

A COGNITIVE APPROACH TO JENNIFER JOHNSTON'S THE RAILWAY  
STATION MAN

Clementina Mihăilescu

Assoc. Prof., PhD, "Lucian Blaga" University of Sibiu

*Abstract:*The paper entitled 'An Interdisciplinary Approach to Jennifer Johnson's "The Railway Station Man"' expands upon a bucolic but also violent Ireland, the narrative background for a love story centred on Roger, a war hero and Helen, a gifted but totally isolated painter, acknowledging Dolezel's opinion that the semantics of narrative, is, at its core, the semantics of interaction. For such a topic to be properly constructed an interdisciplinary grid consisting of Palmer's concepts of inter-mental and intra-mental thought, public thought, embedded narratives, Bachelard's inside/ outside dialectics and Lakoff's conceptual metaphor will be turned to good account.

*Keywords:* Jennifer Johnson, Dolozel, Palmer, Bachelard, Lakoff, conceptual metaphor, inter-mental, intra-mental thought

Jennifer Johnston's novel entitled "The Railway Station Man", whose action takes place in a bucolic but also violent Ireland, tackles the story of Roger, a war hero whose scars are still obviously visible and of Helen, a gifted but totally isolated painter due to her husband's death and her son's attending the university courses in Dublin. They both fall in love hoping to fully benefit from a second chance to enjoy happiness. The novel's atmosphere full of strong and contradictory emotional tensions will be depicted via an interdisciplinary grid mainly consisting of Palmer's concepts of intra-mental and inter-mental thought, public thought, embedded narratives, Bachelard's inside/ outside dialectics, and Lakoff's conceptual metaphor.

We share Bachelard's approach to the "inside/ outside dialectics" in the sense that he regards it as a strong imagistic basis that controls all our thoughts concerning positive and negative issues (239). The inside and the outside are charged with metaphorical connotations and they closely interrelate with the "here/ there dialectical opposition", characterized by strong "ontological determination" (240). Bachelard wonders whether the syntagm the "being-there" bears full stress on "being", that stands for the individual himself, or on "there"(241), concluding that, isolated within oneself, you always have to get out of there and that the individual resembles a spiral characterized by inverted dynamisms, circuits, roundabouts, returns, discourses, stopovers (241).

Bachelard's dialectical oppositions-"inside/ outside" and "here/ there"- can be regarded as productive interpretative methodological patterns that will be employed by us to approach Helen, the female character of Jonston's novel. The very first word of the novel is "isolation", followed by "insulation" (1). Due to the fact that they are associated with the "huge, quite and empty sky" (1) and the sea, constantly watched by Helen who claims that "to watch is my isolation. I have no other function", we discover that the immensity of the sky and of the sea actually stands for "intensity". It is "the intensity of the human being, who, by contemplating and assimilating nature, enhances, expands itself" and becomes an equivalent of "the vast intimate immensity" (Bachelard, 221).

Bachelard argues that the nouns, the adjectives and the verbs are the "archetypes of speaking" (1). Since Helen mainly speaks to herself, a behavioral pattern defined by Palmer as "inner speech", which interrelates with intra-mental thought, we will first describe the space of objects or entities that Helen constantly focuses upon and connect them with the space of thoughts that those objects usually give birth to. The larks and their songs are part of the seascape, but they can hardly reach Helen, or as she puts it, "I am insulated from the sound of their song", due to the "panes of glass" (1) that form one wall of her painting studio. Helen wants the sea "imprisoned there for her alone" so that she could watch it changing.

The cottage, the studio, the easel, the last being bought by Damian, her son, after the first exhibition so that she might feel "more like a real artist"(1), are physically described as being placed on the hillside. Down, next to the sea, there is a "bare rocky headland to the south and a long spit of sand to the north" (1), surrounded by dozens of boats. The village is described as an ordinary one with three or four shops, a machine for making ice-cream, a caravan site, the new Church, a few cottages and two "neat rectangles of houses" (1), "homes of holiday people from Dublin and Belfast, England even" (2) and the railway station, "uninhabited" after the explosion that took place three years before, commented upon by Helen as having been associated with "violent, needless deaths" (2).

