The Poetics of "Pure Invention": John Banville's Ghosts*

A Poética da "Invencão Pura": Ghosts, de John Banville

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Abstract: *This essay argues that John Banville's* Ghosts *(1993) may in fact be Banville's most technically inventive novel, replete as it is with multi-layered ontological levels that repeatedly bring its primary diegetic discourse into communion with other artistic forms – music, paintings, statues, as well as a narrative saturation with other literary antecedents that exceeds anything found elsewhere in his work.* Ghosts *demonstrates an implicit layering of dialectical levels, in effect a narrative enactment of the multiple worlds theory that so fascinates several of Banville's narrators. Nowhere else does he generate so comprehensive a model of a multi-level ontological system in which the levels intersect so purposefully as* Ghosts. *This essay maps out a topography of what is effectively a sophisticated fictional variant on the scientific multiple worlds theory in* Ghosts, *and offers some perspectives on the significance of this aesthetic model.*

Keywords: Ghosts*; pure invention; paintings; intertext; narrative; Vaublin.*

Resumo: *Este ensaio argumenta que* Ghosts *(1993), de John Banville, pode ser considerado o romance mais tecnicamente inventivo de Banville, repleto de níveis ontológicos com diversas camadas que trazem, repetidamente, seu discurso diegético primário em comunhão com outras formas artísticas – música, pinturas, estátuas, bem como uma saturação narrativa com outros antecedentes literários que excedem qualquer coisa encontrada em outro lugar em sua obra.* Ghosts *demonstra uma camada implícita de níveis dialéticos que são, de fato, uma encenação narrativa da teoria dos múltiplos mundos que tanto fascinam muitos dos narradores de Banville. Em nenhum outro lugar ele gera um modelo tão abrangente de um sistema ontológico com diferentes níveis que se cruzam tão propositadamente quanto em* Ghosts. *Este ensaio mapeia uma topografia do que é efetivamente uma variante fictícia sofisticada da teoria científica de múltiplos mundos em* Ghosts, *e oferece algumas perspectivas sobre a importância desse modelo estético.*

Palavras-chave: Ghosts*; "invenção pura"; pinturas; intertexto; narrativa; Vaublin.*

In an interview with Belinda McKeon in 2009, John Banville indicated that he had "moved into another area—pure invention." This suggests that the novels published from this period onwards represented a shift in his work with respect to the diminished significance of subject and a greater emphasis on what may be termed pure fiction. While all of Banville's novels are highly inventive, some of the later novels (in particular, *The Infinities* (2009) and *The Blue Guitar* (2015)) clearly abandon the more verifiable historical, philosophical, and geographical contexts that are evident in works like *The Untouchable* (1997), *Shroud* (2002), and *The Sea* (2005). This is not to suggest that the latter novels are any less 'invented' than other works by Banville but simply that their inventions are framed against tangible material contexts, while novels like *The*

Infinities and *The Blue Guitar*, in particular, depict fictional contexts that might be more closely associated with "pure invention." Nonetheless, prior to 2009, *Eclipse* (2000) is also similarly situated in a highly inventive spatial zone, while the earlier *Ghosts* (1993) – which forms the primary focus of this essay – may in fact be Banville's most radically inventive novel, replete as it is with multi-layered ontological levels that repeatedly bring its primary diegetic discourse into communion with other artistic forms – music, paintings, statues, as well as a narrative saturation with other literary antecedents that exceeds anything found elsewhere in his work. *Ghosts* demonstrates an implicit layering of dialectical levels, in effect a narrative enactment of the multiple worlds theory that so fascinates several of his narrators.[1] In several of the later novels, particularly *The Sea* and *The Blue Guitar*, Banville deploys a doubling of fictional levels by, respectively, integrating the work of Bonnard and, to a lesser extent, Manet, but never does he generate so comprehensive a model of a multi-level ontological system, in which the levels intersect so purposefully, as he does with *Ghosts*. This essay maps out a topography of what is effectively a sophisticated fictional variant on the scientific multiple worlds theory in *Ghosts*, and offers some perspectives on the significance of this aesthetic model.

