

***THE LABYRINTH OF MIRRORS. JENNIFER JOHNSTON – THE ARTIST OF
MANIFOLD REFLECTIONS***

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Abstract: The 'intense' and munificent Irishness of Jennifer Johnston has earned her a merited place in literature, contemporary or otherwise. Her prolificity, far from being detrimental to her artistic value, is in perfect consensus with her ever sprouting creational robustness. It is probably due to the fortunate combination of these two attributes that Johnston succeeds in being present, in reflection, in all her novels. Her artistic avatars are each unique, remarkable products of Ireland with everything this condition implies. Without her novels being autobiographies per se they are however autobiographical. In all of them transpires the writer's attempt to 'write' herself onto the pages of her fictional work. Without the overt intention of confession or of intimation, the essence thus remains well-hidden within the shell of her subliminal self; it is rather a veiled message that she wants to transmit about herself as a woman and as a writer at the same time.

Key words: Irishness, self-reflection, artistic avatar, contemporaneity, non-feministic literature

Introduction

I am silver and exact. I have no preconceptions.

Whatever I see I swallow immediately

Just as it is, unmisted by love or dislike.

I am not cruel, only truthful –

The eye of a little god, four-cornered.

Most of the time I meditate on the opposite wall.

It is pink, with speckles. I have looked at it so long

I think it is a part of my heart. But it flickers.

Faces and darkness separate us over and over.

Now I am a lake. A woman bends over me,

Searching my reaches for what she really is.

*Then she turns to those liars, the candles or the moon.
I see her back, and reflect it faithfully.
She rewards me with tears and an agitation of hands.
I am important to her. She comes and goes.
Each morning it is her face that replaces the darkness.
In me she has drowned a young girl, and in me an old woman
Rises toward her day after day, like a terrible fish.*
Sylvia Plath, *Mirror*

Motto: Books are mirrors. The translucent surface invites us in, Writer and Reader alike. There is a labyrinth inside and an invitation to quest. A quest of the reflected and of the self-reflected. The quest for identity, for our truest self.

It is an already verified fact that in terms of literature as well as when it comes to one's philosophical approach of life, seen as an act of reflection of the self in the mirror of time and society, the national aspect is irrelevant. And so is gender or race. Things are experienced by the contemplator very much in the same way everywhere and irrespective of the historical moment. Only the context that is generated during the process of introspection is unique in the sense that it is every time different.

Very much like the American poet Sylvia Plath, her contemporary, the Irish Jennifer Johnston substantiates throughout her work what Plath has meant to impart with the reader in the above quoted poem. Seated in front of the mirror, 'silver' and 'exact' object of both self-contemplation and of transcendental introspection, the artist confronts her reflected self: two representations of the same self inextricably separated by the pane of glass. The replicating sameness of our individuality. The "truthfulness" of the glass is a lesson the gazer learns. She knows by now that there is no mystification in what is reflected in front of her eyes. The gazer learns therefore to become a truthful creator herself. The act of reflection must be rigorous just as the motive must be genuine, untarnished by disingenuousness and, necessarily, both in perfect harmony with the source.

Much in the way the chassis outlines and supports the glass, Sylvia Plath's poem may, in this sense, be taken as a framework for the interpretation of Jennifer Johnston's novels. Novels that are themselves highly poetical. There is a feeling of pensiveness, of reverie even in the most 'hardcore' writings of Johnston's. The blending of sensitivity and intransigence

may be their keynote. Also the succinctness, the pithiness of the sentence, which is exactly what is needed in the given circumstance. Apart from offering access to infinite perspectives, the act of mirror reflection also implies the filtering of the information bits that make up the reflected object. Filtering, decomposing and then recomposing them into an image which is stripped of any embellishment. The pure essence of the reflected object. This Johnston understood perfectly well. Free of the burden of *formal* ornamentation her prose is opulent *evocatively*. This is one of the major characteristics of her art, the fact that she moves away from form to concentrate on the essential. It appears that the mirror has taught her a valuable lesson.

