(On Not) Eliding Class: Working Class-Consciousness, Rock & Roll Culture, and Narrative Self-Referentiality in the Fiction of Denis Johnson

When he died from liver cancer in 2017, Denis Johnson was rightly hailed as a genre-defying writer, a “storyteller fluent in […] the transcendence of compassion” (Seaman 26), whose visionary scope and lyrical intensity differentiated him from many of his literary peers. His career spanned some forty years and evinced an astonishing range, including nine novels, one novella, two books of short stories, five collections of poetry, two collections of plays, and one book of reportage. But consistent across his oeuvre, particularly in his fiction, was an ability to inject both dark humor and tragic seriousness, including a quest for the spiritual, within characters afflicted by the burdens of class-society in a post-1980s America. Johnson has indeed been one of the few recent American novelists, like his compatriots Larry Brown and Russell Banks, to treat what critic Robert Seguin has called “the injuries of class society with unflagging determination” (“United”), and this despite some academic critics often choosing to “elide the issue of social class” when discussing such writers (Guinn 40) in favor of more palpable race and gender issues. In the introduction to his book *Around Quitting Time*, for instance, Seguin concurs, arguing that “the contemporary exploration” in American culture and literary studies “of the textual and historical imbrications of race/class/gender (a ‘holy trinity’ to its detractors), despite its productive […] achievements, has in fact tended to downplay the salience
of class” (Around 13). Yet many of the small-time criminals, addicts and alcoholics, spies and provocateurs, failed suicides and bungling murderers, hermetic widows, strung-out prostitutes, and gamblers and con men who populate Johnson’s fictional landscape are lower-middle or working-class whites who, despite their sketchy socio-economic backgrounds, possess “[u]nheroic disclosures of depth” and the sort of “inner lives” (Champion 140, 144) hardly glimpsed in the works of those other contemporary American writers with whom Johnson is sometimes associated.

To this earnestness of psychological and spiritual vision Johnson has also shown a penchant for exploiting countless inter- and transtextual references throughout his works, especially by “borrow[ing] freely and often from rock and roll culture” (Parrish 29). Furthermore, Johnson is notorious for engaging in a form of postmodern “self-intertextuality” (Collado Rodriguez 25) or referentiality, whereby he recycles characters and motifs from one novel or short story to the next in a wink-and-nod gesture to his informed reader. In short, Denis Johnson foregrounds an especially working-class consciousness in his fictions, from his first novel Angels (1983) through his final, posthumously published collection The Largesse of the Sea Maiden (2018), and employs elements of popular culture, including many allusions to rock & roll music, along with fictional self-reflexivity to ultimately reveal a humanistic perspective throughout his canon.

The most obvious instance of Johnson exploiting the vicissitudes of narrative self-reflexivity and genre-splicing, class-consciousness, and references to rock and roll culture occurs in Jesus’ Son (1992), “a slim collection […] that established Johnson’s reputation as a contemporary minimalist of the highest order” (Juengel) and a forerunner to “the novel-in-stories” (Giraldi 25) sub-genre. As Scott Juengel summarizes, “the […] interwoven stories follow
a genial addict known only as ‘Fuckhead’ through an America recognizable by its bus depots, emergency rooms, drunk tanks, and taverns.” Like the stories of his literary mentor Raymond Carver, whom he studied under at the U. of Iowa Writers’ Workshop, Johnson in *Jesus’ Son* (which was turned into a 2000 film directed by Allison Maclean) presents us with “noble ciphers manhandled by the falsity of the American Dream” (Giraldi 24). Many of the book’s characters, like Fuckhead, Georgie of “Emergency,” and Donald Dundun of the eponymous “Dundun,” all addicts, “purgatorial drifters” (Juengel), and both petty and violent criminals, appear to be the “alienated” products of their poor white, working-class origins. Dundun, for instance, who reappears in the story “Strangler Bob” in Johnson’s *The Largesse of the Sea Maiden*, is described by his cellmate, and that story’s narrator, Dink (they are in the Johnston Co. jail in east-central Iowa, the main setting for the stories in *Jesus’ Son*, too), in stark terms:

Dundun came from the trailer courts, and I [Dink] was middle-class gone crazy, but we passed the time together freely because we both had long hair and chased after any kind of intoxicating substance. Dundun, only nineteen, already displayed up and down both arms the tattooed veins of a hope-to-die heroin addict. (89)

--which of course he does eventually, as we find out at the close of the story “Dundun” from *Jesus’ Son* (“Strangler Bob” thus serving as a prequel chronologically to this latter one), again indicating a determinism to these characters’ lives, as well as a consciousness that their ends will come sooner rather than later.

