

Postmodern Pastiche: The Case of Mrs Osmond by John Banville

Pastiche Pós-moderno: O Caso de Mrs. Osmond, de John Banville

Aurora Piñeiro

Abstract: *According to both Genette and Hutcheon, parody is transformational in its relationship to other texts, whereas pastiche is imitative. Other theorists such as Hoesterey and Dyer have redefined pastiche (and imitative textual practices) from the perspective of postmodern aesthetics and explored the way in which it resignifies previous artworks, as it is associated to an awareness of historicity. The aim of this article is to analyse Mrs Osmond (2017) by John Banville as an example of a postmodern pastiche that not only operates by correspondence or tribute in relation to The Portrait of a Lady (1881) by Henry James, but also as a novel where recontextualisation does create meaningful differences between the literary works involved. It is in this distance that Banville's text unsettles traditional notions of pastiche and produces a more polyvalent effect as well as an expansion of the multiplicity already associated to his authorial figure.*

Key words: *Banville; Mrs Osmond; pastiche; parody; authorial figure.*

Resumo: *Segundo Genette e Hutcheon, a paródia é transformacional em sua relação com outros textos, enquanto o pastiche é imitativo. Outros teóricos como Hoesterey e Dyer redefiniram o pastiche (e práticas textuais imitativas) a partir da perspectiva da estética pós-moderna e exploraram a maneira pela qual obras de arte anteriores são ressignificadas, pois o pastiche está associado a uma consciência da historicidade. O objetivo deste artigo é analisar Mrs. Osmond (2017), de John Banville, como exemplo de um pastiche pós-moderno que não só opera por correspondência ou tributo em relação a The Portrait of a Lady (1881), de Henry James, mas também como um romance no qual a recontextualização cria diferenças significativas entre as obras literárias envolvidas. É a essa distância que o texto de Banville desestabiliza as noções tradicionais de pastiche e produz um efeito mais polivalente, além de uma expansão da multiplicidade já associada a sua figura autoral.*

Palavras-chave: *John Banville; Mrs. Osmond; pastiche; paródia; figura autoral.*

John Banville's literary project has been primarily committed to a search for beauty, the articulation of what he has described as the perfect sentence, and an intention to drive prose as closely as possible to the density of poetry. It also includes an exploration of varied forms of novel writing, and it is in this specific genre (though not exclusively) where he has experimented with the creation of a multiple authorial figure characterised by complex and paradoxical traits: He has even contributed to the construction of an authorial *posture* or what

Meizoz describes as *posture d'auteur*,¹ a notion at play within a larger literary scene where the aesthete, the art critic, the *noir* writer, the philosopher and the iconoclast coexist in a relentless postmodern tension.

The path towards the creation of this multiplicity as an authorial figure was made evident in 2006, when *Christine Falls* was published; his first novel in the Benjamin Black literary alter ego series. This initial unfolding of an authorial stance would prove to become a serious exploration of identity as a multiple concept when Black went for an impersonation of Chandler in *The Black-Eyed Blonde* (2014), where the author does not write a sequel but embodies the Chandler figure to produce a new Phillip Marlowe novel, a piece of contemporary *noir* fiction that is both a tribute and an appropriation of this American authorial identity and his hard-boiled character. And there was more to come.

In 2017, Benjamin Black published *Prague Nights*, another sample of crime fiction, though this one belongs neither to the Quirke series² nor is it a Chandler/ Marlowe novel, as this time the story takes place in Prague, in 1599. *Prague Nights* is an autonomous piece, but it may also be read as part of an elaborate network of self-referentiality within Banville's oeuvre, as the setting coincides with that of the 1981 novel *Kepler* (and Kepler, as a character, features in at least one scene in Black's text), and the same city happens to be the location for *Prague Pictures*, Banville's 2003 non-fiction book. In this way Black, now a period noir writer, Banville the novelist and Banville the essayist end up being closely linked in an intertextual network that, on the one hand, reinforces intra and extratextual referentiality and, on the other hand, unsettles the borderlines between narrative genres and authorial identities. The descriptions of urban space in the three texts mentioned before are frequently made to coincide via pastiche, and the intrepid use of this strategy across genres and authorial identities takes yet another turn in *Mrs Osmond*, the latest Banville novel,³ also published in 2017.

Mrs Osmond is both a sequel to and a pastiche of Henry James's *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881). As a sequel, it offers readers an imaginative follow up to the life of Isabel Archer, the protagonist of the story. As a pastiche, it establishes a critical distance with traditional conceptualizations that reduce such literary practice to a stylistic imitation. In consonance with definitions of pastiche that include transformational aspects, the aim of this article is to analyse *Mrs Osmond* by John Banville as an example of a postmodern pastiche that not only operates by correspondence or tribute in relation to *The Portrait of a Lady* by Henry James, but also as a novel where recontextualization does create meaningful differences between the artworks involved. It is via the use of formal procedures such as likeness, deformation and discrepancy that Banville's text unsettles traditional notions of pastiche and produces a more polyvalent effect as well as an expansion of the multiplicity already associated to his authorial figure, as he impersonates Henry James to render an elegant but transgressive postmillennial Isabel Archer's adventure.

