Denis Johnston's Revisionist Theatre

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Abstract: *Denis Johnston's first and last plays are, in essence, historical plays.* The Old Lady Says 'No!' *(1929) portrays the leader of the 1803 Rising, Robert Emmet.* The Scythe and The Sunset *(1958) is an Easter Rising play. The object of this article is to consider in what ways these plays can be read not only as historical, but, moreover, as revisionist plays.*

When Denis Johnston's *The Old Lady Says 'No!'* was first staged, the Irish Free State was just seven years old. *The Old Lady* had been rejected by the Abbey, but welcome by the adventurous and innovative sense that oriented The Gate Theatre, where it was successfully produced in 1929. The Abbey, facing a period of insularism, entrenched in a local conservative realism, "under the constant surveillance of a vociferous nationalistic bourgeois audience, could make no commitment of its own to a project devoted to non-Irish work and *avant-garde* to boot" (Harold Ferrar, *Denis Johnston's Irish Theatre*, 9). Johnston's non-realistic play was, then, written under the influence of German Expressionism, for Johnston had been exposed to the work of writers such as George Kaiser and Ernst Toller in London, as well as under the influence of the Dublin Drama League, which performed works of dramatists like Strindberg and O'Neill, Kaiser and Toller. Yet, not only was Johnston dissatisfied with the prevailing theatrical modes in Ireland, but also with the ways of the politics of the Irish Free State. Like other voices in his generation, Johnston's was a voice of embittered and agonized disillusionment with the nationalistic orthodoxies of the Free State. "Cinderella", he once said, "has turned into the Free State" (Harold Ferrar, *Denis Johnston's Irish Theatre,* 29).

When Johnston's last play, *The Scythe and The Sunset,* was first staged in 1958, the Irish Republic was already ten years old. The social and political backgrounds of the late fifties were rather different from those of the mid and late twenties, when *The Old Lady* was written. The first three decades under native governments after the establishment of the Free State were marked by economic and social conservatism: nationalism, concern for the native language, valorization of rural life and antagonism to cosmopolitan values prevailed. The entire period after independence was, then, marked by an essentialist conception of Irish identity and an isolationism encouraged by official

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ideology and protected by severe censorship. In the late fifties, however, Irish society began to plant the seeds for the rapid social and economic changes that would take place in the following decades. According to Terence Brown,

> There were many signs that a new Ireland, an Ireland less concerned with its own national identity, less antagonistic to outside influence, less obsessively absorbed by its own problems to the exclusion of wider issues was, however embryonically, in the making. [...] A new kind of iconoclasm was in the air, distinct from the satiric, antagonistic bitterness that had characterized the work of an earlier generation of writers. (*Ireland: A Social and Cultural History*, 225-7)

Edna Longley has affirmed that "it has grown harder to discuss Irish literature without being drawn into arguments about culture and politics.[...] The argument does not turn on whether to link literature and history, literature and politics, but on how" (*The Living Stream*, 9; 37). Both *The Old Lady Says 'No!'* and *The Scythe and The Sunset* are, in essence, historical plays. *The Old Lady* portrays the leader of the unsuccessful rising of 1803, Robert Emmet, and *The Scythe and The Sunset* constitutes an Easter Rising play. In the light of Edna Longley's argument, it consider in what ways both plays can be read not only as historical drama, but, moreover, as revisionist historical plays.

The term Revisionism, as it is conceived now, however broad in sense it may be, had not been coined when Johnston's plays were first staged, but the seeds of what would later gain force and become a rather widespread movement were definitely being planted. As Luke Gibbons has pointed out, "while it is true that revisionism had to await the 1970s to make a popular impact on Irish life, the first direct challenges to the orthodoxies of the national revival date not from the 1960s, but from the 1930s and 1940s, from in fact the writings of O'Faolain and others associated with *The Bell* magazine (founded in 1940) and the publication of *Irish National Studies* (1938)" (*Field Day Anthology*, 562). It's possible, then, to consder that can consider, then, that the embryo of revisionist thought, as it was developed in the second half of twentieth century, was in the making in the voices of disillusion with the isolationist nationalistic politics of the Free State in the late 1920s, when *The Old Lady* was premièred, and a context of open discussion around the theme of historical revisionism already established when *The Scythe and The Sunset* was first staged.