While self-evident invention is a constant – and often dominant – thread in many of Banville's novels the extent to which it is permitted to supersede or replace social, historical, and intellectual contexts varies significantly. Novels like *The Book of Evidence* (1989) and *Athena* (1995), published on either side of *Ghosts*, for example, are situated in a largely explicit Irish context, most of which resembles Dublin and its environs, while both are also heavily plot-driven despite their fascination with themes similar to those found in *Ghosts*. In addition, *The Untouchable* comprehensively engages with the figure of Sir Anthony Blunt (re-named Victor Maskell), the curator of the Queen's pictures who publicly admitted in 1979 that he had been a Soviet spy for decades. *The Untouchable* is historiographic fiction, a version of true history, with Banville's sources even indicated in the novel's concluding acknowledgments. Similarly, in *Shroud*, Axel Vander partly echoes Paul de Man, who was posthumously exposed as having written numerous antisemitic articles in the early 1940s. In addition, novels like *The Sea* and *Ancient Light*, while highly inventive, are notionally connected to Banville's own biography[2] even if *The Sea* simultaneously engages with the visual arts, particularly via its narrative engagement with the work of Bonnard (*The Sea*). In addition *Ancient Light* may be one of Banville's most self-reflexive novels, as Mark O'Connell (2013) suggests, given the presence of "JB", the fictional author of the text (and film script), *The Invention of the Past*, the biography of Axel Vander, who Alex Cleave is set to play (174). Nonetheless, the presence of coherent social contexts anchors such innovations to a recognisable model of the world, even if that world is not always easily comprehensible.

Alternatively, *The Infinities*, narrated by Hermes, and *The Blue Guitar* whose temporal or spatial context is quite difficult to determine,[3] are closer to the idea of pure invention. Their narrative contexts are primarily shaped from visual, literary and mythic intertexts and are largely devoid of the kind of fictional historicizing that shape the aforementioned novels. They would thus appear to support Banville's contention that he has moved to a form of writing characterized by pure invention. However, the trajectory of this apparent evolution is a little troubled, in part because Banville's work had also previously either evaded tangible encyclopedic specificity or, when used, it is simultaneously disrupted. The early metafictional novels, *Nightspawn* (1971) and *Birchwood* (1973), for example, both undermine whatever generic and historical models they used, while the mirror-image novel, *Mefisto* (1986) reads like an extended hallucinatory adventure. More recently, the novel *Eclipse* is set in a house haunted by

literary ghosts; its narrative focus turns inward to a greater degree than the novels that immediately preceded it and retreats from placing ostensibly coherent subjects like science, history, intellectual history and morality at the centre of the narrators' attention. Banville's own observation that in contrast with the content-heavy *The Untouchable*, *Eclipse* was "as near as I've got to writing a book that has no real center," (qtd. Wallace 2012) is revealing. On a more tangible, indicative level, *Eclipse* is almost exclusively set in a house – a perpetual narrative presence in Banville's work that I have explored in detail elsewhere[4] and which is synonymous with fiction itself. In a sense, then, both the context and the primary subject coincide in a fictional realm that explores its own possibilities.

But *Eclipse* had a comprehensive precursor model – *Ghosts* – and several critics have observed key compositional similarities between *Ghosts* and a few of Banville's other texts. For example Mark O'Connell (2011), in a discussion of Banville's occasional use of third-person narration, makes several compelling connections between Ghosts and *The Infinities* including their shared "cryptic fabulism," (439) while Hedwig Schwall (2010) considers *The Infinities* in the context of the fantastic, tracing its connections to *Birchwood*, *Mefisto*, *Ghosts* and *Eclipse*" (103). In addition, Imhof refers to the narrative frame of *Ghosts* as "pure play," and Ralf Hertel (2005) argues that "*Ghosts especially* has a dreamy, unreal quality to it that evades clear demarcations of time and space" (42: emphasis mine). While it is therefore evident that the tendency towards pure invention has always been a constituent part of Banville's work, *Ghosts* is the purest example of this recurring narrative thread. Furthermore, it is a thread that has long been closely connected to a key aspect of Banville's aesthetic, as is obvious in his praise of Beckett in a 1997 interview, in which he professed admiration for his fellow writer's "pure art," particularly with respect to the late "light works at the end of his life," which created a "house for being" that is "the ideal of what every artist should be" (qtd. Schwall 1997, 16). Similarly, Banville's observations about Picasso's alleged preference for his painting "The Three Dancers" (1925) rather than the more famous anti-war painting "Guernica" (1937) offer further insight to the aesthetic significance of pure invention for him: "It [the *Dancers*] was painted as a picture without ulterior motive." His reasoning is that "The Three Dancers" is "a fearsome, indeed a savage, work, but it is pure painting; 'Guernica,' for all its violence and power, was intended as a political statement as well as a work of art, and for that reason it is, essentially, kitsch." (Banville 2014) The issue again relates to Banville's preference for a diminished significance of rhetorical purpose, subject-matter, meaning – with the glittering invention clearly preferred. It is really a question of how far Banville went in the different novels in terms of his pursuit of this aesthetic aim. This essay posits that, with *Ghosts*, Banville exceeds the degree to which he thereafter deployed the notion of 'pure invention' even if it is a thread that repeatedly returns in different guises.[5]

