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THE ART OF WRITING AND THE ART OF REMEMBERING IN *THE BOOK OF EVIDENCE*, *GHOSTS*, *ATHENA* AND *THE SEA* BY JOHN BANVILLE

What lies at the root of the novelists' inspiration for their books? As John Fowles writes, the first impulse for the creation of his most famous novel, *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, was the image of a woman standing alone on a quay and staring out to the sea (Fowles 136). It is out of this single image that Fowles created his female protagonist and the other characters, as well as the plot and the setting of his book.

Whereas with John Fowles it was the character that gave rise to the novel, for John Banville a novel is born with the creation of space, which only then becomes peopled with fictional characters. The primacy of location and setting in Banville's novels is well-known to his admirers, but not all of them realise that his philosophy of composition has its roots in the writer's youth. As a young man, Banville painted, and although he now considers the then pictures "hideous" (Banville 2009), it is clear that his mid-teen artistic period had a profound impact on his development as a writer. As he observes in an interview with Belinda McKeon,

[T]rying to be a painter did teach me to look at the world in a very particular way – looking very closely at things, at colours, at how things form themselves in space – and I've always been grateful for that. You have all this space, and you have a figure: what do you do with it? And in a way that's what all art is. How do we find a place for our creatures, or inventions, in this incoherent space into which we're thrown? (Banville 2009)

Banville's comment on the influence of art on his fiction is revealing. He highlights his attention to detail and his preoccupation with the positioning of his literary protagonists in space. In his view, this problem is not solely confined to the visual arts, but is also endemic to literature.

The last sentence of the quoted fragment deserves a closer look. Who does Banville mean by "we," and what is "this incoherent space" into which we are "thrown"? Does the writer mean our immediate reality, or perhaps the fictional world of a literary work? Irrespective of the answer, Banville's novels confirm one fact, which is an important introduction to an analysis of his works: many of his novels start with a detailed description of the setting, which frequently reflects the narrators' attitudes and states of mind. This is certainly the case not only with the "art trilogy" – *The Book of Evidence* (1989), *Ghosts* (1993) and *Athena* (1995) – but it is also true of his Booker-prize winning *The Sea* (2005).

As Banville suggests, the problem of space and the protagonists' positioning in it is common both to visual arts and literature. The parallel drawn by the author is an invitation to consider his novels from the vantage point of the visual arts and seek analogies between art and literature. Indeed, such an analysis of his books is already well under way: many critics have traced Banville's allusions to art and considered their significance for the interpretation of his works. There is widespread agreement that the reflections on art and many examples of ekphrasis in his novels have a self-reflexive role: they contain comments on their own linguistic and narrative identity,¹ and, more generally, on the process of writing itself.

It is less often observed that allusions to art in Banville's fiction may be considered as comments on memory and the ways of remembering (and narrating) the past. This observation will be an important starting point for the present analysis of *Athena* and *The Sea*, as both novels offer interesting comments on the functioning of human memory. Before discussing the role of memory in Banville's fiction, though, it is worthwhile to concentrate on the allusions to art in his "art trilogy," in order to demonstrate their role in these novels.

All three novels in the "art trilogy" are written in confessional discourse, defined here as a first-person narrative in which the author reveals intimate and sometimes shameful knowledge about himself.² *The Book of Evidence* is written in the discourse of a court testimonial, while *Ghosts* and *Athena* offer

¹ Linda Hutcheon defines metafiction as "fiction that includes within itself a commentary on its own narrative and/or linguistic identity" (1).

