tations and ambiguities—Kest's "uncertainties, mysteries, doubts"—within a work, rather than looking only for overriding and obvious themes and problems everyone would notice.

THE "PSEUDO-THESIS"

What happens when you do not engage in this relatively extended forethought? You tend to generate the pseudo-thesis (or perhaps that would be soo-DOTH-esis). Note that these statements seriously attempt a thesis and are generally written quite clearly, such that the reader has a good idea of what the writer means. What I'm saying is that they're not grammatically confused or garbled. They are pseudo-theses in that they don't really advance any new idea or provide a genuinely creative insight or imagining. I am not going to discuss here the compacted or elliptical thesis, which is mysterious, vague, and ultimately meaningless: such a thesis represents a failure of language rather than one of thought. Nor will I consider the "dead-horse thesis," which appears to be argumentative but in fact is just taking an already established side in an old, never-to-be-resolved debate ("Abortion should be made a crime because x, y, or z..."), because this kind of thesis is uncommon in text-based analyses, such as the ones I will look at here. But do keep in mind that certain issues, such as abortion, gun control, animal experimentation, and the like, invite such thesis construction: it's very difficult to have an original response to these issues anymore. They're the equivalent of television commercials you've seen a hundred times.

Text-based papers, then, often generate pseudo-theses such as the following:

1. A description of research or summary of the texts
2. A blueprint for a paper that follows
4. A madcap or lunatic invention that everyone, including the author, knows to be zany and inappropriate, and that never attempts to offer anything but that very zaniness

Interestingly, all of these misinterpretations of the idea of a thesis stem from a misunderstanding of what the audience wants or expects. The first, the summarizer, thinks that the audience wants only "proof" that the student writer has read a text and knows some or all of its main features. The second, the blueprinter, feels that the audience, living in a hopelessly chaotic world, wants orderliness, organization, a plan or road map, really anything that will stave off ever-encroaching anarchy. The third, the reasonable person, thinks all that's called for is a true and accurate statement that basically everyone will agree with, and since that's always worked in the past, why shouldn't it here? The fourth has the misguided notion that all the audience is looking for is creativity—unharnessed, unsanctioned, unleashed.

Each of these positions naturally and even logically generates a pseudo-argument to back up the thesis. Not too much careful forethought goes into these. And I want to mention as a caveat or disclaimer that I don't mean to disparage the generic student-responses that I will be discussing. Indeed, these students are merely attempting to reconcile the quite alien notion of writing a paper for a university class with what they have previously been taught. They don't differ that much from you.

To help illustrate some of these ideas about theses, I want to look at some thesis statements about a poem entitled "The Pool." It is quite brief, so I think you can take it all in and more or less figure out what's going on. Written by a poet who called herself H.D., Hilda Doolittle or Hilda Aldington, this poem originally appeared in 1915.

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Are you alive?
I touch you.
You quiver like a sea-fish.
I cover you with my net.
What are you—banded one?
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I choose this not only because I like it but because it was chosen by I. A. Richards in Principles of Literary Criticism as his first example in a chapter entitled "Badness in Poetry." He labels it an "instance of defective communication" (199). Ouch.
Pseudo-thesis: Summary

Here are some sample student responses to this poem. "How can I come up with something new and exciting or even interesting about this?" the first student asks in near exasperation. This student generally writes a summary or description of the text. A thesis from him or her might run, "The Pool" is about someone who encounters a pool of water, who touches it, and watches, surprised, at the effects of having touched it. This is often the "I must defer to the genius of others" position, which does have something to recommend it. But it's too timid. It shies from any real interpretation. Actually, the genuine problem is a misconception of the assignment: the student thinks assignments are just trying to get him or her to provide proof that the work or book has been read.

Pseudo-thesis: Blueprint

The second objection is less passive in its aggressiveness. "But this was the way we were taught," a student, David B., told my class. "My whole high school English department taught the same idea—that the thesis was a kind of 'road map' for the rest of the essay. What's wrong with that?" Indeed, what is wrong with it? I concede that probably in high school it's not a bad idea to hold up this particular ideal. I might do so myself. Why? The blueprint thesis—I take the term from Richard Marius—does force novice writers to come up with some kind of organizing principle. It does urge on some kind of unifying structure. But in university-level classes, we want more than evidence of organization. You are no longer novices, especially if you've read this far! I think David B. was probably trained to write what we unaffectionately call the five-paragraph essay, namely, an introduction with a three-pronged thesis, each point of which is developed in its own brief paragraph, and then a conclusion in paragraph five.

Blueprint theses also have a tendency to turn Procrustean. Procrustes is a figure from Greek myth: he lived in a hut in the woods, and when travelers stopped at his house, he would offer them a bed to sleep in. Little did they know that if they were too tall for the bed, he would cut them down to fit, and if too short, they would be sub-
ject to stretching by their host. (Procrustes also apparently had other ways of dispatching unwitting wanderers, but we won't get into those.) My point here is that when you have a blueprint, you tend to modify the evidence so that it fits the blueprint perfectly. Such modification is Procrustean—or, in a word, fatal. You need in your papers to be more open to possibilities of things that don't fit, and you need not only to deal with them but actively to seek them out. Blueprints offer only a plan that will be followed to the letter.

A blueprint thesis for "The Pool" might look like this. "In her poem 'The Pool,' H.D. (Hilda Doolittle or Hilda Aldington) depicts an individual who addresses nature—represented by a pool of water—disrupts it briefly, and then marvels at the changes she has wrought." Now, this does have something to recommend it. There is the start of an analysis here, and it's slightly more than just a summary as well. This student has a much better idea of how to fill up a paper (probably five paragraphs too), than the previous summer-upper. One hopes that the blueprint builder will in fact come up with an argument. Sometimes they do. The student has found something to generalize about (pool suggests nature) and has found a narrative, a sense of change undergone by the poem's speaker. There is even a "marveling" going on.

It's a start, but the tightly controlled blueprint argument will probably prevent much change or growth of thesis—it's too tidy, this thesis; it leaves no room for surprise, discovery, and excitement. It's exactly what Kahn is alluding to when he talks about having all the answers to a building before you build it. The blueprint contains all the main points of a paper—on page 1. Again, it might be a good idea in secondary education, but I don't recommend it; in fact, it's really only a form of elaborated outlining.

Pseudo-thesis: "Okey-Dokey" with nature and the impossibility of knowing how one's intervention into natural events will affect them and us.

Creators of the "okey-dokey" or the third kind of pseudo-thesis feel not so much betrayed by their previous education as suspicious of what I'm offering in its place. "Why do I have to come up with what you call an 'argumentative thesis'?' (usually accompanied by air-quotes). "I can find plenty of good, solid evidence to back up a thesis, and then you say that's not argumentative. Or I can come up with