Philip Tew

Contextualizing B. S. Johnson (1933-73)

The British Novel's Forgotten Voice of Protest

B. S. Johnson (1933-73) demands clear introduction; his work requires the preamble of summary and chronological placement because twenty-five years after his suicide he has slipped so comprehensively from public and academic view. Nevertheless, he remains potentially an intriguing and important writer of the postwar period, certainly notable as one of Britain's few truly working class twentieth century novelists and as such his narratives continue to reflect a life experience rarely narrativized and interiorized from direct experience. Given his almost complete obscurity in Britain today, despite his continued publication in the U.S. and Germany, it is forgotten that during his lifetime Johnson became a celebrated, much-debated, and controversial figure taken seriously as more than just a self-publicist (of which some accused him) or an overtly self-conscious experimentalist (to which others reduced his *ouevre*).

His polemical statements about literature and the art of fiction were significant. Such reflections and his writing are informed not only by his various creative talents which included that of poet, novelist, filmmaker and dramatist, but furthermore by his classical and literary education leading to a degree as a mature student (an unusual status at this point in the late 1950s) at Kings College, London. His neglect is almost a national disgrace.

Johnson produced an early joint collection of short stories with Zulfikar Ghose *Statement against Corpses*[1] and he was included in *Penguin Modern Stories 7*[2] which features Anthony Burgess, Susan Hill and Yehuda Amichai. He published seven

[1] B. S. Johnson and Zulfikar Ghose, *Statement against Corpses* (London: Constable, 1964).

[2] *Penguin Modern Stories 7* (London: Penguin, 1971), with A. Burgess, S. Hill and Y. Amichai.

relatively slim novels over approximately a ten year period: *Travelling People*; *Albert Angelo*; *Trawl*; *The Unfortunates*; *House Mother Normal*; *Christie Malry's Own Double Entry*; and the posthumously published *See the Old Lady Decently* prepared possibly from m/s and papers which followed the influential semi-theoretical prose collection *Aren't You Rather Young to be Writing Your Memoirs?*[3] Taken together with a few archival traces, one can reconstruct a figure of thoughtful and intriguing creative theorising especially since he bases much of his work on or around dissecting and narrativizing his own direct experiences of everyday life, which itself was a current theme within sociological and philosophical thought of the period.

The first novel *Travelling People* charts a post-degree Summer working in a country club for Henry Henry, its protagonist a barely disguised portrait of Johnson as mature student contemplating his future on graduation. *Albert Angelo* focuses on Johnson's own experiences as a supply teacher and through Albert as protagonist Johnson contextualizes his own such work in north London schools as both exterior and interior setting. He proceeds to drop the fictional pose two-thirds through this narrative and famously declares his presence that allows him to theorise about the nature of telling stuff (things, events, relations) as narrative with: "–fuck all this lying look what im trying to write about is writing not all this stuff about architecture...," (*AA*, p. 167). Having exposed this self-conscious, self-referentiality in his writing, he continues in *Trawl* and *The Unfortunates* to detail and thematize his own experiences as directly as possible mirroring many elements of the diary or autobiographical form (which he also played with in several sections of *Travelling People*). In *Trawl*, aboard a fishing boat in the Barents Sea, the protagonist who is understood to be Johnson reviews his life's hurt, betrayal and failure, confronting the failings of past relationships and anticipates a new relationship: "...this is the best thing she has done for me,

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[3] B. S. Johnson, *Travelling People* (London: Panther, 1967; London: Constable, 1963). Henceforth abbreviated *TP*; B. S. Johnson, *Albert Angelo* (New York: New Directions, 1987; London: Constable, 1964). Henceforth abbreviated *AA*; B. S. Johnson, *Trawl* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1966; London: Panther, 1968). Henceforth abbreviated *TR*; B. S. Johnson, *The Unfortunates* (London: Panther Books, with Secker & Warburg, 1969). Henceforth abbreviated *TU*; B. S. Johnson, *House Mother Normal* (London: Trigram Press, 1971; London: Collins, 1971; London: Quartet Books, 1973; Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1984; New York: New Directions, 1987); B. S. Johnson, *Christie Malry's Own Double Entry* (London: Collins, 1973; New York: Viking, 1973; London: Penguin, 1984). Henceforth abbreviated *CMODE*; B. S. Johnson, *See the Old Lady Decently* (London: Hutchinson, 1975; New York: Viking Press, 1975 – first volume of an intended trilogy entitled *Matrix*). Henceforth abbreviated *STOLD*; B. S. Johnson, *Aren't You Rather Young to Be Writing Your Memoirs?* (London: Hutchinson, 1973). Henceforth abbreviated *AY*.

Ginnie, that I am more natural now, whatever nature is, but I know what I mean, and for any of the earlier ones, others, I would not have felt this, she releases me, Ginnie," (*TR*, p. 169).

Johnson maps, co-ordinates and charts his experience onto his narrative which allows a voyage of self-discovery. These thoughts of placement relate to Virginia Kimpton (later Johnson) who in fact as well as narrative (as in *See the Old Lady Decently*) became his wife. Present, past and reflection intermingle around a pervasive seasickness induced by the voyage, a general unease which relates tangentially to Johnson's frustrations at and responses to the human condition. Johnson related the form and intention of the following novel *The Unfortunates* to that of the two previous works when he explains that the

> ...three autobiographical novels, *Albert Angelo*, *Trawl* and *The Unfortunates* forced their way in, demanded to be written out of sheer personal need, psychotherapy if you like, though I call it exorcism. I wrote those three books to get them out of my head.[4]

In another formal and stylistic shift, he moves from the confessional prose into an autobiographically-based framing by characterisation in two laconic and bleak narratives which owe much to the comic book and cartoon forms of reduction, simplification and exaggeration. A comic desperation reshapes the devices, characterisations and settings of these two subsequent novels, *House Mother Normal* and *Christie Malry's Own Double Entry*. He comments that these two paired works were planned while writing his first novel from September 1959: "During that time I had ideas for two more novels which became *House Mother Normal* and *Christie Malry*."[5] His later experiences in Wales on a writing fellowship influence the setting of the first and his own life as a younger man working as a clerk provide situation and setting for the second. The social matrix of intersecting relations and voices are paramount and are referential to lived experience. Finally, an amalgam of Johnson combining overview, invention of detail around documentation of his deceased mother's life and his own appearance into the text make up or frame the final novel *See the Old Lady Decently* (1975). Here the writing process threatens to stutter into incoherence with lacunae, lack of proper nouns and yet manages to sustain itself. Interestingly he charts the placement

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[4] Alan Burns & Charles Sugnet, eds., *The Imagination on Trial: British and American Writers Discuss Their Working Methods* (London and New York: Allison and Busby, 1981) p. 85.

