

THE HUMAN MOMENT: SELF, OTHER AND SUSPENSION IN JOHN BANVILLE'S *GHOSTS*

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69

She was the single artificer of the world
In which she sang. And when she sang, the sea,
Whatever self it had, became the self
That was her song, for she was the maker.

Wallace Stevens, "The Idea of Order at Key West"

Love is the extremely difficult realisation that something other than one's self is real.
Iris Murdoch

In the course of his narrative in *The Book of Evidence*, Freddie Montgomery poses the question of morality: "I am merely asking, with all respect, whether it is feasible to hold on to the principle of moral culpability once the notion of free will has been abandoned" (16). Thematically speaking, *Ghosts* presents a tentative answer to this question. One part of this answer is that the question itself is wrongly formulated. The question arises out of a Socratic vision of knowledge –i.e., a vision that presupposes the world to be an answerable question– the rejection of which, along with the inability to get beyond, led to the impasse that resulted in Freddie's crime in that novel. The question presupposes the individual as a fundamental psychic unit with an innate capacity for moral judgement, a being wholly adequate to the task of holding on to, or letting go of, principles (which themselves are regarded as having the same fundamental, definite existence), on the basis of whether one

possesses this other clearly-defined substance called “free will”. Such a vision of life was shattered by Nietzsche and *The Book of Evidence* hinted at a more ancient vision, espoused by the pre-Socratics and by mystics of various persuasions. This vision took humankind to be more integrated into the scheme of nature, and ‘sin’, in such a view, meant breaking off from that integration. Integration with nature should not be taken to imply a featureless blending of all life, humanity included, into one great undifferentiated whole. Individuals are still aware of themselves as individuals, and still suffer the same sorrows, joys and –most pertinently for this discussion– guilts as people always have. It is a vision of unity that encompasses multiplicity because it recognises the reality of things other than one’s self, while simultaneously recognising that it is the human imagination that conveys that reality, or creates it by giving it form, by, to quote from an earlier Banville novel, “disposing the commonplace, the names, in a beautiful and orderly fashion” (1976: 240). It is a vision that is both centred and decentred: centred in the imagination, and decentred in the recognition that this imagination lays down no laws and knows itself to be only one half of a whole –multifarious phenomena being the other half. This vision may today only exist as an absence, but it is no less vibrant and essential for that. This is the story that is hinted at throughout *Ghosts*, and it gains its power from the extent of Freddie’s guilt, and the pain of the psychic exile he suffers because of that guilt. His crime, as he has admitted, was a failure of imagination, a failure to realise that something –or in this case, someone– other than himself was real.¹ Now he must use the powers of his imagination to try and put that right. It is no longer a case of ‘principles’ or notions of ‘free will’. These are concepts, linguistic constructs, and belong intrinsically to a view of life that separates humankind fundamentally from its environment. Freddie’s torment is a fundamental, pre-linguistic yearning to be part of the world; his tragedy is that what has brought him to such an acute awareness of this condition –the act of murder– has virtually guaranteed the permanence of his exile.

At first sight, the pain of this exile seems to present a contradiction. If Banville’s novels take the view that the centred self of the Enlightenment is an illusion, what –or who– is feeling such pain? Freddie, at one point, refers to himself as a pack of cards, a whole selection of selves (26-27). His pain, however, would seem to underlie all this. Is this pain not evidence of an essential self? Similarly, on a broad philosophical front, if the idea of the decentred self is to be anything more than an abstract notion, then it must be *felt* by individuals. As Freddie himself puts it, “True, there is no getting away from the passionate attachment to self, that I-beam set down in the dead centre of the world and holding the whole rickety edifice in place” (26). But for Freddie, this ‘self’ is no more than a site of pain. In its intense awareness of its own isolation from the world, it is the very opposite of a true sense of self, one that is *present* in the world, an integral part of the world in the pre-

Socratic sense. The paradox is that the lack of reality felt so intensely by Freddie manifests itself in an acutely painful self-obsession, an obsession that in fact prevents him from seeing the reality of the world. Language, that solid Cartesian arbiter of the real, is useless to him: "To choose one word was to exclude countless others, they thronged out there in the darkness, heaving and humming. When I tried to mean one thing the buzz of a myriad other possible meanings mocked my efforts" (27). This is why the novel, as its title suggests, is a book full of absences, longings, *ghosts*. And this, in turn, highlights one of the work's most intriguing suggestions: that imagination and ethics may be inseparable, and that both may be intrinsic, perhaps even anterior, to the self;² may, in fact, be the essential criteria for the creation of the self, the self that belongs, integrally, to the world, the self that Freddie longs for. Seen thus, Freddie's vivid imagination is both his curse and his only possibility of salvation. His dilemma is a heightened and concentrated version of the existential dilemma that is common to modern Western civilisation: what does it mean to live authentically, and how is this authenticity to be achieved? The sin of living inauthentically that has troubled philosophers down through the ages, is the eternal displacement of humanity between imagination, which occasionally affords glimpses of an impossible wholeness, a lost home that we never had, and the isolated ego stranded in the desert of self-importance.³ By exploring this dilemma through the mind of a murderer with an intense interest in such questions (an interest, in fact, largely born of his crime), Banville grounds the metaphysics in felt life and avoids the etiolation that might follow from too obviously postmodern a treatment of such ideas. At the same time, he has constructed a novel that could hardly be further from conventional realism, with its certainties of self and world and language.

