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# B. S. Johnson: A Topological Approach

COLES, Thomas Alexander Cazel  
M.A. (Hons.)

Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Philosophy (M.Phil.) by research.

School of Critical Studies  
College of Arts  
University of Glasgow

December 2013

### Abstract

Johnson is concerned with the contradictions of writing. He attempts to communicate and entertain truthfully. His project was intimately concerned with the problems of mimesis and self-reflexivity. This leads to a series of contradictions where fiction and reality meet that he, and his readers, find difficult to solve. Through his career Johnson developed a layered style using voices and techniques that are more difficult than usual to isolate. By using ideas of topology and interstice, this study explores these different layers.

### Note:

I give my thanks to the British Library Manuscripts staff for their help at early stages in this study.

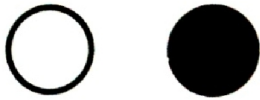
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# Note on Primary Texts and Citations

Where major works of B. S. Johnson are referenced an abbreviated form of the title is used. The list below provides first a full bibliographic record of the original publication details, as well as different editions used. Page numbers refer to the second cited edition throughout.

- TP* — (1963)                    *Travelling People*, London: Constable.  
(1967) *Travelling People*, London: Panther.  
MS Consulted, British Library, 2010.
- AA* — (1964)                    *Albert Angelo*, London: Constable.  
(2004) in *Omnibus*, London: Picador.  
MS Consulted, British Library, 2010.
- T* — (1966)                    *Trawl*, London: Marin Secker and Warburg.  
(2004) in *Omnibus*, London: Picador.  
MS Consulted, British Library, 2010.
- U* — (1969)                    *The Unfortunates*, London: Panther Books.  
(1999) London: Picador.
- HMN* — (1971)                *House Mother Normal: A Geriatric Comedy*, London: Collins.  
(2004) in *Omnibus*, London: Picador.
- CMODE* — (1973)            *Christie Malry's Own Double Entry*, London: Collins.  
(2001) London: Picador.  
MS Consulted, BL 2010.
- AYRY* — (1973)            *Aren't you rather young to be writing your memoirs?* London:  
Hutchinson.
- STOLD* — (1975)            *See the Old Lady Decently*, London: Hutchinson.
- BLMS* —                    British Library Manuscripts, consulted in June 2010. At the time of writing these were not formally catalogued. The Johnson archive was received by the British Library in Winter 2009. It contains boxes of materials used in drafting each of the novels, primary and secondary resources, working manuscripts, final manuscripts, typescripts, proofs as well as correspondence and review materials. It also has notebooks used by Johnson at different periods of his life, some of which have no dates. When referencing I have indicated the box in which they were found, and a short description of the nature of the item where appropriate, and page numbers and dates if available.



The sea, the land in the distance: honed to one general level by glacial action, but broken to the sea in fissures, clefts, valleys, defiles, abscissions, cracks, gorges, rifts, ravines, gullies, and crevasses...

(*T*, p. 28)

## 1. WHY TOPOLOGY?

Emerging clearly after 1895 with the publication of Henri Poincaré's *Analysis situs*, topology belongs properly and firmly to the realm of mathematics. It is a method whereby the mathematician can discover:

...the immediate description of the structures which underlie our senses... the art of reasoning well from badly drawn figures... these figures, if they are not to deceive us, must satisfy certain conditions; the proportions may be grossly altered, but the relative positions of the different parts must not be upset... *Analysis situs*... describes the relative situation of points and lines on surfaces, without consideration of their magnitude.

(Poincaré, 2010, p. 18)

With a less specialist emphasis, Stephen Barr describes topology as, “the study of continuity... those properties of a thing that... are the most permanent – the ones that will survive distortion and stretching” (Barr, 1964, p. 2). Topology is the rending down of the concept of space to the point at which it is uninhabitable – space devoid of magnitude, space in the abstract, as an idea without any concrete reality, as simple relation. It is the study of logical linkages rather than spatial representation. Its basic grammar is the line, point, plane.

A topology, therefore, is not a *topography*, which is concerned with extension, elevation, terrain. Topography is “an exact science of measurements, while topology is the study of the qualitative properties of space, not of the quantitative ones” (Robbe-Grillet & Mistacco, 1976, p. 37). So, as a geometric diagram (the badly drawn figure) is to topology, the topographical map is to the territory. Topography is to

topology as *texture* is to *text*. The geometric diagram can be a depiction of a topological space, and a topographical map can be a depiction of a landscape, but they will never be identical to that which they depict, the mimetic quality of the representation is always in question. A diagram makes the idea of the topology too concrete, the map has made the reality of the landscape too ideal. However, while a topology can be derived from a topography (it inheres) a full topography cannot be produced from a topology. Some mappings tend towards the topological (for example, consider the ubiquitous Harry Beck map of the London Underground), and emphasise connectivity at the expense of distance. Both techniques of representation do not – and cannot – be sufficient to that 'space' which they would represent, as would be discovered were an attempt made to navigate London above ground with only a tube map. Representation introduces distortions, and topological abstraction potentially leaves out crucial information relating to how to inhabit space, information which cannot be read back in to the abstraction.

In normal language a 'space' is somewhere we need, a home, where we can put things, put ourselves, avoid rigorously, or enter in order to take part in some action. A human space is somewhere to be, something to fill. However, with topology normal space is abolished. To the mathematician a topological space is a set of possible positions with some logic determining how these positions are related to each other. A topological space is completely abstract – it has no dimensions, no material reality. The number line of  $\infty \dots 3, 2, 1, 0, -1 \dots -\infty$  is such a space. So in what way, then, is a novel a space? Can a novel, apropos Alain Robbe-Grillet's *Jealousy*, simply count banana trees? In what way are the numbers of trees more or less important to the novel than the death of a centipede? Can an act of counting build a novel? Can an act of accounting, such as that carried out by Christie in Bryan Stanley Johnson's *Christie Malry's Own Double Entry*, be the basis for a novel? Is the act of accounting an occurrence in the novel, or is the novel a manifestation of the way in which accounting orders the world? Is a reading simply a representation of a text, or must some other transformation take place? In normal language a 'figure' is a shape, a character, an image, but for the topological mind all images are badly formed, and it is the survival of certain relations which is important. When it comes to works like *Christie Malry* what is essential, the text, or the operations that are rendered in text?

Why then, deal with texts using the grammar of topology? In what way can these mathematical concepts provide tools for the literary critic? If the central aim of topology is to analyse the logical structure of spaces and objects while avoiding details (errors) of representation (size, colour, material, detail) then how can it be

used to deal with character, description, representation? In one of many essays on the French *nouveau roman* Bruce Morrissette outlines two possible defences of what he calls the “structural relation among contiguous and interpenetrating textual surfaces... [the] fictional topology” (Morrissette, 1972, p. 46). The first is to suggest that both literature and mathematics share intellectual categories – that it is possible for fictional spaces and mathematical spaces to be understood by the same epistemological tools. The second defence is that mathematical objects can become literary objects by analogy. In his *Topographies* J. Hillis Miller asserts that an “essential distortion” will always result from the performance of a theoretical method anywhere other than where it was first formulated (Miller, 1995, pp. 335-7), implying that if this work is to take a topological approach (much as were we to take a topographical) it must be satisfied that the distortions it introduces are worthwhile and productive. Susan Sontag outlines the orientation of an interpretation which wishes to find what is fundamental in a text as having the aim “not to find the maximum amount of content in a work of art, much less to squeeze more content out of the work than is already there. Our task is to cut back content so that we can see the thing at all” (Sontag, 2009, p. 14). Instead of creating new analytical buildings on top of the page, a fictional or literary topology excavates the page.

Crucial to topology, homeomorphism is a quality of spaces or figures which have the same topological structure. They are said to be homeomorphic only when they can through a continuous transformation be reconfigured one to the other. A common example in normal (Euclidean) space is a coffee mug and a doughnut – they are homeomorphic to each other as they both are single surfaces with a hole. In *The Pound Era* Hugh Kenner finds this concept at work in the method of James Joyce, showing that Joyce “discerned homeomorphic structures in the *Odyssey*, *Hamlet*, *Don Giovanni*, *The Count of Monte Cristo*, and his own life” because all are stories about journeys, fathers and returns. Joyce's great innovation was to discover that if you choose to tell one story, you may as well tell all the others with the same structure, because “...all versions of the same plot, whatever the 'viewpoint,' have the same system of interconnectedness” (Kenner, 1971, pp. 169-70, p. 33). This analysis demonstrates that something important remains even when all details of character, setting, language, epoch, and media are excised. For example when each reader meets the events of Johnson's *The Unfortunates* in a different order, after the sections of the texts have been shuffled, can we say that the general readership of the novel has read the same text? Would *Hamlet* still be *Hamlet* if it was told backwards? Further to this, is it possible that the topology of other aspects of texts might remain – such as character or image – even though the chronological plotting has been disrupted. A literary topology would then not only be the study of plots or

of image, but of how textual objects are related within the space of a book, and how those relations are transformed by reading.

The danger, and value, in this deconstruction is that in cutting back those badly drawn figures – what is normally seen as fundamental, i.e. content – and looking for a topology behind the text, the text itself falls to pieces. The problematic core of text is not only what is atypical, but also what is alogical:

The deconstructive critic seeks to find, by this process of retracing, the element in the system studied which is alogical, the thread in the text in question which will unravel it all, or the loose stone which will pull down the whole building. The deconstruction, rather, annihilates the ground on which the building stands by showing that the text has already annihilated that ground, knowingly or unknowingly. Deconstruction is not a dismantling of the structure of a text but a demonstration that it has already dismantled itself. Its apparently solid ground is no rock but thin air.

(Miller, 1976a, p. 341)

In his 'The Deconstructive Angel' M. H. Abrams outlines his problems with this technique, calling deconstruction, quite accurately, an “abysmal vision of the textual world of literature”. He claims that Miller is in fact simply taking part in a collective nightmare while “suspended by the labyrinthine lines of a textual web over the abyss” (Abrams, 1977, p. 436), from which he will awake the moment he begins to use language to create meaning, to argue, or to write. Abrams wishes to assert that it is possible for the critic to find that “whatever else the author also meant, he meant, at a sufficient approximation, at least *this...*” (Abrams, 1977 p. 437). For Miller, and deconstruction, this is an impossible aspiration:

Topology, topography, the mathematics of knots... are the investigation of configurations on a surface that may be twisted or waved, but that has no depth... it is in principle impossible to move behind the configurations to something that lies behind them. There is no attainable behind or within. Only the knots and surfaces exist, along with the possibility of tracing and retracing the intricate lines they make. These lines and surfaces seem to be twisted and turned by some force outside themselves, but no way leads from them to anything outside them. Wherever one goes, whatever way one takes, one remains on the surface or on the line. No lines or paths lead out of that place to the place. The “it” therefore stays placeless, atypical, without location on any map. It is without ascertainable face, figure, or feature. Any attempts to give it a face only deface it, as a critical essay defaces a literary work, writes all over it, perhaps in the way vandals deface a public monument by giving it a new face.

(Miller, 1995, p. 53)

Topology describes the way in which the spaces and connections of the text are configured, giving rise to the possibility of meaning, rather than simply investigating

whether the text is sufficient to a pre-existing object, the 'it' or the 'this' which like butter spilled on the original manuscript (*STOLD*, p. 15) supposedly anchors the text to reality. Miller and his tradition assert that there is no reality behind the topological web, there is not even an abyss below it. Outside of the text, there is nothing.

In this study of B. S. Johnson I will take a topological approach. This will require the drawing in of various different modes of criticism, but especially key will be work done by Miller and others on deconstruction, approaches taken by various critics to the *nouveau roman*, and an exploration of debates concerning processes of discourse and truth telling. Beyond this, the aim will be to look for those places where topology itself fails, where it is not sufficient to explain the text. What happens to a text when an author “deliberately excludes an object, or a verb, or an essential component” (Kanaganayakam, 1985, p. 88) of the normally functioning text? In this study of space and text, what becomes most interesting is the features of writing that seem to deny space, to belong in no place, to leave room where none is apparent and to make visible spaces which do not exist. An attempt to map the topoi of a text becomes a search for the point at which the mapping process fails.

## 2. INTERSTICES

Why read B. S. Johnson, in particular, topologically? Johnson the literary figure is himself, we could argue, *atopos* – ἄτοπος: out of place, irregular, improper – and his body of work has until recent years been left out of most canonical edifices. There is of course no reason that it should be included, and rather than looking for any sort of rehabilitation<sup>1</sup>, my intention in this study is to negotiate with Johnson's textual practice in a manner which does not propose to attempt that process of normalization or inclusion from a periphery into a recognized history. The "compulsive matchings and rankings" (Jameson, 1991, p. 301), the "heaping up [of] diverse similarities" (Foucault, 2002, p. xx), which still makes up a major part of some criticism represents a reflexive ordering of objects by category where the spectrum is often (though not always) divided arbitrarily (McKeon, 2002, p. 25). The "drunk who tells you the story of his troubles in a pub relies on the same curiosity" (AYRY, p. 15) as many histories of the progression of literature through the study of biography, and although there is nothing wrong with drunks, from this curiosity "...the characteristic marks of pseudohistory reappear: the obsession with historical rise and decline, the never-ending search for the date of the fall and the name of the serpent" (Jameson, 1971, pp. 323-4). Criticism must not be content to tell stories about books and argue for their position in a canon, it is crucial that it should also show the social and historical dialectic involved in the production of works of literature: how they create, fulfil, mitigate and *emerge from* social needs. If there is a value in observing that Johnson's work does not fit easily in literary history, it is that it may indicate there is something in his work that exceeds the usual tactics of interpretation.

This is not to say that there is no value in producing a history of literature, only to suggest that there is no static history, and that the choice of history informs the reading of texts. There is nothing about a reading that cannot be suspended and re-determined in a contrary manner. In this process, topology has three key uses. First, structurally, topology not only isolates content and meaning from the formal and logical techniques of production, presentation, and engagement with a receiving agent, but also identifies and traces the survival of the narrative and technological shapes of that presentation through history in order to translate them afresh in changed circumstances. A particular commodity, like the novel, may take a historical form and contain historical content – but the socially determined position the novel

<sup>1</sup> Many do feel this sense of care for Johnson, his friend and contemporary explained that retrospectively she felt... "obliged... to make B. S. Johnson, now dead for ten years, comprehensible to a modern reader, as a person and as a writer." (Figes, 1985, p. 71)

inhabits (or finds itself in) is part of a topological matrix of productive relations. Franco Moretti suggests that the range of stories which can be told depends fundamentally on the society they are set in, pointing out that “different spaces are not just different landscapes... they are different *narrative matrixes*” (Moretti, 1998, p. 84). This makes clear that texts will rarely find themselves read through the matrix they emerged from, and that as readings they find themselves embedded in different social constellations. Johnson sought not only to reconfigure the novel, but to negotiate within and against the standard mode of production of narrative that assumed the conceptual framework of the reader is homeomorphic to that of the writer. Secondly, topology demonstrates how connections and meanings that at first appear to be barred may be traversed by other routes. And thirdly, historically. Although the author himself did not encounter them, Johnson’s texts have persisted into a different technological, political and economic world. Critical readers need to work with a Johnson who post-dates these and other events and developments, and topology is a way of productively collapsing traditional historical method. In short investigating topological arrangements — spaces, shapes, boundaries, continuities and breaks — is not to re-enact Johnson, but to *repeat* or reimpose his radicality, “to retrieve the same impulses in today’s constellation” (Žižek, 2002, p. 11), in an act of translation and transformation. This work will not only be a study of a historical B. S. Johnson, but of a contemporary B. S. Johnson.

David James points out in his essay 'The (W)hole Affect' that although texts such as “*Albert Angelo* [render] redundant the monolithic idea of a 'model reader'” (James, 2007, p. 35), readings still occur. By telling different stories about texts a parallax view can be drawn between different readings, different editions of texts, and different, often fundamentally altered, perspectives. As Albert of *Albert Angelo* describes on a night out on Liverpool Road, London:

...the walls have murals which incongruously incorporate the room's projections and abutments. Terry thinks they picture something like a decadent nineteenth-century Bari. I don't quite know what he means by this, as with a number of his remarks: they, like himself, are sort of offset to reality, as mine are, too, *but its a different offset*. [emphasis mine]

(AA, p. 53)

Texts and readings can be deformed into other states or offset against other arrangements without losing their topological structure, and if readers are truly to share a text from which they derive readings then those readings must produce comparable gestures. Although individual artefacts within them find different signifiers and referents, structurally they remain related to each other in a manner determined in the last instance — an instance which it is one of the tasks of this work

to attempt to discover — by the “inaugural power” (James, 2007, p. 28) of the material page. The materiality of the book, of the page, remains as a topographical inscription of a topological map, and to imagine that texts or meanings can be transmitted without some concrete form would be to abstract away from this fundamental aspect of text. If there is communication between author and reader, it is because the space of reading is homeomorphic to the space of writing – but these spaces communicate through the material book. As such the importance of Johnson will not simply be in his historical novelty (what he did 'first'), but in what might be achieved by orientating an analysis alongside him in today's configurations, and taking seriously his praxis.

Regarding Johnson as a confused and beleaguered figure tempts us to revert to psychologism and cast him as a martyr to experimental literary puritanism but an approach via the graphic surface requires that we *must* deal with the texts themselves first and foremost, and not the author or authorial theory.

(White, 2005, p. 87)

So, following Glyn White and Philip Tew I do not wish to “overburden Johnson’s texts with theory” (Tew, 2001, p. 248-9), or become an instance of the “*academic cunt*” (Coe, 2007, p. xvi) which Johnson presciently imagined arriving to pick his bones, the aim should not be to somehow “redeem” (Tew, 2001, p. 245) his work for the sake of a lost project. The textuality of Johnson's works will determine their meaning in the last instance, and it is through this that work can be done to understand his project in its historical and political context, not simply as a collection of “private meanings” (Coe, 2004, p. 263).<sup>2</sup> Of course it will only be by considering the “overall effect” of his novels that the essence of his practice can be reinvigorated, rather than attempting to find for it some kind of final act of justice (Tew, 2007, p. 204).

Between these tendencies — the concrete, the historic and the speculative — there is a cleft. Miller says of his own deconstructive method, that:

...readings attempt to take each text at its word without presuming to know beforehand how its generic placement ought to impose a way of reading.

(Miller, 1995, p. 5)

This aspiration is misguided if, as I suggest, reading itself functions only when it is an intercession between text and reader. The novel *has no words*, and it does not appear as text — *with the affordances of a text* — if it is not understood as a member

<sup>2</sup> This study makes use of private documents examined at the British Library in the newly available, but as of then (2010) unsorted and uncatalogued, B. S. Johnson archives.

of a species, or genre. Johnson always writes “a piece of what set out to be literature, *for the sake of argument* [emphasis mine]” (Coe, 2007, p. xvii). From the perspective of the *longue durée* novel genres are a “temporary structure... morphological arrangements that *last* in time, but always only for *some time*” (Moretti, 2003, p. 76). The novel itself is not a permanent form but a living artefact, “a deceptively monolithic category that encloses a complex historical process” (McKeon, 2002, p. 20). Despite the temptation to claim that form is irrelevant, it must be taken into account that the novel is still the key media categorization with which Johnson's work is engaged, even if only due to its place in social history — the novel is a real, concrete tradition and a framework for writers as well as readers. Nothing that Johnson wrote escaped entirely from the effects of this tradition.

According to Barthes (1989, p. 83) the novel is an institution (or tradition) of representation as well as a form of representation. Its is also a product of *work*. Johnson's text functions to crack, and pick holes, in both the institution and the form of the work, but more importantly he tries to combine the two senses of the production of literature:

...on the one hand, it is produced materially: books are published, plays are produced. This requires natural resources, capital and labour... On the other hand, literature is produced as a concept. Writing is continuously sorted and classified by... publishers, journals, libraries...

(Laing, 1983, p. 122)

The process of picking holes locates where the hole already was – in this gap between the material and the conceptual. Sink-holes, where the material under the surface has been washed away, point to places where the social *constitution* is no longer appropriate or sufficient to the *work* being done, and vice versa. They become, by design or by accident — differentiation is difficult — *interstices*,<sup>3</sup> spaces conducive for the ghosts of old schema of meaning, left behind by the uneven, unaligned development of social reality and representative technology (Derrida, 1994, pp. 157-162). These misalignments play, or allow for the play of, certain games within their topological potentialities.

I will be using *interstice* in various senses, referring to the spaces between elements of social reality which, like the interstitial spaces between cells in the human body, allow transfer from zone to zone, or across membranes from internal to external. An

<sup>3</sup> *AYRY*, a selection of Johnson's shorter prose including a general exposition on his theories of writing, is described on its dust-jacket as having been written “in the interstices of novels and poems and other work between 1960 and 1973”. The use of 'interstice' is particularly appropriate because it is in these critical pieces produced between other more prominent works that Johnson most explicitly lays out his theoretical arguments.

interstice is not simply a gap in a structure – it is a gap in which things happen, where certain rules are suspended. In *Negative Dialectics* Theodor Adorno describes how a philosophy and an art which are attuned, but never reduced, to each other can keep themselves productively suspended.

Common to art and philosophy is not the form, nor the forming process, but a mode of conduct that forbids pseudomorphosis. Both keep faith with their own substance through their opposites: art by making itself resistant to its meanings; philosophy by refusing to clutch at any immediate thing. What philosophy will not abandon is the yearning that animates the non-conceptual side of art, and whose fulfilment shuns the immediate side of art as mere appearance.

(Adorno, 1973, p. 15)

The artefact of the resistance, the “war for reality” (McGeough, 2007, p. 141), between things and meaning is the gap, or the interstice, which exists both on the page and within the reading as a strategy to overcome pseudomorphosis – a process which will be explored further in Chapter Five. These interstices which topologies traverse but do not close can be of two sorts, either horizontal or vertical, following John Searle's formulation in *Expression and Meaning* (1979). A horizontal interstice is the gap in between objects, or speech acts, within a text. A vertical interstice is the gap between those objects within a text, and with the author and the reader, i.e. features external to the text. Searle argues that these interstices are in fact adequations between speech act and the state of reality (and speech act and speech act), but I wish to weaken this conception almost immediately – Johnson does not produce a static ontology of the text, and therefore problematises in the tradition of Adorno's negative dialectic any attempt by either philosophy or art to clutch the immediate. Instead Johnson explores and *detonates*, to use Carol Watts' phrase, various models of how the text can be at all real or true (Watts, 2007, pp. 80-94). As Searle suggests:

As far as the *possibility* of the ontology is concerned, anything goes: the author can create any character or event he likes. As far as the *acceptability* of the ontology is concerned, coherence is a crucial consideration.

(Searle, 1979, p. 73)

Writers can create their own ontologies internal to novels, but in the work of Johnson the breakdown and introduction of interstices into his literary ontology functions to call into question wider conceptions of coherence of meaning outside the text. Johnson attempts to push coherence to breaking point and beyond – and obliges the reader to cope with and accept the results.

How this coping is achieved is not predetermined. In order to cope readers of Johnson can either place explanations into these interstices to smooth the route to an understanding — explaining them away<sup>4</sup> — or they can recognise them as important features that can be tarried with productively. An interstice is both a fissure and an impurity, a gap or an overlap which allows flow to begin, “the logical difficulties presented by a whole that contains itself are well known: narrative self-embedding is [a] source of aporia” (Dällenbach, 1986, p. 112). In Johnson’s novels “literature declares its status as an intentional source of noise” (White, 2005, p. 15), and the reader is expected to survive, even enjoy, incoherence. For him “the voice of disorder is the voice of truth” (White, 2005, p. 111). Johnson’s work disrupts the naïve idea that text can be transparently used to reproduce the intentions of the author in the minds of the readers. However, his writing is not indulgent or explicitly virtuoso, he is not interested in producing a “modernist machine-fiction... a purely positivistic space created by treating language as a mechanism with nothing in sight but itself” (Porush, 1985, p. 171). Instead the works attempt to negotiate and *refract* through these textual spaces in order to expose and make concrete the contradictions of traditional literary claims: that is, to expose the recurrent invasions of subjective fault that to a greater or lesser extent make their way into all attempts at mimesis, rendering them subjective and untruthful. Meaning, when it occurs, seems to be a local stress, a shock in the field of the page rather than an indelible mark. Johnson does not so much reject the project of “petty realism” (Thielemans, 1985, p. 81), as call into question the traditional assumptions, techniques and machinery used to produce ways of accessing what is real. He questions realism rather than dismissing it, and asks whether it should be only mimetic, or also phenomenological. *Telling stories is telling lies* – indeed “how can you convey truth in a vehicle of fiction... [when] *truth* and *fiction*... are opposites” (AYRY, p. 14) – and Johnson considers it his duty is to make plain the way in which stories lie, and to sabotage the normal modes of producing truth.

Life content cannot be readily summarized or specified since it exists within the overall framework of being (subject as an intersubjective object and entity) and is related to things in the context of life-world praxis. As Johnson comments to a television audience [in 'Fat Man on a Beach'], ‘One can learn from anything. Anything!’

