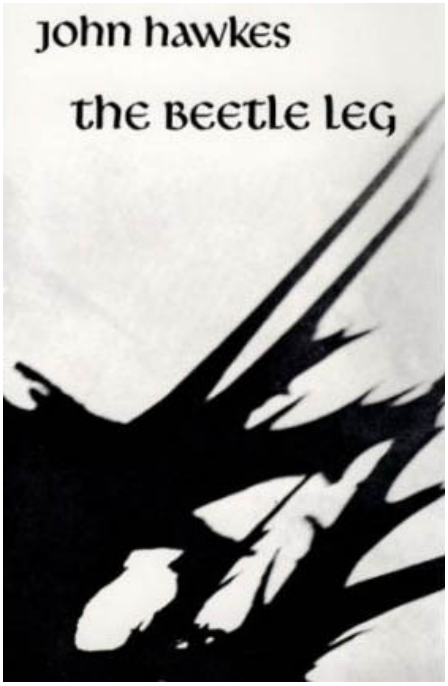

The Beetle Leg

John Hawkes

The Beetle Leg

John Hawkes

The Beetle Leg John Hawkes
The Beetle Leg, John Hawkes's second full-length novel, was first published by New Directions in 1951. Now, after more than sixty years, this brilliant novel is emerging as a classic of visionary writing and still remains Hawkes's only work devoted solely to American life. As a "surrealist Western" (*Newsweek*), and a violent and poetic portrayal of "a landscape of sexual apathy" (A.J. Guerard), *The Beetle Leg* is a rich flight into the special vein of comedy that Hawkes had begun to exploit a decade before the popular acceptance of "black humor."

The Beetle Leg Details

Date	:	Published January 17th 1951 by New Directions (first published January 1st 1951)
ISBN	:	9780811200622
Author	:	John Hawkes
Format	:	Paperback 159 pages
Genre	:	Fiction, Literature, Westerns, Novels, 20th Century, The United States Of America

From Reader Review The Beetle Leg for online ebook

Ian "Marvin" Graye says

Look Who's Pulling Your Beetle Leg

This travesty of a post-modern minimalist novel (boldly published and promoted by James Laughlin's Nude Erections Books until "yesterday's obscure gibberish became today’s course requirement") is best left to the forty bearded shovellers banging their forty metal mugs on the planks of the makeshift timber table, sitting shoulder to shoulder, bumping in the darkness of their interminable empty nights. The employment of dredge and suction pump has done little toward changing the contour and imperfections of this yellow peakless sarcophagus of mud, in which fissures have appeared and deceptively closed, trapping wrestling mice and young lizards. Suddenly, silently but briskly, out of the murky solid, emerges a floating clot of cheerless recognition. Sometimes he dreamed that he could yawn.

Vit Babenco says

It all happened once upon the time in the west…
There is a sheriff and there is a cowboy… There are anglers and there are hunters… But there is no romance. It seems civilization has come to the west…
“It was only one of many eyesores, one hump in a chain of knolls, adding nothing but an artificial lake, obscuring nothing but two hoof beaten points on opposite banks where cattle used to swim across and land. Whatever went into the making or whatever had fallen short of the great pile, it hardened in the sun, swelled at the base and now grew suddenly higher if watched in the pink light of noon.”
There are anglers and there are hunters… And while the anglers could catch no fish the hunters have found a fine possibility to hunt some really big game…
“‘Switch on the lights.’ And through the whorls of milky undergrowth they saw the troop of Red Devils on little horned motorcycles.”
Probably *The Beetle Leg* is a little bit short of lucidity but on the other hand dark sarcasm occurs in abundance.

William2.1 says

Tried twice, found this unreadable. As friend AC said, there's something "deeply inauthentic" here. Read *The Lime Twig* instead. You'll be glad you did.

AC says

I read a chunk of this and had no idea why... lots of descriptions about boots and tables or something... But what bothered me most is that this is an Ivy League professor trying to sound like he's a dirt cowboy in Montana -- just as, in the Lime Twig (which worked better, I thought), he was trying to sound like a working class Brit. There is something deeply inauthentic about this - though I suppose that some would call him a

"master of style". Anyway -- to each his own.