The ensuing essay will explore these ideas along four inter-related strands: the interplay between imagination and quotidian reality (always a salient feature of Banville's fiction, and particularly so in *Ghosts*), the use of painting versus narrative as a metaphor for this interplay, the divided self and, arising out of these elements, the idea of anticipation, of suspension, and how this serves as a basis for art and as a tentative bridge between the reality Freddie lives in and the one he longs for. The narrative mode of *The Book of Evidence* tempted readers to take it as a realistic story while simultaneously undermining such inclinations through Freddie's frequent hints that his tale was largely invention. *Ghosts* takes this ambiguity a stage further. A brief outline of the structure will clarify this. The novel divides into four parts. Part One sees Freddie on an island somewhere off the south coast of Ireland working as an assistant to the art expert, Professor Silas Kreutznaer, and sharing a house with Kreutznaer and his manservant-landlord, Licht. (Freddie is never actually named but it becomes clear who he is when he recounts the murder that occasioned *The Book of Evidence*. The lack of a name only adds to his ghost-like status.) He

invents/ describes a disparate group of day-trippers arriving on the island and proceeds to chart their thoughts and actions throughout the day, concentrating particularly on a young woman named Flora. Part Two consists of a flashback and recounts Freddie's release from prison, his journey south in the company of a fellow ex-convict, Billy (first mentioned in the closing pages of the previous novel), a brief stop-off at Coolgrange, his family home, where he has an accidental encounter with his son, and finally, his arrival on the island. Part Three is a short, in-depth examination of a painting by Vaublin, the fictional painter (modelled on Watteau) whom Freddie is working on with Kreuznaer, and part Four recounts the visitors, minus Flora (and possibly one other), leaving the island.

The chief ambiguity lies in the status of the day-trippers whose doings take up the bulk of Part One, which itself takes up over half the novel. Right from the start, the narrator, Freddie, hints that he is inventing them: "Here they are. There are seven of them. Or better say, half a dozen or so, that gives more leeway" (3). The leeway is needed so that the figures can more adequately perform the task for which they have come into existence: to make Freddie himself real. As the novel proceeds it becomes evident that they have their source in the painting that Freddie is working on, *Le monde d'or*, by Vaublin (a near-anagram of Banville). But, as readers, we find we cannot quite settle comfortably here, either. Part Two of the novel harks back, in style, to the realism of *The Book of Evidence*, where our comfort zone is only vaguely threatened (as, for instance, when Freddie rings his wife from a Dublin pub and remarks, "My wife. What shall I call her this time –Judy?" [160]). This section of the novel ends with the introduction to Kreuznaer and Licht on the island, which thus ties these characters into the realistic strand. In Part One, however, these 'realistic' figures interact 'realistically' with figures who appear to be figments of Freddie's imagination. In one particularly significant passage, Freddie both describes what is happening and gives a sense of the terrible longing that underlies this blending of real and imaginary:

Worlds within worlds. They bleed into each other. I am at once here and there, then and now, as if by magic. I think of the stillness that lives in the depths of mirrors. It is not our world that is reflected there. It is another place entirely, another universe, cunningly made to mimic ours. Anything is possible there; even the dead may come back to life. Flaws develop in the glass, patches of silvering fall away and reveal the inhabitants of that parallel, inverted world going about their lives all unawares. And sometimes the glass turns to air and they step through it without a sound and walk into *my* world. Here comes Sophie now, barefoot, still with her leather jacket over her shoulders, and time shimmers in its frame. (55)⁴

