

LETTERS

and extremely topical subject (vide recent events in the Irish Dáil, involving abuse by a priest), I feel I must defend myself against the implied charges of violence and vulgarity.

I sincerely hope that we may soon have a chance to renew our acquaintance, so that you can establish for yourself my impeccable credentials as a native of the Sceptred Isle.

I remain, dear Sir, yours resolutely and quintessentially English,

Wendy Perriam
Surbiton, Surrey

THOUGHTLESS

Dear Sir,

Re: Your column in the October issue (which has only just reached me today, but that's another matter). I generally enjoy and agree with all your ravings, including those against my fellow Americans, as the politicians say.

But I'm still trying to figure out what the connection is between the

author who was fined for kissing a woman on the street, and the 'visually challenged' legal secretary who was quite justly awarded large damages when she won her sexual harassment suit. The two instances are completely unrelated. The men involved acted from entirely divergent motives. From your perspective it obviously appears ridiculous that any woman should receive damages because her employer groped her. Perhaps you don't realise that the outrageous arrogance of the American Lawyer (as a species) can be checked in no other way than by a blow to the pocketbook. In any event, the comparison, and the gratuitous comment about Ms Weeks' appearance make you come across as extraordinarily foolish and thoughtless. Rather a shock coming from you.

Sincerely,
Nancy Kay Shapiro,
New York

WRITERS' PASSIONS

Dear Sir,

Having just returned from a period of enforced absence (thanks to the Inland Revenue) in Equatorial Guinea, I chanced upon your December issue. I certainly enjoyed the 'Work in Progress' section: that Michael Bywater certainly sounds like an odd one — what a shrewd move by his publishers to send him off to the Australian outback in a single-engined aeroplane. Before I slip out of the country again, I would like to ask you to commission more essays from authors on their passions. In Equatorial Guinea, most taxi drivers claim to be writers or drummers. Do any writers here hanker for another profession, taxi-driving for instance?

Yours sincerely,
R P Mungo,
Notting Hill, London

RESURRECTION

IN A RECENT *Times Literary Supplement* interview, V S Naipaul makes the point that forms in literature can become redundant. He cites the travel book written by Chekhov after his journey to the prison island of Sakhalin. It is a book of facts and figures and tables, as was expected of travel writers at the time, but the real book is buried in the footnotes — the form was simply inappropriate for the material. 'We lost a book because the writer didn't rethink the form,' says Naipaul. 'We can be burdened by dead forms.' He goes on to deride the artificiality of most modern literary novel writing as '...very theatrical, very operatic, with snatches of dialogue between paragraphs of description or dawdle...It has very little relation to reality. People don't talk like that or see like that. It's as stylised as eighteenth-century rhyming verse.' The true novelists of today, he says, are people like Jeffrey Archer and Ken Follett, the writers of blockbusters, providing novelties for consumption on the underground.

In the enduring debate about the decline of the English novel these sentiments are not new. Thirty years ago one

COLIN WILES

B S JOHNSON

novelist above all others preoccupied himself with the state of the novel and its future prosperity. B S Johnson is rarely heard of today, but in the Sixties he was a hugely controversial figure. His experimental novels won a clutch of prizes and he was praised by, among others, Samuel Beckett and Anthony

Burgess. Auberon Waugh even suggested that he deserved the Nobel prize. Yet today, Johnson is a pathetically isolated figure, consigned to a passing mention in textbooks on modern literature. His novels have been out of print for more than ten years and are virtually unobtainable, although they sell for huge amounts in the second-hand market.

Bryan Stanley Johnson was born in 1933 in Hammersmith, the son of working-class parents. He left school at sixteen and worked as an accounts clerk in a number of offices before going to study English at King's College, London, at the late age of twenty-three. He worked as a supply teacher and a sports reporter on the *Observer* before publishing his first novel, *Travelling People*,

to critical acclaim in 1963. He lived in London for most of his life and many of his novels contain wonderful descriptions of the city and its people.

In the brief, prolific decade before his violent suicide in 1973 he produced seven novels, two volumes of poetry, six plays and several anthologies and wrote or directed half a dozen films and documentaries. It was a decade of triumph and disaster, for despite the early plaudits, towards its end he was forced by poverty to consider a return to supply teaching.

