CHAPTER 1

Understanding Charles Johnson

Singing the World

> Were it not for the Buddhadharma, I'm convinced that, as a black American and an artist, I would not have been able to successfully negotiate my last half century of life in this country.
>
> Charles Johnson, *Turning the Wheel*

For Charles Richard Johnson, the unexamined *and* unchanging life is not worth living. Johnson is a leading African American artist, and his work has been deeply influenced by his childhood in an integrated, northern community, by his lifelong interest in graphic arts, by his background in philosophy, and by his practice of the martial arts, which led him to Buddhism. Johnson's Buddhist perspective is a linchpin in his work. Raised in the African Methodist Episcopalian Church, Johnson became a Buddhist in 1967 at the age of nineteen. As an extraordinarily flexible artist and thinker, he finds it impossible to locate himself in only one religious tradition, and his work reflects his openness to religious dialogue. Thus, his Christian background enriches and expands his Buddhist themes with imagery and allusion, while the liberating aspects of his Buddhist convictions give his Judeo-Christian sensibility a provocative intensity that spiritually challenges his reader.

Johnson, who earned a doctorate in philosophy and who also has written philosophical texts, writes fiction to express a

fundamentally philosophical vision. As Johnson told an interviewer, "The subjects that interest me are the ones that require philosophical archaeology."[1] Philosophical discourse tends to be formidable, even forbidding, reaching conclusions as finished products and often offered with clenched minds. Yet Johnson's fiction is wonderfully accessible to lay readers interested in philosophical reflection. They will find at the center of his rigorously intellectual work his celebration of the ordinary, prosaic, typical activities of life. But his work is not simply a salute to the way things already are, a simple acceptance of the status quo. Instead, his work stresses the need for transformation of ordinary experience. Johnson's uniqueness as a contemporary writer lies in his profound understanding of the ordinary, and in the very ordinariness of his profound understanding. Johnson's aesthetics may be justly described as an exaltation of the ordinary. To use Stanley Cavell's felicitous phrasing, Johnson wants us to regain "an intimacy with existence." To Johnson, "the everyday, the ordinary, is not a given but a task."[2]

Johnson was born on April 23, 1948, in Evanston, Illinois, the only child of Benny Lee and Ruby Elizabeth (Jackson) Johnson at Community Hospital, an all-black facility.[3] His childhood showed him at an early age that apparent opposites can unite harmoniously. Johnson writes that his parents "seemed as different as two people could be" but nevertheless "complemented and completed each other."[4] His father remains his model of steadfast masculinity. A conservative Republican, he never went to high school, and he often worked three jobs at once to support his family. Johnson's mother also worked at several jobs, including that of a cleaning woman. She was a liberal Democrat intensely interested in the arts and literature, bringing home discarded books from her cleaning jobs. As a child, Johnson

absorbed her artistic and literary interests and intended to become a commercial artist. Although his father was at first skeptical of art as a possible career, Johnson wrote to a professional artist, Lawrence Lariar, who encouraged Charles and disagreed with his father's bleak assessment. Charles's father relented and paid for a two-year correspondence art course with Lariar. Johnson remembers his father's faith in him and his financial sacrifice for his art lessons as a demonstration of the nature of authentic love.

Lariar proved to be seminal in Johnson's early life, and he helped Johnson begin his career as a cartoonist in 1965. Johnson thereafter published his cartoons regularly in the *Chicago Tribune* and the *St. Louis Proud*. His career as an artist continued while he was in college, and he created his own fifty-two-part how-to-draw television series for the Public Broadcasting Service (*Charlie's Pad,* 1970). It was later distributed nationally. He also oversaw the publication of two collections of his cartoons: *Black Humor* (1970) and *Half-Past Nation Time* (1972). In his current fiction writing, Johnson occasionally sketches his characters so he can more vividly imagine them.[5]

Johnson learned his habits of hard work and persistence from his father. As he writes in *Black Men Speaking,* "He taught me, I truly believe, *how* to work—indeed, to see whatever I did, regardless of how humble the labor, as being a portrait of myself. And never to stop until my goal was realized. Never!"[6] His sense of indebtedness to his father is matched by his acknowledgment of his mother's influence. Johnson attributes his career in fiction primarily to his mother. She filled her house with books and joined book clubs, leading Johnson as a teenager to organize his own book club in science fiction. As an only child, Johnson made books his best friend. Attending an

integrated school in Evanston—Johnson calls it "the number-one high school in the nation in the 1960s"—Johnson disciplined himself to read one book a week.[7] Mrs. Johnson motivated him to write when she gave him a diary, though he was later disturbed to discover she was reading his entries. Johnson has kept a journal throughout his life. As Johnson said in an interview, "There is nothing more beautiful—more suggestive of unlimited possibility—than a blank page or canvas."[8]

In the summer evenings of 1967, he began to practice Chinese martial arts at a monastery, where students were expected to say a prayer before practice. Johnson began to study Buddhism and to meditate, and these factors have continued to play major roles in his art. Currently, Johnson is a contributing editor to the Buddhist journal *Tricycle.*

