

Personhood and Other Objects

The Figural Dispute with Philosophy

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Barbara Johnson's singular contribution to literary theory can hardly be summarized by a quick set of formulations. One writes sentences like the previous one because one has to begin somewhere, and one knows in advance that any "account" will be partial and, in that sense, fail. This volume has a complex task because, on the one hand, we are treating "Barbara Johnson" as the author and, on the other hand, Barbara Johnson as a teacher. So how, then, do we formulate our guiding questions? Are we asking who she was, who she was to us, to others (questions that could involve engaging in a contextualization of her formation and ours, the way she taught us, and perhaps the way she teaches us still)? Or are we asking some questions about the texts she wrote that brought her an unparalleled form of recognition as a literary critic and theorist? If we are asking about the texts, then it would seem we are putting the person aside. Yet oddly and felicitously, we find that Barbara Johnson's texts, including many that appear in this volume, are centrally concerned with the theoretical question of what a person is. Thus, as we try to find our way between the person of the author and the texts by the author, Johnson herself proves to be something of a useful guide. The questions she posed are ones that we struggle with today as we try to think about how to understand her pedagogy and her writing. In Johnson's various readings of Winnicott, Kohut, Lacan, de Man, Plath, and Baudelaire, and again in her engagement with legal cases, she made a strong set of claims: persons

are not thinkable without objects; personification and anthropomorphism are discursive figures that enter the way we think persons and objects; the self is less an origin of action than a content of thought, always to some extent imaginary; another self only becomes real on the occasion that it survives its destruction.

It would appear that the question, what is a person?, is a quintessentially philosophical query. It is true that Johnson trafficked with philosophical texts and their modes of argumentation and interrogation. Yet as we follow her arguments, we see how a literary theorist can and must engage a philosophical question in a distinctive way. In the first place, she pursues the question through a reading of a particular text, and that text may be literary, legal, philosophical, or drawn from popular discourse. In the second place, or perhaps simultaneously, she tracks how the question itself is formulated in the terms of the text, not only how certain figures are presupposed but how the figures presuppose certain philosophical claims. What makes this work “theory” would be difficult to summarize, but it seems possible to say minimally that philosophical questions are pursued precisely in light of the terms in which they are formulated. The philosophical proposition never quite stands alone, because to declare a philosophical truth is still to deploy the declarative mode of speech and so, already, to engage the history and techniques of rhetoric and, more specifically, modes of address. To whom is the philosopher speaking when he or she makes such a claim? Is there not implicitly a problem of audience and address even in the simplest of propositional claims? What shadow of the other haunts every true proposition? To what legacy of figures do its referents belong?

Although Johnson asks about the status of the person and the object in a nearly philosophical mode, she does so to subject certain moral formulations of both to a serious challenge. This challenge takes place partly through mobilizing a reading of texts that show how the person and the object are not thinkable outside of the moments in which their separate status is questioned. Primary among the philosophical positions she challenges is the Kantian precept that humans should only be treated as ends, never as means.¹ This maxim implies that no human should instrumentalize or “use” another human for his or her own ends and that in general, humans ought never to be treated as instruments, understood as objects. The result of such instrumentalization is dehumanization. Kant’s moral precept then depends on a stable human/object distinction; indeed, our moral charge is precisely to maintain the distinction such that humans only use instruments but are themselves never instrumentalized. But what if humanization—that is, the

process of becoming human—requires personified objects and the instrumentalization of humans?

In “Using People” (chapter 18) Johnson turns to the child psychology of D. W. Winnicott to interrogate those dimensions of a self’s emergence that require the animation of objects with human qualities (the transitional object) and must “use” humans as objects to test the limits of the child’s own destructive powers. In the first instance, objects take on human qualities precisely because they mediate the uncertain space between child and mother. Johnson writes, “Transitional objects . . . are the first ‘not-me’ possessions, objects that are neither ‘internal’ to the baby (that is, hallucinatory, like, at first, the mother’s breast) nor ‘external,’ like reality, of which at first the baby has no knowledge, but something in between.” Prior to any question of what we, as humans, ought to do is the question of how, if at all, we got to be humans to begin with. Thus Johnson’s turn to psychoanalytic theory is an effort to establish how humans are formed, and it turns out that no human can be formed, no human can become individuated, without establishing a space that is neither inside nor outside. The object famously mediates the absence of the mother for the child, and it becomes both precious (like the mother’s presence) and the target of heightened aggression (against the mother for going away). Strictly speaking, at this developmental level, there is no clear distinction between object and child, and no clear distinction between object and mother; it is the scene in which the child entertains the fantasy of the mother’s full accessibility and adaptability to the child’s needs only to come up against the reality of the mother’s imperfection. Johnson writes, “The most valuable property of the transitional object is probably its lack of perfection, its in relevance to the question of perfection.” Through aggressive fantasy and play, the child mutilates its object, seeking to assert its omnipotence over those human-objects that have a way of always going away. How precisely this destructive action is handled has significant implications for the formation of the child into an adult. First, the child’s destructiveness has to be encountered and “met” for the fantasy of omnipotence to come up against the effect of reality. Indeed, the object must somehow survive this mutilation, but so, too, must the mother or parent who is not fully distinguishable from that object. In Johnson’s words, “the object becomes real because it survives, because it is outside the subject’s area of omnipotent control.” This is one reason that parents and analysts alike must not only make themselves available for mutilation but survive it. The human figure, then, is differentiated from the transitional object only on the condition that the human figure survives the mutilation that the object does not. For the child to emerge