Johnson's notoriety rested upon two assertions. Firstly, like Naipaul, he believed that literary forms wear out. In the nineteenth century, the novel had replaced the long narrative poem as the medium for storytelling. In the twentieth century, said Johnson, the novel's traditional storytelling role had been usurped by television and the cinema. The novelist therefore had to find material other than mere stories to enclose within the novel form. Secondly, he believed that 'telling stories is telling lies and I am not interested in telling lies in my novels...how can you convey truth in a vehicle of fiction?' As a result, many of his books are auto-biographical in their content, written in a variety of styles (interior monologue, film script, journal) and contain a range of devices and typographical tricks that are designed to expose the hidden workings of the novel form, to overturn the reader's suspension of disbelief. Thus, he launches into authorial dialogue with his characters (*Christie Malry's Own Double Entry*), introduces holes into pages to allow his readers to see a forthcoming event (*Albert Angelo*), prints grey and black pages to signify the heart attack and death of a character (*Travelling People*), splits pages into columns of different type to represent speech and thought (*Albert Angelo*), and presents a series of simultaneous narratives seen from the perspective of nine different characters (*House Mother Normal*). Not surprisingly, Johnson was a great fan of Joyce ('the Einstein of the novel') and Beckett, with whom he corresponded.

It is Johnson's fourth novel, *The Unfortunates*, which seems to me to encapsulate both his genius and his tragedy. Published in 1969, the novel is the infamous book in a box, consisting of twenty-seven unbound pamphlets and single sheets held together by a wrapper and set within a laminated hinged box. There are sections labelled 'First' and 'Last' but the remaining twenty-five pieces are designed to be read in any order. Johnson had worked briefly as a football reporter on the *Observer* and the novel describes a trip to a Midlands town to report on a football match. The author realises that it is the home town of an academic friend who has died of cancer (the cover shows a blown-up photograph of some cancer cells) and the novel describes the journey to and from the game and the game itself, interspersed with long sections of reminiscence about his friend and their often troubled relationship. Pasted to the bottom of the box is the

author's actual match report. The random order of the material supposedly evokes the random workings of the mind as it trawls between the past and the present during the course of the afternoon. 'In this way,' said Johnson, 'the whole novel reflected the randomness of the material: it was itself a physical tangible metaphor for randomness and the nature of cancer...This randomness was directly in conflict with the technological fact of the bound book: for the bound book imposes an order...on the material.'

In its conception the novel is a failure and it fails for this simple reason: the mind may work randomly, in several directions at once, but it is constrained by the present, it progresses along a linear path, and therefore the workings of the mind can be set down on the page, in book form. Yet despite its technical defects the novel contains some brilliantly honest pieces of writing and is a rare insight into Sixties provincial life. It may be a failure but it is a glorious failure. It is almost as if the form gets in the way of the material. The book is, however, a valuable and interesting artefact in its own right (and will, incidentally, cost you up to £150 from a book dealer).

Sadly, Johnson's various devices and typographical fireworks, which are the subject of most critical scrutiny, tend to obscure the humour and vitality of his writing. His books are immensely readable, and usually follow a strong narrative line, almost in defiance of his own doctrinaire attitudes. *Christie Malry's Own Double Entry*, for example, which was so heavily praised by Auberon Waugh on its publication, is a wonderful black comedy with an eponymous hero who decides to live his life according to the principles of double-entry book-keeping: for every rebuff he seeks retribution with interest. But Christie's methods are soon spiralling out of control: because 'socialism is not given a chance', he pours cyanide into Barn Elms reservoir, causing the deaths of 20,479 innocent West Londoners, at which point Johnson intervenes to 'tell his creation that he has cancer and not much longer to live. "Christie," I warned him, "it does not seem to me possible to take this novel much further. I'm sorry." "Don't be sorry," said Christie. "Who wants long novels anyway?"'

Ironically, many of his experiments have since been absorbed into the mainstream. Who can ever forget Peter Ackroyd's authorial dialogues with Dickens in his recent biography? Or Julian Barnes's inclusion of scenes from his own domestic life in *A History of the World...?* Or David Lodge's *Changing Places*, with its changes of style for each chapter? Johnson was doing all this and more twenty to thirty years ago in his obsessive excursions into the hinterland of the novel. Perhaps Johnson's dogmatic approach and his attempts to subvert the traditional novel may have been too much for the essentially conservative and timid literary Establishment which prevailed at the time. What is required is a reissue of some of his novels so that he can be made available to

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a wider audience.

