

“Cancel, yes, cancel, and begin again”: John Banville’s Path from ‘Einstein’ to Mefisto

“Cancele, sim, cancele e comece de novo”: O Caminho de John Banville de ‘Einstein’ a Mefisto

Kersti Tarien Powell

Abstract: *Focusing on unpublished manuscript materials, this article is the first scholarly attempt to investigate the textual and thematic evolution of John Banville’s Mefisto (1986). As originally conceived, Mefisto would loosely follow Albert Einstein’s life story in order to investigate the moral and political undercurrents of 20th-century European weltanschauung. However, the novel’s five-year-long composition process culminates with the eradication of these historical, moral and scientific concerns. Mefisto is finally born when Banville establishes Gabriel Swan’s narrative voice. As this article argues, this novel constitutes a turning point not only for the science tetralogy but for Banville’s literary career.*

Keywords: *Mefisto; literary manuscripts; narrative voice; Albert Einstein; science and literature.*

Resumo: *Com foco em manuscritos não publicados, este artigo é a primeira tentativa acadêmica de investigar a evolução textual e temática de Mefisto (1986), de John Banville. Como originalmente concebido, a história de Mefisto seria livremente baseada na vida de Albert Einstein, a fim de investigar as correntes morais e políticas da weltanschauung europeia do século XX. No entanto, o processo de cinco anos de composição do romance culmina com a erradicação dessas preocupações históricas, morais e científicas. Mefisto finalmente nasceu quando Banville estabelece a voz narrativa de Gabriel Swan. Como este artigo argumenta, este romance constitui um ponto de virada não apenas para a tetralogia científica, mas também para a carreira literária de Banville.*

Palavras-chave: *Mefisto; manuscritos literários; voz narrativa; Albert Einstein; ciência e literatura.*

By 1986, the year of *Mefisto*’s publication, John Banville was definitely not a newcomer to the Irish and British literary scenes, yet he was still far from being a household name. Ronan Sheehan’s profile of Banville, published in the September 1986 issue of *Image* magazine, seemed to suggest that the writer was on the brink of a big breakthrough. While wondering why Banville was not “known to a wider public, despite having, at the age of forty, several excellent books under his belt,” Sheehan added “Next year, things could be different. *Mefisto* is certainly material for one of the big international literary prizes” (166). Sheehan was not alone in his high hopes for *Mefisto*. This novel, the fourth and final installment of Banville’s science tetralogy, had troublesome beginnings and, despite Sheehan’s hopes for big international literary prizes, ended up with less than mediocre sales figures and no prizes under its belt. Yet, *Mefisto* constitutes a significant signpost in Banville’s literary career. As the writer himself

declared, with this novel he had inaugurated a new stage in his fiction: “*Mefisto* was even more so the beginning of a new phase I don’t know anything about. I could see there was quite a difference between it and the previous three [novels of the tetralogy]” (Carty 18). Arriving at this new stage in his writing career was not an easy process; Banville has gone as far as to say that he had had a nervous breakdown or, at other times, that *Mefisto* “nearly killed” him (Jackson 14).

Preceded by *Dr. Copernicus* (1976), *Kepler* (1981) and *The Newton Letter* (1982), *Mefisto* was decidedly different from the quasi-biographies of two Renaissance scientists and a novella on the impossibility of writing, living and knowing. As my overview of Banville’s composition processes will demonstrate, *Mefisto*’s drafts reveal some of the trouble he had with this novel. Below, I explore the drafts as they proceed in distinct stages, beginning with a description of his ideas in a ‘prospectus’ that he composed in 1977 for his publishers at Secker and Warburg. This ‘prospectus’ delineates Banville’s plans for a novel, provisionally entitled ‘Einstein,’ which he envisions to follow *Kepler* and *The Newton Letter*. The first stage of composition, a period between 1981-82 during which Banville finally starts to write ‘Einstein,’ exemplifies how close he still was to the first three novels of the tetralogy. The second stage in *Mefisto*’s development is heralded by a sudden change in the drafts when in 1983 Banville switches from ‘Einstein’ to a working title ‘Gemini.’ The third and last stage of composition begins in 1984 when the drafts demonstrate the emergence of some central thematic points of *Mefisto*.¹ This article constitutes the first scholarly attempt to map Banville’s mid-career crisis back onto the archive.

In his tetralogy, Banville sought to remake the form of the novel through science. As he moved closer to the present, from Copernicus to Kepler to Newton, the task became more difficult. In writing about Einstein, Banville finally faced the full depth of this challenge: the impenetrability of highly specialized, modern scientific discourse. *Mefisto* was a turning point. Looking back at its composition in 2009, Banville said in an interview to the *Paris Review*: “The writer who wrote *Mefisto* was a writer in deep trouble. He did not know what he was doing. He was striking out into new territory – new for him, at least. It was painful at the time, and it was hideous in many ways” (McKeon 6). Archival evidence of *Mefisto*’s composition history does not explicitly record the pain and hideousness of the process, but the novel’s many drafts do reveal the long and twisted path from Banville’s ‘prospectus’ to a very different product in the published novel.

