Contemporary Literary Criticism

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Contemporary Literary Criticism

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

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PROJECT EDITOR

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Contents

John Banville
1945-

Irish novelist, short fiction writer, playwright, translator, and travel writer.

The following entry provides an overview of Banville's career through 2005. For additional information on his life and works, see *CLC,* Volumes 46 and 118.

INTRODUCTION

Banville is a leading voice in postmodern Irish literature. Renowned for his experimentation with the traditional form of the novel, Banville has cited authors Samuel Beckett, Marcel Proust, and Vladimir Nabokov as models for his preoccupation with language and its power to mold perception. Banville's fiction is often characterized by its baroque prose style, metaphysical undertones, and intertextual repetition of motifs and allusions. He has illuminated such themes as the conflict between reality and imagination and the dubious nature of truth and knowledge throughout his oeuvre. Whether centering on influential historical figures or common citizens of Ireland, Banville's novels have been acknowledged for their complex aesthetics and their unique insights into notions of identity and memory.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Banville was born in Wexford, Ireland, to Martin and Agnes Doran Banville. He attended the local Irish Christian Brothers primary school and St. Peter's College secondary school, but chose not to pursue a university degree. After working briefly for Ireland's major airline, Aer Lingus, Banville married Janet Dunham in 1969. Early in life, Banville held interests in both writing and painting; his career as an author began in 1966 with the publication of the short story "The Party." His first novel, *Nightspawn,* was released in 1971. In 1975 Banville won The American Ireland Fund Literary Award. He was a member of the Irish Arts Council from 1984 to 1988 before serving as literary editor of *The Irish Times* from 1988 to 1999. *The Book of Evidence* (1989), won the Guinness Peat Aviation Award and was shortlisted for the Booker Prize for Fiction that year. Banville was granted the Lannan Literary Award for Fiction in 1997, and his thirteenth novel, *The Sea* (2005), received the Man Booker Prize for Fiction in 2005.

MAJOR WORKS

Banville's fiction considers themes of loss, memory, and deception, almost exclusively relying upon first-person narration. His novels are concerned with the clash between perception and reality, particularly as it pertains to language, writing, and the arts. *Long Lankin* (1970) is comprised of nine short stories and a novella titled "The Possessed." The volume features a set of characters from suburban Dublin whose everyday lives become suddenly ruptured, exposing a dark undercurrent of guilt amid destructive relationships and suggestions of murder and incest. Patterned after James Joyce's *Dubliners, Long Lankin* is Banville's only work told from a third-person perspective. The 1984 revised edition of *Long Lankin* removed "The Possessed" from the collection. *Nightspawn* ostensibly deals with an Irish writer's entanglement in Greek political intrigue, but through a chaotic plot Banville parodies the conventions of genre narratives. Banville received a Macaulay Fellowship from the Irish Arts Council and an Allied Irish Banks Prize for *Birchwood* (1973), the gothic tale of an heir to a crumbling Irish estate. As the narrator reexamines his past and the history of his family, his need to reinvent aspects of his life becomes increasingly apparent.

Often referred to as his science tetralogy, Banville's next four novels were influenced by Arthur Koestler's 1959 astronomical text *The Sleepwalkers: A History of Man's Changing Vision of the Universe. Doctor Copernicus* (1976), which won the James Tait Black Memorial Prize for Fiction, offers a fictionalized account of the life of Nicolaus Copernicus, the father of modern astronomy. Banville's historical novel *Kepler* (1981), inspired by the life of German mathematician and astronomer Johannes Kepler, earned the author the *Guardian* Fiction Prize in 1981. Both of these novels utilize the accomplishments of their protagonists to demonstrate the inevitable limits of human understanding. *The Newton Letter* (1982) details an author's quest to complete a book about the influential scientist Sir Isaac Newton. As the main character struggles to ascertain the cause of Newton's nervous breakdown, his own life begins to unravel. The final book of the tetralogy, *Mefisto* (1986), concerns a purely fictional character, Gabriel Swan. A mathematical genius, Swan tries to achieve harmony in his life by writing about it, detailing his struggles against Felix, a sinister figure that Swan suspects is the ghost of his deceased twin brother.

