

## **The Sadism of the Author or the Masochism of the Reader?**

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We're talking about novels, after all, and novels, even gloomy ones, are supposed to cheer us up, to provide recompense, when life isn't all it should be. Supposed, in short, to give us pleasure.

Aren't they?

(Jonathan Coe 2004: 9)

The symposium giving rise to this collection and the thriving of the B.S. Johnson Society both indicate that there is something exceptional going on with the literary and academic community's relationship with this author, something we (collectively) still haven't quite fathomed. In order to attempt to identify the source of Johnson's fascination, I want to discuss the author-reader relationship as it comes into focus in his novels since, implicitly and explicitly, this is a recurring issue in academic studies of Johnson's work (see White 2011).

The roles of reader and writer are a given of any reading transaction, though the nature of, and assumptions underlying, their relationship may be more or less explicit from case to case. Johnson's writing, however, includes some notorious authorial interventions, statements and declarations that suggest that complete authorial control of the reading experience is his goal, perhaps most (in)famously: 'to the extent that a reader can impose his own imagination on my words, then that piece of writing is a failure' (1973a: 28). Is it necessary that, in order for Johnson to have any readers at all, his readers submit to this attitude? Or are readers really being issued an invitation to exercise other faculties, and search out other modes of pleasure in Johnson's work, as David James (2007) has suggested? If so, what are these pleasures?

My first contention is that you wouldn't be reading this if B. S. Johnson's works did not have an effect on their readers and that the nature of that effect wasn't distinct and memorable. What follows examines whether our interest is because of –or in spite of– this author's apparent hostility and will pursue questions of readerly consent regarding what we, as readers and academics, are

prepared to accept from an author. I will consider these issues by drawing on recent criticism and glancing at *Albert Angelo* (1964), but primarily through examples drawn from Johnson's later works: the novels *The Unfortunates* (1969), *House Mother Normal* (1971) and *Christie Malry's Own Double Entry* (1973b) and the pieces of prose that make up the collection *Aren't You Rather Young to Be Writing Your Memoirs* (1973a).

### **'Challenging the reader to prove his own existence'**

Johnson's polemical 'Introduction' to the collection *Aren't You Rather Young to be Writing Your Memoirs* shows an author figure frustrated that readers are not already demanding more from their writers, many of whom appear to be satisfied with the dressing-up box of mainstream fiction. The following quotation from the 'Introduction' is a recurrent feature in Johnson studies.

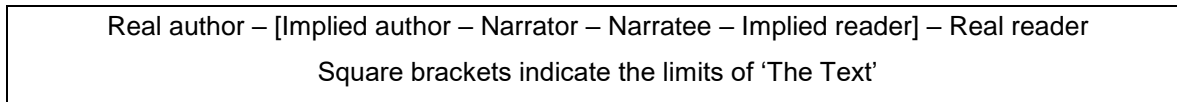
I want my ideas expressed so precisely that the very minimum of room for interpretation is left. Indeed I would go further and say that to the extent that a reader can impose his own imagination on my words, then that piece of writing is a failure. I want him to see my (vision), not something conjured 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. That may be thought anti-reader; but 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. (1973a: 28)

Carol Watts has used the quotation to highlight its implications about the differences in the roles of writer and reader and the 'non-identity' between them. (2007: 82) David James sees this statement as an acknowledgement that the 'discrepancy between intention and outcome [is] a fact of life for any writer.' (2007: 35) I would like to consider the nature of the reader that Johnson

constructs in the above statement, however. There are no conventional authorial assumptions of shared outlook, reading experience and class background. Johnson's implied reader appears to be male, unknown to him, untrustworthy, insufficiently open-minded, and of dubious existence. In short, someone needing to be challenged at a number of levels. The relationship between B. S. Johnson and his readers is combative and attritional, then. The challenges presented to the reader by Johnson's work are keyed by this unsettling encounter with an authorial voice that does not address us as implied ciphers. As Philip Pacey says, 'Books as personal as these exact a personal response' (1972: 64) and in the rejection of the standard contract between reader and writer, and the apparent refusal of the reader's privilege of imagining for themselves, we, Johnson's readers, are given a challenge, and perhaps an insult. How do we react to it?

