"The Familiar Otherwhere of Art"

Awareness, Creation, Redemption. Art and the Artistic Imagination in John Banville’s Trilogy of Art

Roberta Gefter Wondrich

"Then it was science, now it is art": thus Morrow, the protagonist of John Banville’s latest novel, Athena, captures the intellectual and moral development of his personal story (Athena 80); in the past he had devoted himself to science, now, having acknowledged the overwhelming dominance of chaos and drift and the impossibility of finding any certainty and order, he turns his quest for meaning and sense to art.

This sentence also describes the development of John Banville’s thematic concerns from the scientific tetralogy of Doctor Copernicus (1976), Kepler (1980), The Newton Letter (1982), and Mefisto (1986), to his three most recent novels, The Book of Evidence (1989), Ghosts (1993) and Athena (1995), which may be considered a trilogy, in so far as they share some common strands in form and content. They have the same protagonist-narrator, a common texture of plots, references and allusions and a shared theme of art and the artistic imagination — which is central to Banville’s intellectual and literary enquiry and provides the inspiration, structure and narrative of each of the novels.

Art and the artistic imagination can be regarded as the dominant theme of this trilogy in which Banville exhibits all the craft and elegance we have come to expect of him. Indeed, so rich is his style that his books sometimes read as exercises in pure aestheticism. The last novel of the trilogy, Athena, is ultimately a long love letter to Art and to the creative power of the artistic imagination, sustained by a whole cluster of symbolic imagery and internal references, which read as a self-reflecting meditation on the elusive and absorbing nature of the the world of art.
The themes of art and the artistic imagination are extensively treated in the trilogy through a series of interrelated and recurring motifs, which can be briefly outlined as follows: the redemptive project conceived by the protagonist as a form of compensation for the murder he committed, a project that is actually an artistic, aesthetic act rather than a moral one; the constant transmutation of human and organic details into an artistic imagery which informs the descriptive mode with a marked artistic and pictorial flair; the metafictional and self-referential strand, which appeals to and combines with the overall texture of cultural references in the novels. Furthermore, besides a host of pictorial similes which bespeak the narrator’s painterly eye, the notion of art also combines with the mythological motif, especially in *Athena*, with regard to the paintings described and to the self-image ironically devised by the narrator, in which the roles of creator and “little god” merge in a sort of mock-apotheosis.

The narrative starting-point of the trilogy is represented by the crime the protagonist-narrator commits in *The Book of Evidence*. After years devoted to science “in order to make the lack of certainty more manageable”(*Book 18*), Freddie Montgomery, scion of a “Castle-Catholic” upper-class Irish family, is confronted with the awareness that there is no order, no meaning, “all just drift”(*Book 3*). Having abandoned his promising career at an American university he spends years of careless *debauche* with his wife in some sunny Mediterranean islands. Then, forced to pay back a gambling debt, with wife and son held hostage by a local villain, he returns to Ireland to sell his mother’s collection of paintings, only to find that this has already been sold off to an art collector and family friend, Helmut Behrens, whose daughter Anna he had once loved. During a visit to the Behrens’ residence, a “Big House” called Whitewater, Montgomery is impressed by a Dutch late Seventeenth century “Portrait of a Woman with Gloves”, which he decides to steal. He later returns to Whitewater to do so, but is caught by a young maid, whom he abducts and later kills, smashing her head with a hammer, in an impulse of cold, irrepressible savagery.

*The Book of Evidence* is Montgomery’s confession, written in jail and addressed to the presiding judge of the court that will sentence him. It does not attempt to justify his deed or to plead innocence, but rather to “illustrate” his experience and explain the reasons that prompted him to commit such a crime.
The murder, perpetrated with ghastly and clear-headed irrationality, is not recounted by the narrator with the moral and ethical overtones which might be expected, nor is it excused as a sudden collapse of the will or of the conscience, rather it is shown to have been caused by an aesthetic and perceptive inadequacy, a failure of the imagination, an inability to see the girl as a real, live human being:

This is the worst, the essential sin, I think, the one for which there will be no forgiveness: that I never imagined her vividly enough, that I never made her be there sufficiently, that I did not make her live. Yes, that failure of imagination is my real crime, the one that made the others possible. What I told that policeman is true — I killed her because I could kill her, and I could kill her because for me she was not alive. (Book 215)

In contrast with the powerful epiphany experienced at the sight of the portrait, the narrator proves somehow blind to the presence of unrefined humanity, in a sort of contempt bred by an hyperthrophy of will and power, an existential acte gratuite which will remain unjustifiable.¹

I have stood in front of other, perhaps greater paintings, and not been moved as I am by this one. (...) There is something in the way the woman regards me; the querulous, mute insistence of her eyes, which I neither can escape nor assuage. I squirm in the grasp of her gaze. She requires of me some great effort, some tremendous feat of scrutiny and attention, of which I do not think I am capable. It is as if she were asking me to let her live. (Book 104-5)

The woman in the painting moves him so much with "the fortitude and pathos of her presence" (Book 79) as to make him wish he can act as a demiurge, releasing the potential life within her. This he partly does, by making up the story of the painting, the personality and the psychological responses of the sitter to the artist's work and her innermost thoughts. The arresting emotional insight he experiences while contemplating the painting originates from his craving for some sort of enlightenment in the midst of his moral and intellectual derangement:

It is being that he has encountered here, the thing itself, the pure, unmediated essence, in which, he thinks, he will at last find himself and his true home, his place in the world. Impossible, impossible dreams, but for a moment he allows himself to believe in them. (Ghosts 85)
The other woman, the maid he kills, pleads with him to let her live, but does not have the same impact upon his imagination. He cannot see her vividly enough.

Thus for Banville's protagonist the relationship between art and life, conceived as a sort of osmotic confrontation, is somehow resolved from the start in the supremacy of the former over the inconsistency and paucity of the latter, not yet in the terms of a defiant aestheticist attitude, but rather of a deliberately self-questioning exploration that enhances the fictional ingenuity of the novels.

The narrator's aestheticism throughout the trilogy is actually of a rather inhuman and dehumanizing kind (Imhof, Book 72); he is intoxicated by the appeal of art, as he himself admits when writing: "I am told I should treasure life, but give me the realm of art anytime" (Ghosts 239). It is precisely the inner conflict between his desire to be human and to be part of the "real" world, of which he confesses he knows very little, and the awareness of his radical emotional and psychological estrangement that recurs insistently throughout his narrative. All three novels basically either dramatize an attempt at transcending the chasm between art and reality (Hand 7) — and the contemplation of the failure which is bound to hinder this utopian ideal — or complacently explore the intersection, the no man's land which arises from their overlapping.

This is also reflected in the redemptive project conceived by the narrator once he has acknowledged his debt towards his innocent victim, a project which appears to be aesthetic rather than moral:

"What was required was not my symbolic death (...) but for her to be brought back to life. That, and nothing less. (Book 152)

And, at the close of the novel, we are aware that, although he still does not know how to achieve it, he is almost drawing a new life force from his apparently unattainable goal:

And so my task now is to bring her back to life. I am not sure what that means, but it strikes me with the force of an unavoidable imperative. How am I to make it come about, this act of parturition? (...) I am big with possibilities. I am living for two. (Book 215)

Upon this paradoxical, superhuman project Banville constructs the two
sequels of the trilogy, which apparently follow an ascending and at the same
time circular progress, consisting of a sequence of waiting, illusion and
delusion, a progression which recalls what the narrator maintains is the gist
of “the history of our culture”: “illusion followed rapidly by delusion” (Athena
81). The descent to hell of The Book of Evidence, is in fact followed by the
purgatorial period of waiting and stasis in Ghosts, and by an experience of
partial renewal and discovery in Athena.