I fear it will not happen. Over the past five years I have written to a number of publishers to try to persuade them to reprint his work. The answer is always the same: he is not a commercial proposition. This despite the fact that

his books have been published more recently in the USA and Germany with some success. Meanwhile, our bookshops will continue to bulge with novels written by authors who come nowhere near to Johnson in wit, intelligence and energy.

SILENCED VOICES

KOIGI WA WAMWERE, one of Kenya's best-known writers, has never been one to mince his words, as the following extract from his apologia, *Conscience on Trial*, demonstrates:

'Kenya is in Africa. The same Africa that now leads the world in the number of refugees (five million out of the world's ten million). And why? Because of its sacrificing of democracy and human life on the altar of private property. Because of its cruel promotion of poverty, police rule, corruption, assassinations, detentions without trial. Because of brutality and misery among its downtrodden masses. Because of its wholesale auctioning of African labour and natural wealth to multinational companies.

'All this must be resisted, through free public debate, a free press, parliaments, trade unions, and people's governments. This is the challenge for Africa today. Nothing matters more than procuring democracy for the people. Not even the much vaunted development can help, for development really amounts to foreign exploitation and *makombo yamnyapara* — the crumbs of the overseer.'

'People must be free to debate and find their own solutions to their problems. Only then can they be truly free.'

It is hardly surprising that so outspoken a writer should have found himself frequently in trouble. The Kenyan government has tried (and failed) to silence him by arresting him on five occasions. Today he is in prison once again, and this time he is on trial for his life.

Koigi was brought up in poverty, in what he later described as a 'shack' in a forest village called Rugongo, near the town of Nakuru (about 120 miles north-west of Nairobi), and he learnt Mau Mau freedom songs at his grandmother's knee. He was still a schoolboy when Kenya gained its independence from Britain in 1963. Koigi recalls in a later memoir that despite the optimism that the end of colonialism briefly inspired, nothing changed materially: he still went about shoeless until he started high school.

On graduating from high school, he went to Cornell University in the US, where he studied tourism and hotel management. Here, he claims, his political philosophy first evolved: 'I was particularly impressed by the struggle of black people in the US to acquire civil rights. I discovered

SIOBHAN DOWD

KOIGI WA WAMWERE

my own name and my pride as an African.'

On returning to Kenya, he worked as a freelance journalist for the now defunct *Sunday Post*. His articles

exposing the miserable working conditions of forest workers, the problems caused by tribalism, and corruption among government officials and land-buying companies soon brought the wrath of those in power. He was detained from August 1975 to December 1978, and wrote his first novel, *A Woman Reborn*, on toilet paper in Kamiti Maximum Security Prison. In 1981, Koigi successfully stood for parliament, becoming an MP for the northern suburbs of his home town, Nakuru. In 1982 he was back in prison again, this time until December 1984.

In 1986, prompted by fear of a third arrest, he fled the country and was granted political asylum in Norway. In 1990, he mysteriously resurfaced in a police cell in Kenya. The newspapers were rife with gossip as to how he had got there. Some suggested the Kenyan and Norwegian governments had done a deal. Koigi himself claimed to have been abducted by Kenyan forces while in Uganda, chloroformed, and driven across the border. The government claimed he had been caught red-handed smuggling arms into the country. In January 1993, the government, unable to support its claim, dropped all charges against him, released him, but kept him under surveillance.

His fourth arrest occurred the following September. Again he was accused of being in possession of arms and again he denied it. He was released on bail, only to be quickly rearrested in November 1993 at his lawyer's office.

This time the police went a step further: in addition to being accused of possessing arms, he was alleged to have attempted robbery, with violence, of a police station — charges which carry the death penalty. His brother and two others were similarly accused. Once more, Koigi's peers were aghast. 'Forceful and intrepid he may be,' said one fellow writer. 'But a bank robber he is not.'

Koigi's trial opened on 12 April 1994 and still continues. Police claimed that the bodies of two policemen were found at the scene of the crime. The defence argued that all the evidence demonstrated that the two had not been killed *in situ*, but had been brought there later in a vain effort to cast further guilt on the accused.