

# Autobiography as Fiction: Uwe Johnson's *Skizze eines Verunglückten*

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Uwe Johnson (1934-1984) has experimented with narrative technique in each of his novels. His first publication *Mutmaßungen über Jakob* (*Speculations about Jakob*, 1959) sought by way of eliminating the problematic presence of a judgmental narrator to reproduce reality; in effect the reader tells himself the story of Jakob by overhearing the conversations and musings (monologues) of Jakob's friends as they ponder over him and his fate. In Johnson's second book, *Das dritte Buch über Achim* (*The Third Book about Achim*, 1961), the narrator reappears in the guise of a reporter, who in preparing to write Achim's biography gives the narrative its focus and point of view; however, the readers are still represented in the form of questions, supposedly put by friends, curious about the project, which introduce the novel's various sections. Yet another variety of approach to the narrative, although almost a conventional one, is evident in *Zwei Ansichten* (*Two Views*, 1965), which does indeed present two different points of view but as they are explicated by a single narrator, who makes a brief and rather inconsequential appearance as "I" in the story's final pages. Vastly more sophisticated is the narrative technique in Johnson's monumental, four-volume novel *Jahrestage* (*Days of the Year/Anniversaries*, 1970 ff.); the story consists in part of the observations and recollections of the principal character Gesine Cresspahl (who has already played a prominent role in *Mutmaßungen über Jakob*). The relationship between Johnson and Gesine is, however, extraordinarily complex, for he identifies completely with Gesine.<sup>1</sup> In addition, roughly a third of the narrative consists of excerpts from the *New York Times*, translated into German, which Gesine has collected, or Johnson for her, in order to juxtapose present event and personal memoir.

In the short novel *Skizze eines Verunglückten* (*Sketch of an Accident Victim*), which Johnson was inspired to write to pay tribute to Max Frisch, whose influence on his own work he wanted to acknowledge and which was published in 1981 as a part of the *Festschrift, Begegnungen* (*Encounters*), Johnson essayed yet another approach to narrating: a story told entirely in the first person (and largely in indirect discourse). Correspondingly, it deals with events in Johnson's life, in the main those connected with his marriage. Although the book purports to be fiction, it has for the most part the characteristics of an autobiography. The principle which sets the genre apart from other narrative forms is the requirement that the assertions and statements of fact made by the narrating "I" be verifiable by evidence unrelated to the autobiographical material.<sup>2</sup> This matter of concluding that the truth of reality exists in autobiography in contrast to the presupposition that fiction issues basically

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<sup>1</sup> On a few occasions Gesine and Johnson appear together on the pages of *Jahrestage*: e.g., "Wer erzählt hier eigentlich, Gesine. Wir beide. Das hörst du doch, Johnson," Uwe Johnson, *Jahrestage* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1970 ff.), I, 256.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Sandra Frieden, *Autobiography: Self into Form* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1983), p. 11.

from the imagination<sup>3</sup> must have been a factor in Johnson's choice of the form his story was to take. Together with a willingness to experiment with narrative devices, Johnson has exhibited a great degree of conscientiousness in choosing the manner in which to present his story. Responding to the amazement of some critics at the simplicity of style they had so unexpectedly come upon in his *Zwei Ansichten*, Johnson once explained why each of his books has so different a format: "If you commend this book for its simplicity, and that indeed not because of the story, you cast aspersions on the complexity of the previous books by indicating that the complexity might have been avoided. It was simply a matter . . . however, of finding a frame [behavior] for the narrative which suited the story exactly and was suitable for the movements and pace [quickness] of the plot, for the personal and social relationships of the settings, tone, and also events."<sup>4</sup> In choosing the mode of the autobiography for his *Skizze eines Verunglückten* Johnson must also have considered the intrinsic nature of the genre: autobiography is the evocation of a self. Jean Starobinski has stated what he finds the essence of autobiographical writing to be in these words: "It is the internal transformation of the individual—and the exemplary character of the transformation—that furnishes a subject for a narrative discourse in which 'I' is both subject and object."<sup>5</sup> Challenged by Frisch's contention that the personality is never a fixed configuration, but at best a random one, Johnson set out notably in *Skizze eines Verunglückten* to establish some truths about himself and his career as an author.<sup>6</sup>

