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# Looking forward to changes: the Metafictional dimension in B.S. Johnson's "Sheela-Na-Gig"

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- 1 "Sheela-Na-Gig" is part of the collection entitled *Statement Against Corpses*, a collection which Johnson shares with his Pakistani friend Zulfikar Ghose and which was published in 1964. Its somewhat enigmatic title with its Gaelic overtones, in fact, refers to medieval stone carvings found in churches, representing the Celtic avatar of the famous mythical figure of Baubô, i.e. a naked woman with her legs apart, thus exposing her outsize vulva. In the course of the story the unidentified "I" narrator briefly discusses the anthropological character of the figure, but what makes it so central to the story is that its discovery alters the life of the protagonist in a radical way.
- 2 Indeed, Jonathan Coe<sup>1</sup> reminds us that Johnson prefaced his novel *Albert Angelo*, with a quotation he borrowed from Beckett's *The Unnamable* to the effect that inventing fictional characters was a waste of time when: "... I had me on the premises, within easy reach [...] There is nothing else ... let us be lucid for once, nothing else but what happens to me". He therefore concludes that all good fiction in general, and his own in particular, is necessarily autobiographical<sup>2</sup>. As a result B.S. Johnson's life is so intricately woven into fiction as to become one of the main features of his art. This can be verified in "Sheela-Na-Gig" as it is based on a conflation of several anecdotes duly documented in Jonathan Coe's recent biography, in his other fiction as well as in his cult and highly personal 1973 television film *Fat Man on a Beach*. For instance, the mountain of Garn Fadryn from which the narrator imagines he owns the world in the opening paragraph, and which he has a vision of in Kilpeck church, is precisely where a weird mystical experience occurred to him. It is recounted in detail in *Fat Man on a Beach* and becomes in "Sheela-Na-Gig": "I felt an elemental oneness, union, unity, with the moon, the lights, the road, the moor, the sheep, the van, the stones, and above all with her." (100) The only difference is that, whereas it is the hitchhiker who bares her vagina in front of him, it is him who is naked on top of the mountain and allegedly

worshipping a female deity. The reversal is far from innocent, as I will show, and is a reassuring element as far as his sanity is concerned. Similarly, Johnson claims that out of the body experiences did happen to him, and their literary incarnation with their inherent sense of bilocation and autoscopy reads as follows:

The feeling of disembodiment came upon me. I had had it once before whilst driving in North Wales the previous summer, strangely enough, and had been frightened afterwards. It is very difficult to describe. It was as though someone else was using my body, and I was above (always above), dispassionately regarding this person's actions ... I remember the above-myself thinking at the time what a fool this body was, as well. (96)

- 3 The fictional anecdote is thus shown to have a biographical origin, just as his "working holidays" in Wales where he worked for one James Martland<sup>3</sup>, who becomes David in the story, owner of a country club, not a farm.
- 4 However, what matters is less the tracing of the minutest biographical elements in the text, as the way they are inscribed in a symbolic pattern. As a result, the question in B.S. Johnson's fiction is to find a proper articulation between the literary (fictional) and the biographical. This articulation will be studied in "Sheela-Na-Gig" at three different levels, the geographical itinerary, the spiritual journey and the literary exploration, the three levels merging conveniently allowing the short story to go beyond the initial anecdotes in order to reach a metafictional dimension.

## I – Celebrating the accidental: the crossroads of fate

- 5 For all its trappings of esoteric or mystical phenomena, there is nothing about the short story that is extravagant in content nor experimental in form. On the contrary it follows a very conventional pattern: that of the quest and its various avatars. In point of fact, it does provide an interesting variation on the actantial model provided by Greimas. As far as the axis of knowledge and transmission is concerned, the hero of the quest (the unnamed narrator standing for Johnson himself), is despatched on an errand (bringing back a new arm for a combine-harvester) by the sender in the guise of David, the farmer. However, on the axis of desire the object of the quest of the hero has very little to do with the support-arm of the machine and a lot to do with love, sexuality and the desire to become a writer. Consequently, on the axis of power, the agents who support his cause (helpers) and those who hinder his quest (opponents) vary a great deal depending on which level of the quest is considered. Suffice it to say that he overcomes all the obstacles on his way and succeeds in bringing back the required mechanical part to the farm. Moreover, beyond his wildest dreams he also makes an encounter that changes the course of his life and opens up vistas of felicity before him: a home, a wife, a son and the urge to put pen to paper.
- 6 The narrative strategy also relies on the conventional opposition between the iterative and the singulative. The first four paragraphs typically describe the repetition of similar situations, as if in an eternal circle:
 

