

Jennifer Johnston's Works

Jennifer Johnston's works of fiction have, almost unanimously, met with extraordinary praise and pronounced admiration. *Shadows on Our Skin* (1977) was shortlisted for the Booker Prize, if that is anything to go by. *The Old Jest* (1979) won the Whitbread Award for Fiction, and *The Invisible Worm* (1991) was shortlisted for the Sunday Express Book of the Year. The comment on the cover of her latest novel, *Two Moons* (1998), states that Jennifer Johnston "is recognised to be one of Ireland's finest writers" - an appreciation underpinned by numerous articles about her oeuvre. Yet what in the face of all this eulogy may be surprising is that none of the studies written so far has anything to remark on the glaring deficiencies in the novels. Critics may have turned a blind eye to the artistic shortcomings in Johnston out of admiration for her person. Still, it is rather odd that she should seem from their comments to be among the most consummate of stylists and artists. Sean MacMahon, for instance, argues:

Her technical skill, her handling of dialogue, her tact when writing of youth and age, her detachment and humour, her quality of imagination, and above all her economy [...] all mark her out as a writer who may some day be great.

The tentative note in MacMahon's verdict is due to the fact that it was made early on in Johnston's career. Writing some five years later, Mark Mortimer, with far fewer doubts, asserts:

Now that she has established herself as a novelist of great and varied gift - admirable in constructing her plots and portraying her characters. Showing, as Minnie says of herself at school, "remarkable genuity in phrase making" [...] she brings to her work many of the qualities that make a novelist's work memorable: precision in handling the army of words implanted in her mind [...]

Similarly, Heinz Kosok finds evidence in her work of a restless search for le mot juste. But there are occasions, too many in fact to justify such praise, where Johnston's mots are anything but justes. Anthony Burgess even had no qualms in evaluating *Shadows on Our Skin* as "unique and perfect art". While he was penning his review, Burgess must, for a moment, have forgotten what perfect art is. After all - *indignor quandoque bonus dormitat Homerus*, as Horace so sapiently suggested.

Johnston's works of fiction, to offer a summary critique, are self-deflatingly schematic: just too many of them rely on the same compositional pattern and concentrate on the themes of initiation and the sad plight of, frequently adolescent, would-be writers. Johnston's novels, furthermore, betray deficiencies in narrative style and technique as well as an unsure hand at what may be termed metaphorical enrichment, or metonymy. Lastly, they show the author's propensity for simply overdoing the coincidences in her plots and burdening her narrative accounts with intolerably melodramatic elements.

There are many ways of indicating the schematic nature of the novels. One would be to ask why if anyone in Johnston's fictional world plays, or listens to, a piece of music, it has, without fail, to be something by Chopin. In *The Captains and the Kings* (1972), Mr Prendergat immerses himself in the playing of Chopin's *Nocturnes* shortly before he dies; Alec's mother, in *How Many Miles to Babylon?* (1974), has a penchant for Chopin, and so has Maeve, in *The Old Jest* (1979); *The Christmas Tree* (1981) yet again carries a reference to the Polish composer, but there, by way of compensation, Beethoven, Brahms, and Liszt get a mention as well. In *Fool's Sanctuary* (1987), the principal character is, as so often in Johnston, an adolescent girl with a propensity for playing the Joanna. She, too, is fond of Chopin; but unlike Mr Prendergast, she is not particularly good at playing his music, having opted for Debussy instead.

Or, one may ask, why so often in her fictional world do raindrops have to "burst" on some character's cheek (e.g. *Shadows & The Old Jest*), or why so frequently her characters have to stare "inimicably" (*Shadows & The Old Jest*). The best way, however, is by pointing to the structural similarity of the books. In most of them, Johnston has favoured two compositional designs: either a combination of diary entries in the first-person and narrative sections in the third-person, or a circular narrative pattern, utilising a framing device.

The first group consists of *The Gates* (1973) and *The Old Jest*, very similar books also in respects other than purely structural. In fact, *The Old Jest* cannot pretend to be much more than a rçchauffç of both thematic matters and structural patterns tried out in the previous fictions, most notably in *The Gates*. An eighteen-year-old girl, Nancy Gulliver, with aspirations to becoming a writer, narrates certain allegedly crucial events which span a couple of days in her life, adopting a third-person point of view. Once again, as in *The Gates*, each narrative section is prefaced with a diary entry. These entries are intended to record "passing thoughts that give impressions of [Nancy]" (p. 6), and their raison d'être is simply "that in forty years...[she]

can look back and see what [she] was like when [she] started out" (p. 6), or so Nancy wishes the reader to think. In spite of this explanation, though, it remains teasingly unclear, here as in *The Gates*, what the strategy of combining diary entries with narrative units is meant to convey. For, apart from being from the same pen, the two have little to hold them together thematically. Thus it would have been feasible to have the entries reflect on the narrative parts, or vice versa. Besides, why should someone who believes she has it in her to become a writer and wishes to fictionalise aspects of her own life preface her account with unfictionalised diary entries, or undisguised addresses to the reader concerning her whereabouts, before embarking on her narrative enterprise? In slightly varied form the same problem arises again in Johnston's *The Railway Station Man* (1984), where it is, as in *The Gates* and *The Old Jest*, linked with a shift in narrative point of view, quite a questionable shift, to be precise, as will be argued later.

