

IV TRANSITION

All the stories in *Karsch, und andere Prosa* (1964) are unashamedly traditional in form. With one exception none of them, however, should be regarded as self-contained pieces of prose.¹ 'Eine Reise wegwohin, 1960' offers, for instance, an alternative perspective on *Das dritte Buch über Achim*, highlighting the detrimental psychological effects which the GDR experience had on Karsch.² The story is told using an unambiguous neutrally omniscient narrator, which suggests that Johnson, at least, did not consider departure from traditional narrative patterns to be a matter of universal aesthetic necessity. If the '1960' of the title refers to the writing as well as the setting of the story, it may well have been the original sketch for *Das dritte Buch über Achim*. Some of the other stories, it is now clear, are prototypes for episodes of *Jahrestage*; the story 'Osterwasser' (*KP*, 7–17), for instance, is mentioned by Marie in *Jahrestage* (see *JT*, 1254), while Grete Selenbinder, in 'Beihilfe zum Umzug' (*KP*, 18–28), figures prominently in Johnson's final novel. As Ingrid Riedel notes, *Karsch, und andere Prosa* is made up of story elements which are parts of wider contexts: they are not unified by an underlying concept.³ A cynic might suggest that the volume was produced to sustain public interest in Uwe Johnson during the four-year gap between *Das dritte Buch über Achim* and *Zwei Ansichten*. Comprising only eighty-nine pages of large, well-spaced type, these texts have only a peripheral relevance to this analysis of the technical evolution in Johnson's novels. All the same, the omniscient narrative perspective adopted is symptomatic of the rather more complex, but related approach to be found in *Zwei Ansichten* (1965).

In common with Johnson's other works, *Zwei Ansichten* is frequently not excepted from the assumption that Johnson religiously employs a non-omniscient narrator. Marcel Reich-Ranicki maintained that 'Johnson hält es für angebracht, über das Wissen seiner Hauptfiguren nicht hinauszugehen. Nur das wird also dem Leser geboten, was B. und D. sehen, erkennen, erleben'.⁴ That view is belied, however, in the novel's final pages, which reveal that in fact a first-person narrator has been responsible for telling the story. Other critics consequently accept (with some reluctance) the existence of an omniscient narrator in Johnson's third published novel, but are at a loss to explain his presence. Riedel, for instance, asserts that 'Das Auftauchen des Erzählers. . . wirkt . . . unorganisch, wie angeklebt' (Riedel, p. 123). Indeed, in the light of the manifest importance accorded to narrative reflexion in Johnson's other novels after 1959, *Zwei Ansichten* apparently represents a remarkable exception. At first

sight the novel only seems to concern itself with the narrator's role in the most perfunctory manner, so that at least one critic has relegated the status of the narrator to that of an inconsequential joke: 'only a minor ploy at the very end of the book when the story teller suddenly materializes as a participant in the action. . . playfully disrupts the sense of a conventional narrator who is omniscient'.⁵ But detailed textual examination reveals that the narrator in *Zwei Ansichten*, while omniscient, is by no means conventional; nor is his appearance in the final pages of the book a disruption, but confirmation of a narrative strategy whose framework can be traced throughout the whole of the novel.

The structure and external events of the novel are clear enough for them to be schematically represented, a task which the reader of *Mutmaßungen über Jakob* might face with trepidation. On a cursory reading the narrative perspective does indeed initially appear to be confined to the 'zwei Ansichten' of the title, namely B., a young West German photographer-cum-chemist's assistant, and the East German nurse D. The book is divided into ten chapters devoted alternately to each main protagonist, beginning with B. The brief but abortive relationship which the two enjoyed early in 1961 is gradually revealed through the memories of the ex-lovers. The plot concerns the attempts of B. to replace his newly acquired but soon stolen sports car and to fulfil his dreams of parading the vehicle before D., who meanwhile grows more and more dissatisfied with her way of life, eventually seizing the opportunity to depart for the 'neue Welt' of the West. As the story progresses a strong impression is created of purely implied authorship. Yet when B. is struck by a bus on his final arrival in Berlin, the narrator unexpectedly dramatizes himself: 'Ich habe ihn aufheben helfen und bin mit dem heulenden Krankenwagen zur Unfallstation gefahren' (ZA, 239). Our narrator also has personal contact with the other main character, D. When the latter receives her Western identification papers she seeks accommodation:

Sie wurde eine Woche lang aufgenommen von einem jungen Ehepaar, das ein kleines Kind hatte. . . Sie erzählte höflich, ein wenig befangen, von Ostberlin. Später nahm sie mir ein Versprechen ab. — Aber das müssen sie alles erfinden, was Sie schreiben! sagte sie. Es ist erfunden. (ZA, 242)

We can surmise that D.'s host is the narrator of our novel; his information is drawn from D., and presumably B. as well.

But although the narrator only admits his first-person identity in the closing stages of the book, his explicit presence can be detected on several occasions throughout the novel. D. falls asleep in the *U-Bahn*: 'und sie fuhr erst auf, als drei (drei? ja) jüngere Herren. . . den Mann vom Sitz zogen zum Türgang. . .' (ZA, 53–54). The narrator momentarily interrupts D.'s *erlebte Rede*, on the pretext of having to verify the accuracy of his information, and simultaneously registers his presence as an independent figure in the narrative structure. Similarly the illusion of a disinterested, impersonal story teller is broken for the briefest of moments as D. tries to discover why she has begun to travel aimlessly

through the town: 'die ziellose Fahrerei, die müssigen Gänge hatten (meint sie) aber auch zu tun mit wahlloser Neugier auf die Stadt, in der sie lebte' (ZA, 108). The use of the present tense, 'meint sie', provides a clue to the narrative dynamics, indicating a time level different to that of the *erzählte Zeit*; the narrator momentarily emerges into the *Erzählzeit*, the time when he is telling the story. A further hint is to be found when the narrator mentions B.'s return to Berlin in early October: 'Er kam zurück nach West Berlin' (ZA, 132). The choice of words suggests that the teller of our story is himself in Berlin. The narrator represents a third strand of consciousness, a third point of view, whose proximity can intermittently be determined by the reader.

A model for the system of narrative relationships in *Zwei Ansichten* is furnished by a dream D. has when she is visited by fear and anxiety towards the end of her time in the GDR: 'Ein anderer Traum, der nur einmal kam, ging in drei durchsichtigen Schichten übereinander. Sie berichtete, sie machte eine Aussage. Sie war aber auch mitten drin' (ZA, 204). D. makes an 'Aussage' to the narrator about her experiences in the East, material which is then transformed into our story. Hence the figure of the nurse is present on two levels, that of the construction of the story, and that of her meeting and subsequent relationship with B. The consciousness of the latter character, which is treated with a distinct measure of irony, might be represented by the third 'Schicht' in D.'s dream. This image of narrative structure bears striking similarities to those of Johnson's other major novels. All three strands of time and consciousness merge in the penultimate and final chapters as the *erzählte Zeit* reaches the *Erzählzeit*, just as it does in *Mutmaßungen über Jakob*, *Das dritte Buch über Achim*, and *Jahrestage*.

These circumstances involve a certain amount of paradox. Ingrid Riedel sees the revelation of the authorial 'ich' as an indication of the presence of an 'auktorialer Erzähler' as defined by Stanzel (see Riedel, p. 122). This cannot in theory be the case, since an authorial narrator in this sense may comment on the action but may not actually take part in it. To do so, as the narrator of *Zwei Ansichten* does, is to become an *Ich-Erzähler* and hence limited to the information plausibly acquired within the parameters of the particular fictional world at hand. There is much in the text to support the view of an *Ich-Erzähler* who acknowledges the sources of his information and so the limits of his knowledge. As we have seen, apart from the appearance of the 'ich' in the final pages, there are clues which indicate the true circumstances of narration throughout the novel. Yet by making the supererogatory assurance that his fictional information is fictionalized, the narrator deliberately dismantles the device of a first-person narrator, replacing it with what might be regarded as an authorial projection. For the details given of the 'junges Ehepaar' living in Berlin tally with those of Johnson's own life, though in 1965, not in 1961. The author was also certainly involved in a project to write about the activities of the

Girman-Gruppe, an escape organization. This stratagem may be designed to imply a fictional projection of the author into the setting of his book, the creation of an identifiable alter ego in his fictional world. In this the narrator, intimating as he does the similarity between the 'Ich' of *Zwei Ansichten* and Johnson's own circumstances at the time, would appear once more to be delineating the parameters of his knowledge: the implication is that the teller of our story has access to a similar corpus of information in his fictional universe as Johnson the author might reasonably be supposed to have in the historical world.

