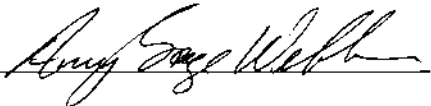


## AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

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Abstract approved: 

The starting point for the writer not practising the traditional type of mimesis is consciousness. The fictionist concerned with internal mental life does not search for an absolute foundation for knowledge in truths that are eternal or in essential structures that would define consciousness in general. Such fiction does not deal in samples or slices of experience; it deals with concrete bits of subjectivity that cannot be reduced to a merely illustrative function. It does not "summarize" experience.

This thesis is devoted to such fiction. The thesis is divided into three sections: the first one examines John Hawkes's short fiction in its ambivalent position in-between phenomenology and deconstruction; the second one functions as a bridge to the third section, which consists of a collection of original short fiction. The stories in the third section pose-- but do not answer-- disparate questions such as: what is a good month to die; what is a good object to hold on to in times of despair, boredom, or just plain curiosity; what could go wrong with a poet; what is the contemporary understanding of theft and how do we adjust ourselves to it; what do you say to an alien on the most fateful night of your life; how does one come to know oneself; where exactly is Nessebur; and, finally, how in the world do you end.

THE CORRESPONDING LIFE

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A Thesis

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by


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“There’s no use trying . . . one can’t believe impossible things.”  
“I daresay you haven’t had much practice . . . Why, sometimes I’ve  
believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast.”  
(L. Carroll, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland and  
Through The Looking Glass*)

“The vase gives shape to space, music to silence.”  
Braque

“[W]e are traveling as if inside a clock the shape of a bullet,  
seated as if stationery among tight springs and brilliant gems.”  
(John Hawkes, *Travesty* 16)

### Collapse That, Please: John Hawkes’s *Lunar Landscapes*

#### I. The Concept of Essence and the Imagination as a Surrogate Center

There are two types of fiction: fiction that recognizes the world and fiction that creates the world. The former is concerned with what is in the world, the latter with what is in consciousness. Consciousness has two kinds of objects, real and ideal. The first type of fiction represents real referents of consciousness; the second type of fiction represents ideal ones. Alternatively called "unmimetic" or "anti-realist," this second type of fiction refuses to compartmentalize the life of consciousness. John Hawkes's short fiction collected in *Lunar Landscapes* identifies psychological with existential terms, the subconscious with the imagination. Further, within the psychological field, Hawkes erases the distinction between consciousness and subconsciousness by eliminating the notion of latency, and, with that, the notions of causality, motivation, accountability, and purposefulness. Hawkes's stories are a meeting ground of the phenomenological valorization of sameness and presence, and the deconstructionist prioritization of difference, play, arbitrariness, and absence. This fiction

exposes the paradoxical nature of the imagination as a combination of absolute power and vulnerability. The imagination is a resistance to reality and resistance has two sides: it is both a form of self-assertion and a form of rigidity bordering on obsession. Hawkes's initial impulse as a writer is phenomenological, but his fiction shows that only the first step of the series of reductions envisioned by phenomenology is possible: the world can be bracketted off, but not the subjective experiences (imagination, memory, desire, self-consciousness, dream, vision), in which that world appears to the individual consciousness. Although these subjective experiences are a detour, a negation of an absolutely transparent, self-present self, they are constitutive of subjectivity. In Hawkes's fiction, phenomenological purity and deconstructionist absence collapse and, in so doing, create tension between the content (the individual consciousness or imagination) and a form that defies genre conventions as it brings prose to the level of poetry.

Charles Baxter's reading of Hawkes's *Travesty* is informative of Hawkes's ambivalent position as a writer, whose work is suspended in-between two conflicting theoretical anchors--phenomenology and deconstruction. Baxter discusses the fictional environment of *Travesty*, a novel written in the form of a monologue spoken by the obsessive Papa as he sits behind the wheel of a sports car speeding to a carefully orchestrated "accident":

Outside, objects which never quite achieve reality fly past, while inside, everything seems static and calm. The contrast of the rushing objects with the 'dead' calm inside produces an odd effect of schizophrenic virtuosity.

(Baxter 874)

The same contrast--static versus dynamic, the still and conditioned versus the free--

when translated to the level of form, puts Hawkes's *Lunar Landscapes* in an ambivalent position in-between the "dead calm" of phenomenology--the individual consciousness, whose essentiality becomes, in Hawkes, a matter of conditioned imagination--and, on the other hand, the play of a poststructuralist form, where meaning is not represented but produced, because, as Hawkes argues in an interview, "the creation ought to be more significant than the representation" (Enck 154). In the short stories collected in *Lunar Landscapes*, Hawkes enacts the oxymoronic nature of the actualization of the individual imagination. The imagination is a source of liberation--the freedom to make the world conform to one's own thoughts instead of letting those thoughts passively reflect the world--but it is, at the same time, self-limiting to the extent that it is conditioned by itself, by its own freedom, which estranges it from the world and thus from change. Reality in Hawkes's stories is not the reality "out there," but is subjective to the protagonists' visions, which make the protagonists immune to change.

The stories may appear anti-dramatic and decentralized; however, the inflexibility of the protagonists' self-obsessed, narcissistic imaginations, serves as a sort of a surrogate center that grounds the open form of the stories. The form of these fictions is dislocated to the point of appearing random. However, it is, in a way, fixed through monophonic characters, recurrent images and analogies, a phenomenological view of time, all of these erasing difference and emphasizing semblance, internal correspondences, "psychological coherence." For Hawkes, absolute freeplay is impossible. Hawkes's stories are not a pure deconstruction of the metaphysics of presence because of the functioning of the imagination as a surrogate center. Even though being is not understood as an essence, it acquires the semblance of an



essence through the rigidity of the imagination. Thus, it is a matter of consistency rather than of givenness.

This understanding of essence or being is comic. Bergson's ideas on laughter are relevant here. Bergson argues that the comic consists of "a certain mechanical inelasticity, just where one would expect to find the wideawake adaptability and the living pliability of a human being" (66-67). Comic effects are produced when a mechanical element is introduced in nature (97). Thus, the comic character is defined by his rigidity, predetermination, habituation. This rigidity--Bergson also calls it "absentmindedness" or "a lapse in attention"--is "brought from without," and imposed on the character: "It lends us its own rigidity instead of borrowing from us our flexibility [as is the case with the tragic character]. We do not render it more complicated; on the contrary, it simplifies us" (70). Bergson's ideas are rooted in a belief in a spontaneous essence that is liable to "corruption" through the introduction of an "inelasticity" from without. The deconstruction of phenomenology questions the existence of essence as spontaneity, but even if the concept of essence is not abandoned completely in Hawkes's fiction, it is certainly altered.

Bergson's philosophy of the vitality of the soul (he contrasts the comic to the "unsprightly," the rigid, or the "ungraceful" rather than to the ugly (79)) is indebted to a belief in essence as granting stability and reassurance, whereas, from a deconstructionist point of view--and this is manifested in Hawkes's characters--essence is what preconditions the individual consciousness, what makes it rigid. What Bergson sees as rigidity brought from without is, in fact, within us. The "absentmindedness" or the "lapse in attention" is the rigidity and inelasticity at the center of consciousness; it is the most "spontaneous" part of

consciousness. The individual, or the Hawkesian fictional character, is preconditioned at the most fundamental level of his subjectivity, the subconscious. Thus, what phenomenology perceives as the most authentic part of us is also the most rigid, habituated. The lyrical nature of Hawkes's stories--both in terms of "pure" characters and anti-dramatic plot-- is a reflection of this fundamental, constitutive inelasticity: "Were events unceasingly mindful of their own course, there would be no coincidences, no conjunctures and no circular series; everything would evolve and progress continuously . . . . The comic is that side of a person which reveals his likeness to a thing, that aspect of human events which, through its peculiar inelasticity, conveys the impression of pure mechanism, of automatism, of movement without life" (Bergson 117). Hawkes's stories deal exactly with this aspect of characters and events, with their unmidfulness or absentmindedness, with the subconscious, with that aspect of man which reveals him as a thing. This focus of the fiction gives the writer even greater opportunities for authorial detachment and control.

Inattentiveness is opposed to self-consciousness and will, and is, thus, associated with the subconscious. Bergson explains inattentiveness as a result of the individual's dependence upon habit, upon everything established and ceremonialized. The lapse in attention is not an exhibition of free will--of the lack of necessity to "pay attention"--but, on the contrary, of the absence of will. The subconscious, once committed to, or even obsessed with a particular idea becomes inert, so that instead of liberating the imagination, it leads to its self-annihilation. To counterbalance the rigidity of his protagonists' subconscious, Hawkes relies on absolute aesthetic detachment which provides him with a sense of freedom and control. The free, de-habitualizing, conscious act of Hawkes, the artist, is in constant tension with the

preconditioned consciousness of each of his protagonists. In the end, a protagonist's imagination emerges as an act of self-negation, because, in ceasing to readjust itself to reality--what appears at first as an act of denial in the name of autonomy--the imagination dooms itself to rigidity and inertia, the very things against which it stands to begin with. Monophonic protagonists, recurrent images, analogies--in short, a spatial rather than a temporal form--belong to repetition, and repetition is a manifestation of the comic: "The truth is that a really living life should never repeat itself. Wherever there is repetition or complete similarity, we always suspect some mechanism at work behind the living" (Bergson 8). The imagination, however liberating, is subject to automatization and, thus, to self-destruction.

Hawkes's vision is one of "comic absurdity," which, Bergson argues, is of the same nature as dreams (180). Comic absurdity is rooted in the idea that "imagined life is more exhilarating than remembered life" (*Travesty* 127). It consists in "seeking to mould things on an idea of one's own, instead of moulding one's ideas to things--in seeing before us what we are thinking of, instead of thinking of what we see" (Bergson 179); it consists in using reality as "nothing more than a pretext for realising [one's] imaginations" (181). By exposing the rigidity of the preconditioned consciousness, Hawkes's fiction attempts to free us from the rigidity within us--a project situated in the double bind of phenomenology and deconstruction.

## II. Hawkes's Version of Mimesis: the Crossing Point of a Phenomenological Project and Its Poststructuralist Realization

The goal of phenomenology is "to distinguish a moment of authentic self-presence--the *Jetztzeit* of punctual perception and plenary sense--from those other modalities of knowledge which involve memory, anticipation or traces of an absent experience" (Norris 201). This means distinguishing between ontology (expression, being) and epistemology (indication, meaning). Jacques Derrida erases the distinction, ironically perpetuating what Kant argues to have been the philosophers' main mistake--ironically, because Derrida's entire work aims at demystifying philosophy and extending the realm of rhetoric--the failure to distinguish between epistemological and ontological issues manifested in the attempt to establish "an exact correspondence between real=world objects and objects of knowledge" (Norris 195). The implications of the collapsing of this distinction are far less threatening than they have usually been made to appear. Being is never completely abandoned. What Robert Alter says about the relationship between mimesis and self-conscious fiction--the latter is not "an abandonment of mimesis, but rather an enormous complication and sophistication of it: mimesis is enacted as its problematic nature is explored" (13)--holds true of the relationship between being and nonbeing. Being is distended, as it were, in its self-interrogation, its problematization, yet it is exactly this distension that ultimately sustains it. In Hawkes's short fiction, reality is distended in dreams, visions, and what sometimes seem like hallucinatory experiences, yet it is namely this blurring of the distinction between real and unreal, familiar and unfamiliar, that sustains reality as something meaningful. Being, for

Hawkes, is not an “authentic self-presence.” Rather, it attains its status of essentiality through its own distension, through its own self-insufficiency.

However pessimistic such an understanding of being appears to be, Hawkes’s fiction is “negative” only in the sense in which Derrida’s “theory” of deconstruction--which, as a theory of the self-insufficiency of presence, can be used as a defence of anti-realism in fiction--seems close to nihilism, but nihilism in the Nietzschean sense of the word, not in its now derogatory meaning. Nietzsche’s *The Will to Power* already includes a critique of phenomenology, of the idea of self-presence and of the subject owning himself. Nietzsche argues that the idea of essence--here we could substitute “meaning” for “essence”--is a pure fabrication meant to satisfy certain psychological needs. It is the result of “certain perspectives of utility, designed to maintain and increase human constructs of domination [and] . . . falsely projected into the essence of things” (194). The idea of “things-in-themselves”--of *a* reality--and Husserl’s transcendental positivism in general, is a psychological mechanism, not really different from a defense mechanism, for example. In fact, Winnicott argues, the insistence upon the presence of the real in a text is a sort of “manic defence,” a version of the “flight to reality” (N.Searl’s term), “a flight to external reality to get away from ‘inner reality’” (Winnicott 130). Hawkes’s fiction has often been called “psychotic.” The reasoning behind such an assertion may be the idea that realist fiction is based on and exists through a belief (the belief in essence), which, when carried to the extreme turns into a mania, an uncontrolled enthusiasm for a relationship of reciprocity with reality. Anti-realist fiction is the opposite of this--disbelief in essence taken to the extreme, ultimately acquiring the character of a psychosis, a “defective” or lost contact with reality.

Hawkes's *Lunar Landscapes* is, in many ways, fiction rooted in a phenomenological view of reality. Husserl explains the nature of phenomena thus:

[W]hen we are fully engaged in conscious activity, we focus exclusively on the specific thing, thoughts, values, goals, means involved, but not on the physical experience as such, in which these things are known as such . . . . Through reflection, instead of grasping simply the matter straight-out . . . . we grasp the corresponding subjective experiences in which we become 'conscious' of them, in which . . . . they 'appear': For this reason they are called 'phenomena' and their most general essential character is to exist as the 'consciousness of' or 'appearance of the specific things. (122)

Hawkes is concerned namely with these subjective experiences, in which the specific things "appear," rather than with the specific things themselves, "things" being the realm of interest of the realist fictionist. The phenomenological reduction Husserl envisions--and Hawkes's fiction tries to actualize--involves the bracketing off of the world, by means of which one gets rid of the "extra-psychical real things" (Husserl 124), which are replaced by "the world as given in *consciousness* . . . so that the absolute world *as such* is reduced to its meaning immanent in our consciousness-as-intentionality" (125). Phenomenology's mission is to move even farther and, through an "eidetic reduction," to provide the means of access to "the invariant essential structures of the total sphere of pure mental process" (127). Phenomenology wants to provide a description of "the essential character [*Wesensart*] of a universal 'stream of consciousness'" (128), positing as a priori "the rationality of . . . essence"(127), the inner continuity of the "subject," that is, a first origin, which is argued to

be the "absolute passivity" of the "pure mental I" (128). Hawkes's short stories are not concerned with the objects of consciousness but with consciousness itself. Hence, they do not have meaning but, rather, constitute the possibility of meaning. In collapsing the difference between writing and the production of sense, Hawkes follows Derrida, whose concept of *differance* "wrests the concept of meaning away from the moment of intuition in order to attach it essentially to the moment of signification" (Norris 67). The shift in emphasis from the objects of consciousness to the subjective experiences, in which one becomes conscious of them, is a repetition of the shift from pre-Kantian to Kantian thought. Norris formulates the pre-Kantian question thus: "given our cognitive faculties, what must be the nature of objective reality?" (196). The Hawkesian reformulation of the question, however, is typically Kantian: "given the ways in which the world makes sense for us, what must be the case with our cognitive faculties?" (Norris 196).

This reformulation does not imply that mimesis is overcome. Rather, it is a different kind of mimesis that Hawkes practises, the mimesis of "a set of cognitive processes" (Alter 16), not of things, people, or places. What is being "represented" is a mental state, not an event: "The book of the past analyzed a situation; the new book translates a state of mind" (Bory 288). While realism strives to make an assertion about the status of reality itself, Hawkes's anti-realism is interested only in the relationship between the individual consciousness and reality, not in the ontological justification of either of them. Hawkes is not concerned with the objects of imagination (i.e. with reality), but with the very act of perception. His fiction takes a step back, as it were, in that it is not interested in the objects of knowledge or in knowledge per se, so much as in the possibility or the conditions of

knowledge. It does not explore the content of consciousness or of the imagination (phenomenology does this), but the way, in which consciousness exists. Thus, it is more form-oriented than content-oriented: it investigates how meaning is produced, rather than what that meaning is. This new kind of mimesis is more active than the traditional, Aristotelian notion of mimesis as the imitation of actions in the sense that Hawkes's fiction does not give itself up, or does not offer itself to the world but appropriates it, and deals with it on its own terms. Despite popular critical opinion, such fiction cannot be accused of being anti-dramatic, unless it is accepted that "dramatic" fiction is, ultimately, passive--it submits, voluntarily, to the world it represents. Hawkes's alleged "anti-dramatism" revives the unities of classical tragedy, which "are no means of producing a realistic illusion, but of bringing into a single frame of reference a constellation of events . . . that were not contiguous in space or time but combine on the level of similarity" (Lodge 81-82). What was the goal of drama as an art form acquires, in Hawkes, an *a priori* status: it is not that the artist is forced to "cram" discontinuous events into the time frame of a performance or a story in order to introduce a sense of simultaneity--a sense of verisimilitude--from without, artificially, but this simultaneity is shown to be the very nature of our perception of reality. It is easy to argue that since Hawkes's stories are so determined by the consciousness of their characters, while the "real" world remains locked in or even twisted by that dominating consciousness, reality's status, for the characters, would be greatly compromised. In fact, the opposite is true, because reality becomes meaningful at all only when it is thus distorted by the conquering mind.

Hawkes performs the first step of the phenomenological reduction in the development of his characters, who, even if they are presented as involved in the world around them,



appear to be stripped of any "extra-psychical" connections, sealed off in and determined by their opaque consciousness. He, however, does not assert essence either as rational or as irrational--he collapses all duality--but merely exposes the alien "lunar" landscapes of human consciousness. Even though his stories deal with the "lunar," the subconscious, the irrational part of consciousness, the stories themselves are not irrational, because, as D.C. Muecke notes, "The artist who forces us to see that his drawings are only drawings forces us, by the same token, to see that a drawing of irrationality is not an irrationality, that art is more powerful than logical absurdity" (169). Hawkes's early fiction--written between 1949 and 1963--is determined by a continuous, unresolvable conflict between what appears to be a characteristically phenomenological project--the attempt to reach at the "pure mental I," the darkest, most menacing corners of the subconscious--and, on the other hand, a free, open form. Thus, the philosophical foundations of Hawkes's fiction are in opposition to his method of writing, which, although it does not subscribe to automatic writing--the recording of unconscious experiences--is still closer to unpremeditated fiction than to the fiction, which develops out of a preexisting model. The tension is between the phenomenological subject matter of the fiction--the individual consciousness--and the open, genre-defying, poststructuralist form of the stories. The stories, then, operate, at the crossroads of stasis (conditioned consciousness that does not undergo development) and dynamics (despite the lack of character development, each character's consciousness is better articulated). They are the crossing point of fact and process.

Hawkes's stories start from nothing, because writing, in general, does not have an origin: "we do not possess a manageable existential category for writing--whether that of an

'author,' a 'mind,' or a 'Zeitgeist'--strong enough on the basis of what happened or existed before the present writing or where it begins" (Said 23). Thus, Hawkes's beginnings are only intransitive--"radical starting points"--rather than transitive--"beginning with (or for) an anticipated end, or at least expected continuity" (72). By deliberately excluding from his stories any kind of motivation or purpose, Hawkes rejects the idea that the subject's unity is immanent--that there is such a thing as the absolutely passive pure mental I--and implies that whatever continuity the subject does have, it is the result of exactly those modes of knowledge, which the phenomenological project attempts to bracket off: imaginary recollection or recollective imagination, anticipation, in other words, the traces of absent experiences.

The paradox of Hawkes's fiction is that its initial impulse is phenomenological--it tries to capture the pure experiential flow of consciousness--but, in the end, it shows consciousness surviving namely through "anti-phenomenological" traces, through the imagination. The subject is shown to be always at a distance from himself, imagining himself, recalling himself, or imagining recalling himself. The self is sustained through such absences as are produced or opened up by the imagination. Although Hawkes rejects the phenomenological notion of the self as self-presence, he still preserves something of the phenomenological view, though considerably modified. For him, the self is neither an absolute presence nor an absolute absence. It is a preconditioned entity (a presence), yet the conditioning factor is the imagination (an absence). The imagination's role is highly ambivalent. On one hand, it unifies the self, but, on the other hand it overdetermines the self and, thus, delimits it. The worlds of Hawkes's protagonists are pre- and over-determined by their active individual

imaginations. Overdetermination results in the collapsing of difference (as in dreams) so that the protagonists' ideas about the world become indistinguishable from the world itself.

### III.Hawkes's Anti-Realism

Albert Guerard defines Hawkes as an "anti-realist" ("Introduction" 57), a term that was meant to replace the older classification of Hawkes's fiction as surrealistic. While the nightmarish incidents, characters, and settings of Hawkes's fiction do seem as "expansions rather than evasions of reality," his "objective technique, his deterministic themes, and his control of imagery are not part of the surrealist manifesto" (Ratner 349). Hawkes's anti-realism functions through de-familiarization, which, in turn, is achieved through the following "strategies": composition as destruction, the deconstruction of self-presence, the creation of "purified" characters, the understanding of meaning as creation, not as representation, the function of the imagination as a mediator between indication and referentiality, the collapsing of latency, the evocative use of language, and the phenomenological treatment of time.

#### The Articulation of Consciousness

Hawkes's anti-realism is concerned with the process by which a consciousness articulates itself, rather than with determining the "content" of reality, or even the adequacy with which consciousness approximates that content. Hawkes does not reject outright the possibility of knowledge and in this he differs from the skeptic, whose "denial of the possibility of knowledge is point for point nothing other than a denial of precisely what the dogmatist asserts [insofar as the] skeptic . . . is committed in equal measure to precisely the same precritical model of 'correspondence' that is the foundation of the dogmatist's epistemology as well" (Morton 100). Hawkes focuses on the conditions of knowledge, on

how we know what we know, not on how correct or authentic our knowledge is after all. Knowledge is the making conscious of conditions, not forthcoming entities, things, what is 'in-itself' (Nietzsche 204). According to Nietzsche, "[w]e set up a word at the point at which our ignorance begins, at which we can see no further" (198) [compare Derrida's "the moment of crisis is always the moment of sign" (Derrida, *Speech* 81)]. Nietzsche--and Hawkes--call for a revision of our idea of knowledge. Knowledge does not involve truths. We know what the sign allows us to know, and that is only "the horizon of our knowledge" (Nietzsche 198).

For Hawkes, the individual consciousness is the ultimate condition of the possibility of knowledge. Hawkes "define[s] the subject as itself a kind of ultimate limiting condition, an infinitely dense particularity, whose inscrutability remains in place so long as our descriptions or determinations of that particularity fail in any way to account for all conceivable descriptions or determinations" (Cole 86). Such a view opens up the danger of an infinite proliferation of interpretations of Hawkes's protagonists. There must be something limiting this proliferation, holding together the protagonists, balancing out their dangerous porousness. This limiting factor, whose purpose is to create a sense of psychological coherence, are the patterns of recurring images and ideas characteristic of Hawkes's fiction in general (for example, sea imagery, animal imagery, images of submerged objects, like Sparrow's sweeper or the pilots' corpses buried below the watermark). "The Grandmother" provides an example of the lack of a center, a standard, in relation to which "deviations" in the perception of the individual consciousness could be measured. Though there is nothing overtly anti-realistic about this story, the suggestion of a barbaric feast around the blood-covered family table, the predominant death images--"his [Mauschel's] arm like a dead reptile"

(23)--and the implied violence--the market boy, who appears to turn his cart so as to run Metze down--are sufficiently menacing to suggest that there is a distance between what really happens in the story and what Justus thinks is happening. It is never implied, however, that Justus's reactions are adequate or inadequate, since the reality, which would have served as a criterion for determining any deviations from it is "omitted," left unnamed: it is not clear, for instance, whether Justus thinks his brother indifferent to his illness, his near death, or Lebrecht only acts indifferent, disguising the violence raging inside him, a violence that he "rechannels" into the carving of the meat: "How, then, did you nearly die?' 'Sunstroke,' I said calmly. 'Lebrecht,' raising my voice, 'I was nearly burned to death by the sun down there.' 'Were you, Justus!' he exclaimed, plunging the fork into his mouth" (18).

The point of view that Hawkes employs here also stresses the absence of a center. Supposedly, this is first-person narration--Justus's story--but the first-person point of view keeps slipping into an omniscient one, making it impossible to determine one central reality against which the characters' thoughts could be evaluated. The complicated point of view reaches its most absurd point at the very end of the story when Justus dramatizes Metze's talk with her dead mother. It is impossible to determine whether the talk is presented from Metze's point of view, or Justus is only imagining the talk, and whether the conversation is really between Metze and the dead grandmother or, rather, between Justus and his guilty conscience, which suggests to him that something (murder?) has to be done with the retarded Mauschel, that he has to be brought to his dead Grossmutter. In fact, Hawkes's experimentation with point of view begins in the earliest story in the collection, "Death of an Airman." This story comes closest to an allegory of the act of artistic creation. The

protagonist, Cecil Bodington, works with the Disinterment Crew, digging out the corpses of pilots buried in the sand on the beach, and transporting them for re-burial to the collecting lot. Hawkes is deliberately inconsistent in the point of view, starting with a third person limited, and suddenly slipping into a third-person omniscient. Just as we have concluded that Bodington must be the protagonist, our expectations are swept away as the D.O. delivers Hawkes's metaphorized statement of the nature of the artistic act, which, in an interview, Hawkes formulates thus: "the author is his own best angleworm and the sharper the barb with which he fishes himself out of the darkness the better" (Kuehl 164).

"A Song Outside," perhaps the most lyrical of the stories in *Lunar Landscapes*, continues the experimentation with point of view. The story opens from a vulture's point of view as the vulture is flying "in a guardian flight over the whole desert" (38). The vulture sees a naked man lying on one of the village roofs. Suddenly, the bird starts dropping, a death rattle in the throat, and as it is dropping, its point of view--the point of view of the story so far--is replaced by a more limited point of view, that of the two strangers who find the dying vulture. The switch in point of view is suggested through a reference to the naked man on the roof, who ceases to be an object in the vulture's point of view: "Momentarily the image of the naked man rose up, then disappeared, and the vulture landed" (39). The new point of view is split--in a mystical sort of way--between the two strangers, whose presence in the village is, as can be expected, left unexplained. The two men turn out to be only one man (his companion might be the imagined actualization of his self-consciousness). The story, however, continues referring to *two* men even when only *one* really exists and leaves "signs" behind him, to mark him for this world, as Justus would say: "[a] pair of blue suspenders and

a shirt in the corner of the patio and a few cigarettes" (41). As the story approaches the end, the "second man" is "left behind" as the protagonist's self-consciousness is, supposedly, stripped away from him, leaving the most alive core of consciousness: "hard of eyes and fluttering his hands . . . [he] hummed, and without melody . . . evoked a bitter terrifying image of the vulture landing and sliding head first across the sand to devour its pray" (42). The story reads as an imaginative representation of the very method of characterization we have seen in the other stories: Hawkes starts with the point of view that gives him the greatest control over his work--the vulture's omniscient point of view--then "drops down" into an individual consciousness, which is always accompanied by the shadow of self-consciousness, attempting to put away that "second skin" and reach at the pure, immediate experiential flow that is consciousness. These experiments with point of view--especially the drive for omniscience in what are supposed to be first person or third person limited point of view stories--are also characteristic of Hawkes's novels, and are carried to an extreme in *Travesty*, where "the narrator's theory--his attempts at omniscience--extends even to the point of perceiving its own limitations" (Rundle 35).

The "articulation" of consciousness is, in most cases, not a constituting activity that produces an entity but, rather, a deconstruction. The artist's act is similar to the disinterment, in which Bodington and the D.O. are engaged in "Death of an Airman." The act of creation is destructive rather than productive. As the D.O. leans forward into the pit from which the corpse is dug out, he thinks: "I've just hauled my own body up from the pit . . . and let it down again" (33). In fishing himself out, the artist fishes out the "corpses," the buried anxieties and dreams of everyone: "the writer who exploits his own psychic life reveals the



inner lives of us all, the inner chaos, the negative aspects of the personality in general . . . . [O]ur deepest lives are largely organized around such [aggressive and self-destructive] impulses, which need to be exposed and understood and used. Even appreciated" (Kuehl 165). The image of the D.O. as the artist centers around the idea of absolute detachment bordering on cruelty, or what Hawkes calls "the diabolical intelligence": "It was hard for such a man as the D.O.--who had worked up from a shoveler himself . . . who had studied every feature of the dead man and could gauge their position--it was hard for such a man . . . to keep his eyes away from a trench that should be neatly opened with a precise three inches around the corpse" (34). The craftsmanship of the artist, the utmost concentration required in the creative act--"my concentration is like that of a marksman, a tasteful executioner, a child crouching over a bug on a stick" (*Travesty* 17)--is comparable to the precision and sophistication with which the D.O. does his job: "The D.O. had made mistakes when he started--a pick would get out of control and hit always the least likely arm or leg" (35). The notion of the complementarity of creation and destruction is most evident in the character of Bodington, the farmer-turned-gravedigger. The clay in the collecting lot where he buries the corpses of the dead pilots, who lie like seeds in the furrows, is hard "like packed fodder in his father's yard" (36), while the only cemetery he has known is the one "near his mother's hearth" (36). Like the gravedigger, the artist always climbs back up from the pit he is digging, that is, he is still among the living--represented, in "Death of an Airman," as a group of naive bathers living in a Catholic tower--yet, he is also living among the dead, among the corpses or memories he digs out, wearing on his heart, like Bodington, the decoration he has forgotten to pin to the corpse.

## "Realist" and "Anti-Realist"

Whatever the differences between realist and anti-realist fiction, they are not to be overemphasized. Tanner draws attention to what he believes to be an artificial opposition between referentiality and reflexivity, the former traditionally perceived as more "realist" and more "humane," the latter too often condemned as "aesthetic" and "inhumane" (26). The basis of this old distinction between referentiality and reflexivity is the opposition between imitation and imagination, the former associated with presence, the latter with absence. Barthes tries to bridge that gap by arguing that all fiction--including anti-realist fiction--is, to a certain degree, representative, insofar as all fiction begins in, or with, the artist's gaze: "Representation is not defined directly by imitation: even if one gets rid of notions of the 'real,' of the 'vraisemblable,' of the 'copy,' there will still be representation for so long as a subject (author, reader, voyeur) casts his gaze towards a horizon on which he cuts out the base of a triangle, his eye (or his mind) forming the apex" ("L'Effet de Reel" 85). Not only is anti-realist fiction representational, but realist fiction, too, is partly reflexive, since it depends on that very absence, with which reflexive fiction is commonly associated. Absence is the basis of representation, "that which makes representation possible, yet nullifies it, hollows it out from the inside" (Durand 77). For mimesis to become possible in the first place, fiction must differentiate itself from its object, and, at the same time, that very object from which it withdraws renders mimetic fiction forever incomplete.

Because the interdependency of referentiality and reflexivity is intrinsic to fiction in general, critics like Barthes suggest that the notion of mimesis is no longer applicable. Barthes proposes that this notion be replaced with the notion of "reality effect" or "effet de

texte,” because “Psychology need not be seen *in* characters as such, but rather in the reader’s perception of a certain ‘effet de texte’” (“L’Effet de Reel” 86). Hawkes’s characters exist as such “effets de texte.” Hawkes presents the claustrophobic point of view of particular characters--in this respect he is rhetorical--but at the same time that point of view emphasizes language, image, rather than the psychology *in* the character. His characters remain in-between the realistic “plausible person” and the surfictionist “word being” (Federman, *Critification* 44). They are neither real people nor mere abstractions or allegories. Burden notes this in-betweenness of Hawkes's characters, arguing that they are “two-dimensional, repressive types; not individuals but more often symbols or forces . . . or ideas [but that] any allegorical potential in these [early] works is belied by the language itself, the absence of any semblance of parataxis, the use of a poetic, evocative imagery, and a highly dislocated structure” (65). However “flat” Hawkes's characters may appear, they are free from allegorical connotations thanks to the opacity of the language in which they emerge, a language, whose words are “opaque as stones, not windows without that allow us to see thoughts and events but walls where windows ought to be, richly textured impediments to light” (Hassan 49). Justus, for example, is not “the traveler.” What makes up a type or a class are characters’ shared circumstances. Since Hawkes leaves out, or barely hints at, the causes for the particular circumstances of his characters, they cannot really be fitted into types, but remain as “traces.”

Even if Hawkes's fiction cannot help being representative, it is also true that the subjunctive nature of language precludes representation: “The essential trope of [all] fiction is hypothesis . . . a technique that requires suspension of belief as well as of disbelief. Thus,

if fiction deals in faith, it also deals in scepticism" (Sukenick 80). Discussing Foucault's ideas in *The Order of Things*, Said notes that for Foucault "language in use is not natural: discourse does violence to nature . . . to an otherwise undifferentiated physical force it ascribes words like ohm or volt" (289). Language--and writing--does not really create, but, rather, destroys the intrinsically indifferent, undifferentiated natural=real world. This is even more true today. Sukenick observes that writing today "more and more bypasses simulation of image [or description]. Writing need no longer try to make the reader see, but instead deals in concrete bits of information which the reader may translate into a wide variety of references: the sky is blue the baby died" (91).

Fellows's term for this type of writing is "emblematic narration" (64). Emblematic narration is typical of fiction that blurs the distinction between the word and the painted image. Such writing operates on the principle of correspondence and simultaneity: "The single frame of emblematic narration--story translated to multiple images within a single frame and seen simultaneously--possesses at least the origins of classical orthodoxy by virtue of the Horatian incantation, *ut pictura poesis*" (Fellows 64). In Hawkes's fiction, emblematic narration functions even on the level of the sentence. Hawkes's sentences tend to conflate disparate elements. The disparity may take the form of time conflation, or conflation of incidents that happen "in time" and abstract reflections "out of time": "Feet ran close to our heads on the sand. The catchers of starfish came dangerously near and a small boy stepped on my arm at midmorning . . . . We saw the child who had called for water in the darkness; well might it thirst" ("The Traveler" 8). In his early fiction Hawkes sometimes overuses emblematic narration: "The undertaker had no more fluids for his corpses; the town nurse

grew old and fat on no food at all. By mistake, some drank from poisoned wells. Banners were in the mud, no scrolls of figured words flowed from the linotype, and the voice of the town at night sounded weakly only from Herr Stintz's tuba" (*The Cannibal* 9). "A Song Outside" abounds in similar examples: "His lips were set . . . the sun shone on top of the pompadour, rounded and contoured like something to be kept in a box of gree grass" (42). Emblematic narration reflects what Baxter calls Hawkes's "aesthetics of trauma." This type of narration copies the nondiscursive logic of trauma: "If the most profound aesthetic experiences bear any relation to trauma . . . then they will be different from discursive experiences. Ordinary language will never comprehend or enclose them; only an allusive and metaphoric language that points but does not or cannot name (thus reproducing the trauma, critically) will be appropriate to them" (Baxter 880).

The bringing together of what appear to be disconnected images or incidents reflects Hawkes's idea of reality. He does not distinguish between the familiar and the unfamiliar, both of which are equally terrifying and alien: "scenes that suggest a kind of terrifying familiarity and unfamiliarity, a kind of controlled chaos, come closest, for me, to the true nature of 'reality.' I am not interested in portraying the psychic states of characters" (Kuehl 181). He is not concerned with characterization so much as with the creation of a vision: "It's with great reluctance that I have to admit even that I create characters. I think of the writing of fiction as the creation of vision, and *The Blood Oranges* is really a visionary fiction and only resembles a novel. That it involves a 'story' and four characters . . . is incidental to its treatment of the imagination" (Kuehl 182). The fictional elements are only side effects of the actualization of the imagination, which is an act of memory or repetition. "It is not a thing

we're thinking, with its molecules and secret laws, but a perception, a perception remembered" says Gass, discussing the representation of "tangible" reality in fiction (*Habitations* 81). And he goes on: "Nothing is being represented. A thought, instead, is being constructed--a memory. Nor is the language out of which it is built any different from the thought itself" (83).

What makes Hawkes's fiction more "aesthetic" than "humane" is the fact that the initial gaze is further emphasized by Hawkes's preoccupation with imagery. He admits that his fiction usually begins from a single image: "in each case I began with something immediately and intensely visual . . . like the visual images that come to us just before sleep" (Busch xix). Hawkes's images are precise and sharp. Their particularity precludes his fiction from slipping into fantasy. Busch observes that Hawkes's images "ground the often surrealistic narrative . . . and permit Hawkes . . . to metaphorize with a foundation of realism" (4) as do, for example, the images in "A Song Outside": "On their bodies lay no fat or muscle, only the suggestion of shoulders and thin, barely jointed arms, all slender and white as if they, together, had cracked their way out from some large dry shell deposited on the sand" (40). Hawkes calls his art "visionary fiction" and defines it as "a fish bowl in which the clarity of the bowl is unique and you see the stream of fish, the gleam of fins--it is a fish bowl different from any other" (Santore and Pocalyko 174). John Graham calls this type of fiction "hallucinated fiction" since it renders the real and the imaginary simultaneous (450).

In "Death of an Airman," for example, the past, the present, and the future converge as Bodington stands in the hole, in which he will bury the corpse, and, at one and the same time, remembers and wishes for another cemetery: "He expected the shaded plot and deep

grass. There was always moisture on the heavy leaves . . . . He expected to see a darkened church by any resting place. He expected shadows and mementos on the stones . . . he expected to find dates on the leaning stones" (36).

Other critics, beside Barthes, have also tried to expose the artificiality of the distinction between mimetic and unmimetic fiction. Sokolowski suggests that, instead of regarding the object (reality) as "present," we should regard it as "presentable," since "the dimension of possible but excluded absence is part of the sense of presence [of the object]; it is the couple 'presence-absence' that comes between me and the object and makes the object nameable" (28). He rejects both extreme views of reality: Plato's, which shows "a preference for the absent," as well as the anti-Platonic view which "implicate[s] things irrevocably with presence . . . [thus] bringing to completion the desirability of things and the gratification we have in them" (29), a view expressing a preference for the present, turning the latter into a surfeit, a tautology. The perception of the object as "presentable" fits Hawkes's idea of man as a crossing point of presence and absence.

For Hawkes, man is never absolutely absent or absolutely present, that is, fully possessing himself. Being an honest writer, he presents both the impossibility of absolute self-presence and of absolute absence from the world. This honesty results in the creation of "characters of purity." "The Traveler" deals with this idea of man as "presentable" rather than "present" as it presents self-possession as unattainable even in what should be the ultimate form of disengagement from the world, the absolute form of unemployment--death. All of Justus's observations are associated with the image of death: "the world came to us behind shut eyes," "What is the sea if not for the washing of dead relatives and for the swimming of

fish and men?" (8), "there was only . . . a sudden blackness that fell upon me in the form of a great dead gull filled with fish," (10), "All memory, the entire line of my family, was destroyed in the roaring of the sea" (11). The story takes its protagonist through what appears to be a series of phenomenological reductions, only to lead to the realization that one does not possess even one's own death, that insignificant, extra-psychical concerns will always stand in the way of what should have been the ultimate act of self-possession ["I might never have returned" (9)]: "On this trip, only a few steps, I left behind my wife, my housecoat, the muffler, the partially smoked cigar that marked me for this world, and then, feeling the sands go wet, braced myself for that plunge into the anonymous black" (8). The impossibility of self-effacement is the other side of the impossibility of absolute presence, or pure expression, in the world. Thus, the world will always retain "records" of the individual human being, data as irrelevant and inexpressible of one's being as, for instance, one's muffler or one's cigar, or one's pair of blue suspenders ("A Song Outside")-- marks, traces, mere indications of one's having been here/there (where?). The "striptease" of Justus--the man in the story--is paralleled by another kind of "striptease," on the level of fictional elements, where Justus operates as a "character of purity," "clean" of any personal history that would have explained him, lacking any dimensions that would "preserve" him as a person outside the story. The character thus created fits Muecke's description of what he calls "the General Ironist": "the man without qualities, the man of whom nothing can be predicated except everything, the man who has knocked off being anything particular because being only something is a limitation" (127). This does not mean that Justus is too rich a character, that he has infinitely numerous dimensions, but, rather, that whoever Justus is, he is what he is only within the story; he is not



preceded or succeeded by anything. In "The Nearest Cemetery," Hawkes goes to an extreme in his desire to create "pure characters." He introduces the characters in a mock *dramatis personae* preceding the actual story, so that he would not have to explain anything at all about them in the story, so that he would catch them exactly as they are, with nothing before or after them. The protagonist is again neither present nor absent. The barber cannot make himself fully present to the world--he has learned his silences and lives "the wordless life"--but neither can he make himself fully absent from the world, and fully present to himself, because he is possessed by his memories.

The ambivalence of presence and absence, the identification of thought and language, is part of Hawkes's general tendency to erase difference. The aim is "to abolish distance" and attain "a unity between the imagination [or memory] and its objects" (Ferrari 124). The dreamlike character of his fiction is thus accounted for. Blanchot says of the dream: "[It] touches the region where pure resemblance reigns. Everything there is similar; each figure is another one," and there is no origin to point back to since "[t]he dream is likeness that refers eternally to likeness" (268). The insistence on sameness, Klein argues, is a manifestation of "the effort towards an absolute of composition" ("The Satyr" 157). The unity of Hawkes's stories is not structural but psychological. Hawkes explains this unity thus: "the sources of my fiction come from deep within the unconscious and . . . the structure of what I write is often a matter of images and symbols that create a pattern because of unconscious consistency, a kind of consistency in psychic need" (Kuehl 176). At another point, he notes: "Related or corresponding event, recurring image and recurring action, these constitute the essential substance . . . of my writing" (Enck 149). Kuehl, too, observes that

Hawkes's "tangential plots ordinarily clarify rather than extend meaning" (60). His stories are typically organized around "suggestive clusters . . . [and thus] reflect meaning rather than advance movement" (62). According to Klein, the formal characteristics of Hawkes's fiction constitute "the essential substance" of that fiction: "[w]ithin the bounds of any individual text, nothing is to be allowed fortuitousness: the fierce system of composition insists not even on a logic of coherences, but on sameness" ("The Satyr" 157-158). Every fictional element is thus supposed to be analogous to the other fictional elements, and seemingly unrelated incidents or aspects of a character are supposed to reveal an underlying sameness. The result is that "everything tends toward the same level of signification--tends toward a tranquil monotony, or tends . . . toward death" (158).

This accounts for the Hawkesian "relentlessly monophonic" characters (Klein, "The Satyr" 158). One reason these characters are monophonic is that Hawkes insists upon the importance of the artist's vision over the creation of particular, plausible characters. As a visionary writer, Hawkes privileges sameness, recurrence, similarity, patterns, over difference, particularity, hierarchization. Visions are internally coherent and all-encompassing and, thus, tend to be opposed to the purely technical aspect of writing--the construction of plot and characters. The visionary writer often runs the risk of slipping into abstractions, turning his characters into ideas. Hawkes manages to offset this tendency through writing his characters into unusual circumstances. He has a predilection for eccentric characters. They are monophonic to the degree that they are all outsiders, strangers, "criminal" in their morality or defamiliarized in their occupation: Justus the incestuous lover, Metze the prostitute-turned-housewife, the Disinterment Officer and his subordinate from the Graves Recording Post, the

two strangers in the deserted village, the barber-murderer. Even if they preserve a degree of individuality, they are more alike than different insofar as they are all presented through their reflections and observations. Thus, even if they are differentiated in terms of "content" (the content of their reflections, of their individual imaginations), they are formally monophonic since in all cases "characterization" is achieved through the same strategy.

