tie, in the ensuing scene, tells the office supervisor that there is not much time to arrange his mother's funeral because "It's a short novel." Not only do writer and reader share the realization that the work is fiction, so do some of the characters. The light-heartedness of most of the observations creates an intermittent atmosphere of good-humored whimsicality: "Be quiet, I think to my neighbors. Some of us are writing masterpieces." Although reinforced by occasional jokes, limericks, and ribald stories, the light-heartedness is only intermittent and sometimes seems labored, for death broods over much of Johnson's work, either as subject or as the inevitable conclusion to chaos. In many of the novels, a central character dies either at the end or before the beginning of the novel, the death serving as the occasion for the book—and rather typically death is caused by cancer. In each instance, death is represented as arbitrary, random, untimely. . . . (pp. 71-2)

To attempt a definitive assessment of Johnson's importance would be clearly premature, not only because he was so recently with us and died before giving us all the novels he had intended, but also because he leaves us with several fundamental matters unresolved. For example, his obstinate and naive contention that fiction is lying is difficult to understand or accept. When he first voiced this dictum, in *Albert Angelo,* he provoked a controversy, but Johnson stuck to his guns and continued to insist on his point of view, although it was conveyed with some modifications in *House Mother Normal.* His insistence, in retrospect, is doctrinaire and curious. Any writer knows that he fabricates not only fiction but, to a certain degree, reminiscence as well, that the imagination is highly selective in compiling even what purports to be unvarnished recollection. As Johnson's own *Trawl* testifies, we are all obsessed with that blessed rage for order which comes into play when we attempt to render human experience in any form, and which results inevitably in some sort of pattern, whether discovered in or superimposed upon the material.

Still, Johnson has performed a useful service with his blunt statements, by refocussing our attention upon what is undoubtedly the crucial aspect of the creative process, the link between the raw material of experience and the consciousness through which that material is filtered and by which it is shaped and articulated. If he obstinately and combatively oversimplified, he made that relationship impossible to take for granted, and his insistence on being as true to life as his talent would allow him carries with it a homely and useful enjoiner against the facile falsification of experience.

Another difficult and related problem is posed by his stubborn insistence upon solipsism, which inevitably comes into conflict with his insistence on telling the truth. The only truth available to the solipsist is the inside of his own head, so that the full flux of experience is never in view, having been blotted out, and what remains is largely a view of the writer's interior landscape at a given moment. To fix on this, and this alone, as the appropriate subject for a writer is to deteriorate into self-indulgent narcissism. Fortunately, Johnson's own practice frequently belies his preachments; he had a very keen eye for the life around him, if his characterizations and descriptive passages are any measure. Again, the contradictions are never quite reconciled.

His compulsive novelty, evidenced by the various forms into which he cast his novels, becomes, finally, tedious. Yet he probably could not, in justice to his tenets, have written any other way. He had rejected the Dickensian novel as no longer appropriate, and to undertake one just to prove he could write it would have been, for him, a pointless enterprise. While we might share the slight exasperation of one of his reviewers who voiced the feeling that with Johnson a better novel "seems to be just around a corner which he doctrinally refuses to turn," we must realize that, to Johnson, experimentation was not something to be simply gotten out of one's system so that one could get back into the main stream but was, indeed, the main stream. We must, in short, take him as he is.

He was stubborn and unregenerate, and these very qualities help make his work significant. For he was not satisfied with the form he inherited. He rejected what to him was an outworn legacy, and he stretched the form to accommodate and give voice to the stuff of the contemporary world. He never let us forget how important the novel is. Whether or not he dealt with them effectively and successfully at all times, he knew very well what the crucial issues of the novel are, and he was right to insist, however extremely, upon their primacy. If he seemed to spend an inordinate amount of time alternating between fist-shaking and nose-thumbing, he was also, at the same time, steadily pointing with his other hand toward the frontier. (pp. 72-3)

Robert S. Ryf, "B. S. Johnson and the Frontiers of Fiction," in Critique: Studies in Modern Fiction *(copyright © by James Dean Young 1977), Vol. XIX, No. 1, 1977, pp. 58-74.*

