

The man inside the box

by HUGH HEBERT

THAT novelist feller, B. S. Johnson, poked his avant gardesman's helmet over the parapet again a week or so ago, and a fine clobbering he got in the press. Philosopher prickwits and pot-shot parodists were up and at him, dailies dunned him, weeklies whacked him, Sundays scanned him carefully before deciding just where to put their gentlemanly boots in. Ah, it was good to know the critics still knew what a novel should be, and that's not a boxful of unbound chapters and single sheets like any thy-end-is-nigh prophet might slip you on a street corner.

"The Unfortunates" is Johnson's fourth novel, and the second of his two-book contract with Secker and Warburg. He delivered it to them in the autumn of 1967. "I had known then," he says, "what the critics' reactions would be, but I'd forgotten—it took 17 months for the book to come out—so it did come as a shock. The hostility: it did upset me for a couple of days." It's about Johnson going to report a football match in Nottingham, and remembering there in the course of that one day his relationship with Tony, his best friend, and the course of Tony's long-suffering illness and death.

He tried to write it straight at first, as a novel to be read in the fixed order that a binding imposes. But after 20 pages or so, he knew he couldn't do this. He wrote then all the memories of Tony and their past, then the bits about the present, being in the city again, reporting of the soccer match, all in sections; then cut them together, as a film editor might into what are now parts of the book as printed.

"The main technical problem with this book, this material, was its randomness," he wrote in the script of the film he made for BBC-2's "Release." . . . the past and the present interact in a completely random manner, without chronology. This is the way the mind works, my mind anyway . . . and I wanted the book to be as near as possible a transcription or version of how the mind worked during the eight hours of this particular day." So the reader shuffles the order of the parts. "In this way the whole novel reflects the randomness of the material, is a physical metaphor for randomness, if you like."

Johnson is 36, a large man, fat by his own claim in several novels. The round face seems to rest straight on the massive round shoulders as he talks in the work-room of his flat overlooking a quiet square near the Angel. "It's being judged at the wrong level—as though it were the thing intended to supersede the book—instead of just a better method of doing one novel, of solving one particular technical problem."

"It's not a perfect solution, but it's a better solution than a conventional book would be. . . . If I had the same problem again, I hope I'd have the courage to do it again." He admits that if he had to make a decision about some unconventional way out of some other technical tangle at this moment, with his ears still ringing from the hostile reviews, he might hesitate. But he's sure this will soon pass.

He loves praise and hates blame, he says, as much as anyone else yet "nothing a reviewer has ever said has ever made me angry differently." Which sounds, and is, arrogant: it's the arrogance without which no experimental writer can go on working. And it's fair to say



B. S. Johnson—picture by Eric Wadsworth

that the praise which his earlier novels collected—"Trawl" won him a Somerset Maugham award—didn't make him write any differently either. What he misses now is not so much the praise as any critical attempt to understand what he is trying to do.

He feels some envy for a literary climate that enables a writer like Luis Glédo to be taken seriously in France. "He's talking about the human condition on every page—and you could just see the English reviewers reaching for words like 'pretentious' if it had been written by an Englishman."

Yet there's no sign that the critics do not take Johnson's work seriously. Almost all the papers gave "The Unfortunates" either top billing in a mixed bag of reviews, or treated it separately from the rest of the week's novels. (Chance operates here: if a book by a more famous name had come out in the same week, those who disliked Johnson's novel might have dismissed it more hurtfully, but more briefly.) Maybe, in fact, they take the technical formal element of such books too seriously.

Many critics of Johnson's book, for instance, hardly bothered to answer the question "Does it work?" Some found fallacies in the author's reasons for presenting his material in this way. Some implied that a modest little novel belonged in a modest little binding with a modest little jacket. Or, conversely, that it was a bit of a literary swindle to invent a new way of presenting a novel, and then to present something that wasn't at least "Son of Ulysses." Most were far more concerned to show how and why the method was wrong in principle than to establish whether it mattered in this practical instance.

And, of course, it doesn't matter. Music critics don't waste space on the propriety of a particular method of achieving aleatory effects—they concentrate on whether they are effective. Art critics have long given up wondering whether collage or the use of spray guns or random dribbles of paint disqualifies; they look, and like, or lump. Critics of every art except the novel have learned to live with, as in form: not merely random conjunctions of notes, but sounds that come out of tapes; not merely different ways of presenting shape and colour on canvas, but "paintings" that are mock-ups of rooms, or that aspire to the state of sculpture.

Literary criticism is stuck with the limitations of its subject. The mainstream formal tradition of the novel has been changed, a little, only by Proust and Joyce in this century. Its format has never changed at all, unless you count paper covers. And a very convenient format it is: to produce, to store, to market, to buy or borrow, to use. It does everything except surprise, satisfies every need of the writer, except the need for a new dimension. And that is a need that every other art form has felt, and somehow managed to supply, in the past few years. B. S. Johnson, in trying to solve his own particular technical problem, may have suggested how the novel can find a new dimension—against his intentions, and perhaps against his best interests.

Whether "The Unfortunates" is good or bad is not my concern. This is not another review of it. But this novel is a very good example of the way in which a writer, in answering purely technical questions as truthfully as he knows how,

can open a different kind of truth to his reader.

The randomness as a metaphor for the way the mind operates, and as a way of allowing the reader to come to the actual words in an order that is special to that reader—all this is acceptable, but not important. What is important is that the format of the novel can communicate something quite separate from the words contained in it.

Opening "The Unfortunates" is rather like opening a box of old letters—the simile is misleading, but the sense of anticipation, of discovery, almost of prying, has more in common with that than with opening a book. And this novel in this format communicates, as you shuffle through, not even reading, a strong sense of its vulnerability. A single sheet here, a little batch of 10 pages like a pamphlet there. The sort of thing you might absent-mindedly screw up and put in your pocket. In spite of its stout cardboard box, this is as near the disposable book, the "Kleenex" novel, as we have yet come. It is not imposing, does not, as a bound volume does, imply a bid for literary immortality. It is the record of Johnson's very personal and painful yesterday, is the reader's here and now, and tomorrow may be waste pulp (Pseud's Corner please note). And whether Johnson intended it or not, all this does add a dimension to this particular story of a lost friend, a long dying, the making of a report about a bad soccer match for a paper that will appear on Sunday and wrap Molloy the day after.

"I never think of 'the reader,'" says Johnson, "because there is never any evidence that any reader exists. The only feedback is from friends, agents, publishers, reviewers. I write for myself." Cat.