GDR Bulletin

Volume 20
Issue 1 *Spring*

Article 8

1994

D. G. Bond: German History and German Identity: Uwe Johnson's Jahrestage

Cary Nathenson
Washington University

Blaum may be more interested in the figures themselves than in the publication and society they describe.

Boria Sax
Mercy College

Bond, D. G. *German History and German Identity: Uwe Johnson's Jahrestage*. Amsterdam/Atlanta: Rodopi, 1993. 232 pp.

Despite the promise of D. G. Bond's title, *German History and German Identity* has surprisingly little of consequence to say about either. Bond's stated intention, "to show how the theme of German history has been interwoven with the form of *Jahrestage*" (15), is likewise as enticing as it is disappointing. The potential breadth of Bond's subject matter--the immense theoretical and analytical responsibilities assumed by any study of German history, let alone history, identity, *and* a two thousand-page novel--overwhelms Bond's sparse insights.

Bond condenses Johnson's attitude toward history into a "principle of remembrance" (15), or, "respect for the dead" (133). It is not with these statements that I have difficulty, nor with his fundamental assertion that "Gesine's [Cresspahl] search for a moral existence in the present is intimately linked to her own past" (46). Bond is most convincing when he explores the link between the personal and the public reception of history as demonstrated through Gesine's character and the development of her "Prague plan." Bond's reductionist view of history, however, leaves his analysis suspended in his own succinct formulations. Bond seems determined to describe every significant aspect of the novel as rooted in the act of remembering and mourning. To read Bond is to be left with the impression that Johnson dedicated thirteen years of his life to a novelistic *homage* to the Mitscherlich's *Die Unfähigkeit zu trauern*.

Even if *Jahrestage* were only about the obligation to remember, then the question of what and how to remember is still left underdeveloped by Bond's study. The crucial discussion of what is history or identity is all but absent here. A pronouncement early in the text permeates the entire analysis: "Writing about history deals with real people, whereas novels tell the invented stories of invented characters, yet they none the less (sic?) aim at a version of history" (18). This facile and suspect distinction between "fiction" and "real history" (or as Bond phrases it on page 115, "concrete political history") hinders an examination of a related and prominent Johnson theme: the monumental difficulty of knowing *the* truth. This pervasive doubt in Johnson's works has no apparent consequences for Bond's discussion of history or identity.

Illustrative for Bond's approach is his dismissal of what he considers past critic's disproportionate

reliance on a narratological analysis of *Jahrestage*. Instead he focuses on Johnson's use of the calendar as an "important model and governing principle in the narrative" (88). It no way diminishes the value of his comments on the cyclical structure of Johnson's work to also call attention to the price he pays for his choice. When Bond declares that the "Genosse Schriftsteller" (90) narrator, or the other labels Johnson gives this voice ("Schriftsteller," "Schreiber," "Der dies schreibt," or even "Uwe Johnson") to be a "fictional characterization of the narrator" and "fairly insignificant" (91), he trivializes the instability and doubt Johnson's language casts upon the source(s) for "his" story. Should this also have no bearing on Johnson's sense of history and identity as well? Apparently not in Bond's eyes. Johnson's "tricks" (92), he warns, are "misleading if taken too seriously" (91). It is as if Bond seeks to protect his narrow interpretation from the interfering author. In resisting these and other tempting divergences Johnson tosses onto the reader's path, Bond hems his inquiry into a tight hermeneutic circle. The result is predictably disappointing.

Where Bond strays from his self-imposed constraints the reader is rewarded. Bond perceptively outlines the synchronic and diachronic functions of the calendar in the novel (esp. 112f.). Its linearity enables Johnson "to ask questions about personal and historical causality" in Gesine's life (113) while its "anniversaries" disturb the notion of an eternal progress of time. Bond's identification of the text's "episodic" or "hybrid" form (122), i.e. the interaction of the main protagonist's more or less steady development with a relatively flexible chapter organization, is a welcome counter to accusations of formal simplicity in *Jahrestage*. Similarly valuable are the observations on the gradual change in emphasis of the *New York Times* quotes as Gesine's attention shifts toward the Prague Spring (48).

A section in which Johnson's description of the *Cap Arcona* sinking is compared with those of historians is Bond's closest attempt to address the problems of writing a "(hi)story" (141). Bond highlights the subtle yet significant alterations Johnson makes to Rudi Goguel's description of the events which surrounded the British bombing of concentration camp prisoners in Lübeck Bay on May 3, 1945. A Poland which Goguel calls "besetzt" becomes "vereinnahmt" in Johnson's version, who also changes "Krematorien" to "Verbrennungsöfen" (147). Furthermore, Johnson's "Germans" and "das Deutsche Reich" stand in contrast to Goguel's "Nazis" of the "Dritte Reich" (148). Regrettably, Bond does not explore the ramifications of Johnson's challenge to "history" here beyond drawing attention to its powerful absence of sensationalism. Instead, he is satisfied with this observation at the end of a footnote: "All in all the question of language shows one area where the writer of fiction can be superior to the journalist or historian" (149). Here, as elsewhere, Bond resists abandoning his artificial fiction-history dichotomy and prefers rather to see Johnson solely as a "Lückenbüßer der Geschichte" (17).

It is not surprising then to find that one of the pleasures of *German History and Identity* is actually a byproduct of its investigation: Bond's *Forschungsbericht*. Throughout his text, Bond extensively details the strengths and weaknesses (and finds mainly the latter) of *Jahrestage* scholarship through 1992. These commentaries, for the most part tucked away in the footnotes, are informative, entertaining, and occasionally aggressive (Bond's favorite targets are Kurt Fickert and the Man Everyone Loves to Hate, Marcel Reich-Ranicki). Ironically, in the main body of his text, Bond lends fuel to the arguments of some of these very Johnson detractors by reducing *Jahrestage* to a simple admonishment to respect and remember the dead.

Cary Nathenson
Washington University