



EXPERIENCE AS
EXPRESSION: FORM IN JOHN
BANVILLE'S *BIRCHWOOD*

Scott Offutt

Less of a traditional narrative than a highly personalized distillation of what may, even by the narrator's admission, be a wholly fictional history, John Banville's *Birchwood* is distinguished by the mysteries posed to its protagonist as well as its readers. While Gabriel Godkin searches for the figures of his sister and Prospero, the leader of the Magic Circus, he guides the reader on a chase for the equally elusive forces of continuity and authorial control. Formally, *Birchwood* adheres to the conventional structure of the novel only insofar as it dismantles that structure from within, describing experiences rather than narratives and lives rather than plots, and obscuring Gabriel's questionable memories through the implementation of various prosaic and poetic techniques within the text. Not merely a deconstruction of fiction and the novel but also of the ideas of reality, truth, and certainty within the literary medium, the form of the work is characterised chiefly by a lack of form, and by the author's tendency to create the illusion of organization in order to test and transcend the imposed and imagined boundaries of prose.

The language of *Birchwood* is inclined toward the same predictability as the substance that the novel's third part is named after. Alliteration peppers Gabriel's account,

as with the “slow semaphore” displayed by the “hands of the clock,” or the statement that his father would have “savoured the scene” of his own curious burial and final “ceremony” (Banville 69, 172). While the tone of Gabriel’s descriptions is influenced by this and other curiosities of phrase, the descriptions themselves see the usage of numerous creative devices, including personification, exemplified by “the wind,” which “sang in the tall reeds,” as well as “the air,” which “grew fangs” (125, 147). Nothing is ever commonplace; the voice of the narrator is too lyrical, and the scenes, characters, and events which he describes too extraordinary to be dismissed. Aunt Martha, for example, is described as “a small intense young woman, quick as a bird, with short red hair and a pale, pointed face” (38). Even the act of cooking is laced with strong imagery: “Into the big black pot it went, that painfully nude flesh, the turnip too, sliced carrots, parsnips, thyme and other aromatic things” (Banville 134). Every detail described by the protagonist acquires a special resonance, from a cold wind, to a meal, to the female sex organ, which is interchangeably a “furry damp secret,” “not so much a hole as a wound,” and “a delicate gash” (13). Resulting from this uniformly poeticized representation of objects, characters, and scenes is a sort of decentralization of focus. Because the same descriptive power is applied to everything within the narrative field of view, the boundaries between functional language and the evocative language of fiction are blurred, and the very idea of ordinary, fixed forms within the narrative is rendered obsolete.

The critic John Hand argues against this point in *John Banville: Exploring Fictions*, stating that “the everyday detritus of life” is “transformed into moments of intense reality plucked from the incessant drift of existence,” and hypothesising that the poetic vision of the ordinary world results in a specific conception of all moments and scenes as

“representations” (Hand 17). From this perspective, the commodification of poetic representation is deemphasized in favor of what Hand imagines as a sincere “poetic sensibility” on Banville’s part. While there is some value in treating the author’s language as an attempt to create “a language adequate to the predicament of living,” the intensity of virtually every moment of *Birchwood* confounds more often than it clarifies, and draws everything into the fragmented world of the fiction and Gabriel’s own fevered imagination (Ibid). No assistance is being offered; instead, the world undergoes changes constituting less of a transformation than a mutation into an almost unrecognizable form.

Contained within the rich idiom adopted throughout the text are numerous direct and indirect references to other works of fiction. In his analysis of Banville’s works, *John Banville: Fictions of Order*, Ingo Berensmeyer accurately observes the extent to which intertextuality figures into the writing style itself, confirming the “dreamlike quality” of the prose and documenting “simultaneous allusions to St Paul, Le Fanu, and Joyce” within a single brief excerpt (Berensmeyer 91). Of course, Prospero, the “withered wizard [...] with his cloak and his black hat” recalls Shakespeare’s *Tempest* (Banville 172). Silas’s description of “a feast which my good friend Trimalchio laid on for me” refers to a scene in Petronius’s *Satyricon* (135). These nods to earlier works are directly relatable to the novel’s overall status as a sort of descendant of preceding “Big House” and gothic novels. They are also indicative of the extent of the author’s creative freedom, insofar as they are inculcated within the text, yet not—in all cases—directly referential to their respective sources. Furthermore, they obfuscate the interpretive process by invoking the imagery of preceding works only sporadically. No mention of Trimalchio and his feast occurs after Silas’s initial commentary; rather, the shadow of the classical work looms over the text

without impacting any later dialogues. Banville's Prospero, aside from being a wizard, is quite unlike the original Prospero, operating exclusively as a subject within the fiction developed by the narrator. Indeed, Berensmeyer's observation that "There can be no immediate connection between things as they are, between the facts that we think to have memorised, and our representations of them," applies to the sway held by intertextual reference as well as Gabriel's perception (Berensmeyer 92). Rather than complementing the work, Banville's allusions interrupt its flow, inviting close readings which yield largely worthless results.