Helen's description of the environment can be interpreted as some sort of "demythization of objects" (Crăciun, 301), due to her depriving the objects of the mystery usually associated with them. Only later, after having been confronted with a series of tragic deaths, Helen contemplates the oneness of her experience within the respective environment, and rediscovers the mystery of her existence through interrelating with objects which little by little become fascinating sources of inspiration for her paintings. Through painting, she will unfold her inherently dynamic character, her mind in action, in Palmer's terminology (24).

To the readers' surprise, Helen introduces herself only on the second page as having "two rows of wrinkles" that circle her wrists and a smooth and pale body spotted with brown moles. She is eager to inform the reader she does not get too much joy watching herself in the mirror because of "too much flesh and pride"(2). She has lived a life "filled with safety", hearing of war only on the wireless. Her education and the process of learning are characterized as "one of passive resistance". Her option for the College of Art did not prove to be a successful choice because she finally left it "with a dismal record and a confused dislike of art in any form". Moreover, she informs us that she "stacked the whole damn paraphernalia of her life into a pyramid and lit it with pink-tipped Friendly Matches" (3). The items of information that Helen provides us with include mood, desires, emotions, sensations, visual images, attention, memory and they are brought into bold relief by the "thought report"( Palmer, 58) of her states of mind.

Her engagement and marriage to Daniel Cuffe - a teacher of mathematics at Kesington Grammar School- is described as comprising "no rapture", in spite of the fact that he was a "nice- looking man with large eyes and a friendly smile... and a good singing voice"(3). Helen sadly remarks "the snapshots I have of him are like pictures of some past acquaintance" (3). They rent a house in Dublin where Jack, their son, was born. She comments the event as follows:" I suppose I was happy and anxious. All young mothers are anxious, most of them are probably happy" (3).

We soon realize why her tone is a little bit sardonic. Firstly, it is due to the fact that they also had a little girl who died soon after the birth of "warring blood", having been offered "no choice but death" (4). Secondly, shortly before Christmas in 1975, while being alone in the house, a policeman and a policewoman informed her that her husband got shot. It

**Section: LITERATURE**

happened when her husband, who had become the head of mathematics department in a large grammar school, was visiting the parents of one of his sixth-form pupils, George Cranston, whose father was an inspector in the RUC. It seemed that those who killed her husband were actually after the inspector, and, by mistake, they killed Dan. Helen wonders: "Did I feel sorrow? Anger? I hope I felt both these emotions but I'm not sure" (5).

While going to the hospital, she was told that it was "bad times". She even started noticing "uncouth gaps in the street's façade" which "meant war" and the fact that the soldiers on the bridge peered into the car and nodded on them. Helen and Dan's mother took him to Dublin and buried him beside the little girl in Mount Jerome. Helen kept recalling how Dan's mother clung to her arm for support, how her hands were still cold, how Jack "seemed curiously unperturbed, rejecting almost contemptuously any comfort from her". Jack seemed to feel very comfortable in the presence of his grandmother with whom he remained when Helen returned to Derry. Back home, she threw the Christmas cards into the bin and was rather shocked to hear an explosion, and "the fire-engines racing to a fire, ambulances, army vehicles". She kept on pondering upon various issues related to war, only to finally wonder about guilt and "decided against it", rhetorically adding: "Where was the point or time for guilt"(5).

She finally sold everything from their house in Derry and moved to the seaside village where she was mainly concerned with "gardening" and painting. Ironically, Helen describes the "full extent of her gardening activity"(5) which amounts to watering the geraniums on summer evenings that would release "a warm sweet smell"(5) while clinging to her hair and clothes. She even mentions the fact that she has never had any aptitude for weeding, grubbing, digging. We notice Helen's predilection for experiencing "moments of lonely self-communion" that trace her spiritual and emotional conflicts and her "private passive flow of consciousness" (Palmer, 59). Jack seems to prefer the role of the visitor, "making quite short and almost formal visits to see me"(6), choosing to spend his holidays with his grandmother, perhaps due to his mother reaction to the death of his father which is very likely to have hurt him.

