

“I could still see her in my mind’s eye”: Water and  
Maternal Imagery in Uwe Johnson’s *Anniversaries: From  
the Life of Gesine Cresspahl*

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Your novel is a document, a lasting one, for the  
entire post-Hitler era. Indeed, you have por-  
trayed this past accurately and, even more im-  
probable, you have portrayed it convincingly.

Hannah Arendt to Uwe Johnson<sup>1</sup>

Looming within the writings of postwar German authors is the un-  
settling question of “generation.” The publications of the *Gruppe  
47*—a group founded in 1947 with the express purpose of clear-  
ing German language and literature from the debris of National  
Socialism—exhibit, as Sigrid Weigel points out, a “concentration of  
metaphors borrowed from the realm of sexuality and nature [with]  
words such as rebirth, renewal, radical rebuilding” (274).<sup>2</sup> Along  
with this emphasis on fertility and new beginnings, I would add,  
goes a disavowal of the mother figure. Masculine prowess in the  
form of “creation” is celebrated at the expense of the maternal con-  
nection, whose loss remains un-mourned. This, at least, is how it  
appears in texts such as Hans Erich Nossack’s apocalyptic rendering  
of the Hamburg fire bombing, *The End* (1948), where the mother  
is simply absent: “There once was a creature that was not born of  
a mother. A fist struck it naked into the world” (22). Or in Günter  
Grass’s paradigmatic postwar classic, *The Tin Drum* (1959), where  
the mother’s body is discarded, as the protagonist finds his “desire  
to return to the womb” thwarted because “the midwife had already  
cut my umbilical cord. There was nothing more to be done” (49).

In contrast, Uwe Johnson, whose tetralogy *Anniversaries: From the Life of Gesine Cresspahl* (1970-1973) I will discuss, seems unusual among his contemporaries.<sup>3</sup> Johnson features the maternal figure as a way of remembering and looking back—a connection to the past that suffuses his writing with a sense of impotence as well as mourning.

Known in Germany as an experimental avant-garde writer, Johnson, who died in 1984, was born in 1934, and thus lived under National Socialism as a child. *Anniversaries*, his most extensive work, deals with German history and remembrance through the eyes of four generations of women: great-grandmother, grandmother, mother, and daughter. It is written from the first-person viewpoint of a partly autobiographical female narrator-protagonist, Gesine Cresspahl, a mother who speaks about her own mother, Lisbeth, as well as her grandmother, Hilde, to her daughter, Marie. While Lisbeth and Hilde are linked to the era of National Socialism, Marie represents the next generation in New York, where Gesine has moved. Gesine's predicament as an immigrant is to be haunted by the German past: "I belong to a nation of people that has slaughtered another group of people" (*Jahrestage* 209-10). This past is specifically associated with her mother Lisbeth who, the reader learns, has committed suicide in response to witnessing the events of the November 9, 1938 pogrom ("*Reichskristallnacht*"). However, it is not primarily Lisbeth's suicide, but rather her severe neglect of her daughter that shapes Gesine's consciousness throughout the book: at age four, she remembers, she nearly drowned in a rain barrel while her mother watched passively. Hence, when the grown-up Gesine ends up writing to the psychoanalyst Alexander Mitscherlich, co-author of the popular *The Inability to Mourn* (1967), to find out why she continues to be haunted by the voices of the dead, his reply is that "it all began with the mother" (*Jahrestage* 1670).<sup>4</sup>

Given that the mother is essentially linked to the central traumatic incident of near-drowning in Gesine's life, my essay focuses on the metaphorical element of water, which is featured throughout the text.<sup>5</sup> As I demonstrate, the "blurring" of boundaries that occurs both stylistically and on the level of the story is intrinsically connected to the desire for fusion with the maternal figure—a symbiotic fusion that entails the dissolution of ego boundaries. The fantasy

of such merging seems connected, in turn, to the experience of a generation that is, as Susan Suleiman puts it, “old enough to remember but too young to understand” (283).<sup>6</sup> Suleiman calls this the “1.5 generation,” and although the assignment of numerical values may seem odd, I find her notion of an “in-between” generation helpful in thinking beyond the usual categories of “first/second” generations. Suleiman’s concept highlights the ambivalent subject position of children who lack, in her words, “the capacity to think hypothetically, to use abstract words appropriately and with understanding, as well as a vocabulary to name the experience” (288). This, in turn, accounts for the way in which Johnson portrays Gesine’s “blurred” perception—recalling, in Suleiman’s terms, the “messiness” of the 1.5 generation’s historical experience. Suleiman primarily refers to Holocaust survivors, but she includes all of those who were “too young to have had an adult understanding of what was happening ... but old enough to have *been there* during the Nazi persecution of the Jews,” because their “shared experience is that of premature bewilderment and helplessness” (277). Johnson was ten at the end of World War II, and Suleiman states: “Children under the age of eleven have a different way of understanding what is happening to them from those who are older” (282). My analysis of Johnson’s text is informed by this concept of an “in-between” generation—one whose ambivalent experience may account, in turn, for the peculiar emphasis on the mother figure.