As its provisional title made clear, Banville planned to conclude the tetralogy with a novel based loosely on Albert Einstein. ‘Einstein’ was to describe a “beautiful adventure of atomic physics.” As Banville said in the ‘prospectus’:

The central preoccupations of the book are the search for the unified field theory (which of course echoes *Kepler*), and the beautiful adventure of atomic physics. The latter may seem a contradiction in terms, but it is one of the tasks of this book to show that 20th century science is indeed beautiful, and an adventure. On one level it is the story of a scientist’s life in modern times, but on another it is an examination of the moral and political issues of the age, of the relationship between science and society, and of the way in which science and art are now rapidly converging. (n.p.)

During that time, the convergence of art and science was amongst Banville’s favourite interview topics. He often quoted Niels Bohr’s statement on how physicists use language

similarly to poets (O'Mahony). Banville clearly wanted to exploit his interest in twentieth-century physics, and put to use his readings on this topic. In the 'prospectus,' he explains to his publishers that the quotation marks surrounding the title 'Einstein' signify that this book is not about Einstein, but an Einstein figure who is an amalgam of most of the leading scientific figures of the twentieth century. It is perhaps the most ambitious, and yet the most immediately entertaining, of all the books. I feel also that it is the most readily assimilated, since it is set in our own time, and deals with issues with which we are still very much concerned. An incidental attraction too may be that it takes place in Europe before and after the last war, which should feed the current hunger for nostalgia. (n.p.)

Banville is here notably concerned with the marketability of his fictional output. He calls his proposed book "entertaining," claims that it has potential widespread appeal and, lastly, suggests that the period he intends to depict might also be of "market" value. In his eagerness to explore issues that he considers 'current,' such as the relationship between science and society, Banville comes perhaps closest to embracing literary realism. His correspondence with his editors reveals that Secker & Warburg were having serious doubts about *Kepler*. Clearly, the prospectus was supposed to convince Seckers to go forward with the tetralogy. In fact, when *Kepler* ended up being a flop in terms of sales, Banville seems to have briefly considered abandoning *The Newton Letter* altogether and wanting to go straight to 'Einstein' as a more viable commercial option.² It is fascinating to see an author, who is usually at least outwardly so nonchalant about his books' marketability, so concerned with his fiction's commercial success. It is, however, even more fascinating to consider 'Einstein' or *Mefisto* as a possible bestseller.

The prospectus does not reveal whether Banville was thinking about using one or two protagonists. The first draft versions of 'Einstein,' dated around 1981-82, showcase a narrator called Jack Hands who relates the story of his twin brother Alex. Alex and Jack exemplify two polarities: Jack is more of an artist whereas Alex represents the scientific mind. Significantly, Alex compares their relations to that of a valency bond in chemistry, a bond which binds the molecules of an element ('Einstein,' 8/9, f.35).³

The earliest drafts demonstrate that, from the beginning, Banville's focus was on contingency: the draft dated 2 June 1981 opens with "'Chance,' said my brother, 'chance brought us together'" ('Einstein,' 8/6, f.116v). By May 1982, Banville had established his opening sentence: "Chance was in the beginning," declares the narrator, hinting at the perils which could have befallen the unborn infants ('Einstein,' 8/9/2, f.1). Several names appear in 'Einstein' that any reader of *Mefisto* will easily recognize: for instance, the twins' maternal grandfather is called Axel Kozok. He is a Prussian blacksmith and a survivor of the "Great War." He marries a maid of the Big House called Ashburn. Eventually, Axel's daughter meets her future husband on the village road, Ashburn suffers a financial collapse and the twins are born. While still at school, Alex's extraordinary mathematical gift becomes apparent. Already in his first physics class Alex seems to know everything – he is a "born scholar" who finds mathematics and sciences in general to be a natural habitat for his mind. Humanities on the other hand cause him insurmountable difficulties: "His memory was bad. Things sifted through his addled head. History, languages, composition, he could not cope. The simpler the task the more likely it was to defeat him" ('Einstein,' 8/10, f.18). This description of Alex's life demonstrates numerous biographical similarities with Einstein.⁴