"The Nearest Cemetery" best illustrates Hawkes's interest in the eccentric character, and the relationship of that interest to the writer's views about artistic control. The importance of this story lies in the narrator. The barber's point of view is an exercise in the "diabolical intelligence," with which Hawkes is to be associated henceforth. Kuehl explains Hawkes's preference for narrators with a criminal mentality by arguing that Hawkes "considered their criminality and rebelliousness [as] directed toward survival" (112), but he also emphasizes that this preference depends not only upon the narrators' diabolical intelligences but mainly on their function as storytellers (110) in the sense that "the authoritarian stance" or "the sadistic mentality" can be seen as perverted, extreme versions of Hawkes's detached stance as a writer. Hawkes explains it as follows: "On the one hand, my fiction depends on a kind of cold, detached, authoritarian stance which I could think of as puritanical, but insofar as the fiction is personal it is so only in the sense that I'm interested in destroying puritanism, overcoming puritanized morality. The very subject I'm trying to overcome provides the emotional stance necessary to do the writing in the first place" (Kuehl 112-113).

Fiction like Hawkes's--one that does away with frames--has been called by Raymond Federman "surfiction" and defined as fiction, in which "[a]ll forms of duplicity will disappear

... all forms of duality will be negated" (*Surfiction* 8). Hawkes's stories avoid hierarchization, the establishment of differences, by employing inconsistent points of view, unreliable narrators, vague settings and characters. Hawkes's understanding of character is close to that of the surfictionists. Characters, or "word-beings" as Federman calls them, need not have "a fixed personality," "a stable set of social and psychological attributes"; instead, they should be "volatile" and "unnameable" (*Critification* 44). The reader is not expected to identify with the character (45), which means that the work should not strive to produce an epiphany or a catharsis. Hawkes's experimentation with point of view is another common point with surfiction, which denies "the possibility of a detached fixed vantage, [and] remove[s] the pregnant point from the center of the circle" (55). Hawkes abolishes frames or subverts duality in two ways. On the level of plot (as far as one can talk about plot in these stories), the seemingly episodic nature of the stories betrays a fundamentally analogical structure, which offsets the appearance of randomness. On the level of characters, distinctions such as those between lover and murderer ("The Nearest Cemetery"), the living and the dead ("Death of an Airman"), victim and victimizer ("The Traveler," "A Song Outside"), memory and desire ("A Little Bit of the Old Slap and Tickle"), vision and reality, and subject and object ("A Song Outside"), "the keeper and the kept" ("The Nearest Cemetery"), "the master and the ship" ("The Traveler"), are erased, so that a totality of vision be attained. This erasure privileges neither member of each "dichotomous" pair: everything is both true and untrue, since simultaneity is the logic of dream. "The Grandmother," articulating a consciousness conditioned by guilt, exemplifies the collapsing of duality in the relationship between victims and victimizers. Mauschel is both the victimizer (he is the

memory haunting Justus) and the victim (Mauschel is a retard). The language is rich in images of violence bordering on barbarity and sacrificial cannibalism: "Mauschel thrust the blades at me," "I extended the knives to Lebrecht, and he . . . held them above the smoking lamb as in some kind of feverish dying benediction," "she reached out piercingly . . . and from the platter snatched a small potato which she immediately began to smash in the bottom of her plate" (15), "I'll give you my whole scalp if you'll cut us some meat," "the only child pulled a hair from his head and Lebrecht . . . began testing the edge of the blade against it" (16), "He walked around the table, behind his wife, still carrying the full fork in one hand . . . smiling for their lack in having me that night" (17). The consciousness ripped apart by guilt takes a sort of masochistic pleasure in regarding itself and the others with absolute detachment, as a result of which the animate collapses into the inanimate. The story objectifies the animate-- "she simply remained white . . . as if that mechanism in her bosom had missed a revolution or two" (19); "Lebrecht stares at Justus "as at a man in his coffin" (18), "Then, my skin turned to water. And, of course, there was the odor, Lebrecht" (18)--and animates the inanimate-- "He lifted a package, shook loose the paper exposing a large beef heart" (22).

It is namely this collapsing of difference that has led to the argument that there is something psychotic about Hawkes's fiction. Durand explains this from a psychological point of view, arguing that the denial of the transcendent Subject is, from a Freudian perspective, just another defence mechanism "in which the subject refuses to acknowledge the reality of a traumatic perception," and, further, that "[w]hat we are asked to do . . . is to reiterate a gesture which is at the origin of the fracture of the self, to replay the cleavage in a deliberate way" (75). Durand concludes that this is what makes de-familiarization--de-familiarization

with the already common, even banal idea of the death of the subject and other entities, God including--especially important: "investigating the familiar is a de-constructive gesture, a gesture of 'unbinding'" (75). Hawkes does not carry de-familiarization to the extreme. He does not create a completely alien, unfamiliar world that would have easily locked itself up and continued to exist--without posing any danger to us, without challenging us--self-sufficient in its absolute outlandishness. To keep the horror, the danger, Hawkes keeps both the familiar and the unfamiliar and juggles them up, without disclosing which is which, and for how long it will remain this or that. (This is most obvious in "A Song Outside" which sounds more like a parable than a short story.) Ferrari notes that while conventional narrative familiarizes the unfamiliar, unconventional narrative defamiliarizes the familiar (79). Hawkes goes beyond both namely in doing both at the same time. What also makes these stories appear psychotic is the absence of motivations and/or causes. The stories are concerned with the ways, in which the past, in each of its manifestations--time, imagination as absence and hence as past, memory, death--determines the characters and, in a sense, represses them. Since reasons are consistently omitted from the stories, the predetermination of the characters appears unreasonable, accidental, irrational, neurotic. Hence, Burden talks about the past, in Hawkes's fiction, as a "neurotic constriction" (285).

Although Hawkes's anti-realist fiction is often labeled "psychotic," there are those who argue the opposite, namely, that it is the realistic work that is "delusional." Sukenick, for instance, believes that the role of the realistic work is to preserve a series of "schizoid" illusions: "that the individual is the significant focus among the phenomena of 'reality' (characterization); the sense that clock, or public time is finally the reigning form of duration

for consciousness (historical narration); the notion that the locus of 'reality' may be determined by empirical observation (description); the conviction that the world is logical and comprehensible (causal sequence, plot)" (3). The new fiction Sukenick envisions will be "rooted in the essentials of the medium: not plot, but ongoing incident; not characterization but consciousness struggling with circumstance; not social realism, but a sense of situation" (243). This new fiction resists the intrinsically despotic nature of language, which poses questions and demands that the fictional work answer them. The language of "A Song Outside" comes closest to such a resistance to interrogation. The story leaves the reader unable to answer any of the questions asked by language's secret police: who speaks? what about? where? why? This is a rebellion against the "fallen nature of language," against that aspect of language, which, aspiring to express "the state of the soul," "requires serial apprehension, the apprehension within linear and horizontal time," failing to express "the labyrinthine logic" of the soul (Fellows 65-66). The logic of the imagination is not the logic of truth. Fellows associates truth with seriality: "Reason and eventual truth . . . are based upon series; whereas lies and fiction are based upon the disruption of sequence" (69). Hawkes's visions are necessarily "beyond or above sequence" (70), but are, instead, built upon "the inverted syntax of lies and forgetfulness" (69). His stories are not *about* something so much as they are *perceptions of* something. They are not accounts of the imagination's potential; they *are* the imagination at work: "Only the account, which is happy verbal fall or mortal externalization that is also a form of expulsion, is linear and sequential--an account that is a fall into the world of . . . extended line and panoramic inclusion as opposed to aspiring verticality" (Fellows 66). From this perspective, Hawkes's visions--based on juxtaposition,

not on seriality--are even more true than realistic fiction as they most closely approximate the potential of language to preserve the immanence, the simultaneity of perception.

#### Composition: Creating Something from Nothing or the Poles of the Authorial Self

Since Hawkes is concerned with the articulation of consciousness, his critic should focus on composition, on form, rather than on meaning or purpose. An appropriate approach would be the idea of "formal thinking," which Sukenick explains as "a matter of valuing the process of thinking over any particular idea, even a good idea" (xii). Hawkes's fiction is to be explored in terms of the process of composition, and its unintelligibility should be regarded not as a failure but as an intrinsic part of composition as destruction. Hawkes's texts do not move from enigma to the revelation of truth. The meaning of his stories is not "deferred," since deferment is possible only if the meaning is, in fact, already known, i.e. if it precedes the story. The stories are best understood in the context of the "generative theory of fiction" proposed by Sukenick, a theory that considers a literary work "from the point of view of composition . . . [un]distracted by incidental effects of mimesis" (10). The theory understands the narrative as "the movement of the mind as it organizes the open field of the text" (13). Instead of examining the text by beginning, middle, and end, which are said to be merely incidental, not intrinsic to the form, the theory places the emphasis on the way the work--"process text"--unfolds (78). Writing is understood as "a movement into fuller consciousness" (87). Hawkes's stories enact the premise of "formal thinking"--the belief that it is the thought that creates the experience, not the other way around. The stories do not tend toward a specific end, because the consciousness they articulate is not coherent, even



though it is consistent. This fiction implies that whatever is to be "revealed"--meaning, truth, emotion--is "revealed" only through a sort of reversal, a perversion, a travesty: "the greater the incongruity, the greater the truth" (*Travesty* 20). The world has a chance of becoming intelligible for man only when he looks away from it, when it becomes alien for him, when he is defamiliarized with it. Hawkes's anti-realist stance is not an outright rejection of reality so much as a deliberate not-looking at it. It is not that reality has disappeared overnight, but man's relationship with it has grown increasingly abstract. However, "the very realization that reality might not exist--the imagining of this possibility--renders that same reality in a meaningful relation to us" (Sukenick 166), without making reality, per se, meaningful. For Sukenick--and, it seems, for Hawkes, too--"fiction is neither reality itself, nor a projection of the ego, but an abstract construction of the relation between the two, in which the feelings of the ego are [momentarily] adjusted to the fact of reality" (188).

The tension between Hawkes's phenomenological project and the open poststructuralist form of his fiction has important implications for composition. The traditional view of the artist is of one who does violence to arbitrariness by imposing aesthetic order. The artistic act is perceived as constructive, efficient, creative. Hawkes's act of creation is, rather, one of decreation, decomposition. Having argued this, however, it is very easy to slip into the opposite extreme and argue that Hawkes's creative act is always and necessarily disruptive. It is not. Yet, it is not traditional, either. The traditional act of composition, where the author starts from a preconceived idea, disparages writing. Such a writer begins from an artificial, rudimentary kind of order, hoping, by the end of the story, to perfect it. Thus, all he does is demonstrate his architectural skills. By starting with a model

and trying to show us how he can stick to it and strengthen it, he actually delimits himself. The story he writes is merely a tautology. Hawkes's short stories begin with a specific image, a beautiful, haunting fragment that seems to exist by itself, for instance the image of the falling vulture in "A Song Outside." Hawkes's fiction does violence--it violates our expectations to see that fragment fit into a whole, or at least stand for that whole. At the same time, though, this fiction does not do violence, because to do violence presupposes the existence of an original order or essence that can be destroyed. Since such essence does not pre-exist, the fiction cannot be said to disrupt anything.

Just as Hawkes's fiction is both disruptive and undisruptive, it is also both innocent and tyrannical. It is best to view the tension between phenomenological impulse and free form in the context of Hawkes's own view of the ambivalent position of the writer, who is split between innocence and power: "the poles of the authorial self, or of the self that creates something from nothing, are precisely these: cruelty, or ultimate power, and innocence" (Ziegler 177). This notion of the artist associates Hawkes with a Romantic temperament. Hawkes himself admits that his view of the creative act is Romantic: "I should think that the romantic impulse is in itself a duality, or holds in balance the power of unlimited possibility and the nothingness that is the context of all creativity" (Ziegler 178). Similarly, Burden argues that the artist is simultaneously a victimizer and a victim (59). Although authorial control is characterized by rigid, cruel detachment, the world over which the artist-tyrant tries to impose his rigid order or law, is always already so sterile, desolate, and fragmented that the artist's cruelty appears innocent in the face of such a world. In the face of debris authorial design loses part of its intrinsic dictatorship. The act of creation is split between a sense of

loss/innocence--"At the origin of creativity is a feeling of bereavement, a basic sense of deprivation, the notion of a yearning never allayed by mere satisfaction, so that the act of writing is identified with the 'art of fasting'" (Laniel 223)--and, on the other hand, a sense of the writer's dangerous, authoritarian power, in which he resembles the criminal. This is all the more true for the writer who does not imitate reality: "The writer who sets out to create his own world in a sense defies the world around him . . . that act is a risk, an assault on the world as we think we know it, and as such can be viewed as dangerous, destructive, criminal" (LeClair 27).

It is unfair to criticize Hawkes's early fiction for being "decentralized" and "anti-dramatic" (Kuehl xi) only because it is organized according to the logic of the mind rather than according to a model constructed "in advance" and then imposed on the stories. Hawkes's understanding of composition is that the nature of incoherence is sameness, while the nature of coherence is difference. The traditional, cause-and-effect, logical plot is coherent to the extent that it distinguishes between different events and aspects of characterization, not only pointing out these differences but perpetuating them by emphasizing them for the sake of the development of plot or character. Hawkes's stories, on the other hand, are incoherent to the extent that they collapse those differences by pointing to that which preconditions them all. These stories are structured the way dreams are. They reveal "a Freudian wit, deeply dependent on unconscious understanding as well as conscious," and they work through "extremely powerful condensation . . . [and] overdetermination" (Guerard, "John Hawkes" 4). It may seem that Hawkes's obsession with form cannot result in a free form but only in the predetermined form of the traditional story. It is important,

however, to make a distinction between the desire to "compose everything" and the finalism of the traditional method of composition: the latter wants to do away with randomness, to present characters and events as probable, while the former tries to show that what appears as randomness can very well be a series of analogies.

The stories in this collection abound in recurrent images. For example, Hawkes carries some of the images from "The Grandmother" into "The Traveler," among them the image of the sea, both violent and tender, and the complementary images of the swimmer and the floater: "and he [Mauschel] shook his very gelatinous soul into the swimmer's fishlike form" ("The Grandmother" 21). Justus's encounters with the rest of the world appear random but, in fact, they are fundamentally analogous insofar as Justus deals with everything/everybody outside himself, with everything Other--the Milkmaid, his own wife, the hotel manager, the bank manager, the hotel guests--with the same degree of detachment, disgust, scorn, and apathy, complemented by his self-absorption bordering on narcissism.

Likewise, there is a connection, an underlying analogousness, between the ritualistic carving of the meat and Justus handing a rubber bank note to his ex-lover, now his brother's wife, in "The Grandmother." The analogies may seem farfetched or unrealistic, but the life of the individual consciousness is made up of incongruities and non sequiturs. Hawkes's analogies are authentic to the protagonists' minds; they are not to be measured according to a standard of verisimilitude and resemblance. The unique thing about Hawkes is that whereas symbolism too often fades out in abstractions, Hawkes's metaphorizing, is rooted in the immediate, concrete, physical reality (in this story, an ordinary family dinner). The same tight connection between real and surreal or symbolical is observed in "Death of an Airman," where

one single, concrete detail--the decoration, which Bodington has to pin to the corpse before burying it--provides the realistic ground for subtle metahorization.

Even though these stories do not have the structure of the traditional story, even though there is no resolution, only an abrupt, incomprehensible ending, even though the open form appears to invite supplements, nothing can really be added to the stories, because whatever is added would be automatically "monopolized" by the protagonist's predetermined consciousness so that the new addition would only be just another example of what is already in the story. Thus, the stories attain a unity in a reversed sort of way: since what is already in the story is arbitrary to begin with--the protagonist's character is "given," not developed, and whatever happens to him is unnecessary, episodic, one scene no better than another for revealing a particular aspect of him--anything that one could possibly imagine supplementing would be equally arbitrary. The story persists in its own unnecessaryness; its incompleteness makes it complete. The free structure permits the introduction of other incidents/scenes/characters, but the preconditioned consciousness of the protagonist renders any such additions repetitive. It may appear then that these stories have one grounding centre--the preconditioned consciousness--but it is necessary to draw a distinction between a preconditioned consciousness and a preconditioning one, one that determines what happens to it. Hawkes's protagonists do not dictate what happens to them, but all the different incidents that do happen bring up one and the same consciousness. Character does not determine plot, but neither does plot determine (develop) character.

Although the idea of dissociating form from content is usually considered an oversimplification, this old distinction would serve to show that, contrary to critics' opinion,

there *is* tension in these early stories, though it is not the tension between Eros and Thanatos, to which most critics draw attention. Hawkes's stance in *Lunar Landscapes* is close to existentialism: for his characters, existence precedes essence, but the terrifying existential freedom is even more terrifying since the freedom of the imagination preconditions these characters and prevents them from going through any kind of change. The tension in these stories is of a structural type. It is the tension between a genre-defying form, which places Hawkes in the poststructuralist camp, and, on the other hand, a subject matter, which emerges from a more phenomenological context, where essence is understood as preconditioned consciousness. This fiction is the actualization of the imagination (Kuehl 9), yet this very imagination delimits the protagonists' consciousness, which remains locked in visions, dreams, and nightmares. The commonly held view that Hawkes's early work does not assert anything, but only exposes problems without ever solving them, should not be regarded as a failure of the stories: Hawkes is not interested in resolution of conflicts, but in the way an individual consciousness exists, from one moment to the next. He "can afford the restful luxury of still projection, the pastoral of timeless suspension" (Fellows 78), because of the intensity of his alleged anti-dramaticism. Dramatic intensity in his fiction is not attained through movement, through a gradual approximation of a climax. Intensity is not built up but granted and then fully sustained. The fiction is not absolutely anti-dramatic, since the greatest movement is, paradoxically, the one that does not actually take place: "I hear [the] ticking loudest when the clock is stopped . . . . The greater the silence, the louder the tick" (*Travesty* 35).

One may assume that a story which does not rely on "action"--on plot--would be

highly digressive. Coste argues that, in fact, every work is a digression between its own beginning and its end (27). Hawkes's stories may seem like an arbitrary sequence of episodes, but, paradoxically, they are far less digressive than the conventional story. Since the latter is preconditioned by its own end, the whole story becomes a mere digression from the end which has been held in view from the beginning. The story becomes an artificially created distance between two equally known points. Hawkes's stories cannot digress since, having no end in view, they have nothing to digress from in order to reach the end. They create a certain atmosphere rather than appealing to our intelligence, and thus they fulfill what Gass formulates as the purpose of the art of fiction: "to satisfy our deepest feelings, not our intelligence. Oh, not that intelligence should be insulted; reason must be reckoned with as well, but only as it gives a sense of structure and stability and completeness to the huge moods, like clouds of stellar dust, the novelist is coalescing" (*Habitations* 94). Since they create moods, the decentralized form of these stories is only natural. In fact, some critics argue that all literary works are decentralized: "A text has no central point or central trajectory . . . and its 'voice' is more likely to be a doodling pen rather than a narrating persona" (Said 10). Said's argument is that works do not have a sacred origin, but only a transitive, secular beginning, which is always disruptive, always "a radical severity" (xvii), the manifestation of a "will to reverse oneself"(35). Said also argues that "in writing there is no longer any proper starting or stopping, only activity resumed or interrupted--and this because for the self there is no stopping or starting, only a selfhood [the writer's] resumed or interrupted"(229).

The decentralized form of Hawkes's stories brings up the question of plot and

causality. Hawkes's rejection of causality suggests that the only causality that we can hope to perceive is not that which links together the things of the world, but that which links together our own subjective experiences of those things. Thus, he "sides" with the formalists: "What characterizes narrative is what the Russian formalists theorized under the name of *motivacija* . . . It is an appearance, a simulacrum destined to conceal under the logic of causal interiority, the founding rule of all fiction, finalism. The function of finalist determination . . . is . . . to produce realistic effects . . . to make fiction artificially natural in order to hide both its artificiality and its arbitrariness. Causality thus appears as the primary connotator of mimesis" (Richard 10). Richard insists that the preoccupation of mimetic fiction with the issue of causality reveals that fiction's fundamentally metaphysical character: "the representation of the universe and of its workings is a twice displaced image of causation: God-the-cause is represented by his effects and his effects can only be represented by their causal concatenation in the equivalent structural organization of poetic language . . . The real is thus reduced to an abstract web of causal relations. . . . Determinism . . . betrays itself as the sly accomplice of metaphysics" (11). Richard goes on to argue that "[t]he disjunction of causality is inscribed in the macroscopic dimension of language, which traces the image of its impotence in the distance revealed between the invisible microscopic units of reality, the causative caeca and the causally produced visibilia, the macroscopic effects of the invisible causes . . . . If microscopic causes can be known only by their macroscopic effects, if causes escape the possibility of representation, what remains is only awareness and representation of, at best, betweenness" (13). Only the subjective experiences, through which we become conscious of things, can be represented, not the things themselves, only phenomena, only the



conditions of knowledge, never knowledge or truth per se. Hence, we find in Hawkes what Richard terms "acausal interaction." The example Richard gives--"A house explodes; a star"-illustrates the point that although microscopic causes and macroscopic effects are not "homothetic," they still "correlate through a continuous series of scales"(18).

The notion of causality has often been used to distinguish between the art of fiction and the art of poetry. Richard Kostelanetz, for instance, argues that poetry aims at "composed stasis" and concentration, whereas fiction deals in activity, movement: "In the beginning of poetry is the word; in the beginning of fiction is the event" (90). Hawkes's lyrical prose reveals the arbitrariness and the bias of such distinctions. "A Song Outside" comes closest to what Todorov calls a narrative of substitutions, lyrical prose surpassing the limits of fiction. While in the narrative of contiguity "we want to know what each event provokes, what it does," in the narrative of substitutions "we slowly arrive [through a series of variations, or clusters of similar images, or actions] at a comprehension of what was given from the beginning [but not at what was, supposedly, given before the story]" (135). Todorov remarks that the narrative of contiguity, with its emphasis on causal, logical sequence and temporal order, is typical of fiction, whereas the narrative of substitutions, characterized by a "spatial order," symmetry and repetition, is typical of poetry (136). Kuehl notes that Hawkes's stories usually circle round a pivotal concept or image, bringing it into better view but rarely going beyond the variations of that concept/image (71). His fiction is not prompted by events but by images, but this does not mean that it is static. It may appear formless, arbitrary, but this in no way devalues it, because, as William Gass observes, "[s]hapelessness may be the general enemy of shape, but every particular form has its own

undoing, its forceful opposite, that condition which it is continually not-being" ("Tropes" 45). Gass, too, believes that finalism is not the nature or the purpose of the art of fiction: "If there is no unsubstantial shadow, there is no substance which has not cast it. Home is the aim of the Odyssey, but not-getting-there constitutes the story" (46).

Even though "form in art necessarily is an exertion toward the elimination of fortuitousness and accident and randomness and athwartness, all of that which we may call liveliness--life being that which doesn't hold still and is recalcitrant to final composure" (Klein, "The Satyr" 158-159), the tension between sameness and randomness, in Hawkes's fiction, eventually creates stories both intense (in the sense of determined) and open-ended: "the strategies of composition never really work--with the result for form . . . that these intensely composed fictions remain at the end quite open-ended and provisional" (159). Finalism is considered the *raison d'etre* of fiction. Hawkes, too, is concerned with finalism but not in the sense of resolution or clarification. His goal, rather, is the creation of a self-sufficient image, without a concern for the use of that image for other purposes. Hawkes's imagination is tautological. His stories may not be "finished" in terms of the genre's technical requirements, but they are always completed as visions. His desire for composure is not, after all, a desire to tame the uncomposed life, a desire to place restraints (beginning, middle, end) on the wriggling vitality of unstructured experience. Quite the opposite--since Hawkes's stories lack the structure of beginning-middle-end, or the expected cause-and-effect coherence, they preserve the restlessness and shapelessness of immediate, imprecise perception.

## The Deconstruction of Phenomenology

Hawkes's anti-realism can, perhaps, be better understood from a philosophical perspective, the starting point of which would be Husserl's "essential distinction" between "expressive" and "indicative" signs. Husserl defines an indicative sign as one "deprived of *Bedeutung* or *Sinn* [meaning] . . . [b]ut, nonetheless . . . not without signification" (Derrida, *Speech* 17). Derrida claims that Husserl's purportedly "essential" distinction is merely functional, not substantial. For Husserl, only signs of expression have absolute, logical meaning. Whereas for Husserl "communication . . . is . . . a stratum extrinsic to expression" and thus to "the logical purity of meaning as the possibility of logos," Derrida sees every sign as "always *caught up* in an indicative system" (20). For Derrida, then, "the general system of signification . . . [is] coextensive with the system of indication," while expression is just "a species of the genus 'indication'" (21). Given that indication is always empirical, connected to "probable experience" (42), one's own essence becomes a matter of probability: "I am" to the extent to which my being is probable, to the extent to which my being is still becoming without ever becoming still. Even as Husserl tries to reveal the most alive core of speech, Derrida shows that at the heart of all signification lies one's relationship with death, and the possibility of one's disappearance: "to think of presence [the presence of the present] as the universal form of transcendental life is to open myself to the knowledge that in my absence, beyond my empirical existence . . . the present is . . . The relationship with my death (my disappearance in general) . . . lurks in this determination of being as presence, ideality, the absolute possibility of repetition. The possibility of the sign is this relationship with death" (53). Thus, the expression which is supposed to reveal my most intimate relationship with

presence--*I am (present)*--turns out to be the expression that threatens most seriously my being: "The appearing of the *I* to itself in the *I am* is . . . originally a relation with its own possible disappearance. Therefore, *I am* originally means *I am mortal*" (54).

Derrida's notion of being as probability can be traced back to Nietzsche's idea that the concept of subject precedes that of substance. Derrida's deconstruction of the subject as a continuous, self-owned entity begins in Nietzsche's claim that "everything of which we become conscious is a terminal phenomenon, an end--and causes nothing; every successive phenomenon in consciousness is completely atomistic" (197). If the phenomena in my consciousness are absolutely independent of one another, obviously they cannot be reduced to a single *a priori* self-presence. Nietzsche gives, in a nutshell, Derrida's idea of the insufficiency of presence as he argues that presence/ being/ consciousness is "something that in itself strives after greater strength, and that wants to 'preserve' itself only indirectly (it wants to surpass itself)" (200). Being (character in fiction) appears retrospectively as it tries to compose its own "history," postulate a point behind itself that would be "older." Thus, "the inferred and imagined cause [Derrida's "origin"] is projected, follows in time" (200). With this, another major distinction falls apart: that between cause and effect. Through a characteristic Derridean reversal, Nietzsche asserts that the subject "is something added and invented and projected behind what there is" (198). Nietzsche admits that the belief in the subject can scarcely be uprooted, but insists that "a belief [such as this] can be a condition of life and nonetheless be false" (198). Derrida's notion of the supplement of origin in language echoes Nietzsche's notion of the supplement of substance in ontology. In fact, what we supplement, Nietzsche argues, is not even the substance itself, but rather the concept of a

substance, or, better still, our belief in the concept of a substance. Derrida will later argue that *differance* is namely this "possibility of conceptuality" (*Speech* 140). If the premise for the existence of substance is rejected--the subject proven to be a fictitious construct--substance, too, is questioned: "One acquires degrees of being, one loses that which has being" (Nietzsche 199). Being, then, becomes a matter of consistency rather than a matter of givenness; it is now understood as consistency or form, rather than as essence or meaning.

### Characters of Purity

The fact that Hawkes's characters have functions but no dimensions is a corollary of the distinction between essence and degrees of being. Phelan draws the distinction between character dimensions and functions. A dimension is "any attribute a character may be said to possess when that character is considered in isolation from the work," while a function is "a particular application of that attribute made by the text through its developing structure" (9). Phelan goes on to note that "dimensions are converted into functions by the progression of the work," and while "every function depends upon a dimension . . . not every dimension will necessarily correspond to a function" (9). Hawkes's dimensionless "characters of purity" are a manifestation of Derrida's idea of the trace: "The trace is not only the disappearance of origin [ . . . ] it means that the origin did not even disappear, that it was never constituted except reciprocally by a nonorigin, the trace, which thus becomes the origin of the origin" (*Of Grammatology* 61). Similarly, whatever dimensions Hawkes's characters have, they are constituted reciprocally; they do not function as "origin" for the characters. The characters have functions which do not depend upon a dimension: they don't have personal history

which can be used to account for what happens to them in the story. Whatever dimensions they do have are incidental to their function in the story. They don't have "mimetic functions," that is, traits that "are used together to create a plausible person or action" (Phelan 11). Their dominant thematic function--characterizing them as representative of a larger class (12)--is to illustrate the opacity of the individual consciousness. They are most conspicuous in their synthetic function and, as such, they are the opposite of the traditional "well-rounded" character, which has become outmoded, unnecessary, or even impossible to create. Sukenick, for instance, denies the need for well-rounded characters since characterization is not so different from "the ordinary process of the mind in any inquiry about anything. In this case, instead of the entities being concepts, ideas, symbols, points of view, they are called Frank, Mary, and Larry" (123). Hawkes reduces a character's personality "to a minimum germinal force beyond which all attributes are strictly incidental" (Sukenick 133).

A typical feature of Hawkes's characters, besides the lack of history, is the lack of development. These characters tend neither toward the past (they do not have dimensions) nor toward the future (they do not experience an epiphany). The protagonist in "The Traveler," for example, is "composed" of a series of sporadic reflections or observations, motivated by what appear to be arbitrary circumstances: "There are banks all over the world and I am always at home in a bank. Nothing else is needed when one brushes off his coat and makes his appearance before the faceless tellers of these institutions" (4). Hawkes moves from one extreme to another, from the detachment of such abstract, arbitrary observations to the most fundamental, physical level of the character's existence, as if Justus's character is impossible to situate between the abstract and the particular, between the world and him,

between his thoughts about things and he himself as a thing of this world, an organism: "The immensity of the sun was challenging, all the biology of myself, Justus, my lungs and liver, my blood-pumping system, cried out to meet the sun, to withstand the rising temperature, to survive the effects, the dehydration, of such a sun" (8). Justus's character is not developed, only better articulated, coming into fuller view through clusters of associations and analogical images such as the following: the sea, which is both the drowning place for midnight suicides and a place of peacefulness; Justus's contacts with strangers (the bank clerk, the hotel manager); the child in the forbidden memory, the (real?) child sleeping in the adjacent room, the idea of the thirsty child that haunts Justus, the child (real? unreal?) he sees on the beach, the child attending, together with the wife (both real? both unreal?) upon the sick Justus. This type of characterization is different from characterization in the realist mode, which operates through metonymy--the contiguity between the part (in Phelan's terms, a function) and the whole (a dimension which is manifested in or represented by the corresponding function). Hawkes's characterization appears abstract, focusing on what appears to be irrelevant; yet, this type of characterization cuts closer to the personality of Justus: "My feet cut the water like a killer shark's fins. I breathed deep--Justus Kummerlich--in the world of less-than-blood temperature . . . a man upon the sea, a rationalist thriving upon the great green spermery of the earth!" (9). "The Nearest Cemetery" provides another example of Hawkes's dimensionless protagonists. Here, the protagonist exists only as a voice over, as in a theatre production. The barber's reflections about the personality of his friend, Jomo, read as a critique of the traditional approach to characterization. For the barber, Jomo's particular physical features exist only for Princess: "He has all this, the hair, the chin and lip. He had

them for Princess" (47). Likewise, physical characterization merely suits the conventional needs of an audience for easy visualization of characters, that is, it serves only the psychological needs of the reader, and is not closely related to the writer's own demand. Characters have certain functions and only create illusions of having dimensions, because beyond the artistic act they do not exist. The barber [the writer] wonders: "Carefully I brush on the powder and sometimes . . . I wonder if all those features won't suddenly disappear when I wipe off the powder" (47). There is not one single attribute of the barber's character that stands out among the others, making him a distinct person. He is just a bundle of memories and reflections, some of them particular, some of them abstract. It is impossible to say who the barber is, because that would require determining who he was before and who he is now. The nature of character, as it is commonly understood, is difference: at one point, one attribute stands out, then another. The artist's gaze--the conventional writer's gaze--changes focus, is projected now on this aspect of the character, then on that one. Dimensions are expected to be fulfilled or exposed, or even manifested, through the character's functions (i.e. dimensions precede functions). However, in the absence of latency, resulting from the collapsing of the latent into the manifest, dimensions are no longer thought of as latent, with functions being manifest. Only the characters' synthetic function--constitutive of character--remains.

The best way to discuss Hawkes's characters, then, would have to take into consideration the coincidence or simultaneity of dimensions and functions: at the moment a character is placed in a scene and either does something or something is done to him (function), at this very "moment," he attains a dimension. This dimension is not reconstructed



or recalled. It is not exploited to account for a given function, but neither is the function a mere addition to, or a manifestation of, a pre-existing dimension. The barber's reflections and observations in the state penitentiary do not serve to clarify his character, do not "draw out" dimensions, of which we, the readers, have not been aware. We do not have a "past," a "present," and a "future" understanding of the character. There is not a point, at which we know "more" or "less" about him, since there is no standard in relation to which we could measure this "more" or "less."

In this story, the unknowability, the inscrutability of the protagonist is further strengthened (or weakened, depending on whether this is perceived as a failure or as a success) by the undefined, unstable point of view, which is split between the protagonist and the narrator. The following reflections, for example, can be attributed both to the narrator and to the protagonist:

But honor and piety or desire and stealth create different silences, and the child learns to hold out his cup, the waitress to set down the plate, a man his money. The child learns to get from the cemetery to the barber shop without a word, from the wild still competition and gainless amusement of the single bowling alley to the salt and blood and danger of the fish-bait without a word. The man has already learned his silences. ("The Nearest Cemetery" 48)

Whatever happens to the characters in the stories does not happen because of, or as a result of who they are. Their function--their existence as characters in a piece of fiction--is the trace, the nonorigin, which is our sole means of access to them, and which becomes, for

us, the origin of their dimensions since the dimensions exist only in the functions, not before them.

The lack of dimensions is a manifestation of Hawkes's indebtedness to poststructuralism. Hawkes shares common ground with Derrida in that he shows that the line that Husserl supposedly draws between expression and indication is, in fact, drawn elsewhere, since indication--and the absence it opens up--is, ultimately, constitutive of subjectivity. Determined to recapture absence from the exile to which it has been subjected by both philosophy and literature, both Derrida and Hawkes tend to valorize absence. Thus, Hawkes often consciously directs our attention to what is absent, as, for example, with the story "The Grandmother," where the character of the grandmother appears only in the final scene, in an imaginary dialogue (and the grandmother is dead). Absence is constitutive of Hawkes's protagonists. Absence, however, should not be thought only in the most obvious sense, as death. John Kuehl remarks that Thanatos reigns supreme in Hawkes's early fiction, but he speaks of Thanatos thematically, as a dominant theme in the stories (xi). As Derrida shows, however, the forces of death operate on a more fundamental level, where the very possibility of language, of giving form to a protagonist's visions and dreams, becomes the relationship with one's own death. Language, as our relationship with death, is constitutive of Husserl's "solitary mental life" rather than destroying it, as Husserl claims. Hawkes goes as far as to claim "death as the final, ultimate act of artistry" (*Travesty* 135), a statement that is not absolutely untruthful. If language exiles self-presence and constitutes our relationship with death, real death releases us from our dependence on language and restores the exiled self-presence. Paradoxically, in dying we make our strongest claim at being-for-ourselves, rather

than being-for-language. Death is not only the main drive preconditioning Hawkes's characters, but also part of his understanding of the creative act of the imagination. Hawkes is concerned with "the destructiveness of one's own imagination . . . [with] our unconscious, personal recreation of the world" (O'Donnel 49).

Self-destruction "happens" in the act of imagining oneself. Hawkes can never present the individual consciousness as absolutely transparent, alive, purely expressive, since language--and, through it, self-consciousness--"gets in the way." Sokolowski's distinction between verbs and nouns may serve to clarify the nature of Hawkes's characters as absences. Sokolowski's discussion deals with the grammatical level of language, but it can still be useful in, at the least, providing an analogy, through which Hawkes's characters will be better understood. He distinguishes between a noumenal and a phenomenal element in language, or what he calls the "noun" and the "verb." The former is recontextualizable, performs reporting functions, and, overall, tends toward presence. The latter evokes a particular context, performs registration functions (registration involves evocation and is opposed to reporting), and tends toward absence (13-15). In this context, Hawkes's characters are phenomenal rather than noumenal: they evoke a particular consciousness that exists only in its determined context, and is thus unrepeatable. Richard draws attention to the subtle way, in which determinism--in this case, determinism on the level of character--slips into idealism. He notes that the world of mimetic fiction, the world of signs, has been replaced by a world of symptoms: "pathology reigns as the new monarch of reality and etiology is the official name of the causal doctrine of the new kingdom" (19). Hawkes's characters are like bundles of symptoms with the "disease" itself left unknown. In an interview, Hawkes explains: "It's

easier to sustain fiction with flashbacks, with a kind of explanatory reconstruction of past lives. All this adds more possibilities for drama. I wanted none of it" (Kuehl 167). The absence of the cause for determinism renders that determinism idealistic: "From the symptoms backwards, we hope to reach the cause: we thus inscribe causality in a dissymmetrical temporality. Causality . . . is always after the fact . . . [W]e can no longer see symptoms as symptoms of what is [only of what was] . . . Determinism has become idealism" (Richard 19). The paradox of Hawkes's "pure" or ideal characters is that their undimensionality fits into both a phenomenological and a deconstructionist context. From a phenomenological point of view, this undimensionality could be interpreted as the final point of the series of phenomenological epoches, the attainment of the purely germinal force of a character stripped of accidental attributes. From a deconstructionist point of view, this same undimensionality could be interpreted as the ultimate proof of the insubstantiality of the subject. Thus, the undimensionality of characters can be seen both in terms of phenomenological purity and deconstructionist absence, yet another manifestation of Hawkes's philosophical ambivalence as a writer.

Even as Hawkes "buries" his fiction in the fundamental structures of the human mind, as a phenomenologist would do, reaching for pure expression, his fiction shares common ground with Derrida's side of the argument, because Hawkes understands that self-consciousness--the ultimate determinant of man--cannot be reduced, cannot be bracketted off. Although imagination constitutes the possibility of liberation from absolute indication, the possibility of, at least, a semblance of self-presence, ultimately, imagination annihilates itself, since what is being imagined or recollected is the self. At the core of Husserl's belief in the

possibility of pure expression lies his belief in the subject absolutely possessing himself. However, a self-conscious subject--Hawkes's characters are conditioned by their self-consciousness--does not own himself completely. The "meaning-intention" is not immediately or fully present in him but must "pass through the mediation of indicative signification" (Derrida, *Speech* 38). In self-consciousness, consciousness is concealed so that I do not have "a primordial intuition" of myself (40). Through the personal pronoun I use to refer to myself--"you"--I inaugurate a series of "'going-forths' [into the world] . . . [thus] effectively exil[ing] this life of self-presence in indications" (40). Self-consciousness introduces in the midst of pure intentionality and self-presence the deathlike apparition of the Other into whom the I has slipped. Self-consciousness "exiles" "the sense-giving act, the animating intention"(38) so that one's own lived experience is no longer present to one "in person." An absence opens up at the heart of self-presence. With indication becoming a prerequisite (for the self-conscious character), the whole range of "involuntary associations" which constitute its nature contaminate the "constituting subjectivity" that Hawkes tries to actualize in his fiction. A manifestation of this "corrupted" constituting subjectivity is the extreme degree of self-alienation Hawkes's protagonists exhibit. They tend to observe themselves from a distance, taking an almost voyeuristic or masochistic pleasure in doing so. Justus, for instance, refers to himself in an unemotional, impersonal manner as "the traveler": "it was the cold dawn of the traveler" ("The Traveler" 1). Likewise, Sparrow the Lance Corporal--from whose third person limited point of view the story is, supposedly, told--observes himself as he stands on the cliff by the sea: "he himself--a tiny figure--stood on the crest with the seawrack and the breeze of an ocean around him" ("A Little Bit" 26).

These examples draw attention to the nature of detachment as a lack of self-possession. The most conspicuous example of a protagonist not possessing himself is the character of Justus, the "floater," in "The Traveler." Justus's consciousness is opaque, preconditioned by an incapacity for change and for true concern for anything else outside itself. Justus is the man who misses nothing, in both senses of the word: "She seemed to know that I, Justus Kummerlich [miserable] would miss nothing" (2). This is the consciousness of one who is not only unable not to notice the most insignificant details of the world around him--the hair on the pen point the bank clerk hands him, the linen in the hotel room that has to be perfectly clean--but who cannot miss (regret) anything, because nothing truly belongs to him, that is, nothing belongs to him as a result of his own volition, his choice. His is the effortless life of the "floater": "If one is ordained to have it, one's money is not stolen, my friend. If there is money in your pocket, it will stay. If money is your domesticity, you will have only to be a good housekeeper. When traveling, my friend, it is simple: one has merely to know how to pin one's pocketbook inside the pillow" (45).

Justus pins his sense of self to his sleeve, as it were, lest he forgets who he is, like a Peter Pan using a bar of soap to attach his shadow to his body. Justus reminds himself of his own existence by living the life he believes he is ordained to live, the corresponding life. It is simply impossible for him to experience loss--of whatever kind--since he does not possess anything to begin with. His own reality--his self-presence--is compromised, on the level of plot, by an incident at the hotel when a couple "leaned heedlessly into our screened doors as if they thought the room empty" (6), as if Justus and his wife were absent, dead. Indeed, the whole story seems nothing more than Justus's dreamlike vision: the child who is both real and

unreal, the wife, whom Justus "forgets" in the beginning of the story and who exists through the rest of the story only marginally, appearing here and there, more a memory than a real woman. Since Justus does not really have a self, he keeps exaggerating this lacking self-possession through a kind of reversal. Hence, the narrative draws attention to possessive pronouns: "my automobile," "his bank," "my hostel," "his small French eyes . . . [and] his register," as if Justus is constantly trying to determine the boundaries of his self and those of other selves, but, in the end, this remains an impossible task (just as impossible as distinguishing the past from the present, the real from the imagined, the conscious from the unconscious) as he realizes that one never possesses oneself. A man not owning himself is like a room by the sea: "a room facing the ocean and filled with that tomb odor of habitations built by the sea. Each time I entered there was the sensation of a mild loneliness, a realization that it was not one's own" (3). That he does not possess himself is also obvious from his relationship with his own future, a future he cannot choose, but which is already known, and thus no different from the present: "So we journeyed, bearing always south . . . setting ourselves to sleep every night in the spring-weakened hollows of familiar beds which, no matter how old we grow, tell us always of mother and father and sick child as we roll from side to side through the years" (3).

### The Creation of Meaning

Hawkes's "anti-realist" fiction cannot be interpreted, since it tries "to preserve the imagination against interpretation" (Baxter 883). Sartre's concept of imagination, indebted to Husserl's phenomenology, serves to explain this negativity, this resistance, characteristic,

both thematically and formally, of Hawkes's anti-realism. Sartre defines the image thus: "l'image est un certain type de conscience. L'image est un acte et non une chose. L'image est conscience *de* quelque chose" [The image is a mode of consciousness. It is an act, not a thing. The image is consciousness *of* something] (*L'Imagination* 162; my translation). Hawkes's view of the imagination is phenomenological--the image is consciousness of something, not the thing itself. The image is not passive, but active. To consider Hawkes's stories static only because they indulge in the imaginary is not only naive but unjustified. Sartre posits as the imagination's precondition "'la possibilite de poser une these d'irrealite'"; for him, "'l'acte negatif est constitutif de l'image'" [the act of negation is constitutive for the imagination] (*L'Imaginaire* 232; my translation). The imagination, then, is "an act of consciousness which in the form of the imaginary posits irrealty and negativity as its precondition" (Hornung 66). Hawkes himself argues that "annihilation is the twin of the imagination" (Ziegler 179). Thus, negativity emerges as a principle of composition, but it is, ultimately, an affirmative principle.

Hawkes's work comments on the ambivalent nature of the imagination: the imagination is both phenomenological and deconstructive. Time perception--Augustine's notion of time as a distension of the soul--best exemplifies the phenomenological aspect of the imagination. Time does not measure the soul, but the soul measures or creates time. The imagination is deconstructive to the extent that it is a matter of absences: it is the absencing of self-presence, the negation of what is for the sake of what is not. Still, it is namely through the absences which imagination opens up that reality becomes meaningful for us. Reality is sustained through its continuous displacement, questioning, postponement, i.e. through its



consistent negation. Indeed, our psychological experiences seem to support such a view: we feel most alive, and, paradoxically, most reassured, in our “negative,” painful moments.

