

# John Banville : interpreting reality through fiction

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Graduation Thesis

John Banville: Interpreting Reality Through Fiction

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## John Banville: Interpreting Reality Through Fiction

### Introduction

The world is. This seems inescapable. The objects and places that surround us are real enough, and the fact of their existence is undeniable. Science relies on this notion that the world is concrete and knowable, and scientists work to understand every nuance of it. At the same time, it is also an undeniable fact that various people will have various ways of seeing the same object. Art, it might be said, takes this stance and chooses to aestheticise the world instead of analyse it. The polarisation between proponents of the scientific and artistic methods that C.P. Snow observed in his famous Rede lecture have today grown less marked – Patricia Waugh notes that the “two cultures divide seem[s] to be loosening with the blurring of distinctions between ‘natural’ and ‘intentional’ objects and ‘exact’ and ‘inexact’ method” (Fuller and Waugh 38). Science, for instance, is becoming somewhat aestheticised, turning to poetic metaphor to explain its more difficult concepts. Italo Calvino also points out that a literary piece “might be defined as an operation carried out in the written language and involving several levels of reality at the same time... some consideration of works of literature might not be completely useless even to the scientist” (Calvino 101). However, as these means of seeing and explaining the world blend into each other, they come up against resistance. Neither is singly capable of a complete explanation, but even in tandem, the flaws of both systems still appear. The problem lies in our attempts to relate ourselves to the world. Nietzsche insists that we know the world through our senses, and that our senses do not fail us in this matter, but it is “what we *make* of their evidence that first introduces a lie into it, for

example the lie of unity” (qtd. in Waugh 109). In other words, it is our interpretations of what we sense that varies, and that therefore makes us always unreliable narrators of the world. Interpretation, Susan Sontag says, “is not (as most people assume) an absolute value, a gesture of mind situated in some timeless realm of capabilities” (qtd. in Waugh 51). Our reading of the world, whether through science or the arts, then, is where we fail. We cannot know the world for what it is, because we impose our own prejudices upon it. We see what we want to see, and so the world is repainted in colours that suit us.

But where some might find a disturbing problem in this idea, John Banville finds a kind of playful revelry. It is exactly this human tendency to re-imagine the world that is at the centre of all his works. Various scientists and artists recur throughout his novels, all inevitably attempting to reconstruct their lives and paint a more pleasing picture than what they truly look like. These protagonists labour to craft something that is entirely fictional. If, as Sontag and Nietzsche suggest, we are immediately prejudiced when we sense the world, then we might as well be selectively prejudiced in such a manner that the world is more gratifying to us. We perceive not so much the thing itself as what we wish to make of it. The process begins with the author himself, who when writing, must project “a fictitious ‘I’ – a mask,” just like the masks that Banville’s protagonists wear (Calvino 111). Writing begins with the author selecting and presenting only those parts of his self that are relevant to the story and his protagonists. But even this fictive persona the author adopts is inevitably influenced by his particular culture, history and so on. It becomes impossible to separate the author, both from the story he is writing, and from the stories that consciously or otherwise influence his writing. If there is an ultimate starting point – the thing itself – then it is indefinable, “a phantom ‘I,’ an empty space, an

absence” (Calvino 113). This could certainly be said of Banville’s protagonists, who struggle to but ultimately find it impossible to define themselves.

Jonathan Culler suggests that if “we are to understand our social and cultural world, we must think not of independent objects but of symbolic structures, systems of relations” (Culler 28). In order to understand the world, we must position ourselves within it. The author is part of a certain culture; the fiction comes of a part of the author; there may be multiple levels of reality within the fiction. Applied to Banville’s literature, this tenet still holds true on a few levels. First, Banville’s oeuvre has its own world which he constantly revisits and re-imagines. Second, all his novels contain numerous allusions to other texts. Banville acknowledges that these various “levels [of reality] are part of a *written world*” (Calvino 104). In all his books up till and including *The Sea*, Banville’s protagonists try to locate themselves in relation to the world, largely by attempting to redefine the world around them. In *Doctor Copernicus*, therefore, Nicolas Copernicus struggles against the theory of the geocentric universe. In *Mefisto*, Gabriel Swan attempts to define the world through numbers. Both of them take a scientific approach to redefining the world, and this will be studied in more detail in the section “Science and Mathematics.” On the other hand, Gabriel Godkin in *Birchwood* and Alex Cleave in *Eclipse* use artistry and acting instead to achieve the same ultimate goal, as is discussed in the section “Art and Acting.” They all fail, however, because they invariably seek to get at the thing itself, to ground themselves in reality which although immutable, can never be objectively seen. Throughout Banville’s oeuvre, his protagonists continually try to understand the nature of fictionality, as is laid out in the section “Symbols.” However, they never take the final step into acknowledging that all the world is comprised of

fiction, and that they must therefore accept that they themselves are made of various fictions. All the symbols and concepts that Banville deals with finally culminate, however, in *The Infinities*, as one of Banville's protagonists makes that leap and revels in the fictive nature of the world he constructs. Banville demonstrates the coalescence of the various concepts he has been exploring throughout his earlier books, and offers one possible solution – a personal canon rooted in myth and symbolism, that does not require realism or objective grounding, that acknowledges and celebrates the fictive nature of the worlds we construct for ourselves.

### Science and Mathematics

The ultimate goal of each of Banville's protagonists is to define, or rather, re-define themselves. In order to do so, they turn to the world around them and attempt to impose order on its chaos in a bid to impose order on what they themselves are. In *Doctor Copernicus* and *Mefisto*, both protagonists are of a scientific bent, mathematicians who assign logical values to that which governs their lives. In a 1986 interview, Banville comments that mathematics is "a thing invented by men in order to explain and, therefore, make habitable a chaotic, hostile and impossible world" (Myers 69). Indeed, this is what *Doctor Copernicus* begins with: the protagonist, as a child, learns to apply certain words to objects, thereby giving them meaning. "At first it had no name," Nicolas Copernicus muses about the tree outside his window. "It was the thing itself... [the words] did not mean themselves, they were nothing in themselves" (*Doctor Copernicus* 9). Even when the linden tree appears to change with the seasons and weather, it remains "changelessly the tree, the linden tree" (*Doctor Copernicus* 9). The "indeterminacy of

meaning” works in reverse here, with the word being too rigid a construct to sufficiently explain the thing itself (Culler 39). Despite mercurial changes in its appearance, the word defines the object, and so it always remains a linden tree. Assigning meaning and value to objects allows us to delineate and therefore understand them. We create our own frames of reference with which to understand the world, interpret them as we choose.

