"Design and Debris": John Hawkes's *Travesty,* Chaos Theory, and the Swerve

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John Hawkes's short novel *Travesty* lends itself to synopsis in much the same way as an elegant experiment in physics clearly and precisely defines its parameters and hoped-for results. "In the darkest quarter of the night" (11), an elegant and finely tuned performance car speeds down a country road in the south of France at nearly one hundred and fifty kilometers per hour. The unnamed driver expertly guides his machine as he explains, in an extended and unbroken monologue, to his friend the poet, Henri, sitting beside him, and to his daughter, Chantal, uncomfortably crouched in the back seat, that he intends to end their journey, quite deliberately, against the thick stone wall of a desolate farmhouse. Their perilous route and destination have been carefully plotted, and the driver estimates their arrival in one hundred minutes "by the dashboard clock" (25). The driver reveals that he knows that Henri has taken both his wife, Honorine, and Chantal as his mistresses. The passengers are left little room to maneuver; the driver deplores Chantal's fits of vomiting and hysteria and blandly points out that Henri's intervention at the wheel will "pitch us into the toneless world of highway tragedy even more quickly than I have planned" (11). Although he remains undissuaded by Henri's attempts at rational argument, the narrator encourages in the time remaining an examination of the perfect "symmetry" (25) that their mutual destruction will create. The subjects of his experiment are thus engaged in its analysis for the duration of the novel.

Travesty is already in motion when it is first encountered, and it remains constantly in motion for its brief duration. The driver has achieved his precipitous acceleration to a surely fatal speed. The trap has been sprung on his hapless victims. In this sense the cause of the present action is matter for retrospection only, seen dimly receding into the night. The initial conditions—infidelity, betrayal,

the artistic temperament—are by no means precisely determined and remain shrouded in uncertainty. The reader in turn becomes a victim of the driver's monologue, another passenger whose pleading remains unheeded and unrecorded throughout the terrifying ride.

Hawkes most resembles Edgar Allan Poe in his allegiance to calculated trauma, undisturbed terror, and a dark futility that will not allow the reader to suspect that Henri could at last convince the driver to relent.[1] So despite the linear progress of the novel, the narration refutes any claim to suspense as a means of galvanizing the reader's attention. Hawkes bypasses the pedestrian concern with *what* will happen to the characters assembled and proceeds to a discussion of *why* they are thus subjected to extremes. The narrator, in an approach reminiscent of Poe's philosophy of composition, wishes to create a single effect upon his passengers:

> We have agreed on the surface aspects of trauma: the difficulty of submission, the problem of surprise, a concept of existence so suddenly constricted that one feels like a goldfish crazed and yet at the same time quite paralyzed in his bowl. A mere question of adjustment. But the fact of the matter is that you do not share my interest in what I have called "design and debris." (19)

The driver would have his captive audience believe that the collision is unavoidable and that their time in his presence is best spent studying the procedures and probable outcome of his experiment. He refutes the charge that he is "merely some sort of suicidal maniac, an aesthetician of death at high speed" (18). He preys upon the normal human instincts to avoid accident and to fear death, but he is not chiefly concerned with inflicting punishment on those who have betrayed him. That would be petty emotionalism, gross morbidness. He begs Henri to adjust his abhorrence of vehicular collision in order to appreciate his own "reverential amazement" before "the symmetry of the two or even more machines whose crashing" is all too swiftly erased by the authorities (20). In an anecdote related to the composition of *Travesty*, Hawkes relates a fascination with vehicular mayhem quite comparable to that of the driver: "Two years ago this summer there was a car accident near us in Brittany—a marvelous French accident with cars coming together head-on and then just melding their pieces all over the landscape for hundreds and hundreds of yards" ("A Conversation" 165). Two highly organized machines disintegrate, disrupting the orderly flow of traffic; the "melding" of the automobiles forms a new and equally complex (dis)array, subject to the aesthetic consideration of the properly attuned observer. In the confusion and disorder of such a site, the driver views a "symmetry" revealed. Like Hawkes, the driver is an aesthetician of collision; he admires the scattering of debris and does not fear it. In a poetics of postmodernism, he worships before dispersal.[2] Unimpeded flow, deflection, collision: for the duration of the novel the sports car is a particle in movement on a preordained path. But the final swerve and impact of the car into the farmhouse wall are beyond the

bounds of narratorial possibility. The driver makes a promise before he ceases to speak, and hence ceases to be recorded: "there shall be no survivors. None" (128). Because the driver is clearly an exemplar of the unreliable narrator, it is possible that this scenario is entirely concocted within the obsessed mind of the cuckolded husband and betrayed father as he sits in an armchair at his mansion, rather suspiciously called "Tara." There are probably as many scenarios as there are clever critics that call into question the palpable reality of the events described in the novel. Hawkes states, however:

> I don't want to be left with nothing but the narrator. . . . Some reviewers haven't wanted to admit that there is a car accident, either. I think the accident the narrator imagines is the accident that occurs. Without the literal accident, you wouldn't have the impossible object, you wouldn't have the whole fabric of imagined event, you wouldn't have the imagination exemplified as it is in that short novel. ("A Conversation" 69-70)

Hawkes is repelled by the suggestion that his narrator merely indulges a morbid fantasy. The driver's act of imagination, his aesthetic impulse, must inevitably come into contact with the cold stone wall of reality, the literal accident. The crash thus articulates the aesthetic of "design and debris" beyond mere theory or proposition. Art happens not in the evasion of, but in the confrontation with, the real.[3] Nevertheless, it remains impossible for this novel to achieve the totality of closure: the impact and its aftermath can only be imagined, never described, by the narrator. The three characters must always be suspended in motion as they race toward, but never attain, their final destination. The narrative is thus a self-consuming, self-destructive artifact. If, as Hawkes argues, we are to accept the narration as a literal description of events as they transpire, how or by whom is this monologue recorded? The "impossible object" that Hawkes describes is both the collision and the novel itself. The sheer impossibility of the narrative moment (there can be no preterit recollection) flaunts the very artifice of all fiction; all art is an impossible object. And for the driver, his gloved hands tightly gripping the wheel, the aesthetic object that is the debris of collision can never be experienced. Both the collision and *Travesty* itself are painstakingly literal and blatantly artificial.

