Ambiguity in Style: A Study of Uwe Johnson's "Osterwasser"

KURT J. FICKERT, *Wittenberg University*

The ambiguity evoked by Uwe Johnson's prose has become the object of critical admiration and complaint. Regarding the obfuscations in Johnson's stories to be the result of his endeavor to avoid beautiful writing (das Schönschreiberische) and to achieve a faithful reproduction of today's reality, Manfred Durzak finds that Johnson has no equal among contemporary German authors.[1] Just as uncompromising is Karlheinz Deschner, who pontificates that Johnson writes "das häßlichste Deutsch unserer Zeit."[2] And Henry Hatfield, even while conceding Johnson's contribution to modern German literature to be valuable, expresses his reservations about a style providing occasions when "boredom threatens" and based on literary devices which "might well have hardened into mannerisms."[3] To judge the effectiveness of Johnson's experiments in stylistics, I intend to consider "Osterwasser," a short story from the collection *Karsch, und andere Prosa* (1964), because it is only in small measure involved with the ambiguous situation of a divided Germany and it was written at a time which falls between the especially unique *Mutmaßungen über Jakob* (1959) and the equally so *Jahrestage* (1970).

In a conversation with Horst Bienek, Johnson has averred that he has not consciously developed a prose style.[4] Its hallmarks are, however, readily discernible and have been duly noted by a number of literary critics. An outstanding characteristic of Johnson's writing is, as Durzak (p. 184) among many others has established, the lack of a point of view, an organizing element. Johnson's narrative consists only on occasion of material presented by the author; it is at other times a collage of disconnected conversations, parenthetical references, and interior monologues.[5] In achieving these juxtapositions, Johnson must as a matter of course shift from the third-person to the first-person point of view and back; it also follows that the narrative past tense must yield, when appropriate, to the immediacy of the present.[6] Since progress in his stories evolves from a series of loose associations of ideas, Johnson tends to ignore the rule which insists that the paragraph be an identifiable construct, and he paragraphs indifferently (see Hatfield, p. 163). He is equally illogical when he approaches the problem of subordination in the sentence. His solution to the difficulties involved (especially, of course, in German) when two dependent clauses appear jointly is anacoluthic, or, by way of avoiding subordination altogether, he favors parataxis (see Durzak, p. 246)—a procedure almost foisted on him both by the vast amount of conversational content in his stories and by his preference for biblical contexts. The conversational style of Johnson's prose (Deschner calls it "verpöbelte Zungenfertigkeit"), which permits him to make grammatical errors (Stilfehler), also provides him with ready-made metaphors. Like the diction of Wolfgang Borchert, Johnson's is poetic. To add another measure of ambiguity to his prose, Johnson has evolved his own system of punctuation, which frequently assigns to the comma the role of the period (see Durzak, p. 249).

---

[1] Manfred Durzak, *Der deutsche Roman der Gegenwart* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1971), p. 245. See also Mark Boulby, *Uwe Johnson* (New York: Ungar, 1974), p. 5, who praises Johnson for creating "a language that . . . represents an original and lasting contribution to German prose."

[2] Karlheinz Deschner, *Talente, Dichter, Dilettanten: Überschätzte und unterschätzte Werke in der deutschen Literatur der Gegenwart* (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner, 1946), p. 208.

[3] Henry Hatfield, *Crisis and Continuity in Modern German Fiction* (Ithaca: Cornell, 1969), p. 151.

[4] Horst Bienek, *Werkstattgespräche mit Schriftstellern* (München: DTV, 1965), p. 112.

[5] Cf. Hatfield, p. 163: "Actually Johnson is attempting very consciously to find a style located as near as possible to the stream of consciousness."

[6] See Paul F. Botheroyd, *Ich und Er: First and Third Person Self-Reference and Problems of Identity in Three Contemporary German Language Novels* (The Hague: Mouton, 1976), p. 68.

