Chaos and Truth: B. S. Johnson's Theoretical and Literary Narratives

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From the late 1950s until the posthumous appearance of his last novel in 1975, working-class, London writer B. S. Johnson (1933-73) published poetry and a range of highly experimental novels, stories and critical essays variously structured around contending motifs of chaos, truth, negation and concepts of facticity. Mid-career an interviewer describes Johnson's insistence that "All writing is autobiographical, because he believes that one should tell the truth and that the only true knowledge is oneself" (Depledge 13). The reflexive and biographical elements of his work are self-evident, yet there are subcutaneous theoretical aspects to his work that extend this view of narrative. Yet, despite evidence of this scattered throughout his writings, interpreting his significance and evaluating the more profound qualities of his work appears to have eluded the majority of academics and critics. In the decisive struggle of exegetical commentary, until recently Johnson has been almost erased from the literary-cultural field.

Although primarily a novelist, Johnson rejected any acceptance of the term *fiction* and its implications as representing acceptance of a mode that was inherently *fallacious* which he theorizes in *Aren't You Rather Young to be Writing Your Memoirs?* (1973). During his lifetime in terms of fiction and aesthetics he was considered as a critical thinker, and it is in this role that this essay reconsiders salient features of his work, attempting to judge whether any trace of him as such a theorist might be redeemed for contemporary reconsideration. Johnson's work demands and claims primarily personal and social relevance, a trajectory that has left him critically marginalized and often labeled as a minor or naive solipsistic writer. Perhaps consequently, in Britain itself Johnson's work has been unavailable for most of the last quarter century. Even the most cursory reading demonstrates that Johnson is a writer as conscious of aesthetics and transformations of form as writers such as Virginia Woolf. My major initial contention is that it is important to recognize that his ambitions lie consciously beyond narrative as mere fiction or inner self-reflection. Since I have insufficient space to analyze Johnson's novels in terms of full plot exposition (arguably a critical strategy of limited relevance in this context), I intend to focus on the four available texts that exemplify best his wider theoretical base and intentions: *Albert Angelo* (1964), *The Unfortunates* (1969), *Christie Malry's Own Double-Entry* (1973), and *Aren't You Rather Young to be Writing Your Memoirs?*[1]

Re-published in Britain in 1999, the revised edition of *The Unfortunates*, the so-called "shuffle" book-in-a-box, is arguably his most explicitly experimental and innovative novel. Its unbound chapters apart from the first and last are designed to be read in random order. In its oblique suggestion of a coffin as final depository of the remains of human life, the device of the box set mirrors the text's funereal mood

as Johnson recovers his memories of a death a few years prior to the novel's opening of a friend, Tony, from cancer. Although it utilizes a striking strategy of textualization, *The Unfortunates* is far from being the only example of radical artefactual and structural devices in Johnson's works. *Albert Angelo* has proleptic holes cut in the page so that future pages appear as text and elsewhere parallel columns to represent a synchronicity of action and internalized narrative thought. The text's quotidian events revolve around the social, emotional and workplace traumas of a London supply teacher moving to (a pre-trendy) Islington after a failed love affair. *Christie Malry* is aphoristic, epigrammatic and polemically aware of the real despite its satirical, almost comic-book prose, plotting and characterization. In the latter, within these contending formal elements, Johnson describes and sets out as business-style financial returns, the debit and credit account of the eponymous protagonist's bizarre one-man terrorist campaign. The novel so records Christie's actions as reactions as he avenges the slights of society against himself using the concept of the double-entry system to itemize both the acts against himself and his increasingly terrorist responses. Overall in his work, the critical challenge is to determine the significance of these formal devices while accepting Johnson's often articulated refusal of an infinite plurality of reality. In fact, Johnson says in *Aren't You Rather Young to be Writing Your Memoirs?* of the reader and the text:

> I want my ideas to be expressed so precisely that the very minimum of room for interpretation is left. Indeed, I would go further and say that to the extent that a reader can impose his own imagination on my words, then that piece of writing is a failure. I want him to see my (vision), not something conjured out of his own imagination. How is he supposed to grow unless he will admit others' ideas. If he wants to impose his imagination, let him write his own books. (28)

In confronting relativism and a semiotic hermeneutics, contemporary theory is creating gradually new paradigms where the reader can contextualize Johnson's work and perceive that his ideas relate further than the literary-critical field that neglects his writing. Johnson presents ideas that seem to parallel the foundations of a radicalized (critical) realism that is being recuperated by theorists such as Pierre Bourdieu, Edward Pols and Roy Bhaskar working outside of literary exegesis, ideas that help a recognition that the process of creativity can itself synthesize within its own theoretical critique its relationship with the real.[2] Johnson interweaves elements of this kind of theoretical positioning with his narrative urge, but leaves the traces of his exposition in a fragmentary fashion, spread unevenly through the seven novels and his collected prose pieces, *Aren't You Rather Young to be Writing Your Memoirs?* Arguably his practice is inevitable given Johnson's sense of necessary disorder and his resistance to contracted ratiocination. It appears almost as if he sets himself against any complete reconstruction of a theoretical order and through the very scattered form of his critique demonstrates that the elements constituting socially the struggle of objective relations that comprises the literary or critical field are as disparate as Bourdieu suggests (see 32–34). The form of Johnson's critique reflects his paradigm of chaotic and random paradigms, hence its aphoristic and inchoate nature. Perhaps this conflict in terms of his life and the internal logic of his works represents a struggle for a rhetorical space. Johnson comments in *Aren't You Rather*

Young to be Writing Your Memoirs?, "I think I write because I have something to say that I fail to say satisfactorily in conversation, in person" (18). Certainly, his critical stance suggests that only in texts can he gain perhaps any of the authority denied him elsewhere. In his commentary on the chaos and uncertainty of the so-called known world, Johnson effects more than a novelist of minor talent. Below I trace the recovered theoretical ideas as primary co-ordinates and points of reference rather than simply focus upon the plot content of the novels themselves.