It was my third summer in Wales [...] For the first two I had worked, and this third I had come down on a kind of working holiday. I stayed at David's farm on the alluvial plain extending back from Hell's Mouth, and helped with the harvest and anything there was to help with." (89)
- 7 What introduces a rupture into this almost static situation of routine is, literally speaking, an accident that moves the story to the plane of the singulative. The incident

that triggers off the story is a down-to-earth mechanical breakdown: "One afternoon the combine-harvester pitched awkwardly and stubbed its drum into the earth, fracturing the left-hand support arm – a great casting about four feet long – with a crack which I was afterwards told was heard as far away as Rhiw." (90), but this accident proves to be a turning point in the protagonist's life as it will take an unexpected course. This memorable event turns out to be his almost supernatural encounter with the girl that obstinately flashes her vagina in the beams of his truck.

- 8 Moreover, the reader's attention is inevitably attracted to the fact that the protagonist is rather irresolute about his future. His mood is clearly uncertain, he does not seem to know exactly what he wants, as if this period in his life was a period of vacancy and stasis, and he did not know what to expect: "This was the time when I felt sure I had nothing better to do than hang around waiting for the right one."(89) On top of that, his status as a Londoner wishing to be adopted by the Welsh, betrays a deep need for identification. Even if, in a perfectly narcissistic drive, in a bid to build a strong ego, he fantasizes an imaginary appropriation of the Lleyn peninsula, he is bound to admit: "Not that, however, I would have mentioned my imagined sovereignty to the Welsh, I, a Londoner – this would really have strained their tolerance of my summers."(89) Such a bout of wishful thinking for inclusion is further illustrated by the fast dissolution of the initial "I" of imaginary fulfilment into the general "we" of inclusion, which he thinks he achieves by pretending he is a Welsh youth just like his companions: "That was how we lived in the summer, worked hard all day enjoyed ourselves all evening and most of the night: there was a group of thirty or so of us, all in our twenties..."(89). Not unsurprisingly the "I" persona returns with a vengeance in the singulative and intensely self-centered part of the story describing the round trip he made from Llanegan to Poole and back, thus focusing on an individual destiny. In this perspective, it is symptomatic that at the end of the story the protagonist can, almost complacently, claim: "This is my home now, Wales, Lleyn." (101), as if adoption had really taken place.
- 9 Significantly, such a desire for social acceptance was adumbrated from the very beginning of the story by the insistence of the narrative on spatial elements. To start with, the topographical accuracy with which the round trip is recorded functions as a system of surveying and naming that constructs a homogeneous textual space which is so close to reality as to allow the reader to follow the route on an ordnance survey map. The young man's criss-crossing of the area to enjoy himself with his friends amounts to a sharing of the space: "In the evening we would go out drinking, driving all over Lleyn – Aberdaron, Sarn, Rhyd-y-Clafdy, Abersoch, Cricieth – and sometimes up as far as the Mermaid on Anglesey, or to Llandudno and Rhyl." (89) In the same way, such a faithful fictional rendering of the geographical particularities of Wales amounts not so much to producing reality effects, as it draws a map that is psychologically oriented. The narrator's mapping out of the area is undoubtedly presented as a means of imaginative possession of a territory marked by its human dimension. The fantasy of imaginary appropriation of the Lleyn peninsula mentioned above is matched by an enumeration of Welsh names referring to the community of Welsh friends which he seeks to integrate: "...: there was a group of thirty or so of us, all in our twenties, in that tense competitive group relationship of the unmarried, Trefor and Anne and Gwendy and Iolo and Alice and Gwilim and Mos and Jenny and Llyr and David and Rhiain<sup>4</sup> and a dozen more." (90) Similarly, a list of toponyms gives the details of his itinerary down to

the smallest villages, the minor roads and the short cuts (Pwllheli, Maentwrog, Blanenau, Shrewsbury, Ludlow, Leominster, Hereford, Ross and Gloucester, etc.)

