GENRE AND CODE IN THE WORK OF JOHN BANVILLE

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Abstract

This thesis examines the role of genre in a selection of works by the author John Banville. It aims to provide insight into the output of a writer who alternates between claiming his various works as being either literary or non-literary. Banville's texts invariably appear paradoxical when the functions and effects of individual generic devices in his writing are considered in light of the larger concerns of aesthetics, politics, and ethics which permeate through all of his work.

The choice of texts discussed provide a variety of generic codes for consideration. Banville's crime fiction written under the name of Benjamin Black are considered as part of a metafictional project akin to that of his main corpus rather than separate, non-literary entities. The Black novels initially appear to be faithful to the established genre of the hard-boiled detective novel, yet they also reveal an engagement with the intellectual and aesthetic concerns of the author's main body of work which incorporates many genres. The conventions and codes of metafictional writings are thus examined side-by-side with those of the crime novel genre. Banville's other works draw upon a range of generic codes such as the historical novel, confessional literature, and travel writing and these are also investigated. Thus, different genres and stages of the author's corpus are represented.

The theoretical basis for this examination draws upon a range of theorists of genre from the pioneering work of Bakhtin and Todorov to more recent developments by Derrida and Lyotard. Such a range provides the tools for this study to investigate the work of an author known for both earnestness and play. The two aims of this thesis are: to show how the complexity of his work's philosophical basis is subverted by aesthetic concerns such as form and style, and to investigate why genre and genre theory has an unstable locale in Banville's textual explorations.

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Acknowledgements

Introduction

Genre and the Intertextual aspects of Banville's writing

The novel grows by a process of genetic building, filling itself out, matching itself to its vision of itself, as a tree grows, becoming a tree by becoming a tree. To break the rules of generation is to break the book.

(John Banville, 'The Personae of Summer')[1]

It is not initially apparent to a reader of Banville's novels that genre[2] is a constructive principle in his work. As a fiction writer, Banville has frequently produced difficult, often esoteric work that seeks to identify and then penetrate the dark mysteries of existence. A typical Banville novel is complex and far-reaching; he is a writer who often eschews finely-wrought plot and a wide cast of characters. Banville's body of work does not adhere to the Jamesian idea of the novel representing life and society; his work is avowedly post-modernist in its interiority, its Lyotardian usurping of grand-narratives and its scepticism towards established epistemological certainties such as truth, language, and reason. Many of his published works are deeply intertextual and intergeneric and incorporate many modes of literary and non-literary genres.[3]

Despite Banville's fictions often being intertextual exercises that draw ideas from a wide range of sources, the author has always made use of genre to

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[1] 'The Personae of Summer'. *Possessed of a Past: a John Banville Reader*. Raymond Bell, ed. London: Picador, 2012. p. 346

[2] Genre is a contentious term and has a variety of interpretations. In this thesis 'genre' typically refers to a category of a form, thus I consider the novel as a 'literary form' and the romance novel as a 'genre' rather than a 'subgenre', although some critics referred to in this work (Bakhtin being one example) refer to the novel as a genre in itself.

[3] *Prague Pictures* (2003), a travelogue supplemented with history, anecdotes, theoretical musings and journalism is a case in point.

give shape to his texts. Genre functions and effects have a deep establishment in

his fiction, particularly since the publication of his first full-length novel

Nightspawn (1971) – a political thriller which masks an experimental and

metafictional underbelly which reveals a writer finding his register. Patricia

Waugh defines metafiction as 'a parodic, playful, excessive or deceptively naïve

style of writing (1984, 2). Since his earliest literary forays, Banville incorporates

genre into his fiction in various ways, and much of his writing has been

characterised by the intertextual and extra-literary playfulness of metafiction.

Birchwood (1973) and *The Newton Letter* (1982) are, at a foundational level,

both iconoclastic and parodic swipes at logically constructed narrative. Indeed,

logic in *Birchwood* is established as a genred epistemology, in the sense that the

idea of 'genre' is predominantly concerned with limits and dialogic

understanding. In addition to the concept of epistemological limits put forward

in this text is an ironicising of the overlap between our understanding of the

terms "narrative" and "fiction" - it is ironic that we 'understand' that there are

fictions, as the surety of understanding is itself a fiction.

   With the breakdown of grand narratives as a starting point in Banville's

corpus, it can be seen that each of Banville's protagonists search for a narrative

mode that most adequately suits their need to express their view of the world and

their place in it. Many of his protagonists seek for a narrative mode that

formalises the quandary they are in: Copernicus tries and fails to find answers in

cosmology, Freddie Montgomery enacts a transgressive and then confessional

narrative to understand his split Self, Max Morden delves into his aestheticized

memory to deal with his grief. Fundamentally, they seek understanding of the 'texts' of their lives in other 'texts'; to explain their subjectivity they reach out to what they assume to be objective realities where answers can be found. Yet the lived experience for the Banvillean protagonist is typically a zero sum game; the narratives often express the possibility of "fructifying, but arguably falsifying, [the] relationship between fictional structures and inchoate lived experience" (Davis, 2004, 148). The experience of the Banvillean protagonist is always intertextual.

The formal features of these fictions mirror the narratorial intertextuality of the Banvillean first-person narrator. The forms of Banville's fictions are not as esoteric as their content may suggest. They use established genres and generic conventions as the foundations of the narratives, even when complex philosophical ideas – not readily amenable to genre forms – are central to the story. The Banvillean protagonist searches for an order, a code which gives reason and shape to their narrative. Banville's use of generic elements is analogous to his creations' efforts to circumvent the breakdown in grand narratives that can lead to a crisis for the Self in the world.

The Problem of Genre

Genre in Banville's writings could be termed as what David Duff refers to as a "*restrictive* model of intertextuality" (Duff, 2000, 17). It is the purpose of this thesis to argue that Banville's writings subvert genre writing's supposed restrictiveness by overtly signposting the limitations of genre writing. Banville

does this by using techniques such as hybridising genres and experimenting with genres. In his late career, it is argued here, Banville turns towards genre fiction as a means of producing works that combine the modernist literary tradition with various other traditions such as the confessional or the crime novel, to name but two examples. Banville's later career work is characterised by an intent to bring novelty to different genres; the work of his early career contains much more unveiling of the artifice of genre. Some of Banville's generic techniques apparent in his early work include stereotyping, hackneyed phrases and clichés, stock characters, bizarre anti-generic plot occurrences,[4] and parody.

Genre is not so much a liberating concept but more of a problematic in Banville's early writings. However, one must also be aware of the ancillary problems in considering Banvillean narratives. An aspect that complicates Banville's treatment of genre is the fact that the majority of his fictions are narrated in the first-person. These fictions can be considered as a separate genre in themselves, and we can consider some of Banville's novels as 'confessional monologues' because they deal with the consideration of crime, sin, guilt, and redemption. Banville's confessional monologues – and the confessors[5] themselves – are concerned with guilt (real and imagined), redemption, violence and ethics. Thus they are connected generically with a rich history of

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[4] The spontaneous combustion of Granny Godkin in Banville's quasi-Big House novel *Birchwood*, for example. This has a literary antecedent in the character of Krook in Charles Dickens' *Bleak House*. The manner of her death is ironic as it is common in some Big House novels for the aristocracy to be depicted as slowly fading into obsolescence or penury. Banville's Granny Godkin is ironically anti-generic in this regard.

[5] The usage of 'confessor' in this work always refers to the person who makes a confession rather than the perhaps more common definition of one who hears another admit a crime or a sin.

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confessional literature. The confessionals are much more than narratorial devices; the content of the confessor's lives, and how they judge their own existence and worth, are defined by the manner of the telling. Banville's tendency to write first-person narratives using relatively similar narrative voices creates a difficulty when looking at the individual genres in most texts. In other texts such as *Ghosts* (1993), *Athena* (1995) and *Shroud* (2002) – where the narratives at points alternate between an omniscient third-person narrator and a first-person, socially distorted point of view – genre is much more apparent.

Throughout all of Banville's texts there is an understanding of the possibilities that generic effects and functions offer to the production of fiction. Genre is used both in the metafictional and the more unitary narratives; thus Banville has more than one approach to genre over the course of his career. In *Birchwood* we see an abrupt shift in his writing as the Big House genre with its stock characters, the Irish landscape of insurrections and political unease allows Banville to examine representation and memory in the first-person narrative of Gabriel Godkin, child heir to a damaged world ravaged by the absurdities of adult politics. Banville's subsequent works in the science tetralogy – *Doctor Copernicus* (1976), *Kepler* (1980), *The Newton Letter* and *Mefisto* (1986) – follow in this vein of using a historical or generic backdrop to develop ideas under the rough heading of 'metafiction'[6] while continuing the use of multiple genres that began with his earlier texts. There is a notable purpose about the

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[6] *Doctor Copernicus* and *Kepler* are connected in their examination of the overlap between the science and creativity. *The Newton Letter* is broadly about trying, and failing, to write a biography and *Mefisto* is the dark coda to the tetralogy and deals with mysticism, chance and obsession.

inclusion of genre and generic aspects in Banville's fiction. Derek Hand has claimed that

> [Banville's] writing appears on the surface to conform to traditional
> modes; for instance, *Doctor Copernicus* being understood as a
> straightforward historical novel, or *Birchwood* being thought of as an
> uncomplicated Big House novel. However, as has been observed, he
> plays with these conventions, extending the limits of what is acceptable
> and expected within the novel form (Hand, 2002, 82).

Thus, Banville's incorporation of 'lesser' genres such as straightforward historical novels can appear as simplistic in the context of the wider genre of metafiction. In the wider context of metafiction, it can be assumed genre is conducive to the elaboration of the concerns of metafiction rather than being contradictory to them. What would perhaps negate the effort of creating an overt metafictional landscape would be the straightforwardness of the genre work – or perhaps more accurately, a work that uses a singular genre. Banville's playful attitude to form, as noted by Hand, is also noted by Declan Kiberd who also alludes to the idea of generic play in Banville's writing by saying that:

> Despite his interest in history and science, Banville has often insisted that
> he is neither a historical novelist nor a science writer but rather a man
> who knows how to mock his own obsessions and especially his
> obsession with the form of the novel itself. Like Schiller, he implies that
> man is most human when he plays (Kiberd, 2006, 174).

However, Banville's fiction is not purely about play or redolent of play. Much of his work contains recurring ideas that seem to defy full expression in the novel form, or rather, in the novel as a unitary object. This is represented by his continuing use of multiple, interconnected books. Banville's writings reveal a

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generic tendency to not just write trilogies but to write connected books that need

their companion books to make any sense. A case in point would be *Mefisto* and

Ghosts which are "deeply dependent upon earlier, shaping dramas for their

fictional justification and dramatic resolution" (McMinn, 1999, 161). It is

reasonable to suggest that both Banville and critics of Banville find it

troublesome to deal with the straightforwardness of generic works and that

straightforwardness, simplicity, or a narrowing of scope is often assumed to mask

a hidden secret, and that we must revisit earlier texts in order to justify our own

metafictional obsessions.

From the very first publication of his first literary work, 'The Party' in

1966 to the 1993 publication of *Ghosts* Banville has remained faithful to the

genres of the novel and the short story, notwithstanding his extra-literary

journalistic articles and reviews. While Banville did work on screen adaptations

during this period in his career (his abandoned film script versions of *Birchwood*

and Henry James' *The Spoils of Poynton* being examples of such) from 1994

onwards the publications of *The Broken Jug* (play, 1994), *Seachange* (play,

1994), *The Ark* (children's book, 1996), *The Last September* (film script, 1999),

God's Gift (play, 2000), *Stardust: Three Monologues of the Dead* (radio play,

2002), *Dublin 1742* (children's play, 2002), *Prague Pictures* (travel writing,

2003), *Kepler* (radio play, 2004), *Love in The Wars* (play, 2005), *A World Too*

Wide (radio play, 2005), *Todtnauberg* (radio play, 2006; *Conversations in The*

Mountains in published format 2008), *Albert Nobbs* (film script, 2011), *The Sea*

(film script, 2013) show that an eventual bibliography of Banville's work when

he ceases writing novels may perhaps by heavily outnumbered by his Benjamin

Black and other ephemeral works. A recent anthologised collection of his work

pointedly omits the Benjamin Black novels, underscoring the difficulty for

scholars and readers of incorporating such a divergent development into the main

corpus of Banville's work. While Raymond Bell in his preface to the collection

Possessed of a Past (2012) states that "One hopes that the limpid light which

falls over these stepping-stone selections may yet lead readers to the greater

corpus of this mischievous, most masterly, of artificers" (Bell, 2012, xii) he

omits the most mischievous of his artifices: the Benjamin Black texts. He goes

on to claim that "The 'Chronology', although comprehensive, is not complete; it

has its lapses like in any lived life. No mention is made of Banville's 'dark and

twin brother', the scarcely selfsame *semblable*, Benjamin Black" (xiv). A

comment such as this reiterates the fact that any compiler, or critic for that

matter, is always selective when looking at his work, omitting texts or extracts

that do not fit within a particular framework, and that with an author as wide-

ranging and as prolific as Banville there are a multitude of contradictory ideas at

the core of his work, often within a single text. However, there is on the other

hand a requirement to be representative of Banville's multifaceted works and this

can be done by looking at some of his writing not traditionally seen as 'literary'.

Genre Theory

The theorist Mikhail Bakhtin treats the novel as a form which is

particularly elastic. The novel's continued existence and predominance as a

literary form is intrinsically linked with its ability to reform itself and reach new

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potentials. The potential of the novel is compared with other major literary genres such as drama and poetry which are more human while "the novel appears to be a creature from an alien species" (Bakhtin, 2000, 70). The novel has been broadly treated as a genre of literature when the discourse involves constructing categories of literary artefacts into broad groups or genealogies. However, every experienced reader of the form will be aware that the term 'novel' covers a broad range of literary artefacts from the realistic to the fantastic, Bildungsromans to romance novels, gothic novels to novels of manners, even to the 'non-fiction novel' as popularised by works such as Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* (1966). While Henry James once referred to the nineteenth-century novel as "large, loose, baggy monsters" (James, 1989, 84) this description could be equally applied to the notion of the novel as a single, unitary genre. Bakhtin's criticism noticeably defines the novel by invoking terms of opacity and uniqueness and upholding the notion that novels are multifaceted and heterogeneous art objects.

The novel as "an alien species" is a metaphor that provides an apt starting point for an extended analysis of the work of a writer such as Banville. As an image it conjures up the novelty of the novel as a form, as well as its otherworldliness, and the difficulty of accurately defining an ever-developing, plastic form. Banville's extended prose writings are, incontestably, novels; they have generic features such as plot, sustained sequential narratives and are, generally, character-driven. Yet his writings are also concerned with the means of invention and artistic creation, the development of the novel as a form; his

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novels also step outside the form to interrogate what the novel means and how to discern its significance.

Banville's work is amenable to a discussion of genre as a founding principle in literary design. Banville has produced an extensive corpus of work in multiple genres to varying degrees of success. To date he has published fifteen novels under the name John Banville; nine under the name Benjamin Black; multiple short stories and one collected edition of interrelated short stories; several screen adaptations; a travelogue; four published plays and several radio plays, as well as one play for children and a version of the tale of Noah and the flood – also for children. This literary output is counterbalanced by a myriad of newspaper and magazine articles, reviews and essays. While Banville's reputation is built mainly on the success of his novels, the range of literary material is significantly broader than perhaps the public image of Banville would suggest.

The work produced by the persona of Benjamin Black should not be seen as an intrinsically inferior to Banville's body of work, even if the author himself often distinguishes between the 'art' of Banville and the 'craft' of Black. A reading of the Black novels can inform a reading of the Banville texts. One useful aspect of the Benjamin Black persona and work is that it reinforces some themes of his more recent work. In interview with Jim Ruland, Banville claims: "I think becoming Benjamin Black was a way of [not becoming distracted] because the John Banville book that I'm doing is very personal. Well, personal in that I'm the only material that I have. Everyone in the book is me, but it's not

autobiographical except that all fiction is autobiographical, except the autobiographical" (Ruland, 2008). Reading Benjamin Black informs the reader of Banville assumptions of what it means to be an author and we can see a clear distinction between 'Banville' and 'Black' personae and the significance of this duality. With this in mind, to ignore the Benjamin Black novels in Banville criticism is becoming increasingly difficult and his work as Black can be no longer confined to footnotes or considered ephemeral and completely on the periphery.

Transgeneric Approach

In true post-modern style Banville's writings are a merging of 'high' and 'low' art. Even his most esoteric fictions contain elements that are bawdy, grotesque and farcical. His works published under the *nom de plume* Benjamin Black have incorporated mainly the mass popular form of the crime novel and the detective novel, as well as borrowing stylistic elements from classic Hollywood cinema, tabloidesque reportage, and trauma stories. Banville's increasingly varied body of work is an attractive prospect for the application of genre theory. It is clear that on one level his Black books have been considered peripheral, not least by the compiler Raymond Bell. On the dustjacket to *Possessed of a Past* there is the claim of this text being "a comprehensive guide...to Banville's sublime art". His more peripheral work can be constructively incorporated into an analysis of his main work as a novelist for the purpose of shedding light upon his main concerns as an artist. This increasing range of output merits a more transtextual and transgeneric response to his

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writing. While it is the broad aim of this dissertation to do so, it is the chapters on the Benjamin Black texts and *Prague Pictures* that take this idea furthest.

Genre can be seen as the legitimation and recognition of a formerly novel or experimental discourse. The idea of genre implies a system, a scheme. Legitimacy and legitimation is an important aspect of Banville's work and the chapter on *Doctor Copernicus* will interrogate how his fictions are orchestrated in both a generic and a counter-generic fashion. How literature is schematised is undoubtedly a large element of all literary critical discourses; moreover, how the process of constructing a fiction is deliberately subjected to an ante-publication schematization itself[7] reveals the author's pre-empting of critical reaction. Use (and misuse) of genre is observably one of Banville's techniques in legitimatizing his work to his critics and this provides evidence of his interaction with the wider critical field. The chapter on the ethical fictions of *The Book of Evidence* (1989), *The Untouchable* (1997) and *Shroud* deal with the concept of experimental discourse in the analysis of these novels as confessional literature.

Lastly, the chapter that focuses mainly on one of Banville's more recent novels – *The Infinities* (2009) – addresses the generic experimentation that this text displays and argues that this is one of the more original and metatextual works that he has produced. This novel is a site for play and parody, and some of the main ideas that are played with are the ideas of myth, authority and artistic continuity.

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[7] As evident from Banville's manuscript drafts, particularly in *Doctor Copernicus*.

Genre and Post-modernity

Post-modern literary theory is, in general, circumspect about genre. Some theorists, such as Lyotard and Baudrillard for example, see genre as symptomatic of the failure of the avant-garde aesthetic. For others such as Genette, genre or 'architextuality' identifies the 'transhistorical foundation' (Genette, 2000, 214) of culture and language and that genre theory provides new ways of thinking about how we establish critical discourse. Our understanding of literary aesthetics in the post-modern era leads to the term 'genre' "seem[ing] to have lost most of its negative charge, and to be operating instead as a valorising term, signalling not prescription and exclusion but opportunity and common purpose" (Duff, 2000, 2). Jacques Derrida characteristically upends this emancipatory notion of genre and points to the fact that the discussion of genre itself is not without its own tautologies and contradictions. Indeed, to discuss genre at any level through any mode or means is to involve oneself in a discourse that is in itself, generic. Furthermore, critical discourse itself is part of a hierarchy of genre and does not operate at a meta-generic level. Criticism is a superior genre, scepticism and discourse break down rules, conventions and dogmas, yet it seeks to be enacted on a plane beyond the recognition of its formal attributes. In short, criticism is, necessarily, a fiction and is bound up with novelty and originality. Tautologically, despite Derrida's work, genre cannot be deconstructed as deconstruction has its own generic codes and laws. It is this problematic that leads towards – especially in literature such as Banville's – a synonymous creation and critique that find its mode of expression in self-reflexivity and self-

parody, or as Rheticus in *Doctor Copernicus* suggests, the engine that destroys itself (*Doctor Copernicus*, 251).

One idea that is perennially prevalent in modern literary studies is that genre is synonymous with Lyotard's notion that modernity is based on a shattering of the idea of singular reality – realisation of a lack of reality – and the invention of minor, alternative realities to fill the vacuum. (Lyotard, 1993, 146). Jean Baudrillard's notion of the simulacra and the hyperreal have an expression in genre. In particular, a literary genre that attempts to rejuvenate a sense of the real by designing strict limits and boundaries which seem purpose built to illustrate the idea of a perfect form depends on a large set of past examples of failed fictions. Genre is a paradox – both unlike and like the real. A crime novel, a science fiction or romance novel leave the world, the real world, uninterrogated due to their hermetic status as generic texts yet they can give the impression of, or signify without encapsulating, a reality. Post-modern writing is concerned with the overflowing of significance as opposed to meaning. On the other hand, it has been said that "It is even considered a sign of authentic modernity in a writer if he ceases to respect the separation of genres" (Todorov, 2000, 194). Generic writing is thusly legitimised by the non-adherence of the author(s) to the dicta of genre. In effect, one can write generically, can produce genre texts, but the conceit lies in the fact that one must legitimate genre by blurring the lines and disrespecting generic boundaries. Todorov continues to argue for the blurring of genres by stating:

The fact that a work 'disobeys' its genre does not mean that the genre does not exist. It is tempting to say 'quite the contrary', for two reasons. First because, in order to exist as such, the transgression requires a law – precisely the one that is to be violated. We might go even further and observe that the norm becomes visible – comes into existence – owing only to its transgressions (196).

In statements such as these, it is clear that a pervasive notion of diachronic evolution[8] based on transgression of norms (adaptation in other words) is effectively the most productive means of creation. It is important to note that the semblance of genre must remain so the work is not perceived as being solely transgressive. Furthermore, Todorov argues that "[a] new genre is always the transformation of an earlier one, or of several: by inversion, by displacement, by combination" (197). Derrida highlights this internal anxiety within genre in his complex and parodic lecture 'The Law of Genre' by claiming that "as soon as genre announces itself, one must respect a norm, one must not cross a line of demarcations, one must not risk impurity, anomaly, monstrosity" (Derrida, 2000, 221). Here, Derrida's use of the imperative "one must etc." is mocked by the pejorative terms used to describe writing that transgresses genre. It could be summarised by saying that generic transgression results in a mock outrage that is fully expected and necessary. Genre is wholly contradictory, it issues an imperative yet to survive and propagate itself it must be constantly novel and reflexive. In this light, the development of literary traditions over a period of time can be seen as a mock drama; however, a consequence of this is that genre

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[8] It is tempting to say Darwinian evolution here. An underlying contradiction in diachronic genre theory is that the exemplary texts used in discussion, Homer's epics, Greek Tragedy, Joyce's *Ulysses*, Eliot's *The Waste Land*, have a broadly reductive sense of transgression and adaptation and these carry their own cultural and political baggage.

and generic development is reflective of the particular context(s) and periods that produce them.

Contradictions are often used by artists and writers, particularly in post-modern works of art that foreground disunity of form – perhaps even approaching formlessness and a disunity of knowledge. In Banville's early work, particularly *Nightspawn*, there appears a heightened awareness of the loaded and hackneyed phrases, images and metaphors that suggest both the inadequacy of language to represent the real and the prevalence of imperfect forms in everyday life. In Banville's later works the use of hackneyed phrases are still retained but typically in order to show a deluded narrator. Authorial knowingness largely disappears in Banville's later ethical fiction. In favour of the language games of *Nightspawn*, of a narrator demonstrating his knowledge in a self-congratulatory manner not dissimilar to Joyce's Dedalus of *Ulysses*, later fiction has a degree notion of co-operation between the narrator and the reader.[9] *Nightspawn* reveals a concern with the status of language and is reflective of both structuralist and poststructuralist ideas.

To make sense of Banville's early texts with regard to genre it is important to look at the literary and critical context. It is worth noting that:

> Genres do not have unchanging, fixed constitutive features. First of all, because of the 'transformation' which occurs in the course of evolution. Second - and this is more important in this case – because of the shifts in importance of distinguishing individual features of structure, depending

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[9] One signifier of this would be the use of endnotes in The Science Tetralogy, *The Untouchable* and *Shroud*.

on the literary context, of the epoch or literary trend. (Opacki, 2000, 123)

Banville's first two novels take their cue from Roland Barthes's idea of the death of the author. Authority is gradually eroded in both *Nightspawn* and *Birchwood*; it is only with *Doctor Copernicus* that we see Banville's return to the foundation of authority in fiction. However, as will be outlined at a later point, this is not a total success. All in all, it is notable that Banville's early career reveals an author who is comfortable with not only using current theoretical ideas in his fiction but also attempting to further them in narratives of speculation and critique. The literary context of deconstructive criticism and post-structuralism is readily apparent in his work.[10]

Banville's interest in literary theory has been considered as detrimental to the readability of the novels. *Nightspawn* in particular is experimental to the point of being an anti-novel with a barely logical plot held together by coincidences, a somewhat superfluous reflexivity and a hyperbolic style centred on the narration of the protagonist, Benjamin White. Derek Hand claims that Banville's "concerns can also be discerned at the level of form. In his early work, especially, he can be seen to be pre-occupied with the form of the novel, testing its limits and experimenting with how he presents his material. The kind of coherence and chronological development that we might expect from a novel are, at times, wholly absent in his work" (Hand, 2002, 17-8). *Nightspawn*, and to

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[10] Elke D'Hoker's text *Visions of Alterity* is notable in tuning Banville's work to philosophic and critical frequencies both in Europe and in North America.

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a lesser extent *Birchwood*, are anti-novelistic and perhaps anti-generic, yet purposefully incorporate common devices so categorically novelistic and generic that one must be cautious when analysing them with regards to form and genre. Yet arguably this is Banville's intention: to create critical fictions (Kearney, 1988, 96). Banville's early texts subscribe to Tynyanov's idea that literary accomplishment through the use of genre is "Not regular evolution, but a leap; not development, but a dislocation" (Tynyanov, 2000, 31). Unexpected dislocation instead of telegraphed 'development' is ever-present in Banville's fiction. Banville's novel *Birchwood* assumes the conventions of the Big House novel as being established and not amenable to further development.[11] A proponent of Banville's technique argues that "On a generic level, *Birchwood* experiments with the big-house form and reinvents it by creating a deeply self-reflexive document and parodically uses this most politicised of forms to create a text that takes great liberties with historical and social actualities" (Murphy, 2006, 17). However, it is debatable whether the intended re-invention in *Birchwood* is necessarily dependent on the genre itself or whether the genre is incidental to Banville's intentions, being rather a 'ready-made' plot around which to build a house of fiction. Instead of evolving the genre, Banville turns the conventions of the genre against itself by involving outlandish scenes, ahistorical and apolitical occurrences in a genre avowedly based on historical facts and political leanings, along with many stylistic feats such as a parodic register,

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[11] Banville's acclaim for Elizabeth Bowen's *The Last September* (1929) is well documented. Banville also adapted the screenplay for a full-length feature film of this novel, directed by Deborah Warner (1999).

bawdy dialogue and anti-realistic descriptions. It could be said that Banville incorporates the narratological ideas of Vladimir Propp, the ideas of 'functions' and 'invariants', as superficial aspects that border on the hackneyed and cosmetic. The extended family of the Anglo-Irish aristocracy for example, both an invariant of Big House novels and an element that typically functions to express diverging ideologies and attitudes, appears in *Birchwood* only in the figure of Aunt Martha, the narrator's "Aunt" but actually his mother due to an incestuous relationship with the head of the family. The protagonist Gabriel's realisation of his heritage is largely incidental to the plot as his feelings of alienation, his quest in the second half of the novel and his coming-of-age as a writer is self-contained within his narration and is not an outcome of or facilitated by the functions of plot and genre. Banville dislocates the codes of genre in *Birchwood* but it is also a self-standing narrative that does not depend on the dislocation of genre to exist. Dislocation of genre as a constructive principle is invoked by Banville, but not carried out in any meaningful way.

As a counter-argument to this, it has been said that "evolution takes place precisely at the expense of the 'fundamental' features of the genre" (Tynyanov, 2000, 32). However, with a genre such as the Big House novel (as with the historical novel and many other genres); there is a presumption on the part of the reader that there will be a degree of plausibility to the fiction. The generic 'evolution' theoretically possible in a novel such as *Birchwood* is undermined by the fact that its historical placement is self-consciously overturned by the author himself. *Birchwood* contains the linear plot of Gabriel's search for his missing

(actually non-existent) twin 'Rose' superimposed against a curvilinear and fragmentary depiction of Irish anti-British struggle. *Birchwood* is, like many of Banville's fictions, metafictional, but in this novel, breaking the frame or exposing the device is entirely parodic in its self-regarding superficiality.

One of the most recent developments in Banville's fiction is the transposing of the metafictional intricacies in the novels into the realm of author's engagement with the public. The displacement of the tropes and concerns of his narrative fictions – for example the double and the missing twin – into the narrative of author and world is particularly interesting. For example, the double, the mirror and the divided self are no longer merely aspects of the narratives that the author produces but are now part of Banville's 'management' of the author persona. The author has developed duplicitous personae in recent years, and this has resulted in an ironic approach to metafiction. Banville, while 'breaking the frames' in his published work, has conversely shown a tendency to construct frames around the figure of the author. Banville's comments when promoting Black reveal a deliberate 'personae game' as well as the idea of real experience as being 'textual'. By transferring the narrative themes of his novels into real world interaction with his audience, Banville parodically constructs a post-modern metafiction like no other. The metafiction of the Black project goes beyond the superficial mischief of mystifying the reader and critic, and points towards the defining concerns of his career as a whole.

Chapter One

The Benjamin Black Project: Writing a Writer

"It was a wearisome business, being himself. He would have liked a break from it, a holiday away from being who he was"

(John Banville, *Holy Orders*)[12]

John Banville's winning of the 2005 Man Booker Prize for fiction with his novel *The Sea* (2005) resulted in a much increased popularity for a novelist typically characterised as writing 'difficult' fiction. This achievement in itself was something of a surprise to many commentators. The Man Booker prize, as some (including Banville himself) felt, had placed a greater emphasis on approachability and readability in the early years of the new millennium; the success of John Banville seemed unlikely given the difficult, complex and often esoteric nature of the average Banville novel. His works are not particularly concerned with plot or self-contained narratives, but are in general confessional monologues simultaneously richly allusive, expansive in their metafictional qualities and penetrating in their interiority. Seamus Deane once referred to Banville's early writings as "aggressively solipsistic" (Deane, 1976, 330). This comment would not be untypical of critical opinion on his early works which are quite experimental and heavily influenced by post-modern theory. On balance, this influence has waned over the years, for better or worse depending on one's perspective. The influence of theory has been considered in some quarters as

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[12] Banville, John. *Holy Orders*. London: Mantle, 2013. p. 92-3

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detrimental to the readability of the novels as mainstream fiction, and for a work such as *The Sea* to win the Man Booker prize is significant. Another factor which affects the mainstream audience's perception of Banville's novels is his tendency to experiment with form. Banville has also gained – and, it has to be said, partly created – a reputation of being a writer's writer, a writer who wears his post-modernism on his sleeve. His novels are often centred on academic figures, historians, literary critics, scientists and scholars. As a post-modernist his concerns are sometimes considered esoteric and not in keeping with mainstream fiction. In criticism, Banville's post-modernism has been reflected to some degree and there are very few examples of Banville being considered as a mainstream popular writer, although *The Sea* arguably opened Banville's work up to readers who would previously have been turned off by the themes and content of his books.

Embracing Genre Fiction

As a whole, genre is never fully expressed in Banville's fiction until his recent work published under the name Benjamin Black. Recently, Banville's fiction as Benjamin Black has featured a full embrace of genre fiction. These crime novels are essentially existing within a tradition rather than being communicative of the hybridisation and the creation act of new genres that his other texts aspire to. His 'Black' books are relatively formulaic, absolutely beholden to the genre that they exist within, barely managing to take even the most minor of digressions and divergences into literariness. They are bespoke

crime novels, constructed around a necessarily aestheticised and ahistorical Dublin which exists only to mirror the torpid and squalid acts of its inhabitants. While it is perhaps a cliché to refer to the Dublin setting of the Quirke novels as almost a character in itself, it is a strange and compelling site of merging and fading identities which obscures the truth, almost like a Banvillean narrator.

Published directly after *The Sea*, the first Black novel *Christine Falls* (2006) shows a shift in a new direction for Banville. The Benjamin Black novels are markedly different to Banville's body of work as they are clearly geared towards a particular popular genre, that of crime fiction. Genre, which has regularly been a secondary concern for Banville, takes a primary role in these new works. Banville has even suggested that the form of the crime novel is more accessible due to the requirements of the genre. He says at one point that "all fiction of whatever genre offers a beginning, middle, and even *Finnegans Wake* has a shape. But crime stories do it better" and that they specialise in "imposing order on a disorderly world" ('Criminal Odes', 2008). Thus, crime writing has a purpose to comfort the reader by offering a clearly defined shape that is suggested by the form, in other words, the anticipations of the audience are not upset. Banville's late emergence as a crime writer in the Benjamin Black novels reveals a new literary landscape. Paradoxically, these works – and particularly the act of producing texts pseudonymously – is both increasingly pursuant of metafictional coverage and less so: a narrowing of focus that appears an extreme reversal. Bertolt Brecht points out that in the crime novel 'the field of view is skilfully restricted. And the deductions are made in retrospect, from the

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catastrophe' (Brecht, 2004, 94). The act of reading Black in the context of Banville could initially appear as a similar catastrophe, it is as if we are presented with an unexpected death. For Banville to move into a new field of literature so late in his career suggests that he has, to a degree, returned to the possibilities of re-ordering the world that was a latent goal in his early texts *Doctor Copernicus* and *Kepler*. The figure of Quirke can be compared to the scientists of these novels in the sense that he embarks on an epistemological quest for closure, for answers to the world's mysteries, even if the immediate aim is to find a murderer it is an example of imposing a sense of order on the seemingly chaotic workings of the world. As Banville has gained a multitude of new readers due to his work as Black, it is the task of the critic to reconcile the divergent corpus of Black and Banville to offer new insights into how to read both sections of the author's output. Like the detective, we must deduce how and why this 'event' has come to pass.

In one sense, there is a gap in Banville criticism, namely how to explain the significance of the Benjamin Black novels as literary works. There is a danger with relying solely on the *ex cathedra* statements of Banville in relation to how his work is perceived. This study considers many of Banville's comments in interview as worthy of analysis for two reasons. One is that there are relatively few academic articles which deal with Black's novels and secondly that Banville's comments about Black's texts are, in my view, designed to steer the reader towards a particular understanding of why he is undertaking the pen-name. His comments on the high art or literature of Banville texts and the

craftsmanship of a Benjamin Black (and the distinction between the two that a pseudonym offers) often disappoints the critical reader because the possibilities and rigour of his literary fiction is left by the wayside in the Benjamin Black texts. One critic has noted that "Banville has so far managed to remain a moving target for his critics" (Imhof, 1989, 13) but so far the Benjamin Black books have been considered poor game, too cumbersome, and lacking the intellectual agility to sustain the interest of critics. For an author who has generated a large field of study, he has outdistanced his critics in terms of output as Benjamin Black. That his texts as Banville are more significant is a reasonable conclusion but one which is based on the existence of a wealth of interesting and thought-provoking body of work under the name John Banville. One suggestion of how the Benjamin Black texts can be approached critically it is to see them as being in an eccentric orbit around the novels written under the name John Banville. At certain points they come close to the concerns of his main works, but only briefly. Perhaps the answers lie not in the texts but in the project and projection of the personae themselves.

Deflecting Criticism from Oneself to One Self

One reason for producing work under a thinly-veiled pseudonym is that both author and publisher anticipate the regular publications. A lack of secrecy could point towards the enterprise being one which is aimed at establishing a new body of work instead of a single 'oddity' in the author's existing works. Thinly-veiled pseudonyms typically hint towards an author who is eager to display their

ability to write differently, as is the case with Banville. With the Black books, not only is Banville creating novels that are markedly different in style, but also his new rate of production is in stark contrast with the long gestation period of the average novel that carries the Banville name. Prolific rates of production often attract critical scorn and can be perceived as pointing towards a writer who is not inclined towards creating imaginative art but rather writing for commercial or contractual ends. For example, Stephen King's popular novels have been lambasted on this front by critics such as Harold Bloom who have bemoaned the regularity of his productions.[13] John Banville writing as Benjamin Black has produced almost one novel per year, in stark contrast to fifteen Banville novels over a forty-year period. With such a notable increase in production there comes an increased susceptibility to critical declaim, or worse – indifference. Perhaps writing under a pseudonym allows "Banville the person" to fend off any criticism of his body of work as "Banville the writer" when the rate of production is going to increase for the foreseeable future. Banville's prolific writing as Black has attracted criticism in many quarters; one example of such is Ruth Dudley Edwards who took issue with Banville's claims to write "cheap fiction".[14] Perhaps like Anthony Trollope, who began to publish anonymously as he was

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[13] Bloom angrily objected to King receiving a 'Distinguished Contribution' award from the National Book Association claiming "My friend Philip Roth, who will now share this 'distinguished contribution' award with Stephen King, is a great comedian and would no doubt find something funny to say about it." King's book *On Writing* – which deals with his creative processes and includes tips for new writers – castigates writers who use showy language. King calls Benjamin Black's *Christine Falls* a must-read and also states in the blurb for *The Black-eyed Blonde* on the Benjamin Black website that it is an excellent book, yet he is a writer who would more than likely criticise Banville's novels for the reasons he praises Black's.
[14] Ruth Dudley Edwards, "Banville scored an own goal even before our crime fiction spat". *Irish Independent*. 9 August 2009. http://www.independent.ie/opinion/columnists/ruth-dudley-edwards/banville-scored-an-own-goal-even-before-our-crime-fiction-spat-26557166.html

sensitive to accusation based on his over-production, Banville's sensitivity over

the lack of mainstream popular success of the commercial and topical novels *The*

Untouchable and *Shroud* contributed to his turn towards pseudonymous crime

fiction.[15] The Black novels created marketing momentum after the success of *The*

Sea in the Man Booker Prize in 2005,[16] opening the door to new readers and

giving them the easy option of readily accessible plots rather than the

thematically complex and varied Banville novels. The Black project is likely a

commercial decision perhaps linked to Banville's retirement from full-time

journalism. Shane Breslin refers to the author as "seemingly increasingly

besotted by the lure of commercial crime (in both book and television form) [and

that] it could be an opportune time to evaluate whether this late career shift in

focus will have any impact on his legacy" (215) yet also points out that writers

such as Charles Dickens wrote with commercial viability in mind to no

diminishment of their reputation.

　　There are many potential reasons why Banville turned to using a

pseudonym. John Mullan in his popular study *Anonymity: A Secret History of*

English Literature categorises anonymous and pseudonymous writing

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[15] One of the barometers of success in the novel in the UK, Commonwealth countries and Ireland is the Man Booker Prize. Banville's success with *The Sea* in 2005 was presaged by his listing as a contender for the same prize with *The Book of Evidence* in 1989. *The Untouchable* was mooted as a possible contender in 1997 and Banville was surprised by its omission for an award that "promotes good middlebrow fiction" (Banville in McKeon, 2009). These unsuccessful novels, and Banville's reaction to their lack of success in this prize, suggest that he is aware that their content matter, plots of intrigue, deception, murder and crime, are the surest path to mainstream success for him and are the closest of his Banville material to the Black novels.

[16] An article by Katy Stoddard features information from Nielsen Bookscan who have suggested that the increase in sales of *The Sea* due to the Man Booker Prize win has been 953% when comparing the sales of the week before the win and the week following it. http://www.theguardian.com/news/datablog/2012/oct/10/booker-prize-2012-winners-sales-data

post-invention of the printing press as rational for several reasons.[17] In his

conclusions he argues that in the modern era:

> There is no possible grand narrative of the changing conventions of
> anonymous and pseudonymous publication because, at any given time,
> there are different reasons for it. The same author will sometimes
> publish anonymously, and sometimes not. Latter-day expectations are
> often upset: a female author will sometimes use her name while a male
> contemporary does not; an author will attach his name to a controversial
> work and keep it off a facetious one (Mullan, 2007, 286).

The author goes on to conclude that "There is, however, one historical pattern.

Anonymity became much less common in the twentieth century, and few leading

literary authors made much use of it" (286). The advent of the internet age,

social media and a sense of an embattled literary marketplace struggling with the

negative impact of falling revenues in print-media and book publishing is

prevalent. Recent and emerging forms of entertainment and literature affecting

sales and marketability together with the simultaneous need for publishers to

promote authors as brands have resulted in a decline in pseudonymous art. The

concept of anonymous and pseudonymous works being indicative of "genteel

reticence" has disappeared and is now used mainly as a signal of generic purpose.

Yet that "convention of reticence allowed [authors] to play their games" (286)

suggesting a readerly nostalgia for the mysteriousness of the unknown author

figure. Pseudonymity, until recent times, excites curiosity yet is now greeted

with a collective shrug.[18] Mullan argues that the excitement of who a Currer Bell

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[17] In Mullan's *Anonymity* these are: Mischief, Modesty, Women being men. Men being women, Danger,
Reviewing, Mockery and Devilry, and Confession.
[18] One of the most public and commented-upon pseudonymous/anonymous artist of recent times has been
Banksy who uses graffiti in public space as his medium. His work, in the obvious visibility of its
production mocks the all-pervasive accessibility of artists through the internet and is one of the few
traditional pseudonyms that combine intrigue, satire and concealment.

or George Eliot actually was is no longer here in the present era. Despite the fact that many writers still use pseudonyms, pen-names have lost the element of mystery that was inherent in the most successful artists and writers. Banville (writing as Benjamin Black) notably does not wholly employ the sincerity necessary to create a truly mysterious pseudonym but it is a method of evading or postponing critical assessment of his work as a two-speed writer. Mullan perceptively suggests that nowadays "Disguise has become mock-disguise, advertising the adaptability of the author rather than concealing his or her identity" (288). Banville is aware that the disguise is a mock one. On the Benjamin Black website, he states: "I wish he would not insist on standing there with his back to the window, keeping the light behind him, for I have yet to get a clear look at him; it is intentional, I know, this evasiveness" ('Banville and Black Interview', 2006).

This idea of intentional evasiveness reveals Banville's interest in preserving the enigmatic quality induced by the pseudonym. If one is to accept Mullan's historicist understanding of the purposes of pseudonymity one would likely categorise the Benjamin Black novels under his most apt heading of Mischief (Mockery and Devilry being other terms for satire). Rationalised as mischief, however, it is more likely that this requires the recipient of this trickery to be a Banville reader – to have read his works as Banville. In other words, the self-referentiality of the Black project has much in common with an in-joke as most likely only a Banville reader would fully 'get' the allusions in the text. As in Banville's writing, in the Black novels there is clear – if not so central to the

theme – evidence of metafiction, history, ontology and morality throughout. These familiar elements challenge the Banville/Black reader to engage with the texts as non-ironic productions (that is, not as a postmodern literary joke) in keeping with the Banville corpus and this adds to the mischief without making the reader feel like a joke is being made at their expense. A veteran reader of Banville is presented with an alien landscape yet one with enough familiar features to prevent one from viewing the project as a provocation, as irony, or as a subversive act of upending the chequerboard of critical discussion.

As a new reader to this 'doubled' author, a reader of Black would accept the pseudonym as a generic convention, treat the novels non-ironically and miss the 'mischief' of the pseudonym project. Rationalised in this manner, Banville is creating two audiences – those who are mocked by the duplicity of the author and the Black project and those who belief in the sincerity of the novels and the crime-writing form. Following Mullan's terms we can perhaps propose a new category of pseudonymity – sincere mischief.

Certainly, the idea of concealment is one which is important in Banville's writing but it is interesting that the development of concealing the author himself makes Imhof's statement that Banville is a moving target for his critics carry a new dimension.[19] Deliberately concealed reality is as apparent in Black's as it is in Banville's writing. In *Elegy for April* (2010) one character suggests that "To take reality as it presented itself was to miss an entirely other reality hidden

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[19] Banville echoes this comment in his interview with himself "As he crosses between me and the window—he is rarely still, preferring I suppose to make a moving target—he seems to me peculiarly blurred" ('Banville and Black Interview', 2006).

behind" (*Elegy for April*, 2010, 112). This concept of a hidden reality informs much of Banville's fiction. A secret reality behind the observable world has been a major theme of Banville's work since the scepticism of the character Copernicus in the 1976 novel based on the astronomer.

Banville on Black

Writing under a pseudonym has consequences for how the works are perceived in relation to Banville's other works; works from a literary career that at the time of the publication of *Christine Falls* had extended back almost four decades. While Banville has often been at pains to emphasise that pseudonyms are more common in crime fiction genre than any other genre of popular literature, he has also stated that he regrets not writing under a pseudonym from his very early publications. In one of Banville's most revealing interviews he states that "In fact, I'm really sorry that from the start I didn't write under a pseudonym" (Friberg, 2006, 208), referring to his first fictions in the late 1960s and early 70s. In this we can see that Banville is suggesting that the experience of pseudonymous writing has not only been a positive experience but that he perhaps sees pseudonymity as adding an extra layer to his literary output rather than being an act of necessity for personal protection, or even commercial, purposes. It has been said that "Doubling is not confined to detective (or crime) fiction but it is certainly characteristic of a great deal of it" (Campbell Ross, 2011, 17), however, Banville appears to be suggesting that pseudonymity is not confined to a generic convention such as the convention of crime writers taking a

suggestive or connotative name, it could have been applicable to his early work typically defined by its generic hybridity, experimentation and elements of serious intellectual inquiry. Name-changing is an all-encompassing idea that could have been applicable to much of his work.

It is notable that Banville is also keen to stress that the creation of the Benjamin Black pseudonym is not an example of post-modernist play, as for Banville "post-modernist" has taken on a pejorative sense. In interview with Robert Birnbaum, Banville states that "The only reason I wrote these books under a pseudonym was that I simply wanted readers to know this wasn't an elaborate literary effort" (Birnbaum, 2011) and in interview with Belinda McKeon he says:

> Of course, everyone tried to persuade me not to use the pseudonym, but I wanted people to realize that this wasn't an elaborate postmodernist literary joke, but the genuine article, a noir novel from Banville's dark brother Benjamin Black. It was pure play when I invented Benjamin Black. It was a frolic of my own ((Banville in McKeon, 2009).

Here, Banville misrepresents the undertaking of a pseudonym and the Black enterprise. To refer to the pseudonym as a "frolic" of his own ignores the representational significance of the Benjamin Black name both for the genre he is working in and his own output. It corresponds with the idea of pseudonymity as mischief-making as put forward by Mullan.

We can interpret Banville's comment that his taking of a pseudonym was not "an elaborate literary effort" in several ways. Are we to conclude that the Black novels are less elaborate than Banville's works or that the Banville novels are an elaborated version of a 'Black template'? Are the constituent elements of

the two corpuses the same but presented in a different way? Or are we to

conclude that Banville, aware that his work frequently employs doubles,

anagrammatic riddles and allusions, deceptions and metafiction, assumes a

degree of suspicion in his audience towards his novels and that they are in some

way inauthentic?

Banville has repeatedly asserted the honesty and humility of the Benjamin

Black novels as a method of bolstering his readership's perception of the

authenticity of these texts. He refers to his use of characters saying "Quirke… is

consciously crafted, whereas John Banville's characters sort of drift out of me, as

if out of my dreams" (Banville in McKeon, 2009) and elsewhere he states "The

figures around [Quirke] are fascinating…and it's wonderful to move them

around – like playing with toy soldiers" (Birnbaum, 2011). Here Banville asserts

his control over the work; they are determined by the conscious authorial mind

rather than the unconscious. Furthermore, Black's characters are susceptible to

change by the controlling author while Banville's characters are more essentialist

in manner, unitary and immovable in their individual aims and functions as

textual creations. That the characters *around* Quirke "are fascinating" and

movable could suggest that Quirke is not, that he is one of those created

unconsciously and are thus not interesting to the author, or wholly controlled by

him. Repeatedly in the opening novel of the Quirke series Black refers to

characters as puppets or toys: Phoebe is "a slack-stringed marionette" (*Christine*

Falls, 2006, 189) and in another instance Quirke's "eye settled on an artist's

articulated wooden model, a foot high, standing on the low telephone table

beside the window, its jointed limbs arranged in a prancing pose" (16), in effect, drawing a meaning from its false humanity. Quirke himself at one point turns "abruptly on his stick like some kind of huge mechanical toy man" (303). Although marionettes are not uncommon in Banville's body of work, their presence could typically be explained away by noting that they are creations of the egotistical, self-centred, unethical leading men of his first-person narratives. Their presence in the Black novels hints at a deeper, more troubling meaning. Perhaps by using marionettes to describe even a main character such as Quirke Banville is undermining the concept of individual agency. In what may be considered an anti-modernist conceptualization of power, we are reminded of Gabriel Swan's rebirth at the end of *Mefisto* where he says he will leave everything to chance rather than attempting to determine his life. The dark, orchestrating figure behind the marionettes in Banville's and Black's fiction reveals an increasingly despairing view of human agency.

