Skipper is capable of moving freely among ephemeral, stylized adaptations. Elements are borrowed, novelized, then left behind or recast under figural pressure so that the "naked history" does not belong to any single genre or classifiable form. The novel owes as much to Shakespearean late romance as it does to the picaresque tradition in its own history. It relies explicitly, but not extensively, on both, and,
in the end, it is voice as an allusive, and even
revisionary, activity that matters much more than any
attempt to situate the novel as a romance (though this
is, of course, immensely helpful), or as an ironic
commentary on an unreliable and deluded solipsism.
Romance and unreliability are always pre-supposed by the
motion of a dramatized voice whose constant swervings
undercut narrowly thematic, mythic, or
psychologically-based readings.

The subject, "Skipper," thus exists not only as an
eclectic self-mythologizing (Skipper as Hamlet, Old
Ariel, Prospero, Iphigenia) tourist of codes and ready
allegories, but as that function through which meaning is
produced not as an epistemological signified, but through
which meaning is disseminated in a chain of serpentine
significations, aphoristic energies of a figural
flourishing into which we read both the virtue and the
pathos of will. A passive will, to be sure. Yet
Skipper's borrowings, and their deployment, formulate a
repertoire for the metonymic (not to mention, theatrical)
name of writing: voice. But what of this voice, this
author/narrator, this Hawkes, even?
This voice, the voice of Virginie ("I am only . . . the insubstantial voice of the page that burns" [V, 11]), any voice consistently and at every turn alluding to the the disappearance of the speaker and a fragmentation into another body (the 'textual' body); also marks his impossible return, the metamorphosis of his intentional energy into a particular style that shades our understanding, marks out our own reading as always agonistic with the voice of the ghostly other coming to us with the alienated majesty of our own ruined magnificence.¹

But the voice seemingly has and hasn't a locus. It is neither literal nor metaphoric. For the text, like its smallest unit, the signifier, is both speech and the very absence of the speaker; the text's voice becomes a medium for a certain transaction always completed on the part of the reader who receives this voice and in so receiving or appropriating it, acknowledges the image of a speaking subject whose disappearance is thus reciprocally constituted.² Furthermore, in a very practical sense, the voice of Skipper or Virginie would seem to be the echo of a real Virginie, a subject, only the voice echoes this subject into being so that what we have is the subject as an echo-being, the myriad tracings
of deferred presence. And textually we thus have an interminable figural mosaic imaging voice in disjunctive (that is: lyric) turns and ruptures.

In general, voice, which may, at any moment, be synonymous with text, or writing, or speech (and has no being outside of such synonymity), does not designate the site or appearance of being, but rather an activity, a work, a play, and even a song, though, to be sure, the term 'voice' seems to conceal within it the secrecy of a being and the mythology of an unmediated origin.

To modify the same point in a different key: it is only voice we are speaking about; thus only voice by which subjectivity is broached and made emergent (voice, not body, which is why sex has no 'subjectivity'); it is only voice that can posit 'truth' or posit an undoing irony within or against truth, thus alerting us to the layers of rhetorical or grammatical meanings forever shuffled in the activation of voice as it disseminates images of itself.

I would hope to get to a point where even the speaker— that vestige of totalizing formalism, that very imago of a deceased author— becomes a voice. Infinitely more or nothing less. A desire, then, at the very least: to study a character, to read his identity as a voice, as Travesty invites us to do with such a measured and sinister assurance, to read in a manner so consuming that
disbelief is hardly the issue.

In the case of a dramatic monologue like Second Skin the tendency is to close off voice within structure, or to ground voice (its reliability of unreliability) within the cohering possibilities available in the multi-leveled interplay of image, echoes, and allusions. But if voice is not to serve primarily as a totalizing metaphysical principle, then those cohering possibilities must finally be seen as an open-ended network of relationships; and voice itself as a functional field where the placement and positioning (the grammatization) of figures forges meaning as willed engendering of rhetorical tensions and not, finally, as a semiological function of structure or as a totalizing telos of direct communication. The subject (in a Lacanian sense) of these novels is the writing that produces the symbolic (that is: inscribed) erotics of a self. As far as I'm concerned, that self, any self, cannot appear except as a play of textual exchanges. Its identity resides in the voices that converge to define it via the potency of certain repeated and unshakable figurations.

This reference to figures and the production of figures is central if one assumes, as I do, that voice is necessarily a theatre of configurations. I should no doubt pause here and dwell for a moment on the notion of
figure. It should be evident by now that this term is crucial to my discussion, and becomes even more immediately relevant in Part III where it is used in a discussion of the image pattern of commas, silhouettes, shadows, outlines, puncturings, etc., that interweave Skipper's story. I take 'figure', on its simplest level, to signify the shape 'external' reality takes in these texts. Yet, within the textuality of voice, a figure is not an imitation but, much rather, a simulacrum. To go further, the concept of figure divides, on the one hand, into images; and, on the other, into metaphors/metonymies. Putting it crudely, then, a figure is much like an image, while metaphor/metonymy is that part of figure which links figuration, in either of its two senses, to the even wider concept of rhetoric.

Since these two tropes hold the idea of comparison implicit within them, metaphor and metonymy are the vehicles by which the concept of figure flees (but never completely escapes) the visual implications of imagery and the whole fallacy of one-to-one representationalism, and lengthens out, in so many tangled traces, to form voice.

But voice, of itself, is not a figure, a representable centre or locus, nor is it a landscape, or a mosaic tapestry (though these metaphors are always functional), but perhaps a space of textures, an
1mmaterial site where figures take shape like holographic
tissues. Barthes articulates this in a passage whose
starting point is the etymological meaning of text as a
product of weaving:

Text means Tissue: but whereas hitherto we have always taken this tissue as a
product, a ready-made veil, behind which lies, more or less hidden, meaning
(truth), we are now emphasizing, in the
tissue, the generative idea that tissue
is made, is worked out in a perpetual
interweaving; lost in this tissue--this
texture--the subject unmakes himself,
like a spider dissolving in the
constructive secretions of its web.

If, following this, one is about to do without the
formalistic idea of text as a self-sufficient product, it
is only with a mind to moving beyond the notion of art as
monumental, immobile, self-enclosed, almost palpably
material: to move from this metaphorical cluster which,
with its ideology of textually embedded norms, largely
excludes the reader's subjectivity, and embrace the much
more fluid vision of text as spectacle, theatre, staging,
and voice. The key shift in Barthes's passage is from
the model of a ready-made product to the notion of a
generative activity. It is, of course, a shift in values
and perspective effected via a shift in figures of
speech. It is a shift I am quite supportive of insofar
as I am interested in the way a voice shifts its figures
and the way that shift signifies the theatrical motion of
voice. Indeed, implicit in the idea of figure is tableau, and in tableau, theatre. Thus, if we look beyond product to "the generative idea" of production, we are looking even beyond that, to the related idea of performance.

Let me explain: where there's writing there's reading. Edward Said, making a case for more committed, worldly criticism in the essay "The Text, The World, The Critic," intends (following Blackmur following Hopkins, as he notes) "the bringing of literature to performance, but more explicitly, the articulation of those voices dominated, displaced, or silenced by the textuality of texts." To bring a text to performance is not merely to represent it, or stage it in some private phenomenological theatre: it's to make its textuality worldly, to let its particular system of significations (quotable fragments: phrases lifted and then shrewdly redeployed), its voice, inform and interweave other discourses. Said's use of "voices" extends into politico-social realms, and through my sensitivity to that is not lost. I risk a certain initial aestheticism in restricting myself to the voice or idiolect of the text and the play of its localized phrasings, ejaculations, lucidities, torsions, rhythms, dispersions—in short, to the shape, sound, style, and semantic outreaches of its figural idioms—which, as
my reading of Second Skin shows, intellectually and
sensually comprise voice.

Another significant point, one which Said also
raises in the essay, is that voice doesn't live and die
in the isolation of its figures, but becomes voice in the
rhythmic, temporal transmission of these figures.
Moreover, narrative voice (fictional or not) is an event
of will; is, in Hawkes's first-person monologues, the
pitch and persuasion of a protagonist's rhetoric for
which we dialectically supply personality, subjectivity
the subjectivity of a subject already unmade, as Barthes
would have it, in the interweaving tissue of figures,
and reciprocate the multifaceted salience of will by
imaging the I in all its formless textual traces.

Said's voices are also an allusion to pluralities,
continuities as well as discontinuities, often
domesticated or even flagrantly repressed in what he
calls monologic readings: the univocal tendency (aim) of
metaphysics ('in its nakedness, its several disguises,
to paraphrase Slipher [195]) to ruthlessly crown
dialectical dynamics under one roof: the metaphysical
imperative always to work (labour is essential) toward
architectonic closure, shutting the text in from
worldliness, keeping the textual body behind closed
doors, confining it at a site of temptations for the more
lucid and designing critic.
PART II: COILS AND COMBINATIONS, OR EROS
WHO IS SAFE?

Hawkes's narrators share a startling isolation out of which the visionary impulse (actually, an authorial disposition toward mannered configurations) effects highly charged allegories of the way the self, produced as a shifting site of lyric (that is: discursive, ejaculatory, periodic, instead of narrative, methodic, ultra-structural) being, is fixated by the multiplicities of its own coiled solipsism. Yet it is only in a secondary, or supplementary, sense that I am interested in the psychological thematics of that solipsism or what may by another name be known as a visionary narcissism. This I will pursue in "The Dead Passion" as I draw examples from Death, Sleep and the Traveler and The Passion Artist. My primary interest here, and in the extended reading of Second Skin in the next section, is the interpenetrating tissue of figures that would clothe these narratives—written against time, history, and destruction—in a transumptive glitter of revisionary victory.

Yet it would be reductive to read Skipper's self-validating victory or Cyril's silky affirmations as instances of thematic finality. The novels, with their dizzying figural multiplicities, chasten or overwhelm any quest for beginnings and ends. The speaker in one novel
echoes, extends, or counterpoints the speaker in another. Imagery generated by Cyril may refer us back to Skipper, and Skipper's own idiom may find disfigured images of its own best insights in some of Papa's or even Allert's formulations. Once spotted, these cross-corpus resemblances or repetitions-with-variation, form a palimpsest, and the moment one reads such repetition critically there is a recognition of forms broken and breaking into other forms so that there is suddenly no priority, no reductive authority, with which to parcel out a moral/anti-moral stand even if the novels, especially those in monologue form, are themselves conceived as arguments, egocentric confessions, justifications against history and defeat.

Indeed, all the first-person narrators since Skipper produce a crafty lyric text whose post-novelistic premise is the fragmentation of conventional narrative into (re)visionary theory: a theory of Eros/Imagination advancing, by displays of sheer rhetorical virtuosity, the notion that the authorial impulse alone is the voice of erotic renewal. Sometimes committed, in affirmative tones, to a circular, self-generating vision (and is it any coincidence that all my relics are circular? Who can tell? Everything coheres, moves forward" claims Cyril (BO, 271)), and yet working against fortune's wheeling turn, practicing a dedicated
narratorial subversion of the humbling circularity of that moral metaphor via episodic reverie, the one long song sung on a floating island in a land of spices, an apocalyptic strip of winding night road in France, an unravelling but imperishable tapestry in a timeless Illyrian landscape. Their sexual history is, in the telling, unmistakably tinged with nostalgia, and their authorial present, tinged with the faint decay Cyril remembers sucking from Fiona's perfect teeth, thus appears to be a self-centering mode of displaced virility. That is, virility de-centered (reconstituted as vision), or at least thrust into a different gear: Skipper the "artificial inseminator" and chronicler of a "naked history": Cyril wondering whether he is "embracing air" and whether love has withdrawn "her breath" from his body (34) even as he retrieves the rich nuances of his sex-song: Allert the mental traveller spiriting himself along in a haze of pornographic slumbers.

With these speakers, the erotic, whether fulfilling, consuming, or self-reading, is a gesture of affirmation in the Nietzschean sense whereby necessity (events, personal history, pleasure or pain suffered and pain inflicted) "is not a fact but an interpretation." Indeed, interpretation itself ceases to be a fact and becomes an allusive, performative activity: it can be transmuted. Wear a many-colored cloak: romance.
confession, reverie, dramatic monologue.

Thus, if all the novels beginning with *Second Skin* are, in some sense, reveries on eros, then as reveries they are also, in a wider and more ultimate sense, theoretical meditations on imagination, plurality, innocence, and the intricate rhetoric that governs the production of an erotic revisionism. No matter how apparently self-deluded or brilliantly poetic, the tendency of these characters is to confirm the realization that the innocence of Eros must be enough since it forms the essential visionary pivot by which imagination, that generator of figural passion, wares with time.

And that is precisely my major concern here in Part II, for inscribing eros on an axis of imagination, these narrators necessarily rely on the ruthless innocence of vision. However, this vision can contain neither purity nor innocence unconditionally, for innocence has many definitions and oftentimes consists of those egocentric spoutings which signify a speaker both bemused and tender, self-infatuated and exquisitely loving, lusty, dangerous but ultimately insistent on his integrity or guiltlessness. Thus this innocence is not beyond equivocation, especially if we consider that it belongs to, and is deployed within, a system of signification where a reader in the act of reading is always losing, or
has never quite gained, a unified picture of Allert or Papa, and is thus constantly bearing witness to the collapse of the unified subject into a power, or voice, extended through that array of figures. More often than not, the subject is nothing more than the image of innocence rubbing rhetorical shoulders with egocentricity. And yet, he will claim, with a perfectly modulated authority of voice and poetic alchemy, that he is no mere "simple-minded beast of the ego" (T. 100) but the "ordinary privileged man" whose passion (in Papa's, in Vost's, in Bocage's case) for dark, blazing alignments reveals "in the subtlest of ways all those saintly, sinister qualities of the artistic mind" (T. 100).

But this "artistic mind" is nowhere seen, has no locus (epistemological, phenomenological, ontological), is nowhere essentially present except as a shrewd masquerade of signs. This 'mind', this performative motion of signifiers, staging a passion for the sublime ("The unseen vision is not to be improved upon." [T. 58]) is evident wherever we rub up against the only body that that artistic mind has: its voice. When a passage seems to point us back to a speaker--a writer of a "naked history"; a chronicler of an elegiac Illyrian sex-song--his text has already pre-supposed and produced his mythic selfhood in a parade of performing tropes. In this sense, the Hawkesian reader is strongest when he
becomes a keen rhetoričian confronting, in the cunning interpretative sense, the exfoliations and involutions produced by an author/narrator already tracing, exploring, and literally producing the mystery of his own psychic plurality.

On the level of production there is, for example, the anxiety of identity anaphorically rendered as a condensation of rhetorically interrogative dread: "Who is safe? Who knows what he will do next? Who has the courage to make endless acquaintance with the various unfamiliar shadows that comprise wife, girl friend, or friend? Who can confront his own psychic sores in the clear glass? Who is safe?" (DST, 164-5); and the related fixation on eros as a rhapsodic ejaculation into the mysterious void: "All speculations, like loose phosporecent threads shot dreamily into a cold night" (165).

I use these two fragments from Death, Sleep and the Traveler partly as thematic lead-ins to the coils and combinations with which the Hawkesian narrator approaches eros, and partly as examples of the self-reflexive rhetoric of voice articulating a searching and figurally vertiginous aesthetic of neuros. In addition, they should be taken as allusive guideposts to my own mode of essaying: Who is safe? Who knows, or can know, unless he subjects himself to the clear glass, looks to the
ambitious sores of his own readerly ambition, or shoots off courageously into the inhuman distance of the text. For if I'm not to fix on either of these passages as fundamental to a thematic reading of *Death, Sleep and the Traveler*, or to any other novel of Hawkes's, then I'm to read them for what they are: moments of abysmal self-reflexive lucidity articulated in one specific novel but linked to a chain of recurring obsessions extending, in figural multiplicity, over the whole œuvre. Therefore, in initiating an episodic survey of the figural procession that comprises the erotic in these novels, I now turn to *Travesty* and its theoretical eloquence as a starting point.
INHUMAN ALIGNMENTS

In Papa's monologue the very strong implication is that symbols, comparisons, elaborate tropes, are constellations, inscriptions on the void, sublime self-deceiving attempts at illuminating the shapes of an eternal and chaotic passion. "But you are already familiar" he says, "with the pleasure I take in these alignments which to me are the lifeblood of form without meaning" (T. 91). More than a Hawkesian gloss on his own fictions, here Papa makes the sober literary observation on alignment, figuration, as a form of play that's invaluably serious precisely because it's a function of imaginative passion; a passion in which choice—and this sounds paradoxical until we recall my formulation of imagination in part I—is essential: the sort of extreme, undoing, rhetorically fearless choice that the weak reader and writer (i.e., Henri who is "No libertine, no man of vision and hence suffering, but a banal moralist.)" [14)] evades with moral "detours":

Suspended as you are in time, holding your lighted cigarette between your fingers, bathed in your own sweat and the gentle lights of the dashboard—In all this there is clarity but not morality. Not even ethics. You and Chantal and I are simply traveling in purity and extremity down that road the rest of the world attempts to hide from us by heaping up whole forests of the most confusing
road signs, detours, barricades. What does it matter that the choice is mine, not yours? That I am the driver and you the passenger? Can't you see that your morality is no different from Chantal's whimpering and that here, now, we are dealing with a question of choice rather than chaos. (14)

Understood in context of the novel, the passage contains a number of shrewd rhetorical ploys, and if it may be approached in many ways, it gives itself readily to that largest and significantly traditional reading which couples an address to the reader and a self-reflexive commentary on the writing itself. From the almost classical abstract economy with which Papa images the conjunctive intensity of psychic-life-as-travel ("traveling in purity and extremity down that road") and travesties the ideal of the road of virtue by reference to the "barricades" and diversions any moral system inimical to the purity of such an imaginative vision thrusts across the path of intensity; from this to his devious abrogation of choice (making it seem as if choice itself, and not the person choosing, is paramount) with which he overrides such morality as Henri desperately clings to, Papa's rhetoric is a staging of the very transgression of voice or writing. In this case, voice is the visionary activity which the world (as history, value, idea, and priority; in short, as the antithetical voice sounding against the
subject's drive to explode and expose the limits of all prior signification) counters, attempts to domesticate or divert with its own "confusing road signs."