The 'Introduction' to *Aren't You Rather Young to be Writing Your Memoirs* (1973a) is the published form of a long-lived document or repeated set of ideas that have been dated by Coe to at least as early as 1965 (2004: 205n). In it Johnson, in the role of an author, comes close to recognising what Roland Barthes expressed in 1968 as 'The Death of the Author'. As Zouaoui argues he does so by defying it (2011: 130). Zouaoui further perceives 'the extent to which Johnson was at a crossroads in terms of literary movements and modes of thinking. His modernist pursuit of an ideal of aesthetic autonomy clashes with a post-modernist tendency to erase subjectivity.' (2011: 141-2) I have argued elsewhere (White 2002) that writing can never 'erase subjectivity' only multiply it. As soon as reading occurs the reader's curiosity and hypothesizing about narratorial (or indeed authorial) identity is activated. Though undoubtedly working 'at a crossroads in ... modes of thinking' Johnson's texts exhibit an ongoing quest to improve communication with readers; to set aside or make clear what is fictional; to get to grips better with intractable reality; to be certain to affect or gain a reaction from real readers. In so doing, he is making an attempt at 'proving his existence' (1973a: 28) or, in other words, that he is not ready to be declared dead. In structuralist terminology we find Johnson, the author, trying to occupy

the space held in the text by 'implied author.' (The following diagram may be helpful. It is adapted from Seymour Chatman's 1978 diagram as cited and discussed in Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan 1983: 86-9)



The implied author constructed from Johnson's texts, may certainly differ from the real one, as seen in Coe (2004), Mengham (2007), Barrett (2007) and other essays in this volume, but Johnson is nevertheless an example of an author where the apparent discrepancy between the implied and the actual is relatively limited.

The purpose of Johnson's presence in, and manipulation of, his texts' forms (see White 2005: 113-7) is intended to reach beyond the insubstantial and unsatisfying 'Implied Reader' to the material and real person beyond. But what manner of contact is generated? Mainstream popular fiction often uses the 'pleasurable unpleasurable tension' (Bersani cited in Zouaoui 2011: 142) of suspense to entice and addict its readers. What's in reading for those who prefer so-called experimental avant-garde texts? A challenge? An opportunity for the exploration of new literary territory or forms? In so doing we must consent to cede power to the text (and its author), but only to whatever extent suits us. Reading, and re-reading, B. S. Johnson forms a particular challenge that may be define the edge of our readerly comfort zone.

### **Readerly pleasures and pains: the rationing of entertainment**

I cannot help feeling that there's an almost masochistic enjoyment in reading Johnson's works. The 'Disintegration' section of *Albert Angelo* that breaks out of that novel's previously more conventional narrative twenty pages from the end confesses: 'It is about frustration' (1964: 169). About the frustration of the writer not being able to write because of the need to make a living, certainly, but also

about the frustration of conventional literary desires and outcomes. The effect of *Albert Angelo* is to bring home that the reading experience is one of not being in control. Blurbs, covers, reviews, generic identification are all ways in which the paraphernalia of literature not only attempt to draw us in, but attempt to prevent nasty shocks of the *Albert Angelo* kind. Being unable to predict the nature of the experience awaiting us inside a book is not everyone's idea of pleasure but, in the same way that sado-masochistic relationships depend upon the masochist's consent, any author's ability to recruit readers relies on the willing of those readers to trust them. To what extent are we willing to submit to an author's control? Why should we consent to do so? What proportion of pain (or frustration) is dished out compared to the provision of pleasure in Johnson's texts?

In *Christie Malry's Own Double-entry* (1973b) Johnson gives a fictional version of his above critique of the reader's use of their imagination:

I have often read and heard said, many readers apparently prefer to imagine the characters for themselves. This is what draws them to the novel, that it stimulates their imagination ! Imagining my characters, indeed ! Investing them with characteristics quite unknown to me, or even at variance with such descriptions as I have given ! Making Christie fair when I might have him dark, for an instance, a girl when I have shown he is a man ? What writer can compete with the reader's imagination ! (51)

The outraged tone, indicated by the exclamation marks, ought to make clear that we are not to take this seriously, but there is a pay-off only a few pages later. After describing a sex scene between Christie and the Shrike involving a vacuum cleaner (don't try this at home, reader, technology has moved on) the narrator tells us that: 'in the pleasantest course of time Christie and the Shrike were able to enjoy almost simultaneous orgasms of unforgettable proportions and intensities. / Now there is something on which the reader may exercise his

imagination !' (57-8) This oscillation between authorial prescription of reaction and (intended?) pleasure or entertainment can, I suggest, be seen throughout Johnson's work. We might call it the rationing of entertainment. Constraints of space require a few brief examples from the later works to suffice to demonstrate how Johnson attempts to constrain his readers and ration their pleasures.