Banville anticipated the potential negative reception *Mrs Osmond* might be exposed to: "I'll probably be eviscerated for it" (qtd. in Sheridan, "John Banville"). In Europe, the reviews of the novel were mainly positive while, in the United States, these expressed either mixed opinions or openly negative ones.⁴ One of the most vitriolic examples was published in *The New Yorker*, by Charles Finch, whose reading centres on the impossibility of imitating Henry James and condemns Banville's use of "straight pastiche" as the reason why "as a result [he] fails the most severely". Finch insists that Banville "fails to mimic James's style", and still adds: "what an act of insanity even to attempt such a book! What writer could be harder to inhabit?" ("John Banville's 'Mrs Osmond'"). An interpretation like the previous one shows not

only Finch's disapproval of Banville's novel but is equally telling of a reductive notion of pastiche as flat imitation and a belated Romantic attachment to canonical works or authors (such as Henry James) as figures surrounded by a halo of the sacral. Bourdieu describes this literary "fetishism" as a belief in the artist's creative powers that turns him/her into a creature invested with "authority in relation to the experience of the inefable" (Bourdieu qtd. in de Teresa), and extends that same "sacred value to the name, words, actions and literary works" (de Teresa 115, translation is mine). My position is that Finch's reading overlooks the complex types of relationships Banville has established with several well-known artworks throughout his long literary career, and how the notion of precursors is both fascinating and a hard one to tackle when it comes to his "connections between preceding intellectual and artistic models and contemporary cultural forms and norms" (Springer, "Introduction" location 223). Banville's writings display unexpected forms of appropriation that contribute to a larger aesthetic project and aim at destabilising received notions on self, literature and reading practices as well.

Portrait and the Making of a Jamesian Prose Style

The Portrait of a Lady (1881) by Henry James is the story of Isabel, a young American woman who, right after becoming an orphan, is paid a visit by a maternal aunt she had not met before, but who offers her a chance to see Europe. She accepts the invitation and her arrival in England, and specifically at the Touchetts family state near London, marks the beginning of a long journey of self-discovery and acquaintance with the ways of the world. Her life in England is also the starting point of a moving though not simple relationship with her cousin, Ralph Touchett, who plays the (ambiguous) roles of friend and benefactor towards Isabel, though his solidarity is not exempt from destructive elements. After rejecting two suitors, Isabel's travels in the continent are parallel to her acceptance of a marital proposal issued by Gilbert Osmond and tactfully encouraged by Serena Merle, two American expatriates whom she reads as embodiments of sophistication. Settled in Rome, the marriage rapidly sours and the story develops towards an uncertain ending, that includes Ralph's death but leaves readers without a closure in relation to Isabel's handling of her future and the notion of individual freedom that she was so concerned with as a young character.

As in other novels by James, in *Portrait* the author explores the cultural differences between the New and the Old world, as well as themes such as responsibility and betrayal. According to Fred Kaplan, "the world of *Portrait* [...] is a threatening, often deathly world of repression and annihilation, where no one is happy, no one is saved" (*Henry James* 361). And indeed it was with this novel that conveyed a bleak view on humankind that James became an internationally acclaimed author whose works were distinguished by a detailed recreation of the psychological depth of their characters, and a prose characterised by the use of long sentences, many times with an inverted order, parenthetical interruptions and an emphasis on relating expressions (see Short *et al* qtd. in Smit 95). In short, a writing that later novels also confirmed as in possession of an elegant, descriptive and equally challenging style. Thus, the reinforcement of the idea of the impossibility to imitate the Jamesian style and, for the purposes of the present article, the need to explore different definitions of pastiche in order to analyse the relationship between this American classic and the sequel published by John Banville.

An Approach to Pastiche in a Contemporary Context

In *Palimpsests. Literature in the Second Degree*, Gérard Genette develops his theory on transtextuality and uses the term hypertextuality to analyse different types of rewritings that are characterised by dependence or an autonomy restriction in relation to their sources or hypotexts, this is, a textual practice “in which the shift from hypotext to hypertext is both massive (an entire work B deriving from an entire work A) and more or less officially stated” (9). Within this initial approach, Genette defines (pure) pastiche as one of the embodiments of hypertextuality, and as “the imitation of a style without any satirical intent” (25). In a second stage of his analysis, and in order to map the exploration of the territory of hypertextual practices in further detail, he creates a diagram that takes into account both structural and functional classifications, and where pastiche, when understood under the structural classification, remains imitational; but, when considered under the functional classification (or mood) is divided into three different varieties, for which he coins specific terms: *pastiche proper* (‘playful’ mood), *caricature* (which he used to call satirical pastiche, thus the mood here is ‘satirical’), and *forgery* (a term closely related to both pastiche and apocrypha, which Genette uses to refer to serious imitations, thus the corresponding mood here is ‘serious’) (see 28).⁵ These three subspecies of pastiche are at play in Mrs Osmond, and some sections from the novel even blur the borderlines with other forms of hypertextuality such as parody, which is a transformational practice (see note 4), because as Genette himself states, “specific works are always, and happily so, much more complex than the species to which they are affixed” (28).

