

The B. S. Johnson -  
Zulfikar Ghose  
Correspondence



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Edited and Introduced by

Vanessa Guignery

Cambridge  
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Zulfikar Ghose and B. S. Johnson in Blauvac, France, 1964  
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—Vanessa Guignery, Paris, 21 October 2014



## NOTE ON THE EDITION

This correspondence comprises all of B. S. Johnson's letters to Zulfikar Ghose as archived at the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center (HRC) at the University of Texas in Austin (Johnson's archive, folder Gift 1978.1; Ghose's archive, R15441, box 40, folder 1). The letters were donated by Ghose in two phases, with a thirty-year interval in-between: the first gift dates from 1974, only a few months after Johnson's death, an act that for Ghose "was a sort of necessary symbolic closure"<sup>1</sup>; the second in 2004 after Ghose found in his Hammersmith house in London some thirty pages of letters, copies of poems and some prose from Johnson, which he then donated to the HRC. With the exception of a letter dated 27 December 1961, Johnson's letters from the end of January 1961 to October 1962 are not included in the HRC archives and, to this day, have not been found elsewhere. Ghose's letters to Johnson are located at the British Library (B. S. Johnson archives, British Library, Add MS 89001). The layout of the letters has been kept as close to the originals as possible.

Zulfikar Ghose's "Bryan" was originally published in *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* 5, no. 2 (Summer 1985): 23-34. B. S. Johnson's "Sonnet for Zulfikar Ghose" first appeared in B. S. Johnson's *Poems* (London: Constable, 1964), 16. "A Conversation with Zulfikar Ghose" was originally published in *The B. S. Johnson Journal* 1 (Summer 2014): 111-133).

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<sup>1</sup> Zulfikar Ghose, "Letters from Bryan," *Critical Engagements: a Journal of Criticism and Theory* 4, no. 1-2 (Spring/Summer 2010 and Autumn/Winter 2010/2011): 14.



INTRODUCTION:  
“KEEP WRITING, MATE”

VANESSA GUIGNERY

B. S. Johnson (1933-1973) and Zulfikar Ghose (born in 1935) met in the summer of 1959 after the latter, an undergraduate at Keele University, invited Johnson, an undergraduate at King’s College, London, to join him as co-editor of the second issue of *Universities’ Poetry*, an anthology of English undergraduate poetry. They became and remained close friends, even after Ghose left for Austin in 1969 to teach at the University of Texas, until Johnson’s death in 1973. Together they published a collection of short stories, *Statement Against Corpses* (1964) and collaborated on a satirical political project, *Prepar-a-Tory* (1960), a comic piece of writing replete with puns and incongruous episodes in the vein of Laurence Sterne, which remains unpublished. Ghose and Johnson met regularly when both lived in London; they took long walks, went to the pub, to literary events and to the theatre; they played squash in Holland Park, held dinner parties at each other’s home, and went on vacation to Blauvac in France (in August 1964) and to the Costa del Sol in Spain (in April 1966) together with their wives, Virginia Johnson and Helena de la Fontaine. Johnson got married on 31 March 1964, Ghose on 16 May 1964—their original idea of having a double wedding on March 31 proving unworkable. Their first poems and novels were published around the same time (Johnson’s novel *Travelling People* appeared in 1963; Ghose’s collection of poetry *The Loss of India* in 1964), and some of their works were reviewed together (Johnson’s novel *Trawl* and Ghose’s *The Contradictions* in 1966, Johnson’s *Poems Two* and Ghose’s collection of poetry *The Violent West* in 1973).

Both Johnson and Ghose were reviewers and sports journalists, and both taught in secondary schools when they could not sustain themselves by their writing. Neither of them had any interest in the popular culture (with the Beatles at the foreground) that was emerging in the 1960s in Britain, but they frequently exchanged views on literary matters, read each other’s work in progress and thoroughly commented on it, suggesting

revisions. In his autobiography, *Confessions of a Native-Alien* (1965), Ghose writes that Johnson had a profound influence on him in his early formative years: “By his own example, he taught me that absolute honesty to one’s work is the one virtue without which no one can write. His own method has been one of patient application, of studious revision; one has only to look at any sentence in one of his novels or at a line in one of his poems to perceive the care which has gone into their construction.”<sup>1</sup> Readers of Jonathan Coe’s biography, *Like A Fiery Elephant* (2004), will have noted how central to an understanding of Johnson’s work are his letters to Ghose. They provide valuable insight into the relationship between the two friends and their literary connections.

