



Neil Murphy. *John Banville*. Maryland, USA: Bucknell University Press, 2018. pp. 216. ISBN 978-1-61148-872-2 (cloth); 978-1-61148-873-9 (electronic)

Echoing the words of Susan Sontag, Neil Murphy artfully professes to “show *how it is what it is*” in his latest monograph, *John Banville* (2018) (21). This ekphrastic reading of Banville’s body of work focuses on its “artistic transparencies,” an expression borrowed from Ortega y Gasset, instead of excavating for meaning (20). After all, meaning is crucially distinguished from significance whereby the semantic differences between these terms in Banville’s own understanding of his work do not simply refer to different modes of knowing, but also perceiving. What these ‘transparencies’ are and how they are engendered, is carefully explored at each stage of Banville’s evolution as a writer, and, more specifically, with relation to the limits and possibilities of art. The distinction between meaning and significance is central to the kind of aesthetics Banville aspires to, in his desire to create works of art. This position that Banville has made explicit, in his interviews, has remained consistent and central, over the years, to his art. The correspondence between the critical approach that Murphy deploys here and Banville’s own views on his work lies with, in part, an insistence on recognising that these novels “are themselves worthy of consideration as works of art of a specific kind,” as shown thoroughly through the multifarious reasons on why these books should be read as works of art and how this can, in fact, be accomplished (2). The justification for interpretative models that focus on aesthetics, more specifically, around a discussion on the nature of art, is informed by a critical discussion of ideas, by various philosophers and critics, such as Etienne Gilson, Walter Pater, and Gordon Graham. But critical stances that place art and aesthetics at the centre, as Murphy carefully makes clear, do not come at the expense of neglecting the more ideologically charged aspects of Banville’s fiction (that other critics have dwelt on), such as, for instance, the representation of women. But, as his argument goes, there is something vital offered by reflections on art that is not made in service of any other purpose except for the making of art, in both literature and criticism, by going beyond the putative primacy of subject matter and what it can mean to attend to the “capacity that art has to *illuminate* experience, rather than to reflect it” (3).

Murphy, like many other critics, is cognisant of the weaknesses of Banville’s craft in the early work, for the then budding writer, while astutely recognising the presence of certain preoccupations that were later further developed as his fiction became increasingly sophisticated. Here, a defining feature of Banville’s work, namely his narrators’ inability to arrive at a coherent sense of the world, is traced back to his earliest work, *Long Lankin* (1970 revised edition published in 1984). Murphy’s consistent scrutiny of the motifs of clowns, mirrors, twins, and red-haired interlopers, which are present from *Long Lankin* onwards, and how they populate Banville’s fiction, is key to understanding how the highly intertextual and aestheticised surfaces of these worlds so often undermine a realist depiction of material reality. These intertextual echoes, as Murphy expertly demonstrates in each chapter, accumulate associations and resonance, with each invocation that harks back to an earlier work,

contributing to a densely interconnected Banvillean universe. But it is the Jamesian trope of the “house of fiction,” which first appears in *Birchwood* in connection with the big house genre as well as the realist tradition, that becomes one of the chief ways, as Murphy goes on to explain, in which Banville self-reflexively engages in a commentary on art, and how inherent to it is “the perpetual presence of the artistic consciousness that informs everything” (7, 8). This metaphor of the ‘house of fiction,’ which recurs throughout Banville’s body of work via descriptions of the various houses that his narrators inhabit or have once inhabited and have, now, returned to, variously stands for the realist tradition, the historical novel, and even the overt metafictional games typically found in postmodernist fiction. As with the subsequent chapters, this motif of the ‘house of fiction’ is shown as an integral link in revealing how Banville’s self-reflexive commentary on and around art is extensively interwoven with the fictions he constructs.

