Interview with John Banville

Luiz Marcello Bittencourt

LMB: John Banville, which were the authors and books that were important in the period of your intellectual formation?

J.B.: Well, when I was young, of course I read Joyce, Yeats and Beckett as we all did; not as much as I understood of them, I don't know. But also, perhaps curiously, I read a lot of the English … what I might call of minor novelists of twenties, thirties forties like P. G. Wodehouse, for instance. I read him for the fun of it when I was a child, I mean, because I read many of these children's books; but I also read Graham Greene, Evelyn Waugh, Henry Green, people like that. I'm not quite sure why I read so many of those books but I loved them and I think I learned a lot about English prose style from them, so they were... those books, they were quite formative for me.

LMB: Besides being a writer you are the literary editor of *The Irish Times*. In which way does this intellectual activity feed your fiction?

J.B.: I'm a divided man, I'm a divided self. I've always tried to separate journalism from fiction writing. I think that one must. They are two disciplines entirely different and, I suppose, being a journalist has helped me to form my style, to make my style clearer. And I do believe that it is the writer's duty to be as clear as possible, in the actual sentence. I don't mean that the meaning of the sentence has to be absolutely clear because otherwise it would be rather simplistic, but I'd like to think that a six year old child could read my sentences and understand them, at least automatically, maybe not get the full import of the book or understanding of it. That's important; and I think journalism indeed helped that. But I must emphasize that I never reread written journalism, my written literary book reviews and so forth. But as a journalist I was always a backroom person, I was always an editor. I had an editor once wants me to find what we call sub-editors, we people who edited people's, edited journalist's material. I remember one editor wants me to find the sub-editors, somebody who changes other people's words, and, [...]. somewhat in the dark [...] so that I was a night walker.

LMB: In your novel *Mefisto*, you set up a dialogue with the Faustus' tradition of which Goethe is its main exponent. What relationships would you establish between Gabriel Swan and other protagonists of the Faustus narratives?

J.B.: Somebody once asked Joyce why he used the Homeric parallels in Ulysses and he looked at this person as if this person were simple minded and said, well, it was his way of working, it was a method of working. And I think that the uses that one makes of mythology and of other literature like the Faust legend and the Faust legend as used by Goethe, a reader shouldn't put too much importance on that because, really, as Joyce said, it was a way of working. When I was young in the seventies I wrote two three books about scientists about Copernicus and about Kepler. Everybody thought that I had deep knowledge and deep interest in astronomy and cosmology. I didn't. It was simply a way of not writing hackneyed Irish books, you know, as a way of engaging in the European tradition. Then I wrote a series of books, which were loosely based on the art of painting. People then assumed, you know, here is this polymath; he knows all about painting, he cares deeply about painting. Again, I have no specialised knowledge of these things. These were simply ways of working, of getting the work done. So that the Faustus legend in *Mefisto*, is perhaps not as important as it might seem, it was again, a way of working.

LMB: Your novella *Newton Letter* was transformed into a film for Channel Four. How do you assess that work and what relationships would you point out between literature and cinema?

J.B.: Well, amazing! I'll tell the story I've had before I came to be made because I have written this little novella of 80 pages long at the time it didn't seem it would ever be published; because it was so short; because publishers simply didn't; so I put it away. And then, Channel 4 people in Britain came and said "would you like to write a movie for us". I said well, I've got this novella I can turn it into a script. It has taken me two years to write a book, I was paid under 500 pounds for eventually from the publisher. It took me three days to write the script from it and I was paid for that 12.000 pounds. So, I'm afraid from the monetary point of view, which is what writers think about a great deal, a great deal more than readers imagined that they do, it was very, very interesting. The film didn't really work because I thought the script was quite good. But I regarded film scripts, and I still regard film scripts, as merely a framework on which to build. But, for some reason, the people making the movie kept absolutely faithful to the script, so it's terribly woodened and it doesn't really move quickly enough, you know. If I wrote in, "this character turns and smiles and somebody should know that character should not turn and smile", this is as if it were a mathematical proposition that is being worked out, and it didn't work for that reason. But to give a more general answer, I absolutly love the movies. I think it's the great popular poetry of our time, I think it is the great popular art form. I'm not sure that intellectuals such as I am, I mean, would be intellectuals such as I am, should be let them anyway near the movies. I mean, if... My dream of working..., I'd loved to have worked in the 1940s in the studio system in Hollywood; that seems to me the absolute ideal way for writers to write for movies. The

way we are just commanded, you know, "you've got three days, write the script and it'd better be funny." That's the way I would love to have worked, and I'm still doing film work. I'm trying to work in the popular end. I don't want to write an art movie. Every time I produce, people say: ah, yes, this can be an arthouse movie. Then, I say no, it won't be; this can be a popular movie! And it may seem odd for a hermetic an artist as I am, to want to work in the movies. But I keep remembering T.S. Eliot always wanted to write to Marie Lloyd, who was a musical artist. I think that inside every feet of an intellectual artist there is a vaudevillian, somebody who wants to write carnival.

LMB: In many of your novels you establish a dialogue between literature and science, and other Arts, particularly Painting. Which relations would you establish between literature and music?

J.B.: I would much prefer to have been a composer than a novelist. I mean, that would have been my ambition except that I can't do it. I think that music is very, very important. I think that you have to have a musical ear to write musical prose, but the one peculiar exception to that is Nabokov, Vladimir Nabokov: had an absolute tin ear, he had no ear at all for music as he confessed. He couldn't hear a tune and when you look at the book of prose, you see the evidence of that because his prose is all pictorial. There is no music, the sentences did not move in a melodic way than would in a pictorial, evidential way. But I think he is the exception. I think that most great prose writers and great poets do have a musical ear, and I do think that there is a crossover between the two. I mean, frequently I will, I catch myself, you know, as I'm writing, I catch myself as if chanting the line as I'm writing it, or the sentence, I suppose as I can say, in a musical way, and that's very, very important, and sometimes even find that I've written down a sentence which doesn't mean anything, it's just sound and I have to go back and give it meaning, give it sense while keeping the melody in the background. So yes, music is very, very important to Literature.

LMB: Dialogues have a considerable importance in your stories. Would you say that orality plays an important function in your narrative?

J.B.: If you write a novel you have to use at some point dialogues, of course. But I think that I'm much more given to the monologue. And yes, the oral tradition of course, is very strong in Irish literature all going way back to the bardic tradition; and I'm still enough of the Irish novelists to have something of that oral tradition in my literary blunt. I do find it for me as I said a moment ago when we were talking about musical influences in literature I do find that I have to have the melody almost before I have the sense of the sentence. And it's very important, I mean, rhythm is one of the most important

things in prose and, for instance, if you look at the way in which Joyce uses the paragraph, Joyce is a master of the paragraph but I think he got that from his very deep knowledge in music because what he's doing is this, there's prose paragraphs and there's a sort of melodies, and themes and cadences that he is using. So for me, and as for practically all writers, yes, the oral element is very, very important. I have to hear the thing in my head before I can write it down.

LMB: How do you conceive humour in your narrative?

J.B.: Well I find my books very funny, nobody else seems to find them funny but I consider them to be quite, quite humorous. Of course, a lot of the humour is black and bleak but it's still humour. But I think people are inclined to approach my work as if it's going to be very, very solemn, and this is great pity because I would hate to think that my books were solemn; serious, yes, but not solemn. Celebrity, I think, is the death of art.