Linda Hutcheon celebrates postmodern uses of hypertextual practices because they force “a reconsideration of the idea of origin or originality that is compatible with other postmodern interrogations of liberal humanist assumptions” (*Poetics* 11). Building up on Genette’s study, she distinguishes pastiche from other forms of rewriting by contrasting it to parody, and equally states that parody is transformational in its relationship to other texts, while pastiche is imitative, in particular, a stylistic imitation or a “form-rendering” (Wells qtd. in Hutcheon, *Parody* 38). Although Hutcheon defends imitation as a practice that always “offered a workable and effective stance toward the past in its paradoxical strategy of repetition as a source of freedom” (10), she defines parody “as a repetition with critical distance that allows ironic signalling of difference at the very heart of similarity” (*Poetics* 26), to later establish a contrast between parody as “a bitextual synthesis [...], unlike more monotextual forms like pastiche that stress similarity rather than difference” (*Parody* 33). Her views on pastiche are more reductive than those on parody, which she is even open to consider a genre instead of a specific writing strategy, to the point that she states that a parody can “contain (or use to parodic ends) a pastiche” (*Parody* 38) and, in a more detrimental fashion, that “parody is to pastiche, perhaps, as rhetorical trope is to cliché. In pastiche and cliché, difference can be said to be reduced to similarity” (38). Illuminating as most of her views on postmodern aesthetics are, when it comes to pastiche, she is not inclined to concede this strategy other potentialities beyond those contained within the scope of accentuating similarity, and even believes that “pastiche usually has to remain within the same genre as its model” (38), while parody is more commonly used in adaptations.

Other theorists such as Ingeborg Hoesterey and Richard Dyer have studied pastiche under a more positive light and have explored its complex dynamics, especially when it comes to its postmodern and transmedia manifestations. In the first chapter of *Pastiche. Cultural Memory in Art, Film, Literature*, Hoesterey includes a glossary with an entry for the term imitation, which she defines as “not in and of itself a negative activity”, and when related to

pastiche, she adds “the basic structure of pastiche is a degree of imitation. What happens beyond this determines the artistic success of both the traditional and the postmodern pastiche” (12). This initial definition, with the use of the phrase “a degree of” and further considerations of pastiche in relation to different artistic languages paves the way for Richard Dyer’s book on the subject.

Richard Dyer defines pastiche as a kind of imitation that readers “are meant to know is an imitation” (*Pastiche* 1) and glosses on several aspects of this when he explains that an entire work may be a pastiche, or that pastiche may be an aspect of a work contained within a wider one that is not itself pastiche, or a formal operation within a work. Another basic consideration is that “pastiche may imitate a specific work or else a kind of work (authorial, generic, period)” (2), and he expands these initial ideas to the notion of pastiche as “an imitation of an imitation” (2), not of life or “reality” itself; it is a “knowing form of the *practice* of imitation, which itself always holds us inexorably within cultural perception of the real and also, and thereby, enables us to make a sense of the real “(2).

Of the many implications derived from these definitions of postmodern pastiche, I will mainly focus on three formal procedures suggested by Dyer, which are likeness, deformation and discrepancy, as it will be explored in the narrative fragments by James and Banville that I analyse below. By likeness, Dyer means that pastiche is “formally close to (its perception of) what it pastiches but not identical to it; very like, but not indistinguishable from” (55), and its likeness is always subject to other aspects of perception: different periods and cultures see and hear varied things in texts and this must be registered in any imitation, and therefore pastiche, of them. Once he has stated that pastiche is not identical to its hypotext(s), he goes on to explore how pastiche may signal difference by its use of the procedures of deformation and discrepancy. Pastiche deforms the style of its referent as it may select, accentuate, exaggerate or concentrate key features of the source (see 56-57). In the same spirit, pastiche may also be achieved by discrepancy, “by something inconsistent or inappropriate in an aspect of the writing that makes one see more clearly the style of the rest of the writing, which is to say, the style that is being pastiched” (58). Thus, pastiche may be highly demanding in terms of bi-directional or multi-directional (re)writing and (re)reading practices, as the case of the dialogues between *Portrait* and *Mrs Osmond* proves.

Portrait and Mrs Osmond: Faraway, (and yet) So Close!

In the opening paragraph of *The Portrait of a Lady*, readers find a depiction of light that may be considered representative of Henry James’ style, his talent for descriptions of space as well as the creation of atmospheres:

Under certain circumstances there are few hours in life more agreeable than the hour dedicated to the ceremony known as afternoon tea. There are circumstances in which, whether you partake of the tea or not -some people of course never do, - the situation is in itself delightful (...) The implements of the little feast had been disposed upon the lawn of an old English country-house, in what I should call the perfect middle of a splendid summer afternoon (...) Real dusk would not arrive for many hours; but the flood of summer light had begun to ebb, the air had grown mellow, the shadows were long upon the smooth, dense turf. They lengthened slowly, however, and the scene expressed that sense of leisure still to come which is perhaps the chief source of one’s enjoyment of such a scene at such an hour. From five o’clock to eight is on certain occasions a little eternity, but on such an occasion as this the interval could be only an eternity of pleasure (59).

