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Greg Bond

*The Tricks of Memory*

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The following presents a piece of useless information which may be of interest to readers of Uwe Johnson, and readers of work on Uwe Johnson. The information is probably no more than conjecture. There will also be some thoughts on two aspects of Johnson's work which it shares with so very many other large-scale literary projects: the question of memory, and the creation of a literary world and landscape that clearly mingles fact with fiction, and requires the difference between the two to be indistinct, and, for the reader, impossible to unravel. This goes much further than just the use of real names for towns and places together with invented ones – Jerichow in Mecklenburg. The method means that the fictitious merges with the real for the reader, who is never once irritated by this, but I use the verb »require« more with reference to the author, in this case Uwe Johnson. The nature of Johnson's literary intentions were clearly such that this method was a necessity, by which I mean that no other method would have fulfilled his purpose. For readers who believe that enough has been written already on Johnson and memory, and that the few attempts thus far to unravel the fictitious topography and relate it to the real miss the point entirely, I can only say in my defence that this short essay is no more than an aside, an afterthought, and the product of a chance discovery (in essence useless, see above), and yet also that I am not aware of any commentary on Uwe Johnson which does justice to his own particular kind of realism in fiction, and certainly none that links this to the problem of memory.

Johnson's own particular kind of realism in fiction? Is it not accepted

wisdom that William Faulkner bears a good deal of the responsibility for what Johnson began to do to Mecklenburg in *Ingrid Babendererde* and *Mutmassungen über Jakob*, and completed in *Jahrestage*? Jefferson in Yoknapatawpha County was a precursor to Johnson's Jerichow in Mecklenburg – of this there can be no doubt. Casterbridge in Dorset certainly was not. The Uwe Johnson-Archiv holds no works by Thomas Hardy, and although when I asked him Eberhard Fahlke recalled the fire that destroyed many of Johnson's books in Berlin while the author was in New York, there is no reason to believe that Johnson ever read Hardy. Dietrich Spaeth lists no reference to Hardy in his list of literary references in *Jahrestage*. And when Uwe Johnson quotes from a literary source, it is true that he frequently has very good reason to do so, and yet makes his reference oblique, only to comment on it and draw the careful reader's attention to it through a further reference or by lifting the veil somewhere else, usually in the vicinity of the first reference. The *Kommentar* to *Jahrestage* does not include Thomas Hardy either. For the famous passage from *Jahrestage* which is of interest here, the *Kommentar* refers to Bernd Aueroch's comparative investigation of memory in Proust and *Jahrestage*, and the distinction between *Erinnerung* and *Gedächtnis*. This is the passage in the first volume of *Jahrestage* where Gesine Cresspahl is reminded by impressions of the weather in New York (seen through a mirror reflection in the doors of the bank where she works) of a day many years previously in Wendisch Burg (a fictitious town), and concludes that there is something false in this memory, and that the »Tricks der Erinnerung« result in alienation, as the past as it was is not the same as its involuntary memory.<sup>1</sup> There can be no dispute that Proust and Faulkner, and Walter Benjamin, and probably a great many others interested Uwe Johnson, and that his treatment of memory in *Jahrestage* can be fruitfully related to their works, and that this can be shown by means of Johnson's clear references to these authors.

But Thomas Hardy? Just to recap: Thomas Hardy is a nineteenth-century great English novelist whose works are concentrated entirely on one large county of south-east England, today's Dorset and beyond – or, for Hardy: Wessex. That, said Hardy, was more than enough for the literary aspirations of one man. Editions of his books today frequently contain maps of Hardy's Wessex, with all the names of villages and towns that Hardy invented adjacent to real names that he used. The latter are

1 Johnson, Uwe: *Jahrestage*. Aus dem Leben von Gesine Cresspahl, Bd. I-IV, Frankfurt am Main 1970–1983, S. 125.

generally the larger towns, as they also are in Uwe Johnson's work. In 1912 Hardy had long ceased writing novels, and the Wessex Edition was published, for which he wrote a short, and modest preface. Hardy's remains – minus the heart – are in Westminster Abbey in London, and his heart in the small Dorset churchyard of Stinsford, next to the graves of his family. Berlin has no Westminster Abbey for its nation's authors to go when they die, and Uwe Johnson's remains are on the Isle of Sheppey in England. There is a plaque in his honour attached to a lamppost in a street in Berlin, with a misquotation from his work.<sup>2</sup>

In the »General Preface to the Wessex Edition of 1912« Hardy wrote:

But I would state that the geographical limits of the stage here trodden were not absolutely forced upon the writer by circumstances; he forced them upon himself from judgement. I considered that our magnificent heritage from the Greeks in dramatic literature found sufficient room for a large proportion of its action in an extent of their country not much larger than the half-dozen counties here reunited under the old name of Wessex, and that the domestic emotions have throbbed in Wessex nooks with as much intensity as in the palaces of Europe, and that, anyhow, there was quite enough human nature in Wessex for one

2 Niedstraße 14. Letter from the mayor of Schöneberg to me, of 18.05.1995: »[...] Als Grundlage für die Tafelvorderseite diente der für die ursprüngliche Tafel von der Historischen Kommission zu Berlin begutachtete Text, der aus räumlichen Gründen leicht komprimiert werden mußte. Die Rückseite wurde nach einer Empfehlung von Dr. Eberhard Fahlke, Leiter des Uwe-Johnson-Archivs in Frankfurt/Main, gestaltet. Der Text wurde dem Manuskript entnommen, in dem die ursprüngliche Fassung »Es zeugt aber die gegenwärtige Phase eines Zustands ...« von Johnsons schwer lesbarer Hand so korrigiert ist, daß man neben »lediglich« und »herrlich« auch noch »herzlich« lesen kann. Dies muß zu diesem folgenschweren Druckfehler geführt haben. [...] Da das Projekt nach vielen Schwierigkeiten noch im 60. Geburtsjahr von Uwe Johnson verwirklicht werden sollte und die Stelle eines Gedenktafelbearbeiters unbesetzt war, haben meine Mitarbeiter sich auf die Arbeit eines externen, zuverlässig bekannten Gestalters verlassen, der das Projekt von der Textauswahl bis zur endgültigen Tafelrealisierung betreut hat. Deswegen konnte uns der Druckfehler auch erst nach der Fertigstellung und eiligen Aufhängung der Tafel ins Auge fallen.

Eine Korrektur ist uns jedoch zur Zeit aufgrund knapper Finanzmittel leider nicht möglich; deswegen werden wir vorerst mit der vorhandenen, leicht entstellten Fassung leben müssen.«

The text is from »Berliner Stadtbahn« and the misquotation is of the sentence »Er zeigt aber lediglich die gegenwärtige Phase eines Zustands ... .« The word on the plaque is »herrlich«; furthermore »zeigt« is correct, and not »zeugt«, as in the letter cited above. Two further differences between the text on the plaque and the text in published editions of Johnson were attributed by the mayor of Schöneberg to the manuscript which was used as the basis of the text. Whatever the case, here we have the kind of unfortunate error that brings discredit; see below on Boswell and Hardy.

man's literary purpose. So far was I possessed by this idea that I kept within the frontiers when it would have been easier to overlap them and give more cosmopolitan features to the narrative.

Thus, though the people in most of the novels [...] are dwellers in a province [...] they were meant to be typically and essentially those of any and every place where

Thought's the slave of life, and life time's fool  
 – beings in whose hearts and minds that which is apparently local should be really universal.

Having dealt with his universal aim, Hardy continues to outline the further agenda in the Wessex novels, which was far more than the mere by-product he here claims it to be:

But whatever the success of this intention, and the value of these novels as delineations of humanity, they have at least a humble supplementary quality of which I may be justified in reminding the reader, though it was one that was quite unintentional and unforeseen. At the dates represented in the various narrations things were like that in Wessex: the inhabitants lived in certain ways, engaged in certain occupations, kept alive certain customs, just as they are shown doing in these pages. And in particularizing such I have often been reminded of Boswell's remarks on the trouble to which he was put and the pilgrimages he was obliged to make to authenticate some detail, though the labour was one which would bring him no praise. Unlike his achievement, however, on which an error as he says would have brought discredit, if these country customs and vocations, obsolete and obsolescent, had been detailed wrongly, nobody would have discovered such errors to the end of Time. Yet I have instituted inquiries to correct tricks of memory, and striven against temptations to exaggerate, in order to preserve for my own satisfaction a fairly true record of a vanishing life.

Uwe Johnson used his Büchner Prize address in 1971 to inform the public about the pilgrimages he made in order to verify one detail, and of the errors which no one would have noticed (to the end of Time) that brought him discredit. Here Uwe Johnson brought himself discredit in order to bring credit, for where there is one mistake there are a thousand correct details. Johnson's Frankfurt Lectures, *Begleitumstände*, include similar admissions of errors, and descriptions of research undertaken. All as if his true labour brought him no praise? But what was Uwe Johnson's true labour? Uwe Johnson instituted inquiries. Perhaps to record a fairly true record of a vanishing life? Johnson certainly believed that this was one of the reasons why people write and read novels.

