

JENNIFER JOHNSON ȘI VOCILE TĂCUTE ALE ROMANULUI**JENNIFER JOHNSTON AND THE SILENT VOICES OF THE NOVEL
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“It seems to me that frequently, the better Irish writers, who wrote about the earlier decades, use them not really to evoke those earlier periods, but actually as an angular way of masking present concerns.”

Declan Kiberd

Abstract

The question that the present paper inquires is whether exploration of the ‘autobiographical’ and of public and private-archive gives Jennifer Johnston argument for character-construction or not and to what extent the tension between tradition and modernity is reflected in it. We relied on the theoretical demonstration, on the writer’s interviews and public declarations as well as on approaches to the recent developments of the Irish novel.

Cuvinte cheie: *autobiografic, construcția personajului, tradiție, modernitate, romanul Irlandez***Keywords:** *autobiographical, character-construction, tradition, modernity, Irish novel*

In spite of the evolution of literature from schematic, stereotype characters to more or less psychological characters (“person-like” versions), there are arguments against conceiving the literary *character as person*. They are outlined and defined by contemporary analysts with regard to the ‘relativity’ of notions such as person, personality, individual and subject as, according to the findings of sociology, they depend on the socio-cultural representations and on the dominant ideologies of every historical age (Hamon: 1983, Glaudes and Reuter: 1998). Another argument comes from the sphere of anthropology: the classic psychological, individualized model of character does not apply to all narratives (such as myth, fairy tales, archaic Indo-European epics). Psychoanalysis also brings its share of contribution to the deconstruction of the unity of the character and of its autonomy as a unique individual. Through its reference to the cleaved subject that is torn between (self-) recognition and non-recognition (i.e. alienation from oneself), through the postulating of any narrative as a *narrative of a phantasm*, as a figuration framed as a story of the fulfilling of an unconscious desire. According to Philippe Hamon “psychoanalysis erases the boundary between the person of the author and characters”(Hamon: 1983, 17). Viewed as ‘semantic effects connected with a textual construction’, characters become *self-projections of the author’s subject* and their status as individual entities is rendered illusory.

Claims that reject the concept of character as person are to be found in the fields of structuralism and post-structuralism. The internal coherence of the narrative is privileged to the detriment of the extrinsic considerations the “outside of the text” (“*hors-texte*”, in Derrida’s terminology) and to the detriment of the identification processes of the reading and writing subjects (Pierre Glaudes, Yves Reuter: 1998, 29). Against these conditions, to structuralist and poststructuralist criticism, the text seems to have come about itself, without being produced by an “author” and structural analyses reject *biographical readings* of the text, of the *writer’s* personal

affinities and of *real event* in his life. They proclaim the “death of the author” (Roland Barthes), the death of the personal, cultural-historical identity of the writer as being projected upon what the text ‘communicates’ in itself. All these alterations exerted by structuralism and post-structuralism brought to the reading of narratives a new terminology (which is also equivalent to a new approach to literature: “text” (instead of “work”/”*oeuvre*”), “communication” (instead of “communion”), “information” (for “style”), “structural analyses” (that replace “biographic analyses”), “structure” (it supplants the concept of the “genesis” of a work and of its integration in the literary-historical context of the epoch). In the meantime, all these new terms inflect the concept of “character” which is no longer seen as the mimetic substitute or “recreation” of a person, but as a linguistic sign.

From a narratological viewpoint, the “person-effect” also proves its inconsistency in that characters are not seen as being anthropomorphic or not, but in terms of their capacity for organizing the text, at the level of the narrative (“diegese”/story), of narration (narrative discourse) and of stylistic textualization. This refers to the character’s label or what Ph. Hamon calls *etiquette* (Fr.). It covers the name of characters (the first name, the surname, the nickname), their portraits, description and designations, as well as the internal evaluations made by the narrator on some characters. It means that the “label” of characters (*etiquette*) comprises all the linguistic signs and markers that constitute the “person effect” and the unifying support for the actions that define characters and their transformation along the course of events. Research into such a controversial issue is of utmost importance to a literature haunted by the question of the self and national identity like the Irish literature.

