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Science, Art, and the Shipwreck of Knowledge: The Novels of John Banville

The novels of Irish writer John Banville make for uncommonly rich reading. His fictional fabrics are always finely textured, often movingly poetic, threading together various narrative styles and genres. Because he is a very literate writer (he is the literary editor of the *Irish Times*), his pages abound with allusions to other great literature. At times his writing is straightforwardly realistic, at times surreal, at all times extremely well crafted: repeated visits to his books only increase our awareness of the subtle and complex figures woven into the mesh of his stories. There are many interpretive considerations that could be (and no doubt will be) made of Banville's work. Here I will examine one of the major concerns in his last several novels: the situation of living everyday life in the context of postmodern understandings of knowledge and truth.

The term "postmodernism" can be defined in many ways. For my purposes here it has to do with certain ideas about knowledge, truth, and desire that have become common in the twentieth century in general, but especially in the last decades. There are a number of sources for these ideas, but certainly a generally acknowledged source would be Friedrich Nietzsche. Nietzsche forced upon the world in a new and powerful way certain truths about the truth: no matter how absolute a truth appears to be, no matter how exactly words appear to be equivalent to the things to which they refer, the

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truth is always, ultimately, a set of “arbitrary metaphors” that are subject to “the legislature of language” and not to the thing in itself (“On Truth” 177, 176). As we know, the kind of thing Nietzsche says about the nature of language and its consequences gets formalized into structuralist linguistics by Ferdinand de Saussure, and then of course such thinkers as Jacques Derrida come along to show how this structuralism in its turn undoes its own attempts at grounding language.

Historically we have two primary responses to the kind of thinking that Nietzsche most fully sets into motion. The first, which we associate more with naturalism and modernism in literature, involves nihilism. As I have argued elsewhere, one ready reaction to Nietzschean claims is a leap to the conclusion that there is no truth at all, that the truth in general is simply an illusion or a batch of lies perpetrated by whoever happens to have power (Jackson 33–37). And even Nietzsche himself falls into this at times. But this nihilistic conclusion is in fact the same *kind* of absolute truth claim that Nietzsche’s arguments disallow. Only in relation to some absolutely true truth could you judge the truth in general to be a lie; but Nietzsche’s arguments rule out such an absolutely true truth. If we do not think his claims through thoroughly, we can easily and without realizing it end up judging the new idea of truth by the standard of the old idea of truth that we have agreed has been disproved by, precisely, the new. This latter is what nihilism always unwittingly does.

“Postmodernism” is one way of describing the second primary response to Nietzsche. And despite the fact that it has been regularly attacked as nihilistic, postmodernism constitutes itself in part through the recognition of that which nihilism misses in Nietzschean claims about the nature of truth. For in fact Nietzsche only shows the unsustainability of certain *kinds* of truth, namely those that present themselves as entirely self-consistent, eternal, changeless, outside of history and desire. Postmodern understandings do not find the truth in general to be simply false, nor the world to be meaningless; rather, we have truth and meaning in a different way than had previously most commonly been thought. The postmodern project involves the investigation of how actual truths have been constituted in actual historical situations. More theoretical writers, such as Derrida, Paul de Man, Jacques Lacan, and Michel

Foucault, have become famous for revealing certain large-scale linguistic or psychological or discursive structures that have operated toward the production of ostensibly universal, self-evident truths. Most of the practical interpretive activities—that is, certain feminisms, new historicism, postcolonial studies, cultural studies, and so forth—that would fall into the postmodern category have tended to show how desire or ideology of whatever kind has produced truths in specific cultural settings.

But although Nietzsche and postmodernism do not destroy the truth and meaning in general, they end up leaving us with a truth and meaning that seem for many people unsatisfying in fundamental ways. Evidently our desire is always, impossibly enough, for the absolute, and we are disappointed with anything less. What are the consequences for everyday life if Nietzschean or postmodern understandings are true? After all, it is one thing to demonstrate logically the end of absolute truths or grounds or centers or selves, but it is another thing to live life without them. Banville's work has considered just this situation, specifically in the context of scientific kinds of knowledge. If we look over a series of his most recent novels, we find that Banville gives us a kind of history. In several earlier novels he imagines what we now see as postmodern understandings of knowledge appearing individually to an array of great Renaissance scientific thinkers. It is as if the most intense thinking will naturally tend to press ever onward until it strikes the kinds of perimeters that postmodernism has taken as its center of interest. And this makes sense. Postmodern conceptuality is not in some radical way unprecedented. Of course thinkers have run up on all this before. But though postmodern conceptuality is not new in itself, it is historically significant that it has now spread into a wide array of intellectual arenas and even into everyday life. And it is this latter case that Banville considers in his more recent books, particularly *The Book of Evidence* and *Ghosts*, at which I will look in most detail.