Because the driver cannot experience the product of his collision, his attention focuses on the present process by which he attains his imagined end. Henri views himself as the unfortunate dummy in a crash test that his friend has set into motion; he cannot remove his attention from the farmhouse wall. Meanwhile, the driver advances his "theory" of art, that "ours is the power to invent the very world we are quitting. . . . It is as if the bird could die in flight. And unless we exercise this power of ours we merely slide toward the pit feet first, eyes closed, slack, and smiling in our pathetic submission to an oblivion we still hope to understand" (57). The driver refutes the fondly held perception of life as a slow, undisturbed, laminar flow toward an emission that is beyond comprehension. He

welcomes turbulence as an intrinsic factor of art and existence alike. In *Chaos: Making a New Science*, James Gleick concurs that "chaos is a science of process rather than state, of becoming rather than being" (5). The driver fails to be excited by the laminar flow of traffic on a limited-access interstate, his cruise control engaged for hundreds of miles, nor is he particularly engaged by the car safely parked in its garage. Like the bird that dies in flight, it is the instantaneous phase transition from laminar to turbulent flow that appeals to him. Gleick describes the physical manifestations of this aesthetic and scientific mystery:

> When flow is smooth, or laminar, small disturbances die out. But past the onset of turbulence, disturbances grow catastrophically. This onset—this transition—became a critical mystery in science. The channel below a rock in a stream becomes a whirling vortex that grows, splits off and spins downstream. A plume of cigarette smoke rises smoothly from an ashtray, accelerating until it passes a critical velocity and splinters into wild eddies. (122)

The onset of turbulence, that moment in which the orderly flow of molecules becomes random, can be "seen and measured in laboratory experiments . . . but its nature remains elusive" (122-23). For Hawkes, the imaginative act resembles this phase transition between invention and destruction, the calculable and the inscrutable, the process of life and the stasis of death.

Regrettably, the driver will be unable to measure the phase change of his automobile from laminar to turbulent flow, from order and coherence to disorder and fragmentation, but he does provide a series of explicitly theoretical propositions while the car traverses the French countryside. Focusing on the didactic rather than on the traumatic, visceral power that these passages possess accedes to the driver's desire to convince his passengers (and thus the implied reader) that the success of his aesthetic experiment is worth the cost of their lives. But his propositions are so intriguing that they merit attention even in isolation from the thrust of the narrative. In the earliest enunciation of the driver's theory, he appears to sympathize with Henri's incomprehension:

> It is not easy to discover that your closest friend and husband to one mistress and father of the other is driving at something greater than his customary speed, at a speed that begins to frighten you, and that this same friend is driving by plan, intentionally, and refuses to listen to what for you is reason.What can you do? How in but a few minutes can you adjust yourself successfully to what for me is second nature: a nearly phobic yearning for the truest paradox, a thirst to lie at the center of this paradigm: one moment the car in perfect condition, without so much as a scratch on its curving surface the next moment impact, sheer impact. Total destruction. In its own way it is a form of ecstasy, this utter harmony between design and debris. (17)

The driver challenges Henri's notion of what is reasonable or rational, because such humanistically defined conceptions contribute directly to Henri's inability to appreciate the paradox that the driver presents. He tries to convince his audi-

ence that the profoundly complex object is neither irrational nor a thing to be abhorred.[4] Although gifted with a poet's fine sensibility, Henri has not transcended the dualist equation of rationality and harmony with order, irrationality and cacophony with chaos. He vastly prefers the laminar flow that leaves the speeding automobile unscathed and fundamentally dreads the uncontrollable condition of turbulence. The driver's experiment challenges this dualist, and ultimately moralist, equation. What happens, he inquires, at that paradoxical moment of phase change from stable to chaotic? How do we express, moreover, the "utter harmony" that exists between these two states without prejudicially advancing the one over the other? Is the moment of impact, in which the perfect form disintegrates into formlessness, an ecstatic moment because the individual is relieved of the burden of self-preservation? The driver does not hold in contradiction his demand for "total destruction" and "this propensity of mine toward total coherence" (75). These absolutes ought to suggest a mutual exclusivity, and conventional wisdom would concur that they are not simultaneously obtainable. But that is in fact the paradox that the driver pursues and the essence of chaos theory that Hawkes engages.

The driver—or Papa as he refers to himself—broadens and embellishes the paradoxical nature of his proposition in a subsequent passage. He posits the possibility of encountering a farm truck on the dark road, a "miscalculation" that would result in "Disaster. Witless, idiotic disaster" (22–23). How nihilistic that their deaths should simply be the result of recklessness, a chance encounter that yielded no calculable results—a botched experiment. The driver is not so singularly in pursuit of the stochastic, random collision of molecules or automobiles as he is concerned with the relationship between the deterministic and the accidental: "What I have in mind," he declares to his unwilling audience, "is an 'accident' so perfectly contrived that it will be unique, spectacular, instantaneous, a physical counterpart to that vision in which it was in fact conceived. A clear 'accident,' so to speak, in which invention quite defies interpretation" (23). As a relatively superficial consideration of plot, Papa's desire to disguise the true nature of the "accident" is meant to deceive both his wife, Honorine, and quite possibly the insurance company, that other peruser of stochastic information. He means the simultaneous loss of husband, lover, and daughter to be far more devastating to Honorine (his route takes them past the chateau where she lies sleeping) than the revelation of a revenge plot could ever be—because the irruption of the uncontrollable in our lives is far more appalling than the vindictiveness of human tragedy.

