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John Banville's *Ghosts*: "A different way of being alive"

Abstract: This article analyses the ontological status of the characters who inhabit the world of John Banville's novel *Ghosts*. While the problem of volatile selfhood recurs in Banville's fiction, in this novel the very existence of the characters within the fictional world remains doubtful. It is argued here that the numerous metafictional elements in the text are central to its interpretation. The novel itself should be treated as a work in progress or a design for a novel rather than a completed project. The narrative initiates and ultimately resists familiar patterns; the characters' peculiar way of being alive seems to stem from an intersection of empirical reality and an obscure realm of fantasy, imagination as well as textual and artistic allusions. Correspondingly, the narrator's status as a literary character is ambiguous. The article suggests that the narrator is the most likely creator of the characters within the fictional world and is himself a playful author-substitute in the novel. In conclusion, a reading that treats *Ghosts* as a postmodern artefact appears to provide a viable framework for resolving the apparent contradictions and ambiguities in the status of the characters.

Keywords: John Banville, *Ghosts*, metafiction, authorship, art in literature

1. "Something in between"

Speaking about the art of fiction, John Banville once suggested that the artist's secret wish is to "write a book about nothing". However, in that same discussion of his creative process the writer toned down this absolutist claim and admitted that "Even the most abstract art is grounded in the mundane, composed, like us, of Eros and dust. Life will keep breaking in". On other occasions, Banville has insisted on the writer's engagement with reality, although not necessarily in the conventional mimetic mode. Defying the prevalent readings of Beckett, he praised his writings for the way they are supposedly "rooted in the solid, the commonplace" (qtd. in D'hoker 2004: 78). In a monograph on Banville's 1973–2005 novels, Brendan McNamee indicated the contrary pulls of realism and postmodernism: these novels

are supposedly “realist in that they deal with recognisable suffering human beings and are written with an intense care for mimetic detail; postmodernist in that they clearly recognise and accept the postmodern position on the inability of language to fully apprehend reality” (2006a: 1). But in each book these tendencies are aligned differently.

Banville’s eighth novel *Ghosts* (1993) has been analysed with reference to the predominant critical paradigms normally applied to his fiction: meditations on creativity (Hand 2002), metafictionality and the narcissism of fiction (McMinn 1999; O’Connell 2013), affinities between writing and the visual arts (McMinn 2002; D’hoker 2004), the problem of selfhood and the self’s mode of being in the world (D’hoker 2004). Joseph McMinn detects in Banville’s fiction a progression “from a mythology of science to one of art” and argues that the “art trilogy” — of which *Ghosts* is the middle part — “charts [the narrator’s] growing uncertainty about the necessary difference between art and reality, authenticity and fakery” (1999: 12).¹ In this article I would like to suggest that of all his fiction to date, it is in *Ghosts* that Banville came the closest to the unattainable ideal of writing a book about “nothing”; in other words, it is the least mimetic of his works.² Derek Hand is right in saying that “The entire novel, and certainly, the first part of it, is like an elaborate ruse or joke. All of it, or none of it, happens” (2002: 149). *Ghosts* is one of those novels by Banville in which, as Rüdiger Imhof once pointed out, “the telling” takes precedence over the story (1997: 173).

Although critics are cautious about praising this novel (Hand calls it “unsatisfying” (2002: 121)), the description of the book as being “about nothing” is not offered here as a value judgement. Rather, it is an indication of the novel’s persistent refusal to engage with reality in any palpable way. Indeed, the usual dichotomies between reality and imagination, life and art, self and the world are both implied and dissolved. *Ghosts* is “the most conspicuously plotless” of all Banville’s books, “focused inward” upon itself (O’Connell 2013: 165); there is no storyline and almost no progression. There are no tangible characters either; even the category of “ghosts” appears too definitive to describe their ontological status. The characters are constituted by perplexing and elusive combinations of memories, fantasies and hallucinations as well as tropes from literature and art. The narrator confesses that his interest is neither in the living nor the dead, but in beings vaguely described by him as “something in between; some third thing” (Banville

¹ Eoghan Smith places Banville’s novel in the broadest interpretive context when he contends that the books which make up Banville’s art trilogy, *The Book of Evidence* (1989), *Ghosts* (1993) and *Athena* (1995), “comprise the most sustained attempt in Irish literature to explore the boundaries of fiction at the end of the twentieth century” (2013: 83).