(Tew, 2001, p. 88)

A reflection, an indirect truth, is not simply a representation, but neither is it direct

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<sup>4</sup> I take the approach, in which the key difficulty is in attempting to critique an author who is a constant critic of himself, that criticism risks becoming an attempt “...to fill the hole and complete the incompleteness, to arrest the movement of desire in the appropriation of the text” (Bataille, 1997, p. 3). It is through tarrying with the desire for completion that the text can best be operated.

access to the self. It is a mimetic transformation rather than a concordance. Johnson claimed by the end of his life that he had cured his writing of the “English disease” (*AYRY*, p. 22), of what T. S. Eliot outlined as the objective correlative, discovering that there is no access by analogy to non-literary features through literary technique. In *Albert Angelo* he despairs that “simply, architecture is just not poetry” (*AA*, p. 168), and it follows that writing simply is not living, and reading is not experiencing. If all is chaos how can anything except a more desperate chaos be written about it? These inaccuracies, which Johnson may consider lies, are essential to the structure of his works, and to his ethic of writing. While it may be that, for example, architecture is from one perspective homeomorphic to poetry, it cannot be from all perspectives. Are the lies inherent in analogy a kindness to human kind, which “cannot bear very much reality” (Eliot, 1969, p. 172). Or rather, does the reading public need to be kept away from totally hypertrophic literature (Porush, 1985, p. 199), where microcosm grows to the size of that which it would model, and instead be exposed gently to a measured dose of avant-garde techniques? Do readers really trust Johnson's claim that after the objective correlative “solipsism is the only truth... belief does not arise” (*T*, p. 172, also expressed in *AYRY*, p. 22)? If his works come out of a radical scepticism about the adequateness of language for understanding the world then this is not a settled position against which the writing perpetually frets, but one that “straddles the materialist and spiritual perspectives” (Bond, 2007, p. 49). Fiction may deceive, it may be an abstraction, it may be a social construct, it may have little reality, but it is not *unreal*. Richard Rorty controversially described the stakes of relativism:

'Relativism' is the view that every belief on a certain topic, or perhaps about *any* topic, is as good as every other... No one holds this view... the real issue is not between people who think one view as good as another and people who do not. It is between those who think our culture, or purpose, or intuitions cannot be supported except conversationally, and people who still hope for other sorts of support.

(Rorty, 1982, pp. 166-7)

Rorty points out that no-one is a solipsist, i.e. an epistemological and ontological relativist, in their everyday practise. No work exists without other forms of material and logical support, and it is not true to suggest that conversation, or discourse – even in the strictest sense – is not material. However, the purely empirical approach that minimizes or eradicates semiotic justifications may be the more utopian project, rather than an approach which engages with the uncanny materiality of speech and the written act. This philosophical debate is typified by a contrast between Searle and Michel Foucault where the “former uncompromisingly pairs up true sentences and objective reality; the latter equally uncompromisingly divorces truth from the

extralinguistic world” (Prado, 2006, p. 19). These two positions must be straddled.

Johnson presses a writer’s pen on the surface of the standard written page and, though it collapses, it does not produce an undifferentiated noumenal void: somehow there is still paper. Though for some readers the disorientation of the material text may be enough to appear as something approaching nonsense, there remains a trace. Adorno claims that relativism is simply an elaboration of:

...bourgeois individualism, in which the individual consciousness is taken for the ultimate and all individual opinions are accorded equal rights, as if there were no criterion of their truth... An entrepreneur... must calculate... he must believe that what he is doing is a fair exchange... The alleged social relativity of views obeys the objective law of social production under private ownership of the means of production.

(Adorno, 1973, p. 37)

If — and it is far from certain in its baldest formulation — the novel is the textual glue of bourgeois individualism, then this exposes the necessity of exposing its interstices in order to refuse to allow the bourgeois 'house of the novel' to bar its doors against the mob. In short, Johnson places gaps in his topologies as a method of de-familiarizing the realism of normal novelistic technique, drawing attention to the problematic nature of the available ontological supports and the inadequate commitment shown by most texts to finding the forms and modes appropriate to concrete social life. Literary technologies — both graphic and linguistic — usually convince the reader by becoming transparent, and by mobilizing inter-subjective hooks and matrices they produce the *truth* that the reader’s truth is in fact a reflection of the writer’s truth. However, while neither the readily transparent nor the impenetrable is used by Johnson, he creates enough dissonance to suggest that that the transparency of literature is an evasion — an evasion with very real class objectives to the suspicious mind of a “committed socialist” (Ghose, 1985, p. 31). For Johnson the Hampstead novel of the nineteen-fifties and sixties blurs class position and differentiation, instead choosing to focus on manners, sex and culture as their social paradigm.

Like the Brutalist architecture he was so fond of, in his texts readers find new technologies employed with abandon. These produce “an intentional alteration or disruption of the conventional layout of the page of a text”, and are referred to by White as graphic devices (White, 2005, p. 6). Johnson’s method makes use not only of the graphic surface of the page, but the space of the larger structure that is the book as a machine operated by a reader. His devices are not simply graphic (or geometric) but in some sense architectural. It is a literary topography with particular

material affordances designed to be moved through, rather than consumed in the normal manner. This space resists digestion, and must, because “one really reconciles oneself with some objective content not when one still has to strive to master and control it, but when one can afford the supreme sovereign gesture of releasing this content from oneself, of setting it free” (Žižek, 1992, p. xxi). Readers are invited to take part in a dialectical movement of becoming familiar with *not* understanding. There is an anti-bourgeois delight in the illegible, the uncomfortable. The problem arises when:

No proper language exists. The “proper” is already “improper.” “Truth” is therefore not grounded in access through the senses to the essence of the thing. Truth is rather a conventionally agreed-upon set of lies. Truth is lie not in the sense that it can be measured as false against some attainable correct naming. Truth is lie in the sense that it claims a false grounding in things as they are, when in fact it is constitutive, not constantive.

(Miller, 1995, p. 172)

Truth is a lie because of a misunderstanding over the nature readers wish to ascribe to it, truth is ideological rather than philosophical — when readers demand *tell me the truth!* they forget that *what they are* will determine the answer. The *langue* is improper, it is incomplete, incomprehensible and uncertain. Johnson’s desire for language to be constantive is impossible, as language cannot declare complete sovereignty over the world, it can only be constitutive of an alternative world — or dialectically involved in movements in the material world. So when in Johnson’s *Christie Malry* Christie’s mother’s states “I have for the purposes of this novel been your mother for the past eighteen years” (*CMODE*, p. 27) it has a similar performative value to the ceremonial declaration, ‘I now pronounce you united in marriage by law’. There the official’s position with respect to the union is parallel to Johnson’s position with respect to the text and readers, it enacts the latent structures of social interaction, thereby creating an instance of an event or bond: that of a reading. As in legal discourse this is what the “jury *decides*, not *discerns*” (Prado, 2006, p. 126) — i.e. it is the enacting of the social relation that constitutes the truth of that social relation — and therefore the literary novel is not found, it is named as such by the right authority. There was no marriage to discover prior to the declaration, just as there is no Christie nor a Christie’s mother prior to the reading. It does this with a chain of bonds that are at play throughout the structure of the novel, linking character to character, reader to character, character to author, and therefore potentially author to reader, at times allowing these positions to elide and substitute for each other. They are what Barthes refers to as *shifters*, and Jakobson as *testimonials* (Barthes, 1989, p. 128). The role of Christie’s mother is here embryonic, she is the necessary condition for the creation of Christie, who must first

invoke *her*, they are an interrelated web spun out of nothing beyond paper and ink – and how can characters be made of such stuff? Characters only adhere if reading is an act which produces social conditions and commitment – rather than merely completing a circulation process through the consumption of a cultural commodity – which relies on the inter-subjective understanding of language and the ethics of reading. James claims that:

...a reader's engagement with the tangible layout of *Albert Angelo* can, and should be, immanently performative... our reflexive interaction with aspects of its typography should be *enacted* across the text as a whole.

(James, 2007, p. 30)

While I agree with this depiction of the operation, I wish to make a far stronger claim. A readers' performance is not *optional*, there is no 'can' or 'should', it is in fact the only possible way for a reading to exist at all. The only contingent aspect is whether the reader can, or is prompted to, discover the nature of their own performative role. This aspect has not been removed or hidden in order that it should be discovered – it is unstable, it is constantly being created and re-created – but is *produced* for each reader and within each reading. All texts are enacted in this way, it is simply that in Johnson's work the process is visibly unstable and provisional, whereas in other texts typography and layout do not expose the standard techniques of novel production. Truth is at best transitory, and at worst, it is a process of shoring up redundant information in order to make sure that a message, however unsatisfying, is preserved, as in *The Unfortunates*:

...the past is always to be sentimentalized, inevitable, everything about him I see now in the light of what happened later, his slow disintegration, his death. The waves of the past batter at the sea defences of my sandy sanity, need to be safely pictured, still, romanticised, prettified.

(*U*, , p. 2)

Johnson considers romanticism an easy exit, even though finding alternatives is difficult. Aesthetic prettification and sentimentality are in fact methods of closing down access to truth, representing it in order to keep it at a distance. Alasdair Gray's characters point out in *Lanark* that a:

...[character's] survival as a character and mine as an author depend on us seducing a living soul into our printed world and trapping it here long enough for us to steal the imaginative energy which gives us life.

(Gray, 1981, p. 485)

Johnson too should be concerned, especially as he is reluctant to seduce the reader. The writing across these radically destabilized landscapes function as a groyne, a

structure behind which a reading can pile up. However, if the text fails to find purchase on the reader, the reader escapes, bored or frustrated. The incompleteness that arises from language's missing ability to be constative, and the desire to find the solutions for this problem of limited allusion, is the driving force of Johnson's art. For him a constitutive act is not enough, he is "challenging the reader to prove his own existence as palpably as I am proving mine by the act of writing" (AYRY, p. 28). By limiting the possible range of engagement, asking in fact for trust from the reader, he hopes to increase the authenticity and veracity of their mimetic experience, creating a new plasticity in the typographic features of the text which engage with the plasticity of reading subjects (James, 2007, p. 36). It is the text which seemingly allows totally transparent access to meaning which is in fact the most opaque, hiding as it does the assumptions about meaning and reading that must be held by the reader in order for the text to appear as transparent. The Johnsonian reader is made through reading in its most active sense, rather than by following a pre-produced narrative. Following Roland Barthes, the text is writerly, and like the denizens of the cafés in Jean-Paul Sartre's *Nausea*, which "In order to exist... must consort with others" (Sartre, 1964a, p. 6), Johnson's characters help the reader demonstrate their own reality.

For Johnson a lying author refuses to make use of these writerly techniques, and misses the opportunity to act on and against the normative ideological mobilizations of reading. Again, there is much at stake if this reading is accepted. In pleasingly Johnsonian tones Searle interjects to challenge this perspective:

Look, Aristotle said, "To state the truth is to say of that which is that it is and of that which is not that it is not." And that I take it is the first statement of the correspondence theory... [T]he idea of the correspondence theory is that when you say something you will succeed in having said something true if independently of your having said it there is a way that things are in the world and you accurately report or state or describe or represent how they are...

(Rorty and Searle, 1999, pp. 34-35)

As C. G. Prado explains, "Since facts are what make sentences true, facts cannot be only what true sentences state" (Prado, 2006, p. 61). For Searle's philosophy of communication 'truth' is certainly *not* what Miller above called a *conventionally agreed-upon set of lies*. There is a relationship — a correspondence — between statements and the way the world actually is. What, then, is the status of fiction, does it show true things, or make things true? What happens when in *Nausea* Antoine Roquentin, sitting in a tram, attempts to "murmur: 'It's a seat,' a little like an exorcism. But the word stays on [his] lips: it refuses to go and put itself on the

thing” (Sartre, 1964a, p. 125). Or what of Jorge Luis Borges' Ireneo Funes, who cannot detect platonic forms, and is left, “irritated [by the fact] that the 'dog' of three-fourteen in the afternoon, seen in profile, should be indicated by the same noun as the dog of three-fifteen, seen frontally” (Borges, 1999, p. 136). One of the key aims of this study is therefore to engage with Johnson's literary attempts to pin down where he himself stands on the issue of correspondence and truth in literature – the debate over realism, relativism, phenomenology and materialism. Following Foucault's consideration in *The Order of Things* of Borges' famous Chinese encyclopaedia, it should be asked, “what kind of impossibility are we faced with here?” What is the species of “the interstitial blanks *separating* all these entities from one another” (Foucault, 2002, p. xvi-xvii)? How do we explain the intractable problem of where fiction, reality and truth meet?

### 3. LIES AND FORM

Firstly, how does the idea of the *lie* function when, rather than simply reflecting the inaccuracy of art works, it claims to pass judgement upon the intention of the artist? The sense in which Johnson uses the terms ‘truth’ and ‘lie’, ‘novel’ and ‘fiction’ are complex and often counter-intuitive. For him, to lie is to provide “an alternative to real communication... an escape from the challenge of coming to terms with real people” (AYRY, p. 14). The “prototype for the word *lie*, [consists] of three elements: falsity, intent to speak falsely, and intent to deceive... falsity of belief is the most important element... intended deception is the next... and factual falsity is the least important” (Coleman and Kay, 1981, p. 26-44). The *lie* adheres to sociality, rather than materiality. The lie is the *untruth*, as equally a social production as *truth* is. Lies are anti-social in that they ignore the needs of the community for accurate information. Lies are ideologically important because they act as part of a dialectical apparatus at a basic level of communication to produce social subjects and forms of behaviour capable of allowing sanctioned values — truths — to be produced and circulated. It reinforces the perception of connections, shapes of meaning, that do not exist. The literary habit that continues this process which is deceptive, and must be countered:

All of us were bored to death with mainstream realist fiction... We were concerned with language, with breaking up conventional narrative... We all used fragmentation as a starting point... Bryan concentrated on a kind of literary honesty... We were all interested in the book as a physical object, in our attempts to break out of the straitjacket of conventional linear narrative, but nobody took the attempt further than Bryan.

(Figes, 1985, p. 70)

Honesty is not simply the process of avoiding untrue statements, but is the use of literary forms and genres which are sufficient to the form of life as lived in the current historical epoch. Johnson's assertion is that the tendency of authors to re-write life with nineteenth-century literary technologies, and their failure to attempt to create new techniques that might be appropriate to contemporary experience, makes their work “anachronistic, invalid, irrelevant, and perverse” (AYRY, p. 14), and ultimately, as Eva Figes points out, *boring*. This has consistently struck (and riled) commentators, critics, and other writers in that it demands of them a level of intellectual and ethical commitment which they, for good reasons, do not feel obliged to take part in. After all, “why tinker with the old machine, make demands on people just looking for light entertainment” (Figes, 1985, p. 70). Claims to truth are always fundamentalist. Johnson asks any writer who relies on “the idle curiosity

of the reader to know ‘what happens next’”, “Have [you] no pride” (AYRY, pp. 14-5)? “Anyone who does less than his best, even unconsciously, must create guilt within himself, severer in proportion to the lesser-than-best that he has done” (AA, p. 118) he insists. He calls for a vanguard to take the leap out of a Dickensian mode of writing — to reorientate their focus on a residual cultural dominant to a focus on an oppositional dominant (Williams, 1980, pp. 40-1). There is an ethic here, in which authors are expected to not simply develop techniques of mimesis, or even to prevent boredom, but to serve as an agent of social change. To change literature, and therefore the world, not just to write it. Art must work for some purpose, and its efforts are too often recuperated for the purposes of the book market, where capital speculates on the need to tell stories (Tew, 2007b, p. 206).

Johnson tried to confront this aspect of literary history, and actively attempted to write for a new audience.<sup>5</sup> So when, as Tew and White point out, “in some ways the class and aesthetic hegemony went out of its way to welcome him aboard” (Tew and White, 2007, p. 4) it is not surprising that he often felt, rather than totally misunderstood, unsettlingly well understood: Valerie Butler has outlined how the BBC at least (as a nominal capstone of that hegemony) seems to have been well aware of how unsuitable he threatened to be (Butler, 2007, pp. 117-131). Johnson reportedly despised the class of “literary entrepreneurs who kept *his* kind of *new* writing in the background” (Ghose, 1985, p. 26). This frustrated Johnson, but as much as it marks the cultural hierarchy's intransigence it also points to the nascent success of his “innovative exuberance” (Davies, 1985, p. 72), as well as his self confidence in the rightness of his project. Innovation is, following Nathalie Sarraute, the baton in a historical relay race, one in which British novelists have “stood still, turned back” or not even noticed (AYRY, pp. 30). To understand Johnson it is therefore imperative to make an attempt to work with how, and how far, he wished to risk becoming incomprehensible. His disdain for the traditional modes of transmission which would communicate ideas, versus his dismay at being misunderstood through them, is a key tension — the result of this is the contortions embodied in his work, the “history of his fiction is the quest for new forms” (Kanaganayakam, 1985, p. 88).

Georg Lukács' comprehensive theorization of the historical development of literature from a dialectical, materialist, classical Marxist position, and therefore observations from the Lukács-Brecht debate on the nature of realism (Adorno et al., 1977), set the stakes of this debate by locating it as a question of political philosophy, much as the

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<sup>5</sup> He mourned the fact that there seemed to be large numbers of people “...imitating the act of being nineteenth-century readers...” (AYRY, p. 15)

conflict between Searle and Jacques Derrida (Derrida, 1988) would for late twentieth-century discussions on fiction and non-fiction. It has never been satisfactorily resolved, only suspended, and it is a live issue for Johnson. It is a debate that encompasses the whole of cultural production:

...over modernism, over socialist realism, as well as the great formalist/realist debate... all of these and more; encompassing several fundamental issues of aesthetics such as the nature of the aesthetic effect, the definition of form and content, subjectivity vs. objectivity and the question of art's social mission.

(Kiralyfalvi, 1985, p. 340)

So, these battles are to be fought again. Johnson went some way to achieving a practical response to these questions.

This ethical writing required a technique sufficient to accomplish it, and there is an optimism in Johnson which believes problems can be solved when enough study and experimentation has been applied to them. Texts rely on a *Gestalt* effect by which readers perceive more information in the whole than is logically present in the parts. A suitably disruptive form would therefore force the reader to provide their own conclusions, to act as a creative rather than passive reader. However, reading is an imprecise process, and it discards that which it has not been able to cleave to its conceptual space. The topology of texts is such that they contain many redundant meanings, a redundancy that is necessary for reliable communication. However, this means that the more precise a text's intended meaning, the more the likelihood of misinterpretation. It is not that Johnson creates these problems of comprehension, he simply takes advantage of them by expressing his ideas "so precisely that the very minimum of room for interpretation is left" (AYRY, p. 28).<sup>6</sup> His is a 'de-automised' text:

The conventional 'realist' text (which Barthes terms 'readerly') attempts to make the reader's life easy by lessening plurality and therefore making reading more economical. The de-automised text (the 'writerly' text) offers various challenges to the reader's ability to limit or contain the text and therefore requires more hypothesising, more forgetting.

(White, 2005, p. 37)

Between the concrete material of the typographic text and the abstract topological text there is an oblique attempt to understand how these interstices, which may be insoluble problems, actually work when they risk a "fuck the reader' attitude... and

<sup>6</sup> This language is strikingly similar to Robbe-Grillet's preface to *In the Labyrinth* (French, 1959, translated into English in 1967), where the reader is advised to see in the writing "only the objects, the gestures, the words and the events that are told, without seeking to give them either more or less meaning than they would have in his own life, or his own death" (Robbe-Grillet, 2010, p. 7).

the abdication of authorial control” (Buchanan, 2007, p. 163).

Whether it be in discussion of how to live life or how to write life, Johnson is interested in the unseen (and invisible) contradictions of his perceptions, experiences, social interactions and attempts at writing. When we attempt to take these problems of transmission into account, they:

...may be thought of as like the transparencies superimposed in palimpsest on a map, each transparency charting some different feature of the landscape beneath: annual rainfall, temperature distribution, altitudes and contours, forest cover, and the like. The landscape “as such” is never given, only one or another of the ways to map it...

(Miller, 1995, p. 6)

Johnson's vocabulary of metaphor, image, technique and prejudice is extant, and can be enumerated. However, as Miller points out it is impossible to give it as such. Instead different topologies of ideas have to be drawn out by different operations. Brian McHale refers to this process as the complication of a “heterogeneous catalogue of features — the *membra disjecta* of literary scholarship” (McHale, 1991, pp. 6-7). The reader must attempt to overcome the contradiction between accuracy and communicability. I would suggest that the sense of a bestiary (made up of weird subjective creatures in a luxurious disorder) is instructive, where the evidence and categorizations on which readers rely are stymied by the inconsistency of the strange creatures from other worlds that they attempt and fail to pin down, half myth and half symptom. It is protest (often with overtones of excess, an indiscreet insistence in the importance of their projects) which typifies the writers of this twentieth-century in which I am interested: an obsession with making manifest the unrealized in “a continuous dialogue with form... If you like” (*CMODE*, p. 166), but also a continuous dialogue with the politics of form.

## 4. SURGERY ON THE NOVEL

Johnson's understanding of the post-war novel is outlined in depth in *Aren't You Rather Young to be Writing Your Memoirs*. Like Robbe-Grillet in *For a New Novel* (1989) he suggests that the nineteenth-century has returned to us (this time as farce) in an even more rigid and total form because it has learned its own meaning and is intent on imposing it upon the world again. This lumbering tradition accepts and continues to work with the fallacy that characters have a psychology, and that stories take place in the same world that readers inhabit (Dällenbach, 1986, p. 129). The basic thesis, that literature (and all representation) must become more fitting through new mimetic techniques – a professional group of experimenters in representation – is a common theme in both the avant-garde and realist traditions. What divides the two on a more fundamental level is the idea that literature must abandon the forms it took in earlier centuries, that a stage has been reached where in order for authors to achieve what they wish to achieve their works may no longer be recognizable as novels. For the novel to continue it must be negated – not simply disavowed – in order to release its potentialities from their limited forms. The fate of this project has been that, rather than breaking the novel as normative social type, it is the objects produced to dismantle this normative type which are themselves discarded. Is it, in fact, the critical institutions which prevent this?

The history of novel criticism demonstrates that, while the novel *form* developed further, its *theories* froze in time somewhere in the last century. What was a temporary stage in literature became a fixed stage in criticism. From this point on, any form which revealed a moving beyond that stage could only be dealt with in negative terms (as not really a novel, or at best as a *new* novel, or as a *metafiction*), rather than being treated in terms of a natural, dialectical development of the genre, as the background traditions parodied in such forms themselves proposed.

(Hutcheon, 1980, pp. 37-39)

Instead of the refining or condensing process that is no longer possible, authors such as Johnson take part in an extension of the realm of their art, including dark spaces, these unthought of and as of yet unthinkable realms that are brought tentatively into view. The latter is a centrifugal process, whereby more and more conceptual space is included. The former is a repeated *clinamen* – a swerving – a gradualist policy of representational innovation, a centripetal process. However, every time such a text is written the tradition scours deeper, and the form weighs heavier. To state the problem politically, we must ask if it is the case that the novel, as Fredric Jameson suggests throughout *Marxism and Form* (1971), is a counterpart in the cultural

realm to the current mode of social life – perhaps even its crowning ideological achievement. Jameson himself recognizes that it is not sufficient, even if it is necessary, to recognize that the “ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas... nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material relationships” (Marx, 1978, pp. 172-3), instead somehow an account must be made of:

...the initial problem which a dialectical theory of literature has to face... that of the unity of the literary work itself, its existence as a complete thing, as an autonomous whole, which, indeed, resists assimilation to the totality of the historical here and now (in what sense can Ulysses be said to be part of the events which took place in 1922?) just as stubbornly as it refuses dissolution in some supraindividual history of forms.

(Jameson, 1971, p. 313)

What accounts, not only for the refusal of some works of art to dissolve cleanly into genre without remainder, but for the more common reality that not only do genres appear to claim works for themselves, but that the works are largely created in the shadow of the genre in order to be included in that genre, and therefore are involved in the repeated retrofitting of consistent topologies of social values? How is this *Gestalt* of form and ground (Jameson, 1971, p. 313), of type and instance, from which the novel for emerges again and again, not only perceived, but maintained and reproduced? Experimentation, through both combination and insight, is the traditional method of investigating and expanding the boundary. It is understood as the basic mutative means for approaching a breakdown, where the multiple changes to a species eventually forms a new genus or genre. Is this to be a scientific process of discovery of some pre-existing social truth, an overthrow of the old through the appearance of something new, or the working out of contradiction, the new emerging through negation of the old? How far up the taxonomic tree of literary and cultural life are single authors able to reach and achieve change? The gradualist tradition, of literary development, focused on the level of the species, is typified by Émile Zola’s application of scientific enlightenment values to the novel:

...we can easily see that the novelist is equally an observer and an experimentalist. The observer in him gives the facts as he has observed them, suggests the point of departure, displays the solid earth on which his characters are to tread and the phenomena to develop. Then the experimentalist appears...

(Zola, 1893, p. 8)

Thus Zola sets out the schema for a literature built on the scientific method — a

medical practise for vivisection of the *homo literati* — and a textual application of evolutionary biology. In the project that Zola sets out for a proper literature, the novelist:

...should operate on the characters, the passions, on the human and social data, in the same way that the chemist and the physicist operate on inanimate beings, and as the physiologist operates on living beings.

(Zola, 1893, p. 18)

This positivist, scientific, empirical technique may appear to be Johnson's method throughout his novels: he sets up situations in which to animate and to test his characters. He uses a stock of experiences — which are often autobiographical, and have for him an assumed authenticity — to transform events and actions via technique (double-entry, shuffling box-novels, pastiche), through the medium of their world's assumptions, and into narrative.

However, Johnson's work is a critique of Zola's assumption that it is at all possible to create solid earth and incontrovertible axiomatic realms for characters to walk upon, where character and genetics are the only variable. While Zola claims that “we novelists are the examining magistrates of men and their passions” (Zola, 1893, p. 10), for Johnson no solid position from which to take such a stand exists. He is perfectly willing to blame, but not to judge. As a physician of subjectivity he is aware that he does not have a particularly adept anaesthetist, and that he is attempting to operate on a history that is still being lived, expanded and adapted simply through the act of being remembered. He also wants the stitches to remain visible, like the *beton brut* of a modernist building, like André Gide rather than Zola, Johnson shows “the influence the book has on the author while he is writing it” (Dällenbach, 1986, p. 14). The shuttering remains. Even the scaffolding continues to re-inscribe itself, as an attempt is made to force the reader to go through a writing by working to keep meaning contingent at every point. This is what makes a reading *writerly*, or *cold*, in Marshall McLuhan's terminology. The process is most noticeable in *Albert Angelo* and *Christie Malry*, where the authorial voice itself stops to consider its scalpel and finds that the patients have awakened. These texts announce themselves as the self-reflexive structures which other texts attempt to embody. It is not only that the novel form is being emended or adjusted from within the conceptual space of a tradition, but Johnson produces self-emending machines which interfere with their own mechanism during their operation — with the complicity of the reader as motive power. It is not only the novel form which is now rendered problematic, but the mechanics and techniques of fiction:

In the image of yourself, Christie is, remember.