Disregarding throughout his monologue any possible accusation of euphemism, of relying on sentences poised in "the work of mere self-protection" (46), Papa—who is "open to new ideas" and emphasizes, with sustained examples of self-analytic eloquence, that he is "not a fixed and predictable personality"—couches promised apocalypse first in terms of a game, a sinister semantic haggling considering the circumstances, and then in metonymic terms of the leap, the despairing but exhilarating union of intimates intimately braving, at the same time fashioning, the abyss they commit themselves to: "After all, how can the two of us talk together unless you are fully aware that the two of us are leaping together, so to speak, from the same bridge?" (47).

Read sequentially, the text prepares us for the first for such an intensity of metaphorical extortion and allusiveness which works, either by paradox, metaleptic reversal, or a negative, self-effacing logic, to suspend one (Henri in this case) in the sublime, even desperate moments this side of death. This suspension (allegorized 'without' by the novel itself as an impossible fiction a la Virginie; and 'within' by the
sealed-in timelessness of the ride) is figuratively wrought, argumentatively expressed, and finally, as a visionary enterprise, serves to dissolve/transcend the self and its slavery to time: "imagined life is more exhilarating than remembered life" (127); or, earlier on, "nothing is more important than the existence of what does not exist. . . . I would rather see two shadows flickering inside the head than all your flaming sunrises set end to end" (57).

The shadows flicker, the sun blazes. Papa prefers the former image and so effects an oxymoronic yoking (of shadow and light) within which is contained a half-buried figure. He uses the nocturnal, metonymically implied metaphor of a flickering candle (so much more poetic than any desperately desired reality of sunrise) to stand for the ebb and flow of his discourse. Because there is no escape and living speech is thus already a momento mori of future death, the metaphor that describes this discursive tide alludes implicitly to mortality (the imagery of a fierce brief flickering preferred to the timeless repetitions of sunrise) and insubstantiality (these are, after all, mere shadows).

The necessity to imagine and rhetorically actualize "that which does not exist" is central to Travesty. This theory of the non-existent, as Papa tells Henri, "lies at the dead centre of our [novel] night together,"
and he claims to hold to it "as does the wasp to his dart" (57). But, flickering shadows to dart, he moves easily between figures so that the theory has no being except its telling. Indeed, the equivocal lustres of his rhetorical aggression (the dart, a pointed, threatening image of the potentiality of physical pain, signifies a theory which mocks the mere fear of pain and yet speaks in the name of a vision/event so pure in its conceptual extremity that the only and actual end is extinction) turn on an ominous assumption: "The moral of it all is to trust me but do not believe me--ever" (102).

Papa, and others like him (especially in the triad) are capable of such confounding theoretical rigour precisely because we come to them through the voice of an absolute imaginative sensuality, and in this case the absolute sensualist is a lyric poet who, never having indulged the seductive distance of Henri's public image, is now, or always was, a member of the anonymous elect, "an ordinary privileged man" (100) and "a specialist on the subject of dead passion" (74): one who conceives in purity and extremity a design so radically disjunctive that it reveals him "as serious as a sheet of flame" (12) against any intrusion of the world's ignorance, desperation, violence, or incomprehension.

To say that the narrators of these novels evade this onslaught by re-enacting, re-imaging, or usurping it
themselves (which is what *Travesty* enacts), is to say that that is the necessary outcome of a lyricism in which the self is: that vacuum in which voice persistently re-envisions history, or cunningly deviates from death (past life, remembered life) via a rhetorical dynamism forever imaging, semantically flexing and tensing itself at the limits of language. I say language instead of imagination, for in these novels imagination is a text (even when conceived negatively "as that which does not exist" [57]), or that which does not exist beyond voice: that which is never seen, represented, phenomenologically intuited, but only read, written, mused on with all the linguistic resources of the psyche.

I am always moving. I am forever transporting myself somewhere else. I am never exactly where I am. Tonight, for instance, we are traveling one road but also many, as if we could not take a single step without discovering five of our own footprints already ahead of us. According to Honorine this is my other greatest failing or most dangerous quality, this propensity of mine toward total coherence, which leads me to see in one face the configurations of yet another, or to enter rose-scented rooms three at a time, or to live so closely to the edge of likeness as to be eating the fruit, so to speak, while growing it. In this sense there is nowhere. I have not been, nothing I have not already done, no person I have not known before. But then of course we have the corollary, so that everything known to me remains unknown, so that my own footfalls sound like those of a stranger, while the corridor to the lavatory off my bedroom suddenly becomes
the labyrinthine way to a dungeon. For me the familiar and unfamiliar lie everywhere together, like two enormous faces back to back. (75-6)

I excerpt at length in order to let the rhetoric demonstrate its own "logic"; let this discourse on imagination mix and mingle the metonymic ("edge of likeness") and metaphoric ("eating the fruit... while growing it") strands of a theory it is at once stating and putting into practice. And my point is also a silent query: do we not hear Skipper ("In the very act of living I see myself, picture myself, as if memory had already done its work and flowered, subjected even myself to the golden glass" [SS, 99]) or Allert ("The conch shell and its human anatomical analogue are mysteries. The imagination cannot be denied." [DST, 79-80]) here? Isn't Hawkes tipping us off as to how to read him, how to remain faithful to his byzantine repetitions, pluralities? But even beyond "Hawkes," and on the level of voice, this passage shows that a rhetoric of paradoxes as belongs to Papa, or any of the others just listed, has no empirical topos (of character, setting, or plot?) and is more readily apprehendable as a proleptic interpretation of time.

Take another example, one in which voice, the rhetorical force, transmuses earthbound passivity and the onslaught of time into images of will and flight:
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. (57)

The power of figuration is here being substituted for time and the world, and indeed for any language which would possibly claim to locate time, world, or self, for that matter, outside of figuration. Such is the quality of Papa's dead reckoning that, in an aphoristically hermetic subversion of the paradigm of creation as the word incarnate (the word opening up world enough and time), the propensity toward figuration (the pathological condition of writing) here marks one's exclusion, exile, and elimination from the very world thus invented. And it is evident why: figuration (invention) stands in for creation: figurative language effaces, by deviation and multiplicity, the 'real' possibility of any creational-essentialist language. Alongside this, figuration bypasses the (misguided and passive) hope to understand the inevitable fate of one's elimination and leaps, so to speak, with a visionary will toward the void itself.

To sum up, then: to battle the inevitability (logic) of death and all its forestructurings named mortality
which reside latent in all theories, conceptualizations, 
fantasies of "history," by pursuing a logical aberration 
of figures at their semantic limit, as Papa indicates in 
the passage above, is the very narcissistic violence of 
the lyric impulse which can apparently negotiate the most 
treacherous crossings of figures, bodies of knowledge, 
discourses, but cannot blot out time or its mortal 
limits.

But I want to get away from this thematics of 
Thanatos, for the nothingness of time, that abysmal depth 
of oblivion, is never confrontable outside of a 
figurative stance which is a renunciation of death in any 
of his faces (two faces: the passing of eros in Cyril’s 
narrative; and its corollary, the fear of eros explored 
in Vost’s third-person ordeal). Likewise, the voice of 
these texts turns on the knowledge that the self is a 
play of psychic forces never safe, never fixed (fixated 
perhaps), especially if the passionate, 'living' image of 
its being depends on the inhuman mechanisms of language 
and the demonic exigencies of imaginative capability.

Thus—to draw an example from the Thanatos 
narrators—involved "innocents" like Allert and 
apocalyptic virtuosos like Papa stage their own 
disappearance as mere characters, selves, and 
conventional subjects, and, as if to prove that the 
psyche (synonymous here with both imagination and self)
is always and only a text, are transformed by the text
they produce into figures of rhetorical plurality.
Libidinal power and anxiety emanates from the writing,
signifying the triumphant dramatization of an insistently
and rhetorically ingenious narcissism, one that foresees
its own fragmentation and doom and plays at actualizing
it.

In fact, there is no referential context to bracket
these performances: no self on which to pin 'the self's
verbal brilliances.' The self, or subject—Papa,
Slipper, Hencher—die as surely as our author has, but
only to be reborn as the invisible presence of the
irrefutable other on which the dialogue of reading
proceeds. The self, staged as an absence in the
visionary voice of these novels, returns in the
interstices of theory, as the very function of the
imagination into which it disappeared.
THE DEAD PASSION

Cyril calls himself a sex-singer, and judging by the novel he formulates, sex-singing is a lyric knowledge, and, like all knowledge, is a way of deferring the world, restoring it antithetically while singing against it against its time; and, finally, it is a tragic knowledge because the apparent centrality of Eros is problematically linked to the sublimities of neurosis and its fundamental tendency toward divisiveness, fragmentation, uncertainty of self. But I'm only using Cyril as an antithetical lead, for it's the neuroses of eros I'm concerned with in this section as I'll shortly demonstrate with examples from Death, Sleep and the Traveler and The Passion Artist.

What I call "the neuroses of eros" is actually a lyrical mode within eros itself: an art of passion I construe orphically as a descent into self, but for that very reason a perverse orphism since it seeks not the infinite other but the infinite wreckage of self. Two brief examples should suffice here at the preliminary stages of a somewhat devious demonstration.

Ursula, who finds "the explicit sexual insecurity" of Allert's dreams "surprising" (DST, 17) and leaves claiming she can "no longer tolerate . . . the stink from the cesspool that is [himself]" (46), also accuses Allert of
being "a psychic invalid"; and he, replying with the absolute sovereignty of the unspoken monologue, addresses a reader poised critically in Ursula's place: "I . . . want others to exist with me, but find it difficult to believe in the set and characters on the stage. Then too I am extremely interested in failure" (8-9). Vost, having prided himself on the self-elect ability to "suffer the understanding . . . that smashed glass is preferable to the pure plane," will eventually find that in the midst of a "disorder [that] surrounded him with the force of shattered morality, he was stunned to discover how rigorously he clung to his former self and how bestial he had in fact become" (PA, 20-1).

I call this bestial self, as well as the self interested in failure, a self produced and poised in the labyrinthine textuality of its own neuros. My next point is that this neuros is a lyrical mode that extends eros beyond the body of the other and into the realm of imagination, self, solipsism. In the neuros of eros (or, synonymously, the neuros in eros) these elements which are, of course, present in the erotic relationship to the other, are distorted into bizarre and bottomless self-referential configurations.

Following this, I now begin a descent (with little hope of bringing anything back but a repertoire of figures) into a concept that is itself somewhat neurotic.
(in the desirous, insistent sense), with the claim that
the neuros of eros is specifically addressed in Allert's
rhetorical question concerning the confrontation of one's
psychic sores in the clear glass: "Who can confront his
own psychic sores in the clear glass?" (164). If there
is knowledge here, posed in the guise of a question, then
it is surely lyrical, discursive, rhetorical, visionary,
yet incessantly self-revisionary in regard to the
multiplicity of figures which signify the neuros not as
a totality of the signified, but as a plurality of
"sores." This knowledge is not subject to any empirical
epistemology, and though it can allude at every turn to
the body, flesh, skin, world as realized in
the other, its eros is never wholly pure, outward (as
cyrl claims his is in his servitude to love), or
"factually" representational, but circles the abysmal
nueros of self (even to the extent of fetishizing the
self's body); and is, indeed, produced in the theatre of
textuality, that theatre where voice as the will-to-trope
expands and explores the design and debris of the
narcissistic psyche.

Claiming this, I feel free to bisect the Hawkesian
corpus with this observation: whether sex-singing
(Bocage, Cyril), or practicing the regimen of true
eroticism (Seigneur, and, to a distended end, Allert).
there remains that knowing apprehended in secrecy, and
the egocentric rationalization of that knowing whose specific mystery—the negation of the body in the acts of the body—is ambivalent and repeatedly contaminated by the picaresque deviations of the psyche through its slime. As The Passion Artist, for example, shows, the psyche, fragmented force-field of an elusive and thereby impossible self, pitches erotic identity between cesspool and stars. Deviations (i.e., tropic turns) between the two, though often intensified by reference to a history of experience with worldly others, are primarily self-referential. I'll demonstrate this first with an example from Death, Sleep and the Traveler and then wrap up with The Passion Artist.

Allert meditates on Ursula as "practical, physical, mythical," remarking that in their long years of marriage she has "been one woman and every woman . . . . because her attitudes have never been predictable . . . . [and] her physical qualities have undergone constant metamorphosis from fat to lean, soft to hard, smooth to rough, lean to fat." Then, even as he claims that "all the multiplicities of her natural power were not merely products of my own projections," he fixes on the evocations of her name, the metamorphosis of essential qualities, "issuing without cessation from . . . . [its] round and beautiful sound": "Uterine, ugly, odorous, earthen, vulval, convolvulaceous, saline, mutable."
seductive" (DST, 61).

Since the whole narrative is produced in the wake of her loss, I might chance here to name Ursula the perverse Eurydice in Allert's perverse Orphism. But she is much less a Eurydice than he is an Orpheus. Appearing in the narrative "with her buttocks thrust high and glazed as with melted butter" (84), or tersely critiquing Allert's libidinal infantilisms, she remains, throughout the novel, a faceless sexual personification of female will and single-mindedness. If she is occasionally overwhelming or cutting with her remarks, she is also rather shadowy, as if Allert is only capable of sketching her in her primordial female distance. She can have no being but that which appears as the sum of her significations (in this way she belongs to Second Skin where every character outside Skipper is a cameo, a silhouette); yet as the primal female Other she nevertheless remains fantastic, charged—as Allert's reflections on her name and body reveal—with all the mystery and inhuman distance of female sexuality.

The fact is that Allert's perceptions are all we have to go on, and it's rather obvious that his voice is the only voice we hear. The lyric extremity of his neurosis is such that his voice manifests its strength and its purpose by appropriating all other voices (Ursula and Peter as the two key sub-voices form a choral refrain
within the field of Allert's all-consuming first-person neuros) and then pressing them into use as antithetical elements heightening the pitch of a self-analysis that has no end in sight; is, indeed, not an analysis at all, but an alienated and autonomous mode of musing, a kind of dark imaginative determination to "think and dream" (179) in extremis. Allert's broken narrative collapses all representations of the other into a language occupying a gap between himself, Hawkes, and the reader, and in this abysmal space of open-ended speculation ("Who is safe?") seems to have entangled reader, writer, and character in a self-dramatizing rhetoric of doubt. I assume, for obvious and rather practical reasons, that this doubt and the totality of its articulation; belong primarily to Allert. Time and again his occluded sexual interests are thrown into relief at an intersection of pornography and the metaphysics of individual failure, and yet the voice that effects this throwing, will, even if transferred to Peter (who, in turn, represents the reader and his suspicions in regard to Allert), seem to be very much Allert's own and will tell us plainly that he, it, occupies a realm where "even normality is a perversion" (95).

Allert's monologue describes a fractured narrative where the subject, the self, in all its novel-length intricacies of dismemberment on the level of
signification, seems to speak immediately to us from some
dim and sublimely perverse source of knowledge. But
aren't the novel's many and crepuscular evocations of the
subject's musings and erotic experience (played out on a
psychic stage where innocence and eros, cesspool and
stars are almost choral polarizations) forms of false
knowledge? That is, false in that there is nothing
empirically apprehendable here; that we are exposed to
sexual insecurity and curiosity via reported dreams and
episodic memory sequences; that what is thus apprehended
by us as readers, or fictionally by Allert as
self-analyst, is given as a peculiarly brilliant
rhetorical capability to pursue eros to its darkest, most
neurotic corners; and yet at the same time to reveal that
this pursuit really pursues its own interior fascinations
and therefore constitutes a drive that cannot help but
produce a neuros?

It is sufficiently evident, I think, that Allert's
propensity toward erotic musings, fears, and misgivings
is a textual phenomenon and, as such, has no empirical
being. Indeed, I want to say that every textual
representation of eros is after the fact and draws its
(potential) sublimity from this belatedness. Moreover,
this belatedness is always identifiable by its
revisionary stance in regard to that eros. But this
revisionism is, as far as I can see, and as far as all
Hawkesian first-person narrators are concerned, neurotic, or, in the very least, elegiac and Orphic. The belated stance draws its strength, its very drive to sing (the-will-to-trope), from an anxious relation to eros and its contingency; from either a knowledge of loss or a fixation with failure. It follows from this that texts do not represent, that any appearance of historical fact or mimetic representation is a simulacrum gloriously subject to the ejaculations of voice that both produces and situates it. Should, then, the image of erotic knowledge, recognition, and loss, differ at all for a first- and a third-person narrator?

If I can hardly hope to come up with a straight answer to this question, I can still look to an example from the The Passion Artist and examine one way in which these novels tautologically (since as texts their medium is language, a reflective medium, and not image, an immediate, sensory phenomenon) appropriate every temporal sequence of 'plot time', every narration of erotic activity, within the revisionary absolute of a lyric present, especially a present in which this lyricism marks the recognition of dead passion. As an intrinsic preliminary to this demonstration, I must first pause to quickly decenter the ideology of 'knowledge' as it functions in the relationship of neurosis to eros.

Following Lacan, I take the point of view that the
psyche is linguistic. Now I want to extend matters by spiriting this admittedly general, and thus generally invisible Lacanian notion in through a cache of Bloomian rhetoric which I have already relied heavily on in my section on belatedness. My point of departure is a cautionary reminder that to speak of neuros and eros is to indulge a formalism whose key terms—eros and neuros—must be broken and are already broken as "knowledge" (i.e., as separate entities, each heading a generally exclusive discourse of its own) the moment narrative, voice, writing, is set in motion. In this moment, knowledge as a classifiable structure of characteristic facts is displaced by knowing: the influx of voice and all its dispositions toward polysemy and figural plurality. As soon as neuros and eros are examined textually, one realizes that they comprise a dialectic of contamination. Hawkes's novels displace knowledge with knowing via the motion of a voice which can revise all facts (Papa), all historical fatality (Skipper), on the level of figuration alone. I repeat, then, the observation that as a key figural alignment within that voice, the dialectic of neuros and eros always contains within itself the possibilities of its own violation, collapse, and inversion.