[5] Alan Burns, "B. S. Johnson: Interview" in Burns & Sugnet p. 85.

of colonial attitudinising and empowerment while narrativizing sections which refuse proper nouns or naming. Thereby he displays language's capacity to convey its relations by its implicit reference to sets of generalised reference and co-ordination which are inscribed on the world without need for further repetition.

Amalgamated into his view of the lifeworld constituted by and narrativized through the experiential were Johnson's responses to ideas permeating the intellectual milieu of the late 1950s and early 1960s. His influence was not contemporaneous British fiction. Johnson comments "In England writers rarely help each other; it's a great pity. I don't discuss the novel with other novelists because I have strong notions about what the novel should be doing. Most novelists disagree with me and I'm not in the business of converting them to my point of view."[6] One exception was friend, confidante and older novelist Rayner Heppenstall who recollects Johnson's first novel's indebtedness to *Tristram Shandy*, and records Virginia Johnson's good French and her former time in Paris, and, Bryan's attendance of a lecture by Nathalie Sarraute (to whom Johnson refers to initiate the introduction to the Hungarian edition of *The Unfortunates*) in the Charing Cross Road in the early 1960s.[7] Elsewhere Hepenstall explains both his own meeting with and influence upon Robbe-Grillet as well as the latter's visit with Sarraute to England in February 1961.[8] Here we can recognise and establish a link with, and the influence of, post-war French thought upon Johnson since these experiences and people suggest themselves as conduits, acting as inspiration for Johnson's forms of narrative which can be examined more closely.

Johnson adapts the classroom and schoolyard ephemera of Michel Butor *Degrés* (1960) for *Albert Angelo*; he includes in his work Nathalie Sarraute's understanding that

> We all know this world, in which a sinister game of blindman's buff is in constant progress, in which people always advance in the wrong direction...[9]

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[6] Burns, "B. S. Johnson: Interview" p. 93.

[7] Jonathan Goodman, ed., *The Master Eccentric: The Journals of Rayner Heppenstall 1969–81* (London and New York: Allison and Busby, 1986) pp. 67–68, 120.

[8] Rayner Heppenstall, *The Intellectual Part* (London: Barrie & Rockliff, 1963) pp. 198–199, 209–210.

[9] Nathalie Sarraute, *The Age of Suspicion,* transl. Maria Jolas (New York: Georges Braziller 1963) p. 44; *L'Ére du soupçon* (Paris: Gallimard, 1956).

and develops the motif and substance of the isolated voyager from both Michel Butor[10] and Alain Robbe-Grillet.[11] Certainly like many of the internally focussed works of the French new wave, Johnson's narratives engage the internal investigation of the mundane and personal, searching for the interconnectedness in the random elements of a life, for within its randomness lies what Merleau-Ponty explains is

> ...a double relationship that an integral philosophy admits of between individuals and historical totality. It acts on us; we are in it at a certain place and in a certain position; we respond to it. Our experience everywhere overflows our standpoint. We are in it, but it is completely in us. We are in it, but it is completely in us. These two relationships are concretely united in life.[12]

Some commentators conjecture that Johnson failed in his enterprise and his suicide was an admission of failure to reconcile this double relationship, but certainly for him an attempt at explicit honesty was important in itself.[13] He said of his collected prose *Aren't You Rather Young to be Writing Your Memoirs?* written over a period of fourteen years:

> ...neither can I really see either progression or retrogression. The order is that which seemed least bad late on one particular May evening; perhaps I shall regret it as soon as I see it fixed
>
> (*AY*, p. 30).

The process re-emphasises the nature of a truth which resists fixity. Johnson perceived that narrative enabled one to look beyond oneself toward an apparent objectivity which itself might well be contaminated by the constructs or the desires and necessities of others. Such is apparent in the informing metaphor holding together the strands of his third novel, *Trawl*.

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[10] Michel Butor, *Second Thoughts*, transl. Jean Stewart (London: Faber and Faber, 1958); *La modification* (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1957).

[11] Alain Robbe-Grillet, *The Voyeur*, transl. Richard Howard (London: John Calder 1959).

[12] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Adventures of the Dialectic*, transl. Joseph Bien (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1973) p. 43; *Les Aventures de la dialectique* (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1955).

[13] See Giles Gordon, *Aren't We Due a Royalty Statement? A Stern Account of Literary, Publishing and Theatrical Folk* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1993) p. 160; Philip Pacey, "I on Behalf of Us: B. S. Johnson, 1933–1973" *Stand* 15 (2) (1974) p. 25; Eva Figes, "B. S. Johnson" in *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 5 (2); (1985) p. 71.

The derivation of such ideas and responses help partially place what Bernard Bergonzi notes:

> Johnson seems to have been prompted both by a demand for total moral honesty, seeing novel-writing as a means of reproducing experience as faithfully as possible, and by a strangely positivistic dislike of imagination.[14]

Johnson's suspicion might not appear such a curious credo for a writer who regarded imagination as a tool of a class system and its dogmatic forms (of which the traditional novel is one) to derive from pre-determined, predefined interactiveness. Johnson was a fundamentalist in regarding the intercommunicative individual as a focus for investigation of creativity and life, of the intersection or relations between the two, since self-searching might reveal some glimpse of the totality, as if beneath his assumptions is a spiritual dimension, almost an element of gnostic vision or the nirvana of truly communicated dialectical perception. Johnson says:

> I can only hope there are some few people like me who will see what I am doing, and understand what I am saying, and use it for their own devious purposes.
>
> (*AY*, p. 29)

In his collection of prose published shortly before his death, *Aren't You Rather Young to be Writing Your Memoirs?*, he pondered over the status of writing and the lifeworld, effectively declaring that the two had to be referential, but the relationship could not be simplistic if communicative writing were to be effective and not distort that relationality of narrative to life. In what amounted to his literary or creative manifesto, Johnson circumspectly delineates his concerns, pencils in the relationship between fact and fiction; if life and narrative were to interconnect, the writer must recognise that

> Life does not tell stories. Life is chaotic, fluid, random; it leaves myriads of ends untied, untidily. Writers can extract a story from life only by strict, close selection, and this means falsification. Telling stories really is telling lies... I am not interested in telling lies in my own novels.
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> (*AY*, p. 14)

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[14] Bernard Bergonzi, *The Situation of the Novel* (London: MacMillan, 1970) p. 208.