The faces of the artist in reflection

The Gingerbread Woman (2000) speaks of Johnston's passion for the written word probably more than the rest of her prose work. It speaks of the writer's robustness and determination to reach self-expression in as personal a way as possible.

"I suppose I should tell you at this moment how I earn my keep (...) – not that it matters very much but people, you people always want to know so much about irrelevant stuff."

For the artist, such questions are the stanchion of her texts: "*What? you ask? How? Why? When exactly did this happen? What was her motivation? Who? Whom? Whither?* All those wonderful w.h. words that only we, the Irish can pronounce properly," (p.3) Johnston 'proclaims', proud of her Irishness.

In an interview¹ Jennifer Johnston speaks about the feelings pertaining to her condition of being Irish with all the ensuing implications of this reality She considers that being Irish – and this will never be treated as a marginal issue by any Irish person ever – must not be however an element that conditions and restricts the apprehension and the acceptance of the message of the text. Her stories are meant to be universally readable and recognizable primarily for their artistic merit but also for the fact that she speaks for people about people and not for the (rest of the) world about the Irish people exclusively.

C.M.: I see "Irishness" in your novels as being on the horizon, peripheral.

J.J.: "[...] *Two Moons* is about Irish people. All my books are about Irish people. They are the only people that I honestly know. (p. 69)

¹ Caitriona Moloney;s interview of Jennifer Johnston. The interview was published in the review *Irish Women Writers Speak Out. Voices from the field*, Caitriona Moloney & Helen Thompson eds., Syracuse University Press, 2003.

I am an Irish writer. What else would I be? I am Irish. Everything I know is about Ireland. But I don't want the Irishness of my books and characters to limit them. All kinds of people can read my books and see themselves in them. (p. 74)

Books are mirrors. In the mirror Johnston sees herself as a fictional character, each different with each context. It is the manifold hypostases that the artist, a shapeshifter by definition, agrees to assume, in full awareness of the implications of the condition of being a Prospero with the magic wand in her hand. In each text, there is another artistic avatar of Johnston, metamorphoses that try to express the valences of the same self. Through Clara Barry's voice, Johnston acknowledges her own propensity for artistic expression. Directly, she confesses this when she refers to Helen Cuffe, the protagonist of *The Railway Station Man*.

J.J.: My writing is much like Helen Cuffe's painting in *The Railway Station Man*. She hears voices in her head telling her what to paint. I hear voices telling me what to write. (p.67)

In much the same vein as practically all Johnston novels, *The Gingerbread Woman* is not an autobiographical experiment. Yet, when reading the story we actually feel that we need to look deeper, to look for some sort of hidden significance, the real one or, perhaps, the real significance according to *our own* expectancies. In any case, the reader approaches a text equipped with the whole paraphernalia that she managed to amass up to that moment. That is why, when we read a text, we *see* the writer in them, and that happens for at least two reasons. On the one hand, because that is what we are prepared for and that is what we wish from that text, and on the other because this is what the text actually contains: the writer herself. It is true, Johnston does not wish herself as one with any of her characters – she upholds this on every single occasion – but since her writings too, like any other text, are *opera aperta* (open contexts), we 'are allowed' to identify at least the contours of her figure in the fabric of her narration. So, her *self*, encrypted in the text, reveals itself (*herself*) even if the reader does not necessarily make any specific effort in this sense. The author is mirrored in her texts.

We get to think of, or rather to refer to all of Johnston's texts as mirrors, each creating a unique context, one that is different from the previous and from the one to follow. Each time we see a different hypostasis of her. Manifestations of the same self. As readers, we witness and also participate in an act of self-construction: the artist 'writes' herself and not *about* herself, as said with no overt intention of confession or of intimation. All the same, imperceptibly, the writer sneaks in and hides inside the shell of her subliminal self. Her message is veiled. She chooses to speak about others but while doing this, she speaks of herself.