Although the familiar silhouette of Alfred Hitchcock can be detected in the driver's proposition of something like the perfect crime, his theory more specifically addresses a conjunction of literature and science. The paradox of a perfectly contrived accident challenges the binary opposition between the deterministic and the stochastic, an event that has a causal relation to its antecedent and one that is purely the result of random processes. The driver has "conceived" the

impact as testament to his own artistic "vision." The event will be a direct manifestation of his intentions, and yet be utterly disguised as the product of chance occurrence. Papa implies that the fine calculations that bring him to the stone wall—time, fuel, route—only serve to enhance the "unique, spectacular, instantaneous" impact and scattering of debris. The utterly unpredictable condition in which the destroyed automobile will be found—keeping in mind that the scene exists only as a projection and not a predictable surety—serves as an ineluctable "counterpart" of the design that brought it to pass. In this sense, the driver joins those postmodern artists, composers, and writers who employ chance operations to sublimate authorial intention.[5] The device, the materials, and the mechanism are indicative of the artist's personal choice, but the resulting artwork is beyond the control of the artist. His "invention quite defies interpretation" (23), intentionality becomes indistinguishable from happenstance, the cleverness of the criminal evades detection.

Hawkes describes the artistic challenge to himself and the driver—to conceive of the inconceivable—not in terms that are limited to such familiar media of creation as the sketchpad, notebook, or musical score but in terms that are more broadly applicable to the physical universe: "Death—cessation, annihilation—is the only thing I can think of that cannot be imagined. The only way that the artist–driver of the car can imagine it is through paradox. He conceives of the wreckage before it occurs; he recognizes that in destruction there is always a design for those of us who want to seek it; and he sees that in any design, any created thing, there is always the potential for the loss of its beautiful shape and its collapse into chaos" (LeClair 28). The paradox of the contrived accident leads to a grander and perhaps universal paradox, the interpenetration of order and chaos. Hawkes claims, as the result of his 128-page experiment, the recognition that in a chaotic system it is possible to discover hidden order, in a scattering of debris it is possible to discover a pattern; and conversely, an orderly system or made object is susceptible to entropic—or catastrophic—decay, as the perfectly formed curve becomes distressed or destroyed. Hawkes demonstrates that the postmodern novelist apprehends one of the central tenets of chaos theory not as a figure of speech but as a physical principle.

Because the driver's preconception of the wreckage, the aftermath of his own annihilation, is at issue in Hawkes's argument, it would be best to visit the site of this "private apocalypse" as it is described—hypothetically—in the narration:

> We have at the outset the shattering that occurs in darkness, then the first sunrise in which the chaos, the physical disarray, has not yet settled—bits of metal expanding, contracting, tufts of upholstery exposed to the air, an unsocketed dial impossibly squeaking in a clump of thorns—though this same baffling tangle of springs, jagged edges of steel, curves of aluminum, has already received its first coating of white frost. In the course of the first day the gasoline evaporates, the engine oil begins to fade into the earth, the broken lens of a far-flung headlight reflects the progress of the sun from a

> furrow in what was once a field of corn. The birds do not sing, clouds pass, the wreckage is warmed, the human remains are integral with the remains of rubber, glass, steel. A stone has lodged in the engine block, the process of rusting has begun. And then darkness, a cold wind, a shred of clothing fluttering where it is snagged on one of the doors which, quite unscathed, lies flat in the grass. And then daylight, changing temperature, a night of cold rain, the short-lived presence of a scavenging rodent. And despite all this chemistry of time, nothing has disturbed the essential integrity of our tableau of chaos, the point being that if design inevitably surrenders to debris, debris inevitably reveals its innate design. (58-59)

One appreciates the fact that this passage moves inductively from a multitude of fine details to a statement of principle; the nature of chaotic behavior makes it irreducible to a normalized statement. Because this "tableau of chaos" is complex, it is therefore rich in information that must be recorded before the system itself can be understood.[6] The driver is determined—plans—to shatter his elegant sports car across the field of an abandoned farm: the furrows of the field, the marks of human cultivation and linear order are themselves undergoing erasure with the "chemistry of time"; so the disarray of mechanical parts becomes one with the landscape, the background, from which order arises and into which order decays. One must abandon the anthropocentric prejudice that finds loathsome that which threatens to absorb the products of human manufacture. In this chaotic scene, the driver does not see gruesome fragmentation but an "essential integrity" amidst the dispersal of car parts. Further, the natural and mechanic elements have become thoroughly interspersed: with "a stone lodged in the engine block, the process of rusting" begins, so that the man-made metallic object, which had been artificially sealed in an oil-filled casement, now interacts, mixes, with other natural substances. "The broken lens of a far-flung headlight" that once artificially concentrated a beam of light now "reflects the progress of the sun," and so participates in a recursive order on an infinitely more complex level. The driver complains, through his description of the wreckage, that we have been hermetically sealed within a compartment of petty orderliness in which any fissure is appalling, at the expense of a far greater participation in the actualities of the physical world. Thus the collapse of that petty order that is the sports car so lovingly maintained, reveals an order on a different scale, or of another sort.

In literature, science, and philosophy a paradigm shift occurs, late in the twentieth century, in the conception of the relation between order and disorder. In the modernist period—although certainly this impulse is identifiable at other prior moments in literary history—the function of the artist was to impose an order, self-consciously, through the use of artifice and design, upon an otherwise disordered, fragmented, and recalcitrantly irrational world. Modernist artists were aware that the patterns they imposed were impermanent assertions of their creativity against the dissolution that surrounded them. In their conception, chaos presents itself as the antithesis of order. Wallace Stevens, for example, addresses this problem from the modernist perspective in some of his most important work,

and in no simple manner. In "Imagination as Value," he states: "imagination is the power that enables us to perceive the normal in the abnormal, the opposite of chaos in chaos" (*Angel* 153). Stevens's assertion seems valid: that reason alone does not permit us to perceive the order in chaos, and that the attorneys and insurance executives whose profession he shared considered the imagination to be abnormal, if not irrational. In his tribute to the powers of the imagination, Stevens is much like Hawkes in that the artistic imagination permits him to perceive the "impossible object." But unlike Hawkes, Stevens places an exceptional emphasis on the mind's ability to establish order, in opposition to chaos. Thus, in "Anecdote of the Jar," a kind of aesthetic parable, the jar as a figure for the ordering capacity of the mind lends shape to the "slovenly wilderness" (*Poems* 76). And in "The Idea of Order at Key West," he acknowledges and approves the "maker's rage to order" the turbulent chaos of the sea (*Poems* 130). For Stevens, the human mind fixes meaning upon an irrational and indifferent physical universe.[7] His position is entirely in accordance with Roland Barthes's description of the modern consciousness as an imagination "fabricating meanings" in the world (218). The modern artist is a maker, a fabricator of meanings and orders that must, as Stevens says elsewhere, "suffice." The critical attribute of the modern artist remains the power to impose order on an inchoate world.