As for the reliance on a framing device. *The Captains and the Kings* marks the beginning. The novel starts off on the afternoon of 20 September, with Guards Devenney and Conroy on their way to Kill House. After two pages, this unit is left undeveloped and unresolved, and the reader is kept guessing as to what the guards' business may consist in. Only at the very end does the account pick up from there to divulge that the two men are on their way to summon Mr Prendergast to the police barracks. Within this frame, the story is told of what happened between "late May" (p. 8) and 20 September, involving Mr Prendergast and the boy, Diarmid Toolish. Intriguing through a framing device may be, the trouble is that in *The Captains* it fails to have any real thematic consequence; it is just an empty ploy. In her third novel, *How Many Miles to Babylon?*, Johnston once again resorts to a framing device as well as to a circular course of events. Alexander Moore has been sentenced to death and will soon have to face the firing squad for shooting his friend, Jerry Crowe. While he is thus waiting for his execution, he spends his time writing, committed to no cause and knowing that "for the waiting days [he has] only the past to play about with" (p. 5). His juggling "with a series of possibly inaccurate memories" (p. 5) leads him back to his childhood in Ireland, and proceeding from that period in time, he gradually unfolds the story of his friendship with Jerry. The next novel openly to make use of a narrative frame is *The Christmas Tree*. While it therefore belongs firmly to the group under discussion, the book at the same time shares certain structural characteristics with *The Gates* and *The Old Jest*. The frame is formed by the letter Constance Keating pens to Jacob Weinberg at the outset, urging him to come and see her before she dies, and by Jacob's belated arrival at Constance's house in Ballsbridge near the close. This apart, the story consists of sections told from a first-person viewpoint and recording the events during the last eight days of Constance's life. Intercalated into these are units presenting scenes from a receding past and constituting those "thousand pieces of a jigsaw puzzle" mentioned by Constance herself. This compositional scheme not only recalls the narrative texture of *The Gates* and *The Old Jest*, but is essentially similar to it, the present sections in the first-person corresponding to the diary entries, and the past sections in the third-person to the straight narrative passages in the other two novels. *The Railway Station Man* yet again employs a framing device, and yet again has a circular course of events, while at the same time exploiting the narrative procedure of *The Gates* and *The Old Jest*. It begins with Helen Cuffe, in the first-person, filling the reader in on her past life before she came to live in a cottage in the North West of Ireland, near Sligo. Unlike most of her fellow-protagonists in Johnston's world of fiction, Helen had, until quite recently, no aspirations to become a writer. A painter of sorts, she exchanged brush for pen after a disastrous event in which her son, Jack, and the eponymous railway station man were embroiled. The last section of the book closes the ring-like frame; it belongs to the same level as the opening passage, again presenting Helen directly addressing the reader in the first-person. Within this frame, reminiscent of the procedure in *The Captains* and, especially, in *How Many Miles*, Helen tells the story of her involvement with Roger Hawthorne and of the explosion cryptically mentioned at the start. The references to the explosion at the beginning and the end thus reinforce the circular pattern, as does the device of starting and finishing the account with a single word. At the outset it is the word "isolation", at the close it is the word "running". It seems as if Johnston deliberately chose to begin and end her novel thus in order to further enhance the circular course of events, to indicate (say) that the story moves from the "isolation" which characterised Helen's life before she got to know the titular hero, via a brief period of friendship, even love, happiness, and involvement, to - well, yes, "running". But where to and what from? There's the rub. Apart from the fact that the novel begins and ends with a single word, the idea does not make much sense. Why, one may wonder, did Johnston not select a word for the close that fitted better the otherwise meaningless pattern?

In Johnston's previous books, whenever there was a would-be writer giving a fictional account of her, or his, life, it was done from a third-person viewpoint. That is, at least partly, again the case in *The Railway Station Man*. But whereas previously the perspective remained the same throughout, namely that of the teller, now in the third-person part of the novel the point of view changes between that of Helen and that of Jack, so that taken together the narrative presents three different perspectives: Helen in the first-person, Helen in the third-person, and Jack in the third-person. Thus, as mentioned, the prefatory section has Helen state, for instance: "At this moment, as I write these words [...]". The first and second units of the fictionalised part are seen through Jack's eyes, while the next one shows a change to Helen's. The strategy is later repeated. Why should that be so? Is the change in point of view thematically necessary, or significant? This much is certain: since Helen states of herself that it is she who is writing everything, this means that whenever the reader is asked to assess the incidents through Jack's eyes, Helen assumes cognizance of her son's thoughts. There is nothing odd about the procedure because, after all, the greater part of the novel represents a fictionalised version of recent events in Helen's life featuring Helen the writer taking on the role of

omniscient narrator. The trouble, though, is that *The Railway Station Man* is so centred, for its effect, on Helen (most narrative units are from her point of view), and Jack remains such a marginal figure in the Helen-Roger drama that the change in perspective must appear entirely arbitrary. Why, for instance, if there must be viewpoints other than Helen's is the reader never allowed to enter into Roger's, or Damian's, mind? Why are the events not mirrored through the consciousnesses of all the main characters, in the manner employed by (say) Joseph Conrad in *Nostromo*? The question must remain unanswered. And so must the related one of why Johnston adopted the policy. In fact, the whole strategy becomes nonsensical if one takes the following into account: in her first couple of paragraphs, Helen states: "To be accurate, and it is in the interest of accuracy that I am struggling with these words [...]" (p. 1). How can she be accurate about Jack's thoughts, unless he told her himself, which is wholly unlikely as he was blown to smithereens in the explosion?