Nathan "N.R." Gaddis says

I continue to be perplexed by the early novels of John Hawkes. His claims to have had no interest in conventional elements of the novel--character, plot, themes, etc--have never been born out by what he's written; I don't believe him. His books were introduced to me by John Barth, and nothing could be in starker contrast than the story-drunk Barth and the austerity of early Hawkes. But story, narrative, and plot, just like character, live rich lives in Hawkes, even if one needs to read far far below the text one is provided with. There is a richness here which haunts the reader even weeks later, an aesthetic experience which few aside from Herr Gass can champion as pure bliss. Some would designate it "atmosphere" but such would shed no light. There remains in my mind of experience something darker than light in these Hawkes novels; something much closer to experience which has always found itself less than fully illuminated.

---

s.penkevich says

It is a lawless country.

Reading John Hawke's second novel, the purgatorial western The Beetle Leg, is like being a small child awake during the night, staring in horror at some formless dark beast of the imagination that lurks within the shadows of their room. The plot, notorious for its obtuseness and the stunning surrealism which furthers the difficulty of finding a handhold from which to cling, churns forward with growing dread and silent monstrosities that rivals even that of Krasznahorkai's The Melancholy of Resistance. Like the formless beast in the corner, it is just that, the formlessness, which makes it so terrifying. To flip on the light and simply understand the features and shapes of which we fear shatters our dread. This is true as well in horror films where the most frightening moments are those when we know there is some terror just around the corner or behind the door, and to see the monster in full as opposed to just a quick flash of claw or demonic eye destroys the real horror that only the imagination can provide. In effect, Beetle Leg is so surreal, shifting and elusive because it is not made up of the actual forms and features of life, but of the shadows that they cast.

The Beetle Leg is very much akin to the works of Cormac McCarthy. This novel, published in 1951, is a precursor to McCarthy's works, but the two fit together quite well, especially works such as McCarthy's own Outer Dark. As in Outer Dark, Hawke's creates a western set in a hellish wasteland of lawlessness. As with McCarthy, the world is a cruel place where the innocent are prey to the violence and venery of the damned, and natural causes are more frightening than any villain. It is often repeated that the only two deaths recorded in the Government City, made an official city due to the influx of workers settling there to work the dam project, are from natural causes. There is the incident of the ground breaking way and swallowing Mulge Lampson during a work accident and Hattie Lampson simply giving up the ghost in her old age. The majority of the characters in Hawke's novel are rather impotent compared to the violence of the natural world. The biggest crimes committed are acts of lust in shallow ditches alongside the road as if they were lowly animals without the knowledge of personal dignity that would keep them from fornicating in public. Those locked in the jail are so docile that they endure being kicked in the ribs by the deputy without even moving to protect themselves, while snakes strike at the heels of children. Nature is described in vivid, figurative language of tight poetic scenery – some of the best lines are those describing the land, whereas the town and characters are given very little, if any, description beyond thin references to misshapen features.

Like a proper western novel, the setting is as much a character as the people. If nature is a character, than it is surely the foe to the people, these people who are always struggling to keep it back by building up a dam, by cutting a city into it and using other forms of civilization to keep it back or controlled. '*Where the scuff country met the broad back of the highway and little clumps of sand and weed were kept from spreading by the long raised shoulder of the road…*'.

To try and pinpoint exact meanings to the swiftly flowing, black waters of plot is just as difficult as trying to merely follow where the flow is headed. Hawke's toys with time, jumbling the order of several scenes and sashaying between past and present, as well as between two simultaneous threads occurring in different parts of town, to create an effect that time is not just something moving from A to B but something more all-encompassing. The scenes aren't so much strung together in a cause and effect manner, one leading to the next through logical constructs, but more bleeding into one another the way our own dreams shift and mutate from one idea to the next. It isn't the actual tangible ideas, made understandable in order to hold in our mind to turn over and examine, that matter in this book. It is the shadows of those tangible ideas that Hawke's wants to immerse us into. To try and make sense of the ethereal scenes that pass through our minds, the reader must look into the emotions, tone and feelings that resonate from the prose instead of trying to comprehend the logic of the actual events. The scenes appear grounded in reality, but transcend the real through highly symbolic features and surreal sense of things being slightly amiss by wrapping each action and description up in abstract, metaphorical poetry. Simply actions as lighting a cigarette are elevated to poetic imagery by being described as '*Luke swallowed the match flame, the sides of the skull glowed as he cupped his hands.*'.

