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Julia Jordan and Martin Ryle (eds.), *B.S. Johnson and Post-War Literature: Possibilities of the Avant Garde* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2014, 221 pp., £55.00 (hbk.)).

We have now passed the point at which B.S. Johnson could be described as a forgotten figure of post-war British literature. As Julia Jordan notes in the introduction to this collection, ‘Johnson now often seems to dominate discussions of the post-war British experimental novel’ (p. 1), and since Philip Tew’s pioneering *BS Johnson: A Critical Reading*¹ and Jonathan Coe’s 2004 biography *Like A Fiery Elephant*² his work has been the subject of several academic symposia as well as scholarly collections and journal articles. There is a B.S. Johnson Society, who in 2014 published the first volume of a dedicated journal, and most of Johnson’s major works are in print with a mainstream publisher. The 2013 volume *Well Done God!* edited by Coe, Jordan and Tew,³ collects some lesser-known short prose and drama, including previously unpublished work. Now his legacy is assured, one might ask what remains to be said about Johnson. *B.S. Johnson and Post-War Literature* addresses this question, suggesting that there is still a great deal more to be said. This collection of twelve essays gives a sense of a broadening and deepening of the field and the freedom to explore aspects of Johnson’s writing that were necessarily marginal to earlier scholarship, most strikingly his engagement with the legacies of modernism and with a wider network of contemporary avant-garde writers. Adam Guy’s ‘Johnson and the *nouveau roman*: *Trawl* and other Butorian Projects’ is exemplary in this respect for the way it traces previous critical comparisons between Johnson and the *nouveau roman* but then pushes them further, exploring what these affinities mean in terms that look beyond superficial formal resemblances or generalised notions of a shared ‘philosophical kinship’ (p. 37). Guy reads Johnson alongside Michel Butor to explore how a dialogue between these writers has the ‘potential to open up a fuller *nouveau roman* context for Johnson’s fiction’ (p. 38); the *nouveau roman* becomes a ‘nodal point’ with a ‘transnational reach’, connecting Johnson to writers including Butor but also Rayner Heppenstall, W.G. Sebald, J.M.G. Le Clézio and others (pp. 50-1). In this way, Guy and a number of other contributors widen the frame of reference for Johnson and challenge the idea that he was a lone crusader for innovative fiction. Other essays in the collection examine some of Johnson’s lesser-

known writing, bringing them into dialogue with the more celebrated works. Paul Vlitos's chapter, for example, returns to Johnson's 'Introduction' to *Aren't You Rather Young to be Writing Your Memoirs?*, reading it alongside the collection it originally introduced, a task made easier since its republication in *Well Done God!* Vlitos argues that in these stories Johnson 'fully works through the implications of [his] critical positions and creative practices' (p. 200), and suggests that the pieces themselves provide a challenge to readerly expectations equally as provocative as the more widely known 'Introduction'. This establishes an important context for the 'Introduction', which is often read as a stand-alone statement of Johnson's aesthetic.

B.S. Johnson and Post-War Literature is divided into two parts. Following Julia Jordan's introduction, which establishes the critical and historical framework, the first part ('Johnson in His Time: Influences and Contemporaries') explores a range of contemporary influences and contexts for Johnson's writing, beginning with Philip Tew's 'cartography' (p. 17) of Johnson's early work. Tew identifies a number of important intellectual and aesthetic staging posts, including Johnson's reading of Frank Harris's 1922 memoir *My Life and Loves*, whose influence is traced via Johnson's novel *Trawl* (1966). These questions of influence and inheritance continue in Adam Guy's essay, discussed above, and in Greg Buchanan's chapter on Johnson's famous 'book in a box' *The Unfortunates* (1969). Buchanan discusses *The Unfortunates* alongside its formal predecessor, Marc Saporta's *Composition No. 1* (1962), to examine 'the importance of the contingency of sequence' (p. 60) for theories of characterisation. His essay also examines the gender implications of Johnson's and Saporta's characterisation, arguing that the comparative under-development of female characters should not be overlooked or excused in favour readings which attribute any implicit misogyny to a critique of the culture at large. As such it provides a challenging counterpoint to the critical tendency to attribute Johnson's sometimes problematic gender politics to a more generalised cultural milieu that resides outside of the author. Sebastian Jenner continues the discussion of *The Unfortunates* in 'B.S. Johnson and the Aleatoric Novel', an essay which also draws on the comparison with Saporta to explore the interplay between randomness and order in relation to questions of narrative temporality. Ultimately, Jenner argues that Johnson's formal innovation in this novel is no gimmick, but rather an attempt to 'expose a more "realistic" consideration of experience' (p. 85). The final two essays in this

section focus on alternative historical and literary frameworks for Johnson's fiction, respectively positioning *Christie Malry's Own Double-Entry* (1973) against the backdrop of the real-life terrorist group the Angry Brigade, and exploring the parallels and distinctions between *Albert Angelo* (1964) and John Wain's thematically similar neo-realist novel *Hurry On Down* (1953). Joseph Darlington's chapter on the Angry Brigade historicises *Christie Malry* within the radical politics of late-sixties and early-seventies Britain, at the same time asking important questions about the under-analysed question of humour in Johnson's fiction, in which light *Christie Malry* might be read as a distant precursor of Chris Morris's *Four Lions* (2010). Martin Ryle's chapter on Johnson and Wain uses series of attentive close readings to suggest how 'Wain's neo-realism, just as much as Johnson's innovation, involves a deliberate choice of means and techniques' (p. 105); and how, as with the Joyce of *Ulysses* (1922), 'innovative form is an integral aspect of [*Albert Angelo's*] engagement with [...] social and cultural tensions' (pp. 111-12). Like Jenner, Ryle examines Johnson's formal experiments not as eye-catching gimmicks but as attempts to use form, including the physical form of the book, to open up new ways of representing new realities.

