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HARRY CREWS: THE ATMOSPHERE OF FAILURE

Middle Tennessee State University

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HARRY CREWS:
THE ATMOSPHERE OF FAILURE

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ABSTRACT

HARRY CREWS:
THE ATMOSPHERE OF FAILURE

by Wade Austin

Harry Crews is the author of eight novels, all of which are set in the New South of the 1960s and 1970s, an autobiography of his early life, a collection of magazine pieces, and a collection of nonfiction pieces and excerpts from some of his novels. Although he disparages the term "Southern Writer," he is very much a writer of the South. He was born in Georgia and lives now in Gainesville, Florida. When he talks and when he writes, Harry Crews has a strong "sense of place" for the South. Out of that "sense of place," he develops his major theme--the failure of the New South to offer its people a sense of value in its religion, rituals and ceremonies, and in its community life.

Chapter I of this study traces the influences on Crews' work from his early life in rural Georgia through his stay at the University of Florida to his exposure to literary figures, especially such "sense of place" writers as Flannery O'Connor. This chapter also shows the

relationship between the writers of what has been called the Southern Renaissance and Harry Crews' work. The Southern Renaissance writers, such as Allen Tate, John Crowe Ransom, and William Faulkner, writing between 1930 and 1955, warned that the South was in danger of losing its regional identity because it failed to develop a "fitting religion" and sustain its traditional rites and ceremonies centered in the home and in the community. Harry Crews' novels show the devastating effects of this failure on the society.

Chapter II examines Crews' first three novels: The Gospel Singer, Naked in Garden Hills, and This Thing Don't Lead to Heaven. These novels explore the failure of religion to provide meaning in people's lives. In The Gospel Singer, the people worship the illusion of religion in a person who sings religious songs; Naked in Garden Hills is an allegory of the failure of faith; and This Thing Don't Lead to Heaven concerns the failure of religion to provide comfort in life and death situations.

Chapter III examines three novels in which characters pursue ritual exercises in attempting to find meaning in their lives. Karate Is a Thing of the Spirit looks into the ascetic world of a karate commune; Car, in which a man tries to eat a Ford Maverick, is a satire on American consumerism; and The Hawk Is Dying shows a man seeking to escape the emptiness of modern life through the tradition of training and manning a hawk. Crews suggests that rituals

which are isolated exercises, as opposed to rites and ceremonies with a family or community involvement, will fail to provide satisfaction.

Chapter IV considers the remaining novels in Crews' output, The Gypsy's Curse and A Feast of Snakes. These two books explore the most devastating failure, the failure of hope. When this failure occurs, Crews suggests, especially in the latter novel, that man's only redemptive alternative is a personal act of violence.

Chapter V examines what the critics say about Crews and how he responds to criticism. Crews has received critical attention from major newspapers and periodicals ranging from reviews of a single book to an examination of several or all of his novels. His best reviews have come from those critics who look at the body of his work instead of at just one book. Finally, the study offers Crews' own views about his life in the South and how that has affected his work.

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Chapter I

HARRY CREWS: THE INFLUENCE OF A SENSE OF PLACE

Harry Crews does not like the term, "Southern Writer." However, if he isn't a Southern writer, he is certainly a writer of the South, born there in Georgia and living there in north Florida. Too, his eight novels are set in the South, and his one great theme, man's failure to find meaning in life to ease the misery of the human condition, grows out of a way of thinking about the South stated in the work of a group of Southern writers during what has become known as the Southern Renaissance (for the purpose of clarity, the term "Renascence" will be used in place of "Renaissance"). Somewhat at odds with his Southern background, Crews credits Graham Greene as the writer who influenced him most:

Graham Greene said: "The artist is doomed to live in an atmosphere of perpetual failure." I am very nervous about the word artist, not as I have used it, but the way it has been used by so many people who have no right to bring the word into their mouths in the first place. But I know what it means to live in an atmosphere of

perpetual failure. I would not presume to think this makes me in any way unique. All of us whose senses are not dead realize the imperfection of what we do, and to the extent we are hard on ourselves, that imperfection translates itself into failure. Inevitably, it is out of a base of failure that we try to rise again to do another thing.¹

As an artist, Crews says he works out of an atmosphere of failure. In addition to that sense of artistic failure, on a professional level, Crews' books have failed to attract a wide reading audience. While artistic and professional failures may be worthy of examination, this study will explore only how Crews' early life and Southern background have directed his work toward a "base of failure" as a major theme on three levels: the failure of religion, the failure of ritual, and the ultimate failure of hope, which leads to violence, to give meaning to life.

Harry Crews was born June 7, 1935, in Bacon County, Georgia. He was born of people who worked on the land but did not own any. He was the first of his family to graduate from high school, and, after four years in the Marine Corps, he attended the University of Florida. After graduation, he taught school at the public and community college levels. In 1968 Crews published his first novel, The Gospel Singer,

¹ Harry Crews, "Climbing the Tower," Blood and Grits (New York: Harper and Row, 1979), p. 212.

and joined the faculty of the University of Florida where he is now a full professor of English.²

Since 1968 Crews has published seven more novels. Naked in Garden Hills (1969) is the story of a six hundred pound Metrechal addict. This Thing Don't Lead to Heaven (1970) explores life and death in a "senior citizens home" in rural Georgia. Karate Is a Thing of the Spirit (1971) looks at man's attempt to find meaning in life through ritual achievement. Car (1972) is a satire on the American mania for consumption. The Hawk Is Dying (1973) once again explores man's use of ritual. The Gypsy's Curse (1974) is a story, ending in violence, of the futility of hope. Crews' last novel to date, A Feast of Snakes (1976), continues to explore violence. It is a book of almost total despair. Since 1976 Crews has published three nonfiction works: A Childhood: The Biography of a Place (1978), a memoir of his early childhood; Blood and Grits (1979), a collection of essays previously published in magazines; and Florida Frenzy (1982), another collection of essays, old and new, and excerpts from his fiction.

Harry Crews' eight novels are set mostly in southern Georgia and in northern Florida in a particular time, the

² David K. Jeffrey and Donald R. Noble, "Harry Crews: An Interview," The Southern Quarterly, 19, No. 2 (1981), 65.

1960s and 1970s. Although he disparages the term "Southern Novelist," he admits to a strong "sense of place" in his work:

It is true that there have been a large number of Southern writers: Faulkner, McCullers, Eudora Welty and on, and on, but I don't think any novelist wants an adjective put in front of the word "novelist." I sure as hell don't, any more than I'd want to be called a science fiction novelist or a historical novelist. I'm just a novelist. I tell stories. It's true that I come out of the South, and because of that, maybe I have some sense of place--of a certain, particular place.³

That "sense of place" is indelibly etched in Harry Crews' consciousness as A Childhood makes clear. He describes his early years in Georgia:

Well, my daddy died before I was old enough to remember him. And my momma married his brother--who treated her awful, beat her. . . . We lived on a series of tenant farms--the kinds of places where you could lie awake at night and look through the roof and see the stars and you could fish for chickens through the big wide cracks in the floor by tying a piece of tobacco twine to a fish hook. None of the kids I played with ate very well--bless their hearts. We kind of came up on a steady diet of biscuits made with lard and water, no milk. Hardly ate any meat whatsoever. We ate clay to make up for mineral deficiency. I know it sounds kind of pitiful. I didn't think it was pitiful then, don't now. It's just the way it was. Constantly, it was back-to-the wall time.⁴

³ Sterling V. Watson, "Arguments over an Open Wound: An Interview With Harry Crews," Prairie Schooner, 48 (1974), 64.

⁴ Steve Oney, "The Making of a Writer," The New York Times Book Review, 24 Dec. 1978, p. 17.

Crews insists he never felt "deprived" as a child.⁵ That may be because of the richness of his imagination and the Sears catalog:

Well, there were hardly any books at all in Bacon County when I was a boy. But there was the Sears catalog. And things were so awful in the house that I'd fantasize about the people in the catalog. They all looked so good and clean and perfect, and then I'd write little stories about them. And they were pretty good stories. I've always been fascinated by perfection of all sorts since then.⁶

Just as important as the Sears catalog were the adults in Crews' family:

It sounds like some sort of cliché, but I think I got started writing because when I was a boy, we had no radio, no television, did not subscribe to newspapers: we were on a farm, and the highlight of every day was when we were by the fire and the work was done and we were all sitting there and my uncles would tell stories to one another. Not really stories; it was out of their own experience, tricks they had played, times they had played, times they had gotten in fights, been hunting or whatever. That sort of just rubbed off on me. I repeated what the grownups were doing.⁷

These comments contain the key to understanding Crews' preoccupation with the theme of failure in his novels. Growing up,

⁵ Personal interview with Harry Crews, 18 November 1982.

⁶ Oney, p. 17.

⁷ Watson, p. 63.

emotionally, socially, and culturally disadvantaged and becoming fascinated with perfection, he encounters then, as a adult, the human condition, imperfect people in an imperfect world. Writing about people trying to, and failing to, escape from that condition seems only natural for him.

Crews says he learned the actual process of writing by using a book by Graham Greene:

I took The End of the Affair, and I pretty much reduced the thing to numbers. I found out how many characters were in it, how much time was in it--and that's hard to do as there is not only present time in a book but past time as well. I found out how many cities were in the book, how many rooms, where the climaxes were and how long it took Greene to get to them. And there were a lot of other things I reduced to numbers.⁸

Based on that learning experience, Crews wrote a novel which he knew was going to be a bad novel. However, he says he learned more about writing from actually doing a novel than he ever learned in a university class or from any other source.⁹

Along with Graham Greene, Crews credits Andrew Lytle, who was one of his teachers at the University of Florida,

⁸ Oney, p. 17.

⁹ Oney, p. 17.

with having the most influence on him as a writer. Other influences range from Andre Gide to Madame Bovary. He does admit, however, to an admiration of other "sense of place" writers. He claims he has read all of Faulkner and calls Thomas Wolfe the best writer America ever had "because he took the greatest risks and made the greatest failures." Crews believes James Agee was a "prince of language" and says Truman Capote "can write, he really can." He thinks Eudora Welty "a great writer" and says Erskine Caldwell "by the way, is a helluva lot better than he's ever been given credit for."¹⁰

Harry Crews is firmly rooted in the South both as a person and as a writer. With this in mind, the best way to look at Crews' work is to look beyond the obvious autobiographical elements to a specific literary context: the Southern Renaissance. Richard H. King dates the Renaissance from 1930 to 1955. He says it was more than a "literary movement. It was certainly that, but it also represented an outpouring of history, sociology, political analysis, autobiography, and innovative forms of journalism."¹¹ Here is a list of names commonly associated with the movement:

¹⁰ Jeffrey and Noble, pp. 68-69.

¹¹ Richard H. King, A Southern Renaissance: The Cultural Awakening of the American South 1930-1955 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), p. 5.

W. J. Cash, Lillian Smith, Howard Odum, William Alexander Percy, William Faulkner, Allen Tate, John Crowe Ransom, and Robert Penn Warren. While the historical, sociological, and political aspects of the Renaissance are important, this study is concerned only with the relationship between Harry Crews' work and the literary aspects of the Southern Renaissance. Such writers as Tate, Faulkner, and Warren wrote with concern that the South in the second quarter of this century was showing signs of failing to maintain its traditional values toward religion, community rites and ceremonies, and human relationships. Harry Crews' eight novels, set in the New South after 1960, show what can happen to people when they lose those traditional values.

Allen Tate believes, according to Richard H. King, that the Renaissance came about because the writers were caught in a creative tension between what they believed best about the Southern past and the pressures of the modern world.¹² King credits Cleanth Brooks with identifying the movement's specific grounding in the Southern experience:

According to Brooks, the Southern experience had been marked by a feeling for the concrete and the specific, a familiarity with conflict, a sense of community and religious wholeness, a belief that

¹² King, p. 4.

the mystery of human nature defied rational explanation or manipulation, and a sense of the tragic.¹³

In a narrower but still important view, Lewis Simpson believes the Renaissance was the product of religion. He says that the writers intended to "assert the redemptive meaning of the classical-Christian past in its bearing on the present" and that the writers were searching for "images of existence" to "express the truth that man's essential nature lies in his possession of the moral community of memory and history."¹⁴ Just as the Renaissance writers were trying to come to terms with the inherited values of the Southern tradition in their relation to the present,¹⁵ Harry Crews is trying to show what happens when the Southern experience that nurtured those values disappears: most of his characters experience failure attempting to find fulfillment and meaning in life.

Crews explains the New South that his characters experience:

Obviously, there is a New South, because there is a new everything. That's a cliché. We know that. The New South comes from the fact of affluence, the television; the cadences of speech are breaking down or have all broken down.

¹³ King, p. 5.

¹⁴ Lewis Simpson, "The Southern Recovery of Memory and History," Sewanee Review, 82, (1974), 5.

¹⁵ King, p. 7.

Instead of children in Ludovici, Georgia, listening to their grandfather talk and tell stories of their uncle, or of their mother, they're listening to the television and, of course, the television has no accent. The guy from California sounds like the guy from Florida sounds like the guy from Texas. So, the speech has broken down. The affluence has caused tremendous mobility. Agriculture has become enormous heavy industry rather than the small farm. I'm not saying any of these things are bad. I'm just saying that all those things which identified the South--a kind of loyalty to blood, and a suspicion of the outsider, and a nurturing of familiar things--have all broken down. Because of mobility, television, and affluence, people simply can't stay alive in the tiny pockets of labor on farms any longer. And so that's all gone by the way, and it's foolish to say or think otherwise.¹⁶

Some of the Crews' characters are old enough to remember the ways of the Old South, and they look in vain for those values and traditions now dead. Moreover, those characters too young to remember the past try, also in vain, to substitute rituals and ceremonies which will help them cope with the spiritual bleakness of the New South.

The New South of Harry Crews' eight novels is exactly the kind of society the Renaissance writers feared the South was becoming. The novels show the failure of religion to bring meaning to modern life; religion is now an illusion, a packaged image of a charismatic performer who has moved from pulpit to tent to the television tube; the failure of ritual, stripped of tradition, to give meaning to life;

¹⁶ Watson, p. 67.

and the ultimate failure of hope, which leads finally to violence and death. This sense of failure, like the "doom" in Faulkner's work, may be traced back to the South's defeat during the Civil War, its religious primitivism, and its lack of cultural and social recognition.¹⁷

Central to Crews' work is this question which troubled the Renaissance writers: What does it mean to live without a tradition?¹⁸ Hannah Arendt sees the failure of a culture to sustain a tradition as responsible for two major problems in the modern world: without tradition to guide, memory becomes helpless; without traditional authority, modern authority may degenerate into violence which will promote counterviolence. Out of this condition, Arendt contends the world may become "fantastic."¹⁹

The New South of Harry Crews' novels is certainly "fantastic." He presents an amazing collection of freaks and misfits. They range from midgets, one with the largest foot in the world, to a man intending to eat a 1970 Ford Maverick, to a deaf mute with no legs who becomes an ax murderer. Crews defends his use of such characters:

If I'm criticized for peopling my novels with freaks, for writing heartlessly about physical deformities, well, I say to these people they

¹⁷ King, p. 11.