The novels written by Dublin-born and now Northern Ireland resident Jennifer Johnston over her long literary career, starting from the earlier novels (*How Many Miles to Babylon?* (1974), *Shadows on our Skin* (1977), to her writing from the nineties (*The Invisible Worm* (1992), *The Illusionist* (1995) up to the present (*This is Not a Novel* (2002), *Grace and Truth* (2005), share many common features, recurrent motives and similar situations in which *characters* find themselves. It could be said that Johnston’s fictional universe is quite homogenous, that certain attributes of her characters migrate from one fictional entity to another, that they cross the boundaries from one book to another. Thus, the overall impression the reader gets is that the fictional worlds constructed by Johnston cohabit in a larger fictional universe and that they intersect at several points, by means of niches through which the reader can travel within the close circuit of her work. It seems that her novels are linked one with the other through what Felicity Rosslyn terms as “the recurrence of a small cast of characters [...]: many heiresses, Anglo-Irish landowners, unhappy soldiers, unreliable Provos and middle-aged women who write and paint” (Rosslyn: 2003, 239).

In Johnston’s novels women and other marginalized types, or ‘silent voices’ literally acquire a first-rank voice through the fact that they are cast as narrators of their own story and the novels populated with such characters can be seen as representative of the new trends in contemporary Irish literature and of the redefinition of the protagonists of Irish fiction. The characters seen as ‘narrators of their own story’ relate, in a way or another, personal, individual stories to the past story of their community. It is ‘the hurt memory’, to use Paul Ricoeur’s terms that needs to be recast into re-visitations as ‘forms of obliteration’ of the scars of violence. Instead of talking openly about the past, Johnston’s characters follow a reverse route: they talk about the recent history, the recent events and, by doing it, they obliquely internalize the ‘past’ into their own experience. Thus, they impersonate the country’s much deferred progress towards modernization through the ‘legalizing’ of many acts (otherwise) forbidden by de Valera’s 1937 constitution meant “to shape the Republic according to catholic values, which privileged the rural bourgeoisie over their urban counterparts and hardly favoured women at all, other than as wives and home-makers” (Peach: 2004, 15). This is Linden Peach’s claim, that the contemporary Irish literature- both in Ireland and in Northern Ireland- is confronted with the emergence of the ‘voices’ of groups hitherto silenced and that several women writers- among whom Jennifer Johnston- are nowadays empowered. As opposed to the past, Irish literature also now tackles overtly new issues that were at best implied if not totally

repressed. Among these are child abuse (also thematized in John McGahern's novels and in Johnston's novels *The Invisible Worm* and *Grace and Truth*), domestic violence, the giving birth of children out of wedlock- which points to the taboo- for Catholics- topic of sex outside marriage and last but not least the topic of 'sexual deviation' that traverses the space of generations of such a novel as *This is Not a Novel*. The interweaving of public and of private worlds, the crisis of memory whenever there is a surplus of the past in the present grow as insistent themes, triggered by the changes and the dynamics of change in the contemporary Ireland. As a matter of consequence in her public declarations and interviews Jennifer Johnston more often than one can expect from a silenced voice set her opinion against prejudices and sectarianism, which she (somehow) sees as an Achilles' heel:

"I feel terribly strongly about the fact that we are all being put into little boxes. The people don't talk to each other, you see them living in a society like there is in a small town here, the people who live on this side of the river don't talk to the people who live on the other side of the river, the people in big houses, don't talk with the people in little houses, and this goes throughout everybody's lives, and children are taught in a way not to have anything to do with people who live over there, for some reason or other [...]" (Johnston: 1996, 11).

