

2013

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Recommended Citation

Girel-Pietka, Virginie (2013) "'Winds of Change' in *The Moon in the Yellow River* and *The Dreaming Dust* by Denis Johnston: Staging Identity in a Crisis," *Journal of Franco-Irish Studies*: Vol. 3: Iss. 1, Article 8.

doi:10.21427/D71F1C

Available at: <https://arrow.tudublin.ie/jofis/vol3/iss1/8>

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Virginie Girel-Pietka

**'Winds of change' in *The Moon in the Yellow River* and *The Dreaming Dust*
by Denis Johnston: staging identity in a crisis.**

Introduction: the Irish national theatre facing troubled times

Up until the 19th century, drama in the Western world was mostly naturalistic and followed the Aristotelian principles of unity and causality considered suited to imitate human life and hold up a mirror to the audience. In late 19th-century Ireland, portraying man on the stage took on a challenging nationalist dimension. Irish cultural nationalism, which had been growing over the 19th century, culminated in 1897, when W.B. Yeats, Lady Gregory and Edward Martyn decided to create the Irish Literary Theatre as a reaction to the "misrepresentation" of Irish people in the colonial dramatic tradition, namely the stage Irishman who proved either a buffoon or a villain (Gregory 1972, 20). Irish identity had yet to be shaped and the national theatre movement was an opportunity for Ireland to imagine what that was. In the words of the founding members, the national theatre set out "to show upon the stage the deeper thoughts and emotions of Ireland [...] and that freedom to experiment which is not found in theatres in England, and without which no new movement in art or literature can succeed" (Gregory 20). Innovation and experiment were thus presented as vital to the movement. Yet only Yeats and Synge allowed for some experiments on the stage. On the whole, Abbey plays mostly followed the traditional pattern of the well-made play, that is to say a play which unfolds from the exposition to a crisis, and on to a logical outcome. There was nonetheless a gap between the dramatists' and the audience's views on what a respectable national image should be, hence the controversy raised by some of the early plays. The Abbey Theatre started off as a forum to discuss Irish identity and test various views of it. In the 1910s, however, it became more and more involved in politics, offering plays in which nationalist militancy was dismissed as a threat to the country, as well as evening lectures on the peaceful and prosperous nation that ought to be looked for (Pilkington 64-111). After the war of Independence, it

avored pro-Treaty plays, implicitly supporting the Free State's cultural policies although those stifled the debate over national identity in Irish arts, reducing the notion to the standards of respectability decided by the State, as listed for example in the 1923 Censorship of Films Act (*Public General Acts 1923*, 655), the 1926 Committee of Enquiry on Evil Literature (Brown 58), and the 1929 Censorship of Publications Act (*PGA 1929*, 117).

While Irish drama focused on Irish identity, the rest of the world was faced with the development of industry and of competing views of what the individual was and what part he or she was to play in society, which gave way to much social and political unrest. Everywhere artists responded to this general sense of puzzlement by turning their backs on mimetic arts, looking for a new aesthetic able to express man's loss of bearings and anguish, that is to say to represent his identity crisis rather than an idealised image he might identify with. In Ireland, the Dublin Drama League was founded in 1918 by Lennox Robinson, one of the directors of the Abbey at the time, who felt it was necessary to introduce foreign avant-garde drama on the Irish stage. The League laid the foundations of the Gate Theatre Company founded by Hilton Edwards and Micheal MacLiammoir in 1928. They continued to stage foreign plays but also encouraged Irish young dramatists willing to experiment with a new aesthetic, a project which was no longer on the Abbey's agenda. Denis Johnston's first play was rejected by the Abbey board of directors in 1927 on the ground that it did not fit with the National Theatre's standards. The play, then reworked and retitled *The Old Lady Says "No!"*, made the success of the Gate Theatre in 1929. *The Old Lady* would have raised a great controversy on the Abbey stage as it shows the Free State and the new elites hijacking the nationalist ideals embodied by Robert Emmet and Cathleen Ni Houlihan, to serve their limited view of national art and national identity. The play also feeds on expressionist and surrealist techniques to stage the main character's schizophrenia: an actor playing the part of Robert Emmet in a melodrama faints under the blow of a Redcoat, then thinks he actually *is* Robert Emmet, and wanders as such around the capital of the Free State, where he is constantly led to question who he is. The audience was thus presented with a new kind of stage language that questioned rather than mirrored what it set out to represent, namely man's identity. But controversy

