

AUTHOR AS OBSTACLE

B. S. JOHNSON: *Albert Angelo*. 180pp. Constable. 21s.

B. S. Johnson's second novel, *Albert Angelo*, begins with some comparatively mild assaults on the conventions of novel writing. In the first two sections we meet Albert, a London supply teacher and architect *manqué*, with an attachment to Jenny, a girl in his past who has rejected him. Certainly the narrative varies between first person, third person and second person, and between perfect and present perfect tense. And certainly there is a section in dramatic form without narrative, another of dialogue in conventional form with italicized thoughts, and elsewhere thoughts are bracketed by a new (to this reviewer) typographical mark. But the writing is intelligible and the drift of the story clear.

In section three, "Development", Mr. Johnson's innovations become more emphatic. There are pages of poetry, pages printed in parallel columns so that the reader is unsure which to read first, facsimile reproductions of each side of a fortune-teller's hand-out, an extract from an eighteenth-century lecture on menstruation and neat, rectangular holes in two of the pages so that three lines of a later page can be read through them. The section begins with four English compositions on sex and violence, written no doubt by Albert's pupils, and ends with nineteen English compositions on what they think of Mr. Albert. Here again Mr. Johnson's writing is for the most part clear and only the purpose of his various techniques occasionally obscure. The story makes a little — very little — progress. Albert is shown not to be able to

apply himself to his private architectural drawing. And the children at his new school become impossible to discipline, let alone teach.

Section four, "Disintegration", follows. "—what I really trying to write about is writing not all this stuff about architecture. . . ." Mr. Johnson begins and goes on to defend and explain what he has written so far, writing now, one assumes, as Mr. Johnson, though possibly as some new intermediary between Johnson and Albert. He explains that "the future-seeing holes [are], for instance, as much to draw attention to the possibilities as to make my point about death and poetry". His defence contains an attack on the distortions of truth which the inventions of the conventional novel constitute. These pages read like the frank answers a well-known novelist might give to a television interviewer questioning him about his work.

A final section, "Coda", briefly describes Albert being drowned in a canal by a neo-Fascist gang of school children. But Mr. Johnson has not finished: a two-page letter accompanies his novel to the reviewer (and to the general reader?) explaining what he is trying to do stylistically and typographically in this and his previous novel.

Any attempt to escape from the rigid conventions of novel writing must not only be applauded but studied with interest for this is a preoccupying concern of modern novelists. When one judges such escapes the first question to decide is the novelist's motives for attempting

them. Mr. Johnson claims a powerful frustration with the dishonesties of the novel. "Why 'invent' characters when you know yourself so much better?" he writes in his letter. There are good answers to this, apart from the obvious one that every novel otherwise becomes an autobiography. He is also against its rigid conventions. "A page is an area on which I may place any signs I consider to communicate most nearly what I have to convey", he writes in the novel. But do they communicate, or do we only feel that Mr. Johnson is making gestures for the sake of making them?

This leads to the more important question of whether his methods are as intrinsic to his particular novel as he claims. "I find the conventional novel unsuitable for what I have to say and have therefore had to solve my problems unconventionally", he writes. But his book does not convince one of this. The reader is aware all the time of the novel as it might have been written in conventional form. Mr. Johnson builds up admirably his sense of place, his schoolmaster's feelings of frustration and his unbearable loneliness. He parodies amusingly and can write movingly. His experimental techniques, instead of enhancing these qualities, seem to detract from them by intruding his own acute self-consciousness. There is a danger, which his defensive passages emphasize, that this sort of writing, far from making for greater honesty, sets up the author as an additional barrier between the reader and the book's subject.