

A Library of
Literary Criticism

modern
IRISH
literature

Compiled and
edited by
DENIS LANE
and
CAROL McCrory LANE

MODERN IRISH LITERATURE

Compiled and edited by

**Denis Lane
and
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INTRODUCTION

Like its companion volumes in the Library of Literary Criticism, this book provides a comprehensive view of a major national literature by bringing together selections of criticism on the individual writers whose works constitute that literature.

Our subject here is Irish writing of modern times. In this collection of more than seven hundred items the reader will find not only a composite picture of the literary history of Ireland in the twentieth century, but also a series of portraits of this century's outstanding Irish authors—poets, dramatists, novelists, short-story writers, essayists—as seen through the eyes and minds of their most thoughtful reviewers and critics. Collectively, the entries on a particular author, arranged chronologically, give an impression of that writer's growth, status, or special qualities; or they may trace new avenues of interest in his work taken by successive generations of readers; or, if he or she is a younger writer, they may indicate those features of the work that have attracted early recognition.

Modern Irish Literature covers 87 authors, both of the north and the south, all of whom may be termed Irish by virtue of birth, parentage, and domicile, or by the fact that their work consistently makes use of the “matter of Ireland”: its culture and history, its topography and iconography. The inclusion of each author was determined by one additional criterion: the degree to which each has provoked significant and sustained interest among various commentators. That so small a country as Ireland should have produced in so brief a period of time as many writers of standing as we are able to represent here is evidence of the astonishing creativity and vigor of Irish writing and of the preeminence of the Irish writer in the development of modern literature in the English language. The chief figures in this development—the giant figures of W. B. Yeats, Sean O’Casey, James Joyce, Samuel Beckett—have, of course, achieved monumental recognition, but there are others—among them Patrick Kavanagh, Flann O’Brien, Austin Clarke, Seamus Heaney—who are also on their way to achieving paramount status. All are well represented here, together with others of established reputation, and together also with many who are perhaps less widely known outside Ireland.

The earliest selections in this volume date from around the turn of the century. The reader will find that then, as now, it was often the literary artist himself who was the first judge of the efforts of his fellows, and for that reason there is value to be gained in reading, for example, Yeats’s 1894

opinion of Russell's *Homeward: Songs by the Way*, or Russell's own reception of Colum's 1907 collection *Wild Earth*. Even when the author-critic had been joined by the literary journalist and the academic critic, his voice still remained a vital one in the assessment of modern Irish letters, an involvement illustrated by a number of selections, particularly those by Denis Johnston on Flann O'Brien, Kiely on Stuart, Fallon on Kavanagh, O'Faolain on Lavin, and Seamus Heaney on Richard Murphy.

In compiling this volume we have attempted to use as wide a range of sources as possible. Much emphasis has been placed on the use of periodicals, especially since in the first quarter of the century they provided a primary forum for literary evaluation, particularly for the author as critic. [For this reason there is cause to regret the present absence of a comprehensive index to twentieth-century Irish periodical literature.] By the 1930s, however, Irish literature had become an international possession, its reception falling firmly within the preserve of critics American, British, and European as often as Irish.

Another aim in selecting the items of criticism for this volume has been to illustrate the different elements from which modern Irish literature has been formed. We recognize, for instance, the central influence of Gaelic culture, as embodied in the traditions of folk drama, the oral peasant poetry, and early Irish myth. In a land fraught with political and religious contradictions this same literature was both a witness to, and an instrument of, the urge toward cultural and political synthesis. Equally, the Irish writer has absorbed cultural and literary perspectives from Europe and America with the result that he, or she, has become not only the practitioner, but also, on occasion, the fount of an international modernist style. Given these various components (each in itself the product of many parts), it is not surprising, therefore, to find in modern Irish literature works that range from the pastoral to the apocalyptic, or (to use the words of two early commentators, David Morton and George Russell respectively), from "the literature of lamentation" to "the sun of realism." It is the reception accorded that literature over a period of almost ninety years that is chronicled in these pages.

A list of authors included and a list of periodicals used with an explanation of abbreviations appear after this introduction. Bibliographies of each author covered are provided at the back of the book.

The editors are grateful to the many copyright holders who have granted permission to reproduce the selections in this book. Specific acknowledgements are provided in the section beginning on page 711. (Only in a very few instances have we been unable to use an excerpt because a copyright holder either denied permission or requested an unreasonable fee.)

