

# Truth In Fiction: Uwe Johnson's *The Third Book About Achim*

Kurt Fickert, Wittenberg University

In stating his objectives as a writer, Uwe Johnson combines telling a story with searching for the truth. Contending, basically, that he intends to narrate something new and interesting (cf. "novel") which will thereby prove to be "entertaining enough," he also proposes that this exercise in inventiveness simultaneously involves the pursuit of the truth. "With my writing I should like to discover the truth," he avows and, by way of defining the term, adds: "life itself."<sup>1</sup> This terse yet inexact explication of the concept of truth in fiction is by no means clarified when, on another occasion, specifically in reference to *The Third book about Achim*, Johnson divides truth into three categories: The subjective, the objective, and the political ("das Parteiische"). The first constitutes the totality of an individual's perceptions and emotions; the second is limited to observation of those aspects of reality which can be scientifically proven, and the third to those which seem to be manifestations of sociopolitical theories.<sup>2</sup> An analysis of the structure of Johnson's story about the attempt to write Achim's biography should net the requisite insight into his theory of the kinds of truth and also into the novel's many complexities.

The antithetical nature of two concepts, truth from the realm of cognition and beauty from the realm of the emotions, is a principle founded in antiquity. However, particularly since the baroque period, there has been a marked tendency in the literary arts to direct creative activities in the direction of the mimesis of nature, of being "true to life." This expectation that the arts, where beauty should prevail, must deal basically with the world as comprehended from without fostered the placing of rationality above fantasy, the play of the imagination. The idea of the primacy of the intellect in all artistic matters persevered even after the eighteenth century's age of reason and makes itself evident today in a visually oriented society which equates the perception of surfaces with reality. A contrary view, which emerged in the Renaissance, holds that the eternal verities embodied in art evolve from the artist's creative use of his or her intuition. The term truth in art in this sense has an entirely new connotation; instead of requiring that the artist faithfully reproduce an external reality, he is called upon to give form to an inner vision. Accordingly, art can be but a symbolic representation of the artist's insight. Hugo von Hofmannsthal has called the symbol "the concrete image of an abstract truth which is out of the reach of the *ratio*."<sup>3</sup>

In his work, Uwe Johnson strives to produce both a facsimile of reality--objective truth--and artistic or inner truth. His first novel *Speculations about*

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<sup>1</sup> "Ich Überlege mir die Geschichte . . ." *Uwe Johnson im Gespräch*, ed. Eberhard Fahlke (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1988) 201. My translation, here and throughout.

<sup>2</sup> *Uwe Johnson im Gespräch* 191 f.

<sup>3</sup> Cited by Wolfgang Kayser, *Die Wahrheit der Dichter* (Hamburg: Rohwolt, 1959) 47. Kayser himself holds the symbol in the same high regard: "In the symbol the higher [form of] truth reveals itself" (8).

*Jakob* (1959) is characterized by extreme impartiality, i.e., the scientific objectivity, with which the situations are presented. The persons in the story disclose Jakob's fate by reporting events and conversations which involved him. The facts they reveal result in the speculations the author encourages the reader to make. *Two Views* (1963) repeats the formula of combining factual, unemotional accounts (in this instance only two) in order to produce a symbolic version of reality; pointedly, the protagonists are Mr. B. from the *Bundesrepublik* (Federal Republic of Germany) and Miss D. from the *DDR* (German Democratic Republic). It is *The Third Book about Achim* (1961), however, which lends itself particularly well to an analysis of Johnson's examination of the kinds of truth in literature; in this book Johnson proposes not only to explore the degree to which the biography of even a living person can be authentic but also to probe the capacity of an author to give expression to any kind of truth. Originally, Johnson had wanted to title the novel *Description of a Description* in order to indicate that he was not only depicting Achim's life but also questioning the viability of the concept of biography.