Returning to the more expansive genre of fiction, one sees that the paradigm in place in the modernist novel is much the same as it is for Stevens. In their overview of the situation, John Fletcher and Malcolm Bradbury argue that the modernist, or introverted, novel aspires "to the condition of ordered game," cognizant as it is of "the fact that all human order is an imposition on the absurdity of experience." Granted that human order is both arbitrary and impermanent, they conclude: "Hence *the novel is implicitly design and design only*, a form of art and joy, a world pleasured by its own making. Reality itself being offensively literal or hideously surreal, the novel has thus tended to become, for a substantial and international group of writers, a particular occasion of order—or disorder—to set against all other orders, or disorders" (*Modernism* 412–13, my emphasis). Fletcher and Bradbury are certainly correct in their description of the goals and methods of the modernist novel. But as they intend this description to be applicable as well to postwar fiction, some emendation is in order. These two critics iterate the modernist emphasis on "making," and the "imposition" of human order on an abhorrently disorganized world. The modernist novel may well be "design and design only," but Hawkes demonstrates that the postmodernist novel must relate "design and debris" as a fully integrated system. If we can return to the driver's "theory," he states that "ours is the power to invent the very world we are quitting" (57). The postmodern artist proposes a world pleasured both by its making and its unmaking, its creation and its destruction, its invention and its abandonment.[8]

Hawkes transcends the dualist imposition of order on chaos that is characteristic of a fabricatory modernism, in which the artist must inevitably be frustrated

by the impermanence of his creation. Those critics who insist on a dualist interpretation of the novel thrust it back into the paradigm of modernism. For example, Eric Henderson claims, "It is Hawkes himself, through linguistic and stylistic devices, through the structuring capacity, who exhibits the authorial (and authoritarian) need to impose a sense of order and coherence on a world characterized by random eruptions of violence and chaotic disturbances" (3034A).[9] Rather, Hawkes wishes to sustain the paradox of design *and* debris and to assert—as the driver so clearly states—the principle of the interpenetration of order and chaos: again, "the point being that if design inevitably surrenders to debris, debris inevitably reveals its innate design" (59). As a postmodern novelist, Hawkes does not shrink before the proposition of "unmaking" or decreative force; he extols the complementarity of the two terms; and finally, he proposes the existence of an orderly disorder. In his statement of the complementarity of design and debris, Hawkes might well be echoed by Douglas Hofstadter who observes, "It turns out that an eerie type of chaos can lurk just behind a façade of order—and yet, deep inside the chaos lurks an even eerier type of order" (Gleick, back cover). Hawkes's *Travesty* illustrates the tenuousness of authoritarian control as it slips into madness, the fragility of pattern as it dissolves into irregularity; and it proposes the revelation of some hidden order in the scatter of random occurrences, some more profound design within the welter of chaos.

Michel Serres, whose career has been devoted to the cross-disciplinary study of science and the humanities, provides confirmation of the paradigm shift as it is described in Hawkes's novel. Serres deplores the "dualist hell" that has separated science and literature, reason and imagination, order and disorder, unity and multiplicity. The result of such dualism is a "desire to dominate. To think in terms of couples of separate concepts is to prepare fearsome weapons—swallow-tailed arrows and darts—so as to control the space and to kill" ("Dream" 233). Instead he observes that everywhere in the physical universe unities are combined with scattered multiplicities: "the mixture is so intimate that there is not one chaotic or distributional area that is not surrounded with systems. . . . Nor is there one area of system that is not surrounded with distributions. . . . It is as if the essential concern here were to border disorder with order and unities with multiplicities. These neighborings are so refined that the interpenetration is total" (231–32). Like the most elaborate of parquet floors, the inlay of aspects of order and disorder in the physical universe is so complete that the contrasts between the separate materials are subsumed within the interaction of the whole. Serres professes, "I believe that they have been sown into a sporadic jigsaw puzzle. This reciprocal plunge, this bathing of islands of order or negentropy in a fractal sea of rumbling, this bathing of lakes of noise in a formerly glacial earth, is not endowed with regularity, for it is itself a distribution, a sheer multiplicity." However sporadic the reciprocity, "the universe vibrates endlessly between the two," pulsating between order and disorder (232). This acknowledgment of the interpenetration of order and chaos is the principal revelation of

the driver's monologue in *Travesty* and an essential component of Hawkes's postmodernism.

The narrator of *Travesty* is quite articulate regarding these themes. Very near the beginning of the novel, Papa "replies" to Henri, "Slow down you say? But the course of events cannot be regulated by some sort of perversely wired traffic policeman." He explicitly rejects a Newtonian determinism that could predict the result of an action with mechanical precision. The variables are too many for such sureties: "Our speed is a maximum in a bed of maximums which happen to include: my driving skill, this empty road, the time of night, the capacity of the car's engine, the immensity of the four seasons lying beyond us between the trees or in the flat fields" (15). Each of these conditions is unpredictable, all have been pushed to their very limits, yet they are so finely interrelated that the failure of any one is the failure of the system. Papa concludes, "Like schoolboys who have studied the solar system (I do not mean to be condescending or simpleminded) you and I know that all the elements of life coerce each other, force each other instant by instant into that perfect formation which is lofty and the only one possible" (15). Such perfection is not achievable through the regulatory impulse of a single determining actor, but rather through the infinite adjustment and interaction of all elements involved.