Finally, we wish to record our appreciation to the following institutions and individuals whose generous services, great or small, assisted in the com-

pletion of this work: the reference librarians at New York University, Columbia University, and the New York Public Library; The Center for Research Libraries, Chicago; the reference librarians of John Jay College, City University of New York, especially Robert Grappone, Jane Gurney, and Anthony Simpson; the librarians of the Hawthorne-Longfellow Library, Bowdoin College; Joyce Kordyban, Main Library, University of Detroit; the Hooyer Library, Stanford University; A. Fred Sochatoff, Emeritus Professor of English, Carnegie-Mellon University; Prof. Mary M. Fitzgerald, University of New Orleans; colleagues Tom Dardis, Carl Wiedemann, and Sherwood Smith; and particularly Rita Stein, our editor at The Ungar Publishing Company, whose acumen and counsel proved indispensable.

D.L.

C.M.L.

NOTE: Further selections on many of the authors in this volume may be found in *Modern British Literature*, Vols. 1-3, ed. Ruth Z. Temple and Martin Tucker, 1966; Vol. 4, ed. Martin Tucker and Rita Stein, 1975; and Vol. 5, ed. Denis Lane and Rita Stein, 1985; and in *Major Modern Dramatists*, Vol. 1, ed. Rita Stein et al., 1984, all in the Library of Literary Criticism series.

AUTHORS INCLUDED

Banville, John
Beckett, Samuel
Behan, Brendan
Bowen, Elizabeth
Boyle, Patrick
Boyle, William
Bullock, Shan F.
Campbell, Joseph
Carroll, Paul Vincent
Clarke, Austin
Colum, Padraic
Corkery, Daniel
Cousins, James H.
Devlin, Denis
Dunsany, Lord
 (Edward John Moreton Drax
 Plunkett)
Ervine, St. John
Fallon, Padraic
Fitzmaurice, George
Friel, Brian
Gogarty, Oliver St. John
Gregory, Lady
 (Isabella Augusta Persse)
Heaney, Seamus
Hewitt, John
Higgins, Aidan
Higgins, F. R.
Hyde, Douglas
Johnston, Denis
Johnston, Jennifer
Joyce, James
Kavanagh, Patrick
Keane, John B.
Keane, Molly
 (a.k.a. M. J. Farrell and
 Mary Lesta Skrine)
Kiely, Benedict
Kinsella, Thomas
Lavin, Mary
Ledwidge, Francis
Leonard, Hugh
 (pseud. of John Keyes Byrne)
Longley, Michael
MacDonagh, Thomas
Macken, Walter
MacLavery, Bernard
MacManus, Francis
MacNamara, Brinsley
 (pseud. of John Weldon)
MacNeice, Louis
Mahon, Derek
Martyn, Edward
McGahern, John
McLavery, Michael
Molloy, Michael J.
Montague, John
Moore, Brian
Moore, George
Muldoon, Paul
Murdoch, Iris
Murphy, Richard
Murray, T. C.
O'Brien, Conor Cruise
O'Brien, Edna
O'Brien, Flann
 (pseud. of Brian O'Nolan)
O'Brien, Kate
O'Casey, Sean
Ó Conaire, Pádraic
O'Connor, Frank
 (pseud. of Michael O'Donovan)
O'Donnell, Peadar
O'Duffy, Eimar
O'Faolain, Julia
O'Faolain, Sean
O'Flaherty, Liam
O'Kelly, Seamas

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O'Sullivan, Seumas	Simmons, James
(pseud. of James Sullivan	Somerville and Ross
Sharkey)	(Edith Enone Somerville and
Pearse, Patrick (or Padraic)	"Martin Ross" [Violet Martin])
Plunkett, James	Stephens, James
(pseud. of James Plunkett Kelly)	Strong, L. A. G.
Reid, Forrest	Stuart, Francis
Robinson, Lennox	Synge, John Millington
Rodgers, W. R.	Tomelty, Joseph
Russell, George William (A.E.)	Trevor, William
Shaw, George Bernard	(pseud. of William Trevor Cox)
Shiels, George	Yeats, William Butler

PERIODICALS USED

Listed below are their titles, their abbreviations, if any, and place of publication.