His average eyes appeared sunken, ringed with yellow-brown; his average cheeks had sunk, too. The general feeling about Christie now is one of sinking.

Not without a trace.

(*CMODE*, p. 183)

What is the nature of the trace that remains after reading? Does Christie remain in some sense? That Christie is Christ-y (or Jesus-ish, in some complex translation of that figure's historical-cultural matrix) is punned upon throughout: "Christie was there for Xmas, it so happened, he had not yet acquired sufficient courage to give and serve notice" (*CMODE*, p. 15).

The cancer which will kill Christie is first identified at "a place just under [his] ribcage on the right side" (*CMODE*, p. 176) in a recapitulation of the final wound of Christ made by the spear of Longinus. Cancer is used as a signifier of an excessiveness of foul-play, a death blow from the body against the body, the archetypal disease in the twentieth-century — a modern plague. The status of Christ as a complexly empathetic figure is particularly important, because Christie is simultaneously the one who offers himself as a sacrifice (he defines his own novel as short: 'this is my textual body, I give it to you'), and the one who is offered — the book is a black mass to the doctrines of commerce. *Détourning* the basic mechanisms of early capitalism's birth into tools for the purposes of social revenge turns Christie into an insurgent force both within the novel's productive mechanisms of meaning, and the fictional spaces of London which they produce. It documents Christie's passion (with the Shrike), his death and his resurrection. The short chapters, and the use of the term 'reckoning' rather than *accounting* for the sections of book-keeping is a direct mimicry of the language of the church. In Christie there is an attempt, failing in the final instance, to unify symbol and body. While he is made in "In the image of yourself" (*CMODE*, p. 183), the reader is united with this everyman in an alternative soteriology. Are readers Gods, making Christie in their own image? Or is the reader, performing as Christ, looking for a forsaking author? Or are they all subservient to the great idea of double-entry bookkeeping? This is not Zola's experiment, the variables involves are not discrete, and author, history, reader and character all interpenetrate.

The archaeology of the writing of the novel can expose some of the traces that are left from this process. Christie has a complicated textual history: the novel was

originally to be titled 'Xtie Malry's Own Double Entry', but the publisher vetoed the decision, worried that readers would find it too unusual. The conception of Christie as Christ is embodied in marks that may not be noticed at all, in the form of stigmata, stoma, or voids within the body of the text. Various spatial clues and hints, which make no sense unless you have a comprehensive knowledge of London, remain in the text:

Then he opened the gates, drove, closed the gates, drove on across Hammersmith Bridge and turned fourth left into Merthyr Terrace, no martyr.

(CMODE, p. 145)

Christie takes the fourth turn, rather than the fifth, which is the quickest route: but the fifth turn is into a street called 'Trinity Road'. Here Johnson's dislike of religion seeps into his navigational choices — but simultaneously Christie's identification with Christ is denied. There is nowhere within the novel that provides this geographic knowledge, and the reader would be required to read it against a copy of the *London A-Z*. This content does not feature in the novel, but it leaves an archaeological mark in the final version by the retention of textual features surrounding a void which keep a proper distance from each other — these are the unspoken, consistent topography of the novel, which is itself an implementation of the conceptual topology of the novel.

The symbolism within the novel was initially designed to be clear by having the christogram (†) as a component of Christie's name. This was also vetoed.<sup>7</sup> Johnson did not miss an opportunity to undo some of the editorial hand, however. The final clearly narrative line of the novel as published, "Xtie died" (CMODE, p. 183), transmutes the censored Christie into Xtie (cross-tie, †tie), a better, more fitting tag. Johnson reinstates some indication of the infallibility of the author over the publishing industry. As with all industrial disputes it relies on a calculated level of sufferance from the public. Nicolas Tredell points out that "Johnson was one of the pioneers of the return of the author to the English novel" (Tredell, 1978, p. 48). It is the exact nature of this return that will be gradually unpicked. As for Christie, "he comes back, so to speak, for the first time" (Derrida, 1994, p. 3) at this point, much as the author returns through various interruptions from the recessed background they had occupied in the traditional novel. The character returns into the novel in a different form, lingers for the space of a " " before the unconscious Christie ends as Xtie. The phrase is an instantaneous transfiguration and ascension: but it is an

<sup>7</sup> This specific manipulation of Christian symbolism occurs again in *The Unfortunates* (❁, p. 5) where "Xtian" replaces 'Christian'. It is a quiet symbol of Johnson's atheism and general disdain for organized religion.

inversion of the transfiguration — it is the sign which dies, not the signifier — where the body of the 'human' Christie remains as the text, but the more abstract Christ-like aspect from the manuscript disappears, never having really been present. The trace is the time spent by the reader with the disruptions to the reading.

The author function of *Christie Malry* acts as the ultimate bureaucrat or overseer of the death process, as the agent of an othered power. The statement “he [Christie] could not die without me” (*CMODE*, p. 180), is different from the idea that Christie is killed at the command of the author: Christie both cannot die and cannot exist without the author. The author washes their hands, or to use Barthes’ depiction of myth-creation and spectacle manufacture, their cruelty is the cruelty of the father that can but won’t act, instead taking “refuge behind the ropes while ostensibly invoking a purely formal right, refusing to shake hands with one’s opponent before or after a fight” (Barthes, 2009, p. 11). The author function appears to withhold subjectivity from the characters, instead escaping to a world of alternative rules (by ascending a level of responsibility, or textual knowledge) and refusing to carry to its conclusion the logic that was begun by the writing of *Christie Malry*, calling instead on a seemingly selective recognition of the limits of the form. Lucien Dällenbach, in his study of textual structure *The Mirror in the Text* (1986), outlines the workings of this in relation to Gide’s *Paludes*, it is applicable here:

...an identification occurs continually between narrator and author, and has a triple objective; tracking down the fleeting figure of the narrator and forcing him to renounce his anonymity; allowing the author to step out of his role and to appropriate the name on the title-page; and giving the book an insoluble aspect through this interchange of function and identity... *Paludes* deliberately plays with problems of topology.

(Dällenbach, 1986, p. 29)

Xtie is the insoluble, the trace of Christie, the unpublishable aspect. Chapter XXI: ‘In which Christie and I have it All Out; and which You may care to Miss Out’, invokes Christie’s statements on the novel against him: “‘Christie,’ I warned him, ‘it does not seem to me possible to take this novel much further. I’m sorry.’” (*CMODE*, p. 165) This intervention is, in the epigrammatic quotation for this chapter of the novel, a denial of itself in “parodistic forms in order to be able to outgrow itself” (*CMODE*, p. 163). Here the decision that the text cannot continue is taken before any reason is given, it is an escape route, and its arbitrariness is justified after the fact. Christie states afterwards that the novel should “now try simply to be Funny, Brutalist, and Short”, “I could hardly have expressed it better myself” (*CMODE*, p. 165), says the implied author.

At best it is a patsy question, at worst a show-trial.<sup>8</sup> An answer is needed, and an answer is given, extracted from Christie under duress. The victim of this prematurely ending novel (which in its passionate and excessive attack on society has reached the limit of its own brief length) is used as a vessel to speak its end in a quick and flippant rationalization of what has already been decided. How can Christie hope to compete with rationality in a world where the rules are not known to him (it will be seen in the next chapter what the ultimate logic of its shortness really is), though it is his job to voice them? As McHale suggests, the first questions to ask are what is “a world?... What happens... when boundaries between worlds are violated... How is a projected world structured” (McHale, 1991, p. 10)? The language used against Christie is the arbitrary tone of the bureaucratic matter-of-fact, the language of all refusals by authority. It is:

...the point where the protagonists, exhausted by having this multiplicity of meanings imposed on them, are eventually revealed as mere ciphers, paper beings whose only *raison d'être* lies in acting as representatives of the waves of isotopic variations unleashed by the *mise en abyme*.

(Dällenbach, 1986, p. 59)

Christie is given his answer in a legal trick – his death sentence at the hands of cancer is carried out not by the natural logic of cancer, but by the authority of literary form. This necessary cruelty, the removal of the illusory ‘paper’ agency that the characters have been afforded, can be compared with other great depictions of London social alterity, such as Joseph Conrad’s *The Secret Agent* (“Scotland Yard may be said to be baffled... It feels like the Anarchists again... And their jowls shook in silent laughter” (*CMODE*, p. 111)). Like Conrad’s anarchists, Christie was never likely to win out against the authority of the narrative, a narrative which must to some extent represent a plausible social reality. Christie’s real threat to the social order is his plodding implementation of the social orthodoxy against that orthodoxy, here the “initial limited demand contains its own implicit universalization... [and] a law above the law, is intrinsically violent” (Miller, 1995, p. 93). The reader is never informed of Christie’s dedication to any cause, merely his antagonism and antagonism to THEM, the grand other. Compare this to Jules Dassin’s 1950 film, *Night and the City*, where the naïve swindler and idealist Harry Fabian comes up against a London underworld which after a few missteps genteelly shrugs him off. There are aesthetic, narrative, thematic, geographical and narrative convergences between this film and Johnson’s novels. During the dawn finale of the film, Harry Fabian, summarizes his lot:

<sup>8</sup> Compare this to *À la recherche du temps posthume* (1957), a *libelle* by Jean-Louis Curtis, in which a disorientated Marcel Proust returns to earth only to find Gilberte Swann admitting that “psychology nowadays is out of style, obsolete, no longer possible” (Morrissette, 1965, pp. 1-2).

He told me, he said: You've got it all, but you're a dead man Harry Fabian... I was so close to being on top... An accident, just an accident, and then everything fell apart... Better go upstairs...

(Dassin, 2007, 1:25:00)

Fabian makes a simple mistake by internalizing the iniquities of his society as personal failings. “Now I really do have it all... including cancer” (*CMODE*, p. 177) says Christie, similarly internalizing with wry humour the blessing and the fate selected for him by the authorial gods, that death and desire should meet in one moment. Christie has been created to aspire to go beyond his situation and to lose this battle with his author. Johnson does not see this as a myth but a truth of life: Tony’s death in *The Unfortunates* happened just “as it seemed things were going his way” (*U*, ✱, p. 1), noting the way that it retroactively invests the period immediately preceding it with a sense of inevitability. Christie is the over-reaching “simple person” (*CMODE*, p. 11) just as Conrad's full title is *The Secret Agent: a simple tale*. After Fabian goes upstairs to face the music the last the audience sees is his limp (dead or unconscious) body being pitched into the Thames off Chelsea Bridge at dawn by a group of Greek gangsters. In Johnson’s later novel *Albert Angelo*, the protagonist will be kicked to death by the ‘Corps’, a faux-fascist group of teenage children. The commonality here is the pathos of the simple man, momentarily lifted towards epic, before being discarded as waste by a social, or textual, logic.

Despite his best efforts, no version of the author has an effective method of providing his characters with more agency than the reading process can impart. Instead he resorts to displaying the marks left (the *beton brut / écriture brut*) by his straining with narrative and world-forming materials. Though there is “a real author outside the text and an implied one encoded within” (White, 2005, p. 57) neither of these have any actual power over the instance of reading. A fallacious sense of pity for the character matrices is produced by the false contrast between their amount of supposed agency, and that of the implied author. This implied author — rather than the author function proper — is “the absolute embodiment of positive cultural values” (Jameson, 1971, p. 356), and is used by Johnson against its usual benign and benevolent Victorian sense as subject-supposed-to-know to demonstrate that this position is either vacant or unable to act. It only has power, like all faith, by appearing as the name of an immanent effect produced by its adherents. The vital forces of the author are surely enough to allow a character to persist if he were to dedicate himself tirelessly to their continual writing — but this invocation can only persist at the expense of the author himself. The key example is the fate of the Shrike in *Christie Malry*, whose continued existence is not promised, not excluded, but

abrogated when the implied author relieves herself of responsibility in the way only a bureaucrat can. Despite being “very fond of her”, she will be allowed to feature “Perhaps another time” (*CMODE*, p. 179), i.e. ‘never’. The function of this elision of the inaugural creative power of the author with the author-function is to render this ridiculous conversation poignant. This technique is reminiscent of the creator/creation intercourse that begins the dissolution of Flann O’Brien’s *At-Swim-Two-Birds*. The implied author’s responsibility for its creations is both moral and personal, “‘Amongst those left are you,’ [Christie] said, accusingly. ‘So far,’ I said” (*CMODE*, p. 179). Does the invocation of the author’s own death, that inevitable finitude, somehow mediate the ethical dimensions of their own inability to permanently sustain the lives of his creations, or to effect real, non-artistic change?<sup>9</sup> Is it perhaps the case, like within history itself, that while individuals can make changes to the articulations of events, even the most powerful implied authors cannot change the general trend of their textual world. To paraphrase Marx’s *18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, characters can write their own books, but they cannot write them just as they please.

However, there is a second sense of — and an alternative target for — the accusatory you. That is the *you*, the readership:

It is a notable and rather enigmatic fact that literary discourse very rarely includes signs of the “reader”; we might even say that what specifies it as literary discourse is that it is — apparently — a discourse without *you*, though in reality the whole structure of this discourse implies a “subject” of the reading.

(Barthes, 1989, p. 131)

If the test of literariness is, for Barthes, the absence of the reader, then what is to be made of the viability of Johnson’s writing as literature at all, when it so clearly and explicitly attempts to co-opt the reader into its structure? Is it not the case that the introduction of *you* throughout the narrative (“l’innovation de Butor” (Morrisette, 1985, p. 108)), while potentially creating moments that de-autonomize the text, also does irrevocable damage to the characters?

Christie’s accusation is used again, more explicitly in the second sense, in the planned title for the last volume of Johnson’s ‘Matrix Trilogy’, which were to be Volume 1. *See the Old Lady Decently* 2. *Buried Although* 3. *Amongst Those Left are You*. The first and only published volume is a mature and agile work. In it he yet

<sup>9</sup> “...for Marxism the adequation of object to subject or of form to content can exist as an imaginative possibility only where in some way or another it has been concretely realized in social life itself, so that formal realizations, as well as formal defects, are taken as the signs of some deeper corresponding social and historical configuration which it is the task of criticism to explore.” (Jameson, 1971, p. 331)

again confronts the inability of granting readers pure access to his intention and actions as a writer:

I shall eat now, the manuscript stained on purpose with the melting butter.

What a pity it is not possible for you to read the MS!

(*STOLD*, p. 15)

The artisanal desire to leave auratic marks on the surface of his writing remains. In this, his final work, there are yet more new techniques (not least the introduction of composition by accident, seen as superior to planning) designed to give the reader an insight into the reality of the writing moment. Similarly, in the manuscripts for *Christie Malry* actual double-entry ledger sheets are used, rather than the reproductions necessary in the final publication.<sup>10</sup> The Toronto Research Group (TRG), in a section of their *Rational Geomancy* that ends with the question “—hey, what about B. S. Johnson?” points out that “—look, even if we went as far as to write this phrase out by hand in every copy of the book it still wouldn't be the original” (TRG, 1992, p. 85). The page of a printed book pretends to represent direct access to the productions of the mind of a creator, and to suggest that printed pages can somehow be redeemed by the small amount of golden butter that has fallen onto the page of the manuscript. Somehow unalienated value expended in the labour process has supposedly passed into the work.<sup>11</sup> However, this transmission is not in the nature of reproduction, as Johnson recognizes. Just as:

...no philosophy, not even extreme empiricism, can drag in the *facta bruta* and present them like cases in anatomy or experiments in physics; no philosophy can paste the particulars into the text, as seductive paintings would hoodwink it into believing.

(Adorno, 1973, p. 11)

This philosophic problem is reproduced in the production process, as outlined by Walter Benjamin:

The political economy of the literary industry is exploded by mass production, and it “substitutes a mass existence for a unique existence”.

(Benjamin, 2006, p. 104)

In his key work on Johnson's use of the printed page White points out the contradiction in this process:

<sup>10</sup> Johnson (uncatalogued), *CMODE* Box, *CMODE* Typescript, BLMS, p. 40

<sup>11</sup> The Johnson Archive at the British Library has the original manuscript of *See the Old Lady Decently*, which does indeed have some aged dabs of yellow grease on the paper.

Print is a necessity as much as it is a contamination... without print there is no 'text', only manuscripts... The result of mechanical reproduction is, indeed, the reproduction of a uniform text; one copy being functionally the same as the next.

(White, 2005, pp. 25, 30)

Novels are more realistically — as technologies of reproduction decrease in price — a fiat form of cultural value, and therefore equally exchangeable and infinitely inflatable. It is not simply that readers do not have access to knowledge about the social content which constructs the novel, but they are also permanently precluded from access to any understanding of the process of creation. “A written sign is proffered in the absence of the receiver ...” (Derrida, 1988, p. 7), just as it is always received in the absence of the sender. The golden butter effect is much the same as what Marx describes of the industrialist who maintains a “foible for using golden spindles instead of steel ones” (Marx, 1976, p. 295). This merely increases the cost to the producer, but does not improve the product — it is a fetishistic treatment of the means of production, as much “an act of folly in our typographic culture” (White, 2005, p. 24) as it would be in an industrial culture. It is an absurdity, produced by the privileged ideological position of the artist in society, to imagine that consumers are impacted by the choice of writing implement. The valuation of literature is not based on some obscure understanding of quality or inspiration. It is instead a social, ultimately economic bond — a “crystal... of... social substance” (Marx, 1976, p. 128) — albeit one that mobilizes an older residual imaginary that views the art object as one-off artefact of direct manipulation. This obscures literature's status as an instantiation of current social values. If a work does not have the ability to function as a consumable commodity in the society it finds itself in, as a net to “trawl... over the snagged and broken floor of my past” (*T*, p. 21) producing experiences, then it is not valorised in the reading process. As Benjamin pointed out:

There have not always been novels in the past, they do not always have to exist in the future; there have not always been tragedies, not always great epics.

(Benjamin, 1970, p. 86)

It is in *See the Old Lady Decently* that Johnson begins to expose how the discourse of society perpetuates that society by means of reducing bureaucratic and imperial language to its structural components — removing the content to show the topology — where language is reified into the image of itself. He also further exposes where the novel is inadequate to the needs of a concrete social reality. That he did not continue into the late seventies and eighties may be a blessing, just as:

Rabelais and Cervantes, the real founders of the novel, were more fortunate

than their successors in that they did not live in the new society of which they were the heralds.

(Fox, 1979, p. 55)

There is a possible reading whereby Johnson's work acts as a herald of a world that never quite came to be. His disavowal of novelistic techniques is so consistent that it might amount to parody, risking appearing as indulging in heterogeneity for its own sake. He has a tendency to complain of his readership's inability to meet his criteria of modernity. However, as White makes clear it is important "to avoid implying... that disruptions of the conventional graphic surface which de-automatize reading merely serve to remind us that we are reading a book" (White, 2005, p. 11). It is not merely the problems of art with Johnson attempts to explore, and he would not undermine the power of such techniques for such a simple trade. There is an aspiration here to develop the novel into uncomfortable territory, and a frustration when such attempts are dismissed. While *Christie Malry* is a novel uncomfortable with being a novel, it is also a novel performing its novel-ness for a reason: it is a narrative application of Fra Luciano Pacioli's descriptions of double-entry bookkeeping through a critical lens, a conceit used as a topological theodolite for the structure of the novel. Through it "narrative becomes interstitial, a sort of comic aporia between marks on the page" (Buchanan, 2007, p. 168). By de-autonomizing reading Johnson does not only wish to expose the structure of reading and writing, but the structure of social existence as well, and some of its pain.

Christie has at times the appearance of special powers — of one able to conceive his own history (both future and past) from a great height — and a privileged plan view of his own world. A key example is the manner in which he is able to commit some metaphysical one-upmanship in his class-conflict with his Supervisor. On being called to task for being absent without leave he justifies his inability to give any notice by pointing out that there "wasn't any more time. It's a short novel... Christie shrugged his way out, knowing there was no answer to that" (*CMODE*, p. 40). Christie's superiority is provided by the Promethean gift of his "very own Double-Entry" (*CMODE*, p. 24)! For Christie this is a hermeneutic system providing analysis of, and effecting redress against, not only the society within which he lives, but the limits of his status as a character. It has both a satisfying symmetry and an increasingly chilling dogmatic resemblance to all totalising economic theories, turning the characters from literary to explicitly economic subjects. Its attraction is furthered by the reconfiguration of a founding and central technology of enlightenment (and capitalist) society as a tool for its own destruction. When he wonders if twenty-thousand 'odd' deaths might be rather excessive Christie reasons with logic borrowed from his antagonists that: "Guilt at Double-Entry or personal

responsibility would be wishwashiness. One must subtly oppose the Government with its own weapons of casualness, indifference, mass carelessness” (*CMODE*, p. 147), cynically recasting the liberal value of political tolerance as a useful form of “malign neglect” (Williams, 1980, p. 41). The terrorism of Christie is an effect of that which it attacks, and the terror in terrorism is that it is broadly consistent with the violence of the system in which it occurs. The entry of “Socialism not given a chance” (*CMODE*, p. 151) in the debit column is more than enough justification for those twenty-thousand dead, by the schema of Christie’s moral relativism. As Albert Angelo wonders idly in his classroom, is there “a constant quantity of violence in the world, continually circulating” (*AA* 70)? Through this economy of violence the destruction of the British political apparatus during the Opening of Parliament may well reduce the death toll elsewhere (*CMODE*, p. 170) in order to balance the books. It is a modest proposal. Christie wishes to see “where the money came from, how it was manipulated, and where it went” (*CMODE*, p. 16), but because this is not a narrowly didactic text<sup>12</sup> Christie moves quickly from doubt, to explanation, to action in a series of fantastical wish-fulfillments that quickly become absurd.

Such apocalyptic destruction was constantly fantasized about in the cold-war era media. One archetype for Mr. Malry is Stuart Christie, the Glaswegian anarchist who in 1964 travelled to Madrid in order to assassinate General Franco. There are various targets of hate in the Johnson canon, and in *Albert Angelo* Albert is described as “a big fat nits how is hiting Franco and Turkey” (*AA*, p. 155). The archived source materials for *Christie Malry* includes a leaflet campaigning on behalf of Greek Cypriots (used as note-paper), as well as: paper clippings relating to the sentencing of Jake Prescott and the Angry Brigade for “conspiring to cause explosions”; a *Guardian* article titled ‘The Judge and the Judgement’;<sup>13</sup> an article titled ‘Cyanide: Firms Will Have to Disclose Poison Stocks’;<sup>14</sup> another titled ‘Bomb Hoaxer — Why We Kept it a Secret’;<sup>15</sup> and ‘Who Are The Angry Brigade? What Do They Want? What is Prescott’s Background?’<sup>16</sup> In light of the decades that followed, the social and economic strife that was to make itself felt as the post-war consensus collapsed, these themes are particularly prescient. It is no accident that it is ICI (Imperial Chemical Industries) who produced the cyanide and explosives used in Christie’s attacks — the giant conglomerate is an example of not only the second

<sup>12</sup> The classic example of a fictionalized course of education in the evils of inequality is Robert Tressell’s *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropist*. Christie does launch into justifications of his action, but they are peremptory rather than the extended lectures found in Tressell’s work.

<sup>13</sup> *Manchester Guardian* (1971) 2nd December, p. 13, in *CMODE* Box, BLMS.

<sup>14</sup> *The Sunday Times* (London) (1972) 5th March, p. 3, in *CMODE* Box, BLMS.

<sup>15</sup> “Today a bomb hoaxer is threatening to blow up Schweppes...”, *Evening Standard* (date, page unknown), in *CMODE* Box, BLMS.

<sup>16</sup> *London Evening Standard* (1971) 1st December, page unknown., BLMS.

industrial revolution and the history of British Empire, but also the coming rapid development of the pharmaceutical and pesticide industries that would come to reconfigure both Western and global communities.

The text constantly poses a question concerning the individuality, or the instrumentality, of Christie's characterization. Chapter XIII — possibly the most politically explicit section — where 'Christie Argues with Himself!' is prompted by his realization that he is now “more responsible than anyone else for a loss of human life” (*CMODE*, p. 115). He had begun his double-entry project by asking, “Who can I blame?” (*CMODE*, p. 24), and now comes to realize that he must blame himself. This is not a position he is able to maintain alongside his generally positive self-perception and is divided, only able to become “one again” by identifying that what society “does in practice is not what it says it does”, choosing to identify with what it actually acts out (life is dirt cheap) rather than what it purports with its “pious mouthings” (*CMODE*, p. 116). He comes to realize that his initial project to find the “successors, heirs, executors, administrators... to take responsibility” (*CMODE*, p. 24) is ultimately futile: “it is impossible to tell from the money itself, how it got into the hands of its possessor, or what article has been changed into it. [*Pecunia*] *Non olet*” (Marx, 1976, p. 205). Money has no smell because the production process scrubs it of any ethical values. Christie's account with THEM is transformed at this point into an account with 'IT', the total society rather than some subsidiary group. This division, reformulation, and re-composition of Christie transforms him from malcontent to vermiform mass murderer. “You begin to perceive a progression: Christie had begun in earnest!” (*CMODE*, p. 107) predicts the authorial voice — it is this new earnest self-identification with a specifically anti-bourgeois, revolutionary morality which will eventually lead to the novel's fulfilment, and Christie's end.