One of Banville's recurring narrative strategies, to render his fictional surfaces self-evidently fictional, is to saturate his storyworlds with intertexual references. Perhaps to a greater degree than elsewhere in Banville's work, *Ghosts* features a deeply intertextual and intratextual universe, in a manner that echoes the breaking of fictive boundaries in many postmodern texts (or what Brian McHale (1996) calls, 'worlds in collision'(59)), while also self-reflexively declaring their invented status. The most immediately obvious set of allusions that break boundaries in *Ghosts* relate to the island itself. Freddie's spectral island is simultaneously the mythical Greek island, Aeaea, yet it is also Cythera, Aphrodite's island, while it is also the rustic fantasy island, Arcady, and Devil's Island (the Cayenne Penal Colony); it is also Laputa from *Gulliver's Travels*, the island in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, the castaway islands in *Robinson*

Crusoe and *The Swiss Family Robinson* (albeit Robertson in *Ghosts*) and it features beehive huts, largely associated with the south-western Irish seaboard, Siren voices, and a strange perpetual music that emanates from the island's core. This web of islands is also spliced through with references to other exotic locations like the Land of Nod and Alice's Wonderland. Furthermore, Banville borrows Professor Kreutznaer's name from Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, whose real name in that novel is also Kreutznaer. The intertextual palimpsest is so heavily rendered that the primary diegetic level of *Ghosts* is actually a proliferation of surfaces rather than a single level. The extraordinary effect is such that our readerly gaze is continually encouraged to look to some intertextual elsewhere. In *Ghosts*, however, this 'elsewhere' is also composed of visual referents as much, if not more than it is with literary, mythical sources.

Ghosts' intertextual palimpsest is interwoven with Banville's most integrated deployment of the visual arts to date. While there is a painting at the centre of *The Book of Evidence*, and an increasing use of allusions to paintings, *Ghosts* significantly extends the presence of the visual arts in Banville's work. On its most overt level, there are multiple references to painters like Modigliani, Corot, Munch, El Greco, and Watteau, and to the fictional painter Vaublin – the primary visual reference-point in the novel – as well as several detailed instances of ekphrasis. Furthermore, references to other art forms are frequently used, like Diderot's views on statues (196-8) and terms related to dance and music – for example, "pas de deux" (179) – and there are numerous references to images, mirrors, perspective, poses, and overt observations about living in "a world of pictures and painted figures" (26). Furthermore, many of the characters are evident fakes; Licht is referred to as a marionette in *Ghosts* (4), Sophie crumples "sideways like a puppet, all arms and knees" (10), Felix makes Freddie think of a "ventriloquist's dummy" (12) and he is also referred to as a "mechanical man" (244), while all the characters are ultimately characterized as a "toy flock" (240). The artistic world-making extends even to the novel's frequent elaborate pictorial descriptions of daily scenes: "And then one day, a day much like any other in that turning season between spring's breathless imminences and the first, gold flourishings of summer, I would look out the window and see that little band of castaways toiling up the road to the house and a door would open into another world" (221). All such indicators are familiar presences in Banville's work prior to *Ghosts* but here they are simply overt textual signals of a far more comprehensive integration of word and image.

