

The Dark One and the Fair: John Banville's Historians of the Imagination and their Gender Stereotypes

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Abstract

So far, Banville has been largely a male critics' author. One of the reasons for this may be that Banville's protagonists are always male and that his women figures only exist in relation to these male protagonists. Moreover, Banville's narrative concerns have so far taken precedence over gender issues in critical discussions of his work. It is nonetheless astonishing that critics have as yet shown little sensitivity to such issues as gender and stereotype in Banville's work. This article examines the two complementary women figures in Banville's short novel *The Newton Letter*. The women in this novel (as in all of Banville's fiction) are always mediated through the mind of a male protagonist, a narrator, and, more than anything else, they reflect his desires and fears. In contrast with the scientific and/or philosophical assumptions these male protagonists aim to subvert, and in contrast with language, one of their most important tools, of which, however, they grow increasingly sceptical, they never subject their conceptions of women to critical scrutiny. The women, then, imagined creatures of these historians of the imagination who are *avowedly* inventors, are perceived as complementary to their ratio and intellect, and they come (to make rather a sweeping statement) in two categories. Either they are sensual, plump, unlovely, awkward, blonde and fairly simple-minded, offering themselves to the narrator; or they are slender, pale, dark-haired, unfathomable, elusive and therefore desirable. The article then broadens its focus and shows that, with variations, these two (rather clichéd) categories of the female haunt all of Banville's protagonists. Thus the female figures in his more recent work—most notably *Book of Evidence*, *Ghosts*, *Athena*—are variants of each other. Not only do the narrators take over images from visual art for their constructs, but Banville also has them take over female figures from their respective predecessors. They are thus preconceived in a double sense.

Those narrators, always men, talk and write too much, to the point where they must begin again to watch and listen. Women, who play such a silent role in the novels, embody a myth of intuitive wisdom and grace always lamented by those 'high cold heroes', those 'great

cold technicians' of the ambitious mind. This most fundamental opposition suggests that the tragedy of this fiction is as much one of the masculine personality as of the intellect. (McMinn 1991, 125)

With this comment Joseph McMinn concludes his critical study of John Banville's fiction and that short paragraph is about all that has ever been written about the role of women in Banville's work. So far, Banville has been largely a male critics' author; one of the reasons for this may be that Banville's protagonists are always male and that his women figures only exist in relation to these male protagonists. Moreover, Banville's narrative concerns, which have been labelled postmodernist—his rethinking of historical narrative, his working within conventions in order to subvert them, his predilection for intertextual and intra-textual links, his 'writing-as-experience-of-limits'¹—have so far taken precedence over gender issues in critical discussions of his work. Criticism on Banville's work has proliferated since the late seventies. As early as 1981, the *Irish University Review* devoted a special issue to the then 36-year-old author, and apart from many articles published thereafter on various aspects of his work, two monographs have appeared: Imhof (1989, revised in 1997); and McMinn (1991), now revised and brought up to date as *The Supreme Fictions of John Banville* (1999). Moreover, a PhD thesis (McIlroy 1991) was devoted to Banville's tetralogy (*Dr Copernicus, Kepler, The Newton Letter* and *Mefisto*). It is astonishing that so far, none of the critics has shown any sensitivity to such issues as gender and stereotype.

In what follows I will be mainly concerned with Banville's novels in which an Irish big house serves as a setting or has, at least, its reverberations. Banville's innovative and subversive use of the big house myth/image has already been commented on extensively.² However, it has not been taken into account that the big house novel has been shaped just as much if not more by women than by men and that in a majority of big house novels (at least in the twentieth century) the protagonists are women. They are young girls or spinsters for whom the house is their living space, protective shell for some, prison for others. Or else they are illegitimate daughters who are the loyal curators of a heritage not wholly theirs. These women are housebound to an extent that Banville's male protagonists can never be. Although big houses have left their marks indelibly on protagonists like Gabriel Godkin (*Birchwood*), Gabriel Swan (*Mefisto*) or Freddie Montgomery (*Book of Evidence*), these restless figures are essentially wandering heroes, in quest of a past that they are dimly aware of, a lost part of themselves.³

The most striking feature of Banville's women figures is their double complementariness: there are two complementary women figures in Banville's short novel *The Newton Letter* and with variations, these two, the dark one and the fair, haunt most if not all of Banville's protagonists.

