

POSTMODERNISM AS AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL COMMENTARY: THE BLOOD ORANGES AND VIRGINIE

The relationship--the similarities as well as the differences--between modernism and postmodernism has been all but too widely discussed. The usefulness of the terms themselves, particularly of the term "postmodernism," has often been called into question, even when postmodernism is restricted to mean little more than an American reaction to literary modernism in Europe. And almost no contemporary writer, whether American or European, would wholeheartedly describe himself as a postmodernist writer. Still, the terms "modern" and "postmodern" serve a purpose and are not merely validated by the fact that they have been in circulation long enough to preclude the possibility of their abolition. Contrasting the terms modernism and postmodernism invokes the question of intertextuality that mirrors the concerns of many contemporary writers. Gérard Genette, especially in his latest study Palimpsestes,¹ defines intertextuality as the ability of a text to comment upon another text, either through the imitation or through the transformation of an earlier literary model. Also, the later literary text will affect our reading of the earlier one. Postmodernism, as the term says, reflects on modernism either on modernist texts or on modernist ideas. It presents a running commentary on modernism, and a postmodernist author formerly of modernist leanings would be bound to reflect in the same manner upon his former self; that is, he would have to write his later texts in light of and as commentaries on his own earlier ones. In a sense, therefore, the postmodernist writer needs to be autobiographical; but autobiography, for him, has changed its meaning. It no longer requires that he write about his life, or even that he--an unalterable identity--write about his life; instead, autobiography comes to mean the process of narration itself as the author relates to it. Not only may a fiction text contain the seeds for subsequent variants of the same text, but it has a direct impact on the further life of the author, making it, in a sense, also fictional. Especially the "marginal" problems of the text acquire autobiographical importance: editorial questions, publication procedures, and the intellectual and emotional feedback offered by literary reviews shape the author's life and become part of his further fictional endeavors.

It is in this "autobiographical" sense that John Hawkes can be considered a postmodern writer. Ever since he started to write fiction after World War II, he has been concerned with the relationship between his narrators and himself in the role of author in the text.² However, since Hawkes believes in poetic language as the expression of the life of the imagination, which for him is an absolute entity, the text has ultimately always been more than its narrator or, by implication, its author. If Hawkes's narrators have been noted for their unreliability, this feature always served to direct the reader and the author towards poetic language and the workings of the imagination as such. The unreliable narrator relentlessly calls for a reading between the lines, for a subtext that validates the role of interpreter of the text. In this role, however, as the reader of his own text, the author is faced with a special problem: since he wrote it, he needs not to interpret, but to re-interpret the text, which means that he must first forget his own text in order to regain the innocence necessary for a second interpretation. This forgetting of the text can be obtained through the device of narrative unreliability. Reliability would veil innocence, because it does not allow for spontaneity, for the choice of the contingent over the predictable.

Innocence is the main theme of two of Hawkes's novels, one of which is representative of what might be called his earlier modernist and the other of his recent postmodernist stance: The Blood Oranges, published in 1971, and Virginie: Her Two Lives, published in 1982. If the force of the innocent imagination has not changed for Hawkes in the intertextual space created by the decade between the publication of the two novels, its forms of narrative expression have changed to a degree that

gives rise to the proposition, advanced at the end of this essay, that the course of Hawkes's fictional life parallels that of the development of the novel at large; yet, this development ought to be regarded less as a chronological progression than an exfoliation of intertextual interdependence. Virginie comments on The Blood Oranges, while The Blood Oranges contains the seeds of the later novel. The relationship between these two novels is dependent upon the weaving of a narrative tapestry that progresses and unravels in turns, and that, as a tapestry of love, becomes a metaphor for the two novels as well as for Hawkes's fictional life.