Copernicus eventually moves on to the language of mathematics to even more accurately define the world around him. Logic appeals to Copernicus because of its precision, and mathematics is the expression of that logic. From his schooldays, this tendency towards logic is evident, as we discover when Herr Sturm gives his class a logic puzzle to solve:

‘In a room there are 3 men, A & B who are blindfold, & C who is blind.

On a table in this room there are 3 black hats & 2 white hats, 5 hats in all.

A 4th man enters: call him D. He, D, places a hat on each of the heads of

A & B & C, and the 2 remaining hats he hides... (*Doctor Copernicus* 27)

To summarise: A’s blindfold is removed and he is allowed to see the hats that B and C are wearing. He cannot tell the colour of the hat that he himself is wearing. The same is repeated with B, who also cannot tell the colour of his hat. Finally, the same question is posed to C – can he tell the colour of the hat he wears? – and C replies that he can.

Banville’s style of writing here is telling. Instead of assigning names to each of the four men in the puzzle, he chooses to label them A, B, C and D. He uses ampersands and numerals instead of writing out the corresponding words. His puzzle, in short, recalls mathematical formulae despite being given in the form of a word puzzle. The connection to mathematical logic is instantly drawn here, and is further strengthened when



Copernicus instinctively and instantly grasps the answer through deductive reasoning. There is, as in mathematical problems, a clearly defined solution. A and B, even when their blindfolds are removed, cannot see the answer, just as Banville will later allude to the wilful blindness of the Church. Blind C, Copernicus, on the other hand, learns through his peers' ignorance, and arrives at the truth.

*Mefisto*, too, begins with an insistence on mathematical certainty. Gabriel Swan speaks of how, by chance, twins are born. In the birth of twins in his family, he sees a pattern: "Thus the world slyly nudges us, showing up the seemingly random for what it really is," he says, and later adds, "I too have my equations, my symmetries, and will insist on them" (*Mefisto* 3-4). The whole book is crowded with these symmetries, from the recurrence of twins, to the two-part structure of the novel. Gabriel Swan needs these patterns to explain the world. Coincidence orders his world, and since coincidence is often argued to be mathematically explicable, it is in fact mathematics which orders his world. Absolutes such as those we see in *Doctor Copernicus* and *Mefisto* are what is expected of mathematics, but as Banville's protagonists quickly discover, these are problematic at best and illusory at worst.

Charles Flowers explains that mathematics is not quite the "serene, concrete, infallible, immutable" (Flowers 106) field most would take it to be. A famous logic puzzle known as the Liar's Paradox states that "This sentence is false." Unlike Caspar Sturm's logic puzzle, this one has no answer, looping on itself infinitely. Mathematician Kurt Godel formulated a version of the Liar's Paradox which read "This statement is not provable," and translated it into mathematical language (a "sentence G"). He discovered that a sentence G appeared in every mathematical system in existence, and that attempts

to overcome a sentence G necessitated the inclusion of another sentence G. In short, “[e]very system will include a true statement that cannot be proved; therefore every system will be incomplete.” (Flowers 120-123). In 1963, mathematician Paul Cohen pushed this further by creating “a way of proving that certain specific question, if only a small number of them, are forever ‘undecidable’” (Flowers 124). However complete a mathematical system professes to be, these tiny chinks in their structure cannot be overcome, and it is these same flaws which initiate the collapse of Gabriel Swan’s and Nicolas Copernicus’ worldviews.

Early in *Doctor Copernicus*, Nicolas Copernicus comes to the conclusion that one of his professors “knew that Ptolemy was gravely wrong” and yet “stoop[ed] into deceit in order... to save the phenomena” (*Doctor Copernicus* 38-39). At this stage, Copernicus finds himself unable to comprehend how one could continue to hold to a system one understands to be inaccurate. Eventually, however, he realises that he himself does not have the courage to go against the Church, and therefore keeps his own theories to himself. Through his silence, he too “save[s] the phenomena” and perpetuates the “old reactionary dogmas” that form the scientific framework of the time (*Doctor Copernicus* 39).

Proposing a heliocentric universe

in a time of civil and religious upheaval was bound to upset many powerful people. For this reason, Copernicus was reluctant to publish his book, only relenting to do so after many years... [Banville] does succeed in capturing brilliantly Copernicus’s dilemma... in a world of chaos, absurdity and turbulence, the great scientist’s desire for some sort of order becomes paramount. (Hand 72)

Imposing “some sort of order” on the world will then allow Copernicus to come to terms with his own life, and find some sense of self. The problems with the existing geocentric framework are obvious, and so Copernicus quietly develops his own system through which to try and understand the world. Not as apparent to Copernicus are the flaws in his own system.

The book does suggest that Copernicus suspected the planets followed elliptical orbits and that this idea was removed from his treatise by Rheticus, who did not believe it possible. This, however, is not all that Copernicus failed to realise. He may have been responsible for the collapse of the geocentric model of the solar system in favour of a heliocentric one, but further realisations about our place in the universe came only much later. Earth revolves around our Sun, which resides on the outer edge of our galaxy, and even our galaxy does not lie at the centre of the universe. In fact, as the universe expands, all galaxies are constantly rushing away from each other. We could view this in two ways – one is that from each galaxy’s point of view, it is the centre, and the other is that there is no centre to the universe at all. Both views are at play in *Doctor Copernicus*; the first brings to mind the egoistic human desire for the universe to be centred around them that Ptolemy’s theories embody; the second demonstrates the ultimate futility of expecting any such framework to hold up under scrutiny. The first embodies the ultimately selfish concept of learning the world as it is applicable to us; the second the futility of trying to get at some ultimate truth. No single man can hope to find a grand, unifying theory, as Copernicus hopes to, but the gaps in his knowledge are not visible to him. Nonetheless, it is his fear of contradicting the existing framework that worries and sickens him. In that

sense, the collapse of the paradigm is the reason he cannot define his own place in the world.

