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Subversive Form, Provocative Content and Truth at All Costs: Liberature of B. S. Johnson

Abstract: The purpose of this article is to approach extreme and subversive experience in B. S. Johnson's novels. Johnson's fictions and his critical writings raise the problem of the condition of contemporary literature and its claims to represent the truth about reality and human existence in the era of electronic media. His novels like *The Unfortunates* can be viewed as classic examples of a movement known as liberature: openly defiant and subversive literature which treats formal aspects of a literary work as at least equally important as the content. Experimental and subversive techniques used by Johnson in his novels are aimed at compromising the traditional narrative as incompatible and falsifying means of giving an objective truth. According to Johnson, the function of telling fictional stories has been taken over by cinema. Storytelling in a traditional understanding is lie-telling. The novel, instead of competing with cinema, should rather turn to its appropriate task: to tell about subjective experiences and mental conditions that fall outside attempts of cinematic representations. Traditional literary forms fail to represent a credible image of a flowing, unstable reality. Thus, the most urgent task for a writer is to work out new forms and techniques that would enable him or her to create literature which could claim the right to give a genuine representation of life and reality. This study aims to analyze experimental and subversive aspects of Johnson's novels as well as techniques used by him to create liberature.

Several months before his death in November 1973, Bryan Stanley Johnson, or B. S. Johnson, under which name he is most widely recognized, wrote his famous introduction to the collection of short stories *Aren't You Rather Young to be Writing Your Memoirs?* The introduction opened with the following words:

It is a fact of crucial significance in the history of the novel this century that James Joyce opened the first cinema in Dublin in 1909. Joyce saw very early on that film must usurp some of the prerogatives which until then had belonged almost exclusively to the novelist. Film could tell a story more directly, in less time and with more concrete detail than a novel; certain aspects of character could be more easily delineated and kept constantly before the audience (for example, physical characteristics like a limp, a scar, particular ugliness or beauty); no novelist's description of a battle squadron at sea in a gale could really hope to compete with that in a well-shot film; and why should anyone who simply wanted to be told a story spend all his spare time for a week or weeks reading a book when he could experience the same thing in a version in some ways superior at his local cinema in only one evening? (Introduction)

Johnson considered the development of cinematography as a watershed and a turning point in the history of literature in the twentieth century. Reflecting upon the role and importance of literature, he expressed his belief that literature, in order to survive, needs to concentrate on those things that it can still do best, that is, the precise use of language, exploitation of the technological fact of the book and the explication of thought (Introduction). Johnson wrote:

Film is an excellent medium for showing things, but it is very poor at taking an audience inside characters' minds, at telling it what people are thinking. . . . In some ways the history of the novel in the twentieth century has seen large areas of the old territory of the novelist increasingly taken over by other media, until the only thing the novelist can with any certainty call exclusively his own is the inside of his own skull: and that is what he should be exploring, rather than anachronistically fighting a battle he is bound to lose. (Introduction)

These words were not uttered in vain. Johnson's whole literary career is a tireless realization of his theoretical assumptions which can be summarized in a few words: an overwhelming desire to make literature tell the truth about life and reality, a pursuit of techniques and forms that are most suited and adequate to convey the truth – which also meant inventing numerous subversive techniques. His literary credo can best be summarized in his own words:

I am not interested in telling lies in my own novels. A useful distinction between literature and other writing for me is that the former teaches one something true about life: and how can you convey truth in a vehicle of fiction? The two terms, truth and fiction, are opposites, and it must logically be impossible. (Introduction)

Johnson's firm belief was that traditional literary forms became exhausted, clapped out so that no matter how good the writers who now attempt to follow them are, they "cannot be made to work for our time" because such writing must inevitably be "anachronistic, invalid, irrelevant, and perverse" (Introduction). His beliefs and theoretical assumptions urged him to pursue new ways and solutions to write about life and personal experience (for the two were the same for him). His literary experiments which did not find understanding and appreciation in the decade of his writing career have been heartily welcomed by readers and literary critics in recent years and have been winning more and more supporters.