For Murphy, the metaphor of science in *Dr Copernicus* (1976) and *Kepler* (1981), the first half of the science tetralogy, is deployed as an extension of the same self-reflexive impulse and artistic problems, such as the gulf between art and the world, the word and thing, that characterise the early fiction. In this, Murphy contends that they “are simultaneously allegories for Banville’s artistic process, and therefore extend the deep self-reflexive resonance that we find in the earlier works” (41). More specifically, Murphy’s attention on the ways in which “the value of science lies primarily in its metaphoric potential, particularly with respect to the notion of scientific inquiry as a creative pursuit” departs from the commentary on the narrative of science by earlier Banville critics, particularly Imhof, McMinn, and Berensmeyer (43). Murphy cogently identifies a transitional shift in *The Newton Letter* (1982) and *Mefisto* (1986), not simply in terms of departing from the historical novel, but also in the ways they evince the limits of the referential mode, particularly in the absence of fixed knowledge systems. As Murphy puts it, with his next books, the trilogy of art novels, “the content primarily becomes the subject of its own self-reflexive investigations,” whereby these books with “art at their plotted centers [free] Banville from the overt metaphorical parallels that had defined much of the early work” (58).

Turning to the ekphrastic dimensions of The Frames Trilogy, *The Book of Evidence* (1989), *Athena* (1993) and *Ghosts* (1995), a convincing argument is made for the interconnections between references to paintings, both actual and imagined, that frequently find their way into Banville’s novels, from this point forth, and the slowing down of time through the, oftentimes unanticipated, use of the present tense by Banville’s narrators. This novelistic technique, as Murphy goes on to explain, engenders a kind of textual stillness reminiscent of still lifes, like those by painters referenced by Banville, such as Vermeer. The blending of the visual and verbal is aptly likened to what Stephen Cheeke identifies as the “‘for ever now’ quality of visual images,” as Murphy dwells on “the formal possibilities offered by a narrative integration of paintings and literature” (77). Around the question of the possibilities and limits of art, as with these novels that “have paintings at their narrative centers,” Murphy stresses the correspondence between strangeness experienced by these characters in the face of an indifferent world, and strangeness as a feature of an imaginatively, or aesthetically transformed world, such as those in works of art (77). Here, too, this strangeness, a quality that Susanne Langer calls “otherness” or, as Murphy insightfully points out, is “variously articulated as ‘strangeness,’ ‘semblance,’ ‘illusion,’ ‘transparency,’ ‘autonomy,’ and ‘self-sufficiency,’ and identified as inherent to works of art (15).

The extensive inquiry into the seepages between visual and verbal art, specifically the significance of Pierre Bonnard's art, in that "the fiction is also constructed in sympathy with the artistic principles that governed the French artist's paintings" forms the crux of Murphy's analysis of *The Sea* (2005), is the main focus of the third chapter. There are the overt allusions to paintings, as with, for example, ekphrastic descriptions of Vermeer's *The Milkmaid* or one of Van Gogh's self-portraits, but it is around the correspondences between the formal and thematic elements of this novel and Bonnard's life and paintings, especially *Nude in the bath, with dog* (1941-1946), that most pointedly evince how "*The Sea* reaches beyond a simple, linear form in an effort to integrate other ontological modes" (102). Murphy goes on to keenly elucidate on the similarity of subject matter, the role of memory in the making of art, and a shared emphasis on domestic settings between the novel and Bonnard's paintings. For Murphy, the novel's sophistication and technical artistry lies in how seamlessly intertwined these multiple levels of being are "without destabilizing the fiction itself," in spite of the considerable mythic, literary, and artistic resonances lending a sense of doubleness, or what he calls "a secondary allusive ontology," to the primary level of plot (108, 95). Instead, as a direct and indirect consequence of these allusions, as Murphy astutely puts it, "[c]haracters and events continually shimmer in and out of view, slipping out of a fixed sense of identity or sharp focus, and reasserting themselves in new unexpected ways, while the very fabric of the novel is frequently suffused with subtle echoes, colors and sounds because of references to various branches of the arts" (96). In this, the complexity of these wide-ranging 'references to various branches of the arts' and how they imbue Max's narrative with intertextual echoes is revealed as markers of the various ontological worlds embedded within the work.

