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THE UNBRIDGEABLE GULF: THE SENSE OF DIVISION IN JENNIFER JOHNSTON'S *THE RAILWAY STATION MAN*

The course of history has scarred Ireland with deep dividing lines, few of which have been healed. The historical class divisions, in Ireland for the most part reinforced by national and language divisions, resulted in a greater split in the cultural tradition of this seemingly enclosed country than elsewhere. Similarly, the polarity of political opinion tends to be felt more acutely in view of the political partition of the island and the tragic chasm that separates the community in its northern part. The reality of divided Ireland, in all the senses and layers of the divisions, has been and remains at the core of Irish literature, whether poetry or prose, written in Irish or English.

Jennifer Johnston is no exception in making her reader conscious of the pervading sense of division. The heroine of her 1984 novel **The Railway Station Man** ponders the meanings of the words 'isolation' and 'insulation' while looking at the sea through the glass partition of her studio on a remote northern hillside near the border, on the two sides of which she first lost her husband and then her son and a lover through needless, violent deaths. Elements and images of division thus permeate the whole novel, its setting, plot, imagery and the characters' states of mind. The concern with the duality of the past and present, the burden of history and one's own past and the inability and at the same time unwillingness to shed it, as well as the moral dilemma of the private and the public, of divided loyalties, and a deeply experienced sense of place, link Johnston clearly with other contemporary Irish writers and poets. With Derek Mahon and Seamus Heaney in particular she also shares some of their ambiguity and indecision and their painful and painstaking search to narrow, though unable to bridge, the dividing rifts.

The underlying realism of Johnston's work is indisputable and there seems to be little sense in disregarding this side of her work. The uniqueness of the Irish situation as depicted in **The Railway Station Man** certainly does not make her work provincial or limited in scope in any sense. Its Irishness and Irish experi-

ence are no bar to the universality of human concerns and the feelings which they generate and which the author sensitively and skilfully lays before us.

It is my purpose here to trace the elements and images of division and disconnection in Johnston's novel and relate them to the events and notions of division in Irish history and the present. I will also try to identify links in Johnston's treatment of the theme to contemporary Irish poetry. Finally, I will raise the problem of a realistic reading of Johnston's fiction.

The sense of division in Irish society is deeply entrenched and its roots stretch far and wide into the history of the country. Social change in the sense of social attitudes and habits is a slow process, always lagging behind the events that have given impetus to it. The victory of the Protestant Ascendancy which followed William's victory at the Boyne in 1690 sustained and in a way completed an awareness of the separation of two cultures on Irish soil along class, religious and national lines. This division continues to play a crucial role to this day in spite of critical voices. Austen Morgan speaks of a 'diet of a Manichean historical melodrama played out by "Britain" and "Ireland", [which] generated the politics of demonology'.¹ In his opinion 'the Irish people are those who live in Ireland. This is very different from the subjectivity of nationalism where the Irish people, invariably, are those who support the nationalist tradition'.² The nationalist sentiment kept dividing the people of Ireland throughout the first decades of this century and plunged the newly independent country into a civil war between two irreconcilable sides of pro- and anti-Treatyites. Maria Luddy and Cliona Murphy describe the war and its outcome as 'a shattering experience for all who had dreamt and fought for a new Ireland and its termination in 1923 left the pro-Treaty Free State government in control of a deeply divided country of twenty-six counties'.³ This was the kind of division which also affected relationships within families and between friends, as is to some extent mirrored in the relationship between the fiercely nationalist Maud Gonne and W.B. Yeats. The physical division by the Partition provided the visual image of yet another opening chasm. North and South began to develop as two separate entities, diverging from each other in the process. According to T.H. Whyte,⁴ the Protestant and Catholic communities in Northern Ireland have from the start been sharply divided, with lack of intermarriage, separate education and even residential segregation in some places. The Troubles which broke out in 1968 not only turned this part of the island into two hostile camps but also further alienated the Republic.