Johnson enrolled at Southern Illinois University in 1966, where he began as a journalism major. He received his bachelor's degree from SIU in 1971, and a master of arts in philosophy in 1973. In June 1970, he married Joan New, a student at National College of Education in Evanston. While in SIU's graduate program, he met John Gardner, whom Johnson describes as his "literary father."[9] Writing under the influence of Richard Wright, James Baldwin, and John A. Williams, Johnson had already completed six novels before he began working with Gardner, though Johnson has suppressed these novels as products of his apprenticeship. Gardner led Johnson to realize the extraordinary versatility of form in African American literature. As Johnson writes in *Being and Race,* "The modern short story or novel may assume the form of [realism or fantasy] or . . . any other narrative form people have employed—diaries, slave narratives, hymns, sermons, interlocking business documents—to clarify their experiences."[10] Johnson's appropriation of this

diversity of literary forms has thereafter distinguished his career, establishing him as one of America's most unpredictably imaginative writers. Johnson also credits Gardner's *On Moral Fiction* with providing him with the sense of writing as an ethical commitment.

Under Gardner's guidance, Johnson published *Faith and the Good Thing* in 1974, while he was also studying for a doctoral degree in philosophy at State University of New York at Stony Brook. As a graduate student at Stony Brook, he taught classes in literary theory and radical philosophy, such as Radical Thought, Third World Literature, and The Black Aesthetic. Pressed to provide financially for his family, Johnson left SUNY to accept a teaching position in creative writing at the University of Washington in 1976. His dissertation, on phenomenology and literary aesthetics, entitled *Being and Race: Black Writing since 1970,* was published in 1988. *Being* provides the reader with an understanding of how Johnson's literary work implicates race, but also escapes the political constrictions imposed by black cultural nationalism. Because he left for the University of Washington, he did not complete his degree at SUNY in the allotted time; however, Johnson was awarded both an honorary and an earned doctorate from SUNY–Stony Brook in 1999. The awarding committee backdated his doctorate to 1988, when *Being and Race* was published.

Besides working on his novels, Johnson continued his affiliation with PBS, writing docudramas, including *Charlie Smith and the Fritter Tree* (1978), about the oldest African American cowboy, and *Booker* (1984), a program on Booker T. Washington, which received the Writer's Guild Award. His association with PBS includes an appearance on Bill Moyer's series *Genesis* (1996) and his collaboration with Patricia Smith and others in

the production *Africans in America: America's Journey through Slavery* (1998). Johnson contributed twelve short stories to the series, which was later published as a history book. Johnson also published his stories as a volume entitled *Soulcatcher* (2001).

While studying philosophy and teaching at the University of Washington, Johnson began an ambitious manuscript, *Oxherding Tale,* published in 1982. This novel was followed by *The Sorcerer's Apprentice* (1986), his collection of short stories previously published during the 1970s and early 1980s. *The Sorcerer's Apprentice* was nominated for the PEN/Faulkner Award, PEN American Center. In 1990, Johnson published *Middle Passage,* which won the National Book Award; Johnson was the first African American male to win this prize since Ralph Ellison in 1953. *Dreamer: A Novel,* Johnson's first book on Martin Luther King Jr., was published in 1998. *Turning the Wheel: Essays on Buddhism and Writing,* a book discussing Buddhism and his theories of writing, was published in 2003. Johnson received the MacArthur Foundation "Genius" Grant in 1998. He was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 2003. He is currently the S. Wilson and Grace M. Pollock Professor of Creative Writing at the University of Washington. He has received honorary degrees from SUNY, Northwestern University, Whittier College, and Southern Illinois University, which also administers the Charles Johnson Award for Fiction and Poetry, a nationwide competition in creative writing for college students.[11]

Johnson's Buddhism has led him to reject a prevailing impulse to discover meaning in an abstract, concealed, metaphysical order: a unifying, all-encompassing system that is repressed, deferred, or buried. But Johnson also rejects the contemporary axiom that meaning is a mere chimera, that it is impossible to

demonstrate any truth whatsoever. For Johnson, a contemporary oscillation between an absolutist system and nihilism can be avoided by the reader willing to cultivate an appreciation for the ordinary, unexceptional moments of life—with all their unrealized opportunities and wasteful carelessness. Johnson, however, does not employ Buddhist principles in a reductive, one-on-one relationship between his text and the Buddhist "sources."[12] Indeed, Johnson explicitly avoids dogmatic and reductive formulations, and (like many Buddhist writers) imbues his work with rich humor. Johnson's reader should always be prepared to laugh. His fiction points to how a person will be transformed by a close, directed attention to everyday experience—defined by Buddhists as mindfulness (sati). For Johnson, liberated, mindful persons attend to the work before them with all the power of mind and heart; they are not distracted by momentary desires and wishes for things outside the moment. At the same time, Johnson's fiction directs a powerful critique of everyday life.