The book’s title, moreover, derives from a lyric in the Velvet Underground’s 1967 song “Heroin,” written and sung by Lou Reed, and serves as the book’s epigraph, the lines placed on the page “preced[ing] the title so that they hover over the narrative like an unanswered inquiry” (Parrish 27):

*When I’m rushing on my run*
Johnson’s narrator, “like the singer of that song [...] is a heroin junkie whose apprehension of the divine derives from the rush he experiences when shooting [up]” (Parrish 27). But if in much of “Johnson’s work, metaphysical identity takes precedence over social identity” (Parrish 19), this is not to say that class does not play an oversized, deterministic role in how the characters perceive the world and act in it. In the story “Work,” for example, we see the narrator’s consciousness of his lower-class status and the desperation that leads to when Fuckhead and his companion Wayne go to an abandoned housing development in “a bleak midwestern landscape devoid of crops or farmers” (Parrish 20) to strip then steal copper wiring to sell “for scrap” (JS 58) as a way of paying for their respective addictions. And, in a parodic allusion to the Protestant work-ethic which Johnson seems to travesty here, Fuckhead expresses pride in his criminality, as if it’s a worthwhile vocation: “We had money. We were grimy and tired. Usually we felt guilty and frightened, because there was something wrong with us, and we didn’t know what it was; but today we had the feeling of men who had worked” (JS 65-66).

However, it may be that “Johnson’s narrator […] associates himself with Jesus to evoke both his own doomed life […] and the fact that he transcended his fate” (Parrish 28)—or, in his case, there’s the sense that his class determinism can be overcome, if not in this world. In the closing story of Jesus’ Son, “Beverly Home,” the hapless Fuckhead, a now-recovering alcoholic and drug addict adapting to sobriety by working at a convalescent home in Arizona, confesses: “I had never known, never even imagined for a heartbeat, that there might be a place for people like us” (160). Such a confessional strain permeates Johnson’s most successful fictions, Jesus’ Son included. Self-reflexively-speaking, therefore, it’s as “the artist of this work” (as in this story where he writes the newsletter for the home’s patients) that Fuckhead “makes
others aware of their existence and glad that their presence on this earth is recognized by someone else” (Parrish 28). His plea, then, for those “people like us”—the recovering addicts and alcoholics, the “homeless nomads” (Gray 137) —suggests Johnson’s sympathy for those living on the fringes of American society. “He was a citizen of a country north of Mexico that made no sense,” thinks Lenny English late in Johnson’s 1991 novel Resuscitation of a Hanged Man (173). He, too, like Fuckhead, is one of Johnson’s many “doomed seekers, unholy prophets, [and] squalid sinners” (Connors 253) who nevertheless continues to search for meaning in a profane, fallen world. Thus, despite the chaotic, low-rent environments his characters usually live in, “Johnson’s fictions typically end gesturing toward some future salvation” (Juengel), as evidenced in Fuckhead’s compassionate appeal to his fellow “weirdos” (160) at the close of Jesus’ Son.

With this social and religious vision Johnson also relies on the repetition of key inter- and transtextual references within and across his works, particularly from popular and rock and roll culture of the 60s, 70s, and early 80s. For instance, besides the aforementioned Lou Reed lyric that haunts Jesus’ Son, in his second novel Fiskadoro (1985), a post-apocalyptic science fiction set in a not-so-distant-future Florida Keys, Johnson sprinkles in allusions to music by, among others, The Rolling Stones (“Sweet Virginia”), Bad Company (“Ready for Love”), Jimmy Hendrix, Bob Marley, Muddy Waters (“Hoochie Coochie Man”), and Bob Dylan (“Man of Peace”). Dylan’s discography is sampled extensively and repeatedly throughout Johnson’s fictions: in Angels (1983), Dylan’s song “Like a Rolling Stone” first appears (it later resurfaces in Tree of Smoke in reference to Bill Houston’s post-military life), as it’s playing over the loud speaker as Burris Houston is arrested (for his role in his older brothers’ bank robbery) at the job site where he performs mindless factory work (Angels 153-54).
*Hanged Man* (1991), Johnson’s 4th novel, seeker Lenny English is moved when listening to Diana Ross’s cover version of “Ain’t No Mountain High Enough”: “In the overheated lyrics of rock and roll he often heard the sorrows and pronouncements of a jilted, effeminate Jehovah, and this song made even grander, more awful claims than most, suggesting that Her love was profoundly uncontrollable and maybe not actually friendly” (105-06). Johnson’s 2009 “pulpy” (Juengel) crime noir spoof, *Nobody Move*, first serialized in *Playboy*, takes its title from Yellowman’s 1984 reggae hit of the same title—“Nobody move / Nobody get hurt” (*NM 30*)—that lowlife thief and compulsive gambler Jimmy Luntz hears over the FM car radio right before he hooks-up with Native American knock-out and *femme fatale* Anita Desilvera for the first time. In Johnson’s 2000 novella *The Name of the World*, one character “fed some dollars to the jukebox and set it to play ‘Let Me Roll It’ by Paul McCartney [from the 1973 *Band on the Run* LP] indefinitely” (*Name 77*). That link between lower and even criminal class characters and pop/rock music is ever-present in Johnson’s fictions, with such songs providing the soundtrack to his characters’ lives and times, and sometimes even standing in as substitutes for their metaphysical or philosophical beliefs (as we’ll see with Jimmy Storm in *Tree of Smoke*).