The effect of all this ambiguity is to heighten the sense of suspension that pervades the book, to make the reader feel, as the painting makes Freddie feel, that it all has

some great significance beyond explanation. If the significance is beyond explanation, then it is beyond the reach of human consciousness, in so far as that term is understood in the Cartesian sense. From where, then, does the significance arise? The sense of suspension, in that it seems a suspension of, and an anticipation of, something *real*, thus calls into question what we mean by reality. Is reality what we perceive in the quotidian sense, or is it what we perceive most intensely? The difference between these two modes of perception is, in one sense, simply one of degree, but it also reflects two fundamentally different outlooks on life: the Cartesian outlook which says the world is simply *there*, and what you see –and label– is what you get; and the pre-Socratic outlook which says in effect that reality is an on-going creation, a bargain between phenomena and imagination. From a rational point of view, this is an indefensible statement, and must call on the poets for justification. It is the gist of Rilke's *Duino Elegies*, lines from which are often quoted by Banville as echoing his own artistic project. Wallace Stevens is saying something similar in the lines quoted at the head of this chapter, as he is, too, in the poem, "Large Red Man Reading", the opening line of which Banville uses as an epigraph for *Ghosts*. Mystics may not need art, since the world itself is their plaything, but for lesser mortals, art is, or tries to be, the keeping of this bargain between phenomena and imagination; tries to be, as Stevens puts it elsewhere, "A tune beyond us, yet ourselves" ("The Man with the Blue Guitar" I.8).

Freddie's hunger to partake of this exchange is in direct proportion to the extent of his exile from it. Characters in his life, characters in his imagination –they are all ghosts to Freddie, because Freddie is himself a ghost. But he needs them desperately, they are his only way back to life. As he charts the thoughts and feelings and actions of his little troupe, it becomes clear how they are all projections of his inner demons and longings. Sophie finds a true sense of reality only through her art: "Things for her were not real any longer until they had been filtered through a lens" (56), just as for Freddie things are not real until they are seen through the prism of art. When she muses on lying in a little room at the top of the house, it might be Freddie speaking (it *is* Freddie speaking): "To be there, to be inconsequential; to forget herself, even for a little while; to stop, to be still; to be at peace" (57). This is reminiscent of Freddie speaking of certain blessed moments of forgetfulness: "It is like being new-born. At such moments I glimpse a different self, as yet unblackened, ripe with potential, a sort of radiant big infant swaddled in shining light" (68). Flora's dream of finding safety behind a mask (64) reflects Freddie's own thoughts on the subject (196-98). Licht says to Alice: "'Do you ever think,' he said softly, 'that you are not here? Sometimes I have the feeling that I have floated out of myself, and that what's here, standing, talking, is not me at all'" (107-8). And Freddie says at one point, "I think to myself, *My life is a ruin, an*

abandoned house, a derelict place" (54). Even little Alice reflects a yearning that is pure Freddie: "She is in love with Flora; in her presence she has a sense of something vague and large and bright, a sort of painful rapture that is all the time about to blossom yet never does" (102).

As mentioned, the purpose of these creations is to make Freddie real. But what can this possibly mean? How can creating imaginary characters help give him a sense of reality? Again, this is the wrong question. One effect of the ambiguities that pervade *Ghosts* is a suspension of the reader's natural inclination to see Freddie as a 'real' character, and to keep in mind that while telling the story, he is also part of a larger story, and as much a puppet in that story as any of his own characters are to him. A brief look at one of the novel's recurring motifs may bring this into focus. The sense of suspension created by the ambiguity as to what is real and what imaginary finds a thematic corollary in Freddie's sense of himself as being important, of being in some sense needed, despite his self-loathing. This feeling is a life-line for him throughout. First, there is his memory of a room in the house in which he was born, which Freddie refers to as a "recurring image" and, significantly, "one of a handful of emblematic fragments from the deep past that seem mysteriously to constitute something of the very stuff of which I am made" (39). What follows is a description of a quiet summer's afternoon where,

74

Nothing happens, nothing will happen, yet everything is poised, waiting, a chair in the corner crouching with its arms braced, the coiled fronds of a fern, that copper pot with the streaming sunspot on its rim. This is what holds it all together and yet apart, this sense of expectancy, like a spring tensed in mid-air and sustained by its own force, exerting an equal pressure everywhere. And I, I am there and not there: I am the pretext of things, though I sport no thick gold wing or pale halo. Without me there would be no moment, no separable event, only the brute, blind drift of things. That seems true; important, too. (Yes, it would appear that after all I am indeed required.) (40)

When he takes up gardening, he finds something similar, if more tangible:

I have the notion, foolish, I know, that it is because of me that they cling on, that my ministrations, no, simply my presence gives them heart somehow, and makes them live. Who or what would there be to notice their struggles if I did not come out and walk among them every day? It must mean something, being here. I am the agent of individuation: in me they find their singularity. (98)

Finally, at the end of Part 2, he imagines the arrival of the band of castaways and then segues into a short musing on the painting with which they are intimately connected: "The figures move, if they move, as in a moving scene, one that they define, by being there, its arbiters. Without them only the wilderness, green riot,

tumult of wind and the crazy sun. They formulate the tale and people it and give it substance. They are the human moment" (222).