In this sense, Johnson's Buddhism is very different from Beat Zen writers like Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg. Their work also advocates a kind of human excellence, since they reject an otherworldly perfection as a goal and concentrate on earthly, sensual gratification. Their vision could be fairly summarized as an acceptance of what is—whatever we do, so long as it brings voluptuous delight, is a satisfactory way to live. But their emphasis on sexuality, narcotics, and alcohol would for Johnson only masquerade as a celebration of the present moment. From Johnson's perspective, this acquiescence to sensuality and self-indulgence would lead to a distinctly unenlightened form of life, for immersion in sensual pleasure is a toxic life. For Johnson, the problem with immediate gratification of

personal desire is that gratification creates an emotional attachment to the object of desire, but if this gratification were not available, disappointment and chagrin would immediately follow. The "attached" person, attached to his or her own desire, is vulnerable to suffering. Further, gratification is inevitably fleeting, to be replaced by boredom as the satisfaction wears off, or by greater craving for more extravagant pleasures. Addiction is inevitable with this way of life. Thus, Johnson's fiction features different categories of addiction—including substance abuse (alcoholism and drug addiction), the "process addictions" of contemporary psychology (sexual addiction, thrill-seeking), and other forms of compulsive-obsessive dysfunctions (hoarding, fruitless writing, kleptomania, compulsive lying, and so forth). Although not primarily a psychological novelist, Johnson evinces in his work a subtle understanding of personality disorders.

Johnson's called-for transformation of the ordinary moment requires the reader's release from the narrowness of self-centered activity and focus on the self, and a transcendence of an exclusive and static identification with the reader's gender, race, and historical time. His use of the anachronism in his fiction simultaneously criticizes the social formations of the past that promoted racism and oppression and calls for a transformation of the contemporary legacy of the past's mistakes. He condemns contemporary repressive social structures without relieving the individual of responsibility for creating those same structures.[13] His work promotes a radical contextualization of one's era in relation to a larger, more expansive history—the greater totality of being human. Johnson's literary aim is to place an individual into a greater and more coherent spiritual perspective than contemporary literature usually offers.

Johnson's philosophical vision is similar to that of Thich Nhat Hanh, the Vietnamese Buddhist nominated by Martin Luther King Jr. for the Nobel Peace Prize. Like Johnson, Nhat Hanh is committed to bringing people together by promoting interreligious dialogue. Nhat Hanh believes in spiritual commitment leading to a sense of unity. In his book *Living Buddha, Living Christ,* he makes this point poetically clear with a metaphor of a flower. Scientifically, the flower is composed of elements such as carbon dioxide, water, and minerals that in no way resemble the flower itself. What we know as a stable (and ordinary) object is a manifestation of invisible or microscopic natural processes, a miraculous mutuality of diverse elements. What "seems to be" a flower is, in fact, "made entirely of non-flower elements; it has no independent, individual existence." We are, Nhat Hanh asserts, "like the flower, like the natural world. It 'inter-is' with everything else in the universe." Nhat Hanh uses the term "interbeing," an infinite interrelatedness, to describe the spiritual connection between human beings. The term "interbeing" can thus also be applied to Buddhism and Christianity, usually considered entirely distinct religions. He writes: "Just as a flower is made only of non-flower elements, Buddhism is made only of non-Buddhist elements, including Christian ones, and Christianity is made of non-Christian elements, including Buddhist ones." To illustrate this point, he returns to his vegetative metaphor:

> It is good that an orange is an orange and a mango is a mango. The colors, smells, and the tastes are different, but looking deeply, we see that they are both authentic fruits. Looking more deeply, we can see the sunshine, the rain, the minerals, and the earth in both of them. Only their manifestations are

> different. . . . Buddhism is made of non-Buddhist elements. Buddhism has no separate self. When you are a truly happy Christian, you are also a Buddhist. And vice versa.

For Nhat Hanh this recognition is crucial to one who wishes to progress beyond an unquestioning acceptance of religion's often dogmatic truths and subjective sense of personal identity. He writes, "When you are able to get out of the shell of your small self, you will see that you are interrelated to everyone and everything, that your every act is linked with the whole of human kind and the whole cosmos."[14]

It is Nhat Hanh's sense of cosmic interrelatedness—interbeing—that Johnson intends to impart to his reader in his fiction. In a world tragically torn apart by tribalism, sectionalism, and the other varieties of factionalism, Johnson's vision of interbeing offers a bracing alternative. But Johnson also refuses to offer or permit the false consolations of sentimentality or messages of unearned sympathy or love. Johnson's positive protagonists are not always nice people; often, they are grumpy, irritable folks. For both the Judeo-Christian and Buddhist traditions, genuine compassion comes only as our suffering grows worse and we are driven to our enlightenment and salvation. So it is that Johnson's work, despite its often uproarious comedy, is replete with images of sickness, physical decay, despair, suicide, torture, and murder. Paradoxically for this comic writer, his most vividly memorable image is the human body disintegrating at the moment of death, or shortly after death. Johnson's emphasis on death, pain, and physical putrescence awakens us from our sleepy routines to become someone wiser, more mindful, more compassionate, and more flexibly attuned to the world than we have formerly been.