

Jonathan Coe

“Great spunky unflincher”:

Laurence Sterne, B S Johnson and me.

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with an introduction by Martyn Bedford

Introduction

Martyn Bedford

I have a hazy recollection of a short-lived TV series in the 1960s, or possibly early 70s, in which boxing matches were staged between fighters from different eras, their roles enacted by pugilistic lookalikes. Muhammad Ali versus Rocky Marciano is one such bout that sticks in my mind. The idea was that the boxers' relative strengths and weaknesses were fed into a computer and the two body-doubles would act out the predicted outcome of the contest. It has occurred to me, especially during several years' involvement with the Ilkley Literature Festival, that the concept would lend itself neatly to staged pairings of non-contemporaneous writers. Joyce versus Dickens, for example. Or Kelman versus Kafka. Non-violent, naturally (the idea of Woolf and Austen engaged in topless mud-wrestling holds little appeal, though no doubt a website exists.) I'm thinking more along the lines of invigorating mental sparring on writerly themes and the fiction-making process, scripted by experts and played by actors. As far as I'm aware nothing of this sort has been tried. However, we had the next best thing when the novelist and literary biographer Jonathan Coe delivered a talk on B.S. Johnson at the Laurence Sterne Trust's annual lecture. For there, in spirit, were Sterne and Johnson – duelling intellectually, as it were, through the medium of a modern writer who (as the text of his lecture demonstrates) has captured the creative tensions and affinities that resonate between these two dead souls. Among the one hundred people who packed the Huntingdon Room of the King's Manor, in York, I suspect there were more Sterne fans than John-

sonites. Yet, by the end of a fascinating, entertaining and well-received talk, it was apparent that B.S. Johnson left the arena with his held held high, if a little battered and bruised. Much as he did in life.

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Jonathan Coe

The subtitle of this talk, as you will have noticed, is ‘Laurence Sterne, B S Johnson and me’. Like so many titles, it was dreamed up well in advance of the thing itself, and now, having finished writing it at last (in Laurence Sterne’s own study, in fact, this very afternoon at Shandy Hall) I realise that there is very little about me in it. Really my objective this evening is to compare two writers, both working within broadly the same tradition, two centuries apart, both of whom pushed the novel to its limits and beyond, but with very different personal results for each of them.

I shall start, however, on an autobiographical note, because the invitation to come here and talk to you tonight has set me thinking again about my youthful enthusiasm for Sterne and where it came from.

I believe I was about seventeen years old when I first read *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy*. For this I have to thank my English teacher, Garry Martin. He was always a good judge of other people’s taste and I could see the gleam of satisfaction in his eye as, describing to me this strange eighteenth-century novel full of black pages and narrative non-sequiturs, he saw my own eyes light up with the kind of enthusiasm that my fellow schoolmates, at that age, were reserving for the new Clash album.

Or indeed, a few years earlier, for the new series of Monty Python. Because we were all in thrall, for a while, to that bunch of Oxbridge-educated surrealists, and I have a distinct memory of bunking off school on successive afternoons one term to go to the cinema and catch a matinee of *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* no fewer than three times in one week. I don't much like the film any more, but I remember those as being three of the happiest afternoons of my life. And it had been while watching *Monty Python*, without a doubt, that I got my first exhilaration at the idea that a TV show, or a film, or a novel, could parody itself, deconstruct its own conventions, and somehow my teenage mind must have cottoned on to the fact that this was the wisest and cleverest joke of all, and if you could pull this off while still engrossing the reader or viewer – without annoying them too much, by revelling in your own cleverness – then you had done something very special indeed.

Monty Python led to Spike Milligan, and in particular to his novel *Puckoon*, which plays Shandean games with narrative convention and includes several dialogues between the narrator and his central character, as BS Johnson would do in *Christie Malry's Own Double Entry*. *Puckoon* in turn led on to Flann O'Brien's *At Swim-Two-Birds*, and after that I was ready for *Tristram Shandy*: I had limbered up for it, as it were. Python, Milligan, O'Brien, Sterne: all of them entertainers (I'm not going to fight shy of the word, or apologise for it – it's one of the highest compliments in the English language) with something in common: an amused, radical scepticism about the form in which they were working, whether it was a radio comedy, a TV sketch show, or the newly-emerging realist novel.

I looked for that amused, radical scepticism in the writers I was force-fed as an undergraduate at Cambridge, and didn't find it, by and large. When I raised the possibility of my writing a dissertation on *Tristram Shandy*, my tutor quoted to me

Leavis's famous line about Sterne being a nasty, irresponsible trifler, and that was that. I wrote about Byron's *Don Juan* instead – not a bad substitute, I have to admit. I was also allowed to dip my toes into Beckett, and in the morbid, obsessive humour of *More Pricks than Kicks*, *Murphy* and *Watt*, I felt I could hear darker, more despairing echoes of what Sterne had been doing a couple of centuries earlier. Why was Beckett allowed, I wonder, and Sterne declared off-limits?

No one could accuse Beckett of trifling, I suppose: he looks the worst of the human condition head on, rather than deflecting our gaze from it with brilliant tomfoolery, as Sterne sometimes does. For my taste, much of the later Beckett carries this bleakness to an unpalatable extreme. All his mordant gaiety has been bleached out of the writing, and this makes it – on some level, to my mind – fundamentally unfaithful to the complexity of life itself. But by the time I left Cambridge, and signed up to do a PhD on Henry Fielding at Warwick University, I was still one of Beckett's sworn disciples. And that was what led me towards B S Johnson. When Penguin reissued Johnson's sixth novel, *Christie Malry's Own Double Entry*, in 1984, it boasted a quotation from Beckett on the front cover: 'A most gifted writer, and one deserving of far more attention than he has received so far.'

