

JOYCE STUDIES IN ITALY

13

**WHY READ JOYCE  
IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY?**

Edited by  
FRANCA RUGGIERI AND ENRICO TERRINONI

EDIZIONI   
ROMA, 2012

*Volume pubblicato con il contributo  
del Dipartimento di Letterature Comparete  
dell'Università degli Studi Roma Tre*

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della legge n. 633 del 22/04/1941

ISSN 2281-373X

ISBN 9788897831051

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[www.edizioniq.it](http://www.edizioniq.it)

e-mail: [info@edizioniq.it](mailto:info@edizioniq.it)

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JOYCE'S "GHOSTS" ..., FLANN O'BRIEN,  
SAMUEL BECKETT AND JOHN BANVILLE

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Joyce is still in 2012 the source of a critical divide when dealing with Irish literature. Ambivalence characterizes his legacy. This is particularly visible in three writers who wrote about or after Joyce, acknowledging more or less directly the quintessential not to say overbearing part he played in their career as writers or in their relationship towards the very act of writing. A chronological perspective to assess this legacy within an Irish context should make things easier to understand. The authors under scrutiny in this essay, to analyze the ebb and flow of the Joycean influence in modern literature, are Flann O'Brien (1911-1966), Samuel Beckett (1906-1989), John Banville (1945- )

Through these three instances, what is striking is that one actually travels through the history of literature but also through the evolution of moral and aesthetic standards, from modernism to postmodernism, from a raw brand of censorship to a more liberal conception of literary creation. O'Brien, Beckett, Banville all tackled the same primordial issue of representation and its aporias, in a way which remains to refine in its definition. But my contention is that with Flann O'Brien, who was contemporary with James Joyce, we still find judgments somewhat resentful and excessively redolent of the original whiff of scandal which Joyce's works were surrounded with in addition to a virulently subjective critical assessment of the great man, as an Irish artist, as an exile, as an unwieldy arch-paragon of the creator. With Beckett, the situation is different since despite his friendship and personal acquaintance with Joyce, the core problem almost turns out to be linked to an abstract philosophy of writing and its tenets, in a context of emergence of a relativistic exhaustion of absolute values. This questioning of the motivations for the act of writing is probably further developed by John Banville who, while using Joyce's example as an initial springboard, defines a new relationship to issues which are now, 70 years

after *Finnegans Wake*, definitely outside the possibility to alter the novel as a literary medium.

In any case, the first element of an answer to the obviously rhetorical question ‘why read Joyce in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?’ might well be that his oeuvre still disturbingly condenses and transcends all these theoretical questions. Secondly, in a genealogical approach, reading Joyce now allows readers and critics to understand how major writers in the Irish literary landscape, such as O’Brien of course, Beckett and also Banville structured—and for the latter the process is still in progress—their approach to literary creation, and possible innovation, since, as I am going to demonstrate, all these authors entered the field of literary endeavor because of James Joyce. This analysis may partly sound like an investigation into a complex family history including elements such as symbolic parricide, irony and Irishness. In any case Joyce’s ghost, so to speak, prevails and seems to be lurking in the authors’ minds on a quasi permanent basis. This rather aptly illustrates the concept of hauntology<sup>1</sup> forged by Derrida according to which, beyond ontology, half-way between being and non-being, there is the possibility of interfering with ideas through a spectral presence.

### **I. Flann O’Brien: oscillating between envious awe and rejection?**

Doubtless a *ghost*, or *hauntological* presence so to speak, can haunt a mind before the culprit’s actual demise. O’Brien seemed simply obsessed with James Joyce and his international success. You find a considerable number of references to Joyce in Myles’ column written in *The Irish Times* from 1940 till 1966, under the penname of Myles na gCopaleen,<sup>2</sup> in some short essays and also in most of his novels. It is worth noticing that his meta-physical masterpiece *The Third Policeman* begins with what a sarcastic reader might view as a piece of wishful thinking, namely the symbolic murder of a father figure, that of an old man called Mathers: “Not everybody knows

<sup>1</sup> Derrida, *Spectres de Marx*. Derrida’s analysis provides powerful insights into the ontological status of both political *and* literary texts.

