"Endless Beginnings" in the Criticism of Banville's Writings

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As few books, though by foremost writers, have been published on John Banville's fiction, Derek Hand's work is very much welcome as it adds another beam of light to the spectrum of literary critique on the work of this contemporary Irish writer.

Advocating that "it is better and more suitable to consider his art as oscillating between a modernist and postmodernist perspective", Hand embarks on another "endless beginning" in the interpretation of Banville's novels, bringing into action the last words of his conclusion.

In his introduction Hand claims that Banville's work can be fully grasped only when read within an Irish context. So, he borrows Richard Kearney's concept of postmodernism "as mediational modernism" to both support this argument and contest Rüdiger Imhof's belief that Banville's novels have to be read within a European/ international setting.

Such a claim might be disputed if considering Banville's own public assertion that he refuses to be reduced to only an Irish writer – "I am not going to do the Irish thing"– as Hand himself acknowledges quoting from Hedwig Schawall's interview (p. 5). On the other hand, Imhof's belief is also supported by Banville's recent declaration stating that he sees himself in "some kind of international way" (Mutran & Izarra 2003, p. 229). However, in order to back his claim, Hand goes beyond these statements and dives heroically into a sound argument that focuses on traces of Irish historical events and literary tradition present in some of the writer's books.

As he is determined to prove Banville's Irishness – something that Joseph McMinn has already done though acknowledging the novelist's work in the intersection of the tradition of the Irish novel and the wider tradition of European fiction – Hand places Banville in-between Joyce and Beckett and makes comparisons with the writings of William Butler Yeats and Elizabeth Bowen among other Irish writers. He adopts a thematic approach to analyze Banville's fiction dividing his book in three main chapters where he deals first with "Irish matters" (*Birchwood* and *The Newton Letter*), then with

the nature of art and the artistic imagination (*Doctor Copernicus* and *Kepler*), and finally with an investigation of the self (*Mefisto*, *The Book of Evidence*, *Ghosts*, *The Untouchable* and *Eclipse*). His conclusion points out the writer's radical openness stressing that his work is "still in process, evolving and mutating with each subsequent addition to it" (p. 176).

Banvillean critics, including myself, have generally been unable to avoid praising the author's self-reflexive narrative technique. His concern with the novel's state of the art and the interrogative quality of his narratives put such a strain on the theory of this genre that we get entangled in the postmodern web of metafictional critique though not denying the historical element of his work and even attempting postcolonial readings of it. Banville himself has many times expressed his concern with the genre saying that he is "trying to think fiction because [he is] always interested in ideas." Thus, "infected with the virus of ideas, which is probably the worst possible thing for a novelist" (Mutran & Izarra 2003, p. 229), he paradoxically brings his critics to the border of the abyss as he leads them to question but, at the same time, to admire and celebrate the novel form, which he defines as the youngest art form that "seems to have been used up very, very quickly" (*op. cit.*). In this way, Banville challenges novelists and critics to rethink fiction from a formal perspective while he goes on looking for a new form through the renewal of old ones or the exploration of other ways of representations that incessantly carry him over "from the dream world into the world of fiction". He insists that his way of doing fiction can be compared to writing "a life-changing dream" so much so that when you read it "you will actually have the dream." (*op. cit.* 230). Therefore, Derek Hand's reading of Banville's work can be considered as another instance of an "endless beginning', as "actually having the dream' while standing at the crossroads of metafiction with both the literary and the historical context of Ireland.

Many of Hand's critical insights are worth mentioning like his close analysis of *Birchwood* and *The Newton Letter* in which he brings up the formal aspects of these novels in a contrapuntal relationship with the historical facts presented in the background, or his explanation in the third chapter of how form enters in a critical dialogue with the content of the novel focusing on the first two books of the tetralogy; and finally, the way he shows how Banville's fiction moves "progressively away from his concerns with the "big game of the intellect' and the issue of Irish history – another grand narrative – toward a more intimate arena for his artistic contemplation" (p. 117) focusing on the individual and the personal, on the (anti)hero out of place. But, in so doing, he also distances himself from his main aim and instead of continuing at the crossroads, he succumbs to the temptation of taking the road of metafictional critique and gets entrapped into deciphering the mechanisms of the imaginary and the processes of construction of the narrators' identities in the dark realm of the novelist's mind.