¹⁸ See the discussion in King, p. 16.

¹⁹ Hannah Arendt, Between Past and Future (New York: Meridian, 1961), p. 141.

ought to do two things. They ought to look into their own secret hearts and see what they think about freaks. I think people who automatically throw up their hands and cover their eyes when they see a guy who's only got one eye and it's where his nose should be, I think something is wrong with these people. Also, I think people who think I make fun of freaks ought to re-examine my books. I have a helluva lot of empathy for a guy who has one eye and maybe is missing a leg. I may walk around a corner thinking hideous thoughts and come face to face with somebody. But that somebody won't know just how hideous my thoughts are. But a freak, if he turns that corner he'll see his dilemma instantly in the other man's eyes. And I detest symbol mongering, but it is true that to write about one thing you very often have to talk about another. I can say more about what the world out there calls normal by writing about what it calls abnormal.²⁰

Crews' philosophy here receives support from Flannery O'Connor who says that only the fantastic and the grotesque can do justice to truth about the South.²¹ Crews' freaks serve as symbols of how distorted life is in the modern age where traditions and rituals have become corrupted and broken.

Crews' first three novels explore how religion has failed to supply a meaningful focus to life in the New South. This failure of religion was a major concern of the Renaissance writers. The twelve Vanderbilt Agrarians agreed in their famous Southern manifesto, I'll Take My Stand, published in 1930, that religion would not play a vital role in the modern

²⁰ Oney, p. 17.

²¹ See King, p. 179.

industrial society they saw the South becoming.²² In his essay on religion in I'll Take My Stand, Allen Tate criticizes the Old South for never creating a "fitting religion" out of its feudal society. Tate contends the failure of religion is one reason the South failed to preserve its unique culture after the Civil War defeat. Tate says the South lived by "images" and not by ideas, and this condition makes the South vulnerable to new ideas.²³ Thomas Daniel Young interprets Tate's view on religion this way:

In "Religion and the Old South," Allen Tate argues that Protestantism, a creed which, as Ralph Gabriel has pointed out, emphasized the individual and his emotions and "a gospel of love which cleanses the world," is designed to support an aggressive, materialistic urban society. Such a religion, Tate insists, undermines the basic Christian myth which should be in "conviction immediate, direct, overwhelming." The modern tendency toward positivism and scientific abstraction has destroyed the myth on which Christianity depended for existence.²⁴

Finally, concerning the problem of religion in the South, John Crowe Ransom says that "religion is an institution

²² See Thomas Daniel Young, The Past in the Present: A Thematic Study of Modern Southern Fiction (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1981), p. 117.

²³ For discussion of Tate's views, see King, p. 56.

²⁴ Young, p. 117.

existing for the sake of its ritual, rather than, as I have heard, for the sake of its doctrines."²⁵ The characters in Crews' first three novels are trying to cope with religion in light of these problems.

The epigram in The Gospel Singer, Crews' first book, states: "Men to whom God is dead worship one another." The people in the book worship the gospel singer of the title, believing he has the power to help and heal them. Although he pretends to be religious, he is thoroughly corrupt. As popular as any celebrity in films or television, he hides behind the religious facade to enjoy the sexual pleasures and creature comforts his fame brings him. Crews is saying that people have replaced the traditions, rituals, and values associated in the past with religion and God with illusions or images of such figures as the Gospel Singer or television evangelists. The book stresses the people's need for such an illusion and their readiness to do violence to preserve it. Allen Tate says that the modern Southerner "has no tradition of ideas, no consciousness of moral or spiritual values."²⁶ Tate wrote that comment in 1925, but it seems even more appropriate in the New South of Crews' novels.

²⁵ John Crowe Ransom, The World's Body (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1968), p. 43.

²⁶ Quoted in Young, p. 3.

The Renaissance writers were concerned about another change they saw happening in the South, a change which has become reality in Crews' novels. That change is the South's loss of its regional identity and those values and traditions which gave it that identity. Allen Tate says that "the concrete forms of the social and religious life are the assimilating structure of society."²⁷ Thomas Young defines what the loss of those forms means to the modern Southerner:

His is not a traditional society, one able to pass on to the next generation what it received from the previous one. In the present age, it naturally follows, there has been a deterioration of, and a general disregard for, manners, rituals, rites, codes and morals; therefore man can only expend his energy in violence.²⁸

Crews' fourth, fifth, and sixth novels explore man's attempt to replace those older forms mentioned by Tate and Young with ritual exercises ranging from karate to training a hawk. The attempts, however, end in failure.

Andrew Lytle argues that during the first half of the twentieth century the South was a society with a "coherent view of life." He sees the Old South as "the last moment of equilibrium . . . the last time a man could know who he

²⁷ Allen Tate, Essays of Four Decades (New York: William Morrow, 1968), p. 523.

²⁸ Young, p. 7.

was. Or where he was from. It was the last time a man without having to think could say what was right and what was wrong."²⁹ Young states that the contributors to I'll Take My Stand all argue that "a disregard for the significance of place initiates a meaningless exploitation of nature and an utter disregard for the ceremonies through which man can live at peace with the natural forces of the universe."³⁰ Crews expresses what "sense of place" means to him:

Living here in North Florida, I am a little more than a hundred miles from where I was born and raised to manhood. I am just far enough away from the only place that was ever mine to still see it, and close enough to the only people to whom I was ever kin in ways deeper than blood to still hear them.³¹

Eudora Welty says that "sense of place" is important to both the artist and the people:

It seems plain that the art that speaks most clearly, explicitly, directly, and passionately from its place of origin will remain the longest understood. It is through place that we put our roots. . . .³²

²⁹ Andrew Lytle, The Hero With the Private Parts (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1966), p. 173.

³⁰ Young, pp. 8-9.

³¹ Harry Crews, "Why I Live Where I Live," Florida Frenzy (Gainesville: Univ. Presses of Florida, 1982), pp. 9-10.

³² Eudora Welty, The Eye of the Story (New York: Random House, 1977), p. 132.

Harry Crews' novels show in vivid images and language what happens to people who lose the "sense of place," who lose contact with the traditional rituals, ceremonies, and values. They may try to substitute a new ritual, but they invariably find it meaningless.

The Crews novel which deals most clearly with this problem is The Hawk Is Dying. The protagonist, George Gattling, represents the plight of the modern Southerner. Crews speaks of the character:

He's got a business, makes money, lives in a very expensive house, drives a nice car; he's got a lot to eat, you know, all those things. In another way, coming as he does from Bainbridge, Georgia, off the farm to this business he has established, what he's found and what he says in the novel is "I was being continually warned while I was growing up about various things, but I was never warned what I should have been warned about. They told me 'work hard.' That work would save me. 'Work hard, save money and you'll be happy.'" He worked hard and one day turned a corner and found that he was on the edge of some kind of enormous hole, was about to fall in, and didn't understand any of it. He has no real relationships with his job, or his family. He has no real connection with the city in which he lives. He goes to cocktail parties and is a stranger. He goes to his office as a stranger, to his home as a stranger. What he ultimately falls back on is this tremendous attraction to blood.³³

George looks to the past for a ritual--training a hawk--to give his life meaning, but Crews suggests in the book that

³³ Watson, p. 67.

a ritual exercise is not enough if someone has lost, as George has, a "sense of place."

John Crowe Ransom insists that a healthy society must teach its citizens the proper use of two forms: work forms and aesthetic or play forms.³⁴ Traditional societies trained their citizens in this way:

Societies of the old order seemed better aware of their responsibilities. Along with the work-forms went the play-forms, which were elaborate in detail, and great in number, fastening upon so many of the common and otherwise practical occasions of life and making them occasions of joy and reflection, even festivals and celebrations; yet at the same time by no means a help but if anything a hindrance to direct action. The aesthetic forms are a technique of restraint, not of efficiency. . . . They stand between the individual and impose a check upon his action.³⁵

Ransom believes the significant function of the aesthetic forms is to deter man's natural impulse to satisfy basic needs directly. This is a key concept that Crews deals with in his last novel to date, A Feast of Snakes. He suggests in the book that the New South fails to place proper emphasis on the true play forms of rituals and ceremonies which were centered in family and community life in the Old South. Today the society emphasizes high school and college football games, hunting and killing for pleasure, and macho posturing with expensive toys, four-wheel drive trucks and guns.

³⁴ See Young, p. 16.

³⁵ Ransom, p. 31.

Joe Lon Mackey, the principal character in A Feast of Snakes, is a prime example of a child of the New South. He is a former golden boy, a high school All-American football player, but he never learned the requisite skills of reading and computation which would have enabled him to go to college and on to a career. During his youth, he managed to get by on his "golden boy" status: his teachers passed him grade to grade without his learning anything; the community lavished praise and awards on him; and girls offered him sexual pleasure. Now, at age twenty-one, Joe Lon has a wife losing her looks, two children, and no future. He makes a living by selling liquor to blacks and chemical toilets to tourists who come to hunt rattlesnakes. The annual rattlesnake hunt, which was a community festival in the Old South, has become simply a means of making quick money from tourists. At the same time, the hunt now offers tourists and natives alike an opportunity to give free rein to sexual and drinking indulgence.

Joe Lon Mackey is the most desperate of all Crews' characters. Religion means nothing to him. Unlike George Gattling, he is too young to remember the traditions and rituals of the Old South, but he realizes the rituals he practices now are temporal and will never offer his life the satisfaction he craves. Ransom says the function of a traditional society "is to instruct its members how to

transform instinctive experience into aesthetic experience."³⁶ Since Joe Lon's society fails to offer him that learning experience, he turns instinctively to violence and kills four people.

The Southern past that Ransom and other Renaissance writers mourned was a past that Thomas Young describes as placing the "appropriate value on these aesthetic forms--myth, rituals, manners, rites, and ceremonies--one that permitted the creation and consumption of art. . . ." ³⁷ The New South society of Harry Crews fails to offer values or meaningful play-forms. Crews' characters search for religion, and find only illusions and images; they search for rituals, and find only empty exercises. Crews' books imply that in the New South religion, rituals, and the society itself fail to offer much hope for the human condition.

In the Southern past, the Renaissance writers saw a society of people with concrete goals willing to work and suffer pain and privation to achieve those goals. The traditional society, with its religion, rituals and ceremonies, and values, was there to help with problems that intellect and experience could not overcome. In the New South man hopes, with little possibility of achieving; he

³⁶ Ransom, p. 43.

³⁷ Young, p. 20.

works and plays, with little possibility of finding satisfaction for his efforts.

From The Gospel Singer to A Feast of Snakes Harry Crews' vision of the human condition turns bleaker and bleaker. Those aspects of society the Renaissance writers feared were disappearing from modern life--religious conviction, traditional rituals and ceremonies, and a sense of place--have done just that in the New South of Harry Crews' novels. In a few instances, Crews suggests that love may offer some hope in an otherwise meaningless existence, but he abandons that possibility in his last two novels. The world Harry Crews writes about is violent and fantastic. He uses grotesque characters, freaks, to point up graphically man's ultimate imperfection in the world's order. A fat man wants to get thin by eating; a midget wants to grow through magic; a legless dwarf wants a "normal" woman to love him. The most frightening idea, Crews seems to say in his books, is that the freaks and the normals are slowly converging in a universal failure--the failure of hope.

Chapter II

THE FAILURE OF RELIGION

In A Childhood: The Biography of a Place, Harry Crews tells of an experience he had at about age five:

I said: "We all of us made out of dirt. God took him up some dirt and put it in his hands and rolled it around and then he spit in the dirt and rolled it some more and out of that dirt and God spit, he made you and me, all of us."

That is the way my preaching began. I don't remember how it ended, but I know it went on for a long time and it was made pretty much out of what I had heard in church, what I had heard the preacher say about hell and God and heaven and damnation and the sorry state of the human condition. Hell was at the center of any sermon I had ever heard in Bacon County. In all the churches you smelled the brimstone and the sulphur and you felt the fire and you were made to know that because of what you had done in your life, you were doomed forever. Unless somehow somewhere you were touched by the action of mercy and the Grace of God. But you could not, you must not, count on the Grace of God. It probably would not come to you because you were too sorry.¹

Crews' experience was common enough in the South of the 1930s and 1940s. Religion played a most influential role in

¹ Harry Crews, A Childhood: The Biography of a Place (New York: Harper and Row, Publisher,s 1978), pp. 65-66.

people's lives there. It is not, then, surprising that Harry Crews took religion as the subject of his first three novels: The Gospel Singer (1968), Naked in Garden Hills (1969), and This Thing Don't Lead to Heaven (1970).²

While giving credit for its "comparative stability" and its "preference for human relationships," Allen Tate has found the Old South's greatest deficiency to be that it never created a "fitting religion."³ The religion it did create was not the kind needed to support the feudal society of the Old South. It was instead a religion intended, according to Thomas Young, to promote "a capitalistic enterprise intent on the wholesale exploitation of nature in order to advance trade as an end in itself."⁴ What this means to the modern Southerner, according to Tate, is that he "has no tradition of ideas, no consciousness of moral or spiritual values."⁵ This is the problem confronting the characters in Harry Crews' first novels. They cling to a

² Harry Crews, The Gospel Singer (New York: Dell Publishing Co., Inc., 1969); Naked in Garden Hills (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1969); This Thing Don't Lead to Heaven (William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1970); hereafter cited as GS, NGH, and TTDLH. All further references to these works appear in the text.

³ Allen Tate, "Remarks on the Southern Religion," in I'll Take My Stand, by Twelve Southerners (1930, rpt. Baton Rouge; Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1977), pp. 166-167.

⁴ Thomas Daniel Young, The Past in the Present (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1981), p. 4.

⁵ See discussion in Young, p. 3.

faith in the saving grace of a religion that doesn't work, and they ultimately face the failure of that belief.

The Gospel Singer (1968) deals explicitly with religion and the failure of the principal characters to receive salvation through its practice. The novel's epigraph states the theme: "Men to whom God is dead worship one another." The epigraph and the novel's first sentence, "Enigma, Georgia, was a dead end." (GS, 7), make clear Crews' attitude toward the human condition. Most of the townspeople in Enigma are trying to get out. The stultifying poverty and narrowness of vision in Enigma are paralyzing. Because of his handsome features and beautiful singing voice, the Gospel Singer, who has no other name in the book, is able to escape, if only temporarily. Although he is outwardly a very religious person, the Gospel Singer is a perverse and corrupted soul. Since he has no faith, he is constantly troubled by his relationship with people who treat him as a god and think he can both heal the sick and offer them redemption. He knows he can do neither, and he is torn between hatred for them and compassion for their condition.

John Crowe Ransom says that religion in the South was "an institution existing for the sake of its ritual, rather than . . . for the sake of its doctrine."⁶ The folk in

⁶ John Crowe Ransom, The World's Body (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1968), p. 43.

