

# *Banville's Fiction Comes of Age as It Lays to Rest Old*

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*Abstract: For twenty-five years, John Banville's protagonists have tried to come to grips with the other brother/shadow self. If the protagonist can come to grips with the shadow figure he can create, for a moment, order in his chaotic world, as do Gabriel Godkin, Copernicus, Kepler. When the character fails to embrace the brother/other self, he destroys and self-destructs, as do Gabriel Swan, Victor Maskell and, for a time, Freddie Montgomery. Freddie Montgomery, as he attempts to lay to rest old ghosts, is a recurring figure not only in the three novels in which he figures—Book of Evidence, Ghosts, and Athena—but, in a sense, Freddie and his shadow self appear as archetypes in all of Banville's fiction, creating an allegorical tale that is long overdue for attention, especially with regard to its Irish nature. Using Jung's concept of the Shadow combined with the implications of Chaos Theory, I analyze the story beneath the stories—the Irish allegory—in the fiction of John Banville, a premier Irish novelist.*

Waterborne he comes, at dead of night, sliding sleek on the river's gleaming back, snout lifted, sniffing, under the drawbridge, the portcullis, past the drowning sentry. Brief scabble of claws on the slimed steps below the wall, brief glint of a bared tooth. In the darkness for an instant an intimation of agony and anguish, and the night flinches. Now he scales the wall, creeps under the window, grinning. In the shadow of the tower he squats, wrapped in a black cloak, waiting for the dawn. Comes the knocking, the pinched voice, the sly light step on the stair, and how is it that I alone can hear the water dripping at his heels?

*One that would speak with you, Canon.*

No! No! Keep him hence! But he will not be denied. He drags himself into the corner where night's gloom still clings, and there he hangs, watching. At times he laughs softly, at others lets fall a sob. His face is hidden in his cloak, all save the eyes, but I recognize him well enough, how would I not? He is the ineffable thing. He is ineluctable. He is the world's worst. Let me be, can't you!

So began my introduction to the fiction of John Banville, reading this excerpt included among other excerpts by great Irish authors which lay under glass down the center of the Long Hall at Trinity. The language leapt through my eyes and latched onto my soul. I had to read more by this Banville; I had to learn what this ineffable, ineluctable thing was. In the course of reading all of the fictional works of John Banville, my intuitive notion grew into a theory, one which I proposed to Banville at two meetings during the summer of 1993 and at which he explained some of what was going on in his own life during the writing of

*Ghosts*. As Banville grappled with ghosts beginning to make themselves evident in his own life, an episode deeply connected with the loss of his parents, Banville's character, Freddie Montgomery reappeared to meet the physical embodiment of his own haunted self. Finally, in *Athena*, Banville's completion of the Montgomery trilogy, Freddie confronts the mental makings of his specters, of himself. But Freddie Montgomery, as he attempts to lay to rest old ghosts, is a recurring figure not only in the three novels in which he figures—*Book of Evidence*, *Ghosts*, and *Athena*—but, in a sense, Freddie and his shadow self appear as archetypes in all of Banville's fiction, creating an allegorical tale that is long overdue for attention, especially with regard to its Irish nature. Using Jung's concept of the Shadow combined with the implications of Chaos Theory, I analyze the story beneath the stories—the Irish allegory—in the fiction of John Banville, a premier Irish novelist.

For twenty-five years, Banville's protagonists have tried to come to grips with the other brother/shadow self. If the protagonist can come to grips with the shadow figure he can create, for a moment, order in his chaotic world, as do Gabriel Godkin, Copernicus, Kepler. When the character fails to embrace the brother/other self, he destroys and self-destructs, as do Gabriel Swan, Victor Maskell and, for a time, Freddie Montgomery.