Helen's "thought report" of her states of mind embed close considerations on her husband with whom she "might have grown into some kind of understanding, of closeness" (6). Her mind switches to Jack, to his desolation experienced when Helen decided to move out of their house in Derry. This is a marvelous example of the stream of consciousness technique, encountered on page six, which depicts Jack's states of mind when he had to rip the posters and pictures from the walls, to empty all the drawers and shelves, to pack into cardboard boxes all his books, records, tapes, papers, throw out old clothes, the past broken toys. Helen concludes: "he felt so vulnerable as he stood there in the dusty, empty room with the pale empty patterns on the walls" (6).

Then her mind switches back to her husband who, exactly as her son, considered her "inscrutable". He could neither understand nor stand her smoking and her subsequent coughing. She recalled how he hated noticing "dead butts and ash beside the crumbs or forlorn in the spilt tea" (6), or how, having run out of cigarettes, she started looking for "the hidden cigarette, a half-smoked one in a saucer somewhere, one shoved into the back of a drawer"(6). She sadly concludes that if he had been alive, she would never have lived like that, because "he was a neat, well-ordered man. He believed in tradition, in keeping up appearances". Being a mathematician, he would often tell her: "Helen you must keep within structures. Otherwise things fall apart". She also recalled his need to protect her "from some destructive demon that he could see inside her" (6). He even remarked, while talking to Jack when they were playing golf at Portsalon and when Helen refused to put a coat or scarf even

**Section: LITERATURE**

if it was raining, that he sometimes wondered what would have happened to her if she hadn't married him. Jack's remark: "She likes been on her own" made his father be silent for quite a long time.

Since Jack, her son, is the only significant person in her life she eagerly reveals his concern for literature highlighted when he established a very interesting relationship between her name-Helen-and Christopher Marlowe's line:" All is dross that is not Helen" (7). On the one hand, we assume that anticipations of Helen's opportunities to reveal her potential as a painter are alluded to through such a line. On the other, Jack's association of Marlowe, the political activist and poet with other Irish politically engaged literary personalities, such as Patrick Pearse and d'Annunzio, and his comment that none of them "shut their eyes to keep out reality" (7) might be regarded as a hint as concerns his own intention to observe and get involved in political issues.

Trivial issues such as the messing up of the kitchen when Jack is having breakfast interrelate with considerations on the issue of death. To Jack's remark, related to his father's death, namely that "a man was alive yesterday and now he is dead", Helen generically remarks:" We all die. We're here one day and gone the next", adding that "it usually happens that a handful of people feel sorrow, fear, pain. Something. Otherwise is just words, news"(7). Jack clinks his fingers and says: "It's the snatching, playing God....that is the outrage..." (7), which clearly reveals his dissociation from strong spiritual issues and his lack of belief in God, which, to a certain extent, is also characteristic for Helen. Their dialogue reveals "those parts of their minds that are most verbal"(Palmer,60) and which well interrelate with the category of thought report, often commented by us so far in relation to Helen, her husband, Dan, and her son, Jack. These techniques can be also related to inter-mental thought which necessarily implies at least one interlocutor.

The question: "Did you know that the station has been bought?" associated with the name of that person- "Hawthorne", characterized by one of the neighbors as wearing a black patch over one eye, brings into focus" the social context of the characters' thought"(Palmer,60) under discussion. Helen feels like "spying" (8) on the station man and, so, she makes for the station, ignoring the rain. Noticing the hedges filled with wet blackberries on her way to the station, she contemplates the possibility of asking Jack to accompany her the following day in order to pick up the fruits. Sadly she concludes: "She laughed at that thought. He wouldn't do that. He doesn't seem to have that line in his mind leading back to early days", when they used to stroll together and to enjoy each other's company.