But that kind of delimitation is disrupted in turn by the use of perspective in the text. Although demonstrably an *Ich-Erzähler*, who, if in the main quiescent, is nonetheless involved during the whole of the novel, the narrator at the same time enjoys a sovereign ability not only to occupy the minds of the two main characters, but also to take up a perspective from incidental outside figures in order to view B. and D. externally. This omniscience is apparent when a customer comes into B.'s shop: 'Der war nur erstaunt, daß der Verkäufer, dem überdies der weiße Mantel offenstand, über eigenen Angelegenheiten ihn warten ließ' (ZA, 28). D. is likewise seen through the eyes of incidental characters; as the nurse wanders aimlessly through the autumn streets, the narrator briefly employs the viewpoint of passers-by, in order to determine the success of D.'s efforts to appear purposeful:

Der helle Mantel, die fest in die Taschen gestemmt Hände ließen sie entschlossen aussehen, die Lippen lagen nicht fest aufeinander, den Nacken hielt sie gerade, so daß die Entgegenkommenden doch nicht auf einen versonnenen, eigentlich auf einen zielbewußten Blick zu treffen meinten. (ZA, 107).

Similarly, when the drunk and maudlin B. relates the loss of his car to the *Wirtin*, the narrator adopts a perspective outside B.:

Sie ließ ihn erzählen vom Diebstahl seines Wagens, und bewegte mißbilligend den Kopf, gerade als er Mißbilligung für den Dieb erwartete, ihm fielen die spöttischen Laute gar nicht auf, die sie mit der Zunge an den Zähnen hervorbrachte, das gespielte Mitleid für Kinder. (ZA, 168)

On other occasions, too, the narrator is able to make observations outside B.'s field of perception: 'Die Frau am Stand mit den Ansichtenpostkarten sah dem Kerl groß hinterher, wie er lang und angeregt die Promenade hinunterstelte' (ZA, 36). The teller of our story adjusts the perspectives just as it suits his purposes to do so, adopting an ironic distance to B. whenever necessary. He is able to wander freely through the text, speaking in the first person as well as through the perspective of any third person of his choice. That he does not necessarily use the perspective of every character is by no means evidence that he cannot do so.

Furthermore it is quite apparent that he does indeed comment, if only implicitly, on the action, by adopting an ironic stance towards B., viewing him

with a distinctly jaundiced eye, while making his sympathies for D. equally obvious. Despite his dramatization, the narrator of *Zwei Ansichten* does bear an extremely close resemblance to the traditional authorial narrator so emphatically rejected in 'Berliner Stadtbahn'. The essay of 1961 clearly has no bearing whatever on the novel of 1965. More than that, *Zwei Ansichten* belligerently runs counter to the policy (the pragmatism of which is thus finally confirmed) of attempting to restrict narrative omniscience directly, a policy which was tested to the limits of its practical usefulness in *Das dritte Buch über Achim*. Both the narrative cognizance and the narrative authority are firmly united in the author-narrator figure of *Zwei Ansichten*, a figure which is defiantly paradoxical and beyond the range of theoretical classifications such as those put forward by Stanzel. The narrative tactics of this novel reinforce rather than question the supremacy of the author in his own fictional world.