The reflection in the mirror is that of an artist and that of a woman, and Irish both. Sometimes she is downright specific about this: “I, upper case, am the Gingerbread Woman”. (p.83)

With each reflection, an act of creation happens, artistic creation and alongside one of self-discovery. Each time a new self comes to light even though the creator (the person who reflects herself) is not always aware of this. What happens is that she *discovers*, she *comes to realise* that about herself: “I am moulding reality into fiction. Is that something that always happens? I don’t know yet. I suppose I will find out.” (pp. 88-89)

In all of Johnston’s texts we read about her love of storytelling. With each story, Johnston sets up a new labyrinth of mirrors. Each story contains in substance the message *she* has received while looking at her *self* in the mirror.

Clara Barry in *The Gingerbread Woman* is one of Johnston’s reflections. From the other side of the glass, she confesses much in the way we would expect Johnston to do: “anyway, i’m not *really* a writer; I always thought that I would like to be a poet. I would like to write stuff like Roger McGough ...” (p.3) Actually, Johnston admits that maybe writers write the same novel throughout their life, in much the same way in which all our life we see ourselves reflected in the mirror, us each time and yet each time different. The same self, another reflection. There is a sense of absence of an end, of a finality in the world in the mirror, merely a door, one more, open for further investigation. Clara likes things ending with a bracket. It is like lifting the cover off a box for a second to peep inside just to check whether we have guessed right. The author’s implied idea. “Yes”, she goes on, “I like the notion of a poem ending with a bracket.” Like in poetry, in mirroring things end with a bracket. There is an invitation here, a call for further investigation, a space perhaps for the understanding and the perpetuation of one’s identity.

In *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Woman*, an essay written in 1986, she discloses some things about her way of telling stories: ‘All I know how to do is tell stories, the same story, some people say, over and over again ... for me ... it has been a reassembling of facts, my facts ... [...]’ (*Culture in Ireland*, 1991, p.10) Her facts are mirrored in her novels, her identity thus perpetuated. Even the difficulty she experienced at the debut of her writing career is found in the way her characters relate to life and to those around them. She started writing in her forties (her first novel, *The Captains and the Kings*, appeared in 1972). After two other of her novels had appeared relatively shortly after this one (*How Many Miles to Babylon?*, 1974, and *Shadows on our Skin*, 1977) there was a pause for about ten years or more. This

discontinuity in the flow of artistic production may be accounted for by the fact that for Johnston text elaboration is a careful, minute and, perhaps, effortful work. Her characters are in fact women whose life developed in a context of grueling events, personal or social, or both.

When she had tailored for herself the courage and the pride – the courage to speak her mind without fearing the consequence of her statements and the pride to show herself as she is, stripped of ‘embellishments’ – she did the same for her fictional avatars. After all, many of her protagonists are middle-aged women, for whom maturity and fulfillment entails isolation from the community, an act of courage proved by their daring to live alone. Jennifer Johnston herself did that when she decided to leave behind her life as a mother and as a wife – materially comfortable, no objection to that – and start everything anew as a writer. Surprising everybody, less herself, probably, she left behind a life that appeared to be stable and started another. Shortly after she began writing, she remarried (1976). In that mirror she rediscovered herself.

The instance of mirroring, the writer who is present, in reflection, in her texts is present in Johnston’s earlier novels already. Not surprisingly, her characters are, most of all, attracted to the *craft* of writing. In her second novel, written in 1973, *The Gates*, Minnie MacMahon, the sixteen-year-old orphan, is already aware of the miraculous seed that is beginning to sprout inside her. Johnston is again in front of the mirror but this time she is reflected not as mature person, like Clara Barry, but as a teenager, a girl on the threshold of life. Minnie is aware by now that she has to speak to the world and that for this her message will employ art as language. She keeps a literary diary, the ‘harbinger’ of her future profession. There is no accumulated experience in her attempts to write only an urge, a voice that somehow foretells future accomplishments. What happens to her, to any artist-to-be actually, knows no barriers of age, of gender, of nationality. The determination that is already manifest will fuel the process of her becoming. As a child she became acquainted with the Irish myths and legends the magic of which will accompany her throughout her life. Minnie, like all Irish people, will weave her own reality where the borders between fantastic and real are irrelevant. “The road ran by the loughside a while, and the sharp smell of seaweed reached Minnie’s nose. Just in sight, four shapes tossed on the waves. ‘Look, Uncle Frank’, she broke the silence, ‘the children of Lir.’” (p.15)

