The Construction of Identity in John Banville's The Book of Evidence

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In the present paper, I propose to discuss how I read *The Book of Evidence* and, echoing Robert Scholes's words, how I inscribe it into the textuality of my life. Scholes actually says that "...each text can only be read by connecting it to the unfinished work of textuality..." (6) that each person's reading represents. Therefore, as I read *The Book of Evidence*, it immediately reminded me of Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment* and Capote's *In Cold Blood.* At the moment I read these novels, I thought my reading of them complete and closed. Dostoyevsky's narrative had opened my eyes to the deep psychological anguish of a young man who feels trapped in his social plight and commits a murder only to confirm the famous cliché that crime does not pay and the path of goodness should always be chosen. I remember turning the pages expecting to find some relief after so much despair. Many years later I dared read Capote's novel. The scene of the merciless massacre of the Clutter family remained with me after a long time as well as the sordid and marginal existence of the murderers and their hopeless path to death. When I took up *The Book of Evidence* I was ready for the same kind of reading experience. But, in spite of its deep intertextuality with Dostoyevsky's novel, the unexpected tone of the narration suggested that I should generate a substantially different reading strategy in order to make sense of it.

Definitely, the treatment of the theme of crime and retribution in each one of the novels mentioned is essentially different as a result of the time and the literary tradition in which they were written. While *Crime and Punishment* is one of the most outstanding exponents of nineteenth-century Russian Realism – with its distinctive psychological streak – and *In Cold Blood*, written in the 1960's, is an example of the postwar American novel concerned with public events, *The Book of Evidence* is a post-modern novel that takes as its basic assumption the fictional quality of experience.

As regards point of view, *Crime and Punishment* and *In Cold Blood* are narrated within the convention of the third person omniscient narrator. In the case of the first novel, the distinctive feature of the narrative voice is its deep psychological penetration, that reveals Dostoyevsky's attempt to create human consciousness in order to analyze human nature. With regard to Capote's novel, what sets it apart in the use of the narrative voice is that in the section dealing with the murderers, point of view is consistently

presented through their intelligence. I believe that in fleshing these unusually heard voices, Capote was trying to portray the inherent differentiation in human kind. Banville, on the other hand, gives another turn to the screw since he tells his story from the perspective of a first person narrator in order to stress the subjective quality of the narrative. Freddie, his narrator, like Dostoyevsky's Raskolnikoff, is an educated man who is fully aware of the power of discourse and its elusive quality. To him "...writing is a question of becoming, always incomplete, always in the midst of being..." (Deleuze1997, 225), the perfect strategy to narrate his fragmented self from different perspectives. Hence, after being hailed by the tradition – his text is part of his legal statement – this narrator assumes Foucault's author function and becomes the object of his own discourse. From this perspective one would expect him to portray himself as the stereotype of the repentant criminal and, by extension, a unified self. However, what arises from his narration is a mocking account of Humanist values and the Cartesian subject and, by extension, a deconstruction of the concept of criminality. Therefore, fully conscious that he is fictionalizing his own life, he makes the pretence of giving the jury and judge what they thrive for, namely the hidden meaning of his actions that will satisfy their morbid curiosity.

In this light, while Dostoyevsky's narrative has as its main theme the notion of redemption through suffering and Capote's is an attempt at understanding the motivations that lead marginal men to perpetrate crimes against the bourgeoisie, Banville's novel is founded on the idea that repentance and redemption are two questioned beliefs in a society whose institutions are in crisis. In the same light, Dostoyevsky's and Capote's novels abide by the notion of the essential subject while Banville's disowns it altogether as it illustrates the fragmentation of the self in a post-modern society.

Consequently, what makes the reading of Banville's novel so different is the fact that it presents the concept of identity from a radically different perspective as it problematizes deeply ingrained assumptions about crime, guilt and retribution. In this light, I read *The Book of Evidence* as, basically, the construction and deconstruction of its narrator's identity, or better, his multiple identities through the successive rereadings and rewritings that he makes of some events that, paradoxically, bear witness to his life but are only indirectly related to his crime.

This game of identities takes the shape of a series of portraits of members of his family and friends that reflect the way he perceives others and, simultaneously, the way he perceives himself through the look of the others. All these portraits are interspersed with frozen descriptions of nature, always glanced at through a window, which have the texture of a painting and thus suggest the fictional quality of life at the time that lend unity to the narration. The 'crevices' left in-between these pictures are 'asides' directed to the jury and, ultimately, to the reader in which the flow of the narration seems to be in suspension as the narrator reflects upon his evidence, contradicts it but rarely reconfirms his own assertions. Rather, the only thing he seems intent on stressing is the multiple selves into which his identity is fragmented, a fact that pervades his narration with a

never receding feeling of uncertainty and instability. The epitome of these pictorial images is embodied in the centripetal and centrifugal reading he makes of a certain Dutch painting – located at the core of his crime – that acts as mirror to the whole story since he rereads and rewrites it in the same fashion that he recreates the story of his life.