² The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines confession as "the disclosing of something the knowledge of which by others is considered humiliating or prejudicial to the person confessing" (2nd ed., Vol. III. Eds. Simpson J.A., and E.S.C. Weiner. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989: 703).

more intimate confessions, which are akin to private reflections in a diary. The narrator of all the novels is Frederick Charles St John Vanderveld Montgomery, commonly known as Freddie. Freddie is a moderately affluent and well-educated man. His lifestyle as a spendthrift leads him to financial troubles, which he tries to solve by committing a robbery. The makeshift plan of stealing a valuable painting from his friend's private collection is successful, but on his way out of the house, he is detained by a maid, the only witness of the theft. On the spur of the moment, Freddie decides to abduct the young woman. When she makes attempts to defend herself, he murders her. After several weeks spent in hiding, he is arrested and imprisoned. He writes his narrative in a prison cell, awaiting trial. *Ghosts* and *Athena* are a continuation of Freddie's story. After serving his ten-year sentence, he is released from prison and retires to a small island, where he assists an art professor in his research. *Athena*, the third book of the "art trilogy," is an account of Freddie's unwitting cooperation with a group of art frauds, and his love for one of its members.

In *The Book of Evidence* Freddie describes his encounter with a painting entitled *Portrait of a Woman with Gloves*. Although the title is fictitious, Freddie's detailed description of the picture corresponds with an actual painting entitled *Portrait of a Lady in Dark Blue*, whose authorship is generally attributed to Vermeer.³ When Freddie first comes across the painting in his friend's private collection, he is entranced. This is how he describes the woman depicted in it: "There is something in the way the woman regards me, the querulous, mute insistence of her eyes, which I can neither escape nor assuage [...]. It is as if she were asking me to let her live" (Banville, *The Book of Evidence* 105).

Although Freddie is aware that the unflinching gaze of the woman is only a result of the artist's genius – "only an organization of shapes and colours" (Banville, *The Book of Evidence* 105) – he reacts to her as if she were real, and, indeed, soon answers her plea to "let her live" by creating a narrative for her and, in this way, giving her a life in the readers' imagination. The following two pages are an elaborate example of ekphrasis, in which he presents a detailed imaginary account of the woman's life up to the moment of being painted. It is a glaring contradiction of the novel that Freddie's sensitive response to art is by no means reflected in his actions, as he murders the maid who disturbs him during robbery, callously explaining that he had no other

³ "Though unidentified in [*The Book of Evidence*], [the portrait] is based on an actual painting that Banville has identified as *Portrait of a Lady in Dark Blue*, a work, variously attributed, which hangs in the Museum of Fine Arts in Budapest. In general, the Dutch painter Vermeer (1632–1675) is credited, and the title of the painting, as in the Budapest museum catalogue, is sometimes given as *Portrait of a Woman*" (Kenny 158).

choice.⁴ The idea that art gives life to the fictional and the departed is the most important conceit of *Ghosts*, the second part of the “art trilogy.”

There is little by way of plot in *Ghosts*. The setting, by contrast, is an important aspect of the novel: the opening pages contain a detailed description of a small island on which several tourists are stranded. The first-person narrator, who calls himself “little god” (Banville, *Ghosts* 4), has Beckettian features: he hides behind the narrated world but shows his presence in short comments which point to the artificiality of this world.⁵ It is worthwhile to add that Freddie’s attempt to partly conceal his name is also visible in the third novel of the “art trilogy,” *Athena*, which will be discussed shortly. Here, Freddie makes a rather superficial gesture of hiding his name by changing it to Beckettian Morrow. This results not only from Freddie’s sense of his shameful past, but primarily from his desire to be someone else. In the latter sense, it is part of his continuous search for a new sense of identity.

In *Ghosts*, the identity of the narrator is first revealed in a story about Monsieur Hypothesis, who had murdered a woman, and was imprisoned and released after many years. By telling the story of the murder, Freddie lets his own mask slip off, simultaneously posing an ethical question of how to atone for his crime. As he says, it is impossible to “make proper restitution” because it is impossible to bring the person back to life. With this painful awareness, Freddie decides to fall back upon “the art of necromancy” (Banville, *Ghosts* 86), and to evoke the ghost of the murdered woman. He attempts to do this by writing his narrative, in which he is inspired by the presence of another young woman – a member of the group of tourists stranded on the island – who reminds him of the murdered maid. Freddie hopes that by observing this young woman and describing her thoughts and actions, he can somehow bring his victim back to life. His reaction to the young woman is not unlike his response to the *Portrait of a Woman with Gloves*. The process of restitution in Freddie’s case is then of aesthetic nature, and, as such, is confined to the realm of his imagination.

