

The Themes of Alienation and Mutual Incomprehension in the Novels of Uwe Johnson

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Among the literatures of postwar Europe, German writing occupies a special and difficult position. It has had to be created virtually from nothing, because the twelve year period of Nazi rule between 1933 and 1945 constituted a hiatus; writers at home were silenced or brought into line with state policy in artistic matters, and those in exile, like Brecht and Thomas Mann, were cut off from their linguistic and cultural roots. It has also had to come to terms with the shame and trauma resulting from defeat and the ensuing revelations about genocide, slave labor, and other horrors perpetrated by the police state Hitler set up over most of the German *Sprachraum*. None of the writers who have achieved eminence since 1945 has been either able or willing to elude the necessary confrontation with the facts either of his country's crimes and of its total and crushing defeat, or of the terrible poetic justice meted out by the devastating, pillaging, and raping soldiery of the allied armies repaying eye for eye and tooth for tooth. Nor has it been possible to ignore the obscurity of the continued division of the country, of what Uwe Johnson refers to as *die Grenze*, the border that begins "three miles off the [Baltic] coast with leaping patrol boats," that continues overland as "a ten-yard-wide ploughed control strip [and] pushes into the forest that has been cleared for just that purpose,"¹ and that within eastern territory becomes the fortified wall that drives a deathly wedge between the two Berlins, and makes the western half of the city an anomalous enclave. As Robert R. Heitner writes, "the serious novelist [in Germany today] is likely to be a literary historian and critic in addition to being a creative writer";² and a practicing novelist, Gerd Gaiser, comments that in contemporary German letters "there is no room left for naive geniuses . . . hardly any author publishing today is without advanced university training."³ This training, this apprenticeship in technique, is essential if the writer is to find the right language to come to terms with the realities of the German situation, of defeat, territorial division, and the separate and antagonistic development of rival economies and political systems perverting and twisting the common language into forms the other side ceases first to recognize and then to comprehend. Added to which, the contemporary German writer is faced with a situation of profound social alienation which leads him to look enviously on his colleagues in France, "where," Gaiser claims, "literature holds a central position in society and politics, and the writer traditionally participates in public affairs, indeed is regularly consulted about them."⁴ Even though the French situation is not as rosy as all that, it is certainly better than in Germany. In the communist half of the country the dogmas of socialist realism hold sway and stifle restlessly creative talents; in the capitalist West complacency and excessive comfort threaten to drown with brash vulgarity and an ostentatious display of material prosperity the nagging voice of the writer for whom on neither side of the internal frontier is all for the best in the best of all possible worlds, and who repudiates the smug propaganda of both regimes. No wonder Uwe Johnson told a journalist that he stands

on neither side of the "Wall," but on top of it.⁵ And in the international sphere, finally, the German writer has spent much of the post-war period overcoming his cultural isolation: for, after the long years of Nazi censorship, Joyce, Hemingway, Faulkner, and above all Kafka, had to be rediscovered. If novelists like Uwe Johnson occasionally appear to have been excessively influenced by these forebears, it is quite understandable, and certainly pardonable.⁶

All these factors—the trauma of the defeat and subsequent political division of his country, the need to recreate the literary tradition, and the problem of relating to a self-satisfied and philistine society—are present in Johnson's work, which I find aesthetically the most accomplished to have come out of Germany in recent years. He constitutes, for me, the genuine avant-garde: beside him, Böll appears ponderous, Grass flashy, and Walser arch. And yet his work to date centers on one obsessive theme (the mutual incomprehension of the two Germanies), and certainly lacks the richness and complexity of the world we associate with his rivals. But, like V. S. Naipaul in *A House for Mr Biswas*,⁷ he has produced a masterpiece by concentrating rather than by diffusing his focus. The masterpiece—dominating head and shoulders his other work—is *The Third Book About Achim*, which is concerned with the foredoomed effort to "fix" the real, to determine its true importance and accuracy, and to solidify the past moment in all its sharp vividness. Reality is not grasped by language, but created by it: language not only delimits the world as Wittgenstein rightly perceived, it also structures it. Johnson—like Nabokov, Simon, and Borges among the other great neo-modernists—has seized upon this essential truth, and explores it with dazzling virtuosity and invention. But before embarking on a close analysis of the novel, I will offer a few comments about Johnson's other books, since the available criticism in English of the contemporary German novel has relatively little to say about him, which is curious in the light of Johnson's standing in his own country, where he was awarded the Georg Büchner Prize in 1971, and in the world literary community, which honored him with the International Publisher's Prize for *The Third Book About Achim* in 1962. It may be that the alleged narrowness of his subject matter has led English-speaking readers and critics to underestimate him, though he makes all but the insensitive feel acutely his own pain over the barbed wire entanglements which split his nation in two; or the turgid and stilted translations of some of his books may be to blame. Whatever the reason, he is certainly neglected in the English-speaking world.⁸

