

REALITY IN THE NOVELS OF UWE JOHNSON

REALITY IN THE NOVELS OF UWE JOHNSON

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SCOPE AND CONTENTS: This study assesses the importance of the contribution made by Uwe Johnson in his novels to the development of contemporary realistic writing, by examining political and social problems raised by the post-war ideological division of Europe and the complex question of individuality in modern society. Johnson's three novels are considered on a comparative basis, with regard to narrative structure, settings and characterisation, in order to indicate his principal interests as a novelist and as an observer of society, and to suggest significant changes of emphasis within the novels.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## ABBREVIATIONS

We have used the most readily available paperback edition of each of Johnson's novels - Mutmaßungen über Jakob, Fischer Bücherei No. 457, 1968 (202 pp.); Das dritte Buch über Achim, Fischer Bücherei No. 959, 1969 (224 pp.); Zwei Ansichten,rororo No. 1068, 1968 (114 pp.). In order to reduce the number of footnotes, all references to these texts are immediately followed by an abbreviated form of the title - MJ, A, or ZA - and the appropriate page number, e.g.

Aber Jakob ist immer quer über die Gleise gegangen. (MJ 5)

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Now if art were simply the mirror of reality, then realism would be a constant, . . . But realism itself is a historical development: it registers the impact of social changes upon artistic conventions, brings about the breakdown of old conventions and the emergence of new techniques, and accelerates the momentum of the novel toward an increasing scope and flexibility.<sup>1</sup>

In this study of the novels of Uwe Johnson, we intend to examine his responses to the formal problem of preserving the vitality of the novel as a vehicle for reflecting the experience of contemporary political and social life accurately and profoundly. We shall also consider the significance of those aspects of empirical reality upon which he concentrates his attention, in particular the consequences of the ideological division of Germany and the limitations imposed upon individuals in modern society. Our concerns are twofold: firstly, to examine Johnson's realism in historical perspective, and secondly, to indicate differences of emphasis and the development of fundamental interests through a comparative survey of his three published novels, Mutmaßungen über Jakob (1959), Das dritte Buch über Achim (1961) and Zwei Ansichten (1965).

We share Levin's view of realism as a relative term, rather than a distinctive literary technique or an historically limited phenomenon, in the awareness that novels have always been essentially intended to

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<sup>1</sup>H. Levin, The Gates of Horn. A Study of Five French Realists, (New York 1966), p. 30.

depict real life, from the restricted perspective which has appeared most important to each author. Furthermore, we acknowledge the continuing need for each literary generation to critically examine the narrative conventions which, in the eyes of its predecessor, afforded the most direct and natural representation of life, and to derive new formal structures and areas of concern from its own experience of life.<sup>2</sup>

Continuity in the historical evolution of realism can, however, be established in respect to certain basic spheres of thematic interest which, as Auerbach has clearly demonstrated, were established in the novels of the leading French writers of the post-Revolutionary era: the serious treatment of everyday reality, extensive focus upon the fundamental material problems of socially inferior groups, close interweaving of fictional characters and events into the complex fabric of a precisely delineated socio-historical background, and awareness of history as a determining, evolving force.<sup>3</sup> These concerns are, as we hope to show, still central in Johnson's novels, modified to permit treatment in depth of the new contemporary experience of ideological confrontation on a world scale.

The seriousness of intent behind Johnson's fictional investigations is underlined by his refusal - most explicit in Das dritte Buch über Achim - to make concessions towards any inclination on the part of his imagined reader to simplify and idealise experience or to expect escapist enter-

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<sup>2</sup>Ibid, p. 57.

<sup>3</sup>E. Auerbach, Mimesis. The Representation of Reality in Western Literature, trans. W. Trask, (Princeton 1968), p. 491.

tainment:

Nun erwarte von mir nicht den Namen und Lebensumstände für eine wild dahinstürzende Gestalt im kalten Morgennebel . . . eifriges dummes Hundgebell, amtliche Anrufe, keuchender Atem, ein Schuß, unversehens fällt jemand hin . . . ich hatte ja nichts im Sinn als einen telephonischen Anruf . . . (A 6)

His interests are clearly not directed towards the sensational and dramatic exceptions in life. This principle applies equally to his choice of people as to events; there is no temptation, such as we find in much of the earlier tradition of the German novel from Goethe to Thomas Mann, to concentrate upon the special problems of the intellectual-artist in his relationship to society, and thereby to disregard the broad social problems of the majority. Aesthetic and intellectual concerns are, in Johnson's eyes, much too restrictive:

. . . für mein Vorhaben wäre eine künstlerische oder überhaupt eine intellektuelle Existenz nicht geeignet gewesen, denn die intellektuelle Situation ist nicht geeignet, einem größeren Kreis vorgetragen zu werden.<sup>4</sup>

Not only is Johnson interested in problems which affect the everyday life of unexceptional individuals; he has suggested that developments at the highest political level are, in fact, reflected much more emphatically in the lives of the unenlightened and the underprivileged than through the deliberations of perceptive, but comfortably insulated observers:

Ich bin überzeugt, daß die 'einfachen Leute' das erheblichere Beispiel abgeben für Lebensverhältnisse in unserer Zeit, . . . insbesondere weil sie jede Verschlimmerung der Lage unerbittlich ausbaden müssen, ihre Schwierigkeiten mit dem schärfsten Risiko überwinden müssen.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>H. Bienek, Werkstattgespräche mit Schriftstellern, (München 1962), p. 90.

<sup>5</sup>M. S. Schoelman, "Auskünfte und Abreden zu 'Zwei Ansichten'" (in rororo edition of Zwei Ansichten, no. 1068), p. 117.

His fictional world is firmly embedded in contemporary historical and political reality; in each of the novels, a major political development makes a considerable impact upon the private existence of his main characters, and the range of their reactions is representative of a wider spectrum of social attitudes, which are by no means specifically limited to the German situation.<sup>6</sup>

Johnson's relentless concentration upon the practical, empirical problems of modern society, and his insistence upon exact observation rather than essayistic abstraction or symbolical amplification, suggests a degree of concrete realism rarely evident in the traditions of the German novel. As Roy Pascal has pointed out, there has been a tendency, even amongst novelists who deal directly with the world of everyday experience, like Thomas Mann (Buddenbrooks), Alfred Döblin (Berlin Alexanderplatz), Hermann Broch (Die Schlafwandler) and Günter Grass (Die Blechtrommel), to transcend the limits of empirical reality, indicating "a dissatisfaction with concrete or psychological realism, an irony or lack of respect towards realism, a tendency towards the non-realistic symbol, to the grotesque, to the utopian."<sup>7</sup> Hans Mayer has directed attention to the surprising fact that German literature in the 1950's scarcely attempted to do justice to the outstanding political issues of the period:

Im Jahrzehnt der Halbzeit und des Transits war in Deutschland der Aufstand des 17. Juni 1953 das beherrschende Ereignis. Die

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<sup>6</sup> see below, Chs. III, IV.

<sup>7</sup> Speech upon receipt of the Shakespeare-Preis, Hamburg 6.6.69, cf. Verleihung der Shakespeare-Preise 1968 und 1969 . . . (Stiftung F.V.S. zu Hamburg), p. 60.



Literatur nahm jahrelang davon nicht Kenntnis, wie sie überhaupt bestrebt war . . . die Themen des Kriegs, Nachkriegs und der deutschen Aktualität in ihren schmerzhaften Aspekten weitgehend zu verdrängen.<sup>8</sup>

The novels of Uwe Johnson have since contributed decisively - together with those of his contemporaries Grass and Walser in particular - to the examination and illumination of the immediate historical past: the Hitler era, the post-war experience of economic reconstruction and political division, and the problems of the affluent consumer society. Johnson has attracted critical attention above all by translating his first-hand knowledge of life under both ideological systems into strikingly original literary terms. To describe him, however, in relation to his main thematic concern as "Dichter der beiden Deutschland"<sup>9</sup>, not only distracts interest from his creative achievement, but is also an oversimplification which fails to throw light upon the distinctive emphasis of each of his novels. The first novel, Mutmaßungen über Jakob, is essentially concerned with a range of East German reactions to the political developments of 1956; Das dritte Buch über Achim presents the reactions of a Western outsider to East German society. Only Zwei Ansichten is written in the form of a balanced contrast between life in East and West Germany as seen through a representative, limited viewpoint on each side.

Johnson's decision to move to the West in 1959 was prompted by the desire for literary independence - to ensure the publication of Mutmaßungen über Jakob without restrictions - and did not imply an

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<sup>8</sup>H. Mayer, Deutsche Literatur seit Thomas Mann, rororo no. 1063, (1968), p. 88.

<sup>9</sup>G. Blöcker, Kritisches Lesebuch, (Hamburg 1962), p. 196.

ideological decision in favour of Western society.<sup>10</sup> By choosing to live in West Berlin, part of the divided city which he has described as the most interesting in Europe<sup>11</sup>, Johnson has indicated the importance of preserving a close acquaintance with the changing face of each society. The most obvious feature of his approach to contemporary realities is the emphasis upon careful observation and exact description of those aspects of existence under each ideology which affect the social, political and economic life of individual citizens; this is coupled with the refusal to make comparative judgments in terms of imprecise abstractions like "freedom" and "justice", which are largely indicative of subjective preconceptions and too readily take on a political bias. These points are well illustrated by the description, in Das dritte Buch über Achim, of the attempt made by the West German journalist Karsch to gain an accurate impression of a large city in Saxony:

Karsch nahm es auf mit dieser Stadt wie mit allen denen seiner Welt, die er besucht hatte nach dem Krieg. Beim Frühstück saß er über einem Plan der Straßenführung und ergrübelte die Geschichte dieser weitläufigen Siedlung, wie sie erschien in den Hauptstraßen, die ehemals als Chausseen die Dörfer an den kräftig gegliederten kleinen Kern herangezogen hatten . . . Im übrigen fotografierte er wahllos nur was ihm gefiel; ihm gefielen die beiden Häuser aus dem sechzehnten Jahrhundert, die verwittert und fremd allein standen inmitten der öden Leere, zu der ihre Nachbarschaft geglättet lag; auch versuchte er sich an dem Unterschied zwischen hölzernen Wurstbuden auf dem Markt und dem Rathausturm . . . aus dem Turm dröhnte grob verstärkt anmutiges Glockenspiel als Schmeichelei für die folgende Stimme, die den Besucher aufforderte die Ausstellung sozialistischen Wiederaufbaus zu besichtigen, denn sie gehe ihn an; er besichtigte sie; begriff im Blick durch die schweren Fenster-

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<sup>10</sup> Bienek, p. 88.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, p. 98.

laibungen die höch zusammengehörige Umbauung des Marktes, die der Krieg ihm ausgebrochen hatte; sah von der Galerie hinunter auf den dichten Strom nachmittäglicher Fußgänger und war sicher daß er nichts verstehen werde mit Vergleichen (du hast mich nach den Unterschieden gefragt): dies war etwas für sich allein und zu erfassen nur von sich aus, er kannte es nicht. (A 15-16)

Karsch is well aware of the difficulties involved in his self-imposed task. He considers thorough documentary research to be an essential preparation: a clear grasp of the historical and geographical background is necessary as a means of giving perspective and direction to his immediate visual impressions. As soon as he embarks upon his exploratory tour, it becomes clear that he is particularly interested in concrete detail which can be recorded permanently and accurately with his camera. His choice is deliberately random and incomplete: systematic investigation is impossible in the complexity of modern urban society. He is only prepared to note differences and contrasts in his immediate surroundings, since direct comparisons with his previous experience would be premature and misleading, in this unique situation where a former national entity is now rigidly divided.

The unexpected, alienating element for the Westerner in an otherwise unexceptional setting is the hidden but ubiquitous voice of authority, intent upon persuading visitors to improve their knowledge of the achievements of Socialism by visiting a public exhibition. Karsch complies, but, significantly, his impressions are not recorded by the narrator. He is evidently more concerned with the possibility of elevated perspective - "Überblick" both literally and figuratively - which his vantage point affords him upon his surroundings. But he gains no real insight and

remains uncertain and distant in the midst of unfamiliar experiences.

The reality which Karsch is intent upon investigating is, however, not the purely visual one: as he points out soon afterwards, in conversation with his actress friend Karin, his researches have distinct economic and political implications - "zu untersuchen wie das wirtschaftliche Gesetz im Aussehen der Straße erschien." (A 17) He believes that the close observation of physical details will permit a more reliable assessment of the ideological situation than the opinions of others or the version presented by State authorities. He is determined to avoid making judgments which derive from prejudice rather than from empirical knowledge. Even after more than a week of inquiry he is not prepared to answer the question of a local journalist, Herr Fleisg, about his initial impressions, other than cautiously:

- Ich sehe ja immer nur das Straßenbild, antwortete Karsch, und  
 aß weiter. - Ich glaubte nicht daß eine Woche ausreicht: sagte er.  
 (A 28)

The thoroughness, the close attention to exact detail, and the reluctance to draw premature conclusions, which distinguish Karsch's explorations, closely reflect the attitudes expressed by Johnson in "Berliner Stadtbahn" (1961)<sup>12</sup>, the essay which contains his most concise statement of the difficulties facing the contemporary writer aiming at a truthful, unbiased representation of reality. Working from the description of a simple everyday occurrence in divided Berlin (prior to the building of the Wall in August 1961) - an anonymous individual stepping of a train from the Eastern sector at a border station on the

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<sup>12</sup>"Berliner Stadtbahn. Ein Bericht", Merkur XV, Heft 8, (1961), p. 722 - 733.

Western side and disappearing out into the street - Johnson makes us aware of the remarkably complex problems involved in presenting an accurate account of what has happened. He indicates how balanced, truthful reporting of any event in this inescapably political environment is hindered by three main factors: the fallibility and prejudice of the observer, the ideologically oriented interpretations offered by the mass media on either side of the boundary, and the difficulty of finding concise, untainted expressions in a situation where few words remain "neutral", since even the most elementary have taken on distinct political nuances.

We have, of course, been made aware of the inevitable bias and distortion of all individual viewpoints and, in consequence, of the elusiveness of objective knowledge, in some of the best imaginative writing of this century (Franz Kafka's novels spring particularly to mind). The observer of any event will, of necessity, select and emphasise those details which seem most important, but too often his choice is made according to preconceived assumptions rather than an exact perception of what has actually happened. Johnson has shown how any distortions at the individual level will be greatly magnified by the political press, particularly in the contemporary German situation, in which the confrontation of two diametrically opposed and mutually hostile political systems is most direct. The uncommitted, inquiring observer is constantly presented with contradictory versions of the truth - "zwei gegensätzliche Tendenzen der Wahrheitsfindung"<sup>13</sup> - neither of which may bear any

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid, p. 725.

significant relation to the observable facts. But within the obvious and severe political division of Germany, a more subtle differentiation is taking place: the increasing manipulation of the language for political and economic ends. The writer, dependent upon the expressiveness and precision of language to represent his thoughts and observations, exactly as he intends, to a wide and discriminating audience, must scrupulously avoid all words which have political implications of any kind:

Denn es kommt hinzu, daß beide Machtapparate ihre eigenen sprachlichen Verabredungen getroffen haben und sie in ihrem Gebiet teilweise als Konvention durchsetzen konnten. Beide Städte Berlin etwa nennen sich frei einander unfrei, sich demokratisch einander undemokratisch, sich friedlich einander kriegslüstern, usw. Einige dieser diffusen Formeln sind tatsächlich<sup>14</sup> sprachgänglich geworden und werden oft ohne Ironie angesetzt.

If these problems are part of the everyday experience of the perceptive individual in modern Germany, then, as Johnson has stressed, the creative writer dealing with this situation must indicate his awareness of their implications in his fictional writing:

Eine Grenze an dieser Stelle wirkt wie eine literarische Kategorie. Sie verlangt die epische Technik und die Sprache zu verändern, bis sie der unerhörten Situation gerecht werden.<sup>15</sup>

Deprived of any certainties other than those which his own limited empirical investigations can establish, unable to rely upon any predetermined system of values, the writer is no longer in a position to assume the attitude of omniscience - "der göttergleiche Überblick"<sup>16</sup> -

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<sup>14</sup>Ibid, p. 732.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid, p. 725.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid, p. 733.

which we associate with earlier realists like Balzac. In particular, Johnson rejects the idea that art should harmoniously transfigure life. He is not prepared to present a neatly planned, well-integrated illusion of reality, when his own experience remains fragmentary and imprecise. The artificiality of his structural framework and the ambiguities of personality should therefore be stressed rather than disguised, and the characters allowed to speak for themselves without being judged by a superior narrator:

Der Verfasser sollte zugeben, daß er erfunden hat, was er vorbringt, er sollte nicht verschweigen, daß seine Informationen lückenhaft sind und ungenau. Denn er verlangt Geld für was er anbietet. Dieseingestehen kann er, indem er etwa die schwierige Suche nach der Wahrheit ausdrücklich vorführt, indem er seine Auffassung des Geschehens mit der seiner Personen vergleicht und relativiert, indem er ausläßt, was er nicht wissen kann, indem er nicht für reine Kunst ausgibt, was noch eine Art der Wahrheitsfindung ist.<sup>17</sup>

Any contemporary fictional work involves a remarkable selection of detail: no-one claims today to offer a "slice of life" in the Naturalist sense. The writer is obliged to choose situations which he considers representative, since the precise description of any specific milieu, viewed as an isolated entity, may not stand in any significant relation to the reader's sphere of reality. The search for truth has, for Johnson, an inescapably political, social and economic basis, just as strongly as for Bertolt Brecht, but with the important difference that the experience of one generation has sufficed to destroy the faith in ideology, which led Brecht in the mid-1930's to talk in terms of a clear

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<sup>17</sup>Ibid, p. 733.

political solution to the evils of capitalism.<sup>18</sup> In Johnson's eyes, we can do no more than cautiously examine modern manifestations of capitalism and socialism as they are reflected in the lives of individuals: there is little indication that any political ideal is approaching fulfilment. Berlin is consequently not depicted as a fascinating metropolis, but is to be seen as a political model - "ein Modell für die Begegnung der beiden Ordnungen".<sup>19</sup> The unspectacular incident which introduces the chain of deliberations in "Berliner Stadtbahn" is a random example which might possibly have wider general implications:

[Der Verfasser] hält den Vorfall überhaupt für ein Beispiel, das man anführen darf. Er glaubt, daß es etwas beweist über die Lebensverhältnisse beiderseits der Grenze.<sup>20</sup>

But he could quite easily be mistaken and thereby falsify a mere factual observation by making it into a significant literary reality - "Unablässig ist er in der Gefahr, daß er versucht etwas wirklich zu machen, das nur tatsächlich ist".<sup>21</sup> The selection of details and the emphasis they imply must therefore be clearly presented as the arbitrary judgment of the author. (The words "Beispiel", "Versuch", and "Modell" recur frequently in Johnson's novels to remind the reader of this fact.) Above all, the writer's language should be markedly "neutral", able to be understood clearly by readers in both parts of Germany and beyond - "eine Sprache

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<sup>18</sup>cf. B. Brecht, "Fünf Schwierigkeiten beim Schreiben der Wahrheit", Versuche 9, (Berlin 1958), p. 87 - 101.