and experiment were out of fashion at the Abbey, which had actually turned against its original principles. Contrary to Sean O'Casey, who moved to England after the Abbey rejected his play *The Silver Tassie* in 1928, and never came back, Johnston stayed in Ireland to try and modernize the Irish stage from within.

In 1931, he was back at the Abbey with his second play *The Moon in the Yellow River*, in which he adopted the set framework of the three-act play. The play draws its plot from one of the Free State policies – the Shannon Electrical Scheme, launched in 1925 to produce water power. The scheme raised a debate between the free-staters, who understood it as a way of modernizing the country and asserting its autonomy, and reluctant Republicans who perceived it as a new form of dependence since the necessary technology had to be imported from the continent. Johnston used the Irish political debate of the time to introduce on the stage the worldwide controversy over industrialization, which was considered either a form of progress or a threat to mankind. The play was therefore a great success as a problem play, often compared to plays by Ibsen or Shaw (Kilroy 49-58) or Chekhov (Barnett 42-58). It is true that the characters keep debating over such topics as patriotism or progress, thus leading the audience to wonder about them instead of providing easy answers. What makes *The Moon* all the more puzzling, however, is the language in which the characters express themselves, for it tends to blur the boundaries between their various views. The topic that stands out as most debatable of all turns out to be language itself, and how stage language may make sense. Johnston had grown “weary of [the] misrepresentation” that prevailed again on the stage in his own time and therefore felt the need to renew stage language and allow it to deal with the problematic notion of identity in a global context. We will first see how he unsettles well-known figures of the Irish stage, emphasizing double meaning and reversing stock characters. This will lead us to reappraise the play's structure and see how the logical unfolding of the plot is undermined and the limitations of well-made or even problem plays are outgrown. In Johnston's modern view, identity is in a permanent state of crisis in which signs can never refer to any stable meaning, hence the dramatist's search for new means of representation. One might then read Johnston's more overtly experimental play *The Dreaming Dust* as a

continuation of this enquiry into the potential of stage language. The dramatist revisits the various biographies of Jonathan Swift and the stage adaptations they prompted, confronting them with each other to let the enigmatic nature of the character emerge on the stage. Even though an “identity crisis” usually means a loss of bearings and the impossibility to define oneself, the word “crisis” nonetheless refers to a climactic moment in a process, a moment when something appears intensely. I will argue that unsettling conventional stage language and stock characters has allowed Johnston to convey the elusive nature of man’s identity all the more forcefully, thus widening the scope of the Irish stage at a time when cultural protectionism was getting out of tune with international concerns.

Unsettling connections between signs and meaning

In *The Moon in the Yellow River*, a German engineer called Herr Tausch has moved to the West of Ireland and built a power house on the river. He pays a visit to Dobelle, a retired Irish engineer, once famous for developing railways. Dobelle has become a cynical misanthropist after his wife died in childbirth. He lives with his daughter Blanaid, a girl he has always held responsible for the death of her mother, and therefore ignored. His sister Columba, a Republican activist, also lives there. The family is in touch with the local anti-Treaty faction who has decided to blow up the power house. The local leader is called Darell Blake and while his men endeavour to destroy Tausch’s work, he tries to keep Tausch busy in an improvised trial where everyone is invited to condemn the power house. The dialectic of “strangers” and “locals” is unsettled from the first act on, and the meaning of common words like “patriot”, “power” and “progress” is continually reassessed.