What purpose do these stylistic abberations or sophistications serve in "Osterwasser," where they at one time or another all appear? In "Osterwasser" Johnson sets out for once to tell a rather uncomplicated story in which the human element has greater significance than the political.[7] As is his wont, he uses the characters who pass from one work to the other, to comment on the coming to maturity of a thirteen-year-old girl. She is Gesine Cresspahl, one of the major figures in *Mutmaßungen über Jakob* and the protagonist in *Jahrestage,* both concerning events occurring later in her life. Her search for "Easter water," that is, water drawn from a spring on Easter morning, which, according to folklore, will provide health and good looks, leads her on a path of self-discovery. Johnson as narrator begins by establishing the year in which the events of the story take place—spring, 1946—and by setting the scene specifically: Gesine is standing in front of the tall mirror next to the kitchen door. The transition from the report of the impersonal observer to the reproduction of an interior monologue is precipitous: "Sie ging in den Spiegel hinein."[8] Simultaneously, the metaphoric substratum in "Osterwasser" surfaces, when Gesine compares herself to "die Katze, die ihr eben durch den Sinn schlich" (p. 7).

The rapidity with which these shifts in perspective occur is evident once again in the next shift in the narration, which involves a telescoping of time. The ambiguity introduced by the figurative language concerning the mirror and the cat is heightened when Johnson suddenly pictures Gesine sitting on the window ledge, having decided to leave the house surreptitiously in search of Easter water. Meanwhile, Gesine's ruminations continue; as the thoughts of a young girl they are reproduced in a conversational tone with the diction of colloquial speech ("sprechen durfte man kein Sterbenswort; eine Quelle bei Jerichow *wußte* sie aber nicht"; p. 7). Having let Gesine escape through the window in the midst of her meditations, Johnson abruptly offers a comment on a character who, it may be assumed, has influenced Gesine in her decision to leave by the window, although his presence in the story is entirely peripheral—Cresspahl; Johnson summarizes the attitude of Gesine's father in one sentence: "Ihr Vater hielt mehr von Türen" (p. 8). Subsequently, Johnson takes a further and wider step away from the stream-of-consciousness presentation of Gesine's inner and outer journey. He associates Cresspahl and his house with the situation which prevails in all other houses in Jerichow and reports on it in general terms, changing from the reporter to the essayist. The impersonality with which Johnson narrates here is emphasized by the use of the impersonal passive: "Vor den Türen mußte heutzutage angeklopft werden" (p. 8). When Johnson turns again to the subject of Gesine, he remains the observer, describing in detail the progress of her walk along the outskirts of the town. The calling into play of these diverse narrative techniques all within five introductory paragraphs has served to produce a realistic picture which avoids inflicting on the reader either the superficiality of an impressionistic sketch or the tediousness of a naturalistic reproduction.

---

[7] Hatfield finds that this situation prevails in all of Johnson's work: "Politics interests [sic] him primarily as it affects people; he seems to have little or no interest in governments or parties as such" (p. 150).

[8] Uwe Johnson, *Karsch, und andere Prosa* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1964), p. 7. Further references in the text.

With the introduction of the second important character in the story, with which the action begins, Johnson resumes his role as narrator. Not only does he reveal what Jakob and Gesine say and do, but he also informs the reader that Jakob is six years older than Gesine and that he works for a farmer whose farm lies a two-hour walk away from Jerichow. The scene is presented, however, in the manner of a motion picture flashback, since Johnson begins with the words "on Saturday before Easter." The depth of the relationship between the two young people, an important aspect of "Osterwasser," is gauged by their conversation, which is elliptical. Their ability to communicate almost without listening to one another is also conveyed by Johnson by way of depicting their looking away from each other: "Er sah etwas neben ihren Augen" (p. 10). Even this significant detail serves a dual purpose in Johnson's pursuit of ambiguity, since at the moment someone else is coming into the room whom he might be catching a glimpse of. Likewise subliminally, the objects on the table across which Gesine and Jakob face one another have symbolic significance. The main theme of the story, Gesine's awakening to a sense of identity and sexual awareness, is linked on the subconscious level to references to Easter (the East), eggs, the rabbit—all symbols of birth (rebirth) and fecundity. The very movements of the characters are mentioned for more than their appropriateness in the situation: "Sie schloß die Augen, legte den Kopf zurück und ließ sich das Ei in den Hals laufen . . ." (p. 9; at this point Gesine is probably only imagining eating the egg). After this encounter at the kitchen table, Gesine goes to bed and continues to talk, but now only to herself. Johnson intrudes on her thoughts with a remark of his own: "Wenn der Hunger wehtat, hörte er auf gesund zu sein" (p. 10). Once again pairing a detail in his narrative with a comment of a general nature, Johnson next relates that Gesine, getting dressed for her excursion into the Easter world, puts on her aunt's old confirmation dress, even though her father has forbidden her to wear a dress, insisting, it must be assumed, that during the Russian occupation she disguise herself as a boy. This compilation of shifts in time and point of view, imagery, realistic description, and essayistic commentary is anything but a random collection of loosely associated ideas. Wilhelm Schwarz has revealed in *Der Erzähler Uwe Johnson* that Johnson usually writes not more than one page a day.[9]