Then, unlike the other novels about murder that make up the textuality of my reading experience, the differentiating quality of *The Book of Evidence* resides, precisely, in its portrayal of the fragmented subject of the post-modern world and its consecutive critique of the concept of identity as one which stabilized the world.

The Construction or Deconstruction of an Identity

I understand that an analysis of the theme of identity in the context of a post-modern world, then, calls for a discussion of the relationship between discourse and the subject as construct since one of the most important tenets of Postmodernism is that the subject is constituted by and constitutive of language.

From the start, it could be said that *The Book of Evidence* is a sharp critique of the notion that through language we are able to represent "the truth" of the world as if this were one and immutable. This is implicit in the quality of Freddie's narration since he never pretends to give a definite account of the murder he has committed. Rather, he endeavours to show that there is not only one way of interpreting and, therefore, telling the events. He succeeds in creating this effect by constantly making references to the fact that as he is constructing his "evidence" in the realm of language, the meaning of his story – the way he narrates his self – is very unstable and, therefore, resists closure. Very revealingly, at a certain point in his narration he exclaims: "I am just...losing myself in a welter of words"(38), thus stressing his lack of control over language.

This might help explain why he is deliberately contradictory in his own narration: he claims not to be homosexual but he would like to find a sodomite in prison; he does not believe in the stability of knowledge but, as a young man, he wanted to study science to be able to grasp truth, paradoxically adhering to the humanist notion that science is a transcendental activity; he longs to be out of any possible system but after he commits the crime he is eager for the hand of authority to locate him back in his right place. This attitude produces a discourse that is elusive and equivocal. It seems almost transparent but when analyzed in detail, it is hard to ascertain facts because no sooner has Freddie stated something that some posterior reflection upon it seems to contradict what he has just said.

Clearly, Freddie's strategy to resist the tradition consists in showing the constructed quality of its discourse and, by extension, the instability of its fundamental tenents. To pursue his point, then, he deconstructs some of society's basic beliefs such as the notion of truth as represented in the discourse of the judiciary. Hence, he stereotypes it through its reduction to one of the most famous clichés of court jargon: "Do you swear

to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth?". His afterthought – "Don´t make me laugh" (7) – disowns it altogether.

From this post-modern conception of the world, then, Freddie acknowledges that truth is highly subjective and very much depends upon the speaker. He knows that "The question isn't simply: can a "reality" be re-presented exactly through language? But also: in the attempt at representation, whose story gets told?" (Marshall 1992, 53). This, in turn, is one of the "truths" that emerges from *The Book of Evidence* once and again. Very significantly, at the very end of the novel, he asks the police inspector to add his written testimony – his book of evidence – to his file "...with the other, *official fictions...*" [my emphasis] (220). Skeptically, the inspector – sketched as the romantic stereotype of the whodunit – asks him: "Did you put in about being a scientist...and knowing the Behrens woman and owing money and, all that stuff?" to which Freddie, from the logic of the post-modern subject, answers "It's *my* story...and I'm sticking to it"[my emphasis] (220), since he knows that the "true" story is not defined solely by its content but also by its frame of reference, namely the teller.

From this standpoint, it becomes clear why Freddie starts his statement by mocking the judge's appeal: "My Lord, when you ask me to tell the court in my own words, this is what I shall say" (3). He knows that the innocent "in my own words" does not lead to some transcendental truth shared by everybody but to his own conception of reality that, in turn, will shock more than persuade jury and judge altogether. This is coupled with his meaningful "this is what I shall say" where "this" stands for one possible account out of infinite ones. Consequently, Freddie speaks of his own life conscious that it is constituted by language and shaped by him, its narrator, thus showing that reality exists as a function of the discourse that articulates it (Marshall 1992, 54).

This insurmountable gap between Freddie's and the establishment's beliefs gives rise to the hybrid discourse of his narrative which becomes, as Nikos Papastergiadis underlines "...a means for critique and resistance to the monological language of authority" (267). Hybridity also accounts for the parodic and, at times, even comic quality of his narration. As an example, we can quote the instance when he sarcastically tells the clerk at court: "...please note that, clerk, it may mean something (8)". In a Derridean fashion he deconstructs, at the time that he parodies, the notion that the meaning of a text is to be found in some presence outside the text, that which it is fundamentally about. Through irony, then, Freddie unmasks the essentialist discourse of tradition.