Johnson scholars, such as Norbert Mecklenburg and Michael Hofmann, have interpreted the complex formal characteristics of *Anniversaries* as part of the difficulty of writing after Auschwitz. Hofmann insists that “the narrative structure of the text can only be understood if related to the question of how ... Auschwitz affects ... non-Jewish German writers” (193). And Mecklenburg identifies a “technique of creating blank spaces” (*Aussparungstechnik*) to conclude that Johnson’s “oeuvre is downright secretive” (276). Such readings seem to highlight the supposed impossibility of representation, along the lines of Theodor W. Adorno’s dictum that “writing poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric” (19). Hofmann states, for example, that Johnson is “dealing with a horror that actually escapes representation” (193). I would argue that Johnson’s writing is representational and also gendered. Representation and its “absence” are

structured in terms of cultural imagery, here: the maternal figure, whose literal or figurative presence—in the form of water—circumscribes and renders the “horror” legible.

My approach is based on the fact that the frequently noted omnipresence of water—an element that transgresses boundaries and seeps through spaces that appear hermetically sealed—is intrinsically connected to the maternal in *Anniversaries*. Water, I suggest, functions as metaphorical element to convey the conflicted feelings caused by an ambivalent relationship to the mother; which I see as representing, on a more abstract, allegorical level, the author’s relationship to German history. Johnson’s text, as I propose from a feminist-psychoanalytic point of view, conveys the sense of loss and impotence someone of his generation might have felt. And it does so by resorting to the maternal as a space where such feelings can be negotiated.

I. Water, in spite of the initial trauma of drowning, is a source of comfort for Gesine. She is attracted to swimming in bodies of water throughout *Anniversaries*—at the New Jersey shore, a midtown Manhattan swimming pool, an upstate New York lake, etc. And water suffuses the text in all shapes and forms: as mist, steam, rain and ice; and as a fire extinguisher for the house burning across the street when, one day, Marie looks out the window. Starting with the novel’s famous opening paragraph, whose long sentences and invocation of memory are reminiscent of Proust, water becomes the element that transports Gesine into the past. When she swims at the Jersey Shore, she remembers the Baltic Sea of her childhood: “Beyond the surf, the waves tug at the swimmer, pulling her on outstretched hands over their backs. The wind is only a flutter, with a wind as slack as this the Baltic had petered out in a ripple. The word for the short waves of the Baltic was choppy” (*Anniversaries* 3). Here water connects different time periods; the shift from present to past tense occurs almost imperceptibly, in the middle of a sentence—the two bodies of water seem to merge into one another.

In Johnson’s detailed, photographic descriptions of reality, water also functions to create a verbal *trompe l’oeil*. When Gesine gazes out of her window on Riverside Drive, she sees the other side of the Hudson and is reminded of the rural landscape of her homeland in

Northern Germany, near the Baltic Sea: “In winter the steep New Jersey shore is visible through the bare branches, and the breadth of the river, the hazy air, can blur the architectural wasteland on the other side to an illusion of unspoiled countryside, to a vision of spaciousness and distance” (*Anniversaries* 20). Here, the boundaries between two landscapes are blurred through Gesine’s memory. And, if one considers the photographs by Johnson’s childhood friend Heinz Lehmbäcker, of the landscape near the Baltic Sea where they grew up, a “blurriness” in the environment itself was part of Johnson’s childhood surroundings. The photographs depict landscapes where one cannot seem to tell clearly where the coast ends and the sea begins, or where the ocean merges with the horizon. The coastal region, called *Mecklenburger Seenplatte*, is portrayed with its many rivers and lakes, where water courses through the landscape like arteries, so that one gets the impression that firm ground could be treacherous, inevitably appearing to merge with watery surfaces.

In fact, Johnson, who was expelled from the German Democratic Republic, seems to have had a life-long need to live in places that would remind him of the lost landscape of his childhood.<sup>7</sup> Gary Baker describes how

[i]n 1974 the Johnsons moved to Sheerness, England, on the isle of Sheppey. The top floor of the house ... extended over the imposing breakwater to offer a view of the mouth of the Thames River where it flowed to the English Channel.... Johnson died ... in the upstairs part of his house that overlooked the mouth of the Thames. (8)

The author died in his study, where he had covered an entire wall with adjoining topographical maps of the *Mecklenburger Seenplatte*—ostensibly to serve as reference for the fictitious “Jerichow” in *Anniversaries*.<sup>8</sup> Among the many books on Mecklenburg’s history, folk customs, and geography Johnson had collected is Theodor Hurtig’s *Physische Geographie von Mecklenburg*, which describes this area as one still frequently flooded. It explains how, when land emerged during the ice age, the boundaries between water and land continued to shift, resulting in a plateau of hundreds of interconnected lakes. Interestingly, according to Hurtig, “when the coast of Mecklenburg transformed itself into a landmass, the ocean on its coast

consisted, in fact, of ‘drowned’ land” (99). Thus the very landscape of Johnson’s childhood suggests instability as well as fusion with the greater body of the Baltic Sea.

