

CAUGHT INSIDE: THE IMAGINATIVE LEGACY
IN JOHN BANVILLE'S *GHOSTS*

Intelligent reading suggests reading which focusses not exclusively on the text in hand, but on a text which to some extent reflects and echoes what has gone before. Henrik Ibsen, in reference to his play *Ghosts*, remarked: "We sail with a corpse in the cargo." (*Ghosts* Intro 10) Perhaps in literary terms the corpse, the corpus, is the body of previous literature which in some way or form acts upon the reader and the writer, so conditioning the understanding of the work. Ibsen's comment on his play is relevant to the Irish novelist John Banville's 1993 novel of the same title. In "*Ghosts*", Banville addresses and considers the difficulties and the consequences of the artistic process, both for himself and for those who have gone before. Banville produces art and this art contemplates its own nature and the nature of its creation. In effect he treats of a number of issues fundamental, not just to him as a postmodern writer, but also to his predecessors, those who in the past have created art. Through a continuous and multilayered process of intertextual allusion the author brings figures from the past to work on his art. If these writers no longer live they, and their characters, are nevertheless present, they are conjured up in this narrative. As our narrator states on page 55: "Worlds within worlds. They bleed into each other. I am at once here and there, then and now as if by magic" (55). In other words Banville's characters do not merely inhabit current time but reach back to previous incarnations.

The intricate allusion that I have referred to above is also used by the author to illustrate elements such as imagination and epiphany or moment which, as I aim to show, lend the work a certain ghostly quality. To facilitate understanding I will offer a brief summary of the novel.

The novel is divided into four sections. The first section opens with a group of seven people struggling up sand dunes on a beach with behind them their boat stuck on a sandbank, betrayed by "the miscalculations of a tipsy skipper" (3). As this first scene ends the narrator states: "A little world is coming into being. Who speaks? I do. Little God" (4). The castaways are on an island, and led by Felix they seek shelter in the house occupied by Professor Kreutznaer, an expert on the painter Jean Vaublin, his assistant Licht and our unnamed ex-convict narrator whom we can nonetheless identify as Freddie Montgomery from Banville's previous work. Freddie spends his time between menial tasks such as collecting wood and the completion of the work on Vaublin that the professor has handed over to him. In the second section we are brought back to Freddie's release from prison and his journey to the island recounted in contradiction to the the first section. A description of Vaublin's painting "*Le monde d'or*" comprises the third part of the novel. In the painting the central figure has a vague aspect and as the narrator informs us x-rays show another face, possibly that of a woman, underneath. The painting also depicts a boat docked at the water's edge and a group of people

making its way towards it. The final section is resonant of the third, with the castaways now going down the hill from the house to the boat just as in the painting.

As we can see Banville is offering us, in a typically postmodern manner, elements which are both complementary and contradictory. The painting and the novel are similar but different and intrinsically linked. This semi-complete imitation is augmented by allusion to work both by Banville and other previous writers. The imitation is never total it is never truly mimetic; and this reality is true also for Freddie who exists in a world that is not truly human, but imagined: Freddie is created in art. Coleridge sought to define the imagination as the principle of creativity in art. In chapter 13 of *Biographia Literaria* he describes the poetic imagination: "It dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to recreate; or where this process is rendered impossible, yet still at all events it struggles to idealise and to unify. It is essentially vital." In chapter 14 he explores the way in which the imagination creates harmonious wholes (poems for example) out of disparate experience: "This power ... reveals itself in the balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities: of sameness, with difference; of the general, with the concrete; the idea with the image ... a more than usual state of emotion, with more than usual order." The romantics were questers, through the imagination, of a pure sublime. As Harold Bloom put it: "The centre of high romantic consciousness is found in each poet's difficult realization of the sublime, a realization that internalizes the quest pattern of the ancient literary form of the romance or marvelous tale, suspended in its context halfway between natural and supernatural realms" (Bloom 6). Bloom is thus indicating that the romantic imaginative creative process moves towards the realization of something suspended between natural and supernatural realms, in other words in a sort of ghostly realm.

For Keats the creative essence of poetry was in, as he put it, the "greeting of the spirit" (Letters, 1, p. 242-243) which give a thing a new existence. Such creativity thus brings a sort of life yet this life does not correspond to anything found in nature. Keats recognizes this in his contemplation of the Grecian Urn:

Fair youth, beneath the trees, thou canst not leave
Thy song, nor ever can those trees be bare;
Bold lover, never, never canst thou kiss,
Though winning near the goal - yet, do not grieve;
She cannot fade, thou hast not thy bliss,
For ever wilt thou love, and she be fair! (15-20).