Who exactly is meant by THEM is unclear. It is made more so in the brief interlude providing a revolutionary sect's list of targets (*CMODE*, pp. 127-9) which is taken directly out of directories of Gentleman's clubs, Ladies' clubs and upmarket hotels — the same classes targeted in the bombing of the opening of Parliament. Unlike Christie, who has the double-entry, the revolutionaries are shown to have no ideology except violence, no tactics beyond making lists of targets, and once they've toppled the government they will immediately select a new target: “We know what it's like to react against conservatism: now let's at least find out what it's like to react against socialism as the dominant idea” (*CMODE*, p. 129). The text is withering about these self-defined forces of revolution, which are shown to be just as politically instrumentalist as those they would oppose. The mode of realism in this novel could not withstand a foray into any more of Johnson's fantasy, and it is derailed when it

begins to produce events that are so socially destructive that contemporary readers could not help but be aware of them. Bombs are one thing (in the context of nineteen-seventies Red Army Faction and IRA activity), poisonings begin to stretch credulity, but the destruction of Parliament is beyond comprehension. In this war to overthrow the economy of the novel, Christie has already lost.

Just as there was no way of clearly apportioning individual economic blame there is, despite Albert's speculations, no balance of payments, and no constant volume of violence. Contemporary monetary policy increases the money supply each year — causing inflation: “you know the ways we are all diminished”, says Christie. There is always more violence available to circulate “in pursuit of pure profit” (*CMODE*, p. 116). In fact, it is Christie's reliance on ever increasing volumes of violence (enabling him to make larger and larger claims on the social stock of value) emerging from his double-entry device which makes his ontological and economic status problematic throughout — he is less a character and more properly a walking ontological/economic time-bomb. The sense of fondness Christie has for his own double-entry, the sense of possession involved in his relationship with this technology (it owns him, he owns it) shows him up as a cipher for something more sinister. Christie's love for one of the founding technologies of business is his symptom, “literally [his] only substance, the only positive support... the binding of [his] enjoyment to a certain signifying, symbolic formation which assures a minimum of consistency to [his] being” (Žižek, 2008, p. 81). It is not that he is alienated from his society and the economic conditions of his existence, but that he believes, inhabits and is made potent by them to the point of becoming a conduit for its logic — and manages to gain increasing amounts of pleasure from his actions (as embodied in his sexual pleasure with the Shrike, which also escalates), while using the double-entry to “offset” (*CMODE*, p. 147) the *jouissance* (the pain of responsibility, or being overdrawn) onto society.

This codification of his econometrics is stopped before it can result in truly historic numbers of deaths. In the ‘Reckoning’ (Johnson’s term for his accounting with THEM) directly after the account of his last outrage, the mass-poisoning of London residents, the reader is prompted to be relieved that “negligible damage to property [was] involved”, though the value of each human life lost is still calculated by the “commercial value of the chemicals contained therein” (*CMODE*, p. 119). The value of the property embodied in the dead — human resources — is a Swiftian satire on commerce's transformation of all human values into economic value. In the original final manuscript, the final page is laid out thus:

23,697

Xtie died. There was no formal  
valediction.13223,829

(11.41am 15/3/72)

(BLMS, *CMODE* MS, Final page)

In the manuscript there is a completeness of time and place — Johnson clocks off. As a good worker, and simultaneously a good Taylorist line-manager, Johnson’s normal method of working was to create graphs of his progress on a day-by-day basis, plotting how much time he had spent, and how many words he had written (Coe, 2004, p. 194). The figures on the left show from top to bottom, 1) the running total, 2) the number of words written on this final page of manuscript, and 3) the total word count for the entire manuscript. The number of deaths in the novel are equivalent to the number of words: in the published version this is lower, at 20,479 (*CMODE*, p. 151). Instead of a calculation of the chemical equivalence of the deaths of West Londoners, there is a textual equivalent. In the manuscript version, where the name of Xtie was used throughout, there is no formal valediction, but in the version as published Johnson takes advantage of the opportunity imposed upon him by the publisher. There the final name change from Christie to Xtie is the valediction, as well as the recognition of the completion of the piece of work.

It is the world historical implications that make *Christie Malry* a work which has in mind as much social prophecy as social reflection. Christie’s attempt at bombing symbols of power turns the story into something that denies itself as a novel, because it produces a narrative that could not be homeomorphic, commensurate or simultaneous with reality as lived by the reader — the threatened destruction of Parliament and resulting chaos would be a total reconfiguration of society. While the logic embodied by Christie’s project is not realised in concrete space, it nevertheless goes too far for the space (the space of the novel) which he currently inhabits — he risks transgressing the borders, “beyond which the reader will leave the field of play” (Iser, 1972, p. 280). As in that strangest of histories, Heinrich von Kleist’s *Michael Kohlhaas*, the author without “signalling the transgression in any way... moves repeatedly from the safely grounded and lawful realm of history into another realm under the jurisdiction of a law the story itself establishes” (Miller, 1995, p. 86). In Johnson’s work this attempt to transgress the lawful space of writing is made through the operation of the characters. Once the scope of the novel moves from concern with the limited space of Christie’s characterization towards the more general and total space of history and social justice, the crisis begins. In Harry Fabian’s case, for example, it is simply an attempt to socially over-reach, while with

Christie it is the ontological reaching towards author-hood which results in his destruction. He risks overwhelming the novel's internal economy, where "a credibility network upholds the conventions that regulate social communication" (de Certeau, 1985, p. 195), and destabilizes the efficacy of the machinery of world-constitution that allow the novel to function as a novel. The novel moves on from a concern with literary style, still grounded in realism, to an act of social speculation which begins to strain the homeomorphism between the spaces of fictional and historical reality. How is this unmooring to be seen when understanding fictional worlds, worlds where:

...the reader must reconstitute a comprehensible world from the text. Reading may create an imitation not simply of a character's voice but of a situation, realisation, mental state or reaction.

(White, 2005, p. 56)

I contend that this novel does not constitute a whole *world*, but simply a *story* within a world with enough of the conventions of, enough vertical coherence to, the real world. Topologically, the text of *Christie Malry* overlays five distinctive narrative spaces: a) double entry book-keeping, b) the life of Christ, c) contemporary Britain, d) the life of the reader and e) the life of the implied author. These spaces are not properly homeomorphic – variously they are technological systems, religious story, sociological analysis, personal experience, and narratological function. In a normal novel Christie's adoption of the double-entry would simply be an object within the text – and each of the other themes could be translated into a space in which they can cooperate. However, here the double-entry, mirroring its economic power to accumulate, allows Christie to accumulate more and more textual power, threatening the economy of the novel – it does not merely signify *within* the novel, but begins to operate *upon* the novel.<sup>17</sup> Its inclusion as a ready-made technology foreign to the novel raises the question: "Is a citation an alien parasite within the body of its host, the main text, or is it the other way around, the interpretative text the parasite which surrounds and strangles the citation which is its host" (Miller, 1977, p. 439)? In its search for a comprehensible form does the space of the novel react with anti-venom (the *deus ex machina* of cancer) in order to defeat the parasitical Christie, or does the novel form suck its potency from the radical

<sup>17</sup> Indeed, one of his final acts is to use this accounting power. He wonders on page 180 whether the contraband "misshapes" consumed on page 67 are to blame for his death. This may entice the reader to prolong his life by referring back to check the previous passage, tethering the end of the narrative to an earlier stage. Similarly, Christie forgets on page 123 which of his principles (as set out on page 89) he is following, potentially leading the curious reader to search back through the text. On page 79 we are told that a version of Genesis given by Christie's mother fulfils a promise mad on page 29. Each jump backwards moves us to a page in the book prior to the starting point of the previous jump, pausing or undoing the progression of the novel.

potential of Christie's attempts at social transformation? If Christie were to achieve all his aims the story would become fantastical (untrue) rather than socially realistic – Johnson's solution to these competing logics is the intervention of the author and the swift abolition of the textual world.

The text shows us, through use of social fantasy, the limits of mimesis for creating plausible speculations in fiction. Christie is not able to oppose the world as it is, and this is in the end a political message:

The end is coming, truly.

It is just so much wasted effort to attempt to understand anything.

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.

(*CMODE*, p. 82)

Christie's death is the novel voting conservative, it is the tragedy of the novel trying to constitute reality, rather than being constituted by it, where "the economics dictate to an extent sometimes not fully realised the real (as distinct from the imaginary) possibilities open to one to move in other directions" (*CMODE*, p. 12). By constituting an imaginary space using economic apparatus the novel depends upon an explicit structure which in normal life is merely implicit. Again, the politics of the economy of the novel is highlighted in *Albert Angelo* through a shift of voice:

Even though I have hardly provided you with a description of him, a corporate being, I know, but he stands for me, I don't need one: Albert, who stands for me, *poor fool*. [Emphasis mine]

(*AA*, 170)

This interjection is a technique seen very clearly in Beckett<sup>18</sup> at the end of 'Dante and the Lobster' in *More Pricks than Kicks* (1936):

She lifted the lobster clear of the table. It had about thirty seconds to live. Well, thought Belacqua, it's a quick death, God help us all.

*It is not*. [Emphasis mine]

(Beckett, 1972, p. 22)

These phrases come down like a guillotine's drop, they are a technique which

<sup>18</sup> It is also observable in a conversation between Johnson and Beckett, recounted by Johnson to Zulfikar Ghose: "...Beckett said he didn't eat oysters. Why? [Johnson] asked him, Because, so he repeats Beckett's answer, with the laugh already coming to his face, the last time I did, one *winked* at me!" (Ghose, 1985, p. 32)

destabilises both the assumed tone, and the authorial voice. What is it about the literary creation of characters, when observed closely, that is so pathetic? It is their ignorance about the true mechanisms of the world – a problem shared by the average reader who prefers the lies of the average novel. Johnson would use the technique again in 'Fat Man on a Beach' a programme he made for Welsh Television, where he comments about cheese being cut up on an industrial scale by cheese wires. "Though we don't have to see it", he says, deadpan, "*thank God.*"<sup>19</sup> Christie's destruction is a result of kicking against the pricks of his textual world, attempting to see how the cheese is sliced – it is his actions against the space of the novel which formally terminates a narrative world which is already crumbling, and like the textual space in Robbe-Grillet's *Topology of a Phantom City*, Christie's space "is destroyed not by historical cataclysm but by an explosion of the text itself" (Morrisette, 1979, p. 21). The failure of the figures to escalate the inconsistency of their texts is pitiful:

A world can never be organized hierarchically and objectively, and even the subjective chains of association that give it a minimum of consistency or order break down, to the advantage of transcendent but variable and violently imbricated viewpoints... Names, persons, and things are crammed with a content that fills them to bursting; and not only are we present at this "dynamiting" of the containers by the contents, but at the explosion of the contents themselves that, unfolded, explicated, do not form a unique figure, but heterogeneous, fragmented truths still more in conflict among themselves than in agreement.

(Gilles Deleuze, 2000, p. 122)

Christie has three parting shots: firstly, he wishes the greatest doom possible on his author, obscurity and irrelevance; secondly, he points out that when they discover a cure for cancer the Author will seem ignorant, and that this novel will become fundamentally outdated, out-of-print, and eventually unreadable. And thirdly, there is an attack at the uselessness of writing itself: "you shouldn't be bloody writing novels about it, you should be out there bloody doing something about it" (*CMODE*, p. 180). Text cannot carry out social change – cannot even depict it without making forays into fantasy, or crossing barriers of plausibility – and the author's attempt to carry out a mimetic portrayal of changes not yet achieved in reality is not only ludicrous, but irresponsible. It is this foray into meta-narrative "where an internal narrator takes over temporarily from the author or the narrator, who are thereby relieved of their responsibility to make the narrative progress" (Dällenbach, 1986, p. 51) that finally 'does' for Christie, his carnivalesque reign of destruction eventually abolishes the economy and hierarchy of the novel, and his *jouissance* returns as a symptom: the cancer that kills him is the return of the authorial power which he was

<sup>19</sup> Johnson, B. S. (1973) 'Fat Man on a Beach', produced by Aled Vaughan, Harlech Television.

attempting to grasp. When it arrives it comes not to raise Christie to further heights, but to abolish him.

## 5. XTIE'S HERITAGE, PSEUDOMORPHOSIS

...the novel is no longer a closed and established form with built-in conventions, like tragedy and epic; rather, it is problematical in its very structure, a hybrid form which must be reinvented at every moment of its development. Each novel is a process in which the very possibility of narration must begin in a void, without any acquired momentum: its privileged subject matter will therefore be the search, in a world in which neither goals nor paths are established beforehand. It is a process in which we witness the very invention of those problems whose solution is its story.

(Jameson, 1971, p. 172)

The myth of the novel in the twentieth-century is, for Jameson, the myth of the self-made work. Its narration is made to appear from a void, without any inheritance — this is an illusion. While it is essential that this is how it *appears*, this *very framing* is also an inheritance: a jargon of realism whereby each novel overcomes the idea of the novel. For Johnson, in his epistemo-critical postscript to his work,<sup>20</sup> *Aren't You Rather Young to be Writing Your Memoirs*, “Joyce was the Einstein of the novel” (AYRY, p. 12). Joyce appears completely new because he is so explicitly and radically indebted to the past, and even though the “subject-matter in *Ulysses* was available to anyone” (AYRY, p. 12) it is not the subject matter but his formal and linguistic innovations which reconfigure the literary landscape. Albert Einstein did not merely develop his area of study, he removed and reformed its foundations in a manner that placed all physics previously done at a different level of relevance. He did not appear *sui generis*, but neither was his insight simply a matter of increasing accuracy or efficiency, it was a theory that introduced small new ideas, but through them reconfigured all previous understandings. Similarly, the already hybrid form of the novel is with Joyce extended to include not only the uncertain possibility of the novel itself, but uncertainty concerning the possibility of consistent and coherent text at all. These operations lead to a text that appears, yet again, as an autochthonic event with no observable place within the tradition before its emergence, but which seems to have always been observable and latent after the fact. By coming into being it retroactively reconfigures all previous formations — in this way Joyce can simultaneously be the exemplary Modernist *and* the last Victorian.

Einstein's theory of general relativity, a description of gravity as a property of time and space, inflects subsequent literary technique. For example, as described by

<sup>20</sup> Glyn White summarizes the place of this work, where “...the ‘Introduction’ [to *Aren't You Rather Young...*] is generally taken, whether in sympathy with its views or in order to expose their shortcomings and contradictions, to be something of a manifesto, to the extent that it has almost become B. S. Johnson, in his absence.” (White, 2005, p. 85) Of course it can only carry out this role because he *is* absent.

Kenner, Joyce's 'Uncle Charles Principle' is essentially a gravitational force, action at a distance upon the fabric of textual space which changes the inflection of speech, while leaving the topology of formal meaning largely constant (Kenner, 1978, pp. 15-38). The novel and the atom are no longer relevant, or pre-eminent, in the way they were previously supposed to be. The economy of the novel/nucleus has been split open. For the writers following Joyce this had an effect on the nature of the desire to write, and the mode in which the desire can be satisfied, casting it further away:

The starting point of the theory of relativity is the strange fact that, for every observer, no matter in what direction and how fast he moves, light moves at the same speed; in an analogous way, for Lacan, no matter whether the desiring subject approaches or runs from his object of desire, this object seems to remain at the same distance from him.

(Žižek, 1992, p. 76)

So it is with the desire for the new, for the new novel as an idea — the real risk comes when an attempt is made to make the desire concrete. As Roland Barthes depicts this process in his *Preparation for the Novel*:

I'm at the Fantasy-of-the-novel stage, but I've decided to push that fantasy as far as it will go, to the point where: either the desire will fade away, or it will encounter the reality of writing and what gets written won't be the Fantasized Novel.

(Barthes, 2011, pp. 11-12)

The fantasy is of a striving, by way of the novel, to transcend the novel — as Adorno outlines in *Negative Dialectics*, what “the philosophical concept will not abandon is the yearning that animates the nonconceptual side of art... It must strive, by way of the concept, to transcend the concept” (Adorno, 1973, p. 15). This transcendence is strived for, but instead what occurs is the *pseudomorphosis* of the novel — a term taken by Adorno from Oswald Spengler in *The Decline of the West* (1922), which itself borrows the vocabulary from mineralogy, where,

...crystals whose inner structure contradicts their external shape, stones of one kind presenting the appearance of stones of another kind... those cases in which an older alien Culture lies so massively over the land that a young Culture, born in this land, cannot get its breath and fails not only to achieve pure and specific expression-forms, but even to develop fully its own self-consciousness. All that wells up from the depths of the young soul is cast in the old moulds, young feelings stiffen in senile works, and instead of rearing itself up in its own creative power, it can only hate the distant power with a hate that grows to be monstrous.

(Spengler, 1926, p. 189)

When it comes to the novel the implications are clear: “The end is coming, truly”

(*CMODE*, p. 82). Yet the end of the novel never seems to come, even where “the form was finished, worn out, exhausted, and everything... had been done too many times already” (*AYRY*, p. 13). Instead there is the maintenance of an outward form while internally the material has changed in its articulations. Spengler's analogy with mineralogy — where one material is replaced by another without it forcing a change in the form — breaks down when he describes how the pressure that builds as a set of ideas forming a 'young culture' are stifled by the dominant power structure. The process is more dialectical than this. This tension is expressed in two of Johnson's novels by the means of biology rather than mineralogy. Cancer — which Johnson experienced first hand with both his mother and his friend Tony Tillinghast — is the force that can collapse both time and space, which can excoriate all but the bare armature of a character, and bring writing to a close by eating away at it from the inside. To gain even minimal distance from it, to combat cancer, the sufferer must mutilate his or her own body at a cellular level. Cancer is the biological equivalent of pseudomorphosis, the colonisation of the body by the insurgent or osmotic force of a hideous cellular topology. In Johnson cancer is ethically null, it is not an invasion, it is the radical potential alterity of the body, of life. Cancer is an attack on the body by the body — it will finish the body, rather than overthrowing it, by occupying and forming interstices through a process of becoming death. It is of the body, but not *for* it. It does not hate, but it is *monstrous*, in a specific sense which will be fully explored in Chapter Eight. Mineralogy talks of crystal lattices which are doped with impurities in order to allow them to become conductors — similarly there is no historical flow without internal contradictions. The cancer is “the deadly objective correlative of the entanglement of truth and fiction” (Hubble, 2007, p. 153), where from this entanglement — a Hegelian struggle for mastery — either the form or the dominated young content must win. In any event, the change is a tragedy. In the case of *The Unfortunates* this form is particularly bitter-sweet — the new form is despairing and despaired of. Johnson recognises that this contradiction is not yet resolved for his own time, and that the literary historical event he desired never arrived.

The creation of a post-novel isn't necessarily a complete overturning of all the novel's features, but it must be a qualitative change, a pupation, as Jameson describes where “the new is to the old as latent content working its way to the surface to displace a form henceforth obsolete” (Jameson, 1971, p. 327). There is a political revolution at stake here. In Antonio Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks*:

...the ruling class has lost its consensus, i.e. is no longer "leading" but only "dominant", exercising coercive force alone, this means precisely that the great masses have become detached from their traditional ideologies, and no

longer believe what they used to believe previously, etc. The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear.

...the mechanical impediment that has been imposed on those who could exercise hegemony... prevents them from carrying out their mission... The death of the old ideologies takes the form of scepticism with regard to all theories and general formulae... But this reduction to economics and politics [leads to] the possibility and necessity of creating a new culture.

(Gramsci, 1971, pp. 275-6)

The history of the experimental novel demonstrates that there is only so far you can push the form, the “hegemonic nature of authority” (Tew, 2007b, p. 204) of Johnson's THEM before the accumulating contradictions — the morbid symptoms — lead to a collapse of the project. This is the background for Johnson's “sheer technical joy of forcing almost intractable words into patterns of meaning and form that are uniquely... mine... to codify existence” (AYRY, p. 18). It is the attempt to challenge the novel form which is no longer leading any cultural change, but still dominates by force of inertia. His works make breakouts from the territory of what Williams calls the cultural dominant, only to retreat back into society as problematic objects of it. Social forms must make a break with their history before the novel can transform into a new technique which is not alien to the emergent content of society, “what we are seeking is the true practise which has been alienated to an object, and the true conditions of practise... which have been alienated to components... or mere background” (Williams, 1980, p. 49). There must be a new form to practice before there can be a new novel, there must be new life content to invoke before there can be a new practice, and there must be new practice before there is new form. This dialectical outworking is a movement of a historical totality. Johnson's work is not the new within the old fully gestated, but within it something is stirring. *Christie Malry*, for example, functions as a well formed carbuncle, a marker of the mode in which writers might proceed. When Christie is forced by his author to point out that the “writing of a long novel is in itself an anachronistic act... relevant only to a society and a set of social conditions which no longer exist” (CMODE, p. 165) it is absurd not to ask if the novel form itself isn't also defunct, and if the short novel inhabited by these characters is a shamefaced attempt to slip away.

*Christie Malry* makes use of the vocabulary of performance and theatre in order to further explain the relationship between readers, authors, heroes and characters, and where their worlds overlap or occlude, using at times what approaches staging notes:

Christie loved the Shrike's room, as well. One wall was of matchboarding. Nothing could be heard through it. Another was of brick, faced with plaster

and wallpaper. Yet another had a window in it. The penultimate had a door in it. The fifth wall was unusual in itself but otherwise unremarkable. The Shrike kept a photograph of Christie as a schoolboy up on it, to remind her. Out the landing was the kitchen and the lavatory, though not necessarily in that order.... the floorboards were painted and woodgrained to produce a striking trompe l'oeil effect. The Shrike was not by nature a butcher's assistant, Christie realised only too well: it was society that forced her to be so, or to be always something similar. She was a pearl in her own right, and it was a reflection on society that it could find only inappropriate use for that wit, that nacreous quality that were just two of the things that endeared her to him.

'Enough of that metaphorical rubbish,' said the Shrike, 'What's wrong with stuffed breasts of lamb.'

(*CMODE*, p. 138)

What metaphorical rubbish is being spoken of? The Shrike is not privy to the importance of the world she inhabits, though she seems to have a 'subconscious' awareness of its construction, she is never the subject of its focalisation. The materials of her world's construction are full of meaning: the brick wall's layered construction is noted. There is a door wall, a window wall. All modern conveniences are outside the door, their existence is necessary but ill-defined as their exact positioning would be an extravagance. The optical illusion of the *trompe l'oeil* is an indication either of poor taste, or that that the narrative world is shifting. Most important is the matchboarding, the tongue and groove internal walling common to subdivided housing and a nod to the realities of inner-city cold water flat living. This bears comparison with the "dialectical topology" (Stoltzfus, 1982, p. 88) of Robbe-Grillet's *Jealousy*, his depiction of the "laths" making up the walls of a building is possibly Johnson's source for this section (Robbe-Grillet, 2008, p. 83). Usually (as in Ann Quin's *Berg*) this material's defining feature is that sound can be easily heard through it, often as a plot device, but here is it silent. However thin the division between author and reader is rendered this wall is still impossible to traverse, it is a structural interstice, a device designed to resonate but not actually create complete meaning.

The fifth wall is a more serious structural problem. If the theatrical metaphor of the 'fourth wall' (which is broken when the actors address the audience) is extrapolated then a fifth wall is another plane beyond (on a different conceptual level to, or parallel to) the one between stage (or here, book) and audience. The exact meaning of a 'fifth wall' is uncertain, but one of its potential functions is to represent the barrier between the writer and the critic (Hunter & Lichtenfels, 2005, p. 1) who is at yet another remove from the work than the reader. Johnson attempts to go one step further than the matchboarding, and planes the barrier between author and critical

reader as thin as possible. Alternatively, when the Shrike places a photograph of Christie as a schoolboy upon it, it represents the page that blocks the author from having critical perspective on himself and his own history — the author is always behind the page and therefore cannot see what is upon it. The fourth wall has already been broken (or had its opacity reduced) through small hints of the actors' (Christie, the Shrike, the Shrike's Mother) emerging knowledge of their status as characters — or rather, their mobilization through reading as enacted beings. The author-function, as the top of a hierarchy of constitutive ability, still cannot gain a view of the page, and neither can the reader, as “the point at which reality and fiction are bound together is that of the graphic surface of the page” (White, 2005, p. 53) which must remain invisible while being the fundamental material support of the text.

Key is the operation which claims that this photograph of Christie, placed upon the fifth wall, simultaneously stands for the author (the reader can never quite disassociate assumptions of autobiography, despite the third-person) and the reader, whom Christie resembles. Rather than simply a writer who “attempts to objectify himself and to realize his being in a work of art” (Jameson, 1971, p. 275) Johnson attempts to realize the being of the reader within the work of art (a similar attempt is made in *Albert Angelo* with the use of the second person tense). There are a series of gazes and doublings, reflections and views across spatial, temporal and ontological barriers, that pass through a character with no explicit link to the author, apart from being his creation, as middle terms between the author and reader. This *mise en abîme* is created in order to create a sense of *eventual* access to the materiality of the book by deferring its arrival indefinitely. The Shrike is brought into this tangle, as she is responsible for placing a picture of Christie upon the wall to remind herself of something. To remind her of what? That she is in a relationship with Christie, or that she is a fictional character? To remind herself that Christie is the most important feature of the novel? The Shrike plays an increasingly curious role in the novel. Or that Christie is both a re-organization of historically existing figures, J. Christ-y, S. Christieish, and simultaneously strangely absent? These features allow the characters to play an allegorical role representing the problem of subjectivity in modern life. Christie is constructed in such a way as to allow the reader to stretch his topological armature out like a frame over her own antagonisms, re-arranging the furniture of his existence to resemble her own life. Christie acts as a cipher which can be used to construct a relationship with the characters and themes of the work. While the reader cannot appear in Christie, Johnson or the Shrike's book, a subset of her memories are fictionalized — are made here to stand in for the reader, as decoration upon this unbreakable fifth wall — a

subjectivity-invigorated self-knowledge decorated avatar. This is a step away from Joyce, for whom "it is essential... that we shall not substitute our own home town for his" (Budgen, 1972, p. 71). In lieu of the impossibility of Johnson carrying out Henri Perron's wish in Simone de Beauvoir's *The Mandarins* to "throw himself live and whole onto paper" (De Beauvoir, 1956, p. 132), Johnson asks the reader to wire themselves into the network of topological positions which he has prepared for the purpose.

