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Literary Criticism

**CLC**

**118**



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Volume 118

# Contemporary Literary Criticism

Criticism of the Works  
of Today's Novelists, Poets, Playwrights,  
Short Story Writers, Scriptwriters, and  
Other Creative Writers

**Jeffrey W. Hunter**  
**Timothy J. White**  
EDITORS

**Tim Akers**  
**Angela Y. Jones**  
**Daniel Jones**  
**Deborah A. Schmitt**  
**Polly A. Vedder**  
**Kathleen Wilson**  
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<sup>2</sup>Yvor Winters, *The Post-Symbolist Methods* (Allen Swallow, 1967); excerpted and reprinted in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, Vol. 85, ed. Christopher Giroux (Detroit: Gale, 1995), pp. 223-26.

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# Contents

Preface vii

Acknowledgments xi

<b>John Banville</b> 1945- .....	1
<i>Irish novelist, short story writer, critic, and editor</i>	
<b>Elizabeth Bowen</b> 1899-1973 .....	56
<i>Anglo-Irish novelist, short story writer, essayist, nonfiction writer, autobiographer, and critic</i>	
<b>David Bradley, Jr.</b> 1950- .....	116
<i>American novelist; entry devoted to The Chaneyville Incident</i>	
<b>Sandra Cisneros</b> 1954- .....	169
<i>Mexican-American poet and short story writer</i>	
<b>Jorie Graham</b> 1951- .....	221
<i>American poet</i>	
<b>Philip Levine</b> 1928- .....	265
<i>American poet</i>	
<b>Antonine Maillet</b> 1929- .....	325
<i>Canadian dramatist, novelist, short story writer, nonfiction writer, and author of children's books</i>	
<b>August Wilson</b> 1945- .....	370
<i>American playwright</i>	

Literary Criticism Series Cumulative Author Index 425

Literary Criticism Series Cumulative Topic Index 495

CLC Cumulative Nationality Index 505

CLC-118 Title Index 521

# John Banville

1945-

Irish novelist, short story writer, critic, and editor.

The following entry presents an overview of Banville's career through 1997. For further information on his life and works, see *CLC*, Volume 46.

## INTRODUCTION

One of the foremost contemporary authors to experiment with the format of the traditional Irish novel, Banville makes extensive use of metaphors, literary allusions, and elements from various genres to create complex aesthetic effects. His narratives are usually enigmatic and ambiguous, reflecting his belief that reality cannot be accurately mirrored by the conventional realistic novel.

### Biographical Information

Banville was born in Wexford, Ireland, on December 8, 1945. He was educated at the Christian Brothers primary school and St. Peter's College secondary school. Instead of attending university, Banville became a clerk at Aer Lingus for a brief period of years. Banville's initial artistic interest was painting, but after moving to London with his wife, he began writing short stories. After publishing his stories in several periodicals, Banville published his first book, a collection of short stories called *Lord Lankin*, in 1970. Shortly afterward, Banville moved just outside Dublin, where he became chief sub-editor for the *Irish Press*. Banville worked at the *Irish Press* until 1983, when he left to pursue writing full time. When he found that his fiction writing did not pay the bills, he returned to the *Irish Press* as literary editor in 1986. Throughout his career Banville has won numerous awards, including the Allied Irish Banks prize for *Birchwood* (1973), an Irish Arts Council Macauley Fellowship, the Irish-American Foundation Literary Award in 1976, and the James Tait Black Memorial Prize for *Dr. Copernicus* in 1976.