The interweaving of the visual and verbal textual levels in *The Book of Evidence* had already offered a telling, if ultimately preliminary, indication of the formal possibilities offered by a narrative integration of paintings and literature. These possibilities are more advanced in *Ghosts*, in which Freddie has been released from prison and is living on an island as an assistant to Professor Kreutznaer, an expert on the work of the fictional painter, Jean Vaublin, a near-anagram of John Banville.[6] *Ghosts* extends the narrative possibilities of the verbal-visual interaction in a far more comprehensive manner than its immediate predecessor. Its primary narrative frame is predicated on at least two paintings by the eighteenth century French artist, Jean Antoine Watteau, *Gilles* and *L'Embarquement pour Cythère*, while a third, *Le pèlerinage à l'île de Cythère*, may also have a presence in the novel. Freddie explicitly alludes to Watteau's "*pèlerinages* or a delicate *fête galante*" (30) and to "Cythera" on several occasions (31; 216), attributing them to Vaublin. *Le monde d'or*, the Jean Vaublin painting that dominates the narrative fabric of *Ghosts* is, to a substantial degree, an amalgam of the three Watteau paintings which in turn mirrors the surface action of Banville's novel. The interweaving of Vaublin, Watteau and Banville is potently conveyed via the way in which the paintings and the novel mirror each

other. Furthermore, the characters that seep from the novel into the imagined painting are also appropriated from other Banville novels. Flora is reborn from "Summer Voices" and "The Possessed" from *Long Lankin*, while Sophie and Felix return from *Mefisto*, and all seem to remember the strange fictive world from their previous incarnations.

Freddie, who himself occupies a curious ontological position in the novel, initially stands separate from the action, observing the characters: "I think of them like the figures in one of Vaublin's twilit landscapes, placed here and there in isolation about the scene, each figure somehow the source of its own illumination, aglow in the midst of shadows, still and speechless, not dead and yet not alive either, waiting perhaps to be brought to some kind of life" (82). They *are*, after all, characters in a Vaublin/Banville landscape with both fictional and real images overlapping, bleeding into one another until the distinction between them gradually blurs. The castaways, inversions of their mirrored counterparts in the paintings(s), act as pivots between worlds, as the novel continues to permit its surfaces to reflect all of the narrative levels.

Even the consciousness of the characters appears to slip and slide between fictional levels, partially aware but largely puzzled at the non-static nature of their world which ultimately acts as a commentary on the nature of being and how one rationalizes different levels of perception and consciousness. Flora even dreams, at one point, of the golden world (mirroring *Le monde d'or*, which is clearly integrated with her consciousness in the novel):

> Flora is dreaming of the golden world.
> Worlds within worlds. They bleed into each other. I am at once here and there, then and now, as if by magic. I think of the stillness that lives in the depths of mirrors. It is not our world that is reflected there. It is another place entirely, another universe, cunningly made to mimic ours. Anything is possible there; even the dead may come back to life. Flaws develop in the glass, patches of silvering fall away and reveal the inhabitants of that parallel, inverted world going about their lives all unawares. (55)

Flora's dream articulates the integrated moving surface that is, in fact, the ontological frame of the novel, while also offering self-reflexive commentary on the manner in which the novel is both itself and other simultaneously—both novel and painting. This process also finds expression in numerous other ways in the novel, as when she notices a color reproduction of *Le monde d'or* in the bedroom which features "a sort of clown dressed in white standing up with his arms hanging, and people behind him walking off down a hill to where a ship was waiting, and at the left a smirking man astride a donkey" (46). The bridge between her own world and that of the painting is further enhanced a few pages later when she looks at Felix and realizes that behind "his shoulder, like another version of him in miniature in a far-off mirror, the man on the donkey in the picture grinned at her gloatingly" (49). Felix is the harlequin in the painting, while Freddie himself is identified as Gilles, the Pierrot, and the other characters in the painting appear to be among those waiting to re-board the ship, as indeed they finally do in the novel.