Innocence for Hawkes means either the non-existence or the dissolution of any power resulting from sexual dominance. One of the symbols in The Blood Oranges which embodies innocence is the statue of a hermaphrodite, whose ambivalent appearance is supposed to represent, and to propel into the mode of timelessness, the changing sexual interrelations among the four main characters of the novel. The statue, dating from antiquity, carries the characters back into a realm of mythical virginity: "There was a time when all our days were only memories of hours that had not yet passed and each one of us was in some way virginal."³ The narrative precondition for such a state of innocence is the conception of space as pastoral landscape. But the imaginary landscape of Illyria becomes an ironic Arcadia that cannot exist without the memory of death. Associated with the Golden Age, Illyria at first seems to mean an indestructible present, but hints referring to the past and to the future--"memories of hours that had not yet passed"--constantly encircle that present and threaten its self-sufficiency. Innocence in The Blood Oranges does not mean a virginal Not Yet, but a paradoxical Again and Again that attempts to repress the idea of recent or imminent loss--a loss, however, that appears inevitable as soon as innocence is seen against the foil of passing time and of age. The last sentence of the novel, "In Illyria there are no seasons" (271), is not a description, but a prayer.

Cyril, the unreliable narrator, incorporates both the serene Apollonian will to form and the festive languidness of the Dionysian cult, asceticism as well as self-indulgence. He regards himself as a heroic figure in the context of a timeless myth, as Love's emissary, allegorically represented on a medieval tapestry:

Throughout my life I have simply appeared at Love's will. See me as small white porcelain bull lost in the lower left-hand corner of that vast tapestry, see me as great white creature horned and mounted on a trim little golden sheep in the very center of Love's most explosive field.... I was there always. I completed the picture. (2)

As narrator, Cyril indeed appears to be privileged. He appears to hold the strands of the story like the threads of a vast tapestry in his mind's hands and to weave them into an intricate narrative design. But his power is ironic: he is not the author and he mistakes Love's will for his own. Like the intrigue of Penelope, who unraveled at night what she had accomplished during the day, his design consists in a constant conjuring up of the appearance of timelessness. Since Cyril, in his double role as narrator and character, creates both a story and an intrigue, the process of narration saves and at the same time threatens this paradoxical design; for it assures the continuity of the story while threatening its success as intrigue.

Cyril's adversary Hugh, a Christ-like figure, represents the beginning of historical time which dissolves Cyril's pagan timelessness. However, Hugh would be capable only of disturbing Cyril's design, not of disrupting it, if the tapestry of love--like the tapestry of narrative--were not defined by its own inherent limits. Cyril divines that he may disregard these limits if he succeeds in establishing a harmonious balance of relationships within the intrigue. Therefore, he strives, for a time successfully, to persuade Hugh to overcome his "greed and shame and jealousy" (58) by acknowledging his repressed desire for Fiona and by satisfying her needs. In making love both to his own wife Fiona and to Hugh's wife Catherine, Cyril thus establishes a pattern of correspondences which validates his concept of idyllic timelessness. But then Hugh dies through what only appears to be an absurd accident: holding the photograph of a nude peasant girl, he dies when he undergoes a partial hanging in order to experience sexual release. Hugh's death represents a perversion of the narrative concept of poetic justice; it is not the result of the interference of an authorial deus ex machina.⁴ Instead it is the result of a mistake within the tapestry of love as such: Hugh's death is an example of the limits imposed upon the life of the senses. Cyril's "guilt" regarding Hugh's death originates in the imperfection of his design. Cyril as character, as the figure "in the very center of Love's most explosive field," confuses self-sufficiency and self-indulgence and indirectly forces Hugh to locate himself at the edge of the tapestry of love. This

is symbolized by the fact that Hugh has but one arm; whenever the four characters attempt to form a chain of sympathy by holding one another's hands, he can never be a link between them. Hugh's erotic deficiency creates a tension between the two male characters which eventually leads to the catastrophe that threatens to destroy Cyril along with Hugh:

Why, after more than eighteen years, does the soft medieval fabric of my tapestry now hang in shreds--here the head of a rose, there the amputated hoof of some infant goat? Is it possible that in purging her field of Hugh's sick innocence Love (impatient Love) purged me as well? Eliminated even her own faithful sex-singer from the joyous field? It is possible. (3)

Cyril is the troubadour who serves a personified Fortuna who is omnipresent, but always ready to withdraw her favors. Cyril's tapestry is not his own; it is not even that of the author. The intrigue is not identical with the story and the story is not identical with the myth whose presence reaches beyond the limits of the text and informs the life of the author. "I was there always. I completed the picture," says Cyril without realizing that his constant presence, his constant performance, always implies absence as its precondition: Hugh's regression and ultimate death; Love's impatient rejection of Cyril's services; the end of the novel.

