



ABEI Journal

The Brazilian Journal of Irish Studies



ISSN 1518-0581
eISSN 2595-8127

Volume 22 Number 1
June 2020

ISSN1518-0581
e-ISSN 2595-8127



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Mariana Bolfarine

Special Issue

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Laura P.Z. Izarra

Hedwig Schwall

Nicholas Taylor-Collins

ABEI Journal, Special Issue, Volume 22, Number 1, June 2020.



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ABEI Journal – The Brazilian Journal of Irish Studies is indexed by Cambridge Scientific Abstracts (CSA), Maryland, USA and Modern Language Association (MLA). It is published twice a year, in June and December, by Associação Brasileira de Estudos Irlandeses. This issue is co-edited with the support of the Faculdade de Filosofia, Letras e Ciências Humanas, Universidade de São Paulo. Subscriptions, submitted articles, books for review and editorial correspondence should be sent to the Editors.

Submitted articles should normally not exceed 6,000 words and should conform to the method of documentation of the MLA Style Sheet. They should be sent electronically with an abstract at the beginning and biodata at its end in Word for Windows, until April and September of each year.

Since 2018 it is a free-access electronic publication at <http://www.revistas.fflch.usp.br/abei/>

To access previous numbers www.abei.org.br

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ISSN1518-0581
e-ISSN 2595-8127



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ABEI Journal: The Brazilian Journal of Irish Studies

– n. 1 (1999) São Paulo: FFLCH/USP, 1999-2017 anual; 2018 semestral

ISSN 1518-0581 / E-ISSN 2595-8127

1. Literatura Irlandesa 2. Tradução 3. Irlanda (Aspectos culturais) I. Programa de Estudos Linguísticos e Literários em Inglês. II. Associação Brasileira de Estudos Irlandeses. III. ABEI.

CDD 820

Cover: John Banville's handmade copy book and Japanese pen © J.Banville

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Revisão

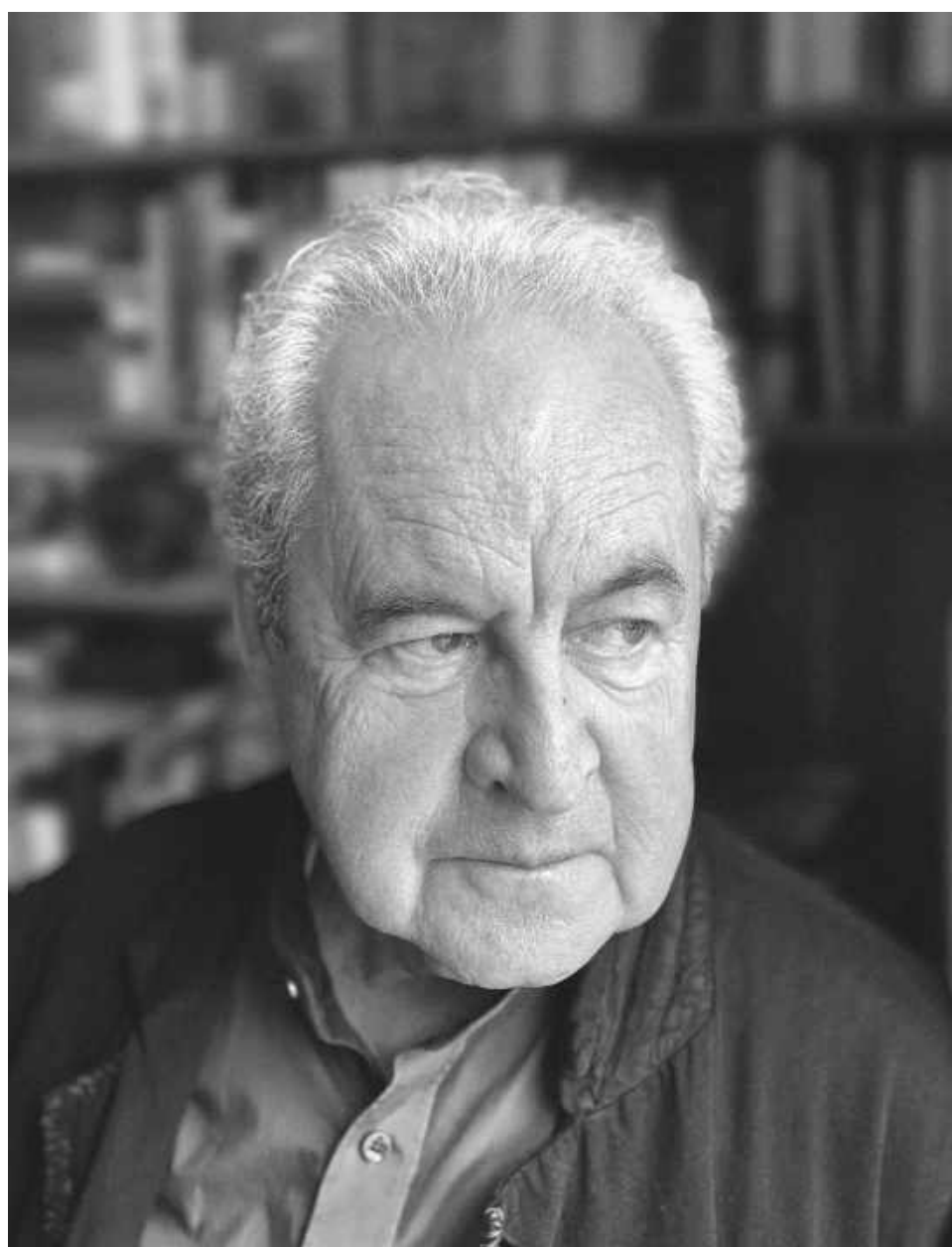
Laura P.Z. Izarra

Projeto de Diagramação

Selma Consoli – MTb n. 28.839

Diagramação

Victor Augusto da Cruz Pacheco



Word Upon World:
Half a Century of
John Banville's Universes

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Introduction

This Special Issue of *ABEI Journal*, **“Word Upon World: Half a Century of John Banville’s Universes”**, celebrates a writer’s life devoted to translating worlds into words. His novels reflect an interior journey in the search of being true to oneself. To reveal the many layers of human interaction Banville plays with different genres; in his narratives he manages all kinds of tricks with characters, time and space; painful memories are mixed with shrewd humour calling up worlds in which a whole range of emotions is beautifully presented. His prose is like Watteau’s: silken companies move in luminous landscapes where dark shadows lurk and loom.

Among the innumerable critical reviews and academic books that extol his fictions, as well as the various awards he received – including the 2005 Man Booker Prize for *The Sea*, the Franz Kafka Prize (2011), the Austrian State Prize for European Literature (2013) and the Prince of Asturias Award for Literature (2014) – John Banville has been recognized in his artistic creations by many academics in conferences and workshops all over the world, in at least fourteen monographs and in countless articles, as well as in two special issues of the *Irish University Review* (Spring 1981 and Spring 2006) and in a world-wide EFACIS translation Project (<https://www.johnbanville.eu/>). Also Banville’s seminal text “Fiction and the Dream” gave rise to an open-access online anthology of testimonials by fifty major Irish fiction authors about what fiction writing can do (<https://kaleidoscope.efacis.eu/>).

His first publication, *Long Lankin*, turns fifty years old in 2020, thus reaching the half-century of a master craftsman. It is Banville’s only collection of stories with vivid narratives of “a live synthesis as well as a synthesis of life”, as the Argentinean writer Julio Cortázar defined the essence of a short story. The young Irish writer decided to walk an unknown road where “the writing of fiction is far more than the telling of stories. It is an ancient, an elemental, urge which springs, like the dream, from a desperate imperative to encode and preserve things that are buried in us deep beyond words” (“Fiction and the Dream” 28).¹ Since then, he has carved universes in an endless interior journey to get in touch with the inner self, either as the author John Banville or his “dark twin” Benjamin Black – “This is the significance of fiction, its danger and its glory” (*ibid.*).

The two images of his manuscripts kindly sent by the writer for this Special Issue of *ABEI Journal* perfectly illustrate how Banville crafts his art as beautifully, cleanly and neatly as possible, and as he said in the interview to RTE One,² how he writes so passionately in order that the reader can find, feel and experience that same passion blueprinted in his narrative. Our cover also brings two important tools of the imagination – Banville’s handmade copybook and his pen. Like the worlds they make, the instruments are carefully selected. As he has developed his craft in the last half century, Banville has selected higher quality pens, ink, and copybooks. If *Long Lankin* marks his sophomore entry into the literary canon, these instruments are as good a measure of his deepening claim to be Ireland’s foremost author: as his influence has grown, so has his sophistication.

“The Crafting of Art – Translating Worlds” gathers the tributes of well-known writers focusing the master’s craft while reflecting on their own creative ways. Thus, Juan José Delaney, Alan Gilsenan, Neil Hegarty, Patrick Holloway, Rosemary Jenkinson, Colum McCann, Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin, Annemarie Ní Churreáin, Billy O’Callaghan, John

O'Donnell and Jessica Traynor share their responses as readers of Banville's work in autobiographical reflections. They either refer to the impact of his collection of short stories that help them discover the significance of its form (Delaney and Holloway), or to some of his novels in order to spot echoes and contacts with other writers (Jenkinson and Traynor), to unveil how science and art are part of his universe (Hegarty), or how his stylish narrative "conjures a dreamlike world" (Gilsenan), "shapes our reality with a thrilling poetic intensity" (McCann), (re)imagines a city as "a site of dreaming" (Ní Churreáin) through which he questions the making of a work of art with "elegance and sly black humour" (O'Donnell). As readers they feel the force of Banville's personality and writing and express his differences compared to themselves or other writers (O'Callaghan) or between the two cloned writers, Banville and Black (Ní Chuilleanáin).

In "Critical Dialogues", both experienced and young scholars discuss Banville's novels from different perspectives, highlighting his narrative technique and his struggle with words as he tries to create stylistically perfect transcendental universes. Memory and the past are tropes present in various of these essays that form a kaleidoscopic composition about the question of identity and the idea of the self as recurrent themes in Banville's work. Thus, Adel Cheong analyses the withdrawal to the past in *Eclipse* and *The Sea* comparing it with McCormack's *Solar Bones*, to affirm that the return to childhood spaces and places helps the protagonists "to confront their sense of identity", while Cody Jarman places *The Infinities* and Lawless's collection *Traits and Confidences* (1897) side by side to show Banville's engagement with memories of the history of the Irish Famine and the conventions of the Irish Gothic and Big House novel. Hedwig Schwall also focuses on *The Infinities*, bringing together Banville and Lacan in order to interpret how the uncanny object *a* reawakens the affects of the unconscious.

Banville's approach to different temporalities in his oeuvre is discussed by Lianghui Li from the perspective of simultaneity of time and space in *The Sea* while Nicholas Taylor-Collins evokes Einstein's and Bergson's theories of time to affirm that the characters in *Birchwood*, *Doctor Copernicus* and *The Infinities* accept and are engaged with the ageing process. Neil Murphy analyses *Ghosts*, "a poetics of pure invention", to demonstrate Banville's comprehensive model of a multi-level ontological system in which intersections with other artistic forms give significance to his aesthetic model. Moreover, in Hedda Friberg-Harnesk's examination of Banville's play *Love in the Wars*, Banville's textual explorations of a Nietzschean "infinite nothing" are compared with Baudrillard's "envisioned universe in which simulation is a 'dominant mode of perception'".

Mrs Osmond is the object of two studies. Aurora Piñeiro departs from Banville's literary alter ego series and illustrates how the narrative of *Mrs Osmond* is a postmodern pastiche showing meaningful differences in its recontextualization of Henry James's *The Portrait of a Lady*. Catherine Toal approaches the novel from a different angle, highlighting how the only female protagonist in Banville's oeuvre is filtered through a 'misanthropy of form': throughout the narrative the dark aspects of all women characters are exacerbated..

The textual and thematic evolutions of *Mefisto* are studied by Kersti Tarien Powell in a thorough analysis of Banville's manuscripts to show that this novel is the turning point of his career. The section ends with Joakim Wrethed's essay that links *Long Lankin* and *The Blue Guitar* to show how Banville's long career should be seen as a hermeneutic process of eternal recurrence of tropes in the form of a spiral as his works form a constant heightening of the stakes, both in an ethic and aesthetic dimension.

“Voices from South America” is the *ABEI Journal* space to introduce writers, thinkers and artists from the south-western hemisphere to interact with other scholars in the field of Comparative Studies and literary contacts. As Banville has made the choice of words his main concern, with painting as the object of many of his novels, Jorge Schwartz was invited to share his elucidating essay on Xul Solar, an Argentinian painter, linguist and friend of Jorge Luis Borges who wrote many lectures about his paintings and language project. Solar created a utopian Latin-American language (a mix of Portuguese and Spanish); his paintings deal with metaphysical symbols, kabbalah, and theosophical understandings of the world, somewhat recalling Yeats’s *A Vision*.

The “Book Reviews” contains David Clark’s reading of Benjamin Black’s *The Secret Guests* and the reviews of two important books on John Banville’s work: Adel Cheong critiques Neil Murphy’s *John Banville* and Mehdi Ghassemi discusses Hedda Friberg-Harnesk’s *Reading John Banville Through Jean Baudrillard*.

We hope this Special Issue on John Banville’s work will inspire the readers to follow the writer’s literary career and vocation to reveal the infinite quest of being human. In the fifty years since his first full-length publication, his writing has altered Irish letters – who knows what the next fifty years of reading Banville will bring?

Laura P.Z. Izarra
Hedwig Schwall
Nicholas Taylor-Collins



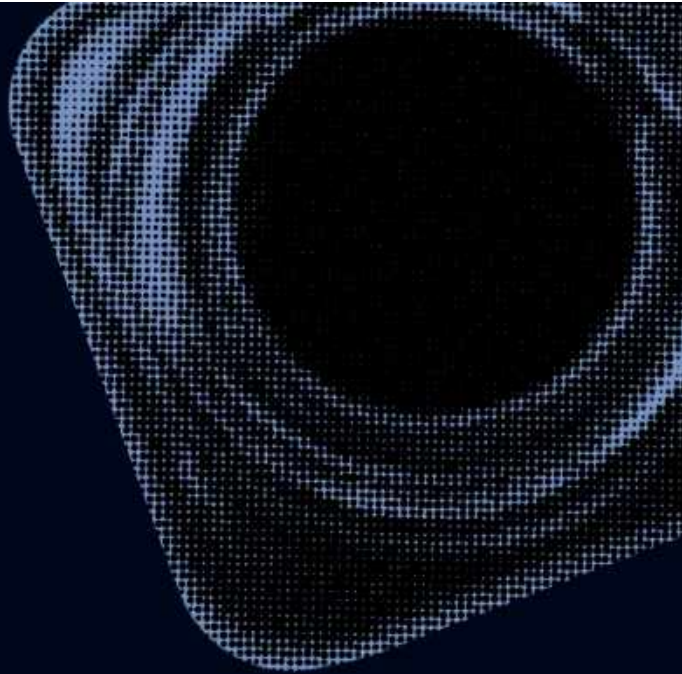
Ismael Nery (1900-1934) - *Figures in Blue* (1924)
Brazilian artist painting philosophical dualities (the
self & the other; evil & good; body & spirit;
masculine & feminine)

Notes

- 1 Banville. “Fiction and the Dream” in *Irish Studies in Brazil*. Ed. M.H. Mutran & L.P. Z. Izarra. São Paulo: Associação Editorial Humanitas, 2015. 21-28.
- 2 Arts Lives: Being John Banville. RTE One (2013). <http://www.john-banville.com/video/>

The Crafting of Art— Translating Worlds





But then, to my surprise, he launched into a/ began
nothing short of garrulous/ launched into an uninterrupted
account of his/ origins/ family/ origins/ and its origins/ and
roots/ in the, however/ otherwise undistinguished corner of the
parcel of earth in the far washed corner of the county. The
Mordaunts had been, and were, no mean people. They
had fought in wars of conquest and rebellion, a hardy
breed they were, men of the horse, cold steel and marketing,
men of learning and civil energies, poets, painters, great
builders, masters of craft and trade and husbandry, sea
farers too, whose ships had ploughed the Spanish main,
had dropped anchor at Venice, at Constantinople and the
ports of Old Cathay; in all, a noble line. All this was
delivered in a toneless drone, as if it had been learned
by rote. I was alarmed. I felt that burning shyness the
sons of others always fill me with a burning, sweaty shy-
ness and I had that burning, sweaty shyness. I felt too that
sweaty shyness the excess of others always provides
if we hadn't been going at a good clip I would have
of the car without even opening the door.
In the sketches of a madman I
he had greeted me
about



Abstract: *This section brings different voices from writers who narrate their experience as readers of John Banville's work to pay tribute to his 50 years of an inspiring writing.*

Keywords: J.J. Delaney; A. Gilsenan; N. Hegarty; P. Holloway; R. Jenkinson; C. McCann; A. Ní Churreáin; E. Ní Chuilleanáin; B. O'Callaghan; J. O'Donnell; J. Traynor.

Resumo: *Esta seção traz diferentes vozes de escritores que narram sua experiência como leitores da obra de John Banville para homenagear seus 50 anos de escrita inspiradora.*

Palavras-chave: J.J. Delaney; A. Gilsenan; N. Hegarty; P. Holloway; R. Jenkinson; C. McCann; A. Ní Churreáin; E. Ní Chuilleanáin; B. O'Callaghan; J. O'Donnell; J. Traynor.

The Short Story Narrative Form According to John Banville *A Forma Narrativa do Conto de Acordo com John Banville*

Juan José Delaney

I met John Banville for the first time in Dublin, on February 2008, thanks to our mutual friend the historian Dermot Keogh. My hidden intention was an interview which would be published in Buenos Aires, in *La Nación* newspaper. “You’re asking too much: John doesn’t like interviews, but go and see what happens”, was Dermot’s reaction.

Following John’s advice, the appointment took place at Dunne & Crescenzi, an Italian restaurant near TCD where the writer is still a regular.

Literature, Irish literature, crime novels and language were the principal topics we talked about. I was impressed by his statement on the English variation spoken by the Irish. The Irish language, he said, is oblique: “... you don’t express yourself directly, it is more a form of evasion rather than of communication. We write in English in a unique way.” He rounded off the idea by claiming that, although the Irish lost their original language, there is a kind of deep grammar in their brains: The Irish speak and write English on the basis of the Irish language.

At the end of the meeting I hinted at the chance of an interview. To my surprise he answered positively because, he said, my accent resembled his mother’s.

The dialogue – published a few months later in BA¹ – took place the day after, at the same cafeteria.

Two questions developed in the conversation concern this article: the account of his beginning as a fiction author and a self definition related to his work as prose writer: “I am, he explained, a poet working in prose.”

During his days as a beginner, young writers used to start writing short stories in the hope of getting published in the small magazines. They knew that publishers wouldn’t accept short stories because they wouldn’t be able to sell them. Their model was *Dubliners*, the classic collection by James Joyce, published in 1914. Banville finally gave up that first experience because the form didn’t really interest him, he wanted to be a novelist.

Long Lankin, Banville’s only collection of short stories, was published in 1970 by Secker & Warburg, the British publishing house. At the time of our meeting, the book was out of print.

Last year I had lunch with John, Janet and writer Billy O’Callaghan at the Terra Madre Italian restaurant, in Dublin. At a certain stage of the conversation I asked where could I get a copy of *Long Lankin*. John shook his head disdainfully, meaning that I wouldn’t find it or that it wasn’t worth while looking for it. He changed the subject by referring to one of his literary heroes, Yeats, who wrote “I have no language, only images, analogies, symbols”, and recommending me *Becoming Georgie*, a biography of W. B. Yeats’s wife, by Ann Saddlemyer. I failed trying to get this book, but two months later, back in Buenos Aires, I received from Billy, a brand new copy of *Long Lankin*, an extra one he had found in his library.

In “Trying to Catch Long Lankin by His Arm: The Evolution of John Banville’s *Long Lankin*” Kersti Tarien (2001) goes through the writing and rewriting process of the stories, from the magazine versions to the 1984 second (probably definite) edition, and quotes the reply of David Farrer, Secker and Warburg’s Literary Editor, to a cable dated May 5, 1969, sent by Roger W. Straus, Jr., from Farrar, Straus and Giroux, the American Book Publishers, asking information about a collection of short stories by John Banville that had been also submitted to them:

We are definitely going to publish his collection of short stories, which incidentally we are billing simply as ‘a work of fiction’. I think myself there is a real talent at work here. I have had two long talks with Banville, who is a young Irishman about 23 years old. He is more than half way through a novel. He strikes me as a young man deeply committed to become a novelist and very much aware of what this takes. In fact, I am extremely impressed with him and, though I don’t anticipate making money over *Long Lankin*, I do feel fairly confident of making money out of him in the future. I’d be delighted to hear that you have taken him on. I don’t think you’d go wrong. (386)

Note that the book would be billed as “a work of fiction” and not a series of short stories.

Eventually released in 1970, *Long Lankin* was to be reissued by an Irish publishing house, Gallery Books, in 1984. This significant revised edition, subsequently republished, is the text I am exploring in this article.

In a brief note placed at the end of his work the author explains:

Eight of these nine stories were published, under the title *Long Lankin*, by Secker & Warburg, London, in 1970. Another story, “Persona”, and a longer tale, or novella, called “The Possessed,” I have decided not to republish. For the present edition, slight revisions to the 1970 text have been made, mainly in punctuation. The final story here, “De Rerum Natura”, was first published in the *Transatlantic Review*. (2013. 101)

The title of the collection alludes to a legend from Northumbria: a stonemason or a robber or even a leper, *Long Lankin*, was an obscure and gothic character who also inspired an old English folk song from where the narrator quotes as an epigraph to the collection:

*My lady came down she was thinking no harm
Long Lankin stood ready to catch her in his arm*

None of the events are directly referred to Long Lankin, but the phantasmal presence of the character and his actions are functional to the obscure, chaotic, violent and irrational atmosphere that pervades the stories.

The inclusion of “De Rerum Natura”, the last text of the second edition, adds a definitive unifying component. By deliberately repeating pessimist poet Titus Lucretius Carus’ title, the Irish writer provides a key to the philosophy that clearly governs the whole book. In his long poem, the Latin poet offers a poetical interpretation of reality based on Epicurus’ philosophy, it is a poetic elucidation of life seen as a harmonic and fatal process of composition and decomposition of things and individuals as part of a whole. This poetical

approach to a mutable universe in which the human condition integrates and disintegrates, and in which art and philosophy are valid options to face pleasantly such a terrible experience, is in the essence of the *Long Lankin* pages. About the old man in “De Rerum Natura”, the narrator pertinently states that “He looked more than anything like a baby, the bald dome and bandy legs, the eyes, the gums, an ancient mischievous baby.” (93)

When the book was released, critics were not generous.

Kersti Tarien Powell writes:

Banville and Farrer paid great attention to the reviews that *Long Lankin* received. Banville’s letters to Farrer show he was disappointed that his critics misunderstood *Long Lankin*’s structure. (...) The article in the *Times Literary Supplement*, however, filled Banville with joy –he had finally found a reader who actually understood what he had set out to do: “The man actually read the book, and thought about it, and got all the points I would wish my ideal reader to get”, he wrote to Farrer jubilantly. (...) Both Ronald Hayman in *The Sunday Telegraph* and Stanley Reynolds in *The New Statesman* also admired the thematic unity of the book and the precise poetic language of the stories. (...). (397)

Perhaps contrasting this first book with the resounding and powerful production that came after, young generations hardly see the deep, subtle spirit of the collection. They find it “underdeveloped”, “fragmentary”, “depressing” and “confusing”, although “wonderfully written” in an “intriguing and engaging prose”.

What is the problem with this “extraneous stuff” as Banville himself defined *Long Lankin*?

In my understanding the answer is simple.

Among the different kinds of short stories, the classic and the modernist are probably the ones mostly performed by contemporary authors. Edgar Allan Poe is considered (inaccurately) the creator of the classic short story: a fixed structure [Exposition, Development (rising action) and Resolution (usually an unexpected culmination)] and the aim of producing an emotional effect in the reader. In “The Black Cat” and “The Tell-Tale Heart” we find this technique. In its way, Banville’s “Wild Wood” fits into this model. We won’t find a fixed structure in a modernist short story. A modernist short story tries to convey reality as it appears in real life: chaotic, senseless, mysterious, unfinished, versatile and changeable... Anton Chekhov, Katherine Mansfield and James Joyce, among others, created effective and credible pages in this line, passages in which situations (significant and intense moments), atmosphere, tone, inscrutable characters and symbols are the elements that really count. The elaboration of a strong plot is not relevant; in fact, these stories are regarded as “plotless”. In an entry of Katherine Mansfield’s journal, dated January 1916 she writes: “The plots of my stories leave me perfectly cold”, a statement shared by our Irish writer who assured: “I’m far more interested in shapes and forms than the story.” (Greacen 8)

Most of the texts in *Long Lankin* are nearer to this last conception of the short story: echoes of Joyce, for instance, can clearly be found in “Lovers”; in the last paragraph of “Sanctuary”, we read: “Helen took Julie’s face in her hands, and covered her ears with her palms, and in this new silence Julie seemed to hear vaguely someone screaming, *a ghost voice familiar yet distant, as though it were coming from beyond the frontiers of sleep.*”(55, my emphasis). The

title of this text sets the tone of it and, as it happens in Chekhov, the unsubstantial plot is displaced by a dense and mysterious atmosphere. Joyce's "The Dead" in "Nightwind" is noticeable: "—No. I'm sorry for them—for us. Look at it. The new Ireland. Sitting around at the end of a party wondering why we're not happy. Trying to find what it is we've lost" (60). The lack of communication in Chekhov's characters affects these texts as well. In "Summer voices" the narrator states that "The voice hung poised a moment in the upper airs, a single liquid note, then slowly faded back into the fields, and died away, leaving the silence deeper than before" (71) and "For a moment he was still, listening. No sounds. Then he went and stood before the mirror and gazed into it at his face for a long time." (81)

By stressing language, its possibilities and impossibilities, Banville tenses and widens the modernist short story capacities; his narrators write not for the sake of sharing events, interpretations or ideas but to understand what they are trying to say. The result is not a short story because, even when there is a plot, it is clear that it is there mainly with a poetical purpose. Nearer to poetry than to the narrative genre, the transgressive texts included in *Long Lankin* are a celebration of words in their aesthetical and philosophical potentials. This explains certain perplexity in people willing to read conventional stories. What they find is different. Disguised in the form of classic or modernist tales, texts included in *Long Lankin* are conspicuous poems in prose, poetic prose.

In this first book we discover the seeds of Banville's future works in which language is an opportunity and a problem as well. Verbal music, rhythm, precise and freak or unusual adjectives, symbols, metaphors, and the primitive, ancestral praise of the magical sound of words are central in Banville's poetics.

An original and strange fulfilment, *Long Lankin* governed a significant and suggestive output.

Notes

1 See *adn Cultura / La Nación*, Buenos Aires, Julio 19, 2008, pp. 24-28.

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John Banville: “The Weightless Density of a Dream.”

John Banville: “A Densidade Leve de Um Sonho”

Alan Gilsenan

*Certain dreams do that, they seem to darken the very air,
crowding it with the shadows of another world.*

John Banville, *Ghosts*

I grew up in a somewhat mythical, and now oft-derided, area of Dublin known as Dublin 4. It has always had a privileged, leafy air about it but, in my younger days, it was a little more eclectic. There were odd pockets of bohemia and academia amidst the grandeur, as well as an occasional Georgian house divided into grimy bedsits, home to older folk, students and the odd, lonely alcoholic all — hidden behind shrouds of greying net curtains. We lived on Raglan Road, immortalised, of course, in poetry and song by Patrick Kavanagh. Our house was elegant and large, although very cold in winter and fraying around the edges a little. Looking back, I realise that it had the atmosphere of an old country house lost in the midst of city. It was old-fashioned too, and otherworldly in some strange respects. I recall it as a world of half-lights. Ghostly and uncertain. Out of time, somehow. On reflection, it may be one of the reasons that I’m deeply drawn to the shifting worlds of John Banville’s fiction. For there is something haunted about the writing of Banville, and something that seems to be at some small remove from what passes for our daily reality.

Much later, in a modern townhouse somewhere else in Dublin 4, as my father lay a-dying in a bedroom across the hall, I sat on a small spare room, surrounded by old tea chests piled high against the surrounding walls, reading *The Book of Evidence* from cover to cover. Right through the night. I was completely captivated. It is a strange and dark book, this florid testimony of a dandy-ish murderer, Freddie Montgomery, and inspired by the real events surrounding a notorious gruesome double murder in Dublin during the early Eighties that became known as the GUBU scandal. (“Grotesque, unbelievable, bizarre and unprecedented” was Taoiseach CJ Haughey’s famous summation of the events that led to the arrest of Malcolm McArthur, a guest at the south Dublin home of the Attorney General, Patrick Connolly.)

Freddie comes from a long line of unreliable shadows that narrate Banville’s fiction. In many respects, like many of these characters, Freddie is a repugnant individual - vain, delusional and self-absorbed, and that’s not even to mention his crimes — but yet somehow he manages to retain our sympathy, our compassion even. Perhaps because, in some ways, he represents our worst side, our own dark possibilities.

Perhaps, too, it was this element that struck such a profound chord with me all those years ago. Or maybe I was seduced by the dramatic potential of the murderous tale which would lead me later to adapt it for stage and screen. Certainly, my heightened state in the face of my father’s imminent demise had something to do with it and perhaps, even, my cell-like

spare room had echoes of Freddie's domain. As the novels opens:

I, Charles St John Vanderveld Montgomery, am kept locked up here like some exotic animal, last survivor of a species they had thought extinct. They should let in people to view me, the girl-eater, svelte and dangerous, padding to and for in my cage, my terrible green glance flickering past the bars, give them something to dream about, tucked up cosy in their beds of a night. (1989. 3)

The idea of us all being morally questionable, along with Banville's extraordinary ability to conjure a dreamlike world – illuminated by shards of ever-changing light – his brilliantly precise, if sometimes archaic, use of language and his philosophical musings combine to paint a universe that seems truer, somehow, than the prosaic world around us. Could it be that Ireland's greatest prose-stylist is really, in every essential way, a poet? For, in terms of literary lineage, John Banville seems to descend from WB Yeats and Samuel Beckett, whilst his influence – unwitting or otherwise – seems evident in contemporary writers such as Eoin McNamee and Sara Baume.

In the shocking and tragic aftermath of the murder at the centre of *The Book of Evidence*, Freddie considers life after his fall from grace. From reality.

Everything had changed, everything. I was estranged from myself and all that I had once supposed I was. My life up to now had only the weightless density of a dream. When I thought about my past it was like thinking of what someone else had been, someone I had never met but whose history I knew by heart. It all seemed no more than a vivid fiction. (1989. 150)

Yet, while Freddie reflects upon his former life as if it had been some sort of vague dreamlike state and that he had now crashed down into some sort of harsh reality. However, in the novel, Freddie has simply been transformed by events, and merely emerged into another seam of myriad Borgean fictional realities.

John Banville's world seems to be a godless one where somehow the gods are still pulling the strings. His imaginative landscape is a seemingly bleak one where the narrative line, the plot, is largely meaningless. For, like Vladimir and Estragon and Co., the characters are going nowhere. The story, that old-fashioned notion of plot, seems like an unnecessary artifice in Banville's work. A kind of fictive chimera. A foolish mirage where the story promises some hope of resolution. Of conclusion. But this darkened world is not irredeemable. For it is infused with moments of profound beauty, of broken tenderness and, of course, shame. And, in that shame, we find a sort of redemption. As Freddie Montgomery concludes *The Book of Evidence*:

It is spring. Even in here we feel it, the quickening in the air. I have some plants in my window. I like to watch them, feeding on the light. The trial takes place next month. It will be a quick affair. The newspapers will be disappointed. I had thought of trying to publish this, my testimony. But no, I have asked the Inspector to put it in my file, with the other, official fictions. He came to see me today, here in my cell. He picked up the pages, hefting them in his hand. It was to be my defence I said. He gave me a wry look. Did you put in about knowing the Behrens woman, and

owing money, and all that stuff? I smiled. It's my story, I said, and I'm sticking to it. He laughed at that. Come on, Freddie, he said, how much of it is true? It was the first time he called me by my name. True, Inspector? I said. All of it. None of it. Only the shame. (1989. 220)

Recently, John Banville received a phone call in Dublin. 11.23am. The voice on the line claimed to be a representative of the Nobel Committee in Sweden. They were ringing to inform Mr Banville that he had been awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. One imagines him putting the phone down and sitting for a moment. (In the half-light, one hopes.) He feels dazed. A sort of physical release spreading through his body. A slight smile, perhaps, a sort of wry grin, unconsciously creeps across his face. He pours himself a small brandy. "Well..." he might have said, quietly to himself, apropos nothing at all. More of an exhalation than a tangible word. After these quiet moments of calm and quiet delight – he would not remember exactly how many – he rang his nearest and dearest to share the good news.

But it was not to be. It was a malicious hoax. A cruel joke, apparently, although there still remains some mystery about it. Farcical in ways and yet true, and strangely full of pathos also. Like a Banville novel. Like life itself perhaps. But there had been a moment when he imagined that he was the Nobel Prize Winner. A simple joyful moment. For it is an award he would have richly deserved, and yet, if he were again to receive a phone call from Stockholm, the moment would never be the same. He has had that moment. The rest is of nothing. As Banville writes in his seminal novel *Ghosts*:

What happens does not matter; the moment is all. This is the golden world. The painter has gathered his little group and set them down in this wind-tossed glade, in this delicate, artificial light, and painted them as angels and clowns. It is a world where nothing is lost, where all is accounted for while yet the mystery of things is preserved; a world where they may live, however briefly, however tenuously, in the failing evening of the self, solitary and at the same time together somehow here in this place, dying as they may be and yet fixed forever in a luminous, unending instant. (1993. 231)

Plate Tectonics

Placas Tectônicas

Neil Hegarty

A few years ago, I was giving a reading and talk in Austria, at the University of Graz. The following day – the reading over, the questions answered, a crisp autumn morning – I was walking through raked piles of fallen leaves in the Stadtpark, when I came across a statue of Johannes Kepler, who taught in Graz for some years at the end of the sixteenth century. I paused, examined, and – in the modern style – whipped out my mobile phone, took a photo of Kepler, and emailed it to John Banville. A few minutes later, he replied with a thank you. He had never been in Graz, he added; was it worth visiting? A few emails passed back and forth, and I was pleased: pleased in the moment with Banville's civility; and pleased too, later, with the sense that in the exchange there had been an element of interleaving of fiction and non-fiction, a blurring of realities, Kepler and *Kepler*, Graz fictionalised in the pages of the novel and Graz experienced in-the-moment, fragments floating through the air – much that was typically Banvillean. Throughout the exchange, a nearby group of kindergarten children were being encouraged by their teachers to jump – again, and again, and again – into the piles of dry golden leaves that reached higher than their heads; they were screaming with pure joy.

John Banville has spoken of the importance of art in providing “ways of looking, of comprehending, of making reality comprehensible.” This, of course, is why he has been drawn to the terrain of science, to the turf occupied by Kepler and others. But Banville's true landscape consists of the nature and form of life itself: and science and art come together in his universe, as he seeks to understand them by breaking them into their parts, fragmenting them, examining them and building them anew. His novels shatter and render as they explore the withholding and revealing and conditionality of meaning, focus on perception and how this is charged or warped by memory, gaze upon the isolation or aloneless or loneliness of the individual – compelling themes handled in ways which absorb and challenge.

I feel drawn to Banville's treatment of such themes because my own work, both fiction and non-fiction, is much given to similar forms of questioning; and is moved in particular by a necessary scepticism of the ‘truth’ presented daily to us, in manifold forms. In aestheticising such scepticism, Banville demonstrates that it is an essential component in the workings of the world, a fundamental element in a writing life. It is a necessary form of fragmentation, for it enables observation, and scrutiny, and – in the end – comprehension.

In recent years, I have felt this sense of familiarity with Banville's ideas and philosophy, already perceptible, become yet more apparent. My latest novel *The Jewel* inhabits a world of painting, of surfaces and palimpsests, of appearance and reality – of the condition of *fragmentation* in history, in our lives. How does one assemble a coherent life and a reality, when our memories and our experiences fragment one by one as the moments fly by? As I stand back and examine my own writing – in my first novel *Inch Levels* and now *The Jewel*, as well as in my non-fiction titles – I find that this becomes more and more my own preoccupation, my own overarching theme. It is instructive, and a comfort, to be aware of a writer who has gone

ahead of me, and who offers a reply in the form of a philosophy and a vision of creativity.

Of all Banville's works, I have always been drawn most to *The Untouchable*: to the story of the hidden and shadowed experiences that direct art historian Victor Maskell's life and work; to the conflicted Irish and gay identities that shape his destiny; to that which may be said and that which must be left unsaid, to the rejection and the attraction that charge an existence. *The Untouchable* is of course something of a roman-à-clef, though one senses that Banville is interested less in the history of art historian Anthony Blunt whose biography underlies the narrative, than in plate tectonics – in a life the discrete, seismically trembling shards of which resolve themselves in the end into a new, disastrous form. There are infinities at work: incalculable numbers of possible movements involving the pieces of Maskell's life, of which many might conceivably involve notions of acceptance and honour. That these pieces in fact resolve themselves into a curdling form is a reminder in itself that in Banville's universe as in life, bleakness is seldom far away. There are lessons for any writer in this tale of dissembling, disassembling, and reassembling.

The Book of Evidence and *Athena* also settle into the world of art – and in these too, Banville focuses on the surface of things, to pick or prise apart that surface, and analyse the resulting pieces. In *The Book of Evidence*, Freddie Montgomery approaches his family home at Coolgrange, and encounters first a broken gate, and then weeds which grow in the cracking steps that lead up to the house; the family wireless sits at a “drunken tilt” on the kitchen counter; and the floor tiles are loose in a house in which the old codes have broken down. In *Athena*, the nature of these very surfaces comes into question, as art specialist Morrow – Montgomery in another guise – offers scholarly appraisals of paintings the provenance of which are far from certain.

Writers fret sometimes about the power of influence: the ability of forerunners and ancestors and books to cast a spell, maybe, over our present work, to send it hurtling off, bobsleigh-like, onto undreamed-of trajectories. It is useless to fret about such fears, I think; indeed, they miss the essential point, which is that we ought to embrace such influence, to fold enriching thoughts and matter into our own work. This process is part of what makes us sentient; in any event, it will happen unconsciously, regardless of our notional will. In this specific context, I feel grateful for the sense in which John Banville's writing offers something resembling comfort, replete as it is with fragments – of life, of lives, of philosophy – that indicate any number of other futures, other wholes. I still think of those kindergarten children playing at the foot of the Schlossberg at Graz: they filled their small fists with golden leaves, I remember, and then they threw the leaves into the air, to fall where they would.

How Banville Makes the Banal Beautiful *Como Banville Torna o Banal Belo*

Patrick Holloway

When growing up, I was spoilt for choice when it came to literary influences and idols. I was born to an island of literary giants whose achievements and accolades I could only wonder at. I grew up reading Yeats, Joyce, Longley, Heaney, McCabe and Banville. As an aspiring writer, this was often intimidating and sometimes paralysing. I remember reading Banville's prose in awe and my early writing tried to mimic his wondrous phrases and clear, concise, poetic descriptions. Of course I'm no Banville, just like Banville is no Joyce.

Years later I was calmed when I read an interview with Banville in which he spoke about the very same worries when he started out. It made me feel like I was on the same path, somehow by thinking like him I could maybe emulate a hint of his successes.

He depicts my worries ever-so eloquently in an interview with the Paris review: "This is a problem for Irish writers – our literary forebears are enormous. They stand behind us like Easter Island statues, and we keep trying to measure up to them, leaping towards heights we can't possibly reach. I suppose that's a good thing, but it makes for a painful early life for the writer." I have long since given up trying to measure myself to the likes of Banville and have happily returned to being in awe at his craft of storytelling, the exploration of moments that seem somewhat banal, yet encapsulate what it is to be alive.

Banville's publication record is a feat of its own and his novels speak for themselves, but what most influenced me most (apart from *The Sea*, which I read as an adult) was his first collection of short stories. *Long Lankin* is a collection of nine stories and one novella, it is a book that Banville himself is now almost revolted at having written, but a book, nonetheless, that inspired me greatly. It was written when his genius as a novelist was yet to be discovered. Although his later books are more complete and rewarding for a reader, when I think of Banville, it is always the short stories in *Long Lankin* that come to mind.

Maybe that is because it is the first work of his I read and therefore was the first time I was introduced to his sentences. He has spoken so frequently about getting as close as he can to the perfect sentence and how he often spends months trying to get it right. His lyrical prose in the stories enticed me with their rhythm and musicality. How each sentence seemed to be a short melody, how each repetition became a motif, each full stop forms a perfect cadence. I am not saying for one second that this is the best of Banville, his future novels go on to explore and perfect his style and read altogether more polished and clean, but to a young writer those short stories conveyed an Ireland I knew too well, while also making it altogether different.

Some of the stories do lack in a steady build of tension or a tangible conflict and the novella leaves a lot to desire but I overlooked these the first time I read them, and have continued to do so because Banville still brings the worlds clearly and magically to the reader's eye. Whether it be about sitting in the woods by a fire "About him the wood was silent, yet

beneath the silence there were movements and strange sounds, strange stirrings and rustlings in the trees.” Or his concise insights into a feeling, “the strange clarity of vision and thought which follows exhaustion now came over him.” It is clear to see that Banville marvels at the world and the everyday phenomena that we forget to notice and this is clear in his winding, striking passages of language.

The stories mostly deal with two main characters in each, and the third silent “Larkin” that enters flawlessly to create conflict. Larkin coming from the old ballad in which there is a horrific murder of a baby. Banville embodies this tale throughout the stories that are set in a contemporary Ireland. He brings to life some terse, eerie stories that haunt the reader, not only through the plot and developments, but through the persistently pressing prose.

The themes are varied but in the stories there is always this pursuit of freedom, which Banville himself felt as a youth, and which resonated with me as a teenager. The stories also deal with the process of writing and the role of the writer. Banville explores this in “The Death” when Stephen reveals “I was going to write a book. A love story. The story of Stephen and Alice who thought that love would last forever. And when they found it wouldn’t or at least that it changed so much that they couldn’t recognise it anymore the blow was too heavy.” (1984. 31)

It is this that rings true in all of Banville’s writing, the connection between writing and life, and the importance of that connection. By writing, Banville does not create the world in which we live in but creates an almost identical one where life experiences are dealt with so exquisitely that they feel like our own. That in this almost-our-world there is reason to the madness, that we can see that glint in the corner of our eye more clearly, that we can understand, or at least, calm whatever it is that beats inside of us like waves constantly crashing into nothing upon an empty shore.

Alive and Tricking – John Banville and Paul Auster
Vivo e Enganando – John Banville e Paul Auster

Rosemary Jenkinson

John Banville's novels could well be described as an antidote to the dispassionate tone of modern prosaism. Banville's writing flaunts a superabundance of lofty adjectives, and while it can't be decried as purple prose, it could at least be described as violently violet. The overblown style during the first few pages can seem discombobulating, but the world is so powerfully drawn and the voice so compelling that the reader has no choice but to stay. Banville's arcane, gothic scenarios are elucidated with idiosyncratic flair.

It's this element of gothic sensibility that finds its spiritual equivalent in Paul Auster's work, notably in *The New York Trilogy* (*City of Glass*, *Ghosts* and *The Locked Room*). *The New York Trilogy* is remarkably similar to Banville's work in its metaphysical conjectures, a keen sense of the passing of time and focus on strange vanishings and peregrinations. In this short essay I intend to prove the proximity of Banville and Auster's vision by pointing out ten parallels in content and form: the blurred lines between being dead and alive, self-disintegration, disconnection from society, the narrator as spy and actor, the precariousness of language, human instinct for survival, the bending of time and space, the use of Gothic tropes, the appearance of reality in fiction, and the power of description. Later, I will point out differences appertaining to style.

One of the biggest resemblances in Auster's and Banville's work centres on how the natural order of existence is subverted. There is an overall impression that events are suffused with elements of Gothic trickery, casting doubt on reality. Their protagonists tend to be lonely souls, so isolated they become unsure whether they're alive or dead and the fact that *Ghosts* is the title of both a novel by Banville and a novella by Auster attests to this. Montgomery in Banville's *Ghosts* states "I have an habitual feeling of my real life having passed and that I am leading a posthumous existence" (25) which is mirrored by Quinn in *City of Glass* who feels "as if he had managed to outlive himself, as if he were somehow living a posthumous life" (5).

Banville and Auster are much less interested in plot than in charting the consciousness and condition of the individual. Among those on the verge of self-disintegration is Licht whose sense of disruption is exemplified by strange, violent dreams: "One night when he was on the very brink of sleep something had gone off ... like a pistol being fired inside his skull" (Banville's *Ghosts*, 108). A striking correlation is to be found with Auster's Quinn: "In his dream, which he later forgot, he found himself alone in a room, firing a pistol into a bare white wall." (*City of Glass* 9).

There is an all-pervasive sense of disconnection from wider society in Banville and Auster's characters. In this illusory world, there is a notion of being controlled: "With that fixed grin and those glossy, avid eyes he makes me think of a ventriloquist's dummy" (Banville's *Ghosts* 12) and "Wilson served as a kind of ventriloquist. Quinn himself was the

dummy and Work was the animated voice that gave purpose to the enterprise” (*City of Glass* 6).

Although the narrator of Banville’s *Ghosts* is a past murderer whereas the protagonists of *The New York Trilogy* either are or become detectives, each is primarily alone in this world. Languishing in jail appears comparable to the self-incarceration of life as a spy. While *The Untouchable* is the story of a secret agent, it correlates to the mysterious life of the private detective in *The New York Trilogy*. Auster gives the impression that everything he writes is a series of codes to be broken, as demonstrated by Ellen’s need to treat Fanshawe’s “poems as secret messages” (*The Locked Room* 263), adding to the Gothic suspense. Likewise, Cleave admits “I have always been a secret stalker” (*Eclipse* 100), and the fact that he is an actor corresponds to the overarching view that life is a stage. Auster frequently uses this image of the actor. The narrator of *The Locked Room* explains that he has written no more than ‘a prelude’ which is “far from a final curtain call” (235), and Blue wonders if his target, Black, is ‘no more than his stand-in, a fake, an actor without substance’ (Auster’s *Ghosts* 170). Also in Auster’s *Ghosts*, Black wears a mask to conceal his identity, reminiscent of Banville’s references to commedia dell’arte masks and the Harlequin, coupled to Montgomery’s exhortation to “give me the mask any day, I’ll settle for inauthenticity and bad faith” (Banville’s *Ghosts* 198).

Loss of language is a huge theme of Auster’s. In *City of Glass* Quinn’s failure to follow Peter Stillman leads to a mental breakdown leading to an inability to form words: “He felt that his words had been severed from him, that they were now part of the world at large, as real and specific as a stone, or a lake, or a flower” (*City of Glass* 130). Banville also depicts a similar phenomenon in *Eclipse* where Cleave’s nostalgia for the past is leading him into a comparable sense of dissolution whereby people are speaking “a form of language I did not recognize; I would know the words but could not assemble them into sense” (*Eclipse* 7). It’s this ever-circling self-analysis that infuses these novels and novellas, allied to the quest to understand the essence of what it is to be human. Yet at times, there is a sense of romanticism in both authors when Auster delineates “the golds and feathery persimmons” of the sky (*City of Glass* 118) which correlates to Banville’s “vastnesses of luminous silver and white clouds” (*Ghosts* 39).

In addition to language, identity and time are fluid too, and the dramatis personae of Banville and Auster dream of freeing themselves from quotidian shackles. Cleave ruminates, “To have no past, no foreseeable future, only the steady pulse of a changeless present – how would that feel?” (*Eclipse* 15). Living in the moment appears to be the biggest aspiration. Quinn has always suffered from “the burden of his own consciousness” and it’s only by taking on the identity of Paul Auster that he feels “lighter and freer” (*City of Glass* 50). Time starts to speed up as a result of the bizarreness of the case Quinn finds himself compelled to pursue: “It was strange, he thought, how quickly time passed in the Stillman apartment” (*City of Glass* 36). Cleave talks of “occasions of timeless time” and rhapsodises on their “sweetness” (*Eclipse* 169).

Continuing with the theme of time, Banville and Auster both exhibit a prelapsarian preoccupation. *City of Glass* centres on Peter Stillman’s study of the fall in the Garden of Eden, leading to the “fall of language” (*City of Glass* 47). Montgomery in Banville’s *Ghosts* refers flippantly to how gardening may rehabilitate his soul to the extent that he can come to some understanding of “Eve, the fatal apple, and all the rest of it” (*Ghosts* 97). Characters have a propensity to feel as though they are falling through space. Auster’s narrator has a sense that “even on that first day I had slipped through a hole in the earth” (*The Locked Room* 203). Cleave has a similar impression of his daughter Cass: “She had never really lost it, that fear of falling into the sky” (*Eclipse* 57).

The elision of day into night is a common Gothic motif. Both Montgomery of Banville's *Ghosts* and Quinn in *City of Glass* are roaming around in the early hours of the morning, the former "awake at three o'clock, wandering through the house... Was it the day still going down or the morning coming up?" (Banville's *Ghosts* 10), while the latter's nocturnal wanderings surreally distort his surroundings so that "the periods of dark nevertheless kept gaining on the periods of light" (*City of Glass* 120). No matter though how time and identity may be stripped from a person, both Banville and Auster agree that there is a surviving life-force in every human being, in Auster's case, "the tiny life-bud buried in the body of the beating self" (*City of Glass* 8) and in Banville's case, "That pilot light...that steady flame that nothing will quench" (*Eclipse* 32).

The Gothic trope of the mad, mentally damaged child features largely in the figure of the young man-child, Peter Stillman, in *City of Glass*, and is employed even more frequently by Banville in the figures of Van in *Ghosts*, Cass in *Eclipse* and Freddie in *The Untouchable*. The other Gothic trope utilised by both writers is that of the ancestral ghostly home of Cleave in *Eclipse* and of the narrator in *The Locked Room*.

While it is fascinating to observe these parallels within Banville and Auster, it is worth bearing in mind that these two writers see a futility in over-exploring what is written or seen, which paradoxically contradicts their ceaseless questioning. Banville's narrator in contemplating the image of *Le monde d'or* reflects, "There is no meaning, of course, only a profound and inexplicable significance" (*Ghosts* 95). Auster echoes this in: "We always talk about trying to get inside a writer to understand his work better. But when you get right down to it, there's not much to find in there" (*Ghosts* 175). Their point is, however, that interrogation of life is still vital even if it fails to reveal an answer.

Where Banville and Auster really come together is in their postmodern playfulness, shifting the boundaries between reality and fiction. For instance, Banville's *Ghosts* deals with the work of a fictional French painter named Vaublin while Auster writes in *City of Glass* about an elusive seventeenth-century writer named Henry Dark who transpires to be invented by one of Auster's characters, the older Peter Stillman. Both writers have a predilection for showcasing their academic knowledge, adding a liberal sprinkling of quotes and references to great philosophers or writers such as Herodotus, Montaigne, Selkirk, Swift, Defoe (*City of Glass* 33-34) and Zeno, Seneca and Marcus Aurelius (*The Untouchable* 24).

It is important also to highlight their supreme descriptive powers. Auster illustrates a perfect understanding of the split personality in this line: "Quinn craved an amoeba's body, wanting to cut himself in half and run off in two directions at once" (*City of Glass* 56). More so than Auster, Banville is a prestidigitator conjuring interlocking scarves of soaring similes from his top hat, and one such simile of brilliant beauty is: "Pensively he buttered a cold piece of toast, lathering on the butter like a painter applying cadmium yellow with a palette knife" (*The Untouchable* 66). Clearly, both writers have observational skills on a par with, if not greater than, the spies and detectives of which they write. It is only through their singular talent and the solitariness of writing that they can tap in so searingly to the gothic loneliness of humanity.

Having mentioned these parallels, Banville and Auster do display differences in style. Banville's depictions are often ornately metaphorical such as this of Sophie in *Ghosts*: "Light is her medium, she moves through it as through some fine, shining fluid, bearing aloft out of the world's reach the precious phial of herself" (7). Auster's use of language is more economic, direct and evocative of the traditional American detective story. As the narrator says himself

in *City of Glass*: “In the good mystery there is nothing wasted, no sentence, no word that is not significant” (8).

The differences are even more acute when it comes to their dialogue. In *Ghosts*, Auster tends to favour a hard-boiled, tough-guy American voice. For example, when Blue is faced by the masked Black, aiming a gun at him, he is still able to quip, “That’s right, I’m the original funny man. You can always count on a lot of laughs when I’m around” (Auster’s *Ghosts* 192). In contrast, Banville’s dialogue can be archaic and self-conscious in its fey playfulness: “‘Oh, come,’ Felix cried, ‘we shall fleet the time carelessly as we did in the golden world – oops!’” (Banville’s *Ghosts* 116).

I’d like to conclude briefly with how my own writing in short stories and plays resonates with the work of Banville and Auster in its depiction of dislocation, the uprootedness of my characters and the search for purpose and belonging in an increasingly fragmented society. The main difference is that I use more humour to undercut the bleakness, but in certain short stories, I employ a pictorial lyricism like Banville; in other more contemporary stories, I take on a more disaffected tone of urban grittiness and aspire, like Auster, to cut straight to the point. I write more dialogue than prose and I write more female characters than either Banville or Auster but we still share a fundamental worldview and a deep, lingering *weltschmerz* wherein our characters battle against a shifting, insecure universe.

John Banville

John Banville

Colum McCann

We are living now in the exponential age – a sequence of rapidly punctuated evolutions, a sort of carousel of quickening, where everything is faster-smaller, faster-cheaper, faster-incomprehensibly reduced. We are tightening and tightening in a narrowing gyre. But John Banville has always refused to kowtow to the times. He is a writer with a longitude and latitude in him. He is a twenty-first century novelist with a twentieth-century rage and a nineteenth century decorum. His work is of great psychological power. He writes to that Faulknerian notion of the human heart in conflict with itself, of beauty and vengeance and pity and sacrifice and love and hate and desire and loss and all the rainstorms in between. The whole time he is properly concerned with language and the music of what happens. He has a daring and a dash about him, served alongside a slice of ponder. He is also prepared to risk failure. He continues to touch on James Joyce's notion that a great artist continues to recreate life out of life and in so doing he (or she) redeems quotidian reality. Banville shapes our reality with a thrilling poetic intensity.

On a personal level I used to work with him at the Irish Press on Burgh Quay in Dublin. I was a very young cub reporter and he was an imposing copy editor. He terrified me. I never once talked to him. He wore a jacket and tie. Often he also wore a heavy scarf indoors. It was as if he was ready to bolt the building at any time and get back to the novels which, at that stage, I hadn't read.

I have read them now and my world is wider and better because of them.

Banville and Black

Banville e Black

Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin

Among the differences between the two cloned writers, John Banville and Benjamin Black, there is one that is quite necessary. In a crime novel, following from the author's contract with the reader, the convention insists that many things are concealed. We are introduced to people in terms of their externals – their appearance, apparent social class, their habits and idiosyncrasies, idiolect. But the truth of their feelings and motives is hidden – with an opacity that is partly the result of a fault in the observer's perception, until the moment of revelation that makes the story complete. In the Banville novels there is opacity and recognition – but the opacity is a real condition not a trick of the light, and the recognitions do not illuminate but cast new shadows. For his protagonists, other people remain a mystery even when the facts about their lives or points of view become known; and thus the revelations about them are genuinely shocking. Think of the moment in *The Newton Letter* when the narrator is confronted with a savagely joyful celebration of the Mountbatten murder, in the voice of a woman he had been imagining as belonging to decayed Anglo-Irish Protestant gentry.

The reader of these fictions is denied the conventional progression towards greater enlightenment as to what is actually happening, and why – even though certain facts may be established. This I think throws one back on his narrator/protagonists. His style, ranging from the apocalyptic to the irritable, flows through them and surrounds them with a cloud of language, a mist through which other people are indistinctly seen and often distorted – physically, like the monstrous mother revealed towards the end of *Mefisto*, or mentally like the mute boy in *The Sea*. Enclosed in that mist the only one who can be known, and only up to a point, is the narrator. And that point is also the limit of the knowledge *he* can access through his introspective reminiscing.

Where does that leave us? Thrown back on knowledge of ourselves, I think, with an enhanced sense of how little we can know of our own life and character. And yet we are here, even if we are in a mist, we can feel the earth of Ireland under our feet ... The mist tells us that there are solid things existing, we know that when we collide with them. We are people with a sense of ourselves and of the world, yet it is one that is not based on accurate knowledge. And time and the self are unstable. Memory, to quote Cecily in *The Importance of being Earnest* “usually chronicles the things that have never happened”; but memory remains our guarantee of identity. If identity can be said to be a fact. In *The Sea* the narrator's mother says to him about his wife, “Why does she keep calling you Max ... your name is not Max.” “It is now” he replies. That “now” slides away off, but the writer clings to it – at the chronological ending of *The Sea*, at the moment when the narrator reveals the things he has known all along but cannot make sense of, and relates the recent farcical and less recent tragic happenings, in a tangle of past and pluperfect tenses, he observes “All this [is] in the historic present.”

But does such a historic present exist in life? The people at the centre of his novels (the ones I have read, not his whole work) live in a precarious present tense; and they exist not

as subjects that things happen to, but as whole relationships with the world they have encountered, and thus as whole lives. To read about them is to consider what a whole life amounts to, with its shocks and compulsions, its early insights and late strategies. They build to a totality that we can experience within the confines of a novel, as we cannot in our own lives, where such truths are constantly escaping us, leaking away as fast as they fill our perception. As Miss Prism says – to return to *The Importance of being Earnest* – That is what Fiction means.

Time Pieces: A Dublin Memoir — *An Ode to the Act of Dreaming*

Time Pieces: A Dublin Memoir — *Uma Ode ao Ato de Sonhar*

Annemarie Ní Churreáin

When is a city no longer a city? When does a city become a site of dreaming? In this compelling portrait of Banville's long relationship with Dublin, he presents to us a suave landscape fondly haunted by the ghosts and echoes of literary giants, philosophers, architects, and historical change-makers. Enlisting the help of an enigmatic tour-guide, he artfully explores—in the form of memoir—the hidden and not-so-hidden nooks of the city he fell in love with as a boy during annual day-trips from Wexford. Returning home by train at day's end "I would have to turn my face away and press it up close against the window to hide my tears..." He remembers his heart "swollen by grief" and the sense that the city was "becoming, in short, the past".

As an adoptee of Dublin with roots elsewhere, I recognise the depths of this strange grief and the almost shame-faced longing for a place that is not yet, and may never fully be, my own. Carefully, and with a refined wit, Banville mines this tension that exists for the writer caught up in the liminal, often ruptured space, between worlds. As he digs, collects, signposts, compiles and constructs the city, I am reminded that we "outsider writers" come to Dublin city with a distinctly searching lens – seeking there, perhaps, what we have left behind in other homes. We bring to our new city the narrator's desire to (re)dream ourselves whole, through the portal of language, into this new fertile landscape. And yet, there is the thorny question of responsibility – to what extent must our retelling of the city bear witness? How does actuality sit alongside the necessary artistic pursuit of beauty and mystery? If memoir is a kind of record, what are the limits – if any – to how we can narrate and/or repurpose the city as a subject?

