

D. S. JOHNSON AND THE CONSOLATION OF LITERATURE

I

In his essay "The Storyteller: Reflections on the Work of Nikolai Leskov," Walter Benjamin stated an idea that is of crucial importance to the understanding of the traditional novel, and also, from an entirely inverse perspective, of the postmodernist writing of Bryan Johnson. In discussing the function of the "death" of a character in a novel and how that end immediately reveals the meaning of the life preceding it, Benjamin states:

But the reader of a novel actually does look for human beings from whom he derives the "meaning of life." Therefore he must, no matter what, know in advance that he will share their experience of death: if need be their figurative death--the end of the novel--but preferably their actual one. How do the characters make him understand that death is already waiting for them--a very definite death and at a very definite place? That is the question which feeds the reader's consuming interest in the events of the novel.

The novel is significant, therefore, not because it presents someone else's fate to us, perhaps didactically, but because this stranger's fate by virtue of the flame which consumes it yields us the warmth which we never draw from our own fate. What draws the reader to the novel is the hope of warming his shivering life with a death he reads about. (Illuminations)

From this perspective, the unspoken and unacknowledged intention of the traditional novel, particularly in its twentieth-century manifestations, has been to comfort and console its middle-class audience. Death is the period, the full stop, as it were, disclosing meaning in the sentence of life. The termination of a figurative life, or lives, is emotionally enacted by the reader who lives to tell the tale, magically. The succession of events whose configuration is the life experience of a character acquires meaning once death, or the end, has set the seal on their totality.

It is evident, then, that the function of death in the novel, whether it is a figurative death in the end prescribed by the technological fact of the book or whether it is an "actual" death, is inseparable from the nature of the consecutive narrative, since it exists as that point toward which the narrative must project. Johnson's point of view, however, was that death resolves nothing in life. Therefore, if death provides no resolution to a life, to construe that life as a closed totality in the form of a meaning-laden story or consecutive narrative is illegitimate. If this is the case, the novel must handle the events and experiences of life differently; not as a succession of tendentious incidents serving to advance an underlying and metaphorical meaning that is revealed through the passage of time and which is determined by its end, but by the presentation of concrete actualities, and wherever possible, factual, even autobiographical actualities that are free from authorial interpretation, released from adventitious connection, and that can postulate no resolution or conclusion.

Once the relationship between the function of death and the function of the narrative in the novel has been recognized, the remarkable continuity of themes that runs through Johnson's published work from Travelling People (1963) to Fat Man on a Beach (1973) can be understood as a unity of ideas that he never considered necessary to revise. The themes of emotional suffering (betrayal as a type of death), aging, dying, and death itself; the suppression of meaning as anthropomorphic, as the imposition of human values (fiction) upon life, which is impervious to moral judgment (truth); the refusal to analyze motive or behavior; the

eschewal of fiction and narrative resolution; the technical innovativeness of the work ("a continuous dialogue with form"): these can be understood as a fundamental rejection of the humanitarian, liberal ideology of the traditional middle-class novel. Johnson's direct refusal to comply with the reader's wish to be comforted with falsehoods lies at the heart of his ambitious approach to the permanent problem of rendering the landscape of the actual without illusion and with the materials of the day. As Alvarez states in The Savage God, "All modernists assume from the start the destruction of traditional values."

Johnson wanted no complicity with the normal subterfuges of the craft of writing. Where they could not be avoided, as with certain passages of omniscient narration in Travelling People, for example, they would be indicated by the author's direct intervention in the text. There is no "suspension of disbelief" in his work. The process of writing and the thinking behind the process of writing are regularly brought to the attention of the reader by the writer's repeated reminders of his presence in the text. The intention governing the establishment of this presence, this authorial "honesty," is to secure an immediate presentation of experience, to set the scene with such integrity that what is presented cannot be dismissed as authorial bad faith, as mere fiction.

This search for authenticity, therefore, determines the unity of prevalent themes as well as the pursuit of technical structures congruent with his vision of reality. It explains the preoccupation with death in the work, not simply as an uncomfortable reality (denial of the reader), but both as an anchorage in the real and as a new point of departure for the novel. Death as an ultimate, undeniable fact, and the inevitable termination of all life, as well as aging and dying as inescapable torments, pervades Johnson's work uncloaked by the artifices of character and situation. The deaths he describes--for instance, Maurie's in Travelling People, Tony's in The Unfortunates (1969), Robin's in Everybody Knows Somebody Who's Dead (1973)--are the deaths of people with whom Johnson was acquainted. The reader is spared nothing, not the inconsequentiality of their lives nor the pain and torment of their deaths. There is nothing perverse in this. It is not a shock tactic "pour l'epater la bourgeoisie," but a technique to confront the reader with his inescapable mortality and to ground the work in the real. There are none of the consolations of fiction. Unlike most writers in sentimental England, unlike even his exemplary writers, Sterne, Joyce, and Beckett, Johnson's work is devoid of compassion. It is a necessary element of his intention and technique.