Moreover, these women figures form complements to their male protagonists.

The Newton Letter (1982) can serve as a paradigm for *The Book of Evidence* (1989), *Ghosts* (1993) and *Athena* (1995). In all of them, the women figures are mediated through the mind of a male protagonist, a narrator, and, more than anything else, they reflect his desires and fears. These male protagonists, flaunting their scientific and/or philosophical assumptions which they aim to subvert, grow increasingly sceptical of one of their most important tools, language. In contrast, they rarely ever subject their conceptions of women to critical scrutiny, and if they do, their insights are ephemeral, ironic flashes. Women are the essential 'other', they are what the protagonist is not, they are what he lacks. The protagonists embody rationality and intellectualism: in the early books (e.g. *Kepler*) he is a scientist; then, in *The Newton Letter*, he is the biographer of a scientist with an eye for paintings; and in *The Book of Evidence*, *Ghosts* and *Athena* he is an art historian.⁴ These narrators do most of the talking, and, from *The Newton Letter* onwards, they perform the intellectual act of writing down the story. They are the little gods who create the fictional worlds ("Who speaks? I do. Little god" (Banville 1994, 4)). The women, then, imagined creatures of these narrators who are *avowedly* inventors, are perceived as complementary to their ratio and intellect, and they come (to make rather a sweeping statement) in two categories. Either they are sensual, plump, unlovely, awkward, blonde and fairly simple-minded, offering themselves to the narrator, or they are slender, pale, dark-haired, unfathomable, elusive and therefore desirable. Obviously, it is the latter types to whom the narrators feel reluctantly attracted and whom they even fall in love with.

1. *The Newton Letter*

An academic intent on finishing his magnum opus, a biography of Sir Isaac Newton, rents the gate lodge at Fern House. The scholar, an unnamed I-narrator, is a self-conscious and fairly withdrawn middle-aged man who has lost his bearings. He wonders whether he has lost his "faith in the primacy of the text" (Banville 1987a, 1). He is unable to go on with his work, cannot even account for his "crisis of faith; there was not even what could properly be called a crisis" (23). In an unprecedented way, this protagonist's stay at the gate lodge turns out to be an *éducation sentimentale* for "the dry old scholar" (52) as he calls himself. Although he does feel like an interloper at times and even confesses to watching the house with "remote prurience" (12), the narrator and tenant of the gate lodge at Ferns feels invaded by those living in the house: "Real people keep getting in the way now, objects, landscapes even," he complains to Clio, the addressee of his letter (1).⁵ The house is one such disruptive object getting in the way, as it brings back memories of regular train journeys as a child, when he would

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gaze at that silent house and wonder, in a hunger of curiosity, what lives were lived there ... I know of course, that those hidden lives wouldn't be much different from my own. But that was the point. It wasn't the exotic I was after but the *ordinary*, that strangest and most elusive of enigmas. (11; emphasis in the original).

His real attention is no longer on his academic writing but "elsewhere, suspended" (24), and "elsewhere" is where he is confronted with the ordinary which is getting in his way. This is similar to what he thinks happened to Newton. As his biographer, the I-narrator imagines the drama after the fire in Newton's room, when he was asked what had been lost: "Newton's mouth opens and a word like a stone falls out: *Nothing*. He notices details, early morning light through a window, his rescuer's one unshod foot and yellow toenails, the velvet blackness of burnt paper. He smiles" (23; emphasis in the original).

He imagines his protagonist in a crisis similar to his own. Newton's drama was that "it did not matter" what had been destroyed. The I-narrator and biographer's dilemma is that, to begin with, he suddenly feels far removed from his own work and then realizes that he is being gradually sucked up by ordinary life. Ironically the narrator, on his first visit to the house, thinks that "[s]ome large lesson seemed laid out here for me" (19)—but it is not what he has vaguely in mind. The lesson is about perception; at the end he must realize that he misconstrued the situation at Fern House from beginning to end, "failed to see the commonplace tragedy that was playing itself out in real life" (79).