<sup>19</sup>"Berliner Stadtbahn", p. 724.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid, p. 728.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid, p. 728.



. . . die beide Gegenden in einen Griff bekommt und zudem überregional verständlich ist".<sup>22</sup>

The practical consequence of the principles outlined in "Berliner Stadtbahn" upon realistic techniques is, to use K. A. Horst's terms, a movement away from the creation of a unified illusion of reality towards the presentation of a deliberately incomplete fiction.<sup>23</sup> This development will, we feel, become more obvious if we briefly consider a representative example of the traditional realistic illusion, the opening scene of Fontane's Effi Briest:

In Front des schon seit Kurfürst Georg Wilhelm von der Familie von Briest bewohnten Herrenhauses zu Hohen-Cremmen fiel heller Sonnenschein auf die mittagsstille Dorfstraße, während nach der Park- und Gartenseite hin ein rechtwinklig angebauter Seitenflügel einen breiten Schatten erst auf einen weiß und grün quadrierten Fliesengang und dann über diesen hinaus auf ein großes, in seiner Mitte mit einer Sonnenuhr und an seinem Rande mit Canna indica und Rhabarberstauden besetztes Rondell warf. Einige zwanzig Schritte weiter, in Richtung und Lage genau dem Seitenflügel entsprechend, lief eine ganz in kleinblättrigem Efeu stehende, nur an einer Stelle von einer kleinen, weiß gestrichenen Eisentür unterbrochene Kirchhofsmauer, hinter der der Hohen-Cremmener Schindelturm mit seinem blitzenden, weil neuerdings erst wieder vergoldeten Wetterhahn aufragte. Fronthaus, Seitenflügel und Kirchhofsmauer bildeten ein einen kleinen Ziergarten umschließendes Hufeisen, an dessen offener Seite man eines Teiches mit Wassersteg und angekettetem Boot und dicht daneben einer Schaukel gewahr wurde, deren horizontal gelegtes Brett zu Häupten und Füßen an je zwei Stricken hing . . .<sup>24</sup>

Fontane's first concern is to create a setting which the reader can clearly envisage - "ein homogenes Ganze . . . von dem ich mich umschlossen fühle und in dessen Bezüglichkeiten ich mich immer tiefer

<sup>22</sup>Ibid, p. 732.

<sup>23</sup>K. A. Horst, Das Spektrum des modernen Romans, (München 1964), p. 30 - 42.

<sup>24</sup>T. Fontane, Effi Briest, (Goldmanns Gelbe Taschenbücher 1576/7), p. 5.

einlebe".<sup>25</sup> The hereditary home of the Briest family and its immediate surroundings are fully and uninterruptedly described as seen through the omniscient eyes of the author. Against this background he will gradually unfold a unified story, in which the social and moral attitudes of the characters are closely related to their environment: the emerging tensions between tradition and modernity ("seit Kaiser Georg Wilhelm"/ "angebauter Seitenflügel"), between exotic and domestic tastes ("Canna indica"/ "Rhabarberstauden"), and between confinement and expansion ("Kirchhofsmauer"/ "Teich", "Schaukel") are already revealed in the setting, yet the economy and significance of detail will only become evident in retrospect, as the plot develops. Such precise craftsmanship, which creates a highly credible illusion of everyday reality through the deliberate elimination of all outward signs of artifice, and which only gradually betrays the moulding hand of the author, offers an apt illustration of Fontane's view that art should transfigure and harmonise reality:

. . . darauf kommt es an, daß wir in den Stunden, die wir einem Buche widmen, das Gefühl haben, unser wirkliches Leben fortzusetzen, und daß zwischen dem erlebten und erdichteten Leben kein Unterschied ist als der jener Intensität, Klarheit, Übersichtlichkeit und Abrundung und infolge davon jener Gefühlsintensität, die die verklärende Aufgabe der Kunst ist.<sup>26</sup>

When we approach a novel like Mutmaßungen über Jakob, however, it is soon obvious that practically nothing of this neat pattern of connections between the background and the characters remains. Instead

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<sup>25</sup> Horst, p. 30.

<sup>26</sup> T. Fontane, Gesammelte Werke, (Berlin 1905-10), 2nd. series, IX, p. 269. Quoted in H. H. Reuter, Fontane, (München 1968), Bd. II, p. 628.

of being introduced in turn to the setting and the main figures, we are plunged immediately into the middle of anonymous conversations and deliberations offering varying degrees of insight, and there is no attempt to provide a smooth transition from one level to the next. Just as the background remains indistinct, shrouded in mist, the figures are blurred and uncertain for some considerable time, until we learn how to differentiate between their personalities, as they emerge in fragments of dialogue and reflection. Chronology is disrupted so radically that the outcome of the story is evident well before we know anything of its beginnings: as a result, we are bound to concentrate our main interest upon the reasons for Jakob's death rather than upon the simple progression of events. In retrospect, only the opening phrase - "Aber Jakob ist immer quer über die Gleise gegangen" (MJ 5) - takes on more general significance as a pointer to the essence of Jakob's personality.

The contrast of styles is almost total and underlines the applicability of Levin's suggestion - which prefaces our introductory remarks<sup>27</sup> - that fictional conventions will become invalid and be rejected as soon as they fail to convey the essence of the rising generation's experience of reality. It should however not be overlooked that, although Johnson has derived his narrative techniques and spheres of fictional interest directly from his empirical investigations, he is still largely dependent upon conventions established by novelists earlier in this century. The idea of the limited narrator, the reflection of events through

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<sup>27</sup> see above, p. 1.

several perspectives, the use of inner monologue, and the introduction of documentary fact or technical detail, are conventions which have been gradually developed, in the works of writers like Kafka, Faulkner, and Döblin. The exposition, in "Berliner Stadtbahn", of the idea that art should portray the general situation of individuals in their socio-political environment by means of exemplary "model" cases, is particularly reminiscent of the theoretical writings of Alfred Döblin. Döblin made the important distinction between the novelist ("Romanschriftsteller"), who simply reproduces the external visual reality, and the epic artist ("epischer Künstler"), who has the insight to select and emphasise situations which illustrate fundamental human predicaments:

Was macht das epische Werk aus? - Das Vermögen seines Herstellers, dicht an die Realität zu dringen und sie zu durchstossen, um zu gelangen zu den einfachen großen elementaren Grundsituationen und Figuren des menschlichen Daseins.<sup>28</sup>

Johnson, like Döblin, is concerned both to keep the reader constantly aware of the practical problems of fictional writing, and to stress the open-ended nature of his investigations, rather than to present a neatly-rounded, comprehensive portrayal of an isolated development:

Bei allen epischen Werken größeren Umfangs muß man wissen, es wird kein rundes, abgeschlossenes, vollkommen umgangenes Kunstwerk vorgesetzt, sondern man wohnt der Zeugung des Werks, der Entwicklung und dem Wachstum bei.<sup>29</sup>

Yet despite the existence of such common theoretical interests, the differences in actual literary practice again point to the modifying force of history. Johnson avoids the naive enthusiasm and mythical

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<sup>28</sup>A. Döblin, Aufsätze zur Literatur, (Olten 1963), p. 132.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid, p. 123.

vagueness into which Döblin often slips in his most successful novel, Berlin Alexanderplatz, preferring the restricted scope and the concentration of emphasis which a more rigorous adherence to empirical experience permits. Furthermore, we do not have the feeling, as we do at times with Döblin, of being overwhelmed by the bulk of extraneous documentary detail. Johnson maintains greater control over his material by relating it precisely to the activities of his fictional characters.

In short, this study will consider some of the outstanding means by which Johnson keeps the reader aware of the fictitiousness of his novels, by preventing the establishment of any continuity of illusion. We shall examine, in turn, the narrative structure, the settings and the characterisation in each of the three novels, in order to assess both the variation of emphasis and the consistency of interest. This approach should, we feel, also contribute to the understanding of realism as a constantly developing technique renewed by each generation as it frees itself from the conventions of its predecessors. In particular, we hope that the study as a whole will help to illustrate how Johnson's rigorous and precise investigations into social and political phenomena are never threatened as creative entities by abstract or theoretical interests, but are, on the contrary, inspired by a profound and sympathetic concern for individuality at every level of contemporary society.

## CHAPTER II

### NARRATIVE STRUCTURE

It may at first appear surprising that Johnson, who is, as we have suggested, intent upon stressing the limitations of each individual's grasp of reality and concerned with the question of personality under the politically oriented pressures of modern society, still makes use of fictional narrators who retain some of the characteristics of their omniscient predecessors. Wolfgang Kayser's warning that the rejection of the idea of the "personal" narrator would seriously weaken, if not destroy, the resourcefulness of the novel as a literary form - "Der Tod des Erzählers ist der Tod des Romans"<sup>1</sup> - would seem to have made its impact upon Johnson. The observations which Johnson has made, in "Berliner Stadtbahn", about the difficulties facing any individual attempting to present a reliable account of any event do, however, have a distinct bearing upon his concept of the narrator. He has pointed out that his objection is principally to the mannerisms of the omniscient narrator, rather than to the function of the narrator as an organiser and editor of the material at his disposal:

Die klassische Perspektive ist nur insofern aufgehoben, als sie sich auf die Manieren des Erzählers, diese Allwissenheit bezieht.

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<sup>1</sup>W. Kayser, "Die Anfänge des modernen Romans . . . und seine heutige Krise", DVS 1954, p. 445.

In der anderen Hinsicht ist sie natürlich nicht aufgehoben, denn die Geschichte umfaßt nach wie vor alles, was sie zusammensetzt und ihr einen Anfang und ein Ende gibt.<sup>2</sup>

This statement becomes quite clear when we consider the rôle of the narrator in Mutmaßungen über Jakob. The basic situation in the novel is the attempt of the people most closely involved with Jakob Abs in the last week of his life to discover the reasons for his death and thereby something of his true identity. As soon as we become familiar with the complex structural pattern of monologue, dialogue and comment from the narrator,<sup>3</sup> the precise definition of the narrator's position emerges as a particularly perplexing problem. It is certainly helpful to view him as a fictional editor, collecting and arranging the fragments of dialogue and inner monologue presented by Rohlf, Jonas, Gesine and Jöche, and ensuring the chronological progression of events up to Jakob's death,<sup>4</sup> but it could prove misleading to think in terms of a "democratic relationship" between the narrator and the other characters, or to state that "there is no omniscient narrator, and an authoritative authorial voice is never heard".<sup>5</sup> It is evident that the narrator prefers to let us view Jakob and the events in which he is involved through the eyes of one of his protagonists whenever this is possible, within the limitations of their knowledge, but it appears to have been previously overlooked

<sup>2</sup>Bienek, p. 90.

<sup>3</sup>For a full explanation, cf. H. Popp, Einführung in U. J.'s Roman Mutmaßungen über Jakob, (Stuttgart 1967), pp. 7 - 10, 18 - 23.

<sup>4</sup>R. Hinton Thomas and W. van der Will, The German Novel and the Affluent Society, (Toronto 1968), p. 113.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid, p. 113.

that the narrator's knowledge of Jakob - perhaps the most important consideration in our assessment of his reliability - undergoes a definite change as the account of events proceeds.

For the first two chapters, he has clear insight into Jakob's thoughts and feelings at crucial periods; for example, after Jakob's first interview with Rohlf's (MJ 31-33), in which Rohlf's suggests that Jakob could do his country an important service by helping to establish an espionage link in West Germany, Jakob's routine of exemplary dedication to his dispatching work for the East German railway is decisively disrupted. Previously he has deliberately avoided involvement in politics because he considers undue concern with principles and wider issues to be counter-productive:

Und eben diese Möglichkeit von Überblick: sagte er: beschwert die Arbeit . . . die gesellschaftliche Ordnung änder[t] Anlaß und Umstände des Verkehrs nur äußerlich. (MJ 31)

Shortly afterwards, during a conversation with his workmate and close friend Jöche, he is unable to discuss what weighs most heavily upon his mind (since Rohlf's has sworn him to secrecy), and it is left to the narrator's superior knowledge to convey something of the impact of this change upon Jakob's life:

Sie waren sich gewohnt und befreundet seit sechs und sieben und acht Jahren, ihre Berufe hatten sich gesondert mit der Zeit, in verschiedenen Verhältnissen waren sie erst heute, Jakob wußte es nun, Jöche erfuhr es zu spät. (MJ 40)

Yet almost immediately prior to this, the narrator, with an element of mockery, has challenged the reader to make his own judgment upon Jakob - "Kennt einer Jakob?" (MJ 39) - at a time when he is supplying important



information about Jöche in response to his own rhetorical question - "Kennt einer Jöche?" (MJ 38), as if to underline the fact that the search for Jakob's identity will be a much more tentative one.

Again, in the second chapter, we gain significant knowledge from an omniscient narrator about Jakob's thoughts and attitudes over an extended period following his visit to Jerichow (MJ 85-90). We learn directly of Jakob's awareness of the gulf between official terminology and practical realities, as he reflects upon his plan for reducing operational delays in the timetable; and as he recalls details of his discussions with Jonas at Jerichow, we receive a direct exposition of his ideas on individual freedom and on the relationship between the individual and the State, which add an important dimension to our knowledge by giving us some conception of his intelligence, perceptiveness and pragmatic approach to life.<sup>6</sup>

The second half of the novel (Chs. III - V) brings about a striking contrast, for the narrator seems unprepared to view Jakob other than externally, as if, in echoing Rohlf's statement of despair - "Eigentlich weiß man so viel wie nichts" (MJ 97, 100) - he suddenly doubts the knowledge of Jakob which he has previously provided, or else deliberately renounces his attitude of omniscience. In either case - the reason is never given - it is Jakob's silence which stands out after this point, and we become increasingly dependent upon the opinions and speculations of the other characters for our grasp of his subsequent development,

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<sup>6</sup>cf. also MJ 37 - 38, 63 - 64.

for example:

- Du meinst: er hat da zum ersten Mal verzichtet auf das Prinzip Pünktlichkeit und Rücksichtnahme. Das soll ein Anfang gewesen sein . . .
- Vielleicht. Ich möchte nur wahrhaben daß keiner sich hinstellen kann und sagen: So war es und nicht anders. (Jonas and Gesine, MJ 110)

The narrator, almost without exception,<sup>7</sup> adopts expressions of uncertainty when referring to Jakob, for example:

Er schien Cresspahl mit zärtlicher Besorgnis zu betrachten . . .  
Denn in diesem Moment mag Jakob begriffen haben wie es für Cresspahl aussah. (MJ 143, 145)

On other occasions he presents us with a list of possibilities, for example as to the reasons why Jakob took Cresspahl into his confidence prior to Rohlf's visit:

Und warum hat Jakob . . . gerade vor Cresspahl angefangen zu sagen 'du, Cresspahl . . . ' und zu erzählen vom vorigen Donnerstag an? oder vielmehr: er sagte nichts, er legte den Revolver auf den Tisch . . . Wollte er endlich einen Mitwisser und nicht mehr gänzlich für alles aufkommen müssen mit seinem einsamen Urteil? oder hielt er seine Meinung nicht für die einzige Zuständigkeit? (MJ 145-6)

Jakob's continuing silence, together with his apparent alienation from his surroundings, creates an impression of inscrutability which the narrator leaves us to interpret at our own risk:

Aber sein Blick verließ nicht die starre Richtung auf etwas unsichtbar Entferntes, das er nur ansah aber nicht mehr bedachte. (Sein Blick bewegte sich nicht). (MJ 137)

The significance of this shift in narrative position, which implies a movement away from the carefully controlled and comprehensible world of fiction towards the ambiguity and uncertainty of everyday

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<sup>7</sup>on MJ 145, 169 he briefly describes Jakob's feelings, but not his thoughts.

relationships, is considerable. The obvious fictitiousness of a structural pattern divided (both formally and typographically) into three separate layers, and the existence of a narrator only partially prepared to fulfil his traditional function (and therefore to be viewed with suspicion), destroys all possibility of keeping the work at a distance with a feeling of security, in the knowledge that it has no direct bearing upon our everyday existence. Instead, we are confronted with very real questions concerning the integrity of personality and the subjectivity of all our attitudes to others. The novel provides a striking presentation, akin to that of Kafka in Das Schloß, of the distorted impression we, as individuals, have of our surroundings, because of our tendency to work from vague assumptions rather than certain knowledge. K., in the alien world of Das Schloß, is continually led into error in his assessments of those around him, e.g. his over-estimation of Barnabas - "sein Blick schien mehr zu sagen als seine Worte".<sup>8</sup> Johnson indicates the dimensions of this problem in a socially and historically precise situation: the shroud of ambiguity is never removed from Jakob's life or the manner of his death.

Das dritte Buch über Achim is the novel in which the consequences of Johnson's move to the West in 1959, and his main preoccupations about the problems of the writer intent upon understanding contemporary realities, are clearly evident. Mutmaßungen über Jakob, despite its multi-layered structure, contains a tightly-woven plot in line with traditionally accepted ideas about unity of action and chronological

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<sup>8</sup>F. Kafka, Das Schloß, (Fischer Bücherei 900, 1968), p. 25.

progression, with a small number of central characters with whose thoughts and actions we are closely concerned. Our immediate knowledge of the death of Jakob, the character with whom we are directly involved, serves to channel our interest towards analytical consideration of possible motives, and away from the climactic moment itself, with all the fascination of psychological drama or (as has also been suggested) of the detective story.<sup>9</sup> In Das dritte Buch über Achim, however, it is impossible to speak of unified action: the perspectives are no longer concentrated upon one central issue. There are now three distinct levels of interest, each of which reveals separate concerns and problems, evolving from a central impulse. At the core of the work, providing the impulse for all the wider reflections, is the life of the East German cycling champion, Achim T.; on the second level is the attempt of the Hamburg journalist Karsch to write a new biography of Achim (two exist already), in which not just his sporting prowess, but also his development as an individual to a position of trust as a mediator between the State and the people - "die Zusammenarbeit von Sport und Macht der Gesellschaft in einer Person" (A 32) - is to be established. This undertaking is however for Karsch nothing more (at least initially) than a convenient pretext which allows him an extended period of residence and State encouragement to comprehend something of the distinctive differences between East Germany and his own country - "neugierig auf dies Land und wie darin zu leben wäre". (A 27) The writing of the biography proves much more complex than expected, revealing a fundamental difference

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<sup>9</sup>Hinton Thomas and van der Will, p. 121-22.

in approach between the "Western" view of personal development, tending to dwell upon contradictions and crises, and the official Socialist view that the past should be examined in the light of the present achievement, so that only those actions which clearly point forward are emphasised, and deviations are ignored as meaningless. Karsch's reflections, on the possibilities of writing a biography under these conditions and on wider problems related to selection and presentation of the available material, make up an important part of this section.