The two main and distinctive periods of her writing ascertain for Johnston's quiet but coherent quest for 'remembering the things past' that had kept the Irish apart from the Irish. The novels written after the year 2000, the themes of isolation and generation gap, of the private and public worlds destroyed by violence are changed and reflected in the distribution of her characters: the woman's viewpoint grows stronger, departing from the isolation of the private world of innocence into communication and openness and the male character (very seldom absent or obscure in Johnston's novel) grows confronted with minimalist position, in one way or another re-'placed' in a new position by the strength of the female's - previously silenced- voice. In the same interview we took the liberty to quote from earlier, Jennifer Johnston explained the change:

"I was very aware from the age of about fourteen on the opportunities that were for men that there weren't for women, and that you had all the time to be sort of returning your thoughts and ideas to fit into this role in the world that you were going to have to play [...]. I think when I started to write, when I was teaching myself to write, I didn't have the courage in a way to approach writing as a woman, and so I came at it *obliquely* through writing *through the eyes of a man*, and this was, I think, lack of courage. Because you can't jump in at the deep of a swimming pool unless you can swim and I had to *teach myself* to swim before I really started to write about the things I wanted to write about" (Johnston: 1996, 8)[our italics].

Some characters have indeed a direct autobiographic lineage and some others are re-constructed imaginatively from 'her land of recollections' associated with 'timelag' or 'in-between-space'. Adjusting them to the area of Irish literature, Linden Peach stated that the hegemonic, monologic, national discourse that de Valera constitution of 1937 tried to impose was in fact undermined by the secret opposition of the marginalized voices. Thus, Bakhtin's concept of heteroglossia or "many tongues" that is meant to capture the specificity of the novelistic discourse can be said to define a nation "internally marked by cultural difference, the heterogenous histories of contending peoples, antagonistic authorities, and tense cultural locations" (Peach: 2004, 23). Peach also evaluates the disruptive impact that these emergent voices on both the time and spatial continuum. According to him, the subversive voices enter the *in-between space* or *timelag* before they find their new identities. Out of mere logic, the resulting temporal and spatial shifts are the disruption of "the past and present continuum" and the disturbance of the centre-margins relations. The former shift is the result of an unresolved, unassimilated historical and personal traumatic event in the past. In fact, the whole of Irish history can be understood, as Cleary (quoted by Peach) states, as a "struggling for independence" that is "the definitive zone of memory" for today's Irish society. Thus, Linden Peach reads Jennifer Johnston's disguised approach in *How Many Miles to Babylon?* (1974) of the contemporary "troubles" through the period of the First World War as an attempt at re-visioning, repossessing the past while exorcising the trauma by means of a traumatic event that the

self has already been reconciled to. Peach relied on the convergence of the psychoanalytic and historicist theoretical discourses and what he achieved- as also happens in Jennifer Johnston's novels- is a fusion of the "history of the nation, dispossessed communities and estranged individuals" (Cleary apud Peach: 2004, 25).

Convergent with Linden Peach's claim of the conflation of individual and collective (national) destinies, of the private and the public spheres is Liam Harte and Michael Parker's assertion about the use of allegory in contemporary Irish novels. What the two critics perceive as allegorical is the way characters' trajectories and fate stand for the larger experience of the Irish nation, and is an embodiment of the typical attitudes of the people of Eire:

"It is quite common, therefore, to find traces of *allegory embedded* in the fabric of recent Irish fiction. The private individual experience often becomes an *illuminative metaphor* of the public and national destiny; texts *frame* the history which itself has framed them"(Harte, Parker: 2000, 2) [our italics].

On the other hand, what 'lingers' in the present creating the disruption of the past-present continuum is a sense of uncertainty engendered by the fact (Linden Peach identified) that the past has not been recuperated as "a comforting narrative" (Peach: 2004). It is "the comforting narrative" that also concerns the issue of where to inscribe the 'modern' in the interrupted past and present continuum and how to relegate 'tradition' in the process of modernization and emancipation in every sense that Linden Peach identifies as yet another trait of contemporary Irish literature.