² *Mefisto* (1986) appears to be another novel about “the meaninglessness of things, or, at least, the impossibility of communicating the meaning of what it is to be” (Hand 2002: 130). Derek Hand claims that in *Mefisto* Banville faces the problem of “how to express meaninglessness, how to give form and shape and flesh to that which is nothing” (ibid.).

1997: 29). He presupposes the existence of empirical reality but he himself appears to inhabit a different one: "I have always been convinced of the existence somewhere of another me, my more solid self, more weighty and far more serious than I, intent perhaps on great and unimaginable tasks, in another reality, where things are really real" (181). The narrator experiences states of being suspended between sleep and wakefulness, liberated from the constraints of time and space, ready to drift away and dissolve. He calls this experience "a different way of being alive" (38). In fact, all the characters featured in the novel are alive in "a different way".³

This paper will analyse Banville's strategies of representing this peculiar state of being, which corresponds to the insubstantial content of the novel. It will be argued that the uncertain ontological status of the characters and of the world they inhabit and, indeed, of the narrator himself, stems from the novel being a work in progress, "an improvised act of creation on the part of the narrator" (Hand 2002: 146), which constantly hovers between a creative impulse and its realisation. Marc Robinson captures this quality of the novel well when he writes that "Banville creates the impression that his novel is coming into being only at the moment we are reading it — that it is still moving from blur to focus" (1994: 41). Hence, the novel calls attention to its mode of being rather than its content. Mark O'Connell is certainly right in claiming that "*Ghosts*' concerns are as much metaphysical as they are metafictional" (2013: 166). Taking account of the metafictional aspect of the novel, special attention will be paid here to the mode of being of the characters — and amongst them chiefly the narrator — in Banville's artifice.

2. A world under erasure

The narrator and protagonist is Freddie Montgomery, known from Banville's earlier novel *The Book of Evidence*; he occasionally alludes to the events recounted in the previous book. However, despite being told from his deranged and highly idiosyncratic perspective, the story of *The Book of Evidence* preserves some links with the empirical reality whereas in *Ghosts* all the elements of the represented world are tenuous and indefinable. The discontinuity and temporal disarrangement of the narrative result in a confusing, formless account, with very few and very oblique signposts. The book is divided into four parts, and it is only in the second (and chronologically the earliest) that any progression is recorded. Freddie is apparently released from prison and travels to an island where he is supposed to assist Professor Kreutznaer in his work on the enigmatic painter Vaublin. Yet all the circumstances of the protagonist's journey are obscure and arrantly contingent. Driven to the coast by an ex-fellow inmate, Freddie suddenly appears to recognise

³ In a self-conscious manner, the novel touches upon a persistent concern of Banville's fiction. The writer said in an interview: "All my books are aimed at going behind mere human *doing* to the question of what it is *to be*, the question of being in the world" (Haughton and Radley 2011: 865).

his house, listens to a passing stranger's fantastic story of his own family and, after breaking into the empty building, encounters his son, who, as he later says, has been dead for several years. The protagonist experiences a sense of confusion and dislocation; the house appears both "quite solid and substantial after all and firmly tethered to its roof" (177) and yet eerily defamiliarised. By entering the house, he enters an obscure indefinable zone between past and present, dream and reality, death and life. Passing through what he describes as a "fissure [...] in the deceptively smooth surface of things" (177) is accompanied by a sensation of self-estrangement, which causes Freddie to see himself in another incarnation, "as if lit by lightning, a stark, crouched figure, vivid and yet not entirely real, an emanation of myself" (179). During his further journey to the coast, he feels "lighter", more and more "insubstantial" (188), and, accordingly, elements of the countryside appear to become animated in response to his emotional states, or perhaps, indeed, are only projections of his mind. Consequently, the existence of the external world becomes doubtful; it seems to depend on Freddie's imagination, as if all were an emanation of himself. The episode involving the driver's confession that all the stories of his life he had shared with Freddie were merely baseless fantasies functions as a *mise-en-abyme* of Freddie's own enterprise. Freddie's reaction to the confession is revealing: he would rather not know the plain truth, preferring lies for their potential to open up new directions, complicate things and thicken the texture of life. Evoking the Platonic concept of art as a shadowy imitation of reality, the protagonist states that "[t]o lie is to create" (191). His strange journey towards an unnamed island may be said to represent his gradual entry into the twilight zone of another way of being, while his preference for creative lying should be considered as a possible mode in which the strange insular world described in the first part of the book has come into being.