1 Austen Morgan and R. Purdie, **Ireland. Divided Nation, Divided Class**. London: Inlinks 1980, p. 178

2 *Ibid.* pp. 220–21

3 Maria Luddy and Cliona Murphy, **Women Surviving**. Dublin: Knocksedan House 1990, p. 243

4 T.W. Moody and F.X. Martin, eds, **The Course of Irish History**. 1984, pp. 342–3

The prominent note of modern Ireland in 1972 was that of looking after its own. The mind of the Republic, as frequently measured by opinion polls, made it resoundingly clear that sympathy for the Catholic community in Ulster did not extend to paying the crippling costs that would be necessitated by national 'unity'.⁵

This view is also confirmed by Tom Paulin, who notes the 'deep hostility which much of the community feels towards both communities in the North. Many Southerners ... regard Northerners as members of what are sometimes scathingly referred to as "hilltribes"'.⁶ There are always new faultlines. For example Edna Longley, who calls herself a 'revisionist' and challenges the **Field Day Anthology** for its (Northern) Nationalist bias, claims that 'the relation of all Irish writing to Protestantism and Catholicism, an issue masked by homogenising "Irishness", should be opened up'.⁷

These largely unresolved divisions and the tragedies that they have brought about have, not surprisingly, been recreated as the most frequent themes in Irish literature. They come to be reflected whether the writers return to historical settings or events or whether they depict their present, in whatever mode, realistic or metaphorical. This, however, does not mean that Irish writers feed off and thereby perpetuate the attitudes that make change a slow process. Referring to young Irish artists of the 60s and 70s, Richard Kearney points out their disillusionment with the uncompromising ideologies of defined identities and discerns a tendency towards finding the positive value of confused identity.⁸

Jennifer Johnston is usually classed with the Anglo-Irish tradition of the Big House novel, but all of her novels which fall into this category, in contrast to many others of the genre, emphasise her acute awareness of the ever-present class, religious and national divisions. The theme of loneliness and isolation with friendships formed across the divide may now be seen as a characteristic feature of her work. In **The Captains and the Kings** (1972) an old owner of a Big House befriends a poor Catholic boy; in **The Gates** (1973) the heiress of an Anglo-Irish ancestral home makes friends with a young Catholic whose parents work on the estate; **How Many Miles to Babylon?** (1974) is a tragic story of a young Anglo-Irish man of a Big House and his working-class Catholic friend. That these friendships, additionally incongruous by circumstances of age, appearance or chance misfortunes, invariably collapse, that the bridge across the gap is not allowed to be built, perhaps reflects Johnston's disillusionment with

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- 5 R.F. Forster, **Modern Ireland 1600 – 1972**, Harmondsworth: Allen Lane, the Penguin Press 1988, p. 593
- 6 Tom Paulin, **Ireland and the English Crisis**. Newcastle Upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books 1984, p. 25
- 7 Edna Longley, **The Living Stream. Literature and Revisionism in Ireland**. Newcastle Upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books 1994, p. 179
- 8 Richard Kearney, ed, **Across the Frontiers. Ireland in the 1990s**. Dublin: Wolfhound Press 1988, p. 187

the reality and is her moral message, but the very existence of such friendships may also spell some hope for the future.

The Railway Station Man (1984) is Jennifer Johnston's seventh novel and departs from the Big House background of her early works. The setting is a tiny village in the north-west of the Republic, on the coast of Donegal. Helen Cuffe, now 50, has been living here alone in a cottage outside the village since her husband was killed in Derry by an IRA bullet meant for somebody else. After five years of loneliness and virtual isolation from the outside world, her brief attempt at friendship and love is destroyed in another blast of violence, when a lorry-load of terrorist ammunition kills her English lover and her son.

Isolation.

Such a grandiose word.

Insulation.