In Konrad Vost's case, the collapse of the whole restrictive ethos he lives and carries himself by ("An
impostor in the black pants of manhood" [PA, 154]), is initiated early in the novel by his passive violation at the mouth and hands of the young girl, and is completed in the recognition he arrives at with Mania, the woman he has intercourse with at La Violaine. In the long sentence describing the climactic unification of the woman's sexual activities and Vost's psychic discoveries, note how the woman—Ursuline echo in the scene of sexuality—becomes absolute body, the pure materialization of erotic will, the necessary catalyst for Vost's realizations in the very moment of flesh:

When she used her tongue as the young girl in the shuttered room had used her childish finger, he discovered that her hair was so long that she could draw it around both sides of his hips to the front of his body and thus wrap and entangle him in the strands of her hair: when she made of his own thin dry mouth the sumptuous mouth of the octopus and caused him to employ his mouth according to the will of her hands, he discovered that the woman's dilation was such that the exterior of her body could no longer be distinguished from her interior: when she encouraged him to discover for himself that the discolorations of the blown rose are not confined to the hidden flesh of youth, it was then that in the midst of his gasping he realized that the distinction between the girl who is still a child and the woman who is more than mature lies only in the instinct of one and the depth of consciousness of the other. (180-1)

Related as if the action were unfolding and wholly
filling out a screen with flesh, the course of these extensions, dilations, and discoveries is introduced with a claim that "In no other way ... can a woman so reveal her eroticism as by an act of the will" (180). Vost complements the act of will, completes the cycle, and seems to tie up the novel's erotic focus with the realization that instinct and consciousness are merely two faces, two kinds of knowing possessed by women and that world of women in which he had hitherto moved in (with "a gaze of disbelief and desire" [179]) but never known himself.

The realization made, the prose pulls back from the scene even as it remains fixed on the transports Vost undergoes. The action of "that singular experience" seems to reach us from a mute but soaring perspective:

He lost consciousness. He regained consciousness. He found her hair in his face. The pressure of her long thighs was turning him at last into a dolphin. He heard the cry of her voice, he heard himself grunting and shouting. Thus in a city without a name, without flowers, without birds, without angels, and in a prison room containing only an iron bedstead and a broken toilet, and with a woman who had never trussed herself in black satin, here the tossing and turning Konrad Vost knew at last the transports of that singular experience which makes every man an artist: the experience, that is, of the willed erotic union. He too was able to lie flat on his bed of stars. He too was able to lie magically on his bed of hot coals. (181)
But this "singular experience," bespeaking an erotic sublimity beyond time, deceives. The erotic act exhausts the erotic will, but never the world. If the willed erotic union actually marks the collapse of world and time, as well as voice and figuration (that consummate tendency "to live so closely to the edge of likeness as to be eating the fruit, so to speak, while growing it" [T. 75]), there nevertheless returns the subliminal insistence that the final pitch of erotic knowledge is not merely a dissolution into unmediated, undifferentiated (the negation of likeness and its edges) ecstasy, but, rather, must return as the privileged, if even painful, perspective of knowing and savouring dead passion.

Erotic transport deposits its own detritus, and this detritus is the world after the fact; the world returning with its myriad reminders of dead passion. Dead passion is evidently contaminating the "childish eagerness" of a crumpled, post-coital Vost as he wakes high in his tower-top cell; wakes to the last hours of his life, and hears music cranked out in the courtyard below, hears a "slight woman ... singing in an unfamiliar language. But the voice of the woman was only a mechanical rendition of silence; the music itself was only the shape. in sound, of a dark space that had once been a cabaret in the past that was gone" (181). The detail,
its atmosphere, belongs as much to The Passion Artist as it does to Monsieur Malmort's tales in Virginia or to the Honeymoon Hide-Away episode with its "out-of-date girlie calendar above the jukebox" and the empty bar ornamented with the plump naked bodies of young Victorian women carved in bas-relief and lying prone on their rounded sides." in Second Skin (121-2). More importantly, the woman's voice signifies silence: the music announces itself as the empty space of a vanished cabaret. Both form an allegory of the aftermath of Vost's erotic transports.

The eros of the past, the remembered eros, is always elegiac: is, indeed, a fixture of dead passion whose "true tonality" the 'survival' narrators like Skipper or Cyril try to set right, but which the darker protagonists, such as Vost and Allert, dwell on with that sublime neurosis which conceives death, absence, and loss as the primordial pre-suppositions of any eros. Yet even in the oxymoronic conjoinance of "dead passion," passion is never merely dead, for this paradoxical construction conceals an extended logic of (and against) time: how time contaminates eros, erodes it, and finally, framing it at a mortal remove, provides the conditions of likeness, differentiation, and figural seduction under which desire may return.
A TATTERED TAPESTRY

The world of chronology, thrust violently upon the unfortunate, sheltered Vost, is the world which destroys most of Hawkes's characters or at least threatens to visit them with a fate evaded, disregarded, bypassed, survived, in the tyrannous symmetry of their own imaginative conceptions. Chronology—the ravages of the unexpected and the unforeseen—is rhetorized as the intrusion of Thanatos, or irony, or the self-consciousness that signals the end of fictional innocence. The Blood Oranges, like all the novels since Second Skin, relates its lyric vision in a language which cannot help but hint at, if not dwell on, the fact that imagination is the twin of annihilation and contains within itself the seeds of its own undoing.

That the novel starts out with Cyril waiting patiently, faithfully, with his erotic romp on hold, would indicate a helpless capitulation to time and the world-shaking effects following upon the death of the Law: that is, Hugh's law, or what is another name for his masturbatory gamble into suicide. This is an unintentional suicide that, curiously, severs Fiona from her devotional role as sex-kitten and, thrusting her free of Cyril's sex-song, turns her, at least provisionally, into a step-mother whose departure rends the golden
threads of her husband's life-long work. If this death, this collapse of Illyrian bliss, is meant to trick us into a moral reading of the novel, then we should not perhaps merely reverse the effect of trickery and side with Cyril, but focus on the problematic nature of a novel, a monologue, that makes such a trick possible.2

Much as Hugh's one repressive (grammatical) Law must fall by virtue of the tracks and disturbing moral ambiguities its 'grammar' contains (Hugh, after all, does not resist Fiona's temptations), Cyril's Law of erotic metamorphosis is also prey to the risks of the vast and far-reaching dynamism of his own rhetoric of eros. The point is that whatever its absurd, deceptive, or structural function, Hugh's death renders problematic the 'naturalness' of Cyril's religion of love and leads us to suspect that his sensual Illyria is the product of a pastoral cant which, in the conventions of all pastoral, is indeed timeless and unnatural (nature is merely a function of pastoral rhetoric and convention), and being without nature, is full of the longing, the dead passion, as Paco would say, of its artifice.

The ancient Illyrian landscape, the circularity of Cyril's relics, the erotic symmetries propounded in his theories of interchangeability, all partake of a visionary harmony held out against the ruin of love's tapestry. Indeed, the allegorical function of that
tapestry shows that there is no nature to be evolved outside of love and the narcissistic vision that serves it. The conflict between Hugh's privileging of monogamous law over the revisionary deconstructive/reconstructive eros of Cyril, must inevitably be contemplated, not in light of anything so simple as Cyril's ability to withstand the disillusioning aftermath of Hugh's death and Fiona's abandonment, but within the perspective pertaining to Cyril's theories of interchangeability and innocence in a pastoral setting.

For a man who, throughout his life, has "simply appeared at Love's will" (2), the revisionary strain is strong and, in its deliberate humility of purpose ("no awkward hesitation, no prideful ravaging"), serves the ends of a figural mobility pronouncing a differential ethos: lovers and love affairs are all uniquely alike, each completing the picture in some corner of "Love's most explosive field." And from this follows the widening of the concept of fidelity ("To me fidelity is the most masculine trait of all" [4]) to embrace the process of erotic re-arrangement in time:

But Catherine, I asked myself, why doesn't Catherine know by now that I am enough, that she is enough, that we are all interchangeable, so to speak, and that our present relationship is already as unlimited and undeniable as our past affair? (121)
For Cyril, like Allert, Papa, Bocage, and Seigneur, would claim himself possessed of a pluralistic ethos of erotic figurations, one not limited to "the most unpleasant banalities of sexual envy" (T. 105), or the hysteria of carnality. Cyril predicates his ethos of revisionary innocence on the belief that the adolescence of the virgin--Virginie's impossible story--already contains within it the luminous possibility of eros: that the integrity of the virgin possesses already the lyricism of an eternally renewable life whose purifying subtext, metaphorically ghost-in-the-machine, is that impossible innocence itself:

And virginity? The adolescence of the virgin? The stiff pictographic story of downcast eyes, clear water, empty hands, light the colour of cut wheat? Is all this mere chaff in the wind of the practical lover? Mere fading sickness in men like Hugh? Unreal? Perhaps. But sex-singing is hardly possible without the presence of the frail yet indestructible little two- or three-note theme of innocence, and though I am anything but insensitive to boring technicalities and dangerous by-products (religious inventions, martyrs amputating their own breasts with stolen swords, and so forth), nonetheless I have always defended the idea if not the fact of purity and have always felt warmly inclined toward the sight of narrow beds and young girls carrying clay pots to massive fountains. (268-9)

A passage like this is perhaps best read in light of Virginie. One must, in the realm of Seigneur's hard
lyric regimen, as in the ambience of Cyril's musings, lose virginity to gain innocence (if not the grace of a certain wholly erotic chastity) as the redeeming element of erotic deployment toward which original, un-informed innocence, blindly, instinctively, and even repressively, moves (Vost., for example, refusing the physical disgorgement of passion: "in the midst of his shock and pleasure he was now refusing what he knew was inevitable inside himself" [PA, 40]).

I should pause, here, to compare the lyricism of Cyril's sensual authority to the stringency of Seigneur's purely erotic ethos. Though Seigneur has no voice—it belongs to Virginie, after all—and is a lesser, and more oblique, more remote character than Cyril, there are resemblances. When Cyril opens with "the soft medieval fabric" of his love tapestry hanging "in shreds" (3), when Seigneur gives his speech on the erotic regimen, the former is already making bright and melancholy music of his now tattered autumnal eros, and the latter is already foredoomed to fire under the error of attempting to teach phallocentric servitude. Cyril subscribes to thoroughgoing egocentric discourse rich with the figures of his sensually spun pastoral mythos (gold bull, white sheep, floral symbolism). Seigneur, on the other hand, is a "Pygmalion in the medium of women." Among other things, this entails that the women of Dedale undergo
instructive rites ultimately based on a worship of the penis, the great sceptre. Both Cyril and Seigneur erect a structure that coheres figurally (according to the rhetoric that governs their vision), but must ultimately collapse under the exemplary strain of its ethic: violation.

Violation not only of marriage and unity (which Hugh is subject to and reacts against), but of innocence. Indeed, a violation so complete that innocence is subordinated to a posture, a learned 'virtue' in the general scheme of erotic deployments. However, the instruction of innocence within a general regimen of erotic learning assumes a false, or at least travestied, sense of values: false values in the sense that any possible "spiritual virtue" or redeeming ethic of this eros is actually a wholesale appropriation of love by lust. Seigneur first says it plainly when he expects his pupils have understood "that when I speak of love I have lust in mind, as when I speak of lust I am thinking of love" (V. 97-8). Later, shouting last words at Virginie from his pyre, he expresses the latent precondition of this particular knowledge: "Destroy your innocence" (212). Virginie's response is a leap into the "embrace of flames," but response as well as leap are displacements of an ideal erotic act. Seigneur has called for a self-violating act which, once executed,
would thrust the protagonist wholly into the realm of eros. This imperative summoning of the erotic will
within innocence is prefigured, with less melodramatic lyricism, in the relaxed rhythms of Cyril's monologue as he alludes to the seemingly innocent and natural necessity of fulfilling the erotic will: "at an early age, I came to know that the gods fashion us to spread the legs of a woman, or throw us together for no reason except that we complete the picture, so to speak, and join loin to loin often and easily, humbly, deliberately" (BO, 2-3).

On the level of style, we may say that all the novels of the triad take Cyril's voice, or variations thereof, in wrestling with Seigneur's equivocal, reductive declaration: all of the narrator's evades answering the paradoxes of such formulations, or bypass the dilemma of the obvious hostility posed by such a position to conventional humanistic values and ethics. And yet, considering the vast lyric energies of voice expended in exploring, justifying, confessing, revising, love's golden instincts or its dark mysteries, the fascination with flesh in Hawkes is never, as I have said, a matter of mere carnality. Each deviation from convention, each visionary swerve against the undertow of puritanism and into love's more protean laws, also signifies the latent destructiveness in love's potency.
The novels, so many of them ending in death, destruction, or riddled with negative structures, paradoxical 'truths' on the level of figuration, prove that even the most dynamic religion of eros, as voiced in ascending strains of monologue, carries within it fixations with futility, and cannot, structurally speaking, do without a Larry, a Miranda, a Hugh, A Maman.

This awareness of futility, of designs whose brilliant ends are debris, comprises the 'meaninglessness,' the lack of moral utilitarianism, the amoral detachment by which Hawkes may infuriate one. To say that these texts don't answer the moral questions they so intensely delineate, is to say that they already parody the critic's quest for an answer, and then turn it against him by not abiding within a linear narrative. The will-to-read, itself a reflexive self-violation, a willed leap, is much like the carrot game in Travesty, or like Virginie's erotic scenarios: it requires innocence, but it also makes a travesty of innocence, for there is, ultimately, only one end in sight, and that end doesn't afford the luxury of an answer, but the compulsive, if pleasurable, repetitions of the same questions. That is, to say, questions which are no longer the chaste, straightforward questions of narrative suspense, but the deceptively simple questions of critical suspension.
PART III: "SECOND SKIN"
In a 1978 interview with Heide Zeigler Hawkes said: "For the first time, with this narrator, Skipper, I allowed innocence to win out." But considering the oscillating pattern in all his works between those old egocentrically tensed polarities of innocence and nightmare, purity and experience, passivity and sadism, one can only nod with some puzzlement and ironic reservations in awarding Skipper a lyrical victory whose sustaining virtue is his baffling passivity; indeed, a victory whose testament is the novel itself completing in so many multifoiled figural flourishes, a tale of virtue rewarded.

A puzzling virtue indeed. It's ripe for the pricking, and hence it's no surprise that a number of critics have already sharpened the satiric or ironic spear-heads of their argument in an effort to deflate Skipper, to rend the protective garment of his confession, and divine Hawkes's guiding, though subtle, intelligence behind it all. In fact, if I were impelled toward irony, if I were centered on the transcendent authorial strategies of a figure named "Hawkes," and if I were drawn to the conjunction of metaphysical and moral concerns in a formalist reading, I might be tempted to do the same. I would sit easily with my own readerly 'I.'
and would rely on Edwin Honig’s discussion of irony and
the narrator as a manipulated authorial agent, to provide
my reading of Second Skin with theoretical backing:

From Gulliver’s Travels to the tales of
James and Kafka, a central character in the
guise of narrator is the instrument of the
author’s ironical purpose—preparing,
slanting, prefiguring, and finally pulling
the action together. This character is
generally an ingenious innocent, a
fair-minded observer, a critical and
passionate lover of truth. But as it turns
out, it is precisely his extreme
reasonableness that victimizes him and
reveals the extent of his self-delusion.
That is, instead of presenting the problem
straightforwardly, the author takes a
opposite tack, beguiles the reader into
agreement, and then by extending the
substance for agreement to its absurdity,
shocks by showing what the argument is really
made of. =

Certainly, a reading from this perspective
(entailing as much of Booth as it does) would be useful
in thematically exhausting/unifying the novel as an
extended satire on the incongruities and dark,
destructive ironies which undercut Skipper’s
self-affirming claims and ‘best’ intentions. The acuity,
and even programmatic necessity, of Honig’s observation
isn’t easy to shake. Switch a few names around and, for
the most part, this passage does well to explain Skipper
and his travails, and to undercut the self-confessed
validity of his virtue. But because Honig is ostensibly
concerned with satires and allegorically 
operative
fictions. I find the parallel somewhat strained, for it is Skipper. I would argue, instead of the author, who has both first and last word. Indeed, the key point is that the author has no argument to show, no unified point of view to communicate or conclusion to draw without having it disappear into the puzzling voices and virtues of Skipper himself.

It may be difficult to do without Honig's approach to character, and it may not be wholly wise to repress that approach by consigning its value to manifestly allegorical works. Still, I don't sit easily with Honig's use of the term "problem" and the reference to such things as "the substance for agreement." For this, to be sure, is language particularly appropriate to the directive mechanisms of allegory, and to the generally unverifiable discourse of authorial motives. I have used Honig, then, as a straw man, but not without the intention of at least alluding to tendencies in Second Skin criticism which fasten on key questions of narrative unreliability and narrative manipulation. These are central concerns in any reading of the novel and I keep them in mind throughout the discussion that follows. If I evade but can't completely flee them, then let it be understood that I put them under erasure (in the Derridean sense) and aim to silence them by overwriting and revising their metaphysical assumptions.
I'm seeking to displace, as successfully as I can, these metaphysical issues of authorial intention/manipulation by posing in their place the question of narrative voice. In this case, a voice I take to be Skipper's more than Hawkes's, but a voice whose origin or being is certainly immaterial and may as well be Hawkes's or Skipper's as it may be mine; or, in the most general terms, may simply be named the voice of textuality: the voice writing makes. Thus, I'm looking to situate the issue of "agreement" or "innocence" not on the manipulating authorial side of the ledger, but within the immanence of the text itself—the site (though not at all a phenomenal entity or locus) where style and signification comprise the illusion of a writing/speaking subject and his voice.

