

# Banville, Black or Bart?

temporary Irish poet and acquaintance Paul Muldoon's statement, "I don't speak poetry, it speaks me".

Banville's writing reminds me of Muldoon's poetry – both are pithy yet semantically adventurous, engaging in what I suppose could be termed 'disciplined linguistic gymnastics'. Muldoon and Banville both have an ability to seamlessly intertwine the dirge and the droll; even the gravest depictions contain minute fluctuations in the language that invoke a lightning glimmer of wit.

Unable to shrug off this uncanny parallel and having been thus far dutifully silent, I decided to recklessly ignore my editor's assurances to the PhD group that I would be "very well behaved and quiet", err on the side of brazenness, and ask a question of my own. Having noticed throughout a constant return to the notion of "transition", I wanted to know in which direction that movement was tending, and whether it was towards a more poetic medium. Unfortunately it seemed my query was more than a little overdue as it was something that Banville had been striving towards all along: "Auden said that the poem is the only art form that you have to either take or leave. You cannot read a poem and fantasise about sex. If your mind drifts from a poem, the poem doesn't work...I like to write novels like that, in which you have to concentrate. I want it to be as dense and demanding as poetry, and I also want it to give the kind of pleasure that poetry gives".

Banville distinguishes that "What you're getting in a John Banville book is concentration, and what you're getting in a Benjamin Black book is spontaneity". Such emphasis on concentration and focus threatens to confer a schoolboy tedium on reading Banville. In keeping with this schoolboy metaphor, according to Banville, writing his books – and, indeed, reading them – is more like sex. Granted Auden, you probably can't read poetry atten-




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tively while in a wanton state of mind. Nevertheless, for Banville, the focus you need in order to write poetically "is almost sexual".

Before we arch our eyebrows in bemusement and wonder if that free wine was really a good idea after all, Banville clarifies: "Concentration on the writing object is like how the lover concentrates on the beloved. The lover knows that the beloved is a flawed creature like himself, but he insists that the loved creature is a Goddess. And that is how the artist treats the world – the world is constantly turning to the artist and saying, 'Look, I didn't expect to be noticed in this extraordinary way'.

And the object blushes under this depth of concentration, this depth of attention. And that's when real art is made – when the object becomes self-conscious and blushes." Arguably, Banville's prose is something of a blushing coquettish sprite – it flirts with the reader, always hinting at some concealed pleasure but never succumbing to candid realisation. It is a tantalising puzzle and thus it "gives the kind of pleasure that poetry gives." According to Banville's definition, his work is nearing the accolade of 'real art': "I think real works of art are always closed, they contain their own enigma and they hide their own enigma, and this is what makes them last because they don't give up their secret."

It would seem, then, that language not only "speaks itself" but controls what it decides to say and when – it is its own agent and not, as we would like to assume, merely a serf of the vessel it finds itself in. We have all felt that internal bubbling of words which we cannot channel and subsequently emit in a sort of frenzied babble. But remarkably, Banville rarely succumbs to verbiage. He is Emily Dickinson's

fearful "man of frugal speech... [who] weigheth – while the rest – expend their furthest pound". Banville's control and facility with language, only achieved he argues "after forty years of scraping away at the pages" certainly is, as Dickinson suggests in her poem, something of which to be 'wary'.

Banville's method now involves writing sentence by sentence: "I finish a sentence before I go onto the next one. So there's practically no revision". The result is deceptively spare prose that veils a seething, complex sub-texture of nuance and motif. You don't look twice when you read a 'Banvillian' sentence, you look thrice – and even then you might want to have another glance just to make sure. Certainly, this isn't a process for everyone. Banville admits that he meticulously crafts the opening paragraph of every novel so that he can "teach the reader how to read. Not your way, my way. Many readers don't like that and I sympathise with them. But I can do it no other way".

But it's not all 'my way or the highway'. Yes, the novels are linguistically thick, but not opaque. The prose is just

sufficiently perforated for the reader to engage and read-in their own perspective – that is to say, sometimes you can flirt back. As Banville says, "*The Sea* becomes a new book every time it is read. People are constantly telling me things about my books that I didn't even know!" For example, as ventured by the PhD group, the novels seem rather saturated with gin. Whereas Banville's interviews almost always seem to include some reference to a "glass of Sauvignon Blanc in hand", the characters in his novels often have a tumbler of gin conveniently nearby. Banville, unfortunately, has not registered this insight. In contrast, one of the students has even ascertained that the characters usually go for the Bombay Sapphire brand.

Banville's texts seem to almost invite these misreadings in their quest to be edifices of linguistic art – and language is one puckish slippery snake. That's how Banville's wife seems to see it, anyway – when the *Book of Evidence* was short-listed for the Booker, she exclaimed to her husband, "they must have misread it... but don't worry, you'll write another one!"