Moreover, and as shown with the reference to Dundun mentioned earlier, Johnson often employs a brand of self-intertextuality or reflexivity in his works, reusing characters and motifs across his fictions. James and Bill Houston, for example, who at the end of Johnson’s first novel *Angels* are “on their way to prison and death row after a bank heist gone wrong,” reappear (with their mother and younger brother Burris) in 2007’s *Tree of Smoke*, a sprawling, Vietnam-era narrative which serves as the “back story” for both men, “who’ve returned from war to a life of no purpose” (Connors 253) – and much of that seemingly precipitated by their lower-class origins which forced them into the military to begin with. One critic describes the
Bill Houston of *Angels*, for instance, as “a truly naturalistic character, the victim of environment, fate, and an oppressive social system” (Giles 122), conditioned by his poor white class constrictions to a life of continual and escalating criminal behavior. So, for the Houston brothers and at least a handful of other characters, *Tree of Smoke* represents “the prequel we didn’t know existed to Johnson’s entire body of work” (Connors 252). Jimmy Storm, for instance, the “quivering bird-dog sergeant” (*Tree* 303) and Colonel Francis X. Sand’s right-hand man in *Tree*, first appears during 1981 in 1991’s *Resuscitation* as “a drug-runner about English’s age” (249), sharing a Barnstable Co. Jail cell with Lenny, who has been arrested for trying to assassinate the Catholic bishop on Cape Cod. By 1983, however, *Tree’s* Storm is back in Southeast Asia pursuing the egomaniacal and elusive Colonel (an enigmatic, Kurtz-like figure a la Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* by way of *Apocalypse Now*) whom he’s heard is fronting a clandestine arms operation in Malaysia near the Thai border. However, like his bunkmate Lenny, who sees himself as “an institutional man” (180), Storm in the earlier *Resuscitation* prefers incarceration to the societal reality that lies just beyond the jail’s walls: “Let me out [only] when the new millennium’s here, a little chaos and shit” (*Resuscitation* 253). This millennial, apocalyptic fervor possesses many of Johnson’s characters, who seem to be “rushing toward their doom with something like relish, as if damnation were a reward and not a punishment” (Connors 254) for their present existences, a feeling also best captured in *Tree of Smoke*.

In fact, *Tree of Smoke* stands as a fitting example of Johnson’s proclivity for combining his interests in class, rock and roll culture, and intertextual self-reflexivity in a single expansive novel. Vietnam and its legacy may be the ultimate *Ur-text* or origin story for Johnson, with *Tree of Smoke* – at 614 pages his longest and most intricately structured narrative by
far — “the historical center of his moral universe” (Juengel), thematically if not chronologically. That is, many of his fictions coalesce around the “before/after” Vietnam trope and that conflict’s locus as the purgatorio of contemporary American consciousness, with “the Vietnam veteran [remaining …] a persistent protagonist in our literature” (Rebein 44), including Johnson’s. For instance, in Resuscitation, Lenny English is haunted by a “tattooed ghost that was stalking him, the dead GI in Vietnam, the one who’d been drafted in Lenny’s place” (169). In Tree, Johnson’s most sustained commentary on the war’s effects, James Houston’s postwar life as an unhinged drifter in Arizona is emblematic of a larger cultural malaise and post-apocalyptic sensibility, as well as his and brother Bill’s “determinate class character” (Day 73) which precludes any sense of real choice they may have over their economic and social circumstances. As Keith Gessen sees it, Tree traces “the logic of American life—and how it brutalizes the segment of the population left behind by the changes in the American economy after 1945. Vietnam is the most violent, loudest expression of this change—but it hardly exhausts it” (43). For Johnson’s people in Tree, there is “no direction home” (596), as its narrator riffs on the Dylan lyric from “Like a Rolling Stone” near the book’s close, since these characters can’t find, post-Vietnam, anywhere they really want to go or feel they belong, and so eventually live as denizens of their “own kind of placeless, intermediate space—[…] on the edge, interstitial” (Gray 141). (Not-so-coincidentally, Johnson titled his first book of non-fictional reportage Seek: Reports from the Edges of America & Beyond [2001]).