In chapter four, Murphy turns his focus to acting, actors, and puppetry, as metaphors for the ever-present self-conscious impulse in Banville's writing, in the Cleave novels: *Eclipse* (2000), *Shroud* (2002), and *Ancient Light* (2012). Although it may seem that the same concerns in Banville's earlier work are revisited here, only with a different metaphorical parallel, Murphy adroitly demonstrates how these intensely self-reflexive novels, as part of Banville's mature period, are different from the overt metafictional games in postmodernism. Kleist's influence on Banville's body of work is attended to, in more significant detail, in the fifth chapter, which is centered on his adaptations of Kleist's plays, *The Broken Jug* (1994), *God's Gift: A Version of Amphitryon by Heinrich von Kleist* (2000), and *Love in the Wars* (2005), as well as his novel, *The Infinities* (2009). The trope of puppetry and the idea of unself-conscious movement, the earliest manifestations of which appear as far back as Mefisto, are closely examined in view of Kleist's essay, "The Puppet Theatre". Here, too, Murphy insightfully explains the differences in the mimetic and diegetic dimensions of the dramatic and novel form, and posits how changes made in these adaptations, whether theatre or prose, were tailored to invoke most effectively "oppositions such as illusion and truth, and reality and appearance and, ultimately, a belief in confusion as a prime market of human experience" that characterise Banville's and Kleist's works (140). For instance, in his analysis of *God's Gift*, Murphy makes the assertion: "the rapid temporal momentum in a play that already features ample amounts of confusion and misapprehension significantly adds to the audience impact [...] Thickets of ontological shifts, varied narrative points of view, and plot convolutions, on the other hand, characterize its prose fictional counterpart, *The Infinities*" (149). As Murphy deftly demonstrates, Banville, by working around the limits and possibilities of each form, has sought continually to capture this particular sense of being in the world, where confusion looms large.

In chapter six, the Benjamin Black novels, set in 1950s Dublin, are read as an extension of the Banvillean universe, as Murphy insightfully identifies tropes and motifs, originating from the Banville novels, that are deployed, with different effects, in the genre of hard-boiled detective fiction. This chapter facilitates a nuanced reconsideration of the boundaries between genres such as modernism, which is typically understood as ‘high’ art, and the genre of detective fiction, which is usually more accessible and relies on conventions of the realist tradition. By participating in another genre, as Murphy has it, the Benjamin Black novels are another avenue for the fusing of self-conscious and plot-driven narrative techniques. Although the intended outcome is arguably different from the Banville novels, the objective for Black and Banville can be said to be the same: to tell well-made stories. In this, Murphy makes a powerful point that the author Benjamin Black is neither opposite to, or separate from, Banville or simply a pen name with which to accomplish a type of “Banville-lite” writing (qtd. in Murphy 180).

The largely chronological structure of the book makes apparent the constancy of certain preoccupations, the expressions of which have been refined over the course of Banville’s development as a writer, and the changes in metaphorical parallels first deployed and then discarded (as with the science tetralogy). But this is not to say that Murphy understands Banville’s development linearly. Throughout the book, Murphy’s keen sense of the intertextual echoes in Banville’s works and thorough knowledge of it is displayed.

This is brought across at moments when the development of an idea is carefully traced to reveal its larger significance in a later work, which Murphy correspondingly dwells upon in fuller measure; or it is shown how a later work retrospectively alerts us to an initial articulation of an idea that was already present in an earlier work. This grants a broad overview of the concerns that Banville has sought perpetually to capture in his fiction, but from an artistically-inflected perspective: the strangeness of the world through the inward gaze of his typically male first-person narrators and their resulting sense of confusion, and the world as transformed and other from external reality especially in ways that evince – as with works of art – qualities that Denis Donoghue recognises as “[a]utonomy, disinterestedness, and impersonality” (qtd. in Murphy 109). This book alerts both readers and scholars of Banville’s fiction to the ways in which ekphrasis is deployed innovatively and pivotal to the unique ontological modes of the storyworlds in these novels. This book undoubtedly opens new pathways to reading Banville’s work as always being, Murphy rightly asserts, “a demonstration of the inevitability of artistic failure rather than a genuine artistic quest for a solution to the unavoidable distinction between world and word” (191). In this, from start to finish, the precarious balance between seeking out moments of significance in Banville’s oeuvre and attending to how significance is achieved without establishing or proclaiming its meaning(s) as fixed is carefully struck.

Adel Cheong

Work Cited

Murphy, Neil. *John Banville*. Bucknell University Press, 2018.