

Irish History, Ethics, the *Alethic*, and *Mise En Abîme* in John Banville's Fiction

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ABSTRACT

A controversy within John Banville scholarship focuses on his seemingly ambivalent relation to his Irishness. The dominance of Banville's philosophical topics has seemingly rendered the specifically Irish issues redundant. However, there are Irish traits that have significance for more subtle themes or motifs in certain novels. These passages often appear as side-paths in the eccentric protagonists' meandering narration. In *The Blue Guitar*, Oliver Orme mentions that his "namesake Oliver Cromwell" attempted an attack upon the town in which his childhood home is situated, but eventually "the victorious Catholic garrison hanged half a dozen russet-coated captains" on the hill where the house stands and where "the Lord Protector's tent" had been erected. Such casual remarks on violent historical incidents harbor a key to a particular Banvillean ethics. The frequently recurring prose structure of thematized *mise en abîme* and the mazes of signifiers indicate that no historical ontology in terms of a meta-narrative seems to exist. However, many of Banville's novels revolve around the disclosure of a truth. This *alethic* element questions an all too convenient reliance on a completely constructivist understanding of history and thereby of Irish historical events appearing in the Banvillean oeuvre. (JW)

KEYWORDS: Banville, ethics, *aletheia*, Irish history, conflict, *mise en abîme*

John Banville (1945-) was for a long time seen as the Irish writer who turned to more "universal" topics when he created his prose fiction worlds. With the science tetralogy, he

explicitly delved into historical topics that only indirectly concerned Ireland. Linda Hutcheon, most notably, categorized *Kepler* (1981) and *Doctor Copernicus* (1976) as “historiographic metafiction,” which neatly summarizes and explains a part of Banville’s writing strategy. Firstly, he selects a topic, as Shakespeare was wont to do, that somehow attracts his attention and curiosity (for instance, the lives and historical epochs of Kepler and Copernicus), and weaves them into narratives by means of historical facts and inventive imagination. Secondly, he adds an element of ideas and philosophy that may even be anachronistic (as is clearly the case in *Doctor Copernicus*), but these additions in their “universal” status contribute to literary themes concerning a much vaster range of topics, such as science, the *lebenswelt*, memory, and history. In that respect, Banville can be regarded as a typical postmodern writer who sets up dialogues between the past and the present, emphasizing the constructedness of any past object. I here want to address Hutcheon’s ideas affirmatively and critically. In *The Politics of Postmodernism* (1989), she states:

What postmodernism does, as its very name suggests, is confront and contest any modernist discarding *or* recuperating of the past in the name of the future. It suggests no search for transcendent timeless meaning, but rather a re-evaluation of and dialogue with the past in the light of the present. . . . It does not deny the *existence* of the past; it does question whether we can ever *know* that past other than through its textualized remains. (19-20)

Banville’s writing both sustains and questions this proposition. Surely, the Irish author sets up a dialogue, using textual material that presumably is accurate about the time in focus, but in addition, he also weaves everything together by means of creative imagination. This level of fiction writing—and indeed, any type of writing—can never really be solely assessed in terms

of propositional facts. This dimension has to do with affectivity, the *feel* or the *texture* of the events, the characters, and the settings. Indeed, this is an aspect of writing in which the skilled author distinguishes him/herself from the mediocre one. Banville certainly belongs to the former category.

In fact, not even a real-life perception is entirely free from this affective halo of meaning, which is something the phenomenologist Edmund Husserl sees as an inevitable surplus of meaning. In the self-constitution of any object—present and actual or past and textual—there will always be a conglomeration of meanings that exceeds the object's presentation. Through phenomenological reduction, the experiencing subject is free to choose to focus on what is given, but in addition, by means of imagination, the subject may co-constitute, for instance, the backside of a house in the actual perception of the house. Thus, when accessing the past, filling in the missing fragments of knowledge can be done by the creative imagination and it can be accomplished in such a way that the reader may apprehend the object as plausible or believable (metaphorically, as an amalgamation of fact and fiction). Therefore, the creative imagination is central in this process. As Husserl formulates it:

[W]e finally arrive at an understanding of how the transcendent real object can be encountered within the act of knowing (i.e., how nature can be known), first as an object merely intended [*gemeint*], and how the sense of this intending [*Meinung*] is gradually filled out in the continuously developing context of knowledge (insofar as this context possesses the forms appropriate to the constitution of an object of experience). We then understand how the object of experience constitutes itself in a continuum, and how the manner of this constitution is prescribed to it, in that its essence requires just such a gradated constitution. (69)

This implies that an historical object, even when regarded as an historical “fact,” has to be endowed with some form of constitutive meaning, which in turn can seamlessly be translated into the creative imagination itself. The historical expositions we shall encounter below have to be understood with a certain amount of imagination and narrativity. What Banville does is just to enhance a necessary component of any phenomenon (actual perceptive object *or* historically past object—constitutively speaking, the experiential acts are almost identical). It is the ethical implications of this move of the creative writer that will be in focus in the present investigation.

To be sure, in Banville’s writing the ethical sphere is rather complex. There is no doubt that the postmodern aspects of his aesthetics are almost fully graspable within an ontology of discourses. The character Copernicus, for instance, reluctantly becomes the creator of a new discourse that in turn will produce more discourses, eventually just blatantly showing the human being how little he/she knows. Time and again the incomprehensible face of chaos is displayed to him/her. According to Declan Kiberd, “Copernicus is like Marx or Freud or Loyola: he becomes the creator of a new discourse, which will give rise to many other discourses, and so the patenter of a new world” (174). However, in addition to this seemingly endless proliferation of meaning, we have the *alethic* truth that breaks in on protagonists in various situations throughout the oeuvre. In the context of the ethical aspects of Banville’s historical moments, an understanding of these phenomena is crucial. As the creative imagination may carry our understanding of the historical content, the moments of experienced revelation are even more important than historical accuracy. The ethical dimension actually resides in the surplus of meaning referred to above. Banville approaches this sphere only indirectly, which actually makes the ethical an even more real and urgent component of his literary universe. Kiberd addresses something similar when he situates *Doctor Copernicus* in the context of the Irish seventies:

Even the conflict between a Catholic and Protestant mindset in the late-medieval world allows Banville a way of exploring at a safe remove the sectarian conflict of the 1960s and 1970s in the north of Ireland. The theme is the same as that analysed by Seamus Heaney in *North*: how the stripping away of ancient rituals has inflamed many people, leading to rituals of death, as some are seized by the illusion that some new ‘truth’ can be found in their place. (180)

Similar instances of indirect and direct allusions to Irish history in Banville’s fiction are of crucial importance in our apprehension of Banvillean ethics. The *truth* analyzed here is not something that is objectifiable in itself; it is not of the type that Kiberd refers to in the latter part of the quote. It cannot be utilized as a fixed point of reference in the edifice of ideologies. Instead, it will be argued that an important addition is the ethical dimension of the creative imagination in combination with the *alethic* manifestation. The bracketing of historical “facts” is actually the constitutive ground for an ethically viable position derived from Banville’s subtle prose. Thierry Robin accurately asserts: “Tropes involving prepositions or conjunctions such as ‘like’ or ‘as’ or even ‘as if/though’ reveal the obvious finding that representations and memories are but partial, imperfect, faulty, incomplete not to mention downright subjective. But precisely it is in the very nature of art to provide that personal idiosyncratic prism” (109). However, even this description harbors the possibility of an *alethic* intrusion, the grain of sand in an oyster that eventually grows into a pearl.

To have some pre-knowledge of the ethical dimension, it is of value to consider how ethics may be constituted in a postmodern context, generally, and in Banville’s fictional universe, specifically. Zygmunt Bauman develops a model for a postmodern ethics that is suitable as a framework for the brief interventions of Irish history in Banville’s prose. It is especially relevant in terms of the individual ethical (or moral) agent, which could include many

of Banville's protagonists. Bauman ponders the potentiality and limits of imagination in relation to the Other (or, rather: *others*, in the plural and without the capital *O*).