However, these are still written objects, at best an illusion of the fingerprints of the author and not the presence of the author himself. They may stand for him, and 'Xtie' may stand for the reader, as long as she does not recognise the fact. At the point of awareness the semblance collapses and this effect must have been (and always have been) an artefact of yet another author figure above the ontological level of Christie, the author function. This is the other sense of the wall: it is unremarkable because it is unbreakable — it cannot be marked — and it is only through its sublation, its conceptual abolition and preservation that it is possible to invoke it and to re-mark upon it, to change its nature, and to turn it into a device rather than an epistemological level. The normal readerly competence is here upset by highlighting the topological armature which allows for readings but must by convention disappear to allow the novel world to maintain its consistency. Here the literal sense of language must be abandoned in normal narrative reading. The wall functions as an interstice which cannot be resolved.

Similarly, the Shrike's fictionality (or functionality) is constantly brought back to the reader, Christie says:

'You could go and work for Pork Pie Purveyors Ltd,' said Christie, 'now that they've been invented. That would be a logical progression of the kind that very much appeals to the vast majority of readers.'

'Not me,' said the Shrike, emphatically, 'someone's got it in for them. Didn't you hear the other day they had a bomb threat?'

(*CMODE*, p. 139)

In what way is the text threatening to blow up the reader? Is the Shrike worried about the readers, or about the factory? Christie's self-commentary highlights that Christie knows more than the Shrike, that there is a hierarchy of implied knowledge as well as ontology among the characters of this novel. The different fictional subjectivities have greater or less access to the truth of the text. Like a demi-god Christie (having borrowed the Promethean fire) can bring items into existence for the gratification of his lover simply by naming them, though the horizons of what it

is possible for the characters to conceive of are set by their social class: a low-level job, idle pilfering from work, and sexual freedom. Properly, it is the author function which can bring them into existence by having him name them — but only from a constellation of allowable meanings and functions derived from the coherence of the social material he has selected to work with:

...the essential characteristic of literary raw material or latent content is precisely that it never really is initially formless, never... initially contingent, but is rather already meaningful from the outset, being neither more nor less than the very components of our concrete social life itself: words, thoughts, object, desires, people, places, activities... neither the creation nor the interpretation of the work can ever be an arbitrary process.

(Jameson, 1971, pp. 402-3)

Like the process of justice, the non-arbitrary application of literary creation is one of the key features of a well-ordered liberal society. From this basic assumption of consistency the fictionality of the Shrike is further highlighted by the constant references to her implausibility, and the playing out of Christie (Johnson's?) fantasies of sexual performance. She is not pneumatic, but not quite as individual an agent as she might be. "I shall enjoy describing her" (*CMODE*, p. 52)! She is present as a subtle form of titillation, and the author gently mocks the reader's voyeurism with an understanding that he knows what the readers like, that they enjoy the funny, the brutal, the short, the slightly smutty, the entertaining rather than simply the kitchen sink. In his manuscripts Johnson deliberated over the obviousness with which he should make this clear, as the line after "Xtie and the Shrike were able to enjoy a simultaneous orgasm of unforgettable proportion and intensity", which was to be, "There's something for the reader to exercise his imagination on!" is excised in the type-script.<sup>21</sup> Perhaps he assumed that the reader would require no prompting. It returns in the final printed version (*CMODE*, p. 58), in a reformulated manner. The levels of self-determination held by the characters in this novel, and the extent to which they are presented as merely *functions* within it, are highly variable. Even *within* character structures it is not consistent, as characters seem to have more or less access to narrative devices at different points. The novel, for Johnson as for Simone de Beauvoir, is:

...larded with personal fantasies. If you look closely enough, every character in a novel is a monster, and all art consists in preventing the reader from looking too closely...

(de Beauvoir, 1956, p. 132)

The invention of the Shrike recalls nothing so much as the self- and desire-inventing

<sup>21</sup> Johnson, *CMODE* Typescript, *CMODE* Box, BLMS, p. 49.

of Don Quixote de la Mancha, where:

Having, then, cleaned his armour, turned his steel cap into a visored helmet, baptized his nag and confirmed himself, he realized that the only remaining task was to find a lady of whom he could be enamoured...

(Cervantes, 2000, p. 29)

There is especial pathos with those constructs which have a heightened knowledge of their written status, only to recede from the fore. For example, Headlam, who like a briefly met Sancho Panza points out that he “seems to be the comic relief in this novel”, and cries into his beer because he cannot possibly know if Christie has heard his jokes before (*CMODE*, p. 103). His provisional quality suggests that at one point he might have been expecting bigger things. Then of course, there is the “real girl, the Shrike, she had hair in her armpits” (*CMODE*, p. 58) who nevertheless is connected in the Dickensian tradition (the shrike is otherwise known as the 'Butcher Bird') by profession and name with all things meaty (and is pandered to with a job in pork pies), and yet is aware of the contradictions of her own existence. She is suddenly able to ask:

‘...how can we be said to be perfectly happy a few lines back, and now be complaining about the monotony of the diet?’  
‘Easily,’ smiled Christie.

(*CMODE*, p. 139)

Like the reader, the Shrike is worried that the text is incoherent, while for Christie this realization is perfectly satisfactory. Even the Shrike's old mum, the one-limbed cluster of music-hall bawdiness glad to have got (pimped) her daughter (“a good looking peasant girl” (Cervantes, 2000, p. 29)?) into “a respectable novel like this” is nonplussed, even congratulatory, on hearing that Sunday is the day the Shrike and Christie get to have “a really long fuck” (*CMODE*, p. 156).

In the end it is the fate of Christie that is the real determinant of the text. This antediluvian second act idyll, from the point at which the Shrike and her armpits put in an appearance until the moment the author function arrives to announce the end of the fun (sexual, and violent), becomes increasingly fantastic and unlikely as it accelerates towards its own limited length under the signs of revolution and endless virility. During this period anger leads directly to effective action against the material and social embodiments of those antagonisms, the jubilant Terror before the Thermidor:

...and this was a Ladies' Invitation after all, wasn't it?

'Yes,' Christie had said, generally, to everything, and thought to himself that if he could satisfactorily stabilise his sexual arrangement then he could the more efficiently concentrate on his Great Idea. And so it was to be: nothing happens by accident in this novel. Or almost nothing.

(*CMODE*, p. 57)

What is the nature of this interstice, the space between *almost* nothing and nothing in which accidents can occur? Is it the destabilization of affect, such as in this passage where the description of the Shrike gradually becomes free indirect speech, with the final question being interrupted by Christie's 'Yes'. Here, as Gerard Genette describes, “the narrator takes on the speech of the character, or, if one prefers, the character speaks through the voice of the narrator, and the two instances then are *merged*; in immediate speech, the narrator is obliterated and the character substitutes for him” (Genette, 1983, p. 174). This normally transparent apparatus becomes opaque through the jarring interventions against the author. That author, Genette's 'narrating instance', Dällenbach's 'productive agency', is obliterated by the unexpected interjection of Christie's reported speech, an answer to what is properly narrative exegesis:

...the nature of a text is to simultaneously *exclude* its empirical producer and to *include*, in place of this exiled subject, a subject who has no existence beyond the enunciation s/he subtends, who is anonymous despite the name given on the title-page, and who is impersonal despite being seen as a literary person.

(Dällenbach, 1989, p. 76)

This merging and obliteration is dramatized in *Christie Malry* as a battle between the different positions of creator and creation. Christie keeps pushing for an 'accident' to happen whereby he would find himself in complete control of his own novel, and his world, able to say the words he has hitherto only voiced. This is an interplay between the exiled subject (B. S. Johnson), the productive agent of the narrating instance, and the characters such as Christie who are pretenders to the position of narrator. The text makes use of transferring ontological status, where the characters are allowed varying levels of reality, with a type of geared series of literary algorithms — what computer scientists refer to as 'bootstrapping' — in order to present a sense of negotiation between the different potential narrative spaces. Of course these novels never continue *ad infinitum* inscribing larger and larger circles (at some point the novel must end — the game runs its course, or reaches absurdity), though Christie might argue that Johnson is obliged to write the characters up to his own death. However they do not need to be continually writing themselves, once the algorithm is materially fixed it continues to express itself through the readers'

enactments of the text:

*The Unnamable* parodies this astonishing feat of pulling-oneself-up-by-one's-own-ontological-boot-straps by showing that no matter how "high" his imaginings go, no matter how many recursive authors and authors-above-authors and authors-above-authors-above-authors he projects, he can never get outside of his own imaginings to the reality of his ultimate creator. There is an absolute ontological "ceiling" above the Unnamable's head which retreats as he approaches it. The ultimate creator, the God whom the Unnamable can never reach, is of course Samuel Beckett himself, and the retreating ceiling is the unbreachable barrier between the fictional world of *The Unnamable* and the real world which Samuel Beckett shares with us, his readers. In short, *The Unnamable* foregrounds the fundamental ontological discontinuity between the fictional and the real, and does so in such a way as to model the discontinuity between our own mode of being and that of whatever divinity we may wish there were.

(McHale, 1991, p. 13)

The 'Author', the 'Unnamable' — this is what the soles of the living Johnson and Beckett's shoes look like. McHale here suggests that within the reading the reader potentially has an equivalent ontological status to that of God (a device used with more structural complexity in Flann O'Brien's *At-Swim-Two-Birds*, which can be read as a recursive or algorithmic version of the serial storytelling of *One Thousand and One Nights*), and that the repeated use of *mise en abîme*<sup>22</sup> reflects the impossibility of achieving such an aim in literature. The novel can never complete the operation to objectify itself within its pages, and just as Johnson the author can never place his own life on the page except indirectly, "[w]riter and reader can never occupy the same place at the same time" (TRG, 1992, Report 2). The discontinuity between the fictional space and the space of reality remains intractable, and productive, homeomorphically similar but not translatable.

The attempt in *Christie Malry* to create a sense of a self-producing work occurs in a reminiscence on childhood, it is an easily missed literary *mise en abîme*:

The points of the compass, carried out in brass and ten feet from north to south, were let into the floor of the School Hall. The wood blocks wearing quicker than the brass, the letters and lines protruded slightly prouder each year; by the time Christie was in attendance they were sufficiently so to be the cause of several accidents each term. The Headmaster would do nothing to relieve the condition; he maintained that the object was an antique and that it did not cause accidents in any case since it was children running into

<sup>22</sup> The literal meaning, 'placing into the abyss', is instructive in the light of Lukács' complaint in his 1962 Preface to his *The Theory of the Novel*. If he is right, and critics such as Adorno take up residence at the 'Hotel Abyss', from where they can daily contemplate that selfsame "nothingness... absurdity", 'post-modern' authors have perhaps begun to be less observers of, and more experimenters on and into this abyss, placing things into it, and attempting to prompt a response. (Lukács, 1971, p. 22)

it which did that. Christie himself fell over it three times, the second injuring his left knee so badly that it left his left leg a permanently twisted misshape.

Other things left other marks, too.

(*CMODE*, p. 81)

The moral 'point' or 'secret' in the novel is not that something is revealed. As Žižek describes of joke forms, "the real 'secret' is already in the narration itself" (Žižek, 2008, 69), and what is slowly emerging is not an explanation for Christie's terroristic activities, but an orientation device that does not reflect any reality and instead "puts the text into practice, to produce itself, reflexion by reflexion, within an unimaginable space" (Dällenbach, 1986, p. 163). Just as the compass does not produce specific meaning, the novel's aim is not so much as to carry out a story, but to carry out its own workings, to move through its own logics in order to capture desire rather than fulfil it. But, as the headmaster says, isn't it strange that it is not the novel which creates problematic texts, but the text which does it to itself by refusing to avoid the ancient hazards. Christie's trajectory is from unsuspecting kitchen-sink subject, who, through his capture of a key insight manages to surmount his ontological difficulties and stage an insurrection into the machinery of the novel in order to transform the world "from something objective and dispassionate in which the hero is a collector of data, into something filled with wonder in which the hero becomes the one-who-makes-meaning" (Porush, 1985, p. 193). The illusion that the hero's self-making (the *bildung*) is mirrored by the form of the novel, pushed to its logical extreme, is the main theoretical reason that *Christie Malry's Own Double Entry*, or any modern novel for that matter, must be short – the hero's aspirations can never be larger than the fictional space of the novel. If they are they begin to stand too proud of the page, causing accidents.

This creates a problem for writers of novels who wish to be honest with their readers, while not being able to be explicit about the fictionality. There is something obscene for the author function to undress or even dissect itself in public. To pick through its own faeces. Johnson tries to solve this problem through the use of the 'little vermifuge' in *Christie Malry*. The little vermifuge is a model train that he sends under an office building (through the sewer pipes) carrying an amount of gelignite in order to explode the Collector of Taxes, the "Fra Lucre, filthy lucre" (*CMODE*, p. 105).<sup>23</sup> A vermifuge is a drug that causes "the evacuation or expulsion of worms or other animal parasites from the intestines" (Oxford English Dictionary 2nd ed., 1989). The idea of a bomb being used to flush out or otherwise destroy the

<sup>23</sup> This is an elision of 'Fra Luca Paciolo' (who defined double-entry bookkeeping), into a quotation from 1 Timothy 3, concerning 'dirty money'. This wordplay itself follows a short psychogeographic exegesis on the historical source of London place names.

oppressive facets of society is here part of the mechanism of the novel's self-destruction. The novel rises out of a collation of disparate digestions, but for the reader the novel presents fragments to be arranged into a topology or network, to be navigated depending on what it manages to appropriate from their own experience. All these substitutions by reader into the space of the novel vivify Christie's own attempt to prove his ability to have "everything" (*CMODE*, p. 166). Christie acts as a pseudomorph within the text, threatening at all times to break its bonds to "detonate, the truth contained in the very ledgers of capital" (Watts, 2007, p. 91) and overturn the form which he occupies by taking literally the economic basis by which all novels are produced. Content is irrelevant, but here the space of the novel is also collapsed. The strategy works, as it did in the works of Robbe-Grillet, to:

...multiply self-inclusion and inclusion/exclusion within an interlocking, inter-dependent series, the new *nouveau roman* not only derides the ideology of realism and cuts itself off from the world by enfolding itself several times within itself, it confirms itself as an *unimaginable* reality, a challenge to *common sense*...

(Dällenbach, 1986, pp. 158-9)

In the end the productive economy of the novel, the economy of the body, the economy of writing, and the economy of the ledger are brought together — the final phrase is that "Xtie died" (*CMODE*, p. 183), and in it body, text and author are abolished. Like the horse trader in *Michael Kohlhaas*, the sovereign force deigns finally to give everything originally due to his subject before having him executed, to take him back into the legal community: "he has lost everything, at the very moment he has regained everything he has lost" (Miller 1995, p. 90) but not before the ability of the novel to control its jurisdiction, the space of the text, had been called in to question. However it is the ledger on the very final page of *Christie Malry* which has the last laugh, the law of the text is now separated from the actions of Christie — the account is closed.

## 6. CHARACTER AND FOCALISATION

“Novel as the destiny of a civilization” (Lukács, Goldmann, Girard)

(Barthes, 2011, p. 12)

If the novel is not developing alongside social developments, then the novel is no longer fulfilling one of its functions as the reflector of popular consciousness. Malcolm Bradbury:

In many respects English society seems to have undergone social changes into the modern world more gently and less violently than many other countries. That, indeed, is one reason why, to many foreign observers, the English intellectual and literary scene has often seemed comfortable, compact and not particularly intellectual. ...in the last century and this [the 19th, 20th respectively], the closeness of English intellectuals to power and rank, their manners and style, their relative concentration and their confidence, all offered a model for an effective intellectual life.... To other eyes, English writers and thinkers were gentlemanly, amateur, unrigorous, too close to class-position and power to exercise ‘real’ creativity or independence of mind... In fact by some definitions of the word, England had no intelligentsia at all...

(Bradbury, 1971, pp. 21-2)

In short, for Bradbury, English authors have accepted a set of bourgeois values that have changed little since the nineteenth-century — the reconfigurations of the British fin-de-siècle have not been as far-ranging as that of the French — i.e.: “bourgeois fiction for the masses and belletristic fiction for the elite... the realistic novel became the norm in fiction... Entertainment rather than art” (Moore, 2010, pp. 6-7). This description is as exaggerated as any other reduction, but perhaps not unduly so. In his 1975 novel, *The History Man*, Bradbury explores the manner in which the bourgeois character of the academic ‘establishment’ persists structurally in the face of apparently radical social change and ideas. Howard Kirk is a result of the full recuperation of working class figures into power structures, in contrast with Johnson's more liminal characters. *The History Man* concerns the life of 'The Kirks' — a coupling with all the features of a new supposedly counter-institutional *bon hominie* — summarized succinctly in chapters two and three as a series of epiphanies (that are really epiphanies of movement into different economic plateaus rather than epistemological epiphanies) followed by a description of a current static ‘today’ of established normality (Bradbury, 1977, pp. 18-35).

The Kirks are at first unaware and baffled about the social changes occurring around them and are drawn along by the changing economic conditions: “Howard was that

conventional *product of circumstances and his time*, the fifties: the scholarship boy, serious and severe, well-read in the grammar school library [emphasis mine]” (Bradbury, 1977, p. 18), who while understanding that mankind in general is determined by historical and economic forces believes that he himself is the exception. Howard’s voice largely is Bradbury’s voice — also academic (via working class birth and grammar school education), and well aware that self-knowledge is not self-transformation. Bradbury magnanimously does not allow himself to be a better critic than Howard, leaving unsaid the conclusion that for Bradbury to even write a campus novel was a betrayal of sorts. Howard Kirk is an ‘angry young man’ pacified or becalmed — as a sociologist at the height of his career he understands his conditions too well to find any absurdity in them. He has corrupted an understanding of the movement of the Hegelian *Weltgeist* into a concept of historical inevitability (especially concerning his own successes), self-satisfied that he is some sort of “demiurge” (Marx, 1976, p. 29). He has a historical perspective but no perspective on his own historicising. In the final dénouement of the novel, Howard’s poisonous destruction of a student is an invective-filled purge of a dissenter charged with counter-revolutionary activity. The plate-glass university of Watermouth has become a dictatorship of true believers. He unwittingly destroys his wife’s life, and consciously destroys the life of one of those in his charge without knowing what necessity he is acting out. Bradbury shows how Howard manages to keep his social cache of radicalism without effecting any structural change. The Kirks (or Bradbury himself) potentially represent where Albert Angelo (or Johnson) may have found themselves if only they held on. Johnson will present a different sort of radicalism by using the form of his books to challenge the normal political economy of truth and meaning, one that the Kirks could not escape: his is not only an alternative history, but an alternative future for the British novel.

When introducing *The Penguin Book of Modern British Short Stories* Bradbury discusses British writing:

[With Beckett] we can sense not just the division of the modern British story into two traditions, one pre-eminently social and one predominantly experimental, but a sequence of constant attempts at reconciliation.

(Bradbury, 1988, p. 13)

There is always this historical dialectic between different trends in literary activity: in Johnson's work there is a clear attempt to resolve this contradiction productively. However, in Britain, as around the world, the tendency indicated by the experimental novel of the nineteen-sixties and seventies, which yearns to be appropriate and sufficient to the modern world and social conditions, failed to

become a popular form (Figes, 1985). This parallels the rejection of what was perceived as other dogmatic systems of social and cultural reorganization. Habermas points out that “the new value placed on the transitory, the elusive and the ephemeral, the very celebration of dynamism, discloses a longing for an undefiled, immaculate and stable present” (Habermas, 1985, p. 5) which is resolved as an outward appearance of contiguity which abstracts the real changes which have occurred. Instead of grand over-turnings, there has instead been a gradual retrenchment of what appear to be old certainties.

Of course this is only one way to view the period immediately following Johnson's death — the Thatcherite revolution was as dramatic as any dreamed of by the leftist thinkers of the nineteen-fifties and sixties. Bernard Bergonzi, a contemporary of Johnson's and critic of modernism, points out that like all history, literary history:

...is full of contradictions and even cowardice, shown by retreats into the generic or the culturally conditioned; a tendency to play the little world of art against the large world of human freedom; or a grateful falling-back on the stock response when material gets out of hand. Like people, literature is deeply imperfect.

(Bergonzi, 1970, p. 8)

This is not a charge from which Johnson escapes. In his obituary in the *Manchester Guardian* it was observed that, “Johnson's theories about the novel sometimes seemed at odds with the plainness of his perceptions.”<sup>24</sup> It is true that it is possible to see in many examples, even in those of such archetypal unusualness as *Ulysses*, that from almost every 'experimental' novel there can be extracted a realist narrative. Is this simply the confusion of a materialist politics with an individualistic aesthetics? It is not that Johnson must see differently, it is that his work explores what connections are passed over by a normative mode of seeing. His project is not to discover new content but to re-arrange the features of the world in a manner which is appropriate to them, and to give others the tools to do so. The change is not necessarily aesthetic, but topological. It is a re-orientation of the structural framework. It is not automatic that an author with radical formal ideals is socially progressive — the fascist history of high modernism attests to this. Indeed, in the critical and political work of Lukács all modernism is socially regressive, as it “exalts bourgeois life's very baseness and emptiness with its aesthetic devices” (Lukács, 1971, p. 68), and turns this emptiness from simply a benign matter of good taste into an ethical principle. The challenge is to find a reading that allows for the chaos and the contradictions, even the cowardice, rather than trying to excise it through schematics. Johnson had many plain perceptions, and clearly contained within him

<sup>24</sup> *Manchester Guardian* (1973) 'B. S. Johnson (Obit.)', Friday, November 16th, p. 9.

both revolutionary ideals, and many conservative values. John Berger outlines some of the fundamental problems and contradictions which made themselves increasingly apparent during Johnson's working life:

...the range of modern means of communication: the scale of modern power: the degree of personal political responsibility that must be accepted for events all over the world: the fact that the world has become indivisible: the unevenness of economic development within that world: the scale of the exploitation. All these play a part. Prophecy now involves a geographical rather than historical projection; it is space, not time, that hides consequences from us. To prophesy today it is only necessary to know men as they are throughout the whole world in all their inequality. Any contemporary narrative which ignores the urgency of this dimension is incomplete and acquires the oversimplified character of a fable.

(Berger, 2001, p. 101-2)

The world has become indivisible, techniques for finding structures among the surface have failed, this is the problem. Berger doesn't quite draw the deeper conclusion, that the problem is not only that the world is indivisible, but that it is also not *totalisable*, that general abstractions no longer adhere. When an attempt is made to isolate any single social feature they begin to denature, much like a sea-creature brought to the surface loses all shape and definition, becoming simply a mass of matter — equally the grand ideological and analytical tools that used to be able to maintain these features no longer seem to operate. Berger asks for a global topology that describes a mutable totality of consciousness, of inter-subjectivity — but of course, this is a utopian vision of the possibilities of art and literature. Instead, the novel slips often into the fable of the individual character, life, and experience:

Thus the first false, one would like to say inauthentic, impulse of the novelists is to want to *decide*, to settle once and for all the contours, the features, of their characters by fiat: as though in real life people did not stand for us as unconscious symbols, leading a second life in our fantasies of which we are only gradually, only partially, aware: as though the very interest of storytelling itself were not the slow, autonomous transformation of the characters under their own momentum, before our very eyes, the narrative thus coming to resemble a kind of inner mediation, rather than a newspaper communiqué.

(Jameson, 1971, pp. 99-100)

It is not that novelists do not attempt create these contours, but that they are not settled once and for all and can only be suggested. More than this, it is the active engagement, the fretting of the material by the reader that produces any depth beyond that which is plotted on the page. The idea of fixed meaning has vanished. In this manner, Johnson's stories manipulate space at the expense of time. With a

*trompe-l'oeil* effect, these vertical interstices where the reader is to place their own details appears as a lack of commitment by the author. They are the pages' surfaces, and its linguistic affordances, organized in order to enclose an *ersatz* depth that becomes an authentic artefact through the simple abstraction of being placed together as a book. A jigsaw that can be endlessly re-organized but never made complete, which manages somehow to hold together as an image. Barthes defines Modernism as “the search for a Literature which is no longer possible” (Barthes, 1968, p. 38), and in Johnson there is a continuing struggle to discover the nature of this impossible literature, desired because of its impossibility. As Dällenbach explores in his study of the *nouveau roman*, Johnson, who was inspired by such works, produces an effect whereby it is:

...impossible to comprehend the fiction within a global summation: a narrative in which 'anecdotes' thrive and become 'a “game” in the fullest sense' is too contradictory an entity to lend itself to any reduction.

(Dällenbach, 1986, p. 149)

The impulse to appear in control, as having placed before you the definitive, finished, complete work (as though the figure were within in the raw marble all along) denies the actual process of writing — or at least, it does so for Johnson's method of working — and the decisiveness of paths not taken. In the original manuscript for *Albert Angelo* the narrator asks, ‘~~and what of Graham introduced at the beginning but never really explained? Are you not curious?~~’<sup>25</sup> According to Coe ‘Graham’ is Michael Bannard — towards whom he suggests Johnson may have felt a homoerotic attraction (Coe, 2004, p. 446). And while it “was enough, for [Samuel] Albert, to know that someone lived upstairs”<sup>26</sup> is it enough for the reader to know that someone lived upstairs? This uncertainty is not an attempt at mystery, it is an attempt at honesty — but is ‘upstairs’ an analogy for something else? Eight lines previously:

This was enough for Albert, to know that someone lived upstairs but not to know who it was that lived upstairs. For many it would not have been enough. They would have been out at many times, on many occasions, contriving coincidences in the hall and in the passageways and other common places... He... did not worry himself with identities.

(AA, pp. 14-5)

<sup>25</sup> Quotation from manuscript: written in red pen, on slant, over the following: ‘He took over the flat from Graham. There was a long section about Graham just here, but I cut it out because Graham bored me. So what you’re getting now is a resume of some of the less boring bits from it. Perhaps you’re bored already though. I don’t know. How should I know? I don’t even know if I’m interested in whether you’re bored. However. What else is there to do?’ In the original it is deleted thoroughly and violently, deletions are shown thus. (*Albert Angelo*, Original MS, BLMS, p. 5)

<sup>26</sup> *Albert Angelo*, Original MS, BLMS, p. 5.

