

## Postmodern Love, Postmodern Death and God-like Authors in Irish Fiction: The Case of John Banville

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### Abstract

This article aims at exploring the crucial correlation between love (eros/desire) and writing, death and writing and God-like authorial strategies as a relevant feature of postmodernist fiction mainly as it unfolds in the work of Ireland's most important (postmodernist) novelist, John Banville. This issue is highly relevant in the context of postmodernism as, according to Brian McHale, postmodern fiction has thoroughly exploited both love and death not only as topics but essentially as formally relevant features of the novel, by systematically foregrounding the relation existing between author, characters and reader, all entangled in a web of love, seduction and deferred annihilation, and by transgressing the related ontological boundaries. In this regard, then, Banville's novels (notably the 'tetralogy of art', namely *The Book of Evidence* (1989), *Ghosts* (1993), *Athena* (1995) and *The Untouchable* (1998)) thoroughly explore and foreground—probably for the first time in Irish writing—both the notion of love and desire as a creative activity, of textual narrative as necessarily seductive and, finally, the time-honoured equation of life with discourse/narration, thus recalling the problematic motif of the impossibility and necessity of discourse.

In the context of Irish fiction, postmodernist literary strategies have not been practised too extensively in the last decades, while it is by now widely acknowledged that a great many of the main features of postmodernist writing had already been inaugurated by the titans of the protean Irish 'modernism': I am obviously thinking of Joyce—especially in *Finnegan's Wake*—and Flann O'Brien.

The crucial correlation between love, eros, desire and writing, death and writing and God-like authorial strategies figures among some of the most specifically postmodernist traits, and the Irish novelist who provides perhaps the most remarkable instance of this issue is John Banville.

The theme of love and desire, traditionally associated with death and writing itself in literature, has long been a prominent concern of Irish contemporary fiction, although primarily on a thematic level, from a sociological angle, especially in the light of the remarkable modernization undergone by Irish society since the sixties, and recorded by the artist as social historian.

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This pivotal and yet elusive issue becomes even more relevant in the context of postmodernism: according to Brian McHale, for example, postmodernist fiction has thoroughly exploited both love and death not only as topics but essentially as formally relevant features of the novel, by systematically foregrounding the relation existing between author, characters and reader, all entangled in a web of love, seduction and deferred annihilation, thus transgressing the related ontological boundaries (1987, 219–232).

In this regard, then, John Banville's novels (notably the 'trilogy of art', namely *The Book of Evidence*, *Ghosts*, *Athena*, which may be considered to form a tetralogy together with *The Untouchable*) develop and foreground a notion of love and desire as a creative activity, an instance of textual narrative which is necessarily seductive and, finally, the time-honoured equation of life with discourse/narration. Banville's characters essentially engage in a challenge with a sense of impending death—both spiritual and physical—precisely by means of their accomplished storytelling, whereby writing, language and its fictions themselves contain a seductive and erotic charge. They evoke the problematic 'tradition' of the impossibility and necessity of discourse ranging from Beckett to Nabokov, only to name two of Banville's most revered literary influences.

This kind of love (and death) as a 'meta-object' and 'meta-theme' of the novel, according to McHale, "characterizes not the fictional interactions in the text's world, but rather the interactions between the text and its world on the one hand, and the reader and his or her world on the other" (1987, 227). An attribute that appears to be one of the sustaining and most recurrent features of Banville's work.

An interesting angle to depart from in this analysis lies in the very narrative structure and framework of some of Banville's novels: *The Newton Letter*, *The Book of Evidence*, *Athena* and *The Untouchable* all are shaped according to a roughly epistolary form, and addressed by the first person narrator to a recorder of events, be it a woman as Muse as in *The Newton Letter*; the impartial presiding judge of the jury that is going to sentence Freddy Montgomery in *The Book of Evidence*; most importantly, a lost beloved in *Athena*; or again, an ambiguous authenticifier of the protagonist's "fictional memoir" in *The Untouchable*.

"Words fail me, Clio" (1995, 1) is the opening of *The Newton Letter*: words pronounced by a writer who gave up the project of a book on Newton, and who—towards the conclusion—reiterates his address: "I set out to explain to you Clio, and to myself, why I had drowned my book. Have you understood? So much is unsayable, all the important things" (1995, 79). In *The Book of Evidence*, again, the opening address is a performative: "My Lord, when you ask me to tell the court in my own words, this is what I shall say" (1993, 3), and the closing sentence is the memorable answer to the

question as to what was true of his story: "All of it, none of it. Only the shame" (1993, 220).

