

John Banville: “The Weightless Density of a Dream.”

John Banville: “A Densidade Leve de Um Sonho”

Alan Gilsenan

*Certain dreams do that, they seem to darken the very air,
crowding it with the shadows of another world.*

John Banville, *Ghosts*

I grew up in a somewhat mythical, and now oft-derided, area of Dublin known as Dublin 4. It has always had a privileged, leafy air about it but, in my younger days, it was a little more eclectic. There were odd pockets of bohemia and academia amidst the grandeur, as well as an occasional Georgian house divided into grimy bedsits, home to older folk, students and the odd, lonely alcoholic all — hidden behind shrouds of greying net curtains. We lived on Raglan Road, immortalised, of course, in poetry and song by Patrick Kavanagh. Our house was elegant and large, although very cold in winter and fraying around the edges a little. Looking back, I realise that it had the atmosphere of an old country house lost in the midst of city. It was old-fashioned too, and otherworldly in some strange respects. I recall it as a world of half-lights. Ghostly and uncertain. Out of time, somehow. On reflection, it may be one of the reasons that I’m deeply drawn to the shifting worlds of John Banville’s fiction. For there is something haunted about the writing of Banville, and something that seems to be at some small remove from what passes for our daily reality.

Much later, in a modern townhouse somewhere else in Dublin 4, as my father lay a-dying in a bedroom across the hall, I sat on a small spare room, surrounded by old tea chests piled high against the surrounding walls, reading *The Book of Evidence* from cover to cover. Right through the night. I was completely captivated. It is a strange and dark book, this florid testimony of a dandy-ish murderer, Freddie Montgomery, and inspired by the real events surrounding a notorious gruesome double murder in Dublin during the early Eighties that became known as the GUBU scandal. (“Grotesque, unbelievable, bizarre and unprecedented” was Taoiseach CJ Haughey’s famous summation of the events that led to the arrest of Malcolm McArthur, a guest at the south Dublin home of the Attorney General, Patrick Connolly.)

Freddie comes from a long line of unreliable shadows that narrate Banville’s fiction. In many respects, like many of these characters, Freddie is a repugnant individual - vain, delusional and self-absorbed, and that’s not even to mention his crimes — but yet somehow he manages to retain our sympathy, our compassion even. Perhaps because, in some ways, he represents our worst side, our own dark possibilities.

Perhaps, too, it was this element that struck such a profound chord with me all those years ago. Or maybe I was seduced by the dramatic potential of the murderous tale which would lead me later to adapt it for stage and screen. Certainly, my heightened state in the face of my father’s imminent demise had something to do with it and perhaps, even, my cell-like

spare room had echoes of Freddie's domain. As the novels opens:

I, Charles St John Vanderveld Montgomery, am kept locked up here like some exotic animal, last survivor of a species they had thought extinct. They should let in people to view me, the girl-eater, svelte and dangerous, padding to and for in my cage, my terrible green glance flickering past the bars, give them something to dream about, tucked up cosy in their beds of a night. (1989. 3)

The idea of us all being morally questionable, along with Banville's extraordinary ability to conjure a dreamlike world – illuminated by shards of ever-changing light – his brilliantly precise, if sometimes archaic, use of language and his philosophical musings combine to paint a universe that seems truer, somehow, than the prosaic world around us. Could it be that Ireland's greatest prose-stylist is really, in every essential way, a poet? For, in terms of literary lineage, John Banville seems to descend from WB Yeats and Samuel Beckett, whilst his influence – unwitting or otherwise – seems evident in contemporary writers such as Eoin McNamee and Sara Baume.

In the shocking and tragic aftermath of the murder at the centre of *The Book of Evidence*, Freddie considers life after his fall from grace. From reality.

Everything had changed, everything. I was estranged from myself and all that I had once supposed I was. My life up to now had only the weightless density of a dream. When I thought about my past it was like thinking of what someone else had been, someone I had never met but whose history I knew by heart. It all seemed no more than a vivid fiction. (1989. 150)

Yet, while Freddie reflects upon his former life as if it had been some sort of vague dreamlike state and that he had now crashed down into some sort of harsh reality. However, in the novel, Freddie has simply been transformed by events, and merely emerged into another seam of myriad Borgean fictional realities.

John Banville's world seems to be a godless one where somehow the gods are still pulling the strings. His imaginative landscape is a seemingly bleak one where the narrative line, the plot, is largely meaningless. For, like Vladimir and Estragon and Co., the characters are going nowhere. The story, that old-fashioned notion of plot, seems like an unnecessary artifice in Banville's work. A kind of fictive chimera. A foolish mirage where the story promises some hope of resolution. Of conclusion. But this darkened world is not irredeemable. For it is infused with moments of profound beauty, of broken tenderness and, of course, shame. And, in that shame, we find a sort of redemption. As Freddie Montgomery concludes *The Book of Evidence*:

It is spring. Even in here we feel it, the quickening in the air. I have some plants in my window. I like to watch them, feeding on the light. The trial takes place next month. It will be a quick affair. The newspapers will be disappointed. I had thought of trying to publish this, my testimony. But no, I have asked the Inspector to put it in my file, with the other, official fictions. He came to see me today, here in my cell. He picked up the pages, hefting them in his hand. It was to be my defence I said. He gave me a wry look. Did you put in about knowing the Behrens woman, and

owing money, and all that stuff? I smiled. It's my story, I said, and I'm sticking to it. He laughed at that. Come on, Freddie, he said, how much of it is true? It was the first time he called me by my name. True, Inspector? I said. All of it. None of it. Only the shame. (1989. 220)

Recently, John Banville received a phone call in Dublin. 11.23am. The voice on the line claimed to be a representative of the Nobel Committee in Sweden. They were ringing to inform Mr Banville that he had been awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. One imagines him putting the phone down and sitting for a moment. (In the half-light, one hopes.) He feels dazed. A sort of physical release spreading through his body. A slight smile, perhaps, a sort of wry grin, unconsciously creeps across his face. He pours himself a small brandy. "Well..." he might have said, quietly to himself, apropos nothing at all. More of an exhalation than a tangible word. After these quiet moments of calm and quiet delight – he would not remember exactly how many – he rang his nearest and dearest to share the good news.

But it was not to be. It was a malicious hoax. A cruel joke, apparently, although there still remains some mystery about it. Farcical in ways and yet true, and strangely full of pathos also. Like a Banville novel. Like life itself perhaps. But there had been a moment when he imagined that he was the Nobel Prize Winner. A simple joyful moment. For it is an award he would have richly deserved, and yet, if he were again to receive a phone call from Stockholm, the moment would never be the same. He has had that moment. The rest is of nothing. As Banville writes in his seminal novel *Ghosts*:

What happens does not matter; the moment is all. This is the golden world. The painter has gathered his little group and set them down in this wind-tossed glade, in this delicate, artificial light, and painted them as angels and clowns. It is a world where nothing is lost, where all is accounted for while yet the mystery of things is preserved; a world where they may live, however briefly, however tenuously, in the failing evening of the self, solitary and at the same time together somehow here in this place, dying as they may be and yet fixed forever in a luminous, unending instant. (1993. 231)