And yet, despite the persistent parallels, echoes and contiguities, a key difference between painting and prose fiction remains. As G.E. Lessing (1879) influentially argued, in the eighteenth century, painting and literature (for Lessing, poetry) "make use of entirely different means or symbols – the first, namely of form and color in space, the second of articulated sounds in time" (91). Paintings are associated with stillness or spatiality, while a sense of

temporality and movement usually informs literary fiction. There is little doubt that Banville seeks to absorb some of the painterly quality of stasis into his work, particularly since many of his preferred distinctly non-avant garde visual artists are firmly associated with still-lifes. Even in *The Book of Evidence* there are moments when Freddie switches to the present tense in the midst of the past tense ("Am I still handcuffed?" 201), illustrating temporal and spatial slippages between what is being told and the narrator's role as literal observer of his own imagistic tale.

The narratorial shift is far more emphatically rendered in *Ghosts*, in part because the inter-relationship between the different planes of existence (Watteau's paintings, *Le monde d'or*, and the novel *Ghosts* in the process of writing about itself) are more fully integrated. The beginning of the novel is related by Freddie in the present tense, followed by frequent switches to the past tense. This pattern is repeated throughout the novel, with Freddie's narrative focal point hovering above some of the unfolding events in the present tense, even if much of the novel is related via the past tense. The impact of this is two-fold. Firstly, Freddie's present-tense observations about the characters reveal that he occupies – at the beginning of the novel at least – a different ontological level to the others, as he stands aloof and offers his observations of the scene before him, much like one would do with a painting:

> There is an old boy in a boater, a pretty young woman, called Flora, of course, and a blonde woman in a black skirt and a black leather jacket with a camera slung over her shoulder. Also an assortment of children: three, to be precise. And a thin, lithe, sallow man with bad teeth and hair dyed black and a darkly watchful eye. His name is Felix. (5)

The persistent use of the present tense, coupled with the manner in which Freddie observes the figures in his landscape, facilitates the insertion of a series of still moments that mirror the effects of the visual or, more precisely, "the illusion of movement" or "movement arrested" as Stephen Cheeke (2008, 23) has it:

> Outside the window the garden stands aghast in a tangle of trumpeting convolvulus. Nothing happens, nothing will happen, yet everything is poised, waiting, a chair in the corner crouching with its arms braced, the coiled fronds of a fern, that copper pot with the streaming sunspot on its rim. (40)

Such tableaux-style moments proliferate in the novel, echoing the stillness that one finds in Vaublin's *Le monde d'or*, which is also both a reflection of, and a model for, the novel itself – the "illusion of movement" is realized when the temporal sequence of narrative fiction allows the stasis to flow.

The painting itself, to which Banville devotes a detailed ekphrastic section late in the novel (225-231), focuses on the figure of the Pierrot in the painting Gilles who, we are assured, "stands before us like our own reflection distorted in a mirror, known yet strange" (225), reminding us again of the hall of correspondences that the novel is. The painting is a partial reflection of the novel, and vice-versa, while Gilles mirrors Freddie, both in terms of his pure fictionality ("has he dropped from the sky or risen from the underworld?" (225)) and as an overt articulation of a key characteristic of Banville's art: "His sole purpose, it would appear, is to be painted; he is wholly pose; we feel ourselves to be the spectators at a melancholy comedy.

See how strangely he fits into his costume; he seems not so much to be wearing it as standing behind it, like a cut-out paper doll" (228). The pure artificiality of Gilles can be viewed as a counterpoint to Banville's own aesthetic disinclination to offer realist representation and, as such, the Watteau/Vaublin aesthetic is a fitting model to intersect with his own fictional world. Furthermore, the painting serves to add further emphasis to Banville's long-established practice of self-reflexive commentary via the use of metaphoric parallels. In this instance, the ekphrastic commentary is extended to offer insight into the storyworld that the characters themselves inhabit and, furthermore, to offer self-reflexive commentary on the textual frame itself:

> This is the golden world. The painter has gathered his little group and set them down in this wind-tossed glade, in this delicate, artificial light, and painted them as angels and as clowns. It is a world where nothing is lost, where all is accounted for while yet the mystery of things is preserved; a world where they may live, however briefly, however tenuously, in the failing evening of the self, solitary and at the same time together somehow here in this place, dying as they may be and yet fixed forever in a luminous, unending instant. (225-31)

Banville's aesthetic enterprise is rendered clear in these lines and the relevance of the ekphrasis is again shown to be vital to his narrative aesthetic. Whether seeking to momentarily evade the temporal sequence of the textual plot, or forging a series of parallel, self-reflexive commentaries, the significance of the painting in *Ghosts* is immense. It also makes a far-reaching contribution to the extraordinary, complex, multi-faceted hall of mirrors that we encounter in this novel. Mirroring the pure artificiality of Watteau's commedia dell'arte, while simultaneously textually-echoing the fictive spaces that we encounter elsewhere in Banville, *Ghosts* represents one of Banville's most accomplished narrative experiments. Everything echoes everything else in this tempestuous island with its "deep, formless song that seemed to rise out of the earth itself" (6).