Minnie’s future starts taking shape. Fully aware of what she already has, the taste for good literature, she will not hesitate to set off in search of her own voice, that of a writer. ‘I do hope (...) that I will have filled many of the gaps of my education’ (p.33). Her taste for the

great titans of universal literature, especially the Russian writers, – Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy, Chekov, or Turgenev – for Camus, Kafka, Sartre, Gide or for the Irish pens, Joyce, Yeats, Synge, O'Connor, Swift or O'Casey is indicative in this sense. 'Altogether, it is a legacy I greatly appreciate.'(p.34)

A writer's life is a condition, one that she seems determined to assume even if this would mean giving up the comfort of a conventional life.

The reflection in the mirror is now her adviser: 'I had a most extraordinary experience [namely her encounter with the reflection in the mirror], she said. (...) I think I saw a sort of a ghost.

'Hallucinations.'

'I've come to an important decision. I'm going to be a writer.' (p.39)

'You'd better concentrate on the domestic arts. A man would rather have a wife who can cook him a good dinner than one who sits typing at a typewriter all day.'

'Then I'll probably never get married. I'm not really very interested in sex, anyway.' (p.40)

'But writing', her friend, Kevin, will comment discontentedly, 'what made you decide on that?'

'I just thought I'd give it a try. It's in my blood. Look at that. It's ink. A hundred times handier than blue blood.' (p.54)

All of a sudden Minnie is no longer a young girl; she is conscious of her priorities. She situates the choice she has made above everything else, above noble ranks or advantageous social positions. Her words prove her maturity and sagacity. The mirror has revealed her true identity. She is now prepared to face the world.

It is only herself and the mirror, no one else matters now. This loneliness, isolation, is a sine qua non condition for her subsequent formation and most of Johnston's characters are well acquainted with it. It's not only that they come to grips with their loneliness, they need it. Isolation helps them to learn be truthful to themselves and to the world and it gives them the peace of mind to meditate on their present self and to think potential amendments.

"The silver-faced ghost in the glass spoke. (...) This is it, then. Where do we go from here?..."(Over three weeks you've been home, and no decision made.'

'I wandered lonely as a cloud, that floats on high o'er vales and hills ...' (p. 36)

As one would expect, the (*self*-)reflection in the mirror ‘seems to know all the answers’, of the kind Minnie would not be able to find by herself. Maturity has come to her, or she has pushed herself into it too soon. Her worries are not unjustified, though, and therefore she looks for the support and wisdom of ‘others,’ tutors for her life.

‘I hate my age’, she writes in her diary. ‘In spite of my expensive education I feel quite unfitted for life. There should be a pool of sensible, logical advisers to whom one can turn. Lean your head against their cool, stainless-steel chests and hear the soothing answers, the only answers, spoken in muted, unemotional voices. I have only my ghost, a trifle hysterical. (p.75)

The reflection in the mirror is highly convincing: very human-like in its manifestation, despondent here, angry there, elsewhere blissful, always displaying a face that we are often surprised to see, are unwilling to admit as true.

Just like Johnston, Minnie *feels* that her time has come. She is ripening for her work. “My novel is growing in my head, and I have numbered all the pages in a red notebook. I must try and find a typewriter somewhere.” Confident, Minnie is now the magician that can make myths come to life on the pages of a book. Her book. “I am sure it would have a splendid psychological effect. The children of Lir come to life again today, after thousands of years wandering...” (p.75)

In *The Invisible Worm* (1991), Laura Quinlan becomes Johnston’s reflection, this time flimsy and poetic. ‘Poetic’ is the uncontested attribute of Johnston’s novels. With this story, the reader discovers a new passage of the labyrinth of mirror where a different reflection, a new representation invites us to follow her farther and farther into her troubled, entangled and no less fascinating world. It is a space of freedom of imagination and of multiple experimentation.