The third level reveals the preoccupations of an author/narrator who stands firmly opposed to the traditional escapist function of fiction and is concerned to make the reader aware of the difficulties involved in the process of creative writing, down to the choice of words and sentence structure. Above all, he regards his fiction as nothing more than a personal opinion, a preliminary effort towards the attainment of a clearer grasp of important elements of external reality:

Die Personen sind erfunden. Die Ereignisse beziehen sich nicht auf ähnliche sondern auf die Grenze: den Unterschied: die Entfernung  
und den Versuch sie zu beschreiben. (A 224)

The structural pattern, providing the impulse for the release of information about Karsch and Achim, is an imagined telephone conversation between Karsch and some friends when he returns to Hamburg, after his disagreements with Achim about the content of the proposed biography have become irreconcilable.<sup>10</sup> The narrator, superior and ironical, has attained a greater degree of certainty and insight than Karsch, and

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<sup>10</sup>cf. Bienek, p. 90.

is in a position to expand and comment upon the material provided by Karsch's imagined telephone call and fragmentary manuscripts. But, as in Mutmaßungen über Jakob, his control over the fictional situation and his knowledge of the characters' thoughts remain deliberately incomplete. For example, he is not prepared to assume anything about Karsch, Achim or the other characters prior to the telephone call from Karin, which provokes Karsch's journey to East Germany and brings the fiction into existence. For knowledge about events in the past he will sometimes rely upon second-hand information:

[Karsch] soll nach dem Krieg mit einer Schauspielerin zusammengelebt haben, das war in Berlin, die war aus dem Osten; augenscheinlich hatten sie bei ihrer Trennung einander gesagt: Wenn etwas ist, will ich dich nicht vergessen haben, oder ähnlich. (A 6)

On other occasions he simply lists the possibilities which have occurred to him, as, for example, in his deliberations about Achim's actions during the revolt of the 17 June 1953:

Als Achim die Gesichter von seiner alten Lehrbaustelle erkannte (wenn Achim da war) . . . lief [er] über den vollgedrängten Bürgersteig hinterher . . . Oder war er dem Zug entgegengekommen auf der Fahrt zum Morgentraining . . . Es kann aber auch am Morgen der erste Blick aus einem der höhergelegenen Fenster gewesen sein, der ihn weckte . . . (A 216)

The inner core of the novel, Karsch's attempt to write an "objective" biography of Achim, has much in common with fictional traditions. On two levels, it provides a chronological thread which runs through the whole novel and gives it a degree of linear development: firstly, we view the progress of the working relationship between Achim and Karsch (with Karin as an indispensable intermediary) over several weeks of Achim's routine activity in 1960 - a probing insight into the career and

way of life of a modern sporting champion. Subsequently, we follow Karsch's attempt to reconstruct Achim's past chronologically, working both from available documentary material and direct observation of the various milieux in which Achim has grown up, as well as the accounts provided by Achim, his friends and relatives. As a fictional biography substantially based on fact,<sup>11</sup> it remains psychologically credible<sup>12</sup> and could be viewed as a modern variation upon the well-established "Entwicklungsroman", concentrating upon the development of the main figure and intent upon revealing the tensions between his subjective self-image and the truth (as understood by Karsch). Yet because this complicated pattern of personality development stands in direct contrast to the simplified image preferred by Achim's State culture, and because Karsch's undertaking represents an unsuccessful experiment to find a level of common understanding within politically divided Germany, interest in this central concern is progressively devalued in favour of the wider, less specific issues it evokes.

In any case, the value of the biographical experiment is brought into question from the early stages. Karsch's reaction to the offer made by Herr Fleisg on behalf of one of the State publishing companies to write the biography<sup>13</sup> is distinctly unenthusiastic:

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<sup>11</sup>cf. K. Pestälözzi, "Achim alias Täve Schur", in Sprache im technischen Zeitalter (1963), p. 479 - 86.

<sup>12</sup>see below, Ch. IV.

<sup>13</sup>We share M. Reich-Ranicki's reservations regarding the credibility of this offer, cf. Deutsche Literatur in West und Ost, (München 1963), p. 243.

Ach: sagte Karsch. Er wollte nur Herrn Fleisgs aufhorchende Pause abkürzen, indem er auch etwas tat. Er gähnte. Warum erzählt er das mir. (A 39)

Furthermore, Karsch's reliability as a biographer is constantly brought into question by the narrator's criticisms. The possibility that Karsch may possess any exceptional powers of insight is quickly eliminated - "Karsch weiß nicht mehr als ihm auffiel" (A 19) - as is the hope that his picture of Achim's past will be particularly authentic:

Karsch ergänzte nun bedenkenlos was er wußte aus dieser Zeit und was er für Achim wahrscheinlich glaubte. (A 52)

Karsch never succeeds in overcoming his problems as regards selection and emphasis (cf. especially A. 156-9); for example, he is unable to impose any form upon his knowledge of Achim's experiences in Thuringia in 1945:

Du magst es weniger für eine Antwort halten als für eine unentschiedene Zusammensetzung von Ungefährem. (A 118)

We cannot help suspecting, however, that the narrator is simply indicating something of his own uncertainty about the understanding of problems in real life by emphasising Karsch's uncertainty in fictional situations. It is clear that he shares with Karsch basic similarities in approach towards comprehending contemporary realities, particularly the insistence upon close observation and upon discovering the individual detail which throws light upon the general situation. The novel, in fact, represents an important stage in Karsch's "education", from an unruffled confidence in the validity of the Goethean view of human development - the idea of a continuing progression from birth, based on the interaction of inherited qualities, the incalculable accidental factors in life, and personal decisions (cf. A 32-8) - towards the narrator's awareness



of the range of new difficulties surrounding the question of identity, imposed both by the political division of Germany and by social and State pressures which continually force the individual to play rôles and conceal much of his personality.

There is considerable deliberate ambiguity within the novel as to who is providing the narrative thread at different stages - whether we are faced with a direct transcription of Karsch's viewpoint or given the benefits of the narrator's superior, yet still limited, insight. The problem of differentiation is of course increased on account of the temperamental kinship of our two reporters. The narrator frequently switches almost imperceptibly from his own perspective to that of his less enlightened fictional representative, either without comment or else clarifying matters only in retrospect. For example, the account of Karsch's first conversation with Herr Fleisg, in which the idea of a new biography of Achim is raised, begins with a brief comment from the narrator and shifts almost without warning to Karsch's (telephone) account of the meeting, presented largely in reported speech; only subsequently does the narrator reveal a lack of certainty as to the accuracy of Karsch's description of the meeting:

Karsch sah es gar nicht, da wurde es ihm nahegelegt. Eines Mittags in der Stadt trat ein Herr an seinen Tisch und erklärte ihm daß es möglich war. Das war so ein Magerer Langer (weißt du), er verbeugte sich eckig und brachte mit schnellen Reden und mit Blicken auf den Wagen vor dem Fenster heraus, daß Karsch Karsch war, deswegen war er gekommen . . . Ob Herr Fleisg nun so war wie Karsch vorführte oder ob er wirklich eine Geschichte gab gut zum Erzählen, ein solches Zusammentreffen ließ nach der Meinung des Redakteurs ein bedeutsames Schriftstück erwarten . . .

(A 28 - 29)

Yet at other times, he clearly reveals his precise knowledge not only of Karsch's thoughts, but also those of other figures, whether directly (Karin, A 8) or incidentally (the typewriter salesman, A 76) involved in the action.<sup>14</sup> He also enjoys distancing himself from his fictional world in order to deal with the imagined reader's prejudiced expectations of excitement and tension (A 104 - 9) or love affairs involving the main characters (A 88), and also in order to emphasise the fictitiousness of it all, particularly at the beginning (A 5 - 7) and towards the end, e.g. "Ich erkläre mir das so: sagte der angenommene Karsch . . . " (A 213).

The continual shifting of stylistic level - dialogue, direct and indirect speech, factual statement and speculative reflection, technically exact and colloquially vague expression - reinforces the effect of the tripartite construction in frustrating the reader's hope of viewing the work, from any of the given perspectives, as a complete or unified illusion of reality. Das dritte Buch über Achim demands a positive response from the reader and a willingness to consider the general problems raised, as well as the particular ones relating to the fiction. It represents a fresh formulation by Johnson of the Brechtian emphasis on serious discussion of ideas, the expectation of active disagreement rather than comfortable acceptance of the fictional world:

Ich würde es vorziehen, daß der Leser, also der Adressat der Geschichte, sich zu ihr selbst verhält, sie selbst überdenkt und dann zu seinen eigenen Schlüssen kommt. Denn es ist ja sein Leben, mit dem er das anfängt . . . <sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup>cf. K. Migner, Das dritte Buch über Achim - Interpretation, (München 1966), p. 28 - 9.

<sup>15</sup>Bienek, p. 95.

Zwei Ansichten, Johnson's most recent novel, is much more rigorously restricted in scope. The structure is less fragmented, and we no longer have to examine information presented from several perspectives offering varying degrees of insight and reliability, nor depend upon a narrator intent on reducing his explanatory comment to an essential minimum. It offers a return to the more conventional fictional approach of viewing the chronological development of a story directly through the eyes of an omniscient narrator. But in a situation in which the main characters are much less perceptive than the principal witnesses of events - "scharfsinnige Beobachter der Gegenwart"<sup>16</sup> - like Jonas, Rohlfs and Karsch in the earlier novels, and less able to comprehend the motivating forces behind their own actions, it is obvious that there is a much greater need for analytical comment from a superior viewpoint. Furthermore, in line with realistic traditions, we are presented with a rounded story apparently based on authentic material - the separate accounts of an East German nurse, D., and a West German photographer, B., of the development of their relationship against the background of the months following the building of the Berlin Wall. The narrator is not restricted, as in the other novels, by considerations of truthfulness, in the sense of refusing to elaborate upon the information at his disposal without openly declaring his intentions. He frequently uses his imaginative powers to create atmosphere and provide descriptive detail which he could not have learnt from verbal accounts, for example:

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<sup>16</sup> M. Reich-Ranicki, in Die Zeit (24.9.65)

. . . im Duschkeller stand sie naß vor der beschlagenen Glaswand, bewegte das dunstige Abbild ihres Körpers, verwundert, neugierig, bevor sie sich Haar und Handtuch vor die Augen zog. (ZA 93)

He also adopts a strongly subjective, critical approach towards the weaknesses and delusions of his characters, in the ironic style of the personal narrator:

B. glaubte auch zu bemerken, daß er es mit diesem Wagen leichter hatte bei den Mädchen. (ZA 8)

[D] ließ sich . . . ablenken in einem Strom halbgedachter Erinnerungen, undeutlich kommentierender Gefühle, bloßen Aufnehmens von Anblick und Geräusch, eigentlich betäubt. (ZA 52 - 3)

At the same time, it would be a clear injustice to Johnson to view Zwei Ansichten as a story with a contemporary setting told in the manner and with the conventions of 19th century realism. In a less obvious way than in the earlier novels, Johnson includes many details which serve to disturb the illusion of reality and keep the deliberate artifice clearly visible. Firstly, there is the means by which the narrator reveals his presence at the end of the novel, dropping the mask of anonymity he retains in Mutmaßungen über Jakob and Das dritte Buch über Achim, giving himself a recognisable, and therefore clearly limited, individuality. We understand that he gets to know B. after witnessing his accident in West Berlin just before the anticipated reunion with D., and helping to bring him to hospital:

Ich habe ihn aufheben helfen und bin mit dem heulenden Krankenwagen zur Unfallstation gefahren. (ZA 113)

He further arranges to look after D. in his own family surroundings during her first week in West Berlin (whether as a result of his contact with B., or through connections with the student escape organisation, or

for any other reason, is not clear). After hearing her side of the story he becomes interested in it for fictional purposes, but undertakes to suppress all individual details of the story:

[D] erzählte höflich, ein wenig befangen, von Ostberlin. Später nahm sie mir ein Versprechen ab. - Aber das müssen Sie alles erfinden, was Sie schreiben! sagte sie. Es ist erfunden. (ZA 114)

Through this device, we are reminded that our narrator is nothing more than a fallible onlooker, whose opinion is not worth any more than any other individual's, and whose interpretation of motivations and events is nothing more than speculative.

At various stages of the story, the narrator betrays the fact that he is working from a basis of information provided by his characters, whether by indicating uncertainties in his thinking, e.g. "und sie fuhr erst auf, als drei (drei? ja) jüngere Herren in ordentlichen Anzügen . . . den Mann vom Sitz zogen zum Türgang . . . " (ZA 28), or by adding supplementary comment in brackets: "(Auf dieser Straße war sie nie nach Westberlin gekommen)" (ZA 29); at times he recalls specific colloquial turns of phrase, e.g. "(Das waren Ringkämpfe, Mensch: sagt sie)" (ZA 58), or tries to imagine exactly what might have been said in a given situation: "(Dolle Dame! sagte er, oder: Die hat sich das ja gründlich überlegt)" (ZA 82).

The structural basis of the novel is a rigidly preserved parallelism, which emphasises the total human separation caused by the Wall and allows us to view each stage of the relationship, from August until D.'s successful escape some six months later, first from B.'s viewpoint, then from D.'s. The only direct contact between these

unromantic and uncommitted lovers - "ein Liebespaar ohne Liebe"<sup>17</sup> - occurs before our account begins: for the duration of the story, both are cast back upon their memories and imaginations, and communicate only through a double exchange of vaguely-worded letters which clarify nothing, aided by the efforts of a few students prepared to facilitate escapes at extreme personal risk.

The pattern of parallelisms extends to small details like the repetition of ideas and feelings, often expressed in the same words, which reveal either similar reactions or basic differences in attitudes. For example, B. is much more susceptible to the temptations of simplistic optimism following the erection of the Wall: "[es] war ihm, als könne alles nicht so schlimm sein. Das wird schon werden". (ZA 20); whereas D., with a much more pragmatic awareness of ideological realities, cannot bring herself to hope for better things: "sie brachte es nicht über sich zu sagen: wird schon werden." (ZA 27) On the other hand, both reveal clearly the effects of their respective "political education", (ZA 77, 93) in their distorted picture of the alien ideological situation. The possibility of escape introduces into both their lives an existential awareness which had been deadened by previous work routines and escapist entertainment:

[B.] hatte nur das Bewußtsein, unerhört wach zu sein . . . (ZA 84)

Für [D.] war es das Bewußtsein, schmerzhaft wach zu sein, wach wie noch nie vorher. (ZA 94)

Similarly, both are totally unable to concentrate on everyday matters -

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<sup>17</sup>Reich-Ranicki, Die Zeit (24.9.65).

"zerfahren", (ZA 74, 95) - and yet consider a successful escape impossible (ZA 84,99). A neatly fitting structural pattern of this kind keeps us continually aware of the controlling hand of the narrator and prevents any lasting absorption in the progression of the action.

Progression, in fact, is hardly a suitable word to describe an action which is distinguished by its aimless, unexceptional quality. B.'s freedom to travel between his provincial North German home and Berlin is a consequence of the nature of his photographic work, based on supply and demand, but his journeys tend to be repetitive, without any real purpose, indicative of his inner confusion. D.'s existence is dominated by the routine of her hospital work, and her willing acceptance of overtime suggests a growing reluctance to establish new social contact or to commit herself on a personal level, following the disillusioning, disorienting events of August. Only the preparation and execution of D.'s escape offer an element of suspense and "action" in the adventure novel sense, but this simply serves to make the conclusion more anti-climactic as B. and D. emerge from the world of imagination, re-discover their real needs and desires, and (presumably) go their independent ways.

Here, as in Das dritte Buch über Achim (A 104 - 9), though less apparently, the element of tension is introduced primarily to underline the falsity of expecting to discover the dramatic situations and absolute relationships of escapist fiction in the routine world of unexceptional individuals. In this case, clear judgment is impossible in the frightfully confused aftermath of a major political development, but this atmosphere as Johnson has pointed out - has not been an enduring one, even within

East German situation:

. . . heute [1965] , vier Jahre später in Ostberlin lebend, mit aufgefangenem Gefühl, in den aufgefangenen Verhältnissen, vom Resignieren längst zum Akzeptieren der Zustände fortgeschritten, jetzt würde [D] . . . wohl nicht drei Jahre Lebenszeit riskieren einer Liebschaft zuliebe und für nichts als ein Leben im Währungsgebiet Westmark.<sup>18</sup>

In Zwei Ansichten, therefore, as in the two earlier novels, the undisturbed evocation of an illusion of reality is effectively blocked by subtle variations in the narrative tone and by the imposition of an openly artificial structural pattern upon the basic subject matter. The reader's critical attention is firmly aroused, and the fiction serves to encourage a more careful examination of current political and social developments.

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<sup>18</sup>Schoelman, p. 118.



### CHAPTER III

#### SETTINGS AND THEIR SIGNIFICANCE

In the opening section of Mimesis, Auerbach distinguishes what he considers to be the two basic epic styles: the Homeric, in which "externalised, uniformly illuminated phenomena, at a definite time and in a definite place [are] connected together without lacunae in a perpetual foreground", and the Biblical, in which concentration is placed upon significant details and decisive points of the narrative, time and place are deliberately undefined, and the action progresses in a unified manner towards a single goal.<sup>1</sup> These two extremes are represented in modern fiction by works like Joyce's Ulysses - which attempts to provide a comprehensive picture of activity at all social and intellectual levels of a specific urban environment (Dublin) within a clearly defined period of time (16 June 1904) - and Kafka's Das Schloß - in which all links with the "objective" ordering forces of historical time and geographical location are broken in order to let full attention focus on the confrontation of an anonymous individual, K., with an alien, impenetrable power structure.

In Johnson's novels, there is, we feel, an unusual fusion of these extremes: he has, on the one hand, helped to fulfil what Hans Mayer has described as a clear need in post-war literature for the representation

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<sup>1</sup>Auerbach, p. 11 - 12.

and analysis of the most obvious reality in modern Germany<sup>2</sup> - the political division of the former Reich and its effects upon the everyday life of citizens in East and West. In this respect, Johnson is dealing with a specific socio-historical situation, the outstanding changes in German society between 1930 and the early 1960's. Yet at the same time, he is concerned particularly with generally applicable problems of the individual in modern societies, whose demands and pressures constantly threaten to erode his capacity to think or act independently. Johnson is much less interested in "local colour" - the description of concrete situations which will offer a visual reproduction of everyday experience in either part of Germany - than with isolated details which will illuminate the structure of society and its bearing upon the lives of individual citizens, which will prove "exemplary" in Döblin's sense.<sup>3</sup>

The historical setting is of overriding importance in determining the action in each of Johnson's novels; with powerful ideological forces evident in modern industrialised societies, the accident of birthplace and the determining influence of environment are perhaps more decisive than before. In Das dritte Buch über Achim, Karsch is particularly concerned to stress the total force of historical developments upon Achim during his childhood in the early 1930's, but is faced with the problem of deciding which factors were most influential, and of describing their effects briefly without reducing Achim's individuality to insignificance:

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<sup>2</sup>see above, Introduction, p. 4 - 5.