In the first Act, Aunt Columba comments on Tausch’s arrival in the words of Yeats’s Cathleen Ni Houlihan, complaining that “Sometimes there are too many strangers in this house” (MYR 115 / Yeats 1902, 23). From the Irish Republican activist’s point of view, a foreigner is necessarily an invader. For that reason, when she explains why she

considers Tausch's power house a threat, her political stance leads her to make the most of the double meaning of the word "power" and build up the figure of a malevolent intruder:

AUNT COLUMBA. I wish it to be quite clear that I have as yet no personal objection to Herr Tausch. [...] Nor have I any objection to any ordinary factory as such. But this building is a power house, which is quite a different thing. [...] once you've become dependent upon anything, you are the slave of the man who controls it. Expected to bow the knee to some place-hunting industrialist with a small technical education and with neither culture nor religion to guide them. (MYR, 146-147)

She turns the power plant into a neo-colonialist attempt on the part of foreigners to enslave the country. Yet Tausch denies the charge: "I am none of these things you call me, I am not expecting you to bow the knee. [...] You misunderstand me" (MYR 147). What the character stands for becomes a question of interpretation: the boundaries between invader and patriot are blurred throughout the play. Tausch admires the work Dobelle did as a young man, developing railways around the world. He hopes to pay back the great engineer's motherland by providing it too with modern infrastructure. To him, "power" means electricity and modern comfort, thanks to which he hopes to build a new nation: "I see in my mind's eye this land of the future – transformed and redeemed by power – from the sordid trivialities of peasant life to something newer and better" (MYR 121). In his view, peasant life is what enslaves the population, condemning them to a dismal hard life. Such a remark reminds us of Synge's plays where some peasants end up so bored with their daily lives that they take to the roads, thus challenging the ideal image of Irish peasantry. For that reason, Dobelle's vitality has been numbed since he settled in that remote house: "My wander-years are over. I have come home to renounce them" (MYR 113). Tausch, however, insists that his host country is inspiring as a place that has yet to be shaped. He learns Gaelic as well as local history and manners so as to bridge the gap between him and the locals (MYR 113 & 117). He has taken a fancy to the place and is determined to serve it as a patriot would: "I love your country and would serve it even in some small way" (MYR 120). Dobelle tries to scare him away, evoking his countrymen's inefficient militancy and backwardness, and suggesting that Tausch deserves better

company and prospects: “It is not the destiny of a man like you to be buried in this accursed hole” (MYR 120). The more the foreigner celebrates his host country, the more the Irish engineer sneers at it. Such shift of patriotism is reminiscent of Shaw’s characters in *John Bull’s Other Island* (1904), a play that also unsettles the stock figures of patriot and foreigner. This play ends with the success of the foreign entrepreneur, who nonetheless deadens the idealized qualities he used to praise the Irish for, turning them into a bunch of materialists, and thus leaving the audience to wonder how far his plans will really benefit the population. Johnston’s play turns out to be even more puzzling insofar as both the foreigner and its local opponents are allowed to succeed and to fail in turn. That double ending is prepared throughout the play by the battles of words between Tausch and the locals.

In Act 2, he discusses the nature of progress with Darrell Blake. To Blake, the machines Tausch imports with him turn workers into beggars: “The rest of the world may be crazy, but there’s one corner of it yet, thank God, where you and your ludicrous machinery haven’t turned us all into a race of pimps and beggars” (MYR 139). Contrary to Tausch who holds peasant life responsible for Irish people’s low standard of living, Blake believes the country has fortunately become a haven for endangered mankind. But the discussion soon blurs the boundaries between the two characters’ views since each speaker keeps turning the other’s remarks against him, using the same words to mean one thing and the opposite. Blake presents the power house as a hellish “blast furnace” threatening human life, thus voicing British poet William Blake’s view of industrialization, which explains the character’s name. Tausch, however, turns the “furnace” into a creative fire that will revive man’s energy: “It seems to me that the blast furnace is just the thing that leaves us all the freer to enjoy life” (MYR 139). What is more, the battle of words is deflated by the scene taking place in the background, where Blake’s acolytes are making fools of themselves, barely escaping being crushed by the big gun that they intend to use to destroy the power house. The humanist activists thus appear as a threat to themselves and to mankind (MYR 139).