Elegant and stylish, Banville's Dublin is a deeply arresting weave of streets, monuments and histories. It is also, arguably, a city in which everyday realities, including those of poverty, addiction and violence seem, at various points, peripheral and very occasionally underexplored. For example, in a chapter titled "On the Street", Banville finds through the Mount Street sex trade of the 1960's a topic of extended curiosity in female sex workers whom he describes as "wraith-like" (83), "pitifully pretty" (85) and "sad creatures of the night". By his own admission, he is tantalised by the misfortune of these women and would "have liked to ask them about their lives, and how they had come to be on the streets" (83). Banville's candour is striking, and whilst it may not be true that memoir owes us what we think we are owed in terms of correctness, one wonders if a less moral tone might have achieved a more coherent and/or resonant cord. Instead, the women are glimpsed only through the naïve eye of a young observer, and not ever (meaningfully) as equals. Stephanie Delahaye – who is positioned as Banville's Dublin love-interest throughout – is subject to a much more nuanced and multi-dimensional portrayal of womanhood. So, it is ultimately disappointing to learn that

Stephanie is not based on any one real woman at all, but is, in fact, a dreamed-up “amalgam of many people”.¹

Time Pieces encounters an unforgettable Dublin. With great expertise Banville poses questions that, satisfyingly, remain unanswered and perhaps “care”, or real compassion, comes eventually in the form of craft itself. Banville’s mastery of the English sentence is both an act of repair and a language of progress. “The sentence is what makes us human.”² Banville has said in interviews. “We declare love in sentences.”³ It is, perhaps, this absolutely primal love that drives onward his (re)imagining of Dublin as a city of glamour over hunger, and of romance at any cost. Is there always a dream-cost to be paid in memoir? It seems likely. Banville leads us through the streets and alleys of Dublin filled with his shadow and, in his shadow, we gratefully follow. Towards the book’s closing, Banville reveals an essential and notable truth: the invisible baton which is passed on to “my eldest son, my firstborn, who is a man now...He is on his way home from work, and has stopped in for a pint, just like my father...”(200). In the end, the writer – both brilliant and brilliantly difficult – seeks out his own image in the making. Time as concept – political, personal and other – does, and does not, move on.

Notes

1 <https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/books/john-banville-i-have-not-been-a-good-father-no-writer-is-1.2837008>

2 <https://www.browndailyherald.com/2014/01/24/john-banville-sentence-makes-us-human/>

3 <https://radio.rte.ie/radio1highlights/struggle-language-lifes-torment-lifes-passion/>

Reflecting on Discovering John Banville as a Young Reader
Refletindo a Minha Descoberta de John Banville como Jovem Leitor

Billy O'Callaghan

When it comes to the crafting of a story or a novel, every writer will profess – or at least claim – a meticulous weighing of their sentences, but few that I can think of, in Ireland or anywhere, carry to their work anything like the dexterity, imaginative intellect and general broad-spectrum genius employed by John Banville.

What's the difference between him and the rest of us? We all have the same dictionary's worth of words at our disposal, but what is it about the particular way he uses them that sets him so apart? For one thing, I suppose, there is the rare symphonic quality to his language, the words on the page, often simple enough in and of themselves, somehow stir to life by a complexly structured natural musicality when strung together in their precise way. Can that be learned? I'm not sure. Found, possibly, more so than learned, or self-taught, by long trial-and-error struggle, honing the mind's ear through a deep and careful attention to some internal tuning fork, and pushing far beyond the poetic, refusing to settle for merely that, out into the realms of sorcery.

Because his sentences always seem just right, even when they have you in their highest moments breathing in gasps, the temptation – and surely the mistake – would be to think that any of it comes easily. On the contrary, I'm sure that the opposite is true, that there must be violent daily and nightly torment behind their sculpting, and so the gift then, the greatness John has as a writer, is in knowing when to keep toiling at something, tweaking the balance by squeezing or elongating syllables, cutting, reshaping and, when the time has come, stopping, recognising when the sentence is right in the way it follows on from what has gone before, and because of that, knowing where it best leads.

With regard to the books of his that I've read – and at this point it amounts to quite a number, since I first began reading him in my mid-teens, going on for thirty years now – what most strikes me about them is their sheer density, with even the seemingly simple banked in layers of meaning and crazed with wildly eclectic allusion. Even now, I read them slowly, marvelling at the language and letting the stories seep into me, taking from them what I can, knowing I'll understand better after a spell of reflection, and a reread, but accepting, too, that there'll still be much I've missed. The hard work involved in their crafting is undoubted, but just as there's no blueprint for art, nothing that can be broken down to any kind of easily replicated formula, it's the gift, the talent, that makes the real difference. When I think of John Banville's novels, what lingers with me are early impressions, the impact of finding some spectacular word exploding within a beautifully formed paragraph, one I'd never possibly have considered yet rings exactly as it should.

A special book for me has always been *The Newton Letter*. I don't necessarily rank it as his best work – for that, I'll take my pick from *The Book of Evidence*, *The Sea, Shroud, Ghosts*, or depending on the day, and my humour, up to half a dozen others I could name – or even, if I was forced to choose, my favourite – that's *Mephisto* – but it's the book that proved to be my gateway into the Banville oeuvre. I'll spare you a summary, because this isn't a review, and

since I am not an academic, I am not even going to pretend an attempt at analysis. Instead, I'd like to offer a few impressions, of the book and the writer, even if that's a bit like trying to bottle whispers.

Writing to me is almost entirely instinctual, a slow and desperate fumbling towards (hopefully) some kind of rightness, so when I stumble across such work by others it always tends to resonate deeply. Even when I had no idea yet of what I was doing, or why, even before I dared risk spinning a yarn or building a single sentence of my own, I could recognise it by sight, sound or feel. And *The Newton Letter* was one of the first books where I felt a sense of that in abundance.

By fourteen or fifteen I had a huge and wide appetite for books and had already spent half my life at that point burrowing into the bookshelves of my local library, glad to my bones that I'd only yet barely scratched the surface. Galaxies of books stood waiting to be discovered, stories that would take me all the places I hadn't yet been. I don't recall why this book made it into the pile I carried home with me one day because I had no great interest then in reading anything that leaned too closely to the world I already knew. I was chasing far corners, not familiarity. I'm sure I was already aware of John Banville as a name, and maybe that was part of it, too, some vague curiosity piqued by the somewhat foreignness of someone I'd have otherwise boxed up and casually dismissed as "an Irish writer". Unexpectedly, then, *The Newton Letter* opened something for me. A barrier had come down, and I began to understand, without putting the thought into words, that the world started far closer than I'd ever previously wanted to acknowledge and that every kind of story worth imagining was within touching distance of my doorstep, if I only knew what to look for. That book led me to seek out more by the same mind, and following on, work by the likes of John McGahern, Liam O'Flaherty, John B. Keane, Michael MacLaverty and, in time, in arbitrary and aimless fashion, free as I was of any kind of guiding hand, countless others. Some missed the mark, others hit and stuck, and I took what I needed from all of them.

What passed me by within the narrative was due to a lacking on my part, young as I was and, despite my best efforts, under-read. For example, it wasn't until years later, coming across something online about the book, that I discovered the main characters, Charlotte, Otilie and Edward, were named for those in a Goethe novel. But as I've said, there are many layers to John Banville's books, with no shortage of joy to savour. I read it as a story, I suppose, and basked in the language, particularly the descriptions of a place and its people that I almost knew:

Oh, he was built robustly enough, there was real flesh under his tweeds, and bones, and balls, blood, the lot, but inside I imagined just a greyish space with nothing in it save that bit of anger, not a fist really, but just a tensed configuration, like a three-dimensional diagram of stress. (1982. 42)

Or:

Love. That word. I seem to hear quotation marks around it, as if it were the title of something, a stilted sonnet, say, by a silver poet. (1982. 53)

Lines like these lit me up.

I selected *The Newton Letter* from my local library's shelves possibly on a whim, likely because of its slight build, something to fill the gap between greater tomes. A deception, as it turned out, a tremendous sleight of hand, because there was more beneath the skin of those hundred or so pages than was often to be found in books three or four times its size; and

revelatory in the way it hinted at just how immense a small book, or even a short story, could be when handled right. Young readers, especially those who might dream of one day writing something even halfway decent, nourish themselves on whatever they find. And sometimes, either by accident or with intent, they happen upon a writer like John Banville. Those are the ones who get to count themselves decidedly fortunate.

Unsworn Statement – The Artful Testimony of The Book of Evidence

Declaração Não Juramentada – O Testemunho Astuto de The Book of Evidence

John O'Donnell

Towards the end of July in 1982 Ireland was convulsed by a series of murders. Two of the killings seemed especially horrific. A young nurse, Bridie Gargan, was beaten to death with a lump hammer in her car in Dublin's Phoenix Park. Three days later Donal Dunne, a farmer, was killed by a shotgun blast to the face from his own gun; his body was found in a bog in County Offaly. The killings seemed random and motiveless; neither of the victims had any previous association with their killer. The man eventually charged with the two murders was Malcolm Macarthur. Macarthur was 36, the only son of well-to-do parents who was brought up in County Meath. He affected an air of intellectual superiority; many thought he was an academic. With his upper-class accent, bow-ties and corduroy jackets, he revelled in the image he cultivated of himself as a cultured eccentric. His arrest in August 1982 in the apartment of the then Attorney General, the Irish Government's legal advisor, only added to the shockwaves the murders generated; Macarthur had been friendly with the then Attorney General, the late Patrick Connolly SC, and though no suggestion of wrongdoing could be made against Connolly, the episode heaped further unwelcome adverse media publicity on a Government already mired in scandal. Macarthur, who was defended by Patrick MacEntee SC, the leading criminal lawyer of his generation, eventually pleaded guilty to the murder of Bridie Gargan. (The Dunne murder charge was not proceeded with, perhaps due to a lack of witnesses, though many felt this was unsatisfactory, not least the relatives of the late Donal Dunne). In January 1983 Macarthur was sentenced to life imprisonment, the mandatory sentence in Ireland for murder. He was released in September 2012.

Macarthur's egregious deeds provide the background to *The Book of Evidence* (1989) in which the murderer Freddie Montgomery recalls the circumstances in which he came to kill a servant girl, and his subsequent arrest and charge. Banville has always claimed to "forget that I'm writing stuff that's based on real lives. I have no sense of responsibility to fact or so-called truth. Fact becomes fiction when you start writing..."¹ but as a witness he is unconvincing in this regard. Like Macarthur, Montgomery wears bow-ties and practices a "slightly sinister, old-world charm"; like Macarthur, Montgomery leaves a partner and child on a sun holiday while he returns to Ireland to commit his crimes, apparently in need of money (Macarthur at one stage appeared to suggest he needed Gargan's car and Dunne's shotgun to enable him to commit a bank-robbery²). Like Macarthur, Montgomery murders a girl in a car and then flees, taking cover in the seaside home of an influential and unsuspecting friend, (the chalk-stripe trousered Charlie French) before being arrested. Montgomery too is defended by "the famous counsel Maolseachlainn MacGiolla Gunna" and ultimately pleads guilty to murder. The

exploitation of tragic real-life events in a work of fiction, especially so close to their occurrence, led to some criticism in the Law Library and elsewhere of the book when it was published. As part of his half-baked scheme to obtain money Montgomery steals a painting, and the book raises the familiar dilemma of the extent to which the appropriation of a recent life and gruesome death is appropriate in a work of art.³

What then is the appeal of this disturbing book? Certainly as readers we are frequently captivated by stories of dark crimes, especially when related by the perpetrator. Such stories reveal to us something inside ourselves we are afraid of: how far would *we* go? But this is more than a confession. Anyway, how much of what Montgomery tells us is true? Asked this in custody by the inspector, he replies “All of it. None of it. Only the shame” (220). Montgomery prides himself on having provided in his story “a masterpiece of dissembling” (123). Even the book’s title is suspect; in criminal law, the ‘Book of Evidence’ is the legal term for the collection materials setting out the evidence which the prosecution intends to give against an accused at his/her trial, including a statement of the charges, a list of exhibits, and a list of witnesses the Director of Public Prosecutions proposes to call, with a statement of *their* evidence; in essence, the case for the prosecution. Yet the novel is in effect the testimony only of the *accused*, his explanation or rationale – such as it is – for doing what he did. Freddie Montgomery’s account is perhaps closer to an unsworn statement, the entitlement which used to exist in Irish criminal law of an accused to make a statement to the court without taking the oath. By this device the accused could say what ever he wanted, telling his story without ever exposing himself to the perils of cross-examination⁴ – and Freddie Montgomery is the ultimate “unreliable narrator”.

In a sense all litigants, civil or criminal, are unreliable in this regard: their aim is to tell *their* story, not *the* story. As a consequence, an accused’s “truth” is rarely the whole truth, since his account may conveniently omit unfavourable details, and is equally unlikely to be nothing but the truth, since he is likely to include any embellishment which he feels may be helpful to his cause. Whether, of course, the “truth” will ever come out in a court of law is another matter⁵. But when the book, a whydunnit rather than a whodunit, asks – what makes a murderer? – even more intriguingly, no real answer is provided. Montgomery is unable to explain what drove him: “My journey, like everyone else’s...had not been a thing of signposts and decisive marching, but drift only...I was living like that because I was living like that, there is no other answer” (37). He repeatedly states his belief that man is “a sick animal, an insane animal” (49). But if one were tempted to conclude that what impels Montgomery is nothing less (and nothing more) than the human condition, a stain left by what Christians call “original sin”, this explanation is rejected. Pressed by the police as to why he did it, Montgomery answers “I killed her because I could...what more could I say?” (198). Indeed, the question of whether “badness” even exists at all is challenged: Montgomery, ruminating in his cell on various names for badness (evil, wickedness, mischief) wonders “if these strangely vague and imprecise words are only a kind of ruse, a kind of elaborate cover for the fact that nothing is there. Or perhaps the words are an attempt to make it be there? Or, again, perhaps there is something, but the words invented it?” (55).

“The words” as Banville likes to call them, gleam here, as always. The shadow of a house lies across a lawn “like a fallen stage-flat”; the sea is “a bowl of blue, moving metal” and the lights of a car passing outside his bedroom is “a box of lighted geometry that slid rapidly over the ceiling and down the walls and poured away in a corner”. Banville’s ability to create startling and unsettling images in dazzling language was apparent as far back as his first book, a

collection of short stories entitled *Long Lankin* where on a breakfast table “the wreckage of their meal lay like the dismembered parts of a *complex* toy” (78). Not just any toy, mind: a complex toy. This urge to draw attention to the art being made even as he is making it is one of the most interesting – or infuriating, depending on your taste – aspects of Banville’s craft. His 2005 Booker Prize winning novel *The Sea* famously contains arcane words such as “cinereal”, “flocculent” and “velutinous”. At least here, however, Banville pokes fun at his own fetish: having described a particular post-coital sensation as a state of “balanic, ataraxic bliss,” Montgomery confesses “yes, yes, I have got hold of a dictionary” (19). There is also a cheeky hat-tip to the other criticism frequently levelled at Banville (that the beautifully written observational detail occasionally weighs down the story) when Montgomery ruefully notes “Oh, by the way, the plot: it almost slipped my mind” (219).

This constant rupturing of the fourth wall is not just a highlighting of Montgomery’s psychological state; it is also a wry reminder from the author that the reader is a witness to the making of a work of art; a work which is the antithesis of the “confession” prepared by the policeman who is, Montgomery sneers, “the kind of artist I could never be, direct yet subtle, a master of the spare style, of the art that conceals art.” (202). Like his creator, Montgomery is endlessly self-lacerating⁶; in his analysis of Montgomery-as-artist Banville is showing something of himself, and this artfulness may be the most compelling element at the dark heart of *The Book of Evidence*.

Of course, there is an old saw that writers who write about writing need to get out a bit more. But the elegance and sly black humour with which Banville engages with the process is appealing. In having his murderer ask himself “Why do I do this?” he is asking the same question of the artist about the creative act - and to Banville the parallels are more obvious than might first appear, since there are no simple answers. It’s easy then to imagine his tight-lipped smile at being described while writing as being like “a murderer who’s just come back from a particularly bloody killing.” (Browne 2007). Perhaps in describing the heartless amorality of Montgomery Banville is also reflecting his view of the essential cruelty of the writer: “...we are cannibals. We’d always sell our children for a phrase. We are ruthless. We are not nice people.” (Sheridan 2016). Indeed.

Notes

1 In Conversation with Chris Boyd, chrisboydblogspot.com June 2006.

2 Joe Joyce and Peter Murtagh, *The Boss* (Dublin: Poolbeg Press 1983) p 216. Chapter 11 of this book contains an excellent account of these events.

3 See for another example Don DeLillo’s *Libra* (USA: Viking Penguin 1988), a fictionalised version of the life of Lee Harvey Oswald, which was however published 25 years after the Kennedy Assassination.

4 The right was exercisable before as well as after conviction (the latter often referred to as a ‘speech from the dock’). The right to of an accused make an unsworn statement was abolished by section 23 of the Criminal Justice Act 1984, though an accused can still tender in evidence a prior unsworn statement made to the police.

5 See Peter Charleton & Ciara Herlihy, Truth to be Told: Understanding Truth in the Age of Post-Truth Politics. Dublin: [2019] *Irish Judicial Studies Journal*, Vol 3, p1-18.

6 “...all works of art are failures, all human endeavours are failures. That’s no comfort to me. Every time I start a book I feel in that completely irrational way that writers have that this one is going

to be the absolute masterpiece. The other part of my brain knows that it's just going to be another damned book that I'll hate when it's finished. "(Interview with John Banville, BBC, October 2016).

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*The Cage Door Open:
Depictions of Monstrosity in Banville and Shakespeare*

*A Porta da Gaiola Aberta:
Representações da Monstruosidade em Banville e Shakespeare*

Jessica Traynor

In 2016, when I was Literary Manager of the Abbey Theatre, we began a series of events called The Shakespeare Conversations, co-hosted by playwright Marina Carr; a brave attempt to read and discuss every one of the plays of Shakespeare in the company of theatre professionals, with extracts read by actors. Each session was guided by a different playwright, director, actor – the invite list was extensive, and different practitioners put themselves forward to lead the group each month.

As a busy Literary Manager with 20 playwrights under commission and a hectic schedule of developmental workshops and events, my homework for the meetings was generally done on the fly; a quick re-read of the play on the morning of the day in question, and a scramble for a few of the obvious questions and themes which struck me. There was something quite liberating in this quick reading of texts we have been taught to view as weighty, difficult, serious. It taught me how much of the text is already embedded in our psyche – because Shakespeare is the great architect of the language, but also because of the echo chamber of popular culture. One of the most memorable moments was during our discussion of Iago, Shakespeare's seemingly motiveless villain, when playwright Mark O'Rowe quoted Michael Caine's line about Joker from Christopher Nolan's Batman film *The Dark Knight Rises*: "Some men just want to watch the world burn."

This brings me to Freddie Montgomery, the protagonist of John Banville's *The Book of Evidence* (1989), a novel which I picked up again recently for the first time in 15 years. I've always been a fan of Banville's lavish prose-style and his facility for ventriloquism, and Montgomery's monologue is immediately theatrical, full of allusion and evasion, bringing to mind Thomas Kilroy's masterful *Double Cross*, another fascinating study in Irish identity and morality, first performed in 1986. And, to continue the theatrical theme, the Shakespearean echoes in *The Book of Evidence* – both overt and subtextual – demanded my attention. On the very first page, Montgomery introduces an image of monstrosity which evokes the final scenes of *Macbeth*:

I am kept locked up here like some exotic animal, last survivor of a species they had thought extinct. They should let in people to view me, the girl-eater, svelte and dangerous, padding to and fro in my cage, my terrible green glance flickering past the bars, give them something to dream about, tucked up cosy in their beds of a night.
(1)

This passage echoes Macduff and Macbeth's last exchange, where the former threatens the latter with a life of humiliation: "Then yield thee, coward,/ And live to be the show and gaze o' the time:/We'll have thee, as our rarer monsters are,/ Painted on a pole, and underwrit,/ 'Here may you see the tyrant.'"

It's always been intriguing to me that humiliation is proffered as the worst fate that Macbeth could suffer in return for the many horrors he has inflicted on others. His best (and worst) characteristic is bravery, and so his agreement to fight Macduff and die rather than be caged perhaps demonstrate the tiniest inkling of a redemption for the man; at least he wasn't a coward. It's intriguing to watch Montgomery play with this idea of monstrosity – the elegance of the beast, "svelte and dangerous", and the transgressive thrill experienced by the onlookers, his desire to "...give them something to dream about."

In the description of the caged beast, Montgomery also calls forth echoes of Caliban: "the girl-eater", with a "terrible green glance" are similar markers of monstrosity as "hag-seed" and "strange fish", and both characters attempt or achieve great harm to women. Much like Caliban, Montgomery is also one of the last of his kind; a ghostly remnant of a fading order, whose father taught him that "the world, the only worthwhile world, had ended with the last viceroy's departure from these shores" (32). The Montgomerys have spent much of their married life drifting between various Mediterranean islands: "It was always an island", Montgomery tells us, adding, "That life, drifting from island to island, encouraged illusions." (12). In these passages his tone shifts from caged monster to powerful arbiter: "We presided among this rabble, Daphne and I, with a kind of grand detachment, like an exiled king and queen waiting daily for word of the counter-rebellion and the summons from the palace to return." (11). If Montgomery on the island was Prospero, his return to Dublin has unleashed his inner Caliban, in the form of "Bunter", Montgomery's overweight childhood alter-ego:

That fat monster inside me just saw his chance and leaped out, frothing and flailing. He had scores to settle with the world, and she, at that moment, was world enough for him. I could not stop him. Or could I? He is me, after all, and I am he. But no, things were too far gone for stopping. Perhaps that is the essence of my crime, of my culpability, that I let things get to that stage, that I had not been vigilant enough, had not been enough of a dissembler, that I left Bunter to his own devices, and thus allowed him, fatally, to understand that he was free, that the cage door was open, that nothing was forbidden, that everything was possible. (169-70)

But beyond echoes of *Macbeth* and *The Tempest*, my re-reading of *The Book of Evidence* brought me back to Iago, and to Mark O'Rowe's abovementioned reference to that pop culture icon, Joker – two archetypally motiveless villains. Like them, Montgomery's motives are opaque to us, and his testimony is compelling because it teases us with the notion that we will be able to piece together some meaning from the fragments of his life and experience. Early in the book, Montgomery tells us that he doesn't believe he ever had a choice:

I used to believe, like everyone else, that I was determining the course of my own life, according to my own decisions, but gradually, as I accumulated more and more past to look back on, I realised that I had done the things I did because I could do no other. Please, do not imagine, my lord, I hasten to say it, do not imagine that you detect here the insinuation of an apologia, or even of a defence. I wish to claim full responsibility for my actions – after all, they are the only things I can call my own – and I declare in advance that I shall accept without demur the verdict of the court. I am merely asking, with all respect, whether it is feasible to hold on to the principle of moral culpability once the notion of free will has been abandoned. (12-13)

This is an eloquent evasion, but an evasion nonetheless, and tells us little except that Montgomery has at some point made an arbitrary decision to dissociate will from action, as we have seen from his references to Bunter. Similarly, despite his vague protests that Othello has slept with his wife, or passed him over for promotion, the final lines of Iago's soliloquy in Act One Scene Three of *Othello* betray a similar tendency for the speaker to follow their ideas as if they are independent things, acting upon their authors rather than vice versa: "I have't. It is engender'd. Hell and night/ Must bring this monstrous birth to the world's light." (55) These are men who give themselves over to chaos.

In the final pages of Montgomery's confession, he does grant us some startling glimpses into the "failure of imagination" that led him to brutally murder Josie Bell: "I killed her because I could kill her, and I could kill her because for me she was not alive." (243-44). This reveals much about Montgomery; even on deep reflection, the only crime he finds himself guilty of is not possessing a sufficiently God-like power to imbue others with life – a rather skewed interpretation of the human quality of empathy, and a return to his Prospero fantasy. The book's ending reintroduces a note of uncertainty: "True, Inspector? I said. All of it. None of it. Only the shame." (249). These lines tell us little more than Iago's infuriating final speech: "Demand me nothing: what you know, you know:/ From this time forth I never will speak word." (261)

This final evasion makes Banville's work all the more satisfying; we have been tantalised by the prospect of understanding a cold-blooded killer, and yet a modicum of mystery must remain in order for us to feel that compelling frisson of fear. As Harold Bloom says of Iago: "According to the myth, Prometheus steal fire to free us; Iago steals us as fresh fodder for the fire." (459). Murderers, tricksters and monsters have obsessed us throughout history, and allowing ourselves to become complicit in their actions through the safety net of fiction is an important part of our processing the risks that surround us – we see this pattern arising in folk tales, in Shakespeare's use of the tragic mode, and in the exploits of comic book villains. Banville's masterstroke in *The Book of Evidence* is his unique collision of high art and pop culture, applying the principles of the crime thriller to a philosophical meditation on evil in a manner that would have pleased the most demanding Elizabethan audience. Our time spent with Montgomery allows us to explore the boundaries of our own humanity, before retreating, safe in the knowledge that true evil is impossible to understand. We have glimpsed the monster, but for now he is safely returned to his cage, and speaks no more.

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Critical Dialogues



Familiar/Familial Strangeness: The Place of Narration in John Banville's Eclipse and The Sea and Mike McCormack's Solar Bones

O Estranhamento Familiar: O Lugar da Narração em Eclipse e The Sea, de John Banville, e em Solar Bones, de Mike McCormack

Adel Cheong

Abstract: *The trope of returning back to the childhood home, in middle age, after some kind of tragedy has struck is central to both the plot and act of narration in John Banville's Eclipse (2000) and The Sea (2005). This withdrawal to the past is not simply a thematic element, but also a narrative strategy through which Banville casts an indirect gaze at the world as he describes it. Reality is, thus, never what is simply before your eyes but layered with echoes of the past, more specifically what we remember or imagine to be the past. The return home is also central to Mike McCormack's Solar Bones (2016), in which Marcus Conway, the ghost-narrator finds himself back at his kitchen table where he reminisces about the past. What unites these novels is the act of narration, or the act of writing, that is carried out in these childhood spaces and places that are key to the ways in which these protagonists understand and confront their sense of identity although this notion of return is met with resistance or not fully understood by oneself. Extending this idea of what the house could symbolize in the context of Banville's artistic aims, I examine the relationship between past and present, the act of writing for an imagined audience in one's childhood home, and how the spatial dimensions of the house itself relate to or reveal the aesthetics of these novels. Mike McCormack, whose writing has recently gained increasing critical attention, is one Irish author who makes an interesting counterpoint to Banville, in that similar concerns about identity and memory are reflected in the space of the home but in markedly different ways. This essay, hence, will demonstrate certain commonalities between these three novels while distinguishing how each engages with representations of space and place, particularly in the context of identity and the idea of home.*

Keywords: *Memory; identity; the house; defamiliarisation; places of narration.*

Resumo: *O tropo do retorno ao lar da infância, na meia-idade, após algum tipo de tragédia é central para a trama e para o ato de narrar em Eclipse (2000) e The Sea (2005), de John Banville. Revisitar o passado não é apenas um elemento temático, mas também uma estratégia narrativa por meio da qual Banville lança um olhar indireto para o mundo como ele o descreve. A realidade nunca é, portanto, o que parece diante de seus olhos, pois está mergulhada em ecos do passado, mais especificamente do que lembramos ou imaginamos ser o passado. A volta para casa também é central para Solar Bones (2016), de Mike McCormack, em que Marcus Conway, o narrador-fantasma, vê-se novamente sentado à mesa da cozinha, onde relembra o passado. O que une esses romances é o ato de narrar, ou o ato de escrever, realizado nesses espaços e lugares da infância que*

são fundamentais para a maneira pela qual esses protagonistas entendem e confrontam seu senso de identidade, embora essa noção de retorno seja não só percebida com resistência, como também mal compreendida em sua totalidade. Ampliando a ideia do que a casa poderia simbolizar no contexto dos objetivos artísticos de Banville, examino a relação entre passado e presente, o ato de escrever para um público imaginado na casa de infância e como as dimensões espaciais da casa se relacionam ou revelam a estética desses romances. Mike McCormack, cuja escrita tem recebido crescente atenção crítica, é um autor irlandês que faz um contraponto interessante a Banville, na medida em que preocupações semelhantes sobre identidade e memória são refletidas no espaço da casa, mas de maneiras marcadamente diferentes. Este ensaio, portanto, demonstrará certas semelhanças entre esses três romances, enquanto distingue como cada um se envolve com representações de espaço e lugar, particularmente no contexto da identidade e da ideia de lar.

Palavras-chave: *Memória; identidade; casa; desfamiliarização; locais de narração.*

The places from which Alexander Cleave and Max Morden, the protagonists of *Eclipse* (2000) and *The Sea* (2005) respectively, narrate or write the story that we are reading are spaces in which their childhood or a summer, at the very least, was spent. This return to a space spent in childhood is typically set into motion by some kind of traumatic event that these protagonists are still grappling with: Cleave has a breakdown on stage which marks the end of his acting career, and Morden has returned to The Cedars a year after his wife's demise. The motif of the ageing narrator who looks back on the past in order to make sense of how he has arrived at the present moment, in Banville's mature work, recurs in *Ancient Light* (2012), where Cleave is once again the protagonist, and *The Blue Guitar* (2015). But *Eclipse* is where the introspective gaze that has always been present in his writing is, I suggest, first focalized in a middle-aged narrator who fully recognises the necessary fictions we create when we remember the past even as he continues to narrate his stories. But the space in which they tell their stories is just as pertinent as the motif of the return home undertaken by these narrators. Kersti Tarien Powell (2006) rightly points out that "[w]hile the frequent use of mirrors in Banville's work is a common focus in Banville criticism, a more thorough examination of his concept of place and its evolution is still lacking" (39). The house is one such space that deserves more critical attention, in that Cleave and Morden both, at moments of self-reflexivity, make it explicitly known that they have withdrawn into rooms, for the very purpose of writing, as they struggle to attend to the project that they seemingly wish to complete, while also hiding away from others. These rooms are not described in great detail, but the need to write or narrate in solitude, where the world is kept at a distance and where there is no one around to refute what they have said, is seemingly key to the retrospective stories they tell. The motif of the return home is also central to Mike McCormack's *Solar Bones* (2016), another twenty-first century Irish novel, in which its protagonist, Marcus Conway, who is in fact a ghost, relates his memories. Although McCormack is not a novelist whose work many will see as similar to Banville's, there are many thematic concerns that these three novels share, particularly the inquiry of man's place in the world that is most emphatic in the ways in which binary categories such as order and chaos are negotiated. By analysing the space of the house, both metaphorically and in literal terms, this essay examines the relationships that the protagonists in *Eclipse*, *The Sea*, and *Solar Bones** have with these spaces, particularly in the context of the act of narration and how

their identities are constructed around these places.

The solipsistic nature of Banville's narrators and the stories that they cannot help but tell is an enduring feature of his novels but, I suggest, from *Eclipse* onwards, this sense of introspection and self-doubt is amplified in the middle-aged narrator who, has the ability to look back on the past with the benefit of the intervening years, but is yet incapable of arriving at a meaningful or coherent understanding of his past. Cleave makes it clear that, as a child, the childhood home felt more like a transitory space, suitable for different types of temporary existences, that he would leave and probably never return to, and yet he does: "I was never fully at home here. If the lodgers led unreal lives, so too did we, the permanent inhabitants, so called" (*E* 49). It is worth noting that both childhood spaces in *Eclipse* and *The Sea* are not traditional family homes; Cleave's childhood home was formerly a lodging house that his mother ran, while The Cedars was a holiday home that the Graces, a family that Morden had befriended as a child, had rented for a summer. But both spaces can be considered as sites where these protagonists first crossed the threshold from a familiar space into the outside world, which, in Banville's novels, is typically regarded as chaotic and a source of bewilderment for these characters as they struggle to arrive at some sense of order or beauty. The return home is arguably linked to a larger yearning that can never be fully fulfilled, as Joseph McMinin (1991) points out, "[a]ll of his narrators look back to their origins and their immediate past for some clue to their sense of tragic and farcical confusion. The underlying and enabling myth is, of course, one of lost innocence" (5). But this idealistic desire, particularly from *Eclipse* onwards, is tempered by a sense of cynicism that is now part of these protagonists' natures by the time they have reached middle age. Hence, even if there may be a 'lost innocence' that these protagonists might wish to gain access or return to, their attempts are accompanied by a sense of conviction that these very attempts will end only in further disillusionment. Despite being somewhat aware of this, these narrators find themselves unable to resist the desire to return to these spaces, even if the particular space at present, as in *The Sea*, is emptied of all physical links with the past, in that it "has retained hardly anything of the past, of the part of the past that I knew here"; yet as Morden puts it: "Amazed, and disappointed, I would go so far as to say appalled, for reasons that are obscure to me, since why should I desire change, I who have come back to live amidst the rubble of the past? (*TS* 4)" In a rather similar fashion, Cleave's need to live in his childhood home again is not fully understood even to himself, although his wife, Lydia seems to know why, yet it is somehow connected to a dream he has about a plastic chicken toy that he receives on a particular Easter day and a near accident with an unidentified animal while on the road. The house appears to have some power or hold over Cleave whereby the act of returning home is not evidently an act of volition, partly because he seems to be obeying some larger forces at work: "The house itself it was that drew me back, sent out its secret summoners to bid me come ... *home*, I was going to say" (*E* 4). But what exactly is the nature of the relationships these protagonists have with these spaces? The return home enacts a spatial representation, or journey, of retreating to the past, but precisely because the past does not exist, the return home is marked by a sense of loss and futility despite the power of imagination and memory to retrieve or conjure images and details of the past. The sense of familiar strangeness of once again living in these childhood spaces, which seem to never change and yet are utterly transformed over the years, felt by these narrators goes back to the central question of what home means. On a linguistic level, there is a sense too that these narrators do not feel quite at home with language, a tendency that is distinctly postmodernist, because of its inadequacies at representing the world.¹

The return home is also a central event that is linked to the act of narration in Mike McCormack's *Solar Bones* even if it is not immediately apparent while its protagonist, Marcus Conway reminisces about the past from his kitchen table. This act of narration and the memories that Marcus relates, namely *how* it is narrated and *what* is narrated, seeming conventional and ordinary in many ways, however ultimately instance what Brian Richardson (2006) calls unnatural narration. Near the end of the novel it becomes evident that Marcus is, in fact, a ghost when he describes his own death, which had occurred a couple of months prior to this moment of narration, and this problematizes everything that we may have assumed about the nature of its narrator and his stories up till that point. What is also undermined, at a stroke, is the portrayal of the world, which until that very moment, appears as a conventional realist depiction of external reality where the rules of its world appear not different from the physical world outside the book. As Brian Richardson puts it:

by moving beyond merely human narrators, texts begin to tamper with or destroy outright the 'mimetic contract' that had governed conventional fiction for centuries: no more can one assume that a first person narrator would resemble a normal human being, with all its abilities and limitations. (1)

The only explanation suggested for this ghostly phenomenon, of Marcus's return home from beyond the grave, is the superstitious belief, rooted in Ireland's pagan history, that the dead may return to the world of the living to visit their families on 2nd November, known as All Souls' Day. On this day, the boundaries between worlds are blurred and even though things may appear unchanged outwardly, but as a consequence, what is deemed as 'reality' is slightly altered, in that beyond the surface things may take forms different to what is accustomed: "the light is awash with ghouls and ghosts and the mearing between this world and the next is so blurred we might easily find ourselves standing shoulder to shoulder with the dead, the world fuller than at any other time of the year" (*SB* 92). This blurring of boundaries does not carry out an inversion of rules and structures of power that govern everyday existence as with Bakhtin's *carnavalesque*, but by bringing together the spheres of religion, folklore and science, which is emphasised by Marcus's profession as an engineer, the novel engages with the merging of worlds, physical and non-physical, and systems of knowledge to powerfully suggest that diametrically opposing worldviews and binary categories are to be renegotiated in relation to each other in vastly different ways.

Marcus does not speak about what had become of him in the time since his death on 21 March 2008 or how he came to be at his kitchen table, and for this one hour, the memories he relates chiefly revolve around three temporal zones: the events that occurred a few weeks prior to his death such as his daughter's first solo art exhibition and the cryptosporidium outbreak which debilitates his wife, Mairead, the years when he meets Mairead and starts a family, and the childhood memories of his father. The novel is essentially a ghost story that is centred around an epistemological inquiry into man's relationship with the world, even if it is defamiliarised through an example of what some might call post-human consciousness, that curiously is not quite so different from how a 'living' character would appear. The highly solipsistic nature of Marcus's account is most evident in the absence of other voices; there is no one at home besides Marcus while he speaks about the past. In the face of the unreliability of memory and precisely because there is no chance of accessing another version of the events Marcus recounts, there are certainly gaps in the narrative, both metaphorical and literal

(from its typological format), but these gaps of meaning are irresolvable from the first. What is consistent in his relationships with his father, wife, and children is the perplexity that Marcus often feels when he is confronted by their worldviews and the ways in which they appear to simply be, which he sees as communicated through their actions. For instance, Marcus appears incapable of comprehending the motivations behind his children's career choices; his shock at Agnes's use of her own blood as an artistic medium is turned inwards as he questions if he has lived up to his responsibilities as a father, while he has little patience with what he regards as his son's lack of commitment to a vocation. Marcus's character flaws are not very dissimilar from those of Banville's protagonists, particularly in terms of their inward gaze and solipsism. This engagement with the limits of what can be known to us, particularly in the context of human connection and relationships, recalls the modernist anxiety around language and the systems of knowledge that make the world known to us, which continues to be a prevailing theme in twenty-first century fiction.

The return home, in a rather similar fashion to *Cleave*, is not shown as an active decision that Marcus makes. Hence, it is just as possible an interpretation that the house may have summoned him, even as we speculate on whether ghosts are free to come and go in places that we might regard as haunted or if they are somehow, as typically figured in popular imagination, trapped in particular locations, caught between two worlds, due to perhaps an improper burial or for various other reasons. Although the house he returns to is not his childhood home, it is a space in which he and Mairead started their lives together upon getting married and where their children were born and raised. As an engineer, it is Marcus's business to ensure that building standards are met, and the family home is another project that he has successfully overseen:

the house
this same house
in which I've lived the best part of three decades and put together all those
habits and rituals which have made up my marriage and family life and where now, for
some reason, this day has given me pause to dwell on these things
sitting here at the kitchen table with my sandwich and paper where... (156)

The materiality of the house embodies the stability of the life that Marcus has built, the cohesion of his family and, of course, it also mirrors the identity that he has constructed for himself. For Gaston Bachelard (1994), the house is not merely a physical structure, rather it encompasses the experiences that one may have within this space, which ultimately changes the nature of the house and one's relationship with it:

For, in point of fact, a house is first and foremost a geometrical object, one which we are tempted to analyze rationally. Its prime reality is visible and tangible, made of well hewn solids and well fitted framework ... A geometrical object of this kind ought to resist metaphors that welcome the human body and the human soul. But transposition to the human plane takes place immediately whenever a house is considered as a space for cheer and intimacy, a space that is supposed to condense and defend intimacy. (47-8)

In this, the house is irreducible to its physical structure or shelter it provides, when understood primarily in terms of function. This house has served as a way for Marcus to anchor himself to the world or it has been, at times, a refuge from the world. The sense of one's identity as intricately interwoven with the place that one is from is played out on multiple levels, such as in public and private spheres, where one's relationship to one's country, county, or in other words community, and even one's own house is each a link that ties an individual to a much larger network or collective. These relationships, which encompass the political and economic structures that one is raised in and familiar with, take precedence in the way in which Marcus conceives of his identity, particularly in terms of the roles he performs as "man and boy, father and son, husband and engineer" (*SB* 262). Yet what is perhaps best carried across by the novel's fragmentary structure is the emphasis on the multiple selves that comprise Marcus's identity at any one point and throughout the different points of his life, selves that stand in contradiction with each other where he is both a family man but also, at one point, an adulterer. This conception of identity stands in marked contrast to Banville's protagonists who often feel or speak as if the people that they are at present are simply older, and no wiser, versions of their younger selves. But in *Solar Bones*, a pluralistic notion of identity, as opposed to the idea of identity as having a monadic structure even as it develops and undergoes change with time, is foregrounded through the anachronies, to borrow Gérard Genette's term, in the novel's structure that mirror the free association of images and ideas as we move from one memory or thought to the next.

In Banville, the relationship between man and house, regardless of whether it is his childhood home, is more complex and multilayered than it is in *Solar Bones* and it extends far beyond any sense of identity that is rooted in the experiences and memories that he has of this particular space. Precisely because these motifs, images, and symbols are part of a dense web of resonance and associations, the metaphor of the house also extends to the sense of selfhood in these narrators, which is inextricably linked to the crises or traumatic events they have undergone or are undergoing. This link between the house and one's identity, as Robin Wilkinson (2003) notes, goes back to the middle period of Banville's oeuvre: "The narrator of *The Book of Evidence* (1989) uses the word 'unhoused' ... to describe his own lack of presence, an image that matches Cleave's feeling that he has been expelled from his self" (358). This association of one's selfhood with a house, or rather with being housed, implies a sense of containment that has to do with boundaries that protect one from the world. But as to what kind of protection this brings about and if this sheltering is essential to establishing a coherent sense of self, although in a rather self-delusional manner, are questions that come with no easy answers in Banville's fiction. This same metaphor is employed in *Eclipse*. Cleave's withdrawal to his childhood home is marked by a point in his life where he finds himself no longer able to act on the stage, his acting career now ended:

Now, that essential self has been pushed to the side with savage insouciance, and I am as a house walked up and down in by an irresistibly proprietorial stranger. I am all inwardness, gazing out in ever intensifying perplexity upon a world in which nothing is exactly plausible, nothing is exactly what it is. (15)

Outside of his profession as an actor, Cleave has struggled with establishing an authentic sense of self, where the disparity between acting and being, or "action and acting", now takes on a new significance since he no longer is able to act on stage (208). While looking

back on the past, what is revealed, to the reader and not necessarily to Cleave himself, in his relationships with his mother, wife, and daughter is the gulf that separates one from the next man or woman in that we can never fully know another just as we are ultimately unknowable to ourselves. This identity crisis in middle age, which is linked to his breakdown in the middle of his performance as Amphitryon, is played out in semi-seclusion, in “this little room, my hidey-hole and refuge” as he turns to writing (130). His spiraling interiority, which is mirrored by his physical withdrawal from people and the world at large, is but a heightened state of the inward gaze that he has always trained on himself, when perhaps he should have tried harder at seeing those around him. Likewise, Morden comments on a change in his sense of selfhood that his knowing Chloe brings into effect: “Before, I had been housed, now I was in the open, in the clearing, with no shelter in sight”. This sense of being ‘unhoused’ recalls the motif of twins, which embodies the idea of the split self, in Banville’s fiction. Cleave, like all of Banville’s other creations, yearns to reach a fullness of being that in our post-Enlightenment age is an idea that is now typically treated with suspicion:

For is this not what I am after, the pure conjunction, the union of self with sundered self? I am weary of division, of being always torn. I shut my eyes and in a sort of rapture see myself stepping backward slowly into the cloven shell, and the two halves of it, still moist with glair, closing round me. (70)

This image of ‘two halves’ implicitly recognises the multiplicity of selves that we each encompass, but instead of celebrating this, it is an attribute to overcome in order to achieve the romantic ideal of the unified self. “If Banville’s myth of art is the endurance of art,” as Eoghan Smith (2013) suggests, “then *Eclipse*, as *The Sea* will also be, is an act of self-mythologizing” (138). Perhaps the only way for these protagonists to arrive at a stable, coherent sense of self is if they will, via the power of imagination, themselves into being. But this would be another supreme fiction constructed by these protagonists that they paradoxically cling onto in spite of their conviction that the coherent self is ultimately a transcendental ideal.

Cleave’s description of his childhood home, in acknowledging his evasiveness when speaking about it, is mostly confined to doorways and the assortment of furniture in various rooms, particularly his mother’s: “See how I parry and duck, like an outclassed boxer? I begin to speak of the ancestral home and within a sentence of two I have moved next door. This is me all over” (*E* 12). This reference to the ancestral home alludes to the big house in Birchwood, which can be understood both literally and metaphorically. The “topographical space of the house”, Neil Murphy (2006) writes, is one of three motifs that Banville’s engagement with the meaning of art is centred around in *Long Lankin* to *Birchwood* (9). Murphy further suggests that in *Birchwood* “[t]he house comes to symbolize not just the big house genre but realist fiction in general” (21).² Extending this idea of the house as representative of Banville’s artistic aims, the architectural layout of The Cedars, where we are provided a more panoramic view as compared to Cleave’s childhood home, can perhaps be understood as a metaphor for the evolution of Banville’s aesthetics in his later work. The Cedars, which is described as a “cottage” in its early days, gradually evolves as modifications are “added on to haphazardly over the years [t]hat would account for the jumbled look of the place, with small rooms giving on to bigger ones, and windows facing blank walls, and low ceilings throughout” (*TS* 4). The design of the house, a mish-mash of styles that come together to form a cohesive

unit, can be a metaphor for the pastiche of styles and traditions, in the form of intertextual allusions to works by poets, artists, philosophers, and even to Banville's own body of fiction, in his novels. The unconventional assemblage of this house, seemingly 'haphazardly' put together, may appear shambolic but there is a certain structure and logic of its own. The image of these doors and windows that open to nothing, which nullify the very purpose of these architectural elements, exemplify a certain logic of failure, that is most emphatic in the slipperiness of language. These narrators suffer a sense of loss from a deep awareness of the disparity between image and world, which runs throughout Banville's body of work, but nevertheless they still desire to express the strangeness of the world and human condition through language. If the image of the house and its changing façade is a reflection of Banville's evolution as an author, the 'original' structure of the house then can be considered as the voice he has developed over the years, and going further back, the influences on his writing which can be traced to earlier authors who may be seen as his precursors. "John Banville, then, very consciously inherits these twin traditions of Irish writing and Irish society, as represented by James Joyce and Samuel Beckett", as Derek Hand (2002) proposes, although he makes the caveat that "[a]ll of this is argued, of course, in direct opposition to Banville's own stated beliefs on this subject" (15). This observation is echoed by McMinn (1999), in that Banville's body of fiction "depends utterly on the drama of the voice, a consciousness which feeds off its own imagination and memory, and which consoles itself with its own fictions" (162). Elke D'hoker (2006), likewise, acknowledges these observations that she extends on in her analysis of the Beckettian influence in Banville's writing (69). Apart from the voice that Banville has refined over the years, there are definitely a number of themes and tropes that Banville consistently returns to in his novels. Other critics have also noted this strain towards silence in Banville's writing which is paradoxically evoked by his eloquence, but there is another underlying idea that arguably becomes more prominent in the mature period of Banville's writing: that of making strange.

The first mention of making strange appears in *Eclipse* when Cleave sets about trying to resist the "deadening force of custom" in order to perceive reality in ways that one may register the singularity of what surrounds us: "*Making strange*, people hereabouts say when a child wails at the sudden appearance of a visitor; how was I to make strange now, and not stop making strange? (46)" Cleave's desire to access the real by acquiring a different perspective, as Elke D'hoker (2004) points out, recalls the Russian Formalist theory of defamiliarisation (222-3). The presence of these ghosts, whether they are in fact supernatural presences or psychological projections, recall Avery Gordon's (2008) definition of "the term *haunting* to describe those singular yet repetitive instances when home becomes unfamiliar, when your bearings on the world lose direction, when the over-and-done-with comes alive, when what's been in your blind spot comes into view" (xvi). Although Gordon takes a sociological approach, her focus on specters and haunting is centred on the idea of transformation, and defamiliarisation, in which the thingness, or reality, of the things around us may be revealed. Here, too, the presence of ghosts, which leaves Cleave feeling like his house has been invaded, has an alienating effect on what we must call the real:

If the ghostly scene has a chair in it, say, that the woman is sitting on, and that occupies the same space as a real chair in the real kitchen, and is superimposed on it, however ill the fit, the result will be that when the scene vanishes the real chair will retain a sort of aura, will blush, almost, in the surprise of being singled out and fixed upon, of being lighted upon, in this fashion. (*E* 48)

These two orders of being, the real world and ghost world, would lend themselves well to an investigation into the ontological dimensions of these fictional worlds, but nonetheless this overlapping of worlds leads to the meeting of multiple temporal moments, thus evoking a highly textured sense of reality. In other words, this scene gestures at the ways in which we continually make sense of the past and present in light of each other, and also in how we anticipate the future. These efforts stem from our need for meaning and coherence despite the post-Enlightenment recognition that, as a result of the epistemological crisis that led to postmodernism and postmodernity, meaning is never stable. In some ways, this ‘aura’ is reflective of the desire to arrive at some kind of transcendent meaning via imagination even if every attempt to bring this about only reinforces the futility of the attempt. Yet the ability to make apparent a quality of the world, in which it appears to blush, is, in Banville’s view, unique to art (Piñeiro 60). This sense of dislocation that arises from a different way of being in the world, where the world appears to shift before our eyes to momentarily lose its ordinarieness, is also observed by Morden:

Bright light of midday streamed in at the kitchen window and everything had a glassy, hard-edged radiance as if I was scanning the room through a camera lens. There was an impression of general, tight-lipped awkwardness, of all these homely things—jars on shelves, saucepans on the stove, that bread-board with its jagged knife—averting their gaze from our all at once unfamiliar, afflicted presence in their midst. (TS 14)

This moment occurs when Morden and his wife return home after receiving her cancer diagnosis, and their knowledge of this new fact that will upend their lives casts a new light on even the most ordinary of things such as the objects in their kitchen. Regardless of whether this transformation is effected by a psychological or emotional state, this new perceptive state reveals the infinite strangeness of that which we have grown accustomed to in our daily lives. The horror lies not just in such moments of acute awareness of our mortality, that dawns on the Mordens here, but also, for Banville, it is borne from our failure to detect the singularity of the ordinary or of, at least, certain moments of our prosaic lives as we move among people and things other than ourselves. But this sensation, which is perhaps similar to a moment in *Eclipse* where Cleave notes that “[t]he world seemed tilted slightly out of true”, cannot be simply be attributed to a projection of one’s psychological state onto one’s physical surroundings (45). While trying to rationalise these ghostly encounters, to understand what might be conveyed through them, Cleave wonders: “So if the purpose of the appearance of this ghost is to dislocate me and keep me thrown off balance, am I indeed projecting it out of my own fancy, or does it come from some outside source? (46)” There are diverse interpretations that can be considered on even the most surface of levels: these ghosts could be figments of his imagination, or there were no ghosts at all instead Cleave had intuited that his caretaker, Quirke and his daughter, Lily were living in secret in his house, or whether these ghosts are perhaps harbingers of Cass’s eventual suicide and the death of her unborn child. What indeed might these ghosts be? There may perhaps be a rational explanation for these ghostly apparitions but to preserve their quality of strangeness, which leaves a trace on the space of the house itself, Banville does not provide his reader with one possible interpretation but several.

Even the house, familiar and ordinary as it may appear to those living there, can evoke a sense of strangeness or otherness if looked at from a different perspective in *Solar Bones*.

Before his death, another dimension of existence or the world, would reveal itself to Marcus when “drifting in that state between sleep and waking it is easy to believe I inhabit a monochrome X-ray world from which I might have evaporated, flesh and bone gone” (*SB* 150). In this liminal state of consciousness, that somewhat parallels his current state as a ghost returned from beyond the pale to the world of the living, the house appears almost as a living thing:

I’ve always believed gets up to some foolishness during the night, whenever I fall asleep or turn my back on it, that’s when the ghost house beneath the paint and fittings asserts itself, flickering like an X-ray with that neurological twitch and spasm which is imbedded in the concrete... (150)

This suggestion of intramural activity presupposes an inner/outer dichotomy, which extends to the material and immaterial, and the seen and unseen, which are key themes that are explored on various levels, most explicitly in the context of chaos and order in relation to man’s place in the world. It is the liminal space between these two qualities or states that is celebrated in the novel, as McCormack attempts to deconstruct such binary opposites. Perhaps what is most effectively carried out through this image of the ‘ghost house’ is the subversion of Conway’s realist depiction of the actual world as it runs counter to the material structures and objects that comprise external reality. This ‘ghost house’ ultimately problematizes traditional conceptions of physical space, premised on scientific principles, even though the ‘ghost house’ is less a supernatural phenomenon than it is an invocation of the immaterial in, once again, suggesting that the boundaries between worlds are not as distinct as we might assume. This ‘ghost house’ ultimately stands in direct contradistinction to conventional ideas about the traditional family home and, by extension, family life as well. As with mimetic representation, the world of the novel is recognizable to us because according to the principle of minimum departure, as termed by Marie-Laure Ryan (2012) in her discussion of naturalising techniques employed during the reading process, readers “construct fictional worlds as the closest possible to their model of reality, amending this model only when it is overruled by the text” (376). If this ‘ghost house’ is a metaphor for the merging or doubling of worlds, then perhaps it cannot be framed in terms of a ‘real’/‘unreal’ dichotomy but that there are, at least, multiple modes of existence and ontologies that coexist. When looked at from a different perspective, even the most ordinary can appear transformed, and thus defamiliarised:

something different about moving through the house today a feeling of dislocation as if some imp had got in during the night and shifted things around just enough to disorientate me, tables, chairs and other stuff just marginally out of place by a centimeter or two, enough to throw me... (*SB* 33)

These disturbances of order can be looked at as symptomatic again of a psychological or emotional state, but this is, after all, a book with a ghost for a narrator. Rather, it is the quality of mutability from the slippages from one mode of existence to another, or from one frame of reference to another that may be its polar opposite, that is stressed by both the subjectivities of its different characters and the external occurrences – such as the economic collapse in 2008 and the cryptosporidium outbreak – that unsettle the prevailing ways in which

we inhabit the world.³ Whether it may be the result of imagined or actual ghosts, or due to this particular ‘imp’, this texture of reality as both simultaneously familiar and alien, in being made strange, is an attribute of modernist fiction that still addresses the need for new perspectives and ways of looking in order to reflect the complexities of human existence in twenty-first century literature and, more specifically, in the work of these two authors.

Place in Banville’s novels, particularly their link to actual spaces in the real world, is often difficult to pin down. On the one hand, the location and landscapes in Banville’s novels are always, in one way or another, based on Wexford, as Banville puts it: “All the landscapes of my books are in some way imbued with wexfordness, even when they are supposed to be modern Greece, or medieval Prussia. When I needed to paint a picture of Copernicus’s Torun, or Kepler’s Weilderstadt, it was Wexford that I conjured up” (“Wexford” 200). With *Eclipse*, Cleave’s house finds its source in the house into which Banville was born, where the representation of this particular space enacts a sort of return home for Banville himself too even if it only takes place imaginatively (“Oblique”). But on the other hand, the relationship between what we call real and its image in Banville’s novels is never as straightforward as holding up a mirror to reality. For instance, from the dislocation, or rather transformation, of actual space in the act of naming this seaside village “Ballyless” in *The Sea* it is apparent that verifiable reality is not crucial to the depiction of these spaces because, ultimately, it is a representation even though it is indeed based on Rosslare (7). Banville’s landscapes aren’t exactly wholly fictive or imagined and yet the traces they bear of the real do not allow us to fully map out the lay of the land in the ways that one might with Dublin in Joyce’s *Ulysses* or *Mrs Dalloway*’s London. These narrative maneuvers may perhaps be explained by Banville’s resistance to being understood in the context of an Irish writer and having his novels read primarily from an Irish context. But it appears that Banville is more concerned with the evocation of certain textures of reality that correspond to certain types of lived experience, rather than representing places as how they actually are in external reality. For instance, memory is chiefly the lens through which reality is perceived in Banville’s mature work, where this negotiation with past, present and future and the duplicity of memory renders the subjectivity and representation of lived experience as something that can ever only be troubled by gaps and incongruences. In contrast, the setting of McCormack’s novels and short stories is typically situated in the West of Ireland, specifically Louisburgh, County Mayo where McCormack himself is from. McCormack (2019) acknowledges this somewhat subconscious proclivity for writing stories that take place in this part of Ireland (“Conversation” 108-9). A strong correlation between the representation of certain kinds of landscapes and what we call ‘Irishness’ in general have been proliferated by certain novels in the past. These stereotypes that such novels perpetuate ultimately reify the assumption that the rural, untamed country is an authentic representation of Ireland. In turn, this decision to set his fiction in the west of Ireland, unwittingly or not, stems in part from a reaction against stereotypical depictions of rural Ireland. Some of the geographical locations or landmarks that Marcus identifies as part of his world are Croagh Patrick, Clew Bay, or, further from home, when traveling to Mairead’s parents, they pass “through Newport and Mulranny and up through the badlands of North Mayo, crossing the terra incognita of Ballcroy with its sweeping bogland” (SB 161). Forming a visible backdrop for the significant and trivial events that comprise the contemporary lives of these characters, these geographical bearings lend to their lives an implied historical and social significance, even such significance is not overt. It is worthwhile noting that Marcus dies from a heart attack, while taking the “sea road once more along the coast” that overlooks Clew Bay,

in the midst of his journey home (*SB* 257). Even when it is not explicit, the ways in which our environments are organised and their impact on our lives play a large part in Marcus's stories: "greater circum-terrestrial grid of services which draws the world into community, pinching it into villages, towns and cities" (150). The world reconstructed in the text is fundamentally a realist one despite the 'ghost house' and its ghost narrator, and beyond its representation of physical surroundings the novel stresses the idea of interconnectedness through the idea of community. This sense of rootedness and connection to place, and community, with its intricate links to identity, in McCormack's novels marks a crucial difference from Banville's work. However, in spite of the vastly dissimilar ways in which place is represented in their stories, and how these representations may have some bearing on these authors' relationships with the landscapes and spaces around which their childhoods and adult lives were spent, place is always central to the stories that they tell. This difference is therefore also the thing that unites these two authors. After giving Lily the deed to his childhood home, Cleave mentions the possibility of putting together another version of his story, or perhaps simply another story, one which Banville himself might write, where maybe it would be one where its relationship with external reality could be more direct but no less inventive and crucial to the story told: "I might write something about the town, a history, a topography, learn the place names at last" (*E* 213).

Notes

* References to *The Sea*, *Eclipse* and *Solar Bones* will appear as *TS*, *E* and *SB*.

- 1 If Banville is identified as an Irish author, whose work is primarily read in an Irish context, then language can mean specifically, the English language. Interpretation focused on the 'Irishness' of Banville's fiction, for its commentary on explicit Irish subject matter are, however, at odds with Banville's views on art and his resistance towards being understood as an Irish writer. Hence, this issue around how to situate Banville's body of work has been attended to by many critics, some of which who share his view, while others, more interested in his contributions to the genre of Irish literature, take an oppositional perspective.
- 2 This metaphor of the "house of fiction", and its significance as a symbol for various literary traditions and genres – as part of an extensive self-reflexive commentary on aesthetics and artistic ambition – throughout Banville's body of work, is more fully developed in Neil Murphy's monograph, John Banville.
- 3 Although the cryptosporidium outbreak happened in West Ireland, these two actual events disrupted thousands, if not millions, of lives in Ireland.