A string of three books—*Doctor Copernicus* (1976), *Kepler* (1981, winner of the *Guardian* Prize for fiction), and *The Newton Letter* (1982)—most established Banville's international reputation. The first two of these are fictional biographies of the real historical figures. Banville portrays both men as having an almost religious conception of mathematics and geometry, as being possessed by the

idea that quantification and geometrization can embrace the entire material world as it really is in its essence. Nicolaus Copernicus experiences a calling to forge a “new beginning . . . a new science, one that would be objective, open-minded, above all honest, a beam of stark cold light trained unflinchingly upon the world as it is and not as men, out of a desire for reassurance or mathematical elegance or whatever, wished it to be” (*Copernicus* 83). Similarly, Johannes Kepler, with his religious conviction that “[t]he world works by geometry, for geometry is the earthly paradigm of divine thought” (26), searches “after the eternal laws that govern the harmony of the world” (*Kepler* 19). “To enquire into nature,” he says, “is to trace geometrical relationships” (145). But though Banville vividly paints each man’s intellectual drive to get at the real truth of nature, he also shows us the eventual sense of failure that haunts each of them. Despite their great successes navigating the sea of knowledge, in the end both men finally run aground on the impossibility of their desire. Copernicus, after a series of disappointments and defeats, comes to lose his basic belief that the world is “amenable to physical investigation, that the principal thing could be deduced, that the thing itself could be said” (*Copernicus* 116). He keeps on working, continues to make discoveries, but underneath it all, as his amanuensis tells us, “All that mattered to him was the saying, not what was said; words were the empty rituals with which he held the world at bay. Copernicus did not believe in truth” (176). Kepler never despairs to the extent of Copernicus, but still, after a series of devastating real-life events, he writes in a letter to his daughter that he had thought the great human task was “the transformation of the chaos without, into a perfect harmony & balance within us.” Now he says this is “Wrong, wrong: for our lives contain us, *we* are the flaw in the crystal, the speck of grit which must be ejected from the spinning sphere” (*Kepler* 134). Though he continues to work, at the very last he thinks: “Everything is told us, but nothing explained. . . . We must take it all on trust” (191).

With *The Newton Letter* Banville turns from the life stories of the great astronomical wizards to the twentieth-century biographer who finds them fascinating. This short novel features a first-person retelling of how a historian comes, after seven years of research, to give up not only his major project, a biography of Isaac Newton,

but his calling as a historian. A key document in his research, one of Newton's letters to John Locke, turns out to "lie at the centre of [the unnamed narrator's own] work" (58). Paradoxically though, in the letter Newton has come to the margins of his own circle of knowledge. After arguing with Locke about some of the grounding claims of the *Principia*, Newton abruptly turns away from the subject of science, formulas, and laws to speak of everyday people: "They would seem to have something to tell me; not of their trades, nor even of how they conduct their lives; nothing, I believe, in words. They are . . . themselves the things they might tell. They are all a form of saying." Therefore, he continues, "expect no more philosophy from my pen. The language in which I might be able not only to write but to think is neither Latin nor English, but a language none of whose words is known to me" (59). No matter his immense successes, in the end the old philosopher finds that the net of his knowledge has failed to capture the essential reality. Newton's recognition of the failure of his scientific knowledge is mirrored in the academic historian's recognition of the failure of history. The narrator has "lost [his] faith in the primacy" of the historical text. "Real people keep getting in the way now, objects, landscapes even" (1). Finally, he simply says, "I can't go on. I'm not a historian anymore" (82).

In his next novel, *Mephisto* (1986), Banville takes a new tack both stylistically and in terms of his interest in the mathematization of the world. *Mephisto* is again a fictional autobiography, but written in a surreal style, with a cast of strange, almost figmentary characters and a bizarre plot that slips back and forth between a macabre realism and postmodern science fiction. The main character, Gabriel Swan, is born with a "gift for numbers," able to count before he can talk (18). In fact, Swan's gift is such that he is "at ease only with pure numbers" (21). In contrast with his great Renaissance predecessors, the twentieth-century mathematician does not have to prove any link between mathematics and the material world: he simply assumes it. But he, too, finally sees his desire crack up on the reef of the real. Late in the novel, after the accidental deaths of his mother, father, and uncle, and after being horribly disfigured in a mysterious explosion, he ends up having to abandon the language of mathematics, but he still listens for the voice of the thing itself. "I

woke up one morning," he writes, "and found I could no longer add together two and two. Something had given way, the ice had shattered. Things crowded in, the mere things themselves. One drop of water plus one drop of water will not make two drops, but one. Two oranges and two apples do not make four of some new synthesis, but remain stubbornly themselves" (233).

As we have seen, all these novels tell in different ways stories of the same kind of desire and the same kind of failure. Each man, after much study and thought, after producing true and useful knowledge about certain aspects of the world, discovers, typically in a striking flash of realization, that some essential, most basic quality of the real world has slipped through his intellectual embrace, and more specifically has eluded a certain kind of mathematical and/or geometrical formalization. With *The Book of Evidence* (1989) and *Ghosts* (1993), we begin where these previous stories end. In fact the thoroughly twentieth century protagonist of these two novels is in many ways the historical result of the Copernican determination to look "unflinchingly upon the world as it is and not as men, out of a desire for reassurance or mathematical elegance or whatever, wished it to be." *The Book of Evidence* and *Ghosts* both revolve around a character who lives in a world that in some senses takes for granted the disillusionment with knowledge that had come belatedly to the astronomers.

And just here we may turn to the thought of Friedrich Nietzsche to consider all this, for Banville has represented the desire of scientific knowledge much after Nietzsche's representation of Socratic knowledge in *The Birth of Tragedy*. There, Socrates is described as operating under a productive illusion: "the unshakable faith that thought, using the thread of logic, can penetrate the deepest abysses of being" (95). And of course this faith has been immensely successful. It has "led science onto the high seas from which it has never again been driven altogether." Alluding to the Copernican revolution, Nietzsche continues that science has cast "a common net of thought over the whole globe, actually holding out the prospect of the lawfulness of an entire solar system" (96).¹ Insatiable,

1. Nietzsche discusses the Copernican revolution more directly in *On the Genealogy of Morals* (153–56).

even violent in its desire, this faith, this knowledge cannot rest without roping everything into its domain. "Anyone who has ever experienced the pleasure of Socratic insight and felt how, spreading in ever-widening circles, it seeks to embrace the whole world of appearances, will never again find any stimulus toward existence more violent than the craving to complete this conquest and to weave the net impenetrably tight" (97). Nietzsche himself has of course experienced just this craving, and his philosophical project tries to make sense out of what we know and who we are once we have realized just these truths about Socratic knowledge. Banville has given us portraits of actual men driven with uncommon force to complete the "conquest and to weave the net impenetrably tight."