The figure of the new nation's architect acquires yet another face when Commandant Lanigan, a Free State soldier, comes to the power house's rescue. Lanigan appears on the stage in an in-between position: "On the threshold stands a soldier in a green uniform" (MYR 151). Wearing the national colour, he stands at a crossroads between two visions of the nation. He used to be one of Blake's acolytes but has now taken sides with the new government and therefore wants to protect the new infrastructure: "These works are a national affair" (MYR 160). That is why Blake disowns him:

TAUSCH (*to Blake*): I think you and the Commandant are old friends, eh?

BLAKE: Friends! Well it was I brought him into the movement in the old days when we were all one against the British. And now, behold my handiwork! A wee state – a Free State, held up by this bile green clothes-prop. [...] Come, come. Give Frankenstein his due (MYR 152)

If the 1921 Treaty put an end to the War of Independence, it allowed only part of the country to break away from the United Kingdom, hence Blake's mention of a "wee state": to him, the Free State falls far short of the Republicans' expectations. The emerging nation unsettles his view of the meaning of the word "Irish" – "one against the British" – so that he feels betrayed. The green uniform now sickens the disappointed Republican who used to glorify it. That is why Blake feels like Dr. Frankenstein in Mary Shelley's novel, disgusted by his creature and awaiting his punishment. The soldier's uniform is considered a theatrical "prop", now at odds with its original meaning, and suggesting how the Free State's national theatre may have hijacked traditional symbols. Such estrangement may legitimize Tausch's distrust of the nationalist rhetoric and his wish to replace inefficient ideals with concrete progress: "Soon you will be a happy nation of free men – free not by the power of empty formulae or by the colour of the coat you wear, but by the inspiration of power – power – power" (MYR, 121). Tausch rebels against empty words (the Republicans' call to resist the new regime) and empty symbols (the green uniform). Yet he seems to get carried away with that word "power" and, ironically enough, will have to experience its other side.

As for Blake and Lanigan, they represent two sides of the multi-faceted figure of the patriot, a paradigm which suggests how someone may be perceived from various angles, evolve in time and acquire new dimensions. They also bring back on the stage the antithetical characters Lady Gregory staged in *The Rising of the Moon* (1907). In most of that play, two nationalist activists sit back to back on a barrel near a river, by moonlight. One is a rebel on the run while the other, who used to be a rebel too and one of his friends, has become a policeman in order to settle down and enjoy a quiet comfortable life. The moonlight does not allow him to identify the suspect he is looking for, who ironically offers to keep a watch with him. He then starts singing old patriotic songs to himself, among which *By the Rising of the Moon*, a popular ballad calling for patriots to gather “by the rising of the moon” and stand up for their rights. The policeman is thus reminded of the old days and recognizes his former friend. Overcome with a surge of nostalgia and admiration, he lets him run away. In Johnston’s play, on the contrary, Lanigan shoots Blake dead at the end of Act 2 so that the audience is first led to think that old activism now has to be dismissed for the sake of a new thriving society. This updating of the Abbey repertoire shows how far the Free State’s national theatre has gone from its original ideals. The soldier’s display of power is nonetheless undermined in Act 3 as an unexpected turn subverts the conventional unfolding of a three-act play.

Greasing the wheels of the theatre

The noise of the power house’s turbines, which can be heard in the background, inspires Columba to prophesy a reversal of fortune. Her prophecy keeps returning as a leitmotiv throughout the play: “The dynamos are turning and the water piles up behind the sluices. But you haven’t accounted for everything” (MYR 115) / “The hour of the poor and the defenseless and the down-trodden comes sooner or later. The dynamos are turning. [...] But the proud in their pride shall be laid low. They didn’t account for everything” (MYR 127 & 131). The movement of the machines reminds her of the spinning wheel of fortune, which turns out to announce the workings of the play: Blake’s acolytes

