

EMBALMING LIFE OR CELEBRATING ACTION? A CASE STUDY IN THE INTERROGATION OF IDENTITIES

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Biography is a branch of history whose forms and methods of representing a person's life have changed according to the historical and political contexts of the time. They can be found in the form of diaries or letters, memoirs, memories of living witnesses, official archives - all of them accounts which were sometimes ruined by excessive adulation, prudishness, gentility or prolixity. In the last decades biography, like autobiography, has become a literary form of great importance not only for the academy but also of popular interest. Different postmodern modes deal with the private and public politics of representation introducing intense self-conscious narratives. Thus, the representation of the other (and the self) reveals the problematic relation of the private and the public. History as private experiences brought to public consciousness, counterpoised to private revisions of public experience, also aims to construct a public collective awareness of the past.

There is a common assumption that history is the true account of the past that reaches us through documents, oral reports and writings, what Lemaire (1981) defines as an "archeologized" past, but its source is always a textualized one. History means interpretation. In Adam Schaff's *History and Truth*, E. H. Carr says that the historian should have a voice to be heard carefully by the reader because "history is interpretation". Lucien Febvre adds that in fact, history is a choice, not an arbitrary but a pre-conceived one. According to him, without a pre-conceived theory there is no scientific work. A historian cannot submit to the facts as if they were not constructed and selected by him. Linda Hutcheon (1988:153) says that "history offers facts - interpreted, signifying, discursive, textualized - made from brute events." However, when the historical knowledge is questioned and explored in the realm of the real, she affirms that "literary genres" become *historiographic metafiction*s. If historiography is an imaginary reconstruction of the process of critical analysis of the events that survived from the past, then, is the referent of historiography the fact or the event, the text or the experience, the derridean "corpus" or the "life"? Historiographic metafiction does not reproduce events, but directs the reader to facts and to other ways of thinking about events. In the historiographic analysis, the subjective factor lies in the selection of the fact and of the theory that precedes the interpretative process. The choice and the logic chaining of the facts to "explain" the history are controlled by the spirit that selects and gathers the facts.

Biography is a kind of work that is on the borderline between fiction and personal history; both fields deal with human constructs and signified systems. In "Otobiographies", Derrida (1985), when proposing an analysis of the proper name and the signature for biographies of philosophers, questions the *dynamis* of that borderline between the "work" and the "life", the system and the subject of the system. He says that the power of this virtual, even mobile potency of the borderline, "*traverses two "bodies", the corpus and the body.*"

John Banville is a contemporary Irish writer who has ventured in the field of historiographic metafiction. He works at the crossroads of Physics, History and Fiction not only to reactivate former incompatible themes - the relation between science and literature, but also to contest the veracity of the historical discourse and bring it closer to fictional discourse. In his tetralogy - *Doctor Copernicus* (1976), *Kepler* (1981), *The Newton Letter* (1982) and *Mefisto* (1986) - Banville deconstructs, on the one hand, the illusory antagonism which sees scientific and literary narratives as opposite discursive practices (objective-descriptive versus subjective-poetic respectively); and, on the other hand, the illusory empirical exactitude of historical narratives, mainly biography and autobiography.

Banville's tetralogy is neither a biography nor a fictional rewriting of the scientists' lives in the traditional sense, as it seems to be at first reading. Crossing first the borders of fiction and science, he dissects the processes of the scientists' discoveries in order to understand the mind-set that guided their experiments. He proves that scientific knowledge is a construction of the scientists' mind because they tried to explain in a deductive or inductive way the *apriori* or a *posteriori* theories created in their minds about facts that were perceived sensorially. Exploring the nature of the scientists' creative process Banville can understand his own process of creation in the field of fiction without having to write about artists. According to him, scientific imagination knits "supreme fictions" in the attempt to "save the appearances/ the phenomena" in the old days and to explain the facts with the advent of modern science. The process of "creation" of the scientist resembles the process of imagination of the artist because scientists "do" science in the same way as artists "do" art. So, the nature of both creative processes becomes one: signs and images appear in the mind of the scientist and artist shaping structures of signification that language translates in an orderly and intelligible way within a context that mirrors the original chaos. It is perceived that both fields construct a paradigm of reality; both have the aim of "representing", of controlling nature with the purpose of redefining the knowledge of the world.