<i>AmS</i>	The American Scholar (Washington, DC)
<i>AWR</i>	Anglo-Welsh Review (Caerleon, Wales)
<i>ArQ</i>	Arizona Quarterly (Tucson, AZ)
<i>At</i>	The Atlantic (Boston)
	The Bell (Dublin)
	Best Sellers (Scranton, PA)
<i>BkmL</i>	The Bookman (London)
	Books Ireland (Goshigstown, Ireland)
<i>CambQ</i>	Cambridge Quarterly (Cambridge, England)
<i>CJIS</i>	Canadian Journal of Irish Studies (Vancouver, BC)
	Catholic World (Ramsey, NJ)
	Chicago Daily Tribune (Chicago)
<i>CSM</i>	Christian Science Monitor (Boston)
<i>Cnty</i>	Commentary (New York)
<i>Com</i>	Commonweal (New York)
<i>CP</i>	Concerning Poetry (Bellingham, WA)
<i>ConnR</i>	Connecticut Review (Storrs, CT)
<i>ContempR</i>	Contemporary Review (London)
	The Critic (Chicago)
	The Criterion (London)
<i>Crit</i>	Critique (Atlanta, GA)
	The Dial (New York)
<i>DM</i>	Dublin Magazine (Dublin)
	Éire-Ireland (St. Paul, MN)
<i>Enc</i>	Encounter (London)
	English (London)
<i>EJ</i>	The English Journal (Chicago, Ill.)
<i>ES</i>	English Studies (Lisse, The Netherlands)
<i>EIC</i>	Essays in Criticism (Oxford)
	Genre (Norman, OK)
<i>HC</i>	The Hollins Critic (Hollins, VA)
	The Honest Ulsterman (Belfast)
<i>Hor</i>	Horizon (London)
<i>HudR</i>	Hudson Review (New York)
	The Irish Book (Dublin)

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	The Irish Book Lover (Dublin)
	The Irish Citizen (Dublin)
<i>ILS</i>	Irish Literary Supplement (Selden, NY)
	The Irish Monthly (Dublin)
	The Irish Press (Dublin)
	Irish Review (Dublin)
	Irish Times (Dublin)
<i>IUR</i>	Irish University Review (Dublin)
	Irish Writing (Cork, Ireland)
	Journal of Beckett Studies (London)
<i>JIL</i>	Journal of Irish Literature (Newark, DE)
<i>JNT</i>	Journal of Narrative Technique (Ypsilanti, MI)
<i>KR</i>	Kansas Review (Manhattan, KS)
<i>LL</i>	Life and Letters (London)
<i>List</i>	The Listener (London)
<i>LondonMag</i>	London Magazine (London)
<i>LM</i>	The London Mercury (London)
<i>LRB</i>	London Review of Books (London)
	Malahat Review (Victoria, BC)
<i>MR</i>	Massachusetts Review (Amherst, Mass.)
<i>MD</i>	Modern Drama (Toronto)
<i>MFS</i>	Modern Fiction Studies (West Lafayette, IN)
	Mosaic (Winnipeg, Manitoba)
<i>NewR</i>	The New Review (London)
<i>NR</i>	The New Republic (Washington, DC)
<i>NS</i>	New Statesman (London)
<i>NSN</i>	New Statesman and Nation (London)
	The New Yorker (New York)
<i>NYHT</i>	New York Herald Tribune: Book Week (New York)
	Outlook (London)
<i>NYTAL</i>	New York Times Arts and Leisure Section (New York)
<i>NYTBR</i>	New York Times Book Review (New York)
<i>NYTd</i>	New York Times, daily (New York)
	Outlook (London)
	Parnassus (New York)
<i>PR</i>	Partisan Review (Boston)
	Poetry (Chicago)
	Poetry Ireland (Cork, Ireland)
<i>PoetryR</i>	Poetry Review (London)
	Punch (London)
	The Quarterly Review (London)
	Renascence (Milwaukee, WI)
<i>RCF</i>	Review of Contemporary Fiction (Elmwood Park, IL)
<i>REL</i>	A Review of English Literature (Calgary, Alberta)
<i>Sat</i>	Saturday Review (New York)
<i>SwR</i>	Sewanee Review (Sewanee, Tenn.)
<i>SCB</i>	South Central Bulletin (Houston, Texas)