### Major Works

Banville's fiction studies the relationship between reality and art, and departs from a traditional focus in Irish fiction on historical and social concerns. Banville is also more concerned with the aesthetic aspects of fiction than his Irish literary predecessors. Each of his novels has a first-person narrative voice; *Long Lankin* is his only work with a third-person narrator, and it is his only collection of short stories. The stories present different stages of life in the *nouveau riche* contemporary suburbs of Dublin, including childhood,



adolescence, and adulthood. The stories present the common conflicts which arise from personal relationships and address such topics as guilt, loss, destructive love, and the pain inherent in attaining freedom. *Nightspawn* (1971) is a parody of several genres in which Banville endeavors to expose the limitations of the traditional novel through an intentionally chaotic narrative in which he merges the narrator, protagonist, and writer. Set on a Greek island, the story involves a potential military coup, a highly sought-after document, a plenitude of sex, and a murder. *Birchwood*, a modern-day Gothic novel about a decaying Irish estate and a disturbed family, centers on Gabriel Godkin, the son and heir, who gains independence and maturity through his involvement in a circus and a revolutionary coup. Next Banville produced novels toward a proposed tetralogy influenced by *The Sleepwalkers: A History of Man's Changing Vision of the Universe*, Arthur Koestler's study of notable astronomers. In the tetralogy, Banville analyzes the relationship between creation and reality by presenting the lives and scientific quests of several famous intellectuals, including Polish astronomer Nicolaus Copernicus in *Dr. Copernicus*, German astronomer Johannes Kepler in *Kepler* (1983), and Isaac Newton in *The*

*Newton Letter* (1987). *The Book of Evidence* (1990) is the first of a trilogy which centers on the mind of narrator Freddie Montgomery. Montgomery becomes enamored with a painting in the home of a friend and impulsively steals it. When a maid catches him in the act, he forces her to leave with him and eventually kills her with a hammer. The book is his confession of the crime to police. *Ghosts* (1993) again takes up the story of Freddie Montgomery as he re-enters life after serving a ten-year prison sentence. He finds a job on an island as an apprentice to an art historian. *Athena* (1995) completes the Montgomery trilogy. Montgomery, now called Morrow, has become an authority on art and is called upon to authenticate pictures stolen from the same house in which he stumbled into his own criminal life. Banville tackled another genre with *The Untouchable* (1997) which charts the world of espionage during the 1930s by fictionalizing the story of Russian spy Anthony Blunt. The novel is unique because it lacks the romantic excess of most spy novels and instead delineates the day-to-day minutia of its characters' lives.

### Critical Reception

Critics often refer to the Nabokovian influences in Banville's fiction. Many commentators praise his lavish prose style; Erica Abeel calls him "a landscape painter with language." Others, however, are critical of the self-conscious impulses of his language and his use of obscure vocabulary. Paul Driver asserts that *Mefisto* (1986) is "massively overwritten" and states, "There is so much verbal flesh on the book that its moral backbone is difficult to discern." Reviewers point out Banville's preoccupation with the relationship between art and reality. Most note Banville's tendency to celebrate the unreality of the fictional world. Philip MacCann states, "Banville's art eschews the vulgar artificiality of life in favor of the stylish artificiality of art itself." Banville is generally respected for his well-researched and erudite books, and critics have credited him for his influence on contemporary Irish literature. Valentine Cunningham posits that Banville is "one of the most important writers now at work in English—a key thinker, in fact, in fiction."

### PRINCIPAL WORKS

*Long Lankin* (short stories) 1970  
*Nightspawn* (novel) 1971  
*Birchwood* (novel) 1973  
*Doctor Copernicus* (novel) 1976  
*Kepler* (novel) 1983  
*Mefisto* (novel) 1986  
*The Newton Letter* (novel) 1987  
*The Book of Evidence* (novel) 1990  
*Ghosts* (novel) 1993  
*The Broken Jug* (play) 1994

*Athena* (novel) 1995  
*The Untouchable* (novel) 1997

### CRITICISM

#### Seamus Deane (essay date 1976)

SOURCE: "'Be Assured I Am Inventing': The Fiction of John Banville," in *Cahiers-Irlandais*, Vols. 4-5, 1976, pp. 329-39.

[In the following essay, Deane, a well-known poet, discusses Banville's awareness that the world he creates in his books is fictive.]

John Banville has so far produced three books: *Long Lankin*, *Nightspawn*, and the prizewinning *Birchwood*. 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.

It is difficult to describe Banville's stylism. Take for instance, the opening of *Nightspawn* (and admitting the heavy Dostoevskian overtones):

I am a sick man. I am a spiteful man. I think my life is diseased. Only a flood of spleen could cauterize my wounds.