Nevertheless, fixity was far from Johnson's perception of the state of life or fiction or of the novel. Truth itself never achieves stasis; its perameters are of complex rather than contracted relations. Truthfulness possesses a quintessentially elusive quality, as Johnson argued strongly:

> Whether or not it can be demonstrated that all is chaos, certainly all is change: the very process of life itself is growth and decay at an enormous variety of rates. Change is a condition of life. Rather than deplore this, or hunt the chimaerae of stability or reversal, one should perhaps embrace change as all there is. Or might be. For change is never for the better or for the worse; change simply is.
>
> (*AY*, p. 17)

Whatever Johnson's apparent obsession with form, his reflection of truth engages the ideational function, the experience of processes, objects, persons, abstractions, qualities, states, relations of the world around and inside. He synthesises the experiential and the logical within which he emphasises the role of observer in the function of language. Language is the core of understanding and his literal honesty but it serves to signify beyond the grammatical. Expression and language cannot erase the admittedly amorphous relation between narrative and life; creativity is not confined as a mere heterocosm. Johnson declared in a telling comparison simply that: "Joyce is the Einstein of the novel" (*AY*, p. 12). Einstein argued for intuitive leaps of understanding for scientific advance and in terms of Johnson's comparison, Joyce is used to indicate a complex relationality of fiction, a mapping of life experience onto the adaptable and mobile features of language as communicative device. For Johnson Joyce expands the perameters of a realm where: "Faced with the enormity of life, all I can do is to present a paradigm of truth to reality as I see it: and there's the difficulty..." (*AA*, p. 170). In the context of Johnson's praise of Joyce and its meaning in terms of understanding how Johnson views the possibilities of the novel, we might usefully recall that Einstein insisted on intuitive, sympathetic understanding where there exists an interplay between experience and "...methodological uncertainty."[15]

Dislocation and chaotic impulses operate on most levels for Johnson, both as writer and as individual.

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[15] Ann Banfield, *Unspeakable Sentences: Narration and Representation in the Language of Fiction* (Boston and London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982) p. 4.

> Touched by deep personal tragedy, Bryan carried an enormous quantity of sadness within him. Life had betrayed him, and he was constantly on guard against fresh betrayals...[16]

Zulfikar Ghose reminisces about the appalling burden social class imposed upon Johnson, his vitriolic abuse at apparent representatives of what he perceived as unjustified class privilege, and: "...the very high praise he had received for his first two novels had endorsed his own conviction that he was absolutely right..."[17] Arrogance, aggression, class perceptions and his own self-doubt interrelate to create a perceptual matrix of the narrative field that Johnson offers to create a perceptual frame for himself both as a man and an artist. What overrides any implicit negativity is the compunction, albeit often self-destructively, to proffer candour and soul-searching in a quixotic excursion toward a conceptualisation, however limited, of truth and therefore honesty. His own account may be differently centred, but it co-exists with critical and contemporaneous accounts of his project in writing and shares many co-ordinating features. In many ways Johnson was a paradigm of 1960s culture and a product of his own very specific past. Reading his work and the commentary surrounding it is like re-creating some of the tensions that produced the particular British social nuances of the period. Johnson's very nature both physical and psychic was imbued with a muscular working class London identity and perceptions which militate against every other feature of his existence whose roots were in bourgeois enculturation: his university education, his work, the friends, girlfriend/wife and his philosophical understandings. Of these tensions Johnson creates his writing where he declares his sense of intersubjective presence or placement among other people which is enhanced by the retrieval for the processual quality of writing:

> All that has helped me to understand perhaps just one thing in my research to trace the causes of my isolation: I now realise the point at which I became aware of class distinction, of differences between people which were nothing to do with age or size, aware in fact of the class war, which is not an out-dated concept, as those of the upper classes who are not completely dim would con everyone else into believing it is. The class war is being fought as viciously and destructively of human spirit as it has ever been in England: I was born on my

[16] Zulfikar Ghose, "Bryan" in *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 5 (2); (1985) p. 24.

[17] Ghose pp. 25–26.

> side, and I cannot and will not desert: I became an enlisted man consciously but not voluntarily at the age of about seven.
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> (*TR*, p. 53)

We can observe something of Johnson's frustrations if we consider that recently fellow writer and acquaintance, Giles Gordon reflects patronisingly that

> Bryan Johnson was a working-class lad who had the singular fortune to marry a beautiful middle-class girl, Virginia Kimpton, who had knees that I lusted after. He was extremely aggressive, and quarrelled readily, unnecessarily with those who wished him well as much as with those who couldn't have given a hoot. His working-class chip could hardly have been more blatant.[18]

Johnson is mediated by marriage and condemned for his social positioning. A better if unwilling paradigm for underlying class tensions would be hard to imagine; the contrast of class voice with Johnson's conveys much.

Johnson's own experience is the subtext and text of all his prose. Friend and fellow-writer Philip Pacey confirms that "Henry Henry is a thinly disguised Johnson."[19] In the novel he reflects a world where political possibilities seem tangibly close, where "integrity" and "responsibility" (*TP*, p. 179) form part of the moral imperative for youth, where social neglect and change are palpable issues. He seeks what Gordon labelled his: "...subjective objective."[20] In simple terms, Johnson writes only of what has and does occur in the lifeworld and not in the realm of imagination. For him everything else is conjecture. His concept of truthfulness operates at the level of precise and often random detail in so far as they exemplify the process of social being since as Johnson declares: "Life is chaos, writing is a way of ordering the chaos."[21] This idea of truthfulness functions also at the level of framework and interaction, where detail is pared down to reflect the idea of a superstructure operating at a social level which diminishes individual significance within the social matrix of an exploitative system as with Christie Malry's girlfriend.

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[18] Gordon pp. 150–151.

[19] Pacey, "I on Behalf of Us: B. S. Johnson, 1933–1973" p. 20.

[20] Gordon p. 159.

[21] Burns, "B. S. Johnson: Interview" p. 92.

> The Shrike was not by nature a butcher's assistant, Christie realised only too well: it was society that forced her to be so, or to be always something similar. She was a pearl in her own right, and it was a reflection on society that it could find only inappropriate use for that wit, that nacreous quality that were just two of the things that endeared her to him.
>
> (*CMODE*, p. 138)

Hence this overview provides the comic, dismissive presence of Christie Malry in Johnson's attack on the work ethic and alienation in *Christie Malry's Own Double-Entry*.

Johnson resists the implications of modernism which results in a distortion of reality since its basis of subjectivity and capital are illusory and therefore integrated in a basic mendacity of its epistemological presence which applies to fiction as much as anything else unless resisted. A. S. Byatt misunderstands this (perhaps wilfully) when she accused Johnson of maligning the nineteenth-century novel which he attacked by evoking its exhaustion, anachronistic qualities and perversity.[22] Later criticism serves incidentally to pinpoint the cause of Johnson's discontent, for what Byatt further ignores is Johnson's irritation at other contemporary novelists' obsession with and continuation of such outmoded techniques and approaches:

> What exponents of "traditional realism" ignored, when they turned to classical mimetic theory for support, was that the instinct to imitate is complemented, in the *Poetics*, by an equally strong impulse toward ordering (7:2 and 4). Aesthetic imitation involves the completed and harmonized integration of parts into an organic whole (8:4), even if such parts should involve the irrational (24:10) or the impossible (25:5). Mimesis is never limited to a naive copying at the level of product alone.[23]

Hence, realism's mimetic intentions were therefore flawed in their theoretical conception of what constitutes any act of mimesis, wedded too firmly to surface detail and a lack of concern regarding the organic connection with the material world and any experiential cohesion. From Johnson's viewpoint, at its best this tradition sought to look and feel approximately right and appear topographically as the world does to the

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[22] A. S. Byatt, "People in Paper Houses: Attitudes to 'Realism' and 'Experiment' in English Postwar Fiction" in Bradbury, Malcolm, and David Palmer, eds., *The Contemporary English Novel: Stratford-upon-Avon Studies 18* (London: Arnold, 1979) pp. 19–20.