- 10 Notwithstanding such careful attention to the natural layout of the fictional space, what makes it meaningful is not so much its precision, as the fact that it functions as locus of a series of unforeseen events. The story presents itself as a succession of accidents<sup>5</sup>, ranging from the more factual (a car accident) to the most intimate (falling in love). What triggers off the narrative is also an accident: the broken support-arm of the combine-harvester that is at the origin of the trip to collect a spare part. This initial journey is the occasion for all sorts of apparently random coincidences and mishaps. The first one is the chance stop-over at Kilpeck Church during which he comes upon the stone *sheela-na-gig*. The second one is the incident with the lorry - possibly a consequence of the delay incurred by the visit at Kilpeck - and the third one, for which he had not bargained either, is the picking up of the hitch-hiker who turns into a living *sheela-na-gig*.
- 11 From that standpoint it is clear that the short story strictly stems from Johnson's conviction that since life is chaos the artist is bound "to celebrate the accidental"<sup>6</sup>. At this juncture it is important to note that the narrator insists that, so far, he has avoided any sort of accident, in spite of their reckless driving: "I never heard of any of us having an accident in spite of the way we used to belt around." (90) He himself seems to believe that he is protected against potential dangers. In order to make up for the time spent visiting the church he takes risks: "As last year I drove dangerously fast along narrow roads. As last year I had very near escapes several times [...] I was enjoying the sun-impregnated stone of the villages, and driving as well as I had ever done: fast, but very safely." (96/97) The irony is that he will be involved in a minor accident with a lorry, for which he holds no responsibility. The whole point of the anecdote narrated in the short story is to bring an awareness that, roughly speaking, the individual subject has to confront antagonistic modalities of the aleatory. The first one is the purely random event that is devoid of meaning, the second turns the indeterminacy randomness into a meaningful encounter or *tuchè*. In other words, the unexpected event acquires a meaning retrospectively when included into a larger pattern. Such is the case for the narrator who has to discover for himself that the accidental in his life was in fact part of the invisible not to say unconscious plan that shapes his destiny, i.e. the whole episode was just a preliminary to paving the way for his falling in love. As Marlow claims in *Lord Jim*: "It's always the unexpected that happens" (Conrad, 60), but the unexpected is more often than not the expression of a larger scheme engendered by the subject's archaic drives or his unconscious desires. Granted that the accidental is the main theme of the story we will see that it interferes in more ways than one in the fate of the protagonist.

## II – An uncertain subjective status: the search for emotional stability

- 12 At the thematic level, the quest pattern outlined above is characterized by the predominance of sexual implications. The biographical layer is also present: Jonathan Coe<sup>7</sup> reminds us that at the time when Johnson lived through the experience that is related in "Sheela-Na-Gig", he was feeling so depressed because he had been jilted by his then Irish singer girl-friend and had not written a line of fiction, that he vaguely

considered suicide. What strikes the reader in the short story is first his lack of determination. He does not think ahead and is merely satisfied with “hanging around” and “waiting for the right one”. One of the first textual markers of this indetermination is the oxymoronic phrase “working holidays” which means that he is neither on holiday nor holding a steady job but somewhere in-between. It betrays the fact that he is a stranger there, and that his stay with his friends is only transitory, while the desire to work is a manifestation of his desire to belong, in short he finds himself in a situation of “no locus stand I”, and he is looking for some subjective and emotional anchorage as his fantasy of mastery and self possession of the peninsula clearly implied. In the meantime he spends his time enjoying life and drinking around with his friends. However, a would-be artist could not fail to perceive the vacuity and meaninglessness of such a life and the underlying desire of their reckless driving through the peninsula is that something happened to him to give a sense of direction to his life.