The Crossover between Pseudonymous Authorial Self and Characters

The name Benjamin Black is a direct link to the Benjamin White character of *Long Lankin* (1970) stories 'Island' and 'The Possessed' and the novel *Nightspawn* (1971). Banville intended for his crime novelist's pseudonym to be also called Benjamin White, only to be dissuaded by his agent Ed Victor (McCarthy, 2007). In these early texts Benjamin White is a troubled young writer in the infancy of his career yet who carries all the existential burdens of being a young artist. In 'Island' he is a writer who is disillusioned with Ireland,

but later having set himself up in Greece in the later stories also becomes disillusioned with the act of writing itself. White is a typical literary cliché of the author-surrogate, yet he is seemingly important enough to be disinterred thirty years after being laid to rest.

The second major occurrence of the author-surrogate in Banville's fixation occurs in the abandoned finale to *Doctor Copernicus*. In that discarded text the author-surrogate character engages in doubling and dissembling. He suffers a crisis of faith in his own work. Ultimately, Banville's rejection of this disjointed appendix to the novel shows an increasing certitude in his method of writing as he resists the urge to complicate and undermine his own fiction. It is possible to see this resistance to his tendency to undermine his fiction as an early indicator of his increasingly 'authorial' statements during the years of the Benjamin Black project. Banville is more confident in allowing a text to stand on its own without peeling back the skin to show the literary and philosophical viscera beneath. He gradually moves away from the idea of a grand novel and becomes less sceptical towards genre. Simultaneously, the existential crises of the author are replaced by the dissociation of writing from the thinking life. He repeatedly stresses the unconscious element in writing from this period onward, and it is only with novels such as *The Untouchable, Shroud, The Infinities* and the Benjamin Black novels does he avow technique and artifice and careful planning as the most important conduits for his expressions.

It is worth noting that the Quirke novels in particular contain a similar essence of existential crisis that is apparent particularly in the early author-

surrogate Benjamin White. Crises of selfhood are typically confined to the main

character and no one else is affected. The typical Banvillean narrator laments the

solidity and togetherness and lack of doubt that other people seem to have.[20]

From the outset, Banville is keen to impart to his audience the idea that

Benjamin Black is a literary character becoming a real person. This adds

symmetry and continuity to what is probably the most discontinuous of ventures

in his writing career. We see the symmetry of the character becoming author in

his evolution of White into Black with the author-figure Banville becoming

minor characters in *Birchwood, The Book of Evidence, Athena* and *Ancient Light*

(2012) – four novels in which the author John Banville becomes a literary

character.[21] Banville often refers to his first experience writing as Benjamin

Black in a manner that serves to differentiate the worlds and methods of both

writer personae. In one instance he says that beginning to write as Black:

> seemed absurd, a folly. Yet by noon, to my astonishment and some awe,
> I had written 1,500 words, more or less in the right order, a total it would
> have taken the poor drudge Banville a week to achieve, if he was lucky.
> Doctor Frankenstein himself can hardly have been more startled or more
> gratified when the lightning struck and his creature twitched into life.
> Suddenly, I had made myself other. A folly, yes: *a folie à deux* ('John
> Banville on the birth of his dark twin, Benjamin Black', 2011).

This statement is quite revealing for several reasons. Firstly, it is one of the

many examples of Banville highlighting the varying speeds of his output as two

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[20] The Quirke novels, along with *The Lemur* and *The Black-eyed Blonde* are noticeably dominated by men; men being the investigators, the researchers, the detectives and the pathologists. Despite an increasing amount of female protagonists and figures as the investigative characters in crime fiction in recent years, Banville chooses to site his crime novels in eras which are, with the sole exception of *The Lemur*, typically made up of men defined by being in senior positions of authority. In the early Quirke novels, the potential for Quirke's daughter Phoebe becoming an investigator in her own right are laid out, but these have not been fully realised as the series has continued.

[21] Johann Livelb (*Birchwood*), Josie Bell (*The Book of Evidence*), and the author JB (*Ancient Light*) are obviously representations of the author Banville in these novels. In *Athena* we have the painters L. van Hobelijn, Giovanni Belli, Job van Hellin, L.E. van Ohlbijn, J. van Hollbein, and Jan Vibell.

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authors. More interesting, however, is the comparison with the Doctor Frankenstein of Mary Shelley's creation. Frankenstein's mixed reaction of being "startled" and "gratified" suggests that the outcome of the creative act is out of the hands of the creator and is some way distorted, disfigured or startling in combination of selfness and otherness. It could be taken from this statement that there is perhaps something transgressive about creating another self, that it is forbidden or repugnant to society. Frankenstein's monster is made up of dead body parts and is in the semblance of a perfect being. Black's novels in some ways cannibalise past authors in the crime-writing genre, highlighting the artifice and incredibility of the genre.[22] Also, Banville may be alluding in this extract to the oft-noted confusion of readers and cinema audiences between Frankenstein (Victor, the Doctor and creator) and the creature (sometimes referred to as Adam or 'the demon' and other names in Shelley's novel) corresponds with the confusion between Black and Banville. Creator and creation mysteriously merge into one another.

The cold, detached, creator is depicted in an article on Black's website. Penned by Banville who visits Black in his apartment, this article contains similar authorial duplicity. In this interview, which is more of a reporting of an imaginary interview, Black begins the conversation:

> 'I'm a simple man, or try to be. I've discovered, late on in life, greatly to my surprise, that human beings interest me, enough to make me want to write about them.' Stung. I wonder aloud if the people I write about are

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[22] Dell'Amico for instance. suggests that the three most relevant influences are Agatha Christie, Donald Westlake writing as Richard Stark and then Georges Simenon and suggests that the outline of Christie and then the hardness of Stark and Simenon are the literary antecedents for Black's work. This is supported by Banville's frequent references to these authors. See, for instance, Banville's article 'Hardness'. *The New Republic*. 11 April 2005.

entirely lacking in human traits? 'Oh, they're human, all right,' he
answers, '—or humanish, anyway. But that's not their point.'
What is their point, then? Again that toothed, feral smile. 'You tell me.'
'Look,' I say, 'I came here to talk about *Christine Falls*, about Quirke—
about you.'
He shakes his head.' 'No, you didn't.'
'Oh?'
'You came here to talk to yourself. You've done a grand job of it. Now,
how about a drink?' (Banville, 'Banville and Black Interview', 2006).

Again we see here a willingness on the part of Banville to make himself a literary

character, to write himself into his work. 'Banville' becomes, as in the novels

Ancient Light, *Birchwood* and so on, a figuration on the literary landscape; here

he is part of Black's world. While it could be said that the use of a pseudonyms

confers a distance between the authorial self and the work, issues of self-

representation come particularly to the fore when two authorial selves 'meet'. It

becomes increasingly clear that Banville the person and Banville the writer are

not only separate entities, but that there are multiple versions of Banville the

writer, the authored Banville who speaks or writes in the knowledge that

everything that is uttered is aestheticised yet not always interpreted as aesthetic.

Banville the person exercises control over these identities. Banville the

interviewee is also keen to stress the automotive or automatic approach to crime

writing which is again anti-deterministic and belies the careful plotting of the

novels. This complicated relationship between the author and the published

work is can be partially understood by taking the author narrative part of the

literary landscape of the author's own creation. It has been said that "With

Banville's own name so self-consciously positioned at the centre of Black's

work, as well as the presence of so many Banvillean figures and tropes, Quirke's

world practically becomes a metaleptic storyworld, even if it is one that still ostensibly retains its own self-contained narrative frame" (Murphy, 2013, 22). Banville suggests that the Black novels are not products of thought but products of craft, of handiwork and not of cerebral activity. This imparts a duality to his literary output and it is clear to the reader which corpus is regarded as the superior in this hierarchy.

The Opposition of Art and Craft

Banville's use of third-person narration in the Black novels is, he claims, entirely based on driving the plot forward. Yet he also suggests that this perhaps holds negative connotations as he is quick to distance his earlier novels from the third-person form that they were written in, almost as if this is a device to mask the voice of each. He claims:

> For my Banville novels, the question of voice and point of view hardly arises, since they're all in the first person. Even early novels such as *Doctor Copernicus* and *Kepler*, although ostensibly in the third person, were really first-person narratives. The Benjamin Black books are entirely in the third person, which allows for multiple points of view. However, the narrative method of these books is wholly functional – they are craft works, without overt literary pretension – and directed exclusively towards establishing the characters and driving the plot forward. (Banville in Gleeson, 2014).[23]

Again, Banville reiterates the distinction between craft and literature and that character and plotting is more suited perhaps to works of craft and function. The use of the third person takes a functional role rather than as a means of expressing anything of import or as being an article of style. Banville's lack of

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[23] Banville at one point mentions that *The Sea* was originally attempted in the third person form but the Banvillean voice came in (Friberg, 2006, 203).

regard for the third person form is documented in *The Paris Review* where he says "I suspect that the reason I don't really believe in the third-person mode is due to the fact that I'm such an egomaniac. Unless it's me speaking, it's not convincing – to me, that is" (Banville in McKeon, 2009). Convincingness, the adherence to a particular idea of plausible reality, is a driving factor in the author's view of a text's success.

It has been said that despite the relative lack of complexity of the Black works of 'craft' as compared to the Banville works of 'art', there is a certain resistance of the texts to analysis. Kathryn Harrison claims that this is due to the characters' familiarity as types. She states that "Because Quirke and his supporting cast are types rather than fully realised characters, they're immune to the kind of analysis, or significance, imposed on a Moses Herzog or a Rabbit Angstrom[24] or, for that matter, a Freddie Montgomery" (Harrison). I would suggest that the similarity between the Banvillean and Blackean casts negates the immunity to analysis and an opportunity for significance is founded on the style and genre of the novels rather than any simplicity of character or narrative. There is an evident similarity between the allusiveness of both corpuses and the intertextual elements such as the connotative names, literary allusion and darkly humorous asides.

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[24] Protagonists of Saul Bellow's *Herzog* (1964) and John Updike's 'Rabbit' series.

Change of Direction

Banville could be said to hold contradicting points on the matter of distinguishing art and craft and the place of the Black novels in this hypothetical literary spectrum. Shortly before the publication of the 'Tone Control' *Irish Times* article quoted above, he took part in an interview for the *Los Angeles Review of Books* and the following exchange covers his opinions on art and craft:

> Jon Wiener: So we have high and low, art and craft, poetry and plot; is that an okay way to talk about Banville and Benjamin Black?
> Banville: No. I hate it. I wish they didn't do that. This genre of "literary fiction" is new since I started writing. It's usually in a corner of the bookstore, and it may as well have a neon sign saying: "don't read this stuff." My ideal bookshop would have no sections, just alphabetical, and not just fiction, but all the books next to each other. You would discover things (Banville in Wiener, 2014).

Despite ostensibly offering a more democratic attitude to genre and types of books, his repeated distinction between art and craft in his own work appears as posturing or provocation. It may be that Banville is challenging the reader and critics of his own work by holding this stance. A good example of Banville's provocation and self-contradiction on the topic of high literature appears in the Birnbaum interview where he says:

> JB: Banville books take two to five years to make. It takes three or five months to make a Black book. Real crime writers are furious when I say this. Because they think I am saying it's easy. That's not what I am saying at all. Banville books are high literature – it's a different way of working. (Birnbaum, 2011)

Despite suggesting that his two methods of writing for his different bodies of work results in a divergent rate of production, he does not equate Banville and Black books in terms of quality, they will remain in a strict hierarchy while Banville still produces books under the Banville name. For the reader and the

critic this is problematic as it could be suggested that Banville is discrediting the work of Benjamin Black as something lesser, as 'high' suggests superiority and sublimity and the removal from worldly, pragmatic affairs.

Banville also suggests that there is a therapeutic effect of writing as Benjamin Black as it forces him to write differently. He suggests that this project was an experiment of method and style rather than one of experiment with content or genre. He states that the pseudonym helped: "I simply wanted people to realize that this was a different direction that I was doing. This was an experiment. And I think it was a necessary experiment because I'd written a series of first-person narratives going back to the early 80s and I had to break out of that" (Banville in Ruland, 2008). *The Sea*, probably Banville's most successful work, was also initially conceived and attempted in the third person and this perhaps suggest an author trying to cure himself of some of his ingrained habits of a long career of mainly first-person narratives.

Carol Dell'Amico puts forward the thesis that from the release of *Eclipse* (2000) onwards, all of Banville's novels have revealed an attempt to address the criticism put to Banville that his narratives are masculinist and show women in a powerless manner, and it is suggested that there is a causal link between the representation of women and the reliance on the singular male voice rather than an omniscient narrator. She suggests that:

> Building on the Banville *mundo*, Benjamin Black's crime fiction
> acknowledges its own failure to keep step with developments within
> feminist, postmodern literature. As such, Benjamin Black's novels may
> be understood not only as examples of the current flourishing of Irish
> crime writing, but as part of John Banville's oblique response to his

critics and as a correction of the *mundo* of his earlier work (Dell'Amico 118).

It should also be noted that Banville's adaptation of Kleist's *Penthesilea* published as *Love in the Wars* by Gallery Press in 2005, but not performed until 2014, could also be considered as a response to accusations of masculinism as it depicts women triumphing over men in battle. Men appear foolish and ineffectual while women appear violent in this adaptation. Thus, Dell'Amico argues that Black's incorporation of Irish society's twentieth-century struggle with the female body elucidated particularly in the first three Quirke novels coincides with Banville's own reaction to his critics. Banville suggests that the Black novels, and more particularly the manner in which he writes them, is comparable to a purging experience and an experiment in method.

Corpus and Continuity

The use of a pseudonym signifies the desire to write differently, but there are also market forces and players that make this literary career-change difficult to enact. Uniquely, the Black novels are published under the Banville name in Italy. Banville states "My Italian publishers almost went down on their knees. Don't use a pseudonym. We want to establish the name John Banville! So I published there under the name John Banville and this puzzles Italian interviewers: This book is by somebody else when it's elsewhere. We're all somebody else when we're elsewhere" (Banville in Ruland, 2008). While this can be considered as an aspect of marketing and branding, the issue of who Banville feels he is writing as has a major impact on his method. At times, the

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use of the alter-ego appears to invoke nostalgia on the part of the author for the times when he was not an established author. Banville creates continuity with the Benjamin Black project and his days as a young writer while also maintaining the difference in the two personae's approaches:

> Of course, this sense of having, or being, a double identity was already familiar. Every novelist knows – perhaps everyone knows who has written even a letter, or a page of a diary – that the process of composition involves two separate sensibilities. The person who suffers and the mind that creates – Eliot again – occupy entirely different zones of action. When I stand up from my writing desk, "John Banville", or "Benjamin Black" – that is, the one whose name will appear on the title page – vanishes on the instant, since he only existed while the writing was being done.
> The invention of an alter ego set me to thinking anew on this aspect of the writing life. In those March days, among the Tuscan hills, I mused much on the question of what it is to be a writer, and why I became one in the first place. Where, nearly half a century ago, did I imagine I was going, as I set out to forge -- *le mot juste!* – a life in literature? Did I invent what I have become, or is imagination at its work again and do I invent now what I was then? Dizzying question.
> Come, Benjamin, put your arm around me and we shall be comfortably one, *mon semblable—mon frère!* " (Banville, 'John Banville on the birth of his dark twin, Benjamin Black' 2011).

It is significant that Banville uses the term 'forge' in this article. Carrying overtones of fakery and deception, the idea of forging and invention creates an added dimension to the Black enterprise, a dimension that is noteworthy not only for its relation to duplicity and doubling – themselves regular occurrences in Banville's novels – but also to both the agency of the author to create a persona rather than be conferred with one by his reading public. The fact that he states that having a double identity was 'familiar' serves to confer duplicity on the work produced under the name John Banville. In other words, their authenticity is nebulous as he has always been multiple selves. The idea of the pseudonym as

twin has an interesting correlation with some of Banville's novels, particularly *Birchwood*. O'Connell points out the purpose of the twins in Banville's work arguing that the author uses the "missing twin... as a catalyst for the more fundamental 'plot' of narcissistic pursuit of self-unity" (O'Connell, 2013, 86).

The writings of the Benjamin Black pseudonym are significantly different to those published under his real name. It is easy to regard the Black novels as, if not less worthy as texts, then certainly less worthy as objects of extended academic and critical interest. Certainly, the common attitude towards the Black novels has been less than praiseworthy with many reviews and critics bemoaning their seemingly-formulaic storylines, the black-white worldview of the noir thriller and the stereotypical, clichéd characters that inhabit the pages. Banville has been accused of "slumming it" as a crime writer.[25] Commenting on *Christine Falls*, the first Benjamin Black novel, writer John Connolly stated in the *Irish Times* article 'Joining the Criminal Fraternity' that "the freedom offered to Banville by the pseudonym [Benjamin Black] has not been matched by any great ambition" (Connolly, 2006). It could be inferred that some see the Black novels as an abandoning of the innovation and ambition of Banville's main body of work. Furthermore, Benjamin Black novels are frequently regarded as inferior by the author himself. One differentiation between the two sets of novels - or one could say types of writing – is that Banville's books are regularly regarded as

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[25] Banville in 'The Week in Books' article in *The Guardian* dated 1st August 2009 claims that Ruth Dudley Edwards allowed herself to be quoted as accusing Banville of 'slumming it'. Dudley Edwards in the *Irish Independent* on 9th August states that this was unfair as she had never said that.

literature and Benjamin Black books as popular fiction, itself a point that Banville, as it appears, does not wish to disabuse his readers of.

Corresponding to this, in a published interview with Mark Egan the interviewer notes significantly that "Banville speaks in the third person and calls Banville an artist and Black a craftsman", which is typical of the author's comments on his work as Benjamin Black. While it can be taken for granted that donning a pseudonym signifies an intent to write differently, to have such a clear distinction between the qualities of both outputs – on the one hand the self-proclaimed art of one and the mere craft of the other – is an example of Banville's efforts to destabilise our perceptions of him as a literary and public figure and of the legitimacy of literary figures in general in the public consciousness. By speaking in the third person of Banville and Black almost as mutual acquaintances, he presents an illusion of both objectivity and madness; or to be more accurate, a playful, measured madness of a writer of metafiction. The reader or listener instinctively doubts a comment such as this and searches for a significant meaning, if there is one. In my view, Banville uses his persona as Benjamin Black to mock the egocentricity of his own writing, and perhaps by extension, the critical tradition of Irish writing.

It could also be said that Banville's awareness of the less erudite, more plot-based narratives of the Benjamin Black books means that it is necessary to bring more depth to the Black persona in order to keep the project interesting. Black is avowedly limited as a writer "There are no limits on what Banville can say, but Black I think has to [have limits]" (Banville, 'Interview with Writers

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Bloc', 2014). While some Banville novels are a literary Rubik cube, the Black novels are far more straightforward. To add intrigue to the less intriguing body of work we are given various, complicated metanarratives of persona – one example being the creation of an interview between Banville and Black – which may strike some readers and critics as being either egocentric or eccentric at the least. Crim, for example, takes the persona as almost a betrayal and says that "Benjamin Black is a kind of Falstaffian counterfeit behind which the writer turns his back on his more serious self" (Crim, 2009, 9) suggesting that Banville's 'seriousness' is under threat. Whatever the case may be, it is fair to say that the interplay between the two personae could provide the author and reader with the necessary novelty to remain interesting, even if it is not occurring between the pages.

Personae Therapy

It is clear that Banville's work as Black impacts his regular body of work. Kavenna convincingly argues that Banville is reinforcing his work as John Banville rather than undermining them with the Benjamin Black novels. This reinforcement typically consists of accentuating the literariness of Banville's work or, in other terms, its status as an art object.[26] The dark aesthetic of human existence and suffering is mirrored in much of Banville's fiction. The use of cliché serves as a reminder of the parodic quality of his writing and Kavenna goes on to state that:

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[26] Banville infamously claimed during his acceptance speech for the Man Booker Prize 2005 that it was about time that a work of art won arguably the most prestigious literary prize of our time (Brockes, 2005).

> Occasionally, [Banville] is even content with cliché. Crossing the border
> between literary fiction and genre fiction, Banville appears, at first
> glance, to be working to reinforce rather than to dissolve that boundary.
> The birth of Black, he proposes, is a generic saturnalia, and the point
> about a saturnalia is that we know order will be restored, that Banville
> will publish as Banville again (Kavenna, 'Pseudonymously yours',
> 2011).

Banville has often dealt playfully with cliché both in his fiction and in his non-fiction. Particularly, cliché for Banville seems to be more readily applicable to discussions of the past in texts such as *Prague Pictures* and his article about a changing Ireland moving from being a "priest-ridden society... in the thraldom of confessional statehood" to "a major exporter of computer software and Viagra" ('Breaking the Spell'). In *Prague Pictures*, as discussed earlier, the blatancy of some of the clichés and the lack of a critique applied to the more offensive (or patently subversive) ones are imaginative in what they ignore rather than what they reveal. Cliché is readily apparent in both bodies of work, Kavenna criticises this aspect of Black's fiction in particular, saying that:

> Black is more pragmatic than Banville, more inclined to use stereotypes,
> and his narratives are more often driven by cultural common
> denominators, such as things that are in the news. Where there's a priest,
> there's usually a child-molesting pervert. Other trademarks of the Black
> oeuvre include: women, who are either thin and dangerous or buxom and
> consoling (Kavenna, 2011).[27]

The use of cliché can be seen as a riposte to critics as the blatancy of the stereotypes is purposely provocative or comfortably generic.

Banville has also claimed several times that writing as Black makes him a better writer, insinuating that the real writing is completed by Banville after the

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[27] However, Banville has always been inclined to use stock characters who are particularly cartoonish. The femme fatales, shady politicians and businessmen, and sexually deviant priests are a continuation of the vein of stock characters that stretch back to *Birchwood*.

process of Black, in effect, Black is like a piano tuner, a technician with some skill but with no art or who is not allowed to exhibit his art. Moreover, it could be suggested that writing as Benjamin Black is to allow Banville the opportunity to exhibit his ability as a writer in an untrammelled manner.

In interview with Belinda McKeon, Banville states with regard to writing his first Black book, "I had fun doing it and I thought, if this has to be my day job, if Benjamin Black is going to earn some money so that John Banville can have freedom, then this is no more difficult than working in the newspapers" (Banville in McKeon, 2009). Banville worked at the now defunct *Irish Press* and then at *The Irish Times*, rising to the position of literary editor, until taking voluntary redundancy in 1999. His occasional reviews for the newspaper and other magazines notwithstanding, Banville's relinquishment of a full-time career in journalism has provided the need for regular commercial success with his fiction. Banville draws frequent comparisons between his work as Benjamin Black and his journalism, suggesting that the craft of Black is something which is an occupation rather than a vocation of being a writer. In *The Paris Review* he draws a connection between being a journalist and a writer into his work as two writers. As he states, "I've spent my life being a journalist, a copy editor – in other words, a technician. I have always been two people, professionally. Going back and forth between John Banville and Benjamin Black is just an extension of that" (Banville in McKeon, 2009). It could perhaps be said that Banville seeks to establish his two literary personae almost as actors cast by type: one can only play the high modernist, aloof and intellectual, and one can only play the popular

thriller-writer, and neither can write differently. In other words, to be a

legitimately post-modern writer, one must play both the roles of high artist and

populist writer.

By playing the 'roles' of two authors and speaking as both, Banville is

harking back to another recurring theme in his fiction, that of acting. One of his

principal protagonists, Alexander Cleave, is a noted actor and appears in two

novels, *Eclipse* and *Ancient Light*. There is also an anonymous actor in the radio

play *A World Too Wide*.[28] However, many other characters in the novels profess

to be acting. In *The Book of Evidence*, Freddie, in his reckless spiralling towards

capture exclaims "What an actor the world has lost in me!" (*The Book of*

Evidence, 179) suggesting that the capacity to act as an 'Other' and not as one's

Self (or deceiving the observer about the reality of what they are seeing) is a

desirable trait to have and for dichotomous characters such as Maskell and

Freddie Montgomery a central tenet of their existence. The duplicitous status of

the John Banville and Benjamin Black personae is thus an echo of the

dichotomous narrators of Banville's corpus. Doubles, imposters, and

doppelgangers exist in different states in the texts,[29] and reflect Banville's

"unflagging fascination with postures and impostures" (O'Connell, 2013, 89).

Take Victor Maskell for example, along with Axel Vander the most fraudulent of

Banville's narrators, who claims that "by day I was husband and father, art

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[28] Reprinted in both *Irish University Review* special volume on Banville (2006) and Raymond Bell's edition of Banville's writing: *Possessed of a Past* (2012).

[29] Most recently in *The Infinities* Banville takes inspiration from *Amphitryon* having the Greek God Zeus pretending to be human in order to fulfil his sexual desires. The invention of oneself as another takes an intriguing ethical turn in Banville's *Ghosts* where Freddie Montgomery, himself a fake, self-invented man -- and allegedly reformed as a person - attempts to imagine his murdered victim Josie Bell into being.

historian, teacher, discreet and hard-working agent of the Department; then night fell and Mr Hyde went out prowling, in mad excitement, with his dark desires and his country's secrets clutched to his breast" (*The Untouchable*, 315-6). Interestingly, Maskell suggests that his true self is a combination of all the masks he wears throughout his life. As D'Hoker opines, "Maskell suggests that his self is the total combination of all these masks. Perhaps, this is Maskell's way out of the prosopopeian predicament: to present an endless variety of masks and faces, which in their never-to-be-contained totality make up his infinitely unstable identity" (D'Hoker, 'Masks and Mirrors', 2006, 125). Rather than be a mere rhetorical act that is difficult to refrain from once started, having several masks suggests that only in their combination can the whole Self be known.

Taking this idea, we can address the crossover of the Banville and Black personae. When asked by Birnbaum in an interview "Is Benjamin Black a person? Do you think of him as a person?" Banville replies:

> It's very strange. I constantly mix him up with Quirke, the main character. The two of them seem to be one, physically. I made Quirke the opposite of me. He's tall, handsome, irresistible to women, clever. All those things I'm not... Ah, is there a separate person? I suspect that Black – I have never told this before, it just struck me now – I suspect that Black is the waking version of Banville while he is asleep, dreaming. (Banville in Birnbaum, 2011)

Here Banville complicates the Banville/Black masquerade by adding that he confuses Black for Quirke sometimes. This goes a long way to confirm the creation of a persona of Black is an imaginative feat in itself as he is given physical and emotional qualities that are the opposite to Banville's. Banville's facetiousness in saying that he is not clever and that Quirke is clever is

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contradicted at a later point when in another interview he states that "Quirke is like a country doctor, an ignoramus, and I like that" (Banville in 'Interview with Writers Bloc'). Quirke is essentially as baffled at the world as Freddie Montgomery or Alexander Cleave and perhaps his penchant for drinking is an acceptably generic emotional outlet for someone who is essentially a split personality.[30] What can be drawn from these contradicting statements is that the Benjamin Black and Quirke figures are used by Banville in an *ad hoc* manner. However, the proximity of author, persona and character that sometimes comes across in Banville's authorial statements suggest that the act of writing as another involves self-construction as it is one of self-revelation. By writing himself into the fictive world of his characters Banville imparts a complexity and self-referential quality to the texts. Perhaps he feels that this is necessary due to the Black books being relatively highly structured, self-contained generic texts in comparison to the Banville corpus.

It has been suggested that the choosing of the pseudonym of Benjamin Black signifies that:

> the complex narrative relationship between Banville's and Black's worlds is…an overt selfconscious 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 (Murphy, 2013, 22).

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[30] While Freddie exults in violence, risk, and later in the trilogy, art, Alex Cleave's emotional outlet is visiting cinema screenings and crying in the dark.

To suggest that Quirke is a central figure that "remains the same" is perhaps

slightly reductive, [31] yet Kavenna concurs with Murphy by saying that the Quirke

novels feature themes, characters and preoccupations that

> course from Banville to his dark brother, stripped of some of their
> elegant attire, but not transformed completely. Banville's obsession with
> tainted, traumatic childhoods – as in *The Sea*, *Ghosts*, and his early novel
> *Birchwood* (1973) - becomes Black's obsession with the crime of
> pedophilia. Banville's obsession with scarcely knowable origins
> becomes, well, Black's obsession with scarcely knowable origins. The
> difference is in emphasis, but these are often sleight-of-hand gestures,
> magician's tricks, making us think that things are substantially different
> when really they are almost the same (Kavenna, 2011).

By saying that emphasis is different but things are almost the same, Kavenna is

ignoring that the change of emphasis itself is a distinctly interesting development

in Banville's writing. Kathryn Crim suggests that the worlds of Black are

"cruder" than our own but again there lies the assumption that Banville's world is

more like our own than Black's worlds which are easier to digest due to their

simplicity. She asks:

> Is Black's mood so different from Banville's? Like Banville's narrators,
> Quirke has an inexplicable but sympathetic desire to establish a coherent
> story, to solve the crime *in order to resolve the past*. If these fictions are
> more digestible, it is not simply because the prose is briskly paced. It's
> also because this world is both cruder and simpler than our own – and so
> we are free to enjoy the landscape cast in the black light of violence and
> subterfuge (Crim, 9).

It is perhaps due to the constraints of genre rather than any particular crudeness

of style or art that these novels are considered simple by some. This would

suggest that genre fiction for many critics is a blind-spot. Ruth Dudley Edwards

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[31] Eoghan Smith's PhD thesis "John Banville: Art, Authenticity and Epic" suggests, among other things,
that there is an unreasonable willingness amongst Banvillean critics to claim that he is writing the same
book over and over again and that his male protagonists are largely the same person.

suggests that the reason why Black's novels are not as highly regarded as they should be is due to the fact that "The literary establishment despises what it calls the genre novel. The notion that a novel should be driven by a compelling narrative is just so yesterday" (Dudley Edwards, 2007). It is worth remembering that even as genre novels – crime being the most suitable genre that the Quirke novels belong to – they are difficult to define and are, in places, not particularly concerned with the central crime or the process of detecting that is central to the genre. They are more often noirish, mood pieces with flourishes that seem cinematic rather than literary, perhaps reflecting their original conception as a TV series.[32] The Black novels feature a "filmic form of narrative instance" assembled by a "master of ceremonies" who arranges the images in a series of scenes (Metz, 200, 89). To call them 'crude' texts would be to ignore the hitherto largely undocumented sources of cinematic inspiration for Black and the Quirke novels in particular. Charting the full extent of such inspiration is beyond the scope of the present study but there are many obvious as well as subtextual connections with film, and to a lesser extent television, which shed light on the artifice and metafictional qualities of Banville's writing as a whole.

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[32] The *Quirke* television adaptation (2014) was commissioned by RTE and BBC. Banville has stated "Early in the 2000s I had written, to commission, a television mini-series set in 1950s Ireland and America which, it had become clear, was not going to get made" ('John Banville on the birth of his dark twin. Benjamin Black', 2011). The original script has thus come full circle via the Benjamin Black books to this screen production.

Screen and Page

The Benjamin Black novels include an extensive range of references to
film. Film is often used by Black to refer to the unreality of the crimes,
particularly murders that are committed in the series. Thus, not only does Black
employ the aesthetic features of mid-twentieth century cinema – the noir and
easily discernible morality, the fetishised attractiveness and mystique of the
detective and the femme fatale – but also the use of film comments on Irish
society through the use of generic signifiers. Often the resolvability of mysteries
or problems in society, such as crimes, social disturbances or nuisances, is
greeted with incredulity. Resolvability is essentially a trait associated with
American detective stories and movies along with the 'Cosy' British mysteries.
In the first Benjamin Black novel *Christine Falls*, Quirke asks Inspector Hackett
have there been any developments in the Dolly Moran murder case:

> "'Ah God, Mr Quirke,' he said, with rich enjoyment, 'you must go to the
> pictures an awful lot.'... 'Developments, now – let me see. We have a
> full set of fingerprints, of course, and a couple of locks of hair. Oh, and a
> cigarette butt-Balkan Sobranie, I recognised the ash straight away -- and a
> lucky monkey's paw dropped by a person of Oriental origin, a Lascar,
> most likely' (*Christine Falls*, 202-3).

In this extract, not only is the genre of crime fiction self-consciously mocked but
the reader is also given the outline for the whole series, there are no essential
clues or even a smoking gun, crimes are endemic, rooted in culture and coming
from within rather than from a malicious, intrusive outsider or a criminal mind.
In *The Silver Swan* (2007), again Quirke's method of questioning is mocked
when Maisie Haddon, a backstreet abortionist laughs at the protagonist: "You
talk like a detective in the pictures. Humphrey Bogart. Alan Ladd. 'Notice

anything suspicious lady'" (*The Silver Swan*, 2007, 272). Later in the series in

Vengeance (2012), again, lines of questioning take their cue from American film

– "If it was the pictures, this would be the moment for me to ask, *Just what are*

you driving at, Inspector? Wouldn't it?" (*Vengeance*, 2012, 230) and again at

another point, Hackett "made his Spencer Tracy face" (*Holy Orders*, 2013, 77).

Jimmy Minor, a journalist friend of Quirke's daughter Phoebe and the murdered

victim in *Holy Orders*, models himself on the reporters and detectives of

America and his drive and ambition in the early half of the series herald his

comeuppance in his eventual murder. Jimmy thinks himself like Humphrey

Bogart (*Holy Orders*, 51) and a newshound from the pictures (28) and in *Elegy*

for April puts on a Jimmy Cagney voice (*Elegy for April*, 2010, 163).[33] Although

oblique and subtle references are made to American cinema throughout the

series, in general, references to film are obvious, knowing and mocking. It could

be said that underlying these largely cosmetic references is an epistemological

position that Banville's characters have often held, namely, to know something

or gain a solution to a problem, you must act as others do and not as you would

normally. Masks must be put on in order to gain an insight into the nature of

things. Analogous to Quirke, Minor and other characters acting like American

detectives are Banville's own act of acting as Benjamin Black, and the generic

overlay and baring of conventions subtly equates deception with the seeking of

knowledge. Perhaps the mocking of the inquisitive Quirke, Hackett and Minor

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[33] In this relatively inconsequential impersonation Jimmy refers to a "super-Gael with a name like Maolseachlainn Mahoganygaspipe". A Banville reader would associate this name with counsel for Freddie Montgomery in *The Book of Evidence* Maolseachlainn Mac Giolla Gunna and who is one of the very few Banville characters with an Irish name.

suggests despair in crime-solving or gaining closure. It suggests that these 'detectives' are mere actors.

Other references and allusions serve not to mock or reveal the internal mechanisms of the genre but rather can be taken as a form of homage. In *Christine Falls*, Andy Stafford, one of the villains of the novels is cast in a light that may allude to *The Postman Always Rings Twice*: "He wondered, as he had begun to do lately, how long he could stay in this town before the itch to move on got so bad he would have to scratch it" (*Christine Falls*, 135). Banville's attraction to this text is well-known. In one article he pays homage by saying, "James M. Cain, who was happy to keep it raw, who gloried, indeed, in the rebarbative, created a masterpiece, seemingly effortlessly, in *The Postman Always Rings Twice*" ('Criminal Odes', 2008). This article is interesting for another reason. It was published before Banville was given the opportunity to write in the voice of Raymond Chandler by his estate under the name of Benjamin Black with *The Black-Eyed Blonde*. Chandler is one of Banville's influences for crime writing, but in this article Banville criticises Chandler and the inclusion of two of the American author's texts in a collection stating that

> On mature reflection, I consider the Marlowe books forced and even a touch sentimental, for all their elegance and wit and wonderful sheen— two of his stories, "Killer in the Rain" and "Finger Man," sit uneasily in the *Big Book of Pulps*, like, to quote *The Waste Land*, a silk hat on a Bradford millionaire. Chandler perhaps labored too long and too hard at effecting the transmutation of life's raw material into deathless prose ('Criminal Odes', 2008).

Allen Barra, in online magazine *The Daily Beast*, was perhaps the first to express surprise at Banville's condemnation of Chandler's writing style and suggests that

Banville's self-consciousness about his position in letters made him stop trying to emulate literary behemoths and set his sights lower as "he was tired of trying to catch Nabokov, but there was an opening for Raymond Chandler, so he took it" (Barra, 2011).[34] This comment reflects one attitude to a supposed gulf between popular mainstream fiction and literature, but interestingly it subtly suggests that the author Banville has failed in his task so has given himself a lesser ambition. A comment such as this one would imply that a modernist writer such as Nabokov (who does not overtly use genre fiction) is more worthy or ambitious than writers such as Chandler who do; it also suggests an anti-generic tendency amongst literary commentators.

Benjamin Black and Ireland

Readings of Banville that foreground his Irish literary heritage have generally upheld the notion that he is a disciple of a modernist, experimentalist tradition dominated by Joyce and Beckett. Richard Kearney in his study entitled *Transitions: Narratives in Modern Irish Culture* makes the comment that one of John Banville's more accessible works – *The Newton Letter* – reveals an author who "does not try to tell a story" but who instead "interrogates the very nature of story-telling in the double sense of the narrative form of the writing and the imaginative powers of the writer" (Kearney, 1988, 96). In my view, this is a somewhat misleading statement which could be the result of Kearney conflating the content of the novel, in this case a historian failing to write a biography of

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[34] This comment is prescient as it was published some time before Banville agreed to write a Philip Marlowe novel in the style of Raymond Chandler.

Isaac Newton, and the form itself. Banville may interrogate the nature of story-telling, and stories and storytelling may fail or come up short, and coherent and cohesive narratives may be, in general, secondary to the author's purpose, but they are not dismissed out of hand. When one looks at his more creatively and technically successful books – *The Newton Letter* being one; others I would suggest in this category being *Doctor Copernicus, Kepler, The Book of Evidence, The Untouchable, Shroud* and *The Sea* – the recurring element of his writing is the faithful return to sequences of events of significance. In other words, stories have an importance in the fact that they are never abandoned for pure theory or aestheticism. While some commentators such as Kearney may have posited Banville as part of a critical tradition, referring to him as a writer whose primary interest is one of a critic rather than being, in journalistic parlance, a "novelist of ideas", many of Banville's recent works, particularly the Benjamin Black novels, have revealed a softening of his "critical" stance. While Banville is prone to experiment with form, his work has always had an emphasis on design over spontaneity, on shape rather than shapelessness. In one sense the Black project is made up of a traditional, story-telling element rather than being purely an example of introverted modernism consisting mainly of tricks with metafiction.

Despite the fact that most of the Benjamin Black novels are set in Ireland – *The Lemur* (2008) and *The Black-eyed Blonde* being the only exceptions to date – a cosmopolitan influence is more obvious than an Irish one, as there is little evidence for an Irish inspiration for the texts. In this, Black's novels are more in line with a certain reading of Banville as a writer who eschews national traditions

and themes. Gerry Smyth refers to Banville's denial of being part of a national tradition "as a form of Oedipal thrust against the authority of tradition, a gesture which perhaps does more to confirm the existence of cultural nationalism in some form or other" (Smyth, 1997, 17). Banville has famously claimed to not see himself as an Irish writer and his lack of allegiance to Irish writing as a field of interest is continued in his disconnection with current crime writing.

Banville's writing of first-person narratives has been in conjunction with his use of the confessional mode and an examination of existential or ontological matters. Benjamin Black's books were to be a break from this *modus operandi*.[35] In an essay 'The Personae of Summer', published roughly a decade before his Benjamin Black works, Banville states that "As a writer I have little or no interest in character, plot, motivation, manners, politics, morality, [or] social issues" ('The Personae of Summer', 2012, 343). Benjamin Black's novels are different to John Banville's in one important regard – Black's novels place a greater importance on plot, a change which corresponds formally with the absence of the interiority of the confessional monologue thanks to this new shift in his writing. In the same essay, Banville says that he admires writers who have thrown away the pretence of realism or those who choose to pick an old tradition and revolutionise it from within. As Benjamin Black is his first foray into an ever-popular and highly populous genre of writing, his novels appear remarkably conventional, perhaps even disappointingly so. In some regards, the degree of examination seems blunted, less agile or – for extensive periods – absent.

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[35] As referred to earlier, in the Ruland interview Banville stated that he hoped to break his writing habits with the Black books.

Interestingly, despite choosing the backdrop of Dublin in the 1950s for the majority of the Benjamin Black texts (a setting containing its own assumed set of values, a morality and social structure somewhat alien to that of the Ireland of today), Banville remains adamant that the commenting on politics and societal issues is absent from his work. When asked in an interview about the Benjamin Black novel *Christine Falls* and why it focuses on the administrative politics of orphanages and constitutional abuse of power by the Catholic Church in Ireland, Banville replies:

> Because they furnished me with a plot. Someone once asked Joyce why he used the Homeric parallels in *Ulysses* and Joyce gave him a look and said simply, "it was a way of working." Fiction is cannibalistic…I wish I could claim to be engaged in social commentary… penning a searing indictment of Irish society, but I'm afraid I'm just writing books (Wanner, 2011).

Perhaps by saying, 'I wish I could claim', Banville is suggesting that he would like to be engaging in such a project but something is preventing him from doing so. Perhaps Banville is in two minds whether to follow this inclination, and the more dominant side of his dual artistic personality continues to reject bald social commentary. Choosing 1950s Dublin for purely aesthetic reasons implies a romantic nostalgia or sentimentality in the reading of an age which seems quaintly removed from, and preferred to, the present. Despite being avowedly apolitical, ironically taking a stance by *not* taking a stance, it could be said, as critic Elke D'Hoker argues, that John Banville's writing has undergone an ethical shift in recent years, and Black's novels have reflected that. By removing the superficial subjectivity of the first-person narrator from his recent work as Benjamin Black, by shifting the focus of his lens to that of the relatively recent

past, and by choosing to confine his art to the genre of crime fiction, Banville is writing, whether he agrees or not, ethically and, therefore, politically. Seamus Deane commented that it is:

> a strange tradition to which John Banville belongs, for it is not a political literature by any means, yet it is not at all a literature without politics. Its removal from the public world is contemptuous. But the removal itself expresses a deep disillusion, not only with Irish politics as such but with the very idea basic to most politics – that the world is subject to improvement if not to change or transformation. For them all, it is a place of proverbial and archetypal corruption. One could, I believe, argue that the degree of introversion in the major Irish fictions of this century is in exact ratio to the degree of political disillusion (Deane, 1976, 334).

To a large degree, this statement is true for Banville's writing to this day as he has resisted the urge to write obviously political or socially relevant literature and he regularly turns towards the distant (often ancient) past. Interestingly, regarding the Benjamin Black books and their setting within a recent historical period, John Kenny made the claim in 2009[36] that:

> because of the Man Booker win and the new kind of publicity surrounding *Christine Falls* and *The Silver Swan*, the characteristic mood-image of Banville conjured up by profilers and interviewers has perceptibly changed. He may, we can now think, be finally coming to realize that he should, like a good Irishman, write fiction about the recent society and history of his own country. He is no longer apparently always the dauntingly bejewelled figuration of his own literary style (Kenny, 2009, 11).

Kenny's comments may be considered in light of a few of Banville's literary productions up to that time. The plays *The Broken Jug* and *God's Gift* were adapted to an Irish locale and *Eclipse*, *The Sea* and then *Christine Falls* would seem to point towards a more frequent setting of Ireland at the centre of the

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[36] At which point only two Quirke novels had been published.

narratives.[37] Although the Quirke books make up the most of Benjamin Black's

body of work to date, the other two novels in the series, *The Lemur* (which was

commissioned as a serial in *New Yorker* magazine) and *The Black-Eyed Blonde*

show a willingness to look Stateside for inspiration, setting, and a new literary

marketplace. Conor McCarthy addresses Banville's relative avoidance of

specifically Irish themes and concerns by suggesting that "He has been a

beneficiary of 1960s modernisation and liberalisation, to the extent that, unlike

earlier Modernists such as Joyce and Beckett, he has not suffered censorship or

felt the necessary linkage of artistic integrity and intellectual exile" (McCarthy,

2000, 81). Banville's emergence in a supposedly more liberalised literary and

intellectual marketplace in the 1970s, perhaps aided by the opportunity for travel

with Aer Lingus for whom he worked, allowed an inversion in the prevailing

Irish modernist attitude to artistic integrity, the result of which can be seen in

Banville's deliberate oscillation between locales in his fiction.[38] Derek Hand says

that for an Irish writer:

> It is a question of choice. Certain critics believe that Irish writers must
> continue to ask the same question of themselves that Stephen Dedalus
> asks in *A Portrait* and *Ulysses*: put simply, to either remain in Ireland
> and not be an artist, or go into exile and be an artist... However, one
> implication of Banville's engagement with Ireland and Irish history in
> *Birchwood* is that choosing is no longer an option; rather, it is a case of
> enduring the nightmare of a past that refuses to be over and done with in
> a neat way (Hand, 2006, 174).

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[37] In fact, from the publication of *The Newton Letter* (1982) until the Benjamin Black novels, only *Ghosts* (in part), *Shroud* and *Love In The Wars* are not identified as Irish in setting.

[38] Banville commented after writing *Birchwood* that he had finished with writing 'Irish' fiction yet returned to write 'Irish' fiction with *Mefisto*, *The Book of Evidence* and so on. He has also claimed to have finished with writing 'European' novels. It is worth considering whether the Benjamin Black novels show him entering an 'American' phase as many of his stated influences are American authors.

For Banville, artistic integrity often emerges in a novel form of critique of previous artistic expressions. One of his techniques in doing so is to parody or create a pastiche of styles, themes and genres.[39] Unlike in *Birchwood*, however, a tone of moral seriousness does exist in Benjamin Black, particularly in relation to the abuse of children by those in religious or educational institutions, despite one or two darkly humorous comments which are made more palatable in the sense that they suggest an assumption that such scandals are commonplace.

It is of interest that the Black novels are largely incapable of dealing with the alarming and nefarious elements in recent Irish history. Despite involving many highly relevant and weighty subjects, such as the treatment of women within marriage, the abuse of children, racism and anti-Semitism, the Black novels offer a depiction of 1950s society that is slightly cartoonish. A reader who has previously read Banville's work will recognise that the tone of profundity, the heightened consciousness, is not as present in Benjamin Black's works. The nostalgic, romantic mode of the Benjamin Black books undermines the potential social critique that these crime novels may incorporate. One should be wary about approaching the Benjamin Black novels with the hope of illuminating the 1950s as a historical period, as the aestheticism of the era, the emphasis on the shabbiness and poverty of post-colonial Dublin, functions textually as a scaffold, an element which forms a skeleton to the novels rather

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[39] Derek Hand, for instance, suggests that "To be sure, in a novel like *Birchwood*, Banville – as a post-modernist – parodies and exploits the genre of the Gothic novel as he does the Anglo-Irish Big House novel" (Hand, 2006, 169). Many of the generic allusions in the Benjamin Black novels can be taken as parodies in the same sense of those in a text like *Birchwood* which parodies the Big House novel genre to a degree.

than being its flesh and blood. The romantic nostalgia of the Benjamin Black

novels should not be read purely politically. Yet there are some things that can

be drawn from the nostalgia.

Frederic Jameson in his work calls for a reclassification of film and how

films are considered and categorised. He argues that genre is a significant aspect

of film and that the formulaic, nostalgia mode fulfils a repressed desire to

experience the long-gone by means of aesthetic artefacts from an older period. It

could be said that the nostalgic mode, which is evident in the Benjamin Black

books as well as some of Banville's, can be construed as consigning significant

elements in politics and society to the history books, positing a status of the

'long-gone'. The secrecy around physical and sexual abuses of the Catholic

Church in Ireland mentioned in all of the Quirke novels is frequently brought up

when the protagonist's childhood is Carricklea is mentioned. Abuse is most

often brought up in one of the more recent novels *Holy Orders* where the

recurring journalist character Jimmy Minor is, the reader presumes, murdered by

a priest who abused him as a child.[40] By dealing with institutional abuse in his

novels, a writer so politically cautious – or indifferent if we are to believe his

own statements – as Banville could be said to be stating that contemporary Irish

society has left this past behind.[41] The content of the novels is, on the surface,

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[40] Priests as sexual deviants is noticeably a recurring feature in Banville's later works. In *Ancient Light* a priest presses a young Alexander Cleave on his sexual experiences with Mrs Gray (*Ancient Light*, 2012, 49-50).