[23] Linda Hutcheon, *Narcissistic Narrative: the metafictional paradox* (New York and London: Methuen, 1984) p. 41.

conscious observer and by so doing accepts the confinement of social narratives written upon the world such as class, value and the alienation implicit in capital. Related to Johnson's work and critical concepts these notions make apparent that his criticism of complacent literature, of the *modern* neo-Dickensian novel lies in a critique of its over-simplifications, its capacity and tendency to copy and construct *lies from apparent surface features* and not in a refusal by Johnson to believe in the possibility of aesthetic reflection in narrative. Johnson comments wryly:

> I can only assume that just as there seem to be so many writers imitating the act of being nineteenth-century novelists, so there must be large numbers imitating the act of being nineteenth-century readers, too
>
> (*AY*, p. 13),

which serves to emphasise the necessary and continuing change in material and social conditions to which the aesthetic must adapt. In *Travelling People* Johnson has his alter-ego, Henry Henry note ironically in his diary (itself a typical element of eighteenth-century novels) that: "Nothing seems to happen as it should happen, as it does in novels..." (*TP*, p. 138).

For Johnson no form of novel or narrative can be pre-established if it is to reflect the processes or recognitions constituting the perceptual mass of the lifeworld and its chaotic dimensions. He explains of his notes that "Essentially they are pictures,"[24] and that "Accidents, like the order in which the bits got thrown into the folder, often dictate juxtapositions which weren't there by design;"[25] hence each novel is in itself an example or opportunity of reflection that serves as an ongoing engagement and development of both substance and material derived from perceptual existence. This novel is the stuff of life set in amongst all other lived experiences. This communicative act combines together sets of relations that underpin experience rather than being or regarding itself as separable from life which is why he writes from what he can know of himself in the world. Clearly this is processual and subject to change. Johnson explains "*Travelling People* gave me an identity in 1962 but not in 1972."[26] Hence, although he is intensely personal, risking the accusations of solipsism and of merely chronicling the domestic and the mundane, at another level he fragments the familiar constraints of social understanding by declaring that the ordinary and the

[24] Burns, "B. S. Johnson: Interview" p. 86.

[25] Burns, "B. S. Johnson: Interview" p. 87.

[26] Burns, "B. S. Johnson: Interview" p. 89.

everyday if dissolved and re-thematized are the seat of a deeply significant and philosophical analysis. He reflects in *Albert Angelo* that

> Faced with the enormous detail, size, of this complexity, of life, there is a great temptation for a writer to impose his own pattern, an arbitrary pattern which must falsify, cannot do anything other than falsify; or he invents, which is pure lying.
>
> (*AA*, p. 170)

Consciously Johnson uses the novel to explore and talk about the lifeworld. Everywhere in his depiction of individuals Johnson attempts to synthesise the theoretical with praxis by "...trying to see everything freshly, trying to realise in practice his theoretically absolute freedom of will, freedom from the passed" (*AA*, p. 134).

Philip Pacey summarises a central tenet of his friend's opinion of narrative: "Bryan's distrust of imagination becomes clear: it is to him mere fancy, the lure of fiction, of escape."[27] Johnson articulates in this resistance a movement toward absorbing into the novel a perceptual difficulty within the nature of the fictional imagination and process, one central to Sartre's understanding of the influences working upon the artist which parallel those of inter-communication itself:

> Because he returns to the source of silent and solitary experience on which culture and the exchange of ideas have been built in order to know it, the artist launches his work just as a man once launched the first word, not knowing whether it will be anything more than a shout, whether it can detach itself from the flow of individual life in which it originates and give the independent existence of an identifiable meaning either to the future of that same individual life or to the monads coexisting with it or to the open community of future monads.[28]

As a foundational subtext, the informing core of Johnson's consciousness is the dialectical possibilities of a concept of truth derived from reconfiguring perceptual and critical functions. The novel can allow us an access by reviewing the elements of

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[27] Pacey, "I on Behalf of Us: B. S. Johnson, 1933–1973" p. 210.

[28] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Sense and Non-Sense*, transl. Hubert L. Dreyfus and Patricia Allen Dreyfus (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1964) p. 19; (Paris, 1948), but this translation based on 3rd edition (1961).

the world via co-ordinates which resist social determination and centering. Therefore the expression of such a concept acts as a litmus test of personal integrity for the writer/narrator himself. The personal is political. The personal is public. Personal consciousness (and morality) is the informing key on reality. In sifting through experience and the placement of consciousness Johnson's protagonists seek to challenge their own inner as well as outer contradictions. Johnson demanded when reflecting on the process of novel writing: "But why should novelists be expected to avoid paradox any more than philosophers?" (*AY*, p. 18). To seek to avoid such paradox would be to falsify. Paradox is a multiple formation resisting contracted rationality and limitation of the dialectic to opposites. Johnson's novelistic expansion of contradiction in itself suggests the limitations of antithetical thought (a limitation of which Merleau-Ponty accused Sartre[29]) especially given the chaos and uncertainty of the world that he reflects in every perceptually linguistic moment.

> On the pretext that every rational or linguistic operation condenses a certain thickness of existence and is obscure for itself, one concludes that nothing can be said with certainty. On the pretext that human acts lose all their meaning when detached from their context and broken down into their component parts ... one concludes that all conduct is senseless. It is easy to strip language and actions of all meaning and to make them seem absurd, if only one looks at them from far enough away... But that other miracle, the fact that, in an absurd world, language and behaviour do have meaning for those who speak and act, remains to be understood.[30]

Johnson's was

> ...a desire to codify experience, to come to terms with things that have happened to me, and to try to tell the truth (to discover what is the truth) about them.
>
> (*AY*, p. 18)

Hence, even in what some might label his naiveté, we perceive that Johnson writes with philosophical conviction and fervour. Johnson retained some fear of, or resistance to, the chaos and meaninglessness that his search might reveal, according to Philip Pacey

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[29] See Robert Denoon Cumming, *Phenomenology and Deconstruction: Volume I. The Dream is Over* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1991).