The driver continually interrelates choice and chance, plan and accident, artificial and natural, order and chaos, until his audience is forced to surrender the fond notion that any decision, act, or result in their life is purely a matter of either intentionality or random occurrence; these things intertwine in the course of our passage. The driver is missing a lung, attributable to "the war of course." Is such a condition accidental or intentional? "At any rate," he continues, "it is probably true that my missing lung determined long ago my choice of a doctor." The doctor, in turn, is missing his left leg, "amputated only weeks before the poor fellow's wife ran off, finally, with her lover of about twenty years' standing" (26–27). The driver deliberately links his choice of a physician—when others shun the man—to the concatenation of disorder in his life. Are these misfortunes a matter of coincidence, or is the final wreckage of the doctor's marriage instigated by his physical disability? In either case, Papa is attracted to debris:

> The affinity is obvious, obvious. But by now you will have perceived the design that underlies all my rambling and which, like a giant snow crystal, permeates all the tissues of existence. But the crystal melts, the tissues dissolve, a doctor's leg is neatly amputated by a team of doctors. Design and debris, as I have said already. Design and debris. I thrive on it. For me the artificial limb is more real, if you will allow the word, than the other and natural limb still inhabited by sensation. (27)

The driver's design, his planning and deliberation, leads him to destruction and debris; that disorder, in turn, leads him to a form of organization that is perhaps "more real" than that which he had previously perceived.

The driver's choice of the "snow crystal" illustrates the way in which order arises out of seeming chaos, a plan emerges from ramblings, and then as quickly melts into disorder. The snow crystal provides an apt symbol of order in chaos because it is a familiar example of fractal structure. James Gleick points out that "the word *fractal* came to stand for a way of describing, calculating, and thinking about shapes that are irregular and fragmented, jagged and broken-up—shapes from the crystalline curves of snowflakes to the discontinuous dust of galaxies. A fractal curve implies an organizing structure that lies hidden among the hideous complication of such shapes" (113–14). Hawkes's narrator has clearly invested his confidence in the principle of regular irregularity, in which "the degree of irregularity remains constant over different scales" (Gleick 98). If patterns reveal themselves in the jagged shapes of snowflakes and galaxies, surely an underlying design will be revealed in the hideously fragmented remains of the automobile: what pertains to the microscopic and the macroscopic should also pertain to the middle distance of human affairs. The "giant snow crystal" is symbolic of a fractal ordering at every scale, permeating every level of existence.[10]

Perhaps the defining quality of fractal order is self-similarity. Gleick explains, "Self-similarity is symmetry across scale. It implies recursion, pattern inside pattern." Fractal shapes not only "produce detail at finer and finer scales," they also produce "detail with certain constant measurements. Monstrous shapes like the Koch curve display self-similarity because they look exactly the same even under high magnification" (103). Postmodern fiction is no stranger to the principles of recursive structure or infinite regress as illustrated by the Koch curve. The world-within-a-world, or the Chinese box model, has served Borges, Burroughs, and Barth among others.[11]No other worlds are posited by the narrator in *Travesty*—the one he enacts is complicated enough—but at least one critic, Patrick O'Donnell, has remarked on the intensive degree of "symmetries, repetitions, identifications, and recurrences" in so short a novel (139). The "affinity" between the single-lunged driver and his one-legged physician is one such detail that prompts the existential query of multiply receding reflections, as when one stands between two mirrors. At a "finer scale" in the narrative, Papa recounts a story told by Lulu, a resort manager, to his wife Honorine about a dwarfish man, "the possessor of a left arm nipped off and drawn to a point at the elbow by one of those familiar accidents of birth," sent by his demanding mistress to sell a branch of mimosa in the street. Here we encounter a "nesting" of stories (Papa's direct discourse, within which the *Chez Lulu* episode, within which Lulu's tale) in which the "constant measurement" of a malformed body appears at a further reduction of scale. It is surely no accident that the pitiable man is humiliated when "a small but elegant automobile drove past with an enormous heap of gleaming, yellow mimosa covering its entire roof" (112–13). Such similarities across scale may be taken either as an indication of fictional artifice or as the revelation of pattern underlying chaos. In any case, the affinity of the inset story

with the driver's own inability to please his wife, and his mocking, destructive solution to the problem, is indeed obvious.

Further mirrorings occur within the novel, notably the attribution of Henri's creative gift as well as his psychosis to Papa. Such similarities between characters are provocative, especially when encountered in profusion.[12] But the most important of these mirrorings is the driver's allusion to another, possibly fatal accident that he describes as "a singular episode of my early manhood. . . . Certainly it determined or revealed the nature of the man I had just become. It is something of a travesty, involving a car, an old poet, and a little girl" (47). For Papa, the earlier incident determines the course of his life; it is a random occurrence that coalesces into—or reveals—a governing pattern. The episode is his youthful "moment of creativity" (47) that underscores the particularly destructive nature of the driver's artistry. Hawkes intends the account of this "travesty" to function as a self-similar model for the novel as a whole, replicating its primary characters and scenario. Only the nodding, inattentive reader can fail to appreciate the "travesty" within *Travesty*. Not until the very close of the novel does the driver describe this "formative event" (125) of his life in detail. In a similarly powerful sports car, the driver believes that he may have struck a beautiful, dark-haired girl (whose apparent ingenuousness mirrors Chantal) being led down a crowded street by an old man with the air of a poet (thus resembling Henri). Irritated by the possessiveness of the old man, the driver deliberately accelerates, brushing past the girl. Because he refuses to look back, Papa remains unsure as to whether he strikes her or not. The uncertainty of this scene, as much as the replication of characters, indicates its similarity to present circumstance, as the three are suspended in the process of a "contrived accident" without clear and definite result. If this "formative event" in the driver's life serves as a prototype for his current actions, the entire novel is a replication on another scale. In metafiction, these incidences of recursiveness usually provoke ontological questions: how does one distinguish between the fiction and the reality? But in *Travesty* the many instances of self-similarity and recursion are there to confirm for the driver his belief in an underlying, permeating design.

