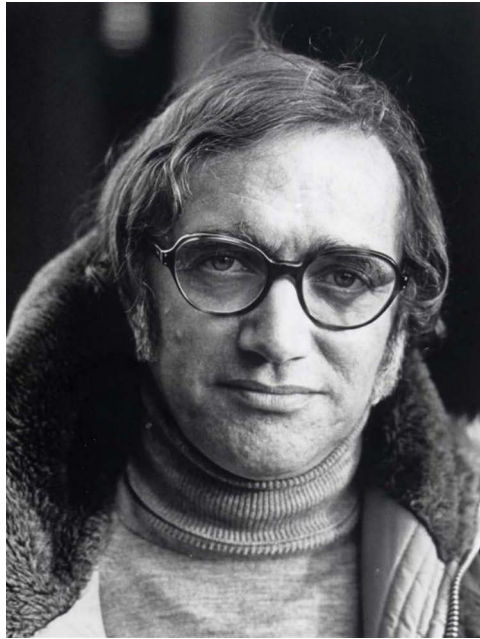


ANALYSIS

Second Skin (1964)



John Hawkes

(1925-1998)

“*The Lime Twig* (1960, 1961) is possibly the best example of Hawkes’s early style, the most mature of his intense, unfocused narratives, without the moments of sentimentality that would mar *Second Skin*. The latter novel reaches out to broader themes and is Hawkes’s fullest work; but *The Lime Twig* shows how he could manipulate that early manner as far as it would go. In a sense, it signals the end of the first phase of his development. *Second Skin* stands somewhat alone, looking ahead to the substitution of sentimentality or softer associations for that hard, intense vision which had been Hawkes’s distinctive mode. *The Lime Twig* recalls the work of Harold Pinter, especially *The Birthday Party*, as much as it does Greene’s *Brighton Rock*. The Pinter play and the Hawkes novel emerged at about the same time....

Despite the tremendous energy, his surges of swift power, and his sense of spatiality and mobility, Hawkes appears to fit readily into paralysis—certainly as a powerful countering force in his vision. In *Second Skin* (1964), we note his typically American reliance on space: a bus trip, an island off the Atlantic coast, a spice island, ‘a wandering island...located in space and quite out of time.’ In addition, there is Skipper’s ship, on which Tremlow mutinies, the frenzied wedding night trip to the abandoned silver mine, and other locales which involve distances and spatial perspectives. Nevertheless, despite spatiality and obsessive movement, the novel is defined by an innerness that seems peristaltic. Space denied, like time stilled, appears to be the inner thematic line of the novel, even while spatiality and time passing seem connected to the outer narrative line. We note opposing drives, one inward and one outward, one attached to theme, the other related to narrative.

‘I will tell you in a few words who I am’: So begins *Second Skin*, with the epic ‘I,’ the picaro, the narrator of his own mock epic. We are carried within to a man for whom each locale has brought with it disaster, a personal loss. He seems himself, if not as Clytemnestra, then as the pawn Iphigenia, this hulk of a man, the Hamlet-husband of Gertrude, whose daughter, Cassandra, remains almost dumb while pointing toward violence and death. His father, his wife, his daughter suicides, his son-in-law murdered, his mother,

having vanished, now dead. Skipper carries death in his wake, is victimized by others, blunted by circumstances. Like the scrambled literary figure he recalls, he is accompanied by bloodshed, yet he is a bringer of life, an artificial and a human inseminator. He plans new generations as rapidly as the past has wiped out those attached to him. Hawkes locates Skipper in a no-man's-land between life and death. Unable to control death, he is able to modulate some sense of life.

The novel is about conception, in all its punning, ambiguous potential. Hawkes works as hard at his conception of the novel—how to tell it, how much of character, event, plot line to reveal or exclude—as Skipper works at replenishing a world that drops away from him. There is a double agent here which enters into virtually every aspect of the novel: Hawkes peering down the ruins of his material and doling it out through Skipper's memory; and Skipper himself, peering down the ruins of his life and trying to find areas of meaning, not at all above distorting his own powers in order to shore up the past. Not unusually, in such a formulation of narrative, scene, and character, images of subterranean things dominate. The sole place where conceptions can come together is in burrows and lairs. Skipper roams from place to place, not unlike a wounded animal, or Kafka's mole, seeking a refuge, only to discover new threats to his existence. So much of Hawkes's view is oppositional that it is difficult to locate the center, except, finally, that island with the bovine Catalina Kate.