In effect the youth, the girl, the tree through the artistic imagination have been brought into being but they are trapped in the urn. They, like ghosts, hover on the edge of our world never to die. The allusion to Keat's poem is evident in Freddie's ruminations on the painting:

Who does not know, if only from postcards or the lids of chocolate boxes, these scenes suffused with tenderness and melancholy that yet have something harsh in them, something almost inhuman? *Le monde d'or* is one of those handful of timeless images that seem to have been hanging forever in the gallery of the mind. There is

something mysterious here beyond the inherent mysteriousness of art itself. I look at this picture, I cannot help it, in a spirit of shamefaced interrogation, asking, What does it mean, what are they doing, these enigmatic figures frozen forever on the point of departure, what is this atmosphere of portentousness without apparent portent? There is no meaning, of course, only a profound and inexplicable significance; why is that not enough for me? Art imitates nature not by mimesis but by achieving for itself a natural objectivity, I of all people should know that. Yet in this picture there seems to be a kind of valour in operation, a kind of tight-lipped, admirable fortitude, as if the painter knows something that he will not divulge, whether to deprive us or to spare us is uncertain. Such stillness; though the scene moves there is no movement; in this twilight glade the helpless tumbling of things through time has come to a halt: what other painter before or after has managed to illustrate this fundamental paradox of art with such profound yet playful artistry? These creatures will not die, even if they they have never lived. They are wonderfully detailed figurines, animate yet frozen in immobility: I think of the little manikins on a music box, or in one of those old town-hall clocks, poised, waiting for the miniature music that will never start up, for the bronze bell that will not peal. It is the very stillness of their world that permits them to endure; if they stir they will die, will crumble into dust and leave nothing behind save a few scraps of brittle lace, a satin bow, a shoe buckle, a broken mandolin. (94)

Clearly some of the non-literary art forms delineate more graphically this imaginative representation. Freddie himself in fact at one stage desires to be a statue in the garden and in reference to the enlightenment figure Diderot he states:

Diderot himself had great reverence for statues; he thought of them as living, somehow: strange, solitary beings, exemplary, aloof, closed on themselves and at the same time yearning in their mute and helpless way to step down into our world, to laugh or weep, know happiness or pain, to be mortal, like us (196-197).

However this phenomenon is not reserved for the plastic arts as the characters in the narrative are depicted in the same way. As Freddie said of Licht: "There were little wells of wrinkles at the corners of his mouth and eyes, very fine like cracks in china" (106). And he himself, Freddie, is thought to be cracked, which means mad but puns on the plastic theme. So in other words he as a character in the narrative is fixed forever in a non-human dimension: "some incarnation this is. I have achieved nothing, nothing. I am what I always was, alone as always, locked in the same old glass prison of myself" (236).

While the plastic arts afford greater definition for Freddie he is elsewhere given less substance. In the painting *Le monde D'or* the central figure Pierrot corresponds to Freddie, yet as I mentioned above, x-rays show beneath his face another face, possibly that of a woman. He is less than substantial, ethereal. In fact we can see Freddie as an Ariel like figure. In *The Tempest* Ariel works for the learned Prospero just as Freddie works for the professor. Ariel is often termed the poet Prospero's imagination and in the play is used by him to shipwreck a se-

ries of characters on the island. Freddie, or the writer working through Freddie, brings his own series of characters to the island. These characters do not correspond exactly to those in *The Tempest* and Freddie in fact to some extent plays the roles of both Ariel and Caliban: being both an imaginative conduit and a wood collector. But the parallels are considerable, even Licht like Caliban, turns out to be the original resident on the island; and most significantly both the novel and the play contemplate their own significance, and the limitations of the artistic illusion through the painting and the masque. We are made to ask: What part does the creative imagination play? To what extent do its creations relate to what we call, perhaps begging a larger question, reality? Is this reality something we bring into being by the strength of our imaginative project, or something that can be said to be really objectively there? Is it in the natural world or is it hovering beyond? Prospero comments on the masque, speaking of the "baseless fabric of this vision" (IV, i) he locates it in the realm of just that, a vision.

For both Banville and Shakespeare the painting and the masque, because of their immediacy, facilitate questioning on the nature of the imagination. In Keats's "Ode On A Grecian Urn" the urn serves the same purpose. The figures on the urn have been caught in a single instant or in a moment. Possibly one can assert that the imaginative faculty allows us draw aside the veil covering our senses and allows us see the soul, the real nature of what we witness in a moment, an atemporal instant of revelation. In "Ode On A Grecian Urn" Keats captures this moment of beauty or truth expressing it equally in an illuminating epiphany:

Beauty is truth, truth beauty, - that is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know (49-50).