The novel ends with a brief postscript: "The characters are invented. The events do not pertain to similar [actual] ones but to the border: the difference: the distance[s]."<sup>4</sup> This cautionary message, similar to one frequently found at the beginning of novels or at the end of films, implies that the author has used an imaginative format in order to make valid statements about his subject. Thus *The Third Book about Achim* is a story in which real events occur that are revealed to have symbolic significance. Its characters are not psychologically founded portraits of individuals but aspects of the search for truth which the author undertakes. Accordingly, Karsch, the protagonist or the key figure in the narrative, is the biographer, that is, Johnson himself, who wants to ascertain the truth about "the border: the difference: the distance[s]" underlying life in East and West Germany. In his book about Johnson, Wilhelm Johannes Schwarz has emphasized the close relationship which exists between Johnson and Karsch: "Among all of Johnson's characters the journalist Karsch is probably closest to his creator . . ."<sup>5</sup> In his role of intuitive interpreter Johnson as the narrator of Karsch's search can forgo providing logical explanations for the occurrences in the novel; he does not find it necessary, for example, to furnish Karin, whom he conceives of as a former intimate acquaintance of Karsch, with a reason for inviting the West-German journalist to visit her in the East; even less does he feel the need to tell why, but only, as he does later on, that her lover Achim, who has no previous knowledge of Karsch, urges her to have the West German come to the DDR. Through the agency of fiction which employs an imaginative framework Johnson can portray his convictions without first having to establish their logicity.

Having set out on his intuitive journey, Karsch soon confronts the embodiment of the ideal DDR citizen, the famous racing cyclist and member of parliament Achim, Karin's good friend. "And Achim's relationship to his country (his country and himself) was incomprehensible to [Karsch]—this was what he wanted to write about" (75), the book's narrator reports, announcing the theme. Karsch's decision to describe Achim's life soon receives unexpected support

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<sup>4</sup> Uwe Johnson, *Das dritte Buch Über Achim* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1961 [edition of 1962]) 337. My translation.

<sup>5</sup> Wilhelm Johannes Schwarz, *Der Erzähler Uwe Johnson* (Berne; Francke, 1970) 32.

from an unlikely source when East-German officials offer to sponsor the authorship of a third book about Achim, since the two previous ones must be considered biased in favor of the East-German viewpoint by non-communist countries. The conflict, rather than suspense, in Johnson's novel results from the interaction among the three parties--biographer, his subject, and the DDR authorities. Each seeks to insure that a truthful account of Achim's life from his standpoint will be presented to the public. The kind of truth which each of the participants strives to endow the biography with, however, is all too distinct from the others'.

Pursuant to, it would seem, Johnson's triadic arrangement, Karsch undertakes his search for truth in the realm of the personal, which Johnson characterizes as "the truth of [individual] experience" ("die Erlebniswahrheit"). In this category the individual's sensibilities reign supreme. "An occurrence lasting five minutes [may] be compressed in the memory into a second, or a second [may] stretch out into infinity . . ." (192). This subjective relationship to reality is exactly analogous to the one which prevails in the storyteller's world. In *The Third Book about Achim* Karsch pursues the path of learning the truth about Achim by using his imagination. His first excursion into the dark continent of the DDR and its sports hero involves a visit to the railroad station of the city (probably Leipzig) to which Karin's invitation has brought him; it is his intention to find a small number of passengers whom he might depict as seated around a table discussing Achim during an interval in their travels.

The similarity of this concept to the concept which underlies *Speculations about Jakob* is striking. However, after having produced a lengthy description of the station and the activity in it, Karsch decides that achieving authenticity by being objective and using realistic details is insufficient. The narrator proposes: "In the end Karsch resisted [the inclination] to give you [the reader], in a deceitful and roundabout way [and] in the half-truthful words of an invented conversation and hints about the state of the railroad station pavement, an opinion about the prehistory of the two German states' differences (and especially this particular difference), since [Karsch preferred] that you should take these from that which [simply] exists, what is that, and how did it come about? this he wanted to present in the way proposed . . ." (56). (The flow of Johnson's prose at most times resembles that of the interior monologue.)

Upon being commissioned to write his biography, Karsch is afforded unlimited access to Achim; he also has Karin's help and Achim's unstinting cooperation. While the novel now becomes a repository of information about Achim's growing up during and after the war and the beginnings of his career as a racing cyclist, gathered and intuitively pieced together by Karsch, the biographer has doubts about the success of his endeavor. Notably, it is Achim who reinforces his reservations, for the kind of truthfulness Achim wishes to find in his biography differs radically from that sought by Karsch. Achim sees himself as what he is now and not as what he was. He has the viewpoint of the writer of an autobiography, whose past life is necessarily seen from the vantage point of the present. As a model citizen of the DDR, a dedicated socialist, and a man devoted to his profession, he acknowledges in his past only those circumstances which have contributed to his development into a hero. As a realist, he confronts Karsch with the limitations placed on the biographer of a contemporary figure: "You can only know about my life whatever I tell you about it" (203).