[30] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Sense and Non-Sense* p. 39.

who recalls that: "I argued that creativity is the human search for meaning, impelled by a sense that meaning must be, by meaning itself calling to be revealed."[31]

So according to Pacey, Johnson was trapped in a conviction that no new revelations remained and he remained dissatisfied with what Pacey describes as his "...transforming experience into art, and so defining himself."[32] Nevertheless, I suggest that one should confront or contextualize the anger and despair that haunt Johnson's words. Fellow novelist Eva Figes evokes the shared response and commonality of what confronted them when she recalls an informal grouping of writers that included herself, Ann Quin, Alan Burns and B. S. Johnson. She recalls:

> ...we shared a common credo, a common approach to writing. All of us were bored to death with mainstream "realist" fiction at a time when, in England, it seemed the only acceptable sort. We were concerned with language, with breaking up conventional narrative, with "making it new" in our different ways. We all used fragmentation as a starting point, and then took off in different directions. Bryan concentrated on a kind of literal honesty, on the author as central character, and on the format of the book itself ... It is a measure of English conservatism and insularity when one remembers that this was the prevailing atmosphere in the literary establishment at a time when, abroad, writers like Beckett, Robbe-Grillet, Grass, and Borges were doing their best work. Their existence was acknowledged of course, but the attention they received was often grudging, respect without liking.[33]

In a literary fashion he was literally searching for truth; Johnson was a figure trawling his own contradictions.

Johnson's fictional consciousness is replete with contrasts and conflicts, between the educated world and the mundane worldliness of the most profane or philistine of circumstances, as with the world of lorryloads of gluebound dead dogs which jumpstarts *Travelling People* on a note of the bizarre which dissolves into the awfulness of a reality where he hitch-hikes in a truck serving the industrial process with dead dogs boiled down to provide glue. The reader is reminded that context and referentiality are presuppositions for our understanding of the lifeworld, for without this the language degenerates into the play of the absurd deprived of its co-ordinates. Apparent contradictions and the bizarre reconfirm an adhesive nature, things coalesce

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[31] Pacey, "I on Behalf of Us: B. S. Johnson, 1933–1973" p. 22.

[32] Pacey, "I on Behalf of Us: B. S. Johnson, 1933–1973" p. 25.

[33] Figes pp. 70–71.

like the dead canines. For all Johnson's admiration of Beckett he rejects the ultimate trajectory or logic of the absurd placed in a more and more displaced interiority.

Clearly, Johnson's narratives include an acute perception of the aesthetic drive, the nature of narrative and the activity and relationship of writer and readers. He foregrounds the fact of his own writing as central to his prose and any understanding of what the reader might presuppose:

> All that time, and the only exact words of his I remember are some of those spoken in the Malet Street coffee bar on that one occasion: "Life is a series of clichés, each more banal than the last."
> I certainly do not feel up to inventing dialogue for your sake, going into *oratio recta* and all that would mean. These reconstructed things can never be managed exactly right, anyway. I suppose I could curry a dialogue in which Robin and I argued the rights and wrongs of his *Conflictual Situation*, but it would only be me arguing with myself: which would be even more absurd than trying to write of someone else's life.
>
> (*AY*, p. 138–139)

Johnson addresses his reader and invites the reader to share and to question the situational relevance of feeling and emotion and judgement, to perceive the difficulties of the role of the writer as difficulties we all share in relating to our own experience of material reality. He identifies this act of recording and fictionalising with both the notion of memory's imperfection, but also with a concrete occasion in a specific location in a context he recalls and claims as autobiographical and actual. Johnson appears to mirror the understanding that: "We shall find in ourselves and nowhere else, the unity and true meaning of phenomenology."[34] Like Merleau-Ponty he perceives that: "The very experience of transcendent things is possible only provided that their project is borne, and discovered, within myself."[35] Implication and complex sets of reference to the social are perhaps Johnson's strongest and most consistent devices, but their location is as part of a social truth which proved problematic for his subsequent evaluation in a period of plurality and barely disguised relativism. Bernard Bergonzi foreshadows the grounds of the later dismissal or decline of Johnson's reputation:

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[34] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul 1962) p. viii.

[35] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* p. 369.

> The idea that fiction is lying, and in other respects undesirable, has been propagated by another English novelist, B.S. Johnson, whose considerable talents seem to me unnecessarily limited by his doctrinaire attitudes. For an English writer Johnson is remarkably conscious and theoretical in his ideas about what he wants to do.[36]

Johnson's dialectical method and perspective mirror Merleau-Ponty's assertion that

> ...the relations among men are not the sum of personal acts or personal roles, but pass through things, the anonymous roles, the common situations, and the institutions where men have projected so much of themselves that their fate is now played out outside them.[37]

This explains the curiously objective stance in Johnson's prose which absorbs even the most emotive and anguished in a matter-of-fact style and implied consciousness. Johnson insists on another underlying, if muted perspective.

> Outside writing I'm a very political animal. My novels have generally been written from a political stance but the politics have been very much in the background.[38]

One of the collection's editors, Charles Sugnet responds that

> ... it's hard to believe the B. S. Johnson who wrote passionately about class warfare, and insisted he would never desert his side in it, could be content to write only for himself.[39]

Certainly in his analysis, Johnson seeks to absorb Sarraute's notion that surface is valueless, which necessitates an examination of the fragments and fragmentation of the universe.[40] Johnson's prose at surface level is modest, hesitant, localised and particular until one discovers that his choices of approach are all purposive and signifying. He

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[36] Bergonzi p. 204.

[37] Merleau-Ponty, *Adventures of the Dialectic* p. 32.

[38] Burns, "B. S. Johnson: Interview" p. 88.

[39] Charles Sugnet, "Introduction" in Burns & Sugnet pp. 9–10.

[40] Sarraute pp. 12, 16–17.

commences from his existentially inspired philosophical and dialectical concern about the nature and interconnectedness of detail; how life constructs or unravels itself as in his mind in *Trawl* remembering jazz musician King Joe Oliver's life:

> And all the others, the way they did it, totally involved in all that was going on ... the treatment of sex and love as enormously important, so rightly for me, as I wanted to be so involved in everything, in all of it, who was a bank clerk at the time and engaged to the bourgeois Dorothy.
>
> (*TR*, p. 164)

Constitution and transcendent possibilities represented by the jazz world stand as separable elements, but he recalls that he "Went round the London jazz clubs, then, in search of this life, disappointed, of course..." (*TR*, p. 165). Johnson seeks his version of Sarraute's "...ultimate deep where lie truth, the real universe, our most authentic impression..."[41] He starts from what he described as "...a theme (the conflict between illusion and reality) in a particular example ... a mass of subject matter, observed, amalgamated and invented..."[42] Johnson's existential concern about why we are here leads him inexorably to thematize how being is constituted and how it is distorted by each and every cultural perception. Johnson refuses presuppositions about big metaphysical problems such as the coherence of individuality which faces the unknown and the strange. He ruffles, sifts, disturbs and distrusts the fabric of here and questions the nature of embodiment as fundamentally given and resting within a bourgeois framework of modernity. Johnson confounds both these apparent stabilities of the subject in their specificity and their ability to express some abstract existential interrogation of the space-time continuum. The possibility of an interrogation of the appropriateness and detail of the underlying social praxis of the subject is central for Johnson; this initiates a deepening of the intersubjective nature of its constitutive dialectical relationship. He seeks an understanding which might explain why his possibilities are constrained in their socio-historical as well as metaphysical contexts, much like those of Christie Malry whose mother *dialecticizes* (her word):

> 'It seems that enough accidents happen for it to be a hope or even an expectation for most of us, the day of reckoning. But we shall die untidily,

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[41] Sarraute p. 12.