[41] Julian Gough in 2010 wrote an online article castigating some current Irish writers ('The State of Irish Literature 2010'). Although Gough was careful not to name names, it is likely that "older, more sophisticated Irish writers that want to be Nabokov" is a thinly-veiled reference to Banville, despite the use of the plural. Gough laments the fact that so many novels are set in Ireland's past, and suggests that some writers are moving backwards rather than forwards. If we take his comment on older writers avoiding the present and the future and the subtle suggestion that Banville is one of these, the Black

indicative of historical revisionism and public outrage (it is notable how often characters keep the abuses secret as if this is protocol) yet no apparent emancipation is offered by way of arrests or convictions. Arguably, the Catholic Church in the Benjamin Black novels functions both as an aesthetic and plot element rather than as any real depiction of the religion, organisation or aspect of Irish society. The depiction of the church is that of a monolithic organisation determined on censoring the populace. There is a dark humour regarding serious topics in Black as there is in Banville. In one instance the narrator in *Christine Falls* refers to babies in St. Marys: "It was like something out of a science-fiction movie, all the little aliens in their pods" (*Christine Falls*, 110) and again: "She had a baby in her arms, wrapped like a larva in a white cotton blanket" (111). Certainly, the societal and institutional aspects of the novels have never been taken too seriously. Ian Campbell Ross refers to Benjamin Black as a writer "who, like a Victorian novelist, has chosen to recess his crime fiction in time, writing of the 1950s from the vantage point of the twenty-first century" (Campbell Ross, 2011, 31) which, it could be argued, suggests that Banville's novelistic techniques are largely out of date or not fit for the purpose of investigating the 1950s on any real, critical level, and that the books have perhaps more in common with the cosy mysteries of writers such as Wilkie Collins and Arthur Conan Doyle.

As the Len Wanner interview illustrates, Banville dismisses quickly the idea that there is a social conscience or any form of political statement in the

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novels and their dealing with institutional abuse seems only reasonable if this troubling issue was safely in the past for Banville.

novels of Black. For him they are purely plot-driven and the message of the

novels is diluted by the necessity of generic convention. The centrality of church

abuse and abuse of teachings in the novels *Christine Falls*, *Elegy for April* and

Holy Orders as well as the oft-hinted darkness of Quirke's past belies Banville's

statement in this interview and shows an unwillingness on the part of the author

to be drawn into a deep discussion of the issue. This unwillingness seems to tally

with Banville's statement in 'The Personae of Summer' that he has "little or no

interest in...politics, morality, social issues" ('The Personae of Summer', 2012,

343). For Banville, the occurrence of institutional abuse is aesthetic, giving the

character a Quirke a unique past when compared to other crime fiction heroes, as

well as allowing the author to sidestep difficult questions where he may be called

upon to take a political stance.

Guilt and Satisfaction

The Benjamin Black novels are not "critical" in the sense that Richard

Kearney uses the term when he refers to John Banville's novels. They lack the

self-awareness and the ever-present sense of shame and guilt that is pervasive in

Banville's fictions from the experimentalist stylings of *Nightspawn* to the more

intimate, accessible novels such as *The Sea* and *The Infinities*. Moreover, the

incisive Banvillean treatment of transgression and guilt is absent from the

Benjamin Black novels, stemming from, in my view, the jettisoning of the first-

person narrative and also the necessity to conform to character archetypes, i.e.

having an unlikely hero, but a hero nonetheless, at the centre of the Benjamin

Black narrative rather than the anti-heroes of texts such as *The Book of Evidence*, or *Shroud*.

Banville's trio of books centred on the murderer Freddie Montgomery – *The Book of Evidence*, *Ghosts* and *Athena* – offer a more interesting and more nuanced examination of criminality and guilt and contain an almost Doestoyevskian intensity which is lacking from the Benjamin Black novels to date. In other words, the content of the Benjamin Black books is not unexplored territory for Banville. The novelty of the texts lies mainly in the sense that while creating popular fiction, Banville is also creating a persona that upholds the established idea that his work as John Banville is critical and philosophical.

To date, the full relationship of Benjamin Black's novels to John Banville's regular work has not been satisfactorily investigated. Banville's own writings are so heavily bound to the pursuits of intellectual inquiry: for example, philosophy, science and art criticism make up much of the surface of his work that Black's novels seem doubly superficial and remarkably peripheral to his main work. Banville's writings constitute a relatively cohesive body of work, several critics and Banville himself have commented that he is writing the same book over and over again. Perhaps by omitting certain elements of his writing style in becoming Benjamin Black he is accentuating particular "literary" aspects to those books published under the name John Banville, making them doubly, stereotypically Banvillean. This has led to suggestions that the Black books are a parody, or at the very least, a pastiche. The reading of Benjamin Black as a parody of John Banville is strengthened by the regular presence of parody in his

novels since the early 1970s. In *Christine Falls*, Irish writer Brendan Behan is

parodied in the character Barney Boyle (in this case he even keeps the same

initials as the inspiration for the character) and frequently throughout the series

Banville parodies the writing style of writers such as James M. Cain, Agatha

Christie, Wilkie Collins and Ian Fleming. From the early stages of criticism of

Banville's work, the element of parody has been cited as the keystone of his

fiction, as in the comment by Deane quoted earlier that his first three books

contain "both a literary and an introverted humour" (Deane, 1976, 329). One

could deduce from this line of reasoning that the value and worthiness of

Banville's writing lies in the very fact that it is self-consciously aware,

introverted and parodic. Significantly, despite attempting to reach a wider

audience, the Benjamin Black books lack the humour which is present in all of

his other works. Perhaps the idea that the seriousness of crime writing is a mock-

seriousness, a wilful ignorance of the absurd which makes up part of Banville's

inheritance as a post-Beckettian, leads some to accuse the persona of Benjamin

Black and the novels themselves as pastiche, for as Frederic Jameson claims

"pastiche is blank parody, parody that has lost its sense of humor" (Jameson,

1992, 167).

Banville's novels are frequently interpreted in terms of depth and

subsequently Black's as mere surface. At heart is a concern about how to depict

reality. One aspect of Black's fiction that has resonance in Banville criticism is

the utilization of masks. The motif of masks in Banville's writing is reflected in

his Benjamin Black novels. In the fourth book, *Elegy for April*, he invokes the

idea of representation and reality "in all the time that Quirke had known Inspector Hackett he had not ever been able to decide if what he presented to the world were truly himself or an elaborately contrived mask" (66). Commenting elsewhere in the mid-nineties Banville states that "the true depth of a thing is in its surface. Art is shallow, and therein lies its deeps. The face is all, and, in front of the face, the mask" ('The Personae of Summer', 2012, 344). Thus, reality is doubly hidden by being depth behind surface behind contrived mask. The mask and masking is evident in Black's fictions, if not to the degree that it occurs in texts such as *The Untouchable*, *Eclipse* and *Shroud*, they appear again and again throughout his work, such as in *Holy Orders* where the faces of the dead appear in front of Phoebe, "Like the masks in an ancient Greek play" (*Holy Orders*, 263).

The comment that the true depth is in its surface, appears contradicted in not only in Banville's work but increasingly in Benjamin Black, where at one point Marlowe says that "I was convinced that behind everything that had happened there was another version of things that I couldn't read" (*The Black-eyed Blonde*, 226). It can be taken from these examples that Black's writing has a clearly identifiable ideological connection with Banville's in asserting a hidden reality behind the curtain.

What is evident in Banville's discussion of his own writings is that the sense of pride in the Benjamin Black books is not reflected in a similar satisfaction in his usual work. He equates the satisfaction of writing a Black book as the same satisfaction he derives from writing a Banville sentence,

diminishing the importance of his Black work in relation to his Banville corpus. If an individual sentence in Banville's work is given an extended amount of consideration, redrafting and perfecting it is fair to say that the effect should be one of meditative, lyrical or aesthetic language. His emphasis on the 'spontaneity' and the 'craft' of Benjamin Black's writing serves to confuse as these terms could be readily applied to his Banville books. To suggest that Banville books are 'art' implies that art and craft are separate things and that something indefinable separates the two and it may imply that art can be made by an artist who is not really trying, or does not 'craft'. Banville increasingly refers to his writing method (as Banville, not as Black) as being a dreamlike process "not only in its content and the mode of its narration, but in the manner in which it was written" ('Fiction and the Dream', 2012, 370). The Black novels are consciously crafted, it would seem, and the manner of writing does not involve dreaming. On the other hand, it appears that every so often the reductiveness of Banville's comments on his crime novels can offer an obstacle to critics that prohibits full engagement with his work.

Real Individuals in the Black Novels

Benjamin Black's novels are marked by a notable use of real-life characters in the texts. These appear to give a contextual framework for those who are not overly acquainted with Dublin of the 1950s, to show the publicness of the Irish writer (that Banville is an Irish writer or even perhaps offer a subtle critique on what it means to be Irish *and* a writer), and to punctuate the texts with

comic asides. In a sense, these characters are almost like moving statues or

marionettes – and the realism of such depictions is quite open to debate.

Most of these literary figures would have had a degree of celebrity,

particularly in Dublin social scene. Barney Boyle is a thinly-veiled version of

Brendan Behan and Banville lays the comparison on in a heavy-handed manner.

Quirke meets Barney in a pub in the first novel *Christine Falls* where:

> He struck a match and Barney leaned forward and cupped a babyish fist
> around the flame, his fingertips touching the back of Quirke's hand, and
> Quirke was struck as he always was by this peculiar little act of intimacy,
> one of the very few allowed among men; it was rumoured, he recalled,
> that Barney had an eye for the boys (*Christine Falls*, 198).

And again, to make the connection even more clear it is written that "Barney, the

people's poet and playwright of the working class, in fact lived, despite the

rumours of his queer leanings, with his long-suffering wife, genteel

watercolourist and something of a beauty, in a venerable white-walled house in

leafy Donnybrook" (*Christine Falls*, 199). Here, Black draws upon Behan's wife

Beatrice ffrench-Salkeld who studied art, and heavy-handedly makes the allusion

that she came from an upper-class family. Barney appears again later in the

Quirke series in *Holy Orders* (77). Barney functions in the text as a provider of

colour and as one of the few people from a lower working class in the novel he is

slightly romanticised.[42]

Elegy for April contains several references to real-life people. One of the

less well known of the real-life connections is the character Patrick Ojukwe from

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[42] Quirke's family, at the centre of the novel and some of the chief suspects in the death of Christine, are
from an upper middle class background, university educated, very well-travelled and holding good
positions in the medical and legal professions.

Elegy for April who is a suspect for the murder of the eponymous victim for

much of the novel. Ojukwe, a medical student like Quirke's daughter Phoebe, is

probably based on South African Shan Mohangi[43] who himself was a student at

the Royal College of surgeons and who killed his Irish girlfriend Hazel Mullen in

1963. An essay by Banville on the Benjamin Black website erroneously refers

to Mohangi as an Indian student and the crime taking place in the 1950s:

"Murder was a rare occurrence here in the 1950s. The country was held

enthralled for months by the case of an Indian medical student in Dublin who got

an Irish girl pregnant, strangled her, and cut up her corpse and fed it into the

furnace in the basement of a restaurant where he had a part-time job" ('Banville

on 1950s Era Ireland'). Other real-life figures who emerge to give an element of

colour and verisimilitude to the Quirke novels include the references to the two

homosexual men who run the Gate Theatre, Micheal MacLiammoir and Hilton

Edward, who appear, without having invented names, in *Elegy for April* (124).

The only other writer to appear is Patrick Kavanagh who appears without being

namechecked in *Christine Falls*:

> Quirke liked McGonagle's best in the early evening, when there was no
> one in but a few of the regulars, that skinny type at the end of the bar
> poring over the racing pages and ruminatively scratching his crotch, or
> that slightly famous dipso poet, in cloth cap and hob-nailed boots,
> glaring at a spark of tawny light in the bottom of his whiskey glass
> (*Christine Falls*, 56).

Patrick Kavanagh appears later, this time named in full, in the fourth Black book:

> They came to Baggot Street Bridge and climbed the steps to the street.
> Across the way, the poet Kavanagh, in overcoat and cap, was sitting in

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[43] Mohangi briefly resurfaced as a news item of interest when he tried to run for office in South Africa fairly recently. http://www.independent.ie/world-news/africa/politician-exposed-as-man-behind-grisly-irish-killing-26523040.html.

the window of Parsons bookshop, among the books laid out there, with his elbows on his knees and the holes in the soles of his cracked shoes on display, intently reading. Passers-by took no heed of him, being accustomed to the sight (*Elegy for April*, 195).

Perhaps Banville is attempting to flesh-out the fictional world of the Quirke novels by adding a degree of verisimilitude as well as propagating a particular ideal of the Irish writer as a rough-and-ready man about town. Banville uses characters such as Behan and Kavanagh, MacLiammoir and so on as stock characters or as props, or as cues to signify the representatives of Irish culture and the arts as dilettantish, unrefined and unselfconscious. Thus, the depictions of these characters are sketches, more like postcard images than what we are used to seeing in Banville's writing.

Allusions and Genre Awareness

Banville parodies the cosy crime novels of Arthur Conan Doyle by making numerous allusions to Holmes and Watson, particularly through the characters of Quirke and Inspector Hackett. In some ways the duo is the opposite of Doyle's pair with Quirke being the medical expert, albeit a pathologist. Quirke is the amateur sleuth but his methods of investigation are far removed from the rationalisation and logical deduction of Sherlock Holmes. In many cases, Quirke does not discover the miscreant or solve the crime, he instead drifts towards a conclusion. These references are parodies in the sense that the characters in the novels make reference to the stereotype. For instance, Inspector Hackett says to Quirke at one point "Not at all elementary, I'd say, Dr Quirke. Eh?" (*Christine Falls*, 204) and this sets the tone for frequent references to

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Conan Doyle's creation. There are many allusions to either Holmes or Watson[44] and this regularity serves to indicate to the reader the constructedness of the crime novel, denies any sense of realism and provides a sly Banvillean intertextuality that some argue is largely absent from Black's novels. The Benjamin Black novels, and in particular the Quirke series, are presented from the start as constructed, as artifice; the intended reader is repeatedly made aware of the genre conventions of crime fiction, literary antecedents and inspirations.

More importantly, Black goes further to suggest that conducting oneself as an investigator involves a degree of mimicry. An example of this occurs in *Holy Orders*: "'It's all right, miss,' Jenkins said gently, not quite knowing what the words were supposed to mean – it was the kind of thing detectives in the movies said" (5). Banville's fiction has always drawn upon the art of mimicry in an overt manner, however, this has always been considered on the level of the Banvillean protagonist. Here, in Black's third-person narratives, the art of mimicry becomes a more essential aspect of human behaviour and not merely one of the idiosyncrasies of the solipsistic intellectuals that are typical Banvillean heroes.

From the early stages of criticism of Banville's work, the element of parody has been cited as the keystone of his fiction. Seamus Deane writes that *Long Lankin, Nightspawn* and *Birchwood* contain "both a literary and an introverted humour which relieves [Banville] from the accusations of monotony, plagiarism and preciousness which could otherwise be justifiably levelled against

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[44]*The Silver Swan* 317; *Elegy For April* 136; *A Death In Summer* 120; *Vengeance* 47, 212-3; *Holy Orders* 254; *The Black-eyed Blonde* 87, 233.

hum" (Deane, 1975/6, 329). One could deduce from this line of reasoning that the value and worthiness of Banville's writing lies in the very fact that it is self-consciously aware, introverted and parodic. The genre awareness of Benjamin Black novels is the first time since the semi-historical novels of the Science Tetralogy that Banville has written in a form that is so obviously self-conscious of genre that the genre in question is both adhered to and parodied, often at the same time. There are many angles of debate in this topic. For instance, Charles McGrath is of the opinion that the less generic points of the Black novels -- and perhaps one could say that the parodic and intertextual elements are less generic – means that, for him, "The Black novels belong, in fact, to that interesting category of novels that are often said to "transcend" or "almost transcend" their genre... To transcend its genre, a book has to more nearly resemble a mainstream novel — it has to be less generic, in a word" (McGrath, 2008). To say that the novels resemble mainstream novels is to absorb, unquestioningly, a range of assumptions.

In light of intertextuality it is notable that Black's novels reference Irish authors more than any other. One section of *Christine Falls* ends, without explanations, with, in italics "The cold heaven ..." the name of a Yeats poem (132). Yeats is again mentioned as being quite vain in *Vengeance* (23, 83, 94) and together with Gogarty, Shaw, Lady Lavery (*Elegy for April*, 145), and in *A Death in Summer* (2011; 77, 211) and *Holy Orders* (58). Joyce is also mentioned, once in *The Lemur* (111) and in *Christine Falls* (390). These literary allusions are not typical for what one would expect of 'mainstream' or 'populist'

literature. Although these allusions may be present in the texts in order to add a splash of local colour, the fact that they are mainly literary appears odd for a writer who has rarely overtly referred to Irish literary precursors in his texts published previously, and despite many of them being set in Ireland or, as in the case of *The Untouchable*, having an Irish protagonist whose nationality is part of his crisis of being as he moves among British and continental European circles. Perhaps Black is using these references to promote the idea of Ireland as a nation of writers, as he gives prominence to writers of the nineteenth and twentieth century. These have more exposure in the Black novels than those of Banville who is more prone to reference earlier writers. Alternatively, the mushrooming of overt references to Irish writers in the Black books may indicate that the author is addressing one of the most frequently raised criticisms of his writing by Irish commentators. Eve Patten, when addressing the metafictional quality of Banville's work, comments that the "philosophical and cerebral character of his work has led many to regard his true affiliations as continental" and that he has had a "'European' trajectory", expressing an underlying attitude to the apparent dearth of Irishness in his work; even the Anglo-Irishness of Victor Maskell is a "characteristically tangential approach to Irish material" (Patten, 2006, 272). The sudden expansion of Irish literary references in the Black novels is an oblique feature of his crime novels. It is odd that the more introspective recent Banville novels set in Ireland such as *The Sea* and *Eclipse* feature many artistic and literary references, yet it is the supposed hard-boiled crime novels that feature the more frequent Irish literary allusions.

Knowledge and Detecting

One could be forgiven for considering the protagonist of the Quirke

novels as one in a long line of similar Banvillean leading men. Quirke is largely

contemptuous of the world, preferring a solitary lifestyle and the life of his work

as a pathologist. He is guilt-stricken for being unable to bring up his daughter

Phoebe and allowing her to grow up thinking he is her uncle. He carries the

weight of the past and the darkness of his work is a welcome reprieve from a

darker world. Moreover, he is a seeker of truth like Copernicus, Gabriel Godkin

or the Newton biographer, although Quirke's truth lies in the secrets of the

cadaver. Early on in the first Black novel we get a sense of the preoccupation

that is also a career:

> It sometimes seemed to him that he favoured dead bodies over living
> ones. Yes, he harboured a sort of admiration for cadavers, these wax-
> skinned, soft, suddenly ceased machines. They were perfected, in their
> way, no matter how damaged or decayed, and fully as impressive as any
> an ancient marble (*Christine Falls*, 63).

A Banville reader is on familiar territory here with an obsessive male

protagonist.[45] In many ways, Banville's style finds an echo in Black's style here.

Banville has been criticised – and lauded – for his grotesque descriptions and

they are perhaps more palatable when part of the crime-writing genre. The

obsession of Banville's male characters with the body (Gabriel Swan, Freddie

Montgomery and Axel Vander are particularly absorbed with commenting on the

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[45] Banville's narrators often refer to people, particularly women and particularly in introduction, as pieces of art. This is overtly self-conscious and has led to accusations of masculinism. One example would be Freddie Montgomery introducing his estranged wife Daphne. He says "always when I saw her naked I wanted to caress her, as I would want to caress a piece of sculpture, hefting the curves in the hollow of my hand, running a thumb down the long smooth lines, feeling the coolness, the velvet texture of the stone." Tellingly, this description concludes with "strike that last sentence, it will seem to mean too much" (*The Book of Evidence*, 8).

bodies of others and themselves) reaches a form of apotheosis in Quirke's career as a pathologist. In some ways, Banville's scientists/artists/historians are all pathologists. They tear open the physical world to glimpse at the concepts behind the real, observable world. At the centre of this searching is the ever-constant idea of a disparity between surface and reality. There are often two apparent worlds, one of calmness and tranquillity and one of violence, of darkness and mystery. One scene in *Elegy for April* begins with an allusion to Coleridge's 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner' and ends with the theme of two realities:

> From that day on he thought of life as a voyage of discovery, it was true
> – and himself as a lone look-out among a shipful of purblind mariners,
> casting the plumb-line and hauling it in and casting it again. All around
> lay the surface of the ocean, seeming all that there was to see and know,
> in calm or tempest, while, underneath, lay a wholly other world of things,
> hidden, with other kinds of creatures, flashing darkly in the deeps (*Elegy
> for April*, 114).

The Ancient Mariner is again referenced in *The Black-eyed Blonde* (2014) when Marlowe claims "I felt like the wedding guest trying to unhook himself from the Ancient Mariner" (*The Black-eyed Blonde*, 17). In Black's writing, what lies beneath the surface is typically tawdry, corrupt and sordid. It is a dark world filled not with criminal masterminds but with humans filled with animalistic urges. In another, similar scene which can be taken as a keynote for the Quirke series as a whole, the arch-villain Costigan, who is somewhat of a Moriarty to Quirke's Holmes, exposes himself as someone who is in the vein of the typical Banvillean antiheroes and not at all dissimilar to Quirke:

> 'I was just thinking,' he said, 'walking along here this lovely morning in
> the sunshine, how different things often are from the way they seem.

Take the canal, there. Smooth as glass, with those ducks or whatever they are, and the reflection of that white cloud, and the midges going up and down like the bubbles in a bottle of soda water – a picture of peace and tranquillity, you'd say. But think what's going on underneath the surface, the big fish eating the little ones, and the bugs on the bottom fighting over the bits that float down, and everything covered in slime and mud' (*A Death in Summer*, 164).

The ordered world of surface and appearances often gives way to the reality beneath. Quirke, like Freddie Montgomery, is distinguished by his bafflement and confusion at the workings of the world. This is particularly apparent in *A Death in Summer* – a novel which often comes across as Black trying to write more in the fashion of Banville and less like a genre writer. Quirke is confused by the world, things and comments that are hitherto simple to explain begin to hold a sublime significance. When asked "What can I do for you Doctor Quirke?" he struggles to deal with this:

It was a straightforward question but one that always left Quirke feeling in a quandary. All his life he had struggled with the unhandiness of concepts, ideas, formulations. Where to begin putting all that chaotic material into short strings of words? The task always baffled him (*A Death in Summer*, 226).

Quirke, like the biographer in *The Newton Letter*, is unable to make language represent the unknowable. He cannot narrate; he cannot mould language into a form that depicts the "unhandiness" of pure ideas. The world is a confusing and formless place and Quirke is subject to a Stevensian rage for order. Jimmy Minor echoes Quirke's desires for order in the world when he states that:

When I was a kid I used to read detective stories, couldn't get enough of them...They made everything so squared off and neat, like a brown-paper parcel tied up with twine and sealing wax and an address label written out in copperplate...There was a body, there were clues, there were suspects, then the detective came along and put it all together into a

story, a true story, the story of the truth – the story of what happened (*Vengeance*, 212-213).

Quirke's career as a pathologist and his subsequent involvement in solving crimes is his act of imposing sense and clarity upon the world. Two visions of reality are present, in general, in Black's novels. One is that there is a hidden reality beneath a discernible, false one,[46] and the other that reality is chaotic and utterly unknowable. This duality, most apparent in Copernicus' vision of the cosmos *Doctor Copernicus*, also appears in the later Black novels as Quirke's stark appraisal of corpses as those "perfected... machines" (*Christine Falls*, 63).

As the series continues, Quirke reaches the depths of despair with his frequent bouts of alcoholism and subsequent rehabilitations, the attempted suicide of his lover Isabell Galloway, the deaths of close family members and the blackening of what were once good, moral people that he was related to or acquainted with. There is a concomitant disillusionment with pathology as his investigations into the various crimes proceed, and it becomes a feature of the novels that Quirke becomes less defined by his career. His medical opinion is rarely needed and he hands over much of his work to Sinclair, his assistant in the lab. His existentialist ennui and disillusionment with the search for answers in the bodies of the dead is encapsulated in the following extract:

> what he yearned for in his deepest heart was not death, not the grand and terrible thing that priests and poets spoke of, but rather a state of non-existence, of simply not being there. Yet that state was unthinkable, for in it there would be no being – it would not be him, inexistent, but not him. It would not be a state at all. It would be nothing, and nothing is inconceivable. All his life, for as long as he could remember, he had wrestled with this conundrum. Was that why he had become a

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[46] *Holy Orders* is a difficult text to analyse due to the doubled deceptiveness of reality as Quirke suffers hallucinatory episodes as a symptom of an illness.

> pathologist, in hope of penetrating nearer to the heart of the mystery? If
> so, it had been in vain. The dead did not give up their secrets, for they
> had none; they had nothing, were nothing, only a parcel of blood and
> bones, gone cold (*Holy Orders*, 86-7)

Here, Quirke is in the solipsistic mood that characterises many Banvillean

narrators and this pervading desire for nonexistence and knowledge of the

inconceivable ranks among the main crossover points between the Benjamin

Black novels and the Banville corpus.

Quirke's initiation into the dual nature of reality occurs when in his

younger years he sees a priest crying. This is described thusly: "he clearly

remembered the moment he was first given a glimpse into the veiled and

deceptive nature of things" (*Elegy for April*, 112). It is of interest that the term

'things' is used as this word carries the weight of Kantian philosophy, especially

when seen in the context of Banville's previous use of the thing-in-itself

throughout his career. One of the major themes of the Quirke series (and a

recurring topic in contemporary Irish society) is the denouncing of the body by

those in positions of power, particularly the clergy. Repressed sexual desires are

frequently hinted at. Quirke was abused at Carricklea, Jimmy Minor was abused

and several other sexual abuses are mentioned. It is assumed that Hackett's

reaction to the crying priest is his realisation that clerics are human and not

divine and that they have common emotions, even those of romantic love. The

clergy are in theory not tempted or bound by feelings of the flesh such as sexual

love: they renounce a part of their materiality (sexual expression and

reproduction) as a doctrine. They are perfect 'things'. Perhaps the 'deceptive

nature of things' refers to celibacy as a deception of the mind on the physical

body, or that to a young Hackett he was himself deceived by a cleric.

In *Vengeance*, the femme fatale Mona Delahaye is 'doubly present' and

has a second Self that Quirke can almost see, revealing his tragically romantic

perception:

> There were certain women, Quirke was thinking, who seemed doubly
> present in a room. It was as if there was the woman herself and along
> with her a more vivid version of her, an invisible other self that emanated
> from her and surrounded her like an aura. It came to him that he very
> much wanted to see Mona Delahaye without her clothes on (*Vengeance*,
> 186).

Quirke's desire to see her without her clothes on carries grim forebodings for the

reader in that as a pathologist he examines naked corpses on a daily basis. It is in

this scene and in Hackett's fleeting vision of the crying priest in *Elegy for April*

that the reader begins to see an equating of sexual desire with a sense of

impending death,[47] that giving in to sexual desires is a return to a less lofty plane

or that it might be confused with the transcendence of death. Corpses are also

frequently referred to as 'things' in the Quirke novels, and even this comment on

Mona Delahaye is deceptive in that it has a double meaning. The 'second self'

can be taken as another veiled allusion to Banville/Black as all doublings and

dual selves in the texts themselves carry the reference to the doubled author.[48]

It can be taken that a broad category of things occupies the darker reality

below the surface of an ordered world in Black's universe. Under the surface lies

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[47] It could be viewed that the priest is crying as he has just been romantically spurned. He cries "bitterly"
over a letter and Hackett surmises that "he would hardly have got the news of a death by letter". The
sight of the priest "grieving inside and covering it up" affects Hackett deeply (*Elegy for April*, 113).
[48] Connections can be drawn between the female victim and the author John Banville as in *The Book of
Evidence* the victim Josie Bell has the same initials as the author.

animality, sexuality and the giving in to desires whatever they may be. Above

the superficial ordered world are those individuals whose perceptiveness can

penetrate the calm exterior to see the murk below. Certainly Costigan and

intermittently Quirke are two antiheroes who can see both realities. They are in

the vein of the self-proclaimed lofty heroes such as Axel Vander, Freddie

Montgomery and Victor Maskell, but Quirke has more redeeming qualities than

any of these. His potential for redemption lies in the fact that he is in some way

in control of his split identity. Redemption is also possible through empathy with

other as he has at various points someone who picks up the pieces for him, be it

his daughter, his extended family, his colleagues or one of his lovers. Perhaps

this points towards an ethical understanding of the Quirke novels. Crim argues

that the Black texts reveal despair for the world while Banville's novels reveal

despair for that world's inhabitants:

> In all three of the Black novels, violence and cruelty fester just where the
> characters are blindsided by their creeping sense of impotence. But
> whereas John Banville despairs of these failed minds, ultimately Black
> despairs of a cruel, corrupt, fallen world and seeks to make us
> responsible for it and for ourselves. In this way Benjamin Black offers a
> powerful critique of Banville, and still leaves the door open to him.
> (Crim, 9)

Crim touches upon an interesting point here; the restorative potential of humanity

to affect the world for the better is always there, even if other people, institutions

or organisations get in the way.

The narrative world of the Quirke novels is one of festering malignity. In

these Quirke is both an institutional victim and a despairing crusader.

(Dell'Amico, 116-7). In most cases the 'villains' of the Quirke novels are

pushed towards their crimes by a misplaced sense of restoring justice or morality to the world. They are not hedonistic, sadistic, violent criminals or gangsters. They are a judge who wants to save souls, a doctor who is strongly conservative with regard to sexuality, a jealous lover, and a priest who believes he is helping the community and so on.

To suggest that Black is Banville's criticism of Banville the author is an interesting point that puts one in mind of Seamus Deane's comment that "criticism too is a satisfactory kind of authorship, being in effect a stance whereby one can watch oneself being someone other than oneself, even though that other is one's own creation" (Deane, 331). It could also be said that the generic conventions of the noir crime novel make Crim's point of argument difficult to validate. It has often been said that crime writing is an evolution of the fairy tale as the genres bear more than a passing similarity (Aisenberg, 17). They are often violent, have a neat conclusion and often a moral point. The Black novels are necessarily contained fictions where the villain of the piece does not reappear and everything returns, roughly, to normal. The protagonist does not utterly fail. For the story to be satisfying for the reader there must be a residing faith in a better way of acting, in other words, of a way of succeeding where one has failed in the past. Yet often in the case of the Black novels the plots are resolved yet the characters are not. For the character Quirke, each text is a recurring disappointed quest as what he is essentially seeking is never the perpetrator of the crime or the resolution of the mystery, and when these are resolved it does not offer any fulfilment for the protagonist.

There is a development of a sense of ethics throughout the later Banville novels and the Black novels which is indelibly ambitious if a lot more subtle than what one would normally expect from the author of the ambitious yet ultimately unsatisfying literary pyrotechnics of *Nightspawn* and *Mefisto*. Certainly, the Black novels carry on the project of ethics developed in *The Book of Evidence* in particular, and this area of interest is considered later in this dissertation.

This idea of restoration corresponds with a development in Banville's recent work which is an increasing belief in the redundancy of the overtly philosophical and epistemological and a sharper focusing on the ethical. This is not to say that his fiction has only recently attempted to examine the relationships between people but rather that his Black works have pared back the extraneous factors to reveal a humble humanity. It is evident that in the later Banville novels too there has been an adjustment of theme and focus. Banville moves away from examining the individual consciousness to look at the interactions between human beings.

Chapter Two

Doctor Copernicus, Historical Fiction and Post-modernity: Genre Fiction as a basis for the Post-modern Novel

"I am no historian, as historians will be happy to confirm."

> (John Banville, 'Liber Occultus', abandoned draft for *Doctor Copernicus*)[49]

Banville's third novel *Doctor Copernicus* moves away from the ideological rejection of genre apparent in *Nightspawn*, and the parodying of genre in *Birchwood*. As in all of Banville's writings, a single idea is never fully integrated into a philosophy without scepticism or subversion, and the idea genre in *Doctor Copernicus* – as evidenced by the authorial tricks that make up the final published text – undergoes a dissection with an eventual reassembly. In *Doctor Copernicus*, and its sequel of sorts, *Kepler*, genre forms the skeleton rather than the shell of the narrative. The fact that they are fictions set in the distant past has led to them being marketed and summarised as belonging to the historical fiction genre. While the setting of these novels in the Renaissance, with all the required description, 'scene-setting' and historical flavour that this entails, is not incidental to the narratives, it is notably seen as a secondary feature to the stories. It could be argued that one of the neglected elements in criticism of these novels is the generic subversion that occurs. Banville's tendency to sceptically introduce an idea and never fully dispense with it leads to a combined

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[49] "Doctor Copernicus", MS 10252/5/1-23, p. 291.

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strain of paradoxical reflexivity and ahistoricity, particularly in the first novel in the tetralogy – *Doctor Copernicus*.

Banville's output as a novelist and prose author consists of texts that have a high degree of interconnectedness. This interconnectedness emerges in the form of ideas, names, symbols and so on carried from one text to another. This interconnectedness draws from his first collection of short stories and a novella published under the title *Long Lankin* which consists mainly of stories that appeared in magazines and had been refined over a number of years, together with newly written material. These individual texts are stand-alone in their own right, yet it is clear from the outset that his writing has been arranged thematically.[50] His first novel *Nightspawn* is linked to the novella in *Long Lankin*, 'The Possessed', by the protagonist Benjamin White. *Nightspawn* is very much an experimental text and shows a high level of indebtedness to Samuel Beckett's fiction. A highly allusive and metafictional text, it is emblematic of two of the most easily apparent techniques that make Banville's fiction difficult in terms of how to categorise his work – these being his use of intertextuality and metatextuality. *Nightspawn* plays with the genre of the spy thriller and is set on the Greek island of Mykonos during the military coup in the 1950s. As the earliest full-length piece of fiction that Banville has published, it reveals essential elements that are intrinsic to our understanding of his work, and to how it would progress over the next decade or so. Rüdiger Imhof uses the

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[50] John Kenny refers to the texts of *Long Lankin* as being related by the theme of death (Kenny, 2009, 21). as are all of Banville's texts, yet the *Long Lankin* texts' effect of opacity is "achieved in an equal and opposite fashion to the intellectualism and baroque prose of all the subsequent books" (125).

term "an inside-out novel" (Imhof, 1989, 41) – non-pejoratively – when referring

to it in the first chapter-length study of the text in 1989, and critics have

generally passed over this text for judicious reasons, partly related to the poor

reception of the text and its laying bare of the nature of writing. Banville himself

has stated: "I remember a reviewer of *Nightspawn* gently suggesting that I had

been reading the wrong people; at the time I was outraged, but now I think

perhaps he was right" ('On *Nightspawn*', 2012, 442). It could be said that

despite the text containing many elements pertinent to Banville criticism such as

concerns about fiction, the nature of reality and language as representation of

reality, the fact that *Nightspawn* has no identifiable 'sister' novel results in it

being isolated as a not-as-yet fully formed or as a novel which is insincere in its

presentation of issues that are obviously of concern to the author as a novelist.[51]

In truth, *Nightspawn* introduces to Banville's corpus a layer of parodic self-

deprecation inexistent in *Long Lankin* yet readily observable in all of his

subsequent work. Imhof terms the work a metafiction but it is worth noting that

Banville uses genre, in this instance the political espionage thriller, as a

counterpoint to his design, an experiment which seeks to verify the myths of

what it means to be a nascent writer. In the Gallery Books re-issue of

Nightspawn in 1993, the book is promoted by the following note on the

hardcover dust jacket: "This subversive, Beckettian fiction embraces the themes

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[51] Banville's fifteen published novels as of October 2012 contains one tetralogy and two trilogies roughly connected by plot. Several texts not connected by plot share similar features such as recurring character names, settings and genre. For example. *Birchwood*, *The Newton Letter* and *Mefisto* have all been read as interrogations of the Big House genre. *The Newton Letter* and *The Untouchable* are connected by a focus on the issue of Anglo-Irish identity.

of freedom and betrayal, and toys with an implausible plot, the stuff of an ordinary 'thriller' shadowed by political intrigue."[52] The fact that the term 'thriller' is flanked by inverted commas reflects a key ingredient of the genesis of Banville's early fictions; genre and categorization are knowingly used in a self-reflexive, self-mocking manner.

Neil Murphy refers to Banville's early fiction *Nightspawn* as a "frolicking exercise in fictional excess, the nearest that Banville ever comes to pure metafiction. From *Birchwood* onwards, the work can arguably be viewed as a commentary on the limits of metafiction without ever fully returning to mimetic fiction" (Murphy, 2006, 16). This statement captures a conflict at the heart of Banville's writing: mimetic fiction and metafiction as strange, antagonistic bedfellows. This conflict reaches a new stage in the process of creating the science tetralogy where we see Banville's metafictional tendencies locked inimitably with the invariable functions of a mimetic genre such as historical fiction.

The incorporation of divergent dynamics – Banville's tendency to indulge metafiction and an increasing requirement for mimeticism – is one which has consequences relevant to both content and style. It is worth noting that Banville's intention after *Birchwood* was to write a novel that was historical in content and style from the outset. The initial drafts of the novel that ended up eventually becoming *Doctor Copernicus* were entitled "The Song of The Earth"

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[52] Banville, John. *Nightspawn*. Oldcastle: Gallery Books, 1993.

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and dealt with the Anglo-Norman invasion of Ireland in Banville's own county Wexford in the late twelfth century. A famous historical personage was ostensibly a central figure in these rough opening drafts and reading list, that character being Henry II of England. This suggests that Banville's fiction over the course of his early novels moves away from a 'loose' technical use of history, a mere backdrop of mild interest – take for example the setting of *Nightspawn* being the military coup in Greece in the mid-twentieth century and *Birchwood*'s use of the famine and various Irish insurrections. His subsequent work moves towards a tightening in relation to the facts and the narrowing scope of his focus. His fiction moves towards the personal in using the extra-literary genre of the historical biography for the first time. Banville would later use other historical and literary figures in most of his more well-known and artistically successful novels – Malcolm Macarthur, an infamous murderer and criminal in *The Book of Evidence*, and its sequels *Ghosts* and *Athena*; poet Louise MacNeice and spy/art-critic Anthony Blunt as a template for Victor Maskell in *The Untouchable* and Paul de Man (and to a lesser extent Louis Althusser) in *Shroud*. Rather than merely channelling these real-life individuals' characters into his protagonists, it is notable that there is a corresponding use of the influence's historical background, setting and the events of their lives down to childhood stories and intimate family details such as MacNeice's brother who had Down's Syndrome, which is largely incidental to the plot of *The Untouchable*. Generic forms and the historical personage provide the anchor that tethers Banville's fiction to the real world.

It has been claimed that "...the novel [*Doctor Copernicus*] is of course about Nicolas Koppernigk, faithfully following the historical sources in order to draw a picture of the great astronomer as a sourpuss and a recluse" (Imhof, 1989, 78). However, this is clearly not the case as Banville takes many imaginative leaps of faith in his novel. Historical novels generally contain a degree of precision forming a secondary element to the story and adding to the verisimilitude of the narrative. By his own admission, Banville apologetically acknowledges that certain characters, such as Professor Brudzewski for example, are greatly exaggerated and distorted in relation to the historical information that exists.[53] With reference to this character, in an early draft of the novel Banville writes: "Thus from next to nothing, the fictionist weaves a farrago. Historians will crucify me" ("Doctor Copernicus", 'John Banville Collection', 301). Some critics have seen beyond the world-building of Banville's research into history and science; Hand sees the political milieu of Renaissance Europe as reflective of the time of the novel's production in the mid-1970s which marked "a grinding halt to [the] progressivist thinking" of the 1960s (Hand, 2011, 219). Banville is drawn to the character of Copernicus as a character out of place in the time in which he lives. As a revolutionary thinker who wraps his revolutionary thought in servile deference to the ancient authorities, Copernicus masks his originality by turning to a bygone era of Ptolemy and others, thereby signalling his

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[53] Both typescripts of the radically altered fourth book that became the 'Magnum Miraculum' section of *Doctor Copernicus* contain a lengthy comparison of the fictional Brudzewski and the real Brudzewski as researched by the author himself.

conservatism in comparison to academics such as Rheticus, in order to be more forward-thinking than his contemporaries.

Genre acts as a schema in the science tetralogy in a less apparent but ultimately more significant and meaningful way. Hand argues that the grounding in real-life characters and plots "offers a ready-made plot upon which Banville can work out his postmodern concerns at a supposed distance" (2002, 71). *Doctor Copernicus* is ostensibly a historical novel or a "biographical-historical account of the life of an eminent scientist" (Berensmeyer, 2000, 169), but various genres appear to inhabit the work. Brian McIlroy refers to *Doctor Copernicus* as a novel that "blurs the genre boundaries of fiction, biography, pure theory, the nineteenth-century historical novel, and twentieth-century modernism" (McIlroy, 2006, 25). While this point is valid and that it is clear that Banville is a novelist moving away from metafiction, I would argue that his work is moving not towards genre hybridisation or the blurring of genre but what could be referred to as polygeneric narratives within the broad narrative of the whole novel. Shifts in genre highlighted by the narrative mode in *Doctor Copernicus* are abrupt and overt. For example, the sequence of letters at the end of the second section serves almost as an archaeological reconstruction of the past, albeit an imaginative, fictional one. They are evidence of the polygeneric style that is prevalent in the heavily demarcated narrative sequences in the novel.

At times the novel appears to evoke the Bildungsroman mode, and various critics have compared certain sections, particular the opening of the novel, with James Joyce's *A Portrait of The Artist* (Imhof, 1989 79; Hand, 2002, 74; Kenny,

2009, 90; McMinn, 1999, 49). To take one example that is an echo of the childlike narration at the beginning of *Portrait*: "You sleep, and in the morning wake again. But a day will come when you will not wake. That is death. Death is sad. Sadness is what happiness is not. And so on. How simple it all was, after all" (*Doctor Copernicus*, 10). The omniscient child narrator, childlike yet knowing, has the effect of alienating the lead character from the world and setting up the theme of discovery. It is clear that the novel shares many aspects of the Bildungsroman genre as our protagonist Nicolas Koppernigk learns the secrets of love and loss, his place within the often-violent education system, the harshness of conservative thinking both in terms of metaphysics and physics, and finally his own burgeoning sexuality in the exotic setting of Renaissance Italy. The first two sections of the novel entitled 'Orbitas Lumenque' and 'Magister Ludi' fill out the fundamental narrative arc pertinent to the Bildungsroman genre. Nicolas's life is depicted as a series of important revelations marked by sudden, epiphanic moments whose significance haunt the character until the end of the text. It is possible to read Joyce's *Portrait* as a companion piece, just as Banville's earlier novels such as *Nightspawn* and *Birchwood* can be read as a repudiation of logical narratives. *Birchwood* loses the arbitrariness of certain elements of *Nightspawn* such as plot, language and pacing, and at least signifies intent and design, despite a centrifugal movement away from a logical, contained narrative.

The novel *Doctor Copernicus* is broadly a historical biography and the events therein are framed by the protagonist's youth and death. As a

development from the previous novel *Birchwood*, which was in many ways a parodic rendering of the Big House genre, *Doctor Copernicus* is relatively devoid of the use of the anti-realistic parodic register used previously. A large element of the new direction that the project of the tetralogy takes is verisimilitude, and this is surprising given that a rejection of realism seems to be a founding principle of Banville's aesthetic. There are elements to the novel, both in terms of style and content that attempt to establish a level of mimeticism that enables the label of 'historical fiction' to be initially applied. *Doctor Copernicus* ends with the acknowledgement:

> A fully comprehensive bibliography would be wholly inappropriate, and
> probably impossible to compile, in a work of this nature; nevertheless,
> there is a small number of books which, during the years of compositions
> of *Doctor Copernicus*, have won my deep respect and whose scholarship
> and vision have been of invaluable help to me, and these I must mention.
> I name them also as suggested further reading for anyone seeking a fuller
> and perhaps more scrupulously factual account of the astronomer's life
> and work (*Doctor Copernicus*, 280).

Banville then proceeds to offer a bibliographic list of texts for further study of Copernicus included a "technical...explication of the heliocentric theory" in "Professor Fred Hoyle's *Nicolaus Copernicus*" as well as texts revealing "the influences of Hermetic mysticism and Neoplatonism upon Copernicus and his contemporaries". These arch statements, along with the list of quotations[54] used in the text are instructive in tone and gesture towards the extensive level of

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[54] These in-text quotations are from Pirenne's *A History of Europe*, Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* (1843), Einstein's Herbert Spencer Lecture (1933), Eddington's *The Nature of The Physical World* (1928), Max Planck, and Wallace Stevens' 'Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction'.

research and influences for the writing of the novel.[55] Referring to the working bibliography at the end of the book Declan Kiberd says, "This scientific and scholarly methodology comes the more remarkably in a work of almost pure fiction, given that so little at the level of indisputable fact is known about Copernicus" (Kiberd, 2006, 177) perhaps saying that Banville's method and presentation is strangely jarring given our knowledge of the events and persons described, or perhaps that Banville, at least for this novel, favours the signifiers of academic writing rather than the signifiers of imaginative fiction.

Banville's intertextuality in these references reveals a process of acknowledgement that is tied up with the notion of genre, in this case historical fiction, particularly in historical fiction with a high level of verifiable historical information. If we take, for example, one of the earliest examples of Banville's highly overt intertextuality, the opening sentence of *Nightspawn*: "I am a sick man, I am a spiteful man. I think my life is diseased" (*Nightspawn*, 11) with its literary forebear, Dostoyevsky's *Notes From The Underground*: "I am a sick man...I am a spiteful man. I am an unattractive man. I believe my liver is diseased" (Dostoyevsky, 1992, 1) we can see that Banville signals his use of intertextuality from his very first sentence in his first novel. Literary references, allusions or borrowings are rarely acknowledged by Banville yet in his relatively historically-based fictions a high degree of acknowledgement is present,

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[55] Several other Banville novels contain a list of acknowledged sources and further reading. In the science tetralogy the extent of the sources mentioned noticeably diminishes over the course of the four novels and it is not until *The Untouchable* (1997) and *Shroud* (2002) that Banville feels necessary to acknowledge sources; the former text's lack of acknowledgement of George Steiner drew a mild rebuke from the author.

revealing a genre-specific attitude or a distinction between the literary modes of fiction and historically-based fiction. Even within a text such as *Doctor Copernicus* which makes uses of the historical fiction format, the degree of acknowledgement of sources is curiously judicious, as Hand points out.[56] The tendency of Banville to borrow elements from other writers is not especially remarkable on its own; however, it is clear that the variant genres in a text such as *Doctor Copernicus* perhaps have their own codes regarding allusion and intertextuality. Wallace Stevens is the only literary source referenced in *Doctor Copernicus*, although it is arguable that the methodologies of the other texts acknowledged – Koestler's *The Sleepwalkers* (1959) being a good example – allow them to be considered as not just purely historical but also literary as well. It has been opined that "at the point of transition from one literary trend to another, there takes place a revaluation of the hierarchy of genres: a previously secondary genre, because it possesses features which are especially serviceable to the new trend, rises to the top" (Opacki, 2000, 123). In the multi-generic form of *Doctor Copernicus*, certain elements of the historical novel rise to the top. The authority of the example and the quotation are enshrined as a legitimating factor of the narrative. The reader 'knows' they are reading a book of fiction, yet the semblance of historical data is demanded by the historical novel genre and this is serviced both by real verifiable data within the text and scientific asides or digressions. What makes Banville's text wholly different to how we expect a

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[56] Hand uses the example of Frau Schillings' introduction in *Doctor Copernicus* as "almost an exact word-for-word copy of George Eliot's classic nineteenth-century novel *Middlemarch*", the character in question being Dorothea Brooke. (Hand, 2002, 85).

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historical novel to be is how his quotations are from scientists and philosophers who are not only non-contemporaries of the protagonist, but live almost a half-millennium later.

Banville's use of genre is duplicitous. As well as arguing that *Doctor Copernicus* and *Kepler* share many characteristics with the genre of science fiction, Hand argues that they are also written "Under the guise of a straightforward historical novel" (Hand, 2002, 68) – notably addressing the idea of disguise or masking not only in their content but also in their form -- and that the "historical Copernicus, and the historical *milieu* in which he produced his astronomical theories, afford Banville attractive material from which to launch his examination of the artistic imagination" (72). The historical novel, as exemplified by Walter Scott and formally theorised by Georg Lukacs, has little similarity with Banville's finished product, even in *Doctor Copernicus*, his one text which corresponds in the closest fashion to the historical novel. *Doctor Copernicus* is a novel which evidently borrows Romantic insistence in the artistic, transcendent imagination as well as the Wordsworthian and Joycean examples of the priestly, self-exiled artist as hero. Georg Lukacs argues that the function of the genre of the historical novel is that of democratising the past and that the novel has always dealt with exiles or alienated characters and their development into a state of belonging in a historical moment (1988, 45-46). In *Doctor Copernicus*, the initial historical homelessness of Copernicus is captured when it is said of the protagonist that "Politics baffled him. The ceaseless warring of states and princes seemed to him insane. He wanted no part in that

raucous public world, and yet, aghast, like one falling, he watched himself being drawn into the arena" (*Doctor Copernicus*, 112). Later in the novel, Copernicus' submission of the *De Revolutionibus* manuscript (208) to Rheticus is an understated character development and in many ways the climax of his narrative arc as he accepts himself as a being part of history and a political present.