A progression of sorts can be discerned here. The first instance involves a distant memory; the second, tangible phenomena; the third, people. And in the third, significantly, it is not he himself holding the wilderness and green riot together, but others, albeit others as imagined by Freddie. These others are figures in a painting which he then proceeds to describe, and this description provides the strongest indication yet that the 'real' figures with whom we have been engaged in Part One are figments of Freddie's imagination drawn from this painting. Then we recall that the memory of the sunlit room recounted in the passage above is prompted by his first coming into physical contact with the castaways (who don't exist, so how can he...?— the mind would boggle, were it not suspended). Worlds within worlds, bleeding into each other—memory, imagination, perception— indicating that the true source, the *reality* of things, can never be pinpointed, or settled into a safe hierarchy, by virtue of the fact that there must always be someone, or something, doing the pinpointing, arranging the hierarchy, which leaves us always back in the world of self-division. "What you are looking for is what is looking", as St. Francis has it (Smoley 2002: v), and, like a dog chasing its tail, as long as one is looking for this essential thing, one is never going to find it because what it is, is one's self *in relation with* the world. It is to be lived in rather than looked for. We are the "pretext of things", the pre-text—we sing the world into being, like Stevens's woman singing the sea's reality. "The unexamined life is not worth living", Socrates said. By contrast, Banville's fictional heart would seem to lie with the pre-Socratics, and might reply, The unexamined life is the *only* life worth living. But living and writing as he is in a Socratic/ Cartesian world, this unexamined state is one that can be attained to only through intense examination, the futility of which must be fully lived to be fully realised. This describes a trajectory familiar to Banville protagonists from *Birchwood's* Gabriel Godkin to *Mefisto's* Gabriel Swan. Eliot catches the idea in these lines from "Little Gidding": "We shall not cease from exploration/ And the end of all our exploring/ Will be to arrive where we started/ And know the place for the first time" (239-42).

This question of knowledge and its shortcomings brings us to what is perhaps the most pervasive motif of *Ghosts*: that of mirrors, doubles and copies. The novel abounds in things, in people, that are not quite what they seem to be. Even the painting that so obsesses Freddie turns out in the end to be a fake, a copy. Even Vaublin, it seems, has had a double. What is it, then, that is missing? What would constitute the real thing, and how would one recognise it as such?

At the heart of the question lies the dilemma of self-division. As mentioned, Freddie is self-obsessed to the point of madness, and it is this self-obsession that

prevents him seeing the world as real, from communicating with it; that drains it of colour so that, as for Hamlet, life is “weary, stale, flat and unprofitable”. Self-obsession goes hand-in-hand with self-division: a self looking, a self being looked at. The self looking –the Cartesian ‘I’– is what prevents the contract between imagination and phenomena taking place. Not surprisingly, Freddie’s moment of breakthrough occurs when this normally shrill voice is momentarily lulled –early morning, when the mind is still sleepy, is working, as Freddie says, “on its own terms, as if it were independent of me, as if in the night it had broken free of its moorings and I had not yet hauled it back to shore” (146). The moment occurs at the close of Part One, when Flora and, in her wake, the world, suddenly become real for him:

And as she talked I found myself looking at her and seeing her as if for the first time, not as a gathering of details, but all of a piece, solid and singular and amazing. No, not amazing. That is the point. She was simply there, an incarnation of herself, no longer a nexus of adjectives but pure and present noun. [...] And somehow by being suddenly herself like this she made the things around her be there too. [...] It was as if she had dropped a condensed drop of colour into the water of the world and the colour had spread and the outlines of things had sprung into bright relief. As I sat with my mouth open and listened to her I felt everyone and everything shiver and shift, falling into vividest forms, detaching themselves from me and my conception of them and changing themselves instead into what they were, no longer figment, no longer mystery, no longer a part of my imagining. (147)⁵

76

Intriguingly, however, this hugely significant moment ends on a question mark, with Freddie wondering, “And I, was I there amongst them, at last?” (147)

There can be no answer because here language has reached its limit. Beyond this is where the ‘I’ finally becomes real by finally disappearing. (This is another thoroughly meaningless statement from the point of view of discursive philosophy. It can be justified, though, if seen as a reflection of the paradoxes that suffice Banville’s work, and also, in light of the mystical slant of this essay, of the *modus operandi* of apophatic language, the mode of writing with which mystics attempt to say the unsayable. As with such language, the statement is not so much an expression of a presence, as an echo of an absence. Anne-Marie Priest paraphrasing Shira Wolosky may be helpful here: “Wolosky argues that in mystical texts, language is not that which reveals truth but a ‘veil’ drawn across its face: it does not reveal what is hidden, but it reveals that something is. Like a kind of buoy, it marks the place of submersion” (2000: 8). Interestingly, Priest’s essay is on Henry James, a writer close to Banville’s heart. This is the absence that Freddie has longed for throughout. He cannot explain it (that is, Banville cannot allow him to explain it) because that would reduce the work to the level of discursive philosophy, a mode