Banville's use of ekphrasis, albeit with respect to an imaginary painting, in *Ghosts* has extensive implications. Not only does he offer an ekphrastic meditation on a painting, and "a verbal representation of a visual representation," as Steven Cheeke has it (168-9), he also folds the static narrative of the painting into the sequential narrative of the novel. The painting is thus allowed to spatially move beyond the frames of its fixed image while the narrative fiction, alternatively, seeks to adopt some of the stillness of the image within its own movement; it suspends time to emphasize the resonating stillnesses in particular moments in the plot. Furthermore, the presence of the painting offers Banville another metaphoric zone within which he may self-consciously articulate his extended observations about art, representation, and the nature of the fictional form. In this, *Ghosts* both confirms and extends the central compulsions which have always been at the heart of Banville's work. For example, the overt evaluation of the value of Vaublin's *Le monde d'or* that Freddie offers is simultaneously a commentary on both Watteau's paintings and Banville's novel:

> There is a mystery here, not only in *Le monde d'or*, that last and most enigmatic of his masterpieces, but throughout his work; something is missing, something is deliberately not being said. Yet I think it is this very reticence that lends his pictures their peculiar power. He is the painter of absences, of endings. His scenes all seem to hover on the point of vanishing. (35-6)

That Banville was drawn to Watteau's work is significant; one of Watteau's first biographers, the Comte de Caylus observed that "His compositions have no subject. They express none of the conflicts of the passions and are consequentially deprived of one of the most affecting characteristics, that is, action." (Weretka 2008). Similarly, Bryson (1981) has suggested that Watteau's paintings are "essentially subjectless," (65) a point echoed in Banville's repeated suggestions in his fiction he has "nothing to say. I have no statements to make, I have no messages to deliver. I simply want to recreate the world as I see it and to provide delight to readers. No messages." (Timmerman 2010). In turn, the reticence, about which Freddie speaks, also suggests a sense of the materiality of things forever suspended beyond one's evaluative methods. Freddie frequently ponders the essential mysteriousness of art, a quality that the novel itself, redolent with the peculiarity of Freddie's own ontological position and the constant reminders of the strangeness of existence, embodies. Or, as Kenny (2009) suggests, "Vaublin's masterpiece, *Le monde d'or*, may itself be taken as a painted analogue of the novel in which it appears," (166) as the following brief ekphrasis illustrates:

> Le monde d'or is one of those handful of timeless images that seem to have been hanging forever in the gallery of the mind. There is something mysterious here beyond the inherent mysteriousness of art itself. I look at this picture, I cannot help it, in a spirit of shamefaced interrogation, asking, What does it mean, what are they doing, these engimatic figures frozen forever on the point of departure, what is this atmosphere of portentousness without apparent portent? There is no meaning, of course, only a profound and inexplicable significance; why is that not enough for me? (94-95)

Banville's doubling of the world, essentially a variant of the mise en abyme is achieved by interweaving the visual imagery of Watteau's paintings with the primary narrative, where the "mystery of things is preserved" (231), the thing-in-itself remains hidden, but is luminously present in the artistic presence that is conjured. The illuminations of art and the paintings of Watteau act both as the surface texture of the aestheticized world and as the central metaphor upon which Banville's observations about the artistic process are based. *Ghosts*, unlike many of Banville's previous novels, is freed of the scientific, historical or philosophical systems which gave their plots substance; even the overt engagement with Nietzschean morality in *The Book of Evidence* is far less explicitly emphasised. This represents a conscious decision by Banville to extend the limits of his previous artistic parallels and to directly engage with art itself: "I suppose because the language of science is too systematized – I couldn't incorporate any actual scientific discourse in my book because it stood out too much. And I am fascinated by the surface of things, and painting deals with these. Painting is the triumph of looking, of obsessed scrutiny." (Meany 1993)

