

Conference Review

“Deep in my heart... I know I love chips”

B. S. Johnson, his Contemporaries, and the British
Literary-Cultural Scene, 1949–1979

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THE RECEPTION OF B. S. JOHNSON has always been divided between derision and admiration, often within the same critic. An experimental writer who rejected the term experimentalism, a writer of fiction who insisted that ‘telling stories is really telling lies’ — Johnson’s treatment of the novel ‘from where Joyce left off’ remains both fresh and problematic to readers thirty years after his death. Born in 1933 into a working-class family in Hammersmith, Johnson’s unhappy relationship with the British education system took a

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1. For more information about this event, see <http://ies.sas.ac.uk/events/conferences/2009/BSJ/index.htm> > [accessed 15 May 2010].

happier turn during a year of study at Birkbeck, followed by a degree in English literature at King's College London. A combination of his imposing physique and penchant for abusing his reviewers at cocktail parties made him one of the most conspicuous figures of the literary scene of the 1960s, yet in the years following his death Johnson's reputation went into a decline.

Its recent recovery begins with Philip Tew's 2001 study of Johnson, which called for a 'more generally empathic and generous recuperation'. By 2004, this recuperation was well underway, with the publication of a new Johnson omnibus, an academic conference, and the appearance of Jonathan Coe's prizewinning biography, *Like A Fiery Elephant*. While the biography came in for much praise, Johnson himself continued to be treated with some ambivalence; as one reviewer concluded, Coe's book was 'much more impressive than anything Johnson ever produced'.

Detractors aside, a Johnsonian renaissance continues apace, as evidenced by the British Library's recent acquisition of his archive, and the 2009 conference reviewed here: *B. S. Johnson, his Contemporaries, and the British Literary-Cultural Scene*.

The stylistic features and approach of the following review are an attempt to remain faithful to the late, great man's insistence that 'when you tidy up the loose ends of life you end up falsifying it'. The attention paid to describing the day's catering arrangements reflect Johnson's abject adoration for stodgy food ('Deep in my heart I know I love chips'), as well as your correspondent's own feelings for biscuits.

But I was sure it began at half past!

Check the ticket, always check the ticket. On the right, the conference centre, isn't it? People stand around in the sunny piazza, waiting for the library to open, scattered like pigeons. Take the folder, yes, and the name badge.

Someone speaking already. Wait?

Don't wait. Quietly, quietly... that's it.

Lynn Wells from University of Regina is speaking, a keynote speaker. University of Regina is Canada, I think, yes, Saskatchewan? Good to know Johnson is appreciated worldwide; an angry man from Hammersmith, admired in Saskatchewan.

She talks about Johnson's 'honest connection with form' and compares his work to that of the Cubists, to Apollinaire and his calligrammes. Both Johnson and Apollinaire were a 'spokesperson for the avant-garde' she says, 'without representing it'. Johnson rejected the idea of the death of the author, wanted to write 'so precisely that the very minimum of room for interpretation is left', insisting that if the reader 'wants to impose his imagination, let him write his own books'. A kind of writerly 'bully', Lynn says.

He has a bully's face actually, that surliness around the brow, that sulky bottom lip.

Perhaps I'll draw him. No.

Now, two parallel sessions. So many speakers!

Session A is called ‘Situating Johnson: Other Experimental Fictions’, I see. He wouldn’t like that, Johnson. What was it he said? ‘Experimentalism is almost always a synonym for “unsuccessful”.’ He’d fume.

Tracy Hargreaves describes her paper, ‘The Meaning of Commitment: Doris Lessing and *The Golden Notebook*’, as not about Johnson, but ‘just standing behind him’. An apt way to put it.

Doris Lessing would need a foot stool to look out from behind Johnson, he was such a big man. Doris Lessing is not tall, I think.

Must take this down, about Lessing’s ‘candid immediacy’, her need to find a form which expresses ‘compartmentalisation and disintegration’, the importance of authorial interruption — yes yes yes, these are all such perceptive comparisons, yet I would never have thought of it, my hand trying to keep up —

Both papers are finished, could I creep to the last one in Session B? Rude, maybe? No no, I have heard both papers after all, and look some others leaving too.

Oh she’s speaking already, will we disturb her? No, see, she’s carrying on. Emily Tristram on ‘Johnson, Porter and Debord: Aspects of Psychogeography in Post-War Literature’, something I have seen very little about, but surely this interested Johnson, psychogeography that is? Those splenetic rages against urban architecture, the way his walk about Nottingham drives the plot of *The Unfortunates*. Yet I haven’t seen much written on the subject, breaking new ground perhaps. The connection between refamiliarisation and ownership, she says, how one can detourn a city to reconfigure power relations.

But Bernard Porter, I haven’t read about him, I’ll make a note here and later I will.

The coffee is out, and the biscuits fanned out on large silver platters. So many people to talk to though! The heat of the coffee, its richness and the way the steam curls, my hands around it.

Always small cups though at these things, I’d rather a mug really. More elegant, I suppose.

Speaking to David James, chairing the last session and speaking later, carefully selecting a large flattish cookie, studded with dark chocolate and plump raisins.

Delightfully crumbly... Oh, try not to get crumbs! And so many people to talk to, such a fizzing of conversation, people are not even noticing the biscuits, only me perhaps, being greedy.