without the psychic conviction that he or she is a murderer, the adult, understood ambiguously as human and object, must submit to its instrumentalization and survive. If philosophers are, as Winnicott presumes, those who must have distinctions to continue to do what they do, they will, as Johnson points out, have trouble with this “intermediate” zone in which objects and humans cannot be rigorously distinguished. Winnicott imagines that the philosopher must leave his armchair and sit on the floor with the child, losing his upright posture to understand this zone of psychic meaning that eludes philosophical concepts. Johnson follows suit: “Something about that intermediate position is enacted by this passage from metaphor to literality. The intermediate position is not in space but in what it is possible to say.” The intermediate position is prior to the world of established persons and objects, and we cannot understand how they are established without this zone—an understanding that shows how metaphors themselves become literalized. If they do not, the child suffers from an endless sense of destructive power and fails to encounter the reality of others. The other becomes real on the occasion of survival, a “check” that alone can check the fantasmatic life of the child with an encounter with reality.

In her reading of both Winnicott and Kohut² (“Ego Sum Game,” chapter 19), Johnson suggests that nothing less than the locatability of the self is in question. In this essay that considers the implications of the myth of Narcissus for a rereading of Descartes, Johnson makes clear again that whatever is called “the self” is not a given of experience or the presumed source of all agency but is a “content of the mental apparatus,” in Kohut’s terms. So ideation is already in operation as the idea of the self is developed. Narcissus provides the allegory here because he seems to know that the reflection of himself in the water is a delusion, but he is not seeking the truth. Descartes will want to know how, if at all, one might distinguish the certain sense of the self from a delusional appearance, but Narcissus only “regrets . . . not being able to merge with what he already is.” Is there a substantial self and a shadow self? These are the questions with which the philosopher begins, but in this essay Johnson points out that the only way for a self to know itself is precisely by becoming an object, and thus not as a subject. In other words, like Narcissus, every subject encounters a noncoincidence among what he or she takes him- or herself to be, what can be seen or known, and some other operation that troubles the sphere of appearance or seems to challenge its sufficiency. Descartes’s worries are recast by Lacan, for whom it is a question of “whether I am the same as that of which I speak,” or whether a certain self-division persists as long as “I” do. The self is cast outside itself, as content,

image, or form (Gestalt), and this establishes the imaginary conditions under which the ego first assumes a shape. The “me” who I am is thus anticipated within the field of the imaginary, which means precisely that this self, or ego, is not the ground of my experience, but its future coordinate articulated in what Lacan called “a fictional direction.” For Johnson, there is no escape from Narcissus, even though there are various checks on narcissism. She writes, “the subject must drink from the waters of reflection in order to tie together libidinal and aesthetic fascination—in order to desire an image.” We might on the basis of her reading continue the argument this way: “and to desire at all, the subject must desire an image.” The image is the condition and shadowy substance of that very self that Descartes seeks to separate definitively from the self. Thus those figures and shadows against which Descartes seeks to ground his own certainty of himself as man and as a philosopher turn out to be preconditions for any self at all. Through Johnson, Narcissus teaches Descartes a lesson or two.