Now if anybody, in this audience or in the community of Shandeansthroughout the world, can tell me of another novel which was ever published with a quotation from Samuel Beckett on the front cover, I should be grateful to hear of it. And indeed, one of the things I discovered when I came to write my biography of B S Johnson (available now, incidentally, at the back of this hall, priced very reasonably at £20) was that Beckett had never sanctioned the public use of these words. He had, of course, written them, but they were always intended as part of a private correspondence between Beckett and Johnson's then-publish-

er, Sir William Collins. He was horrified when they turned up on a dustjacket.. ‘A blast of rage from Beckett followed,’ one of Johnson’s editors told me. ‘He said he’d never given a quote in his life for publication and he was extremely indignant about it ... Johnson was slightly shamefaced about it, I think. Beckett wrote him a letter of reproof and it may have been one of the few letters he destroyed.’

Well, it certainly worked its magic on *me*, anyway, and persuaded me to part with £3 or so for the paperback out of my measly postgraduate grant. And that was how I stumbled on the missing – perhaps the final – link in the chain. The British novelist who, I think, most deserves to be thought of as Laurence Sterne’s heir – even though there are huge differences between them, temperamental differences as men and tonal differences as writers. But again, I would appeal to you: can anyone think of another British writer from the last forty years who has so explicitly and valiantly carried forward the Shandean torch? I hear a couple of cries of ‘Alasdair Gray’, perhaps – which I would certainly entertain, as a possibility. But I’m going to hold out for B S Johnson. And perhaps, before I start making that case, I should explain to some of you who he was and what he did.

The quickest way of doing this, I think, is to read a couple of pages from my biography (available now, at a 20% discount, from amazon.co.uk).

So:

B S Johnson was, if you like, Britain’s one-man literary avant-garde of the 1960s. Yes, of course there were other avant-garde writers around at the time. (Alan Burns, Eva Figes, Ann Quin, Christine Brooke-Rose spring immediately to mind.) But they were not as famous as he was, they were not as good at put-

ting their names about, they did not appear on television as often as he did, they did not argue their case as passionately or fight their corner as toughly as he did, and there is not – as far as I can see, anyway – the same stubborn residue of public interest in their lives and work, at the time of my writing this, some thirty or forty years after the event. B S Johnson was different. B S Johnson was special.

He was a workingclass Londoner, born in Hammersmith in 1933, whose childhood was defined by the trauma of wartime evacuation and his failure to pass the 11-plus. In his late teens he was shunted into banking and accountancy jobs until he forced himself to learn Latin at evening classes and then won places at Birkbeck College and King's College, London. During the rest of his short lifetime he published six novels: *Travelling People*, *Albert Angelo*, *Trawl*, *The Unfortunates*, *House Mother Normal* and *Christie Malry's Own Double-Entry*. A seventh novel, *See the Old Lady Decently*, which was to have been the first of a trilogy, was not published until two years after his death. In addition, he wrote enough poetry to fill two slim volumes, several full-length plays (mostly unperformed), and wrote or directed more than a dozen short films (mostly for television). He was a busy sports reporter, too, covering tennis and soccer for the national dailies, to say nothing of pouring out a torrent of book reviews and polemical articles for anyone who would print them. And he worked tirelessly for the Trades Union movement, making documentaries and propaganda films. All this, and more, squeezed into a working life that lasted little more than a decade.

On the face of things, Johnson had a high reputation. His books won prizes, his films won prizes, and throughout his career he received plenty of favourable reviews. But he was always angry, and hurt, and unhappy at his treatment by

the literary establishment. One of his press releases described him as ‘the most important young English novelist now writing’, but it galled him that not everybody accepted this view. (And besides, he wrote that press release himself.) At an early age, with the publication of his very first novel *Travelling People*, he adopted an uncompromising, oppositional stance to the efforts of his fellow novelists. What these people were all writing, essentially, was ‘the nineteenth century narrative novel’, an exercise which he regarded, in a post-Joycean universe, as the literary equivalent of riding by horse and cart when there were cars and trains available.

Johnson, by contrast, set himself the not inconsiderable task of re-inventing the novel with every book he wrote. In his second novel, *Albert Angelo*, he insisted that his publishers cut holes through the pages of the book, so that readers could see forward to a future event (digression?). In his fourth and most famous, *The Unfortunates*, he presented the chapters, unbound, in a box, so that readers could shuffle them and recreate the randomness of experience for themselves. And so, at a time when the lightly ironic, social realist novels of Kingley Amis, John Wain and William Cooper set the dominant literary tone, it was Johnson himself, if anyone, who looked like the anachronism: an old-style modernist, who firmly believed that literary tradition could only be kept alive by radically re-defining it, who conceived of literature (borrowing his metaphor from Nathalie Sarraute) as ‘a relay race, the baton of innovation passing from one generation to another’, but was dismayed to see that ‘the vast majority of British novelists has dropped the baton, stood still, turned back, or not even realised that there is a race’.

It is hard to overestimate how much, or on how many different counts, Johnson – who began his creative life as a poet, then wanted to be a playwright, before

finally turning his hand to novel-writing – disliked not just most contemporary fiction, but almost everything, in fact, about the novel as a form. (I should add, incidentally, that Johnson had a go at radio drama at the beginning of his career, too: and sent off a number of – rather good – sample Goon Show scripts to the BBC and sometimes directly to his hero ... Spike Milligan. Perhaps it's all beginning to add up.) Dialogue, characterisation and plot as you might expect to encounter them in almost any English novelist from Fielding to Ian McEwan are all pretty much absent from his books. His preferred mode was the interior monologue: what dialogue there is in his novels, he hedges around with ironical disclaimers. His preferred central character was himself, unapologetic and undisguised: when presenting 'fictional' characters, he makes it clear that they are authorial puppets, with no pretence of inner reality. And he disdained plot because 'Life does not tell stories. Life is chaotic, fluid, random; it leaves myriads of ends untied, untidily ... Telling stories is telling lies.'