In *Fool's Sanctuary*, the narrative present forms a framing device for a recollective account of past events. The frame is quite promising. Miranda, late in life - in fact, she is on her deathbed in "Termon" (an anglicisation of the Irish word for 'sanctuary'), a Big House somewhere in County Cork, a situation comparable to Constance's in *The Christmas Tree* - is playing "[her] play for the last time" in her head, a play focusing on a stormy weekend and involving her father, her brother Andrew, Andrew's British soldier friend, Nanny, her youthful sweetheart Cathal, and members of the IRA. The style of the first pages is almost scintillating and the subject matter seems compelling. But as early as page 7, when Miranda's 'play' commences, it becomes only too apparent that a sour disappointment is afoot. Cathal, son of a Catholic worker at Termon and now a student in Dublin and associated with the fight for freedom, has come from "the real world" to visit Miranda in order "to breath the same unreal air as [she]". Also on a visit is Andrew, a sort of glorified spy for the British Army, whose life in Britain has taught him to despise the Irish and their fight for independence. He is haunted by the 'ghost' of his mother and has never been able to hit it off with his father, Mr Martin, who dreams of repaying his debts to a country exploited by his ancestors: thousands and thousands of acres of derelict land must be given new heart, he believes, through "planting combined with major drainage schemes" (p. 65). Andrew is accompanied by his officer friend Harry Harrington, who complicates things at Termon by falling in love with Miranda, thus becoming a rival to Cathal, who is already hard put to it to stand his ground against attacks from his erstwhile friend Andrew for stepping out of his class. While Harry is making sheep's eyes at Miranda and Andrew is quarrelling with his father and getting drunker and drunker, Cathal comes with the news that the IRA have sent some hitmen down from Dublin to assassinate Andrew and Harry. After some poking around in Mr Martin's antediluvian car, the British "intruders" are packed off to Dublin, and Cathal is later taken away by the IRA men and shot for betraying the cause.

The blurb claims that *Fool's Sanctuary* is about "loyalty and betrayal, and the thin line that divides them". If it is, then the realisation is severely marred, most devastatingly by the reliance on worn-out features of the big-house novel: the ineffective, philanthropic father; the soldier son, who has turned to drink and despises his father's idealism; the stuttering, likeable Englishman who has no clue about Ireland; the no-nonsense Nanny; the overpowering mother, albeit now a 'ghost'; and the Catholic patriot who goes to his death for a grand gesture. There is also the problem that the novella is too much centred on Miranda for the themes of loyalty and betrayal to come into their own. The way that Miranda, imprisoned in the unreality of her fool's sanctuary and stunted in her emotional growth by the hapless immaturity of her consciousness, comes to terms, or rather fails to come to terms, with the disruption of her "Indian summer of illusions" is not worked out properly. In fact at times it is made preposterous. For instance, when Cathal meets Miranda, she suggests, quoting the line from Richard II: "Let's sit upon the ground and tell sad stories of the death of kings". This is completely out of context. In its overreliance on dialogue the narrative reveals its origin in a stage play, *Indian Summer*, first produced in Belfast in 1983.

The Invisible Worm (1991) yet again employs a framing device, confronting past and present. The novel is about guilt and atonement, about the laying of ghosts from the past. It is the story of thirty-seven-year-old Laura Quinlan and how the invisible worm of memory "doth [her] life destroy", to adopt a line from Blake's "The Sick Rose". Laura is given to standing by the window and seeing scenes from the past in her "X-ray eyes", scenes that reverberate and conjure up other scenes. In them, her father, with whose funeral the account opens, figures prominently. While kneeling in church, Laura reflects: "I can't. I cannot forgive. Forget it, God." What it is that she cannot forgive is left vexingly vague at this stage. Nor is it any clearer why she "will infect this race [with] her hatred". But not to worry, all is revealed in the end.

The past may preoccupy Laura a good deal, but so does the present: for example, in the shape of Dominic O'Hara, a spoiled priest and a teacher of classics who comes to tea when Laura's husband, Maurice, is away and noses about in Laura's gargantuan collection of memorabilia amassed by her forebears. A bloody museum is what Maurice calls it. Dominic is an oaf and an obnoxious inquisitor who elicits the secret from Laura that she is afraid of her late father - at times even feeling his hands around her neck.

Basically, the account is made up of two stories. The narrative present is generated by a series of quite inconsequential events, showing Jennifer Johnston not at her best in trying to get Maurice off the stage in order for Laura to fall in love with Dominic, who has problems of his own: his father is dying and his family want him to stay away. "Barge in. Fight" is what Laura

advises. And that is what he does. There is also much ado about restoring a summerhouse, overgrown with weeds, brambles and dry grass. The summerhouse is the link with the past. Every so often, Laura envisages scenes featuring a woman running. It is herself. Or so it turns out when she divulges to Dominic the reason for her mental preoccupation with temps perdu. Her father raped her when she was still a child, stealing from her the expectation of love, joy and peace. Her mother, when told by Laura afterwards, killed herself in her boat. In the end, having recovered from a nervous breakdown, Laura sets fire to the summerhouse and unburdens her traumatic past to Dominic.

This is ample stuff from which to weave a good narrative. *The Invisible Worm*, though, is an uninspired novel. The main shortcoming is the inept way in which the past has been incorporated into the present. Of course, memories sometimes do occur in random fashion; mostly, however, they are generated by optical and audible impressions or through associative thinking. The modernists knew this intimately. Here, memories too frequently happen out of the blue. The affair between the oafish Dominic and guilt-ridden Laura is completely unconvincing, and so is her ambivalent relationship with her husband.

The inevitable framing pattern is also employed in *The Illusionist* (1995). The main character, Stella Macnamara, is once more a writer and the narrative that constitutes the novel is meant to be from her pen. But Stella does not match her Johnstonian fellow-writer-personae in the number of imbecilities she perpetrates, even though she is given to dancing around the house, coughing up lines from songs whether appropriate or not and filling her head with silly words, such as “Tararaboomdeay”, in times of crisis, thus, in a way, anticipating Grace in *Two Moons*. The frame-story has Stella’s daughter, Robin, visit her mother in Dublin after her father’s funeral in London. The father, the eponymous illusionist, was killed by an IRA bomb in his station wagon with a hundred and fifty white doves neatly caged in the back. Mother and daughter are estranged; in fact, Robin seems to hate Stella’s guts, particularly because Stella ran away from the illusionist when their marriage was on the rocks. The story accommodated by the frame, which in brief episodes is kept up and elaborated throughout, is the story of that marriage.