It is under this benign light that the ceremony of afternoon tea will take place, and the ritual will be presided by a strong, male character, Mr Touchett, the owner of Gardencourt. The complete first chapter of the novel is devoted to this tea gathering, and introduces readers to the art of representing three variations on male-character identities that touch on received notions on masculinity, ethnicity and social class. Mr Touchett, as the patriarchal figure and landowner who (let us point at the subtle criticism already present in the source) happens to be American and, though successfully transplanted to English soil, is depicted as not in full command of the subtleties of English culture by at least two elements in this chapter: his tea cup, which “was an unusually large cup, of a different pattern from the rest of the set and painted in brilliant colours” (59); and the ironies he is addressed with by Lord Warburton, an English aristocrat who is a close friend of Ralph (Mr Touchett’s son), which are playful ironies Ralph has to “translate” for his father; while the son himself is described as an invalid, a hybrid of English and American culture, who will not inherit a title, and lacks the father’s abilities for the business world. Despite the underlying criticism that James carefully embeds in the chapter (and the novel), the initial atmosphere of leisure and joy prevails, as the characters are tied by blood and honest friendship bonds. The ironies are tuned down to represent an exercise on witticism more than a fully-fleshed attack on any of them. This is a scene of intimacy, that readers are made to perceive as a long adopted, quotidian practice. Furthermore, the chapter works as a preamble for the arrival of Isabel Archer, the protagonist of the novel.

In *Mrs Osmond*, the reader finds a pastiche of the previous tea ceremony in Part II, chapter XX, where Banville’s talent for description also focuses on light, and equally contributes to the creation of an atmosphere that is as detailed and significant as that of James’s novel, at the same time that new insights into the characters’ microcosms are provided. As in James’s *Portrait*, the ritual is presided by a strong, male character, this time Gilbert Osmond, though the place is not Gardencourt but the ancient Bellosguardo House, in Tuscany, where Gilbert has retreated after having been found guilty of adultery, and having been temporarily abandoned by Isabel Archer:

The day had indeed cooled somewhat. The sunlit mist in the valley had softened from glitter to glow, and even the crickets seemed less desperate in the flinging out of their nests of scraped and numbingly vibrant song. In the shade of the house’s overhanging roof a little round wrought-iron table had been set up on the gravel beside the riotous rose-beds; it was covered with a linen cloth, and laid with all the implements requisite for the taking of afternoon tea. This delightful ceremony, so characteristically English, though gently anachronistic here, in the midst of so much southern vehemence of temperature and light, was one of Osmond’s more recently acquired affectations; in fact, the custom had been instituted at about the time, as the countess had not failed to note, of Lord Warburton’s appearance in Rome (193).

At the level of textual structure, Banville reinforces the reader’s expectations of dualities or mirror-correspondences as he locates this episode in the second chapter of the second part of the novel, and the numbering of this chapter 20 is done in Roman numerals, thus the plastic repetition of XX as a figure also contributes to what we might assume as an exact parallelism with the scene in James’s novel⁶. The internal structure of the episode is also reproduced in *Mrs Osmond*, thus we confirm a sequence: type of ceremony- description of the implements necessary for the repast- description of light- description of emotional state of characters or

social traits associated to the ceremony in turn.

At the level of space configuration, both scenes take place outdoors, while light is fading and the atmosphere of leisure, as a privilege for a select few, is set.

At the level of stylistic imitation, we see the coincidence of nouns such as “ceremony” or “implements” and adjectives such as “delightful”, and the elegant Jamesian prose is reproduced by the use of long, highly descriptive sentences with an intensive use of adverbs, parenthetical or subordinate phrases and clauses, relating expressions and even alliterations that make the formal imitation an obvious one.

However, pastiche goes beyond likeness and into deformation as “it does not reproduce every detail of the referent, but selects a number of traits and makes them the basis of the pastiche” (Dyer 56), and it may also involve “working on the traits themselves, **accentuating** and **exaggerating** them” (57) as it happens in the fragment just quoted (and the rest of the tea scene), in the way Banville echoes but also works on James’s realistic traits by adding carefully calibrated adjectives, adverbs and nouns that accompany the already meticulous selection of terms from the hypotext. The scene in *Mrs Osmond* takes place in a summer afternoon that is being *artificially* adapted to fit the standards of the Jamesian one: here the temperature has cooled down “somewhat”; sunlight has barely softened up to the degree of “glowing”. The natural surroundings, which are peaceful in Gardencourt, are scarcely kept within the orbit of order in *Mrs Osmond*, as animals are “less desperate” and the flower-beds are described as “riotous”. The table is not set under the sheltering and cooling shade of an ancient tree but the house’s overhanging roof; the English ceremony is “anachronistic” and one more of Osmond’s “affectations”, which is made ridiculous or satirical (this time deformation is closely related to the pastiche subspecies of “caricature” or satirical pastiche in Genette’s jargon) by the fact that it has been recently adopted out of an intention to emulate Lord Warburton’s lifestyle, and the presence of the verb “instituted” makes it more ironic, as it tries to provide the scene with an air of tradition and authority, while readers (and Countess Gemini) know that they are dealing with the staging of a scene and that the ritual has been incorporated into Osmond’s daily life just a few weeks before. As a consequence of this shift from likeness into deformation, the social ironies present in both novels become intensely deprecating in the case of the work by Banville.