Or, the opening of *Birchwood*:

I am, therefore I think. That seems inescapable. In this lawless house I spend the nights poring over my memories, fingering them, like an impotent casanova his old love letters, sniffing the dusty scent of violets.

Compare these openings with those of novels like Robbe-Grillet's *Dans Le Labyrinthe* or Michel Butor's *La Modification*:

Vous avez le pied gauche sur la rainure de cuivre, et de votre épaule droite vous essayez en vain de pousser un peu plus le panneau coulissant

The comparison (which can be extended far beyond these openings) is useful because it shows, I think, how aggressively solipsistic Banville is and also how incompletely so. For the 'vous' of Butor creates a wider chasm than the 'I' of Banville. Banville's gap is between himself and his reader; Butor's gap is between himself and what he has written. The 'vous' is an 'I' that has become, not self-reflexive and therefore the centre of its own panoramic world, but merely observed as something living in a world of silent objects. 'To restore silence is the role of objects' says Beckett's Molloy and the kinds of silence we meet with in Robbe-Grillet and Butor exemplify this submission of the subjective self to the foreignness and inexhaustibility of the phenomenal world. One major form of the Romantic imagination has always believed in possessing the world entirely, consuming everything in the flames of self; another has always believed in itself as essentially foreign to all that the world contains, Banville begins by belonging to the first opinion and gradu-

ally seems to come towards the latter. In *Long Lankin* and *Nightspawn* even the oddity of the world is, we are persuaded, really a function of the perceiver's brilliant eccentricity. The observed world becomes (especially when written about, since writing is a form of re-observation) a dream locked in the mind of the observer. Or the dream perhaps constitutes a perception about the world which it exceeds the power of mere observation to command. Symbolism outmatches realism. But then, Mr. Banville will not allow us this either, because he creates and hunts for his own symbols and leaves the critic (or a chosen version of the critic anyway) without a job or at least without self-respect:

Sweaty pencils poised, panting hunters of the symbol?

There is wealth in store.

Given such warnings, who would dare pant, especially when the author does it so well himself? He wishes to be as much as possible his own critic, since criticism too is a satisfactory kind of authorship, being in effect a stance whereby one can watch oneself being someone other than oneself, even though that other is one's own creation. And by pretending to be a critic one can save oneself from the grosser defects of the symbolic method by committing them and then pointing them out. The varieties of narcissism are, as I have already mentioned, irresistible to Mr. Banville, but they can also be very usefully defensive too.

So, all this is very obviously a kind of fiction that is no longer either strange or new in itself. Anyone who has read John Fowles' *The Magus* would not find *Nightspawn* unique or incomprehensible; similarly, to have read *Steppenwolf* and/or Henry Green's *Loving* is to have been prepared for *Birchwood*. The Banville novels are clearly more Nabokovian than any of these others; Nabokov seems to be as much of a genre indeed as an influence for this author. Yet, although Mr. Banville's dependence on other writers might at times appear irritating or even parasitical, his work is not, nevertheless, mere pastiche. Its experimentalism is of a curious kind. If we except the nine short stories that make up Part I of *Long Lankin*, everything this author has written strikes me as being a prolegomena to a fiction, rather than a fiction itself. Even those nine stories lose some of their stability when seen in the retrospect of *The Possessed*, the novella which comprises Part II of that volume, and which in one sense completes them while it in another sense opens the way for the next book, *Nightspawn*. Mr. Banville is not really a writer of novels *tout court*. He is a writer working in a medium by testing its possibilities to the point of exhaustion. His fiction is dominated by his fascination with the nature of fiction. The impedimenta we meet with there from other writers, obtrusive as they sometimes are, is part of this fascination. We could put it more clearly perhaps by saying that Mr. Banville cannot write a novel until he sees what a

novel is and that he cannot see what a novel is until he writes one. The preoccupation with the act of writing itself, both in its formal and in its philosophical aspects, is scarcely exaggerated, I believe, by this kind of statement. But there are, of course, other considerations which make this interest less professionally barren than I have so far given any ground to expect.