Chief among the consolations that the novel has traditionally bestowed upon the reader is the story, the discourse, the resolution of narrative; in other words, some idea of natural order. Johnson challenged this hypostasy of reason with his now notorious statement about fiction that "telling stories is telling lies." This statement, incidentally, is not necessarily original; it recalls Adorno's contemptuous dismissal of Hollywood films and their "idiotic stories of successful careers," and Johnson acknowledges his debt to the techniques Godard introduced in his films.

Johnson repeats on numerous occasions, and nowhere more strongly than in the works of the last year of his life, that the story is false. He rejected the traditional techniques of plot construction and the progress of the narrative toward some kind of resolution because he recognized that the fulfillment of the need for a natural basis to a rational order in life, where such order cannot exist, has been an illegitimate function of the traditional novel and is no more valid to the practice of writing today than is Newtonian physics valid to the practices of the modern laboratory. In his view, the writer of the modern novel, if he is to maintain a sense of integrity, has a duty not to comfort the reader, not

to console the reader with illusory meaning that is not available in the circumstances of life. The writer can only present the reader with the truth as he sees it, and from Johnson's perspective this truth is the inevitability of decay, dying, and death within a universe governed by accident that is entirely indifferent to the concept of human values and meaning. He took this philosophy to its extreme in his unbound, aleatoric novel The Unfortunates, whose universe more nearly resembles Heisenberg's, not the immutable Newtonian laws of the traditional novel. As Alvarez comments on the phenomenon of modernism:

Twentieth-century art may start with nothing but it flourishes by virtue of its belief in itself, in the possibility of control over what seems essentially uncontrollable, in the coherence of the inchoate, and in its ability to create its own values.

Johnson's philosophical views, as should by now be clear, are deeply implicated in the ethical intention guiding his work, the choice of themes, and the practice of composition itself. His outlook on life was embodied in a form of stoic pragmatism influenced, at first, by existentialism and the work of Samuel Beckett (with whom he was personally acquainted), and which was unsatisfactorily augmented in the later work by the Jungian hypothesis of remembrance of the archetype. This later development in his thinking is especially evident in his last works, the film Fat Man on a Beach and the posthumously published novel See the Old Lady Decently (1975), where the concepts of the Jungian disciple, Ernst Neumann, and his work The Great Mother provide the conceptual framework for Johnson's attempt to recreate the life and death of his own mother, and, by extension, to survey the decline of the mother country within that same life span.

The ethical intention guiding his work, that the novel must be concerned with truth and with the real despite tradition and despite the expectations of the reader, developed naturally from this philosophical perspective. It also necessarily entailed the creation of new or hybrid literary forms to more accurately approximate what he believed to be the real: the disorder, the inconsequentiality of life, and the impersonality of the world and of its carelessness toward human life. His insistence that figurative representation as a literary technique could be used in his work only on recognition of the paradox of the attempt to embody the real in the form of the unreal, and whose presence within the work is legitimated only where it can be mediated by a self-reflective irony, acknowledges the condition of postmodernist artistic practice which Adorno defined in his analysis of Schönberg's serial compositions:

Illusion vanishes from the work of art as soon as the work begins to define itself in its battle against the ornament; in the process the position of the work of art in general gradually becomes untenable. Everything having no function in the work of art--and therefore everything transcending the law of mere existence--is withdrawn. The function of the work of art lies precisely in its transcendence beyond mere existence. Thus the height of justice becomes injustice: the consummately functional work of art becomes consummately functionless. Since the work, after all, cannot be reality, the elimination of all illusory features accentuates all the more glaringly the illusory character of its existence. The process is inescapable. The dissolution of the illusory features of the work of art is demanded by its very consistency. But the process of dissolution--ordained by the meaning of totality--makes the totality meaningless. The integral work of art is that work which is absolutely paradoxical. (Philosophy of Modern Music)

Throughout his work, Johnson struggled with this implicit paradox in the

functionalist orientation of postmodernist realism.

II

Johnson's critics have been mostly unaware of the profound reorientation he achieved in the novel by altering the ethical intention that has acted as its guiding principle for so long. Some of his contemporary reviewers, appalled by the remorselessness of his vision and of his dismantling the cloistered narrative of the traditional novel, reacted predictably. Jonathon Raban's review of Christie Malry's Own Double-Entry (1972) in Encounter (May 1973) is a case in point:

Novels like [Christie Malry], because of the very slightness of their texture and detail, are invitation cards to an orgy of speculation. They are as good, or as bad, as the critic's capacity to make something of them, DIY kits for building cathedrals out of a few strips of balsa wood and a scrap or two of cellophane paper.

