
Johnson-Jahrbuch

Band 1/1994

Herausgegeben von
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Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht

Redaktion: Holger Helbig

Umschlagbild: Andreas Lemberg, Uwe Johnson I, Öl auf Leinwand

Die Deutsche Bibliothek – CIP-Einheitsaufnahme

Johnson-Jahrbuch. –

Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht.

Erscheint jährl. – Aufnahme nach Bd. 1. 1994

ISSN 0945-9227

Bd. 1. 1994 –

ISBN 3-525-20900-2

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Satz: Competext, Heidenrod

Druck und Bindung: Hubert & Co., Göttingen

Emery Snyder

Johnson's Skizze and Sketches of Johnson

Die literarische Biographie ist eine Grenzerscheinung,
die hinter der Grenze bleibt.

Kracauer

At least since Plato's seventh letter (esp. 344c), European writers have observed that written words are at the mercy of the recipient. This situation creates anxiety for those who wish to have meanings neatly pinned down, and inspires them to adopt restrictive strategies of exegesis. Such anxiety is probably due in part to the current situation in literary scholarship. In the United States, although paradigms derived from the close reading of the New Critics tend to dominate, texts are interpreted according to a huge variety of approaches, often representing the fashions reigning when the practitioner passed through professional training. Given the wide range of possible interpretative strategies, critics are faced with an audience bringing astonishingly varied standards to bear on their efforts. A similar situation prevails in the Bundesrepublik, as traditional approaches like Geistesgeschichte, philology, and source studies compete with the claims of the various sociologies and the »Frankfurt School«, while numerous feminist approaches and the various French currents in structuralism, post-structuralism, and psychoanalysis make progress. Scholars critical of newer approaches, or frightened by the lack of universally agreed-upon standards and the lively competition in the market place of ideas, often turn to literary biography as a familiar genre,

and biographical interpretations continue to be produced along with biographies of major authors.¹

As early as 1930, Siegfried Kracauer pointed out that biographies were popular precisely because the ready-made shape of an individual life seemed to offer a simple yet genuine literary form in an age where individual psychology and »die Konturen des Individuums« had been rendered passé (Kracauer uses the word »aufgehoben«).² Yet it is not, in fact, the case that abandoning the link to an author's personal life thrusts us willy-nilly into a nihilistic world where literary values disappear altogether; it leaves us in the public domain where literary works are produced and exchanged in our culture.

Let us take the case of intertextuality. Having noticed a congruence of some sort between two works, how does one justify paying attention to it? One can assert that the congruence illustrates some sort of structure which a perfectly endowed reader has perceived due to innate abilities (Riffaterre). This leaves the burden of showing congruence entirely up to the rhetorical powers of the critic. Or one can attempt to show that writer A was reading writer B. (This tack can take the form of a oedipal psychomachia, as in Harold Bloom's elaborate theories, or of a purely factual assertion about influences.)³ But the most sensible way is to first show how one text relies upon or responds to the other, and then use the facts of biography and history to ascertain that such a conjunction was possible. (This act is mostly negative, as when we assert that *Bahnwärter Thiel* cannot be referring to *Mutmassungen über Jakob*, although it can also be useful to show, e.g. that Johnson was closely conversant with Goethe.)⁴ Here we need not recur to the writer's intentions; we must merely assume that a relationship between the two texts would have been plausible for some audience related to the work, and not go so far as to assert that the writer must have intended every reader to see the relationship. (The

1 Some critics associated with close readings also call for a biographical approach; see Alan Shelston's comments on Empson in »Biography and Criticism«, *Critical Quarterly* 27.1, 1985, p. 71-75.

2 Kracauer, Siegfried: *Die Biographie als neubürgerliche Kunstform*, in: ders., *Das Ornament der Masse. Essays*, Frankfurt am Main 1963, p. 75-80, esp. p. 76.

3 Not all psychologizing theories need be quite so personally based; see Julia Kristeva's Lacanian exegesis of Bakhtin in the article where she coins the word »intertextuality«: Kristeva, Julia: *Le mot, le dialogue et le roman*, Sémeiotike, Paris 1969, p. 143-173, esp. p. 155-158.

4 See von Matt, Peter: *Liebesverrat. Die Treulosen in der Literatur*, München 1989, p. 421-422. Quoted as (Matt, page).

writer's intentions should not be regarded as entirely conscious, or entirely cognitive: when we talk about Christ-symbolism in a work, we do not always assume that the author must have thought the thought »let's add some Christ-symbolism here«. Although often she will have.) Some critics justify biographical readings by insisting that »the really individual, the really personal aspects of literary art – stylistic and substantive – assert themselves and beg for commentary«. ⁵ Quite aside from the common rhetorical ploy here (asserting that the aspects of a text the critic wishes to stress call plaintively out from the page of their own accord), this tack mistakenly identifies the interesting qualities of individual artworks, susceptible to normal critical analysis, with quirks of personality, as if the former could be assimilated without remainder to the latter. In fact, the work passes through the public sphere on its way from author to critic.