Laura’s emotional structure predisposes her to dream and poetry rather than to cold, pragmatic reasoning. The troubled and distressing factors which govern her life, create a unique blend: a woman whose inner structure calls for artistic definition. In Laura, Johnston reflects her own courage to look at herself and maybe the relief to discover there the artist’s face. She is now a woman who staunchly places herself face to face with *a world*.

As expected, the text now flows and meanders in lyrical cadences:

“Incantations.

‘What is this?’

Maurice said to me once, handing me a yellow rag of paper.

I took it from him and held it between my thumb and forefinger.

Tree, branch, twig, bark, leaf, sap, bud, flower, wood, ivy, trunk,

Smooth, trunk, knots, coruscations, axe, cracking, splitting, raging death.”

(p.3)

Two Moons is a book of several reflections. Grace; like Johnston’s mother, Shelah Richards, is an actress completely engrossed in her work and forgetful about anything else, family included. Penny, the child tossed between divorced parents and in search of stability, social and emotional, much like the young Jennifer Johnston was. Mimi, the grandmother who is about to exit life, the stage where she played her roles, is a cumulative hypostasis of the Johnston characters. Three women, three moments of life, one mirroring. *Two Moons* is the book of mirroring in which Mimi is the person (Johnston) who is able “to see beyond reality” (p.8), beyond the limits of the frame-and-glass” and to understand. An awareness that comes, alas, at the end of one’s journey.

Jennifer Johnston goes beyond feminist and feminine writing

The Irish predicament is, without a doubt, an ardent issue still. In a society torn apart by political, social and personal dissensions, the ones who are most likely to feel the atmosphere of unrest more acutely are the women. The sense of disruption affects to a higher extent the woman’s nature, maybe due to the fact that their inner acoustics amplifies the sound, or the sounds, of the life they live, the clatter of the historical reality seconded by the reverberations of their own reality.

With her writings, Johnston, intentionally or not, demonstrates this. Nevertheless, she has chosen to ‘speak’ about all this reality in a different way even though like her fellow women writers, Johnston speaks about human issues, Irish issues indeed but human primarily.

“Despite all obstacles, changes in Ireland for women since the beginning of the 1970s have sometimes been both dramatic and disturbing, and these have spilled over into literature as well. Contemporary literature by women reflects them all. As more women have begun to speak for themselves, they create alternatives to stereotypical and idealized images and write realistically and explicitly about female experience. Any reading of contemporary Irish literary texts will reveal just how varied and complex the responses to the problems women face can be.”² (p.16)

² Patricia Boyle Haberstroth, *Women Creating Women: Contemporary Irish Women Poets*, Syracuse University Press.

Indeed, her books do make a difference. She is not the militant who lashes her text (and us) with scenes of violence, who drinks hatred and then spits fire to burn the reader deep enough to want to cry. She is not the political analyst either, with a cool mind and a sharp scalpel in her hand ready to dissect the social and political reality down to the bone. She is none of these. Her books speak about the Irish people, mostly about the Irish Woman, and their/her sturdy, resilient and, by all means, generous nature.

As known and shown, Irish women writers are prose writers rather than poetry writers. With a writer like Jennifer Johnston, however, the two types of *écriture* merge in the sense that her prose is highly poetical, incantational. Like poetry, Johnston's prose is unexpectedly but delightfully succinct. Despite the brevity of her statements, her texts are rich, are dense in meaning, which makes them intensely suggestive.

Johnston's texts hardly fit the patterns of what is conventionally described as 'feminist' writing, not formally and not in terms of their content either. With a voice which is rather that of a male poet in its lack of hesitation and clear-cut suggestiveness, her novels depict Irish people, women mostly, and their own slice of existence as they participate in, witness, or quite the contrary, hide from the reality of various historical moments. She does not whisper this feebly, as we might expect, she places everything she has to say before our eyes simply and directly, in a manly way.