In this novel Johnson uses the pseudonym Joe Hinterhand. Clearly it has symbolic significance. Joe, as a common American nickname (thus the designation for an American soldier in World War II), attests to Johnson's longtime interest in English and particularly American English. Hinterhand, as the narrator "I" confides, is a term used in the card game Skat, designating the last player to begin his participation in it.<sup>7</sup> Since Hinterhand also suggests subterfuge—*hinter der Hand* (underhanded[ly])—it might pertain to someone deceived, disadvantaged, possibly the last one to know. In this way Johnson has at once stated the theme of his novel: it concerns an author (Hinterhand identifies himself as having written a small body of work to which he has devoted his life) whose sense of self and purpose has been utterly destroyed: he is *verunglückt*, an accident victim. The book describes the process of his disintegration. The seeds of his destruction lie buried in his past, indeed in his birth. As Johnson evolves the history of his protagonist's past, he once again adheres to the requirements set for writing in the autobiographical mode; basic is the specification that the autobiography deal with the subject's past, but from the vantage point of the present.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>3</sup> See Stephen Spender, "Confession and Autobiography" in *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*, ed. James Olney (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 249: "Autobiography is whatever it seems to be and says what it means, unlike poetry or fiction or whatever else that is *not* what it seems to be and is forever saying what it does *not* mean."

<sup>4</sup> Uwe Johnson, *Begleitumstände* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1980), p. 327. My translation here and elsewhere in the article.

<sup>5</sup> Jean Starobinski, "The Style of Autobiography" in *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*, p. 78.

<sup>6</sup> The search for truth is the ubiquitous theme in Johnson's work; see Wilhelm Johannes Schwarz, *Der Erzähler Uwe Johnson* (Bern: Franke, 1973), who quotes Johnson, p. 93: "With my writing I should like to discover the truth . . . With my characters and stories I try to get closer to the realities of life [*das tatsächliche Leben*]."

<sup>7</sup> Uwe Johnson, *Skizze eines Verunglückten* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1981), p. 16.

<sup>8</sup> Louis A. Renza, "The Veto of the Imagination," in *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*, p. 272, speaks of "sacrificing the autobiographer's past to a secondary role vis-à-vis his 'incomprehensible present.'"

Hinterhand's flawed life begins with the disadvantage of his having been a foundling. With the baby left on the doorstep of the county orphanage, there is a slip of paper giving his name as Jochim de Catt. Becoming a charge of the local authorities, he is duly baptized and his name changed to Joachim.<sup>9</sup> De Catt, as Hinterhand eventually discovers, represents a goal he must attain, the self-assurance which most cats seem to possess in their independence and insouciance. In the Johnson canon cats generally symbolize the knowledge of self-worth; a passage in *Jahrestage* lists the virtues of the cat: "independent, incorruptible, disobedient. And yet a comforting companion, whenever she turns up, and even if she keeps to herself" ("unabhängig, unbestechlich, ungehorsam. Und doch ein wohltuender Geselle, wenn sie sich zeigt, selbst wenn sie sich unerreichbar hält," p. 670). The transformation of de Catt into Hinterhand is an indication that the "I" of *Skizze eines Verunglückten* has yet to attain an identity, while his adoption of the name Joe reveals that he has already set foot upon the path of independence. The different personalities suggested by these names for the author of the *Skizze* (Hinterhand) duplicate in a general way the role-playing which the protagonist in Max Frisch's *Mein Name sei Gantenbein* (*Let My Name Be Gantenbein*, 1964) is driven to undertake because of his lack of belief in a fixed identity.