I am not urging that history be ignored; on the contrary, the conditions of its production and distribution play an important factor in our understanding of a literary work. Modern literature since the birth of the commercial book market is certainly conceived in different relationship to the audience than books which were received largely as oral readings and circulated in manuscript among a small subculture. Even books published in the modern book market often have a double audience, as with many of the communally written salon novels of the seventeenth century (in the wake of d'Urfé's *Astrée* and the Scudéry siblings' novels): a coterie of loyal fans who can spot all the hidden allusions and a larger public which reads as uninitiates. ⁶ (This dual structure, as Anthony Grafton has pointed out, is common among scholarly works today, especially in the matter of what is and is not cited in the footnotes.) ⁷

Nothing prevents us from seeing *Skizze eines Verunglückten*, or any other work, in this light; Johnson may have written in part as a defence or comment on his marital conduct for friends like Siegfried Unseld. ⁸ But he also allowed it to be published – in two different bindings – by the

5 Casagrande, Peter: Biography and Criticism, in: Studies in the Novel 19, 1987, p. 197-209, here 197.

6 See Ketelsen, Uwe-K.: Die Anonymisierung des Buchmarktes und die Inszenierung der »Speaking Voice« in der erotischen Lyrik um 1700, in: Literary Culture in the Holy Roman Empire 1555-1720, ed. James A. Parente, Jr., et al., Chapel Hill 1991, p. 259-276.

7 Grafton, Anthony: The Footnote from De Thou to Ranke, paper presented at the Selby Cullom Davis Center, Princeton University, 22 January 1993.

8 Unseld, Siegfried: Uwe Johnson: »Für wenn ich tot bin«, in: Siegfried Unseld/Eberhard Fahlke, Uwe Johnson: »Für wenn ich tot bin«, Frankfurt am Main 1991, S. 9-72 (Schriftenreihe des Uwe Johnson-Archivs 1).

Suhrkamp Verlag. In so doing, he moved it into what Habermas has called the »public sphere« (Öffentlichkeit), a characteristic feature of modern European society where books circulate in an (ideally) open market. In this situation, the author must find a way to create an audience within the mass of anonymous readers.⁹

Authors may themselves decide to move things »personal« into the public sphere; works like Max Frisch's *Tagebücher* represent another category of the modern literary field: published diaries and letters. Diaries and letters are sometimes entirely private (even encoded), sometimes explicitly literary; some authors (Lipsius, Pliny) publish their own letters, others (Gide, Thomas Mann) their diaries, often in enhanced form. These literary diaries and letters exploit the edge of the modern literary field, much as did the eighteenth-century novels which purported to be »found« documents. Frisch's *Tagebuch 1946-1949* even includes drafts of a private letter (to a German), concluding with the remark »(Nicht abgeschickt)«. ¹⁰ Whatever the circumstances under which these works were composed, the collection of travel accounts, essays, and fictional fragments were Frisch's introduction to the broader German reading public when they became his first work published in the new Suhrkamp Verlag (1950). Like the »confessional« poetry of John Berryman, Allen Ginsburg, or Sharon Olds, these works (albeit in a much less revealing manner) construct a public persona of the private person and, by the act of publication, represent a voluntary incursion within the boundaries of literary, public discourse. (Cf. the recent publication of John Cheever's diaries or journalistic attempts to examine the scene of Johnson's death.)

Biographical criticism, however, seeks to explain texts occurring in the public sphere by introducing material from the private. This is quite feasible, but it cannot occur without changing the nature of both sets of materials. Of course, this effect is partly desired, since crossing boundaries provides much of the punch of »revelatory« evidence. The public circulation of personal documents and statements – what Gesine Cresspahl calls *Schietkeräm*¹¹ – turns an author from the producer of a text into the object of a biography. No »strong reading« performed on a text, however

9 Cf. the texts Frisch (Frankfurt am Main, 1968) – and Johnson in Frisch, Max: *Stichworte*, ausgesucht von Uwe Johnson, Frankfurt am Main 1985 (1975), p. 116–123 – collected under the title »Öffentlichkeit als Partner«.

10 Frisch, Max: *Drei Entwürfe eines Briefes*, in: ders., *Gesammelte Werke in zeitlicher Folge*, 7 vols, Frankfurt am Main 1986; here: vol. 2, p. 469–475.

11 Johnson, Uwe: *Begleitumstände*. *Frankfurter Vorlesungen*, Frankfurt am Main 1980, p. 444. Quoted as (BU, page).

unlikely, operates on an author's production so high-handedly. Nor does biographical criticism really offer much certainty. It interprets the work of literature at hand by comparing it with another work of literature, the biography of an author, which it declares to be more authoritative.