His first novel, *Speculations about Jacob* (1959),⁹ was published when he had just escaped from his native East Germany to the West, at the age of twenty-five. The novel opens, arrestingly, with the death of its hero, the railway signalman of the title, and consists of various "speculations" offered to explain the mysterious circumstances surrounding the manner in which he was killed. But Jacob's death is never elucidated; the various contributions of those who knew him tend to befog rather than clarify the issues, and there is no omniscient surrogate of the author to sort it all out. And since it transpires that Jacob had been offered the opportunity of settling in the West, but had turned it down and returned to the Democratic Republic, his story foreshadows the theme of Johnson's next work, *The Third Book About Achim*.

This was preceded by a novella called *An Absence*,¹⁰ which explores at much shorter length one aspect of the subsequent novel, namely the trip which the journalist Karsch makes to East Germany to visit his ex-mistress.

In the course of that journey; which profoundly disorients him so that, on his return, he feels a complete outsider in his native West, he makes a half-hearted attempt to write a third biography of the champion cyclist Achim who now lives with his former girlfriend. But in *An Absence* the book about Achim is secondary to the theme of alienation. As a westerner Karsch feels ill at ease in the Democratic Republic: he finds his German misunderstood because although the language east of the divide is syntactically identical to his own there are appreciable lexical differences which have grown up over the years, and it is these which make communication difficult. When even a word like "democratic" means one thing on this side, and quite another on that, Karsch's difficulties are understandable. But matters are no better back home: he receives threats and insults for his alleged sympathy with the communist regime. Unhappy and deeply disillusioned with Federal Republic politics—he is also lionized by the young for possessing an (equally imaginary) insight into a system they admire at a safe distance—Karsch retires to Italy and neutral territory. He still continues to publish regularly in the West German papers, and to the outsider his trip seems not to have affected him much. But the reader, who has been the spectator of the collapse of all Karsch's certainties, knows better. Like Germany itself, he is broken inside. His "Reise wegwohin" has been more a mythic than an actual journey, a journey into and beyond himself, as Beckett's Moran found, also, in his unsuccessful quest for Molloy.¹¹

The only other work that has so far been translated into English is *Two Views*¹² which appeared in Great Britain before its predecessor *The Third Book About Achim*. It is a much slighter and less impressive work. A West German press photographer, Herr B., is the lover of Nurse D., who works in East Berlin. After the Wall goes up, he arranges for her escape at considerable risk, although his feelings for her (and hers for him) are curiously tepid and ambiguous. She offers only to "think over his proposal of marriage"¹³ and is much more immediately concerned to inspect the Western hospital which is so much better than the ones she is used to, and to get a job and a room on the unfamiliarly free market. Their story is narrated alternately from B.'s and D.'s points of view, but always in the third person by a narrator, who reveals himself at the end: "She told her hosts politely, a little constrainedly, about East Berlin. Later she made me promise. 'But you must make up everything you write!' she said. It is made up."¹⁴

This narrator thus claims responsibility for the "two views," B.'s and D.'s, East and West. The views reflect in turn the isolation of two minds, and beyond that, of course, the separation of the two Germanies. But somehow this novel feels "contrived," elaborated to a formula, and so does not project the territorial division with anything like the poignancy of *The Third Book About Achim*. It is a more exciting story, of course: D.'s escape is a cliff-hanger, and the suspense is built up by the classic device of portraying the protagonist's own impatience and anxiety. In one particularly graphic moment we read how "she enumerated the dead, the wounded, in the canal, in the barbed-wire entanglement, machine-gunned along the walls, in the sewer pipes stunned with gas . . ." (p. 148). The book is rather sensational, however, and tends to trivialize what the others convey with such intensely genuine anguish.