The first and longest part of the novel begins with the arrival of seven castaways and ends with six of them leaving the island. However, what appears to be a typical narrative pattern turns out to be vacuous. Some potential for a story or perhaps even a multiplicity of stories is constantly hinted at and never fulfilled. There is an aura of mystery, of secret meaning in the characters' arrival, there is some expectation of intent and yet no action unfolds and ultimately nothing significant happens. The first hundred and fifty pages of the novel portray an intrinsically indeterminate world in which certain narrative developments are initiated and not followed, the characters embody recognisable features that, however, fail to cohere, and the numerous intertextual allusions yield no cohesive interpretative framework.

The visitors claim to be day-trippers, whose arrival was unplanned and unintended. They remark on feeling strange on the island but at the same time have an intuition of having been there before and indeed behave as if their arrival on the island was not accidental; likewise, Professor Kreutznaer and his assistant Licht treat this visit, or invasion, as the fulfilment of their expectations, but no change occurs between arrival and departure.

One of the visitors, Felix, describes their group as being like "the Swiss family *Robertson*" [my italics] (52) — the characters may be imperfect or deformed incarnations of figures from literature and myth; their presence connotes the vestigial but misleading presence of familiar stories. There is a young girl called Alice in the group, but it is another woman, Flora, who has Lewis Carroll's heroine's experience of being much too big for her miniature room (45). Yet another woman, Sophie, is a modern-day photographer but also a countess from the Hapsburg Empire, who, rather than being shot at, shoots someone else with her camera (7); Felix confirms her recognition that the island is her native Aeaea, which hints at Sophie's affinity with the mythological Circe (7). Yet an insight into her mind, rather than settling the issue of her identity, reveals her impatience with her role-play. Felix himself, a red-haired trickster who appears to orchestrate the entire visit, has overtly demonic characteristics. The place also has features of an Irish penitential island with beehive huts (22), the biblical Land of Nod (67), the Virgilian underworld (16), Christian purgatory or Dantesque limbo (89), Laputa from *Gulliver's Travels* (34), Alice's Wonderland (105), her world through the looking glass (55), Prospero's island in *The Tempest* as well as Beckett's desolate landscapes (42).

Nevertheless, the plethora of allusions and underlying stories constitutes an array of clues which inevitably lead to a series of dead ends. There seems to be no way out of the enigma of the island, however rich in narrative potential it appears. As the narrator says, "There is no elsewhere, for [the visitors]. Only here, in this little round" (93). The obscure island exudes an ambiance of entrapment and isolation, though the residents and the visitors neither enjoy nor resent it. In the words of one reviewer, "The most tangible things in *Ghosts* seem like abstractions, hallucinations" (Robinson 1994: 41). Hand describes the atmosphere of the fictional world as "quiet, dreamlike inertness" (2002: 144). This is a hollow land, in which characters express no strong emotions, their actions appear futile and aimless and conversations are infrequent and inconclusive. The account of the setting and of the characters is permeated by an impression of emptiness and vapidness, "dullness and lack of emphasis" — in the narrator's own words (25). The island has "patches of waste ground, and mysterious, padlocked sheds", "roads that set off determinedly into the hills", and a forlorn village (24). There is a sense that at any moment the castaways might vanish (29); Flora is described as looking "emptily" or "blankly" at the floor (18); Sophie moves through light "as if through some fine, shining liquid" (7), characters "linger" (7), they converse "haltingly, between long pauses" (72). Professor Kreutznaer, who presides over the island from his turret, remains inert, "brooding by himself or idly scanning the horizon" (4), whereas his glassy countenance reminds his assistant of life-in-death. The Professor's house, in which the castaways temporarily reside, is a typically Gothic setting, labyrinthine, silent and endowed with its own hidden life. The characters wander around this space like ghosts, "spectre-like and never fully present" (Hand 2002: 147); Licht has to reassure himself again and again that they have not disappeared (19). Such references

serve to emphasise the intangibility of this fictional world, to create the sense that “everything is on the verge of erasure” (Smith 2013: 101). As Elke D’hoker notes, “the gothic references to mirrors, ghosts, devils and haunted houses are often exaggerated to the point of self-deflating parody” (2004: 183). In the words of Joseph McMinn, in *Ghosts* “Life is dependent upon, so interchangeable with, artifice, that it appears to have no authentic character of its own, only one drawn by comparison with fiction (1999:14). In his general overview of *Ghosts*, Eoghan Smith remarks on “the naked artificiality of the text” (2013: 84).