Yet biography is an odd and hybrid beast. The U.S. Library of Congress classifies it among the »Ancillary Sciences of History«, and it has been associated with that literary genre since Suetonius and Xenophon. On the other hand, it has clear links to the modern novel, and the practitioners of »docu-drama« in print (roughly since Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*) and on television continue to blur the distinctions between fictional and factual narrated lives. The reason for this is easy to see: fictional lives are able to make much more telling pronouncements about their subjects. Biographies which limit themselves to the facts which can actually be documented are forced to rely on their subjects' own interpretations of their behavior (and the interpretations offered by other interested parties) or informed speculation, often signalled by sentences in the form »Mozart must have ...«. ¹² As historians have realized since the early modern period, the historian's informed judgment, choosing between alternative biased and partial accounts of an event, needs a rationale, usually provided by the historian's own notion of probability. This notion in turn is dependent on the historian's own experience and, hopefully, a sense of what is »probable« (cf. Aristotle's »plausible« in the *Poetics*) that is shared by her audience. Here biography is at a distinct disadvantage compared to other forms of history.

At least since Herodotus in European culture, there has been much disagreement about the nature of the world and what is likely to happen; yet this disagreement seems like blissful concord when compared to the struggles in the field of psychology. If, as many critics like Hayden White have pointed out, historiography is not history itself, and inevitably »distorts« by imposing narrative shape on the muddle of historical process, biography goes even further in rendering coherent and narratable the same mess of contradicting impulses and desires which provides the raw materials for conflict, recriminations, anguish, and years of expensive therapy in real life. The resulting text, although potentially very useful as a work of historiography illuminating the interplay of historical forces and individual actions, often provides a shaky basis for the interpretation of another, more complicated text.

12 See Cohn, Dorrit: Signposts of Fictionality, in: *Poetics Today* 11, 1990, p. 775-804.

Perhaps no author in post-War Germany has suffered more than Uwe Johnson at the hands of biographical criticism. His position as the »Dichter der beiden Deutschland« gave his work panache, and his quick rise to literary prominence thrust him into the center of many controversies. Johnson continually protested against this title and against attempts to make his person the center of attention, most strenuously in his Frankfurt lectures and the book *Begleitumstände* which grew out of them.¹³ His lectures on poetics do center on his personal experience, but he goes out of the way in the opening pages to suggest that only his professional life will be relevant: »Das Subjekt wird hier lediglich vorkommen als das Medium der Arbeit, als das Mittel einer Produktion« (BU, 24). Johnson, in other words, despite his use of autobiographical information in his lectures, was concerned with maintaining the distinction between private and public spheres, and was content to allow readers their own interpretations once a work had passed out of his hands into theirs. Siegfried Unseld has suggested that Johnson liked living »incognito« in Sheerness precisely because it freed him from the need to take public positions on controversial matters and allowed him a private life.¹⁴ If his wish was to keep his life free for his work and his works clear of his private life, it has certainly been thwarted since his death. R.M.'s valiant attempt to turn Johnson-criticism away from the biographical approach has not been successful.¹⁵ Critics persistently attempt to reduce the problems his texts pose by explaining them biographically. Particularly beset by such attempts are the last works, perhaps because of the long lull between volumes three and four of *Jahrestage*. As Johnson complained (BU, 440-444), reviewers of *Jahrestage* even asserted that Gesine Cresspahl was just a convenient fiction for Johnson's autobiographical reminiscences.

The work which has suffered most, however, is the short text *Skizze eines Verunglückten*, with its account of the uxoricide writer J. Hinter-

13 See also BU (note 11), p. 392-396 on the title »Dichter der beiden Deutschland«.

14 Unseld (note 8), p. 54.

15 R.M., »Am liebsten wäre ich unsichtbar: Einladung, weniger in Johnsons privaten Dokumenten zu wühlen und statt dessen, sein rätselhaftes Werk zu lesen«, in: Die Zeit 30 (20. Juli 1984), p. 31. M's plea is accompanied by a new (biographical) interpretation of Johnson's later attitude towards his wife, based on the 20 July chapter of *Jahrestage*, but his basic point is the difficulty of interpreting biographically the works of an author so interested in *Versteckspiele*. M was, as far as I know, the first critic to adduce Johnson's self-composed joke obituary (in: Karl Heinz Kramberg (Hg.), *Vorletzte Worte. Schriftsteller schreiben ihren eigenen Nachruf*, Frankfurt am Main 1970, p. 116-124) to the events surrounding his death.