I see that man there meeting a woman. . . . I may make them into whatever I wish, all the more so that whatever I make them into will have no effect on what they are or will become. I am in charge; I invest their encounter with meaning. I may make him into a philanderer, her into a wife seeking escape from the grinding monotony of marriage. I may send them to bed right from where they stand at the moment, or to their respective rooms, where they will sulk the missed chance. The power of my fantasy is the only limit the reality I imagine has, and the only one it needs. Life as bagful of episodes none of which is definite, unequivocal, irreversible; life as a play. (169)

Life as a complete game would presumably be unbearable. Banville's fiction has an immanent understanding of the ethics involved here. Imagination is an essential human asset. However, reality is also essential—and in the context of this analysis, historical reality is specifically relevant. These two factors come together and explicate Banville's ethical position as a combination of limitless imagination and *alethic* givenness. An ethical awareness must somehow include both aspects. Banville's protagonists seem to be forced to become attuned to "morality without ethical code" (Bauman 31). The lack of grand ethical systems begets morality constantly on the level of the individual (or character).

A central issue in what follows—and concomitantly a contrast to it—has been captured by Michael O'Connell in his book on Banville and narcissism:

Despite the vivid elegance of his prose and the surface of sophisticated allusion with which he textures it, there is a sense in which John Banville's writing remains

fundamentally insular. With the exception of *Doctor Copernicus* (1976) and *Kepler* (1981), all of his novels have been written in the first-person confessional form, a narrative mode that attempts—or seems to attempt—the communication of an essence which is, at its core, incommunicable. (1)

I shall focus on some of the allusions themselves, the content of these, and on what the ethical implications are when they are related to Banville's thematized *mise en abîme* of meaning. The allusions relevant here are historical ones that in some way or another convey a conflict. The question the reader might ask is what level of significance is to be ascribed to the brief intertextual links to Irish history and the conflicts inherent in it. For instance, as it has been pointed out by Derek Hand in *The Newton Letter* (1982), Banville lets one of the conversations drift towards an historical allusion (54):

Edward lifted his glass. "What will we drink to?"

"August the twenty-seventh," Bunny said, quick as a flash.

They turned blank looks on her. I remembered.

"Mountbatten?" I said. One of their dwindling band of heroes, cruelly murdered.

I was charmed: only *they* would dare to make a memorial of a drawing-room tea party.

"Terrible thing, terrible."

I was soon disabused. She smiled her little smile at me.

"And don't forget Warrenpoint: eighteen paras, *and* an earl, all on the one day."

"Jesus, Bunny," Edward said.

She was still looking at me, amused and glittering. "Don't mind him," she said playfully, "he's a West Brit, self-made. *I* think we should name a street after it, like the French do. The glorious twenty-seventh!" (37-38)

The historical details here are accurate. The IRA assassination of the Queen's cousin Lord Louis Mountbatten actually occurred on 27 August 1979, in Donegal Bay off Mullaghmore, County Sligo. On the same day a few hours later, an IRA bomb killed six soldiers and soon after a second IRA device killed another dozen soldiers. The incident has been described in the following way: "The deaths of the soldiers and Mountbatten had a huge impact, sparking a major Anglo-Irish political crisis and marking out that day as one of the most dramatic of the troubles" (McKittrick & McVea 133). The fictional irony here is that Banville's historian has completely misread the situation. He has got it into his head that the family he is renting his cottage from are Protestant gentry. He initially thinks that the visiting Bunny here is lamenting the death of Mountbatten, when she in fact proposes a toast to celebrate the day of the deaths and the British military setback. This is confirmed to the protagonist some time later: "One Sunday . . . Otilie casually remarked that she had skipped the family excursion to Mass to be with me. Mass? They were *Catholics*? My entire conception of them had to be revised" (Banville, *The Newton Letter* 54). The notable detail here is that the protagonist's vantage point for interpretation has distorted the whole set of circumstances. This draws our attention to interpretation as such, and the process of history writing, in extension of the fact that the protagonist himself is a biographer and a historian. Of an even higher level of significance, however, is the intriguing question that arises concerning why Banville inserts these kinds of allusions in the narratives. As O'Connell proclaims, Banville's writing is by and large "insular" (1). Still, the intertext is there and it inevitably comments in some way or another on the fictional world the reader enters.