- 13 The narrator’s indecisiveness about who he is and what he wants is clearly a symptom of a narcissistic impulse too weak to bolster up his self-image. This is made obvious in the story by the repetition of two dubious scenes (pp. 96, 100), bordering on the supernatural and the fantastic and involving what is known as “Out of the Body Experience” (OBE). In the case of the young man these experiences are described in terms that emphasize feelings of disconnectedness and dissociation between the body and the mind, which results in a situation of autoscopy, the subject looking at himself from above. An in-depth analytical approach suggests that it can be considered as a form of suicidal aggression of the narcissistic impulse, in which the subject becomes the object of his own gaze. In the Greek myth what ultimately kills Narcissus is not that he falls in love with his image, it is rather the very gaze of which he becomes the object. What is omitted in this form of de-personalization is the mediating agency of the Other, that introduces the dimension of alterity. Unlike Narcissus the narrator does not die in the story but he cannot help driving dangerously, thus deliberately putting his life at risk. What is more, he goes through an original experience of alterity when he is faced with the living *sheela-na-gig*, which therefore represents not merely female genitalia, but rather an eye staring back at him. It is not his own gaze that is returned to him in a deadly way as in the myth, but as it were the eye of the Other introducing the crucial element of alterity. Contrary to James Duffy, the unhappy protagonist of Joyce’s story, “A Painful Case”, who, unable to love Mrs Sinico, “... lived at a little distance from his body” (Joyce, 120) and condemns himself to a form of death-in-life, the young man is now able to acknowledge his love for Rhiain and live happily ever after.
- 14 Further evidence that, in the case of the protagonist, such OBE experiences have a sexual origin is provided by the fact that each occurrence of the phenomenon takes place after he saw a form of *sheela-na-gig*. The first one occurs just after the visit of the Kilpeck Church where he said he received a shock from identifying a representation of the *sheela-na-gig* on a corbel table:
- All the more to my surprise, then, the last shock this astonishing building had for me that summer morning, when I saw the last figure on the corbel table of the sweetly-rounded apse to be the *sheela-na-gig*: narrow face, huge eyes, thin lips, skeletal ribs, legs haunched high and wide, stick-like arms outside and under the thighs for the hands to hold open an enormous exaggerated vulva. (95)
- 15 The second follows hard on the renewed shock of seeing the living one, and what is remarkable is that the sexual dimension - so overwhelming that it cannot be repressed

- is nevertheless played down by its inclusion in a more general discourse on architecture derived from the booklet purchased in the church, and on anthropology inspired by the well-known work of Robert Graves *The White Goddess*, of which he was a great admirer.
- 16 That the sexual element in his quest is lying just below the surface occurrences of his life was, in fact, asserted right from the beginning when the narrator mentions the "... tense, competitive group relationship of the unmarried..." (90), not to say sexual rivalry that is the rule in his gang. Once on the road, the sexual theme crops up again in the guise of the first hitch-hiker he meets on his way and who turns out to be a girl obviously associated with venal sexuality: "But I saw only one, and she was running for a wagon in front of me that had just stopped. Something about her made me feel that she was on the game, a wagondriver's pickup." (91) The failed sexual congress with that elusive girl is but the prelude to the encounter of the second female hitch-hiker who bares her vulva in front of him. It must be pointed out that the second figure bears textual features similar to those attributed to Rhiain, i.e. the girl that he singled out from the initial group to become his wife: "...and suddenly it was right with Rhiain, good and right, and three summers' knowing had fallen into love between us" (101), as if the longed for accident (fallen into love...) had happened at last. Furthermore, just like Rhiain, the hitch-hiker girl "had a sharp, narrow Welsh face" (99) and she knew exactly which route he was going to take when he had not even made up his mind, exactly as if the narrator could only follow a predetermined road towards his happiness.
- 17 The next encounter with sexuality occurs on the narrator's way back. As he has stopped to have his supper by the roadside he unwittingly spies upon a couple making love, which somehow forces him to occupy the position of a voyeur – a situation that is reported in a rather strange fashion: "On the left, under a rowan tree, there was what I know now to have been a man lying with what I now know to have been a woman, making what I already knew to be love." (98) The variations on the verb "to know" imply a retrospective gaze that hints at an alleged earlier innocence, as if he were unable to recognize love when it stared him in the eye. Eventually, after encounters with sexuality, emblemized by the female organ, first mediated through sculpture, (the "*sheela-na-gig*"), then through anthropology (the monograph), then through uncertainty (the enigmatic couple), he is confronted with sexuality frontally, as it were, as the hitch-hiker turns into a *sheela-na-gig* in the flesh, in a gesture that is exclusively addressed to him. The effect is immediate: he has hardly reached his destination when he falls in love with Rhiain and gets married. In this perspective the narrator's quest reads as a story of initiation<sup>8</sup>, but we will now see that this initiation is not limited to the mysteries of love and sexuality.