Water, throughout *Anniversaries*, also functions to connect and disconnect the imaginary landscapes of past and present. Johnson’s transitions often have a “blurred” quality, as if the same liquid had been poured over two photographs. When Gesine reads the *New York Times*, for example, Johnson connects the quote (from actual clippings he collected while living in New York), with the story of the Cresspahl family to create a link between documentary, mediated reality and the fictionalized story of Gesine’s childhood. The effect is a subtle blending of reported fact and personal memory:

“It looks like fall is really here,” said a gas station proprietor in Upper Montclair. “I don’t know how many more winters I can stand.”© [sic] Cresspahl did not get very old. Time and again the soft white-gray light over the brilliant green squadron of trees, where the marshes used to be. He couldn’t see that well anymore. (*Anniversaries* 85)

Here Johnson quotes from the *New York Times*, a source whose authenticity he emphasizes by inserting the copyright sign; and juxtaposes it to his own fictitious narrative about the Cresspahl family. However, in spite of these vastly divergent types of texts, as well as differing geographical and historical contexts, there is thematic continuity: the sudden shift from the anonymous American gas station proprietor to Gesine’s German father, Heinrich, is smoothed over by the fact that both sequences refer to the universal experiences of aging and the passing of the seasons. Thus, although Johnson works with definitive “cuts” (here the copyright symbol), they become softened—or blurred—by the way in which he creates continuity between images.

Mecklenburg compares the transitional passages in *Anniversaries* to the cinematic technique of “fade and dissolve,” where one image gradually fades into another—rather than the abrupt “cut” employed in *montage*; and he argues that the effect of this technique is to define the contours of each separate image more clearly (338). I would add, however, that an initial “blurring” is also always part of this process; and that the merging of vastly discrepant spaces and

timeframes from Gesine's subjective point of view is essential to Johnson's technique.

In terms of geographical spaces, water, with its properties of "dissolving" and "transgressing" boundaries, also challenges the division of territories. See for example Gesine's recollection of national borders: "The child I once was swam in the Baltic Sea ... along the marine borderline of Mecklenburg, once a province belonging to the German Reich, now coastal region of the German Socialist State" (*Anniversaries* 905). Here, spaces are politically reorganized, yet the body of water remains the same. On the other hand, entire bodies of water may appear, confusing for a child, as either accessible or forbidden:

[I] swam at home in the military pool, forgotten by the German Airforce and the Red Army.... Never: in the Dassow Lake, only twelve kilometers from the back door of my father's house and unreachable, its banks the demarcation line, national border, its water: British Zone, Federal Republic of Germany, the West. (*Anniversaries* 906)

In both cases, the natural element of water is the same, and there is no rationale for the child as to why borders should be drawn in the first place.

Ultimately, the reader must trace the significance of water to Gesine's memory of her mother. Their initial separation is ritualized in Gesine's baptismal ceremony, for which Lisbeth chose the Psalm 71.6 from the Bible: "By thee I have been holden up from the womb! Thee art he that took me out of my mother's bowels." The implication is release from the prison of the womb and this foreshadows a more violent separation, which culminates in a kind of "rebirth."<sup>9</sup> In what is arguably the most traumatic scene of the book, four-year old Gesine nearly drowns in a rain barrel while her mother stands by and watches. Here seems to be the key for the "blurriness" of perception Gesine continues to experience throughout her life. The near-drowning involves different kinds of seeing: that of the mother seeing her daughter fall into the rain barrel; and that of Gesine seeing her mother stand there, first in reality, then "in her mind's eye," once she is submerged under water. The incident, known as the "*Regentonnengeschichte*" 'rain barrel story' is mentioned early on in the

novel, yet Gesine is reluctant to recall it until her daughter, Marie, presses her to tell. Marie prompts with leading questions and Gesine recounts how it all began with her wanting to clamber on top of the rain barrel to play with the cat, which was resting on the window sill:

“But first you had to climb up onto the lid to get level with the cat’s head and then you fell into the water, Gesine!”

“Just as you say.”

“And your mother, your mother stood looking on?”

“Yes. No. If I don’t focus my thoughts, I can see her. Then she’s standing outside the back door, drying her hands on her apron, wringing her hands, one can be the other. She watches me like a grownup being amused at a childish prank, waiting to see what happens; she watches me quite solemnly, approvingly, as if she were confident I’d do the right thing. When I try to force my memory, I can’t see her.”

“And she didn’t move.”

“By that time I was below the surface. I could still see her in my mind’s eye; then I realized that in the round shaft of the barrel only the sky was visible.” (*Anniversaries* 406)

“Seeing” is central here, yet it is a “blurry” kind of seeing, as it is associated with water. What Gesine sees before the sky is the image of her mother “looking on.” The two ways of looking create tension between reality and fantasy: the reader does not learn whether the mother is drying or wringing her hands, as the memory is blurred—hence also not whether Lisbeth is transfixed on the spot by shock, or whether she is a knowing perpetrator (Johnson never provides the information as to who took the lid off the rain barrel). What matters is Gesine’s perception during the experience. Since she cannot interpret her mother’s gesture, it is her immediate vision that shapes her memory. Gesine can see her mother, but only “in her mind’s eye.” Already under water, she continues to “see,” so that even though she is already in another space, the past continues to be mentally present.

