

Reflecting on Discovering John Banville as a Young Reader
Refletindo a Minha Descoberta de John Banville como Jovem Leitor

Billy O'Callaghan

When it comes to the crafting of a story or a novel, every writer will profess – or at least claim – a meticulous weighing of their sentences, but few that I can think of, in Ireland or anywhere, carry to their work anything like the dexterity, imaginative intellect and general broad-spectrum genius employed by John Banville.

What's the difference between him and the rest of us? We all have the same dictionary's worth of words at our disposal, but what is it about the particular way he uses them that sets him so apart? For one thing, I suppose, there is the rare symphonic quality to his language, the words on the page, often simple enough in and of themselves, somehow stir to life by a complexly structured natural musicality when strung together in their precise way. Can that be learned? I'm not sure. Found, possibly, more so than learned, or self-taught, by long trial-and-error struggle, honing the mind's ear through a deep and careful attention to some internal tuning fork, and pushing far beyond the poetic, refusing to settle for merely that, out into the realms of sorcery.

Because his sentences always seem just right, even when they have you in their highest moments breathing in gasps, the temptation – and surely the mistake – would be to think that any of it comes easily. On the contrary, I'm sure that the opposite is true, that there must be violent daily and nightly torment behind their sculpting, and so the gift then, the greatness John has as a writer, is in knowing when to keep toiling at something, tweaking the balance by squeezing or elongating syllables, cutting, reshaping and, when the time has come, stopping, recognising when the sentence is right in the way it follows on from what has gone before, and because of that, knowing where it best leads.

With regard to the books of his that I've read – and at this point it amounts to quite a number, since I first began reading him in my mid-teens, going on for thirty years now – what most strikes me about them is their sheer density, with even the seemingly simple banked in layers of meaning and crazed with wildly eclectic allusion. Even now, I read them slowly, marvelling at the language and letting the stories seep into me, taking from them what I can, knowing I'll understand better after a spell of reflection, and a reread, but accepting, too, that there'll still be much I've missed. The hard work involved in their crafting is undoubted, but just as there's no blueprint for art, nothing that can be broken down to any kind of easily replicated formula, it's the gift, the talent, that makes the real difference. When I think of John Banville's novels, what lingers with me are early impressions, the impact of finding some spectacular word exploding within a beautifully formed paragraph, one I'd never possibly have considered yet rings exactly as it should.

A special book for me has always been *The Newton Letter*. I don't necessarily rank it as his best work – for that, I'll take my pick from *The Book of Evidence*, *The Sea*, *Shroud*, *Ghosts*, or depending on the day, and my humour, up to half a dozen others I could name – or even, if I was forced to choose, my favourite – that's *Mephisto* – but it's the book that proved to be my gateway into the Banville oeuvre. I'll spare you a summary, because this isn't a review, and

since I am not an academic, I am not even going to pretend an attempt at analysis. Instead, I'd like to offer a few impressions, of the book and the writer, even if that's a bit like trying to bottle whispers.

Writing to me is almost entirely instinctual, a slow and desperate fumbling towards (hopefully) some kind of rightness, so when I stumble across such work by others it always tends to resonate deeply. Even when I had no idea yet of what I was doing, or why, even before I dared risk spinning a yarn or building a single sentence of my own, I could recognise it by sight, sound or feel. And *The Newton Letter* was one of the first books where I felt a sense of that in abundance.

By fourteen or fifteen I had a huge and wide appetite for books and had already spent half my life at that point burrowing into the bookshelves of my local library, glad to my bones that I'd only yet barely scratched the surface. Galaxies of books stood waiting to be discovered, stories that would take me all the places I hadn't yet been. I don't recall why this book made it into the pile I carried home with me one day because I had no great interest then in reading anything that leaned too closely to the world I already knew. I was chasing far corners, not familiarity. I'm sure I was already aware of John Banville as a name, and maybe that was part of it, too, some vague curiosity piqued by the somewhat foreignness of someone I'd have otherwise boxed up and casually dismissed as "an Irish writer". Unexpectedly, then, *The Newton Letter* opened something for me. A barrier had come down, and I began to understand, without putting the thought into words, that the world started far closer than I'd ever previously wanted to acknowledge and that every kind of story worth imagining was within touching distance of my doorstep, if I only knew what to look for. That book led me to seek out more by the same mind, and following on, work by the likes of John McGahern, Liam O'Flaherty, John B. Keane, Michael MacLaverty and, in time, in arbitrary and aimless fashion, free as I was of any kind of guiding hand, countless others. Some missed the mark, others hit and stuck, and I took what I needed from all of them.

What passed me by within the narrative was due to a lacking on my part, young as I was and, despite my best efforts, under-read. For example, it wasn't until years later, coming across something online about the book, that I discovered the main characters, Charlotte, Otilie and Edward, were named for those in a Goethe novel. But as I've said, there are many layers to John Banville's books, with no shortage of joy to savour. I read it as a story, I suppose, and basked in the language, particularly the descriptions of a place and its people that I almost knew:

Oh, he was built robustly enough, there was real flesh under his tweeds, and bones, and balls, blood, the lot, but inside I imagined just a greyish space with nothing in it save that bit of anger, not a fist really, but just a tensed configuration, like a three-dimensional diagram of stress. (1982. 42)

Or:

Love. That word. I seem to hear quotation marks around it, as if it were the title of something, a stilted sonnet, say, by a silver poet. (1982. 53)

Lines like these lit me up.

I selected *The Newton Letter* from my local library's shelves possibly on a whim, likely because of its slight build, something to fill the gap between greater tomes. A deception, as it turned out, a tremendous sleight of hand, because there was more beneath the skin of those hundred or so pages than was often to be found in books three or four times its size; and

revelatory in the way it hinted at just how immense a small book, or even a short story, could be when handled right. Young readers, especially those who might dream of one day writing something even halfway decent, nourish themselves on whatever they find. And sometimes, either by accident or with intent, they happen upon a writer like John Banville. Those are the ones who get to count themselves decidedly fortunate.