There was the connection in the dictionary
staring me in the eye. (p.1)

Isolation and insulation: the two words provide the book with a recurring metaphor visualised in Helen's physical isolation from the people in the village and the rest of the world and her emotional isolation caused by the violence of the three deaths. Enclosed in her studio built from a shed on a hillside, she is also insulated from all sound by a glass wall which has silenced even the pounding sea waves. And whereas the dictionary can supply a connection even between words with connotations of separation, Helen, isolated and insulated in the ivory tower of her loneliness, experiences utter disconnection from everything. Yet the element of separatedness is not new to Helen. A sense of division governed her relationships with both her husband and her son. Hers is a divided world: she perceived her husband as a being completely separate from her and their marriage of twenty years seemed to have left them strangers to each other; her relationship with her son Jack is synonymous with disconnection through lack of communication. Helen found herself unable to explain to him why they were moving from Derry after his father's death, leaving him desolate and robbed of the safety of his room. He, too, is difficult to approach. 'Jack's eyes too, unreceptive. Are you receiving me? One two three testing. Are you receiving me son? Silence on the air waves' (p.83).

Johnston's technique of narrative voices adds to the overall feeling of disconnection. The first and the last chapters are told in the first person. The effect of the switch to the third person for the greater part of the story feels more as if Helen herself suddenly changed her perspective and detached herself from her own story rather than an omniscient narrator taking over. The effect is particularly strong in the initial chapters where she is more often referred to as 'she' and not as 'Helen'.

It is not only Helen's immediate surroundings and the recent tragic event that she feels severed from. Her entire past seems to be remote, almost forgotten, bereft of emotion and meaning. But it is still there and it comes back to her in

snatches of memories that somehow have not ceased to matter. Some pieces of the past remain imprinted deep inside in a way not different from perceptions the Irish have of their history and not much different from Roger Hawthorne's mutilated face and body. Roger, an English war hero, has bought the local disused railway station house and hopes to restore it to its original function, to rebuild the connection and renew communication, perhaps also to build a connection between the past and the present. Johnston returns to the image of a derelict or about to be closed railway station in her other novels, too.

The symbolism of disconnection from a place and from people and disconnection from the past seems to offer a link between Johnston's poetics and the poetry of Derek Mahon, who directed the television adaptations of her novels. One of his frequent themes – abandoned places which are places of history – bears the same tension and ambivalent relationship to history, even fascination with it, as Johnston's imagery. In 'The Last of the Fire Kings', Mahon, like Helen, seems to be rejecting the past:

Either way, I am	Dies by the sword
Through with history –	Last of the fire kings, I shall
Who lives by the sword	Break with tradition and
Die by my own hand	
Rather than perpetuate	
The barbarous cycle. ⁹	

The severance with history, however, is never complete; neither Mahon nor Johnston adopt the easy way out of 'either – or'.

Mahon's image of the edge between land and sea, his image of where writing happens, finds a parallel in Helen's studio, for which the view of the sea and the beach is essential. Helen does her painting there or on the beach. Mahon's following verse is hauntingly evocative of Helen's situation:

Perfecting my cold dream
Of a place out of time
A palace of porcelain. (p.65)

Johnston's moral concerns, the clash between the private and the public, provide another connecting link with contemporary Irish poets. Patrick Rafroidi argues that 'among the most characteristic features of the [novel] as practised in Ireland, is the urge to communicate a message – political, social or religious – to interpret or satirise Irish reality past and present.' He attributes this tendency to the necessity, more strongly felt in Ireland than elsewhere, to establish an identity and ensure its survival.¹⁰ These concerns seem to be very much in the focus of poetry as well. The dialectics of the private and the public is shown in McCarthy's poems as the macrocosm of politics measured against the micro-

9 Derek Mahon, *Poems 1962 – 1978*. London: Oxford Univ. Press 1979, pp. 64–5

10 Patrick Rafroidi and M. Harmon, eds, *The Irish Novel in Our Time*. Lille: Publications de l'Université de Lille III 1975, p. 18

cosm of the domestic space. Seamus Heaney is striving for balance in weighing allegiances and judgement. The choices are dismal:

I am fatigued by a continous adjudication between agony and injustice ...
We live in the sickly light of the TV screen, with a pane of selfishness
between ourselves and the suffering.