I believe it is here that we can appreciate the complicated epistemology of the 1.5 generation. Gesine’s imaginary retention of her actual vision in the rain barrel incident seems paradigmatic for the

way reality changes into memory and back, without clear definition. It may not come as a surprise that Gesine feels “haunted” by the past. Throughout the book, as she is trying to live in the present while remembering (she relates the history of her family to her daughter on a daily basis) what happened in Germany, she is depressed and feels invaded by the voices of the dead (which are printed in italics). When, near the end, she writes to the psychoanalyst Mitscherlich—as Johnson himself did—to find out what is wrong with her, his response that it “all began with the mother” includes the commentary that Gesine’s mother “has removed herself from the world” (*Jahrestage* 1670). The word Mitscherlich uses in the original is the adjective “*verrückt*,” which means, colloquially, to be insane. However, he uses it as a verb to indicate that Lisbeth has “re-moved” herself also in her decision to end her life—as the reader knows, she has committed suicide. “*Rücken*” means to move and “*ver-rücken*” to move something to a place where it does not belong. Moreover, Gesine’s mother has already “re-moved” herself from the world of sanity when deciding to give birth to Gesine in Nazi Germany. Lisbeth, having first moved to England with her husband and Gesine’s future father Heinrich, insists on returning to her homeland to give birth to Gesine in the presence of her mother, Hilde. Even though Lisbeth knows that the National Socialists had just come into power, and Heinrich (who turns out to be a *Mitläufer*, or “fellow traveler”) warns her of becoming guilty by association, she decides in favor of German “madness.” It becomes synonymous with her own, increasingly evident, mental illness: she tries to kill herself twice and deliberately withholds food from the child Gesine in an attempt to starve her to death.

Lisbeth’s behavior is motivated by the idea of “rescuing” herself and her child from the “sins” of the Nazis. Interestingly, a reversal of this impulse, namely of wanting to “rescue” one’s parents, has been identified by those who have examined second-generation Germans (and Johnson is usually grouped under this rubric). According to historian Dagmar Herzog, who cites psychoanalyst Reimut Reiche, second-generation Germans would have negotiated their “unbearable grief, rage, and guilt over the Holocaust” by both blaming their parents and wanting to “rescue the parents’ honor and innocence” (Herzog 178-79). This ambivalence, which entails both wanting to

sever and seeking to maintain the connection to one's parents, is heightened, I would argue (attributing this to his having been so young), in Johnson's depiction of a mother-daughter relationship. As he suggests in *Anniversaries*, it is the mother, not the father, who represents the origin of Gesine's depression. One might argue, from a feminist point of view, that he scapegoats the female figure, yet the complexity with which he portrays Gesine's relationship to her mother indicates that the maternal body functions as the preferred site to negotiate ambivalent emotions about the previous generation. And the intimacy of a same-sex, female-female relationship underscores the difficulty of extricating oneself from attachment to one's parents.

Significantly, Johnson portrays the mother, Lisbeth, as in-between "victim" and "perpetrator." She victimizes Gesine by letting her nearly drown (and, later, trying to starve her), because she sees herself as the "victim" of National Socialism. The effect of this is that it becomes impossible for the reader to take the moral high ground, i.e., "judge" the mother's behavior and motives—she is simply insane. And although Lisbeth is a negative figure, her suffering from this insanity forecloses what would be a more simplified, moralizing discourse of assigning blame.<sup>10</sup> Through the narrator-protagonist's subjective, ambivalent portrayal of her mother, Johnson thus conveys the more complicated feelings of someone both attached to and ashamed of his parents.<sup>11</sup>

This paradigm of "blurred" boundaries on both the level of the story and stylistically, through the use of water, extends to the very last phrase of *Anniversaries*: "she, the child I was." Gesine is now in her thirties, and the past tense in "the child I was" emphasizes temporal distance: still, the split between "she" and "I" suggests that, on some level, Gesine may still be a "child." The phrase indicates that Gesine's self is split between past and present (as evident throughout the novel), and between inhabiting and distancing herself from herself. "She" is the objectified subject of a fictional story, a character in a novel created by an omniscient narrator; whereas "I" is the autobiographical subject, who claims to report authentic experiences. It is a split reminiscent of that between what Gesine sees versus what she remembers (or retains "in her mind's eye," when under water). Like the past that haunts her, the past associated with her mother is

something she wants to hold on to, yet must let go of.

It is up to Gesine's daughter, Marie, to create a clearer picture. She prompts her mother to pass judgment on her grandmother, but this seems difficult:

"[Your mother] wanted to kill you!"

"She wanted to pass me on, Marie."

"She must've hated you."

"It wouldn't have taken long, the drowning."

"But she wanted to get rid of you!"

"Whoever loves his child," Marie, "will..." She would have known the child was safe, far removed from guilt and the acquiring of guilt. And that would have been the greatest of all her sacrifices.

"You're trying to say that she loved you."

"That's what I'm trying to say." (*Anniversaries* 407)

Gesine, as Colin Riordan observes, "needs to rationalize the behavior of a mother who was capable of attempted infanticide" (216). She struggles with a form of primitive black/white thinking that attests to both her young age at the time the rain barrel incident, and to the actual madness of her mother she experienced—and which I would see as an allegorical representation of the overall madness of Nazi Germany. Gesine's reversal of "love" and "hate" as a way of rescuing her mother from blame is indicative of her—and, presumably, the author's own—inability to judge what happened. In this regard, Mecklenburg calls Johnson's concept of mourning in *Anniversaries* "aporetic, not therapeutic" (322). He argues, with respect to Mitscherlich's use of the Freudian concept of working through (*durcharbeiten*), that Gesine is incapable of working through the past. Similarly, Christian Elben, who discusses *Anniversaries* from the perspective of trauma theory, maintains that for Gesine, closure remains impossible (258). I would add that because of her young age at the time, her perception must remain, by definition, "blurred," making it impossible to clarify her memory, let alone come to terms with it. Or, as Riordan puts it succinctly, "the mental image of her mother watching the four-year old about to drown is the very crux of Gesine's need to recreate the past" (216).