But it is in *Athena* that the strategy of narrative seduction is most suggestively accomplished, for the whole novel ultimately reads as a love letter to a lost beloved, who is also the personification of art, imagination, absence and loss: "My love. If words can reach you whatever world you may be suffering in, then listen. I have things to tell you" (1996, 1). Throughout the text the second person sustains a communicative circuit and a vibrant tribute that ends in the exhaustion of "Write to me, she said. Write to me. I have written" (1996, 233).

Banville seems to be the Irish writer who is most consistently aware that postmodernist poetics exploit and enact a complex, ongoing game of seduction which unfolds both on a formal and a substantive level, in terms of textual gratification and as an intrinsically cultural, intellectual engagement. As Brian McHale puts it, "the erotic relation can also serve as a productive model for the text's relation to the reader. Narratives 'seduce' their readers, in the sense that they solicit and attempt to manipulate relationships" (1987, 222). The kind of seduction pursued and—in the best cases—accomplished by postmodernist fiction is at least twofold, both aesthetic and intellectual. This dual involvement may even be intentionally and explicitly challenging towards the reader and its position in the cultural context. It offers itself explicitly as a teasing, absorbing message to the sophisticated reader, who is enticed to play the intertextual game, and to follow the many cultural strands embedded in the narrative.

Though fully aware that this is only one possible standpoint from where to look on the quicksands of postmodernist fiction, one may have reasons to believe that art is not only employed in order to deny itself and its significance. Beyond playfulness, pastiche, parody and self-consciousness, postmodernist narratives also become the proper sites for a self-conscious tribute to art, *despite* all the debunking, the irony and the celebration of depthlessness as constituents of postmodernist culture. Thus they conceal an element of passion, albeit one that is nourished by cultural fodder. This, at least, is both true and apparent in Banville's four last novels, if we choose to read them as an elaborate homage to the mystery of the artistic imagination, and as a fictional attempt at retrieving an ultimate sense in the futile, amorphous web of cultural heritage that sustains and informs our perception of love, death, art and of that quintessentially postmodernist theme of the 'unreality of reality'.

Banville's fiction also foregrounds what is almost a foundational element of metafiction and of postmodernist literature in general, namely the capacity to turn self-reflexive and self-conscious writing into a medium to captivate and lure the reader. Thus, even the exhibited self-deprecation or the impatience displayed by his protagonists towards themselves and their own narratives read like a devious but effective ploy to keep going this peculiarly

seductive game of fictions about and within fictions, as in this exemplary quote from *Athena*: "Ah, what a giveaway it is, I've noticed it before, the orotund quality that sets in when I begin consciously to dissemble ... Whenever I employ locutions such as that you will know I am inventing. But then, when do I not use such locutions?" (1996, 2).

The seductive charge disseminated in his texts also reveals a remarkable awareness of the dynamics of the pleasure of the text, as Banville seems to be very much at ease in what Barthes calls the "possibility of a dialectic of desire" (1973, 11; my translation) enacted by reading. His heroes' erotic and voyeuristic inclinations recall that concordance of erotic pleasure in life and in textual reading produced by the 'intermittence', by staging an appearance-disappearance, "a progressive unveiling" (Barthes 1973, 19-20; my translation).

It has to be mentioned that Banville's use of love, art and death as foregrounded constituents of the novel in the art trilogy and *The Untouchable*, and most notably in *Athena*, is also largely reminiscent of Nabokov's *Lolita* (1955), perhaps its most influential literary antecedent. As in *Lolita*, the redemptive project and therefore the unfolding narrative ultimately amount to an elaborate gesture to commemorate the irreplaceable absence of the original victim at first, and later of the lost beloved.