Initially, Johnson's co-ordinates evolve from the Sternean tradition that is evoked consciously in the first novel, *Travelling People* (1963), by an allusion to Tristram Shandy's chair in its preface and the use of blackening pages to signify a character's initial illness and later death (11-12, 211-13, 224-26). Simultaneously, Johnson draws broadly from the contemporaneous work laid down in creative and critical acts by the *nouveau romanciers* and its theorists. In "From Realism to Reality" Robbe-Grillet concludes, "The discovery of reality can only continue its advance if people are willing to abandon outworn forms" (154). Whether Johnson is influenced by theory, ideology or specific texts is impossible to verify, but one can perceive more relevantly in his own re-formulations a general critical mood or *zeitgeist* that is reflected in his theory of the novel and creative prose. Peter Vansitlast notes *In the Fifties* (1995) both the general influence of Robbe-Grillet, Butor and Sarraute on B. S. Johnson and how unusual this is in a British novelist of that period (see 239). There is an important distinction between Johnson and many other writers who adopt reductively the stylistic and hence ultimately topographical devices of experimentalism. Rather than textualizing reality (in Bourdieu's terms a de-realization), Johnson develops Robbe-Grillet's phenomenological insistence of the *nouveau roman*'s narrative description of things where "The objects of our novels never have any presence outside human perceptions, whether real or imaginary; they are objects which are comparable to those of our everyday life, objects like those upon which our attention is constantly fixed" (138), in other words a kind of *supra-realism* theorizing the life-world by its creative act. Sarah Birch recognises in Johnson's strategies an insistence on a form of *alethic,* underlying truth:

> B. S. Johnson's rejection of fiction as "lies" and his insistence in *Albert Angelo* on the need to convey the truth of his existence without recourse to fabulation also reveal a belief in the existence of a pre-discursive reality that, given the proper narrative tools, could be conveyed in a pure state. (200)

Nevertheless, Johnson conceives of narrative as purposeful and goal-directed, something he summarized in an early interview in *Books and Bookmen*. "My basic problem was that of all novelists: how to embody truth in a vehicle of fiction. Truth, that is, as a personally observed and experienced reality, and not of course autobiographical literalness" (25).

In *Albert Angelo* visceral and gritty realist dimensions combine to create layers of multiform and adaptive narratives that relate very explicitly to the material conditions of existence. The eponymous protagonist, a failed architect displaced as a supply teacher, ruminates in an interior monologue, the page presents the voices of his frustrated pupils, and finally Albert is exposed as Johnson disrupting conventional and rational expectation. Later in *Memoirs?* Johnson ponders "The architects can

teach us something: their aesthetic problems are combined with functional ones" (16), a comment particularly significant in terms of *Albert Angelo* in that Johnson has incorporated into Albert's provisional identity the non-practising profession (and yet active eye) of the architect. In *Albert Angelo* Albert calls the register in full detail that mimics real time, displayed in double columns with thought-responses, italicized alongside the curt, realistic exchanges, an exposition that allows Johnson to mark the full significance of this process of naming and response. The method helps exemplify that these exchanges are matters of cultural location and preference and that there is an authorized position within which the teacher is implicated:

'Eray Mustapha'
'Yes, sir.'
'Eray? Which one's Eray? Can you understand any more English, Eray?'
'Yes, sir.'

Accent like any other North Londoner's. must have been born here.

'*Good.* John Nash.'

John Nash and Regent Street and the Quadrant and *All Souls' and the Haymarket Theatre and bits of Buck-Ingham Palace, you think, John Nash.*

'Yes, sir.'
'Andreas Neo... Neophytos.'
'Yes, sir.' (34)

Albert's thoughts and responses indicate several crucial possible readings that overlap. There is an acknowledgement of language as the prime factor in subjugation, an admission of the cultural density of environment and the concept of history. In his final hesitation and uncertainty he hesitates in the literal approval of the pupil's presence, marking authority and society's ambivalence that limits the pupil's ability to redeem fully his identity. Johnson by this juxtaposition of the spatial sense of the page as an ideological divide and his use of architectural motifs demonstrates the inscription of power upon a culture (and reality). He reflects the appropriation of naming by royal and privileged discourses, the hegemony of the familiar, the barriers to inter-penetration that culture and authority create. The architectural reminders of the imperial expansion and its profits are overlaid onto his consciousness and that of his value system. The primary conflict is between himself as albeit an unwilling agent of those cultural forces and the children themselves.

