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Foreign Exchange in Denis Johnson's *The Stars at Noon*

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Arizona Quarterly: A Journal of American Literature, Culture, and Theory

Johns Hopkins University Press

Volume 47, Number 4, Winter 1991

pp. 27-47

10.1353/arq.1991.0016

ARTICLE

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

GAIL REITENBACH Foreign Exchange in Denis Johnson's *The Stars at Noon* In his first novels, *Angels and Fish* and *Codomo*, Denis Johnson takes readers into foreign territory: the borderland that characters on the edge of society inhabit in *Angels* and the post-apocalyptic southern Florida of *Fiskodoro* are outside most readers' familiarity. In *The Stars at Noon* Johnson takes readers into a country, Nicaragua, that is literally foreign. Johnson originally intended to write a non-fiction article on Nicaragua, but his visit there changed his mind. The impression of Central America that persisted was one of atmosphere,¹ and in *The Stars at Noon* the atmosphere (the weather and the metaphysical atmosphere of Hell) is the only element of stasis. All else is movement. As Johnson develops his plot and characters, we realize that the movement signifies exchange. The novel's instances of foreign exchange include the exchange of currencies; the exchange of goods, people, information, and other symbols between individuals and governments of countries foreign

to each other; exchange of human subjectivity or recognition; and exchange between reader and text. 2 Johnson's anatomy of the principle of exchange that governs all social action prompts a reassessment of the novel's genre—the international tale—and an unsettling of the reader's relation to the text. Johnson's unnamed narrator originally entered Nicaragua with a phony press card issued by Eyes for Peace, a human rights watch group with whom she signed on as a contact person. But in less than a week she lost her stomach for observing poverty, torture, and death, abandoned her job as observer, and moved to Managua. When she wanted to leave, the Nicaraguans, desperate for hard currency, would take only Arizona Quarterly Volume 47 Number 4, Winter 1991 by Arizona Board of Regents issn 0004-1610 Gai'Z Reitenbach American dollars from an American buying an airline ticket. Because she had exchanged all her dollars for black market córdobas in Costa Rica, she turned to prostitution, hoping to earn enough dollars and enough favor with Sandinista officials to leave. An evening with an English oil company executive who happens to have engaged in international industrial espionage embroils her in a chase plot. Once they realize that the authorities have discovered the Englishman's activities and are watching them, they try to leave Nicaragua for safer borders, a plan complicated by political naïveté and the narrator's possession of black market currency. In the meantime, what had begun as a business relationship between the American and her "customer," as she initially calls him, evolves into a love affair, their emotional and sexual intimacy fostered by their intimacy as co-conspirators. After several rounds of cat-and-mouse with Costa Rican and United States intelligence agents, the two reach the Costa Rican border, where the American is forced to make a choice of loyalties. In this climactic scene she betrays the Englishman, her lover, to a fellow American, a CIA agent. Johnson's Nicaragua is at once another country and another world—an underworld, or the Inferno, as the narrator calls it. Johnson repeatedly invokes Dante's vision of Hell by using "Inferno" to name Nicaragua, by alluding to invisible demons torturing the narrator, and by emphasizing Managua's ever-present heat. His narrator plays Virgil to the reader-as-Dante, descending into the fictional underworld of the American unconscious. However, Johnson's narrator differs from Dante's Virgil in that she does not have all the answers; instead, she appeals to the reader. Johnson's story, like Dante's, develops historical and mythic levels of meaning simultaneously through details such as the repeated references to 1984, with its evocation of Orwell's vision of a totalitarian state. While the references to a calendar year confer a degree of realism, the absence of proper names for the characters suggests that Johnson's tale is mythic as well as particular: we know the Nicaraguan official with whom the American must sleep or risk losing her papers as Sub-teniente Whoever, her domicile as Motel La Whatsis, and the Watts Oil Company man as "the Englishman";³ the narrator can only be "the American..."

GAIL REITENBACH

Foreign Exchange in Denis Johnson's *The Stars at Noon*

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Angels, Quarterly, Volume 45 Number 4, Winter 2002
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