The narrator observes: “All is coolness and silence [...] Nothing happens, nothing will happen, yet everything is poised, waiting” (40) — but the wait is in vain. The characters’ ephemeral condition contrasts with their bodily existence — their bodies and bodily functions are occasionally depicted in naturalistic detail. Apparently, they do have the potential to become full-blooded people, just as the situation might be fleshed out into a life-like story. But those latent possibilities are wasted. Professor Kreutznaer’s life is a futile, endless succession of days (42); Licht, “with a curious, dreamy sense of inconsequence” concludes that “In the end nothing makes sense” (144) — which might be taken as one of the numerous metafictional comments on the novel itself. The narrative in part 1 lacks a temporal dimension; rather, it is a series of incongruously juxtaposed *tableaux vivants* (or *tableaux morts* — like the title of Sophie’s book (72)). Smith sums up the overall climate in *Ghosts* as “inertia, stagnation and stillness” (2013: 100). The static quality of this other way of being alive is intimated by the narrator in his account of the final episode, which he introduces by promising to “paint the scene” (145).

3. Textual conception

The last episode of part 1, which is chronologically the immediate link to the conclusion of the entire novel, may be read as a definitive illustration of the otherworldliness of the characters, as well as the novel’s self-reflexivity and its refusal to become mimetic. Although apparently present in the house throughout the visit, Freddie is addressed for the first time by one of the castaways — the girl who stayed behind while the others left. Flora unexpectedly comes out of her usual ghostly torpor and begins to talk to the protagonist. The content of the conversation, according to the narrator, is unimportant and he “hardly listen[s] to the sense of it” (146) — which in fact sums up all the exchanges between the characters. In the eyes of the protagonist she becomes an autonomous individual rather than an assortment of elements: “I found myself looking at her and seeing her as if for the first time, not as a gathering of details, but all of a piece, solid and singular and amazing” (147). However, the implication that at least one character has finally become a unified substantial self is undermined in the next sentence, in which the narrator confuses incarnation with textuality: “She was simply there, an incarnation of herself, no longer a nexus of adjectives but pure

and present noun" (147). In other words, Flora remains a textual construct, albeit a different one. Freddie registers the process of "everyone and everything" detaching themselves from him and acquiring an existence independent of his imaginings and his conception of them (147). The incongruous textual components seem ready to be animated into a mimetic novel, and, to resort to a clichéd idea, the characters may start to live independently of their author. The ambiguity of the word "conception" is no doubt deliberate; the protagonist is now ready to let go of the character he has brought to life.⁴ Yet as soon as the girl becomes a solid, singular person, she prepares to depart; if a realistic world is to come into being, it must happen outside the island, "this little round", as the narrator describes the setting (93) (and outside this novel).⁵

The concluding paragraphs of the first part, in which the narrator himself for the first time becomes a prominent presence in his account, interacts with one of the ghostly characters and reveals her dependence on him, in hindsight throw some light on the ontological status of the represented world. The characters' strange "way of being alive" can be best comprehended if one accepts that the novel has an underlying metafictional alignment, in which the unsettling incongruities, contradictions and non-sequiturs of their actions are conceived as part of the narrator's work in progress. D'hoker observes that "the inner life of these various people is very similar to [Freddie's] own thoughts and feelings" (2004: 163). The people on the island are most likely no more than figments of his imagination, half-formed products of his memories, dreams and fantasies. The "little round" might indeed be as little as his own mind. The solipsistic nature of this world is implied later in the book when Freddie describes the experience of entering the Professor's house for the first time as stepping "inside [himself], into the shadowed vault of [his] own skull" (205).