However, narration cannot exist except as constant presence. Hugh, although the representative of history and death and thus the destroyer of the harmony of Cyril's erotic world, cannot invalidate Cyril's role as narrator. Cyril hopes that through patience he may regain Love's favors. He hopes that his relationship with Catherine, who has suffered a breakdown after Hugh's death, will eventually be restored; that Fiona, who has left Illyria with Hugh and Catherine's children, will return; that the peasant girl whose photograph awakened the impulse that sent Hugh to his death will become his mistress. And his hopes are not unfounded. But his patience functions only as narrative patience. The segments of the novel can be considered as expressions of rhetorical strategies, as verbal images of the past, evoked to regain the confidence of Catherine, to whom they are addressed. As spoken words, they easily seem to fill the void created by Hugh's death and the simultaneous end of Cyril and Catherine's sexual relationship, and they seem to link past and present. But Cyril's implied and at times explicit pleading at the end of each narrative segment, "Remember?" (55, 187, 229), alerts the reader to the fact that the presence of the past is always ironic, that it always retains the mark of the past. Cyril is caught in his own rhetoric: he must recreate for Catherine their lost, former landscape of timelessness which is then supposed to cover any consciousness of the time that has intervened.⁵ This is an impossible task, and Cyril could only execute it if he succeeded both in supplanting Catherine's feeling of guilt about Hugh's death with another innocence and in purging his narrative of his own "guilt" as well. He nevertheless tries to fulfill this task by proposing the paradoxical ideal of "sexless matrimony" (81) as a way of life for himself and Catherine and by disrupting the time sequence of the novel's events. But the ideal of sexless matrimony undermines Cyril's belief that innocence cannot be regained through the renunciation of sex, but only through renovation; and the deconstruction of the plot cannot create timelessness, but only a consciousness of the interdependence of past and present. Thus the price Cyril must pay for the role of narrator is too high: sexual impotence and narrative unreliability.

Only the author, by writing another text which constitutes a comment on *The Blood Oranges*, can regain the innocence that Cyril has irrevocably lost. Cyril had learned to interpret objects and events as subjective signs, and he had learned to use language to reobjectify these signs. But in the process, innocence was supplanted by consciousness, and consciousness implies remembrance. Memory, however, causes desire, and it causes the past to be supplemented by the future. Through memory, the values of absence, of those time categories that defy the present, gradually dissolve the values of presence. Innocence, it appears, only exists as a forgetting of time, but for Cyril innocence has become a phenomenon of the past, an unconscious mode of being, lost again and again through memory; while for the author, once he has marked the narrator as unreliable, innocence can become a conscious mode of being that asks to be regained again and again through a series of innovative, and at the same time renovative, texts. Textual innovation thus defines itself, not in opposition to renovation, but as another commentary on an archetype.

In *The Blood Oranges* the innocent imagination reveals its paradoxical nature as memory that does not exclude the erotics of forgetting. The author, by creating a series of fiction texts, can create an independent memory, stored in those texts, which permits him to practice simultaneous forgetfulness--a forgetfulness that

implies the possibility of new beginnings. However, there is always the danger that memory stored will become death and no longer allow for further commentaries. For Hawkes, therefore, each new novel must be a "re-vision" of his earlier ones--beginning with his first novel, *The Cannibal*--without becoming too self-conscious a commentary. The resulting textual dilemma has induced many critics of Hawkes's work to accuse him of an increasing lack of innovativeness. Yet Hawkes must follow the inner logic of his fictional autobiography; he can only attempt to give voice to it.