In Ghosts, Montgomery, now coyly but clearly concealed behind the
unnamed narrator’s voice, has left the jail where he spent ten years. While
there he devoted himself to the study of late Seventeenth century Dutch
painting and acquired the status of “a minor expert”. He reaches a small
island off the Irish coast, Coldharbor, where he is supposed to become the
assistant of the mysterious Professor Kreutznauer, the world’s greatest expert
on Vaublin, a famous (and obviously fictitious) painter closely modelled on
Watteau, whose last and supreme masterpiece, entitled Le Monde d’Or, has
recently been purchased by the same Anna Behrens of The Book of Evidence.

In Athena the protagonist, now named Morrow, is hired by the sinister
entrepreneur Morden in order to attest to the authenticity of seven late
Seventeenth century paintings, which will eventually turn out to be forgeries
of the originals, stolen from the Behrens collection. The novel focuses on
the intense and obsessive erotic relationship that Morrow has with a
mysterious young beauty, symbolically named A., who will eventually leave
him and vanish, and who turns out to be Morden’s scheming sister, another
agent of the fraud set up by their grotesquely villainous father, “the Da”.

In Ghosts the redemptive task remains abortive, as nothing really
happens throughout the novel, except for Montgomery’ failed attempt at an
imaginative reincarnation of the dead woman in the frail and allegorical
semblances of beautiful young Flora, one of the seven daytrippers who have
come ashore on the island having survived a shipwreck, and who is “singed
out” by him as the chosen prey for the imaginary act of restoring the life he
had suppressed.

It was innocence I was after, I suppose, the innocent, pure clay awaiting a grizzled
Pygmalion to inspire it with life. It is as simple as that. Not love or passion, not even
the notion of the radiant self rising up like flame in the mirror of the other, but the hunger
to have her live and to live in her, to conjugate in her the verb of being. (Ghosts 70)
The narrator in fact sets out to shape a vision of the girl with careful and minute artistry:

I am assembling her gradually, with great care, starting at the extremities; I ogle her bare feet (...) her hard little hands, the vulnerable, veined, milk-blue back of her knees. (*Ghosts* 94)

In the end, however, his yearning is somehow undone by a sort of negative epiphany ensuing from the initial enlightenment — or rather the illusion — prompted by Flora, who now appears to him in her true colours, no longer “Our Lady of the Enigmas”, “like the Virgin in the midst of a busy Annunciation”, but “an incarnation of herself (...) a girl, just a girl”, who “somehow by being suddenly herself” makes “the things around her be there too”. (*Ghosts* 146).

Despite this assertion, the narrator’s attitude is too self-conscious and predatory to bestow on the girl any life or personality of her own. At the close of the novel, in fact, Flora is rejected as “just a girl, greedy and dissatisfied”, though he reveals “but that is not what I saw, that is not what I would let myself see”. (*Ghosts* 239)

It is in *Athena* that Morrow-Montgomery somehow manages to overcome the pervasive stagnation of *Ghosts*, and to carry out, at least in part, his redemptive task. Again, his ultimate aim remains bound within the realm of art, since his obsessive devotion and attraction for A. proves to be for a creature who is more fictive than real, a morally ambiguous embodiment of one of the possible ideas of art, the “alpha” and “omega”(*Athena* 48) of the narrator’s emotional and intellectual mind in this phase of his life.

What we are progressively made to follow in the novel is a mingling of fictions, embodiments, disguises, in the name of A(rgt)’s love: Banville is playing a very seductive game of fiction about fictions with all his usual dexterity.

Written in the form of a long, intermittent love letter to A., now his lost love, the novel describes the woman with great accuracy of physical (and even physiological) detail, and yet depicts her in exquisitely abstract, contrived, artificial images: “abstract, that is the word I always associate with her”(*Athena* 47). A. is an object of love, of passion, of obsessive attraction, but she is also gradually revealed as a figment of the imagination,
a creature whose flesh is made of the texture and shades of a beautiful and alluring painting. A. is ultimately a projection of art itself; it is the call of art that makes her step out of her frame to lure Morrow, the aesthetic villain, into the unusual role of victim:

I was content there and wanted nothing but this phantasmally peopled solitude should continue without disturbance, content, that is, until you became animate suddenly and stepped out of your frame. (Athena 83)