Derek Hand writes that order is denied to the protagonists, but “it is the hope of discovering some system that might belie the arbitrariness and randomness of his existence that spurs Gabriel on... If the regular patterns of mathematics can be understood, perhaps it will lead to his own sense of sundered self being brought together and healed” (Hand 122). Gabriel Swan finds mathematics far easier to comprehend than the world around him, and tries to apply that comprehension to that which is not easily explicable. After his mother’s death, he writes:

Ashburn, Jack Kay, my mother, the black dog, the crash, all this, it was not like numbers, yet it too must have rules, order, some sort of pattern.

Always I had thought of numbers falling on the chaos of things like frost falling on water, the seething particles tamed and sorted... (*Mefisto* 109)

This sums up his attitude towards the world up till this point in his life. He seeks the “symmetries” he mentions at the beginning of the book, refusing to believe that there is not some kind of grand pattern to the world. However, he realises that this system has failed him:

But marshal the factors how I might, they would not equate now... Zero, minus quantities, irrational numbers, the infinite itself, suddenly these things revealed themselves for what they really had been, always. (*Mefisto* 109)

Gabriel begins to realise here that numbers cannot necessarily “tame and sort” the “chaos of things.” He discovers, as Flowers points out, that mathematics is not infallible. The

numbers fail him, and he realises that his attempt at ordering the world has been ruined by a formerly unrecognised sentence G. It is immediately after this that Part II of the book begins, and we learn that Gabriel has been in an accident which has nearly killed him and left him horribly disfigured. When he tries once more to retreat into his numbers to hide from the pain, he finds that “[e]quations broke in half, zeros gaped like holes” (*Mefisto* 127). Mathematics cannot provide succour from his physical agony, an agony that mirrors the mental distress he goes through upon realising that his framework has collapsed around him. Yet, even as he suffers, Dr Cranitch informs him: “Well... You’ve pulled through” (*Mefisto* 129). This banal observation, at odds with Gabriel’s dramatics, offers the possibility that Gabriel will also be able to pull through the destruction of his mathematical framework.

It is a possibility, however, which never actualises. The second part of the novel sees Gabriel still locked within the same problems, the same sentence G. He still expects the numbers to give him an answer, which they staunchly refuse to do, and thus he never finds what he is looking for – a means through which to define himself. Derek Hand points out that there is “no progression, only repetition; no move toward an end, but rather a circular track round which Gabriel revolves, imprisoned” (*Mefisto* 127). The mirror characters – Adele and Sophie, Kosok and Kasperl – support this claim. Despite moving to the city, Gabriel remains trapped in essentially the same situation as he was in, in Part I. The symmetries Gabriel insisted on at the beginning of the novel reveal themselves as chains. Even when Kosok cries that “[t]here is no certainty!... You want certainty, order, all that? Then invent it!” Gabriel can only watch in mute confusion. Kosok then accuses Gabriel of thinking “that numbers are exact, and rigorous,” to which

Gabriel can make no response (*Mefisto* 193-194). At the end of the novel, after Adele dies, Gabriel finally comes to the conclusion that “[a]bout numbers I had known everything, and understood nothing” (*Mefisto* 233). Each time, it takes something as drastic as a death to remind him that he cannot fully understand the world through numbers, but each time it is evident that he does not know what else to turn to. The book opens and closes with chance, with Gabriel resignedly returning, however obliquely, to the discipline which has failed him.

### **Art and Acting**

With a logical, scientific mindset having failed to yield a solid framework against which to define oneself, another option is for Banville’s protagonists to turn to a more artistic field. Banville has commented that the artistic and scientific minds are quite alike. “Indeed,” he says, “I sometimes feel that one could substitute the word *identity* for *similarity*” (Myers 68). Derek Hand suggests that the “human imagination is central to both endeavours,” both scientific and artistic; that both struggle to create fictions, whether about the world or within their work of art (Hand 70). Through art, an artist can create a worldview as personally consistent and convincing as anything a scientist can conceive of. Indeed, even *Doctor Copernicus* acknowledges a scientist’s debt to language at its beginning, while *Mefisto* concludes with the suggestion that the only way to move forward is in an “invented world” (*Mefisto* 234). Art plays a significant role in all of Banville’s novels, and from the beginning of his own artistic career, Banville struggles with the idea of artistic creation and the role it plays in one’s definition of reality.

John Kenny points to Banville's own article, "Beauty, Charm and Strangeness," in clarifying his position on the relationship between science and art. Banville writes:

Of course, art and science are fundamentally different in their methods, and in their ends. The doing of science involves a level of rigor unattainable to art. A scientific hypothesis can be proven – or, perhaps more important, *disproven* – but a poem, a picture, or a piece of music, cannot. Yet in their *origins* art and science are remarkably similar. (qtd. in Kenny 109)

This, then, is key. Art and science are both born of the same instinctive acknowledgement that the world is unfathomable. *Doctor Copernicus* and *Mefisto*, though both about scientists, acknowledge their debt to art. The realm of imagination is where both science and art begin. Art, however, is not subject to the same "level[s] of rigor" that science is. When Copernicus proves that the geocentric model is incorrect, the entire framework collapses and a new one must be built in lieu of it. The current paradigm would appear to resist fluidity in science, and so even with Copernicus' acknowledgement that parts of the world are indefinable, the emphasis nonetheless is on trying to do so. With art, on the other hand, one is free to invent new fictions continuously. Their fictive nature makes it difficult for one to call them into question – for after all, these are personal narratives. All the same, just as with scientific frameworks, a personal loss of belief in artistic fictions can also send these frames tumbling down.

*Birchwood* begins with the line "I am, therefore I think" (*Birchwood* 11). This inversion of Descartes sets the tone for the remainder of the novel. Gabriel Godkin defines his life through the imaginative process. He exists, and therefore has no choice

but to imagine his life into being. The novel proceeds along these lines as Gabriel invents the fiction of a lost sister in order to hide from the truth of his twin brother and his own genesis. Gabriel acknowledges the fact that he is inventing a life, as is clearly evident when he describes his parents' meeting and proposal. The emotions he attributes to them are clearly his own fabrication. So too does he create the scene of his mother's first meeting with the circus troupe. Yet he claims that

Such scenes as this I see, or imagine I see, no difference, through a glass sharply... Outside my memories, this silence and harmony, this brilliance I find again in that second silent world which exists, independent, ordered by unknown laws, in the depths of mirrors. This is how I remember such scenes. If I provide something otherwise than this, be assured that I am inventing. (*Birchwood* 21)

Gabriel explicitly states that there is "no difference" between the actual and the imagined. He claims to "remember such scenes" and yet the timeline tells us that he could not have experienced it for himself. He claims as fact what is fiction; since there is no difference between them, he cannot separate the two anyway. He is free, therefore, to create whatever he likes and build a personal universe out of his imagination.