In *The Book of Evidence*, Freddie Montgomery kills in an impulse of cold savagery a young maid who has witnessed his stealing of a Dutch portrait of a woman. In *Ghosts* Freddy, now the nameless narrator, has served a ten-year sentence in jail, and is now an expert in Dutch late 17th-century painting. He spends a purgatorial sojourn on a small island off the Irish coast, where he is supposed to help the shady professor Kreutznauer, the world's greatest scholar of the painter Vaublin. He is looking for a woman in whom he may re-incarnate his innocent victim, but his redemptive task remains abortive:

What was required was not my symbolic death ... but for her to be brought back to life. That, and nothing less. (1993, 152)

And so my task now is to bring her back to life. I am not sure what that means, but it strikes me with the force of an unavoidable imperative. (1993, 215)

It was innocence I was after, I suppose, the innocent, pure clay awaiting a grizzled Pygmalion to inspire it with life. It is as simple as that. Not love or passion, not even the notion of the radiant self rising up like flame in the mirror of the other, but the hunger to have her live and to live in her, to conjugate in her the verb of being. (1994, 70)

In *Athena*, under the name of Morrow, he is hired by a sinister entrepreneur, Morden, in order to attest to the authenticity of seven paintings, which at last turn out to be forgeries of the originals, stolen from the same mansion where he committed the murder. The novel focuses on the obsessive erotic passion between him and a mysterious young beauty, symbolically named A., who eventually forsakes him and vanishes, and proves to be another schemer in the fraud to which he falls prey.

While A. in *Athena* is ultimately exposed as a figment of the imagination, an embodiment of Art itself, the killed maid is totally indifferent to the protagonist's eyes, so that she becomes almost an objective correlative of his lack of humanity, of the abysmal void of his conscience. Hers is an extreme, cruel and dehumanised instance of the otherness of the female body. And all the female figures of the trilogy look like figurations of that impossible compenetration between the creative and artistic imagination and the actuality of flesh and blood. As in *Lolita*, thus, absence as lack is inscribed rhetorically into the text in an attempt at confronting desire and death. Moreover, as in Nabokov's text, it is the very lavishness of language and style that exhorts the erotic element of the narrative, as both H.H. and Freddie are ultimately left with "only words to play with" (Nabokov 1981, 32) and replace what they have lost.

Banville in fact not only refers to but even implicitly reverses the pattern Nabokov works out in *Lolita*. As Elizabeth Bronfen remarks in *Over her Dead Body* (1992), Humbert Humbert's "narrative aims at turning the elusive body of a beloved into a seemingly stable sign", and at preserving "the eternal Lolita" against her physical absence and then demise" (1992, 375). In Banville's trilogy, conversely, the original dead body is both the least significant one and the most important in terms of motivation and plot. The protagonist and narrator as artist thus reverses the literary convention whereby the second woman is conceived as the body double of a no longer existing beloved (Bronfen 1992, 381). The object of his quest is a bodily frame in which Morrow may reincarnate a dead, inert creature who was never beloved, so as to prove himself capable of turning his solipsism and destructive desire into a kind of love. Paradoxically, instead, his one and only act of true moral expiation takes place at the deathbed of his decrepit Aunt Corky, whom he assists in *The Book of Evidence*.

Love and desire are always presented in cultural terms in Banville's fiction, always expressed and transmuted into pictorial or literary similes, metaphors or tropes. It is always a love with quotes, so to say, as that which is anatomised in *The Newton Letter*: "Love. That word. I seem to hear quotation marks around it, as if it were the title of something, a stilted sonnet, say, by a silver poet" (1995, 45).

Equally, the female characters are always likened to works of art or aesthetic objects, so that they become dehumanised creatures. The female protagonist of *Athena*, A., is fashioned as a cliché and almost parodic version

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of the *femme fatale*, halfway between the deferred promise of an improbable rebirth and a figuration of loss, elusiveness and finally death. A. is prone to sadomasochistic sexual mores, she is a seducer and an exhibitionist; she exists in order to tease and tantalize the protagonist, as well as to titillate—or irritate—the reader. And the relationship which connects the authorial instance, the characters, the text and the reader is progressively subsumed by the figure of an imaginary and artificially created beloved, who becomes the object of a self-questioning search for atonement, meaning and beauty at the same time.

Banville actually attempts a daring feat (albeit one that is intrinsic to the literary narrative): that of writing desire in his texts; or, rather, of writing texts of desire. Not only are his novels filled with desire as lack, absence, awareness of otherness, longing, yearning, a will to power, lust, wistfulness, but their very structure is both founded on desire and foregrounds it. Furthermore, the cultural allusiveness of his works is a telling instance of how desire cannot but be channelled into the order of language and culture, though always bound to exceed it. His novels provide a superb exemplification of the notion that, as Catherine Belsey put it “fiction remains the supreme location of writing about desire” (1994, 11).