II. I will now turn to Gesine's mother, Lisbeth. The associative links between "water" and "mother" point to a deeper structure that, as I will show, encompasses a desire for maternal symbiosis. To begin with, Lisbeth's suicide by means of fire—the opposite of her daughter's affinity for water—is triggered by the events of the November 9, 1938 pogrom, when the Nazi Germans burned synagogues and looted Jewish stores.<sup>12</sup> Before she goes home to end her life, Lisbeth witnesses the following scene involving her Jewish neighbors, the Tannebaums. It is a scene that presents a nearly iconic image of a mother-daughter couple:

Frieda Tannebaum emerged from the store, slowly, without being pushed from behind. In her arms she carried her oldest child [and then] stood with her back to the wall.... The child was Marie Tannebaum, aged eight, an unruly, withdrawn girl.... She had long black braids, which now hung almost to the ground. When she became too heavy, Frieda Tannebaum, with the child in her arms, slid to the ground, obediently keeping her back to the wall, and collapsed over her. She was still holding her as if the child were merely asleep and not to be wakened. (*Anniversaries* 472)<sup>13</sup>

The image of the mother holding her dead child suggests a love beyond death, an intimate tie between mother and daughter that both echoes and comments upon the tie between Lisbeth and Gesine. Although the victims are Jewish, what the reader perceives—through Lisbeth's eyes—resembles a Pietà, a "representation of the Virgin Mary mourning over the dead body of Christ."<sup>14</sup> Ironically, it is the child who is named Marie, so that the Christ Mother herself becomes the victim. Johnson resurrects her by making Gesine's daughter, Marie, her namesake. Lisbeth, after having witnessed this scene, is prompted to offer herself as a sacrifice, presumably in her mind, to redeem the death of the Jewish child. A fanatic Christian, she does not realize that by doing so, she competes with the suffering of the Jewish victims in a way that Dominick LaCapra would call false empathy, where "[i]t is dubious to identify with the victim to the point of making oneself a surrogate victim" (78).

Johnson, as author, does not make this mistake: Lisbeth is portrayed as mentally ill and it is clear that her death has no effect other

than to victimize Gesine who, now motherless, becomes a “survivor.” Axel Dunker has proposed, with reference to Primo Levi’s *Survival in Auschwitz* (1958), that Gesine’s (and thus Johnson’s) “survivor’s guilt”—her having survived being Lisbeth’s daughter—is structurally equivalent to the survivor’s guilt experienced by victims of concentration camps. He argues that by constructing this particular analogy, Johnson is able to draw attention to an “absence” in the text, of those who were murdered during the Holocaust (Dunker 165). Whether or not one sees Lisbeth as the “victim” of National Socialism she felt herself to be (in solidarity with those whose murder she witnessed), one can certainly agree with Dunker that she is a “perpetrator” in Gesine’s life. In that sense, Johnson depicts Lisbeth’s suicide as a perversion of the mother-child relationship between Frieda and Marie Tannebaum, which is seen as symbiotic (they appear as one).

In fact, her suicide is a direct response to what she has just witnessed. Dunker proposes that *Anniversaries* draws constant analogies to the suffering of Holocaust victims because “the non-Jewish author Johnson can only approach the victims by constructing similarities for their suffering and dying” (166). He points out that Jewish victims in *Anniversaries* appear only marginally, and that their “presence” only serves to indicate the traces of a much greater, overall “absence.” Indeed, although some of the characters in *Anniversaries* are modeled after survivors Johnson met in New York, they rarely amount to the level of fully fleshed-out personalities.<sup>15</sup> The Pietà-like image of Frieda and Marie Tannebaum is one of the rare moments at which Jewish suffering is featured, yet it only functions to trigger Lisbeth’s own death.

Having witnessed the murder of Marie Tannebaum, Lisbeth goes home, locks the door, throws away the key, ties herself up, and sets the house on fire. Given that there was no note at the scene, and that the information presented to the reader derives only from the detective’s investigation (there is no omniscient narrator), the reader may be led to believe that this may have been a homicide, possibly by local Nazis, who wish to punish Lisbeth as a “troublemaker” (she slaps one of them in front of the Tannebaum store). While Johnson does not entirely foreclose the possibility of Lisbeth having been murdered, most readers seem to agree that this is a

suicide that only looks like a homicide, due to the violent way in which it was staged.

From a psycho-pathological point of view, suicides that look like homicides are conceptualized by object relations theorist Stuart S. Asch in terms of the presence of a “hidden executioner,” who exists in the victim’s mind and is made to appear as if present at the scene.<sup>16</sup> The similarities between one of the cases Asch mentions, and that of Lisbeth in *Anniversaries*, are striking. Asch writes about a young man who

shot himself on a rubber raft drifting out to the ocean ... He had connected a tube to the inflated portion of the raft, attached in such a way that it would be severed by the shot at the instant the bullet entered his heart. It seemed reasonable to assume that the intention was to be shot while he was a passive, helpless victim.... The shot was fatal but the hole in the raft inadvertently sealed itself over with a loose flap of rubber. Although the raft and its grisly burden were carried out to the ocean it did not sink.... The arrangements were so elaborate, the victim’s position so helpless, it was understandable that even the medical examiner’s office initially suspected murder rather than suicide. (55)

A similar mystery takes place in *Anniversaries*, where the investigating detective suspects murder, and the reader is left to wonder why the author has not made it more obvious that Lisbeth has, in fact, killed herself. If she was not murdered, she has gone to some lengths to make it appear as if she were. It seems reasonable to assume that hers was a suicide, based on the fact that she has tried to kill herself twice before—once by drowning and once through poison—but one wonders what possessed Johnson to turn her suicide into this particular kind of extreme pathological act. To assume that she was “murdered” by the Nazis would be in keeping with Lisbeth’s own, declared motives of wanting to free her self from guilt; and one might ask what difference it would make whether they had actually murdered her or “merely” driven her to commit suicide. Certainly in her mind, these two possibilities would amount to the same thing, but for the reader, the question remains.