In *Virginie: Her Two Lives*, paradox becomes the sole mode of being. Innocence and consciousness are established as opposite poles--only to become ultimately indistinguishable. As an epigraph for his novel, Hawkes uses a travestied quote from Samuel Beckett: "Birth was the death of her." Like many a postmodern fiction, *Virginie* is about the impossibility of storytelling, but here this impossibility results from, and in turn engenders, the impossibility of true womanhood. *Virginie* is about the loss of narrative innocence as defined through the loss of female innocence. Female innocence is an absolute value since it cannot become experience without losing its essence, while narrative innocence, through self-reflectiveness, can always be invoked as an ironic possibility, but never possessed without compromise. Thus the form of female innocence causes the uncompromising character of the female spirit which Hawkes claims he believes in, while the form of narrative innocence leads to either shame over its tentative loss or exultation at its subsequent recapture. Narrative innocence has the fluidity of time which may, however, lead to growth; female innocence can present an unalterable vantage point, yet as a result, it can only be destroyed.

The paradox of female plus narrative innocence is incorporated in the eleven-year-old heroine of the novel: *Virginie*. In each of her two lives, which take place in the eighteenth and twentieth centuries respectively, her identical psychic and physical innocence meets with the same fate: destruction by fire. As the novel consists of *Virginie's* journals, which are consumed by the same fire, she also represents narrative innocence that is lost and preserved at the same time, since there is still the novel. *Virginie* passes her first life as the companion of Seigneur, a member of the *ancien régime* who "creates" women as erotic artifacts and who can be understood as the image of the omniscient author of the eighteenth-century novel. In her second life, *Virginie* becomes the little sister of the taxi driver Bocage, who in 1945 likewise "creates" a brothel in Paris after his mother has suffered a stroke. *Virginie* and Bocage die during a fire begun by their mother while Bocage attempts to make love to his little sister. Bocage is the twentieth-century author who, after having lost his former narrative power, can no longer prevail over the vindictive female spirit as represented by the mother. Only *Virginie*, the as yet innocent female, would still yield to his embrace. *Virginie*, the incestuously desired Other, is the author's own text: "Thus I am only the child before the woman, the insubstantial voice of the page that burns."⁶

Virginie's virginity is the special twist of Hawkes's postmodern novel. *Virginie* is constantly exposed to the art of eroticism in her first and to the art of sexuality in her second life, yet the value of her innocence is only heightened by the contrast. Her journals--in keeping with Hawkes's unwavering conviction that pornography is, or should be, the highest form of art--constitute a genre that could be called the "pornographic sublime," a genre that strives to preserve the sanctum of the soul through a precarious balance of paradoxes. *Virginie* observes whatever happens around her with devout eyes; her journals thus render experience as innocence. The beauty of language, Hawkes seems to imply, cannot be defiled, since language does not partake in experience. Like language, *Virginie*, by remaining aloof, can come to express everything, since no personal experience will foreshorten her perspective or clutter her senses. *Virginie* is the Virgin before the Immaculate Conception, the page before it is read, the text before interpretation--worthy of every form of regard, but incapable of receiving it into her mind or body. Like the text, she fascinates the beholder through her constant readiness, which nevertheless resists any "real" embrace. Like the text, *Virginie* is the unattainable Other.

The virginity of the text thus presents a problem for the author. What seems to have become the distinguishing mark of the postmodern text is that it strives to become as self-sufficient as female innocence, but self-sufficiency engenders the paradox of simultaneous presence and absence. As soon as the fiction text begins to lose its mediating function between the author and the reader and begins to become an independent object in the sense in which, for instance, William Gass would have it, it tends to become a barrier between author and reader--its very presence creating an absence of communication. *Virginie*, the text and the heroine, are conscious of this dilemma. They try to face it by effacing themselves. *Virginie*

spends both her lives voluntarily serving everyone in her environment until she reaches the stage when her virginity becomes endangered. She then yields to the entreaties of the author to offer up her innocence, but she dies in the process, bringing her life as text to a close in order to insure the possibility of its interpretation.

Virginie ends her first life by throwing herself into the flames that already consume Seigneur. Seigneur dies at the stake, sacrificed by the very women he has raised to become incarnations of erotic art. He dies because he has enraged his beautiful pupils by denying himself to them sexually, by treating them as living objects of art. Like God, like the omniscient author, Seigneur was always present and absent at the same time. He is sacrificed in order to dissolve this existential paradox. But the death of God affects His creation just as the death of the omniscient author affects his characters, for the memory of him will perpetuate his paradoxical influence and make it indelible. Virginie, therefore, is giving up her role as character altogether, defining herself as the mirror image of the author. She will not survive his death, but will become his "autobiography." In other words: the death of the omniscient author confines him to the role of author within the limits of the text and postulates the text's self-sacrifice. Self-sufficiency as the ontological status of the postmodern text can only be understood as the condition for its self-dissolution. "Writing would never be man's writing, which is to say it would never be God's writing either," says Maurice Blanchot in "The Absence of the Book" ("L'Absence du livre"); "at most it would be the writing of the other, of dying itself."⁷