What is it that makes an experimental novelist? There are many possible motivations, but among them must always be the desire for self-projection in a more total, more arresting form than that available to more conventional writers. Self-projection has usually been a risky business, and until recently the threat of ostracism hanging over the experimental writer was very real. Now it is so no longer. The upsurge of experimental art in the 1960s revealed that experimentation had become a recognised form of publicity-seeking. This is the background to B. S. Johnson's career. Johnson was never shy of self-advertisement—one remembers the advance publicity for his novel-in-a-box, *The Unfortunates* (1969)—but the show he put on was as much one of anxiety and vulnerability as of virtuosity. It was uncomfortably typical of Johnson that the 'random order' effect in *The Unfortunates* should seem superfluous in a novel of painfully literal honesty, that his one popular success with *Christie Malry's Own Double-Entry* (1973) should be achieved in apparent contravention of his own principles, and finally that his most ambitious artistic project, the *Matrix* trilogy, should be curtailed by his suicide. It was as if Johnson had reintroduced the risk into experimental writing by publicly setting himself tasks which were in fact impossible.

One should beware of arguing that any artist deliberately courted failure. And yet while artistic failure is commonplace, a record of ostentatious 'failures' like Johnson's must surely be rather rare. During his lifetime, he was most commonly seen as a brilliant writer thrashing around in a trap of his own making. I shared this view, but have more recently come to feel that there was method and not artlessness in Johnson's constant disappointment of the reader's, and his own, expectations. Reread in sequence, his novels

can be seen to exemplify a peculiarly British form of self-punishment. Johnson's imagination is of the manic-depressive type, the mania resulting in bold experimentation and extravagant comedy, and the depression in the gloomy, morose self-examination of his more intimate novels such as *The Unfortunates* and *Trawl* (1966). This in itself is not so very remarkable; if they did no more than project a personality, Johnson's novels, though certainly arresting, would hardly stand out as unique. What makes these novels significant is that they are shaped in accordance with a conscious aesthetic, and this aesthetic . . . has a deep historical correspondence with the particular kind of personality-structure that Johnson's writings reveal.

'Telling stories is telling lies . . . I am not interested in telling lies in my own novels.' This thesis which Johnson nailed to the door of his house of fiction provoked a barrage of refutation from critics, even the most sympathetic. It was denounced as an expression of hostility to art and a deliberate shackling of the imagination. It was seen as a denial of its author's own gifts and a pernicious example to others. This sort of misunderstanding may have been inevitable, since Johnson was at once a vociferous member of the avant-garde and an extreme individualist. But Johnson's version of the Eighth Commandment was devised for his own purposes, not for the general reformation of contemporary fiction. In arguing this, I wish to stress a point that I do not think any previous critic of Johnson has made—that his objection to 'telling stories', so far from being revolutionary, is the traditional objection of English Puritanism. Thus Johnson's originality was not a matter of mere innovation; it was that his innovations, together with other aspects of his art, reveal how far the Puritan tradition survives as a means of making sense of the contemporary world. (pp. 45-6)

B. S. Johnson was an aggressively anti-religious writer. Whatever its roots may have been in his personal experience his anticlericalism speaks of [an] . . . austere, . . . vulnerably religious temperament. . . . Christie Malry, the hero of Johnson's penultimate novel, tries to prosecute his parish church under the Trade Descriptions Act—after all, they claim to have 'the answer to all problems, personal, political and international'—and eventually has to be cautioned by his girlfriend for his 'obsession with knocking religion'. Christie, an urban guerrilla, is an inverted Christ-figure, and so is Haakon, the scapegoat hero of Johnson's play *You're Human Like the Rest of Them* (1964). The play ends with Haakon's parable of locusts and lizards: the futile resistance of the locusts which are being fed to lizards in a cage is seen as the only protest open to man in the face of a vindictive deity:

> The only thing a locust could do was
> To make itself an awkward thing to eat
> By sticking out its arms and legs and wings
> To make itself an awkward thing to kill
> So shall I: I have to die, but by God
> I'm not going to pretend I like it
> I shall make myself so bloody awkward!