### III – Gaze and voice: from sexuality to textuality

- 18 In this third section I wish to argue that the predominant sexual theme is in fact a cover up for the real significance of the quest pattern: an investigation of the creative urge and the desire to write. This reflexive dimension is contained textually in the incipit and the excipit with their ambivalent deictic markers. The story opens with the somewhat performative statement: "This was at the time I felt sure that..." (89), so that the deictic could refer either to the episode that changed his life (level of the story), or

to the time of the enunciation, since this can also direct our gaze to the text itself. This ambiguity does suggest that the story may well be about the writing of the story. This is amply confirmed by the excipit: "It hit me" (101) in which the referent of the pronoun could be either the events recounted or the narrator's writing about them. The second inference seems even more likely if we notice that the sentence preceding the excipit reads: "But it has taken more than two years for me to bring myself to write it down." (101) The temporal gap indicates that the barrier of repression had to be overcome, as the subject was perhaps too close to the writer's heart to be acknowledged superficially.

- 19 The logical conclusion is that the secret aim of the trip was to lead to a story, or to put it plainly, that the story is the very journey the young man had to complete to become a self-conscious artist. This ties in perfectly with Jonathan Coe's comment in his introduction to *The Unfortunates*: "The primary task of the novel as he saw it, was to interrogate itself, to draw attention to its own artifice, and any writers who saw it merely as a vehicle of linear story telling were kidding themselves" (Coe, VI). I maintain that he does the same thing in "Sheela-Na-Gig" but with different means; instead of challenging the linearity of the narrative he explores the origin of the writing impulse itself, and he does so by focusing on the transition from voice to gaze as implemented in the central episode of the living *sheela-na-gig*.
- 20 In the light of the metafictional problematics that structures the short story, various episodes take on new meaning. For instance, the long circuitous intertextual excursus on architecture turns out to have hitherto unperceived implications, if we connect it with what the main character in *Albert Angelo*, a would-be architect too, has to say about it:
- fuck all this lying look what im really trying to write about is writing not all this stuff about architecture trying to say something about writing about my writing im my hero though what a useless appellation my first character then im trying to say something about me through him albert an architect when whats the point in covering up covering up covering over pretending pretending I can say anything through him that is anything that I would be interested in saying ... (Johnson, 167)
- 21 The story's aesthetic concerns with the church, the statuary in general and the *sheela-na-gig* in particular, oppose the cold perpendicular style of Gloucester Cathedral to the warm Romanesque of Kilpeck church, which the narrator obviously favours because it has not relinquished the traces of the archaic impulses that were at the origin of their creation. Beneath the Romanesque, he perceives the Celtic elements (for instance in the holy-water stoup) that bear evidence of the creative impulse that was at their origin, just like the vision of the *sheela-na-gig* reactivates the archaic sexual forces that urge him to write. In other words the solid stone representation of the *sheela-na-gig* paves the way for the appearance of the living one. Life is no longer severed from its deeper roots, so that he is able to write about it, and what prevents the architecture of the story from imitating the cold formality of the gothic is that it resorts to Romanesque ingredients that accommodate alterity in the guise of pagan architectural elements (the bestiary with the heads of fantastic and grotesque beasts (93), the incongruous stylized crocodiles, (94), the corbel with the *sheela-na-gig* (95), with the paradoxical result that the statues of the apostles and the cross in the church appear to him as alien to the place. As a consequence, it can be argued that the narrator's comments on the church: "I felt oddly that the style and matter of the carving were pre-Christian, even anti-



Christian" (93), could well apply to the short story if we substitute the word story for the word carving.