Once he crosses the borders of science and fiction, he also trespasses the limits of history and fiction, provoking an unusual double-bound tension in the narrative: the biography is articulated as a self-conscious and reflective fiction that transforms the historical novel into a *metabiofiction*, and the *transparent* "truth" of historical facts into *apparent* reality due to relativity of perception and textuality. Thus I prefer to refer to the tetralogy as a *trans(ap)parent historiographic metabiofiction*, also because there is a strong awareness on the part of the writer that to represent the past in language and in narrative is to construct that past and thus, the links between the personal and the political cannot be separated. If the past is seen from the present there is inevitably a process of erasing, selecting and stressing some events rather than others, when one wants to represent a version of them.

The third book of the tetralogy, *The Newton Letter*, is a satire within three tragedies, as Banville said when he compared it to the Greek form. It is more a novella rather than a novel and it plays the same function of the musical composition mentioned in the subtitle, "An Interlude" – an "*intermezzo*" that is inserted in-between the various parts of a long composition. After having written two extensive novels, *Doctor Copernicus* and *Kepler*, and having the project of a fourth novel in mind, Banville wrote the novella declaring, "*My readers, that small band, deserve a rest.*"

I focus my analysis on this precise book because, in my opinion, various modes of historical writing are being articulated: the account of a particular moment in the life of Newton contrasted with the principles of his scientific theory; an autobiography in the form of a personal memoir narrating the biographer's own crisis that echoes Newton's; a letter written to the Muse of History in the form of a confession where an uncertain writer dealing with an uncertain subject concludes that subjectivity is the only reality that could be articulated; and, a personal reflective narrative on the process of writing history and fiction. Thus, in the fictional level, the writer deconstructs the newtonian absolutes (always predictable truths) introducing fictional truths in the pseudo-historical narrative, and, in the metafictional level, it questions the process of writing a biography and a novel. The narrator, an historian, in order to conclude the biography of Isaac Newton, looks for the causes that provoked the scientist's nervous collapse in the letters he wrote to John Locke (one real and the other Banville's own invention, based on *Ein Brief* by Hugo Von Hofmannsthal - "The Letter of Lord Chandos"). In order to explain the historical fact through the analyses of the documents in hand, the unknown biographer has to cross the borders of reality and he discovers the invalidity of reaching a "historical truth". According to McMinn, the fictive biographer does not believe in the value of interpretation any more, and he re-enacts the history of his book in two simultaneous stories: one is the biographic recreation of Newton's crisis, and the other is his own personal crisis when he moves to the countryside of contemporary Ireland to finish Newton's biography.

The Newton Letter opens in the epistolar form as if it were a confession and it deconstructs all the assumptions that refer to the scientific representation of a mechanistic and predictable world. The aim is to question the void provoked by the fictional truth of the historical and scientific discourses. The anonymous narrator starts the letter revealing his failure to the Muse of History, "Words fail me, Clio", and he affirms, "Shall I say, I've lost my faith in the primacy of text?". The historian is in conflict with himself and with his art of narrating the truths of the past, or more precisely, with the science of "making history", when he discovers the impossibility of deducing the causes of human behavioural phenomena of the past and what is worse, of his own present. Thus, the crisis occurs when he applies the universal law that controls the exterior world to the interior world.

Writing the letter to Clio, the narrator believes he will understand why he has abandoned writing his book. The whole narrative is indeed, an explanatory repetition of the hypothesis raised by the historian on the cause that had provoked Newton's nervous breakdown in the summer of 1693, and why the scientist devoted himself to the interpretative study of the Bible and alchemy, a fact that embarrasses his historians a lot. Perhaps Newton's withdrawal from scientific pursuits was intentional due to his doubts about the truth (or rather fictions?) of his own theories. This interrogation is confirmed more explicitly with the analysis of Newton's second letter to John Locke (the invented one) who had challenged his theory. The scientist appears not to have the same old conviction that the absolutes of space and time and motion, on which he founded his theory of the mechanistic universe in the *Principia*, exist in God. Then, the narrator suffers the same experience of doubt and writes to the Muse of History:

But Clio, dear Cliona, you have been my teacher and my friend, my inspiration, for too long, I couldn't lie to you. Which doesn't mean I know what the truth is, and how to tell it to you. (p.10)