Gesine's adventures in the woods, where she looks for a spring and encounters a deranged soldier returning from captivity in Russia, follow in rough outline those of Little Red Riding Hood (Rotkäppchen) who is attacked by the wolf and rescued by the hunter. Johnson does not stress the parallel, but his narrative style becomes that of a storyteller in this section of "Osterwasser.' His prose consists of short declarative sentences, joined, as always in his work, by commas; there is even an instance of the personification so frequently found in fairy tales: "Büsche jagten sie." Like Little Red Riding Hood, carrying her basket, Gesine goes into the forest with a huge pot, the rim of which bruises her leg. Thus the occasion arises for Johnson to use one of his favorite words, according to Wilhelm Schwarz: Kante (also kantig).[10] Despite the straightforward description of this episode, Johnson blurs the clarity of the picture he draws by concentrating on the confused impressions that Gesine has of the situation: "Später wußte sie nicht mehr, ob sie den Rauch eher gesehen oder eher gerochen hatte. Er war so plötzlich vor ihr, als sei sie in die Russen hineingelaufen" (p. 12). Gesine's flight from the Russians and her subsequent struggle with the German homecoming soldier—which, incidentally, foreshadow events in her later life—necessarily have an erratic aspect. What happens is unclear, even though the description is overly detailed.

---

[9] Wilhelm Johannes Schwarz, *Der Erzähler Uwe Johnson* (Bern: Franke, 1970), p. 50.

[10] W. J. Schwarz, p. 45. Later in the story the tents of the Russian soldiers are "kantig," as is the rim of the sea, which is, strangely enough, at the same time "verwischt."

Gesine's perception of these events as hectic, unrelated to the law of cause and effect, provides the background for the sudden appearance of Jakob. In fact, since Johnson depicts the scene from her point of view, and Jakob actually intrudes on her struggle to free herself from the soldier's embrace, the impression is left with the reader that she wills Jakob to come to her rescue and that he might not physically be there: 'Sie merkte Jakob schon auf der anderen Seite aus den Büschen treten, als sie den Kopf halb aus dem breithändigen Griff zwängen und zubeißen konnte" (p. 14). Adding to the nightmarish aspect of the situation is the lack of conversation between Gesine and her rescuer since both are aware that her quest for Easter water will be successful only if she speaks not a word. Once again, Johnson's prose has the tone of the Märchen as he relates the extraordinary in terms of the commonplace: for example, when they leave the beaten, prostrate soldier behind, "sie kamen an eine tote Feuerstelle, neben der ein Aktentasche lag, ein Kochgeschirr, offene Konservendosen, Decken der Luftwaffe" (p. 15). The role that Jakob plays, the Lohengrin-like champion of innocence who arrives mysteriously on the scene, is made even more evident by a dramatic shift in point of view on the occasion when Gesine finally bathes herself in Easter water. As narrator, Johnson first describes their journey to the pond and ends with the observation: "Jakob blieb stehen." The next sentence begins a new paragraph, and the reader finds that he is now sharing Gesine's perceptions: "Vom Wehr aus sah sie ihn auf einem Koppelpfahl hocken, mit ausgestreckten Beinen, das Gesicht gekehrt gegen das Vorholz, hinter dem Jerichow war" (p. 16). The mystery of Jakob's coming to Gesine's aid at the crucial moment, when Johnson has previously not even suggested that he might be following her, is heightened by his remoteness in this scene, in which Gesine disrobes and plunges "in das schwarzklare Wasser." Underlining the dreamlike element in these events, Johnson brings them to a close with another Romantic personification: "Der Bischofsmützenturm zitterte schon im Tageslicht" (p. 16).