It is in the third type of 'recollection', enumerated by Paul Ricoeur- the "act of recognizing" – that skepticism identified by Peach with contemporary Irish literature is erased by the ethical value of the narrative. This is, of course, a delicate matter associated with memory and with images we store in our mind, imprints, traces that can suffer some alteration as the mind undergoes changes day after day, but, according to theorists, it is also one of the major functions of fiction to make the reader aware of the inner life of other human beings by portraying "*the operation of the other minds in their otherness*" (Pavel: 2000, 524) [my italics]. Therefore, the characters in Jennifer Johnston's novels are not represented as mere physical objects- *fictive constructs* of human beings pursuing or rejecting rules, norms and values, represented indirectly through examples of human action, but the moving of the previously silenced voices to the fore of public consciousness. Or, as Linden Peach certified- with the acknowledging of the traditional social marginalized groups (women among others) in the public domain, Johnston's characters become the significant 'other', the nation's sense of itself and they illustrate their role in the refiguring of both individual and national identity. The importance of such a character-configuration is immense, as it tends to efface the geographical and political partition of the two Irelands (Northern Ireland- Eire) and it applies their identity transformations to the Irish nation inhabiting both states:

"[...] recent fictional narratives engage in the determined subversion of actual and metaphorical borders. The *transgression of boundaries*, both literal and figurative, appears as a *familiar trope* in contemporary Irish fiction, as novelists attempt to re-imagine 'Ireland' as a *syncretic space*, thereby interrogating established narratives of identity and difference" (Harte, Parker: 2000, 4)[my italics].

The figurative 'transgression of boundaries' is accomplished by the minute construction of the so-called 'narrative identity' which allows the mirroring and (also) identification of its ethical value into the aesthetic perspective of the literature text, the novel respectively.

In the remarkable *Time and Narrative* (1984), Paul Ricoeur radically reinterpreted the Aristotelian concept of 'mimesis' and conceptualized the circle of narrative and temporality through a 'threefold mimesis' (Ricoeur, 1984: 31-94). The relationship between the three mimetic modes is the mediation between time and narrative. The circle of the three mimeses is conceived as an 'endless spiral' which is developed into a 'hermeneutic circle of narrative and time' (Ricoeur, 1984:74-6). The concept of 'narrative identity', introduced in the third volume of "Time and Narrative" is viewed as an element of mediation between the character and its various narrative representations. Early at this point it is anticipated that narrative identity is by no means 'a stable

and seamless identity', it rather 'continues to make and unmake itself', illustration 'the circle of the three mimeses' and standing out as the 'poetic resolution of the hermeneutic circle' (Ricoeur, 1988: 284).

In his more recent *Oneself as Another* (1992), Ricoeur reconstructs his theory of narrative in order to illustrate the contribution narrative brings to the constitution of the self. He attempts to solve the paradoxes of personal identity that arose in the wake of such philosophers as Locke and Hume by giving the concept a privileged position in the clash between the two main uses of identity: identity as sameness ('idem-identity') and identity as selfhood ('ipse-identity'). The former is defined as very similar to 'numerical identity' so that identity in this sense stands for 'oneness', whereas the latter is similar to 'qualitative identity', which functions as 'extreme resemblance' or interchangeability on grounds of similarity (Ricoeur, 1992: 116). The major difference between the two becomes apparent with respect to character:

"[The] polarity of these two models with respect to persons results from the fact that the permanence of character expresses the almost complete mutual overlapping of the problematic of idem and ipse, while faithfulness to oneself in keeping one's word marks the extreme gap between the permanence of the self and that of the same and so attests fully to the irreducibility of the two problems one to the other" (Ricoeur, 1992: 118)

Character, then, is 'the set of distinctive marks which permit the identification of a human individual as being the same' and designates a set of dispositions by which a person is recognized (Ricoeur, 1992: 120). Indeed, if we accept Ricoeur's distinction (between idem- and ipse-identity) as illustrated in his famous and fundamental questions "What am I?" and "Who am I?", then it is legitimate to claim that character, conceived as the "what" of the "who" conflates the distinction between the two versions of identity. It is one major idea that we retained for this introduction which, if searching for no justification, exposes clearly and openly what the author of the book aimed at. We had in mind the 'opening up of space for ethical justification', as Ricoeur would say, a response to the other person's faithfulness:

"The ethical justification, considered as such, develops its own temporal implications, namely a modality of permanence in time capable of standing as the polar opposite to the permanence of character. It is here, precisely, that selfhood and sameness cease to coincide. And it is here, consequently, that the notion of permanence in time is dissipated" (Ricoeur, 1992: 124).