While Johnson himself was probably not familiar with Asch’s essay, I would like to take the opportunity to point out some inter-

esting correlations between the two texts. Questions of guilt/innocence and victim/perpetrator are raised in both instances, and they seem too closely to resemble one another not to pursue this avenue. According to Asch, violent suicides that are staged to look like homicides involve, by definition, not one but two people: one's self and an imaginary "other," who is assigned, in the victim's mind, the role of an "executioner." In order for this scenario to be successful, the victim must stage her own position as "passive" (see the above case of the young man); and the death must seem involuntary. The message is that one has been killed, symbolically speaking, by another person, presumably someone (or a group of people) by whom one has been injured or violated in some form. Although this injury may be in the past and the victim alone in the present, Asch explains that acts of violent murder-suicides "become more understandable if one assumes as a constant the fantasy of two people being involved" (53). As he points out, the imaginary "executioner" is also one with whom the victim feels some kind of intimate connection, so that, paradoxically, a certain masochistic pleasure is involved. While the "other" certainly appears to be an antagonist, the perceived violation of one's personal integrity through that other perversely may lead to a desire for even greater intimacy—to the very point of self-annihilation.

That is one aspect of the pathology from which Lisbeth seems to suffer. The other, concurrent element is that of "shame," from which she wishes to be purified. The fantasy, according to Asch, is that of becoming "lovable once more" in the eyes of a greater "other," with whom one ultimately wishes to merge. In religiously motivated suicides this could be "God" or "the universe." The examples Asch provides include ritualistic suicides such as Japanese *seppuku* and "Buddhist monks who immolate themselves," where the subject imagines "becoming a part of God [and] entering the secret kingdom" (58). He uses these as evidence to show that not all suicides are accompanied by depression or psychosis—but that all suicides include what he calls a "fusion fantasy." Ultimately, he explains, it is "the parent of infancy, the ambivalently loved lost object," with whom the subject seeks to reunite and fuse. From an object relations point of view, this prime love object is the mother figure. Or, as Freudian psychoanalyst Janine Chasseguet-Smirgel puts it: whereas

the “father” symbolizes differentiation and separateness, the “mother” is associated with a cosmic sense of merging, where the self dissolves into the universe (92).

Lisbeth is described by Johnson as a Christian fanatic, who wants to be “purified” from the “sins” of the Nazis through dying a martyr’s death.<sup>17</sup> The question to what end this purification is supposed to take place remains, however, connected to the mother. If one follows Asch’s theory, Lisbeth’s type of suicide involves a fantasy where one is no longer at odds with oneself, and where one is loved unconditionally—the realm of the “maternal,” in other words. Lisbeth’s violent act of self-destruction can be interpreted in Asch’s terms as “a response to an *object loss* with an effort to enlist or force the *significant object* to act as an imagined executioner. Such suicides attempt *restitution* by establishing a regressed masochistic relationship” (Asch 51, my emphases). The “object loss” would refer to the mother, i.e., the part of oneself that is tied up with positive relationships to others; whereas the “significant object” would be the perpetrator with whom one desires intimacy, i.e., the Nazis. However, these two are intertwined in Asch’s theory—and they would thus amount to the same in Lisbeth’s “*verrückt*” mind.

Lisbeth is not directly a victim of the Nazis, but she believes she has become an unwilling participant of forces beyond her control, including her very own attempts to let her daughter drown or starve to death in order to “rescue” her along with herself. This may be why, as Asch states, “[s]hame is the main affect involved and the suicidal act seems to have the aim of exorcising the shameful part in order to regain face, be purified and once again be worthy of love” (57). The question of whose love one wants to be worthy of is paramount, as it is connected to the maternal figure. And the fact that it is both, the mother and the perpetrator, with whom one fantasizes an intimate connection makes this scenario doubly disturbing—one wonders if it is not Nazi Germany, after all, whom Lisbeth sees as a mother figure.

At least this would explain why, in *Anniversaries*, the maternal figure is clearly linked to the geographical territory of Germany on several levels. Lisbeth’s mother Hilde, as the reader knows, has offered a powerful incentive for Lisbeth to return to Nazi Germany, because she wants to give birth close to her (rather than in Eng-

land, where she had lived with Heinrich). In fact, on a discursive level, equating the German homeland (*Heimat*) with maternity is not new. As Elisabeth Galvan has shown, Nazi “blood and soil” (*Blut und Boden*) ideology was coded in maternal terms. Galvan cites Nazi propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels’s novel *Michael*, where race and soil are equated in terms of bloodlines that are passed on through the mother. Thus Johnson’s emphasis on the maternal figure in *Anniversaries* may be much more than just avoiding the male subject position because it is the one associated with that of the perpetrator, as Julia Hell has proposed. Instead, Johnson turns the mother into the perpetrator, while at the same time giving her the status of a victim.

