Reply to "Endless Beginnings"

Derek Hand

"Endless beginnings" is an appropriate phrase to apply to John Banville's work. It is appropriate too, perhaps, to all those who come to that work and evaluate it critically. After many years reading and studying Banville, and reading and studying the criticism that surrounds Banville's work, it seems to me that any one attempt to "say" or to "know" that work necessarily leads on to other attempts to say and to know: and so it goes on, endlessly. Truth – or a final end – is not, I think, the aim of any reader of Banville's work, nor is it mine. This "reply", then, is testament to that fact which Banville and his characters are so very much aware of, that one text leads inexorably onto other texts.

In general the critical reaction to my intervention into Banvillean studies has been positive. Most reviewers recognise what it was I was attempting to say and do with my book. Some reviewers have disagreed with my approach and this, of course, is to be expected and, indeed, hoped for. Entering into any dialogue necessarily means that not everyone will agree with your point of view. It is right and proper that this is so: the world of ideas would be a very bleak and uninteresting place if we all thought and said the same things.

One particular area that some reviewers, though not Laura Izarra, have had some difficulty with is my positioning of Banville and his work in an Irish context. In doing so I never intended to disallow readings of his work in a European or international context. Quite simply, as a reader and a critic writing from within Ireland, I thought it would be worthwhile and interesting to consider what this writer – who also writes from within the geographic space of Ireland – might have to say about local issues and local concerns. Or, to put it another way, I thought it might be interesting to consider how his ideas might have any local resonance or relevance. I believe that there are many points and ideas within his work that speak directly to the matter of Ireland and, in many ways, illuminate the Irish condition, as his writing illuminates the human condition.

It is quite remarkable that it is still necessary to argue for a postmodern "both/and" approach to Irish writing and culture, rather than the debilitating "either/or" model that sets up an oppositional paradigm between Ireland and the world, tradition and modernity, backwardness and progressiveness. Such thinking is anachronistic at this juncture, despite its long shelf life and its continued existence among certain critics. To read Banville's work as simply confirming the stereotypical view of Ireland as anti-modern and anti-intellectual is to miss the point about the uncertainty at the heart of his

writing. His is a writing that hovers between worlds, between spaces and oppositions. It seems to me to that Banville's characters' struggle toward articulacy and his foregrounding of epistemological and ontological concerns in his work, mirrors the Irish struggle for a voice and an identity in the last 200 years.

History, as Laura Izarra points out, is central to my understanding of Banville's work, especially that work which is set in or deals overtly with Irish concerns. Certainly I agree with her argument that the playful postmodern concept of history as fiction needs to be reimagined in the present moment. In the seemingly more innocent days of High Theory it was possible, perhaps, in Yeatsian terms to simply imagine the world of action and events away: to make them disappear. While this kind of intellectual manoeuvring might not be so acceptable in today's post-September 11th world, it is still pertinent that we continue to probe our understanding of how facts and historical narrative are manipulated. Such understanding is more crucial now than it has ever been.

Without doubt John Banville's difficulties with history are born out of Irish concerns. Certainly, his meditations on history in the novels *Birchwood* and *The Newton Letter* have clear reverberations for Irish culture. Conor McCarthy in his *Modernisation: Crisis and Culture in Ireland 1969-1990* very succinctly makes a claim for Banville's work in relation to the struggles for Irish historical narrative.[1] McCarthy's thesis is that Banville's "history" novels are very much caught up in the debates surrounding the nature of Irish history and the methodologies of Irish history as a subject. That Banville represents characters – and indeed knowledge itself – in crisis is also apposite to the Irish situation, recognising as it does the state of a society and culture in transition. Of course Banville has himself, in numerous interviews and critical statements, denied the Irish element in his work. However, I think it is vital that we keep in mind, as Joseph McMinn argues, how Banville has increasingly created a persona or mask in interviews and critical writings.[2] We should, therefore, be open to "reading" and "interpreting" his comments as we do his fiction. But, on a more mundane note, it is obvious that despite the meticulous control exerted by an author like Banville over his work, there is always room for the unintentional and the unconsciousness on his or her part. And that is the gap that allows for critical engagement.