Anti-Christian attitudes like these play a regular and certainly not a very profound role in Johnson's writings. But it is within the context of an acknowledged anti-religious obsession that Johnson will be seen to exemplify some underlying patterns of the Puritan intelligence. (pp. 47-8)

Johnson's renunciation of fiction was . . . not so much a principle to guide the novel-reader as a standard against which to measure himself. Superficially he may have hoped to change contemporary fiction but deep down, it would seem, he was setting himself tests he did not believe he could pass. While the exploitation of selfconscious devices in his novels was often playful, it could also be anguished and hurt. The bilious emotional outburst which interrupts the narrative near the end of *Albert Angelo* (1964) is far removed from the suavity with which a practitioner such as John Fowles exploits the convention of the novel with a thwarted ending. Johnson's principles provide for many comic moments, but they also produce anguish when he cannot live up to them and guilt when he contravenes them without the reader knowing. In *Aren't You Rather Young* he expressed his private struggle in terms that any serious writer could understand: 'I feel myself fortunate sometimes that I can laugh at the joke that just as I was beginning to think I knew something about how to write a novel it is no longer of any use to me in attempting the next one.' If we see his aims as, in some sense, unattainable the joke here will seem rather precarious. Johnson's self-deprecation is compounded by the fact that, once he had declared in public that he hated telling lies, he had done his best to make the reader suspicious of every novel he wrote. Any success of his will seem hypocritical since he has substituted an impossible technical standard for the impossible moral standards of religious Puritanism.

Johnson's attempts to reconcile fiction and truth was explicit in his first novel, *Travelling People* (1963). Here he announced his intention to expose the mechanism of the novel, by means of interludes, jokes and stylistic variation, in order to eliminate deception between writer and reader. *Travelling People* was well received, but Johnson later called it a 'disaster' because it was 'part truth and part fiction'. . . . His next novel, *Albert Angelo*, contains an extraordinary exercise in self-abasement when the hero, a supply teacher, sets his secondary-modern class an essay on 'What I think of teacher'. The answers make a brilliant series of parodies, but then Johnson interrupts the narrative, denouncing his fictional structure as a sham and confessing that 'teacher' is himself. There followed *Trawl* and *The Unfortunates*, novels of mordant self-examination in which the narrator broods over his futile love-affairs and over a painful bereavement. In *House Mother Normal* (1971) and *Christie Malry*, by contrast, Johnson abandons the autobiographical mode and portrays masterful and self-confident main characters whose behaviour arouses outright revulsion or, at best, a guilty and sneaking admiration. These are novels which cauterise normal human reactions, and only on reflection does their moral purpose become apparent. Such purpose is hidden as if Johnson were ashamed to take credit for it, preferring to be allied with his protagonists as scapegoat-turned-villain. Finally there was to be the *Matrix* trilogy, announced as his major work—a double humiliation in that his determination not to tell lies seemed likely to reduce the narrative to a random montage, and in that he did not live to complete it. (pp. 48-9)

The correspondence between technical and psychic exploration is a working hypothesis which points us towards the real matter of Johnson's art. What was the 'dredged-up material' in his case? He himself wrote of his work as a systematic, rational struggle with technical problems, while I have initially approached it as a process of public self-hu-

miliation. In fact it is the presence of a continuous moral vision that emerges from rereading the novels, although Johnson rarely spoke of that vision. Without such a vision, it would in any case be otiose to speak to him as a Puritan artist. (p. 50)

House Mother Normal, a 'geriatric comedy' set in an old people's home, is a technical *tour de force* consisting of nine interior monologues, each taking up twenty-one pages and covering exactly the same stretch of time. Every line in a given monologue corresponds to the same moment in each of the others. The strict scheme is handled with such ingenuity that we can identify with each of the inmates in turn, while putting together the complex jigsaw of events during the Social Evening which takes up the allotted time-span. The novel has a powerful *memento mori* effect, not least through Johnson's use of blank spaces to indicate periods of pain, mental confusion and unconsciousness. Here a typographical trick which was first exploited in *Travelling People* is put to serious and dignified use. The book is an intimate reminder that—in Johnson's final words—'worse times are a-coming, nothing is more sure'.