At its heart, *Doctor Copernicus* is a novel about the individual creative mind but nevertheless amalgamates various genres, particularly the historical novel, the Bildungsroman, the *Künstlerroman* and the epistolary novel along with what could loosely be described as the science novel. There are, as with most novels, secondary genres conjured up briefly such as the gothic novel, for example, in the opening paragraph to the second section in the book 'Magister Ludi' (107) as well as Copernicus's death scene. Take, for example this scene:

> Then he spied the figure approaching, the massive shoulders and great dark burnished face like polished stone, the wide-set eyes, the cruel mad mouth.
> Who are you? He cried, striving in vain to lift his hands and fend off the apparition.
> I am he whom you seek.
> Tell me who you are!
> As my own father I am already dead, as my own mother I still live, and grow old. I come to take you on a journey. You have much to learn, and so little time.
> What? what would you teach me?
> How to die. (258-9).

Doctor Copernicus juxtaposes genres continuously without adhering to any single one to give structure or verisimilitude to the novel. On the contrary, it is clear that Banville's mixing of genres of the tortured Expressionist horror of the above extract with the mimetic fidelity of the historical digressions creates an

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example of form, that if not being as alien as Bakhtin suggests, then surely it is a Frankenstein's monster of various elements that ultimately create a functioning whole.

In part two of the novel   the 'Magister Ludi' section – genre becomes a constructive principle. We need to see Copernicus as the public man: he is an administrator, going to the new Chapter in Frauenburg, Anna Schillings moves in with him, his uncle and brother dies, and he eventually becomes a political, diplomatic figure. Thus we get more historical features and events of significance to people outside the protagonist. While seemingly being made up of disparate elements, *Doctor Copernicus* moves towards homogeneity of style: each intrusive element serves a purpose in the wider context of the fiction.[57] Rather than upending totalising models of form (as in *Nightspawn* and *Birchwood*), *Doctor Copernicus* harks back to *Long Lankin* in its consistency of structure and theme. *Doctor Copernicus* is, in part, dictated by an aesthetic historicalism conferred by its setting and generic roots in historical fiction. The novel succeeds in creating a dislocation effect – a reader familiar with Banville would more than likely consider the text more realistic than *Birchwood* with its various ahistorical asides – while keeping the intricacies of imaginative fiction. The aesthetic historicism is an element of the necessary invariants of the historical novel genre – such as contextual exposition or the assumption of an exotic or alien political, cultural and social climate and the use of period

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[57] I do agree, however with Imhof's assessment (Imhof, 1989, 95-6) of the parodic shifts in narrative style in 'Magister Ludi' (particularly the 'Anna Schilling' section (*Doctor Copernicus*, 164-74)) as ineffective and problematic.

language to produce an illusory effect. To give one example of the illusory effect employed by language, in a farcical scene the terms "Sennets and tuckets" used by Bishop Waczelrodt (114) refer to trumpet flourishes and both are mentioned in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* and *Henry V* (114). Also, Banville in the 'Magister Ludi' section provides brief contextual news reports of armies moving across Eastern Europe and the political allegiances of the major players in the novel. This opening paragraph to a subsection of 'Magister Ludi' is emblematic of Banville's style in this section:

> "It rose up in the east like black smoke, stamped over the land like a ravening giant, bearing before it a brazen mask of the dark fierce face of Albrecht von Hohenzollern Ansbach, last Grand Master of the brotherhood of the Order of St Mary's Hospital of the Germans at Jerusalem, otherwise called the Teutonic Knights. Once again they were pushing westward, determined finally to break the Polish hold on Royal Prussia and unite the three princedoms of the southern Baltic under Albrecht's rule; once again the vice closed on little Ermland. In 1516 the Knights, backed up by gangs of German mercenaries, made their first incursions across the eastern frontier." (152)

The diegetic style in this extract is an example of the divergences in Banville's novel, and an example of how different particular sections can be due to their generic basis. This extract is relatively free of the figurative language Banville is typically wont to use; and the style is that of an enthusiastic reporter or historian. Up until the 'Magister Ludi' section of the text, there is a considerable paucity of historical detail as Banville concentrates on the Bildungsroman elements of the novel as we see Nicolas grow up and face the vicissitudes of education, love and loss. In the opening sections some contextual information is provided in order to establish historical setting:

It was significant, he realised later, that the college on first sight had reminded him of nothing so much as a fortress, for it was, despite its pretensions, the main link in the defences thrown up by scholasticism against the tide of new ideas sweeping in from Italy, from England, and from Rotterdam. In his first year there he witnessed pitched bloody battles in the streets between Hungarian scholastics and German humanists (35).

Shortly after this, another example of a brief, diegetic passage:

The physical world was expanding. In their quest for a sea route to the Indies the Portuguese had revealed the frightening immensity of Africa. Rumours from Spain spoke of a vast new world beyond the ocean to the west. Men were voyaging out to all points of the compass, thrusting back the frontiers everywhere (36).

However, this usage is minimal and is perfunctory, an invariant of the historical genre that is grudgingly included despite having little bearing on the effect of the narrative itself.

It appears that Banville rejuvenates the generic basis of the historical novel in the second section of the novel – 'Magister Ludi' - and further bolsters it in the illusory production of the epistolary sequence at the end of this section (174-182). In another scene, Banville appears to relish highlighting the contradictions of history. Reflecting on the reigns of the Borgias, the omniscient narrator of the first section of the novel ('Orbitas Lumenque') claims:

The city crouched, sweating in fright, under the sign of the brooding bull. Talk of portents was rife….It seemed, in the brumous yellowy light of that winter day, that the Lord of Darkness himself had come forth to be acclaimed by the delirious mob.
This was Rome, in the jubilee year of 1500 (74).

The use of irony is an example of dislocation in the narrative; if read as a historical novel the narrator appears to wryly observe the contradictions of the

age. In one scene, Copernicus mocks the advances of the Renaissance to his young disciple Rheticus (236-7) and like his young counterpart, we are wrong-footed in the disparity between discernible reality and the attached image of the age. In the Benjamin Black novels, we see a recurrence of this method in Black's mocking of the modernity of 1950s Ireland. Banville's aesthetic historicism in *Doctor Copernicus*, in post-modern fashion, has an aura of legitimacy in order to bring a sceptical, critical perspective to previously held truths to dispel their accompanying illusions. The epistemological shift recounted in Copernicus's narrative is symbolic of a burgeoning modernity in Europe at the time the novel is set, and Banville manages to express this, albeit somewhat ironically. Modernity occurs at an expense, and knowledge is always relative to ignorance. At one point the protagonist voices his opinion to his professor, Brudzewski: "are we to be content with mere abstractions? Columbus has proved that Ptolemy was mistaken as to the dimensions of the Earth; shall we ignore Columbus?" to which Brudzewski replies: "An ignorant sailor, and a Spaniard. Pah!" (46).

When referring to Banville's 'creative dependency' Joseph McMinn posits that:

> the suggestions of a single voice throughout the fiction, are stylistic effects, even illusions, which draw deeply, and ironically, upon the art of mimicry, the skilful imitation of a whole range of discourses, poetic, philosophical, historical, even journalistic. This is what I mean by 'creative dependency', an artistic strategy which creates its own distinctive mythology through the imaginative impersonation of other voices and narratives, shaping them into unprecedented fictional designs (McMinn, 1999, 163).

To create unprecedented designs, to be original, Banville must, ironically, draw

upon precedents, upon generic bases and mimetic techniques to establish

homogeneity of voice. To be legitimately modern and to establish authority one

must acknowledge elements, traditions and techniques that are assimilated either

as readers or as writers. Banville, in a new step in his artistic process post-

Birchwood, wears his mimeticism on his sleeve.

Liber Occultus: Polygenericism and Generic Play

David Duff points out that "To the modern ear, the word genre...carries

unmistakable associations of authority and pedantry" (Duff, 2000, 1). Banville's

Doctor Copernicus appears to be a historical novel yet in a distorted form. It is

of interest, however, that Banville's initial intention was for a longer text, and the

published *Doctor Copernicus* is actually a truncated text which has an ending

that had been drastically altered shortly before it was sent to the printers. The

typescripts for the novel[58] include a coda to the novel which leave behind the

self-contained fiction of Copernicus and involve a semi-autobiographical account

of Banville himself travelling to Poland to discover the 'real' astronomer. The

narrator, "John", travels to the various locations in the text and reflects on how

accurately they correspond to the real-world counterparts. Included in this

section are numerous digressions on life in Poland, observations about tourism as

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[54] 'John Banville Collection'. [Microform] Trinity College (Dublin, Ireland). Library. MS 10252

well as lengthy discussions on the heliocentric theory, the ethics surrounding technological advancements – namely nuclear warfare, stemming from Einstein's acts of creation – and minor anecdotes and remarks about Wexford and Dublin.

Banville's first draft of this section is entitled 'Liber Occultus'; the second draft is entitled 'Magnum Miraculum' and there are only minor differences between the two. The published version retains the name 'Magnum Miraculum' but omits most of the material apart from Copernicus' illness and death. To avoid confusion, the omitted text is referred to here as 'Liber Occultus'. The implications of the extended, abandoned text, this fourth and final book in the structural make-up of *Doctor Copernicus*, is that the preceding books are 'de-novelised'. Banville's text moves outside of fiction, extending the narrative arc of Copernicus' search for a new cosmology to a factual account of the author travelling to Poland to research a novel the fragments of which precede the account of his travel. Along with this, the protagonist's search for a new way of seeing the world becomes analogically linked with Banville's effort in representing the changing world, and it is thus tempting to re-read the character of Copernicus as a reflection of Banville's attempts to revolutionise fiction. The idea of "an exalted naming" in *Doctor Copernicus*, the scientist himself realising that his cosmology is nothing but a new representation (a fiction that matches observable reality but is not *actually* real or true) correlates in this section with Banville's representation of his own creative journey. Copernicus and Banville and their individual projects are realised as pieces of fictions, "a provisional staging-post on a yet-to-be-completed journey" (Hand, 2002, 176) but not in any

way complete. The final part of the novel forges an obvious link between the processes of both individuals. In the mind of the author, doubt begins to take hold as the commonplace articles described in the novel, such as the river Vistula and Copernicus' tower in Frauenburg, do not correspond with his artistic rendering. As Imhof suggests, "Copernicus' way, as charted by Banville, is the way from the certainty as a child about "the thing itself", via a loss of that certainty as a result of the acquisition of language and the acquisition of the epistemological categories attached thereto, to a striving to regain the knowledge of the "vivid thing" (Imhof, 1989, 81). The author undergoes a similar loss of certainty in this section. This uncertainty finds its concentration in the historical realities of Torun and Frauenburg which Banville visits. He questions himself "is history itself a form of fiction?... The historian imagines that he is dealing with facts, while really he is doing no more than collating tales told by historians. It is a kind of innocent conspiracy by which necessary paradigms [sic] of human behaviour" ("Doctor Copernicus", 'John Banville Collection', 301). It is notable that a post-modern epistemological uncertainty finds its expression in the generic overlap between history and fiction. Banville himself once wrote that "Fiction is a kind of infinitesimal calculus, approaching nearer and ever nearer to life itself and yet never really having anything of real life in it at all, except the fictionist's obsessive and doomed determination to *get it right*" ('Personae of Summer', 2012, 347). One part of 'Liber Occultus' is worth quoting at length:

> I can no longer say why, some aeons ago, I decided to write this books [sic], except that I remember perceiving the parallels with art, what I consider art to be, between the manner of novel I wished to make and *De Revolutionibus* which is, to paraphrase Rheticus, a machine which self-

destructs even as it creates itself. No doubt there were other reasons that I have forgotten, that I have preferred to forget, but it is vital to hold firmly to the fact that there was not included among them the desire to locate the real, the historical man. My book, then, is a kind of hieratic naming – but Copernicus is the thing itself ("Doctor Copernicus", 'John Banville Collection', 291).

Banville's insistence that it is his desire not to locate the historical man appears slightly evasive. *Doctor Copernicus* forges *a* life-story, rather than re-creating *the* life-story, of the eponymous scientist by means of historical fiction. In addition, Banville's acknowledgements and recommendations towards biographies create a supplementary network of texts and textual references. Banville's self-reflexive analysis of his narrative of Copernicus' life in the 'Liber Occultus' section reinforces the idea that genres are elliptical presentations of knowledge, they give new information based on old ones, and illustrate by deviating from reality. The 'Liber Occultus' sequence reveals an ethical epistemology with regard to genre. Historical fiction as a genre expects readers to have an intertextual and contextual knowledge. Banville's highlighting of the truth-aspect of his work, together with his digressions, allusions and references, point towards a responsibility of 'reading' the world correctly. Historical fiction foregrounds, whether consciously on the part of the author or not, the truth element in all fiction but Banville goes further by attempting to verify or de-verify the imagination, the guesswork, the artistry and artifice. In short, he puts his book on trial for its truth-aspect.

It is of some significance that Banville, quite late in the editing process of *Doctor Copernicus*, decided that the scale of the novel must be reduced. The

epistemological issues raised by the final part of the novel pour cold water on the project of fiction: it is a self-defeated argument when presented in the form of fiction. Perhaps *Prague Pictures* at a later date allowed Banville to exorcise the ghosts of the *Doctor Copernicus* section where fiction as a necessary form of knowledge is thrown out in favour of knowledge as a necessary fiction. The multitude of narrative voices in *Doctor Copernicus* is exacerbated by the final section. The narrator, "John", has a collection of narrative voices ranging from the mimetic, the diegetic and the pseudo- didactic mingled with the parodic in the revealing of the orbits and movements of the heavenly bodies. This section is also explorative of the issues that are at the heart of the novel *Doctor Copernicus* and the satisfaction of a conclusion is relinquished in favour of this spurious exploration of the epistemology of language, truth in knowledge as opposed to truth in experience.[59]

One example of polygenericism in the omitted section of *Doctor Copernicus* is Banville's long digression in 'Liber Occultus', where he comes to the defence of Einstein's works co-opted by those in the Manhattan Project[60] for the purpose of causing maximum loss of human life to the inhabitants of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Banville's digression is an explanatory narrative that

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[59] What Banville in *Doctor Copernicus'* 'Liber Occultus' attempts to say is perhaps more satisfactorily expressed in the novel form in *The Newton Letter*. It has been suggested that this novel, the third in the tetralogy, is the "sending up [of] the ambitious historical narrative mode of his previous novels" (Radley, 2011, 26). 'Liber Occultus' is an unsatisfying addendum to *Doctor Copernicus* and the mixing of genres is incongruous with the novel.
[60] The development programme devised by the Allies during World War II to deliver the first atomic weapons.

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borders on being a political statement about art. Invoking Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy*, he states that:

> Certain actions are beyond good and evil, because they are performed on a transcendental plane; only when results of these acts filter down to a lower level do they engage considerations of right or wrong, good or bad, moral or immoral, ethical or unethical. However, even on that transcendental plane there is a war waged, without cease; that is the war between the apollonian and the dionysian ("Doctor Copernicus", 'John Banville Collection', 303).

Banville ties in his comments about Einstein's involvement in a scientific process that ended up being used as a force for destruction with his own depiction of Copernicus. It is of note that he exonerates the scientist (itself a symbol for an artist) from ethical issues. The lack of generic fixity in the 'Liber Occultus' section allows incongruous elements such as philosophical and theoretical concepts like transcendentalism to emerge in the work. Banville is speaking directly to the reader rather than appearing in the guise of the narrator "John", an impressionable, dissembling figure. The multitude of narrators in the novel is doubly increased in this section of the text as the author and narrator overlap at various moments in a display of both mimetic and diegetic narrative. This is part of what leads to the critical impression of Banville as a post-modernist or an author who engages in "historiographic metafiction", as Linda Hutcheon suggests (Hutcheon, 1993, 53). While referring to *Birchwood*, Hand notes that

> By presenting 'history' as 'fiction', by dismantling the hierarchical opposition between fact and myth, Banville demonstrates how historical and mythological narratives are made. Moreover, it allows him to move beyond a deadening narrative 'determinism' toward a fictional space of radical indeterminacy. Indeed, in a general way, due to this postmodernist 'playing' with history, it could be said that he escapes the

tyranny of logic and coherence and is thus free to create significance on his own terms and by his own means (Hand, 2002, 39).

These statements could also be applied to *Doctor Copernicus*, particularly in light of Banville's excising of the 'Liber Occultus' section prior to publication.

The 'Liber Occultus' section dislocates the work from its origins as a self-contained, historio-biographical novel. This genre, itself a hybrid, is a narrative built around the skeletal framework of a single life. The dislocation of this unified generic template in the drafts of *Doctor Copernicus* means that the work as a whole is drastically distorted. It becomes various things: an anti-novel, a theoretical experiment, notes towards a novel, a meta-novel or a polygeneric novel. The novel as it stands in the typescript drafts appears as a novel that eats itself, just like Rheticus' description of Copernicus' cosmology as the engine that destroys itself (*Doctor Copernicus*, 251).

Rheticus: Towards a Narrative of Guilt

Banville's *Doctor Copernicus* contains several narrative voices that emerge sporadically throughout the text. Apart from the childlike narrator that charts the growth of Nicolas, and the Anna Schillings narrator who indulges in parody, a sustained narrative voice appears in the third section of the text which is entitled 'Cantus Mundi'. Imhof states that

> Near the end of Part II, a shift in narrative perspective becomes conspicuous. By dint of certain narratorial comments that have a distinctly Fielding-like ring to them, the third-person point-of-view,

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prevalent up to this point, becomes superseded by an omniscient
viewpoint which has a loquacious narrator push to the fore for the
purpose of conversing with the reader (Imhof, 1989, 95).

This narrator takes on the guise of the historical figure Rheticus, Copernicus'

student. The Rheticus section is a memoir of four years as Copernicus's

apprentice and the narrator introduces himself with the arrogant opening "I,

Georg Joachim von Lauchen, called Rheticus, will now set down the true account

of how Copernicus came to reveal to a world wallowing in a stew of ignorance

the secret music of the universe" (*Doctor Copernicus*, 2000, 185). This narrator

asserts his narrative as taking precedence above all others. A pretentious, self-

congratulatory figure, Rheticus bears many of the hallmarks that will define

Banville's narrators in his later career, particularly the figures of Freddie

Montgomery in the Art Trilogy, Alexander Cleave in *Eclipse* and *Ancient Light*,

and Axel Vander in *Shroud*. One of these hallmarks is the fact that his narrative

is one of guilt and admission. In this section of the text, Rheticus' confession is

that he is inventing parts of the story (the main invention being the boy Raphael)

and thereby debunking the claim of his narrative to be "the true account". It is

worth noting that this is an intensely personal account; the narrative is a warts-

and-all account revealing a deeply flawed individual who is sometimes mocked

by those around him. Rheticus also depicts himself as a pederast in order to

justify the reasons why Copernicus did not mention his assistance in his *De*

Revolutionibus. Thus, the narrator is relating an imagined crime, similar to

Freddie's imagined crime in *The Book of Evidence*.[61]

Archetype

Rheticus is the archetypal Banvillean narrator and it is apparent that his

more famous narrators are cut from the same cloth as this would-be upstart.

Rheticus is perennially aggrieved, spiteful about the world, and he lauds his own

standing in the world and his above-average intelligence. He comes from an

upper-class background, Lutheran in this case, avowedly Anti-Catholic yet

intrigued by Catholic rituals and beliefs (it is not clear why someone existing at

the time of the Reformation could be so amazed by the goings-on of the Catholic

clergy, perhaps he is fascinated with something deeper in Catholicism). In this

way it is very much a modern text and reflects modern attitudes and prejudices.

Rheticus is the blueprint for the Freddie and Axel characters who believe their

ability to reach the top in life is thwarted by a malevolent individual. McMinn

states that Rheticus is a more typical Banvillean narrator, marking the bitterness,

anger and angst of Axel Vander and Freddie Montgomery (McMinn, 1999, 48).

These angst-ridden narrators portray themselves as the paragons of victimhood in

their accounts. Like other Banvillean narrators, Rheticus is a fantasist, he invents

Raphael because he has no other explanation for his actions. His confessional

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[61] Rheticus' failure to realise why Copernicus omitted his name in his text is echoed in Freddie
Montgomery's failure to imagine in *The Book of Evidence*. One of Freddie's oft-quoted last statements is
"...the worst, the essential sin, I think, the one for which there will be no forgiveness: that I never
imagined her vividly enough, that I never made her be there sufficiently, that I did not make her live.
Yes, that failure of imagination is my real crime, the one that made the others possible" (*The Book of
Evidence*, 215).

monologue is made up of side-swipes and bitterness. In short, his narrative

provides a generic template for Banville's later narrators and the voice. Todorov

claims that "It is because genres exist as an institution that they function as

'horizons of expectation' for readers and as 'models of writing' for authors. Here

indeed we have the two sides of the historical existence of genres" (Todorov,

2000, 199-200). Rheticus' narrative provides the generic foundation of

Banville's later works, particularly *The Book of Evidence*, as it contains the

functional elements of the confessional monologue (subtle hints at a downfall in

the early part of the narrative; a gradual realisation of guilt; a self-destructive

desire for an increased knowledge about the world, for example). Rheticus'

narrative as a fragment is self-contained and a genred work itself. It is possible

that Banville, at this stage of his career, theorises genre as a declination into

rudimentary elements of other systems and that the deranged narrator is not

viable for an extended, novel-length work. As a break from the main narrative of

the novel and the fact that it is the third of four sections, the 'Cantus Mundi'

section narrated by Rheticus mirrors the structure of the Science Tetralogy with

its third section[62] being a satirical interlude. What is clear, however, is that the

confessional mode is opened up for Banville by the success of the 'Cantus

Mundi' section, and that this sustained focus on an unreliable, guilty and

grotesque narrator figure opens up new possibilities for the representation of the

reprehensible individual in his fiction.

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[62] *The Newton Letter.*

Chapter Three

Ethics and Confession in
The Book of Evidence, *The Untouchable* and *Shroud*

The end of confession is to tell the truth to and for oneself.

> (J.M. Coetzee, 'Confession and Double Thoughts:
> Tolstoy, Rousseau, Dostoevsky')[63]

Like many other works of literature throughout history, John Banville's novels imply that we can understand more about humanity by examining the inhumanity of particular individuals. Banville's novels are ethical in this sense. His characters are not paragons of behaviour, they are antiheroes, flawed individuals who do not inspire imitation, and in the context of the narratives they are usually critical of their own choices. Banville's novels are concerned with how the individual behaves in a world where their behaviour is seen as wrong. By being concerned with the idea of responsibility and recompense for failure, Banville's novels are, summarily, ethical.

Ethics is fundamentally to do with making decisions about the consequences of our actions. We interpret our own and each other's actions and intentions by referring to our constructions of ethics, our sense of 'rightness', our codes of behaviour and responsibility. Art and literature has always had a central role in the creation of systems of ethics. Art has always been concerned with freedom and changing attitudes, usually expressing the singular perceptions of the individual for the community to interpret as they wish, often discursively.

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[63] Coetzee, J.M. 'Confession and Double Thoughts: Tolstoy, Rousseau, Dostoevsky.' *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews*. David Atwell, ed. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992. p. 291

Creative expression reveals the inner humanity of the individual and their relationship with the world and ideas.

Literature in particular has always had a contentious relationship to ethics and morality. Plato's *Republic* argues that literature presents evil men and sufferers as attractive and interesting, unlike painting which is "imitative" (*Republic*, 1997, 334-37), mimetic or purely representational. Literature has had its opponents through the centuries, particularly in Western cultures. Given its textual nature, literature can often be more prescriptive, more pedagogic and more didactic than visual or aural forms of art.

Because literature is usually based on narrative — which could be defined as a vector moving through time and space — "one of the functions of narrative is to invent one time scheme in terms of another time scheme — and that is what distinguishes narrative from simple *description* (which creates space in time), as well as from the *image* (which creates one space in another space)" (Metz, 2000, 87). What perhaps makes a text 'literary' is that the time scheme by which the individual points of information are digested by the reader (comprehension) is out of step with the time it takes to read them (apprehension). Should these two time schemes be identical, the narrative would appear descriptive, instructive, purposeful and non-literary.

Literature has the capacity to explain and to instruct - albeit for a certain definition of literature that is probably held by a minority – as a supergenre the literary is more suitable to the portrayal of cause and effect.[64] In literature, the

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[64] It could be suggested that the process of reading a text is not as immediate as viewing a static image, for example, and the literary typically implies a temporal perception of a group of ideas arranged from a

flawed individual is generally more appealing as it appeals more to our sensibilities. The cathartic element of interpreting the actions of "evil men" – to use Plato's term – emerges as a central feature of many classic literary forms, for example, the tragedy, the epic poem and the confessional monologue, or even more recent genres such as 'Misery Lit' and trauma literature.

In a manner, literature, and particularly modern literature, often depicts the individual attempting to make sense of the place of humanity in a rapidly changing world. Ideas, concepts and ideologies are interpreted, examined and developed in new and profound ways. Literature and art has rightly assumed a responsibility to reflect on the challenging aspects of modern existence, to offer an open and accessible forum for discourse and opposing views that philosophy and theory have largely failed to bring about. However, rather than being instructive or moral, literature can be transgressive and amoral.

This chapter examines three novels by Banville, namely *The Book of Evidence, The Untouchable* and *Shroud*. Taking the broad idea of ethics, this chapter aims to develop some of the ideas present in these three novels by Banville for the purpose of shedding light on the nature and performance of modernity, and how Banville's antiheroical protagonists impact on the generic elements in the novels, and how the 'codes' of behaviour in ethics and genre are examined in Banville's novels.

Banville's novels, and in particular the three novels this chapter focuses on, take up the question that the modern world places burdens on the individual.

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start point to an end point, hence the suggestion that cause and effect are more aptly suited to the literary supergenre.

These burdens are ontological and ethical and are centred on the relationship between the Self and Other. The burden of treating others like other selves is captured by the crime and punishment of Banville's protagonists. The Banvillean transgressor typically realises the error of his ways after going through a lengthy process of rationalising his crime. This realisation is usually marked by an emotional collapse or a loss of control. Often, selfhood, being and morality are explored extensively in Banville's fiction, but usually only after the initial premise that they are essentially hollow concepts is stated explicitly: an example of this would be the opening line to *Birchwood*. Therefore, it can be said that his fiction "deals with the human fall-out of this legacy of disinheritance with an array of characters who exist anxiously in the world, unable to access any shared or generally accepted beliefs that will tell them who they are" (Hand, 2002, 136). The question that must be asked is whether Banville's fictions put forward an answer to this problem or crisis of the individual. It is also important to consider whether the novels considered here, by their basis in several genres[65] including the confessional and the thriller, can by their form offer answers to the ethical questions they raise or whether their purpose is mainly aesthetic, based in form, pleasure and entertainment.

Ethics, however, does not focus solely on the individual but on the relationship between the Self and Other. The goal of ethics is "wisdom about how to live our lives" (Singer, 1994b, 3), not *one's* life but *our* lives, the emphasis being on community above and beyond the needs of the Self. Ethics is

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[65] *The Book of Evidence, The Untouchable* and *Shroud* are readymade plots based on real-life occurrences and people. Generically they take elements from the autobiography and memoir genres.

not solely focused on the personal, as morality arguably is, but on the interpersonal, from Self to Other. In essence, however, ethics is an offshoot of moral theory and incorporates many of the same ideas re-ordered and expanded to include varying aspects of daily life.

There are two generally accepted answers to the question of where our modern sense of ethics comes from. One answer would be that it comes predominantly from the Greeks (and in particular Plato and Aristotle) and from early-modern socio-political theorists such as Thomas Hobbes. Mary Midgely argues that these thinkers imagine "ethics as simply a device of egoistic prudence; its origin-myth is the social contract. It sees the pre-ethical state as one of solitude; the primal disaster being that people ever began to meet each other at all"; the other general foundation of ethics for the Western philosophical tradition is predominantly Christian which "explains morality as our necessary attempt to bring our imperfect nature in line with the will of God. Its origin-myth is the Fall of man" (Midgely, 1994, 4). Midgely goes on to argue that an ethical system derived from such simple, symbolic beginnings lacks rigour and applicability. Our modern sense of ethics is necessarily informed by these accounts, but to develop a satisfactory understanding of ethics for our purposes we must also take into account the age-old 'central' questions of philosophy and the emergence of new issues and dilemmas which threaten our assumptions. These new issues would include the alienation of the individual from the idea of community, post-modern ennui, and the breakdown in centralised authority of previously held worldviews.

The fiction of Banville is marked by the presence of philosophical ideas in varying forms. Generally, ethics, if not central to his body of work to date, is becoming increasingly central in his more recent works. It is also apparent that as a means of interpreting his concerns and themes, discussions of ethics have the potential to extend what is perhaps the primary concern of all art – to give pleasure – to challenge our perception of ourselves, our motivations and our sense of responsibility. Banville's novels constantly recast ideas and concepts to comment on modern existence in a meaningful way. Ideas which have a primary value determined by historical and cultural factors, for example, sin and existential guilt, are re-interpreted as embarrassment about inconsistency or underperforming one's role in life. Largely inherited by cultural interaction, acting ethically usually requires matching up to a standard or standards. Banville's work re-interprets the requirement to act ethically in light of what we have inherited as (post)modern individuals.

Types of Ethics

A text such as *The Untouchable* contains what could be termed as a chronological or historical view of ethics. Behaviour, duty, action, and responsibility is historicised and incidental to other theories. How the main character Victor Maskell acts is dependent on his knowledge of the particularity of theories of ethics. Ethics is based on one's immediate surroundings and situation and from the desire to conform. Maskell behaves as a Marxist to other Marxists, for example. Each mode of behaviour is ultimately empty as a

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principle. Victor repeatedly claims to be an adherent of stoicism and aestheticism but his tale does not back up these claims.

The Book of Evidence on the other hand, offers us a genealogical view of ethics. More nuanced than The Untouchable in its dealing with philosophical questions, The Book of Evidence reveals the protagonist Freddie Montgomery contemplating discursive networks of different formulations of ethics coincident with other theories. Violent and erratic, yet more contemplative than Maskell in his behaviour, Freddie epitomises an egoistic ethos that, for all its irrationalism, he appears to believe in. Shroud could be regarded as a halfway point between these two forms. The protagonist Axel Vander is equally as duplicitous as Maskell and his behaviour can be partially ascribed to pretence or performance, yet in other regards he appears to view himself as the Nietzschean Superman who wills his own law unto himself. Vander subscribes to Nietzsche's rejection of the moral distinction between good and evil as inappropriate to a man without religious belief or any objective code of ethics.

All three texts take us into the lives of three individualistic, subjectivist, egoistic characters that are all at odds with the prevailing expression of ethics in civil society – the code of law and order. Victor Maskell is a betrayer and traitor who indirectly led others to their deaths, Freddie Montgomery is a murderer. Shroud contains an ambiguity; Axel Vander's crime is either that of murdering his wife Magda or assisting in her suicide. All three attempt to justify their actions. Writing on morality in Hegel's philosophy, Alasdair MacIntyre claims,

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in what could refer to the experiences of Banville's principals, that most moral theories:

> are attempts by the individual to supply their own morality, and at one and the same time, to claim for it a genuine universality. As such they are all self-defeating. For what gives a sanction to our moral choices is in part the fact that the criteria which govern our choices are not chosen. Therefore if *I* make up my mind for myself, if *I* set myself my goals, I can at best provide a counterfeit of morality (MacIntyre, 1995, 208).

By universalising their own experience into an objective philosophy, Banville's confessors are doomed to realise the tautologies of the worldview when they are confronted with the consequences of their actions on others.

The Context for the Emergence of Banville's Ethical Fictions

John Banville's novels have periods, patterns and broad themes in his writing which correspond (roughly) to continuations or patterns between consecutive texts. John Kenny's *John Banville* monograph achieves the task of establishing defined periods and emerging themes over the course of Banville's career. The collection of short stories *Long Lankin* and his first novel *Nightspawn* are, in a fashion, experimental works wherein the author is clearly testing the limits and demands of the forms and his own technical ability. These texts are about what can be written, particularly in the case of *Nightspawn* which takes as its theme the process of literary formulation. Banville's subsequent novel, *Birchwood*, retains minor aspects of experimentation, particularly with regard to structure and symbolism. By way of a somewhat obtuse structure based on symmetries and duplication, Banville manages to incorporate a rich vein of epistemological introspection which is continued to varying degrees

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throughout the remainder of his works of fiction to date. The 'science tetralogy', made up of *Doctor Copernicus*, *Kepler*, *The Newton Letter*, and *Mefisto* offer a considerably more in-depth grappling with the themes of epistemology, metaphysics and the creative imagination.

In the latter two works of the tetralogy, significantly written as first-person narratives, a clear development can be charted. Instead of attempting, in a comparable manner to the lofty ambitions of someone like Copernicus, to complete a metafiction of man's place in the universe, Banville concentrates "his aesthetic lens, as his art increasingly focuses in on the individual and the personal" (Hand, 2002, 117). This shift, which comes to full fruition in the 'art trilogy' *The Book of Evidence*, *Ghosts*, and *Athena*, involves a change of perspective while retaining some of the broad themes evident in all his works. Literary theory, modern and post-modern philosophy often initiate shifts of emphasis in Banville's writing. For instance, the question of adequate representation which informs much of *Doctor Copernicus* is echoed in the art trilogy's protagonist and narrator Freddie Montgomery's concern with representing other people. It has been said that "Banville's entire fiction has always been imaginatively responsive to the legacy of those radical changes in our understanding of language and representation which we associate with post-structuralism and deconstruction" (McMinn, 2000, 86-7), and the author has never obviously cast off the weight of theory and philosophy until perhaps the Black novels.

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Seamus Deane argues that the introspective and reflective tendency of Banville's work is a peculiarly Irish phenomenon. He claims:

> What we meet in his work is another version of that brand of self-consciousness which has been such a distinctive feature of one tradition (and that the major one) of Irish fiction which includes Joyce, Flann O'Brien, and Beckett on one level, and accommodates a variety of people, from Jack Yeats to George Fitzmaurice to Aidan Higgins on another. All of them are at times masters of the boredom which comes from self-contemplation, solipsism carried to a degree of scientific precision, some of them are equally at times mastered by it (Deane, 1976, 334).

However, this tradition is very much a relatively recent one, therefore it may be a narrow view of influence as only relatively recent writers are proffered as inspirers. Solipsism and heightened self-consciousness has been a noticeably dominant trope of modernist and post-modernist literature that attempts to engage constructively with the difficulties resulting from the status of philosophy. This does not take away from Deane's point, but it is clear from the allusions in Banville novels and interviews that he draws upon various literary and philosophical traditions and also that a level of self-awareness of belonging to a much-publicised Irish solipsistic literary tradition brings its own difficulties.

It cannot be denied that philosophical considerations are within the scope of fiction. However, we cannot treat literature purely as philosophy because the methods and aims of both fields of discourse are mostly opposed to one another. This does not mean that literature cannot contain, or aspire to be, a philosophy and *vice versa*. It is often noted Banville's writing is 'literary fiction' *because* it contains, among other elements, so many philosophical matters usually confined to academic discourse. Perhaps it is because Banville appreciates the literary

quality of philosophy that he is drawn towards it. He recently quipped "I especially love Emerson. Each of his essays is a collection of impassioned sentences. I am inclined to think that the value of a philosopher's thought is always reflected in his style – mind you, where does that leave Kant and Hegel?" (Banville in McKeon, 2009). Certainly, Banville is aware of the generic implication of writing not philosophy, but philosophically, and that is to be bracketed as an arch-modernist or a writer of 'literary fiction'. Another implication of writing philosophically is that when writing in a genre not traditionally known for being synonymous with philosophical writing – that is, crime-writing – it could lead to the assumption that one is breaking an unwritten code of genre.

The Nature of Ethics

Several themes pertaining to ethics are apparent in many of Banville's novels to date. The question of crime and criminality, the nature and origin of guilt, punishment and redemption and many others make up much of the surface and depth of his work. Many of his protagonists, such as Victor Maskell and Freddie Montgomery, subscribe to a dialectical pattern to life and achievement, that is, only by undergoing a struggle or some form of torment, be it intellectual, moral or emotional, can life be worthwhile. Rather than being solipsistic, this idea of agonistics gives meaning to the individual by suggesting that a positive outcome can be produced by engaging in and emerging from struggle. This pattern often emerges as an irrational impulse – what is 'wrong' in the

protagonist's mind is usually not what the rest of society would consider to be of any importance. For instance, the Newton biographer's failure to gauge the identity of his hosts, Freddie's failing to imagine Josie Bell, Victor Maskell's failure to have a stable identity are given a significance beyond the implications and consequences of their actions. For a Banvillean protagonist, every aspect of self-representation has existential, and more often than not, moral, ramifications. The heightened self-consciousness of his main characters produces a tendency for either the narrative or the narration to collapse. Often, most notably in *Athena*, *Birchwood*, *Doctor Copernicus* and *Shroud*, a narrative that seems stable collapses, characters merge and narrators give up on their narrative. Certain works, in particular *Kepler*, *Eclipse*, *Shroud*, *The Sea* and *The Infinities* are the best examples that feature a reparative epiphany which in some way negates the individuals' crises by way of a full realisation of the actuality of the Other.

The shift in Banville's *oeuvre* which occurs with the publication of *The Book of Evidence* is from the epistemological and towards the ethical. It can be said that "the essentially humanist aesthetic at the heart of [Banville's writing] has involved a continuous and increasingly deft return to themes that are moral in an immanent and vital sense" (Kenny, 2009, 121). This is particularly true for *The Book of Evidence*, *The Untouchable* and *Shroud*.

Banville may be dismissive of interpretations of his work as ethical fictions. He has claimed "I'm not interested in politics, I'm not interested in society, I'm not interested in Man" (Friberg, 2006, 201). However, one cannot take this categorical statement as an essential truth about Banville's work.

Perhaps it can be taken as an indication of the areas of his work that Banville wants to point the reader away from as politics, society and the nature of man could not be absent from such a body of work as Banville's given the fact they are logical narratives, set mainly in an identifiable world, and feature characters that are often based on real, sometimes living, individuals.

On a meta-narrative level, it can be argued that all texts, and particularly fiction, written for publication and general consumption are ethical. However, this is not particularly insightful with regard to the nature or the "ethicalness" of a particular text compared to another. The assertion that Banville's writing is concerned with the ethical holds up well to scrutiny as a large proportion of his work contains solipsistic, highly self-aware and thoughtful first-person narrators who do not take the world or its inhabitants for granted, always seeking a more exact or compatible idea of their relationship with the Other. The very ideas that Banville's writing seems to use as paradigms for literary expression -- humanism and scholarly endeavour, self-absorption, the incommensurability of mind and body, the representations of others, the otherness of the Other, the consequentiality of acting or refraining to act-- coincide with the ethical. These ideas are about dealing not with how we live, but how we ought to live. The ethical is about the choice, about how we modify our actions based on past experience or knowledge, about what "makes an action the right, rather than the wrong, thing to do" (Singer, 1994b, 3).

With this in mind, one can discern an ethical slant to all of Banville's writings to date as his writing is largely confined to the paradigms of the themes

and ideas mentioned above. Other themes have emerged at different points in his

career, for example history, class, memory, but if his work is to have an end it is

to consider how the individual rationalises his (or her, but usually his) actions to

an external figure, be it the judge and jury of *The Book of Evidence*, one's

conscience, the "other self, that stern interior sergeant" (*The Book of Evidence*,

1990, 17), Clio the muse of history in *The Newton Letter*, the imagined reader of

Birchwood, the absent God so frequently referred to or, in short, the anonymous

"you" figure which appears again and again. Judgement and the motif of an

ever-present judiciary inform the choices the Banvillean character makes. As

highlighted, most literary texts are amenable to a discussion of ethics; however, it

is clear that from the time of the publication of *The Book of Evidence* onwards a

greater emphasis has been placed upon the acts of committing and atoning for

acts of criminality, dubious morality or anti-social behaviour. Certain texts, such

as the art trilogy, *The Untouchable* and *Shroud* are conducive to a rounded

discussion on ethics. The epistemological and existential crises of *Nightspawn*,

Birchwood and the science tetralogy and *Eclipse* lend themselves to a discussion

on ethics but will be sidelined not only for reasons of time and space, but also

because the idea of wrongdoing in these novels is confined to thought as opposed

to action. In short, these protagonists are marked by inaction and by

predominantly abstract guilt. Therefore, they cannot be properly termed as

'confessionals' in the conventional sense. All Banville novels are in some way

confessional although the scientific heresies of the Copernicans and the nervous

breakdowns of the Newton biographer and Alexander Cleave are in no way

human or moral transgressions. They are, rather, a personal transgression by the self, the imagination's transgression of the predominant world-view of a particular time in history or a transgression of a professional code of conduct or law. *The Book of Evidence*, *The Untouchable* and *Shroud* all contain narrator/protagonists who either directly or indirectly cause the death of another human being and then rationalise their actions as an afterthought. The mutability of reason in the minds of the main characters of these novels results in what critics have largely identified as either subjectivism or relativism.

Relativism

It is a mark of poststructuralist theory that the prescriptivism of moral theory is essentially prejudiced in favour of the subject. The status of knowledge and authority is in a fashion distorted by subject. Lyotard argues that "the important thing is not, or not only, to legitimate denotative utterances pertaining to the truth, such as 'The earth revolves around the sun,' but rather to legitimate prescriptive utterances pertaining to justice, such as 'Carthage must be destroyed' or 'the minimum wage must be set at x dollars'" (Lyotard, 2004, 357). He continues:

> the only role positive knowledge can play is to inform the practical subject about the reality within which the execution of the prescription is to be inscribed. It allows the subject to circumscribe the executable, or what it is possible to do. But the executory, what should be done, is not within the purview of positive knowledge. It is one thing for an undertaking to be possible and another for it to be just. Knowledge is no longer the subject, but in the service of the subject: its only legitimacy (though it is formidable) is the fact that it allows morality to become reality (357-8).

By analysing this statement, several ideas can be brought into full relief. Firstly, Lyotard gives the impression that prescriptivism is purely oppressive. His usage of the term "Carthage must be destroyed" implies a statement of aggression that the term "Rome must be defended" would not. Also, his example of the minimum wage assumes prescriptivism is a factor in the stratification of society. More interestingly, however, his statement reveals an antipathy towards positive knowledge and posits different realities in which different prescriptions are only applicable. Essentially, he favours a relativist formulation of ethics and justice where the context of the subject is the primary element.

What can be regarded as a maxim of post-modernism is that our ideas about the centrality and authority of ethical systems should be continuously held to account. The process of holding ethics to account often leads to accusations of nihilism. Will Slocombe opines that "those opposed to post-modernism argue that it is nihilistic because of its rampant textuality and lack of political or ethical responsibility; those in favour of post-modernism argue that it is anything but nihilistic because it is a response to an earlier 'modernist' nihilism" (Slocombe, 2005, xii). Following on from this, one could suggest that the idea of assertability and the positive knowledge of theory and philosophy are under threat. This allows forms of discourse that do not fully assume the mantle of positive knowledge, art and literature, to increasingly consider the topics and ideas previously confined to philosophy.

In this context, John Banville's novels are remarkably multi-faceted in their development of ideas which have been the mainstay of what some would

refer to as literary or modernist fiction. Banville's texts are modern in the sense that they are seek to delineate ideas of the moment without being didactic or pedagogic and are clearly aware of their status as "mere" text. Banville's texts are often referred to as modernist or post-modernist texts, and as modern texts they often reveal a scepticism about the end of knowledge and the reduction of God, reason, art, and even logic and mathematics to Wittgensteinian language games. The ethics of the relativist approach to epistemological theories can be summarised as:

> the question of whether to treat language as a picture or as a game. This latter issue – very roughly, between the younger and the older Wittgenstein - is brought to a head by debates about "truth in fiction" because the whole problematic of realism vs. idealism, or of "representationalism" vs. "pragmatism" can be crystallized in the question: what, if anything, turns on the difference between being "really there" and being "made up"? For what purposes is a convenient fiction as good as reality? (Rorty, 1982, 110).

The idea of a "convenient fiction" corresponds with doubts about the applicability and function of theory. Literature of 'codes' plays with representation and pragmatism: what can be expressed and the manner of expression, and what cannot be fully expressed but instead hinted at. In *The Postmodern Condition* Lyotard presents the notion of 'displacement' as a move within a language system which alters 'partner', 'addressee' and 'referent'. He stresses the importance of disorienting the language game in order to stave off uniformity (Lyotard, 2004, 356). Lyotard's founding principle of 'agonistics' or transgression is analogous to Kant's reasonable critique and action, and in a generic sense is akin to hybridisation. This sceptical approach to the pragmatics

of language ultimately results in an anxiety regarding how to justify actions and how to verify ideas in an ever-moving framework of language.

Post-modern literature has been generally reflective of these ideas. In Banville's writing, post-modern doubt often emerges as ambivalent towards authority. Parody, pastiches, allusion and intertextuality are prevalent in much of his work. However, it is also arguable that there are many elements of his fiction and thought which deny the critic the closure of labelling his novels as purely modernist or post-modernist. Banville's narratives have gone beyond the mechanistic post-modern experimentation of *Nightspawn* to reveal a more singular and non-fragmentary purpose. Beneath the modernist veneer of his work one can detect a broad range of values which are largely humanist and Romantic in origin and offer a counterpoint to the philosophy, modernist trickery and post-modern playfulness which many critics and readers allude to. The status of epistemological certitude results, positively, in a type of scepticism. Also, the status of the individual Self is thrown into question. "To claim that [Banville's] characters 'inherit' a world is somewhat misleading, for a better description of their plight is found in understanding them as the disinherited. The world they inhabit is a fallen one: an uncertain and often bleak place wherein anxieties about man's position are paramount" (Hand, 2002, 119). How Banville manages to juxtapose these different aspects or concerns of modernity is interesting. By asking how Banville's work grapples with the relativistic slant of much of modern philosophy and the demands of fiction, and particularly the novel form he has chosen to write in, we are provided with several insightful

moments. The place of the Self in the modern world is the focus of his work in

his early to middle period. It could be argued, however, that anxieties about

subjectivism, moral relativism and authority is not a modern development.

MacIntyre in his analysis of Kant's philosophy says that

> each of us is his own moral authority. To recognize this, which Kant
> calls the autonomy of the moral agent, is to recognize also that external
> authority, even if divine, can provide no criterion for morality. To
> suppose that it could would be to be guilty of heteronomy, of the attempt
> to subject the agent to a law outside himself, alien to his nature as a
> rational being (MacIntyre, 1995, 195).

Banville's examination of the morality of acting without recourse to an Authority

is first illustrated in *The Book of Evidence*, and it is in this novel that we see the

best example of the twisted morality of a disinherited, post-modern individual.

Representations of ethics in Banville's works

The murderer Freddie Montgomery exemplifies Banville's treatment of

the ethical issues of crime and confession. Freddie in *The Book of Evidence*

illustrates that "disagreement about moral codes seems to reflect people's

adherence to and participation in different ways of life" (Mackie, 1982, 160).

The causal connection between law and lawful behaviour is that one is lawful

because participating in a lawful society and not because of the *a priori* value of

law or moral code itself. Freddie's killing of Josie Bell is hardly understandable

as a rejection of moral conventions for a personal morality as even Freddie seems

unclear about the reasons for his actions. Freddie is dismissive of any attempt to

universalise an idea or theory to an objective truth:

> They took the broad view, as if they did not realise that everything is infinitely divisible. They talked of cause and effect, as if they believed it possible to isolate an event and hold it up to scrutiny in a pure, timeless space, outside the mad swirl of things. They would speak of whole peoples as if they were speaking of a single individual, while to speak even of an individual with any show of certainty seemed to me foolhardy (*The Book of Evidence*, 17).

In this short extract, Freddie appears to believe in a lack of absolute certainty, just like Gabriel Swan in *Mefisto*, yet Banville also goes as far as to create an alter-ego for Freddie, the Bunter figure, to offer some explanation for the lack of a personal morality or code. The motif of divided Self, or a lack of an identifiable self, stems back to the opening line in *Birchwood* where Gabriel Godkin says "I am therefore I think". The divided Self is an important aspect of how we as individuals treat our actions, about whether we are responsible for our actions or whether or not we can claim full agency. It is possible to connect Freddie's sense of a divided Self with his all-pervasive relativism. Reflecting on Freddie's sense of class, of entitlement and privilege "the argument from relativity has some force simply because the actual variations in the moral code are more readily explained by the hypothesis that they express perceptions, most of them seriously inadequate and badly distorted, of objective values" (Mackie, 1982, 160-1). Freddie is relativistic at the beginning of the novel, and his main crime is that he is unable to recognise the subjectivity of his views and the selfhood of others.

