

OLLSCOIL na hÉIREANN
NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF IRELAND

TEXT OF THE INTRODUCTORY ADDRESS DELIVERED BY
DR CATRIONA CLUTTERBUCK, University College Dublin – National
University of Ireland, Dublin, on 16 June 2004, on the occasion of the
conferring of the Degree of Doctor of Literature, *honoris causa*, on
JENNIFER JOHNSTON

A Sheánsailéir, a mhuintir na hOllscoile agus a dhaoine uaisle,

It gives me great pleasure to introduce one of Ireland's foremost novelists and playwrights, Jennifer Johnston, on this, the occasion of the conferring of her Honorary Doctorate from the National University of Ireland.

Jennifer Johnston was born in 1930. Her mother was the actress, director, and producer Shelagh Richards, and her father was the author, playwright and broadcaster, Denis Johnston. She was raised in Dublin and studied in Trinity College Dublin. She married in the early nineteen fifties, moved to London, and had four children. She began to write professionally in the mid-nineteen sixties. She lives in Derry with her second husband, David Gilliland. She has published thirteen novels to date and has had roughly the same number of her longer and shorter plays performed; many of these also are published. Her novels have been translated into several languages: French, German, Russian, Polish, Italian, Spanish, Hungarian and Romanian. Her plays have been translated and performed in France, Italy and Portugal. Films for screen and television have been made from several of her novels. She is a member of Aosdana and a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature. She holds honorary Doctorates from the New University of Ulster and from Trinity College Dublin.

In 1987, the Northern Irish poet Derek Mahon celebrated Jennifer Johnston as a writer who offers the "imaginative departure" for which "Ireland is crying out". Honouring and distinctively reshaping the example of Joyce, Jennifer Johnston's work lays down

a series of vital reference points in Irish literature's evolving map of the conflict-zone generated by the paralysis of the human will to grow. The start and end-point of her novels is her tracing of the impulse and means to heal that paralysis – though in her work such desired resolution is never completely achieved. The journey undertaken by characters and readers in the body of her texts testifies to the difficulty and uncertainty, yet the vital necessity and the real potential of that healing. Her fictions are echo-chambers made of lyrically understated, flexible prose whose signature is a combination of dramatic immediacy and knowing and focused artfulness, allowing a microscopic registering of emotional nuance within which larger socio-political implication ramifies far beyond the moment at hand.

Jennifer Johnston's first novel *The Gates* was published in 1973 on foot of the earlier publication of her second, *The Captain and the Kings*, which won the Evening Standard Award for Best First Novel and the Yorkshire Post Award for Best Book of the Year. Johnston won the latter award again in 1974 for her third novel, *How Many Miles to Babylon?* (now on the Irish School Leaving Certificate syllabus), along with an Irish Academy of Arts Award. Three years later, *Shadows on Our Skin* was shortlisted for the Booker Prize. *The Old Jest* closed a highly successful first publishing decade by winning the Whitbread Prize.

The nineteen eighties saw the publications of *The Christmas Tree*, *The Railway Station Man* and *Fool's Sanctuary*, and a turn from the foregrounding of public political themes of Johnston's nineteen seventies fiction to more private concerns of the struggle for personal autonomy and creative self-expression in a series of unforgettable female protagonists. In this shift, Johnston both anticipated and tracked changes in the dominating dynamics of Irish cultural life of the time, as she continued to do in the darkening tenor of her early nineteen nineties novels on family-centred sexual and patriarchal kabuse, *The Invisible Worm* (which was shortlisted for the Daily Express Book of the Year) and *The Illusionist*.

Since the mid-nineties, Johnston has moved towards a more experimental and playful engagement with her defining theme of confrontation of buried trauma and suppressed creative, sensory and sexual instinct. Her participation in the jointly-

composed novel, *Finbar's Hotel* in 1997, signalled this shift as Johnston cedes more and more of the authorial role to her characters who discover their reality to be a theatre of affects largely under their own management. In their struggle to balance the conflicting claims of raw truth and of accommodation with the world as it is, her characters increasingly draw upon the resources of the many artistic traditions linked to magic realism as they inter-splice divergent timeframes, consciousnesses and modes of presentation. In Johnston's three most recent novels, *Two Moons*, *The Gingerbread Woman* and *This is Not a Novel*, inter-generational family relations form a familiar foreground for highly stylized self-reflexive fictions which are richly accessible in their call to the reader to enter the text as self-aware and indispensable co-creators of meaning.

It is a particular pleasure to honour Jennifer Johnston - this great contemporary Irish celebrant of the expanded human consciousness - on this, the one-hundredth anniversary of the day on which her forebear set his embodiments of that same consciousness - Bloom, Stephen and Molly - on their interdependent, individual journeys.

On the 16th of June 1904, this famous fictional triad moved through Dublin as a place of convoluted passageways of the human spirit between the open hills and sea. Hills and sea operate in both Joyce and Johnston as symbolic locations of the heights of achieved distinctive identity on the one hand, and the breadths of immersed, released, non-entity on the other. Between these two lies the cityscape, the constructed landscape of what humans do with their free will and the impulse to escape it. Bloom, Stephen and Molly, in uniting external and internal landscapes of memory and desire, lead a host of offspring – Jennifer Johnston's characters to the fore amongst them – on equivalent journeys of the constricted yet self-releasing human spirit to the hills and the sea.

In the scenarios created in Johnston's fiction and drama, her protagonists face multifarious betrayals of the urgent claims of nurture, trust and desire. These betrayals typically are sourced in the double denial of sexual instinct and inclusive human connection. In Johnston's writing, this denial finds its context in threats to various

minority cultures in an Ireland of seemingly irresolvable, self-perpetuating historical division. The triumph of her protagonists is found in their rising out of this context to the linked challenge of confronting their own suppressed pain and their suppressed creativity.

These characters' realization of their own agency – where they know that their capacity to act in the world is founded upon breaking the barriers between the self and others – often arises in Johnston through the forcing ground of the experiences of ageing and death. The end is the beginning as her characters drive towards luminous moments of healing through the fulfilments of self-knowledge and self-acceptance. These moments - more than her many precise delineations of human failure - extend in the experience of her readers far beyond the close of the texts, and make Jennifer Johnston's writing crucial to the life of this nation.

PRAEHONORABILIS CANCELLARIE, TOTAQUE UNIVERSITAS:

Praesento vobis hanc meam filiam, quam scio tam moribus quam doctrina habilem et idoneam esse quae admittatur, *honoris causa*, ad gradum Doctoratus in Litteris, idque tibi fide mea testor ac spondeo, totique Academiae.