Nevertheless this novel is well in the lineage in so far as its title incorporates a notion common to them all. The word "view" implies conjecture, speculation, or hypothesis, and all Johnson's works ask the same question: what is the truth, what is the reality behind the appearance? The answer

invariably given is that there are many possibilities for interpretation, that there are no absolute truth-values, that enquiry must remain open-ended and ambiguous, and any report cannot help but be elliptical, cryptic, and allusive. Such indeed is the case with *The Third Book About Achim* which is, among other things, an account of how the third book about Achim failed to get written.

As in *An Absence*, Karsch visits East Germany at the urgent request of his former mistress Karin, a famous film actress who is now living with Achim T., the cycling champion of the Democratic Republic. Karsch, who appears to live modestly in the Federal Republic, thus finds himself associating with VIPs on the other side of the border. But why he goes East so precipitately, without even advising his friends of his absence, contrary to his usual practice, is never made clear. Perhaps, thinks the narrator, "when they separated they very likely said to each other: I won't forget you. If anything goes wrong . . . or something to that effect" (pp. 4-5). But if that can explain Karsch's prompt response, it does not account for the request, which is made by long-distance call late at night. When he meets Karin he wonders why she had asked him to come: ". . . her invitation has sounded casual, not particularly friendly, without any explanation" (p. 6), and he even feels he is not the point at all. It seems that Achim suggested the invitation: but why? To have his biography written for the third time? But in that case he miscalculates: Karsch is not going to produce the sort of book Achim expects, and in fact the biography is never finished. It turns up too much in Achim's past that would compromise him if made public: his Nazi youth, his resentment at the Soviet occupation troops (the "glorious liberators" of later years), his illegal purchase of a three-speed gear in West Berlin with East German currency, and above all his participation (voluntary or accidental?) in the uprising of 1953. Damning evidence of this last and most serious episode, which seems to have earned Achim a jail sentence, comes into Karsch's hands in the form of a photograph showing Achim marching at the head of a column of protesters. Karin is greatly worried about this discovery, although she appears to have left Achim and gone to live with one Herr Fleisg, a prominent official in the State publishing organization. Achim, too, feels he is in danger: "They want to trap me," he says (p. 236). Other people seem to be involved in the intrigue, notably an innocent-looking young girl whose boyfriend has absconded to the West, and who may have "planted" the incriminating photograph which Karsch later finds in his jacket pocket. She and her friends, who refrain from political comment when they meet Karsch socially, despite his attempts to draw them, are according to Karin "testing" him. What for? To assist in escapes to the West? But this is set in 1960 when the Berlin Wall had not yet been built. To trap him into compromising himself? In other words, are they opponents of the regime or *agents provocateurs*? Karsch does not have time to find out. Quite independently of these events Karsch has given a lift in his car to a doubtful young man in a garage mechanic's overalls who asked to be dropped at a spot where no roads led off in any direction. The police later call on Karsch and question him about this incident. On their next visit they invite him, as they firmly but politely express it, to refrain from stopping again their side of the border. He was leaving, at the request of Karin and Achim, in any case. When he gets home he finds lots of letters to answer and receives a mysterious telephone call(". . . a soft murmured conversation among several people," p. 246, perhaps the group he met in the East).

The novel ends rather abruptly at that point, quite differently from the novella version of the story. Karsch has failed to write the third book

about Achim because it is not the outward and public person of Achim which interests him, but the "formation of a personality against a background of social and political change that is bewildering in its impact on the individual,"¹⁵ but such a portrait, based on conjecture and the interpretation of scraps of evidence gleaned from a number of sources, would hardly be acceptable to Achim and certainly not to his political masters. They want, and he needs, a simple picture of a people's hero whose motivations are politically impeccable and whose life story serves to inspire socialist youth to imitate his glorious achievements and uphold with him the purity of the marxist ideal against the capitalistic corruption of the decadent West. For, although Karsch's projected book about Achim is no more "true" in an absolute sense than any other account composed by human agency, it is a lot more accurate than the windy rhetoric of state propaganda, which is the sort of abuse of language that was then making it harder and harder for the two Germanies to conduct a dialogue.