The »tricks of memory« – »Tricks der Erinnerung«. This is not a quotation from Hardy in Johnson. For one thing, the phrase is used

differently by Johnson, more personally by Gesine Cresspahl, and more in a Proustian sense, and certainly not in the context of a discussion on the function of the novel as a genre. Secondly, there are no further hints at Hardy here, nor anywhere nearby in Johnson's text. At least, none that I have been able to find. Thirdly, whilst the phrase »Tricks der Erinnerung« is a little idiosyncratic in German, in English it reads like a commonplace, and the sort of thing anyone might say to pass the time of day with a neighbour. Johnson might have picked it up anywhere, or just made it up himself. Finally, there is no work by Hardy in Johnson's library in Frankfurt, and there is no Johnson criticism which draws on Hardy.

Perhaps it is a quotation from Thomas Hardy, or a reference. For Johnson would have been just as likely to turn the poetical and historical meaning of words like Hardy's when summarising his achievement as a novelist into something else in his own novel, such as Gesine Cresspahl's problem with memory, just so that his readers would not notice what this was really about »to the end of Time«.

It makes no difference whether it is a quotation or not. Nor is it necessary to consult any one of many thousands of books and articles by, on or about Thomas Hardy, in order perhaps to find something that may link up with Uwe Johnson, thus substantiating a connection. The needle in the haystack is rightfully in the haystack, perhaps to the end of Time.

It can be said, though, that Uwe Johnson and Thomas Hardy are kindred spirits, from two very different intellectual traditions, but with certain very clear common aims. Uwe Johnson is Germany's greatest twentieth-century nineteenth-century novelist.

Uwe Johnson, whilst meticulously researching the history and topography of his novels, never ceased to insist that it was all invented. Why then does a writer go to all the trouble of research? And why does he insist that whereas the world he has invented is not real, it may be true? Would it not be easier just to remember what you remember, and then invent the rest. No libraries, no newspaper archives, no letters to friends and acquaintances, and to friends and acquaintances of friends and acquaintances, instituting inquiries.

Thomas Hardy wrote: »In respect of places described under fictitious or ancient names in the novels [...] discerning people have affirmed in print that they clearly recognize the originals«. Discerning Johnson scholars have done the same, of course. Hardy goes on to give a long list of twenty-six of his fictitious places and their alleged originals, thus providing the basis for all future maps of Hardy's Wessex, and then he concludes:

Subject to the qualifications above given, that no detail is guaranteed – that the portraiture of fictitiously named towns and villages was only suggested by certain real places, and wantonly wanders from inventorial descriptions of them – I do not contradict these keen hunters for the real; I am satisfied with their statements as at least an indication of their interest in the scenes.

The fictitious remains fictitious, and Hardy flatters the detectives amongst his followers for their interest in his work, not their interest in the real places. Here Hardy seems to be contradicting himself – on the one hand he has »instituted inquiries« to give a »fairly true record«, and on the other hand his work »wantonly wanders« from any model in the real world. This is not a contradiction, but merely the same insistence on the difference between fiction and reality that we find in Uwe Johnson.

The passage in *Jahrestage* which leads to the naming of the tricks of memory describes an unconcentrated moment in Gesine Cresspahl's life in New York, when a sensual experience (concerning the weather) or an atmospheric instant recalls the past, and leads to a state of supreme concentration: the past returns to the imagination as if it were today. This is a common experience, though not everyone who experiences such moments is as hard on himself as Gesine is on herself. I recognised the feeling of what it had been to live in Hamburg when I returned some ten years after by a whiff of the peculiar smell of the city's underground train stations, as I was descending on an escalator. Hamburg was what I remembered it to be. For Gesine, this kind of memory is not to be trusted: the sensation of Wendisch Burg in New York is false, and has nothing to do with Wendisch Burg then. The reasons for this refusal to identify are complex; on the one hand Gesine is so far away from a lost home that she cannot permit any nostalgia, for that would be too painful. Though *Jahrestage* is full of nostalgia, it is equally full of the defence of the self against it (unlike Margarethe von Trotta's television film of the novel, which cuts out the defence). Reason number one: self-preservation in an alienated state. The second reason is historical and political, and is not explicitly raised in the scene in volume one in question. The tricks of memory are tricks, though, because they tend to suggest a happy past, a lost paradise, to which all historical and political knowledge about Germany during Gesine's childhood and youth gives the lie. All very well, but none of this links to Thomas Hardy.

Imagine that the tricks of memory scene in *Jahrestage* were not based on the situation whereby Gesine Cresspahl descends into images of her past whilst entering her place of work one ordinary morning, but on Uwe Johnson at his writing desk. Uwe Johnson was cut off from direct

experience of the scenes of his novel *Jahrestage*, geographically, politically, and through the passing of time. Thomas Hardy in Dorchester had a clearer sense of continuity, but he too was cut off by time from the events of his novels, all of which were set in the past. That is why, as he writes in the preface, he had to institute inquiries.