Both Swan and the protagonist of *The Newton Letter* rely upon language to make sense of their experiences, but find no sense of closure through words.

The Book of Evidence is the first in a trilogy about a former scientist and art lover, Freddie Montgomery. Having become obsessed with a painting by Jan Vermeer, Montgomery plans to steal it from a family friend. When a maid interrupts the burglary, he murders her and subsequently throws the painting into a ditch out of self-disgust. *Ghosts* (1993) picks up Montgomery's story ten years after his arrest for the murder. He now lives on a remote island as an assistant to an art historian. One of the novel's four parts is devoted entirely to the assessment of a painting by Jean Vaublin, a fictional artist based loosely on Jean-Antoine Watteau. In *Athena* (1995), Montgomery returns to Ireland under an assumed name. Hired by thieves to authenticate stolen paintings, Montgomery finds himself back at the house in which he had committed the murder. In these novels, also published together as the *Frames Trilogy* (2001), Banville explores such topics as identity, truth, and morality through the medium of the visual arts.

The Untouchable (1997) is informed by the life Anthony Blunt, an art historian recruited by MI5 in 1940. Blunt served as director of the Courtauld Institute of Art from 1947 to 1974 and was knighted in 1956, but was discovered as a spy for Soviet Russia during the 1960s. While experimenting with the espionage genre to probe novelistic conventions in this novel, Banville investigates themes of deception and reinvention, characterizing them as acts of artistic creation. Alexander Cleave, the protagonist of *Eclipse* (2000), is a stage actor who withdraws to his childhood home after suffering a breakdown during a performance. Cleave struggles with self-examination and an existential crisis as his retreat home summons phantoms of his youth and causes him to question the distinction between his fictionalized existence on stage and that which is real. *Shroud* (2002) features Axel Vander, a renowned professor of literature and aging alcoholic living in California after his wife's death. His routine is disrupted when he receives a letter from a woman who threatens to reveal that he has been living under the identity of a long-deceased childhood friend. Max Morden, the protagonist of Banville's award-winning novel *The Sea,* has also endured the death of his spouse. Banville's narrative alternates between Morden's memories of a childhood summer spent at a seaside resort and his current ruminations on mortality. Like many of Banville's earlier works, the novel studies the complex relationship between self-identity and memory.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

The dense, analytical quality of Banville's fiction has prompted some reviewers to dismiss it as overly difficult or academic, but general response to his work has been enthusiastic. In his assessment of *Eclipse,* for example, reviewer Peter Bien declared that the novel was "not much fun to read," whereas critic Brook Allen marvelled at Banville's intelligently crafted prose, citing it as "richly descriptive and full of original images." Critical studies of Banville's novels have invoked the literary theories of Jacques Derrida, Roland Barthes, and Ferdinand de Saussure as sources of insight into Banville's thematic and aesthetic concerns. The initial publication and subsequent rearrangement of the stories in *Long Lankin* has also been the subject of scholarly inquiry, with commentators examining the implications of the collection's editorial process. Critics have also considered the symbolic importance of the visual arts in Banville's work, centering on the influence of modernism on his fiction. Additionally, scholars have acknowledged Banville's dynamic representation of gender roles, specifically focusing on the significance of doubling female characters in his novels. Some critics have detected an element of parody at work in Banville's prose, attributing this notion to the author's recapitulation of familiar literary forms and motifs. Furthermore, Banville's profound sense of identification with his homeland has been lauded for providing a rich commentary on modern Irish culture.