Johnson was not the first person to hold this view. Mistrust of the imagination, and of the falsehoods into which it threatens to lead us, goes back a long way: all the way back to Plato, at the very least. It's an extreme position, all the same, and not one which you would expect to sit comfortably with the role of novelist. But then, Johnson wasn't interested in making life easy for himself. He took up other extreme positions, both in his professional and his personal life. Ultimately, these positions – and the chain of random circumstances with which they disastrously intersected – proved destructive. He took his own life at the age of forty, in November 1973.

It was Johnson himself, in his final novel *See the Old Lady Decently*, who described Sterne as a 'great spunky unflincher'. The reason for his choice of those par-

ticular adjectives will become obvious, I hope, towards the end of this talk. That novel – a heroic attempt to exorcise some of his own grief over the death of his mother – is perhaps the most strictly ‘Sternean’ of all his books. By then he was beginning to mature as a writer, and what he had absorbed from Sterne – a desperate, ironic awareness that any attempt to convey the real texture, the complexity, the simultaneity of human experience through the medium of fiction was doomed to hilarious failure – had taken hold of his writing, and informs the book at every level – from sentence to sentence, and in its overriding, fragmented, anti-linear structure. In this novel, very movingly I feel, we can see him coming back to Sterne, back to the novelist who had been an enormously important exemplar throughout his career, but whose *direct* influence had not really been obvious since the writing of his first novel, a very different and much more weightless affair called *Travelling People*.

Travelling People is not as dauntingly experimental as some of Johnson’s other books. Its chief departure from convention is that each chapter is written in a different form – film-script, epistolary novel, interior monologue, and so on – very much as David Lodge would do in *Changing Places* a few years later. Here, in any case, is how Johnson set out his own rationale for the book’s methods in a section entitled ‘Prelude’:

‘Seated comfortably in a wood and wickerwork chair of eighteenth-century Chinese manufacture, I began seriously to meditate upon the form of my allegedly full-time literary sublimations. Rapidly, I recalled the conclusions reached in previous meditations on the same subject: my rejection of stage drama as having too many limitations, of verse as being unacceptable at the present time on the scale I wished to attempt, and of radio and television as requiring too many

entrepreneurs between the writer and the audience; and my resultant choice of the novel as the form possessing fewest limitations, and closest contact with the greatest audience.

‘But, now, what kind of novel? After comparatively little consideration, I decided that one style for one novel was a convention that I resented most strongly: it was perhaps comparable to eating a meal in which each course had been cooked in the same manner. The style of each chapter should spring naturally from its subject matter. Furthermore, I meditated, at ease in fareastern luxury, Dr Johnson’s remarks about each member of an audience always being aware that he is in a theatre could with complete relevance be applied also to the novel reader, who surely always knows that he is reading a book and not, for instance, taking part in a punitive raid on the curiously-shaped inhabitants of another planet. From this I concluded that it was not only permissible to expose the mechanism of a novel, but by so doing I should come nearer to reality and truth: adapting to refute, in fact, the ancients:

Artis est monstrare artem

Pursuing this thought, I realized that it would be desirable to have interludes between my chapters in which I could stand back, so to speak, from my novel, and talk about it with the reader, or with those parts of myself which might hold differing opinions, if necessary; and in which technical questions could be considered, and quotations from other writers included, where relevant, without any questions of destroying the reader’s suspension of disbelief, since such suspension was not to be attempted.

I should be determined not to lead my reader into believing that he was doing anything but reading a novel, having noted with abhorrence the shabby chicanery practised on their readers by many novelists, particularly of the popular class. This applied especially to digression, where the reader is led, wilfully and wantonly, astray; my novel would have clear notice, one way or another, of digressions, so that the reader might have complete freedom of choice in whether or not he would read them.'

A few comments about this extract, first of all. Those of you who are familiar with *At Swim-Two-Birds* will recognise that this is a pastiche of its opening paragraphs. The book had been reissued by MacGibbon and Kee in 1959 – after years of neglect and obscurity – and Johnson had clearly just read it: its cadences are everywhere in *Travelling People*, but never more so than in this dogmatic laying-out of his theoretical wares. Even here, however, it's worth noting how severely Johnson's tone differs from that adopted by O'Brien, who himself had already cranked up by several notches the more dour, saturnine undercurrents of feeling which are only fleetingly noticeable in *Tristram Shandy*. On the first page of *At Swim-Two-Birds*, shortly before providing the novel with three entirely different and unrelated openings, Flann O'Brien wrote: 'One beginning and one ending for a book was a thing I did not agree with.' Johnson's version of this, however, is audibly more astringent: 'I decided that one style for one novel was a convention that I resented most strongly.'

Resentment, I feel, is a crucial word to consider if we want to understand B S Johnson both as a writer and a man. I don't think it's a word that many people would want to apply to Laurence Sterne, in either respect. Sitting down to

begin your first novel, with the rhythms of Joyce, Beckett, Flann O'Brien and Laurence Sterne swimming around in your head, eight years' listening to *The Goon Show* having thrown wide open the doors of possibility onto all manner of playful deconstruction, what cause did Johnson have to 'resent' the conventions of the traditional novel? We can certainly observe here, without wishing to labour the point, an echo of his *class* resentments: the London-based 'literary establishment' of 1960s Britain was upper-middle to upper-class, and Johnson, with his family background in stock-keeping, bar-tending and household-cleaning would understandably have felt fearful and aggrieved about how he was likely to be received there.