But the main reason why Karsch cannot ultimately write his book about Achim, much as he and Achim want the biography to be completed, is not political in any but the widest sense. It is the same as the reason why he cannot penetrate the intrigues that enmesh him like a fly in a spider's web: and *that* is what Johnson calls, in lapidary phrase, "the border: the difference: the distance" (p. 246). This is because, as Malcolm Bradbury puts it, the line, of itself, "involves a complexity of viewpoint and a crisis for language."¹⁶ The three facets of territorial division, the barrier itself, the differences it propagates, and the resulting mental and spiritual isolation of the two peoples on either side of the line, weave their leitmotif through the novel, beginning it, ending it, and sustaining it throughout. More than that, they of themselves necessarily *generate* the book, which is written ostensibly in response to persistent questioning of the narrator by a friend or acquaintance (someone close enough to be addressed informally as "du"). This narrator claims that "the characters are invented;" that "the events do not refer to similar ones but to the border: the difference: the distance and the attempt to describe it" (p. 246); that he starts out with something simple and sober, like "she telephoned him," but that the moment he adds "across the border" in a casual fashion, "as though it were the most natural thing in the world," he is caught, he has to explain that "in the Germany of the fifties there existed a territorial frontier," and he perceives at once "how awkward [that] second sentence looks after the first one" (p. 3); but his novel is begun. The interlocutor keeps prodding him with questions such as "How was it?" and "Who is this Achim?" (pp. 5, 7). The replies, longer or shorter as the case may be, constitute the only chapters into which the novel is divided (unlike *Two Views*, which is neatly built in ten instalments, five for D. and five for B.). Relations between interrogator and speaker are not always harmonious: "Enough of that!" exclaims one, "Don't complain" retorts the other (p. 193), but complicity is usually more in evidence than bickering (cf. "you know the feeling," p. 243). In any case, the purpose is utilitarian. This is how the narrator explains it:

The gaps in these conversations are not meant to create pleasant suspense; they are due to the story. Because: if a man visits this country and understands nothing, everything must be considered separately, comparisons are impossible, he speaks the language but fails to communicate, the currency is different, and so is the government: and he is supposed to reunify himself with that one of these days; what does the visitor do? He asks questions, he says more than is written here. This has been selected because that was why he stayed, and he might have realized

from the blanks even then what he didn't perceive: that he ought to try the unification.

Moreover, this is not a story. (pp. 95-96)

In other words, the two main themes of this novel—the fictiveness of fiction, and the alien nature, for the West German, of Eastern Germany—imply each other. Any attempt at telling a true story is false, any attempt at telling a fiction may have a certain explicit truth; just as undertaking a visit across the inter-German frontier involves necessarily an interrogation into the status and truth-value of reality itself. Just as that reality is hard to grasp, so the fiction we are reading folds back upon itself, doubts itself, expresses weariness, offers purely provisional descriptions, parodies official rhetorics, and so on, in a desperate attempt to voice skepticism and draw attention to its own fictiveness. Everything is thus progressively undermined; the feasibility of getting at the truth about the political situation is mocked, and more seriously, there is the fact of the investigator's own selectivity and bias. Karsch writes in detail in his draft biography of the day Achim crossed the border and spent money illegally on a set of gears, "but he had omitted the afternoon in the thickly overgrown ditch beside the autobahn where Achim took a swim in the ice-cold muddy water with a girl" (p. 171), as well as other things, because they "had not fitted into his selection, or were too numerous, although they would have completed his description, and incompleteness is a lie?" (p. 172). But "Karsch didn't want everything about Achim, he only wanted to pick what distinguished him (in Karsch's opinion) from other people, from other bicycle riders, for that was the purpose of his choice among the different episodes of a life, that's what he wanted of the many truths" (p. 172).

Achim had reasons to feel aggrieved since, as the narrator pertinently reminds us, "they were his truths, after all" (p. 174), and Karsch had little right to treat them so cavalierly. Achim is happy that Karsch turns up some good stories about how he improved his bicycle and acquired a mechanic for his team, and he approves of the amount of hard technical information about the machine and about the body that rides it at the very limit of strength and endurance; but he cannot be pleased when Karsch points up the hesitations and ambivalence behind what Achim is now pleased to call, in deference to the masters who have allowed him fame and influence, "My Development Toward Political Awareness" (p. 209). In the end the two men fail to understand each other: "It's shabby to speak this way of us," says Achim, "a guest doesn't do that" (p. 235). Their mutual incomprehension reflects in little the bafflement Achim experiences during his short trip to the West to purchase what no one manufactures at home, a three-speed gear: in a remarkable passage, Johnson compares his feelings to that of being alone in a strange town on a Sunday. The central phrase in the passage, "Unknown persons discussed unknown things in an unknown language" (p. 169), so expressive of alienation, is more forcible in the original German: "Fremde sprachen über Fremdes in fremder Sprache."⁷ Illustrating Johnson's gift for rhythm and terseness of phrasing is expressing his theme.