*The Unfortunates* (1969) offers Johnson's most extreme experiment in the materiality of the text, with its memorable and marketable format of a box filled with 27 separate sections. Jonathan Coe notes that there is the prospect of 'fun' with this form, but that the subject (a memorial of a friend who has died of cancer) doesn't take up this option (1999: x). Similarly the possibilities of endless variations and combinations in twenty-five of the separate sections are framed by two sections of the unbound book being labelled 'First' and 'Last'. The reader's potentially infinite freedom must be apparently be contained. But there is more to the constraining of the form than this, as Judith Mitchell (2007) identifies, since the infinite is not really an option. Readers do not, generally, embark on reading texts that they know to be unfinished. There are certainly exceptions where there is no possibility of completion (Johnson's *See the Old Lady Decently* (1975) is one), but usually readers' decisions are based in good faith, with serial publication or novel series, that the work will be finished. The possibility of an endless and unresolved text opened up by the radical formal changes of *The Unfortunates* is not something Johnson could sensibly invite readers into. Doubly so when the novel is about another man's life and death from the author's perspective. The fact is that novels are finite forms, even if the possibilities of the novel are infinite. *The Unfortunates* fixes beginning and end and 'seeks to draw attention to that dilatory space of the middle, the passing of time between birth and death, first and last. In its circling it is attempting to delay the inevitable; but the ordering of the middle ... matters little ..., given our knowledge of the start and end points.' (Mitchell 2007: 62) It is undeniable that novels and lives are both finite and that in the midst of both 'The end is coming, truly' (1973b: 82), but the unusual form of *The Unfortunates* ultimately reveals something more profound: 'the truth of all texts' which is that 'all texts, however conventional or

unconventional in form, invite the active, imaginative participation of the reader (however much Johnson might seek to deny or avert this).' (Mitchell 2007: 60) While the author figure of *Christie Malry's Own Double-entry* can humourously recognise this interaction as a competitive one between reader and writer (see above), Johnson's explicit authorial pronouncements, however, tend to indicate that he has little faith that readers can be persuaded to engage at all.

Critical predictions about possible readers' responses to perceived mismatches in his choices regarding the form and content of *The Unfortunates* made Johnson particularly disgruntled (see Coe 2004: 269-70). David James makes the point that evaluation of the validity of Johnson's devices was 'a demand directed outwards at his audience; but it was equally directed inwards, part of his own, self-scrutinising sensibility.' (2007: 36) Karen Zouaoui (2011) suggests that Johnson is a masochistic writer in her psychoanalytic update of Patrick Parrinder's (1977) puritan version of Johnson. In the psychoanalytic reading the supposedly unresponsive reader becomes a stick for the author to beat himself with. As Zouaoui says: '[this is] the author's predicament. How ... can he still be writing to be read and yet reject the necessary mark his reader will leave on his work through his interpretation?' (2011: 141) Clearly he can't. It is not possible to eliminate the contradictions in Johnson's stated attitudes. What we can do is to consider how the predicament they create is reflected in Johnson's writing and how readers of his works respond to its presence. Once again, it is worth considering the reciprocity necessary to a sado-masochistic relationship and, in particular, the ways in which it depends on the masochist consenting to things that from some – perhaps most – perspectives don't sound pleasurable at all. Zouaoui usefully cites Bersani's definition of 'pleasurable unpleasurable tension' (2011: 142). Might this describe what we get from reading Johnson? Between forty and fifty years old, Johnson's texts still have the ability to ruffle their readers' feathers by challenging them, incriminating them in fictional or biographical voyeurism and calling on them to give an account of themselves.

## **Controlling Intimacy**

*House Mother Normal* (1971) offers readers an experience that does not sound in the least pleasurable: 'Old age, and particularly increasing senility, is the most fearful challenge we all have to face, yet to shrink away from it can gain us nothing and only make the final shock greater.' (1971 dust jacket text) It is also uninvitingly rigorous in structure: with nine twenty-one page internal monologues all covering the same hour and location. But once again, as with *The Unfortunates*, the unique structure is framed: an introductory page explains the following sections' non-monologue portraits of the characters, with their indications of percentage mobility and Correct Question (CQ) counts, and provides a plot summary telling us that we will find the 'friends': 'dining...singing, working, playing, travelling, competing, discussing and finally being entertained.' (6) This summary turns out to be euphemistic, not least because the 'entertainment' is a strip show by the House Mother culminating in a sexual act with her dog (disturbing, but played for comedy: 'Faster Ralphie we're getting near the end of the page!' (202)). On the final, extra page to the last monologue (by the House Mother) we read her acknowledgement that:

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 stills expects me to be his 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 a laugh! (204)



But whose laugh? Who is most embarrassed and discomforted by this ending?  
Who suffers most? Reader or writer?