Banville’s declared philosophy of composition, with its tendency to focus on the landscape, confirms the primacy of the setting and the protagonists’ location in space in both mentioned novels. Indeed, much of Freddie’s narrative in *Ghosts* is devoted to the description of the landscape, in which he takes special delight, seeing nature as a shelter from the complicated world that lies

⁴ Rüdiger Imhof points to an interesting similarity between Freddie and Humbert Humbert in *Lolita*. As Imhof observes, “Humbert is an aesthete; however, his aesthetic attitude lacks humaneness, at least for the most part. Freddie is Humbert’s kith and kin” (Imhof 64).

⁵ One such example can be found at the beginning of the novel, when the narrator is introducing a minor character: “Croke took off his boater, or do I mean panama, yes, Croke took off his panama” (Banville, *Ghosts* 8).

outside the island. His attitude towards nature is one of silent communion: his contemplation of the sea leads him to a state of self-oblivion, in which he is no longer himself. Incidentally, the desire to be someone other than himself is a major driving force behind Freddie's case, and it is not only nature but also art that offers such refuge.

As critics have pointed out (Kenny 164, Hand 151), the artist who figures prominently in *Ghosts* is a French painter, and an important representative of the Baroque style, Jean-Antoine Watteau (1684–1721). Three of Watteau's paintings are crucial for the interpretation of Banville's novel. The first one is a portrait entitled *Pierrot, dit autrefois Gilles* (commonly referred to as *Gilles*). The painting, which depicts the well-known clown figure of Pierrot from *commedia dell'arte*, is described in detail by Freddie in Part Three of *Ghosts*. As critics have rightly pointed out, Pierrot serves as an ironical self-portrait of Freddie, who considers himself, similarly to Pierrot, an isolated and unfortunate individual.

The second painting to which Banville alludes is the classical Rococo *L'Embarquement pour Cythère*⁶ (*Pilgrimage to Cythera*), which is especially significant in the interpretation of the novel. Before comparing its settings and that of Banville's novel, a few details of the former might be useful. Watteau's painting shows an island full of young couples in courtship, a fitting topic, Cythera, an island in southern Greece, being known as the birthplace of Aphrodite. To the left of the painting, we can see a ship shadowed in mist, with the cupids circling above, while to the right there are three couples who linger on the island but will, no doubt, rejoin the others on the shore to embark the small ship. The painting is interpreted as an allegory of a voyage to the island of love, but, interestingly, critics are in disagreement as to whether the depicted young couples are leaving the island, or about to set sail for it.

Besides the obvious similarity of the setting, Watteau's painting and Banville's novel share the same theme of love and romance. Flora – the young woman shipwrecked with the others on the island – is an object of attention and affection for the other characters, including Freddie. Nonetheless, it is not on the motif of love and courtship that Freddie concentrates, but on the relation between art and life: "Such stillness," Freddie muses while contemplating the painting, "though the scene moves there is no movement" (Banville, *Ghosts* 95). To Freddie, art is the obverse of life in that, contrary to life,

⁶ Watteau painted two versions of this scene. The painting *L'Embarquement pour Cythère*, which he submitted to the Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture in 1717, "proved to be one of his masterpieces, and he was admitted to the Academy as a painter of 'fêtes galantes' – courtly scenes in an idyllic country setting" (Louvre website: <http://www.louvre.fr/en/oeuvre-notices/pilgrimage-cythera>). The second version of this painting can be found in the Charlottenburg Palace in Berlin.

which to him is shapeless and fluctuating, art depicts a world that is ordered and resistant to the passage of time. To Freddie, who believes that the world is only “the ceaseless, slow, demented drift of things” (Banville, *The Book of Evidence* 135), art gives a sense of order. Art freezes time, or, better still, it is the artist who freezes time at the most significant moment.