Einstein's relationship with 'words' showed similar problems to Alex's. In fact, in his "Autobiographical Notes," Einstein recalled that in school his "principal weakness was a poor

memory and especially a poor memory for words” (Hoffmann 19-20). Like Einstein, Banville’s hero undergoes a religious crisis in his adolescence. That this was no mere coincidence is again evidenced by Banville’s marginal notes. His note to himself reminds: “Give him religious attack (like E.)” (‘Einstein,’ 8/9, f.25). Alex is a genial and likeable child, just as Einstein was also renowned for his “humanity” or – as his biographer called it, “as trite as it may sound, the simple, lovable quality of his character” (Bernstein 135). The family name Hands that Banville had chosen for his protagonists could also very well carry an Einsteinian significance. Namely, in his first paper on relativity, Einstein analyses the relativity of time, beginning his explanation with the following example: “When I say, for example, ‘The train arrives here at 7,’ that means that, ‘the passage of the little hand of my watch at the place marked 7 and the arrival of the train are simultaneous events” (Bernstein 54-62). The example of a ‘clock’ illustrated Einstein’s observation that every statement about the ‘objective’ time of an event is, in reality, a statement about the simultaneous occurrence of two events – the event in question and our looking at the clock, at the hands on the dial. However, the most conspicuous similarity between Einstein and Alex is a small textbook on Euclidean geometry, which both the young Einstein and the fictional Alex Hand find utterly absorbing.

Einstein’s description of the “holy geometry booklet” is reverential. Alex Hand also regards his Euclid booklet as a talisman, which he studiously consults, and the contents of which absorb his mind entirely. Jack’s record of his admiration recalls Einstein’s autobiography: “The lucidity and certainty of geometric propositions appealed to him at once, and directly” (‘Einstein,’ 8/9/1/16, f.41). Unlike Albert Einstein, however, Banville’s ‘Einstein’ emphasizes the chaotic nature of the world that Euclid’s geometry will help Alex to tame: “Alex would always be grateful to that Alexandrian, as to a wise old uncle, for showing him how chaos could be toned and tamed into elemental simplicity by patience, discipline and logic” (‘Einstein,’ 8/10/18, f.1).⁵

Banville has not fully developed the mechanics of Alex’s thought-processes; he tries out various approaches for portraying his peculiar gift, but never manages to establish unequivocally its exact nature. Alex’s extraordinary abilities in mathematics are discovered while he is still at school: “At school, in the beginning, when it was still just sums, he had seen the magical power of mere counting in the way things became conscious of themselves, that air of shy surprise which humble objects wore when they were plucked out of obscurity to star in a puzzle” (‘Einstein,’ 8/6, f.117). Given that a character’s perception grants objects their significance, Banville had to establish the characteristics of this significance or what this magical power consisted of. His intentions, however, remain unclear and indicate his uncertainty about the nature of the “puzzle” and self-consciousness that these “humble objects” acquire through their ‘star’ role. Attempting an explanation, he writes that Alex’s “first profound discovery was the capacity of things to be grouped... The world for him from the beginning was a random state informed everywhere by rigid and immutable laws” (‘Einstein,’ 8/6, f. 117). He quickly reformulates this as: “His first profound discovery was the secret harmony that could be set up between disparate things merely by numbering them” (‘Einstein,’ 8/6, f.117r). If the capacity to be grouped is a quality inherent in the objects themselves, and the rigid and immutable laws are there to be noticed, defined and understood, then the ‘secret harmony’ is a connection entirely dependent on the perceiver. This excerpt from ‘Einstein’s’ drafts indicates a further development of this line of thought:

Even before number came the shape. Problems and their possible solutions presented themselves to him first as a floating figure, less form than potential, a kind of geometrical tendency which it was his task to make palpable. He pictured this thing, this thought-form, suspended in a bright space at the centre of his mind. This space was inviolable. The mathematics took place elsewhere, in murk and confusion, in endless doubt and a kind of maniacal glee ('Einstein,' 8/6, f.119).

Banville seems to regard the objects as Platonic ideals, waiting to be “plucked” by the perceiving eye. Yet he avoids explaining the process which yields such a result, leaving it in “murk and confusion,” and his metaphoric, allusive style does not allow the reader an insight into the real significance of this “potential,” if actualized. If making manifest the hidden yet palpable structure is of importance, then the order and not the objects become significant. The meaningfulness of the objects would in this case be revealed through the way they are ordered.

Banville's narrative is inconsistent about Alex's school-leaving results and university entrance. At this juncture, the manuscripts show Banville working on two versions simultaneously. In one, Alex gets disastrous leaving grades in every subject apart from mathematics, and, obliged to give up the idea of university, he receives private tuition at the house of Professor Reizner. The other one, however, has the two brothers going to Trinity College, Dublin, where Alex soon loses interest in the official curriculum, ignores the lectures, and becomes absorbed in Professor Reizner's circle and the mathematical theories which are discussed there.