Before reaching its climactic moment in *Athena*, however, sexual desire is virtually absent in relation to the female figures of the story. Rather, it appears sublimated in his longing to re-capture the essence of such female apparitions, from the woman in the portrait to Daphne, Anna Behrens, Flora, the Dutch widow in *Ghosts*, etc.

Furthermore, in the inextricable nexus of discourse, love and death, even identity and subjectivity as ontological notions are constantly exposed as a fictional construct that exists almost exclusively in narrative terms. Narrative is thus most often a self-narration and the protean self is conceived precisely in terms of the ongoing narration that it is able to sustain. A narration that it constantly undermines, thus problematising the fictional but ineradicable presence and status of the author. There is not a single line in these ‘books of evidences’ that is not self-consciously employed as part of a complex and masterful fictional rhetoric. To parody the opening of *The Newton Letter*, words never fail Banville’s storytellers and their superb fabulations, but rather always exceed them. And since they also endure a sense of annihilation, their eloquence becomes all the more vital to their existence, within and without the text.

All of Banville’s heroes and narrators, and most notably those of the most recent four novels, are also would-be artists and highly accomplished and manipulative writers and storytellers, who may be regarded as a version of what Todorov calls “*les hommes récits*” (1971, 78–91), relating their narratives to (fictional) love-objects, but also trying to stave off the final confrontation with death.

In *The Newton Letter* Edward Lawless's death marks the end of what for the narrator had been a private and imaginary Irish myth. It is an equivocated death, though, to which he reacts with dismay. In *The Book of Evidence* Freddie writes his testimony in jail, while awaiting a possible life-sentence, but his record is conceived both as a sophisticated textual instance and as a courtroom verbal performance to entreat the community's judgement. In *Ghosts*, death is again perceived as haunting the exilic, purgatorial island he has reached to expiate, so to say. A besetting ghost from his past and a constant subtle premonition, that eventually deprives him of the only human presence he feels somehow close to, the Dutch widow that befriends him. In *Athena*, death is also all-pervasive as transiency and metamorphosis in the textual imagery, but most significantly as solitude, hovering between the real, physically disturbing death of old Aunt Corky, to which the protagonist bears witness, the casual murders perpetrated while the story takes place and the final disappearance of A. Finally, in *The Untouchable* Victor Maskell recounts his own life story while being consumed by a cancer that leaves him with no illusions and very little time. Here the 'Sheherazade syndrome' is all too evident: as long as he is still able to narrate, he will be alive to himself, to his treacherous beloved, and to his audience. And in the very closing sentence of the novel he posits the dilemma of whether shooting himself in the head or through the heart.

Banville also self-consciously, plays with versions of the death of the author, most notably in *Ghosts* and *Athena*: in the first case by dramatising a Prospero-like role, in the latter even more overtly, through a kind of melancholic valediction on the part of the God-like narrator and protagonist, whose preamble in *Ghosts* was "Who speaks: I do, little god" (1994, 4). His redemptive project being over, further to the display of his theatrical authority in *Ghosts*, he stages his own mock apotheosis at the end of *Athena*. Here he implicitly reasserts his God-like prerogatives, playing with several anagrams of 'Banville' and some displaced autobiographism, and depicting himself as a forlorn Apollo-Zeus, relinquished by his beloved, Athena-like, a daughter of the imagination.

Banville is not the first Irish writer to have engaged with such a literary strategy: the Irish novel had already been blessed by the triumphant authorial self-irony of Joyce and Flann O'Brien, but his elegiac note of self-delusion deserves at least some kind of mention. At the same time, Banville has thoroughly emphasised the importance of love and desire as constantly associated to the aesthetic impulse and to a typically postmodern questioning of the fictionality of reality. In this regard, he is not the only Irish writer to have expressed (or rather 'simulated') desire and love in terms of creative impulse, dramatising an abiding sense of absence as the very form of desire. Desmond Hogan's novels—notably *A Curious Street* (1984), *A New Shirt* (1986) and *A Farewell to Prague* (1995)—are also powerful instances of a postmodernist treatment of erotic frustration related to creative or artistic

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search for fulfilment. Hogan's fiction has an almost apocalyptic, oracular strain about it, and often his elegiac lyricism indirectly invokes a kind of ideal notion of (Christian) love as a possible response to the doomed eroticism and to the obsession with national history and identity that pervades it.