The way in which we perceive the world and try to make sense of things is preconditioned: this is reflected in the textual underpinning of *The Newton Letter*.⁶ One of the two principal texts to which Banville's novel is indebted is Hugo von Hofmannsthal's *Ein Brief* ("The Letter of Lord Chandos"), which Banville draws on quite extensively throughout the novel, in particular for the second letter which he has Newton write to Locke.⁷ Hofmannsthal's text is a fictitious letter mirroring Hofmannsthal's own creative crisis at the beginning of this century (Imhof 1989, 145), which reflects the fictitious Newton's crisis which reflects the I-narrator's crisis which may reflect ... it is tenuous to go on. Banville's biographer who started out to spin his yarn and still does so sometimes ("old habits die hard" (6)) realizes that language can no longer be trusted. "Words fail me, Clio." The opening sentence of *The Newton Letter*, though innocuous enough, already points to his dilemma, which was also that of Lord Chandos. The relationship to the other text, Goethe's *Wahlverwandschaften* (*Elective Affinities*), lies in the names (Edward, Charlotte, Otilie, the Mittlers) and in the spiritual adultery which recalls Eduard's in Goethe's novel. However, Imhof has shown convincingly that the most important parallels between the two texts are "worked out through what the Newton biographer *imagines*",

and he sees in this manner of assessing reality with “soft feelers of imagination” (Banville 1987a, 42) a parallel to Goethe’s Eduard (Imhof 1983, 164 and 1997, 146; emphasis added).

1.1. *The Fair One*

Ottilie is a “big blonde girl” (4), with “the brave brightness of all big awkward girls” (9), a “large unlovely girl” with “pale eyebrows and pale blue eyes [which] gave her a scrubbed look” (9). She is clearly the one to make the first move, coming down to the lodge with freshly painted lips. “It’s strange to be offered, without conditions, a body you don’t really want” (25), is the narrator’s comment to her advances. He does not reject her but feels something he calls sadness when she undresses. For him, it is as if she was exposing not only her naked skin but also “her very innards, the fragile lungs, mauve nest of intestines, the gleaming ivory of bone, and her heart, passionately labouring” (26). His gaze is an X-ray, yet he implicitly accuses her of exposing too much, of leaving his imagination with no secrets to feed on. With her “blonde baroque splendour” (27) she seduces him, becomes his “very Venice”: “I stumbled lost in the blue shade of her pavements. Here was a dreamy stillness, a swaying, the splash of an oar. Then, when I least expected it, suddenly I stepped out into the great square, the sunlight, and she was a flock of birds scattering with soft cries in my arms” (26). This deliberately artful description of their first lovemaking may be a tribute to Ottilie’s gentleness and sensuality but above all it highlights the narrator’s erudition. Ottilie’s body supplies his imagination with a prompt—had not Venice been an important site for the European imagination? From Byron to Hofmannsthal to Proust to Sartre, “desire of Venice, for Venice or in Venice” (Tanner 1992, 4) has been a crucial force in European literature, and with this tiny vignette the narrator alludes to, and by implication, puts himself into line with the works of great authors.⁸ Ottilie as person does not interest him much, and not surprisingly, the narrator soon gets bored with her, having “assumed from the first that [he] understood her absolutely, so there was no need to speculate much about her” (53). Of course she realizes his waning interest, and tries to keep it with the sexual games she devises, which increasingly become a “frenzied sorcery of the senses” sometimes frightening him (53). What really keeps him with her is his own secret, however, which is paradoxical, for having fallen in love with the other woman in the house, Charlotte, the dark one, he conjures up Charlotte’s presence when he is in bed with Ottilie, so much so that the two women merge to become a third, Charlottilie (48). Significantly, he mellows considerably towards Ottilie after his departure: now Ottilie is no longer a presence, but an absence. In a photograph Ottilie sends him, he sees her “essential otherness, made poignant and precious because she seems to be offering it into my keeping” (78).

In Banville’s work, Ottilie, the voluptuous blonde who freely offers all her bounties, is preceded by Rosie and Mag, the milkmaid, in *Birchwood*.