Stella met the illusionist on a train. At that time, she was working in the publishing business. The couple married, lived in a dingy flat in London at first, then bought a grand house in Suffolk. She left her job, despite a tempting offer to become a partner in the publishing firm, gave birth to a daughter and lived the life of a housewife. Then, one day, her former boss visited her and presented her with a portable typewriter. For he knew that she had it in her to be a writer. Her first efforts with the machine yield only “QWERTYUIOP”, but she made quick progress and before you could say ‘Jack Robinson’, her first novel was completed. Now, at the age of fifty-eight, Stella has been writing fiction for fifteen years. While she was pottering about the house and getting keyed up for her writing career, the illusionist, Martyn (with a ‘y’ to the chagrin of Stella’s mother), was busy taking his illusionist act to the Continent and all over the place. Stella never knew where he went or what exactly he was up to. For Martyn was an egregiously enigmatic man. He is in fact allowed to be enigmatic to such an extent that he is hardly a real presence in the book. His act is a bit of an enigma, too. Apparently, Martyn on stage has doves all over him and, flapping his arms about, is transformed into an angel that hovers above the darkness of the world. It is all done with mirrors, of course. Eventually, the marital relationship deteriorated because “secrets seemed to be everywhere”.

What is somehow disappointing about the novel is that Stella’s development, or growth, into a writer, as that of the other would-be writers in Johnston’s canon, is not in the least made evident and consequently remains unconvincing. We only have Ms Johnston’s word for it. The reader may be somewhat at a loss to say what the illusionist business is all about. But perhaps it is significant that Martyn was an illusionist. For, as one learns at the close of the book, as do Stella and Robin, he successfully created the illusion that he was deeply in love with his wife and his daughter when, in truth, he entertained a fancy woman, his secretary, on whom he sired a second daughter. Which only goes to show that one should not put one’s trust in men who keep their pasts a well-guarded secret and perform with birds.

Johnston’s reliance, for purposes of structure, on framing devices and circular plot-patterns is thus obsessively overriding. Even the story-line of *Shadows on Our Skin* is no exception. For it could be argued that the incidents chart a way from humdrum, stultifying routine via a brief exciting period of time in which Joe Logan, by befriending Kathleen Doherty, is jolted out of the monotony of his existence, back to an even bleaker sort of humdrum, stultifying routine. But enough on that score. There are others that now call for attention, such as the deficiencies in Johnston’s narrative style and technique.

In the very first of her published books, Johnston seems to have developed and exploited the narrative method that best suits her talent. It is here, as in most of her other works of fiction, basically a scenic method that depends for its effect on dialogue. The descriptive passages betray an unmistakable heavy-handedness and lack of control. But even the conversational sections rather often have an imbecile ring about them, for example in *Shadows*. While one could excuse some of them, allowing for Joe Logan’s age, there is one instance especially which is difficult to accept. Coming back from Grianan, Joe notices his brother, Brendan, “standing by the corner of the garden shop”. He hopes Brendan cannot see him; however, in order to make sure, he ducks down his head. Now, this is how the incident is rendered:

...perhaps Brendan couldn’t see him.

The ostrich principle.

‘Hello.’

He heard Kathleen’s voice tentatively speaking.

‘Hello, Miss...’, Brendan hesitated.

The ostrich never wins. (p. 97)

Ah, well, the ostrich leads a hard life! Or take the manner in which the love affair between Helen and Roger is presented in *The Railway Station Man*. The affair is of exceptional importance to the novel, for it entails Helen's relinquishing her chosen life of isolation for the love of another human being, of Roger, but with the sad result that, when this love seems in full bloom, Roger becomes the victim of some hare-brained political action and Helen is left to "mourn the needless dead" (p. 186). To begin with, the love affair is pitifully implausible. Why should Helen, a woman in her fifties, become attracted to a man who is not at all physically attractive, unless, of course, he had an intriguing personality? Of that, however, there is next to nothing. In fact, Roger's preoccupation with restoring yet another railway station on a closed-down line unequivocally singles him out as a nutcase. On the first two occasions when they meet, his behaviour towards Helen is rather rude. But the next thing that happens is that they go on a picnic and end up first in his bed, then in hers. A transition from the status quo, as laid down when they first get to know one another, to their mutual infatuation is simply missing.

And what preposterous features, downright imbecilities, this affair contains, implausible as it is! At the end of one evening, before he leaves Helen, Roger feels it incumbent upon himself to tell Helen, entirely out of the blue: "I've had women you know. I'm not..." (p. 121). Well, of course, naturally; after all he is a man well advanced in years, and he was not born a cripple either. Or here is how the first advances in this extraordinary love affair are described:

He moves his cheek against hers and the sudden scratch of stubble made her heart thud. Oh no God, please God, don't let anything stupid happen. (p. 153)

Of course, something stupid will happen. Yet wait, relish this, just moments later:

He kissed her. He held her tight with his hands on her back so that she could feel his hardness. The stubble scratched, oh God, she thought again, where are You now? Why didn't You do something before it was too late? (p. 155)

God does not seem to have been much interested. For "ten minutes later" they are "upstairs in his bedroom" (p. 155). Next morning, Helen questions herself about what happened the night before: "Was what happened last night love? Desperation? Alcohol?" (p. 157). She is inclined to say "Yes to all three" (p. 157). Her son, Jack, believes it "is some sort of menopausal madness" (p. 127). Matters become even odder when menopausal madness in a woman of fifty and more is coupled with a kind of outlook appropriate only for a teenager. The morning after they have next had sexual intercourse, Roger urges Helen to stay in bed with him and let "the bloody Aga go out". Helen, however, retorts: "Even for Paul Newman I wouldn't let the Aga go out" (p. 169). And when shortly after Roger asks her to marry him, Helen rejects his proposal, justifying her decision by noting that she would "say the same thing to Paul Newman" (p. 175). Would any woman of Helen's age who claims for herself the sensitivity, creative and intellectual capacity of an artist as well as a writer respond, in earnest, by dragging in Paul Newman?