The reader, having embarked upon reading this novel, is subjected to the pretence of fiction and careless (lack of comfort) authorial manipulation of its characters, but the reader surely knew what they were getting into, as the bracket indicates, and Johnson quotes this line in his 'Introduction' to *Aren't you Rather Young to Be Writing Your Memoirs* to reiterate his awareness of the unconvincing nature of fiction. 'What a laugh!' suggests we have had nothing but entertainment from such a transaction and must be happy.

Yet this passage leads us somewhere else, too: In *House Mother Normal* the dignity of the elderly characters is presented against the despicable control of the individual House Mother who, as Parrinder argues (1977: 52), can be seen as an authorial self-portrait. At the end of a text that has taken us into the fictional minds and failing bodies of its elderly protagonists, to ultimately enter the writer's skull (not mind) is a peculiarly telling turn of phrase. There is bodily penetration here for, surely, mental intimacy is just as -if not more- personal. The skull is also emblematic of death (alas, poor Yorick!) and, perhaps, of undeath if we recognise in Johnson the author who refuses to recognise theoretical proofs of his non-existence and die. The skull is also *human* but hollowed out, because its contents have been excavated and have ended up in books: 'I write especially to exorcise, to remove from myself, from my mind, the burden [sic] having to bear some pain, the hurt of some experience : in order that it may be over there, in a book, and not here in my mind.' (1973a: 18-19) Here is another contradiction then, we enter the most intimate relationship with the writer only to be told that what we are being given constitutes mental cast-offs and discards. Rather than not fooling readers, Johnson's work regularly promises great intimacy but devalues it, questions the honesty of the process by which it is achieved and challenges the motives that drive us to seek it.

## Our Own Devious Purposes

Johnson had few apparent qualms about using sexual material in his work, often while writing in confessional rather than fictional mode (see Tew in this volume for precedents). Frequently he links the inclusion of such content to the reader's wishes, however, rather than his own. Certainly there *is* a voyeuristic potential in reading, an element that Johnson is keen to exploit and expose, as he is with so many other literary niceties. The short story 'Instructions For the Use of Women; or Here, You've Been Done!' asks its reader 'how about some sex? That I know you will enjoy : so many commodities sold through sex testify to the stone certainty of that truth !' (84). What the story goes on to deliver, however, describes a sexual encounter during which the narrator's foreskin develops a blister and the narrator ultimately asks the reader:

Did you find the bubble bit interesting ? I doubt you can have read anything quite like it before. And it is true, however it reads to you. By 'quite like it' I mean anything so curiously comic and uncomic, in just that way. Or perhaps you were embarrassed ? In that case it may have been good for you : have you thought of that ?

Johnson's examination of the reader's compulsion to read is invariably and intimately bound up with his own compulsion to write. In the 'Disintegration' section of *Albert Angelo* the revealed author figure admits 'I have to write, I have to tell the truth, it's compulsive, yet at the same time agonising' (1964: 168). This need to write takes telling as its first object, rather than being understood.

Zouaoui says:

He needs the reader and yet denies the role they have to play. This double-pull [...] denotes guilt at deriving easy pleasure from writing and reading, [while] he cannot break free from the repetition of its patterns and reiterates the experience many times over, for, *in fine*, he

needs his readers to be able to project themselves into the text. (2011: 141)

These readers might choose to submit to his desires, but how can you predict what people will do? In *Christie Malry's Own Double-Entry* the authorial narrator laments: 'Lots of people never had a chance, are ground down, and other clichés. Far from kicking against the pricks, they love their condition and vote conservative' (82) Rather like Groucho Marx as Rufus T. Firefly, president of Fredonia in *Duck Soup* (1932), who declares war on his belligerent neighbors because they might insult him by refusing an offer of peace, Johnson recognizes it is an act of faith to offer his writing to an audience, but what if they don't like it anyway (bastards!).

