B. S. Johnson’s ‘Introduction’ to Aren’t You Rather Young to be Writing Your Memoirs?: The Memoir between Life and Literature

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Written in its final form six months before his suicide, B. S. Johnson’s ‘Introduction’ to his collection of short prose Aren’t You Rather Young to be Writing Your Memoirs? is a composite; a manifesto and a memoir of his literary experimentation. It is a hybrid text in which Johnson attempts to compress his literary output into a single essay. Taut with desperation and a desire to be understood, it makes formal demands for an open-minded reading public and offers a methodological treatise. The very existence of this introduction complicates Johnson’s claim that he writes to ‘exorcise … the burden of having to bear some pain, the hurt of some experience: in order that it may be over there, in a book’ and not in his mind (AYRY 19). I read Johnson’s memorial exorcism as a performative moment in which he undertakes an analysis of his own work, a radical movement, a turning over and turning back. Johnson uses the ‘Introduction’ in such a way that it ‘will not let us shelter in the interiority of a psycho-biographical approach’ (Rajan 2002: 172).

This essay investigates the function of the memoir through its particular manifestation in Johnson’s ‘Introduction,’ with its specifically aesthetic orientation. It appears as if the clinical (scientific-evolutionary) and the critical explicitly collide when Johnson compares the process of literary history to a creative evolution made up of multiplicities and/of combinations within which ‘novelists must evolve (by inventing, borrowing, stealing or cobbling from other media) forms which will more or less satisfactorily contain an ever-changing reality’ (AYRY 16–17).

Unlike the auto-biographical content subtending the form of Johnson’s novels, the memoir does not perform the cathartic task of a psycho-therapy or a personal exorcism. Rather, the memoir acts as the site upon which the remainders of Johnson’s previous exorcisms produce a heterogeneous field that calls for self-examination that is an aesthetic
critique or methodological rumination, effectively resisting the recuperative dimensions of the auto-biographical. Johnson’s literary memoir can thus be understood as a site of abjection, in Julia Kristeva’s sense of an expulsion ‘when that subject, weary of fruitless attempts to identify with something on the outside, finds the impossible within; when it finds the impossible constitutes its very being’ (2002: 232). Thus, the memoir deconstructs the interiority of the auto-biographical subject engaged in the literary field by exposing it to an exteriority always already at the heart of subjectivity itself. Such a memorial process could be understood in light of Althusser’s notion of a ‘history without a subject’ (see Althusser 1971). The memorial voice ‘chronicles’ its own history, desperately trying to find a subject or give it a rationality that humanises a process that is fundamentally enigmatic.

Rather than serve as a disclosure of the various hierarchical levels of Johnson’s literary personae, the memoir is a ‘fold’ such as Tilottama Rajan describes in Deconstruction and the Remainders of Phenomenology: a figure inviting a ‘double reading of the work in terms of public and private, outside and inside, present and past’ (2002: 169). Such folding, ‘de-luminating’ rather than illuminating, finds Johnson locating within his own life and texts a pathological world unavailable to the full disclosure of phenomenological description. In this sense I distinguish my reading from Philip Tew’s view of Johnson as a critical realist in his landmark 2001 study, B. S. Johnson: A Critical Reading. If the auto-biographical function of the novels operates as a critical-realistic dialectic then one must analyse the memorial form of the ‘Introduction’ with a different set of criteria. Johnson sensed a need to go beyond auto-biographical novels to express the truth of the world. As memoir, the ‘Introduction’ analyses the critical-realistic dialectic through its remainders, through what has not yet been completely worked through.

The progressive disclosure of Johnson’s life through his texts forces him to confront, in various ways, his own subjectivity. Thus in the ‘Introduction’ the perpetual exhaustion of literary forms in the novels becomes a metaphor for Johnson’s own exhaustion. The posthumous nature of the published memoir serves to remind the reader that six months later the life and aesthetic project alluded to will have exhausted Johnson completely and permanently. Nevertheless there is a productive side which Johnson refers to as ‘hope’ rather than ‘expectation’ (AYRY 28) in the dark humor subtending the question, ‘aren’t you rather young to be writing your memoirs?’ This gallows humor (albeit unintended) allows us to read Johnson’s creative evolution not as a failure but through the abject ‘detritus of the religious feeling’