Enigma are so desperate for salvation that they have placed all faith in the Gospel Singer, faith in the man and faith in the ritual of his returning home or appearing on television:

When Willalee Bookatee turned on that Muntz television and the Gospel Singer's voice slipped out into his cabin, it was balm poured into a wound. Nothing mattered. The world dropped down into a great big hole. Everything--whether it was a razor cut, or a tar scalded eye, or a burning case of clap off a Tifton high-yellow whore--everything quit but that voice and it went in his head and down his flesh to where his soul slept. And he could stand whatever it was for another week. (GS, 6)

Talking and thinking about the Gospel Singer have become ritual for the people of Enigma. They simply believe in the Gospel Singer. Willalee Bookatee has the accepted attitude toward the saving grace of the man: "And yet he believed it. Knowing had nothing to do with it" (GS, 7). The people feel, as Willalee does, "that someday in some mysterious and instantaneous way the Gospel Singer would save them from the tragedy that was Enigma" (GS, 7).

The Gospel Singer knows that he is not going to save anyone; he knows that he is going to fail them because he is only trading on God:

A quiet horror filled him. Loathing. He smelled his sour skin. At these moments of penance how he hated his voice and his beauty. Not only had the voice displaced him, made him uncomfortable among his own blood kin, but it had brought him into the presence of God. More even than that.

It had made him God's own living symbol in the land. He had not tried to be a gospel singer. The voice had simply come out of his mouth one day and he had used it. It was a gift he had not asked for and that at first he had not known what to do with. It had even been amusing in the beginning to see people stopped startled, amazed before his voice. But the gift had proved a curse. Because the simple, frightening truth was that a gospel song in his mouth could convert a man to God, or as in the case of MaryBell, the memory of whom burned him now like a fire, it could destroy utterly. (GS, 57)

Because of MaryBell, or perhaps because she was the first he was to seduce and corrupt, the Gospel Singer always returns to Enigma. The people cannot leave him alone. They stare at him, try to touch him, and make impossible requests of him. The Gospel Singer is "forced to stand in their midst, impotent, castrated by his inability to relieve their suffering" (GS, 41).

Part of the ritual in the Gospel Singer's coming back to Enigma is the perverse sexual and spiritual linkage he has with MaryBell:

She was also the reason he had come back. This time and every time. It was for her: to see her, to hear her. She was his touchstone. He felt sometimes that it was only by her that he knew himself real. When the converts started falling before him like wheat before a scythe, when the whole world started turning on his word, he needed MaryBell. (GS, 41-52)

MaryBell is a constant reminder of the reality of his sin. The Gospel Singer satisfies his insatiable appetite for sex

by trading on his image and position. He seduces young girls like MaryBell who are blinded by his god-like image, and he also can afford expensive prostitutes with the money he makes from the gospel songs he performs. The image and the commercial packaging of that image are what the Gospel Singer has become.

The Gospel Singer thinks about God, but he does not believe in God: "As he lay there dreaming of things he had never seen, his superstition of God opened in him like an old wound" (GS, 44). He is aware that his sins, sexual ones in particular, are at odds with even an attempt to have faith in God:

He thought saving souls and healing the sick were things best left alone, especially in light of the fact that he was doing what he was doing not for God but for money: money to buy silk underdrawers, and finally, money to buy powerful cars that he could jump into and roar out of Enigma. And even to the Gospel Singer, whose faith in God was not faith at all but an overwhelming superstition, it seemed obvious that a man could not have both silk drawers and God. He could have one or the other but not both. (GS, 118-19)

MaryBell becomes the singer's defense against God. He takes her virginity, he corrupts her, and he teaches her sophisticated sexual ways he has learned from prostitutes in the city. She believes the promises he has no intention of keeping because she wants to get out of Enigma. In the beginning she does not see that his is a failed salvation.

MaryBell frustrates the Gospel Singer with the questions she asks. When she asks if God likes whores, because she thinks she has become one, the Gospel Singer says, "I wish you would leave God out of it" (GS, 123). She replies, "I don't think we can leave him out of it. He got in it from the very start. Remember? He got in it the same night you got in it" (GS, 123). MaryBell asks him about salvation:

"Do you even think of saving your own soul?"
Her face went soft in a curious way he had not seen in a long time.

He had thought about it more than a little, and he knew he could not save his soul at the expense of the world. It was too much to ask of a man born in Enigma to give up good food and fine clothes, and cars and hotels and women for the promise of heaven. But he also knew there was a chance. If it was anything the gospel songs made clear, it was the fact that every man, no matter how evil he had been, had a chance in the final moments of his life to gain heaven. He just had to be lucky enough to have the time and the inclination. (GS, 126-27)

MaryBell, who began with faith in God and in the Gospel Singer, has become a totally wanton woman whenever the Gospel Singer is home. Paradoxically, the more her sexual activity with him has grown, the more the community has lauded her virtue. She has helped the needy, has cared for the sick, and has led, in the eyes of the community, an exemplary life. Her greatest good works have been with Negroes in Enigma. She has advised them and inspired them to take pride in their neighborhood. This work brings her

into contact with Willalee Bookatee, a former childhood friend of the Gospel Singer and now his fervent disciple.

Willalee's faith in the Gospel Singer has led him to become a preacher and found a church in the black community. Before the novel begins, Willalee has killed MaryBell. He doesn't remember why he killed her, and, in jail, he is waiting for the Gospel Singer to come home to help him remember so he can die at peace with God.

The Gospel Singer visits Willalee in Jail and is horrified to learn that he was responsible for Willalee's founding a church:

"It was the only thing I could do," said Willalee. "You saved me on the TeeVee." His voice became dreamy. He brought the bible nearer his body. "I was just a ordinary man, workin' in the woods, dippin' tar and chippin' boxes. Evertime you was on the TeeVee, I watched you, and evertime I watched you, I known what you was. Then in the dead of night, lyin' in my cabin, you come on the Muntz, and I seen how it was gone be. The seventh of April, on a Wednesday. You was in Nu Yawk City. And as soon as you come on, I was ready. Miss MaryBell tol me. She done tol me agin and agin how it was gone be if I just kept watchin' you. So I did and it was. I laid my hand on that glas and. . . . (CS, 150-51)

As Willalee tells how MaryBell helped save him, he remembers why he killed her. MaryBell, unable to continue believing in the Gosepl Singer, comes one night to tell Willalee the truth of her relationship with the singer. He recalls:

"She say, you saved on a lie, the church a lie, the Gospel Singer a lie. She say God is a man

with his pants down, God is a unbuttoned fly. She say the Gospel Singer . . . and I hit her with the ice pick. I taken her by the throat and hit her with the ice pick. I taken her by the throat and hit her and hit her and hit her." He sobbed face down on the cot, his fists balled.
(GS, 153-54)

The Gospel Singer easily convinces Willalee that MaryBell was lying; however, he knows that the lie he is living is responsible for the murder: "She filled Willalee full of lies, got him to believing them, then told him the truth" (GS, 159). Because a mob is gathering to castrate and lynch Willalee, who they believe raped and then killed MaryBell, the Gospel Singer decides he must tell how he used and corrupted MaryBell. He says to his manager, "I wouldn't care if they hung him for killing MaryBell, but they're going to hang him for something he didn't do . . . raping her" (GS, 160).

While he is trying to think of the best way to explain himself to the people and save Willalee, the Gospel Singer agrees to sing in Enigma at the request of MaryBell's mother. On the night of the concert, he is approached by Woody Pea, a tent evangelist who offers a deal guaranteed to make more money for the singer:

They were out there waiting for him and in here this man--this Woody Pea--was talking a deal. Deals for as long as he could remember. A deal with his family, a deal with MaryBell, a deal with Mr. Keene, a deal with television studios, and finally a deal with Didymus. He, the Gospel Singer, was a deal. (GS, 187-88)

Although he wants to save Willalee, the Gospel Singer wavers when he realizes he will have to give up all the comfort the money has brought him. Just before he sings for the crowd, his manager, Didymus, who has been moved by the Willalee-MaryBell story and who has never approved of the singer's hedonism, takes the microphone and tells the crowd the Gospel Singer has an announcement to make. The singer feels betrayed, but he is repelled by the sick and crippled in the audience who are struggling for a favored position near the stage. The singer begins to talk, calmly at first and then almost hysterically:

"I'm the biggest sinner here, if you want to talk about that. I've done everything you can think of and some you cain't." The dark rows of Enigma tensed. Their mouths went white; their backs straightened. The Gospel Singer saw them. "That's right," he said. "Did you think I could be what you said I was? Didn't you know from your own black hearts what mine must be like?" (GS, 192)

The crowd begins to react with a savage noise, but the singer continues. He tells the people that MaryBell was a whore and that he was the one who made her a whore. The crowd surges toward the stage. Some still believe and ask for healing; others try to touch the singer. He screams at the crowd that he cannot heal them or save them: "I cain't do nothing but sing gospel songs, and lay your women, your wives and mothers and daughters--all your Mary-Bells" (GS, 194).

The crowd drags the singer to a tree, puts a rope around his neck, and sets him astride a mule. Willalee sits on another mule beside him. Before he dies, Willalee asks forgiveness for the mob. The Gospel Singer tries to say "I'm sorry" to Willalee, but he can only think it. His last words are to the mob: "Damn you, damn you all to hell" (GS, 195).

Allen Tate believed that the Old South failed to create a fitting religion; its religion only exploited nature to advance trade. In the New South of Harry Crews' novels, religious exploitation has a wider meaning. The Gospel Singer uses religion to satisfy his perverse appetites; MaryBell and Willalee use religion as a way of explaining what they have become--MaryBell is the Gospel Singer's whore and Willalee is his devoted disciple. For all three, religion, or faith in God or in the Gospel Singer, is an illusion. The failure of religion in the novel is the shattering of that illusion. The result is death for the three characters. Frank W. Shelton says this about the failure of religion in the novel:

Religion is thus shown to have no relation with truth; people want only comfort and the illusion of meaning. At the end of the novel they have reaffirmed their belief in the purity of the Gospel Singer and MaryBell. The Church of the Gospel Singer, founded by Willalee, will flourish. The only escape from the enigmatic human condition

is through the illusion of perfection, and people will kill to protect that illusion.⁷

The three major characters in The Gospel Singer want the illusion to work. They want their faith and religion to be real. When he can no longer manipulate the people, and his guilt forces him to tell the truth, the Gospel Singer fails to hold onto his illusion. His failure is one of conscience. Because they have placed an easy faith in a man who cannot possibly sustain it, MaryBell, Willalee, and the people of Enigma fail. The end of the novel implies that the people will rebuild the illusion. This is the most chilling idea in the novel: illusion, not reality or faith, can bring meaning to the human condition, but this meaning is merely illusory.

Harry Crews' second novel, Naked in Garden Hills (1969), treats religion in an allegorical fashion. The title alludes to the Garden of Eden. Jack O'Boylan, a God figure, never appears in the story. After the failure of the Florida land boom, O'Boylan looked at the development which was to have been Garden Hills and "saw that it was real good" (NGH, 10). He built on the site the world's largest phosphate mining plant, bringing prosperity to the workers

⁷ Frank W. Shelton, "Harry Crews: Man's Search for Perfection," The Southern Literary Journal, 12, No. 2 (Spring 1980), 102.

who eagerly came. Without warning, he closed the plant. Now only twelve families remain, waiting and hoping for his return. They wait and hope in vain.

The novel's setting is particularly affecting. The contrast between the perceived image in the reader's mind of the verdant Garden of Eden and the barren, deserted phosphate mine in Florida is striking. Also, the allusion to the Garden of Eden makes clear early in the novel that these characters too will fail to find in religion meaning for their barren lives.

The families in Garden Hills look to Aaron Mayhugh, known as the Fat Man, as their savior now that O'Boylan has closed the plant. The Fat Man, son of the original owner of the land, is using his inheritance to keep the twelve families satisfied enough not to leave. They assume that the Fat Man is in touch with O'Boylan and that O'Boylan will someday return and make them prosperous again. The Fat Man encourages this assumption because he is trapped by a reality as serious as the condition of the destitute families. He has almost gone through the fortune left by his father. His real problem, however, is his weight. He weighs nearly six hundred pounds. Ironically, he is addicted to Metrecal, going on binges which drive his weight up.

He, himself, had never had any other desire than to put everything outside himself inside himself, to put the world in his stomach. And he had known for a long time he was not alone in such dreams. Jack O'Boylan wanted to put the world in a sack and call it phosphate. (NGH, 114-15)

As Shelton observes, Fat Man dreams of "perfection, of remaking the world to conform to the measurements of a man."⁸

Another character concerned with perfection is Jester, the Fat Man's valet. He is a Negro jockey only three feet tall. Jester is more than his name implies, a figure for entertaining the Fat Man. He is the antithesis of his employer. Physically, he is perfectly formed; but unlike the Fat Man, he has no illusions about what perfection can do:

Long before Jester ever saw Garden Hills, he knew all about perfection. If you're perfect, you're supposed to win. Everybody knows that. The perfect fighter wins the boxing match. The perfect worker becomes president. It's a natural law, like gravity. (NGH, 140)

Jester knows that the natural order of things can become perverted. In his first race, on a perfect horse, the horse ran into a brick wall, committing suicide. From that incident Jester learned his great lesson: "If a perfect jockey riding

⁸ Shelton, p. 103.

a perfect horse on a perfect day . . . can't even come around the track and take the wire, where does that leave the rest of the world?" (NGH, 141). Jester knows that perfection cannot give the meaning to life the Fat Man wants. Jester accepts himself as part of an imperfect world. He has a major flaw, the fear to race again, which leads him to this understanding:

"I'm not perfect." It came out of him in a rush of breath. "See I thought I was. Thank God I ain't. See a perfect thing ain't got a chance. The world kills it, everything perfect. (Listen to him.) Now a thing that ain't perfect, it grows like a weed. A thing that ain't perfect gets handclapping, smiles, shouts, takes the wire a easy winner. But the world ain't set up right if you perfect." (NGH, 176)

Like the characters in The Gospel Singer who are content with the illusion that the singer can heal and save them from their miserable condition in the world, Jester is content now to dream of horses because he finds stability and meaning in the dream.⁹ On the other hand, the Fat Man continues a futile and frustrating attempt to make a dream come true-- to be thin and to be accepted. He knows that Jack O'Boylan is not coming back to reopen the phosphate plant. He is afraid the families will move away, Jester with them, and he knows he cannot survive alone.

⁹ See Shelton's discussion of this idea, p. 103.