But Nietzsche goes on to claim that "science, spurred by its powerful illusion, speeds irresistibly toward its limits where its optimism, concealed in the essence of logic, suffers shipwreck. For the periphery of the circle of science has an infinite number of points; and while there is no telling how this circle could ever be surveyed completely, noble and gifted men nevertheless reach, e'er half their time and inevitably, such boundary points on the periphery from which one gazes into what defies illumination" (97–98). All this is to say that scientific knowledge has been driven by an at least implicit faith that the world in its entirety can be known within the same *kind* of knowledge. The "essence of logic" conceals the fact that this is simply a faith or optimism, because logic seems self-evidently to be the infallible means to the whole truth. Nietzsche, however, argues that all logic sooner or later runs into its limit, the point at which it turns back upon itself and fails to maintain itself consistently within its own bases for truth. Just this latter truth about the necessary shipwreck of logic, arrived at through logic itself, is of course the point from which deconstructive and poststructuralist arguments typically take off. For Nietzsche it is at this boundary point, the point at which "logic coils up . . . and finally bites its own tail," that a "new form of insight breaks through, *tragic insight* which, merely to be endured, needs art as a protection and remedy" (98).

Along with the "shipwreck" of knowledge, Banville has considered the dialectical emergence of art out of the failed desire of science, especially in the very last pages of *Doctor Copernicus*. In his dying moments, Copernicus is visited by the ghost of his

brother, Andreas, who has been the dark opposite of Copernicus for all their lives. A kind of deathbed realization occurs. Andreas says to the doctor, of his astronomical discoveries, "You thought to discern the thing itself, the eternal truths, the pure forms that lie behind the chaos of the world" (238). But anything ascribed to lights in the sky beyond their simple existence is only a function of what must finally be a matter of "faith . . . belief in the possibility of apprehending reality" (239). Such an attitude, Copernicus protests, attempts to reject knowledge altogether. But Andreas says, "It is the manner of knowing that is important," at least when we come to knowing the thing itself. Though Copernicus has established certain truths, the truth that most matters cannot be apprehended within the kind of knowledge to which Copernicus has been committed. In fact this kind of truth in some sense falls outside even the clutch of language: it "may not be spoken . . . but perhaps it may be . . . shown." And art—"disposing the commonplace, the names, in a beautiful and orderly pattern"—is the means by which this could happen (240). So Copernicus does recognize the significance of art as it emerges from the failure of scientific knowledge, but he does so only at the last minute.²

With *The Book of Evidence* and *Ghosts*, we have a rather more in-depth look at the disillusionment with Socratic knowledge and the consequent turning to art. The books are sequels of a sort. *The Book of Evidence* is the written confession (which will be submitted as evidence) of a captured but not yet tried murderer, Freddie Montgomery. *Ghosts* is the story of Freddie (though his name is never mentioned) when he gets out of jail ten years after the events of *The Book of Evidence*. The central dramatic event of the earlier novels—the disillusionment with science, history, and so with knowledge in general—has, with Freddie, already happened in the past. And this is of course in part because Freddie lives after Nietzsche, whose thinking marks a historical boundary of Socratic thought. Early in his confession, Freddie explains that as a young man he "took up the study of science in order to. . . . make the lack of certainty more

2. The academic biographer of Newton experiences this disillusionment and in effect turns to art: instead of historical biography he writes *The Newton Letter*, a work of fiction.

manageable. Here was a way, I thought, of erecting a solid structure on the very sands that were everywhere, always, shifting under me" (18). This relates Freddie to, but also distinguishes him from, Copernicus, Kepler, and Newton. The earlier men simply thought of themselves as looking for objective truth. Freddie, coming after the progress of science since the seventeenth century, has a Nietzschean conception of what actually brings about scientific truth: the desire for some kind of solid ground of knowledge. But we live in the century of Albert Einstein and Werner Heisenberg, and from the perspective of the previous, which is to say Newtonian, scientific paradigm, our present knowledge consists of very watery certainties. Freddie has studied "statistics, probability theory. . . . Esoteric stuff" (18). Further, as a twentieth-century citizen, Freddie can state freely and even cavalierly that he had a head start in his study of modern science because he was from the beginning "without convictions as to the nature of reality, truth, ethics, all those big things" (18).

With respect to history, Freddie says, "I used to believe . . . I was determining the course of my own life, according to my own decisions, but gradually, as I accumulated more and more past to look back on, I realized that I had done the things I did because I could do no other" (15–16). He now looks on his life "as a prison in which all actions are determined according to a random pattern thrown down by an unknown and insensate authority" (16). The most striking areas of modern science—from quantum theory to contemporary Darwinism—give us a natural "order" that consists of just this contradictory mix of determinacy and randomness. But this kind of order, from a certain point of view, does not satisfy. In *Ghosts*, looking back on the past of *The Book of Evidence*, Freddie describes himself as someone who had been "trained to reason and compute" but "in the face of a manifestly chaotic world ha[d] lost his faith in the possibility of order" (84).