In *The Book of Evidence*, Banville brings into focus the moral and ethical crises that have been lurking just beneath the surface of his previous novels. *The Book of Evidence* is a continuation of the central themes of the science novels

and particularly *Mefisto*, namely the legitimacy of individual agency in a universe seemingly governed by deterministic forces such as inherited traits or character, the laws of Newtonian physics, causality or chance (itself portrayed as a deterministic principle). "Philosophically speaking, *The Book of Evidence* marks a transition in Banville's work from primarily epistemological concerns to a more ontological and existential outlook" (McNamee, 2006, 143). In the spirit of all of Banville's narrative voices, the protagonist of *The Book of Evidence*, Freddie Montgomery, undergoes a personal crisis. What is unique about *The Book of Evidence* is that the plot involves a clearly reprehensible act, the killing of another human being. Banville's antihero is cast against the backdrop of a world where an absent (or almost absent) divine being seems to correspond with an existential crisis for Freddie.

Ethics in criticism is about discovering the limits of behaviour and thought and interpreting the actions that result from this awareness. On the surface, the actions of Freddie Montgomery can be interpreted as 'ethical' – pertaining to ethics – as they deal with theft, dishonesty, murder, lust, remorse or lack of, judgement and punishment.

Kant in his second *Critique* makes the initial assertion that nothing is unconditionally good, except a good will and therefore, as one critic put it "Attention is thus focused from the outset on the agent's will, on his motives and intentions rather than upon what he actually does" (MacIntyre, 1995, 192). Freddie, a murderer, thief and liar is anathema to what any society would term as a 'good' person, yet he is deserving of interest as a literary subject as his actions

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vary from the norms of society. He is appealing because he is an antihero, not *despite* being an antihero. His tale of confession is perhaps born out of good intentions – his account is the foundation for an imaginative attempt to bring his victim back to life through art and writing. *The Book of Evidence* is not only Freddie's mitigating memoir; it is an artful elaboration of the Self in the wrappings of a vaguely directed apologia to the world in general.

Ghosts, the sequel to *The Book of Evidence*, shows Freddie taking on the ethical imperative of imagining another girl into existence (D'Hoker, 2004, 160). This is Freddie's sole act of *contrition* and this self-imposed sentence which negates the "laws of retribution and revenge" which characterise the legal system (*The Book of Evidence*, 152).

Freddie's personal ethics and morality, which stem from his account, are both comically delusional and logically suspect. He believes that he alone is not beholden to the law of the land: "I never imagined there would be anything so vulgar as a police investigation" (*The Book of Evidence*, 103) and his petulant sense of entitlement is one of several examples of moral relativism in the trilogy. Despite the fact that the main character in the novel is a morally repugnant individual, he is not amoral like Meersault in Albert Camus' *The Outsider* – a character with a similar outlook with regards to the crime that he committed. In a key moment at the close of the novel, Freddie finds himself in a police van with "an ancient wino who had been arrested the night before" (*The Book of Evidence*, 217) and in a moment of "sympathy, of comradeship, of solidarity, something like that" clasps him in a protective gesture. In recollection he says that such

things "will not abate [his] guilt one whit. But maybe they signify something for the future" (218) giving a sense of hope and empathy with other human beings that is almost absent in the novel.

To argue that Banville's work, and in particular *The Book of Evidence*, are moral fictions would be going too far, but insofar as certain texts circumscribe morality and ethics it can be argued that his texts delineate the overt and covert norms of behaviour in society. The measure of how ethical a text is depends on the responses and reflections that it generates. To say it is ethical or confessional is not enough, this would be an effort of categorisation and would miss the issues at the heart of such confessional texts.

It could be said that Axel Vander in *Shroud* is more amoral than Freddie for the reason that he takes on the role of moral iconoclast. He says:

> I had been confronted with the all-exuding prospect of freedom. That was the electric possibility toward which all my bristling and crepitant particles were pointed. I was at last, I realised, a wholly free agent. Everything has been taken from me, therefore everything was to be permitted. I could do whatever I wished, follow my wildest whim. I could lie, cheat, steal, maim, murder, and justify it all. More: the necessity of justification would not arise, for the land I was entering now was a land without laws (*Shroud*, 2002, 165).

This extract displays Nietzsche's construction of freedom. *Shroud* is not the confessional fiction that *The Book of Evidence* attempts to be. Axel Vander's narrative does not orbit around a singular immoral action but rather his continued being; his life and relationships are depicted as unethical as they are primarily based on lies and pretence. Lies are unethical because the successful lie is based on knowledge of ethics and a presupposition: "a lie can work only if enough people tell the truth to make truthfulness the normal expectation" (Wick, 1983,

xviii). In *Shroud*, Axel Vander does in one narrative what Freddie does in three – he rewrites the text of his existence.

It could be argued that the main theme of *The Book of Evidence* is the questioning of the legitimacy of a consensual code of ethics or a moral consciousness in light of Freddie's freedom from belief in a world where one's actions have consequences beyond the immediate. For Freddie, the punishment of the judicial system is inadequate. At one point he refers to his handcuffs while on remand: "By the way, they are not as uncomfortable as they might seem – in fact, there was something about being manacled that I found almost soothing, as if it were a more natural state than that of untrammelled freedom" (*The Book of Evidence*, 190). It can be inferred from this statement, and from numerous other examples, that Freddie does not resist the form of punishment that he is being subjected to because it is not conducive to rehabilitation, genuine remorse or guilt. In fact, Freddie seems to enjoy prison and the judicial process. When thinking about the police assembling evidence against him he comments that "it was strange to be the object of so much meticulous attention, strange, and not entirely unpleasant" (*The Book of Evidence*, 173). The course of the trilogy reveals that Freddie believes that only a self-imposed punishment, the re-imagining of his victim, is the only apt recompense for his crime. Throughout *The Book of Evidence* in particular, Freddie's doubting of any form of divine authority reinforces his belief that the only philosophically justifiable act of reparation is the act of self-reparation. The centre of all his problems is the divided Self.

Crime and Punishment

Freddie's lack of faith in God is not an absolute lack of faith, but rather a lack of faith in the abilities of a divine being. Put differently, Freddie appears to believe that submitting to an unconditional belief in a higher power results in a lack of agency. At one point he claims that his comments about the nature of a higher power "are not so much signs of incredulity, I think, as of embarrassment. It is as if someone, the hidden arranger of all this intricate, amazing affair, who up to now never put a foot wrong, has suddenly gone that bit too far, has tried to be just a little too clever, and we are all disappointed, and somewhat sad" (*The Book of Evidence*, 61). This lack of faith in a higher power has the potential to trigger a sense of self-empowerment and a stronger sense of community by a rejection of the "Socratic/Cartesian separation of humanity from a higher power which will, should it so decide, dole out its favour on the supplicant and all will again be well" which depends on "Remorse, and subsequent forgiveness and redemption" (McNamee, 2006, 155). Rejecting an omnipotent authority and/or the notion of redemption does not preclude one having a moral compass or a sense of a communal code of ethics based on responsibility to the Other as a separate Self. However, Freddie's realisation of the absence of omnipotent authority is confounded by his split Self – he claims "I have always felt – what is the word – bifurcate, that's it" (*The Book of Evidence*, 95) and his sense of a moral conscience appears as something he is in effect resistant to.

Arguably our impression of the moral ambiguity of Freddie's account is reinforced by what Joseph McMinn refers to as "[a] similar kind of authorial

absence… in Banville's own fiction, where the characteristic form has been the dramatic: an intense, confessional monologue" (McMinn, 2000, 84). As a narrator he has graduated from the scientists of the tetralogy and is, "the refined issue of several of Banville's earlier narrators who possess the same compulsive need to share their disturbing tale, a post-modern version of the Ancient Mariner" (102). This implies that the natural mode for the later Banvillean character is the confessional: they are typically narrated from a debased position and are post-traumatic experiences where the narrator is somewhat complicit. These experiences are regularly woven into the texts as the central defining feature of each character.

The confessional monologue, as used by Banville, by definition implies that the reader or listener is either morally superior or, at worst, morally equal to the one who confesses. From the outset of many of the novels, Banvillean narrators are either morally or ethically suspect, thus placing the reader in the position of arbiter or judge. For this reason, the Banvillean confession appears to function as an aesthetic stance – that is, being a former transgressor but now a confessor is an intriguing or attractive feature – rather than as a purposefully remorseful act of contrition, and functions particularly as a generic feature in these novels of guilt as the protagonists are cavalier with regard to ethical codes. Freddie's confession is something that is self-willed rather than one that is morally necessary for him to continue with his life. Indeed, Freddie wholeheartedly enjoys his experience when apprehended – "I decided to give myself up. Why had I not thought of it before? The prospect was wonderfully

seductive" (*The Book of Evidence*, 130). The sinner or criminal embodies an aesthetic that rationalises one's sense of being exiled from the demands society puts upon the Self.

In Banville's later novel, *The Untouchable*, the main character Victor Maskell also claims in a similar vein that "In every wrongdoer there lurks the desire to be caught" (*The Untouchable*, 1998, 366). *The Untouchable*'s Maskell and Axel Vander of *Shroud* continue with the theme of the criminal desiring to be found out, sabotaging their selves for the "aesthetic purity" (*The Untouchable*, 196) of the treacherous, duplicitous individual. Following suit, Axel Vander says "where before I had skulked in trepidation, afraid and yet not knowing exactly what it was I feared, now I saw myself as besieged, stalwart, a roundhead suddenly become a cavalier. I felt, I confess it, quite the dashing villain" (*Shroud*, 216). In effect, by fully embracing the role of a villain the Banvillean narrator asserts his individuality as he is "besieged" by those who conform to established norms of behaviour. By extension, "the challenge behind Freddie's rhetorical performance is to acknowledge his depravity in a style which forces us to consider an aesthetic rather than a moral assessment of that depravity... the ultimate self-indictment, wherein we may observe, from an intrigued but safe distance, the aesthetic dimension of the criminal mind" (McMinn, 1999, 103). The Banvillean narrator forces the reader to contemplate the weight of their actions by embracing the trappings of the moral exile.

Immorality is always portrayed by Banville as the taking on of a role, an act or a performance. This offers transcendence previously unavailable to the

protagonists. After announcing himself to Max Schaudeine as Axel Vander, the name of his disappeared friend, the duplicitous narrator of *Shroud* says:

> I had not known what I was about to say, yet it was no surprise to hear myself say it. On the contrary, it felt entirely natural, like putting on a new suit of clothes that had been tailored expressly for me, or, rather, for my identical twin, now dead. It was thrilling, too, in a way that I could not exactly account for. Immediately I had spoken there came a breathless, tottery sensation, as if I had managed a marvellous feat of dare-devilry, as if I had leapt across a chasm, in my dazzling new raiment, or climbed to a dizzyingly high place, from which I could survey another country, one that I had heard fabulous accounts of but had never visited. Nor did I mark the disproportion of these sensations to their cause – I had merely given a false name, after all, as a petty miscreant might to an enquiring policeman. Is this what the actor experiences every night when he steps on to the stage, this weightlessness, this sudden freedom, what Goethe somewhere calls *der Fall nach oben*, accompanied by its tremor of secret, hardly containable hilarity? (*Shroud*, 162-3).

One can see from the extract above that the smallest of immoralities, the telling of a lie, appears to open the protagonist to experiences that are unavailable to those who act according to the demands of truth and reason. Performance or pretence in Banville's novels always contains a pleasure that is impossible to experience communally. The Banvillean individual typically takes pleasure in resisting a standard of meaning and significance; it is as if they are a free-moving element of a language game, asserting their relevance by not being an identifiably singular or static constituent.

In *The Book of Evidence*, Freddie's pleasure in being a criminal is combined with an acknowledgement of the lack of potential for penitence or remorse in a penal institution. Freddie begins his account by describing the drug-use, sexual antics and rampant masculinities of the prison in which he is interred. Penal reform is, for Freddie, a failure of the collective imagination and a failure

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of an ethical system founded on utilitarian principles and not relativistic ones. Freddie criticises the utilitarianism of penal institutions and states that "Your honour, I know that no one, not even the prosecution, likes a squealer, but I think it is my duty to apprise the court of the brisk trade in proscribed substances which is carried on in this institution" (*The Book of Evidence*, 6). Feeling compelled to inform the judiciary of the abuses behind the gates of the prison, as if he is the first to make such an observation, Freddie reveals himself to be aloof and somewhat naïve. Freddie does not conform to codes of behaviour even in his moral exile, as he breaks the prisoner code by being an informer. He is more ethical in exile, reporting crimes to an authority in a way that he would not do before being incarcerated. The obligation of informing the court of the relatively minor crimes of already incarcerated people (and therefore at least less of a threat to the outside world) is in stark contrast to the lack of a sense of obligation or duty to justice or the very real human suffering of his victim and her family in and around the time of the more heinous crime – his act of murder.

By living a life that is in one sense a continuous critique of community and the mundanity of the real world and everyday life, Freddie Montgomery elevates his ego, and consequently his actions, above any ethical obligations that a member of society must have to fully experience the benefits of that society. What is complex yet intriguing about *The Book of Evidence* is that Freddie partially exonerates himself by repeatedly putting forward the idea that he is not responsible for his actions. Choice and responsibility are non-applicable to his being. He does not think – "The fact is, I was not thinking at all, not what could

really be called thinking" (*The Book of Evidence*, 102) – and mocks the notion of choice after stopping in the driveway of Whitewater where there is a fork in the road: "behold, the wretch forsakes the path of righteousness" (104). The reference to choosing a path for himself is undermined by the fact that he is carrying a hammer and a length of rope with which to commit his crime. His crime is noticeably pre-meditated, but our narrator is unwilling to admit this fact. Tellingly, he creates an alter-ego, one "Bunter" upon whom he lays the blame. However, in a typical Banvillean stroke the highly self-conscious protagonist questions whether he could act against the will of the alter ego:

> Decided? - I do not think it was a matter of deciding. I do not think it was a matter of thinking, even. 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 (151).

Not only does Freddie believe that the invention of this alter-ego takes away the responsibility of the immoral action but it also precludes responsibility by denying decision and thought: "I do not think it was a matter of thinking". The individualism of Freddie is undercut by the modern dilemma of psychology – to others he appears to choose his own code of conduct or way to live but his knowledge of himself precludes any willed attempt to modify his behaviour as his actions are not recognisable as his own. Freddie is aloof as his sense of self is, for him, coming from a more informed place than the other individuals who

appear in the novel – often caricatured, fantastical or stereotypical characters –
making him "an intelligent beast who realises that sanity requires an unbearable
degree of mimicry" (McMinn, 1999, 111). It has been said that "with a
distinguished literary and philosophical lineage as a type, Freddie is honed for
the probing of received post-romantic ideas about the individual's entitlement to
his own private ethics of being and authenticity" (Kenny, 2009, 123), confessing
his need for existential privacy in a world of community.

The inevitability of his crime is something Freddie constantly alludes to.
In one section of the text Freddie meets a portentous figure on a bridge. Sitting
on a bridge over a stream he says that:

> Presently a large, ancient man came along and began to address me
> earnestly. He wore sandals, and a torn mackintosh slung like a kern's
> tartan over one shoulder, and carried a thick ash stave. His hair was
> long, his beard matted. For some reason I found myself picturing his
> head borne aloft on a platter. He spoke calmly, in a loud, strong voice. I
> could not understand a word he said – he seemed to have lost the power
> of articulation – yet I found something oddly affecting in the way he
> stood there, leaning on his ashplant, with one knee flexed, his eyes fixed
> on me, speaking out his testament. I watched his mouth working in the
> thicket of his beard, and nodded my head slowly, seriously. Madmen do
> not frighten me, or even make me uneasy. Indeed, I feel that their
> ravings soothe me. I think it is because everything, from the explosion
> of a nova to the fall of dust in a deserted room, is to them of vast and
> equal significance, and therefore meaningless. He finished, and
> continued regarding me in silence for a moment. Then he nodded
> gravely, and, with a last, meaningful stare, turned and strode away, over
> the bridge (*The Book of Evidence*, 93-4).

Hand interprets this figure as a reference to the 'Macintosh' character who haunts
Joyce's *Ulysses*, the macintosh and the ashplant being clear references to this text
(Hand, 2002, 136-7). In *Ulysses*, Leopold Bloom sees Macintosh at Paddy
Dignam's funeral and considers him mourner number 13, "Death's number", and

begins to think about death saying, "Lay me in my native earth. Bit of clay from

the holy land" (Joyce, 2010, 100). This character in *The Book of Evidence* could

also, however, be interpreted as a prophet character, particularly the Biblical John

the Baptist. Significantly, the scene occurs above a river, the common site for

early Christian baptisms, and the sandaled ascetic who speaks "out his testament"

evokes the image in Freddie's mind of a head being borne on a plate, referencing

the beheading of John the Baptist and the presentation of his head to Herod's

daughter Salomé. The scene also makes clear Freddie's point that when

everything has equal significance, everything becomes meaningless, perhaps

emphasizing the existential predicament of knowing that when an object or thing

loses a previously held significance it is the Self that is altered or must assimilate

a new, perhaps unwelcome, knowledge. The occurrence of this scene before the

murder of Josie Bell and the theft of the painting lends weight to the idea that this

character is a harbinger of death, as Macintosh appears to be for Bloom. Later in

the novel, just before Freddie is apprehended, he sees what is likely the same

man at the harbour looking out to sea: "The man at the harbour wall buttoned his

raincoat. The Sunday morning crowd was long gone, but he, *he* was still there"

(*The Book of Evidence*, 185). Soon after, Freddie gives "a great gasp of relief"

when he realises the "man in the mackintosh was gone" (186). While the

similarity between this character and the prophet is slight, the fact that Freddie

appears to connect him with a sense of foreboding is interesting. Perhaps

Mackintosh is a manifestation of Freddie's guilt as he ascribes this individual

with a power of suggestiveness that can only be linked with Freddie's very real

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crime.[66] Whether real or imaginary, the madman prophet on the bridge in *The Book of Evidence* coincides with Freddie's sense of an imminent and inevitable act of violence:

> I felt in fact that I had been here before, and even that I had done all these things before, walked about aimlessly in the early morning, and sat on the bridge, and gone into a shop and purchased things. I have no explanation: I only felt it. It was if I had dreamed a prophetic dream and then forgotten it, and this was the prophecy coming true. But then, something of that sense of inevitability infected everything I did that day – inevitable, mind you, does not mean excusable, in my vocabulary. No indeed, a strong mixture of Catholic and Calvinist blood courses in my veins. It came to me suddenly, with happy inconsequentiality, that it was midsummer day (*The Book of Evidence*, 98).

The fact that it is midsummer strengthens the point that the scene at the river is a liminal one; Freddie is in-between two states, between the human and the inhuman. The notion of acting out a prophecy adds a quasi-religious or mystical tone to the events at the centre of his narrative. Instead of having to choose between two courses of action the prophetic allusions add an air of inevitability to Freddie's intentions. However, this is only knowable by Freddie's choice – that of rendering his story as a text, as a narrative memoir. His course of action is one, we are led to believe, that is ordained for him. Interestingly, Freddie holds on to his guilt as a prized possession and he does not excuse his actions, facetiously blaming his parentage and blood for what he is about to do. He relishes the fact that he is responsible for his actions despite the fact that he does not willingly choose them. After the murder he says:

> I killed her, I admit it freely. And I know that if I were back there today I would do it again, not because I would want to, but because I would have no choice. It would be just as it was then, this spider, and this

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[66] Later, this 'Mackintosh' is one of the policemen that take Freddie into custody (*The Book of Evidence*, 189).

> moonlight between the trees, and all, all the rest of it. Nor can I say I did not mean to kill her – only, I am not clear as to when I began to mean it (*The Book of Evidence*, 150).

These extracts indicate that Freddie's uses the knowledge of the wrongness of his actions to emphasise his lack of individual agency.

The notion of responsibility depends on a fundamental freedom of the subject to choose between several options. In other words, believing in free will is a prerequisite of responsibility. In Banville's texts we can see from the multiplicity of cultural forms, social classes and professional classes (an admixture which represents, or at least points towards, a total), one ethical code. *The Book of Evidence*, however, foregrounds the egoistic ethos of Freddie Montgomery. Despite this, it is evident that each of Banville's texts reveals a sense of moral ballast prevalent in attitudes towards law. Freddie chooses not to actively resist the law, as do Victor Maskell and Axel Vander in *The Untouchable* and *Shroud* respectively. The egocentricity of the narrators can be seen therefore as a non-rejection of the principle of 'correct' or justifiable action. Freddie offers a justification for his actions that is acceptable to his Self but not to society. He is self-righteous in the true sense of the term:

> …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 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 (*The Book of Evidence*, 16).

However, the idea of justifiable action requires a second agent, an "other" or an interpersonal institution or idea (such as law, the courts, a judge or a jury) to declare an action justifiable or unjustifiable. A subjectivist outside the court, Freddie is an egoist inside it, but one who is aware of the necessity of an arbitrator of justice. His comment on responsibility, free will and his declaration that he will accept the outcome of the trial illustrate that he has pre-empted the morality of the court and stoically accedes to its verdict. This reveals his desire to perversely take the moral high ground after committing a morally indefensible crime. The philosophical argument about the nature of free will in a determinist universe indicates that he is thinking of the larger picture, favouring a philosophical conundrum over the immediate reality of the court. Clearly, like Victor Maskell in *The Untouchable*, Freddie believes that the aesthetic nature of martyrdom (its mythological, symbolic and political power) is of primary importance, and only by textualising the experience can it be fully appreciated.

Regarding authority in Banville's writing, Laura Izarra argues that "In order to give meaning for his art, Banville explores the institutionalised discourses of society, deconstructing the assumptions of the various professional areas, particularly where fossilised meanings have become absolutes and unquestionable in their use because they are the mirror of sacramental values" (Izarra, 1998, 150). While this statement offers an excellent insight into the concerns of authority and epistemology in the science novels, it does not hold true for all of his works. In the art trilogy in particular, the conventions and assumptions of morality, justice, art criticism, and literature are certainly

parodied and mocked, but as readers we are always aware of the obscurantist

reasoning of the protagonist. If certain assumptions are deconstructed by

Banville, for example the concepts of authority or being, they are only partially

deconstructed and are left to stand as they offer a certain utility or aesthetic

quality as "sacramental values". Emblematic of the attitude towards art in

Banville's novels, Victor Maskell says that "art was the only thing in my life that

was untainted" (*The Untouchable*, 316). Some things are left unexamined. In

The Untouchable, and in arguably in all of the novels, aestheticism is the one

credo that is not dismissed. In relation to ethics, the Banvillean

protagonist/narrator typically attempts to adhere responsibly to an ideology or

ideologies. The deconstruction of the assumptions of ideology does not

necessarily amount to nihilism; the pervasiveness of reflection, introspection and

sceptical thought are part of a responsible credo which is constantly left

untouched by Banville. His characters' highlighting of the inherent paradoxes of

metaphysics, science and political ideology does not preclude a faith in enquiry

or criticism.

Denying full responsibility for one's actions is entirely different to

denying any responsibility. However, there is an element of self-interest in

Freddie's description of the motivations (or lack thereof) for his crime. While

emphasising the inevitability of his actions, conversely he ascribes pleasure and

satisfaction to the carrying out of his crimes. Regarding a dream of cannibalism

Freddie says:

> Anyway, there I was, mumbling these frightful gobs of flesh, my
> stomach heaving even as I slept. That is all there was, really, except for

an underlying sensation of enforced yet horribly pleasurable transgression. Wait a moment. I want to get this right, it is important, I'm not sure why. Some nameless authority was making me do this terrible thing, was standing over me implacably with folded arms as I sucked and slobbered, yet despite this - or perhaps, even because of it – despite the horror, too, and the nausea -- deep inside me something exulted (*The Book of Evidence*, 54).

For Freddie, the pleasure of being a repugnant, monstrous individual has its benefits. The symbolism surrounding monsters and criminal has an appeal of its own for him. He is the transgressor, a literal Narcissus entranced by his own image. His narrative is filled with descriptions of himself as a monster such as the vampire or cannibal in the extract above. In another instance he sees through Daphne's eyes – "I had a glimpse of myself as she would see me, my glimmering flanks and pale backside, my fish-mouth agape" (*The Book of Evidence*, 68). Even when his pictorial imagination fails him he is a monster – "I cannot see myself. I am a sort of floating eye, watching, noting, scheming" (*The Book of Evidence*, 64). By depicting and describing himself as a monster, Freddie is offering up mitigating factors for his actions. The "nameless authority" of the cannibalism dream also reflects the deliberate refutation of individual responsibility. However, Freddie's account of his motivations is untrustworthy. In response to his denial of responsibility his counsel Maolseachlainn confronts him, and asserts the fact that his crimes must have been in some degree premeditated:

This, however, is not good enough, it seems. Maolseachlainn frowns, slowly shaking his great head, and without realising it goes into his court routine. Is it not true that I left my mother's house in anger only a day after my arrival there? Is it not the case that I was in a state of high indignation because I had heard my father's collection of pictures had been sold to Helmut Behrens for what I considered a paltry sum? And is

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it not further the case that I had reason already to feel resentment against the man Behrens, who had attempted to cuckold my father in – But hold on there, old man, I said: that last but only came to light later on. He always looks so crestfallen when I stop him in his tracks like this. All the same, facts are facts (*The Book of Evidence*, 74).

This unwillingness to confront the hard evidence is later mirrored in *The Untouchable*. When Victor Maskell's biographer confronts him over his treachery to the British state he claims that in his world "there are no simple questions, and precious few answers of any kind" (*The Untouchable*, 28). Echoing Maolseachlainn in *The Book of Evidence*, Maskell's biographer retorts "There *are* answers. Why did you spy for the Russians? How did you get away with it? What did you think you would achieve by betraying your country and your country's interests? Or was it because you never thought of this as your country? Was it because you were Irish and hated us?" (*The Untouchable*, 22) Stating the full facts of the case is, to characters such as Freddie Montgomery and Victor Maskell, representative of subscribing to an ideology of proper behaviour based on a code of ethics. Part of what an ideology, here the abstract idea of justice, needs to function as a discernible logical thought process is the notion of identifiably incontrovertible factors; under certain controlled circumstances with fixed values, one can make a judgement based on evidence or data. Arguments from first principles are not explicitly denied in Banville's novels but are rather treated as circumspect and sometimes mocked outright. The typical Banvillean main character resents that incontrovertible abstractions are favoured to facts.

The narrators of Banville's novels are particularly creative when it comes to holding a philosophical position. They transcribe the figurative from the literal. Banville's main characters are undoubtedly subjectivist in their leanings. In his chapter on *The Untouchable* McMinn refers to the narrators: "The essential point about such figures is their belief in the subjective truth of a fiction" (McMinn, 1999, 142). One could go further and say that whatever is regarded as an essential truth, the narrators always treat as a fiction.

One interesting aspect of Banville's ethical fictions is that *The Book of Evidence*'s Freddie Montgomery and *The Untouchable*'s Victor Maskell are not excessively sceptical. Maskell, on the surface more naturally apt to affirmative and dogmatic philosophies, exemplifies an aestheticism that manifests itself in all of Banville's narrators since the appearance of *The Book of Evidence*. Freddie Montgomery's aestheticism emerges in the form of the idealisation of the split Self, the Jekyll and Hyde of Freddie the scientist/mathematician and Bunter the murderer. The Banvillean narrator is sceptical in the sense that they do not have any indulgence for those of opposite sentiment, appearing to favour those who are silent or enigmatic or who do not adhere to any discernible side of an argument.

Banville's narrators in the post-*Mefisto* novels embody the spirit of scepticism rather than following a certain ideology to the letter. If one accepts that truth and clarity are maxims of responsible, ethical narratives, the unreliable and untrustworthy natures of Banvillean narrators demarcate the limits of fiction and philosophy. Post-modern writing, and particularly post-modern fiction, can

very easily reject the "law of non-contradiction" (Currie, 1990, 64) that academic discourse/criticism and philosophy cannot. In short, there is more scope for ambiguity with sceptical narrators. Philosophically amorphous as they may be, narrators such as Freddie Montgomery and Victor Maskell, to name but two, reflect an existence where doubt is in equal measure to certainty. However, the reflectiveness of Banville's narrators can be interpreted as an ethos itself, Banville's narrators are sceptical, self-analytical and prone to post-modern doubt. The meaning of such scepticism is that when construed in the form of prose fiction and the novel in particular, to function as a successful narrative there must be a teleological aspect to the scepticism of the protagonists. Banville's narratives do have an arc or progression. At some point, doubt must give way to surety, even in the negative form of Gabriel Godkin's closing statement in *Birchwood* "whereof I cannot speak, thereof I must be silent" (*Birchwood*, 1998, 175).

What makes a character such as Freddie Montgomery so involving is that as a narrator he at times attempts to temper his subjectivity with glimpses of attempted objective reasoning. However, the unreliability of his narrative and his flawed logic mean that the reader can never agree with his points of view. Flawed reasoning and subjectivism are important aspects of the appeal of a confessional monologue. Freddie's reason for murdering the maid of Whitewater House, Josie Bell, is intriguing. He claims that his actions are caused by a lack of imagination, a giving in to his ego: "This is the worst, the essential sin, I think, the one for which there will be no forgiveness: that I never

imagined her vividly enough, that I never made her be there sufficiently, that I did not make her live. Yes, that failure of imagination is my real crime, the one that made the others possible" (*The Book of Evidence*, 215). Freddie, in broadening what exists (existence outside the spatio-temporal existence) involves a language-game parasitic on the real world. His ability to commit the crime is manifested in the fact that he does not imagine a background for Josie Bell; he fails to create a fantastical image of her as he does for the other characters in the novel. Individuals are absolutely Other, they lose their humanity and became literary stock characters. Examples of stock characters would be the 'cowboy' Randolph, the loanshark Senor Aguirre, and Aguirre's mother who appears as a wicked witch (one of several references to fairy tales in *The Book of Evidence*). If we consider these stock characters, and consider Freddie's imaginative perception of himself one sees the narrator routinely aestheticizing the human individual as a product of art. In an extended scene, Freddie imagines the process of the lady in the portrait sitting for her artist, a woman who is, possibly, fictional. When confronted with the real – Josie Bell – his imagination fails – his "essential sin" – as he cannot textualise the Other as he can the Self.

The Other

The reasons behind the violence of Freddie's reaction to being caught red-handed are illuminated by how he represents Josie in his narrative. Josie Bell is not absolutely Other, but Freddie wills her to be. Her lack of apparent refinement in the cultured setting of the Behrens estate is alluded to. It is clear

from his perceptions and descriptions of art that he longs to see the transcendent and experience the transcendent in the Other, a desire that leads to the violence of his reaction to being caught in the process of stealing a portrait painted by an unnamed Dutch master. Regarding alterity, Jacques Derrida in his critique of Emmanuel Levinas' philosophy, says that, "The alterity of the transcendent thing, although already irreducible, is such only by means of the indefinite incompleteness of my original perceptions" (Derrida, 1993, 124). The sublime experience that the Self undergoes when confronted with the Other in all its alterity is encapsulated in the profound experience of Freddie when viewing the 'Portrait of a Lady in Gloves' for the first time. His desire to reanimate Josie Bell by imagining her fully in the following novels *Ghosts* and *Athena* reveals that he has a blurred awareness of the limits of what the Self can know when faced with the Other. His is a romantic quest to circumvent the possibilities of the imagination. Realising that his original perceptions of the Other are born out of analogy, comparison and anticipation (usually stemming from his knowledge of art and literature and other cultural forms), Freddie reduces Josie Bell to an entity with no correspondence or similarity to himself. To act in an ethical manner is to tolerate difference: "If to understand Being is to be able to let be...then the understanding of Being always concerns alterity, and par excellence the alterity of the Other in all its originality: one can have to let be only that which one is not" (Derrida, 1993, 141). That Freddie is essentially the Other's other appears nowhere in his account. His treatment of the Other is to define it as an object of finite significance, finite proportion – surface without depth. Thus,

the significant female characters in the novel, the woman in the painting, Josie Bell, his mother, his wife Daphne and his ex-lover Anna are either flat, featureless, or wilfully distorted caricatures. Women are treated by Freddie as artworks – and in particular, the portrait genre. Freddie resists the openness and sublime irreducibility of the Other. He yearns for a relationship between Self and Other that asserts the primacy of the Self over the responsibility of the Self to Other.

Interestingly, the use of painting in the art trilogy can be considered as a concentration of this idea. Freddie's area of expertise is portraiture of the late renaissance. Charting some of the important changes in painting, Leslie Duer, writing about portraiture in the late Elizabethan and early Stuart eras, remarks that the three-dimensional realism of continental portraiture supplanted the high-Elizabethan style and "An unlooked-for consequence was a substantial reduction in the ability of portraits, as visual texts, to direct their own interpretation, despite the appearance of greater accessibility in their lively faces and increasingly easy poses" (Duer, 1988, 32). The newfound openness of the portrait as a visual text reduces, from this perspective, the possibility of a recognisably "correct" response or interpretation and thus the representation of human bodies and faces becomes increasingly enigmatic and loaded with significance. A hermeneutical shift such as this is analogous to Freddie's experience of encountering the portrait and Josie Bell. The enigma of the artwork is such an affront to his imagination's desire to categorise the Other as absolutely other that his response to it cannot be contained. He is unable to act responsibly as the Other – in this

case Josie Bell – is, for him, without a self like his Self. Put differently, he is irresponsibly violent as he cannot see himself as the Other's other.

Freddie is also absolutely responsible rather than partially or contingently responsible for how the Other is represented: "The stranger is infinitely other because by his essence no enrichment of his profile can give me the subjective face of his experience *from his perspective*, such as he has lived it. Never will this experience be given to me originally" (Derrida, 1993, 124). Awareness of this gulf between Self and Other must precede a responsible relationship, representation or interpretation of the Other. What is clear from *The Book of Evidence* is that his murder of Josie Bell is no run-of-the-mill callous crime; for him the act appears to represent more than its consequences. Freddie refuses to acknowledge a modification of the ego and his sense of Self in the encounter with the Other; his existence and selfhood can ironically only be verified by the taking of the Other's self. Instead, "it is in his act of murder that the past, present and future come together violently, as he asserts himself in that moment on the world" (Hand, 2002, 137).

In *Shroud*, the Other is treated differently. For Axel Vander, the sublime transcendence of realising the Other's otherness does not lead to a destructive reaction but rather to a desire coated in the language of lust. Axel says:

> For a moment I was dazzled by the otherness of her. Who was she, what was she, this unknowable creature, sitting there so plausibly in that deep box of mirrored space? Yet it was that very she, in all the impenetrable mysteriousness of her being entirely other, that I suddenly desired, with an intensity that made my heart constrict. I am not speaking of the flesh, I do not mean that kind of desire. What I lusted after and longed to bury myself in up to the hilt was the fact of her being her own being, of her being, for me, unreachably beyond. Do you see? Deep down it is all I

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have ever wanted, really, to step out of myself and clamber bodily into someone else (*Shroud*, 214).

And again at another point he says that:

> I ask what I have asked already: what did it benefit me to take on his identity? It must be, simply, that it was not so much that I wanted to be him – although I did, I did want to be him – but that I wanted so much more not to be me. That is to say, I desired to escape my own individuality, the hereness of my self, not the thereness of my world, the world of my lost, poor people. This seems to matter much (*Shroud*, 181).

By desiring to escape the haecceity of the Self, Axel Vander necessarily lusts

after the absolute otherness of the object in the world. It is clear that Banville's

protagonists evince an escape from the responsibility of being by willing

themselves to be absolutely other. For characters such as Victor Maskell and

Axel Vander, the only immediate option is to take on the appearance of another.

By relinquishing the actuality of the Self, it is a small step to deny the Other an

ethical consideration, the Other is 'written out' of the text of the Self.

Egoism and Consciousness

The Book of Evidence, *The Untouchable* and *Shroud* proceed to develop

the idea of egoism. At the core of the problem is the Cartesian division between

mind and body. In her work on metaphysics, Iris Murdoch points towards the

inescapability of this notion, as well as the fact that the Western philosophical

tradition has been negatively affected by it. She claims that even though "Kant

thought that the good life was within the reach of all, but that our dual nature (the

determinism of our selfishness versus the freedom of our response to reason)

makes it difficult" (Murdoch, 1993, 9-10). In Banville's novels, the fundamental

paradox of Cartesian duality appears to be the cause of all the problems of modernity. One critic refers to the antihero Freddie Montgomery as "a Cartesian mentality adrift in a vacuum created by loss of belief in Cartesian certainty" (McNamee, 2006, 145); that Descartes' *cogito ergo sum* is a fundamental starting point for thinking consciousness, and not an ontological state of perfection reached by expanding one's imagination, is something that Freddie never gets to grips with.

The term "ego" in general refers to a person's sense of self-worth. The philosophical use of the term is slightly more technical, referring sometimes to the mediation between the conscious mind and the unconscious and at other times to the subjective, thinking mind, and is often used to signify that subjectiveness as the primary attribute of the thinking Self. Egoism, in the ethical sense, is the school of thought that holds that the interest of the Self is or should be paramount. Egoism is, at first glance, a system of thought in clear contradistinction to the traditional sense of ethics. It can undermine the question which we must ask about any social practice, about any rules or conventions or customs – is it open to me to choose what rules I shall make my own? (MacIntyre, 1995, 10-11)

Egoism can be considered to be part of the school of thought that denies reason, moral authority and ethics in general while paradoxically asserting individualism. Writing on the nature of post-modern nihilism one critic says that

> the most important aspect of ethical nihilism is its seeming tendency towards egocentricity and hedonism, in that if no absolute morals exist, one can act exactly as one please... This ethic of nihilism – "if nothing is true, then everything is justified" – is ultimately the product of false

assumptions. It presumes that if nothing is true everything must be justified, although if nothing is true then nothing is justified... (Slocombe, 2005, 6).

The existence of at least two agents of free will is the prerequisite for a system of ethics. "Survival itself, let alone social order, became possible only through rules arrived at by reluctant bargain" (Midgely, 1994, 4). The idea of the social contract and social practices based on a regulatory code is founded on the principle of broadly egalitarian principles. Putting aside what can be *known* about the Other, philosophically speaking, in ethical discussion each individual, given all factors of existence and circumstance being equal, must be regarded as equally autonomous and equally capable of decision-making. The notion of one individual, one self, having measurably more or less objective autonomy is individualism carried out to its extreme end.

The elevation of the status of Self in considerations of ethics means that Egoists may claim that motives such as justice, loyalty, compassion, and sympathy are just empty names based on the mistaken presumption that society is the natural state of mankind. The centring of self-interest as a foundation to a philosophy leads to individualism. In Banville's more philosophical novels – and I would categorise these as the novels from *Birchwood* to *Shroud* inclusively – an egoism apparently founded on Cartesian epistemological scepticism is carried to the apparently logical progression of Nietzschean individualism. Moreover, the notion of the Self as a construct of language appears as a crisis of confidence for the egoist. Elke D'Hoker makes a similar point in *Visions of Alterity* – "From *Birchwood* onwards... another strand in Banville's writings

became gradually apparent, a Post-Romantic or Modernist preoccupation with the truth and knowledge with the divide between Self and world, and the mediating role of language" (D'Hoker, 2004, 131-2). In Banville's novels, what we seem to know as indivisible and irrefutable is actually divided, refuted or inverted. This crisis of confidence or surety in previously unassailable axioms is exemplified by the opening line of Gabriel in *Birchwood*: "I am, therefore I think. That *seems* inescapable" (my italics) (*Birchwood*, 11). By the end of *Mefisto*, for example, "being is denied as a final end or goal: solid and stable identity is rejected in favour of perpetual becoming" (Hand, 2002, 131). In other words, characters such as the Gabriels of *Birchwood* and *Mefisto*, like many of Banville's protagonists, are in a constant, and evidently futile, process of becoming an ideal version of themselves.

Banville's reaction to the ontological crisis, the perpetual becoming, has been to create doubles for his characters. The egoist, in light of post-modern uncertainty about the inviolability of the Self, finds refuge in the alter ego. The divided Self, as shall be delineated at a later point, is not a renunciation of egoism but is perhaps a parodic response to the fact that philosophy has, from a political/historical perspective, failed to find communicative ethical values without ignoring the issue of self-interest. Philosophers such as David Hume and, particularly, Immanuel Kant have partially acceptable responses to this. Returning to the matter at hand, it must be stated that egoism is not necessarily the opposite of altruism. Kurt Baier describes psychological egoism as:

> the motivational pattern of people whose motivated behaviour is in
> accordance with a principle, namely, that of doing whatever and only

> what protects and promotes their own welfare, well-being, best interest, happiness, flourishing, or greatest good, either because they are indifferent about that of others or because they always care more about their own than that of others when the two conflict (Baier, 1994, 198).

Egoism in this sense is often treated as a vice, one allowing oneself to act beyond what is morally permissible. On the other hand, a different construal of egoism, rational or ethical egoism, is an ideal which allows for one's motivation and inclinations to be permissible as long as they adhere to a rationally sound or logically consistent code. *The Untouchable*'s protagonist, Victor Maskell, is an exemplar of the ethical form of egoism. Maskell is not driven by altruism; he thwarts the investigation into his treachery towards the state — "By now I was lying for fun, for recreation, you might say, like a retired tennis pro knocking up with an old opponent. I had no fear that he would discover some new enormity – but it seemed imperative to maintain consistency, for aesthetic reasons, I suppose, and in order to be consistent it was necessary to invent. Ironic, I know" (*The Untouchable*, 6). The "aesthetic reasons" for maintaining consistency in acting contrary to the public good is indicative of a type of self-interest that appears baffling for several reasons. There is not always an immediate incentive for Maskell to lie; often he appears duplicitous just for the sake of it. His form of "consistency" mocks the consistency of being or belonging. His apparent motives for masking his Self are, in a gesture towards the art trilogy, the pictorial representation of Stoicism in the painting 'Death of Seneca' by Poussin, a painting which depicts the philosopher committing suicide "with fortitude and dignity" (*The Untouchable*, 27). Stoicism is an ethos of self-control, self-denial and the resistance of that which modifies the Self. In *The Untouchable*, the

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'Death of Seneca' encapsulates for Maskell a *modus vivendi* between the need of the ethos (the requirements of the state, its laws, codes and moralities) and the agency of the individual. The suicide of Seneca is implied to be a compromise between the ethics of citizenship and the ethical egoism of one who philosophises. Ethical or rational egoism is for Maskell a sabotaging of the will and autonomy of the Self for the greater good. However, this existential compromise is ethically suspect as it refrains from dealing with the questions 'was this action right or wrong?' or 'has justice been done?' Baier argues that ethical egoism cannot be sound "for it precludes the interpersonally authoritative regulation of interpersonal conflicts of interest, since such a regulation implies that a conduct contrary to one's interests is sometimes morally required of one, and conduct in one's best interest sometimes morally forbidden to one...It allows only personally authoritative principles or precepts" (Baier, 1994, 202). The numerous references to suicide in *The Untouchable* reveal that Banville is confronting this question. Maskell refers to the character Felix Hartmann by claiming "like a suicide – which essentially he was – he had both earned and verified his own legend" (*The Untouchable*, 162). When the ideal fails, the recourse to an expression of the agency of the autonomous Self by the act of suicide reinforces the "legend", an ambiguous term which is not dependent on truth or authentication. The suicides in *The Untouchable* are unlike the suicides in *Shroud*, *The Sea* and *The Infinities* in that they are ostensibly caused by ideological rather than psychological or personal difficulties. The verification of the legend is depicted as an imperative of ethical egoism in pursuit of a greater

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good. In a similar instance, Freddie Montgomery's act of raising in court the paradox of free will and determinism (*The Book of Evidence*, 16) illustrates the ethical dilemma of committing what in certain circumstance is a permissible action while in other circumstances is not permissible. The self-serving, prejudicial nature of this line of argument is evident.

Looking at the texts it is clear that there is a divide in Banville's fictions between the noumenal (reason) and the phenomenal (emotion). It has been said that Banville's aesthetic "always interrogates the abstract codes of belief through the counter-evidence of a poetic sensibility" (McMinn, 1999, 105). To consider what this interrogation signifies, we must note that the ethical egoism of Freddie Montgomery, Victor Maskell and Axel Vander is founded on the (in)compatibility of acting with rational objectiveness and the need to follow one's desires and sense experience. For rationalism the paradigm of the idea is the concept, for empiricism the paradigm of the idea is sensory experience. Victor Maskell captures the conflict of being an ethical egoist in the penultimate line of the book: "in the head or through the heart? Now, there is a dilemma" (*The Untouchable*, 405). However, throughout Banville's novels there occasionally emerges a response to this dilemma of how to act.

The categorical imperative outlined by Immanuel Kant sheds some light on the inherent conflict of the protagonists' ethical egoism. The categorical imperative is typically expressed as "act only on the maxim through which you can at the same time will that it be a universal law" (O'Neill, 1994, 177). In other words, the definitive test of a genuine moral imperative is whether I can

universalise it. For Kant, egoism would be akin to heteronomous empiricism as the egoist could not universalise their actions as an ethos for others (Kant, 1993, 91). Goodwill can fail not only by being from self-interested motives but also from altruistic motives. An example of this would be the inclination to be dutiful because you 'enjoy' it. "Inclination belongs to our determined physical and psychological nature; we cannot in Kant's view choose our inclination. What we can do is to choose between our inclination and our duty" (MacIntyre, 1995, 192-3). The Kantian narrative is essentially one of emancipation, albeit by the prescriptivism of the universal imperative. Behaving ethically, one would be aware of the intrusion of the Self into the sphere of rationalism and thus adjust one's behaviour accordingly. The universal principle is the answer to this dilemma. The idea of the universalizability of principles in Banville's writings would be regarded as quaint by the average post-structuralist, however Banville does not offer this idea up as a romanticist means for redemption or emancipation. Nonetheless, it is heavily present in his work.

By definition, the categorical imperative relates to duty. The categorical imperative is a statement which demands that the agent *should* act in a particular way; unlike a hypothetical imperative which is dependent on a contingent factor (you ought to do such and such *if*). The imperative is an appeal to an objective law – for Kant, the idea of reason functions as an objective arbiter and all actions must be held accountable to reason. This fundamental principle must be entirely *a priori* to avoid the pitfall of self-interest born out of empiricism. By doing what reason dictates, "your action will be referred to reason alone, and not to

your individual passions and interests. Hence it will be binding not only on you, but on any rational being" (Scruton, 1994, 285). In Kant's philosophy everything empirical is "wholly unworthy to be an ingredient in the principal of morality" (Kant, 1994, 277) primarily because it prejudices the Self. However, regarding his account of wrongdoing, one criticism of Kant's ethics states that "wrongful acts are indeed not autonomous, but they are chosen rather than inflicted mechanically by our desires or inclinations" (O' Neill, 1994, 183). Kant's critique of empiricism coincides with his belief that a universal maxim is (by its *a priori* reasoning) inherently moral. Alasdair MacIntyre makes a statement to the effect that the categorical imperative's detachment from contingent events and societal circumstances make it an acceptable form of moral precept for emerging liberal individualist society (MacIntyre, 1995, 197). Banville, a writer for whom the absence of the moral authority of God and religion in modern society has troublesome consequences, is drawn towards the potential freedom offered by the imperative.

Banville frequently alludes to duties and the categorical imperative in *The Book of Evidence*. Freddie Montgomery highlights the failure of the imperative when referring to his wife Daphne's neglect of their son: "The most one could accuse her of was a sort of moral laziness. There were things she could not be bothered to do, no matter what imperatives propelled them to her jaded attention. She neglected our son, not because she was not fond of him, in her way, but simply because his needs did not really interest her" (*The Book of Evidence*, 7). From the beginning of the novel, it is clear that the contrast between self-interest

and obligation is a motif central to Freddie's monologue. In another instance, Senor Aguirre, the Spanish loanshark who lends money to Freddie so he can pay off the debts he has accrued, ominously brings up the topic of prescriptiveness and maxims in what could perhaps be a reference either to the keeping of promises or the imperative against committing suicide:

> He was a businessman, he said, a simple businessman, not a great professor – and smiled at me and gently bowed – but all the same he knew there were certain rules, certain moral imperatives. One of these in particular he was thinking of: perhaps I could guess which one? Mutely I shook my head. I felt like a mouse being toyed with by a sleek bored old cat. His sadness deepened. Loans, he said softly, loans must be repaid (*The Book of Evidence*, 21).