At Trinity, Jack concentrates on history and comes under the influence of Dr. Cliona Pierson who becomes his teacher and later his friend, and who, of course, recalls Clio from *The Newton Letter*. Alex's mentor, Wolfgang Reizner, an emeritus professor of Mathematics at Trinity, had studied “under Mach in Vienna,” worked with Heisenberg, and was “one of the formulators of the Copenhagen interpretation of quantum theory.” His house is the centre for a group of refugee academics who try to teach Alex how to live, “to know how terrible things are and yet maintain the style galante, [how] to be, in a word, civilized” ('Einstein,' 10/8, f.63). It is clear that Banville is here again exploring the terrain familiar from the previous novels in the tetralogy. The Jamesian lesson to “live all you can” either arrives too late for the Reizner circle scientists or, having consciously neglected the chaotic everyday world, they realize that the harmony they perceive in the universe is a fleeting construct of their own making.⁶ The Reizner circle and their tacit admission of their inability to follow their own lesson recall Banville's Copernicus, Kepler and Newton, while the nostalgic mood of Jack's reminiscences give this fictional memoir a tone similar to *The Newton Letter*. Yet, despite similarities in the mode and manner of treatment, 'Einstein' exhibits a significant thematic difference with the previous three novels of the tetralogy. While Copernicus and Newton's crises were largely due to their avoidance of chaos, 'Einstein' establishes from the outset that contingency is among its central thematic concerns.

It is unclear why Banville decided to abandon 'Einstein.' The drafts go as far as the twins' university years. We do not get to see how Alex intends to use his mathematical gifts. Banville is overly preoccupied with the Reizner circle and other characters whom Jack and Alex encounter, and the story seems to be encumbered by these descriptive passages and fails to develop. The parallels with Einstein's life are fascinating, but their significance could very easily be lost on the reader who is not familiar with the intricacies of Einstein's biography. It is

also difficult to say how Banville intended to narrate the problematic relationship between the human mind and the world that he had outlined in the ‘prospectus.’

The next step in *Mefisto*’s evolution depicts Banville’s attempt to confront this problem by encapsulating within a single microcosm the two polarities – art and science, the convergence of which gives voice to the “rage for order.” A draft dated 29 July 1983 shows a sudden change in the story-line, heralding this new stage in *Mefisto*’s evolution, the appearance of ‘Gemini.’ Following the ‘prospectus’ and the first drafts of ‘Einstein,’ this is the second stage in *Mefisto*’s composition, dated to 1983-4.⁷

In that 29 July 1983 draft in which ‘Gemini’ makes its first appearance, Jack and Alex are replaced by the peculiarly talented Michael and Gabriel: Michael’s gift is numbers, mental arithmetic, Gabriel’s an amazing memory. While Michael can instantaneously perform mental calculations, Gabriel can recall faces, things and places, encountered years ago:

My mind was a portfolio of the faces of people who had passed me by on the street. But why some faces, and not others? Why this room, and not that? What was the rule by which some details were preserved, and the rest, all that vast clutter, allowed to sink? This question tormented me, and torments me still. Was there a significance that I missed that I always missed, in the essence of the things I so obsessively remembered/ preserved/ saved? (‘Gemini,’ 8/7, f.71).

This passage indicates that in ‘Gemini’ as in ‘Einstein,’ objects are made significant by the perceiver. In ‘Einstein’ the hidden order of things was teased out from the phenomena; here Gabriel is left wondering over the significance of the things his mind so obsessively “remembered/preserved/saved.” Michael, although working in a different field, encounters the same problem: “A number to him was not a solid entity, but a congeries of other numbers. He could not hear a sum called out, or see a date written down, without at once, involuntarily, dismantling its numerical attributes, its factors and fractions and roots. It was a kind of manic play in which his mind engaged, of its own volition” (‘Gemini,’ 8/7, fs.71r-72). Although this ‘manic play’ can result either in chaos or harmony, the things which clutter Gabriel’s memory are hopelessly unstable:

They were all slip and slide. When I tried to concentrate on a particular recollection – a face, a room, a snatch of talk – it would at once begin to unfurl into its component parts. The room would become a picture on the wall, the face would resolve into a certain feature, the phrase would feel myself sinking, down and down, into the depths of an eye, into the grain of a board or the weave of a cloth, until it seemed I must eventually slip through the interstices of the molecules (atoms) themselves (‘Gemini,’ 8/7, f.71).

The sheer magnitude of minute details that crowd such a perception casts doubt on the possibility of finding an underlying order which could encompass the “grain of a board” or the “weave of a cloth.” The temptation to discover such an order has been immortalized in Goethe’s *Faust*. Michael and Gabriel are offered the same possibility as *Faust* – to know what holds the world together. Such a possibility sustains their determination to guard every detail granted by their peculiar perception: “What had we done, what rule had we transgressed, that we should be condemned, like figures in a fable, to these endless frantic tasks, he to enumerate

the world, and I to preserve it in the picture gallery of memory? What did it matter. We would not willingly have given up a single sum, a single recollection” (‘Gemini,’ 8/7, f.72).