So Freddie in *The Book of Evidence* lives out his adult life in the situation that came only as a revelation late in the lives of the great astronomers. In fact, Freddie's general awareness, at least in this book, remains stuck in a very particular way in the limbo realm just at the self-undoing of Socratic knowledge. Like Nietzsche, Barville will carry us on past this boundary-condition to present us with a

turning to art, and it is a turning that seeks out in its own way “protection and remedy” (*Birth of Tragedy* 98). But the presence of a “tragic insight” is another issue. For Freddie commits murder in the act of stealing a seventeenth-century Dutch painting. He encounters the painting—of a woman standing in a doorway, entitled *Portrait of a Woman with Gloves*—by chance at the manorial home of an old lover, whose father is a famous art collector. Freddie is swept away, overwhelmed. The painted image seems to reverse the normal relationship between viewer and representation. Everything in the painting suddenly seems to be “an eye fixed on [him] unblinkingly” (*Book of Evidence* 79). The painted gaze affects his sense of himself. As he stares at the painting, gradually “a kind of embarrassment” takes hold of him. He feels, he says, a “shamefaced awareness of myself, as if somehow I, this soiled sack of flesh, were the one who was being scrutinized” (79). The portrait’s gaze carries a “mute insistence . . . which [he] can neither escape nor assuage” (105). “She requires of me,” he says, “some great effort, some tremendous feat of scrutiny and attention. . . . It is as if she were asking me to let her live.” He realizes that “[t]here is no she, of course. . . . only an organization of shapes and colors,” but he is struck by her presence more forcibly than he has been struck by any living human. In *Ghosts*, Freddie briefly retells the story of the theft and murder, speaking of himself in the third person. He says of himself that he was “surprised by love, not for a living woman—he ha[d] never been able to care much for the living—but for the figure of a woman in . . . a painting” (83). Though the woman in the painting is not beautiful, nonetheless, “in her portrait she has presence, she is unignorably *there*, more real than the majority of her sisters out here in what we call real life” (84). Almost instantly Freddie decides he must have the painting. This italicized “thereness,” this sense of being fully and uniquely present in space and time, Freddie has never experienced in himself or in others. All his life he has had the “sense of [himself] as something without weight, without moorings, a floating phantom” (*Book of Evidence* 16). Of his own history, he says, “I was always a little way behind, trotting in the rear of my own life” (38). But the painting brings about a spontaneous experience of fullness in the here and now. As Freddie retells his story in *Ghosts*, he says of the painting, “It is *being* that he has encountered

here, the thing itself, the pure, unmediated essence, in which, he thinks, he will at last find himself and his true home, his place in the world" (85).

This sense of presence is that aspect of "the thing itself" that has escaped the mathematical grasp of Freddie's predecessors in Banville's work. Given this, and given what Freddie apprehends in the painting, the turn to art begins to look like a means of success, a means of finally fulfilling the most fundamental desire, and so securing a remedy for what he perceives as the disease of existence. But this is not the idea of art Banville is after. In the act of stealing the painting, Freddie is surprised by a flesh-and-blood maid who works at the house. He forces her to leave with him and murders her with a hammer when she tries to escape. In the instant before striking her, Freddie is "filled with a kind of wonder." "I had never," he says, "felt another's presence so immediately and with such raw force. I saw her now, really saw her, for the first time. . . . She was quite ordinary, and yet . . . somehow radiant" (113). Now this, though without the sense of wonder, is the kind of "presence" that Freddie has felt in the painted image. He responds to the painting with an almost mindless desire to possess it, to have it for his own. How does this relate to his response to the maid?

Only as Freddie is about to take the maid's life does he see her life as it really is. But this vision does not stop him. It is as if he must go on to complete this ultimately negating action, in the same way that he must possess the painting. The painting makes the perfect, albeit illusory, lover, because a painted woman, unlike a real woman, cannot differ from his perception of it, cannot ultimately be anything other than what he projects upon it. Further, by possessing the painting, he will end its public existence, will close it off from the rest of the world, shut down the possibility that other eyes might see in it either what he has seen or, worse, some other meaning. In fact, Banville makes a point of this. An art historian and her tour group interrupt, without realizing it, Freddie's stealing of the portrait. They look at the paintings in the room with "respectful vacancy." "[T]he picture," he says in disgust, "*my* picture, was given two sentences, and a misattribution" (109). The italicized "my" captures what has happened. The glimpse of some kind of pure being in the painting has given material manifestation to the emptiness,

the homelessness of his own sense of self. He could not have seen the painting as he has seen it unless he himself were empty or deficient in a crucial way. Looking back from *Ghosts*, he will say that suddenly falling for the portrait reveals that a “need was there all along, awaiting its fulfilment in whatever form chance might provide” (85). This particular painting has exactly expressed the nature of being that Freddie most wants, and so least has. In a sense the picture is *of* him. The “love” he feels for the painted image is entirely narcissistic. The living woman, then, accidentally gets in the way of Freddie having himself as he most wants to be. In a way he kills her out of self-defense.