Indeed, this curiously negative, pessimistic approach extends to other questions which are an integral part of Johnson's approach to literature. D. might be termed a typical Johnson character; conscientious, intelligent, observant, principled, though quite naturally capable of mistakes and wrong decisions. Indeed she is very reminiscent of Gesine Cresspahl. It is all the more noticeable, then, that B. is by no means typical of Johnson. He is mean, immature, shallow, foolish, selfish, self-deceptive, and altogether a quite unpleasant character on the edge of caricature. Unlike Joachim T. he cannot be excused on the grounds of political idealism; his thoughts hardly stray from himself long enough to allow any consideration of wider issues. If B. is a cipher for the *Bundesrepublik*, as has been maintained by several critics, then *Zwei Ansichten* contains a terrible and bitter indictment of West German society.⁶ The ironic treatment of love in *Zwei Ansichten* (B.'s love is directed more towards himself than D., while the latter quickly becomes indifferent to the West German's attentions) stands in sharp contrast to the credible, tender love of Jonas Blach for Gesine, or Gesine for Jakob. The sentimentality of the *Bauernsohn* confessing to B. that he cannot bear to be apart from his girlfriend is rare in Johnson, although the incident serves as a foil to B.'s behaviour and indeed to that of D.; the girlfriend of the farmer's son is afraid to run the risk of crossing the border (see ZA, 66-67 and 80). In another unusual departure for Johnson, the plot is set in motion by an unmistakable phallic symbol, namely the powerful, red sports-car, stolen from B., with which he had intended to impress D. The sexual connotations of such an object can hardly be ignored, particularly when it is repeatedly referred to as 'sein rotes Ding' (ZA, 15). Cheated of the chance to display his 'rotes Ding' to D., B. puts all his efforts into retrieving what he has lost; the absent status symbol conditions the course of the novel's external events. Moreover, the nearest Johnson ever gets to portraying explicit sex is in *Zwei Ansichten*; an unwritten rule which pervades the author's work is broken, unfortunately resulting in a rather clumsy euphemism: 'B. zog die Frau von der Bettkante hinter das Fußteil

auf den staubmuffigen Teppich und zwängte sie aus den Kleidern, bis er ihr seinen lebendigsten Teil beibringen konnte. . .' (ZA, 93).

More importantly, the characters occasionally deal with the problem of memory and the past in quite the reverse of the manner adopted by characters elsewhere in Johnson's work. The familiar endeavours to recreate the past, to preserve and reassemble fragments of memory in order to overcome the erosive power of time which are so important in *Mutmaßungen über Jakob*, *Das dritte Buch über Achim*, and above all *Jahrestage*, find little place in *Zwei Ansichten*. In this novel evasion of the past, the eradication of undesirable or unpleasant memories assumes a dominant position.

In Berlin, B. tries to suppress the shame and indignity caused by the theft of his car by swamping his mind with alcohol. On returning to his home town the young West German 'hoffte hilflos, er könne alles ungeschehen machen, und sei es mit Vergessen' (ZA, 22). He tells nobody what has happened, explaining his return by public transport with implausible lies: 'er brachte es nicht über sich, von den vier Stromkreisen und dem leeren Platz vor dem Hotel zu erzählen, mochte daran auch nicht denken' (ZA, 24). After his drunken excursion to Stuttgart he is unwilling to remember his indignity on the train: 'er traute sich nicht jemandem in die Augen zu sehen, er mochte sich nicht erinnern' (ZA, 90). Directly after this he is visited by the couple at whose flat he met D.; he tries to suppress thoughts even of her: 'er. . .erkannte. . .das Ehepaar, in dessen Wohnung in Westberlin er die D. kennengelernt hatte, so daß wieder nicht abgetan war, woran er nicht noch einmal hatte denken mögen' (ZA, 90). In time this kind of memory suppression leads B. to create a new, self-orientated image of D.: 'willentlich bekam er [die Einzelheiten] nicht zusammen, bildete sich inzwischen ein überschmales, blutjunges, verängstigtes Wesen ein an Stelle der D. und überließ sich schwärmerisch dem Genuß des Verlustes, den er sich zugute hielt, fühlte sich ehrenhalber angehalten zu Treue, er meinte Enthaltung' (ZA, 152). This false reconstruction becomes a dangerous matter, almost proving the downfall of his plan to see D. in the West, and indeed nearly resulting in D.'s imprisonment. B. wrongly gives the colour of D.'s eyes as grey-green when her false passport is being assembled by the escape organization; her fury at this most obvious revelation of the emptiness of B.'s declarations of love make her refuse to meet him and his new 'rotes Ding' in Hamburg, indeed even to speak to him. B.'s pursuit of 'Angesehensein' (ZA, 130) has finally been foiled by his own self-deception: his failure in reconstructing indistinct memories becomes a personal catastrophe.