hand/Joachim de Catt.¹⁶ Reviewers were quick to compare the novella to Johnson's own account (BU, 451f.) of how his marital difficulties had hindered the completion of *Jahrestage*.¹⁷ *Skizze eines Verunglückten* has been called a hidden autobiography,¹⁸ and even critics who note the importance of its intertexts insist on reading *Skizze* in the light of the end of *Begeleitumstände*, even going so far as to identify Johnson, Hinterhand, and Gesine Cresspahl outright.¹⁹

This work, however, has always existed within a clearly intertextual framework pointing less to Johnson's own life than to the works of Max Frisch; it made its first appearance in a festschrift in Frisch's honor.²⁰ Peter von Matt (who raises the specter of biographical criticism in order to lay it aside)²¹ has the merit of being the first to explore the links between *Skizze* and several short texts in Frisch's *Tagebuch 1966–1971*: »Skizze eines Unglücks« and »Glück.«²² Both of these texts, like *Skizze*, involve love affairs gone badly; the similarity of the titles is obvious. »Glück« has intertextual echoes in its turn, inserting the railroad-compartment-monologist and wife-murderer Pozdnyshev from Tolstoy's *Kreutzer Sonata* (1889) into a contemporary Swiss train.

Von Matt's last two chapters provide a genuine literary reading of Johnson's text. The maxim »Wer liebt, hat Recht«, asserts von Matt,

16 Johnson, Uwe: *Skizze eines Verunglückten*, Frankfurt am Main 1984. Quoted as (*Skizze*, page).

17 In any case, those wishing to decide whether Johnson's suspicions of his wife were grounded can now grub happily in the archives of the GDR's Staatssicherheitsdienst for information.

18 Fickert, Kurt: *Autobiography as Fiction*. Uwe Johnson's *Skizze eines Verunglückten*, *International Fiction Review* 14, 1987, p. 63-67.

19 See Raddatz, Fritz J.: *Das verratene Herz*, in: *Die Zeit* 46 (12. Nov. 1982), *Literatur* p. 1; cf. Unseld (note 8), p. 17-24, who adduces Frisch's play »Biografie«, but uses citations from *Skizze* to describe Johnson's feelings in 1975 as he »believed he had discovered« his betrayal by his wife (p. 13), and uses the de Catt pseudonym to compare Hinterhand and Johnson, including the »Todesstrafe abzuleisten durch Ableben« (p. 25). He claims: »Geschrieben habe [Johnson] das ja alles [d.h. seine Verletzung] auf meinen Wunsch in der *Skizze eines Verunglückten*« (p. 31). D.G. Bond lists more examples and argues cogently against biographical readings in: Bond, D. G.: *German History and German Identity*. Uwe Johnson's »Jahrestage«, *Amsterdam/Atlanta* 1993, p. 178-183.

20 Johnson, Uwe: *Skizze eines Verunglückten*, in: Siegfried Unseld (Hg.), *Begegnungen*. Eine Festschrift für Max Frisch zum siebzigsten Geburtstag, Frankfurt am Main 1981, p. 69-107.

21 See Matt, 417f.

22 Frisch, *Gesammelte Werke* (note 10), vol. 6, p. 204-225, 237, and p. 333-340.

forms the unspoken basis of the European stories about erotic betrayal (Matt, 21). This assertion would seem to be cast in doubt by Johnson's novella, for Hinterhand is certainly not ›right‹ about his wife if she can betray him for so many years, and the story seems to leave little room for sympathizing with the wife who betrays him, presumably (at least in part) through the claims of another love. *Skizze* is concerned precisely with how the esthetic of love conflicts with the ethics of marriage. Von Matt can thus portray the text as signifying »die Einsamkeit des moralischen Subjekts in der Moderne«, contrasting Johnson's text to Goethe's *Wahlverwandtschaften*, where adultery is the product of cosmic forces rather than merely individual betrayal. Von Matt correctly opposes the marital fanaticism of Johnson's Hinterhand to the more conventional erotic models of Frisch's characters (Matt, 413). But in so doing, he overstates the singularity of Hinterhand's vision. I will extend von Matt's observations, noting further parallels between *Skizze* and other passages from Frisch's *Tagebücher*, providing not an all-encompassing reading, but a suggestion of how research might proceed.

The problems of married life – as Johnson observes (BU, 25) – dominate Frisch's oeuvre, a fact which partly motivates the emphasis in Johnson's novella. Hinterhand's concept of marriage, as the narrator explains it, can be read as a polemic against some modern conceptions and is hence »anachronistisch« (Skizze, 20; Matt, 413), but is also very modern in that it is based on love. It forms a version of ›companionate marriage‹, whose history has been much debated since the appearance of Lawrence Stone's *The Family, Sex, and Marriage*.²³

Von Matt is correct in comparing Hinterhand's ideas to the extreme views of Tolstoy's Pozdnyshv: »Das ist ein fundamentalistisches Konzept wie nur je eine Erklärung des alten Posdnyshew, aber es ist Fundamentalismus ganz nur für sich, ganz nur auf diesen einen Fall der eigenen Existenz hin, und also ist es atavistisch und zugleich radikal modern, ist singular, abnorm, etwas entschieden Verrücktes in den Augen der Vernünftigen, Erfahrenen, mit allen Wassern der Wissenschaft Gewaschen.« (Matt, 413) But von Matt misses the point: it is also precisely the sort of ideology of marriage against which Pozdnyshv polemicizes.