The instability of meaning is also made explicit in *The Book of Evidence* through what might be considered as a dramatization of the Derridean notion of 'differánce'. According to Derrida, despite the efforts of every speaker, meaning can never be fixed because every statement entails its opposite. So, there is always a supplementary meaning that is always out of control and will arise and subvert our attempts to create fixed and stable worlds (qtd. in Hall 1992, 55). In this context, Hall points out that "Our statements are underpinned by propositions and premises of which we are not aware, but which are, so to speak, carried along in the bloodstream of language" (55). Freddie seems to be very much aware of this fact since, many times as he feels carried away by his own

narration, he interrupts himself in the middle of a sentence in order to render the opposite of what he has just been telling as if he wanted to discipline these supplementary meaning that escape his control. Hence, his text becomes highly paradoxical as it considers two opposing meanings at the same time and, by extension, does not fit the patterns of coherence usually expected of a narration. Let's consider the instance when he narrates his father's death:

> I put my arm around him, laid a hand on his forehead.He said to me: Don't mind her [his mother]. He said to me-
>
> Stop this, stop it. I was not there. I have not been present at anyone's death. He died alone, slipped away while no one was looking, leaving us to our own devices (51).

By deconstructing his own statement – and, thus reveal his complex relationship with his father – he shows that he is fully aware that he cannot control language because discourse is permanently destabilized by what it leaves out. Therefore, he makes the opposite meaning explicitly overt. As he does it, he brings to the surface 'the unspoken', 'the silent', that which is not voiced but is also part of the text, a notion that he emphasizes by leaving the sentence purposely unfinished, indicated by dashes.

If reality exists as a function of the discourse that articulates it, then "discourse is the power to be seized" as Foucault has pointed out in "The Order of Discourse". Having committed a crime and, consequently, ended up in prison, words are the only resource left to Freddie for his own defence. Banville has him say: "For words in here [in jail] are a form of luxury, of sensuousness, they are all we have been allowed to keep of the rich, wasteful world from which we are shut away" (38).

Therefore, as already highlighted, Freddie writes an account of some outstanding facts of his life in an attempt, one would expect, to present his crime in such a way that it might persuade judge and jury of his innocence or, at least, attenuate his guilt in their eyes. However, what emerges is a narrative that takes the form of an "oppositional discourse convention" that resists and deconstructs the "dominant discourse convention" (Fairclough 1991, 45) of judge and jury, and, therefore, aims at shocking rather than convincing. In other words, he exercises the power conferred upon him by discourse in an attempt of defense against being reshaped by the desire of the other.

This explains why, throughout his narration, he is bent on mocking the "process of confession" (Foucault as qtd. in Usher and Edwards 1994, 122) as that which will lead him to moral emancipation since, accepting it compliantly, would mean letting the establishment tie him up to the stereotype of the criminal. Therefore, in an almost impudent tone, he acknowledges to judge and jury the responsibility for his crime:

> Please, do not imagine, my lord, I hasten to say it, do not imagine that you detect here the insinuation of an apologia, or even a defense. I wish to claim full

> responsibility for my actions – after all, they are the only things I can call my own – and I declare in advance that I shall accept without demur the verdict of the court (16).

Then, such an acceptance of responsibility does not imply a submissive attitude on the part of the narrator as if once and for all he were going to abide by the establishment´s values. Rather, by refusing to repent of his crime, he rejects the community's moral standards:

> After my first appearance in court the newspaper said I showed no sign of remorse when the charges were read out. [...] Remorse implies the expectation of forgiveness, and I knew that what I had done was unforgivable. I could have feigned regret and sorrow, guilt, all that, but to what end? (151).

By showing no sign of remorse and eagerly demand society's forgiveness, Freddie rejects the interpellation of the official discourse that wants to make him fit the subject-position of the criminal. I think that, in this way, he actually creates a conflictive power relationship with the establishment. Foucault has pointed out that "It is not enough for the Law to summon, discipline, produce and regulate, but there must also be the corresponding production of a response from the side of the subject" (qtd. in Hall 1996, 12). Now, Freddie's response to the discourse of power is really singular. On the one hand we might say that he hails it when he actually feels a certain relief at being manacled and taken to prison. But, on the other hand, he cannot be actually disciplined by it because as he thinks there is nothing to feel contrite for, he cannot be constructed like a 'normal subject'. By extension, though he is jailed for life, the corresponding punishment that should make a new man of him is clearly ineffective.

In order to prove his lack of moral responsibility for the crime he has committed, he goes to the extreme of actually deconstructing the concept of "badness". To do this, he steps out of the boundaries of the discourse of tradition in order to show that – as Foucault points out in "The Order of Discourse" when discussing the arbitrary distinction between "true and false" – the concept of badness is capricious and, therefore, modifiable. As he does it, his discourse also becomes a critique of the logocentrism of language:

> ...leafing through my dictionary I am struck by the poverty of the language when it comes to naming or describing badness. Evil, wickedness, mischief, these words imply an agency, the conscious or at least active doing of wrong. They do not signify the bad inits inert, neutral, self-sustaining state.[...] Is this not a queer state of affairs?
>
> It makes me wonder. I ask myself if perhaps the thing itself – *badness* – does not exist at all, if this strangely vague and imprecise words are only a kind of ruse. Or perhaps the words are an attempt to make it be there?
>
> Or, again, perhaps there *is* something, but the words invented it (55).