<sup>3</sup>see above, Introduction, p. 16.

Zu aller Letzt bot dies Verfahren wohl nicht den spannenden Anreiz, wie man ihn vom Lebensbilde eines deutschen Sportlers verlangen darf: zudem entfernte die neuere deutsche Geschichte die Aufmerksamkeit von Achims Person in fast unleidlichem Maß, wenn sie auch über ihn entschieden hatte, bevor er die Welt überhaupt sah. (A 38)

In Mutmaßungen über Jakob, the relatively insignificant Jöche reveals a perceptive awareness of the difference the time of birth has made to his life, and recognises that values and modes of thinking are inculcated by society and are not in any way "universal".

Verstehst du? daß ich elf Jahre früher unter die Räuber gefallen wäre. Vergleiche mal. Ist das etwa unwahrscheinlich daß ich jeden Juden totgeschlagen hätte aus Spaß und mir wäre sehr wohl gewesen im Krieg? . . . Ist vielleicht nicht unwahrscheinlich. Warum: ich wär zu der Zeit in die Schule gegangen, dies und dies wäre üblich gewesen, 'wir sind geboren um für Deutschland zu sterben', und die Erwachsenen haben ziemlich lange recht. . . (MJ 64)

Furthermore, D.'s naive hope, in Zwei Ansichten, for a return to normal circumstances, after feeling that her relationship with B. has been destroyed by political events, over which she has no control - "Das hätte sich berichtigen lassen in gewöhnlichen Zeiten" (ZA 61) - is vain in a situation in which extended political confrontation inevitably affects normal relationships and makes the idea of personal independence an illusion.

It is significant that Johnson has selected three of the most critical developments in post-war European history as decisive influences upon the action in each of his novels - the events of October and November 1956 in Hungary and the Middle East, the popular revolt in June 1953 in East Berlin, and the building of the Berlin Wall in August 1961. The treatment is, of course, very different in each case: in Mutmaßungen über Jakob, the personal crisis of Jakob Abs coincides with, and is directly linked to, the double international crisis, whereas Zwei Ansichten is

concerned with the after-effects of a political decision upon the lives of two conspicuously apolitical individuals. In Das dritte Buch über Achim, the extent of Achim's involvement in the revolt, and its consequences upon his personality, remain equally uncertain for both narrator and reader, but the issue serves to drive a final wedge between the differing concepts of truthful reporting held by Achim and Karsch.

The stress placed upon accurate historical detail also varies from novel to novel. It is remarkable to see how, in Mutmaßungen über Jakob, a novel composed entirely of fragmentary recollections and the blending of past and present experience viewed from several perspectives, the development of historical affairs on a world scale is so exactly registered. Familiarity with the historical pattern of 1956 is of great assistance in the process of ordering the confused chronological picture which the novel initially offers. It also helps us to realise that the weeks preceding Jakob's death on 8 November<sup>4</sup> are not only critical for an understanding of his predicament, but also form one of the blackest periods in post-war international affairs, when the might of each of the ideological forces dividing Europe - the Russians in Hungary, the English and French in Egypt - was brought to bear almost simultaneously, more in the cause of self-interested expediency than to defend moral and political principles. The factual recounting of these events never predominates over the direct concerns of the fictional characters, but their considerable impact on all of them is unmistakable. The significance of Jakob's death between two trains - irresistibly powerful pieces of man-made machinery

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<sup>4</sup>cf. Popp, p. 98.

(MJ 39) - travelling in opposite directions, whether a deliberate act of despair or the result of bewildered immobility, is obviously accentuated by its coincidence with such bleak developments at the highest political level.

Historical detail is introduced partly as documentary fact, transmitted by means of press or radio, for example, a border clash between Israel and Jordan on 11 October as an indication of increasing tension (MJ 24), the outbreak of the Hungarian uprising on 23 October while Jakob and Gesine make their tortuous journey to Jerichow (MJ 107, 128), and the Anglo-French bombing of the Suez area on 5 November during Jakob's attempt to overcome the alienating experience of Western life (MJ 193). But it is most successfully conveyed through action directly experienced by the fictional characters, for example, the lofty view which Jakob and Jonas share from the control tower of the transport of Soviet troops to crush the uprising (MJ 162 - 5). This, in fact, is the crucial period for Jakob, at which his inclination to concentrate fully upon his work without regard for politics is shown to be an impossibility. His response to the situation, however, is determined by the conviction that the individual is powerless in the face of political decisions made by the State, and that a gesture, even by someone like himself with direct control over part of an important communications network, could have no more than a momentary effect. The attempt to deflect the progress of history by blocking the track would be simply madness - "Verrückt-spielen" (MJ 165). As we experience these developments at first hand, the full import of the historical situation becomes particularly evident.

The great advantage of presenting the varying reactions of the main characters to historical rather than purely fictional events, is that it directly involves the reader by making him consider how he reacted, or might have reacted, to the same conditions. This is particularly true for the Western reader of what is here essentially a series of East German reactions to an international situation. Johnson's method is not to present us with long political debates - although the fragments of discussion on current events clearly play an important part - but rather to reflect the atmosphere of the period through the actions of his characters. There is no obvious bias towards the narrator's "preferred" point of view - Gesine, Rohlf, Jonas, Cresspahl and Jakob all offer a strongly felt viewpoint in an impenetrably complex situation.

The predominating influence upon the political and intellectual climate of the year was the 20th Party Congress of the Soviet Union (held in camera during February), in which Khrushchev not only denounced Stalin and the personality cult, but also formulated the doctrine of "peaceful co-existence". This provoked the most lively period of the decade in Eastern European affairs. The change is reflected most positively in the mind of Jonas, who enjoys the privilege of learning the first details of the Congress in the Western press, while returning from a holiday in Italy with Gesine (MJ 82) - the speech was never published in the East. He is quickly caught up in the intellectual ferment, the re-emergence of open debate centred around the hope of developing "Socialism with a human face":

Alle hatten sie etwas geleistet mit ihren Dichtungen und wissenschaftlichen Lehrbüchern, jahrelang hatten sie nachgegeben

und sich kompromittieren lassen, damit sie bekannt wurden in den Zeitungen und mit Nationalpreisen und durch die Aktuelle Kamera, damit sie an diesen Abenden zusammenkommen konnten als geistiges Gewissen unseres Staatswesens und redeten wie es besser zu machen sei im Interesse eines sogenannten menschlichen Sozialismus. (MJ 77)

Ironically, the new open involvement with ideas produces in him a mood of intense self-criticism: an awareness of the questionable importance of academic research in a society faced with the more immediate need for enlightened social and economic development, which leads him to an enthusiastic admiration for Jakob's work as a practical, positive contribution to society:

Jonas bekam eine unbändige Lust auf solche Arbeit. Hier handelte es sich um feste, dauerhafte Dinge, Wagen, Zugmaschinen, Apparate; die Bewegung aller war sich ergänzend, sich entsprechend zusammengeflochten und gebündelt in einer einzigen erhöhten Übersicht; aber was in Jakobs Kopf vorfiel und geschah, das hatte eine wirkliche Entsprechung . . . (MJ 161)

At the other extreme, we view Rohlf's attitude of annoyance that details of Khrushchev's speech have filtered back into the DDR via Western radio stations. For him, it is a typical example of bureaucratic incompetence that the text has been allowed to pass into the enemy's hands, creating an atmosphere of public criticism at an absurdly premature stage in the nation's development:

Jede westliche Station wirft uns üble Nachrede über die Grenze und dummwitzige Besserwisserei, und jeder kann verreisen wohin er will, raus rein nach Belieben, das soll gut gehen auf die Dauer? wir haben erst vor zehn Jahren angefangen . . . wir können hier nicht Fehler diskutieren lassen. (MJ 84 - 5)

When he overhears an anti-Stalin joke in the Jerichow barracks (MJ 129), it becomes obvious how widespread the news has become and how deeply it has affected the seriousness of intent and disciplinary control which

he considers vital to the success of Socialism.

The Hungarian uprising was, in many respects, a logical consequence of the liberation in the intellectual and political climate. It provokes a wide range of personal reactions within the novel. For Jonas, news of the uprising comes at the height of his personal dilemma, and leaves him in confusion; he is unable to make a clear intellectual response to the situation (MJ 128). Rohlfs, on the other hand, views the revolt, seen through the perspective of historical necessity, as an error (MJ 144). It arouses a stubborn dogmatic attitude in him, whereas for Jonas it brings the realisation that a more dismal age of darkness and persecution has dawned:

er [zustimmte] bereitwillig der Meinung, daß ja vorläufig gar nichts weiter abzusehen sei als daß es vielleicht einen dritten Weltkrieg geben werde. (MJ 176)

In this situation, only Gesine shows the spontaneous concern for immediate practicalities which caused her to leave the DDR in the first place. She is generally indifferent to ideology and clearly distrustful of any theory which acts against the everyday interests of the majority of individuals: she sees nothing in the Soviet reaction to the Hungarian situation to confirm the Socialist view of a progressive historical development - it points rather to a continuing cycle of progression and reaction (MJ 180). At the same time, she does register a positive protest against the Western intervention in Suez by leaving her position with NATO as a translator (MJ 193), and accepting what appears to be a less committed post, organising German instruction classes for the AFN. Jakob appears increasingly weary and perplexed in the face



of the double political absurdity in which he has been inextricably involved (direct experience of repressive measures at home and inescapable alienation in the West), so that a positive decision is scarcely possible - "[die] Wahl zwischen zwei Unsinnigkeiten" (MJ 193).

The interweaving of Jakob's personal crisis with the bleak events at international level is a triumph of careful arrangement and subtle plotting, which gives Mutmaßungen über Jakob a powerful unity and makes its impact upon the reader particularly striking. It offers a most effective blend of individual range of detail and perspective with outstanding general significance. Das dritte Buch über Achim presents a more open-ended, enduring situation with a double historical emphasis, partly on the political atmosphere in the DDR at the fictional time of writing (1960), and partly on the reflection of the previous thirty years of German history as they relate to Achim's life. Johnson's basic concern here is to reveal the contrasting perspective of East and West European thinking upon every aspect of history, as opposed to the series of diverse, but essentially Eastern views, on a specific historical development, which is presented in Mutmaßungen über Jakob. The position of the narrator in relation to his characters has a distinct influence upon the presentation of historical detail here. Whereas in Mutmaßungen über Jakob, the narrator has exact knowledge of the thoughts (expressed in inner monologue) and conversations of his characters about the events described, the narrator (and Karsch) in Das dritte Buch über Achim are faced with awkward problems of interpretation. They must examine what Achim tells them, with his own subjective emphasis - "Sie können von

meinem Leben nur wissen was ich Ihnen davon sage: sagte Achim" (A 135) - in the light of their own general historical knowledge, the information supplied by Achim's relatives and friends, and their own imaginative recreations based on observation of the physical settings of Achim's past experience. The narrator's interest is therefore directed less towards giving us the "exact truth" about what his characters did and thought at a given time, than towards conveying the mood of different historical periods through examples of typical events. He frequently stresses the experimental nature of his (and Karsch's) reconstructions, which are never considered to be more than questionable possibilities - "Versuche":

Es waren ja Vorarbeiten . . . da bestand alles nur aus kurzen Notizen meist mit Fragezeichen so ungefähr ich sie dir eben herauschreiben kann. (A 57)

Yet by this method we are given a series of vivid insights into some of the outstanding experiences of the wartime period: a fleeting glimpse of Hitler in a provincial town (A 93), the first Allied bombing raids (A 62 - 3), the successive occupying forces (A 111 - 13). Perhaps the most successful of these evocations is the representation of one of the countless, senseless executions of "traitors" by bands of disoriented youths and ex-soldiers (A 91). Karsch sees Achim, because of his age and conformist mentality, as a likely member of such an anonymous, destructive force, made up of individuals who have since become the backbone of respectable society:

Von denen einer, die lernbegierig und unbelehrbar das Henken ansahen mit unbewegt jugendklaren Gesichtern als künftige Henker . . . alle heute unter uns leben die möglichen Henker und die wirklichen . . . (A 91)

The impression of a terrified individual at the mercy of an incensed mob is conveyed strikingly in one long sentence, consisting of a succession of factual statements, colloquially phrased and run together, deprived of the logic of grammatical construction to emphasise both the meaningless absurdity and the relentless progression of events:

. . . und die Leute alle herum, ließen die Soldaten kaum durch die ihn brachten bloß den Schlips abgerissen hatten sie ihm gar nichts begriff er von hinten schrie immer seine Frau ziemlich weit weg ganz hohe verständnislose Schreie er konnte nicht allein auf den Schemel stützten sie ihn junge Soldaten sah hilfsbereit aus die haben ja auch immer so ehrliche Gesichter Schlinge nahm er selbst um den Hals wollte was sagen schlugen sie ihm mit der Faust rein nicht mit dem Gewehrkolben mit der Faust sah richtig zärtlich aus stießen den Schemel weg naja da starb er eben ging schnell . . . (A 91)

It is worth noting that the historical chronology of the 1950's is made subsidiary to the description of Achim's rise to sporting success, which is viewed as an uninterrupted, insulated process, from the time that Achim recognises the coincidence of his ambitions with those of the collective sporting organisation (A 174), thereby relieving himself of the need for independent decision-making. Only in retrospect does a chink in the biographical picture occur, in the period between his years in the building trade and his full-time devotion to sport:

Vierundzwanzigjährig [1954] ist sein Name unverwechselbar und läßt an niemand denken als ihn . . . er verläßt den Bau zum Studium des Sports und lebt vom Stipendium des Staates: aus einem Jahr sind über ihn keine Berichte erhalten. (A 181)

Karsch is prepared to overlook this in his series of tentative drafts of the biography, until he unexpectedly and mysteriously receives a photograph of a scene during the 1953 revolt, which shows Achim in the front rank of the marchers (A 194). In this way, which may strike

us as somewhat contrived, Johnson is again able to underline, as clearly as through Jakob's direct experience, in Mutmaßungen über Jakob, of the Russian troop trains in 1956, the considerable impact of critical historical movements upon his characters. Although the exact circumstances surrounding Achim's involvement are never discovered, the mere suspicion of such a total contradiction in his development is enough to break the highly tenuous links between the attitudes of Achim and Karsch towards historical and biographical reporting.

In Zwei Ansichten, the focus is again switched exclusively to one period, the months following the building of the Berlin Wall. Much less attention is given to details of the past history of each of the main characters than in the earlier novels, for significant reasons. Both B. and D. are of a slightly younger generation than Achim and Jakob, and consequently do not experience the Second World War and the division of Germany at such a critical stage in their development. Each moves naturally into the ideological mode of existence determined by the accident of birth: it should be noted, however, that B.'s acceptance of Western attitudes in his provincial environment is much less critical than D.'s acceptance of the situation in the DDR. Not only does the State interfere with her education because of her father's wartime activities, but also she has the unique distinction of being a citizen of Berlin, which allows her a clearer knowledge of the differences between the two ideological systems:

Die Städte Berlin waren für sie immer Nachbarschaft gewesen, die Gegend nebenan, genutztes Eigentum, und es war ihr nicht recht gewesen, wenn B. in Westberlin doch immer für sie bezahlte mit seinem Geld, als wäre das nicht ihre Stadt, und Ostberlin vermied, als würde das seine nicht. (ZA 22)

The development of their relationship is also related to the political situation; for B., it is tinged with the guilt of the Westerner towards the materially underprivileged Easterner:

Eher aus Befangenheit den anderen Gästen gegenüber war er einem Mädchen nachgegangen, das ihm nicht so überlegen schien . . . und als er ihre ostdeutsche Staatsangehörigkeit erfuhr, nahm sein Selbstbewußtsein ausreichend zu, sie zum Tanzen aufzufordern. (ZA 45)

For D., their first night together is a form of self-assertion against bureaucratic controls rather than an expression of feeling:

Am Ende der Woche hatte sie ihn nicht zurückgehen lassen um Mitternacht nach Westberlin, um zu sehen, ob er die Scherereien wegen des verfallenen Passierscheins fürchtete . . . Sie hatte auch sehen wollen, ob sie eine Entscheidung selbständig tun konnte. (ZA 9)

They are separated as a result of an historical decision, over which they have no control; in this case, we are less concerned with details of the event, the building of the Wall, than with the representation of the subsequent atmosphere, particularly in East Berlin:

. . . die verbreitete bittere Stimmung, das blindwütige Verlangen aus dem Staat hinaus, der Blick auf nichts als die Grenze, das Verhalten wie bei einer schweren inneren Verletzung.<sup>5</sup>

The Wall is described only to the extent that it disrupts everyday activity (changes in travelling arrangements, delays in essential supplies, the loss of direct communications with West Berlin), without the emotive, dramatic phrases employed by sections of the Western press, which preferred to view it in isolation rather than as the foreseeable consequence of a prolonged, debilitating economic process - the DDR

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<sup>5</sup>Schoelman, p. 118.

viewpoint which Johnson has attempted to explain, without necessarily accepting, in public debate.<sup>6</sup> The cool, narrative voice however is not without its own undertones in Zwei Ansichten, e.g. "[ein] Sonntag, an dem der Staat mit Vorliebe seine größeren Eigensuchten durchsetzte". (ZA 25)

The other main historical concern of the novel is also of a more indirect nature, centred around the reaction of another group of people - a minority of the West Berlin student population - to the political attitudes of both sides in the European conflict. The assistance which B. receives from the young barmaid and her student friends has a distinct documentary basis, explained in an essay published by Johnson prior to the novel. This essay, "Eine Kneipe geht verloren",<sup>7</sup> describes the courageous idealistic attempt of a small group of students to register a positive protest against political actions taken without regard for the concerns of individuals, by assisting, at their own expense and at great personal risk, citizens wishing to leave East Berlin. In Zwei Ansichten, only the outline of this activity, as seen through the limited perspective of B., is evident, since the documentary interest is kept secondary to the psychological reactions of B. and D., but once again the whole development of the fictional action is carefully related to historical and political influences, and the prevailing atmosphere of a turning point in post-war history is Johnson's prime interest.

In addition to this close attention to historical detail,

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<sup>6</sup>cf. "U. J. am Pranger?", Die Zeit (8.12.61) report on meeting held in Milan to publicise Italian translation of Das dritte Buch über Achim.