This quotation is directly related to Banville's belief in the existence of an interaction between the liar and the listener provoked by the shared knowledge that what is being told is a lie. Thus, the lie is sublimated and becomes transformed into a ritual and supreme fiction, a fictional truth. In spite of the fact that the narrator affirms to Clio, "No, I'm not sick. I have not had a breakdown. (...) You'll think me mad", he focuses on the analysis of the two letters, comparing mainly the subscriptions and signatures with "morbid fascination". Therefore, the biographer's approach resembles Derrida's in *The Ear of the Other* where the philosopher develops his theory of *otobiography* when analysing Nietzsche's identity through his signature in his autobiography

Ecco Homo. He says that a text is signed only much later by the other. According to him, as we need to hear and understand in order to produce, “the signature awaits its own form, its own event” to acquire its significance. Thus, it is the reader/listener who will give a meaning to that signature. In the case of Newton’s letters, the scientist’s signatures become the *morbid* center of the biographer’s analysis. In the first letter, the signature is fragmented, “Is. Newton”, while in the second one, only the plain surname, “Newton”, appears.

According to the narrator, the authentic letter reveals the passionate and irrational Newton accusing Locke of being immoral and “of having tried to embroil him with women”. Words and sentences of the letter are “translated” by him when he approaches it as a sympathetic inquirer. So, the reader only hears his voice which is disturbed by the subscription where the famous man appears as a victim of the other: “I am your most humble and unfortunate servant, Is. Newton”. This way of signing raises co-implications and meanings for the biographer’s cute ear: it could be just an abbreviation of his first name, or an emphasis on the condition of being humble and unfortunate due to Locke’s accusations, thus showing Newton’s “pain and anguished bafflement”, or, it could be also a visual representation of Newton’s broken self, of a divided mind between the certainty of the absolutes and the doubt of their origin. The narrator also analyses the scientist from the perspective of an academic historian mentioning the gravity laws and the discoveries in optics that had given Newton fame despite his personal attitude of being “cold, arrogant, lonely.” But Banville’s reader can also see, throughout the whole narrative, how much the narrator resembles his object of study seeking for a personal reputation and an acclaim for his own work when he refers to the writing of the biography:

It would be a splendid book, fresh and clean (...) The academies would be stunned, you would be proud of me, and Cambridge would offer me a big job. (p.14).

In an essay on *The Newton Letter* Brian McIlroy (1992) also points out that the narrator accuses Newton of Hobbism, the same monolithic power that he gives to Clio, the muse of history, and the scholar also affirms that he suffers Newton’s same entrapment by women when he has sexual relations with one woman while having adulterous desires with another.

The second letter, which is considered the center of the biography and of the scientist’s work, is also Banville’s center where the centripetal and centrifugal forces keep fiction and history in orbit. In this way he introduces the principles of the gravity laws in the construction of the “novella”.

The fictive letter shows Newton’s effort to understand and express his inner self. The historian writes again his interpretation of it and transcribes only some passages which are deconstructed in relation to a historical and fictional truth, questioning the meanings generated by the relationship between facts and the language that expresses them. Hofmannsthal’s letter, which was Banville’s source of inspiration, is a fictional correspondence between Lord Chandos and Francis Bacon in which the former suffers the consequences of his inability to give meaning to reality and reflects upon the inadequacy of language to mediate experience. The narrator reproduces the end of the fictive letter looking for its “true” meaning.

My dear Doctor, expect no more philosophy from my pen. The language in which I might be able not only to write but to think is neither Latin nor English, but a language none of whose words is known to me; a language in which common place things speak to me; and wherein I may one day have to justify myself before an unknown judge. Then comes that cold, that brave, that almost carven signature: Newton. What did he mean, what was it those commonplace things said to him, what secret did they impart? And so I sat in the shadow of lilacs, nursing an unrequitable love and reading a dead man’s testament, trying to understand it. (pp. 60-61)

This passage, reinforcing the inadequacy of language to explain the phenomena, destabilizes both the scientific and the historical truth. If the specificity of the historical narrative is to show the accumulation of relative truths that lead to the absolute truth, the historical will turn into fictional due to the constructed systems of reference and the writer’s own evaluative criteria. In his masterpiece, *Principia*, the historical Newton shows the contrast that could exist between the objective importance of a discovery and the subjective meaning given to it by its author. Therefore, as Schaff says in *History and Truth*, the historical facts are manifestations selected among many others due to the relations between cause and effect and to the action in the map of greater totalities. The criteria of choice will give meaning to the fact and it presupposes a system of reference where evaluation and selection take place and endow the historical fact with relativism.