If it is the Kantian moral precept that prohibits the instrumentalization of persons that is undone in “Using People,” it is now the Cartesian presumption that the cogito is a sufficient starting point for philosophical reflection on the self that is introduced into crisis in “Ego Sum Game.” Although we could follow this procedure in any number of essays, I think it is important to turn to “Apostrophe, Animation, and Abortion” (chapter 16) to make clear the legal and political salience of Johnson’s reading practice. In this essay, she foregrounds the ethical stakes of her inquiry: “Is there any *inherent* connection between figurative language and questions of life and death, of who will wield and who will receive violence in a given human society?” Directly after this probing and open question, she turns to an analysis of the rhetorical figure of apostrophe (the act of addressing someone who is absent or dead or inanimate) and then to a masterful reading of the use of apostrophe in Baudelaire’s “Morsta et Errabunda.” Where we might expect apostrophe to install a human form at the site of its absence, it follows a countertrajectory in Baudelaire, undoing the human figure. Johnson accumulates examples, including this one: “Does your heart sometimes take flight”—an animation of the “heart” that takes the place of the human form, even rendering it dispensable. Johnson writes, “Instead of conferring a human shape, this question starts to undo one.” Her point is not only to distinguish anthropomorphism (the conferral of human form on nonhuman things) and personification (the attribution of human qualities to human parts or nonhuman things) but to show how within some of Baudelaire’s poems (especially “Moesta et Errabunda”), “the inanimate has entirely taken over . . . the poem is as if

emptying itself of all its human characters and voices. It seems to be acting out a *loss* of animation.” In Shelley’s “Ode to the West Wind,” it turns out the poet “gives animation, gives the capacity of responsiveness, to the wind,” but that same wind circulates “dead thoughts” and, in Johnson’s reading, is a “giver of death.” The poem ends with a rhetorical question, according to Johnson: “does death necessarily entail rebirth?” The question stands in a condition of suspended animation, so we do not know whether the question animates or deanimates. Indeed, the question form seems to stall or still the distinction itself.

What precisely are we meant to track about these figures that animate and deanimate, making and undoing human forms? How are they related to the question of whether figurative language is inherently linked to questions of life and death? As Johnson reads poems and stories from various centuries and languages, she poses this question anew, and her reading begins to crystallize around the question of whether we can know whether someone has been lost. This question proves central to debates on abortion that focus on the question of whether a fetus is a person. Can such a question be definitively answered, or is the status of the fetus animated within some discourses and deanimated within others? Is there any way beyond or outside this unknowingness about whether the fetus should be considered a living person?

Johnson moves us toward this consideration slowly, and it is pedagogically important that we understand the various ways that apostrophe and animation can work (and fail to work), the distinction between personification and anthropomorphism, to be prepared to encounter this most important question. In the poem “The Mother” by Gwendolyn Brooks, apostrophe takes the form of an address to children lost before they were born and, of course, it is animated by a doubt over whether that was the loss of children at all. If conventional forms of apostrophe assume the distinctness between the I who utters the address and the you to whom the address is uttered, that distinction breaks down when the “you” turns out to be of one’s own flesh and blood. It is not that the two figures effectively merge, but that “the you” is at once an externalized version of the “I” and an ambiguous part of the “I.” The apostrophic utterance thus enacts the unknowingness about the animated status of the addressee; it animates and deanimates, and remains caught precisely in a state of suspended animation that recalls the end of Shelley’s poem. But this time the question is not whether the poem can reanimate the life, or whether it already treats the life as unambiguously animated, but whether the life that is mourned, the “you,” is finally separable from the “I” at all. In this way, the poem articulates precisely that state of suspended

animation (“living person” or not?), indeed, of undecidability that governs debates on the life or personhood of the fetus. “What is the debate over abortion about,” Johnson asks, “if not the question of when, precisely, a being assumes a human form?”

Johnson is clear that the poem cannot answer the question of whether abortion is legitimate or whether the embryo has the right to life. In fact, she argues very clearly that even if the right to abortion is justified through argumentative means, that does not take away a woman’s “right to mourn.” Indeed, there may well be a sense of loss for the woman who undergoes an abortion regardless of how we define the legal status of the embryo or fetus. But what proves most important for Johnson’s reading of these poems is that they bring to the linguistic surface “the fundamental difficulty of defining personhood in general.” One might say that it is well and good that poems can remind us of such a difficulty, but isn’t the realm of law precisely where undecidability has to be set aside in favor of decisions and judgments? Johnson’s rejoinder to this kind of question is to show that “undecidability” characterizes these debates within law and politics from the start. In fact, if there were no undecidability, there would be no open-ended debate, and no field of the political. In Johnson’s words, “there is politics precisely because there is undecidability.” She makes this abundantly clear in “Anthropomorphism in Lyric and Law” (chapter 17), where she makes her strongest arguments about how figural language becomes literalized as legal language. Those entities or persons who are effectively figured within the legal institution of “personhood” alone have the status to make certain claims and exercise certain rights. There is no legal act that legitimates the claims of persons, whether corporate or civic, that does not rely on personification to establish legal personhood. Thus, there is no way to eliminate personification from law just as there is no way to eliminate apostrophe from debates on life and death. Moreover, there is no single concept of the person that might serve as a criterion by which to distinguish true from false descriptions. If one wants to argue that a specific claim that someone is or should be a person should show that the “person” in question resembles the idea of persons or established versions of personhood, then it would seem that there is no way to identify persons without the problem of resemblance entering the picture. This is another way typology and distinction, legal and philosophical, cannot escape figural language.