Since in *The Christmas Tree* she chose to have the story told, for the greater part, by the principal character as well as to include her death, Johnston was of course in need of someone else as the recording authority. It would, at first glance, seem an expert solution to have Bridie take on this role. Thus Bridie notes: "These last few pages are written by me Bridie May, beginning on Christmas Eve 1978. I have made nothing up, nor have I left anything out [...] at least I don't think I have" (p. 158). There is, however, something quite inexpert about this solution. One would expect that there should be discernible a distinct change in narrative voice between Constance's and Bridie's pages. For after all Constance likes to think of herself as a failed writer with three unpublished novels behind her, and Bridie is a girl of all but ebullient linguistic skill. Self-defeatingly, the novel does not contain any such change in tone and style. To have the doctor referred to as "Dr Bill" is about all there is in this respect, and it simply will not do.

The next point of criticism concerns the melodramatic elements and the overdoing of coincidences in plot development. The love affair between Helen and Roger is of course highly melodramatic. All too often these melodramatic elements go hand in hand with vastly implausible coincidences. This rather deplorable state of affairs is noticeable in all of Johnston's novels. In *The Captains*, Mr Prendergast is given to pondering why, in contrast to his brother Alexander, he has never been able to master the piano accompaniment of Goethe's "Der Erlk"nig":

Wer reitet so spñt durch Nacht und Wind?
Es ist der Vater mit seinem Kind.
Er hat den Sohn wohl im Arm,
Er fasst ihn sicher, er hñlt ihn warm. (p. 111)

It must surely be counted as a pretty preposterous concretisation of the sentiments expressed by these lines, when Mr Prendergast is placed in a situation where, as some sort of father surrogate, he can, or could, hold in his arms and keep warm the

boy who intrudes into his curious privacy. Of the instances of melodrama in *The Gates*, by far the most telling ones can be found in the section describing how Minnie and Ivy try to get the inebriated Major up the stairs into his bed, with the Major in a drunken stupor begging not to let on to his niece, Minnie. The whole passage reads like an involuntary parody of *Tristram Shandy's* difficulty in getting his father and uncle Toby down the stairs. Yet another example occurs in *The Christmas Tree*, involving Jacob Weinberg's arrival at the side of Constance's death-bed as a result of Constance's letter to him. When she sends it, she is altogether ignorant of his present whereabouts, but she is hopeful that, wherever he may be travelling, the letter will follow him around the world and that he will come to Dublin before her life is ended. And Jacob does come, never mind that he arrives too late - the morning after the night in which she died, on *Christmas Day*, like one of the *Magi*. His arrival represents one turn of the narrative screw too many. Tracing a man whose address is unknown, outside Ireland in under six days, is no mean feat, in fact it is a miracle. The Christmas Tree would have been a better book if Jacob's arrival had been left suspended, so to speak, as a mere thematic potential.

The examples could easily be multiplied, but these will suffice. Attention must now turn to Johnston's misfiring attempts at metonymy, at embellishing her narratives with metaphoric connotations. Again many examples could be cited, but for lack of space one must do. The use of the swan-metaphor, near the end of *How Many Miles to Babylon?* before Jerry is shot by Alex, is certainly rather inexpert and objectionable. Particularly during the Big-House part, the two friends are associated with swans: swans fly above their heads while they are taking a swim; and Jerry, minutes before his death, remarks to Alec:

'Remember.'
'I can remember nothing.'
'The Lake. The swans...'
'Only that their wings sound like gun shots.' (p. 140)

Now, before we know what will happen to Jerry, who has just returned to his regiment, Alec observes two swans: "They were flying low, their wings fanning with dignity the air around" (p. 136). While he raises his hand in greeting, the sound of a shot reaches him. "The front bird's neck swung for a moment from left to right and then drooped" (p. 136). One of his soldiers has shot the bird for a lark. But does this incident not foreshadow the fate of Jerry? Yes, yes - but rather too obviously. Even without reading on, one can - by courtesy of this pointing with a bargepole - guess that Jerry will be sentenced to death. Nothing substantial would be missing if those wild swans at Coole were not in the book.

Most puzzling as well as self-defeating about Johnston's novels is surely the fact that in so many of them their author persist in concerning herself with would-be writers, quite a number of whom are adolescents. Minnie, in *The Gates*, is the first of these principal characters. Why, upon returning to Ireland, she should decide to become a writer is a surprise, a mystery even. She claims that a novel is growing in her head (p. 81). But the only explanation for her decision could be that her father had been a writer of sorts himself. He never wrote a novel, though, only "Bolshevik rubbish in the newspapers" (p. 92), as a former friend of his puts it. The next writer-persona is Alec, in *How Many Miles*. Then follow the poetising Joe Logan, in *Shadows*, the novel-writing Nancy, in *The Old Jest*, Constance, in *The Christmas Tree*, Helen Cuffe, in *The Railway Station Man*, and, last in the line, Stella, in *The Illusionist*.

