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### DREAM AND REALITY IN JOHN HAWKES' *THE LIME TWIG*

The realistic novel which emerged as a distinctive literary genre with Defoe, Richardson and Fielding in the middle of the eighteenth century seems to have been the product of a shifting attitude, as to the conception of what is real, inaugurated with new ways of thinking from the Renaissance onward. The Scholastic Realists of the Middle Ages held the view—which, of course, goes all the way back to Plato and Aristotle—that it is Universals, that is, classes of abstractions, Ideas or Forms, and not the particular, concrete objects of sense perception which are the true “realities”. Descartes’ thought in the seventeenth century did much to bring about the modern assumption that true reality exists independently of transcendental Forms and that we get a true report of it through our senses. His philosophical realism, which was soon to spread all over, favoured a scientific view of things. As a result, interest in the sciences was focused upon the study of the individual investigator, who, independent of traditional assumptions, was more likely to arrive at the truth of the things themselves. At the same time, the novel emerged as the literary form which came to reflect this individualistic and innovating reorientation in viewing reality. Its main preoccupation was to represent life as it was lived by particular, ordinary individuals involved in particular, ordinary circumstances, no matter how ugly. Thus, the novel, at its inception as a new genre, took a circumstantial view of life, that is, it intended to explore all the particulars of human experience in a scientific way (cf the naturalistic trend within the realistic movement) and to report it to the reader. It naturally placed a high premium on the rational capacities of the human mind to discover the truth in human experience. This certainty is reflected in the presence of the analytical intelligence of the omniscient, editorializing author/narrator who holds an absolute control over his material.

This certainty of the novel to observe and analyse contemporary life scientifically, to reflect life objectively like “a mirror going down the road”, and, therefore, to convey the truth of human life, came to be disputed by the end of the nineteenth century, the great era of the realistic novel. Realism came under attack and became an issue of heated controversy, which continued well into the twentieth century. It was exposed as a “conspiracy” meant to impose a “rational dominion over a disturbing world”, thus betraying the superstition of an age “which flattered itself with the notion that it had found the key to what really is”<sup>1</sup>. Nietzsche declared that “Realism in

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1. Erich Heller, «The Realistic Fallacy», in *Documents of Modern Literary Realism*, edited by George J. Becker. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1963, p. 597.

Art is an illusion"<sup>2</sup>. Under the influence of contemporary philosophical and psychological theories (Bergson-Freud), Marcel Proust, in his monumental novel "Remembrance of Things Past", formulated a "highly particular but sweeping anti-realistic credo"<sup>3</sup>. A cinematographic view of things, he claimed, takes us the furthest from true reality. Flaubert had equally felt uncomfortable by the realization of the distortion of reality which is effected through the inevitable selection the writer makes out of the raw and complicated material of life. This awareness also haunts many a contemporary writer who have abandoned any pretention to realistic writing, thus betraying an increasing dissatisfaction with realism and a growing realization of the fallacy that the realistic novel objectively reflects "true" reality.

This «realistic fallacy»<sup>4</sup> became the butt of parody by many writers in the twentieth century. John Hawkes is a typical example of a novelist who questions the authority of formal realism as a transparent conveyor of reality. In his novel *The Lime Twig*, published in 1961, he pokes fun at the air of total authenticity of the novel form which claims to represent all the particulars of human experience, that is, the reality of it.

The question that *The Lime Twig* raises is: what is reality after all? where does it reside? on the particulars of events which Slyter, the newspaper reporter, all along and the police at the end of the novel are trying to discover? or in the unconscious, irrational dreams of frustrated individuals? Hawkes seems to favour the latter view as he shows in *The Lime Twig* through a lot of violence and what Greiner has called "comic terror"<sup>5</sup>. Through an interplay of reality and dream, Hawkes seems to be trying to shock his readers into the realization that what makes reality is much more than the surface appearances and particulars, and thus to shake their confidence in a rationally ordered universe. He wants his readers to recognize that part of human experience is motivated by the irrational forces inside man which are readily suppressed or ignored for the sake of order which our rational capacities tend to force upon a fleeting world of sense perception by a knowledge of the particulars.