There are two aspects which seem to require some explanation. The first is the curiously sensational role played by House Mother, a role which ends with her stripping for the benefit of her senile charges and performing a sexual act with her dog. Then there is the correspondence of the novel with Johnson's principle that 'Telling stories is telling lies'. Admittedly, House Mother, like Albert Angelo, is finally exposed as an invented character:

> Thus you see I too am the
> puppet or concoction of a writer (you always knew
> there was a writer behind it all? Ah, there's
> no fooling you readers!). . . .
>
> So
> you see this is from his skull. It is a diagram
> of certain aspects of the inside of his skull!

But, unlike the earlier novel, we are not told *why* she has been invented. At first reading her exhibitionism seems gratuitous and Johnson's purpose remains unclear. At the simplest level, he is no doubt using sexual titillation to sustain an air of suspense about actions which have to be reported nine times over. Beyond this House Mother is used to make a point about 'normality'. Johnson himself wrote that 'The idea was to say something about the things we call "normal" and "abnormal"', but it is doubtful if the point needs such heavy underlining. There may be an error of judgement here, but at least House Mother will not seem the product of cynical sensationalism when we examine the attitudes contrasted in the novel more closely.

House Mother holds her position because society tries to ignore old age by calling its victims 'geriatric' and shutting them away in institutions. She is a petty tyrant with total control over the inmates, and has found how to derive a range of emotional satisfactions from her charge. These satisfactions must be perverse because a healthily sensual individual would not have taken on her job in the first place; this, at least, is what Johnson seems to imply. None the less she is an ordinary person and therefore combines various more or less understandable forms of corruption with an energetic habit of self-justification. We are put off from the beginning by her false, ingratiating tone of address; though ironically her voice introducing the narrative is also the authorial voice. . . . House Mother exerts maternal authority over her patients, but the reality from which she wants to shield them is that of disillusionment with God. Yet she is not a believer, only a hypocrite who believes in maintaining the holy lies on which respectable society is based. Johnson's attitude to her is indicated when he concludes her list of clinical features with a diagnosis of 'malignant cerebral carcinoma (dormant)'. But it must be added that she is also a narrator-figure, whose initial plausibility he is at some pains to establish.

Unlike her patients (whose self-absorption ranges from states of reverie and self-admiration to heavy pain and extreme catatonia) House Mother is always appealing to an audience. Her monologue has a rhetorical purpose; she is an inveterate liar because she is a deliberate story-teller using her fantasies as a means of subduing and imposing on others. These fantasies have become an adequate substitute for reciprocal human relationships, so that she is content with her unenviable profession and content also with a sexual partner who is her dog. As individual psychology this may be fairly lurid, but House Mother must be understood as a surrogate figure whom Johnson invests with his own guilty compulsion to be a writer and tell lies to command the attention of others. Yet the reader who responds to the hints of moral condemnation in the way I have done has himself been manoeuvred into the position of the Puritan externalising his own guilts and finding a scapegoat for them. The subtlety of the novel lies, I think, in Johnson's realisation of the humanity that is fought over by these warring ethical alternatives. (pp. 50-2)

In *Albert Angelo,* the hero prepares a homily to his class on 'the dignity of humankind'. They are unmoved and—in one of the novel's alternative endings—dump him unceremoniously in the Thames. The value of stoicism is sardonically affirmed throughout Johnson's novels. . . . Suffering in Johnson's writing is both intensely personal and a general experience. The dignity of the old people in *House Mother Normal* is partly theirs as members of the generation that fought on the Somme, and who have survived only to face death again in the modern equivalent of the workhouse. As individuals they are not all very attractive, but their memories, whether of war or love or gaiety or bereavement, convey a fortitude which will enable them to meet whatever is in store for them just as they have done in the past. Unlike the reader they are simply unmoved by House Mother's exhibitionism and, whatever the causes of disgust that arise with the decay of the body, they are simply in need of material, and not of spiritual, help. In this novel Johnson has both dramatised the Puritan compulsions of bodily loathing, moral condemnation, guilty self-righteousness and keeping up appearances, and has transcended them by means of a more fundamental, non-rhetorical assertion of human dignity.