"Thought report" is regarded by Cohn as privileging both "states of mind and inner speech" linking" individual mental functioning to its social context"(in Palmer, 76).We will further share Palmer's suggestions regarding the device of thought report which underlines "the nature of consciousness as mental action", thus bringing together "consciousness and physical action"(76). Johnston presents Helen's consciousness connected to the surroundings, that is, to the railway station. The visiting of the station is the physical action undertaken by Helen in order to find out what Hawthorne, the station man, is up to, in the sense of intending to render the station functional again. The station built in 1903 was in those days "a red brick house, solid, functional, tailor-made to suit the network of lines that stretched out through the hills and along the coast, opening up for the first time access to the world for the inhabitants of the tortuous and desolate coastland". "Now, it has become part of the local folklore" because the "wooden steps had rotten away, a couple of panes of glass were missing" and only the white-painted words "Knappogue Road" could be still seen.

The tall man with a patch of over his left eye impresses Helen from the very beginning. He looks "altogether very neat", his voice although neat also sounds "dour and unwelcoming", assuming that Helen has come to spy on him and to disturb his peacefulness and loneliness, thus "violating" his "Private Space", a concept that is characteristic for researches in the field of pragmatics (Semino, 13). Unable to make herself understood from the very beginning, she mentions that she lives nearby and that she has assumed that his name is Hawthorne, adding that she used to know Hawthornes when she lived in Dublin. Considering that he might find it difficult to manage things by himself, she offers herself to help him "with a meal ...or something", to which he unpleasantly replies that he can manage things and that he seldom "goes out in company" (10), a clear instance of his disregarding any form of interaction.

Back home, she enjoys talking to Jack, who informs her that he intends to go down to the village and have a drink, also inquiring about dinner time. At the bar, Jack comes across Roger Hawthorne, who immediately introduces himself, apologizing for having being rude to his mother, when he learns that he is Helen's son. Their discussion can be interpreted as an instance of "consciousness as mental action", because it brings together the characters' consciousness and physical action. It happens through Hawthorne's mentioning Damian Sweeney, an acquaintance of Jack, considered by the former "a real craftsman" (12). Mr. Hasson, the owner of the bar, speaks highly of Jack, mentioning the fact that he is a brilliant student at "Trinity College Dublin". Hawthorne himself replies that he himself wanted to attend that college, that his mother was also Irish, that he spent most of life in hospital due to his having been wounded during the war. Jack feels rather comfortable in the vicinity of Hawthorne and, being asked how long he intends to stay in the village, he replies that he has come to stay only a few days and keep company to his mother who feels lonely because her husband was accidentally killed in the North, in Derry. The peculiar nature of both Jack's and Roger's thought as well as their social nature arises from the latter's invitation addressed to Jack to see the station.

We have come to know all the characters introduced by Johnston so far either with the help of the direct presentation of their minds or through their embedded narratives, a concept introduced by Palmer in association with the "the whole of a character's mind in action: the total perceptual and cognitive viewpoint; ideological worldviews; memories of the past and the set of beliefs, desires, intensions, motives and plans for the future" (183). Jack further introduces himself as a Socialist, concerned with Irish social duties and ironically refers to Roger as being a "bit mad", "a bloody Capitalist with more money than sense", because he informed him that he had another station in England before he came to their village. Damian Sweeney is also commented upon in the sense that he was known as belonging to some illegal organization as a "freedom fighter" (14). As his mother replies that they can enjoy their freedom, Jack ironically asks her: "What have you ever known about anything" (14).

Their discussions about freedom interrelate with the demand addressed by Helen to Jack that he should "never hold anyone in contempt" (15). Jack's reply that he does not hold her in contempt is followed by his wondering why he and his mother find it so difficult to talk to each other. He finally concludes that he does not want her to know his secrets, exactly as Helen herself used to keep her secrets from her husband and son. All of a sudden her mind shifts to the station man and appreciates that he must have been very handsome "when he was whole", wondering what had happened to him. Jack's retort: "The war, I think" brings about Helen's answer: "Ah, yes. The war" (15).

Apparently, the world depicted in the novel is changing, exactly as everything changes, a remark mentioned by Helen somewhere in the novel. If an elementary

phenomenology were turned to good account, it would apply to simple facts meant to prove that nothing is insignificant in relation to human nature. As such, the fact that two trunks with Jack's stuff were still locked and protected from the dust by a couple of pairs of curtains proves, on the one hand, that Helen has never cared for neatness, and, on the other, her desire to constantly postpone turning recollections into some sort of "direct psychology" (Bachelard, 164). The contents of those trucks could stand for the symbol of loneliness, the embryo of some negative states of mind.