The theme of the novel, then, that reality resides not only in what is commonly accepted as reality, but also in the irrational dreams which motivate people's actions and ensare them as easily as birds on a lime twig, is very clearly and ingeniously reflected in the form of the novel which is conditioned by the manipulation of the narrative voice which operates on two different levels: the first corresponding to a limited point-of-view on the level

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2. As quoted by Erich Heller, op. cit., p. 595.

3. George J. Becker, op. cit., p. 549.

4. Ibid., p. 591.

5. Donald J. Greiner, *Comic Terror: The Novels of John Hawkes*, Memphis, State University Press, 1973.

of the surface reality (Slyter's I-narrative perspective), and the second to an omniscient point-of-view on the level of the dream (third-person omniscient narrator). This double perspective constitutes the vehicle through which the technique of the novel becomes the perfect embodiment of its theme and gives it its astonishing largeness of effect and significance. Hawkes' *The Lime Twig* seems to be that kind of a novel which Mark Schorer had in mind when he claimed that "technique [is] the only means [a writer] has of discovering, exploring, developing his subject, of conveying its meaning and, finally, of evaluating it"<sup>6</sup>.

Through the device of the double narrative voice in *The Lime Twig*, Hawkes exposes the gulf between the surface reality of particulars which Slyter himself represents and the reality of the Bankses' dreams into which, unlike Slyter, the reader is allowed a full glimpse by the omniscient narrator. The voice of Sidney Slyter can be read as a parody of the pretensions of the realistic novel which, as Ian Watt suggests, mirrors that attitude towards life which is characterized by the belief in a stable reality out there, knowable and, therefore, manipulable<sup>7</sup>. The way Slyter's reports begin betrays the certainty or rather conceit of the realistic attitude of mind: "Sidney Slyter says", is a phrase which sounds like "Thus Spake Zarathoustra" or even "God says", and which sets the overconfident tone of the reports through which Hawkes parodies the traditional concept of reality. Although Slyter is after the truth—"I want to know the truth about his [Bank's] horse"—and is sure that his "prognostications are always right", in fact, he is always on the edge of mystery. His bubbling efforts to come to the truth lead to a scattered clue here and a fragmented fact there. What he finally possesses is bare, fragmented facts and a lot of suspicions. Cut off, as he is, from the deeper truth, Slyter becomes an ironic commentator. The fact that he refers to himself in the third person is another indication which makes Slyter a typical representative of the scientific detachment which characterizes the realistic attitude of mind which Hawkes undercuts through him.

Though Hawkes parodies "reality" and draws us into another level of reality, which exists beneath surfaces and beyond the dictates of rationality, as well as into an investigation of deeper psychological truths, he still uses traditional realistic conventions in order to create that sense of loneliness and frustration, that feeling of dull life which generates the need to indulge in fantasy and dream.

William Hencher's I-narrative, which introduces us into the essentials of the story in the first chapter, acts like a prologue and sets the atmosphere of loneliness which brought him back to the Dreary Station boarding house, where his mother had died, in an effort to recapture the security of life with

6. Mark Schorer, "Technique as Discovery", *Hudson Review* 1 (1948) 67-87.

7. Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel*. University of California Press, 1957.

Mother. In his own words, "a man must take possession of a place if it is to be a home for the waiting out of dreams"<sup>8</sup>. And William Hencher, the oldish, fattish, lonely bachelor had his dreams of love and devotion. Having spent most of his life with his mother, dragging their belongings from one cheap boarding house to another, Hencher gives us, in this introductory chapter, a picture of himself as the perfectly devoted son whose devotion becomes the sustaining force of his life. When his mother dies, burned in her effort to rescue her cheap belongings from fire, he feels lonelier rather than free. His fondest memories are of their life together and it is these memories which bring him back to the Dreary Station boarding house, longing to smell "the old dead odor of smoke" (p. 24) on the walls or the "damp sheets" in which he used to wrap his burned mother while nursing her. When a decade later, he does get rooms at the same boarding house, he spends the first nights thinking of the past with Mother and sees in the face of Michael and his wife Margaret, the new owners of the boarding house, a substitute for his mother upon whom he can lavish his love and devotion which will eventually appease his loneliness.