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The participants in the game, adolescents still, are considerably younger, the narrative tone more distanced, more ironic, as can be gathered from what Gabriel says of his "affair" with Rosie: "[i]t was founded on mutual astonishment at the intricacy of things, my brain, her cunt, things like that" (68), a statement which might indeed be said to apply to other Banville protagonists' affairs. In both novels the basic pattern is the same: a narrator is initiated into a new world by a female figure who seduces him. In *Birchwood* the new world is above all a woman's body; in *The Newton Letter*, it is of course Otilie's body but also the world of the ordinary, "that strangest and most elusive of enigmas" of which Otilie is part. In both novels, the narrator, with his analytical mind, sees the female body in its parts rather than as a whole. In the case of Otilie, he even imagines her inner parts, which might be taken to be a further variant of Gabriel Godkin's fantasy: "It must have been that chance encounter [with Mag, the milkmaid] which left me with an abiding impression of the female as something like a kind of obese skeleton, a fine wire frame hung with pendulous fleshfruit, awkward, clumsy, frail in spite of its bulk, a motiveless juggernaut" (Banville 1984, 13). What Otilie is to the narrator—his "very Venice" in which he "travels without maps, a worried tourist" (Banville 1987a, 26) Gabriel Godkin: "In her, too, I discovered nooks and musty crannies, crevices which reminded me of nothing so much as the backwaters of the house where I had played as a child, that house which now sleeps around me as lightly as a bird while my stealthy pen blackens my pages" (Banville 1984, 14). In both instances the female body provides the space for the man's movements, his discoveries.

1.2. *The Dark One*

"Stepping past Charlotte in the doorway I caught her milky smell—and heard myself offering her a month's rent in advance" (Banville 1987a, 4). From the very beginning we know that Charlotte is the chosen one, and aptly enough their first encounter proper is in the greenhouse. Dark-haired and tall, she has a "fine-boned slender grace that the dowdiest of clothes could not mask" (12), a "fine head" and a "slender neck" (19), a "pale heart-shaped face" (63) and "pale hands" (39). She reminds the narrator of the Gore-Booth sisters of Lissadell in Yeats's famous poem—"one a gazelle" (Yeats 1981, 263–64) ... Charlotte is *his* gazelle. He feels that she is never quite there, even wondering whether she might be hard of hearing, a possibility he finds oddly touching (14). That she is full of tranquilizers because she is worried about Edward's illness never occurs to him. Her distractedness, her elusiveness are the very qualities that attract him. Her elusiveness is also reflected in the difficulty he has to describe her:

Such words don't exist. They would need to be not more than forms of intent, balanced on the brink of saying, another version of silence.

Every mention I make of her is a failure. Even when I say just her name it sounds like an exaggeration. When I write it down it seems impossibly swollen, as if my pen had slipped eight or nine redundant letters into it. Her physical presence itself seemed overdone, a clumsy representation of the essential she. That essence was only to be glimpsed obliquely, on the outer edge of vision, an image always there and always fleeting, like the afterglow of a bright light on the retina. (44)

A writer's despair over the inadequacy of language when trying to praise his beloved is of course a literary trope as old as literature itself; language is usually perceived as lacking the originality which would pay tribute to the uniqueness of the beloved. In *The Newton Letter*, however, the narrator's dilemma is somewhat different. Language is too assertive, too much of a presence, every word pushing him towards determining something that he wishes to leave undetermined: her essential she. "Always there and always fleeting": the narrator dreams up his *ferne Geliebte* as he admits in one of his more lucid moments (43). In the best of his mental photographs "she is not present at all" and only "her glow remains" (44). Her absence, of course, leaves room for his imagination to create her. His diffidence about using words to describe her contradicts his propensity to see her as a work of art, a painting—a Cranach, or an El Greco (63, 71). When he contemplates whether "it is possible to love someone of whom one has so little" he uses the imagery of painting for what he hesitates to call his love for her: "Perhaps call it concentration, then, the concentration of the painter intent on drawing the living image out of the potential of mere paint. I would make her incarnate. By force of my unwavering, meticulous attention she would rise on her scallop shell through the waves and *be*" (45). End of paragraph. The narrator as god, in an act of concentration begetting the goddess of love, his beloved. He knows that he takes himself too seriously altogether, for the next paragraph he opens with: "I did nothing, of course, said nothing, made no move." But the concentration, the meticulous attention that would beget her—instead of bringing forth his book—reinforce his next sentence: "It was a passion of the mind" (45). The self-mockery is revealing. As with Otilie, it is his own act of imagining—and not the real woman—that stimulates the narrator.