23 Amid the huge bibliography, cf. the opposing viewpoints of Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500–1800*, New York 1977, and *The Road to Divorce. England 1530–1987*, Oxford 1990; Laslett, Peter: *The World We Have Lost. Further Explored*, London 1983, and van Duylmen, Richard: *Das Haus und seine Menschen, 16.–18. Jahrhundert*, vol. 1 of *Kultur und Alltag in der frühen Neuzeit*, München 1990.

An old man in the train prefers an old-fashioned patriarchal household, and his interlocutrix says that he fails to understand »that marriage without love is not marriage; that love alone sanctifies marriage, and that real marriage is only such as is sanctified by love«. ²⁴ When Posdnyshev responds to this ideology in his turn, his objections are telling and practical: what happens when the partners fall out of love, if their union is not guaranteed by a divine sacrament?

The old man's version of marriage is patriarchal and sexist, representing an early-modern model, and the young woman refers to him tellingly as »a living *Domostroy*«. ²⁵ But Posdnyshev's criticism of modern marriage is more telling; it is equally valid against both the sexes, and locates the fatal flaw in the ideology of companionate marriage: love is defined in purely personal terms, but most aspects of marriage – even without churches, there are families, children, property, and the state to consider – are social in nature. Given the transient nature of human desires, sexual passion (which modern society likes to discuss under the idealizing rubric of love) cannot provide the lasting foundation for a social institution.

This problem has been apparent since the advent of companionate marriage. One of the most elegant solutions, perhaps ironically dependent on Kant's famous contract-theory of marriage, is proposed by the stylish *Graf* in Goethe's *Wahlverwandtschaften*:

Einer von meinen Freunden, dessen gute Laune sich meist in Vorschlägen zu neuen Gesetzen hervortat, behauptete: eine jede Ehe solle nur auf fünf Jahre geschlossen werden. Es sei, sagte er, dies eine schöne ungrade heilige Zahl und ein solcher Zeitraum eben hinreichend um sich kennen zu lernen, einige Kinder heran zu bringen, sich zu entzweien und, was das schönste sei, sich wieder zu versöhnen. [...] Man vergäße, wie man in guter Gesellschaft die Stunden vergißt, daß die Zeit verfließe, und fände sich aufs angenehmste überrascht, wenn man nach verlaufenem Termin erst bemerkte, daß er schon stillschweigend verlängert sei. ²⁶

This solution has the advantage of recognizing the contractual element in a marriage; it treats marriage much like any other contract. In fact, with the changing attitudes toward divorce by mutual consent in late-twen-

24 Tolstoy, Leo: *The Kreutzer Sonata*, in: ders., *The Death of Ivan Ilych and Other Stories*, New York 1960, p. 163.

25 Tolstoy, *Sonata* (note 24), p. 160; cf. *Altrussisches Hausbuch: Domostroi*, Leipzig 1987.

26 Goethe, Johann Wolfgang: *Die Wahlverwandtschaften*, in: ders., *Sämtliche Werke nach Epochen seines Schaffens*, hg. von Karl Richter, München 1985f., vol. 9, p. 352.

tieth-century Europe and America, something like this contractual notion of marriage has in fact come into being, and it is in this context that the texts of Frisch and Johnson must be considered. The other alternative to the problem of love and marriage is to make the contract binding but remove the element of sex and love. This is Posdnyshev's solution. A different version would stress the companionate, non-sexual aspects of conjugal love, and assert that such love would grow in an arranged marriage where no erotic passion is present in advance; this version was the most popular in early modern Europe. Posdnyshev's version relies instead on the more ascetic hope that human beings can train themselves away from sex entirely. His hope for human chastity is not at all uncommon as von Matt would like to make out (»radikalisiert bis zum Absurden«; Matt, 408).

