



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Mehdi Ghassemi