'Narrative identity' and 'ethical justification' are effects and not causes. The former, situated in 'the interval of sense', generates a dynamic effect, which, in turn functions as reconciliation between identity and diversity. Earlier, in his *Time and Narrative*, Ricoeur claimed that without the support of narration the problem of personal identity 'would in fact be condemned to an antinomy without solution' (Ricoeur, 1988: 246). Later (1992), he transferred to the character the operation of emplotment coming up with the conclusion that "characters (...) are in them selves plots" (Ricoeur, 1992: 143). In other words, the character preserves throughout the story a narrative identity that is reciprocally related to the story line itself. The term used by the French philosopher and literary theorist to define this kind of preservation is 'discordant concordance' that refers to the inherent duality of the character's identity that is emplotted. With its 'duality', character is one element of the specific dialectical and dynamic nature of narrative identity which, on basis of a broad range of 'imaginary variations', assumes Ricoeur, may mediate between the two essential facets of identity (sameness and selfhood):

"The mediating function performed by the narrative identity of the character between the poles of sameness and selfhood is attested to, primarily by the imaginary variations to which the narrative submits this identity. In the truth, the narrative does not merely tolerate those variations, it engenders them, seeks them out. In this sense, literature proves to consist in a vast laboratory of thought experiments [and the] benefit of these thought experiments lies in the fact that they make the difference between the two meanings of permanence in time evident" (Ricoeur, 1992: 148)(my italics).

The theory about the ethical implications of narrative explored by Paul Ricoeur did not appear in a vacuum. The validity of his theory's implications is verified by way of cross-examination with another similar perspective, formulated by Hayden White in *The Content of the Form*. This time, the subject of analysis is 'historical discourse' as a distinct way of representing reality. White assumed that narrative always seeks to reach beyond itself and grasp what cannot be expressed directly by its own conceptual tools so that 'to endow events with a significance they do not possess' (White, 1987: 14). The point is that, narrative cannot be defined only as a simple representational form, as a 'process of translating knowing into telling', it is rather 'a manner of speaking about events, whether real or imaginary' (White, 1987: 2):

"Fictional storytelling as well [just as historical narrative], is intimately related to, if not a function of, the impulse to moralize reality, that is, to identify it with the social system that is the source of any morality that we can imagine" (White 1987: 25).

On the other hand, taking responsibility for the story of the other and approaching tradition in a process of incessant reinterpretation seems to be part of a contemporary critical revision based on the models of 'exchange of memories' and 'of forgiveness', viewed as 'specific forms of the revision of the past' is a re-telling and changing of the past 'not as a record of all that has happened, but in terms of its meanings for us today' (Ricoeur, 1996: 7, 8-9).

What, in fact, these authors claim is that the ethical implications of literature are extremely important at present and that they ascertain for the validity of ethical criticism. With another view, different from the common knowledge and perspective on the contemporary phenomenon of fiction writing and, ethically speaking, the proliferation of specific forms of the revision of the past with the intent 'to find significant meaning for us today' and such developments in narrative, today, also occur as the putting into question of the ego – in an egocentric, selfish world- the questioning of the 'knowing-subject' and of putting into question self-consciousness. Imposition of 'egology' on 'ontology' claimed by criticism (under the evident influence of Levinas and his ethical theory) is an implicit criticism of the whole tradition of Western philosophy, which- in its non-recognition of the radical difference between the Same and the Other - 'encompassed every Other in the Same'(Levinas 1993: 93). The majority of Levinas's critics agree that the seminal *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence* stands out first and foremost in its unique attempt to escape the language of ontology. We retained from his philosophical construction of this text the idea that of the 'face-to-face relationship' demanding responsibility to further illustrate the importance of reception of contemporary texts for the ethical practice, revealed by interaction with another (writer, author, character, 'other' culture). Thus, the fact that the other person might also experience a similar interaction with 'another', third person representing 'the other' suggests a similarity visible after experiencing the revelation of an original asymmetry, which defines the unique experience of every encounter. In this sense, doing justice to a writer and to his literature text as conceived according to the philosophy of Levinas is, paradoxically "the limit of responsibility" or "the politics of ethical difference", so essential to the ethical relation, in which "the political space is an open, plural, opaque network of ethical relations which are non-totalizable" (Critchley, 1999: 225). It is the double discourse in which the Self does not remain invariable in the midst of change, but its functions are very much consistent with Ricoeur's "narrative identity". Always adapting itself to each unique experience required by the encounter with the Other.