In this respect, the epigraph to *The Possessed*, (Part II of *Long Lankin*) is worth quoting; it is taken from Gide's *L'Immoraliste*:

Take me away from here and give me some reason for living. I have none left. I have freed myself. That may be. But what does it signify? This objectless liberty is a burden to me.

Mr. Banville often seems to conceive of the imagination as a faculty which allows the creation of such a complete and purposeless liberty. Against that kind of freedom, there is lodged the world of necessity, the world of time, in which man is constantly reminded of minor and major loss, nostalgia and death. One passage, from *Birchwood*, gives us the effect of the imagination operating on the world of fact:

Such scenes as this I see, or imagine I see, no difference, through a glass sharply. The light is lucid, steady and does not glance in spikes or stars from bright things, but shines in cool cubes, planes and violet lines and lines within planes, as light, trapped in polished crystal will shine. Indeed, now that I think of it, I feel it is not a glass through which I see, but rather a gathering of perfect prisms. There is hardly any sound, except for now and then a faint ringing chime, or a distant twittering, strange, unsettling. Outside my memories, this silence and harmony, this brilliance I find again in that second silent world which exists, independent, ordered by unknown laws, in the depths of mirrors. This is how I remember such scenes. If I provide something otherwise than this, be assured that I am inventing.

The point is that he must invent, and therefore our assurance is justified. This independent world, typically enunciated for us in mirror and prism images, in a mode of perception that has temperature rather than content, has to be colonised, alas, by the actual world of pain and torment. When he describes this, Banville sometimes comes close to the world of Butor, the world of the phenomenal, exact object bearing to the human perceiver his own refracted pain. But it is also true that Mr. Banville does tend to make the mystique of the moment a little too evident and appealing. In *Nightspawn*, we read:

I thought of that four-letter word of which

Heraclitus was so fond. Things fluctuate, merge, nothing remains still. A late September day, say, and you pause in a deserted corner of a strange town. There is a white sunlit wall, and a patch of dark shadow. Dandelions nod among sparse grass. All is silent, but for an intimation of music somewhere, just beyond hearing. The leaning lid of a dustbin beckons you around the corner. You step forward, and come suddenly, breathtakingly upon the river, far below, calm and blue, with a small white cloud swimming in it. You think that this has all been arranged, that some hand has set up the props, that wall, those flowers, all of them exact and perfect and inimitable, so that you may catch a strange memory of something extraordinary and beautiful. . . . You have touched the mystery of things. In time that moment in a strange town becomes itself a memory, and merges with the one which eluded you. Life goes on. Spring sunshine wrings your heart, spring rain. Love and hate eventually become one. I am talking about the past, about remembrance. You find no answers, only questions. It is enough, almost enough. That day I thought about the island, and now I think about thinking about the island, and tomorrow, tomorrow I shall think about the thinking about thinking about the island, and all will be one, however I try, and there will be no separate thoughts, but only one thought, one memory, and I shall still know nothing. What am I talking about, what are these ravings? About the past, of course, and about Mnemosyne, that lying whore. And I am talking about torment.

Thus it is as a war of attrition between imagination and time, with all its variants of Memory, Dream and Fantasy that John Banville defines the act of writing and treasures the written thing. What we meet in his work is another version of that brand of self-consciousness which has been such a distinctive feature of one tradition (and that the major one) of Irish fiction which includes Joyce, Flann O'Brien, and Beckett on one level, and accommodates a variety of people, from Jack Yeats to George Fitzmaurice to Aidan Higgins on another. All of them are at times masters of the boredom which comes from self-contemplation, solipsism carried to a degree of scientific precision, some of them are equally at times mastered by it.