Memory alone is rarely a sufficient tool for a writer's material, and when the aim of the work is »fictitious chronicles« (Hardy), then memory will never suffice. It must be supplemented and verified or corrected by research. Invention is a poor tool for the historical novelist (invention not creativity), and ultimately it will be easier for him to achieve his goals if he enlists the help of his own kind of open scholarship. Meticulous inquiries do not only make the job easier, they make it possible to do the job in the first place.<sup>3</sup> But the research must be supplemented by invention, just as the invention is by research. Invention is not only the honest admission of the subjectivity of the writer in the present, who shapes his material about the past, and thus the prerogative of all modernist and postmodern historiography, it is also the only way in which the novelist is able to make his research and his story gel. Without fiction, all you have is facts, details, anecdotes, learning, but with fiction you have a sense of place, person, and what Hardy called the universal in the local. That is why the sum of the parts is invented, though it could never have been invented without the parts supplied by inquiries instituted. To make it all true, the whole is fiction, and yet the author recalls his labours and insists on the historical accuracy and reliability of his detail. He restricts his freedom of invention out of necessity, so as to be free to invent; he insists that it is all invented, and then, as in Hardy's case, he remains proud of his achievement in creating an accurate picture of a lost way of life.

This method is clearly a way in which an author deals with change. Living in a fast-changing world, the author responds by writing a ficti-

3 Compare the following passage from an unpublished letter of Uwe Johnson's to Margret Boveri of 19 February 1969: »Ich glaube, die Bedenken zu verstehen, die Sie gegen allzu genaue Recherchen für eine fiktive Konstruktion haben. Für mich ist das aber ein unentbehrliches Gerüst, das das unsichere und unbelegbare Erinnerungszentrum befestigt und schützt. Wer eine erfundene Stadt zwischen Lübeck und Wismar ansiedelt, sollte doch berücksichtigen, ob da eine rostocker Zeitung oder der Lübecker General-Anzeiger gehalten wurde. Nicht nur die Lübecker würden Bedenken anmelden, wenn in einem ihrer Nachbarorte lübecker Ereignisse nicht besprochen wurden. Andererseits müsste ich nicht auf eine Woche nach Lübeck ins Staatsarchiv, und hätte überhaupt ein ansehnliches Leben.« With thanks to Suhrkamp-Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, for permission.

tious chronicle, for which factual research is as necessary as the force of invention. This was the case for both kindred spirits, Hardy and Johnson. The result is the required literary method, which mingles fact and fiction right down to the topographical level, and calls the whole fiction. It is a kind of fiction which mistrusts the tricks of memory.

Hardy and Johnson – kindred spirits? In the chapter of *Jahrestage* which culminates in the tricks of memory the dominant tenor is danger. Gesine says: »erst wenn ich das Bild an der von Neon beleuchteten Ecke des Fahrstuhlschachtes verliere, versieht mein Gedächtnis den freundlichen Anblick und Augenblick und Moment mit einem scharfen Rand von Gefahr und Unglück«. This sharp contour of danger and unhappiness is always lurking in *Jahrestage*, in memory, in relationships of the heart, in dreams, in biographies, in history, in politics, and in the future. In his general preface Thomas Hardy responds to the many critics who thought his works too bleak and tragical. He maintains that he has no coherent »philosophy of life«, and then defends himself as follows:

That these impressions have been condemned as »pessimistic« – as if that were a very wicked adjective – shows a curious muddle-mindedness. It must be obvious that there is a higher characteristic of philosophy than pessimism, or than meliorism, or even than the optimism of these critics – which is truth. Existence is either ordered in a certain way, or it is not so ordered, and conjectures which harmonize best with experience are removed above all comparison with other conjectures which do not so harmonize. So that to say that one view is worse than other views without proving it erroneous implies the impossibility of a false view being better or more expedient than a true view; and no pragmatic proppings can make that *idolum specus* stand on its feet, for it postulates a prescience denied to humanity.

Hardy's critics claimed that his tragic plots were forced, and verged on melodrama. They certainly do verge on tragic melodrama, but for the reason that this is truer than meliorism. Looking at the plots of *Mutmassungen über Jakob* and *Jahrestage*, and the story of the life and loves of Gesine Cresspahl, the same would seem to apply. Uwe Johnson and Thomas Hardy as kindred spirits: in the creation of a fictitious province, in a literary method that requires verifiable fact in order to breathe, and then to invent, and in a »philosophy of life« that places truth above pragmatic conjecture?

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