Hawke's orchestrates a brilliant symphony of symbolism to build the apocalyptic tone of his novel, dipping deep into biblical allusions to gain a firm, icy grip on the souls of his readers. Almost every page is dripping with religious or demonic symbolism, from the snakes, images of fire, frequent talk of flood (a few pages after mentioning Mulge building an ark, the fishing boat bumps into the roof peak of a house that has all but been drowned by flood), and a scene when Luke feels '*that slit eyes had opened, darkly over his shoulder*' as he is offered to trade his work boots for a pair of sandals that have crossed the globe (which, in a stretch, seems to be a Christ reference). Cap Leech is seemingly a satanic reference, coming out of his '*nest of flames*' and with descriptions such as '*Leech, the goat who sat in the hunched position of a man, shrugged, stroked the two long forks of hair at the end of his chin*'. Leech also 'possesses' people, including the Sheriff, by doping them with ether and leading them to do his bidding. Leech also is described as missing one of his ribs, much like Adam from Genesis.

The book of Genesis seems to play a very large role in the novel. Take, for instance, the opening of chapter three, which details the creation of towns in the region:

> '*in the beginning, before the sights were ever taken for Mistletoe, Government City, before the women and children arrived, when stray cows could stop wherever they pleased below the high ground to water, and the water in its turn could slug downstream to flood…*'

Compare that to the opening to Genesis (using a 1970's translation from The New American Bible, which is not an ideal source but it just so happens to be within my lazy, drunken reach at the moment):

> '*In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless wasteland, and darkness covered the abyss, while a mighty wind swept over the waters.*'

While the parallels between the two sentences alone are enough to take note, but not enough to wonder if it is

purely coincidence, the whole of Beetle Leg, with its wasteland setting and its own abyss that claimed the life of Mulge Lampson, pushes toward a belief that this is more than just chance. Hawke's also includes '*Eve's slimy pool, an unshielded dip of water in the waves of earth that…appeared to be covered with palm leaves, broad, clay-veined shadow*', which makes one wonder if this '*little purgatory*' setting could be the eviction from Eden.

> '*The first man had died in Eden, they pronounced him dead. And now, with brightening eye, he found himself sitting in the middle of the washed-out garden's open hearth*'.

There is enough evidence to argue that the rockslide that claimed Mulge was indicative of the casting out from Eden. He did eat of the forbidden fruit, as he allegedly bedded the cook during his year of marriage, and for that was swallowed up by the earth. Or, perhaps, is this town truly representative of purgatory? The whole thread of the novels present occurs in one night, keeping everything bathed in a dark, shadowy gloom. This also could account for the strange handling of past and present, as time ceases to have meaning when faced with eternity. This is also in keeping with Bohn being 'born from death', pulled out and maimed by Leech's tongs from the womb of his deceased mother. Perhaps this is why they sit around drinking and joking the one day Mulge will crawl up through the dirt and walk the earth again, like Jesus back from the dead, signaling that they can move on and into heaven. Mulge does border on being a Christ figure at times, his death being a symbol of the townspeople and the nightly pilgrimages Ma takes to the place of his death.

To simply use the religious context of the novel however, would be to cheapen it and pigeonhole it into some corner of deconstruction and literary criticism and, ultimately, the Beetle Leg would be able to wiggle free from the straps holding it to that operating table and present itself as something much greater. There are many pagan allusions as well, and a great deal of effort is put forth by the Sheriff in his insistence that the moon and astrological signs are what controls not only the crops but our own destinies as well. Hawke's treats the religious and pagan symbols more as relics or trinkets which he scatters across the landscape that he illustrates for us. There are far more facets to this novel than can be addressed here, which is stunning for a novel of only 159 pages. The dam project is most likely an outlet of the New Deal projects, and the damnation of the characters could be a reflection of their societal conditions that is only metaphored by the damnation of their souls. This is clearly a novel that demands multiple readings, and I am excited for the discoveries I am sure to find on each repeat visit.