Having consistently denied the Cartesian man's cogitative power since the beginning of his narration, his main point now is to try to dissociate 'badness' from man's responsibility as if instead of 'human badness' there were some type of 'natural badness' that existed of its own independent of man's action. In this light, man is deprived of his freewill and, therefore, cannot be held responsible of any conscious wrongdoing. In other words, human badness does not exist. Rather, it is some type of illusion created by language, a mirage produced by the logocentric nature of language.

Then, all this discussion – through which Banville once again mocks all Humanist assumptions – serves to devoid Freddie's action of any type of moral responsibility, as he himself points out: "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).

This all goes to show that instead of "seizing discourse" in order to persuade the jury of his innocence, he takes advantage of the power it confers him in order to resist the system even more. From this perspective, rather than becoming critical of his own deeds, he becomes even more critical of the establishment. It is as if he were assuming Foucault's strategy of "reversal" in order to deconstruct the establishment's assumptions about criminality. This seems to be the implication of his words when he startles the inspector and the policemen, who are questioning him, by saying: "I killed her because I could, I said, what more can I say?"(198). In his words, there is neither the revelation of some hidden, though expected, motivation nor the faintest hint of repentance or desire of being forgiven. Rather, through his brazen reply, he refuses to be disciplined by placing himself beyond the boundaries of Humanist ideology.

Consequently, from the jury's standpoint, the discourse he produces is not considered truthful since it resists existing power formations. It is only when he is imprisoned and subsequently interrogated that his discourse is made to conform to the official discourse by the inspector who takes down his confession. When Freddie reads it, he is dazzled by the inspector's 'artistry' at creating fiction:

> I peered in bafflement at the ill-typed page. That's your confession. [...] I marvelled at how he [the inspector] had turned everything to his purpose.
> [...] He had taken my story, with all its [...] frills and fancy bits, and pared it down to stark essentials. It was an account of my crime I hardly recognised, and yet, I believed it. He had made a murderer of me (202-203).

Thus, by exercising all the authority granted him by the "disciplinary power of discourse" (Foucault as qtd. in Hall 1992, 56), the police inspector models Freddie's declaration to make it conform with the authoritative legal discourse. In this way, he manages to bring Freddie, the subject, under strict discipline and control by tying him to the identity of the criminal. However, later on, Freddie's own fiction will embody his attempt at disentangling himself from it.

The sharp disharmony between the way he represents himself through his own fiction and the way he has been represented by the official discourse points to the constructed quality of the subject. Stuart Hall has pointed out that "...the theoretical work cannot be fully accomplished without complementing the account of discursive and disciplinary regulations with an account of subjective constitution" (13). Therefore, I will now focus on the way in which Freddie, through his own discourse, constitutes himself as a post-modern subject.

As already suggested, one of the basic assumptions underlying *The Book of Evidence* is Banville's deconstruction of the idea of the autonomous and unified individual of Humanist ideology as exemplified by his narrator. From this perspective, the novel could be understood as a movement from centering to decentering, from the narrator's image of himself as a 'normal' individual, or better a "masterbuilder" who could "...[determine] the course of [his] life according to [his] own decisions..."(16), to a subject fragmented into multiple selves who problematizes the concept of agency and recognizes himself as a construct constituted by and constitutive of the symbolic order of language.

To begin with, the way in which Freddie dramatizes himself encompasses all the theories on the constitution of the subject. As a young man he portrays himself as a Cartesian man – male, European, Christian – the rational individual who "...took up the study of science in order to find certainty..." (18) and, thus, exercise his rationalistic control over the world. However, later on he questions this conception of the subject and denies himself, as highlighted above, the possibility of any type of agency. Also, if at the beginning of the narration he pictures himself as some type of Romantic hero, seat of intelligence and beauty, whom the "...American [universities] spotted..." (18), throughout his narration he suffers a process of degradation – a kind of Darwinian evolutionary process in reverse – and at the very end of his statement he likens himself to an animal:

> Here I sit, naked under my prison garb, wads of pallid flesh trussed and bagged like badly packaged meat. I get up and walk around on my hind legs, a belted animal, shedding an invisible snow of scurf everywhere I move (144).

Finally, he portrays himself as a Freudian man, deliberately and knowingly making references to his macabre dreams as if he were in a therapist's session.: "The dream. (The court will hear about my dreams)" (54).

Through his identification with all these subjects, he becomes the embodiment of the decentered post-modern man who is a mixture of the different selves enunciated above. Therefore, from a Lacanian perspective, he does not perceive himself as an entity with a unitary identity but, rather, as a being constituted within a matrix of identities (Marshall 1992, 94).

In this context, the novel becomes a critique of the concept of identity as one which stabilized the world by showing how Freddie's identity, composed of several unresolved parts, is highly fragmented. Hence, he is far from the Enlightenment man who was supposed to have a unified and fixed essence from birth to death that shaped his identity. This becomes clear in the narration of his evidence because, in this process, he deconstructs himself as a 'normal' Cartesian man and, successively, reconstructs himself as a post-modern subject whose self has been divided into many contradictory identities that render him transient and unstable.