These disruptions and subjugations are the central characteristics of the novel against which Albert charts the potential for collective, plural dimensions. Despite the divisions created in his and the reader's mind in the act of registering the class, and their own racist divisions, the boys cohere and form a matrix of resistance and appropriation of function and purpose. In a painting class in his role as the teacher and artistically-inclined adult Albert sketches an exemplary piece with "a Doric portico flanked by colonnades" (36), the children's instinctive resistance and subversion

of language imposition by the synthesis of the visual and vernacular amuses Albert, a response he has to suppress as the extension of structure and power:

> A group of boys. They quickly split up, and one tries to hide a painting as they see you noticing. You walk slowly and demand the painting. In the foreground are hardly identifiable animals with television aerials on their heads, yoked to a sleigh. Underneath each is a series of brown splodges, and, leaving no room for dubeity as to what was represented, an arrow and the word *shit*. You conceal your amusement with difficulty, confiscate the drawing for your collection, and stand the boys out in the front facing the board. (36)

Albert is unconvinced of any structure of belief; of his final pupils' unruliness he complains that "'You have to establish your own set of rules, let alone your own obedience of those rules, your own discipline. Which takes all the time and an incredible amount of nervous energy. It's like I'm working at the frontier of civilization all the time'" (130). It is clear that his comment reflects a sense of social processes as provisional across all cultures and identities despite the countervailing desire for epistemological order and coherence.

After a further series of crises for Albert, the author emerges into the frame of the novel to address the reader's having apparently dismissed his preceding narrative as no more than representation. This (in)famous disavowal of a current and apparently foregoing narrative at the start of section four of "Disintegration" where the guise or formal device of fictiveness becomes all too apparent, false and burdensome. Responding to these constraints Johnson extends his disruptiveness to his use of grammatical form and syntax, challenging the strictures of punctuation and sentence formation. However, it should be noted that these conventions nevertheless gradually reassert themselves, as does the fictional narrative even in residual form with the novel's ironic ending and that their abandonment may be seen to evoke a verbalization recognizable from shared life practice and uses a tactic that encourages the reader to review the signification multiply:

> —fuck all this lying look what im really trying to write about is writing not all the 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 the 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. (165)

As convention reasserts itself, Johnson complains of the demands of characterization while typically working further scatalogical humour into his narrative critique: "—Faced with the enormity of life, all I can do is to present a paradigm of truth to reality as I see it: and there's the difficulty: for Albert defecates for instance only once during the whole of the book: what sort of paradigm of the truth is that? (168). Despite the humorous aside suggesting obliquely a constipated prose (or truth), there exists here an underlying insistence that something objective (however enigmatic) extends the dialogue between the self and other in the nature of the commu-

nicative act of which narrative forms a part. Incidentally, punctuation does re-assert itself. The link of *truth to reality* as the crucial relationship of narrative is implied whatever the problematic involved in the correlation. As Merleau-Ponty says, "The task of a radical reflection, the kind that aims at self-comprehension consists, paradoxically enough, in recovering the unreflexive experience of the world, and subsequently assigning to it the verificatory attitude and reflective operations, and displaying reflection as one possibility of my being" (*Phenomenology* 241).

In *Albert Angelo* Johnson insists when addressing his readers that: "Looking back and imposing a pattern to come to terms with the past must be avoided. Lies, lies, lies. Secondbest at best, for other writers, to do them a favour..."(168). Yet the status of his own narrative remains paradigmatic and functional, a space where truth and creativity synthesize allowing the novel to approximate the set of relations Robbe-Grillet describes as the core of the aesthetic. "A work of art, like the world is a living form; it *is*, it needs no justification.... It is in their form that their reality is to be found" (72). In this context of arts dependence upon the real, Johnson argued in *Aren't You Rather Young to be Writing Your Memoirs?* "Subject matter is everywhere, general, is brick, concrete, plastic; the ways of putting it together are particular, are crucial" (16). In his aesthetic practice, a subjective reworking to mediate what exists as reality must include the paradox of its chaotic form, for as Johnson postulates "what characterises our reality is the probability that chaos is the most likely explanation: while at the same time recognising that even to seek an explanation represents a denial of chaos" (17). This is not theoretically oblique or obscure as literary practice in a tradition of a sociology of reality, for as Marcuse notes "The tension between potentiality and actuality... is one of the dynamic focal points of this theory of society.... A historical relationship which can be transformed in this life by real men; the incongruity of potentiality and actuality incites knowledge to become part of the practice of transformation" (*Negations* 69).

In reforming this novel, via his intrusion, through his apparent disruptions, Johnson makes of it a creative form which allows narrative and function to co-exist. Neither one negates the other although apparent autobiographical reality promises a kind of ascendance over the representational, made evident by the authorial incursion as critique in *Albert Angelo*: "—And oh but what other material is not now to be worked in! The visit to Zulf, for instance, who lives overlooking a cemetery and diverts Albert with detailed descriptions of the Week's burials; the teacher who sleeps in the woodwork shed and cooks over the gluepot gasring..." (171). One irony is that this contracted material is *worked in* however obliquely. Moreover, at the end, the dismissed narrative is reasserted in contracted, satirical form, culminating enigmatically at the novel's ending with the pupils tossing Albert to his death in the Regent's Canal at the Angel, Islington.[3] Earlier a pupil's poorly written account of a funeral evokes the dynamics of this apparently fictional final section making its spontaneity and unexpectedness relate to this former childish act of fantasy and wish-fulfillment.[4] These switches of mode, time, place and voice remain purposeful. As Robbe-Grillet explains, "if temporality gratifies one's expectations, instaneity disappoints them, and in the same way spatial discontinuity *frees* one from the trap set by the plot" (151).

