

# The Theme of a Separate Peace in Uwe Johnson's *Zwei Ansichten*

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Two years before Uwe Johnson published *Zwei Ansichten* (in 1965), he had translated John Knowles's critically and commercially successful novel *A Separate Peace*. The title, which summarizes the book's thesis that in an age of intense interpersonal and societal conflicts the individual might be compelled to withdraw within himself to maintain his integrity, is a phrase borrowed from the work of Ernest Hemingway. At a climactic moment in *A Farewell to Arms*, the protagonist declines to participate further in the senseless slaughter of the First World War: "I was going to forget the war. I had made a separate peace."<sup>1</sup> Since Johnson's chief interest is also the plight of the individual in a world in which he is the victim of political pressures which force him to violate his moral convictions, it would seem pertinent to explore Johnson's resolution of this dilemma in the light of Hemingway's. *Zwei Ansichten* lends itself particularly well to such a comparison, since it has an additional number of similarities, even if somewhat superficial ones, to *A Farewell to Arms*.

Both novels concern themselves with ill-fated love affairs, and in both instances the women involved are young, attractive nurses whose commitment to their lovers is more substantial than that of the men in their lives. However, Catherine Barkley in *A Farewell to Arms* is essentially a more passive figure than Fräulein D., even though Catherine's role is the more melodramatic one. In *Zwei Ansichten*, in fact, Fräulein D. holds the center of the stage and assumes the part of protagonist,<sup>2</sup> despite Johnson's apportioning of the book into chapters alternately dealing with D. and her friend B. and his claim to be presenting *Zwei Ansichten*. Fräulein D., whose cryptic name alludes both to the *Deutsche Demokratische Republik* and to her typifying one of the many hard-working people in that Socialist state,<sup>3</sup> does not simply acquiesce to her lover's plan to have her smuggled out of East Germany into his arms and a world of plenty. (Catherine Barkley, on the other hand, has—and would want—no choice other than to accompany her lover into exile and safety, since she is pregnant.) The reason for D.'s hesitancy lies rooted in her sense of self-worth; although she cares for B. and recalls their brief affair with warmth, she resists being compelled to leave her homeland because a wall has been erected to imprison its citizens. She would almost rather put up with the annoyances and frustrations which characterize life in a socialized state with its plethora of restrictions than abandon her family (although her relationship with its members is not satisfactory) and a way of life which has some relevance to her Weltanschauung.

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<sup>1</sup>Ernest Hemingway, *A Farewell to Arms* (New York: Macmillan, 1929), p. 243. Hemingway had used the phrase before in one of the interchapters in the short story collection *In Our Time*.

<sup>2</sup>See Manfred Durzak, *Der deutsche Roman der Gegenwart* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1971), p. 227: "Zweifels- ohne ist die D. für Johnson die eigentliche Hauptperson."

<sup>3</sup>"Ich bin überzeugt, daß die 'einfachen Leute' das erheblichere Beispiel abgeben für Lebensverhältnisse in unserer Zeit . . ." Johnson states in "Auskünfte und Abreden zu 'Zwei Ansichten'" (auf Fragen von Mike S. Schoelman), *Zwei Ansichten* (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1968), p. 117.

This attitude identifies Fräulein D. as one of several Johnsonian protagonists who undergo an identity crisis when confronted with choices which political circumstances force upon them; unable to accept disillusionment with the one government and unwilling to accept the risk of it with the other, they resort to flight to a place where commitment is not required: e.g., Karsch to Italy, Gesine to New York, Cresspahl to Richmond in England.<sup>4</sup> For Fräulein D. West Berlin represents such a quasi-neutral place after she has given up her commitment to live with B. in West Germany. Her resolution of the predicament in which she has become involved is her decision to transcend the conflict of the two Germanys and to sign a separate peace. "She didn't even consider giving up Berlin," Johnson states, indicating her resolve not to let either of the two German states claim her allegiance.<sup>5</sup>

While Fräulein D. acts out of strength of personality and integrity, Herr B. makes an arrangement to have her brought out of East Germany almost out of pique, with no sense of the political implications of her escape. The lack of conviction and personal risk which characterizes his involvement with the group of West Berliners who manage D.'s border crossing underscores his weakness. He is the unknowing victim of the political circumstances which determine the course of his life. His fondness for expensive possessions, specifically a sports car, a characteristic mentioned in the story's first line, has a direct relationship to his loyalty to the West-German state, and the fact that the sports car he has acquired is subsequently stolen in Berlin moves him to try to gain in return his East-German girlfriend as much as does the fact that the East-German Communists have in the interim erected *die Schandmauer* (the Wall of Shame).