It was hopefully enough for the reader — perhaps the bare minimum to maintain their credulity — for this character to be constructed with such sparse armature. Critics can uncover some of these unknowns, but for the reader they remain formally — the reading process is not the same as the researching process — unknowable. This is a void produced in the editing process, but the retention of features surrounding it act as a buttress to maintain the unspoken topology of the novel. The reader is not to know, for example, that *Albert Angelo* was to be called, until immediately preceding its publication, ‘Samuel Angelo’. Do the cut passages and references to aspects of personal mythology, as Gerard Barrett suggests in ‘Strange Intercessions’, remain as “a ghostly trace on the published text” (Barrett, 2007, p. 108)? If so, Johnson's texts are haunted by the truths he chose not to tell.

This goes against Albert's declaration that structure can only be hidden “[i]llegitimately: *form should be honest, should be honestly exposed*”, especially when it is placed against (in the column form which depicts the lecture in *Albert Angelo*, p. 66-99) a description of how in modern architecture deception is achieved when “a thin layer of granite is used to cover the brick or nowadays ferro-concrete structure” (AA, p. 81). Barrett makes a compelling case for the “echoing... resonance” resulting from the “sublimation” of homosexual themes which produced these voids (Barrett, 2007, pp. 114-5). What is this removal of Graham, the creation of a “gapped-toothed bombsite” (AA, p. 126), other than the production of a façade, of allowing a story-telling structure to remain after the removal of a key referent to the *fabula*, thus suspending even the nominal potential for the reader to produce an accurate reproduction of the author's subjectivity. This is not a fault but a component of Johnson's practise, these untidy ends are the visible marks of impossible inter-subjectivity. Interstices, and this elision of material, are instead the positions from within which the reader comes to constitute the connected totality of the reading, establishing a space which is cooperative rather than simply reproductive or consumptive. Is it therefore true to suggest, as Tew does, that Johnson's “own experience is both the subtext and the textual ontology of all his prose” (Tew, 2001, p. 11). If so, there is something strangely equivocal about this ontology:

I think I shall visit my parents every Saturday, as a rule, as a habit.  
Occasionally Sundays: instead, though, not as well. But usually Saturdays, as  
a rule, as a habit almost. Yes.

(AA, p. 19)

With this invocation it is already *almost* habit, almost an identity: two Saturdays and

an exceptional Sunday is the minimal shape of a life in the economy of this novel. Tew is, I suggest, half-right. Certainly, the subtext, the motive, is that his own experience should be in some way mobilized: but rather than having a textual ontology based upon this experience, it is the problem of textual ontology itself and the way in which truth, mind, experience and fiction interact that is the subject of his prose. Character and narrative is constructed on a series of equivocations where the text's gaps carefully tread the line between allowing the reader to identify with Albert, observing how the devices work upon him, and engaging with what Barthes calls:

...the *shifters of organization in relation to history's chronicle time*: this involves inaugurations of historical discourse, places where the beginning of the material stated and the exordium of the speech-act are united. The discourse of history knows, in general, two forms of inauguration: first of all, what we might call the *performative opening*, for in it speech is actually a solemn act of foundation; the model of this is poetic, the *I sing* of the poets... has as its goal not so much to give the historian a chance to express his "subjectivity" as to "complicate" history's chronicle time by confronting it with another time, that of discourse itself, a time we may identify as paper time... to "de-chronologize" the historical "thread"...

(Barthes, 1989, p. 130)

This manipulation of the author function, or more properly the *composer* function (because "what we permanently have is not objects but *notations*" (Williams, 1980, p. 47)), through the use of these *shifters* establishes a bare minimum of grounding in characterization. Parents who value instant coffee made with "all milk" because of their war experience (AA, pp. 21-22), a father who goes with him to football and calls him mate (AA, p. 24), his parents renting rather than owning their house and so on — quickly there is a clear image of a certain class conjured out of social and historical understanding, though the effectiveness of these references wane as the publication date recedes further into the past. Rather than holding the whole representation in their minds as a constant mental map, readers orientate themselves in terms of this process of inauguration. However, this process does not progress in the normal way of a literary work — instead there is an inversion of Proustian inauguration ("For a long time I used to go to bed early" (Proust, 1983, p. 3)), where rather than a foundational habit which is no longer adhered to there is a foundational habit which has not yet come into being. Character does not arise out of memory, but out of projection. The *sjuzet* confronts the *fabula* in a manner which is insufficient in order:

...to restore a complex, parametric, non-linear time... linked by essence to the speech of the poet or the soothsayer; in effect, the shifters of organization attest... to the historian's predictive function... by references to

the actual time of his speech.

(Barthes, 1989, pp. 130-1)

These shifters, or indexical symbols, function to attach the reader to operations in the text and ground focalisation alongside the moment of the reading. The *Surrealist Manifesto* by André Breton critiqued anything but the bare use of this technique, rejecting the usual addition in realist works of useless detail which created a false closure, where:

...the circumstantial and uselessly detailed character of each of the notations [of conventional novelists] leads me to suppose that they are amusing themselves at my expense. I am spared none of their hesitations about their character: will he be blonde, what should his name be, should we see him first in summertime? So many questions resolved once and for all, by merest chance...

(Breton, André, 'Manifestes du surréalisme', quoted in translation by Jameson, 1971, p. 15.)

However, rather than simply rejecting this detail, Johnson takes advantage of, and makes combat with, the robust “ontological framework the reader brings to the text [which] often overrides authorial intention” (Kanaganayakam, 1985, p. 88). He fills his texts with equivocations so that the normal processes of characterization whereby the text is “institutionalized, 'legalized,' sanctioned in some community of readers” (Miller, 1995, p. 86) cannot take place smoothly. He is taking a risk that this sanction may not be forthcoming. This is foregrounded in *Christie Malry*:

Christie is therefore an average shape, height, weight, build and colour. Make him what you will: probably in the image of yourself. You are allowed complete freedom in the manner of warts and moles, particularly; as long as he has at least one of either.

(*CMODE*, p. 51)

Autobiography is here replaced by anthropology and census data: the object of study moves away from the bald attempts to affirm the self in the early works, *Travelling People*, *Albert Angelo* or *Trawl*. There the self and its expression was largely exhausted, the later texts are far more focused on the possibility of character *at all* than they are with the accuracy or otherwise of characterization. This topography of character in *Christie Malry*, where even shifters begin to equivocate, is the main technique used to explore this:

Neither 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.... But Christie's girlfriend!... Where does she work? In a butcher's, say. She could be called the Shrike, then. Which will be too obvious to some, too obscure to others. Ah.

(*CMODE*, pp. 51-2)

This is a re-constructive force where readers begin to hold an *ersatz* personality in mind due to the illusory contours that these rules effect. The reader is not interested initially in Christie as a being, but as a cipher – his reaction to the injustices of society are a class reaction, individually discernible but sociologically general. The methods of Christie are, as previously outlined, the result of a faulty analysis and a faulty technique, though not a faulty sentiment. Once there is enough to hang upon, then “empathy may work as a gap-filling mechanism, by which a reader supplements given character traits with a fuller psychologically resonant portrait” (Keen, 2006, p. 217). The role assigned here is the task of the reader as proposed by Wolfgang Iser, elaborating on Roman Ingarden's work, where while the “text as such offers different 'schematised views' through which the subject matter of the work can come to light... the actual bringing to light is an action of *Konkretisation*” (Iser, 1972, p. 279). For Johnson's work, especially concerning characterization, the topology or schematic from which readers are to elaborate will not bear much weight – the text must be shored up by the readers own processes of concretization. The inference of Shrike's 'obscure' naming, for example, either gratifies the reader for getting the joke, or leads her to wonder if this specific concretisation – i.e. that she is named after the butcher bird, as mentioned earlier – is premature.<sup>27</sup>

Literary processes of comprehension always go together with special kinds of elaborations in retrieval situations, that is, elaborations with reference to subjective ways of experiencing and evaluating structural-stylistic and fictional components of the communicate constructed by the subject as a cognitive representation of the text.

(Hauptmeier et al., 1989, p. 571)

Scaffoldings of literary process accrete more information to themselves, seemingly spontaneously, but in fact through a complex socialized process derived from an historical process larger than the individual. What, for example, happens when the character 'acts' or 'arrives' (which they do repeatedly, each 'action' is also an

<sup>27</sup> As pointed out in Tindall (1985, p. 104), *The Shrike* was a 1955 film directed by José Ferrer, based on the 1952 play by Joseph Kramm. In it, while Ann (the 'Shrike') appears normal to outsiders, she drives her former husband into an insane asylum. By this interpretation, the whole novel is in fact moved by the unheard niggling of Shrike.

‘entrance’) within the novel? In what way, if any, are the mental images constructed by readings correlates of the world of the text? More fundamentally, is there actually such a thing as a cognitive representation of a text at all, in the sense of a correlative model? Is the fact that characters have specific features, however arbitrary, sufficient (Tredell, 2000, pp. 58-60)? Does an inauguration, once completed, transmute into a solid acceptance of a sense of reality which does not further engage the reader but simply grounds experience comfortably for the rest of the text:

Even without the literal map the reader produces a mental map of the landscape he or she reads.... These marks remain in an atemporal spatial array.... his marriage and his death are simultaneous. The reader understands the novel in terms of the movements of the characters across it, the changes they make in it.

(Miller, 1995, p. 211)

Characters are a subset of features within the space of the novel, but does the reader place themselves into the space of the novel as a character, or rather observe the movements of characters. Christie, for example, leases his appearance and history from the reader. Albert has too much territory in him, the first textual contour to appear in *Albert Angelo* is principally architectural and geographical, Percy Circus, and everywhere Albert goes he produces historical spaces. The reader's acceptance of narratives is based on *psychological* empathy, where readers are led to identify with the plight of the character. There is no chorus that prompts mourning for Albert, and while the Shrike mourns Christie, Christie does not seem to hold his death against anyone. Both characters find their ends unsurprising. It is not illogical that a sense of ennui is prevalent in characters who have their existence so thoroughly challenged by the matter of their world.

However, Johnson undermines the routes towards empathetic readings of this sort. Instead his technique takes advantage of the effects of rejecting that empathy, the feeling into characterization employed by other authors. Theories of cognitive narratology hold that readers construct internal mental representations to which they refer and edit while reading. This mental models approach to understanding of texts — they are not read linearly, they are *comprehended* and held as states within readers' minds — is, in Johnson's case at least, untenable. It is not that his characters are static or dynamic, that they are reliable or unreliable as narrators, or structures within narrative, but it is the narrative itself that is dynamic and inconsistent — inconsistency is a mode of writing as well as a subject of that writing. The character's personalities are problematic — indeed can they really be said to have personalities? — not only in terms of their character, but in the very techniques of their characterization. They are ongoing characterizing states of the text rather

than distinct objects. Johnson attempts to interrupt the normal hierarchy of the process of communicate construction at every level. He throws into disorder the:

...hierarchy of subprocesses within [the process of communicate construction which] runs from automatic processing (e.g., letter identification) up to metacognitive processing (e.g., reflecting upon what an author of a text might have intended)...

(Hauptmeier et al., 1989, p. 583)

At the bottom of the hierarchy are his attempts to de-automatize reading by re-configuring the type-setting of his work. It can be as difficult to identify the grammar of alternative graphic symbols as it can be to worry about intention. Johnson has stated that:

...another of my aims is didactic: the novel must be a vehicle for conveying truth, and to this end every device and technique of the printer's art should be at the command of the writer...

(AA, p. 175)

He insists on not controlling each step in the process between the biographical material which is used in construction and the experience the reader receives upon opening these texts. The reader is as free to interpret and implant into the book as the author is to command a full range of techniques — it does not follow, however, that these freedoms are experienced as liberation, they may well be a burden. The comprehension of Johnson's texts, especially *The Unfortunates* and *See The Old Lady Decently*, operates as a rich coping with an environment that necessarily avoids imposing consistency. That the text relinquishes control at times (“almost nothing happens by accident [emphasis mine]” (CMODE, p. 57)) does not mean that there is no system of control, only that it is no longer to be easily found in the text. The features to be controlled are unfamiliar to most readers. A meaning will be found, and those features not yet understood will be held as a trace until one can be found, though sometimes these traces amalgamate and extrude as a disorientation in the reading:

Every Saturday morning in the normal way I shall visit my parents. In the normal way.

(AA, p. 20)

The mother has not asked God for a son named Albert, instead Albert has asked for his parents. He is not interested in becoming, but coming from, and developing a justification from the past, keen to be a respectable, plausible character. Similarly,

Christie is keen to acquire a place in the future, and has to demand a place in the continuing moment of reading for as long as possible. In *Trawl*, the most autobiographical of his generally auto-biographical novels, Johnson wishes to abolish the past. The metaphor used in *Trawl*: of a net (machine made, logical, square-gridded) that brings up a mass of silvery writhing fish is a direct equivalent to the way the seemingly systematic method of constructing a narrative can be quickly overwhelmed by the wealth of material it is exposed to. The act of putting to sea – a space undifferentiated by the memory-ordering allusions of the city in other books – allows memory to rise and self-order into a form which is better able to mimic its associative topology. Johnson makes the task that much more difficult by refusing to throw the dead, the wrong, the useless or diseased fish over the side. He attempts to digest them, but over the side they do go eventually, this time via his gullet and the reading process. Johnson has various techniques for de-structuring the process of characterization: in *Trawl* he overwhelms narration with a “regurgitation” (AA, p. 94) of partially digested biographical material; in *Christie Malry* he divests the figures of the weight of explicit concrete descriptions, and allows them to drift dangerously into the textual machinery.

## 7. BREAKING THE NOVEL'S BACK

[Believing] carves the mark of the other within an autonomy; it loses a present for a future; it “sacrifices”, in other words “makes sense” (sacer-facere), by substituting a debit for a credit.

(de Certeau, 1985, p. 194)

For de Certeau belief is a system where clarification is available only through the partial abandonment of autonomy. The freedom of belief is the ability to abandon the requirement to be responsible for all the organizing functions of your own life. This is one of the greatest pleasures of reading, the freedom to follow. Johnson's writing method was to rigorously sacrifice his past to his texts, and in turn to require certain unusual sacrifices from the reader:

—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 this book: what sort of a paradigm of truth is that?

(AA, p. 170)

Is the experience of this lack of defecation a lie? The experimental novel tradition, which transcludes the technique of novel-reading and writing into itself, requires and expects novelty to occur within it, “that great modern oxymoron of the regular novelty: the unexpected that consumers expect so often and eagerly that they can no longer do without it” (Moretti, 2003, p. 70). The novel tradition – a tradition, according to Moretti, also of *modernity* in general – expresses a contradiction, where the expected must always be mixed with the unexpected, whether that be specific form or content. Within the individual novel readers expect a distinct lack of repetition, to the extent that any multiple occurrences of mundane details, which are not obviously structural or allusive, are read as a fault in the product. This is the difference between a history, which is completest, and a story, which is a simplification. This difficulty is related to the problem of realism, of somehow rendering the non-linguistic into the linguistic, as Leo Bersani says of Beckett, all his:

...attacks of constipated thought... are the result of the mental machine's failure to process the stream of verbal thought mysteriously poured into it. A myth of authentic existence as pre-linguistic both entraps Beckett in a more and more exasperated recognition that only language can vouch for that authenticity (even while it logically cannot do so), and allows him to demystify the claim to truth of any logical discourse.

(Bersani, 1990, p. 11)

This desperate search for some access to a noumenal (unfiltered) experience, one that is pre-phenomenological, traps all authors concerned with truth. Searle has a clear explanation for the process by which fiction interlocks with the concept of truth:

By pretending to refer to people and to recount events about them, the author creates fictional characters and events... the author will refer to real places and events intermingling these references with the fictional references, thus making it possible to treat the fictional story as an extension of our existing knowledge. The author will establish with the reader a set of understandings about how far the horizontal conventions of fiction break the vertical connections of serious speech... coherence is a crucial consideration. However, there is no universal criterion for coherence: what counts as coherence in a work of science fiction will not count as coherence in a work of naturalism. What counts as coherence will be in part a function of the contract between author and reader about the horizontal conventions.

(Searle, 1979, p. 73)

There are certain activities that, once designed, help add to the reality effect (*ekphrasis*) of the description. One of them is to show a variety of events, despite the problem that it is *habit* that makes up most of life. This is a topological framework that not only *intermingles* with reality but maintains a *coherence* with that reality: these need barely be events, indeed can be somewhat arbitrary matter, stuffing. The paradigm of truth quip given in *Albert Angelo* can be contrasted with *Ulysses*, in which Bloom singularly attends “at stool” (Joyce, 1960, p. 86) shortly after he is first presented to the reader. Albert evacuates the scene of the novel twice, and as he dies he does not speak, “Albert walks” and produces “Hardly a splash”, but he goes to the toilet only once. His epitaph is one of the children’s essays used earlier, though this is probably not an authentic essay,<sup>28</sup> about a “shocking display of funeralization” rather than a recounting of his exploits or even any specifics of his death. It is irrelevant whether the text explicitly outlines his drowning — the book is finished, not because he dies, but because it has abolished itself. Albert is collateral damage (AA, p. 180). The shit and the death in writing *does not smell* — *scriptura non olet* — there is no literary equivalent of the olfactory bulb in the brain. The nearest approach made is with the inserted essays, which announce their truth through a telling inarticulacy. Conversely, the regularity with which characters go to the toilet is not something that the trained reader of the novel is looking for, defecation does not ennoble the reader’s conception of herself. Joyce has a reasonable excuse, and Johnson does not because, if the average number of defecations for a healthy adult is thought to be between one and two a day, then Bloom shits acceptably. Albert,

<sup>28</sup> This final essay is not present in the source materials held by the British Library in the hand of anyone other than Johnson. The other essays appear in the individual hands of Johnson's pupils.

however, is in the extraordinary position of having his bowels opened for him only once during a period of around three months.<sup>29</sup> The point here is that the horizontal *conventions* of writing described by Searle are not merely extensions of existing knowledge — fictional texts may operate by their own logics — and that knowledge, the *serious speech* used to refer to the non-textual world is not reliable either because “we cannot climb out of our conceptualization of the world to gain a neutral position from which to compare our beliefs and sentences to the disposition of the world” (Prado, 2006, p. 117). As Sartre expresses in *The Words*, the alternative to the claim that words explicitly refer to signs is not necessarily to claim that words do not indicate anything at all:

As a militant, I wanted to save myself by works; as a mystic, I attempted to reveal the silence of being by a thwarted rustling of words... I confused things with their names: that amounts to believing... I was Roquentin; I used him to show... the texture of my life.

(Sartre, 1964b, p. 251)

The impossibility of silencing words in order to let things speak out does not make the desire to do so any less potent. Moving on from the *lack* of narrative texture in *Albert Angelo*, how are the *excesses* of texture that occur in *Trawl* when Johnson obsesses about the use or non-use of a condom to be understood? Does the continual recounting of this object not go “far beyond the dictates of realism” (Barrett, 2007, p. 113)? Can belief in narrative really be assured by piling up event upon event, or does the production of belief operate in a different mode? Or must it be through texture that phenomenological verisimilitude is achieved? In what way does the novel beat paths over the interstice between the frame of the text and bald noumenal life. Tew:

Although Johnson uses the novelist frame as a boundary within which he constructs an internal mechanism, nevertheless he attempts to signify a world beyond the text... Thus Johnson invites the reader to appropriate his method and apply its dialectical incursions as an exemplary critical practice. In this sense both *Albert Angelo* and *See The Old Lady Decently* are critical-pedagogical guides.

(Tew, 2007b, p. 219)

Is this lesson, as it passes, smooth, or cracked? This is an entirely different idea of what the text is for — a machine for producing meaning rather than a referent for meaning. To approach the world does the text need to be seen as a record of the world, a world-model, or is it instead a text-for-living? A machine which operates

<sup>29</sup> The action of *Ulysses* takes place over 24 hours, with *Albert Angelo* it is more difficult to draw out a definitive chronology. Albert tells his parents early on in the novel that the [school] “holidays are still on” (p. 23), and immediately before the ‘Disintegration’ “seven weeks of summer holiday lay ahead of him” (p. 163). We discover that “next January” is “only another nine months” away (p. 32). Therefore the novel seems to begin during the Easter break and take place over the Summer term; around 3 months.

across the gap to mediate — or even perhaps to censor — the communication between author, reader, and world. Little would be gained from the repeated depiction of Albert's defecation, and:

...since each reader brings to each word his own however slightly different idiosyncratic meaning, how can I be expected to make my own—but you must be tired.

(AA, p. 170)

It is clear from the explicit marking out of the interstices between text and reader that direct coherence of expression and reception is not the mode of communication which is privileged for Johnson's practice. When finally the communicative constipation of *Albert Angelo* is ruptured by the “epistemological blitz” (James, 2007, p. 32) of the “——— OH, FUCK ALL THIS LYING!” (AA, p. 163) it is in an apparent move from mimesis to diegesis. This aposiopesis presents the implied author's exhaustion and frustration as a metaphor for the exhaustion of the novel form (McGeough, 2007, p. 133), it is no longer possible to pile word upon word and expect anything new to emerge, especially not truth. Like Daedalus, the author escapes the labyrinth of his own making “by flying out of it, by cutting the Gordian knot, so to speak, rather than by untying it, though at the cost of his too bold son, rash youth, defier of the sun” (Miller, 1976b, p. 66). The equivalent of this act in *Albert Angelo* is the incision into the material surface of the page, the paper (AA, pp. 149-152), which in its attempt to escape from the page precipitates the disintegration of the novel within 20 pages. Through this type of rupture, as Jean Ricardou outlined in 'Time of the Narration, Time of the Fiction', the “writing [of the novel] is no longer masked by the development of the story but is contested in its very reiteration by the architecture of the book” (Ricardou, 1978, p. 15). That is to say, through repetition of description the narrative returns to identical moments in the fiction – the same object in the topology of the text's events. The text viewed through the hole projects backwards through the novel, intersecting with the textual space of previous pages. The cutting of the knot here is the attempt not just to include a ready made textual object in the novel, but to allow the citation<sup>30</sup> – the insertion of a knife into an eye – to intersect with other sections of the narrative line, by producing a graphic surface to carry it out, thereby creating a short-lived yet disruptive loop in the time of the narration to an historical time not previously encompassed by the novel:

struggled to take back his knife, and inflicted on him a

<sup>30</sup> While the tone of the fragment is notably different to the rest of the text, it is not clear what the source is. It may well be Johnson's own summary, closely following the details of the official coroner's account which was first made public in Leslie Hotson's 1925 work *The Death of Christopher Marlowe*.

mortal wound above his right eye (the blade penetrating to a depth of two inches) from which he died instantly.

(*Albert Angelo*, visible through holes pp. 149, 151, printed on 153)

In his 1972 essay 'Topology and the *Nouveau Roman*' Morrisette describes the 'holes' in a series of novels by Robbe-Grillet<sup>31</sup> in which he compares the operation of textual holes to the mathematical idea of the topology of a 'Klein bottle'. He describes how the "narrative line (the exterior, or 'uncontained' line) penetrates the duplicated field (inner novel, illustration, recorded material, report) in such a way that it becomes impossible to distinguish between container and thing contained" (Morrisette, 1985, p. 77). In Robbe-Grillet's case these holes are simply in the topological structure of the text, not directly in the material substratum of the page. The effect in *Albert Angelo* of historical documents suddenly emerging from among the fiction is escalated quickly by the presentation of more historical documents, the descriptions of Mr. Albert by his pupils. Rather than allowing his ideas to remain within the objective correlative 'underpinnings' of the fiction, the text brings the ideas of the author explicitly on to the narrative line, in such a way that these internal ideas envelop the preceding narrative to produce an auto-critique. The 'Disintegration' begins from the outside in as a liquidation of textual space:

The fact of turning the pages imposes the idea of the right, inescapable sequence... creates the illusion of the inevitable rhythm of a past, a present, and a future. Johnson wanted to violate each of these assumptions.

(Thielemans, 1985, p. 85)

The immobilization of the novel through graphic and material technique cannot be separated from the main themes of the novel, and the mechanism by which it is finally brought to an end. The failure of the space of the novel to tell truth is mirrored by the failure of contemporary political space to do justice to the needs of society. The historic, heroic, stories of East London and Deptford – the noble Battle of Cable Street, the murder of the legendary Christopher Marlowe, spy – are not part of this novel, but they are devices for drawing some version of truth up through the holes they surround and inhabit. London, suggests Doreen Massey, like all spaces and all cities, is available for a "complex mobilization of space and place as weapons as well as stakes in [a] knot of conflicts" (Massey, 2005, p. 168). Albert's answer is not to simply push these social issues into view or to simply note and pass over them, but to be explicit about the analysis that should be drawn:

<sup>31</sup> Specifically *Le Voyeur* (1955), *Danse le labyrinthe* (1959) and *Project pour une révolution à New York* (1970).

If we go on half-educating these kids and more... then the violence will out. I'm sure they know they're being cheated, that they're being treated as subhuman beings. And the school is a microcosm of society as a whole.

(AA, p. 133)

The text hints at a didactic mode far before the emergence of an explicit material critique during the rupture of 'Disintegration'. Albert views the condescension shown towards these children as both a risk and a shame, largely a mundane general cruelty than a grand plot against the people (which makes his final death at the hands of these children all the more bathetic). He points out that "in Cyprus at fourteen they'd be accepted as men, and doing men's job's" (AA, p. 132), and it is the frustration of observing potential squashed in the face of endless useless tasks (school in the minds of the 'Corps', school-teaching in Albert's) that is at issue for Mr. Angelo. This section of teaching is told in third person, but when Albert first appears as a teacher (AA, pp. 27-47), it is in the unusual second person. This movement between different techniques of focalisation produces a queasiness that reflects the social uncertainties of the novel:

I offer the dog a piece of grisly beef for which I have no use.