The Newton Letter is not the only novel that explores this writing technique when it comes to drawing attention to Irish historical events. In *The Book of Evidence* (1989), we have an even more eccentric and unreliable narrator in Freddie Montgomery. As I have pointed out

elsewhere (Wrethed 221-22)—in a similarly spontaneous manner to that in which the historical allusion appears in *The Newton Letter*—Freddie remarks that “a strong mixture of Catholic and Calvinist blood” flows through his veins (Banville, *Evidence* 98). This could be taken in conjunction with the reader being informed of the fact that Freddie’s friend, Anna Behrens, has “blood on her shoes” (81) when returning from a visit to the hospital, and that the blood comes from bomb victims arriving there. These small textual references point to the same awareness of Irish history looming in the background. Eoghan Smith has even suggested that “for all Banville’s metafictional playfulness, it is frequently the occasional elements of realist intrusion which are most shocking in his work” (53)

In the 2015 novel *The Blue Guitar*, the phenomenon once again makes itself manifest. The protagonist Oliver Orme—a kleptomaniac and painter with a painter’s block—contemplates the historical background of his childhood home:

It was built in the middle of the eighteenth century, on the hill from where a hundred years previously my namesake Oliver Cromwell directed his forces in their infamous and vain assault upon the town. After the rout of the New Model Army and the lifting of the siege the victorious Catholic garrison hanged half a dozen russet-coated captains up here, from a makeshift gibbet erected for the purpose, on the very spot, so it’s said, where lately had been pitched the Lord Protector’s tent, before he cut and ran for home and an ignominious end. (89)

Even though there are no exact references to geographical location here, Cromwell’s ravaging in Ireland is well documented. In Banville’s childhood town Wexford, for instance, Cromwell’s New Model Army was reported to have run amok, massacring civilians in numbers estimated at somewhere around two thousand casualties (Connolly, s.v.: “Cromwell”). The Cromwellian

set-back that Orme refers to may call the reader's attention to an historically documented defeat in the parliament's military endeavors in Ireland:

Cromwell's campaign was quickly running out of steam. Sickness and the need to man garrisons reduced his army's size and on 2 December 1649 he was forced to abandon the siege of Waterford. He resumed the next year, as a string of towns surrendered with good terms offered to inhabitants and defenders, only to meet disaster at Clonmel (17 May 1650). When his men poured through the breached walls, they were trapped in a killing ground prepared by Hugh Dubh O'Neill. Estimated losses of 1,000-2,500 were the heaviest the New Model Army had experienced anywhere. Cromwell was conspicuously silent about Clonmel in his dispatches to parliament. (Connolly, s.v.: "Cromwell")

Here we have a vacated siege and a severe loss for Cromwell's troops. Again, such Banvillean references to Irish history and conflict are potentially puzzling. This is so mainly for two reasons. First, since the eccentric protagonists are, to a high degree, occupied with themselves, desperately trying to make sense of their own selves and the world, the historical allusions may appear to be out of place or to be something the reader can easily disregard. Second, even if the reader had the intention of making sense of the allusions, he or she would not have very much to link them to. How is Cromwell related to a kleptomaniac painter and his hopelessly sordid love affairs? It is indeed bewildering, to say the least. Thus, we either leave things as they are, or we try to probe deeper into the conundrum, obviously running the same risk as Banville's protagonists frequently do, that is, to end up in a position of epistemological failure in which we find ourselves without anything to say. Authors and readers with nothing to say. An

alternative reading is of course clearly possible. Metaphorically speaking, in Ireland Cromwell was an English marionette attempting to steal something that did not belong to England.

However, if we turn this around and determine that the references to history are so few and so casual that, precisely because of that, they gain semantic weight out of their penuriousness. In order to create a feasible case we need to establish what the dominating Banvillean discourse does in terms of epistemology and ethics. For the sake of brevity, I shall primarily focus on *The Blue Guitar* and, towards the end of my essay, on *The Book of Evidence*. The epistemological shortcomings of the protagonist Orme in *The Blue Guitar* may be put into three categories. The first is one of repeated laments concerning the narrator's inability to connect with the world. The world is a crazy swirl that refuses to be captured and this seems to go both for artists and scientists:

Now I realised that in seeking to strike through surfaces to get at the core, the essence, I had overlooked the fact that it is in the surface that essence resides: and there I was, back to the start again. So it was the world, the world in its entirety, I had to tackle. But world is resistant, it lives turned away from us, in blithe communion with itself. World won't let us in. (58)