Some critics place Johnson among a literary movement called *liberature*. What is *liberature*? It would be useful to look swiftly at the definition provided by Zenon Fajfer, a Polish avant-garde artist, poet and translator, one of the founders of the movement. In Fajfer's words, *liberature* means total literature – that is, literature for and in which text and space of the book as a physical object are equally important. Thus a book no longer incorporates literary work: it becomes one itself (Bazarnik and Fajfer).

Literature defined in such terms seems to have been present in culture for at least over a century. From Mallarmé or even Sterne, to Russian futurists, Joyce and Beckett, and avant-garde fiction by writers such as Aglaya Veteranniy, literary-like writings are present in literary history, although the movement has grown in strength during recent decades. B. S. Johnson is also one of the most prominent figures who can be classified in the movement. During the literary career spanning a mere ten years (brought to a violent and unexpected end by his suicide), Johnson managed to write over a dozen works covering all literary genres: dramas, screenplays, plays for the radio, poems, short stories and novels.

In this article, I would like to concentrate on his prose writings, for prose is supposed to be the most successful field of his literary experiments. Johnson himself, by trial and error, turned to the novel as the most suitable form in which to express what he wished to express. He rejected stage-drama as having too many limitations, verse as being unacceptable at that time on the scale he wished to attempt, radio and television as placing too many intermediaries between the writer and the audience (Introduction). This led him to the “resultant choice of the novel as the form possessing fewest limitations, and closest contact with the greatest audience” (Introduction).

Johnson’s first novel, *Travelling People*, contains many experiments, but they are not as radical as those in his later works: the novel is rather a prelude to what followed next. Yet it is an important piece of work that introduces many of the ideas that will be developed and mastered in Johnson’s later novels. There are certain characteristics, however, that will remain unchanged or be only slightly altered in his later works. One of them is the idea of writing about his own experience. The main character is called Henry Henry and he resembles the author at that time. Like his hero, Johnson could say: “I’ve just finished a university course, and I want very much to relax after the strain of finals” (qtd. in Coe 14). The novel depicts the adventures of Henry, his summer work at an exclusive country club and a series of personal and romantic affairs. The book closes with an image of Henry, who, sitting in a working-class transport café, concludes that “after a whole summer spent watching the idle rich people at play in supposedly Edenic surroundings, he would rather be sitting down to an indifferent meal in a company of lorry drivers” (qtd. in Coe 15).

Those slight marks of dissatisfaction with the social norms and arrangements of the Welfare State will also echo in Johnson’s later novels. *Travelling People* opens with a passage that – in Johnson’s words – summed up much of his thinking on the novel at that point:

Seated comfortably in a wood and wickerwork chair of eighteenth-century Chinese manufacture, I began seriously to meditate upon the form of my allegedly full-time literary sublimations. . . . After comparatively little consideration, I decided that one style for one novel was a convention that I resented most strongly: it was perhaps comparable to eating a

meal in which each course had been cooked in the same manner. The style of each chapter should spring naturally from its subject matter. Furthermore, I meditated, at ease in far eastern luxury, Dr. Johnson's remarks about each member of an audience always being aware that he is in a theatre could with complete relevance be applied also to the novel reader, who surely always knows that he is reading a book and not, for instance, taking part in a punitive raid on the curiously-shaped inhabitants of another planet. From this I concluded that it was not only permissible to expose the mechanism of a novel, but by so doing I should come nearer to reality and truth: adapting to refute, in fact, the ancients: *Artis est monstrare artem*. Pursuing this thought, I realised that it would be desirable to have interludes between my chapters in which I could stand back, so to speak, from my novel, and talk about it with the reader, or with those parts of myself which might hold differing opinions, if necessary; and in which technical questions could be considered, and quotations from other writers included, where relevant, without any question of destroying the reader's suspension of disbelief, since such suspension was not to be attempted. (qtd. in Introduction)