<sup>7</sup>in Kursbuch 1, (1965), p. 47 - 72.

Johnson also gives his fictional world a convincing realistic foundation by offering us a penetrating impression of each of his main characters at work. There is clear movement away from the confines of the comfortable middle-class surroundings which formed the traditional sphere of interest in the novel, at least until the publication of Thomas Mann's Buddenbrooks brought the mercantile ethic and its associated scale of values into question. Instead, our attention is centred - in ironic accordance with the Bitterfelder Konferenz of 1959, which laid down basic guidelines for Socialist Realist writers in the DDR<sup>8</sup> - upon the working world of the proletariat. We can detect two basic groupings among Johnson's characters; firstly, the main East German figures - Jakob, Achim and D. - whose working activity gives each novel its distinctive atmosphere and predominates over the concerns of leisure in each case. This is particularly evident in the description of Jakob's daily routine - the inquiring mind of Rohlf's is unable to detect any indication of personal interests:

ja und was macht er von alleine? aus eigenem Willen meine ich.  
Man hat doch sonst noch was vor. (MJ 17)

The carefully circumscribed routine of each of these figures is disturbed by outside interference, which places their activities under the critical scrutiny of a second group of more independent, intellectual figures like Rohlf's, Jonas and Karsch (B. is largely an exception here). The narrator-figures in their turn, despite their various limitations, offer a third level of perspective. Consequently there is little chance for the reader

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<sup>8</sup>cf. J. G. Bilke, "Auf der Spuren der Wirklichkeit. DDR-Literatur: Traditionen, Tendenzen, Möglichkeiten", in Der Deutschunterricht, Jg. 21, Heft 5, (1969), p. 37 - 8.

to become absorbed in the specific milieu which gives each novel its basis, although the careful descriptions of the running of a railway network, the training schedules of the national cycling team, and nursing work in an understaffed hospital, contribute considerably towards the impression of authentic representation of aspects of modern urban existence.

Johnson's preferred method is to confront us directly with the specialised language of each sphere, rather than attempt to describe outward appearances. He achieves this in part by impersonal, factual descriptions of specific actions, for example:

Der aufrecht sitzende Rennfahrer bietet dem Wind eine Angriffsfläche von etwa sechshundert Quadratzentimetern, er kann sie aber durch Bücken oder tiefes Krümmen verringern auf fünfhundert und dreihundert sogar; und der Widerstand der Luft wächst ja um das Neunfache, wenn die Versuchsperson ihre Geschwindigkeit verdreifacht. (A 172)

He also provides a precise impression of the working schedules of each of his main figures, for example:

. . . wenn von irgend wo aus der weiten Ebene ein Zug angemeldet und abgefragt wurde von der dienstlichen Formelsprache der entfernten Stimmen, erdachte Jakob sich den Anblick des unsichtbaren Bahnhofs und die Signale vor dem Zug, der für ihn eine Chiffre war aus Kennbuchstaben und einer Nummer, und er wußte nach der Zeit und nach Kilometern wo der Zug stand im Fahrplan und wo er tatsächlich stand . . . Dann hob er den Handwrist auf einen von den Schaltknöpfen seitlich und sagte dem Mikrofon wie er es haben wollte, dann schaltete er die Leitung wieder um, endlich die Stimme des Fahrdienstleiters . . . erklärte was Jakob sich vorstellte in der Entlegenheit auf seinem Turm. (MJ 14)

By means of such meticulous attention to detail, we are taken beyond the facade of superficial understanding - "die Ungefährlichkeit des Alltags" (MJ 39) - which the average reader has of work-spheres beyond his own, and a distinctive form of local colour emerges. The essential difference, however, between this kind of environmental description and



the guidelines established by the Bitterfelder Konferenz is that Johnson's detail is not simply chosen in order to give an impression of activities previously considered unworthy of literary interest, - although this desire may well be present. It also serves an important symbolic purpose: the nature of the work reveals essential aspects of the personality of the individual who makes a success of it. Jakob's careful self-limitation leaves him in exemplary control of the world of machines which he surveys from his control tower - until he is compelled to exceed his limits:

Das Papier auf der schrägen Tischplatte vor ihm war eingeteilt nach senkrechten und waagerechten Linien für das zeitliche und räumliche Nacheinander der planmäßigen und der unregelmäßigen Vorkommnisse, er verzeichnete darin mit seinen verschiedenen Stiften die Bewegungen der Eisenbahnzüge auf seiner Strecke von Blockstelle zu Blockstelle und von Minute zu Minute . . . am Ende machten die Minuten keinen Tag aus sondern einen Fahrplan.  
(MJ 13 - 14)

Achim's rise to cycling fame results from unquestioning acceptance of the will of the sporting collective and an overwhelming desire to assert his superiority in competition:

Achim war auf den Steg des Lenkers gestützt hereingekommen in der vorbildlichen Haltung, die sich auszeichnete durch Unbeweglichkeit des Rückens über sehr bewegten Beinen. (A 137 - 8)

This is clearly related to the psychological attitude of compliance with authority and determination to gain power over one's equals, which is termed "radfahren" in colloquial German.<sup>9</sup> The publicly admired cycling champion under the flag of Socialism was also earlier an exemplary leader in the Hitler Youth Movement:

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<sup>9</sup>"Gegenüber Vorgesetzten unterwürfig, aber gegenüber Seinesgleichen oder Untergebenen herrisch sein" - H. Küpper, Wörterbuch der deutschen Umgangssprache, Bd. 1, (Hamburg 1965), p. 398

nun stimmte er endlich mit dem Bild des Deutschen Jungen, zu dem sie alle auflebten zäh wie Leder hart wie Kruppstahl flink wie die Windhunde. Er meldete sich im Jugendverband. Er brachte es zu einer Befehlsgewalt über hundert Mann.' (A 60)

This tendency to emphasise those elements in the concrete realistic background which have a wider and more permanent significance brings back to mind Auerbach's distinction between the Homeric and Biblical styles, and presents us with a clearer idea of the particular use which Johnson makes of both. The carefully depicted work environment is not embedded in a recognisable geographical locality, in the way that we think of Balzac's Paris, Joyce's Dublin or Grass's Danzig, in which the characters move in surroundings which frequently form part of the reader's personal experience. In Johnson's novels there is a clear movement towards the depiction of situations which can be envisaged in any contemporary ideological or social context. The only location of the main action in his novels which is actually named is Berlin (Jerichow is a common place-name), and even then a more exact phrase conveying something of the current political situation, like "die Städte Berlin" or "die beiden Berlin", is used. Although it is obvious that the novels are basically concerned with the gulf and the differences between the two parts of Germany, Johnson views the ideological confrontation between capitalism and socialism as the outstanding general problem of the modern world:

Wenn diese Zustände ihren eigenen Begriff verlangen dürfen, so nicht, weil sie pittoresk und intensiv wären, sondern weil sie die Grenze der geteilten Welt darstellen: die Grenze zwischen den beiden Ordnungen, nach denen heute in der Welt gelebt werden kann.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> "Berliner Stadtbahn", p. 724.

His predilection for precise description and factual accuracy has led him, in each of the novels, to indicate the main localities closely enough (in terms of relative distance from one another, population, industries, physical features, etc.) to give the assiduous reader, with the assistance of maps, timetables and encyclopaedic information, a clear conception of their whereabouts.<sup>11</sup> Johnson's reluctance to supply these details directly is not simply indicative of a desire to make things difficult for the reader; it would appear to emphasise his interest in transcending the limitations of particularised milieu-description in order to portray an exemplary situation - "Modell" - which reveals something more essential about the structure of society. He appears to have been influenced by Brecht's conception of realistic writing, which, in its pre-war formulation, has an obvious Marxist bias, undoubtedly strengthened by his experience of Hitler's Germany:

Realistisch heißt: den gesellschaftlichen Kausalitäten aufdeckend/ die herrschenden Gesichtspunkte als die Gesichtspunkte der Herrschenden entlarvend/ vom Standpunkt der Klasse aus schreibend, welche für die dringendsten Schwierigkeiten, in denen die menschliche Gesellschaft steckt, die breitesten Lösungen bereit hält/ das Moment der Entwicklung betonend/ konkret und das Abstrahieren ermöglichend.<sup>12</sup>

Brecht wrote this in 1938; Johnson, in view of the political developments in the following twenty years, is much more cautious about presupposing the validity of any ideological solution to the present situation, and would offer no more than a limited, subjective insight into an increasingly complex reality, to be compared with the reader's judgment:

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<sup>11</sup>cf. esp. Popp, p. 24 - 7.

<sup>12</sup>B. Brecht, "Volkstümlichkeit und Realismus", Schriften zum Theater, Bd. IV, (Frankfurt 1963), p. 154 - 5.

ein erzählendes Buch - ein Modell der Welt, Geschichten als Beispiele, die Welt in der Version des Verfassers, Lesern vorgelegt, zum unterhaltsamen Vergleich mit ihrer eigenen Version.<sup>13</sup>

Johnson is concerned with the power structure as a fact of individual experience, rather than with the specific description of any particular instance of it. The recurring situation in his novels is the manipulation or distortion of individual liberties through the decisions of superior authorities. The terms used to describe representatives of authority have all the simplicity and directness of Biblical expression, deprived of all current political nuances. As soon as the State recognises Jakob's potential usefulness in Mutmaßungen über Jakob - "die Grossen des Landes warfen ihr Auge auf Jakob" (MJ 19) - it imposes itself with an anonymous, mechanical ruthlessness upon his life - "der Einblick war bedenkenlos und ergriff gierig jede Einzelheit nur um sie zu wissen" (MJ 18). In Achim's case, compliance with the State will come with the recognition that any other action would inevitably be detrimental to his own ambitions:

[Achim] hörte steif lächelnd an daß der Staat die Einordnung in die Gemeinschaft verlange, denn er begünstige alle und nicht wenige zu einem sehr neuen Ziel. Er glaubte es nicht . . . Er anerkannte: die hätten mich ja noch ganz anders fertigmachen können. (A 176)

His apparent achievement of distinction as a mediator between the State and its individual citizens is only later recognised by Karsch to be a hollow façade built up through the renunciation of personal integrity. D., in Zwei Ansichten, on the other hand, remains hopelessly alienated

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<sup>13</sup>Schoelman, p. 116.

from the sources of power, which, because of her father's transgressions, have deprived her of a specialised education:

Die Inhaber der Macht waren ihr nicht gezeigt worden bei ihrer Ausübung, sondern halb verdeckt durch Rednerpulte, geschützt durch die Brüstung von Opernbalkonen. (ZA 24)

In the West, the manipulation of individual attitudes by those in power is felt by Johnson to be no less widespread, although their workings may be more difficult to detect. The mass media which serve as their organs offer an anonymous public opinion - "eine öffentliche Meinung" (ZA 69) - intended to distort political and economic facts, whether to mislead the citizens of West Berlin into thinking that a boycott of the East German-operated Stadtbahn will seriously damage the Socialist economy,<sup>14</sup> or to create a false image of the DDR power structure which will be unthinkingly accepted by the apolitical citizen like B.

This neutralised, generally valid terminology contributes effectively towards the dislocation of any tendency the reader might feel to view the novels as limited to any single contemporary situation. It is Johnson's obvious intention to draw the reader beyond the fictional framework, through a process of estrangement ("Verfremdung"). He achieves this effect not only, as we have indicated above (Ch.II), through the narrative structure and through attention to small details of language, but also with striking effect in some of the more experimental passages in Das dritte Buch über Achim, in which an unexpected change of perspective causes an apparently unexceptional event to be viewed in a new, revealing

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<sup>14</sup>cf. Johnson's documentary report on this problem in "Boykott der Berliner Stadtbahn", Die Zeit, (10.1.64), and his repeated use of the phrase "eine öffentliche Meinung" in "Eine Kneipe geht verloren".

light. The passage - "Versuch: eine Schreibmaschine kaufen" (A 76 - 80) - offers a particularly good example of the adaptation to a fictional situation of the "Verfremdungseffekt" associated with Brechtian drama:

Es handelt sich hierbei, kurzgesagt, um eine Technik, mit der darzustellenden Vorgängen zwischen Menschen der Stempel des Auffallenden, des der Erklärung Bedürftigen, nicht Selbstverständlichen, nicht einfach Natürlichen verliehen werden kann. Der Zweck des Effekts ist, dem Zuschauer eine fruchtbare Kritik vom gesellschaftlichen Standpunkt aus zu ermöglichen.<sup>15</sup>

The perspective is shifted in this passage, abruptly and without any explanation from the narrator. After a brief consideration of possible reasons why Karsch should want to buy a typewriter, the scene is suddenly switched to a shop in which typewriters are sold - an everyday scene from business life, viewed through the eyes of a salesman to whom Karsch and Karin are anonymous figures. Only after the initial impression of the salesman has been registered, does the narrator offer a critical comment, in pointing out a clear incongruity in the social structure - "ein lokales Detail" - between the egalitarian principles upon which the State has been established and the unchanging class-conscious attitudes of the salesman, who is intent upon creating a favourable image in the eyes of "superior" clients ("Herrschaften"):

er [hinterließ] von sich das Bild wohlgefälliger Hemdkrageneleganz und fahriger Bereitschaft zu allem möglichen Dienst am Kunden. (A 76)

An unexpected intrusion disturbs the routine progression of business; a simple labourer, obviously ill at ease in unfamiliar surroundings, makes inquiries about a copying machine likely to exceed his financial

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<sup>15</sup> Brecht, Schriften zum Theater, Bd. V, p. 79.

resources, and about the security formalities related to the purchase of a machine of this kind. Having received the necessary information, he disappears into the anonymity of the crowd outside.

This slight, inconclusive incident gives a striking impression of social attitudes which Socialism has been unable to eliminate; appearances and command of language are still significant pointers to class differences:

- Daß jeder weiß ...: versuchte [der Arbeiter] zu erklären. Der Verkäufer nutzte das verlegene Blicksenken zur Vorbereitung eines abfälligen Lächelns, das er den Herrschaften an der Wand hinüberreichen wollte . . . (A 78)

The mutual distrust of individuals in a State which claims to protect the interests of every citizen - "[die] Polizei, die über jeden Verstoß gegen die Bürgerrechte wachen wolle" (A 79) - is particularly evident. The uninvolved onlooker, Karsch as well as the reader, is irresistibly drawn to speculate upon possible reasons for the labourer's strange behaviour. The truth about the incident will never be known, but the probable implication is that the majority of the population, whom this man represents in his naiveté, inarticulateness and essential good humour - "Karsch . . . mochte ihn augenblicklich wegen seines ungeschickten gutherzigen Betragens" (A 79) - is seeking the means of expressing feelings and ideas which the official State media fail to articulate:

Aber wer wäre nach dem zufälligen Erscheinen und Verschwinden eines schlichten Mannes in zementstaubiger Kleidung eines Tages der vervielfältigten Maschinenschrift an der Hauswand gewiß, die den Notstand der Lebensmittelversorgung mit den Maßnahmen der Regierung in einen ursächlichen Zusammenhang oder einen der Folge bringen wird, je nach Betroffenheit und Gesinnung? (A 79)

This incident is exemplary in the sense that it illuminates, in a concrete

but generally valid situation, important aspects of the structure of society, which indicate the gulf between the principles upon which it is founded and empirical experience of its functioning; in this case, class-consciousness and the alienation of the unprivileged individual continue to reveal themselves in a nominally egalitarian society.

The deliberate anonymity of the setting reduces the individuals concerned to their purely social functions and underlines the typical nature of the incident. The narrator's closing comment ironically refers to the story as unnecessary, in terms of the main plot, but then reminds us of its general applicability, which is, after all, as he constantly reminds us, his main concern:

Ich habe in dieser unnötigen Geschichte genauere Angaben zu den beteiligten Personen unterlassen, denn sie möchte vielleicht jedem vorgekommen sein. (A 80)

The scene, then, represents reality in the sense understood by both Brecht and Döblin, who both strove, through different literary forms, to undermine the reader's expectations that fiction or drama might offer a simplified illusion of life, and to present situations stripped of the superficial embellishments of local colour, in order to throw light upon the nature of society. Similarly, Johnson's concern for historical detail and factual accuracy has not led him to become absorbed exclusively in the milieu from which he derives his fundamental experience - the political situation in the DDR. Instead, he is constantly on the look-out for small facts which illuminate general problems of modern society, in particular those related to personal identity and the distorting effects of decisions at official level upon the lives of



individuals. His novels indicate how the close analysis of individual details - everyday incidents, work schedules, the functioning of machines, an isolated object - can be more revealing than the attempt to present a visually complete background, against which a rounded, psychologically convincing story can be unfolded. Exactitude and precision are, in his eyes, the most reliable approach to contemporary reality:

Johnsons Stärke ist die Präzision; er hat das große Pathos der Genauigkeit und weiß, daß tausend pedantische Detailschilderungen sehr wohl in der Lage sind, ein diffuses Totalbild zu erzeugen.<sup>16</sup>

In this way, therefore, Johnson's novels represent a deliberate progression from the concrete depiction of external phenomena and historical fact, which we associate with 19th century realistic techniques, towards the isolation of the essential, decisive detail which has a general validity akin to that of the parable.

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<sup>16</sup>W. Jens, "Johnson auf der Schwelle der Meisterschaft", in Die Zeit, (6.10.61).

## CHAPTER IV

### CHARACTERISATION

In the previous two chapters, we have attempted to show how Johnson strives to break down the reader's expectations of a unified fictional illusion of reality, by constantly disrupting the narrative perspective and by emphasising the unspecific, more generally applicable nature of his settings; we have suggested that such methods help to direct our attention more firmly towards consideration of the underlying structure of society and make us more aware of the problems involved in doing justice to the individuality even of apparently unexceptional figures. Both of these tendencies have obvious bearing upon the treatment of character in his novels, to the extent that they indicate a shift of emphasis away from "three-dimensional" presentation, which - as the realistic novels of the 19th century reveal - is normally related to a fixed narrative perspective and the belief that personality can be largely understood in terms of visual appearances and psychological analysis. It has in fact been argued that the outstanding contribution of the novel to literature has been the capacity it allows for characterisation in depth: "most great novels exist to reveal and explore character".<sup>1</sup> Its broad undefined scope has allowed portrayal of the growth and development of personality over an

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<sup>1</sup>W. J. Harvey, Character and the Novel, (London 1965), p. 23.

extended period, examination of the close relation in which every individual stands to his social and historical environment, and analysis of morally and psychologically critical situations.

By focusing our attentions upon the question of characterisation in Johnson's novels, upon the extent to which his main figures succeed in convincing as individuals as well as revealing representative social attitudes, we are inevitably examining what may be considered the central problem for a modern writer who, like Johnson, seeks to convey his experience of the intense social and political pressures against individual dissent, within the confines of the literary form which has owed its continuing vitality and effectiveness to the breadth and variety of characterisation it permits.

