

- 11 Robbe-Grillet, *For a New Novel*, 155.
 12 B.S. Johnson, *Travelling People* (London: Constable, 1963), 12. All future quotations are given parenthetically.
 13 Robert S. Ryf, "B.S. Johnson and the Frontiers of Fiction," *Critique* 19, no. 1 (1977-78): 59.

B.S. JOHNSON'S INTRANSITIVE PERFORMANCE

A man taking pictures of a man taking pictures: there must be something in that. B.S. Johnson

La vérité de notre littérature n'est pas de l'ordre du faire, mais elle n'est déjà plus de l'ordre de la nature: elle est un masque qui se montre du doigt. Roland Barthes

Like Escher's hands forever drawing each other--representing at once the theme and the process--B.S. Johnson's novels always include a mirror image of the author writing the novel itself. The presence of the author in the text constitutes for Johnson the essential element of truth in fiction--"truth" and "fiction" being opposites in his particular use of the two words. In establishing the difference between novel and fiction, Johnson has written:

The novel is a form in the same sense that the sonnet is a form; within that form, one may write truth or fiction. I choose to write truth in the form of a novel.¹

As a writer of fiction, Johnson believed his primary commitment to be to the "truth," and this often led critics to interpret his novels as disguised autobiography. I believe his claim to be "true" and "authentic" should rather be interpreted as a challenge to the same claims advanced throughout the history of literature by those who "practice" literature as a reflection of life. In place of a repetitive imitation of reality, we find in his works a tendency to highlight the fictive construct accompanied by a continuous stylistic and linguistic invention. Only in such a perspective does Johnson resort to the well-known realistic conventions of plot, character, unity of discourse, authoritarian point of view, etc.--ready, however, to disclaim them all and confound the reader.

So while his novels tell stories recognizable as such--they tell of people getting involved with other people, of feelings and failures, of love and death--they also tell the story of the writer sitting at his desk toiling with words and conventions, with options and frustrations. Instead of conjuring up the illusionistic atmosphere of classic realism, Johnson programmatically renounces the transparency of the text either by breaking up its structure or interposing a contrasting voice, highly conscious of being at work with words.

Such awareness of "meta" levels of discourse is common to many novelists who have emerged in the last twenty years, and it expresses itself in a number of devices all ultimately reinforcing the fictional status of fiction. Self-conscious writing is probably the one stylistic

existence. In *Christie Malry* the author comes in at the outset to parody his role with short comments. For example, halfway through the first page, which opens "Christie Malry was a simple person," he adds: "I did tell you Christie was a simple person."¹⁰ The writer, having thus established his function, goes as far as calling one of the last chapters "In which Christie and I have it All Out; and which You may care to Miss Out," where he plays on a special understanding with the reader, while Christie naively questions the very existence of a reader. Another illustration of this frame-breaking strategy appears towards the end when Christie is about to die in a hospital. When the nurses ask the author, not knowing who he is, to leave the room, he then winks to the reader, who is obviously wiser than the nurses and knows, as they do not, that Christie cannot die without his author.¹¹

In *House Mother Normal* the authorial "I" goes almost unnoticed until the last page. Here, like a conjurer who at the end of his performance comes to the front of the stage to reveal the secret of his trick, he says:

And here you see, friend, I am about to step outside the convention, the framework of twenty-one pages per person. 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!)...¹²

There's no mistaking who is talking here: it is once more a projection of the author as the creator of the artifice, a self-parody.

In other words, it is as if the author puts on the mask of the writer to tell the reader the truth about the novel, which is almost by definition pretense, a pack of lies. Although this may sound banal or too simple a project, it becomes almost the compositional principle around which Johnson created all his texts. It is my opinion that only in his last novel, *See the Old Lady Decently*, did he succeed in creating a thoroughly original form by which he came out of this sort of self-repeating mode, a form in which the opposition truth/fiction appears to be resolved both at the aesthetic and the hermeneutic level.

Contrary to the already cited Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes, an autobiography which carries on the first page a self-denying inscription, "Tout ceci doit être considéré comme dit par un personnage de roman," *See the Old Lady Decently* is defined as a novel on the cover while large portions of it purport to be factual and truthful, being made up of historical and personal documents, quotations, letters, and photographs. The work is also a tribute to the memory of the author's mother--it evokes her youth, marriage, and death by cancer; nevertheless, it is as far from factual writing as it is from any other defined genre. The text appears to be fragmented on the page in small sections, some numbered, some identified by alphabetical letters or cryptic abbreviations. The fragments, once decoded and connected to others of the same series, compose the different layers of a "story" which can be read as variations around the theme and concept of "mother," the Great Mother, Homeland, the biological mother, the mother tongue, etc.