PRINCIPAL WORKS

Long Lankin (short stories) 1970; revised edition, 1984
Nightspawn (novel) 1971
Birchwood (novel) 1973
Doctor Copernicus: A Novel (novel) 1976
Kepler: A Novel (novel) 1981
The Newton Letter: An Interlude (novel) 1982
Mefisto (novel) 1986
The Book of Evidence (novel) 1989
Ghosts (novel) 1993
The Broken Jug: After Heinrich von Kleist [translator and adapter] (play) 1994
Athena (novel) 1995
The Untouchable (novel) 1997
Eclipse (novel) 2000
God's Gift: A Version of Amphitryon by Heinrich von Kleist [translator and adapter] (play) 2000
**Frames Trilogy* (novels) 2001
Shroud (novel) 2002
Prague Pictures: Portraits of a City (travel essay) 2003
The Sea (novel) 2005
Quirke [as Benjamin Black] (novel) 2006

*Contains *The Book of Evidence, Ghosts, and Athena.*

CRITICISM

Seán Lysaght (essay date spring/summer 1991)

SOURCE: Lysaght, Seán. "Banville's Tetralogy: The Limits of Mimesis." *Irish University Review* 21, no. 1 (spring/summer 1991): 82-100.

[*In the following essay, Lysaght investigates Banville's evasive treatment of Ireland's religious and cultural conflicts in* Doctor Copernicus, Kepler, The Newton Letter, *and* Mefisto.]

In his first mature novel, ***Birchwood,*** John Banville makes a point of confusing the chronology of Irish history. Elements from the potato famine of the eighteen forties combine with scenes drawn from the period of the War of Independence within what seems to be a relatively short span of the life of the central character, Gabriel Godkin. One effect of this strategy of the author's is to put Gabriel beyond the determinism of localised historical dispute and secure for him a measure of aristocratic remove in the big house to which he returns at the close of the book: "Outside is destruction and decay. I do not speak the language of this wild country. I shall stay here, alone, and live a life different from any the house has ever known. Yes."[1]

Because Banville had not directly engaged the reality of Irish history, Seamus Deane accused him of being

> a *littérateur* 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.[2]

Characteristically, Deane's view is that the process of politics and history "contaminates" every literary work whether the author likes it or not.

Banville's lack of fidelity to history, together with the extravagant, parodic touches which abound in ***Birchwood,*** have led Banville's German commentator, Rüdiger Imhof, to deny that the novel is about Ireland at all. In his critical introduction to Banville's work he says that the idea that ***Birchwood*** is an account of Ireland in chaos is "thoroughly misguided"; he also identifies "the erroneous belief"[3] that it is a big house novel. He further refuses to allow that ***Birchwood*** has anything to say about the eighteen forties: "the social picture of Ireland is generalised, or universalised. It is an Ireland permanently plagued by shortage and want."[4]

Professor Imhof is most interested in Banville as a writer studying quests for order and reflecting the despair which prowls along the margins of the creative enterprise. He denies mimesis in Banville, and has strong evidence to support his case. Gabriel Godkin says, in the closing passages of ***Birchwood,*** "So here is an ending, of a kind, to my story. It may not have been like that, any of it. I invent, necessarily."

Here Banville has over-emphasised by taking the theme of the transformative power of memory a step too far. Earlier in the book, Gabriel describes the peculiar silence and harmony which infuse scenes from memory, where 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."[5] We can assent to this, because he is discussing the secondary, derivative effect of light from the objects of memory; he is not doubting the steadfastness of those objects themselves. Similarly, however Gabriel chooses to remember Birchwood, we remain convinced that Birchwood *is* a big house in Ireland: it is not an igloo; nor is it a castle in Transylvania.

Mimesis, indeed, is a crux at the very heart of Banville's art. Banville has certainly moved beyond the conventions of the realist novel, but in doing so has approached even closer the problem of "the *ordinary,* that strangest and most elusive of enigmas." I wish to suggest here that Banville's achievement in the tetralogy has been not only to enquire again and again of the possibility of *reflecting the phenomena* in language, but also to bear witness to the content of those phenomena. By this I mean that the novels spring from, and have reference to, conflicts of religion and tradition in Ireland which provide the setting for the third and fourth parts of the tetralogy, ***The Newton Letter*** and ***Mefisto.*** However, this provenance and the fact of definitive reference are persistently though not entirely or entirely successfully evaded, which explains why Banville is vulnerable to the charge of aestheticism. But at the heart of this awareness of the artifice of form, there is an essentially mimetic impulse to accede to "the thing itself, the vivid thing."

