

Jennifer Johnston's Monologues: Introductory Note

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This section features four monologues by Jennifer Johnston, none of which has been published previously in book form. Two of them, *Seventeen Trees* (2007) and *I Have Desired to Go* (2008), are published in their original versions, while the remaining two, *Billy e Christine* (2004), are the Portuguese translations of *Mustn't Forget High Noon* and *O Ananias, Azarias and Miseal*, both premiered in 1989.

Seventeen Trees was Jennifer Johnston's generous and original contribution to *Rising to Meet You*. It was written after a visit to France in 2007, where the memorials and scars of World War II imprinted on the landscape of Normandy prompted the writer to delve into the emotional and sensorial imprints left in the mindscape of those who experienced and witnessed the terror of warfare: "I know what terror is. It was in my mouth, in my head, in my belly, in my mother's hand that held mine." It is both as witnesses to terror and reminders of life that the seventeen trees stand: they honour lives irrevocably lost, just as they embody life's renewal; they remind us of life's resilient power, as well as of its utter fragility; they face us with our options: nurturing life or crushing it, bearing in mind that life, like terror, is embodied, and bodies are frail and precious homes.

Jennifer Johnston's imaginative and empathic trajectory, from mindscape to landscape and back again, from national histories to personal life stories, and from the present to the past and back to the present via "terror," is further undertaken in her next monologue, *I Have Desired to Go*. Written in January 2008, it was Johnston's contribution to an initiative jointly launched by Amnesty International, Ireland, the *Irish Times*, and Irish Aid to mark the 60th anniversary of the Declaration of Human Rights in December 2008, and was entitled *From the Republic of Conscience: Reflections on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights by 31 Irish Writers with an Introduction by Seamus Heaney* (*Irish Times*, 9 Dec.

2008; <http://www.amnesty.ie>). In response to Article 15, that states that “Everyone has the right to a nationality,” Jennifer Johnston plunges again into the mind of someone who survived the losses of family, home and country during World War II to find herself in old age devoid yet again of a home, though kept in a place called home, which is in fact “a storage unit; a place to keep unwanted people, people who are no longer needed, if you can call us people.” Set against the backdrop of WWII concentration camps, these places called homes where people are stored in our aging western societies point to contemporary paradoxes and subtle forms of exclusion: “We have no voice. I don’t mean of course that we can’t speak... no, no, no. Just that no one listens. Even if we shouted, no one would listen.” Just as it is our common humanity that is dishonoured when terror is inflicted in the context of warfare, crime and abuse in various forms and shapes, so it is, Johnston’s survivor suggests, our humanity that is at stake when we fail to care for one another in the very institutions designed to care for us in the seemingly benign environment of post-war welfare societies. And caring, she implies, involves listening – having a voice to speak and an ear to listen. With her “home” confined to books, this survivor’s monologue consists in her listening to, and dialoguing with, the voice of Gerard Manley Hopkins’s poem, which resonates with her own longing for a life-enhancing home. And that attentive listening, as shown by the author’s memorable delivery of *Seventeen Trees* at *Rising to Meet You*, as well as by João Cardoso and Rosa Quiroga’s performances of *Billy e Christine* in 2004, is what Jennifer Johnston’s monologues ask of her audience: the ability to listen carefully to the words and silences and trail of associations that they trigger. In that sense, listening to those intimate voices enhances our ability both to listen to them, and to listen to the voices and associations that they awaken in us.

Home, family, nationality, and the violent traffic of history impinging on personal lives also feature prominently in Jennifer Johnston’s earlier monologues set in Northern Ireland at the height of the Troubles. They are presented here in the Portuguese translation used for the 2004 stage production of *Billy e Christine* by the Oporto based theatre company ASSÉDIO, which is discussed in Paulo Eduardo Carvalho’s essay in this volume. Billy, the Presbyterian school bus driver from Northern Ireland, and Christine, the Anglican teacher from the Republic, are the names

of the husband and wife delivering these interconnected monologues, originally entitled *Mustn't Forget High Noon* and *O Ananias, Azarias and Miseal* (1989). As Jennifer Johnston explains in her Introduction to *Selected Short Plays: Moonlight and Music, Mustn't Forget High Noon, O Ananias, Azarias and Miseal, The Nightingale and Not the Lark* (Dublin: New Island, 2003), *O Ananias* was the first written of the two and “re-titled *Christine* by a director who couldn't cope with [the author's] title” (ix); *Christine* was indeed the adopted title when it was first published in *Three Monologues: Twinkletoes, Mustn't Forget High Noon, Christine* (Belfast: Lagan Press, 1995). Christine, Johnston admits in her Introduction, “spoke to me; quite intimately, she spoke, like some bewildered kindly woman who had just popped in for a cup of tea. I listened for a while before I settled at my writing machine and then it was as if she inhabited me” (*Selected Short Plays*, pp. ix-x). It is just as intimately that Christine speaks to her audience, it is that quality of listening that she asks of us, as she welcomes us into the house that she is leaving behind for good – and that was certainly how Rosa Quiroga embodied her and addressed us.

However, as Jennifer Johnston further explains in her Introduction to *Selected Short Plays*, so bound up to Ireland's history is Christine's life that when the play “went from the Peacock Theatre in Dublin to the B.B.C. [...] they asked me to write more so that listeners in England might have the nooks and crannies filled in and be able to understand Christine better” (x). Ironically, the specifics of Irish history that begged for further explication were intimately linked to the close intersections between Irish and British history, apparently lost to British memory and painfully alive to the Irish one. More inclined to proceed by implication rather than explication, the author “resisted” the request of “shining light in murky corners” until Christine's “dead husband Billy resurrected himself in my head [...] I was charmed by him into writing *Mustn't Forget High Noon*. The B.B.C. liked it and both pieces were broadcast in 1989. Each play illuminated the other” (xi).

If, in Jennifer Johnston's novels, dialogues often amount to juxtaposed monologues, thus foregrounding characters' failure to listen to each other, in these two mutually illuminating monologues it is up to the audience to detect the gaps, draw the connections, and become aware of

the intricate web of silences and complicities, fears and affections, and the crucial role of communication in interpersonal relations.

With Jennifer Johnston's *Selected Short Plays* dedicated to "all the men, women and children who have been victims of violence and intolerance, for so long, in this country, Ireland," the Portuguese premiere of *Billy e Christine*, on 11 March 2004, coincided with the Madrid bombings. Between the maiming effects of sectarian violence in Northern Ireland depicted on the stage, and the initial discussion in Spain as to whether the Madrid bombings were the work of national(ist) or international terrorism, one thing seemed painfully clear: although the origin of violence is politically relevant, its effects remain irrevocable and unredeemable. Against the abstract ideals used to justify the enormity of violence and depersonalise its "legitimate targets," these monologues devolve the voice to the "men, women and children" who are the victims of such abstractions, and ask us to listen and respond to them as persons too.