The principle of self-similarity encourages us to consider the interrelation of characters in *Travesty*, but it is at least as valuable to consider the distinctions that separate them. Within the confines of the automobile, Hawkes presents an equation in three variables, a triangulation of force and motive. N. Katherine Hayles advances the argument that "chaos has been negatively valued in the Western tradition" because of the "predominance of binary logic in the West. If order is good, chaos is bad because it is conceptualized as the opposite of order." Essentially in agreement with Serres's invective against the "dualist hell" of binary opposition, Hayles proposes that "not-order is also a possibility, distinct from and valued differently than anti-order" (*Chaos and Order* 3). Let's consider, then, the application of these three values, order, anti-order, and not-order with respect to Hawkes's distribution of character traits. Henri urges the driver to return to his senses, to be

"reasonable." He reasserts the most conventional sort of orderliness in the Western tradition. There is, understandably, a tinge of desperation in his pleas, a patent recognition that the assertion of reasonable behavior is never more than an agreed-upon standard; the façade of civilized order crumbles away. The driver reveals this disintegration when he accuses Henri of being "only the most banal and predictable of poets. No libertine, no man of vision and hence suffering, but a banal moralist" (14). The driver's disregard for order as safe-haven is easily surpassed by his contempt for the pretensions, the presumptions that the orderly man displays. Henri's career as a poet is founded upon his having overcome, mastered, the psychological distress that once afflicted him. People admire Henri, like T. S. Eliot and other modernist poets, for his "desperate courage," and especially for "having discovered some kind of *mythos* of cruel detachment" (43). Hawkes seeks to embarrass those who would lionize such a clearly masculinist control and its mystique of impersonality. Henri epitomizes an order that is unemotional, indifferent, unchanging; it aspires to permanence and totalization. But the driver demonstrates how subject to cracking, blistering, and fading such a wash of permanence can be. Thus the modernist emblem of order is held up as a falsehood.

Chantal's immediate reaction to her father's announcement of his intentions is to flail the driver about the head and shoulders and then collapse behind his seat sobbing uncontrollably. She is the figure of anti-order, of entropic decay in the novel. She falls apart. Chantal has also been dubbed the "porno brat" by her mother because "she was forever stumbling into the erotic lives of her parents" (12–13). And of course, her precocious sexuality provides for further disruption of Papa's erotic life when she takes Henri for a lover. The lesson implied by this, that sexuality is destructive, is altogether too simple. The driver describes the effect of his actions on the two women in his life: "But Chantal and Honorine—what a pair of names. And to think that at this instant the one is white-faced, tear-streaked and clinging to the edge of hysteria in lieu of prayer directly behind us, while the other sleeps in the very chateau we are approaching. But be brave Chantal. There will be no comforting Honorine when she receives the news" (13). What a pair of names indeed! The driver is self-consciously aware—one might say metafictively aware—that these women represent the relegation of uncontrollable emotion and destructive sexuality to the feminine. In the binary logic of the Western tradition, chaos as a purely destructive force and the hysterical woman are members of the same paradigm. In classical terms, the feminine is figured as erotic enchantress (Chantal, Circe) or as a goddess-like object of devotion with the power to destroy her suitors (Honorine, Helen). They are thus conventions of a feminine chaos that must be contained or controlled for the persistence of an orderly society. But just as the driver is aware of the falsity of Henri's prestige of detachment, so he also recognizes that the association of chaos with hysteria is an old prejudice. Papa wishes to redefine the nature of chaos as something much more complicated and profound than anti-order. Chantal and Honorine are indeed unbelievable.

The driver, then, is the figure of not-order, racing toward that point at which design and debris become interchangeable. To do that he must first challenge those binary oppositions that are so dearly held within the culture. His principal method in this endeavor is a process of exchange. Binary opposites should be clearly defined in their differences. But what if the properties of one character are usurped by another? Papa exchanges the bruised ego and jealousy of the cuckold for the imaginative creativity of the artistic mind: "we have one more scrap to toss on the heap of our triumphant irony. Because in our case it now appears that the poet is the thick-skinned and simple-minded beast of the ego, while contrary to popular opinion, it is your ordinary privileged man who turns out to reveal in the subtlest of ways all those faint sinister qualities of the artistic mind" (100). Papa thus attributes to the principle of not-order the ability to create as well as to destroy; like the artist, he assumes the capacity to bring something out of nothing. Ilya Prigogine and Isabelle Stengers describe this aspect of the paradigm shift in chaos theory, pointing out that "non-classical science has taught us that . . . stochastic chaos can become creative. In certain circumstances, evolution bifurcates, the homogeneous disorder is no longer stable, and a new order of organized functioning is established." They distinguish between an entropic, "indifferent disorder," and the "strange tumult" that arises in instances of "creative chaos" (153). The driver thus describes this paradigm shift that attributes an artist's creativity to "not-order."

There is also a degree to which Papa emulates the sexual abandon of his daughter. Papa acquires his mistress Monique when she was exactly the same age as Chantal (about twenty) when Henri "determined to extend to her the love of the poet." Despite his denial that "I was trying to duplicate my daughter in my mistress," Papa is obviously pleased that Monique resembles Chantal in her diminutive size (65). The salient detail in the account of this rather risqué episode is the discovery by Papa of a mild degree of sadomasochistic passion. He feels "suddenly inspired" (the terms are once again artistic) to spank Monique, eventually becoming aroused (68). Monique, however, is less than thrilled by her paddling and retaliates with her garter belt, delivering "full in the lap the pain of the little metal grips" (73). The episode ends with this lesson for father (and by extension, for the artist): "I learned that I too had a sadistic capacity," and that "it reveals that I too have suffered and that I am not always in total mastery of the life I create, as I have been accused of being" (74). Papa learns of the dissipation of sexual obsession, the loss of control that accompanies it. The "total mastery" that he in fact is currently wielding over the passengers in the car can erode, be converted into submission or slavery. And in fact that control does dissipate at the moment the car crashes. The driver, as the figure of "not-order," articulates both the dissipative energies of the sexual deviant Chantal and the creative organization of the poet Henri. The binary opposition between order and anti-order becomes blurred, is itself unmade, as it is interrelated in the character of the driver.