We assume that the railway station has acquired some linking function, connecting the characters' consciousness to the surroundings, but also to physical action. The mode of thought report practised by Helen is now embraced by Jack. While approaching the station he notices the "tufts of grass groundsel" grown through cracks in the surface, whereas where once "the tracks had been was now a mess of brambles and scrub". Damian stops whistling when he notices Jack, whom he once gave a "bloody nose", when they were younger. Jack mentions from the very beginning the fact that the political leader Manus Dempsey said he thought they "ought to get acquainted" (17). Moreover, since Manus' methods are "quite direct", he informs Jack that the "Donegal guys are a bunch of lazy bums", who need to be "activated" (17) - a clear instance of the fact that physical and political actions are expected by Manus from Jack and Damian.

Physical actions are inserted into the novel under different forms. For instance, through references to the "ICA jumble sale" (18) where various useless objects were supposed to be displayed and sold. This is a good opportunity for Helen and the station man to meet again, as he seems rather interested in her gramophone, thus proving his concern with music and with making up with Helen. He invites her to dance with him while he is testing the musical device, surprising everybody with his dancing skills. Moreover, he mentions to Helen, when she asks him about his previous life stuffed with suffering, that he had "to uproot, to learn to be alone, wrestle with devils" (19). Such a retort sounds like some sort of "psychological causality" (Bachelard, 210). The image of the suffering station man can be regarded as a "story-image", in Bachelard terminology, an image which suggests stories of war and love - in the case of Helen and Roger (210).

The image of Helen nakedly swimming in the sea or drawing pictures down on the beach looking as she were "lost to the world" associated with the light motif "whispering grass, the trees don't need to know" brings us closer to the conceptual metaphors present in the novel, as the sea stands for her rich unconscious, whereas the grass can be associated with her being a "multitude of facades", exactly as Whitman's leaves of grass. In fact, two major metaphorical constructions are embedded within the novel- that of the individual's emotional upsurge related to Helen and Roger's love story and of the individual's political upsurge related to Jack's, Damian's and Manus' involvement with Ireland Liberation Movement.

The love story of Helen and Roger will be approached in terms of the conceptual metaphor "Life is Love", whereas the story involving Jack, Damian and Manus will be tackled in terms of the "Life is War metaphor". Before analyzing the two contradictory conceptual metaphors, we will first mention Lakoff's basic conclusions to this issue which are related to the fact that the conceptual structure is grounded in physical and cultural experience, that meaning is never objective, being always grounded in the acquisition and use of conceptual systems, that truth is relative to our conceptual system, being grounded in and tested by experience and that truth is based "on understanding experiential issues" (81).

There are hints in the novel that prove that both the love story and the so-called "war" story bring us to the "extremity of metaphors"(Bachelard, *Poetica spatiului*, 93)- the love story due to Roger's precarious physical outlook, the "war" story due to the violence

**Section: LITERATURE**

involved in it. As early as page 22, we learn that Manus is looking for “a staging post” in the village where Helen, Jack and Damian are dwelling for some “stuff to be stored in there adjacent to the border”. Manus’ plans are associated with the demand that the Englishman (Roger Hawthorne) should not be around when the respective stuff is being stored in there and that Damian should keep an eye on things to be going on according to the schedule, which means “within the month”(23). Moreover, Jack assumes that Damian is in the Movement and directly asks him what he is doing in there, to which Damian replies that he is not part of it, because he is not cut to be a soldier.