The concept above is developed in the autobiographic level of the narrative where the fictional biographer constantly refers to the historical present and to his own experience every time uncertainty appears when he was interpreting Newton’s historical facts. For example, the narrator rented a lodge that was part of a Big House (Fern House), on the roadside near

Dublin, in order to isolate himself to finish writing the biography of Sir Isaac Newton which, after the first weeks, he abandoned as the scientist did with his research in the past. Edward and Charlotte lived in the main house with their niece, Otilie, and Michael, a child. As he has always been attracted by the "insistent enigma of other people", the narrator made an interpretative reading of those people following the law of reversibility: a typical protestant family in a pastoral context, living in a Big House in decay.

Banville's aim is to manipulate elements that already appeared in his previous novel *Birchwood* - the big house, the assumptions of that age, the name of the family (the Lawlesses)- to prove the vacuum that exists in the scientific theory of prediction. According to Newton's mechanistic conception of the world, time is reversible and the law of reversibility determines the future as it determined the past. Prigogine and Stengers in *Order Out of Chaos*, conclude that Newton makes the synthesis of "being and becoming". The metaphor that represents this theory is the clock, whose major implication is the inference that the world as a machine has a fixed and static form and once it is put in motion, it will continue for ever without the need of a divine intervention. The causal process that permits to relate the phenomena to an organizing principle, determines its future coherence and unity. Common sense is essential in the application of the inductive-deductive reasoning to interpret the facts and unveil the mystery of the commonality, not of the exotic. Since he was a child, the narrator had felt the law of attraction by the Other's enigma:

I would gaze at that silent house and wonder, in a hunger of curiosity, what lives were lived there. Who stacked that firewood, hung that holly wreath, left those tracks in the hoarfrost on the hill? I can't express the odd aching pleasure of that moment. I knew, of course, that those hidden lives wouldn't be much different from my own. But that was the point. It wasn't the exotic I was after, but the ordinary, that strangest and most elusive of enigmas. (p.19)

However, in his personal history, the "absolute truths" apprehended by common sense will dissipate, and the idea of a predictable nature that is under human control will be checkmated at every destroyed assumption that he had constructed about the family during the first weeks of his stay. Edward is not a *bon vivant*, an opportunist who got married with the daughter of the owner of Fern House, but he is dying of cancer; Charlotte is apparently terribly refined and distant as all high society is, but this is the result of high doses of valium medicated by her doctor; Otilie is Charlotte's brother's daughter who died with his wife in a car accident, and Michael is a child adopted by the couple which means that he is not their son nor the bastard son of Edward and Otilie, as he knitted in his imagination.

I was like an embarrassed anthropologist realizing that what he had for months taken to be the ordinary muddle of tribal life is really an immense intricate ceremony, in which the tiniest gesture is foreordained and vital, in which he is the only part that does not fit. (p.68)

The anonymous historian abandoned his intention of finishing his book because he perceived that in his own personal history the present facts show lying truths. The oxymoron "fictitious truths" used by Riffaterre in *Fictional Truth*, helps to understand the paradox. The narrator questioned himself implicitly about the "true constructions" of the present. If in the process of interpretation they are inferred erroneously, according to the universal law, the abyss between truth and its construction (the "non truth") will be greater when facts from the past are analysed. Because of this he abandoned his work leaving it unfinished. The narrator ran away from his exile in the countryside because he could not experience the equilibrium of the natural forces of human beings which should repeat themselves in space *in eternum*. Nevertheless, he realized that in the future he would go back to the same place though this time to question the dilemma of truth in the mechanistic Nature. Banville closes the fictional interlude with an interrogative discourse as a way of affirming and subverting the scientific theory at the same time. The biographer will take up the book and finish it though there will be again the uncertainty of leaving his research and book unfinished. "Shall I awake in a few months, in a few years, broken and deceived, in the midst of new ruins?"

Finally, I would like to refer to the metafictional level of writing a biography as the question of subjectivity in the interpretation of history is constantly present in all the levels.

The narrator received from Cliona a biography of Newton published by another biographer, Popov, to "goad him into publishing". He already knew and criticized Popov's method which reminded him of an embalmer's. His narrative follows the process of embalming life, for example, "Newton was the greatest genius that science has produced." Who could deny it? It does not mean that it is not true; it is a fact. But, another kind of truth was more important for the narrator: he wanted to celebrate action, to reveal its function in the life he is portraying! He admits that he nearly followed the embalming process but was courageous enough to give up on time.