Gabriel sees "through a glass sharply" – another inversion, this time of part of in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians in the Bible: "When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things. For now we see through a glass, darkly" (*The Holy Bible*, King James Version. 1 Cor. 13.11-12). Our lives are "see[n] through a glass, darkly," for they are near incomprehensible to us. Rather than admit his inadequacy in understanding himself,



however, Gabriel chooses to create and define himself through imaginative invention. Thus can he see “through a glass sharply,” at least until something happens to break his fictive world – and when he becomes a man, he finds he must put away childish things. He can no longer avoid the truth of his relationship with Michael, or the world. He invents because, as Joseph McMinn puts it, “Michael, like the present, ‘is unthinkable’: it was a way of avoiding his darker self. Only fictions and idealisations offer protection and consolation” (McMinn 37). A fictive world is safer for Gabriel than the one he inhabits, and in defining the latter through the former, he makes the latter safe as well. The house itself parallels this: the structure and order of the house when compared against the wilderness surrounding it is safer for Gabriel, and easier to understand. When the shed burns down at the end of the first part, the illusion of safety is shattered, leading to Gabriel’s departure and decision to join the circus troupe.

Gabriel Godkin is surrounded by actors. Early on, we encounter Aunt Martha and Michael, who both appear to him always to be playing at being themselves. This initial play-acting gives way to the circus troupe in part two of the novel. Theatrical, flamboyant and distinctly disturbing caricatures that they are, the members of the troupe are ambiguous and impenetrable. Much like the world itself, they defy comprehension, and yet in their theatrical appearance and acting, they appear quite overtly fictional. The two worlds conflate in these characters, blurring the boundaries and making the reader question the validity of either. The circus troupe is an allegory of Banville’s writing itself; the explicit meta-textuality of Banville’s post-modern concerns melds with his own rigorous control as author. Hand comments that “writing like Banville’s sets out to explode this illusion [that the writer remains invisible in his work] by blatantly displaying

the fictive nature of what is being presented. Thus, his authorial fingerprints are to be discovered throughout the text” (Hand 35). Indeed, while with the circus troupe, Gabriel adopts the alias “Johann Livelb,” an anagram of “John Banville,” and “Gabriel and Banville become one, albeit only for an instant” (Hand 36). As Gabriel struggles to create a story that can define his world, so too does Banville struggle to define this universe he is creating.

A similar attitude towards acting can be found in *Eclipse*. The protagonist, Alex Cleave, has a crisis of identity while on stage. As he portrays Amphytryon, he laments “*Who if not I, then, is Amphytryon?*” (*Eclipse* 89). The line triggers self-doubt in this actor, so used to putting on various personae and yet completely unaware as to who he himself is. From his childhood, he has been searching for himself by putting on other personae:

I passed the years of my youth practising for the stage... I would be anyone but myself... But what was it I was rehearsing for? When I searched inside myself I found nothing finished, only a permanent potential, a waiting to go on. At the site of what was supposed to be my self was only a vacancy, an ecstatic hollow. (*Eclipse* 33)

At his core, he is empty, like all Banville’s protagonists. The masks he puts on hide this emptiness for a time, until the day he collapses on stage in the sudden realisation that he himself is nothing. He has been so preoccupied being “anyone but [him]self” that he fails to realise the “vacancy” at the heart of him is slowly undermining the structures he attempts to build. There is no foundation for the framework of his invention, and so it collapses.

The novel begins therefore, with his retreat to his childhood home, a home that like Birchwood for Gabriel, frames his attempts to redefine himself. “The house itself it was that drew me back,” Alex says, as if by returning to his boyhood he can rediscover himself (*Eclipse* 4). Near the beginning of the novel, an encounter with a strange, wild animal that runs out in front of his car forces him to stop in the middle of the woods. Alex wants to turn and leave, but “something would not let [him] go. Something” (*Eclipse* 5). He leaves the car and stands there, the “damp half-darkness folding [him] about, making [him] its own” (*Eclipse* 5). In this moment of defamiliarisation, Alex’s various personae, all the people he has pretended to be, are wiped away. The haunting presence of the woods strips away his theatricality and exposes his hollow core. This is what is he left to work with, to try and discover the “permanent potential” he has, and so he returns eventually to the darkened house and its promise of redefinition.

In attempting to redefine himself, Alex turns to his past, back to that point in time when the realisation came to him that he was himself, distinct, “something that everything else was not” (*Eclipse* 32). As a child, unable to quite puzzle out what being himself means, he turned to acting. Now, however, he obsessively revisits scenes from his past, trying to strip away the personae he wore in order to try and glimpse himself underneath it. He is haunted by what he could have been – a parallel to his conviction that he is literally being haunted by a pair of ghosts in the house. Hand comments that this latter conviction only serves to drive Alex “further into the past: his childhood, his marriage, his own child Cass, are all brought to his mind as he contemplates the numerous failures that punctuate his life” (Hand 168). The ghosts of mother and child that supposedly haunt the house might well be the ghost of failure that haunts Alex. His

inability to understand himself carries through into an inability to understand others. All Alex is capable of comprehending are masks, but when the darkness of the woods take that away from him, he is left with nothing.

Alex, like Gabriel Godkin, weaves an elaborate fiction about the world around him. Hand suggests that “[t]he world he creates, through his close observations and the subsequent narrative that follows, has little to do with reality. What should be an act of enlightenment becomes, instead, an act of wilful blindness” (Hand 168-169). This “act of wilful blindness” is strikingly similar to Gabriel’s own construction of an imaginary sister in order not to believe in his real twin brother. Rather than understanding the world as they claim to want to do, both Alex and Gabriel hide from the truth of the world through their fictive creations. Both, however, are unable to stop obsessively returning to their fictions. Just as Copernicus revisits Ptolemy’s theories constantly until the flaws of a geocentric model grow too numerous to ignore, thereby leading to the collapse of that paradigm, so too do Alex and Gabriel examine and rewrite their stories so many times that their flaws can no longer be ignored. They try always to root their stories in objective reality, which simply does not lend itself to such an endeavour. Pretending that their inventions are the truth is what brings their frameworks down and leaves them bereft, struggling to create another fiction through which they can comprehend the world.