of speech that believes in its own powers of truth-telling. Freddie's question is the last point short of Wittgenstein's "whereof we cannot speak, thereof we must be silent" (this is the phrase with which, it will be remembered, Gabriel Godkin ends his narrative in *Birchwood*). Philosophy must, perhaps, be silent, but art and apophatic discourse are two ways of speaking –the one predominantly secular, the other religious– that can profitably hover around this unsayable but compelling absence. *Ghosts* strongly calls to mind two quotations from the French mystic philosopher, Simone Weil: "God can be present in creation only under the form of absence" (1947: 109) and,

All the things that I see, hear, breathe, touch, eat; all the beings I meet –I deprive the sum total of all that of contact with God, and I deprive God of contact with all that in so far as something in me says 'I [...] May I disappear in order that those things that I see may become perfect in their beauty from the very fact that they are no longer things that I see. (1947: 41-42)

The disappearance of the 'I', or better say, the disappearance of the 'I' looking at the 'I', is the dissolving of self-division. One of the beauties of Banville's fiction is the oblique and quirky manner in which he manages to convey something of this paradoxically longed-for absence. Think of that moment in *Doctor Copernicus* when Nicolas, after visiting his dying uncle, takes a walk in the garden and describes his sense of the world about him: "An extraordinary stealthy stillness reigned, as if an event of great significance were waiting for him to be gone so that it could occur in perfect solitude" (119). In connection with *Ghosts*, the point about this sentence and the image it evokes, is that it is only through the human imagination that it achieves whatever reality it has. The event may want to occur in perfect solitude (to take it literally for a moment), but if it does, can it be said to occur at all? Does not the word "occur" refer specifically to the human side of this event? (If a tree falls in the forest...) Take that away and what is left is, as Freddie here says, "no moment, no separable event, only the brute, blind drift of things" (40).

So the 'I' is important, but only in so far as it remains suspended ("like a spring tensed in mid-air and sustained by its own force"), only in so far as it can refrain from defining the world around it. We have seen how, at the pivotal point of the novel, when Flora begins to speak and the fog of self-obsession lifts from before Freddie's eyes, the moment is left on a question. It must be, because it is stepping into an absence that descriptive language cannot intrude upon without destroying. The self-division bedeviling Freddie has plagued his life. In *The Book of Evidence*, he recalls a farmhouse where he went as a child to buy apples and relates how the memory is more real than was the actual visit: "In such remembered moments I am there as I never was at Coolgrange, as I seem never to have been, or to be, anywhere, at any time, as I, or some essential part of me, was not there even on

that day I am remembering, the day I went to buy apples from the farmer's wife, at that farm in the midst of the fields" (1989: 56). The problem appears to be an inability of the imagination and reality to co-exist. Marcel, the narrator of Proust's masterpiece, says: "Time after time during the course of my life, reality had disappointed me, because at the moment I perceived it, my imagination, the only organ by which I could enjoy beauty, could not reach it, out of submission to the inevitable law that says that one can imagine only what is absent" (Shattuck 1999: 40). Proust found an answer of sorts in the idea of involuntary memory. Wallace Stevens's aphorism, "In the presence of extraordinary actuality, consciousness takes the place of imagination" (1959: 165), suggests a kind of shock tactic, so to speak, on the part of phenomena. In *Ghosts*, Banville seems to suggest that anticipation, suspension, can have a similar effect.

The idea has its precursors. Jorge Luis Borges has written: "Music, states of happiness, mythology, faces worn by time, certain twilights and certain places, all want to tell us something, or have told us something we shouldn't have lost, or are about to tell us something; that imminence of a revelation as yet unproduced is, perhaps, the aesthetic fact" (1999: 346). Vladimir Nabokov is of a similar mind:

78

Literature was born not the day when a boy crying wolf, wolf came running out of the Neanderthal valley with a big gray wolf at his heels: literature was born on the day when a boy came crying wolf, wolf and there was no wolf behind him. [...] Between the wolf in the tall grass and the wolf in the tall story there is a shimmering go-between. That go-between, that prism, is the art of literature. (1980: 5)