The signalling of difference at the heart of similarity is also found in the fact that the two male figures central to both renderings of the tea ceremony are American expats and there are behavioural features that denounce them as characters who do not completely belong; but Mr Touchett does not expect to be seen as an English lord while, in *Mrs Osmond*, this shared American origin is turned into deformation as Gilbert adopts the pose of the ultimate English lord. Here, the use of this satirical variety of pastiche accentuates geographic and cultural dislocations, together with other inconsistencies (we start treading on the territory of discrepancy) that alter the apparent likeness of the scenes. The countess, or Mme Gemini, has been forced to attend afternoon tea: readers learn, at the end of the previous chapter, that Gilbert has confronted her and prevented her from answering back with, precisely, his “offer” to have some tea. And the gathering is not one of intimacy. As in a comedy of errors that has gone acutely sour, other characters come and go: there is a major-domo who serves tea and “mumble[s] to himself”, mistakes the countess for Isabel, and plies “the teapot with a gnarled brown quaking hand, and manag[es] to leave in both their saucers a substantial spillage of tea as pale as straw” (194). The lack of colour in their drink emphasises the inauthenticity of this social practice, and Gilbert’s restraint in relation to the spillage (despite his compulsive

perfectionism) shows how focused he is on pretending that everything is running as smoothly as any other afternoon. Later on, Pansy is summoned, and her presence is (among other things) a writing strategy to complete a triangle of characters that echoes the trio in the Jamesian source. However, this becomes one more element to stress difference as, instead of the exchange of ironies leading to no serious harm in the hypotext, we witness Gilbert ruthlessly plotting against every female character in his world and a showcasing of how asymmetric the dynamics of power are, at this stage, in Banville's pastiche, as the young daughter is there to learn that her father will send her to England, unwillingly accompanied by the countess. The ironic signalling at difference is made more evident when readers and characters find that this initiative to send Pansy away has been devised by Gilbert, among other reasons, to counter-mirror Isabel's travel from England to Italy, a strategy that Gilbert will celebrate, chapters later, as a "nice piece of symmetry" (297) which, in the end, will only partially frustrate Isabel's plans, and will be almost devoid of its poignancy as Gilbert's passion for symmetry will have been previously ridiculed in several scenes, including the tea gathering analysed here. To further denounce the narrowness of the notion of symmetry (Gilbert's and any other), Banville uses discrepancy in this tea scene via the radical expansion of its textual length, which goes on for three chapters. The refinement of the nineteenth century idea of leisure and what was described as "an eternity of pleasure" in the original work, becomes snobbery (for it is a pose) and an almost endless nightmare in *Mrs Osmond*, as Gilbert is blackmailing his sister (the countess), baiting Pansy (or so he thinks) with the proposal to see a collection of Boningtons in England (as a decorous pretext for her trip), and thwarting Isabel's intention to rescue her stepdaughter.

The comparison between the two fragments quoted above allows us to see that Banville imitates the elegance of the Jamesian sentence and pays attention to detail but his way of inhabiting someone else's style is not a passive one as the recreation of the tea gathering incorporates likeness, deformity and discrepancy to emphasize, in a postmodern fashion, what Dyer refers to as perception within a specific cultural framework (pastiche and its historicity) and mediation (pastiche always as an imitation of an imitation, not of life or reality itself). The previous assertions are closely interweaved philosophical stances found in the Banville oeuvre. In *Mrs Osmond* the idea of mediation (and art as an imitation of art) coincides with Dyer's explanation that in postmodern aesthetics, even when an artwork makes a concession to the ontological notion of reality, there is also an acknowledgement that "it is never expressed, and perhaps hardly grasped, unmediatedly, but only through using the forms of imitation at one's disposal to apprehend it" (2). In my analysis of the tea gathering pastiched by Banville I mentioned terms such as artificiality and staging, which are supported by the fact that the novel itself points at Gilbert's demeanour as performance, with Mme Gemini referring to the event as a "charade of 'afternoon tea'" (205) and a "piece of pantomime" (213). Elke D'hoker, in her reading of the novel, states that Banville's theatrical tropes "highlight the mediated quality of perception and representation, the way these are always informed by earlier stories, images and scenes" ("From Isabel" location 1695). I would add that the text deliberately alerts readers both on the inevitability of mediation in art and also about the exaggeration and inappropriateness (deformation and discrepancy for Dyer; and caricature and even forgery for Genette) of Gilbert's theatrics as a way of representing his duplicity and evil intent. This is one of the examples where the three operations of pastiche so far discussed are consistent with Dyer's idea on the politics of this hypertextual practice not as a frivolity but as a type of imitation that always takes place in a "politically loaded context of cultural difference" (137)

and thus acknowledges (instead of disguising) its historicity. Banville's sequel is a contemporary reading of *Portrait*, and his characterisation of Gilbert (among other aspects) asserts the author's right, as reader and writer, to depart from the source and render a version that admits a degree of the transformational, exhibits the textual marks of its historicity, its inevitable subjectivity, and its understanding of thoughts and affects from a present cultural perspective.