The first half of the tetralogy, comprising ***Doctor Copernicus*** and ***Kepler,*** is an act of ventriloquism. In the story of Nicolas Copernicus especially, Banville has at his disposal a grand theme which dramatises most forcefully the claims of the secular intelligence against the authority of the Church. The author's shift of attention from Ireland to the history of the Continent at the beginning of the modern period is itself, at the very outset, a decisive gesture away from the confines of nationalist definition. But the cultural and religious polarisations of sixteenth and seventeenth century Europe have strong reverberations towards contemporary Ireland and its own archaic religious polarisations.

A vital key to the hidden agenda in the tetralogy emerges when we consider that there is no attempt to

confuse the historical settings in ***Doctor Copernicus*** and ***Kepler.*** Evasiveness about time and place is principally a feature of the Irish novels, ***Birchwood, The Newton Letter,*** and ***Mefisto. Doctor Copernicus*** is *about* Nicolas Copernicus; ***Kepler*** is *about* Johannes Kepler, the astronomer. Even Rüdiger Imhof calls it an "admirable portrait of the man Kepler." Self-conscious commentary upon the shortcomings and failings of the act of writing is scarcely in evidence in the historical novels: the dilemma of the modern narrator in the face of his contemporary experience is transposed as the problems encountered by two scientists of the Renaissance trying to reform their disciplines. We are therefore justified in reading the epistemological dilemma of Copernicus as a paradigm of Banville's own artistic predicament.

Early in the book, in descriptions of Nicolas's childhood, there is a sublime meditation on the relationship between a thing and its name: the linden tree. The child observes the thing and is later equipped with the name, and beholds the mimetic impact of words:

> They did not mean themselves, they were nothing in themselves, they meant the dancing singing thing outside. In wind, in silence, at night, in the changing air, it changed and yet was changelessly the tree, the linden tree. That was strange.[6]

The relationship between things and names returns at the close of the book when Copernicus is lying on his death-bed, imagining he sees the ghost of his brother Andreas, who died of syphilis and had been a scandal afflicting his reputation at the Frauenburg chapter. Andreas is an image of the guilt and awareness of failure haunting Copernicus's conscience as he dies. Copernicus accuses himself, through the figure of his brother, of having been too proud in his scrutiny of the world. To return to the opening image in the book: Copernicus wanted to know the linden tree in its essence beyond the word, or prior to the word; he wanted the purity of complete mimesis beyond the inaccuracy of names. This *hubris* provides Andreas with an avenue of attack:

> We know the meaning of the singular thing only so long as we content ourselves with knowing it in the midst of other meanings; isolate it, and all meaning drains away. It is not the thing that counts, you see, only the interaction of things; and, of course, the names. . . .
>
> (p. 239)

It is a daring move on Banville's part, thus to introduce a technical epistemological dispute to accompany Copernicus's final moments. Andreas's point here is of doubtful relevance to the scientific problems which occupied Copernicus. Similarly, when Andreas says, "With great courage and effort you might have succeeded, in the only way it is possible to succeed, by disposing the commonplace, the names, in a beautiful and orderly pattern that would show, by its very beauty and order, the action in our poor world of the other-worldly truths" (p. 240), his terms do not extend to encompass the discipline of astronomy.