I had, in my introduction, alluded to a theoretical notion I would now hold to almost as a matter of practical principle: character as a datum irreducible to anything else but that figural convention which magnetizes other descriptive figures and generates voice. Thus, I'll pause here and articulate a desire, a will-to-read of a particular kind, which should clarify the mode of my critical intentions in regard to Second Skin: I want to get to a point where even the speaker—that last, bedrock function of a totalizing formalism—becomes, (in the Heraclitan sense) voice; and
voice. Here is the dissolution of the subject as centralizing owner of point of view. Indeed, to consider the subject thus stripped of his visibility, his point of view, means that Skipper's tale plays right into our hands. He muses first on the wind as his "true subject"—

In all likelihood my true subject may prove to be simply the wind—its changing nature, its rough and whispering characteristics, the various spices of the world which it brings together suddenly in hot or freezing gusts to alter the flavour of our inmost recollections of pleasure or pain—simply that wind to which my heart and also my skin have always been especially sensitive. (3)

—then shifts immediately to the possibility that that "true subject"

may prove to be the stark elongated brutal silhouette of a ship standing suddenly on the horizon of the mind and, all at once, making me inexplicably afraid—perhaps because it is so far off that not one detail reaches the eye, nothing of name, passengers, crew, not even smoke from the stack, so that only the ugly span of pointed iron, which ought to be powerless but moves nonetheless and is charged with all the mystery and inhuman distance of the compass, exists to incite this terrible fear and longing in a man such as myself. (3-4)

This shift between two possible "true" subjects effects a
significant and subliminally symbiotic contrast. I'll take a moment here to expand on what I take to be both the theoretical and practical intimacy of meanings in this contrast, this sudden move from the invisible coursings of wind to the sudden, static, and deceptively substantial (it is, after all, but a far-off "silhouette") appearance of the ship. If wind gives way to ship, it is only in the service of a metaphorical swerve which, as I see it, allegorizes, albeit byzantinely, a theory of narrative. Producing, in the wake of this contrast and, indeed, the whole opening chapter, a "bristly" novel, a fractured narrative which "abounds in suggestions of the ensiform, of spinosity, of the aculeated linked with images of the abrasive, the incisive and the inscriptive," Second Skin would appear to indicate that narrative should perhaps not be imaged empirically as a mimetic sequence of events as, say, may be represented cinematically, but may be more accurately conceptualized as an invisibility, as the site of the absence of any possible singularity one-to-one representationalism. In the place of this absence, a narrative, but Skipper's narrative especially, thus emphasizes its status as a signifying array of serpentine, edgy figures turning on the imagery of lines, points, and prickings; a calligraphic flourish of signs by which it proceeds to signify (in all senses of the
word: to freeze, to arrest, to allude to, to translate.

. . . the impossibly unattainable other, the signified,
into what she--Cassandra, in this case--can only be: a
sign, a cameo, a line of lip, a glimpsed cock of the
head, a statue of the BVM. 'Exteriority' but never
possibly represent it. Thus, the wind quickly "trails
off" Shipper's fingers, "the ship fades" because he
supposes "that names must precede these solid worlds of
[his] passionate time and place and action" (4).

Yet figures, rather than names, are always more
likely to be Shipper's primary concern. The
transformations of wind are his "true subject" since it
serves as a metaphor for his narrative flavourings,
commingled textures of comedy, tragedy, myth, and
romance, and is a way of reflecting on the self's
movement through the past, a way of staging the self
as a stationary traveller rudely awakened in the
vulnerability of heart and skin, by any metonymic
diminution or metaphorical exaggeration of "pointed iron"
the tattooer's needle, the pin on his Good Conduct
Medal, the "hard cold points of day" [58] on the fateful
morning in which he meets Miranda); or any phallic menace
that "moves . . . and is charged with all the mystery
and inhuman distance of the compass" and, existing to
incite "terrible fear and longing," must be exorcised by
the task of artificial insemination. And, beyond that, by
the revisionary virility of "crabbed handwriting"
exploding "into a concluding flourish" and, coinciding
with the birth of Catalina Kate's baby, serving to mark
out victory over a father's suicidal shot. But of
course, alongside all this, an insistently serpentine
entanglement of figures, including a vision of the self
as skin(s): the sensual topography of the self's island
upon which the wind plays in "hot or freezing gusts" (3),
charging recollection and transforming it into that most
inventive of lyricisms: the quest romance as first-person
reverie: "a fable of self unfolding to create its own
text."

It should soon be obvious, even where I'm
thematically silent on the subject, that an immediately
related point of inquiry is the way a voice tropes or
rhetorates its own innocence and the way the
rhetorization of that innocence sustains the voice's
claim to credibility. My central interest is to think
of, and discuss, virtue, innocence, incongruity, and
irony, within the question of style and, more precisely,
within the question of the text's voice, the hum of the
narrative itself, "its changing nature, its rough and
whispering characteristics" (3), its lush details.
Second Skin, like any of Hawkes's novels, never allows us to think of theme or content outside of style. As in the triad of monologues that followed almost a decade later in the early '70s, it shows us that the metaphysics of content (eros, nightmare) depends on a refined discursiveness of voice which underwrites these themes with those more primal to its own status as narrative: innocence, narcissism, design, desire, reverie. For all its violence of action, the novel is a confessional romance, both an apologia pro vita sua as Susan Sontag has remarked, and a document primed in lush sweeps of episodic revisionism as an argument for virtue and the triumphant innocence of a narratorial I.

A writing which reveals overt preoccupations with justifying itself is already historical, is already fleeing a history, and aims to stake out both its own futurity and its historical priority (the two are perhaps mirror images) with revisionary strategies. Skipper develops the serpentine story of his adventures at a leisureed remove, and does so by refining a certain narrative hum, or consistency of style, wherein even the most ironic reversals of his "naked history," its bouts of violence, are measuredly underwritten as extensions of his virtue and his innocence. Relayed in episodic
framings, the twisting journey to a wandering island forms a novel which shifts between the past scene of experience (the plot advancing according to the tabloidal catastrophes of an "erratic flight" [9]) and the present / scene of writing.

Yet, like Cyril's, and perhaps more like Allert's, Skipper's innocence, the self-protecting passivity of his romance, is enigmatic. The providential flourishes and the virtue that guides its remembered action is troubling, though that is not my immediate concern here, for I am more interested in the narrative intelligence, or voice, and its tropes which, aiming to secure the image of this virtue, this innocence, merely call attention to the ingenious integrative structure of the design. But in doing so, any text inevitably calls attention to the variety of entanglements. Levels of meaning which, situated 'within' a formal structure, show it outreaching its own bounds and qualifying, or supplementing, its own significance at every turn.

The novel's opening chapter, "Naming Names," for example, may be read in a number of key ways. On the technical level it is an extended periphrasis-cum-prologue, an overdetermination or amplification of certain literal "facts": family relations, suicides, scenes of writing and scenes of death. On the literary-historical level it is
infiltrated with allusions which distort and inmix conventions; or is ornamented with echoes whereby Hawkes posits his precursors: Proust, Nabokov, and Shakespeare, to mention an immediately recognizable big three. And on the most basic level, one concurrent with all these, it presents itself readily as a voice.

"We have, at the outset," as Guerard notes, "a subduing of chaos, almost a formal invocation. The elaborate reasonings and even the composed classical allusions reach us through what is, still, a speaking voice."

What Skipper is doing in "Naming Names," we later find out, is foreshortening the past, making it into a staged, episodic chronicle and then overburdening it with allusions, rhetorical meanderings, self-cancelling strokes of syntax and semiosis so that the past is as figurally rich as it is co-temporal with any possible present of writing. Both ‘past’ and ‘present’ thus interpenetrate according to a serpentine ‘logic’ of revisionism. Later, as he is about to launch on another golden musing, he begins by saying, "Yesterday, If I can trust such calculations in my time of no time" (162). A mellow, irony-edged statement to be sure, but both past and present belong to the "time of no time" since the novel, in all its entangled tendrils of voice, provides no stable frame of exteriority by which differentiation may proceed. Unlike Ulysses, and much more like
Travesty where time is merely the medium of anxiety within which voice weaves and unweaves its visions, time serves only the barest of structural functions. All time, temporality, transience, and passage, is evaded; or, rather, is subsumed within the manipulative rhetoric of a voice which claims openly that "history is a dream already dreamt and destroyed" (45). Novelistic time, though framed by Catalina Kate's nine-month pregnancy, is timeless as it spans the leisurely duration of its writing on the wandering island.

In the leisurely chapter entitled "The Artificial Inseminator" Skipper refers to his writing, his history, as "my evocation through a golden glass" (49), and, before going on to name this writing "the confession of my triumph," he raises the tropic radiance of his evocation to a higher pitch in calling it "my hymn to the invisible changing serpents of the wind." Since I will make much of the term 'serpentine' (an evident debt here, to the Renaissance notion of the figura serpentina) in relation to Skipper's penchant for silhouettes, cameos, crescents, and his authorial tendency to indulge the various metonymic disseminations of wind (into breath and voice), I must pause to give, at some length, the crowning and key example of a configurative mix (the convergence of wind, serpents, island, flesh and skin as they situate voice) as it
occurs earlier in the chapter in a masterfully sensual passage:

...the wind, this bundle of invisible snakes, roars across our wandering island—it is a wandering island, of course, unlocated in space and quite out of time—and seems to heap the shoulders with an armlike weight, to coil about my naked legs and pulse and cool and caress the flesh with an unpredictable weight and consistency, tension, of its own. These snakes that fly in the wind are as large around as tree trunks; but pliant, as everlastingly pliant, as the serpents that crowd my dreams. So the wind nests itself and bundles itself across this island, buffets the body with wedges of invisible but still sensual configurations. It drives, drives, and even when it drops down, fades, dies, it continues its gentle rubbing against the skin. Here the wind is both hotter and colder than that wind. Cassandra and I experienced on our ill-fated trip across the southwestern wartime desert of the United States, hotter and colder and more persistent, more soft or more strong and indelicacy, in its touch. Cassandra is gone but I am wrapping in wind, wall—always—from the hips: from the hips—through the thick entangled currents of this serpentine wind. (46)

The intensely naturalistic description, based wholly on the weight and consistency of wind against body, marks out a triumphant complementarity: the wind's undestructive extremities accentuate the very confidence of Skipper's striding as he moves through it. Later adding that he is "sensitive... to the green and golden contours of a country reflected in the trembling..."
and in the fullness of my own hips" [48]), and through the vagaries of his narration, himself an island on an island, protectively shrouded in a wind that has now been re-written, cannot threaten him as did the desert blasts that buffeted the southwestern desert trip. This pliancy of serpentine winds paralleling the pliancy of the serpents in his dream, becomes a function of his tale, the inscribed image of sinuous rhetorical weaving that marks a victory over Miranda, displays the assertive ease with which he is able to overturn tragedy and "restore a little of the tonality... set to rights this" passion" [150]. In this sense, the whole passage may be read as a conceit for the narration itself, the way it binds up, in (stylistically) pliant episodic gusts the play of forfeit, frustration, and death which has finally given way to a golden present. The winding serpents of wind and dream are always more wind than they are serpent, so that we see the serpentine patterns of this tale form not so much some slithering organic image as they do the immaterial, shadows, or imagoes, of a reverie fixed on the self's serpentine progress through history.

But more than a reverie: an expansive reaching which would convince on eloquence alone is, quite clearly, the very action of the novel as is marked in the chapter "Land of Spices" written eight months into Catalina Rata's pregnancy, four weeks (if it matters)
before the novel ends:

High lights of helplessness? Mere trivial record of collapse? Say, rather, that it is the chronicle of recovery, the history of courage, the dead reckoning of my romance, the act of memory, the dance of shadows. And all the earmarks of pageantry, if you will, the glow of Slipper's serpentine tale. (162)

Slipper anticipates our reservations with this romance, answers his own questions, makes a grim little pass at the irony of his "dead reckoning," alludes in so many ways to theatre and spectacle, names himself in the third person and closes off in full assurance his story. The passage moves freely between figures themselves outlining a serpentine lineage of narrative pageantry—-from textuality ("chronicle") through will ("reckoning" and "act"), and finishes finally in a "dance of shadows"—-while symmetrically tracing out on a subtler level the elements of psychic awakening or discovery which the writing now chronicles or orders as a progress from vulnerability and possible defeat to triumphant dance: recovery, courage, reckoning, action, and dance.

A "dance of shadows" is thus particularly appropriate, for it signals movement, rhythm, and elusiveness. And, lest we forget, Slipper's story is written on a "wandering island", whose tropical routes, rootless and serpentine, signify a utopia of writing.
The severed, siteless island with its fecund, self-sufficient landscape provides a pastoral pre-condition, facilitates a metaphoric parallel to the meandering security with which he traces his "nailed history" and the neatness with which the birth, the fertile fruit of endeavour and recollections in tranquility, corresponds to the final late night flourish of a tale begun one morning nine timeless months ago.

We are to understand, at the most naive level of suspended disbelief, that the history, like the island, is now siteless, lost in space as well as time, and is only available through the reflective perusals and reconstructions of the tale itself. But a tale, especially so sumptuously a serpentine one as this, may trick, deviate, digress, slither along at its own coiling momentum and, if need be, double back and swallow its own tail. As we shall see, there will be cause to question the authority of all these figures, and the questioning will actually take the form of an observation as they metamorphose into each other showing us that the validity of one is dependant on its sharing space and symbolic weight with other images perhaps equally crucial to the tale's elaboration. Textually and counter-textually, the figures run in, over, through, under, and about each other showing that the novel's ironic edge can only perplex us into comedy: a comedy
whose mistrustful mirth is persistently sundered by the ambivalence of our attitude to Skipper's achieved peace and the 'naive' dexterity of a voice that widens innocence into an extreme range of accommodation.

The accommodation is sensual, more than sexual. Indeed, the necessity of sensual awareness and sensual assertion is important for a narrator who grew up with "a special taste" for "the seeds of death" (12) and whose writing reaches for "everything [he] can think of now to restore a little of the tonality, to set to rights [his] passion" (150). In repose on a paradisial morning of writing, he can finally stop to specify the place of his triumph as the novel itself: he can pause to situate or reveal himself in the relishing of a courageous, virtuous survival which is the very music of that writing: "here I mention my triumph, here reveal myself and choose to step from behind the scenes of my naked history, resorting to this strategy from need but also with a certain obvious pride, self-satisfaction" (48). And later: "Mere victory over Miranda is nothing, while virtue is everything" (99). The word "here," in the former passage, is a synecdoche for the immanence of the whole tale, the conflation of its nine-month writing time and its well-framed, shrewdly high-lighted history, within a voice so generally dispassionate with its striding, that one may fail to see passion serpentine immanent in its
apparent candor. Or one may misread the passion of a retroactively viewed (created?) innocence and call it unrelia-
bility, all the while failing to see a passionate virtue in the brutal instances of violence that both highlight Skipper's confessional divestment and elevate passivity, patience, and writing (over "Death [Trem1o] among others] in his nakedness or in his several disguises" [195]) into an antithetical sublimity.
INCISIONS, INSCRIPTIONS, IMPRINTS

I extract from Skipper's recollection of a Chinatown cafe at war's end, crowded to the hectic gaiety of a torch song called "Tangerine," "the shot-glasses flung like jewels among the sailors," and a blacked-out waterfront "bloody with shore leave and sick with the bodies of young girls sticking to the walls of moist unlighted corridors":

She was in my arms and lifeless, nearly lifeless. Together we stood: the girl, young mother, war bride in her crumpled frock, and I in my cap and crumpled uniform of white duck. . . . I holding the nearly lifeless hand and feeling her waist growing smaller and smaller in the wet curve of my arm. . . . There should have been love in our dark and nameless Chinatown cafe. But there was only an hour to spare. [Only an] agitated eccentric naval officer, well-meaning man, and soft young woman, serious, downcast—only ourselves and in the middle of no romance (10:11)

The pathos here is as thick, and sticky, and smokily erotic as may be expected in a scene that reads as if a healed but still slightly elegiac voice-over is accompanying a nostalgic, doomy film sequence lifted out of '40s Hollywood. But much of this is atmospheric stage-setting, flooded with a poignancy which we read without grief because we know too little, are still too
early in the novel, and the rhetorical patterns we have been exposed to are too deliberately felt, too brilliantly realized to produce the visceral fractures of genuine narrative passion. This 'genuine' passion, its desperate onrush of narrative suspense, begins developing with Cassandra's first insertion into Skipper's narrative ("'I think you would like to know,' she began [13]), gains momentum with her whispered manipulations in the tattooing scene, and finally displays its first substantial manifestation in the Missing Bandits' episode. Its most sustained and indeed exemplary pitch ("I felt relentless" [192]) is reached in the sublimely negative climax: ("'you're not crying, are you, Cassandra? Please don't.'" But the damage was done and I was only an old bird in an empty nest" [198]) of the drag race on Dog's Head beach.

Cassandra's suicide and Skipper's desolation are, of course, prefigured in the pathos (the dead passion) of "Agony of the Sailor," a chapter produced immediately in the wake of a prologue where Skipper has stated that he is "no mere sickened leaf on a dead tide" and that his "true subject may prove to be simply the wind" (3). If we accept the metaphorical claim that the wind is indeed his true subject, if we agree that passion attaches itself only to the most momentous of recollections in a novel almost wholly comprised of recollections, then as
readers we keep ourselves from stepping through the doors of a theatre where unreliability and its norms are projected, and we read carefully but sympathetically within the perspectival shifts and subtle nuances of Skipper’s voice(s). The novel does not immobilize us in an anguished theatre of tragedy, but escorts us in circuitous routes across the visual field of a memory panorama, making pause for a moment to study tragic dispositions, to stop and survey cruel wastes, observe a sinister ambush, witness treacherous folly, and finally leaves us to gaze meditatively on a scene of love and redemption.