In the complex structure of *The Old Lady Says 'No!'* Johnston's main theatrical method is the persistent use of allusions to Irish history and legends, mostly to sentimentalized expressions of those, which he subjects to critique, as wanted a much later historical revisionism wanted. *The Old Lady* opens with a play-within-a-play where the romantic farewell between the nineteenth century hero, Robert Emmet, and his beloved, Sarah Curran, is being performed. In spite of the existence of other views of the hero, which considered Emmet as a force working against more rational parliamentary efforts towards independence, Johnston preferred to work with the popular romanticized view of the hero, as he justifies:

> One of the best beloved figures of Irish romantic literature is Robert Emmet. The story of his rebellion of 1803 has all the elements to make for magic. It was very high-minded, and completely unsuccessful. It was picturesquely costumed and insufficiently organized. Its leader – a young protestant university man of excellent social background – having failed to achieve anything more than an armed street riot, remained behind to bid goodbye to his forbidden sweetheart, instead of taking flight as any sensible rebel should do. In consequence of this, he was captured by an ogre of melodrama called major Sirr, and was hanged after making one of the finest speeches from the dock in the annals of criminal court. [...] So we all love Robert Emmet. Yeats and De Valera loved him. [...] I do too, and so did Sarah Curran.
>
> The whole episode has got that delightful quality of storybook unreality that creates a glow of satisfaction without any particular reference to the facts of life.
>
> (*Dramatic Works*, 15).

The opening playlet, then, is a parody of a melodramatic play where the actors' speeches consist basically of a collage of fragments from sentimental and patriotic eighteenth and nineteenth-century Irish verse, which Christine St. Peter has carefully catalogued in her edition of the play. The very first words of the play, for instance, spoken by voices, consist of lines from *The Shan Van Vocht.* Chritine Christine St. Peter is precise in pointing out Johnston's specific target: "Dorothy Macardle, as a playwright and nationalist historian, had three plays presented at the Abbey between 1918 and 1925, and her *Ann Kavanagh*, produced in April 1922, opened with the song 'The Shan Van Vocht', an evocative touch which Johnston stole for his own overture" (*The Old Lady Says 'No!'*, 30). In *The Old Lady* the opening song acquires new meaning, when related to the famous revised title and to the images of Ireland to be developed further in the play. As the scene unfolds, Emmet defends his ideals of heroism and his aspirations for liberty to be achieved through violent revolutionary action:

> But there is lightning in my blood – red lightning tightening in my blood! Oh, if there was a sword in every Irish hand! If there was a flame in every Irish heart to put an end to slavery and shame! Oh, I would end these things!
>
> I have written my name in letters of fire across the page of history. I have unfurled the green flag in the streets and cried for the high places to all the people of the five kingdoms: ' Men of Eire, awake to the blest! Rise, Arch of the Ocean and Queen of the West!' I have dared all for Ireland and I will dare again for Sarah Curran. Ah, it is a good thing to dare! (*Dramatic Works*, 23).

What Johnston wanted to provide his audience with, in these first scenes, in an extremely clever way of allying content and form, was an image of their own concepts of sentimental nationalism and romantic heroism, perpetuated by patriotic literature and fed by Irish politics.

After the initial playlet, the action of *The Old Lady* happens in the visions taking place in the unconscious or semi-conscious state of mind of the actor who plays Emmet in the opening scenes, in a Strindbergian fashion. Emmet, in the actor's dream is transported to contemporary Dublin, where a series of encounters with people who fail to recognize the hero take place, illustrating the irreconcilable contradiction between his dream and reality in modern Ireland. The most significant encounters are with the statue of Henry Grattan and an old flower woman. The statue of Grattan, according to Nicholas Greene, "speaks for the tradition of constitutionalist nationalism, while Emmet represents the spirit of armed rebellion" (*The Politics of Irish Drama,* 153). In the recently published biography of Denis Johnston, Bernard Adams has affirmed, adding to Nicholas Greene's comment on the play: "*The Old Lady* trenchantly undermined what Nicholas Greene has called 'the postures of nationalist revolution' – particularly violent revolution. Johnston's sympathy for the views of Grattan, the rational gradualist, was clear" (*Denis Johnston: A Life*, 104). In fact, in the play, Grattan states:

> Full fifty years I worked and waited, only to see my country's new found glory melt away at the binding of omniscient young Messiahs with neither the ability to work, nor the courage to wait.
> [...]
> Oh, it is an easy thing to draw a sword and raise a barricade. It saves working. It saves waiting. It saves everything but blood! (*Dramatic Works*, 32-33)

Grattan attacks the hero and the chain of violence which sprung from the fights for independence and prevailed in Ireland in the Civil War and in the Free State government.

The old flower woman becomes a recognizable image of Yeats's Cathleen Ni Houlihan when she says: "Me four bewtyful gre-in fields. Me four bewtyful gre-in fields". She is Yeats's Ireland as Johnston sees her – degenerated and lowered to images of degradation. She is Cinderella turning into the Free State. Not only does Johnston use, then, the image of the romantic hero as the object of his satire, but also the image of Ireland itself as provided by Yeats in his well-known play. What Johnston eventually does in his play, then, is to invert the revivalist and nationalist methods. Instead of taking historical moments and legendary figures to glorify, he uses such figures for a project of demystification and demythologization, again in the fashion of a much later revisionism.

