Neil Murphy, *John Banville*

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Neil MURPHY, *John Banville*, coll. Contemporary Irish writers, Lanham (Maryland, USA), London (UK): Bucknell University Press, 2018, 236 p., \$95.00.

This monograph bearing on John Banville's work – as its title clearly suggests – is the most recent and comprehensive assessment of the fiction written by a major Irish writer who won the Booker Prize for fiction, for his novel entitled *The Sea* in 2005.

The main achievement accomplished by this study is that it manages to reconcile two seemingly contradictory interpretations or aesthetic agendas observable in Banville's work: one heading in a postmodernist, experimental, deliberately transgressive direction, the other blatantly retaining the traditional elements of plot and what is more, an elaborate syntax and a florid lexicon usually synonymous with or redolent of a far more conventional, not to say conservative or realist brand of literature – two dodgy adjectives by many contemporary critics' standards.

Murphy insightfully identifies the initially playful, postmodernist, innovative roots of Banville's fiction. He revisits all his early work, from *Long Lankin* (1970 revised edition published in 1984) and *Birchwood* (1973) to the scientific tetralogy (*Doctor Copernicus* 1976, *Kepler* 1981, *The Newton Letter* 1982, and *Mefisto* 1986). To shed light on this early fiction, Murphy uses the enlightening Jamesian concept of the *house of fiction* to account for novels which essentially mimicked, and played with the codes of historiographical fiction – be it that of Irish history through the *Big House* motif belonging to the land-owning Protestant ascendancy or that informing the narration of scientific revolutions ranging from the Copernican epistemological breakthrough to Kepler's astronomical discoveries. Murphy cogently shows that *The Newton Letter* and *Mefisto* marked a rupture and already bore testimony to Banville's growing awareness of the futility of both referential research and of purely metafictional games. Very early in his writer's career, Banville understood that both narratives that aspire to fully describe reality and those which satirize the aporia constituted by representational literary endeavours were equally doomed to an aesthetic/artistic sort of cul-de-sac. Still, as Murphy reminds us “[a]lthough Banville repeatedly affirms the artificiality of art in his work he always retains a belief in the power of art to signify something for life”. (51) Feeding on the notion that art has to be *significant* rather than *meaningful*, Murphy explains Banville's idiosyncratic creative philosophy quoting from an interview given by Banville to Travis Elborough: “All [...] art attempts to do is to quicken the sense of life, to make vivid for the reader the mysterious predicament of being alive for a brief span in this exquisite and terrible world” (41). In chapter 2, Murphy goes on to explain how Banville got to deliberately appro-

priate, recycle and emulate aesthetic processes borrowed from the visual arts, and most notably painting, illustrating this preoccupation through the mentioning of fictional painters such as the near-anagrammatic though brilliantly plausible *Jean Vaublin* or real ones like Nicolas Poussin or Pierre Bonnard.

In his 3rd chapter, Murphy posits –with many other critics– that *The Sea* is Banville's absolute *chef-d'œuvre*. But he goes on to demonstrate why in a convincing manner. To Murphy, *The Sea* epitomizes the perfect merger of a seemingly realist plot with cleverly reflexive, ambivalent elements underlining the autonomous, *gratuitous* and graceful beauty of art *per se*. The careful and painstaking analysis of recurring motifs such as ekphrastic descriptions echoing both real paintings and characters, static descriptions of landscapes turning into moments of eternity or mysterious tableaux, doubled by the leitmotif of twins, Doppelgänger-like figures, reinforced by the ambivalent and indecidable shift and permutation of viewpoints between the unreliable narrator and the author's diverse *alter egos* etc. help Murphy make his point in a compelling fashion.

Chapter 4 further investigates the playful notion of self-reflexivity, in what has become known as *The Cleave Trilogy* drawing its revealing name from its ambivalent character actor Alexander Cleave, underlining the reading of the world as a stage, where only the surface is accessible. Chapter 5 explores Banville's intertextual debt to the German poet and playwright Heinrich von Kleist [1777-1811], especially in his 2009 novel *The Infinities* and in his three plays *The Broken Jug* (1994), *God's Gift: A Version of Amphitryon by Heinrich von Kleist* (2000) and eventually *Love in the Wars* (2005). Here, Murphy aptly identifies the omnipresent trope of puppetry and the key-theme of inescapable confusion at the world's intrinsic strangeness, which characterize both writers in the midst of what Denis Donoghue appropriately calls the “disinterestedness of the world”, what Murphy rephrases as “the world's essential indifference” (15).

Chapter 6 probably presents the boldest contention in the monograph, asserting that the crime novels written by Banville under the deliberately all too obvious pseudonym of Benjamin Black, far from being “Banville-lite”, actually explore the very same “veiled and deceptive nature of things”, the same radical strangeness of the world, through identical devices and techniques of defamiliarization, as theorized by the Russian formalist theorist Viktor Shklovsky [1893-1984]. It is to be noted that Murphy always bolsters his reasoning and demonstrations by quoting from the most relevant critics, ranging from Etienne Gilson to Gordon Graham as regards aesthetics and art history. As regards crime fiction, after quoting extensively from John Scaggs to question and redefine the characteristics of the crime fiction genre, Murphy very elegantly reminds the reader of what is usually truly at stake through this kind of fiction by quoting from Jon Thompson: “[...]crime fiction dramatizes the contradictory experience of moder-

nity” (164) To Murphy, though the high degree of self-consciousness Banville exhibits elsewhere is less obvious when he uses the Black persona, the same aesthetic agenda finally prevails all the same, preventing his work from being politically or socially motivated.

To cut a long story short: fiction or art according to Banville – be it crime fiction or high-brow cryptic satirical historiographic novels – doesn’t and cannot attempt to render reality faithfully. Neither can it produce meaning. But art has to be *significant*. As a matter of fact, as Murphy demonstrates, reality is always shaped by our imagining minds. Art allows us to catch a glimpse of this counterintuitive but eternal Banvillean truth: the uncanny precedence of imagination over reality.

This book reads well and will certainly help all aspiring or well-established Banville scholars refine or qualify their analyses. There is no doubt it will come in handy to understand this complex and heavily interwoven body of work created by Banville/Black. It certainly proves to be a useful and up-to-date –not to say indispensable–complement to the previous insightful studies written by Derek Hand, Joseph McMinn, Rüdiger Imhof and others.

Thierry ROBIN

Mauyen KEANE¹, *Love Without Border in War-Torn Europe: An Irishwoman’s Story*, Oxford: The Onslaught Press, 2018, (revised ed. of *Hello, Is it All Over?* (1984), 110 p., €12.

Love Without Borders is a memoir of multiple stories. It is a war-time romance between an Irish nurse and a German Soldier that crossed borders and transgressed societal norms. It is also a story of emigration and a personal recollection of the Second World War.

Mauyen Keane begins her story with her departure from home. There are some hints about what was being left behind. Her family could afford to keep a ‘favourite’ horse, unwittingly revealing the family had enough money and access to land to support multiple animals. They already had experience of emigration, her sister had previously left for the ‘mission fields’. Keane had been accepted to train as a nurse after leaving school. So the family must have been able to afford for her to stay on at school. Her decision to migrate also uncovers the uncomfortable reality that De Valera was failing to meet his promise to lift the ‘doom

1. Mauyen Keane is Irish poet Gabriel Rosenstock’s mother.