And yet her death changes everything, for what Freddie sees in the living woman’s eyes silences the appeal of the portrait: just after killing the maid, with one last look he throws the painting into a ditch and walks away. Recalling in *Ghosts* the moment of “sudden access to another’s being” when he looks into the maid’s eyes, he says that “he had never known another creature—not mother, wife, child, not anyone—so intimately, so invasively, to such indecent depths, as he did just then this woman whom he was about to bludgeon to death” (86, 85–86). The crucial word that distinguishes what he has seen in the painting and what he sees in the woman is “another.” With respect to the maid, he has mentioned “another’s presence,” “another’s being,” “another creature.” In the painting, he sees, though he does not think of it this way, only himself. As he is about to kill the maid, he has his first experience of the essential self-presence of another person. But although Freddie suddenly apprehends the intimacy of *another* person’s sense of being, he does not recognize the significance of what he has apprehended. At the end of *The Book of Evidence* Freddie himself offers an explanation of the “essential sin” in murdering the woman. The sin “for which there will be no forgiveness,” he says, is “that I never imagined her vividly enough, that I never made her be there sufficiently, that I did not make her live. Yes, that failure of imagination is my real crime” (215). “I killed her,” he continues, “because I could kill her, and I could kill her because for me she was not alive” (215). Obviously, “alive” in this sense involves more than just biology. Imagination, then, is that extra quality of understanding that can enable us to grasp the essential reality of another human being’s unique alive-

ness. So after the fact, when he has had time to consider the horror of his failure of imagination, he begins to have an updated version of the tragic insight about which Nietzsche wrote.

What makes Banville's representation of all this in fact post-Nietzschean is that there is no mythification to be had, no invocation of dionysian or apollonian essences. Both the theft and the murder seem simply to happen. If it were left at this point, we would have another version of *The Stranger*, but Freddie, unlike Meursault, feels guilt and remorse. At the end of *The Book of Evidence*, he says that his "task now is to bring [the maid] back to life" (215). In *Ghosts*, still recalling these past events, he says that prison, "punishment, paying his debt to society, all that was nothing, was merely how he would pass the time while he got on with the real business of atonement, which was nothing less than the restitution of a life" (86). *Ghosts* is the story of this atonement, this restitution.

In *Ghosts*, Freddie, freed after ten years in jail, has sought refuge on an island. While in jail he had become an authority on Dutch painting, and he applies to become an assistant to a famous but reclusive art historian, Professor Kreutznaer, who lives on the island. The professor takes Freddie on, and Freddie moves into the house in which the professor and his secretary live. All this is told as a long flashback in the middle of the book. Most of the rest of the story involves the arrival on the island of a tour group whose boat has run aground.³ They end up spending the day at the professor's house, until the tide turns and they can refloat the boat. One member of the tour group, a woman named Flora, remains behind. The immediate present of the novel, the (impossible) point of time from which the whole tale is being told, occurs on the day in which she has revealed that she, too, is getting ready to leave.

The professor is a famous authority on the great, mysterious painter Vaublin. Vaublin's masterpiece *Le Monde d'Or* plays a much larger part here than did the painting in *The Book of Evidence*, as much a part as geometry and mathematics in the earlier novels. In

3. Banville's invocation of famous literary islands gives a good example of the literary-historical richness of his writing. In *Ghosts*, we have distinct allusions to or overt mentions of *The Tempest* (6, 23, 124), *Robinson Crusoe* (83), the Circe episode of the *Odyssey* (7), Laputa of *Gulliver's Travels* (29, 34), and *Treasure Island* (30), as well as Antoine Watteau's painting *A Pilgrimage to Cythera*.

fact the characters in the story may be only Freddie's imaginary projections of real people *from* the painting. Since Freddie describes the painting in great detail, often in the language of an art critic, we can readily discover what Banville never reveals outright: that the fictional painting *Le Monde d'Or* in fact blends together two of eighteenth-century French painter Antoine Watteau's later, most famous works, *Gilles* and *A Pilgrimage to Cythera*.⁴ Watteau's *Gilles* features a life-size, standing image of the commedia dell'arte clown known as Gilles, but also called Pierrot. Behind and beneath him, we see four other traditional members of the standard commedia cast as well as a donkey that they are trying to coax into movement. In the descriptions of *Le Monde d'Or*, the Pierrot figure, the donkey, and one other of the players from *Gilles* are discussed at length. But Freddie describes the figures ranged behind Pierrot setting "off down the slope towards that magically insubstantial ship wreathed round with cherubs that awaits them on the amber shore" (230), which is plainly from Watteau's painting *A Pilgrimage to Cythera*. So Banville has created one fictional painting from the two real ones.

Aside from this, Banville also changes elements of the originals. In *Ghosts* the figure of the clown holds a club, which is not true of the original. In the original *A Pilgrimage to Cythera*, we see a number of adult couples gradually moving off down a hill toward a waiting ship. But in *Ghosts*, the group setting off down the hill consists of an old man, a blond-haired woman, two young boys, a teenage girl, and a man on a donkey. These characters do not appear in Watteau's painting, but they are a painted version of the "actual" characters, the stranded tourists, who appear in this novel.⁵ That is, this group behind Pierrot makes up not only the figures in the fictional paint-

4. A look at these two paintings and the criticism about them can help reveal how carefully all this has been constructed. See, for instance, Posner, chapters 4 and 5; and especially Bryson, chapter 3. If Banville has not actually read Bryson's distinctively post-modern interpretation, he nonetheless writes an interpretation of which Bryson would certainly approve. Banville continues his interest in art and violent pasts in his most recent novel, *Athena* (1995).

5. Banville is fairly cagey about the mix of real and imaginary. A couple of times mentions are made of Cythera (1, 31, 221) and of Aphrodite's island (230). Cythera in myth was the island near which Aphrodite (Venus) rose from the foam. And in the short chapter devoted entirely to the painting, Freddie actually mentions in a parenthesis the similarity of the painting to the work of Watteau (227).

ing but the principal cast of characters in this fictional world. Similarly, the image of the clown with a club is both in *Le Monde d'Or* and a representation of Freddie himself. So it could be that Freddie is somehow simply imagining the painting into "real" life, looking at *Le Monde d'Or* and dreaming (the book has much of dreams in it) a reality for these images. And even if he is not, the crossover between painted and real is a central quality of the "reality" of the world Banville has created. Banville pointedly does not provide us with any definite certainty about the location of the real thing, fictional, painted, or historical. In fact we cannot even know with clear certainty who the narrator is. At times he seems to be an actual character, at times a kind of ghost. All this is in stark formal contrast with *The Book of Evidence*, which reads in a very conventional way. Since both books are told in first person by the same speaker, we may take it that the difference in the kind of telling has more than incidental importance. I shall return to this later.