As Lisbeth’s bizarre suicidal act shows, the complex and ambivalent experience of the 1.5 generation is conveyed through a mother figure that becomes a vehicle for what would exceed conventional paradigms of male/female, guilty/innocent, etc. The mother in Johnson’s text, I would maintain—in keeping with the notion of “blurred boundaries” I outlined in the beginning—is synonymous with “loss” as well as wanting to “hold on to” a past one cannot clearly “see.” Gesine tells Marie that she wishes she had been born and raised in England, yet she continually fantasizes about the Germany of her childhood. Still, unlike Lisbeth, who seems to have envisioned a “guilt-free” existence in the afterlife, Gesine does not romanticize the place she has lost. The following passage is typical of the way in which her “mind’s eye” alters reality without becoming sentimental:

On some mornings, the sun’s hot glimmer on the East River disappears in the shadow of the venetian blind, so that Long Island becomes a different island. The smog turns the crowded houses in Queens into a gently sloping landscape with meadows and views of a church spire in the shape of a bishop’s hat, which I once saw from the sea, while gybing the boat, covered from view by ripples in the ground and, finally, close enough to walk to across the steep coastline. I don’t want to go back there. (*Anniversaries* 900)

The seamlessness with which one image blends into another to “blur” Gesine’s vision is belied by the abruptness with which she, as

the perceiving subject, withdraws from the scene (“I don’t want to go back there”). Johnson has been compared to Proust because of his emphasis on time and memory, yet *Anniversaries* does away with any kind of nostalgia—any longing for one’s homeland one might feel inevitably reveals itself to be nothing but an illusion.<sup>18</sup> Gesine might wish herself back to a state of true longing for return, yet she is realistic enough to know that history has destroyed this possibility. As a member of the 1.5 generation, she is affected by her mother’s act of totalitarian self-destruction, and her own mode of existence becomes forever unmoored.

The very end of *Anniversaries* evokes a liminal space, the border between land and sea: “While walking by the sea, we happened to get into water. Pebbles knocking around our ankles. We held each other’s hands: a child; a man on his way to the realm of the dead” (*Jahrestage* 1703). The image is harsh, with “pebbles knocking around”; and the nature of the action unfocused (they “happened to get into water”). The “child” is Marie, the “man” Gesine’s former teacher; and they are in Denmark, where Gesine stops over on her way to Prague, for a business trip. There is no closure; and no location for Gesine to settle.<sup>19</sup> Unlike her mother, Gesine straddles the boundaries between seeing and remembering as if to perpetually relive the primal scene in the rain barrel, which means that she is forever caught in this predicament. As I have tried to show, this blurring of perceptual boundaries is indicative of a subjective state of mind that rings true for the experience of members of the 1.5 generation in general; but also for Johnson’s own particular subject position as a non-Jewish, male German author.

III. Just how personal the story of Gesine and Lisbeth is can be glimpsed from a passage marked by Johnson himself, in Mitscherlich’s *Der Kampf um die Erinnerung* (1975), now located at the Johnson Archive, which states that “at the origin of a mother’s impulse to murder her child might be her own repressed, infantile wish that her own mother might be killed.... At the same time, because her feelings are ambivalent, there is a great sense of guilt over having wished death upon her mother” (Mitscherlich 31). If Gesine Cresspahl is Johnson’s alter ego, as Annekatrin Klaus has also demonstrated, the relationship to the mother as an ambivalent love ob-

ject, with whom one wishes to fuse, but from whom one has had to separate, because of her murderous impulses, will inevitably result in feelings of guilt.<sup>20</sup> And, if one considers Lisbeth to be an allegorical representation of Germany, as I have, Johnson's own notorious sense of guilt for being German would here be represented through her.<sup>21</sup>

Still, there is a difference between fact and fiction: although large portions of *Anniversaries* can be identified as autobiographical, Wolfgang Engler writes that the depiction of Gesine's mother does not actually correspond to Johnson's real mother, who "was an ardent follower of the Nazis" (96). Apparently, Johnson created a Lisbeth opposed to Nazi policies, yet dangerously neglectful of her own child, to achieve the most ambivalent effect. From what we know, Johnson's relationship to his mother was conflicted. She raised him and his sister as a single mother, after his father was arrested and died in a Soviet prison camp. The arrest took place when Johnson's parents had returned to their former home, in what was now the Soviet sector. Having left the children with an uncle in the West, they had gone to find out whether their house was still standing. From this journey, Johnson's mother returned without his father. Hofmann suggests that, as a consequence, Johnson may have assumed—in his child's mind, as I would emphasize—that his mother was, in fact, responsible for his father's death.<sup>22</sup> It would thus not come as a surprise that Lisbeth is given the role of perpetrator in *Anniversaries* (rather, one might wonder why she is portrayed as, ostensibly, anti-fascist). It seems as if Johnson was trying to "rescue" the mother figure on some level; and that this "indeed, portrays accurately and convincingly," to reiterate Hannah Arendt's words, how those of the 1.5 generation remain attached to their parents, in Johnson's case: the mother.<sup>23</sup>

### Notes

1 Original German: "*Dies ist ein Dokument, und zwar ein gültiges, für diese ganze Nach-Hitler-Zeit. Diese Vergangenheit haben Sie in der Tat haltbar gemacht, und was vielleicht viel unwahrscheinlicher ist, Sie haben sie überzeugend gemacht*" in Fahlke, Eberhard and Thomas Wild, eds., *Hannah Arendt – Uwe Johnson: Der Briefwechsel 1967-1975* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2004), 66. All translations are mine, except when otherwise noted.