In each of these novels, the protagonist's sense of self is linked to another character who acts as the embodiment of the shadow, a character who is either an actual brother or an oppositional twin of the self. While the self of the protagonist is the "organizing dominant" of the novel, meaning the self provides the "function or aspect of the consciousness" through which the story is told, the shadow provides the archetype that lends meaning to the narrative (Jung, *Symbols* 391). Jung defines, "By shadow I mean the 'negative' side of the personality, the sum of all those unpleasant qualities we like to hide, together with the insufficiently developed functions and the contexts of the personal unconscious" ("Unconscious" 66n). Certainly the shadows of Banville's protagonists do appear to be negative and unpleasant on the whole and suffering from, at the least, an insufficiently developed sense of morality. In *Birchwood*, Michael, Gabriel's supposed cousin but actual twin, knows the secrets protagonist Gabriel Godkin works to uncover, but his hatred sends Gabriel on a long quest for a non-existent sister-twin only to bring him back to destruction and murder at Birchwood. Protagonist Nicholas Copernicus says of his older brother Andreas, who rots into a death brought on by syphilis, "You Andreas? What was there in you? You despised and betrayed me, made my life a misery. Wherever I turned you were there, blighting my life, my work" (Banville, *Copernicus* 240). Moving into an increasingly complex construction of the shadow other/brother self in *Kepler*, Banville provides protagonist Johannes Kepler with a brother, Heinrich, whom he loves above all his siblings but who resents him the way only an opposite can. Heinrich fought in the wars and suffers from a continually seeping wound. Additionally, he is a man who finds pleasure among the common folk and values magic above science in a world "he had never quite learned how to manage" (94), the complete antithesis of his socially established, scientist brother whose faith and morality is measured only by his reasonable attempts to learn how the universe works. But Johannes Kepler may have another oppositional twin in the person of Felix Jeppes, a worldly and untrustworthy Italian whom Kepler heals of a grievous wound and who teaches Kepler, "Life, life, that was it! In the Italian he seemed to know at last, however vicariously, the splendid and exhilarating sordidness of life" during the time that they share "a kind of awful comradeship" (69). These wounded hateful shadows that know the sordidness of life become more metaphorically related by the writing of Mefisto. Gabriel Swan knows that his own twin died at birth, but sees in Felix (this name begins to recur here) what is perhaps the

twin soul reborn in opposition. Felix is Gabriel's nemesis whose appearance precedes destruction on both a grand and personal scale: Gabriel's first layer of skin is blown off and his beloved Sophie killed in an explosion orchestrated by Felix, he turns to drugs to deal with the pain, and he watches his new beloved succumb to the same drugs. During *The Book of Evidence*, protagonist Freddie Montgomery does not recognize his shadow, so that the only doubling given is of Freddie's own self, creating a struggle in which beast wins and leads Freddie to commit murder. But by *Ghosts*, Felix is back as the shadow, taunting Freddie with what he seems to know of his past, an omniscience indicative of Felix's Mephistophelian character in both *Mefisto* and *Ghosts*. While Freddie will rid himself of Felix by the end of *Ghosts* (or seemingly), Francie will play a similarly ominously knowing and deliciously low character in Freddie's third book, Banville's *Athena*. Significantly, the names of the protagonist and his oppositional shadows in the trilogy all begin with "F," especially telling when we consider that Freddie's female obsession, his anima, he calls simply "A," the letter alluding to Athena—goddess of wisdom—or Alpha, a sense of going back to the beginning, to confronting more forthrightly his anima, his shadow, his ghosts. In an important sense A and all of the Fs are all part of Freddie, whether his shadow, his anima, or self. In his most recent novel, *The Untouchable*, Banville's protagonist, Victor Maskell, a spymaster who has masked his nature—"Have I any authenticity at all? Or have I double dealt for so long that my true self has been forfeit?" (317)—is haunted by the death of his oppositional and simple-minded brother, Freddie, a name that recalls the Montgomery trilogy in one more deft mirroring of the shadow self that inhabits Banville's oeuvre.

Having established that for each of Banville's protagonists there exists a shadow/other brother who seems the negative side to the story of the self—a notion which will be challenged by the rest of the story, we must consider the effect of the shadow's power on the self, especially when the self is dealing with the shadow only at the level of unconscious. Jung writes, "Somewhere we have a sinister and frightful brother, our own flesh-and-blood counterpart, who holds and maliciously hoards everything that we would so willingly hide under the table" ("Unconscious" 39). What remains under the table for Banville's protagonists include such information as the details of one's birth and familial relationships, one's sexual proclivity, one's dependence on external stimulation, one's schizophrenic desires born of repression. These dark areas in the lives of the protagonists can not afford to remain without critical illumination or the dark threatens to engulf. Jung acknowledges, "A dim premonition tells us that we cannot be whole without this negative side, that we have a body which, like all bodies, casts a shadow, and that if we deny this body we cease to be three-dimensional and become flat and without substance" ("Unconscious" 30). Jung goes further and insists that the beast (the shadow) and the moral consciousness (the self) must merge because if they don't, if the shadow is denied, such a repression may lead to "the risk of disorganizing man's animal nature at the deepest level" (31). The deepest level would certainly include what appears to be an almost motiveless, amoral murder such as Freddie Montgomery commits in *Book of Evidence*. The disorganization of man's animal nature does not dissolve it, but lets loose the animal without any creatively imposed order in the midst of the chaos.