We survive explosions and funerals and live on among the families of the
victims, those blown apart and those in cells apart.¹¹

Johnston too, is concerned with the matter of Ireland both north and south of the border, and examines the influence of the public sphere on individual lives. Helen in **The Railway Station Man** is widowed through the political circumstances in the North and divided in political allegiances and opinion with her son. She feels outraged by another man's death in the north, while Jack's response sets them even wider apart: '[Outrage] ... An overworked word. Anyway what do you care? What does anyone care? A handful of people feel sorrow, fear, pain. Something. Otherwise it's just words, news. Manipulated words' (p.16). The clash between the public and the private, the battle between political allegiance and human feeling remains hard to resolve. Damians, one of the local Catholics, remembers his grandfather talking about Ireland: 'You'll have to shoot them out, he used to say ... The English ... He didn't think it was right. He thought it was inevitable' (p.50).

The village is tiny and to all appearances Catholic without exception, but Johnston does manage to give us a taste of the indispensable ethnic identification. Roger, the railway station man of the title, is new to the place and he is English. Admittedly, it may first be what is seen as his eccentricity, but also the fact that he is English that makes him suspect in the eyes of the villagers. What else could he be doing here if not spying, coming to live in a secluded place so close to the North Irish border. The publican Mr. Hasson extolls the religious devotion of his wife, who wants to go to Lourdes, and he tries to show complicity with Jack against the Englishman: "'Jack here's at Trinity College Dublin. A famous seat of learning. Maybe you've heard tell of it?'" He spoke slowly and with great precision as if he were speaking to a child, or a foreigner' (p.28). In answer to this Roger feels compelled to explain that his mother was Irish. But Jack and Helen are comparative strangers to the place too, and probably of Anglo-Irish background, as hinted at in Helen's childhood memories of her parents' house in Dublin. There are degrees of Irishness, the less visible but still discernible lines of division. The Provos are whispered about and feared, cut off by a wall of disapproval. Peaceful and calm, this is a small place with seemingly none of the potential for sectarian tragedy as Bernard MacLaverty's **Cal** or Iris Murdoch's **The Red and the Green**, contemporary and historical respectively,

11 Seamus Heaney, **Preoccupations. Selected Prose 1968 – 1978**. London: Faber and Faber 1980, p. 30

and a number of other novels about Ireland with people torn apart by ethnic and political strife.

Although Johnston's Helen can virtually be seen as an exile, exiled from her native Dublin or from Derry, where she had spent most of the years of her married life, and deliberately exiled from the local society, there is a strong sense of her belonging to the place. She has an intimate knowledge of the countryside around the village and of the architecture of every house in it, bicycling for transport and for pleasure and employing the painter's keen eye for shape and colour. Evocations of a sea-side idyll when she goes swimming on the deserted beach, with the words of an old song still in her head, add to an almost mystic sense of belonging. The scattered boulders which she likes to think of as neolithic stones lend the scene an air of an archetypal myth of a sacred place. The apparent contradiction between the sense of exile and belonging may be less than it seems. Seamus Heaney believes that 'one half of one's sensibility is in the cast of mind that comes from belonging to a place, an ancestry, a history, a culture, whatever one wants to call it'.¹² That is the unconscious part of the mind which supplies meanings that have been lost in the course of time. Heaney regrets the loss, with the loss of the old Irish poetic tradition of *dinnseanchas*, of the topographical record of Gaelic legends. He thinks that 'equable marriage between the geographical country and the country of the mind ... constitutes the sense of place in its richest possible manifestation' (p.132). Heaney goes on to explain why the Irish writer tends to be more obsessed with belonging to a certain place than is the case in other literatures: 'because of the peculiar fractures in our history, north and south, and because of the way that possession of the land and possession of different languages have rendered the question particularly urgent' (p.136). However, J.W. Foster in 'The Geography of Irish Fiction' is less in tune with 'the attention Irish writers lavish upon geographic location and topography.' He finds the Irish possessed by place and claims that they 'have turned the real Ireland into imaginative and fictional landscapes of great and magical beauty', which he eventually condemns as escapist: 'Ultimately, the Irish writer's concern with place is evidence of a subjectivity he is unwilling or unable to transcend'.¹³ Johnston deals with the *topos* of the place in a way which deftly intertwines all the above strands: the connection with its beauty, myth and the past, the relevance to self, and disconnection from its present, its irrelevance, its strangeness and, most importantly, the division of the place, because the reader is always reminded that there is a border nearby, like a portent.