This theme is that Karsch, returning from East Germany empty-handed, is brought face to face with the impossibility of telling the story of another person. "Achim knew what Karsch could only guess at," writes Johnson's narrator (p. 171), but by the same token Karsch knows other things of which Achim is ignorant. From our own viewpoint we misinterpret habitually, and our misapprehensions are characteristic of all attempts to understand reality.

And just as we can never finally know another's life and modes of perception, so we can never truly know places. Karsch's journey eastwards is truly anywhere—and nowhere. Just as for the Jew of Malta's act of fornication, indeed, the past reality of Johnson's Karsch lies "in another country," where "the wench is dead."¹⁸

NOTES

¹*The Third Book about Achim*, tr. Ursule Molinaro (London: Cape, 1968), p. 3. This is the edition I shall be citing throughout this essay, but with a few silent modifications to bring the English into closer relation with the German text. The German title is *Das Dritte Buch über Achim* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1961). For several helpful suggestions incorporated in the essay I am grateful to Dr. Colin Butler of the Department of German, University College, Toronto.

²*The Contemporary Novel in German: A Symposium*, ed. Robert R. Heitner (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1967), p. 5.

³"The Present Quandary of German Novelists," in *The Contemporary Novel in German*, p. 81. Like other critics of the German novel today, I am greatly indebted to Gaiser's remarkable essay on the present state of fiction-writing in his country.

⁴Gaiser, p. 85.

⁵Likewise in reply to an intervention at the Samuel Beckett Colloquium, held in West Berlin in October 1973, he declared that he wrote neither in "West German" nor in "East German," but in his "own German."

⁶Kafka's influence is fairly marked in the opening paragraph of "Eine Reise wegwohin," 1960, collected in *Karsch, und andere Prosa* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1964), p. 29, and Faulkner's in parts of *The Third Book about Achim* (cf. pp. 243-245). According to Gaiser, what postwar German novelists learned from Kafka was the art of understatement, while Hemingway provided an example of "coolness."

⁷V. S. Naipaul, *A House for Mr Biswas* (London: André Deutsch, 1961).

⁸Among readily accessible English writing, there is a rather dismissive entry in the *Penguin Companion to European Literature* (ed. A. K. Thorlby), and scant reference in *Critical Strategies: German Fiction in the Twentieth Century*, by Elizabeth Boa and J. H. Reid (London: Edward Arnold, 1972). In *The Modern German Novel*, by H. M. Waidson (London: Oxford University Press, 1971) there is a short, factual entry on pp. 123-125; there is no separate essay on Johnson in Heitner's symposium; but Malcolm Bradbury has a few perceptive comments, to which I am indebted, in his essay on the contemporary novel in *The Twentieth-Century Mind: History, Ideas, and Literature in Britain*, ed. C. B. Cox and A. E. Dyson, vol. III (London: Oxford University Press, 1972), pp. 319-385.

⁹Uwe Johnson, *Speculations about Jacob* (London: Cape, 1963); *Mutmaßungen über Jakob* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1959).

¹⁰Uwe Johnson, *An Absence* (London: Cape, 1969); the German title, "Eine Reise wegwohin," in *Karsch, und andere Prosa* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1964), literally means "a journey to somewhere or other."

¹¹See Samuel Beckett, *Molloy* (New York: Grove Press, 1955).

¹²Uwe Johnson, *Two Views*, trans. Richard and Clara Winston (London: Cape, 1967). The German title is *Zwei Ansichten* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1965).

¹³*Two Views*, p. 183. In this translation B. is perversely named Dietbert and D. Beate.

¹⁴*Two Views*, p. 183.

¹⁵Waidson, *The Modern German Novel*, p. 125.

¹⁶Bradbury, in *The Twentieth-Century Mind*, p. 378. The richness of Johnson's language is difficult to render in English. The phrase "die Grenze: den Unterschied: die Entfernung" has not only the literal meaning of "the border: the difference: the distance," but a metaphorical connotation which might be rendered as "the borderline: the difference: the remoteness (or gap)." In other words, the notorious *Zonengrenze* between the two Germanies is not only a political and geographical reality but also a metaphor of all divisions and discrepancies of mind, and Johnson's subtle linguistic ambiguities (in the Empsonian sense) reflect both orders of truth.

¹⁷*Das Dritte Buch über Achim* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1971), p. 155.

¹⁸Christopher Marlowe, *The Jew of Malta*, IV. i.