The reign of chaos is what Banville's protagonists fight against without knowing that they are fighting against themselves, against their own shadows. As Janice E. Drane describes the worlds within which these protagonists move, the notion of chaos comes up again and again. She writes of "the chaotic and confining nature" of *Birchwood's* Gabriel Godkin, "the meticulous recreation of the chaotic world in which the scientist [Copernicus]

lived," and Kepler's struggle in light of his obsession with "a perfectly ordered universe" (3-4). Rutger Imhof notes that Gabriel Godkin, Copernicus, Kepler, and Gabriel Swan are all "convinced that, even though the world is chaotic, there are moments, rare moments, when some order, some aspect of the quiddity of life shines through" (55-56). In a 1988 interview with Jean W. Ross, Banville speaks of the notion of order as impacting not only his characters but himself and his world: "I think that, as Wallace Stevens says, we have a rage for order, and I think that must have been built into me from the start." Interestingly, rather like his protagonists, Banville claims to deal with this subject at an unconscious level: "[the rage for order] is not a kind of conscious artistic motivation or methodology that one uses" (6). So if the issue of order is not the conscious dominant of these narrative selves, what is? Aren't Banville's protagonists all trying to achieve some order in their personally chaotic world? As James Gleick, author of *Chaos: Making a New Science*, notes, the idea of order in chaos has been one of the most treasured notions, or, as he calls it, "science's oldest cliché" (157). But what if there is no order in the traditional sense? Gleick writes, "Where Chaos begins, classical science stops" (3). What if the Chaos theorists are right that creation comes out of chaos, that creativity comes to life in the tension implied by unruly freedom, that chaos creates patterns of irregular beauty and power rather than being governed by imposed order? Then there is still order but order born out of embracing the chaotic rather than fighting against it. Here science learns from art new patterns of unique shape that imply new styles, just as Joyce or Beckett or Banville refuse the normative novel pattern, their chaos creating new patterns rather than accepting an imposed order.

Chaos Theory lends insight into Banville's construction of his shadowed protagonists, his chaotic fictional worlds, because it opens new dimensions of possibility that merge art and science rather than leaving them in defined opposition. As Banville explains to Ross, science appeals to him not as science,

but as a mode of thought and as a way of dealing with the world, it attracts me very much because it seems to me very like art. Scientists seem to think in the same way that artists do. You asked me earlier about the notion of order. Copernicus and Kepler certainly were obsessed with the notion that they could find the secret order of the universe, and it seems to me that this is what artists try to do all the time. It's an absolutely impossible task. It can't be done, because I don't really believe that there is any order. But it's the pathos of that quest that fascinates me, the pathos of highly intelligent human beings who know that the world is built on chance but are still going ahead, saying, I will not accept this: I'm going to manufacture order, if necessary, and impose it on the chaos. (7)

Banville himself has now led our attention back to the protagonist, that pathetic individual who struggles to impose order on chaos, but the focus is not the unbelievably-in order, as Banville notes, but the character himself.

If the self of the protagonist is then the dominant focus of the narrative, but the unconscious underlying issue chaotically swirls around impossible order, we may return to the Jungian concept of the shadow/other brother to bring the dominant narrative and the unconscious thematics together in a uniquely Banvillian pattern. Facing the brother/shadow provides healing in the ruptured world of the protagonist, creates some order out of the mental chaos. In Jung's own definition of the shadow, his use of the term "negative" may have some negative connotations which he does not intend, just as the term "chaos" calls up

negative images. As Gleick observes, “The irregular side of nature, the discontinuous and erratic side—these have been puzzles to science, or worse, monstrosities” (3). Both Jung and Gleick respectively note that there is positive potential in the shadow and the chaos. But the self must locate the shadow in the chaos, embrace both the shadow and the chaos to produce a more vibrant pattern. As Jung explains,

there is no energy unless there is a tension of opposites; hence it is necessary to discover the opposite to the attitude of the conscious mind. . . .

Seen from the one-sided point of view of the conscious attitude, the shadow is an inferior component of the personality [one might read chaotic aberration] and is consequently repressed through intensive resistance. But the repressed content must be made conscious so as to produce a tension of opposites, without which not forward movement is possible. The conscious mind is on top, the shadow underneath; and just as high always longs for low and hot for cold, so all consciousness, perhaps without being aware of it, seeks its unconscious opposite, lacking which it is doomed to stagnation, congestion, and ossification. Life is born only of the spark of opposites. (“Unconscious” 53-54)