Thus, on the third night of his return to the Dreary Station boarding house and while he is unable to sleep, Hencher tells us how "in the darkened cubicle [he] listened to the far bells counting two, three, four o'clock in the morning and all that time —thinking now of comfort, tranquility, and thinking also of their [the Bankses] two clasped hands— he wondered what he might do for them" (p. 24). Finally, he made breakfast for them and while taking it up to their bedroom, he saw them sleeping. With the dreamer's sensitivity and perceptiveness, he saw how "behind each silent face was the dream that would collect slack shadows and tissues and muscles into some first mood for the day", and right away he adds: "could I not blow smiles into their nameless lips, could I not force apart those lips with kissing?" Thus, his own dreams of love and devotion will get entangled with those of the Bankses' and will draw them all into the "unreality" of terror and death. For in order to see his dreams realized, Hencher feels that he has to help Michael realize his. The chance is given through a gang whom Hencher knew during the war and who are trying to fix a horse race. Their plans fit Michael's dream to own a horse, and a horse he does get, only at the same time that he acquires the object of his ultimate, longed-for happiness he experiences the ultimate horror and finally death. Perhaps Michael paid too high a price for a single dream, but this is another premise that Hawkes wants to explore in this novel: What happens when we force our wild obsessive dreams to materialize.

After Hencher gives us the historical background, so to speak, of the story in his own voice, his presence as a narrator fades into one of the main

8. John Hawkes, *The Lime Twig*, Norfolk, Connecticut: A New Direction Book, 1961, p. 27.

characters of the story, as if devoured by the dream world into which, from the second chapter on, we are introduced by the voice of an omniscient narrator who tells us the story in the third person while Slyter's voice in an I-narration form goes on in parallel and is superimposed on the main narration giving us the "particulars" of the superficial reality of appearances.

Through a series of symbolic images the reader is initiated to the causes of Michael Banks' fantasies. While Margaret, his wife, is out on her Wednesday fortnight shopping trip to town, he is about to go out on the expedition of getting Rock Castle, the horse embodying his dreams. Before leaving the house, however, he stops for a while "next to their bed... and not beside the door and not in the hall" and stares at it watching "the course of dreams mapped on the coverlet" (p. 30), which is enough to make the reader pinpoint the problem to Michael's sexual relationship with his wife. The next moment Michael steps into the clothes closet and "embraces [Margaret's] two hanging and scratchy dresses and her winter coat" (p. 31) "...reaching and pushing into the dresses now, invading anew and for himself this hiding place which he expects to keep from her... dragging one of the dresses off its hanger by the shoulder" (p. 32). The whole scene, with special attention paid to the verb "invading", has sexual connotations, and the reader is unmistakably let into the secret of Michael's frustration which generates his need for dreaming.

Then, Michael notices a bird through the open window and wishes to hear its sound, a wish which makes him realize that what he actually longs for is the "sounds of a wireless through the open door or sounds of tugs and double-deckers and boys crying the news. Perhaps the smashing of a piece of furniture. Anything..." but he only remembers the "soft, timid sounds", which Margaret made in the "close and ordinary little bedroom" before she left. Words like "ordinary", "timid", betray the actuality of Michael's life while his wish for loud sounds reveals his longing for something special, something more exciting to enliven the dullness of his daily uneventful life.

In the next moment Michael visualizes the embodiment of his dream—a horse—in their sitting-room as a "tall, upright shape", a description with phallic connotations, and is listening "while it raises one shadowed hoof on the end of a silver tread of foreleg and drives down the hoof to splinter in a single crash one plank of that empty Dreary Station floor" (p. 33). Considering this scene in relation to the scenes discussed above, it becomes clear that Michael's dream in the form of a horse symbolizes his wish for sexual control over his wife, a fact which will bring excitement into his life.