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*‘High Stakes’ in the Symbolic Order:
John Banville’s Love in the Wars Read through Jean
Baudrillard*

*‘Alto Risco’ na Ordem Simbólica:
Love in the Wars, de John Banville Lido Através de Jean
Baudrillard*

Hedda Friberg-Harnesk

Abstract: *John Banville’s shrouded fictional territory suggests a Nietzschean world in which the notions of truth and reality are questioned and in the center of which humanity might find “an infinite nothing.” From Nietzsche’s bleak vision, the mind readily moves to Jean Baudrillard’s envisioned universe – even bleaker, perhaps – in which simulation is a “dominant mode of perception.” Baudrillard’s ideas are in dialogue with John Banville’s textual explorations of a territory of radical uncertainty. Elements of what can be seen as Baudrillardian third-order simulation are readily discernible in Banville’s late work, but in his play Love in the Wars, at focus in this article, it is Baudrillard’s notion of a pre-Renaissance symbolic order – an age of “the rule,” not of “the roll of the dice” – that has proved a superior analytical tool.¹*

Keywords: *Banville, Baudrillard; Love in the Wars; Penthesilea; Kleist; Greek myth.*

Resumo: *O território fictício e obscuro de John Banville sugere um mundo nietzschiano no qual as noções de verdade e realidade são questionadas e em cujo centro a humanidade pode encontrar “um nada infinito”. Da visão sombria de Nietzsche, a mente se move rapidamente para o universo imaginado de Jean Baudrillard – talvez ainda mais sombrio – em que a simulação é um “modo dominante de percepção”. As ideias de Baudrillard estão em diálogo com as explorações textuais de John Banville acerca de um território de incerteza radical. Instâncias daquilo que pode ser reconhecido como simulação da terceira ordem baudrillardiana são facilmente discerníveis no trabalho tardio de Banville; contudo, em sua peça Love in the Wars, foco deste artigo, a noção de Baudrillard sobre uma ordem simbólica pré-renascentista – uma era da “ordem”, não do “acaso” – provou ser uma ferramenta analítica superior.*

Palavras-chave: *Banville; Baudrillard; Love in the Wars; Pentésiléia; Kleist; mito grego.*

In John Banville’s play *Love in the Wars*, his interest in myth and the plays of Heinrich von Kleist is evident. Unlike his earlier play, *God’s Gift*, which turns on the Amphitryon myth, Banville’s adaptation of Kleist’s *Penthesilea* resurrects the ancient myth of an Amazon state, a society of one-breasted “women warriors.”² According to Greek myth, the Amazon Queen Penthesilea, “daughter of Otrere and Ares, had sought refuge in Troy”, where she “greatly distinguished herself in battle.”³ As the Amazons take shape in John Banville’s play,⁴ they ride

out of ancient myth, to be sure, but also out of his imagination and that of Heinrich von Kleist. Banville has stated that he sees Kleist's *Penthesilea* as a "tremendous piece of work, one of the great feminist texts." Moreover, he takes the figure of the queen herself to be a "wonderful invention" on the part of Kleist, and describes her, tongue-in-cheek, as "sexy, vulnerable, naïve and vengeful. Any man's dream girl, really."⁵ As for Banville's designation of the play as a great feminist text, I choose to regard that as an acknowledgement of the play's focus on the powerful queen of a mythical all-female state, run strictly by women, for women. It is a state led by a war lady whose lodestar is loyalty to the rules of her culture and who refuses to submit to men, except on the premises dictated by those rules. The primary tool of analysis here is Jean Baudrillard's concept of simulation and his notion of the symbolic order has proved particularly helpful. Other Baudrillardian ideas have also been relevant for analyzing certain parts of the play, as have aspects of the work of George Bataille, to whom Baudrillard is indebted.

In order to "map the transformations in the meaning of images over centuries of Western history" Baudrillard has outlined a scheme of a progression of social orders (Pawlett 72). If Baudrillard's scheme places the beginning of the first order approximately at the time of the Renaissance, then just what – a slightly forgetful and befuddled reader may wonder – was the state of affairs before that time? Was there a time when the sign reflected the real? Baudrillard's answer seems to be that predating the first order of simulacra was the symbolic order. This 'proto-order,' as it were, was presumably set apart from the 'proper' orders of simulacra in that in it, signs were "not referential and not arbitrary," but "relatively fixed" and certain (*ibid.* 74). They reflected, then, a basic "profound reality" (Baudrillard, *Simulacra* 6). Moreover, the symbolic order depends, as Baudrillard sees it, on "the rule" – a form in which "the stakes are high," the ritual "dominates," and "the logic of the duel" established (Gane 239). It consists of "exchanges, of challenges, of appearances: masks, dances, feasts, rituals" (Pawlett 74). In the symbolic order, such mythic forms "made the ritual play of masks meaningful," but to contemporary humanity, the loss of these forms causes anguish (*ibid.* 113). The age of the symbolic order is the age of "the rule" then, not – as might be said of the third order – of "the roll of the dice" (*ibid. ibidem*).

In Baudrillard's scheme of orders of simulacra, the counterfeit marks the first order of simulacra – ranging from the Renaissance up to the industrial revolution – in which "realness" still is attached to the sign and "competition stimulates the counterfeit" (Hegarty 49). According to Baudrillard, the "problem of the counterfeit" was "born with the Renaissance;" thus, it would not have plagued the symbolic order. In the feudal or archaic societies "of caste and rank" of this order, "social mobility [was] nil," but signs were bound and clear. Here, each sign "refers unequivocally to a (particular) situation and a level of status. Ceremony and counterfeit do not mix." Baudrillard warns that contemporary humanity should be sure to refrain from "yearning nostalgically" for a "revitalized 'symbolic order'" because it was "composed of ferocious hierarchies; the transparency of signs goes hand in hand with their cruelty" (Poster 138-39). Moreover, even if such an order existed, it was not, according to Baudrillard, a realm of "the absolutely real," or of "direct access to truth" (Pawlett 74).

In what follows, then, John Banville's *Love in the Wars* will be read in the light of Baudrillard's envisioned archaic symbolic order. My suggestion is that *Love in the Wars* is a gruesome illustration of the kind of cruel hierarchical system the philosopher associates with this order. While the first subsection surveys the Amazon society as it emerges in the play, the second one focuses on 'the duel'⁶ – the lethal game of power and desire played by Penthesilea

and Achilles. In the last subsection, aspects of Georges Bataille's notions on sacrifice and the festival have proved helpful in the analysis of what I see as ritual and sacrificial elements in the killing of Achilles.

Amazon Society: Myth of Origin, Rituals of Courting and Propagation

The Amazons of John Banville's *Love in the Wars* are hard-fighting, fast-riding, woman warriors, who are fiercely loyal to their state. The Amazon culture, with its rule-bound rituals and festivals, can be seen as akin to a Baudrillardian symbolic-order one. The origin the play assigns to the Amazon society, the secret story of the birth of its people, is presented by Penthesilea: "Before the Amazons, there was a race / Of Scythians, god-fearing, proud, warlike. / For centuries the Caucasus were theirs." Their rule ended, though, with an Ethiopian invasion in which the "menfolk all were killed, the young, the old, /Till not a single one was left alive" (51). Thanais, the Queen, is forced to marry the Ethiopian king and her subjects are raped and taken captive. In their captivity, the women prepare a rebellion against the Ethiopians. Drawing on their cultural skills, they secretly make sharp "strong blades" from their jewelry, to use against the king on his wedding day. On that day, the Queen herself plunges her blade "to the hilt" into the king's heart (*ibid.*). This act becomes the foundation on which an Amazon state is built – a "women's state," in which "no man's voice would sound, or eye would see" (*ibid.*). However, the new state fears attacks from armies of men; men are able to draw a bow "full stretch," while women archers are hampered by their breasts. Deciding on a radical course of action to defend their "fledgling state" against attacks, the queen, calling for and demonstrating a necessary sacrifice, slices off her right breast with a knife. From then on, they "were called the Amazons, / Or Breastless Ones" (52).

Talking with Achilles on the banks of the River Scamander, Penthesilea gives a nutshell version of this story to her rival and lover-in-spe. Although, the Greek warrior fails to take much interest in the subject of breastlessness, he asks about the sustainability of this society of women. He wonders how "This manless state you founded, how does it / Continue still to propagate itself/ without – ahem –! the input of us men?" (53) Penthesilea tells him the procedure is simple: on a yearly basis, the Amazon Priestess request Ares, god of war,

to name some noble warrior race / Whose fine first sons we'll pick on for our mates.
/ And when we learn their name and dwelling place, / A flush of wild excitement fills
our hearts ... and we ride out to war." (53-4)

According to their own idiosyncratic courting practices, then, the Amazons capture the "ripest bloom" of the "menfolk" and bring them back to Themiscyra, where they are put through "sacred rituals" associated with the Festival of Roses (54). When, in due time, this collective "wedding" ceremony has resulted in pregnancies, the Feast of Fertile Mothers is celebrated. The captured young men are then sent home, accompanied by the tears of fond mothers-to-be. Moreover, Amazon law stipulates that every young woman must accept as her mate, "the first man that the god puts in [her] path" (55), provided she conquers him in battle. An Amazon girl, then, is barred from romantic encounters with a youth of her choice. In view of this rule, it is surprising that by some form of royal privilege, Penthesilea seems exempt from this rule: her mother, Queen Otrere, has named Achilles as Penthesilea's future mate – "great Achilles waits, in ignorance" (*ibid.*). Yet, Penthesilea knows that she "would be cursed," submitting herself to a man not "won in battle," with her sword (46). Penthesilea's loyalty to

the system is revealed in an exchange between her and Achilles, in the company of Prothoë, Penthesilea's second in command. The queen impresses on Achilles that for her, gentle courting is not an option. Rather, she must hunt on the battlefield for the man her "heart has fixed on for its mate." Achilles retorts, "You speak as if some law prevented you" and Penthesilea confirms, "It does" (50). Achilles finds these rule-bound, martial mating practices "unnatural – unwomanly!" (*ibid.*). To Penthesilea, though, they are the law. As Agee (1998) has stated, Penthesilea does not "rebel against her nation" (xxvii), but obeys its rules.

The Festival of Roses, the Amazon mating feast, is the one occasion on which the women warriors are allowed sexual contact with men. It is a sacred ceremony which no-one, "on pain of instant death," is allowed to witness, except the brides themselves (Banville 54) – and presumably the participating grooms. It is during the Feast of Roses, then, that the Amazon state propagates itself. To turn to Georges Bataille here for elucidation, we find that it is in the nature of a festival to liberate animality; moreover, it entails excess. However, the "excess consecrates and completes an order of things based on rules; it goes against that order only temporarily" (Bataille 90). Thus, the Festival of Roses is one of excessive sexuality, but the excess contributes to the festival's aim, which is to maintain the societal order and the specific rules on which it is based.

Preparations for the rose festival are made by Amazon girls, "carrying baskets of roses and leading a throng of Greek prisoners bound together with ropes around which roses are twined" (Banville 31). Armed Amazons guard the prisoners. Gathering roses in the fields of Troy is no easy matter. The harvest is poor in the barren fields, the rose trees are scarce, and prisoners "easier to pluck than roses" (*ibid.*). Moreover, the girls find that roses have fierce thorns that prick them "to the core, until [they] bled!" (*ibid.*). The fusion of blood and roses foreshadows the fate of Achilles, whose expectation to celebrate the Feast of Roses with Penthesilea is violently thwarted in the end. The fate of the virginal Penthesilea is also foreshadowed as one girl reports having crawled out on a ledge to pluck a rose, which "shone wanly in its nest of moss, / A bud that was not ripened yet for love" and which seemed to her "the very womb of death" (*ibid.*). The roses then, in the context of the festival, seem to be fixed signs; each rose is one coin with two sides – fertility and death. The fixity of signs gestures toward the symbolic order. The Amazon society emerging in *Love in the Wars*, then, is a social order in which the rule dominates, through such aspects as ritualized courting customs and the Festival of Roses. It is, moreover, formed by the logic of the duel which is at focus in the next section.

Desire and the Duel: Penthesilea and Achilles

As suggested in the discussion of the rule-bound Amazon society, Penthesilea manifests traits associated with Baudrillard's symbolic order. Deeply committed to her Amazon culture, she is also a fierce commander of her army of women warriors. As the play opens, war is raging on the battlefields before a Troy besieged by the Greek army and the Amazons have suddenly fallen on the Trojans "like a storm at sea" (10).

Penthesilea's culture demands that she be a soldier, a general leading her troops; she should display "masculine" traits. To be sure, the queen and her Amazons can be said to have adopted forms of "male" behavior: they are fierce fighters, shoot with precision, and handle their horses expertly. Such skills are appreciated, of course, when observed by the Greek army and the Greeks, although attempting to diminish the Amazon women by designating them as "girls," reluctantly admit to being impressed by their prowess: "But gods! those girls can ride"

(19). The smugly misogynist – if the modern term be allowed in this setting – Greek general Odysseus criticizes the Trojans for running with the “pack of bitches howling at their heels” (10). Odysseus proceeds to praise the Amazons – no doubt the praise he offers is the highest which his androcentric mind can produce – by stating that they have “fought like ... well, / Like men!” (12). In a similar way, Achilles speaks of Penthesilea as being “more a man” than the generals Odysseus or Antilochus, whom by contrast he calls “old women” (13). I will return, below, to Penthesilea’s “manliness.”

If Penthesilea displays symbolic order traits, so does Achilles. One example of this is a verbal attack he launches at Odysseus. The latter has just sarcastically asked Achilles, who is preoccupied with Penthesilea, if he has forgotten about Troy – “the little business of a war to win?” (68). The remark prompts an angry outburst from Achilles: “Don’t condescend to me, you dry old stick! / Your caution and your cunning make me sick. / What do you know of daring, or of risk? / You do not live; all you do is exist” (70). Rejecting the older soldier’s “caution” and “cunning,” while celebrating daring and risk-taking, Achilles is cast here as a man of the symbolic order, insisting on intensity and “high stakes.” Achilles’ distinction between “living” and “existing” brings to mind Baudrillard’s (1994) concept of a zombie-like state of “death-in-life,” as opposed to death of the “classical, glorious” kind (*Illusion* 99), presumably favored by Achilles.

To Achilles, the male chauvinist of yore, then, doing battle with women is quite clearly unmanly and “un-Greek,” as it were: “Is there no pride left in the Argives’ hearts? / Today we fled before a band of girls. / We were surprised, did not know what to do; / To fight with females, that is not our way” (18). If he believes doing battle with women is unmanly, being saved by a woman in battle would no doubt be completely emasculating to him. Perhaps knowing this, at one point, as female warriors are “making mincemeat” of the Greeks (14) and a Trojan is “about to deal the finisher” to Achilles (15), Penthesilea surprisingly interferes on behalf of Achilles. She saves his life and rides away, laughing. Gloating, Odysseus reports that Achilles has been “rescued by a girl!” (16). Even so, almost to the end, Achilles can be seen to be assured of his superiority and fixed on the notion of mastering the Amazon Queen – body and mind. In John Banville’s own assessment of the figure of Achilles, the Greek warrior is “just a man” and “an idiot, so deeply in love with himself he cannot see what is in front of his eyes.”⁷ At any rate, he is enthusiastically sexist. In this, he is not alone among the Greeks, however. Rather, in Banville’s rendering, a good-old-boy mentality – if the phrase be permitted – seems to prevail in the Greek camp. Thus, King Agamemnon heaves a misogynist sigh as he refers to Penthesilea, and – clearly thinking of Helen and Menelaos – adds: “It was a woman brought us here, and now / Another woman comes to cause us grief” (Banville 18).

If Penthesilea, as indicated above, is inclined to fight like a man, displaying what might be termed masculine features in the battlefield, evidence of gender *ambivalence* is less easily discernible in her. As Joel Agee suggested, Heinrich von Kleist was apparently familiar with such ambivalence through the modes of expression of his sister, Ulrike von Kleist. Ulrike apparently “dressed like a man and was able to pass for one easily” (Agee xxiv). Kleist, uncomfortable perhaps with his sister’s unwillingness to display unambiguous signs of a single gender, reportedly appealed to her: “Amphibian, you who inhabit two elements always, waver no longer and choose a definitive gender at last” (ibid.). Unlike Ulrike von Kleist, then, Penthesilea does not waver, but remains fixed on Achilles – not just as a foe, but as a man. Increasingly, she desires him. It is, however, as a soldier and the rival of the Argive war hero that the Amazon queen must act, and in this her desire for the man acts against her. If she

admits to feeling as if “torn in two” (Banville 37), it is because she momentarily lets go of what seems to be the conviction of her culture – that the “health, survival or integrity” of the body is not a crucial matter (Baudrillard 2003. 17) – and instead, in line with what Baudrillard sees as contemporary western thinking, veers to “an individualized view of the body, linked to notions of possession and mastery” (*ibid.*).⁸ In this situation, the forces pulling at her – the demands of her culture on the one hand and her body on the other – appear irreconcilable.

Initially, Achilles’ desire for Penthesilea is overshadowed by irritation at his own failure to negotiate peace with her (Banville 14). It is also bound up with the losses the Amazons cause the Greek and Trojan armies: “The finest men of both our armies lay/ Like broken flowers scattered on the plain / ... and hundreds captured, too” (15). Apparently needing to denigrate the Queen, he maintains that she is no different from other women: “I know the type; I’ve tamed her kind before” (18). To him, then, doing battle with females is not the Greek way, but forcing them to sexual surrender is. With brutal crudity, he boasts that he has “never brought a woman to the ground,” / except to have his pleasure with her (*ibid.*). As events unfold, Penthesilea’s commitment to her culture and her army continues to come to clash with her desire for her foe, Achilles. Even Achilles’ fellow officers have noted the fierce attention Penthesilea pays Achilles in the battle field and they comment on it: “The hungry she-wolf, hunting in the snow / Would not so ravenously fix her prey / As she fixed on Achilles, Thetis’s son!” (15). Having initially speculated that her interest is fuelled by a need for vengeance for “some imagined insult,” they are baffled when, as touched on above, Achilles’ “life lay / in her hands, why, she gave it back to him – / and with a laugh!” (*ibid.*). With regard to issues of gender, the image of Penthesilea as the ravenous she-wolf, pinning down Achilles with her stare, brings to mind Patricia Coughlan’s astute suggestion – cited in the introductory chapter, above – that Banville’s fictions leave the “gender system untouched” (Coughlan 97). Again, I agree with this. Nevertheless, the image lingers of an unapologetic and still undefeated Penthesilea, eyes like a she-wolf, objectifying Achilles, self-proclaimed “tamer” of women, in the bright light of the female gaze.

Within the greater turmoil that is the war between Greeks and Trojans, into which the Amazon warriors have inserted themselves, Penthesilea and Achilles become locked in a private battle. This battle, unfolding within a symbolic order framework and dominated by “the rule” as it is, is in line with the logic of the duel – single combat, fought with weapons in the presence of witnesses. It is a life-and-death struggle. Moreover, according to the dictates of warfare and sexual desire, each of the combatants strives for possession of the body of the other – as prisoner and as sexual object. In Baudrillard’s terms, there is “strong seduction” here and the “stakes are high” (Gane 239). As vying contestants, both Penthesilea and Achilles seek, first, to demonstrate superiority in battle. Achilles can be seen to be assured of his superiority, almost to the end, and fixed on the notion of mastering the Amazon Queen – body and mind. Because Penthesilea is as confident of her skills in arms as Achilles is of his, she is determined to make him submit: “I’ll make him eat the dust under my feet, / that haughty Greek” (Banville 26). Although verbally less brutish than Achilles, she, too, sees the struggle between them partially in sexual terms. In Baudrillardian terms, moreover, the duel between Amazon Queen and Argive hero, seems to take place in the sphere of seduction; in this sphere, “neither sex is assured of its ... superiority” (*Passwords* 23). Compared to desire, “seduction is a more fatal game, and a more dangerous one too, which is in no way exclusive of pleasure, but is something different from jouissance” (*ibid.* 22).⁹ Seduction unsettles the identity and offers the “possibility of a radical otherness” (*ibid. ibidem.*). Being a “fatal” game played with high stakes,

the duel is, again, of the symbolic order. Moreover, because according to Baudrillard the interaction between the sexes is a form of both “rivalry and connivance,” the duel allows each combatant to find an “identity by confronting the other.” (*ibid.* 21). The significant aspect of sexual identity, then, is “a kind of becoming-masculine of the feminine and becoming-feminine of the masculine” (*ibid. ibidem.*). Thus, Achilles and Penthesilea are duelling rivals on the battlefield, but they are in collusion, too, in their reciprocal desire. With swords drawn, their unspoken consent seems to be to keep meeting in battle – the one form of communication open to them. Propelled by energies of war as well as of desire, their duel takes its own course within its delimited sphere of rivalry and connivance.

As the duel between Penthesilea and Achilles continues, the stakes are eventually raised. Meeting face to face in battle, Achilles’ question – “what will it be now, peace or war?” – and Penthesilea’s answer – “what peace is there for us, except in war?” (Banville 35) – suggest the entwined forces of warfare and desire, rivalry and connivance, in their exchange. As they fight, Achilles “knocks the sword and shield” from Penthesilea’s hands. Images of desire, war, and death merge as the pose of the disarmed queen, as specified in the stage directions, becomes one of sexual surrender: “She stands before him, her throat bared, her breast thrust out ... as if inviting an embrace instead of death” (*ibid.*). Achilles strikes a blow and she falls, unconscious. The Amazon troops have instructions not to “harm a hair” on Achilles’ head (*ibid.*) and Achilles, in turn, gives the queen over to her troops, again praising her according to his own gauge of excellence: “let them take her; she fought like a man” (*ibid.* 36). As a result of the blow to her head, Penthesilea suffers memory loss. Regaining consciousness after the fight, she is led to believe, by Achilles and Protoë both, that she has taken Achilles prisoner. Penthesilea is overjoyed with the presumed victory, because defeating Achilles in battle is the only condition under which her society will allow her to yield to him sexually. Achilles, aware that he won over her, nevertheless wants the queen to submit willingly. Failing to comprehend the depth of Penthesilea’s commitment to the rules of her society, he expects to clear the way for her ultimate submission by first simulating his own. As a result, he assures her: “I am your prisoner, of course I am!” (47). Trusting him, and believing herself in control, Penthesilea articulates her plans for a wedding, according to Amazon rules, with the warrior she thinks she has won in battle. She tells her troops, then, that the “greatest of the Greeks” is her captive and instructs the “flower girls” to bring their roses. Her primary worry seems to be whether “there be enough blossoms for the rite” (*ibid.*). Despite Protoë’s words of caution – “My Queen, please try to calm yourself” – she gives orders for “a fitting, godlike marriage feast” not just for herself, but for all the brides, who now “shall have fulfillment of their joy tonight!” (48).

As hostilities flare between Greeks and Amazons, though, Achilles loses interest in simulating defeat. Penthesilea is puzzled and Prothoë pleads with Achilles to tell the queen “the truth” (57). Heeding her, Achilles discards his mask of docility and claims her as his prisoner: “By all the rules of war you are my bride. / We met in battle, yes, but I was not / The one it was who fell” (58). Harshly, he adds that he does intend to “give” her a child, but it will not be reared in the Amazon capital of Themiscyra, and he will not follow her there. Instead, he will bring her to “bounteous Phthia, where I have my home” (57). At this moment of brutal truth, Penthesilea’s troops enter, bows drawn, demanding the release of their queen. Achilles tries to pull her away with him, but Odysseus thrusts her toward the Amazons, calling Achilles a “madman” (59-61). Thus, the power balance of the duel shifts again.

The scene evokes Penthesilea's earlier rhetorical question – "What peace is there for us, except in war?" (35) – and suggests a second question: What love is there for them, except in death? For Achilles and Penthesilea, the many phases of the duel have so far entailed something of what Baudrillard described as an "evocation and revocation of the other;" perhaps in "movements whose slowness and suspense are poetic, like a slow motion film of a fall or an explosion," which are indicative of the "perfection of 'desire'" (Poster 166).¹⁰ In its last phase, though, the duel points in the direction of ritual and death and the frenzy of festivals.

A Promised Festival of Roses

The moment Achilles' focus shifts from the high-stake intensity of his duel with Penthesilea, to the duplicitous performance of simulating defeat, he seals his own death warrant. In the symbolic realm, counterfeit and ceremony do not mix. It has been suggested that Achilles is poorly equipped to understand the "necessity that drives his beloved adversary" and that it is a "lethal mistake" for him to believe that he can "apeace Penthesilea with a game of make-believe" (Engdahl 15). Concurring, I think that it is because he misreads Penthesilea that Achilles attempts to play the game that ultimately kills him. Her anger at his slight and his trickery helps trigger in her the fury that, compounded by festival-induced frenzy, prompts her to sacrifice him.¹¹

Several readings of Penthesilea's excesses are possible, of course. First, Agee has suggested that Penthesilea is a warrior of Artemis. Just as Artemis, according to myth, punished Actaeon for violating her by seeing her naked, so Penthesilea, in a frenzied state, punishes Achilles for planning to violate her – by breaking rules stipulated by her society. Agee points out that, after her frenzy, Penthesilea is in an "exhausted trance" which "betray[s] all the symbolic signs of possession by her nation's goddess, Artemis" (Agee xxviii). Second, recalling the transformation of the Amazon Queen into a snarling beast, jaws dripping with Achilles' blood, it is useful to turn to Georges Bataille's notion of the excesses of the festival. According to Bataille, although animality is liberated at a festival and the most hallowed laws are deliberately violated, society's rule-bound order is defied "only temporarily" (Bataille 90). As indicated above, then, the Festival of Roses entails excessive sexuality, but serves, nevertheless, to maintain the societal order based on specific rules. Similarly, Penthesilea, while still in her "frenzy" of murder (*op.cit.* 100), "consecrates and completes" the rule-bound order of things. In addition, as suggested above, Penthesilea may be seen as performing a ritual sacrifice of Achilles. Because, according to Bataille, one purpose of sacrifice – apart from giving "destruction its due" – is to remove contagion, Penthesilea may be seen as attempting to "save the rest" of her society from "a mortal danger of contagion" (*op. cit.* 59). Here, the contagion for Amazon women would be linked to the temptation to submit to men they have not defeated in battle. Third, Penthesilea's killing of Achilles also illustrates the Baudrillardian view that the erotic exchange merges with the ambivalence and excess of sacrificial death. When Penthesilea bends over Achilles's dead body, the images of his wounds and of the roses she has given him, fuse in her crazed mind: "Oh, look at these red roses! And this wreath / Of bloody flowers round his shattered head, / This fresh, unfurlèd blossom in his neck" (Banville 75-6). The fusion of eroticism with the lethal violence of war suggests that Achilles's death is a partial exchange for that erotic encounter which the rules of Amazon society successfully has prohibited. To Penthesilea, Achilles's fatal wounds become so many roses plucked on the fields of Troy in preparation for a much longed-for Festival of Roses.

Driven by commitment to her culture, vengeful rage, and the “madness of sacrifice” (Bataille 55), Penthesilea has performed a ritual sacrifice of Achilles.

This article has established that John Banville’s play *Love in the Wars* displays elements of the pre-Renaissance symbolic order. The Amazon society, as it emerges in the play, is akin to the type of archaic society that Jean Baudrillard (2003) associates with the symbolic order. It insists on the rule; not to bow to the rule is to invite disaster. One question that arises here is whether the philosopher thought that, if contemporary Western societies “can no longer lay claim to truth” (45) it is in a symbolic-order society we may find some measure of truth. Although he apparently did not think that the symbolic order offers direct access to reality or truth, the answer seems to be “perhaps.” In this order, if it existed (and it is unclear if he thought it ever did), there would be intensity and high stakes: when you are alive, you live, and when you die, you do so in a “glorious” way (*Illusion* 99).¹² Standing to the side, observing life at a safe distance is not an option here. However, Baudrillard warned, “caste societies, feudal or archaic, were cruel societies,” trapped in “ferocious hierarchies;” so, if present-day humanity should feel drawn to this order and begin “yearning nostalgically ... for a revitalized ‘symbolic order,’ we should have no illusions” (Poster 139). It should be noted that Baudrillard (2005) made a distinction between, on the one hand, backward-looking practices that “aspire to regress to a real object” (such as a once-existing state) and hence, reprehensibly, cultivate “reactionary nostalgia” (74) and, on the other hand, a looking back that lacks this kind of aspiration. The latter, he seems to consider a necessary “form of mental strategy governing the correct use of nothingness or the void” (*ibid.*). Illusions or no illusions, though, Baudrillard seems to think that privileging such symbolic order features as the loss of self, death, sacrifice, and the rule, would allow humanity to move away from the random, which is a prime source of the radical uncertainty of the contemporary world. Seen in this light, the world of *Love in the Wars* – especially the Amazon society there – presents itself as other to simulation.

Notes

- 1 Part of this essay was originally published in *Reading John Banville Through Jean Baudrillard*, by Hedda Friberg-Harnesk (Amherst, NY: Cambria Press, 2018), 111–132. Reprinted by permission of the publisher.
- 2 Graves, *Greek Myths*, vol. 1, 355. Graves notes that although the word “Amazon” generally is regarded as “derived from a and mazon, ‘without breasts,’ because they were believed to sear away one breast in order to shoot better” – a “fantastic” notion – the word may in fact be Armenian, “meaning ‘moon-women;’” the derivation may be connected to the armed “priestesses of the Moon-goddess on the South-eastern shores of the Black Sea.”
- 3 Robert Graves, *The Greek Myths*, vol. 2, 313. According to myth, Penthesilea “drove Achilles from the field on several occasions.” One source “modernizes the story,” stating that Achilles speared her in their first encounter, and dragged her from the saddle by the hair. As she lay dying on the ground, the Greek soldiers cried: “Throw this virago to the dogs as a punishment for exceeding the nature of womankind!” (Graves, *The Greek Myths*, vol. 2, 320).
- 4 In analyzing Banville’s play, I have consulted Martin Greenberg’s English translation in *Five Plays* from 1988; Joel Agee’s *Penthesilea*, from 1998; and Horace Engdahl’s Swedish translation of Kleist’s play, in *Kleist Två Dramer Amfitryon Penthesilea*, 1987.
- 5 John Banville, e-mail, October 10, 2007. Banville also expressed disappointment with the lack of interest, in Ireland, in staging the play: “I managed to get the Jug [*The Broken Jug*] and Amphytryon [*God’s Gift*] staged here, but no one will touch Pent. [*Love in the Wars*], which baffles me.” (*Ibid.*)

- 6 For a prose example of Kleist's interest in the phenomenon of the duel, see his novella *The Duel*, from 1810.
- 7 John Banville, e-mail, October 10, 2007. More fully, Banville wrote: "poor Achilles, as well as being, as my wife would say, 'just a man', is such an idiot" Achilles, then, emerges as yet another male narcissist in Banville's work.
- 8 More fully, Baudrillard states that in "those cultures where the body is continually brought into play in ritual," the body is "not the symbol of life and the question is not that of its health, survival or integrity."
- 9 The reference is to Jacques Lacan's term "*Jouissance*" (enjoyment), which is that "remainder of gratification" the individual looks for in sexual relations. Because the subject's desire will "always be out of reach" it will be a lasting one – he or she will "continue to seek this object throughout his life, in all his pursuits." Judith Feher Gurewich and Michael Tort, *Lacan and the New Wave in American Psychoanalysis: The Subject and the Self* (New York: Other Press, 1999), 19.
- 10 Poster, *Selected Writings*. Baudrillard also suggests, here, that a "void, an absence" or a "meaninglessness" is "the sudden charm of seduction."
- 11 See details of Penthesilea's killing of Achilles in Friberg-Harnesk, *Reading John Banville through Jean Baudrillard*, Chapter 5, pp. 123-125.
- 12 Again, Baudrillard suggested that "in its classical, glorious sense," death "was the finest of man's conquests – subjective, dramatized death, death ritualised and celebrated, sought after and desired."

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Famine Roads and Big House Ghosts: History and Form in John Banville's The Infinities¹

Estradas da Fome e Fantasmagorias da Casa Grande: História e Forma em The Infinities, de John Banville

Cody D. Jarman

Abstract: *This article considers John Banville's engagement with memories of the Irish Famine and the conventions of the Irish Gothic and Big House novel in his 2009 novel The Infinities by comparing his approach to these topics to that of Emily Lawless in her considerably earlier 1897 collection Traits and Confidences. I argue that Banville's engagement with the history of the Irish Famine and the conventions of the Irish Gothic and Big House novel are not incidental to the novel's exploration of the problem of identity and the idea of the self but, rather, are fundamental to its thematic investments. Furthermore, I suggest that the novel's experimental form fits into Irish literary tradition as Banville's novel develops questions of identity, form, and content central to Lawless's text.*

Keywords: *Gothic; Famine; Big House; Banville; Lawless.*

Resumo: *Este artigo considera o envolvimento de John Banville com as memórias da fome irlandesa e as convenções do romance gótico irlandês e sobre a Casa Grande em The Infinities, publicado em 2009, comparando sua abordagem desses tópicos à de Emily Lawless em sua coleção anterior Traits and Confidences de 1897. Argumento que o envolvimento de Banville com a história da fome irlandesa e as convenções do romance gótico irlandês e sobre a Casa Grande não são acidentais à exploração do romance sobre a problemática da identidade e da ideia de si, mas são fundamentais para sua delimitação temática. Além disso, sugiro que a forma experimental do romance se encaixa na tradição literária irlandesa, pois o romance de Banville desenvolve questões de identidade, forma e conteúdo, as quais são centrais ao texto de Lawless.*

Palavras-chave: *Gótico; Fome; Casa Grande; John Banville; Emily Lawless.*

To leave one's background without guilt is an indication of shallowness of character, I suspect.
(Banville "The Art of Fiction").

People used to say I'm a postmodernist in days when postmodernism was still fashionable. It no longer is.
(Banville "The Millions Interview").

Postmodernism and Place: Critical Discussions of John Banville

I preface this article with two quotes, both taken from interviews conducted near the publication of *The Infinities* in 2009, because they address my central concerns with the novel: despite being an experimental adaptation of Heinrich Von Kleist's treatment of the Amphitryon myth with seemingly no investment in its Irish setting, *The Infinities* remains a profound reflection on John Banville's "background" as an Irish author. Banville's relationship to this background as it relates to his reputation as a postmodern author is, perhaps, the most frequently occurring topic in studies of his work. For example, early Banville critics like Rüdiger Imhof (1989) tended to dismiss his Irishness and positioned him as an exclusively postmodern author. Arguments like Imhof's depend on a deracinated, internationalist definition of postmodernism that insists that any art marked by true formal experimentation must also turn away from regionally or nationally defined subject matter (6-8). Over time, the relationship between Irish subject matter and postmodern aesthetic concerns in Banville's work has been refined, particularly by Derek Hand (2002) and John Kenny (2009), who have both centered the importance of Irish history and culture to Banville's artistic project. Hand argues that Ireland's postcolonial status makes "the notion of transition" between identity formations, ideologies, and social structures key to understanding Irish culture. Thus, the prototypically postmodern investments in the instability of language, identity, or capital-T-truth that Imhof locates in Banville's work are not a turn from Irish themes but, rather, a deep-dive into the fundamental philosophical problems of Irish culture (10). Kenny, on the other hand, stresses the contradictions of Banville's own ambivalent relationship to Irish literary culture, noting that even as Banville has frequently and unequivocally refused to engage with Irish subject matter in a manner that could be construed as nationalist, the conditions of Irish nationality are significant backdrops in works like *Eclipse* (2000), and *The Sea* (2005) (40-41).

By rooting the postmodern in the material conditions of modernity in Ireland, Hand offers a more useful way to think about Banville's writing. At the same time, Kenny's awareness that Irish themes are not limited to the problems of bourgeoisie nationalism makes it possible to see how Ireland is never merely a backdrop in Banville's works. These notions are fundamental to Hand's interpretation of *Birchwood* (1973), the most overtly Irish of Banville's novels. *Birchwood* is a re-imagining of the traditional Irish Big House novel that takes place in a kind of nightmare version of Irish history with major historical events like the Irish Famine and the War of Independence happening simultaneously. According to Hand, this disjointed and confusing structure effectively breaks the Big House novel as a form and dramatizes the central problem of the novel as "one of representation and the inability to find an adequate form that will contain and fix Ireland's history" (38).

As Hand's reading of *Birchwood* makes clear, Banville's engagement with Irish generic conventions and history can easily work alongside any broader postmodern projects. In this essay I take a similar approach to what is—seemingly—one of Banville's most historically unmoored novels, his playfully postmodern novel *The Infinities*. In particular, I argue that Banville's engagement with the history of the Irish Famine and the conventions of the Irish Gothic and Big House novel are not incidental to the novel's exploration of the problem of identity and the idea of the self but, rather, are fundamental to its thematic investments. In order to clearly place Banville's engagement with the historical themes of the Famine and the formal and thematic qualities of the Irish Gothic within a canon of Irish writing,² I will demonstrate how an essay and short story written by Emily Lawless outline many of the broad themes that inform my reading of *The Infinities*. My rationale for this pairing is both thematic

and political; as I will prove, Lawless's approach to representing Irish history bears many striking similarities to Banville's. At the same time, this comparison is a unique opportunity to center an often-overlooked woman writer in the Irish literary tradition while also exposing Banville's active role in continuing that tradition.

The Famine, the Gothic, and the Big House

In her 1898 collection *Traits and Confidences*, Lawless devotes an essay and short story to the problem of the Famine in Irish history. In "Famine Roads and Memories" and "After the Famine," Lawless shows herself to be remarkably cognizant of many of the representational problems literary critics and historians would associate with the Famine throughout the twentieth century. The most notable of these representational problems is that of constructing monuments and historical accounts that capture both the factual and emotional aspects of the Famine experience. Lawless centers these issues at the beginning of "Famine Roads:" "It has sometime seemed to me as if every great event, especially if it be of the more tragic order, ought to have some distinctive cairn or monument of its own." In response to this concern, Lawless nominates a deserted village in Connemara—and particularly the Famine Road that runs through it—as an ideal monument (142).

According to Lawless, the words Famine Road "mean only too much" (151). It is in these roads, which Lawless describes as "the most absolutely futile and abortive" of the public works projects instated by the British government in Ireland to create work and cash flow in rural Ireland during the Famine, that Lawless locates the ideal monument to the historical catastrophe of the Famine.³ She argues that they are appropriate symbols for the Famine experience because of the absolute futility of building roads between always isolated but now rapidly dying communities: "Imagine how urgently some way of connecting them with one another and with the outside world must have been wished for . . . *until made*. Then the need for such means of communication ceased suddenly, and has never returned" (154).

The connection Lawless forms, or acknowledges, between the seeming senselessness of the Famine Roads project, the roads' existence as monumental, metaphorical "scars" on Ireland, and loss of the Famine highlights many of the concerns historians and literary critics bring to discussions of the Famine, particularly as it is consistently couched in the terms of societal trauma.⁴ Examples of these concerns abound; Luke Gibbons (2014) argues in *Limits of the Visible: Representing the Great Hunger* that the lack of photographs from the Irish Famine is not because of technological limitations, but because of the inability of the medium to represent the effects of the Famine in their full extremity without sensationalizing the subject (12-14). Perhaps most representative, however, is Chris Morash's provocatively titled article "Famine/Holocaust: Fragmented Bodies." In this article, Morash (1997) argues that "the Famine and the Holocaust have . . . a history together" (136). While Morash is quick to qualify this claim, arguing against simplistic comparisons of these two tragedies that ignore the significant differences in their causes, qualities, and effects, he insists that the painful nature of both events brings about an emphasis on fragmentation when they are represented in art (147-48).

Lawless's discussion is marked by many ruptures that acknowledge the representational limitations acknowledged by Gibbons and Morash. Words seem to fail her as she instructs her reader to "Take the mere official reports; the report, for instance, of one county inspector in this very district, and you will find him speaking of a hundred and fifty bodies picked up by himself and his assistants along a single stretch of road. Multiply this fiftyfold, and ask

yourself what it means” (155). Instead of counting bodies, she turns to the Famine roads themselves as an ideal monument to the Famine, not because they accurately portray the suffering of the Famine victim, but because of their very failure to represent anything beyond their own futility.

Lawless’s essay also foreshadows the debates surrounding interpreting the Famine as a historical event. The Famine is a famously contested historiographic subject. This issue came to the forefront of Irish Studies with the 150-year anniversary of the Famine in the mid-1990s, which led the Irish government to turn its attention—and its research funding—to documenting and commemorating the Famine. The resulting boom in Famine scholarship generated many questions: Had earlier historians ignored the Famine as a topic? Had revisionist historians downplayed Britain’s culpability in the crisis? Had nationalists irresponsibly generated resentment by arguing that the Famine was an intentional act of genocide?⁵

Even in 1898, Lawless is clearly troubled by similar questions: “How far the Government—misfortunate abstraction!—did or did not realize the extent of the disaster is a point which may be disputed till the crack of doom . . . That the blame must be shared amongst other impersonal potentates—Circumstance, Environment, Fate, and so forth—is true. Still, when we have admitted this, what then?” (158). Lawless raises these questions to stress the challenges she is facing in both her essay and short story; she must represent both the bodily destitution of the Famine and its broader cultural and political implications. These challenges seem to determine the very form of her story “After the Famine,” which she introduces at the end of her essay as having “the double defect of not belonging to the actual time [of the Famine], and of being laid within the limits of a class upon which the effect of the Famine was indirect rather than direct.” (159).

In “After the Famine,” Lawless adopts many of the generic conventions of both the Irish Gothic and the Big House novel to address these Famine themes. This turn to the Gothic is particularly appropriate considering Robert Smart’s claim that the Gothic’s emphasis on haunting memories, decay, and death make it uniquely suited to representing the Famine (8). Furthermore, the Irish Gothic and the Big House novel are united by a preoccupation with the unstable identity formations created by the complicated class relations between the Catholic population and the Anglo-Irish, and a fascination with historicizing these relations. In Lawless’s story these overlapping concerns are overtly connected through the Famine, which is made the historical cause for the decay of the d’Arcy estate in the West of Ireland, destroying the family of landlords and leaving the sole surviving daughter, Eleanor d’Arcy, so overwhelmed by grief she marries Henry O’Hara, the son of their former tenant.

Many critics, most notably Jarlath Killeen (2014), have suggested that the Irish Gothic is rooted in an “Irish Anglican Imagination” (34).⁶ Killeen argues that this imagination stems from two aspects of the Anglo-Irish experience in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: a crisis of identity created by their liminal position between an Irish and English identity, and an “enclave mentality” by the looming threat of the Catholic masses (38-39).⁷ This Irish Anglican Imagination fits into broader trends in historical studies of the foundations of Gothic literature where the Gothic is often seen as a Protestant Enlightenment attack on the supernatural specters of a vaguely pagan and deeply sensual Catholicism.⁸ Killeen notes the ways in which Ireland becomes a “collective of atemporality, a place of the primitive” where the besieged Anglo-Irish are driven to the Gothic because its “Horror offers to those who remain within the borders of the enclave moral purity and safety from annihilation” (10; 41).

While they minimize religious concerns, Irish Big House novels tend to focus on this culture clash, consistently staging the decay of an Anglo-Irish estate as an allegory for the cultural failures of the Anglo-Irish and the growing power of the Catholic Irish (Kreilkamp 6-7).⁹

The Ireland of “After the Famine” is very much a “place of the primitive;” the story’s narrator describes Galway as peopled by “moving skeletons” and “pitiable-looking ghosts of humanity,” while the entrance to the d’Arcy estate is marked by a “sinister-looking old castle” (167; 169). More notably, in the aftermath of the Famine the d’Arcy estate is being pulled apart by both the Anglo and the Irish parts of the Anglo-Irish identity. The narrator is visiting the estate on behalf of an English firm looking to take advantage of the Encumbered Estates’ Act to purchase huge tracts of land at “excessively low prices” (165).¹⁰ While staying at the d’Arcy house to oversee the sale, he becomes infatuated with Eleanor d’Arcy and briefly imagines himself as competing with Henry O’Hara, a “red-headed squireen” with a thick brogue, who ultimately marries Eleanor and takes her to America after the sale of the estate (186). The story belabors the class conflict in this love triangle through the d’Arcy butler who complains that O’Hara was a member of an “inferior family” and that the “notion of one of them aspiring to lift his eyes to a d’Arcy was almost too audacious to have come within his idea of what was possible” (207-08). Thus, the Famine, which continues to haunt the Irish landscape, is established as the triggering event which upsets the entire social structure of the d’Arcy estate, leaving its only surviving family member caught between two kinds of class annihilation, one which forces her to join her own former tenant as a Famine refugee and another that leaves her marrying into the very class that helped to perpetuate the Famine conditions in the first place.

Furthermore, “After the Famine” returns to the representational problem of the Famine by offering up a character whose function within the narrative is quite like that of the Famine Roads of the essay: Eleanor d’Arcy. d’Arcy is frequently described as a kind of vessel for the aspects of the Famine experience that cannot be contained in the narrative itself. Throughout the story the narrator is fascinated by her haunted gaze, which gives the impression that “so much that was heartrending and confusing had passed before her eyes that they could never become natural again” (181). This is in keeping with broader patterns in the Gothic, which tends to be built off the excessive nature of its own subject matter that exceeds repressive and representational bounds. Furthermore, it plays on representational tropes many academics have associated with the Famine. Eleanor’s gaze invokes what Luke Gibbons, borrowing a phrase from Niamh O’Sullivan, refers to as “the unflinching eye,” a phenomenon in Famine art where the victim of the Famine is portrayed looking out at the viewer, seemingly calling for aid and sympathy, while also making Eleanor into a prototypical example of what Margaret Kelleher (1997) calls the feminization of Famine where the female body is made to contain a history “too awful to relate” (15; 6-7).

Read together, Lawless’s essay and short story outline a broad set of cultural and historical concerns for Irish authors, while also suggesting the ways those concerns inform formal choices. As she makes clear in her essay, addressing the nuances of the Famine experience demands a turn to certain generic shapes like those of the Gothic and the Big House novel. By directly connecting her essay and short story, she essentially turns the pair into an experiment on the relationship between form and content. A similar investment in the relationship between form and content recurs across Banville’s writings. Indeed, it is Banville’s self-professed desire to “mak[e] reality comprehensible” through art (Banville qtd in Imhof 18). As my reading of Lawless’s essay and short story make clear, Banville’s concern with

representing reality can grow just as naturally from the relationship between Irish history and literature as any more cosmopolitan philosophical problems. Comparing *The Infinities* to Lawless's writing brings the distinctly Irish dimensions of the Banville's novel to the forefront in ways that both reinforce and complicate its obvious exploration of problems of identity and representation.

Irish Cultural History and Identity in *The Infinities*

The Infinities was inspired by Heinrich Von Kleist's *Amphitryon* (1899), but, as Neil Murphy observes, it "doesn't simply reinterpret and transplant the same story; it enlarges the metaphorical possibilities offered by Kleist's dramatic model" (151). Hedwig Schwall (2010) makes a similar point, noting that the novel expands on the problems of identity central to the *Amphitryon* myth where Jupiter and Mercury take on the identities of *Amphitryon* and his servant *Sosie* to enable Jupiter to seduce *Amphitryon*'s wife *Alcmene* (90). While this narrative still sits at the heart of *The Infinities*—Zeus forces *Hermes* to facilitate a tryst with the character *Helen*—the cast of characters is greatly expanded and, most significantly, the first person narration frequently shifts seamlessly between characters to recreate the problem of identity confusion at the level of form. The new narrative, which takes place in a single day, concerns the gathering of the Godley family to attend at the deathbed of the family patriarch, a renowned mathematician named Adam Godley. Throughout the day, *Hermes*, *Zeus*, and *Pan*, who appears in the form of *Benny Grace*, interfere with the family's doings, eavesdropping on their reactions to Adam's seemingly impending death and often directly intervening in the events of the day, most notably when *Grace* brings about Adam's miraculous recovery at the end of the novel. Schwall suggests that this narrative casts Banville's concern about the boundaries of identity in the mold of fantastic literature, paying particular attention to how *Arden*—the Godley estate in central Ireland—and its environs constitute an "Irish fantastic" space (93). While Schwall privileges a capacious notion of the fantastic in literature that includes motifs from High Fantasy and Romance as well as the Gothic broadly conceived, *The Infinities* consistently draws on particularly Irish aspects of the Gothic tradition.

Much like Lawless, Banville turns to the Famine roads as a symbol of representational excess. The Famine makes its most overt appearance in *The Infinities* as Adam Godley's son, who is also named Adam, returns from picking up his sister's not-quite-boyfriend *Roddy Wagstaff* from the train station. As they drive back to the house, they take the "Hunger Road," which makes Adam feel "uneasy" due to its "desperate purposelessness." The narrator, at this point *Hermes*, informs the reader that "everything seems to face away [from the road], looking stolidly elsewhere", describing the landscape as "uncanny" and haunted by birds that look like "pure-white ghosts" (100-01). The section of the novel describing the road allows a distinctly Gothic voice to intrude into the text, cutting into the harmless musings and wordplay that begin the section of the book about Adam's drive to the train station when he "feels like Adam on the first day in the garden" (89).

Even as the Famine Road demands a shift in the novel's tone, it also leads Adam to directly address some of the novel's central concerns with the nature of identity. As Adam diverts himself from the Famine Road, he contemplates the surrounding landscape, asking himself "where exactly it is that the river ends and the estuary begins?" (101). As he considers the implications of this question he briefly concludes "all that separates them really, and it is not a real separation at all, is his having put the question in the first place" (102). The Famine Road becomes one of the many triggers in the novel that inspire such introspection for its

characters; however, when thought of alongside Lawless's musings, it is clear that Adam's questions are not fundamentally removed from the problem of the road itself. In its "desperate purposelessness" the Famine Road is a reminder of the collapse of clear identity in the excess of widespread death and disease, a collapse mirrored in the problem of the river and estuary.

The Famine Road also does much to locate the Arden estate in a historically-centered—if fantastically rendered—Irish landscape. For Schwall, much of the novel's fantastic landscape is endowed with a life-giving quality suitable for a novel about a man who will survive a serious stroke. For example, she points to the holy well on the grounds of the estate as a site of fertility, connecting it to Helen's pregnancy, which is announced at the end of the text (93). However, when considered within the Irish Gothic tradition's tendency to collapse Irish Catholicism and paganism as primitive holdovers, the well takes on an additional, darker resonance. Indeed, Banville emphasizes this resonance when he describes the view of the Godley estate from the woods surrounding the well: "the place looks crazier than ever . . . [like] a church in some backward, primitive place where religion has decayed into a cult and the priests have had to allow the churchgoers to worship the old gods alongside the new one" (252). When looked at from the well, even the enclave of the Big House itself is revealed to be compromised by its pagan surroundings. This reinforces the novel's larger preoccupations with the delineation of identity, as the well becomes one of the many locations where the boundaries between identity formations like Catholicism, paganism, or even the supposedly rational values associated with Arden as both a Big House and home to the master mathematician Adam Sr. become unclear. This connection is strengthened by the well's connection to Adam Sr.'s theories about the nature of time; it is at the well that Adam explains his theories to his daughter Petra, using the surrounding woods as an example of the "temporal discrepancies" that "hindered [the world] into existence" (117). This idea could be seen as the Irish Gothic recast in the language of science fiction, as the fantastic space of the Godley estate is created by a temporal confusion that blurs past, present, and future.

Unsurprisingly, Arden house itself is marked by similar temporal discrepancies. The most notable example of this is when Petra has a vision of the house's former owner. While walking the halls of the house she sees "a man, heavy-set, scowling . . . in old-fashioned clothes and high boots, standing here and not wanting to do something, to accede to some request or command, but knowing he will have to, will be forced to" (121). Petra is sure that this man is a Blount, one of the original owners of the Arden estate. In this memory, the past once again erupts into the present of the novel. Notably, it also emphasizes the house's particular significance in the Irish context. While the past Petra glimpses remains vague, the man's failure to avoid this request suggests the decline of the estate, a decline that is clearly completed by the time in which the novel takes place as the only remaining Blount now works as a housekeeper for the Godley family. Thus, the class conflict central to Big House narratives like Lawless's "After the Famine" is turned into something of a backdrop for the events of *The Infinities*. However, this backdrop is not merely set-dressing; it is, in fact, one of many Irish cultural traditions that haunt the structure of the narrative, primarily as they are represented through Petra, who is constantly linked with the excesses of an almost forgotten past.

In many ways, Petra is an updated version of Eleanor d'Arcy from Lawless's story. Much like d'Arcy, Petra exists in the novel as something of a vessel for the past violence associated with the Arden estate. She is consistently associated with pain, death, hunger, and sickness. For example, she is introduced as "tiny and thin with a heart-shaped face and

haunted eyes,” with pajamas “hanging limp on her meagre frame (10). Furthermore, she is particularly interested in disease, and is in the process of creating an “almanac of ailments” listing “all the illnesses known to afflict mankind” (98). Notably, she is immediately connected to one of the novel’s many spectral interlopers—a boy Adam Godley Jr. spots from a passing train at the beginning of the novel. Adam is deeply troubled by the boy’s “pinched face and enormous eyes” and his “hungry scrutiny” (7). As Adam reflects on the boy’s gaze, he directly addresses some of the novel’s central concerns with the problem of identity, asking “How can he be a self and other others since the others too are selves, to themselves?” and concludes “The child on the train was a sort of horizon to him and he a sort of horizon to the child” (8-9). Just as Adam Jr. shifts his attention away from the boy, he encounters Petra in the hall and “yet again he sees in his mind the child’s face at the train window” (9). Notably like d’Arcy, Petra and the boy are distinguished by their starved and haunting glance, a glance which troubles Adam by seemingly calling out to and even challenging his selfhood.

Much like d’Arcy, Petra is frequently associated with a history “too awful to relate.” Beyond her vague awareness of the conflicts surrounding the unnamed Blount forebear discussed earlier, she is frequently associated with haunting and the returned dead; Adam Jr. remembers her as a “mummified” baby wrapped in a blanket. Additionally, his grandmother tells him, “you’ll think your arse is haunted” at Petra’s birth after describing the newborn Petra as “one [who] has been here before” (14; 9). Her haunted and starved body recreates another trend that Kelleher associates with the feminized depiction of Famine by revealing a breakdown in domesticity as the maternal form is shown as devoid of life and fertility (6-7). The way that Adam connects Petra’s starved frame to the boy’s hungry glance clearly invokes this fear and suggests that the remnants of the Famine are not exclusively located on the Famine Road leading to the Arden estate. Indeed, in their hungry, beseeching eyes, the boy and Petra bring the unflinching eye of Famine art into the very heart of the estate.

Furthermore, by blurring the lines between life and death and the human animal, Petra represents what David Lloyd (2008) has described as the “Indigent sublime” of Famine memory. According to Lloyd, the Famine challenges ideas of subjectivity and selfhood by threatening to annihilate the self. Much like Morash, Lloyd identifies a unique trauma in the idea of the Famine where human life was brought to the threshold of death (50-51). This connection is most evident in the novel when Petra’s brother remembers her sleepwalking “with her eyes rolled up into her head and her mouse-claws lifted in front of her chest”, an image immediately reminiscent of that quintessential example of the living dead, the zombie. This image also blurs the lines between the human and animal in Petra’s “mouse-claws” (11). By recasting this bodily breakdown in aesthetic terms, Lloyd’s concept makes it easy to see how the problem of the Famine is, in many ways, the problem of *The Infinities*. The conflict of identity at a point of liminal extremity dominates Banville’s novel, from the seemingly subconscious Gothic subtext, to old Adam’s state between life and death, to the very narrative voice of the text, which slips back and forth between Hermes and old Adam, often with no indication as to who is currently the narrator. All of this seems to deny the plausibility of clearly demarcated identities, favoring, rather, the infinite (or infinities) found in the sublime extreme of Famine memory.

By acting as a kind of representational center for *The Infinities*’s most notable engagements with Irish cultural memory, Petra takes on a multiplicitious identity unique in this novel invested in the problem of identity. She is not merely blurred with another character in the ways that Old Adam, Hermes, and Zeus are merged in the novel’s narration. Rather, in

much the same way that Eleanor d'Arcy contains all the aspects of the Famine experience and the fall of the Big House that Lawless's story cannot represent, Petra is forced to contain and express the whole problem of the Irishness of the Arden estate. In fact, one could even argue that Petra enacts this representation on her own body at the end of the novel when she cuts herself in a part of a personal ritual which has left "[t]he underside of her arm cicatriced all along its length" (278). In her act of self-harm, Petra maps the Famine Road that leads to Arden house on her body, turning herself into a vessel for the history that simmers just below the surface of the text.

By casting Petra and the estate as receptacles for the history of the Famine and the problems of Irish literary tradition, Banville creates a novel that is more than just an exploration of Famine memory, a Gothic tale, or a Big House novel. Rather, he engages with the philosophical and representational problems central to all three in his expansion of the Amphytrion myth, latching onto their implications for defining personal identity and its relationship to history. In doing so, he follows Lawless in showing an awareness of the ways that history can strain the bounds of literary convention, in much the same way that it can erode the boundaries of conventional notions of identity. Thus, much like Lawless's essay and short story, the novel is an experimental attempt at thoroughly integrating form and content, a postmodern concern cast in a particularly Irish register.

Notes

- 1 This paper came together with considerable input from my colleagues and mentors. I'd like to thank Claire Connolly and the attendees of the 2017 "Great Famine and Social Class" conference for initial feedback on the project, and Jeffrey Longacre and Sierra Senzaki for their comments on the article draft.
- 2 The very existence of an Irish Gothic is a contested matter. There has been considerable debate whether it is best understood as a genre, tradition, or mode. Throughout this essay I will be following Richard Haslam's argument that it is best thought of as a "gradually evolving yet often intermittent suite of themes, motifs, devices, forms, and styles, selected in specific periods, locations, and rhetorical situations, by a succession of different writers (2).
- 3 The British government regularly turned to such public works projects prior to the famine with some success. However, the sheer number of people made destitute by the famine in the years between 1845-1847 made such projects an impractical solution (Ó Gráda 66-67).
- 4 It is worth stressing here that I am pointedly avoiding the language of trauma studies as much as possible in this article. While I acknowledge that it provides a useful vocabulary for describing representations of the famine, I fear that it is irresponsible for a literary critic to speculate on any individual's psychological state in such terms, let alone the state of an entire country. I am more invested in how the Famine is thought of as a trauma and how artists put that cultural conception to work in their projects.
- 5 It would be impossible to detail these debates here. See James S. Donnelly Jr.'s "The Construction of the Memory of the Famine in Ireland and the Irish Diaspora, 1850-1900," Niall O Cioséin's "Was there 'silence' about the famine?," chapter one of Melissa Fegan's *Literature and the Irish Famine, 1845-1919*, and chapter one of Christine Kinealy's *The Great Irish Famine: Impact, Ideology, and Rebellion*.
- 6 Though he complicates this position in *Dissolute Characters: Irish Literary History through Balzac, Sheridan Le Fanu, Yeats, and Bowen*, W. J. McCormick makes a similar argument in his

contribution to *The Field Day Anthology*. More recently Christina Morin has echoed this interpretation of the Irish Gothic (1-3).

7 In many ways, this can be seen as an expansion on Julian Moynahan's argument that nearly all literature produced by the Anglo-Irish is a response to their insecure position as a "hyphenated culture" (6-10).

8 A prime example of this is Patrick O'Malley's argument in *Catholicism, Sexual Deviance, and Victorian Gothic Culture*. (2-4).