Part Two of the collection ('Johnson Out of Time: The Persistence of Modernism') follows the recent tendency to think of Johnson as a late modernist rather than a proto-postmodernist and continues the discussion of Joycean parallels in his fiction. Rod Menghan's 'Antepostdated Johnson' argues that like the Joyce of *Finnegans Wake* (1939), Johnson's late fiction is haunted by an 'anterior preparation for posterity' (p. 130), or a sense that it is speaking to a future reader, thereby turning its back on a contemporary audience. This disruption of temporality – or rather *contemporality* – is linked via Deleuze and Guattari's category of 'minor literature' to the disruption of language in Johnson's final novel; Menghan argues that like the 'minor' literature of Kafka, *See the Old Lady Decency* (1975) undermines the language of colonialism, particularly as it relates to hierarchies of value between colony and metropole. This is a complex rhetorical manoeuvre which emphasises Johnson's temporal in-betweenness and argues convincingly that for all of his bluster about being unappreciated, Johnson's fiction was always destined for an audience that had not yet arrived. Questions of legacy are also central to Julia Jordan's essay on Johnson and Beckett, which explores literal and metaphorical evacuation in both authors' work, opening up some fascinating connections

and at the same time resisting the more obvious – and to some degree self-evident – question of influence. Like Beckett, Johnson does not give the reader easy pleasures, and this challenging relationship between the implied author and the reader is the subject of Glyn White’s chapter ‘The Sadism of the Author or the Masochism of the Reader?’, which asks a series of probing questions about the tension between Johnson’s desire to reach out to a readership and his desire to retain control of meaning and the reading process. This challenging relationship between Johnson and his readership is further discussed in Nick Hubble’s essay on Johnson’s first novel, *Travelling People* (1963). Hubble argues that *Travelling People* explores a series of alternatives, including Welshness and queerness, for articulating working class subjectivities, and ultimately identifies experimentalism itself as a way to encode his fiction’s ‘not always explicit non-normative (super-normative) tendencies’ (p. 180). Specifically, he locates it in the mode of ‘autobiografiction’, which encodes the ‘move from personality towards impersonality’ (p. 181). Johnson’s dissatisfaction with the ‘dishonest’ blurring of boundaries between fiction and non-fiction was central to his later rejection of *Travelling People*, but it is precisely this blurring of boundaries that interests Hubble, and by revisiting this neglected novel he is able to identify an important connection the modernist exploration of the constructed, fictionalised self. Following Paul Vlitos’s chapter, discussed above, the final essay in the collection, written by David Hucklesby, again looks back to Johnson’s ‘Introduction’ to *Aren’t You Rather Young to be Writing Your Memoirs?* as well Giles Gordon’s similarly polemical argument for a ‘New Fiction’ in the 1975 anthology *Beyond the Words*. Hucklesby also looks forwards to discuss the future of print in what is often described as an age of new media. His chapter provides a fitting conclusion to the collection, drawing connections with writers such as Mark Z. Danielewski who seek to challenge binary oppositions between old and new media. Just as Johnson and Gordon were calling for a fiction which engaged with the new realities of life in the 1970s, so Danielewski and others are responding to the new media landscape of the twenty-first century in ways that make these earlier writers ‘seem once again remarkably prescient’ (p. 215).

It is encouraging to note that half of the contributors to *B.S. Johnson and Post-War Literature* are PhD candidates or early career researchers, and the interest of this new generation of scholars, along with the strength of the essays themselves, suggests many positive new directions for the field.

It is also encouraging that, as Jordan notes in her introduction, this renewed interest in Johnson has taken place in tandem with a 'renewed interest in in other experimental and avant-garde writers of the period', including Christine Brooke-Rose, Rayner Heppenstall, Ann Quin, Alan Burns, Alexander Trocchi and John Berger (p. 1). Not before time, British fiction of the nineteen sixties and seventies is being reassessed, and what is emerging is a much more complex and dynamic picture than the earlier focus on the mainstream return to realism would suggest. One can only hope that collections such as this will inspire more work not just on Johnson but also on the many other writers who continued to engage with the legacy of modernism long after received histories of the period declare it moribund.

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¹ Philip Tew, *B.S. Johnson: A Critical Reading* (Manchester: Manchester University Press).

² Jonathan Coe, *Like a Fiery Elephant: The Story of B.S. Johnson* (London: Picador, 2004).

³ Jonathan Coe, Philip Tew and Julia Jordan (eds.), *Well Done God! Selected Prose and Drama of B.S. Johnson* (London: Picador, 2013).