The ambivalence of the early Christian church toward marriage is easily visible in the Pauline epistles (»If [the unmarried and the widows] cannot contain, let them marry: for it is better to marry than to burn«, 1 Cor 7:8-9, cf. 7:2), and a number of saints are considered holy partly because of their chastity in marriage (e.g. Ursula). Long before marriage became a sacrament,²⁷ the monastic lifestyle was promoted as more virtuous than monogamy and sex even within marriage was frowned upon.²⁸ The result of all this controversy has been a long tradition of literary texts about marriage, for and against different types and from various standpoints, including works from *Les XV joies de Mariage* (1470) and Albrecht von Eyb's *Ob einem manne sey zunemen ein eelichs weyb oder nicht* (1472), through *Pamela*, *Anna Karenina*, *Effi Briest*,²⁹ and the works of Alexandra Kollontai³⁰ to the writings of Bachmann and Frisch. Johnson's novella is designed to stand in this entire tradition of arguments about marriage,³¹ and it thematizes the dispute about marriage by citing it literally. The citation from Kalinin – »Die Ehe ist eine politische Aufgabe« (Skizze, 21) – is countered by others (Skizze, 23, 25f., 54), most

27 See Duby, Georges: *Le chevalier, la femme et le prêtre. Le mariage dans la France féodale*, Paris 1981.

28 See Flandrin, Jean-Louis: »La vie sexuelle des gens mariés dans l'ancienne Société. De la doctrine de l'église et la réalité des comportements«, *Communications* 35, 1982, p. 102-113; Elliott, Dyan: *Spiritual Marriage. Sexual Abstinence in Medieval Wedlock*, Princeton 1993.

29 Cf. »Innstetten-Syndrom«, Skizze 53.

30 It would be worthwhile looking for the provenance and significance of the misquoted »glass of water«, Skizze 23.

31 A topic he deals with elsewhere in the Cresspahls' marriage, and perhaps in Gesine's unwillingness to enter into one.

extremely with the myth of the split androgynes from Plato's *Symposium*, (complete with Stephanus numbers; *Skizze*, 21). This myth, by imagining perfect love as something which could only happen between two people in the whole world (as the narrator comments dourly, 21-22), provides the most personalistic and least social account of love possible, and it is precisely this notion which Hinterhand picks as his ideological basis for marriage.

This provides a remarkable shift from the Frisch texts in *Tagebuch 1966-1971*. In »Skizze eines Unglücks«, the couple is not even married, and the enigmatic accident occurs on a sort of tryst. The same is true in »Glück«. Johnson takes these moments from Frisch and combines them with the otherwise Frischian theme of marriage. But in so doing, he also adds Frischian notions about love from the *Tagebuch 1946-1949*, passages he had included in his anthology of Frisch texts.³² The most important of these is actually included verbatim in *Skizze*, cited by Hinterhand himself before the jury from the »jüngst erschienenenes Buch von MAX FRISCH«:

Es ist bemerkenswert, daß wir gerade von dem Menschen, den wir lieben, am mindesten aussagen können, wie er sei. Wir lieben ihn einfach. Eben darin besteht ja die Liebe, das Wunderbare an der Liebe, daß sie uns in der Schwebelage des Lebendigen hält, in der Bereitschaft, einem Menschen zu folgen in allen seinen möglichen Entfaltungen. Wir wissen, daß jeder Mensch, wenn man ihn liebt, sich wie verwandelt fühlt, wie entfaltet, und daß auch dem Liebenden sich alles entfaltet, das Nächste, das lange Bekannte. Die Liebe befreit es aus jeglichem Bildnis.³³

This passage is at the heart of an important thematic domain in Frisch's work, one Johnson sums up in *Stichworte* (devoting five sections to it, including the first) as »Versuche mit Liebe«. These sections contain fragmentary citations from different works, mostly closely related to the thematics of *Skizze*, e.g. a question from the »Fragebogen« in the later diaries³⁴ about secrets in marriage. Of course, they do not exhaust the thematics of marriage in Frisch's works or even the diaries (cf. the sketch »Ehe nach dem Tod«,³⁵ about retroactive lack of belief within a marriage). But they do identify the particular Frischian themes Johnson wants to engage. The passage from which Hinterhand cites occurs in a text entitled

32 Frisch, *Stichworte* (note 9).

33 *Skizze*, 55; cf. Frisch, *Stichworte* (note 9), p. 44f. Mrs. Hinterhand, we are told, had reminded Hinterhand of this passage when blaming his picture of her for the problems in their marriage, for his decision to believe her (*Skizze*, 54-56).

34 Frisch, *Gesammelte Werke* (note 10), vol. 6, p. 51-54.

35 *Ebd.*, p. 55-57.

»Du sollst dir kein Bildnis machen.«³⁶ Hinterhand cites from the opening paragraph; the second section has perhaps an even more important section:

Unsere Meinung, daß wir das andere kennen, ist das Ende der Liebe, jedesmal, aber Ursache und Wirkung liegen vielleicht anders, als wir anzunehmen versucht sind – nicht weil wir das andere kennen, geht unsere Liebe zu Ende, sondern umgekehrt: weil unsere Liebe zu Ende geht, weil ihre Kraft sich erschöpft hat, darum ist der Mensch fertig für uns. Er muß es sein. Wir können nicht mehr! Wir künden ihm die Bereitschaft, auf weitere Verwandlungen einzugehen. Wir verweigern ihm den Anspruch alles Lebendigen, das unfassbar bleibt, und zugleich sind wir verwundert und enttäuscht, daß unser Verhältnis nicht mehr lebendig sei. »Du bist nicht«, sagt der Enttäuschte oder die Enttäuschte: »wofür ich dich gehalten habe.« Und wofür hat man sich denn gehalten? Für ein Geheimnis, das der Mensch ja immerhin ist, ein erregendes Rätsel, das auszuhalten wir müde geworden sind. Man macht sich ein Bildnis. Das ist das Lieblose, der Verrat.³⁷