However tenacious the characters’ determination to preserve every single recollection or sum, the author was willing to sacrifice one of them. A draft dated 5 June 1984 in which Banville briefly restores Alex’s name, presents a solitary protagonist, the survivor of an accident: “Alex could never remember when exactly he had come to know of his dead brother. He had, when he came to think of it, always felt like a survivor” (‘Version III,’ 8/7, f. 76r). Having made this brief reappearance, Alex is again changed to Gabriel, but the twin-brother is terminally gone. Instead of a flesh-and-blood brother, Gabriel is paired with an imagined double, as the memory of his dead brother continues to haunt him.

It took Banville almost four years to establish the central thematic preoccupations of *Mefisto*. In or around 1983 we see the appearance of the doppelgänger motif and the idea of the chaotic nature of the world. However, this draft from 1984 constitutes the definitive break, as the disappearance of the twin brother turns the story into an adventure of a solitary figure. Just as importantly, the little book of Euclid, treasured by Einstein and Alex Hand, appears now as it does in the published version of *Mefisto*, a “big black notebook, thick as a wizard’s codex, with a worn cloth cover and dog-eared pages, and Heinrich Kaspel, Frankfurt inscribed on the flyleaf in an antique hand” (‘Version III,’ 8/4, f.58).

Instead of the harmony promised by the Euclidian rods and rhombuses swimming in the air, Banville’s narrative descends into “murk and confusion.” The black notebook heralds the abandonment of all hope for a beatific and consoling existence of universal harmony. Gabriel’s “rage for order” becomes a private obsession but also his consolation. Banville reminds himself in his marginal comments: “Briefly on numbers as his private comfort, his rage for order: maths would make everything right, bring completeness, etc.: but no real connection with real world of trigonometry etc.: no *applied* maths for him” (‘Version III,’ 8/3, f.18). Yet, this private comfort is far from a quiet scholarly joy, for “Gabriel must be shown as *driven*, raging for order that will account for his incomplete state: that is, he must drift less, be more present, positive: anger, and grim humour, in narrative voice...” (‘Version III,’ 8/3, f.14). While Alex from “Einstein” found the world to be “real in mensuration,” Gabriel’s anchors to reality are numbers. This, however, does not imply stability. On the contrary, instead of the single, all-explaining formula, this touchstone is a source for innumerable combinations and permutations. Gabriel is seeking to discover the law according to which these permutations are operating. He embarks upon this task undeterred by the existence of contingency, for his belief in numbers and trust in things numerical is all-encompassing in its totality. As Banville told himself in the margin: “Expand: esp. the notion that maths [sic] can explain/ account for everything, chance included...” (‘Version III,’ 8/3, f.22). Thus the published version of the novel depicts a driven Gabriel, raging for order and symmetry in the world which is governed by contingency.

A few of Banville’s original concerns, his inspiration behind the science tetralogy, can still be glimpsed in the published version of *Mefisto*. For example, in Einstein’s epistemology, intuition is capable of perceiving correspondence in external reality, taking these correspondences to be “free creations of the human mind” (Bernstein 25). However, the freedom is not that of a “novelist, but of a person who solves a cross-word puzzle. Any word can be proposed as a solution, but there is only one that fits the puzzle in all parts” (Lenzen 373). Gabriel, who is searching for a means of perception, believes for a moment to have found such a solution:

Everything had brought me to this knowledge, there was no smallest event that had not been part of the plot. Or perhaps I should say: had brought me back to it. For had I not always known, after all? From the start the world had been for me an immense formula. Press hard enough upon anything, a cloud, a fall of light, a cry in the street, and it would unfurl its secret, intricate equations. But what was different now was that it was no longer numbers that lay at the heart of things. Numbers, I saw at last, were only a method, a way of doing. The thing itself would be more subtle, more certain, even, than the mere manner of its finding. (*M* 185)

Gabriel sees a universe which, even if governed by order, consists of an unfathomable number of possible permutations and combinations. The function that would reveal the secret workings of this universe is beyond the grasp of intellectual faculties. When the “mere things themselves” crowd in, Gabriel loses his numerical abilities. Objects melt into one another or remain ‘stubbornly’ themselves without any apparent cause. If one manages to relinquish the desire for constructing and imposing structures on the world, the result is a loss of a creative artistic impulse. *Mefisto* ends with a suggestion that the novel itself is Gabriel’s “black book.” Thus the existence of the narrative becomes a confirmation of Gabriel’s inability to accomplish his act of individuation. He turns his “curse” of eternal ‘other’ into a creative act and seeks if not liberation then solace in art, a decision whereby he chooses to remain a divided self. Suspended between a universe of his own creation and the other, of which he is only offered some chance glimpses, Gabriel is aware of being trapped in *die ewige Wiederkehr*, or the eternal recurrence (Imhof, “Q & A” 13). Telling himself to “cancel, yes, cancel and begin again,” he shows a Beckettian compulsion to go on, and, as in the draft versions, the novel portrays Gabriel driven by the desire to “know things” (*Mefisto* 120).