Keats believed in intensity in his poetry and intensity of perception and he valued the unique quality of each event to suddenly come alive, to reveal itself, to show its "intellect, its countenance" (*Letters*, 1, p. 301) to use Keats' words. In fact in his letters he admits how the magnificence of certain places almost surpass every imagination and how, when with people "the identity of everyone in the room begins to press upon me that, I am in a little time annihilated" (*Letters*, 1, p. 387). These moments for Keats reveal that the intellect, the countenance, perhaps the spirit of external objects come to him through his imagination.

Gerard Manley Hopkins borrowed from Keats to develop what he termed 'Inscape', where in visionary moments of witnessing nature he could see manifest: "The beauty of our Lord" (*Journals and Papers* p. 199). In effect he experiences the spirit of his Christian God. James Joyce uses the christian term epiphany but grafts it into a modern secular discourse. In *Stephen Hero* the "sudden spiritual manifestations", the moments of illumination, the spirits of a common aesthetic experience are like revelations of a mystical kind, except that God has been removed.

The legacy of the above examples is pronounced in Banville's *Ghosts* especially those of Keats and Joyce. Consider the quotation given above on *Le Monde D'or* or the following:

What happens does not matter; the moment is all. This is the golden world. The painter has gathered his little group and set them down in this wind-tossed glade, in this delicate, artificial light, and painted them as angels and as clowns. It is a world where nothing is lost, where all is accounted for while yet the mystery of things is preserved; a world where they may live, however briefly, however tenuously, in the failing evening of the self, solitary and at the same time together somehow here in this place, dying as they may be and yet fixed forever in a luminous, unending instant (231).

This paragraph concludes the third section of the novel, the section describing the painting, and could be considered one of the key passages in the work.

The Joycean epiphanies in the novel are numerous, for example take the moment when Felix knocks on the door of the house. The narrative pauses to reflect on the moment, "Here it is, the moment where worlds collide, and all I can detect is laughter, distant soft, sceptical" (11). There are also many isolated epiphanies or moments without a narrative base that suggest the shout Stephen Daedalus calls 'A manifestation of God'. On two occasions Croke suddenly appears to shout the word "Jesus". The Joycean technique of merely inserting an element of a character or a key to that character is also present, an example being Felix's red hair. It pokes out frequently without overt reference to him. Its red indicates Felix but also possibly hints that he is the devil or Mephistopheles coming back to Faustus the Professor. Joyce's distillation technique is in evidence too, for example as Emma Clery in Joyce is gradually pared down to the initials E. C., the Dutch or South African woman Mrs Vanden becomes Mrs V with no christian name. Or what of the following from the last section of the book?: "'What a start you gave me, ' Felix said to me aimably, 'rearing up out of the dark like that. I thought you were old Nick.'" (241). Here, aside from the tapping of the imagination hinted at by the rearing up out of the dark, Felix suggests someone else is old Nick, the devil, when in fact it would appear to correspond to himself. But also old Nick I suspect refers to Nicolas Copernicus, about whom Banville wrote a faction novel in which Felix appears for the first time. This is but one of many references to Banville's earlier works. All his past fiction is invoked, not only his fiction but all fiction through the complex intertextuality. On page 104 the following suddenly appears in italics: "Oh? Childe Someone to the dark tower came. I hope she ..." Here Banville evokes Browning's phantasmagorical poem 'Child Roland to the dark tower came' which in turn echoes King Lear and Browning's poetic precursors and pre-figures Yeats in 'Cuchulain comforted'. Browning's Child Roland seems to centre upon its vision of a wilfully ruined quester whose own strength of imagination has become a de-forming force. *Ghosts* invokes all the imaginative process and in combining so many diverse, contradictory and discordant qualities he reaffirms the earlier quote from Coleridge (perhaps Banville's postmodern novel is suggesting a fundamental similarity in the romantic and postmodern projects). But is this whole past moving towards a valedictory key, to an affirmative 'Yes' as in Joyce? At the end of the novel we are told the painting is a fake, an imitation

possibly created by the Professor or Vaublin's double. The book ends in the following way: "My writing is almost done: Vaublin shall live! If you call this life. He too was no more than a copy, of his own self. As I am of mine. No: No riddance."

Does this mean Banville is Ruing the poverty of imagination as his book, his characters, his Freddie are just copies of past imaginings? Is he punning on the mimesis theme? The final No: No riddance hints at Ulysses, but here the final qualifying epiphany is ostensibly negative.

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