And so to comprehend the patterns of chaos, the protagonist must comprehend the darkness in his own nature, must face his shadowed self to walk in both the light and shadow of this world. By the end of all but one of these novels, the protagonist succeeds in confronting his other/brother self. Gabriel Godkin meets Michael, his evil twin dressed in a white gown that shatters the illusion of the sought-after non-existent sister, and engages in a death defying, knife fight. By the end of the battle, Gabriel stands triumphant over his brother and himself, no longer needing to kill his evil other, allowing Michael to literally back into the shadows, but now knowing this other self exists, knowing its nature and how to live with it. Lying on his deathbed, Nicholas Copernicus at last faces and comprehends the ghost of his decayed brother Andreas, who speaks the truth about life to the scientist who had forgotten how to live, who had not known what was needed for his own completion. And what is that truth, that ineffable thing that lurked in the shadows? As Andreas tells his brother, “we *are* the truth” (252). He goes on to explain,

You thought to transcend the world, but before you could aspire to that loftiness your needs must have contended with . . . well, brother, with what?  
. . . .With me, brother! I was that which you must contend with. I was the one absolutely necessary thing, for I was there always to remind you of what you must transcend. I was the bent bow from which you propelled yourself beyond the filthy world. (253)

Nicholas accepts his shadow self during this dialogue vision and even importantly learns that the shadow is indeed himself: Andreas’ ghost, now seen as “the angel of redemption,” tells him forthrightly, “It is not I who have said all these things today, but you” (254). Nicholas, having let his mind reel with sickness and chaos, has at last confronted his true nature in its entirety and may himself slip into the shadow of death having found peace at last. Kepler and Gabriel Swan will echo Copernicus and Gabriel Godkin, though the battle of each will be increasingly a battle against self. Kepler, the most successfully integrated, learns how to be human while battling with scientific, religious and domestic forces that

force him to confront his own darkness. On the other end of the spectrum, nearly destroyed and party to the destruction of those they love, Gabriel Swan and Victor Maskell are at least reborn with a clearer vision of the workings of chaos and evil, a better understanding that life, unlike math or spy games, cannot be calculated. But what of the one exception, the one seemingly total failure, Freddie Montgomery?

Banville lets the pattern puddle and shift, allowing Freddie three books in his struggle. In *Book of Evidence*, Freddie has denied so much of his own nature that he cannot love nor really live, only rage at the world in an unexpected eruption born of his repression. At the end of the book, he is both a convicted murderer and a shamed man, one who has failed to comprehend the dark side in time to live with it creatively. But Banville brings his failed protagonist back in *Ghosts*, doing something more here than in all of his preceding books.<sup>1</sup> While on an isolated island, recently paroled from prison, Freddie encounters new characters who mingle with memories from his past—a wife figure, child, victim, and a shadow brother named Felix who seems to know all about him. In an eruption of creative chaos within what had been a thinly-veiled, ordered and closed community until the arrival of the strangers, the dichotomous nature of Freddie is healed during a confrontation with Felix. Freddie bids Felix leave, and he does for the moment. Significantly, not only is Freddie healed, but the others who have come to the island experience their own healing as members of this chaotic community. By the end, all, even Freddie, are prepared to leave the isolation of the island and venture back to the world's mainland. With Banville's completion of the trilogy, *Athena*, Freddie is back in the real world, still dealing with ghosts, but knowing his dark side and seeing the shadow in others too, and ready for the first time to love, to try out a new pattern.

Banville's novels do not follow a traditional pattern: the language puddles and shimmers; linear time refracts; characters struggle for order but find themselves forced to the truth in chaos, creating out of chaos harmony with their shadow selves. Though Banville's works have been called "incontestably non-Irish" (Imhof 7), I would contest that description. Is Ireland not a land for which the historical narrative ceases to be linear, a land in which protagonists must learn to come to grips with the other brother, the shadow self? The answer seems chaotically clear to me. But must we only look north or confine ourselves to the Irish island to see this pattern at work in our world? Perhaps our own comprehension of Banville's fictional pattern should shift, allowing us to recognize that Banville is both an Irish writer who writes of present-day Ireland in a new way and he is a writer who destroys notions of defined borders for national identities, for novels, for individuals in this global community filled with shadow and light.

## Notes

1. Though *The Untouchable* chronologically follows the Montgomery trilogy in Banville's publication history, the story harks back to the first episode, *Book of Evidence*, in two ways: the use of an actual news story as the basis for the protagonist's fictional memoir, and the appearance of yet another Freddie but in the guise of the oppositional brother in this instance. Like Banville's fiction up to *Book of Evidence*, the protagonist in *The Untouchable* meets with his shadow self (his multiple natured-self and betrayal of his brother as well as his spiritual brother, Nick, who has betrayed him) just preceding his own death—a release into the chaos in a pattern that all the fiction up to *Ghosts* had already established. Thus, *Ghosts* creates a departure whereas *The Untouchable* works as a return to the pre-existing Banvillian pattern.

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