House Mother Normal, I believe, will stand as Johnson's finest work. I have argued that it makes subtle use of Puritan reactions, but it is in the middle-period novels *Trawl* and *The Unfortunates* that we find the more narrowly Puritan obsessions. *House Mother Normal* is a statement of the truth of non-rhetorical (and in this sense non-fictional) individual consciousness. Its interplay of nine interior monologues must be technically unique. In the two earlier novels the interior monologue is used in a much more traditional way, to convey the confessional meditations of a

single character suffering from remorse of conscience. It was here that Johnson gave full rein to the solipsistic tendencies inherent in his hostility to 'fiction'. (pp. 53-4)

The gloomy, alienated viewpoint of *Trawl* is continued in *The Unfortunates*. This is a tribute to a friend who died of cancer. . . . It introduces the theme which was continued in the later novels. . . . The theme contrasts sharply with the whimsical randomness that results from putting the novel into a box. . . . Johnson's idea is to allow the reader to participate in his own uncertainties about structuring the novel; but in fact the demonstration is pointless because it makes one feel that the structure does not matter. In my experience there is no way of re-ordering the twenty-seven different sections so as to introduce a previously hidden element of surprise. *The Unfortunates* is not a truly random work because we are never tempted to doubt the common source of the separate discourses constituted by each section. the author provides a 'First' and 'Last' episode, and the intervening sections are all interior monologues produced by a manifestly continuous first-person narrator, who is a journalist reporting a football match in a Midlands city. Given the uniformly confessional content of the novel, the fact that Johnson himself may have pieced it together from different episodes written at different times is really of no significance to the reader.

The one aspect in which Johnson's self-consciousness is triumphantly justified is the reporting of the match itself. Stuck to the bottom of the box is a facsimile of a football report signed 'B. S. Johnson' in the house-style of the *Observer* newspaper. The headline 'Sub inspires City triumph' is, of course, a Johnsonian pun calling attention to the drastically truncated form of the report as it appears 'in print'. The section which shows how this report is produced handles material which would have appealed to Balzac by means of the comic techniques of Joyce and Sterne. The narrator's interior monologue during the game is interspersed with the sentences he notes down in draft. There follows a transcript of his phone-call to the editorial desk during which he dictates his copy. The section combines the formal incongruities involved in the production of a 'text' with a highly authentic picture of a journalist at work; it could be seen as a portrayal of alienated labour with the journalist's professional skill balanced against his personal boredom and resentment. But his exposure of the mechanism of hack writing must make up for the absence of any real exposure of the process of writing *The Unfortunates* itself. The various forces that may have determined the latter text remain conjectural and implicit. (pp. 54-5)

In his middle period Johnson failed to solve the conundrum of the non-fiction novel that he had set himself. Both *Trawl* and *The Unfortunates* have the form of a kind of pilgrimage, a successive discovery of the pain and nullity of the world of experience. The pilgrim has as his goal certain immanent truths but these must either be confined to the self (as in *Trawl*) or falsely objectified in terms of another (as in *The Unfortunates*). The effective result in either case is solipsistic—a dramatisation of the writing self which questions everything except its own justification. In *House Mother Normal* and *Christie Malry* Johnson broke away from this pattern, cauterising the 'I' of his fictions by creating characters who represent the anti-self and become scapegoats drawing upon themselves the weight of Puritanical loathing. The result is that the figure of the novelist comes under reflexive attack in these novels, but at the price of creating a fictional structure akin to traditional comedy, where the hero's bizarre and misguided modes of behaviour are in sharpest contrast to the implied securities of writer and reader. It follows that Johnson could no more escape the accusation that he is using a lie to root out a lie than could, say, Cervantes in *Don Quixote*.