finally manage to blow up the power house in Act 3 so that the free-staters are defeated too. Johnston subverts the pattern of a three-act play to renew the crisis in the end, instead of reaching a logical outcome, and the audience is left to wonder not merely if one way or the other is best for the emerging nation, but if one can go without the other. The sense of inescapable reversal is all the more striking that Columba's prophecy is borrowed from Lady Gregory's play *The Rising of the Moon*, where the wheel of fortune is evoked time and again in the dialogue. When the rebel bids his former friend goodbye, he declares: "You did me a good turn tonight, and I'm obliged to you. Maybe I'll be able to do as much for you when the small rise up and the big fall down ... when all change places at the Rising (*waves his hand and disappears*) of the Moon" (Gregory 1983, 151). Lanigan looks like Gregory's policeman returning to have the upper hand in his turn, before he is defeated again by the rebels. In the end the power house proves to be a metaphor for the theatre: the theatre's machinery and stock characters can be turned inside-out, updated and allowed to make room for competing antithetic views. The theatre can thus tackle the ever-changing nature of its object – man's ambivalent and evolving identity, which is subjected to the spinning wheel of fortune, or even the cycle of the moon – the rising of which always entails a fall.

After his first play was rejected by the Abbey, Johnston was well aware of his need to comply with the old pattern of the three-act play if he intended to have his work accepted there. His second play therefore looks like a problem play staging battles of ideas. Yet, in some of his lectures on his own work, the dramatist claimed that this was only a façade: "*The Moon* is not a Chekhov. It is a Strindberg" (Johnston TCD/MS/10066/51/24). Swedish dramatist August Strindberg despised naturalistic conventions in drama. To him, the supposed unity of conventional characters and plots prevented a play from staging man's shifting identity. That is why he rather staged characters looking for themselves, observing how they behave at different moments of their lives (Szondi 37-52). One might argue that Tausch, Lanigan, Blake and Columba may be various embodiments of the nation in an identity crisis, observing itself from various angles. Moreover, after the two endings have neutralized each other, the play finally

focuses on young Blanaid and her father, who rediscover each other and stand out as strindbergian characters looking for themselves.

The fact that the list of characters in the play mentions “Aunt Columba” rather than “Columba”, suggests that the action may be observed from the little girl’s point of view. Her personal search shows through, beyond the various battles of ideas. When she meets Tausch in the beginning of the play she does not understand why he calls her “lady”: “Oh, I’m not a lady [...] But it’s my father’s fault. He calls me a little slut, but I think it’s calling people things that make them it” (MYR 104). Inspired by her aunt, who writes flyers to call for a new Rising and the emergence of a new nation, and who dreads the word “power” in the phrase “power house”, Blanaid thinks people create reality as they speak – a belief that dates back to the tradition of bardic poetry and the early national theatre’s wish to shape Irish identity on stage. Although the girl seems to trust her father’s word, she questions her relation to him, and therefore his authority: “I haven’t any parents. [...] Not unless you count Father. [...] We don’t get on very well I’m afraid. I can’t remember my mother” (MYR, 105). Deprived of any parent-child relationship, and called differently by different people, she experiences an identity crisis. She dreams of going away to a convent to get a “proper” education. The way she depicts life in a convent shows that she yearns to feel a sense of belonging to a community, no matter how self-alienating such experience may prove: “Don’t you think it must be wonderful to have proper lessons and sleep in an enormous dormitory with twenty other girls and go for walks in a long line like geese? Tell me, have you ever looked through a convent’s keyhole?” (MYR 105). Although the dramatist’s jibe at convent life hardly leaves any hope of self-fulfillment, the place seems attractive to Blanaid insofar as it may provide her with a model to identify with. Being one in a crowd of girls seems better than being denied any interest at home. Dobelle hardly cares more about her needs than a farmer about a goose: “I deny all duties and privileges where Blanaid is concerned. I will feed and clothe her but there my interests end” (MYR 142). In the end, however, once the power house has collapsed in a “roar” that scares the girl out of her bed, Dobelle has an epiphany:

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(At the head of the stairs is a white figure in a long nightgown. He sees it with a gasp.)

DOBELLE. Mary!

BLANAID. I'm frightened.

DOBELLE. Your voice! Why are you standing there looking at me, Mary?

BLANAID. Don't you know me, Father? *(She comes down.)*

DOBELLE. Know you? Why – What am I saying? [...] It's Blanaid! I didn't recognize you. You're so changed, child. You seem to have grown up suddenly.