It is worth stressing that Freddie insists on using the word “significance” rather than “meaning.” Thus, when he describes a piece by a fictitious artist Vaublin, *Le Monde d’Or*, which closely resembles Watteau’s *L’Embarquement pour Cythère*, he comments that the painting is devoid of meaning: it has “only a profound and inexplicable significance.” In refusing to assign meaning to the painting, Freddie shows that his reaction to art is intuitive and emotional: his aim is not to understand the work but to experience it. His careful choice of words also conveys his attitude towards art and life, which he views as two wholly distinct realms. To Freddie, the term “meaning” cannot be applied to art because art’s role is not to mirror the reality: “Art imitates life not by mimesis but by achieving for itself a natural objectivity” (Banville, *Ghosts* 95). Due to the fact that artists create autonomous realities, their works should not be evaluated chiefly by reference to the world; in other words, they cannot be made to “mean” anything. Freddie prefers the term “significance” because it does not necessitate an evaluation criterion which is transcendent to the work itself.

Freddie’s preoccupation with art is also apparent in the third novel of the “art trilogy,” *Athena*. Here, as in *The Book of Evidence* and *Ghosts*, Freddie, who takes on the name of Morrow, shows his fascination with art, his constant search for a stable identity, and his fear of the ever-changing world. Being a careful observer of immediate reality, Freddie notes that it is impossible for him to make sense of the world precisely because of its dynamism. He rejects the scientific vision of the world, which deludes him with “moments of motionless and lucid insight,” because, in his opinion, no such insight is possible: “No, no, flux and flow, unstoppable, that’s all there is; it terrifies me to think of it” (Banville, *Athena* 71), he observes, adding that continuous inner monologue is his way of interpreting and “keeping up” with reality.

Ceaseless inner speech, especially clear in the “art trilogy,” is for Freddie a strategy of survival. His other way of dealing with the inherent mutability of the world is through contemplation of art, the latter strategy being much more fruitful and satisfying than the former. As in Beckett’s works, inner monologue provides him with scant self-knowledge, and brings little satisfaction. Contemplation of art, by contrast, can bring moments of deeper understanding, both of the self and the surrounding world. Unlike self-analysis, art enables Freddie not so much to escape from his own thoughts, as to view them from a distance. As he observes, in his contemplation of a paint-

ing or a sculpture he is “astray in the familiar otherwhere of art. Astray, yes, and yet somehow at the same time more keenly aware, of things and of [himself]” (Banville, *Athena* 81). Thus, the reality and the observer are both, as it were, transformed in an act of aesthetic reception so that they appear “quick with import and intent” (Banville, *Athena* 81). The world, which to Freddie is solely governed by the rule of change, through art becomes more ordered and purposeful. His contemplation of art largely results from his desire for order and harmony.

Aesthetic reception, as described in *Athena*, is a process closely based on the interplay of similarity and difference. The world created in a work of art both diverges from the reality and resembles it; in other words, it offers a vision of the world which is familiar, yet changed. Art, then, creates “a different version of reality” (Banville, *Athena* 83). On the basis of this observation, Freddie builds up his own curious metaphysics. Referring to the words of Theodor Adorno, he observes that art points to “the possibility of transcendence, both of the self and of the world” (Banville, *Athena* 105), a transcendence which is essentially religious because it is expected to happen “in a state of redemption.”⁷ Despite the move towards the metaphysical, to Freddie “transcendence” is confined to an aesthetic rather than a religious experience. An intense contemplation of a work of art can thus lead to transcendence, which although achieved, still leaves him looking not at what possibly exceeds his existence, but at what featured in it, and was, perhaps, obscure or misconstrued.