Dialogical quirks add yet another layer of complexity to the voice of the novel. In an exchange with Gabriel, Silas exemplifies the curiosity inherent to the engagements between characters:

'Tell me, boy, what is your name?'

'Gabriel, sir.'

'Gabriel Sir?'

'No sir, Gabriel Godkin' (Banville 106).

Misinterpretation and awkwardness mark this conversation and numerous others throughout the text. Where the landscapes and figures described by Gabriel are by turns sublime and surreal, the interactions which he witnesses and in which he participates are consistently unsettling and difficult to sort out. Gabriel's confrontation with Sybil reaches across an entire spectrum of emotions, from the compassionate ("Would you like me to help you, Gabriel?"), to the troubled ("They say I'm a bitch, O yes they do, Gabriel, they

say that, but it's not true, not true at all"), to the enraged ("I'll laugh, yes I'll laugh, when they string you up and gut you")—all from a character who has previously been observed from a relative distance (Banville 142, 143). Conversations of this nature occur as frequently between central figures in the protagonist's life as outsiders. Gabriel's final talk with his father is comparably bizarre, with the latter falling into a disparaging rant ("O I was going to do great things, great bloody things, make a mark on the world, yes indeed. I soon learned [...] Look into your heart, boy, listen to it. What does it say to you? What does it show? Nothing. And that's what you'll learn is there") near his conclusion (Banville 92). Without a sufficiently clear explanation of the behaviors of the characters, the account becomes far less reliable. Any conversations which occur provoke questions rather than providing answers or assisting in characterization.

With each object and figure in Gabriel's world illuminated, and with very little explained, the scene itself is undermined. Although Gabriel's motion from the relative stasis of Birchwood to the radical dynamism of the circus is not unpredictable, the world which he inhabits is full of surprises, horror, rapid atmospheric changes, and the appearance of either discontinuous or illusorily continuous symbol systems. Despite Berensmeyer's rendering of the movement of these scenes as a "cyclical structure" (the novel begins from a retrospective point of view and ends in a similar position), the position of the protagonist with regards to the body of the narrative and time demand a more careful assessment of the progression of events (Berensmeyer 94). The sense of time is at best distorted; while the first and final chapters clearly take place in the present ("I feel I have already lived for a century and more;" "The harmony of the seasons mocks me"), the main body of the text is never limited to the recollection of the past: "I am thinking of

Simon Godkin furiously dying with his teeth sunk in the birchbark, of my mother screaming in the attic [...] Their violence will be visited on me, in the fullness of time” (Banville 11, 16, 175).

In the same way that Berensmeyer misreads Gabriel’s return to the present by the end of the novel as a sign of orientation, a reading of his account as purely retrospective, though credible in the sense that he is only examining the past, would understate the complexity of the chronology. Gabriel struggles to recall “[s]ome of these memories,” which “are in a language which I do not understand,” or alludes to future events without necessarily explaining their relevance to the current scene: “there was between us [Gabriel and Michael] a bond which would not be ignored however we tried, and we did try” (Banville 53). He also remembers events which took place before he was born, such as the condition of Birchwood following his great-great-grandfather’s appearance: “The estate was in ruin, bled white by agents and gombeen men” (15). The past will either force itself on the narrator, or he will choose to look away from crucial material, either out of displeasure or a sense of dramatic timing. Gabriel is never given purely to recollection or musings on the present; he is bothered by history from the very beginning, the future and his awareness of it intervene as he is recalling the past, and by the end, the past is, as ever, “incommunicable” (29).

In the same way that time is subject to a range of fluctuations, the world described by the protagonist is in a state of constant change. Surreal events take place, such as the “*spontaneous combustion*” which sees Granny Godkin reduced to “ashes on the wall, that rendered purplish mass in the chair,” and “two feet,” or the gruesome scene of Angel’s death: “Angel began to swell, I cannot explain it, she filled the doorway until the posts