9 Examples of this abound. The foundational Big House novel, Maria Edgeworth's *Castle Rackrent* (1800), establishes this template quite clearly, but even more experimental works like Banville's own *Birchwood* draw on these conventions consistently.

10 The Encumbered Estates Act of 1848 facilitated the fast and cheap sale of Irish estates rendered bankrupt by the famine (Moynihan 76).

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Simultaneous Past and Present in The Sea

Passado e Presente Simultâneos em O Mar

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Abstract: *Time is complex in Banville's novels in that they constantly feature tense switching, chronological confusion, and characters who are always casting a look back to the past for an escape from the present. In The Sea, Banville's experimentation with tenses reflects his conception of time, particularly, the complex relationship between past and present. Part one of this article, focusing on Max's childhood memory, examines how the blurring of the past and present selves, resulting from frequent tense switching and the notable use of the historical present, destabilizes the temporal gap between the narrator and the narrated within retrospective narration. Part two, concerning Max's present, proposes to compare the portrayal of the present-day Cedars in the two parts of the novel, and proves the present to be elusive since Max's experience is not contemporaneous with the time of narration. Drawing on Max's various experiences of an alternative space, part three proceeds to argue that Max's entire act of narration constructs a similar alternative space where past and present are engendered simultaneously. The dubious existence of the self in this alternative space suggests a defiance against the deictic center as I-here-now.*

Keywords: *simultaneous past and present, tense switching, alternative space, act of narration.*

Resumo: *O tempo é complexo nos romances de Banville, pois constantemente apresentam mudança de tempos verbais, confusão cronológica e personagens que estão sempre lançando um olhar para o passado para uma fugir do presente. Em O Mar, a experimentação de Banville com tempos verbais reflete sua concepção de tempo, particularmente a complexa relação entre passado e presente. A primeira parte deste artigo, ao focar a memória infantil de Max, examina como o embaçamento entre os "eus" do passado e do presente, como resultado da troca frequente de tempos verbais e do uso notável do presente histórico, desestabiliza a lacuna temporal entre o narrador e o narrado na narração retrospectiva. A segunda parte, referente ao presente de Max, propõe comparar o retrato da família atual, os Cedars, nas duas partes do romance e provar que o presente é ilusório, pois a experiência de Max não é contemporânea ao tempo da narração. Com base nas várias experiências de Max de um espaço alternativo, a terceira parte argumenta que todo o ato de narração de Max constrói um espaço alternativo semelhante, onde passado e presente são gerados simultaneamente. A existência duvidosa do eu neste espaço alternativo sugere um desafio contra o centro dêitico como eu-aqui-agora.*

Palavras-chave: *Passado e presente simultâneos; troca de tempos verbais; espaço alternativo; ato de narração.*

Banville is fascinated with time, particularly the relationship between past and present. As he questions repeatedly in *Time Pieces*, his Dublin memoir: "When does the past become the past" and "What transmutation must the present go through in order to become the past" (4).

The author's questions are echoed by his protagonist Max Morden in his continuous exploration of memory in *The Sea*. By examining the use of tense in this novel, I argue that Max's narration constructs an alternative space, where past and present becomes simultaneous. For one thing, tense switching challenges the temporal gap between past and present underlying the retrospective narration, and questions the perpetuated present with synchronized experience and narration. For another, generated through the act of narration, both past and present have no preexistence and acquire a non-sequential simultaneity.

Many critics approach the problem of time in *The Sea* from a thematic study of memory, whereas the conception of past and present in relation to the act of narration, or "the temporal logic of storytelling" (Currie 2), calls for more attention. Time needs to be reconsidered beyond the past and present division presumed in the mode of remembering. As Laura P. Z. Izarra compares the entire narration in *The Sea* to a dream, her suggestion of "a confluence of time" with "a self at a simultaneous past, present and future" opens up more possibilities to interpret narrative time (146-7). Joakim Wrethed explores temporality encapsulated in the issue of ekphrasis in light of "the phenomenology of life" and argues that the novel "is a literary enactment of living-through, which follows the temporal laws not of exteriorized reality but of life itself" (204).¹

Additionally, although many have noted a common feature of tense switching in Banville's works, few have systematically examined how it affects the conception of time within *The Sea*.² The unnaturalness of tense in literature has been examined alongside an increasing attention to the narrating process and a rising use of present tense.³ That tenses should match the division of time into past, present, and future proves to be a rule of factual use and is too restricted for literary practice. Indeed, any creative use of tense seems to contribute to a re-configuration of narrative time and a new conception of time. *The Sea* is a typical case in that it abounds with the historical present tense, intermittent present-tense narration, and frequent tense switching. Its tense deployment exemplifies what Irmtraud Huber considers "an emancipation from the mimetic paradigm" (15). Therefore, a study of tense will help explicate the convoluted relationship between self, time, and narration in the novel.

Blurred Past and Present

Within a retrospective narration, there is a present narrator, intrusive or invisible, telling a past story. In the case of the intrusive one, as Huber points out when explicating the deictic use of the present tense, the tense difference between past and present makes discernible both the temporal gap and the narrative levels (24). *The Sea* with intense narrative self-consciousness, however, adopts frequent tense switching and there is also a notable use of the historical present. Therefore, the gap between past and present, and that between narrator and the narrated are blurred. I argue that tense switching and the historical present destabilize the retrospective mode by blurring particularly the narrator "I" and the narrated "I."

In *The Sea*, most cases of tense switching occur in relation to the use of the pronoun "I" which results in confusion between the narrated version of Max (young Max) and Max as the narrator (old present-day Max). The first scene featuring the historical present is about the Graces on the beach. Even before the large chunk of present-tense employment, tense switching occurs frequently. The beginning of one paragraph reads: "I do not know for how long Chloe had been standing on the dune before she jumped." (29). The use of present tense is understandable yet peculiar because in previous paragraphs in the same section, except for a

couple of self-reflexive comments, related experience is invariably expressed in past tense as “I noticed” and “I was sure” (27-9), indicating a retrospective narration. In this case, however, in place of the past “I” is the present remembering self. The present intrusion highlights a significant process of narration and remembering. Reliability of memory is not taken for granted as memory fails the first-person narrator. Much of the confusion caused by tense variation indicates a blur between the past and present selves instead of division, as if there is no point in distinguishing between the two.

A transitional shift with aspectual verbs slips in before the historical present takes over. The transition marks a turn from the rigid tense-time correspondence to a flexible deployment of tense. The key paragraph opens as follows: “They played a game, Chloe and Myles and Mrs. Grace, the children lobbing a ball to each other over their mother’s head and she running and leaping to try to catch it, mostly in vain” (31-2). After this sentence all is related in the present tense. The main clause of the sentence is conveyed in the past tense, but the sentence includes notable imperfective aspectual verbs like “lobbing” and “running.” Aspect and tense are usefully distinguished by Suzanne Fleischman: “Unlike tense, however, aspect is not a relational category, nor is it deictic; it is not concerned with relating the time of a situation to any other time point, but rather with how the speaker chooses to profile the situation” (13; emphasis original). Non-relational and non-deictic are features that Max seeks in aspectual verbs and his overall tense manipulation. The aspectual feature of verbs helps ease the divisive tense-based temporality. More importantly, it offers an alternative to retrospective narration. The transition enunciates Max’s manipulation of ways to re-present the past.

The historical present brings about more confusion upon narrative levels. Switching is not even necessary to enact the blurring of temporal boundaries because the historical present is defined as a rhetorical device that “uses the present tense to narrate past events” (Huber 9). The form itself is a breach of retrospective narration. As the narration in the novel leans toward consistent use of the present tense, authorial intrusion becomes less visible. Within the present-tense playing scene, Max’s involvement is again featured: “I imagine hitting him [Mr. Grace], punching him in the exact centre of his hairy chest as Chloe had punched her brother. Already I know these people, am one of them. And I have fallen in love with Mrs Grace” (32). While the violent impulse and other contextual information point to the viewpoint of young Max, the tense concerning Chloe and Myles’s frolic play in the past perfect suggests old Max’s viewpoint, which is incompatible with the historical present scenario. How does one tell whether it is the desire of young Max or the imagination of present-day Max? The consistent use of present tense deliberately blurs the two by erasing the temporal difference in retrospective narration. It would not be a problem to use the historical present in a third-person narration or in a first-person narration without much self-reflection. *The Sea* engages with temporal complexity because of its intense self-consciousness.

The blurring of past and present is reinforced when the historical present encounters the foregrounded artistic self-consciousness. The historical present is justified when Max as a rememberer adopts a painterly eye. He tends to compare memorable scenes and persons as paintings in that the process of remembering is likened to that of appreciating a picture. The comparison highlights the viewpoint of a spectator. In this way, the hierarchical narrative division between the narrator and narrated obtains physical existence as the frame of a painting. The painter stands outside the frame whereas the painted is always framed within.

Nevertheless, Banville’s artistic self-consciousness does not allow such a simple installation of a frame. The present tense breaks the frame, as observation comes not

necessarily from the present-day Max as a painter but possibly from young Max as a secret voyeur. A striking example is Max's memory of Mrs. Grace washing Rose's hair. The opening line, "I see this one as a tableau" (221), and the entire remembered incident imply a spectator outside of the frame with his attentive gaze. Yet, the present tense allows for an alternative stance for young Max whose view is equally compatible with these statements: "I see her toes in the long grass" and "I have a clear glimpse of her pendent breasts" (222). As shown above, tense switching and the resulted tense complexity not only affect the perception of past and present, but also force us to reconsider the nature of observer as the present narrator or the participant in the past. One may question the involvement of young Max within this discussion since he does not appear in this context. But the loss of young Max's viewpoint has always been a concern for the narrator Max. Without the previous experience of young Max as a witness, how does the memory of old Max come into being? The validity of memory should have both young and old Max as prerequisites. Otherwise, memory becomes a pure imagination that old Max has conjured. Indeed, the duality in subjectivity has been repeatedly sought after in the course of Max's narration. The questions of "Where am I, lurking in what place of vantage" (Sea 10) and "what phantom version of me is it that watches us" (137) mark Max's self-conscious exploration of how memory is formed.

Neil Murphy points out Banville's temporal innovation in merging the verbal and the visual as follows: "The fusion and mirroring of different ontological levels in the novel represents an attempt to move beyond representational and temporally sequential narrative forms" (77). The conception of time is reconfigured in Banville's multi-layered narrative matrix with memory, dream, artistic critique, and daily observation of the Cedars. The historical present constitutes an alternative existence beyond the past and present opposition. Its conjunction with Banville's intense self-consciousness weakens the retrospective mode of narration. As a result, the historical present in *The Sea* cannot be reduced to a rhetorical device which vivifies the representation of memory. Instead, it is a significant indication of Banville's use of non-mimetic or even de-temporalized tense.

One question to be addressed is the selective and uneven tense alternation in the novel. If there is a tendency to de-temporalize tense, especially in the use of the present tense, why are some memories rendered in present tense while the rest remains in the past? Notably, tense switching and the historical present are not employed in Max's memories of Anna. Instead of viewing the use of the past tense as conforming to a retrospective convention, I argue that Max chooses the past tense because the memory of Anna is too traumatic to fictionalize and frame as tableaux. Despite the seemingly plain description in the past tense within certain sessions, Max is highly conscious of time and tense concerning Anna. For instance, when both of them try to come to terms with Anna's disease and her impending death, Max remarks: "we sought escape from an intolerable present in the only tense possible, the past, that is, the faraway past" (99). The past and the present tenses are likened to two spaces offering optional residence. Max also notices Anna's use of tense after the diagnosis: "By then the past tense was the only one she cared to employ" (155). Anna's choice of the past tense indicates her resolution to make an end of the life she has had before the disease. In both cases, tense is not taken for granted. Instead, they reflect Max's flexible view of tense and time. Max's revisiting of the Cedars is also illustrative for an inconsistent use of tense. The revisiting registers both an escape from the present without Anna—like their escape into the past tense in the above-mentioned quotation—and also a yearning to leave Anna in the past. Yet Max's hope to seek refuge at the Cedars is not gratified, which will be shown in next section.

Present as Fictional

When the bond between tense and time is cut, the past and present tenses become equally fictional in narration. If past and present in retrospective narration cannot be distinguished because of tense switching and the use of the historical present, the seemingly immediate and actual present at the Cedars is also questioned. Although Max strives to establish the present as solid through his pervasive use of the present tense regarding his return, the present remains slippery. The simultaneity of experience and the act of narration sustained by the present tense cannot be verified.

Based on notable variations in the use of tense, I propose to compare the two parts of the novel to further unravel the tense and time relationship. In an interview, Banville comments on *The Sea*: “There are really two books there – one set in the past, that is quite direct and has a pulse that’s like the sea: wave sentences, pulsating, while in the present-day narrative, when Max Morden is talking about himself in the present, the style goes back to that of *Shroud*” (Friberg 203-4; emphasis added). Although Banville’s “two books” roughly points to Max’s past and present life, the tension between past and present is stressed. Past and present are inseparable. Yet, the two-part division ingenuously registers the tension and Max’s different attitudes toward both his past and present. That the two parts are allocated exactly the same number of pages in the Picador edition, as Rüdiger Imhof points out (172), also invites a parallel and comparative reading. Additionally, many correspondences across the two parts are suggestive of repetition or a gesture of correction, such as the depiction of the robin and the cat, and the thought-provoking repetition of “Everything seems to be something else” (65, 138).

In the first part of the novel, Max’s stay at the Cedars stands out for its pervasive use of the present tense as opposed to his memories of childhood and Anna. After a brief opening section about the day when the gods departed, the narration shifts to the present Cedars. A brief introduction of the Cedars with its detailed layout, doors and windows is all rendered in the present tense. So are Max’s concomitant sentiments.

I am amazed at how little has changed in the more than fifty years that have gone by since I was last here. Amazed, and disappointed, I would go so far as to say appalled, for reasons that are obscure to me, since why should I desire change, I who have come back to live amidst the rubble of the past? (4)

The renewed impression seems to suggest that Max has just arrived at the Cedars. The present tense strikes the reader with a sense of immediacy, and Max’s act of narration, his experience and thoughts are all synchronized.⁴ As more of Max’s experience at the Cedars is registered in the present tense, simultaneous narration seems to be an inevitable recourse.⁵

However, the portrayal of the Cedars with its daily routine, or as Banville has it “the present-day narrative,” takes only a small part in the first part of the book and it serves to punctuate Max’s endless memories as fillers. In most cases, the present occurrences are absorbed by timeless narration in form of the habitual present, before giving way to another account of the past. For instance, Max’s memory of his first encounter with the Graces is followed by a paragraph describing the present. Max notices his subconscious whistling while Colonel Blunden’s wireless next door leads to his reflection upon the Colonel’s weekly activities. After this present-day interruption, Max’s memory of the Graces continues. Nothing much happens in the present. Some moments amount to simultaneous narration, but the main

function of the present is to balance out Max's obsession with the past.

In the second part of the novel, Max's experience at the present-day Cedars seems to lapse into the past, in contrast with the perpetual present in the first part. A sharp contrast is shown in Max's recounting of his arrival at the Cedars which marks the beginning of the first part.

It was an evening just like that, the Sunday evening when I came here to stay, after Anna had gone at last. Although it was autumn and not summer the dark-gold sunlight and the inky shadows, long and slender in the shape of felled cypresses, were the same, and there was the same sense of everything drenched and jewelled and the same ultramarine glitter on the sea. I felt inexplicably lightened; it was as if the evening, in all the drench and drip of its fallacious pathos, had temporarily taken over from me the burden of grieving. (146)

Unlike the previous quotation from the first part with an immediacy verging on impossibility, this excerpt conforms to the retrospective convention by converting the arrival to a past event. Wrethed points out that the repetition of "the same" banishes the temporal distance of fifty years (207). Yet the temporal distance between the arrival and the narration is obvious. All description and sentiments are naturalized in a retrospective glow. The emphatic repetition of the arrival accounts for a change in Max's mind.

Equally conspicuous are Max's nearly opposite impressions of the present Cedars within his "two" arrivals. In the first part, the present Cedars seems to be overtaken by his memory. Hence, the similarity is stressed and he observes that "little has changed." It is not the present Cedars that he sees but a past he *recognizes*. In the second part, on the contrary, Max is shocked by the realness of the present as different from what he remembers. When Max is introduced to his room by Miss V., he observes: "I experienced a sense almost of panic as the real, the crassly complacent real, took hold of the things I thought I remembered and shook them into its own shape" (156-7). While the past seems to erase the present in the first part, the present starts to gain its independence in the second. In her phenomenological investigation of the alliance between places and the body in Max's mourning and homecoming, Linara Bartkuvienė notes: "Max seems to be re-entering not only the places per se but also the past of a world that is gone forever" and that Max's homecoming offers him only "a considerable ambiguity, rather than reciprocal affinity" that he expects (92-3). The fact that the striking sense of displacement is selectively narrated after the "second" arrival reaffirms Max's renewed attempt at homecoming in the second part.

By recounting the arrival in the past tense and acknowledging the present Cedars, Max seeks to readjust his experience at the Cedars and confront his current problems. Indeed, the past tense is applied in more instances such as Bun's visit, the day that the colonel's daughter fails to turn up, and the night when Max blacks out. The last instance of the present-tense use at the Cedars occurs after Max comes to consciousness from the black-out night. Yet it soon shifts back to the past tense in a paragraph that jarringly includes both "she [Miss V.] says" and "she said" (262-3). The shift seems to be a succumbing gesture to the lapse of time and a resignation to the fictionality of presentness put up by the present tense.

Moreover, simultaneous narration is disavowed openly in the second part of the novel. Max describes a conversation between Miss V. and him as such: "We are in the lounge, sitting in the bay of the bow window, as so often. The day outside is bright and cold, the first real day

of winter we have had. All this in the historic present” (248).⁶ This is the only self-reflexive reference in the narration concerning and debunking the “present” of the Cedars. On the one hand, it severs the tense and time correspondence. The conversation turns out to be prior to instead of contemporaneous with the act of narration. The act of narration recedes and becomes indiscernible within the text. On the other hand, this self-conscious gesture uncovers Max’s previous attempt to presentify and perpetuate his stay at the Cedars.

Max’s varied views upon past and present are drawn from a comparison between two parts of the novel. Narration in the first part perpetuates the present at the Cedars by consistently applying the present tense in order to establish a refuge from the pains of bereavement. The peaceful life at the present-day Cedars is idealized and matches the merry memories of the Graces. Max sustains this delicate correspondence between past and present to facilitate his journey of return. In the second part, problems are uncovered beneath the peaceful disguise at the Cedars in the present, aligning to the traumatic outcome of the Graces in the past. Neither his memory nor the present-day Cedars offers Max the solace he desires. A general resignation to the past tense in the second part suggests the transience of happiness and the ultimate failure of his retreat to the past.

An Alternative Space of Narration

The first section of this article has shown a process of narration in continuous struggle between a narrated past and a present of narration. The second section has identified a temporal gap between Max’s stay at the present-day Cedars and the time of narration. With simultaneous narration debunked, two options emerge to interpret the narrative present. Max’s self-conscious gesture to the historical present offers a partial solution to the tense complexity. In the second interpretation, the present simply refers to the present of narration. This last part focuses on the second interpretation in order to elaborate on Max’s complex conception of past and present. By exploring his various experiences of an alternative space, I argue that Max’s entire narration creates a similar alternative space where the validity of both the past and present is questioned. There is only a constructed relativity of *past* and *present* engendered through the act of narration. For Max, the past is dependent on the process of narration and remembering, while the present comes to be merely a reliving of the past. In turn, they acquire a simultaneous or even non-temporal interdependence.

In the novel, Max has several inarticulate experiences of an imagined space through “inexplicable transport” (97). In the first case, Max compares the torturous days he suffered, when accompanying Anna in the hospital, to “a twilit netherworld” and the dying moment of “pre-departure” (96-7). “Twilit” and “pre-departure” both indicate a sense of liminality in terms of the day-and-night, and life-and-death oppositions. Max also remarks “it has all begun to run together, past and possible future and impossible present” (96). It seems that the special circumstances help shape a particular space where the normal conception of time is inapplicable.

Moreover, in delineating this special space, Max enumerates other instances which elicit similar encounters.

Strange as it was, however, this imagined place of *pre-departure* was not entirely unfamiliar to me. On occasion in the past, in moments of inexplicable transport, in my study, perhaps, at my desk, immersed in words, paltry as they may be, for even the second-rater is sometimes inspired, I had felt myself break through the membrane of

mere consciousness into another state, one which had no name, where ordinary laws did not operate, where time moved differently if it moved at all, where *I was neither alive nor the other thing* and yet more vividly present than ever I could be in what we call, because we must, the real world. And even years before that again, standing for instance with Mrs. Grace in that sunlit living room, or sitting with Chloe in the dark of the picture-house, *I was there and not there, myself and revenant, immured in the moment and yet hovering somehow on the point of departure*. Perhaps all of life is no more than a long preparation for the leaving of it. (97-8; emphasis added)

Two kinds of experiences are conjured up as analogous to Max's imagined pre-departure. The first kind, as the first half of the excerpt shows, concerns Max's particular preoccupation with words. A mysterious state of being in words and out of consciousness suggests a space of words as singular. "Another state" affirms the alterity of this space as beyond the usual conception of time and the life and death dichotomy. Assertively, what Max means by "more vividly present" is a negation of the real-world present. Moreover, this space of words points to a narrative self-consciousness typical in Banville's novels. As Derek Hand observes, "All his [Banville's] writing is concerned with the act of writing itself: it is a self-conscious, self-aware, and ultimately self-reflexive art" (220). The second kind concerns the process of remembering. Apparently, it describes Max's experience that occurred "years before." Yet the retrospective mode invariably implies and posits a remembering process that entails the problematic existence of the self. In other words, it is the narrator Max who possesses the experience rather than young Max. For young Max is already a remembered version and cannot possibly experience the remembering transport. Hence, the process of remembering enables a dubious existence of the self or, as Murphy puts it, "[a] slippage between different temporal versions of himself [Max]" (110). The blurred past and present are a result of the dubious existence of the self within the act of remembering.

The two kinds of experiences above share a common attribute of alterity involving a dubious existence of the self, transcending the divisions of past and present, life and death, and consciousness and unconsciousness. Thus, I argue that Max's act of narration, incorporating both his imagination and memory, helps install an alternative space beyond the usual concepts of time and self. Although Max seldom distinguishes the act of narration from the act of remembering, the unique space of words reflects his underlying concern with narration. This deep-rooted concern with narration is pronounced in Max's dream about typing his will on a typewriter with the letter "I" missing. The loss of "I" stresses that the self cannot be articulated, reinforcing the dubious existence of "I" in the autonomy of words. Ultimately, the alternative space of narration registers Max's navigation through the possibility and impossibility of saying "I."

Banville's view of writing also authorizes Max's alternative space of narration. In several interviews Banville has likened his fiction writing to a dream world. The repetitive comparison indicates that the process of writing is inaccessible. As Banville maintains, "the person who wrote the book that you love is not me. He ceased to exist when I stood up from my desk. And he has no affects, he has no affects at all. There's nobody there" (Haughton and Radley 868). Rejecting to identify with the person that writes, Banville postulates almost an identical view with Max who claims to have penetrated the "membrane of mere consciousness." Both of them have recognized the alterity of the space of words.

Within Max's alternative space of narration, past and present become simultaneous and shed light on more cases of tense anomalies. On one occasion, Max remembers walking down Station Road when he was a child. A seemingly corrective sentence is inserted: "I am walking down Station Road" (12). But the rest of the walk is all rendered in the past tense. One may argue that the present-tense insertion is another case of Max's self-conscious use of the historic present. Yet this assumption is untenable since right before the insertion, Max claims to have heard the Colonel next door. It is more cogent to interpret Max's present walk as fictional and metaphorical, since the walk is not contextualized by any present-day circumstances. In other words, the process of narration and remembering a walk down Station Road becomes an imagined experience of walking down the same road during the process of narration. The present acquires its metaphorical existence as a reliving of the past through the act of narration. As the present "walk" requires only the act of narration and no contextualization, the isolated sentence in the present tense serves to parallel the walk in memory.

Furthermore, the simultaneous past and present engendered in the alternative space of narration are testified by Max's notion of concentration. Similar substitution of the past tense with the present recurs in Max's memories about Mrs. Grace and Chloe: "So there I *am*, in that Edenic moment at what was suddenly the centre of the world" and "I *am* in the Strand Café, with Chloe, after the pictures and that memorable kiss" (89, 160; emphasis added). In both cases, the present tense highlights the present-ness of narration and remembering. Max justifies the possibility of transcending the past and present with an effort of concentration in his memory of Chloe: "Remarkable the clarity with which, when I concentrate, I can see us there. Really, one might almost live one's life over, if only one could make a sufficient effort of recollection" (160). Likewise, in the case of Mrs. Grace, an effort of concentration is also implied: "Let me linger here with her a little while [...]; she will be displaced soon enough from the throbbing centre of my attentions" (86-7). Max's effort to concentrate seeks not a time travel but a transcendence over the past and present dichotomy. Past and present are not temporally defined anymore. Rather, they come into being at the same time within the act of narration. While the present is a renewed experience of the past, the past is a present construction.

Max's concentration corresponds to Banville's conception of "artistic concentration" and foregrounds a narrative manipulation over the authenticity of remembering. In an essay entitled "Making Little Monsters Walk" Banville remarks:

[...] action in a novel is not a matter of stage management but of *artistic concentration*. Under the artist's humid *scrutiny* the object grows warm, it stirs and shies, giving off the blush of verisimilitude; the flash of his relentless *gaze* strikes them and the little monsters rise and walk, their bandages unfurling. (111-2; emphasis added)

Banville highlights the authorial agency that comes with artistic concentration. Max's notion of concentration reveals the authorial self-consciousness. Underlying the desire to concentrate is the control Max holds over those memories, which resembles Banville's authority over the characters he creates.

Related to the temporal ambivalence in Max's alternative space of narration, spatial representations become slippery too. At the end of the first part of the novel, watching his image in the mirror, Max is transported to a dream-like scenario on the beach. Echoing the

boat of death in his previous rumination of pre-departure, Max discerns “a black ship in the distance” and he chants: “I am there. [...] I am there, almost there” (132). Instead of being *here*, Max locates himself on the other side as *there*. On defying the geographical dichotomy, the chants reaffirm the possible split of the subjectivity, similar to the situation where “I was there and not there” (98). Taken together, in the alternative space of narration, the deictic center of I-here-now is destabilized, when subjectivity, along with geographical and temporal locations, becomes questionable. The act of narration transports Max away from the real world and from the comfortable domain of language itself.

To cope with his bereavement, Max seeks solace in the past. However, revisiting the Cedars does not guarantee a possible return. At most, Max’s journey back to the Cedars is a navigation between the past and present both of which remain elusive and require redefinition. Along the way, his endeavor turns out, more and more, to be conceptive, as he engages in experimentation with narration. While the second part of the novel overshadows the first by exposing its deceitful idyll, the second part, by no means, offers a promise of comfort and ease. Max’s experience of the dreamy space, embedded right in the middle of the novel, captures the in-betweenness within which Max is trapped and anticipates future futile struggles with narration and remembering. He is and will be always almost there.

Notes

- 1 According to Wrethed’s study of Michel Henry’s phenomenology of life, the “auto-affectivity of life” constitutes and yet cannot be accommodated in the exteriorized reality (188). The former corresponds to the felt present of life and the phenomenology of life, whereas the latter corresponds to a world of representation (208). In particular, examining Bonnard’s paintings and Max’s narration side by side, Wrethed stresses the similarity between the two (192). He considers the failure of representation in both as exemplary of the inarticulate life which is the “enigmatic core” that “moves Max Morden through the narrative” (188-205).
- 2 Karen McCarthy in her recent article has addressed a case of tense shifting in Max’s imagination of the old sailor “Oh, to be him. To have been him” (5). She argues that the past perfect registers Max’s aversion to the present (172).
- 3 As Suzanne Fleischmann notes, the use of present tense in narration is “consciously or unconsciously antinarrative” (7) since “retrospective intelligibility” is a prerequisite to narrative convention (21). In other words, the use of the present tense against narrative tradition pioneers an interrogation of the naturalness of tense.
- 4 Regarding the mode of narration in this case, interpretation can be contestable between interior monologue and simultaneous narration. The core of this contention lies in the conceptualization of narration. Dorrit Cohn elaborates “self-narration” in the present tense as featuring both the automaticity of interior monologue and the signal of quotation suggestive of narration (*Transparent Minds* 165). The difference between narration and interior monologue is addressed fully in her other work to underline the breakthrough of simultaneous narration (*Distinction* 96-108).
- 5 Many scholars, such as Suzanne Fleischmann, Dorrit Cohn, and Monika Fludernik, have commented on the impossibility of simultaneous narration or narrative present as to synchronize the act of narration and the experience of events. It has been recognized as an experiment upon narrative time yet also a peculiar formula established for long.
- 6 This quotation does not sufficiently justify the historical present as a consistent solution to the

present-day narrative in the novel. The self-reflexivity suggests more of a tense sensitivity and flexibility than a determined choice of temporal expression. Likewise, the semblance of simultaneous narration in many parts of the novel does not justify this mode of narration throughout the novel. Neither mode on its own can do justice to the complex relationship between tense and time in *The Sea* as a whole.

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*The Poetics of ‘Pure Invention’: John Banville’s Ghosts**

A Poética da ‘Invenção Pura’: Ghosts, de John Banville

Neil Murphy

Abstract: *This essay argues that John Banville’s Ghosts (1993) may in fact be Banville’s most technically inventive novel, replete as it is with multi-layered ontological levels that repeatedly bring its primary diegetic discourse into communion with other artistic forms – music, paintings, statues, as well as a narrative saturation with other literary antecedents that exceeds anything found elsewhere in his work. Ghosts demonstrates an implicit layering of dialectical levels, in effect a narrative enactment of the multiple worlds theory that so fascinates several of Banville’s narrators. Nowhere else does he generate so comprehensive a model of a multi-level ontological system in which the levels intersect so purposefully as Ghosts. This essay maps out a topography of what is effectively a sophisticated fictional variant on the scientific multiple worlds theory in Ghosts, and offers some perspectives on the significance of this aesthetic model.*

Keywords: Ghosts; pure invention; paintings; intertext; narrative; Vaublin.

Resumo: *Este ensaio argumenta que Ghosts (1993), de John Banville, pode ser considerado o romance mais tecnicamente inventivo de Banville, repleto de níveis ontológicos com diversas camadas que trazem, repetidamente, seu discurso diegético primário em comunhão com outras formas artísticas – música, pinturas, estátuas, bem como uma saturação narrativa com outros antecedentes literários que excedem qualquer coisa encontrada em outro lugar em sua obra. Ghosts demonstra uma camada implícita de níveis dialéticos que são, de fato, uma encenação narrativa da teoria dos múltiplos mundos que tanto fascina muitos dos narradores de Banville. Em nenhum outro lugar ele gera um modelo tão abrangente de um sistema ontológico com diferentes níveis que se cruzam tão propositadamente quanto em Ghosts. Este ensaio mapeia uma topografia do que é efetivamente uma variante fictícia sofisticada da teoria científica de múltiplos mundos em Ghosts, e oferece algumas perspectivas sobre a importância desse modelo estético.*

Palavras-chave: Ghosts; “invenção pura”; pinturas; intertexto; narrativa; Vaublin.

In an interview with Belinda McKeon in 2009, John Banville indicated that he had “moved into another area—pure invention.” This suggests that the novels published from this period onwards represented a shift in his work with respect to the diminished significance of subject and a greater emphasis on what may be termed pure fiction. While all of Banville’s novels are highly inventive, some of the later novels (in particular, *The Infinities* (2009) and *The Blue Guitar* (2015)) clearly abandon the more verifiable historical, philosophical, and geographical contexts that are evident in works like *The Untouchable* (1997), *Shroud* (2002), and *The Sea* (2005). This is not to suggest that the latter novels are any less ‘invented’ than other works by Banville but simply that their inventions are framed against tangible material contexts, while novels like *The*

Infinites and *The Blue Guitar*, in particular, depict fictional contexts that might be more closely associated with “pure invention.” Nonetheless, prior to 2009, *Eclipse* (2000) is also similarly situated in a highly inventive spatial zone, while the earlier *Ghosts* (1993) – which forms the primary focus of this essay – may in fact be Banville’s most radically inventive novel, replete as it is with multi-layered ontological levels that repeatedly bring its primary diegetic discourse into communion with other artistic forms – music, paintings, statues, as well as a narrative saturation with other literary antecedents that exceeds anything found elsewhere in his work. *Ghosts* demonstrates an implicit layering of dialectical levels, in effect a narrative enactment of the multiple worlds theory that so fascinates several of his narrators.¹ In several of the later novels, particularly *The Sea* and *The Blue Guitar*, Banville deploys a doubling of fictional levels by, respectively, integrating the work of Bonnard and, to a lesser extent, Manet, but never does he generate so comprehensive a model of a multi-level ontological system, in which the levels intersect so purposefully, as he does with *Ghosts*. This essay maps out a topography of what is effectively a sophisticated fictional variant on the scientific multiple worlds theory in *Ghosts*, and offers some perspectives on the significance of this aesthetic model.

While self-evident invention is a constant – and often dominant – thread in many of Banville’s novels the extent to which it is permitted to supersede or replace social, historical, and intellectual contexts varies significantly. Novels like *The Book of Evidence* (1989) and *Athena* (1995), published on either side of *Ghosts*, for example, are situated in a largely explicit Irish context, most of which resembles Dublin and its environs, while both are also heavily plot-driven despite their fascination with themes similar to those found in *Ghosts*. In addition, *The Untouchable* comprehensively engages with the figure of Sir Anthony Blunt (re-named Victor Maskell), the curator of the Queen’s pictures who publicly admitted in 1979 that he had been a Soviet spy for decades. *The Untouchable* is historiographic fiction, a version of true history, with Banville’s sources even indicated in the novel’s concluding acknowledgments. Similarly, in *Shroud*, Axel Vander partly echoes Paul de Man, who was posthumously exposed as having written numerous antisemitic articles in the early 1940s. In addition, novels like *The Sea* and *Ancient Light*, while highly inventive, are notionally connected to Banville’s own biography² even if *The Sea* simultaneously engages with the visual arts, particularly via its narrative engagement with the work of Bonnard (*The Sea*). In addition *Ancient Light* may be one of Banville’s most self-reflexive novels, as Mark O’Connell (2013) suggests, given the presence of “JB”, the fictional author of the text (and film script), *The Invention of the Past*, the biography of Axel Vander, who Alex Cleave is set to play (174). Nonetheless, the presence of coherent social contexts anchors such innovations to a recognisable model of the world, even if that world is not always easily comprehensible.

Alternatively, *The Infinites*, narrated by Hermes, and *The Blue Guitar* whose temporal or spatial context is quite difficult to determine,³ are closer to the idea of pure invention. Their narrative contexts are primarily shaped from visual, literary and mythic intertexts and are largely devoid of the kind of fictional historicizing that shape the aforementioned novels. They would thus appear to support Banville’s contention that he has moved to a form of writing characterized by pure invention. However, the trajectory of this apparent evolution is a little troubled, in part because Banville’s work had also previously either evaded tangible encyclopedic specificity or, when used, it is simultaneously disrupted. The early metafictional novels, *Nightspawn* (1971) and *Birchwood* (1973), for example, both undermine whatever generic and historical models they used, while the mirror-image novel, *Mefisto* (1986) reads like an extended hallucinatory adventure. More recently, the novel *Eclipse* is set in a house haunted by

literary ghosts; its narrative focus turns inward to a greater degree than the novels that immediately preceded it and retreats from placing ostensibly coherent subjects like science, history, intellectual history and morality at the centre of the narrators' attention. Banville's own observation that in contrast with the content-heavy *The Untouchable*, *Eclipse* was "as near as I've got to writing a book that has no real center," (qtd. Wallace 2012) is revealing. On a more tangible, indicative level, *Eclipse* is almost exclusively set in a house – a perpetual narrative presence in Banville's work that I have explored in detail elsewhere⁴ and which is synonymous with fiction itself. In a sense, then, both the context and the primary subject coincide in a fictional realm that explores its own possibilities.

But *Eclipse* had a comprehensive precursor model – *Ghosts* – and several critics have observed key compositional similarities between *Ghosts* and a few of Banville's other texts. For example Mark O'Connell (2011), in a discussion of Banville's occasional use of third-person narration, makes several compelling connections between *Ghosts* and *The Infinities* including their shared "cryptic fabulism," (439) while Hedwig Schwall (2010) considers *The Infinities* in the context of the fantastic, tracing its connections to *Birchwood*, *Mefisto*, *Ghosts* and *Eclipse* (103). In addition, Imhof refers to the narrative frame of *Ghosts* as "pure play," and Ralf Hertel (2005) argues that "*Ghosts especially* has a dreamy, unreal quality to it that evades clear demarcations of time and space" (42: emphasis mine). While it is therefore evident that the tendency towards pure invention has always been a constituent part of Banville's work, *Ghosts* is the purest example of this recurring narrative thread. Furthermore, it is a thread that has long been closely connected to a key aspect of Banville's aesthetic, as is obvious in his praise of Beckett in a 1997 interview, in which he professed admiration for his fellow writer's "pure art," particularly with respect to the late "light works at the end of his life," which created a "house for being" that is "the ideal of what every artist should be" (qtd. Schwall 1997, 16). Similarly, Banville's observations about Picasso's alleged preference for his painting "The Three Dancers" (1925) rather than the more famous anti-war painting "Guernica" (1937) offer further insight to the aesthetic significance of pure invention for him: "It [the *Dancers*] was painted as a picture without ulterior motive." His reasoning is that "The Three Dancers" is "a fearsome, indeed a savage, work, but it is pure painting; 'Guernica,' for all its violence and power, was intended as a political statement as well as a work of art, and for that reason it is, essentially, kitsch." (Banville 2014) The issue again relates to Banville's preference for a diminished significance of rhetorical purpose, subject-matter, meaning – with the glittering invention clearly preferred. It is really a question of how far Banville went in the different novels in terms of his pursuit of this aesthetic aim. This essay posits that, with *Ghosts*, Banville exceeds the degree to which he thereafter deployed the notion of 'pure invention' even if it is a thread that repeatedly returns in different guises.⁵

One of Banville's recurring narrative strategies, to render his fictional surfaces self-evidently fictional, is to saturate his storyworlds with intertextual references. Perhaps to a greater degree than elsewhere in Banville's work, *Ghosts* features a deeply intertextual and intratextual universe, in a manner that echoes the breaking of fictive boundaries in many postmodern texts (or what Brian McHale (1996) calls, 'worlds in collision'(59)), while also self-reflexively declaring their invented status. The most immediately obvious set of allusions that break boundaries in *Ghosts* relate to the island itself. Freddie's spectral island is simultaneously the mythical Greek island, Aeaea, yet it is also Cythera, Aphrodite's island, while it is also the rustic fantasy island, Arcady, and Devil's Island (the Cayenne Penal Colony); it is also Laputa from *Gulliver's Travels*, the island in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, the castaway islands in *Robinson*

Crusoe and *The Swiss Family Robinson* (albeit Robertson in *Ghosts*) and it features beehive huts, largely associated with the south-western Irish seaboard, Siren voices, and a strange perpetual music that emanates from the island's core. This web of islands is also spliced through with references to other exotic locations like the Land of Nod and Alice's Wonderland. Furthermore, Banville borrows Professor Kreutznaer's name from Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, whose real name in that novel is also Kreutznaer. The intertextual palimpsest is so heavily rendered that the primary diegetic level of *Ghosts* is actually a proliferation of surfaces rather than a single level. The extraordinary effect is such that our readerly gaze is continually encouraged to look to some intertextual elsewhere. In *Ghosts*, however, this 'elsewhere' is also composed of visual referents as much, if not more than it is with literary, mythical sources.

Ghosts' intertextual palimpsest is interwoven with Banville's most integrated deployment of the visual arts to date. While there is a painting at the centre of *The Book of Evidence*, and an increasing use of allusions to paintings, *Ghosts* significantly extends the presence of the visual arts in Banville's work. On its most overt level, there are multiple references to painters like Modigliani, Corot, Munch, El Greco, and Watteau, and to the fictional painter Vaublin – the primary visual reference-point in the novel – as well as several detailed instances of ekphrasis. Furthermore, references to other art forms are frequently used, like Diderot's views on statues (196-8) and terms related to dance and music – for example, "pas de deux" (179) – and there are numerous references to images, mirrors, perspective, poses, and overt observations about living in "a world of pictures and painted figures" (26). Furthermore, many of the characters are evident fakes; Licht is referred to as a marionette in *Ghosts* (4), Sophie crumples "sideways like a puppet, all arms and knees" (10), Felix makes Freddie think of a "ventriloquist's dummy" (12) and he is also referred to as a "mechanical man" (244), while all the characters are ultimately characterized as a "toy flock" (240). The artistic world-making extends even to the novel's frequent elaborate pictorial descriptions of daily scenes: "And then one day, a day much like any other in that turning season between spring's breathless imminences and the first, gold flourishings of summer, I would look out the window and see that little band of castaways toiling up the road to the house and a door would open into another world" (221). All such indicators are familiar presences in Banville's work prior to *Ghosts* but here they are simply overt textual signals of a far more comprehensive integration of word and image.

The interweaving of the visual and verbal textual levels in *The Book of Evidence* had already offered a telling, if ultimately preliminary, indication of the formal possibilities offered by a narrative integration of paintings and literature. These possibilities are more advanced in *Ghosts*, in which Freddie has been released from prison and is living on an island as an assistant to Professor Kreutznaer, an expert on the work of the fictional painter, Jean Vaublin, a near-anagram of John Banville.⁶ *Ghosts* extends the narrative possibilities of the verbal-visual interaction in a far more comprehensive manner than its immediate predecessor. Its primary narrative frame is predicated on at least two paintings by the eighteenth century French artist, Jean Antoine Watteau, *Gilles* and *L'Embarquement pour Cythère*, while a third, *Le pèlerinage à l'île de Cythère*, may also have a presence in the novel. Freddie explicitly alludes to Watteau's "pèlerinages or a delicate fête galante" (30) and to "Cythera" on several occasions (31; 216), attributing them to Vaublin. *Le monde d'or*, the Jean Vaublin painting that dominates the narrative fabric of *Ghosts* is, to a substantial degree, an amalgam of the three Watteau paintings which in turn mirrors the surface action of Banville's novel. The interweaving of Vaublin, Watteau and Banville is potently conveyed via the way in which the paintings and the novel mirror each

other. Furthermore, the characters that seep from the novel into the imagined painting are also appropriated from other Banville novels. Flora is reborn from “Summer Voices” and “The Possessed” from *Long Lankin*, while Sophie and Felix return from *Mefisto*, and all seem to remember the strange fictive world from their previous incarnations.

Freddie, who himself occupies a curious ontological position in the novel, initially stands separate from the action, observing the characters: “I think of them like the figures in one of Vaublin’s twilit landscapes, placed here and there in isolation about the scene, each figure somehow the source of its own illumination, aglow in the midst of shadows, still and speechless, not dead and yet not alive either, waiting perhaps to be brought to some kind of life” (82). They *are*, after all, characters in a Vaublin/Banville landscape with both fictional and real images overlapping, bleeding into one another until the distinction between them gradually blurs. The castaways, inversions of their mirrored counterparts in the paintings(s), act as pivots between worlds, as the novel continues to permit its surfaces to reflect all of the narrative levels.

Even the consciousness of the characters appears to slip and slide between fictional levels, partially aware but largely puzzled at the non-static nature of their world which ultimately acts as a commentary on the nature of being and how one rationalizes different levels of perception and consciousness. Flora even dreams, at one point, of the golden world (mirroring *Le monde d’or*, which is clearly integrated with her consciousness in the novel):

Flora is dreaming of the golden world.

Worlds within worlds. They bleed into each other. I am at once here and there, then and now, as if by magic. I think of the stillness that lives in the depths of mirrors. It is not our world that is reflected there. It is another place entirely, another universe, cunningly made to mimic ours. Anything is possible there; even the dead may come back to life. Flaws develop in the glass, patches of silvering fall away and reveal the inhabitants of that parallel, inverted world going about their lives all unawares. (55)

Flora’s dream articulates the integrated moving surface that is, in fact, the ontological frame of the novel, while also offering self-reflexive commentary on the manner in which the novel is both itself and other simultaneously—both novel and painting. This process also finds expression in numerous other ways in the novel, as when she notices a color reproduction of *Le monde d’or* in the bedroom which features “a sort of clown dressed in white standing up with his arms hanging, and people behind him walking off down a hill to where a ship was waiting, and at the left a smirking man astride a donkey” (46). The bridge between her own world and that of the painting is further enhanced a few pages later when she looks at Felix and realizes that behind “his shoulder, like another version of him in miniature in a far-off mirror, the man on the donkey in the picture grinned at her gloatingly” (49). Felix is the harlequin in the painting, while Freddie himself is identified as Gilles, the Pierrot, and the other characters in the painting appear to be among those waiting to re-board the ship, as indeed they finally do in the novel.

And yet, despite the persistent parallels, echoes and contiguities, a key difference between painting and prose fiction remains. As G.E. Lessing (1879) influentially argued, in the eighteenth century, painting and literature (for Lessing, poetry) “make use of entirely different means or symbols – the first, namely of form and color in space, the second of articulated sounds in time” (91). Paintings are associated with stillness or spatiality, while a sense of

temporality and movement usually informs literary fiction. There is little doubt that Banville seeks to absorb some of the painterly quality of stasis into his work, particularly since many of his preferred distinctly non-avant garde visual artists are firmly associated with still-lives. Even in *The Book of Evidence* there are moments when Freddie switches to the present tense in the midst of the past tense (“Am I still handcuffed?” 201), illustrating temporal and spatial slippages between what is being told and the narrator’s role as literal observer of his own imagistic tale.

The narratorial shift is far more emphatically rendered in *Ghosts*, in part because the inter-relationship between the different planes of existence (Watteau’s paintings, *Le monde d’or*, and the novel *Ghosts* in the process of writing about itself) are more fully integrated. The beginning of the novel is related by Freddie in the present tense, followed by frequent switches to the past tense. This pattern is repeated throughout the novel, with Freddie’s narrative focal point hovering above some of the unfolding events in the present tense, even if much of the novel is related via the past tense. The impact of this is two-fold. Firstly, Freddie’s present-tense observations about the characters reveal that he occupies – at the beginning of the novel at least – a different ontological level to the others, as he stands aloof and offers his observations of the scene before him, much like one would do with a painting:

There is an old boy in a boater, a pretty young woman, called Flora, of course, and a blonde woman in a black skirt and a black leather jacket with a camera slung over her shoulder. Also an assortment of children: three, to be precise. And a thin, lithe, sallow man with bad teeth and hair dyed black and a darkly watchful eye. His name is Felix.
(5)

The persistent use of the present tense, coupled with the manner in which Freddie observes the figures in his landscape, facilitates the insertion of a series of still moments that mirror the effects of the visual or, more precisely, “the illusion of movement” or “movement arrested” as Stephen Cheeke (2008, 23) has it:

Outside the window the garden stands aghast in a tangle of trumpeting convolvulus. Nothing happens, nothing will happen, yet everything is poised, waiting, a chair in the corner crouching with its arms braced, the coiled fronds of a fern, that copper pot with the streaming sunspot on its rim. (40)

Such tableaux-style moments proliferate in the novel, echoing the stillness that one finds in Vaublin’s *Le monde d’or*, which is also both a reflection of, and a model for, the novel itself – the “illusion of movement” is realized when the temporal sequence of narrative fiction allows the stasis to flow.

The painting itself, to which Banville devotes a detailed ekphrastic section late in the novel (225-231), focuses on the figure of the Pierrot in the painting Gilles who, we are assured, “stands before us like our own reflection distorted in a mirror, known yet strange” (225), reminding us again of the hall of correspondences that the novel is. The painting is a partial reflection of the novel, and vice-versa, while Gilles mirrors Freddie, both in terms of his pure fictionality (“has he dropped from the sky or risen from the underworld?” (225)) and as an overt articulation of a key characteristic of Banville’s art: “His sole purpose, it would appear, is to be painted; he is wholly pose; we feel ourselves to be the spectators at a melancholy comedy.

See how strangely he fits into his costume; he seems not so much to be wearing it as standing behind it, like a cut-out paper doll” (228). The pure artificiality of Gilles can be viewed as a counterpoint to Banville’s own aesthetic disinclination to offer realist representation and, as such, the Watteau/Vaublin aesthetic is a fitting model to intersect with his own fictional world. Furthermore, the painting serves to add further emphasis to Banville’s long-established practice of self-reflexive commentary via the use of metaphoric parallels. In this instance, the ekphrastic commentary is extended to offer insight into the storyworld that the characters themselves inhabit and, furthermore, to offer self-reflexive commentary on the textual frame itself:

This is the golden world. The painter has gathered his little group and set them down in this wind-tossed glade, in this delicate, artificial light, and painted them as angels and as clowns. It is a world where nothing is lost, where all is accounted for while yet the mystery of things is preserved; a world where they may live, however briefly, however tenuously, in the failing evening of the self, solitary and at the same time together somehow here in this place, dying as they may be and yet fixed forever in a luminous, unending instant. (225-31)

Banville’s aesthetic enterprise is rendered clear in these lines and the relevance of the ekphrasis is again shown to be vital to his narrative aesthetic. Whether seeking to momentarily evade the temporal sequence of the textual plot, or forging a series of parallel, self-reflexive commentaries, the significance of the painting in *Ghosts* is immense. It also makes a far-reaching contribution to the extraordinary, complex, multi-faceted hall of mirrors that we encounter in this novel. Mirroring the pure artificiality of Watteau’s commedia dell’arte, while simultaneously textually-echoing the fictive spaces that we encounter elsewhere in Banville, *Ghosts* represents one of Banville’s most accomplished narrative experiments. Everything echoes everything else in this tempestuous island with its “deep, formless song that seemed to rise out of the earth itself” (6).

Banville’s use of ekphrasis, albeit with respect to an imaginary painting, in *Ghosts* has extensive implications. Not only does he offer an ekphrastic meditation on a painting, and “a verbal representation of a visual representation,” as Steven Cheeke has it (168-9), he also folds the static narrative of the painting into the sequential narrative of the novel. The painting is thus allowed to spatially move beyond the frames of its fixed image while the narrative fiction, alternatively, seeks to adopt some of the stillness of the image within its own movement; it suspends time to emphasize the resonating stillnesses in particular moments in the plot. Furthermore, the presence of the painting offers Banville another metaphoric zone within which he may self-consciously articulate his extended observations about art, representation, and the nature of the fictional form. In this, *Ghosts* both confirms and extends the central compulsions which have always been at the heart of Banville’s work. For example, the overt evaluation of the value of Vaublin’s *Le monde d’or* that Freddie offers is simultaneously a commentary on both Watteau’s paintings and Banville’s novel:

There is a mystery here, not only in *Le monde d’or*, that last and most enigmatic of his masterpieces, but throughout his work; something is missing, something is deliberately not being said. Yet I think it is this very reticence that lends his pictures their peculiar power. He is the painter of absences, of endings. His scenes all seem to hover on the point of vanishing. (35-6)

That Banville was drawn to Watteau's work is significant; one of Watteau's first biographers, the Comte de Caylus observed that "His compositions have no subject. They express none of the conflicts of the passions and are consequentially deprived of one of the most affecting characteristics, that is, action." (Weretka 2008). Similarly, Bryson (1981) has suggested that Watteau's paintings are "essentially subjectless," (65) a point echoed in Banville's repeated suggestions in his fiction he has "nothing to say. I have no statements to make, I have no messages to deliver. I simply want to recreate the world as I see it and to provide delight to readers. No messages." (Timmerman 2010). In turn, the reticence, about which Freddie speaks, also suggests a sense of the materiality of things forever suspended beyond one's evaluative methods. Freddie frequently ponders the essential mysteriousness of art, a quality that the novel itself, redolent with the peculiarity of Freddie's own ontological position and the constant reminders of the strangeness of existence, embodies. Or, as Kenny (2009) suggests, "Vaublin's masterpiece, *Le monde d'or*, may itself be taken as a painted analogue of the novel in which it appears," (166) as the following brief ekphrasis illustrates:

Le monde d'or is one of those handful of timeless images that seem to have been hanging forever in the gallery of the mind. There is something mysterious here beyond the inherent mysteriousness of art itself. I look at this picture, I cannot help it, in a spirit of shamefaced interrogation, asking, What does it mean, what are they doing, these enigmatic figures frozen forever on the point of departure, what is this atmosphere of portentousness without apparent portent? There is no meaning, of course, only a profound and inexplicable significance; why is that not enough for me? (94-95)

Banville's doubling of the world, essentially a variant of the *mise en abyme* is achieved by interweaving the visual imagery of Watteau's paintings with the primary narrative, where the "mystery of things is preserved" (231), the thing-in-itself remains hidden, but is luminously present in the artistic presence that is conjured. The illuminations of art and the paintings of Watteau act both as the surface texture of the aestheticized world and as the central metaphor upon which Banville's observations about the artistic process are based. *Ghosts*, unlike many of Banville's previous novels, is freed of the scientific, historical or philosophical systems which gave their plots substance; even the overt engagement with Nietzschean morality in *The Book of Evidence* is far less explicitly emphasised. This represents a conscious decision by Banville to extend the limits of his previous artistic parallels and to directly engage with art itself: "I suppose because the language of science is too systematized – I couldn't incorporate any actual scientific discourse in my book because it stood out too much. And I am fascinated by the surface of things, and painting deals with these. Painting is the triumph of looking, of obsessed scrutiny." (Meany 1993)

In *The Book of Evidence* and in *Ghosts*, the first two novels of the Frames trilogy, paintings serve quite different narrative functions. Freddie's response, in *The Book of Evidence*, to the anonymous painting is mirrored by his failure to "imagine" the various female figures in the novel, especially Josie Bell, via a series of narrative juxtapositions between the subject of the painting and Freddie's victim, in which the nature of "obsessed scrutiny" is constantly revisited. The imagined life of the girl also serves as a potent metaphoric parallel. In *Ghosts*, however, the association between the different ontological levels (intertextual, narrative fiction, painting) is far more comprehensively interwoven, with the fictional painting acting both as its

centre and, at times, a parallel, echoing universe of visual forms. While there are ekphrastic moments in *Ghosts*, they usually serve as aesthetic portals between mirrored fictional ontologies. Thereafter, with Athena, we return to a much less adventurous form of the ekphrastic mode; even though the sequence of catalogue-style responses to the seven fictional paintings each echo aspects of Banville's fictional universe⁷ they do not nearly reach the comprehensive integration that one sees in *Ghosts*.

As a consequence of Banville's literary, mythic, and visual intertextual elaborations, the narrative surface of his novel is infused with a very specific set of aesthetic qualities. In general, there is a profound sense of overt invention apparent – everything already feels transfigured, shaped by artistic process. In addition, a powerful sense of the events having been subjected to an illuminated gaze pervades all, including, most obviously, moments of stillness and silence, or what Kenny (2006) refers to as “Banville's fascination with tableaux,” and “pictorial stillness and silence” (59). This stillness is akin to what Stephen Cheeke (*op. cit.*) refers to as the “for ever now” quality of visual images in his explication of the way complex form intersects with a sense of “art's eternity”:

Aesthetic patterning and form, not merely in the sense of high technical competence, but also in the sense (and the two are indivisible) of complex intelligibility, promise a marvelous and perhaps mystical intersection of the timeless and the temporal or chronologically linear. (51)

Similarly, for George Steiner (2001), the presence of the poetic can engender a crucial distancing – a gesture towards a free zone that fiction, as it evades the responsibilities of social time and space, can theoretically achieve:

Even more than in philosophy, it is through poetics that human consciousness experiences free time. Syntax empowers a multitudinous range of “times.” Remembrance, a frozen present, futurities (as in science fiction) are obvious examples of the free play with time without which the epic poem, the universe of narrative fiction or the film would be impossible. (59)

Typically, of course, stillness is more evidently present in the visual; Steiner claims that “certain paintings ‘temporize,’ generate their own time within time, even beyond the powers of language . . . Such paintings draw us into a time-grid integral wholly to themselves” (59).

It is the contention of this essay that the function of Banville's aesthetic in *Ghosts*, which includes his radical deployment of a deeply purposeful, saturated intertext, is to open up a poeticized space akin to the free, timeless space analogous to that which Steiner and Cheeke allude. The absence of a determinable time or space in *Ghosts*, has a peculiar impact on the veneer of the novel and brings one closer to the notion of “pure invention” than anywhere else in Banville's work, even including those later extraordinary feats of the imagination, *The Infinities* and *The Blue Guitar*. In *Ghosts*, Banville's island novel, a quality of strangeness is ubiquitous – the word strange or its variants are repeated more than ten times in the opening section of the novel. Banville's frequent association of strangeness with the essence of art is of major significance here⁸ because the world that the characters inhabit, the world of pure art, is a world that Freddie repeatedly associates with the quality of strangeness: “The wind in the chimneys, the gulls, all that: the strangeness of things. The strangeness of being here, of being anywhere” (207). It is a world that Banville would revisit many times in

the years since he wrote *Ghosts*, when Hermes holds sway in *The Infinities*, when the very texture of Pierre Bonnard's late interiors seep into the world of *The Sea*, and when Oliver's memories are infused with Manet and, of course, Vaublin, in *The Blue Guitar*. But nowhere does he so comprehensively engender a world of textual ghosts and echoes, of siren songs and visual universes that so fully intermingle with the primary diegetic level, as he does in *Ghosts*.

Notes

* This work was supported with the assistance of a Singapore, Ministry of Education ACRF Tier 1 research grant, for which thanks and appreciation are duly registered.

- 1 In *Ghosts*, Freddie explains the "many worlds theory" as follows: "The universe it says, is everywhere and at every instant splitting into a myriad versions of itself. On Pluto, say, a particle of putty collides with a lump of lead and another, smaller particle is created in the process and goes shooting off in all directions. Every single one of those possible directions, says the many worlds theory, will produce its own universe, containing its own stars, its own solar system, its own Pluto, its own you and its own me: identical, that is, to all the other myriad universes except for this unique event, this particular particle whizzing down this particular path" (173). The many worlds theory is also attributed to Old Adam in *The Infinities* (202). In *The Blue Guitar*, a variation on the idea is resented by Oliver Orme in the context of a familiar Banvillean fascination with mirrors: "Doesn't the new science say of mirror symmetry that certain particles seeming to find exact reflections of themselves are in fact the interaction of two separate realities, that indeed they are not particles at all but pinholes in the fabric of invisibly intersecting universes? No, I don't understand it either, but it sounds compelling, doesn't it?" (81–82).
- 2 Banville has openly acknowledged that the novel uses elements from his childhood in several interviews. In Banville's memories of Wexford there is "a boy, like Myles Grace, with webbed toes," a dairyman to whom the young writer went to collect milk, like Max does in the novel, and an acknowledgment of the class distinctions between the different kinds of holiday homes in the seaside resort, an awareness that Max too inherits. He also admits, for example, that *The Sea* is based in the fictionalized Rosslare, the seaside town where he spent every summer as a child. See the following interviews: Mark Sarvas, "The Long-Awaited, Long-Promised, Just Plain Long John Banville Interview—Part Two," *The Elegant Variation Blog* (September 19, 2005); "Fully Booked: Q & A with John Banville," interview by Travis Elborough, Picador, June 29, 2012, <http://www.picador.com/blog/june-2012/fully-booked-q-a-with-john-banville> (accessed August 31, 2019).
- 3 While several critics, particularly Eoghan Smith (2019), have usefully drawn attention to the realist place-names and contexts in *The Blue Guitar*, these aspects are repeatedly punctuated by extremely odd occurrences that subvert the realist frame. This is perhaps most strikingly rendered when Oliver encounters a strange procession of coloured caravans and odd music while walking in the countryside. The peculiarity of the event is not lost on Oliver: Had I chanced upon some crossing point where universes intersect, had I broken through briefly into another world, far from this one in place and time? Or had I simply imagined it? Was it a vision, or a waking dream?
Now I walked on, heedless of the encroaching dark, unnerved by that hallucinatory encounter and yet strangely elated, too. (168–69)
- 4 See the following for further elaboration on this: Neil Murphy, *John Banville*, Maryland: Bucknell University Press, 2018: 7–8; 37–39; Neil Murphy, "From Long Lankin to Birchwood: The

Genesis of John Banville's Architectural Space." *Irish University Review* 36, no. 1 (Spring-Summer 2006): 9–24.