"You'll make him sick," says my mother.

"You'll make him constipated," says my father.

The dog accepts my offer, swallows it without chewing, and sits back confused about whether sickness or constipation is now expected of him.

(AA, p. 24)

Here the dog plays a key psychological role, a middle term in the social structure embodying the difficulty of inter-generational communication: "No one is affectionate to anyone else except through the dog" (AA, p. 22). Similarly, no-one communicates without the reading process, and the reader has a right to worry about a sickness or constipation in the ability for the novel to signify. This dilemma, between expulsion and retention is the central pressure behind *Albert Angelo*. The first three sections (Prologue, Exposition, Development) are retentive, and the author's frustration at the difficulties of being a writer is kept pressurized under the "objective correlative of an architect who has to earn his living as a teacher" (AA, p. 168). Johnson uses this depiction of an "architect *manqué*" (AA, p. 29), sustained by the idea of something he isn't doing, to demonstrate how even analogy (or objective correlative) is not a sufficient technique for approaching truthful communication. However, when an attempt is made at truthfulness it is with the 'architectural' device of the hole or 'window' in the page. Through it the images of Marlowe, the

descriptions of Albert, and suddenly the voice of the author are dragged into the reading process. The interjection which heralds the dismantling of the novel does not act as a total block or invalidation of any attempt to use the lessons learned. The whole text is problematised, but the “sudden rejection of what has gone before... does not erase it” (White, 2005, p. 104). As Foucault notes:

In ancient times, this simple assertion was enough to shake the foundations of Greek truth; “I lie.” “I speak” on the other hand, puts the whole of modern fiction to the test.

(Blanchot & Foucault, 1987, p. 9)

The 'Disintegration', the “——— OH, FUCK ALL THIS LYING!” (AA, p. 163), is the I speak test of *Albert Angelo*. Though this dissonance projects the voice as distinctly other to the prior narrative, thus producing the illusion of presence, the effect cannot last and soon the reader begins to re-appropriate the normal sense of the text. This moment of catachresis in *Albert Angelo* begins once the device purporting to stand an architect in the place of a writer, a remapping of roles, has broken down into total incomprehensibility. The textual space of writing is not directly homeomorphic to the material space of architecture. As Dällenbach explains:

This illusion can be brought off, but will surely sooner or later be undone. Many narratives, rather than passively watching the destruction of the illusion, prefer to take the initiative in this destruction... Following mystification with demystification (by spectacularly fallacious similarities), and disturbing the identification by showing resemblances to be false, are surely two ways of showing that the producer has deserted his/her text and that the implicit author is an anonymous authority whose very homogeneity could be questionable. In any case, they demonstrate, by a reduction ad absurdum, that the narrative misleads its audience as to the origin of its mysterious narrative voice and can only answer the question ‘who is talking’ by lying.

(Dällenbach, 1986, pp. 80-81)

Now that the total work is deserted by its previous illusionary coherence it is uncertain what the reader is to make of the previous text, and how must they be brought to terms with that lie. Were it not for the first one hundred and sixty-three pages of *Albert Angelo* this “narrative violence” (White, 2005, p. 108) would not have the same disorienting effect. Johnson brings in evidence of the sort of writing which he wishes to expunge:

“I, yeoman and churchwarden of this parish these thirty years, have seen and had a hand in some things hereabouts, and if anybody cares to read a simple tale simply told they can...”

—Go elsewhere for their lies. Life is not like that, is just not like that.

(AA, p. 176)

Here Johnson recreates the opening of *Lorna Doone*, which stands in for the historical novel of the Victorians in general, with all the features Johnson would abhor: slavishly re-created seventeenth-century Devonshire language, a sentimental romanticism, anecdotes straining towards authenticity. However, even after the *Disintegration's* “serious attempt to replace fiction with 'truth'” (White, 2005, p. 107) the text re-enters the dialectic between mystification and demystification described by Dällenbach. The textual oddities continue to disrupt, but slowly the narrative structure reconstitutes until at the end the reader is left back with the voice of the main body of the text, with some small lingering ironies. When the author says that “even I... would not leave such a mess” it is an admission of defeat, and he is reduced to burying the “loose ends, the lot” even though they remain unresolved (AA, p. 176). Despite it all the “novel ends as a novel” (Thielemans, 1985, p. 84), but not before the hegemonic logic of the novel form has been resisted strenuously. Barthes, in his lectures at Collège de France between 1978-1980 (collected as *The Preparation of the Novel*) described himself as a similar species of *manqué* (though a *romancier* rather than architect), and outlined these difficulties of the writing process:

Indeed, the Novel (since it's a question of the novel), in its grand and extended continuity, can't sustain the “truth” (of the moment): that's not its function. I see it as an interweaving (=Text), a vast, extended canvas painted with illusions, fallacies, made-up things, the “false” if we want to call it that... the novel would be poikilos, many colored, variegated, daubed, speckled, covered with paintings, pictures, an embroidered, complicated, complex garment... managing to write a novel (such is the prospect-the vanishing point- of our lecture course) comes down to conceding to lie, to being capable of lying (it can be very difficult, lying)-to telling that second-order and perverse lie that consists in mingling truth and falsehood-> Ultimately, then, the resistance to the novel, the inability to produce a novel (to engage in the practise of writing one), would be a moral resistance.

(Barthes, 2011, p. 109)

In Johnson this moral resistance to the problematic ethical stance taken in order to begin writing finally breaks out and shatters the complex weaving of the narrative. Behind the surface of *Albert Angelo* there isn't a normal *sjuzet* of historical events attempting to be expressed, but the surface is itself a weaving of materials, lies and falsehoods. It is a canvas which brings together all the artefacts of realist narrative into a discordant whole in order to carry out the repression of a meta-narrative concerning the impossibility of carrying out a process of authentic writing. This is what Bradbury refers to, with a more positive outlook, as the way in which “Marc

Saporta and B.S. Johnson... [break] the book's spine [giving] patent instruction in the field of significant choices the novelist has at his disposal... the breadth of the option which... the writer by starting writing starts to close” (Bradbury, 1973, pp. 290-1). Bradbury goes onto say that, from the reader's perspective, texts have:

...compositional obligations... this must be seen as a structure or action, one which involves persons and events in a closed, authorially conditioned world... Thus, while we must regard novels as verbal constructs, which they inescapably are, we must see what is constructed not alone as a self-sustaining entity but as a species of persuasion...

(Bradbury, 1973, pp. 291-2)

He claims that the spine-breaking of Johnson (and Saporta) at best serves to highlight the “extent of the novel’s typological range” (Bradbury, 1973, p. 291). If it is still the case that Johnson is writing novels, an authorially conditioned world with compositional obligations to its genre, then the structure he brings to bear on the material of a novel like *Albert Angelo* explores the territory of such a world and begins to press at the boundaries — attempting to break into social zones which do not properly belong to the novel. Bradbury's invocation of the novel's *enthymemes* — unstated premises — shows how it is incoherent if only internal logic and structure are considered, and how the cultural assumptions must also be included in any reading. Johnson reformats the standard arrangement of a non-novelistic form, the sonata (Introduction, Exposition, Development, Recapitulation, Coda), by replacing the ‘Recapitulation’ with a ‘Disintegration’. It is this replacement that acts as a blockage, as the constipation — to be more accurate, the removal of the conduit in the structure that would normally enable meaning and narrative progression — which renders it impossible to discharge the rest of the textual devices in the book as simply novelties. This is the key event which pulls together the previous elements into a visible compass on the floor (*Christie Malry*), an alternative set of unstated premises. The problem has been there and visible all along, the travelling eye has been wary of the danger coming (holes, parallel experiences, threats of violence).

It is immediately after the section of *Albert Angelo* which most recognizably attempts a mimetic effect, where Johnson transcribes word for word the *real*<sup>32</sup> composition exercises produced by his class in an alternative epistolary, that the collapse finally happens. The lies he is finally exasperated by are truths delegated to reportage — the verbatim and ruthless opinions of schoolchildren — which as noted remain potentially inauthentic. This is a chase after a narrative mode which remains

<sup>32</sup> The originals, in the children’s own hands, of these compositions are retained in the folder of source materials for *Albert Angelo*. There is no record of the exercise appearing on the final page.

out of reach. It is at the very point where Johnson has done his best to show a form of truth that the crisis is complete, and he refuses to continue his compositional obligations. The knot has already been cut, but there is no other space to escape into. The authorial voice sustains two paragraphs of description of the rain and sparrows before the 'Disintegration' begins. Instead of moving towards closure within writing Johnson *begins* the work with an incomplete and unstable narrative voice, creating inconsistency and writing towards the final test: the breakdown, disclosure, and production, at least momentarily, of a different sort of truth. He returns to this incomplete closure at the very end, reproducing another judgemental school exercise. In final disgust at the project of realism this one is a forgery by Johnson rather than being taken yet again from his pupils, and the sonata form is reinstated by this peremptory recapitulation. No truth is fully divulged, but it is approached.

## 8. THE BOOK AS MACHINE

The Professor then desired me to observe, for he was going to set his Engine at work.

(Swift, 1994, pp. 200-1)

Writing operates with the understanding that the reader will continue to follow linear thought-processes, will not tear up the book, or worse, put it down — that they have good manners. Even Johnson's text does not attempt the aggressive anti-art posture of what Bersani calls “Beckett's extraordinary ambition (constantly defeated by what he himself treats as his exasperating expressive and communicative resources)... to produce a culturally nonviable art” (Bersani, 1990, p. 12). At times Johnson seems to approach this aim, because, as already outlined earlier using Barthes' terminology, it is realized that it is the absence of *you*, the reader, which is the sign of a work's admission into literary culture. How is a mechanism of literary production which so clearly requires a *you* to be understood? The literary terrorism of Swift's projectors, who wish to abolish “all words whatsoever” (Swift, 1994, p. 203), serves as a benchmark to demonstrate that Johnson is not a literary eliminativist. These limit cases are important as an understanding of the implications his own projects when pushed to their logical conclusions.

Of all Johnson's novels, it is *The Unfortunates* which is most obviously an attempt at complete reconfiguration of the material basis of text. The process of reading, very much a process of co-production within *The Unfortunates*, enacts a dialectical process of degeneration and regeneration. This chapter explores again how cancer appears as an alternative logic that, part mechanical and part biological, reconfigures the idea of the book as a machine for producing meaning. The banal abnormality of this text is apparent when the book appears in a box, loose, some sections longer and stapled, some single-sheets, the shortest contained on a single side. Its materiality is a double attack on the concept of division of labour. Firstly, it is expensive to produce, requiring re-tooling for printers. It does not fit into the publishing structure of hard- and paper-back: a cheap edition has never been issued. It also helps to highlight the bald fact of the novel, that it is constructed as a series of useful conventions and abstractions that could potentially be undone. While it is a reconfiguration of form, inherent rather than simply an alteration, it still relies on the assumption of the book in order to be a deconstruction of the book. However, while the pages and order of reading become disordered, the topology of images is reliably transmitted by every reading. However, these may not be the sort of meanings readers expect from novels — there is “no secret to be held until some

crucial point in a linear storyline” (Figes, 1985, p. 71). Secondly, the form changes the division of labour in reading – some assembly is required.

This is in stark contrast to similar disruptive techniques, such as those in *Albert Angelo*, or towards the close of John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969) where the narrative voice interrupts in order to admit that:

These characters I create never existed outside my own mind... I am writing in... a convention universally accepted at the time of my story; that the novelist stands next to God. He may not know all, yet he tries to pretend that he does.

(Fowles, 1972, p. 97)

Here the authorial voice disavows but does not discard its role — of course these characters exist outside the author's mind, they exist *on paper*. This admission hands over some knowledge denied by the nature of reading, but, although it does not *de facto* hold knowledge of all the implications and choices of the reading process, it still retains *de jure* control of the social moment. The “authority is harder to abdicate than Fowles thinks” (McEwan, 1981, p. 26) because, like all those who claim to speak with the authority of a God within a symbolic order, they act not with the power of God, but under the sign of the name of the father (Lacan<sup>33</sup>):

Therein lies the structuralist parable about postmodern fiction. Literature in general is a sort of... machine, translating the imagination into an embodied reality, a text. The structure or code (*la langue*) that gives the text its significance is... invisible... but it is *not* weightless... Historically it has been convenient to pretend that the code does not possess its own calculus and can be reduced out of any system of calculations about reality itself. But *the code is the instrumentation by which the text works its apparent magic*.

(Porush, 1985, p. 113)

Alternatively in Fowles' first book *The Magus* (1966) the text tests the coherence of a reader's belief by ratcheting up the level of unreality, as Johnson does in *Christie Malry*. In *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, rather than any kind of gradual mounting apprehension of missed revelation, there is a “fairly typical English playfulness or literariness, the kind of literary amendment of the novel form often declared as an incipient postmodernity” (Tew, 2001, p. 137), a jargon of experimentalism which still relies on a traditionally competent and closed realism and its modes of structure and signification. There is a critical and ironical distance

<sup>33</sup> “It is in the name of the father that we must recognize the support of the symbolic function which, from the dawn of history, has identified his person with the figure of the law. This conception enables us to distinguish clearly, in the analysis of a case, the unconscious effects of this function from the narcissistic relations, or even from the real relations that the subject sustains with the image and the action of the person who embodies it” (Lacan, 1989, p. 50).

that may in some way stage a challenge to previous modes of cultural production, but which does not claim any alternative source of power apart from anti-commitment. Fowles creates a rift in the novel without attempting to expand its implications — or indeed understanding that, in naming the authorial Father-God, he merely re-enforces its effect.

The difference between Fowles and Johnson is that while *The French Lieutenant's Woman* offends *within* the framework of the traditional novel, Johnson's work attempts to work *against* the framework. Fowles' work uses a destabilizing conceit upon the stable form of the historical novel, even a work such as *Albert Angelo* is materially more dissonant and suspect. *The French Lieutenant's Woman* informs the reader that they have been tricked within the narrative — *Albert Angelo* demonstrates how within the material of the book. In the end, however, both are limited by the tidiness of the material form of the novel itself, the constraints of expectation which are imposed by the very form of the text. The form requires endings (it cannot physically repeat its own existence), permanence (it cannot destroy itself physically), it must be tidy (coherent enough to place on a shelf in a bookshop). The production process of the book makes clear some basic aspects of the narrative framework of the novel, and as a paradigm of Western culture, the form forcefully asserts itself.

While *Albert Angelo* defiles the idea of the page, and makes a mockery of its normal ability to control the flow of information by blocking the pages behind it — by materially forcing a linear progression upon the readership — *The Unfortunates* spills out of itself. If the idea of an interpretive monopoly held by the text author's manipulation of the text form is to be replaced by a sincere promotion of the reading moment, then meanings and arrangements that are outside the possible intentions of the author must be allowed to take place during the reading experience. It must undermine the illusion of the text as a transcendental object or symbol, for which the page is merely host, and replace it with the book as an object with which readers interact and cope. The key insight to be gained from this process is to understand that the work of art is *within* an age of mechanical reproduction. It is not merely its mass production as a commodity which is important, but also its ability to function as fixed capital, as machinery in a process of social reproduction of human subjects, social events and social truths.

This is the distinction between the *work*, and the *product* — one is produced by social relations, the other produce social relations in its consumption. The illusion is that although the individual book commodity is merely (and emphatically) a

window, a way of accessing something that cannot be physically held, the product somehow gains the reader access to the 'urbook', the original work. Traditional products (novels) are designed to create an ease of habitation, through familiarity and training, in the act of letter-division, line breaks, and page turning which are rendered invisible. The book is promoted as a discrete object giving direct access to the thoughts and intentions of the author, "it is only too typical", states McLuhan in *Understanding Media*, that the "content'... blinds us to the character of the medium... any medium has the power of imposing its own assumption on the unwary" (McLuhan, 1968, p. 9). Johnson's technique in *The Unfortunates* destabilizes many of the assumptions of form in order to prevent familiarity with reading to interrupt the process of interpretation of the book machine.

*The Unfortunates*, if it is to be a single entity rather than a collection of discrete items, is a fragmented but topological novel, riven with valences that can be arranged in any order without losing their relation. Kaye Mitchell describes how the work is "figured as a mappable space, within which different elements can be plotted as co-ordinates... as unified whole" (Mitchell, 2007, p. 53). However, the map of *The Unfortunates* can be viewed in various levels of detail depending on which level of language the plotting takes place — there are various scales of map which can be constructed. For example, each chapter in *The Unfortunates*, comes headed with a different capital symbol or printer's mark, a *superscription* — a technique that, like the tradition of illuminated manuscripts, identifies the story with a graphic object rather than a numeral (chapter number) or opening sentence. The symbol has no chronological value indicator, unlike a numbering or lettering system. Here the symbol is symbolic of nothing, it is not an illumination but an arbitrary indexical mark, as all objects are prior to inclusion within a semiotic system.

In *The Unfortunates* pain is a pattern within time and space, but not necessarily organized by it. Comprehension is attempted and reattempted, turning multiple experiences into a single, whole, experience of pain: "Visits run together, the trivial with the important, our life with his dying" (*U*, \*, p. 4) — even the event death is contingent upon its showing up, though it certainly *will* show up. It is a lesson, or trial, a subdivided part of argumentation. Johnson's use of the artefact in *The Unfortunates* is, I would contest, as entries in an encyclopaedia of mundane sufferings, rather than as a function of narrative progression. It is not a chapter in the sense that is commonly understood in the novel-writing tradition. Nor is it the episode, as subsumed into video and television schemas of narrative. These are brief strainings which must be sifted through in exploration of an archive of pain, where the form itself "generates poignancy" (White, 2005, p. 116). Each of Johnson's

sections are a short comprehending — an *exegesis* on the dying body — of a dialectic between the reader's living and Tony's dying via the writer's writing in which the “dead past and the living present interact” (Davies, 1985, p. 75).

The structure of *The Unfortunates* is notorious<sup>34</sup> for its randomness and has been called “formally outrageous” (Zsizsmann, 2005, p. 178). It is repeatedly passed over without the violence of criticism or reading as 'the book in a box'. Alongside Saporta's *Composition No.1*, Raymond Queneau's *Cent Mille Millions de poèmes* and the work of John Cage it is held an example of aleatoric art — an admission of randomness into creative practise. There are numerous examples of such work: *Hopscotch* by Julio Cortázar and *The Garden of Forking Paths* by Jorge Luis Borges also allow the reader to interact explicitly with the material fact of the book. However, these works are largely grouped by their mutual divergence from the norm rather than strict functional similarity to each other. *The Unfortunates* carries out its own specific operation which has to be understood by analysis of its mechanisms. It is a book that is as much operated as it is read, but it remains to be seen how the operation attempts to reconstitute the two conflicting *fabula* it contains, the football match and the death of Tony.

Coe's introduction to the 1999 Picador re-issue of *The Unfortunates* in its original form cites Johnson's own introduction to the Hungarian edition (published as *Szerencsétlenek* in 1973<sup>35</sup>). Limitations in the production process in Hungary meant that the text was bound and printed traditionally, in a fixed order. Key to understanding the importance of the material form of *The Unfortunates* is to see what changes occur when that material form is abandoned. Johnson:

...[the Hungarian reader] should... place these symbols in a suitable receptacle, shake them vigorously to ensure that they are thoroughly mixed... [he] proceeds... to read the *First* section, and then refers to his cut out symbols in order to identify the next section in his own order, and reads that. And so on, and so on, and so on, and so on, until number twenty five has been identified and read, whereupon the reader can sigh with relief and read the *Last* section...

What all Hungarian readers cannot help but miss is the physical feel, disintegrative, frail, of this novel in its original format; the tangible metaphor for the random way the mind works...

(*U*, 'Introduction', pp. xi-xii)

<sup>34</sup> du Sautoy, Marcus (2010) *The Guardian Review*, 3rd July, p. 2.

<sup>35</sup> Translated by Bart István.

The assemblage of this book machine is necessary in the boxed editions — the process must be embodied by the reader in handling the physical manifestation of the text — while in the Hungarian edition there is a different element of choice. Does the reader choose to go along with this explicit mutilation of a page in order to carry out Johnson’s solution for this edition? The text directs that the superscriptions (or symbols) are to be “printed again, but together” (*U*, 'Introduction', p. xi) at the end of the book in order that they can be cut out. However, if each of these superscriptions are taken as a representative for their respective exegesis, and overlaid, the following figure is produced:<sup>36</sup>



The iterative process of graphic overlaying which produces this filled circle — a working out of the possibilities towards completion or finitude — is a reflection of the content achieved by collapsing the topology of *The Unfortunates* into a single graphic location. The exegeses have a thematic but no strict formal unity, nor are they strictly the same length (unlike the technique in *House Mother Normal*), the main graphic constant is that they all have the superscriptions on the same place upon the page. When each of these are overlaid they resolve to a filled circle: that is, the novel progresses from the ‘First’ exegesis (an outline of a circle: ○) to the ‘Last’ exegesis with a filled circle (●) as its superscription, which is not seen until you open the first page of the ‘Last’ booklet.

It is only the central twenty-five exegeses which have no determined place in the order. The ‘empty’ and ‘filled’ circles that mark the first and last exegeses use a void, and completely inked (black) paper to show life and death respectively (following the use in *Travelling People*, borrowed from *Tristram Shandy*). This death is not an absence of anything, but an abolition of life and consciousness through complete occlusion. Ink represents the expenditure of time. This enactment of the mental process implies that completion is achieved through endurance and repetition, where the mind creates a story from events without requiring explicit intra-exegesis narrative structure. What is not performed here is a production of information, meaning or completion: instead the material goes through and sustains a period of fretting — the process whereby uneven surfaces placed against each other under load

<sup>36</sup> Note: the cover of the first edition of *Albert Angelo* is interesting, as its typographical design, with the title set in letters that overlap themselves, can be read as a description of the overlapping repetitions in a personality — Albert is a set of self-overlapping features. All psychologies have doublings, areas of behaviour that are motivated by more than one system of justification.

<sup>37</sup> Each of the 25 superscripts have been photographed before being superimposed over each other.

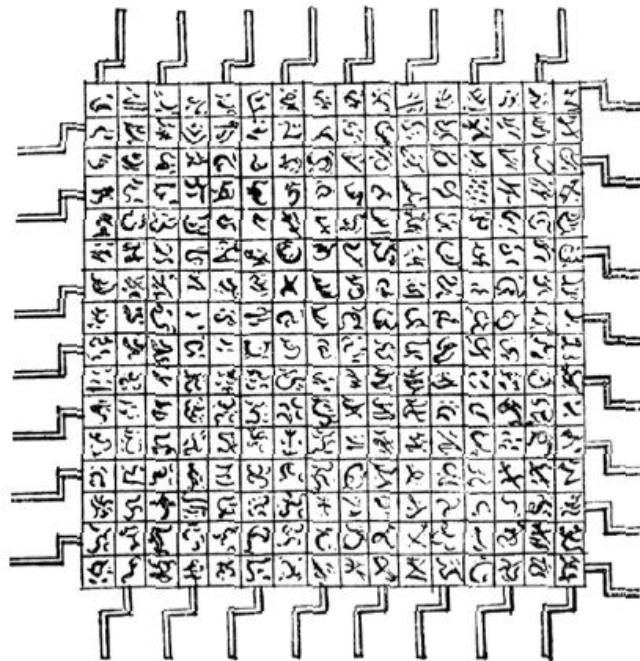
wear down and corrode each other — upon a textual body which arises in the interstitial pauses between exegeses. But the body is overloaded, too many connections are available, too much noise, and the result is occlusion, not representation. As Johnson affirms in *Trawl*, understanding is not the aim:

...to believe the condition is made any more bearable for knowing why, is to be deluded... the benefit must come from the rehearsal of the experiences themselves, like writing an experience down, it fixes it, takes the hurt out of it: one remembers then that one was hurt, but not the hurt itself... Yes, yes, all those loves... I need never think of you again, have exorcised you... have distanced you in mind as well as time... I am glad to be rid of you.

(*T*, p. 180)

Other great literary machines, like the Lagado Academy 'Engine' in *Gulliver's Travels*, work with similar, but different logics:

The superficies [visible surface] was composed of several bits of wood, about the bigness of a die, but some larger than others. These bits of wood were covered on every square with paper pasted on them, and on these papers were written all the words of their language, in their several moods, tenses, and declensions, but without any order... the professor showed me several volumes in large folio already collected, of broken sentences, which he intended to piece together...



(Swift, 1994, pp. 200-2)

Swift's satire demonstrates the empirical absurdity of machines designed to autonomously produce meaning — while his Lagadian Engine operates on the level of the word, Johnson's works on the level of the exegesis. The lesson still stands — what is missing is an interpreter: with the Lagadian Engine that interpreter is the

Professor, with the Johnsonian machine it is the reader. The problem is that the Professor/reader is presented with a superfluity of material which is all isolated, and nominally of equal value.

How many possible *The Unfortunates* are there? In the tradition of the *Ars combinatoria*, especially as codified by Leibniz, the reader can simultaneously use rigorous enumerative combinatorics (there are  $25!$ , e.g. 25 factorial, possible permutations of *The Unfortunates*) and fail to understand the nature of this work. There is a distinct difference between being able to count, or even describe, the  $1.551121e+25$  possible readings of *The Unfortunates*, and understanding the qualitative nature of its iterative machinery. This is why the novel must be topological — whatever ties the totality of the exegeses together, it must be a combination of the links between signifiers within the exegeses, which maintain despite the aleatoric transformations carried out on them. Each configuration of *The Unfortunates* must be homeomorphic to all the others, and whatever chronology is generated the objects of meaning within the text must remain identically orientated to one another in their potential simultaneity. This space persists within a period — it does not change over time. This is not the self-avoiding walk of Georges Perec's *Life, A Users Manual* (1978), where the novel as it is materially presented reflects a pre-determined underlying narrative logic. The potential coherence of all the possible permutations available to the reader in *The Unfortunates* must take the place of the usual guarantee from the author that competent plotting has been undertaken — this is not an ordering metaphor, but an ordering mechanism (Porush, 1985, p. 208). As Gilles Deleuze describes in his section of *Proust and Signs* allusively titled 'Cells and Vessels', it is the abolishing of narrative time through signs which attempts to tie meaning together:

...signs are of two types... those open boxes, which are to be explicated; those sealed vessels, which are to be chosen. And if the sign is always a fragment without totalisation or unification, this is because content relates to container by all the power of its incommensurability, just as the sealed vessel relates to its environs by all the power of its non-communication. Incommensurability and non-communication are distances, but distances that fit together or intersect. And this is precisely what time signifies: that system of nonspatial distances, that distance proper to the contiguous or the continuous, *distances without intervals*... according to the Bergsonian formula, time signifies that everything is not given; the Whole is not givable.