Morrow is constantly puzzled by the personality and looks of A. (who turns out to be inclined towards sexual perversions of the sadomasochistic and voyeuristic kinds) and he conceives of her more as a fascinating object than as a live creature:

I never understood you. I walked around you, (...) as if you were a puzzle-picture such as the Dutch miniaturist used to do, which would only yield up its secret when viewed from a particular, unique angle. (Athena 154)

Nonetheless, the role Morrow plays in their erotic ballet seems only to be passive, for although he is eventually cheated and abandoned, he willingly welcomes the possibility of the fraud, he acknowledges the woman’s fictive nature and the act of creative imagination by which he has conjured her up to life. Towards the end of the novel, A. becomes in fact a:

new creature (...) as if she had just broken open the chrysalis and were resting a moment before the ordeal of unfolding herself into this new life I had given her. I? Yes: I. Who else was there, to make her come alive? (Athena 175)

The narrator, therefore, has partly achieved his task, his attempt at “restitution”, not so much by undergoing an experience of spiritual and moral commitment — as his passion might suggest — but rather by means of an act of the creative imagination, the domain where all the scenes and characters of the novel really belong:

She had been mine for a time, and now she was gone. Gone, but alive, in whatever form life might have taken for her, and from the start that was supposed to be my task: to give her life. Come live in me, I had said, and be my love. (Athena 223)
The brilliant device whereby Banville has the protagonist fulfil his task, however, lies in the other female character of the novel: a distant relative of Morrow, old Aunt Corky, a bizarre elderly lady, whom he visits and agrees to take care of after her dismissal from a nursing home and to whose death he bears witness, facing the depressing sight of decrepitude and illness. The former Freddie Montgomery is thus offered his big, if only symbolical, chance: by prolonging her slow agony, he can somehow restore life to a woman, who is not young and innocent like his victim or little Flora, but rather old and pathetic in her grotesque make-ups and attire. Yet this time he is not acting merely within his solipsistic imagination, but managing to deal with the harsh reality of physical decay.

Thus, whereas A. remains somehow suspended halfway between memory, fiction and desire, between physical lewdness and masked artificiality, giving substance to the deceptive fascination of art, old Aunt Corky appears to be the narrator’s only link with the world of reality, and the object of his single — though perhaps casual — act of moral expiation.

The transfiguration of the young woman into an embodiment of the notion of art which takes place in Athena is also related to a hallmark of the entire trilogy, and of Banville’s work, too, that of a perception of reality mediated through the filter of the intellect and of culture, and of a constant transmutation of organic and human features into artistic, and specifically painterly, imagery.²

The narrator’s attitude towards the surrounding world is an artist’s one, and also an experienced writer’s. His apprehension of reality, his sensibility and imagination are dominated by art, he is in fact an artist figure — though manqué —, and one of his chief concerns as a writer is precisely to render with the utmost accuracy the very process and functioning of his perception (Imhof, Book 76-79). He constantly recurs to precious similes, he uses a showy style which is as remote as possible from mimetic immediacy, and he asserts that his stance towards the subject matter of his narrative is that of an imaginative apprehension, where imagination is an interplay of sensitive faculties, mainly nurtured by art. The number of textual examples that could be selected from all three novels to expound this aspect of Banville’s prose is far too large to be examined in its entirety, all the more so since one of the prevailing modes of the narrative is a distinctly pictorial description.

In the often overwrought web of cultural allusiveness in the trilogy
(which at times can be intentionally and irritatingly ostentatious) numerous
direct references to famous painters may be evidenced, notably Launerec,
Klimt, Watteau and Fragonard in The Book of Evidence; Modigliani and
Munch in Ghosts; De Chirico, Piranesi, Van Gogh, Brueghel and Balthus,
whose "autumnal tones, that characteristic air of jaded lewdness" (Athena
85) are associated with the memory of A. in Athena.