A state of suspension naturally activates the imagination –what is about to happen?– but it is not revelling in a distant memory separate from the reality taking place in the here and now, as is Freddie's memory of the farmhouse. Proust's involuntary memory overcame this separation between now and then, here and there, in that, being involuntary, it was something that *happened*, not something that was consciously sought. Anything that is consciously sought, whether achieved or not, comes laden with self-division because it is, of its nature, laden with self-awareness. It is what Beckett calls "the mock-reality of experience [which] never can and never will reveal [...] the real" (1965: 33). By contrast, something that happens constitutes an *event* in the Lyotardian sense of that word: "To encounter an event is like bordering on nothingness. No event is at all accessible if the self does not renounce the glamour of its culture, its wealth, health, knowledge and memory" (1988: 18). Perhaps Bill Readings's definition of the term may clarify this: "The event disrupts any pre-existing frame within which it might be represented or understood. The eventhood of the event is the radical *singularity* of happening, the 'it happens' as distinct from the sense of 'what is happening' (1991: xxxi). What this event entails is a momentary suspension of self-awareness, a momentary

suspension of the conceptual split between self and world, and thus a momentary healing of self-division.

This healing is what Freddie longs for, and the longing is what powers the creation of his motley group of castaways. In the painting that is their source, Vaublin's *Le monde d'or*, he finds elusive hints telling of that mysterious state of absence that so compels him: "He is the painter of absences, of endings. His scenes all seem to hover on the point of vanishing" (35). This chimes with Freddie's oft-expressed wish not to be, or at least, not to be a self-conscious being: "Not to be. Not to be at all. Deep down, deep beyond dreaming, have I ever desired anything other than that consummation?" (182). (An interesting use of the word 'consummation', this, indicating that the state of nothingness, of oblivion, that he seeks is more rather than less. The Shorter OED defines the word thus: "The action of perfecting; the condition of full development; acme; a desired end or goal".) He wishes he could just blend into the natural world around him: "I thought sometimes at moments such as this that I might simply drift away and become a part of all that out there, drift and dissolve, be a shimmer of light slowly fading into nothing" (38).

This last wish recalls one of those remembered moments from boyhood that remain in Freddie's memory as islands of perfection in a choppy sea of time and self-division. He is on a small boat with his friend, Horse, at a point where the river meets the sea and for a moment they are "halted and held motionless on the unmoving water in the midst of a golden calm":

Nothing happened. We just stayed there for that minute, poised between sea and sky, suspended somehow as if in air, no, not air, but some other, unearthly element, and it seemed to me I had never known such happiness, and never would again, though happiness is not the word, not the word at all. That is where I would like to live, on some forgotten strip of sandy shore, with my back to the land, facing out into the limitless ocean. That would be freedom, watching in solitude the days pass, marking the seasons, observing the spring tides and the autumn auroras, weathering the summer sun and the storms of winter. Pure existence, pure existence and nothing else. (202)

This is very close to what Freddie finds in the painting; even the language used is similar: "poised", "suspended", "unearthly element". What is absent from these pictures is the flow of time, and this is the source of their attraction for him, as he spells out in the closing passage of Part Three, where he describes the painting in detail:

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 as 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. (231)

G. E. Lessing's *Laocoon* argues that poetry, because of the sequential nature of language, is the natural medium for expressing action, which can only occur in the medium of time. Painting, by contrast, through its necessary concentration on a single moment, is the perfect medium for conveying a timeless aesthetic beauty. What Banville manages to convey in *Ghosts* is a fusion (or perhaps a *confusion*) of these modes. The structure of the novel renders it the most static of Banville's narratives. Numerous commentators have pointed out that the description of the painting as "a masterpiece of pure composition, of the architectonic arrangement of light and shade, of earth and sky, of presence and absence" (227) reflects the structure of the novel itself. On the other hand, the stasis that is fundamental to painting is here shot through with the suggestion of movement. The tension thus created, in both novel and painting, gives rise to something that is neither movement nor stillness, but something in between that seems to partake of both. We have seen that when these figures are brought from their enchanted world of art into the real world of consciousness and self-division, the world of time, they become mere echoes of Freddie's own torments. For the reader, on the other hand, they partake of both states. We realise that they are figments of Freddie's imagination, but nevertheless, they are presented on the page as living, breathing characters with inner lives, pasts and futures, and the conventions of fiction dictate that they must be so taken. William Kelly has remarked, in a review of *Mefisto*, "In fiction [...] nothing can ever be struck off the record" (1987: 12). The convention dictating that they are real, and Freddie revealing that they are not, together result in a structural suspension which echoes the thematic suspension pervading the novel. No settled result can ever be accomplished. The suspension is itself the artistic result sought for, just as, within the fictional world of the novel, a suspension from self-division is the result sought by Freddie. And though he can never describe the experience of such a suspension, the mere telling of his story has been a form of healing. He seems to end on a negative note: "Some incarnation this is. I have achieved nothing, nothing. I am what I always was, alone as always, locked in the same old glass prison of myself" (236), and as to Felix, the personification throughout of his dark double, there is to be "[n]o riddance of him" (244). But there are glimmerings of light to be discerned in the gloom. For one thing, there is a distinct improvement in the mood of the castaways from what it had been at the time of their arrival. Then, they were "squabbling, complaining, wanting sympathy, wanting to be elsewhere. That, most of all: to be elsewhere"

(3). Wanting to be elsewhere is, of course, the fundamental characteristic of self-division. They leave, by contrast, with a sense of peace: "A moth reeled out of the gloaming and there was a sense of something falling and failing and I seemed to feel the faint dust of wings sifting down. The god takes many forms" (241).

