

B. S. Johnson's fiction is a rare example of innovative exuberance in the English novel. As a writer he combined fictional experiment with an insistence that all he wrote was true, and as an artist he rejected the hidebound dogma and timidity of conventional literary practice. In a genre not noted for its linguistic inventiveness, he breathed new life into the English novel, making the novel itself a metaphor for the conditions it described. His first four novels, Travelling People (1963), Albert Angelo (1964), Trawl (1966), and The Unfortunates (1969), adopt a variety of stylistic and typographical experiments, and in each one the format of the book itself participates in the novel's experimentation. Indeed, in The Unfortunates Johnson pushes the novel form about as far as it can go and yet produces a triumphant example of what the novel can achieve; in the form of loose pages, with the exception of the first and last sections, it can be reshuffled and read in any order. By such means as these, Johnson reflects the random nature of life, memory, the cancer from which the central character suffered, and ultimately fiction itself. It is my intention to show by reference to each of these four novels how Johnson exploits the novel form to make novel-writing itself a metaphor for the human condition.

In the introduction to Aren't You Rather Young to Be Writing Your Memoirs? (1973), which is in fact, despite its title, a collection of his short stories, Johnson makes a clear statement of his aims as a novelist. He first pays tribute to James Joyce for his extension of the potential range of the novelist when he wrote Ulysses, and goes on to deplore the fact that so many contemporary writers are still prepared to continue writing "anachronistic, invalid, irrelevant and perverse"¹ nineteenth-century novels as if modernism had never happened. He claims that he is not interested in telling stories in his fiction because "telling stories really is telling lies" and "I am not interested in telling lies in my own novels" (14). Truth and fiction are to him direct opposites, and therefore the novelist's task is to find a form that most nearly accommodates the state of chaos within which we live. The publisher of Trawl wanted to classify the novel under "autobiography," but Johnson insisted that it was simply "truth in the form of a novel" (14). Johnson's insistence that the novel was capable of accepting the challenge of portraying contemporary reality directly in this fashion is what makes him such an important--and unjustly neglected--innovator in the contemporary novel.

Much of Johnson's work is undoubtedly autobiographical in character, but it is not the autobiographical element which is important in the novels so much as the novel's exposure to what a novel really is or has the potential to be. Johnson wanted, as he stated in the essay mentioned above, to expose the inner mechanism of the novel and demonstrate the artistry itself--*artis est monstrare artem*. In this way the novels themselves become metaphors of the art of fiction with different styles being adopted for successive chapters and the use within one novel of interior monologue, letters, journals, plays, and film scripts. Johnson's experience in the making of television documentaries must have helped him in this respect and yet he remained insistent that the novel as an art form still had a role to play. If people wanted simply to be told a story, they could now leave that to the television set and retain the novel for a more specialized, difficult terrain, the consciousness of modern man. Johnson was one of the few writers of the sixties and seventies prepared to explore and exploit the features of that terrain.

In Travelling People, Johnson's first novel, published when he was

thirty, the use of innovation is still uncertain and confused. He later regretted the novel's mishmash of fact and fiction and refused to have the work reprinted. The novel begins with a parody of an author settling back comfortably in Johnsonian (Samuel) prose and posing himself the question of what kind of a novel he is going to write. The answer at first seems to be a conventional, linear one with a hitchhiker, oddly named as Henry Henry, a fictional representation of aspects of the author, making his way through North Wales towards the Holyhead ferry to Dublin. Once the narrator reaches the Stromboli Club, however, all pretense of conventional plotting is dropped, and vaguely sinister items--a cargo of dead dogs, an aggressive soldier--tend to become abandoned as failed "incidents" subservient to the main theme of the narrator's self-discovery.

Typographical experiment on a minor scale is present in the novel with such features as an imitation of the black pages of Tristram Shandy to indicate death in the novel, random-pattern grey dots to indicate unconsciousness, and regular patterns of grey dots to indicate sleep or recuperative unconsciousness. These and the parodies of earlier prose writers he admires can seem at times like the exuberance of a late student's enthusiasms--Johnson began a degree in English at King's College, London, at the age of twenty-three. Nevertheless, and despite the conventional aspects of the book's climax when Henry finally fully makes love to Kim, is dismissed from the "paradise" of the club, and makes tentative plans to see her again, the book shows many indications of mature promise in its overall continuity of style and the metaphor of "travelling people" that runs through it.

"Travelling People" is traditionally the name by which Gypsies prefer to be known, and the leading character, Henry, is a travelling person in the sense that he is rootless, unable to mix with either the working classes with whom he was born or the middle classes whom he was educated to emulate. A character like Maurice, at the club, refuses to see him as anything other than a barman since to do so would be to destroy the illusions by which he lives. His enthusiasm for Joyce's Ulysses is taken as a reference to the Hollywood epic of the same title. Henry consequently feels angry at society--"he wanted society to be as it says it is, not how it actually is"²--but he is uncertain what he should do to change it. The answer is, naturally, the book itself; the term "travelling people" is taken by the author to refer both to lorry drivers, admired as the new kings of the roads, and to all those who like Henry are travelling with an unfixed identity in a rigid, class-bound society.

