JOHN HAWKES' "TRAVESTY" AND THE IDEA OF TRAVESTY

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John Hawkes' novel Travesty is a travesty in a broader as well as in the strict sense of the term, what might be termed an "existential" as well as a "literary" travesty: for it travesties, on the one hand, Albert Camus' La Chute and, on the other hand, Camus' philosophical speculations on the existential implications of suicide as well as his somewhat mysterious death in an automobile accident. Hawkes' Travesty finally takes the shape of an apotheosis of death itself: not as a fictionalized instance of the Freudian death-wish, but as the narrator's preoccupation with death as the form for life. The narrator's lifelong concern with pornographic photography as well as his concept of "ideal" suicide in a planned automobile accident force debris to appear as design and thus elevate him to the status of ultimate artist.

The title of John Hawkes' Travesty betrays the novel's ironic intent. Like every travesty, it posits the paradox of the author's striving to transcend, and at times succeeding in doing so, modesty through pretension, imitation through innovation. By producing a tension between an earlier literary model and his present text, the author pretends to mock the former while offering the latter as a tentative alternative, temporarily suppressing the knowledge that this alternative will inherit both the implicit merits and faults of his literary model. For the reader, the apparent battle of creative minds results in a comic effect: the real problem which underlies the very notion of travesty does not, in the last analysis, arise from the tension between two literary texts, but from the clash between literary successor and predecessor.

Whereas parody imitates the form of an earlier model while thwarting its content, travesty does the opposite: it imitates the content while thwarting the form. The resulting tension between content and form produces the more general one between imitation and innovation, which is all the more interesting for the fact that it propels travesty as a literary mode out of the realm of mere aesthetics and into its historical context. If travesty acknowledges a predecessor, it cannot claim to be original: the very fact of its existence testifies to its author's belief in a common tradition as opposed to individual recollection. At the same time, every travesty attempts to overcome this tradition by reducing it to a mere repository for various styles and ideas and resorting to a highly personal, idiosyncratic, at times even hermetic concept of composition. The paradox is that traditional modes retain historical influence and importance only if something individual and radically different, something that cannot as yet be found in their store, is forever being added to them. Thus, in a broader sense which transcends the distinction between content and form, travesty can become an emblem for the possibility of rendering, as fiction, the creative impulse of the imagination as such.
Whereas, in the broader sense of the term, Hawkes' *Travesty* is a travesty of Camus' speculations on the philosophical implications of suicide as well as of Camus' own death in an automobile accident on January 4, 1960, in the strict sense of the term *Travesty* is a travesty of Camus' *La Chute*. Both novels consist of a single long monologue centering on the phenomenon of suicide. Both are directed towards an implied listener. Both give the appearance of being a confession. Both confessions are triggered either by the word (*Travesty*) or the deed (*La Chute*) of a woman who, by transcending everyday expectations, forces a change of outlook upon the narrator. And both changes of outlook are intimately related to the problem of lying and hiding, to the question of falsehood as it reveals itself either in speech or in action. In Camus' *La Chute* Jean-Baptiste Clamence makes a remark on this problem which Hawkes chooses as an epigraph for *Travesty*:

Voyez-vous, une personne de mon entourage divisait les êtres en trois catégories: ceux qui préfèrent n'avoir rien à cacher plutôt que d'être obligé de mentir, ceux qui préfèrent mentir plutôt que de n'avoir rien à cacher, et ceux enfin qui aiment en même temps le mensonge et le secret. Je vous laisse choisir la case qui me convient le mieux.  

In both *La Chute* and *Travesty* the possibility of lying and hiding, while seeming to call into question the logic of the absurd by tacitly assuming the existence of values which can be jeopardized, finally affirms this logic. For Clamence, the distinction between truth and falsehood as well as the distinction between word and deed become absurd in the course of his experience of the contingency of the world: hearing what he believes to be the cries of a suicide struggling in the Seine below a bridge he is crossing, Clamence hurries away in order not to become involved with death, thereby possibly helping to cause it. Unable to bear his feeling of guilt, all his subsequent actions and stories, true or false, tend toward the same conclusion: that it does not matter whether they are true or false as long as they are significant of what he has been or of what he has become.