Indeed, *Travelling People* employs eight separate styles or conventions for nine chapters; these styles include an interior monologue, a letter, extracts from a journal and a film script (Johnson, Introduction). The first and last chapters share one style designed to give the book cyclical unity within the motif announced by its title and epigraph (Johnsons, Introduction). As Johnson admits, the passage quoted above was deliberately a pastiche of eighteenth-century English (Introduction). What he does not mention is that it also refers directly to one of Samuel Beckett's earliest novels, *Murphy*. A discerning reader will link the above passage with the opening sentences of Beckett's first novel: there we have Murphy sitting naked in his rocking chair of undressed teak and contemplating the dualistic nature of mind and body. Beckett was the writer Johnson admired the most, sharing and following many of Beckett's ideas throughout his literary career.

As for the reference to eighteenth-century literature, Johnson openly acknowledges his debt to Sterne, particularly the black pages of *Tristram Shandy* (Introduction). He extended the device beyond Sterne's use of it to indicate a character's death (Introduction). In the section of *Travelling People* which contains the interior monologue of an old man prone to heart attacks, Johnson used random-pattern grey to indicate unconscious after a heart attack, a regular-pattern grey to indicate sleep or recuperative unconsciousness, and subsequently black when he dies (Johnson, Introduction). As Jonathan Coe reports, Johnson would later sum up his first novel as a "disaster" and did not allow it to be reprinted. He dismissed *Travelling People* as a novel that mingled fiction with autobiography in a way he did not approve of (Coe 15).

Albert Angelo, the second novel by Johnson, is one that develops certain motifs and problems indicated in *Travelling People*, and introduces new ones that will recur in his later prose works. It draws on Johnson's own experience and its hero is merely the author in disguise, whose real experiences as a supply

teacher are only thinly veiled. *Albert Angelo* is prefaced with an extract from Samuel Beckett's novel *The Unnamable*:

When I think, that is to say, no, let it stand, when, I think of the time I've wasted with these bran-dips, beginning with Murphy, who wasn't even the first, when I had me, on the premises, within easy reach, tottering under my own skin and bones, real ones, rotting with solitude and neglect. . . . I'm not at home to anything, my doors are shot against them, perhaps that's how I'll find silence and peace at last, by opening my doors and letting myself be devoured, they'll stop howling, they'll start eating, the maws not howling. Open up, open up, you'll be all right, you'll see. (273)

These words became Johnson's rule of thumb as a novelist. He admitted:

I really discovered what I should be doing with *Albert Angelo* (1964) where I broke through the English disease of the objective correlative to speak truth directly if solipsistically in the novel form, and heard my own small voice. (Introduction)

This is a novel which expresses Johnson's dissatisfaction with traditional novelistic conventions, and the dissatisfaction is conveyed by a fragmentary and episodic narrative. The main character, Albert – or Albie, as he is called by his students – is an unfulfilled frustrated architect who earns his living by teaching in London schools. Teaching is a highly unsatisfactory and frustrating occupation for Albert, who considers architecture to be his true vocation. Architecture and architectonic descriptions evoke associations with the process of writing. Both constructing a building and constructing a literary work require the same amount of ingenuity, precision, talent and patience. We see Albert at his drawing board when he attempts to design buildings. We see him in the classroom teaching and, after hours, visiting night cafes with his friend Terry. The more or less conventional narrative proceeds for most of the novel until an unexpected authorial intervention occurs. All of a sudden, we are told: "OH, FUCK ALL THIS LYING!" (*Albert Angelo* 163), and what then follows is a section titled "Disintegration." The author rejects the suspension of disbelief and speaks in his own voice:

– Fuck all this lying look what im really trying to write about is writing not all this stuff about architecture trying to say something about writing about my writing im my hero though what a useless appellation my first character then im trying to say something about me through him albert an architect when whats the point in covering up covering up covering over pretending pretending I can say anything through him that is anything that I would be interested in saying. (167)

At the end of the section, the author concludes by saying to the reader: "Go elsewhere for their lives. Life is not like that, is just not like that" (167). If life is not like that, there is no point in pretending. There is no point either in writing

literature that is so untruthful. Yet, soon afterwards Johnson adds: “But even I (even I!) would not leave such a mess, such a mess, so many loose ends” (167). As a result, what follows is the last and shortest section titled “Coda,” in which the author returns to fiction or at least to something we can call a semi-fiction: we again meet Albert and witness his end – he is thrown by his pupils into the local canal where he drowns.