As concerns Helen and Roger’s love story the first hint occurs on page 29, when he buys the gramophone during the sale and invites her to dance on one of the tunes played on it, namely the one entitled “why tell the trees what ain’t so?”, based on the light motif “whispering grass, the trees need not know”. Two of Roger’s comments intrigue Helen. One refers to the fact that she should not tell the other people her secrets, precisely because her face looks “secretive, cool, private, hiding things” (29), the other one, to the fact that he last danced in 1944, when he was fourteen. Before driving her home he stops the car at “the edge which hung out over the sea” where “the column of sea water spouted” irregularly due to the “dismal wind” offering to the on-lookers an extraordinary view that Helen already knew from previous occasional trips taken to that place. His car adapted to his special needs “at enormous expense” represents a good opportunity for Roger to enlarge upon his previous life mostly spent “among the mutilated” (32). Since Helen has forgotten the pictures from the sale in Roger’s car, soon after she has entered the house he shows up with them determined to buy them for a hundred pounds because he really seems to appreciate them. Realizing for the first time her potential of creating genuine paintings she decides to start “the de-insulation programme”.

The following day she feels “liberated from doubt, from her own special wriggling worm of fear” (34), ready to set about painting. Roger’s and Damian’s visit paid to her under such circumstances reinforces her determination to start a new life. Damian reveals to her that he once noticed her on the beach engrossed in painting the seascape and also informs her that he is working for Roger having the “signal box in working order” (37). Moreover, Roger’s remark that he considers her to be lucky reveals his capacity to read the people’s mind in the sense that he has remarked looking at her paintings that she has “eyes to see and the courage to want to use them”(39) and depict the world as it is. The passages referred to highlight Jonston’s remarkable strategies of employing both thought report and dialogic thought to depict the characters’ mind in action focusing on their consciousness and the social context. The dialogues are centered on approaching love, but also on power and destiny.

Power and destiny are alluded through Jack’s calling his mother to inform her of his visit to her cottage together with a friend of his, which we will soon learn to be Manus. Meanwhile, Helen decides to pay a visit to the old station where she finds Roger praying, exactly as his grandmother used to. Being asked if he talks to God, Roger reveals to her that he mainly prays a lot for comfort, strength and grace. As concerns his beloved mother we learn that she was killed at the end of the war when she came to visit him in the hospital and when she got killed by a buzz bomb that just came out of the sky somewhere near Victoria Station”(43). The fact that he was informed only later on by his father is called by Roger a silly excuse, a mere lie. Helen’s retort that they mainly wanted to save him from pains is followed by her statement that she is not very well acquainted with pain, adding that her life has been “filled with minor complications and confusions , but little pain”(44). Being asked about her husband’s death in relation to the issue of suffering,” she shakes her head most vigorously, but didn’t say a word” (44).

She finds out her two pictures bought by Roger well framed and hanging on the wall. What really impresses her is the fact that they don't look like illustrations but as having "an identity of their own. A little substance" (44). He tells her he strongly hopes that she will continue to paint. Feeling encouraged in this respect, she mentions that she intends to take a portfolio in Dublin in order to accomplish her artistic potential. She also argues that there is little time left and that she has no one to blame for that but herself. Roger clearly behaves like some sort of agent of positive manipulation as far as Helen is concerned. He sounds encouraging but also determined to diminish her appetite for smoking. To further provide her with topics for painting he invites her to admire the flowers that are planted around the platform of the station that, in his opinion, is coming along nicely. He strongly hopes that the station should be ready for the traffic in the New Year. He even checks the whole series of signals and, in order to convince her, he replies that it really works.

Roger expands upon the topic of running stations, mentioning that he had another one in Scotland which he was forced to close by his relatives, mainly concerned with his money: "They wanted me to sign things... to come quietly"....."I never did them any harm" (45). She is informed that the box signal and other issues related to the station are well looked after by Damian whom she believes to be a Provo. The Proves are said to kill innocent people and children as well, but Roger assures her that they never talk politics. Roger recalls how "before the British dropped them fools on Arnhem"( 45), they bombed a lunatic asylum although they had been informed that there were no Germans there. He even states out that he was unconscious then but kept on seeing those white figures floating adding that he thinks that Helen is privileged for not having ever suffered. She becomes emotionally involved when Roger is recalling that event, and, when she is somehow accused of having been deprived of real suffering, her anger grows so strong that she calls him arrogant. The war issues are somehow left apart through Helen's mentioning that Jack will bring a friend to her house and that Roger might come to see them and join them for a drink.