When Johnson published *Travelling People*, he broke new ground on the British literary scene at a time when writers such as Kingsley Amis, John Wain and William Cooper were producing novels which relied on traditional narrative techniques and indulged in social realism. Johnson for his part was awed by the daring innovations of modernist writers such as Joyce and Beckett, interested in the emergence of the French *Nouveau Roman* as advocated by Alain Robbe-Grillet and Nathalie Sarraute, which was to free itself from the constraints of exhausted conventions, and admiring of the formal experimentations of such contemporaries as Brigid Brophy, Anthony Burgess, Eva Figes or Ann Quin. On the other hand, he denounced the anachronistic and irrelevant attitude of writers who went on imitating the nineteenth-century narrative novel “as though the revolution that was *Ulysses* had never happened”<sup>2</sup>. Johnson took that revolution into account and forcefully departed from convention, developing formal devices which all had “a literary rationale and a technical justification”<sup>3</sup>. His innovations include a multiplicity of narrative modes and styles in *Travelling People* and his posthumous novel, *See the Old Lady Decently* (1975), proleptic holes cut through pages so as to glimpse a future event in *Albert Angelo* (1964) as well as pages with double columns—one transcribing the protagonist’s thoughts, the other reproducing direct speech. One may also recall the original use of typography and disposition of pages in *Trawl* (1966), the insertion of facsimile balance sheets with debits and credits in *Christie Malry’s Own Double-Entry* (1973), and the lack of binding in the famous novel-in-a-box, *The Unfortunates* (1969),

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<sup>1</sup> Zulfikar Ghose, *Confessions of a Native-Alien* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1965), 91.

<sup>2</sup> B. S. Johnson, *Aren’t You Rather Young to be Writing Your Memoirs?* (London: Hutchinson, 1973), 15.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

composed of twenty-seven unbound sections which the reader could shuffle and read in any order apart from the first and last, marked as such.

Such innovation testifies that Johnson was constantly looking for new forms and patterns to try and reinvent the novel as a genre since he believed that some of its techniques were outmoded or exhausted. But Johnson's purpose was also to explore the depths of his own self, to convey the truth of his experiences and emotions through first-person narrations that revealed the extent of his sometimes painful and traumatic involvement with his own past. The guiding principle of his work is pronounced in the fourth part of *Albert Angelo*: "telling stories is telling lies and I want to tell the truth about me about my experience about my truth about my truth to reality"<sup>4</sup>, and that programme includes giving a truthful account of his feelings of pain, loss, betrayal and mourning. Therefore, contrary to what some critics have contended, the experimental and playful component in his books does not preclude emotions but, on the contrary, often provides an original means of problematizing the emotional and ethical dimension of writing, while at the same time refusing to give way to either pathos, sentimentality or consolation.

In the last twenty years, critics, writers and academics have taken a keen interest in B. S. Johnson's works thanks to the republication of his work by Picador at the start of the new millennium, an initiative supported by Jonathan Coe whose biography, *Like A Fiery Elephant*, won the Samuel Johnson prize in 2005. Five of Johnson's novels were reissued in 2013 to commemorate the eightieth anniversary of his birth, followed by the publication of a selection of his uncollected or unavailable work (plays, reviews, essays, short stories), *Well Done, God!*, edited by Jonathan Coe, Philip Tew and Julia Jordan. The B. S. Johnson Society was founded in 2011 and the first issue of *The B. S. Johnson Journal* appeared in 2014, thus pursuing a line of academic criticism which had been initiated in 1985 by *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* which devoted half of its summer issue to Johnson. Academic books on his work include Nicolas Tredell's *Fighting Fictions, The Novels of B. S. Johnson* (2000), Philip Tew's *B. S. Johnson, A Critical Reading* (2001), Krystyna Stamirowska's *B. S. Johnson's Novels: A Paradigm of Truth* (2006) and Vanessa Guignery's *Ceci n'est pas une fiction. Les romans de B. S. Johnson* (2009), as well two collections of essays, *Re-reading B. S. Johnson* (2007) and the 2010-2011 issue of *Critical Engagements: A Journal of Criticism and Theory*.

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<sup>4</sup> B. S. Johnson, *Albert Angelo* (1964), in *Omnibus* (London, Picador, 2004), 167.

Johnson's friend, Zulfikar Ghose, was born in Sialkot, Pakistan. He moved with his family to Bombay in 1942, and emigrated to England ten years later, before moving permanently to Texas in 1969. Ghose first made his mark on the London literary scene in 1964 with a collection of poems, *The Loss of India*, later followed by *Jets from Orange* (1967) and *The Violent West* (1972). In 1965 appeared his precocious autobiography, *Confessions of a Native-Alien* (which covers the period from his childhood to the end of 1962), and Ghose went on to publish three novels in Johnson's lifetime: *The Contradictions* (1966), *The Murder of Aziz Khan* (1967), which Ghose himself describes as a conventional and straightforward novel, and the first volume of *The Incredible Brazilian* trilogy, *The Native* (1972), that partakes of the picaresque tradition. Ghose also wrote a formally challenging novel in the stream-of-consciousness mode, *Crump's Terms*, which Johnson, who read it in typescript, admired very much and which, to a certain extent, echoes some of the themes and techniques of *Albert Angelo*. The book was judged too radical at the time and only found a publisher in its final version in 1975. In 1972, Ghose started working on an ambitious novel, *Hulme's Investigations into the Bogart Script* (1981), a book parodying popular culture and genre fiction, and flaunting its own fictionality, whose main purpose is to enquire into the possibilities of language itself. As with *Crump's Terms*, it took a while before a publisher could appreciate the originality and value of the work, and it was published in 1981.

