

- 4 For a documentation of this, see Rubin Rabinovitz, The Reaction Against Experiment in the English Novel, 1950-1960 (New York and London: Columbia Univ. Press, 1967).
- 5 John Fuller, "Almighty Aposiopesis," New Statesman 68 (24 July 1964): 126.
- 6 Interview with Alan Burns, in The Imagination on Trial: British and American Writers Discuss Their Working Methods, ed. Alan Burns and Charles Sugnet (London and New York: Allison & Busby, 1981), 92.
- 7 B. S. Johnson, Introduction in Aren't You Rather Young to Be Writing Your Memoirs? (London: Hutchinson, 1973), 23.

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B. S. JOHNSON

I have only once in my life belonged to something which could be called a literary group, and that came to an end with the death of B. S. Johnson ten years ago. Ann Quin had killed herself by swimming out to sea only weeks before, and shortly after these two deaths Alan Burns, closer to both of them than I had ever been, chose to dig himself in to an American university, and stayed there. Their loss still makes me feel solitary, and bereft.

The four of us had very different talents and preoccupations, but 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. We were all interested in the book as a physical object, in our attempts to break out of the straitjacket of conventional linear narrative, but nobody took the attempt further than Bryan. I often had similar ideas in the early stages of a book, but tended to reject them, afraid that they would simply end up as a gimmick. Such fears did not deflect Bryan: he was a propagandist for the avant-garde with a gift for drawing media attention.

It all seems a bit odd now, looking back to the midsixties from the vantage point of 1983, at the earnest antics of those four young writers. To explain it to those not old enough to remember, certain things have to be said. Because the Swinging Sixties were anything but swinging as far as the English Literary scene was concerned, and it was a discouraging time for a young writer not hidebound by the prevailing insularity. The "Hampstead novel," middle-class and middlebrow, was in the ascendant, and the critics drooled over dreary narratives of suburban adultery. There was only one kind of story, and one way to tell it. Any deviation from this norm was met, not so much with hostility, as incomprehension. "Is the Novel Dead?" was a favorite party game of literary critics, a weary last gasp from people who thought they already knew the answer. And if the novel was dead, why bother to make things difficult for the reader, why tinker with the old machine, make demands on people just looking for light entertainment? What else, after all, could mere fiction be expected to provide? 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. I feel obliged to say all this in order to make B. S. Johnson, now dead for ten years, comprehensible to a modern reader, as a person and as a writer. Bryan would have been delighted to know that a writer like Salman Rushdie is currently top of the best-seller list. The whole climate of opinion has changed beyond recognition since his death.

Bryan's stance was always aggressive, even belligerent, whether the cause was modernity in literature or money, his other great obsession. I remember him throwing paper darts into an audience to campaign for Public Lending Right. I remember sitting next to him at a very rowdy and enjoyable Annual General Meeting of the Society of Authors where he called for the instant resignation of the entire Committee of Management because of their ineffectual handling of the PLR issue. He was too much of a propagandist for his own good in the long term, as far as his development as a writer was concerned, but he was certainly a dab hand at catching public attention. The first time I ever saw him was on television, explaining to a bewildered interviewer why his first novel had a hole in the pages. Later on The Unfortunates became famous to people who did not read that sort of thing as the "book in a box," because it was made up of unbound sections.

It is a measure of the prevailing climate of the period that the nation which produced the author of Tristram Shandy should have been flummoxed by this kind of thing. No doubt the fuss he stirred up helped to sell a few extra copies. What was singularly lacking at that time was any serious attempt to come to grips with the real purpose behind these experiments--the fact that loose, unbound sections were taking fragmentation one step further, for instance, so that it really did not matter in what order the loose sections were read, since there was no conventional plot, no secret to be withheld until some crucial point in a linear storyline.

Apart from being a propagandist, Bryan was a purist, almost a puritan. For most of his writing life he did not invent, "tell lies," as he would have called it. Instead he created a literary text about real people, real experiences and events, with himself as undisguised narrator and main character. This could be witty and delightful, but at other times a bit ponderous. He had a tendency to take things to extremes, to take truth-telling too literally, but he was being consistent in his own way to a belief that Ann, Alan, and I all shared with him: the belief that the seamless "realist" novel is not only not realistic, but a downright lie. Of course all fiction is a form of lying, but the realist novel is a dangerous lie because people have come to believe it.

Bryan's way of coping with this problem was to avoid fictive invention, to try and stick to literal truth, and I think he worked himself into a cul-de-sac. It might have worked for him, both as a person and a writer, if he had been more in touch with his inner problems, and had really explored them in his writing. Instead he tried to seal off the seething cauldron, truth became a lie, and the result was destructive. By concentrating too much on form, on literal truth, I think Bryan lost touch with an essential, greater truth--that the only way to tell the truth is by lying, and that is the real starting point of meaningful fiction.

--Eva Figes