Back home, Helen comments with Mrs Sullivan, who often helps her with the household, her impressions regarding her visit to the station and her impressions regarding Damian considered by everybody as being secretive and involved in political issues.

The image of Dan, her husband, often interferes with the present issues either when she talks about war or when she is all by herself and recalls his insistence on her being more concerned with housework or domesticity. Engrossed in painting, Helen finishes a painting and just when she wants to show it to someone, Roger shows up and informs him that Damian has been away for a few days and that he is rather concerned with his being absent at work. A phone call from Jack announces her that his visit will take place the following evening. Dan's umbrella placed in the corner of the hall makes her realize the general disorder of the house and makes her hopelessly contemplate the destiny of many people who are leaving the country because they can't communicate with one another. Roger's serious concern for her painting changes her state of mind mainly because he mentions that he wants to buy it. The railway station is again in focus. Apparently, the station stands for a beneficial symbol meant to re-establish a harmonious communication between them. In fact, Helen accuses Roger of telling lies as she does not believe that the station will ever become functional. She feels sorry after that and notices that Roger intensely believes in his project of making his station work.

A new stage in their relationship occurs when Roger invites her to join him for a drink at the village pub where he once drank a glass of wine with Jack. She recalls her uncertainty regarding her call for painting, Dan's lack of encouragement regarding that issue, the terribly un-Christian killing of her husband, the shock, the disbelief, the confusion when she found

**Section: LITERATURE**

out that she does not miss him. While pondering over such issues she realizes that she enjoys Roger's company. When he kisses her hand she invites him to join her the following evening and "protect" her from Jack and his friend. So far, it seems that Roger's and Helen's life has been a synthesis between Memory and Will, the Will directed not against the exterior, but against the "dimension of intimacy" (Bachelard, 115) for fear that it might be tested by experiential issues. Lakoff claims that truth is not objective unless it is based on understanding experiential issues, being constantly grounded in and tested by experience.

The arrival of Jack accompanied by Manus might be regarded as an experiential issue in close association with the retort "Give me petrol fumes and the smell of gas works" (62) instead of the great country air. Inquiring whether Manus is in the same college with Jack, Helen gets an unusual answer, in the sense that he informs her that he has been educated in "the university of life" (62). As concerns their plans for the next day, Manus expresses his wish of not getting in touch with Damian, precisely because he was not previously informed about their arrival. Manus even assumes that they must not tell too much to Damian, because he might not be entirely reliable. Both Jack and Manus decide to see Helen's pictures and so they open the door of the shed only to find that she is really painting on the floor without using a brush but her fingers in order to get the right effect. Helen informs them about her intention to work on a series of paintings entitled "Man on the Beach", without letting them know who her model is.

Bachelard claims that "only the images set the verbs in motion again" (140), and, he seems to be right, if we take into account Jack's and his friend's intention to leave the shed in spite of the strong effect that the paintings have generated within Manus' mind and to start looking for Damian in order to accomplish their "mission". Manus keeps on contemplating within himself how beautiful Helen's paintings look like, with respect to the image of the man on the beach that seems to be excessively impressive. We can conclude on this issue, quoting again Bachelard who argues that such images, as those painted by Helen, get animated by the "inside/ outside dialects" (141), revealing the real nature of the painter and of the painted person as well.

Since Jack and Manus are determined to visit the shed from the railway station and see whether it suits their storing plans, Jack draws a picture of Roger- the owner -"a war hero blown apart in World War Two and then sewn together again" (67). Back home, they meet Roger who politely asks Manus questions about his interest in trains which appear to derive from his grandfather having been a fireman in the old GNR.

Damian's return to the cottage after a few days of absence, when Helen is all by herself, is a good opportunity for her to question him about Manus. Damian's opinion about Manus surprises Helen in the sense that he does not believe in democracy." Manus likes to run things his way. He still believes that the gun is mightier than the word" (75). Damian also informs Helen that Roger has been in a bad mood for the last couple of days, and mentions to her that he really likes her. He finally invites her to pay him a visit in order to help him recover.