The friendship and love between Helen and Roger are another of Johnston's symbolic attempts at bridging the omnipresent gulf. With them she challenges reality against many odds. They both have to cross the dividing lines of their self-imposed exile which they have drawn around themselves. Both have en-

12 Ibid. p. 35

13 Patrick Rafroidi and M. Harmon, p. 90

acted, albeit subconsciously, moves towards re-connection. Helen has been painting pictures of bare land- and seascapes, to find herself. Now suddenly she feels she has to strike out of her ghetto: 'I must see them now in the hands of other people, see their eyes consider, explore, reject. Note the interest or indifference' (p.52). Roger's obsession with bringing the dilapidated railway station back to life is his way of rebuilding connection and communication with the world. Helen and Roger make an unlikely couple for a romance. Both in their fifties, their lives scarred by violence, they eventually find what essentially connects them. Their relationship and similar improbable friendships from Johnston's 1970s novels are echoed by Damian's attitude to Roger. Damian is a young unemployed Catholic, potentially involved with the Provos, or at least so rumour has it. He, however, loves the restoration work he does for Roger and comes to like and respect the mutilated Englishman and even looks after him in his bouts of melancholy and inertia. The two manage to meet on human terms. Nevertheless, the bridges Johnston allows her characters to build are shattered again with the finality of another violent blast. Johnston follows here the pattern of her previous novels, which also end in defeat. Still, the pervading mood of the novel is not despair. She seems to suggest, as Anne Clune points out, 'that moments of personal happiness can be snatched in spite of violence and madness and that the ghosts of the past ... can be appeased'.¹⁴

The bridges are not easy to build, because the gulf they are to span does not have clear cut edges. Helen is always looking for a pattern, always asking the 'why' question in order to clarify what she knows herself does not have a simple cause-and-effect explanation. In the end, she does not even want one, because she does not want to be forced to make judgements. Jack resents his mother's attitude: 'One day, mother, your ivory tower will fall down. Then where will you be? Then you'll have to ask questions ... answer questions ... draw conclusions' (p.135). Damian is now reconsidering his involvement with the Provos, however little it may have been, because he does not like Manus, the man who runs some of the activities. Jack has his doubts about him too: 'Manus has a gun on his person. Manus has no scruples. Does he really have a dream, or merely no scruples?' (p.180). Jack is even painfully aware of the vagueness of his own motives for joining in: 'What am I trying to do? Right some ancient wrong? Come, come, surely not. Cancel out in some way the labels they hand on me ... West Brit, shoneen, bourgeois?' (p.179). In his inner argument he pits irreconcilable opposites against each other, the stark contrasts emphasised by his switching from 'I' to 'he': 'Show them ... that my heart is in the right place? He drove a car for fifty thousand miles for Ireland. Got blisters on his arse for Ireland and a first-class degree to please his grandmother' (p.179). Helen does not believe that Jack really cares for politics. She thinks that it may be his reaction to her distaste for involvement that brought him there. In Helen, Johnston is re-

14 I. Henderson, ed, *Contemporary Novelists*, London: St. James Press 1991, pp. 496-8

flecting the weariness of taking sides. The imagery of human faces in candle-light suggests that divisions need not necessarily be a threat, on the contrary, there may be harmony: 'People look gold and secret. All faces divide quite in half, black shadows make caves and the gold is soft, malleable' (p.134).