Laura Izarra asks what might be the reasons for Banville beginning to look at science and scientists, and then abandoning this "big game of the intellect" for more intimate meditations in his later novels. With the perspective of hindsight it could be argued that the kind of "chaos" enacted in *Birchwood* and, as I argue, the loss of authorial control within that novel, perhaps prompted Banville to move away from overtly Irish concerns. It must be remembered that during the 1970's Banville was a copy editor for the Irish Press newspapers. He was witness night after night to the reports of atrocity after atrocity coming out of the North of Ireland. No wonder, then, that he moved away from the all-too-real violence of the present moment, to the relative safety of the distant past. And yet, *Doctor Copernicus* has many relevant passages concerned with the issues of the day: sectarian identity and national violence underpin Nicholas's journeys

throughout Europe. The same could be said of *Kepler*. We might ask whether the past is reflected in the present moment, or whether the present is being reread into the past?

Perhaps it is his Irishness that explains, somewhat, his movement from the "Grande Histoire" of science and history toward the "Petite Histoire" of the intimate and the individual.[3] Just as W.B. Yeats in his great late play *Purgatory*, or in his poem "Politics", declares the end of, and the impossibility of, the continuance of the grand narrative, Banville also realises the need to reconsider the individual human world as against the national world and collective identity that governed so much Irish literature and culture in the past two centuries. Indeed, it might be argued, that it is precisely this tension between ideas of community and the idea of the individual that underpins much of Banville's writing. His characters, to be sure, are isolated and alienated individuals yet all yearn for some kind of connection with others or the other beyond the self. If the word "we" does not reverberate throughout Banville's fictional world, it is a world – even in its absence – which possesses resonance in his writing.

Izarra challenges my remarks concerning Banville's *Doctor Copernicus* and *Kepler* being "science fiction". I agree that Banville's fictional worlds – in the past and the present – do not possess the strict criterion necessary for Brian McHale or Robert Schole's definition of "science fiction". Nevertheless, it does seem to me that in those novels Banville wants to make strange the present by reconfiguring it through the lens of the past, in the same way that science fiction makes the present strange by imagining possible futures.

It is true, too, that a reader will not discover much hard "science" in Banville's tetralogy and, yet, readers will come away with an understanding of both Kepler and Copernicus's theories of the heavens. I have always felt somewhat like Rheticus who can declare that, despite the advent of the Copernican Revolution, "the sky is blue, and shall be forever blue, and the earth shall blossom forever in spring, and this planet shall forever be centre of all we know."[4] What Banville achieves is a humanisation of science: a recognition that from the limited perspective of humankind, science and its conclusions remain, at a certain level, incomprehensible and distant.

Izarra's final call for all of us readers of Banville to keep in mind his own declared sense of irony and humour is fitting. The absurdity of our world and the absurdity of the human sense of authority and importance in the world have long being a central element of Banville's fiction. There is, though, a serious aspect to his constant comic puncturing of our human foibles and affectations. In a world, as we know, increasingly divided between rigid positions – stark yes and no situations and choices; in a world increasingly dominated by people who appear fixedly certain and sure of the moral rightness of their beliefs; in a world increasingly accustomed to using and hearing a language of conviction, belief and faith; in such a world, a writer like John Banville questioning those "certainties" – of moral universalities, of language itself – is not just a luxury but a necessity.

So, the "end" does indeed open up the possibility of many new beginnings. It is that sense of openness, I think, which binds us students of John Banville's work together, forcing us to continue to read and continue to interpret a work that offers "endless beginnings".

Notes

1 See Conor McCarthy. *Modernisation: Crisis and Culture in Ireland 1969-1990.* Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2000, pp. 80-134.

2 Joseph McMinn, "Versions of Banville: Versions of Modernism" in Liam Harte and Michael Parker (Editors. *Contemporary Irish Fiction: Themes, Tropes, Theories*. ondon: Macmillan Press, 2000, pp. 79-99.

3 See Ihab Hassan. The Dismemberment of Orpheus: Toward a Postmodern Literature. (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1982, p. 259ff.

4 John Banville. *Doctor Copernicus.* London: Paladin, 1987, p. 232.