In fact, what Freddie constructs out of his own narration is an "identification", more than an identity with all the implications that this concept has. In his article "Who needs identity?" Stuart Hall defines 'identification' as

> ...a process of articulation, a suturing [...] an over-determination or a lack, but never a proper fit, a totality [...] it is subject to the play of *differánce*. And since as a process it operates across difference, it entails discursive work, the binding of symbolic boundaries, the production of 'frontier effects'. It requires its constitutive outside, to consolidate the process (3).

This process of identification can be clearly seen in the way Freddie constructs himself through his statement since the multiple selves that make up his identity are in a constant process of articulation due to the play of differánce. Hence, as his identification consists of the 'suturing' of all the 'subjects' enumerated above, it becomes '...open-ended, variable and problematic...' (Hall 1992, 50). This fact explains the paradoxical quality of his narration, as every new fragment of evidence, i.e. every new self, that he adds to his fiction contradicts the previous one. In this light, Freddie confirms the analogy between language and identity as pointed out by Derrida (qtd. in Hall 1992, 55).

In his discussion of the process of 'identification', Hall also calls attention to the 'constitutive outside'. In the case of *The Book of Evidence*, it is present in Freddie's obsessive awareness of the "look of the other" which is highly decisive in the way he 'sutures' his different selves as he constructs his own identification.

In redefining the concept of identity, Stuart Hall points out that the notion of the sociological subject was proof that "...the inner core of the subject was not autonomous and self-sufficient but was formed in relation to the 'significant others', who mediated to the subject the values, meanings and symbols – the culture – of the worlds he/she inhabited..." (49). In other words, he clearly states that identity is formed in the "...continuous dialogue..." between the self and society which in the case of *The Book of Evidence* seems to be embodied in this game of looks. Paradoxically, instead of relating Freddie to the others, these looks seem to isolate him even more since he understands them as society's desire to discipline him into some of its field roles.

In his narration, Freddie problematizes them through his portrayal of the different characters of his fiction. This becomes clear when, in his account of his prospective

trial, he calls his wife and mother to the witness stand as evidence of why he has committed his horrid deed. As he fictionalizes their relationship, he curiously characterizes them as stereotypes of Cartesian subjects frozen in portraits that, he feels, stare back at him. Thus, for example, when he narrates his return to Coolgrange, his parents's estate in Ireland, he thinks that after their long separation his mother will see in him "...a man of parts, with a wife and a son and an impressive Mediterranean tan..." (42). However, she only seems to notice that he has got fat. Thus, on the spot, he regards himself likewise.

The epitome of all these portraits and looks, as suggested above, is embodied in the centripetal and centrifugal reading he makes of Frances Hal's painting "Portrait of a Woman with Gloves". This vignette acts as synecdoche to the whole novel since Freddie rereads and rewrites it in the same fashion that he constructs the fiction of his own life.

When he first encounters it, Freddie starts by deconstructing the woman on the canvas as "a mere figure". In a very detached and economical way, he describes her in terms of what first meets the eye of the beholder: clothes and features, thus likening his first impression to that of the members of the jury: "You have seen the picture in the papers, you know what she looks like" (78). Until he comes to decoding her look. Here, he becomes fully involved as the texture of his narration – tinted by own obsession, namely seeing and being seen – shows: "Her gaze is calm, inexpectant, though there is a trace of challenge, of hostility, even, in the set of her mouth" (78). The words 'calm' and 'inexpectant', on the one hand, and 'challenge' and 'hostility' on the other render the woman aloof and invulnerable. Little by little as his own look gains in intensity and concentration, he invests the figure of the woman with some powerful life to the point that he feels she is intently looking back at him:

> I stood there, staring, for what seemed a long time, and gradually a kind of embarrassment took hold of me, a hot shamefaced awareness of myself, as if somehow I, this soiled sack of flesh, were the one who was being scrutinised, with careful, cold attention (79).

Freddie is so overpowered by the woman's penetrating stare that he not only sees himself reduced to a degrading physical condition but also feels that the whole picture has become alive and is staring back at him: "Everything in the picture, that brooch, those gloves, the flocculent darkness at her back, every spot on the canvas was an eye fixed on me unblinkingly" (79). It is as if Freddie saw in her powerful gaze the embodiment of an essence, a unity that distinctly contrasts with his own fragility and disintegration. Consequently, instead of feeling as the one in command – the one who has the power of representing the other through his fiction – Freddie feels that he is being represented by the portrait's intent stare. This game of identification seems to prove Stuart Hall's theory according to which

> ...identities are constructed through, not outside, difference. This entails [...] that it is only through the relation to the Other, the relation to what it is not, to precisely, what it lacks, to what has been called its constitutive outside that the positive meaning of any term – and thus its 'identity' – can be constructed (4)

In this context, Freddie endows the woman in the portrait with a substance that he lacks because in voicing this 'presence' – that is silenced in him – he, at the same time, makes the play of difference overt.