BLANAID. I am not changed. Only you never look at me. *(MYR 168)*

After being called a “lady” and a “slut”, imagining herself as a “goose” and being treated like one, Blanaid is finally mistaken for her mother. Ironically enough, the apparition is called Mary and only appears to let the onlooker discover his own daughter. Calling him “father”, she trusts him again with his part as such and he finally acknowledges her as his daughter, with a name in her own right. Blanaid then falls asleep in his lap and the dawn of a new day replaces the glow of the explosion in the background. Such an ending cannot, however, make the audience forget everything that happened or was said before. Following the play's logic of building multi-faceted characters and defeating those that feel they have succeeded, Blanaid appears as a character-in-progress, who still has to evolve and test aspects of herself. As for Dobelle, he soon fails again to answer his daughter's need for explanation: she falls asleep before he can tell her why people are unhappy. It occurs to him that unhappiness is what distinguishes men from other species. He used to think such a gift came from the Devil but is now led to wonder if God and the Devil are not one and the same person, thus leaving the audience faced with renewed questions about who they are, what drives them and where to. Dobelle reaches a new stage in his psychological development: after playing the part of a retired engineer who has seen it all, he now starts wondering again. The fact that he rediscovers both his daughter and his existential doubts on the dawn of a new day suggests that he has at last found a way out of the time when his life was numbed, and out of his misguided certitudes.

The play therefore revisits various uses of the three-act play – notably one of Lady Gregory's well-made plays and one of Shaw's problem plays – to outgrow their forms and

raise new issues about the workings of a character. It thus testifies to the dramatist's modern view of drama as a mechanism that might oversimplify and misrepresent identity unless its workings are greased and granted their full potential: as M. Bradbury and J. McFarlane explain in their study of modernism in European literature, "the Modern movement in the arts transformed consciousness and artistic form just as the energies of modernity – scientific, technological, philosophical, political – transformed forever the nature, the speed, the sensation of human life" (Bradbury & McFarlane 11). Johnston then kept exploring the potential of stage language, constantly moving from the Abbey to the Gate theatres, and trying his hand at various styles. His efforts to stage the complex nature of identity reached a climax in his play *The Dreaming Dust*, staged at the Gate in 1940. That play tests the contradictory records of the life of Jonathan Swift against one another, and may therefore be read together with *The Moon*, as a further effort to open up the form of a play and show how Irish drama may tackle universal issues.

Looking for characters

To Johnston, Jonathan Swift epitomized the trouble with man's identity: the more we try to grasp it, the more elusive it proves. Although Swift is well-known for his clerical and literary careers, his private life makes it difficult to understand him as an individual, with his personal feelings, motivations and interests. Biographers have put forward various hypotheses explaining why he seemed to have two long-lasting love affairs at the same time, without ever trying to clarify the situation, either for the sake of the young women involved or to satisfy public opinion. The fact that someone so famous can paradoxically remain an enigma fascinated the dramatist, as he points out in the introduction to his own biography of Swift: "After two hundred years, the fog is still billowing around him" (Johnston 1959, 9). Johnston's interest for that foggy individual was aroused by two plays about Swift that were based on some of his biographies. First there was Yeats's *The Words Upon the Window-Pane* in 1930, and then Lord Longford's *Yahoo* in 1933. In Yeats's play, the ghost of Swift explains that madness runs in his family.

He does not wish to pass it on to any child so he prefers not to get married. In Longford's play, Swift has secretly married his lifelong friend Stella but does not want to spread the news so as to continue seeing other women, especially young Vanessa. To Johnston, neither play proved satisfactory because they only focused on Swift and did not do justice to the other people involved. According to him, strong-minded Vanessa should have argued that her own blood might be given a chance to counteract any disease of Swift's that may threaten their progeny. As for Stella, who was known as a very respectable young woman, she could hardly have been satisfied with being an unacknowledged and deceived wife. Assuming that a man entangled in a love triangle could only make sense if the two other characters were allowed to play relevant parts, Johnston went on a twenty-year-long research and experimented with various media – radio, television, and stage plays, as well as a biography – to try and do justice to all three.