Like the climactic act of violence that in the Greek theater always occurred offstage, the critical action in the narrative of *Travesty*—the swerve that sends the sports car toward collision—is anticipated. Its repercussions are analyzed, but it remains beyond the immediate experience of the narrator and his audience. The driver has carefully chosen the site of the collision. The swerve that propels the car toward impact is deliberate and thus distinguished from the random accident that would consign the occupants of the car to "the toneless world of highway tragedy" (11). The driver rejects the old Roman viaduct over which they must pass, "that narrow dead viaduct that spans the dry gorge and always reminds me of flaking bone" (23), as an appropriate site. Because the viaduct is a *memento mori* it is entirely too obvious: "All those 'logical' details and all those lofty 'symbols' of melodrama speak much too clearly to the professional investigator" (24). No, although the swerve is determined by the driver, it must in every way appear to be an inexplicable, unmotivated occurrence. Instead, beyond the viaduct, the car "shall make an impossible turn" toward the abandoned farmhouse. The driver proposes a "turn that is nothing less than incomprehensible," leading to a collision that is both "severe and improbable" (24-25). The swerve, the deviation from the road, remains incomprehensible to the authorities precisely because it defies the logical, symbolic order intrinsic to human affairs. It is madness, it is brilliance. It "must be senseless to everyone except possibly the occupants of the demolished car" (25). The "incomprehensible" swerve and the "improbable" crash confound those investigators—or for that matter, those critics—who wish to interpret the impact either as an error in driving skills or as a moral failing in the act of murder–suicide. The authorities hear only a noise that obscures the meaning of the incident, stymies their attempt to distinguish between accident and intention, and so they feel compelled to squelch that interference in the signal. But such a noise is paradoxically the instigation of a rather profound communication among the "victims." Only a slight extension of the driver's statement allows us to interpret the crash as a noisy channel for a message between Papa as sender and his presently widowed wife Honorine as receiver.

In "Lucretius: Science and Religion," Michael Serres gives particular attention to the concept of the *clinamen atomorum*, or swerve of the atoms, which Lucretius introduces in his verse treatise on physics, *De Rerum Natura*, to explain the origin of the cosmos from an earlier, undifferentiated state of atomic flux. The atoms "fall" through space in a parallel and undisturbed motion until, as Lucretius suggests, "at utterly unfixed times and places they swerve a little from their course, just enough so that you can say that the direction is altered. If the atoms did not have this swerve, they would all fall straight down through the deep void like drops of rain, and no collisions would occur nor would the atoms sustain any blows. Thus Nature would never have created anything" (*On Nature* 47). For Lucretius (elaborating on Epicurean philosophy) the stochastic swerve in matter ultimately enables free will in human beings, "by virtue of which we each go where pleasure leads us and, like the atoms, swerve in our courses at no

fixed time and in no predetermined direction, but when and where the mind itself impels" (*On Nature* 48). More important to Serres is the fact that Lucretius attributes the self-organizational power of the cosmos, the creative force of Nature, directly to the random swerving of the atoms and to the turbulence that their collisions provoke. For those of his readers who still required a godly image, Lucretius attributes the pleasure motive and the fictive ability of turbulence to Venus. Serres defines the *clinamen* as the "minimal angle to laminar flow [that] initiates a turbulence" (*Hermes* 99). He associates the initial condition of laminar flow with the deterministic physics "of repetition, and of rigorous trains of events. . . . There is nothing to be learned, to be discovered, to be invented in this repetitive world, which falls in the parallel lines of identity. . . . It is information-free, complete redundance" (*Hermes* 99–100). The physics of classical dynamics—here associated with Mars—describes a world of rigid causality: "Without the declination, there are only the laws of fate, that is to say, the chains of order" (*Hermes* 99). Such a martial physics will inevitably result in "death at the end of entropy" (*Hermes* 100).

The introduction of the swerve, however, occurs (in the words of Lucretius) *incerto tempore . . . incertisque locis* (Leonard 333, II. 218–19), at uncertain times and places; it is thus indeterminate and unpredictable, an aspect of random dispersion. Serres argues that "the angle interrupts the stoic chain, breaks the *foedera fati*, the endless series of causes and reasons. It disturbs, in fact, the laws of nature. And from it, the arrival of life, of everything that breathes; and the leaping of horses" (99). Serres may seem to make a dramatic leap from atomic motion to bio-evolution, but the collision of atoms and the resulting turbulence allow for increasingly complicated structure that an unchanging, parallel motion of atoms does not permit. The swirling commotion of turbulence actually creates pockets of negentropy, small areas of increasing organization, within the large-scale flux. Prigogine and Stengers, reading Serres's reclamation of Lucretius for contemporary physics, point out that "while turbulent motion appears as irregular or chaotic on the macroscopic scale, it is, on the contrary, highly organized on the microscopic scale. . . . The transition from laminar flow to turbulence is a process of self-organization" (*Order Out of Chaos* 141–42). Referring to the Lucretian model, they reinforce Serres's position:

> the infinite fall provides a *model* on which to base our conception of the natural genesis of the disturbance that causes things to be born. If the vertical fall were not disturbed "without reason" by the clinamen, which leads to encounters and associations between uniformly falling atoms, no nature could be created; all that would be reproduced would be the repetitive connection between equivalent causes and effects governed by the laws of fate (*foedera fati*). (*Order Out of Chaos* 303)

The swerve that marks the transition from laminar to turbulent flow ushers in a generative rather than a static world, a world that is information-rich rather than

information-free, a world that moves toward a greater degree of complexity rather than the death that the laws of entropy ultimately demand.