To further explore the implications of the characterisation of Gilbert as an evil figure and how this connects with a larger view on existence and literature in the world of *Mrs Osmond*, I quote from one of the numerous articles on *Portrait* by Banville:

The book [...] is an American drama played out among American characters against a European backdrop. We might say, however, that they all have been tainted, and in some cases corrupted, by Europe, or at least by what Europe represented -paradoxically, perhaps- for the unfailing Europhilic James: a place, a milieu, tender, lovely and enviably cultured, which yet is sick at heart, and sickens the hearts of those who fall for its all too plausible charms. [...] Henry James, when it came to Europe, saw the sin behind the splendour ("Master by the Arno").

Mediation stands out in this quote as the inescapable filter, the awareness that James's representation of Europe has passed through the sieve of the writer's perception and, if extended to Banville's novel, the Irish artist's as well. But it is of a central concern here to pay attention to the idea that the characters in *Portrait* have been either tainted or corrupted, and that James "saw the sin" behind European splendour. The selection of the word sin sets the tone for Banville's pastiche of *Portrait*, as he finds this an element in the source and, at the same time, amplifies it. The prose in *Mrs Osmond* is characterised by an abundant use of religious imagery, though this does not mean there is a turn towards religiosity in the text, but that Christian imagery is a vehicle to represent varied degrees and forms of corruption, even if the concept of evil remains a secularised one: "Banville locates evil in actions rather than in character or nature" (D'hoker, location 1867). The already ambiguous Transcendentalist echoes found in *Portrait* undergo a shift towards a less essentialist view on humankind which facilitates the presence of ontological uncertainties that lie at the heart of the tense dynamics of closeness and distance between *Portrait* and its sequel.

Gilbert, a villain in *Portrait*, is more emphatically presented as a murderer in *Mrs Osmond*: it is in fact uttered that his role in his first wife's death was probably a more active one than readers are made to believe in James's novel. This development from schemer (and impostor) to murderer is representative of the more corrosive view on existence that prevails in Banville's novel. Additionally, the darkness associated to Gilbert as a character is also reinforced by the depiction of his determination to force Pansy into marrying a noble man and his cruel dismissal of Edward Rosier, Pansy's initial suitor, as the young lover is not up to Gilbert's expectations. But in Banville's novel Gilbert's attitude towards Rosier might also be read as an attempt at suppressing a character that, in an uncanny fashion, reminds Gilbert of his own young self, Rosier being an American art collector with little money and no social standing. This ominous representation of Osmond and Rosier as the old and young versions of the same type of greedy male figure is acknowledged by Isabel in chapter XVI, when she realises Rosier has swiftly secured his financial future in Europe via a new fiancée, and is also capable of harshness when he refers to "happiness" during their conversation by the Louvre (see 162-163). The presence of this *Doppelgänger* takes us back to the notion of symmetry that

Banville uses to emphasize negative traits in the articulation of Gilbert's psychology, and which Isabel escapes from, as I will discuss later on.

Two of the key features in Gilbert's characterisation as a destructive figure have to do with his being a man "that prized clarity and control above so much else" (187), and the fact that, like Rosier, he is a collector of precious things, which includes women. I will devote the remaining pages of this article to analyze two additional forms in which Banville employs pastiche and which, again, have *Portrait* as a point of departure, but reach further into Banvillian territory. These examples have to do with Gilbert's (and Serena's) notion on objects, and the narrative strategy of framing: both of them with the purpose of depicting Gilbert's psychology but, this time, in connection to his relationship to women, and how female characters acquire agency and escape Gilbert's control in *Mrs Osmond*.

Women, Objects and Frames

In my initial analysis of the tea ceremonies in both novels, the descriptions of Mr Touchett's peculiar tea cup and the major-domo's faulty pouring of tea, which overflows cups and stains saucers, were noted as meaningful in relation to identity and cultural dislocations. But the attention that both writers pay to these particular objects, cups, finds further connotations in what I will term Gilbert's philosophy of objects which is voiced through one of Mme Merle's conversations⁷ with Isabel in *Portrait*:

What shall we call our "self"? Where does it begin?, where does it end? It overflows into everything that belongs to us -and then it flows back again. I know a large part of myself is in the clothes I choose to wear. I've a great respect for *things*. One's self -for other people- is one's expression of one's self: and one's house, one's furniture, one's garments, the books one reads, the company one keeps -these things are all expressive. (253).

Gilbert surrounds himself with precious objects as the expression of his self for other people, and that includes pieces by known artists as well as women, modelled according to specific standards and as part of his personal art collection. Thus, he cannot afford a faulty trait in cups or vases, especially when he is fencing his observations on those objects as synecdochical representations of *his* women, as he does in another scene in *Portrait*. In this subsequent episode, Serena accuses him of having made Isabel afraid of him and also utters her concern for her own safety, for how much damage he could do her. Gilbert responds to this "provocation" in the following terms: "[he] walked to the chimney, where he stood a moment bending his eye, as if he had seen them for the first time, on the delicate specimens of rare porcelain with which it was covered. He took up a small cup and held it in his hand; then, still holding it [...], he pursued: 'You always see too much in everything; you overdo it'" (570). In her answer to this, Serena mentions "Please be very careful of that precious object" (570), to what Gilbert immediately adds: "'It already has a wee bit of a tiny crack,' said Osmond dryly as he put it down" (570). The imperfection in the cup stands for Gilbert's disgust at what he considers an insolence on Serena's attitude, as well as her aging or her attempts at a power of her own, which he will not tolerate because they are turning her into something that is no longer a suitable expression of his self.