(A couple of digressions, on that subject: one of his posher editors told me, in the course of researching my biography, how he had been invited to dinner – or rather 'supper' – at the house of Johnson and his wife one evening. He regarded it as a casual affair, and turned up in a sweater: for Johnson, this was a big, important occasion, so *he* had put on a suit. A minor piece of social embarrassment, maybe: but Johnson was unable to leave it there. Between the soup and the main course, he slipped off to his bedroom, changed out of his suit, and put a sweater on himself. A man less burdened with class insecurities would have stuck to his guns. A university friend of his also told me that Johnson's parents had three flying ducks – those terrible signifiers of working- or lower-middle-class taste – hanging on the wall of their house. When Johnson gave a party there for his student friends, he took them down off the wall. But the marks they left were clearly visible, and his friends noticed them and made fun of him.)

Anyway, whatever its class origins, let's return to Johnson's 'resentment' as it manifests itself in his literary politics. The most Shandean device in *Travelling People* is without doubt its use of black pages. Johnson went several stages beyond

Sterne in what he tried to make the device do for him, however. Instead of being – as in Yorick’s case – simply a tablet of mourning, accompanied by cheeky speculations about whatever scandalous text might lie beneath – Johnson’s version uses different shades of grey, deepening into black, to signify the moment at which one of the characters – an elderly roué who has started to overstretch himself, sexually – slips into semi-consciousness and finally death after suffering a heart attack in the midst of coitus.

A few years after *Travelling People* was published, Johnson’s friend and fellow-novelist Gordon Williams wrote him a letter taking him to task for the dogmatic theories about the evolution of the novel which he had recently put forward in *Vogue*. Johnson had written, on that occasion, that *Ulysses* represented a revolution in novelistic form which made nineteenth-century, Dickensian devices like plots and omniscient narrators seem reactionary and foolish. Williams felt that he could see a contradiction here: ‘For a man who put black pages (the ultimate, I suppose, in anti-language) in his novels, it is surely a bit much for you to claim that you are on the side of Joyce, of all people?’

Johnson’s reply was typically belligerent:

‘It seems strange to have to explain (I disdain to defend) the black pages in *Travelling People*. You just haven’t understood the problem, which is what I was complaining about in the article. The section in question is taking place in interior monologue, in the man’s mind, right? So how in words can you convey he’s dead? He can’t say after the event I’m dead, now can he? How would you have dealt with this problem? Is not this simple device the best solution to the problem? You can’t even see the problem as far I can see. Every device I use has an organic, empirical justification.’

You find the same tone elsewhere in Johnson's writing: what his friend the poet Zulfikar Ghose referred to as, 'the posture of deliberately provoking offense and the suggestion that the writer is in exclusive possession of the truth and the reader contemptibly stupid if he does not accept that truth.' When his second novel *Albert Angelo* was published, Johnson sent out four pages of notes to prospective reviewers, alerting them to the unusual nature of his devices and explaining why he had used them. There were, for instance, the two columns of parallel text, one to convey what a teacher is saying, the other to convey what he is thinking, during a classroom scene; and, more famously, the rectangular holes cut through two of the pages, so that readers can 'see forward' to a future event which is described a few pages later. In his notes, Johnson quoted from the novel itself, in which he writes: 'A page is an area on which I may place any signs I consider to communicate most nearly what I have to convey: therefore I employ, within the pocket of my publisher and the patience of my printer, typographical techniques beyond the arbitrary and constricting limits of the conventional novel. To dismiss such techniques as gimmicks, or to refuse to take them seriously, is crassly to miss the point.'

Now, let's think about this for a moment, and identify two obvious differences between B S Johnson and Laurence Sterne – one temperamental, and one literary, although of course these two categories can't really be so neatly separated. One is to do with their relationship with critics. Both writers were involved in a continual dialogue with their critics – a relationship unfolding, in Johnson's case, as each of his new novels appeared, and in Sterne's, with the publication of successive volumes of *Tristram Shandy* throughout the 1760s. Sterne's comments on critics are justly famous: 'Grant me patience, just Heaven! – Of all the cants which are canted in this canting world – though the cant of hypocrites may be the worst – the cant of criticism is the most tormenting!' Now, that is a

fine, beautiful, rhythmic piece of rhetoric, but I still prefer the way he deals with Monthly reviewers in Chapter 5 of Book 3:

‘Heartily and from my soul, to the protection of that Being who will injure none of us, do I recommend you and your affairs, – so God bless you; – only next month, if any one of you should gnash his teeth, and storm and rage at me, as some of you did last May (in which I remember the weather was very hot) – don’t be exasperated, if I pass it by again with good temper, – being determined as long as I live or write (which in my case means the same thing) never to give the honest gentleman a worse word or a worse wish than my uncle Toby gave the fly which buzzed about his nose all dinner-time, — ‘Go, – go, poor devil,’ quoth he, — ‘get thee gone, why should I hurt thee? This world is surely wide enough to hold both thee and me.’

Both Sterne and Johnson were sensitive to criticism: perhaps over-sensitive. But here we can clearly see the vast superiority in resources – resources of rhetoric, and also resources of personality – to which Sterne had access in coping with this sensitivity. To compare a reviewer to a housefly buzzing around your nose, and then to show your willingness – as if it was an enormous act of human generosity – to throw open the sash window and cradle him gently out to a kind of freedom – could hardly be surpassed for an exercise in putting someone in their place. Apart from anything else, it locates the writer himself in a position of enormous power. It’s gentle, elegant, ruthless and devastating. Quite different, in other words, to the tactic of sending an explanatory note out with your book, and warning reviewers that if they dismiss your techniques as gimmicks they will have ‘crassly missed the point’. By doing so, in fact, Johnson reversed the power relationship completely, handed his enemies the ball and gave them an

open goal. Sterne's magnificent, lofty arrogance in that passage is well-earned, and comes ultimately from a supreme confidence in what he was doing. Johnson comes across as arrogant, but is really showing nothing more than his terrible vulnerability.