Eventually, the moment comes when, through Hencher's loving mediation, Michael is able to realize his dream of owning a horse. Symbolically enough, Hencher takes Michael to the appointed place on the *Artemis*. The obvious association of the boat's name with the Greek goddess of hunting

appropriately fits Michael's image of hunting his dream. It is also worth mentioning the little details which become symbolic of Michael's entering into the realm of dream such as the fact that both Hencher and Michael are stowaways on the *Artemis* and they travel with "no luggage, no destination" as there is no need of them when travelling in a dream. Equally symbolic is the fog which prevails over the scene of Rock Castle's arrival: "Fog, of course, and he should have expected it, should have carried a torch. Yet, whatever was to come his way would come, he knew, like this — slowly and out of a thick fog. Accidents, meetings unexpected, a figure emerging to put its arms about him: where to discover everything he dreamed of except in fog. And thinking of slippery corners, skin suddenly bruised, grappling hooks going through the water: where to lose it all if not in the same fog" (p. 45). The above quotation foreshadows, so to speak, all what Michael is to discover in meeting with his dream —sexual excitement with Sybiline whose function is to keep Michael interested and content until the end of the horse race and violence in way of bruised skins— and all what he is to lose— his dream along with his life.

While waiting in the fog for Rock Castle to arrive "all about him was the visible texture and destiny of the expanding fog" (p. 45), a scene which invokes the atmosphere created when a dream invades reality. The fog bells and whistles are a warning of what is to come, only Michael cannot grasp their metaphorical meaning. The dirt which is in such a realistic manner described in the cargo shed, where Michael is waiting for his dream to arrive, symbolically anticipates what is going to happen to him. The narrator's comment accompanying this description of filth is unmistakable in its implications: "Only Hencher, himself and the rats. Only scum, the greasy water and a punctured and sodden dory beneath them — filth for a man to fall into" (p. 43).

Another element which metaphorically marks the passing beyond the line of actuality and into the realm of dream is the fact that Michael loses his sense of time. When the horse arrived, Michael felt "it was not Wednesday at all, only a time slipped off its cycle with hours and darkness never to be accounted for" (p. 40). During the unloading scene, the horse is referred to as "the unexploded bomb" and the reader cannot help associating this image with the image of the falling aircraft described in Chapter One by Hencher. The lifting up of the horse is also significantly referred to as the "fishing up of a live bomb big enough to blow a cathedral to the ground" (p. 51), a metaphor which reveals the potentiality of destruction latent in the dream.

Margaret, too, has her own dreams of love and sexual fulfillment with her husband, only she seems unable to let herself go as the clasped safety-pin under her shirt signifies. The reader is given quite a few hints by which he realizes the degree to which Margaret, by repressing her femininity, fails to

have a fulfilling relationship with her husband and is led to fantasies through which she tries to compensate for the absence of excitement in her ordinary life. She repudiates the combination of pink and herself as outrageous and wears dark brown instead. She escapes the Italian Barber's pass but dreams of "the crostics and, in the dark, men with numbers wrapped round their fingers would feel her legs, or she would lie with an obscure member of the government on a leather couch, trying to remember and all the while begging for his name" (p. 68). Finally, she misplaces the orchid (a sexual symbol) which her husband has given her and thinks: "how horrible she felt in pink; how horrible the touch of the barber's lips; how heavy the clasped orchid on her dress" (p. 65).

Margaret, however, unlike Hencher and Michael, will not actively seek her dream out. Convinced that there is "nothing for her" in this life, she has always denied her dream. Unlike them, she will be passively pulled into confronting it, accompanied with all the violence and pain which haunted her night dreams—children being crushed by trains while toads hopped off their bodies—whenever she feared that she might lose Michael. And it is precisely this fear which drags her into the realm where her fantasies will substantiate: she goes to the Golden Bowl, for instance, responding to Michael's strange telephone call after his even stranger disappearance from home.