Falsely denying that he has God-like prerogatives, Freddie nevertheless identifies himself as the prime cause of all: "I am the pretext of things, though I sport no thick gold wing or pale halo" (40). The phrase not only "hints at his awareness of his own author-status within the novel's fictional world", as O'Connell notes (2013: 166), but also evokes "the old analogy between Author and God" (cf. McHale 2001: 29)⁶ and immediately dismantles it in a postmodern gesture. By commenting on his creative process, Freddie further "undermin[es] the truth-value of his narrative" (D'hoker 2004: 191). As a *pretext*, he is also the textual antecedent of all the text he supposedly authors; he is "that which *precedes* the text" (O'Connell 2013: 166). Also, Freddie's claim is corroborated by his "pretext" — in the sense

⁴ At the end of the book, Freddie says: "There was never any question but that I would lift her up and let her go; what else have I been doing here but trying to beget a girl?" (244).

⁵ Elke D'hoker elaborates on Freddie's attempts to bring Flora into existence, relating them to the previous novel in Banville's art trilogy, *The Book of Evidence*. She suggests that Freddie first tries to imagine the girl in the likeness of the woman in the portrait he stole, but at his second attempt Flora manages to break free from his artistic imaginings and becomes almost real, a near incarnation of the maid he murdered (2004: 161–165).

⁶ McHale quotes John Barth's formulation from *Lost in the Funhouse* (1969).

of “justification” — for being on the island: he is employed as a ghost writer and has taken over from the Professor the task of writing a book on Vaublin, on the understanding that Kreutznaer will feature as its author. But, on another level, he is obviously a textual construct whom the extratextual writer John Banville uses so as to pen his own novel.

4. In the creator’s image

Noting the novel’s allusions to *The Tempest*, Wendy Lesser observes that its narrator regards himself as “the Prospero-like figure who has created the entire cast” (1993). Freddie’s creative enterprise is predicated on the romantic concept of the artist’s divine powers but is undercut by postmodern self-doubt and crippling self-consciousness. The castaways’ arrival at the beginning of the novel is described as a creation of a world in its own right: “A little world is coming into being” (4). This time explicitly alluding to the analogy between author and God, the narrator identifies himself as its creator: “Who speaks? I do. Little god” (4). The adjective “little” points to the correlation between the scale of this world and the status of its divine being, or, equally, may be taken as a self-deprecating comment on Freddie’s limitations as creator. William Gass once remarked: “Authors are gods — a little tinny sometimes, but omnipotent no matter what, and plausible on top of that, if they can manage it” (qtd. in McHale 2001: 29). Freddie is, however, uncertain of his powers and unable to achieve plausibility. His ideas remain nebulous, his attempts at stories are unconvincing and undeveloped, and his characters falter on the way from the artist’s vague outlines to life-like beings. When the narrator refers to them as “My foundered creatures” (5), he probably means more than just the fact that they have run aground and now stumble on the way to the Professor’s house. Even their number, let alone their identity and function in the would-be story, is arbitrary. In a strikingly insouciant declaration, Freddie reserves the right to shape this world according to his changing design: “There are seven of them. Or better say, half a dozen or so, that gives more leeway” (3). The realism in the description of the house is immediately destabilised by the narrator’s self-addressed exhortation: “Details, details: pile them on” (8). The existence of the characters depends on Freddie: “That would be a laugh, for me to die and leave them there, trapped, the tide halted, the boat stuck fast forever” (126).

The narrator has apparently created this world in the likeness of his private vision. In the strange hour between dream and wakefulness, he says, “the world looks as I imagine it will look after I am dead, wide and empty and streaked with long shadows, shocked somehow and not quite solid, all odd-angled light and shifting façades” (29). The characters, too, have apparently been created in the likeness of the little god. O’Connell suggests that it is “[Freddie’s] consciousness of phenomena which makes them real” (2013: 166). Freddie remarks on his own

uncertain existence: "though I am one of [the characters], I am only a half figure, a figure half-seen, standing in the doorway, or sitting at a corner of the scrubbed pine table with a cracked mug at my elbow, and if they try to see me straight, or turn their heads too quickly, I am gone" (40).⁷ Freddie imparts something of his own to all his creatures. Although separate, they unknowingly retain a bond with one another through their creator. Mistakenly assuming that they are "singular and unique", they are unwittingly united by the moods and mode of being given to them by Freddie. As they arrive, "something that was almost happiness" wafts through them, which corresponds to the narrator's "mellow mood" (7). All the characters emphasise their feeling strange in this place, by which they echo the narrator's permanent sense of alienation.⁸