While being a difficult, demanding little novel, Hawke's The Beetle Leg is a powerful display of surrealism and poetic potency. Those who enjoy the works of Cormac McCarthy, Flannery O'Connor (of whom Hawke and his wife were close friends with) and William Faulkner will find an exciting and refreshing blend of the three all poured into a postmodernist glass. This ideas of this book are ineffable, and can only, truly be done justice by simply reading this incredible novel. The effort is more than outweighed by the sheer beauty of the writing and careful handling of such vague, yet sprawling ideas that march forth through a procession of the damned towards a dramatic, apocalyptic climax.
4/5

Brent Legault says

Thick, chewy stew of a novel poured into a small bowl. Plenty of gristle. Salty, salty but shy on spice. Nearly choked a time or two. Wouldn't recommend it as an airplane or commuter train read but an excellent choice for solitary confinement or for those that are trapped under rubble.

Mike Puma says

I am an **uncontrolled variable**.

The text, in this case *The Beetle Leg*, is the **independent variable**.

My reaction, or yours, or anyone else's would be the **dependent variable**.

With this **experiment**al novel, one might (I was) tempted to say that the experiment failed, but experiments don't fail—they produce unexpected results, or results unhoped for.

*****\/*****

I did not enjoy this one. Not at all. Not one little bit. I've looked over at my unfinished copy. For more than a week. 10 pages to the end, and I just don't care enough to pick it up and finish it. For me it is unsalvageable. Hawkes' experiment has gone awry. So pared down as to barely constitute a novel at all. The language doesn't excite or move. Threads of story don't congeal. Plot has run amok (and not in a good way). I'm irritated, enough, and frustrated, enough, to not even much care about badmouthing it.

*****/*****

Suppose a director made a movie (or a film, for those who care about such distinctions). Now further suppose, rather than making a trailer for the promotion of said movie/film, he or she made several trailers. Then suppose, for some unknowable reason, the director took those individual trailers, sequenced them end-to-end, then bookended them with mini-scenes involving two of the characters, who in no ways dominate the film as either protagonist or antagonist. In a final outrage, the director then decided the trailers and mini-scenes worked best as the movie/film, and that *version* would be the only commercially released manifestation. Voila, *The Beetle Leg.*

Reading this has come too hot on the heels of bad experiences with *The Master and Margarita* and *The Tetherballs of Bougainville*. I've been lucky. I'm unaccustomed to so much dissatisfaction coming so closely together. Others, others whose opinions I regard highly, have rated all three of them highly and write wonderfully extolling those novels' better aspects. I can't find an aspect of TBL to praise (well, beyond its brevity, and that's kinda bullshit, and we all know it.)

Some reviewers have commented on TBL's similarity to the writing of Cormac McCarthy. I'm not exactly buying it. I can see why others find those similarities—the novel's dark tone, characters one wouldn't want to know and find troubling to identify with, rural locations seemingly filled with rubes, grizzly gruesomeness, etc. But the *dirty realism* strand of *minimalism* the two authors share is not inherited one from the other, rather what is used occasionally by the one (McCarthy) seems to be part and parcel of the other (Hawkes), at least in TBL. I'm unaware of anything so open-ended, so vague, with the possible exception of the end of Cities of the Plain, so devoid of coherence.

Usually, after finishing a novel, I like going back through it, looking at passages I've liked and highlighted, or words I've had to look up, or notes, or burn holes (damned exploding seeds!), but in TBL, I only marked two passages, and those because the one iterated the other with a slight modification. I'll share:

> *Trim no trees of vines when the Moon or Earth is in Leo. For they will surely die.*
> He stopped reading and marked his place, and began to talk.
>
> It is a lawless country. (p. 7)

Later:

> The Sheriff scowled into the magic page. *”Trim no trees or vines when the Moon or Earth is in Leo. For they will surely die.”* He stopped reading, marked his place, and began to talk.
>
> It is a lawless country. (p. 46)

It is almost as if Hawkes foreshadows his own novel’s lawless abandon of story (*sjuzhet*) leaving only plot (*fabula*), which can’t be abandoned whether the author chooses to or not, while at the same time, overestimating the ‘magic’ of his pages.