The god takes many forms. One of them, it might be said, is the writing of fiction. We can see here the intimate connection between ethics and imagination (again, understanding ethics here less as a set of strictures than as a sense of reverence towards the world and a recognition of its otherness). In effect, the terms are synonymous. True imagination, seeing things *as they are*, is realising that "something other than one's self is real", and, as Iris Murdoch has it, it is a form of love. Tony Jackson has pointed out (531) how Freddie's realisation of Flora's essential otherness, and the way in which this allows the world to suddenly become real for him, finds its precursor in *Doctor Copernicus*, when the ghost of Nicolas's brother, Andreas, tells him of "that thing which is all that matters, which is the great miracle. [...] Call it acceptance, call it love if you wish, but these are poor words, and express nothing of the enormity" (1976: 241). (Cf. Freddie in *Ghosts*: "happiness is not the word, not the word at all" [202].) Kepler had a similar insight: "What was it the Jew said? Everything is told us, but nothing explained. Yes. We must take it all on trust. That's the secret. How simple!" (Banville 1981: 191).⁶

But such words, alone, "express nothing of the enormity". Like Priest's buoy, they simply "mark the place of submersion". In an essay on Watteau, the painter that Banville's Vaublin is clearly modelled on, Norman Bryson says that "Watteau's form is the *koan* –the question without closure" (74).⁷ This is true also of Banville. In *Ghosts*, words have referents, as all words do, but because the status of these referents is seriously called into question –in particular, the status of the characters Freddie invents/describes– the whole is held in an eerie state of suspension, neither one thing nor the other. Eternally undecidable, and perhaps for that very reason, eternally captivating, hinting at "unaccountable significance that is disproportionate to any possible programme or hidden discourse" (227). It is all about asking the questions in the right way. To ask questions in this right way is the job of art, and if done with sufficient skill, the questions will be, not answered –that would be a failure of the wrong kind altogether– but brought to such a pitch of intensity in the reader's mind as to bypass the normal mode of consciousness whereby questions, posed in language, presuppose –and receive– answers, also posed in language, which, of course, are not really answers at all but, as Derrida would have it, endlessly deferred signifiers. This is why painting is such a useful metaphor for Banville, particularly a painting such as *Le monde d'or* is described as being, a painting full of the kind of suspension and anticipation and undecidability that pervade the novel itself. The questioning, when seen eventually to be futile (in the

sense of attaining to answers), gives way to a more meditative frame of mind, and the essence of this meditative frame of mind is an absence of language and, as a corollary of this, a temporary suspension of the sense of self that normally depends on such language for its own sense of being. This is what we saw with Copernicus and Kepler and Gabriel Swan. Their questioning minds, having finally beaten themselves silly, gave in and allowed their owners to see what had been staring them in the face all along –the world, “myriad and profligate” (Banville 1981: 191). So, too, with Freddie as he waits patiently for grace. There is a hint of this when he says, with regard to the castaways: “Company, that was what we wanted, the brute warmth of the presence of others to tell us we were alive after all, despite appearances” (39). The theologian, Martin Buber, has written, “All real living is meeting” (25). Buber’s theology sees human experience as expressing two different attitudes to life which he denotes by the word-compounds *I-It* and *I-Thou*. These correspond closely to the conflicting views that form the basic thematic tension in Banville’s fiction. The *I-It* attitude is the Enlightenment faith in the supremacy of the individual consciousness to which the world is a place apart, a thing to be known and used; the *I-Thou* stance, on the other hand, sees the world as a place consisting of an equal reality to one’s self and therefore to be met with on equal terms. This is not something that can simply be decided and then acted upon; it is something that has to *happen*, in the sense that I have used that word earlier in this essay. It happens for Freddie, momentarily, when Flora begins to speak, and this, momentary though it is, constitutes a true advance. Normally, Freddie inhabits a decentred world, but only in the despairing sense that feels this decentredness as a tragedy; what he yearns to reach is the sense of a decentred world that is accepting, one which is perhaps delineated by Pascal’s sphere: “God is a circle whose centre is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere” (Borges 1999: 352). A hunger for the sense of reality that these words evoke is what drives Freddie Montgomery. In *The Book of Evidence*, it drove him to murder; in *Ghosts*, in the struggles of his “poor, swollen conscience” (22) to come to terms with his act, it teeters on the brink of being assuaged. It never can be, wholly –that is, any description of such a redemption would be an act of artistic bad faith, a shooting beyond the tangible⁸– but in structuring his novel to echo the confusions and yearnings of its protagonist, Banville comes as close as language can get to evoking that nothingness “whereof we cannot speak”, and which his Newton of *The Newton Letter* realised “automatically signifi[e]d the everything” (31).