2. Homogeneous Images of Women

Charlotte and Otilie are complementary figures who embody the familiar opposing poles of saintly woman and whore, which reflects the narrator's rather clichéd concept of woman. Within Banville's work, Otilie was to be the last of her type on stage in this pure and undiluted form. In contrast, the figure of Charlotte, the dark lady, elusive, fragile, enigmatic, reminiscent herself of Gabriel Godkin's mother in *Birchwood*, makes her

appearance in every novel following *The Newton Letter*, gradually accruing some of the qualities of the fair one. The female figures are thus recognizably variants of each other, which is perhaps best illustrated in a collection of quotes from the novels in question. The matrix is prepared by mothers. Thus Mama in *Birchwood*:

Tall, very slim, with very long fine brown hair which each morning she bound into a burnished knot at the nape of her neck and each night unbound again. There is, in the dark past, like something in Rembrandt, a corner illuminated where her hair tumbles softly in silence around her shoulders in the yellow dust of lamplight. I remember her as neither young nor old, but thirtyish, you might say, awkward and yet graceful, with perfect hands, yes, graceful and awkward all at once, I cannot put it better than that. I think she had a beautiful face, long and narrow, as pale as paper, with big dark eyes ... Words. I cannot see her. When I try I cannot see her, I mean I cannot find any solid shape of her, as I can of Granny Godkin for example, or of my father, those who vibrate in the mind like unavoidable stars. Mama seems to have left behind her nothing of her essential self. (26–27)

She had a smell, of milk, of violets, the smell of madness. (98)

Women, in earlier novels often with heavy hair, who are at the same time awkward and graceful (associated with asymmetry in a face), women with pale long faces, with remarkable hands and a milky smell—such women will again and again make their appearance in Banville's novels. Like Mama in *Birchwood*, they elude the narrator's inner eye or they are at least "silent" and "enigmatic" as Gabriel Swan's mother in *Mefisto*: "a stranger, silent and enigmatic, disconsolately smiling, like a dark madonna in the brownish sea-light of some old painting" (4). From his mother, who had been born in a cottage behind the stables at Ashburn, Gabriel has inherited an infatuation with the big house. On one of his forays to the fringes of the Ashburn grounds he is lured into the house by Sophie:

She stood very close to me, examining me intently with her eager, lopsided smile, and made a sort of mewling sound at the back of her throat. I felt as if I had come face to face with a creature of the wild, a deer, perhaps or a large, delicate, fearless bird. I started to say something, but she shook her head, and touched a finger lightly to her lips, to show me she was deaf, and could not speak. (42)

Sophie, moreover, has "a milky odour" (46), later he catches her "warmish, lilac smell" (84). Her hair is a hot, heavy mass of which he could sense the

dark weight (46). Her slender hands are also a case in point, and she, too, has a "long, heart-shaped face [which] was slightly lopsided", giving her "an expression at once eager and wistful" (36). She is a puzzle that "would not solve" (55).

In the second part of *Mefisto*, we encounter Adele, the punkish variant of the dark lady who in many ways points forward to A. in *Athena*. She has "a pinched, heart-shaped face (154), "pale, narrow wrists" (144), and a "thin almond-white body" (157). The smell Gabriel associates with her is, once more, the smell of milk and violets (200). She is a chain smoker, a drug addict as it turns out, reminding us of Charlotte who was addicted to valium. She too is not quite there, "as if part of her attention were elsewhere, concentrating on something beyond me" (157), and her "absence" is a prerequisite for his imaginative recreation of her.

In Banville's next novel, *The Book of Evidence*, we find the narrator again between two women: "I see the two of them opposite me there in that milky twilight, the dark one and the fair: they have an air of complicity, of secret amusement, as if they are sharing a mild, not very unkind joke at my expense" (65). He is captivated by them because they embody an ideal that he "had not known [he] harboured until now" (65). The "two of them": Daphne, his "lady of the laurels" (7), his "dark mysterious darling" (72), is his future wife. And Anna Behrens, ash-blond, with "long, slightly off-centre melancholy face with ... close-set grey eyes and florentine mouth" (62f.), is the one he only much later realized he loved. The two women, the dark one and the fair, now share attributes of the dark lady. Aptly, the relationship culminates in an afternoon *à trois*, after which the dark one and the fair have melted together in the narrator's mind (71). This is reminiscent, of course, of the Charlottilie scene and it points forward to a scene in *Athena* which, in its banality, deconstructs the surreal touch which went with the scenes in *The Newton Letter* and *The Book of Evidence*.