The narrator writes to "illustrate", rather than to explain, he is bent not
so much on an impossibly exhaustive account of his experience as on the
depiction of situations, moods, emotions and characters, natural landscapes
automatically turned into landscapes of the mind. He does this by recurring
insistently to a lavish repertory of painterly similes, sensory feelings and,
quite often, synaesthetic images, which produce an intense evocative
suggestiveness. No physical or concrete detail is too low or banal to be
transmuted into a new visual entity by the narrator's mastery: even the most
repulsive matter like vomit is seen, with a touch of Shakespearian self-parody,
as "something rich and strange, a dark stream of ore from the deep mine of
my innards" (Book 157); the clients of a sordid bar appear to him as "a group
of wigless surgeons", "like something out of Hogarth" (Book 162), Anna
Behrens is compared in her allure to "a piece on show" with "close grey eyes
and a florentine mouth" (Book 62-3). In one of the opening pages of Ghosts,
the narrator thus exhorts the reader: "Details, details: pile them on." (Ghosts
8); Licht, one of the minor characters, is said to look "like a big, old, rain-
stained statue of one of the Caesars" (Ghosts 11), young Flora's beauty is
reminiscent of "Modigliani's girls" (Ghosts 15), and her "warm, dark, faintly
urinous smell" (Ghosts 47) reaches the narrator's attentive nostrils. Sheer
mannerist hues appear in the "moments of black fright" that make the narrator
think of "some bruised little purple plum or orchidaceous fold of malignant
tissue" (Ghosts 23).

In Athena the use of metaphors, similes and imagery is no less elabora-
to or precious, and it evokes a whole set of pictorial atmospheres, ranging
from a Renaissance clarity to a Mannerist brightness or voluptuously Baroque
shadings, in the context of an even more pervasive cultural allusiveness. For
instance, a touch of affected (and frankly deadpan) expressionism unfolds at
the very opening of the novel:

Three things the thought of you conjures up: the gullet of a dying fish into which I
have thrust my thumb, the grainy texture of your most secret parts, ditto, and the
tumescent throb in the throat of some great soprano — who? — on the third, held
note of the second alleluja of Schubert’s Die Junge Nonne (...) Much else besides, of
course, but these textures persists above all. (Athena 2)

A luscious, fetishist visual memory that adds details and sets the stage,
is employed to recreate the image of A., the lost love:

Hair really very black, blue-black, like a crow’s wing, and a violet shading in the
hollows of her eyes. Identifying marks. Dear God. Absurdly, I see a little black
pillbox hat and a black three quarters veil — a joke, surely, these outlandish accessories,
on the part of playful memory? (Athena 38)

On the one hand memories are made even more vivid and evocative as
they often consist of contrasts: Morrow, for instance, dwells on A.’s charming
raven black hair, on her ivory complexion, on “the fish-pale back of her
knees” but also on a “sharp, faint, foxy tang of sweat” (Athena 54). On the
other, the artificiality of some of the recollections interspersed in the narrative is
so overt as to expose the protagonist as a self-conscious storyteller relishing
his own skill in creating, superimposing and multiplying different layers of
fictions, such as when he recalls that A. “smelled of brine and bread and
something excitedly musty and mushroomy. Her spit tasted of violets,
whatever violets taste of.” (Athena 186), or when “shuffling behind her” he
feels himself “carried off to other times and other, imaginary places: a spring
day in Clichy (I have never been in Clichy)” (Athena 53).

Significantly, one of the most recurrent images that bespeak the narrator’s
painterly gaze is that of the frame, also in the variant form of the window or
the doorway. The frame is constantly used to outline the female characters
when they appear, such as the woman in the stolen portrait, the maid, young
Flora and A. It is also used for landscape details, especially the sky and the
clouds, which the narrator likes to focus on. The frame thus becomes a sort
of leit-motif for the narrator’s unremitting contemplation which aims at
embracing both nature and the imagination, inanimate objects and human
beings. It encloses within a mental outline something that has provided an
aesthetic epiphany, as if to crystallize it permanently. It also works as a
symbol — or token — of recollection (“the frame of memory”) and of the
creative power of the imagination, as when A. “became animate suddenly
and stepped out of (her) frame” (Athena 120.83).