In *The Book of Evidence* and in *Ghosts*, the first two novels of the Frames trilogy, paintings serve quite different narrative functions. Freddie's response, in *The Book of Evidence*, to the anonymous painting is mirrored by his failure to "imagine" the various female figures in the novel, especially Josie Bell, via a series of narrative juxtapositions between the subject of the painting and Freddie's victim, in which the nature of "obsessed scrutiny" is constantly revisited. The imagined life of the girl also serves as a potent metaphoric parallel. In *Ghosts*, however, the association between the different ontological levels (intertextual, narrative fiction, painting) is far more comprehensively interwoven, with the fictional painting acting both as its

centre and, at times, a parallel, echoing universe of visual forms. While there are ekphrastic moments in *Ghosts*, they usually serve as aesthetic portals between mirrored fictional ontologies. Thereafter, with Athena, we return to a much less adventurous form of the ekphrastic mode; even though the sequence of catalogue-style responses to the seven fictional paintings each echo aspects of Banville's fictional universe[7] they do not nearly reach the comprehensive integration that one sees in *Ghosts*.

As a consequence of Banville's literary, mythic, and visual intertextual elaborations, the narrative surface of his novel is infused with a very specific set of aesthetic qualities. In general, there is a profound sense of overt invention apparent – everything already feels transfigured, shaped by artistic process. In addition, a powerful sense of the events having been subjected to an illuminated gaze pervades all, including, most obviously, moments of stillness and silence, or what Kenny (2006) refers to as "Banville's fascination with tableaux," and "pictorial stillness and silence" (59). This stillness is akin to what Stephen Cheeke (*op. cit.*) refers to as the "for ever now" quality of visual images in his explication of the way complex form intersects with a sense of "art's eternity":

> Aesthetic patterning and form, not merely in the sense of high technical competence, but also in the sense (and the two are indivisible) of complex intelligibility, promise a marvelous and perhaps mystical intersection of the timeless and the temporal or chronologically linear. (51)

Similarly, for George Steiner (2001), the presence of the poetic can engender a crucial distancing – a gesture towards a free zone that fiction, as it evades the responsibilities of social time and space, can theoretically achieve:

> Even more than in philosophy, it is through poetics that human consciousness experiences free time. Syntax empowers a multitudinous range of "times." Remembrance, a frozen present, futurities (as in science fiction) are obvious examples of the free play with time without which the epic poem, the universe of narrative fiction or the film would be impossible. (59)

Typically, of course, stillness is more evidently present in the visual; Steiner claims that "certain paintings 'temporize,' generate their own time within time, even beyond the powers of language . . . Such paintings draw us into a time-grid integral wholly to themselves" (59).

It is the contention of this essay that the function of Banville's aesthetic in *Ghosts*, which includes his radical deployment of a deeply purposeful, saturated intertext, is to open up a poeticized space akin to the free, timeless space analogous to that which Steiner and Cheeke allude. The absence of a determinable time or space in *Ghosts*, has a peculiar impact on the veneer of the novel and brings one closer to the notion of "pure invention" than anywhere else in Banville's work, even including those later extraordinary feats of the imagination, *The Infinities* and *The Blue Guitar*. In *Ghosts*, Banville's island novel, a quality of strangeness is ubiquitous – the word strange or its variants are repeated more than ten times in the opening section of the novel. Banville's frequent association of strangeness with the essence of art is of major significance here[8] because the world that the characters inhabit, the world of pure art, is a world that Freddie repeatedly associates with the quality of strangeness: "The wind in the chimneys, the gulls, all that: the strangeness of things. The strangeness of being here, of being anywhere" (207). It is a world that Banville would revisit many times in

the years since he wrote *Ghosts*, when Hermes holds sway in *The Infinities*, when the very texture of Pierre Bonnard's late interiors seep into the world of *The Sea*, and when Oliver's memories are infused with Manet and, of course, Vaublin, in *The Blue Guitar*. But nowhere does he so comprehensively engender a world of textual ghosts and echoes, of siren songs and visual universes that so fully intermingle with the primary diegetic level, as he does in *Ghosts*.