While rumors of Jack O'Boylan's return flourish and the Fat Man grows fatter and more desperate, Dolly, a former beauty queen reared in Garden Hills, appears to be a new savior. Earlier Dolly tired of the rumors about Jack O'Boylan and went to New York to find him. She failed to do so, but accidentally she learned something about the way of the world. She learned what the Gospel Singer and his manager learned--package an image properly, and it will sell. Furthermore, the best way to package is with sex; and sex, properly packaged, will bring money and power. Larry W. DeBord and Gary L. Long have analyzed what Dolly discovered:

By accident, she blundered into a job at a go-go bar. After years in a cage, she discovered that beauty, freely offered, merits no rewards, that people will pay for the untouchable and for the fantasy of possession. She learned that easily possessed commodities are worthless unless packaged to appear more desirable. In the go-go, Dolly discovered the principle of organization and sales: successful people are not those in the cage, but those who package others.¹⁰

Dolly succeeds where the Gospel Singer failed. He had no faith in God, and he was powerless within himself. He came to realize that the deal was everything. Dolly comes to

¹⁰ Larry W. DeBord and Gary L. Long, "Harry Crews on the American Dream," The Southern Quarterly, 20, No. 3 (Spring 1982), 49.

understand that too, and then she makes an amazing discovery.

She tells the Fat Man:

"It took a long time to find out. But the truth is--I'm Jack O'Boylan." She laughed at his startled expression.

"Now you are being silly."

". . . And you're Jack O'Boylan--everybody is. Jack O'Boylan is a thing in all of us that eats raw meat and drinks blood. And you either admit it or use it, or you get fed to somebody."

(NGH, 159)

Dolly browbeats the Fat Man into using what is left of his fortune to turn Garden Hills into a roadside attraction, a Disneyworld for freaks and the hopeless. She puts the people in Garden Hills to work, becoming in time as much of a legend as Jack O'Boylan was. His religion becomes hers--progress and profit. Dolly's failure is that she becomes less of a person as her legend grows. In that sense she dies as surely as the Gospel Singer did.

Just as the people of Enigma preserved their illusion of the Gospel Singer as a god, the people of Garden Hills preserve their illusion of a savior, shifting from a faith in Jack O'Boylan to a faith in Dolly. She has given them meaningless jobs in the tourist attraction that Garden Hills has become, and so their dream of a savior's return comes true. Jester gets to realize his dream by riding another person on stage in a perverse imitation of horsemanship.

The Fat Man retains no illusions. Deserted by Jester and unable to care for himself, he ends as a freak exhibit in Dolly's nightclub, his weight rising beyond six hundred pounds. Earlier in the novel, the Fat Man asked himself a question: "Was man a joke, a shaggy dog story of incredible length, stretching on now toward three thousand years?" (NGH, 109). The answer appears to be yes.

What the characters in the novel have at the end is false hope in a world without hope. Belief and faith that a higher power can bring meaning to the human condition fail them. All they have left is an illusion.

With This Thing Don't Lead to Heaven (1970), Crews abandons religion as a specific subject for his novels. This book deals with old age and death, specific signs of man's limitations and occasions of spiritual longing. Like the first two novels, This Thing Don't Lead to Heaven has a central character whom other characters place their faith and hope in. She is Pearl Lee Gates, whose name is certainly Crews' most heavyhanded use of a symbol in all of his novels. She is known simply as Axel, however. Axel owns an "old age home" in a small Georgia town which is very successful because it makes death palatable. Once again Crews contrasts hope and reality, but, for the first time, he suggests that there may be one way to add meaning to life and escape the misery of the human condition. That way is not through religion, but through human love.

The novel focuses on Jeremy Tetley, an eighty year old man approaching death. Junior Bledsoe, a grave plot salesman, and Hiram Peters, a minister who has lost his faith, vie for Jeremy on the day of his death. The contrast between the two characters makes clear once more that religion will fail to offer comfort in Crews' world. Junior believes in what he is doing. He hands out his company brochures with this assurance: "We take the guesswork out of where you're going" (TTDLH, 104). On the other hand, Hiram Peters hands out pamphlets titled "There Is No Death." Hiram has lost his faith, and he is so terrified by that loss that he has willed himself not to believe in death: "Not his own death, not anybody's. It was an act of will. He stood trembling in the fiery sun and the thought leapt in his blood: I will not die" (TTDLH, 142).

Another character is Jefferson Davis Munroe, a midget massage artist working for Pearl Lee. Jefferson Davis wants to be normal sized, and he puts his faith in the voodoo magic of Carlita, a Spanish speaking lady with whom he cannot communicate. As superstitious about religion as the Gospel Singer was, Jefferson Davis believes Carlita will release the evil which has dwarfed him so that he may grow to a normal size.

Pearl Lee is as much trapped by her life as Jefferson Davis is trapped by his size. She has lived all her life in

the old age home, and she wants to get away from the sick and the dying and believe in and touch another human being. Shelton comments on Crews' first suggestion that human love may be all the hope mankind has in this life:

She [Pearl Lee] finally seduces--practically rapes--Junior, much against his will, since he fears sex, love, and children, suggesting life as they do rather than death. Yet he seems finally won over by her. In this episode is the first suggestion in Crews' work that love offers an escape from man's trapped condition.¹¹

As they did in the previous novels, the principal characters reject religion. Shelton says the title refers to Pearl Lee, the home, and to earthly life.¹² Pearl Lee tells Junior how her father designed the home using bands of lights pointing to heaven:

"Straight to heaven," Junior whispered.
 "That's what he made them believe," she said.
 "He made'm believe his house was the steps to heaven. One step, two step, three step, you're there!" she sang it out. "The old folks started coming and never stopped. They brought'm in from Florida, from Alabama, from all over the South. It made him rich. It made him famous."
 "Straight to heaven," said Junior, almost gagging now, his breath caught in his throat.
 "Don't worry," she said. "It was a lie. This thing don't lead to heaven." (TTDLH, 162)

While Jeremy is dying, Junior and Hiram Peters continue to argue over the best way to prepare for death. Alone with Jeremy, Jefferson Davis assesses what it means to die,

¹¹ Shelton, p. 105.

¹² Shelton, p. 105.

rejecting both Hiram Peters' thinking that there is no death and Junior's preparation that makes death easy:

"I wisht it was something I could leave," said Jefferson Davis. "But I ain't got a thing I can leave. I don't know anybody that has. You gone be all right though. You doing it fine. Don't take a thing but guts. It's all it ever taken."
(TTDLH, 181-82)

Allen Tate says in I'll Take My Stand that the people of the Old South never "created a fitting religion" for the feudal culture that the South was and that the people "lived by images" and not by ideas.¹³ This assessment is especially true of the characters in Harry Crews' New South. From the person of the Gospel Singer to the lights leading toward heaven on top of Pearl Lee Gates' old age home, the people are still putting their faith in an image. Some, like the Gospel Singer and Jefferson Davis Munroe, come to rely on a superstition. Others thus have no religious faith at all. Thus, Crews' first three novels agree with Thomas Daniel Young's assertion that religion in the South has become merely "a capitalistic enterprise."¹⁴ The Gospel Singer, Dolly, Pearl Lee, and Junior Bledsoe are all involved in the commercial possibilities of religion and are exploiting those possibilities to the fullest.

¹³ Tate, pp. 166-67.

¹⁴ Young, p. 4.

Religion fails to offer these characters a better life on earth or comfort in the face of death. All that is left in the end are the illusions--the illusion held by the people that the Gospel Singer was perfect and could save them; the illusion held by the people in Garden Hills that Dolly had given them meaningful work; or the illusion held by Jefferson Davis that magic could make him grow.

Chapter III

THE FAILURE OF RITUAL

After his first three novels, Harry Crews dismisses religion as a force in the world. Instead he explores various rituals, inquiring whether man may through discipline fill the void left by the failure of religion to give meaning to life. As he did in This Thing Don't Lead to Heaven, he considers the possibility that human love may be the only way man can escape the misery of the human condition. The novels with ritual exercise as a recurring theme are Karate Is a Thing of the Spirit (1971), Car (1972), and The Hawk Is Dying (1973).¹

Just as The Gospel Singer focused more closely on religion than did the two books following, which used the same subject, Karate Is a Thing of the Spirit focuses more closely on the discipline of ritual than do the two books which follow it. As the title implies, karate is more than

¹ Harry Crews, Karate Is a Thing of the Spirit (New York: Pocket Books, 1972); Car (New York: Pocket Books, 1972); The Hawk Is Dying (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1973); hereafter cited as KTS, Car, and HID. All further references to these works appear in the text.

mere physical exercise; it is a combination of body and mind control. Frank W. Shelton defines it this way:

In Karate Is a Thing of the Spirit, karate is an almost religious ritual through which people attempt to link and fulfill body and spirit. A symbol of purity, order, peace and control, it depends on ritual physical training and self-discipline, elements which become increasingly important at this point in Crews' career.²

Crews has studied karate with a black belt master,³ and he once described karate in an interview as "self contained, self justifying madness."⁴

Belt, the leader of the karate commune in the book, believes that karate "could not be built on top of anything else. Everything had to be scraped away, right down to the barren nothingness before karate could begin to grow" (KTS, 87). Belt believes that a man has to go far inside himself, to test his limits, to find meaning in his life. Crews' novel shows the failure of most people to subject themselves to the discipline required to do this and also the emptiness of a life solely predicated upon such a discipline.

² Frank W. Shelton, "Harry Crews: Man's Search for Perfection," The Southern Literary Journal, 12, No. 2 (Spring 1980), 105.

³ Harry Crews, "A Night at a Waterfall," Blood and Grits (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1979), p. 44.

⁴ Anne Foata, "Interview With Harry Crews," Recherches Anglaises et Americaines, 5 (1972), 222.

The principal character in the novel is John Kaimon. He is a true child of the sixties, searcher and wanderer with no roots to speak of, although he is tied to Oxford, Mississippi, because of an interest in William Faulkner. His prized possession is a shirt with Faulkner's image on it. He is an ex-war protester, ex-commune member, and the victim of rape by a motorcycle gang. He needs control in his life, and he is attracted to the karate group because of the self-discipline he sees in them and the certainty they seem to have about the value of karate.

The commune philosophy put forth by Belt is that a spiritual breakthrough comes when man simply believes in the power of belief. Gaye Nell, or Brown Belt as she is known to the commune, tries to initiate Kaimon into this way of thinking:

She smiled. "I know," she said. "I know how hard Belt is to believe at first."

He shook his head. "That's not the problem. I can believe anything. Hell, I'm the world's champion believer. After what I've seen, I believe it all: religions, prophets, mystics, all of them put together at once. It's a sickness I got, like cancer or a hard liver."

"To believe what's here, you've got to disbelieve the rest of the world." Her voice went suddenly flat as though she were giving it from rote.

"I'm not good at that," he said. She was sitting with one hand on each knee now. . . .
"I'm good at believing. But I'm not worth a shit at not believing. Like I said, I believe it all." (KTS, 37)

Kaimon has no focus for his life, no faith in a particular direction. He is like the Fat Man in Naked in Garden Hills who wanted to put the whole world inside himself.⁵

Kaimon finds a focus in Gaye Nell, whom he refuses to call Brown Belt. With Gaye Nell, Crews returns to a motif, which began with Dolly in Naked in Garden Hills, of beauty contest participants as a symbol of the American dream. Gaye Nell is becoming a karate expert, but she is still entering beauty contests. She, like Kaimon, needs a focus in her life, and she believes, in the beginning of the novel, that the ritual of karate will provide that focus and give her life meaning. She resembles Kaimon in another way. She is having trouble rejecting, as Belt has done, the outside world, as her continued participation in beauty contests indicates.⁶ Although she comes closer than anyone else in the commune to accepting Belt's philosophy, she will, eventually, reject the karate ritual as a method of bringing a satisfactory meaning to life.

Belt's idea of the perfect life is separation from the rest of the world, which involves a very high degree of self-control. That kind of control seems to elude Kaimon. He asks Gaye Nell for an explanation:

⁵ Shelton draws this parallel, p. 106.

⁶ See Shelton, p. 106.

"How do you get under control?"
 "There's no way to control. Control is the way."
 He stopped eating. "Say it again."
 She said it again.
 "But I still don't know how. That doesn't tell me how."
 "Nobody can tell you how. They can only show you the example of their lives. If you do not see, you cannot be shown." (KTS, 98)

What that control means is a rejection of everything except the karate ritual. Belt says to Kaimon: "I've retired from the rest of it. . . . Said goodbye to all that. The only country I'll ever defend is the five foot circle surrounding me wherever I happen to be" (KTS, 111). Kaimon begins to see the limitations inherent in Belt's philosophy. Giving oneself totally to the karate ritual will not make for a satisfied life because such self-discipline will be grounded in loneliness and isolation.

Kaimon finds another flaw in Belt's way of life in the commune: exploitation. Belt teaches that membership in the karate order, and strict adherence to its discipline, will change the members' lives. It doesn't. Members have escaped from the pursuit of success-oriented goals in the conventional society and the pain that follows when goals are not reached, but they live now subservient not only to the karate ritual but also to Belt. Male members work in nightclubs using threats of violence to maintain order; females who are pretty enough are exploited as sex objects

in beauty contests and promotions for money that is all turned over to Belt.

Larry W. DeBord and Gary L. Long say that Crews is suggesting "there is no respite from individual aspiration in closed, paternalistic communities of shared belief and simplified goals."⁷ Kaimon and Gaye Nell reach this same conclusion, helped by the fact that Gaye Nell is pregnant by Kaimon. Kaimon, who at the beginning of the novel professed to believe in everything, has narrowed his range considerably. What he does believe in now is Gaye Nell and an affirmation of life:

"But I believe in you," he said.

"Yes," she said.

"And I believe you can have my baby."

She did not answer, but in the hard white light of the morning she clung to him there where they were on the mat. (KTS, 154)

The extreme discipline of the karate ritual is not enough to give meaning to life. Gaye Nell and Kaimon reject Belt and karate, but they do not reject them simply to embrace a life in a conventional society. Crews suggests that love, which is far from perfect, may be the only way, in a world which is far from perfect, to offer any comfort to mankind.

⁷ Larry W. DeBord and Gary L. Long, "Harry Crews on the American Dream," The Southern Quarterly, 20, No. 3 (Spring 1982), 41.

Following his first book, a straightforward narrative of religion's failure to give meaning to life, Crews used the same subject in his second book; but he here treated the failure allegorically. He follows the same pattern in the fourth and fifth books. Karate Is a Thing of the Spirit concentrates on the ritual itself. Car (1972) has the failure of ritual as the subject, but Crews treats the subject satirically. This treatment gives the book a richer texture than Karate has.

The satire in Car is on the American passion for consuming goods, especially automobiles. Crews returns to a theme he introduced in Naked in Garden Hills: he explores how his characters, most of whom remember the pastoral ways of the Old South, try to cope with technology in the New South. Herman Mack, idealist, dreamer, and car lover, attempts to perform what Shelton calls a "common ritual with his god" by consuming a whole car, a 1970 Ford Maverick.⁸ In an essay from his collection, Blood and Grits (1979), Crews comments on the American association of God with the car, reacting to a news story about a man arrested for speeding who claimed that he had found God and that God had given him the car:

⁸ Shelton, p. 107.