The novel contains a set of avant-garde and subversive narrative techniques. One of the most interesting issues raised by the book is the editorial challenge of conveying simultaneously thoughts of a teacher and those of his pupils (Introduction). Johnson resolves the problem by putting the teacher’s thoughts on the right-hand side of the page in italics and his and his pupils’ speech on the left in roman, so that, though the reader obviously cannot read both at once, when he has read both he will have seen that they are simultaneous and have enacted such simultaneity for himself (Introduction). Another famous device employed by Johnson in the novel is cutting out a section in a page through which future events are revealed to the reader even before he or she reaches the following pages.

Johnson departs from fictionalizing for good in his next novel, *Trawl*. As Jonathan Coe reports, Johnson’s publisher at the time considered it to be not a novel but an autobiography. Johnson, however, disagreed, saying: “It is a novel, I insisted and can prove; what it is not is fiction” (qtd. in Coe 19). There is no plot in the novel, only an interior monologue of the main character, who is the author himself. Nor are there any invented characters, although many of them still appear under changed names. The book describes a three-week voyage Johnson undertook on a fishing trawler in the autumn of 1963. The monologue consists of descriptions and reflections on the journey interspersed with numerous reminiscences from the past, flashbacks recalling incidents from Johnson’s past, many of them romantic or sexual, most of them unsatisfactory and unhappy (Coe 19). The author-narrator recalls the episode of his evacuation during the Second World War, an event that exerted influence on the young boy he was at that time. Breaks in the mind’s workings are symbolized by spaces punctuated by dots at decimal point level. The device employed here will reappear in his later novels, yet the spaces will become empty, without any dots. The rhythms of the language of *Trawl* attempted to parallel those of the sea, and much use was made of the trawl itself as a metaphor for the way the subconscious mind may appear to work (Introduction).

The novel begins with words that – again – refer directly to the prose of Beckett:

I . . always with I . . one starts from . . one and I share the same character . . are one one
always starts with I . . one alone sole single (Trawl 7)

These words as well as the whole novel express Johnson's firm belief that there is no escape from subjectivity and every narration is always subjective. Thus the only possible truth flowing from direct experience is that concerning the narrator's own psychical condition. Consequently, if literature is to convey any truth about human experience, it has to distance itself from telling fictional stories and concentrate on the experience and feelings of the author.

In the introduction to *Aren't You Rather Young to be Writing Memoirs*, Johnson referred once more to Beckett, quoting his famous words:

What I am saying does not mean that there will henceforth be no form in art. It only means that there will be new form, and that this form will be of such a type that it admits the chaos, and does not try to say that the chaos is really something else. The forms and the chaos remain separate. . . . to find a form that accommodates the mess, that is the task of the artist now. (qtd. in Introduction)

He supplemented Beckett's words with a comment: "Whether or not it can be demonstrated that all is chaos, certainly all is change: the very process of life itself is growth and decay at an enormous variety of rates" (Introduction).

Another attempt made by Johnson to achieve this objective was *The Unfortunates*. This is, unarguably, the most subversive and experimental novel of Johnson, a major stepping stone in the evolution of thinking about the novel form in the twentieth century. Johnson's fourth and, perhaps, most famous and recognizable novel, *The Unfortunates* seems to be the most faithful and honest embodiment of his theoretical assumptions. It consists of 27 sections not bound together but put loosely in a small box. There is no fixed order in which they are meant to be read; they are rather to be shuffled and read in whichever random order the reader happens to take them.