While it would be difficult to prove that the characters represent aspects of Freddie, it could plausibly be argued that their formlessness and the overall disjunction of the narrative correspond to his inner fragmentation. His self-description indicates a chaotic medley of roles and identities:

I was myself no unitary thing. I was like nothing so much as a pack of cards, shuffling into other and yet other versions of myself: here was the king, here the knave, and here the ace of spades. Nor did it seem possible to speak simply. I would open my mouth and a babble would come pouring out, a hopeless glossolalia. (26–27)⁹

The narration is constantly refocused from one character to another — a structure resembling a shuffling of cards. That this may be a game is revealed in the narrator's laying bare the device, as when he chooses to focus on yet another of the visitors: "Croke now, try Croke, he is the real thing" (118). At the end of part 1, having had a revelation of the girl Flora's solid being, the narrator paradoxically casts doubt on his own existence: "And I, was I there amongst them, at last?" (147).¹⁰ Freddie cannot think of himself as having any kind of existential weight and so, in the words of O'Connell, "The title of the novel refers as much to himself as to the various shipwrecked characters with whom he populates his story" (O'Connell 2011: 335).

⁷ Interestingly, Freddie's creative process is akin to his own creator's. In an interview with Derek Hand, the writer stated that for him the "moment of writing" seems to take place in "some strange place that's like a dream state" (Hand 2006: 205).

⁸ D'hoker, while taking account of Freddie's projecting himself onto the other characters, is nevertheless prepared to accept their independent existence. In her reading, he misinterprets reality "in terms of fiction, fantasy or art" (2004: 185).

⁹ Freddie is an embodiment of a type that, as Hand has remarked, inhabits Banville's fiction from *Mefisto* onwards: "utterly isolated and alienated, cut adrift from other people and from reality" (2002: 128).

¹⁰ D'hoker emphasises that Freddie's sense of "insubstantiality, weightlessness, yearning; lack of reality, solidity, or being" is in fact carried over from *The Book of Evidence* and even intensified (2004: 194–195). In the other novel the narrator refers to himself as "something without weight, without moorings, a floating phantom" (Banville 1995: 16), "a kind of ghost, hardly there at all, a memory, a shadow of some more solid version of myself living, oh living marvellously, elsewhere" (144).

Freddie's self-doubt may also be interpreted as an acknowledgement of his shifting position within the structure of the narrative. In an arbitrary fashion, he moves (or, it might be more accurate to say, is moved by his creator John Banville) between the diegetic level, which he shares with the other characters, and the extradiegetic level, on which he occupies a position of omniscience and omnipotence. Parts of the book are narrated in the first person, and the other characters are presented from the kind of limited, external perspective that one might expect from a first-person narrator. However, in at least equal measure the narrative is also carried out from the all-encompassing vantage point of a narrator who is situated outside the created world, can access the characters' minds and observe them while they are alone. Lene Yding Pedersen comments that the narrating I is "split into the authorial and first-person versions of Freddie" (2003: 227). After Freddie declares that he is "one of them [the characters]" but may also become invisible (40), the narrative becomes focalised through Professor Kreutznaer, apparently alone in his turret at the top of the house. Not only the Professor's actions, but also his thoughts and emotions are recorded in a passage of interior monologue (41–42). Shifts between the two narrative modes occur continually but on no occasion is this distinction overtly signalled. Freddie's reflection on parallel worlds may serve as an oblique commentary on those apparent incongruities:

Worlds within worlds. They bleed into each other. I am at once here and there, then and now, as if by magic. I think of the stillness that lives in the depths of mirrors. It is not our world that is reflected there. It is another place entirely, another universe, cunningly made to mimic ours. Anything is possible there; even the dead may come back to life. Flaws develop in the glass, patches of silvering fall away and reveal the inhabitants of that parallel, inverted world going about their lives all unawares. And sometimes the glass turns to air and they step through it without a sound and walk into *my* world. (55)