I don't want to hit too hard on a young man who obviously has his own troubles, maybe even a little sick with it all, but when I read that he had found God in the car, my response was: so say we all. We have found God in cars, or if not the true God, one so satisfying, so powerful and awe-inspiring that the distinction is too fine to matter. Except perhaps ultimately, but pray we must not think too much on that.⁹

As the Old South mourned by the Southern Renaissance writers evolved slowly into the New South pictured in Harry Crews' novels, the car became to many Southerners an almost mythic possession. In the newly industrialized South the car became the principal symbol of success, whether the goal was money, social status, or sex. All these attitudes coalesce in Herman's brother Mister who runs the car-crusher in the junk yard owned by the family. Mister thinks fondly of Cadillacs:

Cadillac: the poor man's car (Once you git yourself one of them babies, you got yourself something. Your regular Cadillac is a precision machine. Low upkeep. No depreciation to speak of hardly).

Cadillac: the rich man's car (I didn't work eighteen hours a day and get three ulcers at the age of thirty-six to drive a Volkswagen. You show me a man who can trade in for a new Cadillac in October of every year and I'll show you a man in the mainstream of America). (Car, 10)

As a result of this Southern obsession with cars, Herman's plan to eat the Maverick turns into a media event,

⁹ Harry Crews, "The Car," Blood and Grits, p. 96.

even to the extent of its being televised from a hotel in Jacksonville, Florida. He receives all the consideration afforded any celebrity. The hotel provides him with Margo, a young prostitute. After Herman tries to explain what the Maverick really means to him, Margo tries to explain the connection between sex and cars:

"High school," she said. "I was a cheerleader for the football team."

"Right," he said, not listening. He had leaned forward and taken the top of the steering wheel in his teeth.

"But the fullback had a Vette," she said. He took his teeth off the steering wheel.

"And I ended up in an orange grove."

"A goddam orange grove?" he said.

"On my back," she said. She laughed. Her voice was conversational, offhand. "There was no way he could have missed. It was a snow-white Vette with Goodyear racing slicks. It was the night of the championship game and he scored four touchdowns, a school record. He came out of the locker room like a bull, threw me in the Vette, roared away from the stadium and whipped in the first orange grove we passed just south of Tampa. He dragged me right up on top of that Vette and drove me like a truck. (Car, 48-49)

All the principal characters in Car are similiary defined by cars or by something related to cars.

Like John Kaimon, Pearl Lee, and Dolly, Herman Mack wants more from life than the conventional society has to offer:

The thing about Herman was that he couldn't take hold. He never had been able to. . . . But Herman was a dreamer. That was what his daddy, who loved him said. But Herman's dreams never

seemed to amount to much, or when they did amount to something, there was always somebody to stop him, somebody to say no. (Car, 16)

Easy Mack, Herman's father, does not understand why his son wants to eat a car. He tells Herman he has a right to know. Herman replies:

I don't know what you've got a right to, Daddy. But I know I'm thirty years old, never had anything, nothing. We been squatting out there on those mountains of rusting cars, and it ain't coming to nothing. But now at last, I've got something. (Car, 29)

Like most of Crews' characters, Herman has only an illusion that something will add meaning to his life. He believes that the ritual of eating the car will add that meaning.

Easy is from the past; he doesn't understand Herman's illusion and its association with eating the car:

Easy loved cars. He had always loved them. Always in all ways. He had started working on Fords almost as early as Ford started working on them. With the gentleness of a lover he had stuck his hands into their dark greasy mysteries, and in time he had become the best shade-tree mechanic in Lebeau County, Georgia. . . . Finally he had seen his chance, bought forty-three acres of land on the bank of the St. John's River in 1939 just before the beginning of World War II, and opened Auto-Town. It was a junkyard. But he called it Auto-Town. It gave a little class. It honored. He was determined always to honor the thing he loved. You didn't get to own forty-three acres of anything without love. That's what he believed and that's what he had always tried to teach his children, all of whom were in the business with him. (Car, 19-20)

Easy cannot understand how eating a car is consistent with this love. Herman thus tries once more to explain:

"You always knew I wanted to be somebody. I never came right out and told you. But you always knew it, didn't you?"

"Yes, I think maybe I did."

"A man has to take the chances that come to him. You can just sit out there on that mountain of wrecked cars so long before you have to make your move." (Car, 31)

The business of cars personified by his father is ultimately too much for Herman. He says, "I refuse to have my life measured out in cars. . . . Goddam cars are measuring me: Mel! Don't you see we're on the wrong end?" (Car, 45).

Herman believes he can transcend the hold cars have on people by eating one. However, like so many Crews characters, he is doomed to failure. It is not the car that is measuring Herman; it is the illusion of what the car can mean in the society that is the problem. The night after he begins to eat the Maverick, one half-ounce at a time, Herman has a dream filled with cars:

But at the last moment, when he was gasping and choking with cars, . . . a solution--dreamlike and appropriate--came to him in his vision. He was a car. A superbly equipped car. He would escape because he was the thing that threatened himself, and he would not commit suicide.

(Car, 65)

Herman dreams he becomes a car in which worn out parts can be replaced "until he was not even what he was when he

started. Replace everything with all things until he was nobody because he was everybody" (Car, 65). Shelton observes that this is "Crews' grotesque adaptation to modern times of Emerson's vision of the desire for union of self and Over Soul."¹⁰ The relation of spirit and ritual is surely persuasive.

As Herman attempts to eat the car, a change is coming over him, partly because of the event itself and partly because of his relationship with the Maverick. As media attention grows, Herman sees himself becoming a marketing symbol, one of the very things he is protesting. More important than that is a new attitude toward what he is doing and the pain involved:

Herman hurt in a long devious line starting at his mouth and running down his throat. . . . And it hurt all the worse because he still loved the car. Since he had started eating it, the Maverick had become like one of the family. He saw clearly that he was defined by the car, that his very reason for living was bound up in the undigested parts of the Maverick that still had to be swallowed. (Car, 94)

Herman finally can eat no more of the car. He tries to explain:

I love that Maverick car. And I think because I love it so much, I can't stand for it to cause that kind of pain in me. I mean I can stand the pain--I think I could stand the pain if it was just the pain--But I can't stand that kind of pain from something I love. (Car, 112)

¹⁰ Shelton, p. 107.

The people involved in the commercial aspects of the venture, of course, do not understand.

Herman tries to escape being measured by a thing, by a car. His attempt is a failure; his belief that he could escape is only an illusion. His ritual eating of the car makes him realize he is not escaping; he is ironically measuring his attempt to escape by the thing itself.¹¹

The failure of this ritual has personal as well as fictional significance for Crews. In an essay in Blood and Grits, he remembers the rituals associated with the cars of his youth, a 1940 Buick and a 1953 Mercury:

Those were the sweetest cars I was ever to know because they were my first. I remember them like people--like long-ago lovers--their idiosyncrasies, what they liked and what they didn't. With my hands deep in crankcases, I was initiated into their warm mysteries. Nothing in the world was more satisfying than winching the front end up under the shade of a chinaberry tree and sliding under the chassis on a burlap sack with a few tools to see if the car would not yield to me and my expert ways.

The only thing that approached working on a car was talking about one. We'd stand for hours, hustling our balls and spitting, telling stories about how it had been somewhere, sometime, with the car we were driving. It gave our lives a little focus and our talk a little credibility,¹² if only because we could point to the evidence.

¹¹ See discussion in DeBord and Long, p. 44.

¹² Crews, "The Car," Blood and Grits, p. 98.

Later in the essay Crews says of his love affair with the car that "Like many another love affair, it has soured considerably."¹³ Herman and Crews clearly share a common disillusion.

Herman leaves his twin brother, Mister, to attempt eating the car, and he takes Margo with him. Crews appears to be suggesting again that only human love can add meaning to life or help one escape from life's meaninglessness. However, Herman seems to make the same mistake he made in trying to eat the Maverick; he takes Margo deep into the piles of cars in Auto-town to an old car he went to as a child. Allen Shepherd says the peace they find there may well be a "dubious" peace. He comments further on Car:

Car is a fearful and bizarre story precisely because it is continuously in contact with and grows out of a vision of life we know well and instantly recognize and is yet simultaneously a closed system. Although it is sometimes argued that the grotesque, of which Car is a fine example, offers us a glimpse of the sublime or that, alternatively, after affronting our sense of the established order, it partially satisfies our desire for a more flexible reordering, Car finally does neither. Ending the novel the way he does, Crews affects an escape from an apparently closed system; as a consequence, we can believe wholly in neither the system nor the escape.¹⁴

¹³ Crews, "The Car," Blood and Grits, p. 99.

¹⁴ Allen Shepherd, "Matters of Life and Death: The Novels of Harry Crews," Critique, 20 (1978), 56-57.

Crews finally argues that material symbols such as the car dominate the American society to such a degree that people are being defined by those symbols. Escape from such domination is only an illusion if the escape is planned in terms of those symbols.¹⁵

Car is a departure for Crews in several ways. It adheres to his overall theme of "failure" in his characters' lives, but its major thrust is the satire of the American penchant for believing in marketing symbols. Significantly, Car is the last of Crews' novels to suggest that love may offer some relief from the unhappiness, frustration, and failures of life. His vision grows bleaker in subsequent novels.

The Hawk is Dying (1973) differs from Crews' other novels. The characters are more recognizable as ordinary human beings, unlike the grotesque characterizations of the Gospel Singer, the Fat Man, Herman Mack, and Marvin Molar, a legless deaf-mute in a novel to come. The setting is different, too. Hawk takes place in a quiet suburb of Gainesville, Florida, a setting much unlike a fanatical religious rally, or a karate commune, or a hotel in which a man is trying to eat a car. What isn't different is the theme. George Gattling, the principal character, seems to

¹⁵ See DeBord and Long, p. 44.

have achieved the American dream of success, but his life has nothing to give it meaning. To remedy that, George undertakes the ritual training of a hawk, hoping with discipline and control to add meaning to his life. Like the other Crews characters, though, he is doomed to failure.

George Gattling owns a successful automobile upholstery business in Gainesville. He has an expensive house in a good neighborhood and community respect. He is the invited guest of university professors at cocktail parties. He has a young mistress who provides him with the sexual service his upbringing will not allow him to ask for by name. His best friend from childhood is still his best friend. George has achieved middle-class success, and he cannot understand why his life is so empty:

I'm at the end of my road. I was warned about everything except what I should have been warned about. I was warned about tobacco and I don't smoke. I was warned about whiskey and I don't drink except when I can't stand it. I was warned about women and I never married. But I was never warned about work. Work hard, they say, and you'll be happy. Get a car, get a house, get a business, get money. Get get get get get get. Well, I got. And now it's led me where everything is a dead end. (HID, 70-71)

George Gattling is a perfect example of a man, reared in the Old South to value place and customs and rituals, who finds himself adrift in the New South, rootless now and filled with anxiety. He is the living embodiment of what the

Southern Renaissance writers warned was happening to the South and its people. George has rejected the faith and the ways of his rural upbringing, but he has found nothing to replace what he has rejected. To escape the meaninglessness of his life, he becomes obsessed with a hobby--manning a hawk.¹⁶

Like many of Crews' characters, George has rejected religion. Because orthodox religion has failed to account for the chaos of modern life, George has trouble believing:

You ask nothing when you are born; you ask nothing when you die. Everything in between is suffering. Because God works in mysterious ways. How beautiful it all was, he thought, if you could believe it. How terrifying it all was if you could not. (HID, 147-48)

Allen Shepherd says that "the issue in Hawk is, as might be said of Car, the nature of man's nature: what is and is not natural for a man to want and do."¹⁷ Since George cannot believe in God or find meaning for his life through conventional means offered by his society, he looks to the past, searching for a tradition and a ritual to fill the void in his life. What he finds is something as real as it is basic: training and manning a hawk, a ritual of blood, conquest, and tradition. George seeks to

¹⁶ See DeBord and Long, p. 37.

¹⁷ Shepherd, p. 57.

anchor his life in tradition, folklore, and craftsmanship,¹⁸ all of which he finds missing in modern life.

George explains how he is going to man the hawk, using the method described by Emperor Frederick the Second in his The Art of Falconry in the thirteenth century:

I'm going to man her the hard way. . . . In seventy-two hours she'll be manned. I'm going to watch her. That's what it's called--watching her. I'm going to put her on my wrist wild. Just like she is now. I'll put her back on. She'll fly again. I'll put her on again. And I won't let her sleep. That's the point. I won't let her sleep, but I can't sleep either. . . . I'll have to stay awake until I break her. Or she breaks me. It'll be as bad for me as it is for her. It sometimes takes five days. Sometimes even longer. (HID, 60)

Crews talks about George Gattling in an interview:

But what I wanted to deal with was the fact that man, traditionally, controls everything on earth--that's the myth--control over all the things that creep and crawl and fly. I said a while ago that George has an attraction to blood. That is a return to the most basic of all human actions. To dominate a thing physically. And to dominate yourself, in a kind of metaphor, emotionally and spiritually and every other way. You can't argue about an open wound. I mean, "I am cut. I am bleeding. My arm won't work." And if you are my adversary, and you've beaten me, never mind why, then I have to make my adjustments within that defeat. The hawk has to make his adjustment within the defeat by the man, and obviously George Gattling has to make his adjustments, defeated

¹⁸ DeBord and Long, p. 38.

as he is by the society he finds himself
in.¹⁹

The defeat George experiences is the failure to find any satisfaction in his work or in his social milieu or even in sex. He remembers his mother's warnings:

His mother was one warning after another: Keep clean; eat much rich food; sleep a lot; take nothing stronger than tea; clean all scratches, bumps, and cuts with alcohol; when in doubt or distress, work; take care of your work and your work will take care of you. (HID, 72)

Now George's work is selling seat covers with peace symbols on them to college undergraduates. His sex life with his mistress Betty is hardly more than that of client and prostitute. He is bored with the pretensions at university cocktail parties and equally with the banalities offered by his best friend and by his sister. George's work is not taking care of him. More and more he is driven into isolation with the ritual training of the hawk:

The hawk was the thing now. The hawk was a fact. There was no guessing about why's and how's. She was there in the world and you could touch her. Find what was real in the world and touch it, that was what a man ought to do. (HID, 97)

The hawk has become the focal point of George's life, and he finally mans her:

¹⁹ Sterling V. Watson, "Arguments Over an Open Wound: An Interview with Harry Crews," Prairie Schooner, 48 (1974), 68.