Albert Angelo, Johnson's second novel, constitutes a considerable improvement in narrative technique from the uncertain, widely ranging tones present in Travelling People. The fictional persona he adopts is more confident, even though it is later abandoned in the "Disintegration" section of the novel. He manages to convey a mature presentation of a mind collapsing in chaos and fear that is completely convincing. Superficially, the novel tells the story of a young substitute teacher who wants to fulfill his vocation as an architect yet is condemned to teaching in ever-worsening teaching establishments. The fictional persona, Albert, finally meets his nemesis in a dreary secondary school at the Angel, Islington, in London, where his sarcasm infuriates the pupils to such an extent that, meeting him late one night after a drinking session, some of them push him into a canal and drown him. More significantly, Johnson is conducting a debate between himself and the reader on what exactly the novel should try to represent. Johnson later wrote that it was the first novel he was really pleased at having written. He felt it had broken through

the English disease of the objective correlative to speak truth directly if solipsistically in the novel form, and heard my own small voice.³

The novel is formally laid out in sections--prologue, exposition, development, disintegration, and coda--as if to mock the expectations of what a novel is expected to do, in the same way that some modern architects lay bare the basic features of a structure both to stress the artificiality of it and to incorporate that artificiality into the overall concept. Typographical eccentricities are also present in the novel: a hole between pages 149 and 152 of the original British edition to enable Albert to foresee his own death, Marlowe-like, in a brawl. Similarly, when Albert looks at a pamphlet about a fortune-teller, the pamphlet itself is reproduced in order to stress both fiction's nearness to life and its total artificiality. As with the confession in the "Disintegration" section, Johnson is trying to use fiction to reproduce life as closely as possible and, in his inevitable failure to succeed, he extends our notion of the possibilities of the novel.

In some senses, the most powerful and sustained experimentation occurs in the longest section, "Development." Johnson creates a highly memorable virtuoso sequence in which Albert's performance in the classroom serves as a metaphor for his collapse as a person. In parallel columns across the page he juxtaposes the lesson content itself, the thoughts of the teacher on what he is teaching and the children's reaction to it, and finally, the repellent actions and words of the children themselves. The teacher's defense of his failure to prepare the lessons--after all, he is an architect (i.e., a writer), not a teacher--collapses in self-doubt. Meanwhile, outside the school--itself a metaphor for England's condition--Albert drinks with old men, adopting a false persona and reveling in his neighborhood's decrepitude:

No use saying I enjoy it decadent and decaying, decrepit, like my state, London's state, England's state, man's state, the human condition.⁴

The novel might simply be an attack on the social and political conditions which create such a mess, if not for its fourth section, "Disintegration," where all the earlier artifice breaks down and the author suddenly steps out from his persona as an omniscient narrator:

Fuck all this lying look what im really trying to write about is writing not all this stuff about architecture. (167)

He admits what we have known all along, that Albert was only a figment, that he was really writing about teaching when he, the author, wanted to write, "Albert, who stands for me, poor fool" (170). He wants to write only the truth since fiction consists by definition only of lies, but he cannot remember everything, and anyway, how can you keep track of all the changes? Albert Angelo describes Islington streets as closely as Joyce had described those in Dublin, yet between the writing of the novel and the production of the galleys, many had been torn down in Percy Street: "You just can't keep up with it, life" (173). Johnson concludes the section with his personal credo ("the novel must be a vehicle for conveying truth"), to which end, "A page is an area on which I may place any signs I consider to communicate most clearly what I have to convey" (176). The novel itself is therefore the metaphor for Johnson's intention, and the short concluding "Coda" in which Albert is murdered comes almost as an anticlimax after the dramatic revelation of the novelist's intentions in the preceding section.

Trawl, which followed Albert Angelo, was certainly Johnson's most autobiographical and experimental novel to date. The book is an account of a voyage on a fishing trawler that is being made for an unexplained reason by the narrator who spends a lot of time being sick in his bunk at first but who later emerges more frequently on deck, metaphorically and literally healed. The title "trawl" is a play on words, referring to both fishing and

the conscious effort of mind made by the author in reassembling the fragmented areas of his subconscious. He makes a determined effort to remember everything about the past: "I must think of it all, remember it all, it must be everything, otherwise I shall certainly not understand."⁵ Yet, like an actual fishing net, his consciousness is only capable of catching the larger, unassimilated segments, and he has frequent moments of self-doubt: "Why do I trawl the delicate mesh of my mind over the snagged and broken floor of my past?" (21). The answer is, of course, that the mind compulsively returns to the past and the book is itself a metaphor of a mind at odds with itself, one that cannot rest until it has laid to rest the ghosts of its earlier self. Indeed the mind works under its own compulsion:

This is tedious, has no relevance.... Yet it is compulsive: the memory has no stop, it is only partly under control, bubbles on, once switched on. (80)

Johnson is continually afraid that he will betray himself into "fictional representation" and gnawingly conscious that ultimately he is left with no explanations, "just things, happenings" (87).