One thing that Freddie fails to fully grasp is his own past. He is, in this respect, no different from other confessional narrators in Banville’s fiction, whose attitude towards the past veers between fascination and frustration. Freddie’s attitude towards his life is heavily influenced by his philosophy of aesthetic reception: he believes that memory, like art, can freeze the past exactly at the moment when it is full of import and significance. In his narrative the past becomes primarily a series of lifelike and evocative images.

The images that haunt Freddie are primarily those of his beloved (known only by the first letter of her name: A.). His minute description of her appearance is reminiscent of his detailed ekphrases of famous works of art; indeed, at one point in his narrative he confesses that he treated A. as an intricate and fascinating masterpiece.⁸ After her mysterious disappearance, he takes up a task which is essentially an aesthetic one: he wants to secure each image

⁷ The sentence which Freddie quotes is taken from Adorno’s *Aesthetic Theory*: “In their relation to empirical reality works of art recall the theologoumenon that in a state of redemption everything will be just as it is and yet wholly different” (Banville, *Athena* 105).

⁸ As Freddie writes, addressing his beloved, “I walked around you, stroking my chin and frowning, as if you were a problem in perspective, a puzzle-picture such as the Dutch

from his past in order to “preserve it in the crystal of remembrance” (86). As is the case with art, immutability here becomes the most important criterion: Freddie is at pains to recreate his past as if it were a series of separate stills from a silent movie.

Freddie’s confessional narrative is interrupted several times in order to make room for the ekphrases of seven paintings by fictitious artists, all of which concentrate on mythological scenes: *Pursuit of Daphne*, *The Rape of Proserpine*, *Pygmalion*, *Syrinx Delivered*, *Capture of Ganymede*, *Revenge of Diana* and *Acis and Galatea*. The ekphrases of those works are succinct and their role is to present the reader with information necessary for a true appreciation of those paintings. Although the identity of the author of those descriptions is not clear at first, the similarities between the themes of the paintings and those of the book itself – love, desire and loss – suggest that it is Freddie himself. Those suspicions are fully confirmed in the fourth ekphrasis, in which the narrator interrupts the impersonal discourse of art criticism and suddenly switches to confessional monologue, addressing A. with a personal comment. As he begins to combine the two modes of expression – one pertaining to the world of art and the other to that of his own past – the reader may have the impression that the two discourses are about to merge: art criticism becomes a mode of expression which conveys his strong feelings of regret and loss, while his confessional discourse, with its concentration on images, becomes an elaborate form of art criticism.

What fascinates Freddie in both art and memory is time. He believes that memory, like art, can freeze time and turn events from the past into images. Recollections of the past events are presented as a movement back in time, but it is worth pointing out that the opposite movement may also be applied to imagine the workings of memory. To Henri Bergson, the movement of memory is primarily progressive: we bring forth the past from the unconscious “pure memory” into the present by forming our recollections into images. The memory of past events becomes “materialized in an actual perception” and “becomes a present, active state” (Bergson 239). In short, the past is made present to us by means of mental images.

Banville’s prose strongly echoes Bergson’s comments on the workings of memory. For the narrators of his novels – Freddie in the “art trilogy” and Max Morden in *The Sea* – the memories of the past events are made so tangible and realistic in the process of writing that they become a reality of their own in the present. Like the confessional discourse and the discourse of art criticism, the two distinct realities – the writer’s past and his immediate sur-

miniaturists used to do, which would only yield up its secret when viewed from a particular, unique angle” (Banville, *Athena* 154).

roundings – are so closely interrelated in the narrators' minds that they have a direct influence on each other. The reality and, most importantly, the immediate surroundings, evoke memories which, in turn, modify their perception. As Bergson puts it in his famous metaphor, memory covers “with a cloak of recollections a core of immediate perception” (34). This mutual impact will be examined in greater detail in the ensuing discussion of *The Sea*.