Another parallel paper to choose! Julia Jordan’s ‘Let’s Celebrate the Accidental’ and Vanessa Guignery ‘Celebrating the Chaos’, a coincidence that they should both choose this angle, ha! Some irony there perhaps. What is this word ‘chaogenous’? — is this the word she, Julia, is saying?

I’ll make a note to look it up.

Because the randomness of life, the need to avoid imposing order in its representation in writing, these are major themes of Johnson’s, I see this now.

Interesting how the chaos is on the one hand to be celebrated, but also stands in *The Unfortunates* for the terror of cancer. I like Simon Barton’s talk

about 'Measuring Silence: Textual Gaps in the Works of B. S. Johnson', like Lynn Wells talk of calligrammes, calling some attention to the graphic representation of Johnson's story. Textual gaps, he says, measure the gaps in the

thoughts, the

length of the

pause

or the

beginning of

disintegration.

Effective, perhaps.

Ah, plates of neatly stacked sandwiches, fat shiny bagels with cream cheese and smoked salmon, soft and dense when you bite into them, the creaminess and that salty tang, good yes.

Talking to Steven Barfield animatedly and half a bagel slides onto the floor, he points out. Waste, really. How do other people manage to maintain a conversation and feed themselves tidily? And fruit, too! Served with tiny silver forks. Swollen shiny blackberries, not like any I've seen before, not the tart, knotty ones you find in the hedgerows.

Back in the big room now, Dorian Hayes talks about B.S.J. at King's, the 'patrician elder brother' to UCL, chosen by Johnson because he 'liked the name'.

Ah, celebrating the accidental again, perhaps. The King's Centre for Life-Writing Research wasn't there in Johnson's day, but something he'd have liked maybe, something in his vein.

Philip Tew next on 'The Avant-Garde, Johnson and Post-War Fiction', talks of how he found alternatives to 'exhausted forms', how by avoiding traditional literary realism he found new ways of representing reality, particularly one of working-class London.

Johnson's engagement with issues of class stands in contrast to Lessing's more detached and introspective outlook. If Lessing is standing behind this paper too then Philip should watch out, she might cosh him on the head with *The Golden Notebook*...

The plenary panel, where on the programme? Here. 'Modes of Innovation'. Three quite different papers, Glyn White on the future of Johnson Studies, David James considering B. S. Johnson within a tradition of late modernism and David Hering on Johnson and film yet it all seems to keep circling the man himself, Bryan Stanley Johnson. There's no getting away from him, the 'fiery elephant' in the corner of the room, ha!

More coffee now, but where are the biscuits? Not making a return, it seems. Who eats the left over biscuits I wonder? And such nice ones were left.

Silly to think of it, really. The jammy ones.

An unusual thing, a conference about an author who is no longer alive, but can be spoken of by those who knew him, who still have fresh things to share about him, enough distance from his death to be able to speak intimately of him somehow.

Anthony Smith on how the two were ‘baffled old sods about what was happening in the 60s’, and a story of an abortive holiday in France, how the car got stuck in a ditch and how in Le Touquet they met ‘a couple of girls and it worked out well for me and not for him...’

Eva Figs on the mutual respect between the authors, but how he couldn’t accept that since women had the vote that there was more to be done, that he believed ‘all we need to do now is love each other’.

Anthony Smith finishes:

‘I miss him, and I’m still angry.’

Jonathan Coe is a part of this panel, a different sort of friend, one who never met Johnson but spent years in his company, writing the biography. Funny how the combination of affection and frustration with Johnson is just the same for him as for people who knew him. He says that the two things that came up in interview were people’s ‘love and affection’ for Johnson but also their ‘sense of wanting to grab him by the shoulders and give him a good shake’.

I have a question! Sitting up straighter, tense with the desire to ask, raise the hand, but... no, no, its going somewhere else, its, next time, a bit faster maybe. I have to do it more certainly, my hand must look hesitant.

I think Jonathan Coe goes back to his seat, alone. Would it be an imposition to..? Would he? But I’ll go. He is a nice man, I think.

Excuse me, sorrytodisturbyou, but I was wondering if I could oh thank you yes, yes, that’s kind — Um, —

InLikeAFieryElephantyou say ‘Like B. S. Johnson, I have a strong puritanical streak, and it remains one of my core beliefs that a work of literature should speak for itself.’

Whatdoyouthink Johnsonwouldhavemadeoftoday’s conference?

Breathe.

I am perched absurdly on the top of a tip-up seat, hovering lightly, trying to indicate my willingness to be gone and stop troubling important authors. But he’s answering!

‘I’m glad you didn’t ask me that actually, it’s a hard one.’ A hard one! But listen.

‘The reactions to *Trawl* were in some sense not a review of the novel, but of the person’, Coe says. And this still seems true, this need to review Johnson himself, or at least to try and unpick his contradictions, to argue back at him, it is always personal somehow. But Johnson was personal, wasn’t he? To his critics and to his admirers, it cannot be otherwise. I think most of us are here because Johnson feels personal to us. I think that this is what Coe is saying, perhaps.

‘There are many aspects of contemporary culture which would have horrified him but not this aspect’, he adds. This literary conference, that is. ‘I think he would have felt vindicated by it.’

For all his bombast and messianic-sense of how the novel should proceed, Johnson needed, and still needs, days like today, days in which we give him some well-earned vindication.

Darkness falling in the empty piazza now, a little chill in the air as I walk to the tube.

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