[42] B. S. Johnson, "Anti or Ultra?" *Books and Bookmen* (8); (8th May 1963) p. 25.

> when we did not properly expect it, in a mess, most things unresolved, unreckoned, reflecting that it is all chaos.'
>
> (*CMODE*, p. 30)

Once more Johnson hints at his pervasive methodology and perceptual insight. His world view is less parody of expectation and more socio-political analysis: "If you want to get near the truth then its silly to start fictionalising, because you immediately make one step away from the truth and this may lead on to others..."[43] For Johnson *everything is embedded* and *material*, even his own act of writing; consequently everything is interrogated since present understanding is the illusion and an entropic resistance fragments and disrupts our praxis. In these resistances Johnson glimpses an underlying de-structuring of identity and its familiar contexts, revealing truths which are neither mythic or alien, but subsumed and oddly familiar as disruptions which Foucault outlines in *The Order of Things* (1966):

> ... there is a worse kind of disorder than that of the *incongruous*, the linking together of things that are inappropriate; I mean the disorder in which fragments of a large number of possible orders glitter separately in the dimension, without law or geometry, of the *heteroclite*; and, that word should be taken in its most literal, etymological sense: in such a state, things are "laid," "placed," "arranged" in sites so very different from one another that it is impossible to find a place of residence for them, to define a *common locus* beneath them all.[44]

The nature of these disruptions infer Johnson's radicalising vision of "The continuous process of recognising that what is possible is not achievable" (*AY*, p. 79), but also his singularity in terms of historical literary contextuality within the lifeworld, without which the novel amounts to the production and product of "... a babel of

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[43] B. S. Johnson, unpublished transcript of taped interview between B. S. Johnson and Christopher Ricks most of which was used for radio broadcast 11th August 1964; Tp. "Interviewed by Christopher Ricks on his New Novel, Albert Angelo" *New Comment* (Caversham: BBC Written Archive, dated 31st July 1964) p. 2.

[44] Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (London and New York: Tavistock/Routledge 1989) p. xvii–xviii; (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1966).

incomprehensibility: realists and experimentalists, cynics and idealists, obscurantists and populists, men and women, young and unyoung, poor and poorer ..."[45]

Johnson dialecticizes a disengagement from presupposed constructs and contracted narratives of modernity of which the traditional novel is merely one. Johnson inserts an authorial dialogue with his protagonist in *Christie Malry's Own Double-Entry* who confronts his creator with the fact that

> 'The writing of a long novel is in itself an anachronistic act: it was relevant only to a society and a set of social conditions which no longer exist.'
> 'I'm glad you understand so readily,' I said, relieved.
> 'The novel should now try simply to be Funny, Brutalist, and Short,' Christie epigrammatised.
> 'I could hardly have expressed it better myself,' I said ...
>
> (*CMODE*, p. 165)

Nevertheless, Johnson's consciousness develops Sartre's partial recognition in *The Problem of Method* that ideology and the lived personal project derives from engaged and concrete experience:

> To make comprehension *explicit* does not by any means lead us to discover abstract notions, the combination of which could put the comprehension back into conceptual Knowledge; rather it reproduces the dialectical movement which starts from simply existing givens and is raised to signifying activity. This comprehension, which is not distinguished from *praxis*, is at once both immediate existence (since it is produced as the movement of action) and the foundation of an indirect knowing of existence (since it comprehends the ex-istence of the other).[46]

Beckett retreats from this alterity of material presence into divisions and pathologies of plurality in an unstable epistemology of language. It is interesting that for all his admiration of Beckett's work Johnson centres his own quite differently. Of *The Unnameable* Johnson commented: "What you are left with is less pleasing to me

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[45] B. S. Johnson, *London Consequences*, a novel by 26 novelists with unattributed chapters, B. S. Johnson and Margaret Drabble, eds.; first and last chapters written jointly by the two editors (London: Greater London Arts Association, 1972) p. 15.

[46] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Search for a Method* transl. and introduction by Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Vintage Books, 1963) pp. 170–171; "Question de Méthode," prefatory essay in *Critique de la raison dialectique*, Volume I (Paris: Librairie Gallimard, 1960).

than Beckett's earlier novels. I regret intensely that one of the things he has jettisoned is his humour..."[47] Let us therefore reconsider what the two writers do similarly and differently. Johnson asks why history and society are formulated through a subjective desire which confounds us; so, for both writers the question of variation of identity is both dynamic and crucial. Interpretation of Beckett suggests that: "...the ultimate language of the Self is silence, and in silence the *Trilogy* ends."[48] As Johnson concludes: "I admire Beckett very much, while I don't imitate him in any sense. I look upon him as a great example of what can be done. I think personally he is in a cul-de-sac..."[49] For Johnson there is history as he demonstrates in his reflection in his final novel *See the Old Lady Decently* on the pre-Celtic past and what it may signify:

> Soon we may be closer: for post-civilization is upon us, startling us with the speed of its advance, the apogee is passed, soon everything will be cimmerian as five thousand years ago seems to us now.
>
> (*STOLD*, p. 106)

Nevertheless, Johnson chronicles the specificity of contingency where potentially: "The dialectic was going to appear in concrete facts."[50] He recalls of Tony in *The Unfortunates*:

> ... he had a great mind for such historical trivia, is the right word, no, nor is detail, trivia to me perhaps, to him important, or worth talking about, if that is important, which I doubt, to me ...
>
> (*TU* "First," p. 3)

Tony's preference allied to the specificity of objective forms prevails as the underlying principle of the narrative, and substance is all that can reconfirm even partial understanding of intersignification and meaning in the impermanence of being:

> This worn handrail, familiar to the touch, polished brass knobs every few feet, the wooden treads, in small squares, worn, wooden, wood wears more quickly than most things, like him, like me, at something like the same rate, perhaps, how can I know? The permanent way, ha!
>
> (*TU* "Last," p. 1)

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[47] Johnson, unpublished transcript of taped interview between B. S. Johnson and Christopher Ricks p. 8.

[48] Richard N. Coe, *Beckett* (London and Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1964) p. 79.

[49] Johnson, unpublished transcript of taped interview between B. S. Johnson and Christopher Ricks p. 7.

[50] Merleau-Ponty, *Adventures of the Dialectic* p. 7.