(Deleuze, 2000, p. 129)

With the abolition of space by time, there emerges an incommensurability of different pains. However, it is possible to overlay pain with other pains, and find that even through non-communication and disorientation there can be a relation.

Exposed to enough light over time photographic film goes black: this effect can be produced by printing image after image on the same sheet until all the receptive material is exposed and inert — the black dot is produced as if a series of x-rays images had been cast onto the same acetate film, a demonstration of the shadow of cancer enveloping the entire area over a series of hospital appointments. This superfluity of image is in fact the destruction of image: the whole is not giveable, certainly, but perhaps it possible to enact it, and indicate its presence with a void. To use Miller's explanation for the arrangement of essays in his work *Topographies*:

They exist rather as a strange spatial array in which the chapters can easily be arranged in different orders and through which various lines of exploration, in a different way in each case, are possible by following different paths of relation. Each chapter can be related to the others by a multitude of different conceptual and figurative links.

(Miller, 1995, p. 6)

The superfluity of narratives is in a sense the destruction of the possibility of narrative. The superscriptions combine in some way: the completed circle is a petri dish that has been completely colonized by the cancer cells it wishes to document the effects of. Like his earlier use of the idea of overlay, Miller here shows a method of exposing the way that reading can draw these semiotic links up from the inert typographical marks into an animate mental state:

... Lacan has used the theory of knot as a powerful image for intra and interpersonal relations. For him, semiotic lines tie the self to hidden regions of the self, to others, and to that Other who is always presupposed within the self as outside the self.

(Miller, 1995, p. 10)

If the topology of this knot is such that it places all the relations and regions under maximum simultaneous stress then the possibility of movement is abolished. There must be a link which can loosen or detach, an interstice within the structure, in order for change to occur. While the surface of *The Unfortunates* may seem knotted *topographically*, topologically the structure maintains. Key here is the role of the Other, which is able to traverse inside and outside, as well as move position within the topology. When there seems to be no possibility of movement or change it is the identification of the interstice or the other, the internal void which acts as outside, which can break the stalemate for better or worse. There is a structure within *The Unfortunates*, but it is a structure with voids. The empty space is that which would be occupied by Tony who, if he were to return, would return not as he was when living, but as having passed through death. All textual figures speak from a place of dead matter, but few so explicitly as Tony. The source of meaning for the novel is

structurally inside it, but presupposed as outside it when:

...*plurality* and a *historicity* are knotted into the act that posits, by the same gesture, a *different* partner and a *deferred* restitution... The thing given is exchanged for a right that places the other — and time itself — within a nexus of obligations.

(de Certeau, 1985, p. 193)

After being offered the reading the reader sacrifices their time to the work in the hope that they will receive back a truth. However, one of the ordering logics of the text – cancer – militates against this. No value or truth is going to emerge from the text – the time risks being voided. In *The Unfortunates* Johnson does not use the word ‘cancer’, but ‘illness’ throughout. The only explicit image of cancer is, with the original version, an image of cancer cells on the cover, as though it were somehow a portrait of the author. The knotted structure ties together different components and temporalities in a spatio-historical topology to ensnare the central object of the study without explicitly naming it. This central motif of *The Unfortunates* occurs in the ‘First’ exegesis:

His cheeks... bones... gums... teeth... mouth... face... glasses... head... saliva... glands... because of what treatment had done to his saliva glands, how it had finished them.

H i m

(U, ○, p. 1)

*The Unfortunates* is a reanimation of his dead friend, his ‘finished’ friend, from components, to ‘H i m’ through a working through of what de Certeau calls a nexus of obligations. A form of mourning, a paying of debts. Barthes describes how the novel is a death which “transforms life into destiny, a memory into a useful act, duration into an orientated and meaningful time” (Barthes, 1968, p. 39). The switch from them (his features) to him, is fraught, both emotionally and in terms of their arrangement into a character and a temporality — it is this arrangement of medicalised body parts into an entire person which is resisted here, in language and in intention. In the February 1969 BBC ‘Release’ broadcast of *The Unfortunates*, narrated by Johnson, there is a visual equivalent. It is a visual rather than graphic representation of the transformation of the first ○ exegesis into the final ●. Various faces including Johnson’s own are displayed, and simple editing techniques have been applied to the images to show a progression of the wasting process that is a result of cancer treatment. Here the process of cancer that is implicit in the structure of the novel is made visually explicit in the adaptation for television. Johnson’s decision to show the death — or the worst ravages of it — in this film, and to mention his eventual disintegration at the beginning (○), attempts to recreate the

sense of the reading and an emergent sense of a disestablished life.

The nature of the randomness in *The Unfortunates* is clearly proscribed. Kaye Miller argues that the “relative stability and determinability of the fabula... militate against any perceived randomness in the *sjuzet*” (Mitchell, 2007, p. 55). Indeed, this partial randomness of the *sjuzet* must be a different definition of random to that of the mathematicians. A vernacular, folk tradition of randomness. In the central exegeses there is not chaos, nor drama: there is football and the mundane aspects of life — instead of randomness there is rather a branching of choice and unpredictable event ordering. Their forms and type, defined by the world into which the characters are placed, are predictable, but their configuration is not, because *The Unfortunates* is not a completely aleatoric text even in terms of what the form makes possible, as the beginning and end of the reading are fixed with a definitive ‘First’ and ‘Last’ exegeses. In fact it is the *sjuzet* which militates against the *sjuzet* — it is only the middle 25 exegeses of the text which can be re-ordered. The reader is required to read all 27, so end up with a whole: “you have ‘free will’ if you like but all the choices have the same value” (TRG, 1992, p. 38). The question is what is the smallest (and largest) components of a discourse which can be given over to determination by chance, and what form or aspects of ‘randomness’ will be mobilized by the work? For the Lagadian Engine the level of discourse is the *word* (or properly, the glyph), for Johnson it is the exegesis.

This form is appropriate because the novel body reproduces within it a representation of the medicalised body — there is a diagnosis, and a pre-defined outcome — it is Johnson's answer to his own question “how can I place his order, his disintegration” (*U*, ○ , p. 4) in a manner which is “true only if it is true for me” (*U*, ● , p. 6). The true affect of the work is this: that Johnson is unable to truly represent Tony, only his own horrified gaze as the inability of art to in any way abolish or mitigate the arbitrariness of death. The mark of chaos is subtle: the present may determine the future, but an *approximate* present does not determine an *approximate* future. Accurate human understanding, description, modelling or prediction — which must always take the form of an approximation of approximations — is therefore impossible. It is this which is the tragic aspect of all attempts at systematization — and give the lie to any aspiration from the well-fashioned novel to achieve mimesis. But distressingly, the ability of cancer to cause death contradicts this: it is an example of the inevitability of coming to grief. The ‘chaos’ of the reading stands in for the effect of cancer, which develops through small random actions at a cellular level, but has emergent properties (death) at other levels. Epistemological problems push over into ontological issues. Symptoms are

approximate, cellular death occurs by approximations, and the terminal period of cancer is approximate. The finitude of cancer is absolute. The effect of reading in this way is this: Johnson's friendship with Tony develops and recedes, becomes more and less intense, depending on which exegesis is read in what order. The health of Tony can seem to improve, quickly falter, improve again, and so on. Finally he will die, and all the individual reader is left with is a memory of the process and the death, not combined into a narrative, but instead lingered with before being abolished:

Inanimate life is always moving towards disintegration, towards chaos, and man is moving in the opposite direction, towards an imposition of order... This was the paradox...

(AA, p. 133)

In his final work (*See the Old Lady Decently*) these concerns persist, now on a grander scale:

All of this is very difficult to comprehend. Look, there were millions of people, thousands of people, hundreds of countries, all of them going in every direction and performing every kind of significant and insignificant act, How could anyone impose order on that multitudinous discontinuity? History must surely be lying, of one kind or another, no more true than what used to be called fictions. How can any one mind comprehend it? And would there be any point if it could?

(STOLD, p. 91)

In *The Social Context of English Literature* (1971) Bradbury outlines the issues of political and social alienation:

...it becomes possible for men to feel that society's reality is not theirs, and hence the social process can become phantasmagoric, unreal, an impersonal social contract, while satisfaction is sought within terms of personal consciousness, personal life, intense and immediate satisfactions. But this in turn leaves men with a weakened sense of objective reality, or a feeling of deep division between their nature and the historical process... it may give us a sense that there is a reality working independently of man which is random or destructive, and makes the world too great for comprehension... Hence that feeling of increased exposure, of being condemned to freedom...

(Bradbury, 1971, pp. 12-3)

In *The Unfortunates*, and modernity generally, it is not the social contract which has become phantasmal — it never existed in the first place except as an abstraction or mode of persuasion. It is the *body itself* as a supposed host for subjectivity which is ghost like, which strains to come into view. The position of Tony is not to be condemned to freedom, he is simply condemned to die — Johnson is unable to find a

literary form which is able to bring this sort of death into the social contract, and produces instead one that maintains the radical distance caused by it. There is no access to any sort of religious comfort, or maintenance of a tradition. It is a secular society — without even a secular religion of solidarity or humanism — with no way of recalling the dead “without generalization” (*U*, ● , p. 6). Instead there is only a recounting of the specific medicalised wasting process which is not a self or a social death, but a material death. A mass of dead millions, where their deaths lack any mode of comparison with other deaths. With *The Unfortunates*, Johnson attempts to reclaim this sense of alienation from the normative narrative and social processes that undo it. One obituary for Johnson completely inverted the productive effect of *The Unfortunates*, judging that the “experimental form of this book was less interesting than its traditional content. One recalls from it the narrator’s coherent grief for a dead friend, which gained little from an incoherence of presentation.”<sup>38</sup> There is, in fact, an important and profound mode of coherence in the expression of the incoherence of the reaction to death. The final statement — “only the fact that he did die, he is dead, is important” (*U*, ● , p. 6) expresses the meaningless utterance of the word 'death', which has no content, and is instead void of meaning. This void, however, can be maintained.

Within these exegeses references reoccur to *The Leaves of Southwell* by Nikolaus Pevsner — it is mentioned in *U*, © , in the context of a visit to Southwell Minster. It is connected to the descriptions and discussions of religious buildings in the text, especially Lincoln and its Cathedral, which has an unusual ‘wrap around’ West Front (in ❁❁❁ ) covered with carvings:

...Lincoln Cathedral... a partly-ruined tower in the castle across from the west front, which had later served as a prison, trees, shady, well-trampled soil as well as grass, with small gravestones marked only with a number, was it, or initials: hanged men, I could not determine whether they were murderers, deserters, traitors, or unlucky, just unlucky, unfortunates.

(*U*, ❁ , p. 6)

The description is a model of a possible landscape that may remain upon completion of a reading of *The Unfortunates*. A cemetery of the unlucky dead, the unfortunate. That their gravestones are each marked only with a number seems to be as arbitrary and insufficient as the superscriptions used to mark these exegeses of *The Unfortunates* itself. In *The Leaves of Southwell* “every aspect of the sculptural work in the chapter house [at Southwell Minster] was seen by Pevsner as a unified and consistent reflection of ‘the spirit of the age, operating in art as well as in philosophy,

<sup>38</sup> *Manchester Guardian*, ‘B. S. Johnson (Obit.)’, November 16, 1973.

in religion as well as politics” (Pevsner, 1945, pp. 63-4). Pevsner is a well-regarded figure in the history of modernist architecture and its spread within the UK, especially prominent during his move away from “the centre ground of avant-garde modernism [which] was bitterly resented by Reyner Banham” (Benton, 2006, pp. 357-360). Banham was another of the key critics of the movement towards a modern, Brutalist architecture promoted by Alison and Peter Smithson, and, to some qualified extent, by Johnson himself. Pevsner’s works are present on Albert Angelo’s bookshelf (AA, pp. 109-10) when he does a quick run-down of his architectural (and literary) inspirations. Indeed Pevsner potentially appears in ☼ as part of the “German family at the next table: what did he do in the war, the middle-aged grandfather? Anglicized mother, charming little girl” (U, ☼, p. 2). Pevsner was dogged by his support for Hitler in the nineteen-thirties, and was interned for a period during the Second World War.

More interesting than the evidence of Johnson's continued and deep subscription to architectural modernism are the sorts of sculpture that the Leaves of Southwell represent. They are from the Decorative Medieval period of Gothic church building:

...[t]he carving [at Southwell] I was marvellously impressed with... appropriately, from a technical point of view, the depth cut under the leaves, at such angles, but did not see the point of representing natural things thus, why, it is all tied up with truth, with things being what they are... And the stink of such dead places.

(U, ☉, p. 1)

Within the leaves carved with such free-standing virtuosity there is a mixing of Christian and Pagan imagery, and the presence of The Green Man, a satyr figure present in medieval masks, is shown with branches and leaves growing out of his mouth — a form known as the ‘Disgorging Head’. *The Unfortunates* again:

...June had told me the tumour was on his collarbone, that they had cut him open to remove it but had found that its feelers or fingers or tentacles had grasped right round the collarbone... that now they were trying radiotherapy to kill it, to stop its growth, at least...

(U, ✱, p. 5)

These images of strangulation, and internal growth, documented by *The Leaves of Southwell*, can be combined with Johnson’s obsession with the pagan figure of the Sheela-na-Gig — both are forms of uncodified gargoyle — to suggest a personal mythology of the monstrous. The threatening nature of bodies is further exhibited by the potential for tumours to metastasize — to spread — as the section with an illustrative branching superscript explains:

The area bombarded was so much larger than the actual tumor, as he described it: a square, the top line of which crossed his upper lip, to the bottom of his ribs, taking in the arm on the side the lump was... They did mark this area with lines, ink of some kind, target... It also destroyed the saliva glands... For good. The area had to be this large in order to try and kill all the explosive, runaway, zealous, monstrous cells of the tumor: if one single cell escaped to another part of the body, by insinuating itself into the bloodstream, then it would grow and multiply there too.

(*U*, ❁, p. 8)

Having a body is the seed of biological destruction, it is the return of the theme of pseudomorphosis discussed earlier, where the movement of literary and social history is instead the operations of life (including the reading life of the reader) enacting the production of death:

An empty body, a body conceived of as a sieve, or as a bundle of organs analogous to a bundle of things, a body 'dismembered' or treated as members unrelated to one another, a body without organs — all such supposedly pathological symptomatology stems in reality from the ravages of representation and discourse...

(Lefebvre, 1991, pp. 201-2)

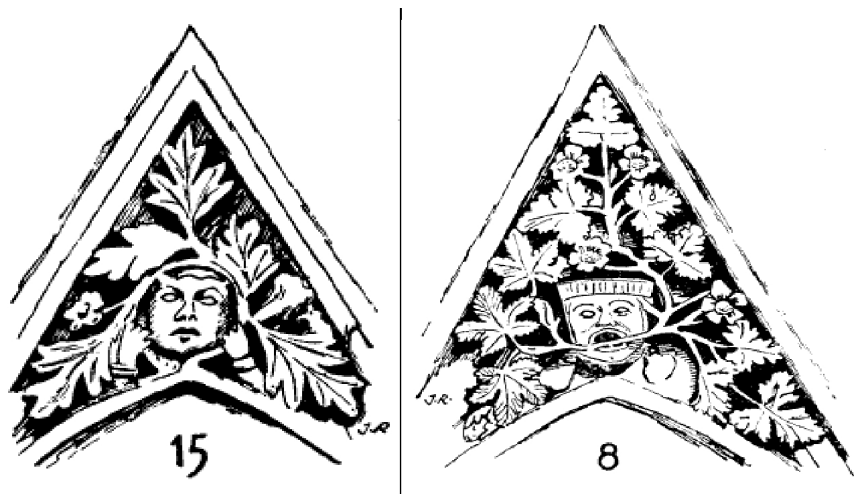
While *Trawl* acts as the monument to Johnson's own biographic sifting process, *The Unfortunates* enacts this sifting process, this retro-dismemberment, or retrograde analysis, in the hands of the reader searching for the moment, which never comes, when the body will re-appears from its parts. Every exegesis is, concurrent with the reconstruction of Tony, helping to effect his destruction. Though only writing, and not cancer, can kill the fictional Christie, text has no such power over the once-alive Tony. Each is an infarct into the brain, small contusions and blockages: "It is difficult to think of these things without terror, the pity is easy to feel, easy to contain, but so useless... I fail to remember, the mind has fuses" (*U*, ❁, p. 3, 5) These fuses are both a protective mechanism, and the mechanism by which death may come about — the text is a semi-permeable barrier against the reality of the death. Each exegesis breaks off and fails to complete the story, even when the reader is presented (at random) with the death (❁) and the funeral exegesis (❁), both are only a single page. It is likely (odds: 25-to-1) that the account of his death will not be the last section you read — indeed by this reading no section definitively ends Tony's life, but collectively they move to turn the lights out on an empty room — 'behind' the text there is no body. It is no more comprehensible for its definitiveness:

That this thing could just come from nowhere, from inside himself, of his very self, to attack him, to put his self in danger, I still do not understand.

Perhaps there is nothing to be understood, perhaps understanding is simply not to be found, is not applicable to such a thing. But it is hard, not to try to understand, even for me, who accept that all is nothing, that sense does not exist.

(*U*, ✱, p. 2)

It is impossible here for the narrator to even be a solipsist, except as self-defence against the horror of an undivided noumenal world, as it is the self which emerges as the biggest threat to the self. The Green Man's tentacular emergence of excess, the disorganized general cellular growth which is Johnson's imaginary of cancer, of life. Watts is correct to point out Johnson's work "becomes a means of forcing an encounter with those excluded from the conservative certainties of bourgeois life" (Watts, 2007, p. 88), but the first feature on which such certainties are constructed is always the human body, the initial subject of political suppression.



(Two images of 'Green Men' from Southwell Minster, from Raglan, Lady (1939) "The "Green Man" in Church Architecture", *Folklore*, Vol. 50, No. 1, Mar., pp. 45-57)

The leaves themselves, carved so realistically from stone, are dead representations of living, useless, yet gratuitous and unstoppable growth. This is to be contrasted with the end of segment ☉ where Johnson and Tony narrowly miss a car accident, "someone was backing into Tony's path... all I could do was push the horn button... the other man stopped in time" (*U*, ☉, pp. 2-3). This is an image of the intervention no-one can make into Tony's trial with his diseases — and from the perspective of *The Unfortunates* Tony, like the Green Man, is stopped in time at the moment of dissolution. "If all time is eternally present / All time is unredeemable..." (Eliot, 1969, pp. 171-2). Tony is constantly on the verge of being devoured, and perpetually about to be hit by a car. The images of the entrapment of the face in 15, and the spontaneous disgorgement in 8 illustrate the grin of life that remains after life has ended.

Cancer is the alien within. It is a lack of functional control of the body's own processes — the sort of control that Johnson relinquishes for the ordering of his novel. Bodies themselves are normally treated as abstract totalities, not collations of components, and when the body becomes viewed as divisible the horror is total. The same effect occurs with the body of the novel — the reader is disquieted by its mutilation. The disorder is total — stretching not just across the space of the novel, but across the time of it, obliterating any attempt at narrative redemption and orderliness. The mechanical disorderliness of *The Unfortunates* is obscene, evil, as Nature with all human narrative excised:

...did something inside him decide, some organism, was something set in motion, irrevocably, irremediable? That is fanciful... but Tony believed it had something to do with it... For him it was too much to believe that there was no reason, not for me, it is all chaos, I accept that as the state of the world...

(*U*, ✱, pp. 2-3)

This is Johnson at his most horrifying. The only solace we may try to take is that the death might be meaningful, definitive, rather than suspended in a box of disjecta. He goes “not without a trace” (*CMODE*, p. 183) — the trace is acceptance and a moment of quietude, affected in the same way one counts rosaries, or closer, how Beckett's Molloy circulates stones from pocket to pocket, obsessed with making sure none remain unsucked. The corruption of genetic and generic information, the reduction of the cells to pure reproduction is as disorientating as it is frightening — the plasticity of the reading is itself a disorientating feature. Worse, it is the body working against the body, actively destroying itself with a glut of growth by functioning *too well*. It is content — topography — producing a level of pointless detail, a map of obliterated terrain. The body is an excessive spectre, and this writing of the body as indefinite is for Johnson “a protest against the signification of his own discourse... we have to read in every line the work of the play of writing against meaning” (Bataille, 1997, pp. 3-4). The tumours recruit networks of blood vessels to them, starving the rest of the body of nutrition, just as the book recruits readers' time and mental facility in order to enact the dying. As Johnson himself describes, the treatment itself takes part in destroying the hair follicles — with the body as collateral damage in this war against the body's generative abilities. The act of reading *The Unfortunates* is a fundamentally different operation to other texts, it requires the systematic removal of each exegesis, smaller and larger, each secondary tumour, which is then placed to one side. The non-textual superscriptions used to head the exegeses, different shapes and sizes, each a stylization of something natural, but still a printers mark and therefore mechanical are a satire of properly

functioning nature. This is still textual material, not the body. However, if cancer represents the radical potential alterity of the body when its systems go wild, then *The Unfortunates* is a gesture towards the potential release possible for the materially embodied text. One that would kill the book, just as cancer kills the body.

## 9. CONCLUSION: *EPPUR SI MUOVE*

The sea, the land in the distance: honed to one general level by glacial action, but broken to the sea in fissures, clefts, valleys, defiles, abscissions, cracks, gorges, rifts, ravines, gullies, and crevasses...

(*T*, p. 28)

Yet again it must be asked, how it is possible to explain the problem of the interstices across which fiction and reality meet? How does the concept of the lie – and the fiction – which is not merely a moral failing, but a fundamental epistemological problem of knowledge, change the world? Even if a path is beaten through all the ideological machinery of mystification, and it is discovered in what way the novel functions in society, and what happens when, as McHale puts it, “intractable epistemological uncertainty becomes at a certain point ontological plurality or instability: push epistemological questions far enough and they 'tip over' into ontological questions” (McHale, 1991, p. 11)? For Johnson this is no longer simply a question of the possibility of truth, but of the possibility of being, of continuing. In *See the Old Lady Decently* Johnson said, “Our task is to see that the languages gets a decent burial” (*STOLD*, p. 14), a difficult task when the language refuses to lie still. His works hone these questions down to one level within the text. The cumulative effect of his experiments in technique, the scouring of different textual, biographical, epistemological and ontological levels, is to leave a no more comprehensive an understanding of these problems, but one which at least has a new *texture*.

There can be a brief summation, however, of the idea of a literary topology. There must be the possibility of finding similarity, of seeing in one text, idea or image the likeness of another. Whatever the nature of the cracks, gaps, gorges, or interstices which make this communication both possible and impossible, there still must be a mode of communication – on a level below the text, above, or through it. It is all, after all, material. Meaning is arbitrary, historical, human, but it emerges and is real but unreliable. This is Johnson's key insight – that to take up the immediately available modes of communication is to almost guarantee miscommunication, to not be involved in the world.

The engagement with the materiality of the novel – and most importantly, the materiality of the novel's production – is key to this process. The myth of the novel as an unmovable abstraction does not hold up in the face of the destabilizations carried out by Johnson. Just as epistemology can be pushed into ontology, cultural analysis can be pushed into economic analysis. While in *Christie Malry*, as so often

in Johnson's own life, the financial ledger is left grinning when all others have departed, the effect of capital is at least made visible. Its effect is registered. It is still being asked: why does the novel survive? The answer is, of course, that people still read novels. Novels still produce meanings.

Christie can receive no better commendation than that he was too dangerous a figure to risk many words on. If previous forms and centuries have returned with an even more deadening weight, it is because of the void left by the absence of figures such as Johnson. His “novels have something of abandoned ruins, but, as real ruins, they exert a strong power of fascination” (Thielemans, 1985, p. 87). Any explanation of the production of novels today has to be set against the fact that there is a counter-history of the novel, one which understood the concrete material conditions of the people who write and read texts. So rather than proclaiming false prophecy, it is appropriate to affirm the continuing desirability of a B. S. Johnson. His project remains a gesture towards a potential release, and a warning of the risks of seduction by commitment and experimentation. As a section of Johnson's *Aren't You Rather Young...*, extracted as 'A Few Selected Sentences', puts it: “Someone has to keep the records. I may even be thanked, in time” (Bradbury, 1988, p. 285).

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## B. SYMBOLS AND FIRST LINES IN *THE UNFORTUNATES*

Symbol	First Line	No. of Pages
	But I know this city!	4
	The opera singer...	2
	That was the first time...	4
	Away from the ground...	3
	His dog, or his parents' dog...	5
	Yates's is friendly...	3
	For recuperation...	6
	Up there, yes...	12
	Then he was doing research...	6
	This poky lane...	7
	So he came to his parents...	5
	I had a lovely flat then...	6
	We were late for the funeral...	1
	Time! It's after two! I must...	6
	That short occasion...	2
	Then they had moved...	7
	Just as it seemed things...	8
	The estate. That enormous flat.	8

B. Symbols and First Lines in The Unfortunates

	Again the house at the end...	6
	Cast parapet, pierced rondel design...	3
	At least once he visited...	2
	Here comes the main course...	2
	Sometimes that summer...	4
	The pitch worn...	12
	Southwell, the Chapter House...	3
	June rang on the Saturday...	1
	Paper, yes. Chelsea result.	6