Egoism is, however, essentially a consequence of the narrative of Enlightenment which typically accentuates the agency of the individual over objective realities such as morality, the state or reason. Jürgen Habermas' concept of the Enlightenment holds that the segmentation of reason into the three spheres of science, morality and art are a direct consequence of a subjective criticism of an authoritative metaphysical world view espoused by the combination of state machinations and moral doctrine (Habermas, 1992, 132). These areas of reason mirror the three concerns in Freddie Montgomery's life.

The Project of Modernity anticipates that through the critical reasoning of individuals released from self-incurred tutelage, an unanimity or consensus is formed, thus allowing a practical implementation of reason for the enrichment of the life-world. Essentially, the categorical imperative is an attempt to pre-empt the problems of modernity as highlighted by Habermas. Banville's characters

make attempts to construct imperatives that can be universalised. They are guilty

of being inclined,

> The ought of the categorical imperative can only have application to an
> agent capable of obedience. In this sense ought implies can. And to be
> capable of obedience implies that one has evaded the determination of
> one's actions by one's inclination, simply because the imperative which
> guides action determined by inclination is always a hypothetical one
> (MacIntyre, 1995, 196).

These imperatives are doomed to failure, giving birth to the Banvillean ethical

egoist, who can know no Other than his Self, yet is aware that this knowledge is

a necessary goal to have.

Chapter Four

Between Fictions: *Prague Pictures* and Genre

It is not down on any map. True places never are.

(Herman Melville, *Moby Dick*)[67]

The publication of *Prague Pictures* (2003) is an example of the increasingly

multigeneric nature of Banville's work in the last two decades. Over the course

of Banville's writing career certain threads or themes have been carried through,

often over decades, several texts and multiple genres. His rendering of the life of

Johannes Kepler in his novel *Kepler* is echoed further in *Prague Pictures*.

However, this is not an isolated retelling of the life of Kepler in his *oeuvre*. The

radio plays *Stardust: Three Monologues of the Dead*, broadcast by BBC

Radio 3's *The Verb* on 11 May 2002 and *Kepler* (radio play), broadcast by BBC

Radio 4 in October 2004 were both first published in *Possessed of a Past: A John*

Banville Reader in 2012. *Prague Pictures* has a further ephemeral echo in the

piece 'The Life of Joachim Müller', one of two imagined biographical sketches

on paintings whose subjects are shrouded by anonymity and written by Banville

for the publication *Imagined Lives: Mystery Portraits from the National Portrait*

Gallery c.1520-1640 (2010). In this brief work Banville's refers to John Dee and

Edward Kelley, Emperor Rudolf, Kepler, Golden Lane, and Hradcany Castle in

what is perhaps a re-using of source material for *Prague Pictures* that originates

in the novel *Kepler*. It is significant that the purpose of this collection of works

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[67] Melville, Herman. *Moby Dick*. London: Penguin, 1994. p. 79

mirrors Banville's concern for the fictiveness of biography, the appeal of the

mysterious and the occult, and the aggrandisement of the scientist-provocateur.

Banville's continued fascination with the Kepler figure owes much to surviving

accounts of the astronomer's personality and also to such evocative (and

sympathetic) works such as Arthur Koestler's *The Sleepwalkers* (1959).[68]

Published as part of Bloomsbury's "The Writer and The City" series, John

Banville's *Prague Pictures: Portraits of a City* can be considered a work of

travel literature, albeit with frequent deviations from the subject material of

general works in this genre. In this book the author recalls his several journeys

to the city he describes as "mysterious, jumbled, fantastical, absurd" (*Prague*

Pictures, 2003, 9) over a period of roughly twenty years, his first visit being in

the early 1980s. *Prague Pictures* is Banville's first full-length work of non-

fiction and like the other texts in the series, this work is an atypical piece of

travel writing and defies simple description. Banville merges fiction with fact,

scholarly rigour with playful parody, and earnestness with comic insincerity as

he writes about the Czech capital. Furthermore, the text appears to fail to

conform to the norms of travel literature: accuracy of information, practical

advice and contemporaneity of subject matter are regularly undermined by the

author. Throughout *Prague Pictures*, Banville consolidates anecdotes,

autobiography, literature and history into what can be considered an

interdisciplinary collection of "essays". This wide-ranging document of

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[68] Koestler views scientists in this text as akin to artists in their creative capacity, and puts forward the
thesis that the "history of cosmic theories, in particular, may without exaggeration be called a history of
collective obsessions and controlled schizophrenias" (Koestler,1989, 11), which is strikingly similar to
Banville's representations of scientists (and Kepler in particular) in his Science Tetralogy.

Banville's experience of and love for Prague remains a curiosity when viewed alongside the author's other works. At the heart of this text, however, is an epistemological quest as the author aims to form a representation of Prague that lays bare the enigmas of his chosen subject. Banville's main concern as a writer is "the relationship between fiction and the world it ostensibly takes as its subject" (Brown, 2010, 231). *Prague Pictures* continues in the vein of Banville's works of fiction by continuing the questioning of authenticity readily apparent in his corpus, and it is possible to see a move from the egoistic narrators of recently published novels at that time to the more impressionistic narrators of *The Sea* and *Ancient Light.*

Prague Pictures can be considered a highly stylised work of non-fiction. At certain points the impressionistic narrator comes to the fore. At one stage he refers to the selectiveness of memory and how it is often the mundane details we remember when he states, "It is as if we were to focus our cameras on the great sights and the snaps when developed all came out with nothing in them save undistinguished but maniacally detailed foregrounds" (*Prague Pictures*, 83). Memory is thus deceptive but it is often the seemingly insignificant details, the things that get between the observing subject and the observed object that are most vivid. In the foreword to the text, Banville's romanticist imagination appears as he uses the imaginative metaphor of the city as a silent, female lover and his text as a "sad song of love to a beloved that can never reciprocate" (*Prague Pictures*, n. pag.). Unrequited love is mentioned twice in the foreword 'Caveat Emptor' and the metaphor is carried on in the 'After Images' coda to the

text where we again hear of the love affair and "its intensities and lamentable intermittences" (237). Banville thusly frames his narrative as an act of non-fulfilment and as readers we are subtly asked to either forgive or ignore when the author digresses from the realm of fact into the fancy of the imagination. The everyday and the mundane contain a high degree of metaphorical potential in *Prague* Pictures, and this is a hallmark of Banville's writing.

In the non-fiction *Prague Pictures*, Banville plays with the parasitical nature of textuality with frequent asides and lengthy digressions, and aspects from his main body of work resurface. His opinions and observations are frequently reinforced with allusions to other thinkers. He weaves allusions from Ripellino, Goethe, Heidegger, Beckett, Larkin, Neruda, Apollinaire and many others into the text. These elements give *Prague Pictures* a palimpsest-like quality and reinforce its cosmopolitan style. The five main chapters of the book are quite different to one another and it is clear that Banville is deconstructing the generic template of the travel book.

Prague Pictures has been well received by critics and reviewers, with many commenting on the evocativeness of the prose and the depth of the material. Kersti Tarien Powell's article "The Lighted Windows: Place in John Banville's Novels" (2006) astutely draws connections between the *Prague Pictures* and the typescript drafts of *Doctor Copernicus* in how the enigma of the unfamiliar is familiarised, presenting the means by which we can approach the singularity of this work of travel literature in the author's body of work.

Prague Pictures is notably similar to the 'Liber Occultus' section of *Doctor Copernicus* as "both are generic mixtures, both cannot refrain from half-ironic 'asides' to the reader and both are governed by their author's yearning unapologetically to fuse his fictions with reality and to position himself onto his fictional terrain" (Tarien-Powell, 2006, 47). Both are a melange of personal narrative, anecdotes, historical biography, travel writing, commentary on the change in the political backdrop of Europe. Journalism and some short essays aside, this is Banville's first work of non-fiction and this text sometimes reads like an academic work or perhaps a work of cultural criticism. While in *Prague Pictures* his use of footnoting is not an exhaustive guide to illustrate influences and authority: it establishes, particularly with respect to *Doctor Copernicus* and *Kepler*, a network of related texts and establishes linked texts. This is essentially how a genre comes into being, by forging linkages with other texts. The informative aspect of the footnote/endnote is part of a generic function of academic or scientific writing and the inclusion of this aspect in these works charts a frame of reference material that is often non-literary. Therefore, Banville draws overt connections between this work of non-fiction and his fiction through his use of multigenericism. *Prague Pictures* covers a considerable range of themes for a work of travel literature. One of the hallmarks of travel writing as a genre is the transformation of a literal, geographical journey into a symbolic or psychological one. Banville's comment that the "metamorphosis of world into self that [Rainer Maria] Rilke tells us is our task on earth" (*Prague Pictures*, 11) is particularly relevant to travel literature, which is primarily based on how the

novelty of being geographically destabilised requires an ontological reassessment

on the part of the traveller. Thus, the book is intellectually ambitious particularly

in relation to the generic standard of providing contemporaneous, practical

advice for other travellers. The textuality of travel is brought to the foreground

as travel is not considered by Banville as any more authentic than reading about a

location, or viewing images such as Josef Sudek's photographs. Banville's

readers are on familiar ground here as this work continues his career-long process

of investigating the idea of authenticity and in particular the authenticity of

individual narratives. *Prague Pictures'* status is, however, loosely defined in

criticism, despite its placement in a series which could warrant a comparative

analysis. As a work of non-fiction it brings a significant twist to Banville's

problematic of authenticity in writing. In this text he gives rise to the idea that

fiction and non-fiction are essentially non-separable. *Prague Pictures*

incorporates a coruscating mixture of multi-generic elements removed from the

avowed subjectivity and untrustworthiness of the flawed narrators of his more

well-known works such as *The Book of Evidence* and *The Untouchable* – two

texts which are nevertheless based on identifiable truths and readymade plots.

It is clear from the beginning that Banville's text is not a guidebook to a

city; he states his aim is "not so much to express the city as to ingest it, to make

that metamorphosis of world into Self that Rilke tell us is our task on earth. It is

analogous to the effort every serious visitor must make. One will not know a city

merely by promenading before its sites and sights, *Blue Guide* in hand..." (11).

The text is written in a style that is familiar as in places the musings and

digressions appear markedly similar to that of Banville's self-reflexive narrators. Indeed, the self-referentiality of this work of non-fiction suggests a direct connection between this text in particular and Banville's works of fiction. The task of writing in the travelogue/memoir genres is almost impossible as the narrator of *Prague Pictures* realises that these genres are types of fictions in themselves: 'Where, in what era, may one station oneself to find the best, the truest, view?' (12). Banville's readers are on familiar ground here as his work of non-fiction continues his career-long process of investigating the idea of authenticity and in particular the authenticity of individual narratives.

Travel Literature and Post-modernism

Although *Prague Pictures* is not strictly travel literature in the historical sense of the term, travel writing is the genre that the text most closely resembles. However, *Prague Pictures* is notably an evolution of a genre which is possibly more protean now than it has ever been. Compared with the long tradition of travel literature which arguably stretches back to Herodotus' *The Histories* and which becomes a popular genre in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, *Prague Pictures* is a chimera of a text, odd in its formulation and in its status in Banville's *oeuvre*. It is perhaps an example of a dying form, as Evelyn Waugh once famously wrote that "I do not expect to see many travel books in the near future" (Waugh, 1946, 11). In the post-modern era, the paucity of undiscovered lands, the reduction in the cost of travel and new vistas opened by air travel resulted in a considerable change of direction for the travel-writing genre, as

evidenced by *Prague Pictures*. Rather than focusing on experiences and sights, the post-modern travel text could recommend more commodities, activities and practical information than ever before due to the developing environment. Travel literature as a genre has reached an impasse. As a genre, to counter the advances in technology and relatively cheaper travel new approaches must be made as the source material is ever more familiarised for the potential reader. A genre disappears when the material is ever more familiar, so an evolution or an alternative method is required. Post-modern travel writing has little in common with travel writing in the modern or pre-modern era. In an increasingly globalised world, travel writing is a genre receptive to commercial interests in the tourist industry – that most post-modern of industries – and more than any form of writing bar perhaps journalism, is 'of its moment'. Accordingly, it has been said that the "late-capitalist process of hypercommodification involves the production of commodities that are commodifying in their turn – such as travel and the travel book" (Holland and Huggan, 2000, 198). Regarding commodification and globalization in *Prague Pictures*, Banville is acutely drawn to this process and the text has evidence of such. For example, he writes that "Now the dollar is everywhere, the young have all the blue jeans they could desire, and there is a McDonald's just off the Charles Bridge. Well, why not. Praguers have the same right to vulgar consumerism as the rest of us" (*Prague Pictures*, 10-11). However, Banville's text is much more than a mere product of post-modernism but rather one which engages intellectually with what it means to be post-modern and to write travel literature in the contemporary moment.

The context of the post-modern travel experience supplies a chaotic backdrop for a genre of travel writing.

It is important from the outset to regard Banville's text as an atypical piece of travel writing as the genre is usually understood, and it is even more significant that the author is adamant that this be the case. The first line of the text is "This is not a guidebook, nor was meant to be", which suggests that not only are travel guides and travel writing distinctly different genres, they have different levels of literary quality, a guidebook being of lesser value. From the beginning, we are informed that the pragmatic function of the guide is absent here and that we are on a more literary footing. It is clear that Banville is cautious about labelling his text and that its predecessors in the travel-writing genre were perhaps more predictable and pragmatic. This comment also shows a raconteur-like promising of unpredictability and of novelty. It is however, difficult to force the reader to divorce the experience of reading the text and using it as an inspiration for physical travel. Banville at times, apparently begrudgingly or ironically, offers pragmatic information. It is to be noted that part of the motivation for the text is to counter traditional travel-writing topics. *Prague Pictures* offers an alternative view of travel – a writer's view.

Holland and Huggan argue that post-modern examples of travel writing are complex as by "invoking a specialized mission these writers often appeal to the reader's yearning for a kind of countertravel to assuage their heightened (Western, postmodern) guilt" (Holland and Huggan, 2000, 198). Countertravel, as explained by these theorists, is a process where the traveller travels differently

to the imaginary, established norms of travelling. Countertravel writing – which

Banville is doing in *Prague Pictures* with its vast digressions and heterogeneric

approach – can be considered as an example of generic evolution, however "such

oppositional narratives cannot escape being haunted by an array of hoary tropes

and clichés (originary, primitivist, exotic etc.) any more than they can hope to

distil 'authentic' encounters from their commodified sources" (198). In the

contemporary moment, a consolidated genre such as travel writing operates

against the assumptions of the reader and the texts themselves are noticeably

more theoretical, or in extreme cases polemical, dialogues between Self and

world than ever before. A text such as Umberto Eco's *Travels in Hyperreality*

(1987) illustrates this new shift in travel writing, and its central concerns with

authenticity and the diluted, commodified experience of art has echoes in *Prague*

Pictures. Casey Blanton makes the point that

> Freed from strictly chronological, fact-driven narratives, nearly all
> contemporary travel writers include their own dreams and memories of
> childhood as well as chunks of historical date or synopses of other travel
> books. Self-reflexivity and instability, both as theme and style, offer the
> writer a way to show the effects of his or her own presence in a foreign
> country and to expose the arbitrariness of truth and the absences of
> norms" (Blanton, 2002, 27)

From the start, *Prague Pictures* is a self-reflexive series of remembered accounts

– or half-remembered accounts as Banville is keen to stress. The text is a salvage

mission of significant events, realisations and observations that are loosely held

together by the geographical region of Prague, although the section 'Great Dane,

Little Dog' (which makes up over quarter of the full text) about the service of

Tycho Brahe and Johannes Kepler to the Holy Roman Emperor in the

seventeenth century, barely involves Prague at all and is instead partly set in

Denmark. This section has a direct involvement with Banville's earlier novel

Kepler which justifies the change of locale – particularly if one sees the main

concern of *Prague Pictures* to be not Prague itself but the author's creative

processes. It is perhaps that Banville sees the tortured Kepler as symbolic of

Prague, as part of the narrator's journey in the text involves the famous

personages of Prague instigated by the thought "If Prague is not place, is it

people, then? Not the great sights but the great figures?" (*Prague Pictures*, 83).

As a post-modern text that functions in an intergeneric space, it is more

amorphous formally than much of Banville's other works. Its hybrid quality is

even more unique in his *oeuvre* when viewed against his Benjamin Black novels

with their strict, almost dogmatic adherence to the rules and stylings of the crime

novel genre.

One of the hallmarks of travel writing as a genre is the transformation of a

literal, geographical journey to a symbolic or psychological one. Banville's

comment via Rilke that the "metamorphosis of world into self" (11) is the main

task of the human race is particularly relevant to travel literature which is

primarily based on how the novelty of being geographically destabilised requires

an ontological reassessment on the part of the traveller. Travel writing can be

seen as a consolidation of autobiography and fiction with geographical and

perhaps historical information often added. Reflecting on the universality and

potential that travel literature offers, Blanton states that "Because one of the

central issues in travel reportage has always been the relationship between self

and world, the development of the genre we have come to call travel literature is closely aligned with the changing role of subjectivity in other kinds of literature, especially fiction and autobiography. The genre has survived because it has changed" (Blanton, 2002, 29). In the globalised, mapped world of few unexplored frontiers it can be put forward that the decreased potential for novelty and new experiences creates a compensatory void that can be filled with authentic experience and similarly authentic expression, or, at the very least, an alternative expression. Holland and Huggan posit that in travel writing "both parties [writers and readers] need to appeal to the 'authenticity standard' – to envision the possibility of 'new' and 'genuine' experience, even if that novelty and that genuineness are simultaneously acknowledged as doomed" (Holland and Huggan, 2000, 158). Accordingly, Banville stated in an interview that "the older I get the more I realise that the world is not as varied as we thought it was when we were young. Most places are much alike. But Prague is a strange city, as we know. It's one of the three great magic capitals of the world along with Lyon and Turin" (Banville in O'Connor, 2006). To state that the world is not as varied suggests that the lack of novelty corresponds with a difficulty in having a 'deep' or 'genuine' experience as every new location appears less new and more familiar than before. Perhaps we can interpret this comment by Banville as nostalgia for de-commodified travel experience.

One could categorise *Prague Pictures* as countertravel writing as particular elements of Banville's style, the repeated use of clichés, long digressions, embellishment and playful self-promotion of other of his published

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works, for example, being characteristic of post-modern ennui. The quest for

authentic experience is prevalent in Banville's *Prague Pictures* and is, therefore,

the consummation, the 'travel' towards fulfilment that the genre demands.

Memory and Imagination

At the heart of Banville's consideration of authenticity in *Prague Pictures*

are the repeatedly referenced twin concepts of Memory and Imagination. Both

memory and imagination are mentioned in the 'Caveat Emptor' foreword to the

text as the author describes the text as "An effort to conjure a place by a mingled

effort of memory and imagination". These two terms here could be said to

correspond with 'fact' and 'fiction' and the text as a whole being intended as a

halfway point between the two. In this foreword Banville's romanticist

imagination appears as the stronger force as he uses the imaginative metaphor of

the city as a silent, female lover and his text as a "sad song of love to a beloved

that can never reciprocate." This nod towards the agency of the male observer

and the passivity of the silent, female observed is a recurring aspect of Banville's

writing, most notably appearing in all three texts of The Frames Trilogy (*The*

Book of Evidence, *Ghosts* and *Athena*), but also notably in other minor characters

such as Professor Brudzewski's daughter in *Doctor Copernicus* and the

protagonist's daughter Regina in *Kepler*. Unrequited love is mentioned twice in

the foreword and the metaphor is carried on in the 'After Images' section at the

end of the text where we again hear of the love affair, "its intensities and

lamentable intermittences" (*Prague Pictures*, 237). Banville thusly frames his

narrative as an act of non-fulfilment and as readers we are subtly asked to either

forgive or ignore when the author digresses from the realm of fact into the fancy

of the imagination. This shows his recognition of the anti-generic code breaking

that the text reveals. The author also states in the 'Caveat Emptor' while

referring to himself in the third person, that "Returning there, he feels he has

never been away, and yet feels guilty, too, of forgetfulness, neglect, infidelity".

Prague Pictures is from the outset presented as a site where reason and control

have lost sway and that despite the author's lack of surety as to what the text is –

"As to what it is, that is harder to say" – one can be sure that it is either largely or

wholly fiction, reinforcing the idea that the uncharted territory is not

geographical but, rather, philosophical and internal in make-up.

Memory, for the narrator/author figure of *Prague Pictures*, is depicted as

notoriously unreliable, novelistic and prone to stereotypical categorisation.

Regularly throughout the text memory is referred to as failing. Commenting

early on in the novel that his somewhat mysterious contact in Prague whom

Banville, and his female accomplices Kafkaesquely named as J. and G., have

agreed to smuggle works by photographer Josef Sudek out of Czechoslovakia,

Banville's memory fails: "Even as he stood before me I found it hard to get him

properly into focus, as if a flaw had suddenly developed in the part of my

consciousness that has the task of imprinting images upon the memory" (14).

The pictorial metaphor of memory as imprinted images subtly alludes to the

photographs and camera functions -- such as focusing and imprinting – setting up

a corresponding interplay between the realism of instantaneous imagery and the

realism of non-fiction writing. Unreliable memory regularly puts its stamp on the plot of the text, Banville at another point refers to Russian businessmen and states that, "No doubt my jaundiced memory has exaggerated the look they had of so many pigs busy at the trough" (17). The pictorial quality of memory is again reiterated when Banville comments that "How much of this first visit to Prague, twenty years ago, am I remembering, and how much is being invented for me? Memory is a vast, animated, time-ravaged mural" (45), which also alludes to the lack of authorial agency in the writing of the text, which is in part, "being invented for me". The fact that memory is a "mural" also implies human artifice. Thus, memory is distinctly unreliable and duplicitous: "Sometimes one is led to wonder if memory is a faculty of deception rather than recollection" (*Prague Pictures*, 116, n. 17). However, not only is memory unreliable but imagination also functions outside of the author's control and is subject to its own reason. Memory and imagination are interpreted on a metafictional level when Banville asks: "Why these fragments and not others, far more significant? Why these?" (46). It is clear from these examples that memory is of great import to Banville's *Prague Pictures*. Perhaps it is the fact that the selectiveness of memory implies a 'filtering' method of thinking about the past, and that memory is shaped into a more cohesive shape than 'pure' thought. Memory, like language, has a generic aspect.

It is of significance that Banville frequently mentions the failings of memory. In a fairly inconsequential episode he writes that:

> Indeed, much as I try I cannot remember what means of transport we used in any of our time during that first visit. We must have travelled by

bus, or tram, or even, despite, J.'s claustrophobia, the metro – still unnervingly spotless, by the way – but I cannot see us on any of those conveyances. We are simply here, and then there, and then somewhere else, with only blank space in between. How smoothly does Mnemosyne's magic chariot glide! (22-23).

Allusions to Mnemosyne, the Ancient Greek demi-goddess of memory are regular in Banville's work. In *Nightspawn* the narrator/protagonist Benjamin White proclaims "What am I talking about, what are these ravings? About the past, of course, and about Mnemosyne, that lying whore" (*Nightspawn*, 2013, 102) showing that Banville's concerns about memory stretch back to his earliest, novel-length work. At times in *Prague Pictures* when memory fails, there is not a 'gap' in his remembrances but rather imagination fills in the extra details, almost as Freddie Montgomery does in *The Book of Evidence*. Referring to Alex, a guest at a party that Banville and some friends end up at, the author states in another novelistic comment that "in my memory he wears pince-nez, but no doubt memory is being fanciful" (*Prague Pictures*, 121). Here, the spectacles once again allude to observation and perception. However, the failure of memory has a largely prosaic purpose in the fact that it allows Banville to inject absurd humour into the relatively mundane situation; he goes on to state that "Alex was standing at the bookcase with his hands clasped behind his back, frowning at the titles through those pebble lenses I have imagined for him" (122) and that "in the end he took the cup and gave a little bow and – or do I imagine it again? – clicked his heels" (123). The effect of scenes such as these is that of novelization as the text evolves from travel-writing into a quasi-novel. The generic siting of the text as 'travel writing' is almost distorted beyond

recognition and the encroachment of 'novelish' or fictive aspects into the non-fiction text results in a post-modern, multigeneric style that is *de rigeur* and reflective of Banville's more generically experimental texts *Nightspawn*, *Doctor Copernicus*, and *The Infinities*.

For Banville, travel writing is an exercise in organised falsehoods; it is still within the realm of fiction despite all evidence to the contrary. His work valorises the falseness of each fiction while striving for alternative, more worthy fictions. It is this duplicitous masking that is a driving force in much of his writing. He has stated in an interview almost a decade after the publication of *Prague Pictures* that:

> Fiction is an X-ray of the self, whereas travel writing and memoir are both marvelous masks. I do have a plan to write an autobiography, though – of course I shouldn't be telling you this, because it's no good if it's known – but to write an autobiography in which everything would be slightly false. Instead of a brother and a sister, I would have two brothers. Instead of being born in Wexford I'd be born in New Ross. Upon publication, I would insist that it was all true (Banville in Breathnach, 2012).

Banville's imaginative rendering of characters and events in his texts are expressed in *Prague Pictures* partly in the form of cliché and stereotyping. Throughout his fiction, most notably in *Birchwood*, *The Newton Letter* and *The Book of Evidence*, the flawed and unreliable narrator presents an image of the surrounding characters that reduces them to individual traits or features. Take, for example, the police in *The Book of Evidence*, going under the names of Kickham (*Book of Evidence*, 199), Cunningham (201), Barker (198) and Hogg (190) i.e. suggesting pigs and guard dogs. Banville invokes stereotypes for a specific purpose: "The thinness of these characters is their point: in his frequent

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use of clown and puppet tropes, Banville recapitulates modernist gestures which drew on the expressivity of carnival and circus" (Coughlan, 2006, 83). Names and cliché features, traits or affectations function to express both humour and a level of falseness, or artifice, for the textual representation. This places an onus on the reader to assess their own reaction: to see the humour, the parody of the pastiche, is to treat it most seriously. Writing on Banville's stereotyping of the Anglo-Irish class in *Birchwood*, Brendan McNamee comments that "Thus, the blatancy of Banville's stereotyping undercuts the readerly inclination to view the characters as 'real' people while still portraying life-like figures on the page that must be responded to in some fashion" (McNamee, 2006, 58). The blatancy of the stereotyping in *Prague Pictures* is even more striking as the text is supposedly a work of non-fiction. Stereotyping appears to have a generic basis: in one instance Banville writes that, "The guard who had been inspecting my passport handed it back and in a guttural accent straight out of an old war movie bade me welcome to Czechoslovakia" (*Prague Pictures*, 3). Banville's invocation of parody and irony is yet another feature of the text that is particularly 'novelish'.

Time and Timeliness

In *Prague Pictures*, two ideas that appear again and again in the text are time and timeliness. From the start of the text, Banville introduces terms related to time as being deceptive and relative with regards to meaning. For example, the text begins with an "unseasonably bright" January and the announcement that

the Cold War was going through "one of its decidedly warmer phases" in the early 1980s (1). Here, a discrepancy is introduced between the significance of terms and the reality that words attempt to describe. From the beginning of the text, meaning is usurped by the author's willingness to draw attention to when metaphors and metonyms 'fail'. These instances of readerly assumption being overturned frequently occur when issues of time and timeliness are mentioned. The suitability of acting appropriately   or as expected within a defined time period – is raised in the opening sequence of the text. The above examples are followed by the untimeliness of the fashion sense of two prostitutes – or as Banville describes: "In an alcove, sitting over cold coffee cups at a table under a plastic palm, two achingly beautiful girls in poor imitations of last year's Paris or New York fashions…" (5) and the subsequent untimeliness of Banville's task at hand: "Now would be a suitable moment to contemplate a brief history of Prague. Instead, I get up and go down the corridor to talk to J. and G." (6). In these examples from the opening of the text, it is clear that Banville is pushing forward the notion that there is a sense of displacement in travel, that a readjustment on the part of the subject must be made not only spatially but also temporally. A comparison can be drawn here with the narrator of *The Newton Letter* who becomes creatively inept due to his suffering a "sense of displacement": of being outside time and existing outside of the real world, or the world he reads of in the newspapers (*The Newton Letter*, 2000, 544), as he too takes a journey in the physical and the psychological sense. It could be argued that Banville's sense of time, as particularly evinced in *Birchwood*, is a

relativistic one that draws upon man's need to create distinction, categories and histories which are themselves a form of fiction.

With reference to Sudek's photography, again the issue of timeliness arises as Banville states that "It is remarkable that work so delicate and sensuous, so luminous, could have been produced in such dark times" (*Prague Pictures*, 68). The depiction of Sudek's work in *Prague Pictures* is an echoing of Banville's earlier work and puts one in mind of George O'Brien's comment that in *Doctor Copernicus* and *Kepler*, "the disintegrative consequences of political unrest are contrasted with the renovations and clarifications of [the] free and original scientific thought" of the eponymous scientists (O'Brien, George, 2012, xiv). Here, it can be reasonably suggested that one of the chief reasons why the idea of timeliness is recurrent in the text is the correspondence between the minor subject and the larger grand narrative. The "luminous" beauty of the monochrome photos appears ahistorical. The teleological, historically generalist perspective of Czechoslovakia is one of a darkening place in the Soviet era, and that the only allowable art may be assumed to be that of social realism. Perhaps Banville is positing that the Lyotardian incredulity to grand narratives is exemplified in his deceptively throwaway comments on time. Jean-François Lyotard states in *The Post-Modern Condition* that:

> The narrative function is losing its functors, its great hero, its great dangers, its great voyages, its great goal. It is being dispersed in clouds of narrative language elements – narrative, but also denotative, prescriptive, descriptive, and so on. Conveyed within each cloud are pragmatic valencies specific to its kind. Each of us lives at the intersection of many of these. However, we do not necessarily establish stable language combinations, and the properties of the ones we do establish are not necessarily communicable (Lyotard, 2004, 356).

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The aforementioned aim to "make that metamorphosis of world into self"

(*Prague Pictures*, 11) is the communicable narrative that fiction strives towards.

It can be taken that post-modern travel-writing as a genre aims for totality in its

concern for communicable narrative. It can be suggested that the issues of

timeliness raised by the narrator of *Prague Pictures* signifies the 'apartness' of

the narrator, between the person observing and the observed object. Travel

writing as a genre depends upon the cloud of "narrative language elements" but

also upon the novelty of unstable signification. The idea of 'timeliness' merges

the Lyotardian breakdown in narrative function with the spatial de-stabilization

of travel, and its concomitant changes in perception. Banville's writing is

centred on rates of changes of realisation: i.e. timeliness. The artist or the

creative observer realises an object – narrative in this case – as packed with a

meaning it formerly lacked. The presence of timeliness in Banville's work is

political in the sense that one narrative, one grouping of meaningful

communications, is preferred to the other. The idea of rates of change establishes

a hierarchy in travel writing between the origin of the writer and the destination

through the lens of timeliness. The untimely signifies a failed communication, a

failed narrative, another fiction, but one that is, from the position of the observed,

correct to all intents and purposes.

In another section at the beginning of *Prague Pictures*, Banville reinforces

the linkage between time and fictiveness. The narrator attempts or contemplates

defining or giving voice to a single idea – the idea being linked to historical or

realistic authenticity — and again is confused or rendered inactive by the sublime

magnitude of the idea:

> Time lays down its layers like strata of rock, the porous limestone of the
> present over the granite of the communist over the ashes-and-diamonds
> of the Habsburgs over the basalt of the Premyslids... Where, in what era,
> may one station oneself to find the best, the truest, view? When I was
> young I thought that to know a place authentically, to take it to one's
> heart, one must fall in love there. How many cities have seemed to
> spread themselves out before me in the very contours of the beloved's
> limbs. Solipsism. There are as many Pragues as there are eyes to look
> upon it – more: an infinity of Pragues. Confused and suddenly glum I
> make my way back toward the hotel (12).

Here, the narrator is struck by the sublime qualities of the object, in this case

Prague and the complexity of idea of cities, that he is contemplating. Reference

is made to the infinity of time, the infinity of Pragues,[69] and the infinity of eyes

or perspectives to view the infinity of the object(s). Also, we see the narrator

move from the surety of seeking a hierarchical understanding of subjectivity –

"the best, the truest view" – to the uncertainty of multiple views. Interestingly,

Banville includes a radical possibility for the subject when the narrator states:

"Where, in what era, may one station oneself", as this gives a powerful agency to

the contemplative mind, giving it an autonomy that is not beholden to a

temporally or spatially confined perspective. In simple terms, Banville suggests

absolute freedom. However, the romantic spirit is chastened by the ensuing

"Solipsism". It appears that this is evidence of the narrator moving from

believing in grand narratives to accepting the plurality of narratives as a more

correct way to contemplate the world.

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[69] Scenes such as these form a precedent to the many-worlds theory which serves as a premise of the world of *The Infinities*.

Elements in the text such as the movement towards solipsism and uncertainty mark the text as a work of countertravel literature. The journey shown is one of psychological and philosophical interiority and subjectivity rather than the consideration of the object and world that most travel writing conforms to. The extract quoted above perhaps illustrates one of the recurring ideas in the novel, the yawning gaps between youth and experience and between assuredness and self-doubt. It is due to the recurring ideas such as this idea of time that the text gravitates towards a coherent form. Banville, the young romantic, is now the cold modernist with an infinity of possibilities, none correct or authentic and all more or less equal. The experiential gap manifests itself in the frequent shamings of the narrator/protagonist of *Prague Pictures*. These shamings are moments where the shortcomings of the narrator/author are laid bare.

The issue of time is significantly played with given that two of the foundational genres for *Prague Pictures*, namely travel literature and histories (including the historical fiction of *Kepler* which informs the 'Great Dane, Little Dog' section) are genres that largely rely on a concerted attempt to construct or reconstruct the period in which the action occurs. These genres aspire to a truth that is as close to a represented totality as can be – even if that is not expressing all knowledge within the text, as an intertext they add to the sum of all knowledge by their belonging to a genre with specific codes and rules. Therefore, it can be said that the breakdown of time, its highlighted quality of fictiveness, opposes the constructed narratives of these genres by breaking the

fundamental rules of logical progression and disciplined containment within a brief. Murphy offers the point that *Nightspawn*, a text similarly playful to *Prague Pictures* – at least in terms of their respective genres – is "related via Ben's[70] memories of past events [and] questions the capacity of fiction to reclaim the past and in doing so displaces the realist novel's implicit acceptance of the past as an attainable, imaginative goal" (Murphy, 2006, 14). *Birchwood* is similarly circumspect with the past with the claim of protagonist Gabriel Godkin: "We imagine that we remember things as they were, while in fact all we carry into the future are fragments which reconstruct a wholly illusory past" (*Birchwood*, 4). For Banville, to draw upon the universalizing rationalizations of his protagonists from his early period in *Prague Pictures* - a supposed work of non-fiction -- shows that his scepticism and parodying of time and history was not exorcised by the relative adherence to historical fictions in the first two texts of the science tetralogy.

As to accurately defining the purpose of Banville's concern with the implications of time in the narrative of *Prague Pictures*, there is very little to go on. For a Banville critic, difficult issues in a single text usually require an analysis of that text's 'sister' text or texts as Banville's works are usually categorised in pairs, trilogies and tetralogies.[71] Regarding one confusing aspect of *Doctor Copernicus* and *Kepler*, it has been said that:

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[70] Benjamin White, the protagonist/narrator of *Nightspawn* and the progenitor of all of Banville's erudite, introspective and solipsistic first-person narrators.

[71] Perhaps this is one of the reasons why the stand-alone texts *Nightspawn*, *Prague Pictures*, *The Sea*, *The Infinities* and *Ancient Light* are, notwithstanding the recent arrivals of the latter texts, relatively undercritiqued.

> A ... necessary confusion suffuses the novels as novels.
> Epistemologically speaking, they have things to say -- about forms of
> knowledge, changing historical paradigms, the nature of story-telling –
> but these do not constitute the heart of the fiction. No theme does. At
> heart, the novels are ludic artefacts, themselves reflecting the ludic
> impulses behind their prime thematic elements of art, science and
> religion (McNamee, 2006, 66).

For *Prague Pictures*, we are on less sure ground as to the purpose or "heart" for

while it can also be termed a ludic artefact, the presence of shifting paradigms

within the text and within its assumed genre complicates the statuses of artwork

and practical guide that the text, alternatively, appears to resemble. The text

reveals Banville's scepticism towards singularities and has an analogy in

The Untouchable whose narrator, Victor Maskell, describes as being "a journal",

"a memoir", "an autobiography, notes toward" and eventually a "fictional

memoir" (*The Untouchable*, 3, 57, 405).

Perhaps it is unnecessary to treat Banville's use of time in his non-fiction

as nothing more than a literary device to reinforce the duplicity of his text as,

paradoxically, he is largely unable to rely on the unreliability of his imagined

protagonists and their penchant for dissembling. Therefore, it can be put forward

that Banville's immersion in the process of dissembling is more than an aesthetic

but an ontological standpoint and that his recent work as Benjamin Black is an

extension of this imagining. As a counterbalance to this, some of his recent work

writing as John Banville, *The Sea* and *Ancient Light* to name the two chief

instances, begs the question whether they are partially autobiographical, as the

first-person narrators are less fantastic, violent and monstrous (but no less

human) than the Freddie Montgomerys, Victor Maskels and Axel Vanders of his

fiction, and are set in the Wexford of his childhood, drawing upon childhood
memories.

Parody

Banville has a history of creating emancipatory fictions that have a

degenerative narrative and narrator/protagonists. Within each narrative is a

counter-narrative that subverts the emancipatory intent of the protagonist. In

Doctor Copernicus it is politics and sexuality that is the aspect that corrodes the

main narrative of scientific/artistic realisation. *Prague Pictures* sees a

protagonist who is searching for emancipation from the stereotypical images that

have percolated through his consciousness: in a way the narrator is seeking

enlightenment on his journey. Stereotypes and clichés are corrosive to the aims

of a person seeking truth in 'factual' genres. Banville is circumspect about the

genre that he is writing in, given that one must contend with stereotypes. As in

the abandoned draft to *Doctor Copernicus*, Banville in *Prague Pictures* invokes

the blatant stereotyping of races, nations, language and cuisines, resulting in the

expectations of the travelogue genre being disrupted by the blatancy of the

stereotyping involved: "I had come to Czechoslovakia in the expectation that all

my received ideas of what life was like in Eastern Europe would be overturned. I

was to be disappointed – most of the clichés about communist rule would prove

dispiritingly accurate..." (*Prague Pictures*, 2). This signals Banville's

undermining of the travel-writing genre and one of the reasons why we can

consider *Prague Pictures* as an example of countertravel literature. Holland and

Huggan suggest that "repeated cliché sometimes appears to be the stuff of travel writing, a commodity that cries out to be purchased and consumed and purchased again. It is as if this cycle of production, consumption, and reproduction were at the genre's core; and as if repetition were the paradoxical gesture that both marked and warded off the risk of its demise" (Holland and Huggan, 2000, 199). Cliché is practically impossible to avoid in travel writing and Banville's gleeful embracing of cliché produces, in part, a riposte to his earlier comment that everywhere is largely the same. Cliché, whether used conventionally or in the ironic mode, by the act of universalising a group of ideas or preconceptions, is propagated by the alienating or differential qualities and create a standard 'norm' – sited in the reader or the observer – and the deviation of the 'abnormal'. It is worth noting that the above comment – perhaps deliberately provocative – "I had come to Czechoslovakia..." (*Prague Pictures*, 2) appears churlishly high-minded for travel literature. This statement may be, to paraphrase Holland and Huggan, a self-conscious, parodic aside. It could be said to allude to the imperial questing and dismissiveness of the hoary paragons of the travel-writing genre (Holland and Huggan, 2000, 199) of those who could afford leisurely foreign travel in the heyday of 'classical' travel literature.

This self-conscious generic parodying finds its expression in some of the more grotesque moments of the early part of *Prague Pictures* and in the shamings in the latter part of the text. The grotesque moments reveal an affinity with Banville's fiction and a regular reader will find themselves on familiar ground here, but a newcomer, for example a casual reader of the travel-writing

genre, would perhaps be put off by this self-conscious, self-referential style.

Typical of Banville's brand of aesthetic is the mixing of the sublime and the

banal grotesque in the description of his arrival:

> I rubbed a clear patch on the window and looked out on a bleak expanse
> of no man's land the size of a football pitch, with ghostly patches of
> glittering ice, and a watchtower on stilts, starkly lit, and lamps glowing
> in the frozen mist like giant dandelion heads, and dim bundled figures
> moving spectrally over the countless criss-crossing line of dully
> gleaming rail. As I was turning from the window I noticed that someone
> had blown his nose on the tied-back oatmeal-coloured curtain beside me
> (*Prague Pictures*, 3).

Banville once again incorporates grotesqueness into his work and by this act

ironises the observations of the travel-writing genre. It can appear that he is

suggesting that if the grotesque is permissible in travel literature, a more

authentic narrative is capable of being produced by the writer, as nothing is

excluded or omitted, therefore authenticity is ensured by the fact that the

narrative can contain such a wealth of significant meaning. In another, similar,

scene the narrator says that:

> Light-headed after that sleepless train journey and buzzing still with
> travel fever I clambered on to the bed and lay with hands folded on my
> breast, staring up desperately at the dim ceiling with its sprinkler vents
> and its miniature, fake chandelier. There was what looked like a wad of
> chewing gum stuck up there, the legacy of what must have been a
> prodigiously powerful spitter (6).

Again, attention is drawn towards the grotesque and the fakeness of the

chandelier, fakeness itself being seen as repellent by some. On the same page the

narrator's female accomplices are mentioned as being "Intimidated by the scale

and mortuary stillness of the place" (6). The grotesque and repellent quality of

the observed objects in these opening scenes work against the aesthetic of the

picturesque which makes up some travel writing. Banville perhaps labours the

point by stating that, "The women recount with a shudder the experience at an

early-morning buffet in the Gellert in Budapest, when they lifted the lid of a

nickel receptacle, unencouragingly suggestive of a kidney-dish, and were

confronted with a bloated, grey, semi-circular sausage floating in an inch of

warm, greasy water" (6). These scenes suggest a self-conscious parodying of the

travel-writing genre regarding the observations that are recounted. These

considerations are worth recounting as they are memorable anecdotes, anecdotes

themselves being suited to travel writing, and that their negativity counters the

assumed 'filtering' of repulsiveness that a commercially-driven guidebook would

incorporate. This could be considered an example of a less discriminatory

attitude of the modernist or post-modernist writer as to what aspects could or

should be left out of the text. The grotesque and banal observations are elements

of countertravel writing in that they most likely cannot be observed again – at

least not deliberately by the reader who uses the text in any pragmatic way. In

one section of *Prague Pictures* Banville talks about the Golden Lane area of

Prague and then appears to pre-emptively suggest the reader's dissatisfaction

with his guide:

> It is attractive to think of those magi huddled over their alembics in these
> cramped little rooms, but my guidebook insists, in a distinctly reproving
> tone, that despite popular lore, Rudolf's alchemical horde did not work in
> Zlatá ulička at all, but were confined to nearby Vikarska Lane, that runs
> along the north side of St Vitus's Cathedral – yes, yes, we shall visit the
> cathedral presently (23).

This extract reveals in the final line an assumed reader's impatience with the

detours and digressions that Banville's narrative is taking. Also, it shows that the

author is showing a playful, self-conscious awareness of the constraints of the travel-writing genre with its allusion to the author's own guidebook.

Cliché and ironical allusion

Banville can be said to use cliché in *Prague Pictures* as a converging point for his concerns of genre and representation. Cliché is a literary device which ironises the genre of travel writing. In Banville's fiction in general, cliché operates to show the relativism of the narrators, the wrongness of their outlook is signposted by the outlandishness or oddness of their observations. Often, the expected reality is often very dissimilar to the observed occurrence, and many of his narrators favour the cinematic or literary cliché when describing an article of interest. In *Prague Pictures* we see a continuation of Banville's penchant for the cliché. In one scene early in the text, two Czech guards at the border are cartoonish, clichéd and assume a quality of falseness: "Their guns looked altogether too square and stubby and ill-designed to be effective, and might have been made of cardboard, but still were frightening" (3)[72] showing a disparity between what the narrator sees and what is actually happening. Representation and meaning are typically brought into question also; language is an untrustworthy actor who typically adds to the script. With regard to the sleeper train from Ljubljana to Prague the narrator-protagonist states "That word, 'sleeper', proved to be a misnomer, for in our carriage of couchettes no one

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[72] Echoing *The Book of Evidence* when Freddie is arrested one policeman "was, I suspect, a keen student of the cinema. He had a hatchet face and lank black hair and wore a sort of padded military jacket. The sub-machinegun he was holding, a blunt squarish model with only about an inch of barrel, looked remarkably like a toy" (*The Book of Evidence*, 189).

slept" (2). Other scenes in the text invoke cinematic and literary clichés. The narrator is surprised by the surveillance in the hotels in Prague: "There were, there really were, hidden microphones everywhere" (16) and mid-twentieth century musicals are suggested when:

> At that moment the double doors to the dining room behind us swung open from within, pressed by the backs of a pair of waiters, each bearing a tray piled high with used plates, who spun on their heels in co-ordinated pirouettes like the sleek male dancers in an old-fashioned movie musical, and pranced away in the direction of the kitchens, their trays held effortlessly aloft (17).

These elements in the text serve to highlight the artifice and machinations of the destination or the observed place. The narrator subject is coldly rejected by the environment and his journey appears somewhat heroic and intrepid due to the fact that he is attempting to smuggle photographs out of the country and also due to the unwelcoming, suspiciousness of Czechoslovakia in the Cold War era. The statement, "There were, there really were", quoted above, points to the state of disbelief that the narrator holds. Banville again refers to the cinema when writing about the Soviet era stating that: ·

> Praguers are the most circumspect of city dwellers. Travellers on trams and in the metro carefully remove the dust jackets of books, no matter how innocuous, that they have brought to read on the journey; some will even make brown-paper covers to hide the titles of paperbacks. Understandable, of course in a city for so long full of informers, and old habits die hard. Likewise, our brief journey to Kateřina's apartment had the air of the credits sequence of a 1960s espionage movie (113).

Once more the apparent unreality of the communist era is alluded to. Similar to the plot of *The Untouchable*, the portrait of communist rule appears, at the very least, lacking in the seriousness required for any rendering of a totalitarian regime.

In another instance of cliché, in what can be taken as an offensively clichéd depiction, the narrator states at the beginning of a party that: "I wish I could say that at that moment suddenly the door burst open and a crowd of half-drunk Praguers came in singing, waving bottles and with sausages sticking out of their pockets" (123-124). In scenes such as these, the assumed political correctness of the travel writer is undermined and the aloof narrator is presented strongly, showing an author countering the expectations of the genre. As a text in the genre of travel literature, moments such as these serve to alienate the narrator from his destination and to create that disparity between subjective viewpoint and objective reality that the genre requires. Instances such as these also serve to make the text more novelistic as the narrator appears more flawed, more human in his observances by resorting to clichéd representations. It has been said that "The offensiveness of literary clichés often lies not in their newness or oldness but in the difficulty one has of conceiving an excuse for them" (Wimsatt and Brooks, 1970, 356).

Banville uses an ironic sense of humour when mentioning his source of authority: "My brief history of the Czech Lands, downloaded from the Internet, opens by observing that the first inhabitants of the region were prehistoric fish" (*Prague Pictures*, 72). After proceeding to give historical and mythical information, the chapter ends, as it begins, with the Internet and the topic of the Emperor Rudolf:

> Who can guess the judgement of posterity? Searching the Internet for
> information on Rudolf, I was offered not Ripellino or Evans or Yates,[73]
> but, mysteriously, the memoirs of an SS Kommandant at Auschwitz, the
> *Eddeades IV et V* of Plotinus, three taped episodes of the *Teletubbies*,
> and seven versions of *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer*. Thus does the
> glory fall (96).

This excerpt shows that Banville's epistemological and, more particularly,

metafictional concerns of the science tetralogy emerge in a slightly different

light. The fallen "glory" alludes to a fictional, prelapsarian time, where

authoritative knowledge was exalted and where the mundane and the banal did

not exist. In *Copernicus*, *Kepler*, *The Newton Letter* and *Mefisto*, the scientists at

the heart of the narratives are invariably misled, distracted or thwarted by sexual,

political or domestic issues that appear to suggest that the ideal state for the

inquisitive mind is aloof, apart from the *demos* of the populace, the bodily, or the

commonplace. Travel writing ironises the epistemological 'quest' as the traveller

must find significance in his or her experience for others. The aforementioned

quotation[74] stresses that, roughly, "every *serious* visitor must make" (my italics)

an effort to convert epistemological data into ontological knowledge.