In *The Clash of Ireland* Jose Laners claims that Jennifer Johnston's works are 'without exception concerned with "the Irish question", with the colonial heritage that divides the island to this very day'.¹⁵ In spite of that, and in contrast to other critics who have focused on the realism of her novels, Laners suggests that Johnston should not be read as a realistic novelist. He argues that a more fruitful approach to her fiction is along the lines of allusions, patterns and her reworking of Biblical and Shakespearean motifs. Thereby he wants to strengthen the effect of 'lifting the Irish historical experience onto the level of myth and legend, giving it a universal human significance outside of its limited naturalistic context' (p. 222). The usefulness of such an approach seems to me debatable. *The Railway Station Man* no doubt contains a great deal of thought of universal significance, but what makes it valuable, in my opinion, is precisely that which makes it unique: 'its limited naturalistic context', which Laners advises us to eschew. Universality and myth smooth out the ruggedness of lived experience, which has a special ambivalent poignancy in Johnston's novel. By the very choice of her themes and setting Johnston seems to be consciously continuing the tradition of Irish writers who have a message to convey. To disregard this commitment would amount to ignoring an essential part of her writing. Both Helen and Roger believe that an artist has a role to play: 'In Russia, after all, they put poets in lunatic asylums ... Here we leave them outside but don't bother to read what they have to say. There's madness for you' (p. 97). The realism of Johnston's novel is palpable and significant, her links to Irish reality direct and clear. This is how Helen feels about the death of her husband: 'That brutality ... I found it unforgivable. I still feel that, each time I read about another ... snatching of a life ... I feel that same unforgiveness rising inside me. I don't mean vengeance ...' (p. 119). The few lines condense the enormity of the division which comprises history and the present, cultural and religious difference, economic and political dispute, and loss of life.

There seems to be a reasonable agreement among Irish writers and critics on how much of the Irish reality in writing is acceptable and beneficial to Irish literature. James M. Cahalan quotes from Sean O'Faolain's 1950s publication that the Irish writer 'ceased to be provincial when he wrote of what he knew and could describe better than anybody else ... They had conquered their material by accepting it'.¹⁶ Similarly Richard Kearney sees it as a positive development that

15 C.C. Barfoot and I. D'hean, eds, *The Clash of Ireland: Literary Contrasts and Connections*, Amsterdam: Rodopi 1989

16 J.M. Cahalan, *Great Hatred, Little Room: The Irish Historical Novel*, Dublin: Gill and Macmillan 1983, p. 113

the young writers of the 60s and 70s have not repudiated Irish culture and the specifically 'Irish thing'. 'On the contrary, each acknowledges a fundamental sense of belonging and fidelity to a "native place" ... Here we understand that we can be Irish **and** citizens of the world without contradiction'.¹⁷ In much the same vein, Gearoid O'Tauthaigh endorses the shift in Irish art towards combining the universal and the national: 'In sum, post-war Irish artists have discovered that in opening the shutters the window allows not only a view to the outside world but also a new light through to the interior'.¹⁸

Although Patrick Raffroidi believes that 'the greatest fiction ... is perhaps never conceived on the spur or in the disillusionment of the moment ... [because] history in the making is too full of sound and fury to signify anything'¹⁹, the fact that Johnston's story is set against the background of momentous events which also constitute an essential part of her thought, detracts in no way from the value of her fiction. The imagery of division as she employs it in **The Railway Station Man** reflects a deeper Irish experience and can be seen as a metaphor of the historical Irish condition. Dealing with this condition links her not only with other contemporary Irish novelists and poets, but with generations of Irish writers. The universal aspect of the concept of the divided psyche, which is inevitably present in the novel, allows the concerns to transcend the boundaries of the limiting reality. Johnston's attempt at bridging gaps and blending the strange and the real also appears to be well within the Irish tradition.²⁰ It is this ability to blend the universal themes of loneliness, division and personal trauma with a very specific real situation that makes her realism no limitation but an asset which marks the individuality of her fiction. At the same time **The Railway Station Man** documents an era as its witness and acts as a mediator.

17 Richard Kearney, ed, **Across the Frontiers. Ireland in the 1990s**, Dublin p. 187

18 J.J. Lee, ed, **Ireland 1945-1970**, Dublin: Gill and Macmillan 1979, p. 121

19 Patrick Raffroidi and M. Harmon, eds, **The Irish Novel in Our Time**, p. 20

20 *Ibid.* p. 27