- 5 Some of the analysis of *Ghosts*, particularly that which pertains to the visual arts hereafter, also features in my monograph, *John Banville*, Maryland: Bucknell University Press, 2018.
- 6 Jean Vaublin, a fictionalized variation on both Banville and Jean-Antoine Watteau, is a recurring figure in Banville's work, also figuring in, or mentioned in, *Athena*, *Eclipse*, *The Sea*, and *The Blue Guitar*.
- 7 Mark O'Connell (2013) argues that the scenes depicted in the seven entries correspond to "the dissolution of his own love affair with A" (174). John Kenny (2009) offers a more specific itemization of the analogous relationship between the paintings and Banville's work, arguing that the commentaries "might be seen to correspond to each of the seven novels Banville had written up to *Athena*; and *Athena* itself, like the one painting that is not given its own critical piece, might be seen as the final, eighth work" (30). Both perspectives may be accurate, in the sense that Banville's characteristic fascinations recur so frequently, in slightly modified forms, it is arguable that the specific detail from each commentary applies both to *Athena* and to Banville's own catalogue of novels.
8. Banville suggests, in an interview with Derek Hand, for example, that strangeness is "the mark of art." Hedda Friberg, "John Banville and Derek Hand in Conversation," *Irish University Review* 36, no. 1 (2006): 200.

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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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“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

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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 McMinn, "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).

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Banville and Lacan: The Matter of Emotions in The Infinities

Banville e Lacan: A Questão das Emoções em The Infinities

Hedwig Schwall

Abstract: *Both Banville and Lacan are Freudian interpreters of the postmodern world. Both replace the classic physical-metaphysical dichotomy with a focus on the materiality of communication in an emophysical world. Both chart the ways in which libidinal streams combine parts of the self and link the self with other people and objects. These interactions take place in three bandwidths of perception, which are re-arranged by the uncanny object a. This 'object' reawakens the affects of the unconscious which infuse the identity formations with new energy. In this article we look briefly at how the object a is realised in The Book of Evidence, Ghosts and Eclipse to focus on how it works in The Infinities, especially in the relations between Adam Godley junior and senior, Helen and Hermes.*

Keywords: *Banville and Lacan; emotions; The Infinities; Object a; Scopic drive; the libidinal Real*

Resumo: *Banville e Lacan são intérpretes freudianos do mundo pós-moderno. Ambos substituem a dicotomia físico-metafísica clássica pelo foco na materialidade da comunicação em um mundo emofísico. Ambos traçam a diferentes maneiras pelas quais os fluxos libidinais combinam partes do eu e vinculam o eu a outras pessoas e objetos. Essas interações ocorrem em três larguras de banda da percepção, que são reorganizadas pelo objeto misterioso a. Esse "objeto" desperta os afetos do inconsciente que infundem as formações identitárias com nova energia. Neste artigo, veremos brevemente como o objeto a é percebido em The Book of Evidence, Ghosts e Eclipse, a fim de focar em como ele funciona em The Infinities, especialmente nas relações entre Adam Godley Júnior e Sênior, Helen e Hermes.*

Palavras-chave: *Banville e Lacan; emoções; The Infinities; objeto a; pulsão escópica; o real libidinal.*

Introduction

If Flaubert's ideal was to write a novel about nothing, Banville gets pretty close to it – maybe most so in *Ghosts*, in *Eclipse* and in *The Infinities*.¹ All three are books about air, about mood changes between characters. All three show how perception is steered by different aspects of a self which are reshuffled by a fascinating object (a painting, a daughter, a formula which seems to offer a magical kind of hermeneutics). In this sense Banville's work offers a curious parallel to Lacan's thought. The psychoanalyst distinguishes three aspects of perception which constitute the psychic system: the affects of the unconscious, the emotions of the subconscious ego and the suprapersonal frames of reference of one's culture and family. These three bandwidths of perception, the Real, the Imaginary and the Symbolic, are condensed by the fascinating object which Lacan calls "object a", an object causing desire.

Likewise, Banville's characters are no "in-dividuals" but beehives of RIS activity. As a result, both the analyst and the novelist avoid the classic dichotomies between inner and outer world, between material and emotional phenomena. In this introduction I want to first show how Lacan and Banville's views converge and illustrate briefly how the RIS system works in *The Book of Evidence*, *Ghosts*, and *Eclipse*. The body of this article will focus on Banville's *The Infinities* and Lacan's *Seminar XI* (on the concept of object a) and comments thereon.

Banville and Lacan: converging interests

We could summarize the parallels between Banville and Lacan in four main points: the authentic self is a matter of constantly adjusted 'equilibido'; this can only be reached via language; and though this self and its models always retain an aspect of *unknowability*, the speaking self can transcend itself to reach some 'impure metaphysics'. First there is the regular change of one's inner makeup. This self-questioning is part of the main aim of a Lacanian analysis: to help people find their own desire as distinct from that which others want one to do.² A self is a living thing, a never-ending interaction of the unconscious, (pre)consciousness and culture, and as all three aspects change constantly each person must always search for a new equilibrium, an 'equilibido' – the very thing Banville's so-called solipsists are looking for. Second, both are confessed Freudians, Banville reluctantly, Lacan radically so, as he set himself the task to reread Freud, translating his work into postmodern thinking.³ This means that the focus is on language and literature. Indeed, for both Banville and Lacan, the unconscious is not an amorphous vague thing, but a matter to be filtered by language. "The world is not real for me until it has been pushed through the mesh of language", says Banville (qt. in O'Connell, "Empathic Paradox" 430), which matches one of Lacan's most insistently repeated lines, that the unconscious is structured like a language.⁴ Third, both the novelist and the psychoanalyst found their work on the unknowability of the world as Kant saw it: "Our knowledge ... is grounded in objects that are not themselves grounded" (Ragland 201). If Banville is the Kleist of twenty-first century literature, Lacan has that role in psychoanalysis, in the sense that he describes the human subject as suspended 'in an essential vacillation' (Ragland 194) within the RIS system, between libidinal drives, provisional identifications and negotiation of one's cultural forms. As a result, all understanding is partial and illusory. Fourth, both writers are interested in "impure metaphysics". They take the impact of the libido seriously, and find how it palpably effects human beings and their familiars. As a result, Lacan reacts against Merleau-Ponty and the whole (Platonic) Western philosophical tradition, seeing the boundaries between the invisible and visible not so much as that between a metaphysical and physical beings, but between unconscious and conscious energies. This seems to be the case also for Banville: "a work of literature must ... have a quality of the transcendent. I do not mean metaphysical transcendence, but a kind of heightening ... the artistic act is almost like the sexual act [where] ... the Other ... takes on a transcendent glow" (qt. O'Connell, "Empathic Paradox" 431). Lacan's study of literature (whether Greek drama, de Sade, Joyce or Flemish mystics) also revealed to him that "The reality of the unconscious is sexual reality".⁵ In what follows I hope to highlight how both Banville and Lacan's focus on libidinal flows allows them to overcome the dichotomy between the empirical and the transcendent. In their focus on *object a* both morph metaphysics into a kind of 'epi- or emophysics', a frame of thinking which focuses on human emotions, revealing they have more nuance and wider scope than expected.

RIS and object a in *The Book of Evidence*, *Ghosts* and *Eclipse*

When talking about the RIS system Lacanians first of all distinguish between the two kinds of Real, the primordial real (R1) and the routine real (R2). As the routine real is the ‘habitual’, encrusted way of perceiving, this is what Lacan wants his analysands to break out of, as it means that the subject has lost touch with his roots, the primordial real, which are the libidinal forms developed in childhood. The same goes for Banville’s protagonists: Freddie Montgomery, Alex Cleave, and later Adam Godley (both father and son) in *The Infinities* are, like most Banvillean protagonists, transported to childhood experiences.⁶

The human being, according to Lacan, consists of the ‘I’ who is surrounded and directed by ‘others’ (family, peers) and by ‘the Other’. The Other is written with capital O as it cannot be assimilated by the consciousness; it denotes both the culture which is too vast and complex for the I to comprehend, and the transgenerational material which is the unarticulated unconscious memory of a family which feeds at least three generations. Roughly speaking the ‘transgenerational Other’ feeds the Real, the ‘others’ have a strong impact on the formation of the I’s Imaginary perception, while the ‘cultural Other’ constitutes the Symbolic make-up of the self. In terms of energies the Real organizes the libido in ‘drives’. These are strong impulses which bring libido, which Lacan calls “jouissance”, enjoyment – in the British tradition considered ‘affects’. As they are palpable while remaining under the radar of normal articulation they can be scary; they make themselves felt when the subject is ‘passive’ or off-guard, open to the unconscious via dreams and lapses, or via the *object a*. In the Imaginary mode of perception, the I is strong and active; its narcissistic outlook filters only appealing objects and projects images on its experiences which please the self and filter affects into more recognizable emotions. In the Symbolic mode the laws and terms further articulate emotions in a hierarchy of values.

In the case of Freddie Montgomery, his ‘equilibido’ is profoundly disturbed: the Real hits him when he is captivated by a painting. His active, projecting Imaginary self is turned around: he is not looking at an ‘other’ who is equal or ‘similar’, but is looked at by some Other: “It was not just the woman's painted stare that watched me. Everything in the picture, that brooch, those gloves, the flocculent darkness at her back, every spot on the canvas was an eye fixed on me unblinkingly” (*The Book of Evidence* 79). Throughout *Ghosts*, Freddie tries to ‘repair’ the tear the Other has made in his self. He uses his time in prison to restore his I with images and symbols: following his love of paintings he imagines himself in a couple of paintings by Vaublin, thus trying to paper over the trauma he caused others and himself. It is significant that one of the paintings that feeds his imagination is “the Embarkation (or Pilgrimage) for Cythera”: the Voyage to the island of love is a most appropriate title for an “object causing desire”. Yet his rich stores of self-love and learning cannot seal off the powers of the Real: “Evidently there is allegory here, and symbols seem to abound, yet the scene carries a weight of unaccountable significance that is disproportionate to any possible programme or hidden discourse” (*Ghosts* 227). In *Eclipse*, too, the self-confident actor Alex Cleave finds his neat RIS package being slashed open when he is in the middle of a performance, acting the role of Amphitryon: suddenly he loses the gift of acting, the gab becomes a gap.

In both cases the breach is caused by the *object a*, the “object causing desire”. “Object” is the term used in psychoanalysis to encompass anything that is not-I, so both persons and things are meant, in varying degrees of substance and imagination. “Causing desire” means that *object a* is supposed to function as a signpost toward desire; it is written with a small *a* as it is not the Other (*Autre* in French), but only a *messenger* of the unconscious (*autre*; hence often

called “the object of the Other”). In this sense Alex Cleave’s childhood home is an *object a*: “The house itself it was that drew me back, sent out its secret summoners to bid me come” (*Eclipse* 4). Being engendered in the Real makes this object scary; but it is also appealing, causing desire. In *The Book of Evidence*, the painting of the *Portrait of a Woman with Gloves* (104) functions as an *object a*: it breaks Freddie’s lethargy and splits his RIS system, but in a dramatic way: his unconscious floods his I so that all imaginative and social connections snap, with fatal result.⁷ It is worth noting that the *object a* always stands out as uncanny. As I argued elsewhere, this means it is connected to childhood experiences,⁸ but more specifically it is connected to what Lacan calls ‘the scopic drive’. While the term ‘drive’ denotes a libidinal force from the unconscious, scopic means that the subject feels how an object seems to gaze at them while the agent of the seeing remains invisible. This is how Alex experiences an uncanny gaze from his mother’s house: “The figure was motionless, gazing steadily in my direction but not directly at me. ...What was it she was seeing? I felt diminished briefly, an incidental in that gaze, dealt, as it were, a glancing blow” (*Eclipse* 3). The figure’s gaze, though it turns out to be hallucinated, sent out a palpable energy. In this sense *object a* is the “underside of consciousness ... irremediably limited” (Ragland 194). It is “[l]ike a vampire, whose menacing shadowy presence is disturbingly palpable and yet an invisible blank” (Johnston 253).

The Infinities

Discussing *The Infinities* Kinga Földvari notices “a more than commonly marked presence of nonhuman characters, the gods, or infinities, as he calls them” (213). This is probably why this novel is both Banville’s favourite (and my own): the book is all about more or less processed forms of libido, of scopic drives made palpable, while their origin remains hidden in the Other.⁹ But the charm of this novel is that it is comic, in the sense that it ‘shows’ the Other, the deeper layers of our psyche. Indeed this novel is “theory” in its purest sense: derived from the Greek “*theos-orein*”, god-seeing, this novel is indeed a god-goggling affair. Bryan Radley praises the novel’s “polyvocality” for being “the best medium for exploring humour”(15); I agree, but will understand ‘humour’ in the pre-eighteenth-century sense, as a psychic mode; and indeed as RIS brings at least three different kinds of moods, the novel needs that polyvocality. Mark O’Connell considers the narration “highly problematic”, and reads *The Infinities* with “Heinz Kohut’s theories about the relationship between narcissism and empathy”. That a perceptive critic like O’Connell uses ego-psychology like Kohut’s is surprising, as the American’s psychoanalyst plays down the forces of the unconscious, whereas Banville turns them up. Banville’s philosophical project seems not so much one of ego- but of emo-matters; his characters are no entities and definitely no ‘individuals’, but factors in interactions with aspects of other selves. This dynamic idea of a self is clear in Banville’s word choice when he proclaims himself to be “such an egomaniac” (qt. in O’Connell, *Emphatic Paradox* 427). The word “maniac” does not refer to some neat apollonian ego who understands himself and from that position can empathize with others; it is very much a ‘dionysian’ word, stressing the drive in one’s affects and emotions. In another article O’Connell uses Winnicott’s theories, rightly observing that “Banville’s work is peculiarly suited to a psychoanalytic critical approach” because this author has been “unswervingly concerned with the inscrutable forces and afflictions of personhood” (O’Connell, “Winnicottian Reading” 329). In what follows I hope to show how both Adam and his wife Helen’s confrontation with object a steeps them in the Real, which reshuffles their understanding of themselves and their place in society.¹⁰

The *object a* between Adam junior and Adam senior

Right from the start young Adam Godley is presented as one whose subjectivity is split by an *object a* which manifests itself in the form of a strong scopic drive originating in the “enormous eyes” of a boy on a passing train who looks into the house where Adam Godley junior is standing:

Shaken by thoughts of death and dying he forces himself to fix his attention ... he is being regarded ... by a small boy with ... enormous eyes. How intensely the child is staring at the house ... what is it he is seeking, what secret knowledge, what revelation? ... surely the window from outside is a black blank ... [the clock behind him] regards him with a monocular, blank glare (7-8).¹¹

Adam’s self-importance is diminished three times: by the house, to which he was called to bring support in the imminent danger of his father’s death (who is still in a coma); by the boy who is peering at an image that fascinates him – the house, not Adam; and the functionality of the clock is supplanted by the scopic drive’s “blank glare”. The moment reveals that Adam is not an ‘individual’: while his Imaginary self focuses on the boy his Real self may be with his wife: “A part of his mind knows what is happening but it is not the part that thinks” (5). The narrator refers here to the fact that Adam somehow knows that his wife is having an intense sexual experience without him (as we will see later). But Adam Godley junior also shares emotions with Adam senior. As Mark O’Connell pointed out, the son’s experience of the peering boy is the reverse of his father’s dream: as a boy, Adam senior also passed the house, thought it ‘out-standing’, would “dream of living here” (32) and ended up doing precisely that, since he became the house’s owner.¹² So when O’Connell observes that “the entire novel is the work of the staring boy’s imagination” this underscores three things: first, that Banville’s “solipsists” are paragons of in-betweenness; second, that transgenerational material (like Godley senior’s dream) feeds into the next generation’s “Real” dimension, and third, that, like in *Ghosts* and *Eclipse*, the *object a* is central, “a strange attractor” which initiates the novel’s action which is a matter of reimagining oneself.¹³

But we need to say something more about the form and nature of the *object a*. It has something quotidian, it has a recurrent form, and as it aims at reviving the affective dimension of the subject’s perception it brings about strange intersections between the empirical and the transcendental aspect of things. Indeed the object is not just reserved for magical times and spaces, but is part and parcel of the human being’s daily existence. The two most important *objects a* are the voice and the gaze. Both are themselves non-phenomenal (one cannot measure the emotional charge in a voice or a gaze) yet connected with physical phenomena (mouth and eye) which have a hole (the mouth and the pupil). It is paradoxical that a person is characterized by objects which are beyond their control: voice and gaze, as heard and seen by others, differ from what the sender knows (the difference becoming clear when one is confronted with a recording of oneself). So voice and gaze are unique to a subject, yet beyond the subject’s control, and so simultaneously most authentic and uncanny.

But not only do the *objects a* originate in every human body, they also have the ‘architecture’ of this origin. They consist of three elements: a *physical* point of support, a *hole* or strong sense of an absence, and strong exudings, which can feel like a palpable aura. In this sense the whole of the Godley’s house works as an *object a*. The house is outstanding in its physicality (especially to those who pass it in the train). It has a “hole”: all occupants of the

house are preoccupied with the “dying progenitor” (30), and all are “[s]haken by thoughts of death and dying” (7). Analogous to the difficulty of determining where the eye stops and the look starts, it is difficult to distinguish where the house’s physicality ends and its emotive associations start: “[t]he house seems to boost more than its share of corners, have you noticed?” (190). Its aura is clearly felt by Ursula when “Something brushes past her in the air, less than a draught, more than a thought” (21). This “invisible presence” explicitly breaks up her sense of herself as an ego as it “barges past her again, or through her, rather, and she feels it is she that is without substance, as if she and not this other were the ghost (23). Ursula seems rather gifted in perceiving the immaterial reality of libidinal activity: she ‘knows’ that her husband is still “thinking away”: “The elastic link between them has not been broken yet: she can feel still the old twanging tug” (19). So she seems to have found the right way of using her senses, which she calibrates neither with intentionality nor with denial, but in the mode Žižek says is needed to be aware of objects *a*, “looking awry”, a cautiously receptive, non-imaginary perception: “She has glimpses of figures that cease to be there when she tries to look at them directly, like floaters in the eye” (22).

That both Banville and Lacan focus on object *a* is what brings them to (what I consider) their major feat: to represent the “intersection of transcendental and empirical dimensions”, “short-circuit[ing]... this dichotomy and many of its permutations”, as Ellie Ragland observes in Lacan (92). While Radley observed that “the evanescent nature of the infinities” was at odds with the fact that it is “a novel with materiality at its heart” (13) it seems Banville agrees with Lacan’s “there is nothing more philosophical than materialism”.¹⁴ Indeed Banville loves ‘fleshing out’ the sensual side of events, like when Adam Godley *père* gets his stroke while straining “too strenuously in the effort of extruding a stool as hard as mahogany” (17); his daughter Petra has the habit of, when being introduced to someone, concentrating on disgusting aspects of the body: “she will picture him squatting on the lavatory ... underneath him all his awful puddingy things dangling over the steaming bowl” (119). Banville’s sensualism resounds with the postmodernism of David Lynch, whom Žižek characterizes as a master of the *object a* in that “over-proximity to reality ... brings about the loss of reality” in the extreme close-ups of the underside of things which are teeming with wriggly forms of life.¹⁵ The opening of *The Infinities* even echoes that of *Blue Velvet*, where the shot of the idyllic small American town focuses on a jet of water on the lawn which keeps going as the father figure got a stroke while watering the lawn. In their investigations of matter as a channel, a language of emotions, both Banville and Lacan are on Barthes’ wavelength: “Qu’est-ce que la signification? C’est le sens *en ce qu’il est produit sensuellement*” (Barthes 257). “How ... *object a*’s [are] ... transformed from the material of the world into subjective networks of meaning” (Ragland 189) in Banville’s novel is what we will look at now, first focusing on Hermes, then on Helen.

Hermes: the hermeneutics of the unconscious and *object a*

In Banville’s hermeneutics of the unconscious Hermes is, of course, the prime player. He is both son and messenger to Zeus, and in that sense closely linked to both the workings of the unconscious and the *object a*, message of the Other.

Of course Zeus’ reputation for fickle behaviour fits his role as the incarnation of libido. But Hermes too sports four aspects Freud distinguishes as characteristic of the unconscious: it is indifferent to the ego, contradictory in the impulses it gives, marked by delayed action and not subject to causal reflection, but *causing* desire instead. First, Hermes

admits his indifference: when he enters the body of the house's manservant, Duffy, he plays with the maid's feelings for Duffy: "I was just amusing myself, toying with one of my creatures, as so often is the way" (88). Later again he admits, "oh we are cold, cold" (262). This ties in with Feldstein's qualification where "[t]he Other insists on the alterity of the unconscious ... which can be understood as impersonal", thus also making the second point that it has "its own inconsistencies" (Feldstein 156). That certainly is the case with Hermes: though a god himself and so immortal, he is subject to Zeus' whims. Third, *The Infinities* teems with indications of unconscious time. Unlike conscious memory, the unconscious never loses anything: "This is the mortal world. It is a world where nothing is lost, where all is accounted for while yet the mystery of things is preserved" (300). Time is never singular, but always presenting experiences in loops and doubles, which Freud called "delayed action". Hermes notices "We are in the midst of an aftermath" (195). Likewise, all inhabitants of the Godley estate observe this looping: "that is the way with everything in this house, everything ... makes him feel as if he were a child again" (4). Unconscious memory is not lost, but it leaves a strange kind of hiatus in the consciousness, as Hermes whispers to one of the Godleys:

you will ... hear my voice. You'll think you have imagined it and yet, inside you, you will catch an answering cry ... your heart will shake, you'll weep for nothing, pine for what's not there. For you, this life will never be enough, there will forever be an emptiness, where once the god was all in all in you" (257).

The transgenerational image of the house is again interesting in this context of the achronological unconscious. Here Banville inverts the meaning of Hermes as the "psychopompos": while he is the one who carries souls to the "netherworld" (15) of the afterlife, this Hermes passes on thought material from the dying to the living. Focusing on this kind of (psychic) activities needs a narrator who can swirl his way into any characters' mind, from homodiegetic to omniscient and back. The fourth feature of the (Freudian) unconscious is that it is a-causal.¹⁶ Banville, always being allergic to causality, lets Hermes, together with Zeus and Pan, form a 'trinity' of forces which help bring about the resurrection of Adam Godley from his coma. That this outcome cannot be explained by any scientific perception of things is underscored by the family doctor's surprise at this turn of events. It seems to be a water-mark of all of Banville's epistemological novels to sabotage causal thinking: instead of single, reflecting, post-factum causality his narratives install multiple, future-oriented causing.¹⁷

But Hermes is also the unconscious' *messenger* and so the *object a* par excellence, of which Adrian Johnston observes that "while itself tending to remain in the shadows off-stage, [it] function[s] ... as the invisible transcendental condition of possibility (i.e., the cause of desire) for the visible parade of desired empirical objects" (259). Hermes definitely operates off-stage: as the incarnation of the optic gaze, he is palpably invisible, but only 'transcendental' in that he urges people to re-root in the Real and sense the libidinal aspects of the empirical world, i.e. the signposts of their desire. In true Lacanian way, Banville makes all realities in *The Infinities* never simply 'visible'(or invisible), but always 'over- or undervisible'; Hermes makes objects palpably present to Ursula, significantly to Ivy, uncannily to all.

Hermes also conforms to the 'architecture' of *object a*. First he appears as a physical presence in the real world: "The house ... is ... an impossible sort of folly, ... and that winged tin figure – ahem! – atop the single turret" (105). The weathervane is the perfect imaginary embodiment of Hermes, serial shape-shifter, as he turns with the wind, with moods.

Moreover, being on top of the turret of the house, he will be the one who steers things according to libidinal laws. But he is also marked by the second feature, the hole: “I should ... give some small account of myself, this voice speaking out of the void” (14), and so again characteristic of the Lacanian object in that he is a “‘vanishing mediator’ between seer and seen” (Johnston 253). And as eye and gaze belong together, “Lacan compares the place and function of object *a* to that of a window” (Johnston 254). Likewise Banville lets this mediator between matter and *e*/motion, souls and things, objects and libido, outside and inside worlds, dwell in doorways, frames and windows. “What a striking tableau we must have made, ... me in the bright doorway” Hermes observes (87), while acknowledging his roles as “keeper of the dawn, of twilight and the wind, ... the sweet-tongued one, ... guardian of crossroads” (15).

But ironically the Hermes figure shows us another vital thing about the *object a*: it cannot be reached. Lacan says the essence of the object is that one misses it, because it is only seeming anyway¹⁸ and Banville’s Hermes stresses this point:

To us your world is what the world in mirrors is to you.. ... infinitely unreachable. A looking-glass world, indeed, and only that. ... to put a fist to that blank pane and burst through to the other side! But all we would meet is mercury. Mercury! My other name, one of my other names (261).

Just like the human being who can never reach the *Ding an sich*, only the world in mirrors, the gods, embodying the unconscious drives, cannot directly reach the consciousness, but indirectly they do make it work. Like the tain of the mirror, a foil made of mercury, it is language which links human subjects both to the visible and invisible aspects of their world.

Helen: on the way to becoming an *object a*

Helen, wife to Adam Godley junior, likes nothing more than to embody language. She has come along to the house with her husband to support the family as her father-in-law is dying, but she is first and foremost an actress, and she has felt this to be her vocation since her earliest childhood:

She always wanted to be an actress, from when she was a little girl and dressed up in her mother’s clothes and mimed in front of the wardrobe mirror, preening and striking attitudes and stamping her foot. Later on she conceived of the stage as a place of ...self-fulfillment, ... she is convinced that by an accumulation of influence the parts that she plays ... will gradually mould and transform her into someone else, ... It is like putting on makeup, but makeup of a magically permanent kind, that she will ... only continue adding to, layer upon careful layer, until she has achieved her true look, her real face (251).

It seems that Helen has been realizing her ‘destiny’ following the “objects causing desire” which leave a trail in her life, like the props of “her mother’s clothes”, but also the “attitudes” to be mimed, like “stamping her foot”. Indeed *objects a* do not always have to be literally objects; Lacan also mentions the ‘Gestalt’, the body language which can convey strong emotions, is among the “sublimated objects in which bits and pieces of the Real dwell” (Ragland 189). Johnson’s characterization of Lacan’s *Gestalt*, a “seductive, specular *imago*” even echoes Helen’s programme, as it grounds a “series of identifications enveloping one another ... like the layers of a pearl, in the course of development of what is called the ego” (Johnston

259). While Lacan uses the image of an onion to describe the subject, Helen thinks of layers of a “magically permanent ... makeup” which is neither skin nor emotion, but something in between. This corresponds to Lacan’s “Surplus jouissance ... the objectal substance which remains after the object is sifted through the symbolic grid” (Feldstein 156).

Like Banville who said that “The world is not real for me until it has been pushed through the mesh of language” this is even more literally true for actors as they process text through their bodies. Alex Cleave seems very aware of this “objectal substance” which remains:

When an actor walks out of a performance no understudy can entirely fill his place. He leaves the shadow of something behind him, an aspect of the character that only he could have conjured, this singular creation, independent of mere lines. The rest of the cast feel it, the audience feels it too. (*Eclipse* 20)

But before Helen manages to integrate a rich RIS and turn into an object *a*, becoming the accomplished actress who causes desire for her ‘libidinal substance’ her Imaginary perception is enriched by an immersion in the Real via making love to Zeus. Upon her arrival at the Godley house Helen is preoccupied with her prospect of playing the role of Alcmene. This role strengthens her ego: “She cannot think ... why the play is called after Amphitryon, since Amphitryon’s wife Alcmene, her part, is surely the centre of it all” (192). In the play of Amphitryon Alcmene is the Greek general’s wife, who makes love to him twice in a short time span. The first time she is surprised to find her husband coming back from battle, but in reality it is the god Zeus, who could only seduce her taking the form of her husband. Briefly after their lovemaking the man himself arrives and they make love again. In *The Infinities* Helen’s husband has left the bed at dawn, but she has some experience of passionate love making. “Was it a dream? Surely something so intensely felt must have been real” (55). Her libido is certainly charged up: “the morning beats around her like a pulse ... the light out here in the country ... intenser” (56). Later, Adam comes back and they make love again. Helen is confused but happy enough: while she illustrates Lacan’s dictum about missing the object (she does not realize what happened), she makes her husband happy and enriches her perception of the role of Alcmene in its whole RIS range, especially as *object a* in her dream, in the Zeus-like form of an almost physical experience, will infuse her performance with the dimension of the Real. Helen clearly illustrates Marie-Hélène Brousse’s observation that “[y]ou are always involved in a new fantasy, a new bit or piece of desire, which is precisely the definition of *object a*” (Brousse 113). But not only is Helen renewed in her perception of her role as Alcmene, she may also have rediscovered the “lover” in her “husband” (76); and whereas Alcmene’s double lovemaking engendered one mortal and one immortal boy in the Greek version, Helen’s baby may be more perceived in a twenty-first-century way, alternately as just a baby (routine real), but sometimes maybe with a glimmer of the glory of his origin shining through.

In this way Helen may, as an accomplished actress, realize what Banville set himself to do in his “work of literature”: to reach “a kind of heightening... almost like the sexual act” which “takes on a transcendent glow”, confirming Lacan’s observation that the reality of the unconscious is a sexual reality.

Conclusion

Patricia Coughlan once observed of Banville that “visuality may be the distinctive characteristic of his writing” (Coughlan 63). After reading *The Infinities*, I would specify that the author is a specialist in visualizing how a subject’s perception changes as its libidinal-cultural-identificatory modes mix in different ways. The main player in this book is the air, filled with affects, emotions and moods moulded by scopic drives. *The Infinities* is Banville’s Wonderland, and like Lewis Carroll he makes his readers break through the shell of routine perception by practising an “utter contempt for verisimilitude”. Like Lacan, Banville is most interested in “quasi-similitude”¹⁹: “everything is different – when the world looks like an imitation of itself, cunningly crafted yet discrepant in small but essential details” (13). Like “the Cheshire Cat and its grin in Wonderland” Hermes’ “appearance and disappearance is ... the conceptualization of the production of fantasy” (Feldstein 169). In Hermes Banville has found the perfect narrator to cross the chasm between word and world (leaving out empathy):

And these names - Zeus, ... Hermes ... are your constructions. We address each other, as it were, only as air, as light, as something like the quality of that deep, transparent blue you see when you peer into the highest vault of the empyrean (16).

But whether it is the unconscious or the gods inspiring a theorist or a novelist, neither Lacan nor Banville offer metaphysical kinds of consolation: “no salvation of the soul, ... no afterlife ... nothing ... except stories” (91-92). But it is these stories which are the life-blood of our perception, as they kindle the libidinal, imaginative and socializing aspects of it. These RIS aspects seem beautifully summarized in Banville’s soap bubble: “They seemed to be rotating inside themselves, ... and the iridescent surplus kept cascading down the sides. ... they were another kind of elsewhere”(66).

Notes

- 1 In a letter to his friend Louise Colet Flaubert writes “Ce qui me semble beau, ... c’est un livre sur rien, un livre sans attache extérieure, qui se tiendrait de lui-même par la force interne de son style, comme la terre sans être soutenue se tient en l’air ... où le sujet serait presque invisible ... le style étant à lui seul une manière absolue de voir les choses.” (16 January 1852) <https://www.etudes-litteraires.com/flaubert-art.php>. Likewise, Banville’s three novels have almost no exterior reference and hold themselves up by their sheer style; the subject is the almost-invisibility of interactions.
- 2 In *Seminar VII* Lacan wants to implant a basic rule in the minds of the young analysts in his class, and the thing they have to make sure is that their analysands have acted according to their own desire: “As-tu agi en conformité avec ton désir?” (359). The difficulty will be that this desire is hard to catch, the signifiers that hold it up always slip away: “en tant que ce désir ...[est] la métonymie de notre être” (371).
- 3 As O’Connell points out Banville repeatedly wrote about Freud in *The Irish Times*. “By now we are all Freudians,” as he has written, “whether we like it or not.” Especially in his article “Freud and Scrambled Egos” Banville praises the analyst as he managed “to dispel the ignorant pride that surrounded an idealized picture of mankind” (qt. in “A Winnicottian Reading of John Banville’s *Ghosts* and *Athena*” 329-330).
- 4 “l’inconscient est structuré comme un langage” (*Séminaire XI*, 23). This is such a basic line for Lacan

that he italicized it, as he wants to make clear that the unconscious is definitely not a matter of natural, animal instincts, but formed by cultural interaction, starting with the family. This does not only mean that unconscious content can be picked up and, to a certain extent, translated, but all libidinal satisfaction in daily life has to be negotiated in language. “One must negotiate in language for libidinal satisfaction” (Ragland 198). Again Lacan stresses that libidinal energies are at all levels mediated, interacting, with the kinds of languages we use in daily life, whether verbal, iconic, gestural, spatial or other.

5 La réalité de l'inconscient, c'est ... la réalité sexuelle.” (*Séminaire XI*, 138).

6 As neither Lacan nor Banville are interested in the routine real, we will leave out the specification 1 and 2 and refer to the primordial real as simply “Real”, but with a capital, to make the distinction with the common use of the word, i.e. being adapted to some functional reality.

7 Freddie will keep saying that in essence “that failure of imagination is my real crime” (*The Book of Evidence* 215). The Real was so strong it pushed away the Imaginary and the Symbolic, as a result of which he did not identify co-human beings as such, like the maid he killed. The fact that this “book of evidence” is narrated by someone whose perception is steered by affects and emotions rather than values makes the title all the more ironic.

8 As is argued in Schwall, “Aspects of the Uncanny in Banville's Work with a Focus on *Eclipse*”.

9 The few times that Banville admits being pleased with his own work it seems he can only allow himself using litotes, like when I asked, “Isn't *The Infinities* your favourite novel? “, his answer was “*The Infinities* is the one for which I feel the least disgust. In fact, the book I'm writing - trying to write - is a sort of sequel, both to *The Infinities* and *The Book of Evidence*” (private email, 16 May 2020).

10 It is worth noting that the biggest reshuffle in Adam and Helen's RIS, the fact that they become parents, is only revealed in the final pages of the story.

11 As quotes from here on will be from *The Infinities* this will not be further marked.

12 When an object a remains a fascination for life these images are called phantasms. As Mark O'Connell points out, Banville said in his own childhood he was fascinated by such a house, which became “the germ” of *The Infinities*. As the Big House recurs in many of Banville's novels this can be seen as one of the author's phantasms.

13 As Žizek puts it, the object a “is the form of an attractor drawing us into chaotic oscillation” (*Looking Awry* 38).

14 “Il n'y a rien de plus philosophique que le matérialisme” (*Séminaire XX*, 65)

15 Žizek, “Lamella” 207.

16 Following on Freud's idea of “overdetermination” Lacan insists on the “irreducible gap that separates an effect from its cause” (Žizek, “Lamella” 211): “a contingent external cause can trigger unforeseen catastrophic consequences by stirring up the trauma which always already glows under the ashes” (Žizek, “Lamella” 219). As we will see Hermes will explain this principle of delayed action, which means that a reaction is never caused by one event but by the chiming together of several experiences over time.

17 This is especially visible in *Eclipse* and the rest of that trilogy.

18 “L'essence de l'objet, c'est le ratage” (*Séminaire XX*, 55). This is in the nature of the thing, because “The *object a* is a semblant”, as Ragland observes (198).

19 Feldstein, “The Phallic gaze of Wonderland” 154.

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Ageing John Banville: from Einstein to Bergson¹

O Tempo em John Banville: de Einstein a Bergson

Nicholas Taylor-Collins

Abstract: *There is a clear engagement with theories of time across Banville's oeuvre, from his earliest published work through to the twenty-first-century novels. I explore how, in their engagement with age and ageing, Banville's characters adopt and interrogate Albert Einstein's and Henri Bergson's competing ideas of the present and the passage of time, sliding from favouring the former to prioritising the latter. Martin Heidegger's conception of Dasein, a Being-toward-death, allows me to explore how Banville's characters evoke either Einstein's spacetime and series of nows, or Bergson's psychologised Duration (Durée). This is borne out in Gabriel Godkin's subverted and anti-atavistic narrative in Birchwood (1973), the battle over authenticity between Copernicus and Rheticus in Doctor Copernicus (1976), and how Hermes controls the mortals' time and tries his best to age in The Infinities (2009). I conclude that Banville's characters' evolving preference for Bergsonian over Einsteinian tropes indicates an acceptance and happy engagement with the ageing process.*

Keywords: *ageing; John Banville; Henri Bergson; Birchwood; Doctor Copernicus; Albert Einstein; The Infinities; temporality.*

Resumo: *Há um claro envolvimento com as teorias do tempo na obra de Banville como um todo, desde em seus primeiros livros publicados até nos romances do século XXI. Considerando os conceitos de idade e envelhecimento, exploro como os personagens de Banville adotam e interrogam as ideias concorrentes de Albert Einstein e Henri Bergson sobre o presente e a passagem do tempo, deixando de favorecer o primeiro e priorizando o segundo. A concepção de Martin Heidegger de Dasein, um Ser em direção à morte, permite-me explorar como os personagens de Banville evocam a relação espaço-tempo de Einstein e séries de "agoras", ou a Duração psicologizada de Bergson (Durée). Isso é confirmado na narrativa subvertida e anti-atávica de Gabriel Godkin em Birchwood (1973), na batalha pela autenticidade entre Copernicus e Rheticus em Doctor Copernicus (1976), e na forma como Hermes controla o tempo dos mortais e tenta o seu melhor para envelhecer em The Infinities (2009). Concluo que a preferência crescente dos personagens de Banville pelos tropos bergsonianos e einsteinianos indica uma aceitação e um envolvimento bem-sucedido com o processo de envelhecimento.*

Palavras-chave: *Envelhecimento; John Banville; Henri Bergson; Birchwood; Doctor Copernicus; Albert Einstein; The Infinities; temporalidade.*

*[Y]et I was the very one who would break time's arrow
and discard the slackened bow.
Old Adam Godley in The Infinities (215)*

John Banville has recently proclaimed Albert Einstein “as famous today as he was when his theory of relativity first set the public’s imagination alight”, confirming him as the “greatest scientist since Newton”. Banville also describes Henri Bergson, a contemporary of Einstein, in opposing terms: “Yet who now reads Bergson, apart from a few lonely specialists?” (2016: paras 1–2). This is not just a historical observation for Banville, but I believe an ironic and personal one, too. In considering age and ageing in John Banville’s writing, I will be explaining the shift in emphasis from an Einsteinian “expanded present” in which universal time is observed singly and even contradictorily by separate observers, to a Bergsonian “Duration”, in which ageing is an intuitively felt experience. I contend that as Banville ages, his characters too develop a greater appreciation for ageing, fearing it less and enjoying the experience of the passage of time. I will show that Banville’s characters develop a consolidation of temporality as defined and characterised by science, all the while evolving an anti-ageing writing system. In these analyses, Martin Heidegger, Einstein and Bergson will be important as they consider the conundrum of time as experienced psychologically or described scientifically—the division that Einstein used to characterise his differences from Bergson (Scott 2008. 188). This philosophical turn is encouraged in Banville’s *The Infinities* (2009). Ventriloquised through old Adam Godley’s thoughts are a set of contradictory “times”, with old Adam wondering “why” time “var[ies]”. He thinks a “flow” and “an unbreaking wave” against a “great stillness, stretching everywhere” (Banville 2010. 70–1). These twin poles are representative of both Bergson’s *durée*, Duration, and Einstein’s spacetime. These ideas are enhanced by reading Heidegger’s philosophy. I have chosen time as my subject because when we think about ageing, and when we encounter ageing either in ourselves or others, we leave “the big world and [enter] into the dark underground of our selves” (Banville 1985. para. 5) where we are confronted by the nature of time. This is ultimately a philosopho-metaphorical inquiry, dispensing with Einstein’s hard science and thinking through the ontological consequences of scientists’ experiments. Banville’s novels become those consequences, with their characters exploring how time is not singular and is irreducibly contestable. This is not a quotation-spotting exercise, noting Mark Currie’s warning that literary criticism about time should avoid scrutinising only those texts that explicitly quote theorists of time (140). I will show that the apparent tension between Bergson’s Duration and Einsteinian spacetime correlates with Banville’s changing representations of ageing. Following a theoretical sketch, I follow Banville’s ideas chronologically in *Birchwood*, *Doctor Copernicus*, and *The Infinities*.

* * *

Time was a constant source of interest throughout the twentieth century for scientists and philosophers, though fluctuating in its nature. Newton’s earlier theories relied on a fixed state called “space”. Within the limits of this space, time could flow uniformly and unidirectionally towards the future. This theory was cemented in the early twentieth century by British astronomer Arthur Eddington who, engaging with the Second Law of Thermodynamics – that entropy in any body is inevitable – described the asymmetrical state of time: entropy ramifies in the future, the direction of travel of the arrow of time, but it is limited in the past. Eddington concludes that entropy is only verifiable as we journey into the future, and since entropy is a law of physics, we must all be travelling into the future. This confirms the process of human ageing.

Einstein, however, challenged these ideas, ruining “many reputations [...] Eddington’s name among them” (Banville 1985. para. 2). In his theory of special relativity, Einstein accounted for the speed of light being constant regardless of the observer (their own speed relative to light is ineffective). He theorised that as a traveller approaches the speed of light, space must shrink to accommodate the high-speed travel. However, when the traveller returns to the departure point to re-join her observer, the time experienced by the traveller will be less than her observer, with time having dilated accordingly. The traveller will now be younger. Einstein famously explained this theory through a thought experiment on identical twins. The logic of the twins paradox appears in Banville’s *The Infinities* (2009) when young Adam Godley considers his mother:

[O]nly he does not think she is like a mother at all. She is absurdly young [...] and seems all the time to be getting younger, or at least not older, so that he has the worrying sensation of steadily catching up on her. She too appears to be aware of this phenomenon, and to find it not at all strange. (2010. 7)

Whilst Banville’s writing allows for emotional consequences of time dilation, for now note the revolution that Einstein’s theories had begun in scientific theory: time was no longer homogeneous, and space no longer neutral. Instead, a density called “spacetime” had been discovered, in which humans are agents and not just passive passengers. Spacetime exists in four dimensions and, were humans able to “see” the fourth dimension as humans “see” three dimensions, we would be able to see time happening all at once, in every space and at every time. Thus, the immortal narrator of *The Infinities*, Hermes, is able to see and narrate all time at any one instant.

Einstein’s theories were not universally accepted. In an unplanned meeting of minds in 1922, Einstein met Bergson, the famed French philosopher whose ideas on *durée* (Duration), Intuition and *élan vital* (life force) had made critical waves in philosophy. Bergson summarised Duration in “Introduction to Metaphysics” (1934):

[Time is] the unrolling of a spool, for there is no living being who does not feel himself coming little by little to the end of his span; and living consists in growing old. But it is just as much a continual winding, like that of thread into a ball, for our past follows us, becoming larger and larger with the present it picks up on its way[.] (1971. 192–3)



Figure 1 Heidegger’s depiction of Bergson’s spool of time. See Heidegger (1992: 206).

In *The Infinities*, young Adam Godley considers the flow of a river in a Bergsonian way, “thinking, there would be no line or boundary at which the river stops being the river and the estuary starts being the estuary: they would flow into each other”. His sister Petra thinks similarly: “Either [time] drags itself painfully along like something dragging itself in its own slime over bits of twigs and dead leaves on a forest floor, or it speeds past, in jumps and flickers, like the scenes on a spool of film clattering madly through a broken projector” (116). These provide perfect analogies of Duration. Here is the crucial distinction between Einstein and Bergson: one conceives of a spacetime which stills time (albeit in[to] a fourth dimension), whilst the other focuses on flow; Einstein’s is a universal time, whilst Bergson’s is intensely personal or psychological.

Flow versus eternal presentism. Duration versus spacetime. These terms co-ordinate the defining twentieth-century contest between schools of thought about time. Philosophers other than Bergson also had to contend with these issues. Chief among them is Heidegger, in whose philosophy influences from both Einstein and Bergson are visible. For Heidegger in *Being and Time* (1927), Dasein (the human in conscious earthly existence) is essentially a Being-toward-death. Moreover, this Being-toward-death exists because at any one moment Dasein conditions temporality. Heidegger explains that Dasein “exists historically and can so exist only because it is temporal in the very basis of its Being” (428). Importantly the three ecstases of temporality – having-been-ness, present-ness and futurity – all exist in and emerge from Dasein at any one time. Elsewhere, Heidegger elaborates that

Expectance implies a being-ahead-of-oneself. [...] This approaching oneself in advance, from one’s own possibility, is the primary ecstatic concept of the future. [...] But this coming-to-oneself does not, as such, stretch over a momentary present of my own; it stretches over the whole of my having-been. [...] T]his having-been-ness temporalizes itself only from out of and in the future. The having-been is not a remnant of myself that has stayed behind and has been left behind by itself. (1992. 205–6)

To illustrate this concept, Heidegger offers the following image (Fig. 2), countering the spools in Bergson’s Duration (Fig. 1).



Figure 2 Heidegger's image depicting Dasein's temporality. “This approaching oneself in advance, from one’s own possibility, is the primary ecstatic concept of the future [...] (the question mark indicates the horizon that remains open).” (Heidegger 1992. 206)

In contrast to Bergson’s Duration – wherein the past is dragged into the present such that “the novelty of the present moment is precisely the recollection of the immediately preceding moment” (Čapek 127), whilst the future is a distinct category entirely – Heidegger’s Dasein

brings presence to bear upon the world, which contains within it/relies upon both a futurity and having-been-ness. In this framework, ageing is a constant process to which only the authentic Dasein can be attuned, whereas Bergson's Duration is felt by all individuals, regardless of their acuity.

In Heidegger's explanations this time-space represents a place of stillness that simultaneously contains all of Dasein's temporality. This is not dissimilar from Einstein's spacetime, in which all of time and space are available for scrutiny. In both, this now-time emerges from the self. Einstein's reference body (the one making the observations) and Heidegger's Dasein are both selves who, at the moment of temporalizing time – be it, respectively, measuring or paying close attention to oneself in time – are loci for temporality itself, at the point where temporality emerges into the world. For Einstein, this is the “expanded present” (Rovelli 44). For Heidegger (2008) this present is *Der Augenblick*, “That *Present* which is held in authentic temporality and which thus is *authentic* itself, [and] we call the ‘moment of vision.’” (387) Importantly, Adam Beck (2005) draws attention to the parallels Heidegger himself limns between *Der Augenblick* and the “kind of originality involved in a transformation of the basic concepts during a scientific crisis” (166 and note), such as that inaugurated by Einstein.

Aligning Heidegger with Einstein is not uniformly accepted. David Scott (2006), while acknowledging the influence that both thinkers had on Heidegger's developing conception of time (185), asserts that Heidegger would have sided with Bergson's Duration over Einstein's spacetime. Scott reduces the problem to one of “simultaneity” and Einstein's advancement of (scientific) clock time over lived time (Bergson's Duration and Heidegger's Dasein's temporality). Thus Heidegger's “notion of time as self-extemporizing, as temporalizing of itself is in direct contrast to the conception of time in terms of simultaneity,” writes Scott (184), “and the defining of time in terms of [Einstein's] sequence of ‘nows.’” To reckon time as quantifiable clock time, rather than qualifiable, means to put the cart before the horse, when “Dasein is made present in the making present of the now” (*ibid.* 198). To this end, Scott's Heidegger is much closer to Bergson than Einstein, since Scott's Einstein can only consider ageing as happening in relation to the world which gives to being its age, whereas for Heidegger ageing is a notion that emerges *from* Dasein *into* the world.

Ageing is always a reckoning of the self with the world and with others. However, the manner in which the self–world–others relationship is configured changes according to scientific–philosophical preference. Einstein's “now” is universal but is experienced singly by the observer from their point of reference looking out at the world; whereas for Bergson, the self *feels* time's passage inside themselves. Finally, Heidegger's sense of ageing begins and ends with the self, from whom time emerges into the world. Critically, the notion of “time” is not homogeneous, and this heterogeneity is duly represented across Banville's oeuvre. By understanding the shift in emphasis from one temporal model to another, we are able better to appreciate how Banville's work has developed not only in thematic or stylistic terms, but also in its ontological focus—an argument that has been amply made elsewhere, but never with a focus on time.

Birchwood

In *Birchwood* (1973), aged characters cast a long shadow for the narrator Gabriel. For example, his Granny Godkin “thrashe[s] about under the blankets” when her daughter-in-law wakes her in the morning and she is also a sort of “ogre, [and] her smile was awful, really awful, a sort of

shattered leer [... T]he jaw that I kissed trembled with ague”. This unnerving mix of youthful energy and age leads to her authority – Granny Godkin sits at the head of the table – that cuts memorably into Gabriel’s Imaginary, in contrast with his Mama: “When I try I cannot [...] find any solid shape of her, as I can of Granny Godkin”. Granny Godkin’s solidity is the first indication that in *Birchwood* Banville is engaged with atavism² rather than age and ageing purely. The weaker Granda Godkin is nonetheless an indelible curiosity with a “wizened skull” and “a wicked little old man”. When Granda Godkin is later ill and dying, Gabriel “was made to sit with him, I suppose on the principle that an old man should want the youngest carrier of his name and seed near him at the end” (14, 19, 15, 50–1). By limiting Gabriel’s movements, Granda Godkin’s actions prove atavism’s restrictive nature and the authority of the aged characters.

These figures are in charge of the eponymous Birchwood, the house where the Lawlesses and the Godkins have lived in competition with one another for generations, their “family trees” “ensnarled” (O’Connell 72). The Big House genre, coming to its end when Banville enters the fray in the 1970s,³ is itself ageing along with Birchwood and the elder Godkins. Granda tragically is the first to suffer when he and his son (Gabriel’s father, Papa) try to stop poachers. As a poacher runs from Papa who has tried to shoot him, he clatters into Granda. “The poacher bounced off Granda Godkin,” writes Banville, “stumbled, regained his balance, drew back his arm and smacked him across the side of the head with the pheasant” (46). Whilst they “sewed up Granda Godkin’s ear and bathed his black eye [...] they could do nothing for his maimed brain” (51). This damage has aged Granda Godkin to the point that he no longer seems present with the world. Old Granny Godkin’s own demise is even more dramatic: she spontaneously combusts. Prior to her death, Granny Godkin is as exuberant as ever, and on her way to the summer house “The grin became a skeletal sneer, and she glared about her at the hall”. Gabriel spies the remains of his grandmother’s body: “[T]he ashes on the wall, that rendered purplish mass in the chair, Granny Godkin’s two feet, all that was left of her, in their scorched button boots” (69, 72). Thus the two aged characters who began the narrative as authorities reach their demise by halfway through *Birchwood*, almost as if the Big House itself is rejecting their ancient authority.

Two other key elements accompany these deaths. The first is the coterminous demise of the Big House itself. In Granda Godkin’s case, the poacher attacks him moments after Papa has accidentally shot the house. Similarly, when Granny Godkin combusts “The room shook. There was no sound, but instead a sensation of some huge thing crumpling, like a gargantuan heart attack” (46, 70). Tying in with the Big House genre more broadly, Banville’s *Birchwood* is reminiscent of earlier novels such as Maria Edgeworth’s *Castle Rackrent* (1800) that “establishes the conventions of an enduring literary genre: the neglected house as symbol of family and class degeneration”. However, the agent of degradation in *Birchwood* cannot be limited to neglect, but rather to wilful, villainous destruction, much as in the Gothic iteration of the Big House novel (Kreilkamp 62). The process of ageing is not left to the arrow of time but hijacked and accelerated by the novel’s villain: Gabriel’s long-lost twin brother, Michael, born of an incestuous arrangement between Gabriel’s Papa and Papa’s sister, Martha (Gabriel’s *de facto* aunt).

Where Gabriel has been domesticated in spite of his incestuous conception, the arrival of the “mad cold brother” born “of the misalliance between brother and sister” (168–9) invites other readings of the novel. First, the violence done to the aged Granda and Granny Godkin can no longer be considered innocent: it is part of the malevolent narrative that leads

to Michael's taking over Birchwood, even when he is the *de facto* illegitimate son having been brought up by his mother, Martha, out of wedlock (Gabriel is the due inheritor of the estate). Youth therefore trumps age. Second, we can consider Gabriel and Michael the twins of Einstein's famous paradox. In the second section of the novel, Gabriel goes on a journey with the circus, away from and then returning to Birchwood. Michael, meanwhile, thought lost when his mother dies mid-novel, has actually stayed in his initial "frame of reference" at Birchwood the entire time.

The twins have therefore lived and aged separately, as though in separate spacetimes.⁴ It should thus be expected that the travelling twin, Gabriel, has aged less. However, the opposite has happened. First there is Michael, whose "fearsome set of teeth" do not appear to have degraded by the novel's close. Gabriel describes how Michael "looked up at me with terrible teeth clenched in a grimace" and that "He had not changed. His red hair was as violent as ever, his teeth as terrible" (32, 165, 167); Michael has not aged in accordance with Einstein's theory. The second reversal of the idea of time dilation is evident in the state of *Birchwood*. Gabriel notes that "The house was [now] in better repair, and eyed the world through its blazing windows with a steely new assurance, and there were new slates on the roof, and the garden was elegantly barbered" (161). Time dilation, then, appears to have been reversed within the novel's narrative, upsetting the model of Einstein's theory of special relativity and subverting the traditional mode of narrative following Eddington's arrow of time.⁵ This word "subversion" is important when discussing *Birchwood* (Kreilkamp 75; McMinn 32), and there appears to be an obsession with subversion in *Birchwood*, particularly if we think of it relating to time and time dilation.

For example, the novel's beginning is the end of its narrative, with Gabriel's decision to tell his story through flashback. The idea of the past being "poised around me" (4) at the start of Gabriel's narrative confirms the novel's analeptic narrative structure. The first sign that this constitutes a subversive act is Gabriel's "I am, therefore I think", reversing René Descartes' famous dictum. Gabriel then reveals that the story is of the "fall and rise of Birchwood", another phrasal reversal, this time hinting at Edward Gibbons's eighteenth-century tome on the Roman Empire. "The name is Godkin, Gabriel," the narrator continues, telling us that "I feel I have already lived for a century and more". He also asks: "[W]hat, for instance, did I do in the womb [...] with my past time still all before me?" Without answering, Gabriel goes on to claim impossibly that "In my time I have gone down twice to the same river", and, before the first page is out, he explains that "I have begun to work on the house. Not that it is in need of repair, no" (3). Even cause and effect – corollaries of entropy and the Arrow of Time – are subverted, such as when Gabriel attempts to conclude narrative strands that have yet to begin and describes the photograph of a "young girl dressed in white" whom he had thought, later in the novel (though earlier in time), to be his long-lost sister. Now, however, at the end of his *fabula*, "I knew this girl was someone else, a lost child, misplaced in time" (4–5). This, I propose, is how to think about Gabriel and Michael, identical twins whose lives were divided from their very beginning: children lost in time. Time's subversion may therefore appear inevitable.

In response to Gabriel's Proustian subversion when he describes gathering his "madeleines [...] anew, [and] compared them to my memories of them" (5), Gabriel becomes for Rüdiger Imhof (1987) a blueprint for Banville's later "Einstein figure" (113) Gabriel Swan in *Mefisto* (1986).⁶ Not only do both Gabriels seek "meaning, harmony, [and] order" (126) in the world, but they tell their stories in narratively similar ways: like Godkin, Swan "tries to

discern sense and meaning in his life through the manner in which he recounts it in retrospect” (114). The youthful experience of subverted time is thus privileged in *Birchwood* because it allows Godkin to establish narrative order. For Godkin, however, the subverted past that lays the ground for the future is contingent since, first, “all we carry into the future are fragments which reconstruct a wholly illusory past” (4), and second, “the past comes back transformed only to startle us with its steadfastness. It is our fractured vision which has transformed it” (161). The latter reminds us that not only is our experience of time relative, but our relative position in time and space is an active agent of the experience of time. The combination of youth and Einstein’s theory of special relativity make an interesting cocktail in *Birchwood*.

The subversion of time in *Birchwood* does not occur outside the effects of the narrative or characters. Clearly, the malevolent twin, Michael, is the narrative interloper⁷ whose actions subvert temporality in *Birchwood*: ageing takes place horizontally *across spacetime*, rather than vertically *through chronological time* as we might expect with ageing in a Big House novel. This adulterated temporal structure is also signalled in “one of the novel’s most haunting symbols, [...] the eponymous birchwood” (McMinn 35): “Our wood was one of nature’s cripples. [...] The trees grew wicked and deformed, some of them so terribly twisted that they crawled horizontally across the hill, [...] The roots they had struggled to put down were thrust up again[.]” (B 23) The horizontal branches and the upturned roots provide an apt metaphor for the problem with ageing that Gabriel himself undergoes. The “existential schizophrenia” (McMinn 39) that Gabriel experiences when he realises that his twin brother exists helps to explain the “mad” world “with laws cast in the wrong moulds” (B 26). Gabriel’s feeling of expedited ageing – “more than a century” (3) – emerges and becomes explicable because of his twin, and because of the logic of Einstein’s theory of the twin in his models of spacetime and special relativity. As such, rather than instantiating them the interloper Michael resolves (or at least makes possible to resolve) the narrative’s temporal contradictions that result in the restoration of the authority of youth at Birchwood.

Hints at the horizontal dilation of time were already present in the relative differences between Birchwood and the travelling circus, and their respective frames of reference. Eleanor Lybeck’s (2019) argument that “The circus [...] is a way of seeing in *Birchwood* and less a spectacle in itself” (138) confirms that it is worth reading this twins narrative through the idea of Einstein’s thought experiments about the nature of simultaneous, yet relative observation. The twins paradox and its associated notion of spacetime additionally helps to make sense of the temporal subversion and Gabriel’s attempt at seeking order and meaning *in spite* of the subversion, and in light of his disregard for aged figures and their atavistic authority. Michael, therefore, was not the problem but provided the meaningful solution. Wilfully or not, Gabriel’s space and its relative time have altered counter to the expected motion of spacetime because of Michael. He is the Einsteinian solution to the problem that atavism and an ageing authority posed all along to Gabriel’s own existence, demonstrating Banville’s predilection at this stage for Einstein’s temporal model.