But Copernicus, in his final delirium, imagines Andreas in other roles too. He acts as a Mephistopheles figure, accusing Nicolas of having sold his soul "to the highest bidder." Subsequently, he appears as an angel of redemption, escorting his brother back to the commonplace world, of which he, Andreas, was a ghastly and extreme manifestation. Copernicus then expires in an ecstasy of reunion with the commonplace:

> Nicolas, straining to catch that melody, heard the voices of evening rising to meet him from without: the herdsman's call, the cries of children at play, the rumbling of the carts returning from market; and there were other voices too, of church bells gravely tolling the hour, of dogs that barked afar, of the sea, of the earth itself, turning in its course, and of the wind, out of huge blue air, sighing in the leaves of the linden.
>
> (p. 242)

The imaginary dialogue with Andreas is most convincing at such moments, where the full extent of the human poignancy in Copernicus's story is given expression. Copernicus realises the human price he has had to pay for his devotion to his discipline. On its own, this solitary obsession is sufficient to make the Faust theme plausible.

Andreas's attempts to quibble with the *aesthetic* of Copernicus's achievement are less convincing; the gap between Renaissance science and modern semantic speculation is one which Banville does not quite manage to bridge on this occasion with Andreas and his Wittgensteinian vocabulary. There would have been no point, for instance, in Copernicus disposing his orbits in "a beautiful and orderly pattern" alone. The point for Copernicus was that this pattern should correspond to the reality of planetary movements, and if possible account for them.

The reasons for Copernicus's failure, if indeed we may use the term failure, have more to do with the political pressures of the time than with deficiencies in his method. Banville's book is consistent with Koestler[7] in portraying Copernicus as "the timid Canon", too cautious of his own position within the Church to speak out strongly in defence of his heliocentric theory. The elements of contrivance which I have criticised in the dialogue with Andreas are quite absent from Copernicus's encounter with Osiander, the Lutheran from Nuremberg who supervised the publication of *De revolutionibus orbium coelestium.* (It is his presence in the room which provokes the image of Andreas in Copernicus's mind.)

Osiander explains to Copernicus that he has written a preface to the book to placate conservative opinion. In the preface he repeats the view that models of planetary motion are mere hypotheses which have no real relation to the movements of the planets. The astronomer, says Osiander, "cannot by any line of reasoning discover the true causes of these movements";[8] that was beyond the wit of man. It was on this very issue that Copernicus had a major dispute with Professor Brudewski in Cracow where he and Andreas were students. "The only acceptable theory," he contended, "is that one which *explains* the phenomena" (p. 36). It is clear that by putting the sun at the centre of the universe, Copernicus did not merely wish to make his calculations easier, but meant to assert the reality of the heliocentric model. With Osiander's preface therefore, Copernicus's theory is reassimilated by the scholastic tradition and its validity as accurate mimesis is denied. It is in these contemporary terms that the nature of Copernicus's failure is most powerfully articulated.

As a counterpoise to the timid canon, whose later career as a church official stretches the historical novelist's capacity to keep him interesting, we have Rheticus, the fiery student from Wittenberg who came to Frauenburg to try to persuade Copernicus to publish his findings. The book's third section, "Cantus Mundi", with Rheticus as the narrator, is imbued with an anti-Catholic venom which could hardly be sustained without a historical character as a mouthpiece. (In the same way, the historical genre allowed Frank McGuinness to produce, in *Innocence,* a portrait of church corruption which would have been sensational were it thought to have an application to the present.)

It is made clear from the outset that Rheticus has an axe to grind. He played a crucial role in the publication of Copernicus's work and feels that he has not been adequately rewarded, indeed that he has been betrayed by connivance. Copernicus in his later years he calls "a cautious cold old brute obsessed with appearances and the security of his prebend." He describes Frauenburg as "clenched in its own ignorance and bitterness and Catholicism." The religious statues in Copernicus's residence are "bloodstained idols"; Copernicus's concubine is "that bitch", and so on.