## **Symbols**

Banville’s protagonists’ scientific and artistic struggles are mirrors of Banville’s own struggles with artistic creation. The hauntingly familiar presence of all his novels comes from his attempts to create a world of his own. Like his protagonists do, Banville

tries to define a world through language, and explores this same world in different guises in each of his books. He blends realism with various mythologies and inter-textual references which combine to create a resonance throughout his oeuvre. Where his protagonists, be they scientists or artists, fail is in their inability to accept the reality of the world around them. Banville's universe may be apparently realistic on an initial reading, but its roots lie in mythology, and so the fiction survives where his protagonists' fictions do not.

The house is a recurring symbol in Banville's novels. Often dilapidated, frequently mysterious, the house alternately offers sanctuary and becomes a prison for the protagonists. *Birchwood* initially begins as a haven for Gabriel Godkin, but later comes to be an oppressive trap he must escape. It is when he leaves the house that he meets the circus troupe and begins to truly flesh out his invented world. The vague suspicions that he has a lost sister turn into a fully-fledged quest to find her, outside the confines of the house. In contrast, as McMinn points out, *Mefisto*'s Gabriel Swan "escapes into the decaying world of the Big House" (qtd. in Hand 122). It is the outside world, with all its imperfections, which Gabriel Swan wants to get away from. Swan seeks to order the world through his numbers, and his leaving the house signals the breakdown of that imposed order. Alex Cleave similarly retreats to the house in *Eclipse* in an ultimately futile attempt to understand and re-construct the world. Vera Kreilkamp asserts that "for most of Ireland's population, Ascendancy houses signalled division, not community" (Kreilkamp). While Big House novels are generally understood to explore the decaying gentry and divisions of class and politics, the concept of "division" itself is highly applicable to Banville's work. Some of his novels, like *Birchwood*, are unmistakably

about the Big House and its separation and isolation from the rest of the community. The importance, however, is not the socio-political repercussions of such isolation, but rather its impact on the protagonists. They are constantly at war within themselves; the divisions between the Big House and the community mirror the divisions between what they perceive as their selves. Hence, Alex Cleave retires to his childhood home to try and piece together his sense of self; Gabriel Swan moves to the house at Ashburn to try and make sense of the world. The house itself, and its alternate roles of sanctuary and prison are as important in demonstrating the mental states of the protagonists as the protagonists themselves. The recurring houses in Banville's novels are removed and distant from the rest of the world, and their disconnect is precisely what makes them resonate with the protagonists.

Just as the house is a literary trope that Banville borrows and makes his own, so too are the recurring characters. Banville writes certain characters that recur throughout his works. For instance, Hedwig Schwall points out the "leering, insinuating red-haired bohemian" that appears constantly, usually in a position that enables them to undermine the protagonists (Schwall 119). In *Doctor Copernicus*, this figure appears as Andreas; in *Mefisto*, as Felix. Andreas does his utmost to prevent his brother from gaining any accolades, and if he does, to mock him for them until Copernicus flees. Copernicus views Andreas' "intolerable presence" as the reason he could not "become the real self he had all his life wished to be" (*Doctor Copernicus* 80). It is worth noting here Copernicus' desire to be "real" and his connection, therefore, with objectivity – even though he does acknowledge both the fluidity and problems of the language of science, he ultimately depends on it. With Andreas' departure, Copernicus feels as if he can attempt to better

understand himself. Indeed, it is when Andreas is not near him that Copernicus manages the better part of his work, but if Andreas ever makes his presence known, Copernicus reverts to the fumbling, uncertain child he once was. Andreas' scorn undermines the foundations of the world Copernicus tries to create; he reveals the flaws in Copernicus' worldview and stands on the sidelines, watching as a few words from him bring these flaws to the fore. Felix in *Mefisto* is less overtly cruel than Andreas, but his basic characteristics are the same. In contrast to Andreas' destruction of Copernicus' world, Felix offers Gabriel a safe haven in which he can create his world. Felix is "a knowing character and maliciously threatening... slyly giggling at the predicaments of the other characters... the tempter" who draws Gabriel into the "weird and wonderful life of the Big House of Ashburn" (Hand 121-122).

Banville works with types, which explains why his characters always appear so familiar to us as readers. The red-haired antagonist is a trickster figure; he is Loki and Hermes, Anansi and Maui. Banville borrows from all these trickster figures from various mythologies in creating his own sly god. The red-haired man, whatever guise he appears in, watches from the sidelines, stepping in mostly to confound the protagonist for his own amusement. Trickster gods are usually ambiguous in that they do both good and evil, and Banville's trickster is no exception. Felix offers Gabriel Swan a refuge at first, but later offers little help when Gabriel is disfigured. Instead, he places Gabriel in various difficult situations and simply watches in distanced amusement. Andreas is at once popular with Copernicus' friends and distinctly unpleasant to Copernicus himself. The dual nature of the god keeps him from being easily understood; the protagonists generally have no idea what to make of him and he constantly slips definition. This ambiguity is a problem for

the protagonists' worlds, which, fictive though they might be, are meant to be a substitute for the real world and therefore must be realistic. In a Banville novel, however, the god is acknowledged as such. His inexplicability is simply part of his nature and so the mythos holds.

Then there are the dogs. They appear in many guises throughout Banville's novels. Whether as Sirius, the Dog Star or as a stray cur roaming the streets, most of Banville's writings contain a dog somewhere in them. The layperson might attribute qualities of loyalty and friendliness to the animal, but dogs in Banville's books are of quite a different ilk. In *Birchwood*, Gabriel Godkin constructs his story as "Sirius rises in icy silence" (*Birchwood* 11). In *Eclipse*, Alex reflects on the "superabundance of summer... the dog days, when Sirius rises and sets with the sun" (*Eclipse* 188). In *Mefisto*, a dog stands outside the house where Gabriel Swan and his soon-lost twin are born (*Mefisto* 7). And of course, all of *Doctor Copernicus* is shadowed by the stars (and their attendant gods), including Sirius. These dogs are cold, watchful creatures. They are omens, after a fashion, not merely of death but of upheaval and the slow decay of a world that once might have made sense. When Jack Kay threatened the mongrel outside the house, it "cringed, licking thin lips" but did not run (*Mefisto* 7). The narrative does not mention the dog again, leaving the fact of its presence ambiguous. It may or may not have been there to hear Gabriel's twin die, but its presence haunts the birth nonetheless.