At another level, and from an anthropological perspective, Donnan and Wilson acknowledge that as a result of modernity's apparent fragmentation of culture there has been a radical reconsideration of the concept of culture that is centered not so much on its content any more, but rather on the 'determination of its boundaries':

"Culture ties the people and institutions of the international borderlands to people and institutions within their own states and those very far away. It is in this sense that we speak of *cultural landscapes*, which transcend political borders. Such landscapes are defined by the social interactions which construct borders" (Donnan-Wilson, 1999: 9).

Therefore, culture becomes the interface of identity and provide people with a 'cognitive map of the world'.

The postmodern, argued Thomas Docherty, prefers the event of knowing to the fact of knowledge and illustrates 'the shift from text to event' (Docherty, 1994: 25). As a consequence there is a tendency in contemporary literature to exalt the event, that is, to tell the story of the particular occurrence rather than trying to investigate the essence of the event or the outside works:

"No longer do we know with any certainty the point towards which history is supposedly progressing. In the wake of this, humanity becomes enslaved not to the enchantments of myths, but rather to the necessities of narrative, for humanity has embarked upon a secular movement whose teleology is uncertain, whose plot is not inherently predetermined by values or by an ethical end" (Docherty, 1994: 10).

Docherty concluded that there is a demand for 'a just relating to alterity' and that 'we must behave justly towards the face of the other; but we cannot do that according to a predetermined system of justice, a predetermined political theory' (Docherty, 1994: 26). Thus, postmodernism, which has an obvious effect on contemporary literature, is to be understood its relation to an "ethics of alterity", which is opposed to the reduction of the other into the same (i.e. sameness and otherness)). The 'ethics of alterity' calls 'a politics of ethical difference' in which the space is an open, plural opaque network of ethical relations.

The ungraspable ethical relationship between the Same and the Other is best illustrated by the *process of reading and interpretation*, of the critical reception of literature and by the vast, practically inexhaustible range of 'imaginary variations' literary fiction offers. In some ways literary fiction has a benefic effect on everyday, inter-subjective relations. In his book *Against Ethical Criticism* (1997), Richard Posner claims that 'the moral content of the work of art, including work of literature, has little to do with the value of a work (...) or with the pleasure to be derived from that work (Posner, 1998: 394). He clearly defends the aesthetic tradition in literature, which holds that literature does not have a significant ethical consequence. His arguments rest upon the idea that 'literature does not make us better citizens' and that 'the morally offensive views of literature even when the author appears to share them should not influence anyone' (Posner 1997: 2). Beyond this apparent contradiction, he argues for a separation of the moral from the aesthetic which, in his view, is not a rejection of the former simply because 'the aesthetic outlook is a moral outlook, one that stresses the values of openness, detachment (...), curiosity, tolerance, the cultivation of the self (...), in short the values of liberal individualism.' (Posner, 1997: 2). He in fact seeks a broader definition of moral categories that would eventually encompass the literary taste of a non-egalitarian like him. His attempt may meet Ricoeur's understanding of mimesis in the more complex definition ('the synthesis of the heterogenous', 'the hermeneutic circle of narrative and time'). Therefore, he objected to the very notion of 'application of fiction to life' associated to a naïve concept of mimesis (Ricoeur, 1992: 161).