The characters of her novels are all of the same kin in terms of what they express: they all speak of life values. They have no 'gender' since what they represent in the narrative context, their inner structure and most of all their message is sexless. They are artistic constructs and the fact that they are shaped as men or as women is fortuitous and unimportant for the overall message. Equally strong and convincing, they are the two sides of Johnston's personality. They are reflections, variations of the same self. In the way in which they are rendered by Johnston's fictional context, these representations are randomly male and female. From beyond the idea of physical differentiation, Johnston addresses the world, the balance of which is rendered by the equal participation of the two sexes. With her texts, Johnston participates in a universal dress rehearsal (after all, theater has been a permanent presence in her life) where the characters put on costumes alternatively, men, women, then again men, and women again, in a perpetual alternation of roles played by the representations of her creative self.

Like shifting images in the mirror, Johnston's characters are in permanent motion. Put together, they make the big wave that pushes Johnston's boat further and further towards new fictional shores. Separately, they open doors, always new ones, doors leading to 'other rooms' where 'other voices' are at play. They move restlessly, determinedly and courageously on, entering yet new passages of their labyrinth.

I see her again.

Running.

Showing a clean pair of heels; I've always loved that daft
expression. [...]

She could be **any age**.

My age.

My mother's age.

My daughter's age.

Through the opening trees.

(...) **All ages.**

All women. (*The Invisible Worm*, p.65)

When interviewed by Caitriona Moloney, Johnston also stated her position towards social and art-contained feminism.

C.M.: Are you a feminist writer?

J.J.: No, not as such. [...] I like women [...] and I try to explore them in my work. I think the militant feminists have made a terrible mistake. They have gone too far and they want too much. They are responsible for the many problems women have today.

C.M.: The backlash?

J.J.: Yes, I'm not a "feminist" as such. (p.73)³

Conclusion

In the 1970's a new name appears in the literary firmament. Jennifer Johnston asserts herself with an astounding precision and force as a writer of fiction. She seems to have found her voice from the very beginning, and wishes to impart to the reading public of Ireland and of elsewhere some of her stories. Johnston and her characters, male or female, fight confidently with life for their life, assuming audacious roles and winning too, in the long run, no matter

³ Caitriona Moloney has interviewed Johnston. The interview was published in the review *Irish Women Writer Speak Out. Voices from the field*, Helen Thompson, Syracuse University Press, 2003.

how impossible this victory may seem. They – Johnston and her characters – are undeniably people with adamant willpower. By becoming a writer, Johnston has assumed the responsibility of being the spokesperson for everything this art implies.

Unknowingly, despite her strong resistance, Johnston has created characters ‘in her likeness.’ The time she spends in front of the mirror is not a time of vanity but one of analytical introspection. She is in dialogue with the countless possibilities of self-representation.

The text semantics of Johnston’s stories reveals the fact that in reference to the characters the label “woman” is emptied of content. In the texts prototypes are constructed, representations envisioned by the author as belonging to a certain fictional time-space frame and who are in constant interaction with all the other constituting elements (setting and the other characters). With each text, the literary-genetic similarities that characterize Johnston’s characters fade away, losing their precise contours. They are subject to constant reshaping and redefining. In this they are always new, always different. Yet, they are fugues. They are ‘phases of mirroring’, a woman passing from one mirror to another inside the labyrinth, looking for her identity, for the reflection and, hence, realization of the true self; they are also stages of the author’s change of mood of perspective or attitude towards reality, and adaptation to the context, according to various subjects she tackles in each novel.

Johnston’s message is quite clear: “Writers tell you as much as they wish – that should be enough for you. But it seldom is.” (*The Gingerbread Woman*, p.3) Indeed it seldom is. For this reason we take pains in digging deep, deeper and deeper into their texts to find what *we* wish to find. The meanings and the interpretations *we* attribute to them, which comes, most of the time, probably, as a genuine surprise to them. But this is only fair in terms of literature, that is, the Reader and the Author surprising each other. This makes the literary world go round.

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