Which brings me on to the second major difference between them. Going back to that belligerent, defensive letter he wrote to Gordon Williams: did you notice how often he used the word 'problem'? 'You just haven't understood the problem,' he wrote, referring to his grey and black pages in *Travelling People*, which were meant to convey the moment of death in a character is who is speaking in interior monologue. 'How would you have dealt with this problem? Is not this simple device the best solution to the problem? You can't even see the problem as far I can see.'

I can feel the dangers of extrapolating too much from one paragraph, written in the heat of the moment: but the conception of novel-writing which Johnson reveals in those lines is both very different from Sterne's and also, I feel, potentially very constraining. To put it quite simply, the writing of novels is not a question of identifying a series of 'problems' and then solving them. It's very typical of Johnson that he should have thought of it that way – he trained as an accountant, after all, and carried a kind of clerkish mentality with him throughout his literary career – but he was wrong. The central 'problem', the big 'problem' as far as he was concerned, was the obvious one, the one I've mentioned already: how do you convey the complexity, the simultaneity of even the simplest human experiences while using those bluntest of instruments, words on a page. Can it be done? Johnson saw this question as a problem to be solved. Sterne saw it as something else: a nonsense. Of course it can't be done. He had worked that one out before he even set pen to paper: in fact that was *why* he set pen to paper, in

some ways – in order to demonstrate the ludicrousness of the whole novelistic enterprise, and to have as much fun as he could while doing so. Johnson’s own hard-won mantra, repeated in an essay he published towards the end of his life, was: ‘Writers can extract a story from life only by strict, close selection, and this must mean falsification.’ For him, such falsification was morally offensive, and so the struggle to avoid it became a literary battle desperate in its seriousness. Sterne knew that you could not avoid it; that even if you spent hundreds of pages describing someone’s conception and birth, you would still have missed out the vast majority of details, significant and insignificant. (Except of course that nothing is insignificant in Sterne’s philosophy.) Realising this, owning up to it, gives him an enormous liberation – turns the whole novel into a playground, for him – whereas for Johnson it remains a prison: he is one of the most constricted, the most circumscribed of writers – and that’s what gives some of his novels their almost unbearable tension and energy, the sense that we are looking at a huge, powerful bull tethered in a tiny cage and seething for ways to get out. It also means that Johnson can never allow himself any fun, and why the jokes in his book (like the epic, elaborate one at the end of *Albert Angelo*) always feel dampening rather than liberating. Or, as Tom Stoppard memorably put it after reading *Tristram Shandy*: ‘I can see no connection between it and *Travelling People*, except that Sterne does certain things as marvellous, irrelevant and irreverent jokes ... which Johnson does in grim meaningful earnestness.’

(By the way, I’ll give you an example of Johnson’s humour, by way of digression. Originally there was going to be a whole section of my biography called ‘The B S Johnson joke book’, gathering together all the terrible gags which he would collect in pubs or off lavatory walls (he was a great hoarder of graffiti). Here’s one from 1968, in a letter to Zulfikar Ghose:

Heaven is getting a bad press, so God, Jesus, and the Holy Ghost have a top-level meeting about it. Lots of holy hot air is expended which boils down to JC being reluctantly persuaded that the time for the Second Coming is Now. Approaches are discussed. JC suggests the Loaves and Fishes bit, but the HG ousts this one by pointing out that with supermarkets, packaged fishfingers, Oxfam airlifts, etc., people just wouldn't be impressed. When the HG suggests a second Lazarus, JC just laughs and points out that with kidney machines, heartgrafts, and so on, people have already seen that one. Eventually they settle for the Walking-On-The-Water, which no one has done since. JC duly reincarnates, announces his intention to a credulous world, the press boys hire launches, the tv boys a helicopter, JC steps over the side --- and sinks like the proverbial stone. Back in Heaven, a post-mortem: HG says Next time send me, God says What happened, son? JC says, Okay, so last time I didn't have holes in me feet ...)

Johnson is a writer very close in technique to Sterne, then, but utterly different in spirit; and this is never more obvious than in his final and most Sternean novel, *See The Old Lady Decently*. (Incidentally, five of Johnson's seven novels are now back in print – but not the two I'm talking about tonight: an unintentional but appropriate piece of Sternean absurdity.)

This *was* to be have been the first volume in a trilogy. Johnson's mother Emily had died the previous year. He wanted to write a work that would commemorate her, record the details of her life, but also map some of the social and historical changes that had taken place during her lifetime. It was a vast, and dizzyingly complex scheme: and fraught with the possibility of failure, when you think about it. Here was a novelist, after all, who did not even think that

he could write about episodes from his own life without selecting, rearranging and therefore falsifying them. How on earth was he going to broaden that canvas – already thinned out to breaking point – by giving his work a dimension of social history? Of course, he never could. And most of the time *See the Old Lady Decently* is not a step along the road towards ‘solving’ Johnson’s literary problems, but a bald, despairing statement of their insolubility. Here he is, for instance, lamenting the difficulty of writing with any accuracy about the historical events of 1928:

‘All this is very difficult to comprehend. Look, there were millions of people, thousands of peoples, hundreds of countries, all of them going in every direction and performing every kind of significant and insignificant act. How could anyone impose order on that multitudinous discontinuity? History must surely be lying, of one kind or another, no more true than what used to be called fiction. How can any one mind comprehend it? And would there be any point if it could?’