Notes

¹. Elke d'Hoker makes the valid point that Freddie's failure is an ethical rather than an imaginative one, pointing out that just prior to the murder, Josie Bell becomes vividly, astonishingly real to him, and Freddie himself muses over the moment in *Ghosts* (86). It will be part of my purpose in this essay to argue that, in Banville's fiction, and particularly in the art trilogy, ethics and imagination are the same thing; the failure of one is the failure of the other (in both senses of the word 'other').

². I follow the trend in modern ethical criticism in using the term 'ethical' to suggest a generic recognition of, and openness to, the reality of others and otherness, as opposed to 'morality', which implies a particular set of rules and strictures.

³. The condition is evocatively described by Flann O'Brien in *At-Swim-Two-Birds* as "a huddle between the earth and heaven" (216), and the character in that novel to whom this condition is ascribed, Sweeny, occupies it for the same reason as Freddie does in *Ghosts*—he has estranged himself from the world through an act of murder. And like Freddie, he assuages his pain through art, in his case, singing.

⁴. Mirrors are a recurring motif in Banville's work. Recall Gabriel Godkin's words in *Birchwood* about "that second silent world which exists, independent, ordered by unknown laws, in the depths of mirrors" (1973: 21). *The Newton Letter* has a mirror-like construction, with the narrator leaving Ferns in a mirror-image of his arrival: "On the train I travelled into a mirror. There it all was, the backs of the houses, the drainpipes, a cloud out on the bay, just like the first time, only in reverse order" (1982: 88). And *Mefisto* is a book of two halves, one half mirroring the other.

⁵. I will have occasion later in this essay to propose certain similarities between Banville's thinking, as I interpret it here, and the mystic philosophy of the Jewish

theologian, Martin Buber. For now, I would simply highlight a remarkable resonance between the passage from *Ghosts* just quoted and the following paragraphs from Buber's *I and Thou*. Buber divines two basic attitudes to life which he defines by the two word-compounds, *I-It* and *I-Thou*. In Banville's passage Freddie, to use these terms, has moved from an *I-It* position to one of *I-Thou*:

If I face a human being as my *Thou*, and say the primary word *I-Thou* to him, he is not a thing among things, and does not consist of things.

This human being is not *He* or *She*, bounded from every other *He* and *She*, a specific point in space and time within the net of the world; nor is he a nature able to be experienced and described, a loose bundle of named qualities. But with no neighbour, and whole in himself, he is *Thou* and fills the heavens. This does not mean that nothing exists except himself. But all else lives in *his* light. (21)

⁶. Banville's novels frequently allude to their predecessors, but both *Doctor Copernicus* and *Kepler* are echoed with particular clarity in one scene of the present novel, when Flora and Licht go up into Professor Kreutznaer's tower. "Everything tended upwards here", Flora thinks (106); "All tended upward here", is Copernicus's impression as he climbs Canon Wodka's tower (1976: 25). Licht begins to tell her of the Emperor Rudolf, a character who played a significant part in Kepler's life. Alice feels as if she has been given to hold, and to mind, "a sort of bowl or something" (106), which "felt as if it were brimming over with some precious, volatile stuff" (109). The imagery and the language recall the opening of *Kepler*, when the astronomer dreams "the solution to the cosmic mystery", and "holds it cupped in his mind as in his hands he would a precious something of unearthly frailty and splendour"

(1981: 3). As if to clinch the matter, Banville ends one paragraph written in the third person and describing this episode with the words, "I have been here before" (109).

⁷. Tony Jackson points out that Bryson's interpretation of Watteau closely resembles Banville's reading of Vaublin: "If Banville has not actually read Bryson's distinctly postmodern interpretation, he nonetheless writes an interpretation of which Bryson would certainly approve" (1997: 523).

⁸. I allude to Yeats's "Per Amica Silentia Lunae", wherein he distinguishes between the saint and the artist: "I think that we who are poets and artists, not being permitted to shoot beyond the tangible, must go from desire to weariness and so to desire again, and live but for the moment when vision comes to our weariness like terrible lightning, in the humility of the brutes" (1934: 340).

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The Human Moment: Self, Other and Suspension in John Banville's *Ghosts*

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