The extremity of Margaret's beating scene has bothered many critics like Littlejohn<sup>9</sup>, who says that Hawkes has gone too far with violence but, as Greiner believes, this scene "is explained" as a manifestation of her dreams, the violence of which she never expects to be realized, even though she has always been vaguely aware of the possible terror within her fantasies<sup>10</sup>. One tends to agree with Greiner because how could Margaret's preposterous and to a great extent unconvincing reaction—judged with ordinary everyday standards—to the torture be explained? When she is nudged on her thigh, Margaret makes no effort to pull her leg away. When Thick moves in for the kill, she notes that he is wearing his trousers with two buttons open. When Larry approaches to rape her (in revenge for Sybilline's over-indulgence to Michael), she sees an angel's whiteness on his face and thinks of her situation as incomparable with violent events shown in films. Her pathetic passivity is only explainable if we accept Greiner's view that "Michael and Margaret metaphorically experience the kind of sexual fulfillment with each other which they had been unable to feel in their real lives"<sup>11</sup>.

Thus, the three main dreamers of the story, Hencher, Michael and

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9. David Littlejohn, "The Anti-Realists", *Daedalus* 92 (Spring, 1963) 256-258.

10. Greiner, *op. cit.*, p. 130.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 153.

Margaret, whom the dull, lonely and unsatisfactory daily routine encourages to nurture dreams which are to destroy them in the process of their being fulfilled, are all caught like birds on lime twigs. Like birds, they are all trapped on the lime twig of their dreams. The association with trapped birds —apart from all kinds of recurring bird images throughout the novel— is made clear when Michael ominously thinks, as the dawn of the horse-race is approaching, that “Even two tits may be snared and separated in such a dawn. He listened, turned his head under the shadows and reflected that the little bird was fagged and tasteless as the bird on the sick bough” (p. 159). When Michael makes this observation, both he and Margaret are imprisoned beyond escape and the identification of their situation with that of the two tits to be snared and separated is easily made.

When Michael becomes aware of what is happening to him, he will try to stop the whole thing by rushing into the horse-race course in front of the horses and he will meet his death under the trampling hoofs of Rock Castle, thus actually killed by his dream. This act of repudiation, no matter how redemptive for Michael, judged as a character, it may be, is a hopeless act, all the same. Michael has to pay the full price for his dream. And Hawkes, as Greiner remarks, “denies the possibility of conventional poetic justice in this topsy-turvy world where dreams come true with such violent results. Banks’ sacrifice may redeem him, but he, Margaret, Hencher, Monica and Coles are all dead. Larry and the gang still escape and the police of the real world fumble about ineffectually in search for the facts of the case, unaware that those facts are buried in the dreams of Hencher, Banks, and Margaret”<sup>12</sup>.

John Hawkes is considered as one of the truly gifted writers in the so-called Black Humour movement which has flourished since 1950, but is, as Leslie A. Fiedler put it in his introduction to *The Lime Twig*, “the least read novelist of substantial merit in the United States”. Hawkes is one among those authors who envision of their world as chaotic and fractured; who realize the complexity of contemporary reality and refuse to verify a moral code because verification would allude to order and sanity in a world which they see as fractured and absurd. They also reject the satirist’s faith in the ability of satirical laughter to reform man’s follies but do believe that the ridiculous joke called life must be laughed at, if sanity is to be maintained. There is, undoubtedly, a lot of violence in Hawkes’ novel but, perhaps, Hawkes means his work to contain all the violence that dreams in their waking contain so that his readers are supplied with a safe way to compensate for the excitement which their ordinary, uneventful lives lack.