The following passages consider the effect of prophecies and the degree to which we ourselves are the creation of others. These ideas could be related to the prophetic bourgeois idyll in *Skizze*,³⁸ or to the attempt to create a marriage entirely à deux, or even to the interesting question of how pictures and vision relate to the theory of eros expounded by Diotima at the end of Plato's *Symposium*. But it is more important to look at the ramifications of this passage for *Skizze*. The most important aspect is the causal flow: disappointment about another person results from a previous loss of that willingness to accept the other's changing which Frisch defines as love. The counterpart to this idea can be found in another passage from the *Tagebuch 1946-1949*:

Das Klima der Sympathie – wie sehr wir darauf angewiesen sind! Es zeigt sich, sobald uns eine Sympathie, die lang vorhanden ist, entzogen wird. Da ist es, als habe man keine Luft unter den Flügeln. Frage: Ist die Sympathie, die uns das Gefühl gibt, fliegen zu können, nichts als eine freundliche Täuscherei, eine schonende Unterlassung der Kritik, so, daß das andere Klima – dieses Klima ohne Sympathie – als das gültigere anzusehen ist, das einzig gültige?³⁹

This question could be posed to Hinterhand. In Frisch's texts, of course, two people are always involved; *Skizze*, on the other hand, contains few

36 Frisch, *Gesammelte Werke* (note 10), vol. 2, p. 369-371.

37 Ebd., p. 269f.; cf. Frisch, *Stichworte* (note 9), p. 237.

38 *Skizze*, 29-31; cf. Matt, 414f.

39 Frisch, *Gesammelte Werke* (note 10), vol. 2, p. 365 (Neujahrstag 1949); Frisch, *Stichworte* (note 9), p. 224.

attempts to portray the wife's point of view – notably the moment where she quotes Frisch – and these, like most of the text, are mediated by the viewpoint of Hinterhand. Hinterhand's view contaminates the narrator's voice in its use of indirect-discourse subjunctives, as Marlis Becher has shown.⁴⁰ This quasi-focalization through Hinterhand underscores the degree to which his personal vision has first been imposed on the world, and then destroyed by reality's resistance to it. The persistence of Hinterhand's attempt to live his vision might well be connected to his work as a writer, and help to explain why the destruction of his personal utopia results in the destruction of his literary »means of production«. This situation reveals the fundamental problem for a person caught in the Frischian dynamics of love: love is only possible when someone loves the other as someone unknown and undefined. Yet we ourselves are a product of the others' view of us, and need the sympathy of an other. As soon as such sympathy and trust allows us to form an image of the other, however, love has already been lost. The self is both the locus of love and its potential undoing.

Another important aspect of Frisch's ideas in the early Tagebuch, not cited in *Skizze* but anthologized by Johnson in *Stichworte* under the rubric »Eifersucht in der Liebe«, is the role of the self in jealousy: here Frisch speaks not of trust but of feelings of inferiority, of a sense that the rival is better. The function of these passages, particularly those about the impossibility of sympathizing with a betrayed husband, deserve further consideration in the interpretation of Johnson's *Skizze*. The most important point, however, is that the atomic notion of the self which von Matt sees in Hinterhand's marital aims is implicitly and explicitly undermined by Frisch's theories. Becher's analysis makes clear how much citation goes on in the novella, as if Johnson wanted to emphasize Hinterhand's dependence on social ideology and how it undermines Hinterhand's attempt to construct an entirely personal utopia within a marriage. Here again, as so often in Johnson's work, we see individual lives deformed by

40 Becher, Marlis: Der Konjunktiv der indirekten Redewiedergabe. Eine linguistische Analyse der Skizze eines Verunglückten von Uwe Johnson, Hildesheim 1989 (Germanistische Texte und Studien 30). Treating these subjunctives as pure examples of indirect-discourse, and thus as an autobiographical narration by Hinterhand himself – as does Peter Ensberg (Ensberg, Peter: Identitätsfindung und ihre Ambivalenz in Uwe Johnsons »Skizze eines Verunglückten«, in: C. Gansel/B. Neumann/N. Riedel (Hg.), Internationales Uwe-Johnson-Forum. Beiträge zum Werkverständnis und Materialien zur Rezeptionsgeschichte, Band 2 (1992), Frankfurt am Main 1993, p. 41-73), is perhaps overstating the matter.