<i>SoR</i>	Southern Review (Baton Rouge, LA)
<i>Spec</i>	The Spectator (London)
	Stand (Newcastle on Tyne)
	Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review (Dublin)
<i>TSLL</i>	Texas Studies in Language and Literature (Austin, Tex.)
	Threshold (Belfast)
<i>TT</i>	Time and Tide (New York)
<i>UR</i>	University Review (Dublin)
<i>WSJ</i>	Wall Street Journal (New York)
<i>YR</i>	The Yale Review (New Haven, CT)

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BANVILLE, JOHN (1946—)

John Banville has so far produced three books: *Long Lankin* (1970), *Nightspawn* (1971), and the prizewinning *Birchwood* (1973). In each one of them he shows himself to be very conscious of the fact that he is writing fiction, and this lends to his work both a literary and an introverted humour which relieves him from the accusations of monotony, plagiarism and preciousness which could otherwise be justifiably levelled against him. He is a *litterateur* who has a horror of producing "literature." This horror is equalled only by his amusement at the notion that literature might (by accident or innate capacity) reproduce life. He rejects mimetic realism by practising it in the avowed consciousness of its incompetence. Various authors betray their influence on his writings—Nabokov, Henry Green, Hermann Hesse—and, in addition, he makes his relationship to the reader as quizzically autocratic as does John Barth, Borges or even Richard Brautigan. He favours his sensibility as something so electrically endowed that it can only be glimpsed in its movements with the help of modern, high-speed, novelistic lenses. Like some of those authors mentioned, he joyfully commits technical narcissism over and over again, photographing every mutation of the self in the act of mutation, reproducing in words a wordless process, recording for ever a fugitive experience:

Only here, in these sinister pages, can time be vanquished. These little keys on which I dance transfix eternity with every tap.

The three books are all interlocked in their sets of characters and preoccupations. Each is an odyssey of a writer for whom the act of writing is itself the only Ithaca and the only Penelope his Muse or his memory. (The fact that *Nightspawn* and *Birchwood* are both told in the first person and in the past tense is a trite but important one. The pastness of that which is written about is the source of much of the writing's grief.) There is a good deal of Gothic glare and glamour—exotic parties and exotic parts, revolutions, Greek and Irish, famine, circus, arcane relationships, codes, puns and riddles—but, basically, Mr. Banville writes about writing and the relation of the thing written to the thing written about. Like many modern novelists, he is a scholastic, one of the *cymini sectores*, splitting atom-sized distinctions, watching the flight and disappearance of neutron sensations in the quantum world of the self and yet always aware of the fact that the self and its sensations are always determined by the very act of watching. Consciousness is, for his heroes, a burden and it

creates other burdens which are in direct proportion to its own mass. The plot of his fictions is Sisyphean, repetitive. Their structure, which in its inner parts is largely a matter of consequential images, is outwardly (and sometimes pretentiously), that of a myth. . . .

[E]ven *Birchwood*, for all its manifest achievement, still appears as if it were no more than a preparation for something other, something more exclusively Banvillean to come. One can be more assured that he is inventing as we see his heavily dislocated fictions move in their typical constellations of event—incest, murder, inconsequence, breakdown—around their inner subjects of time, memory, freedom, and death, converting these stiff concepts more and more surely and profoundly into the substance of our consciousness. No other Irish novelist seeks the effect of timelessness more hungrily than this one.

Seamus Deane. In Patrick Rafroidi and Maurice Harmon, eds., *The Irish Novel in Our Time* (Lille, Publications de L'Université de Lille, 1975), pp. 329–30, 338

John Banville's novel [*Doctor Copernicus*] has the qualities—earnestness, ambition, and stern historicity—which appeal to the judges of glittery literary prizes, and the defects—clotted prose and humourlessness—which deter readers. It reminds one of Johnson's comment on Congreve's *Incognita*, that he would rather praise it than read it. Nor has Mr. Banville exactly picked one of the more gripping greats: [Arthur] Koestler describes Copernicus as "perhaps the most colourless figure among those who, by merit or circumstance, shaped mankind's destiny." Mr. Banville naturally plays up the man-for-our-time side: the astronomer is sceptical, detached, secretive out of disgust at the world's pretences, and half certain that the whole set-up is absurd. He inhabits a world in political and religious chaos, full of arbitrary suffering, vain scholarship and joyless whoring.