The imagination, then, is both substantial (phenomenological) and nonsubstantial (deconstructive). It is substantial insofar as it persists, is never “lost,” but this persistence is a matter of consistency guaranteed through the repetition of displacements of immediacy (of essence), repetition being anti-phenomenological. Hawkes’s view of the imagination takes into consideration both its bleak and its joyful aspects. He tends to erase the distinction not only between conscious and subconscious, but also the distinction between psychology and the imagination. Although the subconscious is considered the most authentic, the most spontaneous part of us, it also conditions us with its rigidity. In recognizing the threat the subconscious poses, Hawkes differs from conventional stream-of-consciousness writing, which privileges the subconscious and is, generally, uncritical of it. Hawkes acknowledges the rigidity of the imagination, which is, paradoxically, a product of its very autonomy. The subconscious/the imagination can make one vulnerable, inflexible, helpless. It can be a deadening force in that it involves repetition, and repetition is, in the end, a mechanism. The imagination is a lively force in that it refuses to submit to the world and instead imposes its own terms, but its own terms eventually become just as automated as the reality against which the imagination initially rebels. Whatever the nature of reality, it is changed when the imagination acts upon it--in this sense, imagination is bound to introduce something artificial, mechanical, in an inherently undifferentiated nature. On the other hand, the imagination exists in this reality, is part of that nature, and, thus, cannot be absolutely unnatural.

Given Hawkes’s understanding of the imagination as an act, it is only logical that

meaning does not precede Hawkes's stories, hence cannot be retrieved--it has never been, and then been lost. Meaning exists purely on the level of the sign, not in some relationship between the sign and what is taken to be the real world. The negation of being as essence is succumbly expressed by Bataille: "Being in the world is so uncertain that I can project it where I want--outside of me. It is a clumsy man, still incapable of eluding the intrigues of nature, who locks being in the me. Being . . . is found NOWHERE and it was an easy game for a sickly malice to discover it to be divine" (377). That meaning is not given but the writer only projects it wherever he wants should not, however, be regarded nostalgically. Derrida himself draws a distinction between viewing the lack of origin (a preexisting meaning literature is supposed to express) as a loss, and viewing it simply as a non-origin, with a Nietzschean affirmation (Derrida, "Structure" 970).

In fact, this view of meaning is optimistic. If meaning does not precede the story, it exists at every point of the story. Since it is not represented but produced, each point in the course of its production is saturated with as much meaning as there is--there is simply no "more" meaning at that given point. Nothing is "held back" only to be "brought out" later in the story and throw light on what has gone "before." "The Nearest Cemetery" is a case in point. In the *dramatis personae* preceding the story Hawkes actually summarizes the plot. We know the barber is the killer. What might we expect, then, to "learn" from the story? Why he killed the Princess? But this question, too, is left unanswered (it is not even posed). The pleasure of the story does not derive from asking a question and then answering it. The work does not talk about the cause of the act or even about the consequences. Yet, it gives us much more than that: the barber's thoughts are pleasurable to read because we are free to

situate them anywhere we wish--as causes, symptoms, effects, as neither of these, or as all of them at once. As each thought leads into another, it is impossible to determine which has originated which. What Baxter observes about *Travesty* is fully applicable to Hawkes's short stories: they contain "impressions rather than fully formed ideas" (878).

One way, in which meaning does not precede Hawkes's stories is the absence of personal histories "behind" the protagonists. The stories usually begin in *medias res* without, however, casting a wistful glance backward and seeking to reconstruct the missing context. The opening sentence or paragraph introduces the protagonist straightforwardly, the rest of the story remaining focused on one specific moment in the character's life, or on one specific action. The stories circle around an isolated moment. The protagonist often almost lacks corporality. Hence, the impersonality bordering on anonymity: "Early one morning in a town famous for the growing of some grape, I arose from my bed in the inn and stepped outside alone to the automobile" ("The Traveler" 1); "It was with all the old patience that I cried to them, with all the old affection that I announced myself, and my hands were outstretched . . . I felt the wanderer come home" ("The Grandmother" 12); "I remember the day--blue, puffy white, orange--and that I was smiling until we passed a hot dog stand and a shingled church with windows as bright and painful as some of my own dreams" ("The Nearest Cemetery" 43).

Although Derrida seems to suggest that all signification is indicative (this is a corollary of the idea that meaning does not exist a priori but emerges only in language)--since even expression has to be replaced by indication as a way of compensating for expression's "intrinsic nonplenitude" (Derrida, *Speech* 89)--his understanding of the way meaning

functions in principle suggests that all signification is expressive, in Husserl's sense of nonreferentiality. Fiction functions formally, as internal coherence, acquiring meaning without reference to the world. No sign is subject to truth-value tests since fictional language is poetic. Phenomenological reduction then is not necessary in the first place. It would be superfluous because all signification is already, primordially, reduced to a formal kind of expression--one could perhaps call it "indicative expression"--which makes sense even if its juxtaposition with "the facts of life" produces insurmountable paradoxes: "My death is structurally necessary to the pronouncing of the I . . . The Bedeutung (meaning) 'I am' or 'I am alive' . . . will be different from the Bedeutung 'I am dead,' but not necessarily from the fact that 'I am dead'" (Derrida, *Speech* 96). Writing, and everything that for Husserl falls under "indication," has an autonomous meaning, thus attaining the privileged status of speech--even in the absence of an "intuitive presence"--simply by virtue of the nature of writing as a relationship with death: "The autonomy of meaning with regard to intuitive cognition . . . has its norms in writing and in the relationship with death" (97). Fictional worlds do not add anything to reality, do not enrich it, but compensate for an initial lack in that reality. The things, which do not exist, and of which fiction speaks, are not added to the world of existing things, but compensate for the nonplenitude of the real world, which is never "rich" enough to encompass the objects of the imagination. Imagination is a reproach of a world that is too "poor" to begin with. This "poverty" is the reason why presence, according to Derrida, never is. It is not an entity but a trace, which has neither essence nor existence, and which, by appearing, risks disappearing, since it is itself a disappearance (134). Presence is an effect of *differance*. If presence is not an origin, signs cannot attempt to "recapture" a "lost" presence:

it has never been "lost" since it has never existed in the first place. Derrida asserts that presence is derived from sign, not the other way around. Each time the present is composed through sign, the present, meaning as trace, is that which is not any more and not yet: "Trace relates to past and future . . . it constitutes what is called presence by this very relation to what it is not" (142-143). Similarly, Hawkes's fiction operates through distortion, incongruity, and paradox, all of which focus on what is not. This is the way, in which the imagination functions--through varying degrees of modification and distortion. Meaning is, then, produced through absences, rather than represented through presences. This qualifies Hawkes's stories as what Jonathan Culler calls "non-genre literature," literature that "avoids established relations between *écriture*--production of a surface--and *lecture*--production of sense" (259). Edward Said supports the view of meaning as generated rather than represented, in his discussion of Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams*: "meaning cannot be imagined as residing in a finished object like the dream; nor for that matter can meaning precede its verbal description. Rather, the meaning of the unknown (the unconscious) is always being produced" (168). Hawkes's stories are moved by consciousness, and the plot is, as it were, the self-fulfilling prophesy of the particular consciousness, which, however, is not something latent that suddenly becomes manifest. It is not "lurking" or "murmuring", emerging *here* and *there*, or *now* and *then*, through the sleazy fabric of the story. It is exactly the stuff the story is made of. Such a story does not try to live up either to its beginning or to its end. We do not ask of the story "How did all this lead up to the end?" or "How did all this follow from the beginning?" This is not to say that such a story is purposefully written as stream-of-consciousness (it is not therapeutic), nor is it nonsensical (strictly speaking, it

is impossible to write nonsense). In "A Song Outside," for example, we do not ask who the two strangers are, why they are in the village, how long they have been there, how long they are going to stay, what they do. The story has an almost hypnotic effect, mystic, even mythical. Any explanation would disambiguate the self-sufficiency and sharpness of the image of the two men sitting in the patio:

Now the men sat cross-legged against opposite walls and stared at each other across the narrow patio. Slowly their white shoulders began to burn. They sat in the patio and breathed heavily, soricine and white, thin and light-headed under the pulseless sun and high on the altitude of the plain. And the sun, the abode, the plateau of the desert--out there squatted the vulture--and the buildings, the black holes of windows like cannon ports, the cornices of white and the silence: for the men all this was the mere end of a bus ride, the space for which there was no rent. (41)

Hawkes uses distortion consciously. According to O'Donnell, "purposeful distortion, black humor and fantasy, and an occasional decadent willingness to let language overwhelm life" (41) are major characteristics of Hawkes's anti-realism. Distortion is, in fact, natural to language. Todorov explains: "Words are to things what desire is to its object" (106). Just as the nature of desire is, in part, to defer the presence of the desired object, so also does language want to keep a distance between itself and the things it names. "Language overwhelming life" is a reflection of Vico's view of burial, a view Said connects with Derrida's idea of *differance* as the possibility of a beginning, and, ultimately, of being: "to bury, in Vico's sense, is to engender difference; and to engender difference, as Derrida

argues, is to defer presence, to temporize, to introduce absence" (Said 373). Vico's association of history with language--the idea that language makes time/history possible--hints, according to Said, at the way in which "language effectively displaces human presence, just as history is engendered only by burial (removal, displacement) of immediacy" (373). Being is engendered only through the sign displacing self-presence, only through language overwhelming life. In Hawkes's fiction, the only way to present reality seems to be to point away from it, to point at the subconscious, the unimmediate, the remembered or imagined. Hawkes keeps reiterating his preference for, and trust in, the imagined life: "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" (*Travesty* 57). Reality, meaning, being become accessible only in their imagined loss, which, however, is a good thing because "[t]he incipient infection is livelier than the health it destroys" (26).

#### Indication versus Referentiality

Hawkes's fiction shows that although language indicates, it does not necessarily refer. Husserl's "essential distinction" is similar to the one Langer draws between what she terms the "communicative" and the "formulative" uses of language. The formulative function is "normally coincident with the communicative functions, but largely independent of them; and while its most spectacular exhibition is in poetry, it is profoundly, though not obviously, operative in our whole language-bound mental life" (Langer 537). Both Langer and Husserl need to make this distinction in order to exempt poetic language ("poetic semblance," to use Langer's term, or "the solitary mental life," to use Husserl's term) from the truth-value

considerations to which "actual statements" are subjected. They both search for a niche in language that would not be referential, for a language that would be meaningful even when it does not indicate anything, simply because it does not need to indicate. Husserl believes that even if in certain cases indication is a form of subjectivity, it is merely an empirical subjectivity, which must be subjected to the first phenomenological reduction in order for the "constituting subjectivity" to be reached (Derrida, *Speech* 30). For him, indicative signification results from "the association of ideas," an empirical process outside the realm of truth. The aim of the series of epoches is to reach a state of mind that would be absolutely self-sufficient. By "self-sufficient" Husserl understands noneffective--not ineffective but not-necessary-to-be-effective. Expression does not need to be effective (since expression is not "used" for communication), whereas "the whole stratum of empirical effectiveness . . . belongs to indication . . . not only because it [indication] is in the world, but also because it retains in itself something of the nature of an involuntary association" (34). What follows from Husserl's definition of indication as possessing the nature of an involuntary association of ideas is the already common view, according to which whenever man uses language, it is not man who speaks, but language only. It may seem, then, that Derrida's deconstruction of phenomenology only makes matters worse for man. However, deconstruction's rejection of the idea of a transcendental Subject and the introduction of the idea of freeplay serves to dissociate language from the world of things, thus making it possible to draw a distinction between indication and referentiality. All language is indicative, but this does not mean that it always has to be "effective," in the sense in which Husserl uses the word. Husserl's desire to get at the state of mind, in which one would not have to be effective--would not have to



tell oneself anything, i.e. would be free of self-consciousness--may not be attainable on the level of ontology, but it is not absolutely unattainable on the level of fiction, if one draws a distinction between indication and referentiality. Language indicates both ideal and real objects. Granted that fictional language is indicative not of real=world objects, but of concepts (Tanner 26), language can be indicative without being referential, where by "reference" we understand reference to the "real" world. Hence, although it is impossible to find a niche of self-presence outside indication, it is possible to find one within indication itself, in that aspect of it which is nonreferential.

This part of indication is the imagination. The imagination measures or registers desire (anticipation) and loss (memory), or power (the power to envision endless possibilities) and innocence (the innocence of loss). Since the imagination, whose nature is that of absence, is "situated" within indication, indication being the absencing of self-presence, the result is a double negation--an absence within an absence--which, by a travesty of sorts, ends in an affirmation. Thus, the imagination attains the semblance of a self-presence. Mimetic fiction fails to achieve this semblance of self-presence, because mimetic fiction does not leave room--within indication--for nonreferentiality. It does not go through the double negation--the "negative affirmation," to use Hornung's term (67)--through which a semblance of essence is attained. In Husserl's terminology, "[n]onexpressive signs mean only to the degree to which they can be made to say what was murmuring in them" since they represent "everything that cannot itself [voluntarily] be brought into deliberate and meaningful speech" (36). Mimetic fiction is nonexpressive. It is fiction that "murmurs." It is dissociated from the most alive core of consciousness--from the series of absences produced by the active imagination.

Hawkes's fiction, on the other hand, is explicit, even if unintelligible, or rather, because of its explicitness it is uninterpretable. At first glance it may seem that it begs for interpretation, that there is a hidden meaning "murmuring" from some unidentified depth, but in fact the opposite is true: this fiction lacks any illusory, artificially produced depth. It has only a surface, and it asks to be experienced as a surface. "The Traveler" provides an example of the absence of depth preceding and overdetermining the story. The event that has, supposedly, burdened Justus's consciousness with guilt is "omitted" (the incestuous affair of Justus and his brother's wife, which is hinted at in "The Traveler," though even there nothing is said directly). By refusing to reveal what past event has conditioned the protagonist's consciousness, the author strips the story of a motivation, an origin, a cause that would explain it. He purposefully eliminates any depth that could be attributed to the narrative and thus focuses the reader's attention on language. It is clear that a certain secret precedes the story--Metzger's mysterious ache--but the story is focused in the immediate present. The story is a surface, flat and self-sufficient like a painting. It does not refuse to admit that it is preceded by something, but it insists that whatever precedes it is, ultimately, irrelevant to the story, which is not to be "understood" so much as experienced.

### "Latent" and "Manifest"

The Hawkes story does not deal with ontological issues. It does not ask "Am I?" or "Who am I?" or "Why am I?" It is not concerned with the ontological justification of man, with man's "soul." If we imagine the protagonist's consciousness as a straight line, the meaning of a Hawkes story would not be something that "descends" into the protagonist's

consciousness, and from there, into the whole story. The Hawkes story does not deal with epistemological issues, either. It does not ask: "What do I know?" It is interested neither in the mind's gymnastics, nor in the soul. Hawkes's protagonists are not presented as undergoing a change (i.e., they are not presented as event) only to attain an essence that is supposed to underlie them. The stories bypass naively positivistic premises of the kind "I am (present)" or "I know," and try, instead, to show *how* we know what we know. They bypass the assertions "There is meaning" and "There is no meaning" to examine the meaning that a particular consciousness *can* perceive. They ask "How do we make any sense at all in an arbitrary world?" finding that the source of this any-meaning-at-all is the subconscious. These stories should not, however, be identified with a psychoanalytical study of man: such a study typically explains the conscious through the subconscious, thus disparaging the conscious, whereas Hawkes's stories, by refusing to distinguish between the real and the imaginary, privilege neither the conscious nor the subconscious. "A Song Outside," for instance, bypasses the question of presence in the most literal sense, refusing to reveal such basic "information" as whether there are indeed two characters in the story, or just one character lost in a schizophrenic trance. In fact, the story not only refuses to clarify this but purposefully insists on deluding the reader. "A Little Bit of the Old Slap and Tickle," too, refuses to acknowledge itself as a vision, a dream, a memory, or a real experience, and is, thus, all at once. All stories in *Lunar Landscapes* are perched on the border between the real and the imaginary, the past and the present--the memories of Sparrow the Lance Corporal, the wanderings of the traveler, the corpse-like presence of Bodington, the ex-farmer, the absent past of the men (man) in "A Song Outside," the barber's two islands, of past and

present--thus subverting the possibility of even asking the question of truth as correspondence. The stories do not reject the authenticity of "objective" reality, but they do suggest that the question of evaluating the correspondence between "inner" and "outer" is irrelevant: Hawkes is not concerned with invalidating the "outer" so much as with validating the "inner" world.

This he does by collapsing the "inner" into the "outer." The deconstruction of the expression-indication dichotomy, and the resulting omnipresence of indication has important implications. If all discourse is a detour, if everything signifies rather than is, the distinction between signification (epistemology) and being (ontology) becomes untenable. All discourse is expressive namely because being indicative is the only way for it to be at all. Discourse cannot be justifiably accused of artificiality, because if there is no alternative, no "greater degree" of sincerity, whatever is, is sincere. Within such a framework it becomes impossible to preserve the conventional distinction, in fiction, between "showing" and "telling," or, on the psychological level, between "manifest" and "latent," between "reality" and "vision" or "dream." To accept that certain things are latent is to assume that certain things are inexpressible and have to be indirectly indicated, *made* manifest.

In Hawkes's stories, there is nothing latent that does not represent itself voluntarily and, thus, has to be "made manifest." The barber's reflections, in "The Nearest Cemetery," reveal the fundamentally nonmimetic nature of fiction, which does not need to borrow its motivation from reality but is always self-sufficient and self-reproductive:

Because the ear is already packed with sound like the hollow tree or the dog's skull in the dump or the coffin Vinny carries out of town in his

garbage truck. Every object . . . and every place already contains its fill of sound and the ear is its own coffin, its own little reverberating casket that hears everything it was meant to hear at any moment of the night . . . The ear is the coffin that can't be closed or nailed or buried--it is forever warped with so much sound . . . So the mind lies between the echoing coffins of the ears. (49)

In dreams, the latent is the only reality--it is manifest. Similarly, the subconscious in Hawkes's stories is the only reality--it is no longer latent, timidly "lurking," but is manifest (not manifestED). It is the only reality, because there is no center or standard, against which to measure the possible "approximations" of the subconscious to reality. In Hawkes's fictions, the "latent," the subconscious has been "raised," or has raised itself, into consciousness, a kind of a reversal of Husserl's intended transcendental reduction. Unlike consciousness and self-consciousness, the subconscious cannot be defined as "subconsciousness of" since the potential "object" of subconsciousness is itself unknown. Instead of self-consciousness being reduced to pure subjectivity, pure subjectivity is raised to the level of consciousness. The consciousness of Hawkes's characters appears unjustifiably preconditioned, since the reason that would have justified that preconditioning is absent. "Consciousness of" becomes synonymous with "subconsciousness of," but since the object of the latter is unknown, consciousness, too, becomes unexplainable. The latent collapses into the manifest, the vision or dream into the conscious perception of reality, as, for instance, in "The Traveler" where the protagonist's painful memories or visions are indistinguishable from the equally painful immediate reality. It is exactly under these circumstances--when

conscious and subconscious exist on a par--that the imagination comes into its fullest potential: "the imagination expands . . . when the unconscious can be perceived but not recognized" (Baxter 882).

The preconscious content in Hawkes's stories is not analyzed but synthesized, i.e. it is not distinguished from the consciously shaped material but all material is amalgamated in the images Hawkes uses: "visual and mental images may both be defined as an immediate synthesis in which each detail loses its autonomy. Description, on the other hand, is a construction elaborated on the basis of analytic elements, a synthesis deferred. The details which emerge in the image, in a description are intensified, particularized, highlighted" (Ricardou 266). Hawkes's imagination is not "scriptive," or analytical, not emphasizing differences, i.e. seriality. It is, rather, synthetic or tautological, continually returning to a set of recurrent images. His imagination does not judge the validity of perceptions--how real or unreal they are--and in this it is actually less self-deluding, however psychotic it may appear. Couturier makes the point: "Only in a psychotic state can the self be fooled . . . and reality be experienced as true, non-fictitious," where "fooling the self" means "turning the reader's attention from reality and trying to produce in him vivid, unprecedented impressions of unmediated bliss . . . There is not, on the one hand, a story, and on the other, a discourse, but rather an opaque and dazzling piece which no amount of critical investigation can ever hope to explain away or disambiguate" (5).

## Language

Tony Tanner calls Hawkes's fictions "luminous deteriorations" because while they are

a form of “psychic siphoning” (Hawkes, *Death* 51), exposing “the interior life of the man [which is] a pit of putrescence” (*The Passion Artist* 31), they do so in a way that “bring[s] to this exposure a savage or saving comic spirit and the saving beauties of language” (Tanner 148). Hawkes’s style serves as a sort of compensation for his disturbing subject matter. In the end, he manages to “erect a linguistic order quite in despite of the often appalling disorder of his subject” (164). Hawkes's "anti-realism" and defamiliarization techniques have a lot to do with the conception of language as the only surface=reality available to us: “[t]he impossible and the arbitrary, the contradictory, reduce the [prefabricated] significance of language and fix it in a certain place which keeps it at the surface and does not allow it any traditional or associative profundity” (Sukenick 130). In fact, “defamiliarization . . . increases the reality quotient of phenomena” (145). Hawkes’s “visions” cannot be “unreal” since we use one and the same language to refer to what we take to be conscious and what we take to be unconscious. Gass’s view is relevant here. Gass criticizes the rationalist belief that “the structure of language reveals the structure of thought, and that the structure of thought is in harmony with the structure of the world,” because this is true only if “thought is as essential to things as language is essential to the thought of things” (*Habitations* 84), an idea which Gass rejects. Language is not essential to things, and “[a]nything that can be thought has being . . . Unicorns are possible, and the left-headed head” (84). Hawkes's “lunar landscapes” are to be experienced as surface, because “a word is closer to its sense than to its reference, even if we can write or say the word without knowing what it means, as if its meaning were as absent as its object usually is”(97).

Hawkes uses language evocatively, to use Sokolowski’s term (5). In addition to

emphasizing language at the expense of communication (Baxter 875), evocation renders "the composition, the putting together of words" (Sokolowski 5) relatively unimportant, since the functions of language is "to assist perception, not to make an explicit statement" as a result of which such language inevitably "functions with the imprecision of perception itself" (Gass, *Habitations* 5-6). An example of this is found in the character of Justus. The world in the story is seen and experienced only through his perspective. Although the structure of the story is loose, the character of Justus is so predetermined by his outlook on the world that his outlook overwhelms the rest of the story: "Vagueness and precision in the narrative depend essentially upon his [Justus's] sense of inconvenience or pleasure. The more he feels deprived by his journey, the cloudier his perspective becomes" (Steiner 115).

Hawkes's view of language is important for understanding his "anti-realism." The postmodern writer, realizing that "literature both reveals and falsifies experience" (Sukenick 70), includes the awareness of that falsification in the text (the self-referential text). Hawkes, however, never posits a distinction between "reality" and "vision" or "dream," or "memory" because for him language is the only reality. Language "brings into consciousness something that has been entirely beyond it" (Sukenick 111)--the writer creates something completely new that has been neither in history nor in the unconscious. Hawkes's language not only "fishes out," from the unconscious, a man's deepest fears and dreams but also "creates" that unconsciousness: it is not that a preexisting depth disguises itself as surface for us to "drill," but language opens up a depth which would not have existed without it. Guerard draws attention to what Hawkes himself calls "chordal insistences," language "as simply rhythm and words, words from which the strangeness has not been rubbed away" ("John Hawkes" 2):



With the wind, on which I smell the blood of fish, and with masonry and with fixed perimeter that is nonetheless fluid rather than geometric, the walls buttressed against open fields, road and village in a circumference vaguely but not perfectly circular, the prison is itself an island (and time is the clam, or time the hurricane) but further it brings to mind the lighthouse because of the white painted stone, the metal underfoot thick with coatings of gray heavily-leaded paint, lighthouse because of the narrow walks and odors of fresh paint and oil and half-inch sheets of glass blinding, at sunset, high above our heads and behind bars. Island of men; lighthouse large enough to contain so many men each with his own Venus (though in memory; though only some approximation of her who charmed, each to her liking. Blud and me and Jomo and the Captain) and each with denim pants and coat and face like that of the keeper and the kept combined, since in his tower at dusk the lighthouse keeper shows his enchantment in his white stubbled jaw and eye that looks and looks nowhere except down the three-mile patch of his silent light toward a sea from which no ship may rise and approach because of the very nature of that eye's desire, the very nature of that light's dangerous beam. It is the lure that warns away the catch. (Hawkes, "The Nearest Cemetery" 45-46)

The passage has a characteristically poetic rhythm, strengthened by the use of parallel sentence structure: "with the wind . . . and with masonry and with fixed perimeter," "the lighthouse because of the . . . lighthouse because of the . . . lighthouse large enough."

Ignoring grammatical conventions, Hawkes places words and phrases not in the "correct" order but in the order, in which they flow through the mind, preserving their natural inconsequentiality which, though appearing discontinuous, actually preserves the original psychological coherence of thought. In the words of Wayne Templeton, Hawkes manages to "produce objects, rather than descriptions of objects" (6), dissolving the hardness, the materiality of reality into the characters' consciousness of reality. The result is a type of fiction that achieves a state of "static, impersonal absoluteness" (Klein, "John Hawkes's Experimental" 204). The quoted passage illustrates not only the recursive nature of reading, but also the nature of representation of perception in fiction, a representation not of the object of perception, but, rather, of "the thought [of the thing] in the process of composing itself" (Gass, *Habitations* 81). Gass quotes the opening passage of Danilo Kis's *Garden, Ashes* to illustrate the composition of a thought and of its object through repetition, which, translated into fictional technique, becomes parallelism (parallelism of structure, recurrence of images, analogies):

Late in the morning, late in the morning on summer days, my mother, late in the morning on summer days, would come into the room softly, late in the morning on summer days, my mother would be carrying that tray of hers, late in the morning on summer days, when my mother would come into the room, softly, with that tray.

The uniqueness of Hawkes's style, as Templeton observes, is not due to symbolism but, rather, to syntax (20), a syntax reflecting the original movement of consciousness as it comes into contact with reality. Tanner calls Hawkes's idiosyncratic syntax a form of

“semantic retardation” which “defeat[s] 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” (153-154). Language is used not for the purpose of giving an account of an event or treating the psychology of a character, but for the purpose of creating a particular “verbal reality” (154).

## Time

Another way of achieving defamiliarization, besides the rebellion against parataxis, the creation of characters of purity, and the collapsing of duality, is through the creation of a narrative that does not follow clock time. Augustine’s concept of the threefold present provides the philosophical foundation of Hawkes’s unchronological narratives: “there are three times, a present of [de] past things, a present of [de] present things, and a present of [de] future things” (Ricoeur 11). This is possible since “without itself being movement, time . . . is the measurement of movement [of the human soul, not of celestial motion] . . . . Movement can stop, not time” (15). “Distended” time measures the reality of the individual consciousness. Hawkes’s fiction cannot be accused of having “static plots” since, given that his fiction is concerned with the individual consciousness, when that consciousness is at rest, the story measures that very rest: there can be no action, but there is always something that measures that lack of action. Given’s Augustine’s understanding of “the extension of time [as] a distension of the soul” (Ricoeur 16), the structure of the story--exposition-complication-climax-resolution--is a distension of the protagonist’s consciousness. Aristotle believes that the poetic act is meant to mend Augustine’s discordance (Ricoeur 31), but then

Aristotle argues for causality which he understands as probability, whereas Hawkes refuses to bring concordance into the distended souls of his protagonists and thus remains as close to that primary disharmony--or what he calls "psychological coherence"--as possible.

Heidegger's concept of time complements Augustine's. For Heidegger, who calls the conception of time as "a simple sequence of abstract nows" vulgar (Ricoeur 63), within-time-ness "is defined by a basic characteristic of Care, our being thrown among things, which tends to make our description of temporality dependent upon the description of the things about which we care" (62). Ricoeur goes on to explain that "it is always preoccupation that determines the meaning of . . . time, not the things we care about"(63). The significance of things dominates their actuality. Hawkes's stories are particularly concerned with imagination and memory, i.e. with the significance rather than the factuality of things. The emphasis, however, is not on the fact of memory--the fact that it is a memory, rather than an immediate experience--but on the way in which memory is part of the usual experiential flow. Memory is not used to produce time or the sense of time, and in this Hawkes's stories differ from the traditional story, whose function is "to fracture philosophical time": "[W]hat philosophical reflection seeks to defer indefinitely," the traditional story "concentrates in a point, the moment, the time of decision [the moment of resolution or the point separating the present from the remembered]" (Godzich xvi). Disruptions of chronology create a sense of timelessness, "minimizing the sense of change and development while maximizing the sense of sameness and recurrence" (Friedman 184).

The understanding of time as borne out of the evaluation of the things of the world is central to Hawkes's fiction. Time does not measure the things themselves, but our

judgement of them, our attitude toward them, the degree to which they occupy our thoughts. Time is concentrated, as it were, in the things that mean the most to us, with which we are preoccupied. Those things are most *within-time*. Hence, they are also the ones the soonest to be lost. On the other hand, the things which mean nothing to us, which are irrelevant, not needed, remain on the periphery of time. In them time is rarified, simplified, most absent. Those are the things not easily lost. They are always there, guaranteed, unnecessary, unneeded, unimportant. Hawkes's stories are concerned with what is important for his protagonists, not with what there is. Hence, the things that are lost--everything not present, every memory or desire--provide the pivotal images, around which the stories are built. The imagined and the remembered determine whatever plot there is. In "A Little Bit of the Old Slap and Tickle, for example," the border between real and imagined life is blurred. The story appears to be held together by a chronological sequence of events--Sparrow goes back to his family on a two days' leave--yet the way, in which Hawkes uses language suggests another alternative: the Lance Corporal does not go anywhere; he only remembers, or imagines, or even remembers an imagined happy family life. What he comes to know at the end of the story--"All won, all lost, all over. But he had his"[his memory? his imagined life?]" (30)--he already knows at the beginning--"Now it was all won, all lost, all over" (26). He may be living out the memory or the imagined leave as a real experience, which, however, remains exiled from reality. "And he thought of the work it would take to set the whole thing afloat again--and he knew it could not be done" (30). Perhaps the best indication that the story is dealing with an unreal event is the treatment of time. Right when the protagonist has arrived home, after the scene with his wife--a scene that is, supposedly, fixed in a specific time and

place--the narrative changes tense. The gerundial constructions "distend" the dramatized event, spacing it out in the same way memory spaces out a remembered event: "Scraping paint or splicing rope, or sitting and holding a half cup of rum in the sun on the bow, or following the boys down the idleness of the beach, he smelled what the woman washed or what a hundred-foot wave discharged into that whole long coastal atmosphere" (28). The last sentence of the story, too, casts the story into the shape of a memory, either real or imagined: "He chucked his cigarette as he limped back into the world from which he had come" (30).

The mystical anti-realism of "A Song Outside" is, likewise, strengthened by the way, in which language conveys time. It is impossible to determine whether the story tells of a stranger who is *now* residing in the village or, instead, of a man who *has been* residing there, and, further, whether the story speaks of a dead man or a man still alive: "They lived in the patio . . . They bathed one at a time as dusk . . . A pair of blue suspenders and a shirt . . . were the only signs they left to tell they were, or had been, in the village" (41).

Imagination functions the way time does. The things man cares about most, the ones he keeps imagining, are the ones most easily lost, while reality is always there. In focusing on imagination and memory, Hawkes remains true to the age he lives in. Federman characterizes the postmodern age as "the age of the instantaneous" (*Critification* 119). In this age that disvalues memory or even erases it, the very nature of memory seems to have changed. Memory measures the change in the value ascribed to things. But in the age of the instantaneous everything changes so fast that change becomes the nature of things. Thus, instead of being "added" to things, memory becomes the nature of things. The things of the world become pieces of memory. The world, even if "out there," is lost to man. It has to

be regained, reclaimed by the active imagination, by desire and memory, else man shall remain indifferent to it, and it, too, will remain indifferent to man, because the nature of loss is indifference. The world can become present to man again only through the anti-phenomenological imagination, which distends self-presence by introducing the not-here and the not-now. Paradoxically, reality remains real only through that which negates it. Language has to overwhelm life; the sign has to exile being in order, in the end, to sustain it.

Time and imagination share the nature of desire. What is not now and not here is what man desires most. Man has no pretensions or expectations with respect to reality. Thus, the thought about things is more important than the things themselves. For Hawkes, and for his protagonists, the thought about movement (action) is more important and more real than the movement itself, which explains the domination of character (or, rather, mood) over plot in the stories. Lyotard's radical view of the imagination recalls Hawkes's preference for the imagined life over the remembered life: "Reality is only a sector of the imaginary field which we have agreed to give up, from which we have agreed to withdraw our fantasies. This sector is surrounded on all sides by the imaginary field where the gratification of desire through fantasy continues to be carried on" (*Discours/Figure* 284). Following this definition—considering the nature of consciousness as desire—reality can be defined as that toward which man is passive, indifferent. Hawkes believes that “[t]he ultimate power of the imagination is to create anything, and everything, out of nothing” (Emmett and Vine 171). Reality is not the object of Hawkes’s desire, and, thus, not the object of his fiction. The unseen is.

## The Imagination Workshop

Hawkes's irreverential attitude towards genre conventions leads one to ask: How intelligible is such fiction? For Hawkes, intelligibility is, in the end, a question of honesty. However cruel in his disruption of reader expectations, Hawkes argues that his motive is not cruelty: "I try to be disruptive and honest . . . . Idealism and innocence lie behind everything I write" (Kuehl 158). It is not his aim to be "experimental" for the sake of "experimentation." Yet, not to experiment with the potentials of the genre disparages the audience, offering them only that which they can easily recognize: "Integration and understanding [for Hawkes] get in the way of art's creation because they furnish the audience with what it can recognize--that is, something is not coming into existence from nothing but is being remembered instead" (Baxter 882). Hawkes--and writers, in general--are not to be held responsible either to themselves or to their audience, but only to their work (Le Clair and McCaffery 15).

Deconstruction is, at least partly, motivated by the notion of intelligible meaning as constraining. The conflict between intelligibility and unintelligibility is, however, necessary to stress the idea that the aim of fiction is not to reveal the meaning of reality, but, rather, to make reality meaningful, because "reality comes into 'meaning' in a fiction but is not identical to meaning" (Rayner 22). In the place of the old mimesis, Hawkes is searching for a more truthful, intimate representation of the way the individual consciousness experiences reality. O'Donnell characterizes the fiction resulting from these concerns "schizophrenic," insofar as it is "an attack upon or parody of the fragile, innocent, vulnerable elements of life, in order to inspire a compassion for those elements, as well as to acknowledge the power and the



strange, romantic attraction toward the source of that attack" (*John Hawkes*13). If the truth of our experience of reality is "schizophrenic" fracture and decomposition rather than coherence and meaningfulness, if truth can be achieved only through distortion (Steiner 3), then an honest writer like Hawkes will "maintain the truth of the fractured picture . . . the aspect of bleakest artistry that destroys in order to expose, that does violence to the world and to our expectations" so that "a cheerless recognition [be] attained" (O'Donnell 71). The vulnerable element of life that Hawkes exposes, for the purpose of rescuing it, is the imagination. Hawkes's notion of "characters of purity" is a manifestation of the idealistic or phenomenological aspect of Derrida's deconstruction--the valorization of absence, which Foucault sees as just another translation of the notion of a transcendental presence. The phenomenological traces in Hawkes's formally poststructuralist fiction, are not, however, limited to characterization, but are also reflected in the writer's desire to disambiguate his work, to strip it of "history," of depth. This "drive" for reduction is at the root of the disagreement between phenomenology and deconstruction. From a deconstructionist perspective, the production of meaning is a matter of recognizing differences, the differences between words, and on another level, between images, incidents, characters. Phenomenology, however, emphasizes semblance, the ultimate semblance being self-presence or essence. Hawkes's monophonic protagonists are, thus, anti-phenomenological since the phenomenological project insists that true life cannot be repeated. Yet, within the individual works, Hawkes's "method" of characterization is phenomenological: it relies on repetition of images and analogous incidents, i.e. on semblance. The view of the imagination is what separates the phenomenological project from deconstruction. Phenomenology's aim is, first,

to isolate consciousness from its objects in the world, and, second, to isolate the essential structures of consciousness from the subjective experiences in which it becomes aware of its objects. This requires bracketing off anything lacking self-presence, which includes the imagination. Hawkes's impulse, as a writer, is initially phenomenological--he aims to bracket off "hardcore" reality. However, his work shows the bracketing off of the imagination to be unnecessary and impossible since whatever essence or meaning there is, it is constituted namely through the imagination. Meaning is projected, not reconstructed. Hawkes's version of mimesis is an imitation of exactly those subjective experiences that phenomenology wants to seal off: "I . . . was aware only of the perception of the event rather than of the event itself" (Hawkes, *Death* 112).

Hawkes's indebtedness to both phenomenology and deconstruction suggests that perhaps these two approaches should not be perceived as extreme opposites. In fact, if there is a critical approach that would be applicable to Hawkes's work, without disparaging it, it is deconstruction. The deconstructionist resembles Hawkes in the way he views language as perched at the edge of a precipice. Deconstruction shows the utmost respect for language by refusing to view it merely as a medium, a tool, and instead viewing it as something alive. This critical "method" is perhaps the only one that does not bring anything extraneous to the material it analyzes: it does not "invent" its critical tools but "finds" them in the language that is already there. It does not create chaos--abusing Derrida's notion of freeplay is a common error--but only exposes the chaos constitutive of language. It does not do violence to the text, does not skew it to make it fit a particular theory. Its interest in contradictions and paradoxes is in accord with the way, in which we perceive reality: today, if we want to

“notice” anything at all, it must strike us as a paradox, an incongruity, a distortion. Our vision fails us when the world appears to us uniform, even. This is why Hawkes feels it is important to de-familiarize reality.

Deconstruction is especially appropriate for discussing poetry, or lyrical prose like Hawkes’s, where meaning cannot--indeed, must not--be reduced to any form of “totality.” But it also seems to be the most appropriate approach to literature in general. If the language of literature is acentric, then the critical language that analyzes that literature must be acentric, too. Deconstruction does not aim at reconstructing authorial intentions or at foreseeing the meaning of a work. It does not ask “What is the meaning of this work?” but asks the first question, “How does a work of literature become possible in the first place?” It is not a teleological but an operative method: it focuses on the event of making sense, not on the justification of the validity of that sense, just as Hawkes’s work focuses on how reality becomes meaningful for us, rather than on what it means. Likewise, while deconstruction emphasizes the importance of being aware of the dichotomies underlying our thinking, Hawkes sustains our awareness of the duality of reality and of our thoughts about it by collapsing that duality.

Deconstruction can be viewed not only as an attack on phenomenology but also as “a further radicalization of phenomenology” which demonstrates that “constitution involves a perpetual deferral and difference” (Mohanty 400). After all, deconstruction opposes the hierarchization of the sides forming a dichotomy--such as the dichotomy real/anti-real, for instance--demonstrating how each side is used to define the other. The “iconic realm” which, O’Donnell argues, Hawkes is trying to attain--a realm “where the relational boundaries

between the self and its history, its being-situated in respect to others, events, 'reality,' are erased" (O'Donnel, "Self-Alignment" 126)--reflects the idealistic aspect shared by phenomenology and deconstruction. In collapsing dichotomies such as conscious/subconscious, manifest/latent, subconscious/imagination, Hawkes privileges neither side of the dichotomies. The only prioritization he is "guilty" of is that of the "imagined life" over "remembered life"--this reveals Hawkes's anti-realism as a form of idealism. Deconstruction challenges the idea of a center and indeed Hawkes's stories seem decentralized, but they still have a surrogate center--the imagination--which, however, is not really a stabilizing, reassuring center because it functions through distensions of self-presence, i.e., of center. The imagination is a decentralizing center, an oxymoron.

Hawkes's indebtedness to poststructuralist thought manifests itself in the idea of meaning as emerging in the sign rather than preceding it, in the relationship between signs rather than in a relationship between things and signs. Thus, the evocative use of language in Hawkes's fiction dominates the communicative one, the latter appearing almost as a side effect: "Communication is not at the heart of the linguistic act but only an epiphenomenon . . . if literature tells a story, if the author has to use a reference, it is simply a consequence of the fact that he is manipulating a linguistic sign" (Donato 571). Hawkes's Romantic side is his indebtedness to a phenomenological understanding of personal or psychological time and coherence. Hawkes's fictions reveal the continuity of the self to be not substantively but transitively constituted by a series of absences through which the imagination functions--the imaginary, the recollected, the imaginatively recollected, the recollected imaginary. The nature of the imagination is displacement or postponement of self-transparency, which is why

Hawkes often associates it with death and with memory: “But he calmed himself by recalling for an instant his theory of memory: that memory was an infinitely expanding structure of events recollected from life, events that had been imagined, imaginary events that had been recollected, recomposed, dreamt once again, remembered” (*The Passion Artist* 22).

As a writer, Hawkes has the tendency to “stop” the narrative and zoom in to a specific “moment”—image or incident—creating a tableau, a fixed point which establishes an illusion of timelessness, of a self-present phenomenological essence. In a way, he “achieves the bottom” (Hawkes, *Death* 56), or the solitary mental life of Husserl, in the atemporal syntax of his sentences, a syntax that creates a sense of simultaneity, that collapses the consciousness of a thing into the thing itself. Yet, on the other hand, Hawkes’s protagonists are always determined if not by an external force, then by their own consciousness, their own self-definition, their own imagination which cannot be reduced: “The imagination cannot be denied” (*Death* 80). The imagination is so strong that it determines the world of the protagonists absolutely. In *The Passion Artist*, for example, Konrad Vost’s imagination achieves the impossible—it begins manifesting Vost’s thoughts, creating what would have to be the ultimate instance of a thought crime. Vost’s theories about memory, severed limbs, the nature of man, are rendered manifest, as a result of which his “penchant for irony” (*The Passion Artist* 121) is fulfilled. The Hawkes story or novel frequently turns into the self-fulfilling prophesy of its protagonist, whose imagination is so unlimited that it turns reality inside out at the slightest stimulus: “the smallest alteration in the world of physical objects produces the severest and most frightening transformation of reality” (*Death* 38). Reality is transitory because the perception of it is.

The phenomenological “drive” persists in Hawkes’s fiction as evidenced in the juxtaposition of the arbitrary and the analogical. While the sequences--sometimes chronological, sometimes not--of tableaux that make up the stories result in a free form associated more with the randomness, or freedom, of a deconstructionist view of reality, a view stressing difference, those tableaux obey the logic of analogues and correspondences, the logic of an underlying sameness, a surrogate center, an essence of sorts, a deep psychological unity associated with a phenomenological view of reality. This surrogate center is the subconscious, which Hawkes tends to identify with the imagination.