Assessing his situation upon arriving at the island, Freddie can at least say that he feels in a very qualified way "at home" there (*Ghosts* 25). Having always felt the world to be incomprehensible on some most basic level, he now hopes he "might come to understand things," at least simple, basic things. But the problem is that the manner in which he knows things disallows such understanding. "The object," he says, that which he would come to know, "splits, flips, doubles back, becomes something else. Under the slightest pressure the seeming unit falls into a million pieces and every piece into a million more. I was myself no unitary thing" (26). If the analytical attitude of scientific knowledge is not simply arbitrarily cut off, then it will go on, apparently without end, finding smaller and smaller "unitary things," arriving in the late twentieth century at the incomprehensibly tiny "things" of quantum theory. This realization is one of those boundaries of knowledge mentioned by Nietzsche. In modern (or postmodern) times this boundary-awareness becomes unavoidable—indeed, in some ways seems to become the norm. Freddie cannot even speak simply: "I would open my mouth and a babble would come pouring out, a hopeless glossolalia. The most elementary bit of speech was a cacophony. To choose one word was to exclude countless others." "My case," he concludes, "was what it always had been, namely, that I did one thing while

thinking another and in this welter of difference I did not know what I was. How then was I to be expected to know what others are, to imagine them so vividly as to make them quicken into a sort of life?" (27).

Freddie, after his time in jail, still sees the necessity of imagination, but given his sense of being an unanchored self, he cannot see how imagination is to work. Just here we have a key to his dilemma, and we can see the way nihilism on the one hand and postmodernism on the other arise out of the situation Nietzsche described in *The Birth of Tragedy*. Freddie is caught between two ideas of knowledge. In a way he knows this, and in a way he does not know it. He has described his own situation a number of times in both books, but without being able to grasp its significance. In *The Book of Evidence*, after becoming obsessed by the portrait, Freddie imagines a story to go with the painted woman: the story of how she came to be painted. In his imagination, when she sees the finished portrait of herself, she has a moment of disorientation: "She had expected it would be like looking in a mirror, but this is someone she does not recognize, and yet knows" (108). This is in fact a projected image of Freddie himself. He is constantly in the situation of knowing and yet not recognizing. We can see this in the way he doubts (in the quotation above) the possibility of someone such as himself being able to imagine others into life. He does not doubt himself because he is a murderer; he has thought of himself this way for most of his adult life. Something else is going on. On the one hand, he clearly knows his own "case." He gives us an accurate description of his own sense of self and the sense of knowledge and language that accompany and are accompanied by that sense of self. So what he has described is obviously what he knows, but he cannot recognize what he actually knows *as* knowledge. In other words, when he says, "I did not know what I was," this statement can only be true in relation to some notion of knowledge and self that is so taken for granted as to be invisible, "concealed," as Nietzsche puts it, "in the essence of logic" (*Birth of Tragedy* 97). His self-criticism assumes some right idea of what a person is, but what Freddie actually lives does not fall within that idea (again not simply because of his crime); this unseen, governing right idea will not allow him to recognize his actual state of being as a positively existing, alternative *kind*

of self. He can only conclude, nihilistically and in contradiction with actuality, that he has no real self, no real language, no real knowledge. Again, on some level he “knows” this contradiction, but he cannot recognize it for what it is. The version of knowledge by which he automatically judges himself, as Nietzsche showed, underlies the achievements of Copernicus, Kepler, and Newton and is taken for granted by modernity as the right kind of knowledge.

This contradictory state of mind can help us better understand Freddie’s relationship with the portrait in *The Book of Evidence*. Seeing the portrait, Freddie is struck by a knowledge that falls outside the boundary of what can typically be considered knowledge, but his instant response is to possess the painting in just the way Socratic knowledge sets out to possess whatever appears to fall outside its established limits. Of course it is not that he wants to pull the painting into a formulated system of knowledge: unlike his predecessors, he has already given up on that, and in any case Banville is now exploring all this on a more everyday level. But the almost mindless craving to hold the painting to himself operates in the same manner. Freddie grasps the potent “thereness” of the painted image, but he cannot allow this most fully present “object” to exist outside the orbit of a center in himself, a center that he does not even know exists. Thus he seems to act spontaneously, obsessively. Just before he kills the maid, he fully realizes the otherness of a living self outside his own confused center, but in going on to kill her, he disallows that otherness. In both cases he has been suddenly opened to the knowledge that all Banville’s protagonists have most wanted and, at the same moment, has violently shut down that knowledge.

Perhaps the largest-scale sign of this great contradiction appears in the different manner of telling the two stories. In *The Book of Evidence* Freddie lives a life on the boundary of the kind of knowledge that the conventional realistic novel both supports and is supported by, and yet he still employs that mode of narration—realism—to tell his story. In effect, the life he actually lives calls for a different narrative mode, a different net of art by which to catch his life’s mysterious, uncatchable essence, in much the same way that Nietzsche’s philosophical message required a different mode of philosophical discourse. The narrative net of *Ghosts*, like the narrative

form of all thoroughly postmodern literature (as well as certain postmodern philosophical writings) attempts to capture an existence that occupies the strange boundary-area defined by Nietzsche. It will necessarily fail, but it will fail in a significantly different way from how conventional realism fails, and with failure, as with knowing, it is the manner in which it is done that is important.

