

THE QUEST FOR GOD IN THE NOVELS OF JOHN BANVILLE 1973-2005: A POSTMODERN SPIRITUALITY

Brendan McNamee

Lewiston, Queenston, Lampeter: The Edwin Mellen Press. 2006

(by Violeta Delgado Crespo. Universidad de Zaragoza)

violedel@unizar.es

121

As McNamee puts it in his study, it seems that “the ultimate aim of Banville’s fiction is to elude interpretation” (6). It is perhaps this elusiveness that ensures a growing number of critical contributions on the work of a writer who has explicated his aesthetic, his view of art in general, and literature in particular, in talks, interviews and varied writings. McNamee’s is the seventh monographic study of John Banville’s work published to date, and claims to differ from the previous six by widening the cultural context in which the work of the Irish writer has been read. Although, to my knowledge, John Banville has never defined himself in these terms, McNamee portrays him as an essentially religious writer (13) when he foregrounds the deep spiritual yearning that Banville’s fiction exhibits in combination with the many postmodern elements (paradox and parody, self-reflexivity, intertextuality) that are familiar in his novels. To McNamee, Banville’s enigmatic fictions allow for a link between the disparate phenomena of pre-modern mysticism and postmodernism, suggesting that many aspects of the postmodern sensibility veer toward the spiritual. He considers the language of Banville’s fiction intrinsically mystical, an artistic form of what is known as apophatic language, which he defines as “the mode of writing with which mystics attempt to say the unsayable” (170). In terms of style, Banville’s writing approaches the ineffable: that which cannot be paraphrased or described.

Rather than attempting to cover each text in full, McNamee's analysis hinges around four interpretative elements which he nevertheless considers secondary to the aim of tracing the elusiveness that characterises the Banvillean world. In his introduction, he starts by elucidating the terms "significance" and "meaning", a distinction which pervades the whole of Banville's fiction, meaning being the futile imperative of consciousness to translate significance, a pre-linguistic sensation (2). This afflicts most of the main characters, struck by a sense of significance in the world around them, but unable to accommodate it into the schemes they devise to understand reality. Lying at the root of this failure is the theme of the divided self, which torments Banville's protagonists, and to which McNamee gives a religious dimension in as far as religion implies the desire for union, for a more perfect, complete version of the self. To him, all characters are "searching for God in a world where no god is to be found" (3). The third theme inherent in the previous two is that of conflict as consciousness of the fact that representations of the world or of the self only provide (usually unconvincing) analogues for the real world.

The last issue, the relationship between mysticism and postmodernism occupies a chapter of its own (Chapter 1). This novel linkage allows for an exploration of the spirituality of the postmodernist desires of Banville's characters. Both the mystical and the postmodernist are aware of the inadequacy of language to encompass reality, the difference being that the mystic believes that there is a reality, while the postmodernist believes the opposite. Banville's fiction lies in the middle: reality is neither present nor absent, but suspended. Thus, Banville's characters are driven by the need to replace a powerfully felt absence. McNamee extends this drive to Banville's project and his use of language, which can be said to be apophatic (instead of cataphatic or paraphrasable) in that it is not about anything, it just *is* (31). When apophatic language is used the referential element is suspended, style becomes an event in itself, the fiction turns into a "supreme fiction", with its mystical overtones: "Through the medium of literature, the referential becomes the reverential, and the fiction becomes supreme" (35). And this is the only medium through which presence can be recovered, the presence of the particular, which is where the essence of Banville's project lies: to articulate nothing but to display the particular in all its splendour.

This original theoretical exposition is successfully combined with references to particular characters and events from the novels. However, as the book proceeds to survey the texts consecutively and separately, often close stylistic analysis and more conventional critical discussion take over leaving the philosophical and theological contexts propounded slightly in suspension. There are exceptions: the chapters devoted to the first two volumes of the "Science Tetralogy" and to the "Art Trilogy", Chapters 3 and 6 respectively, where the analysis is focused from this illuminating critical perspective.

Previous critical discussion on *Dr. Copernicus* (1976) and *Kepler* (1981) has hinged around the theme of the nature of scientific and artistic pursuits, evidencing the ordering impulse that underlies both discourses. Here McNamee introduces the element of religion, as he identifies the main characters' desire for order and perfection with mystic rapture. The two astronomers desire to reach absolute reality, a mystic state of plenitude (religion), through relative phenomena and therefore through a constructed necessary lie (science). In other words, they are souls seeking God through science. They are tempted to believe that the forms they create are real, but this confusion is necessary to arrive at the truth of accommodation. This shows Banville's work occupying a middle ground between mysticism and postmodernism. McNamee also argues that the novels conflate science, religion and art to "bring out the ludic qualities" (65) in all three forms of ordering chaos.

The study is at its most innovative in the chapter that deals with the three volumes of the "Art Trilogy": *The Book of Evidence* (1989), *Ghosts* (1993), and *Athena* (1995), as McNamee considers their symbolic perspective. He introduces the idea of the visionary dimension of the story that opens the Trilogy, the brutal murdering of an innocent young woman as told by her remorseless killer, Freddie Montgomery. As has often been pointed out in many critical approaches to the novel, Montgomery identifies his worst, most shameful crime as a crime of the imagination, that he never imagined the young woman and thus failed to perceive her in all her alterity. That an act of imagination would be enough for atonement is questionable at a realistic level. McNamee points out that it only makes sense in a vision of life that escapes the (Cartesian/Christian) world of crime and punishment (the world of time and space and referential language), a vision which has to be associated with a pre-Socratic mythological landscape. From this perspective, the victim acquires a symbolic dimension and the murder represents "the loss of belief in certainty and in the ability of Socratic knowledge (dialectic reasoning, science, logic) to fully comprehend the world" (154). In this light, Montgomery's torment is the realisation that his act of murder has permanently exiled him from the world. The suspended narrative that follows, *Ghosts*, is Montgomery's apophatic attempt to ease the pain of exile; and the volume that closes the Trilogy, *Athena*, is devoted to an absence (of the real, of the world, of the other) that is felt, and so must be spoken in the form of a long letter to a symbolic A. (a woman whose I-status as real or imaginary remains ambiguous from beginning to end).

Part of McNamee's book runs along the trodden path of the accepted wisdom on Banville, overlooking the focus suggested by its title. In addition, as is common in previous approaches to this writer's fiction (with few exceptions), one has the feeling that sometimes characters are mere mouthpieces for authorial ideas, that

Reviews

there is no room for any ideological distance between the author and his work. A further shortcoming might be that it is slightly disconcerting to find an occasional incomplete or missing reference (likewise, as bibliographical lists on John Banville proliferate, a list of “works cited” would be more clarifying than a bibliography). Nevertheless McNamee’s comprehensive study is still a highly worthwhile and original contribution in that it manages to pinpoint the element that has always made Banville’s work fall short of being labelled ‘postmodern’: its deep spirituality, an unspoken spirituality that transcends any cultural movement, this mysterious, elusive something that keeps attracting more and more critical and reader attention.

Received: 22 November 2007