

## *Banville and Black*

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Among the differences between the two cloned writers, John Banville and Benjamin Black, there is one that is quite necessary. In a crime novel, following from the author's contract with the reader, the convention insists that many things are concealed. We are introduced to people in terms of their externals – their appearance, apparent social class, their habits and idiosyncrasies, idiolect. But the truth of their feelings and motives is hidden – with an opacity that is partly the result of a fault in the observer's perception, until the moment of revelation that makes the story complete. In the Banville novels there is opacity and recognition – but the opacity is a real condition not a trick of the light, and the recognitions do not illuminate but cast new shadows. For his protagonists, other people remain a mystery even when the facts about their lives or points of view become known; and thus the revelations about them are genuinely shocking. Think of the moment in *The Newton Letter* when the narrator is confronted with a savagely joyful celebration of the Mountbatten murder, in the voice of a woman he had been imagining as belonging to decayed Anglo-Irish Protestant gentry.

The reader of these fictions is denied the conventional progression towards greater enlightenment as to what is actually happening, and why – even though certain facts may be established. This I think throws one back on his narrator/protagonists. His style, ranging from the apocalyptic to the irritable, flows through them and surrounds them with a cloud of language, a mist through which other people are indistinctly seen and often distorted – physically, like the monstrous mother revealed towards the end of *Mefisto*, or mentally like the mute boy in *The Sea*. Enclosed in that mist the only one who can be known, and only up to a point, is the narrator. And that point is also the limit of the knowledge *he* can access through his introspective reminiscing.

Where does that leave us? Thrown back on knowledge of ourselves, I think, with an enhanced sense of how little we can know of our own life and character. And yet we are here, even if we are in a mist, we can feel the earth of Ireland under our feet ... The mist tells us that there are solid things existing, we know that when we collide with them. We are people with a sense of ourselves and of the world, yet it is one that is not based on accurate knowledge. And time and the self are unstable. Memory, to quote Cecily in *The Importance of being Earnest* “usually chronicles the things that have never happened”; but memory remains our guarantee of identity. If identity can be said to be a fact. In *The Sea* the narrator's mother says to him about his wife, “Why does she keep calling you Max ... your name is not Max.” “It is now” he replies. That “now” slides away off, but the writer clings to it – at the chronological ending of *The Sea*, at the moment when the narrator reveals the things he has known all along but cannot make sense of, and relates the recent farcical and less recent tragic happenings, in a tangle of past and pluperfect tenses, he observes “All this [is] in the historic present.”

But does such a historic present exist in life? The people at the centre of his novels (the ones I have read, not his whole work) live in a precarious present tense; and they exist not

as subjects that things happen to, but as whole relationships with the world they have encountered, and thus as whole lives. To read about them is to consider what a whole life amounts to, with its shocks and compulsions, its early insights and late strategies. They build to a totality that we can experience within the confines of a novel, as we cannot in our own lives, where such truths are constantly escaping us, leaking away as fast as they fill our perception. As Miss Prism says – to return to *The Importance of being Earnest* – That is what Fiction means.