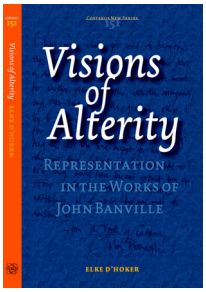

D'hoker, Elke. ***Visions of Alterity. Representation in the Works of John Banville.*** Costerus New Series 151. Amsterdam/NY: 2004. 243pp. ISBN 90-420-1671-X. 243pp.

Hedwig Schwall

In *Visions of Alterity* D'hoker undertakes an ambitious, rigorous, and theoretically sophisticated examination of the novels of John Banville, combatively and thoroughly engaging with the current critical reception of his work. It both produces brilliant and challenging accounts of individual works and simultaneously shows how each novel is to be read as a part of its trilogy. On occasion, ideas are reversed or revised thus reinforcing the sense that this book presents a core of ideas that incrementally grows and evolves as the work progresses. D'hoker's study is no introductory work, nor is it chronological: the readings are organised around thematic clusters, which allows the reader to see how Banville does develop ideas on representation, epiphany, correspondence between inner and outer worlds.

As I want to take the reader on a quick trip through this book, we start at the table of contents which already shows the work's two main qualities: a clear logical line of development, often worded in poetic ways. Thus, Part I, which investigates the relations between "Self and World" combines Chapters one and two, respectively "Books of Revolution" and "Books of Revelation", whereby the first deals with the Scientific Quest for Truth, the second with the Epiphany in the Science Trilogy. The scientific quest, starting with the radical implications the notion of "representation" has in Kant, further leads to Heidegger who stresses the "uncanniness of a reality" which, according to the philosopher, is best represented by poets. Rorty ties in with this view, as his "edifying philosophers" are those who "want to keep a space open for the sense of wonder which poets can sometimes cause … something which is not an accurate representation of what was already there" (9). With Derrida D'hoker then draws attention to the *desire* for presence which lies at the heart of representation, thus introducing a psychological category which will later help to elucidate the narcissism of the art trilogy's protagonist. Chapter Two is outstanding in the thoroughness with which the notion of epiphany is treated and developed throughout the science trilogy(49). Again, D'hoker deems the new concept worth a brief sketch of its history, and connects theological definitions of epiphany with Abrams' discussion of this phenomenon in Emerson, to scrutinize Joyce's famous statements and compare them to Ashton Nichols' *The Poetics of Epiphany*, which lead her to reconsider observations made by the Banville specialists Imhof and McMinn. The result of all these surprising connections is a new and handy difference made between meaning and significance, which proves to be significant indeed to understand the fine developments in the epistemological adventures represented in

the science tetralogy. But though D'hoker is a champion of close reading, her exercises always end in a handy set of categories which order her impressions. So, she throws a new light on the science trilogy by distinguishing three different degrees of creativity in representational work, i.e. "*mimesis* (close adherence to reality), *poesis* (transformation of reality) and *aletheia* (revelation of the oddness of reality)" (223). This result is interesting, but the way in which she came to it as well. In her scrutiny of the science tretralogy, D'hoker cleverly pairs off one poet's epistemological system with one novel. So Wallace Stevens' poetics illuminate *Dr. Copernicus* in surprising ways; Rilke's *Duino Elegies* prove to enlighten the "poetic transformations in *Kepler*" (92); the confrontation of Hofmannsthal's "Chandos Letter" with Banville's *The Newton Letter* results in a new paradigm of "negative aesthetics" which reinterprets both texts (103 ff); finally, Goethe's two Faust books help D'hoker to define the postmodern Faust Banville creates in *Mefisto*.

Part II, on "Self and Art" brings in "Banville's Explicit Poetics", which are confronted with his implicit poetics. As Banville maintains that "I always feel you should write about what you *don't* know. Find out something" (77) this ties in nicely with Rorty's ideas about the "edifying philosophers" – though I am not sure whether this applies to his latest novel, *The Sea*.