In his predicament, the figure on the canvas is more alive to him than any real person in the world. This might explain why he, literally, feels hailed by her: "It is as if she were asking me to *let her live"* [my emphasis] (105). And in a way he does endow her with a new life because though he fully acknowledges that "...[she] is only an organisation of shapes and colours..." through his interpretation "... [he tries] to make up a life for her" (105). Hence, from his centripetal reading of internal evidence, particularly the woman's clothes which are dated between 1655 and 1660, and her physical features, as it has already been discussed, he unfolds a centrifugal reading that, at the beginning, seems to be a stereotype of all the grand narratives associated with that period.

From this perspective, he portrays her as a plain, motherless woman who has all the traits of the spinster and is pampered by her widower father. Predictably, she bossily runs their household, visits the sick and, very often, is sickly herself. Everything points to an uneventful existence, as if she were dead in life. Until she has her portrait painted. At this moment, Freddie breaks away from the style of the grand narratives and his centrifugal reading begins. His 'Woman with Gloves' actually acquires a new identity as he imagines the painter imprinting her with the intensity of his own penetrating eye.

Curiously, the scene when she first sees her image on the canvas parallels the scene when Freebie reads the police inspector's account of his statement. Like him, she also becomes prey to a deep feeling of estrangement:

> For a second she sees nothing, so taken is she by the mere sensation of stopping like this and turning: it is as if -as if she had walked out of herself. [...] She looks and looks. She had expected it would be like looking in a mirror, but this is someone she does not recognise, and yet knows... (108).

Thus, Freddie's creative, open-ended reading of the portrait denounces the way he understands his own identity because, once again, the relationship that she establishes with her own image on the canvas is the same that he has with the little man 'Bunter' who lives inside him and leads him to commit the crime. As in Freddie's case, it is someone she knows but does not recognize. The irony of the situation resides in the fact that while this unfolding of her self brings "The Woman with Gloves" back to life, the little man Bunter incites Freddie to murder and, consequently, to death.

I understand that what Freddie has done through his centrifugal reading is to deconstruct the almost defying seamless unity, embodied in the woman's stare, that he perceived when he first approached the painting. In this way, he has managed to show the central rupture at her core – like him, the woman turns out to be a divided self – produced by the intense look of the painter, her constitutive other. In turn, the same could be said of the painter because if his look has provoked this rupture in her identity, it means that his unity must also be fragmented by his own constitutive other. This seems to be confirmed by the fact that Freddie never identifies the author of the painting: it could be Vermeer or Hal or Rembrandt (104).

Throughout his narration, Freddie stresses this split in the self's identity by his use of the image of 'turning' that functions as a refrain to his story. Though Daphne and his victim also 'turn' at certain moments in their lives, only himself and the woman in the portrait seem to be aware of its signification, namely that in so doing, they have become contradictory and different new selves that will become 'sutured' to their own identification.

This many-sided quality that he lends to the painting, then, he denies to all the subjects that surround him by freezing them in the closed identity of the Cartesian subject. This might count as an explanation of his 'reading' of his victim when he first encounters her:

> A maid was standing in the open french window. She must have come in just then and seen me there and started back in alarm. Her eyes were wide, and one knee was flexed and one hand lifted, as if to ward off a blow (79).

Paradoxically, his description of the flesh and bone woman has a rigidity that the painting lacks. She does not look at him but involuntarily 'sees' him. This is why he does not describe her 'gaze' – that would imply action – but the size of her eyes, as if they were static. Finally, her posture suggests more a statue than a human being.

Later on, when he is already in prison, he sees a photograph of his victim in a newspaper that very much resembles the portrait of the 'Woman with Gloves': "...she was wearing a long, ugly dress with an elaborate collar, and was clutching something, flowers, perhaps in her hands. Her name was Josephine Bell"(148). Only when he sees her fictionalized in the picture, he is able to reconstruct her as a human being who actually 'looks' at him: "And suddenly I was back there, I saw her sitting in the mess of her own blood, looking at me..."(148). Therefore, Freddie killed her because he could not reconstruct her identity as that of a human being. In his mind her look and that of the painting merged to the point that the line dividing reality from fiction became fully blurred.

This goes to show the deep dislocation in Freddie's process of identification as he can only represent life from the perspective of art.

This dislocation of the concept of identity in Freddie's narration should be reconsidered in terms of the wider process of change that is subverting the main cultural and social structures in modern society that act as its foundation (Hall 1992, 48).

Consequently, as Freddie tries to give evidence of why he has committed his crime, most cultural and social identities come ‘under erasure’ (Hall 1996, 2) because he does not feel represented by them any longer. In this context, he becomes critical of family and class by depicting his decadent parents as the last remnants of a perished social order suggested by the run down Coolgrange estate. He also questions sexuality as, with a brazen disregard for social mores, he deals with traditionally taboo subject matters like homosexuality and multiple sexual relations. The conflictive Irish national question is also present at the background of his narration in the continuous references he makes to terrorist assaults. Institutions also come under the spot light in his sarcastic criticism of university teachers. He presents them as men whose lack of genius “...had condemned to a life of drudgery at the lectern...” (18), thus revealing his scorn for ‘enlightened men’ who are supposed to be the path breakers of society.