Nevertheless, the fictive historian adopts the method of historical materialism that approaches the object of study as a

monad, in spite of the fact that he believes in history as a “celebration of action”. As Walter Benjamin says, to think does not only include the movement of the ideas but also their immobilization. The narrator concentrates his thought in a configuration saturated with tensions, the letters to Locke, which he crystalizes in a monad in order to be able to recover a past that has been silenced and to hear the echo of a voice that has become mute due to the fluctuating political powers of history. Thus, Banville writes his interlude, *The Newton Letter*, to question the “objectivity” of a “historicizing history”, which is purely descriptive, in counterposition with the dynamic historicism which, according to Adam Schaff in *History and Truth*, implies to capture nature, society and the human being in motion. Historicism leads to the denial of the absolute principles because the historian has to relate the ideas to the historical conditions. The caricaturesque description of the historian Popov containing some quotations from his own biography of Newton, clearly shows the contrast of the two forms of producing history.

I met him once, an awful little man with ferret eyes and a greasy suit. Reminded me of an embalmer. Which, come to think of it, is apt. I like his disclaimer: *Before the phenomenon of Isaac Newton, the historian, like Freud when he came to contemplate Leonardo, can only shake his head and retire with as much good grace as he can muster.* Then out come the syringe and the formalin. That is what I was doing too, embalming old N.’s big corpse, only I did have the grace to pop off before the deathhead grin was properly fixed (p.29)

The fictional historian rebels against the descriptive function of the facts which reveals stagnation and dissection of the scientist and his work when seen from this perspective. This is due to the absence of a preconceived theory that precedes the historical “doing” which would give it sense, an object, a cause, an aim of writing history. He explains his own theory ironically at the beginning of the novel when he justifies the aim of his book:

Oh yes, you can see, can’t you, the outline of what my book would have been, a celebration of action, of the scientist as hero, a gleeful acceptance of Pandora’s fearful disclosures, wishy-washy medievalism kicked out and the age of reason restored. But would you believe that all this, this Popovian Newton-as-the-greatest-scientist-the-world-has-known, now makes me feel slightly sick? Not that I think any of it untrue, in the sense that it is fact. It’s just that another kind of truth has come to seem to me more urgent, although, for the mind, it is nothing compared to the lofty verities of science. (pp.29-30)

In the historical narrative, different visions and various discourses, sometimes contradictory, construct relative truths that will be interpreted according to the context. Riffaterre defends that the discourse of truth is external and parallel to the narrative; it is a metalanguage and depends directly on the logic imperatives of assumptions and conclusions. He also affirms that fictional truth belongs to the field of fiction for being a genre, and contrary to what was believed traditionally, it does not depend on verisimilitude. Following this thought, *The Newton Letter* subverts that verisimilitude, or *mimesis* of reality, introducing another fictional truth conceived as a linguistic phenomenon that depends directly on the text.

Such as Newton succeeds in making a synthesis between Kepler’s and Galileo’s principles and in discovering *a posteriori* the universal law of gravitation, as well as improving the concepts of optics, Banville makes a synthesis between the eighteenth-century and the postmodern thoughts. He deconstructs the knowledge that was guided by fossilized principles rooted in the notion of linearity, and he subverts them in relation to their origin using the same principles of the newtonian synthesis, now applied to the art of writing fiction. Banville plays with the absolute truths of space, time and motion upon which Newton constructed his concept of the universe. The fictional narrative, which develops the question of validity of the description of facts and the objective interpretation of history, subverts the mechanistic vision of the world and deconstructs the idea of Nature as automaton which views phenomena occurring linearly according to a cause-effect determinism. *The Newton Letter* is, therefore, a satire of Positivism that keeps the historians side by side with the scientists as owners of an objective truth.

Banville reverses the newtonian synthesis which shows an alliance between the rational comprehension of nature and its practical manipulation. To do this, he adopts the scientist’s strategies which consist in isolating a specific phenomenon and uses it as a base for all other types of deduction of other groups of phenomena that occur under the same circumstances but in a reversal way. Interrogating the identities presented by the narrator at each different level, the scientific characteristic of the limits of a historical truth are transposed to a fictional space. The embalming of life gives way to the celebration of action at least at a fictional level, but the fictional truth will be also questioned at a metafictional level in the form of a satire which will be understood by those readers with “cute ears”, while others will only laugh.

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