<sup>2</sup> A quick look at the titled contributions of Myles is proves revealing: “J. A. Joyce” in July 1955, “Take your Joyce” in August 1956, “Ulysses” in December 1957, “Finnegan” in December 1957, “Joyce and others” in July 1958, “That man Joyce” in December 1965, to name but a few.

how I killed old Phillip Mathers [...] (1967b, 7).”<sup>3</sup> As Myles na gCopaleen, O’Brien never missed an opportunity to sneer at Joyce’s transgressive skills, more or less cryptically, underscoring the alleged obscurity of his prose disparagingly. For instance, we can read the following excerpt from Myles, published in the *Irish Times* on March 21, 1944: it is entitled rather vaguely “On the Artist”, but its target is obvious:

Imagine anyone reading Mr Joyce in order to clarify the contemporary situation – or clarify anything! [...] Nowadays your “artist” is a neurotic imbecile; he has the cheek to discern in his own dementia the pattern of a universal chaos and it is no coincidence that most of his books are dirty and have to be banned. Beware of ‘culture’, reader; of ‘art’ and artists, be careful and apprehensive [...] People who call to my lodgings for advice often ask me whether being Irish is itself an art-form. I am not so sure that the answer can here be yes. One asks oneself whether the state of being Irish is characterized by the three essential requisites of James Aquinas Joyce – integritas, consonantia, claritas. (1999, 121-122)

The semi-ironic accusation of neurosis might sound gratuitously outrageous. Yet more seriously, one can but only remember Jacques Lacan’s psychoanalytical work on Joyce’s writings in the 1960s and early 1970s, diagnosing a potential psychosis overcome by literary creation. As regards O’Brien, we are definitely dealing with a no-nonsense, skeptical, and also rather conservative approach to what literature should essentially boil down to. If Joyce’s irony aims at eliciting pleasure, O’Brien’s more aptly debunks that of alleged complacency, humbug theory and obscure criticism in a malcontent fashion. Let us note in passing the reference to Aquinas, usually associated with Joyce. In this neurotic portrait of the artist drawn by O’Brien, one has to recognize an ironical reference to chapter 5 in *A Portrait of the Artist as a young man*: “Aquinas says : *ad pulcritudinem tria requiruntur integritas, consonantia, claritas* [...] *three things are needed for beauty, wholeness, harmony and radiance* (1992a, 211).”

Strangely enough though, despite O’Brien’s dismissal of Joyce’s ‘lunatic’ achievements, Joyce remained one of the main sources of inspiration for O’Brien, who may well be dismissive at times but still owes a large debt

<sup>3</sup> Even if it was eventually published posthumously in 1967, *The Third Policeman*, like *At Swim-Two-Birds*, was written before Joyce’s death in January 1941.

to Joyce's alleged neurosis as the initial matrix for his impetus to write. It is a fact that *At Swim-Two-Birds*, O'Brien's first novel, was a painstaking though brilliant parody of Joyce's *Portrait*. In this book, O'Brien both tries to imitate Joyce while keeping a sarcastic stance, and paradoxically transcend, surpass his example, pushing as far as he could the logic of an internal psychic world described through interior monologues, eminently self-conscious reflections and intricately embedded stories revolving around a self-centered narrator inventing a caricature of an artist, namely Dermot Trellis. In other words, it basically features the same kind of *Künstlerroman-like* male protagonist informed by Stephen Dedalus, "an antisocial being all wrapped up in himself (1992a, 177)." And let it be clear paradoxically that O'Brien's literary ambitions were ignited, so to speak, by Joyce, whose hovering presence and influence can be felt throughout O'Brien's palimpsestic texts. The second element which characterizes O'Brien is that of bitterness or resentment, feelings which are all the more unexpected from someone who contributed to the invention of Bloomsday in Dublin in 1954. This sarcasm stems from a disbelief as regards avant-garde creation at large, an ambivalent brand of skepticism echoing more Pascal's philosophy than Thomas Aquinas'. You find traces of this ambivalent skepticism throughout Myles' column:

What's this I have in my pocket? Dirty scrap of paper. Some newspaper heading I cut out. 'LANGUAGE IN DANGER' [...] Being an insulated western savage with thick hair on the soles of my feet I immediately suspect that it is that fabulous submythical esperantique patter, the Irish, that is under this cushion—beg pardon—under discussion [...] Poor Jimmy Joyce abolished the King's English, Paulsy Picasso started cutting out paper dolls and I [...] I founded the Rathmines branch of the Gaelic league. Having nothing to say, I thought at that time that it was important to revive a language in which absolutely nothing could be said. (1968, 102-103)