Taking the previous fragments from *Portrait* as a reference, we may proceed to analyse how Banville provides readers with a second rewriting of the tea ceremony towards the end of

Mrs Osmond. This time he pastiches both the gathering at Gardencourt and that at Bellosguardo, and manipulates the accumulation of references to show how pastiche is always an imitation of an imitation, at the same time that his use of hypertextuality and self-referentiality becomes more intrepid in terms of both maintaining a connection with the source(s) and equally precipitating events towards a new narrative and psychological territory.

This time the setting is Rome and, in particular, the hotel where Mme Merle is staying. The encounter is the very moment of Isabel's reckoning, and an appointment only Isabel and Serena were supposed to partake of though, to complete the trio of the previous renderings, Gilbert will later join them. To foreshadow the extent to which events will echo the past but will be different this time, Serena's invitation to hold the gathering at "*sala da tè*" (330) is rejected by Isabel, and thus substituted by the little parlour in Serena's suite as the new arena. The privacy of the gathering will be disrupted, as in Banville's previous pastiche, but this time by Gilbert's arrival, which had been previously devised by Serena. In terms of narrative *tempo*, the episode will take two chapters (neither the single nor the three-chapter extension of the antecedent ones), and the importance of objects will be underscored.

At this stage of the novel, the dynamics of power have utterly changed and Isabel is no longer the credulous or spontaneous girl of the Gardencourt scene. Before she launches her assault on the once master schemers, she observes several "fusty" adornments in the hotel paraphernalia and inwardly ponders: "It sometimes seemed to her that the chief aim of all inanimate objects was to hold themselves in hiding in plain sight and thereby go safely unnoticed; it was her aim, too" (329-330), which establishes a link between those objects and herself, though this connection has to do with intent and not with essence. Once Gilbert has joined the group and is fighting to keep control over Isabel, her wished for object camouflage holds no longer, as Gilbert, unsurprisingly, will resource to his synecdochical objectification of women via a Murano glass vase which he makes to stand for what he calls "the vulgarity of [Isabel's] mind" (343). Banville pastiches the style and Gilbert's physical displacements (though he also adds circular predatory movements) from the hypotextual confrontation scene in *Portrait*, thus the text reads: "He had stopped by the window, and was turning in his hands a Murano glass vase, purple in hue and of a remarkable ugliness. 'How dare you,' he said softly, and almost with a kind of mildness, 'how dare you make reference to that lady, even if it were only so much as to utter her name?'" (343), and a few lines later: "Osmond had turned at last to look in her direction, still cradling the vase in his hands. 'Might one inquire how you came to the preposterous notion -preposterous, disgraceful, disgusting: you find me lost for words adequate to the thing- how you arrived at the notion that -what was it?- that I *allowed* my wife to *die*?' (344) Although Gilbert aims at ridiculing Isabel, it is via the pastiche of words and theatrics, a repetition that is acknowledged as such, that Banville exhibits the villain's lame attempt at control. The author's substitution of a cup for a Murano glass vase as Gilbert's objectifying weapon is clever, as the opacity or partial transparency of this type of glass contrasts with (and resists) what had been previously quoted as Gilbert's obsession with clarity and control, and connects with what the same character referred to, in the Bellosguardo tea scene, as his detection of a change in Isabel: "She has developed a subtlety, or at least an opacity, of expression I did not think her capable of" (201). The employ of similarity (language and behaviour likeness), selection and exaggeration via repetition (deformation) and substitution of objects and alteration of power relationships (discrepancy) works in a carefully balanced way to make it possible for Isabel to face the beasts (Banville's imagery) and attain her victory.

In an additional representation of the shift in power relationships in the former scene, Isabel, on her way out, stands by the parlour door (see 352) but just long enough to be framed by it; and this image is one more pastiche in the text, though now, of the ending of the first chapter in *Portrait*; an extra device which Banville uses to depict not her entrance into the European world, but her triumphant exit from Gilbert and Serena's confinement plot. And the critical and affective distance betwixt the narrative framing of Isabel at the beginning of *Portrait* and its reformulation almost at the end of *Mrs Osmond* is not abrupt, but a gradually developed one, with two other significant framings in-between which provenance, as it usually happens with these two inexorably linked novels, is found in both works.

On the one hand, in *Portrait*, Isabel visits Pansy in the convent where her father has secluded her again, before the former's leave for England. This is the last encounter between the two female characters, and the episode where the vague but nonetheless coercive promise of Isabel's return takes place. By the end of the chapter, it is Pansy who is framed by the convent doorway (and indeed framed, in the sense of snared, by her father) while "watching Isabel cross the clear, grey court and disappear into the brightness beyond the big *portone*" (369). In my reading, Banville cunningly builds upon this scene to later articulate both Isabel's final liberation from marital imprisonment and a turn in Pansy's personality which, tainted with resentment as it may be, also represents an escape from her father's control.