One decision by the narrator in *Albert Angelo* is played out before us:

> I think I shall visit my parents every Saturday as a rule, as a habit. Occasionally Sundays: instead, though, not as well. But usually Saturdays, as a rule, as a habit almost. Yes.
>
> (*TP*, p. 17)

In tone, its repetition and focalisation all draw on Beckett:

> I resolved to go and see my mother. I needed, before I could resolve to go and see that woman, reasons of an urgent nature, and with such reasons, since I did not know what to do, or where to go, it was child's play for me, the play of an only child...[51]

Nevertheless, one can perceive large differences between the writers, despite the obvious parallels. Johnson continues to specify location and personal historic referentiality for the ensuing visit which expresses the prior intentionality:

> They live at Hammersmith, my parents. I walk down the hill from Percy Circus, along Kings Cross Road, into Pentonville Road, towards Kings Cross. The station has two squat stock-brick arches, their yellow uncommonly unblackened: Cubitt, the youngest, Lewis.
>
> (*AA*, p. 20)

Beckett is concerned more with the creation of interrogations of subjectivity, but in particular how it is both expressed through and determined by language, a logocentricism which Johnson avoids:

> And once again I am, I will not say alone, no, that's not like me, but, how shall I say, I don't know, restored to myself, no, I never left myself, free, yes, I don't know what that means, but it's the word I mean to use, free to do what, to do nothing, to know, but what, the laws of the mind perhaps, of my mind, that for example water rises in proportion as it drowns you and that you

[51] Samuel Beckett, *The Trilogy: Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable* (London: Picador, 1979; London: Calder, 1959) p. 16.

> would do better, at least no worse, to obliterate texts than to blacken margins, to fill in the holes of words till all is blank and flat and the whole ghastly business looks like what it is, senseless, speechless, issueless misery ... To restore silence is the role of objects.[52]

Language is evasive in itself and operates to signify, intervene in and control man's self and mutual apprehension. As will become clear I regard Johnson as perceiving a crisis of the notion of the subject in its material and expressive condition or configuration. Language is secondary to his critique. Selfhood of this kind is a locus and agent of crisis. Johnson develops from a Beckettian base, utilising a range of other discourses and perspectives. Johnson's contingency is experiential and not an abstraction which separates him from both Sartre and Beckett.[53] Beckett's world is bleak and unpeopled by his inward eye; as such he represents a fear that philosophy and understanding are unable to sustain the intelligibility of their own content. Johnson's world is one rendered by and full of people and it is through their presence and manipulation that patterns of interpretation and social discourse reassert themselves, not necessarily through the nature of language but by its familiarity and reassurance. In the manner of phenomenological perception (from Husserl onward) Johnson prioritises present experiences as perhaps the only viable validating principle.[54] In his sense of the lifeworld autonomous difference is erased by specific manipulations through elements like "...branded products and factory stock..." (*AY*, p. 56) and:

> It has come to the point where there is no such thing as a local speciality in the exclusive sense: for everything is available everywhere, flown in that morning from anywhere, with the dew and the bacteria and the insects still on it.
>
> (*AY*, p. 62)

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[52] Beckett, p. 14.

[53] Sartre's separation of a philosophic and abstracted claim from experienced personal engagement is dealt with in Robert Denoon Cumming, *Phenomenology and Deconstruction: Volume II. Method and Imagination*, (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1992) pp. 159–161.

[54] See Cumming, *Phenomenology and Deconstruction: Volume I. The Dream is Over* pp. 29, 31–32.

Johnson reflects a reality where

> ... the tendency towards totalization and 'integration' (in the social system as a whole – in other words the state) prevents us from seeing how disjointed everything is becoming.[55]

Johnson's periodization may retain a significance in extruding strands of historical development which explain the origin and formulations of his critical thought:

> In the 1950s, a renewed development of modern processes took place, and there is much evidence of a definite phase-shift somewhere around the year 1960. Many of the social and cultural forms that had been crystallised as modern then started to be seriously questioned and eroded by the continuing modernization process itself ...
> ... [Any] claim that we have passed from the modern epoch into a new condition of 'post-modernity' underestimates the continuities between high modernity and the current phase of development. Our times have seen a radicalization and intensification of modernization rather than its dissolution.[56]

Fornäs's statement summarises well the outline context and resulting philosophical shifts at the crux of which I position Johnson in terms of method, narrative reflection, form, and critical significance. Johnson reflects the minutiae of the perceptual in such a manner:

> On my way home I pass late shops, the assistants looking weary, bored, mutinous. I do not know how they can work in such places, again, I cannot understand how people do such jobs. I could not do them. Even the thought of others doing them makes me feel unwell.
>
> (*AY*, p. 122)

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[55] Henri Lefebvre, *Introduction to Modernity: Twelve Preludes September 1959–May 1961*, transl. John Moore (London and New York: Verso, 1995) p. 121; *Introduction à la modernité* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1962).

[56] Johan Fornäs, *Cultural Theory and Late Modernity* (London: Thousand Oaks, New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1995) pp. 34–35.

For Johnson as for Ricoeur "...discourse is not another person but a project, that is, the outline of a new being-in-the-world."[57]

The opening of *Trawl* which articulates subjective presence and the fear of solipsistic isolation prefigures a movement toward absorption of others into a unifying project of self-understanding. The mood of *Trawl* is hesitant and reflective, the accumulation of detail in conflict with the inner moroseness of the traveller, with a flatness derived from both his sickness and his sense of personal defeat. The two forces contend as he matches the progress of life, through the war and evacuation to his *rites of passage*, the voice growing in certainty from the fragmentariness of its commencement:

I • • always with I • • one starts from • •
one and I share the same character • • are one •
• • • • one always starts with I • • one • •
• • • alone • • • • • • • • sole • • • • •
• • • • • • • single • • • • • • • • • • • • •
• • • • I

(*TR*, p. 7)

The use of such very idiosyncratic ellipsis points midline to indicate breaks in consciousness or the abandonment of reflection and narrative continue through the novel. They are its chief technical ploy or innovation (although its use remains entirely reminiscent of Céline's ellipsis points in *Rigadoon* as well as Nathalie Sarrraute's perpetuation of this effect). A similar pattern of form which reflects and moves from the solipsistic structures Johnson's novels where overall he posits a recognition parallel to Ricoeur's observation:

> ... that there are other subjects present before me and that they are capable of entering into a reciprocal relation of subject to subject and not simply into the dissymetrical relation of subject to object ...[58]

Clearly Johnson perceives in fiction that which can be expressed theoretically as "...the problem of reconciling the apparently autonomous logic of social processes with the

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[57] Paul Ricoeur, *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics, II* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1991) p. 149; *Du texte a l'action: Essais d'hermeneutique, II* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1986).