Through this frieze-like back-and-forth narrative runs the sharp end-point imagery of laceration and inscription, as well as the serpentine threads of a writing which, in producing a coiled plot, gains strength by illustrating its elements, its details, its characters, in the imagery of an ingenious verbal draftsmanship. "Agony of the Sailor" is the paradigmatic example of the text’s bristly, coiling texture. Skipper cuts from heated setting to direct speech, and integrates the two. He is dancing with Cassandra. He has finished speaking, and now he scrupulously sets the scene for her reply (a scrupulousity marked by details of a larger image pattern: touch of fingertips, line of jaw, windy whisper, coiling snake):
I held her, with a moistened finger:
touched her dry mouth. I raised her
chin—unsmiling dimple, unblemished curve
of her little proud motherhood—I watched
her grey eyes and I waited. Waited for
the sound of the voice which was always a
whisper and which I never failed to hear.
And now the eyes were tuned, the lips
were unsealed—moving, opening wide
enough to admit a straw—I was flocced
with the sound of the whisper and sight
of a tiny golden snake wriggling up the
delicate cleft of her throat—still no
smile, never a smile—and curling in a
circle to pulse, to die, in the shallow
white nest of her temple." (15)

Whispers and soft indentations of the flesh in
Cassandra's face will soon be superseded by what we soon
see as the order of pain that that "tiny golden snake" is
capable of carrying. The build-up toward the tattooing
scene (with the puncture of the electric needle recalling
the "helpless abomination" [19] wreaked by Tremlow) is
intensified when Cassandra tells him she has burned
Fernandez's green guitar, and Skipper, in an almost
insultingly few display of affection, takes his Good
Conduct Ribbon which, "like a dazzling insect" marks "the
spot of [his] heart in all that wrinkled and sullied
field of white," and pins it on Cassandra's "rumpled
frock." The pinning of the Good Conduct ribbon is an
event immediately obtaining in ironies since Skipper's
bestowal costs him a minor "pinprick, drop of blood,
another stain," and thus leaves his "sullied field of
white" promiscuously exposed, vulnerable to Cassandra's
more calculated, less impulsive counter-pricking.
Indeed, breath's golden snake becomes a painfully
inscribed green lizard when Cassandra requests that
Fernandez's name be burned in, printed over Skipper's own
heart.

As I have already remarked, scars, fingers, and
"burning pinpricks" (19) are the elements of an elaborate
figural effort which Skipper's narrative pursues as he
recalls the attempts to save Cassandra from suicide; but,
throughout, Cassandra's "serious duplicity" (14) is as
much a force that degrades him and ultimately determines
her own destruction, as it is, in this scene, a capacity
to double Skipper, outmaneuver him in the folly of his
own innocence. Details are instructive and unmistakably
significant. Her whisper continues "its small golden
thread of intelligence exactly on the threshold of sound
and [15] as fine and formidable as the look in her eye"
(13). She takes note of the ribbon, "touching it with
the tip of her pinky--no other sign than this" (he
recalls) and maintains the "minimum formal cadences" (14)
of her disciplined and vengeful sorrow. Later, after the
tattooing, stirring a swizzle stick, touching again her
frock, she torments Skipper (and Sonny) with the "sonber
clarity" (23) of a communication that casts into sharp
relief facts as yet unannounced in the arabesques of his
tale. Fernandez, she explains, left "for the love of
another person. A man who was tall, dark-haired, sun-tanned and who wore civilian clothes. A gunner's mate named Harry. He had a scar. Also, he was tattooed" (23-4).

There are a number of other wandering associations available in this chapter. Skipper feels on his own broad belly the shape of Cassandra's during their weary dance, and so we are prepared, albeit distantly, for the brutal belly-slamming contest with Uncle Billy, and, finally, for the pastoral fertility lesson after the iguana has disengaged from Catalina Kate's back and Skipper urges her to reach down where she had been lying face first and "feel with her soft young fingers . . . the warmth of the recent flesh and the little humped hieroglyphic in the warm sand" (109). The move from Cassandra's belly to Kate's could be thought as a shift along the axis of polarity: from barrenness (widowed Cassandra will later issue a premature foetus) to fertility; from grief and resentment to an innocent and fecund purity. The imprinted warmth of the "Unborn baby down there in the sand" (109) signifies triumph, neutralizing—via a metamorphosis of sharp point into blunt imprint—the hard-edged imagery associated with his dreams of "the once-living or hardly living members" of an "adored and dreadful family" (3-4).

However, this triumph is still a long way off in
"Agony of the Sailor," where the imagery of stomach with its contained secret (foetal) life is distributed alongside the imagery of incision, inscription, figurative glyphs, and finally snake and lizard life, via the tattooer who, in the chapter's central scene, is described as an "oaf" with the "comatose eyes of the artist . . . drinking [Cassandra] in . . . from where he fell in a mountain on his disreputable table" (15).

The mountain of flesh adorned with "the sweaty peacock colors of his self-inflicted art" contrasts Skipper's skin which is "an even and lively red, unbroken, unmarked by disfiguring scars or blemishes," and ultimately prefigures the imminent collapse of Skipper's pre-sacrificial mass into "pinched declivities, pockets of fat, strange white unexpected mounds, deep creases, ugly stains, secret little tunnels burrowing into all the quivering fortifications of the joints" (18).

In contrast to the quickness with which he sizes up the tattooer, the intensity of this all-too-appropriate Ruben-esque self-evocation establishes Skipper's imposing vulnerability, and exposes the opulence of a flesh which Cassandra will see sadistically defaced as she whispers her desire into the tattooer's ear and he literally/ritualistically inscribes her desire. Skipper
who hears his daughter refer to him as her "boy friend" and who immediately perceives the sordid sexual underseams of the whole scenario, helplessly observes what happens next: "and I saw him move, saw his blue tattooed hand swim like a trained seal in the slime of a drawer which he had yanked all at once into his belly" (16). The details—hand searching with the blind instinct of a "trained seal" fishing something out of the drawer's "slime"—are related to the novel's various fingerings, and more conspicuously, if rather distantly, to the crude obstetric imagery of Cap Leech's (he too of comatose eyes and incisive instruments) work with Harry Bohn's birth and the Mandan's tooth, as well as the foetus Luke Lampson hooks in The Beetle Leg and Miranda eventually gives to Skipper as a birthday 'gift.'

Finally, attaching pain and death to the idea of birth by insisting on its complicity with imagery of skin, stomach, and fingering, we note that from the drawer against which the belly abuts emerges the "greasy envelope" (which Skipper knows to contain tiny prints of pornographic imagery) on which Cassandra writes (on the outside of course) "in large block letters" the name Fernández which Skipper soon enough sees as a "green lizard" lying "exposed and crawling on [his] breast" (20). In giving birth to Skipper's pain via the tattoo, she actually turns his breast—as Sonny bitterly
remarks—"into a tombstone full of ache and pain" (22). It is a tombstone whose legend is not wholly effaced by time, even in the paradisial realm of the wandering island from whence Skipper recounts all this. Indeed, by the end of "Agony of the Sailor" Skipper's tombstone chest painfully incarnates what was earlier a foreshadowing, merely a matter of breath and metaphor: the recollected Skipper is revealed as suddenly, inevitably, helplessly, bearing the inscribed legacy of those "seeds of death" he has claimed to know with such familiarity.
EVEN BASTARDY HAS ITS PLACE

Even bastardy has its place if it's "soft and well-intentioned" (2). At least such is the conclusion Skipper comes to reflecting on Pixie whom he slept beside at night, "looming" in "silhouette" "as she sat the always unfamiliar white statuary of the chamber pot." The chamber pot, the silhouette, the looming shadow—all inverse parallels to the first "uncensored scene" (7) of a father's suicide: a scene which, in recollection, Skipper sees as marking Pixie's significance as "the final accident" in a "long line" of death. But whereas the father's death was hastened by the first example of Skipper's "destructive sympathy," the ghostly vigil with Pixie implies survival: "In the mirror our two heads—the bald one, the little silver one—would make faces together, reflecting for our innocent amusement the unhappy expressions worn once by those whom she and I—Pixie and I—had survived (2).

This mirrored pairing, signifying the end of a bastardy loosed by a father's suicidal shot which Skipper soberly claims "was meant for me" but "went wild," thus extends an inverse figural parallel as it spans that originary scene of death—

At least I was witness to my
father's death. In a sense was the
child-accomplice of whatever dark phantom
might have been materializing by his side
that noon hour he finally locked himself
in the hot lavatory—it was a Friday in
midsummer—and rushed through the bare
essentials of taking his life." (7)

--where Skipper himself is child and accomplice-phantom,
and then doubles the recollection of mirrored images (the
two heads: one bald, bullet-shaped: the other silvery,
bullet-colored) with "the little unused bullet [the shot
that couldn’t carry away Skipper, couldn’t claim Pixie?]
which was companion to the one he fired" and which
Skipper "later fished from the trembling cupfuls of water
in the bottom of the toilet bowl."

Skipper fishes this bullet, this seed of death, out.

But if there is closure derivable from such symbolic
parallels as compare bullets to seeds, bullets to heads,
shadows to accomplices, then it’s no doubt torturous. Or,
at the very least, paradoxical. The imaginary line of
illegitimacy is confessionally redeemed by a man who is
"the aggressive personification of serenity" (3) and
whose tale affirms this victorious serenity in the lyric
coils of its phyrriach subtext. I say 'phyrriach' for
evident reasons. It is, after all, a tale centering on,
lying from, coming out of suicide. Suicide
paradoxically breeding suicide, until it is neutralized
by a naked history. In other words, by a writing which
luridiates in the ability to flourish, write against time
and minister against the dark sense of destiny awakened by the repercussive fragments of the father's blast.

Yes, but what does this mean? To begin, it means that to gaze, and to survive having gazed on, the suicidal gallery of the past, is--to put it naively--to assign history to a realm of signification, figuration. Voice poised paradoxically in an aggressive dispensation of serenity, Skipper is, throughout and to the last, a writer, man of prodigious imaginative capabilities. He follows, with an obeisant grace, the wild bullet ricocheting in all manner across space and time. But the manner of his following is impotent, somewhat similar to the fatalism that governs Odysseus's journey, rewards his tenacity, and brings him to final peace in the Ithacan grove. Skipper saves no one, announcing that he has "suffered with a certain dignity for father, wife, daughter, each of whom was his own Antigone"; he calls them "the sand-scratchers, the impatient sufferers of self-inflicted death, the curious adventurers for whom I remain alive" (2). Truly, then, the novel as a closed structure--the chronicling of history closed off by writing as the redemptive end of a perverse lineage of suicide--would seem to be consistent with the thematic utterances of its main character, a narrator/author who celebrates this closure in saying "history is a dream already dreamt and destroyed" (45).
To recount before going on: if the "soft and well-intentioned" bastardy functions as an associative symbolic extension of a father's "wild shot" of death missing Skipper but claiming others and inseminating him with an intimate knowledge of "the seeds of death" (12), then its symbolic role as the narrative spine of his "naked history," of the plot itself, leads me to muse on two things: that narrative as imaginative bastardy is a surprisingly appropriate metaphor for Hawkes's episodic fragmentations and his originally announced tendency toward subversion of conventional plot, character, and setting; and, the idea that Skipper's choice of bastardy, as one of many analogues to the 'facts' of his story, emphasizes his strong imaginative talents, his tendency to what critics assume are figural distortions and unreliable perceptions, but perhaps are really elements contained in the complex metaphor of the subject and that subject's disappearance into the entire system of figural traces which constitute his voice.

The strain of bastardy and the burden of deathward history is solemnly summoned and then dispatched in images of line, the inscribed narrative hardenings of time past. This constitutes an immediately recognizable figural pattern which prevails throughout the novel on many associative levels. When in the first chapter Skipper refers to
the once-living or hardly living members of my adored and dreadful family, the cameo profiles of my beribboned brooch, the figures cut loose so terribly by that first explosion which occurred in my father's private lavatory, (2-3)

he is already spanning two key associations. The "cameo profiles" recall both the silhouette Skipper makes near Piece, and his own crouched cello-playing shadow on the other side of the lavatory door. From shadows to silhouettes to cameos: variations on a theme, one that extends into the very realm of writing, inscription, and calligraphy. In both cases, "the figures cut loose so terribly" are profiled in the beribboned, serpentine windings of Skipper's own writing and refer us to the fact that in the emblematic flourishes of this chronicling Skipper often casts himself as a cameo, a frozen (impotent) figure in a waxen tableau.

And yet, to look to Skipper's passivity qua passivity and so miss his passion, is merely to look at the novel for its flaws: its speaker's lapses in perception and judgement. A misreading or misplaced looking of this sort dwells on narrative seams which apparently undo a narrator's virtuous passivity and courageous innocence. But such a reading, teeming with suspicions and depending on extra-textual and intuitive norms (since the speaker's voice, his—and not the author's—text is, ultimately, all we have to go on)
marks one's contamination by ironies and all those figures of deception or incongruity with which one may easily bypass voice in favour of (unreliable) message. The point, however, is that any pinning down of moral, thematic, or psychological identity in a character or a novel is necessarily accomplished by extrapolating from particular figures, devices, analogies which comprise voice. This notion of voice suggests that unreliability is generally an invalid concept insofar as a character is not a unity or an identity, but essentially a subject; and a subject, in the sense in which I use it here, is unthinkable outside of the plurality of figures and traces that, reciprocally speaking, guarantee his status as subject via the voice in which this plurality is manifest. What Second Skin does is play with the revisionary innocence of that voice so that the novel that follows the tightly packed, dazzlingly obscure beauty of its opening chapter, has, in that chapter, already begun teaching us how to attend to Skipper's pace and his many and serpentine insinuations, foreshadowings as qualified by the immanent lyricism of memory.

When Skipper describes his manner of walking as "slow-paced, impervious, deliberate" (3), he is explicitly troping the revisionary mode of his history. As author/narrator he is asserting the value and necessity of a style by linking it to a vision of self.
In short, he is situating the subject, the 'I,' while subtly commenting on the only way that that subject collects and reveals himself. That he does this in the novel's first chapter is crucial, for it is a way of acclimatizing the reader both with the exigencies of a subject and a balmy tropical style which, in essence, produces the vast shimmering image of that subjectivity. When he discounts the rhetorically self-posed argument that he may be a "sickened leaf on a dead tide" or a "dead weight burdening some gaudy hammock," the answer (in the form of a rhetorical question) is given so that it not only furthers our picture of his character, but also accounts for the very tone, mood ("serenity" and "peace"), and rhythm ("forward drift or handsome locomotion") of the memory-narrative, and so constitutes the very image of his voice: "In body, in mind, am I not rather the aggressive personification of serenity, the eternal forward drift or handsome locomotion of peace itself?" (3)

What I want to say, then, is that to look for Skipper the reliable or unreliable 'character' in all this is best traded off in favour of looking for Skipper the characterized; that is, by looking at the figures that do not so much constitute an objectively perceivable character (how could such a thing exist in a monologue novel?), but partake of a rhetorical strategy comprising
composite layers of meaning. The rhetorical strategy is Skipper's, but it also belongs to the reader who is himself a rhetorician, an organizer of perceptions. Hence, by "composite layers of meaning" I mean meaning cut loose, set free, bastardized in the intercourse of critic and text. This type of meaning, produced in mutual interpenetration, is an overdetermination, for the text itself is, as we have seen even in a brief glimpse of end-pointed images, figurally overdetermined. This, then, is meaning so overdetermined (here synonymous with: fragmented) that it renders absurd any search for clearly decipherable fixities of motive or reason. And indeed, to look at Skipper there, in the field of overdetermination (in the voice), is to look at the written Skipper, the image of Skipper within a company of other things, places, names, persons, events, devices, allegories, implications, resemblances, distinctions.
Cassandra

A cross-indexed listing would not do justice to the embroidered interplay of incisional and end-pointed imagery in Second Skin. One would have to embroider a critical fiction of one's own in order to understand that such a list is not absurdly random or encyclopedically dull, but is manifestly significant insofar as the images occur in an abundance that evades gratuitly and ultimately tempts significance. I start, then, by following out an extended example designed to give strong sense of the subtly orchestrated deployment of cameos, tableau, profiles, engraved reliefs, incise silhouettes and shades, that form the textural topography, the nuances of voice in the novel.

The focus here will be, more or less, on Cassandra who is the perpetual crisis point of the novel's past action: the character whose life and death is especially important to Skipper's history, because she was the last and most beloved victim of the bastard lineage, and is thus the most significant element integrating the tireless designs of death and demise for whose "poison" Skipper has substituted the "milk of [his] courageous heart" (2). ¹

Early in the novel she is incisively drawn: "chin tilted, lips tight in a crescent, spine straight--and
reaching out for the black angle of [Sonny's] hand" (22). Then, during the moonlight busride across the Southwest desert, her face is "a small luminous profile on a silver coin, the coin unearthed happily from an old ruin and the face expressionless, fixed, the wasted impression of some little long-forgotten queen" (29). There is a circuitous association here with the "bright paper medallions of the Roman Church" (22) in Sonny's cap, for during the drive to Honeymoon Hide-Away Skipper remarks more than once on a "tall white plastic Madonna [Queen of Heaven] screwed to the dashboard" (114)—an image that has been foreshadowed (particularly appropriate word) when in the kissing bandits scene he refers to Cassandra as "only a silvery blue madonna in the desert" (42). Still later, her head is "small and serpentine in the moonlight" (31); she is again a "sweet queenly head on an old coin" (32), and her mouth is a "pale little fissure" (35).

Later in the novel, observing Cassandra and Miranda in their knitting, joined by a "black umbilicus" (70), Skipper begins to notice that Cassandra is Miranda's shadow, "sweet silent shadow of the big widow in slacks" (69). The point isn't merely that both are widows, that one is a quieter accessory of the other, and that Skipper is beginning to intuit the next destructive step in the lineage of bastardy, but that he is showing the formation, via parallels and shadowy extension, "of
secret designs and death" (69). Earlier, when Skipper gains his second "glimpse" of Miranda, he fleshes it out this way:

Kneeling and sitting back on her heels--wicked posturing, rank mystery of the triangle, bright and brazen cohesion between the rump and calves and canary yellow thighs. . . . her shoulders were thrown back and her powerful spine was a crescent and her broad hands were cupped on her knees (62).

Cassandra is indeed her lesser shadow, and an abstract foreshadowing as we see in the excerpted passage above ("lips tight in a crescent, spine straight") from which we can easily trace Skipper effecting an anatomical displacement from Cassandra to Miranda. The displacement also affords us a contrast between the two women: one, stiffer, straighter, reserved with a more grieving sinuous elegance, the other one larger, brazen in the flesh, compressed into a tensile crescent-backed triangle—a triangle whose mystery is not merely "ran!" according to her posturing, but is also black in regard to the "mystery" of the devouring female sex: packed into a pair of canary yellow tights.

Cassandra also functions within a whole other series of relationships centered on the presence of drivers in the novel. She herself is the driver on the night of her honeymoon ("I glanced at her--mere doll behind the wheel,
line of firmness in her jaw, little soft hands tight and
delicate on the wheel" [116]); and later Skipper loses
her precisely when he himself is driving and mistakes a
decoy dummy for Cassandra ("two silhouetted heads"
[193]), as he chases Bud's hot rod up and down Dog's Head
beach on the Atlantic island.

In both cases, as well as in two other scenes
dealing with travel, the driver is, as expected, stiff,
doll-like (no doubt derived from that first image of
Skipper "at last" sitting up in his father's hearse, "like
a miniature fat corpse" discovering the paraphernalia of
death "turned to dense geometric substances of
light--orange, yellow, radiant pink," the very colors of
coral and tropical perception [7-8]). static, immobile,
completing mysteriously a menacing tableau. We first
observe this figure before the embarkation across the
American Southwest: "Driver--another mean nigger, as
Sonny would say--already stiff and silhouetted behind his
sheet of glass and wearing his dark slant-eyed driving
glasses and his little Air Force style cap crushed and
peaked" (26). The "mean nigger" prefigures every ominous
phantom or sinister shape and shadow Skipper runs up
against; moreover, observable behind glass sitting stiff
and silhouetted, and disguised in all his paraphernalia,
he is, like the "ship standing suddenly on the horizon of
the mind" (3), both dark doll and mysterious harbinger of
fear and longing.

When Skipper and Cassandra later ride in the back seat of a limousine on the way to Gertrude's grave, this Gothic play of echoes is intensified. There is "a curiously muffled and familiar look about the driver" (132) though with his cap and dark glasses Skipper 'can't quite place him': the shatterproof glass that encloses them isolates an instance of allegoric cross-play within the novel and seems to seal in the episode's symbolic weight:

There was a shadow in the front seat next to the driver, a dark amorphous shadow that swelled and tried to change its position and vague shape according to the curves in the road, black shadow that seemed to be held in its seat by the now terrible speed of the Caddy. The driver had both hands on the wheel and now the speed was whispering inside my spine. I noticed that the tints of the window and windshield glass had slid, suddenly, onto Cassandra's black dress, were shining there in the black planes of her body, and that she was looking at me. The black shadow was snuggling up to the driver. (133)

What better way to allegorize Cassandra's flight from Skipper toward death, than by ordering the sentence so that, side by side with her gaze back at him, we perceive the shadow snuggling up next to the driver? Mere phenomenon of light, this shadow, but in a novel so given over to a (polarized) play of figures (the one dominant
pole being 'pointed', the other being wind: the two related by the adjective/figure 'serpentine'), not the least of which are concerned with nature and atmospherics (wind, light, invisible shores, blasted landscapes), we are well aware by this point of the dark threads Skipper is capable of stitching with. The manner of this stitching is largely a matter of Gothic phrasing: "a dark amorphous shadow," a "vague shape," "terrible speed," and tints sliding "suddenly," shifting dramatically, so that our attention moves from the shadowed vacant seat next to the driver, to the reflected tints marking Cassandra who, in turn, stares at Skipper. Thus Skipper's dark gilding of a noon-day episode replete with serpentine associations (including the curving road which parallels the "endless ribbon of our ocean road"
[50] observed from the wandering island) is evidently derived from a figure of death's vague and shifting shade. That is, to say, the "dark amorphous shadow" is a cousin of 'death's seeds' in "Agony of The Sailor," and represents the ghastly maturing of these seeds into nothing but "vague shape" and "black shadow." The fact that the shadow falls on Cassandra need not elicit further comment as she is, quite clearly, the lost black centre of the novel's past action.
THE STILL VOICE

Now I sit at my long table in the middle of my loud wandering night and by the light of a candle—one half-burned candle saved from last night’s spectacle—I watch this final flourish of my own hand and muse and blow away the ashes and listen to the breathing among the rubbery leaves and the insects sweating out the night. Because now I am fifty-nine years old and I knew I would be, and now there is the sun in the evening, the moon at dawn, the still voice. That’s it. The sun in the evening. The moon at dawn. The still voice. (210)

In relating here a scene of completion, a final scene of writing, Skipper quietly comments on the status of his own text. It is a text whose "true subject may have proven to be simply the wind" bringing together "the various spices of the world" (5), and hence a text which he completes, appropriately enough, by blowing away ashes. But if these ashes and this "final flourish" signify death, then surely this death is (paradoxically) Edenic and triumphant.

A scene of completion related on balmy tropical night thick with the presence of "breathing among the rubbery leaves and the insects sweating out the night," completes what was initially a naming of names, an "Adamic prologue." Here, at the end, then, Skipper himself among so many leaves of his "naked history," sweating out a long Edenic night. But an Edenic night
with a difference, for this Eden is an invisible wandering island with a terrestrial topos, and one must still write and still sweat in chronicling the ordeals survived in regaining paradise.

Yet here, at the end of his tale, all those myriad memories which were once "on the tip of [his] tongue and crowding [his] eye" (99), are vanished or annihilated to the rhythms of the one voice. The last passage is a calm, final instance of Skipper's stepping out "from behind the scenes" of his history, and he does it with such a stillness of voice that one would be led to believe that this disjunctive story is indeed a history made naked in its telling, rendered clean of its "verbal garments" by the time the last hissing syllables of this voice trail away in a reader's respiratory hollow.

To successfully close the novel, complete the utopian circularity of an apologia, and preserve the notion that virtue, as vision, has appropriated the ravages of history to the ease of its own time, Skipper brings the discourse to a satisfying, peaceful, and intimate end. Seeing now, in his 59th year, the work of his own hand by the light of a faithful but disintegrating candle, he hits upon an expansive, unifying, series of images cutting across time, space, and self. Observing the hand of his own flourishing, Skipper sees ("That's it") that the flourish has already spelled out the end, and he
pauses to repeat it in three end-stopped meditative entities: "The sun in the evening. The moon at dawn. The still voice." The voice both laying itself to rest and culminating in these images is ostensibly dispassionate, consistent in tone to the opening sentiments of one who has remained, above and beyond his victimization, a "lover of my harmless and sanguine self" (1), and whose identity within the episodic frame (Slipper's novel begins with feet propped on a "rotted sill") of his "naked history" is now complete with the flourish of its final peace: "the still voice" of a triumphant writing which set out to prove that "surely I am more than a man of love. It will be clear, I think, that I am a man of courage as well" (1).

A man of love, or a man of cunning? It hardly seems to matter at this point. The flourish that ends in silent (written) voice and late-night stillness is much more significant. There are, after all, suns in eveningtime, moons at dawn, and still voices, though this last tricky (non)image of voice is, more so than the diaphanous others, the most subtly conceived of all. It is telling us, among other things, that the silence of told tale is the silence of the stilled voice which, in turn, is also a version of the book's perpetually active silence.

A novel that journeys between two cemeteries and
ends in a still voice assures us of its accomplishment as the highly polished staging of a dramatic imagination: a staging effected in tones of purgative revisionism as the narrative circles back, in spiraling swoops, into old terrain to prove at every turn that "history is a dream already dreamt and destroyed" (45). In this way, Slipper's story correlates with, and puts into practice, with perhaps a similar degree of illusive calm but with none of the haste of pursued doom. Papa's transcendent claim that "ours is the power to invent the very world we are quitting" (T. 57).
POSTSCRIPT

Perhaps it has been in the interest of stimulating what, in Harold Bloom's terms, would be my own 'strong misreading,' that I have written against Hawkes: and have hoped to have effaced him in Parts II and III of the thesis after laying down the serpentine groundwork of his disappearance in Part I. In any case, by Parts II and III "Hawkes" has become a textual activity I have fixed on and named the "voice" of a text: the voice whose function it is to disseminate figures under the aegis of its (fictional) author/narrator.

Figuration, so central to this paper, is pursued episodically and somewhat disymmetrically, and it is so for obvious reasons. My intention, here, was not to be an encyclopedist of tropes or their systematic expositor, but to sustain myself as a seeker of auras (in Walter Benjamin's sense of the word), interweaving Hawkes's voice with another one—the voice of this text.

Of course, to write or speak of 'voice' (mine, his, yours) is not new, nor does it have to be considered a priori valid. But that is what I have attempted to do: to write on voice and to prioritize it by attempting to recover it from the metaphysics of an author-owner. I hope to have progressively shifted points of centrality: to displace Hawkes with an author/narrator, and then to
dissolve (in everything except name) the author/narrator into voice; and, finally, to disperse this voice amidst the coils and combinations of my own rhetoric—a rhetoric awakened by what remains, beyond any and all modes of critical execution, an admirer’s response to these novels.
PART I: INTRODUCTION AND THEORETICAL PRELIMINARIES

HAWKES


2 There are no definitions of mannerism. There are only footnotes to an intuition, or digressions on deterritorialization. Hence, my use of 'mannerism' in regard to Hawkes may seem deliriously scattered, insofar as it combines what others have recognized as baroque angularities of style and an intense, hallucinatory, preciosity of detailing. As rococo, as idiosyncratic, as this detailing may sometimes be, it takes its place within the general baroque rhythms of Hawkes's structural ambitions, and both, in turn, comprise the general manneristic, or anti-realistic virility of the whole.

I subsume baroque under mannerism in the same spirit that E.R. Curtius does in his chapter on Mannerism in *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, trans. Willard Trask (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1953). Spanning Greek and Latin antiquity, the Middle Ages, even approaching the modern period, Curtius surveys a number of figurative techniques in order to prove that "in rhetoric itself... lies concealed one of the seeds of mannerism" (274). Indeed, I find in Curtius crucial support for my notion that figural luxuriance in a writer such as Hawkes (not to forget Djuna Barnes, Nathanael West, Quevedo, or any of the precursors he names for himself) derives from a strong anti-classical (read: anti-normative, anti-universalist) detachment in regard to his materials or the givens of his genre (plot, character, setting), and a subsequent distortion of their formal aspect: "The mannerist wants to say things not normally but abnormally. He prefers the artificial and affected to the natural. He wants to surprise, to astonish, to dazzle. While there is only one way of saving things naturally, there are a thousand forms of unnaturalness" (282). I don't intend this passage to serve as a systematic definition, but it is a prologue to the understanding of a deeply-rooted ornamental tendency that designates the daemonic unnaturalness of 'mannerism.'
I'll provide something of a background on what I take to be Hawkes’s mannerism by stringing together at random a number of critics commenting either on the general flavour of his œuvre or on specific texts.

Frederick Busch, *Hawkes: A Guide to his Fictions* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1973), p. xxiv, remarks that Hawkes's "is the frisson of the metaphysical." An innocuous, almost aphoristic, beginning though it also allusively alludes us of the gilded cadaver of Donnean mode and method: the disturbing, but seductive exorbitance of an almost sacerdotal sensuousness, and visions of symmetries bent floridly out of shape, or committed, finally, to the debris of death.

This Donne-founded allegory may also serve to isolate us on Slipper’s island of paradisal prose. Writing on *Second Skin*, Christopher Ricks, *The Merrill Studies in Second Skin*, ed. John Graham (Columbus: Charles E. Merrill, 1971), pp. 9-10, notes that "The rhythms are luxuriantly enervated. . . . The poised ostentation of Mr. Hawkes’s style both invites and then freezes our laughter. It is the same with the purple patches: they know they are purple, and they choose—not succumb to—the cadences of blank verse. The decadent romanticism is not self-indulgent but is about self-indulgence." Anthologized in the same volume, Susan Sontag understands that for Hawkes, plot, like moral perspective, always remains obliquely afloat in the corrugations of style, by which I think she means the textures of voice: "it is always, in a Hawkes novel, the style. He is the master of an immensely artful, corrugated surface of language—a looped, virile, restless style that really is the story" (4).

Meanwhile, the most compact comment on semantic coils and caprice in the Hawkesian sentence comes from Tony Tanner, *City of Words: American Fictions, 1850-1870* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1971), p. 209:

"[An] aspect of Hawkes's style, which results from the tweezer-like selection and placing of words, is a phenomenon which we may call semantic retardation. He presents us with surprisingly sustained sentences, of Faulknerian length and rhythmic complexity, which force us to pause at every word, to ponder and appreciate each "isolate" in the "set." This sometimes has the effect of defeating the usual semantic impact of a sentence: we do not register a unit of sense and information but find ourselves
taking the slow impress of vivid fragments, unanticipated phrases, unusual configurations. It is in such ways that 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.

Having understood this, and getting back to mannerism (im)proper, consider finally, and more extensively, Arthur Danto's review of Humors of Blood and Skin, "Gems Without their Settings." New York Times Book Review, 25 November 1984, p. 3:

John Hawkes is the Cellini of contemporary fiction, a demonic artificer of works in verbal virtu. The surviving masterpiece of the legendary saltcellar of Vienna, an extravagant and mannered ornament almost ironically disproportionate to its residual domestic function as a holder of the king's condiment. So with the intricately filigreed exercises in narrative architecture typical of Mr. Hawkes: they are achievements in the craft of pure imagination and disproportionate to any of the residual uses to which literature might be put. Indeed, they 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 could be utilized for anything except art.

I let Danto's conceit close this extended note, but not before urging that the Cellini saltcellar as a mannerist figure par excellence need not overshadow the "outrageously exaggerated" naivete of his Autobiography which, as James Mirollo, Mannerism and Renaissance Poetry (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), p. 72, notes further, "is a precious index to the attitudes that underlie the mannerist mode."

4 John Hawkes, *Travesty* (New York: New Directions, 1976), p. 91; hereafter cited as T. Citations from other Hawkes novels appearing in the body of the text are abbreviated as follows:

*Adventures in the Alaskan Skin Trade*, AA  
*Bleak Leg*, BL  
*The Blood Oranges*, BO  
*The Cannibal*, C  
*Death, Sleep and the Traveler*, DST, DST  
*The Lime Twig*, LT  
*The Passion Artist*, PA  
*Second Skin*, SS  
*Virginies: Her Two Lives*, V


To name another contemporary critic somewhat more conservative than Bloom in his conception of critical back-tracking, we need only look to the more measured context of Frank Kermode's *The Genesis of Secrecy: On the Interpretation of Narrative* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979), p. 20: "Sometimes it appears that the history of interpretation may be thought of as a history of exclusions, which enable us to seize upon this issue rather than some other as central, and choose from the remaining mass only what seems most compliant."


7 John Hawkes, "Interviews with John Hawkes," *The Radical Imagination and the Liberal Tradition: Interviews with English and American Novelists*, eds. Heide Ziegler and Christopher Bigsby (London: Junction Books, 1982), p. 177. Hawkes, responding to Ziegler's remark that his "characters take on the role of author in a much more comprehensive way than the average first-person narrator does," says, "I think you're the only person so far to bring up this idea of doubling between author and narrator in my fiction, and to associate this narrative device, as you call it, with romantic impulse." Needless to say, the author/narrator is crucial to my study insomuch as he is the prism in whose voice Hawkes's authorial disappearance is allegorized: that is, through his voice, the voice of his text, the author/narrator serves the allegorical function of authorial
disappearance and reveals this disappearance--this transmission of authorial authority to a first-person character, and ultimately to the reader himself--as a necessary romantic impulse within deconstructive criticism.

3 This one note should suffice for at least three related ideas.


This has become something of a landmark document in Hawkes criticism. The interview contains perhaps the most serviceable, and subsequently most oft-quoted, piece of commentary available on the structure (not to overlook, however, such seductive abstractions as the
definition of structure: "verbal and psychological coherence" of his novels. Almost all other critical essays are extrapolations or monumental footnotes to what Hawkes states in this passage (I italicize in order to emphasize passages bearing direct relation to my complementarily conceived use of terms such as "voice"--or that which Hawkes says is discovered in the reading/writing process--and "lyricism"--or what he calls the poetic method--in this essay):

My novels are not highly plotted, but certainly they're elaborately structured. I began to write fiction on the assumption that the true enemies of the novel were plot, character, setting, and theme, and having once abandoned these familiar ways of thinking about fiction, totality of vision or structure was really all that remained. And structure--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. However, as I suggested before, this kind of structure can't be planned in advance but can only be discovered in the writing process itself....I'm trying to hold in balance poetic and novelistic methods in order to make the novel a more valid and pleasurable experience.


13 See Jack Beatty, "Uncle Jake and the Mosquito-Crazed Prospector," The New York Times Book Review, 29 September 1985, p. 9. Beatty calls Adventures in the Alaskan Skin Trade "the most accomplished meaningless novel I have ever read": it is "for all its size too small...like Alaska itself--cold, grand and all but empty."

Beatty joins a number of voices necessarily, but ambivalently, acknowledging the evident intensity of Hawkes's rationalism (see Note 15 below), or what I refer
to as his mannerism. Two reviews of *Second Skin* offer sharp and not wholly unperceptive comments. Paul Levine, "Individualism and the Traditional Talent," *The Hudson Review*, Vol. 17, No. 3 (Autumn 1964), p. 47b: "Mr. Hawkes is a novelist of virtuoso originality, but his tolerance for bizarre effects remains a defect of his imagination." David Madden, "Enemies of Love," *Kenyon Review*, Vol. 26, No. 3 (Summer 1964), p. 578: "Hawkes has vision, but it's a seeing made possible by the masterful forcing of style. If he strives for organic unity, each part rots before my eyes as I perceive it. Hawkes could achieve his fine effects with any character. Any situation: his style can make anything seem fictively real and important."


In regard to this idea of performance as related to my continuing obsession with Hawkes's mannerism, I note John Shearman, *Mannerism* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1967), p. 44, on two elements "both central to Mannerism: the concept of the work of art as an enduring virtuoso performance ('something stupendous') and the concept of the 'absolute' work of art."


Perhaps the most convenient opposition to consider, concerning the novel now, would be that between the empirical realist, for whom the novel is in one way or another a report upon the world, and that of the rationalist, for whom the novel is an intense interior, formed like a flower from within, and opening out only into absence.

16 Hawkes has, on more than one occasion, conceptualized his work by such polarities as life/death ("Eros is only the obverse of Thanatos.", in Heide Ziegler, ed., *The Radical Imagination and the Liberal Tradition*, p. 175) yet he has at least always done so with an eye to paradox, metamorphosis, and the interpenetrability, or inverse re-doubling of any strict terminological (metaphysical, in the Derridean-sense) contraries. On the other hand, even among the best critics there's a tendency to remain comfortably situated within a certain naive, and theoretically unexamined
vocabulary of terms, formal assumptions, and thematic readings.

The Eros/Thanatos dualism is perhaps one of the most accessible all-purpose polarities available. Yet for all its value, it has, through uncritical overuse nearly become wholly empty. Its most extensive application is in John Kuehl, John Hawkes and the Craft of Conflict (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1975).

IMAGINATION, REVISIONISM


2 Bloom, *Ago*, pp. 242, 244.


4 Friedler, *Love and Death in the American Novel*, p. 27: "The American writer inhabits a country at once the dream of Europe and a fact of history; he lives on the last horizon of an endlessly retreating vision of innocence--on the 'frontier,' which is to say, the margin where the theory of original goodness and the fact of original sin come face to face."

AUTHOR, IRONY, UNRELIABILITY

1 I'm thinking here of two texts: Roland Barthes.
and Wang, 1977); and Michel Foucault, "What is an
Author?" Language, Counter-Memorizer Practice: Selected
Essays and Interviews by Michel Foucault (Ithaca:
Cornell University Press, 1977). This essay by Foucault
also appears in Textual Strategies: Perspectives in
Post-Structuralist Criticism, ed. Josue Harari (Ithaca:

In reply, and in the schizophrenic interest of
fairness, I'm obliged to cite Bloom, Agon, p. 48: "The
various waves of Modernism from Eliot to the related
Modemism of Barthes and Foucault have played at emptying
out the authorial subject, but this is an ancient play,
and recurs in every Modernism from second-century B.C.E.
Alexandria down to our moment."

2 Steven Bell, "Realism Rewritten: Another Reading
of Hawkes's Second Skin," Bell State University
Forum, Vol. 25, No. 3 (Summer 1982), pp. 44-69.

Though Bell has anticipated me with his essay,
there remains a fundamental difference in perspective.
He approaches the subject of the author's disappearance,
but he maintains the sovereignty of the authorial centre
by conceiving of the disappearing act as a master stroke
of controlling artifice: "Hawkes's presence as author or
'Implied author' is all but effaced, and is in fact
almost unnecessary to a clear understanding of the
novel... [He] is undeniably the controlling
presence behind the work, but the significant difference
is that Hawkes uses his authorial control paradoxically,
in an attempt to eliminate it and efface his presence"
(66). This position is further elaborated in Note 8 of
his essay: "I contend that it is of more significance to
recognize now the 'artifice' of Second Skin is found in
its (utile) attempt to eliminate from its surface the
(artificial) presence of the (implied) author, in its
letting flow of pure subjectivity, in its conscious
attempt at unself-consciousness, in its non-stylized
(unmediated) style" (66).

However, I would claim that it is precisely with
this observation, linking 'supposed' authorial
disappearance with the subsequent unleashing of the
narrator's 'pure subjectivity,' that Bell approaches but
falls short of what I explore with the notion of 'voice':
that is, what covers the displacement of the (the
ontological, intentional, phenomenological, omniscient,
structural) author into author/narrator, and thereby
leads us to conceive the dissolution of that narrator's
'subjectivity' or any other 'affixed' item of fictional
convention (character, consciousness, point-of-view),
into the play of figures wherein the author, or implied 
author, or fictional author, may be situated as a purely 
functional 'being.'

3 Maurice Blanchot, The gaze of Orpheus and Other 
Literary Essays, trans. Lydia Davis (Barrytown, NY: 

4 Heide Ziegler, "Postmodernism as Autobiographical 
Commentary: The Blood Oranges and Virginie," The 
Review of Contemporary Fiction, Vol. 5, No. 3 (Fall 
1985), p. 211.

5 Robert Steiner, "Form and the Bourgeois Traveler," 
A John Hawkes Symposium: Design and Debris (New 
that for "the contemporary reader" Hawkes's experimental 
narratives "should produce something more radical than 
the contemplation of irony. The storyteller's function 
today is to 'erotize' knowledge."

6 Jacques Derrida, Of Grammatology, trans. 
Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins 

7 M.M. Bakhtin, "The Epic and the Novel," The 
Dialogic Imagination, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael 
Holquist, ed. Michael Holquist (Austin: University of 
Texas Press, 1981), pp. 5-7. I'm thinking here of 
Bakhtin's claim that 
the novel gets on poorly with other 
genres... The novel parodies 
other genres (precisely in their role as 
genres): it exposes the conventionality 
of their forms and language; it squeezes 
out some genres and incorporates others 
into its own peculiar structure, re-formulating and re-accentuating them. 
...

In an era when the novel reigns 
supreme, almost all the remaining genres 
are to a greater or lesser extent 
'novelized' (might we also say that in an 
era when theoretical criticism reigns 
supreme, almost all remaining literary 
genres take on interpretative features,
thus remaining true to Wallace Stevens's dictum that "the best poetry will be rhetorical criticism?]. [But] throughout its entire history there is [also] a consistent parodying or travesty of dominant or fashionable novels that attempt to become models for the genre. . . . ever-developing genre.

Needless to say, Balint's views have immediate application to Hawkes's work, and have already been unknowingly remarked on by critics whenever they have noted loose genealogical interpenetration of genres, internal comic disruptions, or parodies, echoes, allusions, to other works and forms. Take, as a unique and appropriately sharp insight, Christopher Ricks's remark (Studies in Second Skin, pp. 11-12) that if we want parallels to the mythic horror in Second Skin, it will be found in "the Elizabethan minor epic, where Ovid's tales of violence and perversion, the 'heady riots, incests, rapes' of Marlowe were made into something new, something that did not deny the cruelty but was determined to find a cool way of reducing cruelty's power to drive us mad."

In rewarding Ricks's subtle observation here, I should call on Harold Bloom to say (italics mine) that "Criticism is the art of knowing the hidden roads that go from poem to poem" (The Anxiety of Influence [New York: Oxford University Press, 1973], p. 96).

VOICE, PERFORMANCE

1 Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Self-Reliance," The Selected Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson, ed. Brooks Atkinson (New York: Modern Library, 1940), p. 145: "In every work of genius we recognize our own rejected thoughts; they come back to us with a certain alienated majesty."

2 My strategy of reciprocation derives from Derrida's key passage on the "disappearance of [the] origin" and transcendental signified, in Of Grammatology, p. 61:
The trace is not only the disappearance of origin—within the discourse that we sustain and according to the path that we follow it means that the origin did not even disappear, that it was never constituted except reciprocally by a non-origin, the trace, which thus becomes the origin of the origin. From then on, to wrench the concept of the trace from the classical scheme, which would derive it from a presence or an originary nontrace and which would make of it an empirical marvel, one must indeed speak of an originary trace or arche-trace. Yet we know that that concept destroys its name and that, if all begins with the trace, there is above all no originary trace.


It is no longer a question of imitation, nor of reduplication, nor even of parody. It is rather a question of substituting signs of the real for the real itself, that is, an operation to deter every real process by its operational double, a metastable, programmatic, perfect descriptive machine which provides all the signs of the real and short-circuits all its vicissitudes. (254)

Whereas representation tries to absorb simulation by interpreting it as false representation, simulation envelops the whole edifice of representation as itself a simulacrum.

These would be the successive phases of the image:

- it is the reflection of a basic reality
- it masks and perverts a basic reality
- it masks the absence of a basic reality
- it bears no relation to any reality
whatsoever: it is its own pure simulacrum.

In the first case, the image is a good appearance—the representation is of the order of sacrament. In the second, it is an evil appearance—of the order of malefic. In the third, it plays at being an appearance—it is of the order of sorcery. In the fourth, it is no longer in the order of appearance at all, but of simulation.

The transition from signs which dissimulate something to signs which dissimulate that there is nothing marks the decisive turning point. The first implies a theology of truth and secrecy (to which the notion of ideology still belongs). The second inaugurates an age of simulacra and simulation, in which there is no longer any God [author] to recognize his own, nor any last [critical] judgement to separate true from false, the real from its artificial resurrection, since everything is already dead and risen in advance. (256-7)

Now consider, as supplementary to this, Derrida's passage in Of Grammatology, pp. 158-9 (italics in the original):

Yet if reading must not be content with doubling the text, it cannot legitimately transgress the text toward something other than it, toward a referent (a reality that is metaphysical, historical, psychobiographical, etc.) or toward a signified outside the text whose content could take place, could have taken place outside of language, that is to say, in the sense that we give here to that word, outside of writing in general. . . . There is nothing outside of the text [there is no outside-text: il n'y a pas de hors-texte]. . . . For we have read, in the text, that the absolute present, Nature, that which words like "real mother" name, have always already escaped, have never existed: that what opens meaning and language is writing as the disappearance of natural presence.

In the latter essay I'm thinking especially of Genette's discussion of metaphor: "its promotion to the rank of figure of analogy par excellence is the result of a sort of takeover... by which, again, metaphor, absorbing its ultimate adversary [metonymy], turns itself into the 'trope of tropes' (Sejâcher), the 'figure of figures' (Dегuy), the kernel, the heart, and ultimately the essence and almost the whole of rhetoric" (113). He also speaks of "an inflation of metaphor" (114) and what seems to him to be "the profound desire of a whole modern poetics... to suppress the divisions [among rhetorical figures] and to establish the absolute, undivided rule of metaphor" (117).


I want to also cite Said's useful note that "The paradox is that something as impersonal as a text, or a record, can nevertheless deliver an imprint or a trace of something as lively, immediate, and transitory as a voice... a text needs to show how it bears a personality, for which a common analogy is a talking voice addressing someone" (p. 163 in Textual Strategies; p. 73 in the Harvard edition where the excerpt I quote in this note appears in a considerably revised form).
PART II: COILS AND COMBINATIONS, OR EROS

WHO IS SAFE?

1 Harold Bloom, Poetry and Repression: Revisionism from Blake to Stevens (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), p. 115: "the transumptive mode, which is necessarily both retrospective and prospective."


INHUMAN ALIGNMENTS


2 See Christine Laniel, "The Rhetoric of Excess in John Hawkes's Travesty," The Review of Contemporary Fiction, Vol. 3, No. 3 (Fall 1983): 177-185. Laniel makes some key observations on Travesty as a text sustained on death's door by contradictory metaphoric clusters which thereby also make it a meditation on the "ars poetica." I find much of what she says in this essay complementary to my own discussion of the subject, and his voice, in Hawkes's fiction. Reading Travesty, she claims,

we are left with the disquieting notion that the self is no longer the active and thinking subject who controls his language but only the product of an ambiguous, treacherous, fraudulent flow of words.

But the creative potentialities of language are to be found precisely in its
deceptiveness: "... the true language, always precious and treacherous at the same time" (53). This should be related to the meditation on the poetic function of language which underlies the whole text. The poetic quality of a text can be achieved precisely in the detours and contours of indirect language. The poetic potentialities of language arise from its power of deception and treachery.

So that the poetic writing of Travesty is wrought on the brink of destruction. It is a paradoxical attempt to produce a text undermined by its own destructiveness, like extravagant architectural structures crumbling upon themselves as though sucked down by an internal vacuum. ... The basic metaphor pervading the text is that of the car speeding toward its own destruction, so that the time of the fiction is nothing but a reprieve for the passengers since "there shall be no survivors" (128). ... Travesty reveals an insight into the nature of poetic writing which makes the fiction a real "Ars poetica." Because the act of poetic writing is necessarily condemned to death, it is always in reprieve; and it can only survive by creating its own destruction, just like the driver of the speeding car. Travesty is a reflection on the poetic function of language and particularly on the metaphorical process. The fiction analyzes itself as producing metaphors which are the vehicle of poetic writing, but a vehicle doomed to self-destruction. (183).

It doesn't take much to leap from Laniel's notion of the self-analyzing yet necessarily death-driven meditation the novel subjects itself to as writing, to Charles Baxter's "In the Suicide Seat: Reading John Hawkes's Travesty," Georgia Review, Vol 34, No. 4 (Winter 1980), pp. 871-85. Discussing the climactic statement, "Imagined life is more ex cathedra than remembered life," Baxter refers to Henri's "shock of insight" as an acknowledgment of "the truth of the Symbolist ideal" (880). The insight crowns the novel's premise ("the accident, which makes no sense anyway") as well as the whole "overload of stimuli" provoked in its
wake, and thus "as a sentence of death ... is meant to break the chain of pre-programmed causes and to introduce a free space where the imagination presumably expands" (881). I take Baxter's idea of the sentence to form a double-edged figure: the sentence is both a semantic unit and a brilliantly conceived, but cruel pronouncement "mockingly powerful" in the hands (mouth text?) of its wielder. Moreover, we read the novel as a death-sentence populated with death-sentences in all their allusive, anecdotal, metaphorical, serpentine overdeterminations. Their paradigm is the annihilation of all remembered, experienced life to a knife-edge Symbolist ethos of imagination.

As an additional, if indirectly related point, I should note that Gerard Genette, in "Proust Palimpsest," *Figures of Literary Discourse*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), pp. 207-8, speaks of "The passage from the ontological to the analogical, from the substantial style to the metaphorical style"; there is, no doubt, a correlation here with Papa's choice of imaginative over remembered life.

5 Perhaps this is what Hawkes was unconsciously invoking when he said that he began writing fiction "on the assumption that the true [who, then, are the false?] enemies of the novel were plot, character, "setting, and theme."


4 I rely on Baudrillard (see Part I. "Voice. Performance." Note 3) here in support of my notion that a character or any fictional self or subject is primarily a simulacrum and never a representation of a "real" supra-linguistic consciousness (whatever that may be). Needless to say, this perspective has jarring consequences for readings from unreliability.

THE DEAD PASSION

through all the resources of troping." In regard to
Allert's possible status as a former patient of Acres
Wild, and his decision to spend the rest of his life
thinking and dreaming, note also Bloom's statement that
"A neurotic's dreams are seen as belated efforts to
master trauma after the shock has been inflicted"
(151).

2 Hawkes, in conversation with Paul Emmett and
Richard Vine, p. 167, says: "an epigraph by Braque: 'The
vase gives shape to space, music to silence.' That really
should have been the epigraph for Travié.
" In
conversation with Heide Ziegler (The Radical Imagination
and the Liberal Tradition, [London: Junction Books,
1982], p. 179), he goes even further, saying that it is
"The epigraph most appropriate to [the] triad."

A TATTERED TAPESTRY

1 John Hawkes, The Radical Imagination and the
Liberal Tradition, p. 179: "annihilation is the twin of
the imagination."

2 Hawkes, in an "Interview" in John Kuehl, John
Hawkes and the Craft of Conflict (New Brunswick: Rutgers
University Press, 1975), p. 169, says: "I meant the
death of Hugh in a sense to trick the reader into
thinking of it as a moral judgement on the multiple
relationships—but to me it is not."

3 Bärtha Harris, "Sade Cases" [review of
Virginie], TV Voice, 18 May 1982, p. 46: "without
innocence we are bereft of appetite."

Lorna Sage, "Spoils of Erotic Parody," [review of
Virginie], The Observer, 30 January 1983, p. 47:
"The point being, for Hawkes, that speculations on the
art of pleasure can only take place via an innocent
consciousness... The pursuit of pleasure (as
commentators on pornography have often remarked) is an
arduous rather than ardent business, and requires a
systematic deformation of style."

5 I take this from a review of Virginie by Alan Friedman, "Pleasure in Pain." New York Times Book Review, 27 June 1982, p. 20: "Now this is the stuff of fable and romance. . . . In both plots the eroticism is choreographed. Passion is rhetorical. Sexuality is emblematic of spiritual virtue."
PART III: "SECOND SKIN"

THIS SERPENTINE TALE


Honig's observation, coupled with Hawkes's comments on "imperception" in the Ziegler interview (see Note 1), would seem to be foundational to any, and all, critical fixations on narratorial unreliability. It appears that there is something in the machinery of fiction, the way in which we read it (having restructured it to certain expectations) and come to construe a first-person narrative consciousness, that lends itself intrinsically to suspicions of unreliability: as if in having accepted the 'fact' of a 'creatively' rendered 'consciousness,' we are free to be suspicious or critical about the things we would least like (perhaps rarely admit) in ourselves or others: as if in this anonymous embrace with the created other, or what is commonly called reading, we are quick to anatomize with a certain clinical ruthlessness, and do so knowing full well that a mind--any mind, a fictional one--invested with all the rhetoric of (probable) motives, implorations of sincerity, unique explanations, charged descriptions, serpentine thought-processes, is likely too 'real' in its deviousness to be trusted. I use this extended aside, then, to introduce the citation of a short litany of suspicions as have collected around Skipper and trapped him in the prison-house of unreliability.

narrative as self-deceptive: "The foundation of this self-deception is in Skipper's life-long refusal to acknowledge his impotence and possible homosexual inclinations" (The homosexual angle is supported by a number of critics).


Even in the briefest of counter-texts, we hear the note of mistrust and are told to "expect" confirmation for our suspicions. Take Thomas Friedman, "Hawkes's Second Skin," Explicator, Vol. 38, No. 1 (Fall 1979), item 28, p. 428: "Each of [Skipper's] works as clear, as distinct, as beautifully formed as a snowflake, together he makes them a blinding blizzard. One should expect constant contradiction, falsification and misstatement."

Intentional fallacy aside, it's not at all harmful to throw Hawkes himself in amidst this rather merciless chorus. In "The Floating Opera and Second Skin," Mosaic, Vol. 18, No. 1 (1974), p. 22, he says that Skipper is a "morally reprehensible" narrator and that "the writer knows more than his narrator"; he also remarks on Skipper's "histrionic sensibility" and claims that "For Skipper there is no logic, except the 'logic' of violent coincidence and purely sensuous association."

A critique of some complexity, and one that initiates here my own revisionary ambitions, appears in Frederick Karl's American Fictions: 1940-1980 (New York: Harper and Row, 1983). Karl also alludes to a hierarchic double agency and maintains the primacy of the authorial function as, it crafts Skipper's unreliability: "There is a double agent here which enters into virtually every aspect of the novel: Hawkes peering down the ruins of his material and doling it out through Skipper's memory; and Skipper himself, peering down the ruins of his life and trying to find areas of meaning, not at all above distorting his own powers in order to shore up the past" (221). But he also makes the important observation that "except for Skipper, who is writing this narrative, almost no one speaks in Second Skin" and that thus "it is a novel of great silences and interstices, like Robbe-Grillet's fictions," a novel where Hawkes is typically probing "margins and seams" and exploring "static silences" (221).

However, this insight isn't taken far enough. Karl
doesn't really do much with the idea that one of the novel's primary structural metaphors is the frame (Skipper begins by noting "the hummingbird that darts to the flower beyond the rotted sill where my feet are propped" [11] and the framing of the tale as a series of "episodic memory tableau:... What is woven together within this frame of revisionary retrospection is an end-to-end... omission of action on Skipper's part) via the imagery of outlines, silhouettes, inscriptions, frozen gestures, absurd melodramatic spectacles (cello playing at the father's suicide), desolate or grotesque precision of certain details in the aftermath of calamity ("the revered fingers... responsible for the spicery red lines scattered over everything.") [156] at the site of Fernando's suicide: "the eternal picking fingers of wave on rock below [Dog's Head Light]. The shoals... miles long and black and sharp, long serrated tentacles that began at the base of the promontory and radiated out to sea." [198-9], at the site of Cassandra's suicide.

Indeed, this sort of appropriation reveals any speech, silence, and even perception (all attributes of the subject, the author/narrator who Earl places at the right hand of The Author), all fall outside the realm of unreliability: insofar as the procession of simulacra (the procession of tableau) erases the ever-illusory possibility of there having been any omission of mimetic facts. Speech, silence, perception, and action/non-action, all remain unrepresentable and indeed 'unreal' (like the wandering island and its wind) outside of a serpentine system of significations where history is consumed in a (re)visionary sensuousness.

For Peter Brooks, Studies in Second Skin, p. 16, "Second Skin depends on a point of view both unreliable and banal. Its mode is apologetic." Brooks then thrusts us back onto the familiar and central metaphor of theatre and tableau: Skipper's "apology necessarily takes the form of a series of isolated acts, 'arrested moments'-narrative method appropriate to Hawles' scenic imagination—which he must attempt to understand and explain." This last point is rather dubious: for as should be clear, there is little that Skipper does not understand or cannot, in retrospect, comically and wistfully rhetorize. Nevertheless, in the very next sentence, Brooks continues his dialogic vying whereby structural principles are again joined to an assertion of narratorial unreliability: "The structure of [Skipper's] tale--complex, illogical, and emotionally effective--is the product of his combined evasiveness and sincerity." Thus Brooks's, like all readings from unreliability, tends to simplify anxiety and paranoia (he says "Skipper sees reality as a 'plot'") and reduce them to mere
unreliability, when what is precisely unreliable is not
the meaning, the intention, of the narrator’s point of
view (which is variable according to textual figures and
is actually the master metaphor according to which
figural play is psychologized), but the cabal of figures
which do not so much order the subject’s consciousness,
but stage it as a rhetorically plural text.

In adding to my counter-attack against readings from
unreliability, I cite two articles quite close to my
sympathies. First, Robert Steiner, “Form and the
Bourgeois Traveler,” A John Hawkes Symposium: Design and
Debris (New York: New Directions, 1977), pp. 121-2:
“Beyond the formalism of the traditional unreliable
narrator, Skipper is, in fact, a triumphant narrator
because he is a fraudulent storyteller...” The
mythic shroud that overwhelms [his] past fears and
provides a distracting glaze ought to remind us of the
chronic plasticity which paradises of the alienated
imagination share.” Second, and more substantially, a
reading which, much to my liking, overturns the
simplistic notion of unreliability in favor of ‘voice.’
is Mary Robertson’s “The ‘Crisis in Comedy’ as a Problem
of the Sign: The Example of Hawkes’s Second Skin,”
4 (Winter 1984), pp. 425-54. Her debunking of
irony/unreliability trades on the idea that

such an operation of exposure would
depend on establishing some point of
perspective on Skipper from the outside,
but that we do not have because the whole
tale is his. Yet neither do we have the
direct, fresh voice we find in most
first-person narrative: Skipper’s ‘own’
voice is self-estranged, multidimensional, and byzantine. (437)
Skipper’s intimate voice seems bizarre
because it has the quality of reported
rather than direct speech... In
Hawkes’s work the ‘outside’ voice is
within; the direct speech comes in the
form of reported speech—or rather, the
difference is deconstructed. We feel
uneasy when this voice tries to purchase
from us the kind of sympathy ordinarily
generated by direct speech by means of
language with the qualities of abstract
speech; yet this is Skipper’s way
throughout the novel. (438)
Robertson also notes that Skipper is not a "represented character" (434) and argues this by showing, with an analysis of his opening words, how his voice is colonized by other voices, (multiplicity of classical allusions, rhetorical indeterminations, incongruence of figures, indirection, appositive descriptions, ironic suspensions perennially blooming in the split of signifier/signified) which break the unified voice of character or subject. Thus, other voices belong, conceptually and in practice, to that realm of supplementary multiplicities made suddenly affordable by the recognition of Derridean dissemination and difference: "Not only can we not judge Skipper partially from an observer's perspective, but we cannot even keep his ontological status as character straight because his voice is a hieroglyph confirming its vacancy or 'otherness' in its attempts to express itself... the only way the self's 'voice' can 'originate' its own expressions is by being previously (simultaneously?) colonized and constituted by something exterior to it" (439).

4 Note Gerard Genette, Narrative Discourse (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980), p. 164, arguing against the notion of visibility inherent in mimesis and point-of-view: "Narrative, oral or written, is a fact of language, and language signifies without imitating."

5 Marc Chenetier, "The Pen the Skin: Inscription and Cryptography in John Hawles's Second Skin," The Review of Contemporary Fiction, Vol. 3, No. 3 (Fall 1983), pp. 170. This is a key essay for my reading of Second Skin, especially as it anticipates and, in key instances, correlates with many of the basic observations by which I proceed.

Other critics discussing, or somehow essentially alluding to the imagery of incision, pricking, probing, puncturing, inscribing, are: Albert Guérard, "Second Skin: The Light and Dark Affirmation," Studies in Second Skin, pp. 93-102. Guérard notes what is so central to my reading of the novel: "Skipper's narrative is serpentine"; he also notes that "A very complex play of imagery (surrounding fears of impotence, castration, homosexual violation) juxtaposes snakes and rubber with the stinging of needles and bees" (94).

Tony Tanner, City of Words: American Fiction, 1950-1970 (London: Jonathan Cape, 1971), pp. 221: "What all [the novel's] landscapes have in common is the presence in them (or on them) of sharp, hard things, sometimes natural, more often man-made, forming a
continuum of stony and metallic objects, places and people, most of them with dangerous points and edges. Skipper, with his hypersensitive skin, suffers unusual cuts and woundings. He has trouble with all edged or pointed things, and hostility assails him in a variety of metallic forms. He is constantly liable to abrasions and puncturings."


This idea of "staging the self" as well as casting others as canoes, profiles, silhouetted figures in a tableau, is crucial to my discussion of Skipper's peculiar brand of figuration (and is intimately related to the notion of bringing texts to performance, especially Hawkesian first-person texts which openly image their own performative status). It has, in one way or another, been remarked on by a number of commentators. I now take three examples which I consider to be both paradigmatic and idiosyncratic.

Susan Sontag, in Studies in Second Skin, p. 4, says that "Skipper is not so much an ordinary man, a realistic character in a realistic novel, as a palpable vessel of viscera and juices, his life not so much a story as a frieze of fleshly details."

On another tack, Thomas LeClair, "The Unreliability of Innocence: John Hawkes's Second Skin," p. 14, unintentionally, and rather handily, accents the "source" of Skipper's theatre of outlined women ("those figures cut loose so terribly by that first explosion" [SS. 1]), by describing Skipper's "final vision" of his mother, as an "arrested image" which--true to the emblematic, linear scheme of standards, but veering far from LeClair's psychologically weighted phrasing--functions "as a standard against which he measures all women."

An intriguing and more acute series of observations may be found in Jay Fellows, "Diderot, Hawles, and the Tableau mouvant de l'âme: From the Motion Pictures of Interior Animation to the Luxury of Still Exterior Projection," Diderot Studies, Vol. 18 (1975), p. 62: "Hawkes' blood, despite the fact that he presents himself as a novelist, is the blood of a poet who would be a director of film like Gustave." Fellows goes on to say: "Hearing, smelling, the Hawkesian poison--in this case a first-person who is killed one third of the way through. The Liza Jindig only to be reborn as the gentle and accommodating Skipper of the later Second Skin--always
sees. And that sight may be of a projected vision that is portraiture about ready to break into the animation of a moving picture" (76).

Frederick Karl. American Fictions, 1940-1980. P.

LEISURELY CHAPTERS


See Geoffrey of Vinsauf cited in E.F. Curtius. European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1953), p. 277. Note 10: "To prolong the work, you must avoid naming things by their names. Use other designations: reveal not a thing entirely but suggest it by hints [inner—cf. 'innuendo']: nor let your words course through your subject but rather take a long and circuitous route around what you were going to say briefly."

I should add that as an issue in language-based criticism, Slipper's extended periphrasis has been to date most keenly remarked on by Mary Robertson, "The 'Crisis in Comedy' as a Problem of the Sign: The Example of Hawkes' Second Skin." pp. 431-2:

[With "Naming Names"] we are caught in a crossfire between forces tending to extreme intimacy and forces unusually distancing. . . . The very precision of enumerated details slows the pace of the forming idea drastically and often causes us to halt and read over again, sometimes unbelieving of the triviality or outrageousness of the choices.

All of the passage seems a self-canceling combination of portentous
and petty fact (his walk) and of semantic contradictions. As the reader is trying to get a firm picture of Skipper, it is continually rotting out from under him or her like the decayed sill on which Skipper's feet are resting. If the reader consents to recognize a character here at all, much less an attractive one, it is almost in spite of where the text is leading. From the first, Skipper forces the reader into a complicity which in retrospect might seem to have been accomplished only through the reader's own 'bad faith' decision to pretend not to notice what he or she knows is there, or rather, the 'nothing that is' there except for the chain of words.

Carl. American Fictions, 1940-1980, is helpful here insofar as he single-handedly opens up a string of allusive possibilities: "To begin, Skipper is himself the old man of the sea, a combination of a wandering Ulises, a magical Prospero-Ariel, a desolate Menelaus, and the mythical Poseidon . . . the epic 'I', the picaro, the narrator of his own mock-epic" (221). But then, "While he appears to be a picaro of sorts (and encourages this manly aspect), there is always the 'other' dimension, alien to the picaresque, of the inner self having already unfolded before the story is related" (5).

This notion of "the inner self having already unfolded," contains a silent, double-edged point of reference. On the one hand, I'm reminded of William Gass's idea of the rationalist novel, "an intense interior, formed like a flower from within, and opening out only into absence" (see Part I, "Hawkes," Note 15); and, on the other, it also recalls for me Harold Bloom's idea of the internalization of the quest for romance.

Whether internal or external, the romance-myth allusions in Second Skin are themselves obviously not 'pure,' combining, as they do, mock-epic pastoralism and Shakespearean travesties, and functioning within an apparatus of narrative techniques that remind one critic (Johan Thielemans, "Violated Bodies: Hawkes's Second Skin, The Review of Contemporary Fiction (Fall 1981), p. 195), of Orson Welles's film The Lady from Shanghai.

The point, then, is to see, as Norman Lavers, "The Structure of Second Skin," Newf. Vol. 5, No. 7 (Spring 1972), p. 210, does, that Hawkes has written "an 'arcadian' romance" and "has gone back to the original
Greek romance for its form"; the novel contains "the very furniture of the romance of Longus, Apollonius Rhodius, Xenophon, Apuleius."

But, seeing this, the second point is to take heed of Robert Steiner's ("Form and the Bourgeois Traveler," A John Hawkes Symposium, p. 115) claim that "While we are occupied with mythmaking, and the transfigurations implied by it, myth is being unraveled in a contradictory invisible book behind our backs. Hawkes' thesis is not a story of myth, as many contend. The text hinders its own interpretation ultimately, and because it is itself an interpretation" (p. 126).

Needless to say, inmixing, distortion, parody, or novelization (as Bahltin would have it) of genres cannot be extended solely on the basis of shifting contexts and perspectives, for Karl also rightfully sees Second Skin as "an intensely American work in the Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman, Edenic tradition" (53).

But even the reasonably sound genealogical prospectus of this last point, raises a number of modifications or counter-positions. Lucy Frost, "Awakening Paradise," Studies in Second Skin, argues rather dubiously, I think) that the flight to Eden involves coming to terms with the past as a ruin since Cassandra's death defeats Skipper "utterly" and therefore "the chronicle" he "writes on the sunny island is the history of his defeat." (55); Stephen Nichols, "Vision and Tradition in Second Skin," (appearing in the same volume), speaks of "the identification of island worlds, with pre-fall paradise and the post-fall infernal world, and the recognition that the written word at once creates man's awareness of paradise and imparts the grim intelligence of its loss" (70). The most perceptive comment, however, comes from William Robinson, "John Hawkes' Artificial Inseminator" (also in Studies), when he calls the novel an "ironic version of metamorphosis story and [of The Terrest]" (64). He goes on remarking on its "romance-correlate" by claiming that Second Skin, by self-admission (162, 173) traces its lineage from that ancestry perhaps more insistently than any other kinship... Hawkes works many twists upon his Romantic heritage but none more significant than his recreation of the sea as that great mystic solvent in which Whitman, for example, bathed his cosmic imagination." (65)
4 Karl, Amerifan Fictions, 1940-1980, p. 5, sees Froust in "Naming Names" insofar as we are located "in the familiar territory of remembrance of things past"; Guerard, "Second Skin: The Light and Dark Affirmation," p. 100, says that—To mention Nabokov is to note chiefly, perhaps, the suave relishing of words and rhythms: a prose of delicate balances."


6 For an important theoretical supplement to this passage and to my elevation of Skipper's revisionism over and above the simple-mindedness of unreliability, see Bloom, Agon, p. 67: "Evasion is in flight from or represses fate, and again, whether erotic, religious or literary, the principle of evasion denies that existence is historical."

7 I borrow the figura serpentina from Michelangelo, via G.F. Lomazzo as well as Quintilian (see John Shearman, Mannerism [Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1967], pp. 81-85), finding it appropriate to my notion of "serpentine" as one of the crucial metaphors in Second Skin, especially as it relates to Skipper's use of the term and his tendency to render forms, describe physical postures, evoke memory tableaux, under the aegis of serpentine figurations and outlines. Needless to say, this figure of speech from Michelangelo thus ties in rather conveniently with my notion of Hawkes's "mannerism" (see Part I, "Hawkes," Note 2).
aftermath: that is, the aftermath of an absence) that, quite obviously, concerns me since the centralization never quite occurs. What follows, rather, is a dispersal of figures "loosed," as Skipper says, "by that first shot" (SS. 3). In a sense, this central loss is a mythic point of reference against (not for, as for a mythic point is perhaps no point at all) which all of Skipper's discursive revisionism proceeds. It proceeds against, as well as from, the point by way of a free-floating ethos of imagination. To this end, the revisionism must make a virtue of hard-won innocence since, "Skipper is a child when his father dies, so that the grotesque event is a meaning of innocence" (26). The point is not to succumb to the self-inflicted death as a primal, shadowy taint, but to overcome it from the standpoint of a victorious innocence which, in the image of that first catastrophe, is bound to be repeatedly tested.

It might be useful here to recall William Gass's discussion of character in Fiction and the Figures of Life (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1970), p. 50:

Mountains are, characters in Malcolm Lowry's Under the Volcano, so is a ravine, a movie, mescal, or a boxing poster. A symbol like the cross can be a character. An idea or a situation (the anarchist in The Secret Agent, bomb ready in his pocket), or a particular event, an obsession, thought, a decision (Leno's, for instance, to quit smoking), a passion, a memory, the weather, Gogol's overcoat—anything, indeed, which serves as a tied point, like a stone in a stream or that soap in Bloom's pocket, functions as a character. Character, in this sense, is a matter of degree, for the language of the novel may look back seldom, often, or incessantly. But the idea that characters are like primary substances has to be taken in a double way, because if anything becomes a character to the degree the words of the novel qualify it, it also loses some of its substance, some of its primary, to the extent that it, in turn, qualifies something else. In a perfectly organized novel, every word would ultimately qualify one thing like the God of the metaphysician, at once the subject and
the body of the whole.

CASSANDRA

1 John Hawkes, "The Floating Opera and Second Skin," p. 23: "Skipper is talking against time" and "is writing only to himself and his dead daughter." This looks forward to Michel Leiris’s epigraph to Travesty:

I am imbued with the notion that a Muse is necessarily a dead woman, inaccosible or absent; that the poetic structure—like the canon, which is only a hole surrounded by steel—can be based only on what one 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.

THE STILL-VOICE


3 Tanner, City of Words, p. 219.
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