On the other hand, in *Mrs Osmond*, there is an encounter between Isabel and Gilbert in Tuscany, previous to the last pastiched trio ceremony in Rome. And this time, as an opening to the chapter, Gilbert is framed. Isabel has stepped into "the day's full dazzle" (pastiche of "brightness" in *Portrait*) to find Gilbert "framed within the arch of vines, as if he had been required to pose there by a photographer and instructed to remain motionless for the taking of his portrait" (277). The signalling at both the hypotext and the technique of framing is evident, but the departure from the source is equally powerful as Isabel perceives Gilbert as "to have been 'taken in' a size" and wonders: "Was it possible that in a mere space of weeks she had forgotten his true proportions? It was not only that he appeared shorter than she had remembered him to be; no, the reduction [...] had been effected all round, so that his face, his beard, his arms and legs and hands and feet, all were a slight yet, to her, perceptibly miniaturised version of what they had been when she last saw him" (277). The enumeration of body parts enacts a linguistic dissection that cuts Gilbert's power over Isabel apart. He has been diminished and reduced to vulnerability, while all women within his previous control orbit have acquired agency, even if at a dear price. By the end of the novel, Pansy has developed a duplicity unsuspected by her father but clearly seen by Mme Gemini, who has also observed his brother's vulgarity at the tea ceremony in Bellosguardo and wielded her own linguistic weapons against him. Serena is by then in legal possession of the house where she and Gilbert will be forced to cohabit, in a corollary to the triumph of both pastiche, as it is a substitution of the "eternity of pleasure" for an eternity of torments, and to Isabel's victory, as she was the designer of this all too secular hell. This dark but effective empowerment of female characters is not short of ethical ambiguity but tempered, in Isabel's case, by her final support of Miss Janeway's revolutionary cause and her young nephew, Myles Devenish, whose enthusiasm to see the New World mirrors Isabel's early thrill to see the Old one. While Gilbert has murdered his young double, Isabel shows she has not lost her capacity to act honestly, as she confesses to young Myles her initially accidental role as a supporter of the cause, and does not prevent him from pursuing his dream.

The coming of age process of the story provides Isabel with a more focused

inwardness and a wider affective spectrum which translates into a new awareness (or at least an intuition) of the complexities of social interaction and their relation to the notion of freedom. The textual ambivalence of the ending is Banville's final tribute to Jamesian aesthetics, as well as a consistent postmodern openness to other hypertextual experiments to come.

In *Mrs Osmond*, Banville pushed the limits of traditional conceptions of pastiche and provided readers with a prose work that is imitative but admits of transformational ends, and a novel that unsettles received notions on originality or the halo of the sacral that still surrounds canonical works such as *Portrait*. In this way Banville has proved that pastiche is an instrument to deal with the past -the literary past and the historicity of reading practices- as he allures audiences towards multidirectional or rhizomatic approaches to the living artistic phenomenon. Within a wider literary scene, one of his essays on *Portrait* includes a quote from James, where the American writer declares that "in literature we move through a blest world in which we know nothing except by style, but in which everything is saved by it" (James qtd. in Banville, "John Banville: Novels"). This belief in the cohesion that literature provides us with when dealing with our paradoxical state of being in the world was expressed by Banville, let us notice, in a non-fictional text (or epitext) which, as it was said at the beginning of this article, is one of the varied literary strategies that contribute to the staging of an authorial posture that accompanies *Mrs Osmond* and also reinforces this pastiche as a successful vehicle for impersonation by adding one more authorial identity to the already long list of writing selves that inhabit the name of John Banville.

Notes

- 1 According to Jérôme Meizoz, an author's posture is "the self-representation of a writer, both in his management of speech [discours] and in his public literary behaviour". A posture "is part of an interactive process: It is co-constructed both inside and outside the text, by the writer, the various intermediaries who promote it (journalists, critics, biographers, etc.), and audiences". It is a collective image "forged as a result of the interaction between the author and the intermediaries and audiences, with the first one anticipating or reacting to their judgements" ("Ce que l'on fait dire au silence" 2, translation is mine).
- 2 The seven novels by Black which showcase Quirke, the pathologist, as a central character.
- 3 Another Banville novel, *Snow*, will be released in October 2020. It will be the first noir novel published under John Banville's name, which will add complexity to the textual interweaving described above.
- 4 Besides the example I quote in this article, see other reviews published by Jean Zimmerman in npr books, Jeffrey Eugenides in *The New York Times* and Caryl Phillips in *The New York Review of Books*.
- 5 To complete the description of Genette's diagram, I add here that, under the structural classification, transformational textual practices are equally subdivided according to their function or mood, and those are parody (playful), travesty (satirical), and transposition (serious) (see 28).
- 6 And we might add to the elements already mentioned that *Mrs. Osmond* is divided into two parts, with eighteen chapters each; and that the countess' surname as a married woman is Gemini, which again points at duality and, in her case, also at duplicity.
- 7 I point at this ventriloquism not as an assumption that Mme Merle is not capable of being an unreliable or destructive character in her own terms, but because in this particular fragment she is puppeteering Isabel, in complicity with Gilbert, and also because there are other episodes in

Portrait, and particularly in *Mrs Osmond*, where she admits to have played a role under his instructions and have been contaminated by him.

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