To which Laurence Sterne – who knew an intuitive thing or two about life’s ‘multitudinous discontinuity’ and its relationship to literature – would no doubt have answered: ‘Relax, Bryan. Pour yourself a drink. No, of course it can’t be done. Some other writers – less honest writers than you and me – like to think it can be done, and they find readers who choose to believe them. You and I know better. But let’s not get in a state about it. Take it easy, enjoy yourself, and turn it all into a great big joke. Stop trying to be absolutely faithful to a reality that can never be captured and try writing a 30-page digression on big noses instead. It’ll cheer you up. Otherwise you’re going to make yourself very unhappy.’

Which is exactly what happened, while Johnson was writing *See the Old Lady Decently*. He became very unhappy. Ironies multiply, in and around this novel: although they are not the sort of ironies that bring much of a smile to your face. One of the most upsetting is the thought that Johnson's lengthy description of his own conception and birth – his most explicit ever homage to *Tristram Shandy* – must have been almost the last thing he wrote before his death. It's a strange note on which to prematurely end your writing career – a real closing of the circle.

It's while preparing himself for the writing of this passage, on page 117 of the novel, that Johnson uses the phrase which I've taken for the title of this lecture. 'It is only with the greatest difficulty,' he says, 'and after weeks of procrastination, that I write this section. ... I can think of only one man who has done it, Sterne, and even that great spunky unflincher was obliged to do it comically, to distance it with laughter, his and ours.' (Obliged, was he? I'm not sure I agree with that. It seems to me that Sterne's laughter always came to him naturally, irresistibly. It was Johnson who often had to will himself towards it.) He then goes on to imagine a Sternean dialogue going on between his readers:

- What, does the fellow know what he is about?
- Competing with Sterne, indeed!
- Is the man mad? Does he not know the rules?
- What will Ponderus the critick say, or the wisplike MacWasp? Let alone Tiny Tone, the alternate Sunday scourge of scribblers!

Johnson himself answers these objections by saying: 'Not competition, Master, simply going on learning. We all take from others; you took more than most, and made it your own. No one invents it for himself, literature, we all stand on others' shoulders, if we are lucky and able to see.'

And now I'll read the passage in full: from which you will be able to hear, I hope, the enormous difference in voice between Johnson and Sterne, as they describe their respective conceptions; and will be able to judge for yourselves, too, how successful Johnson was in his attempt to stand on his hero's shoulders.

'Out they all set, then, on this exciting journey, full of vigour and overwhelmingly inspired by their sense of purpose, dedicated to one object only. Between thirty million and five hundred million of them, if one is to believe the educated guesses.

But only one penetrated the pellucid zone to reach the nucleus.

Why only one, since they were all equipped with the same determination and attributes, the lashing force of the tail and the nose tipped with corrosive enzyme? As ever, it is the first home who defeats the others. Perhaps that is why it is called the human race. How many others have had that thought? I know of none.

But this one, the one that won on this occasion. Let us call him Me, since that is half of who he is. The other half (I use the term loosely, for who knows in what proportions the genes mix in that crucial half-hour or so after the two nuclei meet and are married, dissolving the one into the other with intimate closeness that they become each other) was Me, too.

Is that moment, that half-hour of absolute singleness for which I coin the term OCE, the condition to which all lovers aspire, is there some trace or memory of it in us, that we are constantly seeking to regain it? Certainly I look for that, certainly I shall have more to say on that,

OCE; here is another pledge I intend to redeem in Two or Three or both.

During OCE many things were determined: the colour of my hair, my temperament, my proneness to certain diseases, my tendency to run to fat, amongst oh so many innumerable others: that I was to be Me, in fact, and nobody else.

Then the primary tragedy occurs, the unity becomes the dyad, already it is beginning to divide, the cell, to split, for it is natural and destructive, the division of cells, basic.

That one the two nuclei became, for about thirty minutes, has now reproduced itself, doubled itself; and again it happens; again, two by two.

We call it growing.

More than a hundred cells were Me by the end of the first week, drifting as if at random, and casually, down the poetically-named Fallopian Tube.

Meanwhile, Emma and Stan went on no doubt as if nothing had happened.

Early the following week, however, what does Me do but insinuate itself into the cosy inner lining of the womb! Follow that!

Not long afterwards the hormone balance mechanism changes gear and menstruation will for nine months be no more.

And Emma notices, waits until she is sure, tells Stan. Are they pleased? How should Me know, only just there?

But the cells are already specialized, some bent on a career in the spinal cord, others certain of a vocation in the spleen, the cornea, the coccyx. One or two brave cells have it in mind to aspire to becoming sperm themselves, one day, in the fullness of what needs to be termed time.

The insinuation ingratiatingly leads to implantation, the complex of cells putting down roots, sucking sustenance. From now on there can be no holding the pullulation of the cells: every hour there is a change, the condition of life! An embryonic shield was formed in the second week, then something resembling a yolk sac though it had no yolk in it. The following week Me was as long as a tenth of an inch, and, oh, the heart had begun to beat! Stumps of arms were there on the twenty-sixth day, and legs two days later. How useful they were all to be!

Me could now be called an embryo, and under that provisional name Me developed day by day, followed the pattern laid down for it immutably, was what it was, and is, from then on, though had still conditioning to come, of course. And the development meant diversity, paradox as usual, the specialization even more pronounced, the liver cells stuck together and refused to become another pancreas, and reciprocally the pancreatic cells passed up the chance to move out to the open lung spaces, and so on for all the multiplicity of other cells,

each part of the continuous adjustment in obedience to the mistress code, and all cushioned by the gentle amniotic fluid, in the lamb-soft amnion.

And that was the first month, the month of greatest change, something from almost nothing, perhaps. Me was there, not quite thinking yet, but how aware?