As knowledge and misrecognition came in the forms of a painting and a woman, so atonement and restitution will come in the forms of a painting and a woman. At the end of *The Book of Evidence*, after being in jail only a few weeks, Freddie has already begun studying Dutch painting, from biographies to histories to techniques, even to “the methods of grinding colours” and the like. All the learning, though, all the researched information, fails to give him what he wants to know: “How could mere facts compare with the amazing knowledge that had flared out at me as I stood and stared at the painting lying on its edge in the ditch where I dropped it that last time?” (214). But of course here again we run into an unrecognized confusion of ways of understanding. Studying, in the way Freddie approaches it, cannot begin to bring the kind of knowledge he seeks. It does, however, prepare the way for what may be had of knowledge.

Chapter 3 of *Ghosts* is an interpretation of *Le Monde d’Or*. It begins: “He stands before us like our own reflection distorted in a mirror, known yet strange” (225). Already, this interpretation in a sense diagnoses, and so remedies, what was wrong with Freddie’s response to the portrait in *The Book of Evidence*. Some version of “we” is consciously being brought into the experience. Freddie consciously recognizes the projection of his self into the work, so that he does not simply mistake the painting as an independent, freestanding thing in itself, an object to be possessed that can, conversely, possess him. The rest of the opening passage consists of strings of questions that bring forth meaning without solidifying it. In spite of what he said about historical research at the end of the previous book, he brings it readily into this interpretation. He has not, that is, closed off the material world and history as meaningless in favor of the meaningfulness of art. Also, certain puzzles are simply left standing: “It is difficult to say which effects are intentional and which accidental” (227). In fact, the central discovery of his interpretation is that something in

the very nature of the painting eludes the net of his comprehension. On the one hand the painting is “a masterpiece of pure composition, of the architectonic arrangement of light and shade.” In this sense he sees the painting in the way that the scientist sees the natural world. On the other hand, being art, it thrusts forward that which science must ignore: it “carries a weight of unaccountable significance that is disproportionate to any possible programme or hidden discourse” (227). And this—both the architectonic arrangement and the *lack* of a hidden program—is precisely its significance. The nature of the painted image is such that it is “hardly present at all and at the same time profoundly, palpably *there*” (228). So the restitutive response to this painting does not simply reject the previous moment of misrecognition in *The Book of Evidence*. In both experiences of art Freddie has a moment of knowing what he most wants to know. But as Andreas said in *Doctor Copernicus*, “It is the manner of knowing that is important” (239). “Who is [the clown]?” Freddie asks. “[W]e shall not know. What we seek are those evidences of origin, will and action that make up what we think of as identity. We shall not find them” (228). The “what we think” is of course a key phrase: since he no longer takes for granted the version of identity that he himself has never in fact experienced, he is no longer doomed to the misrecognitions that were explored in the previous book. We could say, in other words, that now he is not unconsciously judging a Nietzschean identity by the unrecognized standards of a Socratic identity.

In the end Freddie concludes that the painter has created “a world where nothing is lost, where all is accounted for while yet the mystery of things is preserved” (231). From this, again, we can see that it is not so much that the knowledge of art is opposed to or destroys scientific knowledge. The scientific desire, too, is that nothing be lost. But the “mystery of things” must be given up or ignored in order to produce certain kinds of knowledge, some very useful, some very destructive. Nor does art simply appear as the success in relation to science’s failure. As Nietzsche himself points out, there is not “*necessarily* only an antipodal relation between Socratism and art” (*Birth of Tragedy* 92).

As Freddie’s experience of the painting in *Ghosts* does not simply discredit the experience of the painting in *The Book of Evidence*, so his experience of the woman, Flora, does not somehow reverse or

make up for the crime in the earlier book. Nonetheless, in the world Banville has created, it is as close to an atonement as can be expected. We know little of Flora, except that she is young, has been hired as a nanny for the two obnoxious boys who accompany her on the boat tour, and is being pursued by the sinister, Mephistophelean Felix, another member of the tour. She comes down with a fever as soon as she arrives and stays in bed alone all day. When it is time for the group to leave, she asks Freddie two things: if she can stay on at the house when the others leave, and if Felix, who has himself been talking of staying on, will in fact be going. Freddie says yes, and this modest guarantee of a shelter and safety becomes, for a man wracked with guilt and self-doubt, a monumental act. "Something had happened," he says. A "solemn warrant had been issued on me, and I felt more than ever like the hero in a tale of chivalry commanded to perform a task of rescue and reconciliation" (240). Flora remains for, as nearly as we can tell, a few weeks. Other than being temporary housemates, no relationship appears to develop between her and Freddie. In fact they have apparently hardly spoken until the morning of the present moment of the telling of the story, when the climactic event occurs.

The event is singularly unsingular and yet for Freddie means everything. Flora simply begins to talk with him at breakfast. Significantly, they speak of history. "What interested her was the same thing that interested me, namely. . . . [h]ow the present feeds on the past, or versions of the past. How pieces of lost time surface suddenly in the murky sea of memory" (146–47). As I noted earlier in my consideration of *The Book of Evidence*, Freddie has always felt that history, being "determined according to a random pattern" (16), is a kind of prison. But his earlier understanding of history, as with his other understandings, has been involved with the unseen contradiction he has been living. The ineluctable mix of randomness and determinacy appears as a "prison" only from the perspective of a version of history that no longer stands as the obvious story of change over time. One quality of this moment with Flora is an acceptance of this changed notion of history: he no longer unwittingly judges this *different* understanding of history as a failed or wrong or menacing history.