In this extract, you find the same ambivalent treatment of Joyce as elsewhere in O'Brien's prose. O'Brien posits and acknowledges Joyce's achievement as an avant-garde writer, comparable to Picasso in visual arts, while remaining tongue-in-cheek skeptical of the whole experimental aspect of his writings. Simultaneously what he asserts is a deeply self-conscious Irish relationship to writing and creating, a relationship fraught with both an implicit inferiority complex originating in a Gaelic background and the contradictory conviction of a unique privileged status of Irish writers. This



strange combination accounts for the love-hate relationship with Joyce and experimental writing. Let us quote rapidly this column to illustrate O'Brien's contradictory stance:

[THIS is the first time a newspaper article was started in brackets. Innovation, you see. The Homeric task of creation. Bringing into being a thing hitherto not here, much more exhausting than building pyramids in Egypt. Please remind me to close the bracket at the end of the article. (1968, 211)

Even in this short excerpt, Joyce is alluded to through the adjective "Homeric". *Finnegans Wake* and the absence of apostrophe between the two words was also a staple *leitmotiv* in Myles' column. This position chosen by O'Brien is to be found again in this extract from *The Irish Times*: "The essentials of life do not –indeed cannot– vary from one century to another, for life itself means reproduction and repetition; to hold otherwise is to confuse life itself with the temporary vessels which contain it very temporarily (1999, 122)."

To summarize the ambiguous controversy between O'Brien and Joyce, one could venture the idea that the former was concerned with a closed eternal hellish truth made up of repetition (including Joyce as a favourite motif), whereas the latter was more interested in the open dynamic concept of beauty and form. This deep schism between the two explains the choice of topics in novels which was radically different. In Joyce's novels, nothing actually momentous is to take place historically, what matters may be purely anecdotal, trivial, sensuous, bearing on the notion of beauty, seen as deeply idiosyncratic and joyfully accepted as such in all its ambivalence and all this happens at the individual level, that, for instance, of epiphanies. In O'Brien's novels, be they minor, there is always an impending general catastrophe or potential collective apocalypse or hellish outcome to expect, as in *The Third Policeman* set in hell, or *The Dalkey Archive* where de Selby, a mad scientist, contemplates destroying the world with his DMP gas, or even *At Swim-Two-Birds* which ends on a threefold *memento mori* and suicide etc. To O'Brien what prevails is derisive futility, the rest is pure entertainment and vanity not to say treachery as in this extract from *Further Cuttings*: "Are we all liars and humbugs and if so, why not? Are we national exemplars of Vico's theory of ultimate chaos (1976, 158)?" Even in this short quote, the reader will find an implicit personal indictment of Joyce through Vico, whose cyclical theory supposedly informed *Finnegans Wake*. One could

eventually refer to “A Bash in the Tunnel”, an essay published in *Envoy* in April 1951, in which James Joyce is portrayed through a strange parable, namely that of an alcoholic drinking whiskey secretly locked up in the toilet of a railway dining car itself locked up and permanently shunted here and there in the same Dublin train station. The parable elaborates on hubris, and lashes at Joyce:

Funny? But surely there you have the Irish artist? Sitting fully dressed, innerly locked in the toilet of a locked coach where he has no right to be, resentfully drinking somebody else’s whiskey, being whisked hither and thither by anonymous shunters, keeping fastidiously the while on the outer face of his door the simple word, ENGAGED? I think the image fits Joyce. (1973, 175)

Joyce positively continued to haunt O’Brien’s world long after he died, in the same way Old Mathers’ ghost nags at the narrator in *The Third Policeman* long after his skull was smashed with a spade. If de Selby’s illegible manuscripts in that work may be sarcastic allusions to the obscurity of *Finnegans Wake*, O’Brien’s last novel in 1964 *The Dalkey Archive* features a narrator who encounters an elderly and slightly deranged James Joyce (who dismissively refers to his work by saying “I have published little” and, furthermore, does not seem aware of having written and published *Finnegans Wake*) working as an assistant barman. O’Brien is the only writer in our trio who uses prosopopeia to make a dead Joyce speak. The hauntological process here reaches a paradoxical acme through vengeance by fictional resurrection. So much for resentment, be it as talented as O’Brien’s.