Although Johnson establishes a framework for his story which places his characters in a time a decade or two removed from his own, the events which he describes can easily be assumed to have autobiographical significance. Hinterhand's Jewish origins and his Christian upbringing can be read as references to the participation of Johnson's father as a petty official in the Nazi regime and to Johnson's own schooling in a Nazi institution; assigning himself a Jewish ancestry and the role of the outsider, that is, of an orphan, would seem to be Johnson's way of atoning for his flawed youth. Equally related symbolically to circumstances in Johnson's life are Hinterhand's encounter with the woman who was to become his wife and subsequently first his, then her flight from Nazi Germany to places of refuge in England and the United States. Hinterhand, as the story is told in *Skizze*, realizes the danger in the Nazis' rise to power and flees; in a somewhat similar way Johnson chose to leave East Germany because of continued difficulties with the authorities. Since at the time he was able simply to move from East to West Berlin, he called his emigration a change of address. Johnson's choice at a later date not to remain in West Berlin or West Germany but to become an exile in England, a decision much more difficult to make, takes the form in the novel of smuggling Hinterhand's wife out of the Third Reich.

These similarities, which suggest the format of the *roman à clef*, are not as significant as the similarity between the unfolding of the relationship between Hinterhand and his wife, and that between Uwe and Elisabeth Johnson. In this case the fictional framework all but disappears. Johnson's marriage was much more than the culmination of a love affair. It represented not only a reconciliation between Johnson and a society which he mistrusted but also release from his "outsiderness" in that his wife's participation in his work, typing his manuscripts and affording him both criticism and support, signified others' approval of his mission, the quest for truth, which his writing purported to be. The pivotal event in *Skizze eines Verunglückten* is Hinterhand's discovery of his wife's unfaithfulness after many years of marriage, which had included the birth of their child. Hinterhand's world collapses after the suspicion of his wife's infidelity is confirmed by her confession and their private torment becomes common gossip. The destruction of a marriage and the loss of the writer's sense of self-worth described in the novel duplicate events

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<sup>9</sup> Johnson has included Hinterhand as a character in the last volume of his *Jahrestage* and refers to Hinterhand's flight from Nazi Germany because of the threefold J's in the evolution of his name, i.e., Jochim, Jude, Joachim, Uwe Johnson, *Jahrestage*, p. 1459.

in Johnson's life almost to the letter. Tilman Jens in his biographical account of the last years of Johnson's life, *Unterwegs an den Ort wo die Toten sind (On the Way to the Place Where the Dead Are)*,<sup>10</sup> relates much the same story: the rumors of Elisabeth's clandestine romance with a Czechoslovakian security agent that eventually forced Johnson to confront her, her admissions, and, finally, after a failed attempt to establish a marital *modus vivendi*, his sitting in judgment on her and sentencing her (and their daughter—Hinterhand has a son) to a life in limbo—out of his sight, completely out of touch with him. The kind of existence he imposed on her was similar to a life in exile and had the finality of a death sentence. In the novel Hinterhand strikes his wife a blow which kills her.<sup>11</sup> Johnson depicts the consequences for Hinterhand—his arrest, imprisonment, and the hopeless and unproductive years following his release—as a fate more dire than the one which was meted out to his wife. As a result of the isolation which he sentenced himself to endure on the island of Sheerness, Johnson found himself unable to write, to bring to a conclusion the lengthy novel *Jahrestage* which he had wanted to be his crowning achievement. It was his desire to contribute to the *Festschrift* for Frisch and the subsequent composition of *Skizze eines Verunglückten* which brought his writer's block to an end.

Since the autobiographical element in the story is so pervasive, the fictitious aspect might seem superfluous. However, as Northrop Frye has pointed out in his *Anatomy of Criticism*, autobiography like fiction "transforms empirical facts into artifacts . . ."<sup>12</sup> In order to ascertain the truth about himself, to attain the goal which the autobiographical format has set, Johnson, it must be supposed, felt the need to regard himself objectively; as a novelist he resorted to the device of inventing a fictive personality to contain the autobiographical "I." The character Hinterhand as an "I"<sup>13</sup> allows Johnson to be both subjective and objective about himself. The critic Roy Pascal has suggested that authors who have ventured into the realm of first-person fiction have enjoyed a particular advantage: "This subjective view has a profound truth in it, and for this reason novelists have often adopted the first-person narrative."<sup>14</sup>

At the same time, in combining autobiography and fiction, Johnson availed himself of a literary format much in use in German literature in the latter decades of the twentieth century. Sandra Frieden has identified "the shattered self as the most apt metaphor for the form and content of autobiographical writings in the nineteen-seventies."<sup>15</sup> The failed marriage in *Skizze eines Verunglückten* symbolizes more than the destruction of the relationship between husband and wife; it represents the separating of the man from his sense of self-worth, of leading a purposeful existence, and, specifically for Hinterhand, from his identity as a writer. Hinterhand attaches yet another significance to the motif of a marriage in which partnership and mutual trust must prevail; it has a political aspect in that it constitutes a commitment to living for others. For Johnson Hinterhand quotes the

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<sup>10</sup> München: Piper, 1984.