Cerberus, the famous three-headed guardian of the Hades, permits souls to enter the lower world but not to leave, and is therefore associated with death. The Black Dogs, Barghest and Gwyllgi of Britain are similarly linked to dying, with numerous folktales about one's death being close at hand, should one encounter one of these creatures. Some



African creation tales also claim that the dog, through either failing or deliberately contravening its orders as messenger, is responsible for death being present in the world in the first place (Fauconnet 483, 485). Mythologies' dogs are not quite the friendly companions we might envision, but they certainly are the watchful, near-malignant presences we encounter in Banville's works. Banville's dogs do not meddle in the lives of the protagonists, but remain as a constant reminder that death – whether metaphoric or literal – is close at hand for them. The failure of their constructed lives, at the very least, dogs them always.

But aside from mythology, Banville also borrows extensively from other literary texts, as well as art, science and music. *Doctor Copernicus*, for instance (and the other science books), is loosely based off the real Copernicus' life. The scientist is an archetype Banville uses and rewrites, in the same manner that Copernicus tries to rewrite his life in the novel. So is the artist archetype that Banville uses in *Eclipse*. Besides these broad types, he also plucks characters from famous stories and books and works them into his universe in order to create an air of unsettling familiarity. Hand points out that in *Eclipse*, Alex lives with "Quirke, the caretaker of the family home, and Quirke's daughter Lily. These characters, and especially their names, are suggestive of their literary antecedents in, respectively, Maria Edgeworth's *Castle Rackrent* and James Joyce's short story 'The Dead'" (Hand 167). In addition, *Mefisto* clearly borrows from the Faustian tale. Felix, the trickster, is aligned with Mephistopheles, and Gabriel Swan is aligned with Faustus. It is after accepting Felix's offer to join him at the house at Ashburn that Gabriel begins to truly rewrite his life. Even after this, after his disfiguring accident, it is Felix once again who pulls Gabriel out of the morass he has sunk into and further dangles temptation

before him. Felix's indirect influence culminates in the destruction not only of Gabriel's life, but also of Adele – Gabriel feeds her drug addiction and she prostitutes herself in the chapel in exchange. "Everyone says that the world of the drug addict is a kind of hell," Banville says, "and sex in the chapel is certainly a blasphemous notion – not in classical Greece, though" (Myers 71). The hell that Gabriel and Adele find themselves in is one which Felix has offered as an option, but not forced on them. Like Faustus, they choose to accept what Mephistopheles offers, and are thus destroyed.

These numerous literary allusions serve to create a background score that reminds the reader of the fictive nature of the book, and of the characters' self-inventions.

Banville says that

We're part of a tradition, a *European* tradition: Why not acknowledge it? And then, books are to a large extent made out of other books: Why not acknowledge that, too? Also, I find that the incorporation of references to other works, and even quotations from those works, gives the text a peculiar and interesting resonance, which is registered even when the reader does not realize that something is being quoted. (Myers 67)

The various melody lines that Banville pulls from each source do not have to be individually tracked down in order to be appreciated. The resonance Banville refers to can easily be heard even without such dutiful work. Another fact to keep in mind is that while Banville does borrow extensively from other texts, artwork and so on, he makes them his own. In reference to *Mefisto*, he warns that he "would not want the *Faust* analogy to be taken too literally" (Myers 68). As his characters attempt to re-invent their lives, so too does Banville re-invent the very melodies that give his oeuvre that familiar

orchestral resonance. Other sources provide the inspiration, but Banville reworks them so that Loki and Hermes are no longer Loki and Hermes, but rather Banville's own trickster god.

Gabriel Godkin sits in Birchwood and attempts to create and re-create his family and personal histories. Like him, Banville revisits the same idea throughout multiple books in an attempt to put together a worldview that does not collapse like Gabriel's does. "I had to keep doing it over and over again, until I got it right," he explains (Friberg 203). The author's attempts are more successful than his protagonists' – perhaps because the latter, while acknowledging the fictional nature of his work, still seeks to ground himself in realism, whereas the former recognises the archetypal and mythological roots of his world. Still, the world that Banville creates is a fragile one, one with emptiness at its core. All his books up to and including *The Sea* have protagonists who could be described as tabulae rasae. Banville might use the archetype of a scientist or artist, for instance, but in each case he wipes them clean and starts anew, in a parallel to their own search for self. This is why Alex Cleave's crisis of identity in *Eclipse* comes at the moment when he, as Amphytryon, declaims, "*Who if not I, then, is Amphytryon?*" (*Eclipse* 89). In the play that is being referenced, Jupiter assumes the form of Amphytryon in order to spend the night with Amphytryon's wife, Alcmene. After Jupiter leaves, Amphytryon returns, and when his wife makes a comment about the night before, Amphytryon is initially bewildered by the implications of his wife having been visited by another Amphytryon. The story echoes not only Alex's crisis of self, but also Banville's penchant for mirroring and twins in his novels. In *Mefisto*, Gabriel Swan admits that what fascinated him about the twins in his class was "the thought of being able to escape

effortlessly, as if by magic, into another name, another self” (*Mefisto* 17). Jupiter escapes into Amphytrion’s body; he is his doppelganger, and the potential for mischief that Gabriel sees is realised. Each of Banville’s protagonists lives in fearful awe of their other selves. Their mirrors hold such fascination for them because at their core, they are empty. Banville’s protagonists may or may not consciously acknowledge this fact, but it is what drives them to re-invent their lives; it is therefore the driving force behind the novels themselves.

### **The Infinities**

Banville comments on needing to keep writing the same story, “doing it over and over again” in a bid to get it right (Friberg 203). That the same themes recur throughout his books is therefore not a surprise, and neither is the fact that each book further develops those themes in subtle yet important ways. They become less overt – the various ideas that Banville works with are far more integrated in *Eclipse* than in *Birchwood*, for instance. From *Long Lankin* through to *The Sea*, Banville’s experimentation with form and structure demonstrates his increasing skill at disguising the inter-textual references, as well as elaborating on his own pantheon of gods. Banville’s latest novel, *The Infinities*, however, is both a break from and a continuation of this pattern. The pattern of familiar characters and an obsession with crafting the world repeats itself, but this time, in a departure from his increasingly subtle allusions, Banville blatantly sets up Hermes as the main narrator of the novel.