He reached over the side of the bed for his leather welder's gloves. He drew them on and still wearing his pajamas pressed the gloves against the backs of the hawk's legs and she stepped back and up, just the way Emperor Frederick had promised she would. It seemed to George an awesome mystery that any hooded hawk anywhere in the world would step in precisely the same way if the backs of her legs were touched. It was true in the days of Frederick, and it was still true. Presumably it would be true forever. For the first time in his life, George felt himself part of some immutable continuity. (HID, 221)

George achieves what he set out to achieve, and he feels, as Hemingway would put it, "good" about something. He completes a ritual exercise with success, something that John Kaimon and Herman Mack were not able to do. His successful search for meaning in his life, as Shelton points out, "involves the inhuman, in fact demands the exclusion of the human realm altogether. . . . Crews seems to despair at the ability of people to reach any real understanding of others."²⁰

By the end of the novel, however he, finds himself in a real dilemma. He ceases to feel good about his achievement in manning the hawk: "A little sour ball of shame settled in George's stomach. The hawk was as docile as a kitten. He could touch her and she never moved, permitting any indignity" (HID, 221). He tries not to think about that,

²⁰ Shelton, p. 109.

but he fails again: "He was determined not to think about that, but he knew he would think about it anyway. It couldn't be helped. Hadn't his mother insisted all his life that nothing was free?" (HID, 221-22). Although the ritual of hawk and austringer seemed at the time the only way George could escape from the trap of his everyday life, he has destroyed, by manning and dominating the hawk, that very freedom that had so appealed to him in the beginning of the ritual.²¹ The novel ends with the first real test of the hawk's training in the field. George looses her to attack a rabbit which she kills. The novel ends at that point without telling the reader if the hawk returns to George. Allen Shepherd points out that whether or not "she will return is largely beside the point. George's reality is blood."²²

Certainly, George has gone far beyond where he was in the beginning of the book, marketing naugahyde seat covers. He has observed something, the hawk, performing a natural role which just happens to be killing. What George will do with that knowledge is unknown. Also unknown is what he will do with the knowledge that achievement predicated upon ritual alone will likely end in isolation. Karate

²¹ See Shelton's discussion, p. 109.

²² Shepherd, p. 50.

and Car suggested that human love might be a solution to a satisfied life. Hawk does not end on that hopeful note.

Through six novels Crews has rejected religion and ritual achievement as means of escaping the failure to find some satisfying meaning in life. The Hawk Is Dying ends with a violent and bloody image, a portent that Crews' vision of the human condition is growing considerably darker, as it does in his last two novels which focus more and more on blood and violence.

Chapter IV

THE ULTIMATE FAILURE

The final image in The Hawk Is Dying is a blood image. In Crews' final two novels to date, The Gypsy's Curse and A Feast of Snakes, blood and the violence which causes it dominate the action. Both novels end with a murder; A Feast of Snakes ends with a mass murder. Crews' earlier books show the failure of religion and ritual achievement; these last two imply that even hope and the pursuit of dreams are doomed to end in failure.

In The Gypsy's Curse, Crews examines physical ritual and the hopes and dreams centered on love. He tells the story through the character of Marvin Molar, this time using a physical "freak" as the principal character. Marvin is a legless deaf-mute who supports himself by performing as a hand balancer. Since he must lipread, Marvin misses much that is said around him, but he is intelligent and self-sufficient. He is not bitter about his handicap, and he has mastered a disciplined ritual of workouts which have refined both his physical prowess and his emotional well-being:

I don't know what it did for anybody else, but it helped me. It got me up for the workout, put a little fire in my blood, made me want to compete with myself, to get up on the rope and meet some pain and see if I could handle it. Because, finally, the thing about a real workout is that you know you're going to meet pain, and the only question is how you're going to be able to handle it.¹

Living in a world of "normals," Marvin works as hard to achieve balance in his life as he does to maintain his balance during a handstand. Because the reader gets to know this about Marvin through a first-person narrative rooted in his sensibility, the reader is drawn painfully close to this character, more so than to any other in Crews' work.

Marvin lives communally with two ex-boxers, Leroy and Pete, in a gym managed by Al, a retired stuntman. All four have suffered some physical and emotional damage in the normal world and now live and survive together. They share earned money, make exceptions for each other's handicaps, and help ward off failure in the normal world by defining their own standards for normalcy.² Through this sense of brotherhood, they think they have found meaning in their lives.

¹ Harry Crews, The Gypsy's Curse (New York: Pocket Books, 1976), p. 124; hereafter cited as GC. All further references to this work appear in the text.

² See Larry W. DeBord and Gary L. Long, "Harry Crews on the American Dream," The Southern Quarterly, 20, No. 3 (1982), 39.

Marvin especially thinks so because of his ritual of exercise and performance. Like so many of Crews' characters, however, these live in a world of illusions; and they are doomed to have those illusions shattered.

As long as they accept the boundaries of the gym in their lives and work, the four men function very well. The outside world, what they perceive as a "normal" world, is the problem. They hope and dream to be normal, despite their handicaps. Because he tells the story, what Marvin wants is explicitly known. He wants a normal, beautiful woman to love him, a woman with a "perfect lap."

For a while Marvin has the illusion his dream is coming true in the person of Hester. As Marvin tries to please and possess her, she brings ruination on him and his friends because she is "the gypsy's curse." Marvin realizes too late what he has done:

I lay on the bed and thought about it. I put my hand on Hester's good rump. I was who I was and nothing was going to change that. And yet I felt like by bringing Hester here to the gym I was trying to change something that couldn't be changed. But what I was trying to change I couldn't figure out.

Well, Fernando always said the Gypsy's Curse would make you do strange things.

"Find a cunt that fits you and you'll never be the same," he would say. "Never find any peace."

(GC, 75)

Marvin is trying to change the reality of his deformity through the illusion that Hester will love him. The irony

in the book is that beautiful Hester, the desirable "normal," is much less complete as a person than Marvin. Through his ritual of exercise and performance and the brotherhood in the gym, Marvin's life has some meaning, some purpose. Other than using her aggressive sexuality in a destructive manner, Hester's life has no meaning at all. Near the end of the novel she tries to explain her destructive behavior to Marvin:

I just want you to understand this. All I'm trying to do is stay alive. When everything starts to die I get this dreadful loneliness. No, not lonely. Alone. Like I was the only one in the world. Like everything else is a desert. People dry up and die. Food's got no taste. Color goes out of the trees, out of everything. Tomorrow won't ever come. Yesterday isn't worth remembering. Or if you can remember it, you wonder how you lived through it. . . . That's when I . . . well, when I have to change things. I just have to. What I want has nothing to do with it. I have to turn things around, and then it's all interesting again. (GC, 164)

Because he has worked so hard to make a life that will compensate for his handicap, Marvin cannot understand how a "normal," especially one as beautiful as Hester, can have so little in her life. Shelton says that "she lives the desperately empty, bored life of modern man."³ She lives only for momentary stimulation.

³ Frank W. Shelton, "Harry Crews: Man's Search for Perfection," The Southern Literary Journal, 12, No. 2 (Spring 1980), 110.

By manipulating their foolish male pride, Hester causes the four men to lose the sense of brotherhood they have in the gym. She looks into their past experiences and encourages them to dream of repeating past successes. Pete and Leroy, the punch-drunk fighters, dream of fighting again, but they only end up hurting each other. Al dreams of repeating a stunt he did as a young man, having a car run over his chest. Against Marvin's protests, he goes through with the stunt and is killed by the weight of the car, a Ford Maverick. Having successfully manipulated Al, Pete, and Leroy, Hester turns her attention to Marvin. She believes she can exercise her power over him by resuming sexual activity with a former lover. Unable to escape the Gypsy's Curse, Marvin kills her with a hatchet. Later, he discovers he has acted just as Hester planned. She had written in her diary: "Someday I'll find somebody who loves me enough to kill me. And someday I'll find somebody I admire enough to make him do it" (GC, 189). The hopes and dreams of the major characters in The Gypsy's Curse are based only in illusions. Hester's dream of a perfect love ends in her death. Al dies performing a dangerous stunt, and Pete and Leroy do not have the security of the communal gym anymore. Marvin, who has just seen shattered his illusion that the love of a normal woman would make up for his handicap, is on his way to state prison thinking that the prison gym will allow him to regain balance in his life through the

ritual of discipline and exercise. He simply replaces one illusion with another.

DeBord and Long see the "curse" in the book as a metaphor for the human condition rather than a perverse relationship between men and women:

In *Gypsy*, it is not a woman, but aspirations for success by the failed and for normalcy by the abnormal that are deadly. The destructive force is a culture that encourages those who cannot to compete and that holds out a single standard of the normal even to those who are physically impaired.

The curse is the private dream to which all aspire and against which there is no communal defense. It is the standard that measures all people as failures, the end of the quest brings not success but another delusion.⁴

The Gypsy's Curse is, with the possible exception of Car, the Crews book with the richest texture, when it is analyzed from a literary point of view. Crews handles his overall theme of failure on more than one level, and there are many allusions in the book to work by American writers from Mark Twain to Hemingway to Norman Mailer. These allusions are specific in the context of the "male principle" in American literature.

Paul Seydor offers a rationale for this "masculine principle" in American literature:

⁴ DeBord and Long, p. 40.

If, then, a harsh, repressive gentility was the prevailing culture of American society even well into the twentieth century, it is perhaps little wonder that Emerson was once given to lament the absence in American culture of what he called a strong masculine principle, and even less wonder that many of our artists in the nineteenth century are curiously schizoid, or, to use the more up-to-date terminology, possessors of dissociative personalities, mouthing genteel pieties yet creating works in which there is, in Melville's good phrase, a blackness ten times black. On the one hand they have, from figures of authority, teachings of home and hearth, pieties of doing good and being good; on the other hand they see in the world around them much that contradicts what they have been taught to think and feel. Young Sam Clemens bore witness to more poverty, hardship, and violence than he could comprehend; Hemingway ran away from a suffocating middle-class home only to fall into the horror of warfare. . . .⁵

Seydor argues that the "masculine principle" is a poor answer to the genteel "system" which spawned it:

Insofar as many of our artists can be said to be limited, it consists perhaps mostly in their failure to imagine what that new system might be like. This could be called a failure of imagination and, less sympathetically, a failure of nerve; but it suggests as well a generalized failure in American culture and society to face realistically "the facts of life." What we get instead are dissatisfaction with the way things are; and when we get intimations of what they could be, they take the form of the most idealized aspects of masculine camaraderie (Natty and Chingachgook, Huck and Tom or Huck and Nigger Jim, Ike and Sam . . .); or else they conjure up, as Hawthorne liked to do, the Arcadian Society. . . .

⁵ Paul Seydor, Peckinpah: The Western Films (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1980), p. 233.

Whatever the complaint sounded or the vision proffered, all of these artists are revolting against the prevailing official culture, and the revolt usually consists in an escape from a place they don't like to someplace else.⁶

If the society Crews is revolting against, the New South, is no better than the societies Twain and Hemingway tried to escape, the escape itself is certainly less promising in Crews' world. Huck could speculate about lighting out for the territory and Nick Adams could camp out down by a big, two-hearted river. Crews' characters escape to the road or to a junk yard or to Raiford Prison, in Marvin Molar's case.

Patricia V. Beatty also explores the "masculine mystique" in The Gypsy's Curse, but she emphasizes the failure of the spoken language:

A major theme in the book is that external spoken language is unnecessary, ineffectual, or deceptive, and that the language of physical love is destructive. Only body language, a fragile, wordless, intuitive form of communication, seems valuable, and in The Gypsy's Curse, it is limited to men.⁷

Paul Seydor says that "rightly or wrongly" many American writers from Twain on came to associate "much of what was

⁶ Seydor, p. 23.

⁷ Patricia V. Beatty, "Body Language in Harry Crews' The Gypsy's Curse," Critique, 33, No. 2 (Winter 1981-82), 62.

stultifying, prosaic, and materialistic in American culture with women, in youth the mother, in maturity the wife."⁸ Thus satisfactory communication between man and woman is unlikely at best.

The woman is certainly the most destructive character in The Gypsy's Curse. The four men in the gym all respond to Hester's body; and Marvin, who is more at the mercy of his own body than the other three are to theirs, is more at the mercy of Hester's too. Bodies, not words, are the tools of the characters' speech. Crews shows the failure of the spoken language through the old Negro fighter, Pete. Pete is the first to see the destruction Hester is going to cause the men in the gym and their way of life. Pete watches Al bend a steel spike, something he is too old to be doing, because Hester has made him dream of youth and competition again. Pete cannot articulate the consequences he knows Hester is bringing; he just "smiled his old blue-gummed smile, but it was sad enough to make you cry. 'Thas it,' he said. 'Thas it right there!'" (GC, 140). The men don't listen to him because all eyes are on Hester; and, even if they were listening, what Pete means, what he knows about Hester, is not made clear through his spoken words.

⁸ Seydor, pp. 230-31.

Marvin, whose deformed body is his only means of livelihood, is the only character in the book who appreciates and respects language. This is one of Crews' finer ironies. Marvin frets over the misspelled words in the note his "normal" parents left when they abandoned him. He takes pride in reading "good" magazines like Harpers and "good" books like Graham Greene's The Power and the Glory. However, Marvin, though he is a deafmute, has found that there is danger in talking:

So like I said, I didn't know exactly what Hester was doing with me, and I'd never tried to find out, because my experience is that it's better not to talk about those things, or else you get in too deep and end up paying the price. (GC, 64)

Marvin also worries about language because people lie. At one point, out of frustration, he asks, "Why does anybody say anything they say?" (GC, 122).

Since Marvin doesn't trust language, he depends on his eyes: "Fool the ear, maybe. And everybody fools everybody with the mouth. But nobody fools the eye. The sovereign sense, the eye. I read that somewhere" (GC, 131). This understanding that Marvin achieves through experience is what Paul Seydor sees as the disparity "between what one was taught and what he came to know through experience."⁹

⁹ Seydor, p. 235.

The knowledge gained through experience, through seeing, is sometimes more than a person is prepared for. Sometimes, Seydor says, a person "discovers, as Huck Finn did, that what people are capable of doing to one another is enough to make a body sick of the damned human race."¹⁰ Marvin reaches that conclusion when he finally acknowledges the evil that Hester is and does. Sadly, Marvin realizes that Hester even lied to him about mouthing the words of love he had asked for as they made love.

The "body language" expressed by Hester is completely negative, a destructive force. Because he fell under the influence of Hester and the Gypsy's Curse, Marvin feels responsible for the destruction she causes in the lives of the men in the gym. To make up in some way for that, he hatchets her to death.

In contrast to the destructiveness of Hester's "body language," Patricia Beatty sees the "body language" among the men in the gym as a positive force:

A stronger intuitive bond among the men is forged; their use of "body language" here does not obliterate the body, as with Hester, but instead affirms and celebrates it. The novel is, after all, an American novel, in which passion is normally seen as threatening to reason and ultimately destructive.

¹⁰ Seydor, p. 237.

On the battlefield, in the locker room, at the Fireman's Gym--in the final analysis, the body speaks to men.¹¹

That positive feeling Marvin has from male camaraderie gives him comfort as he is being sent to prison for the murder of Hester. He has failed to find love, and he has failed to penetrate the world of "normals." True to himself, though, he is looking forward to the gym, "I hear they've got a good gym at Raiford Prison" and the consolation that he will be the only inmate there with "twenty-inch arms" (GC, 190).