The resulting oscillation between concern and contempt in the writer/reader relationship repeatedly makes it onto the pages of Johnson's texts. In *Christie Malry* the protagonist operates in a world where the value of other humans can only be accounted for as £1.30 worth of constituent chemicals, and though we may also share Christie's embattled feelings about that world, we are not allowed to forget the mediating presence of the author figure who delimits what we can know about it. Two examples may suffice to demonstrate this. In the first, a solicitous narrator notes: 'You must be curious about Christie's father. So am I.' (80) No further information on this subject follows, however. And, in the second example, while describing Christie's homemade device to turn off the power at Tapper's factory the narrator fills the place where details logically follow with '...which I am not going to bother to invent on this occasion.' (101) We see in these two examples different inflections of the same device (a refusal to invent), but in the first both reader and author share thwarted curiosity (even if one of them ought to do something about it), while in the second the absent information is absent because of authorial fiat or wish. The needs of readers are thus self-reflexively present in the text but their powerlessness to have them acted upon is emphasized. Ask and you shall not receive, sometimes seems to

be Johnson's attitude to his readers, one generated by his clear awareness that if his readers are happy to figure it out for themselves, they don't need him.

This attitude is particularly apparent in the 'pieces of prose' of the collection *Aren't You Rather Young to be Writing Your Memoirs*. The title story tantalizes the reader with the assumption that they (readers of fiction) like gunplay by recounting an enigmatic and unresolved example from Johnson's experience. Here is the author willfully not giving the readers what he appears to think they want:

But you can provide your own surmises or even your own ending, as you are inclined. For that matter, I have conveniently left enough obscure or even unknown for you to suggest your own beginning ; and your own middle, as well, if you reject mine. But I know you love a story with gunplay in it. (1973a: 41)

The reader's pleasure and benefit is clearly a concern, but how to deal with the perverse expectations gained elsewhere is a theme running through the collection. 'Instructions for the Use of Women; or Here, You've Been Done!' argues it's confessional awkwardness may have been good for the reader, as we have already seen, but patches things up by ending on a joke. The seedy first person narrative 'These Count as Fictions' ends when an unknown reader provides its narrator with a copy of the *XLCR Mechanical Plot-Finding Formula* which is subsequently used to structure the gloomy memoir 'Everyone Knows Somebody Who's Dead' that ends the collection with the words: 'There. I have fully satisfied the XLCR rules, I think. Popular acclaim must surely follow.' Appearing in 1973, this last line is ironic and bitter.

Throughout all the examples of Johnson's prose mentioned above, for every element of the text that flaunts authorial control, there's a self-reflexive recognition that though the space is left for it there is a lack of feedback from the reader. The motivation for writing may be personal, but the writer always knows

or at least imagines there's a reader at the end of it all, reading. 'I write perforce for myself, and the satisfaction has to be almost all for myself ; and I can only hope there are some few people like me who will see what I am doing, and understand what I am saying, and use it for their own devious purposes.' (1973a: 29) Johnson may poke and provoke his implied reader as much as he likes but there is inevitably no immediate response. In this gap he is left to worry whether it is extended because the reader hasn't understood, or because the author hasn't got it right.

Given these stark possibilities it becomes entirely predictable that Johnson would rail against reviewers and critics who summarized and dismissed his work, especially since he saw that they were interposing themselves between his work and mass (or at least larger) readership and daring to imagine they understood his intentions and the likely reactions of readers. His shifts of publishers were undoubtedly financially motivated but were also often justified with the idea that the next one might succeed in marketing his books more successfully since the only reliable marker of readers (however flawed) is sales figures. Johnson's pursuit of the public library lending rights for authors, though again part of a quest for financial stability, may also be seen as another attempt to discover, and therefore move closer to understanding, the true extent of his readership.

Johnson flaunts his power over his readers because he needs them, desperately. They need to play along, to submit or consent, yet what he wants is not (just) power but close, intimate communication. The best way this can be achieved is to make uniquely challenging, original and engaging avant-garde texts that experiment but remain fully accessible. The works avoid and reject conventional reading positions, conventional vanilla realism, and boredom, though they never challenge us to the extent of being really difficult, or by flirting with unreadability, nonetheless they often succeed in making us question our role as readers. In reading them we expose ourselves to self-reflexive manipulation, flaunting of authorial power, demands that we adopt the same worldview, grotesque subject matter, excessive intimacy. We might also find Johnson's cumulative portrait of the reader of his work as prurient, confused, helpless,

enmeshed in chaos and doomed to die hard to take, but it is no less accurate because of that. It is also –it cannot help but be– a solipsistic self-portrait of the author unable to know if he has reached anyone who can share recognition of that depiction with him.

David James (2007: 33) says of *Albert Angelo's* 'Disintegration' section that it calls for 'a more collusive relationship with an obstreperous writer' and this holds true for all Johnson's works. Obstreperous, but not sadistic, Johnson was a writer who refused to accept the limits on his control of the reading process and refused to cease reaching out to the elusive readership that might embrace his work but to whom he could –frustratingly– never feel an actual connection to. Sadly, he was looking for us about forty years too soon.

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