In one of his most self-revealing passages, Johnson alludes to a sort of assemblage technique as the only way to give shape to the irreducible difference between experience and a literary construction. To him poetry

is about the fragmentariness of life, too, attempts to reproduce the moment-to-moment fragmentariness of life, my life, and to echo it in technique, the fragmentariness, a collage made of the fragments of my own life, the poor odds and sods, the bric-à-brac, a thing composed of, then.¹³

The design behind *See the Old Lady* is in fact the attempt to reproduce the complexity of reality without betraying it by imposing a thoroughly falsifying pattern on the "enormity of life." In this connection, the figure chosen to open the book, the uroboros or the Great Round, and taken up in the last fragment, is charged with meaning and gives us a key to the understanding of the ciphered meaning (or one of the plurality of meanings) of this overdetermined text: "O let me open as though there were a beginning, though all there can be is the Great Round, uroboros, container of opposites, within which we war, laugh and are silent."¹⁴ The image of the uroboros, the snake that bites its tail, thus forming an eternal circle, is taken from Erich Neumann (*The Great Mother*): it stands for the original magmatic chaos which contains within itself the opposites, positive and negative elements, masculine and feminine together, and obviously symbolizes the totality of the psyche in which elements belonging to consciousness and hostile to it coexist inextricably. I believe that this image gives shape to the whole book and can be taken as a metaphor for language: language as a possibility, language as system and as performance. The text in fact develops a subtle analogy between the idea of mother and that of language.

If the text is about "Mother" in its wider references and implications, language is also a "Matrix," the generative power of literature. This is the encoded level of the text, never rendered explicit, but which includes every other level. The mixing of autobiographical with fictional and historical material only adds to the ambiguity of the fictional nature of every literary text. So while the facts about Great Britain, the Empire, and his mother's life constitute the historical antecedents to himself as a social being, the author is not merely reconstructing a context for himself, he is also developing a discourse upon narrativity. This becomes clearer by reading the several hints scattered throughout the text which allude to the efforts of "creation," the genesis of a work, a "masterpiece."

What seems to illustrate or sum up the multilayered quality of the language in this text is the concrete poetry included in it, in which words are made to represent graphically the object they mean. "Poem 5" gives shape to the word "breast" and is typographically composed in the form of a female breast broken in two by an unnatural gap which includes scattered letters n and c like disseminated cancer cells.

The short poem that concludes the novel represents the birth of Bryan, Johnson's first name, and the birth of the writing persona:

So: it began with the Great Round, and everything had to follow:
 from them
 from Em
 from
 embryo
 to embryon
 from Em,
 Me

Here the meaning proceeds as much from the literal level as from the game played with words and letters. Them (the parents) include Em, his mother's name; Em plus the embryo ramifies into embryon (mother plus child). The typographical dislodgement of this second column of words almost represents the slipping out of the child from the mother's womb only to be reunited once again in the word embryon.

This novel-as-epitaph for his mother effectively becomes the epitaph for the novel: a self-ironical celebration of the burial of the traditional text.

NOTES

- 1 B.S. Johnson, Aren't You Rather Young to Be Writing Your Memoirs? (London: Hutchinson, 1973), 14.
- 2 Heide Ziegler, "Postmodernism as Autobiographical Commentary," The Review of Contemporary Fiction (Fall 1983): 207.
- 3 Michel Foucault, Les mots et les choses (Paris: Gallimard, 1966), 313.
- 4 Wayne C. Booth, The Rhetoric of Fiction (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1968), 20.
- 5 B.S. Johnson, Trawl (London: Secker & Warburg, 1966), 7.
- 6 B.S. Johnson, The Unfortunates (London: Panther Books), 1969.
- 7 B.S. Johnson, Albert Angelo (London: Constable, 1964), 167.
- 8 Michel Butor, Répertoire (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1960).
- 9 Roland Barthes, Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes (London: Macmillan, 1977), 37.
- 10 B.S. Johnson, Christie Malry's Own Double-Entry (London: Collins, 1973), 11.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 180.
- 12 B.S. Johnson, House Mother Normal (London: Collins, 1971), 203-4.
- 13 Johnson, Albert Angelo, 169.
- 14 B.S. Johnson, See the Old Lady Decently (New York: Viking Press, 1975), 17.

NO FUTURE

1. "You have written books. They have delivered you unto death, the other, the frightful." Edmond Jabès
2. B.S. Johnson killed himself. A suicide.
3. Of course, all comment is superfluous except to note that Johnson did avail himself of the only true free act all of us are capable of.
4. Edward Dahlberg's saying: "It is abnormal not to think of suicide at least once a day."
5. I admire Johnson for his end. Finally to be in control, a little, and not a victim, not to disappear and reappear years later in the obituary columns: "I thought he had died years ago..."
6. Back in February 1984 I gave in two manuscripts that Alice Quinn, an editor at Alfred A. Knopf, had asked to see. In October 1984, eight months later, I went to see Alice at her office and asked if she had read the manuscripts. "No, my stepmother died last week. I was very close to her." The manuscripts were returned two weeks later.
7. Johnson, at least, saw much of his work into print. He went through four publishers in six novels and even more if we throw in the collections of stories, poetry. If he were alive today he would be unpublished. I'd bet on it.
8. All of his work is out of print in the United States and two of his novels are back in print, temporarily, in England. Johnson's work has