## **II. Samuel Beckett: companionship, filial admiration, final opposition?**

As regards Beckett’s relationship to Joyce, there is a major shift from skepticism or the outdated semi-ironical accusation of obscenity underlined by O’Brien, to questions which focus more amply on style and form. O’Brien saw Joyce as emerging “through curtains of salacity and blasphemy, as a truly fear-shaken Irish Catholic” (“A Bash,” 1973, 174) and these moral quasi theological preoccupations could not be further from Beckett’s mind. With Beckett, we are dealing with a closer, less ambivalent companionship between two fellow writers. Even though, of course, the initial difference in age may account for certain variations of feelings as time went by. It was

originally a rather young Beckett who met, thanks to his friend Thomas Mac Greevy's connection, a living literary monument in the person of James Joyce in Paris in 1928. Joyce was already famous and 46, Beckett was only 22 and had hardly considered publishing anything. Perhaps it took several years after Joyce died before Beckett actually managed to find the adequate distance from the master, as he acknowledged over sixty years later in an interview imbued with Joyce's ghostly presence:

I realized that Joyce had gone as far as one could in the direction of knowing more, [being] in control of one's material. He was always adding to it; you only have to look at his proofs to see that. I realized that my own way was in impoverishment, in lack of knowledge and in taking away, in subtracting rather than in adding. (Knowlson 1996, 352)

In other words Beckett became Beckettian after getting rid of all pretence to erudition and infinite culture and learned winks as displayed in early poems or novels—such as 'Whoroscope' or *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*, or even *Murphy*. In the interview with James Knowlson, which took place a few weeks before Beckett himself died, Beckett clearly acknowledged his debt to Joyce though, going so far as to declare:

When I first met Joyce, I didn't intend to be a writer. That only came later when I found out that I was no good at all at teaching. When I found I simply couldn't teach. But I do remember speaking about Joyce's heroic achievement. I had a great admiration for him [...] But I realized that I couldn't go down that same road. (1996, 105)

Knowlson also aptly remarks:

Although there are entire passages in *Dream of fair to Middling Women*, that either imitate or parody late Joyce [...] Beckett certainly felt, from early on in their relationship, that it was essential for him to separate himself and establish a distance between himself as a writer and Joyce. Yet the basic impetus in his early writing remained accretive and accumulative, just as Joyce's art was based on absorbing everything into itself. (1996, 106)

Beckett eventually found his writerly way in March 1946, according to literary legend and through an almost too good to be true sort of epiphany, while he was back in Ireland and turning 40. Beckett from then

on, explored madness, failure, ignorance, impotence, rejecting the Joycean principle that knowing more was a way of creatively understanding and controlling the world. There remain striking similarities and contrasts between Joyce and Beckett. Both were Dubliners and finally exiles, living most of their lives abroad, notably in France, but only Beckett actually adopted a foreign tongue as a direct and principal medium of creation namely through French, even though Joyce's vast knowledge of languages was visible in his works. Moreover, Beckett explored dramatic writing and is best remembered for his plays such as *Waiting for Godot* or *Endgame*, even though his novels and short stories eventually met with critical acclaim. Joyce went the other way and his little known play *Exiles* tends to prove so. Eventually and thematically, Beckett focused on poverty, failure, exile and loss, on man "as non-knower or non-can-er," (Knowlson 1996, 353) whereas Joyce, through his cunning narratorial voices actually appears as a positive combiner of words and worlds, epitomized by the accumulation of *yesses* at the end of *Ulysses*. So many *yesses* which could be contrasted with the conclusion in *The Unnamable*: "[...] where I am, I don't know, I'll **never** know, in the silence you don't know, you must go on, I can't go on, I'll go on" (1959, 418). Beckett's final equivocal position ends up being radically different from Joyce's, notably through his minimalist aesthetics, and final emphasis on solipsism and silence as in *The Unnamable* (1959) or *How It is* (1961), which are made up by monologues delving into the questions and puzzles intertwining the concepts of impossible identity, language and being without any elaborate plot in sight. This somewhat painfully restrictive approach to language and creation is made luminously blatant through the following statement on art made by Beckett in *Disjecta*, echoing the conclusion of *The Unnamable*, a few years later: "The expression that there is nothing to express, nothing with which to express, nothing from which to express, no power to express, no desire to express, together with the obligation to express (1983, 139)." <sup>4</sup>

This apparent dead-end still displays a good amount of humour though, as in this self-conscious dialogue between father and son figures in *Endgame*:

<sup>4</sup> Much useful information about Beckett's literary philosophy and indirectly about his relationship with Joyce can be retrieved in a collection of essays by Beckett dealing with literature, aesthetics and painters. See Beckett *Disjecta*, including the "Three Dialogues with Georges Duthuit". See also Cronin's analysis of the same quote on the impossibility to express: "It could be—it is—a description of *The Unnamable*" (Cronin, 1996, 398).

