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Damion Searls

»*Funny how the past catches up with you*«

Uwe Johnson in Sheerness, 12 Years Later

It is no frivolous curiosity that sends us to Dickens's house and Johnson's house and Carlyle's house and Keats's house. We know them from their houses – it would seem to be a fact that writers stamp themselves upon their possessions more indelibly than other people. Of artistic taste they may have none; but they seem always to possess a much rarer and more interesting gift – a faculty for housing themselves appropriately.

Virginia Woolf, *Great Men's Houses*

26 Marine Parade, Sheerness-on-Sea, on the Isle of Sheppey in the district of Swale in Kent County, England, Uwe Johnson's home for the last ten years of his life, is now encased in scaffolding, a jarring interruption to the otherwise unbroken line of Victorian facades curving out of sight along the coast. *Diagonally across from my window, to the left, is the beginning of a row of houses called Neptune Terrace, which includes the Dauphin Café, where at midday I have a hot lunch: bacon and egg.*¹ Johnson describes a disaster, the fifth change of ownership (*since I've been using it*) of the café, which two years earlier he had called *Café »Dolphin«*. Now, in July 1996, the café – whatever its exact name – is gone for good; a young woman working at K's Amusements Snack Bar and Casino on the corner says it

1 All italicized words and passages are quoted from Johnson's posthumously published *Inselgeschichten*, ed. Eberhard Fahlke (Frankfurt am Main 1995), my translations.

vanished »ages ago«. Johnson's friend Ronald Peel (*Ron*) died two years ago; Colis Mason (*Col*) retired and moved away to Minster, a few miles east down the island. In 1978, his wife Elisabeth and daughter Katharina moved to the ironically named Unity Street in Sheerness, but in the current phone book the E. Johnson on Unity Street – the only Johnson in Sheerness – is Eddie Johnson, no relation.

A passenger and automobile ferry, the Olau line, arrives twice a day in Sheerness from Vlissingen [Flushing]. Their travel office has more information, but not anymore – the Olau line was bought out by Eurolink. »The Eurolink service was started by the Euromagique in April 1995 and she was joined by the Euromantique two months later (June 19)«; Eurolink »has already taken 120,000 bookings for travel in 1996«.² The tourist map of Faversham and Sheerness still refers to the »Olau Continantal [sic] Ferry Terminal«, perhaps because the Sheerness Tourist Information Center closed a few years back, though not without taking the proper legal precautions: »Every possible care has been taken to ensure that the information given in this publication is accurate, and whilst the Publishers would be grateful to learn of any errors, or omissions, they regret they can accept no responsibility for any expense or loss thereby caused.«³ Round-trip train tickets to London (»day returns«, valid after 9 a.m.), currently cost, not Johnson's 1979 twelve marks (around £3), but £11.

In other ways, of course, little has changed in Sheerness since Uwe Johnson's death. *It is a small town, the inhabitants know each other.* Men gather nightly to drink among themselves at the Napier Pub and the Seaview Hotel, though the latter is now run not by Ron Peel but by a former customer, Maurice Anthony Flinn. They still serve *Hürliman* (»Swiss lager at its best«), which is still brutally strong. The Napier seems to have become rather seedy, with a scary barman covered in tattoos; one creepy customer with raised eyebrows, who couldn't have been much older than 18 in 1955, has L-O-V-E tattooed on his right knuckles and H-A-T-E on his left. But perhaps the Napier has always been seedy, I don't know, Johnson wrote little about it. In the nearby *steelwork monstrosity, chopped up cars are transformed into sheet metal for cars to be chopped up later.* The *esplanade* and its *stony beach* still look out over the mouth of the Thames, and on the horizon, where by all rights and according to the cartography

2 Sheerness Times Guardian, *Summer in Sheppey* supplement, Thursday, June 27, 1996, p. 3.

3 Kent County Council, »Information Map and Street Index: Faversham, Sheerness« (Fordham, Colchester, Essex). You can get this map from the Sheerness Police Department, around the corner from the railway station.

we would expect the south coast of Essex, a mere difference: no line, just something blurry between the water and the sky, which educated persons call a horizon and which is therefore mine. Offshore, a group of parallel diagonal poles still marks the wreck of the Richard Montgomery, which the longest piece in Inselgeschichten describes historically, magically, biographically, sociologically, chemically, administrato-scientifically, poetically, statistically.

High tides, according to the weekly *Sheerness Times Guardian*, were at 2:15 p.m. and 2:42 a.m. during my visit. *You simply cannot overestimate how anxiously we look forward to the newspaper: an iron stolen, dog caught in rebar, Susan and Colin married, relatives visiting from New Zealand.* In my issue,

»A fishing reel and two pouches of tobacco, total value about £30, were stolen from a house in Richmond Street, Sheerness, on Monday.«

»The two Alsatian dogs who killed dozens of sheep on a Sheppey farm have been destroyed.«

»Sheerness Christmas lights association is holding an emergency public meeting at St. Georges Avenue Co-op Club this evening to decide the fate of the town's lights. There are just two people on the committee and Mrs Jarrett feels it is too much work for two to do. If not enough support is shown at tonight's meeting, which starts at 7.30pm, the association will fold and the Christmas lights will shine no more.«

The reported events are different, yet basically the same; the question of whether or not things have changed in Sheerness since Johnson's death rests on a false dichotomy. Change is constant, and for change to have stopped twelve years ago would have been the biggest change of all. As it is, from the death of the Dauphin to the death of Ron Peel to the death of two Alsations, life is continuing on as usual.

Even Johnson himself remains in Sheerness – every middle-aged or older person I asked remembers him. People are used to getting questions about »that old German writer, Something Johnson«: apparently ten or twenty people a year come to Sheerness and ask about him, from Germany mostly. Iris (pronounced like a New Yorker's »Hey, Russ!«, dropping the »H«), walking her dog on the promenade, remembers walking by Johnson's house and seeing all those books, and wondering how he had time to read them all. »What kind of books did he write anyway?« she asked me; a difficult question which I did not know how to answer. Bill Wiseman, my host for a night at the Invicta Guest House, knew him too: »Nice guy, for a German. (I learned from others that he [not Bill Wiseman, someone else] entered Berlin with the first troops in 1945, and since then expressed an unshakeable opinion of the Germans as a race, but not in

front of me, the individual, the guest.) He was a quiet, reserved sort of man. Kind o' kept hisself to hisself. But when he made a friend, he made a friend.« Bill Bishop, the current owner of 26 Marine Parade, researched Johnson's life so he would have something to tell the people who knocked on his door, as he showed them around the house. Every possible care has been taken to ensure that the information given is accurate, although he can accept no responsibility for any expense or loss.

Perhaps the biggest change in Sheerness since Johnson's death is that the wreck of the Richard Montgomery – *»our only sight worth seeing«, the residents say with concealed pride* – has been dethroned by 26 Marine Parade, the Seaview Hotel, and Johnson's lingering presence. Back when Maurice was a local at the Seaview, he never thought he'd someday be running the place, and »Charlie« Johnson was just another customer at the other end of the bar, Maurice certainly never thought people would come over from the Continent or even America to ask about him. »It's funny how the past catches up with you«, Maurice said to me, drying a pint glass and putting it back on the shelf, long after I had asked my last question of him.

I think that's what Johnson's books are about, Iris – the past catching up with you, bleeding into the present. He is no longer with us to map out those relationships, to recover the past in the present, but he is also no longer an outsider, characteristically describing himself in the third person as writing things down in his notebook (*it embarrasses him, we're used to it*), or pretending to read the paper while *really he is trying to memorize and retain the whole conversation. Wanna bet that he goes home and writes it all down?* Johnson is part of Sheerness (*eingemeindet*) at last, a part of the past, and the resurrection of the past which Johnson performed so uniquely and so well continues without him, and continues with him.

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