This is a strange tradition to which John Banville belongs, for it is not a political literature by any means, yet it is not at all a literature without politics. Its removal from the public world is contemptuous. But the removal itself expresses a deep disillusion, not only with Irish politics as such but with the very idea basic to most politics—that the world is subject to improvement if not to change or transformation. For them all, it is a place of proverbial and archetypal cor-

ruption. One could, I believe, argue that the degree of introversion in the major Irish fictions of this century is in exact ratio to the degree of political disillusion. Both *Nightspawn* and *Birchwood*, with their complicated political backgrounds, offer us exemplary instances of this. In the first case, post-war Greece forms the backdrop to a confusing if not confused story of murder, rape, espionage and betrayal. Julian Kyd acts the part of Master of the Revels (which Ben had played in *The Possessed*) while the Irish writer and exotic Dubliner Ben White plays out a Nabokovian twin game with the German agent Erik Weiss and his hunchbacked partner Andreas. The chronology is deliberately disturbed and in case we should forget this obvious fact we are several times reminded of it. We also have an arcane relationship within the Kyd family. Ben stalks and even rapes the beautiful Helena but perhaps truly seeks the brother Yacynth (Hyacinth). Myth is constantly rattling about in this Hiberno-Anglo-Greek cupboard, although sometimes it would be, like the family skeletons, better hidden.

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**[Birchwood] . . . is a story of the fall of the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy house, but this Godkin/Lawless home wears its rue with a difference.**

—Seamus Deane

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The novel is fundamentally concerned with pursuit and immunity. A magic document which gives immunity is at the centre of all the espionage as of all the myth. Perhaps Marvell's lines would be a cooler epigraph than any:

Apollo hunted Daphne so,  
Only that she might laurel grow;  
And Pan did after Syrinx speed,  
Not as a nymph, but for a reed.

Yet the novel does not keep its various levels of 'significance' alive, although it misses no opportunity to remind us of Significance whenever it should appear. A spy story which is also a myth, it has at its centre what Erik wrote down after Ben had said it:

What the heart desires, the world is incapable of giving.

Maybe so, but even in that sentence there is, I think, visible a heavy sag towards cliché. The second time this is said it comes without the usual and attendant irony. If we read again the passage where it originally occurs, we have this:

'Isn't it strange how all these things work together', I mused. 'The wind lifts the waves, and the waves pound the shore. These strange cycles. People too,

with their cycles and reversals that cause so much anguish. It's amazing.'

I looked at Erik. Erik looked at the sea. I went on, 'Imitating the seasons, I suppose. The rages and storms, the silences. If only the world would imitate us once in a while. That would be something, wouldn't it? But the world mountains a contemptuous silence, and what the heart desires, the world is incapable of giving.'

A pretty speech. I would refuse to believe that I had made it, did I not have evidence, which I have. Erik hitched up his trousers, and blew his nose. I wondered if he had been listening to me. He had.

The irony does not rescue the passage, it simply gives its superficial gloss a higher sheen. *Nightspawn* is characterised all through by this device—attempts at solemn truth subverted by a supposedly wicked or devastatingly deadpan humour. Instead of finding a way in which the commentary on time and freedom will arise naturally from the story and its circumstances, Mr. Banville makes the story into an exotic mode of talking about these problems. The most harmful exoticism is not of background, but that of anguish, torment, art. The idiom of an adolescent romanticism is strong here, and the rhetoric, while spending itself in cliché, is also congratulating itself on its power of insight. Take, for instance,

The wind lifts the waves, and the waves pound the shore. Whatever I did, or might do, the world went on, with or without me, always, and I was but a small part of an eternal confluence which I could not understand, and had no need of understanding. I am talking about the healing of wounds. I am talking about art.

But talking about it in this way is not at all the same as creating it. The thing itself is at some distance from commonplace ruminations upon the *ding an sich*. The best comment on this sort of thing is Mr. Banville's own. In *Birchwood* we read:

The Exotic, once experienced, becomes commonplace, that is a great drawback of this world.

It is also the great drawback of *Nightspawn* and of *The Possessed*. A brilliant, lyric phrasing does not redeem either from its adolescent softness, a softness which largely arises from the self-enhancement which Mr. Banville allows himself in the character of Ben. His is a Portrait of the Artist as a Cryptic or as a Corrupt Young Man, but Mr. Banville forgets Ben's youth and forgives it as Joyce never does Stephen's. The result is that much that would have been

structurally ironic—i.e. belonging to a sustained view of Ben as a projection in fiction of certain possibilities in the self—becomes instead merely a matter of self-conscious embarrassment. The biggest danger about solipsistic novels is that the author may forget to disengage his solipsism from that of the hero. When that happens, even the author's occasional self-consciousness at the figure he is cutting may appear to the reader to be sadly belated and never enough.