In his preface to the play, he stresses the necessity for all the characters to behave in some understandable way: "A character in a play has to be explained sooner or later to the player who is expected to portray it, and this is no easy task when he bears no resemblance to any known pattern of human conduct, or even to some convention of the stage" (*DD* 260). That is why he resorts to the pattern of a play-within-the-play, in which actors and director are looking for their characters. The actress playing Stella's part stands up against the irrelevance of her character:

If I am Stella, I must be a real woman – not a wraith invented by some biographer to explain *his* behaviour. [...] Am I just part of the scenery of your life, Jonathan Swift, dying quietly in my lodgings – happy in the role of being your unacknowledged wife? No, no. That is not good enough for me. Stella was not that kind of nonentity. (*DD* 305)

Her rejection of stock images is emphasized by the recurrent use of negation. She then urges the whole crew to look for more: "There is something missing from the picture... [...] Without it everything that follows is unintelligible" (*DD* 305).

The group has just performed a medieval Morality in the Cathedral, in which they played the parts of the seven deadly Sins. Although that play is over, each of them

imagines Swift's life from the point of view of the sin he or she has just enacted. The two young girls are significantly played by Pride and Anger, who are determined to do justice to their characters. Each of the sins stages his own short drama, revealing in turn various aspects of Swift's personality. For instance, Avarice suggests that "money must have been at the back of it" before Lust argues that: "He loved women more than money" (DD, 285). All the embedded short plays are tested against one another until the actors realize each of them only happens to portray the sin he is most familiar with. They actually lend their various masks to the mysterious dean of St Patrick's, who is presented from different points of view, as in a cubist painting which brings together various parts from different bodies, viewed from different perspectives. The characters are progressively shaped by the actors' contrapuntal discussion, thus exemplifying the dramatist's view that "modern drama [stages] one person expanding into several characters, [...] an overall picture of a split personality to be staged" (Johnston TCD/MS/10066/258).

The transition from one view to another does not allow previous views to be forgotten. The fluid structure of the play rather gives the audience various glimpses of the same love triangle in different times and places. The sound of the organ always brings the characters back to the main play in the Cathedral: "*(The thunder rolls, and cross-fades into the sound of the organ. The Players relax into their original roles)*" (DD 280). Other sounds suggest other periods of time and other settings: "AVARICE. [...] Doctor Swift was much younger then. A vicar with a country church, planted in a prim Dutch garden [...] *(Fade out organ and fade in the occasional twittering of birds)*". Johnston's experiment with radio drama provided him with those new means of sewing together the various pieces of the characters he was looking for. Identity is conveyed in an endless interplay of views, competing to represent it but forever disputing and postponing representation. Although every sin tries to assert its own view as the right one, the play encompasses them all and draws attention to the very contradictions which let the ever-changing nature of the characters come out. The play actually stages the spectrum of identity – that is to say, the different shades or layers that compose it – and thus suggests its puzzling nature all the more forcefully.

Conclusion: Reviving stage language

Representing identity was the plan of the Irish National Theatre's founders. To a modern dramatist like Johnston, the stage still seemed particularly suited to the task but only if it was allowed to go off the beaten tracks so as to discuss and challenge conventional figures. The theatre could prove a "power house" brimming with energy to revive signs and lead the audience to wonder about meaning and about the unfathomable dimension of identity. While criticizing the Irish National Theatre for falling short of its initial intent, Johnston's work turns out to celebrate and revive its original probe into identity and stage language. Questioning the univocal way history might be represented by dramatists or recorded by unscrupulous biographers or historians, Johnston explored and highlighted the full potential of the theatre to stage modern man's identity crisis. His *Abbey* and *Gate* plays are not as different as they seem; they only reflect the dramatist's modern concerns and longing for "winds of change" both in form and content: "modernism is less a style than a search for a style in a highly individualistic sense; and indeed the style of one work is no guarantee for the next" (Bradbury & McFarlane 29).

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