Christie Malry is an urban guerrilla waging an isolated, solipsistic war with society. Trained as a bank-clerk, he adapts the method of double entry book-keeping to his own purposes; every debit entered by the outside world against his own name must be balanced by a corresponding credit. The idea of life as a vale of book-keeping, in which the account one can render of one's own life corresponds as exactly as possible to the balance that is written up in heaven, is one that is dear to the Puritan imagination. The difference between Christie and the 'Johnson' of the earlier novels is that the discharge of conscientious duty makes him not a novelist or a self-punishing solipsist but a Jacobean revenger. He reduces the debt that society owes him by expedients that range from pilfering stationery to blowing up a tax office and poisoning London's water supply. The result is an acrid little tale, written with tremendous verve and punctuated at invervals by the balance sheet which shows Christie's own reckoning of his 'current account'. Finally, with his debt-collection getting more megolomaniac and his methods of reckoning increasingly farcical Christie is struck down by cancer. The revenger has at last turned scapegoat, and before he dies he just has time to turn his dissatisfaction on the narrator: '"In any case," he said, almost to himself, not looking at me, "you shouldn't be bloody writing novels about it, you should be out there bloody doing something about it."' So we are back to the hideousness of cancer, and its unfairness—an unfairness which will not be wiped out when the doctors discover a cure. In *House Mother Normal* and *Christie Malry* Johnson has resolved the unfairness of cancer in the one (ineffectual and lying) way to which the novelist has access: by creating victims who for all their entertainment-value are finally so monstrous that cancer is what they deserve. The fiction of 'poetic justice' serves to bring home in a grim and farcical way the injustice—the lack of any balance-sheet—in life.

The creation of a scapegoat may be satisfying to the Puritan conscience, but what after all is it worth? Christie's sturdily anarchist values, his effortless success as a revenger and his capacity for uncomplicated erotic enjoyment may form the basis of the novel's comic exuberance, but the exuberance is superficial and behind it we sense the author's helpless and sardonic detachment. The idea that Christie ('Christ'?) deserves his fate does not compensate, except in the terms of his own dehumanised 'book-keeping' attitude to human relationships, for the pain and bewilderment that are present as surely as in *The Unfortunates* and *Trawl*. The book ends with the 'Final reckoning,' which is obviously a parody of the Last Judgement at which the entries in God's Book are to be revealed. (pp. 55-7)

Johnson was a conscious disciple of Beckett and Joyce, and his place in modern fiction may be best ascertained by invoking the category which Hugh Kenner has proposed for these novelists—that of the 'stoic comedians'. (p. 57)

Johnson's principle that 'Telling stories is telling lies' is what makes the space available for his novels a confined one. In many ways he is a 'stoic comedian', a minor fol-

lower of one of the major modernist schools. But there is one crucial difference between Johnson and the giants who figure (whether rightly or wrongly) in Hugh Kenner's pantheon. Johnson's literary attitude, unlike theirs, is that of a humanist. In Beckett's fiction the tedium and sterility of life is experienced by a succession of fictional personae, behind whom their creator lurks, noncommittal and unseen. Johnson is a confessional, not an impersonal artist, and the sterility and tedium are felt by him as a private burden or obsession. His first-person narrators are not distanced but transparently autobiographical, and the burden of inadequacy and guilt are his own. Against his occasional lugubriousness should be set the fact that he was able to be very direct about his reasons for writing:

> I think I write because I have something to say that I fail to say satisfactorily in conversation, in person. Then there are things like conceit, stubbornness, a desire to retaliate on those who have hurt me paralleled by a desire to repay those who have helped me, a need to try to create something which may live after me (which I take to be the detritus of the religious feeling), the sheer technical joy of forcing almost intractable words into patterns of meaning and form that are uniquely (for the moment at least) mine, a need to make people laugh with me in case they laugh at me, 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. And I write especially to exorcise, to remove from myself, from my mind, the burden [of] having to bear some pain, the hurt of some experience; in order that it may be over there, in a book, and not in here in my mind.
>
> (*Aren't You Rather Young . . .*)