Occasionally while reading TBL, I’d hit a passage that made little sense, actually it happened frequently, but when forced to slow down, slow down and reread, the passage would yield logic when finding the right emphasis—you have to pay attention. But in the end, the paying of attention, for me, didn’t make the reading worthwhile. Alas, another for my Ugh shelf—another joining the ranks of TM&M, TToB, On the Road (another mind-number), and other titles many have loved, but I’ve found wanting.

Three stars, barely.

??x Nestelieiev says

strange western about dead water and one dam, about motobikes (once again) and one snake that bites a car, about one Sheriff who doesn`t like sex and one fetus instead of fish and about one corpse as a useless sacrifice.

Doc says

Not quite as accomplished as "Second Skin" or later novels (his next novel, The Lime Twig would be his breakout book), this seemed like a warm up for Cormac McCarthy's books of the West, particularly Blood Meridian which it echoes in tone and hyper-realism. The prose style employed here is bravura and exhilerating.

John Madera says

A fractured novel set in a nightmarish American West, comprised of visions and disturbing set pieces. Amazing sentences that defy expectation at almost every phrase abound.

Szplug says

Nota bene: *Do not read the following if you have no desire to discover what happens, though I make no guarantee to having accurately set forth what did—and, seeing as it makes not a lick of sense to those not partially subsumed within the ghost world, what the fuck do you care if it seeks to squeal that business anywho?*

The sheriff narrates the opening chapter in a tongue thick with twanged weariness and the dust of life.

Luke Lampson has an older brother, Mulge—the man the sheriff spies frozen by the sludgy river in the opening narration?—who was killed in the renowned (locally) Great Slide from years back, a huge shifting of the sun-baked earth. Lampson, living with that dead brother's wife, a hard woman he calls *Ma*, and a silent, willful indian companion, the Mandan, sets out to find a man called Bohn (or something) in M. and then Claire. On the way to the first village he stops to suck the venom from the leg of a boy, the son of a man and wife—the Camper and Lou—touring through this particular inferno and of whom the former worked previously on the dam and was aware of the Great Slide.

Second chapter sees the Sheriff, an older man, and his (deputy?) Wade, who have some mysterious people—motorcycle gang *The Red Devils*, Indian half-breeds?—locked away in the jail. Wade is sent out to collect the travelling medicine man/dentist who extracts teeth and keeps ether on hand. Wade brings the MM to the jailhouse where the sheriff takes the ether, digs about in his parchments, and begins reading from where the opening narration began: *It is a lawless country*.

The small villages are amidst a harsh and unforgiving desert which is constantly referenced as claiming the lives of the unwary. However, Gov City and Mistletoe, it is further said, have had but *two* individuals—Mulge and Hattie Lampson—who have expired from natural causes over the past decade. It is apparently also a *violent country*, taking souls before their time; particularly those who have dared its vast, empty expanses in some peculiar manner of personal challenge/endurance contest/inward mystic sojourn and been utterly defeated, their wind-scoured, sun-devoured bones bleached and buried beneath the shifting sands and hardscrabble plains.

The Camper, Lou, and their tousle-headed lad find a hotel/resort in the midst of the empty plains, wherein the Camper disappears and Lou comes across Bohn and the Finn feasting on pie while the Cook, a giggly, trembling woman, rebuffs Lou's efforts to discover just what her husband's past link is to the hell-hiccuped place. Outside, workers from the dam sit with backs against the wall and soaking their aching, fungicidal feet in a violet liquid while the strains of a guitar sound.

Subsequently, the purple explodes like pineapples with imperial pretensions, the spray of hard tack and pliant mush making the entire readerly screen impermeable until, at the last, it blanches, scrubs itself unto ivory nothingness, and elevates the following to the queried heights:

Nate D says

The barest tracings of a story (a myth? a nightmare?) bubbling up through an indistinguishable murk of words and description. It's not incoherent, it's not nonsense, it just rigorously defies all effort to extract any overarching sense or purpose.

---

knig says

It has been said Hawkes writes but doesn't read. As in, he's unreadable. Well, he is. I mean, he does. Theres a whole lot of nothing much going on here, but I've been weaned on de Chirico's Hebdemeros, the quintessential book about nothing, so this isn't going to send me on a wild goose chase so easily. Plus, the guy was only 23 when he wrote it: its very possible he had nothing much to say to begin with: how many of us do at that age?