The questions to be answered in connection with this repeated choice of writer-protagonist are these: Do all the characters really represent artists? Are, therefore, Johnston's novels *K nstlerromane*, as some critics think? Are their experiences, artistic as well as initiatory, compelling at all?

As for the mental agonies of adolescent protagonists, did not Aldous Huxley have Mr Scogan, in *Crome Yellow*, express the view: "Why will you young men continue to write about things that are so extremely uninteresting as the mentality of adolescents and artists"? The same would seem to apply to women writers, this especially so if the mentality portrayed is in no way exceptional, in spite of the author's implicit claim that in *Shadows*, as elsewhere, we are after all concerned with the mentality of a potential poet, or writer.

There is good reason to suppose that Johnston wants the reader to regard Joe Logan's frame of mind as somehow akin to that of Stephen Dedalus, for instance with regard to Joe's preoccupation with the sound and meaning of words. Instances such as these:

Sugar, gritty crystal in a blue bowl! (p. 18)

'Obscure!'
The word came into his mind and he said it out aloud.
'Obscure. Ob...scure...lure...pure...hoor.' He laughed to himself. 'A pure hoor dressed in velour is pretty obscure.'
(p. 68)

do of course recall Stephen's musings on "Tower of Ivory", "God" and "Dieu", "suck" and "kiss"; and Joe's deliberations on how he can make words express what he is seeking to express (cf. p. 139) are reminiscent of Stephen's pondering on matters aesthetic and creative. But what a difference there is between the delineation of the two artistic, adolescent consciousnesses! That Joe should be concerned with such issues is quite in order, after all he is endeavouring to write verse. Where Joyce incorporates only one sample of Stephen's poetising, the one about "ardent ways", Johnston offers several specimens of Joe's poetic efforts, which are presumably meant to chart his artistic progress. Here is one:

My brother has come home.
Why?
That's what I would like to know.
That's what I ask myself from time to time.
He has money rattling in his pockets.
Money that folds in his wallet.
He says he earned it by working hard.
Over there he worked.
Making a packet.
How?
My mother says I shouldn't believe everything I'm told.
Why not? (p. 47)

It may be easier "if you [don't] have to make rhymes" (p. 47), as Joe reasons, but he goes on to ask himself: "[Is] it poetry at all?" Well, the simple answer is: No. It is, among other things, rhythm that matters, as Joe is rightly aware himself, "so that it [doesn't] sound like ordinary sentences" (p. 47). His sentences are pretty ordinary, though. After the trip to Grianan he pens another 'poem', which he recites to Kathleen, once more stressing: "You don't have to rhyme" (p. 85). Indeed not, but the long and the short of it is that Joe's efforts do not add up to much. In fact his forays into poetry bring to mind the wise reflections on poetry of Rilke's Malte Laurids Brigge:

Ah! but verses amount to so little when one begins to write them young. One ought to wait and gather sense and sweetness a whole life long, and a long life if possible, and then, quite at the end, one might perhaps be able to write ten good lines. For verses are not, as people imagine, simply feelings (we have these soon enough); they are experiences...it is the memories themselves that matter. Only when they have turned to blood within us, to glance and gesture, nameless and no longer distinguished from ourselves - only then can it happen that in a most rare hour the first word of a poem arises in their midst and goes forth from them.

One does of course not become a writer by merely putting pen to paper while one is waiting for the bullet, like Alex. Nancy's endeavours, in *The Old Jest*, are scarcely less pathetic than Minnie's, in *The Gates*. Constance Keating, in *The Christmas Tree*, may be an exception. In spite of some melodramatic coincidences, the way in which she pieces together the jigsaw puzzle of her life shows a fair amount of novelistic skill. But then, mercifully, she is no longer an adolescent girl, and, equally mercifully, she is well past the stage at which she entertained pretensions to be much of a writer. As early as her sojourn in Italy she told Jacob that, although she left Ireland for London to become a writer, it was hopeless: "I suppose I didn't have anything to say. Not enough talent...perhaps no purpose" (p. 52). The case of Helen, in *The Railway Station Man*, is different. The ado about her art, her sudden burst of creative energy do pose severe problems; and so do her efforts at writing, as witness the examples discussed earlier. Additional problems arise as far as the portrayal of Helen's consciousness is concerned. Here once more, despite her being a woman in her fifties, the theme of initiation looms large. And that is, not least, because her reflections, as offered in what for better or for worse must be termed her interior monologues, are more akin to a teenager than to a woman of Helen's age. Her deliberations on art are of the Simple Simon variety. Her mental reaction to seeing Damian jogging in the raw on the beech: "I hope to God he doesn't catch pneumonia" (p. 105), is quite laughable. Or take her thoughts immediately after she has been informed about her husband's death: "I remember that I hadn't got a handkerchief and wondered would I need one. Uncheckable tears flow in the cinema. Maybe at any moment that might happen" (p. 9). Would anyone at such a moment really be reminded of the tears that flow in the cinema? Or would a woman in her fifties, unless she were dotty, mentally refer to her bicycle, which she has to leave by the side of the road because someone is offering her a lift in his car, in the following manner: "Goodbye, old faithful" (p. 68)? It is in such interior monologue passages, but also how in many cases she makes her characters respond mentally to certain incidents, that Johnston could do with more imaginative resources. The personalities of her would-be writers are frequently at odds with the kind of consciousness they have been equipped with.

The prime instance of this shortcoming is probably to be found in *The Old Jest*. From what is shown there of Nancy's

mental activities, or reactions, one cannot but conclude that hers is a rather retarded consciousness. For would an eighteen-year-old girl really agonise over unrequited love as Nancy does, wishing “the same wish that she had wished for years, that Harry might one day love her” (p. 120)? Would an eighteen-year-old girl, upon hearing that her rival, Maeve, is not present, react thus:

Fingers crossed tightly in her pocket. Not coming. What bliss! Never coming again. Found beautifully drowned, like Ophelia or the lady who went to call the cattle home across the Sands of Dee. Hair floating, lilies, ever so romantic. What bliss! A beautiful corpse [...] (and so on) (pp. 45f.)