This statement has an admirable simplicity, which not one of the great modernists would have managed. It may be modelled on Orwell's 'Why I write'. Perhaps so confidently discursive a tone speaks too much of the journalist-novelist, and throws into question Johnson's position as an experimental artist? Johnson himself would seem to have felt unhappy about it, since he went on to provide an alternative, more poetic but also much balder statement. The interest of this second statement lies in the last of the three motives which he lists for writing down an interior vision: 'so that I would not have to repeat it'. Even here, one would guess that the idea that he could exorcise his experiences, and avoid repeating them, may itself have come to seem a lie: one of life's unavoidable, and yet unjustifiable, fictions.

B. S. Johnson is like Bunyan's pilgrim, condemned always to go on writing in the hope of getting rid of the burden on his back. English seventeenth-century literature exemplifies two of the ways in which a writer may respond to the overwhelming presence of evil and death in the world. The first is the way of the Jacobean dramatists, with their farcical and morbid connoisseurship of evil, revenge and the suffering of the innocent; a way that is broached in *Christie Malry* and *House Mother Normal*. The second is the confessional impulse of the isolated soul searching for what is lasting among the ephemeral phantoms that assail him; this is what Johnson pursues in his middle-period novels. I would suggest that these are two sides of the lurid, isolated and self-punishing Puritan imagination. To see Johnson in these terms is to suggest that, for him, experimental writing was the authentic expression of a deep-rooted artistic individualism. Despite his anti-religious obsession Johnson succeeded in reviving the characteristic religious form which British individualist consciousness has taken. His Puritanism offered a standpoint from which—except in *Travelling People*—he could at all times attack merely fashionable or respectable values. A corresponding tendency to solipsism was most adequately countered in *House Mother Normal,* which exploits the forms of Puritan consciousness in such a way as to transcend and negate them. But if Johnson's reputation as a minor novelist continues to survive it will owe as much to his revival and exploration of the Puritan conscience as to his membership of the contemporary avant-garde. (pp. 57-9)

Patrick Parrinder, "Pilgrim's Progress: The Novels of B. S. Johnson," in Critical Quarterly *(© Manchester University Press 1977; this abridged version © Patrick Parrinder 1978), Summer, 1977, pp. 45-59.*

* * *

JONES, Gayl 1949-

Jones is an American novelist, poet, and short story writer. Both the form and subject matter of her work are drawn from the black oral tradition. Her writing is powerful, the rhythms of black jazz and blues giving cadence to her poetry and prose. (See also *CLC,* Vol. 6.)

This ["Eva's Man"] is the blues that lost control. This is the rhythmic, monotone lamentation of one woman, Eva Medina, who is nobody I have ever known.

You gather from the name that she, this woman, embodies bad news for men. (Cf. the Garden of Eden and also the stone consequences, so to speak, of Medusa.) You further surmise that this alleged Double Trouble, this demented black woman invented by a black woman writer, is supposed to renew or revise some pretty traditional ideas about the female. And, in case you miss the first two heavies, there's another signifying figure in the story, name of "Queen Bee": so much for the apparent aims of this experimental, gruesome narrative.

In addition, there is the very real, upsetting accomplishment of Gayl Jones in this, her second novel: sinister misinformation about women—about women, in general, about black women in particular, and especially about young black girls forced to deal with the sexual, molesting violations of their minds and bodies by their fathers, their mothers' boyfriends, their cousins and uncles. (p. 36)

Did Eva skip school, altogether? How was it when her mother bought new winter clothes for her, or didn't? Did her family never attend a wedding celebration or a christening? What happened about birthdays, in her house? In this short work of bedeviled compulsion, there is sex or there isn't. There is absolute loneliness by one's self or there is the elliptical loneliness of brutal, mute coupling; accidents of exploitation that bespeak no history, no promise.

Miss Jones delivers her story in a strictly controlled, circular form that is wrapped, around and around, with ambiva-