After Johnson's death, Ghose went on publishing poetry in journals and collected volumes—*A Memory of Asia* (1984), *Selected Poems* (1991) and *50 Poems* (2010)—, as well as fiction, with novels such as *A New History of Torments* (1982), *Don Bueno* (1983), *Figures of Enchantment* (1986) and *The Triple Mirror of the Self* (1992). As the correspondence with Johnson ascertains, the poet and novelist is also a perceptive and discerning literary critic as can be appreciated in such esteemed works of criticism as *Hamlet, Prufrock and Language* (1978), *The Fiction of Reality* (1984), *The Art of Creating Fiction* (1991), *Shakespeare's Mortal Knowledge* (1993), *Beckett's Company* (2009) and *In the Ring of Pure Light* (2011). Ghose has a distinguished reputation in North America, where he was featured in the summer 1989 issue of *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* together with Milan Kundera, and where studies of his work include Chelva Kanaganayakam's *Structures of Negation, The Writings of Zulfikar Ghose* (1993).

Historically, Ghose was the first writer from Pakistan to be published in England and the United States and had become an established name long before writers from the Subcontinent, Africa and the Caribbean



became commonplace on the western literary scene. However, Ghose rejects labels such as “Commonwealth” or “postcolonial”: “I don’t believe in categories, be they regional or national or parochial”, he told Mansoor Abbasi, and added: “artists are a global and not a flag-waving nationalist community”<sup>5</sup>. Even if he agrees that his early work (his poems in *The Loss of India* and his autobiography *Confessions of a Native-Alien*) is marked by “the idea of roots, of displacement and the desire to belong”<sup>6</sup>, he then moved away from the topic and his later writing does not fit in such narrow and useless pigeonholes: *Crump’s Terms* is more indebted to Joyce, Beckett, the *Nouveau Roman* and the *Nouvelle Vague* than to Ghose’s South Asian origins, just as his Brazilian Trilogy is very far from any postcolonial agenda. If Ghose’s attachment to Pakistan is perceptible, it is not through any kind of political consciousness or sentimental longing for the home country, but through his attraction to Pakistani music and, above all, his passion for cricket, which led him to become a cricket reporter for *The Observer* and to cover the England team’s tour of India and Pakistan in 1961-1962, a time during which he was “feeling nostalgic about England” (letter of 30 October 1961). As a writer, Ghose did not share Johnson’s obsession with truth and rejection of fiction and imagination as lies. After a first phase of writing that drew from autobiographical memories, Ghose turned away from the realistic form and towards “making up stories or pursuing some compulsion of the imagination” as he told Chelva Kanaganayakam in 1996<sup>7</sup>. Most importantly, he is concerned with the complexities of language, aesthetics and style, and is always eager to experiment with new modes of writing.

Although in the early years, Johnson and Ghose lived in London within walking distance of each other, they frequently wrote long letters to each other in which they discussed their current work and literary preoccupations. Johnson rehearsed many of his experimental ideas in his letters and in some instances, responding to his friend’s criticism and doubts, wrote an extended analysis of his work in progress. The two exchanged early drafts of their work, and the letters contain detailed critical comments on the work from which the reader will derive a comprehensive understanding of Johnson’s critical thinking, whether it concerns his ideas about form, his attention to questions of style, his

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<sup>5</sup> Mansoor Abbasi, “An Interview with Zulfikar Ghose,” *Pakistaniaat: A Journal of Pakistan Studies* 3, no. 1 (2001): 114 and 115.

<sup>6</sup> Chelva Kanaganayakam, “Zulfikar Ghose: An Interview,” *Twentieth Century Literature* 32, no. 2 (Summer 1986): 178.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

thoughts on prosody and the metres he used in his poems, or what ‘truth’ in literature meant to him. Ghose’s approach to literature also emerges from his detailed commentary of his friend’s work and other writers’ production, as well as from his statements on rhythm and images in poetry, the use of syllabic meter, or his advocacy of strict forms within which to achieve freedom. Much of the correspondence is thus an extended literary discussion. As Ghose points out, “we hardly ever exchanged gossip or conveyed autobiographical information [...] it was simply not in our character to sit talking about personal affairs.”<sup>8</sup>

Correspondences between writers such as this one contain hidden treasures of literary analysis when the recipient of a text comments upon it, criticizes or judges it, inciting the sender to justify or defend his choices, or to reconsider his method. It is thus partly through their correspondence that Johnson and Ghose (as well as other writers) have managed to define more clearly their trains of thought and develop their own poetics and aesthetics so that epistolary discussions sometimes result in the formulation of a full-fledged *ars poetica*. The correspondence thus includes such pieces as Ghose’s “theoretical thoughts on rhythm” (13 February 1961) or “In Defence of Syllables” (December 1963), as well as Johnson’s thoughts on short stories (11 March 1963), his definitions of a poem, poetry, verse, metre, stress and tone (17 May 1963), and his insistence on conformity to correct English usage in terms of grammar, spelling and punctuation (13 November 1959). In “Letters from Bryan”, Ghose remarked:

Bryan’s idea about conformity was not that we should restrict ourselves to creating regimented sentences that marched to a familiar drumbeat. He knew his English literature well and understood that the celebrated variety and richness of the English language came from its being open to extraneous influences. His commitment to creating sentences that precisely imaged the truth of a past reality involved taking risks with language and giving that peculiar twist to narrative form which together bring that past reality freshly alive and, doing so, suggest and ultimately accommodate certain variations as the new conformity.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Zulfikar Ghose, “Letters from Bryan,” *Critical Engagements: a Journal of Criticism and Theory* 4, no. 1-2 (Spring/Summer 2010 and Autumn/Winter 2010/2011): 16. This piece has also been anthologized in Ghose’s *In the Ring of Pure Light. Lectures on Language and Literature*. Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2011. 129-141.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

More particularly in the case of Johnson and Ghose, the epistolary genre thus becomes an aesthetic laboratory and a place for literary debates, offering literary criticism of a peculiar type as the letters were never meant to be published. Critical comments are therefore not formulated with that intention in mind, and the letters sound spontaneous, direct and open, without any taboo or censure.

Among the topics discussed by the two friends is precisely the status of criticism as both writers sometimes felt offended when reviewers or publishers failed to duly appreciate the value of their work. However, on 1 May 1967, Ghose wrote: "While I fully share your abhorrence for criticism, it is a necessary evil and is better when it comes from writers; far, far better from Eliot than, say, Frank Kermode. From Philip Sidney down, all the important criticism has come from the writers themselves." In reaction to Johnson's irritation with reviews of *Christie Malry's Own Double-Entry* in the *Times Literary Supplement* and the *Observer*, Ghose reiterated his distinction between two categories of critics in a letter of 7 March 1973: "I would pay no attention to any critic; my feeling usually is that critics who dismiss my work merit nothing but scorn and critics who praise me merit my contempt. I have no respect for any of them. The only praise that pleases me is that of a writer whose work I respect", and that writer could very well be Johnson himself, as Ghose suggested in *Confessions of a Native-Alien*: "Bryan has been the best critic-companion any writer can wish for"<sup>10</sup>.

The two friends were thus often writing lengthy assessments of each other's work, more particularly of their individual poems and short stories, even if on 19 July 1967, Ghose offered detailed comments on Johnson's plays *One Sodding Thing After Another* and *Whose Dog are You?*. The two writers did not hesitate to compliment and encourage each other. On 10 October 1967, Ghose deemed *The Unfortunates* "first-rate": "this is by far your most outstanding work", and went on to provide a detailed and informed analysis of the novel. He proceeded to do the same with *Christie Malry's Own Double-Entry*, finding it "Good, highly entertaining and very well written" (7 March 1973). On 26 December 1971, Johnson asked for a copy of the revised version of Ghose's *Crump's Terms* (he had already read the first version) as he wanted "to laugh again".

The two writers clearly relied on each other's opinion. Thus, on 21 October 1963, Ghose wrote to Johnson that he would bring him his first novel, *The Contradictions*, and his autobiography, *Confessions of a Native-Alien*. He remarked: "I'd be anxious to know what you honestly

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<sup>10</sup> Ghose, *Confessions of a Native-Alien*, 92.

think of them as I'm most worried about both." On 21 April 1972, after sending Johnson the typescript of *The Native*, Ghose wrote: "I'm relieved that you didn't mind the Brazilian novel too much, for I was afraid you'd hate it thoroughly." After Ghose had commented upon the short stories Johnson had written for their collaborative work *Statement Against Corpses*, the latter exclaimed in a letter dated 22 April 1963: "I found your comments very stimulating, and this sort of discussion is obviously a VERY GOOD THING". On the other hand, the author of *Trawl* was offended when Ghose did not immediately read and criticize the new novel, assuming that his friend had actually never finished it (21 September 1966). The crucial importance of a friend's opinion is confirmed in a letter from Ghose to fellow writer Anthony Smith: "the worst thing about being a writer: even when you've sacrificed material comfort and produced a reasonable good work, there may be no reward for it at all. It's only the love and admiration of a few friends which keeps you alive"<sup>11</sup>.