The only access to this world, Orme admits, is to capture its expression, how it articulates itself to him: "What concerns me is not things as they are, but as they offer themselves up to being expressed. The expressing is all—and oh, such expressing" (112). The second aspect of epistemological inadequacy comes out in the protagonist's non-coinciding with himself, made manifest in the always already split self that lacks a solid core:

The inevitable conclusion being, in my reading of the case, that there is no I—I’ve definitely said that before, and so have others, I’m not alone—that the I I think of, that upright, steadfast candle-flame burning perpetually within me, is a will-o’-the-wisp, a fatuous fire. What is left of me, then, is little more than a succession of poses, a concatenation of attitudes. (211)

These pre-given ontological circumstances seem to abort all epistemological possibilities. The neat subject-object constellation is cancelled beforehand. This state of affairs makes Orme revert to a groundless ground on which the floating subject tries to express something already simply expressed to him, which constitutes the third category: “[I]t’s what I do, I transform everything into a scene and frame it” (116). Thus, we have a sphere of creativity in which the already expressed gets expressed, either in paintings or in words, which seems to end up as a realm solely made up of representations. In this zone, signs refer to other signs, which is something that appears to indicate the Derridean *différance* or a *mise en abîme* of meaning. It should be mentioned that this Banvillean variety of *mise en abîme* is for the most part of a thematized type, that is, it appears in the telling, often as the protagonists lament their hopeless predicaments. This is an epistemological and ontological set-up that Banville utilizes repeatedly in slightly different versions throughout his oeuvre.

The question is what this epistemological limitation does in relation to the previously mentioned allusions to Irish history and conflict. Furthermore, what kind of ethical implications can be drawn out of the outlined state of affairs? What are the links between Banvillean epistemology and ontology in relation to a moral sphere? What is the connection between real historical atrocities and Banville’s version of *homo ludens*, the man of play? In terms of the allusions to history mentioned, a radical dichotomy between the subjectivity of the protagonists and the sought objectivity of historical accounts seems to arise. If we return to the Wexford

incident referred to, but this time from another historical source, we can reveal something of the dilemma involved. The tone of the military historian James Scott Wheeler is similar to the type of writing that Freddie Montgomery in *The Book of Evidence* comments on when he reads the police report after having been arrested. Freddie claims it must have been written by “a master of the spare style, of the art that conceals art” (Banville, *Evidence* 202). The Wexford massacre in Wheeler’s account:

Cromwell’s men quickly occupied the castle, which overlooked the town’s wall, and launched an assault over the walls. The garrison fought stubbornly against this attack but were driven back into the center of town and overwhelmed. The fighting became a slaughter of the defenders and hundreds of innocent townspeople. Many inhabitants also drowned while trying to escape across Wexford harbor when the attackers sank their boats with heavy fire. Over two thousand townspeople died in the capture of Wexford, leaving the town nearly uninhabited. (Wheeler 216-17)

Freddie says about the police report: “He had taken my story, with all its . . . frills and fancy bits and pared it down to stark essentials” (*The Book of Evidence* 203). Similarly, Wheeler has to adhere to an objective style that as far as possible sticks to facts, figures, and crystal clear propositions. The historian’s report of events has a recognizable narrative structure, but the “slaughter” is reduced to the *figure* of “two thousand townspeople.” Reading the military historian’s descriptions of the civil wars in the United Kingdom in the seventeenth century is to some extent like staring into an anthill of human insanity. Wheeler’s overall historical narrative consists of movements of armies of varying sizes with different objectives, almost always labeled with the commander’s title and surname. Their successes and failures are accounted for. Threats to these military cohorts are mainly other stronger armies, disease,

mutiny, lack of food and gunpowder, dearth of financial support and/or motivation, and so forth. As indicated, the whole realm of historical events and their descriptions by the historian present a stark contrast to Banville's fictional project.