It is important to remember that Mutmaßungen über Jakob was written in ironic rejection of the simplified view of personality presented in the novels of Socialist Realism,<sup>2</sup> in which, as Levin has pointed out, "characters . . . more often than not, are blueprints and stereotypes controlled by ideological preconceptions."<sup>3</sup> In direct contrast to the relativising tendency of all analysis of individuality in the experimental novels of the Western world - which has directly contributed to the decline of the idea of the hero - the approved literature of the state in which Johnson lived and studied had moved towards unambiguously black and white representation of the ideological alternatives open to Germans. The main characters in Mutmaßungen über Jakob have, as

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<sup>2</sup>cf. M. Reich-Ranicki, Deutsche Literatur in West und Ost, p. 231 - 6.

<sup>3</sup>H. Levin, The Gates of Horn, p. 467.

Reich-Ranicki explains, close affinities with standard figures in Socialist Realism<sup>4</sup>; Jakob brings to mind the officially encouraged image of the working man dedicated to his job and proud of his achievements; Rohlfis resembles the humane Party representative, furthering the Socialist cause, yet also capable of understanding dissenting viewpoints; Jonas is caught in the dilemma of the intellectual, concerned with the morality of society but doubtful of the importance of his personal contribution, in the field of academic research, towards the betterment of an imperfect social and economic situation; Gesine is swayed by considerations of immediate well-being to choose life in the capitalist West rather than await the fulfilment in the DDR of the Marxist view of historical necessity. These characters, however, are presented in an ambivalent light and with a psychological depth which suggests the inadequacy of the didactic tendencies of Socialist Realism.

We have already suggested affinities between the multi-perspective structure of Mutmaßungen über Jakob and the concentrated drive of psychological drama.<sup>5</sup> The fact that we receive the thoughts and feelings of all the main characters - except, of course, those of Jakob, with whom we are essentially concerned - at first hand, with a minimum of explanatory comment from the narrator, means that we are bound to scrutinise each in turn in order to determine the reliability or bias of their interpretation of events and personalities. We are presented with a wide range of viewpoints and temperaments; but the fog in which much of the

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<sup>4</sup> Reich-Ranicki, p. 232 - 3.

<sup>5</sup> see above, Ch. II.

main action is shrouded obscures (metaphorically speaking) their external features and fixes our attention upon their intellectual and emotional reactions. The task of visual recreation can safely be left to the reader's imagination: "Die Profile . . . lassen sich im Nebel der 'Mutmaßungen' nur ahnen, sind aber dennoch unverwechselbar".<sup>6</sup>

As the characterisation in Mutmaßungen über Jakob has already been examined elsewhere in some detail,<sup>7</sup> it will suit our present interests to concentrate upon the ways in which the figures differ from their Socialist Realist counterparts, in order to indicate how effectively they are presented to us as fallible and ambiguous individuals. Rohlf's is in essence a theoretician seeking the incarnation of his Socialist ideal - the resourceful working man with the intellectual acumen to recognise the truth of Marxism through his personal experience, and confirm it through willing, active support of the Socialist cause. Jakob, almost from the first moment of their acquaintance, appears in Rohlf's eyes to possess extraordinary abilities:

mit einem Mal saß ich fest vor ihm und konnte mich nicht rühren vor Spannung, irgend etwas an seiner Art zu denken kam mir untermündig bei, allmählich verfiel ich auf Ähnlichkeit: als seien das Argument und die Stelle des Einwands mir bekannt gewesen, nicht daß ich je dies benutzt haben würde! (MJ 31)

He is prepared to apply his enlightened principles - "Es ist nicht unser Ziel die Leute einzusperren. Wir brauchen die nämlich" (MJ 54) - to the extent of giving Jakob the opportunity of experiencing Western civilisation at first hand, in order to draw his own conclusions about the ideological alternative to Socialism. Similarly, he passes over

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<sup>6</sup> Reich-Fanicki, p. 243.

<sup>7</sup> E. Friedrichsmeyer, "Quest by Supposition", Germanic Review 42, (1967), p. 215 - 26.

the opportunity of arresting Gesine and discovering the reasons for her illegal entry into the DDR, in the conviction that the greater gain would be the cooperation of both Jakob and Gesine in the activities of the State. In his memory, the decision to defect to the Russian side during the 1942 campaign involved a recognition of historical necessity such as he expects now from Jakob, and which he claims to hold in greater esteem than all concerns of national loyalty and military discipline. Yet despite this apparent independence of outlook and belief in individual autonomy, he shows signs of self-contradiction in his refusal to admit that the Party can make mistakes (MJ 83), and in his confused efforts, after the invasion of Hungary, to justify himself and his superiors to Jakob:

Ich habe gedacht es gibt nur eine Antwort . . . Gespräch ist ein Fehler. 'Hätten Sie doch lieber verzichtet auf diese demokratischen Brüderlichkeiten. Auf die Frage nach der Wahl zwischen zwei Unsinnigkeiten. Zwischen dem größeren und kleineren Übel.' Die Wirklichkeit ist nicht unvernünftig . . . (MJ 192 - 3)

He is also confronted with the discomfoting realisation that his methods of investigation are inadequate for the attaining of any knowledge of individuals beyond the purely bureaucratic: "Ich weiß sozusagen alles, und es nützt mir nichts!" (MJ 156) As he arrests Jonas at the end of the novel - an action which Jonas views as one of desperation - his need to preserve faith in himself and his ideal, by clinging to the belief that Jakob died in confirming it, is obvious:

Daß er mit Jakob darüber sich hätte verständigen können.  
Wortlos, in einem unauffälligen Schweigen und Blickwechseln.  
Daß Jakob gerechter gewesen wäre. (MJ 202)

Jonas Blach is also depicted in an ambivalent light, with a mixture of sympathetic and reprehensible traits, as an intellectual caught

between conflicting interests. In the mood of revitalised political activity following the 20th Party Congress, he has been led to reconsider the relevance of his contribution to progress and to react against the threat of being caught up in a pre-ordained, mechanical process of academic promotion:

er hingegen, er würde ja wohl Dozent, Dr. habil. heißen im nächsten Jahr und Oberassistent werden und Professor und geachtet sein in der Würde des wissenschaftlichen Dienstes: wenn er nichts dagegen tat. (MJ 71)

He is consumed by the burning need for assurance that he can play a positive part in the advancement of society - "er [wollte] an der Welt teilnehmen" (MJ 113) - without really knowing in which direction to move. His dilemma of self-knowledge - "die Unkenntlichkeit seines eigenen Lebens" (MJ 74) - coincides with Jakob's crisis of decision, but represents a movement in the opposite direction, away from the meaninglessness of abstraction and theory towards a fascination for practical activity (MJ 161). Yet although Jakob gives him a thorough assessment of the demands which railway work entails, he seems aware that Jonas is unlikely to translate his interest into actual commitment; he implies this in his suggestion that life in the West near Gesine, pursuing academic goals without needing to worry about their political utility, would be more suitable for Jonas (MJ 167).

It remains uncertain whether Jonas' professed determination to remain in the DDR reflects the depth of his ideological commitment or the realisation that life in the West would involve him in a similar conflict of individual and social interests. The development of his

relationship with Gesine clearly lies in her hands, since her journeys back to the scene of their holiday in Italy, and to Jerichow, suggest that she is carefully considering its relative importance in her life before reaching a decision. The unresolved crisis-point for Jonas has been his inability to inject any vitality into the political essay which he has come to Jerichow ostensibly to write:

Das Niedergeschriebene kam ihm vor wie ein mitgebrachter Vorrat, der am Ende der Reise nicht mehr zu gebrauchen war. (MJ 115)

Yet ironically, it is his involvement in such questionable political activity which brings about his arrest, one of the many acts of repression in the DDR following the crushing of the Hungarian uprising, before he has a chance to discover where his true interests lie. His future remains uncertain, just as the strength of his intellectual convictions remains to be tested against the demands of everyday living in a totalitarian society. In Das dritte Buch über Achim, Johnson appears to insert a reflection upon the likely course of development for someone in Jonas' position - timid, frustrated conformity and a reluctance to engage in political dialogue of the sort that Karsch would wish to establish:

Der Lange mit den dicken Haaren in der knöchigen Stirn, der immer so abwesend aussah: der hatte sich nach dem Aufstand in Ungarn öffentlich für etwas entschuldigen müssen. Er soll einen Aufsatz geschrieben haben, er sei auch schweigsam von Natur, der liebt eine, die bringt er nie mit. (A 192)

Gesine's identity remains much more enigmatic and defies categorisation. She provides a refreshing contrast to the preoccupations of Rohlf's and Jonas with self-justification and theoretical principles. The facts surrounding her unexpected arrival in the DDR point to some form of espionage, yet our knowledge of the impetuosity of her character



tempts us to suspect, with Popp,<sup>8</sup> that she is pursuing her own interests under the guise of assisting NATO, because this kind of double-dealing offers the only possibility for a refugee of gaining contact with her home. Her decision to move to the West has obviously been a negative one, implying a rejection of her own state rather than an acceptance of the material benefits of the West. It is, moreover, taken at great cost, because it cuts her off from everything which gave value and meaning to her life - her bleak homeland, her father, Jakob and his mother. Her present existence is "verdorben" (MJ 127), yet she feels there was no real alternative to leaving Jerichow - "habe ich es so gewollt? so habe ich es gewollt" (MJ 127). Her disaffection with all forms of ideology has led her to accept without undue soul-searching - "gewissenlos" (MJ 187) - aspects of Western life, like free enterprise and the class system, which immediately alienate Jakob, yet she has retained a sufficient sense of moral indignation to resign her position in NATO. Courageously independent and committed to present realities, she also reveals a depth of feeling for the past, tinged with the awareness that her life could have been very different if the forces of history and ideology had worked less unfavourably against Jakob and herself.

Apart from the few "omniscient" insights offered by the narrator into Jakob's thoughts,<sup>9</sup> we are dependent largely on the viewpoints of Jonas, Rohlfis and Gesine for our knowledge of his personality and attitudes.

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<sup>8</sup>Popp, p. 92 - 3.

<sup>9</sup>see above, Ch. II.

The general lack of objective certainty about Jakob is emphasised by the psychological problem underlined by Friedrichsmeyer;<sup>10</sup> not only are all of the people surrounding Jakob highly subjective in their assessments of him; they also feel tempted, in the conviction that Jakob offered an ideal of independence and integrity during a period of political upheaval and confusion, to create from their memories a wish-image of their own particular conception of this ideal. He remains for Gesine (whose knowledge is easily the most complete, not only because of their closeness as adolescents, but because she alone witnessed his actions during the days immediately preceding his death), the adventurous, affectionate, good-humoured half-brother whom she understands instinctively on a spiritual level - "es ist mein Seele, die liebet Jakob" (MJ 141) - and whom she respects for having discovered the means of preserving links with the past without succumbing to ideological pressures.

Jonas, however, after finding it impossible to define Jakob's personality in terms of qualities when he first sees him -

. . . begann ich sogleich nach Worten zu suchen. Das Nächste war daß ich ein Wort nach dem anderen wegwarf, sie meinten sämtlich Eigenschaften, dieser schien keine zu haben (MJ 49) -

comes to view him as the incarnation of practical efficiency and instinctive knowledge. For Rohlf's, as we have seen, he is the man who may realise the Socialist ideal and make a real contribution to the cause of ideological progress. In the midst of preconceived viewpoints of this kind, it is revealing to consider the opinions of apparently minor figures,

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<sup>10</sup>Friedrichsmeyer, p. 217 - 8.

like Jöche, who, after all, has the most precise knowledge of Jakob at work - the dominating interest in his life. Their conversations reveal a frankness and friendly trust which stands out in a state where suspicion is encouraged - "seid wachsam gegen Agenten" (MJ 156) - and free discussion remains a constant risk:

sein Blick war wie sein Wesen eine schmale harte unbeugsame  
Brücke von Freundschaft und Erinnerung und Zuverlässigkeit.  
(MJ 170)

In preferring to recall small details, like Jakob's refusal to take sport too seriously (MJ 16), which underline his flexibility and work against categorisation (in this case, the feeling that Jakob will stolidly dedicate himself to any task), Jöche reveals a knowledge of his personality more precise than the assumptions and sweeping generalisations of outside observers like Rohlfs and Jonas.

It remains nonetheless impossible to understand Jakob's actions, during the crisis which forms the main interest of the novel, in anything other than an ambivalent light. A critic who, like W. Emrich, sees Jakob in positive, metaphysical terms, in order to relate Johnson's work closely to Kafka's, ignores or distorts too much of the evidence:

Jakob verwirklicht in seiner Person das in den Beamtenorganisationen Kafkas bestimmende und den Beamten selbst unbekannte Gesetz. Keiner kennt ihn, jeder stellt nur endlose, unsichere 'Mutmaßungen' über ihn an, und dennoch leitet, regiert er alle.<sup>11</sup>

His exemplary productivity, for example, does not necessarily represent an affirmation of Socialist society, or the harmonious integration of the individual into society: Jakob's work is an end in itself, and he gladly

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<sup>11</sup>W. Emrich, "Zerstörung und Aufbau der Person in der modernen Literatur", in Geist und Widergeist, (Frankfurt 1965), p. 64.

accepts the responsibilities it entails. His attentions appear to be centred around the job and the well-being of his fellow-workers, to the exclusion of all personal interests:

'Ich wünsch mir nichts' sagte er, und ein unterschwelliger Auflauf von Herzklopfen machte ihm bewußt daß er gesagt hatte was sein Leben war in diesem Herbst . . . (MJ 37)

Rohlfs' request for cooperation in a mission with direct ideological implications produces a situation of crisis for Jakob, by forcing him out of his clearly defined routine into a position in which he has to make political and moral decisions. It is nothing less than a displacement from the working world, in which time and space are controllable factors on the daily schedule sheet - "die Aufsicht über die Zeit war ihm möglich" (MJ 41) - into a world of irresistible change calling for constant reassessment - "an diesem unaufhaltsamen selbstwilligen Ablauf der Zeit kann einer leicht bescholten werden" (MJ 42). From the time of his return to the "private" world of Jerichow, after his first interview with Rohlfs and the news of his mother's flight to the West, it is his incapacity for action and his total self-absorption which dominate his life and present an impenetrable mask to the observer. Over the whole weekend he remains distant - "wie erstarrt vor Abwesenheit" (MJ 53) - preferring to listen to Jonas' problems rather than reveal anything of his own. Later, he appears to indicate that Rohlfs is asking too much of him in wanting him to persuade Gesine to involve herself in espionage, during a conversation with his close friend Sabine (MJ 92) and perhaps again, as Popp suggests,<sup>12</sup> after listening to the long

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<sup>12</sup>Popp, p. 64.

discussion between Jonas and Rohlf's about political necessity (MJ 145).

The feeling of alienation which grips him after leaving Sabine - "er fühlte sich entfernt" (MJ 93) - who alone appears to have given meaning to his private life during the previous months, reveals itself in his increasing tiredness - "sein schweres übermüdetes Gesicht" (MJ 166) - in the days before his visit to the West. The experience of a bewilderingly different political and private atmosphere in the West only accentuates his feelings of alienation and exhaustion. (Gesine describes him in turn as "befremdet", "verloren", "unbeweglich", "maschinenmäßig" MJ 180 - 4.) The result is the destruction of his only significant link with the past, his understanding of and affection for Gesine, at a time when present events and future prospects remain unremittingly bleak: "es war die gefürchtete schlimme Fremde, in der er mich nicht mehr verstand" (MJ 187).

From the fragments of evidence, we are tempted to feel that Jakob's desperation and aimlessness are the direct consequence of a mistaken political judgment on the part of Rohlf's, combined with his own awareness that his perception of events is much too exact and rigorous to allow him to fit into any pre-cast ideological mould, at a time when he knows that any individual deviation - "quer über die Gleise" - is inadmissible.

Yet the reader, deprived of the security and certainties associated with the reliable personal narrator, and lacking any substantial direct knowledge of Jakob's thoughts and feelings, is little more than an eavesdropper upon the fictional world of Mutmaßungen über Jakob, and can never feel that he has more than a partial understanding of the truth about Jakob.

Despite Johnson's reservations - emphasised strikingly by the fragmentary, multi-layered structure - as to the possibility of doing justice to the complexity of any individual's personality, Mutmaßungen über Jakob remains closely linked to the traditions of realistic fiction in being essentially a novel of character, through its close examination of the response of four clearly differentiated temperaments to a situation of extreme crisis. Each of the main characters is forced to reconsider the fundamental structure of his existence prior to October 1956, through a concatenation of events over which he has little control. As Popp has shown,<sup>13</sup> we can recognise in the attitudes of Jakob, Rohlf, Jonas and Gesine a spectrum of possible concepts of freedom open to East Germans at this specific stage of history: absorption in duty as an end in itself, which leads to the elimination of the idea of freedom ("Pflicht" - Jakob); freedom seen as the recognition of historical and political necessity ("Einsicht in die Notwendigkeit" - Rohlf); freedom consisting in the possibility of choice, through a consideration of alternatives ("Anderskönnen" - Jonas); and freedom as the imperative urge to reject the status quo and seek a viable alternative ("Andersmüssen" - Gesine).

The course of events compels each of them to review the validity of his own attitude, and the test of circumstances finds them all lacking. Dislocation is most serious in Jakob's case, because he has no way to turn; imprisonment makes a decisive end to Jonas' deliberations; Gesine attains her goal only at the cost of personal happiness; Rohlf is forced to compromise in favour of expediency and views the destruction of his fondest

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<sup>13</sup>Popp, p. 90.

hopes. Many elements of the structure of the novel suggest a system of parallels and contrasts, which occasionally threatens to become too obvious (e.g. the contrast between the work of Jonas and Jakob - MJ 13, 115; and the coincidental meeting of Gesine, Rohlfis and Jakob in the Elbe Hotel - Ch. III). Yet the novel rarely gives the impression of conforming to any preconceived schematic pattern. The elaborate structural web disappears in the immediacy of every individual segment of the text, the characters impress through their many-sidedness and vitality, and, if they are in some ways representative of general attitudes, it only becomes evident as an afterthought.

In Das dritte Buch über Achim, a change of emphasis is immediately discernible. The re-emergence of a controlling, relativising narrator (albeit with the limitations discussed in Ch. II), allows us to examine the words and thoughts of the main characters with a greater sense of perspective. Yet there is, in effect, little temperamental difference between the narrator and Karsch, other than the dimension of ironic superiority created by temporal and spatial remoteness from events: both share the attitude of the uncommitted observer, concerned with precise detail and factual accuracy, and intent upon suppressing subjective reactions as much as possible. Karsch is never much more than a shadowy recorder; only occasionally is he described in his "non-professional" capacity, and despite his apparent long-standing acquaintance with Karin, we never enter into details of this (or any other) relationship. This is, of course, not unjustified if we accept that Karsch is particularly concerned with Achim's life and the attempt to comprehend an alien society, rather than

with private affairs, but even from the wider perspective of the narrator there is still little attempt to describe Karsch as an individual.