One might think that *Travesty* deviates from the Lucretian model because the swerve is both premeditated and in a predetermined direction. Much of the novel's discourse is devoted to establishing the motive and causation of the swerve, as an expression of the driver's deliberate intention rather than as an impulsive gesture. The swerve thus constitutes an element of plot; it is not merely an aspect of story. Because the driver apparently intends the automobile's swerve to inflict death upon all occupants, one wonders how closely Papa's philosophy could be allied to the Lucretian physics of Venus instead of Mars. Or is the deviation so very great? The driver's argument throughout the novel has been to redefine the nature and relation of order and chaos, design and debris. He has sought to dispel the commonly held belief in chaos as a purely destructive force and order as a preeminently sustaining structure. With Lucretius and Serres, the driver conceives of laminar flow, straight-line travel, as resulting inevitably in "death at the end of entropy." For Papa—the admirer of fast cars—there is greater misery in the slow, sure decay of the condition in which he finds himself. But the turbulence brought on by the swerve and collision promises the possibility of an increase in complexity. The social order of family and friend has clearly failed; perhaps there is an innate design, a more complex array, that will reveal itself in farmhouse field. There are new worlds, other possible combinations of matter. Ultimately, the aspect of indeterminacy in the swerve of *Travesty* lies with the reader's inability to ever know for sure whether the promised turn does come.

Hawkes is intent on confounding the "professional investigator" who sees in the swerve and the resulting turbulence only death and disintegration. In *Travesty*, the death of the narrator—and hence the death of the novel—signals the creation of a more recondite order. Logical details are scattered across a furrowed field, cause and effect is obscured in the absence of skid marks, and the chains of a grim self-preservation are broken on impact. Like Serres, Hawkes believes that it is not the meager reassurances of a rationally derived order but the revelation of innate design in turbulence that ultimately sustains life and being.

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NOTES

1. For a thorough analysis of *Travesty* in relation to Poe, see Charles Berryman, "Hawkes and Poe: *Travesty*," in *Modern Fiction Studies* 29 (Winter 1983): 643-54. Charles Baxter's fine essay, "In the Suicide Seat: Reading John Hawkes's *Travesty*," in *Georgia Review* 34 (Winter 1980), also identifies trauma as "the central experience of the novel" (874). It is also amusing to note that the driver finds

the ticking of the dashboard clock to be "unbearable" (34), reminiscent of Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart."

2. In another anecdote, Hawkes also reveals some identification with Henri's terror: "I soon developed a horror of automobiles through trying to drive an ambulance" in the American Field Service in World War II; with little driving experience, "I ran the ambulance into a boulder and blew out a tire" ("A Conversation" 165–66).

3. Although the driver resembles the unreliable narrator that figures so prominently in the French New Novel, Hawkes's insistence on the "literal accident" would seem to distinguish his work from cyberpunk fiction with its proposition of a virtual reality that is equal to but other than the literal world.

4. The driver here attempts to refute the accusation of depravity that might be attributed to him, much as Herman Melville attributes it to Claggart in *Billy Budd, Sailor:* "Though the man's even temper and discreet bearing would seem to intimate a mind peculiarly subject to the law of reason, not the less in heart he would seem to riot in complete exemption from that law, having apparently little to do with reason further than to employ it as an ambidexter implement for effecting the irrational. That is to say: Toward the accomplishment of an aim which in wantonness of atrocity would seem to partake of the insane, he will direct a cool judgment sagacious and sound." *Volume III. Novels and Tales* (New York: Library of America, 1984) 1383. The driver argues that his reasoned inquisition is no mere mask for an irrational jealousy.

5. For a discussion of the role of chance in the postmodern aesthetic, especially in the novels of William Burroughs and the music of John Cage, see Christopher Butler, *After the Wake: The Contemporary Avant-Garde* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1980). 102–08.

6. In *The Noise of Culture: Literary Texts in a World of Information* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1988), William R. Paulson distinguishes between chaotic disorder and complexity: "The terms *order* and *complexity* may lead to confusion, especially in the context of information theory. We can imagine two completely different types of organized states, both of which would be intuitively opposed to chaos or random disorder. The first, which may be appropriately called 'ordered,' is characterized by a high degree of redundancy and thus a low level of information. . . . The second, which would be better called 'complex' or 'varied,' is characterized by a low level of redundancy and a high degree of information. The complex state may be formally identical to the chaotic state but with the following crucial difference: its particular arrangement is meaningful or important in some context" (72). For the driver, the "tableau of chaos" obviously represents a "complex" arrangement.

7. In *Connoisseurs of Chaos: Ideas of Order in Modern American Poetry,* 2nd ed. (New York: Columbia UP, 1984), Denis Donoghue comments regarding this poem: "The singer imposes upon reality her own imagination, until reality is taken up into her song and there is nothing but the song. And when the song is ended, the observers . . . find that even in their own eyes reality is mastered, more orderly; the sea and the night are fixed and disposed. . . . By common agreement the sea is reality, things as they are that come to us without invitation or apology, often to be thought of as chaos" (190). Thus the function of the imagination for Stevens is to master chaos, not to illustrate or extol it.

8. Ihab Hassan describes, albeit in a list of binary oppositions, the distinctions between modernism and postmodernism such that the modernist impulse toward Creation/Totalization is contrasted with the postmodernist emphasis on Decreation/Deconstruction. He ascribes to postmodernism "a vast will to unmaking." *The Postmodern Turn: Essays in Postmodern Theory and Culture* (Columbus: Ohio State UP, 1987) 91, 92.

9. As a further example of a dualistic opposition in which artistic ordering fails to maintain itself against encroaching chaos, Henderson proposes that Hawkes's novels express "a dialectic between the art of fictional ordering and the chaos of a 'reality' which is potentially subject to the ordering process but which ultimately threatens to dissolve such designs as are present in created or fictional reality" (3034A). The novelist as "creator" inevitably wages a losing battle against the oppressive forces of chaos.

10. Fractals are frequently illustrated by the Koch "snowflake." See Gleick (98–100), and Hayles (*Chaos Bound* 166–67).

11. For a discussion of "Chinese Box Worlds" in postmodern fiction, see Brian McHale's descriptive catalogue in *Postmodernist Fiction* (New York: Methuen, 1987) 112–30.

12. Papa denies that his "brain is sewn with the sutures of [Henri's] psychosis" (120), but then reveals that he carries a scrap of paper on which he has written two lines of Henri's poetry, claiming

that "I might even have written them myself" (127). Patrick O'Donnell provides an extensive discussion of the likenesses established between Papa and Henri, as well as those between Chantal, Papa's mistress Monique, and Honorine (139–40).

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