Part of the two writers' tacit agreement was that they should not only offer love and admiration but also be "bluntly critical if that was what the work deserved"<sup>12</sup>. For example, when Ghose disagreed with Johnson's apparent defence of "a poetry without metaphor" in one of his early poems, the latter vehemently reacted: "wasn't the point of showing each other poems that we should try to make each other's writing better? Thus I'm not interested in whether you accept the statement in THE DISHONESTY OF METAPHOR or not: I'm interested in whether the poem can be improved in diction, rhythm, or any other technical thing." (3 May 1967) To give a few examples of each other's uncensored bluntness, on 4 December 1966, Johnson judged Ghose's second novel, *The Murder of Aziz Khan*, "a retrogression" from the first, even while understanding his reasons for that: "I am very disappointed you have not tried to do something new [...] you have not pushed the novel form any further forward with this novel". On 9 May 1967, Ghose responded to Johnson's poems in a similar way: "show me something new, something which is really a development from your past work: your last three poems are neither; they are merely different without being good." A few years later, on 10 January 1971, after reading *House Mother Normal*, Ghose commented: "My immediate response, I'm sorry to say, is one of disappointment. While the basic idea is a good one, the 21-page sections

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<sup>11</sup> In Anthony Smith, "Silence, Exile, Cunning," lecture at the Harry Ransom Center, Austin, Texas, 6 February 1994, unpublished. (HRC archives, A.C.H. Smith Collection, R15361, 16489, box 26, folder 11).

<sup>12</sup> Ghose, "Letters from Bryan," 22.

are too brief and instead of the characters' particular feelings coming through, there is a generalization of emotion".

The two friends sometimes had differing views on literature. For instance, while Johnson admired formal experimentation that caught the eye even before reading the text and was wary of traditional narrative approaches, Ghose could appreciate the value of an astounding book written in a conventional form. Ghose gives the example of the Australian writer Patrick White:

[...] he did not care for Patrick White, for White wrote in a traditional form, whereas I maintained that at least in *Voss* and *Riders in the Chariot* the power of White's language, which released an astonishing imaginative content, was sufficient to override the formal deficiency. Bryan refused to accept such a compromise, while I rejected the opposite view, that anything which visually flaunted formal experimentation even before one read the text was to be approved.<sup>13</sup>

One should not misread this comment as a sign that Ghose is not thoroughly interested in form, quite the contrary. As he told Mansoor Abbasi, "I am not interested in content unless it can be presented in a form that charges that content with an unprecedented imaginative power and therefore engages the reader with new, and perhaps challenging, ideas associated with that content"<sup>14</sup>. He then added: "in my view, one's emphasis should be on the quality of the writing", a credo he keeps insisting upon in the correspondence and that he would also instil later on in his students of Creative Writing: "pay attention to the language, the construction of the sentences, see if you can't arrive at a style that captures your unique voice"<sup>15</sup>.

In their epistolary exchanges, the two friends not only offered literary criticism; they also encouraged and supported each other whenever needed, as when Ghose wrote: "keep writing, mate" (11 and 15 November 1961) and Johnson echoed him a year later with: "Keep it up, mate" (22 November 1962). In January 1968, when Ghose felt dispirited after *Jets from Orange* had been largely ignored by the press, Johnson urged his friend to "live through it, most particularly OUTLIVE YOUR ENEMIES. [...] The thing not to do is give up, to let it stop one: just live, do, and outlive." And yet, sometimes, neither of the two friends could keep

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>14</sup> Abbasi, "An Interview with Zulfikar Ghose," 113.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 114.

obscure thoughts at bay, especially when they found themselves in dire financial straits, as was quite often the case in the early years, to the point that sometimes they could not even afford a stamp to send a letter. On 27 April 1961, Ghose wondered: “what’s to be done, mate?; The question, mate, is not Where is it all going to end, but What’s the point of its going on?”, and on 13 July 1972, Johnson’s anger and desperation could clearly be felt: “what’s the point, etc.? Eh? WHAT IS THE FUCKING POINT? And don’t give me all the old cock. There is no point: it is understanding this that is the point. You can (anyone can, the academics can) verbiage on about what’s in it: but what’s in it is DEATH, nothing more”.

One should not, however, draw the conclusion that the letters dwell too long on these fits of discouragement. On the contrary, the correspondence also registers moments of personal happiness and jokes are narrated with considerable gusto, so that the letters, with their surprising asides, entertain the reader with both their biographical and intellectual content. Johnson seems at his most elated and has the funniest jokes and anecdotes to tell when in Paris, Hungary, Ibiza or Wales. Ghose is driven “mad” by the mangoes in Brazil (27 December 1966) and the “tropical goodies” in Mexico (12 February 1970).

The letters also have that amazing capacity to capture the two writers’ tone of voice. Ghose remarks: “The letters are charged with a distinctive tone, Bryan’s voice comes through strongly”; “I do think [...] that his prose style in the letters, while always formally correct, matches his speaking voice. Certainly in those passages where he is angry with me or repelled by some suggestion I had made one can hear his voice rising to a very loud pitch.”<sup>16</sup> This is for example the case when Johnson reacts to Ghose’s idea of founding “The Writing Centre of Great Britain”, “calculated to make us both enormously rich” (5 June 1972). Johnson’s reaction is one of (unfair) outrage: “How dare you suggest I should turncoat for money? Should I not rather die?”; “Chameleon Zulf, unrecognisable in the violent west, doing violence to his talent” (13 July 1972). But Johnson’s voice is also rising to a pitch for merrier reasons, for instance when he’s finished the first draft of *Albert Angelo* on 13 July 1963: “Hurrah Hurray”.