By the seventh week, however, Me was nearly an inch long and very likely (overweight as ever) tipping the maternal scales at one-twenty-fifth of an ounce Imperial. And Me was capable of movement! Elementary co-ordination was possible, digestive juices bubbled expectantly in the stomach, the kidneys had commenced their long task of extracting uric acid from the blood – yes, there was blood, too!

It was a fine start in life, could we all have known it at the time. Most of the rest could only seem an anti-climax, by comparison.

All the evidence that was later to become available to the chiromancers was already there at two months.

The development henceforward really concerned size and subtlety. Bone cells took over from soft cartilage, the embryo came to be called a foetus. Me could definitely be said to be here in a recognizable form; could anyone have seen. Why, in the ninth week Me could make a fist, jiggle his toes, squint, inhale and exhale amniotic fluid in rehearsal for the real thing.

Emily did not know all this, though she suspected and was perhaps

excited. Thoughts are all of ahead, and preparations are made, elder mothers on both sides are fussing.

She felt a movement, Emily, first at fifteen weeks of Me, the undeniable confirmation of her intuitions, fears, expectations. She told Stan, had him shyly feel the possibility of further movement, lay still and sleepless afterwards.

Individual traits were there for the duration at the end of the third month. Everyone was calm. Already Me looked like his Mum and Dad, and like a male; already Me was capable of the vagitus, but it was not to be given a chance of attempting it for six more months; already Me could have eaten, had suitable food been provided, like a human being.

And there we were, as if time were nothing, at the fourth month! And what wonders Me performed! Put on height to be over half that Me was to be at birth, made the old placenta more than work for its living, cake indeed, who would heartlessly feed them on bread? A big hand for the placenta; few of us would be here without it! Never to forget the umbilical cord, of course, not to become lost, through which all passes, either way, the essential link, line of communication, the only link between Me as an otherwise closed system, and Emily, let alone Stan.

Hair was there at some time in the fifth month, sacred number, so important! Nails were adumbrated on the beds laid down some two months earlier. Several times Emily felt the rhythmical knocking for

half an hour or so at a time that her doctor told her was Me hiccupping. Me turned somersaults, too, for reasons so far obscure, and also slept, on occasion, usually in his favourite lie.

If Me had been born in the sixth month in some unfortunate miscarriage, then he would have had some little chance of survival which he would not have had earlier. Me could have started breathing for perhaps a day, for perhaps longer, but there would have been little hope for him.

And it is more weight again in the seventh month, a lesson Me learnt all too well and has been putting into practice ever since. Thumb-sucking is not conspicuous by its absence, either. No more athletic somersaults, however: restlessness can be expressed only by turning from side to side, arm and leg movements. The most accommodating foetuses now decide that head down to be first out is the best policy to pursue.

Boxing Day it was, which fell in the eighth month, when Me delivered such a righthander that it knocked a knitting magazine Emily was reading right out of one hand. Her father-in-law saw it, and laughed. She was very fond of him, and laughed too; it was a right rare moment, the others, son and mother, were in the kitchen at the time, in Medway Street I suppose, ha! I could ask my father to tell me what they were actually doing that first Xmas of Me; could he remember?

Then there were the antibodies, antisocial in only the best causes,

from Emily to Me. The last prenatal gift, together with gamma globulin.

The lordly purple placenta grew tired during the ninth month, sensed the end of its task. As a result, Emma's hormonal balance changed again, awoke the upper muscles of the uterus, primed them ready like athletes full of drugs for the inexorably rewarding pain ahead.

But first we should acknowledge the feat of Me during the preceding period (if I may be allowed the ambiguity of the word, in the context) and Emma. Between us we have managed to multiply that one original cell by two hundred million, give or take the odd half million. Are you not impressed? Refuse to be, you and your mother did much the same and perhaps with a better result.

Birth is rarely easy for the mother; that we know and can be told by those mothers who were undeniably there. But is it just as difficult for the child, the baby? And I do not refer to all those commonplaces about the birth trauma, which are largely hypotheses, it may seem. We cannot know, who were equally there, in the same way that the mother can know: though there are those, however, who have some memory of the moment of birth, even of the joyful, replete haven before that, and whose subsequent life has been affected. We should take note of these.

I have nothing myself I can attribute to this time.
Except Me, my constitution. I think.

So there we were, all of us, my father on his way back home that Saturday having done his half-day as ever at SPCK, my mother on his return out there on the steps that winter lunchtime, scrubbing them clean. I cannot help it if this is archetypal, or trite, that is what she was doing when my father returned to 56 Mall Road, Hammersmith on Saturday the fourth of February in the year nineteen hundred and thirty-three. Then she no doubt uprose and greeted him, he carried her bucket into the flat, perhaps, when she had finished (how far through her task she was I cannot say), saw how cosmically gravid she was, Emily, smiled at her beauty in her tiredness, perhaps, again, as she served him the lunch that was ready.

That afternoon the pains set in, the labour began, of an unknown (at that moment) duration. She knew her time was near, so did Stan, the grandmothers-to-be were alerted too, were more enmeshed having gone through all that was to come themselves.

Queen Charlotte's was the hospital afforded, where is it exactly, let me go to look. . . .

Though it is now the next day, and still I have not looked. A moment – do not go away, or lose interest, after reading this far, and with such effort –

It is in Goldhawk Road, at the western end where it curves to pass under the twinned and elevated section of the District and Piccadilly lines to Acton Town, Boston Manor and beyond, she must have lain there that evening hearing the District Line trains slowing, stopping

and starting again at Stamford Brook Station, the sleek, low Piccadilly Line coaches speeding through non-stop to Acton Town from Hammersmith. Unless she was otherwise preoccupied.

By teatime, then, she was in both labour and Queen Charlotte's Annexe.