5. Art as a parallel reality

The narrator repeatedly intimates the existence of other worlds — a belief which he grounds in his favourite "many worlds theory" (172). In a conspicuously post-modern fashion, Freddie's world, filled with "shadows of another world" (90), turns out to have its prototype within the space of the book. His ambition to "paint the scene" (145) could also be taken quite literally; in the words of Marc Robinson, "the picture is clarified: clarified *as* a picture" (1994: 40). Freddie, an art historian by profession, confesses that during his imprisonment he retreated into solitude, into a fantasy world "of pictures and painted figures and all the rest of it" (26). If he has now fantasised the world of the island into being, then this world was created in the image of an image. Hand suggests that "in the absence of a plot, it is one of the more obvious unifying forces holding the threadbare narrative together" (2002: 145). John Banville once said about his fiction: "You have to find a scaffolding. For

me, in a number of books, painting was a scaffolding" (qtd. in Kenny 2006: 53). In her review of *Ghosts* Wendy Lesser argues that painting gives this novel both a structure and aesthetic value: "The achievement of 'Ghosts' is to use words as brushstrokes, to create in language an artwork that has all the appeal of a complex painting. Our eye roves over it and back again, not in linear, chronological order but in a state of suspended time, picking up new details and drawing new conclusions with each concentrated gaze" (1993).

Part 3 of the novel describes a painting called *Le Monde d'or* by the mysterious artist Vaublin, which, by the narrator's admission, is "one of those handful of timeless images that seem to have been hanging forever in the gallery of the mind" (94–95). The description of the painting hints at the possibility that the characters' dreams of a golden world may be recollections — or anticipations — of their existence in a work of art. D'hoker notes that they are often seen framed by windows or doorways (2004: 160–161). Their appearance and conduct imply that there are correspondences between the characters in the novel and the people from the painting. Joseph McMinn opines that the painting "serves as a kind of visual parable of Freddie's world" (1999: 124). Freddie's account of *Le Monde d'or* appears to be yet another metafictional comment on his own narrative; the scene represented on the canvas, just like the static situation depicted in the novel, is still, enigmatic, endowed with significance but not meaning (95). Such "pictorial mirroring" (O'Connell 2013: 167) validates the characters' special "way of being alive" — "animate yet frozen in immobility", as Freddie describes the figures in the painting (95). As D'hoker asserts, the iconic relationship between the narrative and the painting effaces the boundary between art and reality in the novel (2004: 126). *Ghosts* is underlain by a "confusion between the natural and the artificial, and the loss of certainty about the real difference" (McMinn 2002: 144). O'Connell claims that the narrative creates "a kind of hall-of-mirrors effect, whereby the reader loses all sense of distinction between which surfaces are being reflected and which are doing the reflecting" (2013: 167).¹¹

In fact, the novel goes far beyond the Platonic distinction between the real thing and its shadowy copy, towards postmodern multiple regression. The narrative is a verbal imitation of a work of pictorial art, which is in itself an imperfect imitation of the real world. But the painting is not in fact by Vaublin; it turns out to be a fake of indeterminate origin. In the conclusion of the novel, Freddie wonders: "if this is a fake, what then would be the genuine thing?". The next obvious question concerns the identity of the artist: "And if Vaublin did not paint it, who did?" (245).

Freddie's earlier musings on the painter reveal that Vaublin had a double, "a shadowy counterpart stalking him about the city", capable of imitating his style (127). There are hints that this double, and the actual author of *Le Monde d'or*,

¹¹ Comparing *The Book of Evidence* and *Ghosts* in terms of the relations between art and life, Brendan McNamee argues that whereas the former observes "a reasonably clear" distinction between them, in the next volume "all such clarity evaporates" (2006b: 183).

might be Professor Kreutznaer, or the demonic Felix. However, Freddie's imaginary recreation of the painter's creative effort, in imposing elements of his own biography on the enigmatic artist (the murder of a woman, similar to the one described in *The Book of Evidence*), suggests that Vaublin's shadowy double may be Freddie himself: "I see him aloft in his attic room ... He tells La Roque, *I have embarked for the golden world*. He wants to confess to something but cannot, something about a crime committed long ago; something about a woman" (128).

