

“Necessary fantasy”: The Presence of Fantastic in John Banville’s Birchwood and Mefisto

“Fantasia necessária”: A presença do fantástico em Birchwood e Mefisto de John Banville

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Abstract: *Among the many aspects of John Banville’s writing, the fantastic is underscored. In this respect, two of his novels reveal significant material for analysis: Birchwood (1973) and Mefisto (1986). Besides the repetition of themes such as the double and the search for an organizing force in the world, the presence of twin siblings is another interesting similarity of the novels. In addition, theories of the fantastic will certainly enrich the interpretation of these novels and contribute to a different perspective of the fantastic in Ireland. As Banville’s home country, Ireland has influenced his writing and because of this nation’s long practice of fantastic and gothic literature, Birchwood and Mefisto can be considered a contemporary expression of these traditions. The notions of the fantastic added to the Irish context provide a valuable analysis of John Banville’s novels and a greater understanding of Irish literature.*

Keywords: *Fantastic; John Banville; Contemporary Irish Literature.*

Resumo: *Entre os muitos aspectos presentes na escrita de John Banville, o fantástico se destaca. A esse respeito, dois de seus romances, demonstram ter material significativo para análise: Birchwood (1973) e Mefisto (1986). Além da repetição de temas como o duplo e a busca por uma força organizadora no mundo, a presença de irmãos gêmeos é outra semelhança relevante nos romances. Além disso, as teorias do fantástico certamente enriquecem a interpretação desses romances e contribuem para uma perspectiva diferente a respeito do fantástico na Irlanda. Como país natal de Banville, a Irlanda influenciou sua escrita, e por causa da prática de longa data dessa nação com a literatura fantástica e gótica, Birchwood e Mefisto podem ser considerados uma expressão contemporânea dessas tradições. As noções de fantástico quando inseridas no contexto irlandês fornecem uma análise valiosa dos romances de John Banville e uma maior compreensão da literatura irlandesa.*

Palavras-chave: *Fantástico; John Banville; Literatura Irlandesa Contemporânea.*

The tradition of Irish literature is extensive and meaningful, touching on various themes and genres throughout the last centuries and it can be said that the fantastic is, to a great extent, part of this tradition. Bruce Stewart, for example, claims in his introduction to the collection *That Other World* (1998) that the fantastic in Irish studies has been treated “as an intrinsic property of the national literature” (1). Ib Johansen agrees, adding that “the fantastic certainly plays an immensely important role in Irish literature” (51), with the issues surrounding national identity as a probable stimulus for the development of this literary trait. Therefore, the reason for such a close relationship between Irish letters and fantastic writing may be justified by the country’s close relationship with Celtic folklore or even with its troubled history; nevertheless, it remains that the fantastic should be considered as fully belonging to Irish literature.

Among the great writers Ireland has produced, John Banville is an important contemporary presence with a career that is impressive both in length and quality. While it is challenging to choose from such a vast body of work, it is necessary to focus on a few aspects of Banville’s writing so that one can aspire to develop an analysis that is worthy of this author’s brilliance. Therefore, considering the place the fantastic has in Banville’s homeland it seems valuable to search for uses and expressions of this literary expression in his fiction. In other words, this paper aims to understanding how John Banville utilizes the fantastic in his narratives. Besides, Banville’s position as a contemporary Irish writer also contributes to this discussion since it allows for the question of whether or not there is a place for the fantastic in the contemporary context.

Using two of Banville’s novels, *Birchwood* (1973) and *Mefisto* (1986), and a variety of bibliographical sources, such as Derek Hand’s *John Banville – Exploring Fictions* (2002) and Rüdiger Imhof’s *John Banville – A Critical Introduction* (1997), this article aims at becoming a valuable, even though brief, addition to the contemporary studies on John Banville’s work.

As regards the novels, it is fundamental to present an outline of their plots. *Birchwood*, for starters, narrates the story of Gabriel Godkin, his family, and the estate he is destined to inherit. Like many Big House novels, it portrays the complicated relationship between the Irish Catholics and the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy in terms of the conflicts of the country and the ruin of the house, both physical and ideological. However, it does that in an interesting way, using not only by the use of common themes belonging to the gothic tradition but also adding elements from other genres.

Besides presenting the characters of the Godkin family, the first part of the novel sets the scene for Gabriel’s adventure, which takes place in the second part. He believes he has a sister and joins the circus so that he can travel the country and find her. However, the social

and political instability of Ireland makes this a difficult and brutal experience. Eventually, he comes back to Birchwood, amid a conflict between the Big House and the Irish rebels, ready to face the truth about his family. Even though this is a painful process, in the end, Gabriel completes the process of acceptance regarding his origin.

On the other hand, *Mefisto* is very clear about the main character's origin. The novel starts with the birth of Gabriel Swan and his deceased twin brother, a character that becomes present in his absence throughout the narrative. Later, the novel follows Swan's development, his connection with mathematical practices and his relationship with the people that currently live in the Big House nearby. In fact, it is in the Ashburn house that Gabriel meets Felix, the devilish character, and where he is later injured in a fire.

Then, the novel deals with Gabriel's recovery and his latter struggle with disfigurement. New characters enter Swan's life, once again with the assistance of Felix, and Gabriel finds work with a mathematician, analysing data. This occupation allows him to develop his abilities with numbers and deepens his reflections about the possible guiding order of the world.

Before diving into the examination of the literary material, it is necessary to discuss what constitutes the fantastic for the present analysis and after some research into this area of literary criticism, it has become apparent that Tzvetan Todorov's work is still relevant. Even in 2014, more than forty years after the original publication of Todorov's *Introduction à la Littérature Fantastique* (1970), Eugenio Bolongaro claims that "Todorov's contribution, while certainly subject to criticism, remains pivotal to the discussion" of the fantastic (62). In his article, Bolongaro discusses in more depth the criticism that has emerged against Todorov's work; however, it seems more productive to focus on Todorov's writings while keeping in mind that his words are not meant to be read here as universal truths.

For this text the fantastic, then, is to be seen concerning the marvellous and the uncanny; it is the moment when the reader is not sure if the action he or she is witnessing is a product of the supernatural or an odd, but explainable, event. Although Todorov's explanation was "conceptually clear, rigorous, elegant and systematic" (Bolongaro 61) it still leaves a lot open for interpretation when applied to actual texts. Nevertheless, it can be understood that such fluidity in the theoretical definition indicates the instability of the concept itself, perhaps because the fantastic deals with uncertainty, its definition cannot be strict. Or, as Bolongaro puts it: "The fantastic, the uncanny and the marvellous are not airtight categories" and their "heuristic and explicatory value can be increased rather than lessened precisely for being porous" (75).

This ambivalence resonates with the Irish context, where the ideas of Irishness and Britishness have long been intertwining, so it makes sense that artists immersed in this reality

would use the fantastic in their writings. The idea that the fantastic also works to reinvigorate “established conventions of mimetic fiction” (Lelen 11) again makes sense for an Irish author because it allows for the questioning of patterns and conventions, something that Irish literature is known for, especially considering its most notable modernist writers, James Joyce and Samuel Beckett. Also, accepting that the fantastic can be responsible for a renewal of conventions and established stories, makes it possible for a different reading of John Banville’s texts, for example.

In both *Birchwood* and *Mefisto*, Banville uses known stories and genres, but he adds elements, among them the fantastic, which result in a fresh perspective and original novels. With this juxtaposition of genres, Banville appears to highlight that “one form, or genre or discourse, can never fully encompass Ireland as an idea or a story” (Hand 31). Besides, the transgression of generic boundaries results in the “ironic playfulness that is the hallmark of post-modern literature” (Bolongaro 63).

In fact, *Birchwood* takes advantage of the Big House genre to explore the life of Gabriel Godkin among his family, however, the novel is not limited by the grounds of this Ascendancy estate. Narrated by Gabriel himself, the story of *Birchwood* is an attempt to comprehend the past and so it tells the story of the Godkins from before Gabriel’s birth until he is the only one left. The first half of the book is concerned with Gabriel’s family, his grandparents, parents, and later his aunt and cousin, and ends with him leaving in search for answers regarding his lost twin sister. In the second part, Gabriel joins Prospero’s circus and travels the country, being a small part of their act, which allows him to see the Irish countryside beyond his Ascendancy property. When the social agitation of the country meets him, Gabriel returns home where he can finally admit his true family story, that there is no lost twin sister, that his cousin Michael is actually his brother, and that they come from an incestuous relationship between his father and his aunt Martha.

While the house of *Birchwood* is central to the narrative’s development, it is also significant that Gabriel spends half of the book wandering through Ireland with the circus, allowing the novel to approach different themes than the ones usually present in Big House novels. The famine, for instance, so pivotal to Irish history and culture, is depicted in *Birchwood* under a different perspective than most Big House novels, with Gabriel seeing it first-hand and living the adversities of a shortage of food in the countryside. Additionally, Gabriel’s quest for his lost sister, which results in his acceptance of his true family situation, can also place the novel in the *Bildungsroman* tradition.

From the title, it is clear that *Mefisto* is also set against an established tradition, in this case, the Faustian tale, but Banville adds other elements to enrich the story. The main character

of this narrative is also called Gabriel and his life, alongside his family, is once more the focus of the narrative. Although *Big House of Ashburn* is not part of the Irish Ascendancy, it deeply affects Gabriel Swan's life since that is the place where he spends a great part of his young life and where he contracts the injuries that will influence his adult life. Ireland in this novel becomes more urban, with Gabriel Swan living in a city that resembles Dublin, in the second half of the book. However, this does not restrain the possibilities for the novel to meet with the fantastic, as it will be discussed shortly.

As *Birchwood*, *Mefisto* is filled with references to other texts, and it promotes discussions that go beyond subjects related to the lives of the characters, since both novels have an underlying concern with what organizes the world. While Gabriel Godkin focuses on the difficulties of narrating in the contemporary world, Gabriel Swan's aptitude lies with numbers, yet they are both seeking an explanation that will give a greater meaning to their lives. In fact, they are searching for direction, "for the whatness of things" (Imhof 59), or, as Mark O'Connell (2010) would say, "both Gabriels are fundamentally preoccupied with the notion of harmony, of finding some kind of unity of self and experience" (131).

So, it seems natural to observe these two novels in proximity due to their similarities, the most evident one being the name of the main character, and this structure allows for a better understanding of Banville's use of the fantastic in a wider sense. The issue of the narrator in these novels, for example, can be seen through the lenses of the fantastic if one considers the fantastic as moments of uncertainty. The fact that first-person narrators are unreliable is well established throughout literary criticism, and once the reader is aware of that fact, the narrative becomes a sequence of dubious scenes where there is no way of knowing with certainty what is in fact true. Besides, Banville's narrators are telling their story from memory, another element that is known to be unreliable and easily influenced.

Even though most of the situations presented in *Birchwood* and *Mefisto* are consistent with realism, because of the way they are told, the sense of mystery remains. When the narrator makes himself present in the middle of the action, he reminds the reader that this is fiction, and Gabriel Godkin's interferences have a way of doing that in a casual but compelling manner. While this may not be what Todorov had in mind, it is interesting to think that moments such as these are glimpses into the fantastic world:

Such scenes as this I see, or imagine I see, no difference, through a glass sharply . . . Indeed, now that I think of it, I feel it is not a glass through which I see, but rather a gathering of perfect prisms . . . Outside my memories, this silence and harmony, this brilliance, I find again in that second silent world which exists, independent, ordered by unknown laws, in the depths of mirrors. This is how I remember such scenes. If I provide something otherwise than this, be assured that I am inventing (13).

Here Godkin not only admits that he is an unreliable narrator, but he also opens the possibility for a reality that is beyond rational thought, which even if just for a second, leads the reader to believe that there is more in this story than previously expected. Gabriel Swan also makes himself present in his narrative which brings attention to the deceptive nature of fiction, and in certain moments of the novel this creates instances of uncertainty, for the reader is not sure where to place his or her trust. For example, Swan questions himself amidst a recollection whether it is possible that the scene he is remembering actually happened, to which he answers, “it’s what I remember, what does it matter whether it’s possible or not” (39). Following the tone of uncertainty, this passage ends with a question mark, leaving the reader in an endless state of doubt, prolonging the moment of the fantastic.

Of *Mefisto*, Derek Hand affirms that there is “the sense, for the reader at least, of a murky, uncertain place where nothing is fully comprehensible” (121), and while Birchwood creates the feeling of confusion with the disruption of the narrative, in *Mefisto* Banville is no longer constrained by facts or the necessity of a coherent narrative. His novel offers “unlikely juxtapositions and fantastic connections where anything is possible and anything can happen” (Hand 121). Banville appears to use the fantastic as a different way to tackle the issue of unreliable narrators, blended with the uncertainty of the fantastic, fittingly to contemporary times where realism cannot be fully trusted to portray the individual.

The characters that surround the narrators in these novels also bring the sense that anything can happen, Mr Kasperl and Professor Kosov, although fundamental to Gabriel Swan’s search for meaning are not approached in-depth and their academic activities are not clearly defined. Professor Kosov is searching for the meaning of life (170) but what that entails exactly is not explicitly discussed. And while Mr Kasperl was strange, “not like the rest of us” (96), Felix is by far the most intriguing character in Swan’s narrative, something that his aunt “might have invented” (40). His presence in *Ashburn* and his relation to Mr Kasperl remains surrounded by a mysterious quality; nevertheless, it is in the second half of the book that he becomes a truly enigmatic figure.

Everything changes for Gabriel Swan after the burning of *Ashburn*, even his relationship with his own body, so the fact that Felix continues to exist around Gabriel throughout the novel brings up the question: “What does Felix really want from him?” Meaningfully, Derek Hand describes Felix as a character that “seems to be in control of events and lives, pulling invisible strings and forever making things happen” (121). Felix’s existence, then, adds the sense that something bigger is about to be revealed at all times, that the order and harmony Gabriel is searching for exists in his narrative at least. Although by the end of the novel such revelation is still expected, looking at Felix inside the Faustian tradition shows that

he is the devilish character, his role in the novel takes the form and aura of the uncertainty that surrounds him which is, if not explained, at least justified.

Gabriel Swan does not fully understand Felix because he is meant to be an incomprehensible character, a representation of the complexities of the world that the narrator cannot explain. This way, John Banville seems to use the fantastic to add meaning to the character of Felix, putting him on the long list of references present in *Mefisto*, while at the same time constructing a character that speaks to the central argument of the novel: whether the world is governed by chance or by order.

Perhaps there is not a character like Felix in *Birchwood*. Nevertheless, the Godkin family is capable of creating a similar sense of mystery, with madness being associated with them more than once. Gabriel's mother, for example, is said to wander through the corridors "a bit mad" (7) and the Godkins are described as "stalked by an insatiable and glittering madness born" (8). While the veracity of this madness is not fully discussed in the novel, by presenting these characters as mad, Banville puts them in the realm of things that cannot be completely understood. The uncertainty that exists around the Godkins is used as a way of differentiating them from others, as indicative that there is something yet to be explained about them, which happens near the end of the story.

The deaths in *Birchwood* add to this sense of the fantastic and inexplicable. Because their circumstances are unusual, Gabriel's account of Grandad Godkin's last moments, for example, appear to be between dream and reality. He talks of a "shimmering pale figure" (53) and sleepiness (54) so it is not clear if Gabriel actually saw his grandfather leave for the woods or if he imagined that scene after they found him there. And in fact, the scene with Grandpa Godkin "curled like a stillborn in the grass" and "his false teeth sunk to the gums" (54) into the nearest tree speaks, once again, to the oddness of this family.

Granny Godkin's departure is equally strange, with a "rendered purplish mass in the chair" and her two feet in their "scorched button boots" (72) as the only things that remained from her corpse. Upon meeting such a scene, the narrator, and his family, are unable to talk about it and until the doctor arrives and provides an explanation, they appear to be stuck in a moment of the fantastic, unsure of how to explain their relative's end. However, Gabriel seems to prolong that feeling of uncertainty even after the doctor's reasoning that Granny Godkin was a rare case of spontaneous combustion; he has a notion that "the house itself had something to do with it", and perhaps because "Birchwood had grown weary of her" he questions if it assassinated her (75).

While it does not matter how she died, it is interesting that a narrative that is supposed to help Gabriel understand his past leans towards the less logical explanation and

personifies the house of Birchwood. In a text so influenced by the Big House genre, it is expected that the estate would acquire such great importance, but in this particular novel, it also enlarges the idea that Gabriel does not understand his family completely and therefore has to grab onto unlikely ideas to explain them. Fire, another common theme in Big House stories, is here connected with the difficulty of organizing thoughts into a narrative, of talking about the “unmentionable horror” (74), which, in a way, repeats itself in *Mefisto*.

Similar to Gabriel Godkin’s story, it is because of a house on fire that Gabriel Swan was forced to change his life, but in the most recent novel, the fire affects the narrator physically as well. The pages following the burning of Ashburn bring forth the complexity that it is to narrate pain and the effects of medicine on human consciousness. Gabriel’s use of language in this part of the novel indicates that he is in a state only comprehensible through metaphors and references to other texts. He says, for example, that “pain was the beast my angels kept at bay” (124), comparing drugs to the agents of the Christin God, and that he was Marsyas “lashed to my tree, the god busy about me with his knife” (124), indicating that his suffering was similar to a punishment from a Greek god.

And while there is an explanation for his state of mind, the medicine in his system, the sense that something of his experience is still missing from his narrative remains, that even though this is an explainable event, it leads Gabriel to a world he cannot fully comprehend: “I had never known, never dreamed. Never. The loneliness. The being-beyond. Indescribable. Where I went, no one could follow” (125). This moment in Gabriel’s life works as a form of transition into the second part of the novel that is, in a way, a mirrored reflection of the first part. Following Derek Hand’s argument (127), the painkillers work to keep Gabriel inside the endless reflection that this duplication of the plot provides and because the narrator steps into the mirror (132) it is fitting that he does so in a state of confusion.

The circularity of *Mefisto* lies in Gabriel’s continuous pursuit for order in the world around him, and his relentless concern with the unity and its functions is possibly connected with his absent twin brother. Even though Gabriel never meets his deceased sibling, this is part of his identity as seen from the beginning of the narrative where he mentions Castor, the famous twin brother of Polydeuces in Greek mythology. It fascinates the narrator that there is no logic in the event of his brother dying and not him, his existence is completely due to chance. Because Gabriel is constantly looking for something hard to define and perhaps beyond the laws of logic, he built a narrative that follows these definitions. The mystery of the double, of two individuals that look identical but are different people, runs through *Mefisto* because Gabriel Swan is, and is not, the part of a duo. Swan’s quest appears to be,

subconsciously, for his identity and his place in the world, and the structure of the novel indicates that this search is circular and, at times, meets with the unexplainable.

While Banville seems to point to the futility of Swan's inquiries since the character does not achieve his goals by the end of the novel, the presence of the fantastic may indicate that in explorations such as this, things are not always clear and logical. Although Gabriel may be stuck in the constant reflection of the two parts of his story, with no apparent exit, the reader goes through that same journey and gets to ponder on it. Considering that the fantastic is an effect that depends a great deal on the reader's reaction to the text, it is appropriate to use it in a narrative that wants to include him or her in the novel.

Likewise, the issue of the twin affects *Birchwood*, first in Gabriel's relentless search for his lost twin sister, and finally in the revelation that his cousin Michael is his brother. Most interestingly, in this case, it is not the existence of Michael, despite the unconventionality of the incestuous relationship that originated him and Gabriel, it is the state of denial in which the narrator lives. It would be expected that upon meeting Michael the similarities in their appearance would give away their secret kinship, but the novel keeps it covert until the end, hiding it with Gabriel's conviction that he has a twin sister instead.

His conviction is upheld after a feverish dream (78) and, as in *Mefisto*, this search is related to the narrator's identity: "A part of me stolen, yes, that was a thrilling notion. I was incomplete, and would remain so until I found her" (79). However, because the novel reveals that Gabriel's ideas were not completely unreasonable, his quest goes beyond the necessity of self-definition into the process of acceptance. The fictitious twin sister Rose, then, becomes the artefact the narrator uses to deal with the fact that his family lied to him, and his origin is highly complicated. Apart from dealing himself with this, Gabriel also uses it as a way to intrigue the reader, maintaining the notion that there is a secret regarding the Godkins, even if it is not Rose.

The manner in which the narrator uses language assists in building the sense that there is something unresolved, even though he claims to be secure of his beliefs: "my thoughts turned again and again to my lost sister, of whose existence I was now *convinced*, but in a detached, *unreal* way, I cannot explain" (84-5, emphasis added). The choice of words in this passage, for example, leaves the reader unsure if Gabriel's certainty is trustworthy, but as the novel unfolds, he is able to accept that Rose is not real. Nevertheless, this uncertainty is an important part of Gabriel's journey into acceptance. His lost twin sister is a "necessary fantasy" because according to Gabriel "if [he] had not a solid reason to be here, travelling the roads with this preposterous band, then [his] world threatened to collapse" (132).

John Banville uses the fantastic in this narrative connected with the questions of the double and all its mysteries to build the argument that in the process of understanding and accepting one's origin, it is necessary to live a situation of unpredictability and uneasiness. While the usage Banville makes of the fantastic is certainly different from what one expects when first approaching fantastic narratives, it has become apparent that John Banville indeed takes advantage of the fantastic as an element to enrich his texts in a unique way. Hedwig Schwall comments on Banville's ability to switch "effortlessly between the commonsensical and the fantastic, between the nuanced subjectivity and wild objectification" (97) in the novel *The Infinities* (2009), and it seems that he was already doing that in his earlier novels.

The various ways *Birchwood* and *Mefisto* express uncertainty, from the unreliability of their narrators to the issues of twins and doubles, are a confirmation that Banville's writing was influenced by the Irish literature's leaning towards the fantastic. Although many critics have discussed whether or not John Banville's work is part of the Irish literary tradition, the present analysis shows that even though the influence Ireland had on his work is different, and perhaps discreet, it exists. With Derek Hand calling the Irish post-colonial context an "unconscious influence" (10), then this unique representation of Irishness is, arguably, what makes John Banville an essential part of the contemporary Irish canon.

In the broader context of contemporary literature, Banville's novels also help build the case that there is a place for the fantastic in the current world, especially considering that uncertainty and apprehension are common themes of contemporaneity. Both Gabriels can, therefore, be seen as representations of the contemporary subject, endlessly searching for order, harmony, and the meaning of life in a world that appears to exist circularly and repetitively.

Although Banville's texts do not provide a simple answer for the afflictions of the current world, they allow for a reflection on them that may prove fruitful depending on the reader. Besides, the inclusion of the fantastic in these narratives seems like an urge to accept that some things are unexplainable and that does not diminish their importance.

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