But if he is thin on plot and action, butter won't melt in his mouth. He has a way with words, a lulling cadence which carries mesmerizingly and draws you in.....not least because he dwells on the macabre, relishing the spin out of detail of Goyaesqye folks: the decrepit, rotting, porous, fungusly challenged denizens of Mistletoe, a settlement out in the West which no one from the outside seems to be able to actually find (witness Camper and Lou, who traverse backwards forwards almost futilely). Mistltoans have been lost in the West for so long they're a breed of inbred: pale folk with 'towhead', whatever that is. Their ancestors mated with sheep in the ravines, the women are 'whore-wounded' and families share, but not like you know it: they seem to be in and out of each others knickers : its a veritable swingers paradise (e.g. Ma married Mulge who absconded with Thanga who....ah, well, get it?,), but all this is alluded to softly, softly: nothing is brash or crass in this sing-song bassuo continuo of foibles.

Hawkes is relaxed about the linearity of time, but it does seem to me, to all be happening on one particular night with various flashbacks, cut throughs and snap shot transitions. As to whats happening: beats me, but it does seem to anchor around the memory of one Mulge, buried in the beetle leg mountain: a shifting, moving hill which threatens to subsume Mistletoe. Mulge is a great non character: he is the Godot in this 'surrealistic Western': in a bizarre but unique scene, which actually takes up a whole chapter, the guy manages to get married without a single reference to himself: clever little technique.
I'm not sure how well Hawkes understands the fabric of the 'wild west', but even if he doesn't, hes very good at shaping out complete weirdos and misfits. Warts and all.

A dreamy, wordy, eerie tale.

Charlie Zoops says

Before reading one of John Hawkes books, it is helpful to understand the author's intentions,
"I write out of a series of pictures that literally and actually do come to mind, but I've never seen them

before. It is perfectly true that I don’t know what they mean, but I feel and know that they have meaning,” He says, and it is clear that the interest lies in verbal and psychological coherence, rather than any conventional plot that can be followed easily.
With the overlapping time-frames, and characters which morph into the events of setting, reading “The Beetle Leg” can be a meditation into the blurred actions that are occurring nebulously throughout the pages. That being said, Hawkes descriptive landscapes and enigmatic but raw behaviors are phenomenally achieved, in his greatly intelligent arrangement of words collected into paragraphs. This story was written in 1950 when Hawkes was spending the summer in Montana, as a tour guide on the Fort Peck Reservoir dam. An actual visit to these type of desolate places helps in understanding a spiritual side that this barren land offers.

The story takes place in a desert near a town surrounding a collapsed dam, which in the past has buried Luke Lampson's brother, Mulge, in its “Great slide.” Some of the characters include a child attacked by a poisonous snake on the side of the road, a spontaneously arriving pack of motorcyclists called the Red Devils, and a local sheriff who has a fancy for girls with short whirling skirts. Although the narrative sends you into tornado of meaning, everywhere amidst the authors blowing tumble-weeds of prose, lies a beautifully evocative tale.

Jimmy says

"I began to write fiction on the assumption that the true enemies of the novel were plot, character, setting and theme, and having once abandoned these familiar ways of thinking about fiction, totality of vision or structure was really all that remained."

This seems to me, to be the mission statement for most experimental fiction. The concept of the death of the novel always sounded a little too gimmicky for my taste. It's more appropriate for a contemporary writer to simply state that the novel as an artistic medium, has unlimited potential, and it can be manipulated in myriad ways. It's not the novel that is dead, it's the tired, formal restrictions of the novel that have been rendered obsolete by the stylistic audacity of certain writers. John Hawkes is definitely one of them.

I can't even remember exactly how I found out about the man. I vaguely recall him being grouped in with the likes of Joseph Mcelroy, Thomas Bernhard, and Robert Coover. In other words, with every mention of Hawkes, the postmodern red flag always comes up, warning people that this is yet another one of those "difficult" writers. Not that the Beetle Leg isn't a difficult novel. In fact, it would probably be in my best interest to read it four more times before writing this, but here goes...