Mr. Banville presents this background with some informed vigour, especially the sense of cosmic claustrophobia which agonised Copernicus into the idea of the heliocentric universe. But as for his prose, the best that can be said is that it is, in all its awkward sincerity, at least his own. He favours those inelegant nominal marriages (nerveknot, cloudshadow, dogmerd) which claim vainly to add up to more than their partssum. The attempt to describe mental processes drives him to empty, hulking metaphors. Copernicus has a head "packed with granite blocks of knowledge"; on the next page he "ventures out in the frail bark of his thoughts" (a wonder he doesn't capsize); and when he makes his famous break-through, the solution arrives "like a magnificent great slow golden bird alighting in his head with a thrumming of vast wings." At such vital moments it would be profitable to switch to Koestler, both for

the astronomy (*The Sleepwalkers*) and for the intellectual processes (*The Act of Creation*).

Julian Barnes. *NS*. Nov. 26, 1976, p. 21

It is not surprising in a conscientious artist such as John Banville, who pays meticulous attention to form, that [in *Nightspawn*] he should try and reflect the theme of his fiction in its compositional design. Among other narrative strategies, the futility of representing reality through fiction is expressed by means of a circular narrative movement. The circularity of texture is evoked in the very first section; it is sustained throughout the account and fully brought into its own at the end. The evocation is effected by a slightly modified quotation from Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock": "How should I begin?" Banville's Prufrockian protagonist wonders. "Should I say that the end is inherent in every beginning?" (p. 7). The end of the story Ben White recounts is indeed inherent in its beginning, or reversely, the beginning inherent in its ending, as at the start of his efforts to transfix his experiences, he is as far from his goal as at the close, where he is compelled to confess his failure. "One more effort" (p. 224), he urges himself on, and he starts anew: "Chapter one. My story begins at—" (p. 224). This fresh attempt, however, will be as feckless as his first one.

Ben's efforts are unconventional indeed. Advancing from the conviction that "art is, after all, only mimicry" (p. 217), he places his principal interest in demonstrating how this mimicry is accomplished. The metafictional elements can roughly be classed into two groups. Whereas the laying bare of the general narrative conventions is brought about through explicit commentary on the descriptive procedure, the turning inside out of the conventions pertaining to the thriller or novel of suspense is worked out by means of parodic treatment. The concept dominating the metafictional activities is that of the novelist as magician or Aristophanic sorcerer who opens a box of tricks and conjures up a self-sufficient world.

By far the most telling example of the kind of game the narrator in *Nightspawn* plays with the reader concerns the thematic, stylistic as well as compositional, elements of outstanding excellence with which Ben claims to have invested his story. "There are," he maintains, "pearls here strewn among this sty of words. Time enough to rend and tear, time enough" (p. 36). Probably only the most inattentive of readers would not jump at the suggestion and be sent off on a quest for these pearls; and there are, indeed, enough to discover. There are those pearls which reflect the artistic skill of the fictionist Banville: descriptive passages of great beauty and evocative power, or the ramification of plot. Contrary to customary practice, where such constitutive elements of a fiction are pulled into polyphonic relations by the dynamics of the aesthetic purpose connected with the story, in *Nightspawn* they are em-

ployed for their own sake, to demonstrate how a successful description is effected, how a complex plot is worked out; the aesthetic end they strive towards is not the story itself, but how a story is *made*. And there are those pearls which, once the secret springs of fiction have been revealed, serve to bring home to the reader what impact they have on him in conditioning his creative participation in the communicative act between text and reader through which a literary work of art is brought into being.

Rüdiger Imhof. *IUR*. Spring, 1981, pp. 59–61

Kepler, John Banville's fifth book, is the second in his quartet of historical novels that deals with the scientific mind and artistic creation. An Irishman whose work is little known in America, Mr. Banville is a prose stylist of extraordinary merit, and his novels have already garnered him several prestigious awards in Europe. *Kepler* itself comes to these shores having won the Guardian Award for fiction.