On a larger scale, the Johnson-Ghose correspondence provides insight into the London literary scene of the 1960s, even though both writers were impervious to the cultural phenomenon epitomized by the “Swinging London” and marked by a new hedonism and sense of freedom. As Ghose recalls in his essay “Ghose’s London: A Valediction”, written a few weeks

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<sup>16</sup> Ghose, “Letters from Bryan,” 14.

before he emigrated to the United States in 1969, “[t]he satire boom left nothing sacred and at first refreshingly took the stuffiness out of the air, but then filled the vacuum with its own degeneration”: “The standard of living rose, the standard of culture declined”<sup>17</sup>. The correspondence therefore makes no mention of the popular names from the music, fashion or television world of the time. On the other hand, the two friends often refer to university poetry journals and literary magazines they contributed to or edited, as well as poetry societies and meetings they attended. Their involvement in such groups as well as their dealings with publishers, editors and agents is very revealing as to the publishing mechanisms of the time. The two friends also regularly write about the main writers of the time (novelists, poets and essayists) they knew, read or reviewed, conjuring up a fairly comprehensive picture of the literary world of the 1960s in Britain. Ghose became very critical of the 1950s Movement (including such writers as Kingsley Amis, Philip Larkin, Donald Davie, John Wain and Elizabeth Jennings), but both Johnson and he attended some of the weekly poetry readings of the 1960s Group, organised by Edward Lucie-Smith. The two friends often railed against the critical consensus that tended to praise shallow, parochial, mediocre and modish works of art in the English contemporary production. While Johnson was enthralled by the work of Robert Graves and the Irish novelist Liam O’Flaherty, Ghose was more interested in such American writers as Robert Lowell, Stanley Kunitz and Thomas Berger.

This unexpurgated edition of the Johnson-Ghose letters from 1959 to 1973 follows a tradition of publication of writers’ correspondences whose focus is mainly literary, such as the famous Flaubert-Turgenev or Flaubert-Sand letters, or the correspondence between Vladimir Nabokov and Edmund Wilson. The lively exchanges between the two friends give insight into the creative process and illuminate the writers’ work in ways that should complement the most thorough scholarly criticism.

A text in prose and a poem by each writer in which each proposes his own perspective of the other have been chosen to provide a personal point of entry into the correspondence. Zulfikar Ghose’s memoir “Bryan” (1985), a deeply moving testimony of their friendship, is teeming with anecdotes about the two writers, while his unpublished “Poem” recalls their walks and intimate relationship. Johnson’s “Sonnet for Zulfikar Ghose” (1961) points to their closeness in spite of differences, and his 1967 prose piece is a eulogising presentation of Ghose’s early work as a

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<sup>17</sup> Zulfikar Ghose, “Ghose’s London: A Valediction,” *The Hudson Review* 22, no. 3 (Autumn 1969): 376.

poet and novelist. These four texts are meant to initiate the stimulating and continuous dialogue that follows in the correspondence.



## ZULFIKAR GHOSE, “BRYAN” (1985)<sup>1</sup>

Looking back and imposing a pattern to come to terms with the past must be avoided. (*Albert Angelo*)

The first thing I saw of him when I opened the door was his eyes. Not their color, which in the shadow of the threshold appeared a greyish blue, but their look that struck me as sad and *afraid*. Perhaps it was merely the apprehension of meeting someone for the first time with whom previously he had only corresponded; perhaps it was fear of a door opening to beckon him to enter an unknown world. From that moment we were friends for fourteen years, and I never saw that look in his eyes again; when, during the fourteenth year, I received a cable from his wife with the news of his death, that image of his eyes came to my mind. He was not standing where, opening the door, one would immediately see him, but a little to the side, so that the door had to be opened wider than usual to see who the visitor was and take a partial step out to make his acquaintance and to welcome him in. My second impression was that he was rather large. In height, perhaps no more than two or three inches taller than my own five feet eight, but there was bulk about him; a lot of blond hair, the cheeks fleshy and convex, the lips full, a well-proportioned head on a potentially corpulent body.

That was late in the summer of 1959. We had both just graduated, he from King's College, London, I from Keele. During my final year at Keele, I had taken on the task of editing an anthology called *Universities' Poetry*, which had been founded by a fellow undergraduate who, after producing one number, had had the misfortune to be sent down. I took the opportunity to advance a secret grand aim: to astonish Britain with the quality of its new generation of poets, believing with the arrogant conviction of youth that we were far superior to the horrid bores of the Movement then in vogue. To accomplish this, and wishing to add to the Redbrick origins of the anthology the respectable aura of the older

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<sup>1</sup> Originally published in *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* 5, no. 2 (Summer 1985): 23-34.

universities, I invited John Fuller, who edited *Isis* at Oxford, and Anthony Smith from Cambridge, where he edited *Delta*, to be coeditors; and then, as an afterthought, deciding that London should not be left out, and looking at the magazines from the colleges there, found the one from King's closest to my taste and therefore wrote to its editor, Bryan Johnson, inviting him to join me as one of the coeditors.