The gods become literal characters who watch the Godleys go about their day. Hermes, the main narrator, relates not only the physical actions which are occurring, but

also what the human characters are thinking of at the moment. As a god, he can dip into their minds and study their thoughts, emotions and actions. This is particularly intriguing given the gods' desire to understand humans. Though Hermes can describe the flow of their thoughts, it is evident that he considers himself quite apart from them. He regards them as little more than children whose beliefs are amusing but not particularly noteworthy. All the same, he and Zeus both demonstrate a fondness for humans, and a desire to learn more about them. Zeus, in particular, is fascinated by the mortal capacity for love and death. Their physicality sets them apart from the gods, as when Hermes comments on the two manners of walking that Helen has. The walk she practices for the theatre appears "languorous" but a closer examination "shows that there is nothing loose or languorous here, that on the contrary she is as tense as a tightrope artist," whereas the other, her natural stride, Hermes describes as an "effortful yet exultant plunging" (*The Infinities* 188-189). He further adds that Zeus' preference is for the latter, for on Olympia, only the former can be seen. The controlled, deliberate acting of Helen's theatrical walk, then, is the only kind that the gods understand. Zeus' fascination stems from the fact that the unconscious physicality worn by humans is one which he will never be able to experience.

The gods, then, are obsessed with understanding humans, and in return the humans attempt to get closer to the understanding of the gods. They search for a more complete knowledge of the universe, one which the gods, by nature of their omniscience, are already in possession of. This is the elder Adam's great triumph; he has devised a "Brahma hypothesis" that revolutionises the theories of the day. "I took a big flying kick and put my shiny big toe through their big Theory of Everything," he tells us (*The*

*Infinites* 165). In so doing, he reveals that there are infinite worlds and universes that coexist and run through each other. Though this should open up the possibility of a better understanding of the world, the opposite effect occurs. The scientific community is paralysed by the magnitude of what has been revealed. The elder Adam comments:

Oh, I told myself, I tell myself, that to say equal to is not to say identical with, but does it signify, does it placate? My equations spanned a multitude of universes yet they posited a single world of unity and ultimate order. Perhaps there is such a world, but if there is we do not live in it, and cannot know how things would be there. Even the self-identity of the object is no more than a matter of insisting it is so. Where then may one set down a foot and say, 'Here is solid ground'? (*The Infinites* 215)

This harkens back to his childhood memory of when he first discovered the “magic square,” whereby adding up the numbers in any line gives the same result. Despite different numbers being involved, the end result is the same – a parallel to the conundrum that his Brahma hypothesis poses, that there are infinite universes, but they all ultimately create a whole. The cohesive theory to explain the world that Copernicus and Gabriel Swan search for has finally been explained. Ironically, in destroying the “Theory of Everything” that scientists were aiming for, the elder Adam has created the possibility of an even more unifying theory, another Theory of Everything. Yet the problem persists: even if such a cohesive world were to exist, one could not conceive of it. A “sentence G” will always exist in the structure of the universe (and all others) no matter how comprehensive the theory, and attempts to address it will only result in another “sentence G.” There is, then, no chance of a fully explicable world. It is entirely likely that even the

world of the gods might have a “sentence G” that is hidden to them and renders their supposed omniscience flawed. Hermes is a trickster god and admits as such; the reader is obviously meant to be wary of trusting him, but Banville adds another dimension to Hermes’ unreliability by implying that there may be other factors that even Hermes is unaware of. The possibility of a “single world of unity” seems less and less likely as the universes converge.

And yet, even as the elder Adam posits the idea of converging universes as a mere theoretical possibility, it is evident that that very possibility is happening, as the gods dart in and out of the human realm. “Everything blurs around its edges, everything seeps into everything else. Nothing is separate” (*The Infinities* 71). Hermes poses occasionally as Duffy, Hermes as the younger Adam, and Pan as Benny Grace. Other than these obvious incursions into the human world, there is another god that should be noted in this story. Banville’s watchful reminder of death, the dog, appears in this story as the family dog, Rex. Rex has a much larger role in this book than in most of Banville’s novels – the other dogs are usually peripheral asides, mongrels that appear and vanish in the space of a line or two, ghostly presences that haunt his work. Rex, however, is a constant presence in the house. Hermes makes it clear that the dog can see the gods, claiming that Rex recognises Hermes, Pan and Thanatos for who they are, whether they are there in human form or invisible as gods. This minor connection is further strengthened by Rex’s attitude towards humans. In a section of the novel written from Rex’s point of view, we find that he regards the family as his. “These people are in his care. They are not difficult to manage” (*The Infinities* 198). It “amuses him” to interact with them (*The Infinities* 199). This sense of fond proprietorship is similar to that which Hermes espouses when he talks about

humans as if they were little toddlers he indulges. Rex serves as yet another connection between the two realms, and the ease with which he traverses from one to the other makes any distinction between them vague at best.

On his way back to the house after picking up Roddy Wagstaff at the station, Adam finds himself “wondering idly where exactly it is that the river ends and the estuary begins” (*The Infinities* 101). He first thinks that there can be no real demarcation, merely an application of a word, a human delineation of something that is not naturally separated. Shortly thereafter, however, he realises that there are distinctions in terms of salt- or fresh-water, motion, and so on that mark the two out as different. The analogy of the river and estuary demonstrates how the realm of the gods and human merge. There are differences, as when Hermes gloatingly pronounces that “in the blinking of your eye, I girdled the earth’s full compass thrice” for a “diversion” and because “you could not” (*The Infinities* 16-17). However, by and large the primary differences seem to be a matter of description and definition. The elder Adam applies his theories to explaining the world, but he and his scientific peers are all constrained by the very language they use. The problems brought up in *Doctor Copernicus* and *Mefisto* recur here; even the exacting nature of scientific language cannot be fully trusted.