This elusive entity of 'postmodern love' had also been dealt with by a relatively 'conservative' novelist such as John McGahern in *The Pornographer* (1979), where the intertwining narrative plans of the main plot and the pornographic stories written by the protagonist and narrator offered a debunking version of that 'citationality' of desire and love which is perhaps the hallmark of its postmodernist representation. A love which is unspeakable, both silent and wordy, which feeds on texts and cultural imagery, as Belsey puts it: "postmodern love is at once endlessly pursued and ceaselessly suspected ... Desired as the ultimate good ... doubted as an illusion ... is both silent and garrulous. It cannot speak, and yet it seems it never ceases to speak in late 20th century Western culture" (1994, 74). And while McGahern's intertextual strategy still conveyed a strong sense of social and cultural critique focused on the Irish context, Banville's poetics provide the subtlest representation in Irish writing of this entanglement of love, death and discourse as one nourished by a world of language, signs, texts and images that ultimately turn it into just another supreme fiction.

His narratives, moreover, being conceived as delivered to an addressee, necessarily pursue some kind of sympathy on the recorder's—and therefore on the reader's—part, given that "every reader is potentially *you*, the addressee of the novelistic discourse," as McHale reminds us (1987, 223). Such a sympathy may even develop into a kind of intimacy between the *hypocrite lecteur* and those moral semi-monsters such as Freddie Montgomery/Morrow or Victor Maskell.

As valuable instances of meta-fiction or anti-narrative—for what labels may be worth—the 'Art Trilogy', *The Untouchable* and even some of Banville's previous novels are all texts that intentionally revel in the self-reflexive, self-conscious technical narcissism enjoyed by all parties in the textual game.

Finally, the involvement of the reader as a third party to the ontological relationship of author and characters appears even more sophisticated on closer scrutiny. Banville's fiction assigns a prominent part to the male protagonist as bearer of the male gaze, as well as the unreliable agent in the plot, while the female image is generally passive and blatantly objectified. This element of gender representation typical of most film narratives is in keeping with the recurrent motif of troilism (especially in *The Newton Letter*, *The Book of Evidence* and *Athena*) and the voyeurism constant in his novels and particularly conspicuous in *Athena*, and it is clearly aimed at involving the reader as a third, conniving part, whose position becomes that of a surrogate and accomplice spectator. In *The*



*Newton Letter*, Banville dwells on the multiplicity of the voyeuristic stance by implicitly mingling the author/narrator and the reader as spectators of the imaginary *menage à trois* between the protagonist and the two women, fused into a 'Charlottilie': "There was a fourth, too, which was the other version of myself which stood apart, watching the phenomenon of this love and my attendant antics with a wry smile, puzzled, and at times embarrassed" (1995, 58). Troilism in fact reads here like an allusive reminder of the 'triangle' connecting author, character and reader in a game of literary voyeurism and seduction. This device also helps to create a space for what may be regarded as a surrogate reader, namely somebody within a fiction who represents the reception of the narrative.<sup>1</sup> So here we revert full circle to the previously mentioned addressed recorder of the self-centred storytelling.

Furthermore, the prominent motif of forgery is also a foundational element of Banville's postmodernist strategy of foregrounding love and death. It imparts a note of ambiguity and instability that makes the whole narrative even more absorbing, or, rather unnerving. Feelings and perceptions are exposed in a hide-and-seek equipoise between the search for an impossible truth and the awareness of the fictionality of the self and reality. In *Athena*, for example, the reader is forced to become an interpreting cooperator to the textual strategies, as the seven brief catalogue essays, the 'critical asides' written by Morrow that are interspersed in the main narration become more and more overtly self-reflexive, and prompt a re-reading of the plot and characterization. And in *The Untouchable* art (as painting) is definitively tainted by the loss of innocence of those that cherish it, and so it can no longer be enjoyed. Maskell learns that the touchstone of his life, Poussin's "Death of Seneca", is a fake. Another self delusion: even the love of art is denied a happy ending.

Ultimately, then, both *Athena* and *The Untouchable* subsume some of those meta-themes developed so far: the validation of aestheticism presented as the love of art; the confutation of the search for meaning; love; inflicted and impending death. Thus, these four novels close on a celebration of overlapping fictions, embodiments, disguises, in the name of A(rt)'s love. And, once again, Banville's allegories and metaphors are seductive enough to leave us puzzled. We may have been led to think he gave us a doomed romance, and we are left with the infinite regress of a postmodernist Pygmalion.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> With reference to the definition given by Mark Currie (1998, 52).

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