In the abortion poems that Johnson considers, she is clear that figuration does not simply humanize. The direct address to the “you” who is the aborted fetus does not presume that the “you” is human. Apostrophe can animate or

deanimate or be caught in the bind of doing both at once without resolution. It can presume the separability of the I and the you only to problematize that distinction in the course of its articulation. When apostrophe becomes maternal, new complications come into play. Is the mother who “speaks” or writes presumed to be in the position of giving life or, indeed, taking it away? Johnson ends her essay with the provocative suggestion that motherhood is itself induced through apostrophe, one that establishes the mother less as a person than as “a personification of presence or absence.” One might be reminded of the problem of the fantasy of omnipotence attributed to the child by Winnicott. Here, it seems, the maternal itself is invested with the ultimate power over life and death, a personification that effectively takes the place of the person. When Johnson makes this suggestion, her referent is no longer Winnicott, but Lacan, though she subtly brings Winnicott back into the reading. The child demands presence or absence, and this is the meaning of the fort-da game: “go away” and “come back” as I wish! For Johnson, distancing herself from Lacan’s claim that this happens at a level that has nothing to do with “real dependence,” “there is precisely a link between demand and animation, between apostrophe and life-and-death dependency.” In other words, the question of survival reemerges in the cry “mama!” The poems written about abortion find themselves in another predicament, the one in which that cry is precisely the one that is never heard; the one that does take form as lyric is precisely the apostrophe to the tissue that did not yet assume human form or perhaps to the dead child, a cry that cannot answer even that question and does not know precisely what has been lost.

For Johnson, lyric poetry is “summed up in the figure of apostrophe,” which means that it engages the questions of what lives and what dies, what is animated and what is not. But instead of giving us fine and fast distinctions between life and death, it articulates another intermediate zone, one in which the sure distinction between the two cannot hold. Like Winnicott, who counseled that with the transitional object, it is not possible to pose the question, did it originate from the outside or from the inside? In fact, Johnson reminds us, he remarks that “the question is not to be formulated.” Winnicott’s counsel is not to prohibit questions but to underscore that that question brings with it a set of assumptions about the distinctions among child, object, and adult that will keep us from understanding the intermediate status of the object and the ambiguity of those relations. In the questions posed by lyric, there is similarly no one answer. The question instates itself as such, opening up the field of the undecidable without resolution.

This question seems nowhere more pertinent than in the question of mourning, a topic that Johnson pursues in relation to Paul de Man's reading of Baudelaire's "Obsession" in "Anthropomorphism in Lyric and Law." Who can be mourned and who cannot are clearly political questions as well and depend on how the "grievable life" is figured. De Man remarks that the most true mourning can do is "allow for non-comprehension." His comment leads Johnson to query further: "Is mourning—or, rather, 'true mourning'—human or inhuman? Or is it what makes it impossible to close the gap between 'man' and rhetoric?" Do we personify mourning when we call it true, and is the process then extracted from the persons who mourn? If we do not have a sure way to define those persons, but are always engaged in modes of personification, apostrophe, and anthropomorphism when we seek to settle that question, then there is no question of the human that is not also a question of lyric. For Johnson, lyric insists on our unknowingness about what precisely in or of the human can be defined. If our definitions falter, we are left precisely with what cannot be presupposed. We are not precisely stopped or paralyzed there, but we do continue with an understanding, not a certainty, that unknowingness defines the human, which is to say, there is no sure definition. So even when we ask what we have lost (or who), we are left with a question, open-ended and suspended, that does not mitigate our mourning.

NOTES

1. Immanuel Kant, *The Moral Law: Kant's Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*, trans. H. J. Paton (London: Hutchinson, 1948), 74–77.
2. Heinz Kohut, *The Analysis of the Self* (New York: International Universities Press, 1983), xv.