In Banville's literary insularity, we seemingly get a thematized *mise en abîme* of meaning. The protagonist-self is lost in endless mirroring of mirrors, petering out in the epistemological inconclusiveness in the Derridean sense of *différance*. However, the failure of meaning and knowledge is also what potentially gives birth to a moral self. Banville's fiction acknowledges the possibility of a factual reality, as exemplified in the historical allusions and in the texts of Wheeler and the author of the police report in *The Book of Evidence*. These are texts boiled down to facts and essences, apparently cleansed of ambiguity and vagueness. This opens up for objective realities but these realities, of course, come at a price. They make the moral imperative of the Other disappear into the crowd of similarity. For instance, Wheeler provides an almost casual remark when a royalist cohort has been defeated in Scotland:

After over half of the royalists had fallen, the remainder asked for and were granted quarter. After the battle, the Covenanter soldiers and country people murdered them and over 300 Irish women were found in the camp in cold blood. (142)

When such events are subjected to this particular stylistic abstraction, they become, in a way, incomprehensible. Thus we face an epistemological failure of a different kind and on a different level. As Bauman has discussed it at length in his *Postmodern Ethics* (1993), the death of pre-given, normative ethical systems can be the birth of moral man. Moral responsibility arises in the meeting with the Other.

The Face is the otherness of the Other, and morality is the responsibility for that otherness. The crowd is the smothering of otherness, abolition of difference, extinction of the otherness in the other. Moral responsibility feeds on difference. The crowd lives of [sic] similarity. The crowd suspends and shoves aside society with its structures, classifications, statuses and roles. But it also puts paid, for a time, to morality. Being in the crowd is not *being for*. It is *being with*. (130)

The Banvillean epistemological failure is frequently accompanied by a fundamental insight that at least has the resemblance of a truth. For Oliver Orme, it is the realization that ironically he, the thief, was also the victim of theft in the amorous quartet in *The Blue Guitar* (as his best friend Marcus has an affair with Oliver's wife when Oliver thinks he is stealing Marcus's wife away from him). For Freddie Montgomery in *The Book of Evidence*, it is the insight of what the Other (or 'others') truly is (or are) and what that ultimately implies. These instances can be categorized as *alethic* moments and they become crucial in the actual narratives as well as in the present historical analysis.

As Robin argues, thematically *The Blue Guitar* most clearly connects to the art trilogy and perhaps especially with *The Book of Evidence* (104). This is an imperative connection, since it is in this work that the *alethic* process may be most clearly discerned. Moreover, Robin also highlights the problems of history and history writing: "[H]istorical writing *is* performance and the past does not exist *per se* independently of the performance of the act of writing History, which proves problematic to do in a strictly objective thoroughly comprehensive unbiased fashion" (105). A little further on Robin asserts that "art is ubiquitous to account for human experience in both individual and collective terms" (105). To this description I have to add that *alethic* truth may theoretically be part of both forms of writing, but that the phenomenon also transcends them. In general, the two writing genres may be seen as complementary. Banville

forwards the potentiality of the *alethic* dimension and the creative imagination as essential components in ethical processes. Obviously, the central idea is that fiction can weave these constituents together and achieve something that history writing in general cannot attain, no matter how objective and accurate it may appear to be. *Alethic* aspects could at best appear as pared down to propositional facts in the category of descriptive history. To illustrate this in detail, I turn to *The Book of Evidence* and look more closely at the phenomenology involved. We follow the protagonist's encounter with the woman in the painting he steals and subsequently the meeting with the maid he eventually murders.

A commonsensical outlook would classify a painted figure as fictional and less real than a living human being. Through the mind-set of Freddie Montgomery, Banville plays around with this distinction. Initially, the woman in the painting becomes real to Freddie; she becomes the Other who demands a moral response. What suddenly becomes an ethical topic is the force of art, in many respects as a Kantian manifestation of the sublime:

You do not know the fortitude and pathos of her presence. You have not come upon her suddenly in a golden room on a summer eve, as I have. . . . I stood there, staring, for what seemed a long time, and gradually a kind of embarrassment took hold of me, a hot, shamefaced awareness of myself, as if somehow I, this soiled sack of flesh, were the one who was being scrutinised, with careful, cold attention. It was not just the woman's painted stare that watched me. Everything in the picture, that brooch, those gloves, the flocculent darkness at her back, every spot on the canvas was an eye fixed on me. I retreated a pace, faintly aghast. (Banville, *The Book* 79)

The object suddenly takes on the role of the subject. In ethical terms, this would be perfectly fine as a realization of the realness of the Other. The problem, however, is that this is the

impression of an artwork. Freddie's co-creative imagination reveals the capacity of being able to make an object that is not present "in the flesh" come alive. Directly transferred to an historical object, this would potentially be an important ability. Non-present objects could turn into living subjects who demand some kind of response from the protagonist (or historian). The objectively cold inertia in history writing referred to in the example of Wheeler's prose may be avoided.