Furthermore, the notion of framing — no longer taken literally as an object but in its widest sense of construction or supporting structure (OED) — may be referred to the way it is used in metafiction⁵, where it “draws attention to the fact that life, as well as novels, is constructed through frames, and that it is finally impossible to know where one frame ends and another begins” (Waugh, Metafiction 29).

Another prominent theme of the trilogy, and especially of the last two novels, is the celebration of the artistic vision which combines with a strand of self-referential and metafictional resonances in the passages describing Vaublin’s masterpiece Le Monde d’Or in Ghosts and the eight paintings examined by Morrow in Athena, since these fictitious works of art appear to reflect and provide a commentary about the novel’s creator and its narrative.

The static and evanescent atmospheres of Ghosts, its wistfulness of tone, its vaguely allegorical and artificial characters and obtrusively stylish narrator are mirrored by the arcane sceneries of Vaublin’s enigmatic pictures and by the figure of the painter himself — “the master of darkness, as others are of light” (Ghosts 35) — who “holds himself remote from these figures” (Ghosts 35). The “painter of absences, of endings” whose works are all pervaded by a “faint but ever present air of concupiscence” (Ghosts 95) in fact becomes an evident self-projection of the narrator himself. Vaublin’s masterpiece seems almost to tease him out of thought, like another Grecian Urn, with its figures “dying as they may be and yet fixed forever in a luminous, unending instant” (Ghosts 231), and he finds in it “something mysterious (...) beyond the inherent mysteriousness of art itself” (Ghosts 94). The “stillness” and the “profound yet playful artistry”, the theatrical ambience of the fictional painting are easily recognizable in the novel as well⁴. Le Monde d’Or thus looks like the perfect representation of an aesthetic and artistic ideal which haunts the mind of Banville’s narrator, that of an art where “There is no meaning, of course, only a profound and inexplicable significance” (Ghosts 94), and which prompts him to question himself:

Why is that not enough for me? Art imitates nature not by mimesis but by achieving for itself a natural objectivity, I of all people should know that (Ghosts 95).

The identification of the narrator and Vaublin is further enhanced by
the fact that the fictional painter also seems to have committed a mysterious crime “against a woman”, which he wanted to confess to in a letter but could not (Ghosts 128). Then, at the close of the novel, the narrator reveals that Le Monde d’Or is just a fake, like Vaublin’s very identity:

My writing is almost done: Vaublin shall live! If you call this life. He too was no more than a copy, of his own self. As I am, of mine.” (Ghosts 245)

The three main figures of the story, the narrator, the Professor and Vaublin himself thus seem to overlap and coincide, for they are somehow brought together by a crime they have committed and by the collective responsibility of having carried out a forgery. Each of the two living ones is in fact supporting the others’ fraud: the Professor should say the final word about Vaublin, but actually leaves the task to the narrator who mockingly announces that the great painter shall live in his writing, “if you call this life” (Ghosts, 245).

The notion of the fake, of the fictive nature of things, the stress on the arbitrary boundary between authenticiy and forgery are constantly evoked in the trilogy, especially in Ghosts and Athena. They are intrinsically related both to the very idea of art and to the protagonist’s literary mastery, so that the notion of fiction and fictiveness in their widest sense are included in the celebration of the primacy of art as the “supreme fiction”5. The novels deal with works of art which turn out to be fakes and with minor and major characters who are markedly distinguished by “an air of fakery” (Athena 59). These wear all sorts of costumes, as a clear token of disguise, and their characterization is intentionally contrived and unconvincing.

Furthermore, the narrator constantly undermines his narrative and affirmations6 by emphasizing their meaninglessness and unreliability, in a way that reinforces a stylistic hallmark of Banville’s work from Birchwood onwards. “Be assured that I am inventing”(Birchwood 21)7 was the memento imparted by Gabriel Godkin, the first spokesman of Banville’s penchant for metafictional artistry and literary beguilement, a reminder which echoes insistently throughout the trilogy.