We were all in our final term as undergraduates when we agreed to work together, and deferred editing the anthology to the summer when we would all be in London. John Fuller was in Blackheath and could come to only a few of the editorial meetings; Anthony Smith went away to France and wrote long letters from there; Bryan lived with his parents in Barnes, I with mine in Putney; we were within walking distance of each other, and after that first meeting, saw each other practically every day for two years when I moved to Battersea and Bryan to a flat in Islington. We continued to get together about twice a week, meeting usually in the Chelsea Potter on King's Road. From that time to ten years later, 1969, when I left for Texas, we were each other's closest friend.

Every line we wrote was immediately copied and sent to the other for criticism; we went on long walks across Barnes Common and Putney Heath, stopping at pubs if we had any money for half-pints of beer, talking literature; we wrote long letters which continued the talk; when I had begun to report cricket for the *Observer*, I recommended him to the sports editor and he was taken on as a soccer reporter; he recommended me to his literary agent; we supported each other in the literary politics of London; and when we had both found the women we wished to marry—he Virginia, I Helena—we planned to marry on the same day: 31 March 1964.

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Touched by deep personal tragedy, Bryan carried an enormous quantity of sadness within him. Life had betrayed him, and he was constantly on the guard against fresh betrayals, suspicious of anyone who could not love him wholly. Some time before I met him, he had suffered the worst betrayal of his life: a woman with whom he was deeply in love had left him for another man. Many of his early poems are about her, as "Nine Stages towards Knowing":

whom I can forget  
no more than breathing.

She is given her name in the explosive sentences of the “Disintegration” part of *Albert Angelo*:

---But an effect, salutary, yes, it has had, this working out things with her under the name of Jenny, of release, a definite effect of release.... But welcome, nevertheless, having been held in this memory’s thrall these four and a half years, to be released, being by the end of this book not under the influence of her memory, suffering the pain of her betrayal, as I was at its beginning.

And he can now say, “But it is good that I am rid of the ghost...have laid her ghost.” But he has not. He has to punish himself by going on a sea journey on the violent water of the North Sea in a trawler that plunges and pitches, he has to put himself in an extremity of physical discomfort; the teller of truth, who wrote novels and not fictions, is ironically engaged in an archetypal drama, for the voyager in quest of truth, of renewal, is older than Homer; the terrible journey is the Voyage of the Sun that must sink in the underworld before it is reborn. He has to sink in the sea of memory to find her again, to lay her ghost again: “She was a wound, yes, an area of pain, a death of a certain part of me.” *Trawl* is his truth. “And I hated any conversation in which she was mentioned, it disturbed me, sullened me.”

He had talked about her to me, but I had not thought of his experience of rejection as so deep a wound. One day I briefly met the woman at a party, and seeing Bryan a day later told him of the fact. His eyes stared at me with terrible anger and a few days later I received a poem from him called “Sonnet” and dedicated to me; after a touching description of our friendship, the sonnet concludes with

but when tonight you spoke my dead love’s name  
a hatred for you spat like a welding flame.

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He played a good, fast game of squash. Something rubbery about his body on the court. The belly bulging over the white shorts, bouncing as he ran or moving like a mass of jelly. His pink face going redder. The shoulders slightly stooped as he ran, the head lowered, charging bull-like, the eyes on the ball. Blond hair on the legs. He hit the ball hard, placed it cunningly. It was remarkable to see that body, always so heavy and seemingly without a potential for energetic motion when he was seated, deploy itself with such speed on the court. More often than not, he won. He hated to lose.

We played on Sunday afternoons at a public court in Holland Park, and then went for tea to my flat in Norland Square. This became a fairly regular event during the winter months, and even after I moved to a house in Hammersmith, we continued to meet at the Holland Park squash court for a game. Two or three other friends came to play, too, and sometimes there would be quite a gathering at the Sunday tea in Hammersmith.

After he had married and moved to the flat in Mydleton Square, he gave many dinner parties. He had three novels behind him then, was famous in London, and enjoyed playing the elegant host. Helena and I were frequent guests; there would be two others to make a party of six that the dining table accommodated—writers Bryan had met, publishers, editors. He was very generous with his invitations, and had he possessed the means, he would undoubtedly have entertained in the manner of Proust. The dinner parties made an enormous strain on Virginia's patience and stamina, for sometimes Bryan invited people without consulting her and then expected her to labor in the kitchen; in this respect, he was something of an old-fashioned master of his household, expecting an unquestioning devotion from his family. Virginia worked quite heroically to give him that devotion, serving not only in the kitchen but also his career: when there were too many novels to read for a review that had to be written, she would read some of them and advise him whether or not he needed to concern himself with them; when he began to make films, she was invariably there to attend to some of the details. She served him to the point where a sense of loss of her own identity reached beyond endurance. The earliest intimation I had of this was one evening at a dinner in Mydleton Square when Virginia, then pregnant with the second child, coming from the kitchen with a dish in her hands, broke down and wept. Bryan went to her aid with affectionate concern, assuming, as did the guests, that her collapse was caused by her condition, and could not have thought that she was finding it difficult to cope with his demands.