His rejection of central social structures, then, displaces him not only from himself – as has already been discussed – but also from his place in society (Hall 1996, 49). In his text, this feeling of estrangement is made explicit in the unbridgeable distance he perceives between himself ‘I’ and his fellow men ‘they’:

> I watched them, wide-eyed, wondering at their calm assurance in the face of a baffling and preposterous world. [...] They understood matters, or accepted them, at least. They knew what they thought about things, they had opinions. [...] they did not realise that everything is infinitely divisible. They talked of cause and effect, as if they believed it possible to isolate an event and hold it up to scrutiny in a pure, timeless space.[...] Oh, they knew no bounds (16-17).

From his perspective, ‘they’ are the agents of the main beliefs of modernist, progressive society that he rejects like the concept of presence manifested in their absolute certitude about things; inviolable truth expressed through opinions that do not accept contestation but are to be meekly accepted; the concept of unity that, again, does not admit of difference and stifles the world; the fake coherence that appears as natural. Finally, the logical relationship between cause and effect that he consistently denies throughout his narration in the construction of his evidence.

Then, by problematizing all these beliefs, Freddie is also questioning the concept of ‘pastness’ as one which ensures the continuation of consolidated systems of values. As Wallerstein points out, “Pastness is a mode by which persons are persuaded to act in the present in ways they might not otherwise act” (78). And this is, precisely, what Freddie refuses to do by disowning consolidated social and cultural identities. From this perspective, he reflects about the murder he has committed in the context of his past life:

> The myriad possibilities of the past lay behind me, a strew of wreckage.
> Was there, in all that, one particular shard – a decision reached, a road taken, a signpost followed – that would show me just how I had come to my present state? No, of course not (37).

Clearly, he denies any type of cause and effect relationship between his past – as an ordinary citizen – and his present life – as a criminal – because as he adheres to the view that the 'social past' is 'inherently inconstant' (Wallerstein 1991, 78) – and, therefore, a construct too – it can be deconstructed in infinite ways depending on the frame of reference i.e. the narrator. Thus, by denying the possibility of viewing the past from a single and unquestionably true perspective, Freddie is not only questioning the permanence of the social landscape but also the old concept of identity which stabilized the world.

Conclusion

According to our discussion, then, Banville seems to abide by the notion that as the social environment is highly fragmented and unstable, values can only be momentarily fixed since they lend themselves to multiple interpretations. Then, as his portrayal of Freddie as a murderer shows, the significance of crime and the identity of the criminal also come under erasure. At this point, one might wonder whether Banville is actually condoning crime. I believe that in order to answer this question, *The Book of Evidence* should be considered at two levels.

On the one hand, as I have already tried to show, I understand that Banville actually adheres to the view that as tradition is always in an undergoing process of becoming, always modified by some new supplementary meaning, the subject cannot have a stable sense of self from birth to death thus giving rise to the multiple identity of the post-modern subject. But, on the other hand, – also consistent with this view – he aims at desacralizing the serious beliefs of the Western world. Hence, he gives another turn to the screw of his narration by framing it from the perspective of an unrepentant murderer who carnavalizes all social mores by confusing fiction with real life.

Consequently, considering the story from Banville's, not Freddie's author function, I think that its main aesthetic feature is his skillful use of hybridity that brings Western culture under erasure as, through his pointed use of irony, he not only dislocates the Humanist notion of the unified subject and the concept of transcendental truth but also the grand Western narratives since his discourse parodies some of the popes of canonical fiction like Blake, Shakespeare, Fitzgerald, Borges, Dostoyevsky and Whitman. Therefore, from the start, the sarcastic tone of this polyphonic narration suggests a different type of aesthetic experience.

As I have already hinted at in the introduction, when I first approached the book I expected to experience the same type of anguish produced by other novels of the genre. However, in spite of the narrator's plight, I never felt suffocated by the narration. This brought to my mind my reading experience of Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* and *Absalom, Absalom!* At the time I read them, I remember wondering how I could bear all the obscenity portrayed in them – murder, rape, miscegenation, incest – while I

was almost afraid of reading some novels of the nineteenth-century Realism that dealt with the same subject matter. And my conclusion was that it was due to their aesthetic quality since Faulkner's use of form and vocabulary downplayed the crudity of the scenes.

My reading experience of Banville's *The Book of Evidence* goes along the same lines, only that his experimentation – his distinctive aesthetic feature – resides in the ironic quality of his text that provokes its pronounced dislocation. In this context, it is difficult for me as a reader to see in Freddie the prototype of the criminal. What's more, at certain moments of his narration, I could not help smiling at the jokes he cracked at the expense of some well-known social stereotypes. Thus, Banville's novel becomes an example of Bakhtin's carnavalization because, through laughter, he establishes a dialogic relationship with the inviolable beliefs of the Western world that clearly dislocates them.