Indeed, the essence of the ethical controversy debate lies in a more complex interpretation of mimesis. Thomas Pavel's research in fictionality, "Fiction and Imitation" (2000) shows that the age-old question of mimesis is back "with three positions being defended: the full rejection of the mimetic character of fiction, the recognition of the partial role imitation plays in fiction, and the firm assertion that human imagination and therefore fiction are essentially mimetic" (Pavel, 2000: 521). According to Pavel, we use literature "as a means for reflecting human condition [and] seek in it the opportunity for raising questions, pondering hypotheses, and debating issues relevant for the kind of beings we are" (Pavel, 2000: 522). Relying heavily on Jean-Marie Schaffer's *Pourquoi Fiction?* (1999), Pavel defines the two main uses of mimesis that can be traced back to Plato and Aristotle. Thus, imitation can be viewed as either 'a form of empathic immersion in an alternative reality' or "a strategy for deliberate and instinctive learning of new types of behaviour' (Pavel, 2000: 526). Moreover, mimesis is attributed with a third, more abstract meaning, that of 'representation with the help of a cognitive model' (Pavel, 2000: 527):

“We need and can afford fiction because we are neither well-defined beings nor fully dependent on actual stimuli. From early childhood on, we mix reflections on the surrounding world with mental wanderings that have no immediate empirical basis, our brain being eager to act even when outside stimulation is lacking. We therefore supplement ‘homological modeling’, that is, the creation of cognitive models based on the surrounding reality, with ‘fictional modeling’, which is less dependent upon actual stimuli. When these private activities become public, fiction as a cultural genre is born” (Pavel, 2000: 527)

Fiction, in fact, makes the reader aware of the inner life of other human beings, so one of its major functions is ‘to portray the *operation of other minds* in their very otherness’ (my italics) (Pavel, 2000: 524). However, the characters in fiction are not represented as mere physical objects, but rather as human beings pursuing or rejecting rules, norms and values. Thus, Pavel argues that unlike observable facts, these norms and values can only be represented ‘indirectly through examples of human action’, but these examples do not necessarily represent the norm, the value, or the attitude it is meant to typify’ (Pavel, 2000: 530). It means that there is no determined relation between fictional values or its interpretation and actual behaviour. Instead, what becomes relevant is the debate initiated by the various possible interpretations, and fiction is defined both as maintaining ‘close links to the observable, actual world’ and is involving ‘distance and difference’ in that ‘it calls our attention to the non-factual, to the invisible, and to the exemplary’ (my italics) (Pavel, 2000: 539).

It is such a definition of fiction that does justice to the shifting “narrative identity” proposed by Ricoeur and to the fundamental ethics of Levinas. These elements of the invisible and of the (non)-exemplary are discussed in Jennifer Johnston’s novels, of earlier as well as of recent time, with regard to authorship, to reminding and to remembering of the past, with narrative-knowledge circulating in the plot of her novels as incarnated in different objects (letters, diaries, autobiographies, family documents and books that the characters read and entities, as ‘silent’ characters that carry the burden of their secret. The Irish writer’s characters emerge out of a liminal space, postulated by Linden Peach as ‘timelag’, in which present and past interfere, only for the ‘present’ to be disrupted by the permanent reconfiguring of the past through acts of memory (voluntary or involuntary) and of (self) narration, endowed with ethical value. Seemingly figuring of herself and of her way of writing, Jennifer Johnston’s characters set out to express a truth of which they are not fully aware until accomplishing the narration of the self. For, in the writing process, Johnston’s character is projected against this ‘radical modernity’ of ours, and against the process of simultaneous transformation of subjectivity and global social organization. “I can sit for days and weeks”, she said in an interview,” and not really write anything at all, and I think this is the novel slowly assembling itself subconsciously in my head, and then it comes out very slowly, but I am *very seldom absolutely conscious* until I get back to look at it a second time, and it has a pattern, has worked out” (Johnston: 1996, 8)[our italics].

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