To begin, Skipper is himself the old man of the sea, a combination of a wandering Ulysses, a magical Prospero-Ariel, a desolate Menelaus, and the mythical Poseidon. As the latter, he is a man who threads his way through the deep, surfacing from depths. As Menelaus, he travels with Cassandra, his wife, Gertrude, having deserted him for others, as Helen fled Menelaus for Paris and as Gertrude moved to the bed of King Hamlet's brother. As Ulysses, he has his Circe-Miranda, his passage from island to island, his adventures with life-giving as well as death-bearing women. As one or another, Skipper (also known as Captain and Edward) is continually changing shapes and roles. He mothers Cassandra, grandmothers Pixie, acts as stud for Catalina Kate and artificial stud for the cows on his sweet island, has incestuous drives toward Cassandra, acts as faithful son to his suicidal father, serves loyally as husband despite (or because of) Gertrude's alcoholism and faithlessness, plays father-in-law to Fernandez and countenances the latter's ludicrous marriage to Cassandra. He plays all family roles, even as the members of his family, as in a classical tragedy, drop away through violence.

The tattooing scene in Chapter 2 recalls Kafka's 'In the Penal Colony': Skipper is paying for unknown sins and being forced, by his love for Cassandra, into a pain beyond pain. With that experience, we have the external form of suffering which gains us narrative or scenic entrance into Skipper's world, that world or 'overview' provided in the first chapter. There, by 'naming names,' he supplies a Proustian reverie, the past that his pen and memories will recapture. The tattooing is the first external act that gives us any approximation of his Hamlet-Odysseus-Menelaus inner life, as the 'courageous victim.' That scene is followed by the one in the bus, a tunneling into the velvet dark, a subterranean trip into unknowns. The bus journey is concerned with final things, where the 'highway was a dead snake in the distance,' where the desert contains 'tiny cellular spines, dead beetles, the discarded translucent tissue of wandering snakes, the offal of embryonic lizards and fields of dead dry locusts.' Skipper, along with daughter and granddaughter, must traverse this field of the dead in order to arrive at the death city in the East where he will find Cassandra's husband, Fernandez, a 'little fairy spice,' stabbed to death.

Interwoven with these scenes of darkness, death, paralysis, and suffocation are those on the sweet cinnamon island, where Skipper artificially inseminates cows. This island is Eden revisited, where, now fifty-nine years old, he writes down his memories. One of the false notes in the book is the ease with which Skipper achieves bliss. Granted that the novel operates at the level of myth, and that this island is part of the Eden-Golden Age legend; nevertheless the novel also functions at the level of unresolved tensions and conflicts. The sweet island of Catalina Kate, however, has no tensions: insemination, which was never Skipper's thing, now comes easily, and bread and fruit grow on trees. Hawkes has provided his Prospero with a retreat as if there were still no Lear, or Hamlet, or Coriolanus.

More accommodating to the novel's tensions are the scenes on the windswept raging isle off the Atlantic coast, where a different kind of sexuality obtains. On this other island, everything that had been sweet and spicy becomes charged, tense, anxiety-ridden, full of cruelty and brutality; sex is symbolized by men

circling Cassandra, by a lighthouse off which the fated girl jumps, by a Circe-like Miranda, quite unlike her namesake in Shakespeare, by the ex-marine Jomo with his hook, by Captain Red with his drunken intensity and Bub with his willingness to do their dirty work. All is encapsulated dynamism, negative, disguised energy, potentiality; experience based on inertness and suffocation.

In the section 'Cleopatra's Car,' Miranda's hot rod is a multiple symbol of sensuality, phallicism, and eroticism, all played out against a snowy battleground. Fire and ice grip the characters, their responses so intense words are unnecessary. The scene passes like a catapult drawn ever tighter. The silent snowball fight in the graveyard, a scene of primitive intensity and covertness, is the 'ice' equivalent of the 'fire' of the bumping inside, with both suggesting an unexpressed sexuality, potential ejaculation, an entire life based on incompleteness. Despite intense sensuality, the key image is impotence.

Whereas Kafka's mole stuffed his burrow with provisions, Hawkes pours into his maze contrary feelings which cannot break out. We realize that except for Skipper, who is writing this narrative, almost no one speaks in *Second Skin*. It is a novel of great silences and interstices, like Robbe-Grillet's fictions, in which the work generates its own expression of sound and silence, isolated from what occurs beyond it. Like Hawthorne with his historical material, Hawkes probes margins and seams, and explores 'static silences.' The reader struggles for connective tissue even as he is being borne along on the crest of violence and death. This method, which also appears to *The Lime Twig* and *The Cannibal*, catches the undertow of American attitudes, that other side of a 'city of words': an inability to verbalize, a need, concurrently, to express in violence what words fail to express. In the penultimate chapter of *Second Skin*'s twelve-chapter quasi-epical structure, Hawkes carries us back to the cold island.