groaned under the strain, and her massive trunk poured itself into every nook” (Banville 77, 80, 163). Silas’s tale of a “false coffin” used to economically dispose of the dead ceases to be “fantasy” when two members of the circus, Mario and Magnus, recall a funeral in which “a plain wood box with an ill-fitting panel underneath [...] was wrenched out to release the body” (Banville 145). The world changes as its inhabitants recount its features; Birchwood is troubled by “intruders” who “might have been ghosts had they not been indifferent to the sombre duties of ghosthood” and create in Gabriel’s father an “edgy rear-regardant look” (52). Of course, Michael and the protagonist “saw them first,” yet other characters are influenced by the same phantoms. The environment changes as the mood changes, though never predictably. With famine, misfortune, and death awaiting the circus, the “summer ended,” even though “the sun still shone,” and groups of possibly nonexistent “savage-fanged hermaphrodites stalked the countryside at night killing and looting” (144). Black humor prevails even in the wake of crucial events, preventing any particular mood from taking hold. Following the death of Ida and a wild conflict between the other members of the circus, Strongbow, Sergeant Trouncer, and his constable, the protagonist is surprised to learn that he is eating ““monkey stew,”” that is, the remains of Albert, the monkey belonging to Prospero’s Circus—and imagines the other performers “perched in a tree” or “served up piping hot in a can” (159). Gabriel inhabits a world that is anything but solid. What would be obvious symbols of the fragmentation of the Big House and the protagonist’s memory in another work, such as the “magnificent jigsaw puzzle” which “shattered with an absurdly inadequate, heartbreaking little clatter,” are never applied broadly enough to be regarded as organizing factors (42). Michael’s juggling act on the following page could be connected with the circus in the book’s second half, and Michael

could logically be associated with the outside world, considering the protagonist's heretofore unspoken denial of their fraternity, partly expressed in his escape from home. Still, the abundance of other, unaccounted-for symbols throughout the novel refutes the significance of these specific points—there are no definite aids to the clarification of the fiction.

Still debatable is Gabriel's role in the novel. Berensmeyer casts the protagonist as a sort of hands-on researcher experimenting with the limits of his perception, reality, and selfhood, caught up in a "carnavalesque celebration of existence" which "provides a space for [...] philosophical meditations on time and identity that reflect the artistic process of this novel" (Berensmeyer 95). Arguably, in constructing the figures of Prospero and his sister, or as Berensmeyer observes, separating the ever-changing world into an aggregate of "stillnesses" in the "game" which results in the possibly illegitimate "discovery of fixity within continuity," Gabriel is at play with his notions of what is and is not "real" in an internal and external sense (Banville 128). Still, the protagonist appears too stunned, even by his own memories, to be in complete control—thus his infrequent exclamations in the present tense ("Humankind is extraordinary"), his desire for forgiveness from the dead ("Granny! Forgive me"), and his musings on figures whose behaviors cannot be cleanly explained ("it was on her, on Sybil, our bright bitch, that the sorrow of the country [...] was visited against her will") by him or the reader (Banville 63, 78, 143).

Laura P. Zuntini de Izarra, in *Mirrors and Holographic Labyrinths: The Process of a 'New' Aesthetic Synthesis in the Novels of John Banville*, offers an alternative conception of Gabriel's position within *Birchwood*. Because he is as much a part of Banville's fiction as his past and its inhabitants, and is as vulnerable to the unpredictable nature of time and

his own past in recollection as in the moment, he is “seduced by the everyday unreality and reacts in the same way as the public, becoming another player in the game of enchanters and enchanted” (Zuntini 41). Gabriel may be the author of the past, but he is a fictional author, and as such, he is confined to the same untrustworthy universe as any other character, or the “public,” that is, the reader. He may appear to decide the limits of reality and move through time at his own pace, but he does not determine what takes place in his world, force it to be real, or deny the non-existence of the characters which he has imagined: “There is no girl [Gabriel’s sister]. There never was. I suppose I always knew that, in my heart. I believed in a sister in order not to believe in *him*, my cold mad brother. No Prospero either, there never is” (Banville 172). Gabriel knows that his quest is fruitless from the beginning, yet he continues, indicating his imprisonment within the limits of the story. He is as lost as the reader—there is no order, no truth, no preconceived delineation between the real and unreal.

By manipulating form and then eliding the very concept of it, as well as conjuring and dispelling the illusion of order in *Birchwood*, Banville directly challenges the limitations which have been placed upon the artistic process. The death of organization within the world and mind of Gabriel Godkin heralds nothing short of an affirmation of total artistic freedom. As disorienting as the by-product of this new creative power may be, the reward yielded by the prosaic demolition which takes place in the text signifies the genesis of a truly limitless range of prosaic opportunities. No longer constrained by stasis, the world of the new fiction can explore the whole of the human experience, take whatever shape its creator chooses, and flourish in the struggles of its inhabitants.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Banville, John. *Birchwood*. London: Picador, 1998.

Berensmeyer, Ingo, *John Banville: Fictions of Order*. Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag, 1999.

Hand, Derek, *John Banville: Exploring Fictions*. Dublin: Liffey Press, 2002.

Zuntini de Izarra, Laura P. *Mirrors and Holographic Labyrinths: The Process of a 'New' Aesthetic Synthesis in the Novels of John Banville*. London: International Scholars Publications, 1999.