Despite Johnson's declaration of the text's narrativity, the tension of both an irreducible living form and schematic representation feature centrally especially throughout the third section of *Albert Angelo*. In contradistinction to his aversion to

patterning and externally imposed order (168), his narrative remains paradigmatic and functional as truth and creativity synthesize to allow the novel to become what Robbe-Grillet describes. "A work of art, like the world is a living form; it *is*, it needs no justification... It is in their form that their reality is to be found" (72). Whatever its problematics, Johnson retains "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" (*Memoirs?* 18) despite a greater realization in *Albert Angelo* of the impossible project that both determines and undermines the narrative and perceptual mass about which he ruminates on the function of writing reflexively as part of locating the function of his narrative:

> —And also to echo the complexity of life, reproduce some of the complexity of selves which I contain within me, contradictory and gross as they are: childish, some will call it, peeing in the rainfall gauge, yes, but sometimes I am childish, very, so are we all, it's part of the complexity I'm trying to reproduce, exorcise.
>
> —Faced with the enormous detail, vitality, size, of this complexity, of life. There is a great temptation for a writer to impose his own pattern, an arbitrary pattern which must falsify, cannot do anything other than falsify; or he invents, which is pure lying. Looking back and imposing a pattern to come to terms with the past must be avoided. Lies, lies, lies,... (168)

Effectively, Johnson seeks to access a paradox at the heart of all narration. If the narrative act is to locate or access its material source and reference, thus constituting material relations in some sense, it does so with other elements than those that are its subject. This intervention is a cartography of both possibility and impossibility that become in the narrative sphere co-ordinates that have a dialectical relationship with the real. For Johnson that which aspires to completeness is not only frustrated, but aspires to control that from which it derives. Reflecting on narrative in *Memoirs?* Johnson insists "I love anecdotes. I fancy mankind may come in time to write aphoristically, except in narrative; grow weary of preparation and connection and illustration, and all those arts by which a big book is made" (78). *Arts* here seem to imply artificiality and untruthfulness, a separation from life. Significantly, anecdote is incident and event based, rather than the framing of knowledge in its formalizing and rational sense. Even in pondering over Albert's crisis, Johnson's novel articulates a tension replete with the ambivalence of man's social relation to nature itself and to being (see Bhaskar 73-74).

> There was this tremendous need for man to impose a pattern on life, Albert thought, to turn wood into planks or blocks or whatever. Inanimate life is always moving towards disintegration, towards chaos, and man is moving in the opposite direction, towards the imposition of order: as the animals are, too, but to a far lesser extent. This was the paradox: for the fundamental rhythm of life was the alternating disintegration-reintegration of matter. Perhaps five hundred millions

> years ago matter became capable of maintaining itself by reactions to stimuli: that is to say, it became life. (131)

For Johnson narrative involves constantly a recognition of what Parrinder describes in his writing as "the conflict between illusion and reality..." (25). Both *Albert Angelo* and Johnson's boxed novel in their own modest manner incorporate formally and laterally this paradoxical disintegration-reintegration of matter, the ambivalent tensions of chaos and order as an irresolvable and opening matrix.

In *The Unfortunates* Johnson underpins his narrative with his avowal of the *a priori* existence of his own life-world materiality, but confirming its vulnerabilities by relating in painful and confessional autobiographical detail his memorial narrative of his friend's death. This is not a naturalistic effort or conception. Johnson faces squarely the difficult interrelationship of perceptual understanding and concrete events, one that is problematized further by the narrative form itself. However, his focus remains the dialectic of the particular and the general, since without an attempted synthesis of these two perspectives (or modes) any cognition is wilfully incomplete: "The difficulty is to understand without generalization, to see each piece of received truth, or generalization, as true only if it is true for me, solipsism again, I come back to it again, and for no other reason. In general, generalization is to lie, to tell lies" ("LAST" 6).

Johnson accedes to reality's own ambivalence. However, inserted within this commentary is his commitment to confronting *received truth*. Although imperfect, the text counters in its enactment of Tony's life *both* generalization *and* solipsism. The truth for Johnson is that something of its ontological reality is communicated. In *Memoirs?* Johnson describes his novel in terms of a complex sense of historical identities of the subject (variously himself, Tony and readers):

> What matters most to me about *The Unfortunates* is that I have on recall as accurately as possible what happened, that I do not have to carry it around in my mind any more, that I have done Tony as much justice as I could at the time; that the need to communicate with myself then, and with older selves as I might be allowed, on something about which I cared and care deeply may also mean that the novel will communicate that experience to readers, too. (26)