Doctor Copernicus

When confronted with ageing, a signal problem is the feeling of running out of time. That fear is ironised when what you need time *for* is time itself. This is true in *Doctor Copernicus* (1976), when the eponymous protagonist tries to inaugurate the heliocentric view of the universe by establishing the length of the orbits of other planets and therefore the varied

length of a year in our solar system. In an early version of “clock time”, Copernicus is in a race to finish his work and publish his calculations before either he dies, or someone else gets there first. However, this race to avoid death is felt not by Copernicus himself, but rather by those around him. Moving beyond *Birchwood*’s youthful exuberance, in *Doctor Copernicus* the hero develops an authentic embrace of his ageing and coming death.

Copernicus’ ageing is first told to the reader through the letters of eminent priests. Canon Tiedemann Giese writes that Copernicus “is an old man now, & in ill-health. He does not sleep well, & is plagued by hallucinations: sometimes he speaks of dark figures that hide in the corners of his room”. Giese later defends Copernicus from malicious rumours, citing “his advanced age & his neverending studies”. Meanwhile Copernicus is also aware of his own ageing when he comments in a letter to Giese that he is “touched, truly” by his housekeeper Anna Schilling’s “devotion to an old sick man” (150, 152, 155). In these examples there is a sense of genuine anticipatory resoluteness, to use Heidegger’s phrase. In gerontology, this has been termed “gerotranscendence”: “The gerotranscendent individual [...] typically experiences a redefinition of the self and of relationships to others and a new understanding of fundamental, existential questions.” (Torstnam cited in Ingman, 2018: 4) Copernicus knows he will die and is readily committing himself to it. He appears, in his own words and those of Giese, to be what Heidegger would term an authentic Dasein, preparing for death.

However, that preparation frustrates a visiting scholar from Wittenberg, Rheticus. Rheticus narrates the penultimate section of the novel as he meets Copernicus and organises to have the latter’s proofs published (Copernicus earlier published a preparatory thesis, promising a fuller explanation later). Rheticus’ frustration is not restricted to Copernicus’ ageing, but Copernicus’ gerotranscendent *acceptance* of his ageing:

“When you have once seen the chaos, you must make some thing to set between yourself and that terrible sight; and so you make a mirror, thinking that in it shall be reflected the reality of the world; but then you understand that the mirror reflects only appearances, and that reality is somewhere else, off behind the mirror; and you remember that behind the dark mirror there is only the chaos.”

Dark dark dark.

I said:

“And yet, Herr Doctor, the truth must be revealed.”

“Truth is that which cannot be concealed.”

“You have not listened, you have not understood.”

“Truth is certain good, that’s all I know.”

“I am an old man, and you make me weary.”

“Give your agreement then, and let me go.”

“The mirror is cracking! listen! do you hear it?” (209)

Here Copernicus reveals his Bergsonian persuasion by *intuiting* his Duration, simultaneously relinquishing his claim to authenticity over the work itself, dismissing it as a “mirror”. Where Gabriel Godkin sought order like Rheticus, Copernicus notes the mirror’s cracking. When Copernicus implores Rheticus to look beyond the mirror that “reflects only appearances”, Copernicus reveals that he has recognised his Duration as the inevitable, eternally mobile flow of time. Added to this gerotranscendence and Copernicus’ contingent place in the world (“The shortness of life [...] allow[s] us to know but little”), is Copernicus’ embarrassment of

his work: “First they shall laugh, and later weep” (209). Here Copernicus owns his guilt as much as his temporality, showing that he appears to be the authentic Dasein that Heidegger describes. Of guilt, Heidegger (2008) says that “*Being-guilty* is more primordial than any *knowledge* about it” and gives rise to conscience since “The call” into Being “is the call of care” (332). And Copernicus’s “care” in the world is to right the wrongs of the Ancient map of the heavens by virtue of a new, more accurate science – and even to acknowledge his theory’s faults when they appear.

The call to care demands truth, as both Rheticus and Copernicus agree in the discussion quoted above. And yet, the “truth” that Copernicus has written – “more than I had hoped [for],” says Rheticus (181) – is not to be published under Copernicus’s name. Instead, Rheticus is coerced into “writ[ing] down an account of the book from memory”, in order that Copernicus can destroy his own copy and that Rheticus, though far younger and considered a disciple of sorts, can become “a kind of John the Baptist, the one who goes before” (187). Thus, refusing to sign his own name and himself into immortality allows Copernicus to commit himself authentically to death: “[W]ith the help of friends and enemies, he achieved the legendary status he had worked so carefully to avoid” (McMinn 47). At the same time, Rheticus, the younger, fails while overtaking Copernicus in the race to immortality; or, as McMinn explains, “Copernicus was a failure who, through the intervention of others, became a legend” (*ibid. ibidem.*). And yet, John the Baptist does not rise again, unlike Jesus – here analogised with Copernicus. Ageing, therefore, leads to a kind of immortality via the assumption of an authentic Being-toward-death. To take the analogy one step further, Rheticus gained no “such fame” as Copernicus’, even though it was his work (B 187).

Thus, Rheticus’ inauthentic Being-toward-death results in his broad omission from history and confirms the fruitlessness of worrying about ageing. Copernicus has thus discovered a “good way of signing” by “writ[ing] things that, finally, are things, worthy of going without [his] signature”, thereby perfecting the strategy of making the signature “remain and disappear at the same time, remain in order to disappear, or disappear in order to remain” (Derrida 34, 56) – this is Banville’s Copernicus’ anti-ageing writing strategy that I read as a development of Banville’s attempt in *Birchwood* to see order in the chaotic Big House by virtue of Einstein’s twins paradox. To write in *Copernicus*, therefore, is to write into immortality; to sign, by contrast, is to claim that work inauthentically as your own. Copernicus appears to have worked out that the *work undertaken* (his taking-care) is sufficient to live authentically, whilst on the other hand, Rheticus discovers that signing one’s name does not ensure immortality, his becoming instead an inauthentic life. In the time that remains to Rheticus in *Doctor Copernicus* as he ages, he does not undergo “gerotranscendence” and therefore remains inauthentic. Youth is beginning to be superseded by the ageing and aged characters.

The Infinities

In *The Infinities* the ageist and gerotranscendent ideas deployed in *Birchwood* and *Doctor Copernicus* find a new outlet in the immortal storytelling – and puppeteering – of the god Hermes, whose anti-ageing system elides with the author’s own. Hermes’ narration relies on understanding both Einstein’s and Bergson’s ideas of time. I have already shown how *The Infinities* navigates between the two poles of time as sketched by Bergson and Einstein. The novel concerns the rapid ageing and dying of old Adam Godley, father to young Adam and Petra, and husband to Ursula. Importantly, “The universe in which *The Infinities* takes place [...] is not our own” (Murray 13) since, among other oddities, old Adam Godley has supplanted

Einstein's theories of relativity and other theories of quantum physics. For Godley, now comatose following a near-fatal stroke, there has always been a competition between temporalities, evident in the ways that Petra and young Adam oscillate between Einsteinian temporal paradoxes and Bergsonian Duration, as I quoted above.

In the final pages of the novel old Adam is (just about) returned to life. When he is, immortal god Hermes describes the mortal world

where nothing is lost, where all is accounted for while yet the mystery of things is preserved; a world where they may live, however briefly, however tenuously, in the failing evening of the self, solitary and at the same time together somehow here in this place, dying as they may be and yet fixed for ever in a luminous, unending instant. (300)

Not only does this description again conjoin the self–world–others relationship, but Hermes' description allows for the ideas of the “unending instant” of Einstein's spacetime and Bergson's Duration “where all is accounted for” on a personal level, “while yet the [worldly] mystery of things is preserved”. The same tensions accounted for through Banville's earlier work are here restated, albeit now from an immortal's perspective.

Hermes envies the mortals' world, though he admits its failings. For immortals, two things defy experience: “[L]ove [...] is one of that pair of things our kind may not experience, the other being, obviously, death.” This is no source of happiness for the immortals, claims Hermes, who instead proclaims that “of course [Zeus] wants to die, as do all of us immortals” (72–3). The immortals plainly are not Beings-toward-death in the Heideggerian sense, and in fact the temporalities on which Heidegger draws – either Bergson's or Einstein's – are inapplicable to the world of the immortals. Moreover, the limited temporalities of Dasein are desirable to immortals.

However, the most important intervention in the mode of living-through-time in *The Infinities* comes from old Adam. As he lies in bed, physically immobile and able only to think on his memories, he laments that “dear life is what I could never quite get the hang of”. By contrast, “Others seem to manage it easily enough: they just do it, or have it done to them – perhaps that is the secret, not so much to live as be lived, let life itself do the work” (217). This reversion to the passive voice turns “to live” into a deponent form, in which it sets aside its activity and turns the human agent into the object of the action. “To be lived” leads inexorably on to “to be aged” and, more problematically, “to be died”. This is a paradigmatic version of Heidegger's inauthenticity in which Dasein's thrownness into the world is rejected, and a passive existence substitutes for the authentic, anticipatory resoluteness of Dasein – old Adam's behaviour is reminiscent of Rheticus in *Doctor Copernicus*.

This collocation of ideas leaves *The Infinities* in a paradox: Hermes promotes Bergsonian and Einsteinian temporalities, on which Heidegger drew, but its hero old Adam rejects Heidegger's central conceit of thrownness and authentically being-toward-death. This paradox is central to Banville's creative production. The novel he longed to see in 1985 would contain “a new poetic intensity, once the form is freed of its obligations to psychologize, to spin yarns, to portray ‘reality’” (Banville, 1985. para. 22). The motif of ageing, as I have charted it, thus reaches in *The Infinities* a non-real portrayal – Hedwig Schwall (2010) has helpfully explored the text's fantasy credentials – when living itself is displaced into passivity, even while time itself maintains its twentieth-century tensions. It makes sense that *The Infinities*

is this novel, given its adjustments of political and scientific history (Mary, Queen of Scots has decapitated her cousin Elizabeth; old Adam Godley has supplanted Einstein's theories of relativity and other theories of quantum physics). These tensions, whilst never resolved, continue to hold sway in *The Infinities*, while there is increased pressure from *outside* these hermetic systems – another paradox.

And yet through Hermes' "prestidigitation" (75, and cf. Schwall, 1997) the god points us towards the best understanding of this outside-time-ness as ordinary, the "to be lived" as normal. In positioning and animating the marionettes – and delaying dawn, manipulating the flow of time itself (29)– Hermes is, like the author, both inside and outside the narrative. A novel is a closed system, with front and back covers. But unlike the arrow of time that demands unidirectional time, Banville's closed systems abide by their own laws of time's arrow. It is the ageing within the covers that abides by the logic of that novel, rather than the universal temporalities applied to, and emerging from, Dasein more generally. Hermes-as-prestidigitator is but a version of Banville, his characters "marionettes in Banville's puppet theatre" (O'Connell 152), thereby establishing a new type of a closed, Hermetic system: in *The Infinities* "time is all out of kilter" (194). Unlike the thought experiment of Schrödinger's cat that "says that we cannot investigate darkness by bathing it in light" (Banville, 1985. para. 17), Hermes sheds light on the temporal forces at work in Arden House and further develops the anti-ageing writing system in the Godleys' home that circumscribes the "achrony or temporal utopia in which the comatose Adam finds himself" (Schwall 2010 100); in doing so, Hermes relieves ageing of its inevitability. The novel ends by returning life to Helen's womb, and (just about) returning old Adam from death's door to the world of the living.

* * *

In *Birchwood* I explained how the horizontal time dilation resolved the problem of atavism and the inauthentic Dasein for the protagonist. In *Doctor Copernicus* I showed the inauthenticity that derives for Rheticus from wishing to expedite another's ageing – that is, playing god to another's Dasein – whilst in *The Infinities* I counteracted that by showing how the author–prestidigitator reveals himself by reversing or forestalling the process of ageing, rather than by expediting it. Of all the characters in Banville's novels, Hermes in *The Infinities* reveals himself as the most authentic (quasi-)Dasein because he actively wills death, even though (or *because*) it is absolutely unavailable to him. From outside mortal temporality, he seeks mortality and becomes therefore authentic – even as he reverses ageing in the mortal characters under his control. To reverse others' ageing is the closest he gets to expediting his own. Thus, Gabriel Godkin time travels within a mode of Einstein's temporality, Copernicus embraces his Duration's flow through time and Hermes controls the flow of time in either direction, proving that Duration is at his whim. I therefore argue that the growing bid to slow and to reverse time's flow in Banville's novels proves the author's increased interest in Bergson over and above Einstein.

Notes

- 1 My thanks to my co-editors for their careful reading of this paper. I additionally want to thank Laura Zuntini de Izarra in particular for hosting me at the W.B. Yeats Chair at the University of São Paulo in July 2018 where I first aired some of these ideas, as also to the organisers of IASIL

2019 in Dublin. My thanks, as ever, to Emma Taylor-Collins for patiently reading and re-reading my prose.

2 Etymologically, “atavism” invokes the relation of the grandfather, rather than the father.

3 See *The Newton Letter* (1982), in which the inhabitants of the land are the Lawlesses – presumably descendants of those in *Birchwood*.

4 I am treating Einstein’s theories metaphorically here, rather than suggesting that Banville is conducting a science experiment in *Birchwood*.

5 The most notable subversions of Eddington’s arrow of time are Martin Amis’s *Time’s Arrow* (1991) and Christopher Nolan’s film *Memento* (2000).

6 See Kersti Tarien Powell in this issue on the importance of Einstein to Banville’s stop–start development of *Mefisto*.

7 In this idea of the interloper, I am referring to the *Long Lankin* interlopers that featured in Banville’s short-story collection *Long Lankin* (1970; revd 1984).

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Misanthropy of Form: John Banville's Henry James

Misanthropia da Forma: Henry James de John Banville

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Abstract: *Mrs Osmond (2017) is unique to date among John Banville's non-pseudonymous novels in having a female protagonist and no first-person voice. Reviewers have hailed it as a pastiche faithful to the style and dramatic situation of the classic work for which it offers a sequel, Henry James's The Portrait of a Lady (1881). This essay argues that Mrs Osmond dismantles all the central elements of Portrait. Its manner of doing so shows the fundamental importance of a quality often observed in Banville's male narrators—misanthropy—to the design of his novels, particularly its close connection to the aspect of his work most highlighted by scholars: metafictional self-reflexivity.*

Keywords: *John Banville; Mrs Osmond; Henry James; The Portrait of a Lady; misanthropy; metafiction; the Bildungsroman.*

Resumo: *Mrs. Osmond (2017) é o único entre os romances não pseudonímicos de John Banville a ter uma protagonista feminina e nenhuma voz em primeira pessoa. Os críticos o saudaram como um pastiche fiel ao estilo e à situação dramática da obra clássica The Portrait of A Lady (1881), de Henry James, para a qual oferece uma sequência. Este ensaio argumenta que Mrs. Osmond desmonta todos os elementos centrais de Portrait. Sua maneira de fazer isso mostra a importância fundamental de uma qualidade frequentemente observada nos narradores masculinos de Banville para a construção de seus romances — a misantropia — e particularmente sua estreita conexão com o aspecto mais destacado de sua obra pelos estudiosos: a auto reflexividade metaficcional.*

Palavras-chave: *John Banville; Mrs. Osmond; Henry James; The Portrait of A Lady; misantropia; metaficção; Bildungsroman.*

The reception of John Banville's work has been pervaded by a preoccupation with misanthropy. Michael Springer (2019) notes "the tinge of misanthropy and self-loathing that marks out so many of his narrators (135). Focusing on one in particular, Jessica Winter (2003) argues that Axel Vander is "caged less by his 'dead leg' and 'sightless eye' than by his own corrosive misanthropy." Citing another, Kathleen Costello-Sullivan (2018) acknowledges Max Morden's "general misanthropy" (45). Introducing a scale of comparison, Mark O'Connell (2013) deems the "narcissism" of Gabriel Godkin and Gabriel Swan "less aggressively misanthropic" than that of Alexander Cleave, Vander, or Freddie Montgomery (86).

Misanthropy is so characteristic a feature of Banville's work that it has come to be associated with the author himself. Rob Doyle (2016) makes the identification: "the narrators of John Banville's novels tend towards misanthropy, solipsism, and the same patrician hauteur he affects in his public persona." One reviewer even worried that the tendency had wrought a debilitating effect, noting "quiet signs of creative weariness, if not of a creeping misanthropy" (Foram 2010). Banville's pseudonymous works do not escape the affliction, though it is partly

attributed to a literary forbear: “[Benjamin] Black takes up the misanthropic attitude of Chandler’s Marlowe” (Eisenberg 2017. 21). Interpretations that do not diagnose the ailment nevertheless register its impact. Seamus Deane (1976) once criticized the “introversion” that produces Banville’s world of “proverbial and archetypal corruption”(334). More recently, Neil Murphy (2018) pointed out the saturation of that world with crime, injury and menace (159).

Banvillean misanthropy has connections with another feature of his work often highlighted by critics: its interest in metafictional self-reflexivity. Scholars have long recognized the “self-conscious” and “experimental” quality of his novels and their overt focus on the construction of fiction (McMinn 1991.1). Often, this direct allusion to artifice finds a parallel in the concerns of the protagonists. As Rüdiger Imhof (1989) has pointed out, Banville heroes from *Doctor Copernicus* to the elder Gabriel Swan show an obsession with “unifying systems, literary or scientific, of sublime beauty and order”(171). On occasion, this fixation on what Elke D’hoker (2004) has described as a “shaping mode of representation” is dangerous to other human beings, who are regarded as disposable or incidental material (220). Freddie Montgomery, Axel Vander, and Victor Maskell strew collateral damage in pursuit of personal fantasy. Inspired by historical scandals of deceptive self-invention—Malcolm MacArthur, Paul de Man, Anthony Blunt—these figures connect fictional fabrication to heedless inhumanity.

Like larger narrative arcs, the brushstrokes of metafiction in Banville’s novels follow a misanthropic bent. Gabriel Swan in *Mefisto* (1986) flaunts his lack of interest in crafting a fully seamless story: “I had come to tell her, let me see, to tell her—oh, what does it matter, I can’t think of anything” (33). Indifferent to the reader, and apparently careless of detail, he casts doubt on the value of his entire authorial effort: “all wrong though, surely, this geography, or do I mean topography? It doesn’t matter” (74). On the rare occasion when a Banville narrator diffuses only lightness, a certain detached, speculative toying with human frailty still carries the stamp of misanthropy. In *The Infinities* (2009), probably the most fantastic of Banville approximations between amorality and fictional impunity, the Greek god Hermes disposes of the destinies of the personnel, arranging positions, interactions, couplings, impregnation. Like Freddie Montgomery in *The Book of Evidence* (1989), who considers mortals a mere blemish on the face of a world far too beautiful to be a suitable home for them (26-7), this godlike perspective views human affairs as an absurd, incongruous blip in a vast, mysterious, yet ordered universe.

The sense of festivity in the schemes of a Greek god initiated into the laws of nature collapse an opposition recurrent in Banville’s texts, between mathematical or scientific system and a realm linked to the “circus.” Stepping into this space begins a journey that involves shifts of identity, theatrical play, and apparitions from the unconscious. Gabriel Godkin in *Birchwood* (1973) and Gabriel Swan of *Mefisto* both venture there, beyond the reach of damaged and fractious families. Yet this new anarchic terrain turns out to repeat the aggravations of the abandoned world of childhood, which are now directed toward other victims. The Banville narrator’s obsession with “system” is just the reverse side of a fascination with sportive experiment. Both are symptoms of misanthropy, and derive from subjection to arbitrary interference, seeking release by transferring this irritant to others. Even Hermes has a father (“my old Dad”) more delinquent than himself.

The close link in Banville’s oeuvre between misanthropy and the license claimed by fiction is most clearly demonstrated by a text in which the typical misanthropic male narrator does not appear. *Mrs Osmond* (2017), alone among Banville’s literary works in having a female protagonist and no first-person voice, scans the horizon of metafictional possibility, proposing

a sequel to Henry James's *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881). Stylistic imitation, historical reference, and updates for a contemporary sensibility are all part of its repertoire. But rather than representing a faithful succession to its source, as reviewers have claimed,¹ the pastiche offered by *Mrs Osmond* in fact shows the irresistible pull of misanthropy on Banvillean novelistic design. The sequel mocks and nullifies every aspect of Jamesian structure. A general darkening of the characters makes a nonsense of the betrayal at the heart of *Portrait*. A focus on materiality destroys that text's abstract, psychological force. Instead of having a male speaker recount the carelessly inadvertent victimization of his fellow creatures—as in Banville's other plots—the narrative multiplies minor physical afflictions for its female protagonist. In other words, the metafictional revision amounts to a misanthropic action of form, by which the elements of the original are dismantled. In its place appears a familiar Banville landscape, where predictable human pettiness plays out against the alienated backdrop of an alluring cosmos.

As readers of James know, *The Portrait of a Lady* contains a pattern common in some shape to all of his novels: the betrayal of the main character through a compact between a mentor and a love-object, involving a hidden intimacy between these two. Sometimes the hero is overwhelmed by the resulting conflict. Hyacinth Robinson in *The Princess Casamassima* (1886) commits suicide, unable to reconcile formative influences with innate passions. The eponymous sculptor of *Roderick Hudson* (1875) blunders toward fatal accident, ignorant of his patron's stake in his amorous as well as his artistic affairs. With James's late phase, the protagonist's innocence becomes a weapon against conspirators. In *The Wings of the Dove* (1902), the relationship between Merton Densher and Kate Croy is destroyed by the dead Milly Theale's bequest, which has been made in full knowledge of the impecunious lovers' plot. In *The Golden Bowl* (1904), Maggie Verver banishes the threat to her marriage posed by her friend—and stepmother—Charlotte Stant, by pretending not to recognize it. Isabel Archer's final position is more ambiguous. A sequel contradicts as much as it resolves this quality, since the frozenness of impasse is also a characteristic Jamesian conclusion.

Corrupted Characters

Mrs Osmond makes the central betrayal of *The Portrait of a Lady* impossible. It does so by means of a general misanthropic transformation of the original. This is evident first of all in a change to the protagonists. Elke D'hoker (2019) notes the instances of complete reversal. Pansy Osmond goes from angelic to callous (363). Beneficent Mr. Touchett is besmirched as an adulterer (252). In addition, as D'hoker observes, "most Jamesian characters have come down a notch or two in the scale of coldness and corruption" (75). The Countess Gemini feels a newfound "antipathy" toward her niece (216), and a much more qualified sympathy for Isabel (191). The meddlesome yet well-intentioned Henrietta Stackpole turns out to have harbored secret, self-interested motives (89). In James's original she was a forthright American patriot. In Banville's sequel she appears status-conscious, easily offended, hypocritical. Isabel herself, previously inscrutably dutiful, is now no longer above thoughts of revenge (161).

Attitudes taken by the characters toward one another have also markedly hardened. Henrietta reserves for Warburton's sisters "her strongest disapproval and disdain" (87). She also held Ralph Touchett "in such low regard" (97), a statement surprising given that she cared for him on the journey home during his last illness. "I *warned* you against a person I knew to be unworthy of you," Mrs. Touchett reminds Isabel, adding the direct insult "not, frankly, that I considered you worthy of so very much" (256). Mr. Touchett, modest about his vast wealth,

now appears to have been contemptuous of the masses, regarding them as living not on money but “small change” (41). The very tone of the humor in *Mrs Osmond* is pettily nasty. Whereas James creates comedy out of transatlantic misunderstanding, Banville parades and mocks small-minded pretense. “I do not follow with any interest the doings of the aristocracy,” claims Henrietta, “stiffy” (86) while Isabel, equally superficial, “dearly wished” she could suppress a memory to the contrary—of Henrietta keeping a “sharp” and imitative eye on English country house table manners (118).

If its deformation of the Jamesian ensemble were not enough, *Mrs Osmond* adds new characters to extend the range of bad temper and venality. Isabel’s maid, “discreet, devoted, and active” (524), is replaced by the figure of Staines, whose “chief token and proof” of loyalty is “a permanently maintained state of vexedness” (4). Isabel visits a suffragist, Florence Janeway, for guidance, and must summon the word *Schadenfreude* to describe the response (58). The smiling journalist Myles Devenish, Janeway’s nephew, has designs on Isabel’s wealth just as Merle and Osmond did, ambitious to become established as a newspaper editor in America (376). Supplementary details embellish the litany of perfidy. In a glance at James’s family origins, Amy Osmond remembers from her New York schooldays a violently punitive teacher from “the County of Cavan” (218). Gilbert Osmond was the childhood torturer of his sister, squeezing her wrist in an apparent gesture of friendliness “until the bones and sinews inside it creaked” (189). Nature itself seems vindictive. The moon peers at Isabel “with a gloating smirk” (105). Behind modern spectacle lurk the horrors of history. In the Louvre, Isabel imagines the swarms of tourists as marauding pupils in a *grand lycée* who have, on the morning of a national insurrection, “murdered their monitors with happy enthusiasm” (150).

In this atmosphere, it is difficult, as D’hoker remarks, to distinguish any particular wickedness in Osmond and Madame Merle. This is why, she speculates, the novel adds a new crime to top the rest (76). Osmond is a murderer, having taken his first wife to a plague-infested region, knowing she would die (337). But the misdeeds—and the sourness—of the characters do not simply spread the canker of Banvillean misanthropy. Their effect is to destroy the structure at the heart of *The Portrait of a Lady*. The crimes of the miscreants are in fact figured by *Mrs Osmond* in two distinct ways. In Chapter XXV, Mrs. Touchett recounts an episode from her marriage, telling of an affair between her husband and the wife of a colleague, which produced a child who was left in an orphanage. The chapter begins with an adaptation of one of the most famous of all opening lines from the novel in English: “there is a universal truth which the young are all too infrequently surprised into acknowledging, and then with a sense of having been violently brought up short, which is that, as they are now, so too were the old, once” (251). Mrs. Touchett tells Isabel the story so that she will realize her situation is not so unusual. The framing of the chapter itself, with its conversion of the *Bildungsroman*’s journey of insight into the recognition of a common truth, seems to share this perspective.

However, the putative outrage at the core of *The Portrait of a Lady* is not adultery but conspiracy. In a classic violation of the categorical imperative, Isabel was turned into an object of use or “convenience” (547). Introducing the crime of murder on the one hand, and emphasizing the commonness of infidelity on the other, is a misanthropic adjustment which stresses the limitlessness and the banal frequency of treachery. The gravity of conspiracy, by contrast, depends on a moral differentiation between its perpetrators and everyone else, and most importantly, between the perpetrators and their victim, the main protagonist. Already demoted from the nobleness of the original, Banville’s Isabel is portrayed as being so

concerned with appearances that she is not even able to acknowledge what has happened to her. In *Portrait*, she admitted to the dying Ralph Touchett that she was married for her money. In *Mrs Osmond* she objects to Henrietta's vehement summary of the facts, "ow[ing] a duty to her husband not to hear him maligned and mocked for a scoundrel and a fortune-hunter—nay for a common embezzler!" (130). The archaic flourish "nay" (found nowhere in James's novel) renders her a priggish Victorian stereotype.

Dismantled Form

The nature of the misanthropic perspective that drives *Mrs Osmond* can be illuminated by the modifications to a pivotal sequence from the original. Banville has Isabel think of the years of her marriage as spent "crouched in the cramped confines of the little model dwelling she had so handily fashioned" (16). Her husband, she realizes, "had not been with her in that little house, but had been outside it all along, standing upright and at his leisure, with his hands in his pockets, and only leaning down to peep in at her amusedly now and then where she sat huddled with her arms circled about her knees and her head so sharply inclined she could see little more than the tips of her toes" (17). This image combines several elements to suggest that Isabel constructed the fiction of her marriage all by herself. Osmond's pose is the same as the one Isabel noticed when she saw him in casual conversation with Madame Merle and realized the nature of the relation between the pair. Here she is shown willfully severed from that reality. The image also invokes Ibsen's well-known association in *A Doll's House* (1879) between the infantilization of women and their confinement to a private, domestic sphere, depicting Isabel as having deliberately shrunk herself into the position of child. Most importantly, the trope refers to the rhetoric of dwelling and habitation from the famous Chapter XLII of *The Portrait of a Lady*.

In that decisive rumination, however, the implications of the metaphor are very different. Isabel imagines her relationship with her husband as a terrifying journey underground. After a year "she had suddenly found the infinite vista of multiplied life to be a dark, narrow alley, with a dead wall at the end. Instead of leading to the high places of happiness...it led rather downward and earthward, into realms of restriction and depression..." (405-6). As she clamors through this subterranean region, "it was as if Osmond deliberately, almost malignantly, had put the lights out one by one" (406). Although we are in Isabel's mind, or affiliated to it by Jamesian "point of view," the roles of both parties in the degeneration of the marriage are traversed. The causes lie in Isabel's willed and unconscious self-limitation, and in her own and Osmond's desire to convert each other into objects of acquisition. Burdened by her vast wealth, she bestowed it on what she thought was a worthy recipient, and to win his approval made herself "lesser" in his company. In return, James suggests, she expected to gain masculinity itself, in rarefied form, as a possession: "the finest—in the sense of being the subtlest—manly organism she had ever known had become her property" (408). Osmond, for his part, wants to convert Isabel into a collector's item. Believing she has "too many ideas," he would have liked her to have "nothing of her own but her pretty appearance" (409).

The journey beneath the earth ends with arrival at "the mansion of [Osmond's] own habitation." In this mental space, Isabel feels "incredulous terror": "between those four walls she had lived ever since; they were to surround her for the rest of her life. It was the house of darkness, the house of dumbness, the house of suffocation" (410). Whereas previously Osmond had seemed retiring, independent-minded, and of excellent taste despite his meager

resources, he now appears to care deeply about the world's opinion. Affecting a "sovereign contempt for every one but some three or four very exalted people whom he envied" (410), he combines esteem for the rituals of aristocratic society with tolerance of its sexual mores. Isabel is at first shocked—"Did all women have lovers? Did they all lie and even the best have their price?"—and then disdainful, earning Osmond's hatred, which becomes "the occupation and comfort of [his] life" (413). In Chapter XXVII of *Mrs Osmond*, Banville revises the second part of James's long metaphor. Here, confinement in the "mansion" of Osmond's superficial mind changes into a visit, *before* the marriage takes place, to a "cloacal den" at the back of his villa. Osmond's attitude to society is presented in both literal and metaphorical terms as a "malignant satisfaction in turning up the world's stone so as to expose to the light of day the foul things swarming and squirming underneath it" (272). In *The Portrait of a Lady*, by contrast, the reptile from which Isabel recoils is Osmond's own "egotism," which "lay hidden like a serpent in a bank of flowers" (410).

As Franco Moretti (1987) has shown, the *Bildungsroman* "seems to justify itself as a form in so far as it duplicates the proceedings of a trial"—a trial in which we can expect to see "the false testimonies of the villain and the sincere confessions of the hero; the cult of innocence and the all-pervasive opposition of 'right' and wrong" (212). Although more complex, James's novel nevertheless remains predicated on this paradigm. *Mrs Osmond*, however, rejects the very oppositions that the "trial" upholds. Depicting Isabel as a child who has by her own contriving shut out the facts of her circumstances, it suggests that the innocence of the "hero" is a willful infantile delusion. The change to the timeline of the visit to Osmond's "mansion" implies that no deception has been practiced. So too does the image of the upturned stone. Instead of a shallow obsession with the world's opinion of him, the action of uncovering swarming insects foregrounds Osmond's opinion of the world, and gives his disclosure of it to his wife a natural rather than a social dimension. Gone is the impression created by *Portrait*, of a coldly dissimulated hypocrisy of personality. An emphasis on revolting earthiness is quintessentially misanthropic, and its invocation of nature asserts the legitimacy of that disposition. The idea of a reprehensible betrayal of innocence is therefore no longer in play. The explicitly sexual and scatological connotations of the "cloacal den" challenge the elusiveness of the body and sexuality in James. Did Isabel's desire, or, as Rebecca West (1916) once argued, the deplorable absence of it, not lead her to self-deception?² But the main function of the overtone here is to substitute initiation for development, and degrade psychical horror to the level of disgust.

Just as it obliterates the betrayal central to *The Portrait of a Lady*, *Mrs Osmond* dismantles the typical Jamesian dénouement. Banville's heroine responds to her entrapment with a device similar to that of Milly Theale in *The Wings of the Dove*. Like Milly, she parries the conspiracy against her through a lavish act of giving, bestowing her marital home on Madame Merle. Her aim, however, brings out the retaliatory element in the wronged hero's munificence. Milly's bequest means that Kate Croy and Merton Densher must always regret their scheme. Isabel wants to ensure that Osmond is daily confronted with the scandals of his past. As well as emphasizing its avenging effect, Banville's "quotation" of this gift motif punctures its dramatic power. Mrs. Touchett thinks Isabel's plan confused and naïve (257). When it is announced to Osmond and Merle, we see a flat, frozen tableau and a slide into anticlimactic irrelevance: "the two were staring at each other, eye to eye—a *quattr'occhi*, as the Italians say, Isabel recalled with surpassing inconsequence—and in their looks were mingled so many meanings, emotions and calculations that it would be foolhardy to attempt to enumerate them here." (352).

The moral force of the gambit also drains away. As Isabel is making her statement, she is “like a child in the classroom who has been summoned to her feet by the teacher and commanded to recite a lesson she had spent all of the previous evening striving, with much worry and effort, to learn off by heart” (350-1). This comparison appears at two other points. The restaurant of the London hotel where Isabel goes after leaving Gardencourt reminds her of a “schoolroom,” where, despite the waiter’s “soft obsequiousness of manner,” she feels “screwed down into her chair, like a cork forced into the neck of a bottle”(18). The space contains a figure answering to the description of Henry James himself, whom Isabel imagines—in a nod to a disastrous phase in James’s career—to be some kind of “man of the theatre, perhaps, an actor-manager, or even a playwright?” (19). In a subsequent scene, when Henrietta is chiding Isabel about her forfeited potential, she remarks that she and Ralph Touchett had previously regarded Isabel as parents do “when their child is independently brilliant in front of a class of worthy dullards” (101).

These images again imply—contrary to the usual impetus of the *Bildungsroman*—a lack of growth and development, indeed a retrogression. Isabel is a child before her marriage and after: a star, then a reluctant, and finally a diligent but struggling pupil. Construing her gambit as “rote-learned” is typical of the intertextual world of metafiction, in which the singular power of a dramatic conclusion becomes a stock device from a well-known bag of authorial tricks—or here, from the playscript of James the theater man. It has a further, more hostile meaning. Banville’s frame of schoolroom memorization for the notion of pursuing retribution through the grand gesture ridicules this as a childish fantasy, perhaps one inspired by early humiliations. Amy Osmond’s recollection of a Cavan schoolteacher could also be pertinent here. With the “coals of fire” element in the justice it imagines, James’s trope may be less a literary invention than a doctrine indelibly imbibed from his Ulster Presbyterian roots.

Corporeal Ideals

Mrs Osmond introduces a number of signs that it will follow preoccupations typical of Banville’s other novels. His familiar opposition between mathematical system and the circus appears in miniature during Isabel’s train journey to London. She thinks of her dilemma as “a hard task to solve, like an exercise in geometry or algebra” (5). The potential seen in her by Ralph Touchett and others becomes a performance of “spangled-swoopings, to and fro in the powdery light, high up, oh, so high up, under the big, the tremendous, top” (5). When Isabel and Henrietta are talking in the garden about why Amy Osmond revealed the truth about Osmond and Merle (out of “boredom,” Isabel speculates, repeating a hypothesis from *Portrait*), the narrator imagines a “faun” in the undergrowth who is “bored” by the “somewhat aimless animadversions” of the conversation (128). This aside betrays the attitude of an author uninterested in psychological motive, and keener on the surrealistic flights of some of his more dream-like narratives.

Rather than featuring a misanthropic male narrator, who, harassed as a child, distresses others, *Mrs Osmond* instead depicts its heroine as a child or infant animal vacillating between constraint and release. Her withdrawal of money from the bank is like the little “gambol” of a lamb who had been “caught up in a hedge of thorns” (31). Returning from the awkward company of Florence Janeway to her hotel, she feels “like a child given the run of a delightfully deserted house”(67). The smiles and friendliness of the journalist Myles Devenish make her realize that she had been “like a child hiding in a cupboard from a capriciously cruel parent” (309). The most striking image of Isabel’s constraint incorporates an element of wild

unleashing. It revises James's evocation of his heroine's "idea of happiness": "a swift carriage, of a dark night, rattling with four horses over roads that one can't see" (157). In *Mrs Osmond*, "the creature she imagined in that coach now was not herself, but a captive child, baffled and frightened and in dread of whatever destruction lay ahead, while up on the driving seat, in the darkness of the rushing night, a wordless fiend rattled the reins and mercilessly plied the whip" (47).

Instead of the male misanthrope precipitating the injury and death of a female character (a motif in several Banville novels), we see the narrative itself harry and afflict its woman protagonist. Isabel's first appearance more closely resembles the young and oppressed governess depicted in *The Turn of the Screw* (1898) than the disillusioned heroine at the end of *The Portrait of a Lady*. The beginning of *Mrs Osmond*—"it had been a day of agitations and alarms" (3)—already echoes the governess's first words about her long-ago experience: "I remember the whole beginning as a succession of flights and drops" (6). The governess continues to conflate psychological with physical oscillation: "in this state of mind I spent the long hours of bumping, swinging coach." Banville's borrowing converts this into a bodily invasion: "the awful rhythm of the train's wheels, beating on and on within her" (3). This is the first of a random series of proddings, jabbings, attacks. In Paris, "a splinter of early sunlight entered at a gap in the curtains and struck her eyes and made her open them" (146). In Florence, on the way to an *osteria* with Mrs. Touchett, she feels "at a point in her brow mid-way between her eyes" a pain "as sharp as if she were being pierced by the point of a needle" (240). Isabel is also enveloped by threatening, animated, savage spaces: the train is "a great snorting, smoking brute" (3); the bank "seemed to look down upon the sunlit street with its nostrils flared in pained reprehension and disdain" (24).

Bethany Layne (2018) has observed that Banville creates a more corporeal Isabel. Her motherhood is no longer mere proof of marital consummation, and the power play imposed by Osmond has acquired a sexual dimension (2). But the physicality of *Mrs Osmond* is part of a misanthropic attachment to the earthly material. It shifts away from and negates psychology, and thereby also the abstract values of *The Portrait of a Lady*, especially a certain vitality of spirit and intellect associated with its heroine. In *Mrs Osmond*, Isabel is forgetful and mindless. She mislays the sum of money withdrawn from the bank, leaving it by mistake at Janeway's and only retroactively (for reasons not explained) converting it into a donation to "the cause." In Italy, she forgets that her husband is in Florence, despite having been told so by Mrs. Touchett, and despite the fact that a confrontation with him is her main goal (240). Banville's Isabel has no talent for holding her ground in such encounters. "I fail to see the logic of it" Madame Merle aptly responds when Isabel blurts out that she rather than Merle ought to quit the scene of their chance encounter in Paris (174). As well as forming a thoughtless heroine, the narrative focus on the corporeal brings with it a conventional kind of misogyny. Isabel's hoped-for confidante, the feminist activist Janeway, is an infirm "spinster" whose hospitality, commensurate with her convictions, inflicts a minor ordeal. In an affirmation of the reproductive basis of desire, she promotes the prospects of her young nephew, but is ultimately skeptical and jealous of Isabel. If the malice of these details is doubted, it can be confirmed by the invocation of the real name of one of the greatest of Victorian writers, Mary Ann/e Evans (George Eliot), to designate the supervisor of the printing of banners for Janeway's rallies (56).

The materiality of *Mrs Osmond* is in part a critique of a coyness about money in *The Portrait of a Lady*, and in the nineteenth-century novel in general. It foregrounds the entire infrastructure—travel, food, servants, and cash—that makes psychological rumination and

struggle possible. Indeed, the material base of *Portrait*, as *Mrs Osmond* demonstrates, would be the ruin of its superstructure of lies and delusion. Servants know—and could at any time communicate—everything. At the same time, this reminder carries an overtone of nastiness, a sense of snide exposé. The juxtaposition of Isabel’s predicament with the plight of a weeping beggar in Chapter I (9), has both these implications: of critique, and subtle undermining of the already-established Jamesian dramatic scenario. The repeated setting of the action in the restaurants of popular European city-destinations drops a sly hint that the enjoyments of a novel like *The Portrait of a Lady* (for both writer and reader) partly derive from the vicarious experience of mild exoticism and luxury. Further, they imply that James’s great cultural themes are based in something no more exalted than tourism. Corporeality has the effect of degrading the characters into objects of an amusement generated by their fleshly weakness—as when Mrs. Touchett mops up the sauce on her plate, instructing Isabel in the proper Italian word for the proceeding (254).

If *The Portrait of a Lady* was, despite the financial motor of its plot, coy about money, it is also vague on the choices open to Isabel. These fall somewhere between Caspar Goodwood’s outburst—“a woman deliberately made to suffer is justified in anything in life—in going down into the streets if that will help her!” (563)—and Mr. Touchett’s reassurance to Isabel that she will have “great success” (54), by which he probably means marriage, an assumption of which she does not seem aware. *Mrs Osmond* adds the apparatus of bankers, lawyers, legal documents, divorce, but these concrete resources only bring the Jamesian arrangements to an end. Isabel resolves to take on the task of nursing Janeway through her last illness, a decision that completes the identification between the cause of women’s suffrage and the body of the spinster (374). She brings Myles Devenish to see the spot where she failed to give the beggar money (375), which is not a resolution in a favor of philanthropy, but the conversion of what might have been an actual deed into an abstraction, and so the mere negative of the novel’s emphasis on materiality. When Isabel says “nothing, nothing at all” (376) to Devenish’s proposal, this can be read as a sign that she has learned from previous attempts to exploit her. It also, however, fittingly represents the novel’s action upon James’s *Portrait*; its dismantling of all of its elements, leaving no remainder.

Notes

- 1 Michael Wood (2018) claims that Banville “scrupulously reviews (and revives) the situation in the other novel.” Edmund White (2017) argues that Banville follows James’s pacing and his combination of vagueness with vivid metaphor.
- 2 There could be nothing “less delicate,” West remarks of Isabel’s purportedly noble character, than “to marry a person for any reason but the consciousness of passion” (70).

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*“Cloud’s red, earth feeling, sky that thinks”:
John Banville’s Aesth/ethics¹*

*“Nuvem vermelha, terra sentindo, céu que pensa”: Est/ética de John
Banville*

Joakim Wrethed

Abstract: *John Banville’s long career can of course conventionally be viewed as a linearity, but it would be better seen as a form of spiral. This spiral is the hermeneutic process and concomitantly the movements of eternal recurrence in the oeuvre. In accordance with Nietzsche’s concept, these recurrences are not to be construed as returns of the identical. Rather, this ethic and aesthetic dimension in Banville is explicated as an attunement to the overall force of becoming. In agreement with Wallace Stevens’ poetics, Banville’s aesthetic is seen primarily as process. Through the immediate access to metacognition and reflection in the intentional act, Banville, through his protagonists, maintains a sense of wonder as hope in a fictional world often permeated by loss, melancholy and despair. This fictional trait is argued to have been there since the debut up to Banville’s more recent creative work.*

Keywords: *Stevens; Nietzsche; Deleuze; Husserl; intentionality; metacognition; eternal recurrence; becoming; aesthetic; hope; The Blue Guitar; Long Lankin.*

Resumo: *A longa carreira de John Banville pode, evidentemente, ser vista convencionalmente de modo linear, contudo seria melhor se fosse vista como uma forma de espiral. Essa espiral representa o processo hermenêutico e, concomitantemente, os movimentos de recorrência eterna na obra. De acordo com o conceito de Nietzsche, essas recorrências não devem ser interpretadas como retornos do idêntico. Em vez disso, essa dimensão ética e estética em Banville é explicada como uma sintonização com a força geral do devir. De acordo com a poética de Wallace Stevens, a estética de Banville é vista principalmente como processo. Por meio do acesso imediato à metacognição e reflexão no ato intencional, Banville, através de seus protagonistas, mantém um sentimento de admiração como esperança em um mundo fictício, muitas vezes permeado por perda, melancolia e desespero. Argumenta-se que esse traço ficcional está presente desde a sua estréia até a escrita mais recente de Banville.*

Palavras-chave: *Stevens; Nietzsche; Deleuze; Husserl; intencionalidade; metacognição; recorrência eterna; devir; estética; esperança; The Blue Guitar; Long Lankin.*

John Banville's extensive work as a writer in the time-span of fifty years (1970–2020) would most certainly allow any scholar to highlight a plethora of themes and motifs that could be traced through the output of fiction. The attentive and zealous Banville reader could find roots of authorship foci already in the debut *Long Lankin* (1970). These would be semantic-experiential concentrations that come to blossom in opulent profusion later in the oeuvre, enhanced perchance by repetition and the relative clarity that the privilege of hindsight sometimes has the aptitude to endow its objects with. In the short story "A Death" from *Long Lankin*, the reader encounters a diminutive life sequence following the funeral of the protagonist's father. Narratologically, the piece displays many of the conventional short fiction characteristics: *in medias res*, limited focus and impressionist presentation of few characters and a strongly restricted setting. In brief, a minimalist technique, since the form determines that there is not much time-space to embellish the narrative with elaborate and extensive information. The short story illustrates the method of building up questions that are vaguely or only partly answered. More show than tell evidently. Indeed, as pointed out by Kersti Tarien, the spare style comes out as a conscious choice when Banville later revised the short stories and sought "to suggest by implication, rather than state the characters' emotions explicitly [...]" (394). However, the dimension we will be pursuing here transcends the different diachronic developments in Banville's writerly progression. The phenomenology of dwelling upon a certain phenomenon appears in different shapes, but the basic structure of their appearance is the same/similar throughout the oeuvre.

Overall, in the scene we shall initially focus on, the atmosphere is darkened by the melancholy topic, but in addition by something larger, a zeitgeist of some form, with the weight of an almost physical presence, possibly *Long Lankin* as the unifying force of all the short stories (Tarien 390). As often is the case with Banville's fiction though, it is left open if the ambience is *Long Lankin*, Ireland, world politics, an individual existential crisis, or even a palimpsest of all of those. At home after the funeral, the protagonist Stephen is suddenly beset by a specific affective mood:

He wandered restlessly about the room. The strange clarity of vision and thought which follows exhaustion now came over him. The things around him as he looked at them began to seem unreal in their extreme reality. Everything he touched gave to his fingers the very essence of itself. The table seemed to vibrate in the grains of its wood, the steel of the sink was cold and sharp as ice. It was as if he were looking down from a great height through some mysterious spiral. In the corner behind the stove a blackthorn stick leaned against the wall. When he saw it he stepped forward and put out his fingers to touch it, but halted, frowning. He stared at the knots, and they seemed to be whirling in the dark wood, each one a small, closed world. He moved back uncertainly, and dropped his hand. (*Lankin* 32–33)

The "blackthorn stick" presumably heightens the intensity of the Irish context, but more importantly we have the sudden clarity that is supposedly explained by fatigue. It is concomitantly an embodied experience of the tangible world that precipitously becomes "unreal" in its "extreme reality". Arguably, this paradox is actually a dynamic chiasm that lies at the heart of all of Banville's writing: the real is unreal and the unreal is real. However, an even more important detail to note is the small closed worlds in the spiralling or twirling wood of the blackthorn stick. The protagonist's experienced "mysterious spiral" is in our context the

hermeneutic access to the world that constitutes the filter we can never expect to transcend.² In any case, the interpretative mesh will be the only part of possible mediation that shall concern us here. The opening up of the closed worlds and that process regarded as a repeated aesthetic practice constitute the aspects of attention.

In all, this draws us into Banville's phenomenology and thereby into theoretical matters more generally. However, the kernel we shall seek in the analysis of *The Blue Guitar* (2015) is more specific within the phenomenology utilised by Banville and the type of experiential aesthetic that we examine. There are two central claims that I intend to substantiate below. Firstly, Banville's phenomenological aesthetic is basically about freedom, and secondly, Banville's writing style in itself encompasses an ethics of hope.³ The concept of freedom refers to the liberty of imagination that is involved not only in direct artistic activity, but also in everyday experiences, perceptions, and contemplations of these experiences and perceptions. This level of metacognition is immediately available as a reflective realm connected to acts of intentionality in the Husserlian sense.⁴ Banville's writing stages this activity, while the narration implicitly attempts to reach a greater clarity of any phenomenon that the fiction visits. The laments concerning the impossibility of a saturated givenness are simultaneously endowed with a sense of hope. The creative force that is central in the fiction writing method—and by many of the themes in this writing—is elucidated by the Nietzschean-Deleuzian concept of becoming.⁵ We shall begin by looking more in detail at writerly methodology and continue through the connections between Wallace Stevens, Banville and the notion of eternal recurrence, which conceptually is intimately linked to becoming. This section illustrates how Stevens' poem "The Man with the Blue Guitar" and parts of Banville's fiction turn in on themselves, while at the same time avoiding solipsism by opening up for an artistically rendered 'reality.' Then the analysis turns back to *Long Lankin* to conclude that this attunement to becoming as a force has been there from the beginning of the oeuvre and that an ethical dimension of Banville's writing teaches the reader to adopt a certain aesthetic attitude.

"The maker of a thing yet to be made"

The implicit contrast between Banville's early and late work may be elucidated by form. It is obviously possible to conclude that since the novel form offers more space, Banville is allowed to elaborate and expand his style. Concisely put, to say more of the unsaid in "A Death". In any case, that possibility is not the main path explored here. Another initial objection may be that an overall affective atmosphere in Banville's writing—in "A Death" as well as in *The Blue Guitar* and in other works—would most certainly be that of doubt and despair rather than that of hope. However, as the protagonist is abruptly drawn into the enigmatic aspect of lived experience and perception of what we call reality, a different phenomenological universe is unveiled. As indicated above, the protagonist in "A Death" has the sense of perceiving the "very essence" of the objects (*Lankin* 32). Oliver Orme has similar affects when contemplating the perceived environment.

The rain had stopped and the last big drops were dripping down the window-panes in glistening, zigzag runnels. The clouds were breaking, and craning forwards a little and looking high up I could see a patch of pure autumnal blue, the blue that Poussin loved, vibrant and delicate, and despite everything my heart lifted another notch or two, as it always lifts when the world opens wide its innocent blue gaze like that. I think the loss of my capacity to paint, let's call it that, was the result, in large part, of a

burgeoning and irresistible and ultimately fatal regard for that world, I mean the objective day-to-day world of mere things. Before, I had always looked past things to get at the essence I knew was there, deeply hidden but not beyond access to one determined and clear-sighted enough to penetrate down to it. [...] Don't mistake me, it wasn't spirit I was after, ideal forms, Euclidean lines, no, none of that. Essence is solid, as solid as the things it is the essence of. But it is essence. (Guitar 57)

The speaker thinks through a theme with the markedly metacognitive style that is characteristic of Banville's narrators and protagonists. Neil Murphy—commenting on Banville's early fiction—has identified this phenomenon as “deployment of metafictional self-reflexive devices and the use of subtle patterns of metaphors that generate a figurative doubling of expression” (27). The act and act-awareness pattern outlined here does not necessarily have the metafictional purpose that Murphy points at. In terms of Husserlian intentionality, the act of perceiving a sky immanently and immediately provides the reflective dimension that opens up the realm of the *how*. It is explicitly made clear that this is not an element of abstract meaning or something taken out of a Platonic realm of ideas. The “essence” is part of the perception itself as meaning-substance or experiential-sense. Orme as the pictorial artist, does not make up this image as a fantasy, but perceives it as something “solid.” Similarly, in the protagonist's moment of affective intensity in “A Death,” the concrete wood and steel are affects. Essence as affect. The minor autonomous domains as whirling concentrations of wood in the blackthorn stick are also densities of meaning and virtuality that can be unfolded in the thematised cognition of the artist and/or phenomenologist. The blending of literal and metaphorical is seemingly unproblematic in this context. For Orme the raindrops are liquid lines that, gathering weight and then momentum, run off in criss-crossing webs. Substance, affect, form, meaning, and pattern.

Furthermore, Orme goes on to conclude

that there was no such thing as the thing itself, only effects of things, the generative swirl of relation. [...] No things in themselves, only their effects! Such was my motto, my manifesto, my—forgive me—my aesthetic. But what a pickle it put me in, for what else was there to paint but the thing, as it stood before me, stolid, impenetrable, un-get-roundable? Abstraction wouldn't solve the problem. I tried it, and saw it was mere sleight of hand, merest sleight of mind. And so it kept asserting itself, the inexpressible thing, kept pressing forwards, until it filled my vision and became as good as real. Now I realised that in seeking to strike through surfaces to get at the core, the essence, I had overlooked the fact that it is in the surface that essence resides: and there I was back to the start again. (Banville, *Guitar* 57–58)

The obsession with essence is central and Orme claims to have come to terms with it. It comments explicitly on aesthetic issues but it also implicitly shows the phenomenological dynamic that functions as a Nietzschean eternal recurrence in the oeuvre. The surface of an object serves as the phenomenological empirical basis. Affects, impressions, perceptions, or in Orme's terminology “effects,” are of course germane to most literary worlds. Phenomenologically, these appear as meaning-substance that have a complex interaction with the something-factor they are the effects of, which is other than, and not reducible to, the perceiving pole of the intentional act. All consciousness is consciousness of something and

whatever enigma ‘reality’ presents is present already in the immediate encounter. As stated already by Edmund Husserl: “[A]ll mediate validation is ultimately based upon immediate validation, and the riddle is already contained in what is immediate” (28). As with the darkened wood-concentrations in the blackthorn stick, there seems to be an ample giving of effects or affects, but simultaneously a holding back, a refusal to give itself completely over to the epistemological realm, since the bulges in the wood are “each one a small, closed world” (Banville, *Lankin* 33). Orme’s predicament circles around this phenomenon too and ultimately it gives energy to the narration. The painster’s⁶ dilemma becomes metacognition that thrives on this particular energy. Even a dead God keeps giving off the vitality of its absence.

“Between issue and return”

In order to understand what is at stake in Banville’s writing methodology, we must look more closely at the Nietzschean concept of eternal recurrence. Nietzsche’s overall presence and influence on Banville is so well known that it could almost be asserted without secondary support.⁷ Hedda Friberg-Harnesk (2018) dwells on the topic of return in her monograph *Reading John Banville Through Jean Baudrillard*. She rightly points out a number of ways that one can trace Banville’s circular movements throughout his output of novels. It contains numerous re-cyclings of characters, names and spaces, all similar within each category, but not exactly the same (Friberg-Harnesk 175–83). This is something that Pietra Palazzolo has analysed as “intra-textuality” in Banville’s fiction as related to the context of Rilke’s and Stevens’ poetry and poetics (103). In terms of the phenomenological trace we outline here, I would like to develop the understanding of eternal recurrence as well as adding a slightly different philosophical aspect to the existing catalogue of scholarship. In doing so, I follow Gilles Deleuze’s explication of the concept. Thereby I do not negate the Banvillean patterns that Friberg-Harnesk has uncovered, but rather move this insight to a different philosophical plane. Deleuze comments on central Nietzschean ideas:

The eternal return is as badly misunderstood as the will to power. Every time we understand the eternal return as the return of a particular arrangement of things after all the other arrangements have been realised, every time we interpret the eternal return as the return of the identical or the same, we replace Nietzsche’s thought with childish hypotheses. [...] [O]nly that which becomes in the fullest sense of the word can return, is fit to return. Only action and affirmation return: becoming has being and only becoming has being. That which is opposed to becoming, the same or the identical, strictly speaking, is not. [...] This is why Nietzsche says that the will to power is not wanting, coveting or seeking power, but only “giving” or “creating.” (Deleuze 857–59)

Thus, the concept is related to Nietzsche’s *amor fati* and the concept of *fatum* in Stoicism (other central thoughts in Banville’s fiction)⁸ and it is in addition intimately linked to the aesthetic in terms of creative force. The becoming in Banville always brings something new. It is possible to say that Orme, Morden and Cleave are similar, but they are not identical. The eternal recurrence is *becoming* in accordance with Deleuze’s philosophical cognition, but the phenomenon has taken a specific fictional form. What Banville frequently stages is the difficulty of staying attuned to becoming in the Deleuzian sense and to create in accordance with this fundamental virtuality and energy,⁹ which is denoted as “giving” or “creating” and

that has nothing to do with a subjective and reactive will to power. This explains the Banvillean preference to repeatedly utilise failed or blocked writers, scientists and/or artists as his protagonists.

In addition, eternal recurrence has relevance in at least two other important ways. Firstly, it can be said to highlight an aspect of Banville's aesthetic that partly overlaps with Orme's thinking. It is the artist's and the artwork's turning in upon themselves without isolating themselves entirely from 'reality.' We find something similar in the novel's most obvious intertext "The Man with the Blue Guitar." The motivation for introducing Wallace Stevens as a prominent influence and inspiration to Banville is self-evident in the context of *The Blue Guitar*.¹⁰ Canto XXII is of specific interest in the present analysis.

Poetry is the subject of the poem,
From this the poem issues and

To this returns. Between the two,
Between issue and return, there is

An absence in reality,
Things as they are. Or so we say.

But are these separate? Is it
An absence for the poem, which acquires

Its true appearances there, sun's green,
Cloud's red, earth feeling, sky that thinks?

From these it takes. Perhaps it gives,
In the universal intercourse.
(Stevens 176–77)

As we have seen in the intentional acts highlighted in Banville's prose above, we have continuously a metacognitive dimension. The speaker takes in and reflects on certain qualities of that taking in, thereby the metacognitive dynamic spirals in on itself.¹¹ The process is written into the artwork (poem or novel) and presumably mirrors Banville's own writing methodology, as has been suggested by Friberg-Harnesk (186).¹² In Stevens' poem, the theme of poetic ontology—analogously including certain 'poetic' forms of prose too—is explicitly commented upon. The poem turns in on itself and presumably cannot do anything about the "absence in reality."¹³ The poetic speaker overtly contemplates whether this absence applies to the poem or not. It is suggested that the poem "takes," but does it give too? The poem definitely transforms: "sun's green, / Cloud's red, earth feeling, sky that thinks," but is that all? The aesthetic contemplation here becomes elaborate. Indeed, drawing on George Steiner, Cody Deitz suggests that this particular canto is deceptively simple and that it presents precisely an ontological problem (157). Deitz's argument helps to pinpoint the link to Banville and Deleuze's understanding of Nietzsche.

[T]he subject of poetry is poetry, and within the process of the poem—a circular going out and coming in—there is an emptiness; this emptiness, or absence, is an integral part of this process, and of reality. There is, in other words, a kind of absent center on which poetry and art hinges. Poetry is thus defined not as product, but as process. (158)

This description could without much interpretative strain be applied to the oeuvre of Banville's prose fiction. Furthermore, the tautological threat (poetry is about poetry)—intimately linked to the hazard of *l'art pour l'art* in its negative sense—is challenged in Stevens' poetry as well as in Banville's prose fiction. In the Irish author's writing, the process is highlighted both as an explicit theme in the fictional worlds of the works and as an immanent part of the writing itself. In Banville, the speaker is confronted with the enigma of the world and the peculiar phenomenon of knowledge in its most basic sense. The speaker scrutinises this phenomenon and he investigates the process of the scrutiny as well. Turning in on itself does not mean closing oneself off from the world in any way. It rather means to open the world up from within. In analysing the canto, Deitz concludes that "it is both commentarial and performative: it enacts the event it ponders over" (158). This statement is equally applicable to Banville's prose fiction.