The tension of Hawkes’s ambivalent position in-between presence and absence manifests itself in his tendency to express one in terms of the other. His works often center around the juxtaposition of a fixed point and a free context, the juxtaposition of immobility and movement, of sameness and difference. This tension is recapitulated in the phrase with which the protagonist in *The Passion Artist* refers to himself: “the stationary traveler” (14). The subconscious, or the imagination, is sometimes associated with immobility--hence, Hawkes’s metaphors for the subconscious: “I felt as if I were wearing the rubber suit of the skin diver beneath my clothes . . . . Inside the rubber skin I was a person generating his own unwanted lubricant of poisoned grease . . . . For a moment I longed for a quick slice of the surgeon’s knife as if I were my own ulcer” (*Death* 79). As a “second skin” (138), the imagination is delimiting, deadening. Hawkes, however, perceives everything in its duality, in its ambivalence tending toward self-erasure. Hence, sometimes, the imagination is associated with motion and thus juxtaposed with the deadpan immobility of reality: “I . . . felt through all my weight and cold musculature the heavy slow rumble of the engines and the

unmistakable revolutions of the great brass propeller blades in the depths below us. The distant vibrations were all around us, were inside me, as if my intestinal center was pulsating with pure oceanic motion and the absolute certainty of the navigational mind doing its dependable work” (*Death* 8). The subconscious is dependable because it continues turning its propellers even when the ship seems dead, but, on the other hand, it is namely its dependability, which is easily translated into automation, that delimits the individual imagination. The imagination is, ultimately, self-destructive. When it is strongest and most liberating, it also reaches the point, beyond which it only makes the terror of one’s unfreedom even more obvious to oneself. A strong imagination finally subjects reality to itself and collapses the private into the public. With that, chronology corrupts the inner, private life of consciousness and leads to the terror of a travestized phenomenological reduction, whereby instead of the world being bracketed off, it collapses into the inner world only to reveal the latter’s limitations: “even then, in the drabest and the cruelest hours of those night hours, he had only the first and faintest intimations that his life had collapsed into chronology, that private axis had coincided with public axis, and that the disordering of his small world had in fact begun” (*The Passion Artist* 42). What can be worse than a reality reflecting one’s imagination, a world that keeps throwing back at you your own reflection? It is then that the bars of the cage are most obvious and unbearable. This bleak aspect of the imagination is, nevertheless, complemented by an insistence on the inner world’s autonomy and the imagination’s domination over reality: “Here the spectator is never allowed to forget that the illumination occasionally and slowly gathering, like a fog on a marsh, and in itself becoming the ‘daylight’ necessary to the experience of the interior world, is not in fact the light of day

or the light of dawn, but is only a reflection of that light-in-time by which a certain day once existed, or will in the future exist, or now exists but as imaginary without a genesis in either the past or the future . . . . It is here, when he has all but lost it, that the spectator knows the dread of consciousness” (*The Passion Artist* 58).

The imagination is Hawkes’s, and mine, major concern. The imagination is both phenomenological (especially in the understanding of “lived space” and “lived time”) and deconstructionist insofar as it is defined in terms of absences. The imagination is our way of “humanizing” an otherwise undifferentiated, indifferent reality. Thus, the imagination performs what appear to be two mutually exclusive functions. First, it renders the intrinsically undifferentiated reality relevant to us, i.e. it differentiates it, it introduces difference insofar as our perception of reality is always determined by difference: we “pick up” certain parts of reality and not others, we establish hierarchies of importance, we care about certain things more than we do about others. But then, the imagination makes the second step (the first was “taming” reality, making it meaningful at all) which integrates, synthesizes our perceptions, establishes similarities, “picks up” analogies. With the first step, the imagination seduces reality; with the second, it pushes it back again--like a cloyed lover--asserting its own independence from it. The imagination is both essential and nonessential, both intransitive and transitive: it establishes a semblance (transitive) of self-presence (intransitive). When it imposes its own terms on reality, the imagination is doing something mechanical, something artificial to what is otherwise a natural world, but, on the other hand, the imagination exists as an object in that world. The imagination--or consciousness, since Hawkes identifies the two-- is both natural and unnatural. “Human consciousness is only the odd flower in the



unbounded field. It exists in the natural world and as such is natural, whether it is enigmatical or not" (*The Passion Artist* 42).

The term "experimental fiction," like most terms, is not particularly useful in discussing John Hawkes. To categorize any writer as an "experimental" fictioneer is to suggest that he writes this way deliberately, to deny that this is simply the only way he can write (we leave out purposeful imitation). Writing is my way of thinking. While I am writing I do not usually know what I am doing. Then, when I finish, it suddenly strikes me that what I have been doing with characters, for example, has already been done, by another writer, and, furthermore, that there is even a special term describing this particular "strategy" of characterization. In my case, the term is "characters of purity." Justus Kummerlich and Konrad Vost are representative of Hawkes's "characters of purity." An extreme example of this type of characterization is the tendency to erase distinctions such as that between the psychological and the biological. Body and mind are not separated--they are both equally important in determining the character: "he lay in cold and bitter wakefulness, unable to move, unable to breathe, listening to a concert of sounds he had never expected to hear: the snakelike distending and contracting of sinews, the sluggish flow of the blood, the slippage of enormous blunt bones in their sockets" (*The Passion Artist* 102). Konrad Vost's wife's view of human nature reflects Hawkes's general treatment of character, a treatment resulting in the creation of monophonic protagonists: "You know what I think, my dearest: that no life disappears, that nobody dies, that the person you have lost today reappears tomorrow in a different place, in different circumstances, not in your own family but in someone's else's . . . [E]very person is repeated endlessly . . . [E]ach person is really an enire population, my

dearest, increasing, ravished, increasing again . . . . We are all the same" (*The Passion Artist* 77-78). Vost's awareness of "the desolation of [his] own beginning" (74) as a human being comments on his being a "character of purity": "I know where I am going, I am in possession of myself, yet I know too that I have no history, no recollection of the past, so that my life, which is specific, depends only on the field, the ditch, the night, and what I am about to experience within the chateau" (73).

The characters that I create tend to be monophonic, too--each character is just a continuation of another. This is not to say that one character is a representative sample of a given group, or even of the entire humanity. It is crucial, against the background of this theory of resemblance, to preserve the kernel of difference. It seems to me that difference is preserved not in the subjectivity of separate characters, or in the objectivity of reality, so much as in the unique relationship between the individual's subconscious and reality, i.e. it is not a question of what the content of the one or of the other is, but a question of how the two are related. My characters are, more often than not, "given" in the sense in which Hawkes's characters appear static. They rarely undergo development: they are only better articulated. We do not know anything about them: they exist through their reflections, dreams, memories, i.e. not through specific events but through their perception of events, through what they mean to them or how they affect them. The conflicts my characters face are rarely resolved. Even if something does happen, it is never certain that it changes things or the character's view of things. My resolutions are nothing more than slight alterations in the general mood of the story: Elijah does not reach an epiphany, a clear understanding of himself, but somehow moves, more by the inertia of his thoughts rather than by an act of will,

from one thought to another. We do not know for sure that he will not kill himself or that he will be happy from now on. He might very well change his mind--and I would probably make him change it were I to extend the story another page or even another paragraph.

I do not create "characters of purity" deliberately--the way John Hawkes does--yet many of my stories are inhabited by such characters: characters stripped of personal history, characters not "backed up" by dimensions. Like Hawkes, I do not regard a character as an object of study. I am not interested in clarifying, like a psychiatrist, the causes and effects of the content of a character's imagination. A character is a process, not an object: "The subject is an activity, not a thing . . . the subject produces itself by reflecting on itself, but when it is engaged on some other object it has no being apart from the activity of being so engaged" (Caws 85). I do not write such characters intentionally; this is, simply, the way I write. Likewise, it has never been my goal to create plotless stories. Yet, most of my stories lack a clearly defined plot. My stories are not teleological, purposeful. The reason for this is that they are unpremeditated (it is usually plot that makes a story premeditated). It is not that plot is unimportant to me or that I am even scornful of it. In fact, it may just as well be that I cannot construct plots, i.e. it is a failure, not a strategy. On the other hand, the life of consciousness, with which I am concerned, does not require a background "accompaniment"--a plot, a conflict, a resolution--to "show off," as it were, its own liveliness. The mind moves even when nothing else does. The mind measures the world, not the other way around.

What I have said so far leads me to one conclusion only (one I have reached many times)--it is hard, and very often pointless, to write about writing. In fact, I am so skeptical of what I am doing here that my subconscious has surely made a note of what I just said

about my stories--my next story will probably have a solid plot. Perhaps even subject matter. It is often difficult to look for subject matter--in the usual sense of "subject matter" as "what the story is about," a corollary of "what we learn from the story"--either in Hawkes's or in my stories. Indeed, in the context of Barthes's ideas about critical interpretation, subject matter becomes an outdated notion: "There is no subject expressed by an author; subject is a level in the hierarchy of interpretation" ("Style and Its Image" 10). Again, it would be wrong to assume that I write "without" subject matter, that I consciously avoid it. The point is not that my stories are about nothing; the point is that, for me, the process of writing the stories is more interesting and more rewarding than whatever the stories happen to be about.

This is to say that the only area for me, as a writer, are my thoughts. I am interested in capturing my thinking, not in capturing the object of my thoughts. Barthes makes the point when he argues that the goal, today, is "to substitute the instance of discourse for the instance of reality (or of the referent) which has been, and still is, a mythical 'alibi' dominating the idea of literature. The field of the writer is nothing but writing itself, not as the pure 'form' conceived by an aesthetic of art for art's sake, but, much more radically, as the only area [*espace*] for the one who writes" ("To Write: An Intransitive Verb?" 135). The only "purpose" my fiction serves is to clarify the thoughts that I have at a given moment. I do not think either about beginnings, or about endings. I do not say to myself: "I want to write a story about this." Endings I find extremely difficult and frustrating. Since writing is my way of thinking, and since my imagination--like Hawkes's, I suppose--is tautological, the idea of an ending strikes me as an impossibility. It requires me to put a period to my thoughts, to disentangle them from one another, to make them "behave." Thoughts, of course, are never

finished: they may reach increasing degrees of completeness, but they never come to an end. They are only abandoned, suspended. They are boomerangs. It is, thus, very difficult for me to determine where one story ends and another one begins, or where one character "ends" and another one "begins." I can easily imagine stringing together all my stories by simply inserting a conjunction between them, and probably writing a few transitions. I never ask myself when writing a story: "Is this too much for this story/frame?" or "Is this enough to fill out the story/frame?" There are no frames. Only thoughts. Only transitions between thoughts, which are themselves thoughts. There is no stopping, only a slumbering imagination that is reawakened again and again.

Hawkes's stories resist interpretation by refusing to move from "less" to "more," that is, from "less" knowledge about what is happening in the story to "more" knowledge. My stories do not "reveal truths," either. They do not even reveal that there is no truth. They are usually held together by a dominant mood, which is, in turn, created through a dominant point of view. I share Hawkes's drive for omniscience--many of my characters are unreliable narrators. This is also a result of my general ironic stance as a writer. I tend to get caught up between extremes: I am either too close to the story (or the protagonist), or I am absolutely detached from it (this is especially true of my self-conscious stories).

Everything in my fiction--characters, plot, conflict--is borne out of language. I seem to revel in long, convoluted sentences. The reason I use them is that I want to stay as detached from my characters as possible and I also want them to stay detached from themselves. Hawkes's self-justification is similar to mine: "My writing depends on absolute detachment, and the unfamiliar or invented landscape helps me achieve and maintain this

detachment” (Tanner 147). Creation out of nothing, the invention of bizarre characters, incidents, settings sustains the resistance of the anti-realist to the sentimentality and self-preoccupation of the traditional mimetic fictioneer. Representing reality is, ultimately, an act of narcissism, a manifestation of a snug reliance upon a supposedly natural, that is, necessary relationship between consciousness and the world. To counterbalance the danger of slipping into the despair of mimesis, I keep stepping back, through another and yet another sentence clause until both I and the character are “above” the character. I do not really “construct” my characters; I think them. Each character is a more or less consistent sequence of thoughts on a given subject. I rarely use physical description: my aim is not to help readers visualize the character but to produce an impression, create a certain mood, a certain vein of thought. I do not use much dialogue either or when I do, it is a source of misunderstanding. Characters are revealed through their internal thoughts--that is my idea of a “setting”--rather than through communication with other characters.

In my more unself-conscious pieces I let language use me. In my more self-conscious ones I use language. It is a fair deal, I think. It is, also, more honest, or at least less self-deluding, than the deal a realist fictioneer strikes with language. The realist is unwarily desperate even as he believes that his confidence, fed on a belief in a steady relationship with reality, is so much better than what he perceives to be the non-realist’s despair over the lack of such a relationship: “to imagine . . . that one’s work is an image of the real world, to imagine that one can communicate directly to the reader what it is that one uniquely feels, that is to fall into the real solipsism, which is, to paraphrase Kierkegaard on despair, not to know that one is in a state of solipsism” (Josipovici 309). This does not mean that I consciously

refuse to write realist fiction. In fact, many of my stories are realistic, and all of them follow one or another genre convention. The point is that even in my most realistic works, I did not set out with the intention of writing realistic fiction, just as, in my least realistic works, I did not set out with the intention of writing non-realist fiction. Both when I follow conventions and when I break them, I do so spontaneously, almost naively. It sounds like a tautology but the truth is that I write what I write-- and there is a certain degree of idealism about this. I, too, seem to be condemned to an in-between position, a limbo between realism and "everything else," although I tend to lean over to the "everything else" side. My stories, it seems to me, reflect Barthes's view of language (which recalls Derrida's): "Man does not exist prior to language, either as a species or as an individual. We never find a state where man is separated from language, which he then creates in order to 'express' what is taking place within him; it is language which teaches the definition of man, not the reverse" ("To Write: An Intransitive Verb?" 135). When I begin writing, I do not feel a "need" to express myself or define my subject matter. Language does that for me. Quite literally, language first draws out, as it were, thoughts--not thoughts I have had, or at least not ones I have consciously had--and, in the process, formulates them, creates them: it is, literally, a creation out of nothing. Writing does not merely stimulate my thinking, but originates it, makes it possible in the first place. Writing originates in ignorance, in that which is not yet. In the words of Michel Leiris, "the poetic structure--like the canon, which is only a hole surrounded by steel, can be based only on what one does not have . . . ultimately one can write only to feel the void or at least to situate, in relation to the most lucid part of ourselves, the place where this incommensurable abyss yawns within us." Writing is not, in any way, associated

with the need to “say something”; it is not “unavoidable.” Some say that the “true” artist does not choose to write—he simply does what he has to do, as though he could not help it, as though it were a natural necessity for me to write a story about Elijah the Fisherman, for example. I *can* help it, namely because I do not set out with the idea or the intention of writing *this* particular story. I could have written anything else: I am not committed or loyal to what I think/write. Writing--thinking--is more important than what is, in the end, written or thought. If I still have to answer questions about subject matter, they would probably require me to justify my tendency to write about generally unpleasant things, such as death or insecurity. The reason I do not write about happy people or happy incidents is that I do not usually notice them; hence, they do not “figure” in my vision of reality. The sense of reality is usually a sense of awkwardness--to feel real is to feel trapped, deprived of the possibility to disguise oneself. To feel real is to feel exposed, and, thus, embarrassed: “And now I felt too large, too sick, too purposeless, too awakened” (Hawkes, *Death* 94). It does seem that reality comes to our attention mainly through the discomfort it causes us: “the day’s ‘reality’ is merely the extent of the displeasure it brings to consciousness . . . calamity is the fuel of time” (*The Passion Artist* 75). Since I write about things that interest me, and since those things are, generally, things that disturb me rather than reassure me, my stories possess only as much unity as a disturbed perception of reality--which, for me, is the same as a disturbed reality--could possibly possess. Like Allert, the protagonist of *Death, Sleep, and The Traveler*, I am, too, “extremely interested in failure” (9).



Interview with Author on Some Important Matters Revealing Author's View of Life and  
Her Attitude Toward Her Work

I have been waiting for this interview for a long time. I come upon Author in an unfamiliar cafe. I have never been here before: a nice little place, though not very clean. I don't understand why there are so many people dashing in and out of the place, carrying out chairs, tables, and coffee machines. Behind us, there is a stack of folding chairs. The personnel are having an argument in the back room. Author doesn't seem to notice any of that. She stares--thoughtfully--at the chippy rim of her cup of coffee. In fact, it is not her cup; we are still waiting for the waiter to come clean up the dirty cups and take our orders. I watch her: she sighs, thoughtfully, scratches her forehead, thoughtfully, twists her head around, her eyes searching, even more thoughtfully, for a waiter, and, finally, slips her hands in the pockets of her jacket, not less thoughtfully. I see she is consistent in being thoughtful. Author accepted my suggestion for an interview with thoughtful yet exuberant enthusiasm. She has so many things to say. Luckily, I am not short of questions either. She looks up at me in expectation. She smiles, nervously or thoughtfully, letting me choose the word myself. How typically thoughtful of her.

I:"Let us start with the obvious, with what our readers know but would like to hear it once again, from you--"

A:"I don't mind that."

I:"Good."

A:"Ditto."

I: "So, hum, would you mind reminding us what exactly was--"

A: "Oh, yes, of course! We know how the obvious works, right? No matter how obvious it may appear, it is never quite so obvious. We need to reiterate things once in a while, or even more often than that. This is, how should I put it--obvious--"

I: "No doubt you are right!"

A: "I thought so, too."

I: "Splendid!"

A: "I am so glad that you are, evidently, with me on this one--"

I: "Certainly!"

A: "Surely, of course!"

I: "Of course is for sure, no doubt about it!"

At this point, one of the wandering waiters drops by to collect the china and the dust that has been accumulating on it for the last one hour. He says he will be back, for our orders I presume.

A: "Shall we move on then, now that we've got the obvious out of the way--"

I: "By all means! Now, what would you say about this?"

A: "My thoughts exactly!"

I: "And how about that?"

A: "I don't see why not."

I: "Hold on a minute, please. I can barely keep up with you. I have to write all this down word for word, lest there should be any misunderstanding. You were saying--"

A: "I didn't say that! Are you trying to put words in my mouth?"

I: "I am terribly sorry! I didn't mean to suggest you said *that*. On the other hand--"

The same waiter comes to our table and takes away the tablecloth. He promises he will be back again. He gives the appearance of someone who desperately wants to take everything away.

A: "Absolutely! I couldn't agree with you more . . . or less!"

I: "Such flexibility is truly admirable! Yet, in a previous interview I remember you arguing the opposite, something to the effect that--"

A: "Thank you for bringing this up. I've been meaning to address this issue for a long time. My personal opinion is--"

I: "Don't you think thus is a rather extreme point of view? How exactly did you have this simple yet prophetic vision?"

A: "To be honest, the idea came to me just as I was--"

I: "Really? This sounds incredible! You mean you were--"

A: "Exactly! I realize this is not what usually happens to you when you are merely--"

I: "Wait! Let's clarify things a bit, shall we? You are saying that you had an epiphany as you stood by--"

A: "About twelve meters away, to be somewhat exact."

The waiter is back again, accompanied by three other men in overalls; they ask us to stand up and move our chairs to the right. The three men lift the table and walk away. The waiter gives them directions.

I: "And you were with--"

A: "That is correct. But we were not alone. Besides us, there were also a few--"

I:"Oh, you could not disclose this kind of information! It could be misinterpreted by--"

Author appears mildly disturbed. I am afraid she will squeeze my hand and divulge some horrifying writerly secret to me.

A:"Are you implying someone might actually say that--"

I:"I think there are many who would not hesitate to go that far."

A:"Well, in that case, I will defend myself by arguing that even though--"

For the first time I notice three trucks parked by the back door of the cafe.

I:"This won't do. Still they will insist that--"

A:"Even if I showed them the very--"

I:"Oh, please! Please! There's no need to get graphic!"

A:"But all I said was--"

I:"Stop! Don't say that again! The editors will not tolerate such--"

The men are back. One of them takes me by the hand; another takes the chair from under me and carries it, high above his head, to the nearest truck. The other two men do the same with Author's chair. I make to lean against the pile of chairs but it is no longer there. I notice a stranger hanging a note on the door of the cafe. I look at Author: she yawns thoughtfully.

A:"My apologies. Perhaps I really should have used a more neutral word, for example--"

I:"Don't! I mean--I'd like to thank you--I am afraid this interview is getting a little too personal. When I asked you to be specific, surely I didn't mean *that* specific! I believe our readers learned more about you and your work than they had expected. Thank you for--"

A:"One last word then--"

I:"Really, Author!"

A:"Excuse me, I didn't mean to sound vulgar. I just wanted to remark that my first name is spelled \*\*\*\*\*, just in case you get this published--"

I put away my notebook. The truck drivers are starting off the engines. I drag Author to the door of the cafe. The note reads *FOR RENT*. Author stoops to pick up something from the ground. It's a waiter's name tag. It's blank.

I:"Why did you want us to meet here?"

A:"You found me here. Incidentally, I hereby unsay whatever I said, or whatever you thought I said, as well as whatever I thought I said or I said I thought."

## September Is a Fine Month

At first, the old man thought it was a mistake. He asked to be shown the X-ray. The dentist, an amiable young man who seemed to possess an understanding of human nature though he never paraded it, took out the old man's file and explained to him in great detail and in a language clean of any confusing medicinal terminology what was wrong with the lower left canine and why there was nothing to be done about it. The old man listened carefully, feeling like a student listening to a lecture on some very abstract subject that could not, in any way, touch him personally. He almost felt he was expected to take notes. The root canals stood out very clearly in the picture, looking like sewers that had not been cleaned for a long time.

The dentist sat back in his chair, looking at the old man expectantly and compassionately. His name was embroidered upon the upper left corner of the little pocket of his clean white overall, right above his heart.

The old man swallowed and looked at the green branches touching the window, still and tired in the August haze.

“How much did you say the Marilyn bridge would cost?”

The dentist put the plastic bag with the bridge samples back in the desk drawer: “Around a thousand, I'd say. But I'd really recommend the Kathryn bridge. The material is better, stronger, and will last you longer. It's not too expensive either, just 1700.”

“Eh . . . I don't think I'll do that right now.”

“But Mr. Vance, you simply must have that tooth extracted. The infection is spreading

continuously. It will, eventually, reach your brain. Your teeth are simply rotting all over. You can't afford ignoring the problem. Here, take a look at the statistics."

The dentist showed Mr. Vance a piece of paper filled with figures, the number of people who had died as a result of an ignored abscess.

"No, please, there's no need," the old man waved his hand. "I believe you. The thing is there are, well, some financial concerns that don't allow me to . . ." he coughed, embarrassed to admit that he didn't have the money to pay for the pulling out of a damned rotten tooth. "My pension, you see, doesn't cover dental services."

"Well, then," the dentist concluded understandingly. He wrote down something in Mr. Vance's file and pushed it to the old man. "I need you to read this and sign your name underneath. Initials will do."

It was a statement saying that Konrad Vance was fully aware of the risk he was taking by ignoring the need for extracting the third tooth, in the left lower jaw, and the need for a bridge in place of the extracted abscessed canine, and that, therefore, it was his responsibility entirely were something to happen to him.

"How much then? In terms of time, I mean?" the old man asked, businesslike, as if he were asking how much he had to pay for the examination.

"Well, we can never be completely certain about such things," the dentist looked at Mr. Vance's mouth as if the size of it would tell him how much time exactly was left, "but if you don't do anything about it, I'd say about a month."

The old man nodded as though he had heard what he had known all along.

"I'll see you again, Mr. Vance. Soon," the dentist reminded him, as he was bending

over his desk to put Konrad Vance in the record book with that day's appointments. The door squeaked, the far-away expression of Mr. Vance's face swaying in the draft.

"You said a month. What is next month?"

The dentist checked the calendar on the wall and said it was September. Then he looked at his patient with sincere concern.

"Are you sure you're going to be alright, Vance? If there's anything I can do . . . Perhaps a removeable Grace bridge . . . just 870?"

The old man put on his grey hat, adjusted it carefully, and said goodbye.

"September . . ." he muttered to himself out in the street. "September is not a bad month. Not a bad month to die. I think it will be alright. It's neither too hot in September, nor too cold. Yes, I think I shall like that."

A woman passing by turned around and looked at him with curiosity. He smiled, confused, and bent down to fix his shoe laces, which were perfectly all right. He should not talk to himself in the street. No, not even in his room. As he walked toward the bus-stop, he repeated this command to himself. And yet, it'd be very hard, since he was the only person he felt like talking to. It was still early. He didn't have to go back to the senior citizens' home until dinner. But where could he go? His bus pulled out of the bus-stop. He watched it turn the corner, without him.

Konrad Vance had no family, no relatives. That had bothered him once, but gradually he had come to understand that people with family were as lonely as he was. At one point he had stopped considering himself lonely. He found that he could always think of enough things to do to fill the hours of each new day, just as his dentist always had enough silver



filling for the holes in his teeth. Well, until today. The first time Vance had become aware of this analogy, he was seized with a feeling of certainty. He was calm. When some of the other men at the senior citizens' home started crying, for no reason whatsoever--usually while they were playing cards or chess in the evening, listening to the world news on the radio, waiting for dinner-time--Mr. Vance could not understand it. Perhaps it was just the fact that he was, in general, luckier than most of them. He was a better card player, and even when he lost a game of chess, which happened rarely, he didn't feel dejected. After all, it was just a game, and surely he would win the next time. The other men complained of boredom, and envied him because he was never bored. He seemed genuinely interested in the TV political debates, he had a subscription to several newspapers, one magazine on fishing (a lifelong passion of his, he had told them), and *Newsweek*, a copy of which he used to carry folded in the pocket of his jacket. He shaved every morning, didn't use aftershave (on the grounds that it was too vain), and was attached, in quite a charming way, to his old jacket. His friends wondered if it had been a gift from a relative, but never asked him. Vance was an open man, but just like everybody else, he needed others to think that he had a private life beyond that of a subject in a senior citizens' home.

Vance headed in the direction of the harbor. He knew he was supposed to come to terms with his own feelings--that was generally expected of people who were going to die. Only he was not quite sure how he felt or how he was supposed to feel. Usually he figured out how he was supposed to feel about things after experiencing them several times. For example, when he went to the dentist for the first time, he knew he was in for a lot of pain. People had warned him. Yet he had made it a rule always to wait and see for himself. While

the dentist was busy doing his regular excavation work, Vance was busy trying to determine whether it was as painful as the others had told him it would be. Maybe that was why he didn't feel pain. He was so busy thinking that he didn't pay attention to it. Hence, he had concluded that there was no pain. The next time he went to the dentist, in knowing there was no pain, he found none. All that, however, was of no use to him now. He could not determine if he was supposed to feel sorry or happy or indifferent for having to die next month, simply because dying was a one-time experience, requiring nothing further than improvisation. He could, however, feel definitely sorry about *that*.

The closer he got to the harbor, the easier it was to breathe thanks to the light breeze coming from the sea. It was always like that in August, the air pressing down his eyelids. The air, a cannon-ball of swelter. In September, though, breathing would be natural and easy. September was a pleasantly neutral month--it was neither a time of great expectations (Christmas still far away), nor a time of nostalgic memories and lost beauty (April and May safely in the past). There were so many good things to be said about September, things that would prove it a month fit for dying. Not to mention that in September the tourist season was finally coming to a close so that the number of tourists in the streets was almost bearable. Children, too, were going back to school, which meant he could take long walks in the city park, sit on benches that were not sticky with the remains of ice-cream and gum, look at fountains empty of small, tanned limbs and silenced of shrieks of joy.

He remembered hearing or reading about people who were told they were dying soon. They were usually shocked at first, but gradually recovered as they thought of how much more they'd enjoy living, knowing it'd end soon. Whenever there was a deadline, a limit of

some kind, everything that was done within those limits appeared ripe and meaningful, as if the shrivelling of time added extra weight to the content that filled it, as if the less time one had to enjoy oneself the better. Supposedly, those people felt relieved. Drinking their morning coffee, they thought that it would probably be just so many more cups of coffee before they stopped drinking it. Numbers calm one down. The most trivial, routine acts acquired an almost romantic aura--*this is the last time I am throwing out the garbage, this is the last time I am brushing my teeth, the last time I am buying a ticket for my bus home, the last time . . . Nevermore.* Standing in the line before the bakery shop for hours, listening with a sad, far-away-but-contented smile to people shouting at one another, at the woman behind the counter, the suppliers, the transportation system, at the Minister of Transport, at his family (at that point the shouting goes on to a higher and more intimate level, and many new words are coined in the attempt to catch the most characteristic features of that family), shouting at the members of the people's own families, and sometimes at a deity. But this is the last time, and it is so painfully sweet . . . Ah, the sense of fulfillment such people get out of dusting the furniture, the dish-washing done with reverential care, the daily after-lunch and after-dinner ablutions . . .

Vance went through those expected feelings of self-fulfillment and greater enjoyment of life, and found them lacking in him. He felt he was not filled with good intentions. The world didn't suddenly glow with the beautiful melancholy of something he had to leave. He didn't long to see a smile on every face he passed by. He didn't feel like doing good to strangers, just for the beauty of leaving something good behind him. He didn't want to take one last, full breath of life and get high on the charming simplicity of it, the simplicity of "all

things considered . . .” or “when everything is said and done . . .” or “all things being equal,” “life is . . . well, irresistible.” In fact, he was rather annoyed.

He passed the benches lining the embankment, instead of sitting on one of them and sinking in quiet meditation on some beautiful, redeeming, abstract idea, a meditation that would have manifested itself on his face in the form of a wishful look, not entirely fixed but hovering aimlessly somewhere about the horizon. It was not that he felt too depressed to be thus quietly occupied in thoughts about his impending death. Quite the opposite--a strange eagerness he had not experienced before was making his arms and legs move briskly, energetically. It was as if he were convinced he was destined for a great feat, for an act full of abominable meanness--because the greatest feats are acts of pure evil--abominable because it was going to be completely unjustified. That was the sweet part. It would have been a mistake, however, to assume that what Konrad Vance wanted to do with the rest of his life was do evil, and further, it would have been another mistake to assume that he wanted to be mean as a sort of compensation for having been a relatively good man all his life. It was not a matter of rechanneling or displacing some up-to-then subterranean destructive energy. The desire to do evil to others requires a great deal of interest in others. The harm-doer has to investigate his future victims very carefully, feel their weak spots, decide which torment would be most fitting in each individual case, because people hurt in different ways. Vance, however, was too great an egoist to be thus concerned with others. He was not so interested in making *them* suffer as he was interested in how much evil he himself was capable of doing. It was a test, a matter of sheer curiosity. How much harm could he inflict on others--completely ungrounded harm, done just as a diversion--before growing ashamed or even

disgusted with himself, that is, how much could he get away with. Of course, vanity was a great part of it, too. He anticipated the pleasure with which he would explain things to them-- later, when they asked him, for surely they'd want to know the motive for his actions. The confusion, the humiliation, the self-doubt he'd read on their faces when they finally comprehend that he had been so bad and arrogant (as he intended to be) not because of *them*, not because he *hated* them, but just because he was curious about himself.

Vance was so satisfied with his thoughts that he clapped his hands. He leaned against the metal fence, and, looking down at the small, muddy waves languidly lapping against the dirty bottom of an abandoned, rusty boat, he thought about it all for a while. He decided not to plan his actions; that would be petty. He didn't think of himself as one of those misanthropes locked in their narrow attic rooms, planning, with petty malice, their revenge on the world. They didn't understand that to want to avenge themselves on life implied that life had been powerful enough to do something terrible to them. Well, *he* didn't think life had mistreated him by trifling with the root canals of one of his less reliable canines. What were his root canals to him! Vance considered himself a magnanimous man of far greater imagination than that of the average misanthrope. He'd improvise. He'd be rude, evil, brutal, even horrifying and repellent, but in a very gentlemanly, self-controlled fashion. He'd be mean with style. The wounds he'd inflict would be accidental, and, precisely because of that, more painful. What more beautiful and admirable than a man who hurts others but apparently doesn't intend it, doesn't realize it even when it is pointed out to him, and, logically enough, doesn't feel morally responsible! The only thing he had to be extremely cautious about was never to let them imagine him to be out of his mind, because if they believe that, they'd be

ready to excuse even the most vile thing he did. That would be entirely unacceptable. He was repelled by the thought that someone could presume to excuse him. He needed people to hold him fully responsible for his actions: that was the only way he would consider himself responsible, too. The point was to find out for how many vile acts he could bear to hold himself responsible. And never to allow them question his sanity, or else he might begin to doubt himself.

He turned his back to the sea and walked toward the cinema on the corner. A middle-aged woman came up to him and asked him the time. Her manner was pleasant. She didn't mutter her question, but articulated every word. It was a calm, intelligent face, and, all things considered, still looking young.

Vance stared at her accusingly.

"What do *you* care about time?"

The woman didn't seem to understand, and repeated her question, this time a little slower, stressing each word. Apparently, she thought he had not understood or had not heard her. He bent his face next to hers, and looked straight into her eyes. She didn't move.

"I said," he repeated, in turn stressing every word, "why are you interested in knowing what time it is? Are you deaf or just a natural bother?"

When the woman was finally able to shift her eyes away from his, she stepped back, looked around, as if searching for someone to explain to her what that old man wanted from her, didn't find anyone, and looked back, involuntarily, at Mr. Vance. He had meanwhile drawn out a cigarette and was now lighting it. Then he stood there, looking through the smoke and through her, as though wondering what the back of her neck might look like.

“I just wanted to know the time,” the woman muttered apologetically. “To see if I was late for the movie,” she added, hoping that would persuade the old man she had done nothing wrong, and at the same time feeling stupid and ashamed of herself.

Vance drew back his eyes from the invisible point somewhere behind her to her confused face, pretending to be surprised that she was still there. She saw he had completely forgotten her, which made her feel even more ashamed for having reminded him of herself. She felt like a bother.

“If I were you, I’d have bought a watch and worn it every day, never took it off, even at night. Of course you are late for the movie. What did you think, coming here? That you can just drop by, see if you can catch a movie on your way home? If you had decided in advance which movie you wanted to see, and at what time, and of course if you had your own watch, now you would not have been standing here, wondering, with no idea what time it is, no watch, frustrated, too late, without a ticket, and on top of it, with a very lousy alternative: that is, if you choose instead to see the other movie they are showing. Unless you are really in the mood for a dark, depressive East-European movie that will, most likely, make you still less able to appreciate the simple fact of living.”

“What? What do you mean?” The woman hugged her leather handbag. “I only asked you a simple question, and you . . . you act as if I insulted you.” Her cheeks flushed, her eyes were moist.

A man came up to them and put his hand around the woman's shoulders. “What’s going on here?” he demanded sternly. He wore a Scandinavian sweater and a matching black, intellectuallizing goatee. “Are you alright, Ellen? Who’s this man?”

Vance looked at the goatee, unimpressed, imperturbably letting a few mocking sparkles crack in his eyes.

The woman mumbled to the Scandinavian sweater that she didn't feel like standing there any longer. She lowered her voice (though not enough) to say that she didn't want him to get into an argument with a dotty old man. The goatee man didn't seem to agree with her. He stepped forward, putting his beard very close to Mr. Vance's masterfully shaved face.

"You think you'll get away with this only because of your age?"

Vance only raised his eyebrows in a mixed scorn-sympathetic grimace that was meant to say that yes, that was exactly what he had, originally, thought, and what he still thinks.

"I know you! I know your type!" the other asserted, pointing a finger at Mr. Vance's disinterested face. "It's easy to play the idiot and go around abusing people. You won't fool me! Oh, blink and manoeuvre your eyebrows as much as you want! Roll your eyes, why don't you? Let go of me, Ellen!" He drew away from Ellen who was pulling his sleeve, begging him to calm down and walk away. She kept repeating "Gary, please!"

Vance sighed to show how bored he was with both of them.

"I simply suggested to your wife that she bought herself a watch. Though now that I think of it, I am not sure any more that was exactly what I meant to say to her." Vance paused, trying to recall what exactly he had meant to tell the woman. "Perhaps, what I really meant to say to her was that I smelled a strange, rather unpleasant odour around her, but, being a man of great delicacy, my conscience, my principles didn't allow me to be so straightforward, and, instead, made me substitute my original concern with one less personal. Perhaps that was it. What do you think, Gary? Have you, too, noticed that strange . . ."



“What did you just say?! Ellen, did you hear what he just said?”

Ellen had. She had let go of Gary's Scandinavian sleeve, but not because she intended to shift her efforts elsewhere, not because she meant to start pulling his beard. Her head had dropped. She appeared to be sniffing the flesh under her blouse.

Meanwhile, Gary's initial shock had subsided to the point of turning into supreme disbelief purified of anger, that is, purified of reason.

“If you'll excuse me now, I must be on my way. Nice talking to you,” Vance grinned politely.

At this, Gary's feelings seemed to peek back up to the “you won't get away with this!” point in his scale of passion, but Ellen started sobbing. Reluctantly, Gary had to calm her down instead of resuming the argument. The old man carefully crushed the cigarette butt under the sole of his right shoe and walked away to look closer at the posters advertising the movies coming the following week. He deliberately didn't turn around, but he could swear Gary still stood there, absent-mindedly hugging his wife. When he finally turned around, Vance saw them walking down the street, with their eyes on the ground. They seemed lost but not sad enough, not sad enough to make *him* sad. He smiled to himself.

It was late afternoon and the street cafes were full of people. The whole summer the street cafes were crowded. Vance had never been able to figure out why those people were there, instead of working in their offices, and how they could spend an entire day with hands clasped around a cup of cold coffee or a glass of lousy, warm machine orange juice, artificially colored. He looked up--the sky was blue, with narrow white streaks, like the streaks on the skin of a woman after she has given birth. The air smelled of freshly mown grass.

Vance headed toward the little park at the back of the cinema. It was not a secluded place, but more of a crossroads. People working on the other side of the park, that is on the other side of the cinema, but living on this side, used to cross the park on their way to their offices. And vice versa--people living on the other side of the park but working on this side, used to cross it to get to their offices. This accounted for the fact that at any given hour, starting at 7 am and ending at about 9 pm, the several park alleys were filled with people hurrying in both directions, in and out of the park, either going home or going to their offices, depending on the point of view. Vance liked the fact that the place was always busy, or rather he liked the way it gave the impression of always being busy when it was actually not, for, after all, all those people were merely passing through on their way to somewhere else. The benches were rarely occupied, even though they appeared quite comfortable, and the grass was always well-mown, and the little colorful birds were tireless and were always where they were supposed to be, and the flowers were always fresh, arranged in geometrical figures that were pleasing to the eye, and cold water kept pouring down from the cracked mouths of the two white stone cows, the little cowgirl patting, reassuringly, the backs of the cows with her small hard hand. It was a very nice little park, and perhaps it was just alright that people only passed through it.

As Vance approached the park, a plastic bottle of Pepsi in hand, the strong smell of grass worked upon his senses in such a strange way that he suddenly felt an irresistible surge of positive thinking. He imagined all the grass in the park was there for him. A slight proprietary impulse tickled his whole being as he walked, slowly, through the grass, its surface so pleasantly levelled, with not a single blade sticking out. He listened to the sound

of his steps mingled with the sound of rustling grass. When he reached one of the beautifully arranged flower-beds, he stooped and picked a dark-blue pansy.

“Hey, what do you think you are doing!” someone called on his left.

Vance turned around very slowly. The other was sitting on one of the comfortable-looking benches. He wore a light-grey suit and a pair of very thick glasses. A business briefcase lay open in his lap. Papers were spread all over the bench. He was pointing at Vance with his pen. Vance’s first impression was that the man looked considerably distressed, indignant, and somewhat shocked. Vance stared at the other for a few seconds, and then stooped to pick a pansy bursting with yellow, which he thought would match the dark-blue one, producing a stunning effect by way of their contrasting colors.

“What’s the matter with you, old man?! Didn’t you hear me?!” the man almost shouted. “Don’t touch that!” he shouted again just as Mr. Vance’s hand skillfully twisted the stalk of the yellow pansy. The two pansies were now in his left hand, producing a stunning effect by way of their contrasting colors. The old man looked at them for a long time, apparently oblivious to the other.

“This is a public park!” the man shouted, still pointing his pen at Vance. “These flowers don’t belong to you! Don’t you see you are treading down the grass?! Didn’t you see the sign?! The picking of flowers is prohibited, and so is walking through the grass areas! You should be ashamed of yourself . . . at your age!”

Vance neared the bench. The other was looking at him doubtfully, as if he couldn’t decide if the old man was deaf, eccentric, arrogant, or a fool. Vance smelled the flowers, his eyes closed. He bent over to clean the soles of his shoes--blades of grass had stuck to them.

“What do you think of the colors? Do you find them as beautiful as I do? The intensely mysterious blue and the almost threatening, outrageous yellow. What do you think?” he asked, as though the other were an old acquaintance of his, and Vance was used to asking for his opinion on things. He made the question sound serious and casual at the same time. The other didn’t answer. He appeared genuinely bewildered.

“Perhaps you’d like to smell them?” Vance suggested, extending the hand with the flowers and waving them under the man’s nose. The man leaned back as if afraid the flowers’ aroma would poison him. They remained in their poses for several seconds. Then the man collected himself.

“What do you mean? With this?” he pointed at the pansies in Mr. Vance’s hand. “Didn’t you see the sign? It’s right there, right . . . there.” He turned around to point at the sign.

Vance ignored him: “So you don’t like pansies? Or is it the colors?” Then, tired with playing the game, he added: “Yes, I saw the sign. Now what do you mean with *that*?”

The other’s face relaxed a little bit--he appeared relieved that, finally, he had struck a common ground with the old man. “Well, I only meant to remind you that you are not supposed to violate . . .” he began, but Vance interrupted him.

“What are these sheets of paper?” he demanded.

“The sheets of . . . what?” the man didn’t understand. “You mean these . . . sheets? They are financial reports, but,” he waved his hand impatiently, “but that’s not the point, that’s not what we’re talking about here . . . You have to see that violation . . .”

“What does a man like you do in a place like this?” Vance asked in an assertive tone,

as though he were not asking a question but making a statement, or even a claim that the other man's presence in the little park was quite simply preposterous.

"How . . . What . . . That is . . . what do you mean with this . . . really, I don't understand . . ."

"What is it that you don't understand?" Vance asked politely, taking a sip of the Pepsi and smelling the pansies again.

"We're talking here of the grass, and the flowers, and of you coming here and all at once . . . despite the sign . . . and you don't seem to understand, and now you ask these questions that simply . . ." The man was desperately searching for words. He looked completely confused, even a bit ashamed, as if he had been caught doing something illogical.

"I asked you a simple question: 'what does a man like you do in a place like that?' What does a man like *you*," Vance repeated slowly, pointing at the other, a gesture meant to be self-explanatory, "do in a beautiful place like *that*," he finished, pointing at the trees and the grass, and smelling the flowers again. "Why are you doing financial reports here, on this bench?" he insisted.

"I . . . I really don't see how all this has to do with me, and it's none of your business where . . ." the man began in an apologetic yet naively provocative voice.

"You sit here, taking up the entire bench, spreading your papers on the entire bench, preventing people from enjoying the sight of this beautiful bench, the white-painted boards, the curved ends of the boards. You write down your figures, no doubt feeling important, because you think all the rest of us rely on you conscientiously writing down all the figures, keeping track of every figure. And you probably consider yourself a nature-lover. Of course.

Sitting in the park, in the shade of a tree, smelling the flowers from afar, but accidentally, only because they happen to be there, never really thinking of smelling them up close. When you are done writing figures, you'll collect your papers, put them in your suitcase, go home or to your office, telling everyone what a nice afternoon you spent outside, and even managed to do the work assigned. You'll feel so content, because your little pleasant afternoon in the park convinced you that you are not at all a mere accountant, with no imagination, stuck with a boring job and with a boss who never seems to notice your efforts because he is simply too bored himself to notice anything, stuck with a boring family any single member of which is bored with any other single member, and all of them together are bored with knowing how bored they are. But here you are, today, doing the same thing you do every day, but doing it on a bench instead of in an equally comfortable, and usually much more comfortable office chair, and you think that makes all the difference, and what you do suddenly acquires a new significance, and you even start to like yourself. Because, generally speaking, you don't like yourself very much, do you? You think that you are alright, only you are not necessarily convinced about that. You like yourself, but you don't *particularly* like yourself. Now I bet you've been thinking of that quite often, haven't you? Even today? This morning? Or perhaps on your way here?"

Vance took another sip of the Pepsi--it was already warm, unfizzy, and tasteless. He had spoken in a casual, indifferent voice, as if he were reciting a passage from a favourite book. The other man had made no attempt to interrupt his speech, but now suddenly began collecting his papers. Vance casually leaned forward and let the rest of the soda pour down on several of the sheets.

“I am sorry. I lost my balance and my soda poured down your papers,” he explained enthusiastically. “I’m getting old. It’s difficult to keep my body from doing all sorts of movements on its own. I hope you have copies of those reports, because I am afraid these will be of no use to you. But being the person that you are, I am sure you have copies.”

The other’s naively provocative face changed into a naively angry face, and at first it seemed he was going to react normally, that is, punch the old man, call the police, or grab the pansies from his enemy’s hand and crush them. Instead, he continued collecting the sheets of paper, including those wet with Pepsi. He stood up, pressing the briefcase against his chest.

“This is outrageous. Unheard of. You should be . . .” he could not refrain from expressing his strictly personal opinion on the matter at hand.