*Birchwood*, the most recent of Mr. Banville's novels, is, however, a different matter. It is a story of the fall of the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy house, but this Godkin/Lawless home wears its rue with a difference. (The name games in these novels are intricate and sometimes very funny.) Gabriel Godkin has to discover that he is twin to his sinister cousin Michael, and therefore child of 'Aunt' Martha. The relationship, in its horrible intimacy and in its secrecy, is typical of the kind of plot device upon which Mr. Banville weaves a good deal of symbolic tapestry. Equally though, the eerie power with which these relationships are evoked is at times reminiscent of the atmosphere in a Julien Green novel. In fact what Green said of his own fiction in 1929 could in many ways be applied to Mr. Banville's, although *Birchwood* is the work to which it can most reasonably be referred. Since ordinary life supplied him with nothing, Green said,

J'en suis réduit à inventer . . . c'était toujours le fait réel qui avait l'air faux et le fait inventé, la fiction, qui avait l'air vrai.

The same is true here. The grotesque deaths of Granny Godkin and of Aunt Martha, the first certainly, the second possibly filched from Dickens, the volatile chronology which moves us from the world of the Troubles in this century to the world of last century's Famine, the juxtaposition of the political against the familial and circus worlds, the occurrence of manic forms of cruelty and violence, of mutants, physical and moral cripples—all of these things make *Birchwood* one of those rare books in which phantasmagoria has all the presence of a reality. The hero's sensibility is as precious as ever, but it discovers itself through this phantasmal world, it does not merely use it as an excuse for some kinds of reaction. Anguish is real here. It has a political and a social expression. Psychosis is no longer simply the determinant of circumstances but their product. Then it appears to be their determinant. The relationship is so close that one cannot ask of Mr. Banville's world that it become more historically actual, since it has a psychiatric accuracy which is itself part of the Irish historical experience. The favourite motif of distant, almost unheard music, the favourite technique of the frozen instant of crisis in which a Beckett-like mania for precision occupies the shocked consciousness, the swirl of secret relationships and initiations, which shadow the more overt social and familial groupings, these all oc-

cur in new systematic combinations, the force of which is to bring to bear upon the reader the awareness of some wildly inexplicable yet radical grief at the heart of all personal and social existence. It evokes a metaphysical shudder in the true modern Gothic way (although besides Julien Green and Mervyn Peake, I would most strongly be reminded here of the most unGothic *Loving* by Henry Green). Prospero does not exist, yet his circus does. God does not exist, yet His world does. And so too, the novelist and his novel. Mr. Banville has provided, in *Birchwood*, a complicated metaphor of the world as book and the author as God.

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***Birchwood* [is] one of those rare books in which phantasmagoria has all the presence of a reality. The hero's sensibility is as precious as ever, but it discovers itself through this phantasmal world, it does not merely use it as an excuse for some kinds of reaction. Anguish is real here.**

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—Seamus Deane

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For his interest is obsessively of this kind, and in this area. The author who is a God within his world of book, enjoys complete liberty, especially liberty from time. Art abolishes sequence, allows invention. It makes plots into structures, stories into fables. Yet in order to exist, art must make use of the world which, unlike itself, is death-driven, disordered, meaningless. The imagination of a writer like Mr. Banville, therefore, hovers and hesitates over this paradox. Like the theology of transubstantiation, the theology of art asks the fundamental questions. Does the world exist in art as a Real or merely as a Symbolic Presence. Or, to put it in Gabriel Godkin's more electric terminology:

I find the world always odd, but odder still, I suppose, is the fact that I find it so, for what are the eternal verities by which I measure these temporal aberrations? Intimations abound, but they are felt only, and words fail to transfix them. Anyway, some secrets are not to be disclosed under pain of who knows what retribution, and whereof I cannot speak, thereof I must be silent.

Whatever the retribution, John Banville will hardly be silent. For even *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 con-