In *The Unfortunates* itself although Johnson holds before us the flimsiness and vulnerability of our understandings, as narrator he ponders about his novel writing and concludes of the influence of his dead friend who guided his creative project that "it had passed the scrutiny of someone whose opinion I respected, whose judgement was based on academic standards which, even more than my own, were given some sort of objective, or at least collective-subjective, value" ("Again the House" 1). The equivocation and the elements of that ambivalence convey much about his sense of the nature of value and the intersubjective, yet elusive nature of agreement. Both are as fluid and corrigible as both memory and narrative and yet exist among and derived from a material, complex set of relations. Their dialectical formulations and significance constitute the particularizing matrix of history as a slow and implacable process of contradictions (see Lefebvre *Modernity* 67-68). Johnson does not privilege his text even in its vagaries and irresolution. Significantly he counters the

solipsistic with this possibility of a collective-subjective if not objective value. He recalls meeting Tony unexpectedly on a London street near his flat, not recognizing his friend and consequently sharing with Tony: "an authentic alienation-effect, we thought" ("I Had a Lovely Flat..." 3). Johnson is aware in *Memoirs?* of such historical "links and cross-references..." (30) that provide the critical foundation for his artistic and ideological endeavours.

As Nicolas Tredell notes citing *The Unfortunates*, there is an ambition in Johnson's writing beyond aesthetic reflection. "The comments on words and images which we can attribute to the narrator could perhaps be better assimilated to a critical rather than creative discourse; on the representational level, we might say that the narrator himself is assuming the critical function performed by Tony for his earlier novels" (37). A critical commitment to the primordiality of textuality leads Tredell to regard Johnson as naïve, limited or both in his exposition. As for most critics of his period, for Tredell to be critical implies ultimately self-referentiality and hermeneutic constraints. However, Johnson's critique may be referenced well beyond the literary field given its complex relationship with the real. Each novel allowed Johnson to explore elements of the interrelationship of both consciousness and externality where "the incomprehension and weight of prejudice which faces anyone trying to do anything new in writing is enormous, sometimes disquieting, occasionally laughable..." (Johnson *Memoirs?* 31). Moreover, Johnson demands, "But why should novelists be expected to avoid paradox any more than philosophers?" (18). To so position philosophy and creative writing speaks volumes and his recognition of paradox, implying a theorized base for narrative that refuses its constraint into what Woolf once castigated as Edwardian *materialism* or obsession with topographical form. Johnson absorbs Woolf's implicit recognition of fiction's need for a depth-model of structure and content.

If *The Unfortunates* as a novel seeks a literalness or autobiographical validity undercut by its own form, then *Christie Malry's Own Double-Entry* (1973) with its bold narrative strokes both mirrors and yet contracts the underlying qualities of sets of relations by which society reduces individuals to subjects of limited agency. Drawing attention to the novel's ambivalence is to constitute that sense of being alive and imperfectly perceiving others. In reflecting outwardly about his protagonist in *Christie Malry's Own Double-Entry*, the narrator addresses his implied reader in a tone of cultural and ideological admonishment:

> Nor are his motives important. Especially are his motives of no importance to us, though the usual clues will certainly be given. We are concerned with his actions. A man may be defined through his actions, you will remember. We may guess at his motives, of course; he may do so as well. We may also guess at the winner of the three-fifteen at the next meeting at Market Rasen. (51-52)

In essence, Johnson evokes Sarraute's insistence that character or personality is a diversion from true relations (8). The familiar may be reconfigured and imply different interpretative possibilities of the real. The reader recognizes the overall dynamics of Christie's squeeze or repression by very mundane elements, like having a wage increase swallowed by increased social payments. Both the bizarre dimensions of his pathological revenge and the pared-down narrativity are mapped discursively and

polemically against the ground of the apprehensible and real. In the latter novel in the mouth of the protagonist's mother, Johnson indicates that his narrative *dialecticizes* (a word that is evident from his practice beyond its appearance in this novel) in a manner parallel to the tradition of the radical thought influencing his period and which was busy thematizing social and metaphysical process.[5] The brief reference is instructive. Clearly, such a sense of complex materiality or objective occurrence is primordial for Johnson. The novel is simultaneously comic and serious, both analytical and epigrammatic in style. The tension of these overlapping elements and their very incongruities provide a sense of transformation.

Johnson creates other paradigms of critical engagement in his narrative. His constant reflection and commentary on the architectural and spatial significance of the social subject becomes highly complex and progressive. Christie's apparently ridiculous outbursts become critical and ideologically-revealing devices. Christie quizzes himself (all of his internalized thought is italicized in the original narrative):

> Who made me walk this way? Who decided I should not be walking seven feet farther that side, or three points west of nor-nor-east, to use the marine abbreviation? Anyone? No one? Someone must have decided. It was a conscious decision, as well. That is, they said (he said, she said), I will build here. But I think whoever it was did not also add, So Christie Malry shall not walk here, but shall walk there. If he chooses. Ah! And there I have him/her/them! I choose so. But my choice is limited by them, collectively.... (23)

Here Johnson inverts Nietzsche's placement of justice as responding to the violation of a commonwealth of communal pledge and contract which leads to punishment of the individual; he perceives collective incursions on individual needs expressed by property and appropriation of space (see Nietzsche 203-04) as requiring an individual demand for freedom. Note the social, intersubjective constitution of individual rights that Christie sees as constrained. In Christie's extreme contestation, Johnson conveys something of Merleau-Ponty's conception that the allowance of an apparently essential space as always *already constituted* negates further understanding by its implicit withdrawal into a *wordless perception* (*Phenomenology* 251-52). Christie articulates those objections. He critiques the positioning of his subjectivity within the power relations expressed by access and choice. He inverts the normal power relations as described by Nietzsche which attach themselves in spatial terms to the relationship of justice and retribution, being celebrated in the further monumental space of the court and prisons; through the medium of constructed objective space.