“Ashamed?” Vance suggested obsequiously.

“That was not what I intended to say! Not at all!” the other tried to sound indignant. “You are an old man and you obviously don’t know what you are doing. I am sorry for you. Yes, I am sorry for you,” he repeated as if doubting his own credibility.

Vance walked toward the trash-can, deposited the empty Pepsi bottle, walked back to the bench and sat down, crossing his legs.

“I have noticed,” he began, assuming the expression of a scientist who has just finished an important research, not even looking at the man with the briefcase but gazing instead at the flower-bed, “that some people really believe that the surest way to humiliate someone is to tell him how sorry they are. But do you know what my personal opinion is? I see you are curious to hear it. I think,” he paused and looked the other man straight in the

eyes, "I think that right now you are far more sorry for yourself than for me, that is if we decide to compare how sorry you are with regard to both of us. You feel sorry that you couldn't stand up to an old man who picked up two pansies--a capital violation, mind you!--merely because he felt like picking them. He was wrong. You were right. To tell you the truth, I am not sure which one of us should feel guilty. You look rather uneasy."

"This is . . . absurd," the other repeated mechanically, still pressing the briefcase against his chest, like a shield.

"Do you find it so, really?" Vance asked as if they were discussing a painting. "I think you are right," he eagerly agreed. "But tell me, have you noticed how everything you say or do is right, and yet, eventually, something always spoils it? Curious, don't you think? For example, I myself was in the habit of saying and doing the right thing. I went to the doctor regularly, ate regularly, spent even more time conversing with friends than was absolutely necessary, helped others on a daily basis, took care that my clothes were always ironed, read regularly--and I mean serious, important books--strolled regularly, and laughed quite a bit. Recently I had to change my dentist--my previous one moved to another city. Now, it may seem highly unlikely to you but my new dentist changed my life forever. He discovered something about my root canals that my previous dentist had been unaware of. He explained to me this exciting discovery in great detail. He showed me pictures. We sat together, like two old pals, and I just couldn't help listening to him, just like now you can't help listening to me. The words he used--*irreparable*, *certain*, *fatal*, *soon*, *danger*, *September*! Beautiful words. Because, let me tell you, there are ugly words, too. There are words that distort your face in a disgusting grimace when you pronounce them. Like *conscience*, for example. I can



feel my facial muscles protesting as I am saying the word. I bet I am not a fine sight while I am saying it. *Conscience. Conscience. Ouch! Are you still here?*” Vance started. Was he really started or did he act so?

The other stood still. Disbelief, confusion, and fear contended for his current facial expression.

“So what ugly words do you know?” Vance asked matter-of-factly, meanwhile changing the position of his legs.

The businessman was thinking: the process was displayed in an intense look and a pair of flushing cheeks.

“Are you out of your mind?” he had the courage to ask, as a last resort.

“I am sorry, I can’t confirm this supposition.” Vance shrugged his shoulders, can’t-do-anything-about-it fashion. “But you know what, I’m afraid you have the wrong approach to your problems. You can’t just say that anyone who acts in a way you can’t understand must be ‘out of his mind,’ as you put it. This is what they call escapism, I think. Do you think I must be out of my mind because I rhapsodize about pansies? Believe me, a man who keeps silent is so much more suspicious.” Vance stopped to shake his head. “No, I am afraid I am a rational man. You’ll have to live with this. The two of us, we are rational men, aren’t we? Aren’t we?” Vance threw a roguish glance at the other. “Rational men don’t feel uncomfortable with one another. Are you uncomfortable?”

The businessman loosened his tie. “I have to go now,” he said uneasily.

“Of course, you have to go.” Vance coughed as if he were introducing a new thought. “You’ve got so much important work to do. I am sorry if I made you feel uneasy.

I do have this effect on people sometimes, I mean, whenever I say what I mean. It could have been anyone else, of course. You just happened to be sitting here, at the right time. But look at the bright side of it: now that you know your life has been wasted, you'll have a chance to recharge your batteries, so to say, and do something about it." Vance adjusted his hat. "But as I said, it could have been anyone else."

The businessman walked away, crab-wise.

"So how about those ugly words? Can't think of any?" Vance shouted after him. "You could've said *ugly*, if nothing else came to mind. *Ugly*. There you have an ugly word!" he muttered to himself.

He looked around. All that time people had kept passing in and out of the park, not paying attention to the two of them. Vance wondered whether he had expected them to pay attention or had rather hoped they would go on their way, indifferent. He could not decide. When the whole thing had started, when the man had shouted to him, Vance had secretly hoped people would notice them. Perhaps some of them would have taken sides. Most likely, they'd have taken the side of the man with the briefcase. But that would have been just what Vance needed--he would have shown them how little he cared, how much more they cared, and how that put them at a disadvantage, because to care meant to be vulnerable.

He bent over and looked at the ground in front of the bench. He enjoyed looking at the ground in front of benches because he always found things, insignificant things like a Mars wrapper, a dirty, crumpled card, a sheet from an address-book with the addresses of strangers, or a balloon gone flat. He reached for a sheet of paper lying under the bench. The sheet, covered with Pepsi stains, was filled with figures. Many, many figures, going right to

the end of each line. At the bottom there were several larger figures preceded by *Amount Due* and several dates. Vance leaned back, holding the sheet of paper at the level of his eyes, as though he were reading the evening newspaper, finding the news relevant. People kept passing by. Some of them passed very close to the bench, their movements creating something like a stream, dividing the heat into two, making the edges of the financial report flutter. Vance looked closer at the last figure in the bottom right corner. The whole sum--it was not clear what that sum signified, it could have been the money to be paid for the purchase of anything at all--was due in September. So many different things were due in September. A busy month, that one.

He rested on the bench for another hour, looking at the financial report, devising theories about the possible type of purchase involved. He considered briefly the man and the woman from the cinema, and then the businessman, comparing them to see if he had shown any progress in the quality of his self-assigned malice. He had to admit, however, that an absolutely objective comparison was out of the question since, ultimately, it all depended on people's subjective responses to the stimulus of malice. He raised his hands before his eyes, and as he rubbed them (his hands were always cold: even in the summer he had to put them under the hot water tap to make the fingers more lively), it felt as if an electric current passed from the ends of the fingers of his right hand to the ends of the fingers of his left hand.

So much unused energy. He needed a worthier opponent, he thought, someone who'd stand up to him, so that later the pleasure of putting him down would be even greater. Someone else's intemperance or violence would be the perfect background that would emphasize his own malicious poise. Even if the other were equally malicious, it would make

all the difference if the other's malice was emotionally expressed, was loud, that is, was vulnerable.

Vance looked at his watch. It was almost dinner time. He was hungry yet he didn't feel like going back to the senior citizens' home and listening again to the familiar complaints of the other residents. The majority of them were not strong enough, physically, for something more than a ten minute walk around the home, which was enough reason for them to regard Vance's visits to the dentist as real "excursions," experiences to be envied. He couldn't imagine that all these years he had lived like them, spending whole days in his little room on the third floor. What have they all been doing? Sleeping late, taking long noon and afternoon naps, going to bed early, dreaming and then trying to recall their dreams so that they'd have something to talk about over dinner.

He didn't know when the next bus would come, so he hailed a taxi.

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Before he entered the senior citizens' home, Vance looked up, searching for the window of his room. It was always difficult to find it, unless there was some distinguishing mark about it, like the several pieces of laundry still hanging on the clothesline out on the balcony, but sometimes even laundry wouldn't do, since the laundry on all balconies looked one and the same, the cheap cotton type, specially designed for the elderly, to keep them warm and comfortable. Only size varied. He had seen that cotton laundry flutter on every balcony for fifteen years now. Now and then, the laundry on one of the balconies would

disappear. That was a sign the senior citizen occupying that room had died, or a relative had appeared from somewhere and had made the incredible suggestion that the old man or woman move in with the young family. The latter had happened only once at this home, but the personnel kept referring to that single case whenever they wanted to boost up the residents' hopes for the future and undermine any irrational thoughts the old people might have.

Vance checked all the balconies: no one seemed to have died while he had been downtown. There was steam coming from under the grating on the ground (the kitchen was in the basement). Anyone passing by the home could tell that day's menu. It had been that way for seventy-two years. Vance sniffed at the steam thoughtfully. The kitchen personnel kept using the same recipes. The potato stew smelled exactly the same way it had smelled seventy-two years ago when Vance, at the time a snotty second-grader, used to pass by the home on his way to school. Over the years, the home had gone through several renovations, the walls had been dyed three times in the same undefined, yellowish color, several hundred senior citizens had gone in and out, the smell of potato stew persisting like an emblem of the home. Vance tried to imagine a special senior citizens' home flag, next to the national one: it would probably feature a pot of hot, steaming potato stew, spiced up with finely cut parsley and nutmeg. He was sure that if he suffered a fit of amnesia, as a result of a terrible accident, the smell of potato stew would be a sufficient reminder of where he was coming from.

He decided not to go up to his room but go directly to dinner. The cafeteria was packed. He stood in the long line winding before the metal counter where today's courses were displayed for the residents to make their choice. The kitchen personnel insisted on food variety. It was recognized that this would be a welcome distraction for the senior citizens.

It would make them feel as if they were making choices; it would make them feel the importance of valuing the potato stew more than they did the meat-balls in tomato sauce or the green beans with yoghurt.

The line moved very slowly. Some of the other old men saw Vance and nodded at him, but he didn't hold their attention for too long. Their hungry eyes shifted to the plates on the counter and they knitted their brows, swallowing noisily, deliberating between potatoes and green beans. Vance wondered if they made their decisions on the basis of the number of swallows at the sight of each plate. That would be an interesting scale for measuring things.

The woman dishing out the first course, behind the counter, didn't even look at him. She had to be new: he hadn't seen her before. She pushed the plate to him. The oily stew spilled on the counter and trickled down onto his jacket.

A calm sarcastic remark was what the situation called for. Yet Vance couldn't summon even a pinch of sarcasm. It was easy to be maliciously calm out there, where no one knew him and he knew no one, but here it was suddenly so hard to disarm others by anticipating the irritation they were bound to produce in him by being, himself, malicious in advance, prior to any real reason for being malicious. But when someone else is suddenly, and perhaps unintentionally malicious *in advance of your being malicious in advance*, and when hot, oily stew stains your jacket, there is reason enough--it is unavoidable--to be sincerely malicious, not merely act so.

"Hey!" he cried at the woman behind the counter, but she didn't pay any attention to him and went on dishing out green beans.

"This," he pointed at the stain, "won't wash away, that's for sure!"

“You’re holding up the line! Move on, please!” the woman said in a dull voice.

“The line may damn well start waiting, because I’m not getting out of here before you apologize to me!” He stood in the middle of the aisle, his legs apart, to make sure no one could pass.

The woman put down the ladle.

“Look here, Mr . . . whatever your name is. I’m doing my job here. If you’ve had a bad day, that sure doesn’t mean you can take it out on the rest of us.”

She grabbed the plate with the remainder of the stew, obviously meaning to put it away, but Vance grabbed it from his side. For a few seconds, they pulled the plate in opposite directions. The plate scraped the metal counter, the potatoes moving from one side of the plate to the other. The woman wasn’t as strong as Vance: she let go of the plate, Vance staggered backward, the plate flying out of his hands. The rest of the stew spilled on the counter, the potatoes flying in the air, hitting the face of a short old man standing right behind Vance. Vance turned around. The other man moaned quietly: one of the hot potatoes had slipped under his bosom, another one had brushed his cheek, and a third one had smacked his forehead. Vance looked at the woman--she looked as if she refused to believe what had happened or take any responsibility for it. He bent over the dwarfy, helpless-looking man.

“Are you alright? I’m sorry for this, but that woman . . .” He paused, at once ashamed of himself and amazed at that feeling. “Let’s go to the bathroom and clean you up,” he suggested. He had the strange feeling that he was talking sense.

Before the two of them walked out of the cafeteria, Vance turned around.

“This is not the end.” He was glad to hear his voice had recaptured its former poise.

The woman shrugged her shoulders, taking the next plate from the pile of clean plates behind her.

They went to the bathroom on the first floor. Vance had to walk slowly since the other man walked slowly, obviously putting a great deal of effort into each step. Vance didn't know what to say. Should he apologize again?

In the bathroom there was no one else. Most residents took their shower early in the morning. The two men stood in front of the big mirror, cracked and covered with stains of paint from the last renovation. The other man turned the cold water on and tried to take the miniature piece of soap in his hands, but the soap kept slipping between his fingers and falling back in the sink. After watching a few unsuccessful attempts, Vance offered his help.

"I'm sorry. I'm so clumsy. I do things so slowly. It's the arthritis," the other apologized.

Vance didn't know how to tell him that he shouldn't apologize, not he. He splashed water on the other's forehead and cheeks. Then he dried them with a towel.

"There! You're all cleaned up now!" he announced, content, like a barber asking his client if he liked his newly shaven face.

The other looked at himself in the mirror. Vance followed his eyes and saw a little shrivelled face and a pair of very blue eyes that seemed to have a perennially surprised look, the look of a man who didn't know what was going to happen to him the next minute, and who was desperately scared by that.

"The potatoes were so hot, but my face didn't get burned, right?" the man asked, as if he wanted to convince himself that there was no real reason to be scared *now*.



“No, the skin’s fine. It’s a bit red, but that’ll go away soon. You’ll be fine.” Suddenly, Vance realized how calm he was and how frustrated the stranger beside him was--a man with no abscesses, yet not knowing anything, not knowing when another hot potato would burn his shrankled, pathetically little face or when something even more terrible would run him down.

“The woman in the cafeteria shouldn’t have . . .” the little man began.

“Well, it happens sometimes,” Vance interrupted him. “Don’t think about it!”

The man shook his head, repeating to himself, “Don’t think about it, don’t think about it!”

“Listen, I forgot to ask you for your name,” Vance said casually as he soaped the stained pocket of his jacket.

“It’s Ryan. Ryan Merringer.”

“Well, Ryan,” Vance turned off the tap. “I’m Konrad. How about a game of chess? Do you play? Or perhaps checkers?”

Ryan blinked: “I have checkers. I have a chessboard, too. A real, wooden one, you know. Not that magnetic kind.”

“You go upstairs now and find that wooden chessboard, and I’ll be with you in a minute,” Vance smiled.

Ryan hurried out of the bathroom, walking as fast as he could. Vance washed his face. He remembered he had a pack of cards somewhere in his room.

“I could teach Ryan some bridge or poker,” he said to the one in the mirror. The latter seemed to approve.

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September was a very pleasant month. Neither too hot, nor too cold. Vance spent long hours sitting on one of the benches by the sea, gazing dreamily at the end of the muddy water. He managed to see several excellent movies. Once he was even able to get Ryan to go with him. Ryan was proving to be a good poker student. Almost every day now Vance would stroll around town. He found that many beautiful words came to him without any effort on his part. At night, he'd lie tucked up in his warm bed, whispering: "*Ab-scess-s-s-s.*" He would draw the blanket to his chin, and say with conviction: "I think it's not an ugly word, after all. I think it's alright. I think it's going to be alright."

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One morning he woke up to a patch of unpleasant October sky. He spent that first day of October by the window, waiting. Then, he had several more October awakenings. After seven of these he consulted another dentist, who made what he called "a happy discovery" about Vance's root canals. The pictures he showed Vance were nice. There was nothing to worry about.

Vance began waking up feeling uneasy. He couldn't readjust himself to the thought that he had to go through another day, and then another and another, without having the end in full view, as he had got used to. When Ryan came over for the next bridge lesson (they had already covered poker), Vance didn't feel as enthusiastic about it as he had before. He didn't feel he was doing something worthwhile. There was no deadline ahead. It had been so easy

when he knew that he had only a month, *exactly one month*, to teach Ryan the art of bluffing. Now, however, he could teach him that whenever he felt like it. He could postpone it. He could say “Not today, Ryan.” And he had said it, several times.

“Not today, Ryan.” He closed the door, but Ryan wouldn't go away.

“There's potato stew for dinner, Konrad,” the familiar shrill voice came from the other side of the door.

That was meant as a spirit-raiser. Vance waited by the door, eyes closed. After a while, he heard Ryan's steps down the hall. He went to the window and pressed his cheek against it. What if he took a complete physical tomorrow? Surely one could rely on other parts of one's body apart from the oral cavity.

*Four months . . . or three months . . . or, perhaps, two weeks*, he thought, crossing his fingers.

## Elijah the Fisherman

I turned away from the window. The view tired me--blue sky, yellow sun, green grass, dogs with contented faces, Sunday people walking the park alleys, faces saying *I insist on my right to be here*, faces in which lurked an arrogant hope that someone--the world--would question that right, so that the person bearing the face around would have the opportunity to list all the good reasons why he has the right to have a little rest and have that rest acknowledged by others. Here and there, the balloons of unnaturally pink chewing gum, dragging behind them the mouths of unconscious youngsters.

I reached to draw the curtains. There were no curtains, of course. I tried to recall who had them. I had stopped keeping track of my possessions after I got rid of the carpet. The next item on my list was the ugly chest. My neighbor on the second floor, who had shown interest in that monstrous piece of wood, had failed to understand my disgust with that particular piece of furniture. She had found it quite useful and pretty, and had even shared with me her grandiose plans, how she'd have it repainted, repolished, what articles of clothing she would store inside--on that point, she had gone into some detailed discussion of the various pieces of underwear, hers and her husband's, which would lie quietly inside it, like a pearl inside the mussel. Naturally, she was going to keep these bare necessities in the upper drawer (there were four drawers altogether), because her husband suffered from sciatica, and stooping every night to get his underwear would require too much effort from him, causing him too much unnecessary pain (although I personally thought that there was a certain degree of pain that was, in his case, actually necessary--the man never learned to get drunk in a

proper way). She, Mrs. Lowley that is, even asked me for my advice. Should she put the chest by the wall and arrange the family photos on top of it, or should she rather put it in the center of the room so that her guests--who, I was sure, would not be spared an official acquaintance with that new and profitable, but, best of all, free, acquisition of hers--could walk around it in circles, in imitation of Native American dances around the fire, I imagine, and thus take in more of its beauty. My neighbor was rather taken aback when I refused to help her with the transportation of the chest to her apartment. Not that I was not strong enough. I have lifted far heavier weights, not to mention having to wake up every day, thinking that the only thing lying and dying ahead was the evening. I don't think she had the right to feel and act offended because of my refusal. After all, I suggested to her the names and addresses of several offices in town which provided just the services she needed, transportation of furniture. She didn't appreciate my politeness. For some strange reason she thought I was being sarcastic. This present transaction was the first time we were brought together, as it were, in a certain kind of relationship, that between a seller and a client, between one who desperately wants to get rid of his life and another who would gladly help him out, given that it is all free anyway.

When I moved in, six months ago, Mrs. Lowley had already managed to do several major things in this apartment building. At this very address, she had managed to get born, drop out of school (the reasons for that were somewhat unclear, though slow wits may not be such an unlikely explanation), marry a drunkard, suffer the consequences (in addition to the most immediate ones, there were a couple of children too, one or two demented), and go through a short period of philosophical quandering whose subject was the reason(s) that had

lead her to where she now was. After the original unpleasant surprise at finding herself unhappy, she had marched, determined, on an anxious quest for possible explanations. The most likely "cause" of her suffering had eventually been identified as the shadow of a man exploring the family cellar rather methodically, persistently, and even defiantly. The self-blaming following that important discovery was crowned, as time passed by, with the usual self-hatred, all of it melting, fading away into a general, succulent self-pity (in the absence of anyone else's), and, finally, into a peevishness, tinted by pride, and the conviction that the world owed her something and should it not give it to her, so much the worse for the world. There was only one thing left for her to do on her second floor--though her own thoughts were rarely bent in that direction--die, and make all the rest of us feel guilty, that is, good Christians (regardless of our religious inclinations), instead of relieved.

Sometimes, when I was in a relatively good mood, I wondered what it would be like to explain things to Mrs. Lowley just the way I really felt them. I would invite her over to my place for a shot of whiskey--Mrs. Lowley was not the tea type; tea didn't feed into her peevishness, was no use--wait for her to relax into a more mellow phase of her all seasons' discontent, and I would tell her of my disgust with the chest. How it had belonged to my parents, and to their parents, and so on and so forth, how my parents had cried--their faces both sad and proud--on that day when they passed that sacred piece of furniture to me, that symbol of our modestly long family tree, a fragment of time, of history, something for me to remember them by, something for me to pass on to my own children (the unexamined assumption here is too gross to be missed). The chest was polished in tears that had rolled down from old, wrinkled, poorly seeing eyes. It was painted in the frightfully colorless color

of aged, mouldy skin covered with variously shaped and variously colored splotches whose origin I did not dare imagine. Invisible and not so invisible cancers, tumors, varicose veins.

When I moved in, I had first meant to boost up my feeling of a fulfilled filial duty; I was ready to actually keep things in the chest, well, things I knew I wouldn't need too often anyway: family albums, letters, old records. Pieces of clay and some of my instruments from the time I thought I was a sculptor. Little, useless Christmas gifts of the type which make you scream "Is that cute or what?" Several diplomas. But even while I was arranging these things in the drawers--carefully, because I didn't want to rumple them up or spoil them in any way, these being the things, however insignificant, that I was leaving after me, eventually--while I was trying to decide which ones should go in which drawer, I shivered. It wasn't cold. It was late May and actually too hot for the season. I had heard on the radio about several cases of old people dying from a sun stroke, just as they were walking in the street. Once, as I was passing through the park, an old pigeon perched listlessly on a branch suddenly plumped down, right before my feet. It was that hot. I didn't shiver because I was afraid either. I didn't have any queer ideas about what I was doing right then with all those things, I didn't imagine I was burying my past life or anything, didn't feel regret, nostalgia. My hands moved mechanically. I was calm. But then, when I drew out the four drawers, I shivered and sat down on the naked floor. I couldn't help it. The chest looked like a drooping mouth that was bursting with laughter, with four tongues hanging out in a perverted invitation to me. Suddenly, I saw the dead faces of my ancestors, smiling that hateful where-you-are-going-is-where-we-are-coming-from smile, that tiresome wisdom I would have liked to kick in the butt or punch in the face, if only I could locate either of these two. But I felt too feeble. I sat

there, almost choked by the nauseating smells that swept over me as I thought of all the objects that my ancestors had stored in those drawers for several generations: family albums, letters, underwear, gifts of habit, and other needful things, things that had been there long before I was even born, and that were now gone, while I was sitting on the floor, breathing in and out the portions of air due me. I saw clearly the flesh hanging out from bras, belly-belts, knickers and underpants, the sequence of carefully folded pairs of socks, all one and the same, like an obedient, reliable army unit. I saw the "hoping this finds you in good health," the "remember me to aunt Mary," the "the weather here has been rather nice and we've had a wonderful time," the "be sure to see the doctor for that cough," already sinking in the yellowish sheets of letter paper; then the strange faces staring intensely at the camera, waiting for the moment to pass so they could blink a welcome to the next one, the scarfs, the gift pens, the rough home-woven mittens, one-fingered (in expectation of the caution or the disgust with touching the world with naked, unsterilized hands).

I shut the drawers slowly, as if I were afraid the ghosts inside would hop out and enter me through the various orifices nature had punched in my body. I often had the feeling that if I were not on the alert, something horrible would sneak inside me, through my eyes, nose, mouth, or ears. I tried to fight those fears by blinking, shutting myself up between my earphones, and not opening my mouth (I rarely spoke to people anyway).

So, I would explain all this to Mrs. Lowley. She would listen, then she would comment on the strange taste of my whiskey, ask me where I had got it, shake her enormous head--on which several warts were in full bloom (I never knew whether it was the sun or just the strange way her bodily fluids functioned)--shake it again, to make the point stronger--the



point being that I should have known better, at thirty, that there were subtle distinctions to be made between the whiskey at Mr. Nausen's liquor store and that at Joshua's bar (but, of course, home-brewed stuff was always the best)--and, finally, would counsel me to "get myself a decent sleep" and "think of all the lonely people out there who'd would give anything for a peaceful family dinner." Then she would go down to her only friend--Mrs. Zosey, who lived on the third floor--and assure her how relieved she felt that I was not her son, and that she still had her old folks (both of them still hesitating whether they should call it a life, or stay a little longer in the circle of it, which, in their case, was located in a nursing home), whom she could visit now and then with the purpose of letting out her filial love and gratitude. "Some folks," she would say, "simply can't appreciate what they have. Because they want too much from life. You make up your desires and needs as you go along. You can't expect to wake up every day and simply not worry about anything, now can you?!" Mrs. Lowley had finally given up acting offended. She had asked some of the more cooperative tenants--"she should have known I was not the cooperative type"--to help her in that transportation predicament. The whole lot of them were supposed to come for the chest at 5pm. Their cooperation was encouraged by Mrs. Lowley's plan to give a modest party in honor of her kind neighbors.

I sat in the center of the room, where I enjoyed a better view of what remained of the furniture. I couldn't rid myself of the image of Mrs. Lowley waking up in the middle of the night, a strange, inexplicable worry weighing down her massive chest. I saw her get out of bed quietly, lest she should wake up William--yes, the drunkard was back, after several weeks of experimental separation; she was trying to get him into AA, a branch of Agonizing

Anonymous--tiptoe to the living-room and there . . . ah! the shining surface of the newly-polished chest, so beautifully grand in the shadows, mysterious, awesome really. I saw her touch the brass handles timidly, a contented smile crossing the face twisted by daily discontents, twisting it even more. A smile on a face, whose smile muscles have long atrophied is a hideous sight. I saw her cuddle in the old armchair, chin propped on her aging knees, staring at the imposing structure of cedar wood, dozing off to sleep. In her dream, she was walking long country roads, the sun rising behind her, both sides of the road lined up with chests, majestically towering in the first bleak strokes of light.

The only two things--beside the chest--that still belonged to me officially were the mirror and the hanger, both family presents, too. Actually, it was a hall-stand, but I preferred to call it a hanger--I found that word was somehow more melodious.

My hat was still hanging on the hanger. I put it on and opened the door of the closet. An avalanche rolled down at my feet-- heavy winter sweaters, rubber boots, hangers, cardboard boxes full of trifles, packets of cigarettes, still unopened, empty plastic bottles, newspapers, bundles of unwashed bed sheets, a bicycle tyre (I had never had a bike), can openers (generally, canned food did not agree with me), and hundreds of plastic bags that I had been too lazy to throw out. The kitchen table, with one broken leg, was perched on top of everything, trying to hold its balance. On top of the table, I had piled up old issues of *The Fisherman's Guide*. I had not subscribed to the magazine--the former occupants of my apartment had made a two year subscription. When they moved out unexpectedly, without leaving an address, and I moved in, the magazine kept coming. I called the editor-in-chief, tried to explain the situation. He said they had to send it for the rest of the subscription

period, that is for six months more. They were paid to do so, it was their job, and it would seem dishonorable of them to take advantage of the circumstances and try to make some profit, only because I had not thought of subscribing too. I told the editor he didn't have to worry about the reputation of the magazine. I really wouldn't mind not receiving *The Fisherman's Guide* any more. I did not fish. I had never learned to fish. The editor was concerned about that. He promised they would send me a fishing rod as soon as it was humanly, or rather fishermanly, possible. Free of charge, of course. I did not get the joke. The editor was convinced that would take care of things, and both sides--that is I and him--would be equally satisfied. I lost my temper and admitted to him that I did not particularly care to be satisfied. I did not have the time or the patience to begin learning the subtleties of fishing, though, I hastened to assure him, I did appreciate his efforts to expand my knowledge of rivers, lakes, fishing seasons, the latest behavioral studies of the psychology of fish, the eating habits of the latter, etc. By the time I finished my wholehearted explanation, the line had fallen apart. Two days later I received a long package containing a fishing rod--accompanied by all the attributes whose names or functions I didn't even know--a brochure with instructions for beginners, which I ignored, and a short letter, in the hand of the editor, which basically summarized his view of honor, professional duties, the personal element in business communications, how we were all fishermen and life one big river, and how some fishermen were better than others ("though that could be remedied"--another joke I missed), and how one never knew what fish one was going to get, Amen.

I kicked the abdomen of the avalanche of stuff, causing another, slightly bigger avalanche to begin forming at the top of the pile. Clenching my teeth, pumping up my

muscles, eyes sparkling, I collected all my physical strength, and hurled myself against these untimely reminders of my past life. It took me some time to realize that wouldn't work. I gave it up.

A shadow lay prostrated on the floor. It wasn't mine. In the corner stood the only one of my sculptures I had not managed to get rid of. The other ones were lying in one of the car graveyards on the east side of town. I had always wondered why they made those graveyards on the east side--in every town I had been to it was so. It seemed to me it made much more sense to have them on the west side, where everything went to die.

It was a statue of a young woman. I don't even remember the girl I had hired as a model. A plain, placid, expressionless face. I don't recall what it was that I wanted to say with that work, if anything. I first meant to make the woman stand behind a door that was slightly open. Every day, for two hours, my model had to stand behind the bathroom door. I had her wear a simple dress. Many sculptors would go for a naked body--after all, the girl was young and some would have even found her attractive. But I wasn't interested in that, at least not in that girl. Not then. I was fascinated with the folds of her dress. Draperies had always meant a lot to me--dresses, with their multiple folds were, to me, like brains exposed. The shadows, the grooves, the bulges, the lightness of the stone. Eventually, I had decided to keep the girl in her pose, but remove the door. The effect seemed stronger, less direct. The door, however, was too well done to be thrown away. It looked real. I gave it to the neighborhood children (there were so many children in this apartment building, sometimes I thought they were more than I could take). On several occasions, when I happened to pass through the backyard, I saw my door propped up against the wall. The children were playing

some new version of hide-and-seek, obviously adjusted to the new participant in the game, the door. One child would hide in the narrow space between the door and the wall. The others would line up. Each would knock on the door, and the child behind it would ask each one in turn why he should let him in. The child who came up with the most convincing reason would be "let in" and take the privileged place behind the door. Then the whole thing would start again. The only rule was never to repeat a reason that had already been suggested, regardless of whether it had been rejected or approved.

The reason I didn't want too many children around was not that I hated them. It hurt me to see them play serious games and remain unaware of what they were turning into. I definitely didn't feel a catcher-in-the-rye urge to save them--I was past the messiah stage. I also knew I lacked the strength to do anything--that's why I preferred to stay away, feel a little guilt as was possible (which was not much). Sometimes, I almost managed not to hate myself for being that way. But then, of course, I started pitying myself and hating myself for that.

The last time I crossed the backyard, my door was lying on the ground, so that it actually opened into the ground. The children hopped around it, clapping their hands, singing at the top of their voices a silly verse, probably composed by the smartest among them:

“The ugly frowning man is sleeping  
deep in the ground, under your steps.  
If you open the door to his grave  
He'll get you to keep him company.”

The older children especially liked dragging the younger ones to the door and making

them put their sweating, dirty small hands around the door knob. If someone really opened or rather lifted the door--it was a small door, as if specially designed for children--everyone began shaking their bodies hysterically, the older children crying with excitement, the younger ones covering their eyes with their hands and stamping their feet as if they wanted someone to pick them up and put them on his shoulders.

I had kept the girl-behind-the-door-without-the-door not because it had a sentimental value for me. I rarely reconsidered now whether I had been right in doing away with sculpture. When I rented a truck to transport all my works to the car graveyard, there had been no place for this one. I didn't feel like paying for another round. The graveyard was too far away from where I lived, as was everything else, and at that time I was not exactly financially contented. So I just left the statue where it had been standing from the day I had finished it. It didn't bother me, I didn't notice it. Ours was a perfect relationship. It just so happened that both of us--the statue and its author--were there, on the same premises, at one and the same time.

As I was trying to think of the best way to drag the statue to the closet, I happened to look at the face again. Suddenly, I had the feeling I was looking in the mirror. On the rare occasions when I had looked at my face in the mirror--the mere regular, necessary checks of whether I was still there, or parts of me, certain groups of my molecules, had started moving out along with the furniture that was leaving me behind--I had seen the same face, a face like the surface of a cake of cheese, and sometimes even less expressive than that.

Somehow, I managed to get the statue to the closet. I let it lie down, across the entrance. I jammed my hat over the marble head; the face was actually turned toward the

floor. After a moment's reflection, I took my hat back, put it on my head, and closed the door.

I stood by the window again, trying to convince myself that it was really surprising how the view from it was always one and the same, no matter what. Come to think of it, though, there was no "no matter what." "No matter what" implied variation, change, a breath of fresh air, a mint drop.

There was a quiet knock on the door.

"It's open," I cried. I didn't want to move.

Mr. Kowalewsky peered from behind the door. Mr. Kowalewsky was the landlord.

"Can I come in?" he asked timidly, as if I were a count sleeping in late and he was one of my servants who had awakened me although the message he was bringing was not really important.

I just nodded. I wasn't sure how Mr. Kowalewsky qualified, was he the man I liked best, among all the tenants of this building, or was he just the person I found least unlikable? Sometimes, it seemed to me I disliked him because he somehow reminded me of myself. Briefly, we shared the same invertebrate nature, although in his case there were certain extenuating circumstances--he was married to the most obnoxious woman in the world.

"So, you are moving out," Mr. Kowalewsky said, by way of starting a conversation.

It was one of those absurd restatements of the self-evident. It would have been the same had he said "So, Elijah, I hear you are considering killing yourself." But people, I have remarked, rarely notice the self-evident. Of course, I was moving out: what else could a bare room--mirror, hanger, and chest excluded-- signify? Then again, I contemplated further, it

was equally possible I was moving in. It was odd how one and the same room could mean two mutually exclusive things. There is obviously a point, where in (moving in) and out (moving out) intersect, where the simple facts of life hold two opposites together, and either becomes identical with or. Being the landlord, however, Mr. Kowalewsky knew perfectly well that the direction, this time, was out.

"Yes," I confirmed. The conversation had regressed to the stage at which it had been before the landlord had made the initial effort. We had to begin anew, or he had to. In conversations, I was usually the reflection of the other side.

"Well, I've been telling my wife about that hanger you said you were not going to need any more." He wasn't sure how to go about this.

"Do you want it then?" I helped him out.

"As I said, I've been telling my wife about it. She asked me to describe it to her and when I did, she said it'd be a good idea to put it, the hanger that is, in the corner by the door, because there is nothing in that corner, you see, I mean it's empty. And when we have her relatives over for dinner, they could hang themselves, I mean their coats and umbrellas there, I mean on that hanger." He pointed at the hanger as if it was possible that I should think he was talking about another hanger or about something completely different altogether.

"Do you think this would be a good idea?" he finally asked, as though I were a designer and he one of my regular clients.

Suddenly, I was overwhelmed with pity for the man who had to live around a woman whose sole preoccupation was the filling out of empty space. I looked at him very seriously.

"I think this a great idea," I said.



Mr. Kowalewsky's face relaxed. He even smiled a little, an embarrassed smile. When he smiled, he never fully opened his mouth--his wife had once advised him not to, because, she had explained with a too eager concern, his teeth were too big and made people uncomfortable.

There was silence. I ventured a polite question.

"So, how are things going at work?"

Mr. Kowalewsky's eyes beamed. He was very devoted to his work. He was a postman, had been one all his life. He had one year to retirement.

"Yesterday I delivered a big package to one Mrs. Winster, on the west side you know," he said in a dreamlike voice. The west side was where the rich people lived.

Suddenly, he seemed to remember something.

"Listen, what shall we do about *The Fisherman's Guide*?" he asked anxiously.

I reflected for a moment. I had kept that in the back of my mind. I had been trying to imagine how, after I was gone, Mr. Kowalewsky would come to clean my apartment and get it ready for the new tenants. I wondered if, seeing my things piled in the closet, he'd begin to doubt. Would he tell anyone, his wife, or keep it to himself as the only secret he was allowed to have?

"I'm not really interested in the magazine. I've never been much of a fisherman, you know. You can have the subscription if you want to," I suggested.

I think Mr. Kowalewsky liked the idea. He pushed his hairy hands in his pockets. His nails were trimmed very low; one could see the rosy meat under them. He looked away. He might have been picturing himself sneaking at night into the bathroom, sitting on the cold lid

of the toilet bowl, reading about fly fishing, smiling freely, because there would be no one around he could offend with his teeth, the apartment quiet and relaxed as Mrs. Kowalewsky would be asleep, though loudly so.

He came out of his fishing reverie--I suppose he rarely enjoyed such private moments--waving his hands in front of his face and shaking his head.

“No, no. What would I do with it? I have so many other things to do. My wife and I, we’re not much into fishing either.”

He repeated “no, no” several times, sounding less and less convincing and perhaps realizing it and feeling ashamed of himself. I didn’t feel good making him uncomfortable any more than he already was.

“Then I guess I’ll just transfer the subscription to my new address. This would be the simplest way to go about it. Would that be too much trouble for you?”

“Trouble?” he waved his hand. “No trouble at all. I’ll arrange things for you so that you won’t have to do anything yourself. You just sit back; the *Guide* will find you. It’ll be very simple and easy, yes. Just give me your new address.”

He took out a newspaper folded up three or four times. He looked very pleased that he was needed. I dictated to him an address I made up. As he was writing it down in big, crooked letters, in the empty side column, next to his wife’s lottery numbers, he repeated to himself the name of the imaginary street and the area code. He promised he’d take care of it right away.

I helped him move the hanger to the door. He thanked me once again, and on behalf of his wife too, who was too busy to come over herself and say good-bye to me.

"So, you're sure you don't need anything? I mean, you've got rid of your furniture and everything. You have something better in mind, I suppose?" he asked.

"I've some money put aside. I was thinking of beginning all over again, you know, start from scratch, meet new people, do something with my life," I lied.

I had closed my bank account a month ago.

He seemed sincerely pleased to hear I was so enthusiastic and full of plans for my future.

"You know what," he said as I was closing the door behind him and the hanger, "I used to be worried about you. You looked like you didn't know what you were doing, sitting in this apartment all the time, never going out with friends, never talking to folks. That's none of my business, I know, but we've never seen you invite a girl over, or just friends. I was wondering about you. Yes, I was worried, but now I see you're going to be alright, won't you?" he said and it sounded like he himself was not very sure of what he was saying.

"Yes, of course," I assured him.

We shook hands.

"I'll think of you," he said and then he added, "sometimes," as if he was afraid I'd think it presumptuous of him to think of me.

I smiled. I wished he hadn't said that. I stood by the door for a while, listening to his steps down the stairs. Then it was silence once more.

I assumed my habitual pose at the window. Over time, I had acquired the habits and the sensibility of a sentinel. The park was almost empty now. The ice-cream man was pushing his cart, decorated with orange balloons and national flags, toward the shadow of a

big tree, where he was going to wait for the late afternoon crowd of strollers, hungry for a little coldness. The park was now clean of people. Actually, I didn't mind people as long as they didn't try to convince me that I belonged. The same was true of things; they constrained me in the same way. Even if they were gifts someone gave me, no matter sincerely or not, I resented them, was suspicious of them. Every object that was specially meant for me was an attempt at defining me. I didn't like it when things, or people, presumed to be associated with me. But even if I decided not to be seduced by the objects in my apartment, each one of which made a certain claim at me, I found it impossible not to admit to myself that these things were part of me, whether I liked it or not. They were a burden to me. I longed for a string of surprising, even if unpleasant accidents. The nature of accidents being what it is, I could not go out and search for them. Perhaps accidentally, no accidents came my way, and that was the only accidental thing that I experienced, although an accident that you can count on--the accident of not experiencing any accidents happened rather consistently--cannot quite qualify as an accident.

Around the time I first became aware of my thirst for accidents, I also began to bend a frowning eye at my sculptures, which had once been the only things I didn't mind associating themselves with me. One evening I arranged all of them with their backs against the wall, and went around, inspecting each one in turn, as if I were making an inventory. I found one common motif in my work. All faces had the expression of someone who had just been caught doing something, no matter how trivial or disturbing the act. The faces ranged from startled or pleasantly surprised, through confused or ashamed, to offended or frightened. As I stood in the center of the room, looking at, roughly, one year of my life, I felt like

someone who had peeped through a hole and seen things he was not exactly supposed to see. It occurred to me that what I had been trying to do with my sculptures was to manufacture a series of accidents that otherwise would not have happened to me. Only these sculptures had nothing of the beauty real accidents would have. There was even something unnatural, almost repellent about this sequence of surprises fashioned out of stone or cheap, deficient marble. I considered tying black ribbons around their eyes. The girl coming out of the bathroom, the woman dipped in a pool of rippling stone, covering her bare breasts with her hands, the suicide bringing down the hand with the gun, interrupted by someone dropping by to see how things are going, the man in a suit, bent over a child, making to slap the shrunken face, stopping his hand as someone else--a wife, a guest, a boss--comes in, the artist before his canvas, trying to cover it with his whole body from the prying eyes of a gang of art critics. The black ribbons, however, would have made them pretentiously tragic. It was easier to get rid of them.

Even when I made the decision, I didn't feel better but cheated. I felt I should have made the decision long ago. And yet how incomprehensible it was that I should feel annoyed at having lost so much time! After all, I had a sense of loss every time I thought of my life. Yet that was nothing compared to the sense of waste I had when I realized I could have done away with that sense of loss, and whatever produced it, years ago. To lose so much time, to wake up so many mornings with the sense of loss--the feeling was further strengthened by my habit of waking up around noon, when the tide had already turned and what lay ahead was just the needlessly extended introduction to another low tide--to feel guilty for having such a sense of loss because others didn't . . . Others would say I was doing it to myself, and I'd

agree with them, to a certain extent. Still, when someone suggested to me that I took charge of my life, they seemed to assume that I could choose to have a sense of loss or not. But even if everyone experienced this sense of loss, evidently certain ways of dealing with it were more efficient than others. Sometimes a chest would do the job, or a hanger. Things like these take a lot of space. The point was that the space that needed to be filled was, with different people, on a different scale. Chests, hangers, mirrors were just enough to fill in a void the size of a tooth cavity, and that was not the size of my personal void. Sometimes my void sprawled even beyond the limits of my self, and there was no need to think of ways to fill it, because I myself became a filling assigned to stop one of the draughts created within that monstrously enlarged void, in which I shivered, as was my function, in the company of other shiverers. I am sure everyone is bound to shiver for good, as the vacuum waiting to be filled is practically inexhaustible, and no matter how many people or things are crammed into it, it'll always be drafty.

It was lunchtime, the initiation into the most depressing part of the day, the early afternoon when nothing stirred and the park turned into a pretty postcard, the colors painfully bright and joyful. I remembered, somewhat vaguely, that I had some biscuits somewhere in the closet, but the thought of having to dig them out outweighed the hunger. I drank some water instead. It was thick as milk and it smelled of chlorine. I was already used to that. I was also used to sleeping on the bare floor.

When I woke up, my shadow on the floor had moved a little to the right. It reminded me of those criminal movies where they drew the corpse contours in white chalk. I thought I heard some noise behind the door. It could be a mouse, the whole building was full of them.

It was not a mouse, though it was close. It was Elia, the girl with the stealthiest steps. She was a ballerina, around nineteen, lived on the first floor, walked quietly. When I moved in, for a while I thought I was in love with her. We went out a couple of times. Nothing happened. And the way it didn't happen was also quiet, inconspicuous, like everything about her.

"I was afraid I was going to wake you up," she said in an apologetic voice.

"I never sleep in the afternoon," I lied convincingly.

I closed the door behind her. She stood in the center of the room, looking around. There was not much to hold her look--the windows, the walls, the mirror propped against one of the walls, the chest.

"It's beautiful," she said.

"What is?" I didn't understand.

She raised her hand, pointing to nothing in particular.

"The light," she said. "There is so much room for light here. It's like you're in a movie theatre. So many shadows, patches of light, pictures."

She blinked against the light. The hair on her arms and legs was gold. She was wearing a simple dress, a little above her knees. Even as she stood still, the dress was a feast of folds and shadows. Her dark hair, gathered into a thick plait on her back, was a blotch of night at the very heart of the light pouring on the room. She wore sandals, the type with many thin straps. I couldn't get my eyes off her feet. For me, the most beautiful part of a woman's body is the anklebone. The skin there is almost transparent and betrays a sense of

vulnerability. It evokes in me a surprising feeling of sudden, overwhelming, inexplicable tenderness.