Chapters 9 and 11 parallel each other, and both are sandwiched between 'sweet island' episodes. Chapter 9 fills in the incomplete details of Twemlow's mutiny. Fernandez's hopeless, seedy death, and the suicide of Skipper's father while the boy played Brahms on his cello to still the older man's pistol hand. The chapter ends with the eschatological vision of final death for all. 'Wasn't I myself, as a matter of fact, simply that? [Skipper muses] Simply one of those little black seeds of death? And what else can I say to Father, Mother, Gertrude, Fernandez, Cassandra, except sleep, sleep, sleep?'

The eschatological vision is already complete for Skipper, since he is writing a remembrance of things past, but we do not know as yet what he knows. He must carry us through final things. Chapter 11, on the 'cold island,' is the denouement of the 'silent death' which accompanies Skipper's 'first skin.' Skipper is in almost constant activity which leads nowhere, first in the *Peter Pool* sail, then in the drag race on the beach, finally in his frantic footrace to head off Cassandra and Jomo at the lighthouse. The sail on the *Peter Pool*, a rotting little fishing boat, is something out of Conrad's *Typhoon* and also the scene for Skipper's assumption of a 'second skin'—the oilskin he dons for the wet sail. A second skin usually signifies a rebirth, the snake's molting, seasonal change. Skipper, apparently, is going to enter a new phase without Cassandra, a revived life. Yet this second skin is not his, but something he must don as protection: armor-plating, not an element intrinsic to his growth or development. Like nearly everything else in the novel, it is ambiguous: both protective and part of what will destroy. For the *Peter Pool* sail is the beginning of the end for Skipper's last possession, Cassandra.

The drag race follows, once again based on misunderstanding. Skipper races to head off Cassandra and Jomo, only to discover that he has been blocked by Bub, which gives them time to make for the lighthouse. Miranda, who accompanies Skipper in the hot rod, is a form of sexual torture, the possessor of the black, huge-cupped brassiere that appears throughout, a leitmotif of frustrated sensuality, voyeurism and/or masturbation. Skipper 'drags' furiously, not to win anything, but to block, to impede, only to discover he has been tricked by Jomo's decoy. Frustrated by deception, tortured that someone with a hook has got to Cassandra, his Cassandra, Skipper frantically makes for the lighthouse, only to arrive after she has jumped. The horizontal spatiality of the race blends with the girl's vertical plunge; distance dominates, only to be muted by the containment of space within Skipper's experience. Cassandra's jump carries him back through memory to those other leaps into the darkness of suicide. The chapter ends with Miranda's presentation to Skipper of a box containing 'Just a fetus, Skip. Two month old. Human.' A bit of living tissue enclosed in a box, it is Cassandra's reason for her leap, her posthumous gift to her father.

The novel teeters on melodrama, especially when the ironic tone is diluted. But because so little is devoted to talk, melodramatic events become part of the spatial and temporal substructure. With the line of development so close to night dream, or a day reverie, or a sequence of memories, Hawkes can just escape without sensationalism. Also, by having avoided linear development in the narrative, he can conjure up episodes which would, in a more normal narrative, have seemed extravagant, what we find in Mailer's *American Dream*. By the early 1960s, Hawkes had discovered the way to present that mixture of violence and sentiment which has so dominated the American novel, and without foregoing the innerness so frequently sacrificed to spatiality.

The final chapter, titled 'The Golden Fleas,' brings Ulysses home. The seas are quieted, and he is enwrapped by his devoted, nonverbal Penelope, Catalina Kate, a prelapsarian Eve. Unlike Agamemnon on *his* return, he is not destroyed. On the 'sweet island,' having observed his former life slip away, like an old skin which no longer functions, he enjoys his 'second skin.' Molting, seizing control of his destiny with a pen, writing his way out of his death-dragging memories, Skipper finds a way of transforming entrapment into a new life: by turning it into the narcissistic circuitry of memory.... I have merely touched upon the idea of a 'second skin,' with its sense of covering up, creating an inner space. It has multiple references. It is sheath material, evokes sexual connotations, and suggests a protective-destructive potential."

Frederick R. Karl
American Fictions: 1940-1980
(Harper & Row 1983) 219, 221-23

Michael Hollister (2015)