Although at this point *Mefisto* did not sound like “a commercial possibility,” the published novel was met with reasonably encouraging reception. Yet, Banville has clearly cultivated *Mefisto*’s status as a troublesome book: his statements in interviews about his own mental breakdown, and how this novel nearly killed him are good examples of that. He has also widely claimed that *Mefisto* did not attract much interest from reviewers. He told the *Paris Review*: “When the book was finally published, it was completely ignored. In those days they used to review four or five novels in one go and in one or two of those my book was dismissed in a half inch at the end of the column – this was the only review attention it got. Commercially it failed miserably” (McKeon 143). Rüdiger Imhof (1987), the only scholar to have discussed *Mefisto*’s reception, also claimed that “for the greater part [*Mefisto*] met with a lukewarm reception; quite a few reviewers have altogether disapproved of the book, believing it to be a straight realistic novel whose second half for some strange reason goes bad” (“*Mefisto*,” 137). Imhof does not list the reviews he had in mind, but when one studies the novel’s reception, both Banville and Imhof seem to be aggrandizing its near-mythical status as Banville’s ‘problem book’ or a novel that was largely ignored. The publication of *Mefisto* was acknowledged by the major daily newspapers both in Britain and Ireland. True, the novel seemed to have caused some perplexity. *The Financial Times*, for instance, began its review by stating that “John Banville’s *Mefisto* is a puzzle. It is extremely well-written, the work of a prize-winning novelist, yet almost wholly unsatisfactory as well” (Best iv). *The Observer* admitted that *Mefisto* was “intriguing” and sometimes “hauntingly beautiful” but “finally unsatisfying” (Walters 27). Neither *The Financial Times* nor *The Observer*’s reviewer took it for a “straight realistic novel;” they were, rather, dissatisfied with the “mad logic, discontinuities and the

random cruelty of fairy-tales” (Imhof, “Mefisto,” 137). Furthermore, *Mefisto* was enthusiastically and even reverentially reviewed in, for instance, *The Irish Times*, *Fortnight*, *The Times Literary Supplement*, *The Irish Literary Supplement* and *The Irish Review*.⁸ Thus, Allen Findlay in *Literary Review* declared, “With *Mefisto*, John Banville carries on the tradition of excellence that seems to be inherent in modern Irish literature” (12). William Kelly in *Irish Literary Supplement* proclaimed, “If a book, as Kafka put it, should serve as an ice axe for the frozen sea within us, then this one is hard enough for the job” (15). *The Irish Times* reviewer, Mary Leland urged, “So – read *Mefisto* straight through; it deserves it. It is not random, but deliberate, chosen, complex, the dense pattern almost obscuring the workmanship. It has humour, and there is the fun of finding out, on that other level, what the Deuce/Dickens/Blazes he is getting at” (Leland 5). Leland’s review also mentions that Seckers had submitted *Mefisto* for the Booker Prize.

As my analysis of the manuscript versions indicates, the scientific theme had been troublesome from the beginning. Banville had started out with an idea for an entertaining and commercially successful story of twentieth-century physics, based on Einstein’s life. Gradually, he lost sight of the science part of the story and started to focus more on the biography of his protagonist. Although the convergence of art and science had been one of his favourite topics at the time, in an interview he let it slip that one reason for abandoning the theme of science and scientists was the scientific discourse: “The language of science is too systematised – I couldn’t incorporate any actual scientific discourse in my work because it stood out too much” (Meaney 12). With *Doctor Copernicus* and *Kepler* he had managed to avoid scientific jargon, but, as the drafts of *Mefisto* indicate, an Einstein figure turned out to be much more problematic in this respect. ‘Einstein’ also remained both in tone and theme too tightly anchored to the previous novels of the tetralogy. By the third stage of his composition process, Banville had severed that connection, and, as he said in post-publication interviews: “[In the] published novel I wanted to signal – to myself, mainly – the fact that I was returning to what one might call the realm of pure imagination... No more history, no more facts!” (Imhof, “Q & A,” 13).⁹ Thus in 1984, when Banville finally formulated *Mefisto*’s thematic nexus, he overcame his artistic impasse by distancing himself from the realist mode. Gabriel, never granted a connection with the real world through his mathematical endeavours, becomes mesmerized by his black notebook or a “wizard’s codex.” An accessible and entertaining novel is buried under a demanding tapestry of Gabriel’s abstract mental virtuosity, which, in the end, turn out to be a mere “method,” and not the “thing itself.”