2 Weigel refers to authors of the Hitler Youth Generation, i.e., slightly older than Johnson. However, postwar German writers are often grouped together based on their participation in *Gruppe 47*.

3 Johnson, *Anniversaries: From the Life of Gesine Cresspahl*, trans. Leila Vennewitz (New York: Harcourt, 1974). Orig. *Jahrestage: Aus dem Leben von Gesine Cresspahl* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1970-83, rep. 2000), 4 vols. Unfortunately, the English translation is incomplete: it contains only the first two volumes, and these have been abbreviated. While I use the existing English translation (*Anniversaries*) throughout this article, I have included a couple of relevant passages from the longer, original German edition (*Jahrestage*) in my own translation.

4 An actual correspondence between Johnson and Mitscherlich is said to have existed, but cannot be located. On 27 May 1971, Johnson—who remained silent on this matter—had written to his publisher, Siegfried Unseld, as to whether he could contact Mitscherlich for a “long-distance” diagnosis of Gesine; and Unseld agreed to pass on this request. According to records in the Uwe Johnson Archive, Mitscherlich’s widow, Margarete, wrote a letter to the secretary of Johnson’s publisher, Burgel Zeeh, on 21 April 1983, to which Johnson replied on 23 May 1983. She may have asked what to do with this correspondence, which some scholars suggest Johnson may have wanted to be destroyed. Given his precarious mental state near the end of his life, he may have been afraid that this correspondence about “Gesine” would be interpreted as a diagnosis of his own person.

5 The significance of water in *Anniversaries* has been discussed—albeit without any reference to gender—by critics such as Severin Strasky.

6 The other categories Suleiman proposes, based on research by psychoanalysts and cognitive psychologists, are children “too young to remember” and “old enough to understand but too young to be responsible.”

7 For biographical information on Johnson’s life in the context of his work, see Mecklenburg. For an actual biography, see Bernd Neumann, *Uwe Johnson* (Hamburg, 1994)—note, however, that an updated biography by a team of authors is scheduled to appear. For autobiographical references in *Anniversaries*, see Holger Helbig, ed. *Johnsons ‘Jahrestage’: Der Kommentar* (1999). And for Johnson’s own autobiographical writings, see *Begleitumstände: Frankfurter Vorlesungen* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1980).

8 Johnson’s fictitious Jerichow was modeled after William Faulkner’s fictitious Yoknapatawpha County. The map of the *Mecklenburger Seenplatte* is located in the Uwe Johnson Archive in Frankfurt am Main.

9 Also see Johnson’s rendering of the Biblical myth of Jonah, “Jonas zum

Beispiel,” *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* 6 January 1962. Rep. in: Karsch *und andere Prosa* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1964).

10 For a discussion of Lisbeth and ethics, see Muhic.

11 For a discussion of Johnson’s use of a female persona in the context of the crisis of masculinity in postwar Germany, see Hell.

12 Elben has compared this to a form of “baptism by fire,” the element that “purifies.”

13 In Margarete von Trotta’s 2000 made-for-television version of *Anniversaries*, the scene is filmed slightly differently: here, the mother does not lean against the wall but holds her child free-standing, then walks slowly towards Jansen (the Nazi perpetrator), which increases the melodramatic effect. For a helpful comparison of book and film, see Hoesterey.

14 Webster’s Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary.

15 Kleihues has traced the real-life models for the fictitious Holocaust survivors Gesine meets in New York.

16 I thank Hilary J. Beattie for drawing my attention to this article, which is highly relevant to Lisbeth’s case in *Anniversaries*. Readers interested in the basic tenets of object relations theory should consult Freud’s essay on “Mourning and Melancholia” as well as Melanie Klein’s essay, “A Contribution to the Psychogenesis of Manic-Depressive States.” My own book, *Subject to Delusions: Narcissism, Modernism, Gender*, discusses these in detail. For lack of space, I cannot go into detail here.

17 Also see Bormuth.

18 Hoesterey has commented on this “postmodern” quality of Johnson’s writing in “Modern/Postmodern.”

19 This is also true for Johnson, who moved from East Germany to West Germany, to New York and, eventually, to England—he was never allowed to return to the Germany of his childhood.

20 Klaus’s *Weibliche Hauptfiguren im Werk Uwe Johnsons* is one of the few monographs within the vast body of Johnson criticism—most of it limited to a German-speaking context—that approach the author’s work from the point of view of gender studies.

21 There is an anecdote about Johnson going to a restaurant on Manhattan’s Upper West Side, which was mostly patronized by Jewish customers, and then leaving in the middle of the meal because he felt embarrassed about being German.

22 Hofmann writes: “[S]o erscheint doch die Hypothese plausibel, dass Uwe

Johnson ein Misstrauen gegenüber der Mutter entwickelte und ihr unbewusst ... zur Last legte, den Vater verraten oder aufgegeben zu haben" 'As a hypothesis, one might plausibly assume that Uwe Johnson developed a distrustfulness of his mother and unconsciously [...] accused her of having betrayed or abandoned his father' (19).

23 Judging from their correspondence, Arendt seems to have been somewhat of a mother figure for Johnson, at least intellectually and philosophically. They met in New York and maintained a long friendship.

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