Freddie Montgomery is just “amusing (...) musing losing” himself “in a welter of words”, none of what he recounts “means anything, anything at all”(Book 38), and his whole memoir is ultimately true in “all of it, none of it. Only the shame”(Book 220). The unnamed narrator of Ghosts, whose preamble
is “Who speaks: I do, little god” (Ghosts 1), displays an increasingly confident and ironic narrative self-consciousness — often irritatingly obtusive — whereby the artifice of language is at one with that of the imagination.

Finally, in Athena Morrow strikes the helpless pose of one who has only “language to play with” in order to entertain himself (like a famous literary antecedent, the Humbert Humbert of Lolita), and delights in bouts of mannered authorial showiness such as:

Ah, what a giveaway it is, I’ve noticed it before, the orotund quality that sets in when I begin consciously to dissemble (...) Whenever I employ locutions such as that you will know I am inventing. But then, when do I not use such locutions? (Athena 2)

In reading such passages the Banville reader is reminded of the definition of “technical narcissism”, diagnosed by Seamus Deane at an early stage in his career, and would think that Banville’s fiction still appears to be “dominated by his fascination with the nature of fiction” (Deane 329. 332)

In Athena the self-referential motif is furtherly expanded with even greater complexity and stylization in the seven brief catalogue essays interspersing the story, that contain Morrow’s commentary on the eight paintings examined. The correspondence between the world depicted in the novel and the erotic mythological scenes of the pictures, inspired by Ovid’s Metamorphoses, becomes more evident as the impersonal and restrained tone of the first essays gradually merges into the narrative and identifications are established between the narrator, the painters, the mythological gods and demigods. The styles, “mannered and overwrought”(Athena 75) in both artifacts, the literary and the pictorial fiction, also have much in common. The Apollo of a “Pursuit of Daphne”, for instance, is “probably like the painter himself at the time, a male in his middle years, slack limbed, thick-waisted, breathing hard, no longer fit for amorous pursuit”(Athena 17). It is as though the god of poetry, the artist and the narrator merged into this reverberation of fictions (and we are aware that in modernist and postmodernist literature it is the artist who replaces God).

In the last three “critical asides”, and in the description of the eighth picture — the only original, entitled “Birth of Athena” — Morrow addresses A. and reveals the mirror images he has created. His pronouncement on the seventh painting, “Acis and Galatea”, for instance, reads like an explicit comment on the erotic vicissitudes of the novel:
Vibell’s is a subtle and ambiguous art; is the subject here the pain of jealousy or the shamefaced pleasure of voyeurism, or, again, the triumphant female’s desire to be spied by one lover while she lies in the arms of another? In this painter’s dark and sickly world nothing is certain except suffering. 

(...) I am Acis and Polyphemus in one. This is my clumsy song, the song that cyclops sang. 

(...) I feel a strong and melancholy affinity with the lovelorn giant. (Athena 203)

Morrow himself leads the reader to regard the descriptions of the paintings as “a portent of what was coming”, namely of A., and of all that she entails (Athena 81). This, in fact, is the ultimate insight contained in the novel: all the figures look like his beloved, he paints her over them, and the woman, her fictional self, the paintings, the “familiar otherwhere of art” (Athena 81) are the same reality, the only one that is true to this solipsist:

You were the pictures and they were you and I never noticed. All this I understand now — but then (...) (Athena 81)

Furthermore, so pervasive is the theme of art that not only do the characters involved seem to share in the fay and disquieting colours of the works of art represented in the novels, but the paintings themselves appear to take on the murky hues of life, as though their evocative grace may secretly hint at the most sordid and amoral acts. It is almost as if moral and aesthetic issues become interchangeable in the texture of the novels. This is certainly the case in Athena, where all the seven paintings of mythological subjects examined represent male figures in the act of an attempted rape, or abduction. Their images of predatory violence represent a timeless archetype of the brutality which haunts the narrator’s experience and the world he inhabits.