D. also suppresses thoughts and memories as her family breaks up and her surroundings become less and less bearable: 'So wick sie jetzt aus vor Einfällen, von denen sie nicht hätte zurücktreten können, auf der Hut, der Flucht vor einem Entschluß, sie schwärzte die Stelle in Gedanken, klinkte sich aus, verzog sich auf die erstbeste Seite' (ZA, 108). She even seems to transform her efforts to

wash away memories into physical action: '[sie] wusch sich aber auch die Haare, wenn sie mit der Handfläche an die Schläfe gekommen war und vielleicht doch nur leichte Haftung der Strähnen gespürt hatte und nicht eine Erinnerung' (ZA, 109). In the same way as alcohol was for B., physical work becomes a means of repressing mental activity as far as D. is concerned: 'sie wusch Geschirr aus Gefälligkeit für andere, polierte den Fußboden mit dem schweren Bohnerbesen, die gleichförmigen Bewegungen drängten das Denken so wohltätig zurück' (ZA, 182). D. leaves her subconscious to grapple with the problem of her dissatisfaction, a problem to which she avoids applying any conscious deliberation. The letter from B. saps her of any further will to suppress thoughts of leaving for the West: 'Danach war die Erinnerung kaum noch wegzudrängen' (ZA, 187). The memory of West Berlin increases in strength, and D.'s final capitulation solves the problem for her. But in her case, suppression of the mental images memory represents extends to other workings of the imagination as she envisages showing B. round the hospital: 'Mit der Wiederholung wurden die Vorstellungen ausgelaut, das lebendige und bewegte Bild ungreifbarer, ausgedörnt zu Wortfolgen' (ZA, 190). This barren image is both indicative of D.'s despair and symptomatic of the unprofitable road along which *Zwei Ansichten* travels.

Both the thematic and the narrative approach of *Zwei Ansichten* amount to an almost mechanical reversal of the techniques tested in Johnson's second novel, creating an ironic counterpoint to the successful strategy which was to be adopted with renewed vigour and sophistication in *Jahrestage*. The employment of an omniscient narrator ironically concealing his omniscience by dramatizing himself as an *Ich-Erzähler* has none of the advantages and refinements of the narrative scheme of *Das dritte Buch über Achim*. The only detectable narrative legacy of *Zwei Ansichten* to emerge in Johnson's major novel is the authorial projection, which, however, far from assuming the sovereign position evident in *Zwei Ansichten*, is incorporated as an element of the narrative dynamics. The question arises of why the moral imperative which so dominates Johnson's narrative approach in other cases seems here to diminish in importance. The answer lies in the nature of the subject matter: Herr B. is a paradigm of cynicism who is as dishonest with himself as with others. This cynicism is documented in *Jahrestage* by Gesine Cresspahl's letter to Anita Gantlik (the *Wirtin* of *Zwei Ansichten*); Gesine asks her if she remembers Dietbert B., 'den Fotografen, den Weltmann' and others who asked for escapes to be organized:

Hörte man sie reden, so ging ihnen die Entfernung von der geliebten Person ans Leben, waren sie einander unentbehrlich um jeden Preis, und tatsächlich reichte es ihnen nicht einmal zu einem beliebigen Ort, da zusammen zu leben. Dann war die absolute, bedingungsfreie Liebe doch nur möglich in der kapitalistischen Konjunktur. Schiet, Mensch! (JT, 189)

Perhaps it was with Gesine's contemptuous exclamation in mind that Johnson made his farewells to Berlin and West Germany. After D.'s arrival in the 'neue

Welt' of West Berlin, Johnson turned his attention to the new world of Gesine Cresspahl in the USA. The unproductive course pursued by *Zwei Ansichten* was to be abandoned in favour of renewed efforts to hinder the erosive progress of time.