HAMM : We're not beginning to... to... mean something ?

CLOV : Mean something ! You and I, mean something ! [brief laugh] Ah that's a good one ! (1958, 22)

Let us note in passing that the treatment of the father figure symbolically echoing that of James Joyce in this play is, to say the least, negative, the father being an “accursed progenitor” or an “accursed fornicator” doomed to end up rotting in a dustbin. The central motif described in Beckett's plays or novels becomes eminently internalized, that of the self, or that of consciousness not to say self-consciousness or self-exhausting and questioning linguistic processes. The comparison between *Finnegans Wake* (1939) and Samuel Beckett's actual last full-fledged novel *How It Is* (1961) reveals the chasm between the two writers. If both novels are cyclical in their general structure, Joyce's numbers more than 600 pages milling with intertextual references constituting a perfect loop whereas *How It is* is barely 150 pages of unpunctuated lines focusing on the narrator's tormented monologue fragmented into paragraphs. Joyce's novel may be said to focus on a family saga whereas Beckett's only depicts the narrator's return to his initial formless solitude. In Joyce, you find movement and space while in Beckett you end up with terminal stasis, mud and closure. Even if both books may be regarded as highly experimental investigations into the narrative voice, they delineate two opposing directions: Joyce being the seminal father/writer/multiplier, Beckett the terminal son/silencer/reducer in a Hamm/Clov-like complementary dialectics.

### III. John Banville's Joycean ghosts

With John Banville, Man Booker prize winner in 2005 for his novel *The Sea*, we reach the third and last stage in our short survey of Joyce's ambivalent literary legacy. A pattern begins to emerge: that of Joyce as the one who lies at the origins of the desire to write and who subsequently turns out to be somehow cumbersome and has to be left behind, albeit symbolically, in aesthetic terms, despite remaining an implicit haunting authority. In various interviews, Banville clearly acknowledged a debt to Joyce, asserting that he embarked on his literary career because of him or more precisely “thanks to” *Dubliners* which he tried to emulate as a young man. Some details in the interview Banville given to Mark Sarvas in September 2005 for his literary

blog called *The Elegant Variation* are revealing enough. Talking about his aspirations as a young man and how he came to writing, this is what Banville said rather bluntly:

We all wanted to get a short story published in a good magazine. So everybody started out by writing short stories. It wasn't a medium that I particularly liked, although I suppose I still hearken back to *Dubliners*. I put together this rather inept book. [*Long Lankin*, (1970)] (Sarvas, 2005, part 3)

Banville further develops this reference to *Dubliners* in the same interview:

Well, I started writing when I was about twelve. My brother [...] sent me *Dubliners*. And I was bowled over by this because here was a book that wasn't about cowboys and Indians, or murder at the vicarage [...] It was about something else. So I started writing dreadful imitations of *Dubliners*. I threw them all away but I remember the opening sentence of one of them, which was something like: "The white May blossom swooned slowly into the open mouth of the grave." *laughs delightedly* (Sarvas, 3).

Beyond the grave motif, the reader is glad to know *Dubliners* is not "about cowboys and Indians, or murder at the vicarage." Banville has always shown some ambivalence as regards Joyce. His famous essay revealingly entitled "The Dead Father" that he published in the *Irish University Review* in 1982 is a masterpiece of ironical ambiguity.