[58] Ricoeur p. 235.

equally inescapable fact that society is the outcome of human interactions,"[59] where he senses separation and isolation amid the cultural landscape of conglomerated urban density all of which signifies that

> Surely what is new and genuinely 'modern' is the contradiction between individual loneliness and the bringing-together of crowds or masses in gigantic cities, in massive business companies ...[60]

Johnson is a hybrid, amalgamating a factuality with a concern for a philosophical and materialist version of realism, which is quite separate from the literary school of realism of Anglo-American literary theory. To suffuse his narrative with such philosophical realism Johnson does not select merely, but illuminates the truthfulness of bundles of complex relations that interrogate topographical verisimilitude. He comments:

> With each of my novels there has always been a certain point when what has been until then just a mass of subject-matter, the material of living, of my life, comes to have a shape, a form that I recognise as a novel. This crucial interaction between the material and myself has always been reduced to a single point in time: obviously a very exciting moment for me ...
>
> (*AY*, pp. 23–24)

His work was radical in its refusal to accept the standards of British fiction which were dominant during his lifetime. The test of the literary or other merits of perception might be said to lie for Johnson in the ability or otherwise to define elements of substantiating truths themselves or perhaps definitions of the very elusiveness of any particular truth. He is quoted as insisting that "All writing is autobiographical, because he believes that one should tell the truth and that the only true knowledge is oneself,"[61] which of course does nor mean that Johnson's appeal is to a self solipsistically or subjectively constrained in its potential form. *House Mother Normal* is structured to demonstrate both a technical and expressive problem which expands the realm and territorial possibilities of the self:

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[59] Dews, p. 14.

[60] Lefebvre p. 189.

[61] David Depledge, "Author with a Bold Device: Interview with David Depledge" *Books and Bookmen* 9 (13th June 1968) p. 13.

> Due to the various deformities and deficiencies of the inmates, these events would seem to be progressively "abnormal" to the reader. At the end, there would be a viewpoint of the House Mother, an apparently 'normal' person, and the events themselves would then be seen to be so bizarre that everything that had come before would seem "normal" by comparison. The idea was to say something about the things we call "normal" and "abnormal" and the technical difficulty was to make the same thing interesting nine times over since that was the number of times the events would have to be described.
>
> (*AY*, pp. 26–27)

Johnson does not anywhere explain why he chose exactly nine accounts; the communitarian multiplicity of accounts is essential. Each such narrative segment serves to confirm the same substantiating material framework and basis, however distorted the perceptual and communicative abilities of any one geriatric (or of the House Mother due to insanity). Material and temporal processes underscore each of these exemplars of the reflective and referential frameworks however flawed. The self-referential values of a linguistic system which excludes other systems would have certainly been rejected by him as curiously monistic. To say something, however apparently complex, for its own sake (a statement only has ultimate self-sustaining relevance within that system) would appear to have been anathema for Johnson, since for him this conflation of life, thought and expression was no linguistic game since he believed the critic should "... think a little further, and what I am really doing is challenging the reader to prove his own existence as palpably as I am proving mine by the act of writing" (*AY*, p. 28). Johnson in effect extends Robbe-Grillet's notion in 'From Realism to Reality' that "The discovery of reality can only continue its advance if people are willing to abandon outworn forms."[62] Formal experimentation serves to function as an ongoing perceptual recognition of the nature of things, for reality and consequently truth lie at the heart of the enterprise which moves toward a perception of the concrete and material and the effects of Johnson's style and themes will be enumerated in the ensuing chapters. On one level Johnson holds to what is described by Gerald Vision as a correspondence theory of truth, which is "... the view that truth-bearers are true by virtue of their relation to a situation in a mind-independent world ..."[63] The world exists. Writing exists. The two have some connection and are interdependent. Hence the process as progression of material understanding Johnson

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[62] Alain Robbe-Grillet, *Snapshots and Towards A New Novel*, transl. Barbara Wright (London: Calder and Boyars, 1965) p. 154; *Pour un nouveau roman* (Paris: Gallimard, 1962).

[63] Gerald Vision, *Modern Anti-Realism and Manufactured Truth* (London and New York: Routledge, 1988) p. 11.

alludes to in his essay collection's title piece "Aren't You Rather Young to be Writing Your Memoirs?": "I write this down so you may know in time the circumstances of my first visit, which in turn led to my second visit" (*AY*, p. 36). This interface of event and account may be one aspect of the complex intersections of truth (an absent or x-factor constituting uncertainty does not eliminate potential coherence); certainly Johnson insists the nature of truth is no easy matter. In *The Unfortunates* Johnson admits this interdependence and its form may be problematic, but is extrapolated from the particular as well as the general, for without the balance of these two perspectives any cognition is deceiving:

> The difficulty is to understand without generalization, to see each piece of received truth, or generalization, as true only if it is true for me, solipsism again, I come back to it again, and for no other reason.
>
> In general, generalization is to lie, to tell lies.
>
> (*TU* "Last")

Truth and lies in their dialectical formulations and significations constitute the particularising matrix of history and hence they must be a focus for significant interpretation of Johnson's work, and, such historical "... links and cross-references ..." (*AY*, p. 30) determine his artistic and philosophical endeavour. The material centrality of truth concepts helps to explain the tortuous nature of his artistic career where he might appear to retreat from his own creativity and the impulses of the fictive form into a morass of the observable and yet dissolving features of the material world. Subjective truth must include otherness; the reflector of his consciousness is the potentially intersubjective presence which proves troubling in alterity's apparent objective form; Johnson chronicles things, actions, events and surroundings as if circling the interrogative presence of these apparently impenetrable subject selves. As Merleau-Ponty thematizes:

> It is thus that one surmounts or, rather, sublimates the experience of the Other. We easily escape from transcendence as long as we are dealing only with things: the transcendence of other people is more resistant. If another person exists, if he too is a consciousness, then I must consent to be for him only a finite object, determinate, *visible* at a certain place in the world. If he is a consciousness, I must cease to be a consciousness. But how am I then to

> forget that intimate attestation of my existence, that contact of self with self, which is more certain than any external evidence and which is the prior condition for everything else? And so we try to subdue the disquieting existence of others.[64]

Each novel allowed B. S. Johnson to explore elements of the interrelationship of both consciousness and externality where in the British context "... the incomprehension and weight of prejudice which faces anyone trying to do anything new in writing is enormous, sometimes disquieting, occasionally laughable ..." (*AY*, p. 31). For the Hungarian speaker drawn to Johnson's work perhaps the most representative and adventurous is available translated into their own language. As Johnson explained, writing in 1972 for an essay prefacing *Szerencsétlenek* entitled "Előszó a magyar kiadáshoz":

> Biztosan tudom, hogy ebbe a regénybe többet adtam magamból, mint bármi másba, amit azelőtt vagy azóta írtam.[65]

[64] Merleau-Ponty, *Sense and Non-Sense* p. 29.

[65] B. S. Johnson, *Szerencsétlenek*, transl. István Bart (Budapest: Európa Könyvkiadó, 1973) unpaginated. – "I know for certain that I have invested more of myself in this novel than into anything else that I have written before or I have written since."