The next step is to illuminate what Banville's image of art and the art that surfaces in his writing methodology have to do with what can be denoted 'reality.' Do we only have the naïve option of the artist filling the void of the world with her words, clay, marble, video snippets, or paint? Part of a tentative response is Stevens' "sky that thinks." Recall the section of Poussin-blue sky in *The Blue Guitar*—which is concomitantly the "pure autumnal blue"—that Orme is exposed to. He does not completely manufacture this blue since it is both Poussin-blue and pure blue. It is always already an intermingling of artistic creativity and perceived reality. He finds *it* and in a way it finds *him*. Blue sky thinks Orme into being in a specific way, which immediately constitutes the cancellation of the notion of solipsism. In Deleuze's conceptualisation of *becoming*, this is creative activity as *involvement* in the overall becoming. Temporally, it does not last but is a momentary attunement to an ontological complexity that literature partakes in; an energetic limit that the natural sciences have excluded beforehand. Science has to be unambiguous, binary, and thus has to determine whether a particular statement about any *Sachverhalt* (state of affairs) is true or false, "the truth, Dichtung und Wahrheit, all / Confusion solved, as in a refrain / One keeps on playing year by year, / Concerning the nature of things as they are" (Stevens 177). Art and powerful forms of thinking magnify and expand reality; they set up a dialogue that allows for oscillation between the *alethic* and correspondence predication.¹⁴

This observation leads on to the second Banvillean trait that eternal recurrence sheds light on, which is the aforementioned immanent freedom of metacognitive reception and elaboration of the *hom*.¹⁵ As the artist has to put in an effort in decoding the closed worlds of givenness, the reader too has to learn to open up to the unfolding of phenomena. This gap that allows for contemplation is so frequent in Banville's fiction that the Banville reader is immanently *taught* how to approach art and literature. The phenomenon introduces the experience of art as an aesthetic of dynamic processing. For Orme this experiential connoisseurship has even overloaded and partly metamorphosed into his kleptomania, through which he seems to want to take objects out of the world in order to somehow preserve them, or at least to sustain their energy, reminiscent of the deed, an affective trace of the

transgression. What fascinates the protagonist is the impossibility of possessing certain moments as objects. Time as becoming changes the tunes on the blue guitar.

The sky in the window was clouded yet all inside here was quick with a mercurial light that picked out the polished curves and sharp corners of things and gave to them a muted, steady shine: the handle of a knife on the table, the teapot's spout, a nicely rounded brass doorknob. The wintry air in the room was redolent of unremembered things, but there was, too, a quality of urgency, of immanence, a sense of momentous events in the offing. I had stood here as a boy, beside this same table, before this same window, in the same metallic light, dreaming of the unimaginable, illimitable state that was to come, which was the future, the future that for me, now, was the present and soon would fall away and become the past. How was it possible, that I had been there then and was here now? And yet it was so. This is the mundane and unaccountable conjuring trick wrought by time. (*Guitar* 110–11)

The experiential tinge is not solely bestowed onto things, since they have the capacity to shine by themselves, but the temporal dimension pushes *becoming* onto the same focus. The attunement to the becoming can only happen momentarily in the creative act and in the experiencing of the aesthetic object in its eternal becoming.¹⁶ However, I suggest that Banville invites the reader into a generous understanding of becoming and creativity, which constitutes a kind of phenomenological hospitality. As well as the act of writing is obviously a synthesising of potential symbiosis, the readerly stratum is a similar co-creative practice. Recall how the sink was “cold and sharp as ice” in “A Death” and here the corners of things are “sharp.” The “mercurial light” adds to this affectivity of metallic coldness, sharpness and perceptive astuteness. The metacognitive layer of Banville's style thus imparts an attitude while at the same time bestowing any act with a dimension of hope. That hope will be a mute “steady shine,” which goes to show why it is labelled ‘hope,’ rather than something else, which could potentially be articulated in a more epistemologically precise way. We cannot go on, we will go on. There is no closure in “the universal intercourse” (Stevens 177).

“An absence in reality”

In a certain way hope feeds on absence. A fully saturated and complete reality and literary text would be next to meaningless. Absence is fertile. In Orme's narrative, this phenomenon is as mentioned paralleled by the pilfering activity. However, the engendering of creative freedom is actually intimately intertwined with stubborn resistance and absence. The ultimate nightmare for a kleptomaniac would probably be that stealing was suddenly not prohibited any longer. Similarly, the freedom of the *how* in Banville's fiction has a certain shade.

When I left the town for the first time all those years ago, to seek my fortune—picture me, the classic venturer, my worldly possessions over my shoulder, in a handkerchief tied to a stick—I took certain choice things away with me, stored in my head, so that I might revisit them in after years on the wings of memory—the wings of imagination, more like—which I often did, especially when Gloria and I went to live in the far, bleached south, to keep myself from feeling homesick. One of those treasured items was a mental snapshot of a spot that had always been for me a totem, a talisman. It was nowhere remarkable, just a bend in a concrete road on the side of a hill leading up to a little square. It wasn't what could be called a place, really, only a way between

places. No one would have thought to pause there and admire the view, since there wasn't one, unless you count a glimpse of the Ox river, more a trickle than a river, down at the foot of the hill, meandering along a railed-off culvert. There was a high stone wall, an old well, a leaning tree. The road widened as it rose, and had a tilt to it. In my recollection it's always not quite twilight there, and a greyish luminance suffuses the air. In this picture I see no people, no moving figures, just the spot itself, silent, guarded, secretive. There is a sense of its being removed, somehow, of its being turned away, with its real aspect facing elsewhere, as if it were the back of a stage set. The water in the well splashes among the mossed-over stones, and a bird hidden in the branches of the languishing tree essays a note or two and falls silent. A breeze arises, murmuring under its breath, vague and restless. Something seems about to happen, yet never does. (*Guitar* 73–74)

Even though the topos here is conceived as a non-place, it contains several objects that resonate phenomenologically, akin to the dark knots in the blackthorn stick. The unremarkable something that is the 'between-places' rather than a notable site—similar to the silence between words or the white space between words in a text—still has the capacity, through being "secretive," to become a mnemonic "talismán" of obvious significance.¹⁷ The whole image thrives on a form of absence that builds up the expectations of an arrival of an event that never materialises. Again, the focus is on process rather than static endpoint, on absence rather than presence, on intensity without obvious structure.¹⁸

As a memory always has to be a blend of the contemporary position and the object of memory, any perception has a similar basic phenomenology. To perceive a tree means that the perceiver can never have 'the whole tree.' It will always contain concatenations of continuous temporary fulfilling with an overflow of sense, that is, something similar to imagination.¹⁹ There obviously is an absence in reality, which can be philosophically dissected in different ways. Stevens' speaker wonders about the poem: "Perhaps it gives" (177). In the Banvillean discourse, the writing style merges with an aesthetic principle that draws the reader into the freedom of the how, but which is a liberty that only works under the pressure of constraints. The abundance of presence only appears as shaded and placed into relief by its paltry and starving twin of absence. Circling in on a certain givenness, Banville takes on an aesthetic attitude, similar to the one Stevens implements in "The Man with the Blue Guitar." In addition, it is this type of performative philosophical cognition that Deleuze is after in his interpretation of Nietzsche and in his own highly creative philosophy, encompassed by the concept of becoming. As formulated by Todd May in his tracing of this Deleuzian concept: "[T]he point of a philosophical perspective is not to tell us what the world is like—that is the point of science—but to create a perspective through which the world takes on a new significance" (142). That statement works perfectly well for Banville and Stevens too. If we return to "A Death," we see that the blackthorn stick becomes narratologically significant. Stephen claims to have a limited memory of his father, who hovers in the tale like a ghost: "All I can remember is his knuckles. They were white, you know, and they used to curl around his stick — like that" (33). This whiteness is perhaps reminding Stephen of his father's tenseness—something that might have made him recoil when essaying to touch the stick earlier—but it concomitantly heightens the sense of withholding when it occurs together with the stick. A new significance here is an absence of expected significance in the overall logic of becoming.

“The blue guitar / Becomes the place of things as they are”

In another *Long Lankin* story, the Hemingway-tinted “Island,” the female character is anxious about her boyfriend leaving her. The couple resides in some southern sun-drenched clime trying to work out what kind of tension is ruining their relationship. By narratological default, the reader is invited to do the same, to interpret the scarce information into a converging meaning. However, in addition there is a moment of affective intervention in the ordinary flow of things similar to the one in “A Death.” The female protagonist contemplates the relation that the male character does not seem to be as interested in doing. Perceptions reach a similar kind of concentration, as was the case for Stephen in the passage analysed at the beginning of this investigation.

She looked down at the table where the shadows from the tree stirred on the wood. Soft sunlight touched the cups and plates, the bread and the small green grapes, extracting from each thing it touched a sense of the thing itself, a sense of the fragility of its existence. Then the leaves stirred, and the shadows changed, a new pattern formed, one that seemed held in place by a force from within the wood itself. Something came back to her of their life together, and she smiled. (*Lankin* 76)

In this play of light and shadow, the objects seem temporary and denoted by “fragility,” as if the wind could suddenly eradicate their individuality and they might blur into nothingness or disappear in the overall *chaosmos*. Indeed, the “thing itself” is this very brittleness, its endless becoming, and its shape-shifting reality that language has to strain itself to keep up with. New patterns form in concatenations of becoming, but which are also held together by this “force” residing in their physical existence. To generalise slightly, we can say that this energy is what many of Banville’s protagonists struggle to hold on to or to give scientific or artistic form. They seek to be carried along by a reality/virtuality that is often one step ahead, trying to continuously set up a creative dialogue so as to do justice to virtual intensities. Yet, at the same time as being forceful, this becoming-reality seems paradoxically to be delicate, as if it could drown in nothingness and absence. In other instances, the unnamed feeling of something felt, that the text circles around, has an affective shimmer of hope. For the character in the above passage, we see a smile when she recalls some treasured memory that the reader is excluded from. If there is something like ‘things as they are,’ presumably they would appear as in Banville’s fiction: in an abundance of virtuality and becoming, albeit always with the tantalising saturation on the tip of the tongue or just beyond our reach, as Oliver Orme feels about the past that soars around him, “there and not there, like a word on the tip of [his] tongue” (*Guitar* 219).

Conclusion

As we have seen, there is a thematic and stylistic spiral running through Banville’s authorship. It involves the Deleuzian–Nietzschean concept of eternal recurrence, which is strongly tied to the concept of becoming. Banville utilises this in his own writing by recycling and returning to similar situations and epistemological and ontological challenges. In all, the prose fiction develops a methodology that the reader has to engage with, which essentially is a thematisation of a certain experiential sphere that involves several strata of metacognition, for instance, the act of having a perceptual experience and reflections upon that act, the act of experiencing a similar act in fiction and reflecting upon that act, the act of putting these two experiential

layers together and reflecting on that etc., etc. The iterations of layered intentionality teach the reader to read and to engage with art. This dimension also involves a freedom of creativity and of ‘giving’ in the Nietzschean sense. However, such liberty is closely intertwined with constraints and a holding back in the way the world worlds. Similarly to the poetics of Wallace Stevens, Banville (and many of his protagonists) try to keep up with the force of creativity. This aesthetic does not stipulate an autonomous art that creates ‘reality.’ Rather, the artist and poet (and reader) co-create and revitalise ‘reality,’ while simultaneously turning in upon themselves in metacognitive contemplation. The kinds of meaning-zones required are theoretically pre-figured in Husserl’s early phenomenology of intentionality. The ethics involved draws its dynamism from the hope of a complete givenness and wholeness that Banville’s fiction suggests will never happen, which in turn constitutes the core-vitality of art, fiction and poetry. As has been shown above, this aesth/ethic had its seeds already in the debut *Long Lankin*.

Notes

- 1 The quote is from Wallace Stevens’ poem “The Man with the Blue Guitar” as are all the subsection headings.
- 2 Laura P. Zuntini de Izarra has also used this circular and spiral-like metaphor: “Various images of the process of writing may be perceived through a critical reading of his novels. It may be seen as a spiral in which there is a perpetual return, though on higher planes” (158). Similarly, the protagonists return to perceptual and hermeneutic activity as if a closure would be possible. The claim here is that this process constitutes the basis for Banville’s aesthetic.
- 3 ‘Hope’ can here be understood as secular but is also fully compatible with a Christian construal. See for instance St Paul: “and hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us” (ESV, Romans 5:5). In a more secular mould, this would be ‘faith’ or ‘life’ felt in any life lived, its enhancement accentuated in Banville’s prose fiction and the aesth/ethic moments I refer to.
- 4 What is meant by Husserlian intentionality in relation to Banville’s creative writing, is that the author (and often the protagonist too) becomes a phenomenologist in front of givenness. This entails a relinquishing of *the natural attitude*. As formulated by Husserl: “What appears to natural thinking as the matter-of-fact givenness of known objects within knowledge becomes a riddle” (17). Banville’s aesthetic attitude contains the metacognition that ponders the riddle.
- 5 While the link between Nietzsche and Banville is relatively unproblematic, the conceptual relation between Deleuze and Husserl may seem complicated. I just want to make clear that I use Husserlian intentionality together with Deleuzian becoming because these processes best shed light on the aspects of Banville’s fiction that I analyse. I am not interested in pursuing the philosophical complications that could be teased out of this conceptual combination.
- 6 Banville’s neological merger of ‘the painter’s pains’.
- 7 Cf. for instance John Kenny 168–69; Rüdiger Imhof 158–59 and 176–77.
- 8 Cf. Imhof 160.
- 9 I prefer using the Deleuzian ‘virtual’ instead of ‘potential’ or ‘possibility.’ The creative force that is dominant in Banville’s writing is closer to virtuality as explicated by Todd May: “The virtual is not the possible. The possible is that which does not exist but might; it is modeled on the real, parasitic upon it, but is not real. It is the real minus existence. If I think of a fence that I want to build, a white picket fence, that fence is possible, although not real. [...] In contrast, the virtual is

real, it exists [...]” (148).

10 Cf. for instance Kenny 99–100 and Pietra Palazzolo 87–109.

11 This spiralling in on itself is also used as an explicit method as concerns aesthetic form. When working on *Long Lankin*, Banville sought to create a ‘world’ that would hold the short stories together in a new way: “The enigmatic description of the book [*Long Lankin*] as a ‘work of fiction’ was to signify a new hybrid, which goes further in establishing coherence than a collection like *Dubliners*, but which falls short of an actual novel” (Tarien 396). It is not farfetched to suggest that Banville is attempting something similar with his full oeuvre.

12 As a writer in an Irish context, it might be appropriate to distinguish Banville’s project from fellow Irishmen such as Joyce and W. B. Yeats. In for instance Yeats’ case, his poetic and philosophical vision takes the form of “historical cones” and time moves in a spiral-like fashion (DeForrest 137). However, Yeats presents a mythological thesis that displays some form of ideological vision. In contrast, Banville’s version of eternal recurrence is immanent to his work and closely connected to phenomenology in general and hermeneutic phenomenology specifically. It would be difficult to dub it a meticulously conceived and articulated mythological system.

13 This phenomenon is of course widely commented upon in Stevens studies. For instance, very succinctly put by J. Hillis Miller: “The subject of the poem is the poem as an activity” (10). Similarly, Banville stages this as experience of the physical world, in which prose text expands reality which in turn expands the text and so on, potentially *ad infinitum*. However, the *alethic* dimension also displays a withdrawal that endlessly produces new attempts at pinning the phenomenon down. Instead of using Miller’s definition of Stevens’ poetry, as dominated by an “interplay between metaphor and reality,” one could say that, in Banville, this interplay implies that metaphor is reality and vice versa (11). Whatever is reached is reached in language as language, but that language is always already connected to ‘reality’ through experience and cognition. In drawing together Heidegger’s and Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology, Clive Cazeaux states that “the world-disclosure performed by the senses is the ground or condition for a consciousness that always returns to and locates itself in the world through the senses” (95). The Banville reader has to learn this process and to be attuned to its expression.

14 This type of disclosure embedded in the swirl of the world’s happening may be further elucidated by Heidegger’s understanding of Nietzsche’s concept of the “will to power”. Heidegger clearly links this phenomenon to the activity of art: “The creating of possibilities for the will on the basis of which the will to power first frees itself to itself is for Nietzsche the essence of art. In keeping with this metaphysical concept, Nietzsche does not think under the heading ‘art’ solely or even primarily of the aesthetic realm of the artist. Art is the essence of all willing that opens up perspectives and takes possession of them [...]” (Heidegger 85). It is the potential freedom for artist and art itself that Banville invites the reader to partake in. Arguably, in the prose fiction idea that Banville forwards, art spills over—or is already at least covertly a fundamental part of—any life lived, if we allow ourselves to perceive it or feel it.

15 Further elaboration of Banville’s associative style can be found in Thierry Robin’s book chapter “Liars, Similes and Story-Tellers in *The Blue Guitar* by John Banville”. For instance, Robin draws attention to the descriptive level of language constructed as a maze of similes, which can be construed as Banville’s prose fictional version of Derridean *différance*. In the context of the present essay, however, such similes actually draw attention to the importance of knowing ‘the things themselves’. Such knowing demands a level of experiential dwelling that Banville returns to again and again.

16 A shortcut to an understanding of this process would be to turn to Michel Henry’s explication of a

detail in Husserl's phenomenology: "For, at the heart of this continuum, a decisive split emerges between the primal impression on the one hand and the continuous production of modifications on the other. This distinction arises from the production of modifications' being taken in the strict sense of the word. It is a real production that is the feat of consciousness and owes everything to it, whereas the continual upsurge of the originary impression escapes from this production of modifications by consciousness and owes it nothing" (40). Banville's fiction continuously stages the phenomenology of this continuum/process. Any linguistic elaboration on a 'thing' still rests on the *alethic* presentation of that 'thing'.

- 17 Precisely this aspect of literature has been analysed by Roman Ingarden as the metaphysical events (and non-events): "In their unique form, they do not allow purely rational determination, and they cannot be 'grasped' (as, for example, one 'grasps' a mathematical theorem). Instead they merely allow themselves to be..." (291).
- 18 As Joakim Wrethed has pointed out, a comparable 'empty' place that should not have significance appears twice with a similar wording in *Mefisto* (158, 230) (Wrethed 287).
- 19 In Husserlian phenomenology this overflow of meaning has got to do with primal expectation, which in technical terminology is called 'protention' (similar to 'retention' that denotes primary memory). In any perception the perceiver must anticipate what comes next according to experiential habitual patterns. In its fictional form Ingarden calls it the "habitus of reality of represented objects" (220–22).

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Voices from South America





Pareja, 1923, acuarela y gouache sobre papel montado sobre cartón, 25,9 x 32 cm, montaje 27,7 x 33,9 cm.

*Let The Stars Compose Syllables
Xul and Neo-Creole **

*Deixe as Estrelas Comporem Sílabas
Xul e o Neo-Crioulo*

*Deja que las estrellas compongan sílabas
Xul y el neocrioll*

Jorge Schwartz

Abstract: *This article analyzes the neo-creole, a utopian Latin American language, in the midst of the historical avant-garde era, the 1920s and 1930s, although Xul Solar (1887-1963) was faithful to his project until his last days. Neo-Creole is a binding language, basically a mixture of Spanish and Portuguese, thought in terms of a utopia of Latin American brotherhood. Ideologically, it borders on Esperanto. This linguistic production is related to the cosmopolitan aspect of Buenos Aires, a multilingual city with a huge flow of immigrants in the first half of the twentieth century. His two great interlocutors in this invented language have been his wife Lita Cadenas, and Jorge Luis Borges, who wrote several lectures on the painter. Furthermore, this essay mentions the artist's permanent inventive character: the duodecimal system instead of the decimal (1961 = 1775), the influence of the Kabbalah on his paintings (the pan trees), as well as an impulse to permanent change, the never definitive, fruit of a permanent desire for correction and perfection.*

Keywords: *Xul Solar; Alejandro Schulz Solari; Jorge Luis Borges; Neocriollo; Latin American Vanguard.*

Resumo: *Este artigo analisa o neo-crioulo, um idioma latino-americano utópico, em meio à vanguarda histórica das décadas de 1920 e 1930, embora Xul Solar (1887-1963) tenha sido fiel a seu projeto até seus últimos dias. O neo-crioulo é uma língua vinculativa, basicamente uma mistura do espanhol e do português, pensada em termos de uma utopia da confraternização latino-americana. Ideologicamente, faz fronteira com o esperanto. Essa produção linguística está relacionada ao perfil cosmopolita de Buenos Aires, uma cidade multilíngue com um enorme fluxo de imigrantes na primeira metade do século XX. Seus dois grandes interlocutores com essa linguagem inventada foram sua esposa Lita Cadenas e Jorge Luis Borges, que escreveram várias palestras sobre o pintor. Ademais, o artigo menciona o permanente caráter inventivo do artista: o sistema duodecimal em vez do decimal (1961 = 1775), a influência da Cabala em suas pinturas (as “pan trees”) e um impulso em direção à mudança permanente, nunca definitiva, fruto permanente de um desejo de correção e perfeição.*

Palavras-chave: *Xul Solar; Alejandro Schulz Solari; Jorge Luis Borges; Neocriollo; Vanguardas da América Latina.*

Resumen: *El artículo analiza el neocriollo, un lenguaje utópico, latinoamericanista, en plena era de las vanguardias históricas, los años veinte y treinta, aunque Xul Solar (1887-1963) fue fiel a su proyecto hasta sus últimos días. El neocriollo es un lenguaje aglutinante, mezcla básicamente de español y portugués, pensado en función de una utopía de confraternización latinoamericana. Ideológicamente roza con el Esperanto. Esta producción lingüística tiene mucho que ver con el perfil cosmopolita de Buenos Aires, una ciudad multilingüe con enorme flujo de inmigrantes en la primera mitad del siglo XX. Sus dos grandes interlocutores en esta lengua inventada han sido su esposa Lita Cadenas, y Jorge Luis Borges, que escribió varias conferencias sobre el pintor. El artículo menciona también el carácter inventivo permanente del artista: el sistema duodecimal en vez del decimal (1961 = 1775), la influencia de la Cábala en sus pinturas (los pan trees). También un impulso al cambio permanente, lo nunca definitivo, fruto permanente de un afán de corrección y perfección.*

Palabras clave: Xul Solar; Alejandro Schulz Solari; Jorge Luis Borges; Neocriollo; Vanguardias latinoamericanas.

For Juan Manuel Bonet

What are you?

A painter, a utopian by profession.

Xul Solar in an interview from 1961

The interesting thing -the surprising thing- is that nothing, absolutely nothing, distinguishes true writings from false ones: there is no difference whatsoever, except in context, between the undeciphered and the indecipherable. It is we, our culture, our law, who decide the referential status of a given writing. What does this mean? That the signifier is free, sovereign. Writing does not need to be “legible” to be writing with all the rights pertaining thereto.

Roland Barthes

Genesis of Neo-Creole

The Spanish language Xul Solar was destined to be born into is a phenomenon typical of the Babelic cosmopolis that Buenos Aires was transformed into after the end of the nineteenth century. “A century ago it was a small city of 41,000 inhabitants, now it has 2,500,000; and not because of its own fertility rate but because of a flood of immigrants from all the nations of the earth”, records an astonished Amado Alonso in an article from 1932, five years after having immigrated to Argentina. The renowned philologist is the witness of a language in an unprecedented state of crisis¹.

If Borges was born into a bilingual home, Oscar Agustín Alejandro Schulz Solari was destined to be trilingual by antonomasia: German comes to him through his father Emilio Schulz Riga (1853-1925), from Riga (Latvia), and Italian, through his mother Agustina Solari (1865-1958), from San Pietro di Roveretto (Italy). This first crossing of Germanic and Romance linguistic families, combined with an innate vocation for language learning and the vital experience of twelve years of residence in different European cities —especially in London, Paris, Florence, Milan, Munich and Stuttgart— transforms him into an outstanding polyglot.

“The mastery of several languages permits Xul to read authors in their own language, an advantage that no one denies. He speaks French, English, German, Italian, Portuguese, Russian and Guarani. He is familiar with Latin, Greek, Chinese and Sanscrit”, comments his interviewer Wells in 1956.² It is in Europe that the first signs of a new kind of writing take shape which will later evolve into Neo-Creole: an agglutinative language, a mixture of Spanish and Portuguese, conceived to facilitate the creation of a utopian Latin American brotherhood.

In 1915 the title of the painting *Dos Anjos* [Two Angels], no doubt painted in Europe—possibly in Paris—, already reveals the crossing of the two basic linguistic matrices of the future Neo-Creole. The angelical sesame gives the title early mystic connotations that will form part, in the coming years, of a complex system of esoteric painting and writing. Surprisingly, Xul Solar is the only Spanish American vanguardist who, instead of using French as a foreign language—*lingua franca* of the Latin American culture of the period (as, incidentally, did Vicente Huidobro, César Moro, Oswald de Andrade and even Torres-García’s texts-manifestoes)— follows an unusual linguistic path, determined by a geopolitical principle and chooses, as part of his project, Brazilian Portuguese.

Neo-Creole is the fruit of a process that has, as its point of departure, the written adaptation of a gauchoized, colloquial language, definitive of what is supposedly an Argentine stock, with linguistic expressions that are typical of the Creolist vanguard of the period.³ This search for “Argentine authenticity” in Xul’s first texts is very similar to what we might call the “variants” of the first versions of *Fervor de Buenos Aires* [Fervor of Buenos Aires] (1923) that Borges himself would take on the task of standardizing in several reprintings during his lifetime. The “vanguardist Creolism”, studied and defined by Beatriz Sarlo,⁴ doubtlessly follows the dictates of a language that seeks to forge an identity, whether as a gesture of linguistic independence with respect to the rigid norms of the Academia de la Lengua Española [Spanish Language Academy]—which would still in 1927 lead Guillermo de Torre, with rather serious consequences, to defend a “Madrilenian intellectual meridian” for Hispanic America—, or as an attempt to neutralize the contamination of the foreign expressions introduced by the immigrant masses of the period. (“Aki hay mucha cancha polémica” [There is a lot of polemical room here], Xul would no doubt say to de Torre).

To this overall picture is added, in the case of Borges and of Xul, the longing for a distant and absent geography, but one that is registered in the memory and in the desire for a place of origin. After seven years in Europe, Borges returns to his native city to recreate or ‘found’ a Buenos Aires that turns toward the past, towards its myths, national heroes, and traditions, in a gauchesque and very oral language, thereby diminishing the distances between the rigid norms of written language and the lively modifications of speech. A Buenos Aires that is as Argentine as possible, to the detriment of the European and the cosmopolitan.⁵

Xul’s trajectory conforms to mechanisms and motivations that are similar in principle, but with totally different consequences: the result culminates in an imaginary, esoteric city that looks toward the future and is more universally cosmic than cosmopolitan, inundated with flags, in a language in which, instead of being the heir of a collective experience of speech, the colloquial element corresponds to the invention of a new language for the new man of the Latin American continent. Could Xul be rejecting the European in the same way that the vanguardists themselves rejected their continent, by importing, as a solution, African or Polynesian primitivism? From London, toward the end of the decade of 1910 (1919-1920?), Xul writes to his father in an incipient Neo-Creole: “Mi querido tata: Esperaba ya este año volverme á la patria desde Londres. Envez estoi aqui desde ha poco i kedaré 2 ó 3 meses.

Cansado de tanto salvajismo i atraso ke hai en Europa...” [My dear papa: I hoped this year to return to my homeland from London. Instead, I have been here for a little while and will remain 2 or 3 months. Tired of all the savagery and backwardness that there is in Europe].⁶ Ten years before the proposals of Oswald de Andrade’s *Antropofagia* [Anthropophagy] and several decades before Torres-García’s *Universalismo Constructivo* [Universal Constructivism], Xul rejects the “European and civilized” and imagines a local or, rather, mental solution. Cosa mentale.

The first texts by Xul that indicate the possibility of creating a new written and oral language are domestic: they emerge in the correspondence that, from Europe, he maintains with his family in Buenos Aires, especially with his two “old ladies” (his mother Agustina and her sister Clorinda Solari). When Xul, in 1912 and at twenty-five years of age, leaves for England, there is nothing to indicate —or, at least, we have no record of— a practice of modification of language. In his initial correspondence from 1913 addressed to his father, Oscar Alejandro reveals a total mastery of Italian and standard Spanish with no variations, which can be equated with the language in general.⁷ He also writes to his father in French and in German. Later, all his family correspondence will be written in an “Argentinized” language: oralized, phoneticized and with a use of contractions that permits the agglutination of words.

At this moment, Xul, who still signs his name as Alec in many of his letters, writes in Creole or Precreole: “después deste destierro ya muy largo kiza cuando será la reunión de nuevo en la kerencial” [after this perhaps already very long exile when will we meet again in the homeland!] (Genoa, 9 July 1917?); “Ya estoi aqui, pero no instalao, no sencuentra pieza, quizas acabaré en una pensión, aunque sea Casa serálo menor quel hotel. Ya empecé a ir a lácademia...” [I am already here but not moved in, I can’t find a room, perhaps I will end up in a boardinghouse even if it’s a house it will be less than the hotel. I have already begun to go to the academy...] (Munich 1921). The process of Creolization of the language is slow and oscillates. Even in his correspondence with his “old ladies” one can detect contradictions in the verbal inflections: a very Hispanicized usage crossed with Creolized forms (“me teneis alarmao” [you have me worried], “vos escribi regularmente” [write regularly], or “Si estuvieseis aqui llamadme pues” [If you are here, well call me] (Munich, March 1923). At what point in time and for what reason did Xul transform these linguistic expressions into a plan for a utopian language?

The Desire to Correct

Xul does not propose to deny his mother tongue,⁸ Spanish, but rather intends to “correct it” and “improve it”, to use a terminology of his own invention. It is a desire that will accompany him all his life. Seven months before his death, at 75 years of age, in his important “Conferencia sobre la lengua” [Conference on Language], Xul emphasizes the fallacies and errors of the existing language and his dream of correcting it: “At some moment the time to criticize the good faith and to *correct the defects and failings of our language must come...*”.⁹

Xul’s invention of language —in the case of Neo-Creole as well as in that of Panlanguage—, besides constituting a utopian plan, justified by a humanist ideology of the brotherhood of peoples of different origins, is based on a permanent desire to correct. Xul is a person who not only invents and modifies, but who has as his point of departure a vision of what exists as something mistaken, that must be corrected, beginning with language itself. His disciple and wife Lita (Micaela) Cadenas, recalls: “The ambiguities of our language annoyed him. For example he hated hearing the word *suculento* ‘Why not sucurápido?’, he used to ask.

And in an almost anthological expression of his neocriolo, he was in the habit of asking—even of those he had only just met— ‘¿Me fona plis?’ [Will you call me on the telephone, please?] No one ever asked him what he meant”.¹⁰

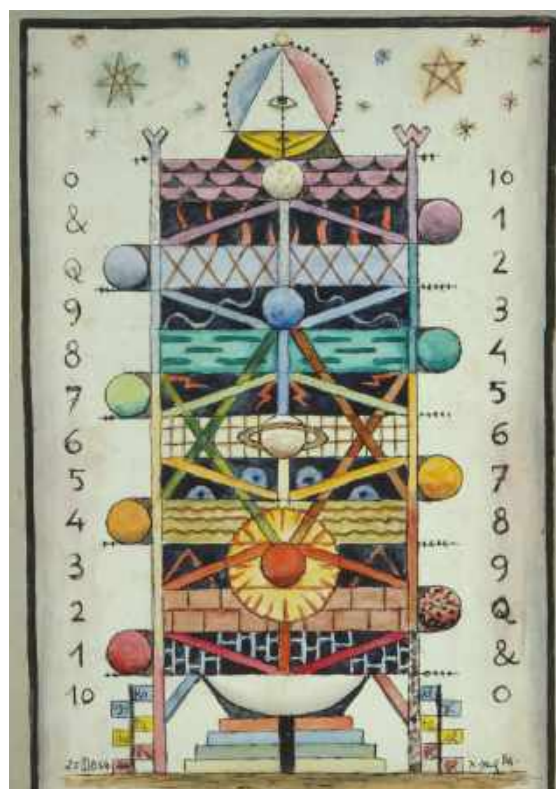
The number of things that one had to ‘improve’, to use his own terminology, is innumerable. In arithmetic, for example, one had to replace the decimal system with duodecimal (here there are esoteric connotations, because of the twelve signs of the zodiac).¹¹ For that reason, a great number of his paintings, especially the depictions of writing and the architectures, are signed with two dates. For example, in the writing depiction *San Pablo* say, two dates appear: the decimally based 1961 and the duodecimally based 1775 (FPK 842).¹² In music, he developed a piano with three keyboards, to shorten the time required to learn to play; the keys, color coded, were quite possibly filled with symbolic meanings, of Pythagorean and Goethean origin. With respect to the cabala, Xul offers “[t]he attached duodecimal astrological diagram, a detail of the pan tree which is a new improvement on the cabalistic tree of life and which aims at containing everything in the cosmic order”.¹³ The complex system governing Panchess requires the didactic explanation of Jorge O. Garcia Romero's monograph (1972):

The board has thirteen spaces on each side, the first being a superposition of the last, as in an octave chord, which is to say, each side corresponds to the duodecimal system. The pieces are astrological and zodiacal, representing the constellations. The spaces correspond to the days, weeks, months and years, and besides the passage of time each space represents ten minutes of time, a musical note or two-and-a-half degrees of arc. Each player plays with thirty pieces, and there is one, chance, that is for both, with the ability to decide the match, not by luck, but by combinations or logical calculations of an adversary. In a game as rational a and mathematical as chess, the combinations multiply ad infinitum. (FPK 35)

Xul was the victim of his own inventive compulsion, as in a continuous process of rotating signs (to employ the terminology of Octavio Paz) in a combinability in *motu perpetuo*. One of his contemporaries, Osvaldo Svanascini (1962), author of the first book on Xul and the man who organized his last exhibit, attributes this impulse toward continuous change to a desire for perfection:

Among the many things that one should remember regarding this admirable Argentine artist, one should single out his constant need for perfection. That has complicated the rules of his games, writing systems, languages and other inventions. Anyone who learned to view or play on a given day would be corrected the following day, since Xul had already introduced improvements into his own work. Even while explaining he would plan new modifications that would likewise increase his creative interest. (48)

Some twenty years later, in his lecture in 1981, Borges (1980) corroborates the fact that Xul's case is one of a kind of inventive machine, running at top speed toward the unforeseen, almost like Mallarmé's throw of the dice:



Pan árbol, 1954, acuarela y tinta sobre papel montado sobre cartón, 35,5 x 24 cm



Pan chess id 1890 inv1222. Caja-tablero transportable, ca. 1945, 62 piezas de panajedrez y 2 cajas contenedoras; madera, manija y trabas de metal; madera tallada y pintada al óleo, 43 x 41 x 2,7 cm

As I said, Xul lived his life continuously inventing. He had invented a game, a kind of chess, but more complicated, as he would say, more “pli”, and he tried to explain it to me many times. But as he explained it, I came to understand that his thought process had already outdistanced what he was explaining, that is to say that while explaining it, he continued to make it more complicated, and I believe that it was for that reason that I never came to understand it completely because he himself realized that what he had said was already out of date, so he added something else. As soon as he said it, it was already out of date, so he had to make it more complicated. (“Recuerdos”)

Besides describing the process of invention, modification and correcting a language, the most interesting thing is to try to understand certain motivations, little studied as of yet, that would reveal Neo-Creole to be the cosmic projection of a monolingual artificial language that, seen from the point of view of religion, might reveal mystic or occult secrets.

À la Recherche of an Identity

The universe, as a combinational series of signs, is inscribed in this sort of self-baptism that, after a series of variations, is crystalized in permanent form in the esoteric and formidable Xul, a reversible trilogy in which the amalgam of his paternal (Schulz) and maternal (Solari) surnames generates the anagrammatic game of XUL / LUX SOLAR.

In the correspondence Xul maintained from Europe with his parents and his aunt, we can follow the sequence of signatures: Oscar (Marseilles, 1913), Alejandro, Alex (Munich, 1922), Alec (in the majority of the letters to his family, and also the name that he affectionately received from Pettoruti in his correspondence from the 20s, A. Xul Sol, with which he signs the article on “Pettoruti y obras” [Pettoruti and His Works] (dated Munich, 1923), Shul, a stage on the path to phonetization, prior to Xul, which figures in watercolors dated 1918 in which titles in English and French *The Wounded Sun*, *Le Soleil blessé*, and *Worshipped Face* appear in his handwriting together with the signature Shul-Solary and Shul Solary (Gradowczyk 36-37). In 1926, the images reproduced in *Martin Fierro* (nos. 30-31, 8 July 1926, pp. 1-3) clearly register the signature A. Xul Solal. There are three illustrations with the same signature repeated, which eliminates all possibility of a typographical error. One last variant, Xul Solá, appears as the signature in the gauchozed version of “Apuntes de Neocriollo” [Notes on Neo-Creole] (1931), in which the phonetized anagram SCHULZ / XUL / LUX defines a permanent writing style: Xul Solar. These are the prior oscillations, beginning with the first correction of his own name.

The abbreviation XUL appears in writing for the first time in a letter dated 14 March 1923 sent from Munich to his “old ladies” or “mamas”: “My address here is A. Xul Solar”. These variations are explained—to my way of thinking—in a rather limited way, by Jorge O. Garcia Romero, who moves up the date of the baptism with the name of Xul: “In 1916, dissatisfied with the excessive length of his names and surnames, with their inharmonious sound and the difficulty their pronunciation represented for others, he translated his paternal surname (Schulz) from German into its phonetic Spanish equivalent: Xul, and converted his Italian maternal surname (Solari) into Solar” (Romero 10). To all this one must add the mystic element. The visionary element of this way of writing his name arises after his encounter with the mystic and master Aleister Crowley (Paris 1924), and appears so described in one of his *San Signos*, in the transcription of the dialogue with the angel who marks on his body, in a fiery red, the letter X. A divine baptism sealed with a tattoo on his body from a red-hot iron:

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luego serre los oqos, i noai mas luzes. dige: "sou lu mas negro keas visto, i sou too luz, i mi nombres lux, es dize, xul, al revéz." entón le digu: "¿sou tú, o eres yo? si mi nombr'es el tuyo." él dige: "eres too, sou too, cada uno es too." me arroibu en él, me le unu, mas luego me coibu, i pr'untu porké sou tan fiaco, tan tolo, tan meskino, porké olvidu nel mundo, i me'ponde: "te grafaré mi nombre nel pecho, ke te kemilembre." i su mano me glif en rogo fuego nel cuor'lao: xul, cun gran gor'letras, ke me gozi gusti ardan. luego me insulte: "vil, pigro, cobarde, ruin . . ." i más ke olvidu, i me corte o me arranke trozos mo crustas ke qondicaian asta el mar triste ke se abre i los trage, i mi cuerpo kede otro, no ya negro sinó hial 'azúl sobre oriaura, cun oripenacho.¹⁴

Patricia Artundo has informed me that Xul initially translated his visions from English into Spanish and then, at a later date, into Neo-Creole, creating many variants along the way through a continuous process of revision. In the Fundación Pan Klub, there are four handwritten notebooks of the *San Signos*, which were later revised on a typewriter, perhaps because he was thinking of a final version for publication, which was never accomplished. We cannot speak of definitive versions, not even among the published versions: for there is not a single page, handwritten, typewritten or printed, that has not gone through a constant and irrepressible corrective process on Xul's part. I take this opportunity to reproduce the English translation —done by Daniel E. Nelson— of the fragment cited above:

then he closes his eyes and there are no more lights. he says "I am the blackest thing that you have ever seen, and I am made entirely of light, and my name is lux, that is to say, xul written backwards". then I tell him: am I you or are you me? because my name is the same as yours". he says: you are everything, I am everything, each person is everything". I am in ecstasy with him, I unite with him, but then I feel inhibited, and ask him, why am I so lazy, so foolish, so petty, why do I forget myself when I am in the world? and he answers me: "I will write my name on your chest, so that you remember chemically". and his hand writes on me in a fiery red on the side where my heart is: xul, in big fat letters, that burn into me with pleasure and delight. then he insults me: "vile, careless, cowardly, despicable man . . ." and other things that I can't remember, and he cuts me and tears pieces off of me like scabs that fall down toward the sad sea that opens and swallows them, and my body becomes different not black any more but a frigid blue with a golden aura and a crest of gold.

This kind of pact written in blood ("I will write my name on your chest, so that you remember chemically" and his hand writes on me in a fiery red on the side where my heart is") resonates with Faustian connotations and recalls Sor Juana's signature, written in her own blood in the registry, when she enters, definitively, the Convento de los Jerónimos.¹⁵ No symbol could better incarnate the person of a being illuminated by a higher will than the name XUL. Solar radiation, primary source of energy, appears in the primary color of the suns and in the orange and red tones of the first decades of Xul's work. His name almost takes on an allegorical value. Besides being the bearer of the name as a divine mission,¹⁶ and although the written record of these *San Signos* is posterior by several years to the adoption of the name Xul, there is a kind of fascination with the X, which directly translates the Christian connotation of the cross. The equation of an abstract geometry with mystic connotations could not be better represented than by this name, this letter, and this image.

The X is converted into a veritable logotype in many of Xul's paintings.¹⁷ When he looses the X in the space of the painting, as in the case of *Místicos* [Mystics], what we find is a veritable framework construction, in which the Xs are superimposed and dialogue with crosses and multiply in the vertical spaces of the columns that are repeated in the geometry of the painting. In *Algo marcial* [Something Martial], great framed Xs sketch out a kind of aerial syntax, as if they were something like a Succession of kites in space. In *De Egipto* [From Egypt], one sees an Egyptian ritual procession, in which two of the figures clothe their bodies with emblematic Xs. Yet another variant, the most synthetic of all, is when he signs merely with the X (the calligraphic painting *Gran Rey Santo Jesús Kristo* [Great King Saint Jesus Christ]).¹⁸

The name XUL, does it have something to do with Neo-Creole? Strictly speaking, the Spanish pronunciation, at least in Buenos Aires, would have to be KSUL or SUL. But it has always been pronounced with the Portuguese or Brazilian fonetization: SHUL. This is the way that we hear Borges say it.¹⁹ It could be that, in this exercise in homophones, the name might also be an early indication of Neo-Creole, in which Spanish and Portuguese are fused. In the repertoire of esoteric signs, the X exercises a preponderantly symbolic, phonetic and religious authorial role, but it is not the only symbol to do so. In *Ronda* (1925) [Round], for example, several Stars of David and swastikas fly about in the space of the watercolor together with the Xs covering the bodies of seven beings walking about, this long before the swastika acquired Nazi overtones.



Ronda, 1925, acuarela y gouache sobre papel montado sobre cartón, 25 x 31 cm.

Explica?

The most obvious paradox of Neo-Creole is that, while Xul Solar spends almost his entire life trying to systematize an artificial language for collective use, a kind of Latin Americanist utopia in which predominantly Hispanic and Brazilian Portuguese roots are combined, at the same time this same language becomes hermetic. Not only because of the difficulties the average reader encounters in trying to comprehend Neo-Creole, but also because of the occult connotations it can contain. It is a question of a language that is simultaneously transparent and opaque, destined for the masses yet, nonetheless only comprehensible to initiates.

Xul Solar's insistence and determination in disseminating Neo-Creole among the reading public is surprising. The first publication in the language appears quite rightly in *Martin Fierro*, a review in which Xul had already presented an article on Emilio Pettoruti and reproduced several of his own watercolors.²⁰ The translation from German into Neo-Creole, under the title "Algunos piensos cortos de Cristian Morgenstern" [Some Short Thoughts of Christian Morgenstern] (from the original *Stufen* [Steps], 1918, in *Martin Fierro*, 28 May 1927) may have seemed to the readers of the legendary review a vanguard exoticism, *jitanjáforas* perhaps, not far distanced from the eccentricities of Gironde or Macedonio. The aphorisms translated reveal Xul's identification with the ideas of the German poet through language games, nonsense poetry, and links to the theosophy of Rudolph Steiner. Besides the agglutination in the title ("piensos" for "pensamientos" [thoughts]), Portuguese is also present: "ome" —a phonetized form of *homen* [man]- and "então" [then]. Creolized oral forms emerge ("tirao" [tirado = thrown], "espiritualidá" [espiritualidad = spirituality], "seriedá" [seriedad = seriousness]), the frequent use of contractions ("piensos" for "pensamientos", "s'estimen" [se estimen = esteem themselves], "q'esto" [que esto = that/than this], "d'ellas" [de ellas = of them (f.)]), etc. Some of the aphorisms of Morgenstern (1871-1914) could easily belong to Xul's linguistic idearium and may even have inspired him: "With dialect, the spoken language is only just begun", advocating a new dialectal language. The defense of a language differentiated from the general language, accessible to a few initiates, is clear if we understand by democracy of language its capacity for universal comprehension: "The worst consequence of democratic ideas is that words too are considered equal", Xul translates.

The striking thing in this first publication in Neo-Creole and its similarity to almost all the others is that they are almost always accompanied by an apparently didactic explanation. "Algunos piensos cortos..." (1927) includes as an epigraph a "Nota del traductor" [Translator's note];²¹ "Apuntes de neocriollo" [Notes on Neo-Creole] (1931) is followed by a "Glosa" [Gloss], as is "Visión sobrel trilineo" [Vision on the Trigram]. (1936). The title of the text "Explica" [Explanation] (1953) may give us the appearance of false didacticism. These last three texts are in reality *San Signos*, in other words, translations into Neo-Creole of his own visions. And "Conferencia sobre la lengua", from 1962, is his final effort (I understand by "final" his last effort, which does not mean that it was definitive) and the most didactic of all in its attempt at explaining the structure of Neo-Creole and the syllabic structure of an Panlanguage (Artundo, *Entrevistas*). Over a forty-year period, very few texts were published in Neo-Creole, but almost all of them are accompanied by this didactic urge to explicate.²²

Xul, Transcreator

Xul lived Neo-Creole intensely: on the everyday level of his conversations and his correspondence with Lita during the transcription of his visions, in the calligrams in his paintings, in his different publications in the language, in his public declarations of a

theoretical nature and, in addition, in his work as a transcreator.²³ In addition to these uses, which go from pragmatic to esoteric, Xul also tried to confer literary status on Neo-Creole. Proof of this comes in the form of some exercises in fiction, like the unpublished children's story *El mundo despierto. Una histori pa néntos i mamues. Con glosas margi en hebreo i latín, pa uso dus sabues i calues* [A Story for Small Children and Drunkards. With Marginal Glosses in Hebrew and Latin, for the Use of Wisemen and Scholars],²⁴ or poems like "Pampa rojiza" [Reddish Pampa] (Artundo 2002. 207). The area where, without doubt, Xul puts the most effort into this translation work is in his visions, which were first translated into Spanish and later into Neo-Creole. An example we can examine with interest is the transcreation into Neo-Creole of the sonnet by Baudelaire "La Mort des Amants" ("The Death of the Lovers") from *Les fleurs du mal*, 1857.²⁵ Here, I cite an unpublished version, a difficult handwritten manuscript in the possession of the FPK, transcribed by Daniel E. Nelson:

La muerte dos Keri

Mui wil ten kâma plen de huêlie leve
 Yi divân tumbihondoè
 Yi drolflor sur xêlfo
 deselosia pa mui sub keûlo maior
 siêl plu' bel
 gastiñ pórfiñ xus lasti hotie
 warmie
 naxi cuôr wil sé duo vasti gran tôrche
 ke wil reflecte xus bilûx
 nen naxi mête, kwes twin mirro
 hâlma
 psyûh
 soar
 Wan soire de rose yi myusti blu
 Mwil xanje' un uni' lampo
 blitzo
 'mo diu sobe
 long zasplore
 plen cargie de salûto gretie
 sauda grûsie
 Yi luegó un anjo fiel yi gay
 leal
 va vene', terabrîr lo puérta
 pa limpie li mîrro turbio yi
 cleanse
 yi renime li flamo muerta
 pa o

A version that is much less elaborated in terms of its use of Neo-Creole —whether it is anterior or posterior to the handwritten version unknown— is the typewritten text, signed X. S., that I reproduce here:

La muerte d'os amantes

Tendremos camas frag'illenas
i divanes tumbihondos

i flores drolas en estantes
abrias pa noh, sob ceos mejores

Gastin porfiue xus poscalores
nuestros cuoreh serán dos granteas
qereflejarán xus biluzes
en nuestras mentes, coespeyos.

Una tarde rósea i mistia
trocremos un lampo uni,
'mo largo sollozo
plencarg'io de adioses

I luego un ángel, fiel i jubli
vendrá entreabrin las puertas
pa limpie los espejos empañidos
i reanime las flamas muertas.

Charles Baudelaire (trad. X.S.)

What first draws the reader's attention is the change of structure: from the classic form of fourteen lines divided into two quartets and two tercets, Xul shifts to four quartets of four lines each, in other words, sixteen lines, with no fixed meter and no rhyme. He deconstructs the formal structure of the sonnet, but not its contents. The thing that without doubt attracted the artist was the theme of the mystic death of the lovers, who, united as a single ray of light, would be received by an angel who would reanimate their dead and spectral images. A redeeming version, opposed to the classic Baroque theme of *carpe diem*, eternalized by Góngora in the line "en tierra, en humo, en polvo, en sobra, en nada" [into earth, into smoke, into dust, into shadow, into nothing] ("Mientras por competir con tu cabello" [When Compared to Your Hair]).

The presence of the angel, the warm tones of the flames, the torch and the ray of light, the mystic lights, the possibility of life after death: all this verbal iconography could be transformed into one of Xul's unmistakable watercolors. The process of contraction and synthesis of the vocabulary appears at various moments: "frag'illenas" (for "pleins d'odeurs légères [full of slight fragrances]); "tumbihondos" (for "profonds comme des tombeaux" [deep as graves]); "biluzes" (for "deux vastes flambeaux" [two great torches]); "coespejos" (for "miroirs jumeaux" [twin mirrors]). The use of the gauchesque also permits the contractions "pa" (for "para" [for]), "noh" (for "nosotros" [we]), "mistia" (for "mística" [mystic]), "mo" (for "como" [like / to]), and the phonetization of the conjunction "i" (for "y" [and]). Also the subtle insertion of Portuguese "ceos" [skies] (for "cielos", in reality it would be "céus") and the Gallicism "drolas" (from "drôle" [unusual / strange]).²⁶ Finally, another of the strange and constant aspects of Neo-Creole is the shifting of the acute accents, transforming the words into proparoxytones: "amantes" [lovers] and "empañidos" [tarnished]. We find the explanation

for this practice which is so frequent in Xul's Neo-Creole texts at the end of his "Conferencia sobre la lengua" from 1962 in topic X. Acento [X. Accent].

One defect of our languages (and other) is that the accents fall on the word endings, increasing ad infinitum the "poor" rhymes, which are bad in prose too, as can be seen in so many official documents, overflowing with -on, -ado, -dad, etc. To the contrary, accentuate the root, wherever possible. (*Entrevistas*)

More than anything else, Xul reinvents himself. He translates his visionary images into a written text, translates the same text into Neo-Creole, and rewrites it endlessly. And when he fixes his attention on other texts, like the one cited above by Baudelaire, we can discern, more than a rereading of Baudelaire, an extension of Xul's own interests and preoccupations.²⁷

Neo-Creole: A Crossroads

Neo-Creole evolves toward a Pan-American utopia, of brotherhood among nations, though a language tending toward agglutination mixing primarily Spanish and Portuguese. However, this does not exclude from Xul's practice the introduction of terms in English, French, German and Italian.

The nationalist basis of the project initially resides in the defense of an attempt to define a very oralized Argentine language which was defended by a great part of the Argentine vanguard generation. Although it may seem paradoxical, the gaucho, symbol par excellence of the nationalist literature in the nineteenth century, is reborn in the vanguard, enthroned in the title of the review *Martín Fierro*, and in gauchesque language as the definition of a modern national standard.²⁸ Mixed into this is a sociolinguistic plan for international brotherhood among nations. Umberto Eco, in the magnificent *La búsqueda de la lengua perfecta* [The Search for the Perfect Language] postulates an apparently simple principle: "In order to search for a perfect language, one must think that one's own is not".²⁹ Xul searched his entire life to find a perfect language by modifying his own. In his final "Conferencia sobre la lengua" (1962), Xul affirms:

All in all, and although it is rather far from the ideal of the *perfect language*, English, due to the simplicity of its grammar, accompanied, as I believe, by our other two languages, has the ability to become a world vehicle, although it would only be provisional for a long time, that would fulfill the need for the exchange of ideas and mutual understanding. (*Entrevistas*)

Whether for religious motives that seek a return to an original universal language to repair the Babelic curse that condemned men to linguistic diversity and, therefore, to incomprehension; or for ideological reasons of brotherhood among nations; or because of the remarkable progressivism of the nineteenth century, that, in order to increase the speed of oral and written communication, generates a variety of alternative languages as broad as that of existing languages.

In Neo-Creole, then, various aspects cross. It is a question, without doubt, of an artificial language that starts with existing or natural languages. It is not a case of glosolalia, also known as "speaking in tongues", as known in spiritualist séances, Pentecostal rituals or

clinical cases, among which the most famous is that of Mlle. Hélène Smith, a patient of Dr. Flournoy,³⁰ in which the language, considered Martian, is practically indecipherable, since it does not belong to any social system. When Xul translates his visions into Spanish, and from Spanish into Neo-Creole, he deliberately transforms them into an esoteric language, befitting a seer and designed for initiates. This connects him to other traditions that help to explain his artistic and mystic trajectory. First to the spiritualist wave of the second half of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth that circulated in expressionist circles, especially in Germany. It is possible that Xul may have read *Abstracción y Naturaleza* [Abstraction and Nature], by Wilhelm Worringer, which establishes the relationship between transcendence and the desire for abstraction in art. And if, in 1924, Xul brought home in his luggage a copy of *Der Blaue Reiter* (1912), edited by Wassily Kandinsky, it is quite probable that he had also read his classic *Of the Spiritual in Art* (1912).

Thanks to the information in “El Libro del Cielo”, by Patricia Artundo, we know that Xul returns from Germany with the books of the principal theosophists: Helen P. Blavatsky, who in 1875 founds, in New York, the Theosophical Society; Annie Besant and Rudolph Steiner, whose crowded lectures Xul had attended during his stay in Germany. This spiritualist trajectory would take a definitive course after his encounter with Aleister Crowley in Paris, in 1924, when he receives as his mission the transcription of his visions, accompanied with the 64 ideograms of the *I Ching* (*Entrevistas*). After having passed through a period of initiation and in accordance with the difference Maurice Tuchman establishes between mysticism and occultism, I believe one could inscribe Xul in the tradition of the occultists.³¹ In *Desarrollo del Yi Ching* [I Ching Development], a tempera from 1953, the saintly authors of the I Ching appear atop mountains. The last of these, on the extreme left, leaves no room for doubt: “NOW XUL”,³² who presents himself in a self-portrait as one of the great initiates, possibly after having rewritten the I Ching, in accordance with the mission entrusted to him by Crowley in 1924.

Preoccupied with the invention of a universal language, Leibniz was one of the first Europeans who had access to the *I Ching*. Just as Xul does, he treats the 64 symbols as a sacred divinatory system, but also as a logical and variable system. “The mystery of combinatorial analysis will obsess him throughout his life”, Umberto Eco tells us of the father of binary logic.³³ Borges, who followed the theoretical reflections of Gottfried W. Leibniz (1646-1716) with regard to the binary system of numeration and its connections to the I Ching, remarks: “I recall that Xul Solar used to reconstruct this text with matches or toothpicks”.³⁴

Xul’s archives reveal that, besides having a practical interest in Neo-Creole and Panlanguage, he was also informed regarding theories of perfect, universal and artificial languages. The contemporary character of Esperanto, an artificial language proposed by Dr. Lejzer Ludwik Zamenhof in 1884 (he signed his name Doktoro Esperanto, in other words, “Doctor Hopeful”), is surprising, considering it is still in full force more than a century after its creation.³⁵ In the important interview Xul granted to Gregory Sheerwood (1951), he conceptualized Neo-Creole and Panlanguage as, like Volapük, Esperanto and Interlingua, *international auxiliary languages*.³⁶

We are living in the age of the great blocs: Pan-America, Pan-Europe, Pan-Asia, —my interlocutor continues—. Creole or Neo-Creole would be the *auxiliary language* of Pan-America; Panlanguage would be the complementary language among the three blocs. Panlanguage is remarkably simple, and its writing is similar to stenography or shorthand.

Among a number of curiosities in his archives, we find a detailed description of a “Sistema de escritura condensada y abreviada” [System of Condensed and Abbreviated Writing] named Densografía [Densography], filed in Buenos Aires in the Registro Nacional de la Propiedad Intelectual [National Registry of Intellectual Property]. More than anything else, the publication *Larjentiome. Folletín Mensual Novel Idioma Argentino*, edited by T.J. Biosca (1 April 1946), is folkloric. The motto of the review –whose cover is illustrated by two photographs of equal size of D. F. Sarmiento and its editor T. J. Biosca (!)– is “El novel idioma Argentino no teraa ke als Arjentinos nos digan Argentinos perfeccion gramatical”. This linguistic system also justifies itself through brotherhood and social justice: “Larjentiomaestriases panamerigloble argentryankifrances sistem Biosca”.



Desarrollo del Yi Ching

Pan, Trans, San Signos

Xul's writing project cannot be viewed separately from any of his other initiatives. Underlying his thought is a continuous search for the spiritual and the absolute, in which life and art are indistinguishable. Like his entire generation, Xul is influenced by the spiritualism of the German vanguard, which runs from the beginning to the end of the twentieth century.³⁷ For even an artist as rationally based as Torres-García passed through the experience of spiritualism.³⁸ In consonance with the Symbolist tradition of correspondences, Xul seeks to supply communicating vessels, imparting a sense of unity to his inventions. His piano, with several color-coded keyboards, much more than a piano, is a sophisticated system that attempts to integrate music with color and algebra.³⁹ Xul returns to the Pythagorean tradition, which introduced the notion of a sacred world ruled by numerical relationships and by the music of the spheres.⁴⁰ To that are added the Goethean principles of color interpretation, touching on the chromatic vibrations of the *Thought-Forms* (1901) of Annie Besant (1847-1933), in which the keys to the meanings of colors are represented and explained. Similar connections arise in Panchess, in which the sacred geometry of the board allows Xul to play

combinatorial games in which the numeric is combined with the astrological. His paintings, his writings, his writing systems and neoplasticisms, the architectures, the *I Ching*, the *Tarot*, the Pan-trees of Cabalistic origin, the hundreds of astral charts, the duodecimal number system and the twelve signs of the zodiac, all lead to a coherent, unifying cosmic plan, with a mystic and fundamentally Christian orientation, which is paradoxically opposed —no matter how modern Xul may seem— to two of the greatest myths introduced by modernity: the idea of the new and a fragmented view of the universe. “What is the reason for this tendency of his to universalize language, music, writing, a game as old as chess [?]”, Sheerwood asks him, to which Xul replies “In the universalization of these and other things lies brotherhood; brotherhood is the essence of the Christian religion” (*op. cit.*).