The unfolding of the rich moment of knowledge reveals the con-

ceptual depth and density of these two novels. The large-scale, structural crossover between “real” and “painting” in the book becomes integrated with a thematic crossover here at the end. The experience of the “moment” with Flora happens as a mixed return to, and surpassing of, what Freddie has experienced with both the painted portrait and the flesh-and-blood maid in *The Book of Evidence*. As with the portrait of the woman, the knowledge that matters comes “out of nowhere” and as the result of a perfectly everyday event: Flora begins to talk. But then echoing almost verbatim the moment of recognition of the maid in *The Book of Evidence* (113), Freddie says that “as [Flora] talked I found myself looking at her and seeing her as if for the first time” (*Ghosts* 147). And he sees her “not as a gathering of details, but all of a piece, solid and singular,” as well as “amazing,” the same word he had used to describe the knowledge that flared out at him from the painting in the previous book. But then he goes on, as if now seeing the difference between the experience of being in art and the experience of being human: “No, not amazing. That is the point. She was simply there, an incarnation of herself, no longer a nexus of adjectives,” such as “amazing,” “but pure and present noun.” He says that the event of her beginning to speak “transfigured everything,” but of course it is actually he who has been changed (we have no evidence that Flora perceives any of this). For now, “by being suddenly herself like this she made the things around her be there too. In her, and in what she spoke, the world . . . found its grounding and was realised” (147). The recognition of another human *being* can never involve simply one separate individual peering into another, like a scientist looking at a particularly amazing specimen. As Freddie himself has said of his moment with the maid, it was as much an invasion, an indecency as it was a recognition. Really to recognize a single human being is to recognize the essence of the human world in general.

Carrying forth the mix of painting and real, Freddie goes on to say, “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.” Listening and watching, he feels “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). With this summary statement, it turns out that this experience of another's being not only surpasses, as had the experience in *The Book of Evidence*, the conventions of scientific knowledge, but also the kind of imaginative knowledge that Freddie has demonstrated in his understanding of *Le Monde d'Or*. The word "vividest" specifically recalls the two previous passages (*Book of Evidence* 215, *Ghosts* 27) in which he has lamented the failure of his imagination, so it seems that this time his imagination has not failed. But on the other hand, if the rejection of "amazing" indirectly points out the inadequacy of his understanding of the portrait in *The Book of Evidence*, the rejection of "mystery" must indirectly point out an inadequacy of his concluding assessment of the Vaublin painting (in which the "mystery of things" was preserved). And more obviously, he says outright that this experience of being does not have to do with his imagining.⁶

So what are we to make of this? The moment combines elements of the experiences of both paintings and of the maid but seems to go beyond them. What is the extra wind that blows this experience into yet another current in the sea of knowledge? The answer comes to us only very indirectly, primarily through hints and imagery. Once again, however, it has been previsioned in *Doctor Copernicus*. At the very last, the ghost of Copernicus's brother, Andreas, says that what Copernicus has most missed is "the thing itself, the vivid thing. . . . that thing, passionate and yet calm . . . fabulous and yet ordinary. . . . Call it acceptance, call it love if you wish" (241). And we may call the extra knowledge gained through Flora love or acceptance, as we wish. The last pages of the novel confirm this. Having taken on his "task of rescue and reconciliation," Freddie escorts the rest of the tourists back to their boat, in a replay of Watteau's *A Pilgrimage to Cythera*. "We walked down the hill road in the blued evening under the vast, light dome of sky where Venus had risen" (240). And of course Cythera in myth is the island near which the goddess of

6. Hopefully my discussion has revealed some of the interweaving of words, images, relationships, characters, and so forth that runs from book to book in these novels. But I have only brought out a couple of examples from a striking array of interconnections. Banville, it seems, is setting up an oeuvre in the fullest sense.

love arose from the foam. At the very end, we are brought to the immediate present, again some weeks after the tour group's visit and departure, and the same day on which Flora has spoken and given Freddie the experience of being that he has most wanted. Significantly, having brought about this event, she "is getting ready to leave" (244). In the end, Freddie is, like Nietzsche, "[c]oncerned but not disconsolate" (*Birth of Tragedy* 98) at the way things have turned out. "I shall be glad to see her go," he says. "There was never any question but that I would lift her up and let her go; what else have I been doing here but trying to beget a girl?" (244). He imagines soon watching her, in the image of the risen Venus, "skim away over the waves" (245). Thus we can conclude that the extra knowledge that surpasses the knowledge of art, that in its turn has surpassed Socratic knowledge, is, modestly enough, love. The difference between love in this instance as opposed to the "love" in *The Book of Evidence* is apparent.

Hopefully it need not be said, but Banville is hardly suggesting that only through brutal violence can the decentered modern human come to a healthy understanding of the self and others: violence here is not redemptive, but the sign of a horrific failure of knowledge; or as Freddie calls it, of imagination; or as we have seen in the end, of love. Rather, Banville has given us a fictional exploration of what it can be like to live life in the turbulent historical wake of the Nietzschean understanding of knowledge and desire. As with any other identifiable historical epoch, the one considered here by Banville can, and perhaps must, produce new versions of ancient forms of human ugliness and cruelty. But the epoch will just as necessarily produce new forms of beauty and charity. As always, we can depend upon literature to help us see just these truths.

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