Marvin indicates he is entering prison with a positive attitude, but he has suffered a terrible failure: the failure of hope. His hope for the love of a "normal" woman failed. Crews' vision of the human condition turns considerably darker here. He suggests that man without hope sees violence as his only alternative.

If Crews offers only a cursory treatment in one book of the tradition of male camaraderie, he devotes much more space to the American tradition of violence. His work begins with a mob killing in The Gospel Singer and ends with a mob killing in A Feast of Snakes. Like writers such as Hemingway and Mailer, Crews sees violence as a daily part of American life. He describes the crowd at a dogfight:

¹¹ Beatty, p. 66.

There was an incredible din, the noise of violence, viciousness, and the lust for blood and money. The naked American. Nothing fake here. Life insurance and retirement plans were forgotten, children were forgotten, there was no future, only the moment, and the moment was savage. Here was the faith that brought the black man from Africa, the faith that still kicks the shit out of American-born Mexicans in Texas, the faith of the officer saying in his laconic but believing voice, "We had to destroy the village to save it." It was so ugly, it was beautiful. It was mine and I would no more deny it than I would my own blood.¹²

Violence is not confined to something as grotesque as a dogfight. It comes into the daily life on television. A character in A Feast of Snakes likes the NBC Nightly News:

It was Lottie Mae's favorite program. Much better than the detective stories where you had to put up with a lot of talking and fooling around before you got to the good parts. NBC Nightly News went straight to the robbing and killing, the crying and the blood, burning buildings and mashed cars. Them NBC Nightly News sum-bitches was mean. Soon kill you as look at you. Killed somebody ever night. Sometimes drowned whole towns in the ocean. Or made babies grow together at the shoulder.¹³

These two excerpts from Crews' work help to illustrate his view toward violence. As Paul Seydor points out, the violence issue is not between "violence and non-violence,

¹² Harry Crews, "A Day at the Dogfights," Florida Frenzy (Gainesville: Univ. Presses of Florida, 1982), p. 57.

¹³ Harry Crews, A Feast of Snakes (New York: Ballantine Books, 1976), p. 122; hereafter cited as FOS. All further references to this work appear in the text.

but between personal violence, which contains redemptive possibilities, and impersonal, or state and mechanized, violence, which does not."¹⁴ This idea of the "redemptive possibilities" of violence began in Crews' work with *George and the hawk*, continued with *Marvin Molar*, and culminates with *Joe Lon Mackey* in *A Feast of Snakes*.

Shelton calls *A Feast of Snakes* "a desperate and hopeless work."¹⁵ The setting is Mystic, Georgia, which each year holds a rattlesnake roundup. What was once a community festival with rites and ceremonies for the native folk has become another way of exploiting tourists for money. The traditional rites and ceremonies have given way to New South rituals of release through drink, drugs, and casual sex. Natives and tourists alike transform Mystic into a marketplace where they buy and sell just as they do in the daily life. *A Feast of Snakes* pictures a New South that is a perfect realization of the kind of society the writers of the Southern Renaissance feared the South was becoming. Religious convictions and the wholesome rituals of a stable society do not exist in Mystic. The characters experience the ultimate failure--the failure of hope.

¹⁴ Seydor, p. 238.

¹⁵ Shelton, p. 111.

The principal character, Joe Lon Mackey, cannot stand his present life. He had been Mystic's "golden boy"--high school football hero, lover of cheerleaders, and the town's favorite good-old-boy. Now he has a wife losing her looks because of too many children too close together, a job in his father's store selling whiskey and renting chemical toilets, and the responsibility for his aging father and retarded sister. Joe Lon dwells too much in the past, dreaming of his glory days. As he watches the current football hero receiving all the attention from the community, Joe Lon tries to comfort himself with the thought: "That's all right. By God, I had mine" (FOS, 6).

Joe Lon cannot relate his miserable circumstances now with the glory of his youth barely two years before. He had not learned the requisite skills in high school, reading and writing, which would have enabled him to go to college, but the teachers had passed him year to year because "they liked him anyway, even loved him, loved tall, blond, high school All-American Joe Lon Mackey" (FOS, 5). Early in the novel Joe Lon considers how he achieved his favored status in the community:

He was stronger and meaner and faster than other boys his age and for that he had been rewarded. He had even suspected he was smarter, too. For whatever reason, though, the idea of studying, of sitting down and committing facts and relationships to memory was deeply repugnant to him. And always had been. Unless it had to do with violence.

He liked violence. He liked blood and bruises, even when they were his own. (FOS, 46)

As his life in the present becomes more and more unbearable and he rejects love, religion, and the empty rituals he sees available to him, Joe Lon comes to see violence as the only means of regaining control over his life.

As it failed to provide meaning in the lives of George Gattling and Marvin Molar, love fails to offer Joe Lon any satisfaction:

He did not know what love was. And he did not know what good it was. But he knew he carried it around with him, a scabrous spot of rot, of contagion for which there was no cure. Rage would not cure it. Indulgence made it worse, inflamed it, made it grow like a cancer. And it had ruined his life. . . . It had messed up everything. (FOS, 110-11)

Just as he never learned the facts and relationships he needed in school subjects, Joe Lon never learned about the tenderness and redeeming qualities of love. Joe Lon is like the football player who took Margo in Car. He and Joe Lon equate love with the physical act of sex, something they are due because of their status. Although he can't explain why, this attitude toward love is not enough for Joe Lon anymore.

Joe Lon has achieved his only success in the violence of the football field, and he tries to recapture that success through such ritual exercises as weight lifting in competition with other men. In the middle of a contest he

realizes that the ritual and the competition fail to give him any feeling of success:

What did he, Joe Lon, do? What did he have? He had once had football to fill up his mind and his body and his days and so he had never thought about it. Then one day football was gone and it took everything with it. He kept thinking something else would take its place but nothing ever did. He stumbled from one thing to the next thing. From wife to babies to making a place for crazy campers bent on catching snakes. But nothing gave him anything back. So here he was lying under a dead weight doing what he'd done five years ago, when he was a boy. If it had meant anything then, he had forgotten what; and merciful God, it meant nothing now. (FOS, 96)

Like so many of Crews' characters, Joe Lon experiences failure wherever he looks to find relief from his despair. He rejects love and ritual exercises and hardly considers religion. Religion is represented in A Feast of Snakes by a snake-handling old preacher who is derided by nearly everyone except Joe Lon. Even so, Joe Lon doesn't look to the preacher or to God for salvation, and he believes in religion only to the extent of believing that he will be punished somehow for wrongs he has done.

The principal Crews' characters suffer failure when they hope for relief from the misery of their lives, through religion or ritual, but most of them at least harbor some hope that the future will be better. Dolly, Pearl Lee, John Kaimon, Herman Mack, and Marvin Molar look to the future with hope. Joe Lon sees nothing in the way of salvation in

his future, but he does achieve self awareness of his fate. As the rattlesnake festival is nearing its end, Joe Lon's wife Elfie tries to comfort him in his misery:

"Thing'll be different tomorrow," she said.
"All right," he said.

Then he had gone carefully to sleep, a deep dreamless sleep, because he knew and accepted for the first time that things would not be different tomorrow. Or ever. Things got different for some people. But for some they did not. There were a lot of things you could do though. One of them was to go nuts trying to pretend things would someday be different. That was one of the things he did not intend to do.

(FOS, 158-59)

Joe Lon has no hope left. All that he can think of is the control he once had over life--success and opportunity. He was in control on the football field, in romantic relationships, and in the community. He wants to be in control again.

The novel ends with Joe Lon attempting to put control back in his life. He shoots four people at the snake pit, which is the center of the festival. The crowd then throws him into the snake pit, and he dies there.

Violence is hopeless, but it is not senseless; Joe Lon picks his victims carefully. With all hope for a more rewarding life gone, he kills those people who represent areas which promised success but ultimately have offered up only failure: the preacher, whose religious promises were only empty words; the deputy sheriff, who represented

the male oriented rituals which failed to satisfy Joe Lon; a former cheerleader girl friend, who offered only sex, not love; and finally an anonymous tourist who represented the empty values of the New South. Just before the mob gets to him, Joe Lon achieves his illumination; he finds meaning by exercising control through violence: "He felt better than he ever had in his life. Christ, it was good to be in control again" (FOS, 164). Unable to exercise real control over his life, to find some way of relieving the hopelessness he feels, Joe Lon settles for what DeBord and Long call a "suicide," a "control" in which "he finds an illusion of freedom from failure."¹⁶

A Feast of Snakes is the most disturbing of Crews' books. The implication is that if man fails to find meaning in life, if he loses all hope, violence may be his only alternative. Shelton says of this last novel: "No ritual, no equilibrium, no balance seem possible. Hope is non-existent; the only redemption lies in accepting the truth. And the terrifying truth is that we are all potentially murderous grotesques."¹⁷

Crews touches on this theme of "redemptive" personal violence in an essay written after a visit to the University of Texas campus in Austin. He began to think obsessively

¹⁶ DeBord and Long, p. 46.

¹⁷ Shelton, p. 112.

about Charles Whitman who climbed the Texas Tower on the campus in 1966 and shot twelve people dead before he was killed by a policeman. In the essay Crews observes, "We all know that there are people throughout the world resisting with all their might and will climbing the tower, because once the tower is climbed, there is no turning back, no way out of it, no way down except death." Further on in the essay he writes of wanting very much to be out of Texas and back in Florida: "I wanted to get back to the place where I had resisted so many things, and failed at so many things, back to the place where even when I succeeded I failed because it was never good enough." He ends the essay on a note as bleak as the ending of A Feast of Snakes:

What I know is that all over the surface of the earth where humankind exists men and women are resisting climbing the tower. All of us have our towers to climb. Some are worse than others, but to deny that you have your tower to climb and that you must resist it or succumb to the temptation to do it, to deny that is done at the peril of your heart and mind.¹⁸

Douglas Day says that A Feast of Snakes reveals Crews' "radical despair" for the first time,¹⁹ but anyone familiar

¹⁸ Harry Crews, "Climbing the Tower," Blood and Grits (New York: Harper and Row, 1979), pp. 212-13.

¹⁹ Quoted in David K. Jeffrey and Donald R. Noble, "Harry Crews: An Interview," The Southern Quarterly, 19, No. 2 (Winter 1981), 75.

with all of Crews' novels knows that the sense of despair so complete in A Feast of Snakes has been growing in every book since the first one. Crews admits that part of that despair results from his personal life: "My personal life is, and has been, as long as I can remember, a shambles. I don't live, I don't do it very well." Later in that interview he speaks of the costs of being a writer:

If you're a person of feeling, if you feel things deeply and keenly--and I don't think you can be a writer unless you feel things not just for the moment but they live in you--that costs you. I don't think you can be a writer of consequence and merit unless you have grave doubts about yourself, about what you've done and who you are and whom you've hurt. And that costs you. And so, it all costs you.²⁰

These aspects of Crews' personal life are surely important, but even more significant is the fact that Harry Crews is a writer with a highly developed "sense of place" attitude. The New South that he writes about has undergone a radical change from the South of Crews' youth. The religious convictions nurtured in the community church are now nurtured by an electronic image of the television evangelist with the stylized delivery of a model selling deodorant. Community rituals built around the seasons of planting and harvest have turned into spectator sports from high school

²⁰ Jeffrey and Noble, pp. 75.

football games to stock car races to dog fights. The failure of the New South to hold on to the values and traditions identified by the Renaissance writers as giving the South its stable society is graphically pictured in the novels of Harry Crews. His characters desperately search for something to give their lives meaning. In the middle novels a few characters seem to find that meaning in human love. The final three novels reject that possibility and even depict love as a destructive force.

Crews' characters fail to find solace in religion, in ritual exercises, and finally in hope itself. The closest they ever come is through illusion: George with his hawk, Marvin Molar on his way to the prison gym, and Joe Lon with the illusion that he finds control through violence. If the illusion of faith in religion, of happiness through ritual, or control through violence is all man can expect, then Crews is entitled to his "radical despair."

Chapter V

HARRY CREWS: A CRITICAL LOOK

Harry Crews' eight novels did not sell well when they were first published; today, most of them are out of print. Each of the eight books received a fair amount of critical attention when it appeared. The books were reviewed in The New York Times, Harpers, Atlantic, Time, Newsweek, and in smaller papers and journals. A close reading of the reviews reveals that Crews received, on the whole, a favorable press; however, he received significantly better treatment from critics who have followed his work closely and view the eight novels as a body of work. Critics who take his books singly are apt to miss the seriousness of his intent and place him in a genre such as comic Southern gothic.

In a short review of The Gospel Singer, The New York Times Book Review set the tone for the criticism the other books would receive: ". . . Mr. Crews' novel has a nice wild flavor and a dash of Grand Guignol strong enough to meet the severe standards of Southern decadence."¹ Other

¹ Rev. of The Gospel Singer, by Harry Crews, The New York Times Book Review, 18 February 1968, p. 77.

than a plot outline and a brief mention of characterization, this is the extent of the critical evaluation of the novel. The review lacks clarity as much as it does perception.

Katherine Gauss Jackson did much better by Naked in Garden Hills. She was the first critic to see that Crews' work should be judged in context:

The author of this novel, who also wrote The Gospel Singer, has set the stage for his morality play with such minute perfection and reality that anyone else trying to describe it would be caught in vague inanities. What, for instance, would one make of this passage out of context: ". . . and when he passed the window he heard the Fat Man the former God begging Lucy the former whore for Metrecal, for slimness, for normality, for hope"? But in context it's real enough and freighted with enough concentrated meaning to stop the breath.²

She calls the book a "ruthless, cruel, and blackly beautiful parable--as simple and inevitable as sin-brings-punishment and as complicated and intense as the imagined and unimagined variety of human experience."³

Other critics have ignored any context for Crews' work. In his review of This Thing Don't Lead to Heaven, James Boatwright flatly states his opinion of the book and Crews:

It's a preposterous novel, but there is something more seriously wrong. The offensive element is

² Katherine Gauss Jackson, rev. of Naked in Garden Hills, by Harry Crews, Harpers, May 1969, p. 102.

³ Jackson, p. 102.

an all too common one--the irresponsible establishment of distance between the narrator and his subject, a willed distance that allows the cheapest kind of god-playing, the setting up of these quaint, oddly named characters who frenziedly work out the destiny invented for them by a none too clever puppeteer. . . .⁴

Boatwright closes his review accusing Crews of lacking the humility needed to face the puzzle of human personality.

By the time Car was published in 1970, many critics were taking Crews seriously as a writer. Although the reviews for Car ranged from terrible to excellent, some critics were spending more time analyzing Crews' work. In Newsweek Walter Clemons says that Crews "isn't facetious. He's a satirist who's not afraid of blood, and there are pages of Car as painful to swallow as metal fragments."⁵ In The New York Times Jonathon Yardley calls Crews "a writer of most impressive talents" whose books are "funnier, more compact, more inventive" with each new title. He goes on to say this of Car:

The book is exceedingly funny, indeed painfully so, and yet it contains passages that are Crews at his best. Yet in the end it collapses; it leaves one frustrated and, alas, irritated. . . .