The second chapter clearly proves the relationship between history and fiction as well as how Banville's two novels – *Birchwood* and *The Newton Letter* – are a metaphorical awakening from the nightmare of history. Nevertheless, I would like to

point out a sophism that is implied *en passant* in one of the theoretical statements. When it is affirmed that history is a "fiction", it is, of course, a reference to historical narratives rather than to historical events, as it is declared that this is not to say "the past loses value when thought of as fiction or that "things/events' did not happen" (p. 26). However, these assertions turn out to be double-edged because are also assumed as possible and true by the reader. They have the same effect of the historian's statement in *The Newton Letter* when he refers to "this Popovian Newton-as-the-greatest-scientist-the-world-has-known": "Not that I think of it untrue, in the sense that it is fact" (*TNL* pp. 29-30). To avoid this risk a wider theoretical support should be provided to prove that history or historical facts are interpretations. Moreover, when in Banville's novel the fictional historian refers to the historian Popov as an "embalmer", he is against the descriptive function of facts because it reveals the stagnation and dissection of science and, in the process, he also comes to perceive that, in his own personal story, the current facts reveal lying truths. Thus, considering these oxymoronic "fictitious truths" and the impossibility of reconstructing the historian's present as well as the past I reaffirm that "it is at this crossroad that Banville places his interlude to question the "objectivity" of a purely descriptive "historicizing history", and of the dynamic historicism which, according to Adam Schaff in *Fiction and Truth*, implies capturing nature, society and human beings in motion. Historicism leads to the denial of the absolute principles because the historian must relate ideas to historical conditions." (Izarra 1999, pp. 102-103). I fully agree with Hand that Banville is interested in how the past is mediated to us in the present through writing and in the dismantling of "the rigid hierarchical divide between history writing and creative/artistic writing." (p. 26). But, the risk of postmodernism is that it leads us to support blindly Baudrillard's project which, according to Christopher Norris (1990, p. 196), defends that it is no longer possible "to maintain the old economy of truth and representation in a world where "reality" is entirely constructed through forms of mass-media feedback where values are determined by consumer demand (itself brought about by the endless circulation of meanings, images and advertising codes), and where nothing could serve as a means of distinguishing true from merely true-seeming (or ideological) habits of belief." This is a "true" argument, but it is also a sophism because historical "things/events" did happen: while people are being killed at wars, facts are being constructed through mass-media forms that turn them into spectacles of hyper reality accepting the latter as "the real" instead of a product of mediation. The French historian Lucien Febvre says that history is a choice, not an arbitrary but a pre-conceived one, and a historian cannot submit to the facts as though they had not been constructed and selected by him. I cannot help wondering whether this concept or any other dealing with the epistemological aspects of history as science help to reinforce and expand Hand's argument finding out more hidden clues that show how Irish history is mediated in Banville's later novels. Why did Banville choose to write about the scientists' creative processes of discovery in relation to creative writing and the house of supreme fictions, and then move on to "a more intimate arena for his artistic

contemplation"? What present historical facts or cultural debates are "hidden" in his agenda?

A second point that I would like to raise is Hand's reading of *Doctor Copernicus* and *Kepler* as science fiction resorting to Mc Hale's definition of the genre and claiming that it is "the postmodern genre *par excellence*." Hand concludes after a few considerations that the two novels "could be said to share many characteristics with the science fiction genre" (p. 68). Echoing McHale, he says that the juxtaposition of different worlds (the here and now and the projected world of the future) "brings ontological concerns to the fore. [...] Science fiction comments upon the present through a process of estrangement and defamiliarisation. [...] Thus, science fiction becomes a means to both look forward and backward simultaneously". Analogically, Banville "moves into the historical past in order to comment upon the present" (pp. 67-68). Let us say that science fiction is a mode of modern fantasy rooted in ancient myth, mysticism, folklore, fairy tale and romance. Tzvetan Todorov's *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre* (1973) was the first serious critical work about a form of literature, which had been dismissed as frivolous. Todorov represents diagrammatically the changing forms of the fantastic, from the marvelous (with its belief in the supernatural and the magic in genres such as the fairy tale and science fiction) through the purely fantastic (in which no explanation is offered on the facts presented) to the uncanny (which explains all strangeness as generated by unconscious forces). Moreover, in *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*, Rosemary Jackson says that in the nineteenth-century the fantastic began to hollow out the "real" world, making it strange, without providing any explanation for its strangeness (1981, p. 25) and adding that Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) could be considered as the starting point for this literary trend. There is no doubt that science fiction like postmodernist fiction could be considered as the ontological genre *per excellence* due to its subversive and interrogative function. It is subversive because, as it projects the world into the future based on present reality, it produces a sense of estrangement. But McHale quotes Robert Scholes who says, "speculative fabulation [i.e. science fiction] is defined by the presence of at least one clear *representational* discontinuity with life as we know it" (McHale 1987, p. 59). Considering this theoretical background, Banville's tetralogy does not juxtapose the present with the projection of a "brave new world" different from our own. He does not introduce any *novum* either – character, world structure or event – to confront the present or highlight disparities and *representational* discontinuities.