In Part III, "Self and Other", Chapter seven clearly and concisely pictures what "the ethical turn" is all about, and again D'hoker enlivens the picture by (rather neatly) opposing one group of ethical thinkers against another one. Once more, this confrontation serves a double purpose: not only do we see how Martha Nussbaum on the one hand and the group around Derrida and Derek Attridge on the other take a very different critical stance, but this difference helps to explain Freddie Montgomery's predicament in the Art trilogy. D'hoker argues that Nussbaum uses literature as a mirror (154) to confirm and nuance her own views, whereas the Derrida-Attridge group would treat the text more "as a stranger" (148) and read it against the grain. Likewise, Freddie Montgomery treats women as mirrors, and so his tragedy consists indeed in a failure of the imagination which links the women of the trilogy, Daphne, Flora and A. : Freddie remains confined in his imaginary art world and cannot reach life as such. D'hoker's discussion of the women is very interesting: not only does she take their "cardboard quality" seriously, but, referring to Ruth Frehner's article, she deepens the views there propounded as she connects Banville's women with insights gained from Melanie Klein and Sarah Kofman, thus coming to a more general diagnosis of the constant feature of "the split mother figure" in the novelist's oeuvre (142-144), to be recognised from *Birchwood* till *Eclipse*, and beyond: D'hoker's intuitions will prove to be even more relevant for the very ambiguous mother figure in *The Sea*.

The psychological categories used in the previous chapters are further elaborated with the introduction of the phenomenon of "the Double" in Part IV, "Self and Self". In this chapter D'hoker harks back to the play of masks and mirrors she elucidated in the previous trilogies, but now refining the categories of possible "doubles" in her analysis

of the protagonist of *The Untouchable*, a master-spy whose skilled duplicity complicates the inherent ambiguity of the autobiographical genre. To sound out the pitfalls of this genre D'hoker goes back to Rousseau (202) and gradually complicates the questions at stake, focusing on Banville's clever turns of plot and style in his Jamesian spy novel.

In a characteristic inclusive movement the study's conclusion wraps up the foregoing insights yet applying them to Banville's then last novel, *Eclipse*. The liminal concepts are taken one step further again: the "visions of alterity" prove to be also "visions of mortality" (217), the paradoxes become more tightly packed. The protagonist's lazy, mimetic reading of reality is combined with a more active "making strange" of his context, i.e. a Derridean questioning aiming at the otherness of the other, i.e. its singularity, which makes that "The world seemed tilted slightly out of the true" (221). This attitude refers back to Banville's ex- and implicit poetics and question his "mode of disengagement" with the world.

That this book ends with a questioning attitude and a paradox is again typical of the creative and sporting way in which the critic tackled her subject, but it also indicates that this work is not quite finished. I have been most laudatory of this study, as I relished my reading of it, but of course the book has its flaws, though they are imposed by quantitative rather than qualitative criteria. For instance, the author promised to analyse the novels from an epistemological, aesthetic and ethical perspective, but the epistemological approach was mainly limited to the science trilogy and the aesthetic and ethical perspective to the art trilogy, whereas the inverse would have worked very well too. But what I most miss in this study is that the psychological concepts could have been elaborated in a more systematic way. The notion of *Nachträglichkeit*, briefly mentioned in the discussion about epiphanies, could have led to the delineation of the phantasm, which plays a key role in each of Banville's novels; this would in turn have allowed a more precise diagnosis of the postmodern Faust of *Mefisto*, whose psychotic structure is very relevant as a hinging figure in Banville's oeuvre. Another problem is that, because so many sources are used, they are sometimes treated rather summarily: I do not think that Nussbaum's readings are that problematical, and Hofmannsthal's *Nosce te Ipsum* is not exactly a "solipsistic" undertaking. Or, when D'hoker tries to formulate Banville's poetics, one wonders what kind of "disengagement" makes him protest so much against Coetzee's *Disgrace*, so "shockingly crowded .. with the issues of the day"?

But this lack of elaboration has its gain: the prose has a strong flow, and takes the curious reader swiftly along. One might even say that D'hoker is one of the more edifying philosophers.