As a guide to a city, the reader is gradually aware that Banville is

imparting little relevant information on Prague in its current state. He is slightly

defensive when he refers to a convent: "It was abolished as a convent in 1782,

but was restored in the 1960s and now houses a collection of nineteenth-century

Czech art from the National Gallery. Don't say I do not give practical advice"

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[73] Angelo Maria Ripellino is the author of *Magic Prague* and this text is Banville's go-to book for the
city, despite its difficult and different style to *Prague Pictures*. R.J.W. Evans and Frances Yates are the
scholars mentioned.

[74] "to ingest it [the city], to make that metamorphosis of world into self that Rilke tell us is our task on
earth. It is analogous to the effort every serious visitor must make. One will not know a city merely by
promenading before its sites and sights, *Blue Guide* in hand..." (*Prague Pictures*, 11).

(167). This extract highlights Banville's self-awareness of the novelty or anti-traditional nature of *Prague Pictures*, revealing that his project intentionally ironises and undermines the genre. It reveals that generic conventions are part of his concerns in the formulation of the text and that he is aware that he is, more often than not, flouting conventions. Travel literature as a whole is an awkward site for irony – as a genre it has to contain both practical knowledge and enjoyable, novelistic scenes. Ironical or parodical asides and digressions hinder the pragmatic function of the narrative but can bolster the novelistic function. We can justifiably say that Banville is being novelistic when he is being ironic. It has been said that "Genres are the meeting place between general poetics and event-based literary history" (Todorov, 2000, 201) and one can see that the dichotomous structure of *Prague Pictures*, the generic 'travel guide' and the counter-generic 'novelish' asides, result in a creative piece of literature.

The Quasi-Novel

Post-modern generic writing is legitimised by the non-adherence of the author(s) to the dicta of a single genre. *Prague Pictures* can be taken as an almost-novel because the author is covertly playing with genre and partly due to the fact that Banville resists the implied simplicity of writing in a single genre. In *Prague Pictures* the narrator of the text undergoes a series of shaming or embarrassing moments, usually related to how he misguidedly perceives the world, that are instructive to his creative self. Therefore, 'wrongness' and 'incompletion' are central to how the creative process is represented; i.e. as an

unfulfilled act. Banville regularly undermines the reader's assumptions of

plausibility of the non-fiction text he stretches the limits of the genre throughout

the text. The overt signification implied in generic writing is resisted by Banville

and he upholds the notion that his texts are amorphous artefacts unfitting for

simple categorisation.

The categorisation of Banville's novel *Doctor Copernicus* involves the

dilemma of whether to take the historical information and research involved as

indicative of its generic fidelity. Referring to this dilemma, Imhof claims that

"This… thematic interest has misled some readers and critics to regard the book

principally in terms of an historical novel. But *Doctor Copernicus* is not so

much an historical novel…[i]nstead, it should be more appropriate to approach

the account as a 'novel of ideas' (Imhof, 1989, 78). Although Imhof is

attempting to lionise the text by deflecting criticism that denotes the novel as

merely 'historical', Banville himself in *Prague Pictures* addresses historicity by

claiming that in travelling to Prague:

> I had something more than a visitor's curiosity. Some years previously I
> had written a novel partly set in Prague at the turn of the seventeenth
> century. When I was working on the book I did not regard the inventing
> of a city I had never seen as any more of a challenge than, for example,
> having to re-create the early 1600s – all fiction is invention, and all
> novels are historical novels – but I was interested to know what level of
> verisimilitude, or at least of convincingness, I had achieved (*Prague
> Pictures*, 7).

Here, Banville can be seen considering himself as a novelist and his text as

novelistic while also making its authenticity ambiguous. He also shows that he is

consciously reimagining his work in the science tetralogy and that this body of

work generates continued inspiration and is the bedrock for his more playful work.

Kepler and *Doctor Copernicus*

The texts *Birchwood, Doctor Copernicus, Kepler, The Newton Letter* and *Mefisto*, the latter four making up the Science Tetralogy, correspond with an arc of generic cynicism or scepticism that is apparent in Banville's early work. In *Birchwood* we see the mocking of genre as Banville uses techniques such as stock characters, a 'doubled' narrative and ahistorical 'facts' to show the artifice behind fiction. Hand refers to Gabriel Godkin's process of viewing the past in *Birchwood* as revealing the "disorderly fragments" (Hand, 2002, 38) and the sleights of hand or artifice involved in any historical writing. With *Doctor Copernicus* and *Kepler* we have two texts which evince a relatively more faithful rendering of historical fact as the author for the main part eschews the post-modern literary games of his previous novels. Where Banville deviates from history in the Science Tetralogy he almost apologetically informs the reader where these allusions come from. Moreover, he offers more illuminating texts as an alternative to his own work of fiction. These are historical biographies and surveys, monographs or in the case of Arthur Koestler's *The Sleepwalkers* a mixture of fact, fiction, theory and digressions which is partly the template for Banville's *Doctor Copernicus*, particularly the abandoned finale to the novel which is still extant in typescript form. While his use of footnoting is not an exhaustive or accurate guide to illustrate influences and authority or to relinquish

authority, it establishes, particularly in the case of *Doctor Copernicus* and *Kepler*, a network of related texts to which these novels by implication belong to. The elucidatory aspect of the footnote or endnote is part of a generic function of academic or scientific writing and it is worth noting that these texts, along with *Prague Pictures* and other more historical novels such as *The Untouchable* and *Shroud*, contain an extensively formalised acknowledgement of sources and inspirations.

Doctor Copernicus in particular mirrors *Prague Pictures* in illustrating metatextual genericity.[75] Literary critics must by necessity use the illusions of schematisation, categorical institutions to grapple with an amorphous reality. Banville's *Doctor Copernicus*, particularly the original idea in its typescript form but also to a lesser extent its published version, was a metanovel trying to capture the multitude of ways to apprehend knowledge and reality by way of presenting them in a hybridised, polygeneric form. As a text it oscillates between two points: the polygeneric metanovel on one side and the genre novel the other. It is more than Banville paying lip-service to genre literature; the fusion of genres in *Doctor Copernicus* and *Prague Pictures* expresses a multifaceted rendering of the world that the complexity of the subject requires, be it a city with its past and future, its culture and geography or a scientific revolution with its shattering of previously-held ideas.

Banville's *Prague Pictures* corresponds thematically with *Doctor Copernicus* and *Kepler* for two main reasons. Firstly, *Kepler* is largely set in the

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[75] Mainly the 'Liber Occultus' section of *Doctor Copernicus*.

court of Rudolf II, ruler of the Holy Roman Empire; Prague being his seat. *Prague Pictures* builds upon this text in the section 'Great Dane, Little Dog'. Secondly, the initial typescript draft of *Doctor Copernicus* contains a coda, eventually abandoned at the eleventh hour before submission to his publisher, where the author enters the narrative, breaking the fourth wall of the historical novel genre in a particularly post-modern gesture. In this section Banville narrates a real – but like *Prague Pictures* a considerably digressive – account of his trip to Poland where he went to assess the veracity and verisimilitude of his almost-complete novel. For these reasons, it is easy to conclude that "Banville's work...has a noticeable habit of quoting itself, or moving forwards with an image or an idea taken from an earlier work", leading to the accusation that he is writing the same book over and over (McMinn, 1999, 10). Furthermore, *Doctor Copernicus* features a confrontation between a contemporary narrator and a narrated historical context (Hutcheon, 1993, 53) which creates a distancing effect not dissimilar to the countertravel style of *Prague Pictures*.

Millenarianism

It could also be said that both *Doctor Copernicus* and *Prague Pictures* contain an underlying fear of technology and knowledge that can be termed millenarianism. The reasoning behind this is that *Prague Pictures* contains many examples of the epoch-defining defeat of communism in the late twentieth century and the destruction of many building, medieval and renaissance artworks and what Banville termed "a European disaster" (*Prague Pictures*, 231) when the

river Vltava burst its banks on the night of August 8 in 2002. *Doctor Copernicus*, set around the year 1500, depicts a different upheaval (and a disaster, from some points of view) as the astronomer symbolically and literally placed man far from the centre of the universe in his scientific work.

On a documentarian level, the ideologies of capitalism and communism are expressed in the observations in *Prague Pictures*. Referring to the status of Franz Kafka as a non-person before the 1960s, Banville states that "One almost has to admire the simplicity of it, the horrible, blank thoroughness of this erasure of a life and its darkly luminous products" (27). However, after the fall of the Iron Curtain it would seem that this sea change indicates a Hegelian notion of history (10-11). Banville's travels to Prague straddle the regime change and his cosmopolitan outlook allows him to draw an extensive amount of literary and historical allusions to the journey of change that the city undergoes.

In *Prague Pictures*, as in many other works of travel writing and other genres such as historical and political writing, the desire to mark the millennial moment in Banville's text is readily apparent. Banville states that "I feel uncomfortably as if I have gatecrashed a wake" and is shaken: "Over the years I have spent many happy days in this city...but after such damage, what is to be my attitude now, and how should I comport myself?" (231). He continues to say that

> One needs to know something of the successive defeats and invasions the city has suffered through the centuries to appreciate the full extent of the shock that Praguers felt as they cowered before the raging waters of the Vltava that August. It was the White Mountain all over again. Here was another assault to be resisted, not from without, this time, but from within (232).

And later: "It was as if all the flood waters, coursing through the catacomb of cellars and underground passageways beneath the city, had stirred something ancient and elemental in Prague's very foundation. I felt as if I had come to visit a sometime lover and found her beautiful as ever, but aged, and melancholy, and fearful of the future" (234). It could be said that such millenarianism in travel literature is part of a quest for authenticity. In travel literature and particularly millenarianist travel literature, one seeks to engage and define frontiers that are exotic – frontiers at extremities, for example, of the Western, of the 'civilised', of historical regimes (Holland and Huggan, 2000, 204). For the contemporary travel writer, the desire to mark decisive ends and beginnings particularly through millennial discourse is an option. Prague presents a frontier for Banville for many reasons. At one point he writes of a confrontation between himself and his host: "We continually spoke, she said, J. and G. and I, of Eastern Europe...Eastern Europe? she said, glaring at each of us in turn – where was that? Where does Eastern Europe begin? At Moscow? Budapest? Prague? Vienna?" (*Prague Pictures*, 52). Banville's journeys to Prague begin with his first in the early 1980s, thus straddling the Velvet Revolution of 1989 which ended the Soviet control of Czechoslovakia, allowing him to experience the rapid change from a censorious, communist state to a modern, capitalist state. The text is also concerned with defining epochs of human history. Soviet-influenced Czechoslovakia offers a good demarcation point for the work, being produced little over two decades after the breakdown of the Soviet sphere, with crass American-influenced consumer society on one side of the Soviet epoch and a

Mitteleuropean idyll pre-twentieth-century on the other. It has been put forward

that "that has always been the real advantage of the travel narrative form anyway:

that the slippy unpredictability which sets if off so markedly from many other

forms of writing, that allows it so many guises and shifts, makes it the one best

suited for such difficult times, and such difficult places" (Hooper, 2008, 188),

and the mixture of genres allows Banville to write far more openly, and

politically, than he would perhaps suggest himself.

Prague Pictures contains scenes from a collection of visits over a time

period of roughly twenty years; in many ways; therefore, Banville's text is a

crossing of frontiers – geographical, historical, political and textual. Perhaps the

attraction of writing about Prague is that Banville, with the benefit of hindsight

and having lived and travelled through a turbulent stage in European history, is

that the timeless, "magic" Prague of Ripellino, the romanticised, fragile,

victimised city, represents the artistic subject being ravished by the overpowering

forces of modernity. In Banville's text the subject – Prague – functions as a

literary symbol for the Self, perhaps the artistic self in a disorderly era.

Doctor Copernicus, a novel about an astronomer who brought about an

epistemological paradigm shift, also features a sense of foreboding centred on the

year 1500,[76] similar to the sense of impending and irreversible change that is

apparent throughout Czechoslovakia's crossover from Soviet satellite state to a

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[76] An example of ironic millenarianism previously used in a different context earlier in this study is:
> The city crouched, sweating in fright, under the sign of the brooding bull. Talk of portents was rife....It seemed, in the brumous yellowy light of that winter day, that the Lord of Darkness himself had come forth to be acclaimed by the delirious mob.
> This was Rome, in the jubilee year of 1500. (*Doctor Copernicus*, 74)

liberal capitalist state. In one scene, taking place in the 1980s, Banville and his

friends meet a character known as 'the Professor', and they request that he show

them the local museums and galleries which

> were shut…and had been since sometime back in the Seventies. No
> reason had been given for their closure, and enquiries to the 'faceless
> authorities' – in Prague, the cliché took on a fresh, or rancid, rather, new
> life – elicited either a contemptuous silence, or pompously worded, but
> carefully vague, assurances that elaborate programmes of repair and
> refurbishment were about to get under way (*Prague Pictures*, 32).

The change in established forms of knowledge and the expression thereof marks

a common ground between Banville's science novels and his only full-length[77]

work of non-fiction.

Evolution of the Science Tetralogy Intertext

Banville plays with the genre of travel literature in *Prague Pictures* in

almost a carbon copy of a scene from the coda to *Doctor Copernicus*. The author

invokes a 'classroom' and almost becomes Johannes Kepler drawing the

explanation of planetary movement for his students:

> He had drawn on the blackboard a diagram illustrating the progression of
> the great conjunctions of Jupiter and Saturn, that is, the crossing points at
> which, approximately every twenty years, the planet Jupiter catches up
> with and passes Saturn. Because of slight variations in distance between
> the points on the Zodiac at which the conjunctions occur – pay attention,
> please, this is really not as complicated as it seems – it is possible to
> inscribe a series of triangles within the circle of the Zodiac joining the
> conjunction points, triangles which on their inner sides will, as if by

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[77] It is important to note that with regards to genre and how generic works are perceived, the term 'full-length' confers a totality and a coherence that may not necessarily be present. It is also worth noting that many of the texts reveal a circumspect attitude about the status of 'wholeness' of texts and are acknowledged as notes towards novels, variations on themes. For a good example of this, the last paragraph of *Nightspawn* reads "Come, one more effort to transfix it all, to express it all. Try. I cannot. The world is… Art is…No, no use. I cannot. You must, there must be a conclusion. A word, even. Try. Try now, here. Could I? Try. Chapter one. My story begins at a –" (*Nightspawn*, 199).

magic, or divine intention, 'draw' another, smaller circle... Oh, all right, here is an illustration (*Prague Pictures*, 158-9).

In the 'Liber Occultus' section to the *Doctor Copernicus* typescript, Banville similarly speaks to an imaginary classroom when he explains Copernicus' heliocentric theory. These extracts reveal the author attempting to show the reader how the astronomical systems of his characters' work. The significance of this lies in the necessity – or lack of necessity – to publish illustrations of Kepler's zodiac along with an illustration of his model of the universe in *Prague Pictures* (161). The didactic speech mode of these sections, combined with the presence of scientific woodcuts from the seventeenth century,[78] is remarkably tangential in a work of travel literature. Why Banville involves the character of Kepler in *Prague Pictures* is difficult to fully decipher. In the beginning of the text Banville is quite coy about the novel *Kepler*, not even mentioning it by name:

> I had something more than a visitor's curiosity. Some years previously I had written a novel partly set in Prague at the turn of the seventeenth century. When I was working on the book I did not regard the inventing of a city I had never seen as any more of a challenge than, for example, having to re-create the early 1600s – all fiction is invention, and all novels arc historical novels – but I was interested to know what level of verisimilitude, or at least of convincingness, I had achieved. Many readers had complimented me on the accuracy with which my book had 'caught the period' to which I was too grateful and too polite to respond by asking how they could possibly know; I understood that what they were praising was the imaginative feat they felt I had performed in persuading them that this was just how it had been then (*Prague Pictures*, 7).

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[78] These are the only visual images printed in *Prague Pictures*, and it is notable that they add to a discernible effort to connect his texts in different genres.

In this excerpt we see Banville depicting himself as a novelist first and foremost and his text as novelistic while also making its authenticity ambiguous. The phrase, "I had something more than a visitor's curiosity", serves to mark him out as a non-typical tourist but as a traveller in the literary-historical tradition and that this work of travel writing is of the palimpsest qualities required to qualify it as an evolution within the genre. The post-modern travel text is thus an article of cultural criticism involving various types of knowledge – historical, philosophical, experiential and geographical – expressed in a multigeneric fashion. The 'Liber Occultus' coda to *Doctor Copernicus* is a similar assessment of verisimilitude. At one point Banville writes "I have not found Copernicus, but the search remains, the books remains, I have made a book out of the search; surely it is worth something" ("Doctor Copernicus", 1973-1975: 1978, TS 344). Unlike the perceived failure in *Doctor Copernicus*, *Prague Pictures* redresses the lacuna in the imaginative feat by the author's claim:

> Yes, I had got it right, to a startling degree. Why was I not pleased? In part because, standing there surveying my handiwork, I was struck yet again by the essential fraudulence of fiction. Conjure a winter morning, a river and a castle and a traveller disembarking with a book under his arm, and for the space of a page or two an implied world comes to creaky life. It is all a sleight of the imagination, a vast synecdoche. And yet one goes on doing it, spinning yarns, trying to emulate blind Fate herself (*Prague Pictures*, 9).

In *Prague Pictures*, there are few passing references to *Doctor Copernicus*. In one, Banville states that

> In another novel, set long ago in what is now Poland, I had fashioned – forged perhaps, would be the better word – a minor character, a soldier, whose presence the plot had demanded, but whose real existence I learned of when, after the book had been published, I received a

biographical sketch of him from a helpful Polish historian. The making of fiction is a funny business (8).

The use of the word 'forged' implies that there is a level of deceit in every fiction that is historical, not only artifice but perhaps also fakery. That *Doctor Copernicus* is alluded to in *Prague Pictures* shows at a simple level the superficial similarity between the texts but it could also be inferred that the author sees the latter as a continuation of the aborted process of 'Liber Occultus'. While the coda to *Doctor Copernicus* shows Banville finding out the inauthenticity of the imagination, *Prague Pictures*, with its invocation of many diverse, absurd and experimental artists and writers, celebrates its enigmatic qualities. It is difficult to argue with the assertion that in Banville's works the "fictionality of the fiction is slyly hinted at by the extensive intertextual references" (McNamee, 2006, 57). It is necessary to note that the fictionality of the fiction is not discontinued by the move towards non-fiction but rather that writing non-fiction, and all that this implies, for Banville, bolsters the sense of artifice, forgery and the creativity of the fiction.

Shame – Towards a central hero

It can be argued that *Prague Pictures* moves further towards the novel form by the nature of its narrator. The narrated self in the text undergoes a gradual development and an epiphany towards the end of the text that allows one to term the text as a pseudo-novel. Throughout the text it is noticeable that the protagonist-narrator experiences events which lead him to feel embarrassed, guilty or ashamed. Sacrificial deaths and sacrificial shamings line the novel.

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There are several violent 'deaths' and rebirths in Banville's fictions, most notably Gabriel Swan in *Mefisto*, Axel Vander in *Shroud*, and Freddie Montgomery in *Ghosts*. In *Prague Pictures* I would argue that the successive shamings of the narrator, combined with the humiliations of Tycho de Brahe and Kepler with whom the author has a clear empathy, imply a rebirth that never occurs. This arc of life-death-rebirth is too novelistic, even for *Prague Pictures*, and Banville withholds this development in a moment of restraint, returning the attention in the epilogue 'The Deluge' to a symbolic death and rebirth of the city in the floods of August 2002.

The development of a flawed character-narrator is not fully elaborated in *Prague Pictures* but it is clear that the genesis of a hero is there. One of the purposes of the narrator's earliest visit to Prague is to meet 'the Professor', who is to give him Sudek's photographs (perhaps the pictures of the title to the book) which are to be smuggled across borders into the West. This scheme, whether real or not, is not fully expanded upon but it fits in with the 'novelish' aspects of *Prague Pictures* by hinting at a quest, a plot, and a battle between good and evil (or censorship and freedom of expression in this case). The shamings that occur throughout the text show an affinity between the narrator-protagonist-author and the revolutionary scientists of earlier fictions, and the reader may expect that the shamings are a device to give the central 'hero' a flawed aspect.

Rather than being a digression from the text's main concern of capturing the quintessence of Prague, the frequency of the shamings of the narrator allow the reader to envisage a narrative arc within the text. The function of shame in

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the text is a novelizing feature of the text. The reader is presented with a figure that is far removed from the informative, playful and dissembling 'author' Banville. The 'character' Banville emerges as an appeal to the empathy, solidarity and emotional qualities of the intended audience. The empathetic qualities of the character Banville, the repetition and variations of shame, give the novel an enclosed space and a recognisable underlying emotional path for the author-figure who takes the place of the hero in the text.

Several instances of shame or embarrassment connect directly with the nature of the genre that Banville is writing in. In a contradictory tone to the imperious, cliché-ridden, explorer of the opening of the text, the narrator strikes a more apologetic note when he feels lost in the artistic history of Czechoslovakia: "Names, names. Listening to the Professor, I experienced a sense of shame such as a professional explorer would feel on being gently told that an entire civilisation had flourished briefly in the valley next to where he was born, the existence of which had been entirely unknown to him" (*Prague Pictures*, 50-1). This is one example of a self-doubt about the aptness and informedness of the traveller and is marked by the not-quite-metaphor of the "professional explorer". Later on, in a remarkable confession which again contradicts the tone apparent earlier in the book, the narrator recounts how he once offended the delegates of a literary conference on Czech literature and censorship in a ham-fisted attempt to praise current Czech writers by "asking if perhaps Gore Vidal's assertion that Hollywood never destroyed anyone who was worth saving might be adapted to Soviet communism and Czech writers" (205). In this anecdote the narrator-

author proceeds straight after the moment of shame to the Old Jewish Cemetery "seeking balm for my still burning blushes". It is possible to read the confessional quality of this section as an apology for the inadequacies of his insights. The question of whether the author is up to the task of depicting "the uniqueness of places or persons" (201)[79] is pre-emptively, and negatively, answered.

It is interesting to note that in Banville's writings, "On the unusual occasions when the male protagonist is forced into being watched rather than watching, he is disconcerted" (Coughlan, 2006, 86). In *Prague Pictures*, the source of shame is more varied such as when he appears inept or unknowledgeable or fails to register the intricacies of society. When asking the Professor and Marta how many rooms they had in their apartment (*Prague Pictures*, 49) a social awkwardness occurs when they announce they have only the room that they are standing in. He recounts an earlier moment of shame in Rotterdam (120), shame about his private life (104), for his lack of languages (200) and shame when he chases a girl pickpocket (237). In *The Book of Evidence*, the essential sin, for Freddie, is the failure of his imagination (*The Book of Evidence*, 215); for the narrator-protagonist of *Prague Pictures* the shame arises from a lack of foreknowledge, from being cut loose from the associative frames of information – in short, for not being 'in the know'. In the

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[79]The full sentence is "Fiction is a strange, voracious business, and no respecter of the uniqueness of places or persons" and refers to Banville's inspiration for the scene of Cassandra Cleave's suicide (cf. *Eclipse, Shroud*).

final comment on the first section of the book – 'Perspective – Sudek's City'

shame is, like in *The Book of Evidence*,[80] the final note:

> When we crossed to the Austrian side the first thing I saw was a hoarding
> of a half-naked woman advertising some degenerate Western luxury –
> Dior fashions or Mercedes motor cars – and something in me revelled
> instinctively, irresistibly, in the sight of what seemed such happy,
> hopeful, life-affirming colours, and I thought of the Professor, and Marta,
> and felt ashamed (*Prague Pictures*, 71).

Here, the shame is linked to the author's status as a traveller from an arguably

more modern, capitalist, Western state. The capitalist guilt of the traveller who

crossed the Soviet Bloc frontier chastens the ebullience of the introduction of the

narrative, and this realisation appears to set the stage for the rest of the text. The

other shamings in the text are, in general, variations of this epiphanic close to the

first book of *Prague Pictures*.

Banville's sole book-length work of non-fiction thus draws upon the

foundations laid out in his fiction. He recycles excised autobiographical material

from *Doctor Copernicus* and combines this with a variety of fiction and non-

fiction genres. Banville's use of himself as a 'shamed' hero with the misfortunes

and regrets that this entails places this 'Banville' character in the same archetype

of his confessional antiheroes, albeit with a godlike control of the parameters of

the narrative. With his later work, *The Infinities*, Banville transfers this

unbounded narratological control to his characters rather than to his

representation of himself on the page in *Prague Pictures*.

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[80] "How much of it is true? All of it. None of it. Only the shame" (*The Book of Evidence*, 220).

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Chapter Five

Return to Metafiction: *The Infinities*

Should poetry simply be divided up? Or should it remain one and indivisible?
Or fluctuate between division and union? Most of the ways of conceiving a
poetical world are still as primitive and childish as the old pre-Copernican ideas
of astronomy.

(Friedrich Schlegel, 'Athenaeum Fragments')[81]

The Infinities (2009) is Banville's first work published after the broadening of his

audience with the success of *The Sea* (2005) and his foray into new genre spaces

with the Benjamin Black books. In its complexity, *The Infinities* is more akin to

Shroud than its immediate predecessor *The Sea*, as the intersubjectivity of its

narrator, the god Hermes, who variously claims to be one with all the other gods,

thus the narrative voice is a conglomeration of various guises and identities. The

gods Zeus and Hermes possess various characters in the course of the novel, so

that it is not always clear who has power over the speech and thought of each

character.

The loci of the gods in *The Infinities* appears as an ostentatious break

from the concerns of the previous novel. The success in the Man Booker prize in

2005 and the first forays into the world of crime fiction with the Benjamin Black

series brings new expectations for a writer such as Banville who by leaving

behind his work as literary editor of the *Irish Times* may have been expected to

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[81] Schlegel, Friedrich. *Lucinde and The Fragments*. Trans. Peter Firchow. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1971. p. 237

write more accessible works with an increased market appeal given that he would not be sustaining his career as an artist through working in journalism.

The Sea, although characteristically weighty and serious in both the theme and tone, is one of Banville's shorter novels and compared with some of his highly allusive, self-reflexive and metafictional works of the 1990s and early 2000s, such as *Ghosts*, *Athena* and *The Untouchable*, has a lesser degree of overt literary and philosophical elaboration. The expectation that Banville's critical success with *The Sea* would be followed by a similar follow-up in *The Infinities* would have been dashed by the opening section of *The Infinities*. In relation to this *The Infinities* is comparable to *Ghosts*: the narrator is distanced from the cast of characters by appearing to have superhuman abilities of observation yet also affirming their place amongst the cast. The omniscience of the narrator is counterbalanced by the realisation that the narrator is a character no more aware of events than the rest. O'Connell is perhaps the first to draw connections between the two texts, and he says "There is, with each novel, a point of epiphanic disclosure at which we realize that the narrative that has actually been unfolding is very different from the one we thought we were following; where the things we have been reading about are revealed to have been the inventions of a man alone in a room with his imagination" (O'Connell, 2011, 439). The text is narrated initially by the god Hermes and this technique of making the narrator non-human (or superhuman) chimes with the perceived unworldliness of previous Banvillean narrators and protagonists: Copernicus, Gabriel Godkin and Freddie Montgomery being the best examples of Nietzschean *ubermenschen*

whose ambitions or quests are curtailed by the baseness of the physical world. The divergence from the preoccupations of *The Sea* has been considered in some quarters as a return to the earlier ideas of Banville's novels in the 1970s and 1980s. Nolan comments that "In 'Physics and Fiction', Banville challenged his readers to 'imagine a Nabokov novel based on the life of a Godei or an Einstein'. *The Infinities*, finally, is that book" (Nolan, 2010, 40). The choice of a divine narrator (and the presence of a plethora of Gods themselves), initially at least, undermines the textual preoccupations of *The Sea* where mortality, the remembrance of love, and human frailty constitute the beating heart of the prose. A reader introduced to Banville through *The Sea* would arguably be mystified by the seemingly new direction of its follow-up, as the familiarity of an average man reflecting on human issues in *The Sea* is transformed into a superhuman being curiously observing human issues and reflecting on their unavailability, unknowability, and strangeness.

Readerly expectations are further undermined by the presence of ideas and tropes more common in science fiction novels than in an author newly accepted by "middlebrow" readers,[82] and could be perceived as either potentially isolating a new audience or as an act of authorial rebellion against any demand for more of the same. In other words, the presence of new ideas is always a sign of an author affirming their agency. Certainly, in terms of language and tone there is much in

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[82] Banville has stated that the Man Booker Prize award generally "promotes good, middlebrow fiction" (Banville in McKeon, 2009). His post-award interview with Kirsty Wark for the BBC is notable for his claim that a work of art had just won the award, and his use of "middlebrow" is definitively pejorative. It could be that by drawing attention to the artistic quality of *The Sea*, Banville is deflecting potential criticism of a novel that is relatively plotless and straightforward when compared to *Shroud* and *The Infinities*.

The Infinities to compare with *The Sea*: we have a narrator who is extra-aware yet in all their lucidity cannot access a desirable truth, we have ruminations of not only the aesthetic qualities but also the ontological otherness of objects, and we have a creative mind who is aware of the incompleteness of his creation. Yet, there is an element of ludic disjointedness to *The Infinities*. Schwall has noted that the novel incorporates fantastical play and that the "mythological narrator shows us...that the outside world is merely a characterisation of inner worlds; that space is a purely subjective thing; and that world upon world is a theatre, ad infinitum" (Schwall, 2010, 94). *The Infinities* is a remarkably metafictional text that addresses the act of creation with a playful complexity typical of the author.

For the experienced Banville reader, however, there is discernibly familiar ground in *The Infinities*. The novel is part of an elaborate conceit in a way: although not overtly acknowledged in current editions of the text,[83] it is a re-telling of Banville's earlier novels. The novel is set in a Big House in a southerly, coastal area most likely the Wexford of *Eclipse*, *The Sea* and *Ancient Light*. The Big House immediately invokes *Birchwood*, *The Newton Letter*, *Mefisto* and *The Book of Evidence*. The dying figure at the centre of the novel, Adam Godly Sr, evokes Banville's scientist, world-changing protagonists of the tetralogy and, in name at least, Gabriel Godkin of *Birchwood*. Following a pattern of The Sea, *Shroud* and *Eclipse*, death is centrally placed as a theme.

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[83] Relatively speaking, Banville's inspirations for *The Infinities* are hidden. *The Untouchable*, *Doctor Copernicus* and *Shroud* acknowledged most (if not all) of their sources of inspiration in endnote form. Banville's second work for the stage is a version of Heinrich von Kleist's *Amphitryon* (itself borrowing much from Molière's adaptation and Plautus' original of the same name) called *God's Gift*, and *The Infinities* revisits the material. Hedda Friberg-Harnesk's charts the intertextuality of the play and the novel in her article: 'In the Sign of the Counterfeit: John Banville's *God's Gift*'. *Nordic Irish Studies*. 2008. 9. 71-88. http://www.jstor.org/stable/41702650. Accessed 21 October 2015.

More so than *The Sea*, *The Infinities* shows Banville expressing the breadth of his fiction in a self-reflexive way but one which is also more experimental with genre by invoking classical myth, fantasy, science fiction and alternative history.

The main sites of Banville's generic experiments with the novel form in *The Infinities* come in the employment of multiple narrators and his use of the many-worlds theory[84] which functions, literally as well as figuratively, as a *deus ex machina* which allows both the presence of humans and the improbable Greek gods in a bizarre yet semi-familiar Irish landscape. The advances in science by Adam allow cold fusion to be possible, and the vehicles in the novel run not on conventional fossil fuels but on seawater. Historically, several differences are included: the Popes are typically English; the reign of Mary I is considered more successful than that of her sister Elizabeth; England is predominantly Catholic; Cesare Borgia is a patron of the arts; Sweden resembles early twentieth century Germany; and Kleist is a better known writer than Goethe. These differences and allusions are more or less secondary to the plot of the novel, but they allow comedy and irony to inhabit the text in their reimagining of political and literary authority. Yet the world of *The Infinities* resembles our own closely so that the world is not defamiliarised for the reader. Thus, the generic experiment is partly muted by its familiarity, yet in the context of other Banville 'Wexford' novels it seems radically experimental.

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[84] As proven by Adam who overturns conventional physics in his life's work.

Genre and Politics

In Banville's *oeuvre*, the mixture in *The Infinities* is one of the most generically varied. Published not long after the hybridisation of historical/autobiographical non-fiction and literature in *Prague Pictures*, *The Infinities* has several thematic precursors in the author's work, but still heralds a development in generic form. It is evident that Banville extends his stylistic technique in this novel by including elements more common to science fiction and alternative history genres/subgenres which are a novelty in his body of work. Banville facilitates these elements through the narrative twist of Adam proving that multiple universes exist simultaneously. From an authorial standpoint, this allows Banville to do several tricks and include narratorial sleights of hand. In the past he has invariably invoked easily recognisable genres such as historical fiction, the Bildungsroman and the thriller but turned the plot and themes towards metafictional concerns which can appear to be alien to genre fiction. Conor McCarthy, talking about the Science Tetralogy says that Banville writes

> historical novels, but he metafictionally disrupts any emerging similarity between these books[85] and those of the tradition we now trace to Sir Walter Scott. In *The Newton Letter*, the two projects come together: we read a story of a man who could be the author, in that he is trying to write a biography of another great scientist, Sir Isaac Newton (McCarthy, 2000, 112).

In the landscape of *The Infinities*, the subject of the narrators' is not the past but the tangible present, and rather than being an interrogation of the process of creation we have a narrator – Hermes – who, surveying the creations of his

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[85] Here, *Doctor Copernicus* and *Kepler* are being referred to.

cohort, not only fails to understand them but doesn't need to understand them, and does not have much social or moral responsibility given the prevalence of predestination in the novel. The rampant relativism in the fictive world of the novel could be also seen as a subtle avoidance of real world issues, events and occurrences, and the narrator is similar to the ethical egoist of earlier Banville fictions in his inability to understand the otherness of the characters – in this case mainly because they are utterly unlike the gods. It is the very same experimentation with verisimilitude which would complicate a socio-historical interpretation of *Birchwood* that examines the historical period of the Famine or the genre of the Big House novel. The anachronisms of *Birchwood* resurface in *The Infinities*; however, in the later novel the anomalies of time and setting are more speculative and fantastical due to the modern 'blank canvas(es)' of many-worlds theory. This blank canvas results in the adherence to a fantastical unreality being an axiom for both the author's style and the narrator's imagination. Yet, there is enough relevance to the setting of the real world for the comments on history and literature to be more humorously ironic than grotesque. The playful, parodic improbability of *Birchwood*'s events and sequence are transformed in *The Infinities* into an ironic commentary on history by a narrator who can remove himself from the physical world should he so wish.

An intriguing and ironic feature of *The Infinities* is that we are presented with a world devoid of apocalyptical despair. In the novel, the Greek gods exist. Though the gods are mischievous, and self-serving, the existential despair present in earlier Banville narrators such as Freddie Montgomery or Benjamin

White is negated by the potential that Adam Godley's theories have opened

doors to parallel worlds, opening the possibility of other existences. There are no

fears or thoughts of destruction and an afterlife is not only theoretically possible

but actual in the fictive world of the text.

The issue of the denigration of the environment and carbon in the

atmosphere becomes moot as diesel trains have been replaced by "new-fangled

models that run on steam" (*The Infinities*, 2009, 95) – again thanks to Adam's

theories – which allow seawater to be the most productive fuel available due to

the emergence of cold fusion as a viable technology. An element of irony

emerges as one would assume that this world would seem like a future version of

our own, yet horses are still in widespread use as a Postman arrives on a pony "in

Thurn and Taxis[86] livery, with his tricorn cap and his post-horn looped on his

shoulder" (5). Therefore, the Banville reader assumes this is an anachronism

akin to those in *Birchwood*. Surreptitiously, Banville circumscribes the current

debate on energy use by amalgamating historical and futuristic methods of

transport to make fossil fuels obsolete as the curiosity of the gods in a race that is

destroying the environment would appear incommensurate with their idle

fascination with humans. While this has little bearing on the plot or the central

theme of *The Infinities*, the inclusion of such technology has such minor

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[86] The Thurn and Taxis family appear in another notable post-modern novel, Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*. Banville alludes to the family again in one of his portraits in *Imagined Lives*, which also continues the scientist character archetype "Joachim Müller, scholar, scientist and probably spy, was born in Regensburg in 1576, the illegitimate son of an itinerant preacher who, according to some sources, was an Englishman. Maria Müller, Joachim's mother, a maid in the service of the Thurn and Taxis family, was obviously a forceful woman, for despite her lowly status she managed to send her son to the University of Wittenberg, where he distinguished himself in the study of natural science" (*Imagined Lives*, 28).

narratorial necessity that its main consequence is the authorial sidestepping of the issues of the day and revealing Banville's masking of politics.

In another passing reference in the novel, we see Banville, rather than have to deal with the political crises of the nuclear era, alluding to the project of the atomic bomb which, in this fictive world, is a technological white elephant. Adam, taking over the narration from Hermes later in the novel, refers briefly to the bomb by saying that his own appearance resembles J. Robert Oppenheimer "who failed to build the bomb he boasted so much of" (171). While brief allusions to scientists and theories are common throughout Banville's writing, it is notable that the world of *The Infinities* seems a more stable place than our own and the threat of human inexistence or destruction is not an issue as of yet. The existence of other worlds and gods offer a likely solace to both the characters within this fictive world and the reader who accepts this distorted reality on its own terms. The very existence of the gods ameliorates the existential uncertainty that often is present in Banville's other narrators. Here, an afterlife is possible, the world is inviolable and the existence of humanity is upheld by gods who, if not quite benevolent, have a personal interest in observing their human creations.

The absence of a significant threat to existence can be taken either as device that enables the space of the fiction to expand – one can do anything when all potential worlds exist – but it can also be interpreted as an escapist strategy that avoids dealing with the prevailing issues of the real world in which the author Banville lives and breathes. Thus, Adam Godley accidentally solves multiple environmental crises rather than actively involving himself with them,

bringing a neat symmetry to his overturning of Einstein's theory of general relativity.

The ironic inversion of history is evident throughout the novel. The character Ursula, Adam Senior's wife, is named after a saint who has been decanonised "in a fit of anti-German pique, by one of the more reform-minded English pontiffs" (22-3).[87] Sweden perhaps resembles its near neighbour Germany in the first half of the twentieth century where Adams says "Bellicose Sweden, I remember, was on the warpath again, mired in yet another expansionary struggle with her encircling neighbours" (162). Elsewhere, we find that Heinrich von Kleist is better known than "the poet Goethe – entirely forgotten now but in his day there were those who would have ranked him above the sublime Kleist" (161). The Nobel Prize is replaced by the Borgia Prize "founded in memory of gentle Cesare, peacemaker and patron of natural sciences and the arts" (219). Charles Darwin's theory of evolution is replaced by Alfred Russel Wallace's theory which is overturned prompting Adam Jr to want to become a scientist (90). The historical inversions and asides provide humour and colour to *The Infinities*, but it could be considered as an indication of Banville's approach to reality and verisimilitude in his writing. *The Infinities* is Banville's first novel to display such an escapist tendency not tied to a prior historical period[88] or an escape into language and solipsism. In this novel the escape offered is that of the imagination unburdening itself of political necessities.

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[87] England has only produced one pope, Nicholas Breakspear. who became Pope Adrian IV from 1154 to 1159.

[88] For instance, the late medieval and early modern periods of *Doctor Copernicus* and *Kepler*.

Escapism is a politicised term in any regard, particularly in post-modern writing where escaping from one realm of meaning often disguises a venture into another.

One of the most successful genres of post-modern writing, magical realism, often plays upon the idea of politics and realism, one consequence of which is the conferring of a cultural responsibility on authors who use elements of the fantastic in their writing. Banville addresses magical realism where he says that "Despite the flash and crackle of their conjurings, Grass, García Márquez, and Rushdie, and their numerous imitators, seek to engage directly and vigorously with society, with politics, with history" ('On the Fatal Shore', 2002), thus reinventing the form and creating a successful formula for writing fantastical literature. This reveals that, for Banville, magical realism is not an attractive form as beneath the veneer of mere "conjurings" are novels that analyse society and are, therefore, socially responsible acts of writing. Banville's easy and contrived use of allusion allows him to defer cultural responsibility onto another text: the ideas and themes are lifted straight from the canon of literature, from a set of movies and so on, and their obviousness exonerates the author as an original 'voice'. Allusions are staged in Banville's writing as being an inconsequential feature, part of a network of literary connections, antecedents and originators. Adapted works are given a pedestal of extra importance by Banville. For him, the act of writing is the ultimate transformative act which undermines impressions of the original material, but for all this, novelty is either not fully realised or deferred to the next creation. Often, the creator surrogates in

Banville's novels, the actor, scholars, historian, and scientists and so on, seek not an escape but a return to some previously reified centre of meaning. Terence Brown referring to *Nightspawn* says, "there are those moments when writing itself seems to compose an alternative reality to the dismal conditions of its originating matter. There are passages of compellingly composed metaphorical writing in the book that suggest the transformative powers of the literary art which the narrator seeks to achieve as writer of the text" (Brown, 2010, 230). Others have seen in the novel a culmination of the thought-processes of the earlier, linked figures as "it is in *The Infinities* that Banville's protagonists achieve true freedom at last. It is only in an infinite number of worlds, where anything is possible, that the search for absolutes is rendered meaningless" (Nolan, 2010, 43). It is in texts like *The Infinities* and *Birchwood* where the potential of the narrative is so expansive that the reader must have faith in the author to confine the plot to relatively human concerns, and perhaps it is the allusive familiarity of the former and the structural circularity of the latter that allows some to consider them successful, apolitical novels.

It is more accurate to consider the surface apoliticalism of Banville's work as an aspect of his art that could be interpreted as the exercising of authorial control, insofar as one can with regard to interpretation. Banville, it could be said, is either reticent in engaging with or dismissive of political readings. Smith says that despite this attitude of the author:

> Banville's writing has a clearly defined politics. Much like *The Sea*
> before it, *The Infinities* is a repudiation of a politically committed art,
> because art no longer has the kind of power needed to transform society.
> Nor does it have the moral authority to do so. Banville's writing is very

much in keeping with the prevailing politics of ideological scepticism characteristic of our current era. In its anxiety about the legitimacy of its status, *The Infinities* is an illustration of the suspicion of absolute value that is characteristic of contemporary Western culture (Smith, 2010).

Banville's novel looks inwards using elements and themes from his own work to the degree that it is possible to conflate theme with method given the recurring thematical feature. Elsewhere, Smith again comments on the novel by linking its concerns with the apocalyptic scepticism of earlier work saying that "*The Infinities* contains moments of arctic pessimism which chime with the scepticism of works such as *Mefisto* and *Shroud*" (Smith, 2014, 166). Scepticism is one instance of theme encroaching into the 'sphere' of method as scepticism supplies narrative digression and allows the interiority of the narrators seem consistent with a philosophical standpoint. The narratorial suspicion of absolutes, particularly moral and ethical absolutes, together with the solipsistic interiority of the fiction allows the author to confer style with the highest significance in artistic terms. Yet to argue that art does not have the moral authority to transform society is to ignore the Benjamin Black novels which, for all their rain-soaked gloom and existential despair, offer in their revisionist take on 1950s society, a past that must be rejected for progress and social transformation to occur. The Black novels reveal a less sceptical narrative voice and a marginally more socially minded author-figure.[89] Arguably, the abuses of the church and

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[89]The complexities of Banville's utterances on the significance of the social realities of the Black novels means that the critic and reader must approach his comments with caution. It is possible for the critic to impose their own 'personality' on the Black persona, and the sustainability of an argument that focuses on a selection of the authorial personae of Banville is doubtful. In the contradictions of statement and intent, some of which occur within the space of weeks, perhaps the critic can interpret the authorial voice in psychoanalytical terms, and overcome Freddie Montgomery's realisation that "to speak even of an individual with any show of certainty [seems] foolhardy" (*The Book of Evidence*, 17).

political authorities in the Black novels are superficial and provide a noirish setting and tone to the stories. In *The Infinities*, Banville's scepticism towards absolutes is distilled by the existence and narration of a playful god whose main doubt is the veracity of meaning in language. It is common for Banville's narrators to be sceptical towards a medium of communication – language – that approaches universality and the status of absolute, centralised meaning. The subjectivity of the Banvillean narrator is the agent of scepticism.

Banville, as revealed in his novels, would seem to agree with the idea that the geography of the modern novel cannot legitimately go too far beyond the singular thinking individual. Narratorial obsession with this point could be construed as solipsism. Walter Benjamin's view that "The birthplace of the novel is the solitary individual, who is no longer able to express himself by giving examples of his most important concerns, is himself uncounselled, and cannot counsel others" (Benjamin, 1999, 87) is diffused in Banville's writings as an outcome of modernity is that "the communicability of experience is decreasing" (86). If we accept that instruction, the provision of wisdom and political thought is not a desired end of the modern novel but rather a means of providing relatable experience for the individual,[90] the view that solipsistic novels, as Smith would regard *The Infinities*, reveal a fundamental decay in the political and social reach of the novel form. The relatively unchanged form of

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[90] The Bildungsroman, the political novel, the fairy tale and other, more politicised forms of prose are legitimised generically by their adherence to rules. If a novel is an attempt to be a political novel, for instance, and a failure at that, it is often still considered a novel but a novel without political impact. To be legitimately and successfully political (or perhaps ethical) one must still adhere to the strictures of form and genre.

the novel from its historical inception reveals an absolute in itself, be it one of structure, ease of understanding or legibility. Banville's *The Infinities*, as in Flann O'Brien's similarly fantastical *The Third Policeman*, reveals a fictive world very much like our own but one where the politics of the novel are sited in the act of the narrator's (and the readers') retrospective comprehension rather than in their experience of the plot events. In both of these novels we encounter narrators who understand the necessity for breaking rules but cannot adequately deal with the ramifications of doing so. Also, despite being both 'trapped' in body and free in mind, their freedom of thought is itself subject to confining factors and the reader is aware that their experience may be endlessly repeated. Adam may, it can be surmised, live again. Although he is aware that he is dying (*The Infinities*, 232), he ambiguously suggests that his mind will survive bodily death: "I cannot think any more, for now" (233). Banville's escapist narrative that avoids pragmatic, political discourse is mirrored in Adam Godley's demise, which reflects Banville's "post-Nietzschean nihilism" in that "The best that can be hoped for is the comfort of ignorance; the artist provides consolation, not transformation" (Smith, 2010). However, perhaps it is more telling to say that *The Infinities* does not console but instead bears witness to self-consolation. In the novel the conceit is that Adam is a godly author, an "Olympian" (*The Infinities*, 262), and the world is his text and creation.

The process of creation is typically a solitary activity in Banville's *oeuvre*. In this singularity of purpose and activity, Adam is the sole progenitor of his work. He is an artist figure, disguised as a mathematical theorist, as his trouble

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with language and his use of metaphor suggests. His singularity of purpose

implies an unethical transgression, his fellow narrator Hermes[91] says, "I am a

maker and inventor and know the secrets of every trade and skill; I am, you

might say, I might say, a Faust and Mephisto rolled into one" (178). *The*

Infinities moves into the realm of metafiction in its substantial and profound take

on the act of creation and the legacy of the creator.

Metafiction, allusion and authority

Being on one level an adaptation of an earlier work (*God's Gift*) means

that *The Infinities* must comply with an underlying artistic ethos of fidelity and

acknowledged authority that this subgenre of literature must gesture to in order to

appear legitimate. Linda Hutcheon argues that by "investing authority in

imaginary hierarchies of genre or medium as well as in primacy and antiquity"

the reader and critic "views the very process of adaptation as a necessary evil at

best; fidelity to the "original" is the primary evaluative criterion, and any change,

however minute, is axiomatically an inescapable loss" (Hutcheon, 2006, 10).

Banville's unfaithfulness to the original in *The Infinities* and his plays[92] is mainly

a performance of arch-post-modernist iconoclasm rather than any effort of re-

examination or faith in the themes, ideas or action depicted in the original plays.