And at the mercy of the medical profession.

Here is a little lecture, by one who knew:

'Now, for poking about in the vagina and related areas what is it best to use? And I don't want anyone telling me the obvious because the time we're talking about is most definitely after that instrument has already been used to very noticeable effect. Now favourite at the period we have been considering would probably have been Sim's Double Duckbill Speculum; it might have been Auvard's, Ferguson's or in very special cases indeed McCullagh's Self-retaining Speculum, but for a good general poker-around in the well-know orifice you can't beat a Sim's Double Duckbill, for my money. And that's what at that period, as at any, you would have been doing: having a good old poke around with a Sim's to try to find out what it is you should have been doing ten or fifteen minutes earlier. You may also have found it invaluable to have had to hand at the time a Playfair's Probe and a pair of Rampley's Sponge-holding Forceps – but you should for Christ's sake have watched what you were doing with your Playfair's: it's all very well to induce by bursting the bag of waters, but no baby is ready at this stage to be undergoing brain surgery.'

The lecturer paused for effect; then continued.

‘Fortunately, women have been having babies without the help of the medical profession for many millions of years, so the chances of complications or of your doing anything to assist are relatively few. In order to justify your presence at the sacred moment at all, therefore, you should have seen to it that you had the appropriate period instruments at the ready, to wit: umpteen pairs of Waugh’s Long Fine Dissecting Forceps, one Urethral Bougie to be used in the unlikely event of your needing to examine the common bile duct, four of Moynihan’s Gall-Bladder forceps, Geig’s Myoma Screw, Westheim’s Angled Scissors, three Vulsellum Forceps, one Wrigley’s Short Midwifery Forceps, five Payr’s Crushing Clamps, one Doyen’s Retractor, four Willett’s Scalp Forceps, Bonney’s Uterine Depressors, and Clover’s Crutch for trussing up the patient like a fowl if necessary; which latter is not necessarily uncomfortable, either.’

And he was not finished yet:

‘So away you would have gone, then, learning from your midwife, hoping for the best, leaning ever so hard on dear old Mother Nature.’

He had done.

Were any of these fearsome instruments needed? Did they notice her blood group was rhesus negative? Did the bag burst or leak, was Me

heralded by a torrent or a trickle? Who remembers? Does it matter, again, now?’

The dying fall – and I use that word advisedly – on which my extract ends is very un-Sternean: but very typical of this particular B S Johnson novel, which is full of questions like ‘Does any of it matter?’ and ‘What’s the point?’ He was depressed for much of the time that he wrote it, and killed himself soon afterwards.

In the introduction to my biography, I say that one of the reasons I wanted to write it was to try and answer the question of *how far, to what extent* literature is able to console us. As I get older I become more and more certain that the entire corpus of literature is merely a symptom of mankind’s neurosis, and that a properly-adjusted species, a species which felt more at ease with itself and with the world around it, would not need to compensate for its deficiencies by pouring out and then devouring vast quantities of poetry, prose and drama, to say nothing of music and painting, films and sculpture. Johnson unashamedly referred to his own novels as ‘therapy’. Writing about Sylvia Plath in 1965, he hazarded that most of her poems ‘were not intended in any sense primarily to communicate with others, but to make an emotion external in order to try to come to terms with it’. In the end, he said: ‘I must yet question the *value* of her poems: after all, they did not save her, did they?’

To which one can only add, gloomily, that Johnson’s novels did not save him either.

Did Sterne write for therapeutic reasons? All writers do, to some extent. No doubt for a man who seems to have shared some of Johnson’s sense of the

daunting *ungraspability* of life, being able to turn it into a wonderful, erudite, mischievous and warmhearted joke was at times very consoling indeed. And of course, *Tristram Shandy* was a big popular success: it made Sterne famous, and desirable, and that can be a very big consolation too – one that Johnson never had, or even came very close to having.

Why did he never have it, though? I suppose it's because his novels, in the end, are too introverted, too solipsistic. Like Sylvia Plath's, his books 'were not intended in any sense primarily to communicate with others'. He had his own personal demons to exorcise, and his books were his way of doing it. But it's tempting to remark, in retrospect, that the enterprise was doomed from the start: Johnson's radical scepticism about what fiction could achieve, which drew him irresistibly to Sterne and the other great practitioners of the anti-novel, was too radical, in fact – it bordered on contempt for the very form in which he was working. So he ended up putting a huge weight of expectation, a huge burden of faith, onto a form which he really had no faith in at all.

He called Sterne an 'unflincher', but I wonder whether it was the right word. Sterne stared the complexity of life straight in the face, it's true, but he was never going to flinch because it seems to me that it never really frightened him. He saw it instead as the most wonderful joke. Furthermore, he manages to persuade *us*, while we are reading him, that it's the most wonderful joke as well. That's why reading him is still the most joyous experience, as intensely exhilarating as my teenage encounters with Monty Python and Spike Milligan all those years ago. Like all great writers, Sterne convinces me that his way of looking at the world is the right one. B S Johnson, for all his honesty and ingenuity, never quite does that. What he does, instead, is invite me to share in a private sadness.

John Berger spoke to me about B S Johnson, with wonderful affection and acuity. He pointed out that as a man, Johnson was fatally over-sensitive: he 'lacked the protective carapace that other people have, but one has to add that his achievement wouldn't have been possible if he'd had that carapace. So that the lack of a carapace was intimately related – was the same thing, almost – as his talent and his vision and his originality.'

So that seems to be the deal, then. Without the unhappiness, without the neuroses – you don't get the books. No pain, no gain. Was it a price worth paying? It's a tough one, that. One of the toughest questions of all. I'm not sure even Sterne could have answered it – let alone made a joke out of it.