The narrator of *Travesty* on the other hand, driving at top speed towards an old poet and a beautiful little girl standing by the side of the road, does not care whether he has hit the girl or not; he does not turn around to look or even glance in the rear-view mirror. He accepts death and its foreshadowings, illness and deformity, as part of reality without any qualms, but he is able to do so only because he denies that reality has any meaning. Thus, to him the distinction between truth and falsehood becomes absurd because the realm of reference for both notions must be reality, whereas for him only the realm of the imagination is of any value. And he succeeds in making the distinction between word and deed seem absurd, too: while engaged in the paradoxical task of causing a planned automobile accident, which is to involve himself, his daughter Chantal, and the poet Henri, lover of both Chantal and the narrator's wife Honorine, he is able to fuse word and deed:

... like many men destined for the pleasures and perils of high-speed driving, now my mouth is working in subtle consort with eyes, hands, feet, so that my silent lips are moving with the car itself, as if I am now talking as well as driving us to our destination.  

His sustained monologue not only parallels his speeding at 149 km./hr. through a dark and rainy night towards a dark chateau where Honorine lies sleeping and eleven kilometers beyond which the fatal crash is supposed to take place, but word and deed are, in fact, identical, since the imagination is the source and rationale of
both. The narrator strives to outdo Henri as an artist by constantly interweaving life and narration, and his imagination functions equally through word and deed, because both partake of the imagination’s supposedly inevitable flow.

Denying reality the power to order and shape the world implies that the absurd in *Travesty* loses its painfulness. This becomes obvious when we compare Clamence’s idea of confession in *La Chute* with that of the narrator in *Travesty*. It is not until after his fall, when Clamence realizes he can never return to his former state of innocence, that he has recourse to the idea of confessing. For him, his confession as judge-penitent assumes historical proportions and meaning. He does not confess in order to escape from his own false and guilty self through the hope that his listener, being his better, will take responsibility for him and leave him innocent once more — in fact, he confides to his listener his at first glance paradoxical belief that “nous confions rarement à ceux qui sont meilleurs que nous” (p. 97); instead he wants to prove, in the face of absurdity, that truth must be implied in the act of confessing since it necessarily follows a state of hypocrisy; and that redemption is of relevance only to the guilty. For if Clamence can prove, through his own change of attitude, the existence both of his former innocence as well as his present guilt, and if he does moreover succeed in making the listener — and, implicitly, the reader — his heir, then he can become the representative of a mankind suffering through the throes of history rather than of absurdity.

For the narrator of *Travesty*, however, the experience of absurdity is joyful rather than painful, a possibility not to be eschewed but to be embraced. For it is absurdity which releases him from the considerations and responsibilities of everyday life into the freedom of the willed juxtaposition of what he calls design and debris. Confession, for him, becomes identical with recollection directed towards his own purposes:

> For the term “confession” let us substitute such a term as, say, “animated revery.”
> Or even this phrase: “emotional expression stiffened with the bones of thought.”

(p. 36)

What he seeks is neither truth nor redemption, but clarity, the moment when everything in his life, owing to an elaborate theory of likenesses, can be arranged into a symmetrical pattern, when everything will finally cohere and come to rest in the utter harmony of paradox. The paradoxical quality of this longed-for harmony is clearest in the passage where the narrator describes his discovery of a fountain which, according to local legend, is the “Fountain of Clarity” and which becomes as dear to him as the Fountain of Youth might to others:

> You can imagine how pleased I was to stand in the last of the sun with this precise moment of our dark passage fixed in my mind — hearing the rain, the engine, the tires, seeing our lights — and at the same time to lean forward and regard my own face in the little pool of water that lies in the depths of the Fountain of Clarity .... But my own face, our dark night that was as real to me as it is this moment .... — it was nothing, nothing at all compared with the intensity with which I was then contemplating the existence of our own Honorine. Your Muse, my clarity, I cannot convey to you my satisfaction as the thought of Honorine filled the silence of an earthly spot which, except for the fountain, was otherwise perhaps a little too picturesque. (p. 103f)
The paradox of the situation does not rest with the fact that imagined experience and actual experience can, in the act of recollection, become identical, i.e. that the narrator’s idea of combined suicide and murder was as “real” to him in the mere imagining of it as in the actual execution; for reality here simply means clarity, and clarity means the highest possible degree of imaginative intensity, an intensity that both moments, past and present, share. Instead, the paradox rests with the fact that, by being apostrophized as the narrator’s “clarity,” Honorine can become both the means to and, at the same time, the ideal end of her husband’s extreme narcissism.