But Bryan's demand for unquestioning devotion was a measure of his love. And this, too, was perhaps a consequence of his experience with the woman who had jilted him: he had loved her with such total commitment that her betrayal was a treacherous act against his will, and, therefore, whoever loved him after her must never perform the slightest act that appeared to be at variance with his will. He wrote in *Trawl*:

I have been through some rough old emotional times, it becomes clear, yes. So have the women, to be fair. Always I was trying to make them conform to some concept I had of what a relationship could be. If I could conceive it, then it should be attainable: a dangerous concept, I see, if applied to many things, to any other thing, perhaps, demonstrably untrue, in fact, but I

certainly believed it to be true of something I could see between man and woman, and still believe it, still search for it.

The abstract language is trying desperately to avoid expressing an idea that is partly awfully sentimental, a yearning for some never-ending romantic idyll, and partly the masculine desire to play the dominant sexual role.

He was a very jealous lover. Once at a dinner party, a male guest greeted Virginia on entering the flat by kissing her on the cheek. Bryan, who was just then coming to the hall and had seen only the end of the perfectly innocent greeting, glared angrily at the man and said in a harsh, accusing voice, "Did you *kiss* my wife?" The man made a joke of it, but Bryan's evening was ruined. He could never disguise his feelings; if he felt rotten, his face showed it.

There were other dinner parties. Bryan and Virginia were as often our guests as we were theirs. Sometimes I did the cooking, preparing some Indian dishes (and I want to take this opportunity to say that the line "the gross body eating a poor curry" in Bryan's poem "In the ember days of my last free summer" is not a reference to my cooking but that of a very poor Bengali restaurant near King's Cross!). The most glittering parties were given by Joe McCrindle, editor of *Transatlantic Review*. Here the food was sumptuous, the wines invariably glorious, and quantities of liquor unlimited. At that time, we were not affluent enough to afford such abundance ourselves, and so we would inevitably get quite drunk. Bryan always declared that because he had a large body, he therefore possessed a higher tolerance level than others; but when drunk, he would grow obstreperous and, losing his inhibitions, become somewhat rude. At one of McCrindle's parties, Bryan and I were having a long conversation about the form of the novel he was then beginning to work on, *The Unfortunates*; he had only just begun to see the possibility of having loose sheets instead of a bound book and was describing with considerable animation the form he had discovered that would perfectly match the subject matter of his book; but suddenly, he broke off, and turning to another guest, a man who was an editor at a publishing house, shouted at him, "You know what you are, you are a cunt!" And he proceeded to abuse the man at the top of his voice for several minutes, so that the roomful of people stared in amazement at the incredible performance. The person in question did not deserve any of the abuse, but he was not the only one over the years to have been the object of such a public outburst from Bryan. In a letter Bryan wrote to me when I had moved to Texas, he described how he had given someone (a critic and editor) a "dressing down" at a party at Edward Lucie-Smith's.

Both these men whom Bryan abused belong to a particular class, socially much higher than Bryan's; they are of that group of gifted or fortunate people whose class, together with an Oxbridge education, assures them a privileged position in London's literary power struggle. Bryan despised them: perhaps because they were what he could not be, or because they acquired so easily what he, with his great talent, was denied. He saw them as literary entrepreneurs who kept *his* kind of *new* writing in the background while promoting the hackneyed productions of the mediocrities who repeated old forms. Also, the very high praise he had received for his first two novels had endorsed his own conviction that he was absolutely right and therefore anyone who uttered a word of praise for an old-fashioned writer was implicitly uttering a criticism of Bryan's work. As with his love, so with his work: he demanded a total commitment. He was very much a totalitarian. Literary disagreement was not the expression of a different point of view which might have a certain merit; it was heresy that had to be stamped out.

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In December 1963, he sent me the first draft of a short story called "What About All the Oicks and Tearaways?" and wrote in an accompanying letter: "It's no more than an anecdote, and I wouldn't attempt to defend it on any other ground than that I think it's funny. It's probably hideously immoral, too, but anything goes with me if it's funny."

At another time, he sent me a postcard from a seaside resort with a picture that provocatively revealed a young female's buttocks and had printed across it, "I'm a little behind in my writing."

Whenever we met, he would suddenly say, "How about this, then?" and repeat some joke he had heard or recite a verse that he had made up. Or, "Listen to this one, mate":

There was a young woman named Gwen  
Who liked it now and again,  
And again and again  
And again and again  
And again and again and again!

His voice rose with each repetition of "again" in an expression of amazement, his head nodding in emphasis. And then uproarious laughter. Or he would enclose a funny verse with a letter: