

DUBLIN CITY UNIVERSITY

Indestructible Treasures: Art and the
Ekphrastic Encounter in selected novels by
John Banville.

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Declaration

I hereby certify that this material, which I now submit for assessment on the programme of study leading to the award of PhD is entirely my own work, and that I have exercised reasonable care to ensure that the work is original, and does not to the best of my knowledge breach any law of copyright, and has not been taken from the work of others save and to the extent that such work has been cited and acknowledge within the text of my work.

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For Roberta Gray

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Abstract

In the novels of John Banville, the search for authenticity is a well-established preoccupation of what we can refer to (after John Kenny) as the middle period of the author's work and beyond. Beginning with *The Book of Evidence* his work is marked by aesthetic shift; primacy is given to visual art, ahead of the scientific motif of the tetralogy that preceded it and significant instances of ekphrasis appear. Ekphrasis is traditionally the domain of poetry and is a natural medium for an author who espouses the novel as a form that must go beyond narrative. Here, three novels are examined, *The Book of Evidence*, *The Untouchable* and *The Sea*. Each novel depends on a dramatic ekphrastic encounter that is the locus of the success and failure of the quest for authenticity that lies at the heart of Banville's work of this period.

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1 Introduction: Research Question and Thesis Outline

The original purpose of this study was to investigate the use of ekphrasis in the novels of John Banville. The author's interest in visual art and use of art in his work is well established, but a truly comprehensive study dedicated to ekphrasis in Banville's oeuvre is lacking, and many questions remain unanswered: Is there continuity in the author's use of art over different novels? What are the commonalities and disparities in his treatment of ekphrasis from one novel to another? Is there a particular approach to visual art and ekphrasis in the novel that we may identify as specifically Banvillean? What do Banville's novels reveal about ekphrasis?

However, such is the depth and breadth of the author's textual engagement with art that a comprehensive study eludes the scope of this thesis also. The research process indicated the need to streamline the original research question, but simultaneously opened up a little researched strain of ekphrasis that remains formally unidentified for scrutiny. For the purpose of this thesis, I focus on *The Book of Evidence*, *The Untouchable*, and *The Sea*, because of how ekphrasis is used within the narrative of each novel. These three novels, more than any other from Banville's oeuvre, best exemplify the strain of ekphrasis that is the subject of my research: the dramatic ekphrastic encounter.

The Book of Evidence and *The Untouchable* both revolve around a principal ekphrasis in which the protagonist has a fateful encounter with a painting, an encounter that drives all subsequent action. This occurs differently in both texts, but there are also striking similarities, and I regard *The Untouchable* to be a development of the ekphrasis in *The Book of Evidence*. *The Sea* is quite a different novel, and something of a departure within the author's oeuvre. Visual art is one way in which the novels intersect, and ekphrasis in *The Sea* is a development from the ekphrases and the ekphrastic approach of the earlier novels. In addition to paintings, photography plays a key role in what can be termed Banvillean ekphrasis.

With Freddie Montgomery in *The Book of Evidence*, an overwhelming response to a painting unleashes something in him that had been heretofore contained. The result is a crime spree of theft and murder, immediate and brief in duration. Victor Maskell in *The Untouchable* is more circumspect in his reaction to the artwork he encounters, but it sends him on a life-long path of duplicity and treachery. Where Freddie takes 'his' painting by force and soon abandons it, Victor acquires his legitimately (or so it would seem) through a friend and lives with it for many years. Both characters find that an artwork unlocks something fatal within them.

The Sea is a somewhat different proposition to the other two novels. Max Morden is not a criminal, nor will he become one during the narrative. Morden is grieving for his wife who has recently died, and endeavours to effect a literal retreat into the past by moving to a boarding house in the seaside town where he holidayed as a child. Actual ekphrasis is used in an innovative way in that it is ingrained into the text, with ekphrases of the work of Pierre Bonnard not so much presented in the narrative, as forming part of it. In contrast, the dramatic ekphrastic encounter is of some photographs, and is purely notional.

There is now a large, interdisciplinary and still growing body of research about ekphrasis. Likewise, John Banville's work has proved stimulating for researchers across the span of his now forty-year writing career. A methodology section will outline the term ekphrasis and elaborate upon some commentaries that have been of essential use to the current study. This is not intended to serve as an overview of research into and critical commentary on ekphrasis generally, which would require an entire volume or more.

The literary review will focus on an introduction to John Banville's work generally, and visual art in the author's work specifically. In order to contextualise Banville's use of visual art, some commentary is forthcoming on *The Infinities*, *Athena* and *Ghosts*, which will outline the relevant ekphrases in these novels, but also clarify the reasons for their omission from the main analyses. I examine the main novels in sequence of authorship, which corresponds to the order of the complexity of the dramatic ekphrastic encounter found in each novel. *The Book of Evidence* and *The Untouchable* are considered first, followed by an analysis of *The Sea*.

1.2 Methodology

1.2.1 Ekphrasis

Ekphrasis: a Greek rhetorical term for a kind of description.¹

The above definition of *ekphrasis* is the eager student's first clue that they have wandered into very deep waters indeed. The use of the words 'Greek' and 'rhetorical' in a companion guide to visual art ominously denotes a lengthy history. The remainder of the definition seems suspiciously general, and the questing student must continue further to find out what 'kind of description' could be involved. One will immediately find that definition of *ekphrasis* is still variable, and somewhat contested. The above wording is a particular example, but in general definitions of *ekphrasis*, while revelatory on first reading, often prompt as many questions as they answer. As a constituent element of the epic poetry of ancient Greece, *ekphrasis* is part of the infrastructure of Western literature, and has a history that extends back to the foundation texts of the Western canon, yet it is still being disputed and discoursed upon, still fruitful and dynamic for artist, reader and researcher alike. Comparative literature is the appropriate discipline for the study of *ekphrasis*, inherently interdisciplinary and comparative in nature.

The author to whom this complex term, and concomitantly vast body of research, is being applied, is John Banville. Banville consistently produces writing which, being richly inter-medial and inter-textual, is also perfectly suited to the comparative approach. Visual art in Banville's work has been addressed by researchers, particularly with regard to depictions of female characters and the representative quality of art in his novels. The present study aims to advance previous research while also pointing to a fruitful line of enquiry in both ekphrastic studies and those engaged by Banville's work. The approach has been streamlined to focus on three of the author's novels: *The Book of Evidence*, *The Untouchable*, and *The Sea*. The study builds on previous research into the effects of ekphrasis in the novel, and proposes a new term, the dramatic ekphrastic encounter, to interrogate how ekphrasis aids narrative in providing structure, narrative dynamism and a textual and visual locus for the artist's underlying artistic concerns.

1 *The Oxford Companion to Western Art*, ed. Hugh Brigstocke (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 2001.

1.2.2 What is *Ekphrasis*?

Ekphrasis is a term borrowed from the classics. As a rhetorical and representational device, it was a basic component in the development of the oral narratives from which modern Western literature evolved. Long before the advent of the written word, vivid description was a vital component of oration and storytelling. *Ekphrasis* was a descriptive passage of speech that allowed the audience to vividly imagine a subject. *Enargeia* was the quality of the ekphrastic passage that generated the vivid image in the minds of the audience. Both are related to the notion of *phantasia*, the imaginative impression of the listener – the desired effect being, to make the listener simultaneously into (almost) a viewer, where the viewing subject is absent. Speakers were judged on the calibre of their *ekphrases*, to use the plural, which they delivered by utilising *enargeia* to produce a vital impression, or *phantasia*, in their audience.

One of the compelling attractions of the classics is their duration; they endure and the tradition that surrounds them endures, while still yielding new insights to present day commentators. Though current euro-centric literature and scholarship derived from centuries-old preservation and study of the classics, these two fields diverged quite some time ago. As the oral tale gave way to the written, *ekphrasis* remained, and as literature evolved, *ekphrasis* evolved also.

A problem that arises for the student of modern usages of *ekphrasis*, from a theoretical standpoint, is that it is too easily confused with classical *ekphrasis*. It is much examined in classical scholarship and a complex and lengthy body of work exists on the topic. Frequently, definitions sought from sources outside the classical field will still direct the quester back to classical sources, as above. In recent years, during a particularly fruitful time for research in what will be termed modern ekphrasis, it becomes apparent that there was a need for clarity between the old tradition and the new.² Ruth Webb provides a comprehensive study of classical *ekphrasis*, and clarifies in that book and elsewhere the difference between classical and modern usages.³ Ruth Webb points out that the two are far from interchangeable, as they belong to such vastly different cultures and systems of thought. Conceptual terms such as ekphrasis cannot be interchanged over barriers of time and radically different frames of reference.

Webb informs the student of modern ekphrasis, while also providing a clear boundary between these two areas of study, classical and modern and she has been at the forefront of calls for clarity and precision

2 The modern versus the classical variant will be distinguished from this point onwards by the italicization of the classical form only.

3 Ruth Webb, *Ekphrasis, Imagination and Persuasion in Ancient Rhetorical Theory and Practice* (Aldershot: Ashgate), 2009.

between the two usages. In deference to her views, the student of modern ekphrasis can then proceed without recourse to the classical tradition. However, Webb points to a potential problem, namely the instability inherent in modern definitions of ekphrasis, founded, as they were, on shaky understandings of classical scholarship.⁴

Armed with a certain amount of what may be called contextual advantage, the classical scholars are positioned to point out the extent to which modern commentators have complicated the term, by narrowing definitions on one hand (*ekphrasis* did not necessarily have to involve an object, but could also refer to a situation such as a battle, or to a person or a place), and extending them on the other hand by omitting the rhetorical component (just naming an object can be sufficient to comprise an ekphrasis).⁵ The position best adopted by scholars of the modern variety is to be wary of plundering classical scholarship out of hand, but bow to their precedence, so to speak. However, ideas of representation and the dynamics of image-text relations are increasingly complex, and conceptualisations of ekphrasis must expand in tandem.

Post-classical ekphrasis found a natural outlet in poetry, and in fact, without the poets' predilection for writing about paintings, sculpture and *objets d'art*, ekphrasis would not have developed in its current direction. Ekphrasis was wedded to poetry through the *ut pictura poesis* (as in painting, so in poetry) belief, which held that poetry shared the features of painting. G. E. Lessing most famously disrupted this, in his 1766 essay *Laocoon: On the Limits of Painting and Poetry*. Lessing is still mentioned frequently with reference to image-text relations.⁶ There is still something in his basic argument for the essential difference of painting (a spatial form) versus poetry (a temporal form), but this becomes more complicated as the forms themselves become more sophisticated. Lessing's distinction seems self-evident, but so does the fact that, as Elizabeth Abel notes, the relationship between art forms will change over time: "the similarities between a painting by Picasso and a poem by Apollinaire differ from those between a painting by Claude and a poem by Thomson, or a painting by Hogarth and a scene from Dickens".⁷

Lessing's argument became the default stance for a long time. Meanwhile literary innovation stemming

4 Ruth Webb, 'The invention of a genre', *Word & Image: A Journal of Verbal/Visual Enquiry*, 15:1 (1999), pp. 7-18.

5 Shadi Bartsch and Jaś Elsner, 'Introduction: Eight Ways of Looking at an Ekphrasis', *Classical Philology*, Vol. 102, No. 1, Special Issues on Ekphrasis (January 2007), pp. i-vi.

6 Extensively commented on but see for example, W. J. T. Mitchell, 'The Politics of Genre: Space and Time in Lessing's *Laocoon*', *Representations*, no. 6, (Spring 1984), pp. 98-115.

7 Elizabeth Abel, 'Redefining the Sister Arts: Baudelaire's response to the art of Delacroix', in *The Language of Images*, ed. W. J. T. Mitchell (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980).

from the late 19th century onwards made ekphrasis and its analysis more pertinent than ever. Concomitantly, visual arts intensified in complexity and reach, especially with reference to photography. It was not until the 1950s and 60s that theorists such as Jean Hagstrum and Murray Krieger took up where Lessing left off.^{8 9} Since that time, there has been growing interest in ekphrasis and image-text relations have emerged as a cogent and discrete field within the humanities. What is still somewhat contentious is definition. Having appropriated the Greek term for it, modern literature is still not exactly sure what it has acquired through that appropriation. James Heffernan is one of those commentators who have focused extensively on ekphrasis itself, exploring, in two works, a conceptual definition of the ekphrastic principle. Heffernan proposes that ekphrasis is essentially representative and that it is through application of the representative quality that we can recognise instances of ekphrasis, and gauge qualities that all ekphrastic literature holds in common. His definition that ekphrasis is “the verbal representation of visual representation” is the most widely, though not universally, accepted, and will be applied in the current study.¹⁰

8 Jean Hagstrum, *The Sister Arts: The Tradition of Literary Pictorialism and English Poetry from Dryden to Gray* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1958).

9 Murray Krieger, *Ekphrasis: The Illusion of the Natural Sign* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991).

10 James Heffernan, *Museum of Words. The Poetics of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashbery* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press) 1993, p. 3.

1.2.3 What Does Ekphrasis Do?

Heffernan's definition is simple and inclusive, and can encompass a variety of forms within the broad limits of visual and verbal. The stipulation that representation is a constituent element of an ekphrasis is apt; without levels of representative meaning and signification, the ekphrasis is description and no more.¹¹ It also succinctly encapsulates the question of what ekphrasis does within a text, while leaving room for a proliferation of answers. The function of ekphrasis is what is important in our understanding of a text.

A fundamental distinction made about the artefact at the centre of an ekphrasis is whether the object is ostensibly real or not. John Hollander made the formal distinction between an ekphrasis of work of art that is real (actual ekphrasis) and an artwork that is imaginary. Hollander's term for the latter kind, a notional ekphrasis, has been widely adopted.¹² Hollander was not the first to recognise the distinction, but the first to propose a term to designate the difference simply. In doing so, he also highlighted the need for further attention to the categorisation of ekphrasis. Expansion of the lexicon applied to ekphrasis seems an obvious strategy but had been somewhat lacking.

Frederic De Armas, in an introduction to a volume on ekphrasis, has proposed many other terms subordinate to actual and notional to further designate the action of the ekphrasis with a text.¹³ De Armas attempts to classify ekphrasis according to subject (e.g. hagiography, mythological, grotesque, historical, a landscape), and also according to their form and function (allegorical, emblematic, decorative or veiled, a rhetorical or mnemonic device). He notes that ekphrasis can take the shape of the traditional pause in the narrative (descriptive ekphrasis) or can expand on a story depicted in the artwork (narrative ekphrasis) and points also to a shaping ekphrasis, an account of the object being created. The latter applies to the most famous example of ekphrasis from antiquity, the creation of the shield of Achilles. The shield is also an example of a meta-ekphrasis, of one ekphrasis contained within another.

De Armas elaborates on Hollander's terms, and points out that, whether real or notional, an ekphrastic artwork may be combinatory (combining elements of different artworks) transformative (the writer changes some elements of a work but maintains its overall identity) or fragmented (using one element of an artwork). All of these may exist in combination in one ekphrasis. De Armas further proposes a

11 One caveat about the word description; its use is still necessary to the exploration of an ekphrasis and occurs alongside the term as a matter of course. The two are not meant to be interchangeable, but description is still the best term for the linguistic means by which ekphrasis functions.

12 John Hollander, *The Gazer's Spirit: Poems Speaking to Silent Works of Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

13 Frederick A. de Armas, 'Simple Magic: Ekphrasis from Antiquity to the Age of Cervantes', in *Ekphrasis in the Age of Cervantes*, Ed. Frederick A. de Armas (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2005), pp.13-27.

category he called meta-descriptive. This last category was the principal topic of his chapter within the volume, and is defined as an ekphrasis based on a textual description of a work or art that may or may not exist. In the Renaissance, artists produced paintings based on the (most likely notional) ekphrases found in classical literature. Such activities, says de Armas, “fully integrate the concept of the sister arts through a double link” as Renaissance writers also became interested in the invisible elements of such paintings and how to render these elements ekphrastically.¹⁴ Jodi Cranston explores the use of notional or ‘lost’ artworks in Renaissance painting and literature.¹⁵ She notes that the visual and verbal arts were often complicit in generating versions of ‘lost’ objects from antiquity, i.e. objects that most probably never existed, thus engaging in an exchange of representations.

Writers have always responded to visual art and vice versa, but ideas of creative dialogue have often been overshadowed by the *paragone*, a Renaissance term expanded upon by Da Vinci and others, which emphasised competition between art forms and ideas. Heffernan and W.J.T Mitchell contend that ekphrasis is characterised by a fundamentally paragonal energy; it brings together two rival forms of representation.¹⁶ Whatever about rival, the visual and the verbal (or image and text) are certainly different systems of representation and this is the essential difficulty of ekphrasis.

Mitchell has written on this question and outlined three stages of our approach as individuals to ekphrasis.¹⁷ The first is ekphrastic indifference, the sense that ekphrasis is impossible, which all common sense tells us it is. Then, comes the advent of ekphrastic hope – the aspirational spirit found in ekphrastic writing that the divide can be and is being overcome. Finally, there may follow ekphrastic fear, in which the synthesis that seems imminent is counter-acted by resistance to the image. A lot of the paragonal energy, that ekphrasis does invariably contain, stems from these last two stages, or at least something like them. Mitchell opines that a stance of ekphrastic indifference is the only reasonable way to interrogate ekphrasis, in other words, we must admit that it will fail before we can consider in what way it succeeds.

Nonetheless, theory can be applied to text and image only after the fact of their creation and if one finds text and image to be coupled in a creative dialogue, it is often more helpful to scrutinise the effect of this exchange on one or the other work of art before speculating as to its nature. Stephen Cheeke’s fluent 2008 study is extremely helpful in its focus on close readings of various texts and images to articulate the

14 Ibid., p. 14.

15 Jodi Cranston, ‘Longing for the Lost: Ekphrasis, Rivalry and the Figuration of Notional Artworks in Italian Renaissance Painting.’ *Word & Image: A Journal of Verbal / Visual Enquiry*. 27.2 (June 2011) pp.212-219

16 W.J.T Mitchell, *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 1986

17 W.J.T Mitchell, *Picture Theory*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 1994.

considerable body of scholarship concerning image-text relations.¹⁸ Cheeke reminds us that ekphrasis does in fact, thrive on failure and points to the gap between text and image not as something to be overcome, but as a potentially fruitful site for investigation.

Cheeke's interest lies only in actual ekphrasis as opposed to notional, and outside of a rich body of work about classical and renaissance ekphrasis (such as De Armas and Cranston to name two of a very great number) studies of instances of actual ekphrasis outnumber the notional. It is not surprising, as an actual ekphrasis is a richer hunting ground for intertextual and intermedial references, allusions and inspiration for author and scholar alike.

Abigail Rischin emphasizes how George Eliot employs ekphrasis in *Middlemarch* to prefigure and reinforce narrative development of the romance between Will Ladislaw and Dorothea Casaubon, a central plot of the novel.¹⁹ Eliot has the Ladislaw character praise the supremacy of the linguistic arts over the visual (recalling Lessing and centuries of theoretical debate surrounding the *paragone*) while undermining her own character's statement by using an ekphrasis of a statue to represent sexual desire in a way that side-stepped Victorian mores on sexuality, particularly female sexuality. Eliot was by no means the only author to do this, and ekphrasis is rife with gendered representation. In this case the statue that Dorothea stands beside is a real statue, still in the Vatican, that had been known for centuries as a representation of Cleopatra, but identified in the late 1800s as being of Ariadne. At the time the novel is set, the re-designation had not happened, and so the reader has access to knowledge that the characters in the novel do not. This episode demonstrates a particularly deft use of the narrative potential of ekphrasis, and neatly illustrates how ekphrasis is often more than a two-sided exchange between an image and a text. The image of both Ariadne and Cleopatra derive from written narratives of some kind. The stories of both figures have been retold and redeployed in fables, myths, poetry, drama and historical accounts, paintings and sculpture over hundreds of years. The image of this statue has been copied in drawing and woodcut many times. So in one brief ekphrasis, we find an extension of intermediality and intertextuality that reaches back through the past to the earliest products of Western art and literature.

When an author uses a known, actual artwork as their ekphrastic object, the known history of the artwork itself and its subject become an inherent part of the ekphrastic subject matter also. A notional artwork, conversely, confers greater creative freedom but comes with the risk of representational poverty, as potentially, the artwork itself lacks the integrity of a context that is independent of the text. The fantastic

18 Stephen Cheeke, *Writing for Art: The Aesthetics of Ekphrasis* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008).

19 Abigail S. Rischin, 'Beside the Reclining Statue: Ekphrasis, Narrative and Desire in *Middlemarch*', *PMLA*, vol. 111, no. 5 (Oct 1996), pp. 1121-1132.

is a particular genre of literature that owes much to ekphrasis and often employs notional ekphrasis; in these stories what is interesting is that the fantastic element relies on the artwork transcending its boundaries.

François Rigolot reminds us that the Pygmalion myth has at its centre a belief in power of art to give life rather than mimic or even represent it. Infatuation with images is an old trope in literature, and has been dramatised over and over again. Invariably, a human character develops a fascination with an image that becomes a passion, and leads them to assign meaning, agency and values to a statue, painting or other images; in many cases the art-work itself comes life.²⁰ Rigolot sees the fantastic in literature as a displaced mode of ekphrastic representation. Rigolot emphasises the capacity of ekphrasis to blur the boundary between description and narrative; where ekphrasis is used in the fantastic tale, descriptive detail is essential to (in some way) animate what is inanimate, as it almost always will involve setting that what is still into some kind of motion, or attributing qualities to or personifying an object in some way. Rigolot rightly points out a basic but valuable property of ekphrasis – that it is inevitably associated with action of some kind, whether literal, imagined or hermeneutic.

The story Rigolot examines is *La Vénus d'Ille*, a story by Prosper Mérimée, which concerns a statue that allegedly comes to life. He points out that an initial description of the statue takes the form of dry, objective data, delivered to the narrator (an archaeologist visiting a provincial town) from a local guide. As the guide continues to speak, he departs from observable fact, becoming more speculative and eventually pronouncing the statue to be evil. The narrator (and by assumption, the reader) greets this with amusement; confounding lifelike appearance with lifelike qualities and abilities is the preserve of the primitive, uneducated mind, suggesting superstition and iconoclasm. The narrator, being an educated man, will not confuse a representative object with a living entity, supernatural or otherwise. Mérimée's tale rests on such assumptions, and the fantastic element in the story seeks to subvert it. Ultimately, the statue is destroyed, as a consequence of what Rigolot calls the ekphrastic vigour bestowed upon it, and it seems, from the hero being beset by a literal version of Mitchell's ekphrastic fear. Fantastic literature depends on generating confusion in the mind of the reader between a natural or supernatural explanation of events. To an extent, the inanimate becoming animate, the statue that comes to life is the persuasiveness of an ekphrasis – that quality of *enargeia* – taken to its most literal level. Fantastic literature will take the figurative and make it literal, as Rigolot says: “the ekphrastic moment is precisely the rhetorical locus where the ‘event’ shines forth”.²¹

20 François Rigolot, 'Ekphrasis and the Fantastic: Genesis of an Aberration', *Comparative Literature*, Vol. 49, No. 2, (Spring 1997), pp. 97-112.

21 Ibid. p.103.

Motion within and by an artefact is a frequent feature of ekphrases, and in fact, was a principal element of the ekphrastic account of the Shield of Achilles in the *Iliad*.²² De Armas focuses on the importance of visual and verbal arts in *Don Quixote*. Cervantes' first novel, *La Galatea*, engaged ekphrastically with Raphael's fresco *The Triumph of Galatea*, and rather than describing the painting, Cervantes sets it in motion. There is extensive comment in the theoretical literature of the capacity or otherwise of ekphrasis to generate some kind of movement in the visual, static, artwork. An analogous discussion is the effect ekphrasis has on narrative pace, and it was the case that it became synonymous with narrative stasis, or at least a pause in the narrative. In fact, this seems to be very much the concern of modern ekphrasis only.

James Francis joins with Ruth Webb in emphasising the need to separate the ancient forms of *ekphrasis* from the modern. In his opinion, blending the two forms does not work and can even be contradictory. Classical *ekphrasis* cannot be divorced from its oral delivery; both its rhetorical function and its intended audience are indispensable factors. Francis contends that the idea of *ekphrasis* as a pause in the narrative seems to be a modern one: "Far from a calm, contemplative pause, ancient *ekphrasis* [...] is filled with movement on several levels, sometimes reinforcing, sometimes subverting the narrative, often calling into question the very process of sight, language and thought."²³ For Francis, because Greek epics were oratorical performances, they were naturally dependent on highly evocative description, amounting to "a level of re-enactment or recreation".²⁴

To a certain extent, a kind of textual re-enactment is often found in ekphrastic writing. Valentine Cunningham posits a view of ekphrasis as essentially resurrectionist, feeding literature's craving for the past and its desire to en-voice the historical and textual artefact. Reflecting the primary dichotomy of image versus text, polarities of presence / absence, silence / speech, male / female and living / dead permeate much ekphrastic writing and writing about ekphrasis. This is often seen as a challenge to be overcome, but the inherent duality of ekphrasis in fact makes it possible to represent these polarities and the challenges they pose. Robert Browning's poem "*My Last Duchess*" is an example, containing all of these oppositions; the poem also invokes the distinction between the glance and the gaze. Glance and gaze are often gendered and denote mortality. In this case they additionally refer to iconoclasm.

Lawrence Starzyk examines works by Browning, particularly "*My Last Duchess*", in which the poet

22 See particularly Stephen Scully, 'Reading the Shield of Achilles: Terror, Anger, Delight', *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology*, Vol. 101 (2003), pp. 29-47.

23 Francis, James A. Metal Maidens, Achilles' Shield and Pandora: The Beginning of "Ekphrasis", *American Journal of Philology*, 130 (2009), pp. 1-23, p. 6.

24 *Ibid.*, p.8.

“employs ekphrasis to dramatize the dialectical relations between seeing and being seen”.²⁵ For Starzyk, the poem exemplifies the paragonal nature of ekphrasis, as it simultaneously attempts to empower and enforce the silence of what is mute (the image of the Duchess). Starzyk, and elsewhere, Heffernan, contend that the viewer (the Duke) becomes, through projection, the object of the timeless gaze of the image.²⁶ In Starzyk’s reading, the Duke is essentially a failed but unrepentant iconoclast. He has the painting made and his wife destroyed, so she becomes more thoroughly his object and possession, but cannot stand to look at the painting for long. He is “outmanoeuvred by the very commodity he has attempted to control”.²⁷ The painting is a threatening object to him in that he may own but not possess it, any more than he was able to possess the woman he sought to replace with the image. His ekphrastic hope of union with her only as a painted form is subverted by the ekphrastic fear that he himself may be silenced by the image. The duke, who is planning to obtain a second wife for himself, serves as a warning of the dangers of trying to appropriate an image and that attempts to aestheticize or de-aestheticize an image will fail:

Browning’s ekphrastic poems underscore the importance of rescuing self from the static enthrallment threatened by idols, images and portraits, of freeing the self for dynamic growth. Ironically, release in this dialectically ordered system requires entrapment; seeing demands being seen; integrity of identity depends upon the indeterminate state of becoming in the present what one is currently not.²⁸

Browning’s poem is also concerned with otherness and the suppression of that other. Alterity has emerged in the latter half of the 20th century as an interdisciplinary concept. Again the student of ekphrasis must tread carefully: while otherness is intrinsic to ekphrasis in many ways, the use of the term should not be used without specifying the limits of application.

As Mitchell observes:

The ‘otherness’ of visual representation from the standpoint of textuality may be anything from a professional competition (the *paragone* of poet and painter) to a relation of political, disciplinary or cultural domination in which the ‘self’ is understood to be an active, speaking, seeing subject, while the ‘other’ is projected as a passive, seen, and (usually) silent object. Insofar as art history is a verbal representation of visual representation, it is the elevation of ekphrasis to a disciplinary principle.²⁹

25 Lawrence J. Starzyk, ‘Browning and the Ekphrastic Encounter’, *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, 38.4, Autumn 1998, pp. 689-706, p. 690. Online: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/451093>.

26 Heffernan, pp. 139-145.

27 Starzyk, p. 698.

28 Ibid., p. 708.

29 *Picture Theory*, p. 157.

What ekphrastic hope strives toward is otherness, the semiotic ‘other’ of the text, being a visual or plastic art of some form. This other can only be figurative and never come literally into view; the semiotic other must simultaneously remain other, and absent, while also comprising the subject matter of the ekphrastic text. Mitchell likens it to a ‘black hole’ in the verbal structure “entirely absent from it but shaping and affecting it in fundamental ways”.³⁰ The subordination of the semiotic other is impossible with ekphrasis, as Browning’s poem shows.

What is designated as the other may change with the medium. A great deal of commentary on ekphrasis still pertains to poetry, though an increasing amount of attention is being paid to prose forms, such as the novel or the short-story. Most deliberations about poetry and visual art extend to prose forms as well, but the duration of the novel and all the qualities that come from that – characterisation, plot, style – change the implications for ekphrasis. The previously mentioned Rischin study of *Middlemarch* shows how one slight ekphrasis can still anticipate a major narrative arc. Similar ekphrases (and much indebted to Eliot) occur in the work of Henry James, for example.

Rather than en-voicing the silent object, novelistic ekphrasis often expresses that which cannot be openly said; the visual other is rendered verbally in order to achieve what words alone cannot. In Salman Rushdie’s novel *Shame*, for example, eighteen embroidered shawls are created by Rani Harappa to denounce her husband, a corrupt dictator. Thyra Knapp outlines the ways in which the deeply ekphrastic novel *Das geheime Fieber* (by Christoph Geiser) uses the author/narrator’s dynamic engagement with the work of Caravaggio to create “an intricate play of veiled unveiling” which articulate hidden desire and marginality.³¹ In an entirely different proposition, David Kennedy has examined the role of ekphrasis in a series of detective novels in which mysteries are resolved or not through the interpretation of images and what Kennedy refers to as readable surfaces.³² In these novels featuring ‘ekphrastic detective’ (as Kennedy designates him), Lew Archer, the silent images either aid or frustrate efforts to provide a voice for the silent, absent victims. Kennedy notes how ekphrastic writing often concentrates focus on one particular aspect of an artwork, an unusual or specific detail. The intense attention ekphrasis pays to an artwork is testament to the power of art to fascinate and to challenge our capacity to create meaning visually, and ekphrastic writing, Kennedy asserts, is an attempt to overcome that power by “bringing art

30 Ibid., p.158

31 Thyra E. Knapp, ‘Mediating Marginality: Ekphrasis and the Outsider in Christoph Geiser’s *Das Geheime Fieber*’, *Seminar: A Journal of Germanic Studies*, 46.4, Nov 2010, p. 434.

32 David Kennedy, “‘An Assault of Dark Forces on the Vision’ – What Ross MacDonald’s Lew Archer novels tell us about ekphrasis”, *Word & Image*, 27:1.

into the realm of our contingency”³³.

The novel as a form allows for the use of multiple ekphrases, and for a thorough incorporation of the potential of ekphrasis as narrative element. Mack Smith has looked in detail at how ekphrasis functions in the novel. In dealing with multiple ekphrases and visual references in Cervantes, Austen, Tolstoy, Joyce and Pynchon, he codified what he terms the ekphrastic system of a novel, which is defined as “a network of representational scenes”³⁴. Rather than existing in isolation, or just serially, multiple ekphrases in a novel work together as components of a representational system, which encapsulates the mimetic and formal norms at work within the text. What Smith found in the novels he focussed on was that the ekphrastic system supported a discourse about representation and mimesis. Through elaboration of this discourse, characters arrived at or abandoned ways of thinking. Critical discussion of a work of art, individual reactions to and thoughts or voiced opinions about an artwork designated their wider attitudes. The novels “dramatized the consequences of confining life according to false truth-claims of a discredited discourse”³⁵. Conflicting views take the form of conflicting representational paradigms. The novel as a form is capable of supporting an ekphrastic system that permeates much of its qualities and structure – such as plot, character, style – and functions at a discursive and dramatic level. Smith does not deny that poetry functions on a similar level, but difference in form also yields to the novel a specific way of utilising ekphrasis.

Tamar Yacobi has worked extensively on ekphrasis, often focussing on its function in the novel and the short story³⁶. Yacobi has looked at ekphrasis’ capacity to reveal narrative (un)reliability³⁷. Similar to Smith’s elaboration on ekphrasis as an ideological marker, a character’s opinion or interpretation of an artwork can be revelatory particularly when compared to the wider narrative it is embedded in. Her conception of the ekphrastic model complements Smith’s ekphrastic system in that it adds to the representational network that the system encapsulates. Yacobi states that even a brief allusion to a pictorial type, to a stock image, is a form of ekphrasis, which she designates an ekphrastic or pictorial model. Yacobi’s ekphrastic simile is similar, but refers to a specific artwork. What the ekphrastic model and ekphrastic simile acknowledge is the potential for complexity through even very slight references. The ekphrastic model has further utility in its very simplicity – the references need not be complex to be

33 Ibid., p. 105.

34 Mack Smith, *Literary Realism and the Ekphrastic Tradition* (University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), p. 35.

35 Ibid., p. 10.

36 Tamar Yacobi, Pictorial Models and Narrative Ekphrasis’, *Poetics Today*, 16.4 (Winter 1995) 599-649, <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/1773367>> [accessed on 15 April 2008].

37 Tamar Yacobi, Interart Narrative: (Un)Reliability and Ekphrasis’, *Poetics Today*, 21.4 (Winter 2000), pp. 711-749.

significant and appeals to the reader's own perception and experience of art and images directly. Accessibility is one of the weaknesses of ekphrasis. How much of an ekphrasis will be absorbed by the reader will vary considerably depending on many factors. An appeal to a stock image (in one example used by Yacobi, referring to a dinner as a 'the last supper') brings the reader's own store of imagery into play more than a specifically designated artwork. With both ekphrastic model and ekphrastic simile, the old Greek quality of *enargeia* is then completely forsaken. However, though still an important component of ekphrasis, one hardly imagines this to be as important as it was to ancient Greeks. Simon Goldhill, for one, points to the lack of discussion of *enargeia* as one of the weakness of modern conceptions of ekphrasis, however modern treatments of imagery mean that readers are more receptive to the textual invocation of images.³⁸

Image saturation in modern times is indisputably a fact and technological development has taken us further into the 'pictorial turn' that Mitchell wrote of in 1994.³⁹ Stephen Cheeke considers the applications of photography to ekphrasis. The verisimilitude of the photographic image to its subject was greeted as a marvel following the invention of the camera, but also met with a good deal of hostility. As Cheeke points out, in the digital age where technology has interfered with the very realism that photography enjoyed as its birthright, things may change, but up to now, Cheeke ventures that ekphrastic fear is alive and well among many who engage ekphrastically with photography. The temporally bound image captured in a photograph means that photographic imagery has always been associated with transience, and with death – as Susan Sontag puts it: "Precisely by slicing out this moment and freezing it, all photographs testify to time's relentless melt".⁴⁰ Writers have never been reluctant to engage with mortality, it must be said, but there is something in the very realness of a photograph, the fact that it offers, as Cheeke puts it, "proof of the real"⁴¹ that challenges the representational capacity of painting and threatens to overwhelm language through the authority of its very realness. Hence, Cheeke finds "an even greater ambivalence, a sharper disquiet about the rival medium, than texts about paintings".⁴²

Photography is also part of the pervasiveness of commercial imagery and leads us to the question of the monetary value of art and what Wendy Steiner called "the economics of ekphrasis".⁴³ Steiner considers ekphrasis as used in Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*. Throughout the novel, ekphrasis, along with pictorialism, is deployed to identify the heroine, Lily Bart, as an art object. The novel turns on the

38 Goldhill, p. 6.

39 Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, pp. 11-35.

40 Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (London: Penguin, 1977), p. 15.

41 Cheeke, p. 146.

42 Ibid.

43 Wendy Steiner, 'The Causes of Effect: Edith Wharton and the Economics of Ekphrasis', *Poetics Today*, 10. 2, Art and Literature II (Summer, 1989), pp. 279-297. Online: <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/1773025>>.

commodification of beauty, and Lily's willingness (or not) to transact a marriage with no other resource than her looks and her talent for display and effect. She turns herself into a painting through a *tableau vivant*, one of two ekphrases that Lily makes of herself, which, Steiner contends, reinforces the subject-object confusion surrounding Lily, which she herself generates. A marriage plot is also at the centre of Henry James's *The Wings of the Dove*, but the ekphrasis used as regards the heroine of this novel is of a very different variety.

Zoe Roth and Michael Trussler have both written about ekphrasis and the commodification of art. Quite rightly, Roth makes a connection between ekphrasis and socio-economic power structures. Ekphrasis, among other things, can serve as a socio-economic marker within a fictional work.⁴⁴ Consumerism and commercial imagery became embedded into the wider capitalist socio-economic framework from the latter half of the 19th century onwards. Art works have always been seen as status symbols and objects with inherent commercial worth. Art can simultaneously vivify and vilify materialist consumption, but is rarely divorced from it. In *The Wings of the Dove*, heiress Milly Theale is viewed by others as an art object, and compared directly to a painting, a valuable Bronzino, while standing next to the painting in a gallery. Unlike Lily Bart, Milly's positioning as art object is unwilling on her part. Trussler examines Salman Rushdie's short story, *At the Auction of the Ruby Slippers*, which he believes to be concerned with exposing the nature of contemporary visual representation.⁴⁵ Essentially, the story ponders the commodification of the image and judges it to be inescapable.

44 Zoe Roth, 'Vita brevis, ars longa: ekphrasis, the art object, and the consumption of the subject in Henry James and Michel Houellebecq', *Word & Image*, 29.2 (April-June 2013), pp. 139-156.

45 Michael Trussler, 'Literary Artifacts: Ekphrasis in the Short Fiction of Donald Barthelme, Salman Rushdie, and John Edgar Wideman', *Contemporary Literature*, 41.2 (Summer, 2000), pp. 252-290. Online: <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/1208761>>.

1.2.4 The Dramatic Ekphrastic Encounter

An extensive survey of the corpus of ekphrasis research revealed a dearth of research on ekphrasis in the novel, in comparison to the extensive research into ekphrastic poetry. The *ut pictura poesis* tradition still lives in research as well as creatively, it appears. The current study endeavours to point to one new way of conceiving of ekphrasis in the novel, where applicable, as a simple meeting between a person and an image.

My primary concern is to examine occasions of ekphrasis that are critical to the narrative arc of selected novels by the author. Ekphrasis is, as already seen through examples in the literary review, accepted as an encounter in and of itself. While this study draws upon the considerable quantity of theoretical discourse now established about ekphrasis, I want to make a distinction between that concept of ekphrasis as an encounter between image and text, and my configuration of an ekphrastic encounter, where we ‘meet’ the painting or art object within the text. The first is a purely theoretical conceptualisation and the second a narrative action. To underscore that distinction and avoid confusion, I will use the term ‘dramatic ekphrastic encounter’ regarding the latter.

My delineation of this term is simple. Where, within a text, an image provokes a response in a viewer that motivates them in some specific direction, we can speak of a dramatic ekphrastic encounter. As it functions at the structural level of plot, but also at a thematic and representative level, such an ekphrasis is intrinsic to that text. There are two strands to the dramatic ekphrastic encounter: occasion and consequence. The occasion of the dramatic ekphrastic encounter is the way in which a fictional character encounters an artwork and then, in turn, how this encounter is mediated to the reader. The circumstances surrounding a dramatic ekphrastic encounter in a narrative can have significance of near equal weight to the ekphrasis itself, and must be regarded as an integral part of the overall effect. The consequence of the dramatic ekphrastic encounter encompasses both the response of the viewer and the dynamic effect of this encounter on the narrative.

What is not given sufficient weight in much scholarly work concerning ekphrasis is what is happening in the text that surrounds the ekphrasis itself; how and by whom is it mediated to the reader, where is the work positioned in the narrative, where is the work reported to be physically? Consideration of such matters is not limited to the dramatic ekphrastic encounter. However, as I conceive it, the dramatic ekphrastic encounter is an ekphrasis that cannot be considered independently of these questions and has one additional essential: a dramatic ekphrastic encounter must be an account of beholding a physical

object. This is what I mean by the occasion of the dramatic ekphrastic encounter – the physical meeting of person and object, the situation in which that meeting occurs and the means by which the reader learns of it. Furthermore, the dramatic ekphrastic encounter must be of pivotal importance to the novel. The meeting with the physical object will have a discernible effect on an individual who in turn affects the events of the novel in a significant way, this being the consequence of the dramatic ekphrastic encounter. In this way, it is connected to the central deliberation surrounding ekphrasis itself, namely, reconciling the spatially fixed object with the temporal flow of narrative.

Here I must recall Abigail Rischin who makes the case for the catalytic power of art in the narrative of *Middlemarch*.⁴⁶ As noted, Rischin examines the point in the novel where Will Ladislaw first sees Dorothea Brooke, before he knows who she is, at the Vatican Museum, and standing beside a statue of a reclining woman. Eliot has Will Ladislaw disparage visual art as static, fixed and unchanging, and therefore unable to represent living experience as well as language.⁴⁷ Rischin points out the intended irony – that it is Will who is most affected by the art he encounters, which triggers a change within him and a change in his action. Art may be physically still, but it can have a dynamic effect in those who observe it. Rendered ekphrastically, a static artwork can drive a narrative forward and the dramatic ekphrastic encounter encapsulates that ability.

The dramatic ekphrastic encounter functions at two levels in a novel: first at the surface level of plot, the overt level at which story happens and narrative events occur, and second, at the substrate level of the novel, as a representative element of the author's artistic aims. While the second condition is a necessary function of any ekphrasis worthy of the name, the first is not found in every instance. Certainly, in the novel, ekphrasis can function as an aside, as a passage that may have significance but may not be essential, contrary to what we find with the three novels scrutinised in this study. The dramatic ekphrastic encounter is an episode within a text that has both dramatic and stylistic relevance, the absence of which would fundamentally change the nature of that text. The occasion of the encounter must involve an object that is physically present, and the situation (both physical and contextual) in which the object is viewed is part of the encounter. Some form of catharsis – through identification, and emphatic response or suggestion – must take place during this encounter, whether oblique or overt, which leads to the consequential action arising from the encounter.

46 Though she does not offer an original term, Rischin is analysing a dramatic ekphrastic encounter in *Middlemarch*, and it was this article that first suggested inspired the idea of dramatic ekphrastic encounter as a separate sub-set of ekphrasis.

47 Eliot has Ladislaw echo Lessing's *Lacoón* in his comments deliberately.

1.3 Literary Review: John Banville

Though unquestionably one of the foremost Irish writers of recent times, the label ‘Irish writer’ does not apply easily to John Banville, beyond biographical fact. It is unsurprising that many of his contemporaries, coming of age in a struggling post-independence Ireland, chose to root their narratives locally, and engage with the nation’s trajectory. Banville wrote an early collection of short stories, *Long Lankin* (1970) and two novels, *Nightspawn*, (1971) and *Birchwood* (1973), which could be seen as his ‘Irish’ writing. With the publication in 1976 of *Doctor Copernicus*, we see a definite break with the traditional territory of the Irish novelist.

Doctor Copernicus was the first novel of Banville’s science tetralogy. It was followed by *Kepler* (1981), *The Newton Letter: An Interlude* (1983) and *Mefisto* (1986). Again, Banville changes direction, with the so-called Frames trilogy, *The Book of Evidence* (1989), *Ghosts* (1993) and *Athena* (1995), in which the science theme of the tetralogy is usurped by art. These last three are often referred to as the art trilogy and will be in this text also. His subsequent novel, *The Untouchable* (1997), offers a re-imagining of the life of art historian and spy, Anthony Blunt, and so visual art also prevails. With the publication of *Eclipse*, (2000), we see another change; a novel which deals primarily with grief. *Eclipse* finds a kind of sequel in *Shroud* (2002), and a thematic companion in *The Sea* (2005), also a meditation on grief and loss. *The Infinities* was published in 2009. Generally regarded as being more optimistic in tone than many of his previous novels, with a puckish humour, it stands out from his other work in being quite close to science fiction. The author has since returned to the territory of *Eclipse* and *Shroud* with his most recent novel, *Ancient Light* (2012).

These are trite summaries of course. Though there is huge variation in subject matter, there is much that Banville novels hold in common. An informed reading of his oeuvre reveals each novel as one of a series of variations on certain themes, or as various points on the same continuum. There is an inherent contradiction here, but that is also one of the recurring motifs of Banville’s work, and indeed of Banville as author.

Banville refers to Nabokov, Beckett, Joyce and Thomas Mann as his main influences, but though an avowed follower of the European high-modernist tradition, he is essentially a post-modern novelist. His novels display a high level of erudition, but he is notably an autodidact, whose fascination with art and science feeds his writing. Banville is an arch-stylist and a master of prose, who aspires to the quality of poetry and the sensation of visual art in his writing, reflecting a long tradition of writers who wish to

break down the boundaries between art forms. He presents the reader with protagonists who seek out knowledge, art, beauty and even redemption through scurrilous means; his novels are replete with obsession, covetousness, criminality, death, grief, all underscored with a dark humour, and authorial detachment. Banville follows the rule prescribed by Flaubert, that a novelist must be everywhere sensed and nowhere present; all his novels are unmistakably 'Banvillean'. A distinguishing Banville trait is a fluent and liberal use of visual art; it is this aspect of the author's work that is examined here.

1.3.1 Art, Ekphrasis and Representation in Banville

It was Joseph McMinn who first wrote about ekphrasis in Banville's work directly, but many other commentators refer to art and representation generally in Banville, most notably John Kenny and Elke d'Hoker.⁴⁸

Anja Muller took up the challenge of tackling both visual art in Banville and the depiction of female characters, which is problematic in the art trilogy.⁴⁹ One strand of her argument is especially pertinent here; Muller avers that the trilogy "foregrounds this closure-providing function of the frame in the narrator's attempts to represent women by relating them to painting and by almost treating them as if they were pictures".⁵⁰ Banville's narrators 'frame' the women of those novels by consistently returning to visual art and allusions to art in order to describe, not just the women themselves, but their actions also. Muller focused on the Pygmalion element of this constant conflation in the trilogy of women and painted women. Muller concludes that ultimately, the would-be Pygmalion, the narrator of the trilogy, fails, in that he never manages to convert his painted ladies from object to subject, they are never granted their own 'reality' and agency but, culminating in the figure of A in *Athena*, are 'pure signifier'. Muller is undoubtedly correct in her analysis of the trilogy; from that point the depictions of females change and become fully realised, culminating with Anna Morden in *The Sea* and Helen in *The Infinities*.

Patricia Coughlan covered similar ground by addressing the erotic in Banville's work.⁵¹ A main concern of Coughlan's article is the triadic in Banville's fiction. A lot of critical work has pointed to the 'double' and 'doubling' in Banville but Coughlan focuses on the recurrence of threesomes, both in the literal sense, being imagined by the narrator or 'really' occurring in the narrative, and in also in an emotional sense, through sets of three being emotionally bound to each other in some extreme fashion – jealousy, unrequited fixations, and frustrated possessive, often Oedipal, desire. The conundrum of physical versus psychical being is at the centre of Banville's writing, which is sensually evocative; his prose is particularly good at tactual and olfactory description, for example. When it comes to sex, the erotic, the body and particularly physical decay, Banville is not coy. While commentators do engage with the earthier aspects of Banville's writing, Coughlan was the first to address this directly. Art is often

48 Joseph McMinn, 'Ekphrasis and the novel: the presence of paintings in John Banville's fiction', *Word & Image: A Journal of Verbal/Visual Enquiry*, 18.3 (2002), pp. 137-145.

49 Anja Muller, "You Have Been Framed": The Function of Ekphrasis for the Representation of Women in John Banville's Trilogy (*The Book of Evidence, Ghosts, Athena*), *Studies in The Novel*, 36. 2 (Summer 2004).

50 *Ibid.*, p. 186.

51 Patricia Coughlan, 'Banville the Feminine, and the Scenes of Eros', *Irish University Review*. Vol. 36, No. 1, (Spring - Summer, 2006), pp. 81-101

connected or coincides with his writing about the body and sex, most often through the creation of tableaux, but in some instances by equating the desire for art with erotic desire explicitly. Sublimation of desire into painting is an undercurrent in both *The Book of Evidence* and *The Untouchable*.

Aside from direct references to visual art, the author's style is very visual. Banville is on record several times over as saying that he had ambitions to be a painter in his youth, which he believes taught him to look at surfaces and colour differently. He also has a fine sense of the comic, albeit of the dark variety. The comedic element in Banville's prose is widely acknowledged but largely overlooked in both reviews and scholarship. The author has stated:

I feel viscerally that the novel is a comic form, that it's essentially a burlesque form [...]. You can be as poetic as you like, or tragic, but the form itself will drag you back into the world, will make comic moments, will make absurd moments, will make ridiculous moments.⁵²

Bryan Radley is one of the few who have paid significant attention to humour in Banville's novels. Radley's contention is that Banville's particular brand of black comedy is at the nexus of the aesthetic and ethical concerns of the author's work, and he cites both Freddie Montgomery and Victor Maskell as two characters that exemplify not just the comedic in Banville, but the importance of it. Radley's work will be returned to subsequently.

Elke d'Hoker's extensive work on Banville involves representation and ethics, the two most salient concerns of the trilogy. She notes that an argument can be made for the inclusion of *The Untouchable* alongside the books of the so-called art trilogy (*The Book of Evidence*, *Ghosts* and *Athena*) to form a second tetralogy in Banville's oeuvre, in which science is replaced by art as the epistemological foundation.⁵³ These four novels also share a preoccupation with ethical choices and moral relativism as well as visual art, which is most overtly present in *The Book of Evidence* and *The Untouchable*. For my own purposes, and viewed through the prism of ekphrasis, these two novels are linked; both feature a dramatic ekphrastic encounter which is underscored by an intense fetishization of paintings as desirable objects of power, mediated to the reader by an unreliable narrator, and furthermore, through an obviously parodic tone from which the art object is spared.

52 An Interview with John Banville, Haughton, H., and Radley, B., *Modernism / Modernity*. Vol. 18, No. 4, 2012, pp. 855-869.

53 Elke D'Hoker, Portrait of the Other as a Woman with Gloves: Ethical Perspectives in John Banville's *The Book of Evidence*. *Critique*, 44.1, Fall 2002.

1.3.2 Ekphrasis in *The Infinities*

Banville primarily derives *The Infinities* from the play *Amphitryon* by Heinrich von Kleist, which he has adapted before. The novel is a kind of re-working of the Von Kleist play, but a re-working in which Banville's own adaptation is directly referenced also. Banville described *Amphitryon* as the skeleton of the book, and believes that Von Kleist was trying to blend Shakespearean burlesque and Greek drama and has stated that this was also his intention with *The Infinities*.⁵⁴ The Von Kleist play was inspired by earlier dramatizations by Dryden and Molière, treatments of the story stretch back to Plautus and (allegedly) Sophocles. The story is also mentioned in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.

Amphitryon, a general of Thebes is married to the beautiful Alcmene. Zeus covets Alcmene and while *Amphitryon* is away at war, the god takes the form of her absent husband to seduce her. Her husband arrives back from battle just after this mortal / immortal coupling, prompting some confusion and marital discord – and also a pregnancy. Alcmene later gives birth to twins, Iphicles, the mortal son of *Amphitryon*, and Heracles, the son of Zeus.

A thoroughly modern re-working of this old story, *The Infinities* has one particularly unusual feature, in that it is clearly set in an alternative version of our own time. This alternative time-line links in with the way in which ekphrasis is used in the novel, which in this case is handled so adeptly as to blend seamlessly into the narrative. It is apt that the ekphrasis in this case comes from a work by Picasso, who fused ancient myth and modern art so uniquely during his long career.

The disparities between our world and that of *The Infinities* emerge steadily from the beginning of the novel and it quickly becomes clear that we are dealing with another version of our reality. Adam Godley, the family patriarch, is a mathematician, and was the leading light of a group of physicists and mathematicians who “exposed the relativity hoax and showed up Planck's constant for what it really is”(48). He posited a series of theorems, which, among other things, prove the existence of an infinite number of worlds, not parallel, but inter-penetrating. So world that Adam and his family inhabit is our own, but one of *The Infinities*, many alternative versions of our own world that Adam's so called Brahma hypothesis has proclaimed.

54 In interview with Yoder, A.K., *The Millions Interview: John Banville, The Millions*, February 2010. Online: <http://www.themillions.com/2010/02/the-millions-interview-john-banville.html>>.

Adam's equations seem approximate to the Many Worlds Interpretation, proposed by Hugh Everett and developed by Bryce De Witt. Quantum mechanics are most definitely beyond the scope of this project, but, to put it simply, the Everett / De Witt theory is a way of interpreting quantum mechanics, which, followed to its conclusion, asserts that all possible outcomes of a situation do occur, in one of many possible alternative universes, so that all possible histories and futures are tenable, elsewhere, or in another time.

The theory has certainly caught the imagination of writers and filmmakers, and particularly comic and graphic novel artists. Creating a plausible alternative reality confers great freedom upon the writer, but within a series of pre-defined rules or boundaries. Extant reality or, with fictional characters, the original story, is the starting point, for what Karin Kukkonen⁵⁵ calls the baseline reality. The writer can invent anything they want, as long as the differences can be explained by reference back to the baseline reality, and are strong enough for the reader to accept. An alternative reality is based on what it is not, and so is particularly attractive for science fiction and fantasy genres.

Adam Rovner, writing about alternate history and Jewish literature conceives of the alternate history genre as “imaginary travel literature in which the present is a foreign country”.⁵⁶ If this is so, then how does the reader navigate this foreign country? Kukkonen suggests that this can be most effectively achieved (especially in graphic novels and comics, where baseline reality is weak or absent) through a narrator that is also a character, who explores the story world or relates their activities, what she calls a ‘reader surrogate’.⁵⁷

In *The Infinities*, two narrative voices act as our surrogate guides, one of whom – in keeping with the mythical origins of the story – is Hermes, messenger of the gods. The other is Adam, who has suffered a stroke and lies immobilised. His mind is still active, but he appears comatose and his family have been told that he will not survive. Hermes, in Greek mythology, was a psychopomp, one who crosses boundaries between worlds, and so the implication is that he is waiting for Adam to die. The idea of the fixity of our own reality (i.e. natural reality as opposed to the supernatural) descends from the Classical world, whereas the idea of multiple or alternative versions of our reality, (without recourse to the supernatural) is the most post-modern of notions. Banville merrily appropriates a god of classical Greece (a supernatural figure) to introduce the reader to a post-modern (but natural) alternative reality, and the

55 Karin Kukkonen, 2010). *Navigating Infinite Earths: Readers, Mental Models and the Multiverse of Superhero Comics. Storyworlds: A Journal of Narrative Studies*, vol. 2, pp. 39-58.

56 Adam Rovner *Alternate History: The Case of Nava Semel's Isra-Island and Michael Chabon's The Yiddish Policemen's Union. Partial Answers*, vol. 9, no.1, (2011) pp.131-152, p. 132.

57 *Ibid.*, p. 52.

man whose mathematics assert its (and our) existence.

Tony Jackson addresses Banville's treatment of science and mathematics in his tetralogy novels and beyond. Beginning with *Doctor Copernicus*, Banville's work presents a series of characters for whom the search for knowledge becomes exhausted by the limits of knowledge as it is available to them, and the limits of the individual. In Banville's novels, those who seek out empirical knowledge invariably find it is of little use in grasping subjective reality as they experience it. Banville's *Doctor Copernicus* and his *Kepler* believe that mathematics, geometry and cosmology will reveal the world as it really is, will reveal an objective reality, a set of infallible laws that govern the world, regardless of man. Jackson says "both run aground on the impossibility of their desire" and we see a similar loss of faith and ability in the protagonists of both *The Newton Letter* and *Mefisto*.⁵⁸

Jackson's point is that Banville's work considers how we reconcile daily life with post-modern understandings of knowledge, particularly scientific knowledge:

[...] we find that Banville gives us a kind of history. In several earlier novels, he imagines what we now see as post-modern understandings of knowledge appearing individually to an array of great Renaissance scientific thinkers.⁵⁹

Jackson sees the primary concern of these novels as being, as he puts it: "the situation of living everyday life in the context of post-modern understandings of knowledge and truth"⁶⁰ By this Jackson means specifically post-Nietzschean thought. Nietzsche presented the case that 'truth' despite whatever we may think to the contrary, is ultimately a set of 'arbitrary metaphors' subject to the vagaries of perception and language, that post-modern thought takes nothing for granted, nothing to be eternal or changeless, rather interrogates the context and conditions by which 'truths' are derived or constituted.

In *The Book of Evidence* and *Ghosts*, post-modern conceptuality has become part of intellectual and daily life. Freddie Montgomery in *The Book of Evidence* was attracted to science and mathematics as a means of controlling his sense of life as chaotic: "here was a way, I thought, of erecting a solid structure on the very sands that were everywhere, always shifting under me". (18) However, Freddie gives up his academic career, and we as readers meet him long after this has happened; encountering a difficulty

58 Ibid., p.513.

59 Ibid., p. 512.

60 Tony Jackson, Science, Art and the Shipwreck of Knowledge: The Novels of John Banville, *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 38, no.3 (Autumn 1997) pp.510-533.

similar to that experienced by the protagonists of the tetralogy, Freddie turns away from his search for knowledge, and surrenders to chaos. As Jackson points out, Freddie lives in the post-modern world and is thus aware of the limits of knowledge, or of the limits of the pursuit of knowledge. He claims to be: “without convictions as to the nature of reality, truth, ethics, all those big things”.⁶¹ Adam Godley does not suffer from the same flaws, but we find a similar kind of sense of failure, this being the feeling of having missed the point of life, of futility and time wasted. Once he had made his grand hypothesis, there was no more work for him to do.

Banville harks back to the tetralogy for his dominant theme, in *The Infinities*, but visual art is also present. We find in the novel an ekphrasis of plate 62 from Picasso’s *Vollard Suite*, known as *Sculptor and Reclining Model Viewing Sculptured Head* and also called simply, *Le Repos du Sculpteur*. An image of the plate is used on the first edition of the novel, published by Picador in 2009. The *Vollard Suite* etchings were the product of a revival of classicism in Picasso’s art, begun in the early 1920s developed over the subsequent decade. This coincided with, and was aided by, Picasso’s meeting Marie-Thérèse Walter, who became his model, muse and mistress. The liaison between them lasted more or less ten years, but her influence on Picasso’s work was enduring. She is frequently present in sculptures, drawings and paintings from the late 1920s until the mid-1930s, but, as Elizabeth Cowling notes, the inspiration she gave Picasso impacted his work beyond that time.⁶¹

Picasso produced the 100 plates of the *Vollard Suite* between 1933 and 1937, 27 of which deal with varying, dis-unified themes, but the majority adhering to five main themes; *The Battle of Love* (5), *The Sculptor’s Studio* (46), *Rembrandt* (4), *The Minotaur and The Blind Minotaur* (15), and *Vollard* (3). It is *The Sculptor’s Studio* series that is pertinent here. Elizabeth Cowling regards the *Vollard Suite* as the pinnacle of this period of Picasso’s neoclassical renewal, and sees *The Sculptors Studio* as the most vital part of the whole.⁶²

In the years prior to and during this period, Picasso had largely eschewed painting in favour of sculpture. In the summer of 1932, it became his favoured medium, and he worked at an intense pace, often re-working in sculpture images and themes from the years immediately preceding this time, including depictions of Marie-Thérèse. When not sculpting, it was drawings and etchings that proved most fruitful for the artist during this time. Cowling notes a certain unity to the majority of Picasso’s drawings and prints prior to and during this period; there are few portraits, most are imaginative scenes with similar

61 Elizabeth Cowling, *Picasso: Style and Meaning* (London: Phaidon Press, 2002).

62 Ibid.

style and imagery, which belong to a larger surrounding narrative in his work.⁶³

The creative burst that resulted in *The Sculptors Studio* combines the artist's new passion for his sculpture, and his ongoing engagement with neoclassicism and classical themes. The sculptor (a heavily bearded, almost Zeusian figure) and the young voluptuous model cavort and frolic with others, or convene together, or sit alone, in the presence of sculpted heads and busts. In most cases, the sculptures are already whole and complete (or very nearly), not works in progress. The setting is abstracted, devoid of extraneous detail, without any reference to time or place. In this studio, the sculptor works, he loves, rests, and he communes with his art and his muse. The impassive, cubist style of the sculptures contrasts with the neo-classical figures of the man and woman. The mood is often serene or light-hearted, even humorous, but there is also unrest, frustration and even sorrow. Neither is this entirely a dream world. *The Sculptors Studio* is both fantasy and reality. The series forms a deeply personal and immediate narrative of the artist's creative processes, his personal life, his mental, emotional and physical pre-occupations, as Pierre Daix has commented:

The agonies and doubts of creation were never so impressively expressed. It represents a dialogue between the artist and his work-object, which has its own specific presence, its own proper life. It is also a dialogue between the model and the work; the artist and the model, his companion, face to face with the irruption of reality into the studio.⁶⁴

Picasso completed the drawings and then the resulting plates as they occurred to him and the result is an urgent and explicit honesty, an image series that documents the artist's creative and psychological state.⁶⁵ Through the sculptor figure, the male in the *Battle of Love* scenes, the Satyrs and the Minotaurs, the viewer has access to the artist's mind with an urgency and immediacy that is difficult to find in painting and sculpture.

Returning to *The Infinities*, the scene in the print of *Le Repos du Sculpteur* is a scene of post-coital repose (figure 2.1). The scene is evoked when Helen, (Adam's daughter in law) is made passionate love to by her husband. Helen falls asleep and awakes to find her husband fully dressed and seemingly unaware of their recent lovemaking. She is confused and dismisses it as a particularly intense dream. Unbeknownst to her, Zeus had taken on the form of her husband to seduce her, the same fate that awaited Alcmena, the wife of Amphitryon. Hermes relates the aftermath of the seduction:

63 Ibid.

64 Pierre Daix, *Picasso* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1965), p. 147.

65 Lisa Florman, *Myth and Metamorphosis: Picasso's Classical Prints of the 1930s* (Massachusetts: The MIT Press), 2000

Their passion all used up at last, they lie in bed together naked, Dad and his girl, reclining on a strew of pillows in the morning's plum-blue twilight. Or rather, Dad reclines, leaning on an elbow and cradling the girl's golden head and burnished shoulders in his lap. Her left arm is raised behind her and draped with negligent ease about his mighty neck. He gazes before him, seeing nothing. In his ancient eyes there is that look, of weariness, dashed hope, tormented melancholy, which I have seen in them so often – too often – at times like this (75-76)



Figure 2.1 Vollard Suite Plate 62 *Le Repos du Sculpteur*

Here, as with many ekphrases in the novel that preceded it, *The Sea*, the ekphrastic scene is part of the narrative as an action. Furthermore, it is a quite brief and only partially rendered actual ekphrasis, and the artwork is not denoted textually, that is, not referred to outside of the ekphrasis.

The scene contrasts with the ‘framing’ that Anja Muller pointed to in Banville’s earlier work. As ekphrasis here is actual (though implicit), appropriating a real artwork, the author is associating Helen with visual art but not constructing it around her. Helen, through being part of an ekphrasis, is at least subject rather than object. The artwork that is used is not explicitly presented, Helen is not framed and has no frame that

she need escape from. There is no controlling element as in ekphrases of earlier novels, with less fully wrought females. Unlike in the Frames trilogy, and like Anna Morden in *The Sea*, this woman has agency, activity, and not an object of desire. Helen may provoke desire in others, but does not respond passively. Helen is not the object of anything here, but fully her own person, and if also a signifier, it is as signifier of vitality and action.

Recalling Patricia Coughlan's remarks about triadic groups in Banville, the *Vollard Suite* plate used in *The Infinities* contains such a triad, of artist, model and artefact. Artist and model had already been a recurring motif in Picasso's work prior to the *Vollard Suite*, and was one that abided. In *Sculptor and Reclining Model Viewing Sculptured Head* the model is seen in the natural or real form, the sculpture is the model transformed into art. So appropriately, we see different ways of representation, the model is classical imagery, the sculpture, a more structured, almost cubist form. If the sculpture is the 'artistic' rendering of the 'real' model, it is notable that the artist figure, generally in the *Vollard Suite*, is found looking at the sculpture rather than the woman, at the transformed rather than the natural, looking to his own creation, to what is of the mind, rather than the body. In the particular etching that Banville evokes here, the artist figure has an air of resignation as he contemplates the artefact. The female nude gazes directly at the viewer. She is of the world, engaging with the viewer, while the male is perhaps unwillingly drawn instead to the artificial image.

Lisa Florman notes that many of Picasso's paintings and drawings seem "explicitly designed for the imaginary satisfaction of desire".⁶⁶ An inescapable development in *The Infinities* is the blending of narrative voices, as the novel proceeds, of Hermes and old Adam Godley. In his comatose state, Adam recalls his career and life, and regrets, ultimately, the time he devoted to his work, and indeed the work itself. As the day in Arden progresses, the pronouns of our narrator become decidedly muddled, Hermes and Adam become interchangeable, and one is led to the conclusion that Hermes is a figment of Adam's imagination as it idles in his unresponsive body. The descriptions of old Adam resemble very much the bearded, Zeusian figure of the *Vollard Suite*, and of course, Helen is described as being almost exactly like the model.

During an interview with online literary magazine, *The Millions*, in February 2010 Banville admits:

The gods, of course, are Adam Godley's mind. They don't have any physical reality, they don't have any reality at all outside Adam Godley. I mean, the whole thing is got up by him, I think. It's all happening in

66 Ibid. p. 115.

his head. It's the old argument which I've been writing, I suppose, all my life – which is more important, or are they equally important, the life of the mind or the life of the world?⁶⁷

He goes on to say:

Constantly in my work is the tension between the life of the mind and the life of the world – the physical life, the life we want to lead, the Helen side of things, that wonderful, erotic (and I mean erotic in the whitest sense of the word), that sensual sense of being in the world, as against the desire to speculate and to think and to make theories.⁶⁸

The desire to possess is also central to the ekphrastic scene of Helen and Zeus / Adam but once the fused narrative voice develops, this desire is revealed to be more than mere concupiscence; what Adam seeks is life, a second chance, renewal. On his death bed, Adam realises: “doing, doing is living, as my mother, my poor, failed, unhappy mother, among others, tried her best to din into me. I see it now, while all along I thought thinking was the thing” (170)

Joseph McMinn anticipates the author when he says that “Banville’s scholarly types come to feel that they have over-intellectualized their account of the world”.⁶⁹ In doing so, they’ve lost touch with the sensuous ‘life of the world’ as Banville puts it. McMinn is somewhat less critical of the author than Anja Muller and emphasises the power of the feminine over the Banvillean anti-hero, arguing that Banville’s fiction “often uses the ‘feminine’ world of art to rebuke his own fictions about the supremacy of the male intellect”.⁷⁰ In *The Infinities* old Adam ponders his work, his life of the mind. The big revelation of Adam’s equations was an objective reality which is in fact an infinity of possibility; what is revealed is not order, but further chaos. Jackson employs a metaphorical image of a shipwreck to for his examination of the tetralogy. In *The Infinities*, there is no shipwreck of knowledge, rather, Adam and his colleagues have exceeded the limits of knowledge, but run aground on their own, human, limits. Overwhelmed by the implications of what they have discovered, Adam and his peers are unable to move further on:

The hitherto unimagined realm that I revealed beyond the Infinities was a new world for which no bristling caravels would set sail. We hung back from it, exhausted in advance by the mere fact of its suddenly being there. It was, in a word, too much for us. (217)

67 The Millions, *Ibid.*, paragraph 20.

68 The Millions, *Ibid.*, paragraph 10.

69 McMinn, *Ekphrasis*, p. 142.

70 McMinn, *Ekphrasis*, p. 142.

In a sense, it is a more optimistic book than previous Banville novels where the limits of knowledge are a main preoccupation. As Adam's daughter Petra, reflects: "in an infinity of worlds, all possibilities are fulfilled". (116) Do infinite possibilities trump the shipwreck of knowledge? Not quite. Adam still faces mortality as everyone must and in the end, as the author says

The science is just what we call cod science here. It's fake. And the book is not really concerned with quantum physics and those things, which are very frightening for all of us. It's a human comedy. We may be amused and fascinated and enthralled by scientific theories but we have to live through our days in this world, and we have to face death, and death is what gives life its flavour.⁷¹

In the *Vollard Suite*, Picasso explores ideas of contrasting styles and media. Many are reminiscent of sketches for larger works, and indeed, many are sketches of sculptures that the artist had finished or was working on at the time. He had come to a personal and creative crossroads, and the *Vollard Suite* became a "refined sketchbook" where he developed and played with many themes and motifs that came to heavily influence his wider work during the thirties, up to and including, *Guernica*.⁷²

The collection is emotionally and psychologically autobiographical, and allows a glimpse of the artist's creative process and state of mind at the time, during what was a turbulent period in his life (even by Picasso's standards). The minotaur and the bearded figure are seen as the artist himself, enmeshed in varying extremes of desire, anguish, love and grief, but there is always a certain detachment there too. Marilyn McCully, writing in the *Burlington Magazine* in 1997, notes a contrast between the ostensibly violent, mythological subject matter and the decidedly Apollonian manner in which they are executed.⁷³ This contrast between the Dionysian and the Apollonian is echoed in Banville's novel. Commenting on the *Vollard Suite*, Tim Hilton used the term extra- artistic, (in the sense of external, or extraneous) in that it reveals Picasso in the process of creating a new personal mythology that becomes the bedrock of his art from that point. Picasso extracts elements of the cultural heritage of Western European myth and visual art and makes them his own. He is constructing a new imaginative world which will guide his later work. Hilton says:

It is an Arcady where terrible things can happen. The elements of the mythology are mixed and can be contradictory. They are pagan or Christian or simply personal to Picasso; they are universally

71 The Millions, *Ibid.*, paragraph 5.

72 Timothy Hilton, *Picasso*, (London, Thames & Hudson, 1975) p. 207.

73 Marilyn McCully, 'Picasso: Classicism and the Theatre', *The Burlington Magazine*, vol.139, no.1128 (Mar. 1997), 218-220.

recognizable or remain arcane [...] but they have the Picassian stamp on them, unmistakably.⁷⁴

In the same fashion *The Infinities* is intimately concerned with the creative process. In the *Vollard Suite*, Picasso allows himself freedom to explore, he consolidates and renews some elements of his work and rejects others, in a kind of creative exorcism. In the novel, Banville resurrects many habitual tropes and partakes of the same mockery that Picasso engaged in (of himself and his critics) in the *Vollard Suite*.

In *The Infinities* Helen is an actress, and due to play the part of Alcmene, in a new, re-worked version of the Von Kleist's *Amphitryon*, which she says "takes place around Vinegar Hill, at the time of the rebellion" (191). This is actually the setting for Banville's own re-working of *Amphitryon*, *God's Gift*. Old Adam, through his work, revealed the existence of infinite worlds and possibilities. It is fitting then, that it is these two who inhabit the ekphrastic rendering of the Vollard suite plate. *The Infinities* takes place in an avowed alternative history, in which the author can experiment with new and old facets of his work.

The ekphrasis has two decoding functions: by itself, it reveals the author's preoccupation with the tension between the intellect and the material – the life of the mind and the life of the world – and as part of the Vollard Suite, it is an emblem of the artistic imagination and the creative process. In many ways, it is there to demystify. Helen is the centre of this. The Hermes / Zeus / Adam confection falls away as her actions and the actions that revolve around her reveal the overtly self-conscious 'staginess' of the novel, or the play within the novel. She is also central to the balance of tragedy with open comedy in *The Infinities* and her job allows Banville a self-mocking aside to highlight this. Talking to Roddy about the play she is in, Helen tells him:

[...] about her director, who is impossible. He nods; he knows the fellow, he says, and knows him for a fool [...] 'Oh a fool' he says, 'and a fraud along with it, everyone knows that.' [...] 'And such a notion of himself' he adds, widening his eyes. (192)

Her further reflection on the subject of her upcoming stage role as Alcmene is equally telling: "She cannot think, she says, why the play is called after Amphitryon, since Amphitryon's wife, Alcmene, her part, is surely the centre of it all".(192)

74 Hilton, p. 207.

1.3.3 *Athena and Ghosts*

The Infinities differs from the pertinent texts in this study, in that there is no physical encounter between a character and an artefact of some kind that is the subject of an ekphrasis. Theoretically, there may be a highly abstracted one – Adam has seen the print at some point and thus is able to recreate the image in his mind – but equally, Picasso could also be one of the casualties of Banville’s vision of an alternate world, and may not exist. For the purposes of the novel, it is of no consequence. Ekphrasis in *The Infinities* reveals the author’s creative process at work and is a visual representation of what the novel is about. In that sense, it is apt that the ekphrasis almost disappears into the text, seamlessly camouflaged within the narrative.

In *Athena*, despite the apparent engagement with art in the novel, the narrative does not feature a painting as being ostensibly present. Morrow, the narrator, is commonly held to be Freddie Montgomery in loose disguise, following his release from prison. He is hired to appraise a cache of paintings held by Morden, a man whose wealth is of dubious provenance, to say the least. The chapters are divided by discrete sections which mimic the exegetic passages usually positioned next to works of art in a gallery or museum exhibition, and also found in art catalogues. The account of a painting in each section keeps pace thematically with the developing action of the novel. The art catalogue passages may refer to and describe the paintings that Morrow is has been hired to examine, or they may not. He recounts his time spent examining these paintings, but does not provide any detail about them.

Athena seems designed to confound, as McMinn notes; the plot is obfuscated and the reader is left guessing as to what is happening.⁷⁵ Events occur outside of the agency of the Morrow / Freddie character, which is why he functions so badly as a narrator, unable to understand what is going on around him. Written in a semi-epistolary form, Morrow is writing to the mysterious A, as he recollects their love affair and the events around it. As the novel progresses, the art-catalogue passages begin to be directly interrupted by Morrow, further reflecting his inability to control his narrative.

The behaviour of most of the characters is motivated by or governed by their relationship to art works in some way, with the exception of Aunt Corky, who is instead associated with art through ekphrastic models and similes. *Athena* is replete with references to visual art; Yacobi’s work on ekphrasis is very relevant to this novel. The recurrent use of pictorialism in *Athena* has been commented on by Kenny,

75 McMinn, *Ekphrasis*, p.141

McMinn and Anja Muller.⁷⁶ The exegetic sections between chapters are combinatory ekphrases which are formed from actual paintings and sculptures, with some notional elements. These ekphrases are an example of the narrative potential of ekphrasis, but as they depict scenes from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, they link back to literature itself, as do the real art works on which they are based. Brendan McNamee notes that all of Morrow's critiques emphasise the opposing qualities of stillness and movement, one of the essential oppositions found in ekphrastic writing.⁷⁷

McNamee's article is one of few on the novel; there is comparatively little critical work written about *Athena*. One of the most thoughtful, by Petra Tournay, locates *Athena* in a category of mannerist-postmodernist literature exemplified by Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* and elaborated on in his own critical companion to the book, *Postille al nome della rosa*.⁷⁸ Tournay's argument is extremely convincing. She identifies several components of the novel – the labyrinthine house and plot, the use of myth (especially Ovid), excessive use of metaphor – as mannerist elements which are situated within a post-modern framework. As regards the use of visual art, she identifies the ekphrastic art critique passages as evoking paintings which are unmistakably baroque. In doing so, she comments: “Banville could not have erected a clearer signpost pointing down mannerist avenue”⁷⁹

All critical commentary on (and some reviewers of) *Athena* point to the author's use of word play when naming the artists whose work Morrow is (allegedly) evaluating; all are anagrams of the authors name (for example, Johann Livelb) or near-anagrams that yield humorous translations (Giovanni Belli). The passages are used to critique the artist, as well as his work, as Banville engages in some playful self-reflexive mockery, with a nod toward his own critics also. Similarly self-referential humour occurs in later novels, such as *The Infinities*, as mentioned above, where Roddy comments on Helen's director, and in *The Untouchable* as well; the Livelb anagram was a pseudonym adopted by the hero of *Birchwood* as McMinn reminds us.⁸⁰

It is possible that even the ekphrastic passages in *Athena* are not really concerned with visual art one way or another, and more engaged with the mythic scenes they depict, that the novel is essentially about writing, and the limits of post-modern writing, and the output of an author who is intent on finding new

76 John Kenny, *Visions and Revisions – Irish Writers in their Time 3: John Banville*, ed. Stan Smith (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2009), McMinn, *Ekphrasis and Supreme Fictions*, Muller, *You have been Framed*.

77 Brendan McNamee, Interpretation, suspension, response: a reading of John Banville's *Athena*, *Orbis Litterarum* no. 61, vol. 3, (June 2006) 183-201.

78 Petra Tournay, Into the Heart of the Labyrinth: The Pursuit of Mannerist Traditions in John Banville's *Athena*. *Miscelánea: a Journal of English and American Studies*, vol. 24, pp.107 -125 (2001)

79 Ibid., p.108

80 McMinn, *Supreme Fictions*, p.135

modes of expression. This is Petra Tournay's point, and her theories about *Athena* are hard to overlook. As regards the thesis at hand, as there is no ekphrastic encounter one way or another, *Athena* falls outside of the remit of this study. The ekphrases that are present are quite likely to be highly abstracted versions of ekphrasis; by following Tournay's approach, and informed also by Brendan McNamee's article as well as other commentaries, one would conclude that the ekphrases in *Athena* are fictions within the fiction, and not based on any painting that is under Morrow's scrutiny, but entirely his fictions. The only painting that is named as actually existing within the novel is the *Birth of Athena*, which is not subject to one of Morrow's exegetical passages. The other paintings he works on are not named. When Morden and The Da's elaborate double cross is revealed, it becomes clear that the *Birth of Athena* is real, and the other paintings are forgeries. Morrow already knows this when he writes his narrative, and constructs, textually, accounts of paintings that are only intended to provide an expressive outlet for him as he writes. This is still ekphrasis, of course, what De Armas termed narrative ekphrasis, and similar to his analysis of ekphrasis in *Don Quixote*, where ekphrases may extend to entirely meta-fictional objects, which do not have ostensible existence within the text, and are entirely the fantasy of a character.

The *Birth of Athena* is by Jean Vaublin (1684 to 1721), another near-anagram of Banville's own name, and the artist to whom *Le Monde d'Or*, the painting at the centre of *Ghosts*, is credited. Vaublin is based on Jean Antoine Watteau (1684 to 1721), a French artist who, during only fifteen or so years of creative production, became the first and still foremost Rococo painter.

In *Ghosts*, we find Freddie Montgomery, who has apparently served out his prison term, living on an island, where he has a kind of employment as the amanuensis of an eminent art historian, Professor Kreutznaer, who is writing a monograph on the artist Vaublin. Also living there is the professor's sidekick, Licht. An assorted group of people – four adults and three children – on a day's pleasure cruise from a hotel on the mainland run aground in the shallows around the island, and call to the house where the trio live. One of the adults, Felix, is known to the Professor, and familiar to Freddie. Another, Flora, is subject to Felix's predatory attentions; they stay for an afternoon, waiting for the tide to rise, and they leave. One of the party, Flora, feels unwell and stays behind on the island.

Plot is far too robust a word for the meandering, rather contemplative narrative. As opposed to *Athena*, it is easy to know what is happening on the surface of the narrative, as Freddie tells us, but very difficult to know why. The novel opens with the group of stranded day-trippers, as they wade ashore, uncertain, struggling, on unstable ground. Thus it is for the reader of *Ghosts*; in this novel, the structure is erratic, the narrative voice unreliable and occasionally improvisational, and the characters are cyphers,

representations of people, marionettes. The one stable thing in the novel is the painting *Le Monde D'Or*, a pastiche of the work of Watteau, comprising elements of about four of his paintings. The Watteau connection is announced immediately: ““Cythera my foot”” (3) exclaims one of the stranded. Cythera, the birth isle of Venus, has been an enduring literary and artistic motif.⁸¹ The island of Cythera, as a place of myth, was held at the time Watteau was painting as a representation of an idealised society, a kind of utopia associated with the principles of peace, freedom, equality and the primacy of art and beauty (Coward, 2001). In *Ghosts*, the island is, if anything, a negative double for the island of Watteau's paintings; here, we find no utopia, and indeed, the island is also referred to as “my penitential isle” (22) and also as “Devil's Island” (30), referencing the infamous penal colony of the coast of Guiana. If the island so termed, the inference is that it is a prison; despite Freddie's claims of self-imposed exile and account of his weekly visits to the local Garda station to sign his parole, much of the narrative points to the likelihood that *Ghosts* is Freddie's fictional invention, while he is still sequestered elsewhere.

As Banville commented shortly after the novel's publication: “I actually think the narrator is still in jail, imagining the whole thing..”⁸². Evidence of this is found also on the first page of the novel: “Thus things begin. It is a morning late in May. The sun shines merrily. How the wind blows! A little world is coming into being. Who speaks? I do. Little god.”(3-4) The narrative voice occasionally adopts an authorial style, or muses on his power over his creations: “And I, I am there and not there: I am the pretext of things, though I sport no think gold wing or pale halo” (p. 40) The visitors are compared to statues, marionettes, ghosts, or, in the case of Flora, “*the innocent, pure clay awaiting a grizzled Pygmalion to inspire it with life*” (p.70).

In this novel, Freddie is searching for some kind of atonement, of at least equilibrium. He conceives of a girl whom he could save, not ruin. He tries to imagine a girl that he could protect. He finds her in another painting, *Le Monde D'or*, and brings the painting to life, in a landscape, or rather, a dreamscape, envisioned by Banville as a synthesis, a transformative ekphrasis of the work of Watteau.

Le Monde D'Or is ekphrastically evoked several times, on each occasion building in significance and complexity. Essentially, Banville is composing a visual meta-fiction, presented to us verbally. He synthesises various Watteau paintings, and elements of Watteau's work, into one meta-fictional ekphrasis, a transformation of Watteau's best-known works, *The Embarkation for Cythera* (1717), *Pilgrimage to Cythera* (1718-1719), *Gilles (or Pierrot)* (1718), and *The Italian Comedy* (1717) into *Le Monde D'Or*

81 Brigitte Le Juez 'De Banville a Banville: le developpement litteraire de la representation picturale du mythe de Cythere'. *Acta Litteraria Comparativa*, No. 5, Special Issue on 'Transformations of the European Landscape: Encounters between the Self and the Other', pp192-208. 2011

82 Helen Meany, Master of Paradox, *The Irish Times*, Wed March 24th 1993

which encompasses the entire of the novel. Ekphrases of other Watteau paintings, such as *Harlequin and Columbine* (1716-1718) and *Jupiter and Antiope* (1719) can also be detected within the narrative. Where, then is the dramatic ekphrastic encounter, or is there one? At no point in the novel do we behold *Le Monde D'Or*, the painting itself. All ekphrases are second hand accounts, as Freddie only has access to books, and reproductions. The real painting is held in the Behrens collection, in Whitewater House, the scene is his crime. Certainly, there is an ekphrastic encounter; the first description is through Flora's eyes, and brief:

A coloured reproduction of a painting torn from a book was tacked to the wall beside the mirror. She looked at it dully. Strange scene; what was going on? There was 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)

In the *Cythera* paintings, and in his *Italian Comedy*, and *Gilles*, we find all the actors on Banville's stage. Felix is a more sinister and intelligent rendering the Harlequin figure, Sophie a rendering the earthy Columbine, Croke as a less offensive Pantalone, and all simultaneously the aristocratic (or maybe bourgeois) figures presented in the departing / arriving party. The too-knowing, vulgar children Hatch and Pound are vaguely grotesque putti, Alice and Flora the endangered innocents – Flora particularly, who barely appears, who rarely speaks, but is the central element of the meta-fiction. Flora is here our Pierrot.

Freddie imagines himself as “[...] a sentinel, a guardian, a protector against that prowler, my dark other [...] If he is here, it is the girl he is after. He shall not have her, I will see to that” (34) Felix, who is a revived version of the Mephistophelean character from *Mefisto* arrives with the visitors to play Freddie's dark other. Flora dreams she is in the painting, and her companions too. She walks into a clearing in a wooded area. Her companions from the boat are all around her, but still, and “posed like statues”. (64) A faceless figure, clad in white stands in the middle of the clearing. Felix, as Harlequin astride Licht, as his donkey, moves towards her. She flees and approaches the motionless Pierrot figure, which is hollow. She climbs inside:

In the dark she climbs the little steps and reaches the hollow mask that is the figure's face and fits her own face to it and looks out through the eye-holes into the broad, calm distances of the waning day and understands that she is safe at last. (64)

This pre-empts the final chapter of the novel. Flora does not have to flee, as Freddie, who had previously

stayed away from the visitors, marches into his own frame and escorts them – including Felix, off the island, back to their boat. Of course in the painting, the Harlequin figure remains. There is a quasi acknowledgement of Felix as the sinister aspect of Freddie's consciousness, his 'dark other', and that Freddie's feat of imagination, to save instead of harm, is at best ambiguous. Approaching the boat, Felix speaks to Freddie as they walk together: “‘Time to go, I think,’ he said. ‘I had thought of staying for a bit, but now you're here, there is no need. Definitely de trop, what?’” (242)

So Freddie's efforts to imagine himself as a saviour are not entirely successful. Banville appropriates elements from Watteau's paintings, and chiefly the *Cythera* and *Gilles* works, to create a hybrid painting, which is both actual and notional and heavily transformed, while also remaining quite faithful to the artist's work. The fictional painting contains the fictional world that Freddie creates in order to find within himself some level of peace, or the beginning of a kind of redemption. He cannot fully realise this; even the 'real' painting of *Le Monde D'Or*; is suspect, as Freddie has Felix claim it be a fake.

Banville exhibits the 'fakeness' of the events and people described by employing so many expositions of the painting, a painting that is revealed to be 'fake' in itself. Tamar Yacobi points us to the effectiveness of ekphrasis in highlighting narrative unreliability, maintaining that the ekphrastic device allows the describer or narrator to manifest their reliability or otherwise through their mediation of a visual artwork; any discordant element introduced by the describer will point the reader to that discord.⁸³

In this case, the discordant element is in fact concord – the 'characters' and situation fit too well with the painting. The painting, an acknowledged (textual and 'real') fake does not contain the narrator himself. All the island bound characters can be easily construed as elements of the Freddie, bar Flora, who is a wish fulfilment that cannot be fulfilled. We are told, in the 'real' painting *Le Monde D'Or*, an X-ray has uncovered a pentimento – the face of the Pierrot or *Gilles* figure was previously that of a woman. I think of *Ghosts* as a kind of palimpsest, where the author fuses paintings and stages his text over them, or a kind of literary pentimento, as noted by John Kenny⁸⁴

There is an ekphrastic encounter in the book, but one that is so heavily mediated by the omnipotent narrator that belies analysis according to the standards applied to the novels attended to here. The choice of Watteau as the model for Vaublin reinforces the sense of the narrative as a fantasy. The art critic Jed Perl thinks of Watteau's *Cythera* paintings as re-workings of the pastoral form in which he “[...] embraces this

83 Yacobi, *Interart Narrative*, p.719-720

84 Kenny, *John Banville*, p.164

great tradition as a map of the soul, the mind, the imagination”⁸⁵ One crucial passage in the novel, Freddie’s account of Flora’s dream, is assurance, if it were needed, that the narrative is meta-fictional, and the reproduction which she sees is most likely tacked to the wall in Freddie’s prison cell. Perhaps it too is beside a mirror:

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. (55)

The real ekphrastic encounter, then, occurs daily for Freddie, and it is out of this image that he spins his tale. Rather than being a dramatic ekphrastic encounter, it is instead a narrative ekphrasis, and of such complexity that *Ghosts* requires a distinct deconstruction that, while related to the current thesis, necessarily falls outside of its remit.

85 Jed Perl, *Antoine’s Alphabet: Watteau and his World*. (New York: Knopf) 2008, p.138

2 *The Book of Evidence*

Created as a recognisable anti-hero, Freddie Montgomery is a narrator whose only consistent quality is his unreliability. Freddie is in prison on remand, awaiting trial and is compiling his own statement with that event in mind.

The narrative comprises his recollection of the events preceding his crime and those that followed, right up to his arrest and his time in jail, but is interspersed with episodes from his near present – visits from his solicitor, Joanne (his mother's employee and companion) and his wife, Daphne, his mother's funeral, some details of his daily life on remand and musings as to his state of mind. We find out that his crime was committed on Midsummer Day and he was taken into custody on the last day of June. At one point in the first half of the narrative, Freddie tells us it is September. By the time his legal counsel first advises a guilty plea, it is November and by the very end, it is spring. Only twice does he interrupt his narrative to tell us something as it occurs to him; all other information is retrospective in some way.

From the outset and until the end of the novel, Freddie is in the process of constructing his testimony, a process to which the reader's attention is drawn directly. He begins by rhetorically addressing the judge at his upcoming trial: "My Lord, when you ask me to tell the court in my own words, this is what I shall say" (3). Near the end of his narrative, he says: "I thought of trying to publish this, my testimony. But no. I have asked Inspector Haslet to put it into my file, with the other, official fictions" (219-220). In between these statements is his account of how he came to steal a painting, during which act, he killed a girl named Josie Bell.

"My cell. My cell is. Why go on with this." (4) Why indeed? Freddie repeatedly admits guilt, and describes his actions in detail, while paradoxically questioning how he or anyone can really be responsible for their deeds. Truth and certainty are, for him, hollow and unsubstantiated terms. Nonetheless, he feels compelled to explain himself, but whether redemption is on his agenda or not is at first unclear. Freddie repeatedly maintains that there is no explanation for his transgression and invokes a series of chance occurrences that led him to commit his crime. Towards the end, we find that Freddie intends to plead guilty; therefore the statement will be inadmissible or at least superfluous. The trial will be brief and procedural. So why go on? Joseph McMinn contends that Freddie writes to illustrate rather than explain his deeds, which fits well with what he correctly terms Freddie's obsessively pictorial

imagination.⁸⁶ Yet, there is also the sense of his need for a counter-narrative, not just an alternative to the official fictions of the police, but also an alternative to the brutality of his actions. He tries to establish his own version of the truth, while insisting repeatedly that “none of this means anything” (38, 104 and 108).

The figure of the educated, civilised man who nevertheless commits a terrible crime is hardly without precedent in literature, film and drama. In a 1997 essay on *The Book of Evidence*, Banville admits that this novel is a variation on an enduring theme and notes that he employed intertextual allusions to philosophy (Nietzsche and Schopenhauer most directly) and literature (Musil, Maturin, Nabokov, Dostoevsky to name some) partly as an acknowledgement of Freddie's “luxuriant family tree”.⁸⁷ Freddie's tale is also derived in part from the real-life case of Malcolm MacArthur. It is unsurprising that the MacArthur case was taken up by an Irish author; if anything, Banville's fiction is understated when compared with the real incidents and the surreal aftermath of MacArthur's crimes. Much of what is violent and criminal in the plot, then, come from other sources which the author openly declares. However, other elements of the novel have antecedents within Banville's own fictions.

Freddie claims to have been a mathematician “Statistics, probability theory, that was my field. Esoteric stuff, I won't go into it here.” (16). He worked for a while at “the Institute”, a mathematical or computational sciences research centre, and it seems, the same rather ambiguous organisation that featured in *Mefisto*. The researchers vie with each other for a chance for some uninterrupted time working on a specialised computer which was housed in the basement: “At night it was tended by a mysterious and sinister trio, a war criminal, I think, and two strange boys, one with a damaged face” (136). Thus does Freddie attempt to announce his separation from the science tetralogy – the things that he ‘won't go into here’, and throws aside his mathematical work to pursue a frivolous, profligate lifestyle wandering around the Mediterranean, symbolically leaving Gabriel Swan in his room with Kasperl and Kosok.

Nevertheless, *The Book of Evidence* does not break decisively with the earlier novels, but rather re-engages with some of themes found in the tetralogy. Freddie is an inheritor of what Rüdiger Imhof called ‘the philosophy of despair’ that was first found in *Copernicus*.⁸⁸ Elke D'Hoker contends that *Mefisto* ends with the same problems and tensions found in *Doctor Copernicus* and without resolution⁸⁹. Tony Jackson

86 Joseph McMinn, *Supreme Fictions* p. 103.

87 John Banville, ‘Thou Shalt not Kill’, in *Arguing at the Crossroads: Essays on a Changing Ireland*, ed. Paul Brennan & Catherine de Saint Phalle (Dublin: New Island Books, 1997), pp. 133-142. See Kenny (2009, 2006), D'Hoker (2002, 2004) and McMinn (1999) for more on intertextuality in this novel and Banville generally.

88 Rüdiger Imhof, ‘John Banville's Supreme Fiction’, *Irish University Review*, 11.1, John Banville Special Issue (Spring, 1981), pp. 52-86.

89 Elke D'Hoker, *Visions of Alterity: Representation in the Works of John Banville* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2004), p. 125.

sees this as well, and regards *The Book of Evidence* and *Ghosts* as efforts to address the questions posed in the tetralogy from the perspective of art rather than science – no resolution will occur here either and we arrive back to many of these issues again with *The Infinities*. It seems that Freddie is endowed with much of what led the scientists of the tetralogy to a sense of failure. He recalls the solipsism of the narrator of *The Newton Letter* with far more destructive results. Banville regards Freddie as having an aspect of the affliction that befalls Von Hofmannsthal's Lord Chandos. Chandos claims to have lost the ability to think or speak coherently. Freddie can certainly speak, and think, but, the author notes, the coherence is gone.⁹⁰ Freddie takes Gabriel Swan's desire to leave room for chance to its extreme degree. Of his scholarship, he says:

It helped, to be without convictions as to the nature of reality, truth, ethics, all those big things – indeed, I discovered in science a vision of an unpredictable, seething world that was eerily familiar to me, to whom matter had always seemed a swirl of chance collisions.(16)

For him, the disillusionment with the limits of knowledge that Tony Jackson and others find in tetralogy is already a done deal, though of course no Faustian pact has taken place – Banville has Freddie warn us of taking him too seriously: “But I am not Euphorion. I am not even his father”⁹¹ (38).

The scientists of the tetralogy struggled with the implications of the chaos of existence, but Freddie is already aware of it, and embraces it. He had hoped that mathematics would become his route to solidity, and would “make the lack of certainty more manageable” (18). In turning away from science, he has embraced a moral relativism derived from what he sees as the inherent randomness of the universe. The chaos extends to his absence of a unified self. Among other people he feels “at once exposed and invisible” (16), weightless, indistinct, like a child among adults. He claims to be inwardly amazed by other people:

They took the broad view, as if they did not realise that everything is infinitely divisible. They talked of cause and effect, as if they believed it possible to isolate an event and hold it up to scrutiny in a pure, timeless space, outside the mad swirl of things. They would speak of whole peoples as if they were speaking of a single individual, while to speak even of an individual with any show of certainty seemed to me foolhardy. Oh, they know no bounds. (17)

That others know no bounds, for Freddie, translates to knowing that there are no bounds, no order or

90 Banville, ‘Thou Shalt not Kill’, p. 136.

91 Euphorion being variously the son of Achilles, the son of Faust or the son of Aeschylus.

solidity, but no barriers either. In many ways, the narrative is concerned with what could happen if the chaos that the scientists of the tetralogy despaired of is taken too literally. This conceptualisation of the world as random and ungovernable is what allows him to ask whether he can be held responsible for his actions, and his lack of coherence. The lack of a coherent, unified self divorces him from his own actions, hence his references to himself as a beast, or a child, his feeling of being bifurcate.⁹²

Freddie's talent for aggrandisement and self-mockery are fundamental to the black humour of his narrative. Bryan Radley points out the latent violence in Freddie's comic asides and hyperbole, a violence which erupts in the killing of Josie Bell. Freddie entrenches himself in what Radley calls the disturbing aesthetics of humour to in order to distance himself from his crime.⁹³ It is this gallows humour which also reinforces the sense of him as fabricator, his tale a confection which he constantly undermines. It also reveals his many illusionary versions of himself, his ontological confusion. His designation of the version of himself which permits theft and murder as Bunter – the fat, greedy, mean comic-book schoolboy – is interesting, in that Freddie associates his most base actions with those of an obviously unreal figure, a cartoon, and so, of course, an image. His compulsion to structure the world, and especially women, in images is part of his downfall. What permeates Freddie's narrative is that his lack of self-awareness and self-knowledge makes him unable to believe that he is responsible for his actions, and he questions his guilt even as he claims it. His fatal lack of self-awareness is an accusation he levels at others. On his journey back to Ireland, he sits opposite a man who catches his eye and does not look away, presaging the calm stare that Freddie later sees in the painting he steals. He claims to have had a premonition that he is about to commit a terrible wrong, and yet says of the man opposite:

They stare like that, these people, *they have so little sense of themselves they seem to imagine their actions will not register on others.* They might be looking in from a different world. (25, my italics)

Banville avows that the three books featuring Freddie Montgomery, or versions of him, can be bundled under the heading *The Search for Authenticity*.⁹⁴ That being the case, we can think of each novel as being a stage in that search, and *The Book of Evidence* being the first step towards grasping a sense of self and other as real. Freddie's failure of imagination is expressed through identification with an image in preference to a real woman.⁹⁵ He reveals throughout his statement his historical preference for thinking of woman – Anna Behrens, his wife, Daphne, his Mother – in terms of paintings, sculptures or framed

92 See p. 95.

93 Bryan Radley, 'John Banville's Comedy of Cruelty', *Nordic Irish Studies*, 9 (2010), pp. 13-31, p. 21.

94 Banville, 'Thou Shalt not Kill', p. 134.

95 The phrase 'failure of imagination' was employed by the author in his 'Thou Shalt not Kill', essay and is much commented on.

images.⁹⁶ His failure of imagination is twofold; he cannot tell the difference between an image of a woman and a real woman because he identifies with the image and not with the real person, and also because he does not imagine himself to be sufficiently real.

The narrative starts out as Freddie's idiosyncratic testimony, his evidence, only to turn into an examination of himself, as he plays his own witness for the prosecution. During the course of the novel, he traces his fatal ontological errors through a series of ekphrases, which I will examine in the order in which they occur in the text.

96 See especially Anja Muller, “‘You Have Been Framed’: the function of ekphrasis for the representation of women in John Banville’s Trilogy (*The Book Of Evidence, Ghosts, Athena*)”, *Studies In The Novel*, 36.2 (Summer 2004), pp. 185-205, as previously noted.

2.1 The Ekphrastic Encounter

Having set out his stall early in the novel as one who has fled the scene of the shipwreck of knowledge, Freddie, throughout his narrative, is forced to confront the substance of the reality he denies knowledge of.⁹⁷ This takes the form of a series of incidents where violence is either implied or actual. The first such incident occurs during his meeting with Aguirre, to whom Freddie owes money.⁹⁸ Freddie realises that Aguirre means business and, managing to connect cause and effect when it implies danger for him, and he must take action. So he flees the Mediterranean and returns to Ireland. Heading more or less straight to a pub he remembers, he meets an old family friend, Charlie French, referred to as “a forgetful Eumaeus” (33), the man who, later in the narrative, unwittingly shelters Freddie after he has committed his crimes.⁹⁹ He visits his mother and, following an argument about their collective lack of funds, he is outraged to find that she sold various paintings that he assumed were still in her possession. Learning that the paintings had been transferred to a friend of his parents, Helmut Behrens, he sets off in high dudgeon for Whitewater, Behrens’s splendid home, where he lives with his daughter Anna, another figure from Freddie’s past.

It is in a room in Whitewater that he first encounters the painting he will steal and the woman he will kill, immediately connecting the two. The encounter with the painting is written as a meeting between a man and a woman, though she is merely image. The real woman he encounters, the maid, is described as poised and still; he can conceive of the painted woman as real, but not of the real as more than image. This first and most powerful ekphrasis in *The Book of Evidence* is an episode around which the entire novel is structured, in terms of action and theme, hence the identification of a dramatic ekphrastic encounter. The ensuing ekphrases will also be examined. These ekphrases only exist through this first ekphrasis; it is during the first, dramatic ekphrastic encounter that Freddie really gets himself into trouble, as the crime he commits would not have happened but for this experience. All other ekphrases in the novel occur after his crime, and show Freddie at the various stages of realising the enormity of what he has done.

The painting in the novel is titled “*Portrait of a Woman with Gloves*”. It is held by several commentators to be based on a painting held in the Museum of Fine Arts in Budapest, called “*Portrait of a Woman*” (Fig

97 I borrow here, of course, from Tony E. Jackson, ‘Science, Art, and the Shipwreck of Knowledge: The Novels of John Banville’, *Contemporary Literature*, 38.3 (Autumn 1997), pp. 510-533.

98 Possibly a reference to Lope de Aguirre, a conquistador, and also to the Werner Herzog film, *Aguirre, Wrath of God*.

99 Being a shepherd and retainer of Odysseus, who does not recognise him on his return to Ithaca. Whilst some of Freddie’s allusions are significant, (as with Euphorion) he is occasionally quite hackneyed, a deliberate strategy to undermine him as a figure to be taken seriously.

2.1), which after some years of varied attribution, is now believed to be the work of Willem Drost, a pupil of Rembrandt.¹⁰⁰ There are four ekphrases of this painting in the novel.

Figure 2.1. Willem Drost, *Portrait of a Woman*, 1655

Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest¹⁰¹



100 For example, Imhof (1997) McMinn (2002, 1999), D'Hoker (2004), Kenny (2009). It was Rüdiger Imhof who first identified the painting. The current attribution to Drost was kindly confirmed for me by Julia Tatrai of the Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest.

101 http://www.szepmuveszeti.hu/adatlap_eng/portrait_of_woman_willem_10138.

It has long been recognised that ekphrasis depends on sympathy, empathy and/or identification with an artwork on some level for its feasibility, as is evidenced in some of the earliest examples of ekphrasis. Ayala Amir considers one of these, an incident from the *Aeneid*, where Aeneas contemplates the murals on the wall of the temple at Carthage. I will return more thoroughly to Amir's commentary in the next section, but for now I wish to emphasise her point about empathy in the viewer of an artwork or object. Of an empathetic response in a viewer, Amir maintains:

The self, which perceives the other – whether a person or object – is no longer a mere observer, as he or she mentally repeats a physical condition. [...] The notion of empathy thus preserves a sense of separateness which in sympathy, i.e. 'feeling with' the other, is less pronounced.¹⁰²

We can find an example of such an empathetic response in Henry James, an author much admired by Banville. *The Wings of the Dove* has a well-known ekphrasis at its centre, one in which the character, Milly Theale, encounters a painting which reminds others of Milly herself visually, but with which Milly identifies empathetically, and in doing so, confronts her own mortality and the likely nearness of her death¹⁰³. This encounter and the situation of the encounter are relevant to both *The Book of Evidence* and *The Untouchable*.

If we are considering the entire of the first ekphrastic encounter in *The Book of Evidence*, it spans slightly over three pages of the novel, therefore only some passages will be quoted here¹⁰⁴. Following Freddie's arrival in Whitewater, he barges in, proclaims himself to be an old family friend and asks if Anna is home. The butler goes off to check. The ekphrastic encounter begins when Freddie says:

I waited. All was silent save for the ticking of a tall seventeenth century German clock. On the wall beside me there was a set of six exquisite little Bonington water-colours, I could have put a couple of them under my arm there and then and walked out. The clock took a laboured breath and pinged the half hour (76).

Freddie then hears other clocks, all throughout the building chiming in sequence. This sound signals the beginning of Freddie's immersion in the art works surrounding him. He immediately looks to three other

102 Ayala Amir, 'Sunt Lacrimae Rerum: Ekphrasis and Empathy in Three Encounters between a Text and a Picture', *Word & Image*, 25.3 (2009), pp. 232-242, p. 235.

103 There is a wealth of commentary, past and present concerning this ekphrasis. See, for example, Nicola Ivy Spunt, 'Pathological Commodification, Contagious Impressions, and Dead Metaphors: Undiagnosing Consumption in *The Wings of the Dove*', *The Henry James Review*, 34.2 (Summer 2013), pp. 163-182.

104 In the version of the Picador paperback used here, see start of the last paragraph of p.76 to near the end of p. 79. For other editions, see beginning of the passage that follows his arrival in Whitewater, when Freddie is told to wait by the butler.

paintings in the hall, a Tintoretto, a Fragonard, a Watteau. He hears two more sounds, the tooting horn of the taxi that Freddie has neglected to pay, a door bangs shut. He advances down a hallway, and fancies that a figure in the Fragonard watches him as he does go. He steps into a room which he experiences as golden and feels as if he had stepped in to the eighteenth century. He listens and hears no sound, the house seems to shiver. At the end of the room he sees a French window with the door open and a gauze curtain fluttering. Beyond the window he sees outside, the lawn, a horse, a river, trees, mountains against a blue sky. All of these pictorial elements are compiled around him as if he is no longer moving in time but in space only, the quality of which has changed, and flattened:

It struck me that the perspective of the scene was wrong somehow. Things seemed not to recede as they should but to be arrayed before me – the furniture, the open window, the lawn and river and far-off mountains – as if they were not being looked at but were themselves looking, intent upon a vanishing point here, inside the room. (78)

Then he turns and sees the painting. His description is at once detailed and rhetorical. He addresses the putative jury of his trial, who have seen the picture in the newspapers, and tells them they know nothing of her presence. His reaction to her presence is physical:

I stood there, for what seemed a long time, and gradually a kind of embarrassment took hold of me, a hot, shamefaced awareness of myself, as if somehow I, this soiled sack of flesh, were the one who was being scrutinised, with careful, cold attention. (79)

He recoils somewhat, stepping back a pace from the painting. The tingling clocks marked a suspension of time and the closing door signalled a threshold crossed, allowing Freddie to inhabit a hermetic pictorial space where his encounter with the painting occurs, but this cannot last: “The silence was fraying at the edges” (79). He hears animals outside and a car engine starting. He turns again and sees Josie Bell, a maid working at Whitewater, standing at the French window:

She must have come in just then and seen me there and started back in alarm. Her eyes were wide and one knee was flexed and one hand lifted, as if to ward off a blow. For a moment neither of us stirred. Behind her a sudden breeze burnished the grassy slope. We did not speak. (79)

Josie steps back through the window, hand still raised and stumbling back a little. Freddie's “golden room on a summer eve” (79), where he meets a painted woman, has been breached by another, real woman. She is now part of his perception of suspended time and flattened, painted space. She therefore cannot be

spoken to or described other than ekphrastically; it seems inescapable that she is posed in the manner of the figure in the 1933 painting by Balthus “*The Window*” (also called “*Fear of Ghosts*”) (Fig 2.2) which will be used again on the cover of the first edition of *Eclipse*.¹⁰⁵

Figure 2.2. Balthus (Count Balthazar Klossowski de Rola), *The Window* 1933
Indiana University Art Museum, Bloomington, IA¹⁰⁶



Also called: *The Fear of Ghosts*, *La peur des fantômes*, *La Fenêtre*, *Das Fenster*

It is tempting to designate this an ekphrasis within an ekphrasis, but in fact what we have here are two ekphrases comprising one ekphrastic encounter, rendered in differing degrees of detail and clarity,

105 Hedwig Schwall, in “Mirror on Mirror Mirrored Is All the Show’: Aspects of the Uncanny in Banville’s Work with a Focus on “Eclipse”, *Irish University Review*, 36.1, Special Issue: John Banville (Spring - Summer, 2006), pp. 116-133, identifies Balthus and also Edward Hopper as referenced in Banville’s work generally through themes and motifs.

106 <https://www.indiana.edu/~iuam/provenance/view.php?id=16>.

according to the degree to which the narrator can identify with them. As Josie retreats, a telephone rings to finally break the spell and reinstate temporality. Freddie leaves the room.

The physical response that Freddie has is never really analysed, as he does not understand it himself, but in his own account, experienced something similar the day before, when one of his mother's ponies pressed up against him – shocked with the warmth, realness and solidity of the animal, he had a sense of his bodily self:

[...] not the tanned pin-up now, but something else, something pallid and slack and soft. I was aware of my toenails, my anus, my damp, constricted crotch. And I was ashamed. I can't explain it. That is, I could but won't. (46)

He is reminded of the animal again that evening, when he declines mother a glass of wine, revealing that she had recently suffered a small stroke. Freddie's response is muted to say the least, and he presses a glass of wine on her anyway, in stark contrast to Joanne, who instinctively hugs his mother. Freddie stares in surprise at the spontaneity and sincerity of the gesture, and prompts what he takes for embarrassment in the girl "Her cheeks were aflame, I could almost hear them hum. Had a look from me done all that? I sighed, poor ogre and ate a potato" (50).

Coincidence and chance are frequently invoked by Freddie, but behind his experience of the world as part of a random sequence of events is the assumption that it is not random at all, but subject to the agency of others.¹⁰⁷ Since arriving in Whitewater he has perceived objects and space as uncanny, beginning with the Tintoretto in the hall, which "blared at me its vast chromatic chord" (76). Later, on a sanctioned return to the room, the uncanny quality he experienced during his first, clandestine visit continues, the painting "leaned out a little from the wall, as if listening intently" (82) and watches him "from the depths of the room a pair of eyes looked out, dark, calm, unseeing" (83). Hedwig Schwall points to Freud's conception of the uncanny, one aspect of which is the inability to perceive space correctly, to distinguish that which is self versus other.¹⁰⁸ Schwall reminds us of the trouble Banville protagonists frequently have with differentiating self and other, objective and subjective worlds. What Freddie is confronted with in the room at Whitewater is in fact himself. He feels watched by the painting, by the whole painting, not just the female figure: "Everything in the picture, that brooch, those gloves, the flocculent darkness at her back, every spot on the canvas was an eye fixed on me unblinkingly" (79). Banville himself notes that

107 Joakim Wrethed, 'The Aesthetics of the Flesh in John Banville's "The Book of Evidence, Eclipse and Shroud"', *Nordic Irish Studies*, 9 (2010), pp. 49-70.

108 Hedwig Schwall, 'Mirror on Mirror Mirrored'

Freddie sees others indistinctly, and looks to them as mirrors of his own existence; Freddie possesses an insufficient theory of mind, enough to negotiate the world but not to grasp it.¹⁰⁹ Without this knowledge, his own sense of agency, of being able to act, but also of having to negotiate the results of his actions, is weak. Here the painting reflects his gaze back to his own self, and in doing so, confirms his being. Recalling his earlier proclamations, here he is exposed, but not invisible, and he himself is held up for scrutiny in a pure and timeless space. Elsewhere, Banville has written of the capacity of art to make things strange, by which he means reinforce the otherness of an entity:

[...] this interiorisation of things, this taking into us of the world, of all of that stuff out there which is not ourselves. It happens all the time, continuously, in art. And its result is a different order of understanding, which *allows* the thing its thereness, its outsideness, its absolute otherness. Such understanding is wholly individualistic, yet profoundly democratic. Every thing has its own place its own space, which it inhabits utterly.¹¹⁰

Freddie, viewing the painting, has an aesthetic response but misinterprets the object's absolute otherness. Brendan McNamee considers that Banville's work shows humanity as being displaced between imagination and the material world, and here we have Freddie, in a room which acts as the site of his displacement.¹¹¹ Within the novel, the room corresponds to Michel Foucault's concept of a heterotopia.¹¹² The room is private, yet easily accessed (by Freddie and later, by a tour group). It is associated with time; Freddie experiences time in the room as suspended (during the ekphrastic encounter), normal (during dinner with the Behrens) and accelerated (when he is stealing the painting). The contents of the room – antiques and paintings – are objects that correspond to preserved parcels of time. It is both familiar and unfamiliar to him and performs both a banal and extraordinary function. It is illusory and yet completely real. It becomes a place of crisis and deviation. Spatially, he experiences it as a normal room and but also as an uncanny space with the flattened perspective of a painted surface, and the painting as the

109 The term theory of mind is broadly accepted as meaning the ability of an individual to attribute mental states to self and others by interpreting behaviour and assigning intentionality. Those for whom theory of mind is weak will have trouble understanding the behaviour of others and understanding their own effect on others. Folk psychology is a similar term, as is Daniel Dennett's phrase 'intentional stance', though the latter has further theoretical considerations. It should be noted that while there are many, and growing, theories about theory of mind, the term itself is not a theory, but a description of an aspect of human cognition. That theory of mind exists is not disputed, but the mechanisms governing it the form it takes is subject to ongoing debate and research. The term was first coined by David Premack and Guy Woodruff in 1978. There is a vast array of literature and research concerning theory of mind across the fields of psychology, neuroscience, philosophy and computer science, specifically artificial intelligence research. For a literary perspective, see Lisa Zunshine, *Why We Read Fiction: Theory of Mind and the Novel* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2006).

110 John Banville, 'Survivors of Joyce', in *James Joyce: The Artist and the Labyrinth*, ed. Augustine Martin (London: Ryan Publishing, 1990), pp. 73-81.(p.78)

111 Brendan McNamee, "'A huddle between the earth and heaven'": Language and Displacement in the Work of Flann O'Brien and John Banville', *Colby Quarterly*, 39.2, (June 2003), pp. 151-160.

112 Michel Foucault & Jay Miskowic, 'Of Other Spaces', *Diacritics*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (Spring, 1986), pp. 22-27

perspectival vanishing point – the point of convergence but also, therefore, where nothing more can be seen.

Again from his essay on Joyce, Banville wrote: “the gaze which great art gives us back is utterly vacant”.¹¹³ Freddie’s visceral reaction to the painting is actually a reaction to this vacant gaze in which nothing is reflected but his own self, his own materiality, his being-in-the-world. Freddie’s conception of the world and his place in it is being disrupted, a process begun with the threat from Aguirre, which startled him in a physical sense. It is continued with the nudging pony, a connection made with the natural world from which he feels alienated.¹¹⁴ Lastly, he is struck by the natural empathetic gesture from Joanne toward his mother and, while he may have misread her emotional reaction (anger is as plausible as embarrassment), he at least realises that has provoked that reaction. These experiences allow him a glimpse of the absolute otherness that is reflected back at him by the painting.

Alison Katz, in her consideration of ekphrasis in Thomas Hardy, contends that the essential conflict within ekphrasis is also its strength. She finds ekphrastic scenes in three short stories by Hardy in which it is the inherent antagonism between the temporal and spatial, living and non-living, verbal and non-verbal, which creates a tension which proves cathartic and revelatory.¹¹⁵ Here, Banville creates that tension with this dramatic ekphrastic encounter, but Freddie experiences catharsis only, with the revelation yet to come. Unable to grasp what it is he feels, he invests the portrait with a power that is in fact not there, and this is one reason why, in encountering Josie in the same space, he is unable to recognise her as other than an image, albeit a vaguer image, more troublesome than troubling. Freddie’s ontological confusion allows him to kill Josie because he feels rather than understands, and so misinterprets, the implications of art itself.

113 Banville, ‘Survivors of Joyce’, p. 75.

114 John Kenny, *John Banville*, p. 93.

115 Alison Fisch Katz, ‘Violent wisdom: Thomas Hardy and ekphrastic discord’, *Word & Image: A Journal of Verbal/Visual Enquiry*, 27.2 (2011), pp. 148-158. Online: <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02666286.2010.515381>>.

2.2 Undoing the encounter – subsequent ekphrases in *The Book of Evidence*

If this dramatic ekphrastic encounter is the catalyst for Freddie's crime, then it is through the subsequent ekphrases that he is able to gradually understand it. His narrative gradually evolves from being his own conception of evidence, what Banville called “an appalled act of witness”, towards being an effort to reconstruct his victim in his mind – a task he will continue in *Ghosts*.¹¹⁶

Freddie, having failed to recognise what he found in the painting continues to see the image of the painted woman and feel her as a presence, during an interlude in the house where he dines with Anna and her father. He also recalls, apparently under the influence of art and later alcohol, that he loved Anna and then changes his mind again. He stays the night in a nearby village and has a restless night, dreaming of first of Anna, and then the other women connected to him – his wife Daphne, his mother, and her employee, Joanne – all of whom seem to merge together. Finally he sees only one figure, the woman from the painting, who “hovered over the bed and gazed at me, sceptical, inquisitive and calm” (92), which prompts a realisation in him that he will try to steal the painting, and he returns to Whitewater with that aim. The second ekphrasis of the painting is very different to the first:

The painting is called, as everyone must know by now, *Portrait of a Woman with Gloves*. It measures eighty-two centimetres by sixty-five. From internal evidence – in particular the woman's attire – it has been dated between 1655 and 1660. The black dress and broad white collar and cuffs of the woman are lightened only by a brooch and gold ornamentation of the gloves. The face has a slightly Eastern cast. (I am quoting from the guidebook to Whitewater House.) The picture has been variously attributed to Rembrandt and Frans Hals, even to Vermeer. However, it is safest to regard it as the work of an anonymous master (104)

This contrasts not only with the first ekphrasis but is markedly different to what follows, when the technical detachment of this passage juxtaposes with Freddie's explanation of how the painting makes him feel:

There is something in the way the woman regards me, the querulous, mute insistence of her eyes, which I can neither escape nor assuage. I squirm in the grasp of her gaze. She requires of me some great effort, some tremendous feat of scrutiny and attention, of which I do not think I am capable. It is as if she were asking me to let her live. (105)

McMinn correctly reminds us that these sections take place further along in Freddie's narrative, and while

116 Banville, ‘Thou Shalt not Kill’, p. 138.

the first was an account of what he felt when he met the painting, this and the next ekphrasis are attempts to justify that response. As McMinn notes, this first is dependent on what Freddie has learned, in the factual sense, since that time.¹¹⁷ He will later tell of how he has become an amateur student of art-history and painting. In his cell, he has a reproduction of the painting on his wall and at this point in the narrative, is still under its spell. We can locate his dream visions of the image and the 'great effort' required of Freddie in branch of literature that is endemically linked to ekphrasis, namely the genre of the fantastic. Recalling Rigolot's exploration of ekphrasis and the fantastic, in Mérimée's *La Vénus d'Ille*, investing an art-work with supernatural powers is the product of the less sophisticated mind, and not something that the educated man would subscribe to.¹¹⁸ Rigolot remarks on the how the archaeologist in the tale describes the statue in dry terms at first, when he writes "the ekphrastic code appears to be for the scholar a mandatory hygienic process that must precede any hermeneutic gesture".¹¹⁹ So here is Freddie, the nascent scholar engaging in that hygienic process, but it yields little to him. The emotional and physical response that he had still controls his contemplation of the *Woman With Gloves*. He proceeds to a hermeneutic interpretation; but he is still misguided in looking to the painting rather than into himself and tries to actualise his response on some level.

He envisions her life, and how the painting came to be created, in another long passage that fits with what De Armas calls a shaping ekphrasis, where the description is of an art object being created, and also calls to mind Laura Izarra's connection of Banville's literature with holograms.^{120 121} Freddie's version of the woman in the painting is of a spinster. She is an only child, keeping house for her widowed, but wealthy, father. She is plain and sickly and her father worries that she will die before him. She is reluctant to have her portrait made, but her father insists. Once finished, the portrait is a revelation:

For a second she sees nothing, so taken is she by the mere sensation of stopping like this and turning: it is as if – as if somehow she had walked out of herself. [...] She looks and looks. She had expected it would be like looking in a mirror but this is someone she does not recognise, and yet knows. The words come unbidden into her head: Now I know how to die. (108)

This passage shows that quality of ekphrasis which Trussler¹²² refers to as an ontological miniature, something that signals a world beyond the narrative. In the novel, it serves as further evidence of

117 Joseph McMinn, *The Supreme Fictions of John Banville* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), p. 110.

118 Rigolot, p. 101.

119 Ibid.

120 De Armas, p. 22.

121 Izarra.

122 Trussler p. 261

Freddie's ontological confusion. Both this projected narrative and the attempt at academic detachment occur in the novel just before Freddie steals the painting and kills Josie. However, at this point in his compilation of this book of evidence, when Freddie composes this imagined life for the painted figure, he has already killed Josie. Still he continues to try to extract meaning from the painting and imaginatively reaches back into the past to this woman, unwilling to allow the painting its autonomy, misunderstanding its absolute otherness, and mistranslating that otherness as a silent plea from the object for it to be en-voiced. Freddie has a fatal case of ekphrastic hope, an affliction he will continue to suffer from in some sense for another two novels.¹²³ Yet, here is some progress. Freddie has the fictional woman make a connection that he has not yet consciously made. In his ideation of her, she at least makes the distinction between the image and reality. The painting is her likeness, but is not her, the 'knowing' is the knowledge of death, which is part of her sense of self as separate from the likeness. Freddie's fantasy woman, for now, possesses more insight than he – but of course, this shows that on some level he is starting to understand his mistake: "She. There is no she, of course" (105). Freddie knows that his attempt to make up a life for her is a reflexive fiction.

In his account of the theft of the painting, there is a visual reminder of the encounter of the day before. Freddie feels the eyes of the painting woman looking at him ("I almost blushed" 110) when he feels another presence behind him, where Josie stands, cast again in the pose of the Balthus painting. The ekphrasis of this painting in both instances is necessarily faint but its importance is not to be underestimated. Freddie equates Josie with an image as well, and this is one reason why he kills her, and in fact, why he abducts her too – she can also be stolen. Though he does not consciously compare her or liken her to an image, painting or sculpture, she appears to him as posed and static in the manner of the figure from the Balthus painting, in other words, this ekphrasis occurs at a mimetic level. After the image itself, it is the perspective of this painting that is so striking; the viewer is that terrifying thing that advances on the girl. The reader who responds to the ekphrasis, or recognises the inter-medial quotation (to borrow from Tamar Yacobi) is now part of the crime, implicated in Freddie's blurring of the border between art and life.¹²⁴

Recalling another figure who felt a painting of a woman gaze back at him, Freddie is caught in the situation that Starzyk writes of regarding Robert Browning's ekphrastic poetry, notably "*My Last Duchess*":

123 See Mitchell, *Picture Theory*.

124 Tamar Yacobi, *Interart Narrative*. I am paraphrasing Banville on this last point; see 'Thou Shalt not Kill', p. 139

Browning's ekphrastic poems underscore the importance of rescuing the self from the static enthrallment threatened by idols, images and portraits, of freeing the self for dynamic growth. Ironically, release in this dialectically ordered system requires entrapment; seeing demands being seen; integrity of identity depends upon the indeterminate state of becoming in the present what one is currently not.¹²⁵

Freddie begins this process almost immediately after the killing. He echoes the iconoclastic actions of Browning's murderous Duke, in that he does not destroy the painting, but separates himself from it. Freddie's theft of painting is farcically bad, and having abducted and attacked Josie, he makes a mad dash back to the outskirts of Dublin in his stolen car.¹²⁶ He abandons the car, leaving Josie for dead and jettisoning the *Woman with Gloves*, though he is still in thrall to this image. For James Heffernan, the Duke of "*My last Duchess*" is disturbed by the still lifelike and passionate glance emanating from the painting of his deceased wife, which he could not control in life nor in death, and so he has the painting covered up. Freddie likewise feels himself subject to a glance, to something live and animate, rather than an impassive gaze, and is conflating the two conditions. He literally ditches her, she who looks back at him with disdain: "The woman with the gloves gave me a last, dismissive stare. She had expected no better of me" (119).

The final ekphrasis is of two photographs. One is a composite of what has gone before, in that it fuses Josie with the figure in the portrait. Hiding out in Charlie French's house the next day, he gets hold of an evening edition newspaper:

There was photograph of her, too, gazing out solemn-eyed from a blurred background, it must have been lifted from a group shot of a wedding, or a dance, she was wearing a long ugly dress with an elaborate collar, and was clutching something, flowers perhaps, in her hands. (148)

Josie looks straight out of the photograph, as the woman in the portrait also does. Freddie has previously alluded to the black dress with the broad collar depicted in the painting. In the ekphrastic encounter, in the garden room in Whitewater, he states that the woman in the painting is holding something in one hand, maybe a fan or a book. Though slight, the resemblance between the painting and the photograph is there, but more importantly, it furthers a connection between Josie's image and the painting that he has

125 Starzyk, p. 704.

126 One of the funniest parts of the novel is also the most grisly, the theft of the painting and the abduction of Josie, as Bryan Radley points out. Ironically, some of the most unlikely incidents – the ambulance, the inquisitive woman being ordered away by Freddie – are very closely based on incidents from the MacArthur case, and in many ways the novel is more plausible than the facts of the real crimes committed.

already made. As he was actually about to kill her, Freddie recalls looking at Josie properly for the first time: “I was filled with a kind of wonder, I had never felt another’s presence so immediately and with such raw force [...] She was quite ordinary, and yet, somehow, I don’t know – somehow radiant” (113). Banville, commenting on this line, says that the radiance, the immediacy is what the victim and the painting have in common.¹²⁷ Freddie, at that point, has the same experience of absolute otherness as he did the first time he saw the painting, the misinterpretation of which allows him to kill her.

Up to this juncture, there are five ekphrases in the novel. Three are of the *Woman with Gloves*, one of Josie embodying the Balthus figure, and this photograph, fusing Jodie and the *Woman with Gloves*. Photography is long thought of as an elegiac art but is also capable of being, as Barthes put it, a message without a code – a direct communication of something as it was.¹²⁸ Susan Sontag, and following her, John Berger, both allude to the photograph as a trace; the photograph is of its subject in two senses, a literal image of the person and also in the sense that it belongs to them, it emanates from them in a way that a painting or other image reproduction does not belong to its subject.¹²⁹

Berger makes a distinction between private and public photographs. The private photograph, taken to contribute to living memory, remains continuous with the context in which it was taken, on some level, even when viewed out of that context. The public photograph offers information dispassionately, the private photograph denotes lived experience, “a memento from a life being lived”, and therefore, becomes in time a *memento mori*.¹³⁰ It is through this photograph that Freddie begins to realise his fatal mistake, of preferring an image over the life of a person, but there is one more ekphrasis which finally enables him to understand it.

Of the ekphrases thus far, all are either constituents of the dramatic ekphrastic encounter or result from it in some way, that is, either part of the occasion of the encounter, or part of the consequence of it, and also comprise an ekphrastic system in which the narrator is trapped.¹³¹ The last, sixth ekphrasis, was generated from outside of this system and thus allows Freddie to be freed from it.

There is text with the newspaper photograph of Josie, a statement from Mrs Brigid Bell, Josie's mother, and a photograph of her as well. Freddie recalls himself looking at the newspaper picture of Josie’s

127 Banville, ‘Thou Shalt not Kill’, p. 139

128 Roland Barthes, *Image Music Text*, trans. Stephen Heath, (London: Fontana Press, 1977), p. 17.

129 See Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (London: Penguin, 1977), and John Berger, *About Looking*. New York: Vintage International, 1980).

130 Berger, p. 56.

131 Mack Smith, *Literary Realism and the Ekphrastic Tradition* (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995).

mother. She stands out in front of her house, but not in any doorway, or window, not framed. Borrowing then, from Muller's argument, this woman is materialized.¹³² Standing in front of her home, she is located biographically. Seen in a photograph in a newspaper, this image is accompanied by a report of what she said: "Her Josie, she said, was a good girl, a decent girl, why would anyone want to kill her" (148). Freddie recalls that on reading this, his memory flashed back to the last time he saw Josie, before he left her to die in the car, when she said something he couldn't quite make out - "Tommy! *she said, or a word like that, and then: Love*" (118).

For only the second time in the text, Freddie breaks with his retrospective narration and says: "*Mammy* was what she said, that was the word, not Tommy, I've just this moment realised it. *Mammy*, and then: *Love*" (148).

The photograph unlocks reality for Freddie on two occasions, this first when he sees the newspaper and the second time when he recounts seeing the newspaper, showing him at differing stages of his understanding of what he has done, and of the real implications of his actions. The first time he sees the photograph he understands that he had "destroyed a part of the world" (152) and he sees that he must somehow replace the irreplaceable. There follows all sorts of revelations; Charlie French divulges details of his parent's affairs, and so Freddie makes a heartfelt phone call to his mother. He walks the streets of Dublin somewhat dementedly, following people, still not feeling one of them, but observant, sympathetic and eager to be among them and wants, most of all to be caught: "Then finally I would be me, no longer that poor impersonation of myself I had been all my life. I would be real. I would be, of all things, human." (162). Nevertheless, on his first night of incarceration, the image of the figure from the painting looms in his mind.

The later recollection of the newspaper, through the telling of his story, is what finally allows Freddie to grasp the enormity of his crime, see his fatal error and disengage himself from the painting. More than the photograph of Josie, which was still linked to his dramatic ekphrastic encounter, the photograph of her mother enabled him to understand what Josie said, where before he could not. The image of Josie was too like the painting; though it was a private photograph, betokening her life, the dress and pose were reminiscent of the painting, and the background of the photograph is blurred. It does not tell Freddie enough. The use of a photograph in a public medium (the newspaper) is to provide information, but it can also be an instrument of testimony. Freddie, unable to distinguish between Josie and an image, killed her and now she remains only as an image, unable to speak for herself. Her mother is left to speak for her, and

132 Ibid.

it is the photograph, accompanied by her words, which is revelatory.

In prison, he has studied as much as he can about Dutch painting, but now finds it futile. As for the image he has of the *Woman With Gloves* in his cell: “something is dead in it. Something is dead” (215). He speaks of Josie being brought back to life, and this narrative is in fact turning out to be his first step at realising this symbolic resurrection.

As noted earlier, Freddie accuses himself of a failure of imagination, something much commented on, including by the author, who notes that his narrator comes to realise the difference between his crime of murder, and his sin – a radical failure of the imagination.¹³³ Joseph McMinn remarks upon the paradox of representation in *The Book of Evidence* Freddie’s pictorial imagination finds an honesty in images that language obfuscates, but all of this is conveyed through Banville’s prose, which has the stylistic confidence to employ language to deny the adequacy of language.¹³⁴ One of the ways the author achieves this is through ekphrasis. The novel demonstrates the scope of the dramatic ekphrastic encounter and also illustrates some the issues that are germane to ekphrasis at a theoretical and creative level. As has been observed at the heart of all ekphrastic writing is the question of how meaning can best be represented – by image or text?¹³⁵ Freddie tries to en-voice his fantasy figure of the *Woman with Gloves*, and gets nowhere. An entirely different image allows him to comprehend Josie’s actual voice when she spoke her last words, which leads to the revelation so long deferred. Crucially, this image was mediated by text in the newspaper and by Freddie’s own narrative, words were needed to free him from his fixation with images and begin his process of, to quote Starzyk again, becoming in the present what one is currently not.¹³⁶

Banville was completely free in the choice of visual art he would use, but curiously, little authorial attention is given to the actual paintings. Neither the Drost painting nor the lesser used Balthus painting, as they are deployed in the novel, are of much interest of themselves. This is one reason why there is so little transformation of the images. As already noted, the slightness of the representation of the Balthus figure is necessary for that ekphrasis; in that instance, it is the pose and the position of Josie as an embodiment of the figure that is important, and in that there is no real adulteration of the figure from the actual painting. As for *Portrait of a Woman* and her fictional equivalent, a few details are changed, or ignored; the novel mentions light coming from a doorway, which is not so evident in the painting, or at least in reproductions of it. The gloves in the real painting, even in reproductions, are extremely intricate

133 Banville, ‘Thou Shalt not Kill’, p. 138.

134 McMinn, 1999, p. 114.

135 Many commentators, but see, for example, Trussler, 2000, p. 267.

136 Ibid.

but not emphasised at all in the novel, despite the title given to the literary version. However, the painting in the novel remains on the whole very faithful to the one on which it is based.

For the author's purposes the anonymity of the woman portrayed was essential. A painting depicting a specific figure, whether an archetype (a Madonna, a goddess or some other mythic entity) or a real person of known identity (whether significant or not) – would not have produced the same effect on Freddie and Josie Bell would have lived. She would not have been interchangeable with an image, not a thing to also be stolen, if not for the anonymity of both the painted woman and the real. As for the artist, there is little written about Willem Drost. The attribution of the real painting in the Budapest Museum of Fine Arts to Drost is quite recent and was made after Banville wrote the novel. Freddie says: "it is safest to regard it as the work of an anonymous master" (104) – why safest? Dark humour emerges again, in Freddie's new found prudence of judgement about art, but of course, the principal point is that an anonymous master as creator is appropriate as the painting signifies the autonomy of art itself.

There is something further in Freddie's statement, however. The lure of the image itself could be considerably amplified by a charismatic creator. The substance of Banville's next novel, *Ghosts*, is a further consequence of the dramatic ekphrastic encounters in *The Book of Evidence*. In this novel, Freddie, for different reasons, is enthralled not just by art but by an artist, Jean Vaublin, a fictionalised version of Jean Antoine Watteau. As previously outlined, ekphrasis in *Ghosts* is of a type which is outside the ambit of the current study, but *The Untouchable* similarly concerns obsessive preoccupation with art, and with a named artist.

What other danger might there be for Freddie in a different attribution? Freddie tells us that he will plead guilty to murder in the first degree, and few others apart from him seem interested the painting. Nevertheless, theft is part of his crime and the value of the painting is pertinent to his sentence. Val Nolan notes the meticulous attention that Banville pays to space and objects in his work; for Freddie space and object together overwhelm him, but he was set in motion by cupidity.¹³⁷

Zoë Roth's examination of how ekphrasis relates to the material consumption of art, and art as a commodity is pertinent here, if we recall that before Freddie's failure of imagination, there was avarice, envy, sloth, all seven sins, in fact, but also a lack of money¹³⁸. Freddie alleges that he was never going to

137 Val Nolan, 'The Aesthetics of Space and Time in the Fiction of John Banville and Neil Jordan', *Nordic Irish Studies*, 9 (2010), pp. 33-47.

138 Zoe Roth, 'Vita brevis, ars longa: ekphrasis, the art object, and the consumption of the subject in Henry James and Michel Houellebecq', *Word & Image*, 29.2 (April-June 2013), pp. 139-156.

steal anything, or at least not according to his definition of theft:

But I believed, you see, that the matter would be entirely between Behrens and me, with Anna perhaps as go between. I never imagined there would be anything so vulgar as a police investigation, and headlines in the paper, and all the rest of it. A simple business transaction between civilised people, that's what I intended. [...] I was not thinking out threats and ransom demands, certainly not. (103)

It seems some sort of kidnapping, with a painting as hostage, was the idea. Freddie's financial incompetence, as well as his predilection for paintings, seems to be learned from his father, whose property he first comes in search of when he turns up at Whitewater. His father was the one who acquired the paintings that Freddie erroneously believed to his salvation, financial and otherwise. These pictures were never given much countenance, but their absence was. Freddie accuses his father of philistinism, "he cared nothing for the works themselves, only for their cash value" (61), and failure "so much for your connoisseur's eye" (85). Freddie, of course, cared only for their cash value as well, and is materially reckless:

It was the same old squabble, money, betrayal, my going to the States, my leaving the States, my marriage, my abandoned career, all that, the usual – and yes, the fact that she had flogged my birthright for a string of plug-ugly ponies [...]. (74)

Whatever the strength and nature of the impression left on him by *Portrait of a Woman*, criminality, on some level, was still what he was intending. Roth considers how the economic value of a work of art governs the actions that surround it, how aesthetic pleasure and associated emotions become constituent of what turns art into a commodity. Ekphrasis is capable of exposing socio-economic or cultural division. In *The Book of Evidence*, systems of dominance repeatedly compete throughout the novel, and the crime, as well as much of the humour, stem from Freddie's distorted view of his position within and without these systems.¹³⁹

The examples are numerous, but his dealings with Anna and Helmut Behrens relate directly to the dramatic ekphrastic encounter. In the hallway of Whitewater, the paintings Freddie sees denote wealth and luxury not of themselves, but because they are by Tintoretto, Fragonard and Watteau. He deplores that he was left alone, unguarded, with access to the art, "what had happened, that it was all left unattended like this" (77), but of course, he is permitted to be there because of his own insistence on

139 Radley, p. 21.

being a friend of the family, having barged insouciantly past the servant who opened the door. Freddie is intimidated by Anna's car, her deft handling of it and that she has the "impatient assurance of the rich" (81). He arrived by taxi and neglected to pay his fare; when the unfortunate driver calls, Freddie "took the phone and spoke harshly to the fellow" (83) and is puzzled that Anna finds it funny. Helmut Behrens was earlier spoken of as comparable to a "the great robber barons of the past [...] the Guggenheims and Pierpont Morgans" (62), both mentioned in the context of being art collectors. Freddie thinks Behrens has come to look like a small object d'art "like one of those exquisite and temptingly pocket-sized jade figurines which I had been eyeing only a moment ago on the mantelpiece" (84) but then perceives him as resembling a predator "He turned his raptor's gaze on me" (85) when Freddie broaches the subject of the paintings his mother sold. Behrens bought the paintings to help her, he claims, not for the objects themselves, which "would not have been comfortable, here, at Whitewater" (85).

Paintings, and their comparative value and the ownership of them, signify power. The possession of art is one of the reasons that Behrens prospers and Freddie's family do not. The hints of suspect or disreputable acquisition accrue on both sides; from Freddie's perspective, or lack thereof, this negates ownership. Theft has been on his mind from the outset: "I wanted my share of this richness, this gilded ease" (83). Acquiring a painting is his way of adjusting the balance of power, but by allowing himself to be carried away by his perception of an image and his misinterpretation of it, the crime is sublimated into a fatalistic surrendering to art, the aesthetic impulse transmogrified into the criminal.

Paradoxically, Freddie's narrative warns about the dangers of investing objects with power, financial or otherwise. Dining with Anna and her father, both of whom seem physically dissipated, Freddie says:

We dined at a rickety table [...] the cutlery was cheap, the plates mismatched. It was something I remembered about Whitewater, the makeshift way that life was lived in odd corners, at the edge of things. The house was not meant for people, all that magnificence would not tolerate their shoddy doings in its midst.

Despite their undoubted wealth and comfort, Behrens' and Anna's lives are subordinated to the house itself, and its precious contents. Together they have some of the qualities of diminishment and disintegration that Brian Murphy identifies with the Godkins in Banville's early novel *Birchwood*.¹⁴⁰ The gilded ease that Freddie covets is also a burden. The last one to bear it will be Anna, single, an only child and herself childless, she looks like "one of Klimt's gem encrusted lovers" (85), a comparison which

140 Neil Murphy, From "'Long Lankin' to 'Birchwood': The Genesis of John Banville's Architectural Space', *Irish University Review*, 36.1, Special Issue: John Banville (Spring-Summer, 2006), pp. 9-24.

implies she is doubly trapped, in a frame and an outline. There is a wider backdrop of violence in Freddie's narrative, a bomb which has exploded in the city. The Behrens were caught up in the chaos of it. Freddie sympathises, but is more concerned with the inattentions of the servants at Whitewater, the laxity which allowed him his dramatic ekphrastic encounter: "All the same, I said, anyone could have got in. Why, she asked, do you think someone might come and plant a bomb here? And she looked at me with a peculiar, bitter smile" (82).

3 *The Untouchable*

As with *The Book of Evidence*, visual art is a pivotal component of the narrative in Banville's *The Untouchable*. Produced after *Athena*, *The Untouchable* breaks with the Freddie Montgomery character, but many of the themes found in the *Frames* trilogy endure. The trilogy sees Freddie trying to re-invent himself; the feckless dilettante becomes, in *Athena*, an art expert with a new name, a process begun in *The Book of Evidence*. In *The Untouchable*, a similar re-invention of the self occurs, the narrator is again unreliable, he is dominated by the perceived power of a work of art, and the dramatic ekphrastic encounter at the core of the novel is very much a development of that found in *The Book of Evidence*, the trilogy novel it most resembles. But whereas Freddie's translation of himself into Morrow, art appraisal expert, is not really successful, the protagonist of *The Untouchable* is a legitimate art historian and academic. The significance of art in this novel is amplified further and the authenticity of the narrator's profession intensifies the textual engagement with painting. In fact, that Victor Maskell is what Freddie aspires to be gives rise to a substantial difference between the two novels.

The distinction between actual and notional ekphrasis is obviously important when considering any ekphrastic text; the question of why an author may choose one form over another is fundamental to the inception of an ekphrasis and the inspiration that visual art provides to the author. In *The Book of Evidence*, the ekphrasis of *Portrait of a Woman with Gloves* demonstrates that actual ekphrasis need not be restrictive. Little is known about the real painting that the fictional painting is based on, and so it confers almost the same freedom on the author as a notional ekphrasis. The ekphrasis of *The Window* evokes this painting without directly presenting it, and so the author avoids too abstruse an engagement with either that painting or with Balthus' work, while retaining significance within the novel.

What is the author to do, then, if the choice is taken out of his hands? When he comes to write a novel that is unambiguously based on a real person, but one whose knowledge of art and art history was profound and indisputable? *The Untouchable* is an imaginative interrogation of the life of a spy, and modelled on a man who was both a highly esteemed art historian and an agent for Soviet intelligence. Anthony Blunt was an academic, a member of the upper echelons of British society, a knight of the realm, curator of the art collection held by the British crown and even a distant relative of the monarch. He was also revealed to be one of the so-called 'Cambridge Five', the notorious spy ring. As George Steiner noted in his review of *The Untouchable*:

If ever there was a subject hand-crafted for John Banville, it is that of Anthony Blunt's treason, of the web of duplicities intellectual, ideological, professional, sexual, in which this eminently gifted mandarin chose to enmesh himself.¹⁴¹

Banville has confirmed that he was fascinated by the Cambridge spies, Blunt most of all, whom he referred to as "a master of evasion, the quintessential masked man" and allows that he had planned the book for a long time before writing it.¹⁴² However, he also acknowledged some misgivings about the prospect of Blunt as literary subject:

From the start I had worried about the difficulty, indeed the effrontery, of attempting a first-person narrative in the character of an upper-class homosexual English gentleman and scholar, who also happened to have been a communist spy.¹⁴³

The strategies employed by the author to over-come the difficulties presented by Blunt's extraordinary life are pertinent here, especially as Blunt's connection to visual art is so conspicuous. Leaving aside his more notorious occupation, Anthony Blunt was undoubtedly an art historian of high stature, particularly in relation to his work on the baroque painter Nicolas Poussin (1594-1665). When writing *The Book of Evidence*, *Ghosts* or *Athena*, Banville was free to use any art form, by any artist to express what he wanted to convey. *The Untouchable* heralds a departure for the author, in that use of art or ekphrasis while writing about the life of Anthony Blunt would not only be inescapable, but also bound to the known history of Blunt the academician, the only public facet of his life, and a matter of no little record.

As regards every aspect of his life outside of his scholarship, however, the details are scant. It is a boon to the novelist and evidently perplexing to the non-fiction writer, judging by books relating to Blunt. Miranda Carter notes that "even to his friends, he was an enigma [...]. He was a habitual compartmentalizer and withdrawer from the world [...]. Blunt left extraordinarily few permanent personal traces of himself".¹⁴⁴ Blunt remained resolutely private and inscrutable in the face of publicity. He encapsulates two recurring motifs in Banville's work. As Blunt was as a spy, he personifies the discordance between the inner and outer self (what Banville and his commentators refer to as the 'men with masks' motif) and as an art historian, he presents Banville with a singular opportunity, in that visual art occupies a natural place in the narrative. Yet this also presents an inherent difficulty, if what is known and recorded about Blunt's specific area of interest and scholarship does not encompass artworks that

141 George Steiner, 'To Be Perfectly Blunt', *The Observer*, May 4th, 1997, Review section, p. 15.

142 John Banville, 'Omens and Poetic Licence', *The Guardian*, 25th February 2006.

143 Ibid.

144 Miranda Carter, *Anthony Blunt: His Lives* (London: MacMillan, 2001), p. xvi

coincide with what the author wants to convey. When reading *The Untouchable*, one is left in no doubt that this was, for the most part, the case. The necessity arose to successfully and plausibly negotiate this divergence. This was achieved by writing between the lines of fact and fiction, through a plethora of allusions to art and through the use of transformative ekphrasis, in which an existing work of art is not only altered, but re-imagined as the work of Poussin. The resulting fictional painting is an indispensable part of the narrative.

Little was revealed about Blunt's espionage activities during his lifetime, and most of what is known has been uncovered since in non-fiction books published about the Cambridge spies. Writer and journalist Philip Knightley has written extensively on the Cambridge Five as well as on international security and military intelligence. He was part of *The Sunday Times* team who first linked Blunt with the KGB via his association with Kim Philby. In a review of *The Untouchable*, he notes that, while the question of what Blunt did has been answered, the reasons why remain elusive. Knightley considers that fact-driven biographical works may not always be the best tool for uncovering the more subtle and complex questions of motivation.¹⁴⁵ In this assessment he is joined by Miranda Carter, who, commending Alan Bennett's play *A Question of Attribution* and *The Untouchable*, ventures that "Non-fiction has, for the most part, served him [Blunt] less well".¹⁴⁶ For Victor Maskell, Banville's version of Blunt, the locus of his motivation toward espionage is his life's emblem, a painting called *The Death of Seneca*.

145 Phillip Knightley, 'A Traitor's Heart', *The Australian*, 9th July 1997 B04.

146 Carter, p. xviii.

3.1 “the Frankenstein’s monster who would be Victor Maskell”¹⁴⁷

The Untouchable and *The Book of Evidence* are both first-person narrative confessionals, but with different aims. If Freddie speaks of feeling bifurcate, Maskell is a veritable hydra, with at least four divisions within him – his sexuality, his academia, his espionage and, as Eibhear Walshe has observed, his nationality.¹⁴⁸ Freddie wants to record his version of the truth, and in doing so becomes engaged in reconstruction, but Maskell is actually composing an apologia. Both are trying to aestheticize their wrongdoing, but Freddie, at least, reaches some equilibrium and insight through doing so. Maskell may gain some insight, but he is even more powerless than Freddie, being displaced from the centre of his own story. It is not Maskell who is *The Untouchable*, but Nick Brevoort. Freddie at least has ownership of his story; it is his book of evidence.

As both Freddie and Maskell are based, to varying degrees, on real people who committed real crimes, these fictional creations take the author dangerously close to the kind of social and political statement that he claims to be wary of.¹⁴⁹ *The Untouchable* could be interpreted as a sarcastic commentary on the emptiness of western left-wing politics of a certain type, and similarly *The Book of Evidence* could easily be read as a commentary on the parochialism and corruption of Irish society and politics during the 1980s and beyond. Banville has allowed that the latter was a more political novel than he realised.¹⁵⁰ Both novels allude to and satirize the sensationalist tendencies in the modern media generally and it is certainly possible to read either novel as a criticism of class structure and the commodification of art (this last point will be returned to).

The author relies on the acceptance of certain inherited class distinctions and mores in order for the action in both novels to take place. Freddie and Maskell are both rather ridiculous and are recognisable upper-class caricatures. Nonetheless, there is a serious point which underscores their excesses, which the author occasionally makes explicit – that it was partially the existence of such conceits that enabled the crimes of the real figures that each novel is based on. Recalling *The Book of Evidence*, Freddie tells us of Ireland: “This is a wonderful country, a man with a decent accent can do almost anything” (98).¹⁵¹ An essentially parodic tone is one stylistic motif that serves to distance Banville’s fictional work from the individuals on

147 John Banville, ‘Conspiracy’, *A New Ireland in Brazil – Festschrift in Honour of Munira Hamud Mutran*, ed. Laura P. Z. Izarra and Beatriz Kopschitz X. Bastos (Sao Paulo: Humanitas, 2008), p. 32.

148 Eibhear Walshe, ‘A Lout’s Game’. *Irish University Review*, 36.1 (Spring Summer 2006):102-116

149 John Kenny, *John Banville*, p.44.

150 See for example, ‘Oblique Dreamer: Interview with John Banville’, *The Observer*, Sunday 17 September 2000.

151 A remark based on a witness statement from the MacArthur case, see ‘John Banville and Derek Hand in Conversation; 2; Interview’, *Irish University Review*, 36.1 (22 March 2006), p. 200.

whom the fictions are based. Brian Radley notes the theatrical flourish with which characters such as Maskell and Montgomery, but also Alexander Cleave (from *Eclipse*) and Axel Vander (in *Shroud*) use comedy to confound and mock others, as well as to deceive and dissemble.¹⁵²

Banville's comedy of cruelty, to use Radley's term, works both with and against Freddie and Maskell. In *The Book of Evidence*, as previously discussed, comedy is used to expose Freddie as facile and buffoonish both consciously (for example, referring to his interior self as Bunter) and unconsciously (Anna's comment about his pomposity, Charlie French's seeming enjoyment in Freddie's reaction to revelations about his parents). In Freddie's account of his actions, humour and hyperbole are acts of bravado that gradually dissipate as the novel progresses. In *The Untouchable*, examples of cruel humour are numerous and the humour proceeds both from Victor and against him. The latter takes a form similar to that targeted at Freddie Montgomery; incidents of Victor being pompous evoke mirth in others and even in the retelling of his story, he is frequently unaware of it.

Radley draws attention to a particular Banvillean trope, that of his characters behaving as if they were on stage. In both these novels, the first-person confessional narrative becomes a stage set up by both protagonists to make their case. Freddie's book of evidence may or may not be the truth – he himself is not sure (“All of it. None of it. Only the Shame” 220). Maskell's performance is even more successful than Freddie's; he knows the truth of his narrative, but conceals it, as he says: “I have never done anything in my life that did not have a purpose, usually hidden, sometimes even from myself” (7). To extend the stage metaphor, Freddie is a lone performer, with only himself to appeal to for truth, and so he is doomed to keep enacting his drama over and over again – in *Ghosts*, in *Athena*, and in his endless turning towards the painting “[...] as I sometimes imagine I shall be turning always, as if this might be my punishment, my damnation, just this breathless, blurred, eternal turning towards her” (78). Maskell has fellow actors, but gradually reveals that his is not the principal role.

The novel is replete with references to stage and screen, which begin immediately. When his narrative opens, and Maskell avows his stoicism in the face of members of the press earlier that day, he seems particularly satisfied that he “dressed the part to perfection” (8), providing a detailed description of the clothes he wore. Maskell says of Skryne, his interrogator from the British secret services: “We had become a kind of double act at the end, he and I, a music hall routine” (5)¹⁵³. He adds that Skryne is not “the popular image of an interrogator [...]. He reminds me of the fierce father of the madcap bride in those

152 Bryan Radley, see p. 16.

153 Pronounced, assumedly, like the Co. Meath place-name which is pronounced ‘screen’.

Hollywood comedies of the thirties” (5) and yet also “He is straight out of Dickens” (6) and “a fellow thespian” (385). Almost immediately, the narrative relies on the brief mention of either specific or general types of image, character, or scene or on suggestions of the stage, the camera or actors. This continues throughout the text. Maskell’s father is “a character out of Trollope” (70) while Nick Brevoort is guilty of “Woosterisms” (72). Mrs Brevoort “stood there in her Sarah Bernhardt pose” (91) and is compared to no less than four characters from Henry James’ novels (three of whom are from *Portrait of a Lady*), while Maskell, in her presence feels like a theatregoer. Felix Hartmann has a Byronic limp and is the Student Prince. Boy Bannister was “Brought up on Buchan and Henty, he saw his life in the lurid terms of an old-fashioned thriller” (126).

In Moscow, Maskell is followed closely by a slow-moving car and reflects: “Really, that is the kind of thing they did; I suspect they got it from Hollywood movies, of which they were depressingly fond” (127). Maskell frequently meets his soviet handler in Britain in a cinema, and recalls the time that Bannister and McLeish flee “as if we were on a stage” (363). The novel even has another writer present in it, namely Querell, who, it seems inescapable, is based on Graham Greene. Querell’s Catholicism not only harks back to Greene’s life and his work, but also recalls Evelyn Waugh, to whom there are also oblique references, particularly *Brideshead Revisited* and *Vile Bodies*. Banville admitted that “*The Untouchable* was a big acknowledgement to people like Waugh and P.G. Wodehouse” and goes on in the same interview to say “Wodehouse is very interesting. There must be all kinds of darkneses in that man’s life”.¹⁵⁴ This comment, particularly in relation to a novelist such as Wodehouse, shows how seriously Banville takes his comedy, as well as giving further weight to the comedic elements of the novel. Examples are legion, and not limited by any means to those mentioned here; there are many other instances of literary and cinematic allusion which augment Victor’s narrative. For Victoria Stewart, Maskell’s self-consciously literary references and language and (to borrow her term) his use of Hollywood tropes, are deliberate strategies of estrangement that Maskell uses to distance himself from the ramifications of his actions. Maskell, says Stewart, becomes “a performer in a film of his own life”.¹⁵⁵ By these means, Stewart argues, Maskell relies on a mythologised version of the past to disrupt the historical background of his narrative and thus evade the material impact of his activities. Stewart is correct but she neglects the authorial intention.

Banville uses allusions to theatre, literature and film to underscore the artificiality and in-authenticity of Maskell and the narrative as a whole. The obvious and oblique references to Hollywood films and their

154 ‘Oblique Dreamer’.

155 Victoria Stewart, “I May Have Misrecalled Everything”. John Banville’s *The Untouchable*, *English*, 52 (Autumn 2003), pp. 237-251, p. 244.

tropes, for example, stand out in ironic relief to the anti-American sentiment directly espoused by Boy in the novel, and half-heartedly by Maskell. Fear of American domination was much subscribed to by the real individuals involved and not uncommon in British intellectual circles in the 1920s and 1930s. The increased influence of America in Europe and the United Kingdom after the First World War was viewed with suspicion, and Hollywood films, seen as harbingers of the debasement of English culture, were much scorned.¹⁵⁶

Another example is Maskell and Nick's mobilisation to France during the early days of the Second World War, an interesting interlude in the novel. Their phoney war, as that period was called, is quite literally that, replete with references to theatrical comedy: Corporal Haig is "a music hall version of an East Ender" (208), a local madam resembles Oscar Wilde, and most of the locals are outrageously clichéd stereotypes, such as the restaurant proprietress who recommends a dish "with much theatrical shrugging and kissing of bunched fingers" (210). Maskell somehow ends up being in charge of monitoring and regulating the thriving prostitution trade that had sprung up as a result of the war and feels "like a character in a Feydeau comedy [...] colliding everywhere with stock characters" (211 - 212). Their farcical exploits – and French farce at that, as Maskell tells us (201) – in this case are quite close to the realities of Blunt's five month stint in Boulogne early in 1940.¹⁵⁷

The literary and cinematic allusions serve to locate the narrative in, as well as dislocate it from, a time and place, in a parodic and hyperbolic way. More than any other Banville novel, *The Untouchable* constantly warns the reader against taking its narrative too seriously. The author is not trivialising the real events on which he based the novel, nor is he being disingenuous. Recalling Banville's reservations about his subject matter and George Steiner's review of *The Untouchable*, two influences on the novel are thus revealed.

What is most pertinent in Banville's aforementioned statement regarding his anxiety around attempting a first person narrative based on someone like Blunt is the use of the word 'effrontery'. When writing his historical novels, *Doctor Copernicus* and *Kepler*, the author had the benefit of many centuries' distance from his subjects. While the particular culture and time that Anthony Blunt lived in is now past, it remains within living memory for some, but outside of the author's own experience. How indeed was he to portray a member of the British upper class of the 1930s and beyond, who was homosexual, an Oxbridge academic, a military officer during the Second World War and a spy? The author remarked: "When one

156 John Costello, *Mask of Treachery: The First Documented Dossier on Blunt, MI5, and Soviet Subversion*, (London: Collins, 1988), p. 143.

157 Ibid., pp. 337-341, 367-368.

sets out to write a novel based on real events, one enters in to a conspiracy with the facts. But then, what are the facts?”¹⁵⁸ The question is double edged: a character based on Anthony Blunt will embody duplicity and ambiguity and yet in some ways, Blunt led a quite public life – what are the facts of what was hidden and, for Banville, what was not? Banville commented:

Fiction is fiction, of course, even when it is based on fact [...] but a reasonable level of verisimilitude is always imperative. At the very start of the novel that would become *The Untouchable* I was brought up short by the recognition of how little I really knew about my subject, about his time and the circumstances of his time.¹⁵⁹

To create Victor Maskell, Banville performs a transformative operation on Blunt, giving him the youth and background of the poet Louis MacNeice and aspects of the adulthood of Blunt himself, while emphasising the artificiality of this creation. It works in a similar fashion to the transformative ekphrasis he uses to create *The Death of Seneca*, the painting which is the subject of a dramatic ekphrastic encounter in the novel.

The choice of MacNeice as a partial model for Maskell was far from random and the echoes of MacNeice in the Maskell character, both explicit and implicit, are many. There are important omissions from MacNeice’s early life, yet the background is recognisable as that given to Maskell. MacNeice was the son of John MacNeice, a Church of Ireland clergyman, who was originally from Galway and went on to be the Bishop of Down, Connor and Dromore. The poet’s mother died shortly after his seventh birthday, and John MacNeice married again just over two years after the death. His elder brother, William, had Down’s syndrome.

In the novel, the equivalent character is named Freddie, undoubtedly (considering Banville’s well-established care with names) a reference to Freddie Montgomery, of the preceding trilogy, as pointed out by Patrick McGrath in his review of the novel.¹⁶⁰ As McGrath notes, it is not without significance that the Freddie of *The Untouchable* is relegated to a part of his life that Victor sheds, is eventually sent to a residential home, and dies. Banville’s naming of characters has been commented on in relation to his use of twins and doubles, especially in his earlier novels.¹⁶¹ An echo of that pattern is present here as well; Louis MacNeice’s given first name was Frederick.

158 Banville, ‘Conspiracy’, p. 23.

159 Ibid., p. 30.

160 Patrick McGrath, *The Fourth Man*, Review, *The New York Times*, 8th June 1997.

161 See for instance, McMinn (Naming the World) and Coughlan (Banville, the Feminine and Scenes of Eros)

MacNeice was sent to preparatory school in England, and gained a scholarship to Marlborough College, a public school which, though traditionally a school for the sons of Protestant clergymen, would have been beyond the means of MacNeice's father at the time. Along with the fact of being Irish, the comparative humility of his background was a source of some difficulty for the poet, which he compensated for with considerable academic prowess. In Marlborough he was a close friend of Anthony Blunt, with whom he shared a study in their last year attending the school. They remained friends until MacNeice's (much earlier) death.¹⁶²

Concerned about his ability to mimic an upper-class English gentleman of the 1930s, it was this relationship that prompted Banville to attempt his transmogrification:

To assuage my early fears I had decided to make my Blunt-figure [...] into a transplanted Irishman in the tradition of Oscar Wilde, George Bernard Shaw, Brendan Bracken – at least, I thought, I could get the accent right. I knew that the poet Louis MacNeice had been a boyhood friend of Blunt's, and wondered if I might dare to give Maskell the adulthood of Blunt and the childhood of MacNeice.¹⁶³

Whether he got the accent right or not is dubious, as Banville himself acknowledges in the same article, in which he also writes of his hesitation in appropriating aspects of MacNeice's life in this way. Writing of this uncertainty in another commentary, Banville avows a reluctance to “suborn MacNeice's character” by using his background to create Victor Maskell. In the eyes of the author, Blunt's actions and notoriety made him “fair game, as it were, but MacNeice was a highly respected, even much loved, poet whose work stood as a monument of honesty and good faith, as against poor, disgraced Anthony Blunt”.¹⁶⁴

The decision was made, he claims, when he opened a volume of MacNeice's poetry and found that the first poem in the volume was *Poussin*, a short, early piece.¹⁶⁵ Banville acknowledges the poem early in *The Untouchable*: “I see myself swaddled in zinc-white cerements, [...] through a swirl of clouds the colour of *golden tea* head first into just such a patch of pellucid bleu céleste” (4, my italics).¹⁶⁶ That MacNeice should write about a Poussin painting is not so surprising or co-incidental. The poem is from his juvenilia and was written in 1926, the year he left Marlborough, where his friendship with Blunt, a

162 See Jon Stallworthy, *Louis MacNeice*, (London: Faber, 1995).

163 ‘Omens and Poetic Licence’.

164 Banville, ‘Conspiracy’, p. 32.

165 Ibid.

166 The opening line reads “In that Poussin the clouds are like golden tea”. That Poussin is believed to be *Acis and Galatea*, in the National Gallery of Ireland.

precocious art scholar, had awakened MacNeice's interest in visual art.¹⁶⁷ If Banville genuinely felt a sense or permission granted, or omen revealed, then it came to him via Anthony Blunt himself.¹⁶⁸ Tom Walker emphasises the visuality of much of MacNeice's poetry and other writing and locates the germination of MacNeice's way of seeing in the knowledge of art and art criticism that Blunt passed on to him.¹⁶⁹

Some references to McNeice continue in Maskell's adult life, all occurring through the Brevoort family. Mrs. Brevoort mistakes Maskell for a poet during his first visit to her house.¹⁷⁰ Vivienne refers Maskell to her mother for permission for their marriage; McNeice's first wife was Jewish, and her family were alarmed by his brother's condition in a similar manner to Mrs Brevoort's alarm about Maskell's brother Freddie.¹⁷¹ Until the final revelations, Nick Brevoort seems to play a sort of McNeice figure to Maskell's Blunt. Nick also attends Oxford rather than Cambridge, and is described by Maskell as "profoundly, depressingly hetero" (p. 252), while Blunt said of MacNeice that he was "beautiful but irredeemably heterosexual".¹⁷² Also of note is the trip to Spain embarked on by Maskell and Nick, which must derive from a similar trip taken by Blunt and MacNeice shortly before the outbreak of war. This occasion is complicated by Nick's opposition to Maskell's views, seemingly like the differences in opinion between Blunt and MacNeice. Their political views differed vastly.¹⁷³

The sections of the novel that appropriate aspects of MacNeice's life as opposed to Blunt's differ in one essential way, namely, in Radley's words, the Banvillean comedy of cruelty. Victor's recollections of his childhood and visits home are spared the mocking, merciless undertone with which his adult life is presented. Rather than present us with an uneven narrative, the changes in style produce a dissonance that increases the readers' awareness of Victor as multi-faceted; having performed one essential schism in his life, in distancing himself from his roots, subterfuge came easily. The allusions to theatre, film and literature help the author circumvent his avowed lack of knowledge about the place and time in which the novel is set, and their frequency and nature reinforce the sense of artifice, of the in-authenticity of Maskell and his double life. Some instances of these intermedial references and allusions recall Yacobi's concepts of the ekphrastic model and the ekphrastic simile, and work with the larger ekphrases and more explicit references as part of the overall ekphrastic system of the novel. The regular occurrence of stage

167 Tom Walker, "Even a still life is alive": Visual Art and Bloomsbury Aesthetics in the Early Poetry of Louis MacNeice', *Cambridge Quarterly* 38.3, 2009, 196-213, p. 197.

168 Banville, 'Conspiracy', p. 32.

169 Walker, p. 197.

170 As noted by Stewart

171 Stallworthy

172 Costello, p.78

173 Stallworthy

and film references are particularly fitting, being that, as Simon Goldhill reminds us, ekphrasis is “particularly close to the theatre – the space of seeing and illusion” and heighten the effect of the narrative as a rhetorical performance.¹⁷⁴

The strategy may be effective, but still begs the question of why employ such an approach in the first place. The aforementioned review of *The Untouchable* by George Steiner is pertinent here. Steiner begins his review by referencing an article about Anthony Blunt which he wrote for *The New Yorker* in 1980, entitled *The Cleric of Treason*.¹⁷⁵ In his *Observer* review, Steiner asserts that some elements of *The Untouchable* appear to him to be based in his 1980 article. Having declared this conjecture, he waves it aside and proceeds with the review. If the author was indeed familiar with Steiner’s article, he has never publicly acknowledged it. Certainly, Steiner has just cause for his suspicions; his work is referenced in some of the books noted by Banville in a short acknowledgements section and as John Kenny has pointed out, Banville is obviously familiar with Steiner’s work.¹⁷⁶

Whether a direct or indirect influence, there are a number of points that Steiner makes in the article which have parallels in the novel.¹⁷⁷ Of particular interest is the emphasis Steiner placed on Blunt as an art historian. Steiner contends that, far from being divorced from his other life, Blunt’s passion for art was instrumental in leading him to espionage. Steiner notes that Blunt’s left-leaning politics were fully on view through his work as art critic of *The Spectator* in the late 1930s. Steiner recounts how Blunt went to Paris in 1937 to view Picasso’s *Guernica*. Blunt’s review was arrogant and dismissive, alleging that Picasso had not realised the political significance of the Guernica attack and declared that the future belonged to painters such as William Coldstream (a British realist painter and contemporary of Blunt’s); Picasso belonged to the past. While Blunt later conceded the genius of *Guernica*, and very generously so, in one of a series of lectures in the Courtauld Institute in 1966, the Blunt of the 1930s was trying too hard to fit his art to his chosen theory. Opposed to artists such as Picasso, Matisse and Bonnard, he believed that art had to find its way out of abstraction, and that surrealism was no solution – art had to turn back to realism. He championed ‘honesty’ in art, but used the term in a variety of ways to extol the virtues of a Marxist approach to art criticism and pointed, from the past, to work by Ingres, Fragonard, Lancret,

174 Simon Goldhill, ‘What is Ekphrasis For?’ *Classical Philology*, 102.1 (January 2007), pp. 1-19, p. 3.

175 George Steiner, ‘The Cleric of Treason’, *The New Yorker*, 8th December, 1980, p. 158.

176 Kenny, *John Banville*, p. 29.

177 The Steiner article is mentioned by most commentators on *The Untouchable*, with varying degrees of attention. Eibhear Walsh, for example, regards this article as the one of the main influences on the novel. I focus here on this article ahead of other Blunt biographies referenced because of the relevance to the novel and also due to the time it was written. Published in 1980, just over a year after the announcement by Margaret Thatcher, Steiner writes as one still in shock. His central question is how Blunt got away with what he did and why he did it. Banville in *The Untouchable* assays an answer to these questions. However, Costello’s vast *Mask of Treachery* in particular seems to have been a rich source of information as well as suggesting Maskell’s surname.

Watteau, Rembrandt. He looked to Gris, Coldstream, Orozco and Rivera among contemporary artists, as an example to be followed, to lead art out of the abstraction which impressionism started, and in doing so, separated art and the artist from the proletarian world. Under socialism, Blunt maintained, the artist would be able to play a more clearly defined role in public, intellectual and social life, and he cited the example of the Mexican Muralists who, he believed, were helping the proletarian classes of Mexico to define their culture.¹⁷⁸ In *The Untouchable*, a conversation between Victor and the agent, Felix Hartmann touches on many of these themes (109 to 114).

As Steiner points out, art and artists in Britain were put to the service of the state and the war effort after 1939, but after 1938, Blunt began to publish mainly in the *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* and the *Burlington Magazine*, journals aimed at and mostly read by artists and art historians. In these journals he published articles that established him as an art historian of note, with a particular focus on Poussin, William Blake, French architecture and Italian painting of the 17th and 18th centuries. In other words, rather than issuing polemics in *The Spectator* about the public role of art, at the very time when that public role was being fulfilled, he confined himself to scholarship. Steiner sees this as a sign of the fundamental shallowness of Blunt's politics, and his understanding of Marxism, as evidenced by his art criticism, according to Steiner "is parlour pink talk in the approved 1930s style".¹⁷⁹ There are many examples of such throughout *The Untouchable*, which expose Victor's poor understanding of political theory, and his somewhat disdainful attitude toward those with a better grasp of these concepts:

I never thought in terms of *us* or the *nation*; none of us did, I am convinced of it. We *talked* in those terms of course – we never *stopped* talking thus – but it was all not more than a striking of attitudes to make ourselves feel more serious, more weighty, more authentic (33)

They were discussing the gold standard, or the state of Italian politics, something like that. Small talk on large topics, the chief characteristic of the time (43).

The fact is, the majority of us had no more than the sketchiest grasp of theory. We did not bother to read the texts; we had others to do that for us. The working class comrades were the great readers [...]. Besides, I had scholarly reading to do and that was enough [...]. Politics was not books anyway; politics was action. Beyond the thickets of dry theory milled the ranks of the People, the final, authentic touchstone, waiting for us to liberate them into collectivity. (47-48)

178 See also Carter.

179 Steiner, 'The Cleric of Treason', p. 170.

As I think I have remarked already, I am a staunch Royalist, as all good Marxists are at heart... (323)

'[...] It's just that I'm not a democrat, you see; I fear mob rule'

'What about the dictatorship of the proletariat?'

'Oh please,' I said, 'let us not descend to polemics [...].' (383)

As well as an historian, Blunt was also a pre-eminent cataloguer, a complex exercise which requires a huge array of skill and knowledge to arrive at a correct, final attribution, the result of what Steiner called acute rational intuition. Steiner did not at all decry the importance of Blunt's contribution to the field of art history, writing: "Blunt has literally put in intelligible order central rooms in the house of Western art".¹⁸⁰ He also noted the economic and moral issues surrounding attribution in art and stated that in this Blunt was above reproach.¹⁸¹ That Blunt emphasised the need for scrupulous honesty to his students at the Courtauld was noted in *The Burlington Magazine* editorial on the occasion of his retirement from that institution.¹⁸² The journal proclaimed his contribution to the Institute to be greater than that of any other individual:

"[...] and whatever innovations his successor may wish to introduce, however radically the economic and cultural situation may change [...] the tone of the Courtauld, its professionalism, the free exchange of ideas, that *passionate addiction to the truth about the past that Blunt inculcated*, is there for good".¹⁸³

Steiner puzzles over the central paradox of Blunt the academic, known for his standards of scholarship and probity, and Blunt the spy, the professional deceiver and betrayer.¹⁸⁴ He speculates that, rather than espionage being contrary to or incompatible with his scholarship, it was partly instigated by Blunt's commitment to and passion for art. He also contends that Blunt was prevented early in his career from pursuing his desired specialisation in the work of Claude Lorrain, due of the dearth of Lorrain's work on display in public settings at the time. Art works by Poussin were more easily accessed, which swayed his choice. Steiner wonders if such frustrations as these engendered distaste for capitalism in Blunt. To ingratiate himself with Hartmann, Victor Maskell propounds the political duty of the artist, the critic and

180 Steiner, 'The Cleric of Treason', p. 170.

181 Steiner (ibid.) writes that the value of an artwork "depends immediately on expert attribution. The temptations are *notorious*. (Berenson allegedly yielded to them on occasion)." He refers to the American art expert Bernard Berenson, who is also referred to in *The Untouchable* in a similar context: "He ignored the lip-biting smile I could not suppress; I remember catching Bernard Berenson smiling like that once, when he was making a blatantly false attribution of a tawdry piece of fakery" (p. 111).

182 Editorial in *The Burlington Magazine*, 116.858 (Sep., 1974), p. 501, Anthony Blunt and the Courtauld Institute.

183 Ibid. my italics

184 Steiner, 'The Cleric of Treason', p. 173.

the virtues of central galleries, where art is removed from private ownership and “taken back for the people” (112). It is clear, from Victor’s covetous and emotional attitude towards his own paintings, that he believes no such thing.

Citing Nietzsche’s theory that a deep and total interest in something is an almost libidinal drive, more powerful than all other occupations, relationships, emotional, social or financial imperatives, Steiner concludes: “the absolute scholar is in fact a rather uncanny being”.¹⁸⁵ The abstraction of work, the concentration and obsessive attention of the ‘absolute scholar’ to their field will necessarily distance them from others and society as a whole. Perhaps the scholar sometimes yearns to be relevant in that world of the present day, to be of use. Remembering Faust, Steiner adds that it is “the deed that tempts Dr Faustus out of the prison of the word”.¹⁸⁶ Again, we find parallels in the novel; Maskell wonders if the peril to which he exposed himself was “a substitute for some more simple, much more authentic form of living that was beyond me” (46). What would he have been, he asks, had he not engaged in espionage, answering: “A dried-up scholar, fussing over nice questions of attribution and what to have for supper” (46).

Steiner speculates that, for those whose field, of any kind, is antiquarian, a dissociation from the present is possible – “a social and psychological estrangement”.¹⁸⁷ He compares the true antiquarian scholar to a figure from Dante’s *Inferno*, one of a group forced to walk with their heads turned backwards. In *The Untouchable*, Maskell’s devotion to art is such that he confounds art with real life in a similar fashion to Freddie in *The Book of Evidence*; but rather than one fatal error of understanding, Maskell’s errors are pervasive, made at a remove from their actual consequences, and amenable to rationalisation. Maskell attempts to explain by recalling his reaction on learning of a major turning point in the Spanish Civil War; the fall of republican Barcelona to Francoist troops in 1938 should have been of huge significance to anyone espousing left wing or even anti-fascist views. While working in his rooms in Cambridge, he hears this news on the radio:

[...] and I continued calmly studying through my magnifying glass a reproduction of a curious pair of severed heads lying on a cloth in the foreground of Poussin’s *The Capture of Jerusalem by Titus*, as if the two events, the real and the depicted, were equally far off from me in antiquity, the one as fixed and finished as the other, all frozen cry and rampant steed and stylised, gorgeous cruelty. You see...? (155)

185 Steiner, ‘The Cleric of Treason’, p. 183.

186 Ibid., p. 188.

187 Ibid., p. 185.

Steiner allows that Blunt may have been rather insignificant as a spy, but also allows for the opposite; he theorises that Blunt has been protected from greater exposure and early detection for a reason – a central tenet of Banville’s novel. Steiner is highly critical of Blunt and those who would defend or condone him, but ambivalent also, when he considers Blunt’s academic legacy. In Maskell, Banville creates a version of the Anthony Blunt as put forward by Steiner and others, and contrives him as a less successful scholar, and a less successful spy. Banville locates Maskell’s espionage in his obsession with art, as Steiner does with Blunt, but does not allow him the dignity that Blunt, through his own self-possession and his position in British society and academia, managed to preserve. Here we can detect the other reason for the comedic aspects of Banville’s cinematic and literary allusions in the text, and here we find the purpose of Maskell’s theatrical posturing. For Banville to achieve that aforementioned level of verisimilitude, Maskell as Blunt is a parody of the type of man the real Blunt was, derived from Waugh, Wodehouse, and impressions of stage and screen. However, this also underscores the very artificiality, the unreality of Maskell, not just as a literary character, but also as an embodiment of the author’s concerns with questions of authenticity and objective reality that occupy his preceding novels. For Steiner, Blunt was ultimately, in his detachment and reticence, “simultaneously his own witness and his own judge”.¹⁸⁸ In Maskell we find no master spy, but a rather hapless figure whose possession of the facts of his own life and the consequences of his actions are insufficient for him to act as his own witness and judge, though that is what he sets out in his narrative to do. Maskell’s convictions prove to be intellectual vanity, and worse, an aesthetic error, a misattribution. Steiner finished his 1980 article by recalling Ezra Pound’s *Cantos*, and specifically the lines in Canto LXXXI referring to Wilfrid Scawen Blunt, the poet, who was a great-uncle of Anthony Blunt.¹⁸⁹ The lines Steiner refers to are:

But to have done instead of not doing
 this is not vanity
 to have, with decency, knocked
 that a Blunt should open
 to have gathered from the air a live tradition
 or from a fine old eye the unconquered flame
 this is not vanity.
 Here error is all in the not done
 all in the diffidence that faltered.¹⁹⁰

188 Steiner, ‘The Cleric of Treason’, p. 190.

189 Steiner (ibid., p. 195) claimed that Pound’s treachery seemed “*amateurish and essentially histrionic compared with Blunt’s*”.

190 Extract from ‘Cantos’, Ezra Pound, quoted in Steiner, ‘The Cleric of Treason’, p.195.

Steiner wrote:

Pound meant the name to stand for everything that is radiant and truthful in our love and study of art. [...]. As it stands, 'Blunt' burns a derisive hole in the bright fabric of the poem. At the last, this may be Professor Anthony Blunt's strongest claim to remembrance. Damn the man.¹⁹¹

Banville's version of Blunt, Victor Maskell envisages his intellectual and philosophical self in a painting, *The Death of Seneca*. It is through the ekphrastic rendering of this painting, and through the treatment of art generally in the novel, that Banville attempts to damn Blunt his own way.

191 Ibid.

3.2 *The Death of Seneca*

As previously mentioned, the painting is a transformative ekphrasis, but unlike the ekphrases in *The Book of Evidence*, this transformation is highly significant and a vital part of the intricacies of the ekphrastic encounters in the novel. The ekphrastic system of the novel comprises a wealth of intermedial allusions and quotations, and makes repeated use of the ekphrastic simile, and the ekphrastic model, but has at its centre the ekphrasis of *The Death of Seneca*. The painting is referred to fifteen times in total in the novel, and even the barest mentions are significant. However, only twice are these occasions of a dramatic ekphrastic encounter. This first of the two dramatic ekphrastic encounters is the most consequential, the second reinforces the first, and all mentions serve to amplify the force of these two ekphrases. Furthermore, there is another encounter where the painting is not described, and therefore no ekphrasis actually occurs, but nevertheless this occasion is highly significant and an essential part of the ekphrastic system of the novel as a whole.

The first ekphrasis of the painting *The Death of Seneca* is also the most extensive and occurs early in the novel. It is this dramatic ekphrastic encounter that generates and guides the subsequent narrative, and leads to the denouement. As always, the occasion of the encounter (the circumstances and location) forms a fundamental part of the overall ekphrasis. The narrative opens immediately after Maskell's past has been exposed publicly. He feels "Like a child, yes: as if I have suffered a grotesque form of rebirth. Yet this morning I realised for the first time that I am an old man."¹⁹² He begins a journal, immediately calling it "my last testament". Maskell remarks that he has never kept a journal before, for fear of incrimination; therefore it is both his first and last testament, fitting with the general motif of the first section of the book of birth and death. As Victoria Stewart has observed, Maskell cannot settle on a term for his document, finally calling it a "fictional memoir" (405).¹⁹³ He questions what he is doing, but finds encouragement in the familiar practices of the art historian:

Am I, like Querell, out to settle old scores? Or is it perhaps my intention to justify my deeds, to offer extenuations? I hope not. On the other hand, neither do I want to fashion for myself another burnished mask [...]. I realise the metaphor is obvious: attribution, verification, restoration. I shall strip away layer after layer of grime [...] until I come to the very thing itself and know it for what it is. My soul. My self.
(7)

192 Outside of the obvious connotations, a possible reference to the novelist's appropriation of MacNeice and Blunt for the Maskell character.

193 Stewart, p. 239.

His attribution process is the substance of the narrative, binding *The Untouchable* to visual art through the profession of its protagonist, its plot and textual allusions as well as through ekphrasis.

In the days following his unmasking, he is contacted by Serena Vandeleur, the would-be biographer. During the course of her visit, he shows her *The Death of Seneca*. His reason for doing so is ambivalent. She has just tried to explain to him her plans for writing a book about him. He attempts to negate her intended role of interviewer by retreating into academia, diverting the conversation towards philosophy and stoicism, changing the tenor of their interaction to that of master and student. In viewing the painting she may understand its significance to him (in which case he has a sympathetic interlocutor), or she may not understand, in which case he has succeeded in confounding her. In the act of showing the painting, he endeavours to reveal and conceal at the same time. However, revelation occurs only to Maskell and the consequence of this dramatic ekphrastic encounter is radical. It initiates the unravelling of all that he had concealed from others and himself. The importance of this ekphrasis necessitates quoting the passage at some length, though with abridgement.¹⁹⁴

Displeased with Miss Vandeleur's response to his discourse on stoicism, Maskell brings her to his study to view *The Death of Seneca*. His introduction is telling: "'Here', I said 'is my treasure, the touchstone and true source of my life's work'" (26). Yet immediately Maskell is disconcerted. In the narrative he remarks that "paintings are always larger in my mind than in reality" (26). It is intended as a literal statement in that he always remembers paintings, including his own, as being physically bigger than they actually are, but on this occasion something else is amiss:

[...] even after a brief interval I have the uncanny sense that it has shrunk, as if I were viewing it through the wrong side of a lens [...]. Now as always the picture did its trick and for a moment as I stood before it [...] it seemed diminished not only in size but in – how shall I say – in substance, and I experience a strange little flicker of distress [...]. (26-27)

Nevertheless, Maskell remains composed and resumes his lesson:

'The subject', I said, in what I think of as my Expounding Voice, 'is the suicide of Seneca the Younger in the year AD 65. See his grieving family as his life's blood drips into the golden bowl [...]. There is Pompeia Paulina, the philosopher's young wife, ready to follow her husband into death, baring her breast to the knife. And notice, here in the background, in this farther room, the servant girl filling the bath in which presently the philosopher will breathe his last. Is it not all admirably executed? Seneca was a

194 The encounter begins on p.26 ("Here is my treasure")... and ends on p. 29.

Spaniard and was brought up in Rome. Among his works are the *Consolationes*, the *Epistolae morales*, and *The Apocolocyntosis, or 'Pumkinification', of the Divine Claudius* – this last, as you may guess, is a satire. Although he professed to despise the things of the world, he still managed to amass a large fortune, and much of it derived from money-lending in Britain; the historian Dio Cassius says that the excessive interest rates charged by Seneca was one of the causes of the revolt of the Britons against the occupier – which means, as Lord Russell has wittily pointed out, that Queen Boadicea's rebellion was directed against capitalism by as represented by the Roman Empire's leading philosophical proponent of austerity. Such are the ironies of history.' [...] her eyes were beginning to glaze; I was wearing her down nicely 'Seneca fell foul of Claudius' successor, the aforementioned Nero, whose tutor he had been. He was accused of conspiracy, and was ordered to commit suicide, which he did, with great fortitude and dignity.' [...] For the first time it occurred to me to wonder if the painter was justified in portraying the scene with such tranquillity, such studied calm. Again the shiver of disquiet. In this new life I am condemned to, is there nothing that is not open to doubt? 'Baudelaire', I said, and this time I did seem to detect the tiniest quaver in my voice, 'Baudelaire described Stoicism as a religion with only one sacrament: suicide'. (27-28)

Recalling A in *Athena*, Serena Vandeleur is an insubstantial and ambiguous figure who may or may not be part of a plot against Maskell. For the purpose of this ekphrasis, what is of interest is that she is present with Maskell during his dramatic ekphrastic encounter, and ostensibly the person at whom the viewing of the picture, and therefore, the ekphrasis, is aimed. The painting, Maskell's newly begun written account of his life, and Miss Vandeleur are all part of the process of verification Maskell assays; the written testimony, the confessor and the image form a triangulation of the evidence he wishes to assemble in order to carry out his restoration of the self.¹⁹⁵ In showing her the painting, Maskell tries to make Miss Vandeleur into a witness as well as a confessor. She, in a general sense, asks the questions that anyone — press, government, fellow agents, the public — would want to ask of a figure such as Maskell:

'There *are*', she said, in a surprisingly restrained tone, 'there *are* simple questions; there *are* answers. Why did you spy for the Russians? How did you get away with it? What did you think you would achieve by betraying your country and your country's interests? Or was it because you never thought of this as your country? Was it because you were Irish and hated us?' (28)

These are questions that he himself has not asked until now, when, publicly humiliated and with no reason to dissemble any longer, he permits himself to do so. However, he can only answer by deferring to *The Death of Seneca*:

195 I mean this in a sense used in the social sciences, where triangulation refers to using different research methods to examine the same phenomenon, the rationale being the one can have greater confidence when differing approaches lead to identical results.

I looked away from her, smiling my weary smile, and considered *The Death of Seneca*. How superbly executed are the folds of the dying man's robe, polished, smooth and dense as fluted sandstone, yet wonderfully delicate too, like one of the philosophers own carven paragraphs. (I must have the picture valued. Not that I would dream of selling it, of course, but just now I find myself in need of financial reassurance.) (29)

The combination of Maskell's display of the painting and his homily on Stoicism to Miss Vandeleur is both a digression and a direct foray into the heart of the matter. He tells her there are not, in his world, any simple questions, and few answers; what answers he can — and through his narrative, will — give proceed from the image in the painting. For now, Maskell's strategy to both distract and engage Miss Vandeleur has backfired. She is not confounded by his objective description as they view the painting, but provoked, while Maskell's subjective vision of the painting is eroding, hence his feelings of distress and disquiet.

Anthony Blunt did indeed own a Nicolas Poussin painting. Now housed in the Fitzwilliam Museum, at Blunt's alma mater, the University of Cambridge, the work is entitled *Eliezer and Rebecca*. The subject matter is an Old Testament story about the betrothal of Rebecca to Isaac, son of Abraham. There are no similarities at all to the painting evoked ekphrastically in the novel, not in theme, nor in the physical dimensions of the painting, or in the date attributed to it. Poussin had a long and illustrious career, leaving behind a large volume of work. Moreover, narrative painting was a salient feature of his oeuvre; Poussin depicted many historical, biblical and mythic scenes and often used textual sources as inspiration. As a painter he exemplified the *ut pictura poesis* tradition and his work would be most amenable to ekphrastic exposition.¹⁹⁶ Finally, Blunt, as the model for Maskell, was an avowed expert on Poussin — so why is a Poussin painting not used for the principal ekphrasis? Here we return to the problem Banville faced in fictionalising the life of a real person, where the details of that actual life did not correlate with what the novelist wished to express. Banville did not wish to jettison Blunt's dedication to the life and work of Poussin, as it is germane to the deeper concerns of the novel, but the real painting by Poussin that Blunt owned was clearly not of authorial interest. A further question arises; why is the ekphrasis that of a treatment of the death of Seneca? The subject has been depicted by many other artists but Poussin produced no version of it. The contention here is that Banville has ekphrastically evoked a painting that reads plausibly 'like' a Poussin painting, but this ekphrasis is based on Jacques Louis David's treatment of the subject, being his 1773 painting, *The Death of Seneca* (see Figure 3.1). This is neither coincidence, nor for convenience. Banville has created a notional art-work which is a transformative ekphrasis of the

196 See Jonathan Unglaub, *Poussin and the Poetics of Painting: Pictorial Narrative and the Legacy of Tasso* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

David painting and attributed the notional painting to Poussin, while consolidating the aspects of the aesthetics, politics and philosophy of both painters in the figure of Maskell, and the notional painting. This ekphrastic appropriation and combination of Poussin and David in *The Untouchable* is the principal means by which Banville establishes and interrogates the predominant theme of authenticity in the novel.

Figure 3.1: *The Death of Seneca*, Jacques Louis David (1773), Petit Palais, Musée des Beaux-Arts de la Ville de Paris¹⁹⁷



¹⁹⁷ <http://www.petitpalais.paris.fr/en/collections/death-seneca>

3.3 Maskell and Blunt, Poussin and David

Anthony Blunt died in March 1983. Some months later, *The Burlington Magazine* published an obituary written by French art historian André Chastel. The piece is firmly restricted to the appreciation of Blunt the scholar. That the obituary appeared six months after Blunt's death, and was not written by a British academic, speaks to the discomfort that still surrounded Blunt and his career in the United Kingdom. Chastel recalls the two areas of scholarship in which Blunt honed his expertise, French art in the classicist style, and Italian Baroque. The essays in the festschrift presented to Blunt on the occasion of his sixtieth birthday were, Chastel wrote, half on France and half on Italy "for two completely different 'human landscapes' two utterly diverse art-historical premises, were needed to encompass these two objects of his life-long enthusiasm".¹⁹⁸ It seems that doubling was present in all aspects of Blunt's life, including his academic work. He also divided his attention between painting and architecture, and devoted his very last years of scholarship to the latter. In *The Untouchable*, Maskell confines himself to painting, and to Nicolas Poussin, but Jacques Louis David is a covert presence within the ekphrases of *The Death of Seneca*, and within the text.

Banville's appropriation of a painting by David does not necessarily equate to a rejection of Poussin and his work as an artistic touchstone. David as evolved as a painter within the *Poussiniste* tradition, and much of his early work harks back to the earlier master. Maskell claims that he is imbued with much of Poussin's philosophy and aesthetics, or at least, the Bluntian version of Poussin.¹⁹⁹ Some of his comments on the painter are reminiscent of Anthony Blunt's approach to the man and his work, and one passage in the novel is derived very obviously from Blunt. The vacillations of art history scholarship, the value of personal reputation on which that field depends is one more theme raised in the novel. The veracity of Maskell's narrative and his competence as an art historian are intertwined. Victor Maskell, as a scholar, is no Anthony Blunt, as George Steiner notes in his review of *The Untouchable* "this 'Victor' could not have written the great studies of Poussin, of Borromini".²⁰⁰ Where verisimilitude necessitates, Banville aligns Maskell with Blunt by means of art and in particular, Poussin and his work. Conversely, where the artistic concerns of the novel come in to play, Banville also uses art, Poussin and the fictional painting, *The Death of Seneca*, to dissociate the fictional man from the real.

198 André Chastel, 'Anthony Blunt, art historian (1907-1983)', *The Burlington Magazine*, 125.966 (Sep., 1983), pp. 546-549, p. 547

199 Existing commentaries on *The Untouchable*, such as McMinn (1999, 2002) Kenny (2009), D'Hoker (2004), Stewart (2003) and Walsh (2006) also point to this.

200 George Steiner, 'To be Perfectly Blunt', *The Observer*, May 4th, 1997, Review Section, p.15

A recent article by David Carrier addresses Blunt's scholarly work on Poussin. A long established school of thought about of the artist was that of Poussin as a 'philosopher – painter', an artist whose work was intellectually charged, who engaged with esoteric subjects. Blunt, as Carrier says out, built on this pre-existing view, which had been accepted to the point of cliché, but poorly elaborated upon and little examined. In doing so, Blunt revived interest in the artist's oeuvre and was the first to thoroughly interrogate the complexities of Poussin's conceptual approach to his work. Echoing Steiner, Carrier maintains that Blunt's politics and his espionage activities did inform his scholarship. Carrier regards Blunt's interpretation of Poussin as self-reflexive, in other words, whether or not it was true of the artist, Blunt saw in Poussin a fellow dissembler; "Blunt's Poussin was a privileged person who in public hides his true self, like Blunt himself".²⁰¹

Maskell's narrative is punctuated with allusions to stoicism, Poussin, *The Death of Seneca*, (as well as other art works and artists), but on three occasions, longer passages take the form of didactic discourses on the painter, which capture the tone and intellectual stance taken by Blunt on Poussin.²⁰² Maskell believes that the stoicism he sees in Poussin's paintings, as exemplified for him by *The Death of Seneca*, accords with the philosophical approach of the artist himself. In this, Maskell is similar to Blunt. Carrier refers to *The Untouchable* in his article, quoting a passage from the novel which is even more pertinent here:

One might say I have invented Poussin. I frequently think this is the chief function of the art historian, to synthesise, to concentrate, to *fix* his subject, to pull together into a unity all the disparate strands of character and inspiration and achievement that make up this singular being, the painter at his easel. After me, Poussin is not, cannot be, what he was before me [...] From the start, from the time at Cambridge when I knew I could not be a mathematician, I saw in Poussin a paradigm of myself: the stoical bent, the rage for calm, the unshakeable belief in the transformative power of art.(343)²⁰³

In the work of Poussin, Maskell saw a model of a way of living to aspire to, a visual representation of the tenets of stoic philosophy and, convinced of the power of art to transform, dedicates himself to art and to Poussin's work in the belief that he can become that which he sees represented in painted form. Blunt's large volume on Poussin contains a chapter on Poussin and stoicism, in which he proposed that the artist's adherence to reason, his love of order and visual harmony corresponds to the stoic conception of *logos*,

201 David Carrier, 'Anthony Blunt's Poussin', *Word & Image: A Journal of Verbal/Visual Enquiry*, 25:4, pp. 416-426 (p. 418).

202 Stewart, p. 247.

203 In using this quote from the novel, Carrier underlines a reference back to Freddie Montgomery, another failed mathematician, but also to Blunt himself, who first studied mathematics in Cambridge, and in fact, was there on a mathematics scholarship. He switched to modern languages at the start of his second year.

and is evident in his paintings.²⁰⁴ Blunt surmised that Poussin strove to represent his stoic values in his painting, particularly in the execution of his later work, and especially the later landscapes, dating from the 1640s onwards. Prefacing the excerpt above, Maskell quotes from a letter written by Poussin, in a passage plucked almost verbatim from Blunt's monograph on the artist. Writing to Paul Freart de Chantelou, Poussin remarks on the turbulent times in which they live: "It is a true pleasure to live in a century in which great events take place, provided that one can take shelter in some little corner and watch the play in comfort".²⁰⁵ Poussin, says Blunt, in writing this, is adhering to the code of the later Stoics, such as Seneca, rather than the attitudes of Zeno and the earlier stoics, who believed that the individual had a duty not to withdraw from his community, but to take an active part in society. Maskell expresses the exact same opinion, and identifies himself directly with it, saying confidently: "In my life I have exemplified both phases of the philosophy" (196).

This passage precedes the second dramatic ekphrastic encounter in *The Untouchable*, in which Maskell also alludes to the greatness of Poussin's late work, the period of the artist's oeuvre that Blunt regarded as being most influenced by stoicism. However, even as this seems to further align the character of Maskell and *The Death of Seneca* with Blunt and Poussin, a detail in the ekphrasis that follows accentuates its divergence from Poussin's actual body of work and from Anthony Blunt.²⁰⁶ Maskell has (tentatively) dated the painting to 1642. Blunt details how Poussin was summoned back to Paris from Rome in 1640, and given royal court commissions by Cardinal Richelieu and Sublet de Noyers. He worked only on altarpieces and public display works at this time, no other type of work was possible for him until his return to Rome in late 1642. He produced no small canvases depicting classical scenes in that year. Blunt's monograph on Poussin is listed as an acknowledged source at the end of the novel and there is no doubt that Banville would have considered this when writing.; using Blunt as his guide, Banville has deliberately chosen a date which no Poussin expert would pronounce upon for a painting such as the one evoked ekphrastically. This is further signal of the in-authenticity of the painting, but also of Maskell himself.

David Carrier reflects on Blunt's choice of scholarship, wondering what a self-identified Marxist could make of Poussin, a painter who did not depict contemporary life, and would certainly not be associated with the political or socioeconomic struggles of day. Poussin painted religious, historical and mythological scenes almost exclusively, with just two self-portraits forming an exception; his paintings

204 Anthony Blunt, *Poussin*, (London: Pallas Athene, 1995) Chapter IV, pp. 157-176. Logos for the Stoics signifies the order inherent in nature, which humanity should strive to emulate.

205 *The Untouchable*, p. 198, also Blunt, *Poussin*, p.169, exception being: "It is a great pleasure to live", otherwise verbatim.

206 I will return the second dramatic ekphrastic encounter in more detail.

by and of themselves tell us nothing about the 17th century. Carrier's article is in many ways concerned with the elusive possibilities of a truly objective stance in art history research. Scholars will always be in danger of contemporizing an artist, or of engaging in an excess of subjectivity. Banville is aware of this hazard, but not so Maskell, who says: "For even the pictures were more a matter of mind than of eye" (4), an assertion that places Maskell's self at the centre of his scholarship.

Carrier is not censorious about Blunt's espionage. He claims, justifiably, that many of Blunt's academic contemporaries had socialist sympathies, but most of them were not in a position to act as he did:

Blunt alone acted on his beliefs, in ways that may have affected his scholarship. He is thus the Jacques Louis David of art historians. Many artists have had passionate political convictions. But David is the only first rate painter who provided a pictorial record of a great revolution in which he played a major role.²⁰⁷

Carrier asserts that David's paintings cannot be understood outside of the context of his political actions and considers that the same may be true of Blunt's scholarship: "And so if he recreated Poussin in his own image, then maybe his influential writings distort our view of that artist".²⁰⁸ Banville was also aware of this danger and thus does Maskell claim that he in one sense 'invented' Poussin. The statement is an allusion to Blunt, and a denial of him as the same time, as much of what is associated with Poussin in the novel is either invented or actually pertains to David. Eibhear Walsh interprets Maskell's art scholarship as being a point of idealism in the novel. This is the case, but to extend this line of thought, the implication is that it is a poor sort of idealism indeed, for Maskell is a poor scholar.

A direct assignation of the painting to Poussin is substantially delayed in the text. Poussin is mentioned within the first two pages, but during the first dramatic ekphrastic encounter, no artist is named as the painter of *The Death of Seneca*. A pivotal episode in the novel is an encounter with the painting, where Maskell recalls how it came into his possession. The incident occurs an opening at a commercial gallery, improbably, but aptly named, *Alighieri's*. Victor, embarrassed that he did not recognise Nick Brevoort's sister Vivienne and annoyed by Wally, the art dealer, looks through some paintings stacked against a wall in the back room of the gallery. An ekphrasis of the painting is not redeployed here, but from the previous ekphrasis, it is clear to the reader that *The Death of Seneca* stands in stark contrast to what the gallery is exhibiting (supremacist art by a white Russian emigré), to the conversation around Victor (Orozco and the need for 'People's art', and paradoxically, the saleability of the artist being exhibited), and to the other

207 Carrier, p. 416.

208 Ibid.

paintings Victor peruses: “Failed fashions of past years, tired, sad and shamefaced: orchards in April, the odd wan nude, some examples of English cubism that were all soft angles and pastel planes” (41).²⁰⁹ In the first dramatic ekphrastic encounter, it is Maskell’s emotional reaction that complicates his account of the painting. Here, in lieu of the ekphrasis already provided, Victor’s reaction to the painting is the only focus. Ekphrases often mark the difference, the ‘otherness’ of an art-work by focussing on aspects of the viewing experience which transcend the visible, such as perceptual and emotional responses.²¹⁰ This passage is not ekphrastic but nonetheless a vital part of the overall ekphrastic system of the novel.

And then there is was, in its chipped gilt frame, with a cracked coating of varnish that made it seem as if hundreds of shrivelled toenails had been carefully glued to the surface. It was unmistakeable what it was, even at first glance and in poor light. I laid it back quickly against the wall, and a sort of hot something began swelling outward from a point in the centre of my breast; whenever I look at a great picture for the first time, I know why we still speak of the heart as the seat of the emotions. My breathing grew shallow and my palms were moist. It was as if I had stumbled on something indecent [...] taking a deep breath, I lifted out the picture and carried it to the window. Definitely.⁽⁴¹⁾

Confronted with this painting which for him, depicts a model of an heroic commitment to an ideal, is the visual epitome of a philosophy of reason, a painted representation of duty, forbearance and dignity – confronted, in fact, with any great painting – Maskell behaves very irrationally; he hyperventilates, he sweats, he is very much the antithesis of the stoic.

Maskell is already familiar with the painting: ““Looks like *The Death of Seneca* by what’s-his-name’ Nick said, surprising me. ‘We saw it the Louvre, remember?’” (42). Still no artist is named. Victor proclaims the painting to be school of – but school of whom? It is Nick Brevoort who seals the deal for Victor, by asking Leo Rothenstein to buy the picture for him, and who is the first to say: “It’s a Poussin but Wally doesn’t know it.” (43)²¹¹ The delay in attributing the fictional painting to Poussin is another indication that those seeking a real-life source must look elsewhere.

Though *The Untouchable* is not the subject of David Carrier’s article, he has made an association that was fundamental to Banville’s construction of a re-imagined Blunt. Seeing Blunt as analogous to Jacques

209 Also a pithy, tongue-in-cheek summary of the novel itself.

210 Jodi Cranston, *Longing for the lost* p. 213.

211 The Poussin that Blunt owned was purchased in a similar manner to the circumstances surrounding purchase in the novel. Blunt located the painting in a small gallery, somewhat damaged and heavily varnished. He was unable to afford it and it was bought for him by Victor Rothschild, a friend and contemporary of Blunt and Burgess, for whom Leo Rothenstein is a literary substitute. There was no question over whether it was a Poussin or not, merely that the artist was unfashionable at the time. See Costello, p. 209. There is an earlier version of *Eliezer and Rebecca* held in the Louvre.

Louis David is tenable, despite the vast difference in their respective times, contexts and actions. David's political activities loom large over his paintings, many of which engage with political themes. From a historical distance, it is difficult to separate his actions from his work; thus it now is with Blunt. The first and most obvious indication that *The Death of Seneca* is not based on an art-work by Poussin is simply that, despite his interest in the stoic philosophers, and moreover, despite the fact that the death of has been an enduring motif in art and literature, the artist did not produce a painting on this subject.

James Ker, in his study of the numerous treatments of the subject, observes that repetitions of the narrative of Seneca's death, whether visual or literary in form, were used to exhibit, and distinguish between, specific attitudes towards death²¹². Differing aspects of the account of the death are emphasised in different treatments of the subject. Of the many depictions of the death of Seneca, it is in the David painting that the similarities to the fictional painting in *The Untouchable* are most manifest. The description of the scene compares well with the ekphrasis in the novel; the group surrounding the philosopher, the blood-letting into the golden bowl, the officer of the guard, and the presence of Pompeia Paulina, who is noticeably absent from many other treatments of the subject, all coincide with Maskell's ekphrasis of his painting.

What of the dissimilarities? The obvious difference is the bath being filled in the background. Seneca is said to have immersed himself in a bath to speed his bleeding; some images of his death show the philosopher already immersed but none show the blood-letting with the bath being prepared in the background in the fashion described.²¹³ Also, Maskell questions the tranquillity and calm with which the scene is depicted, a contrast to the turbulence of the David painting. This may be Banville transposing Poussin onto David – the author creating a version of the David painting as Poussin would have painted it. The bath preparation, as an authorial addition, increases the narrative quality or the literariness of the David painting. In fact, both augmentations originate in two other David paintings. The tranquil quality is found in the comparative poise of the figures in David's *The Death of Socrates* (Figure 3.2) and the bath is inescapably associated with his famous *The Death of Marat* (Figure 3.3). All three paintings depict martyrdom and betrayal – the assassination of Marat, the suicides of Seneca and Socrates, ordered for reasons of political expediency – and thus anticipate the proposed suicide of Maskell at the end of the novel.

212 James Ker, *The Deaths of Seneca* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 11.

213 Ibid., pp. 274-278.

Figure 3.2: *The Death of Socrates*, Jacques Louis David (1787), Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York²¹⁴



²¹⁴ <http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/31.45>

Figure 3.3: *The Death of Marat*, Jacques Louis David (1793), Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique, Brussels²¹⁵



²¹⁵ <http://www.fine-arts-museum.be/fr/la-collection/jacques-louis-david-marat-assassine?letter=d&artist=david-jacques-louis-1>

David was previously thought of as a highly skilled, but uncomplicated artist, whose legacy and reputation were comprised by his involvement in the French revolution. However, a re-examination of David's over the last thirty years has revealed the complexities and intellectual vigour of his work. He was revolutionary as an artist in both the political and creative sense, challenging the accepted Rococo style that dominated French art from the 1750s to the 1780s. David was the vanguard of new classicism in French art, in which narrative qualities were heightened and the body used as the locus of communication. Outside of France, the abiding consequence of his political activities were little understood until recently; the part he played in the revolution was never forgotten, and he spent the rest of his life walking a fine, and precarious, line, both politically and artistically. As David Carrier observes, other major artists have lived through violence and political turmoil, but without taking the active, politically overt role which David chose:

Neither Delacroix nor Courbet played a comparable role in French public life. Nor did the Russian modernists, or Picasso, or Diego Rivera provide a visual record of political events equal in quality and influence to David's.²¹⁶

In the surface details of David's life – youthful commitment to a political cause, a court sinecure in middle age, disruption and exile in old age – we see a more likely model for Maskell than Nicolas Poussin. There is more; recalling Maskell's blasé attitude towards political theory, it seems David, while not lacking passion or commitment, certainly was no theoretician either. He had little or no political influence on the revolution; rather he served the cause and acted as those around him did. Like Maskell, his loyalty to his friends and associates was unquestioning and his politics derived from the company he kept. From our vantage point, David's work provides a vital record of the revolution but it must be remembered that much of what he was artistically engaged with at that time was essentially propaganda. He orchestrated pageants and festivals to teach and reinforce the messages of the new regime, immortalised the revolution's dead heroes on canvas, and helped turn their funerals into public spectacles. David was drawn into politics in the first place by his quarrels with the *Académie Royale de Peinture*, railing against that institution while simultaneously retaining his membership of it, later calling for its abolition, and proposing the liberation of art into a gallery open to the people²¹⁷.

Maskell does not demur when Alastair Sykes imagines him as a minister for culture in a post-revolutionary England (112), and, as noted, states his belief that privately held artworks should be seized

216 David Carrier, 'Jacques-Louis David and his modern day American successors', *Art History*, 26.5 (November 2003), pp. 730-751, p. 732.

217 Anita Brookner, *Jacques-Louis David*, (London: Chatto & Windus, 1980)

by the state, while later taking his place as curator of the royal collection, and personally prizing the art he owns above all else:

My immediate sensations, when Nick gaily told me about the dynamite in the hold [...] there flashed into my mind a fantastically clear and vivid image of *The Death of Seneca* [...] I should have thought of wife and child, of father and brother, death, judgement and resurrection, but I did not; I thought, God forgive me, of what I truly loved. (219).

Like David and arguably like Blunt, it is art that leads Maskell to radicalise. It was this radicalisation that complicated the legacy of their work – David’s artistic and Blunt’s scholarly – during their lifetime and beyond. Maskell, as noted, is a pale version of Blunt the scholar, but is aware that his academic legacy is tarnished, and gleefully speculates, in the final pages of the novel, as to the effect of a forthcoming academic article.

If Maskell opines that he has exemplified both the early and later stoics, he has commonality with both David, who took an active part in revolution, and also Poussin, who withdrew from political action and intrigue. Anita Brookner describes David as a painter who was “born an Epicurean and became a Stoic”; stoicism could hardly describe the actions of David’s youth and early career and this personal and artistic transition was hard won. Certainly, the stoic mindset is evident in David as an old man, when faced with the prospect of yet more upheaval in his life, he writes to a friend:

“[...] I have nothing to reproach myself, I have always done good all my life, I was useful in every country that I lived in, let men do as they will, they will never astonish me, I have lived enough to know them.”²¹⁸

Again, Maskell’s re-telling of his life abounds with incidents of decidedly un-stoic reactions and behaviour, despite his declarations to the contrary, but he achieves a realisation of the philosophy at the end of the novel.

David is closer to Maskell than Poussin’s ideal of taking shelter to watch the play in comfort and yet, in some ways, this is what Maskell has done also. His actions were covert, hidden and the consequences of his actions largely unknown to, or at least, avoided by Maskell himself, who seeks to deny any material consequence of his action.²¹⁹ Not for him, says Maskell, “the grand gesture. The John Cornford type of

218 Mary Vidal, ‘With a Pretty Whisper’: Deception and Transformation in David’s *Cupid and Psyche* and Apuleius’s *Metamorphoses*, *Art History*, 2.2 (June 1999), pp. 214-243, p.237.

219 Stewart, p. 245.

manufactured hero struck me as self-regarding and, if I may be allowed the oxymoron, profoundly frivolous” (105). Cornford was a poet and near-contemporary of Blunt’s at Cambridge who fought with the international brigades in the Spanish Civil War. He was killed in action in 1936, his death attaining something akin to martyr status among his circle in England. Similarly, Maskell tells us that Wally Cohen, the art dealer, died at the Siege of Madrid. Both remarks express a hypocritical disdain for those who act publicly on their political convictions. Maskell is rejecting a course of open, decisive action taken by others, not on the basis of ideology, or right or wrong, but for aesthetic reasons. He stylises his own actions, but, as already noted, can only do so with recourse to paintings, as well as to film, literature, theatre; the black and ironic humour in Maskell’s statement reveals his own profound frivolity. Maskell is neither the reclusive aesthete nor the man of action, who publicly stands by his cause; of his many masks, neither of these quite fit and instead he inhabits a kind of no man’s land, suspended between two states.

This is alluded to in the text, when Maskell reports that his doctors tell him he is in remission “I feel I have been in remission all my life” (29).²²⁰ This remark comes immediately after the first dramatic ekphrastic encounter, when, on looking to *The Death of Seneca*, Maskell finds neither approbation nor assurance but instead is perturbed and disquieted. Secrecy was essential in Maskell’s life, not only to commit espionage, but to avoid any confrontation with that which he now seeks through the composition of his narrative – the very thing itself, his soul, his self. The metaphor he chooses, the art historian examining an art-work is indeed apt; if he is the art historian, embarking on new research, then he himself is also the object d’art. So it has been with Maskell for many years. In the first dramatic ekphrastic encounter, he has just begun his narrative and his new mission of “verification, attribution, restoration” (7). As he begins to turn his professional eye inward, he looks outward to *The Death of Seneca*, and finds that the painting he regarded as his touchstone has diminished in substance. The edifice he had erected around himself and his life is eroding. The painting had become, starting with that first emotional response detailed in the non-ekphrastic encounter, the locus of what Maskell believed to be his self. The ekphrasis is absent because the actual image of the painting is less important at that point than what Maskell saw in it.

220 Blunt had been successfully treated for cancer in the 1970s.

3.4 The Death of Victor Maskell

Freddie Montgomery saw in ‘his’ painting a glimpse of the absolute otherness, the autonomy of art, and due to his misinterpretation he takes action, once, stupidly and very badly; Maskell also misinterprets the autonomy of an art-work, in that he believes he can become part of it. For Maskell the painting is a visual representation of a philosophy espoused by the subject and by the artist, the tenets of which he admires. He wishes to embody the painting by living according to the principles he sees codified within it. In the first dramatic ekphrastic encounter, what he sees within the painting has changed. The passage is beset on either side with allusions to death. The second dramatic ekphrastic encounter presages the end of the novel, where Maskell intends to emulate the action in the painting directly. This encounter occurs again in Maskell’s study, where *The Death of Seneca* is displayed. Maskell frets about the painting which is to be sent that day for cleaning and valuation. He worries that he will find it altered on his return: “What if I look up from my desk some day and see a changeling before me” (198). Of the three encounters with the painting, the occasion of this one differs in a significant way: he is alone.

The painting is kept in his study, acting as a benison over Maskell as he goes about his research and writing. However, if the painting is the true source of his life’s work, it is the source of both his occupations – the scholar and the spy – and more so the latter. He was already on course to be an art historian, already a Poussiniste, before he owned the painting. The espionage came after the purchase.²²¹ The painting’s presence in his study is another indication of how the scholar and the spy in Maskell are not as separate, not as compartmentalised as it might seem; as Maskell says: “all that I am is of a piece: all of a piece, and yet broken up into a myriad selves” (34). In the first dramatic ekphrastic encounter, he is not alone, having invited a stranger, Miss Vandeleur, into the sanctum of his study. She personifies the glare of public attention directed at him and the private scrutiny he places himself under. Neither is Maskell alone when he first finds the painting in the back room of *Alighieri’s*. The room is somewhat ecclesiastical. It was “painted greyish white, and the ceiling was a shallow dome. Two filthy windows side by side looked out on a cobbled yard thick with evening sunlight shining straight from Delft” (41). In one of many religious references in the novel, the room is presented as a small chapel where art is the faith. All the major actors in Maskell’s drama are there; he was brought to the gallery by Querell, and Vivienne and Nick are with him when he finds the painting; Leo Rothenstein will buy the painting for him, and Boy Burgess is called on to corroborate the purchase. A covenant of sorts has been made, though not within the chapel-like gallery room – it’s on the street outside that Nick makes the proposition to Leo,

221 The encounter with the painting in *Alighieri’s* occurs in the Summer of 1931, according to Maskell. His recruitment to comintern, via Felix Hartmann, is given as 1936.

and thus the painting itself is insulated from the worldliness of the deal. More importantly, it was the witnesses to his encounter with the painting that enable him to possess it, and later it is in the company of another witness (Miss Vandeleur) that the painting and all it represents to him begins to erode.

In the second dramatic ekphrastic encounter, he is alarmed by the prospect of not having the painting present. Now that the painting is being sent away from him, he wonders if it will return changed, or rather, that what is represented by the painting will not survive its absence. There is an implication that Maskell has never had the painting cleaned, despite the cracked and thick varnish. It has not been examined or authenticated by anyone but himself; the only other authenticators were those present when it was bought. Without any witnesses, Maskell makes a more direct connection between the painting, the process which it is about to undergo, and the possible consequences for himself:

It is still on the wall; I cannot summon the courage to lift it down. It looks at me as my six-year-old son did that day when I told him he was to be sent to boarding school. [...] Here nature is present only in the placid view of the distant hills and forest framed in the window above the philosopher's couch. The light in which the scene is bathed has an unearthly quality, as if it were not daylight, but some other, paradisaical radiance. [...] The effect is achieved through the subtle and masterful organisation of colours, these blues and golds, and not-quite-blues and not-quite-golds, that lead the eye from the dying man in his marmoreal pose – already his own effigy, as it were – through the two slaves, and the officer of the guard [...] to the figure of the philosopher's wife, to the servant girl preparing the bath in which the philosopher will presently be immersed, and on at last to the window and the vast, calm world beyond, where death awaits. I am afraid. (198)

Here, concentrating on a different aspect of the painting, the ekphrasis again resembles all three David paintings, with more evidence of *The Death of Socrates* than previously. Certainly, 'marmoreal pose' corresponds to the figure of Socrates in the later painting. Though depicted still as being still alive, and yet to drink the hemlock, the posed Socrates also gives the impression of a painted statue – already his own effigy. The colouration suggests both David's *Seneca* and his *Socrates*. Maskell's distress has increased, from shivers of disquiet to outright fear and the recognition of the consequence of each death scene – death itself, rather than dying – is now explicit. James Ker observes that David's *Seneca* is analogous to his *Socrates*; in each painting the artist denotes the sequence of events leading to the imposed suicide, creating a visual narrative where *Death of* encompasses the prelude to and the process of the demise of each man. Regarding the *Seneca*, Ker comments: "The viewer, then, is allowed to enter into the death scene without necessarily being located at one definitive moment between Seneca's living and

dying”.²²² In both the *Seneca* and the *Socrates*, the main figure is not yet dead, but the imminence of his death and aftermath of it is implicit, most starkly in the *Socrates*. Both paintings relate also to *The Death of Marat*, a painting notorious for the ambiguity with which it can be interpreted – is Marat dying or is he already dead? The figure is suspended between two possible states. Didier Maleuvre contends that David’s *Seneca* is similarly suspended:

David’s *The Death of Seneca* draws near the impossible limit of death as closely as possible. It wants to catch the uncertainty in the act. [...] The right half of his body has gone limp and droops ominously; whereas the left arm and leg, reaching for the light, buckle against death, strain as though to leave their own body. Half of him is already in Hades, in the realm of the shades, while the other half pulls toward the living. Stretched asunder between right and left, Seneca’s body straddles the passing of the death-event.²²³

The Untouchable ends with Victor Maskell armed with a loaded gun and about to turn it on himself. Following the funeral of his wife, Vivienne, Maskell accuses Querell of precipitating the public revelation of his espionage. On realising he was wrong, he goes to Nick’s house, and confronts him. That Nick was also a spy further complicates the veracity of Maskell’s narrative. Maskell had long been aware that it was Nick who had betrayed him in the first place, and had also kept Maskell outside the circle of those who knew about his own (Nick’s) double agency. Loyalty and love keep Maskell from revealing this even in his own narrative – until he realises he has been betrayed again.²²⁴ Commentary on *The Untouchable* invariably holds Maskell’s suicide as fictional fact, as the actual ending, but like the Seneca figure in David’s *The Death of Seneca*, Maskell at the end is neither alive nor dead, we cannot know if the gun is fired or not.

Dorothy Johnson observes that David “imposed on French painting a new aesthetic of the body, in which the configuration of the entire human figure radiated meaning”.²²⁵ The deterioration and fragility of Maskell’s body is referenced repeatedly throughout the novel, beginning in the very first paragraph, when his footsteps momentarily falter, and continuing to the end, when he has developed a definite tremor. When, as an art-historian, he closely examines the surface of his own life, he physically begins to break down, the painting alters, and Maskell’s own narrative becomes a fictional memoir (405). He has hidden the truth even from himself, existing in a suspended state of knowing and not-knowing. Maskell compares

222 Ker, p. 231.

223 Didier Maleuvre, ‘David Painting Death’, *Diacritics*, 30.3 (Autumn 2000), pp. 13-22 + 24-27, p.17.

224 Hence the New Testament references where Nick and Maskell meet for the first and last time.

225 Dorothy Johnston, ‘Corporality and Communication: The gestural revolution of Diderot, David and The Oath of the Horatii’, *The Art Bulletin*, 71.1 (March 1989), pp. 92-113, p. 92.

his public disgrace to a rebirth, but in fact, his public unmasking is the beginning of the end. Indeed, for the entire narrative arc, Banville denotes the events that lead to Maskell's death which, as in the David paintings, is both imminent and already achieved, again, suspended between two states. Even the fictional painting, *The Death of Seneca* is authentic and in-authentic; the painting as a fake is too literal an interpretation, rather it becomes a fake only when it is removed away from Maskell. The novel is concerned not just with the dichotomy between the authentic and the in-authentic, but the very uncertainty and relativity of these states of being, and the impossibility of knowing the difference.

Despite the centrality of the *Seneca* ekphrases, it is Poussin with which the novel begins and ends. *The Untouchable* is enfolded by two small and partial ekphrases of a famous Poussin painting. The opening section to the novel presages the final section, and is replete with references to death, beginning with a brief and partial ekphrasis of *Et in Arcadia Ego* (fig 3.5). Contemplating his public unmasking, Maskell says:

There is a particular bit of blue sky in *Et in Arcadia Ego*, where the clouds are broken in the shape of a bird in swift flight, which is the true, the clandestine centre-point, the pinnacle of the picture for me. (4)

Maskell regards his *Seneca* as part of the great works of Poussin's late period. A Poussinian element, not revealed in the painting before, creeps into the second dramatic ekphrastic encounter, in the paradisaical radiance, the unearthly light and in "the placid view of the distant hills and forest framed in the window above the philosopher's couch" (198), which at the end of the section, becomes "the vast, calm world beyond, where death awaits" (198). In placing this element of the ekphrasis in the context of Poussin's late landscapes, the world outside the window translates to the arcadia of *Et in Arcadia Ego*, and it is connotations of death. At the close of his narrative, Maskell looks up to the clouds, waiting for a bird-shaped hole.

3.5 Ekphrasis in *The Untouchable*

There are varying levels of sympathy for Blunt to be found in the literature concerned with the Cambridge Five. Steiner, though appalled by the spy, admired the academic. Phillip Knightley shows considerable sympathy for Blunt, especially with regard to the public nature of his exposure so long after he had ceased his activities and cooperated with Britain's security services. The concomitant press attention of Thatcher's announcement was quite aggressive, as Miranda Carter's 2001 biography reveals. Carter's book is interesting with regard to *The Untouchable*, as it reveals an Anthony Blunt who was essentially out of step with the world around him, unable to understand the public opprobrium he was subject to, but whose private regret and pain over his actions was at odds with the public sangfroid he maintained. John Costello in *Mask of Treachery* is the most critical of Blunt, and also the author who ascribes the most consequence to Blunt's espionage. Among academics and former students, Blunt has his defenders to this day. Banville himself seems sympathetic towards Blunt and his own creation "I'm a bit appalled by some reviewers who consider Maskell to be an irredeemable swine and a villain."²²⁶ Reviewing Miranda Carter's book in 2002, Banville says of Blunt's exposure "Press reaction was astonishing, even by the standards of English journalism".²²⁷

It is easy to see how the extraordinary story of Anthony Blunt appealed to Banville, but writing about such a notorious figure posed a set of problems that were not presented by modelling Freddie from *The Book of Evidence* on Malcolm MacArthur. Much more is known about Blunt, much has been written about him and by him. Banville resolved the potential difficulties of Blunt's fame (academic and otherwise) by intensifying the darkly comic in his work, including an aside about the author taking on the mantle of contemporary historian. I do not mean that Banville positions himself as Miss Vandeleur (an intriguing thought), but he does include an allusion to his own predicament in writing about a known figure:

That writer telephoned, requesting an interview. What effrontery. Well spoken, however, and not at all embarrassed. Brisk tone, faintly amused, with a hint almost of fondness: after all, I am his ticket to fame, or notoriety, at least. I asked him to say who it was that betrayed me. That provoked a chuckle. (16)

The ekphrastic system of *The Untouchable* comprises a dense network of references and allusions which conspire with the principle ekphrases to give the novel an overwhelmingly visual aesthetic. The

226 John Banville, *The Beatrice Interview*, circa 1997, <www.beatrice.com/interviews/banville/> [accessed on 10 February 2010].

227 John Banville, 'Cowboys and Indians', *The New York Review of Books*, 14 February 2002.

references to stage and screen are part of the intensely visual quality of *The Untouchable* and correspond to Yacobi's delineation of the ekphrastic model. Their use is slight, but doubly effective. As Yacobi reminds us, the invocation by an author of an ekphrastic model can simultaneously serve many facets of narrative, including point of view.²²⁸ Maskell is unable to write without recourse to the intensely visual and everything for him is an image, or a stock figure. The use of the ekphrastic model and the comic together ensure that Maskell is an obvious simulacrum of Blunt, but not the real thing. Maskell is a copy, a forgery, and yet also an original creation, thus reflexive of the very questions of the authentic and the inauthentic that Banville is concerned with.

The space occupied on the occasion of both dramatic ekphrastic encounters is Maskell's study, which overtly connects the painting to the intellect and so, as noted, to his profession, but to both professions. It also denotes his need to possess the painting covertly, to keep it private. Maskell's covetousness when it comes to art is similar to Freddie's. The question arises late in the narrative as to whether the painting was used as bait to secure Maskell's loyalty. Again, as in *The Book of Evidence*, art as a commodity has the capacity to reify power relations, economic, but also social and emotional, between those viewing the artwork and / or between those viewing and those present. Zoe Roth comments that "ekphrasis functions to set up the art object as the centre of a nexus of looks and ways of seeing that mediate the understandings that govern characters relations to each other"²²⁹. When Maskell first encounters the painting he is with Wally, who runs the Gallery, an avowed communist but also an art dealer; Maskell is figuratively being sold communism. Nick and his sister Vivienne (Baby) are there also. Later Maskell will wonder if the painting was a plant, a way of buying his loyalty, a transaction in which he himself was the price paid. To borrow again from Roth, the entire encounter is organised around access to knowledge which is controlled by the ability or otherwise to read and control looks²³⁰. The scopic elements of this encounter, i.e. who is looking at who, merits some further consideration.

It is a look from Vivienne that prompts Maskell to browse among the stacked paintings, where he finds *The Death of Seneca*. He was "Unnerved by Baby's challenging, slightly bulbous gaze" (41). Heffernan reminds us of Norman Bryson's distinction between gaze and glance, the gaze being "timeless, magisterially synoptic, and rational".²³¹ Vivienne says nothing and Maskell, who had initially not recognised her, is defeated by her gaze and propelled towards the paintings, for want of anything to say or knowing what to do. He finds the painting and takes it towards the window. Wally and Nick both speak

228 Yacobi, *Pictorial Models* p. 631

229 Zoe Roth, p.146.

230 Ibid., p. 148.

231 Heffernan, *Museum of Words*, p. 144.

about the painting, but it is not stated that either look at it directly – Wally stands at Maskell’s shoulder, Nick is behind him. Maskell puts the painting down, and turns the painted surface towards the wall, so it cannot be seen.

Wally was eyeing me with malicious speculation [...] Nick and Baby were sitting side by side on Wally’s table in an oddly crumpled attitude [...] graceful and lifeless as a pair of marionettes. Suddenly I was shy in their presence, and said nothing, and Wally looked at them and then at me and nodded, closing his eyes and slyly smiling, as if he understood my predicament of the moment, which I did not: something to do with art and embarrassment, and desire, all mixed together. (42)

The embarrassment is partially financial. Vivienne suggests the solution: “We all looked at her. Nick laughed and jumped down nimbly from the table, suddenly animated” (42). Nick, Maskell and Vivienne leave the room to ask Leo Rothenstein to secure the purchase. Leo speaks to Nick, nods to Maskell and gives Vivienne “a sharp, appraising look and the shadow of a smile” (43). Leo considers aiding the purchase of the painting, sight unseen. Nick looks at Leo and then at Maskell “as if it were his game and we were laggards. Leo looked at Boy and something passed between them, then he turned his measuring eye back on me” (44). The purchase is agreed.

Maskell’s access to knowledge is confined to the painting; he can see but not read the looks passing between the others. The power structures around him are more complex than he realises. He is preoccupied by *The Death of Seneca*, his covetous glance leading him to position it so that the surface cannot be seen by others. From the beginning then, the painting is associated with concealment and revelation. The room where the painting was found is, as already noted, like a religious site, and so the bargain is made elsewhere. Leo’s wealth allows him to buy a painting without looking at it, but it is Nick and Boy who control his decision. The picture is a commodity which Leo pays for, but it is not what he has procured. Maskell is looked at by others as much, if not more than the painting; he is aligned with the art object, and also positioned as a commodity.

This also betokens that authenticity of the painting, as well as of Maskell. The ostensible value or realness of the painting is of no concern. Both dramatic ekphrastic encounters involve the depletion of the painting and the inception of fear. The painting has no authentic value outside of Maskell or outside of his conception of himself. The diminishment of the painting corresponds to Maskell’s physical and philosophical decline, philosophical because it is his belief in his belief that has come undone. In the final pages, Maskell tells us that *The Death of Seneca* will be dispatched back whence it came, from Nick. The

final painting invoked by Maskell is *Et in Arcadia Ego*, an actual Poussin, and a painting about which Anthony Blunt commented “the tone is one of contemplative resignation”, a comment also applicable to the end of *The Untouchable*.²³²

The novel’s title is ambiguous. The various dimensions of meaning of the phrase are fitting. It is used as an English version of words that denote someone of the lowest social standing within a caste system, and has connotations of uncleanliness and also contamination. Victoria Stewart correctly maintains that Maskell is simultaneously untouchable in the sense of low status, and in the sense of being elevated²³³. The term could also refer ironically to his broken bargain with the intelligence services, that he would not be named. All of these could, and do, apply. However, it best applies to Nick Brevoort, who is even protected by Maskell even from his own narrative, until the very end. For behind his relentless verbosity is silence, the silence he maintained for years and maintains throughout most of the novel. He breaks this silence only after the painting has been directly cited as a fake (396). Maskell has just enough fire left to repudiate this allegation; for him, the painting may be in-authentic, and still not be a fake. The book ends not with a gun going off, but with silence from Maskell, a silence so disconcerting and dissonant that the natural assumption is that the gun is used. Instead he remains, as with the painted *Seneca*, at no definitive point between life and death.

232 Anthony Blunt, ‘Poussin’s *Et in Arcadia Ego*’, *The Art Bulletin*, 20.1 (March 1938), pp. 96-100, p. 99

233 Stewart, p. 242.

Figure 3.4: *Et In Arcadia Ego*, Nicolas Poussin (1637-1638), Musée du Louvre, Paris²³⁴



234 https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Nicolas_Poussin_052.jpg

As with *The Untouchable* and *The Book of Evidence*, *The Sea* is written in the first person, but although it is also a confessional narrative, it differs vastly from those novels. Max Morden is neither spy nor thief, not in peril or disgrace, nor awaiting trial. The confessional element is subtle and not fully revealed until the end of the novel. *The Sea* continues Banville's preoccupation with the nature and reliability of memory; like Freddie and Maskell, Max may be an unreliable narrator, but unwittingly so. His narrative has no other motive than the need to remember, and to reconcile himself to past and present loss. Unlike Freddie and Maskell, his aim is clarity, rather than obfuscation and he seeks salvation rather than redemption.

The story of Max Morden is gentler than many other Banville narratives, and the structure of the book is relatively straightforward. Morden struggles to cope with the recent death of his wife, and his grief leads him to recall a particular summer during his childhood which culminated in the death of Chloe and Miles Grace, two children he had befriended. Max's narrative concerns both his past and present; the majority of the novel is a prologue to death – that of his wife, Anna, and further back in his past, the events that lead to the death of the Grace twins.

Mortality looms large in all of Banville's work, but it is this novel that deals with the knowledge of death most directly, and in a decidedly candid tone. Max's situation of the grieving widower, his efforts to come to terms with present grief, past trauma and the prospect of his own demise are very much the stuff of the human condition, and routed in the quotidian, unadorned by extreme drama or criminal doings. There are aspects of all of Banville's anti-heroes in Morden, but he is the everyman version of a Freddie Montgomery, a Victor Maskell or an Axel Vander. The author's brand of black comedy abides, but suffused with pathos. That familiar Banville trope, the invented self, is a particular feature of the book, but the reinvention of Morden takes no more sinister form than a pleasant and comfortable life.

In a sense, *The Sea* forms an antithesis to the novels of the art trilogy, while occupying similar territory to them. While the ekphrases found in *The Book of Evidence* centred on a failure to realise alterity, *The Sea* is an effort to regain an actual Other, to resurrect the past. *The Sea* unashamedly quests to capture the sensation and emotions of a life undergoing a crisis of grief, a life struggling to comprehend that very otherness that is the novel's central idea. *The Sea* is the Banville novel most concerned with, and that most successfully realises, the struggle to properly apprehend the consciousness of another reality and best realises the alterity of which Elke d'Hoker wrote. This is enabled by the author's use of visual art,

and particularly the work of Pierre Bonnard, which saturates the narrative; the influence of Bonnard's work in *The Sea* is more pervasive than even that of Poussin and David in *The Untouchable*. The interior, domestic scenes that dominate Bonnard's work, and his repetitive studies of his wife Marthe, are essential to *The Sea* and an essential part of understanding the novel. In no other book does Banville achieve such a comprehensive synthesis between the visual and the textual, between the highly personal, subjective vision of Bonnard's painting and his own writing.

At no point in the narrative is it claimed that a Bonnard painting is physically present, and so the dramatic ekphrastic encounter found in the novel is not of a Bonnard artwork. Rather, Banville creates notional ekphrases of photographs taken by Anna, Max's wife, and once more, the dramatic ekphrastic encounter in Banville takes the form of revelation and catharsis. However, the efficacy of these notional photographs is contingent on author's use of Bonnard's work; their significance is derived from the counterpoint they form to the actual ekphrases of Bonnard paintings which are intrinsic to the narrative. Bonnard's art is overtly subjective in nature and thus the novel is influenced not just by his painting but by also by the life of the artist. It is necessary, therefore, to reflect on the life and work of Bonnard in some detail, as a basis to fully examine ekphrasis in *The Sea* and to decipher the full significance of the dramatic ekphrastic encounter.

4.1

Pierre Bonnard

Even the most cursory perusal of critical and scholarly commentaries on the art of Pierre Bonnard will reveal a history of equivocation. Commenting on a major exhibition of Bonnard's work in the Royal Academy in London in 1966, Sarah Whitfield expresses a degree of frustration with the artist. According to Whitfield there is some disagreement at this time among critics and art historians regarding Bonnard's place in the canon of western art. How important an artist is he? Does he belong to the 20th century or the 19th? Whitfield notes that Bonnard evades easy definition and presents a difficulty for critics and academics:

It is easy to see why. Like his personal life his career was quiet, domestic and uneventful, he produced no intellectual dynamo like a *Demoiselles d'Avignon*, no polemical manifesto, no ardent followers, and what is even more alarming to the art historian, no easy chronology on to which one can hook a glib account of his development.²³⁵

Though she goes on to write a positive review of the exhibition and makes it clear that she regards Bonnard as a great painter, it is interesting that Whitfield chose to add this caveat from the outset. Indeed, it seems that Bonnard is a painter who has always been received with a degree of ambiguity. He was never out of fashion, so to speak, with collectors or fellow artists, and received a good deal of recognition during his lifetime. He was able to make a comfortable living as an artist from an early stage of his career. He was not, however, regarded as being a foremost painter of his time, not lionised like Picasso, or revered like his friend and supporter, Matisse. Categorisation of a painter and their work underpins so much of art and art history scholarship, and becomes more complex from the early 19th to mid-20th century, as innovative styles and techniques emerged, artistic movements fluctuated, and visual art changed more completely than at any time since the Renaissance. Bonnard, born in 1867, emerged as a painter at a particularly fruitful and revolutionary time in French Art. Yet, the first thing that the novice student finds, on approaching Bonnard and his work, is uncertainty as to his artistic denomination, as it were. This and his (in comparison to some of his contemporaries) modest personal and public life are what gave rise to the ambiguity that characterised so much reaction to his work. Bonnard is very difficult to pin down and it is this quality to which Whitfield refers.

More recently, art critic James Panero alleges that Bonnard suffered from critical and popular neglect during the first half of the 20th century due to this very elusiveness. Bonnard, says Panero, "once labelled

235 Sarah Whitfield, 'Bonnard at the Royal Academy', *The Burlington Magazine*, 108.755 (Feb. 1966), pp. 105-109, p. 106.

insufficiently revolutionary, has smouldered like a subterranean coal fire, shooting out ever more brilliant arcs of light through time.”²³⁶ Panero maintains that Bonnard’s work began to be re-evaluated in the second half of the 20th century as part of a larger evolution in taste, a cultural shift that allowed for deeper appreciation of the qualities of the artist. The corollary is that critics who were Bonnard’s contemporaries were interested only in what was obviously radical, and could be labelled as such. Bonnard’s work is subtle in its inventiveness, and coupled with his lavish colouration, his canvases were often (and occasionally still are) dismissed as pretty, but too conventional, lacking an innovative thrust. While the viewing public and buyers have always responded well to Bonnard, critics have been unnerved by those very qualities which make the artist accessible, by what Morris Dickstein, in a review of a Bonnard retrospective, calls the scandal of Bonnard’s paintings, i.e. the pleasure they give to the viewer.²³⁷

Critical reception of Bonnard’s work continues to be fractious and at odds with the popular opinion. Dickstein notes the hugely enthusiastic public response to the MoMA retrospective of Bonnard in 1998, while Hilton Kramer’s review of the same show focuses (with some bemusement) on the virulent response the exhibition provoked from many American art critics and comments “judgments of Bonnard’s achievements have been – and continue to be – hostage to whatever mix of avant-garde sentiment and radical political ideology happens to be rampant”.²³⁸ It is obvious that Banville is familiar with this history. Bonnard’s work is mentioned in *The Untouchable*, where art is the medium through which Felix Hartmann evaluates Maskell, in a scene so overtly associated with seduction: “‘Bonnard?’ he said. Bonnard was all the rage just then. ‘Domestic bliss. Saturday night sex.’”(111) Maskell takes the opportunity to prove his credentials as a Marxist art critic, and goes on to praise Diego Rivera to ingratiate himself with Hartmann, an artist whose work is the polar opposite of Bonnard. The conversation takes place in 1936, a time when the artist was indeed enjoying another bout of recognition. This allusion shows that Banville is aware of the paradox of Bonnard. In his choice of subject matter – nature, bucolic landscapes, domestic interiors, gatherings of friends and family, their pets – Bonnard seems to offer little challenge of comprehension. The intense colouration of his canvases, a salient feature of his work which in itself is outstanding, adds to the visual pleasure derived from viewing his paintings. It is the very beauty of these paintings that leads to a suspicion of superficiality, the scenes of pleasant middle-class life that seem to proffer a kind of easygoing, decorous hedonism in which poverty, political turbulence, hardship and danger are unknown. The allusion in *The Untouchable* is all the more apt: Maskell in his role as critic makes a superficial remark which connotes that Bonnard was popular in 1936 as his work suited a pleasure-seeking generation recoiling from the growing prospect of war. This

236 James Panero, ‘Bonnard’s Butterflies’, *New Criterion*, Dec. 2002, 21.4, pp. 32-35, p. 32.

237 Morris Dickstein, ‘Bonnard at the Modern’, *Dissent*, 46.1 (Winter 99), pp. 94-98, p. 94.

238 Ibid, and Hilton Kramer, ‘Bonnard and ‘the stupidities’’, *New Criterion*, 17.2 (Oct. 1998), pp. 18-22, p. 22.

reference also reveals that Banville has been aware of the artist's work for some time, an awareness that culminated in his writing of *The Sea*. Filled with light and colour, Bonnard's paintings are reminiscent of high summer – as Perl notes, his late work evokes tropical heat.²³⁹ His canvases are populated by people rather like the affluent and worldly Grace family, or Morden and Anna, also well-off, sophisticated, somewhat dilettantish; but as in the novel, all is not what it seems. Banville found in Bonnard an inspiration that amounts to collaboration, a painter who exemplifies Banville's dictum that it is on the surface that we find depth.

239 Jed Perl, 'Complicated Bliss', *The New Republic*, 1 April 2009, pp. 25-29, p. 25.

4.1.1 Early life and work

That Bonnard was accused of being *bourgeois* is not surprising since he was of that background and enjoyed steady commercial success almost immediately upon embarking on his career as a painter. He was born in a suburb of Paris, in 1867, to upper middle-class parents. Bonnard's early life followed a pattern that was typical for a boy of his class and time; an early education in the home, followed by boarding school and then a prestigious lycée. His father determined that he should complete a degree in law. Bonnard complied but also pursued his own interest in art and entered a private art school, the Académie Julian, and then the École des Beaux-Arts. He passed the bar, but failed his civil service examination, it is assumed, out of disinterest but also to send a clear signal to his family about his determination to commit to a career as an artist – or at least to the lifestyle of one. Bonnard scholars often refer to something the artist said in an interview with his biographer, Raymond Cogniat:

I think that what attracted me then was less art itself than the artistic life, with all that I thought it meant in terms of free expression of imagination and freedom to live as one pleased. Of course I had been attracted by painting and drawing for a long time, without this becoming an irresistible passion; at any cost, however, I wanted to escape from a monotonous existence.²⁴⁰

While this quotation points us to Bonnard's frame of mind as a young man, it also reveals the strong independence that characterises so much of his subsequent career – the refusal to adhere to artistic fashions or theoretical rigidities, this unwillingness to be categorised. The only artistic 'movement' that Bonnard definitely belonged to was a small and loose group of friends who had as many differences as they had shared concerns, and were themselves difficult to categorise. Bonnard and his circle, most of whom attended the Académie Julian called themselves *Les Nabis*.²⁴¹ This label functions more to identify those involved than as any shorthand definition of the type of artists that they were.

The Nabis found themselves coming of age at a curious juncture in the art world, both in France and abroad. No longer the *enfants terribles*, the Impressionists were now part of the old guard. Fauvism and Cubism would not emerge for some years hence. Post-impressionism has always been somewhat of an umbrella term, and simply refers to those who came after the first wave of Impressionists, including the Nabis. Though it may seem surprising now, the artistic education afforded to Bonnard and his

²⁴⁰ Nicholas Watkins, *Bonnard* (London: Phaidon Press, 1994), p. 15.

²⁴¹ From the Hebrew word *Nabi*, meaning prophet, a somewhat tongue-in-cheek label.

contemporaries as this time still tended towards the conservative, as Nicholas Watkins points out.²⁴² However, the Nabis were all privileged young men who had the benefit of some of the best schooling Paris had to offer and were influenced by literature, music, theatre and dance. Their interests and artistic styles were multifarious from the outset. What united them was a confluence of the new art of Paul Gauguin and the emergent symbolist movement – the autonomy of the artistic object, the capacity of art to represent that which is subjective and ineffable and an insistence on the primacy of the decorative quality of art. The Nabis embraced the wider Art Nouveau movement, and they moved comfortably between the fine arts and the applied arts.

Bonnard himself enthusiastically pursued a variety of media and forms in the early part of his career. It was in graphic art (specifically lithographs and posters) that he first made his mark. In 1889, Bonnard won a competition to design a poster to advertise champagne; it took some time to go into print, but did appear widely on the streets of Paris in 1891 and in effect, marked his artistic debut.

Figure 4.1 *France-Champagne* (1891)²⁴³



Bonnard was very much drawn to Japanese art. From the mid-1850s, trade between Japan and Europe had opened up and, within a few decades, had led to a craze for Japanese arts and crafts which flooded the market in Paris and elsewhere. The impact of Japanese artefacts and style on Bonnard's early work is easy to spot; for example, the overflowing fizz from the *France-Champagne* poster is derived from the

242 Watkins, p. 19.

243 <http://www.musees-midi-pyrenees.fr/encyclopedie/artistes/pierre-bonnard/france-champagne/>

sea foam in Hokusai's famous print, *The Great Wave off Kanagawa*.²⁴⁴ This fascination with *Japonisme* went beyond the faddishness of an early-career artist exploring different forms. From Gauguin's work he had learned the expressive value of colour; from Japanese prints and textiles he realised how colour could be used expressively and also to construct. The fluid composition and arrangement of figures found in Japanese woodblock prints were particularly appealing to Bonnard who saw therein a dynamism he had not found elsewhere. In Japanese art, says Watkins, Bonnard found a new way to work, a way that retained "the freshness and immediacy of the direct experience of nature".²⁴⁵ Watkins's point is important as this desire to preserve the experienced moment is an abiding concern of Bonnard's entire oeuvre.

Throughout the early 1890s Bonnard continued to work in graphic art but also made forays into other areas of the applied arts. He was particularly interested in theatre and contributed to avant-garde theatre projects in the 1890s. Watkins remarks upon the emergence, during the early 1890s, of Ibsen, Maeterlinck, and Mallarmé. He speculates that the influence of these writers on Bonnard and the artist's interest in theatre had a direct effect on development of the intimist interior, which became so prevalent in his art, and enabled "his conception of pictorial space as a stage around which the attention of the spectator had to be moved as the subject unfolded".²⁴⁶

Essentially Bonnard began to eschew the primacy of tableaux in traditional painting, and began to depict people, animals and objects in arrangements as they occur in real life, relative to a subjective viewpoint. It was from these two influences – the immediacy and fluidity of Japanese printing, the contrast of theatrical space to traditional pictorial space – that his mature style evolved. Bonnard had already taken to painting interiors, but from the mid-to late 1890s, he would begin the process of refining these interiors in terms of depth and brilliance. Watkins notes:

While there is little of the melodramatic in Bonnard's art, which on one level continued the realist tradition established by Chardin, nevertheless Ibsen's 'dramas d'intérieur' and Maeterlinck plays contributed to a general expansion in the consciousness of rooms as a potential subject-matter.²⁴⁷

What we find in *The Sea*, and which I will examine in more detail later in the chapter, is the extent to which the novel is in harmony not just with the images Bonnard produced, but the artist himself – his

244 See Colta Feller Ives, *The Great Wave: The Influence of Japanese Woodcuts on French Prints* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1974), p. 57.

245 Watkins, p. 22.

246 Ibid., p. 29.

247 Ibid.

working method, his artistic aims, and the attempt to communicate a life lived through art. It is his development of the interior and his almost obsessive reproduction of images of his muse, and later wife, Marthe, that makes Bonnard's work so extraordinary. No consideration of his art can be complete without addressing their relationship, which is particularly pertinent in the context of *The Sea*; Marthe's role as Bonnard's muse was consolidated by his illustration of two literary works, drawings which firmly marked the maturation of his idiosyncratic artistic style. Always influenced by literature, Bonnard's paintings began to take on the quality of a first-person narrative. Marthe was a key part of what makes his work so perfectly suited to literary transposition.

4.1.2 Bonnard and Marthe

Bonnard met his future wife in 1893, in circumstances that are not precisely known. She was from a humble background, and worked in a shop. She claimed to be 16 years old, and named Marthe de Méligny. In fact, she was 24-year-old Maria Boursin, but Bonnard was not to know her real name, age and background for many years, by which time, it did not really matter. She was reputedly a demanding individual who suffered from ill health and bouts of depression. Her background did not endear her to Bonnard's family, while she disliked his friends and all social life in general. They did not marry until they had been together for 30 years. Bonnard was not always faithful, and left her on at least one occasion, but they remained together until her death in 1942.

Although the relationship was often difficult, Marthe transformed Bonnard's art and her image is found in hundreds of his paintings and drawings.²⁴⁸ Jed Perl described her as “the archetypal elusive presence [...]. She is Bonnard's there-but-not-there muse”.²⁴⁹ Her influence became more intense as the years went on, but a singular change in Bonnard's art upon meeting her was that he began to paint and sketch nudes. Images of women had always pervaded his art, in domestic scenes and social gatherings, his *Japonaiserie*, street scenes and his poster and lithographic work.

Bonnard never used models, and his subjects always came from his family and social circle. Nicolas Watkins suggests that his familiarity with his subjects limited his ambition, for both social mores and the nature of his relationships with these women made nudes unwanted or inappropriate.²⁵⁰ Marthe changed that. A comparison between Fig 5.2, a portrait of his cousin Berthe (with whom he had a romantic relationship) and Fig 5.3, an early depiction of Marthe, neatly illustrates his point.

Marthe freed Bonnard to experiment with a form he had previously denied himself. As Sasha Newman observes: “In the years between 1894 and 1900 Bonnard's obsession with the nude is realized entirely through Marthe; their coupling becomes the subject of his art.”²⁵¹

248 Commonly given as 384 – see, for example, Dickstein, p. 96.

249 Jed Perl, ‘Levitation’, *The New Republic*, 14 & 21 September 1998, pp. 35-40, p. 39.

250 See Watkins, p. 36.

251 Sasha M. Newman, in *Pierre Bonnard: The Graphic Art*, ed. Colta Ives (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1989), pp. 171-172.



Fig 4.2 *Portrait de Berthe Schaedelin* (1892)

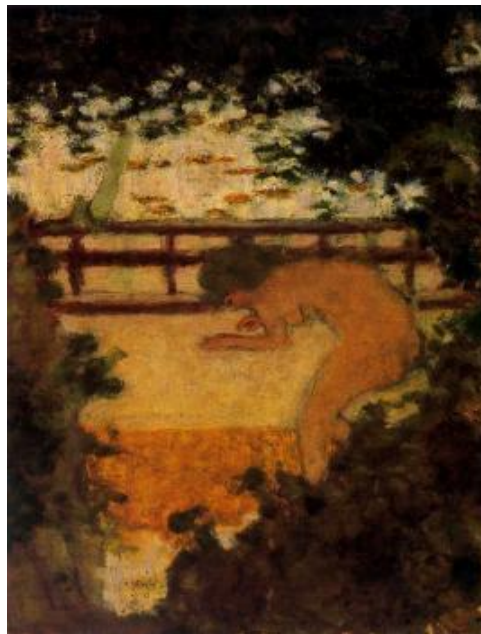


Fig 4.3 *La Baignade* (1893)

Bonnard used Marthe as his model for a series of illustrations of a novel, *Marie* by Peter Nansen; this story of young love disrupted by social and class divisions was surely pertinent to Bonnard, and his work on this was much admired, notably by Renoir. He received another commission from the art dealer Ambroise Vollard to illustrate an *édition de luxe* of Paul Verlaine's *Parallèlement*, published in 1900. Bonnard spent two years on the project which seemed to consume him, and his paintings of this time all recall or prefigure the images in *Parallèlement*. Though now regarded as one of the finest examples of 20th-century *livre d'artiste*, the edition was not successful at the time, Newman tells us, because:

[...] these nudes were not sufficiently in disguise. They were too provocative, too direct, and were not even restrained by the formal conventions expected of illustrations in a book. Moreover, Bonnard used the levelling quality of caricature, as well as the elevating style of the Rococo, to express and redefine sexual experience.²⁵²

The illustrations do mark a subtle but noticeable change in style as well as subject matter. A major stumbling block to Bonnard's art had been the absence of nudes, the nude form being possibly the most important expression in European art. It is only through his work on *Parallèlement* and *Marie*, through the inspiration to create paintings such as *La Baignade*, and so in other words, through Marthe, that he began to challenge himself as a painter. It is only with *Parallèlement* and the paintings from that time that, as Julian Bell puts it: "Bonnard was starting to refer back to earlier European art"²⁵³ A second vital tradition within western art that had been largely absent from Bonnard's work was the pastoral. With a second set of lithographs for Vollard, to illustrate an edition of Longus' *Daphnis et Chloe*, Bonnard unites a new awareness of the pastoral with the eroticism of *Parallèlement*. From 1900 onwards, Bonnard and Marthe were increasingly away from the city, spending long periods of time in the countryside outside Paris. *Daphnis et Chloe* was begun around this time, and completed comparatively quickly. The book was published in 1902 and was much more critically and commercially successful than *Parallèlement*, to which it offers an antithetical vision of passion and love. The bedroom interiors are replaced with an edenic garden setting. Though Marthe (as Chloe the shepherdess) is still very much the centre of things, Bonnard himself is also present as the Daphnis figure.

The illustrations are contained in rectangular panels rather than flowing riotously across pages. The style is impressionistic and ethereal in contrast with the sensuous rococo of *Parallèlement*. Intensely personal as all Bonnard's art was, Watkins sees in *Daphnis et Chloe* the artist's attempt to make a lovers paradise

252 Newman, pp. 171-172.

253 Julian Bell, *Bonnard* (London: Phaidon, 1994), p. 15.

regained, or rather re-imagined:

For Bonnard the recovery of the past was only possible in terms of an equivalent discovered in the present. It was almost as though he were putting the clock back to their first meeting in 1893 and re-creating their initial affair in the pastoral conditions he would ideally have chosen.²⁵⁴

Whereas his work for *Parallèlement* was inspired by Verlaine's verses and Bonnard's own erotic life, *Daphnis et Chloe* is made more personal still, by taking the form of a wish-fulfilment. In *Parallèlement*, Marthe serves as the indispensable model, but with *Daphnis et Chloe*, she is his muse. As important was the development of his particular brand of the pastoral, combining elements of impressionism, classicism and the rococo. This was to develop further in his paintings of the early 1900s and into the next decade. Marthe was to continue to be the focal point in his art, depicted as present and absent, as solid and ethereal, humdrum and extraordinary in a series of paintings which mythologised their relationship, even after her death. Bonnard created many paintings throughout the 1920s and 30s of Marthe washing and bathing. In earlier works, she had often appeared naked or half-dressed, but the later canvases depict her bathing in to an almost obsessive extent. Some of the most powerful of these were finished after she died in 1942, aged 72. All the paintings of her show her as a much younger woman. His efforts to resurrect, visually, the younger Marthe have a literary equivalent in Max Morden's reminiscences. In *The Sea* Banville has also, as Ronald Paulson writes of Bonnard, "told the story that begins with untrammelled landscape and ends with Eden compromised."²⁵⁵

Bonnard's complex bond with Marthe is indelibly linked to his art. Banville, recognising this, appropriates more than the images of Bonnard's paintings, but recreates parallel relationships among characters in *The Sea*. Morden seems to echo the relationship of Bonnard and Marthe in his feelings toward those he has lost. Following his inappropriate and prurient interest in her mother, Connie, the young Morden transfers his affection to Chloe Grace who becomes the Chloe to his Daphnis. With Anna the comparison is complicated by their revolving roles. Anna is explicitly associated with Marthe Bonnard, through ekphrasis, as we shall see, and also through Morden's growing obsession with picturing her in his mind – preserving her image as Bonnard did with his wife – but Morden is himself also Marthe to Anna's Bonnard.

254 Watkins, p. 75.

255 Ronald Paulson, 'Four Artists' Studios', *The Hopkins Review*, 3.1 (Winter 2010), pp. 122-132, p. 132.

4.1.3 Bonnard's work and method

Of all his contemporaries, Bonnard is most likened to Henri Matisse.²⁵⁶ Karen Wilkin, reviewing a 1998 exhibition of Bonnard's work, refers to a small book of letters exchanged between the two artists. They were friends for many years. Wilkin reminds us that, aside from being very near each other in age, Bonnard and Matisse were from similar backgrounds, had abandoned a more steadfast career in law for art, and both had studied at the Académie Julian.²⁵⁷

Aesthetically, they had similar concerns and characteristics too, notably a preoccupation with the representation of space, especially gardens and interiors, and they both used colour most intensely, to convey emotion as well as to give form. But where Matisse's work uses contour and lines to define boundaries of his intense colouration, Bonnard, as Wilkin observes:

[...] was the quintessential master of ambiguity, of forms and shapes that dissolve into adjacent patches of colour and then slowly reassemble themselves as we watch. He may have dreamt of seeking the absolute, but he seems to have been a painter of the barely glimpsed, of the fleeting.²⁵⁸

This bare glimpse was rooted in the reality of his daily life. Whereas Matisse set up his studios with props, plants and models to create a vision of an intended work before him, Bonnard painted his actual domestic world. Many of Bonnard's interiors convey a vivid banality. The perspective is disconcerting as the viewer's gaze is that of being in the room, the radiant colours and light make the scene almost tangible. After the immediacy of the sensuous experience of a Bonnard interior, it is almost puzzling that such technical expertise was used to depict such ordinary scenes.

The most intriguing feature of Bonnard's work and method is that he painted mainly from memory. He sketched from real life, but rarely – and never in his later years – painted from life. This is the reason for his reluctance to use models. It was certainly not due to poverty nor from some sense of propriety, but to the fact that it did not suit the way he worked. He used sketches, photographs and notes to aid his recall, or to compose fictional elements; these synoptic devices were as much about composition as subject. For Bonnard, having the real object or person in front of him as he worked interfered with his ability to

256 See, for example, Whitfield, p. 106.

257 Karen Wilkin, 'Radical Bonnard', *The Hudson Review*, 51.2 (Summer 1998), pp. 393-400, p. 394.

258 *Ibid.*, p. 395.

recreate the moment that inspired him.²⁵⁹ He did not use easels, but pinned canvases to a wall, often much larger than he required. In this way, he could work wherever he happened to be and modify as he painted. This idiosyncratic approach was necessary to produce the work he wanted. As Muriel Julius comments: “For him it was the intensity of the first moment of perception that he wished to preserve and, as he described it, that could only be retained in the calm of the studio.”²⁶⁰ This desire to capture the bare glimpse, the visual recreation of a memory of a perceived, personal, yet universal reality is articulated not just through Bonnard’s remarkable use of colour, but his audacious use of focus. Paintings are often broken up with screens, windows or doors, with figures and objects out of centre, or almost off the canvas completely and multiple focal points compete for the viewer’s eye, as with the following example:

Fig 4.4 *Salle à manger à la campagne*, 1913



259 Stanley Meisler, ‘Pierre Bonnard’, *Smithsonian*, 29.4 (Jul. 1998), pp. 33-40, p. 37.

260 Muriel Julius, ‘Pierre Bonnard at the Villa Le Bosquet’, *Contemporary Review*, 265.1543 (Aug. 1994), pp. 99-102, p. 101.

In this way the artist endeavoured to replicate the way the world appeared to him. John Berger could have been writing about Bonnard when he reminds us that our vision is active, not passive, constantly moving, that we “never look at just one thing; we are always looking at the relation between things and ourselves.”²⁶¹ Bonnard is said to have wanted to convey on visually the experience of suddenly entering a room, in other words, the perceptual experience and the act of perceiving.²⁶²

It is a common observation about Bonnard’s work. Naturally, he is compared and contrasted not only to Matisse, but to other of his contemporaries. Beyond Gauguin, the Impressionists, his Nabis colleagues and his experiments with *japonisme*, many commentators on Bonnard’s work see the influence of Chardin, Boucher, Fragonard and Watteau, and echoes of the Dutch masters of the interior, de Hooch, Van Eyck, and Vermeer. Outside of the visual arts, however, comparison is quickly made to literature. Morris Dickstein draws explicit attention to this, equating the artist’s preoccupation with representing a subjective point of view with that of the modern novel.²⁶³ Many commentators align Bonnard with Proust; they were contemporaries and we know that Bonnard read Proust’s work, *À la recherche du temps perdu*, at least twice.²⁶⁴ Both were essentially concerned with the way in which memory shapes subjective experience and the perception of the past, and made this the cornerstone of their art. Stanley Meisler contends that Bonnard and Proust tried, via different mediums, to capture memory.²⁶⁵ The alignment of Bonnard with Proust is particularly apposite when considering Banville’s engagement with Bonnard, and it is fitting that this author serves as a link between them. Proust, the quintessential high modernist, is one of the writers that Banville draws upon in his own work.²⁶⁶

This can be clearly detected in *The Sea*. As previously noted, Morden’s efforts to remember are just that, and lacking the subterfuge that is the wont of many other Banville characters. Morden is compelled to remember his life in order to relive it – his grief does not allow him to move forward and so he returns to the site of his childhood holidays, drawn back there by an involuntary memory. It came to him on waking from a dream, in which he is trudging alone along a dark road, in winter. He has a sense of heading for home, and also a foreboding that he will not get there; he wakes and ...

261 John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: Penguin, 1972), p. 9.

262 Meisler, p. 32.

263 Possibly, rather than establishing a comparison, Dickstein regards Bonnard’s painting as superior, the sentence is open to interpretation, but apt in either case: “No modern novel could be more preoccupied with point of view than Bonnard’s canvases”, p. 96.

264 Timothy Hyman, *Bonnard* (London: Thames & Hudson, World of Art Series, 1998), pp. 141-143.

265 Meisler, p. 32.

266 See Kenny, pp. 24-25.

Immediately then, and for the first time in I do not know how long, I thought of Ballyless, and the house there on Station Road, and the Graces, and Chloe Grace, I cannot think why, and it was as if I had stepped suddenly out of the dark into a splash of pale, salt-washed sunlight. (26)

This flash of remembrance, associated with a specific place from his childhood, a place of holiday, as with the town of Combray in *À la recherche du temps perdu*, is the first of many involuntary memories which both torment and elude him. The allusion may be slight, almost vestigial, but the trace of Proust in Banville's work became stronger beginning with *Eclipse*, the novel *The Sea* most resembles, and continues in *The Infinities*.

Ekphrases in *The Sea*, though all interrelated and intrinsic to the novel, can be divided into three distinct groups. The first group encompasses the ekphrases of Bonnard's work which are integrated into the narrative without direct reference to the work of art. These ekphrases relate for the most part to the Grace family and Morden's experience with them as a youngster. The second group comprise direct associations made between Anna and Morden with Marthe and Bonnard, and also in one instance, between Morden and Vincent van Gogh. The third group gathers together the ekphrases of Anna's photographs, the novel's climatic and dramatic ekphrastic encounter. As previously noted, the full significance of the photographs can only be realised with reference to the rest of the novel's ekphrastic system, and therefore the first two ekphrastic strategies will be examined prior to Morden's account of the photographs.

Bonnard's work is a sustaining element of the narrative. The artist's thematic concerns with point of view and memory are shared by Banville as an author, and by his narrator, Max Morden when, as an adult, he reconstructs the summer he spent in the company of the Grace family. In trying to document through art his own perception of his life as lived, Bonnard's paintings forms a narrative, but one which demands the intense perceptual input of the viewer also. Commenting on Bonnard's work, John Elderfield refers to this quality:

[...] if you don't spend time in front of his paintings, they will look simply beautiful [...]. Bonnard's paintings are meant to give visual pleasure. But the longer you look at them, the more complex that pleasure becomes... and it is not all happiness. There is an uneasy, disturbing, mysteriously exciting quality to his art [...].²⁶⁷

This comment is apt and also underscores Bonnard's compatibility with literature; his paintings are revealed to the viewer over time, similar to how a narrative unfolds, and in this case, to how Morden gradually reveals his own life and the tragedy that befell the Grace twins.

267 Anna Hammond and John Elderfield, 'Pierre Bonnard: An Interview with John Elderfield', *MoMA*, 1.3 (Jun. 1998), pp. 10-14, p. 13.

4.2.1 The Grace Family

The association with Bonnard is begun by Morden's dream, and the impression he has of moving into sunlight. Many of the implicit ekphrases in the narrative serve to create an appropriate atmosphere around characters or situations, filtered through Morden's recollection. In many instances the ekphrases contain one or two elements of a Bonnard painting, in some cases the scene as described by Morden is suggestive of a recurrent theme in Bonnard's work. By way of example, the first that young Max sees of the Graces is their motor car, which contains a much used road map of France. This immediately distinguishes them as different, and somewhat exotic in Morden's mind, but it is also the first connection with Bonnard. The map designates the imaginative territory from which the Grace family (and Morden's interaction with them) are partially derived, through Bonnard's paintings. The car itself is of significance too. Many commentators mention Bonnard's restless temperament and love of driving; he bought a car as early as 1906 to indulge his urge to travel freely.²⁶⁸

Bonnard and Marthe led a rather peripatetic lifestyle for many years, moving between Paris, and various rented houses in the north and south of France. Morden's fixation with the Grace's rented house, The Cedars, extends to the building itself and is reminiscent of Bonnard's repeated use of interior scenes, and of the houses which held personal significance for him. Different stages of his oeuvre are demarcated partially by the house depicted. Two were of particularly enduring significance; Le Bosquet in Le Cannet on the Côte d'Azur, where Bonnard finally settled in 1926, and remained until his death in 1946, and his father's ancestral home, Le Clos, was where he holidayed as a child and continued to visit well into adulthood.²⁶⁹ Le Clos was important for a particular motif in his work, the depiction of his own extended family. Nicolas Watkins remarks that no other artist made such extensive use of his own relatives as subject matter.²⁷⁰

His sister, Andrée Terrasse, and her family feature prominently in his work. Bonnard fused his recollections of visits to Le Clos in his childhood with later memories of the Terrasse children holidaying there, and produced a mythologized vision of childhood.²⁷¹ The paradox of family life, unity and division, is depicted in *The Terrasse Family* (also known as *The Bourgeois Afternoon*, Fig.5.5).

268 See, for example, Watkins

269 Antoine Terrasse, *Bonnard: The Colour of Daily Life*, (London: Thames & Hudson, 2000) pp. 132-133.

270 Ibid. p. 15.

271 See Watkins.

A partial ekphrasis of the painting can be found in *The Sea*, in the figure of Carlo Grace, who is described as dark-haired with a dark-pointed beard, and in at least two pivotal outdoor scenes, seated. The initial association of the Graces with sunlight and holidays continues with the first ekphrastic image of them as a group, when Morden remembers seeing them gathered at the beach (26-33). The picnic (112-127) which occurs later in the novel is similar in circumstance but with one key difference: in the first scene, Morden is watching from nearby, while in the second, he appears as part of their group, but his voyeurism is more pronounced. Elements of several Bonnard paintings are brought together in both episodes.



Fig. 4.5 *The Terrace Family* (1900)

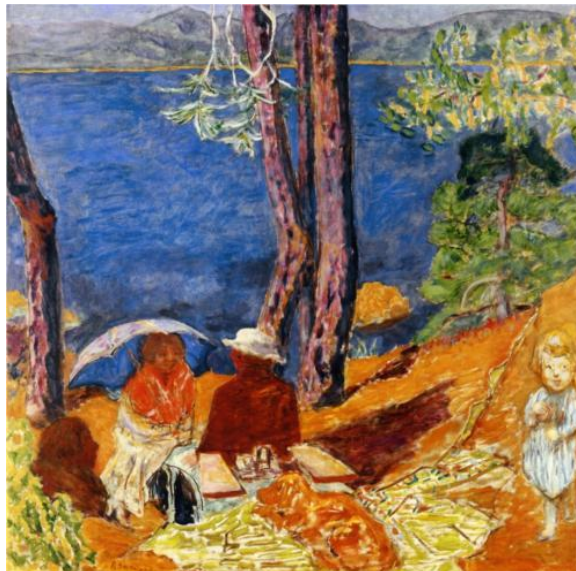
The Grace's striped canvas wind-barrier and Carlo Grace's candy-striped blazer (26-27) are reminiscent of the striped bathing tents in Bonnard's *La Plage (Arcachon)* (Fig. 5.6) from which the wider beach setting is also evoked: "Out on the bay a white sail shivered and flipped [...]. Children. Bathers. A wire-haired ginger dog" (31).

Figure 4.6 *La Plage (Arcachon)* (1922)



The mention of the dog is owed to *By the Sea, Under the Pines* (Fig. 4.7), which relates to the picnic gathering of the Graces and Morden “Mr Grace was waiting for us on a grassy bank [...] under an umbrella pine. [...] between the low grassy bank and the wall of ferns a white cloth was spread” (112-113)

Figure 4.7 *By the Sea, Under the Pines* (1921)



Games figure in both episodes. On the beach, Mrs Grace and her children play catch “When she runs her skirt billows behind her” (32), whilst at the picnic spot Morden, the twins, Mrs Grace and Rose all play chase among the grove of ferns: “I see the game as a series of vivid tableaux, glimpsed instants of

movement all rush and colour” (125), both suggestive of the grouping in the far right corner of *Dusk, or a Round of Croquet* (Fig. 4.8).

Figure 4.8. *Dusk, or a Round of Croquet* (1892)



Through these figures, the painting directly references Gauguin’s *The Vision After the Sermon*, (Fig. 4.9) through transposition of the figure of Jacob wrestling the angel.



Figure 4.9 *The Vision After the Sermon* (1888)

This pivotal early work of Bonnard’s marries the influence of Gauguin with Japanese art, his other main

source of inspiration. As Watkins notes, both the Gaugin and the Bonnard juxtapose two different levels of reality in foreground and background.²⁷² What would not have appealed to Bonnard was the overtly religious subject matter, and so he absorbed and reproduced it in a personal and secular form; his modern, debonair family replace the pious Breton women, and the Old Testament figures become a group of vernal (and probably impious) dancers.²⁷³

In Morden's recollection, the Graces are conspicuous in their treatment or occupation of physical space. They are separate from the surrounding village and holiday-makers as they occupy a privately rented house, as opposed to the communality of a hotel or the chalets where Morden's family stays, and prefer to travel by car. When on the beach, they commit a small act of social transgression in their choice of location:

This was a part of the beach that was tacitly reserved for residents of the Golf Hotel [...] and indignant stares were being directed as these heedlessly interloping villa people with their smart beach furniture and their bottles of wine, stares which the Graces if they noticed them ignored (26-27)

They picnic in an area out of the way of the main village, which is described in liminal terms: "We went that afternoon in Mr Grace's racy motor car far down the Burrow, all the way to where the paved road ended" (109). Morden recalls his unease with this choice: "I never liked, even feared a little, this wild reach of marsh and mud flats where everything seemed turned away from the land" (112).

From the beginning of *The Sea*, the language Morden uses in relation to the Grace family emphasises their other-worldliness. They are referred to from the outset as "the gods" (3), and for young Morden, "the gods had singled me out for their favour" (109). Each member of the family is in some way preternatural: Carlo Grace is "a laughing deity, the Poseidon of our summer" (123), Myles "an all too visible, all too tangible poltergeist" (84), Connie "an object of helpless veneration, a faceless idol, ancient and elemental" (118) and even Chloe, is first heard from on high rather than seen (8), and when seen is first a silhouette (29). The dancing figures in *Dusk, or a Round of Croquet* are similarly quasi-mystical – present and at the same time not present among the other figures depicted. This is reflected in the title of the painting; *Dusk* refers to the faintly cabalistic dancers, while the *Round of Croquet* belongs to the commonplace people in the foreground.

272 Watkins, p. 22.

273 Of the dancers, Hyman remarks that they are *jeunes filles en fleurs* – Proust's *Budding Grove*. Hyman, p. 16.

As in *The Book of Evidence*, external sounds signal a withdrawal from, and then return to, the wider world. On the beach: “I distinctly heard across from across the water the ruffle and snap of the canvas. Then the breeze dropped and for a moment all went still” (31). The absence of external sound allows the game to begin, and like the dance in the Bonnard painting, it occurs within and outside of quotidian time and place. When the game dissolves, external sound returns: “The little waves rise and splash, the ginger dog barks” (33). The game of chase during the picnic does not require quite the same suspension of time, as it already occurs in a liminal space, but it is still signalled to begin and end by sound, this time created by the twins. First, Myles signals to Chloe: “And now far off in the ferns there came a thin, shrill sound, an archaic pipe-note piercing through the lacquered air” (117), and Connie Grace then falls asleep. Waking, she instigates the game, during which she chases Rose: “two barefoot maenads framed for a moment by the bole and branches of the pine” (125). In the figures of the women, another Bonnard painting, with an overt theme of pagan hedonism, is evoked (Fig. 5.10). When the game has ended, Myles blows “another reed note between his thumbs and waited, still and rapt as a plaster faun [...] and a moment later from far off came Chloe’s answering call, a pure high whistle piercing like a needle through the waning Summer day.” (127)



Figure 4.10 *Le Plaisir*

Between sounds, Morden remembers space and time as altered. The subtle ekphrasis of two of Bonnard's more esoteric paintings along with the language used to describe the Graces transform two of the simplest games – catch and chase – into occasions of the uncanny, a traditional territory of ekphrasis, as discussed earlier.

The specific designation of Connie Grace as a figure of desire for young Morden was established with his first observation of her on the beach and was heightened by a visit to The Cedars. Again, the author deploys ekphrases of specific elements of Bonnard paintings. Adult Morden recalls that his young self befriended the Grace children specifically to be near their mother, and longed to gain access to the house. He does not recall on what pretext he did get inside, it was:

[...] as if, by a truly magical version of Myles' leap over the top bar of the gate, I had vaulted all obstacles to land up in the living room next to an angled, solid-seeming beam of brassy sunlight, with Mrs Grace in a loose-fitting, flowered dress, light blue with a darker pattern of blue blossoms [...]. (85)

She is vague and offers him, variously, some lemonade, or an apple. Morden tries to remember what she was doing: was she arranging flowers? He recalls the intensity of the sunlight which seemed to slanting down from high above them, and his memory “gropes in search of details” (87), such as “those vestigial flowers – sweet pea? all at once I seem to see sweet pea – and blonde Mrs Grace offering me an apple that was however nowhere is evidence” (89).



Figure 4.11 *Sweet Peas* (1912)



Figure 4.12 *A Woman in a Room* (1925)

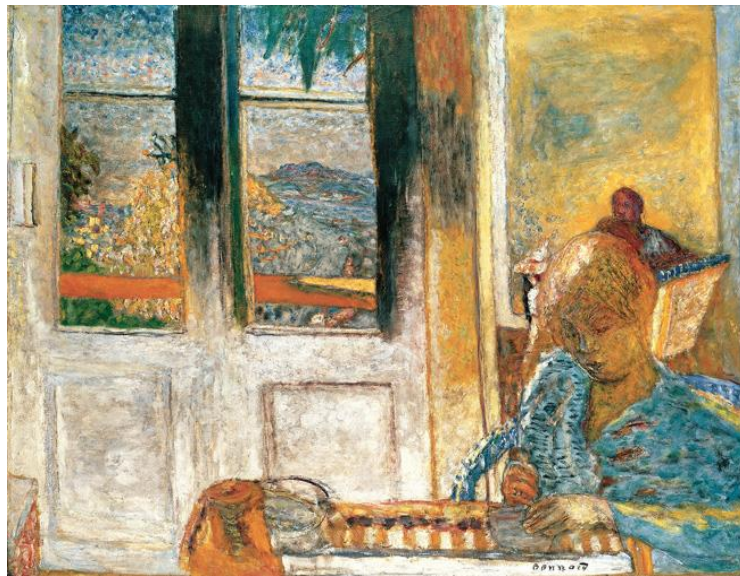


Figure 4.13 *The French Window (Morning at Le Cannet)* (1932)

A small black dog bursts into the room and Rose, Myles, Carlo Grace and eventually Chloe follow. Morden does not recall seeing the dog again after that day. Dogs and cats were recurring motifs in Bonnard's work, for example in *The Bourgeois Afternoon* and *Dusk, or a Round of Croquet* above, and here (Fig. 5.14):

Figure 4.14 *The Terrace Children with Black Dog* (1912)



Morden's obsession with Mrs Grace reaches its apotheosis, as he puts it, on the day of the picnic, and is delineated by an ekphrasis of two further Bonnard artworks. Reclining on her side on a grassy bank, she stretches back and lies supine on the ground, bringing one knee up. Morden, positioned opposite her is afforded a view up her skirt:

[...] along the inner side of her thigh all the way up to the hollow of her hap and the plump mound there sheathed in tensed white cotton. All at once everything began to slow. [...] a foreshortened, headless giantess at whose feet I crouched in what felt almost like fear, gave a sort of wriggle and raised her knee higher still, revealing the crescent-shaped crease at the full-fleshed back of her leg where her rump began. A drumbeat in my temples was making the daylight dim. (116-117)



Figure 4.15 *L'indolente* (1899)

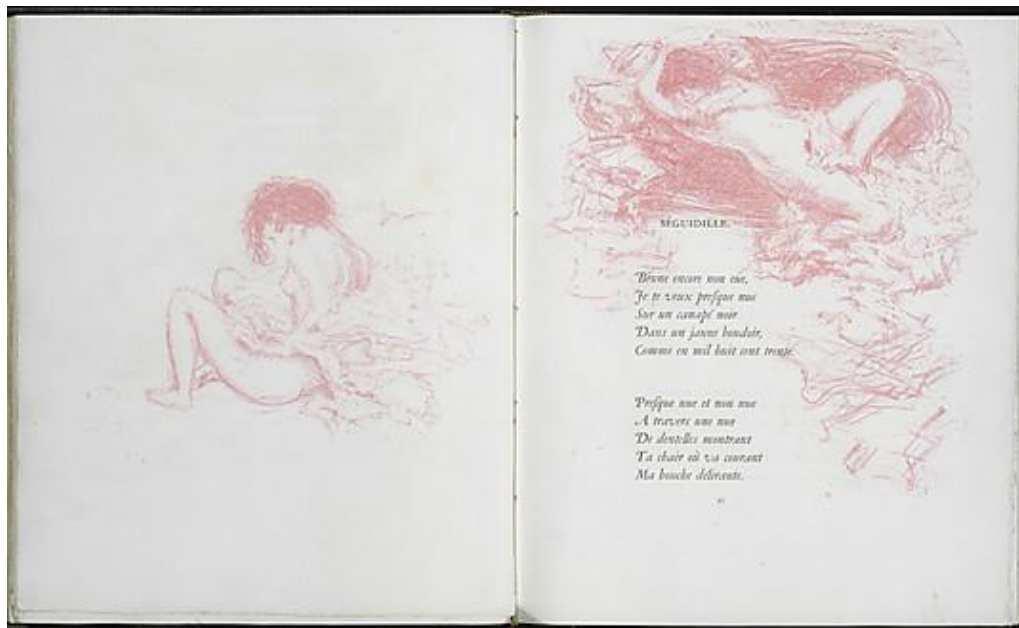


Figure 4.16 From *Parallèlement* (published 1900)

The overt eroticism of Bonnard's work on *Parallèlement* led to two full-scale nudes (there are two versions of *L'indolente*), again in an erotic vein. Evoked ekphrastically in *The Sea* through the figure of Connie Grace, the overt and adult sexuality overwhelms the young Morden. His glimpse of her is fleeting; almost as soon as the view up her skirt was afforded him, Connie (following the twins whistle) falls suddenly asleep and turns over. Morden is disconcerted, embarrassed and eventually, feels scornful of the sleeping woman. His attention then begins to turn, more appropriately, to Chloe.

Though Chloe is one of the three significant females who are compared directly to a named painting, ekphrasis is lightly used by the author in relation to her.²⁷⁴ Morden's romance with her is age-appropriate, and this is reflected in her name which, in the context of the multiple ekphrases of Bonnard's work in the novel, identifies her with the gentle pastoral style of Bonnard's illustrations of the Longus tale *Daphnis and Chloe*, rather than with overt sexuality. Bonnard's *Daphnis et Chloé* proved to be a turning point for the artist in many ways, not least in his treatment of the nude. As Sasha Newman points out, after the explicit sexuality of *Parallèlement*, Bonnard now tempered his depictions of the body in his drawings and Marthe was now displayed with sensuality, rather than overt sexuality. Newman remarks:

Marthe [...] was now metamorphosed into a shy, adolescent Chloe. Standing under the bough of a sheltering tree, legs apart, eyes downcast, she is a delightfully modest girl, whose nudity is

274 The other two being Anna Morden, and in one further ekphrasis yet to be examined, Connie Grace.

entirely natural, unutterably chaste.²⁷⁵

The drawing style led to a permanent change in Bonnard's treatment of nudes. Timothy Hyman notes that the almost animal sexuality of early depictions of Marthe mellow after this point.²⁷⁶ Sensuality, as opposed to sexuality, is the basis on which young Morden and Chloe approach each other, almost as innocent as the hero and heroine of Longus' tale. The tentative kiss they share in the cinema, with its framed backdrop from the cinema curtain, is an ekphrasis of a first kiss between Daphnis and Chloe as illustrated by Bonnard (Fig. 4.17):

Above us the screen retained a throbbing grey penumbral glow that lasted a long moment before fading [...] Chloe and I turned our heads simultaneously and, devout as holy drinkers, dipped our faces towards each other until our mouths met. (144)

The earlier vision of Chloe on the day of the picnic, the day Morden began to translate his rather febrile obsession with Connie Grace into genuine affection for her daughter, has no direct counterpart in Bonnard's illustrations.²⁷⁷ However, the bucolic setting and her position, framed by trees, aligns her with the Arcadian idyll of Longus' tale, as opposed to her mother, unwittingly the inappropriate subject of Morden's attention.



Figure 4.17 *Daphnis et Chloé* (1902)

275 Newman, p. 179.

276 Hyman, p. 61.

277 See pp. 123-124.

The edenic moment of Mrs Grace proffering an apple is continued with Chloe, whose breath smells of apples, the implication being that she should be the one with whom he shares an Eden. When it appears, the ekphrasis of *Table in Front of the Window* (Fig. 5.18) as a part description of Chloe strikes a deliberately discordant note, connecting her with the emotional complexity of Bonnard's interiors of the 1930s:

[...] like, it suddenly strikes me, remarkably like the forehead of that ghostly figure seen in profile hovering at the edge of Bonnard's *Table in Front of the Window*, the one with the fruit bowl and the book and the window that itself looks like a canvas seen from behind propped on an easel [...]. (137-138)



Figure 4.18 *La Table devant la fenêtre* (1934–35)

This is the first reference, since the enigmatic opening passage of the novel, to the death of the twins and the reason behind Morden's compulsion to return to Ballyless and The Cedars. Chloe is part of the adult Morden's grieving.

Carlo and Myles Grace are bit players in terms of ekphrasis within the novel. Rose, however, is not one of the Graces. She is markedly different from the other females, a difference reflected in the way visual art is used in relation to her. In Morden's memory of her, she is dark haired, pale and nearly always

associated with the colour red, appearing first wrapped in a red towel (27), and when dressed, in red and black (32). Bonnard, for whom colour was everything, rarely employed such stark divisions in palette. Two images are possible:



Figure 4.19 *Le Corsage Rouge* (1925)



Figure 4.20 *Woman on the Street* (1894)

Despite the, for Bonnard, unusual use of red and black as dominant colours, and the consistency with which Rose is associated with them, neither image quite fits with the novel. The woman in the red blouse is Marthe Bonnard, who is aligned with Chloe, Mrs Grace and Anna Morden. The *Woman on the Street* is a very early Bonnard, when he was still interested by Paris and the movement of people through its streets. Neither painting is relevant to Rose, not the intimacy of the Marthe painting, nor the distance of the stranger in *Woman on the Street*, with its urban setting. She is linked to Bonnard, but not of him, as Morden tells us. As an older woman, Rose, or Miss Vavasour, wears her hair

[...] gathered into a tight loop behind her head and transpierced by two crossed pins [...] suggestive, wholly inappropriately, of the geisha-house. The Japanese note is continued in the

kimono-like belted silk dressing-gown that she wears of a morning [...]. (38-39)

On the day Morden arrived at the Cedars, she was also in Japanese mode, “making me think, incongruously, of those erotic prints of the Japanese eighteenth century” (148). The association between Miss Vavasour and *Japonisme* refers to Bonnard’s early career interest in Japanese art, but not to any work *by* him. The distinction is important and also a hint that Miss Vavasour is also the Rose of his memory, it signals that she is connected with Morden’s early days, as the ekphrastic reference to Japanese prints recall Bonnard’s beginnings as a serious artist.

Another occasion of ekphrasis involving Rose and Connie Grace contains the barest trace of Bonnard. Morden tells us of how his younger self found them together one day, as Connie helped Rose wash her hair with water from rain-water barrel:

Rose stands bent forward from the waist with her hands on her knees [...] and is wearing one of those vaguely Tyrolean short-sleeved white linen blouses [...]. The neckline is deeply scalloped and inside it I have a clear glimpse of her pendant breasts, small and spiked [...]. Mrs Grace wears a blue satin dressing gown and delicate blue slippers [...] her hair is pinned back at the ears [...]. It is apparent she is not long out of bed and in the morning light her face has a raw, roughly sculpted look. She stands in the very pose of Vermeer’s maid with the milk jug [...]. (221-222)

The pose Rose stands in is reminiscent of some of the early Bonnard paintings of Marthe bathing outdoors (such as Fig. 5.3, above), or washing with a small basin. Though the body position as described is not directly found in Bonnard, it is suggestive of his work, and the typical of the scenes he depicted, the briefly glimpsed, intimate moments he specialised in. The act itself – one woman aiding another in grooming her hair – was a recurrent theme in Japanese *Ukiyo-e* prints, reinforcing the association of Rose with that which influenced Bonnard, as opposed to that which he created.

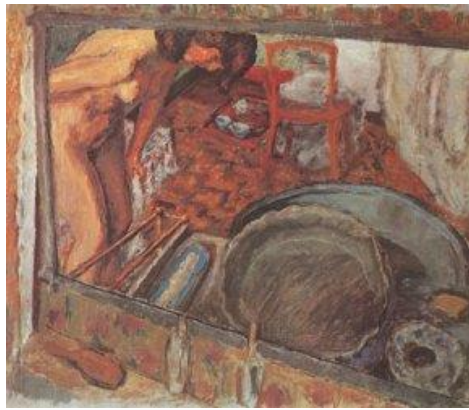


Figure 4.21 *Effet de Glace*, 1909



Figure 4.22 Tying Hair Utamaro, (between 1798 and 1801)



Figure 4.23 Washing Hair, Utamaro, (between 1798 and 1801)

Connie Grace's *peignoir* adds to the impression of *Japonisme*. That her body position is compared explicitly to that of Vermeer's famous Milkmaid painting may seem incongruous but is in fact vital to the scene. Banville is no doubt aware of scholarship relating to that painting which identifies it as a scene of suppressed or contained desire. The milkmaid, while seeming to go about this mundane task, is in fact preoccupied with thoughts of love. As Walter Liedtke commented:

[...] in a way, Vermeer in this work has crossed a border between symbolism and what you might call psychology, that there is this feeling of attraction and restraint [...] she is doing a totally mundane task in the kitchen, but she is thinking about her emotional life.²⁷⁸

Liedtke identifies the restraint as being on behalf of the viewer, a kind of self-conscious voyeurism, and on behalf of the maid, the suggestion is that she is thinking of love when she should not be. The scene reveals what is never made absolutely clear in any other way in the text, that Rose's love for Connie Grace was not entirely unrequited. Adult Morden, in recalling the scene, dimly senses what his young self did not understand.

That Rose was never a romantic interest for Morden, young or old, also sets her apart from Chloe, Connie and Anna; only those three are linked with Bonnard directly. Morden tells the reader as much:

Of the three central figures in that summer's salt-bleached triptych it is she, oddly, who is most sharply delineated on the wall of my memory. I think the reason for this is that the first two figures in the scene, I mean Chloe and her mother, are all my own work while Rose is by another, unknown hand. [...] Rose, is a completed portrait, Rose is done. (224)

This statement reveals much about Morden's pursuit of the past, and much about how he uses art as a mnemonic aid. It also positions him with Bonnard, which, like so much of Morden's life, is both plausible and erroneous at the same time.

278 Walter Liedtke, 'Vermeer's Masterpiece "The Milkmaid": Discreet Object of Desire', Curatorial Talk, 26 September 2009, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York: <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JfMIEx515V0>>.

As Morden is the narrator, and it is his life that the reader is invited into, it would seem to follow that he is aligned with Bonnard, the artist, while the other characters denote the subjects of Bonnard's painting. Replicating subjective, lived experience was paramount in Bonnard's art. Like Proust, his literary equivalent, the search for lost time was his aim, in a different medium. Timothy Hyman contends that one of Bonnard's achievements as a painter (and one not always understood) is to have taken the lessons of impressionism and turned it on its head. He absorbed "the blur of impressionism, to suggest the indistinctness of memory" but used the methods of impressionism to emphasise subjectivity: "If the impressionists had aspired to remove the ego from perception, Bonnard put it back again, registering the *place of the spectator – Bonnard's own place* – with a subjective emphasis new to painting."²⁷⁹

In *The Sea*, Morden occupies the place of the spectator, but while Bonnard's vision and narrative was most definitively his own, but the same does not wholly apply to Morden. His statement about Bonnard is curious, as he confesses: "[Bonnard is] A very great painter in my estimation, about whom, as I long ago came to realise, I have nothing of any originality to say." (40) He goes on to admit that he lacks the drive of what he terms the true workers, but rather than commitment to his project, Morden's problem lies in the paradoxical statement he has made. If he has nothing original to say about Bonnard, then the artist is not a great painter in *Morden's* estimation, but in the estimation of others. Morden is informed by the opinion and perceptions of others, but offers nothing himself. He is knowledgeable about the painter, but not insightful. In life, also, lack of insight has let him down. Once more, we have a problem of interpretation, as with Freddie and Maskell; Morden's errors are at least of the minor kind in comparison. His perceptual and interpretive mistake as regards Rose and the Graces had repercussions beyond his control.

Like Marthe Bonnard, Morden changed his name, and the reader never finds out the first name of young Morden, in contrast, for instance, with Rose, or Miss Vavasour. She has both her names, and is delicate enough to refer to Morden as Max, despite having known him as something else. It seems likely that the absence of the child-Morden's first name represents his essential malleability and lack of identity at that age. His chosen initials being identify him with Marthe also, whose own adopted name was Marthe de Méligny. He was of humble background and enjoyed a prosperous life through his marriage to Anna, as with the Bonnard marriage. He remarks that Marthe Bonnard was "a great and dedicated hypochondriac" (152) without irony, despite his own fixation with illness and his health. He lived, with Anna, in a house

279 Hyman, p. 96, my italics.

she bought, which is situated, like Bonnard's at Le Cannet, between the mountains and the sea. In the face of his lack of ambition, his desire for comfort and his essential passivity, he resembles Marthe Bonnard rather than her husband. Anna Morden was the provider of material wealth and comfort for Morden, she was the one who proposed to him, the one who allowed him to "fulfil the fantasy of myself" (105). The world that Morden joins when he first meets Anna has a painted quality, in which he plunges "as if into another medium, a fantastical one [...] where everything shimmered and nothing was real, or was real but looked fake, like that platter of perfect fruit in Charlie's flat." (105)

Meeting Anna was transformative for Morden. She is also a photographer, and so creates and produces images; Morden even modelled for her on a few occasions. When Morden first sees Anna, she is not in, not framed by, or not seen through a window, but "standing between me and the window" (100). In Doctor Todd's rooms, she is reflected in glass, as though posed for a portrait, "sitting very straight on the metal chair in three-quarters profile, being the model patient, with one knee crossed on the other and her joined hands resting on her thigh" (15). Crucially, the windows in this room are actually walls, floor to ceiling plate glass, and therefore, without frames. Anna is free of the frame that so many other Banville heroines have been bound by, and compared to her husband, far more the active, in the sense of possessing agency, of the pair.²⁸⁰ Of the two, she is closer to emulating Bonnard, yet this is complicated by the ekphrases generated by Banville around each character.

Bonnard executed a series of self-portraits, the most powerful of which are those from late in his career, as an older man. Morden's account of his reflection in the bathroom mirror (127-132) approximates Bonnard's late self-portraits, and directly invokes those images. However, Morden also refers to two self-portraits by Vincent van Gogh. He took a look at himself, stooping slightly to see into the mirror:

When I consider my face in the glass like this, I think, naturally, of those last studies Bonnard made of himself in the bathroom mirror at Le Bosquet, towards the end of the war, after his wife had died [...] but in fact what my reflection most reminds me of, I have just realised it, 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, with a Provence-blue necktie with all ears intact, looking like he has just emerged some form of punitive dousing, [...] he peers out from the frame sideways, warily, with wrathful foreboding, fearing the worst, as so he should. (130-131)

280 On that day, as related it was Morden who was framed. After the consultation, he and Anna return home and go into their kitchen. He gives her a glass of brandy 'Light from the window behind me shone', Muller, p. 21.



Figure 4.24 *Self-Portrait with Bandaged Ear* (1889)



Figure 4.25 *Self-Portrait* (1887)

The ekphrases are presented together to the reader but the images occur to Morden at different times. The account he gives is of looking in the bathroom mirror that morning, and is retrospective. Morden implies that he habitually thinks of the Bonnard paintings when contemplating himself in the mirror, but in this instance, when later recalling his gaze into the mirror, he thinks also of van Gogh. The two brief

ekphrases serve to reveal the intense distress that underlies Morden's narrative. Van Gogh's life – turbulent, troubled, often impoverished, his artistic achievements ignored, ending in suicide – stood in sharp contrast to the comfortable and creatively fulfilling life Bonnard enjoyed. The paintings both concern the harm that van Gogh would do to himself. The first mentioned refers to the notorious incident of the artist cutting off his own ear. The second portrait was painted over a year before that incident, but reminds Morden of the danger that van Gogh posed to himself. Morden's interpretation of the painting, or rather, of his memory of the painting, associates the flecks of colour around the artist as water, and connects it to drowning and punishment.

While the full implications of this only become clear at the end of novel, it presages the harm that Morden will try to do to himself. A Bonnard painting is also rendered ekphrastically, through Morden's description of standing in the bathroom, and the death motif is amplified rather than dissipated. The portrait as a form is synonymous with mortality, and the late Bonnard portraits exemplify this relation.



Figure 4.27 *Autoportrait dans la glace* (1939)



Figure 4.26 *Portrait du peintre par lui-même* (1945)

These paintings and the following one were created during the years of World War II. It seems clear that the painting referred to by Morden in *The Sea* is *Portrait de l'artiste dans la glace* created just months after Marthe's death in 1943:

The pink-tinged pallor of my cheeks, which are, I am afraid, yes, sunken, just like poor Vincent's, was made the more stark and sickly by the radiance reflected off the white walls and the enamel of the sink. This radiance was not the glow of a northern autumn but seemed more like the hard, unyielding, dry glare of the far south [...]. Standing there in that white box of light, I was transported for a moment to some far shore, real or imagined, I do not know which [...]. (131-132)

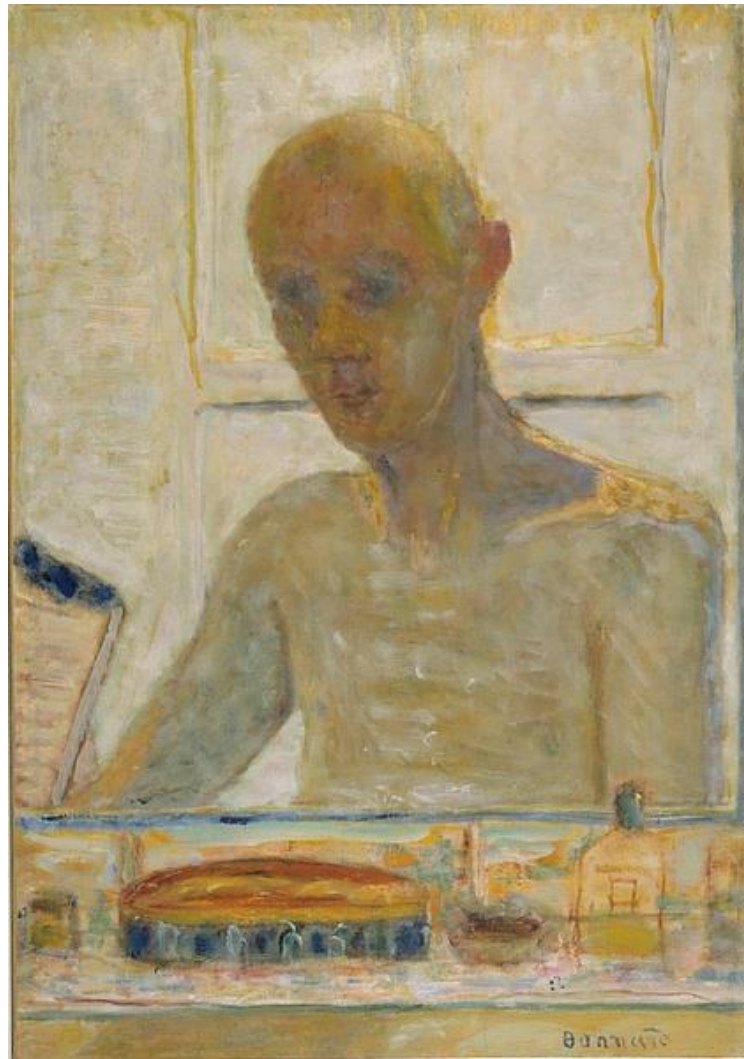


Figure 4.28 *Portrait de l'artiste dans la glace* (1943)

The poignancy of this painting is deepened by the knowledge that it was completed in the year after Marthe's death. Bonnard's grand-nephew, Antoine Terrasse, believes the last self-portraits to be "an internal examination of self, made at his own expense and taking more from him than it gives".²⁸¹ It seems that Morden's reflection is also taking more from him than he has left. One of the most salient features of Bonnard's work, his use of colour to evoke radiance and light, is evoked ekphrastically by Banville in thematic sympathy with the artist. Morden, in his loneliness and grief, is soothed by projecting himself onto a stygian shore, via the southern sunlight of a Bonnard painting. In his re-telling, the later intrusion of the Van Gogh image is all the more urgent and alarming, as Morden moves from out of the past tense:

281 Terrasse, p.108.

“I see the black ship in the distance, looming imperceptibly nearer at every instant. I am there. I hear your siren’s song. I am there, almost there.” (132)

This ekphrasis marks the end of the first section of the novel, but the beginning of a series of revelatory passages that are sustained by ekphrases, which become more complex as the narrative progresses. The ekphrastic comparison of Chloe to the figure from *La Table devant la fenêtre* comes next, which leads to an ekphrasis of one of the late *baigneur* series, and a congruent memory of Anna.

Bonnard’s bathroom mirror self-portraits form a powerful counterpoint to the *baigneur* paintings of Marthe, particularly the late career pictures, in which she appears untouched by age, in contrast to the artist’s documentation of his own physical decline. The painting used in *The Sea* is *Nu dans le bain au petit chien*, a painting it took Bonnard five years to complete, working on it sporadically from 1941, the year before Marthe’s death, until finishing in 1946. In the novel, Morden is in art-historian mode, providing a small vignette of Marthe and Bonnard. Of the painting he says:

[...] she lies there, pink and mauve and gold, a goddess of the floating world, attenuated, ageless, as much dead as alive [...]. The narrow room that is her refuge vibrates around her, throbbing in its colours. Her feet, [...] seem to have pushed the bath out of shape [...], the floor is pulled out of alignment too, and seems on the point of pouring away into the corner, not like a floor at all but a moving pool of dappled water. All moves here, moves in stillness, in aqueous silence. One hears a drip, a ripple, a fluttering sigh. A rust-red patch in the water [...] might be rust, or old blood, even. (152-153)



Figure 4.29 *Nu dans le bain au petit chien*, Pierre Bonnard (1941 – 1946)

Morden sees the figure of Marthe as being suspended in time, arresting transience, neither dead nor alive. Her surroundings are malleable, the bath and floor displacing to accommodate her, she is both deified and diminished at the same time. She is supported by the intensity of colour, equivalent to the intense white light of the bathroom self-portrait in which Morden imagined himself in and then transported from. The rooms in both paintings are figurations of death, or the process of dying: “Her right hand rests on her thigh, stilled in the act of supination and I think of Anna’s hands on the table that first day when we came back from seeing Mr Todd” (153).

The power of the *baigneur* paintings is undeniable. At the most recent Bonnard exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 2009, the paintings were absent. Dita Amory, curator, explained:

I left out the bathers; those ravishing paintings of Bonnard’s wife Marthe floating in the tub, or towelling at her toilette, since they tend to overwhelm the experience of looking at the late pictures. Marthe takes centre stage in the bathtub in resonant ways, formally, emotionally and otherwise. It is the memory of the bathers that we often carry around when we think retrospectively of an exhibition of Pierre Bonnard.²⁸²

282 Dita Amory, *Pierre Bonnard: The Late Interiors*, Curatorial Talk, 2009.
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OLCZBfIDMFU> (4.06 to 4.30 minutes)

Paintings and drawings of Marthe washing, bathing, or drying her body extend back to almost the beginning of their relationship. Most, but not all of the late paintings, show her fully in the bath, beginning from around 1925 onwards. On a practical level, this had much to do with the purchase of the house at Le Cannet (and the modern bathroom installed) but also relate to Marthe's ill-health. Critical commentary on the *baigneur* paintings, particularly those where Marthe is immersed in the bathtub, frequently allude to death. Jed Perl, for example, commented that Bonnard "invented what amounts to an entirely new variation on the theme of the naked goddess" and notes the bathtub often suggests a sarcophagus.²⁸³

The feminist critic, Linda Nochlin acknowledges Bonnard as the most significant 20th-century painting to engage with the motif; she connects Bonnard's image to David's *Marat*, and to depictions of Ophelia. Of *Nu dans le bain au petit chien*, she notes the distortion of the end of the bathtub, and "the bather herself melting into anatomical dissolution".²⁸⁴ Nicolas Watkins makes similar remarks with reference to the earlier *Le Bain* (Fig. 4.30): "Marthe is stretched out like a corpse in the stillness of a watery grave, a modern Ophelia of the bathroom". He designates it a cold painting, "that speaks of uncomfortable events, troubled dreams and blighted hopes".²⁸⁵



Figure 4.30 *Le Bain* (1925)

283 Perl, 2009, p. 26.

284 Linda Nochlin, *Bathers, Bodies, Beauty: The Visceral Eye* (Harvard University Press: Massachusetts, 2006), p. 142.

285 Watkins, p. 186.

Banville draws upon the resonance of these paintings in *The Sea*. The *baigneur* images denote nostalgia, loss, mortality, love and grief, and also attest to life while simultaneously illustrating, or auguring, death. Dita Amory's comment, above, recognises that all-powerful images carry with them an intrusive quality, lingering in the memory and forming conscious or sub-conscious associations. Morden, as a scholar of Bonnard's work is aware of the critical view that sees Marthe in the bath as a simulacrum of death. It was even the subject of a joke between himself and Anna: "Brides-in-the-Bath, Anna used to call him, with a cackle" (40).

The reference is to a notorious murder trial in England in the early part of the 20th century. George Joseph Smith was found guilty of murdering three women by drowning. He had polygamously married each of them. Anna's joke may refer directly to *Le Bain* (Fig. 4.26, above) which was painted in 1925, the year Bonnard and Marthe finally married. In the painting, Marthe's feet are truncated. The murder investigation found that Smith's method of drowning was a particular one; when the victim took a bath of her own accord, he gripped them by the feet, pulling the legs up suddenly. The upper body would be submerged, and the unfortunate victim drowned very quickly, the respiratory tracts inundated with water.

The inference of the joke is that Bonnard was symbolically drowning Marthe by painting her. On this occasion, the Banvillean comedy of cruelty mutates into a cruel pathos:

She too, my Anna, when she fell ill, took to taking extended baths in the afternoon. They soothed her, she said. Throughout the autumn and winter of that twelvemonth of her slow dying we shut ourselves away in our house by the sea, just like Bonnard and his Marthe at Le Bosquet. (153)

A deep, dreamy silence accumulated around us, soft and dense, like silt. She was so quiet, there in the bathroom on the first-floor return, that I became alarmed sometimes. I imagined her slipping down without a sound in the enormous old claw-footed bath, until her face was under the surface and taking a long, last, watery breath. I would creep down the stairs, and stand on the return, not making a sound, seeming suspended there, as if I were the one under water, listening desperately through the panels of the door for sounds of life. (154)

This passage amounts to a reproduction of the ekphrasis of the painting, with Anna substituted for Marthe. The silence Morden imagines emanating from the picture is now Anna's but also his, as he waits for the equivalent from Anna of Marthe's fluttering sigh. Ambivalence prevails, for Morden also longs for the relief that Anna's death will bring: "then I would hear a soft heave of water as she stirred, the soft

splash as she lifted a hand for the soap or a towel” (154).

Anna’s bathroom is located on the first floor return, or in other words, between the ground and first floors. The negotiation of space, which is liminal and somewhat purgatorial, or alternately transgressive, is a dominant motif in the novel. As previously noted, the places where young Morden first sees, and then joins with, the Graces, serve to remove them from the context of other holiday-makers in Ballyless. That Morden and Anna’s house, as mentioned, correlates to Le Bosquet by its position, was previously hinted at and is now made explicit in the passage above. The Cedars was an emotionally charged space for young Morden, and the house relates in many ways to the vacillations of memory. As an adult he finds it does not conform to the model he had in his head.²⁸⁶ He notes “the jumbled look of the place, with small rooms giving on to bigger ones, and windows facing blank walls, and low ceilings throughout” (5). Neither the house nor its occupants can give him any answers as Miss Vavasour tells him: “‘I can’t help you’ she says, smiling ‘You must know that’” (248). The house literally does not fit the adult Morden, who stoops to see in the mirror in the bathroom, in which, recalling Bonnard’s 1943 self-portrait, he projects himself towards death, where he must cross the sea instead of the river Styx.

Another affecting quality of the *baigneur* paintings is the vulnerability of the body depicted, and the intimacy of the moment. A closed door stood between Morden and Anna when she was alive. In the case of the Bonnard painting, the moment of Marthe bathing had long since passed by the time the picture was created; not only had Marthe died, but she was much older than the painted body appears. Timothy Hyman sees the essential subject of the bathroom paintings as being “the exchange between self and other: sometimes a merging, the breaking of a barrier between them, sometimes the sense of a rift, of their separation”.²⁸⁷ Water is a barrier to the longed-for Other; both Marthe and Anna’s ablutions shut them away, the rooms like water tanks in which each is submerged.

Lingering behind this all, for Morden, is Chloe Grace. In the narrative, the brief ekphrastic comparison of Chloe to the ethereal figure at the edge of *La Table devant la fenêtre* occurs between Morden’s gaze into the mirror and the ekphrasis of *Nu dans le bain au petit chien*. The timing is important, and initially confounding for the reader who does not yet have access to the fact of Chloe’s death. There is something almost primitive about the outline image in the painting (Fig. 4.18), which corresponds to the formative nature of Morden’s relationship with Chloe. She was his first love, but more than that, as it was through his feelings for her that he became fully aware of the distinction between self and other:

286 See p. 156, occurring just after the passage describing Anna bathing.

287 Hyman, p. 170.

[...] it was in Chloe that the world was first manifest for me as an objective entity. [...] no one had yet been real in the way that Chloe was. And if she was real, so, suddenly, was I. She was I believe the true origin in me of self-consciousness. [...] In severing me from the world and making me realise myself in being thus severed, she expelled me from that sense of the immanence of all things, the all things that had included me, in which up to then I had dwelt, in more or less blissful ignorance. (168)

Morden's summer with Chloe was edenic in the sense of both paradise, and paradise lost – Chloe and Connie's surname, Grace, comes with all the connotations of the expulsion from Eden. She was his first experience of romantic love, through which he began to understand alterity; but that new understanding was not sufficient for him to accept her death, a fact with which he still struggles.²⁸⁸ Of the figure in *La Table devant la fenêtre*, Dita Amory commented: "Its model barely registers at the right margin, one is at pains to find her profile, and yet her presence adds a powerful psychological tension."²⁸⁹ Morden has been carrying the impossible and yet actual fact of Chloe's death within him for many years, unable to quite understand "How could she be with me one moment and then the next not? How could she be elsewhere, absolutely?" (140). Now it is Anna's death he struggles to apprehend, an event Anna herself questioned also: "'Strange' Anna said. 'To be here, like that, and then not'. [...] 'to have been here' she said" (211-212). Bonnard's canvases were created with that very question in mind. Morden hoped that retreating to The Cedars would alleviate his grief, and somehow reconcile himself to the fact of Anna's (and Chloe's) death. A kind of catharsis is achieved, but through a vestige of Anna, in the form of some photographs she took before she died.

288 Morden mentions that he still sees her, or someone who might be her, in the street. (137)

289 Amory, *The Late Interiors*, (10.36 to 10.45 minutes)

4.2.3 Anna's photographs: the dramatic ekphrastic encounter in *The Sea*

As with the Freddie and Maskell, Morden's dramatic ekphrastic encounter is relayed to the reader in retrospect, though the distance between the encounter and the telling of it must be shorter in this case. Morden begins by expressing his antipathy to being photographed, especially to being photographed by Anna. He disliked the outcome the pictures produced by her camera and "her special gift, the disenchanted, disenchanting eye" (174). On the occasions he posed for her, early in their relationship, he found the results too raw, too revealing: "In those half-dozen black-and-white head-and-shoulders shots that she took of me – and took it the word – I seemed to myself more starkly on show than I would have been in a full-length study and wearing not a stitch. (173)

That he ever posed for Anna is, as mentioned, another link between Morden and Marthe, but his attitude to being photographed calls forth his antecedents in Banville's fiction. In the photographs of him, Morden sees an imposter, a criminal:

My expression was uniformly winsome and ingratiating, the expression of a miscreant who fears he is about to be accused of a crime he knows he has committed and yet cannot quite recall [...]. She trained her camera on a fresh-faced hopeful but the pictures she produced were the mugshots of a raddled old confidence trickster. Exposed, yes, that is the word, too. (174)

Victor Maskell would agree with Morden on the subject of photography, of being the subject, as it were: "cannot even remember them being taken – apt verb, that, applied to photography: the savages are right, it is a part of one's soul that is being taken away". (6). Maskell, ambivalent about his guilt, is also ambivalent about his crimes being discovered. Freddie, certain of his guilt, longs to be found out. Morden, who has done nothing wrong, sees in photographs of himself the face of a villain, a criminal whose crime is not evident, but whose guilt is certain, and fears exposure. The sense of guilt he has is not that of the transgressor, but of the survivor.

Anna, whilst in hospital, takes photographs of her fellow patients. Having not used her camera in many years, she asks their daughter, Claire, to bring it to her. They attempt to keep this secret from Morden who jealously wonders why he was left out. It is clear that he does not care for Anna's creative work at all – not the pictures that result, nor the making of them. Her return to creative activity provokes anxiety and a rather skittish fear in Morden; the stark photographs, the description of her as blind in the taking of them, the sense of foreboding he feels when he finds she has returned to her "old obsession" (174).

He feigns disregard:

Did I seem to disapprove of her attempts to be an artist, if taking snapshots can be considered artistry? In fact, I paid scant attention to her photographs, and she had no reason to think I would have kept the camera away from her. It is all very puzzling. (176)

Morden shares both Maskell's mistrust, superstition even, of photographs, and Freddie's inability to read them. As he recalls what he saw the day he brought Anna's developed pictures back to her, he is for the first time not comparing a person or action to a picture, or talking about a painting, he is directly recounting pictures that he saw *at the time he saw them*. He is describing physical art-works as he experienced them. Anna used colour film, not black and white. Of the photographs themselves, Morden tells us:

They might have been taken in a field hospital in wartime, or in a casualty ward in a defeated and devastated city. There was an old man with one leg gone below the knee, a thick line of sutures like the prototype of a zip fastener traversing the shiny stump. An obese, middle-aged woman was missing a breast, the flesh [...] all puckered and swollen like a giant, empty eye socket. A big-bosomed, smiling mother in a lacy nightdress displayed a hydrocephalic baby with a bewildered look in its mother's bulging eye. The arthritic fingers of an old woman taken in close up were knotted and knobbed like clusters of root ginger. A boy with a canker embossed on his cheek, intricate as a mandala, grinned into the camera [...]. There was a shot angled down into a metal bin with gobs and strings of unidentifiable dark wet meat thrown into in – was that refuse from the kitchen, or the operating theatre? (181)

For all that he uses such visceral language, Morden seems appalled, even at a remove, and is confounded by these people who bear their suffering and display their afflictions so calmly, who still smile for the camera. He recalls one photograph in detail, an old woman with legs lifted and knees drawn back, allowing a view of a prolapsed womb. Morden remembers it as something almost other-worldly, and makes an improbable connection:

The arrangement was as striking and as carefully composed as a frontispiece from one of Blake's prophetic books [...] an inverted triangle bounded on two sides by the woman's cocked legs and along the top of the hem of her white gown [...]. Above this triangle the woman's Medusa-head seemed by a subtle trick of perspective to have been severed and lifted forward and set down squarely in the same plane as her knees. (182)

Not quite a prophetic book of Blake's, but one of his illustrations for Milton's *Paradise Lost* is echoed here. The outline of the woman's raised legs, and strangely positioned head, with her wild hair suggest *The House of Death*, the name Blake gave to his illustration of *The Lazar House*, a scene from Book 11 of *Paradise Lost*. The angel shows Adam a vision of the future of mankind, the Lazar house referring to a site of disease and death, another consequence of the fall from grace.²⁹⁰

Figure 4.31 *The House of Death* (1795)



The crooked legs also recall young Morden's stolen glance on the day of the picnic, many years before, though he does not equate the two images. Morden came back to The Cedars as he felt it to be "the only possible place, the only refuge for me" (157). His crush on Connie was the stuff of childhood, an essentially juvenile fantasy. It led, however, to his nascent romance with her daughter; it was his relationship with another child that began to turn him towards adulthood. The shock of her death has never left him, but what he cannot recognise, in his grief, for Anna and also still for Chloe, is the symbiosis of life and death. Morden does not want to return to life with Anna, or with Chloe, but to life before he knew either of them. It is Ballyless he seeks, rather than The Cedars, once a place of almost primordial happiness. In longing to return to that state of the immanence of all things, he is saying, with

290 Adam, observing the sick, asks: "O miserable mankind, to what fall / Degraded, to what wretched state reserved! / Better end here unborn. Why is life given / To be thus wrested from us?"
<http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/26/pg26.html>.

Milton's Adam, "Better end here unborn".²⁹¹ Had he stayed in his childhood state, his pre-Chloe state, the blissful ignorance in which he dwelt would never have given way to the subjective experiences of a life as lived, the happiness as well as the tragedy, the very memories he is pursuing.

The woman in the photograph has no such qualms, however. She is calm, she smiles "in a humorously deprecating fashion and yes, a certain definite pride" (182). Morden is not only baffled by Anna's photographs, but also somewhat jealous of her and the camaraderie she has with her photographic subjects.

There is now a long history of photographic documentation of illness, most conspicuously on occasions of an urgent or chronic public health concern that is also culturally and socio-politically charged; documentation of AIDS patients, breast cancer sufferers and amputees are all examples. The visibility or invisibility of the disease and the diseased body, of the sufferer and the survivor are the most salient and recurrent themes, along with, inevitably, death. Mortality and photography have been bound together since the inception of the art form, a quality which is considerably amplified when the images are of bodily affliction and decay. The authenticity of the photograph and its indexical relationship to the subject-matter are dependent entirely on the photographer. There are a few interesting points about the photographs Anna takes. Firstly, the photographs have no accompanying text, beyond the obvious ekphrastic rendering. In other words, Anna presents no titles or captions for them. Secondly, she herself is not photographed; she makes no auto-portrait, and lastly, uses colour film instead of black and white. Colour is more explicit and more faithful to real life, Anna is presenting images that occur to her as she sees them, without imposing her own aesthetics upon her subjects. The use of colour makes the body and the suffering body explicit. As Laura Izarra observed, colour photography denotes the real world, whereas black and white images metaphorically represent inner life.²⁹²

Stella Bolaki, writing about different photographic approaches to breast cancer, notes how images are not necessarily silent, and are part of the desire to speak, to have a voice.²⁹³ However, the work she focuses on is autobiographical; the authenticity of the lived experience is at the core of the work of each artist she discusses, and the ways they choose to speak their own experience, visually and otherwise, are part of a wider debate about illness, body image and femininity. In *The Sea*, by not titling or captioning the images, Anna does not impose any narrative of her own on her fellow patients. They are a range of ages, are both

291 Ibid.

292 Laura Izarra, *Disrupting Identities*, p. 195.

293 Stella Bolaki, 'Re-covering the scarred body: textual and photographic narratives of breast cancer', *Mosaic*, 44.2 (June 2011), pp. 1-17.

male and female and have a range of maladies. By displaying their bodies they testify to both their difference and their commonality. By using colour film, Anna does not aestheticise the damaged flesh, and allows her subjects to be just as they are. Preservation too, in the face of death, is at the heart of what Anna does, an embalming of time, to recall André Bazin.²⁹⁴ Through the photographs, Anna affirms her own subjective experience and thus preserves a trace of herself, as well as those who pose for her, and they all, in some way, transcend the limits of their bodies.²⁹⁵

For all his talk of art then, Morden is unequipped to deal with Anna's creative output. His dismissal of her work as 'snapshots' and his intense dislike of being photographed (in general, as well as by Anna in particular) suggest he has a fundamental difficulty with what photography does. Anna asks him what he thinks and he does not know how to respond:

She did not care what I thought. By now she has gone beyond me and my opinions. 'Will you show them to Claire?' I asked. Why was that the first thing that came into my head? She pretended not to have heard, or perhaps had not been listening. A bell was buzzing somewhere in the building, like a small insistent pain made audible. 'They are my dossier', she said. 'My indictment.' 'Your indictment?' I said, feeling an obscure panic. 'Of what?' (183)

Perhaps Anna is beyond Morden and his opinions, but telling himself this is a convenient way for Morden to excuse his confusion. To borrow and paraphrase from W.J.T Mitchell, Morden is asking what these pictures want from him, and has no idea what the answer could be or might mean. Anna is asking nothing of him, but wants to leave something authentic behind, something that shows her life as lived. The photograph arrests time, and in doing so, it preserves a moment that is then both continuous with, and different to, all other, non-photographed moments.²⁹⁶ It does not create eternity, as painting does, with all the connotations, symbolic and semiotic, of a painting. Photography has its own aesthetics, which are "to be sought in its power to lay bare the realities".²⁹⁷ This is something that Morden cannot or will not grasp, a man of painted surfaces who is at odds with the urgency of the photographic image.

The occasion of this dramatic ekphrastic encounter is radically different to those found in the two other Banville novels under consideration here. The juxtaposition of painting and photograph appears in *The*

294 André Bazin, 'The Ontology of the Photographic Image', trans. Hugh Gray, *Film Quarterly*, 13.4. (Summer, 1960), pp. 4-9.

295 This idea was suggested by Bolaki's article.

296 John Berger alludes to this in his essay 'Photographs of Agony' (*About Looking*, pp. 41-45). However, Berger refers to moments of violence. The calm demeanour of Anna's subjects equates to a sense of normalcy and continuity.

297 Bazin, p. 8.

Book of Evidence, and the dramatic ekphrastic encounter is experienced with another person present in *The Untouchable*. Both devices feature in *The Sea*. Morden, however, is shown images by the person who created them, and in the place where she did so. In this sense, Morden has access to art in a way that the other two do not, but to a form of art that he regards as inimical to him.

Again, the space in which the dramatic ekphrastic encounter transpires is integral to the ekphrasis, more so on this occasion as the hospital is also the space in which the images that are the subject of the ekphrasis were created. Once more, Morden's seminal experiences happen in a liminal space. Hospitals are spaces in which transience is inherent. One speaks of a hospital stay as a situation that, one way or another, will be temporary and concluded by leaving. Not so for Morden who, in the middle of relating how he came to look at Anna's photographs, pauses to ruminate on the pleasingly nursery-like quality of a hospital room, and wonders if he can perhaps rent one, to work and live there. Morden is, it would seem, hopelessly mired in, not a purgatorial state, but a limbo. Unwilling or unable to move on with life without Anna, he casts around for an alternative. Reversal is what he wants, but unable to achieve that either, the possibility of death looms.

The consequence of Morden's dramatic ekphrastic encounter is, unlike Freddie and Maskell, not death.²⁹⁸ As Laura Izarra insightfully pointed out, Anna's photographs bring about a catharsis for Morden. Directly following the ekphrasis, the weather changes²⁹⁹:

We have had a storm. [...] I have never known the like, in these temperate zones, for violence or duration. I enjoyed it outrageously, sitting up in my ornate bed as on a catafalque [...]. At last, I thought, at last the elements have achieved a pitch of magnificence to match my inner turmoil! I felt transfigured [...]. (184)

He directly contemplates death, anticipating not an afterlife, as such, but that:

I shall be expressed, totally, I shall be delivered, like a noble closing speech. I shall be, in a word, *said*. [...] has this not always been my aim [...] to be no longer flesh but transformed utterly into the gossamer of unsuffering spirit? (185)

298 With Maskell, of course, we cannot be sure. Throughout the book the implication is, though, that some deaths resulted from his espionage, and so from his dramatic (non-ekphrastic) encounter. It seems certain that his boyfriend, Patrick, died because of him, at least. With Freddie the situation is decidedly unambiguous.

299 Laura Izarra, *Disrupting Identities*, p.196

This last point seems to negate one of the two possible means by which he could sit up on his metaphorical catafalque; Morden is, speculatively at least, galvanized toward some sort of action. Immediately following the storm, and following Anna's photographs, there is a decisive change in pace. Morden's narrative is largely preoccupied with the past; he weaves in and out of the distant past (the Graces, his parents, his early days with Anna) and near past (the previous year of Anna's death). Passages concerned with daily life at The Cedars, as he now experiences it, are vague as to time, which is poorly demarcated. There are references to last night, and this morning, and just now, but no way for the reader to discern if one day has passed, or two days, or a month. Finally now, time begins to pass: "Another week done with" (186).

His melancholia and grief deepen. The futility of staying at The Cedars begins to dawn on him, "being here is just a way of not being anywhere" (192). He visualises himself at dinner, degrading his image from "a large dark simian something" to "not a something but a nothing" and then "a darkness visible", he thinks he is "becoming his own ghost" (193-194). Two direct outbursts against Anna, against her absence, seep into the text: "You cunt, you fucking cunt, how could you go and leave me like this, floundering in my own foulness" (196), "Why have you not come back to haunt me [...] it is like a fog, this silence of yours" (247). Morden, like Maskell in *The Untouchable*, is somewhat displaced from his own narrative. There are so many other stories of which Morden was only a part – his parents, the Graces, Rose, even the Colonel, Bun, the Duignans – and Anna too.

Morden reflects on his relationship with her. He finishes the other story, of what happened to the twins and what became of Rose. Interestingly, only the vignette of Mrs Grace helping Rose to wash her hair calls upon visual art. Morden largely dispenses with ekphrasis after his account of Anna's photographs. The scene with Mrs Grace and Rose, as outlined previously, is a combination of elements of different images, all of which serve to reveal what young Morden could not possibly have guessed at.

The ekphrasis makes only the lightest of references to Bonnard. Morden's retreat into the past fails, as what he actually seeks in neither past nor present but a respite from the forward motion of life. Anna's photographs set him moving forward again, even if unhappily so. As an expert on Bonnard, images from the artist's oeuvre have permeated his memory. Morden notes "memories are always eager to match themselves seamlessly to the things and places of a revisited past" (148) and memories may match themselves seamlessly to what is familiar, also, rather than what might have been. Morden knows this, despite himself "Yet how easily, in the end, I let it go. The past, I mean the real past, matters less than we pretend" (157).

For Bonnard, painting was the medium by which he transmuted his own perception and subjective experience into something universal, or even beyond that, as he put it himself “I dream of the quest for the absolute”.³⁰⁰ His oblique perspective, his depiction of the bare glimpse, of what is seen from the corner of the eye, has something of the quality of photography about it. Both Bonnard’s paintings and Anna’s photographs call to mind what John Berger wrote about the photographer Paul Strand: “The photographic moment for Strand is a biographical or historic moment, whose duration is ideally measured not by seconds but by its relation to a lifetime”.³⁰¹ Anna’s work testifies to her lifetime and that of her subjects. Morden, viewing them, is nonplussed but the recall of this becomes, in the telling of it, a dramatic ekphrastic encounter which casts him back into his own current lifetime, even he is reluctantly to be there. Morden, like Freddie and Maskell before him, is a man too enamoured with the painted surface. Like them, he made a fundamental error of interpretation, misunderstanding images of what Jacqueline Munck identified as the continuous present in Bonnard’s work, and hoping to find something of that to retreat into. He differs from Freddie and Maskell in one fundamental way: while they try to aestheticize reality in order to redeem it, poor Morden is aestheticizing reality in order to heal. The novel ends, not on an optimistic note, not quite that, but as least a movement forward. He is being retrieved from Ballyless by his daughter, Claire, and her fiancé. He will return home, and, having been taken up by two of the true workers (41), he may get around to finishing that Big Book on Bonnard. Or maybe not: “Well it is no matter. There are other things I can do” (260).

300 Quoted in Hyman, p. 190 and a much alluded to quote, from a letter to Matisse in 1940.

301 Berger, p. 47.

5 Conclusion

Stephen Cheeke, in his book *Writing for Art* suggests that we should place more emphasis on considering what ekphrasis does, than on asking what it is. Furthermore, he questions the stress placed on the paragonal qualities of ekphrasis in much of the theoretical literature on the subject. Cheeke comments on the frequency with which ekphrasis is characterised by most theorists as a struggle for dominance between image and word: “But what, we might ask, are they struggling over? In what sense, in what activity, do they wish to dominate, out-do or eclipse each other?”³⁰²

Cheeke’s thinking as regards the primacy of the function of ekphrasis has guided the approach of this thesis. Heffernan’s definition of ekphrasis – the verbal representation of visual representation – is widely accepted with few variants, and stabilised discussion of the modern usage of ekphrasis. Alternative definitions, such as Yacobi’s inter-medial quotation, are essentially similar to Heffernan’s when applied to ekphrastic texts. The efficacy of either definition can only be qualified when we think about ekphrasis from a functional perspective, when we prioritise how ekphrasis operates within, and as part of, a given text. Any evidence of a paragonal dialogue can also only be revealed through consideration of what ekphrasis does.

The term dramatic ekphrastic encounter was conceived of through a prioritisation of function. Close readings of the texts and review of the attendant critical work on Banville revealed a congruent use of ekphrasis in *The Book of Evidence*, *The Untouchable* and *The Sea*. However, despite the vast body of scholarly literature on the topic, I was unable to locate a variant of ekphrasis that encompassed what Banville achieves through use of visual art in these novels. As previously noted, Abigail Rischin’s article on ekphrasis in Eliot’s *Middlemarch* was particularly useful and instructive in my deliberations and also an indicator that there existed a small lacuna in the critical literature. As a formal term, dramatic ekphrastic encounter may lean excessively towards utility, but it does encapsulate the particular type of ekphrasis we find in the three relevant novels; dramatic (in that the protagonist is propelled into action), ekphrastic (as it is an ekphrasis), and encounter (in that it describes the situation of a character confronting a work of art).

The dramatic ekphrastic encounters examined in this thesis are all intrinsic to the narratives of their respective novels. The contention that ekphrasis is inherently paragonal treats paintings as problematic

302 Cheeke, *Writing for Art*, p.24

because of their alterity as image objects that have both an external and autonomous locus of representation. In these three novels, the alterity of the image is not the problem; rather it is the protagonists who fail to interpret these image objects correctly. In the case of *The Book of Evidence*, the narrative builds toward the dramatic ekphrastic encounter, to contextualise Freddie's actions. On any other day, he might have admired the painting and moved on, unperturbed; on that particular midsummer's day, his singular reaction to the *Woman With Gloves* sets in motion a chain of events that culminate in his imprisonment. He misinterprets the vacant gaze of the *Woman With Gloves*, which acts, as Laura Izarra points out, like a mirror³⁰³. In trying to steal the painting, he also steals and fatally injures Josie. Maskell locates an idealised version of life in a death scene, and in trying to emulate this, gives himself licence to live a duplicitous life. In effect he substitutes the life he might otherwise have had for one lived in adherence to a misinterpreted image. Morden uses the paintings of Pierre Bonnard to as a mnemonic device, and in doing so allows the images to seep into his memories, and avoid his own subjective reality.

For all three the protagonists, the experience of viewing artworks blurs context. Morden's memories are augmented by Bonnard's paintings, Maskell can regard the *Capture of Jerusalem by Titus* and the fall of Barcelona as similar events, equally distant in time, and Freddie's imagination can be so thoroughly conquered by the image of the *Woman With Gloves* that he is unable to correctly perceive a fellow human being. Recalling David Kennedy's remarks on ekphrasis as an aspect of our fascination with art, these protagonists all surrender to art to varying degrees; they succeed in creating meaning visually by appeal to paintings, but are mistaken in their efforts.

The dramatic ekphrastic encounters in all three novels drive the narrative and effect change in the individual, thus overcoming the theoretical quandary of the ekphrastic artwork as a static interruption of the temporal text. His use of visual art is no battleground for dominance of word over image. The ekphrases are vital components of the narratives; each of these novels would be entirely altered by the absence of a dramatic ekphrastic encounter. In that sense, there is no struggle for dominance between image and text occurring, there is in fact, in each case, only text, in which ekphrastic renderings of images are integral to the narrative. Stephen Cheeke, in an analysis of Derek Mahon's "*Courtyards in Delft*" comments that the poem "[...] recognises and confesses to a deeper identity with the sensuous memory of the picture, to the disturbing life of the image."³⁰⁴ Mahon, says Cheeke, does not somehow wish to control, supersede or dominate the image as something 'other' nor does he necessarily seek to overcome

303 Izarra, *Mirrors and Holographic Labyrinths*

304 Cheeke, *Writing for Art*, p.35

the differences between image and text, “[...] even though *these differences are also at the root of the exchange*”.³⁰⁵ We can discern from the novels under scrutiny in this study that Banville is not seeking to compete with visual art, but draws inspiration from it. The best examples of this are the ekphrases of multiple Bonnard paintings in *The Sea*, where Bonnard’s work is not just evoked ekphrastically but is part of the fabric of the narrative. In Bonnard, Banville recognises another artist who tried to portray his subjective experience: “I just want to recreate the sense of what life feels like, what it tastes like, what it smells like. That’s what art should do”³⁰⁶

Ekphrasis in Banville is a rumination concerning the difference between the visual and literary or verbal forms. *The Untouchable* and *The Book of Evidence* best exemplify this. Cheeke notes that visual art challenges us to construct meaning visually, a challenge taken up by the two protagonists of these novels, at which they both succeed too well. The study of the history of art unites Freddie, Maskell and Morden. They perform similarly to the scientists of the tetralogy, in being unable to properly comprehend the world around them. In seeking to do so through scholarship, they run aground on the limits of their knowledge, to recall Jackson.

These three protagonists love painting, there is no doubt that the effect it has on them and their admiration for it is sincere and intended by the author to be taken sincerely. However, the study of visual art depends on an artwork that evokes an emotional and aesthetic response being subjected to rational scrutiny, and it is in this that they fail. Freddie Montgomery engages in his scholarship in a penitential fashion, to ensure that his fatal misinterpretation of art will not be repeated. In *Ghosts* he uses his knowledge of art to create a fantasy of redemption, in which he saves Flora, rather than killing Josie. In *Athena*, he constructs his narrative around passages of fake art criticism about fake paintings, which serve more to aid his comprehension of a plot which he, as narrator, has only partial access to. These exegeses are small dissertations on the failure of scholarship to explain life as subjectively experienced, and not really about the paintings at all.

Athena, by this reading of it, suggests a progression of sorts, but next in Banville’s oeuvre comes Victor Maskell, who is nothing less than Freddie fully realised, and taken to an extreme degree of scholastic absorption, for whom art permits a species of amorality. Banville’s use of dark comedy to delineate Maskell assures us of the shallowness of his politics. Ironically, his scholarship is tainted by the subjectivity of his vision (“After me, Poussin is not, cannot be, what he was before me. This is my power.

305 Ibid, p.36, my italics

306 The Millions

I am wholly conscious of it.” p.308). Maskell is highly susceptible to the seductive power of visual art, to the strong emotion provoked by an aesthetic response, and this misinterpretation of art fatally taints his life and his work.

An interesting aspect of *The Untouchable* is the extent to which Maskell’s narrative is retrospective; most of what he tells the reader has happened a long time ago. There is a facet of the novel that can be read as a parable similar to Browning’s “*My Last Duchess*”. Recalling Starzyk’s comments, Maskell becomes enthralled by his *Death of Seneca*, and fails to free his own self for dynamic growth. It is possible that he once believed in political action and the tenets of Marxism, but now in old age, finds himself faithfully aligned with what he refers to as a “vulgar ideology” (44).

In *Athena*, Morrow cannot spot the forgeries, and is willingly seduced, by A and by his new role as an art expert. The difference between a fake and a forgery is intention. A forgery is intended to deceive, intended to replicate the original in every way. A fake is intended to imitate the real thing, but not to replace it. Maskell’s *The Death of Seneca* may or may not be a fake, as he himself may or may not be authentic. He is guilty of a failure of aesthetic judgement, and many more serious things besides; the damage that Maskell does to others remains untold, and ambiguous. One could also read the painting as something that became a fake over time, and as it is emblematic of the self he once believed himself to be. Maskell, of course, is a fake in more ways than one, as he is a copy of Anthony Blunt. Maskell is not original to the artist, as George Steiner noted: “Victor’s evil remains that of a *petit-maître*, ‘from the school of’, as art catalogues put it.”³⁰⁷

The paintings in *The Book of Evidence* and *The Untouchable*, as ostensible entities, are also autonomous artworks; they are themselves and nothing more. Both protagonists misinterpret art’s vacant gaze and assign power to these paintings in a manner that recalls the tradition of ekphrasis and the uncanny, as well as relating to the uncanny in Banville’s own work. Freddie / Morrow and Maskell attempt to use art to fulfil their fantasies of themselves. For Max Morden this was achieved through his marriage to Anna, but art is still integral to his perception of the world and his construction of memory. Bonnard’s paintings are universal yet entirely personal in vision; Morden over-identifies with the subjectivity of Bonnard’s work in place of his own autonomy and authenticity.

If considered purely in terms of the workings and effect of the dramatic ekphrastic encounter, these novels form a triptych of the same subject, portrayed differently. The painting in *The Book of Evidence*, as a

307 Steiner, ‘*To be Perfectly Blunt*’, p.15

portrait, relates to mortality. The painting in *The Untouchable* depicts a group of figures involved in an event with a specific historical and philosophical context, all of which is eclipsed by the fact of it also being a death scene. The named paintings in *The Sea* are also concerned with death, but more intimately about the subjective experience of life, and how perception shapes lived experience and memory.

Space, in all three novels, is perceived as altered by the engagement with the painted surface and time is slowed or suspended. All three are moving from one form of indeterminate, in-between, state to another kind of liminality. Freddie led a peripatetic existence which culminated in the repetitive artificiality of prison, where he waits for a trial that never seems imminent, and writes a document that is superfluous at best, and possibly fictional. Maskell's double life is at an end; he is undergoing, as his doctor informs him, a kind of public death, and can be read as an incarnation of his *Death of Seneca*, suspended between life and death. Even Morden's blameless, dilettantish life was provided for by money inherited from the illicit actions of others. Now that Anna is dead he seeks out a kind of timeless stasis.

My conception of the dramatic ekphrastic encounter is of an episode within the text which is an essential part of the narrative and involves a highly significant ekphrasis, which is 'real' within the text; the artwork must be physically present. The encounter encompasses the time, relative to the narrative, and place where it occurs. As Laura Izarra noted, "Banville gives shape to space".³⁰⁸ Rooms in each novel – the golden room in *The Book of Evidence*, Maskell's study in *The Untouchable* – that contain art take on qualities of the artwork. This is amplified in *The Sea* by the temporariness of every space Morden inhabits. Each occasion of a dramatic ekphrastic encounter, depends partially on where it occurs, and has a consequence, and so the encounter has spatial and temporal qualities.

The three protagonists have something other than trouble with paintings in common. While their own lack of autonomy and authenticity leads them to misinterpret painted images, each character is either freed from this misinterpretation, or begins to be freed from it, by photographs. This applies even Maskell, in a very brief allusion. Having invited Miss Vandeleur in on their first meeting, they sit by his fireplace and, for want of anything to say, look at framed photographs of Maskell's family:

I thought for a moment I was going to cry, I could not say why, precisely, though obviously the photographs were part of it. (21).

Soon after that, the first dramatic ekphrastic encounter occurs, and as Maskell discourses to Miss

308 Izarra, *Mirrors and Holographic Labyrinths*, p.140

Vandeleur in front of the painting he sees diminished for the first time. Though the descriptions of the photographs are very slight, they still form part of the ekphrastic system of the novel. A photograph enables Freddie to finally understand the real crime he has committed, and the real implications of it. Anna's photographs provide the dramatic ekphrastic encounter in *The Sea*, and prove cathartic for Morden, which releasing him from his self-imposed stasis and exile. These three novels provide, through the treatment of visual art, some insight into the author's creative process and show him refining his approach to art and ekphrasis over time, with photography becoming, by *The Sea*, even more significant in the narrative than painting.

The *ekphrases* in these novels interrogate our interpretation and understanding of representation and art. They effectively demonstrate how visual art can function as an accomplice to the creation of a text, and, rendered ekphrastically, work within it as part of a narrative. The aim is not to bring art under the control of the text, in some way, not about translating the visual into verbal, but is concerned with the effects of that translation, with the difference, as Stephen Cheeke says, that is at the root of that exchange. These novels portray the effects of visual art on three individuals who assign power to images rather than accept them for what they are: "They were like themselves and nothing else" (*The Untouchable*, 31).

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Figure 2.1. *Portrait of a Woman*, Willem Drost, (1655)
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<http://www.petitpalais.paris.fr/en/collections/death-seneca>

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Minneapolis Institute of Art, Minneapolis

<http://www.wikiart.org/en/pierre-bonnard#supersized-interior-222050>

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http://www.musee-orsay.fr/en/collections/works-in-focus/painting.html?no_cache=1&zoom=1&tx_damzoom_pi1%5BshowUid%5D=109582

Figure 4.7 *By the Sea, Under the Pines* Pierre Bonnard (1921)
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<http://www.wikiart.org/en/pierre-bonnard/by-the-sea-under-the-pines-1921>

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<http://www.nationalgalleries.org/collection/artists-a-z/g/artist/paul-gauguin/object/vision-of-the-sermon-jacob-wrestling-with-the-angel-ng-1643>

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Foundation Bemberg, Toulouse.

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