Although Banville’s revisions largely removed Einstein’s life-story from *Mefisto*, the reviewers and critics kept either reading Einstein into the novel or noting his absence. For one, Imhof claimed that Gabriel’s life in the published novel seems to be “loosely grounded on the life of Gödel or Einstein” (“Mefisto,” 155). Writing in the *Irish Times*, Ronan Sheehan admonished Banville for not having written a book on Einstein: “If he had pursued the themes [how Copernicus and Kepler, two men of genius, struggled to shape and sustain their visions of the universe in hostile environments] in two more naturalistic lives, of Newton and, say, Einstein, he might have presented his publishers with a substantial highbrow package, reasonably accessible and eminently marketable. He might have made a lotta dollars” (Sheehan 9). It is possible that Sheehan might have known about Banville’s original plans for the tetralogy. It is equally possible that instead of inside information from Irish literary circles we have here a terrifyingly accurate hindsight. The few paragraphs on the proposed ‘Einstein’ in the ‘prospectus’ do not offer enough information on Banville’s “beautiful adventure of atomic

physics,” to say with certainty that this would have been Sheehan’s “substantial highbrow package,” a commercially successful and accessible book on Einstein. As the ‘prospectus’ demonstrates, Banville’s original idea was to use Einstein’s life story in order to investigate the moral and political undercurrents of twentieth-century European weltanschauung. However, his five-year-long composition process culminates with the eradication of these historical, moral and scientific concerns. *Mefisto* is finally born when Banville establishes Gabriel’s narrative voice.

Prior to *Mefisto*, Banville had seen the future of the novel to lie in the fusion of art and science. Post-*Mefisto*, Banville’s ideas exhibit an important change: he now sees the future of the novel as residing in narrative voice, “The classic, Victorian novel was about the building of a nation, the building of a people, and that people telling itself its own story through the novelist... However, I am not interested in that kind of novel at all. The thing that interests me in the novel is voice” (Friberg 201). The pitfalls and successes associated with this discovery are still debatable. Arguably, Banville’s newly-found reliance on narrative voice might have led him into another artistic impasse. As one *New Yorker* critic recently complained, “Sometimes you feel that, over the past twenty-five years or so, he has been writing just one long novel” (Acocella).

Although Banville does not reveal the exact circumstances that led to his new interest in narrative voice, *Mefisto*’s compositional processes, and especially the textual and philosophical decision to kill one twin and birth a survivor beleaguered by an unnamed loss, remain strong contenders. In 2009, Banville stated rather solemnly: “*Mefisto* was a big shift for me. I began to write in a different way. I began to trust my instincts, to lose control, deliberately. It was exciting and it was frightening” (McKeon 142). It is impossible to pinpoint exactly where in those messy drafts he started trusting his instincts, but I find it significant that Banville followed *Mefisto* with his most assured fictional voice – Freddie Montgomery from *The Book of Evidence*.¹⁰

Notes

1 I am grateful to John Banville for his generous permission to quote from the unpublished materials. Hereafter the drafts from the first stage – 10252/8/9 and 10252/8/10, fragmentary annotated Ts. Drafts, dated 1981-1982; and 10252/8/6 and 10252/8/7 fs.1-36r, Notebooks with early Ms. drafts, dated 1981-1983 – will be referred to as ‘Einstein.’

The drafts from the second stage – 10252/8/7 fs.37-75r – will be referred to as ‘Gemini’ and the drafts relating to the third period – 10252/8/7, fs.76-129, 10252/8/3; 10252/8/4 – as ‘Version III.’

2 See Banville’s correspondence held at Secker & Warburg archive at Reading.

3 An interesting parallel can be drawn with Einstein’s remark in his “Autobiographical Notes.” While discussing Maxwell’s electromagnetic theory, Einstein says that pairs such as Faraday-Maxwell and Galileo-Newton possess a “most remarkable inner similarity where the former of each pair grasps the relations intuitively, and the second one formulates those relations exactly and applies them quantitatively” (Einstein, 35).

4 Parallels with Einstein were clearly intended. For instance one of Banville’s marginal comments is: “Re-read Einstein’s infancy here” (‘Einstein,’ 8/9). It is not clear which books and biographies Banville consulted: I found significant parallels between these drafts and Einstein’s own, “Autobiographical Notes,” which was the closest Einstein came to writing an actual memoir, and

Banesh Hoffman's biography, *Albert Einstein: Creator and Rebel* (1972). The story also recalls Thomas Mann's description of Adrian Leverkühn's school-years. Banville acknowledged having introduced allusions to Mann's novel in all four novels. See Imhof, "Q & A with John Banville," 13.