The image of Narcissus is called forth by the reflection in the fountain of the narrator’s face; and this image assumes meaning when we consider that narcissism is not, originally, just another term for egotism or even egocentricity. According to Freud’s concept of primary narcissism it is the early self’s oceanic feeling of limitless extension and oneness with the universe, when the libidinal cathexis of the ego becomes the source for a libidinal cathexis of the world. But whereas for Freud this state of primary narcissism is a state of transition, followed by an increasingly antagonistic relation between the ego and external reality, narcissism in *Travesty* can become, through the dominating monologue of the narrator, the governing principle of life. Through the use of language as action, the narrator can justify his total transformation and revaluation of the world. Hence, too, the erotic quality which the planned accident has for him: the moment of the crash will not only be the moment of willed destruction but the moment of willed union with a world that has, in its experienced and recollected entirety, become an extension of the self. Thus, what in Freudian terms one might call “secondary” or “artistic” narcissism becomes the necessary precondition for an imagination which would absorb reality and reign supreme.

Within this context of artistic narcissism, suicide and murder assume a new dimension while, at the same time, expanding the idea of travesty. At this point it becomes obvious why *Travesty* was triggered not only by *La Chute*, but also by the somewhat mysterious death of its author. Hawkes said in an interview that he thought that he was doing “something seriously dangerous in looking to another writer’s work and specifically his death in order to create my own fiction.” This statement seems immediately convincing. For not only is it ethically dangerous to try to pay ironic homage to a great and widely respected writer, but it is even more dangerous aesthetically. One might argue, of course, that fiction has always thrived on the transplantation of extreme existential experiences from the realm of reality into that of an author’s imagination, that every fiction is, in a sense, a travesty of reality. One might further distinguish between two forms of travesty, “literary” and “existential” travesty, and describe Hawkes’ *Travesty* as an attempt to fuse these two forms in order to ascribe ultimate value to the artistic imagination. For endeavoring to travesty the death of a writer while travestying, at the same time, one of his books requires that the author find a realm where fictional and real experience may be merged. This realm can, of course, only be seen as the mind of the author-narrator as artist. However, in *Travesty*, the fusion of author and narrator in the role of artist can achieve authority only when Henri, the poet, who takes the place of Camus in the car, subscribes to the narrator’s imagination.
Of course, *Travesty* does not intend to describe Camus’ death. But it does travesty this death by taking Camus’ first and foremost philosophical concern, the idea of suicide, for granted and expanding it to include the idea of murder as well. For by killing Henri, his best friend and worst enemy, the narrator actually murders his *alter ego*, which means that in his eyes he is only committing a more complex suicide, a suicide that reaches utmost complexity by being extended, moreover, to include Chantal, the narrator’s only remaining child. “Now that you mention it,” the narrator says at one juncture, “the thought of a child surviving you is out of the question” (p. 86). Henri and the narrator both agree that the daughter as an offspring, as an extension of one’s self, has to take part in one’s suicide. What the reader is witnessing, then, is the “ideal” suicide, which, by transcending the phenomenological boundaries between human beings, transcends reality in the direction of the imagination. Henri can never hope to catch up with his friend’s act of willed annihilation as an expression of an imagination which achieves objectivity simply by utterly disregarding its own subjectivity. Therefore, the only hope that remains to Henri is, ironically, to identify with his murderer. He comes to understand and accept this in the end.

However, the novel cannot be fully understood unless we keep in mind that — just as Camus was a writer — Henri is a poet. Poetry as the most subjective and therefore most radically imaginative of all literary modes is conducive to a world view that assumes that “imagined life is more exhilarating than remembered life” (p. 127). Only when the narrator triumphs over the world view of the poet is he able to become the true artist. But for Henri the difference between reality and imagination is one of kind, not of degree. To him, he is the true artist who, in the face of annihilation, would invent the world. For the narrator, however, the difference between reality and imagination is only one of degree, which means that, to him, he will be the true artist who would himself annihilate the world in order to be able to invent it. For him, reality is not replaced by, but transformed into imagination. Thus, for the narrator, life and art become inseparable, whereas Henri, by agreeing to his own murder, saves and, in fact, enhances his independent status as an artist.

