

## *Plate Tectonics*

## *Placas Tectônicas*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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