the social forces of the twentieth century: they keep the couple apart and produce the ideological conflicts that define literary *raison d'être* and then exert their influence of the end of his marriage later (»mit einem Bürger der Feindstaaten«; *Skizze*, 51). Hinterhand's model of a purely personal marriage thus reflects the theme of a »moralische Schweiz« which occurs so often in Johnson's work. Hinterhand can be regarded, as he seems (through the subjunctive) to say at the text's end, as an accident victim. But Hinterhand's life and »accidental« death, like those of the two victims in Frisch's »Skizze eines Unglücks«, ⁴¹ and like those of Jakob Abs himself in *Mutmassungen*, are not easy to interpret given the complexities of human interrelationships. The Frisch intertexts serve to theorize this problem, and the novella can be read as Johnson's contribution to the whole tradition of polemic about marriage.

What makes Johnson's *Skizze* particularly amusing as a target for biographical criticism is Johnson's combination of the problematic of marriage and Frisch's problematic of the picture. The themes of picture-making and love can also be found in an intertext from another author important to both Johnson and Frisch, Brecht's *Geschichten vom Herrn Keuner* (1930-57):

Wenn Herr K. einen Menschen liebte
 »Was tun Sie,« wurde Herr K. gefragt, »wenn Sie einen Menschen lieben?« »Ich mache einen Entwurf von ihm«, sagte Herr K., »und Sorge, daß er ihm ähnlich wird.« »Wer? Der Entwurf?« »Nein,« sagte Herr K., »der Mensch.«⁴²

The further significance of this passage for Johnson's novella, as well as the significance of the many other intertexts it flaunts, cannot be examined in detail here. One might suggest, however, that biographical critics have taken a lesson from Herr K. Thomas Bredsdorff has cogently suggested that only imperfect artworks are in need of biographical analysis. If authors have done their job well, the works should be coherent in themselves and not need the later biographical investigations of critics to help them in their job of making sense. Analyzing several poems of Sylvia Plath – a poet whose »confessional« mode encourages amateur psychology on the part of literary critics – Bredsdorff notes, »The poetry exists and

41 One of the points of »Skizze (II)« [Frisch, *Gesammelte Werke* (note 10), vol. 6, p. 237] is surely that what von Matt calls »ein Orakel auf Tod und Leben« (Matt, 401) will be seen as an accident by the outside world.

42 Brecht, Bertolt: *Gesammelte Werke in 20 Bänden*, Frankfurt am Main 1967, vol. 12, p. 386. The Keuner-Geschichten were published in vol. 2 (1965) of the Suhrkamp Prosa edition, in which Johnson edited the Me-Ti fragments.

ought, where it succeeded, not to be obscured by being translated into what Plath, with all her creative powers, managed to translate it from.⁴³ It is particularly ironic that this strategy should be adopted on an author whose masterwork is a novel, almost two thousand pages in length, that takes as its theme the difficulty of successfully narrating a human life with all of its influences, crosscurrents, and constellations. If there is any central theme to Johnson's work, from *Mutmassungen über Jakob* through the last volume of *Jahrestage* and the fragments of *Heute neunzig Jahre*, it is the difficulty of narrating an individual life in the twentieth century. The difficulty of making an accurate *Bildnis* of a person's life seems almost insurmountably difficult in the world of Johnson's novels.

The final irony about biographical readings of Johnson's works is that they negate their own motivating impulse, which was to determine a work's meaning by starting from the author. Asking what the author intended a work to mean is a sensible question, if not the very last one in literary hermeneutics (asking what the author can have assumed an audience would get out of it might be a more sensible question). But if we ask how an author intends his work to signify, it is clear that Johnson actively discouraged biographical readings of his works, from his explicit statements in the *Begleitumstände* to his continual insistence on the independent existence of his characters. When Johnson suggests leaving the author's personal life out of literary criticism, he does so with the assertion that »private Mitteilungen zur Person« are »ohnehin wenig ergiebig«. The examples he draws – Grass, Walsler, Hemingway, Frisch – are concerned mostly with marriages. »Schließlich können Sie sich vorstellen, wie geknickt Max Frisch sich empfand, als einer seiner Romane bedacht wurde mit dem grundsoliden Kommentar, über das Scheitern seiner Ehe habe man doch längst Bescheid gewußt« (BU, 25). Those who draw such conclusions, implies Johnson, usually provide a picture as boring as it is unfaithful. If we assume that a literary work has something to say to its public, restricting its intertextual meaning to one text – someone's biography of the author – greatly impoverishes its meaning.

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43 Bredsdorff, Thomas: The Biographical Pursuit. Biography as a Tool of Literary Criticism: Sylvia Plath – A Test Case, *Orbis litterarum* 44, 1989, p. 190-191.