Although Achim reluctantly permits Karsch to dramatize his relationship with his (Achim's) father and to romanticize his acquaintanceship with a refugee girl, he balks at having two questionable matters brought into the public arena: the possibility that he may have purchased a three-speed gear illegally (for East Germans) in West Berlin and almost traitorously may have participated in the ill-fated uprising of June 17, 1953, in East Berlin. Achim insists that speculations about his past life are inappropriate in a factual biography. Even Achim's biographer must concede that the manner in which he lends credence to his depiction of Achim's life by imaginatively reconstructing it is suspect: "Perhaps the story [of a bicycle given to him by a Russian soldier] would not have come to light if it didn't fit so well into [the making of] his career?" Karsch asks himself (170).

Combined with the doubt about the efficacy of his imaginative approach to the truth about Achim, the pressure placed upon Karsch by East German officials to exclude material of negative import in the biography convinces Karsch to give up the project. These political forces represent the possibility of a third kind of truth; according to it, the goal attained alone has the quality of an absolute; what might have happened is inconsequential. Out of his loyalty to the state Achim affirms its position: "It's more important, isn't it, looking at it from my life now, that the Red Army freed us from fascism and helped us [to set up] a new life, right? and not that they [Red Army soldiers] now and then had sex with a woman or [stole] bicycles or such" (195). The lack of sympathy that the author of *The Third Book about Achim* has for this sociopolitical version of truth becomes evident in the disinterestedness with which he treats the characters associated with officialdom; they are the "types" found in expressionistic literature. Johnson's attempt to give some dimension to one of them, symbolically named Fleisg, Mr. Industriousness (a trait common to most Germans), by having him court Karin is much too contrived; he makes better use of the device of always referring to Walter Ulbricht as "der Sachwalter," Mr. In-Charge. Persuaded by the intransigence of his sponsors, Achim's dissatisfaction, and a disinclination to resolve these conflicts, Karsch abandons his project of writing a true biography ("it didn't work out," 56) and leaves the DDR.

Although the third book about Achim remains unwritten, Johnson did complete his decription of the attempt to write it. The truth about the border, the difference, and the distances between the two German states which could not be expressed in a biography with a confused point of view came to light in Johnson's fictional account of the biographer's sojourn in the DDR. (The story of Karsch's subsequent and equally conflict-ridden stay in the German Federal Republic is told in the somewhat redundant narrative "A Trip into the Blue 1960.") Johnson's ability as a novelist to create out of his imagination two model figures who display the East and West-German state of mind allows him, despite misgivings about the imprecision of words themselves, to make truthful statements about life in divided Germany. Karin's description of the relationship between Karsch and Achim, as she identifies the West-German journalist for Achim's father, states explicitly what is intuitively incorporated in the fiction: "He's a West German. Reunification for two people" (149). The truth that Johnson reveals is that the border, the difference, the distances have split Germany in two, not only geographically, but also individually. In the essay "Epilogue to *Karsch and Other Prose* by Walter Maria Guggenheim," which is affixed to the collection of prose pieces, Johnson poses as his own critic and in-

terpreter: "The difficulties involved in writing (and telling) the truth has been discussed and thought about many time since Brecht. The most confusing difficulty is surely the fact that a lie needs [to be expressed] in the most innocent words while truth in its disposition needs damaging words, but that lying has crept into the words themselves so that they change themselves involuntarily in the mouth of the speaker, are twisted, and no longer convey reality in any of their usual sequences."<sup>6</sup>

In depicting Karsch's search for truth, Johnson establishes that truth in the form of what pertains to be historical fact, data objectively verifiable, is a qualified truth, subject to interpretation. He believes, however, in the existence of truth in art, a subjectively perceived truth. "I believe in individual truth, personal truth," he avers.<sup>7</sup> The import of the statement seems to be that facts alone misrepresent the truth, largely because words have become propagandistic, while that which is not necessarily true—namely, fiction—can convey authenticity because of the author's sense of integrity. In *The Third Book about Achim* Johnson describes most trenchantly the failure of the standard form of biography due to the collapse of honesty or morality on the sociopolitical scene and proposes that fiction by encompassing some of the features of conventional biography in its imaginative recreation of life replaces it as a medium for expressing what is true to life.

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<sup>6</sup> Uwe Johnson, *Karsch und andere Prosa* (1964; Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1972) 94 f. See also Walter Schmitz, *Uwe Johnson* (München: Oskar Beck, 1984) 58.

<sup>7</sup> Quoted in *Uwe Johnson im Gespräch* 288.