The plot of *The Sea* is simple: the narrator Max Morden, an art historian, after the death of his wife, revisits a house near which he used to spend his summers as a child. During his visit he is reminded of the people whom he met on one of such occasions: an affluent and brilliant couple Mr. and Mrs. Grace, the twins Chloe and Myles – and their nursemaid, Rose. The carefree atmosphere of his summer holidays was interrupted by an argument between Chloe and Rose, as a result of which the twins walked into the sea, swam away and drowned. Alongside this story, with its tragic end, the reader learns about Max's relationship with his wife Anna, who died of cancer shortly before Max's retirement to the country. The two stories are intertwined in Max's narrative, and the three deaths are related at the end of the book.

Max shares at least two important features with other first-person narrators in Banville's fiction: he is in constant search of his true self, and he is obsessed with the passage of time. In fact, those two features are rooted in two of his greatest desires, both of which are discussed by him in relation to art. The first and the most important one is to be someone other than himself. Towards the end of his narrative, Max confesses that he had always felt hollow inside. As he writes pithily, “I was always a distinct no one, whose fiercest wish was to be an indistinct someone.” His relations with other people, and most importantly with his wife Anna, gave him a chance to become someone, because, as he observes, it is only in the eyes of other people that we create ourselves. As he confesses, he saw his wife as “the fairground mirror in which all [his] distortions would be made straight” (Banville, *The Sea* 216). Through his relationship with Anna, which was based on mutual love and acceptance, Max created a positive image of himself, which he affirmed and accepted. With Anna's death, he looks to other sources in the effort of reconstructing his lost identity.

Besides his childhood memories, to which Max devotes much of his attention, what helps him in the task of self-reconstitution is art. As an art critic, he makes constant references to the subject, and, in fact, identifies himself with certain artists, e.g. Van Gogh, in one of his self-portraits:

What my reflection most reminds me of [...] is that Van Gogh self-portrait, not the famous one with bandage and tobacco pipe and bad hat, but that one from an earlier series, done in Paris in 1887, in which he is bare-headed in a high collar and Provence-blue necktie with all ears intact, looking as if he has just emerged from some form

of punitive dousing, the forehead sloped and temples concave and cheeks sunken as from hunger; he peers out from the frame sideways, warily, with wrathful foreboding, expecting the worst, as so he should. (Banville, *The Sea* 130–131)

His detailed description of Van Gogh's painting corresponds to and makes up Max's own self-portrait: one that does not only capture his physique, but, more importantly, his experience – the “punitive dousing” being a reference to his mourning – and his desperate thoughts about the future. Thus, Van Gogh's self-portrait becomes an objective correlative of Max's sadness and his sense of loss after the death of his wife.

One more artist in whose works and life Max is interested is a French artist, Pierre Bonnard (1867–1947). As an expert on his art, Max has considerable knowledge both of his works and life. In a short biographical note on the painter, Max concentrates on Bonnard's love for his wife, Maria Boursin, whose portraits he continued to paint from memory even after her death in 1942. Bonnard's devotion to the memory of his wife enables Max to identify with the artist. When describing Bonnard's *Nude in the Bath, with Dog* – one of a whole series of his paintings depicting his wife bathing – Max rightly observes that the picture is slightly out of scale, its perspective being subordinated to the central figure of the woman. Likewise, Max's narrative is concentrated on his wife, and even the seemingly unrelated story of his childhood infatuation with Chloe, as well as her tragic end, may be read as a displaced story of Max's love for Anna.

Max writes about his wife's death with lyricism and poignancy. In what is perhaps the most evocative passage of the whole novel, he compares the gradual departure of his wife to swimming out and drowning in the sea: “First it was a blur on the horizon, the next minute we were in the midst of it, purblind and stumbling, clinging to each other” (Banville, *The Sea* 247). He compares himself and his wife to the twins he knew in his childhood: similarly to Myles, who followed Chloe into the sea, Max sees himself as his wife's silent companion in her last days. As the metaphor suggests, his sense of loss was so profound that he felt as if he empathically participated in it.