"Osterwasser" ends with a few paragraphs which describe the aftermath of the rites of coming to maturity. Although the time is specifically Easter morning, Johnson indicates that more than several hours have passed between Gesine's leap from the window and her return through the door: "Inge kam, mit der sie *vor Zeiten einmal* befreundet gewesen war . . ." (p. 16). By abandoning the more or less narrative style which he has used to depict the main events of the story and resuming the tone of colloquial speech, Johnson can more readily deal with the subtlety of the time relationships. The terse statement "Den vergaß sie" disposes of the possibility that Gesine's encounter with a rapist (if he was one) might have had a traumatic effect and allows the implication to stand that her search for Easter water had resulted in her finding that she loved Jakob.[11] One of the last sentences in "Osterwasser" is a compendium of all the stylistic devices—shifts in time, colloquialisms, the run-on sentence, the employment of the demonstrative pronoun, etc.—which Johnson uses to make his own style both so unique and ambiguous: "Aber lange später noch trieb das Datum von Ostern, ein geöffnetes Fenster, davor rasch ins Frühjahr laufende Luft ihr Herz so schnell wie das des Mädchens, das bei Cresspahl am Tisch saß, mit einer Hand im wassersträhnigen Haar den Widerschein des Blicks in Jakobs Gesicht las und sich gesagt sein ließ, daß Weinen gegen Osterwasser nicht bedeutet, damit du schön wirst, gut zu sehen" (p. 17).

---

[11] To borrow one of Johnson's stylistic devices, the "editorial" question, so prominent in *Das dritte Buch über Achim*, I would suggest that "Osterwasser" is the answer to the question posed by Johnson's readers: "When did Gesine and Jakob fall in love?"

Johnson's endeavor to achieve ambiguity and ambivalence in his narration through the use of stylistic devices derives from his appreciation of the fact that contemporary fiction must have a form compatible with contemporary life. Since the comprehension of reality of today's reader is fragmentary, the writer of narrative literature can no longer present to him a world in which clarity reigns or a story in which there are no loose ends. Describing the art of fiction in modern times, Wilhelm Emrich has concluded that no human action is completely comprehensible to a writer and that no human being has a definable character for him.[12] Because it is Johnson's concern to deal with everyday life and people[13] including the effect on them of political and socioeconomic matters which at times take on the appearance of their destiny, he must necessarily reflect their lack of awareness of the total picture. Johnson perceives that no man can fully grasp the complexity of his own personality and of his relationship with others. Of particular importance in regard to this uncertainty about himself is a human being's consciousness of a dichotomy which exists in the manner in which he seeks to understand himself. Johnson has addressed this problem in a conversation with a newspaper reporter: "In each man's life there exists a conscious past—what you think of yourself—and there is the real past that actually occurred and there are tensions between the two."[14] This principle guides the depiction of events in "Osterwasser" and explains the occasional nebulousness in the telling which Johnson has deliberately introduced. The relationship between Gesine and Jakob progresses not in an orderly fashion, and their awareness of their feelings is a matter of hindsight: thus the shifts in perspective and in time are motifs per se in "Osterwasser." Gesine's impressions of her experience in the woods and her recollection of it overlap in that Johnson uses both the stream-of-consciousness technique and straightforward narration. In addition, the mythical or fairy tale points of reference provide his story of a young girl's growing up and falling in love with an aura of universality.

---

[12] Wilhelm Emrich, *Deutsche Literatur in unserer Zeit* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1959), p. 64.

[13] See Albert Berger, "Uwe Johnson" in *Deutsche Dichter der Gegenwart*, ed. Benno von Wiese (Berlin: Erich Schmidt, 1973), p. 652: "Es geht vielmehr um das durchschnittliche Leben." See also back to footnote 7.

[14] Phyllis Meras, "Talk with Uwe Johnson," *New York Times Book Review*, 72, no. 17 (April 23 1967), p. 43.