(It is worth noting that, in the later story "Eine Reise wegwohin",<sup>14</sup> which is directly concerned with Karsch's fortunes after his return to the West, we receive a much fuller impression of his personality.)

The fact that the imagined counterpart to the narrator also indicates through his questions that he knows Karsch personally, further justifies the reduction of Karsch to his function as journalist/biographer. Furthermore, the unidentified acquaintance of Karsch's who comes to write an article on the last stages of the land-collectivisation programme in the DDR is not distinguishable as an observer of life in any essential respect from Karsch, as we learn from the description of his subsequent report:

Der Bericht verschwieg die Lage des Ortes und machte ihn verwechselbar mit allen anderen, die ein etwa dreißigjähriger Herr neugierig und vorurteilslos aufgesucht hatte und festgehalten in Gesprächen und Fotografien und in den ungenaueren Eindrücken des Gefühls. Er beschrieb die Frage nach dem Friedenswillen . . . er erklärte säuberlich die Vorzüge der genossenschaftlichen Nötigung, er zeigte in Bildern den Zustand der Höfe . . . (A 146)

It is obvious, even from this brief consideration of the West German characters in Das dritte Buch über Achim, that the predominating interest of the narrator - "die Grenze: die Entfernung: den Unterschied / und den Versuch sie zu beschreiben" (A 224) - tends to reduce problems of characterisation to a subsidiary position of importance. On the other hand, we are bound to share Karsch's concern with Achim's development over a crucial period of contemporary history and with his particular individual traits. Johnson has suggested that these pursuits are not, in fact, contradictory, by drawing our attention to Achim's representative position

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<sup>14</sup>In Karsch und andere Prosa, edition suhrkamp 59, 1966, p. 29 - 81.



in East German society as an outstanding sportsman, one of the few people in a position to mediate between the anonymous mass of the people and the State authorities:

Allerdings ist dieser Rennfahrer mit einiger Absicht ausgewählt, denn ich halte ihn für ziemlich stellvertretend für das, was Sie 'das Gesamtkolorit der DDR' nennen. Er ist beliebt bei den Leuten und beliebt bei den Oberen, da aber die Leute und die Oberen etwas auseinander sind, ist er eine sehr vermittelnde Figur, und das machte ihn mir interessant.<sup>15</sup>

Achim's situation, therefore, is one of the few which appears to withstand the levelling tendencies of modern society and offer the possibility of heroic individuality of the kind we associate with the adventure novels of the 18th and early 19th centuries, from Tom Jones to Julien Sorel. The task of Karsch is to discover where that individuality lies in the confusion of instincts and socially or ideologically determined responses which make up personality. It is quite possible, as Migner has indicated,<sup>16</sup> for the reader to gain a highly credible psychological picture of Achim from the contradictory statements supplied by Achim and those who have known him. His total determination to succeed in the public eye, from his days in the Hitler Youth up to his achievement of international sporting renown with the East German cycling team, can be viewed as a means of compensating for his inability to communicate on a personal level. He is never close to his father - "Der Vater war nicht anzureden ohne daß er gefragt hatte" (A 50) - and the frequent changes of residence during the war years have prevented the establishment of any enduring friendship. The only rays of hope come firstly through his affection for an equally isolated Jewish girl - "das Mädchen, das nicht dazugehörte"

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<sup>15</sup> Bienek, p. 89.

<sup>16</sup> Migner, p. 50 - 55.

(A 45) - who disappears without warning from his existence, and secondly by his attempt to live independent of all party influences in the years following the war. But when he again accepts the need to live in accordance with State authority in order to attain sporting success, he is, in effect, cutting himself off from personal relationships:

heutzutage [1960] noch fragten ihn einige in Briefen um Rat . . .  
und Achim antwortete ihnen dankbar, denn so nah waren ihm danach  
keine Freundschaften mehr gekommen und auch so glaubwürdig nicht.  
(A 162)

If this general psychological assumption does in fact do justice to Achim's pattern of development, then his involvement in the 1953 uprising could be viewed as the critical stage in his attempt to live according to his own conceptions of morality rather than those approved by the State, and the sobering experience of repressive measures against protesters might have positively determined his move towards conformity. Nonetheless, it is clear that only when Achim realises that his personal sporting ambitions cannot be achieved outside the framework of the State collective, does his integration take on an affirmative dimension. At this stage, the process of re-interpreting the past to illuminate and confirm the present public image begins, to the ultimate detriment of his sense of unique personal identity.

Of the other figures in the novel, it is obvious that the Party officials, Frau Ammann, and Fleisg, have none of the vitality and complexity of Rohlf's. Both are much less self-assured, insecure in dealing with anything which cannot be fitted into normal bureaucratic and ideological channels. The gulf between their responsibilities at official level and

their confused, inadequate private existence is particularly emphasised.<sup>17</sup> Only Karin has anything of the subtlety of the characters in Mutmaßungen über Jakob, and cannot be easily defined in representative terms. She is akin to Gesine in her disregard for authority and in the courage and independence of spirit she reveals in refusing to join in the officially-inspired condemnation of the article published by Karsch's journalist friend about land-collectivisation (A 146 - 7). As a well-known public figure who makes a valuable contribution to the State culture - "erinnertes Bild und fast Vorschrift des Verhaltens geworden mit . . . Spielfilmen" (A 12) - she has a certain degree of autonomy, but the State allows little scope for deviations from its ideological norm, and the prospects for an unrestrained progression of her good-humoured, but critically discriminating approach to life may be viewed as precarious.

Her longstanding involvement with Achim may strike us as an incongruous element in her characterisation. From Achim's point of view it is perfectly comprehensible, since Karin resembles the Jewish girl who meant so much to him as a youth (A 47), and is the only person to whom he is closely attached in private life. But it is more difficult to believe that Karin, who has previously been emotionally involved with Karsch, and who sets rigorous standards of personal integrity for herself, should be satisfied with an extended close relationship with Achim, in which she never really gets to know him (in particular, his feelings in 1953, which must have been a critical period for anyone with sensibilities like hers). This tends, in our view, to strain the psychological pattern of the novel;

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<sup>17</sup>cf. Migner, p. 57 - 8.

Karin's functional value as a mediator between Karsch and Achim is outstanding and she fascinates as an individual, but her love for Achim is somewhat less convincing.

The movement which we discern in Das dritte Buch über Achim towards less individualised, unexceptional and frequently anonymous figures, whose function in the framework of society is of greater importance than their ability to convince as personalities, appears to be continued in Zwei Ansichten. It seems possible, although never explicitly stated, that the initials of the two protagonists, B. and D., simply indicate their respective countries of origin - "die Bundesrepublik" and "die Demokratische Republik". Their reactions and attitudes certainly reveal the unmistakable impact of the two different political environments upon the personality of unperceptive and generally uncritical individuals, and the nature of their work suggests something of the basic difference between capitalism and socialism. B., as a freelance photographer, must be opportunistic in gauging fluctuations in public demand in order to make a living; he is responsible to no-one. D., on the other hand, working as a nurse in a large city hospital, has actively committed herself to a socially essential task which severely limits her freedom of movement, because of the responsibilities it entails. Neither of their lives is described with any significant concrete or physical detail, and the action alternates between an unspecified North German backwater and Berlin, the ideological axis of Johnson's world. There are no other characters of import; the members of D.'s family and the regular clientele of the bar in West Berlin never emerge from the background, and both the main figures remain

essentially isolated in amorphous, depersonalised societies. As a consequence, we view their psychological reactions to the separation brought about by the Berlin Wall as solitary inner monologues which, due to the unexceptional monotony of their everyday lives, tend to lead the narrator increasingly into abstractions. Problems related to the issue of identity in modern society and to the conflict between natural feelings and social pressures, which were treated implicitly in Mutmaßungen über Jakob, are increasingly subjected to explicit, analytical treatment in Zwei Ansichten.

In the earlier novels, Johnson's main characters have largely been able, at least at the outset, to organise their lives according to their own preferences; they all have a considerable measure of public respect or personal dynamism which allows them to take a positive attitude to political and social change, whether as protest (Gesine, Karin) or as affirmation (Rohlf's, Achim). With less privileged individuals like B. and D., life involves a constant grudging compromise with alien standards of value if it is to remain tolerable. It is rarely prudent to reveal true feelings; it is better to present an inconspicuous external image. For D., it is a matter of satisfying State authority - "sie hatte gelernt, sich für eine andere auszugeben bei Leuten, die der Macht und Gewalt des Staates verwandt waren" (ZA 21), whereas for B. (in whose reactions Johnson for the first time attempts to define the structure of Western capitalist society) the insidious influence of the mass media in determining the bounds of socially acceptable behaviour is predominant:

er scheute davor zurück, den vollständigen Herrn B. vorzustellen, wie die illustrierten Blätter hielt er das innre Leben einer Person für ihr eigentliches, das belangbare Kennzeichen, war demnach

bedacht, nicht mehr zu zeigen als einen zerstreuten jungen Herrn von bürgerlichen Formen . . . (ZA 73)

B.'s lack of self-assurance makes him continually concerned with the appearance he cuts in trivial social intercourse, as the narrator constantly stresses, for example:

Er wollte nicht für betrunken gelten . . . er wollte nicht für krank angesehen werden . . . Er blieb noch eine Weile stehen und gab sich nüchtern, tat hellwach, aber ungefähr zehn Tage lang vermied er das Lokal . . . (ZA 72)

This need to disguise his real feelings leads him, at different times, consciously to adopt socially recognisable rôles:

So, bequem vorgestützt auf die Tischkante, mit Schnapsschwindeln im Gehirn, überließ B. sich einstweilen der Rolle des Unglücklichen, deren Stichworte ihm zugespielt wurden. (ZA 46)

It is constantly emphasised that the need to act in such an artificial manner is largely determined by the experience of isolation and alienation in urban surroundings. In West Berlin, B. is unmistakably "der Fremde" (ZA 12, 19), obsessed with the feeling that his provincial upbringing is painfully evident and causes his exclusion from the inner circles of urban activity (ZA 38). But conformity to appearances takes a heavy toll on personality. We recall that Jonas Elach found it impossible to describe Jakob in terms of "qualities" (MJ 49); B.'s existence is so aimless, lacking in inner resources, that we fear he has no real qualities. This is frequently stressed by the narrator's use of negative adjectives to describe his activities, for example:

Was soll ich denn machen? sagte B. so hilflos, daß die anderen einlenkten . . . Er bemerkte gedankenlos, daß sie immer wieder mit drei Schritten hinter der Theke an der Wand war . . . Reglos aufgestützt sah er ein Flugzeug von Westen ankommen . . . Vor dem Grenzbahnhof lief er ziellos von einer Seite zur anderen . . . (ZA 38 - 9)

Unlike Achim, however, he does not succeed in eliminating self-critical

responses to his adoption of a public image. B. offers a pathetic case of personality split between an ideal conception of its potentialities and an awareness of the distorting effect of conforming to society:

und bei allem Verlangen nach Berührung mit fremder Haut, nach Schutz in Umarmungen, nach Zuflucht im Geschlecht, er konnte sich kaum je vergessen, war kaum je aus seiner Welt, fühlte sich angesehen, seitwärts beobachtet von einem anderen Herrn B., der diesen aufnahm . . . fotografiert von jenem Herrn B., der er sein wollte. (ZA 73 - 4)

His obvious need, behind the social mask of flippancy, uncommittedness and permissiveness, is for a personal relationship to give his life direction and purpose:

Tatsächlich gab er sich ausgeglichen, anständig, fix, denn ihm war zu tun um jede freundliche Antwort, ein Lächeln, den Anschein von Gewohnheit, von Trost. (ZA 14)

His confused helplessness at the end of the novel emphasises the fact that he must come to accept this need whole-heartedly, without trying to give superficial gloss to his personality with status symbols like sports cars, before he can hope to have any success.

D.'s situation is markedly different: the responsibilities which she has learned to bear in helping to bring up a family under difficult economic conditions (ZA 48) have given her life a foundation and continuity which stand in striking contrast to B's rootlessness. She is ready to forge an independent existence and is not prepared to accept developments at a personal level without question, as B. quickly discovers:

Darf ich Sie fotografieren? hatte er nach einer Weile befangenen Gequatsches gefragt; sie war ihm aber unerschrocken in die Quere gegangen mit der Frage wozu . . . (ZA 45)

The building of the Berlin Wall forces her to give serious thought to the future by becoming aware of her real needs and objectives. Her unreflecting

trust in the State, and in the possibility of political choice, is shattered by the experience of being immured in a segment of her native city:

Sie hatte unter diesem Staat gelebt wie in einem eigenen Land, zu Hause, im Vertrauen auf offene Zukunft und das Recht, das andere Land zu wählen. Eingesperrt in diesem, fühlte sie sich hintergangen, getäuscht, belogen . . . (ZA 25)

Her reaction recalls that of Gesine to less bewildering circumstances - "das Andersmüssen"; without being sure of the alternative, she feels compelled to reject the present political structure in order to open up the future again, although it may involve an incalculable loss in terms of human warmth:

Als sie gehen mußte, fiel es ihr schwer, die Hand des Versteckten gleich wieder loszulassen. Ihr war, als ginge sie von allen Menschen weg. (ZA 105)

Her decision to leave is an impulsive one, which is seriously shaken by her realisation, in examining the passport description which B. has provided of herself, that she has deluded herself about him: "Sie wollte nicht mehr. Er wußte von ihr nicht einmal die Augen. Sie wollte zurück" (ZA 110). Nevertheless, she does have friends in West Berlin and the city still has a recognisable identity for her; it is likely that she will, with sober determination, carve out a tolerable existence there.

The question will obviously arise whether it is possible to preserve interest in characters who in many ways reveal socially representative attitudes through the course of a novel, since the genre, as we have suggested, owes much of its flexibility and durability to the scope it has offered for the treatment of individuality in depth; the characters must be convincing as individuals, if their relationship is to hold the reader's



attention. Johnson's success in reconciling these diverse interests may well be, as Reich-Ranicki has suggested,<sup>18</sup> no more than partial. B. remains too indefinite, an amalgam of too many social problems, uncomfortably balanced between perceptive self-awareness and pathetic incomprehension, whereas D., with the advantage of a more precisely delineated environment closer to Johnson's personal experience, comes alive psychologically and - as a Berliner and not just a "typical" East German - has a much clearer profile.

It may, at this stage, be valuable to take an overall look at certain figurative devices which Johnson uses to underline the problem of determining the identity of individuals from the confusion of partially revealing "images" they present to the outside world. As a guide to exactitude, the camera will often prove more reliable than the human eye or memory, and Johnson's novels indicate something of the influence the photographic image has on our everyday lives:

es ist doch so, daß das allgemeine Denken unserer Zeit von der Fotografie entscheidend beeinflußt ist. Denken Sie an die Familienalben und denken Sie auch an die Pressefotos in der Zeitung, die uns das Geschehen des Vortags, bei dem wir zugegen waren, in einer ganz anderen Haltung und Bedeutung servieren. Und die Fotografie ist ja von unserem Denken zunächst einmal geschaffen und dann geformt worden, so daß wir sie benutzen.<sup>19</sup>

This influence is, as Johnson's arguments suggest, ambivalent: not only is the photograph of positive value to the individual in precisely recording aspects of his experience; it can also be, in the hands of the mass media, through which any bias of emphasis or distortion of perspective is greatly magnified, a weapon in the process of manipulating public opinion.

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<sup>18</sup>M. Reich-Ranicki, Die Zeit, (24.9.65).

<sup>19</sup>Bienek, p. 91.

Photographs play an important part in each of the novels. Gesine's photographs of Jakob, taken during their visit to the refugee camp, contradict Rohlf's image of Jakob's reaction to life in the West, and stress the fact that Jakob's journey was made for temporary, personal reasons (visiting his mother), rather than purposes of ideological comparison. In addition, Gesine's enlarged photograph of Jakob and Rohlf as they travelled from Jerichow to the border, reveals something of the essence of Jakob's elusive identity:

Eben das Aufglimmen der Tabakglut hatte Jakobs Gesicht beleuchtet. . . . sonderbar scharf . . . . war die ganze Gegend um die Augen herausgehoben, und da die Vergrößerung die natürlichen Maßverhältnisse geringfügig überschritt, blieb der Blick des Betrachters am hochgeschobenen unteren Lid hängen, auf dem die Pupillen sehr flüchtig in die Blickrichtung der Linse gegangen waren und nun festgehalten in einem Ausdruck des Beobachtens ohne Teilnahme. (MJ 191)<sub>2</sub>

In the surrounding darkness, Jakob's freedom from concern about appearances, and his refusal to be enclosed in any (restrictive) framework, is strikingly evident. "The lens no more fixates Jakob's eye than his eye does the lens".<sup>20</sup>

In Das dritte Buch über Achim, where we are directly concerned both with a meticulous private photographer - Karsch - and a sporting champion - Achim - whose career has been comprehensively publicised for distinct ideological reasons, the ambivalent value of the photograph is strongly emphasised. A complete outline of Achim's life is provided by the succession of photographs described in the novel. Karsch, of course, is concerned to discover details which the public image excludes. Invaluable "objective" counterbalance to Achim's memories and interpretations of the

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<sup>20</sup>Friedrichsmeyer, p. 224.

past is offered both by Karsch's photographs of aspects of Achim's environment and by old family photographs, like the one with the Jewish girl, which suggests his concern for appearances even as a child:

Achim steht etwas entfernt von seinen Eltern und hält sie an den Schultern vor sich, er lacht mit allen Zähnen, sie blickt ernsthaft in die Kamera und ist bemüht, seine Hände zu halten wo sie sind. Da hat er das Beschützen gelernt. (A 46)

When he achieves fame, Achim is totally absorbed in preserving his "image" even in private life - "bemüht so gesehen zu werden wie Achim sich Achim vorstellte". (A 70). Photographs of his sporting activities are constantly being interpreted to stress the exemplary nature of his achievement - "Ich möchte nicht nur als Sportler ein Vorbild sein" (A 75) - and its figurative political implications - "Sei er doch ein Sinnbild für die Kraft und Zukünftigkeit des Landes" (A 29). Significantly, it is a photograph of the 1953 uprising which finally reveals the incompatibility of Karsch's search for objective accuracy and Achim's concern to simplify his own personality.