When Freddie finally steals the painting, his attention shifts to the maid, who is "real" in the fictional world. The protagonist is then more forcefully drawn into an ethical dimension, which we by now are able to identify as part of the *alethic* process.

I could not speak, I was filled with a kind of wonder. I had never felt another's presence so immediately and with such raw force. I saw her now, really saw her, for the first time, her mousy hair and bad skin, that bruised look around her eyes. She was quite ordinary, and yet, somehow, I don't know—somehow radiant. (113)

The maid's radiance reveals that she has transformed into an ethical object similar to the woman in the painting. Analogously, in terms of ethics and moral behavior, the historical dimension needs to be endowed with the surplus of imaginative meaning to fully connect to what we recognize as a humane response. This draws attention to the ethical element in terms of creative imagination. The murder of Josie's imaginative potentiality is highlighted as the ultimate crime.

In killing Josie Bell I had destroyed a part of the world. Those hammer-blows had shattered a complex of memories and sensations and possibilities—a life, in short—which was irreplaceable, but which, somehow, must be replaced. (151-52)

The lack of a universal pre-given ethical system puts a great pressure on the individual. The aesthetic, *alethic* and ethical moment in Banville's fiction is almost always preceded by an epistemological failure of some sort. The historical allusions that intermittently appear gain weight in the light of this set-up. It is suggested that the conflict and violence of the past can only be understood through the activation of a personal and sincere engagement with what it means to be human. To return to historical events through objective historical narrative does not fully cover Banville's ethical position. Only by adding the dimensions of fiction and imagination can we reach a justifiable moral position. Fiction is a necessary complementary constituent in a viable moral system.

The infrequent historical allusions that appear here and there in Banville's prose world have a specific impact when seen through its conspicuous *mise en abîme* prism. Robin has meticulously shown in his linguistic analysis of *The Blue Guitar* that Banville repeatedly signals the complete uncertainty of what is depicted with markers such as "as," "as if," "like," and other analogy connectors, to indicate that nothing is what it seems (113-14). In contrast to that style, the accurate historical details become strong testaments to the element that destabilizes an all too convenient emphasis on standard postmodern features. At least a possibility of the truth is maintained in what is an *alethic* process. In history writing, this would amount to simple propositional facts that could be verified or falsified through rational scrutiny, while in art it involves a form of insight that is carried to the reader or viewer on a different plane. It is no longer the question of verifiable propositions but, rather, that of *alethic* events that demand something from the protagonists. Similar to Freddie Montgomery, who seeks redemption by a recovery of Josie Bell through imagination in *The Book of Evidence*, Oliver Orme in *The Blue Guitar* imagines that some similar endeavor is demanded from him, and very noticeably so in terms of the past as such:

In my rummagings about the house in preparation for that auto-da-fé of illicitly acquired objects, I chanced upon the burlap folder my father made to contain, like a sacred relic, the portrait I did of my own mother when she was dying. The canvas cover was mildewed and the Fabriano paper had gone somewhat sallow and its edges had crinkled, but the drawing itself was, to my eye, as fresh as the day I did it. How lovely she was, even in death, my poor mother. As I squatted there in the attic, musing on her image, with the soft smell of must in my nostrils and thronged around by *the wreckage of the past*, it occurred to me that perhaps that should be my task now, to burrow back into that past and begin to learn all over again all I had thought I knew but didn't. (249, emphasis added)

The texture and the ambience of the moment is highly material, even though the dead mother belongs to the past. But the feel of the wrinkly paper, like skin, and the moldy and fusty air, almost accomplish a physical revelation of the memory. It is highly significant that this experience places some form of ethical demand on the protagonist, similar to the importunity from the past directed towards Freddie in *The Book of Evidence*. According to the logic of the Banvillean prose, the connection has to be brought about by means of the creative imagination. However, this also reveals that the past is not infinitely malleable. The mother as she was to the protagonist can (or even should) be treasured as a nodal point of meaning on which to build a new understanding. It seems to be only with the help of art and imagination that the human being can reach a morally sustainable position. Without the *alethic* element, Banville's ethical stance would not be possible.

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