In a way the most intriguing figure in *The Book of Evidence* is the woman of the *Portrait of a Woman with Gloves*. This is the picture Freddie Montgomery is enraptured with, and for which he kills a maid-servant because she happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong moment. The woman in the portrait wears a black dress, has "a face with a slightly Eastern cast" (104). With "her querulous, mute insistence of her eyes", which he can neither escape nor assuage, "she requires of [him] some great effort, some tremendous feat of scrutiny and attention ... It is as if she were asking [him] to let her live" (105). This is the mirror image of the Newton biographer's act of concentration on his beloved Charlotte. Another important characteristic of the painted woman is that she "does not want to be here, and yet cannot be elsewhere" (78), which is in contrast to her sisters in Banville's fiction who can, or rather, in order to be desirable, need to be elsewhere. Fixed on the canvas, her presence is "more real than the majority of her sisters out here in what we call real life" as we are told in *Ghosts*, where the story of the

picture robbery is retold (Banville 1994, 84). It is this presence that unsettles Freddie, makes him “‘fall in love’, as they like to put it, with a painted image” (Banville 1994, 84). Her very presence, though a painted and therefore a fictional one, is his undoing. It is as if the lady of Poe’s “Oval Portrait” had finally taken revenge for all those women who had withered away under their lover’s possessive stare. Occasionally, ironic detachment subverts the narrators’ surrender to these dark ladies as when the narrator in *Ghosts* reflects on his account of how he had spotted Flora (inevitably “wearing an affected far-off look” and “beautiful like one of Modigliani’s girls, with that heavy black hair, those tilted eyes, that hesitant, slightly awkward pigeon-toed grace” (Banville 1994, 14)): “She sprang out from their midst like the Virgin in a busy Annunciation, calm as Mary and nimbed with that unmistakable aura of the chosen” (Banville 1994, 69). And in an aside he then comments on his own account: “(By the way, why so coy about using her name? Want to rob her of her individuality, eh?—want to turn her into *das Ewig-Weibliche* that will lead you on to salvation, is that it, you sly old Faustus? ... What have I said?)” (Banville 1994, 70).

This comment points to A. in *Athena* who, indeed, is not given a name and who will after all *not* lead Freddie on to salvation. A., who has left the scene before the beginning of the book, is perhaps the woman most present in all of Banville’s books in her absence. She preoccupies the narrator’s mind from beginning to end in *Athena*. He holds her in his head (1)—she is literally his brainchild—like Athena, who is Zeus’s brainchild. The narrator acts as a god again. She turns out to be Adele resurrected, this woman dressed in black, with crow-black hair, this time cut “in page-boy style” (38), and her “pale, heart-shaped face” (39). Small hands with nicotine stains, bitten fingernails. Stiletto heels. She will entice the narrator further into the ‘city of the flesh’ than any of her sisters before her. A. is a long way from Mama in *Birchwood*, yet she is still recognizably a descendant. As readers of Banville’s novels we have the benefit of watching how the narrator’s first woman, his mother, transmutes from saint to *femme fatale*. This cursory *tour d’horizon* of the major women figures in Banville’s novels reveals the narrators’ anguished attraction to what Freud called the ‘dark Continent’. These narrators, great cold technicians of the mind, not only lack emotional intelligence, which makes them somewhat helpless in their dealings with women, as McMinn, quoted at the beginning, has suggested. What is of equal importance is that they make it their business to imagine things or to be historians of the imagination. The latter, in particular, would be overly familiar with the (visual) imaginations of women in art, which would not leave unaffected their own perceptions of women, and therefore their own imaginings of women. This inescapable preconditioning of the mind is also reflected when one of the narrators laments: “what is it lovers ever love but the images they have of each other?” (Banville 1994, 84).