It is, precisely, from this perspective that I believe crime should be considered in Banville's novel since its parodic quality not only sets it apart from other novels of the genre but also makes it almost impossible to treat it as a serious allegation on crime. To pursue my point, I would like to draw a brief comparison between *The Book of Evidence* and *Crime and Punishment.*

Let's consider the two parallel scenes when both murderers explain the motivations that led them to commit murder. The scene in Dostoyesvky's novel takes place in a sordid, miserable room where Sonia, Raskolnikoff's beloved, lives. To add to the somber tone of the narration, it should be pointed out that Sonia, a religious girl who believes in the goodness of the world, has had to prostitute herself in order to make a living for her consumptive stepmother and children since her father is a drunkard. In this context, Raskolnikoff explains to the gentle and stoical girl the dark motives that have led him to commit his horrid deed. Thus, '...prey to a gloomy fanaticism...' he tells her that he had not killed for money in order to help his poor mother and sister but because he had always wanted to commit some daring act that would gain him men's respect, thus setting him above all of them:

> ... power is only given to the man who dare stoop to pick it up. Nothing more is needed, except courage. From the moment this truth had dawned upon me – a truth as clear as the light of the sun – I longed to dare, and I committed murder. All I wanted was to do some daring thing, Sonia; that was my sole motive! (332).

His words are really breathtaking. Here is a man who, with real pathos, actually confesses that like Hawthorne's Ethan Brand, he consciously cut the chain that linked him to humanity to prove himself more powerful than any man or woman alive.

Throughout the gloomy scene, prey to a mixture of fear and compassion for his extreme suffering, Sonia, the loving Samaritan, is fully persuaded that Satan has induced him to commit the crime. By the end of the novel, her love and faith in God, as well as

all the hardships he undergoes, make a new man of fallen Raskolnikoff. So much so that the story finishes when he has been disciplined into the role of the convict, ready to do his time, with Sonia's Bible under his pillow and the hope that her faith and love will regenerate him. Therefore, after stretching the boundary between good and evil, Dostoyevsky's discourse clearly adheres to the forces of good as its clear admonitory tone stresses humanist values:

> They [Sonia and Raskolnikoff] did not know that a new life is not given for nothing; that it is to be dearly paid for, and only acquired by much patience and suffering, with great future efforts. [...] but now a new history commences: a story of the gradual renewing of man,

In a similar scene in *The Book of Evidence* Freddie, after all the hardships he has endured, pretends to have had 'a glimpse of a new world' and thus converted to Humanist ideology. Consequently, in a mock heroic tone, he explains the motivations for his crime at the time that he proclaims himself a new man. In his new seriousness, he feels full of regard for the others and, hence, portrays the characters in his fiction in a different light. He thinks that his mother disinherited him as a way of teaching him about the ways of the world. Joanne, his mother's protégé, who has inherited everything that was legally his, comes to visit him and, rather than considering her a usurper, he only sees good intentions in her. Then it is his wife's turn. The cold, detached woman has overnight become sentimental and, like Raskolnikoff's Sonia, tells him how much he has always meant to her.

If, at this point, the reader is suspicious of Freddie's newly acquired contrition, his next words clearly confirm it when, in the same mocking tone, he reconsiders his murder of Josie Bell and proclaims that he killed her because he could not imagine her '...sufficiently alive...'and, therefore, '...that failure of imagination is his real crime...' (215).

One might wonder at the cruelty of the statement! This is a real Ethan Brand! But, wait a minute!I think that *The Book of Evidence* is a real parody of Hawthorne's 'Unpardonable Sin' for what do you make of a narration in which the main character finds that a portrait is more alive than a human being? Shouldn't his statement be understood as a line from a parody rather than from a novel seriously dealing with murder? Freddie himself seems to confirm it when, in the same sarcastic tone, he triumphantly proclaims:

> I seem to have taken on a new weight and density.
> I feel gay and at the same time wonderfully serious
> I am big with possibilities. I am living for two.
> (216) [the rewriting of the paragraph in blank verse is mine]

I think that at this point Banville's carnavalization of Western grand narratives and, by extension, Humanist ideology reaches its highest pitch. To begin with, he seems

to be echoing Foucault in his embedded criticism of the regenerating power of prison. But, on top of that, he does it through the decentering of one of the founding texts of Western culture such as Whitman's "Song of Myself" that in a grandiloquent manner predicates the birth of the New Man.

Hence, Freddie's words mock Whitman's persona poetica – after its emergence from the dark night of the soul – since he pretends to come out of the crisis of identity that led him to crime as a totally new man, with renewed energies for himself and, ironically, for his victim too. Undoubtedly, Freddie's words would sound outrageous if one forgot the function that underlies them in Banville's text, namely to stress the subject's crisis of identity against a disintegrating social landscape through the use of a caustic irony that, clearly, dislocates a system of values that seemed fixed and closed for ever.

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