Christie prioritizes, however pathologically, communal rather than individual infractions and slights of the individual. Collectivity becomes a matter of culpability, one that reaches its vengeful climax when the protagonist poisons thousands of Londoners for their complicity in the systemic abuse of his rights. Thereby Johnson evokes a series of dialectical qualities and observations that permeate every level of the text itself. Christie's deviance reconfigures the nature of subjectivity in its traditional role of characterization. This cipher demands equivalency, account of value and free access to the natural world unconstrained. These themes evoke the origins of modernity and its adaptation of law and subjectivity from the classical mode:

> To the question how did the ancient, deep-rooted, still firmly established notion of an equivalency between damage and pain arise, the answer is, briefly: it arose in the contractual relation between creditor and debtor, which is as old as the notion of "legal subjects" itself and which in its turn points back to the basic practices of purchase, sale, barter, and trade. (Nietzsche 195)

Exchange itself is a spatial praxis. Christie articulates this in his thoughts. He recognizes he cannot confront a dead planner or speculator, but sees a genealogy or succession of culpability and responsibility which defies the facelessness of capitalism, thereby refusing its retreats into obfustication, the diffusion of time and generation or facelessness:

> But his successors, heirs, executors, administrators, personal representatives and assigns are, or they would not be here, in business. They are not averse to taking responsibility for all the money they/he/she left them, so they may conveniently take responsibility for standing this building in my way, too, limiting my freedom of movement, dictating to me where I may or may not walk in this street. (24)

Christie cannot perceive his problem in anything but spatial terms; most Johnsonian protagonists see interconnectiveness of feeling and pain to environment and perception. Spatiality is determined by the anterior, as is Christie's predicament, for as Merleau-Ponty notes: "My personal experience must be the resumption of a prepersonal tradition. There is, therefore, another subject beneath me, for whom the world exists before I am here.... Space has its basis in our facticity. It is neither an object, nor an act of unification on the subject's part..." (*Phenomenology* 254). Hence space questions the primacy of a philosophy of being and the significances of subjectivity.

Johnson recuperates a sense of individual dislocation as a significant act, even within the ordinary, the intramundane, and yet nonetheless hostile and fascinating environment of city life. Rejection or revolution may be aided or even suggested by the most familiar as when Christie learns to make a Molotov cocktail in the satirically entitled Chapter XVI "Keep Britain Tidy; or, Dispose of this Bottle Thoughtfully":

> Glass bottles are obtainable in their millions.... No, by far the best bottle on the market for them has been provided by the soft drinks companies: half an imperial pint capacity, a screw cap of light gauge metal, glass walls of the very minimum thickness, a circumference so snug to the hand as to make accurate throwing relatively easy, and, being non-returnable, of such ready availability as to provoke ironic comment that the forces of conservatism are unwittingly providing the very instruments of their own discomfort. (133)

Here, Johnson alludes both symbolically and directly to the seeds of revolt available to subjects who perceive both the injustices and the opportunities for disruption. He posits the personal malaise of any individual as having the potential to reveal the duplicity of accepted norms and experience. Christie goes on to poison hundreds of

thousands via their drinking supplies. As Marcuse reflects, "Basic to the present form of social organization, the antagonisms of the capitalist production process, is the fact that the central phenomena connected with this process do not immediately appear to men as what they are 'in reality,' but in masked, 'perverted' form" (*Negations* 70). In his novel Johnson returns that perversion in its pathological form to heighten the unmasking process of the real. Johnson evokes Sarraute's idea of an "emotional commotion that made it possible to apprehend all at once, and as in a flash, an entire object with all its nuances, its possible complexities, and even—if, by chance, these existed—its unfathomable depths" (16-17). Subjectivity can both enmesh and question these conceptual presences, dependent on the nature of one's interrogation (or otherwise of reality).

That Johnson's narrative perspective is intensely (and in the case of Christie perhaps at times insanely) personal and focused upon the subject, means he risks the accusations of solipsism and of chronicling merely the domestic and the mundane. A more sympathetic view is that he fragments familiar constraints of social understanding by declaring that the ordinary and the everyday if dissolved and re-thematized are the seat of his aesthetic action upon reality:

> With each of my novels there has always been a certain point when what has been until then just a mass of subject-matter, the material of living, of my life, comes to have a shape, a form that I recognise as a novel. This crucial interaction between the material and myself has always been reduced to a single point in time: obviously a very exciting moment for me. (*Memoirs?* 23-24)