Fire, which consumes Virginie's journals and the two worlds they contain, is the dominant metaphor in Hawkes's *Virginie: Her Two Lives*. It represents the imagination as it purges the author's self in the struggle between the unconscious and the conscious. The nature of fire is paradoxical: as one of the four elements, it is an archetypal force; at the same time, fire is the most inconstant of the elements, the least reliable. In order to put it to use, man has to employ his wit, that is, consciousness. Prometheus, in presenting the fire of the gods to man, is usually seen as the saviour of mankind; however, his gift is always associated with culture, not with nature. And Loki, the old German demon of fire, whose cult was later identified with that of Prometheus, is an even more ambivalent figure. Although representative --as "Logi" ("Lohe")--of an element that can also be life-sustaining, he kills Baldur, the god of light. The Germans believed that the world would end in fire and thus Loki came to represent destruction and death. He is the herald of the "Götterdämmerung," the twilight of the gods; he is the negative force of civilization, of consciousness become destructive in its struggle to overcome the unconscious. Yet the repression of the unconscious entails its own revenge: life becomes a task and a responsibility.

Seigneur represents an historical period that still knew that all art was supposed to serve God as its great Origin. The omniscient author was but a secularized version of His omnipotence; he still tacitly presupposed a stable reality as was formerly guaranteed by divine law. Because of this hypocrisy, Seigneur's art, like the eighteenth-century novel, unwittingly created a tradition of guilt which had its source in the unacknowledged tension between God and man and which would finally result in man's decision to proclaim the death of God, not in order to gain an advantage over an absent God, but in order to find a way of suppressing his own inferiority complex. For Hawkes, therefore, the history of the novel is an exfoliation of repressed guilt that is displaced into metaphor. When Seigneur dies, his last words are a command: "'Virginie!'" he shouts. "'Destroy your innocence!'" (212) Her options in fulfilling this command are either to live and become a woman or to die and destroy, not her innocence, but her body which represents that innocence. Out of love for Seigneur, Virginie chooses the metaphorical solution to his demand. Living would have implied the will to independence, the negation of everything Seigneur had come to mean. Virginie sacrifices her life in order not to destroy meaning. Hence her reincarnation as text: life-in-death that results from death-in-life. Virginie's deed expiates Seigneur's guilt since she sacrifices her title to the same kind of experience he had denied his pupils; however, her journals, which carry the memory of this guilt, serve to prolong it. The reincarnated version of Virginie thus inherits the burden of Seigneur's guilt as well as its metaphoricality. Her presence forces the twentieth-century author, that is, the author of her second life, to become nothing but an ironic repetition of a former self.

In her second life, Virginie is less radically innocent than in her first, since female innocence and narrative innocence have become intertwined. The memory

of her former death is both present and absent in Virginie's mind as a form of erotic consummation which requires, as well as forbids, repetition: "Consummation prompts prior passion. Thus I both know and do not know that in the most secret recess of my spirit my prior life exists" (18). The unconscious memory of her former commitment to Seigneur renders Virginie incapable of expiating the guilt of Bocage, which is the guilt of civilization. Her female innocence thus only serves to set off the depravity of her second environment: Bocage's brothel becomes a degraded version of Seigneur's *école des femmes*. On the other hand, Virginie's narrative innocence draws her closer to Bocage in the role of author; together they achieve the consummation that was denied the omniscient author and his text. But this closeness paradoxically only serves to underline their ultimate difference: the biological difference between male and female, and the ontological difference between author and text:

Thus he is heaviness itself while I am weightless; thus his great body gives solidity to the sounds of his passion, while my own small breaths of sweetness are mine alone and toneless. (9)