For instance, in *Love in the Wars* (2005), Banville's adaptation of Kleist's

Penthesilea, after the stage direction "*Exit, amid violent thunder and lightning*"

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[91] Adam and Hermes become increasingly indistinct as narrators in the latter half of the novel.
[92] Banville's screenwriting for *The Last September*, *Albert Nobbs* and his own adaptations of his own
work have been considerably more faithful to the original material than his written output.

the character Asteria concludes "A little overdone, I think, don't you?" (*Love in the Wars*, 2005, 66). Here, Banville points out the histrionic quality of an antiquated play by pointing to its failures and parodying its tone. This knowing comment affixes the metafictional colour of the adaptation to the proverbial mast. Yet the minuteness and irregularity of moments of subversion such as this leaves one to wonder at the value of the aspects of the text that are not parodied or undermined. Character, plot and structure (notwithstanding some excisions for the sake of brevity) remain largely unaltered. One could ask whether Banville expects his readers to both be entertained and to ascertain the value and qualities of the text with its metafictional aspects so visibly foregrounded. It is in parodying canonical texts that Banville is most post-modern, yet the half-hearted and superficial depth to his parodying perhaps confers an exalted status to the original text. The paucity of novelty in this play can be read as an author deferring to the quality of the original play by Kleist. Perhaps the element of parody results from the view, as Steiner holds, that "Since the modern imagination is no longer animated by the tragic worldview of the classical world... the context is so totally altered that the ancient myths appear in the modern playhouse either as a travesty or as an antiquarian charade" (Steiner, 1961, 323). Thus, the tragic is debased into a form of melodrama that Kleist, and Banville in places, can be accused of. The tragic form connotes the universal while the melodramatic can be considered to connote the immediate and the ephemeral.

The fact that *The Infinities* draws upon adaptation and science fiction,

alternate history and the Big House novel implies a post-modern versatility on

the author and the fact that the novel appears after the success of *The Sea*[93] is a

showcasing of the author's ability to combine the antique and the post-modern.

The Infinities is a nexus of old and new methods. In terms of genre, the novel

displays aspects of the conventional and the experimental. Significantly, *The*

Infinities is much more experimental than Banville's earlier adaptation of the

Amphitryon myth in *God's Gift* (2000). Steiner's disparagement of "modern

dramatists who pour into the old bottles of Greek legend the new wines of

Freudian psychology or contemporary politics" (228) can be arguably applied to

Banville's play. His point that "Increasingly unable to create for itself a relevant

body of myth, the modern imagination will ransack the treasure house of the

classic" (228) is avoided by Banville in his novel as the modernity displayed in

his use of science fiction, the solipsistic scientist as hero, and the tonal change

that parody and the grotesque offer. In the latter stages of *Love in the Wars*,

Banville is clearly offering a parody of the tragic form and his next mythic

'adaptation' – *The Infinities* – proffers a faith in comedy[94] that is a repudiation of

the tragic genre while providing Banville a platform for any future generic

diversions in his writing. That Banville uses irony and parody as a vehicle for

much of the comedy in *The Infinities* contributes to the metafictional element of

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[93] A novel that withdraws from the literary pyrotechnics of *Shroud* where deconstructist theory,
Nietzschean egoism and twentieth-century European history perhaps weigh too heavily on the text.
[94] As Bryan Radley comprehensively points out in his dissertation "'Imagine a wry smile': Comedy in the
Fiction of John Banville". PhD Thesis. University of York, 2011.

the novel as the knowingness of the erudite, godly narrator is unavoidably referential to the author's past work.

Myth, Adaptation and Self-reflexive Metafiction

The Infinities is largely born out of Banville's attraction to the writings of eighteenth and early nineteenth century German Romantic dramatist Heinrich von Kleist (1777 – 1811). Banville's trilogy of plays – *The Broken Jug* (1994), *God's Gift* and *Love in The Wars* are adaptations of *Der zerbrochne Krug*, *Amphitryon* and *Penthesilea* respectively, all written in 1808. The adaptations of Kleist's plays notwithstanding, mentions of Kleist are quite frequent in both the novels and the interviews and talks Banville has given. *The Infinities*[95] was initially planned as a novelised *Amphitryon*, not as an adaptation as with *God's Gift*, but as a faithful rendering of the tragicomic play. Banville comments that "Kleist's great ambition was to blend Shakespearean burlesque with Greek drama and in Amphitrion [*sic*] he certainly does that. It's a painful play about a General whose identity is stolen by the god Zeus. That was my starting point. I kept the skeleton, but fiction always goes in its own direction" (Leonard, 2009). By retaining the skeleton and the central conceit of gods toying with human relationships, it is tempting to see *The Infinities* as a culmination of Banville's experimentations in dramatic form and his meditation on death and loss in the novels prior to *The Infinities*, with *The Sea* being a significant milestone, and probably the most successful work, in this process.

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[95] Early versions of the novel were called 'The Sinking City', alluding to Venice, where some of Adam's scenes take place.

Banville uses the Amphitryon myth to fashion a thematic heart of the novel and then incorporates fantastical tropes common in science fiction and alternative history genres to give stylistic flavour. The infusion of myth is more than a mere "skeleton" for the novel as the fictive potentialities of the existence of Gods could perhaps be seen as the creation of a new genre that relies on the formula of the modernist updating of myth. An antecedent of Banville here would of course be James Joyce, whose *Ulysses* also covers the events of a single day, although the characters of Bloom and Dedalus may be inverted in the form of the two Adams. Adam Jr, like Bloom, is married to a desirable woman of the stage, worries about his ability to be a father, and is cuckolded by Zeus instead of Blazes Boylan (although there are symbolic convergences between the two). Adam Sr is an intellectual like Dedalus, has a standoffish personality, and a revealing liaison with a prostitute in his past.

Literary adaptations of myth have always been popular and Greek drama has spoken to different peoples throughout the centuries. Myth is malleable and open-ended in its possibilities and, as Walton says "What myths have in common is their antiquity. What myths have in common is their novelty" (Walton, 2002, 8). To use myth in fiction is to draw attention to the act of writing as an act understood historically in terms of precursors and successors, influencers and the influenced. Hutcheon proposes that the fundamental pleasure that literary adaptations provide their audiences is that of "repetition with variation... the comfort of ritual combined with the piquancy of surprise" (Hutcheon, 2006, 4). By invoking the mythic form, even if the myth in question is not known by the

reader, it is obviously ascribed a value that non-mythic forms must 'work harder'

to attain. In other words, it confers a status that correlates to completeness,

universality, importance and inviolability. Furthermore, for the artist the mythic

is attractive creatively as it offers a gamut of hermeneutical possibilities as, "By

invoking the names of Medea, Agamemnon or Antigone, the playwright sets an

ambush for the imagination. He knows that these high shadows will rise in our

minds with an attendant train of association" (Steiner, 1961, 326). To ostensibly

violate the mythic form by applying contemporary or modern signifiers (in the

case of Banville's *God's Gift* and *The Infinities* this would be the setting of 1798

and an alternative, contemporary Ireland respectively) is to signal the

experimental and original creativity of the author/adapter. To draw attention to

the parasitical nature of creativity is to showcase one's modernity as an author;

the laying bare of method is as important as the method itself.

Banville draws attention to his continued process of adapting his own

work throughout his career. In *The Infinities*, the actress Helen is currently

playing the role of Alcmene in a version of *Amphitryon* (*The Infinities*, 191-2).

She says in conversation with Roddy Wagstaff that the

> version we are doing all takes place round Vinegar Hill, at the time of the
> Rebellion'. 'Ah.' He frowns. He does not approve of the classics being
> tampered with, he says. 'The Greeks knew what they were doing, after
> all'. 'Oh, but it's not Greek,' she says before she can stop herself, and
> then *to make it worse continues on*. '-It was written only a hundred
> years ago, I think, or two, in Germany (192).

This is obviously Banville's *God's Gift*, also set during the 1798 Rebellion in

Wexford, and the character Helen is playing is Minna (from Alcmene) and the

adaptation is of Kleist's original.

The Infinities also draws upon the Big House setting that forms the basis

for *Birchwood*, *The Newton Letter* and *Mefisto*. In *The Infinities*, the Big House

was formerly owned by the housekeeper Ivy Blount and purchased by the

Godley's after the success of Adam's work. It is an old Anglo-Irish ascendency

house and "The wonder of it is the place has survived so long and not been set

fire to by lightning bolt or rebel torch" (49). Adam Jr tells Roddy Wagstaff that

the land had been divided and sold off (104) as Gabriel Godkin's father has done

gradually throughout *Birchwood*. The dark and foreboding birch wood of that

novel is partially present, seeming to make up a residual memory of the

characters of *The Infinities* rather than actually exist in reality. The younger

Adam's wife Helen thinks at one point that

> The window looks down on a field of thistles and, farther on, a circular
> dark wood that seems to huddle around itself in fear of something, and
> over which now the morning sun is pouring vain its somehow heartless
> cheer. When she is outside she can never seem to locate that field, or
> that wood – how is that? – not that she would spend much time searching
> for them (53).

The wood, like the linden tree in *Doctor Copernicus*, takes on a metaphorical

quality that is not fully explained, but it means something even if that is an

unrepresentable sublime metaphor. The land around Arden House in *The*

Infinities, corroborating with the many-worlds theory that is present in the text, is

where Banville's previous novels meet in a metafictional nexus.

Other reiterations and alterations of *Birchwood*'s Gabriel Godkin's ideas

occur throughout the later novel. *The Infinities* also addresses the concept of the

pursuit of knowledge and thought (or the thinking life) as the main purpose and

validation of existence. Adam Sr thinks at one point: "God! not to know, not to

be able to know the least of things! Doing, *doing*, is living, as my mother, my poor failed unhappy mother, among others, tried her best to din into me. I see it now, while all along I thought thinking was the thing" (170). Here, we see the movement of a Banvillean narrator away from the surety of epistemological inquiry and towards a validation of life that is not tied to the intellect but to the body, in a new formulation of Descartes' dictum: I *do* therefore I am. That Adam Sr is incapacitated in a coma, slowly dying in his "Sky Room" where he formulated his "Brahma equations" (103) may bring an air of inevitability to this realisation. Immediately after thinking this Adam directly brings into relief the scenarios and themes of *Birchwood* and The Science Tetralogy by saying: "Picture me there at that long white table, gazing out at the white birches", looking like "one of those cold and lofty doctors" whom "the world takes as the very model of a bloodless man of science". Then Benny Grace says to the comatose Adam that he would like to bring him to "a venerable tavern where Tycho Brahe is said to have stopped for a night on his way to Prague to take up the post of assistant to Johannes Kepler" (171). Banville contrives connections between these texts that, despite the inversion of the Brahe/Kepler relationship, signal a grand theme or continuing concern at the heart of his writing that is sited in the thinking mind realising its limits and that thought is not a fundamental of existence.

In certain respects, Banville's narrators each make a decision between thinking and doing, living and creating, being and knowing. This narratorial choice is also one that the writer must make. In his foreword to a collection of

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J.G. Farrell's letters, Banville states: "To live or to create? – this is the perennial question. For the genuine artist the answer is always inevitable" (Foreword, 2009, xii).[96] Adam Godley, like Copernicus and Kepler, is comparable to an artist even if his pursuits are scientific. Banville's chosen subjects are the mercurial creative scientists of their fields, unlike the workmanlike and methodical Tycho Brahes of the world.[97] Living and creating are mutually exclusive, and the artist must choose between the two. The artist must sacrifice their life, be it merely the quality of life, the feelings of those around them, the necessity of living comes second to the pursuit of art. Thus, a man of science is "bloodless" (*The Infinities*, 171), essentially lacking the most vital of things that make intelligent life animate. *The Infinities*' main narrator Hermes muses on Adam's condition, saying that he has been "pronounced vegetate" and goes on to consider, *à la* Shakespeare's Shylock, "does a vegetable see, does a vegetable hear, does a vegetable – and this surely is the clincher – does a vegetable cogitate?" (31). While Adam is "trapped in the celestial dentist's chair", Hermes wonders "why he is not content with this state? Is it not the apotheosis he always hankered after, to be pure mind, mind unalloyed?" (31-2). Adam's state brings an apparent unhappiness, which at this point only the omniscient Hermes can tell us of. This unease with his "apotheosis" perhaps shows that despite Banville's statement that to create necessarily involves a renouncing of life; there is an unavoidable void

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[96] Banville, it must be said, expresses regret at choosing to write rather than 'live'. He says "I tell myself — and my ex-wife, in her generous, wifely way, tells me so too — that I had no choice, that the business of being a writer precludes many if not most of the ordinary familial and domestic pleasures" (Banville, 'Booker prize winning novelist John Banville admits he was too selfish to be a good dad', 2013).
[97] Banville's *Kepler* and *Prague Pictures*, following Koestler's *The Sleepwalkers* and other works, paint Tycho Brahe as a successful chronicler of scientific data rather than an original, conceptual cosmologist.

created in one's sense of being in the world with the devotion to creating new art and new narratives.

Uniquely amongst Banville's metafictional narratives the mood of *The Infinities* oscillates between the bawdiness of mistaken identities to the sombreness of the deathbed scenario. The involvement of a divine narrator, and the weight of literary association carried with this, is offset by the use of other narrators such as Adam and Rex. It is the employment of a god as a narrator that provides most of the metafictional ideas that haunt the text. With the presence and voice of a god in the novel, the narratee is one that the narrator has physically created, humans being the gods' creations. If we accept the narrator-narratee logic, a consequence is that although the narrator is physically close to the character,[98] the narratee is psychologically 'closer' to the characters than the narrator who, as a god, cannot understand his creations. Thus the apotheosis of Adam is not reciprocated in a divine apotheosis of the gods becoming mortal, and the effect of such is that the mood of the narrator is melancholic as Hermes is, paradoxically, both omnipotent and impotent. For Hermes, Adam's state appears as a liberation and an achievement of sorts, while each believes their own activities have been failures. Like many Banvillean narrators, they find it impossible to realise their imagined ideals.

It is implied in the novel that for the imaginative being, intellectual inquiry is akin to imbibing a poison. Hermes states that "The secret of survival is a defective imagination. The inability of mortals to imagine things as they truly

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[98] Although the gods are typically incorporeal, several possessions take place in the novel. Adam Jr. Duffy, and Roddy Wagstaff are possessed by Zeus and Hermes.

are is what allows them to live, since one momentary, unresisted glimpse of the world's totality of suffering would annihilate them on the spot, like a whiff of the most lethal sewer gas" (37-8). Not only does this idea of a defective imagination put us in mind of Freddie Montgomery's failure of imagining the real existence of Josie Bell who is imagined as non-human (*The Book of Evidence*, 215), the fact that the narrator here is supposedly a divine being gives this statement an assumed authority that it would not have from the mouth of a human. Yet, the gods themselves have an equivalent flaw in that their "imagination", if the term is adequate for the all-knowing, seems to have its genesis in the observance and frequent possessions of human bodies. The result of an overactive imagination is the torpor of self-analysis and self-doubt. Imagination in Banville's writings is often considered retrospectively, as in the case of Freddie in *The Book of Evidence* where it is its failure that prevails as the murderer's conclusion for his irrational actions. In particular, it is the outcome, typically negative, of imagination and creativity rather than its content or function that is often expressed in Banville's work. The successes of the imagination are never elucidated except as a restorative process to a pre-imaginative state, as in *Athena* (1995). In *The Infinities* Adam displays a passing ethical consideration of his calling to intellectualism when he is close to death. Stating that "My mind is tired, I cannot think any more, for now", he considers that in the past he would pace the floor when his mind was tired "like a panther, until equilibrium was re-established". In the "iron way of computation" was incomparable joy and "No such joy to be had elsewhere, or elsewhen, the quiet joy of a man alone, doing

brainwork". He does, however, ask "Did Ursula envy my solitary calling, did she resent it? Did the children?" (*The Infinities*, 233).

Adam Sr is thus remorseful about how he has treated Adam Jr, but thinks it is now too late to make amends for his failings. It is one of the rare moments of doubt in Banville's creative thinkers where the idea of living rather than creating seems like a missed opportunity for fulfilment. However, Adam still wonders whether his wife envied his calling rather than having a calling of her own. Ostensibly, the self-indulgence of Adam Sr is evident here in that he cannot imagine another as a Self. Ursula is another Self, yet one who desires to be the Self that is Adam Sr. This thought evolves into his imagining, absorbing his wife into his own self in an act of apotheosis that resembles other Banvillean narrators searching for their 'missing twins':

> I used to yearn so for Ursula that even when she was in my arms it was not enough, and I would clasp her to me more and more fiercely, octopus-armed, in an ecstasy of need, as if it might be possible to engorge her wholly, to press her in through my very pores. I would have made her be a part of me (236).

Adam's daughter Petra is also configured as an aspect of his being. He says that "It was as if she were connected to me, as if I and not her mother had given birth to her and the vestigial umbilical cord was still unbroken" (234). The connection with *Birchwood*'s Gabriel Godkin is illustrated in the use of the word 'rose'[99] in the comment: "If I could I would have had a notch cut in my already ageing side and a slip of her, my young rose, inserted there and lashed to me with twine. Tell me, tell me, was that not enough of love?" (236). The absorbing of his wife is an

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[99] Significantly, Gabriel Godkin's fictitious missing twin is named Rose.

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obvious inversion of the creation of Eve from the Biblical Adam's rib, and reflects a grotesque understanding of human love that is more akin to that of a god, in all their confusion about love and death, and signals that the terms used by Adam Godley can be misleading interpretations by a being that can understand the workings of the world but cannot understand anything beyond his own Self, his ambitions, and his mental preoccupations. He sees his daughter Petra[100] not as a person but as the inconceivable conceived. His son says "Pa, of course, who claims she is inspiration, his muse made flesh, the invariable quantity in all his equations" (11). The fact that Adam is 'godly' and undergoes a transmutation with the other narrator Hermes may for some redeem the coldness and somewhat pathological consequences of his thinking. In Adam we see an envisaging of the author as god, everyone in his life is physically but not mentally him and in his mind they want to return to the origin, to their godly progenitor.

For the gods in *The Infinities*, selfhood is not a question that arises. Hermes states that:

> now there are three of us haunting the house, my father, me, and this rascal [Benny Grace] who has just arrived…Yet I should not speak of this or that personage when speaking of the immortal gods – we are all one even in our separateness – and when I use the word 'father', say, or 'him', or, for that matter, 'me', I do so only for convenience (143).

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[100] When comparing how children and adolescents are depicted in Banville's novels, there are frequent occurrences of damage either psychological or physical. Examples of 'damaged' children are: Gabriel and Michael in *Birchwood*; the professor's daughter in *Doctor Copernicus*; Regina in *Kepler*; Gabriel in *Mefisto*; Freddie's son in *The Book of Evidence*; Victor's brother in *The Untouchable*; Alex's daughter in *Eclipse*; *Shroud* and *Ancient Light*; and the twins in *The Sea* whose death haunts Morden.

Later on, the Self is referred to by Adam as "that lynx-eyed monitor [that] sees all the subterfuges, all the cut corners" (165), echoing Freddie Montgomery's "stern interior sergeant" (*Book of Evidence*, 17). Ironically, this comment occurs at a moment in the narrative when Adam and Hermes are undergoing a transformation and becoming one another, which lends weight to a reading that considers the narrators of *The Infinities* to be one and the same. It has been said that "The voice frequently changes with a rapidity that we have not seen before from Banville" (Smith, 2010). Hermes speaks to humans collectively when talking about the Christian God as a distillation of the pagan gods: "Even our avatar, the triune lord of a later epiphany, forfeits the omnipotence you ascribe to him in the simple fact that the thing he cannot do is will himself out of existence" (*The Infinities*, 260), yet a couple of paragraphs later supposedly the same narrator talks about his job of replacing divots on the golf course on Haggard Head (261). The difficulty in following such a duplicitous narrative voice is readily apparent: are we to read Hermes as someone born out of Adam's rampant imagination as he lusts after his son's wife, and the god's berating of Petra's boyfriend as a profession of fatherly protection? It is possible that the multitude of pagan gods represents for Adam an ideal (after Nietzsche's *Übermensch*) of what a human should be – capricious, obsessive, all-knowing and unable to experience the feeling of love.

Language and Meaning

Typical in much of Banville's fiction is a scepticism towards language. This scepticism is concomitant with the lack of certainty that Banville's scientist protagonists find in their creations. Banville appears to agree with one of the tenets of structuralist thought in that language is fundamentally imprecise and its relation to the thing that it attempts to represent is tenuous. Language is the foundation for understanding anything and misunderstanding is extrapolated from the inherent faults of language and representation of the real. In *The Infinities*, doubt about larger issues, ideological and epistemological certainties, is a result of lesser misunderstandings. Emphatic doubt is illustrated in the line, "He cannot be sure; he cannot be sure of anything" (94-5). Existential doubt is present elsewhere, especially in the incident when Adam Jr's lovemaking with his wife is characterised by his concern "an hour ago, when she came stumping comically on her knees over the bed to him and seized his face and pressed it against her breasts and laughed her tigerish laugh, surely he was wholly there, wholly himself, flesh and blood and solidly present in her arms?" (95). Here, desire becomes a reciprocated acknowledgement of existence. It is significant that Adam Jr does not wonder about the reality of his wife's presence but only his own. Ironically, it is his wife who is responding to Adam when he was not "wholly himself" but possessed by the god Zeus earlier that morning.

Demarcation of things and language is typically expressed in terms of doubt and confusion in *The Infinities*. At one point Adam Jr wonders idly "where exactly it is that the river ends and the estuary begins" (101). How to

define two alike and co-dependent things relates back to his attempt to understand the Self. One consequence of being aware that the overlapping of meaning and selfhood is that the Self cannot be accurately defined but can be confirmed to exist by its relationship to the non-self, the Other. Petra is similarly worried about her selfhood, seeing herself as written in a form of code that others cannot understand. Her being puzzles and confounds, creating a sense of otherness in this young woman. She is aware of this otherness and knows she must conform to a particular code of language: "Everything she thinks and intends must be translated into an approximation of their language before they can understand anything of what she is saying" (115). She is self-invented, acting: "Some parts of [the code] are missing and some that are there are there only because she has put them there" (115). Petra's obtuseness to other people – Granny Godley had said of her "that one has been here before" (9) and "[Adam's] loony sister, hearing voices, seeing things" (11), Rex the dog thinks of her "she smells of blood" (199) – results in her translating her sense of being into a language that fits the conventions and rules of others. She behaves generically, restraining her individuality. The reader encounters Petra, a "loony" (11) initially dressed in her father's "clownish" pyjamas providing a further connection with *Birchwood* as at the end of that novel, Gabriel's deranged brother Michael is dressed in drag. In keeping with Gabriel's oddness, Petra cannot be tickled while her precursor cannot cry (*The Infinities*, 12; *Birchwood*, 48). These simple signifiers of emotion and cause and effect are absent in the odd youths, conferring on them an element of the non-human – they are

otherworldly changelings who are unable to 'fit in' with their families. Petra is

engaged in an act of forming a compendium of human ailments and diseases.

She categorises illnesses in a systematic fashion in order to have a greater

knowledge of the world. It is this will to categorise that is mocked by Hermes

when he claims "Names and categories are of no more weight in [Rex the dog's]

world than they are in ours – you humans are the relentless taxonomists" (*The

Infinities*, 201). Tellingly, this corresponds with Banville's own oft-stated

opinion that books should be ordered by author rather than by genre.[10]

In *The Infinities* we are presented with a world that is seemingly devoid of

meaning. Like Copernicus before him, Adam Godley has shattered the

previously held tenets of cosmology, in this case Newtonian physics. His new

version of the many-worlds theory is sublime and in a moment of terror he

imagines himself "a fallen Icarus" (156) in an increasingly dimensionless world

with "no horizon, the featureless distances merging seamlessly into an equally

featureless sky...A vast void everywhere, and I terrified, clinging to my rock

with both hands and barely holding the world from tipping on its end and letting

everything slide off into the abyss of emptiness" (156). Egotistically stated as

this statement is, it is clear that it is Adam himself who prevents the world sliding

into the abyss. He resembles the mythical Atlas in that he physically upholds the

world. Ironically, it is a self-imposed sentence as Adam has deconstructed the

prevailing theories of space and time. In this he resembles his Biblical namesake

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[10] One example of such is in the interview 'I Hate Genre' where Banville says "I hate it. I wish [booksellers and publishers] didn't do that...My ideal bookshop would have no sections, just alphabetical, and not just fiction, but all the books next to each other" (Wiener, 2014).

by bringing sin into the world. Yet Adam, despite feeling cosmically and existentially alienated by his own discoveries is baffled by the metaphors of his imagination. He says "What must it mean? It must mean something, or signify something, at least" (157), showing that a flicker of doubt is present in his mind. It is his creativity, his imaginative capacities, that divorces the idea from the thing, in a Platonic rendering of language. The recurring theme of the Banvillean narrator is the being involved in a search for a holy grail or on a quest (Molloy, 1981, 31). Unlike the earlier Banvillean scientists, Adam Godley has already achieved his magnum opus but has realised that with knowledge still exist ontological aporia. The aporia of memory and metaphorical figuration bloom in his interior dreams as he lies in a comatose state in the Sky Room[102] in Arden. Nolan suggests that the novel resolves an issue that is present in earlier Banville novels:

> It is in *The Infinities* that the Tetralogy's conflict between 'scientific knowledge and imaginative perception', identified by Joseph McMinn, is finally resolved. Its many worlds offer a reconciliation of Copernicus with his languid 'other self', the 'phantom existence' who 'crossed his path again and again'. *The Infinities*, with its uncountable universes where everything is a little different, is the ultimate physical manifestation of subjectivity (Nolan, 2010, 34).

While the world of the novel may be the ultimate state of subjectivity, the sublimely destructive features of the world that Adam imagines in his sleeping state implies that he has rationalised the objective realities of death, decay and

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[102] Perhaps another allusion to the Dedalus and Icarus myth, or even the observatories of the astronomers. Incidentally, Adam Sr remains at the summit of the house which is redolent of Hermes, whose metal statue is on the roof. Hermes says of this: "I did not expect to encounter myself here, in such surroundings, at this elevation, especially in the form of a two-dimensional tin representation of a godling" (*The Infinities* 18), which has a double meaning revealed later when we realise that Adam Sr and Hermes merge into one another.

human frailty. Significantly, traversing these worlds is not possible and nor is an afterlife. Death is a veritable end rather than a stage on a journey, as evinced by the comment: "I always liked to think that death would be more or less a continuation of how things already are, a dimming, a contracting, a shrinkage so gradual that I would not register its coming to an end at last until the ending was done with (*The Infinities*, 158).[103] Benny Grace mocks Adam's idea that he could be potentially immortal: "Was it that I thought to be the last man? he would enquire, and gaze at me in head-shaking, compassionate reproof, smiling. And he was right – look at me now, the last of myself, no more than that" (169). It is consistent with the inherent scepticism towards meaning in the novel that the certainties of Adam are overturned and mocked in such a way.

In *The Newton Letter*, we see a similar act of self-effacement. The biographer's sublime experience of the shrinking self when confronted with the enormity of memory results in his statement of failure: "I can't go on. I'm not a historian anymore" (*The Newton Letter*, 559). The biographer's rational analysis is subverted by intuition and unreliable senses; he undergoes a sublime experience similar to Adam's in *The Infinities* but he is unable to cope with the creativity of thought that allows an understanding to occur. The biographer's ability allows him to write *post factum* but he cannot make the imaginative leap necessary to see a different reality to the one he is accustomed to. In other

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[103] The realisation of death becomes a linked metaphor with the fall of Icarus. "Even when I laid my ladder against the mighty Christmas tree that all the others before me had put up over ages and popped the fairy on the topmost spike, whereupon her little wand lit up in what before had been an endless forest of firs, hung with all manner of baubles" (*The Infinities*, 168-9). This excerpt can be taken to mean that Adam instigated the gods by creating his theories or that he himself represents the fairy, a figure synonymous with angels and the winged Icarus.

words, he is too rational. While Johannes Kepler makes serendipitous discoveries due to – rather than despite – his irrational side, the Newton biographer becomes creatively inept for the same irrationality. He suffers from a "sense of displacement", of being outside time and existing outside of the real world, or the world he reads of in the newspapers (*The Newton Letter*, 544). Towards the end of the novella the biographer awakes "in the middle of the night to a noise of shipwreck, a smashed mast, doomed sailors crying in the wind" (522), continuing a recurring Conradian imagining of the sublime that is repeated with Adam Godley in *The Infinities*.[104] A metaphorical outcome of the shipwrecked self can be seen when Adam's discoveries lead to popular lampooning in the press; one of the cartoons reveals Adam as "an entire crew of identical sailors marooned each one in his own solitude on his own earth-shaped island afloat in a sea of inky darkness" (*The Infinities*, 43), suggesting that as a scientist Adam has struck a victory for solipsism and the multiple self.

In *The Infinities*, other selves play a significant role. Adam Jr, unlike his father is not a great thinker yet wishes he could be. In one instance he duels with the two sides of himself: "When he was a boy...[he] used to play with [the shed fronds of palm trees], pretending they were scimitars, duelling two-handed with himself" (105). Roddy Wagstaff, a young man who has an "absorbed and single-minded sense of himself" (117) is who impresses Adam's sister Petra. His single-mindedness marks him out as different to the men in her family as he is

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[104] Banville's use of the sublime using maritime metaphors bears similarities with the sinking of the *Patna* in Joseph Conrad's *Lord Jim* (Conrad, 1994a, 77) and his evocation of figures crossing abstract tightropes is also used in *Nostromo* (Conrad, 1994b, 409-10).

"an entirely free spirit, weightless and airy" (117), and has a "lack of substance" (118). Yet his singularity reminds her of her father, but he is the typical Banvillean interloper who "fitted himself into the household like a knife into a sheath" (118). He is also an asexual "manikin" with "nothing between his thighs but a smooth featureless bump", a "navelless" "plaster man" (119), which may reflect more on the narrator who, it is increasingly obvious, is a character mixture of Hermes and Petra's overprotective father who may view Roddy's sexuality as a threat. Roddy is more or less a pawn of the gods, and is possessed when he kisses Helen. Significantly, he is marionette-like. As an aspiring biographer of Adam Godley, he is considered by the narrator as inauthentic and sterile next to the authentic intellectual fertility of the scientist. Roddy is ambitious and single-minded, as Petra notes; he nevertheless represents the antithesis of the creative authentic Self of Godley. Adam's work emulates the lofty gods while Roddy's emulates the base human, which is also why he is portrayed negatively throughout. His creative capacities are plagiaristic and he hopes to gain success by holding on to the coat-tails of the scientist.

In Venice, a younger Adam has sex with a prostitute called Alba. Neither can understand the language of the other. "He tells her about Dorothy who has died. He marvels at how easy it is, suddenly, telling it all to her, out loud, with not a word of it understood" (127). This unfettered outburst of mourning is reminiscent of *The Sea* and *Eclipse* as we see grief dealt with. Yet after having sex with the prostitute they speak in languages that neither can understand and the emotional outburst appears comically inept. Moreover, it is increasingly

obvious that meaning is absent in the pragmatic communicative sense, and Adam is in effect conversing with himself.

Narration and play in *The Infinities*

Banville's predilection for unreliable, comic, stylish or aestheticist narrators is well known. One of the developments of *The Infinities* is the move away from the confessional narrator typified in *The Untouchable, Eclipse, The Sea* and *Shroud*. Immediately after publishing *Christine Falls*, it is noteworthy that a detective fiction, that typically most prescriptive of genres, is followed up by a work such as *The Infinities* where narrative *deus ex machinas* are par for the course. The expansive metafictional world that Faustian and divine characters engender, with a richly suggestive literary-historical heritage, allows narrative sleights of hand that liberate an author from the constraints of a single genre. Thus, we encounter not only an omniscient narrator but an omnipotent one who can hold time still and is regulated, only mildly, by the hierarchy of gods of which his father, Zeus, reigns supreme. Perhaps this signals Banville's resistance to the prescriptiveness of the genred works of Benjamin Black when what his readers may have expected was '*The Sea* Part II'. Hermes is a unique narrator as his omniscience is matched by his omnipotence, whereas hitherto Banvillean narrators have been marked by a failure or misunderstanding, Hermes' arc of realisation has occurred prior to the events of the novel. He knows his limits are the tragedy of the gods, and he resorts to comedy as an antidote. Hermes is at the top of the house, an overseer of all, he is immune to the self-analysis of an Adam

Godley or a Max Morden. He is an invading yet silent presence. That he also has the ability to control the bodies of others is probably a desire of all Banvillean narrators who are creative frauds living in a world populated by marionettes and manikins. Hermes' desire to control what are by association his creations reflects the vision of authority in Banville's novels. Hermes is quick to assert his power over the world and makes several references to his knowledge and abilities. He envies the permanence of the created work and tempers his pride with regret.

One of the most prevalent narratorial techniques used by Banville in *The Infinities* is the use of play. An example of contextual play occurs when Hermes refers to recent debates about creationism and evolution, making off-handed claims about gods planting dinosaurs in the earth, dark matter and a cosmic hum to deceive human beings (16). Hermes is the only narrator to speak directly to an imagined audience: "I, by the way, in case you have forgotten me, am perched in the middle of the back seat, leaning forward eagerly with my hands pressed between my knees – I have knees, I can perch – taking in everything, words, gestures, looks, noting it all" (99). The direct appeal to the reader is consistent with metafiction and we see a narrator who is overly concerned about how he is read and about how he represents himself. He is playfully asserting his corporeality to a reader whom, he assumes, doubts the veracity of his tale.

Hermes is the narrator for most of the novel, yet he is a unique narrator who morphs into Duffy, and eventually into Adam Godley as well. Adam is himself a narrator, reminiscing about his early days in Venice with Benny Grace

and other mysterious characters. In a humorous aside, the thoughts of the old

dog Rex are also given narrative space via Hermes' narration. This is probably

the most commented-upon moment of narrative play in criticism of the novel.

Despite the difference in species, there is a notable similarity of concerns

between the observations of Rex and the typical Banville observer. It appears

that

> Rex the dog is a keen observer of the ways of the human beings. He has
> been attached to this family all his life, or for as long as he has known
> himself to be alive, the past for him being a doubtful, shapeless place,
> peopled with shadows and rustling with uncertain intimations, indistinct
> spectres. These people are in his care. They are not difficult to manage.
> Obligingly he eats the food it pleases them to put before him (198).

Rex is authorial in his own way, shaping the emotions of those whom he views

as under his care. He has, we are told, a typical Banvillean ego; he is in control,

managing the humans 'in his care'. Rex is similar to narrators such as Max

Morden and Axel Vander in that, for him, the past is indistinct, nebulous,

abstract, and of doubtful significance. Rex's comments are extrapolated in

Banville's 'My Hero'[105] article for *The Guardian*. 'My Hero: Ben the Labrador'

was published in November 2009, roughly at the same time as *The Infinities*.

Here, Banville reminisces about his dog and quotes Nietzsche's *The Gay Science*

(1882): "I fear that the animals see man as a being like them who in a most

dangerous manner lost its common animal sense– as the insane animal, as the

laughing animal, as the weeping animal, the miserable animal" (Nietzsche, 2008,

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[105] In this series of articles Banville's playful contribution is on his deceased pet when others have generally written about historical figures. Banville attributes the dog's heroism to guarding, exercising, tolerating children, and a "gift above all gifts...[making] us laugh" Banville, John. 'My Hero: Ben the Labrador'. *The Guardian*. 28 November 2009. http://www.theguardian.com/books/2009/nov/28/my-hero-john-banville. Accessed 20 September 2015.

145). Banville uses Rex in *The Infinities* to provide a criticism of humans as

irrational beings. Rex, as an old dog, approaches a stage in later life marked by

the contemplation and accepting of the past. As it is for Max Morden in *The Sea*,

the past and memory for Rex are tinged with a grainy, indistinct quality. When

he acts it is not out of self-interest but to please old Adam: "for his sake [he] even

pretended to like nothing better than chasing a stick or a tennis ball when it was

thrown for him" (199). Humans are capricious yet

> not so much dangerous as limited, which is why, he supposes, they are in
> such need of his support, affection and praise. It pleases them to see him
> wag his tail when they come into a room, especially if they are alone –
> when there are more than one of them together they tend to ignore him.
> He does not mind (199).

Rex validates and offers emotional support to the solitary human beings and

ironically, in his selflessness, appears more human than his owners.

Banville's playful use of the observing dog through the omniscient

narrator has several functions in this sequence. Firstly, Banville's use of multiple

perspectives is unusual for him, and elsewhere in his corpus it is only in *Shroud*

and *Doctor Copernicus* that we see multiple points of view present in a single

text.[106] Furthermore, while Rex and Adam are not narrators as the narrative

demarcation is deliberately blurred, the change of tone implies that Hermes

undergoes a change of voice and tone as though he possesses the minds of the

other characters. Rex is affectionate and blissfully ignorant rather than curious

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[106] In *Doctor Copernicus* the 'Rheticus' sequence is an obvious change of narrator from a third-person,
limited narrator to a first-person one. In *Shroud*, we move from Axel Vander's first-person narration to a
brief third-person sequence covering Cassandra Cleave's part of the story. In the Benjamin Black novels
the author gives more narrative space to viewpoints other than the protagonist, particularly with the
recurring characters Phoebe, Inspector Hackett and David Sinclair.

and knowing like Hermes. We also see a different comic side to the novel, and while the crossing between Hermes' and Adam's narratives can be seen as narratorial play, the use of a dog can be considered authorial play due to its ridiculousness and incongruity with Banville's typically arch, erudite voice. Rex and Hermes share, however, an interest in the consciousness of mortality that human beings have:

> There is a thing the matter with them, though, with all of them. It is a great puzzle to him, this mysterious knowledge, unease, foreboding, whatever it is that afflicts them, and try though he may he has never managed to solve it. They are afraid of something, something that is always there though they pretend it is not (199).

Both Hermes and Rex have a contrasting attitude to death to that of the humans in the novel; Rex is baffled by the spectre of death, Hermes has witnessed it and desires it. Rex's narrative sequence continues:

> Even when they are happy there is a flaw in their happiness. Their laughter has a shrill note, so that they seem to be not only laughing but crying out as well, and when they weep, their sobs and lamentations are disproportionate, as though what is supposed to have upset them is just a pretext and their anguish springs really from the other frightful thing that they know and are trying to ignore. They have an air always of looking behind them – no, of not daring to look, afraid of having to see what is there, the ineluctable presence crowding at their heels. In recent days, since old Adam's falling asleep, the others seem more sharply conscious of their phantom follower; it seems to have stepped past and whirled about to confront them, almost as this fat stranger has done, just walked in and sat himself down at the table and looked them all in the eye as if he had every right to be here. Yes, the scandalous secret is out – but what can it be? (200).

Rex understands humans in a rational way and does not understand the impending demise of Adam.[107] In his knowledge of the "phantom follower" of

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[107]Banville uses Rex as a litmus test for the rationality of humans. In his review of Milan Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (1984), Banville commends Kundera's dog character Karenin as being more vividly drawn than any human one, and comments that Kundera's moral significance lies in the fact

death, Rex is limited yet is not overburdened by his lack of knowledge, unlike

many of Banville's protagonists he is not subject to accidie and egotistical

self-absorption.

Hermes as a typical prescient narrator gives cues and information as to

what will occur in the future. Unlike Rex, he is aware of the nature of death and

passing even if he cannot experience it. His prescience is evident when he states

that Petra will soon die: "Poor Petra, poor mooncalf, she is the one of all the

household who is dearest to us. And because we love her so we shall soon take

her to us, but not yet, not yet" (120).[108] Hermes is omniscient and prescient,

knowing how all pasts, the present and how the future will pan out. Interestingly,

the only corresponding narrator who seems to have knowledge of everything is

the sly narrator of *Ghosts*.[109] Hermes is mocking: "On a squat table in the middle

of the room there is set an enormous chipped marble head of Zeus – why, hello

Dad! – neckless, with a tight crown of curls and a pubic beard, seeming sunk to

its chin in the wood and wearing an expression of puzzlement and slow-gathering

indignation" (124). Hermes' roguishness is one of the most prevalent elements

of comedy in the novel, and his puckish narration contrasts favourably with that

of Adam's. His narration reveals Banville's attempt to perhaps leave behind the

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that he is aware that "it is by our treatment of animals that we most clearly display our essential and
unforgivable arrogance as a species" (Banville, 'Light But Sound', 2004).

[108] This aspect of narration is relatively common in Banville's novels given that his narratives often jump
between two or more moments in time, his narrators being at a late stage of life and looking back. For
example, in relation to the death of characters in *Shroud* we see the line "Kristina Kovacs, poor Kristina,
will be dead before springtime" (*Shroud*, 178) and the memorable reflection of Gabriel Godkin opening
the shutters to let the light fall on "the charred circle on the floor where Granny Godkin exploded"
(*Birchwood*, 11).

[109] The narrator of *Ghosts* is later identified as Freddie Montgomery. This is unclear in the opening
section of the novel, particularly in the opening scene which ends with the comment "Who speaks? I do.
Little God" (*Ghosts*, 4).

tone of *The Sea*: indulging the implausible by making the godly comically profane.

Language and Singularity

The inhabitants of the world of *The Infinities* exist in a time when language is increasingly devoid of concrete, definable meaning. Echoing Gabriel Godkin's exclamation, "To be specific – to be specific!" (*Birchwood*, 20), meaning in *The Infinities* is relativistic: by being mediated through an essentially flawed language meaning it loses the qualities that give it value. Certainty, logical progression and the action of distinguishing between objects are increasingly difficult in the post-modern minefield of reference that Hermes – or any storyteller – must traverse when relaying a narrative that conforms to the norms of coherence and wholeness. In this fictive realm of impermanence and doubt, Banville proceeds in a different manner to a contemporary such as Thomas Pynchon. The demise of certitude is the most obvious consequence of the Banvillean narrator's anti-essentialist stance. Importantly, the creative individual or the rational thinker imposes (or at least strives to impose) a Stevensian order[110] on a world which, unfortunately for a seeker of essentialist truth, in *The Infinities*, "looks like an imitation of itself, cunningly crafted yet discrepant in small but essential details" (*The Infinities*, 13).

One of the notable elements of Banville's centrifugal depiction of referential meaning is that the narrator often draws solace from the comic

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[110] Or we could call it a Copernican order that "saves the phenomena". Adam Godley's work is more of an unlocking of a true order of the universe rather than a creative fiction that is descriptive or *post factum*.

connotations of words and phrase. Thus, Adam's stroke is a playful punt by a clumsy god and the affliction itself is remarked upon as "oddly innocuous, even pretty a term...for something so unpleasant" (17). As Morrow says in *Athena*, "The gods have a sense of humour but no mercy" (*Athena*, 131). The authoring of the novel's events leads to numerous jokes of naming. A tomcat is called Tom (*The Infinities*, 84). The doctor, the augur of Adam's future, is called Fortune like the doctor in *The Sea* who is Mr Todd (*The Sea*, 13). Banville's use of naming has been extensively considered in criticism of his work, and he continues to add weight of meaning to even the most innocuous of minor characters. It is the subversive attribution of meaning to the insignificant that marks the heightened perception of the Banvillean narrator.

Adam Jr as a child ponders the idea of the singularity of meaning: "The impossibility of accuracy torments him. So many this, so many that, but what before anything is the unit?" (*The Infinities*, 70). Later on, it is mentioned that Adam Sr hated the descriptive analogies of his scientist predecessors and objects from which they

> forged their metaphors, all those colliding billiard balls and rolling dice, the lifts going up and coming down, ships passing each other in the benighted night. Yet how else were they to speak that which cannot be spoken, at least not in the common tongue? He sought to cleave exclusively to number, figures, concrete symbols. He knew, of course, the peril of confusing the expression of something with the something itself, and even he sometimes went astray in the uncertain zone between concept and the thing conceptualized; even he, like me, mistook sometimes the manifestation for the essence (144).

Despite his hatred for their metaphors, one of Adam's achievements is his 'Brahma' equations, and it is this godly metaphor in its mystical unknowability

that is acceptable when compared to the mundanity of billiard balls and passing ships.

Expression regularly fails both the narrators and the characters in Banville's works. At one point in *The Infinities*, Petra repeatedly says the word 'and' seven times without any conclusion to her sentence (29), meaning and finality is deferred until a later moment as the weight of the situation is too much for language to bear. This moment in the novel bears a resemblance to Max Morden's comment in *The Sea*: "The café. In the café. In the café we" (*The Sea*, 145), immediately after which there is a section break in the text. This concept of deferral or interrupted meaning emerges also in *Athena* where one chapter ends abruptly: "Just so the world must have looked at me and waited when" (*Athena*, 169). This technique displays the inadequacies of language to consistently relate the most intense of feelings. To be communicative of intense emotion, as in the case of Adam and the prostitute, language and words must be rehearsed, constructed and ordered artificially in order to impart their intended meaning. In the end, everything must be properly authored in order to be fully communicative. It is this ironic self-lionising of authorial ability that makes Banville's novels metafictional works *par excellence*.

Conclusion

Like most prolific writers, Banville's corpus has been subject to categorisation by readers and critics alike. As with any writer who has been active in the world of publications for the best part of fifty years, his work is also subject to periodization. It is tempting to consider the time around the publication of the critical and commercial success *The Sea*, the first forays into popular crime writing, Banville's move away from the world of full-time journalism as demarcation points in his career. Certainly, as with any living author, categorising his work and analysing particular aspects of his style will be a tentative act. It is not enough to comment on what exists in the corpus; every critic of a living author gives thought to the fact that corpus is not yet complete.

The relative lack of critical analyses of Banville's recent work, particularly his writing as Benjamin Black, will surely change in the near future, and new interpretations and developments in both the author's work and criticism will change the reception of these texts. Banville's recent forays into different genres make it certain that his work will receive more polygeneric critiques as he establishes a portfolio of non-fiction, whether it be plays, screenplays or the 'non-literature' of his essays and miscellanea.

It is increasingly obvious that a polygeneric approach reinforces ideas that have been widely held in Banvillean criticism. His screenplay for *Albert Nobbs* (2011) confronts the ideas of masks and forgery that have been present in his early work, for example. Yet it is equally clear that new and strange ideas are

emerging in recent work. The Benjamin Black project has put the author

personae further into the spotlight, and the 'Banville' that emerges in interviews

and other forms of public speaking has drawn comparison with some of his

duplicitous characters. The reader is potentially wrongfooted by the utterances of

such an essentially artificial 'reality' of the author who comments on their own

work while establishing the fictive world of their creation even further. For the

reader who views the Benjamin Black books as prosaic or traditional novels in a

genre that has undergone some change in recent decades, the persona of Black

extends the text of the novels to the metatext of Banville's interaction with his

readership. The politics and ethics of such an extension is troublesome to

contend with, for the real author at the centre of the 'project' is particularly

serious about parody and play.

There are definite trends that emerge in Banville's recent work which

could be seen to address the issues of categorisation and periodization. As this

dissertation shows, Banville often draws perimeters around areas of his writing,

considering his Black books as spontaneous and his reviewing and essays as

ephemeral by saying they are "written for the day and nothing more" (Friberg,

2006, 212). This is a deliberate act by an author who is managing the reception

of his work by constructing a framing metanarrative of the duplicitous author.

The metatextual project of the Black and 'Banville' personae is another act of

shepherding his readership in a particular direction, and this redirecting always

demonstrates a hierarchy, with his published novels as Banville at the apex of his

pyramid of publications. *Prague Pictures* is a signpost towards a writing career

that is cosmopolitan, expansive and philosophical. The 'Banville' figure therein is 'novelized' as a smuggler of banned art, an awkward yet brilliant author-figure in an unfamiliar landscape. Banville's plays and screenplays are mostly adaptations, perhaps signalling an unwillingness to create wholly original works in these forms as it may detract from the main stream of novels. Rather than using these genres as sites for new ideas to develop they reiterate the concerns of the novels.

Banville's appropriation of various genres within each novel is more experimental and rooted in a striving for novelty or new ways of expressing old ideas. Instead of being ancillary to a greater idea, his uses of the confessional murder tale, the thriller, the historical novel and so on have pushed to the fore his post-modern ethics and an apparent non-committal attitude toward politics. The scepticism of a young Copernicus turns into a rejection of the worldly and an acceptance of things as they are. The criminals Freddie Montgomery, Victor Maskell, and Axel Vander look inwards to the Self and despair; yet their appeal for understanding and empathy reveal a hankering for the concept of forgiveness even if they are unwilling to compromise their essential Selfs to atone for their actions. The effect of such works is that the separations of Self and World and Self and Other is portrayed in a consistent way. Banville's works show individuals who, realising the lack of an Authority, assume a personal authority for their actions yet appear to rationalise them after the fact, effectively turning toward objective truths such as Reason, Imagination and Stoicism to explain their ethical discrepancies, their crimes, and their failings. Ethics and philosophy

provides a shape and a narrative to their actions, they no longer drift aimlessly but are directed by a central ethos.

Banville's assimilation of various genre traditions, often within a single text, echoes his protagonists' awareness of the fractured post-modern world that they exist in. Genre is an aesthetic that favours singularity over the fragment and shape over shapelessness. Genre is, in a way, an aesthetic Authority that is appealed to, but does not respond satisfactorily, does not meet the needs of the sceptical artist. A sceptical artist such as Banville may turn to individual genres in turn in the quest for perfect form, and then turn to the multigeneric to decipher the components of perfect form. The knowledge that genre does not provide the shape and cohesion in art that it suggests is possible haunts Banville's narratives, and after the generic effort is abandoned, the ghostly echoes remain.

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