Notes

1 In Ghosts, Freddie explains the "many worlds theory" as follows: "The universe it says, is everywhere and at every instant splitting into a myriad versions of itself. On Pluto, say, a particle of putty collides with a lump of lead and another, smaller particle is created in the process and goes shooting off in all directions. Every single one of those possible directions, says the many worlds theory, will produce its own universe, containing its own starts, its own solar system, its own Pluto, its own you and its own me: identical, that is, to all the other myriad universes except for this unique event, this particular particle whizzing down this particular path" (173). The many worlds theory is also attributed to Old Adam in The Infinities (202). In The Blue Guitar, a variation on the idea is resented by Oliver Orme in the context of a familiar Banvillean fascination with mirrors: "Doesn't the new science say of mirror symmetry that certain particles seeming to find exact reflections of themselves are in fact the interaction of two separate realities, that indeed they are not particles at all but pinholes in the fabric of invisibly intersecting universes? No, I don't understand it either, but it sounds compelling, doesn't it?" (81–82).

2 Banville has openly acknowledged that the novel uses elements from his childhood in several interviews. In Banville's memories of Wexford there is "a boy, like Myles Grace, with webbed toes," a dairyman to whom the young writer went to collect milk, like Max does in the novel, and an acknowledgment of the class distinctions between the different kinds of holiday homes in the seaside resort, an awareness that Max too inherits. He also admits, for example, that *The Sea* is based in the fictionalized Rosslare, the seaside town where he spent every summer as a child. See the following interviews: Mark Sarvas, "The Long-Awaited, Long-Promised, Just Plain Long John Banville Interview—Part Two," *The Elegant Variation Blog* (September 19, 2005); "Fully Booked: Q & A with John Banville," interview by Travis Elborough, Picador, June 29, 2012, http://www.picador.com/blog/june-2012/fully-booked-q-a-with-john-banville (accessed August 31, 2019).

3 While several critics, particularly Eoghan Smith (2019), have usefully drawn attention to the realist place-names and contexts in *The Blue Guitar*, these aspects are repeatedly punctuated by extremely odd occurrences that subvert the realist frame. This is perhaps most strikingly rendered when Oliver encounters a strange procession of coloured caravans and odd music while walking in the countryside. The peculiarity of the event is not lost on Oliver: Had I chanced upon some crossing point where universes intersect, had I broken through briefly into another world, far from this one in place and time? Or had I simply imagined it? Was it a vision, or a waking dream?

Now I walked on, heedless of the encroaching dark, unnerved by that hallucinatory encounter and yet strangely elated, too. (168–69)

4 See the following for further elaboration on this: Neil Murphy, *John Banville*, Maryland: Bucknell University Press, 2018: 7-8; 37-39; Neil Murphy, "From Long Lankin to Birchwood: The

Genesis of John Banville's Architectural Space." *Irish University Review* 36, no. 1 (Spring-Summer 2006): 9–24.

5 Some of the analysis of *Ghosts*, particularly that which pertains to the visual arts hereafter, also features in my monograph, *John Banville*, Maryland: Bucknell University Press, 2018.

6 Jean Vaublin, a fictionalized variation on both Banville and Jean-Antoine Watteau, is a recurring figure in Banville's work, also figuring in, or mentioned in, *Athena*, *Eclipse*, *The Sea*, and *The Blue Guitar*.

7 Mark O'Connell (2013) argues that the scenes depicted in the seven entries correspond to "the dissolution of his own love affair with A" (174). John Kenny (2009) offers a more specific itemization of the analogous relationship between the paintings and Banville's work, arguing that the commentaries "might be seen to correspond to each of the seven novels Banville had written up to *Athena*; and *Athena* itself, like the one painting that is not given its own critical piece, might be seen as the final, eight work" (30). Both perspectives may be accurate, in the sense that Banville's characteristic fascinations recur so frequently, in slightly modified forms, it is arguable that the specific detail from each commentary applies both to Athena and to Banville's own catalogue of novels.

8. Banville suggests, in an interview with Derek Hand, for example, that strangeness is "the mark of art." Hedda Friberg, "John Banville and Derek Hand in Conversation," *Irish University Review* 36, no. 1 (2006): 200.

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