There may be many things left to do *in* the novel, but after him [Joyce], there is nothing left to do *to* it [...] Literary nineteenth century's will to progress achieved total entropy in *Finnegans Wake*. As T.S. Eliot, with characteristic ambiguousness, remarked: one book like this is enough. No longer required, then, to make it new, we are free to play with the old things, the wrack and the wreckage, the pretty shells. (1982a, 64)

In his analysis, Banville definitely takes after T. S. Eliot and his ambiguity. The main problem Banville claims he encountered while reading Joyce is that of saturation:

At the level of technique alone he is incomparable [...] But [...] I think Joyce knew too much for his own good [...] Most artists manage to keep down this

rich food. Beckett, we are told, must have large and frequent doses of pure knowledge —yet the only “fact” I can recall being offered in his work is that constipation is a sign of good health in Pomeranians. Joyce, however, wants to tell us everything he knows —and he wants to know everything. (1982a, 64-65)

This strongly echoes Beckett’s view that Joyce is a great modernist, accumulator and expander, whereas Banville or O’Brien would probably head in the *postmodern* more fragmentary direction. In addition to this regrettable blatant excess of knowledge displayed by Joyce according to Banville, yet another fault plagues Joyce’s writings, namely their paradoxically simultaneous obscurity: as Kersti Powell asserted in her article very revealingly entitled: “‘Not a son but a survivor’: Beckett... Joyce... Banville”:

Banville has also acknowledged rather complex filial feelings towards Joyce, declaring: “When I think of Joyce I am split in two. To one side there falls the reader, kneeling speechless in filial admiration, and love; to the other side, however, the writer stands, gnawing his knuckles, not a son, but a survivor.” (13) This intricate relationship with his literary “forefather” is apparently due to the impenetrability of Joyce’s work [...] His texts are “mysterious at their core” and seem self-generated, as they are “created out of nothing by some secret, unknowable means.” This impenetrability has encouraged critics to associate Banville with Beckett, and deem Joyce to have been a negative influence. (Powell 2005, 202)

Excess of referential knowledge and obscurity are just like the two poles between which hauntology oscillates: being and non-being, the past and the future. Joyce is both excessively present and concretely absent.

Beckett’s writings though, are far from being crystal-clear either. Yet again, one recognizes the fatal trace left on the master’s legacy by his last cryptic work. Contrary to Beckett, Banville has always stuck to the form favoured by Joyce and that he claims he dislikes so much, namely the novel.<sup>5</sup> It is also strange that Banville should assert so vehemently his allergy to knowledge, given he produced some masterpieces strongly informed by a reality swarming with data and facts, historical reality at that. One could quote *Doctor Copernicus* based on impressive scholarly research, *Kepler* or even *The Un-*

<sup>5</sup> Rather unexpectedly though revealingly, John Banville added in the same interview: “But I did dislike—I still dislike—the novel form. It annoys me.”

*touchable*, which he wrote after gathering an impressive collection of facts on the British spy Anthony Blunt and the Irish poet Louis MacNeice. But one may retort that contradiction is dynamic and compatible with a postmodern ethos, yet one cannot help but remark, as Elke d'Hoker did, that Banville's florid and sensuous style is on the whole rather different from Beckett's sparse prose, especially Beckett's prose after March 1946.

So if knowledge and its apparent saturation is not what actually makes the difference between Joyce and Banville, surely enough apparent philosophical concerns differentiate the two. A rather cold epistemological approach to science and arts seems to lie at the heart of Banville's preoccupation with the authentic essence of things, "the thing itself, the vivid thing," (1976, 3) the process of discovery or invention which seems to be ever-elusive, be it in his science tetralogy [*Dr Copernicus*, (1976) *Kepler*, (1981), *The Newton letter*, (1982), *Mefisto*, 1986)] or in his art trilogy [*The Book of Evidence* (1989), *Ghosts* (1993), *Athena* (1995)]. In a word, Banville, playing the part of the bold adventurous son, explores fields very seldom trodden by Joyce, the more classically flamboyant forefather.

And other parallels with Joyce's works, *pace* John Banville, loom large. Banville's literary investigations concentrate on the narrating voice and its avatars, its flaws, its dead angles, its unreliability, be it the voice of a Greek God as in his novel *The Infinities* (2009) or that of an unreliable narrator as in *Ghosts*, in the same way that Joyce also blurred the lines between third person narration and the unfolding of the self through various techniques including streams of consciousness, thus initiating, or prolonging a long problematic investigation into the way a narrating voice appropriates, distorts, projects ideas and external perceptions. Joyce's work also elaborates on the possibilities opened by a narrating voice interacting with the voice of various characters, a whole range of variations between (free) direct speech and indirect speech co-exist in *Ulysses* for instance (1992b). Similar preoccupations dealing with narratorial reliability or linguistic referentiality, as problematic mirrors of experience and reality, can be observed in the works of both writers. To be convinced, one simply has to read the incipit of *Doctor Copernicus* and that of *The Portrait*, in which the same theme of the emergence of consciousness develops through a focus of narration provided by a baby:

BANVILLE

At first it had no name. It was the thing itself, the vivid thing. It was his friend. On windy days it danced, demented, waving wild arms, or in the silence of



evening drowsed and dreamed ... Wrapped in his truckle bed, he could hear it stirring darkly outside in the dark, all the long night long. There were others, nearer to him, more vivid still than this, they came and went, talking, but they were wholly familiar, almost a part of himself ... Look, Nicolas, look! See the big tree!

Tree. That was its name. And also: the linden. They were nice words. He had known them a long time before he knew what they meant ... That was strange (1976, 3)

JOYCE

Once upon a time and a very good time it was there was a moocow coming down along the road and this moocow that was coming down along the road met a nicens little boy named baby tuckoo....

His father told him that story: his father looked at him through a glass: he had a hairy face.

He was baby tuckoo...

*O, the wilde rose blossoms*

*On the little green place*

He sang that song. That was his song. [...]

When you wet the bed first it is warm then it gets cold. His mother put on the oilsheet. That had the queer smell (1992a, 7).

Let us note in passing the converging conclusion through the adjectives “strange” and “queer” to qualify the nascent narrator’s sensorium. This concern about narrating voices examined by Hugh Kenner for instance<sup>6</sup> along with that of self-consciousness has also lain at the heart of Banville’s fiction since the 1970s according to critics such as Seamus Deane, John Kenny and Rüdiger Imhof.<sup>7</sup>

The anatomizing of writing may display similarities with the study of the way genes are reshuffled and transmitted. But literature does not, and cannot produce cloned monsters. Contrary to what Flann O’Brien asserted, repetition and reproduction can only occur with a difference.<sup>8</sup> Joyce seems

<sup>6</sup> See Kenner, *Joyce’s Voices*.

<sup>7</sup> See Seamus Deane, “Be Assured I Am Inventing’: The Fiction of John Banville”; John Kenny, *John Banville*; Rüdiger Imhof, *John Banville: A Critical Introduction*.

<sup>8</sup> As a matter of fact, O’Brien wrote with a sense of wit not devoid of sarcasm: “The essentials of life do not—indeed cannot—vary from one century to another, for life itself means

to have established an enduring branch in Irish not to say world literature. His offshoots are numerous, his influence more or less conscious but undoubted. His ghost will continue to haunt Irish literature precisely because his writing is based on a tantalizing specter, that of meaning, which still remains to unveil. In that perspective, he is quite Derridean: literature hides a secret, its implicit secret is that deciphering is endless, in other words its secret is that there is no (fixed) secret.<sup>9</sup>

An important trait inherited from his work revolves around the exploration of self-consciousness, perfectly illustrated by Beckett's solipsistic texts, O'Brien's mordant reflexive irony and Banville's careful dissection of the narrator's wavering or manipulative voice. These three writers in turn have developed their own aesthetics based on parody for O'Brien, minimalism for Beckett and a wistful elegant sophistication for Banville. Their works like Joyce's are going to be endlessly altered by new generations of readers, critics and scholars, thus taking part in the neverending cycle of the creation of meaning. The same cycle which can be found in *The Third Policeman*, *How It is*, *The Infinities* or *Mefisto*, echoing Derrida's words: "The circle of the return to birth can only remain open, but this is a chance, a sign of life, and a wound" (Derrida 1995, 340).

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reproduction and repetition; to hold otherwise is to confuse life itself with the temporary vessels which contain it temporarily (*O'Brien At War*, 122)."

<sup>9</sup> See *Papier machine* by Derrida, the original French quote reads thus : «La littérature garde un secret qui n'existe pas, en quelque sorte. Derrière un roman, ou un poème, derrière ce qui est en effet la richesse d'un sens à interpréter, il n'y a pas de sens secret à chercher. Le secret d'un personnage, par exemple, n'existe pas, il n'a aucune épaisseur en dehors du phénomène littéraire. Tout est secret dans la littérature et il n'y a pas de secret caché derrière elle, voilà le secret de cette étrange institution » (Derrida 2001, 398, emphasis in original).

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