Within this project, how can Neo-Creole and Panlanguage be defined? The agglutinating principle culminates over time in the plan for a monosyllabic language. At 66 years of age, in an interview with Carlos A. Foglia, Xul reveals that:⁴¹

—At present I am working on a monosyllabic language —the subject of our interview adds—, that has no grammar, that is written as it is pronounced, composed of basic, univocal, and invariable roots, which can be combined at will, with an easy, musical phonetic system in which all pronounceable sounds are registered. These should be, upon careful consideration, the basic characteristics of every a priori language. Each consonant represents an entire category of ideas qualified by vowels arranged in a positive and negative polarity. The new language is regular, has no exceptions and uses an obvious system of accentuation so the word will be recognizable.

— Could you give us some illustrative examples?

— The hardest letter, corresponding to Saturn and representing quantity, which is something like the law of this world, is T.

Ta means how much; Ti, little; Tu, much; Te, less, and To, more. Rr is the most restless; it corresponds to Sagitarius, indicating verbs of action: Rra, to act; Rri to do or to make; Rru, to undo; Rre, to interchange, and Rro, to move.

The dictionary of this language, which I will propose at the opportune moment, is the board of Panchess. The consonants are the game pieces, and the vowels with their various combinations are the spaces of the board, which equal one hundred sixty-nine.

The minimalist profile and the fixity that Xul wishes to give to the language are not without disadvantages, already foreseen by Amado Alonso in the essay initially mentioned: “Remove from language the renovating blood of styles, leave it in its strictly defined condition of repertoire of designations and combinations, and you will have converted it into a dead language”.⁴² Neo-Creole is a linguistic project shielded from diachronicity, invulnerable to time, that by incorporating other languages —hypothetically, Portuguese— hybridizes itself, but eliminates all otherness, transforming itself into a kind of South American linguistic monad. The only flexibility is the continuous process self-correction, which paradoxically prevents Xul from arriving at a definitive version. To see this, we might add another type of criticism, like that of Annick Louis: “Tlon, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius” can be read as an homage to Xul Solar’s ideas on language, but it is also undeniable that it can be interpreted as a parody of these ideas, or even worse: as an ideological reading. In the narrative, the language created is

not just a game practiced by a small elite: it is also the instrument of a totalitarianism that leads to the disappearance of other languages”.⁴³

Another of the permanent contradictions in the constitution of Neo-Creole is that if on one hand it is a South American language whose utilization serves as a vehicle leading to the brotherhood of nations, on the other hand its occultist character leads toward what Macedonio Fernandez came to denominate, ironically, as a language of incommunication.⁴⁴ It could be that Xul did not want to, or could not, elaborate a definitive system of Neo-Creole. Perhaps he maintained Neo-Creole as a utopia in progress due to the empirical nature of his changes, his obsession with change, with correction or reinvention; or because he was aware of the paradox of proposing a system that did not change with time (the elaboration and definition of permanent rules) for a society whose culture, and therefore, language change in diachronicity.

Finally it is necessary to consider the status of “the poetic” in Neo-Creole, especially in the San Signos. Aleister Crowley gave Xul the mission of rewriting the 64 hexagrams of the *I Ching*, a task which inserts him in my view into a wider plan of rewriting the world. There were to be 64 symbolic drawings of *short prose or poetical descriptions* (Artundo 2002. 210; my italics). I can only imagine the challenge that that would have implied for someone like Xul who, according to Borges, “embraced the destiny of proposing a system of universal reforms”.⁴⁵ Xul himself might have been convinced of the poetic function of the transcription of his visions, as is demonstrated by the title to “Poema”, the first of the San Signos to be revealed in the review *Imán*, in Paris, 1931, whose origin—which is part of the sacred sphere—was never publicly revealed by Xul.⁴⁶ Neo-Creole is a ciphered language. Although it may be a translatable system, as Daniel Nelson has ably shown, its “explanations” or “glosses”, apparently didactic, help little in regard to a greater understanding of the linguistic system.

In much the same way, Xul leads the reader astray by giving the name “Poema” to a text in prose that, in my view, does not satisfy the basic rules of the poetic function, but whose title doubtlessly contributes to the identification of the text as such.⁴⁷ The Spanish version (the Neo-Creole is a translation) reveals to the reader a visionary universe, which prevents, entirely, categorizing the text as poetic prose. The strangeness provoked by the effect of reading Neo-Creole and the difficulty in deciphering it can lead us to think, mistakenly, of regions on the border between prose and poetry.

For example, let us read the first paragraphs of “Poema”, according to the version published in Paris in the review *Imán*, in 1931, and later rewritten in various manuscripts. Patricia Artundo has informed us that Xul wrote his first visions in English, that at a later time they were translated into Spanish and then immediately into Neo-Creole, at which point they began a process of continual revision. There are in the *FPK* four handwritten notebooks of the San Signos, which were later typewritten, with the possible intention of preparing them for a publication that never came to pass. The process of modification and rarefaction of the language, of “Neocreolization”, that is apparent between the first and one of the last versions in Neo-Creole belonging to the various handwritten and typed corrected versions is remarkable. Likewise remarkable is the synthesis evinced when we compare the syntax of Neo-Creole with that of English:⁴⁸

Es un Hades fluido, casi vapor, sin suelo, rufo, color en ojos cerrados so el sol, agitado en endotempestá, vórtices, ondas y hervor. En sus grumos i espumas dismúltitú omes

flotan pasivue, disdestellan, hai también solos, mayores, péjoides, i perluzen suavue.
Se transpenvén fantasmue las casa i gente i suelo de una ciudá sólida terri, sin ningun
rapor con este Hades, qes aora lô real.

[It is a fluid Hades, almost vapor, without sky, without ground, of a reddish color, like the color that you see with your eyes closed under the sun, stirred up by an internal storm, in vortices and waves at a boil. In its lumps and foam different crowds of men float passively and sparkle in different ways. there are also beings who are alone, larger, in the shape of fishes, and they continuously and softly emit light. Through all of this, one can barely make out fantasmagorically the houses and people and ground of a solid terrestrial city, with no connection to this Hades, which is now reality].

The following unpublished version, also transcribed and translated by Daniel E. Nelson, is accompanied, like all the *San Signos* manuscripts, by the design of one of the 64 hexagrams of the *I Ching* (the third) in the upper left margin, with the date and the time of the meditation: *San Signos* 36, 36 first, 8 May 1926, 13h. None of the published versions include hexagrams or meditation dates. The explicit inscription of hexagram 3 modifies the status of the text which, from what is seemingly a poem, passes into the sphere of the occult, or more precisely, one of Xul's visions. It is important to make clear that the numeration of the hexagrams does not necessarily coincide with that of the visions:⁴⁹

Es una bría fluida, casi vapor, sin çeo,⁵⁰ sin fondo, fuei rufa mo en oyoh cérridoh so el sol, agitada en endotempestá, vérticzes ondas i yervôr. En sas grumos i espumas i olicrestas dismuititú de omes d'rivan destellan discróni; hai tamién solos maiores péxoides ke luzan suavi. Xe penven fantasmi tran too eso las casas i gente ándindo i suelo de una sólida mundiurbe sin ningún rapór con esta bría kes aora lu real.

[It is a fluid spiritual world, almost vapor, without sky, without bottom, a fiery red, like the color that you see with your eyes closed under the sun, stirred up by an internal storm, vortices, waves, at a boil. In its lumps and foam and cresting waves different crowds of men drift and sparkle at different moments; there are also beings like great fishes that are alone and emit light softly. One can scarcely make out phantasmagorically through all of this the houses and people walking about and the ground of a solid city of the physical world with no connection to this spiritual world which is now reality].

At various times, Xul defined his pictorial work as a description of his visions. He acknowledged in his art a semantic painting, in which the referential function prevailed. Borges, too, interpreted it in that way: "Xul told me that he was a realist painter, he was a realist painter in the sense that what he painted was not an arbitrary combination of forms or lines, it was what he had seen in his visions".⁵¹ In her analysis of the *San Signos*, Patricia Artundo corroborates this reference in Xul's writings: "... his visions had been extracted from the notebooks in which they had been recorded immediately after *they had been generated, since in reality they were a record that was as exact as possible of what he had 'seen' and 'heard'*" (*Entrevistas*, my italics). Beyond the intention of the author, and independent of the oscillation between the referential and poetic function, his pictorial work goes beyond this issue and imposes itself as

great art, now with national and international recognition. And if the occult referent obtains in the image an extraordinary artistic result, this equivalence is not produced in the writing. Xul, one of the most original painters of the historical Latin American vanguards, gives the lie in his writing process to the Horatian motto *ut pictura poesis*.

I do not believe that Xul Solar thought of his Neo-Creole *San Signos* as literature. Nor did Lita Cadenas believe that they belonged to the literary series.⁵² Without doubt, elements inherent to literature exist in his prose: symbols, metaphors, alliterations, paronomasias, many *portemanteau* words of agglutinative character and the effect of surprise (*ostraniene*), defined by the Russian formalist Viktor Shklovsky, in his *Theory of Prose* (1925), as essential to define the artistic object. But I would dare to affirm that the sum of all these conditions is not sufficient to convert the *San Signos* into poetic prose. Classic examples like the *Petits poèmes en prose*, by Baudelaire, *Une saison en enfer*, by Rimbaud, *Finnegans Wake*, by Joyce, *Espantapájaros* [Scarecrows], by Gironde, *Catatau*, by Leminsky, or *Galáxias*, by Haroldo de Campos, have an undeniable literary legitimacy, which is difficult to define in the work of Xul. In addition, when the concrete poet transcreates the Bible into Portuguese (Genesis and Revelations), although its purpose privileges the literary aspect of the text—which was never a priority in the canonical translations of the Bible—de Campos cannot modify the basic religious status of the text.⁵³ Nor do I believe that the dialogues of John Dee with the angels or the infinity of psychographic texts in mediumistic séances should be seen as literary texts. A similar phenomenon occurs with *A Vision* of the symbolist poet Yeats, even though visions have influenced his poetry, in the same way in which they influenced Xul's painting.⁵⁴

Xul tirelessly revised his manuscripts, which were destined for a future publication that was never achieved in his lifetime, and even today they remain largely unpublished. When Barthes affirms “It is we, our culture, our laws, who decide the referential status of a given writing”,⁵⁵ he allows us to define the *San Signos* in Neo-Creole as visions of liminal heavens, in a perpetual search for a written form that never completely defines itself and of a borderline genre that would, in the final analysis, oscillate between the referential of the “great beyond” and the poetic of the “here and now”. The commentary on the work of Xul Solar is infinite and also circular, infinite precisely because it is circular. Our commentary must accompany the spiral of situations that this work proposes: repeated situations, variants folded back on themselves. The commentary-text that accompanies this movement shines a light on it, without giving it a definitive meaning in the meanwhile. All we can do is to continue working with an expression of permanent amazement in the face of these (re)written materials. The *San Signos* permit analysis and commentary, but something in them will always escape interpretation, which can therefore never be definitive. To decipher these fascinating texts that resist interpretation means confronting the risk of being devoured by the Sphinx.

Notes

* Jorge Schwartz's “Let the stars compose syllables: Xul and Neo-creole” was first published in Spanish in *Xul Solar. Visiones y revelaciones*. Buenos Aires, Malba (24 set.- 30 dez. 2005, curator Patricia Artundo); then, in Portuguese and English for the exhibitions in São Paulo at Pinacoteca do Estado de São Paulo, in Houston at The Museum of Fine Arts and in México at Museo Tamayo Arte Contemporáneo, May-August 2006. All rights reserved to Fundación Pan Klub Museo Xul Solar (images on pages 198, 204, 207 and 213)

1. “Buenos Aires has ruined and denationalized the learned language of its own country, the honorable

language that can be clearly seen in the prose of Sarmiento, of Avellaneda, of Echeverría. What good is it if a few traditional families have inherited that way of speaking, partially improved today, if they are no more than a paltry few lost in the mare magnum —large and confused— of Buenos Aires? (...) What it has become independent of is not the Spanish of Spain, but the good Spanish here. It is not a nationalization but a denationalization of the language”. In “El problema argentino de la lengua”. *Sur* 2, Buenos Aires, 1932, n° 6, pp. 169-170.

2. Wells, “Xul Solar: un mago práctico”. In *Noticias* 2. Buenos Aires, September 1956, n° 3, p. 6. Collected in *Alejandro Xul Solar, Entrevistas, artículos y textos inéditos*. Buenos Aires: Corregidor, in press, Patricia M. Artundo editor. (Hereafter, Entrevistas).
3. I do not wish to take up the discussion again here of the Andalusian origins of this gauchesque language, nor of the use that has been made of these same resources in Spanish Golden Age poetry.
4. Beatriz Sarlo and Carlos Altamirano, *Ensayos argentinos: de Sarmiento a la vanguardia*. Buenos Aires: Centro Editor de América Latina, 1983, and *Una modernidad periférica: Buenos Aires 1920 y 1930*. Buenos Aires: Ediciones Nueva Visión, 1988. Cf. Jorge Schwartz, “Los lenguajes imaginarios”, in *Las Vanguardias Latinoamericanas*. México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2002. 55-78.
5. Borges’s attitude, in his review of *Calcomanías* [Decals], toward the cosmopolitan Oliverio Girondo, is not surprising: “Undeniably, Girondo’s efficacy frightens me. I come to his work from the outlying neighborhoods of my poetry, from that long verse of mine in which there are sunsets and little sidewalks and a vague girl who is fair next to a light blue balustrade. I have seen him so able, so suited to leaping off of a streetcar at full speed and being reborn safe and sound between a threatening claxon and a stepping aside of passersby, that I have felt somewhat provincial compared to him. Before I began these lines, I had to lean out the window into the patio and make sure, in search of courage, that its rectangular sky and the moon were always with me”. In *Martin Fierro*, year II, n° 18, 26 June 1925, facsimile ed. The best example of the evolution of a gauchesque language (meaning Argentinizing) toward standardization we see in the comparison between the first edition of *Fervor de Buenos Aires*, of 1923, and the last, during the lifetime of the author, of 1977 (Emecé). Both have been preserved thanks to the special edition of *Fervor de Buenos Aires*. Buenos Aires: Alberto Casares, 1993: 2 vols. First and last facsimile edition of the first book of Jorge Luis Borges, three-hundred numbered copies.
6. Patricia Artundo, “El Libro del Cielo”. *Xul Solar* (exhibition catalogue). Madrid: Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía [Queen Sofía National Museum Art Center], 2002. 206. (Hereafter, “El Libro del Cielo”). All of Xul’s correspondence mentioned in this essay, as well as other articles authored by him, are in the possession of the “Archivo Documental. Fundación Pan Klub - Museo Xul Solar”. (Hereafter, *FPK*).
7. “We are now embarking for Italy happy with Paris, and I am delighted with the Russian art of ballet... The company that performs it is going to Buenos Aires and I highly recommend that you see it, and hear it, for its music is unique among all others. Paris is perhaps the most complete city. The ladies have been through everything, and now know a great deal. Greetings from Oscar. Soon I will give you details of the trip”. The plural refers to his mother and his aunt Clorinda, who embarked for Europe a year after his departure and arrived in April of 1912. (Letter of 20 May 1913). Cf. the transcription of the important letter in Italian addressed to his father Emilio Schulz, in Artundo, “El Libro del Cielo”, *loc. cit.* 204.
8. The invention of a new language as maternal or paternal rejection, with psychological motives, could result in a case similar to that of Louis Wolfson, whose experience is narrated in his book *Le shizō et les langues* (Paris: Gallimard, 1970). As a North American, Wolfson rejects English and

composes his autobiographical text in French. Gilles Deleuze, in the introduction, affirms that “it is a question of a very clear form of destroying the mother tongue. Translation, which implies a phonetic decomposition of the word, which is not done in a particular language, but within a magma that gathers together all languages against the mother tongue, is a deliberate destruction”.

- 9 “Conferencia sobre la lengua ofrecida por Xul Solar en el Archivo General de la Nación”, 28 August 1962. Typewritten text, *FPK*, p. 1, reproduced in *Entrevistas*, op. cit. (My italics).
10. Lita Xul Solar, “Las graflas de Xul Solar” (*Correo de Arte* 5, Buenos Aires, May, 1978, p. 38).
11. On the esoteric value of the number twelve, Wayne Shumaker remarks, with respect to John Dee: “Twelve was the number of the tribes of Israel, of the disciples, of the gates to the City of God in Revelation 21 and much more”. In “John Dee's Conversation with Angles” (*Renaissance Curiosa*. New York: Center for Medieval and Early Renaissance Studies, 1982, p. 39).
12. In November of 1939, Borges publishes in *Sur* a review of the book by George S., Terry *Duodecimal Arithmetics*, Longman. Borges’s knowledge of the different systems of arithmetic is astonishing; he ends the review defending Xul Solar: “For more than twelve years Xul Solar has preached (in vain) the duodecimal system of numeration; for more than twelve years all the mathematicians of Buenos Aires have been telling him that they are already familiar with it, that they have never heard such utter madness, that it is a utopia, that it is a mere trick, that it is impractical, that nobody writes that way, etc. Perhaps this book (which is not the work of a mere Argentine) will cancel out or temper their denial”, in *Sur*, n° 62, November 1939: p. 77).
13. “Explica”, in *Pinties y Dibujos. A Xul Solar* (Buenos Aires: Sala V, Van Riel, Buenos Aires, in *Entrevistas*, op.. cit.)
14. These are the “Neocreolizing” processes of this fragment, through some examples drawn at random: phonetizing agglutination (pr'untu, for “le pregunto [I ask him], me'ponde for “me responde” [he answers me]), Creole or gauchesque (too, for “todo” [all]), Portuguese (sou [I am] and tolo [foolish]), Portunish (entón [then]), “normalization” of irregular verb forms, él dige (he says), Lunfardo (fiaco [fiaca = lazy]).
15. Cf. *Libro de profesiones y elecciones de prioras y vicarias del convento de San Gerónimo, 1586-1713*. Rare Book Collection Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas, Austin, Unpublished manuscript book.
16. The procedure recalls Christopher Columbus, who signed his name *Cristus ferens*, convinced that, as the bearer of Christ, he had the divine will of discovery installed in his very name.
17. In the history of painting, the most famous logotype belongs, without doubt, to the design of the signature of Albrecht Dürer.
18. The signatures of Xul also pass through a clearly evolutionary process that culminates in the X, in the final stage of the graffas plastiútiles [plastiuseful writings). In *Dos Anjos*, 1915 (Gradowczyk 27) the signature is clearly “Schulz Solari”, transforming the “S” into a capital-letter monogram that interlaces the two surnames, a kind of orientalist sinuosity, almost an arabesque, a version of the signature that we will not find again in the later works I have consulted. In his last years, in many of the grafias plastiútiles, Xul signs with an X with a period below. It could merely be an abbreviation. Xul was familiar with Hebrew, a consonantal language: this solution could then be read as the consonant X accompanied by the low vowel, represented by the period.
19. *Borges habla de Xul Solar*. Buenos Aires: Acqua Records, 1999. CD, 43'53"- Universidad Nacional de Quilmes, recorded in 1975.
20. *Milicia, Angel y Escenario*, in *Martin Fierro* Year III, n° 30-31, pp. 219 and 221 of the facsimile edition.
- 21, I transcribe, as an example, the epigraph in question: “Translator’s note. -The present indicative

and the present subjunctive have been used with the endings of a single conjugation (the first conjugation) and the longer words have been shortened: -cion [-tion], and miento [-ment], and dad [-ty] because they are useless and ugly”.

22. “Algunos piensos cortos de Cristian Morgenstern” (translation from German into Neo-Creole) in *Martin Fierro* Year IV, n° 41, 28 May 1927, n/p. (p. 345 [347] of the facsimile edition), Buenos Aires, Fondo Nacional de las Artes, 1995; “Poema” in *Imán*, Paris, April 1931, p. 50; “Apuntes de neocriollo”, in *Azul, Revista de Ciencias y Letras* 11, August 1931, pp. 201-205; “Visión sobre el trilíneo”, in *Destiempo* 2, Buenos Aires, November 1936, p. 4; “Explica”, in *Pinties y dibujos*, Buenos Aires, Galería Van Riel, 22 September-7 October 1953.
23. I use the concept of transcreation, initially elaborated as *recreación* by Haroldo de Campos in *Metalinguagem* (Rio de Janeiro: Vozes, 1967, p. 24). See the complete list of translations by Xul in the Bibliography compiled by Teresa Tedin de Tognetti, exhibition catalogue *Xul Solar*, Museo Reina Sofia Xul (Queen Sofia Museum], pp. 236-237.
24. Typewritten text, unpublished, three parts, with handwritten corrections. FPK Archives.
25. La Mort des Amants Nous aurons des lits pleins d'odeurs légères, / Des divans profonds comme des tombeaux, / Et d'étranges fleurs sur des étagères, / Encloses pour nous sous des cieus plus beaux. / Usant à l'envi leurs chaleurs dernières, / Nos deux coeurs seront deux vastes flambeaux, Qui réfléchiront leurs doubles lumières / Dans nos deux esprits, ces miroirs jumeaux. / Un soir fait de rose et de bleu mystique, / Nous échangerons un éclair unique, / Comme un long sanglot, tout chargé d'adieux; / Et plus tard un Ange, entr'ouvrant les portes, / Viendra ranimer, fidèle et joyeux, / Les miroirs ternis et les flammes mortes.
26. One of the works exhibited in this show and reproduced in this catalogue bears that very title: *Una drola*.
27. With regard to the relationship between Xul and poetry, Borges would correctly assert: “I suspect that [Xul] had less of a feeling for poetry than for language: and that for him the most essential things were painting and music”, in “Laprida 1214”, in *Atlas* (1984).
28. Parallel mythologies occur with the anthropophagous Indian of Oswald de Andrade or with the Andean wise man of Mariategui. I do not know of an expressionist or cubist gaucho in the River-Plate iconography of the period, in contradistinction to what occurs with Diego Rivera's modern view of the indigenous or Tarsila's modern view of the Afro-Brazilian.
29. *La búsqueda de la lengua perfecta en la lengua europea*. Barcelona: Crítica, 1999, (orig. 1993). Trans. Maria Pons. Chapters developed from this work are found in the book by the same author *Serendipities. Language and Lunacy* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1999). Trans. William Weaver.
30. Théodore Flournoy, [1899] *From India to the Planet Mars. A Case of Multiple Personality with Imaginary Languages*. New Jersey: Ed Sonu Shamdasani, Princeton University Press, 1994.
31. “... mysticism refers to the search of the state of oneness with ultimate reality. Occultism depends upon secret, concealed phenomena that are accessible only to those who have been appropriately initiated. The occult is mysterious and is not readily available to ordinary understanding or scientific reason”, “Hidden Meaning in Abstract Art”, in *The Spiritual in Art Abstract Painting 1890-1985* (Los Angeles County of Art, 1986. p. 19).
32. I reproduce a note from the monograph by Jorge O. Carcía Romero: “Xul Solar depicted himself a single time in the water-color [sic] entitled *Desarrollo del Yi Ching*. Figuring the Chinese symbols Yin and Yang, the trigrams of the *Book of Changes*, *Fu* and *Hi*, the first historical figure of China, King Wan and his son Tan, Confucius and Xul Solar with an inscription over his head that reads Now Xul”, in *Alejandro Xul Solar* (Universidad de La Plata, August 1972, note 12, p. 127).
33. According to information provided by the FPK, Xul had in his library two works by Leibnitz:

- Correspondencia con *Arnauld* (Buenos Aires: Losada 1946), and *Tratados fundamentales* (1st. series) (Buenos Aires: Losada 1936 and 1946). Borges, besides knowing the principles of binary logic, knew of the connections between Leibnitz and the hexagrams of the *I Ching* (cf. also the chapter "de Leibnitz a la *Enciclopedia*", which includes "El *I Ching* y la numeración binaria", in Umberto Eco, *La búsqueda de la lengua perfecta*, p. 230.
34. In J.L. Borges, "Sobre los clásicos", in *Otras Inquisiciones* (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1960, p. 260). For the connection between Leibnitz and the French missionary in China, Joachim Bouvet (1656-1730), who discovered the connections between the *I Ching* and the dyadic or binary arithmetical system of Leibnitz, cf. the excellent article by Frank K. Swetz, "Leibnitz, the Yijing, and the Religious Conversion of the Chinese", in *Mathematics Magazine* 76, n° 4 (October 2003): 276-291. Xul, like Leibnitz, who was also a sinologist, saw in numerology, and in the *ars combinatoria* of the *I Ching* a link with cosmology, metaphysics and theology.
 35. Although English is becoming more and more the great auxiliary language of international communication, there is the Universala Esperanto-Ligo (UEL), which is associated with the Argentina Esperanto-Ligo, with its headquarters located not far from the Fundación Pan Klub, at 2357 Paraguay. See www.uea.org and www.esperanto.org.ar.
 36. Gregory Sheerwood, "Gente de mi ciudad: Xul Solar, campeón mundial de panajedrez y el inquieto creador de la 'panlingua'", in *Mundo Argentino* (Buenos Aires, 1 August 1951, p. 14) in *Entrevistas*. Cf. Umberto Eco, chapter 16, dedicated to "Las lenguas internacionales auxiliares", in *op. cit.*, pp. 266-281. (My italics).
 37. Cf. the catalogue of the exhibit *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890-1985*. Org. Maurice Tuchman (Los Angeles: County Museum of Art, Abbeville Press, 1986).
 38. In Paris, in 1926, "the masonic musician Luis Fernandez introduces Torres-García to occultism and spiritual transcendence, including medieval symbolism, the Cabala, Pythagorean numerical mysticism, which involved the notions that the spirit and the celestial bodies were ruled by numbers and that the numerical values appropriate to musical harmony derived from the music of the spheres. Esoteric knowledge seemed very attractive to Torres-García, who was possibly already predisposed to it during his previous experience with Neoplatonic philosophy and progressive education (whose spiritual leader was the theosophist Rudolf Steiner)", in Barbara Braun. *Pre-Columbian Art and the Post-Columbian World: Ancient American Sources of Modern Art* (New York: Abrams, 1993, p. 256).
 39. "The keyboard is a much smaller size than the ordinary one, the keys are uniform and rounded, which permits the fingers to move more easily. In addition, they are marked to permit their recognition by touch. This keyboard permits the intercalation of quarter tones on intermediate rows of keys, a feature that does not exist on present-day instruments. Also, one can learn to play the piano in a third of the time". Xul's explanation, in Artundo, "El Libro del Cielo", *op. cit.* p. 226.
 40. Cf. Neil de Grasse Tyson, "Wordless Music and Abstract Art", in *Exploring the Invisible* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002, p. 15).
 41. "Xul Solar, pintor de símbolos efectivos", in *El Hogar*, 18 September 1953, reproduced in *Entrevistas*, *op. cit.* (My italics).
 42. *art. cit.*, p. 138.
 43. In "Acontecimientos: Xul-Borges, a cor do encontro", in *Xul Solar / J.L. Borges. Lingua e imagem* (Rio de Janeiro: Centro Cultural Banco do Brasil, exhibition catalogue, curator Alina Tortosa, 1998, p. 44).
 44. "Precisely because it lacks intelligibility, Neo-Creole excited Macedonio Fernandez, who publicly

- celebrated Xul Solar as the creator of a language of incommunication”, comments Naomi Lindstrom, one of the first critics to focus on the analysis of Neo-Creole. Cf. “El utopismo lingüístico en Poema de Xul Solar”, *Texto Crítico* 24-25, (México: Universidad Veracruzana, January-December 1982, p. 244).
45. Prologue to the exhibit *Homenaje a Xul Solar* (Buenos Aires: Museo de Nacional de Bellas Artes, 1963).
 46. I transcribe Patricia Artundo’s observation with regard to this publication: “The first time that Xul revealed one of his visions under the title ‘Poema’ it was in the first and only number of *Imán* (April 1931) published in Paris by Elvira de Alvear. (...) The exceptional character of this review that brought together collaborations, among others, from Alejo Carpentier, Jaime Torres Bodet, Miguel Angel Asturias and Franz Kafka displayed Xul’s ‘Poema’ in a publication of marked reflexive tone, with no limits to its interests —‘we will be all-embracing’— affirmed its editor in its introductory text”. In “A Xul Solar: una imagen pública posible”, in *Entrevistas*, *op. cit.* “Poem was first analyzed by Naomi Lindstrom, after the reproduction of the text in Osvaldo Svanascini, *op. cit.*, p. 7.
 47. Roman Jakobson’s classic definition of the poetic function affirms that it arises at the crossing of the two axes in the articulation of language: the vertical, of signification, and the horizontal, of the succession or combination of words in “Linguistics and Poetics”, in *Selected Writings III. Poetry of Grammar and Grammar of Poetry* (La Haya: Mouton, 1981, pp. 18-51). (My translation).
 48. Concerning the text “Poem”, I transcribe the following note by Patricia Artundo: “... published for the first time in 1931, we know the first version —immediate registry of his vision as soon as it was finalized—, another handwritten version, a typescript copy, the version finally published in the review *Imán*, and the one published in *Signo* (1933), plus two variations on the printed version”, in *art. cit.*, note 3, in *Entrevistas*. I cite two versions in Neo-Creole, transcribed and translated into English by Daniel Nelson. The first of these is from the review *Imán* (Paris, April 1931, pp. 50-51). Cf. the complete Spanish translation in *Entrevistas*, *op. cit.*
 49. Thanks to the article by Frank J. Swetz, we know that the sequential order of the 64 hexagrams is read from right to left and from bottom to top, *art. cit.*, pp. 279-280.
 50. The only word in Portuguese in the selected fragment is “çeu” [sky], in standard Portuguese “céu”. Interestingly, the introduction of the cedilla (çeu) is in fact unnecessary, given that in medieval Spanish and in present-day Portuguese it is only used before the vowels “a”, “o”, “u”.
 51. Address to mark the occasion of the opening of the exhibit *Homenaje a Xul Solar*, Museo Provincial de Bellas Artes de la Plata (Provincial Museum of Fine Arts of La Plata], 17 July 1968. Reproduced in the catalogue *Xul Solar en el Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes* (Buenos Aires, September 1998, p. 12).
 52. Jorge O. García Romero affirms: “... According to what Mrs. Micaela Cadenas de Xul Solar declared to me, during the hour, the hour in which the artist was accustomed to meditate, the present text is one of his visions or revelations through transcendental meditation written in ‘Neo-Creole’, not a mere literary invention as it may seem at first glance”, in *Alejandro Xul Solar*, *op. cit.*, note 2, p. 129.
 53. Cf. Haroldo de Campos, *Éden* (São Paulo: Perspectiva, 2004).
 54. Upon referring to William Butler Yeats’s book *Per Amica Silentia Luna*, Richard Ellman affirms that “the reader is never certain if he is faced with a doctrine or a prose poem”. Cf. Yeats’s *The Man and the Masks* ([1948] New York: Norton, 1999, p. 223). Here, we could also make good use of the commentary of Wayne Shumaker, in his excellent book *Renaissance Curiosa*, in which he analyzes the text of John Dee only to arrive at the ironic conclusion that “the angels were

particularly poor pedagogues”, op. cit., p. 36.

55. Roland Barthes, «Variations sur l'écriture», in *Oeuvres Complètes IV* (Paris: Seuil, 2002, p. 284).

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Book Reviews







Benjamin Black. *The Secret Guests*. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2020. ISBN-10: 1250133017.

Not everyone was surprised when, over thirty years after the publication of his first works, John Banville started writing crime fiction under the pseudonym of Benjamin Black. For Neil Murphy (2013), Banville's works had "always been infused with criminality", and are "built around a variety of the detective genre" (19). For Carol Dell'Amico (2014) this is in many ways a result of his "career-long interest in evil", which can be seen as "the force that thwarts human wishes" and which "guarantees that human beings are frequently an abomination, and are unable to steward life's beauties" (116). Crime has been a frequent theme in Banville's writing, from the short stories in his first published work, *Lankin* (1970) and including *The Book of Evidence* (1989) where Freddie Montgomery appears as a sophisticated and highly unlikely murderer. This would seem to correspond with the common critical belief that Banville's work can be divided into two clearly delineated and differentiated groups, which, on the one hand, consists of the "literary" novels published under the Banville name, and on the other the lighter detective fiction released using the Benjamin Black tag. Banville (2011) himself admits that he approaches the task of writing the Black novels in a different way to that he uses while creating the Banville works. Wendy Werris (2012) notes that Banville 's office contains a separate desk for writing the Benjamin Black on computer, while another desk "is reserved for writing as Banville with pen and paper".

For Murphy, however, the supposed distinction between the literary works and the thrillers is "an extremely reductive experiment" (22). Rather both groups of novels use a striking web of interconnectivity which characterises the author's work in both its facets. Characters from the Banville novels often appear in a slightly modified version in the Black mysteries, and Black's characters "inhabit an intertextually framed universe just as their near relatives do in Banville's novels" (Murphy 29). Detection, and all this implies, is present throughout the Banville oeuvre, and the Benjamin Black novels form part of a "self-conscious game, itself modelled on the genre of the crime novel, with mysterious clues, echoes, and a central figure, Quirke, who transforms and yet remains the same across the complex dimensions of the Banville-Black fictive world" (*ibid.* 22).

Now, fourteen years after the publication of the first Benjamin Black novel, the writer reinvents himself again, in a way, by signing his latest novel *The Secret Guests* (2020) with the name of B.W. Black. The Benjamin Black name had been used for eleven works, seven of which were set in the Ireland of the 1950s and centred around the figure of the Dublin pathologist, Quirke. Of the other four, one was a story set in the world of contemporary North American finance, another was an interesting attempt at writing a classic hard-boiled novel, *The Black-Eyed Blonde*, one of a number of novels using Raymond Chandler's character Philip Marlowe, with the sanction of the Chandler estate, while *Prague Nights* (retitled *Wolf on a String* for the US public) was set in sixteenth-century Prague. The other was a book, *Pecado*

(*Sin*), which, to date, has only been published in a Spanish language edition. *Pecado* was awarded the prestigious – and financially attractive – “Premio RBA de Novela Policiaca”, the RBA Crime Novel Award, and was published by the editorial which awarded the prize. Set mainly in Banville’s native county of Wexford in 1957, shortly after the events in the Quirke novels, *Pecado* introduces a tee-total Protestant Irish police officer, Inspector Strafford, a protégé, it is suggested, of Inspector Hackett, of Quirke fame. Indeed, Strafford – who continually has to inform his interlocutors that his name is written with an “r” between the “t” and the “a”, that it is not “Stafford” – is an acquaintance of the pathologist, who is apparently on his honeymoon and whose name is mentioned in passing four times.

Pecado is a slight novel, but it is here where, perhaps, we can discover the genesis of *The Secret Guests*. Although set during the early 1940s, this new work also features Strafford, younger but essentially the same character, and whose name other characters continue to mispronounce. The guests of the title are two sisters, Elizabeth and Margaret, daughters to the King of England and heiress to the throne and princess royal respectively. During the Blitz, and fearing for their safety, they are shipped to Ireland under the care of Celia Nashe, a special agent posing as their nanny, to stay in an ascendancy Big House in Tipperary, under the care of a distant cousin, the Anglo-Irish aristocrat the Duke of Edenmore. The house, reminiscent of those so common in Irish literature, and which Banville himself had drawn with such sensibility in his early novel *Birchwood*, is also guarded by Irish army troops, led by Vivion De Valera, eldest son of the Taoiseach. It soon becomes apparent that the secret of the girls’ identity has become common knowledge in the surrounding area, not least to local members of the IRA. Although the plot is stronger than that of *Pecado*, the most interesting feature, once again, is the strength of Black’s characterisation. Strafford is fascinating as a self-doubting, modestly charming police officer – a Protestant in a force which is overwhelmingly Catholic, and an intriguing anomaly throughout the novel. Aware of his privileged heritage as “a descendant of the land-grabbers who had flooded over from England three centuries before”, Strafford feels pity for his “poor divided little country, gnawing away at immemorial grievances, like a fox caught in a snare trying to bite off its trapped leg” (TSG 151). Strafford is under the orders of Quirke’s yet-to-become friend and collaborator, Inspector Hackett, who makes a brief appearance in the work.

Celia Nashe is, to all intents and purposes, an advanced woman for her age, one of the few female members of Special Branch who, when “the possibility of war turned to certainty”, had “succeeded in wangling a transfer to MI5” (TSG 24). Her merits, however, are diluted somewhat by the knowledge that she had used her influential father’s high-ranking friends to bring about this transfer. Celia’s earnest good sense is countered by the unscrupulous flippancy of Lascelles, the brash, opportunistic British Embassy representative with whom Celia initiates a brief, and seemingly ill-advised, sexual relationship. It is typical of Banville/ Black to provide inter-and intra-textual references in his works, and in *The Secret Guests* this is apparent in the figure of Isabel Galloway, with whom Quirke is briefly romantically involved in *Elegy for April*. Here we learn that Lascelles is delayed from coming to Tipperary because of a squabble with his girlfriend in Dublin, “a fledgling actress Isabel Galloway” (TSG 36). Later we learn that Strafford had also fallen for Ms Galloway. After being presented to Isabel by “his friend the pathologist”, – Quirke, although he is not named – the detective and the actress begin a relationship, severely hampered by Strafford’s chronic shyness (TSG 107). After “their first edgy date” at the Shelbourne Hotel, the police officer hears that Isabel “has taken up with someone else, some Englishman, apparently” (*ibid. ibidem*). Nowhere is it mentioned that this

Englishman is, in fact, Lascelles, but this information, even though neither Strafford nor Lascelles is apparently aware of this circumstance, provides the reader with a delightful snippet of information which reflects the character of both men and which somehow corroborates the ill will they feel toward each other.

The IRA volunteers portrayed in the novel are divided into two distinct groups, the locals and the outsiders. The latter are faceless – in the case of one of these, quite literally – and nameless, in that they go under the names of Smith and Jones. These men are the cold-blooded, hackneyed gunmen of the Troubles thriller, and they are sketched by Black using broad and unsubtle strokes. The local IRA men are more carefully drawn, however. Joey Harte, the young man who initially reveals the presence and identity of the sisters on the estate, is a troubled young man whose past could almost reflect that of Quirke before the pathologist was accepted into his adoptive family. Harte “had passed his teenage years in various foster homes and so-called industrial schools, and in every one of them had been bullied, and interfered with by the priests and Christian Brothers, and generally kicked around” (*TSG* 129). Joey, it would seem, joined “the Lads” early, his militancy a means of escaping the harsh life he had lived and of securing a sense of belonging, of being a part of something. Clancy, on the other hand, a local businessman, is the head of the IRA in the area, and his bombastic declarations are at odds with his intrinsic cowardliness. At the end of the novel, and following the tragic events, he realises that he has wasted his life in unrealistic dreams of running a flying squad and helping the revolution when, in reality, his position had been simply “a way of spicing up his life and looking important, to himself and to the town” (*TSG* 243).

The two royal sisters conform, largely, to the accepted opinions widely held regarding their characters. Elizabeth, the future queen, is of few words, but when she does speak she reveals the determination which is often attributed to her. She is against, for example, their exile in Ireland, believing that rather than an act of bravery this seems more like running away from events. Much more interesting is the younger of the sisters, Margaret – in Ireland under the pseudonym of Mary. Mary is a precocious ten-year old who is, headstrong, meddlesome and constantly at loggerheads with her prim and respectable sister. She is also haughty, telling one employee that her sister is *the* Queen, not *a* queen.

Although the first thing readers are likely to miss from *The Secret Guests* is the figure of Quirke, whose presence would seem to differentiate the great Benjamin Black novels – effectively the seven which feature the pathologist – from the rest. The plot in this novel is, in common with those of the later Quirke novels, deliberately underplayed, apparently slight, but full of resonance for the discerning reader. Although an unkind critic might question the author’s need to milk the commercially attractive cow that is the British royal family, particularly, perhaps, in the wake of the success of a television serial like *The Crown*, *The Secret Guests* never descends to the level of popular melodrama. The underlying violence which erupts towards the novel’s closure provides a terrifying contrast with the apparent tranquillity of the Irish countryside, evoking other Big House dramas such as Elizabeth Bowen’s *The Last September*. Despite the laid-back simplicity of the plot, *The Secret Guests* stands one level above thrillers written in a similar vein, if only for the strength of the characterisation and the occasional glimpse of the tensions that haunted Anglo-Irish relations during much of the twentieth-century in general and during the war that the Irish called the Emergency in particular.

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Neil Murphy. *John Banville*. Maryland, USA: Bucknell University Press, 2018. pp. 216. ISBN 978-1-61148-872-2 (cloth); 978-1-61148-873-9 (electronic)

Echoing the words of Susan Sontag, Neil Murphy artfully professes to “show *how it is what it is*” in his latest monograph, *John Banville* (2018) (21). This ekphrastic reading of Banville’s body of work focuses on its “artistic transparencies,” an expression borrowed from Ortega y Gasset, instead of excavating for meaning (20). After all, meaning is crucially distinguished from significance whereby the semantic differences between these terms in Banville’s own understanding of his work do not simply refer to different modes of knowing, but also perceiving. What these ‘transparencies’ are and how they are engendered, is carefully explored at each stage of Banville’s evolution as a writer, and, more specifically, with relation to the limits and possibilities of art. The distinction between meaning and significance is central to the kind of aesthetics Banville aspires to, in his desire to create works of art. This position that Banville has made explicit, in his interviews, has remained consistent and central, over the years, to his art. The correspondence between the critical approach that Murphy deploys here and Banville’s own views on his work lies with, in part, an insistence on recognising that these novels “are themselves worthy of consideration as works of art of a specific kind,” as shown thoroughly through the multifarious reasons on why these books should be read as works of art and how this can, in fact, be accomplished (2). The justification for interpretative models that focus on aesthetics, more specifically, around a discussion on the nature of art, is informed by a critical discussion of ideas, by various philosophers and critics, such as Etienne Gilson, Walter Pater, and Gordon Graham. But critical stances that place art and aesthetics at the centre, as Murphy carefully makes clear, do not come at the expense of neglecting the more ideologically charged aspects of Banville’s fiction (that other critics have dwelt on), such as, for instance, the representation of women. But, as his argument goes, there is something vital offered by reflections on art that is not made in service of any other purpose except for the making of art, in both literature and criticism, by going beyond the putative primacy of subject matter and what it can mean to attend to the “capacity that art has to *illuminate* experience, rather than to reflect it” (3).

Murphy, like many other critics, is cognisant of the weaknesses of Banville’s craft in the early work, for the then budding writer, while astutely recognising the presence of certain preoccupations that were later further developed as his fiction became increasingly sophisticated. Here, a defining feature of Banville’s work, namely his narrators’ inability to arrive at a coherent sense of the world, is traced back to his earliest work, *Long Lankin* (1970 revised edition published in 1984). Murphy’s consistent scrutiny of the motifs of clowns, mirrors, twins, and red-haired interlopers, which are present from *Long Lankin* onwards, and how they populate Banville’s fiction, is key to understanding how the highly intertextual and aestheticised surfaces of these worlds so often undermine a realist depiction of material reality. These intertextual echoes, as Murphy expertly demonstrates in each chapter, accumulate associations and resonance, with each invocation that harks back to an earlier work,

contributing to a densely interconnected Banvillean universe. But it is the Jamesian trope of the “house of fiction,” which first appears in *Birchwood* in connection with the big house genre as well as the realist tradition, that becomes one of the chief ways, as Murphy goes on to explain, in which Banville self-reflexively engages in a commentary on art, and how inherent to it is “the perpetual presence of the artistic consciousness that informs everything” (7, 8). This metaphor of the ‘house of fiction,’ which recurs throughout Banville’s body of work via descriptions of the various houses that his narrators inhabit or have once inhabited and have, now, returned to, variously stands for the realist tradition, the historical novel, and even the overt metafictional games typically found in postmodernist fiction. As with the subsequent chapters, this motif of the ‘house of fiction’ is shown as an integral link in revealing how Banville’s self-reflexive commentary on and around art is extensively interwoven with the fictions he constructs.

For Murphy, the metaphor of science in *Dr Copernicus* (1976) and *Kepler* (1981), the first half of the science tetralogy, is deployed as an extension of the same self-reflexive impulse and artistic problems, such as the gulf between art and the world, the word and thing, that characterise the early fiction. In this, Murphy contends that they “are simultaneously allegories for Banville’s artistic process, and therefore extend the deep self-reflexive resonance that we find in the earlier works” (41). More specifically, Murphy’s attention on the ways in which “the value of science lies primarily in its metaphoric potential, particularly with respect to the notion of scientific inquiry as a creative pursuit” departs from the commentary on the narrative of science by earlier Banville critics, particularly Imhof, McMinn, and Berensmeyer (43). Murphy cogently identifies a transitional shift in *The Newton Letter* (1982) and *Mefisto* (1986), not simply in terms of departing from the historical novel, but also in the ways they evince the limits of the referential mode, particularly in the absence of fixed knowledge systems. As Murphy puts it, with his next books, the trilogy of art novels, “the content primarily becomes the subject of its own self-reflexive investigations,” whereby these books with “art at their plotted centers [free] Banville from the overt metaphorical parallels that had defined much of the early work” (58).

Turning to the ekphrastic dimensions of The Frames Trilogy, *The Book of Evidence* (1989), *Athena* (1993) and *Ghosts* (1995), a convincing argument is made for the interconnections between references to paintings, both actual and imagined, that frequently find their way into Banville’s novels, from this point forth, and the slowing down of time through the, oftentimes unanticipated, use of the present tense by Banville’s narrators. This novelistic technique, as Murphy goes on to explain, engenders a kind of textual stillness reminiscent of still lifes, like those by painters referenced by Banville, such as Vermeer. The blending of the visual and verbal is aptly likened to what Stephen Cheeke identifies as the “‘for ever now’ quality of visual images,” as Murphy dwells on “the formal possibilities offered by a narrative integration of paintings and literature” (77). Around the question of the possibilities and limits of art, as with these novels that “have paintings at their narrative centers,” Murphy stresses the correspondence between strangeness experienced by these characters in the face of an indifferent world, and strangeness as a feature of an imaginatively, or aesthetically transformed world, such as those in works of art (77). Here, too, this strangeness, a quality that Susanne Langer calls “otherness” or, as Murphy insightfully points out, is “variously articulated as ‘strangeness,’ ‘semblance,’ ‘illusion,’ ‘transparency,’ ‘autonomy,’ and ‘self-sufficiency,’ and identified as inherent to works of art (15).

The extensive inquiry into the seepages between visual and verbal art, specifically the significance of Pierre Bonnard's art, in that "the fiction is also constructed in sympathy with the artistic principles that governed the French artist's paintings" forms the crux of Murphy's analysis of *The Sea* (2005), is the main focus of the third chapter. There are the overt allusions to paintings, as with, for example, ekphrastic descriptions of Vermeer's *The Milkmaid* or one of Van Gogh's self-portraits, but it is around the correspondences between the formal and thematic elements of this novel and Bonnard's life and paintings, especially *Nude in the bath, with dog* (1941-1946), that most pointedly evince how "*The Sea* reaches beyond a simple, linear form in an effort to integrate other ontological modes" (102). Murphy goes on to keenly elucidate on the similarity of subject matter, the role of memory in the making of art, and a shared emphasis on domestic settings between the novel and Bonnard's paintings. For Murphy, the novel's sophistication and technical artistry lies in how seamlessly intertwined these multiple levels of being are "without destabilizing the fiction itself," in spite of the considerable mythic, literary, and artistic resonances lending a sense of doubleness, or what he calls "a secondary allusive ontology," to the primary level of plot (108, 95). Instead, as a direct and indirect consequence of these allusions, as Murphy astutely puts it, "[c]haracters and events continually shimmer in and out of view, slipping out of a fixed sense of identity or sharp focus, and reasserting themselves in new unexpected ways, while the very fabric of the novel is frequently suffused with subtle echoes, colors and sounds because of references to various branches of the arts" (96). In this, the complexity of these wide-ranging 'references to various branches of the arts' and how they imbue Max's narrative with intertextual echoes is revealed as markers of the various ontological worlds embedded within the work.

In chapter four, Murphy turns his focus to acting, actors, and puppetry, as metaphors for the ever-present self-conscious impulse in Banville's writing, in the Cleave novels: *Eclipse* (2000), *Shroud* (2002), and *Ancient Light* (2012). Although it may seem that the same concerns in Banville's earlier work are revisited here, only with a different metaphorical parallel, Murphy adroitly demonstrates how these intensely self-reflexive novels, as part of Banville's mature period, are different from the overt metafictional games in postmodernism. Kleist's influence on Banville's body of work is attended to, in more significant detail, in the fifth chapter, which is centered on his adaptations of Kleist's plays, *The Broken Jug* (1994), *God's Gift: A Version of Amphitryon by Heinrich von Kleist* (2000), and *Love in the Wars* (2005), as well as his novel, *The Infinities* (2009). The trope of puppetry and the idea of unself-conscious movement, the earliest manifestations of which appear as far back as Mefisto, are closely examined in view of Kleist's essay, "The Puppet Theatre". Here, too, Murphy insightfully explains the differences in the mimetic and diegetic dimensions of the dramatic and novel form, and posits how changes made in these adaptations, whether theatre or prose, were tailored to invoke most effectively "oppositions such as illusion and truth, and reality and appearance and, ultimately, a belief in confusion as a prime market of human experience" that characterise Banville's and Kleist's works (140). For instance, in his analysis of *God's Gift*, Murphy makes the assertion: "the rapid temporal momentum in a play that already features ample amounts of confusion and misapprehension significantly adds to the audience impact [...] Thickets of ontological shifts, varied narrative points of view, and plot convolutions, on the other hand, characterize its prose fictional counterpart, *The Infinities*" (149). As Murphy deftly demonstrates, Banville, by working around the limits and possibilities of each form, has sought continually to capture this particular sense of being in the world, where confusion looms large.

In chapter six, the Benjamin Black novels, set in 1950s Dublin, are read as an extension of the Banvillean universe, as Murphy insightfully identifies tropes and motifs, originating from the Banville novels, that are deployed, with different effects, in the genre of hard-boiled detective fiction. This chapter facilitates a nuanced reconsideration of the boundaries between genres such as modernism, which is typically understood as ‘high’ art, and the genre of detective fiction, which is usually more accessible and relies on conventions of the realist tradition. By participating in another genre, as Murphy has it, the Benjamin Black novels are another avenue for the fusing of self-conscious and plot-driven narrative techniques. Although the intended outcome is arguably different from the Banville novels, the objective for Black and Banville can be said to be the same: to tell well-made stories. In this, Murphy makes a powerful point that the author Benjamin Black is neither opposite to, or separate from, Banville or simply a pen name with which to accomplish a type of “Banville-lite” writing (qtd. in Murphy 180).

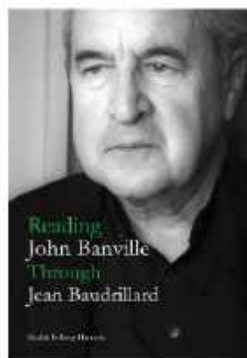
The largely chronological structure of the book makes apparent the constancy of certain preoccupations, the expressions of which have been refined over the course of Banville’s development as a writer, and the changes in metaphorical parallels first deployed and then discarded (as with the science tetralogy). But this is not to say that Murphy understands Banville’s development linearly. Throughout the book, Murphy’s keen sense of the intertextual echoes in Banville’s works and thorough knowledge of it is displayed.

This is brought across at moments when the development of an idea is carefully traced to reveal its larger significance in a later work, which Murphy correspondingly dwells upon in fuller measure; or it is shown how a later work retrospectively alerts us to an initial articulation of an idea that was already present in an earlier work. This grants a broad overview of the concerns that Banville has sought perpetually to capture in his fiction, but from an artistically-inflected perspective: the strangeness of the world through the inward gaze of his typically male first-person narrators and their resulting sense of confusion, and the world as transformed and other from external reality especially in ways that evince – as with works of art – qualities that Denis Donoghue recognises as “[a]utonomy, disinterestedness, and impersonality” (qtd. in Murphy 109). This book alerts both readers and scholars of Banville’s fiction to the ways in which ekphrasis is deployed innovatively and pivotal to the unique ontological modes of the storyworlds in these novels. This book undoubtedly opens new pathways to reading Banville’s work as always being, Murphy rightly asserts, “a demonstration of the inevitability of artistic failure rather than a genuine artistic quest for a solution to the unavoidable distinction between world and word” (191). In this, from start to finish, the precarious balance between seeking out moments of significance in Banville’s oeuvre and attending to how significance is achieved without establishing or proclaiming its meaning(s) as fixed is carefully struck.

Adel Cheong

Work Cited

Murphy, Neil. *John Banville*. Bucknell University Press, 2018.



Hedda Friberg-Harnesk. *Reading John Banville Through Jean Baudrillard*. New York: Cambria Press, 2018. pp.223.LCCN 2018027875 | ISBN 9781604979534

Hedda Friberg-Harnesk's *Reading John Banville Through Jean Baudrillard* deploys the philosopher's key contributions to tackle the most recurring and identifiable of Banville's motifs: masks, memory, dreams, doubles, performance, and repetition. Friberg convincingly develops simulation-simulacrum as a common thread that links the themes at the heart of Banville's project: the aestheticisation of the self as an unfinished project and its relationship with the world. Additionally, it demonstrates how Banville's fiction of "mercurial instability" still provides fertile ground for further full length, single-authored monographs. The core argument— Banville's later novels function as "states of simulation"—is presented within the space of nine chapters, with the ninth also being the conclusion. The book covers many of Banville's key texts of the period, from *The Untouchable* to *The Blue Guitar*, including Banville's lesser known two plays, *God's Gift* and *Love in the Wars*. Chapter 1 focuses on the relationship between the self and masks and later connects it to hybridity, simulation and memory. Chapter 2 examines Alexander Cleave and Axel Vander in *Eclipse*, *Shroud* and *Ancient Light* and chapter 3 uses Baudrillard's elaborations on the "orders of simulacra" and the hologram to analyse Cass Cleave, perhaps Banville's most memorable female character, who confronts Axel Vander and Alex Cleave with a fundamental lack at the core of their sense of selfhood and highlights both narrators' ethical catastrophes. The following two chapters, 4 and 5, veer away from Banville's novels to discuss his plays. Here, Friberg shows how copies are more real than the original, reducing the unfortunate Ashburnigham (*God's Gift*) to a talking shell threatened by cancellation. *Love in the Wars*, according to Friberg, contains elements of Baudrillard's idea of the Symbolic order where signs still meant something and were relatively fixed.

The strongest parts of the book are arguably the following chapters, 6, 7 and 8, where Friberg demonstrates how a paradigm shift starts to manifest itself starting with *The Infinities* up to *The Blue Guitar*. In these chapters she skillfully demonstrates Banville's "posthumanist" shift to blurry boundaries between humans, gods, and animals. Friberg additionally argues that Banville's writing starts to depict a more optimistic view of humanity in contrast to his otherwise bleak universe. Finally, chapter 8 proposes a defense of Banville's later work against his critics who accuse him of being repetitive. In Banville, Friberg rightly argues, repetition is a fundamentally creative process of transformation and renewal. This is a crucial point in Banville's aesthetic and epistemological project and, one with which I find myself deeply in agreement. Banville's later work is the story of a creative narrator discontented with the gap that separates him from the natural world. His quest predictably fails to yield "the thing in itself", yet his narration produces a universe in which certainty and playfulness give way to uncanny encounters, ones that shake the foundation of his subjective existence. It is a world in which dichotomies collapse, where reality and imagination fuse and become inseparable, interiority strikes a chord with exteriority, subjects coincide with objects, absence weighs more

than presence, the inanimate becomes animate and the animate inanimate. In this drama of the sundered self, subjectivity is rendered precarious but is nevertheless enhanced through layers after layers of significance. Faced with the fact that no ultimate guarantee can be found with regards to the validity of his perceptions and representations, the narrator heroically pushes on, continues to come back, sometimes under a different name. Though he sets upon himself the task of taking on the chaos and imposing on it a totalizing order, he yet fails every single time. In the process, however, with every return he reveals a new aspect of the fragmented self.

Friberg's Baudrillardian take comes at a time when French "theory" seems to be receding in contemporary literary studies. Yet her book shows, yet again, how theory is still relevant and, at times, necessary to shed light on Banville's body of fiction that often engages in sophisticated dialogue with various thinkers and philosophers. Moreover, as Friberg points out, Nietzsche, who is an almost constant presence in Banville's fiction, heavily informed Baudrillard's thought. Baudrillard's reworking of Nietzsche in the age of hyperreal images thus provides a suitable prism to read Banville's highly visual, intermedial, and holographic narratives. At the same time Friberg carefully avoids the all familiar risk of reducing fiction to illustrations of "grand" theory. She demonstrates time and again throughout her study that despite the relevance and importance of Baudrillard's thinking, what primarily interests her study is Banville's vision of humanity and the ways in which it is constructed and deconstructed in his unique prose. In this respect, Friberg's is yet another reminder that Banville's literary feat is not reducible to any single theory or system.

A major component of Friberg's analysis is the assumption that Banville's fiction treads a "territory of radical uncertainty". While this is an apt metaphor for Banville's later fiction—which, to be fair, is Friberg's subject—it would have been fruitful to set this observation, at least in part, against the background of a key novel from Banville's earlier period, namely *Mefisto*. The latter comes precisely at the point of shifting from science to art, depicting a mathematician who barely demonstrates any doubt with regard to his scientific system and, instead, focuses his quest on finding an alternative system of representation that can bridge the epistemological gap between the subjective experience and the objective world. This point made the present reader wonder especially since Friberg at some point, though in passing, does draw a parallel between *The Blue Guitar* and *Mefisto* (179).

In conclusion, this book is nothing short of an achievement made possible only by dedication, sharp observation, and a lifelong love for Irish literature. The present reader thus recommends it as an essential reading to students and scholars of contemporary Irish fiction as well as to anyone interested in Banville's universe of precarious subjectivity.

Mehdi Ghassemi



2019



2018



2018



2014



2000



1998



1997



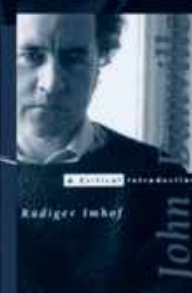
2013



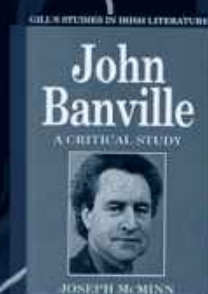
2002



1981



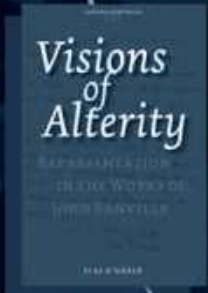
1989



1991



2012



2004



2006



2006



2008



2009

Contributors

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John O'Donnell's work has been published and broadcast widely in Ireland and abroad. Fiction publications include *Counterparts* (The Stinging Fly) Hennessy Book of Irish Fiction, the Sunday Tribune, the Sunday Independent, The Stinging Fly, and Books Ireland and the Irish Times (online). Awards include the Hennessy Award for Emerging Fiction, and the Cuirt Festival of Literature New Writing Prize for Fiction. His first collection of short stories *Almost the Same Blue* was published in May 2020 by Doire Press. He has also published four poetry collections, the latest of which is *Sunlight: New and Selected Poems* (Dedalus Press, 2018). Awards for poetry include the Irish National Poetry Prize, the Ireland Funds Prize and the Hennessy Award for Poetry. He lives and work in Dublin. <https://johnlodonnell.com/>

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