Nathalie Sarraute suggests that the real movement of meaning within life is "hidden under the commonplace, harmless appearance of every instant of our lives" (8). Consciously, Johnson retains the novel form to explore and convey this subterranean quality as material praxis, not primarily a textual matter. Formal experimentation for Johnson functions as an ongoing perceptual recognition of the nature of things, for reality and consequently truth lie at the heart of the enterprise that moves toward a "discovery of reality," a perception of the concrete and material, as with the novel forms of typographical and other experimentation he offers his readers. His method of writing is revealing. Johnson's narrative emerges from notebooks three by five inches that were carried and in which he records the stuff of life. The genesis over time of his work is a process of transcription, review and analysis that responds to his presence the life-world transversally through time and space. He spatializes the notation itself, a process of contingency he expanded for the form of *The Unfortunates*:

> I tear the pages out of the notebooks and stick them into folders marked with the names (or until they have names, the numbers) of the novels I'm going to write. Some notes are indecipherable because I was drunk at the time, or writing on a train or whatever. I always think I'm going to transcribe the notes into a book within a few days, but it's usually years. (Burns 86)

The material centrality of truth concepts helps to explain the tortuous nature of Johnson's artistic career where he seems to flee from his own creativity and the impulses of the fictive form into a morass of the observable and yet dissolving features of the material world.

For Johnson revising notions of individuality is the starting point for reforming social relations, and for intimations of a radical intersubjectivity, initiated by perceiving within selfhood matters of primary importance which render social relations evident. Alienation derives from its historical circumstances, the implication of that ideological narrative. The apparent narrator/creator of *Christie Malry* comments polemically in a dialogue with protagonist Christie that "'Politicians, policeman, some educators and many others treat most people as idiots'" (166). Yet, despite this aversion, Albert Angelo resents the complicity of others in their alienated and implictly thoughtless involvement in urban culture, as if he senses their complicity in that overall and overarching alienation so central to the image of the great city. He opines: "What's anyone doing this morning, for that matter? There are all these people, out there, in London, say, millions of them, this morning, all doing things, doing things—and I resent them doing things, for mine is the only way to live, mine are the only things worth doing, my doingthings" (102).

Johnson faces the interrogations and negations of the critique others would use to justify the kinds of fragmentariness and hermeneutic contractions of language that exemplify the plurality of postmodernism and does something very different with this material and mode of understanding. He uses the difficulties of accounting for those forms and elements of narrative and its reflection of experience to evoke a broader conceptual engagement with the lived experience and the possibility of communicating the nature of this process. Johnson is concerned with the intersections of irresolvable paradoxes. Nevertheless some concept of lived experience promises residually a kind of ascendance over the representational:

> 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 means falsification. Telling stories really is telling lies.... 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? (*Memoirs?* 14)

Johnson's aesthetic project problematizes traditional contractions of rationality to a simple correspondence common sense view while positing an expanded view of social and historical forces as experienced by individual agents. In the intersection a kind of chaos defeats man's simplistic epistemological accounts.

Whatever his sense of neo-Heraclitean flux, there remains a cultural density in Johnson's prose that creates an implied, direct, layered and referential use of a specific culture to inform and shape the narrative. This tone permeates both the background and foreground of all his narratives. Take an apparently simple passage from *The Unfortunate*:

> Up there, yes, the high mast, radar is it, crownlike, a turret, walkway, on the building, they were building it then, some sort of college of tech-

> nology, was it, or communications centre? But they were building it at the time, Tony pointed it out to us as a new landmark which would be useful to us in finding our way about the city, only my second visit, and her first, Wendy's. ("Up there, yes..." 1)

Johnson represents the public and private as social territories that interpenetrate and where mutual self-realizations take place. There is irony in his recollection that the prior visit is evoked centrally in terms of Wendy, since through this admission Johnson implies that the real centre of his narrative consciousness is the separation from this girl in that it at times dominates his thinking. So much so that in the novel at times it perhaps threatens to eclipse his ruminations over the dead friend, displacing his sense of loss, all of which is re-invoked by the spatial cotermination of past and present. Johnson's narratives appear to incorporate Merleau-Ponty's understanding that "History is not only an object in front of us, far from us, beyond our reach; it is also our awakening of subjects" (*Dialectic* 30). Hence the very layering and interpenetrations of narrative voices and subject recognitions within a broad sweep of historical moments that create the common texture of Johnson's narratives however different the form, topographical tone and voice of his works. Consider Johnson's narrative in "These Count as Fictions" with regard to defining the method of his projected critique: "I occupy my mind with statements the truth of which interests me, such as *Form follows function*, or it might be on another occasion *Everything is merely or exactly the absence of its opposite*. Or sometimes I will tell myself *You can't have it all ways: at least at once*" (*Memoirs?* 116). Even in his humour, we begin to see that Johnson can "appreciate dialectic as that great loosener which breaks down exclusive dichotomies—between present and past, process and product, one being and another..." (Bhaskar 380). Central to Johnson's work is the tenet that in falsifying the lived conditions of the subject as defined by broader forces, by narrowing the significance and parameters of everyday experience traditional narrative knowingly simplified and falsified the dimensions of that experience of the life-world that is being or living. His ambition was to include that complexity, its contradictions, its co-ordination and present a paradigm of life that was broader, more open and non-linear, perhaps transversally three-dimensional. Hence the formal devices and the conflictual relationship with linear presentations of words.