The lack of distinction between reality and the imagination on the narrator’s part provides the key to the paradox inherent in his recollection of the experience at the Fountain of Clarity, the paradox that, for him, his wife Honorine can embody both the means and the end in achieving the fulfillment of his artistic narcissism. As for being the means, Honorine, in her love for both Henri and her husband, has served them both by having been, as the narrator puts it, Henri’s muse and her husband’s clarity. In other words: not only has she inspired Henri’s poems, but also this drive towards nothingness of which we are the witnesses. Her statement that both her lovers seem to her selfish and hurtful, that she trusts neither one of them but still loves them both and is “willing and capable of paying whatever price the gods, in return, might eventually demand of her for loving them both” (p. 124) — this statement leads her husband first to conceive of the existential necessity to fuse design and debris, love and hate. His clarity reveals an underlying paradoxical structure: it is, on the one hand, a longing for revenge, the “secret desire to punish eternally the lady of the dark chateau” (p. 124), while being, on the other hand, the narrator’s only act of true love. By committing the “ideal” suicide for his wife, by depriving her of himself in the form of husband, lover, daughter, the narrator achieves his
own apotheosis; and by assuming the role of god towards Honorine he can, at the same time, idealize her. For by sacrificing the lives of the three human beings she loves, he isolates her so completely as to make her eternally unattainable, eternally "absent", "her face not seen, her voice not heard" (p. 127). He drives the car beyond the chateau, the usual point of its destination, in order that Honorine alone may recognize her husband's design and, after the terrible pain of loss has passed, not only acknowledge its greatness but understand that her ultimate elevation had to proceed out of this debris. 7

At first sight this idealization of Honorine seems to be contradicted by the narrator's lifelong interest in pornography, especially pornographic photographs of his wife. And this contradiction is not negated by Honorine's own fascination with the subject, by her willingness to pose for her husband, but is, rather, negated by the narrator's obsession with death and with form. Indeed, death and form in Travesty are linked through the use of pornography as metaphor. Pornographic photography renders sex as a series of static erotic gestures, but it may either be an instance of the impulse to dominate in love by reifying libidinousness, by making woman into a desirable object, or it may be an instance of a preoccupation with turning the flux of life itself — where it becomes most intensely apparent — into the stillness of death. Thus the narrator in Travesty remarks that to him "dead passion is the most satisfying" (p. 63). 8 Since his monologue is a prolonged recollection, it must be obvious that "dead passion" to him can only mean "passion frozen" and not "passion forgotten" or "passion spent." His photographs, like Henri's poems, give continuance to his encounters with the beauty of sex that would otherwise be lost. In other words: only through the painful pressure of the anticipated loss of Eros can shape or form come into being.

Bringing this realization of form as the ultimate human freedom to a logical conclusion, the narrator of Travesty in the end comes to embrace death itself as the utmost fulfillment. By willing his own death, he makes chaos or debris subservient to his concept of order, which has become his design. Death will give the final form to a life that he has striven to shape according to the beauty that, for him, lies in the symmetry of paradox, "the geometries of joy" (p. 12). And the reader will be the witness to this achievement. For if a travesty, being an attempt to cast an earlier model into a new form, attaches value to this very form, then the narrator's concept of design and debris, the elevation of death or form for giving shape to content or life, requires that Honorine's recognition, acknowledgement, and understanding be ultimately replaced by those of the reader.

At this point Hawkes' Travesty assumes the dimension of its own travesty. For given the narrator's belief that only debris can give meaning to design or, as regards language, that only silence can give meaning to words, the form of Travesty seems to explode itself. Since the novel's first publication it has appeared as an unresolvable dilemma that this is one of the so-called "impossible" fictions, i.e. that the narrator could not be telling what he is telling us if the intended crash had really happened. 9 The alternate solution to this dilemma has been offered that the reader should either assume that the crash did, indeed, not take place; or that everything we are being told only happens in the narrator's imagination. 10 However, the true solution seems to be that Travesty was designed to be an "impossible" fiction and
that the “impossible” narrator is emblematic of a more far-reaching irony. This irony would consist in Hawkes’ implying that death as such be the ultimate solution to the novel. Then Travesty would be a novel that could not, in turn, be travestied, because death allows of no remodeling. Travesty would reflect upon itself and derive its meaning from its ultimate silence. However, there still remains the witness of silence. And just as the narrator intends that Honorine discover meaning out of what amounts to the content of the book, so the author intends that the reader discover meaning from its form. The reader must recognize his own “impossibility”, which derives from the fact of the “impossible” fiction, and acknowledge its validity in order to understand that John Hawkes was paying ironic homage to Albert Camus in writing a novel which develops into an apotheosis of Death.