What a marvelous idea it is. Yet in the end it sags into mere sentimentality. Herman and the

⁴ James Boatwright, rev. of This Thing Don't Lead to Heaven, by Harry Crews, The New York Times Book Review, 26 April 1970, p. 45.

⁵ Walter Clemons, rev. of Car, by Harry Crews, Newsweek, 6 March 1972, p. 78.

hotel prostitute, Margo, become infatuated with each other. Having consumed a fair portion of the Maverick, he tires of the pain and the insatiable voyeuristic appetite of the throngs that pant around him. Hand in hand with the Whore with the Heart of Gold, Herman flees the madness. True love wins all.⁶

Yardley correctly calls this ending a "flabby resolution." He points out that such sentimentality conflicts with Crews' toughness of vision which can allow him to describe the mangled victims being taken from smashed cars at the same time he describes Junnel, Herman's sister, and her highway patrolman boyfriend having sex in his cruiser while the rescue squads work on the crash victims. Yardley says "the scene is horrible but it is true, a superb grotesque of the ordinariness of death on the open American road."⁷

A significant aspect of Yardley's review is that he looks at Car in relation to Crews' previous novels:

The Gospel Singer was an incisive exploration of Bible Belt piety, and Naked in Garden Hills was a convincing grotesque of a rotting American landscape and its decadent inhabitants. This Thing Don't Lead to Heaven had some devastating comments on how we grow old and die, but it was weakened by a first suggestion of what is coming to be the Crews' conclusion: True love triumphs over the madness of society.⁸

⁶ Jonathon Yardley, rev. of Car, by Harry Crews, The New York Times Book Review, 22 Feb. 1972, p. 18.

⁷ Yardley, p. 18.

⁸ Yardley, p. 5.

There is no way of knowing if Crews reacted in any way to the criticism that he was frittering away "good ideas in easy soap opera solutions,"⁹ but after suggesting in three successive books that love might offer an escape from the misery of the human condition, he has yet to make such a suggestion again.

Two reviews of The Hawk Is Dying illustrate the extreme critical attitudes toward Crews' work. Phoebe Adams calls it "a fine new novel" containing events which are "hardly realistic in the usual sense, but the book becomes immensely convincing because the underlying pattern of desperation over wasted time and neglected abilities is real and recognizable."¹⁰ On the other hand, Sarah Blackburn relegates Crews' book to a genre she calls "comic Southern Gothic." She goes on to attack Crews' credibility because she doesn't believe Crews is really interested in his subject matter, that his characters "function mainly as receptacles for a somehow shrill, self-righteous, smoothly designed display of emptiness, hoplessness, despair."¹¹ She accuses Crews of unsuccessfully reworking material she thinks Truman Capote and Tennessee Williams use far better.

⁹ Yardley, p. 5.

¹⁰ Phoebe Adams, rev. of The Hawk Is Dying, by Harry Crews, Atlantic, April 1973, p. 128.

¹¹ Sarah Blackburn, rev. of The Hawk Is Dying, by Harry Crews, The New York Times Book Review, 25 March 1973, p. 47.

James R. Frakes is ambivalent about The Gypsy's Curse. He warns readers with sensibilities to shed them before reading the novel:

Shining and stinking, the novel gives a ghostly light, but at least a light by which you can glimpse, dimly but blindingly (if you can understand that), more cathartic revelation about the damned human race than you've been blessed with since West and Twain.¹²

After pointing out what he calls the "sick mayhem" in the novel, Frakes reaches this conclusion:

Harry Crews flattens all this out for us in dead-level prose so that the horror derives from the reduction of the freakishly obsessive to banality. No tricks, no flashy experimenting--except for an unusually effective split-screen technique instead of traditional flashbacks. When a deaf-must children's choir at the Sunshine Shopping Center sing "America the Beautiful" with their synchronized fingers, you may well feel that Crews has gone too far. You'd be wrong. You can stand it.¹³

When A Feast of Snakes came out in 1976, critical attitudes toward Crews' work had settled down to one constant: reviewers like parts of his novels better than the whole. Reviewing Feast, Jerome Charyn says the book provides a "spooky glimpse at a new Gothic South" and then makes a comparison between Crews and Faulkner, faulting Crews for

¹² James R. Frakes, rev. of The Gypsy's Curse, by Harry Crews, The New York Times Book Review, 23 June 1974, p. 31.

¹³ Frakes, pp. 31-32.

lacking Faulkner's "generosity" toward characters, a sadness for their plight. Then he finds the part he likes:

Yet there is a remarkable thing about the book. Harry Crews writes about snakes and other animals with incredible beauty. The "dry, constant rattle" of diamonbacks haunts the novel, forces us to enter into a dream-world of primitive shapes, anxieties and ideas. Unfortunately, this is not enough. Next to the snakes, Joe Lon Mackey and his friends are puny and not very interesting.¹⁴

Paul D. Zimmerman picks up Charyn's Southern Gothic theme, calls Crews "outraged and outrageous," and says he has created in Feast an "extravagant exercise in the blackest of all black comedy" by turning his "savage eye upon the supposed 'normals'" in the New South society. Zimmerman sums up his criticism of the novel by attributing a revenge motive to Crews:

Crews has an ugly knack for making the most sordid sequences amusing, for evoking an absolutely venomous atmosphere, unredeemed by charity or hope. Few writers could pull off the sort of finale that has madeyed rednecks rushing in sudden bursts across a snake-scattered bon-fire-bright field, their loins inflamed by the local beauty contestants, their blood raging with whiskey, their hearts ready for violence. Crews does. There is a strong smell of revenge in his writing and behind his comic grotesquerie keens the angry cry of a man enraged that life can be so cruel and people so victimized by the lumpen conditions of their

¹⁴ Jerome Charyn, rev. of A Feast of Snakes, by Harry Crews, The New York Times Book Review, 12 September 1976, p. 43.

lives. When Joe Lon goes on a gunning spree at the end of this fantastic, ghastly funny book, he is acting as Crews' cleansing agent, scouring the earth in the hope that something a little better might grow.¹⁵

Zimmerman's review of Feast touches on all the major themes in Crews' work from the atmosphere of place through loss of faith in the conventions of society to the act of violence.

Understandably, the best criticism of Crews' work has come from critics familiar with all, or almost all, of his novels and who see a design in the eight books not readily apparent to the reviewer who is looking at only one book.

Allen Shepherd writes about the body of Crews' work:

Bizarre and grotesque as his conceptions often are, they are surprisingly plausible and consistent: given these people in these situations (large givens), it all follows logically. He possesses his misshapen imaginative world in complete self-confidence, apparently undeterred by pity or compassion. In the shrewd intensity of his fiction, much of the known world is excluded, but his obsessive depth of penetration compensates for conventional breadth and variety. His characters' slim hope of escape from life's entrapment heightens their desperate and often fatal struggle.¹⁶

Shepherd says, as Zimmerman did, that the dogs, snakes, and other animals Crews writes about are more interesting

¹⁵ Paul D. Zimmerman, "Snake Pit," rev. of A Feast of Snakes, by Harry Crews, Newsweek, 2 Aug. 1976, pp. 74-75.

¹⁶ Allen Shepherd, "Matters of Life and Death: The Novels of Harry Crews," Critique, 20 (1978), 53.

than many of his characters, and he closes with this observation:

Crews' vision is powerful and idiosyncratic, not in service of any conventional moral message, social insight, or economic imperative. All of his novels are of necessity tragicomedies; all of them, even the least successful, are illuminated by flashes of brilliance, and all of them, even the most successful, are marred by stylistic lapses and self-indulgent grotesqueries.¹⁷

Like most other critics of Crews' work, Frank Shelton applies the adjectives "Mysterious, violent, and dangerous" to the South of Crews' novels:

His characters, by nature physically or spiritually grotesque, are often ruled by an obsession or instinct for something higher than simply physical life. Almost always their desires are frustrated because of man's radical imperfection. Individual will and discipline and adherence to ritual may perhaps enable one to attain some kind of control over life, but such control is always tenuous, given the facts of existence and human nature. . . . The novels are very powerful evocations of the plight of characters without Crews' imaginative capacities who, with at best only limited success, try to find a way of ritualistically controlling their lives and living in a world devoid of ultimate meaning.¹⁸

Crews responds to a question of how reviews affect him, especially the unfavorable ones:

¹⁷ Shepherd, p. 61.

¹⁸ Shelton, p. 113.

Well, I'm not quite that tender, I don't think. But maybe I am. I can get hurt really quickly and really deeply emotionally, and it hurts for a long time. Nobody needs that. You don't need that very much.

Geoffrey Wolfe reviewed one of my books, a two page review, but you know, he's got to start out by saying, "Harry Crews has written eight novels, four of which I have read, one of which I have liked, but if you have come here for me to knock Crews, you've come to the wrong place." And from then on, all roses, which I didn't read. I'm not gonna listen to somebody tell me he's read four of my books and liked one out of eight of them, and now he's gonna give me a good review. I just don't need that. It's probably true. Maybe they're all bad. Hell, I don't know. Let somebody else decide. I just write'em.¹⁹

As if life is imitating art, the sense of failure so evident in Crews' work follows him into the book store. His books do not sell well; he has not attracted a large audience. Naturally enough, he says that lack of sales bothers him, but he thinks he knows the reason people in large numbers don't buy his books:

You may not know that this has been said, and you may not agree with this, but the audience for fiction in America is suburban and middle class. Suburban housewives around thirty-five or six or seven. That's who buys the books. Now, are they gonna buy a book with a guy walking on his hands, hitting a lady in the head with a hatchet? They gonna buy a book with a guy in it that's got the biggest foot in the world, and he himself is a midget? Practically everybody that's written anything about me maintains that I put that stuff in those books--midget with the biggest foot in the

¹⁹ David K. Jeffrey and Donald R. Noble, "Harry Crews: An Interview," The Southern Quarterly, 19, No. 2 (Winter 1981), 77.

world; guy who walks on his hands, can't talk, can't hear, and the story is told from his point of view, which is a goddam triumph--they say I put that stuff in there to sell books. Well, if they knew anything about selling books, they'd know what would'nt sell books. I don't put anything in my books anyway. Middle-aged women don't buy those books, and middle-aged men don't buy them. That criticism hurts me.²⁰

Despite some negative criticism and despite poor sales, Harry Crews has produced a substantial and significant body of work. He is significant because he is the only writer about the South whose entire body of fiction has explored the devastating results occurring in the transition period between the Old South and the New South as the people lose that "sense of place" and the attendant values and rituals that gave life a fuller meaning.

Up to the 1950s the Southerner felt strongly a "sense of place" because of the kinship with the land so strong in the South. Greil Marcus writes eloquently of the South and its land. He says "we usually read our own meaning into the landscape. . . . We live and speak according to the metaphors of the land." He adds that the Southerner cannot "escape the feel of the land anymore than we can escape its myth."²¹ Harry Crews understands that the Southerner's

²⁰ Jeffrey and Noble, p. 76.

²¹ Greil Marcus, Mystery Train (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1982), pp. 61-63.

intimate relationship with the land, the Old South, has ended. Industrialization, urbanization, and the democratizing effect of the electronic media have changed forever the landscape of the South. The characters in Crews' novels are caught in the transition with no support.

The story of the New South may be the struggle by its people to escape the limits they are born to. Alexis de Tocqueville has written that the American has "a love of physical gratification, the notion of bettering one's condition," and the "charm of anticipated success."²² Nowhere is this attitude felt more strongly than in the South where there is a feeling, as Marcus puts it, that "you can always get what you want, and that even if you can't, you deserve it anyway."²³ To be a Southerner is to feel the promise of being more than what you are, and when that promise fails to hold, as it does for Crews' characters, the feeling left is one of betrayal and hopelessness.

The promises of the church failed first. How could they not in a landscape of which William Faulkner once said, "You run without moving from a terror in which you cannot believe toward a safety in which you have no faith."²⁴ It

²² Quoted in Marcus, p. 22.

²³ Marcus, p. 22.

²⁴ Quoted in Marcus, p. 33.

is no wonder Allen Tate said the South never created a "fitting religion."

The promises of the society failed next. The traditional rites and ceremonies centered in the home and community have no counterpart in the New South, only rituals of empty exercise and discipline.

When I asked Harry Crews to comment on the theme of failure in his novels in relation to the New South, he gave me an answer involving himself as a person and writer and the place itself:

Growing up in the South, I have to tell you I went all the way to manhood, all the way to the Marine Corps without knowing I was deprived. . . . All the people I knew had what we had, lacked what we lacked. There did come a time when I realized I had been, as they say, out of the mainstream of America; I thought in order to save myself I had to be in the mainstream. But then I made an amazing discovery--that my strength, whatever it may be, that my abilities, whatever they may be, come out of that place [Georgia] where we talked funny and had hookworms and rickets, yeah, and I wrote about that, too. . . . There was a night, I'd been up four days, I'm eatin' speed, amphetamines, with both hands, trying to stay awake, 'cause of working all day to support my family, and I'm writing all night and I'm wired to the end of the world, my little eyes turnin' sixes and sevens, and it suddenly occurred to me--I'd published nothing up to that point, by the way, I wrote ten years during which time I made a hundred dollars, hard, I wrote ten years with great dedication, my first novel was my fifth novel, but anyway--it occurred to me there in the middle of the night that everything I had done up to that point had been dishonest, that I had been trying to be somebody I wasn't, I was trying to write about something I didn't

know anything about. It was out of that atmosphere of failure came whatever strength I have, and I believe it not only to be true of me but to be true of other people too. You just look in your own little garden, you just look right there in your own little house; it's not that you ought not to be educated or have money. People ought not to be hungry; people ought not to be sick; and people's backs ought not to hurt, but it's going to happen.²⁵

Harry Crews' work presents a bleak vision of the human condition. With few exceptions, his characters fail to find a way to give meaning to their lives and ease the pain of their existence. In the beginning of this study Crews is quoted as saying it is out of "a base of failure" that a person rises to try again. Many of his characters do just that.

In an interview in 1981, Crews had this to say:

You know, all we've got is time. I'm halfway to eighty-six and that's getting on. I'm on the downhill side. How damn long do I expect to live? I always wanted twenty titles. I always wanted twenty titles because I thought if you did (hell, this sounds so mechanical and arbitrary to say, "I wanted twenty titles," as though that meant anything) but, if you wrote as well as you could and as honestly as you could and with as much concentration, focus, diligence, whatever, as you could, well, then, out of twenty you might get a good one. You know, you might get a good one.²⁶

²⁵ Personal interview with Harry Crews, 18 November 1982.

²⁶ Jeffrey and Noble, p. 79.

In 1983, Crews is at work on a new novel, his first since 1976. As he likes to say, "It is out of a base of failure" that one rises to try again.

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