Would an eighteen-year-old girl who is intent upon starting “to become a person” (p. 6), absent-mindedly pick her nose in the presence of a stranger while telling him about her grandfather (p. 52)? Would an eighteen-year-old girl really ask the man she desperately hopes will one day love her whether he has “fucked” (p. 79), and then go on to tell him that she will “have done it by the time [she’s] twenty-six”? Oh tempora, o mores! Does an eighteen-year-old girl really talk to her sponge and really say to the cat: “I really want him [i.e. Harry] to love me” (p. 79)? Does an eighteen-year-old girl respond to being told what a good thing it is to be a freedom-fighter by ejaculating: “Tomorrow I’m thinking of starting a life of crime. Maturing crime” (p. 116)? Not very likely, and it is not only Nancy who, for desiring to lose her virginity first (“that’s a terrible liability”, p. 114) and then join the Republicans (pp. 114f.), needs a “good spanking”, as Harry appropriately comments.

And yet, Shari Benstock has approached Johnston’s novels as portraits of artists as young men, or women, believing that their subject-matter is fundamentally “the act of writing and the motivation for story-telling”. The books, according to Benstock, portray boys, or girls, who, having discovered in them the vocation to become writers, are trying to come to grips with the creative process. Admittedly, if viewed in this light, the weakness and shortcomings discussed here would take on a new significance. They would not so much reflect on the artistic ineptitude of Johnston herself, as on that of her writer-protagonists in the individual books. Thus, for example, the mistake of introducing Christopher Boyle in *How Many Miles*, and the failure to inform the reader about the relationship he had with the Moore family could be laid at Alexander’s door. It is a nice thought, but hardly a true one. If one compares these weaknesses and shortcomings and also the tones and styles of the fledgling writers, one will conclude that they are always more or less the same, a fact surprisingly acknowledged by Benstock herself. Does this mean that the juvenile writers in Johnston’s world of fiction all share the same artistic difficulties, all grapple with the same creative problems, all adopt the same tone of voice? This would surely be a ridiculous state of affairs. No one would seriously want to submit that every aspiring adolescent would-be writer finds himself, or herself, in a predicament shared by every other adolescent would-be writer. As Benstock goes on to note, these would-be writers all have come to terms with social, parental, familial, and other forces that impinge on their personalities, no matter whether they live in Derry or on some Big-House estate in the Republic. These forces are, furthermore, said to have the same effect on the sensitivity and mentality of the would-be writer. Does this mean that Johnston believes all writers have the same kind of sensitivity and mentality? It is not easy to subscribe to such a disparaging idea. The crux of the whole matter seems to lie elsewhere: in Johnston’s inability to differentiate her writer-characters sufficiently. Her novelistic efforts should not bring forth like results.

There is also something quite wrong with Johnston as a literary artist, and this something can aptly be characterised by referring to one of William Golding’s statements on the nature of the artist, literary or otherwise. Golding has remarked that the artist, any artist, must remain a moving target. To be precise, he has said of himself: “[...] as for me, I am a moving target”. It is true, artists worth the name must remain moving targets. Their artistic conscience must compel them to develop their art. They must keep themselves as well as their readers and critics on their toes by observing the need for innovation, variation, change of technique and subject-matter. They must not let their art grow stale, but keep it alive.

There is a difference, though. That difference is represented by Johnston’s latest novel, *Two Moons*, a book about missed opportunities and relationships jaded because things remained undiscussed that should have been discussed while there was still time to do so, or because of an overriding concern with one’s own interests. The narrative thrives on dialogue and interior monologue or free indirect discourse. Whereas on previous occasions, Johnston’s deployment of these two techniques, particularly of interior monologue or free indirect style, betrayed an unsure hand, here this has greatly improved, a few lapses notwithstanding.

The novel focuses on the lives lived in a house in Killiney, covering a period of about three weeks. Eighty-year-old Mimi Gibbon all of a sudden receives a messenger from the land of the shadows, someone like the spirit of Hamlet’s father, who of course remains unseen by everyone else, even though he occasionally leaves some of his accoutrements lying around the place. The messenger, or angel, has come, one supposes, not least because, as he remarks, Mimi is someone who is able to “see beyond reality” (p. 8). He is one Bonifacio di Longaro, who was born in Borgo Sansepolcro in 1429 and died forty-two years and three months later from a “plague you might call it of misquitos” (p. 106). Bonifacio fills the old woman with a fresh, quite pleasant and invigorating sense of life. Thus, for example, the pain which she at times feels in various parts of her body disappears in his presence. She enjoys going on walks with him, whereas BB (that is: Before Bonifacio) she spent her days

sitting in her garden or staggering laboriously around on her walking stick. Additionally, he makes her relish the purchase of sinfully expensive Italian suede boots, this being a consequence of the fact that Bonifacio used to be a shoemaker in fifteenth-century Italy.