Notes

1 The Deutsches Worterbuch, compiled by Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm and revised by Matthias Lexer and Dietrich Krälik (Leipzig: Hirzel, 1854 - 1954), XI/1, 1 (1890 - 1935), 1567, defines travestie as a genre differing from parody, thus a “komische, meist satirische wirkung erstrebende dichtungsgattung, im 18. jh. aus gleichbed. engl. travesty entlehnt ... das im 17. jh. aus dem partic. des französ. verbums travesti ... gebildet wurde ... die travestie ist das entgegengesetzte von parodie; dort wird der inhalt beibehalten, aber durch eine verdrehte behandlung ins lächerliche gewandt (bei der parodie umgekehrt).” A Glossary of Literary Terms, revised by M.H. Abrams (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966), pp. 9 - 10, maintains that “Burlesque, parody, caricature, and travesty are often used interchangeably, but to equate the terms in this way is to surrender very useful critical distinctions ... A parody, like the mock epic, is also a form of high burlesque, but it derides, not its subject, but a particular literary work or style, by imitating its features and applying them to trivial or grossly discordant materials ... One type of low burlesque ... the travesty, mocks a specific work by treating its lofty subject in grotesquely extravagant or lowly terms.” The Reallexikon der deutschen Literaturgeschichte, edited by Paul Merker and Wolfgang Stammel (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1925 - 1931), II (1926 - 1928), 630 - 53, holds that travesty, in contrast to parody, achieves its comic effect through the retention of the original plot in an incongruous form, but points out that at the same time parody and travesty often go together, that their starting-point (the imitation of an earlier literary model) as well as their intention (the comic effect) are identical (cf. pp. 630 and 632). Gero von Wilpert in his Sachwörterbuch der Literatur (Stuttgart: Kröner, 1961), p. 653, sees Travestie as an inversion of Parodie. As common to both he too cites the comic effect, but he believes that this effect is achieved through a discrepancy between form and content as well as a respective dependence upon a model. Travesty, a satirical derision of a serious literary work, in contrast to parody, retains the plot but changes the form of its model. Wolfgang Karrer in his Parodie, Travestie, Pastiche (München: Fink, 1977), pp. 113 - 17, restates the incongruity between a travesty and its literary model, but finds this incongruity historically dependent mainly on sociological or ethical value conflicts. Travesty is seen as a deliberately inept imitation of high style or manner.

2 Albert Camus, La Chute; récit (Paris: Gallimard, 1956), p. 139. All further references will be in parentheses.

3 John Hawkes, Travestie (New York: New Directions, 1976), p. 97. All further references will be in parentheses.


It is an interesting minor irony of literary history that Hawkes was convinced, on commencing to write his own novel, that Camus himself had been driving the car in which he died. "After finishing Travesty I learned that my own imagined situation, that of driver, best friend and daughter riding together in the speeding car, was oddly close to the real situation in which Camus died." (ib.) The notion of alter ego which links Henri and the narrator would certainly seem corroborated by this coincidence.

Robert Steiner, for example, contends that the narrator's driving beyond the chateau where he, his friend and his daughter are expected 'will make the accident an absurd one.' But it is this very absurdity that will make the accident meaningful to Honorine. Cf. Robert Steiner, "Form and the Bourgeois Traveler," in: Anthony C. Santore and Michael Pocahyko, edd., A John Hawkes Symposium: Design and Debris, Insights-I: Working Papers in Contemporary Criticism (New York: New Directions, 1977), p. 132.

Cf. Steiner, ib., p. 72; Marcus Klein, "The Satyr at the Head of the Mob," ib., p. 162.

Tony Tanner was the first to point out that Travesty was an "impossible object." Cf. Tony Tanner, "John Hawkes: No Instructions How to Read," New York Times Book Review, March 28, 1976, p. 24.


Cf. Ihab Hassan, The Literature of Silence: Henry Miller and Samuel Bckett (New York: Knopf, 1967), p. 3: "Literature, turning against itself, aspires to silence, leaving us with uneasy intimations of outrage and apocalypse. If there is an avant-garde in our time, it is probably bent on discovery through suicide. Thus the term anti-literature, like anti-matter, comes to symbolize not merely an inversion of forms but will and energy turned inside out."

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