What has all this to do with Banville's use of the big house novel? Perhaps just this: in *The Newton Letter*, the narrator's preconceived and, as it turns out, utterly misconceived idea about the people at the big house is also symptomatic of his perception of the world, and in particular of his perception of women. He takes the great gulf between him and Charlotte above all to be rooted in a difference of class, when in fact it is his empathy that is amiss. It is ironic that a historian should fall prey to the cliché of the patrician family in the crumbling big house. In a similar way the narrators of the subsequent novels have their preconceived ideas about women; preconceived in the above sense that they take over images from visual art, preconceived also in that they take over the female figure from one of their predecessors' (con)texts and modify it to suit their purposes. The narrator of *The Newton Letter* realizes "the cruelty of [his] wilful blindness" at the end (80). His successors, though masters of wit and irony, and though often self-conscious about their writing, fail to see the cruelty of their wilful imaginings of woman. Except for their rare moments of lucidity, when they glimpse something of another truth through the mist of their own conceptions, they fail to reveal their own imaginings as what they are: the reproductions of a myth of woman as the essential 'other'.

NOTES

¹ Cf. Hutcheon 1988, especially chapter 1.

² Kreilkamp argues that "in writing *Birchwood* Banville turns to conventional literary forms in order to dissolve and then reinvent them. He is strikingly aware of the implications of the forms he recalls. His version of the Big House novel is, in a significant way, a fulfillment of these implications as well as a parody of the tradition itself" (1987, 219). Imhof, basing his arguments on statements by Banville himself (cf. interview with Sheenan in 1979), passes over the Irish background in his writing and foregrounds his internationalism. He raises the question whether *Birchwood* can be said to belong to the genre at all, indeed he thinks to call *Birchwood* a big house novel is somewhat naïve, too simple (1989, 53). In the introduction to his critical study, McMinn, in return, repudiates Imhof's contention that the Irish background is totally unimportant to Banville, having already emphasized Banville's delight in playing with the traditional form in an article in 1988 (94). Similar positions were taken by Molloy (1981, 4), O'Neill (1990, 209f) and Cronin (1991, 227). For Deane, Banville was the only novelist in whose fiction the traditional imageries of the Irish novel, images of the big house, were "wedded to the experimental tradition" (1985, 32). In whatever way he uses the image of the big house, houses are the hallmark of almost any Banville novel: *Birchwood* (1973) is the name of the house which provides the setting for his first novel in which he uses the

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big house theme, in *The Newton Letter* (1982) there is Fern House; in *Mefisto* (1986) Ashburn House provides a haunting background for the first part, *The Book of Evidence* (1989) has the son of a big house as its protagonist, who, after a long stay abroad, returns to the house to find it in rather a dilapidated state, with his mother living in the kitchen, and the pictures sold to cover debts which he had inflicted on the house. *Ghosts* (1993) is set in a "large house of another age" on an island—the age being the Victorian. For *Athena* (1995), he chose a run-down Georgian town house.

³ Both *Birchwood* and *Mefisto* have affinities to Maturin's *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820); *Mefisto* also draws on the Faust topos.

⁴ Note that Maskell in Banville's latest novel, *The Untouchable* (1997), is also a trained art historian.

⁵ Clio is of course also the name of the Greek muse of history, but later the narrator once addresses her as Cliona, thus associating his addressee with a Celtic otherworld lady in literary and oral tradition.

⁶ The most comprehensive treatment of the intertextuality of *The Newton Letter* is Imhof's chapter 7 in his *Critical Introduction* (140-52). Burgstaller has also taken up this aspect, adding a few annotations to Imhof's.

⁷ Banville acknowledges this source at the end of the text.

⁸ There is another aspect to this Venetian imagery. Tony Tanner argues that Venice became such an important site of the European imagination not least because what was once "the greatest and richest and most splendid republic of the world", was now declined and fallen (4). By analogy, but on a much smaller scale of course, the Anglo-Irish big house, also declined and fallen, has for a long time provided such a site for the literary imagination within Irish literature in English. A still further connection lies in the fact that Hugo von Hofmannsthal, whose "Letter of Lord Chandos" plays such an important role in *The Newton Letter*, also wrote about Venice in his *Andreas* fragments.

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