It is precisely the sense of loss that drives Max's narrative. It does not only refer to the death of his wife, but also to his painful awareness of the passage of time. Thus, transience and memory seem to be at the core of Max's attention to detail that characterizes his whole narrative. Just as according to Gaston Bachelard in his *Poetics of Space* “[m]emories are motionless, and the more securely they are fixed in space, the sounder they are” (9), memories in Max's narrative become a succession of images connected by the narrator's digressive logic of telling. This spatialization of memory may stem from the narrator's declared weakness: as he confesses in his narrative, the past,

the present and the future have begun to coalesce, so their order is not necessarily governed by the temporal succession of events. In this situation it is perhaps more logical for the narrator to organize the experiences of his life on a digressive rather than a temporal level: proceeding from one image to the next, following the flow of memory and imagination.

It would be false to claim that the concentration of images in *The Sea* results from Max's inability to order his past consistently on the time axis. By seeing the past in terms of images Max attempts to rediscover the thoughts, feelings and emotions that he experienced at a given moment in time. In a memorable passage he describes one of his first encounters with the enchanting Mrs. Grace. Although he cannot remember exactly what the woman was doing in the living room, he pictures her in the process of arranging flowers in a vase and is so delighted at the image that he decides to prolong the moment and "linger here with her a little while" (Banville, *The Sea* 86) before his memory takes him somewhere else. Max's tendency to present the scenes from his life as if they were paintings seems to be a part of his attempt to understand what was partly obscure to him at the time, such as his feelings for Mrs. Grace and his infatuation with Chloe.

What remains at the centre of his reflections is his wife, whom he failed to understand as fully as he would have wanted to. In her absence, his reflections on her can only rely upon his memory. Memory, however, does not render reality faithfully; instead, it idealizes reality as do Bonnard's paintings. Thus, Max poses the rhetorical question: "Why should I demand more veracity of vision of myself than of a great and tragic artist?" (Banville, *The Sea* 218). His question concludes this part of his meditations, and it seems that Max reconciles himself to the thought that memory will never convey a faithful image of the past.

For Max, the act of remembering the past is both comforting and painful. Although the feeling of loss is acute, there is in Max a kind of imperative to continue his recollections of the past. In the following passage Max compares his flashes of memory about his wife to a painting, which decays with the passing time: "Already the image of her that I hold in my head is fraying, bits of pigments, flakes of gold leaf, are chipping off. Will the entire canvas be empty one day?" (Banville, *The Sea* 215). Thus, the act of remembering his wife in his narrative is an attempt on his part to forestall the inevitable erosion of memory. In another fragment Max compares himself to an artist who tries to enliven the past by "applying a dab of colour here, scumbling a detail there," yet he confesses that despite his efforts, his work remains "blurred" (Banville, *The Sea* 224), as the time seems to take away the desired accuracy. This, however, does not detract from the memories' impact on him; on the contrary, his desire to freeze the past into images and enliven them in his

narrative only intensifies the feelings he once experienced, both those of bliss and of profound loss.

Art in Banville's novels is primarily the struggle of an individual consciousness to give shape to the inherently chaotic universe. In this sense, the contemplation of art is invaluable because it shows the viewers how they can make sense of the surrounding reality. The artists' ability to transform the flow of time into images is paralleled by the narrators' ability to halt the temporal progression of their narration in order to ponder upon the scenes and images from the past that had a decisive influence on them. This ability is, of course, not exclusive to artists, but is shared by all people. It lies in the nature of thought to be able, to some extent, to resist the flow of time, enabling one to revisit the events that occurred in the past. In Banville's fiction, it is art that encourages such introspection and, in consequence, changes one's perception of one's life. Inspired by art, Banville's narrators work upon their own pasts in order to fashion them into coherent, meaningful narratives, which would have both an ethical and an aesthetic value. In a sense, the concentration on art has an important self-reflexive role in Banville's novels: it shows that writing, like painting, is always, to some extent, an art of remembering.

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