Seigneur's characters were as incapable of receiving his gifts as they were of becoming independent. They could not overcome the feeling of humiliation resulting from the fact that their erotic curriculum was not a matter of their own free choice. Their historically necessary reaction was revolt. In 1945, Bocage no longer attempts to educate the women he gathers into his brothel; but still their erotic experiences are not a result of free choice, but of random sexual encounters. Thus, they cannot even rebel, since they don't know what to rebel against; they can only suffer. The difference between a text in which the character can still rebel against his or her author's intention by developing, in the course of a changing historical context, an independent, even opposing intentionality, and a postmodern text, in which the character becomes the language of the text itself, is that the latter cannot develop a distinctive voice that is not the author's. This in turn implies that none of his own texts will help the author to overcome his rising sense of personal shame over his historical guilt, unless he manages to regain his narrative innocence again and again through an ever more conscious effort.

The intertextuality of Hawkes's novels, that is, the way they comment on one another, mirrors such a development between unconscious guilt and conscious innocence, and thus parallels the development of the novel between the eighteenth and the twentieth centuries as it is imaginatively rendered in *Virginie*. At the beginning of Hawkes's fictional autobiography stand two unselfconscious novels, *The Cannibal* and *The Beetle Leg*, which reveal his ability to eroticize poetic language in order to woo, and as a tribute to, the power of the imagination. With *The Lime Twig* the author reached the apex of his narrative omniscience which, turning into self-consciousness, called for the first-person narrator of his next novel, *Second Skin*. But in striving to write himself into the text, the author found that he attempted to deal with a narrative tradition of repressed guilt which, as soon as it was raised to the level of his own consciousness, endangered his narrative innocence. Therefore, Hawkes's first-person narrators became more and more unreliable, throughout the triad of *The Blood Oranges*, *Death, Sleep & The Traveler*, and *Travesty*. Thus the author could always hope to recuperate from his identification with his narrators, who had developed into artist-narrators. Still it became increasingly difficult for him to regain his narrative innocence since the rising degree of the narrator's unreliability could no longer veil the unfolding of an artistic consciousness within the text. After *Travesty*, Hawkes believed that he had exhausted his imaginative resources. But in *The Passion Artist* he began to face his dilemma by turning the struggle between the protagonist's unconscious and his consciousness into the struggle of an everyman. And in *Virginie: Her Two Lives* the paradoxical fusion of guilt and innocence has found its expression in an allegory that generalizes even more the necessity of fictional autobiography. Hawkes's next novel, whose working title is *Adventures in the Alaskan Skin Trade*, may demonstrate how his personal life has become a mirror for the life of the novel.

--Heide Ziegler

NOTES

- 1 Gérard Genette, *Palimpsestes: La littérature au second degré* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1982).
- 2 Cf. "John Hawkes and Albert Guerard in Dialogue," in *A John Hawkes Symposium*:

- Design and Debris, eds. Anthony C. Santore and Michael Pocalyko, Insights-I: Working Papers in Contemporary Criticism (New York: New Directions, 1977), p. 23.
- 3 John Hawkes, The Blood Oranges (New York: New Directions, 1971), p. 269. All further references will be in parentheses.
 - 4 John Hawkes's own attitude towards Hugh's (his alter ego's?) death is ambivalent: "I meant the death of Hugh in a sense to trick the reader into thinking of it as a moral judgment on the multiple relationships--but to me it is not. Hugh's death is thoroughly absurd" (John Kuehl, John Hawkes and the Craft of Conflict [New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1975], p. 169). Steven Abrams regards the "difficulty of coming upon Hawkes's solution without his help" as reason for "a serious criticism of the novel" (Steven Abrams, "The Blood Oranges as a Visionary Fiction," The Journal of Narrative Technique, 8 [1978], 108).
 - 5 Cf. Frederick Busch, Hawkes: A Guide to His Fictions (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1973), p. 147.
 - 6 John Hawkes, Virginie: Her Two Lives (New York: Harper & Row, 1982), p. 11. All further references will be in parentheses.
 - 7 Maurice Blanchot, The Gaze of Orpheus and Other Literary Essays, trans. Lydia Davis, ed. P. Adams Sitney, introduction, Geoffrey Hartman (Barrytown, NY: Station Hill, 1981), p. 151.