On her way to the station, Helen keeps contemplating Jack's part played in her newly-acquired determination to give up "non-involvement" and to face her social "responsibilities", understood by her as a direct and confident interrelation with people. She even adds: "God damn you, Jack, for throwing this rock into the pool of my isolation" (77). In spite of the fact that she feels "undignified" because she has intruded upon the space of the station man lit only by the "flicker of the firelight" (78), she soon changes her state of mind when he warmly greets her. Roger refers to his mood as "melancholy" or "depression" (78) and when he is asked why he did not stay in England and become a managing director or

**Section: LITERATURE**

barrister, he sadly argues “Because I am mad” and “placed under constraint in the nicest private homes” by the relatives who feared that he might do himself some harm.

To Helen’s surprise, Roger turns out to be determined to live up until the age of hundred, and have his relatives pay for his funeral when all his money were spent on great issues such as turning stations functional. Melancholy “followed by spleen” and his return to a normal life are his near-by future plans. Sociality and commonality interrelate. The information regarding the fact that Manus seems to be involved “in violent activity of some sort”(79) does not change or diminish his determination to experience happiness in the company of Helen, disclosed to her in the simplest manner possible: “Perhaps we are going to be happy”(79).

Helen’s and Roger’s love story is coloured by those images charged with both mental and physiological connotations meant to highlight the communion between soul and body. As such, the walls of the station, the rocks near-by, the trees, the metal and wood structures are little by little deprived of their rigidity turning somehow into some realities belonging to the realm of the imagination (Bachelard, 187).

And yet, “the living embryos of the imaginary” (187) closely related to the “life is love metaphor” prove that no matter how “watchful and happy imagination might be” it can be quickly and irreversible replaced by reality, previously associated by us with the “life is war metaphor”, consisting of piles of negatives issues.

The switch from inner happiness to outer violence is supported by the contingent nature of the characters’ life. Manus’ and Jack’s unexpected arrival at Helen’ cottage takes place at the worst moment possible as Roger has just asked Helen to marry him and is eagerly waiting for her answer. Jack’s reproaches addressed to both of them brings about Roger’s departure just when Manus is downloading the explosive from the two trucks into the shed from the station. Jack realizes the danger, follows him and, all of a sudden, Helen hears the first explosion. The house shivers and the windows crack from top down to the bottom across the floor, “shards, slivers, splinters, slide scattered across the floor”. Helen starts pondering over the fact that nothing else matters, when she realizes the loss of Jack’s and Roger’s due to the explosion, “poor Roger, half-drunk with wine and love, and Jack whose hand was still on the horn as he ran into the back of Roger’s car...I mourn the needless deaths”(98).

Helen and Damian are the only persons who know that Manus was also present at the station on the night of the explosion, even if there were no traces of his presence. The recollections that Helen keeps to herself are part of her “private being”. She sadly claims:” On canvas, I belong to the world. I record for those who wish to look, the pain and joy and loneliness and fear that I see with my inward and outward eye”. They are part of the “round being”, the complete individual.

The two metaphors commented so far -“the life is love metaphor “and ‘the life is war metaphor”-cover the main issues of the reality around us from which we sometimes run away, exactly as Manus did after the dramatic accident from the station when both the railway station man and Helen’s son were killed for nothing. Following Bachelard’s aesthetics we might conclude saying that such images can be digested only if they are charged with the “living light of our imagination” (203). Interpreting the novel from a phenomenological perspective, we may also contemplate that the story ends only to be permanently renewed within our consciousness where we are raised to the status of the “round being”- that is both rational and emotional, but not at the same time.

## **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

**Iulian Boldea, Dumitru-Mircea Buda, Cornel Sigmirean (Editors)**  
**MEDIATING GLOBALIZATION: Identities in Dialogue**  
**Arhipelag XXI Press, 2018**

---

Gaston Bachelard, *Poetica spațiului*, Pitești, Paralela 45, 2003  
Gheorghe Crăciun, *Aisbergul poeziei moderne*, Editura Paralela 45, 2009  
Jennifer Johnston, *The Railway Station Man*, Open Road Media, 2014  
Alan Palmer, *Fictional Minds*, University of Nebraska Press, 2003