- 22 As a re-enactment of the mythological scene in which Baubô lifts her garments to expose her vulva in front of Demeter in order to put an end to her grieving and to restore her fecundity, the scene with the hitchhiker acquires new resonances. Indeed, without taking part in the debate of deciding how the myth should be interpreted, what remains immutable is the association of the gesture with the notion of joy and fertility. Probably following Graves, Johnson links the myth to procreation: "But what the *sheela-na-gig* stands for is constant for all ages, eternal and universal: for if there were no death there would be no need of procreation. The two are inseparable." (95-96) By so doing, he re-focuses the story on the problematic of artistic creation because it is precisely that incident that is the seminal centre, we could almost say the omphalos of the story we are reading, as he openly acknowledges: "But it has taken me more than two years to bring *myself*<sup>9</sup> to write it down." (101) Significantly enough, the presence of the reflexive pronoun "*myself*" echoes the repetition of the same signifier in his account of his first OBE experience: "I remember the above-*myself* thinking [...] Eventually I found *myself* following [...] Gradually *myself* came down, ..." (97), thus establishing a direct link with the question of becoming a writer.
- 23 However, the self in question is clearly presented as separate, out of control and therefore connected with unconscious desires. In other words, the implication of the OBE experience is that the artist needs to confront alterity within himself if he wants to be able to write. In this respect, it appears that when the narrator asserts: "It was as though someone else was using my body, and I was above (always above), dispassionately regarding this person's action." (96), there is no doubt that the person who thus overshadows him is a figure of the double in the guise of the writer in him, from whom he needs to distance himself, so as to fend off<sup>10</sup> the overwhelming effect of affects that threaten him when faced with a potentially traumatic situation.
- 24 What remains to be established now is how such an encounter with alterity is accomplished by the vision of the living *sheela-na-gig*. This singular form of negotiation is achieved by relying on the well-known split<sup>11</sup> between eye and gaze that is inherent in the scopic drive, and which is nothing other than a subjective division taking place in the field of vision, because when someone looks at an object, the object is always already looking back at him/her. However this Other gaze is issued from a point that he/her cannot see, hence the interference of the dimension of alterity. In the case of the narrator it is the formal analogy between the eye and the vulva that is the key to the conversion. Indeed, what he sees is not so much female genitals as his own gaze staring back at him. It is exactly as if the vulva had turned into an eye. In such a situation of obscene exhibition of the female genitalia, the effect that is supposedly produced is one of terror, as the story of Medusa shows. In some variants of the myth, Baubô assumes the guise of Gorgô and petrifies the subject. Nothing of the kind happens in Johnson's story because, in the realm of art, the function of the painting, here the text, is to civilize, to tame the gaze and produce enjoyment. It is not surprising that throughout the story, through the manner of repetition of his symptom that is the succession of OBEs and of encounters<sup>12</sup> with the *sheel-na-gig*,<sup>13</sup> the young man experiences a strong feeling of elation which is closer to liberation and release than to petrification. No such deadly paralysis occurs here on account of the fact that the vulva/eye that stares him in the face is, after all, not an eye but a mouth, the shadowy mouth, the "bouche

d'ombre" of the poet, the very *fons et origo* of his creation, as the homage paid to the figure of his Muse (here taking the shape of his wife) as the end of the story unmistakably suggests - a muse who seems to know him better than he does. Thus he confesses: "To Rhiain I tell everything. She listens and understands and knows. She smiles in her way, the pointed Welsh face full of love for me and our son." (101) In the light of Giorgio Agamben's exploration of the theological significance of nakedness and his argument that nudity is to be associated with the spiritual act defined by the Scriptures as an opening of the eye central to the concept of human nature confronted with the question of Grace, it stands to reason that the hitch-hiker's exposition of her most intimate nudity is but an appeal to recover a state of primitive innocence able to restore the creative impulse through the agency of such a highly original muse figure.