The typographical innovation is complex in Trawl, even if the method--almost entirely interior monologue throughout--is relatively straightforward. Johnson uses separate spacing--3 em, 6 em, and 9 em--to indicate that the narrator is either reflecting, remembering, or commenting on his own thoughts and descriptions. Short sentences in groups interconnected by means of dots replace paragraphs in the manner of Céline, and the rhythms of the sentences attempt to reproduce the rhythms of the sea. The confrontation with the dead weight of his past and his eventual triumph in recreating the lost, unsatisfying and brief encounters with women, so that by the end, "It is as though I have at last paid off some vast emotional debt that I had incurred through all my years" (179). Significantly, an anguished memory of his inability to perform sexually is the last stage before his confidence in the new, "permanent" love from Ginnie that gives him the energy to face the future.

The sea journey is a traditional voyage of self-discovery in literature, as in Melville, Aiken, and Lowry, where, in Johnson's case, even the captain has to keep justifying himself by his instinct for finding fish. The captain is a godlike figure always on deck, finally accepting the sea and the ship's crew. However, this sense of identity is fragile:

Just when I want to be, think of myself as being, one of them, up and around, there is no place for me, no place, I am replaced in my isolation yet again. (179)

The isolation of the artist is underlined when he remembers he has not told Ginnie his time of arrival and she may not be waiting for him. He returns to his hermetically sealed consciousness, and the novel ends as it began with his sense of perpetual self-imprisonment:

I, always with I....one always starts with I.....And ends with I. (183)

If Trawl follows a linear pattern mirroring the internal processes of the mind, Johnson's next novel, The Unfortunates, was his most adventurous assault on the traditional expectations of the English novel. The novel was sold as a boxed set containing loose sections, some bound as printer's signatures. Apart from the first and last sections which were clearly indicated, the other sections could be read in any order. Once again, the format of the book was itself a reflection of its subject matter. The narrator is on a journalistic assignment in a strange town when he remembers that a former close friend died of cancer in this place and he has not been back since. The dead past and the living present interact in his

mind, and the random way the novel can be read is a reflection of the random way in which the mind's associations work. Additionally, the novel was, as Johnson wrote in the introduction to Aren't You Rather Young to Be Writing Your Memoirs?, itself a physical, tangible metaphor for randomness and the nature of cancer. The book is a powerful attempt to expand the boundaries of the English novel, even if the subject matter can seem at times too slight to justify the extremity of the effort involved.

B. S. Johnson strenuously disliked the label "experimental" that was given to his novels and insisted that he was simply writing the kind of novel that needed to be written, now that the cinema and television had usurped the novel's story-telling function. Nevertheless, and despite the virulence of his detractors, Johnson remains a rare figure in rising to the challenge facing the English novel. As William Burroughs pointed out in his introduction to Jeff Nuttall's Pig, the novel is fifty years behind modern art. Johnson is one of the few novelists to write as an innovator, utilizing techniques so that the novel itself becomes a metaphor for artistic creativity. There are signs that in his incomplete final novel, See the Old Lady Decently, Johnson was beginning to despair of ever breaking through the resistance of English authors to change. The most that could be hoped for, he now felt, was to give the novel a decent funeral: "Our task is to see that the language gets a decent burial."⁶ The association in the novel's title is even more complex, referring to his mother's death from cancer as a metaphor for the decline of Britain in the twentieth century. However, the novel, ending at the point of Johnson's birth, written shortly before his death, was intended to show that life, which seems random and chaotic, is in reality a circle of decay and renewal. If that is so, then B. S. Johnson has left in his early fiction a powerful image of the potential for renewal that exists in English fiction and the living proof that art and creativity can inhabit new forms in the frequently moribund wastes of the English novel.

--David John Davies

NOTES

- 1 B. S. Johnson, Aren't You Rather Young to Be Writing Your Memoirs? (London: Hutchinson, 1973), 14.
- 2 B. S. Johnson, Travelling People (London: Constable, 1963), 180.
- 3 Johnson, Aren't You Rather Young, 22.
- 4 B. S. Johnson, Albert Angelo (London: Constable, 1964), 115-16.
- 5 B. S. Johnson, Trawl (London: Secker & Warburg, 1966), 14.
- 6 B. S. Johnson, in Michael Bakewell's introduction to See the Old Lady Decently (London: Hutchinson, 1975), 14.