The essential thing in order to appreciate what Hawkes is trying to do in his novel is to slough off our traditional notions of what makes a novel and realize that realism is not the only way of looking at life truthfully. And this is

12. *Ibid.*, p. 156.

exactly what Hawkes means to convey through his novel, *The Lime Twig*, and his work more generally. Along with writers like W. Golding, Iris Murdoch and Lawrence Durrell in England, Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., Terry Southern and John Barth in the United States, John Hawkes has realized that realism has only been a formal convention and has come to its end as the only vehicle of representing reality. They are all against that kind of realism which subordinates words to their referents, "exalts life and diminishes Art, exalts things and diminishes words"<sup>13</sup>, and "rely more on the power of words to stimulate imagination"<sup>14</sup>, as Robert Scholes observes in his book, *The Fabulators*, in which he groups these authors together as a movement reacting to formal realism and Naturalism in spite of the great differences among them as far as their individual practices are concerned. Yet, they are all recognized by what Scholes calls "fabulation", which he defines as "a return to a more verbal kind of fiction... to a more fictional kind" of writing by which he means "a less realistic and more artistic kind of narrative: more shapely, more creative, more concerned with ideas and ideals, less connected with things"<sup>15</sup>. These are authors who do not conceive their art, as Stendhal did, as "a mirror strolling down the lane, reflecting the sky above and the mud below", but as an imaginative construct with a great emphasis on story which constitutes an important dimension of the modern fabulation, as Robert Scholes remarks in his book: "such return to story for renewed vigor is characteristic of the modern fabulators" (p. 31).

Besides being a fabulator according to Scholes' definition of the term, John Hawkes is also a gifted craftsman who has managed to make the structure of *The Lime Twig* reflect its theme through an ingenious manipulation of the point-of-view.

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13. Robert Scholes, *The Fabulators*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1967, p. 11.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 12.

15. *Ibid.*

## ΠΕΡΙΛΗΨΗ

Μαρία Θ. Αναστασοπούλου, *Όνειρο και πραγματικότητα του Τζων Χωκς 'Η Ξόβεργα'*

Σκοπός του άρθρου αυτού είναι να δείξει τον τρόπο με τον οποίο ο σύγχρονος Αμερικανός συγγραφέας Τζων Χωκς χειρίζεται τα διηγηματικά στοιχεία για να ανατρέψει την πίστη, ότι η ρεαλιστική γραφή αντανakλά επακριβώς την πραγματικότητα. Ο Χωκς πιστεύει, ότι ένα μεγάλο μέρος της πραγματικότητας ενυπάρχει στα κρυφά όνειρα που κυνηγάνε οι άνθρωποι για να εξισορροπήσουν τις φτωχές εμπειρίες της καθημερινής τους ζωής. Για να αποδείξει αυτή τη διπλή διάσταση της πραγματικότητας ο Χωκς αξιοποιεί μια διπλή αφηγηματική φωνή, η οποία δημιουργεί μια διπλή προοπτική και η οποία ανταποκρίνεται στη διπλή διάσταση της πραγματικότητας. Η πρώτη αφηγηματική φωνή ανήκει στην περιορισμένη οπτική γωνία του δημοσιογράφου Σλάιτερ και αντιστοιχεί στην πραγματικότητα των επιφανειακών φαινομένων, από τα οποία ο Σλάιτερ στην αρχή του μυθιστορήματος και η αστυνομία στο τέλος προσπαθούν να φθάσουν στην αλήθεια. Η δεύτερη ανήκει στην απεριόριστη οπτική γωνία του παντογνώστη αφηγητή και αντιστοιχεί στην πραγματικότητα των ονείρων των τριών κυρίων χαρακτήρων. Ο αναγνώστης, που γίνεται μύστης των κρυφών ελατηρίων από τα οποία πηγάζει η πραγματικότητα της επιφάνειας, αντιλαμβάνεται την ειρωνία που δημιουργείται από την αντιπαράθεση των δύο διαφορετικών αφηγηματικών φωνών και εκτιμά το αισθητικό αποτέλεσμα, όπου η φόρμα του μυθιστορήματος αντανakλά το θέμα του με αποτέλεσμα να το τονίζει ακόμα περισσότερο.