I agree with Hand's statement that Banville rewrites stories of the lives of the scientists to "set up a correspondence between the past and the present" (p. 68) and to show that these books "do deal with history and how it is perceived in the present" (p. 26). Precisely because of this, I believe that the tetralogy should be read as a dialogic encounter between Science and Literature because both fields of knowledge try to validate a "reality" (an experience). Banville deconstructs the illusory antagonism that presents Science and Literature as opposite discursive practices in order to show through narrative

and form that the discourses of science and fiction meet in the field of concepts, in the primacy of imagination and intuition during the process of creation, in the power of persuasion, in the presence of the subjective constituent, in self-referentiality, in the power of metaphor, in the tensions provoked by the social, economic and ideological context, in the formation of knowledge and in its publication. For all these reasons, I cannot agree either with Hand's consideration of *Doctor Copernicus* and *Kepler* as science fiction because "quite simply, they are fictions about science" (p. 69). Banville's tetralogy is not about science nor is it a fictional rewriting of the scientists' lives. Banville explores imaginarily the nature of the scientists' creative processes of discovery and the implications of their discoveries in their ordinary life in order to comprehend his own creative process in the field of fiction. If we accept the idea that history and fiction are human constructions, as already suggested when discussing historical and fictional narratives, and to it we add Banville's own discovery that scientific narratives are also "fictitious truths", the way I defined the tetralogy in the past is still valid. It is, then, "a *trans(ap)parent historiographic metabiofiction* where the past is seen from the present and the limits of biography and fiction are blurred, provoking a tension in the narrative: the biography is articulated as a self-conscious and reflective fiction, transforming the pseudo-historical novel into a *metabiofiction*, and the *transparent*, true facts into *apparent* reality due to the relativity of perception" (Izarra 1999, p. 57).

Just to conclude this essay in a circular way as expressed in its title, let's go back to the beginning. In the introduction, Hand affirms that though Banville has been telling the same story for many years, his artistic achievement is such that he has been able to portray, question and interrogate reality in a fresh and original way. However, he also affirms that though there are variations on the basic tale, "it is the same story nonetheless"; and he ends by saying "Banville's abilities mean that his major concerns are returned to in each of his novels and what can be said of one could, in truth, be said of all" (p. 21). This statement conditions Banville's readers and critics to feel trapped in endless repetitions. Throughout the analyses of the novels, Hand explains in different ways how each end points to another beginning, another attempt at understanding reality and though the result might be a failure there is sometimes "a note of hope". I think that though I can hear the dark strains of Banville's "melody" and atmosphere in the background I would like to recall also Banville's sense of humour and ironic twists in representing "the glorious incoherence of reality" and in writing "the same bloody book again in a different form" although the cliché that we are all actors and wear masks is repeated (Mutran & Izarra 2003, pp. 242, 245). Thus, I challenge "this sense of failure" pointed out by Hand in Banville's work counterpoising his view to the enlightening effect of a derridean *aporia* present in Banville's mythopoetic open endings. Like the fenix being reborn out of the ashes, a repeated story brings about a renewed performance of actors and context. It is the perception of those changes that brings the reader into a state of *aporia* when flashes of partial truths reveal endless understandings of other complex manifestations of the self. Banville believes in the inauthenticity of the self.

According to him, there is no self, no being in the Nietzschean way, there is only becoming (*op. cit.,* p. 244). When referring to *Mefisto*, Banville advocates art as the combination produced by letting darkness mix with light to which he adds: "for artists, letting in the light is probably more problematic. I mean, Felix is a character perhaps of darkness, but he is also, you know, quite skittish and he's quite funny … He's not all evil; he's not all wickedness … He's a lot of fun …" (*op. cit.*). This spiraling quality of the interrogative endings of his novels, where implied answers reverberate, marks the "progression" of Banville's art – "it's a kind of progression from the past to the following one. [...] [B]efore I finish the book, the next book is started in my head" (*op. cit.,* p. 235). This takes us to another level of understanding his fictions as ironic *simulacra* of life. We are not lost in the funhouse, are we?

Derek Hand's *John Banville. Exploring Fictions* is an important contribution to Irish literary studies as it allows readers to perceive this "logical progression". It also challenges us to find the Ariadne's thread that brings us triumphantly out of the labyrinth of Banville's fictions because the novelist has let the light penetrate darkness.

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