Rheticus's portrait of the worldliness of the Catholic Church at this time centres on Löbau castle in Prussia, the home of Bishop Giese, and especially on the ritual bedlam of mirth and gluttony termed dinner:

> In the face of it all, the Bishop, enthroned on my left, maintained a placid mien—and why not? By the standards of the Roman Church his dining room was a model of polite behaviour. Yes, to him, to them all, everything was just splendid, and I alone could see the ape squatting in our midst and hear his howls. Even if they had seen him, they would have taken him for a messenger from God, an archangel with steaming armpits and blue-black ballocks, and sure enough, after a few prayers directed by the company towards the ceiling, the poor brute would have been pointing a seraphic finger upward in a new annunciation (The Word made Pork!). Thus does Rome transform into ritual the horrors of the world, in order to sustain the fictions.
>
> (p. 172)

A factor moderating the impact of this passage is the excess of Rheticus's style overall: he violently condemns most of those he comes in contact with; he feels great personal bitterness at being banished "to rot in this Godforgotten corner of Hungary that they call Cassovia". He invents, on his own admission, a story about a young boy whom the Church accused him of corrupting to explain his earlier banishment to a chair of mathematics at Leipzig. "I had to find something, you see, some terrible tangible thing, to represent the great wrongs done me by Copernicus" (p. 219), he says, referring to the omission of any mention of his name in Copernicus's book.

Since it was Lutheran authorities which Rheticus eventually fell foul of, he does not give us an unqualified picture of his own church either. It was the Lutheran Osiander, after all ("a cold, cautious, humourless grey creature"—Rheticus), who wrote the placatory preface to Copernicus's book, and Rheticus makes it clear that Wittenberg "considered Copernicus at best a madman, at worst the Antichrist." All in all, Rheticus's impatience and impetuousness are easy prey for the shrewd church officials, Catholic and Lutheran, with whom he is dealing. (Kepler, too, is a poor match for the power-brokers of his age.)

Nonetheless, in spite of Rheticus's shortcomings as a character and in spite of the extent of the apparent compromise made by Copernicus in his later years, we can still discern certain values which are affirmed by these two thinkers and which are not diminished by their vulnerability to despair. The main one here is the validity of human attempts to know the world, as espoused by Copernicus in his dispute with Brudewski. And despite the renewed sense of hopelessness which the protagonists feel, as well as the political pressures which are ranged against them, this impulse to knowledge must be promoted and defended. Copernicus and Rheticus rehearse those ideas towards the close of "Cantus Mundi" in a dialogue of quotes from modern scientific authors, where Rheticus says, quoting Einstein, "I hold it true that pure thought can grasp reality, as the ancients dreamed." Among the threats to that enterprise is any system of thought (i.e. the Aristotelian tradition of the schoolmen) which obstructs the scope of the intellect with a view to protecting vested political interests.

The emphasis on the commonplace which returns at the end of ***Doctor Copernicus*** is, in its philosophical implications, anti-religious. In Rheticus, the vehicle for obscure, frustrated anger, it is specifically anti-Catholic. Rome, says Rheticus in the passage quoted, transforms "into ritual the horrors of the world, in order to sustain the fictions." The commonplace can be horrible, but it can also be beautiful, as Rheticus witnesses at the end of his narrative and as Copernicus does in the book's closing lines. Through the figure of his brother, Copernicus admits as he dies that the last rites for which he was being prepared are all "a myth", and, as the priest recites a Hermetic text, he asserts that "Redemption is not to be found in the Empyrean."

On the other hand, the scientist or the artist attempts to forge a redeeming fiction which will be adequate to the commonplace without losing consciousness of itself as fiction.[9] The despair which Copernicus expresses in dialogue with Rheticus consists of losing faith in the adequacy of one's expressive means and abandoning the mimetic enterprise: "Stars or torches, it is all one, all merely an exalted naming; those lights shine on, indifferent to what we call them. My book is not science—it is a dream. I am not even sure if science is possible." (p. 207)

The dialogue of quotes between Rheticus and Copernicus, as well as the modern terms of the dialogue between Copernicus and the figure of Andreas, highlight the parallels between Copernicus's scientific method and the contemporary writer's method. In ***Kepler,*** the second novel of the tetralogy, that parallel is not so explicitly drawn. Nonetheless, in the passages devoted to explaining Kepler's method and his understanding of his scientific problems, we can locate procedures similar to those just described in ***Doctor Copernicus,*** although these procedures are obscured by the difference in Kepler's approach.