The connection between art and sex is also important: both are regarded as a way to cope with reality and humanity. Sex is “the anesthetic that makes bearable the flesh of another”(Athena 121) and “the universal palliative” (Ghosts 238), just as art is ultimately a way to make life and reality tolerable, by transfiguring it and providing the only consolation that can be offered to an imagination bound to cope with a collapsed world.

It may be argued that the true artist lurking behind the works of art of the three novels is thus the narrator himself, for whom the only possible and accessible reality is that of art (Imhof, Book 77), in contrast to the drift and
meaninglessness of "real" life and to the darkness he finds in his soul. His own experience appears to be repeatedly mirrored in the paintings he describes, in a sort of cultural progress which touches upon the mythological and the allegorical. This accounts for the sort of personal apotheosis, related to his redemptive project, to which the protagonist aspires. It starts with the aftermath of the murder, evolves through the "little god"'s theatrical orchestrations of his walk-ons in *Ghosts* and is imaginatively achieved at the end of the last novel when A. splits into a twofold figure, one lost forever to Morrow, the other, like the goddess born out of Zeus' head in the eighth painting, "who steps out" of his head "to live. If I can call it living: and I shall" (*Athena* 233), adds Morrow, wistfully proud of his "act of parturition", his recovered capacity to give birth, or rather to restore life.  

Art thus appears to be Banville's ultimate — and only — object of reverence, and it becomes, for all the pervasive ambiguities of tone of the novels, a sort of amoral and yet superior "real life" of which so little is shown and which is eventually made to dissolve into the the self-conscious, obsessive embebed strata of figments about the categories of language, memory, imagination and perception.

It is within the boundaries of his captivity in this realm, this "familiar otherwhere of art", that Banville's hero-narrator delights but pretends to despair. It is here that he gets lost, encounters and loses his fellow creatures in a mad pursuit of images, figments and "ghosts" of which he himself is the very artificer.

---

**Note, Notes, Anmerkungen**

1) Montgomery's *acte gratuite* has been related to other famous literary antecedents such as Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, Wilde’s *De Profundis*, Camus' *La Chute* and *L'etranger*, Gide's *L'Immoraliste*, Nabokov’s *Lolita* by O'Brien 89; Imhof, Book 72; Mc Minn, 109.

2) It is to be noticed as well that abstract nouns or concepts are insistently assimilated into organic, naturalistic similes, such as, for instance, "I suppose memory will simply fall away from me, like hair, like teeth" (*Athena* 188).

3) A tendency within the contemporary novel to which Banville’s trilogy clearly belongs.
4) Theatricality is a relevant feature of *Ghosts*, as can be seen in the many echoes from *The Tempest*; this aspect of the novel has been remarked on by almost all reviewers.

5) Banville has frequently referred to Wallace Stevens’ poetry and to his conception of “supreme fiction”, both in his early novels, in several interviews and in the essay “Making Little Monsters Walk” (Boylan *Agony* 110-111). In an interview by R. Imhof (*Irish University Review*, 1981: 16) he declared: “Society, he (Henry James) tells us, lives by, can only live by, necessary falsehoods. Art is one of them — the Supreme Fiction — as Wallace Stevens calls it”.

6) See Mc Cann, 39.

7) The exact reference is: “This is how I remember such scenes. If I provide something otherwise than this, be assured that I am inventing” (*Birchwood* 21).

8) “Oh, my Lolita, I have only words to play with!” (Nabokov 32). On the literary echoes from *Lolita* contained in *The Book of Evidence* see Imhof, *Book* 72-81.

9) Attributed to different (imaginary) late Seventeenth century artists whose names turn out to be anagrams of the mysterious “Vaublin”, which is also nearly an anagram of “Banville”.

10) Another similarity between *Athena* and *Lolita* may be traced in the concluding paragraph of the two novels, where the narrator self-consciously lays bare his attempt to immortalize the lost beloved in a work of art. Besides, both novels are essentially “books of evidence”, as was remarked by Imhof (*Book* 72).

---

**Opere Citate, Works Cited**

**Zitierte Literatur**