The randomness of the event created in this way corresponds to the randomness and chaos of life. Johnson says:

Life does not tell stories. Life is chaotic, fluid, random; it leaves myriads of ends untied, untidily. Writers can extract a story from life only by strict, close selection, and this must mean falsification. Telling stories really is telling lies. (Introduction)

A novel, in order to give a genuine representation of reality (or to come as close to this as possible), to stand for the truth and reflect the truth, needs to adjust itself to this perspective. Thus, a novel needs to reject not only the old, worn-out techniques: the third-person omniscient narrator, transparent language and semi-realistic, semi-fictional convention, but also the traditional form of the book as such, with a fixed order of events imposed by the author. As Johnson reports:

The main technical problem with *The Unfortunates* was the randomness of the material. That is, the memories of Tony and the routine football reporting, the past and the present, interwove in a completely random manner, without chronology. This is the way the mind works, my mind anyway, and for reasons given the novel was to be as nearly as possible a re-created transcript of how my mind worked during eight hours on this particular Saturday. (Introduction)

It is hard to imagine an invention more closely representative of the chaotic and random nature of life than a book which consists of a set of signatures placed loosely in a box.

There are empty spaces in the text itself – an idea that was used by Johnson in his previous novels and that will reappear in his next novel, *House Mother Normal*, with a double impact. Here, the empty spaces and gaps in the text appear mostly when the narrator digs into his memory and is flooded by blurred images or tries to remember something he is no longer able to. In terms of the narrative mode, it is, again, an interior monologue in which episodes and events from the past intercut and intersperse with present actions. The action is enclosed within eight hours on a Saturday afternoon. The author and narrator are one and the same person. For the first time in Johnson's novels, the characters and events are no longer fictionalized: he describes himself and his own life, the other characters in the book are his friends or relatives appearing under their real names; the same goes for the places and actions. He works as a football reporter and is sent out to cover a match. When he arrives at his destination, he realizes this is the same city where his best friend Tony studied as a postgraduate, and where he himself used to come on numerous occasions. The narrator spends the rest of the afternoon trying to concentrate on the football match but is, instead, flooded by the memories of Tony that recur and resurface against his will.

Johnson's next novel, *House Mother Normal*, consists of nine chapters which present a single set of events through the eyes of nine different people: eight pensioners in an old people's home and the House Mother. We are presented with a single and – exceptionally in Johnson's writings – fictional event simultaneously from ten different points of views. Each chapter begins with a brief presentation of the speaking voice. What is significant is that the respective narrators are presented through their deficiencies in speaking, hearing and all the possible impairments and illnesses they suffer from. Noticeably, each successive character is more disabled than the preceding one so that the monologues become more and more fragmented, partial and incoherent as the book progresses. So does the language of each chapter: gaps in the workings of the mind are indicated by empty spaces in the text. With each monologue, the spaces are longer and more frequent. Thus Sarah Lamson's interior monologue is virtually free from empty spaces, more or less coherent and lucid, but as we reach the last speaker, Rosetta Stanton, the chapter amounts to a few

disconnected words and sounds scattered at random over the pages. The explanation is given at the beginning of each chapter – Sarah Lamson, the first speaker, is 74, with her hearing seventy-five per cent intact and a maximum CQ count of ten (Coe 24), whilst Stanton has a CQ count of zero and a long list of various disabilities. Finally, we have the House Mother's version of events, which turns out to be even more unreliable and bizarre than those of her elderly charges.

As Johnson admitted, his aim in writing *House Mother Normal* was “to say something about the things we call normal and abnormal” (Introduction). Indeed, by the end of the novel the reader is left wondering who is more normal or abnormal – a decrepit old pensioner whose perception of reality is blurred by senility or the callous and uncaring young House Mother, a person who is supposed to take care of them. In fact, Johnson says much more than this. The deformities and deficiencies of all kinds that affect the narrative voices of the eight chapters lay bare (once again in Johnson's novel) the illusive character of the idea that it is possible to convey any objective image of reality, even within the first person narrative: the images we receive are deformed and altered by the deformed and deficient receptive skills of the narrative voices on the one hand, and the equally disabled language on the other. Moreover, Johnson would not have been himself had he not spoken in his own voice. Each old person's monologue is 21-pages long, apart from the House Mother's. She is allowed to speak for one page more, and on this last page, she is made to speak to the reader directly, in her own (or the author's own) voice:

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!), a writer who has me at present standing in the post-orgasmic nude but who still expects me to be his own words without embarrassment or personal comfort. So you see this is from his skull. It is a diagram of certain aspects of the inside of his skull! What laugh! (*House* 204)

Jonathan Coe argues that the implication here is a contradictory one: it is permissible to fictionalize, to make things up, but, apparently, only if you come clean about it in the end (25). And yet, as Johnson's own words make clear, there is actually no need to come clean about it, because “there's no fooling you readers” (qtd. in Coe 25). The novel features yet another characteristic of Johnson's later works: his fascination with old age and a growing awareness of the inevitability of the physical and mental degradation and destruction that is common to all people. This brings Johnson closer to Beckett again.

The reader is once more made very much aware that he or she is reading a book and is being addressed by the author in Johnson's sixth novel, *Christie Malry's Own Double-Entry* (Introduction). Jonathan Coe describes Johnson's sixth novel as “a brilliant, fast-paced black comedy” and “the point at which

newcomers to B. S. Johnson are encouraged to start" (26). The novel tells the story of Christie Malry, a young accounts clerk at a confectionery factory in London. It is divided into five parts, each ending with a page of accounts in which Christie attempts to draw a parallel with life (Introduction).

Malry, frustrated by some petty injustices at the hands of society and, particularly, of the authorities, invents a unique way of compensating for the harm he incurs: he develops a system of moral double-entry bookkeeping. For every offence society commits against him, he feels an urge to react in order to balance the moral books. He does so by committing some – at first minor – offences against the social order and the authorities. At first, Malry's grievances are small, so the payment he demands is correspondingly modest: resenting the presence of an office block that stands in his way, Christie responds by scratching a line down its stone facade with the edge of a coin. Specific lambasting from the Chief and assistant Accountants is met with the Undertaker's bill being unpaid, while the unpleasantness of Malry's employer, Mr Wagner, is offset by stealing stationery items from the office. However, as the novel proceeds, Malry's grievances and claims become more and more absurd and disproportionate to the offences he himself experiences. Thus, the failure to give socialism its due or to give Malry's girlfriend Shrike a chance commensurate with her abilities elicit more decisive action, such as the planting of a bomb outside the offices of the Collector of Taxes or the killing of 20,000 people by poisoning their water supply.

Soon it becomes apparent that Malry's ingrained sense of personal and social injustice is impossible to mollify. Instead, the author, all of a sudden, appears at the level of the main character and interferes abruptly by imposing terminal illness on Malry:

'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, in a kindly manner. We don't equate lengths with importance, do we? And who wants long novels anyway? Why spend all your spare time for a month reading a thousand-page novel when you can have a comparable aesthetic experience in the theatre or cinema in only one evening? The writing of a long novel is in itself an anachronistic act: it was relevant only to a society and a set of social conditions which no longer exist. (*Christie Malry* 165)

As we can see, Johnson was not prone to compromising or abandoning his ideas. The consequence of such assumptions for the novel is that the lump Christie discovers in his body develops rapidly and leads to his death several pages later.

To sum up, we can conclude that the works of B. S. Johnson belong to the most avant-garde currents in the history of twentieth-century literature. Johnson himself, like his great predecessor and master Samuel Beckett, was a writer who believed in the possibility of attaining his ultimate objective – the truth – and the

medium he employed to convey the truth was literature, specifically the novel. Johnson's belief was that the author, in order to be authentic and create trustworthy literature, needs to reject old, clapped-out conventions and literary techniques and create new ones. His own works are the best evidence of the process of seeking and articulating the truth, the process that resulted in subversive (cut-outs in the pages of *Albert Angelo*, authorial interventions in *Travelling People*, *Christie Malry's Own Double-Entry* and *House Mother Normal*), unrestricted (loose pages in *The Unfortunates*) and sometimes transgressive forms (the cinematographic simultaneity in *Albert Angelo* or *House Mother Normal*).

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