6. Conclusion: blurring the frame

Ghosts playfully gestures towards the world outside the novel and tacitly erases the boundary between the fictional and the real. In 2001 *Ghosts*, together with the other two books which make up Banville's "art trilogy", was published in a volume called *Frames* — a title which, according to D'hoker, "draws attention to Banville's continued preoccupation with 'framing' reality — in scientific theories, artworks, or narratives — as a way of bridging the gap between subject and object, self and world" (2010: 352). It must be pointed out, however, that the effect of framing is not only bridging the gap but also its opposite, i.e. exposing it. In her seminal book on metafiction Patricia Waugh contends that "Everything is framed, whether in life or in novels". She defines the frame, after the *Oxford English Dictionary*, as "a construction, constitution, build; established order, plan, system ... underlying support or essential substructure of anything" (1984: 28). A key characteristic of contemporary metafictional fiction is, according to Waugh, the fact that it "foregrounds 'framing' as a problem, examining frame procedures in the construction of the real world and of novels"; hence, it poses questions about "the 'frame' that separates reality from 'fiction'." Self-conscious fiction questions the division between reality and fiction by drawing attention to and destabilising "the frame": "Is [the frame] more than the front and back covers of a book, the rising and lowering of a curtain, the title and 'The End'?" (1984: 28).

It appears that the frame of Banville's overtly fictional world is not only the covers of the book but also the frame of a painting. The description of *Le Monde d'or*, the mention of Watteau (227) and Cythera (31, 221) bring to mind the painting by Jean-Antoine Watteau, "The Embarkation for Cythera".¹² At the same time, however, the possibility of sameness between the two places is ruled out when the characters mock the island as a false Cythera (3). The narrator of the novel is likely to be the fictional artist's shadowy counterpart, but Jean Vaublin himself was a shadowy being, or, as Freddie says, "a manufactured man" (35), or "a copy, of his own self" (245) — or perhaps an imitation of Watteau. Even the name "Vaublin"

¹² McMinn notes a similarity between the scenes depicted in *Ghosts* and the motif of *fête galante*, a genre championed by Watteau (1999: 127).

is uncertain — according to Freddie, it may have been Faubelin, Vanhoblin, Van Hobellijn (35) — but it cannot be missed that Vaublin is a near anagram of Banville.¹³ O'Connell concludes that "Banville, Freddie and Vaublin become consubstantial, as though they formed a kind of three-personned godhead within the cosmos of the fiction" (2013: 171). But, it must be added, they naturally occupy different ontological levels. The final paragraph of the novel fuses the writing done by Freddie with the writing done by John Banville, when the narrator announces: "My writing is almost done: Vaublin shall live!" (245). However, the only person who really lives is obviously John Banville himself. The narrator Freddie, the painter Vaublin and all the other shadowy characters who emerge from Freddie's mind or from the painting — or possibly from both — are of course Banville's creatures. In *Metafiction*, Waugh stresses the paradoxical status of all literary characters: "a fictional character both exists and does not exist; he or she is a non-entity who is a somebody" (1984: 90–91). In Banville's novel, the frame of the fictional world is visibly blurred, and his characters are trapped in this borderline zone between being and non-being.

The ontological indeterminacy of the insular realm of Banville's novel evokes some of the typical postmodernist questions, formulated by Brian McHale as "What is a world?; What kinds of worlds are there, how are they constituted, and how do they differ? [...] What is the mode of existence of a text, and what is the mode of existence of the world (or worlds) it projects?" (2001: 10). "Another way of being alive" situates the "ghosts" of Banville's novel within the gimmicky world of postmodern ruses. By revealing the artifice of his novel, John Banville implicitly points to himself as the ghost writer behind it all.

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¹³ Hand has no doubt that "Vaublin" is "a playful version of the name Banville" (2002: 145). This conjecture is backed up in Banville's subsequent novels. The paintings described in *Athena*, the last book of the art trilogy, are attributed to painters whose names (Johann Livelb, L. van Hobelijn, etc.) are all "anagrams or near-anagrams of John Banville" (McNamee 2006b: 186). In Banville's recent novel *The Blue Guitar* (2015), the painter-narrator Oliver Orme calls Vaublin "*mon semblable*, nay, my twin" (223). John Banville said in an interview: "The double is a powerful metaphor for the act of fiction. In telling a story the writer too becomes someone else" (qtd. in D'hoker 2004: 188).

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