Johnson explains of his preparatory notes for his writing that "Essentially they are pictures" (qtd. in Burns 86) and that "Accidents, like the order in which the bits got thrown into the folder, often dictate juxtapositions which weren't there by design" (87); hence each novel is in itself an example or opportunity of reflection that serves as an ongoing engagement and development of both substance and material derived from perceptual existence. Clearly, this is an ongoing process and itself subject to change. Hence Johnson reflects of his first novel: "*Travelling People* gave me an identity in 1962 but not in 1972" (Burns 89). As Johnson reflects in *Aren't You Rather Young to be Writing Your Memoirs?*, "all is change: the very process of life itself is growth and decay at an enormous variety of rates. Change is a condition of life" (17). This understanding ought to apply to the evolutionary mode of the novel itself and the critical account of its effects. Of his experimentation Johnson insisted when pressed by Christopher Ricks in a radio interview "They should be considered for whether they communicate the meaning better than older methods" (*unpublished*

transcript 3-4). In using narrative as critique, Johnson seeks what has been recently explained by Roy Bhaskar to be one of the outcomes of non-linear dialectical transformation. "It is a moment of genuine contingency, openness, multi-possibility (and doubt), closed by the ensuing greater determinacy or determination" (31). Whatever its ironic or stylistic variation of voice, compare the underpinnings of the passage above from *Memoirs?* and of Christie's sense of the world with Marcuse's analysis of the

> dialectical relation of opposites... rendered possible by the recognition of the subject as an historical agent whose identity constitutes itself in *and against* its historical practice, in *and against* its social reality. The discourse develops and states the conflict between the thing and its function.... (*One-Dimensional* 100)

Clearly in Johnson's conception of narrative, he cannot finally accept or entertain any solipsistic, subjectively constrained world-view. He insists that any critic should "think a little further, and what I am really doing is challenging the reader to prove his own existence as palpably as I am proving mine by the act of writing" (*Memoirs?* 28). There is a mutuality of objective presence implied in this comment. Johnson shares with Robbe-Grillet his sense that the coexistence of things in a space to which man adds consciousness of his own existence is apprehended in a very concrete manner as a thing even within the text (see Bachelard 203). Lived experience and space are not constituted by either a mere "frame" or a neutral form or container, but by a social morphology expressed through function and structure (see Lefebvre *Everyday Life* 94). Johnson evokes and integrates the tension is of man's relation to nature itself and to being. He says, "For me the act of writing is a way of not becoming insane. Life is chaos, writing is a way of ordering the chaos" (Burns 92). In reviewing his work in his final critical commentary in *Memoirs?* Johnson admits:

> Even in this introduction I am trying to make patterns, to impose patterns on the chaos, in the doubtful interest of helping you (and myself) to understand what I am saying. When lecturing on the same material, I ought to drop my notes, refer to them in any chaotic order. *Order* and *chaos*, are opposites, too. (17-18)

Now at the beginning of a new millenium, in a world recognizing a paradoxically disordered, complexly-ordered chaos within nature, Johnson's novels could acquire a renewed contemporaneous interest. This is even more necessary at a moment when in critical thought the plurality and fragmentariness of postmodernity is being questioned, particularly since he uses many of the techniques and perceptions associated with literary postmodernism to determine a located and politically-relevant critique of society and the individual. In so doing and with his focus upon truth, he creates from the very elements of ludic topography and the collapse of certainties an entirely differently-centered ideology of representation when his concepts are compared critically with most postmodern accounts. Hence, whether for contemporary critics Johnson seems either an *ersatz* or a serious theorist, he deserves his place in literary

and critical culture and his work deserves further careful exegesis and re-evaluation in a theoretical context.

Notes

1 *Albert Angelo* (1964) and *Aren't You Rather Young to be Writing Your Memoirs?* (1973) are available in New Directions US reprints, *Christie Malry's Own Double-Entry* (1973) has been re-issued by Bloodaxe Books and moreover all three appear to be pencilled in for an omnibus publication by Picador in 2000. In Autumn 1999 Picador reprinted a revised edition of *The Unfortunates* (1969). Since this latter novel is paginated within each separate section separately and is unbound, all reference and quotation alludes to the first few words of each such section to facilitate identification of the citations. A full set of Johnson (apart from the first novel) is available in German translation. His first novel, *Travelling People* (1963), Johnson disowned effectively. In this paper direct quotations from Johnson's chief works will be cited in the text with an abbreviated form of each title. Editions used are not always the first edition publication due to availability difficulties (even the British Library cannot offer all of his work).

2 See the work particularly of Roy Bhaskar, Pierre Bordieu, Frederick Jameson, and Edward Pols amongst many others.

3 And certainly not in the Thames as Patrick Parrinder appears to conclude from his apparently close reading in *The Failure of Theory: Essays on Criticism and Contemporary Fiction.*

4 In a recent conversation with myself in the British Library on 27th January 2000, official biographer of Johnson, Jonathan Coe, informed me that in *Albert Angelo* Johnson inserts almost unaltered (apart from names) actual essays written by pupils that he himself taught while a supply teacher in Holloway, North London.

5 Much in the manner of figures such as Vaneigem, Merleau-Ponty, Sartre, Lefebvre, Marcuse and so forth in texts far too numerous to cite. Nevertheless such discourse is rare as the primary and conscious function of a novel itself, particularly a British one.

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