Neither, evidently, can the language of art. Helen brings this immediately to light when she practices the lines for her play. “[S]he will play Alcmene, the soldier’s wife, sweet and baffled and beleaguered. How to pitch it?” she wonders (*The Infinities* 59-60). Art is immediately associated with falsehood, with masks. Like Alex in *Eclipse*, she is aware that she is simply wearing a certain persona. We see her in the process of inventing that persona, picking and choosing elements to suit. This is the languorous walk of the



gods that she channels, rather than her own physical stride. When she encounters Roddy Wagstaff in the music room, the falseness of these two artistic figures is further thrown into relief. Roddy looks “as if he were sitting for his portrait” and “has the appearance of a painting” (*The Infinities* 189-190). From their first meeting, there is a sense that everything about them is posed and artificial. Furthermore, it is revealed that the version of the play that Helen is to perform in is a reinterpretation of the original. It is not merely the character that Helen is reinterpreting then, but the entire play is someone’s re-visioning of something else. Roddy disapproves of tampering with “the classics” but Helen explains that it was written in Germany, not Greece (*The Infinities* 192). Even the origin of the play becomes suspect here, and so the possibility of an “original” vanishes. All art, it is implied, is a re-imagining of something else, and getting at the heart of that “something” is not possible. In other words, the signified will always elude us no matter how far back along the chain of signifiers we attempt to move. This is further reinforced by the fact that Helen suggests Roddy write her a favourable review: language becomes a commercial and political tool, with all its attendant implications of portraying only what one wants to show.

Language in any form cannot be trusted to fully explain the world – ironic, considering that it is the only medium through which we can make the attempt. Banville himself is acutely aware of the fact that he must rely on words to make this point. The idea of being able to define the world is laughable, and Banville acknowledges this by implying such a thing is impossible. There is little difference between the trials of the author and of the protagonists, as they both struggle with a medium that can never be exact enough. Clark accuses Banville of being a “troublemaking god himself” and

therefore conflates Banville with the apparently omniscient gods of *The Infinities* (Clark 46). As he has done in other books, Banville inserts himself into the novel in order to demonstrate the problems involved in inventing a world. The slow merging of the elder Adam's and Hermes' viewpoints throughout the book further alludes to this. Laura Miller suggests that, in fact, Hermes and all the other gods might well be Adam himself:

Deep into the novel, the narrator has to keep reminding himself that he's Hermes, and when he forgets, the "he" he uses to refer to Godley lapses into an "I." There are many signs that the gods of "The Infinities" may have been made in one particular man's image. Like Zeus, Godley tormented his wife with his infidelities and thought of his daughter "as if she were connected to me, as if I and not her mother had given birth to her," the way Zeus squeezed Athena out of his own head. Godley's is indeed a formidable head. Having used it to remake the world, he has more cause than most to regard himself as divine. (Miller)

According to Miller, the elder Adam is inventing the gods as he lies comatose in his bed. There are other clues that point to this conclusion than what she offers, such as the fact that Rex has been "impossible" to handle since Adam's illness (*The Infinities* 183). The omen of death is perhaps the only being that recognises the ambiguous fate of constructed characters, should their creator die. But if Adam is in fact the gods, he would also be inventing everything that Hermes is seeing, as his family goes about their day. Once again, Banville is conflated with his protagonist, in that both are creating worlds and manipulating their characters. Adam goes further than any of Banville's protagonists thus far, and might in his own right, be said to be a creator just like the gods he purports to be,

or Banville himself. The gods may or may not actually exist in the world of *The Infinities*, but more important is the fact of their invention. Like all other characters, even the supposedly omniscient gods are in fact created personae. What initially appears in the novel to be the most overt manifestation yet of Banville's pantheon, may in fact be his subtlest. The congregation of gods in Arden could conceivably be the invention of a single man. In fact, the whole world described in *The Infinities* could be the elaborate construction of a dying man. Those aspects of that world – such as saltwater-driven cars – could be real in that realm, or entirely fictional constructs of Adam's mind. By calling into question not only the narrator's trustworthiness but his very existence, Banville effectively demonstrates that the only kind of life left to us is that which we create ourselves.

And it works. Where Banville's previous protagonists all fail to sustain their invented worlds, Adam essentially beats back death, at least temporarily. Copernicus and Alex might have failed to accept that fictionality is the only existence left to them, but Adam embraces the concept. He casts his friends and family – and himself, the maverick genius – in the roles of fictional characters. He invents his entire world and in so doing, survives to enter it. Fiction, Banville implies, is perhaps the only thing that will continue, and all that is left to us is to create our personal stories to live in. "Competing worldviews – divine, scientific, novelistic – abut and overlap each other" in *The Infinities* (Dillon 76). When, at the end of the novel, the first-person narrator seamlessly changes from Hermes to Adam, Dillon suggests that Adam is "grasping at last the reigns [sic] of the novel, in the face of a decidedly untheoretical death of the author" (Dillon 76). It would be more accurate to say that Adam has had control all along and is only now showing his hand.

Adam is Hermes, is the trickster god, and in cheating death is himself reborn. He succeeds, for however short a period of time, in fictionalising a life for himself.

## Conclusion

Where, then, does this leave the reader? Banville's works appear to be contradictory at times and contrary always. Throughout his oeuvre, his protagonists have slowly learned to come to terms with the fictional nature of their work. Alex Cleave is a little more accepting than Gabriel Swan, who is a little more accepting than Copernicus, and so on. None of them quite manage to achieve a complete immersion in fictionality until the appropriately-named Adam. In Adam, Banville's protagonists find vindication. Nietzsche might suggest that when we have "abolished the real world" we will find that "we have also abolished the apparent world" (qtd. in Waugh 112), but Calvino reminds us that

the levels of reality evoked by literature, the whole gamut of veils and shields – may perhaps stray off into infinity, may perhaps encounter nothingness. As we have witnessed the disappearance of the "I"... so the ultimate object eludes us. Perhaps it is in the field of tension between one vacuum and another that literature multiplies the depth of a reality that is inexhaustible in forms and meanings. (Calvino 120)

The real world is not so much abolished as it is acknowledged and then painted over. The various types of realities that connect Banville's fiction to the larger canon and to the world itself all merge, offering a multitude of meanings to the reader. The apparent world coexists with the real world, just as the realms of the gods and the humans coexist in *The*

*Infinites*, and we must acknowledge that they are essentially fictionalised. Defining ourselves against the world as Banville's prior protagonists attempt to do is futile; the more appropriate course of action would be to reverse that and define the world against ourselves. It is only in situating ourselves amidst our own significances, finding syntagmatic relations to that which surrounds us, that we are truly alive. In this way, all of Banville's lyrical prose serves to eventually bring to light the fact that fiction brings to life, life itself.

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