<sup>11</sup> The motif of a protagonist's imagined murder of his wife appears in Max Frisch's *Stiller (Stiller/I'm Not Stiller)*, 1954).

<sup>12</sup> See also William C. Spengemann, *The Forms of Autobiography* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), p. 120: "The language of autobiography has been allegorical . . . from the beginning . . ."

<sup>13</sup> Conspicuously, Hinterhand's first-person account is told almost entirely in indirect discourse, the subjunctive mode. The effect is that of a sworn statement before a magistrate, the truthfulness of which is officially recognized; a penalty would also exist for falsification.

<sup>14</sup> Roy Pascal, *Design and Truth in Autobiography* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960), p. 176 f.

<sup>15</sup> Frieden, *Autobiography: Self into Form*, p. 54.

Russian writer and political figure Kalinin: " 'Marriage is a political task' " (" 'Die Ehe ist eine politische Aufgabe,' " p. 21). The honesty with which proponents and opponents of a political system deal with one another both within and outside of its confines is the hallmark of that system's strength and value. Thus, Johnson's self-examination and appraisal of the failure of his marriage in this short autobiographical novel acquire political dimensions.

In attempting to describe what Johnson, in the *Skizze eines Verunglückten*, called the soul of the individual (p. 25), modern authors have had to concern themselves with autobiographical material. At the same time they have become aware of the inadequacy of the autobiographical form in so far as the original concept restricted and confined itself. The literary process of regarding the past from the vantage point of the present, which autobiography requires, is a flawed one since, even though events themselves may be faithfully recorded, their interpretation is the product of reflection which takes place in most instances long after the fact. Georges Gusdorf, writing on the conditions and limitations of autobiography, has concluded: "The illusion begins from the moment that the narrative *confers a meaning* on the event which, when it actually occurred, no doubt had several meanings or perhaps none."<sup>16</sup> The self that emerges from this tardy introspection is necessarily a reconstituted one which comes into being during the process of writing.<sup>17</sup> This recreated self has an intrinsic advantage over the autobiographical self: "it is truer, because it adds to experience itself consciousness of it," as Gusdorf has pointed out (p. 38).

Thus, in combining the autobiographical, first-person narrative with a fictitious framework, Johnson in *Skizze eines Verunglückten* was able to explain to himself and his readers the significance of events in the story of his life as they occurred, that is, within a novel's structure of relationships. Eakin has established the basic principle that pertains to contemporary writing of this kind: "The autobiographical quest for knowledge of the self can succeed only if its traditional reliance upon an historicist approach to life history is exchanged for a psychoanalytically informed act of *poesis*" ("the originating of significant imaginative patterns").<sup>18</sup> In dealing with his personal crisis in a format of poetry and truth, Johnson also gave his story a mythic dimension. *Skizze eines Verunglückten* describes not only the shattered world of Hinterhand/Johnson but that of the intellectual and writer in the latter decades of the twentieth century. Those who are self-aware have found themselves betrayed because in both the political and personal spheres of their activities their commitments have been nullified by the treachery of those to whom they have dedicated their efforts. Although *Skizze eines Verunglückten* is the history of a failure, Johnson himself succeeded, because after he had written it he took up again and finished his work on *Jahrestage*, one of the great achievements in contemporary German literature.

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<sup>16</sup> Georges Gusdorf, "Conditions and Limits of Autobiography," trans. James Olney, *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*, p. 42.

<sup>17</sup> See John Paul Eakin, *Fictions in Autobiography* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985), p. 3: "The self that is the center of all autobiographical narrative is necessarily a fictive structure."

<sup>18</sup> Eakin, *Fictions in Autobiography*, p. 169. The definition of *poesis* is given on p. 170.