Harold Ferrar, among other critics, considered *The Old Lady Says 'No!'* "a landmark in the story of Irish theatre – at once a summing up of the advances of the decade and a herald of future possibilities. [...] The Irish theatre stood at a critical point, a zenith of anticipation" (*Denis Johnston's Irish Theatre,* 15). The point here is to consider that in embodying a satirical and political content in an experimental form that broke the barriers of isolationism and opened up to outside influence and plurality, in a project of open demystification of history, Johnston was definitely anticipating several aspects of the revisionist agenda which was to come. He wanted "to paint Ireland and her problems in their true colours" (Ferrar, 17), to shatter what he identified as misconceptions of Ireland's past. In this same fashion the revisionists of following decades have committed themselves to interpret history, in the belief that what they saw as false images of Ireland's past undermined its present and compromised its future.

Loyalty to truth and commitment to a reexamination of Irish history, divested of sentimental romanticism, again constituted Johnston's inspiration as well as his aspiration in *The Scythe and The Sunset*. Insofar as this play leans heavily on O'Casey's *The Plough and The Stars*, their contrasting relationship usually helps to identify how Johnston attempts to rewrite and reshape history as well as transform the image of the Irish national spirit. Although Johnston denied any intention of parodying his predecessor's shatteringly successful work, most analysis of *The Scythe and The Sunset* cannot afford to neglect *The Plough and The Stars.* Our primary aim, here, however, is not to confront O'Casey's and Johnston's plays, but identify Johnston's own interpretation of the Easter Rising. He sets out in the introduction to his play, to present factual evidence that would sustain his play as a truthful unromantic, however theatrical, vision of what took place:

> I was a schoolboy at the time of the Rising, and for the greater part of the three days my home was occupied and fortified by four male members of the De Valera's battalion, while we of the family were held, supposedly as prisoners, but actually as hostages. [...] It all sounds more dramatic than it really was. Our captors were soft-spoken and apologetic young men who did the least damage they could, compatible with their order to turn the house into a fort and to prevent us from leaving [...] consequently my recollections of the week are personal and undramatic. Of the rebels, I principally remember their charm, their civility, their doubts and their fantastic misinformation about everything that was going on. About the men in khaki there remains an impression of many cups of tea, of conversations about everything except the business in hand, and of a military incompetence of surprising proportions. (*Dramatic Works*, 87)

The idea of being loyal to a truth divested of romanticism and propaganda, apart from being very much inserted in an established context of rethinking history from a revisionist perspective, as we now conceive it, had been strengthened in the war years, when Johnston worked as a BBC radio reporter. In his autobiographical report on the war, Johnston states: "I was not going to concern myself with propaganda. I was going to describe soberly and sensibly exactly what I saw, and give the people at home the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, whether happy or unfavorable" (*Nine Rivers from Jordan*, 8). Thus, Johnston links his experience to the production of *The Scythe and The Sunset* and explains:

> Most plays about national uprisings are based upon an assumption that the embattled rebels are always romantic, and that the forces of oppression are totally on the wrong. A dramatist whose historical experience makes it difficult for him to accept these rather shopsoiled axioms as a matter of course, is usually regarded as being either satirical or deliberately confusing, unless he is prepared to waste a lot of time disproving such conclusions. (*Dramatic Works*, 86-7)

The three acts of Johnston's realistic play take place in a café called the Pillar Café, used as a site of support for the insurgents in the Post Office across the street. From there the Rising can be perceived and commented upon by the characters inside. Johnston is, then, insistent in providing characters that make explicit judgments about the conflict, apart from suffering its consequences. As the scenes unfold, we see in the café representatives of the common people, the rebels, and the Irish serving the British army, whose words convey the ideas of the groups they represent. Johnston's satire strikes in every direction; he sees the failures and contradictions of every party involved in the absurdity represented on stage. He shares with his audience a satirical but sympathetic view of the combatants, which include a perception of confusion and a sense that somehow people get entrapped by the nets of history and power in wartime. Johnston's play meets, then, his personal view of war inserted in the historical-political debate in Ireland in the late fifties.

Denis Johnston employed theatrical methods to convey his views and represent the Irish past, as well as reinterpret established images of that past. In the *Old Lady Says'Nó!* and in *The Scythe and the Sunset* he anticipated Historical Revisionism, thies providing a fuller understanding of the Irish history. In what ways did Denis Johnston somehow anticipated a revisionist interpretation of history, while employing theatrical methods to convey his views and represent the past. And I conclude with Ciaran Brady's words in the introduction to his *Interpreting Irish History – The Debate on Historical Revisionism*: "the recognition that complete understanding can never be attained in history should be sufficient to stay the hand of judgment, and to sustain the belief that all historical judgments, whatever their provenance, are partial and imperfect" (29).

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