In Zwei Ansichten, B. occupies an uncomfortable position of compromise between private perception and public demand. As a professional photographer, he feels compelled to make concessions to the prejudiced expectations of the general public. His first album is only accepted by the town authorities after he excludes the unflattering shots - "Bilder, die die städtischen Hilfen für Alte und Bedürftige zeigten wie sie waren" (ZA 7). Although he has the potential to offer penetrating insights into social and political situations, he lacks the courage to present a dissenting version of the facts. After his first visit to Berlin following the erection of the Wall, he sells a meaningless conventional view rather

than a precise close-up which could reveal much more:

Hätte er etwas zeigen wollen von seinem auswärtigen Aufenthalt, so wäre es ihm angekommen auf das von schlampigen Mörtelfugen gerahmte, rißscharfe Feld eines einzelnen Steines, das dem Betrachter die Fingerkuppen schmerzen machte. Er traute sich aber nicht, das der Redaktion anzubieten, er fürchtete es erklären zu müssen, und überdies wollte er Spott hinter seinem Rücken vermeiden. (ZA 14)

During the course of his prolonged stay in West Berlin, he becomes increasingly aware that the image of reality presented in the wide-ranging, action-packed photographs favoured by the popular press, which he has striven to imitate, is totally lacking in substance and authenticity. Small and apparently insignificant local details offer a much more genuine reflection of life:

manchmal und insgeheim wollte ihm diese winzige Pinte mit ihrem verträglichen, auch besorgten Gesprächsgeräusch deutlicher für die Stadt vorkommen als was er tagsüber an Stelle der Stadt fotografierte. (ZA 21)

This realisation places the value of his previous activity in a highly questionable light, and leaves B. with a dilemma which he avoids considering seriously while he is preoccupied with the anticipation of D.'s arrival. Nevertheless, a decision in the direction either of material expediency or of a more courageous and rigorous commitment to personal values remains to be made.

In addition to the conflict between public and private images of reality, Johnson constantly stresses the tension between the temptations of self-indulgent subjectivity and the need to seek out the truth with the minimum of bias and prejudice. The gulf between these extremes is figuratively illustrated by the contrast between the idealised dream-image and the photograph. We have already examined how all of the main characters in Mutmaßungen über Jakob are tempted to reduce the complex totality of Jakob's personality in order to make it conform to their own particular

wish-image. Gesine's warning to Rohlf's is highly appropriate:

Aber sehen Sie nicht daß Sie die Wirklichkeit verarmen . . .  
Niemand besteht aus den Meinungen. (MJ 188)

In Das dritte Buch über Achim, Karsch, like the reader of Mutmaßungen über Jakob, is compelled to probe carefully for something of Achim's true identity between the variety of subjective opinions offered by Achim's friends:

Wie sollte man es sehen? Alle meinten sie einen dreißigjährigen Mann, der lebte bei ihnen mit Radfahrern und berühmt, sein überraschtes Lächeln war glaubwürdig, sein langer harthäutiger Kopf war faßlich und befremdete kaum . . . Der und alle meinten nicht ihn sondern ihren eigenen Blick auf ihn, die brachte Karsch nicht zusammen, die notierte er . . . (A 150)

His self-imposed task is to perceive exactly what makes up Achim's individuality without imposing any subjective emphasis; his standards are so absolute that neither he nor anyone else could fulfil them, as his deliberations regarding problems of selecting material (A 156 - 9) indicate. He can offer no more than a version of the truth, but his acute awareness of the problems involved leads us to trust that his blend of objective fact and imaginative recreation may at least prove more reliable than versions which present a more rounded, fully-comprehensible picture of personality.

The concern with identity is still central in Zwei Ansichten, although at the reciprocal level of an emotional relationship. The untenable basis of B.'s activity as a photographer is revealed when he gives away his fondest secret to D.:

. . . auf dem Gang zur Stadtbahn in der knochenkalten schwarzweißen Nacht hatte er den unentschuldbaren Fehler begangen, ihr etwas zu sagen, was er heimlich und tatsächlich dachte: in seinem Berufe wünsche er eines Tages so gut zu sein, daß ihm in den Bildern die Genauigkeit von Träumen gelinge. (ZA 46)

For B., as for D., the deluding image of dream becomes more real than the actuality of experience. Deprived of the immediacy of direct contact, both gradually confuse their fragmentary recollections of each other with romantic wish-images until the tentative, casual nature of their relationship is forgotten. B. exaggerates the extent of his involvement with D. in order to boost his social prestige, by playing upon the aura of mystery and adventure surrounding links with the DDR in the eyes of his small-town friends. Thereafter, it is a strange combination of guilt, self-pity and concern to live up to his self-imposed social image which ties him to D. She, however, keeps their relationship a private concern and only gives in to an idealised impression of the future because of the overwhelmingly bleak reality of her existence in the East. The qualities she imagines him to have are those which seem to have disappeared in the all-pervading atmosphere of fear and repression; but she is attracted as a sister to an idealised brother rather than in an emotional sense:

Sie stellte sich einen hochgewachsenen, beruhigend\_kräftigen jungen Mann vor, auf den passte ihre Auffassung von Ausdrücken wie besonnen, überlegen, geduldig, treu; er war verschlossen, oft zu ernst, aber sie konnte ihn leicht, bloß mit einer Kinderschnute zum Lächeln bringen. (ZA 92)

Yet as soon as D.'s escape gives access to the dream world, it fades away in the grey light of dawn, and both are brought sharply back into the reality of uniform mediocrity. For D., the inaccurate passport description is enough, while the image of assembly-line conformity strikingly reflects B.'s indiscriminating perception of real life:

Das graue Morgenlicht stumpfte die Farben [der Autos] ab, die Menge und die regelmäßige Aufstellung der immer gleichen Form machten das Modell langweilig. Der junge Herr B. konnte die Vorfreude nicht aufbringen, deren Gefühl so wach gewesen war im Traum. (ZA 111)

Although, as we have indicated, Johnson's novels have underlined the extent to which our view of reality is distorted by the wide range of images and patterns through which we try to make it comprehensible, he has, in fact, occasionally attempted to define something of the essence of his main figures in metaphoric terms, by the use of animal symbols. Cresspahl's cat, in Mutmaßungen über Jakob, embodies the independent, indefinable quality which not only distinguishes the Jerichow world from modern urban civilisation, dominated by de-personalising economic and ideological forces, but also emphasises Jakob's superiority to every pattern which others may try to impose upon his personality.

The cat has been handed down to Cresspahl with almost sacramental solemnity - "testamentarisch vererbt" (MJ 116) - by his friend Brühshaver. Both men have been distinguished by a proud, monumental spirit of human independence which stands firm against the ravages of nature:

[Cresspahl] lebte allein in den Wind, der grau und rauh vom Meer ins Land einfiel hinweg über ihn und sein Haus. (MJ 6)

The cat has the instinctive means of recognising this spirit and allying herself with it, as Gesine shows - "Mein Vater ist geachtet in der Welt und angesehen, die Katzen laufen ihm nach" (MJ 120). Jonas, as an uninitiated outsider in Jerichow, is impelled to communicate with the cat and treats her as a human being, to the extent of imagining a conversation and worrying about causing her inconvenience (MJ 118 - 9), so intent is he upon defining her unique qualities. He realises that her superiority consists in being free from the limitations which the awareness of time places upon humanity - "Eine Katze kennt keine Sekunden" (MJ 119).

For Gesine, it is the re-establishment of understanding with the cat which

gives her the feeling of having returned home:

Bevor sie anfing [die Milch] zu lecken, drückte sie den Kopf in den Nacken und sah ihr zu: Die Luft fühlte sich an nach mittäglicher Wärme. Mir war als sei ich am Ende doch nach Hause gekommen. (MJ 137)

It is also significant that Jonas, before ever reaching Jerichow, uses the cat simile - "wie eine Katze so unbedenklich" - in the attempt to express what he feels to be Jakob's instinctive understanding of ideas which others must learn by rote - "als Regel und Vorschrift auswendig" (MJ 50). It is an expansive symbol which permeates the whole novel, illustrating the idea of elusiveness, unpredictability and inviolacy, without ever suggesting a categorisation or the limited scope of a direct parallel.

The animals in Das dritte Buch über Achim also reflect elements of the cyclist's nature. The young tiger in the city Zoo - "diese gefährliche kleine Katze" - which has been named after Achim, is caught in two revealing attitudes. Firstly, during its public "baptism" there is an obvious contrast between the serious façade which Achim is anxious to present, and his uneasiness at the latent violence of the animal as it playfully stretches a paw towards his face (A 19). On the second occasion, a brief view of the young tiger feeding is interpolated into a description of Achim's public renown:

Die kleine reizbare Katze lag im Tierpark an den Stäben, zerriß und verschlang blutfrisches Fleisch, tappte nach dem Futterstock, folgte dem Wärter mit den Augen, gähnte gedankenlos. (A 32)

The thoughtless dependence of the caged animal upon the keeper who feeds it represents a violent reversal of the image of mutual admiration between the sportsman and the State powers, which is being officially proclaimed - "Der Staat liebte ihn, er liebte den Staat". The future life of the tiger



will be completely in the public eye, as part of skilful and well-trained team intended to entertain the general public - "geachtet wegen der anstelligen Tücke seiner dressierten Brüder". The ironical query of the narrator - "warum sollte ein Tiger Achim heißen?" - points to Achim's compelling inner need to ally himself with the most powerful in order to assert his superiority, on the amoral basis of the survival of the fittest:

. . . wir machen euch kaputt und fertig und zur Sau . . . wir helfen uns wir nutzen dich aus . . . der Sieg ist nicht für Wehleidige, wer schwach ist soll verzichten . . . (A 223)

A brief description of the mountain goat is also introduced as an interpolation, aimed at emphasising the ambivalent "radfahren" motif - the combination of soaring ambition and acquiescence with authority:

Die Ziege ist ein Tier mit gebogenen Hörnern und einem feinstrehnigen Bart . . . es kann geschickter in die Schräge klettern als ein Mensch, gibt Milch und kennt die Leute mit dem Futter am Schritt . . .  
(A 53)

These images are, of course, much more restricted and directly explicit than the cat-symbol in Mutmaßungen über Jakob, and their importance ought not to be over-emphasised. Similarly, in Zwei Ansichten, a sheepdog with distinctly human features briefly confronts B. in the bar and slips away into the darkness after apparently gaining some insight into his personality - "als habe sie sich etwas eingeprägt" (ZA 77). Its closeness to the barmaid and the link between its name - Henriette - and the location of the bar - Am Henriettenplatz - suggest, in a faint echo of Jonas' uncomprehending fascination with the cat in Jerichow, that it is at home in this corner of West Berlin in a way that B. will never be.

In summing up this comparative consideration of Johnson's approach to characterisation, we should particularly wish to stress the change of

emphasis away from the treatment of individuality in depth - in Mutmaßungen über Jakob - towards the depiction of more representative social types, to some extent in Das dritte Buch über Achim, and as the central concern in Zwei Ansichten. His characters are never "three-dimensional", or "round" in E. M. Forster's sense;<sup>21</sup> we recognise them not as physical entities but as temperaments, viewed through a succession of fragmented perspectives rather than in constant, logical evolution, in line with Johnson's rejection of the pose of fictional omniscience on the grounds that it conflicts seriously with actual experience. Although we may accept Harvey's view that there is "a heart of darkness in the character, a central mystery which is never penetrated",<sup>22</sup> in the most memorable creations of the 19th century realistic novelists, who were well enough aware of the need to avoid excessively neat patterns of personality, it is difficult to see why he tends to doubt the validity of the attempts of modern novelists, like Johnson, to experiment with structural patterns, in order to convey this perception in a new and striking manner.<sup>23</sup>

There is a clear movement towards a more abstract examination of the question of individuality, under what Johnson views as greatly increased pressures in modern society towards conformity and standardisation. (The sharp contrast between the rugged independence of the older figures in Jerichow and the impersonal uniformity of the urban environments, tends to point to the end of the war as an important turning-point.)

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<sup>21</sup>E. M. Forster, Aspects of the Novel, (Penguin Books 1968), Ch. IV.

<sup>22</sup>Harvey, p. 71.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid, p. 31 - 3.

The figurative illumination of difficulties involved in the accurate depiction of any individual's personality, by means of the contrasted images of photographic precision ("Bild"), publicly encouraged simplification ("Vorbild"), and subjective self-delusion ("Wunschbild"), tends to increase as the abstract interests become more evident, whereas the amplification of elements of personality through the use of metaphor ("Sinnbild"), has only been attempted at length in Mutmaßungen über Jakob.

Although Zwei Ansichten has its own distinct tensions and fascinations, we tend to feel here that Johnson, in his attempt to deal with more general social problems, working from ideas to characters rather than making convincing characterisation his first concern, may have restricted his scope too rigorously, by eliminating the clash and contrast of personality which gives the earlier novels much of their vitality.

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION

It seems premature to attempt to reach any positive conclusions about a writer who is still at a comparatively early stage of his career. We have preferred to draw attention to some significant developments in Johnson's novels, viewed in the historical perspective of realistic writing, and to indicate the particular emphasis of each novel. It might be argued that the outstanding challenge now facing Johnson is to confirm the general validity of his social and political interests by giving them convincing fictional shape in a new realistic background. A recent interview<sup>1</sup> indicates that he will use his experiences in New York (working as an editor for a publishing house, 1966 - 8) to provide a broader basis for his forthcoming novel, and thereby free himself from the possible limiting effects of the title "Dichter der beiden Deutschland". His most recent essay, "Ein Teil von New York",<sup>2</sup> reveals the desire to comprehend the complex identity of one of the less glamorous parts of the city, Upper Westside, with its heterogeneous mixture of social and racial groups, by a consideration of its historical evolution and of the sociological and economic factors which have contributed to its decline. It should be most interesting to see

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<sup>1</sup>V. M. Drath, "U. J.: Der stille intellektuelle", in Was wollen die Deutschen?, (New York 1970), p. 180.

<sup>2</sup>In Neue Rundschau 80, Heft 2, (1969), p. 261 - 74.

whether he now finds effective means of translating his far-reaching concern and sympathy for the socially underprivileged - "Der Slum ist ein Gefängnis, in das die Gesellschaft jene deportiert, die sie selbst verstümmelt hat"<sup>3</sup> - into a fictional representation of this situation.

Perhaps the most important general literary problems which our examination of Johnson's novels has suggested, at least implicitly, are firstly, the relationship between art and entertainment, and, secondly, the future of the realistic novel, in what G. Steiner has described as and age of "high journalism".<sup>4</sup> We have, throughout this study, stressed Johnson's seriousness of intent, his desire to draw the reader's interest beyond the isolated fictional situation towards the wider problems raised in the novels. It is clear that, in Mutmaßungen über Jakob and Das dritte Buch über Achim, he has used narrative and structural techniques aimed at making immediate comprehension extremely difficult and preventing the establishment of final certainties about his characters and their surroundings. Zwei Ansichten, on the other hand, is concerned with a much more readily accessible situation which, in the eyes of one critic at least,<sup>5</sup> represents a timely and necessary escape from the labyrinth of the earlier novels. It is more directly entertaining, for the reader who is less interested in technical aspects of creative writing, although to neglect a close examination of the narrator's position and the parallelism of structure

<sup>3</sup>Ibid, p. 268.

<sup>4</sup>G. Steiner, Language and Silence, (New York 1967), p. 84.

<sup>5</sup>G. Blöcker, Literatur als Teilhabe, (Berlin 1966), p. 37.

would be, as we have suggested above (Ch. II), to miss many of its finer ironical points and its distinct anti-escapist tendency.

In the debate about the range of subject matter which makes the reading of novels a pleasure, Kayser has pointed out the dangers, evident in modern fiction, of concentrating too exclusively on the banal, unexceptional aspects of everyday existence and on problems which are more the concern of the specialist than the lay reader.<sup>6</sup> While Johnson might be felt, at a glance, to reveal both these tendencies, it should not be overlooked that, in the first instance, his "insignificant" characters like Jakob or D. are raised decisively out of obscurity by the critical historical events which inevitably affect their private existence; and secondly, that the specialised technical language which gives each novel distinctive "local colour" has figurative implications pointing, for example, to the wider relevance of Achim's success as a cyclist, yet also provides a convincingly concrete, realistic basis for the action.

If objections to the unrelenting political nature of Johnson's writing are heard, we may point to the equally serious commitment of other leading German writers like Grass, Böll, and Weiss to current political issues, and suggest that there is in general a strong feeling - given a powerful impetus by the post-war writings of Albert Camus, in particular L'Homme Révolté<sup>7</sup> - that the prime concerns of creative writers should be to arouse public awareness of the destructive potential of our age, and to

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<sup>6</sup>Kayser, p. 442 - 3.

<sup>7</sup>Gallimard, (Paris 1951).

uphold the claims of individuality against the levelling forces of society and authority. Johnson has striven to avoid the temptations of political didacticism in his novels by presenting, particularly in Mutmaßungen über Jakob, a range of possible viewpoints on a given situation, without any obvious narratorial bias; by implication, he is encouraging the reader to take a serious interest in political developments and to search for ways of reducing the degree of prejudice in his reactions.

It may of course be argued that "non-fictional" writing, which has become particularly refined in recent years, in the form of reportage, history, biography, the critical essay, etc., is much better able to give an accurate impression of modern life than is possible within the unavoidably selective and restrictive framework of the novel.<sup>8</sup> But it still appears valid to assert that the well-chosen, representative example of a widely-felt experience, such as Johnson strives after in his novels, can provide a more penetrating illumination of reality than a wealth of "authentic" material, which must nonetheless be selected and arranged by a fallible, prejudiced mind. The creative writer also has the advantage of not being confined by the grammatical logic of established syntax, by the need to maintain consistency of perspective, or by the demands of chronology, as the journalist or historian is. Johnson has made particularly wide-ranging use of this freedom, whether to convey the full impact of an occurrence as seen from different viewpoints (e.g. the meeting of Rohlf, Jakob and Gesine in the Elbe Hotel, MJ 96 - 103), or to emphasise the

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<sup>8</sup>cf. Steiner, p. 7.

uncontrollable illogical development of events (e.g. the execution, A 91), or to estrange the action by placing it in an unfamiliar light (e.g. in the typewriter shop, A 75 - 80).

As long as novelists like Johnson continue to use the structural and linguistic possibilities of fictional writing with such resourcefulness, there seems little danger of the novel becoming any kind of pale imitation of the sociological or historical document. This study has suggested three ways of approaching Johnson's novels which, in our opinion, not only offer proof of the continuing capacity of the novel for the reflection in depth of individual experience at all levels of society, but also emphasise Johnson's closeness to the pulse of life in both parts of Germany. His deliberate reduction of focus within the novels has allowed concentration upon the activities of a small number of characters and required selection of only the most significant background details. By approaching reality through cautious empirical investigation, Johnson has been able to create literary works of unusual importance, remarkable both for their individual detail and for their wider applicability. He has, in a modest yet effective manner, extended our awareness of the problems surrounding modern fictional writing and drawn out attention to some of the most urgent social and political concerns of our day.



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