- 5 According to Bernstein, Einstein also never showed any interest in chess or mathematical puzzles. He was gifted in music and an accomplished, though largely self-taught, violinist.
- 6 On *The Ambassadors* influence on Banville see Powell (2015).
- 7 There are a few other pieces of evidence that indicate that Banville was serious about 'Gemini.' For example, in 1985 Banville published an excerpt from a "work-in-progress" entitled "Gemini" in a collection edited by Robin Robertson, *Firebird 4: New Writing from Britain and Ireland*. Note also that in astronomy, Gemini is a Northern constellation where the two brightest stars are called Castor and Pollux (Polydeuces in Greek).
- 8 See Joe McMin, "Reality Refuses to fall into Place." *Fortnight*. (October, 1986): 24; Patricia Craig, "A Rage for Order." *Times Literary Supplement*. 10 October 1986: 1131; William Kelly, "John Banville's Great Expectations." *Irish Literary Supplement*. (Spring, 1987): 15; and David McCormack, "John Banville: Literature as Criticism." *The Irish Review*. No.2 (1987): 95-99.
- 9 In fact, when *Doctor Copernicus*, *Kepler* and *The Newton Letter* were re-issued as *The Revolutions Trilogy* in 2000, the publishers left out *Mefisto*. The tetralogy seemed to be no more.
- 10 Derek Hand also noted, "There is a sense in which John Banville took seriously the advice volunteered at the close of *Mefisto*. With *The Book of Evidence* (1989), he goes back to the basics and offers his readers a story at once simple and straightforward, yet utterly compelling" (Hand 131).

Works Cited

- Acocella, Joan. "Doubling Down." *The New Yorker* (8 October 2012).
- Banville, John. Prospectus. Secker & Warburg. The Archive of British Publishing and Printing. University of Reading. , 'Einstein,' TS Draft, 10252/8/9. John Banville collection. Trinity College Library in Dublin.
- . 'Einstein,' TS Draft, 10252/8/10. John Banville collection. Trinity College Library in Dublin.
- . 'Einstein,' MS Draft, 10252/8/6. John Banville collection. Trinity College Library in Dublin.
- . 'Gemini,' MS Draft, 10252/8/7. John Banville collection. Trinity College Library in Dublin.
- . 'Version III,' TS Draft, 10252/8/3. John Banville collection. Trinity College Library in Dublin.
- . *Mefisto*. 1986. London: Minerva, 1993.
- Bernstein, Jeremy. *Einstein*. Suffolk: Fontana/Collins, 1973.
- Best, Nicholas. "When Predatory Children Run in Germany." *The Financial Times*. 13 September 1986: xiv.
- Carty, Ciaran. "Out of Chaos Comes Order." *The Sunday Tribune*. 14 September 1986:18.
- Einstein, Albert. "Autobiographical Notes." *Albert Einstein: Philosopher-Scientist*. Ed. Paul Arthur Schlipp. Vol.1. New York: Harper & Brother's Publishers, 1951: 1-95.
- Findlay, Allen. "An Irish Devil." *Literary Review*. (November) 1986: 11.
- Friberg, Hedda. "John Banville and Derek Hand in Conversation." *Irish University Review*, vol.36, no.1, (Spring-Summer) 2006: 200-215.
- Hand, Derek. *John Banville: Exploring Fictions*. Dublin: The Liffey Press, 2002.
- Hoffmann, Banesh. *Albert Einstein: Creator and Rebel*. New York: The Viking Press, 1972.

- Imhof, Rüdiger. "Mefisto." *Irish University Review*. Vol.17, No.1 (Spring, 1987): 137-140.
- . "Q & A with John Banville." *Irish Literary Supplement*. (Spring, 1987): 13.
- Jackson, Joe. "Hitler, Stalin, Bob Dylan, Roddy Doyle... and Me." *Hot Press*. Vol.18, No.19 (5 October 1994): 14-16.
- Kelly, William. "John Banville's Great Expectations." *Irish Literary Supplement*. (Spring, 1987): 15.
- Leland, Mary. "Gabriel's Sinister Angel." *Irish Times*. 13 September 1986: 5.
- Lenzen, Victor F. "Einstein's Theory of Knowledge." *Albert Einstein: Philosopher-Scientist*. Ed. Paul Arthur Schlipp. Vol.2. New York: Harper & Brothers's Publishers, 1951: 355-384.
- McKeon, Belinda. "John Banville, The Art of Fiction No.200." *The Paris Review*. No. 188. Spring 2009. 132-153.
- Meaney, Helen. "Master of Paradox." *Irish Times*. 24 March 1993, 12.
- O'Mahony, Andy. 'Interview with John Banville.' *The Book Show*. RTÉ 1. 15 April 1976.
- Powell, Kersti Tarien. "'The Answer ... Is Yes and No': John Banville, Henry James, and *The Ambassadors*." *Irish University Review*, vol. 45, no. 2, Nov. 2015: 302-319.
- Sheehan, Ronan. "The Devil I Know." *Image*. (September) 1986: 164, 166.
- . "John Banville and the Music of the Spheres." *The Irish Times*. 13 September 1986: 9.
- Tonkin, Boyd. "The Wrong Choice in a List Packed with Delights." *The Independent* (11 October 2005)
- Walters, Margaret. "Middle Distance Man." *The Observer*. 14 September 1986: 27.