Even critics sympathetic to his point of view have also missed the significance of his work. Philip Pacey, a friend of Johnson's in the last years of his life, wrote:

The limitations of the slogan "telling stories is telling lies," beyond which it is itself a lie, are obvious. I had been happy to apply it to Bryan's own novels, but increasingly he seemed imprisoned in his own theory, breaking out only to lock himself in again almost apologetically. For with this theory (which is true of story-telling of a very crude, corrupted kind) Bryan shackled his own imagination...and cut himself off from the possibilities of symbol and myth. ("I, on Behalf of Us," Stand 15, 1974)

Johnson's work has, in fact, enjoyed a more sympathetic reception and a more professional examination in the United States rather than in England, in particular in articles by Morton Levitt, and it is probable that this pattern will continue. The hostility displayed by English critics toward postmodernist artistic productions is general and is particularly noticeable among the literary critics. The English have more need for consolation.

III

I have attempted to present a defense of Johnson's writings because I consider his work to have fundamentally altered the terms on which the novel must now be written. Johnson's service to the novel has been to change the ethical intention guiding its purpose and construction, and to fit the form for purposes other than those to which it has been dedicated for so long. His departures from the traditional form have been many, but the unifying principle has been a radical ethic whose effect has been to dismantle the involuted value system of the middle-class novel, a value system inscribed into the very practice of its writing.

To the nostalgia for a decaying way of life, the failure of courage to face the changed circumstances of the modern world, the need for solace and consolation, the medicine-show cures for alienation, Johnson insisted upon the truth and the real, no matter how painful these might be, and upon techniques designed to demonstrate the limitations of the form, to inform the reader of the realistic expectations that the novel is now able to fulfill without compromise to illusion.

Johnson's dismissal of the ideological core of the traditional novel won him few friends amongst the defenders of the old faith who rejected

his works as "experimental" without properly evaluating them, or evaluating their evaluation of them. His lasting achievement has been to place the postmodernist novel on a new footing. Serious writers will continue to ignore his work on peril of succumbing to the traditional expectations of the novel, contaminated as these are by the need to evade an assessment of life that is in keeping with what can realistically be expected of it, contaminated as these are by illusion.

--Paul M. D'Eath

ALBERT ANGELO OR B.S. JOHNSON'S PARADIGM OF TRUTH¹

B.S. Johnson's literary ambitions were far from modest. He felt ill at ease with the literature written by his successful contemporaries. The drift of English letters after 1950 to a conventional form of realistic fiction he found particularly harmful. He saw the literary landscape as a place occupied and controlled by the wrong, unimaginative people. He felt it was his duty to speak for another vital form of writing. In order to do so with more authority, he had to present his own version of literary history. His view on the nature and the development of the form had to have a subversive force. This history is rapidly sketched: he promoted the eccentric Lawrence Sterne to the position of major author. It was a move of considerable importance in a literary environment which was dominated by Leavis's Great Tradition and by the no-nonsense aesthetic of the Angry Young Men and the Movement-authors. But for Johnson the situation was clear: Sterne was a central figure because he was an experimenter. From him, Johnson jumped to Joyce and Beckett. He considered the novel an evolving form, constantly seeking new possibilities. Each new step had something final and irreversible. The texts by Joyce had so radically changed the nature of the art that all previous forms had lost their validity. Johnson thought along the lines of the avant-garde: the practice of contemporary authors has an inherent historical significance, and each new novel could be classified as being behind the times or as an adequate expression of what the precise moment in history needed.

Looking at the novels of the "great" authors of the early 1960s (Nain, Amis, Murdoch), he felt that their output was not a meaningful contribution. Quite simply, they were on the wrong track. Not only did they not take into account the discoveries of Joyce and Beckett, but they in no way tried to explore new venues. They wrote something which English critics to the present day like to describe as responsible, ironic social comedy, but the painstaking description of a character's outward appearance, combined with a careful social indexing of manners and ways of speech, did not seem to Johnson the most important task of the artist. He abhorred the petty realism and conventional mimesis. With his dissatisfaction he stood very much alone on the isolated shores of Albion. Literary analyses in British magazines and at British universities could and wanted to concentrate on social, ethical, and political questions. If one feels a limited point of view, one feels obliged to grant these commentators that in the British fiction published in the fifties and the sixties, there was not much else to discuss. Most novels were observing the rules of any manual on "good" writing in which considerations of a