Like Frederic Henry in *A Farewell to Arms*, Herr B. is an "overage adolescent," as Henry Hatfield puts it. The use of two first names contributes to the childish wilfulness of the character as Johnson's use of the initial B., on another level, suggests shallowness. Instead of being a provocative political act, B.'s sponsoring D.'s escape is a show of his inability to deal with a situation which impinges on the immediate fulfillment of his wishes. Johnson himself has pointed out: "He never gives a thought to living in the East,"<sup>6</sup> whereas D. has weighed the consequences of a defection carefully. B.'s approximation of a separate peace is therefore a simple refusal to deal with the issues; the woman who is presumably the head of the underground railroad in Berlin tends to laugh at him in his role of knight-errant and undertakes the rescue of D. almost in spite of him. Hers (the woman's) is an act of political confrontation.

The protagonist in Hemingway's novel has a concept of a separate peace which is in accord with B.'s apolitical Weltanschauung. Lt. Henry, too, reacts unthinkingly to circumstance. An ambulance driver for the Italian army, he is caught up in its retreat from Caporetto; on the point of being shot as a suspected deserter, he escapes, and consequently determines to fight no more and to begin a domestic life with his pregnant girlfriend. One critic of *A Farewell to Arms* contends: "When he . . . makes 'his separate peace,' it is simply a quiet, private gesture in behalf of life, a re-enactment of his earlier impatience with the big words 'sacred, glorious,

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<sup>4</sup>See Albert Berger, "Uwe Johnson" in *Deutsche Dichter der Gegenwart*, ed. Benno von Wiese (Berlin: Erich Schmidt, 1973), p. 659: "Dem bisherigen Werk Johnsons liegt die Differenz zwischen den als schicksalsmächtig erfahrenen politischen, ökonomischen, sozialen Faktoren und dem als persönlich und unteilbar empfundenen Leben zugrunde."

<sup>5</sup>"Sie dachte nicht daran, Berlin aufzugeben," *Zwei Ansichten*, p. 114—my translation here and elsewhere in this paper. See also Henry Hatfield, *Crisis and Continuity in Modern German Fiction* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1969), p. 165 f.: "The fact that she has seen the strength and weakness of both views and has made her excruciatingly difficult choice is the foundation of her strength."

<sup>6</sup>"Ihm fällt ein Leben im Osten nicht ein," "Auskünfte und Abreden zu 'Zwei Ansichten,'" p. 115.

and sacrifice and the expression in vain.'"<sup>7</sup> On the occasion when Henry and Catherine smuggle themselves out of Italy by rowing to the Swiss shore of the lake on which they are living (the boat is provided by a conspiratorial friend), the tension in Hemingway's prose provides a model for Johnson's in *Zwei Ansichten* in the depiction of D.'s flight from East Berlin. Swiss neutrality functions as a symbol in *A Farewell to Arms*; E. M. Halliday has pointed out its continuing significance: "Frederic Henry thinks of the Swiss Alps as a neutral refuge of peace and happiness—surely millions must have lifted their eyes to those mountains with like thoughts during both World Wars."<sup>8</sup> Even in their aftermath, the age of cold wars, the symbolism perseveres; Johnson himself has the protagonist in *Jahrestage* present the searching question; "Where is that moral Switzerland to which we could emigrate?"<sup>9</sup>

In proposing these parallelisms, I do not suggest, of course, that Johnson is imitating Hemingway but rather that Hemingway's work exists as a paradigm in contemporary literature. While Johnson's literary style has frequently and justifiably been associated with that of Döblin, Faulkner, and Dos Passos, its affinity to Hemingway's has not been sufficiently considered. The three features of Johnson's style which Karl Migner finds to be trenchant can be seen "in the colloquial, sometimes dialectally-oriented turns of phrase which sometimes are justified by the conversational tone of the work and which otherwise lend it credibility, in the inclusion of professional jargon, and finally in the poetic diction";<sup>10</sup> these characteristics are present in Hemingway's prose to a remarkable degree. In addition, the intent which undergirds Johnson's style, to tell a story truthfully,<sup>11</sup> coincides with Hemingway's objective in his art: "From the first Hemingway has been dedicated as a writer to the rendering of *Wahrheit*, the precise and at least partly naturalistic rendering of things as they are and were."<sup>12</sup> A juxtaposition of texts by Johnson and Hemingway clearly illustrates the relationship:

There were mists over the river and clouds on the mountain and the trucks splashed mud on the road and the troops were muddy and wet in their capes; their rifles were wet and under their capes the two leather cartridge-boxes on the front of the belts, gray leather boxes heavy with the packs of clips of thin, long 6.5 mm. cartridges, bulged forward under the capes so that the men, passing on the road marched as though they were six months gone with child. (*A Farewell to Arms*, p. 4).

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<sup>7</sup>Jay Gellens, "Introduction" to *Twentieth Century Interpretations of A Farewell to Arms*, ed. Jay Gellens (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1970), p. 12.

<sup>8</sup>E. M. Halliday, "Hemingway's Ambiguity: Symbolism and Irony" in *Twentieth Century Interpretations of A Farewell to Arms*, p. 70.

<sup>9</sup>"Wo ist die moralische Schweiz, in die wir emigrieren könnten?" Uwe Johnson, *Jahrestage* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1970), p. 382.

<sup>10</sup>"In den umgangssprachlichen, manchmal mundartlich gebundenen Wendungen, die einmal durch den Gesprächscharakter der Dichtung gerechtfertigt sind und ihn zum ändern glaubwürdig machen, in der Einbeziehung von exakten Fachausdrücken und schließlich in der poetisierenden Stilisierung," Karl Migner, *Uwe Johnson: Das dritte Buch über Achim* (München: R. Oldenbourg, 1966), p. 86.

<sup>11</sup>"Mit dem Schreiben möchte ich die Wahrheit herausfinden," Johnson quoted in Wilhelm Johannes Schwarz, *Der Erzähler Uwe Johnson* (Berne: Francke Verlag, 1973), p. 98.

<sup>12</sup>Carlos Baker, *Hemingway: The Writer as Artist* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1952), p. 289. See also Wyndham Lewis, "The 'Dumb Ox' in Love and War" in *Twentieth Century Interpretations of A Farewell to Arms*, p. 86: "It is the *prose of reality*—the prose of the streetcar or the provincial newspaper or the five and ten cent store.

On a morning gloomy under streetlight, on the way to the express train to Hamburg, he looked at the huddled together, dripping wet houses as if he were taking leave of them for a long time. It had become a long way for him to go, crossing Cathead Square day by daily day, then downhill on sidewalks wide enough for two, intruded on by front-door steps, finally trotting to the drugstore down Lock Street, with its summer cover of asphalt, passing afternoons through the unaltered streets, out on an assignment for the newspaper, on his way to his customary evening meal at the Post Hotel.<sup>13</sup>

While the similarity of Johnson's style to Hemingway's cannot indicate a deliberate resolve on his part, his use of the theme of a separate peace derives from convictions he obviously shares with Hemingway.<sup>14</sup> Both involve their characters, pointedly in *A Farewell to Arms* and in *Zwei Ansichten*, in situations in which political events impose moral dilemmas on them. Unwilling to choose sides in the confrontation between warring world powers, Frederic Henry and Fräulein D., the one in desperation and the other with resolution, decide to find sanctuary in maintaining their own integrity. In the continuing personal and political conflicts of the twentieth century their choice can at least be said to have considerable merit.

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<sup>13</sup>"An einem laternentrübten Morgen, auf dem Weg zum hamburger Eilzug, sah er die beengten, tropfnassen Häuser an wie bei einem Abschied für lange. Es war ihm lang geworden, den täglichen Tag über den Katzenkopfplatz zu kommen, dann auf den nur doppelt mannsbreiten, von Haustürtreppen bedrängten Gehsteigen abwärts, endlich auf der sommers asphaltierten Schleusenstraße zur Drogerie zu trotten, nachmittags durch die unveränderten Straßen zu den Aufträgen der Zeitung, zu seinem Eßabonnement im Hotel Post," *Zwei Ansichten*, p. 62.

<sup>14</sup>A coincidental aspect of the situation comes to light when one considers that when Johnson translated *A Separate Peace*, he used a title which is another borrowing (at second hand) from Hemingway. Johnson called his German version *In diesem Land*, which echoes the title of the German translation of *A Farewell to Arms*: *In einem andren Land*.