Most importantly, though, Bonifacio causes Mimi to think about her late husband, Benjamin, “not something she did very often” (p. 31) or used to do BB. Benjamin led a strange life, cooped up within himself and drowning his never-disclosed sorrows and pains in gallons of whiskey. He was like a man “in a locked room banging his body and his spirit against the wall” (p. 59). In the end, he took to silence. The marriage had been reasonably happy for a brief period of time; but after the birth of a daughter it deteriorated quickly. Mimi did not run away from what she experienced as hatred out of consideration for this child. Bonifacio helps Mimi come to terms with the past. “It’s so hard to get rid of the past. [...] It’s like a web all around me. I keep trying to escape and I can’t” (p. 44), she admits. Bonifacio likewise assists Mimi in coming to grips with her misspent life and in arriving at an understanding of her husband. In fact, Bonifacio, first claiming to have been summoned by Benjamin, turns into Benjamin near the ending of the novel, where the husband unbosoms the secret of his life that marred his relationship with his wife. Before he came to know Mimi, Benjamin was passionately in love with another man who suddenly left him after making love to him at the Pine Forest. He kept this hidden from Mimi, fearing that otherwise she would have deserted him. “I was so disgusted with myself. Neither prayer nor drink saved me from that disgust. And I saw [...] how I was destroying your life [...]” (p. 213). After Benjamin’s confession, Mimi can say: “[...] you’ve lifted some burdens from my back” (p. 214).

Mimi’s fifty-year-old daughter, Grace, an actress currently playing Gertrude in a production of *Hamlet* at the Abbey, also lives in the house in Killiney. (Hence the reference to the spirit of *Hamlet*’s father earlier on.) Grace is given to spouting some of Gertrude’s lines throughout the book, apparently so as to show the full extent to which she is preoccupied with her work, which indeed is the only plausible reason for having her do so. “[...] I am steeped in omelette” (p. 10), she explains to her daughter, Polly, when Polly is a bit miffed at not being greeted with the expected enthusiasm upon her arrival from London. The ‘omelette’ is of course meant to be funny, in case you hadn’t realised.

The phrase most employed by Grace throughout her adult life as well as in the course of the book whenever someone, especially Mimi or Polly, approaches her for comfort, help or advice is: “Not at this moment” (cf. for instance p. 13). At one point, appropriately, while noticing her mother’s sulking face, Grace wonders: “Is this my fault [...] Am I not giving her her fair share of attention? I used to wonder that about Polly too” (p. 20). She presently finds herself in a situation where “[her] inertia or carelessness has caught up with [her]” (p. 130). As Mimi correctly comments, Grace’s problem has always been that she puts her work first (cf. p. 149). Thus, when Polly desperately tries to seek succour from her mother after Paul has broken off his engagement to her, Grace is, as mostly, otherwise engaged. Neither Polly nor Mimi nor any man could ever mean as much to Grace as her work. Her marriage came to an end after fifteen years. There was a divorce and John, her former husband, married again. Polly is now living in the basement of his house in Hampstead, feeling neglected and pushed around.

The title of the novel is a reference, firstly, to the two moons that Grace sees outside her window: “one suspended in the globe of blackness, the other flickering in the sea below” (p. 26), and secondly, it is a reference to her personal approach to life, Grace being suspended “between Gertrude and I [sic]”, between her work and her role in a clearly defined social context.

What may somehow stretch one’s credulity about the skein involving on Grace is her affair with Polly’s lover, who is about thirty years her junior. Paul arrives late one night out of the blue. Polly had told her mother that her new lover would arrive on the next day. Possibly, Polly, like Grace, is so self-centred that she is unable to attend properly to matters concerning other people. The following evening, Grace and Paul go for a swim in the sea and without as much as by your leave he pulls Grace against him and begins to kiss her. Grace’s first reaction is to give him a good whack on the ear. But he keeps persevering, pestering her with phone-calls from London and telling her that he does not know what to do. “I am so sorry. My darling Grace” (p. 100). For the most part, she is fully aware that “[this] is all totally absurd” (p. 155) and that she is too old for “this sort of nonsense” (p. 155). But eventually he succeeds in having sex with her at the Pine Forest after the first night of the *Hamlet* production.

There is a coincidence involved here. Grace’s father, Benjamin, made love to his male lover at the Pine Forest. Mimi never went to the Pine Forest with her husband and never lay with him under the trees (cf. p. 233). Grace grants Paul her favours at the very same place before sending him packing for good, saying: “But there is Polly. I love Polly. I couldn’t do that to Polly. I couldn’t build that wall between us” (p. 225). Has Grace finally overcome her self-centredness? Or is she only trying to have her cake and eat it? It is difficult to tell; and so is it to interpret the significance of the coincidence.

In the end, the strand featuring Mimi is altogether satisfactory and offers some good writing. But the Grace parts of the book fall flat in comparison, mainly one feels because of the love affair, which is implausible simply because next to nothing is provided that could suggest the development of the relationship. So one is landed in a position where one can either take or

leave the entire business. The Polly skein, lastly, is left too underdeveloped to impress.

Of course, one has, in evaluating *Two Moons*, to make allowances for a number of things, for certain supernatural occurrences, for example, things like

I am thy father's spirit,
Doom'd for a certain term to walk the night,
And for the day confin'd to fast in fires,
Till the foul crimes done in my days of nature
Are burnt and purg'd away.
(Hamlet, I, v, 10-13.)

One has also to make allowances for other elements that for different reasons beggar one's credulity, such as the love affair or the fact that Grace is given to quoting not only Gertrude's lines, which is quite warrantable in her situation, but also lines from songs at the drop of a hat. If, however, one draws the line at suspending one's disbelief to a degree of that sort, then perhaps there is after all not such a great difference between *Two Moons* and Johnston's other novels.

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- Rilke, Rainer Maria. *The Notebook of Malte Laurids Brigge*. Oxford, New York: OUP, 1984, pp. 18-21. There seems to be a mistake in the translation. For the original version reads: "...Denn die Erinnerungen selbst sind es noch nicht. Erst wenn sie Blut werden in uns..." Instead of rendering the first sentence thus: "For it is not the memories themselves that matter", the English version has turned it into a positive statement: "...it is the memories themselves that matter".