Like its excellent predecessor *Doctor Copernicus*, *Kepler* is a portrait of a man and his age. The man, Johannes Kepler, was born in 1571 in the town of Weilderstadt in southern Germany. One of the world's foremost astronomers and mathematicians, Kepler discovered three laws of planetary motion which later formed an indispensable part of the foundation of Isaac Newton's discovery of universal gravitation. Kepler, a graduate of the University of Tübingen, was a Copernican. Rather than undergo compulsory conversion to Roman Catholicism he left his post as a teacher of mathematics in Graz, and became an assistant to Tycho Brahe, the greatest astronomical observer before the introduction of the telescope. After Brahe's death, Rudolph II, the Holy Roman Emperor, appointed Kepler to the position of Imperial Mathematician. Striving for several years to find an orbit to fit all of Brahe's observations of the planet Mars, Kepler made his most significant discovery. He suddenly realized that Mars' orbit could not be circular but elliptical. The ellipse worked, and Kepler destroyed a belief that was 2000 years old. He died, still struggling to unlock the mysteries of the Cosmos, in 1630.

So much for the bones of the story. These events Banville skillfully records. He brilliantly recreates the 17th-century world and brings the reader into intimate contact with the chaotic atmosphere of Kepler's age. Here are the plagues, furies, agues, witchcraft, bawdiness, and uncertain politics of Church and State. And through it all comes the picture of the fevered, struggling, oft-humiliated and angered figure of Kepler. Perpetually at the center of things, his portrait is extraordinarily rendered. Banville manages to capture the private, domestic Kepler, husband and father, a fretting, dishevelled man with complaining wife always at his shoulder, and also the public "Imperial Mathematician and Court Astronomer" whose life is dedicated to discovering a cosmic harmony. Both sides of the man are beautifully balanced and blended. Whether painting the tensions and minor dramas of Kepler's family

life (witness the vivid scenes with his jeering wife, churlish father-in-law, and mad mother) or the grand intensity of the astronomer's inspiration, Banville is marvellously at home.

Kepler, then, is a tour-de-force of historical fiction and a worthy successor to the prize-winning *Doctor Copernicus*. It enhances Mr. Banville's growing reputation as an artist of supreme craft, and confirms him as one of the major writers of prose fiction to have emerged from Ireland in many years. With the next volume in the quartet, *The Newton Letter*, due out later this year, it is to be hoped that his work will finally achieve the recognition he deserves on both sides of the Atlantic.

Niall Williams. *ILS*. Fall, 1983, p. 29

In *The Newton Letter*, Banville does not try to tell a story. He interrogates the very nature of story-telling in the double sense of the narrative form of the writing and the imaginative powers of the writer. The narrator is an historian who attempts to make sense of the nervous collapse suffered by another "scientific" mind, Isaac Newton, in another point in history, 1693. The only "factual" evidence he has to go on is an enigmatic letter sent to the philosopher, John Locke, in which Newton intimates his crisis of faith in the ability of the mind to explain the "true" workings of the external universe. Scientific facts, Newton seems to suggest, are themselves fiction. The task of the contemporary historian-narrator in the novel is to establish and interpret the "facts" behind this decisive "interlude" in Newton's career. Not an auspicious project by all accounts. . . .

This historian, not surprisingly, begins his narrative by conceding his own failure of imaginative nerve: "Words fail me . . . I have abandoned my book . . . I don't really understand it myself . . . I've lost faith in the primacy of text." The beginning of the novel thus bespeaks the ending; and the entire intervening narrative is written retrospectively in the past tense; that is, in the form of a reminiscence which would explain the narrator's own failed quest for narrative understanding or coherence. In this respect, Banville's novel is no less circular and fated a narrative form than [Bernard] MacLaverty's [*Cal*]. But the circle moves in opposite directions. Whereas *Cal* showed the mind unable to escape from the insular circularity of history, in *The Newton Letter* the mind is its own prison and history the one possibility of salvation (what its narrator calls the possibility of "the innocence of things, their non-complicity in our affairs"). In short, while MacLaverty's hero struggles to be delivered from the historical past, Banville's seeks to be delivered into it.

But can the fiction-spinning mind ever dispense with its own interpretations? Can it ever hope to suspend its adulterating interference with the "innocence of things?" Banville's narrator brings guidebooks on trees and birds with him to Ferns only to discover that the "illustrations would not match up with the real specimens." In similar fashion, the human specimens of Fern