Kepler was a Pythagorean haunted by the urge to decipher the hidden harmonies of the world: "It was his principal axiom that nothing in the world was created by God without a plan the basis of which is to be found in geometrical quantities. . . . Therefore his method for the task of identifying the cosmic design must be, like the design itself, founded in geometry."[10] This early doctrine of Kepler's is later stimulated through his acquaintance with the Jew, Wincklemann, who introduces him to the cabalistic and Hermetic traditions and provides him with precedents for his own concerns:

> It was in Linz . . . that he first heard faintly the hum of that great five-note chord from which the world's music is made. Everywhere he began to see world-forming relationships, in the rules of architecture and painting, in poetic metre, in the complexities of rhythm, even in colours, in smells and tastes, in the proportions of the human figure.
>
> (p. 48)

This perception of "signature and form" everywhere is therefore far more than an abstract preoccupation with mathematics and geometry; these are merely the tools which Kepler uses to decode the harmony of the world. He glorifies geometry and numbers not for what they are in themselves, but because they are methods which allow mankind access to the divinely ordained harmony sustaining all things. Man, he decides early in his career, "is godlike precisely, and only, because he can think in terms that mirror the divine pattern."

Where Kepler errs in his calculations, as in his geometrical definition of the intervals between six planetary orbits,[11] the result is a grotesque contrivance. Elsewhere, in his derivation of the famous laws, he defines the thing-in-itself with greater accuracy than had been previously achieved. Kepler's realisation that the principle of uniform velocity was false, and his refutation of the axiom of planetary motion in perfect circles, both further strengthened the claims of his discipline to being a true description of the universe. Early in his career, thinking of Copernicus, he decides that "the great man . . . had been concerned only to see the nature of things demonstrated, not explained." Manifestly, we are given to understand that one thinker's achievement is never conclusive and that the quest for knowledge must begin again among his successors.

In Banville's account, Kepler does not suffer persecution because of his practice of the science of astronomy. While a young man teaching at the Stiftsschule in Graz, the Rector warns him that some of the pupils' parents would disapprove of astronomy and that "they burn at the stake poor wretches who have had less dealings with the moon than you do in your classes." There is no suggestion here, or later, however, that Kepler suffered persecution because of his scientific vocation. Kepler falls foul of the authorities for religious reasons, appropriately enough in the age of confessional conflict. His flight from Graz to Tycho Brahe's castle near Prague was caused by the Catholic Archduke Ferdinand's suppression of Lutheranism in the province of Styria. (This is where Banville chooses to begin his novel.) Later in life, while teaching in Linz, in Upper Austria, the Lutherans excommunicated him because of his views on the Eucharist and his refusal to ratify the Formula of Concord. Kepler sided with the Calvinists in denying the doctrine of transubstantiation, whereby the bread and wine of the Eucharist are held to be actually transformed into the body and blood of Christ. He regarded the bread and wine as symbols. In dispute with the Chancellor of the University of Tübingen, Kepler declares, "I hold it self-evident that matter is incapable of transmutation. The body and soul of Christ are in Heaven. God, sir, is not an alchemist." (p. 169) Although it is said of Kepler that he could not fully agree with any party, Catholic, Lutheran or Calvinist, his broad religious sympathies are clearly Protestant: in

the Lutheran town of Graz, despite its squalor, he felt the air was "wider" or freer than outside; he complied with a Jesuit request for a missionary treatise on modern astronomy, but thinks: "what did he care for converting the Chinee, and to popery at that?"