I mentioned how the beginning of the novel sounds like a direct influence on Mccarthy, in particular his book No Country for Old Men. The law plays a similar role here, but the sheriff in the Beetle Leg has less of a morally upright tone. However, he is just as beleaguered. For the most part, I still believe that Hawkes is an important influence on Mccarthy.

The setting is a sort of post-apocalyptic west (apparently this book is set in eastern Montana, that mostly sounds like conjecture, I saw no direct indication of that fact, but...it works). The sheriff is simply referred to throughout the book as the sheriff. The book begins with a passage from a book that he is reading aloud in the jail, he stops, puts the book down, and then begins, "It is a lawless country", indeed it is. This introduction to the town branches out into a number of fragmented narratives about a family called the Lampson's, a medicine man by the name of Cap Leech, a family traveling through the town (the son is bitten

by a snake), the law, and a motorcycle gang called the Red Devils. Each character, or subgroup of characters seem to function metaphorically, all making different statements about this post World War II wasteland. They lament the dead, feel nothing short of complete apathy for the future, and merely deal with their present situations.

A great deal happens in the novel, but it seems to me that the most important detail to pay attention to is not the action that unfolds, but how the characters are dealing with it. There is a theme of restrained utilitarianism that prevails throughout. People do not have as much time to think about why they are doing something. What's more important is that it must be done in order to keep this strange cycle of existence going, and they all seem to be preoccupied adequately enough with that. Early in the novel, when a little girl becomes concerned with the presence of a strange man hanging out by the lake, the sheriff has a rather pragmatic reaction.

"Honey," I said, "I can't arrest that man." She didn't answer. If I did, the jail would be full of them, men who have come home on foot or men just walking aways from a ranch they never left and that I ain't happened to have seen before. We had too many in them days anyway. "He ain't hurt." I said. "He ain't drunk. I don't think he's got a gun. That's enough." But he was something to stare at for an hour or two."

This sort of indifference, or rational restraint sets the tone for the novel. Hawkes is definitely a talented prose stylist though. The one redeeming quality of the novel, especially for those who dislike floaty narratives, is his language. He's so mellifluous that it's surprising that this was only his second novel. It's difficult to decide on a particular passage that exemplifies his gracefulness, but here is a short, decent one.

"They fired. From the parapet of the truck a tinkling cloud of shot landed among the vandal herd, rock salt into the buttocks of cornered apple thieves. In the headlights and streaming of the muskets, on motorcycle, as its rider fled, turned to flame under the little seat, reared, contorted into a snake embrace, and fell writhing in fire. A honking set up from the handless horn as the rubber bulb shrank in the heat".

Nearly every paragraph in the book has this same consistent flow to it. It's a shame to think of how marginal he still is. Also, one last note about the narrative; there is one. It's digressive, yes, but it connects at enough points to form a whole. Hawkes's presentation is just extremely abstract. When I hear all of the standard complaints about experimental fiction and its lack of a plot or structure, I usually just chalk it up to laziness on the reader's behalf. Writers like Hawkes are not babysitters, he isn't going to hold your hand throughout the narrative, work is involved, and significant demands are placed upon the reader. I enjoyed it overall, but from what I've heard, which isn't much, Hawkes's later novels are much more polished.

As far as I have read, he draws the closest comparison to Mcelroy, but there are several stylistic similarities to Gaddis's narrative voice.

Courtney says

this is my first Hawkes novel. i didn't think i would finish it. i kept saying, "i'm 40 pages/60 pages/halfway through this thing and i have no clue what it's even about!" now i've got 10 pages left in this book and i'm still not totally sure what's happening, but i still cannot put it down. the delivery is so alluring, the scenes are beautifully eerie and vivid, offering an impression of a scene with gritty detail on a few focal points. i suppose that's really how i recall most books anyway, not by the specific turns of a plot, but by the tone and the feel. whatever is happening, i'm hooked.

Cody says

If you tell me you understand all of it, I will tell you that you are absolutely full of shit to your face. Brilliant. A ghost.

Abe Frank says

Cap Leech is a good antecedent for McCarthy's Judge, except that things are even more discordant here.

Adam says

An opaque, surreal parody of a western. Grotesque and confusing, will bring to mind Faulkner and Dante(and David Lynch).