- 25 The metamorphosis of the restless young man into a self-conscious writer can be construed as the very manner in which an artist responds to his symptom. If the response of the subject to his symptom goes by the name of *sinthom*<sup>14</sup>, I would like to conclude by arguing that the transformation of the obscene eye into a mouth is in fact a form of literary anamorphosis, a sort of *sinthomatization* of the young man's desire to write and it amounts to nothing else than a textual voice, the self-conscious writer being able to accommodate the textual voice in his own text.
- 26 That the young narrator stands in for Johnson himself is highly probable, since Jonathan Coe does mention in his biography that just before writing the story he went through a phase and: "It all started to get on top of him and he lapsed, temporarily, into a kind of paralysed, introverted despair." (Coe, 37) The writing of the story, thanks to the workings of the textual voice, through anamorphosis, is therefore the *sinthom* that pacified his symptom. From that angle, the feeling of relief that springs from the conclusion of the story can be said to rise less from his inscription in a process of symbolic filiation - as he acquires a new father and produces a son, and so becomes adopted by the Welsh tradition - than from the satisfaction of having produced a truly literary text, even if it is not the best piece he ever wrote.
- 27 If, as Johnson believes, the function of art is to celebrate the accidental, then such a celebration does take place in the story. It is achieved tongue-in-cheek by the narrator through the medium of the textual voice in the story. Its *modus operandi* consists in resorting to the device of anamorphosis in order to make possible the transformation of the potentially frightening image of the vulva into an eye and then into a mouth. With a tinge of bawdy irony the accidental encounter with the *sheela-na-gig* is thus turned into a meeting of the young man with his own fate.

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## NOTES

1. In his biography entitled : *Like a Fiery Elephant: The Story of B. S. Johnson*, p. 18
2. Indeed, in the excerpt of his novel *Trawl* the narrator fittingly concludes: "..., always start with I ... one always starts with I ... And ends with I." (p. 183)
3. See *Like a Fiery Elephant*, p. 91 for a detailed account.
4. This is the first occurrence in the story of the name of the girl who became his wife.
5. Etymologically: from *ad cadere*: to fall.
6. See his film: *Fat Man on a Beach*. Quoted by Jonathan Coe in his biography: *Like a Fiery Elephant*, p. 2
7. *Like a Fiery Elephant*, p. 37
8. A hypothesis textually supported by the variations on the verb "to know" which is frequently associated with the verb "to feel" in order to suggest that there is nothing rational in the process, but rather an emotional basis not devoid of unconscious implications specially when this knowledge concerns the *sheela-na-gig*.  
p.94: I felt I knew what it was really. (the holy water stoup)  
p.95: I felt I knew exactly what kind of corbel had been childishly effaced. (the *sheela-na-gig*)  
p.96: I felt I knew why the despoilers had left this one alone. (the *sheela-na-gig*)
9. From now on the italics are mine.
10. This is indeed suggested by the cropping up of the adverb "dispassionately" at the heart of his statement.
11. An in-depth analysis of the process can be found in Lacan: *Séminaire XI, Part 2*, pp. 64-108.
12. Let us not forget that three successive encounters take place during the trip: in the monograph, in the church and ultimately in the flesh.
13. If the *sheela-na-gig* is indeed an avatar of the mythical figure of Baubô as some maintain, then it ties in perfectly with my reading of the story since Baubô is sometimes associated with the obscene songs in iambic meters that were sung at Eleusis. Their function was to relieve the emotional tension the ceremonies generated. The story performs the same task for the narrator/writer.
14. It should be noted that whereas the subject's symptoms carry a meaning, his *sinthom* does not, in the likeness of the textual voice that must remain meaningless, for the simple reason that it is merely an operator.

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## ABSTRACTS

La nouvelle peu connue de B.S. Johnson doit son titre à des statues représentant la figure de Baubô re-visitée par la tradition celtique et survivant presque en fraude dans la statuaire catholique. Elle est structurée par schéma de quête traditionnel dont le modèle actantiel de Greimas permet de saisir tous les enjeux apparents. L'histoire est celle d'un jeune homme au devenir incertain qui, au cours d'un trajet, s'arrête dans l'église romane de Kilpeck, célèbre pour sa statuaire. Il y découvre une sculpture de sheela-na-gig qui prendra mystérieusement vie à la fin de son périple lorsqu'une auto-stoppeuse se dénude dans les phares de son véhicule. Pourtant, au-delà de la sexualisation systématique du récit, la nouvelle met en scène la naissance d'un écrivain par le biais d'un traitement de la pulsion scopique faisant intervenir la schize de l'œil et du regard pour débloquer le champ de la parole et ainsi libérer la pulsion créatrice de l'écrivain.

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