Tree encompasses a dizzying array of characters, a labyrinthine plot that stretches from the death of JFK to the Reagan 80s, a hallucinatory prose style that seems to mimic sensually the jungle fever of its setting, and a veritable pastiche of inter/metatextual allusions to its literary and cinematic predecessors. It’s also chock-full of references to pop
and rock music singers/groups of the period, from Percy Sledge to Bob Dylan and The Doors. For example, Jimmy Storm, the Colonel’s obsequious acolyte, long after the war is over and still questing obsessively after his lost leader, at one point tells a Hindu sooth-sayer in Kuala Lumpur, who had asked him what he “would say if [he] spoke to God?”: “’Break on Through’, it’s a song. It’s my philosophy, my motto […] Break on Through” (Tree 554). The rock and roll references throughout Tree, as in other Johnson fictions, thus serve as the sounding board for his characters’ wretched existences. “This is the end” (Tree 518), Bill Houston tells himself as he faces life on “The Deuce,” that skid-row area of Phoenix, “the street of outlaws and whores” (526), after returning from his purposeless tour of duty, and the line recalls another song by The Doors, “The End,” which is also the apocalyptic anthem that disturbs the close of Coppola’s Apocalypse Now (1979), a key intertext. Tree of Smoke, then, as such repeated textual allusions suggest, is less “about Vietnam” per se than it is about the sense of resignation, aftermath or psychological fallout that afflicts those who survived it, those on the periphery of the conflict, and those left to chronicle it in our own history-ravaged present.

All told, Johnson’s fictions would seem, with their rock music allusions, intertextual and self-referential tropes, and permutations of popular forms, to “help further eclipse the line between mass culture and literature” (Ulin), a project that has engaged many other American novelists of the past half century. Moreover, it’s this author’s fixation on his characters’ socio-economic precarity in works such as Jesus’ Son, Tree of Smoke, and Nobody Move that intimate his “tragicomic nobodies begin to look like regular folk, but without the middle-class safety net and with a wee bit more imagination than might be good for them” (Maury), as one reviewer opines. In the “Envoi” to his 1985 novel Continental Drift, Russell Banks—one of Johnson’s close literary peers and a fellow practitioner of what came to be called a “new naturalism” (see
Guinn 38) in contemporary American fiction—has his narrator end on a note of lament: not just for Bob DuBois of Catamount, N. H., the blue-collar drone of that book whose quest for the American Dream ends in moral degradation and finally his own death, but for all “the young American men and women without money, with trades instead of professions […] breaking their lives trying to bend them around the wheel of commerce” (Banks 366). For such poor, usually white, men and women—as holds true for Fuckhead, Lenny English, and the Houston brothers as they’re depicted in Jesus’ Son, Resuscitation of a Hanged Man, and Tree of Smoke, respectively—their anxieties, frustrations, and compulsively-violent actions are offshoots or bi-products of their class station. These characters are often irrational, sometimes even pathological, and their conduct not to be condoned; still, their behaviors become understandable, and perhaps also inevitable, given the constraining social conditions under which they live. Hence, they deserve to be noticed and mourned over, as I’d contend that Denis Johnson, in his sympathetic presentation of these figures, implicitly does, restoring to them a modicum of humanity in a progressively more entropic and “posthuman” (see O’Donnell 115-23)—as some would have it—age.
Works Cited and Consulted


Guinn, Matthew. *After Southern Modernism: Fiction of the Contemporary South*. UP


---. “United States (20th Century).” *The Encyclopedia of the Novel*, edited by Peter