"So," I managed to break out of that discomfoting moment of light, "how have you been?"

My voice sounded business-like; it sounded as though it was coming out of the radio. She started. I am not sure but I think she even blushed. I found that very appealing--I could not remember the last time something or someone had made me blush.

"I'm sorry, the light . . . My apartment is so dark and full of--well--things, that when I saw this empty room, and then that light," she couldn't finish. "That's stupid of me. I'm sorry," she repeated.

I wanted to tell her that it was not stupid at all. What I actually said, though, was, "I understand what you mean," in a repulsively patronizing tone.

She went over to the mirror and stroked the glass.

"I was wondering if you were still thinking of giving this away," she said. "Of course, I already have two myself, but I need as many more as I can find, for my dancing, that is. You see, when I make a movement--a pirouette or anything at all--I should be able to see the whole movement in the mirror. Ideally, I should have mirrors on all four walls, I should have walls of mirrors, so that I could see the beginning of the movement, the way it unfolds, the way it becomes fuller, ripens, and then dies out. At any moment, I should be able to see it from all different angles."

She grew silent, as if she were afraid she had spoken too much already and had made it sound like a justification, even though it was a real need.



What could I say, except "I understand." It was as if I did it on purpose, so that I would have one more reason to hate myself. "I mean, you can take it, of course," I added quickly. Then I said the only sensible thing I had said that whole day: "Let me help you get it downstairs. The damn thing is pretty heavy."

Well, it sounded stupidly macho, but still I was glad I had said it.

Elia thanked me, then walked ahead, opening the doors for me. On the second floor, we saw Mrs. Lowley, or rather she saw us. She looked at the mirror, then at Elia, finally at me, and it was clear she had drawn her own conclusions about my criteria in choosing the people, to whom I didn't mind offering my services as a porter.

"Good afternoon, Mrs. Lowley," I said from behind the mirror. "You're coming at five, right?"

She snorted out a "yes" and disappeared into her apartment.

In Elia's apartment I left the mirror next to the other two and turned around to say goodbye.

"So, you're leaving," she said, yet this time I wasn't annoyed by that sentence. I couldn't tell from her voice whether it was just a statement or there was more to it. I nodded. I expected her to ask me where I was going. She didn't. I stepped back toward the door, unable to think of anything else to say to her.

"And what are you going to do now?" I asked, crushing my skull against the bottom of my repertoire of catchy, meaningful questions.

"I think I'll take a nap," she smiled awkwardly.

"Strange. I mean most people don't sleep in the late afternoon."

"I am afraid to fall asleep in the early afternoon. I have the feeling I will never wake up. It's so quiet."

Suddenly, her face was awfully serious. Perhaps I was the first person she was telling these things to. Or maybe I just wished I was. I don't know why but I felt afraid for her, or, rather, I was on the verge of feeling that way. I wished I could, because she was really not very different from the children. The only reason I still hadn't signed her off as another pathetic were the remains of my infatuation with her. Her timid seriousness suggested to me that, perhaps, she had recently tripped over the little hole inside her, stared at it in puzzlement, and when she had noticed it was beginning to expand into the void with which I was already on almost intimate terms, she had decided to stop the hole with the nimble beauty of her dancing limbs. She was like a child who had skinned its knee while playing carelessly, now applying a piece of plaster to the wound, just as its mother has taught it to do. I must admit I still could not overcome the stupid timidity I felt in her presence, the vague expectations, typical of a love that had grown out of boredom, and was, probably, still feeding on it. I knew this was not a real feeling, it could not develop into anything that would be more than it was at present. It was more like the deceptive itching one feels after one of his limbs has been amputated.

"I have to go. Mrs. Lowley is coming at five to get her chest," I told her.

I wondered if I should shake hands with her. After all, she was my neighbor; I was not going to see her again. Somehow, though, it seemed ridiculous to shake hands with her. She closed the door and I went upstairs.

Mrs. Lowley and her party were quite expeditious. When they were gone, I looked

around. For the first time since I had moved in, I felt something familiar about the empty space lapping like an underground coolness against me. It was not exactly a sense of home. I felt easy, relaxed; I felt I was in a place where I belonged. And what was even stranger was that I didn't mind leaving. There was really nothing else I could do.

I put on my hat and went to the bathroom for a glass of water. And there, in the corner, behind the bath tub, I saw something I had completely forgotten about--the fishing rod. I twirled it in the air. It occurred to me that it was not just a fishing rod. It was *my* fishing rod. I could even think of a name for it, or a nickname. The *Unwanted* sounded appropriate. Suddenly, that strange instrument, which I didn't even know how to hold properly, let alone how to use, became dear to me. All the things I had had, all the stuff in the closet meant nothing to me. They were lent to me, or given to me, each one having a specific, clearly defined purpose.

The strange object I was now holding in my hands, somewhat awkwardly, had come to me out of nowhere, and although it did have a specific function, it did not care about me, didn't require me to be someone, do something. I had thrown it in the bathroom, ignored it; it had stayed there, waiting for this moment. It didn't impose itself on me, but courteously and patiently waited for me to make a decision. There was a lure hanging on the end of the rod. I recalled that was how they had sent it to me, probably with the good intention of saving me the trouble of doing it myself. I looked at it closely, lovingly--my first lure. I thought about the address I had given to Mr. Kowalewsky. They'd send *The Fisherman's Guide*, and then they'd have it returned to them, sealed "no such place" or "no such person." Still it was possible, though not very likely, that I had hit upon a real address, and the person

living there--it could be a whole family--would become the next heir in the chain of involuntary subscribers.

I propped the fishing rod against the bathroom wall. It had been the one true accident in my life. I didn't feel so much irritated that I had not seen that earlier as I was amused, in a strangely dull, dispassionate way. In the end, it had all been a matter of bad timing. When the fishing rod was sent to me, I had no idea what an accident felt like, since I had never had any. I felt every object, every person in my vicinity wanted something from me. They were parasites trying to find themselves a nice host. I felt intimidated, no, not intimidated but appalled at their attempts to fool me that I was connected to them in some simple, self-evident way. So when I received the fishing rod, I misunderstood it as just another manifestation of the world's persistent attempts to adopt me as one of its youngest satellites. I took it to mean "see, we are sending you something that was not even meant for you, but you'll be hooked to us alright." I had put the rod away. Now my paranoia appeared unjustified. I had been so scared that the magazine, like everything and everybody else, was intruding on me, imposing on me expectations, since the worse thing for me was to feel that something was expected from me. I had kept throwing the issues in the closet without realizing that the editors didn't care if the magazine was coming to me or to someone else.

It was clear to me, as I closed the bathroom door, that the fishing rod had been a beautiful accident. And although I saw this rather late, I was glad that I had seen it. Of course, things could have happened otherwise, but that didn't matter any more. I didn't know if I would have liked it better if things had happened otherwise. I guess I was really spoiled.

The lure hung before my eyes as I walked down the stairs. Outside the sun was shining brighter than I remembered it. The park was full of the usual noises people make. I turned into one of the alleys winding down to the key, leaving behind me the sleepy ice-cream man, the cheery flags standing still in the haze, the bright ice-cream oozing down waffle cones, sticking to little dirty palms. I was going to the river, on the outskirts of town, to test my ignorance of fishing. And the lure. And to see fish live.

## Woods

When I found her arm, the earth was hard, like a mind in winter. I piled up some fallen leaves and sat down. I was convinced I had made the right decision, not to call the police. At least not right away. It seemed sacrilegious to me to draw strangers' attention to something so mysterious, so personal, self-sufficient. They would want to understand it; they would miss the beauty of a bare, white arm already turning blue and mauve--like a sunset--with fingers spread wide in a last attempt to grasp at something. They would surely try to find the other parts of the body. They would insist on the whole picture; they wouldn't notice the bizarre, anonymous beauty of the fragment.

Had I searched the area I'd have probably found other fragments, a twisted torso, a head rolling in the briar. Only I didn't want to search and find. The arm lay at my feet like someone ready to give herself up to me. There was something comfortingly matter-of-fact about it. I wondered absent-mindedly what the hand had touched, what it had withdrawn from, disgusted, whose hair it had fondled gently, what passionate notes it had written hurriedly, what meaningless, long letters, what other hands it had twined with. It was a right hand. Had it been the shorter of the two? Had it been the one the body had lifted to protect itself from the dancing axe?

The arm lay twisted like a smile; a piece of wood dying in the fireplace. It smiled sarcastically at my silly guesswork. For a moment, I had the crazy idea of taking it home with me, putting it in a special solution, or just dumping it in the fish bowl and watching my underfed fish nibble at this unexpected gift. What a feast that would be! Yet, I couldn't carry

it safely around. I had no suitable bag or sack. Then again, it didn't belong at home. It was an art object in a precarious dependence on its context: the rotting foliage was the only context in which it wouldn't appear perverted.

I turned around to take one final look. A robin cautiously made circles around the hand. The bird perched on the crushed knuckles, ducked its lovely little head under its wings, and seemed to doze off.

The woods were dark now. I raised the collar of my raincoat and walked straight ahead. The woods were a canvas and perspective was not invented yet. The trees in what once had been the distance lined up with those I was just passing.

Several steps farther the lake lapped against my rubber boots, a wide opened wound staring at the dark and stared at in response. An autumn sky in the muddy water had given up trying to rise up to the surface and lay at the bottom, like dregs lying low in the coffee cup I had left at the edge of the kitchen table several hundreds thoughts ago.

I had always liked autumn. Autumn puts the sky behind a museum window, but since we quickly grow skysick, some conscientious maintenance aide provides a substitute, a cheap one, something neutral, white, not too impersonal, yet not too intensely white either, because white can be threatening, too. Dull, dirty, mouldy white spread evenly above me. An expanse of a hole.

I leaned against a diseased-looking sycamore. Bugs crept hurriedly up and down the wrinkled bark. Dark trees exposed pure, peeled limbs, the stumps their mysteriously gleaming bellies. Branches pointed upwards with a strange determination, as though beckoning someone. Others died to be stepped on, crushed, eager to hear themselves crackle. There

were those dreaming of dying quietly in the fireplace amidst the echoes of a deserted mansion. Some cut the air into regular, geometric patterns; some drilled it gently; some stretched themselves across it, crucifying the air, a piece of canvas flattened out on an invisible frame; some hesitated branching out in the cool emptiness; some still oozed from the latest mayhem.

These were the woods, in which a dead body would be found, now and then, with a face scarred with smallpox, cuddled in the deceptive warmth of melting life, the woods whose lakes breathed out steam to conceal their bottoms littered with the pearls of white limbs, heads with hair tugging downstream, the woods, whose molehills were indistinguishable from human mounds.

These were the woods whose trees were always waving goodbye and withdrawing courteously to make way for the ambulance.

In these woods, light was made to wait outside like a lowclass relative begging at the Thanksgiving door. Here the stones' only company was only bigger stones. Here the only movement was slipping away.

These were the woods where the grass grew up downtrodden, where the earth smelled of death, even though all that was buried in it were weekend picnic bags or battered cases bursting with stolen money.

And the view from its edges was always one and the same, the hills rising up like the backs of drowsy elephants. Every tree here had a hollow, in case one needed a shrine or a shelter. Every tree had to stare daily at its own mortality, because it was always fall in these woods. It was always Rotting Time.

These were surely the woods, in which I would take her, when I turned over the last



dead leaf before the plateau awaiting us, beyond the shivering bushes. Remember?

*The shivering bushes  
Are sheltered by a leaden sky.  
There's a movement in the hushed grass  
Copying the whispers of my brain--  
The folding and unfolding of greyish matter,  
The tickling as of ants  
Illegally exploring the vicinity.  
There are eyes in the mirror  
And a grand plateau behind them.  
There's touch sometimes, too--  
But only when the fingers withdraw.  
There's a word hanging from the edge of my tongue--  
A cliffhanger grown dizzy and unsure.  
There's a collision in the air's molecules  
Waiting for words                    worlds  
To get close enough to collide.  
There's a whisp of smoke  
And I lost my pipe months ago.  
There's music locked in the music-box  
There's dead meat roaming the back alleys  
But there are no murderers.*

It was full moon, though what did that signify if the moon looked to me like a hole in the vast blackness? I took out the torch from my raincoat pocket and dragged my feet behind the path of light crawling under me. Looked at from above, I had become myself a hole drilled in the corpse of darkness.

The woods were too unreal to seem ominous. It was so quiet: I might just as well have lighted a candle and gone down into the basement that was my mind. I thought of birds flying scared, wings crushed by winds, spitting down the seeds they were hanging on to, the intervening years, the sprouting, the filling of the rings, and now the elongated shadows escorting me and my indecisions.

The light that had been creeping sheepishly before my feet rose up from the ground

and hurled itself against my eyes. It was a wall. I played with the torch and saw other walls float into the light. It looked like a house long ago abandoned, fallen out even of the state of a memory. The night had already grown a habit of resting there, had turned it into its decadent mansion. I went slowly around the house, found no doors, no windows, like me. The walls were made of large, irregularly shaped stones. Through the tiny cracks between the stones the wind slid with a moan. Weeds bloomed unhappily, as there was no one around to curse them, nor were there flowers up against which they could persist existing malignantly. Some of them had bent and continued growing right through the cracks in the walls, like cowardly guards stooping behind the embrasures of the castle with whose protection they had been charged. I pressed my right eye against one of the cracks. Coldness pierced my pupil.

There was still some sort of a floor, and right in the middle of the largest room there stood a large low table. The glass on top of it was broken as if a large stone had been hurled from above. From under the table a tree had grown out, a fig tree that almost touched the absent ceiling. I tripped over. A small yet very definite horror pulsed under my tongue. I stepped back and felt another wall. The light still held the tree and the table. Together they looked like an island from someone's dream, swimming in the aging moonlight, full of promises.

The light died out. I shook the torch and directed it at the wall on my left. I thought I saw something scribbled in-between the peels of wallpaper. I moved nearer and the words leaped out to me. "There's something the matter with you." Now, that was a statement--an observation? a reproach? an accusation?--so beautifully bizarre, so general yet so specific.

I let the light search the entire wall. The only thing I found could have been both a response to what I had just read, and the question which had evoked the latter: "Why can't you speak to me?"

I slid down, my back against the words, and looked back at the fig tree. The more I looked, the lighter the three wall room became. It was as if a dozen spotlights held the tree and wouldn't let go. I loosened my tie. Drops of sweat crawled from under the roots of my hair and sank in my thick eyebrows. My eyes shut \*\*\*\*\* Voices, questions, the mesmerizing click of cameras . . .

*The conference room. I am sweating under the heap of my long, uncombed hair, sweating even more in my efforts to look intense, concentrated, devoted to what I am doing.*

*It is not that I cannot endure a conference. In fact, I love everything about press conferences, except maybe the press. I often wonder what it would be like to continue answering their questions calmly, articulating each word, at the same time smashing—with the same degree of reserve, of course—all those reality-imagining gadgets against the wall. The satisfaction, it seems to me, would far outweigh that to be had from crushing human skulls. The beauty of the blood blossoming on the dull surface of conference walls! It is really a pity technical equipment is not made of flesh and cannot bleed. Anyway, that whole thing is a dream wasted. The walls of conference rooms are, by rule, upholstered with leather, a preventive measure, surely.*

*I like being asked questions, though. I like to be caressed by eyes filled with expectancy. I like answering questions not because I enjoy listening to my own voice, nor*

*because I feel a particular urgency to answer them, but because I take pleasure in convincing myself, again and again, that nobody understands my answers. No, it is not even that! What I always look forward to is the absolutely ingenious way, in which they all pretend to understand. Their pathetic attempts to lie to me and to one another become almost heroic in my eyes. I am ready to forgive them their weak wits so long as they are able to clad their misunderstanding in such beautiful pretense at understanding. I love to see a reporter wrinkle his forehead in a desperate, wholehearted effort to grasp my words. I fall for his "yes, I see" nods. My favourite part is the second when the man makes the ultimate effort, and then, instead of becoming gloomy and withdrawing in shame, unsure of himself, angry with his deficiency, his face lights up by the imaginary halo of an epiphany. Ah, the ritual of the nervous, passionate scribbling in the little black notebook, which is then put away in the inside pocket, near the heart! There is nothing more worthy of admiration than a mediocrity that truly, desperately tries to overcome itself or at least tries to make others believe it has done so.*

*The only thing that spoils my public encounters with mediocrity is the blinking and the sudden, uncontrollable twitching of my muscles each time a camera flashes and whizzes, as if the room were filled with whizzing lungs of patients suffering from consumption. I feel stupid blinking; I try covering up my discomfiture by drinking from the glass of mineral water. Some conscientious usher has kept track of my habit--there are three bottles of water on my table, in case of excessive blinking. I feel my face growing the casual look of a poet eager to share his soul with every Tom, Dick, and Harry. A camera flashes. I blink.*

*"Elizabeth Bowen, New York Times," proclaims a ripe, self-confident voice.*

*I lean back in my leather chair and smile at the woman, who cannot help counting the missing buttons on my rampled shirt of a young and extremely promising poet from the suburbs.*

*"Mr.Pane . . ."*

*She stops counting and collects herself. Then there is another pause, during which she is probably contemplating how unlucky I must be to have such a common, unpoetic name and be an aspiring poet at the same time.*

*"Would you, please, tell us a bit more about the major literary influences that shaped your artistic development. Perhaps," she pauses to consider whether she should venture such a bold suggestion, "perhaps, you could even divide them into periods, for the sake of chronology, that is," she finishes all in a breath. She then produces an elegant, brown leather notebook, undoubtedly full of other such bold questions.*

*I reach down my pocket for a cigarette and recall I have quit dying--I regard that as an euphemism for smoking--an hour ago. I smile an embarrassed smile, which is all it usually takes to undo middle aged, self-assured female reporters. I give the Bowen woman a look that is meant to express my astonishment at the fact that I have not noticed her earlier. Her hand, holding an expensive pen, freezes in the air. Her lips are slightly parted. I speak in a tired yet intimate voice, as if I were talking to her only. Out of the corner of my eye, I see envious looks collide somewhere between the platform and the line in which the woman is sitting.*

*"There are no major or minor influences," I begin slowly. "I believe that," I pause, pretending to search for the most poetic words, "I believe that one should try to read as little*

*as possible. Reading other people's thoughts confuses me, slows me down, exhausts me."*

*At this point, I throw in another pregnant pause. I speak in pauses. Usually, I impregnate them with the twining and untwining of my fingers, a meaningful sip from the bottle of water (for this I use my right hand, while at the same time my left hand is beating the devil's tattoo). Sometimes I scribble what others imagine to be spontaneous poems, but what are actually caricatures. "Perhaps you'll call me an egoist. Fine. I am an egoist every chance I get. I don't believe in getting inspiration from reading books other than those I myself have written. One can invent the whole world if he has had 24 hours of dense self-conscious existence. Having to rely on external irritants is too easy for me. They will always guarantee me an interesting story, interesting only because it is alien to me. But try making up an interesting story using only the source you are most familiar, most bored with, your own mind . . ."*

*"Would you say that refusing to talk with other poets and writers is a bit unusual? Are you trying to get the attention of the press?" she interrupts me.*

*"It works, doesn't it?" I grin. Everybody in the room grins understandingly. "You have to understand one thing: I have never refused to talk with a fellow poet. I am simply not interested in drinking wine and rhapsodizing about muses in the arts club cafe. It's simply a waste of time. If I meet another writer, I simply ask him for a copy of his work, and the rest is . . ."*

*Leaving my sentences unfinished is a habit I have perfected over time. It gives them additional weight. Too often it is the only weight I have.*

*I watch the face light up. The woman licks her lips, drops her notebook, bends over*

*to get it, looks around, and finally looks back at me, but I have already managed to shift my eyes to my next diversion.*

*During the rest of the conference I glance at her now and then. She keeps writing passionately in her notebook with the nervousness of a person, who thinks he has finally grasped something extremely complicated and hastens to put it down lest it should slip away again. As I am leaving the building two hours later, a cleaning woman comes up to me and hands me a small white envelope.*

*"I figure you are the poet?" she says. "A woman asked me to give this to the poet."*

*Suddenly I feel like a character in the mind of a writer, who thinks this should better be the complication. Indeed, my life has not been complicated for quite a time now. I am surprised to find out I feel somewhat expectant. The cleaning woman does not seem very bent on leaving. Obviously, she expects me to share something with her. Messengers are never content with simply fulfilling their mission.*

*"It must have been my wife. She likes playing tricks on me," I lie.*

*The woman gives me a scornful look. Did I really think her that stupid? A very perceptive cleaning woman she is. Oddly enough, I feel guilty for having lied to her. Why do I have to lie to her? I don't even know the stranger, who has sent me the letter. Why should I care? Or am I afraid that, finally, something unpredictable, and because of that important, is coming my way, so I feel an instinctive urge to protect it? I walk away quickly. Outside I lean against a lamppost, straining my eyes in the irritating orange light, ignoring the nasty drizzle that usually drives me mad. The letter is written in pencil. Some of the words are already smeared and hard to read:*

I wonder if my greyish matter folds and unfolds the same way yours does. Do you have a center to begin with or are you just a vicinity? How long has it been since you last collided with another world?

I touch when I withdraw. I am of the rescue unit. I am not afraid of heights. I don't smoke but I bought a new pipe yesterday. The wood is still young. Smells of pitch. Smells of darkness. You can still read the rings. I unlock things locked. I find things lost. I identify absent murderers. I explain the world away. I do not speak.

Now, to get to the matter-of-fact of it, to that which will be obvious to you, eventually:

*There is a fig tree between the cracks  
in the crumbling walls.  
There is a shadow of a man  
leaning against a windowless window sill  
(and sometimes against lampposts).  
There is a place  
hidden between the folds of the air  
that waits to be opened up  
by cracked, bewildered lips.  
There is a sound of dripping water  
from the faucet long gone--  
a forgetful hand--bare and white.  
There are traces overgrown with grass.  
There is a hand waving in the blooming evening,  
and a handful of words  
tucked away in a polished jewel-box.  
There are seeds of white narcissus  
waiting to be sown.  
There is a waiting  
long overdue.  
There is a shadow of a fig tree,  
and no sun.*

The torch rolled down from my numb hands. The darkness sucked me in and I let



myself be digested. The dirt on the face of the moon appeared ominous, a tumor. My hand reached for the torch and the light exploded right in my face. I could not see my face; I shivered with horror. Slowly, I directed the light to my right. The sink gleamed back at me, a malicious ceramic grin. My eyes clang to the rusty faucet. A drop of water lingered awhile at the end of it, like a suicide still considering, then plunged down. The sound of it crushing reached my ears with a slight delay. I shut my eyes and walked across the room with the self-confidence of a blind lord, who knows every niche in his enormous mansion. The window was long gone, but the frame was still there. I leaned against the window sill and turned off the light. My nostrils filled with the long extinguished smells of the small garden under the window. The dripping of the water hammered me down. The moon was experimenting with shadows, signatures.

*There is no signature. For once in my life something has happened, and I don't have an address. I run back into the building. Luckily, the cleaning woman is still there.*

*"Excuse me, do you remember me? The poet? Did you by any chance notice what the woman who brought you the letter looked like?" I blurt out.*

*The woman gives me her perceptive look and remarks in a casual voice:*

*"Then you don't see your wife so often or else surely you'd know what she looks like."*

*It is hard to miss the sparks of triumph in her mocking eyes. I am about to spit out another lie but she simply turns her back on me, resuming her meaningless task with the utmost concentration and devotion. I curse silently and walk toward the exit, but then I hear her voice. She speaks with her back still turned to me.*

*"Long, slim arms, white skin, a mole on the right palm."*

*I turn around and ask in an almost friendly voice that even NYT reporters have not been honored with so far.*

*"And was that undoubtedly important detail the only one that caught your attentive eye?"*

*"The woman had a black silk stocking over her face. Obviously, I could not see much of her face under these circumstances, could I?" she snaps back.*

*I am, to put it mildly, quite taken aback by this new piece of information; information, in general, only obscures my vision a bit further. I try to remain calm and indifferent.*

*"I don't understand. Why would she put such a thing over her face?"*

*"Maybe she didn't want to get wet. It's raining outside, as you can surely see."*

*The cleaning woman points at the street. I almost turn to see if it is actually raining when I realize what a fool I have made of myself.*

*"It seems to me absolutely clear that woman was a burglar. You'd better check out your equipment, see if a bucket or a broom is missing," I tell her in an even voice as I am making my way to the door, without even glancing at her.*

*"The lady was obviously too timid and would rather remain anonymous. Women in love prefer to move around incognito," her voice stops me.*

*This time I decide to refrain from my usual sarcasm. Still, I cannot help picturing the cleaning woman reading the dictionary each night before going to bed, learning strangely beautiful words, feeling part of something larger and luminous.*

*"I am not what you think I am," she says, opening a window, lovingly breathing on the glass and assiduously scrubbing it with the cloth.*

*I don't know what to say.*

*"Sometimes I think they should be giving out Ph.D.'s to the people who make it their job to clean up the dirt of this world," she goes on.*

*"Are you, by any chance, one of the cast of Twin Peaks or does making no sense come natural to you?" I ask. No reply. Yet, she doesn't appear hurt. "Have you not gone through professional training for what you do?" I am aware I have to show at least some appreciation for the efforts of mediocrity.*

*"I've been trained, though not in what I am doing now. In this I'm still a beginner. Making things clean is, well, tough," she pauses. "I have a degree in a trade rather dishonorable and uncompromisingly narcissistic." She steps back, slightly bending her head to one side, examining the glass surface like an artist appraising the painting she has just finished.*

*"What trade is that?" I am curious.*

*She shifts her critical eye to the ends of my raincoat, decorated with blotches of ink, reflects for a moment whether there is any reason for her to answer me. Finally, she turns her back on me and walks toward the next window.*

*"Something called literature."*

*"Why did you quit?" I cry after her.*

*She takes out a new, still white piece of cloth.*

*"I am doing penance." She breathes in the lemon smell of the detergent.*

*I leave. There are certain slight modifications that have to be made in my view of women, and this is not the result only of my discovery that cleaning ladies are not always who you think they are (though, alas, the margin of error is really not that remarkable). The stranger's letter has made me think that perhaps my study of the sex usually referred to as the opposite one--though I have never been able to understand whether the term means women stand or speak or lie or laugh or cry opposite us or what--is not yet as exhaustive as I have thought it to be.*

There was no mattress on the bed, just an iron frame. I lay down on the spring, stretching my legs and shoulders. My bones cracked.

*When I go to bed that night, I have a disturbing dream. I am standing under an imposing granite rock, munching figs. It is night and the moon is a perfectly round piece of Roquefort cheese. A woman is sliding gracefully down a rope hanging right above my head. Her slender body, clad in an evening dress, is wrapped up in solid mountaineer's ropes. When she finally steps on the ground, she turns around very slowly, and as her head emerges from the shadow, I see her face is enshrouded in a black silk stocking. She rummages in her small bag and hands me something. My lost pipe. There is music coming out of it. A gypsy love song.*

*I spend the following days in a state of mild absent-mindedness, which gradually turns into a state of desperate concentration, whose sole object is the letter and its author. I examine the sheet of paper under a magnifying glass. At first, I think I would have liked*

*it better had it been written in ink. That is more stylish, more feminine. As I read the words to myself, though, I begin to think pencil is more subtle, sophisticated, delicate. The words written in pencil somehow lack the pretense of ink. Ink makes a claim at finality. The pen says it has come up with just the right words. The pencil, though, is aware of its own transitoriness, expectant of erasure. It is its own foreshadowing of disappearance. There is something crude, materialistic, down-to-earth about pens. Pencil written words bathe in a sea of glowing abstraction, tender elusiveness, intelligent fear, an odd kind of reserved spontaneity hinting at an effervescent mystical spirituality. I look at the words, feel the paper, whisper them to myself until I learn them by heart. No matter how I try, though, the words fail to evoke a corresponding image. Finally, I lock up the letter in my desk. I let the phone ring, and one day, I simply unplug it. I spend the days lying on the floor, trying to invent a face. I switch around hairstyles, hair color, eye color, cheekbones, variously shaped faces, long necks, short necks. I put moles in various parts of the absent body. First, she is a subdued blonde with warm, reclusive eyes, then a fiery brunette with bold green eyes and high cheekbones. At one point, her eyes are yellow. I suspect that has something to do with the fact that orange juice is the only thing I am consuming at that time. She is just on the point of turning into an one-eyed albino with an exceptionally long neck, when I realize I am overstepping a boundary (though I have no idea what that boundary is and who's postulated it in the first place).*

*Having starved my cat for three days, during which time period the poor beast has gone from mild surprise to accute disbelief, sometimes bordering on plain denial, this followed by guilt-provoking significant glances and miaows in my general direction,*

*indignant silence breathing out scorn, and, finally, a short series of hysterical attacks, all of which have ended in a royal resentment tinted by the expectation of an eventual revenge, after Hugo has gone through all those stages (which have, supposedly, turned him into a more mature being, though I cannot say there is much conclusive evidence to support this), I decide to write a poem. Naturally, I haven't the faintest idea how that work of mine is to reach its addressee, but I am determined to give that woman, whoever she is--maybe the last intelligent woman on earth--a chance. I write the poem while Hugo is pondering whether he will not humiliate himself too much by condescending to some sort of negotiations with his disrespectful, discourteous master. To stimulate his pondering, I have left a bowl of fresh milk by the kitchen table. For once I wish he were not intelligent enough to consider this a bribe or a case of "wise after the event," both of which, of course, it is. While he is licking up the milk--his old face signifying that, beyond all doubt, he is merely passing by the bowl and the milk is, in fact, nothing unexpected, i.e. nothing he should be grateful for, nor is it of an exceptional quality--I am sitting folded up in the armchair, writing. I write in the dark, I am afraid to look at my own words. Rereading my response, it strikes me as uncharacteristically sincere. I have no one to turn to for a second, more objective opinion. After a while, Hugo retires to his corner. To disturb him now, to distract him from his after-dinner ablutions, will be a proof of bad manners at best, an unpardonable sin at worst. The only way for me to continue that strange communication--I assume the woman expects me to answer her letter--is through the literary-critic-turned-cleaning woman's mediation.*

*Before going out on my mission, I hesitate whether I should shave, put on a tie or cuff-links, but then I figure an unshaved face and a white shirt several shades falling off the*

*original color will best spell out my despair and the strange, indefinite longing I find incomprehensible in a habitualized poet like me.*

*The repentant doctor of philosophy is wringing out the cloth, with which she has been washing the floor. As I approach her, I take a closer look at her face. She is about forty but her skin is still smooth. Her hair is put up in a bun, which is already hanging low at the back of her neck. It is a natural reddish color, like the rusty moon while it still hangs low, dripping blood, over the storehouses on the key. Suddenly, it strikes me that I have overlooked one possibility. The cleaning woman can just as well be my epistolary lover. The chances are rather slim, though, judging from the contents of the stranger's letter. That is definitely not the letter of a penitent. It is the letter of a dishonorable, narcissitic lover of words.*

*The woman sees me right away, brushes aside her hair with her wet hands and speaks in a resolute voice:*

*"Listen, I'm not a post office. There's one two blocks away, in case you're interested."*

*"So she hasn't come back?" I ask cautiously, aware of the power she has over me.*

*"No. You might as well throw away your letter."*

*Then she experiments with acting humane.*

*"Don't think too much about it, though. You have other mail, don't you? Besides, what could you possibly say of a woman, whom you haven't even seen?"*

*"I've read her letter, and her poem," I note in a somewhat apologetic voice.*

*"You've seen her handwriting, that's what you've seen. Her voice is what you need, not the words she speaks. The hand, not the paper."*

*She stoops and begins pouring a cleaning detergent, with the familiar smell of lemon, in the bucket filled with water. She has nothing more to say to me. I drag my feet to the waste paper basket, get the two letters out of my pocket. I'm about to tear them apart, when I notice something familiar lying amidst the discarded sheets of paper. A woman's black stocking. I turn around. The cleaning woman is scrubbing one of the windows. She has already forgotten me. I fold the stocking carefully and put it in one of the pockets of my pants. On my way out, I notice a board hanging next to the door. Attached to it are the photographs of the most distinguished members of the personnel working in the various offices in the building. I smile. I have an idea.*

I was tense. The almost inaudible sound continued bombarding me from the other end of the room. I went to the sink and tried to tighten the faucet. It wouldn't. I kicked the sink and cursed for a while.

*"The hell you are!"*

*"You can swear as much as you please. But try to reason logically. What's the point of declaring someone you don't even know, someone you haven't even met, missing? It's common sense. A person has to be present before he could disappear," he explains to me in a patronizing tone. "You don't have her picture, do you?" he asks almost reproachfully, as if I am supposed to have it but have been dumb enough to forget it or lose it.*



*"I have a letter she wrote to me . . . officer," I mumble, wondering how each time I have to be polite, it feels like squeezing a tooth paste tube to force out the last part of the contents. When it comes to communication with civilians I am not exactly a natural. When it comes to accosting the authorities, I am definitely a slow learner. I accompany my words with something intended as an embarrassed, helpless smile which, however, ends up as a condescending grin. I can see that the officer's tolerance functions in a way not very different from that of my politeness. He smoothes the meagre remains of his hair, opens a large notebook, coughs significantly, and says in a voice a shade too calm, "This week only we've had seventeen people reported missing. All of them have been missing for at least a month."*

*He pauses. He is trying to build up suspense. He wants to give a special emphasis to what follows.*

*"All of them have photographs." He points to the improvised gallery on the opposite wall.*

*I decide to appeal to the pathetic side of his humanity.*

*"Have you ever loved your wife?" I ask in a resigned, subdued voice.*

*The officer puts down his thick glasses, blows his nose, and looks up at me with his bulging, watery eyes. His pupils are dilated.*

*"I understand what you mean."*

*"I do have a heart," he finally confides.*

*I nod my reserved gratitude. Our relationship having reached that degree of familiarity, I venture a suggestion.*

*"Why don't you put up a special board for the letters of unidentified authors?"*

*The officer looks at me very seriously: "I will consider that." He removes a photograph of a mentally retarded old man from the gallery of missing faces, and in its place we hang the stranger's letter and my response to it. While we are shaking hands, looking in each other's eyes in mutual appreciation of our inchoate comradeship, the officer whispers, "Why did we put up your letter too? You are not missing."*

*"So much depends on point of view," I remark quietly, but authoritatively.*

*His face lights up. Still, he looks disturbed. "Don't you think it is a bit too personal to be thus exposed to the public eye?" he asks.*

*"My friend, in such an impersonal world as we live in, surely it won't do any harm to get personal once in a while. To be honest, I am afraid these days nothing can be personal enough," I observe with the sad, premature wisdom of a twenty-seven year old.*

*He assures me he understands.*

I lay down under the table. The fig tree towered above me, a majestic flag on a pirate ship. The original copy of my poem-response-letter was still in my back pocket. The words were hard to read. I had written them in pencil.

To Whom It May Concern, rather,  
To The Only One It Concerns, rather,  
To The One I Hope Will Find That It Concerns Her:

In all the houses of this town  
your steps are fading out.  
Every window closed  
is closed by your hand.  
Every yawn of the wind  
is heavy with your smell

and erases me.  
Every song I hear  
is a farewell.  
Every smile I stumble on  
is a disguised weeping.  
There is calm in your eye,  
and the hand clinging to this pencil  
is a blotch of raw meat.

*Hugo is waiting for me to stop re-reading the single sentence and pay attention to his state of mind. I have found the note slipped under my door. A small sheet of letter paper, the type with tender, barely visible pictures. This one has trees shedding their leaves by a frozen lake. The note reads "It's taking you too much time." That is all. What is taking me too much time? Finding her? What is "too much" time anyway? If she wants to be found, why wouldn't she give me decent hints? Or does she mean I am slow witted? That I don't know how to find things when I lose them? That I can't deal with the everyday? That I am perhaps too abstract, too much of a poet? Too much? How much? How much is allowed then? How much is reasonable? How much would suit you, woman? But she is wrong. I am tired of conjuring her up, tired of running around like a terrier after a faint smell. Does she really want to be perceived as game? As a game? If she has meant to bring me down to the level, where I have to deal with snappy cleaning women ashamed of their Ph.D's and authority figures in possession of hearts, why has she chosen a strategy that is, ultimately, self-defeating? After all, by writing notes, poems, letters to me, isn't she feeding into the very habit she, supposedly, means to attack? Because I know why she is doing it. She's teasing me. She's mocking the poet who has a theory about life yet cannot live it. Why wouldn't she speak to me then? That would make things so much simpler. Doesn't she want*

*them to be simple? Don't I? This whole thing is beginning to tire me. It requires too much effort. It annoys me. She is beginning to annoy me. The thing is . . . I don't understand how that is possible. Her game of absence is, ultimately, cheap. She might have been right in assuming that what I need is a partner who will challenge my intelligence and make me discover things about myself I have never known. That is really what I once thought I wanted. Now, though, I find, to my disappointment, that my desires and needs are far less poetic and abstract. I don't want to get to know myself better. As a matter of fact, I would be grateful if only I could know myself worse, that is, less. I am not after some parlor game where lovers try to outwit each other. My taste is, actually, conservative. I want to look at the woman, see myself reflected in her eyes. I want her to give herself up to me. In that I would be giving myself up to me. I would make a precious gift of myself and I would give it back to me.*

*In the evening I post a note on the door of my apartment, close the door, and stop thinking about the stranger. I have myself, I have Hugo, and an interview or a press conference in-between. This is enough.*

*A week later, the note disappears. I figure it is the neighborhood kids, who while away their lives between the first and the fourth floor of the apartment building.*

*The last time I see my note to her is in a dream, about a month later. I dream Hugo is sleeping in a nest of dead, dark red leaves. On his black, sleek fur I read the familiar words: Speak or go away. It is a black-and-white dream. Everything is back to normal.*

I raised the blotch of raw meat, keeping it in the torch light. It looked more like a

normal hand than a blotch of raw meat. I felt as if I had just been informed of the untimely death of a minor deity. I shoved the sheet of paper in my mouth, feeling its soft edges with my tongue. There was an air of normality about me I had to accept.

*Seven months later I am on my way to a small, decent Bible Belt town, lost in the vast Kansan sleep. I am supposed to meet with some young, promising poets, who want to share with me their heroic efforts to convince the local church people that replacing the amazingly absurd messages on the special boards in churchyards--like the one that asks the innocent passer-by whether he has committed yet a random act of kindness and if not, how long does sweet Jesus have to wait--with stanzas from their own vibrant, sexually liberated poetry, only seemed "a blasphemous idea." The poets claim they have carried the personal relationship with sweet Jesus to a higher stage, where they do not have to hide any of their primal desires from His all-seeing eyeball that rotates in all directions, conscientiously inspecting everything even accidentally amoral.*

*I have to change trains, which means I have to spend two hours in one of those depressingly neat railway stations the BB takes such a pride in. The personnel are rather happy to take care of me, though I don't think I have shown them in any way that I expect to be taken care of. I have managed to find a secluded table, and I am just trying to make up my mind whether to spit out the lousy coffee I have not been spared, or risk swallowing it down, when a white, slender hand pushes a note next to my coffee cup. I swallow mechanically, which puts an abrupt end to my Hamletian fit. The note reads: "Is the coffee good?" I look up.*

*The woman is in her late twenties or early thirties; it is hard to tell. Her skin is smooth, her face young. Very short, ash brown hair exposing the thin veins pulsating on her neck. The lips are full, giving her a childlike expression. The eyes are extremely dark and absent--I cannot see the pupils. Her eyes are smiling, yet it is a strange smile, somehow withdrawn.*

*"Do you know me?" I ask, trying to hide my frustration, motioning her to have a seat.*

*She takes out a very short pencil--it is almost unbelievable that she can still write with it--and writes something on the same piece of paper. Then she pushes it toward my side of the table.*

*"Yes, you are the man sitting in a place he hates, drinking coffee he'd rather spit out, and wondering," the note says.*

*I don't ask her what she thinks I am wondering about. I pretend I am not surprised to see her there. She is playing with the pencil, rolling it on the glass surface of the table. She disturbs me even more than the happy McDonald's faces making themselves busy around me. A girl comes up to our table with the intention of giving me a refill. I raise my hand, not sure whether I am trying to protect my cup or myself, and give the girl a significant look. She seems to understand.*

*"I'll be back soon," she assures me, obviously convinced that her only mistake has been one of bad timing.*

*I turn to the woman. She is still smiling.*

*"Can't you speak?" I can't help it.*

*She writes down her answer: "It takes people too much time to understand one another when they speak. If ever."*

*"So you are keen on saving time?" I ask, casual again.*

*"No, I am dumb," her answer reads.*

*This time she has gone too far. I leave the money for the coffee next to the cup--having decided to drop all charges against the local coffee makers--and stand up.*

*"I don't believe you. You know that. You coming?"*

*She seems to hesitate.*

*"For a walk. The woods," I explain, pointing at the oaks on the other side of the tracks.*

*Outside, as we pass by the window, I notice she has forgotten her pencil on the table.*

*It is cool in the woods. As we sit on two enormous stones, watching the colony of frogs on the tiny island in the center of the lake, my desire for punishing her fades away. I cannot understand why she has to lie to me when I ask her if she is the woman with the black silk stocking. She seems to be quite amused by my story. When I see she will not admit to it, I drop the subject. She will probably give herself away eventually. We just sit there, silently watching the frogs. I have no desire to hear my own voice. The odd thing is I don't want to hear hers either. I don't want her to write any notes to me. I don't want her to write letters to me.*

*In the shadows of the woods, her white arm is the tired glow of a firefly.*

*I follow the BB poets around town, look at the church message boards--they are*

*lighted up at night, I am informed, lest a stranger passing by should pass uninspired--and think of her.*

My muscles grew stiff. Beyond the missing wall the leaves murmured in a different way. It was stupid to come back here.

*On my way back, I have to spend another two hours at the same station. I have told her when I am going back, the time, the train.*

Someone else's torchlight fell on the wall with the words. A dog jumped at me. Two uniformed shadows bent over my head.

*The little island in the middle of the lake looks deserted. Only her arm is there. I wonder. Should I cry? Should I switch to prose?*

"Mr. Pane."

An ugly face smiled too close to me.

"I see you're already writing down your testimony." He nodded at my sketchbook. He was the kind of officer who reveled in obliging with detailed directions citizens lost in the streets of their home-town. He caught the coldness in my eyes and hastened to correct himself.

"Well, then, hmm, maybe you were not writing your testimony after all, a letter



perhaps, right?" He almost begged for my confirmation. "Of course. A letter," he mumbled, and then repeated "Of course" several times.

The other officers turned out even less quick-witted. "Yes, I was a bit depressed that evening, so I thought a walk in the woods would do me some good," I explained for the third time while they were trying to eat donuts and write down my testimony at the same time.

They had come to my compartment minutes before the train was supposed to leave. I had decided not to call the police. I didn't feel like talking facts. I didn't even bother asking them how they knew I had found the arm. They had told me that the dispatcher, a hunchback of an indefinite sex, had seen me and a young woman go into the woods the day before. Would I mind coming to the station, just the regular check-up?

"Very well, Mr. Pane, that'll be all. Thank you very much for your cooperation," the "Of course" officer finally said.

I went to the door, then walked back to his desk.

"Officer, I was wondering if you could tell me the name of the woman. Just curious to whom the arm belonged," I mumbled.

A shadow of doubt crossed his wrinkled face, but he looked into the papers spread before him.

"Elaine. Elaine Parker."

Then he spared some more facts.

"A sign language instructor. Quite pretty, even though she must be what, in her fifties?" He checked the papers. "Yes, fifty-two. You don't find such women any more. The killer is a loony in his forties. His family had refused to send him to a mental home. Did it

in the basement of his parents' house. We found her left arm in the bushes by the tracks. The right one is still missing. The head was buried under one of the stones by the ruins of the old forester's lodge. Haven't found the rest of her yet. It will take some time, but we know what we are doing. The nice thing is we have the bastard. You should see him, the way he rolls his eyes and gives you that innocent look. Sometimes, I wonder why some people ever get to be born, you know what I mean?"

The officer's exhaustive report crowned with this philosophical observation, left me numb.

"Are you sure?" I heard my own voice.

The officer gave me a strange look.

"Of course I am sure. I have a witness."

The door behind his desk opened. She came in followed by another, younger officer. As she passed by me, I was once again amazed at how dark her eyes were. Like a moonless night.

When they were gone, the officer remarked in a compassionate voice:

"The poor thing. Tsk, tsk. Was there the whole time. Saw him hide away the parts. The left arm, that was pure luck. Well, I had a sort of a hunch about it." He coughed, feigning modesty. "We've been asking her questions and she seems quite cooperative, but what can you do--the woman's dumb, and when we gave her a pen and asked her to write down everything as she recalled it, for some strange reason she wouldn't take it. Yes, it will take some time." He coughed, implying our conversation was over.

"She wants her tiny pencil," I mumbled. The officer went back to his paper work.

The next train was leaving in two hours. I wanted to stroke old Hugo's back. Instead, I patted the sketchbook in the pocket of my raincoat.

The ends of something white fluttered on one of the benches in front of the station cafeteria. An envelope. I looked around anxiously, searching for her. I bent over, and touched the paper. Another hand snatched the letter. A teenage girl looked at me indignantly. She shoved the small envelope in one of the multiple small pockets of her jacket, and ran after the leaving train. I smiled nervously and sat on the bench. Through the cafeteria window I could see a man eating a sandwich and reading a letter at the same time.

I dozed off. I saw the postman delivering the mail in my neighborhood; he shouldered a big brown leather bag. I watched him put letters in other people's mail boxes.

## Manifesto

I remember the split second when I became fully aware of the revolutionary role I was meant to play in the rebirth of our culture, and the responsibilities thereof. I was trying on a pair of shoes. I had found them falling short of my idea of size and color, which had prompted me to take them off and tiptoe--in my red-yellow-green checkered socks--through the store, intending to ask the shop assistant to find me size 9 1/2, light brown. Returning to the fitting room--that shop took pride in the unique privacy it allowed its clients--I found my own shoes kicked in the corner. Someone--though I realize that individual is unworthy even of such a collective, and by necessity, anonymous appellation; in fact, he deserves to be left unnamed or even misnamed, were I not as moderately fair as I am--had sneaked in the room in my absence and had, with an undoubtedly malicious expression on his face, stolen my shoe laces. It was not the fact of the theft that touched me. No. Those of you in the back row--did you roger what I just said? That was an emphatical negative: No. I was taken aback by the pettiness of the act. In order to establish rapport with you, I suppose I should give you a context, in which you will better understand my indignation.

I am a thief. The sad thing is that there was a time when I would have made that declaration with a sense of satisfaction and self-respect. But as I sat in the fitting room that woeful early October afternoon, mirthlessly preoccupied with thoughts--inadvertantly copying the thinker's pose, forgetting that I had made it a matter of principle never to let my outward appearance betray the occupation that made me most vulnerable, thinking--I realized that I could only admit my identity with something that would be considered a little more than

considerable reluctance bordering on embarrassment. What had transpired in the fitting room had brought to the surface--I'm not ashamed to admit that sometimes I distract myself by living on the surface--a problem that I had, for a long time now, tried to disregard. Yet will you not agree with me that a responsible citizen cannot, should not, indeed, **MUST NOT** eschew the duty--because this, mind you, is a full-fledged duty, not a matter of sheer taste--the duty, I say, to uphold the admirable ideal of professional expertise? And how would you judge the expertise or the quality of theft in this particular instance that I brought to your attention, in my capacity of a conscientious citizen? Would you, please, be so kind as not to misunderstand me: I am not at all referring to the fact that the perpetrator of the aforementioned heinous crime got away. My concern lies, rather, with the issue of style. Be fair now: would you say that thief's aspirations--I wouldn't like to call him my colleague--were as high as they should have been? Would you say he did his job with that graceful self-control, that dignified self-absorption, that finesse, that *je ne sais quoi*, if you will, which distinguishes the real thief from the despicable imitator twice or even thrice removed from the shining original?

And so I say unto you . . . where was I? Aha! What we have here is a definite--how sickening the thought is!--a definite decline of the art of theft. Those who choose this form of expression in life are losing, steadfastly, the integrity and the penchant for perfection that once used to be the prerequisites for entering our respectable guild. Our art has gradually been assimilated into the vulgar culture.

I have been reading a play these last few days, hoping to divert my attention away from such heavy thoughts, and there, too, I found an echo of the present problem. One of

the characters in the play enunciates thus: "the age is grown so pick'd that the *toe* of the peasant comes so near the heel of the courtier, he galls his *kibe*" (my emphasis). My thoughts exactly. What more could I say? (I will not even mention the obvious similarity with my case, manifested in the feet, and by extension, shoe metaphor.) I have been considering establishing contact with this gentleman (yes, I do realize that "hamlet" is only a code name--it's actually quite common among underground revolutionaries), and work with him on the formation of a network of revolutionary thief committees. Nationwide. Our goal? A Renaissance in the private and public arena of theft. The thief's character, gentlemen, has suffered depletion. It needs to be rebuilt, strengthened. I wouldn't like to come off as immodest, but I will say that I have already begun working on our new platform. It has been a long and strenuous effort on my behalf. (No, really, you don't have to applaud! [Applause repeated] I am not in this for the conventional type of reward.) First, a research needs to be done to establish, at least approximately, the possible causes of the heinous degradation of the thief's morale that we have witnessed. It is my belief that we have exhausted the possibilities with respect to the objects of our professional occupation. Under the present conditions, it strikes me as preposterous to continue applying our skills to objects and/or subjects. Stealing money or material possessions, or kidnapping subjects and asking for ransom are, really, vulgar and outdated goals. Such gross ends disparage the beauty inherent in the thief's traditional concept of life. We are losing our idiosyncrasy, if you don't mind me saying so.

I have been informed that certain factions suggest a back-to-basics approach, by which they mean, I suppose, going back to nature, i.e., ambushing unaware citizens in out-of-the-

way places. Personally, I am doubtful as to what can be reasonably expected from that kind of strategy. We have to keep in mind that the sociocultural context, in which we find ourselves today is different--you decide whether it's a matter of a radical or sporadic difference--from what it used to be. It is a symptom of social and personal myopia, as well as of a complete lack of a historical perspective to believe--as some of us seem to do--that we can retrieve the golden times when we used to ambush, in pristine groves and woods, by serene lakes and babbling brooklets, golden chariots transporting negligé royal personas, with the worthy purpose of confiscating the ladies' pearls, and, depending on the quality of the former, their hearts, too. Those factions--I will not name them as it is not my aim to embarrass them any further than they have already embarrassed themselves--seem to think that we can still go to the public park and ambush a sweating juppie jogger or an asthmatic eighty years old stoic cyclist. Do you really believe we could get anything from such subjects, apart from a battered walkman--the batteries nearly dead--or a plastic bottle with lousy, warm mineral water? Really, we have to understand that we are well beyond the stage of dealing with *les gens et les choses*. This is too easy. It is beneath our dignity to continue to steal things that can be stolen, that readily lend themselves to being stolen. It is time we challenged that which people consider inalienable, things that go far beyond the 100 carat bracelet or the eight years old cute son of a millionaire. Theft needs to be elevated to a new, higher level in order to meet our new needs and become congruous with the new ways thieves and their subjects perceive reality. Mark me! Theft must become abstract, or rather the objects of theft must become abstract. We need to reinvent the mythical substratum of theft. I have already made the first steps in that direction. In fact, I must say I have been moving in that direction

since the very beginning of my career, only I had not been sufficiently aware of that. To the point then. Let me ask you this: have you not noticed how many times people would say something like this: "If it were not for his love, I would have not been able to go through all that . . ." or "Your moral support means so much to me . . ." or "They gave me such hope . . ." Wherever I go--dinner, party, mall, street cafe--I hear words like these, accompanied by the corresponding drivelling looks. I have made a habit of writing these expressions in the little black address-book I always keep with me. I have drawn a chart, in which I have listed love, support, hope, and similar items. I have tried to establish the approximate value--to our subjects--of each item. I have been examining closely the correlation between types of people and the different values they attach to each item on my list. I keep the list and my mind open, if you'll excuse the zeugma.

These are the things we want to focus on. These are the supposedly inalienable things we want to take into consideration. Now you may very well ask: How do we do that? Good question, as our American colleagues say whenever they don't know the answer to a question. I don't have a ready answer for you. What I would suggest, though, is this. Thiefs, start keeping journals! Write down your ideas for renovating our profession. What should we strive for? What should we not settle for?

In case you feel particularly enthusiastic about debating the matter one-to-one, feel free to stop by the shoe store at the intersection of 17 Gone Avenue and 0 Blank Street. (I must confess I am a bit sentimental about this shoe store--after all, that was the birthplace, in a manner of speaking, of the present mani--mephi--stoph--festu.) Look for the man with light brown shoes without shoe laces. And if you . . . What? Is it time yet? But I was told



I was going to be on air for seven pages . . . I mean minutes, at the least. [I apologize for this intermission. Things have to be straightened out with the Network.] What's that? What do you have for me here? A letter? From a fellow thief? So soon? It's not a letter? Oh, I see. A journal entry? This will actually serve as a sample for all of you sitting out there, with an incredulous smirk on your face. If you'll excuse me--I'd like to read this to myself before I bring it to your attention. [Reading.] [Repeat.] Hum. [Repeat.] Gentlemen, this doesn't deal with the items from the list I already mentioned, but it is moving in the same direction. There is a fresh vision here. One can actually follow the way this colleague's consciousness is derived, unfolding like a tongue stuck out, in ridicule, at the world. But let me not tease you. Lend me your nerve endings and listen.

"TO: The Members of the Theft Renaissance Movement

FROM: A devout anonymous thief

RE: A Poetics of Theft

I am a simple thief, which is to say I know the difference between stealing a presence and stealing an absence. Of the two, the first is easier to bear. Of course, I am talking from the point of view of a subject deprived of either of these two. When you steal a presence, what is left behind is an absence, which, I dare say, is still something. At least it is something to miss, remember, feel nostalgic about, wish for. What is left after the theft of an absence--tell me that! Presence is referential. It refers to an absence, so that absence, at least, is always guaranteed. Absence, however, doesn't refer to anything outside itself. It does not refer to presence. These are obvious yet important distinctions to keep in mind. But let me illustrate my point.

Recently, I came across a short newspaper article dealing with the municipal affairs of the county in which I happen to live. It is, of course, a regional case, yet it seems to me it is not an entirely isolated one. Rather, this case informs the whole series of sociocultural reformations that have been going on in this county for a decade now. Here find reprinted, with the publisher's permission (stollen, as is quite natural) this same article, with just a few minor truncations so competently done that you will not be able to tell the wounds in the body of the narrative:

The city municipality wishes to extend its gratitude to all participants in this year's Philosophy-in-Administration Awareness Week. Some of the projects for the revitalization of Civil Services were, obviously, influenced by one or another philosophical doctrine. We, however, were looking for something a bit more simple or generic, a way to add a philosophical flavor to the traditional format of documents having to do with the status of citizens, marital, social, or other. The idea was just to spice up the traditionally dry, technical language of documents of this kind, not to let philosophical reflections overwhelm the essential statistical significance of the said documents. The project, to which the committee gave their unanimous approval and which we plan to implement in the relatively near past, makes a bold suggestion. It proposes a revision of the traditional format of the birth certificate. The revised version, as you will see from the sample provided here, takes into consideration the idea of death-in-life, namely the idea that the human being lives (by, through, in, while) dying. Hence, the name of this particular certificate has been changed from the superfluous, elementary, myopic, and naive *Birth Certificate* to the philosophically more accurate and subtle *Qualified Obituary*. Sample follows:

*This is to certify that on August 30, 1995, in the city of Rousse, an infant of the female sex was born to die (or 'was born to death'--the final version is pending approval) to Orthodox parents Russi Stanislavov and his lawful wife Ralitsa Stanislavova. It was mutually agreed that the newly born infant would be henceforth referred to with the following "'self-effacing' trace . . . which consists of all the nonpresent meanings whose differences from the present instant are the sole factor which invests the utterance with its 'effect' of having a meaning in itself" (Abrams 204)"--Eliya Russeva Stanislavova. The infant was, conventionally speaking, born on August 30, 1995, but given that "on the one hand, there is indeed an 'effect' of meaning in an utterance [such as the above] which is produced by its difference from other meanings, but that, on the other hand, since this meaning can never come to rest in an actual presence or 'transcendental signified,' its determinate specification is deferred from one substitutive linguistic interpretation to another, in a movement, or 'play' without end" (204), the particularity of this date is, unavoidably, "disseminated . . . dispersing meanings [dates] among innumerable alternatives [the innumerable permutations of day, month, year], and negating any specific meaning [date]" (205), the aforementioned Eliya Russeva Stanislavova was not exactly born or was not born exactly on August 30, 1995. As a matter of fact, her birthday matters only because she was not born on any of the other possible days of any of the twelve months available to her in any of the other possible years. To write down that ERS was born on August 30, 1995 is, therefore, merely a matter of convenience, as opposed to listing all the dates on which she was not born, i.e. writing down 'ERS was not born in 67BC nor on December 23, 1745, nor on . . . nor on . . . etc.'* Toward the end of the naming ceremony,

*it (the infant) appeared somewhat anxious, which was attributed to its acute though premature perception of the lack of a "logos or presence . . . a self-certifying absolute, or ground, or foundation, directly present to our [the godparents'] awareness outside the play of language itself" (204), which is to say the infant seemed to be offended by the godparents' presumptuousness to call it by its name, as if that mattered. The infant's behavior seemed to suggest that the infant did not find the ceremony made any difference, even if it did make some difference [the civil servant was twenty minutes late; later it was clarified that he, not being a deconstructionist, had spent some considerable amount of time in the parking lot just outside the city hall, trying to decide whether what seemed to him a vacant parking lot was a "positive entity" or merely the nasty work of a "network of differences," that is, whether it was vacant only because the other parking lots were already occupied, or it was vacant in and of itself].*

Without further ado, I should like to approach this from a thief's critical point of view [please, bear with me--I know my analysis will necessarily be limited by my horizon of a thief and by the entire hermeneutics of theft discourse]. Apparently, the authors of this little article, and the poor soul, whose project was said to have been finally approved, believe that their lame efforts have borne fruit, that since they have finally recognized the absence in their lives, the blind spot at the center of their birth certificates, the blind parking lot, and, conversely, the void determined by the circumference of their crania, then they must be safe and wise(r). How safe is it to presume that no matter how "alienable", i.e. subject to theft, your presence(s) can be/are, at least you have your absence(s) to lean on? To believe that at least they are inalienable?

Let me define my terms before some of you accuse me of deliberate vagueness and inconsistency. You will agree--will you not?--that whenever a major paradigm shift occurs, the language that is used to talk about the object of that shift must, too, change. When speaking of the new art of theft, theft as an abstraction, we simply cannot use the old terminology. Therefore, "to steal," "thief," and "theft" must fall out of our vocabulary. Naturally, we will feel nostalgic about these and similar words--just because we have grown into the habit of using them--but we also have to realize that if we keep them circulating they will turn into anachronisms, old blood, which will, eventually, make us lose our respect for them. It is better to part with our old *parole* before we start scorning or mocking it. Hence, in place of "stealing" we will, from now on, speak of the act of "alienating." Accordingly, we shall call ourselves "alienators" instead of "thiefs," while "theft" will, henceforth, be known as "alienation." What then will be our new, worthier objects of alienation? Birth certificates! Birth certificates in their newly approved format, which "celebrates" absence in an annoyingly self-satisfied way. The authors of this article refuse to see that the mere act of "admitting" an absence does not automatically turn it into a presence, i.e. it does not necessarily guarantee inalienability.

That is where we will strike. We must needs take advantage of this rampant self-deception and encroach upon that which only we know to be alienable, i.e., vulnerable. Sooner or later, the upshot of this reformation of Social Services will be translated into a new addition to the Bill of Rights, the addition of the right to absence, the right to possess an absence. The gravest crime, then, the ultimate crime that we, the perfectionists that we are, must be after, is infringing upon the right to absence. And where does absence emerge most

naturally? Where is it most easily recognizable? In the beginning of one's life, which is sealed in one's birth certificate. Alienate that and nothing is left of the subject.

This brings us to more practical considerations, such as the physical locations, at which the proud alienators of this new generation of ours will function with the highest possibility of success. Given the growing interest in hygiene in this country, of which the interest in baptism is a symbolic manifestaion, religious establishments are turning into promising targets for us. Begin with a little reconnoitring. Find out where in town newly born infants are scheduled to be baptized, or simply walk past the town churches, listening for heart-rending shrieks, as the priest's strong hairy hands sink the infant's wriggling torso in the enormous couldron filled with chlorinated holy water. Wear respectable clothes. Don't draw attention to yourself. Don't be too obvious in your eagerness. Wait for moved parents and family to come out of the church and assemble in the church backyard for refreshments. Wait for the priest to count the money he got for performing the service (verily, the holy water in that couldron gets cold fast, and arthritis is such a scourge for our priesthood!). See him join the festivities outside, hiding the crumpled bills under his cassock. Then go you into the church. Let not yourself be distracted by the whimper of the pathetic, small naked man, forgotten in the couldron, splashing the chilly water with the unconfident strokes of its undeveloped muscles. Surely some tender family member will remember--while taking a bite of a free chicken sandwich--the baptized matter in the couldron, and will come back to check in on the little fellow. If you are absolutely unable to resist your natural altruistic impulse, fasten the baptized fluffy little hands to the rim of the couldron. You may even pinch the red cold nose, as a way of encouragement. The document you will be looking for will, most

likely, be lying on the wooden table by the door, next to the pile of candles and small decorative icons of St. George, in plastic or fake golden frames. On your way out, you may want to join the festivities, but don't get overfriendly. Just make sure no one wonders whether you have really been invited to attend the happy occasion.

These are just general guidelines. Everyone is welcome to approach alienation from his personal perspective. In fact, some may prefer to work with death certificates, which, too, deal with absence. In the end, it all comes down to everyone's unique imagination. Some have a soft spot for birth and the absence of a beginning, others for death and the absence of an end. Pick out whatever you find most agreeable with your own personality. On that encouraging note I end my report. Alienators from around the world unite!"

Gentlemen, before I finish, I'd like to extend my deepest gratitude to Yarma, the charming gypsy from my childhood, who initiated me into the art of alienation. Dear Yarma, I still keep my first alienated quarter, although, obviously, it can do me little good now.

Let me remind you to pick up, on your way out, a copy of the brochure *Procedures of the Nineteenth Congress of Non-Mainstream Art Forms*. Thank you.

## Hum's Wow-Monologue

If there is a moment in a man's life when he feels with absolute clarity that the entire world is against him, that moment must be the moment when he decides to join his Craftsman, or, as some prefer to call him, the ca-ca Maker (though not exactly with the intention to thank him for his perverse notion of Craftsmanship). Among us, simple-minded, middle-class-height-weight-age-IQ-sexuality-sociability-zest-for-life individuals, this experience is known as "suicide" (yes, we have an inherent predisposition toward sophisticated terminology, even for such basic, routine experiences as this one).

### The First Attempt

Yesterday I woke up with a wonderful feeling of certainty. The birds were singing outside, right beneath my window (which is a remarkable happening indeed, especially given the fact that both sparrows are dumb and suffering from chronic bad-feather day), the sun was shining with intense concentration, and the world, in general, struck me as a gleeful place to be in. I walked briskly to the bathroom (yes, I am a bit conventional when it comes to the choice of an appropriate setting--the bathroom, I am well aware, is where most people choose to *do it*), whistling a happy little tune (I believe it was from a coo-coo scene from *Schindler's List*), and it didn't even matter to me that my rusty voice consistently cracked into a falsetto. I was at peace with myself and with the dozen of bastards occupying the other endearingly filthy apartments in this old building. My intentions were clear to me, my spirit fiery with anticipation (though my feet were rather cold on account of the temperature in my apartment, which could be accounted for through a quick reference to the neat stack of unpaid bills I



kept on the cold radiator in the bedroom), as my hand reached at the medicine chest above the bathroom sink, the chest where I kept my razor-blade treasures. WOE, FUCK, ALAS, FIE-FIE, and so on and so forth! Behold: the door of the chest was wide open and I was there and then swept to my cold feet by the depressing sight of a medicine-chest-not-containing-razor-blades-though-still-offering-a-few-empty-bottles-of-body-lotion. A sight for sore suicidal eyes that!

That's what I have to deal with, day in and day out. That's what I am talking about. That's my point. A lousy family life, with a wife, who can't even remember to buy a new set of razor-blades for her husband, let alone buy the type I have requested, in vain, on so many occasions (I am a bit preoccupied with estimating the quality of the steel). I am still hanging on to the outdated belief that a woman should take care of her man and his razor-blades.

I had gone through the trouble of washing myself (Vanity, thy name is a suicide!-- Really, now, can you imagine being found dead, with the remains of the bacon and fried eggs you had for breakfast still stuck in-between your teeth! Or, if you happen to be an evening suicide, with the remains of . . . well, whatever it is that you had for dinner, in-between your teeth! And the foul breath!); I had gone to the restroom (would you want your bladder to burst out when they open you up for the autopsy?!), and I had written the routine bi-annual postcard to my aunt Ellen, of whose existence I have not been made more sure even after I switched--out of sheer nobility of spirit, and only secondarily out of financial distress--from hexa-annual to bi-annual postcarding. And after all that--to find that your wife does not give a damn about your razor-blades! And look here! See! There's dust on the upper shelf where he keeps his lipstick and his eye-pencils. And see this--he has spilled his nail-polish all over

the sink, as usual. What a revolting bloody color! Do you want to know how I feel right now? I'll tell you. I'd rather pull the shower curtain and find him bleeding in the bathtub, having taken advantage of my habit of waking up late, and having *done it* before me--I'd rather this, than see his nails smeared with this bloody nail-polish as we are sitting at the table tonight and he draws out a new set of razor-blades--the ones he was supposed to buy yesterday but forgot--and cut, with a new, shining razor-blade, a slice of the Pepperoni pizza, and offer it to me, hoping thus to atone for his forgetfulness, which has resulted in this unexcusable shortage of razor-blades in the bathroom, in the midst of depression season.

### The Second Attempt

As my pre-planned getting-rid-of-myself proved a total failure, my next attempt was guided by the opposite premise--no planning. I climbed on top of the roof of the neighborhood church--I imagined that would add a flavor of significance to my performance--but then I talked myself out of such supersignificant death. I re-adjusted my ambitions and climbed, instead, Wal-Mart. That required some preliminary training (Wal-Mart is higher than the neighborhood church--blame the city architect!) as well as the use of a cliff-hanger's special equipment, which I was lucky enough to buy at a discount rate from a late friend. It was a starry night. I did some reconnoitering on the roof: no one in sight. It was past midnight. I had heard rumors that it was getting more and more difficult for us, suicides, to die up to our last expectations because the managers of tall buildings had gone into the habit of hiring professionally trained psychologists to keep watch, up on the roofs of the buildings, and try to dissuade suicides from suicide-related activities, that is, dissuade those suicides, whom the psychologists deemed good enough to have around a couple more years, and direct

the rest of the suicide mob to the most promising corner of the roof so that the suicide, having once *done it*, would not make a big mess down on the paving stone, that is, not a bigger mess than that which could be taken care of with the help of a single hose from the Home Improvement Department in Wal-Mart. Luckily, there were no psychologists on this particular roof on this particular night (although I cannot be absolutely certain as I only checked 57 of the roof corners). I put down the cliff-hanger equipment and began chewing on my last Nicorette gum, reminiscing nostalgically about the arousing touch of the razor-blade on my skin (yeah, well, wives and razor-blades--beyond a certain point, it becomes difficult to say which one turns you on faster). Finally, I checked the hose attached to my leather belt. There is no time now to explain everything but my little hose invention, of which I was so proud, was to ensure that the second I hit the ground, water would gush out of the hose, cleaning the paving stone under my corpse--30 meters in circumference was the ideal I was going for (this concern with hygiene has nothing to do with Freud--I had had only the basic latrine training every poor little bastard undergoes; so, in this respect I wish not to be considered an exception to the rule).

I was ready. My left foot was in the air. Then a sweet voice said:

"That's gum, right?"

I lost my concentration and instead of putting my right foot forward, I put my left one backward. I turned around. I was annoyed and meant to show it. The sweet voice, it turned out, belonged to an alien. It (the alien) hung, cross-legged, from a wire and smiled at me in an encouraging sort of way. Even I knew that one was supposed to be polite to representatives of other *definitions of life*, or as some call them, other *species*.

"Huh?"

"Can I have some of your gum, please?" it asked politely.

Evidently, other species were equally well-versed in the Outer Space Code of Manners.

"Are you a smoker?" I asked. I just wanted to make sure I wouldn't end up being sued for corrupting an innocent six-legs-three-ears-two-mouths-no-eyes definition of life through second-hand smoking. I studied it carefully. The most obvious difference distinguishing that form of life from those with which I was already painfully familiar, did not escape my attention: this form of life did not use bloody nail-polish. Perhaps, it occurred to me, this had something to do with the fact that it did not have nails.

"Macadamia nuts!"

"What?"

"Macada . . . oh, that's just one of the stock exclamations we Anonymaniacs use," the alien explained.

"Anony-what?"

"Anonymaniacs. I come from the planet Anonymania B 45% & 2,4 w+ , which makes me an Anonymaniac. It's like a frankfurter."

"A what?"

"A bloody German from Frankfurt," it explained.

"Where's Anonymania?" I inquired in my characteristic casual voice of ignorance which disguises itself as forgetfulness.

"It's a zero zillion light years away," the alien informed me.

“Zero zillion? That’s no real distance! That’s absurd!” I protested.

“Well, I like the alliteration, Dick,” it winked at me.

“Don’t call me “Dick”!”

“How about ‘Champ’?” it suggested.

“I am not really an evolutionist. I’ve got my own name.”

“Tutti-frutti,” the alien interrupted me nonchalantly.

“Tutti-frutti?!”

“Means “whatever” in Anonymaniacish.”

“Is that the language spoken on your planet?”

“Yuck.”

“Yuck?”

“Yuck--yes,” it translated. “I know, it’s kind of hard in the beginning, like with any other foreign language, I imagine, but once you get the knack of it, it’s a lollipop,” it reassured me.

“A lollipop? Meaning ‘it’s easy’?”

“Hey, jelly bean! Jelly good, I mean!”

“Jolly good,” I dared to correct its diction.

“Tutti-frutti,” it repeated.

“Tutti-frutti,” I nodded in agreement.

I didn’t want any unnecessary confrontation, yet I was determined to defend my individuality.

“Nevertheless, I mean, tutti-frutti or not, I am used to being called by my name. I

was born Homphrey Sapienson von Razordale the IIIrd, but I changed my name to Humphrey Sapienson de Razordale the IIIrd--I prefer to emphasize the French side of my genealogy," I explained.

"Humphrey . . . Humphrey." The alien repeated my name several times, trying to form an opinion about it. "It's too long," it finally announced. "'Hum' sounds better. I like short names. Like mine. I'm Pepe," it introduced itself, grinning. "I, too, prefer to stress the French side of my genealogy."

"Nice to meet you, Pepe. Eh, are you employed, I mean out there on Anonymania?"

"I am not at liberty to discuss my Anonymployment with strangers. How about you? What do *you* do?"

"Oh, just the usual. I'm an all-day sucker," I shrugged my shoulders.

"Does it pay off?"

"Chicken soup! Oh, sorry, I must've inadvertantly slipped into Anonymaniacish," I apologized. "I meant 'Bullshit!' Would I be here if it payed well?! I work all day, every day, every year, and all I get is a few hundred coconuts, eh . . . bucks, per month. It's even harder when you've got a family. My wife, Tootsie Roll . . ." I began opening up my tortured soul.

"Do you have Tylenol, Hum? I've got a terrible headbangbang."

"Ugh. I mean 'No.' But don't worry, it'll go away soon," I said, a little disappointed in its lack of interest in my suffering. Being of aristocratic genealogy I had rarely, if ever, shared my dusturbances with another human being

"Zonk! On the contrary! Zonk-zonk! Even further on the contrary! It won't 'go away.' When we Anonymaniacs get a headbangbang, we lose our wham memory."

"Is that your short-term or long-term memory?"

"Short-term, you stupid fortune cookie. Lalapaluzza memory is long-term memory.

The word says it all." It paused. "Now, where were we? . . . Macadamia nuts!"

"What? What did you--?"

"We already covered that part," it looked at me semi-furiously.

"I thought you said your wham memory was not--"

"Shut the duck up!" it shrieked.

"The duck?!"

"Chopped liver! Shut the suck up!" It was desperately searching for words.

"Chopped liver??!"

"It's a synonym of 'tutti-frutti,' you moronish-applesauce-that-needs-urinalysis! Tell me what we were talking about before we got into this macadamia-nuts business!" it demanded. "I asked you if you were a smoker," I reminded it quietly.

"Yummy! But of course! Macadamia nuts! I am 4021 years old. I've been buying Camel from Dillons for 4003 years and never, NOT ONCE, has any of the GRE-less employees doubted my smokership," it said, offended. "You a smoker?"

"Well, yes, but see, first and foremost, I am *homo sapiens*. (I figured it was not the time to introduce the alien to the subspecies *homo suicidus*). I used to be a smoker, in my free time, but not any more . . ."

"Homo who?" it asked.

"Well, since you put it this way, I mean, I appreciate it when people . . . when other forms of life are open with me. I don't like beating the bush, either, although occasionally I

take pleasure in beating other objects and/or persons. So I guess I'll just spill the noodles . . . (I took a deep breath) I am homo . . . "

"All right, all right! I heard your first name! I am not deaf! What's your last name?"

(Zap, the forms of life down here *are dumb!* I heard the alien think.)

"No, no, homo is not my real name, you see . . . Homo sap . . . "

"Sub? You said 'Sub,' n'est pas? Oh, pardon moi," it blushed all over, "I tend to slip into foreign languages when I am impatient. Homo Sub, huh?"

"No, it's Homo Sap . . . "

"I've heard of it! Do you think we other forms of life are so what's the word . . . DAMN uncool?! Are you insinuating that we are somewhat un-cookie?! Oh, the zeitgeist we're living in! I know everything about Sub, only I am more familiar with the original, unabbreviated form of it--*Subway*, nicht war? I've heard that Americans--these, I'm told, are the weird life forms wandering on this planet, right?--are keen on abbreviating words. So, you must be that *thing* they put in-between two buns and squeeze ketchup on top, right? I can see how that works."

It smacked the lips of its two mouths in perfect unison.

"No, that's hot dog. Subway involves several types of dressings, such as . . . (I checked myself in time) . . . But that's not the point here! You are not listening to me! I am Homo . . . "

"But don't they put meat between the buns?" the alien insisted.

"Yes, of course--chicken, turkey, pickles, and sometimes . . . but look here, you have to understand that homo . . . "



"Then why are you denying outright that Americans put you--*Homo Sub* (it pointed an accusing finger at me)--in their SubSandwiches!"

"But I *am* an American myself!" I shrieked indignantly.

"No, you're a sausage," the alien informed me confidently. Its tone was a bit patronizing. Evidently, it felt sorry that I had such terrible identity problems.

"A sausage?!!! I certainly am not!" I was afraid my face was too red.

"Gotcha!" the alien suddenly grinned, took out one of its teeth and poked me with it in the stomach. "Just kiddin'!" it elaborated on its grin.

"You mean you believe me? You mean you knew all this time that I wasn't a sausage?! Not even a Subway sausage?!"

"Why? Would you rather be one?" it demanded coldly.

I understood. I made a note to myself not to act so overfamiliar with other forms of life, not even with those I met upon Wal-Mart roof.

"So, what are you up to?" it asked, as a way of changing the subject.

"Oh, nothing much, really. The usual stuff. Killing myself," I apologized. "Would you rather have the whole roof to yourself? I could leave now and come back later when there's not so much traffic," I suggested tactfully.

"Oh, no, no, get on with it!" it urged me and then it began picking its absent teeth.

"Are you sure? All right then. It really won't take much time. Zap-zap." I looked at it doubtfully. "Are you going to stand there and watch?"

"Oh, excusez-moi, are you bashful?"

"Eh, not really."

"Then I'll hang around if you don't mind. I've got to keep record of all roof experiences I have down here, you know."

"What for?"

"So that when I go back home and tell my fellow life forms how you *do it* down here, and from what roofs you *do it*, we could build, on our own planet, buildings like these, and *do it* there, instead of having to travel to Earth every time we need to *do it*," it explained in-between yawns. I had the feeling it had explained this to many other Homo Subs before me. I felt part of a continuum.

"You mean your species can't kill themselves jumping from the roofs that you have available on your planet?"

"Yeah, pretty inconvenient, not to mention un-cookie, I know. But hey," it lightened up, "pretty soon we'll have all we need to renovate our cities and build these . . . how do you call them . . . Walmarts, so that there would be enough roofs for everyone to *do it*. We are an equal opportunity civilization, you understand. We can't deprive any members of our civilization of the opportunity to jump down from a Wal-Mart roof if and when their hearts--or what have you--so desire."

It paused to check if its teeth were as absent as it had got used to having them. "No, we don't discriminate on any basis. Not even against six-legs-three-ears-two-mouths-one-eye life forms," it concluded proudly.

"I am amazed at the fairness of your system of civilization. I must admit that down here, on Turf, I mean Earth, there is a great deal of discrimination. For example, many discriminate against Homo . . . "

"Well, we *do* have a certain atrophied intolerance toward a particular brand of life forms, an intolerance that may surface now and then, under favourable circumstances," the alien specified.

"What sort of life forms are those?"

"We refer to them as *life form distortions*, but they are better known as *Verbosus Suicidus*," it said, smugly, as it swung forward on the wire and kicked me off the edge of the roof.

On my way down I saw it grinning over me, against the starry sky. It had something in its hands--between the seventeenth and the eighteenth one, to be specific--and it pointed at it triumphantly. It was my hose.

"You're an interesting pepsimen, Hum!"

I tried to shout back "Don't you mean 'specimen'?" but I didn't even have enough time to think "What a mess I'll be!"

### The Third Attempt

I wasn't such a mess after all. They had to use two hoses instead of one, but they said it was OK. They were nice to me. They assured me there was no need to apologize--I understand there is a history of all-day-suckers-spilling-their-guts on the Wal-Mart parking lot. Evidently, we, all-day suckers, don't break any rules by jumping from the roof. After all, the only warning sign in the parking lot was the one saying *No Urination, Please! Adopt-a-Latrine!*

So here I am, in the street. With hernia. I am something of an artist, which explains why the note I wear suspended on a string from my neck attracts so much attention. The note

says: *HELP! Oh, please, help a POOR suicide!*" People stop to ask me how they can help. I've had some extremely generous offers. One offered to shoot me in a fresh, green meadow on the outskirts of town, where he practised for the Olympic Games (he was into biathlon). Another one asked me if he could strangle me to death with the nightgown of his deceased mother--it was a life-long bed-time fantasy of his, he confided. Yet another tried to talk me into cutting my tongue into little pieces and stuffing my nostrils with the pieces, until I could breathe no more. Talk about sophistication! I kindly declined these thoughtful suggestions, and explained to these wonderful turfens that I was determined to stick to my simple plan (it was a matter of principle, free will, and zap-zap logic), which consisted in hanging myself from the flag pole on a cruise ship to Alaska (I had always wondered what it would be like to visit my aunt Ellen in Anchorage and find her well-preserved, along with all my bi-annual postcards--in the heart of an iceberg). Yes, my needs were modest: all I needed were \$27.99 for a solid rope. I was so devastated that my decision had to make so many people unhappy, people who would do anything, ANYTHING, to help me join my Craftsman.

Finally, I got the cash: all the \$27.99 for the rope plus money for a bus ticket to the city port. As I was leaving my place--I had had to fight for it with a dozen of beggars, who had argued that this was their corner, and that poor suicides earned their dying between 32nd and 57th street--just then, a man came up to me, and he was kind, and he was smiling, and he was well-dressed, and he had a candy proposition for me.

"No, thank you. I am not interested," I told him before he had even spoken up. "Not even if you offer me a new set of razor-blades as a gift, from the bottom of your compassionately constituted chopped liver!"

"No, sport. I am not dealing in that kind of merchandise. I just wanted to see up close the beautiful job you've done on this here note. (The note still hung from my neck.) Beautiful! Have you studied penmanship?"

"Not really. It's a gift I have. Listen, I must be off now or I'll miss my cruise ship to Alaska . . . "

"Our publishing house needs a gifted illustrator of children's books, so I thought that perhaps you would consider . . . "

". . . and I haven't seen my aunt Ellen for . . . years."

"How does \$25,000 sound to you?"

"Deal."

We shook hands. I couldn't help noticing that the hand I shook was just one of nineteen. My own hand felt strange. I looked at it: it was hardly visible under all the blood. My blood. The alien grinned, thrusting his hand open so I could take a better look at the two sets of razor-blades attached, in an even manner of distribution, to its palm.

My eyes closed: a dim vision of a Craftsman sat at the back of my left eyelid. It was not the ca-ca type I had been raised up to expect. "Boy, ain't it good to be a homo!" I whispered in ecstasy. This time I even had time to add "Wow!" As I was falling, I heard the alien's voice. It was reciting tenderly: "In the Name of the Schnook, the Schlepp, and the Holy Schmuck, I hereby schlock your shpritz and schlemiel your shtick. When you join your crafty Craftsman, don't forget to klutz His kvetch and putz His Holy Bubbe! Macadamia nuts!!!"

## The Corresponding Life

### Willie the Beggar

Willie is the sort of person that, when people meet him, they exclaim "You remind me of so and so." The connotations of his physical body are, however, not matched by a versatile personality. As soon as people spend five minutes in his company, they realize that the attempt to recall the person of whom Willie has reminded them, is not quite worth the self-sacrifice involved in keeping the conversation they have, lacking foresight, started with him. Most of them give up after the third time Willie answers their question or remark with his usual "I really don't know." He has often stood in front of the mirror, trying out different ways of varying his single response to external stimuli. Usually, he does this in the morning and in the evening, while brushing his teeth in front of the bathroom mirror.

Willie's teeth are the least spectacular thing about him. On the other hand, it would not be fair to say that his eyes, or his nose, or his ears, or any other part of his physiognomy deserves to be called "the most remarkable thing about Willie." It is not one thing in particular but their combination. This is not to say that he is a Frankenstein, although sometimes he wishes he were regarded in that way. Not that he likes villains, but neither does he rest content with the way he has been filtered through strangers' eyes over the last several weeks.

On several occasions now, Willie has found himself sitting on a bench at a bus stop, simply waiting for the bus. He has this habit, as he sits, waiting, of bending forward just a little bit, and extending his hands before him. Now and then he rubs them against each other

to stimulate the circulation of the blood. As he sits there, someone walks by--and this is normal, after all it is a bus stop and there is a steady flow of people--and drops a quarter in his hands, sometimes even a one dollar bill. They never wait for him to explain himself, and he understands them very well--he, too, feels uncomfortable giving money to beggars, just as uncomfortable as when he doesn't give them anything.

Incidentally, Willie is not a beggar. He just sits there waiting for his bus. So he says to himself, "If I am able to deceive people so easily, unintentionally, there must be something essentially 'beggarly' about me."

As a result of these bus stop experiences, Willie buys a new mirror, a large one. He props the mirror against the wall in the living-room. He rehearses in front of it. Simple, routine movements which he thinks will provide the best opportunity to detect that beggarly side of him, hopefully at an early enough stage so that he can still do something about it. He uses the furniture in the living-room as props for his mini-improvisations. He sits on the sofa, reconstructing his bus stop pose. He ruthlessly examines his pose in the mirror to see what could make strangers imagine that he is a beggar. He observes nothing unusual. He walks to the desk and back to the sofa, looking at himself in the mirror, out of the corner of his eye. It is not really a desk, but a few high piles of books (all hard-cover) with a wooden board on top of the piles. The board he took off from one of the kitchen cupboards. It is one of the back boards that one doesn't really see, unless one opens the cupboard, but then who would ever open the cupboard except him (Willie lives alone). He figures he can live without the back board of the kitchen cupboard. It is economical, taking parts of one piece of furniture and using them to mend another or to make an entirely new piece of furniture.

Willie studies his movements. They are neither too phlegmatic, nor too rush. His clothes are okay. Grey corduroy jeans, just his size, a sweater in mute green, unintrusive. The jacket he bought at a yard-sale but it looks new. Many people shop at yard-sales. It is an accepted practice. Then why *him*? Why *his* jacket? It is grey, too: high collar, black square buttons, large pockets. He doesn't wear shawls or hats (somehow, Willie thinks that shawls and hats are the two items that make the difference in distinguishing beggars from nonbeggars--it depends on the type of shawls and hats, of course). He wears his hair very short but this is common. Willie's facial expressions run the gamut from mildly benign to confusedly so. The look in his grey eyes is not alert, decisive, or ironic, but it is not imploring, either. His nose is a bit suspect--Willie has broken it twice--but that actually gives him the appearance of an active man, who has often fought life nose to nose. Every part of him, so far as he can see as he waltzes in front of the mirror like a beginning ballet dancer, is of an approximately average proportion. Nothing sticks out. There is really nothing about Willie that would qualify him as a beggar.

Yet there must be. Maybe the chin. Yes. It is a very sharp chin, triangular. Since Willie's face is very narrow and bony, this chin only makes it appear even more narrow and skinny. Perhaps he gives off the impression of being underfed, although he eats three times a day, just like everybody, and the food he eats is nutritious. Could that be it? Could his chin create the false impression that Willie needs sympathy? Strange way to earn money--well, just a few dollars a day, that is, on his "lucky" days when he is mistaken for a beggar at least three times. Makes him wonder about all those beggars he himself has given money to. How many of them had not been beggars? Some he met at bus stops.



## Willie the Hoarder

Willie is no longer seen at bus stops. He has placed his life in quarantine. Willie is not mad. He knows he is not a beggar. The things he needs—once he gets them—he likes to keep close to him. This is his way of reassuring himself that what he has is really his. It is a reasonable paranoia. Some would argue that Willie hoards his life as the miser hoards his cheap treasure, but the fact that Willie has come to live the greater part of his life in his bed is not sufficient grounds for accusing him of renouncing the joy of life and slipping into pathetic nihilism. He doesn't mind the way he lives. His needs are modest. The fact that the bed will always have four corners is a sufficient source of reassurance. The geometric patterns on the rough dark-blue blanket are distributed in such a way that, in whatever position Willie puts his foot, as he lies in bed, the foot—not a big foot really for such a tall man—is always parallel to the lines of the white squares against the dark-blue. Over the course of every day, the other objects in the room travel, in one way or another—usually by way of his use of them—from their places to the bed. At night, Willie has to collect all used objects that lie cuddled in the folds of the blanket. It is an archeological endeavor, crawling from one end of the bed to the other, closing and disclosing folds, like a child who is made, every evening before going to bed, to collect his toys and put them back in the drawer where they belong, before they are scattered anew the following day. It is not a big bed. It is a very big room. The bed is pushed in the corner. It is not even comfortable (the bed, not the corner; corners are shelters). From the shred of time known as awakening to the shred of time known as going to sleep, Willie is busy dragging things to that modest bed in the corner. It is a veritable black hole, the bed, sucking in the rest of the world (world?) He feels like a

hunter-gatherer. He hunts down the world and then drags it after him--like a boy dragging his toy-car on a piece of string--as he shuffles across the rooms of his apartment, picking up a book here, a pack of cigarettes there, a bottle of mineral water, a deck of cards (he plays with himself to learn more about schizophrenia), a pencil-sharpener, pencils (he has begun keeping a record of his life, because it is *his* life, he begrudges anybody else's right to tell it), an eraser, an ashtray, a warm sweater. In his sleep, he has the habit of holding the metal bar at the top of the bed with his right hand. His left hand he pushes under the mattress. The reason people feel the need to put a mattress on the bed, and then cover the mattress with a blanket, is that they are afraid the metal skeleton of the bed resembles too much their own skeletons. Or is it the other way around?

Willie folds himself under the blanket. This is his world. He belongs here. Right here. Right underneath. It is a setting close to him, but not so close a setting as his body is, nor as distant a setting as the world is. So, he lives in-between. Lying on top of the blanket, he thinks that were his body--the flesh that hangs loose in the loose grey pyjamas, the curling hairs on the chest, the inconspicuous head going bald, the bones that crack, the blood that murmurs, the cells, of which he is comprised and which he will never see, the muscle that hurts in the left section of his chest--were this body on the blanket pure white, instead of dusky, he would be just another geometrical figure in the ruffled fabric of the blanket.

He should consider keeping this blanket. When he is dead, they can spread it out in his coffin or wrap his body in it.

## Willie's Diary

*Dear Diary, finally I have some time to myself. Nobody is peeping from behind my shoulder. The door is locked, I think. I am safe, and I can now share with you all the confused thoughts and feelings that have been tormenting me for the last several weeks. It's so difficult when you have no one to trust. Things keep piling on top of one another. My mouth wants to speak up, but I've kept silent till now as I knew that no one but you would understand my worries. I feel so lucky that I can finally unburden my mind. I know you won't tell anyone. I've been meaning to tell you for so long that--shsh!--footsteps--a key in the lock--I have to--*

“Willie! How many times do I have to tell you that you are not supposed to be up after 10pm, and even less so to be sitting on the cold restroom floor. And you are wasting the toilet paper again, aren't you? What's this? Where did you get this lipstick? From the nurses' room? What have you been scribbling again? If you absolutely need to write, you should ask me and I will give you a pencil and some paper. There's no need to go to such extreme ends. Now, be good and collect all the pieces of toilet paper. No, don't stuff them in your pockets. You'll get that lipstick--this is an awful color, by the way--all over your pyjamas. Give them to me. You don't need them. Come, come, I won't even look at them. I promise. I don't want to read your secrets. See, I am taking them and I am putting them in the toilet bowl. Flushshs. There. Do you feel better now? Come, it's time to go to bed! I'll give you some saccharine and you can suck on it till you fall asleep. How does that sound?”

“Why saccharine? Why not sugar?”

"Saccharine is even sweeter than sugar, so stop whining. I'm in no mood for arguments. I've been unreasonably patient with you. I'm not supposed to be biased, you know that, Willie. All patients are equal. There are no privileges here. You must not presume that your insanity is more deserving than that of your fellow patients. You understand that, don't you Willie? We've talked about that, remember? You agreed with me, remember?"

"Please! I just need--"

"What now? What is it that you need? Haven't we given you enough already? Hasn't Dr. Beneville been too good to you? Haven't we given you a room of your own, while everybody else has to share? You should reconsider your needs, William. You should stop begging me, or the other nurses, for things you don't really need."

"I need--"

#### Memoirs of an Amnesic

--Willie will not remember anything. It will happen very inconspicuously. He will set his alarm clock, he will lie under the warm blanket, he will recall a few insignificant points from the day that will have just passed, he will then think ahead of a few insignificant points from the day awaiting him, his eyes will close, he will smack his lips unconsciously, tasting this end of sleep; in about half an hour, he will be asleep. At about 1 am, there will probably be dream traffic jam, as this is, arguably, the time when REM reaches its climax. On the following morning, his eyelashes will flutter, hesitantly, undecided yet if they should let in another day. At one point, his eyes will be wide open, his ears silent, his mind a blank tag. He will remember nothing . . . [*Instructions: To make the above fit the title, add 'Willie was*

*told' in the beginning, and then change the simple future form of the verbs to 'would'. Thank you.] . . .* It happened exactly as he had been told: he didn't remember anything. He forgot that he had ever remembered. Specialists were unable to decide which drug exactly had led to this state of mind, and if it had really been a medically induced phenomenon or, rather, a personal aberration of Willie's organism.

As time passed, he began dreaming of memories. He needed memories. Of course, he was never able to remember any of those dreams. The reason he was able to realize--realize! not remember!--that he had begun dreaming of having memories was simple. Over the course of a single day, he would come upon a certain moment when he would begin to wish for something, that is think about the future. Those wishes would be so strong, and at the same time the realization that their fulfillment was impossible would be so painful, that, through some inexplicable self-gratifying mechanism, his mind would incorporate or adopt those wishes in such a way that they would no longer be wishes but would turn into memories, i.e., he would convince himself that everything he wished would happen to him had actually, at some unidentified point in his life, happened to him, so that the pain he felt while thinking of those wishes-memories had to be, he reasoned, the natural nostalgia produced by memories. After a while, all his thoughts about the future had turned into self-manufactured memories.

As a result of this metamorphosis, Willie is currently unable to think in future tense. As he turns his face toward what others call "the future," all he sees before him, all that lies ahead are memories. Instead of being limited, on either end, by past and future, "behind" him there is nothing (since he doesn't remember anything), and "before" him is his "past," his

wishes-turned-memories, and these can never take him by surprise. If Willie knows what he wishes for, he also knows what his past will be. It was--will be--he can't quite remember--

### Coming to Know Himself

Willie doesn't remember the day Dr. Beneville bade him goodbye, congratulating him on a long awaited recovery. Neither did he remember the doctor's warning that, over the following few months, Willie might experience some unpredictable but minor side effects--Willie was to consider those an unavoidable part of his recuperation.

Willie is too content with his life to remember things like that. Moreover, he is especially busy this time of the year. Around Christmas he has so many new encounters every day. He is free of any self-doubt. He changes the bus stops every two hours: this strategy enriches his existence not only by the number of quarters and nickels that are dropped into his extended hands, but also by the sheer variety of his benefactors, the people who, recognizing his newly found self, reward it with nickels, dimes, and quarters.

"Thank you," he says to the middle-class man, who has just dropped a one dollar bill in Willie's cupped hands.

At last, Willie knows who he is. He conscientiously lives the corresponding life.

## Nessebur, the Black Sea

Sometimes looking at the extent to which people's eyes are screwed up, when they are looking right in your face, is all that it takes to find out if they have weird hobbies. With Adam, my brother, it shows there and everywhere else. I am not dumb or anything, but can anyone please tell me what scissors were made for? I can understand if you tell me they were made to cut square notices saying "The food is inside. Get it!" to attach to fridge doors, or to cut paper daffodils for the special paper flowers vase in the bedroom, or to cut your bun of Easter-cake dough into two equal halves and give one to the sad dog lolloping behind you in the street, or to cut down national budgets, or to cut the face of someone you never want to see again from a happy-happy photograph, or sometimes to trim your toe-nails when you haven't got much to do anyway. But when I come into Adam's room and see him working at his desk--that's beyond me.

My brother is a cutter. Whatever his eyes happen to look at, it is doomed and it enters his herbarium. Adam is not what you'd call a particular man--he cuts glossy paper (white or colored), newspaper, magazine paper, letter paper, wrapping paper from supermarkets, still bearing the smell of salami, Bible paper (at least he uses his own edition, the one our parents gave him once as a birthday present), Oxford dictionary paper, agenda-book paper, telegram paper, and once, when I was not around, he cut the mid portion of his birth certificate, said it would fit exactly in what he was working on just then. He had cut me standing in our grandpa's pen in the village, with a sleepy, dirty-looking sheep cuddled up between my feet, and he had pasted that right in the middle of Fifth Avenue on a color post card, and somehow

the Mercedes and Cadilacs seemed to be turning left and right as if cautious not to run over me and the sheep. As far as I remember, the piece cut from his birth certificate went “ infant was given the name . . . ”

Whenever I come into his room, Adam looks at me, screwing up his eyes, and I am afraid lest he should get it into his head that I am something worth cutting from the bleak surroundings. He stops to consider which pair of scissors he should use, he withdraws a little to get me in perspective, and investigates my body as if he were taking my measures.

This time I manage to slip into the room and sit next to him before he has had time to look up from his paper. As close as we are sitting now, it is unlikely that he can take my measures with precision, so I feel as relieved as to show some curiosity in his occupation:

“What are you doing, Adam?”

“Exotic landscape,” he says.

I look at the paper under his big hands--this time it is clean, white paper marked with the “Once is not enough: Recycle” sign.

“Let’s see--palms, gulls, skies . . . Rather realistic,” I judge. “You don’t want to be so predictable all the time, Adam. Look here now, let me give you some suggestions.”

Adam looks surprised and probably he has a reason too, for after all, how many times has his younger brother showed any interest in his work? He leans back in his chair and remains still, waiting, giving me that cutting look of his.

“So, Adam, do you want to make this more provoking and intriguing? Then make it appear extraordinary, unbelievable. For example, why don’t you turn it all upside down? You make the gull fly down from the upper right corner, her wings going up like your



eyebrows now. We turn her--flop!--and now she is on her back, spreading her wings, resting. Let's do the coconut palms now. By the way, why are they green? Don't you know that coconut palms are green? Make them orange--that'll be a nice way to start startling people. You take the palms, juggle with them for a while, and you put them casually upside down. Now you can make the beach brellies into boats or gigantic, ripped up mussels."

I wipe the glue off my hands and look with satisfaction at the piece of art before me.

"Why do you turn the coconut palms upside down?" Adam asks, innocently sweeping away the connotations I have cautiously piled up around the sheet of paper.

"Adam, things are not as they appear to you. Even a simple coconut-tree is never simply a simple coconut-tree. When you are looking at it, you are half-watching, half-creating it. You must show more imagination," I say.

"Isn't a coconut-tree a coconut-tree," Adam says.

I can never tell if he is asking a question or just making a statement--his voice is always vaguely even, like a horizon in mist.

"Well, in a way, yes, but there is more to it," I stumble.

"But if things are not what they appear to be, and I draw or paste them as if they were what they appear to be, then I am making things up, I am showing imagination," Adam objects.

Although I see the logic there I am irritated. He doesn't stop at that but rambles on about the insecurity that, according to him, suffuses my correction of his collage, then talks at length about the inverted gull, which, he says, looks more dead than just resting, how she ~~reminds~~ reminds him of the floating white hair of a witch or of an open book turned upside down.

“Enough of that, a . . . damn, I mean Adam!” I cry as reasonably as I can. “You shouldn’t exert yourself so much. Take a rest. How about a glass of warm milk?” I finally hit upon my usual pitch of voice.

He looks down at the inverted seashore on his desk and mumbles that he drinks only from his paper cup, and that he doesn’t like milk warm.

Usually, I read such an answer as retreat and meekness, but now I think I sniff some indifference there. I can’t stand it when people, especially those who need things to be explained to them, close the doors on me. I walk back to Adam’s desk.

“Adam, cut that paper stuff!” I pause, slightly ashamed of the paradox in my command. “Can you at least explain what is the point of it?! You might wish to try reading the books, magazines, newspapers and letters instead of cutting them. You must see that paper is paper, is nothing.” As I am instructing him on what constitutes something and what nothing, I keep looking at his gluey hands. I remember a Christmas, many many pages ago (both intact ones and those shred into pieces), when we had to write down our wishes in the Santa Claus wish list. Adam wrote he wanted a paper moon, because, as he explained, the moon in the sky had already been there for too long, was too old, its yellow had faded to white, and there were some ugly stains all over its surface.

“When you make things of paper, you begin to forget what the real things look like, and that’s not something to forget,” I elegantly finish my thought. “When the glue falls off, you’ll see what I mean,” I add, both as a warning and as a promise.

Adam squeezes his fingers through the loops of the scissors, as if he were decorating his hands with rings.

“Those books in your room,” he begins.

“What about them?” I say in a tone, which even I realize sounds overprotective.

“Nothing.” He seems to hesitate. “It just occurred to me that you must be living in a very unreal room,” he says slowly, without looking at me &

& I think this is the point where the story ends, but Adam looks at the next line, even turns over to the next page, and informs me that there are other words there, namely those in, lap my from laptop the snatches He . line preceding the and this on appearing his typically gentle, slow movements, as if he were not doing anything important, as if he were not making me feel like a paper man fallen off a color paper collage he has once done and forgotten &

*& there were indeed other words ahead of us, and I will try to copy them here, an endeavor which will require quite an effort on my part, since my fascination with paper was not at all accompanied by a fascination with the writing that appeared on the paper. Reading had never agreed with me. Once Max tried to seduce me away from my collages into reading, but when he handed me a book--I don't recall the title, but the front cover was very smooth, unscratched by fingernails--I felt unwell and had to lean on my desk. There was a very strange bad taste in my mouth, though I had not had anything slimy for lunch. Max was convinced it was some sort of elegy, that is, allergy, maybe the stale air (I didn't like opening the windows of my room because of life being so vulgarly exposed out there, in the street). Whatever the case might have been, he never again brought up the issue of*

books. Besides, at that time he had his own problems, among which were garbage bins. Max depended on garbage bins. When he arrived in Nessebur, he first checked the arrangement of the garbage bins in his neighborhood. He had always been convinced that there was nothing random about it, just as there was, supposedly, method to any madness. He used to think of garbage bins in terms of road signs. He sometimes wondered if there were a spirit of garbage bins, just as the ancients had once believed in a spirit of the stone heaps which were used as marking trails in remote areas. Travelers used to throw a stone on the pile, for good luck. The idiosyncratic thing about the garbage bins framing the landscape of Max's Nessebur neighborhood was that they were always full, and as it was summertime, the smell of the rotting remains of strangers' lives packed the air full. It took him a couple of walks down to the beach and back to the house to remember the configuration of the bins. He developed a habit of throwing an item of garbage every time he passed by the last garbage bin near the house he lived in. For luck. He was content that the people from the town's sanitation service were not doing their job, because if they had, they did, they would have probably shuffled the bins around or replaced the old bins with new ones, whose clean smell of fresh paint he would have found distracting and confusing. Fortunately, sanitation was lax, as was everything else in that lazy town. Time breathed heavily, reluctantly. It spent most of itself leaning against the remaining walls of Byzantine churches, yawning through the blackness of vanished windows. The people of the town lived slowly, not so much cautiously, but more like they were living because someone had asked them to live, and they were simply too polite, too indifferent to decline doing that someone the favor. Even the movements they made seemed to require too much physical effort from

*them. Lifting their hands to cover up a yawn was considered hard labor. The air was sticky and burdensome, which made the performance of the simplest gesture as fruitless as the scooping up of hardened honey with a plastic spoon. Since covering up a yawn was considered not worth the trouble, the streets were full of people walking with their mouths wide stretched (which, they say, is good for keeping the skin elastic and young, but that was not the concern of the people of Nessebur), yawning their hellos at one another, their eyes full of tears caused by the exertion. To say hello, they usually shut their eyes, so that the only contact made between people was that between their gaping mouths. At first, Max had found that frustrating--it was odd to greet somebody by so blatantly refusing to register him optically--but before long he found a certain beauty in it for, after all, if people didn't even had to look at one another, how intimate they had to be, how well they had to know one another.*

*The natives of Nessebur could be easily distinguished from the tourists by a peculiar uneagerness that coated all their movements. The tourists crept through the winding, indefatigable streets, eyes wide open and mouths shut. The natives, on the other hand, kept their eyes tightly screwed up, or sometimes completely closed, while their mouths opened up like carnivorous flowers. The natives sat on the beach, watching lazily, almost against their will, enthusiastic tourists learning to fish with a net. When a tourist got entangled in the net, the natives just sat there, slightly more nonchalant than buddhas, silently observing the poor man's ridiculous attempts to free himself. When the sight of a man in a net stopped interesting them, the natives simply averted their eyes and gazed at the horizon, though not with the type of gaze that tries to penetrate the horizon. It was equally possible that they just*

dozed off. In the evenings, when the tourists swept over the beach cafes or danced to restaurant orchestra heart-breaking music, wrapped in the stimulating smell of kebabche, the natives sat quietly behind the fences surrounding their stone houses, in the shadow of majestic walnut-trees, sipping hot raki from special small ceramic cups with a long beak, and eating shopska salad with the utmost lack of concentration.

The town of Nessebur consisted of two parts, the old quarter and the new one. The old town, in which Max had rented a room on the second floor of a crumbling house, on a rock bulging into the Black Sea, was on an island connected to the modern part of the town, on the mainland, through a very narrow strip of land, like a baby hanging desperately to the umbelical cord. There was an old wooden windmill—long ago gone out of use—on that cord. Its only function now was purely aesthetic or destructive (which, often, is one and the same). The tourists took pictures of it or, those who scorned taking pictures as spoiling the “real” experience enjoyed not taking pictures with the devotion of a handful of rebels who had finally hit upon a specific cause. Sometimes, a part of the rotten wood would crumble down into the sea, though on one occasion it had fallen on the land, more particularly on the head of an absent-minded, awe-struck, cameraless tourist. The modern town administration had expressed a readiness to bring down the windmill, but the old town of Nessebur had sent a delegation consisting of several less buddha-like represenatives, who had actually tried to explain, that is discontinue yawning, how important the windmill was to the sense of history of the people of Nessebur. The administrators yawned, waved their hands in a gesture that could mean anything, and agreed. After all, nobody had ever considered bringing down the remains of Byzantine churches, all of which were much older than the windmill and thus

*more dangerous. On the contrary, they arranged art exhibitions and concerts in the draughty church ruins, while the not so imposing ones were put to a less glamorous use as unofficial public restrooms. Max wondered what an experience it must be to empty one's bowels in a place, which time itself had chosen to empty its own bowels. It had to create a sense of continuity with the past.*

*Max had gone to Nessebur to kick off the habit of painting (of course, what I was told was that he was going there to take part in the annual art festival Apollonia), which also happened to be his professional occupation (painting, that is, not kicking off habits). It concerned him that painting had become a habit. Every morning he got up at one and the same time, took a shower, drank black coffee, put on the denim overalls smeared with paint, squeezed new tubes of oils, and sat before the easel waiting for an inspiration. He had come to wait the whole day, and even part of the night, before he would finally go to bed. (I know that because at that time I was busy with a very challenging paper project--a self-portrait--and I stayed up late, listening to him making rounds in his room upstairs.) He suspected that what created this painter's block were the perfect conditions he himself created. He had everything he needed at exactly the time he needed it, i.e., he didn't have the luxury of complaining that someone/something was standing in his way. Perhaps someone/something had to stand in his way in order for him to be able to create anything. The days passed, and he kept sitting, staring at the canvas, walking around the room, gripping the paintbrush so tight that at night he must have found it hard to fold and unfold his fingers. One day he found himself hurling the tubes of paint against a white sheet stretched across one of the walls. It must have been a pleasurable activity, which was why he eventually put an end to*

*it. It was a feeling he had--as long as whatever he was doing was painful and disturbing, it was alright, but if some small pleasure sneaked in, unchecked, he felt he was losing ground. He decided to kick off the painting habit by subjecting himself to the greatest temptation he could devise. Since he didn't trust himself too much, he also thought it reasonable to find a temptation that would simultaneously be his torture and his cure. Nessebur seemed to meet both requirements. The sea town and its people appeared to be the perfect subject matter for art, and as such would be the perfect last temptation of the artist. The sea air, on the other hand, would soften the severe withdrawal symptoms. Max liked to think of them as "withdrawal" symptoms even though he must have been perfectly aware that what he would be withdrawing from would not be something substantial, the real act of painting, but rather the last drops of it, the sincere blankness of the canvas. He had grown into the habit of not painting or rather of intending to paint; he had to kick off an abstraction, and a negative one at that, something nonexistent. He had to struggle with his intentions and convince himself that he could live without them, that nobody expected him to have those particular intentions. Ultimately, Max had to justify what he didn't want to admit to himself--his absolute lack of intentions.*

*The first week in Nessebur he just strolled around town, looking at the natives' faces. He imagined a tableau packed with dozens of faces reminiscent of that in Munch's "Scream," except only the exact opposite of it. The screamer's face was intense; his horror appeared justified or at least justifiable. Max's faces--the ones he intended to paint but had to fight the imaginary, false intention--would also have wide opened eyes and mouths, but they would be yawning, not screaming. They would be yawning their screams. Their eyes*



would be lifeless, though not exactly cold. They would be the eyes of men who have just awoken, after a long, unplanned afternoon siesta, still confused whether their eyes are wet because they have been weeping or these are just the tears that come naturally with too much sleep. Dozens of long-faced, yawning Pierrots, faces neither rebelling against nor flattered by their own tragedy, but simply bored with it. Instead of the white make up, Max would make their faces well-tanned, to suggest a lifetime on the beach.

Over the next several weeks his own skin was already turning him into one of the native tanned Pierrots. Several days ago, he had noticed a new object intrude itself in the configuration of garbage bins lining his way home. It was a sagging yellowish sofa, decorated, here and there, with stains of unknown origin. A fat, ugly street cat, with an obviously vehemently independent spirit, had developed an inexplicable attachment to the sofa. In the long, slowly bending afternoons, she sprawled her flabby flesh on the sofa and watched him malignantly whenever he sneaked past her, the keys jingling in his nervous hand. As he unlocked the door, he had to stop up his nose with his other hand--the garbage had recently entered the final stage of its reluctant death.

The air in his room was a mixture of the salty breath of the sea and the strong smell of oils. He was almost surprised that the air was not actually colored; he wondered what sort of material air would make, what sort of aethereal paintings one could paint in/on it, paintings that people would understand by dissecting the air with their hands. He had squeezed several tubes of paint on a piece of wood signifying a palette. The walls were covered with white wallpaper. He barely refrained from hurling the paints, already covered with a thin crust, against the wallpaper. In one of the multicolored piles of paint he found

*two dead flies. They had probably been intrigued by the strange color, texture, and smell of the oils. Max thought the flies could be considered a modest sacrifice on the artist's altar, although that thought would have probably not made the flies see their death in a new light.*

*He spent the rest of the day warding off the flies from the exposed oils.*

*I must admit I know very little about my brother's problems. He was not the sharing type. That was what a characteristic we shared &*

**& that night I probably dreamt, but when I awoke, the only thing I recalled was that I had had, in my dream, a wonderful idea about a story I would write. I sat up in my bed, palms pressed against my temples; my head was a coconut I was trying to crack open. The dream would not come back to me. Two flies raced around my head, making me dizzy. Maybe if I went back to sleep, the dream would mercifully replay itself. I slapped my cheek and laughed. That was, in fact, a wonderful idea for a story-- a writer trying to recall an idea about a story he wants to write. I would catch the writer at the point at which he's having writer's block, and I would make him write many stories in the hope of eventually hitting upon the lost idea, overcoming his writer's block and remaining forever unaware of it. "Idea Lost" sounded like a promising title. If I didn't write this down right away, the idea of the Lost Idea would be lost, which seemed, after a brief rumination, another wonderful idea. I wondered vaguely where wonderful ideas originated, and where they were discarded after they had been abused long enough. There was a charcoal by my pillow. I turned in my bed**

towards the wall and scribbled, in a few words, the wonderful idea. Relieved that I now had it recorded, black-on-white, I put my hands under the pillow and looked at the words on the wall. My eyes moved across the four walls; walls seemed such a waste of whiteness. It was stupid to settle for a pillow book, given that one always had at least four clean walls.

[There should be a transition of some sort here but since, being a transition, it scrupulously adheres to its transitory nature, it revealed itself to me only temporarily, evoking just a fleeting sense of continuity.]

The story/stories of Adam and Max is/are located, as far as I can remember, somewhere in the bottom left corner of the southeast wall. I had some difficulty deciphering the words, and my back hurt every time I had to get down on my knees to verify a comma or a semi-colon. Maybe this is a good time to mention that I am a writer. To be perfectly honest, I am a writer who doesn't write. However, there is at least a couple of worlds of difference between being a writer who doesn't write and one who has ceased writing--in the former case, one is still a writer. It's not that I don't have stories in my head. My problem is that I don't know where one story ends and another one begins. Perhaps it's just a matter of punctuation--I have the same problem with sentences. Of course, I know where a period is expected, where a comma, where an elipsis, etc. . . . Sometimes I wonder if my confusion stems from my parallel awareness of American and British English. In British English there is no "period;" instead, there is "full stop." "Full stop" suggests its own alternative--the "half-full

stop” or the “partial stop” or the “unfull stop.” Just as I can erase all the “full stops” in this paragraph and insert a conjunction between what are now “separate” sentences, I can throw in such a series of conjunctions between all my stories. How do I know where Adam’s story ends and Max’s begins? How do I know where Adam ends and Max begins? I find it hard to have to make up, every time, a whole new background for each of my characters. They come to me—or rather “he” comes to me, since it’s just one character coming over and over again, a tedious and yet strangely charming *deja-vue*--as a naked snail, a crippled, shell-less tortoise. “He” leaves no mucuous trails behind him, no memories. “His” world, his “background” comes with him like a faded, distant halo. “He” is like a piece of clothing hastily cut out, with safety pins holding together the frail aspects of his meagre personality, because I am never sure what will become of him and whether I would not decide, impulsively, to change his destiny. I don’t know what the word “inspiration” means. Any object I see makes me feel obliged to ask myself: “What can you say of this thing here?” What can I say of this patch of snow or of the shadow on the rising back of that dune? I can describe the snow in the same words I would use to describe the desert. What is the difference then between Adam and Max? I could switch them around and you wouldn’t know the difference. Their “personalities” are perfectly random--I pile up a few characteristics, and there I have you applauding me, “Look! A character!” At one point “characters” become mutually replaceable, the opposite of mutually exclusive, which once used to be the basic prerequisite for the existence of a character. Everything that once seemed typical of a character, everything that made him singular, distinguishing him from all other

characters, now only appears eccentric, i.e. applicable to any other character. In potentiality, every character is capable of having any thoughts and performing any actions, just like man, on whom, we assume, characters are modelled. When I say that Max treats his brother somewhat condescendingly, this doesn't mean that Max is not perceptive, that he fails to acknowledge the not so obvious intellectual capacity of Adam. Perhaps Max is afraid to acknowledge it lest that should undermine his own self-esteem. When I say that Adam doesn't usually react to his brother's statements but keeps silent and self-absorbed, this doesn't mean that he doesn't know what his brother thinks of him. Perhaps Adam knows very well what Max's attitude toward him is, but he (Adam) is afraid to condemn that attitude as unfair, maybe because Adam realizes that his own behavior, his deliberate, dumb-sounding silence is a lie too, is unfair too. The fact that Max is not distinguished by an unusual habit like that of his brother, the "cutter," doesn't mean that Max is not the same introverted and reflecting type Adam appears to be. The fact that we don't see Adam reflecting on his intentions with regard to collage making doesn't mean that he engages in that activity with all his heart, i.e., very intentionally. But I am chatting away when all I really have to do is give you an example (always give an example of what you're talking about when you're in America; you won't get away with theoretical chat). Here is a character that was delivered together with the Max and Adam characters, though she appeared to have no connection to either of them. But of course I shall see about that in due course. (This time, for the sheer purpose of diversity, let the character be female) &

*& I was a woman of bad habits although I tended to forget it. Most of the time people were thoughtful enough to remind me of my imperfection, for which I carefully tried to be grateful. I did not have a permanent job, partly because I was aware my habit of having bad habits would at some point interfere with the correct execution of my duties. One of my bad habits people found especially offensive was my great capacity for misunderstanding (although a poet I once bumped into told me that this bad habit was actually a special gift, something to do with the imagination—I didn't have time to ask him to elaborate this interesting point as he was too busy testing both the influence of spirits on his own capacity for misunderstanding and the truthfulness of the last line of Pushkin's "Neznakomka"). My problem was that I couldn't, for the death of me, distinguish between an invitation that was really meant as invitation, and what people referred to as a "metaphorical" invitation, one that was actually meant as the opposite of invitation. They said I was literal-minded, and they must have been right since too often I could not understand a word of what they were saying. We all spoke the same language, used the same dictionaries (and basically the same type of letter paper), and yet their words were too beautiful for me to understand. I sometimes wondered whether we had all come from one and the same tunnel or theirs had been a little lighter. I twisted my mind with questions like these every time I went to a metaphorical dinner, i.e., one to which I had imagined myself invited, contrary to what the imaginations of the hosts suggested to them.*

*Feeling uninvited, however, didn't disturb me as much as the feeling I had to deal with whenever I mistakened a real dinner for a metaphorical one, and consequently didn't*

*attend, much to the politely indignant horror of the people who had invited me. As I was a neophyte in the art of excuse-making, gaffes like those meant an irreversible severement of all ties with the horrified hosts in question. My experiences as an insensitive invitee had made me rather prone to asking myself the question of what, and how much of it, I had in common with the rest of the world, and at what point on my way to the point where I currently found myself had I gone down on my knees to tie up the loose laces of my shoes, and thus lost sight of the others trodding ahead of me.*

*I was quite opinionless, which could be, at times, a considerable problem. I had not read many books--I found it difficult to convince myself in the undeniable use of books. They looked good on shelves, and I really loved the smell of them when they came fresh from the printing press, but whenever I tried to sit in a comfortable chair designed specially for reading--someone told me that they made different kinds of chairs to go with specific art media, or even genres, and I was once shown a chair designed for reading poetry (it was rather uncomfortable, consisting of three cold steel bars, supposedly expressing the great degree of pure abstraction characteristic of that particular art medium)--I grew nervous, and the words simply refused to stick to my memory. Words reminded me of those small plastic letters of the alphabet, with a magnet attached to their back, that ambitious parents buy their children when they are still very young (the children I mean) in the hope that the children would plunge with enthusiasm in the cesspit of language and stick the letters to the specially designed magnetic board, all the while singing merrily to express the pure pleasure that occupation brought them. The little magnets can easily be broken (accidentally, of course).*

*Despite my ill luck with reading—you might call it “metaphorical dyslexia”—I had read (I can’t recall my motive for doing it, but it must have been a strong one) what eventually turned out to be the essential text necessary for an average participation in regular dinner conversations, which usually centered on the creation of man in general, and of woman in particular. One story I kept hearing at dinners was that if God had really intended to create woman equal to man, He would have created her from some other part of Adam’s anatomy, some organ located in the upper part of his beautiful body, rather than from such a lower, insignificant part as his rib appears to be (but then again we don’t know how much taller than us Adam was, i.e. whether his ribs would have been considered a relatively low point in his physique). The evidence used in support of this bold hypothesis was drawn from mythology. It was argued that if Athena was born from Zeus’s forehead, Eve should have been at least as smart as that, instead of settling for the province of the rib, and a floating one too. Even if she had been born from the rib, surely she could have worked her way up and come out of Adam’s throat, piercing it with the sharp end of his own rib. And maybe she did—how else to account for Adam’s apple except as the result of Eve’s unfortunately unsuccessful attempt to bump herself into existence through Adam’s thick, insensitive skin? Personally, I preferred the rib version of Eve’s creation, but I was also curious what Eve would have looked like had she come out of Adam’s forehead, not clad in armor like Athena, but, what appeared more logical to me, brain mucus-coated.*

*I wondered why myths were always concerned with explaining the birth of whole bodies. Why weren’t there myths telling of the miraculous birth of this beautiful ankle*



*or that trembling finger clad in transparent skin; not the generic type of myths that different deities could exchange amongst themselves, but myths with a little bit of a personal touch? Creation stories interested me for another reason too. I used to entertain myself trying to guess what kinds of creation stories my neighbors might be telling themselves. The junkie downstairs, for example, Ian. Zeus is smoking a joint of marijuana. Turns out Prometheus, the celestial pusher, has given Zeus crap, keeping the good stuff for himself. But Prometheus's recklessness unbounds him. Say another, minor deity, has tricked him too, and Prometheus ends up taking an overdose of crap. He survives it, of course, for after all he is divinish. There is just one minor detail--the side effect of Prometheus's overdose, which turns out to be no other than man. Or Mr. Lanteen's version of creation (Mr. Lanteen is a writer)--Prometheus (or Zeus, depending on whom one chooses to put the blame on) misses that really crucial session in the Creation Workshop. As a result, he mixes the earth and the primeval water in the wrong proportion, and there you have the ridiculous extremes of human nature. On my floor, the artist's version (he lives incognito, because he is afraid he is too popular)--God is scribbling a sketch of man, which he intends to turn into a magnificent oil painting. He is just an amateur but, much to his credit, He has a great aesthetic sense and is very critical of the fruits borne of his hobby. The sketch turns out so bad that He decides He should not spoil it further by putting in color, i.e. filling the frame with substance. He is a deity with really great aspirations.*

*Most people would probably condemn me as a blasphemmer, but really, I make up these creation stories out of deep respect for and concern about God. I think it is insulting*

*for Him that His own creation should show such poor imagination, coming up with just a couple of stories about Him and His Act. Sometimes I share some of my creation myths with others—especially when I find myself at a dinner to which I had, undoubtedly, been invited--although then I don't call them creation stories or myths, but refer to them as theories. I have found the word "theory" has a curiously soothing effect on people. It makes them more open-minded. One of their favourites is the Conspiracy Theory of Creation. A mysterious enemy of god (from here on you'll have to excuse the small cap "g"--my PC is trying to show me it has a character, and can think on its own, i.e. it can have its personal opinion on religious matters; besides, I have to be tolerant to religious views that differ from my own) conspired against him (of course, the above qualification is to be extended to all personal pronouns related to god) and created our world making it, quite purposefully, extremely bad. The conspirer then falsely ascribed his bad creation to god, with the abominable intention of making god feel ashamed and even guilty about the world. Of course, the poor conspirer didn't know god in all his (god's) magnificence--god pretended, with an admirable competence, that the world was not his creation. I believe what made this theory so appealing to people was the trick motif, to which most of them could relate.*

*There was another, fairly common theory, according to which god created the universe while he was dreaming. I didn't revise that theory but added a question I thought intriguing--if only, back then, they had had the modern technology we now have, they could have recorded the beating of god's heart, they could have looked at the changes in the irregular curve, and somewhere in the confusion of all those neurosignals sent*

*from his heart, they'd have foreseen, that is prevented, the impending birth of the universe, as god's eyeballs rotated wildly in their orbits. Usually, I'd skip the already unfashionable theories about god creating the world in a fit of narcissism or under the influence of a very strong suicidal personality. Which theories I chose to tell depended a lot on my audience. If I were in the company of Russian desperadoes, I'd add a crime-and-punishment touch to my theory--god first did something terrible (he still hasn't confessed it), and then, to atone for his sin, he deliberately created an imperfect world in order to remind himself for ever how bad he was (I should admit there is one major flaw in this particular theory--that god was able to refrain from creating perfection implies that he actually had the power to attain perfection, an idea which no true Russian nihilist would let me get away with). If I knew my audience consisted of drug addicts, I said god created us while he was on one of his bad trips (that theory could be easily readjusted to meet the demands of an audience of bulimia fans--it was a matter of overdose rather than of overeating). My Hamletian theory was the theory of unintentionality--god was sleepy (he had spent timelessness trying to decide whether he was to take his own timelessness as an enviable gift or he was to feel deprived); he yawned and out came the universe. My favourite theory, though, the one I took particular pride in, was a rather conventional theory of light and darkness. The universe is god's dilated pupil. You see, god had been in the dark for so long that when he created the light, the pupil of his left eye, which was particularly unaccustomed to that new, bright irritant, grew extremely dilated, actually beyond the borders of god's immediate personality. My latest theory, which I developed while I was going through my mail, argued that some irresponsible heavenly creature*

*responsible for delivering god's mail forgot to get to him an important message (presumably from some higher authorities), which warned god to refrain from creating anything until further notice.*

*Sometimes, in my darkest hours, I was haunted by the suspicion that god had spitted me out simply because he felt he had the right to &*

**& actually, Max and Adam are not brothers. I inserted Max into Adam's story hoping to achieve greater depth, and yes, length too. People usually get tired of squatting in the mind of a single character. They want action. The reason for this is that in their heart of hearts--or in any organ that is still viable in them--people are MPO (Multiple Personality Order) structured, though not all of them are aware of that. Given that Adam spends most of his time in the isolation that is so essential to cutting, how could anyone notice him, unless I throw in Max's observing eye? Max and Adam could just as well have been an uncle and his nephew, or two cousins, or friends, or acquaintances, or perfect strangers--how would that have changed the story? So their relationship is not what matters. It's purely accidental. What about their occupations? Yes, let us clutch the idea that their occupations matter! Soon enough we'll have to give up that prop too. Adam cuts paper, but, as the first paragraph of the story suggests, one could and does cut a great variety of things. How is cutting one's toe-nails different from cutting Bible pages? Contemporary art being what it is--contemporary art being what is it?--you could walk into an art gallery and see a collage, in which one of the components are the artist's mother's toe-nails, hanging next to**

another collage, in which Luke 18:36 or Mark 2:6 is used to make some point (usually, the point remains obscured by the author's preoccupation with the idea that there should be no point, but it seems to me that arguing that nothing makes sense any more doesn't make sense any more, and I am tired of crawling around in circles, trying to adapt the famous "Eastern" saying to our "Western" needs, humming, under our noses, the morning-noon-night mantra "first, there is meaning, then there is none" oh let's drop the subject).

I'd also like to suggest that we, that is I, drop the subject of determining what's so special about Adam or Max, because we all suspect there is nothing special about them. What is really interesting is the question how these three stories, or beginnings of stories, fit together. They don't, but I assure you I can easily think of one unifying idea that would turn this hotch-potch into a respectable story with a single effect (though I cannot guarantee the reading-in-one-sitting part of the deal). Let's take a look at the raw material we have at our disposal. First, a man who enjoys cutting paper and making collages out of the variously shaped shreds of it. Second, a man who is trying to remain sincere and is ready to sacrifice his love for painting rather than further get habituated in what he loves and does best. Third, a woman somewhat socially inadequate and fond of spinning creation myths/theories. The sexes of the characters simply beg for a love triangle treatment (or we could add other characters and do a different geometric figure story), but this is too easy. We want a unifying theme that binds these three characters in a strange and complicated way. Although I said Max and Adam may not be brothers at all, it may actually be a nice idea to keep

them family. That way we would not have to worry how to get Max to the place at which Adam is or vice versa. We just assume they move around together. The only thing to be determined then is how the two of them meet the woman (let's call her Pandora, with the explicit understanding that you won't crash her character through an oversimplifying mythological prism). Let's say also, for the sake of argument, that Pandora lives in the same apartment building in which Max and Adam abide. It has already been mentioned that Pandora amuses herself by concocting creation myths that, in some way, correspond to the personalities of her neighbors. Yet she has difficulty coming up with creation theories that would express Adam's and Max's personalities, since both of them are rather withdrawn, and she knows next to nothing about them. She doesn't want to make it easy for herself by making up a theory based solely on their occupations (she's not even sure if Adam has an occupation; in fact, it wouldn't be stretching it out to say that she has never seen Adam). She could go and ask them directly about their opinion on the issue of creation (she could lie she was doing a research on comparative personal mythologies), or she could follow Max to Nessebur and try seducing him into painting her portrait. He'll have to explain to her why he doesn't want to paint her portrait (not that he finds her unattractive), and thus he'll disclose himself. Or she could wait for Max to leave for Nessebur, and then establish a beautiful relationship with Adam, supplying him with high quality paper for cutting, something like the relationship between an agent and the junkie attached to him. There is yet another way. Instead of giving the three narratives of the characters in turn, I could insert the story of one character, or part of it, in that of

another character, like threading a needle. For example, Pandora's mail gets to the wrong address, ending up in the brothers' P.O. Box. Adam opens her mail and cuts those portions of it he deems worth cutting. Of course, when she finds out, things have to be straightened up (with Max as a go-between) which is when they get complicated, and on the characters go with the notion of ripening action and the unavoidable climax at the back of their minds.

Naturally, it would be simpler to have them all go to Nessebur. After all, Nessebur is a very pleasant town. The Black Sea is exceptionally green in certain parts along the beach, and I would heartily recommend the pub Under the Pear-Tree (Forget-Me-Not Str. 11, in the basement) both to the connoisseur of Bulgarian wine as well as to the sadly uninitiated wanderer.

I must be off now. Tonight is the premiere of the ballet *Origins and Importance of Creation Myths* down in the deserted Byzantine church on the beach. But before I go, I have to take care of several things. I have to clean Pandora, fold up Max, and brush the dust off Adam. I should not really tell you this, because it is a secret code, but I will (since none of you have a clue where Nessebur is anyway). Pandora is the jewel-box--decorated with emeralds as green as the Black Sea--in which I keep my sleeping pills. Max is my easel (I do intend to paint a grand tableau soon). Adam is my old, battered edition of the book that I sometimes use to remind myself of the names of things (for the sake of loyalty to the publishing company I have to emphasize that it's not *Webster*).

There, you know everything now.

And Now For Something Completely . . . Meaningful

A: Do we have more napkins or was this the last one?

I: Why did you have to frame the . . . story? It strikes me as an outdated, nonexperimental strategy. It makes your work appear somehow . . . obvious.

A: It was the last napkin, that's why.

I: Why don't you try turning it over and--

A: I did. That's how I got back to the beginning. Sometimes framing is not a matter of choice. External circumstances are often more important than you think. Sometimes the length of a story depends on whether I am writing it on my desk, in my bed, or at the bus stop.

I: Or in the cafe. I see. Well, shall we to another mind then?

A: Why yes, of course.

I: Is it far?

A: Oh, just a flicker of a thought away. First, though, I'll have to do something about you--

I: Hector.

A: Hector, thank you. You still strike me as rather flat.

I: I know, I know, but, frankly, we don't have the page numbers to--

A: But I can't just leave you like that. I have responsibilities.

I: You'll have to. You must stop now.

A: How do I do that?

I: It's easy. Just follow the basic rules.



A:Rules?! I don't even have a current MLA manual!

I:Oh, what times we live in when strangers don't hesitate to steal one another's MLA manuals! . . . Eh, just put a period after this sentence.

A:I've put periods after all the sentences so far, but that doesn't seem to have stopped me from going on.

I:(taking A's hand to show her) There now. Hold the pen this way. Now put a period after this word.

A:After 'word'?

I:Yes.

A:But I already put a question mark after it. Should I go back and erase it?

I:No, no. Just put the period at the end of this line.

A:Listen, I can't do it this way. It's too infinitely regressive. Let's do it my way. Let's pretend that I am pouring you a glass of wine. I'll ask you "Say when," and you--

I:I hate wine.

A:Not even French wine?

I:I hate the French.

A:All right. Let's not get into personal prejudices. It's too personal. Let it be water.

I:There's no need to insult me. I'm not a baby. I do imbibe occasionally. For example, two months ago our magazine had a party dedicated to--

A:Forget the water. Relax. Take it easy--

I:I'm not nervous. I just don't like being patronized.

A:(cautious) Listen, Hector . . . Eh, how do you feel about soft drinks?

I:I like soft drinks.

A:What soft drink do you prefer?

I:I like lemonade.

A:All right, then. Let's pretend I am pouring you a glass of lemonade and I am asking you "Say when."

I:All right. Ask me. But I'd like ice in my lemonade.

A:You've got it. Say when.

I:Now.

A:Oh, do I count to three after you say "Now" and before I put the period?

I:Just put the period. Don't count.

A:All right. One more try. Say when.

I:(emphatically) *Now*. No, no, this doesn't count.

A:Why?

I:You must stop qualifying my actions or the tone in which I speak. Just let me say "Now" and I'll do it *emphatically* on my own, without you having to write down these damned adverbs.

A:All right. Do you have correction liquid?

I:What?!

A:So I can erase "emphatically."

I:(fighting these parentheses) Ahhggr! (draws out a syringe and gives Author an intramuscular injection) It's quite harmless, actually.

A Wandering Policeman wanders by.

WP: Sergeant Max Reiner. What's going on here? What's the matter with this woman? Is she inebriated?

I: No, no.

P: Is she dead?

I: Heavens, no.

P: Did you--

I: No, no, no. Yes, but--

A: Aaah--

P: What?

A: I am sighing. Aaah--

P: Who started this?

I: Sir, she wouldn't stop--

A: Aaah--

I: See?!

A: (to P) Do I know you?

P: I don't think so.

A: Didn't you have an art exhibition at \_\_\_\_\_ Gallery last month? Collage or something?

P: You've got the wrong policeman.

A: Aaah--

I: She started it--she couldn't stop.

P: (to A) Is that true?

A: Don't you see that I'm unconscious, you moron! Stop asking me stupid questions!

P: You don't seem unconscious to me.

A: (disgusted) All right, all right. (Reflecting) But I have every right to be.

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