The dispute about the doctrine of the Eucharist is clearly continuous with the theme of the commonplace as expressed at the end of ***Doctor Copernicus.*** Copernicus rejects redemption from heaven and is reunited with the humble commonplace world as he dies. Similarly, Kepler refuses to mix the empirical world, here represented by the bread and wine, with the transcendental; he sees transubstantiation as a denial of the ordinary, and will at most allow that the bread and wine are symbolic of higher things. He even entertains the idea that Christ himself was a symbol, and by implication not God. (p. 169)

As Kepler dies, the theme of the enigmatic nature of experience is again prominent, that, as Yeats wrote in his last letter, "Man can embody truth but he cannot know it."[12] In Banville's text, the dying Kepler contemplates a joke of the Jew Wincklemann's, that "at the beginning God told his chosen people everything, everything, so now we know it all—and understand nothing." The mood at the end is far from one of resignation, however; Kepler refuses the consolations of religion with the closing words of the book: "Never die, never die." This characteristic tenacity in the face of apparent failure is already apparent in ***Doctor Copernicus***—and is an example of Banville's debt to Beckett. Even at the very end of the biography, Kepler is still to be seen struggling in this world as he stops off at Regensburg on his way to Linz to collect interest on Austrian bonds and demand settlement of moneys he was owed by the Emperor. The human poignancy of his struggle is best captured in the description of an earlier trip to Tübingen, on foot, to try to find a printer for his famous *Rudolphine Tables*:

> it was February, the weather was bad, and after two days he found himself halted at a crossroads in the midst of turnip fields, exhausted and in despair, but not so far gone that he could not see, with wry amusement, how all his life was summed up in this picture of himself, a little man, wet and weary, dithering at a fork in the road.
>
> (p. 187)

Kepler is a fuller figure than any of Banville's earlier or later protagonists, and has wider human appeal. Unlike the other figures in the tetralogy, he is a family man embroiled in the conflicts and commitments which that involves, "crowded round by capering clowns . . . whose names were Paternity and Responsibility, and Domestgoddamnedicity." The aloofness which Copernicus maintains for many years in Frauenburg to the end of his life is something Kepler can never durably achieve.

The Newton Letter is a return to the contemporary Irish scene, and also a return to the question of narrative practice itself. As has previously been pointed out, this was not an issue in the first two novels of the tetralogy—with the exception of Rheticus's narrative—because there artistic problems were replaced by and represented as scientific ones.

One aspect of the play of narration in ***The Newton Letter*** is the question of truth as fidelity to circumstance. The novel opens with an address to Clio, the Muse of History:[13] the writer admits, "you have been my teacher and my friend, my inspiration, for too long, I couldn't lie to you." In ***The Newton Letter,*** the writer slips into the historical mode on a number of occasions, but checks himself, because he realises that he cannot be a historian any more.[14] Having confronted the history of the Renaissance as *fact* in the historical novels, the writer is now struggling to achieve some secure relationship with his own modern experience. But here, because the revelation of fact may be personally compromising, or may in any case be manipulated by the whimsical, arbitrary moods of the creative artist, we are denied the security of circumstance which could be taken for granted in the first two novels.

The writer in ***The Newton Letter*** has rented the lodge at Fern House for a summer in order to finish an academic book on Newton. Becoming embroiled in the personal affairs of his landlady Charlotte, her husband Edward, and their niece Ottilie (with whom he has an affair), he loses grip on his project and decides to abandon it. The story thus schematises perfectly the competing claims of the contemplated past and the lived present. A central feature of this short book is the way in which it teases the reader with a series of uncertainties and puzzles, and therefore entices to the book's conclusion to have them cleared up. Charlotte's husband Edward, for instance, appears to be a sick man, but for most of the book we are unsure if it is because of drinking and self-neglect or because of some other serious illness. There is also the enigma of Ottilie and the child Michael: it takes us some time to discover that he is not her illegitimate child, but the child of a former servant and "a girl" who went away, abandoning it. The writer begins his stay at the lodge with a series of preconceptions about the family at the house which are modified or overthrown as he proceeds to find out more about them. At times all this boils down to the rather banal conclusion that people are not what they appear to be and that "humankind . . . will never run out of surprises", as the writer affirms when Edward, the rough-hewn parvenu, admits to him that he used to write poetry. (Edward, a Catholic, used to manage the nurseries for Charlotte's father and then married the daughter of the house.) Elsewhere, preconceptions are the equivalent of social and political prejudices, as in the writer's clear fascination with the Protestant tradi-