The changing novel form : Virginia Woolf and John Banville

Lim, Yiru

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**THE CHANGING NOVEL FORM: VIRGINIA WOOLF AND JOHN
BANVILLE**

LIM YIRU

SCHOOL OF HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

2015

**THE CHANGING NOVEL FORM: VIRGINIA WOOLF
AND JOHN BANVILLE**

LIM YIRU

School of Humanities and Social Sciences

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Abstract

This thesis will examine Virginia Woolf's and John Banville's obsession with art and formal experimentation, and how they define the relationship between the artistic imagination and reality to discuss the problem of representation in art in terms of the changing novel form. By looking at the changing form of the novel through the study of both writers' artistic methods, I seek to establish an artistic genealogy between Woolf and Banville by reading Banville's work in the context of, and as a counterpoint to, Woolf's. I argue that there is narrative and artistic continuity between the ideas and work of both writers which demonstrate how the novel has developed since its beginnings in the eighteenth century. I posit that the discussion of art through art as demonstrated in these writers' texts problematize the act of writing, which continues to be the central concern of the contemporary critical novel

List of Abbreviations

<i>A</i>	John Banville, <i>Athena</i>
<i>BA</i>	Virginia Woolf, <i>Between the Acts</i>
<i>BE</i>	John Banville, <i>The Book of Evidence</i>
<i>BW</i>	John Banville, <i>Birchwood</i>
<i>CDB</i>	Virginia Woolf, <i>The Captain's Death Bed and Other Essays</i>
<i>CRI</i>	Virginia Woolf, <i>The Common Reader Vol.I</i>
<i>CRII</i>	Virginia Woolf, <i>The Common Reader Vol.II</i>
<i>G</i>	John Banville, <i>Ghosts</i>
<i>GR</i>	Virginia Woolf, <i>Granite and Rainbow: Essays by Virginia Woolf</i>
<i>MB</i>	Virginia Woolf, <i>Moments of Being</i>
<i>MD</i>	Virginia Woolf, <i>Mrs Dalloway</i>
<i>RO</i>	Virginia Woolf, <i>A Room of One's Own</i>
<i>S</i>	John Banville, <i>The Sea</i>
<i>TL</i>	Virginia Woolf, <i>To the Lighthouse</i>
<i>WD</i>	Virginia, Woolf, <i>A Writer's Diary</i>

Introduction: The Novel Form

The poet being an imitator, just like the painter or other maker of likenesses, must necessarily in all instances represent things in one or other of three aspects, either as they were or are, or as they are said or thought to be or to have been, or as they ought to be. All this he does in language, with an admixture, it may be, of strange words and metaphors, as also of the various modified forms of words, since the use of these is conceded in poetry.

Aristotle, *Poetics*¹

The writing of this thesis was galvanised by a response given by John Banville during an interview with Hugh Haughton and Bryan Radley on June 23, 2011 during the *Samuel Beckett: Out of the Archive* Conference and Festival at the University of York. An excerpt of the exchange runs thus:

Q5: You used the phrase, “delighted us enough,” which made me think of Austen. I wonder if you could say anything about the influence of women writers on your work.

JB: That’s the high point of Austen for me. It goes downhill after that. I can’t say really. I don’t think, for instance, that Virginia Woolf is ... Oh God, I won’t say anything about Virginia Woolf. I don’t distinguish between women writers and men writers, I really don’t.
(868)

My curiosity was piqued by Banville’s truncated comment on Virginia Woolf, by the unsaid. What I mean by this is not the similarities or differences between male

¹ From *Western Philosophy: An Anthology*. Taken from *Poetics* [*Peri Poetiks*, c.325 BC], extracts from chapters 4, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 25 in *The Works of Aristotle*, Trans. I. Bywater, Ed. W. D. Ross. Oxford: Clarendon, 1924.

and female writers but what Banville felt he could not or did not want to say about Woolf. Moreover, it is interesting that of the women writers Banville could have named, he thought of Woolf. The intrigue contained in that unfinished sentence fuelled my desire to 'complete' that utterance on his behalf, to fill in the gaps.

How did Woolf and Banville write their novels? Can I perhaps trace not a direct influence from Woolf to Banville but certain developments in theme or formal aspects of writing? Are there strands of thought common to both? Is there some insight I could glean from looking at both writers' processes of writing? John Banville has been variously compared to and associated with writers from various 'traditions', for example, Irish writers like W. B. Yeats; postmodern writers like Vladimir Nabokov; Samuel Beckett who falls into both categories; and Henry James, a writer Banville himself claims as an influence. But there has not been any sustained study that considers the possibility of Banville's and Woolf's writing as having anything to do with each other. This is surprising considering both writers' obsession with art and formal experimentation, and the relationship between the artistic imagination and reality, and I believe that a joint analysis of their work will yield fruitful discussion, adding to the conversation surrounding the novel and its changes in form.

Although it is probable that any two writers could be lumped together in a study concerning literary art, I believe that examining the novels of Woolf and Banville in a sustained study can yield insights into the artistic process and the difficulties writers face when they negotiate the tricky terrain of the relationship between art and life.² Both Woolf and Banville engage with the problem of representation in art but deal with it using differing methods, and I believe that these different approaches

² In this thesis, the terms life, world, reality, experience, truth, the infinite and the real will be used interchangeably to refer to external reality as distinguished from the 'reality' of the work of art.

showcase the distinction between modernist and contemporary writing, reflecting certain dominant traits of each milieu's artistic and cultural production. By looking at the changing form of the novel through the study of both writers' texts, I seek to establish an artistic genealogy between Woolf and Banville by reading Banville's work in the context of, and as a counterpoint to, Woolf's. I argue that there is narrative and artistic continuity between the ideas and work of both writers—seen, for example, in the increasing level of complexity of form—which demonstrate how the novel has developed since its beginnings.

Art and Life

Discourses of and around art have taken many forms and assumed many positions since critics started theorising and discussing the subject but one thing remains clear: any consideration of art has to deal with its dogged companion which has been called, in various contexts, life, experience, the world, truth and/or reality. And central to this argument about art and the world is the artist who is the primary agent in this tenuous contract.³

The formulation of art as imitation or *mimesis* was first put forward by Plato when he considered the nature and desirability of art in his ideal state in *Republic* (380 BC). Arguing for the exclusion of the artist in the ideal state because he is only a “manufacturer of images and is very far removed from the truth,” Socrates explains his position by reminding Glaucon that the artist is an imitator because he only represents things as they appear not as they are, that is, the painter only portrays

³ This assertion is not an attempt to rescue the author from obscurity or to make a case for the reading of authorial intention in a text. It is a recognition of the *process* of writing (artistic creation) and the role of the writer in that process.

appearances and not reality: artists, like Homer, “are only imitators; they copy images of virtue and the like, but the truth they never reach” (686; 673). As such, the artist is thrice removed from the Ideal and is deceiving the viewer (or reader, in the context of this argument) rather than depicting the truth.

Aristotle, after Plato, offers a more congenial view of poetry—with respect to Greek tragedy—while still maintaining this idea of mimicry in art. He allows for the imitative qualities of drama by acknowledging, as he does in *Poetics* (325 BC), the use of language that must necessarily be metaphorical and figurative since it is not reality itself but a device, a body of signs, that one uses to talk about reality. What is pertinent to our discussion here, though, is not his concession but his idea, in the epigraph to this chapter, about how the poet “must necessarily in all instances represent things in one or other of three aspects, either as they were or are, or as they are said or thought to be or to have been, or as they ought to be.”

His understanding that art not only represents (“as they were or are”) but also *re*-presents (“ought to be”) is important as this introduces the element of the transformative in art. His ideas also suggest that the artist, far from being a passive surveyor of reality, is an active presence who tries to understand and relate the experience of life and articulate the sensibilities of his or her milieu. We see that art is not merely a passive mimetic mirror held up to the world but something active that modifies the world as it portrays it—art and life exist in a state of creative tension to each other.

Another integral aspect of Aristotle’s account of the poet is the use of language in the literary arts: “an admixture ... of strange words and metaphors” that are necessary yet slippery intermediaries. This body of symbols, which is not ‘the thing itself’ but must convey its essence, inevitably has to twist itself into fantastic shapes

and figurative forms to remain faithful to its subject (depiction) while disclosing some hitherto unknown truth of the world (creation). Art straddles both illusion and truth as it recreates microcosms to reveal something that is both within and beyond the ordinary that is not easily grasped.

This tripartite enigma of reality-art-language will be explored in this dissertation through a study of two writers of the modern novel: Virginia Woolf and John Banville. Realising that a simple and direct means of apprehending and translating reality through language into art was either quickly slipping out of or already out of their grasp, these writers perceived existing literary techniques and theories of their time as missing the mark, prompting them to search for other methods that would be better suited to render life and experience through art, or that at least would be able to register the difficulty of the process. Both Woolf and Banville, through the texts they create, highlight the strangeness and opacity of the world they are trying to write about but deal with this difficulty in dissimilar ways. By considering how their fiction and non-fiction configure and portray the relationship between art and life, the artistic methods by which these writers have developed in their efforts to face this obstacle can be traced and related to one another. Consequently, the changing novel form can also be understood to be a product of these different processes which will allow us to identify how and why the contemporary novel, as exemplified by John Banville, has assumed its current form.

The Novel and the Modern

The decision to concentrate on the novel in this thesis is based on its centrality of place in modern writing. Ian Watt in *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding*, characterises the novel as a modern form, arguing that the

novel's "individualist and innovating reorientation" and its "primary criterion [of] truth to individual experience" makes it original by virtue of "individual experience [being] always unique and therefore new" (13). Part of its originality lay in its "rejection ... of universals," and in its recognition of "a growing tendency for individual experience to replace collective tradition as the ultimate arbiter of reality" (12, 14). This new criterion by which it abides becomes the basis for judging these new formless works and it is in fact this need to "convey the impression of fidelity to human experience [that makes] attention to any pre-established formal conventions" in the novel an endangerment to its success (13). Furthermore, the novel reflected the "general temper" of philosophy, which like the novel, stood in contrast to its age:

The general temper of philosophical realism has been critical, anti-traditional and innovating; its method has been the study of the particulars of experience by the individual investigator, who, ideally at least, is free from the body of past assumptions and traditional beliefs; and it has given a peculiar importance to semantics, to the problem of the nature of the correspondence between words and reality. All of these features of philosophical realism have analogies to distinctive features of the novel form, analogies which draw attention to the characteristic kind of correspondence between life and literature which has obtained in prose fiction since the novels of Defoe and Richardson.

(12)

The equivalence between philosophy's methods and the novel's form that Watt observes illustrates the critical disposition of the novel from its very beginnings. The problem of language, one that we see Woolf and Banville wrestling with as well, problematizes the relationship between art and world. The subject under investigation

in philosophy is the individual experience of the world, a subject that the novelist also tackles. But more importantly, the attention to the “particulars” instead of the general dictates, even necessitates, the originality of forms and narrative methods in order to convey the nature of the particular as it evolved. The novel, from its time of inception, can thus be seen as a form that ‘keeps up’ with the changes the individual perspective and experience undergo. As such, instead of classical texts that aspire to universality and in that way timelessness, the novel form is very much constrained by time, place and circumstance. This makes the novel and changes within the novel form particularly interesting to examine as it is implied that evolving and diverse experience will naturally result in a corresponding development or change in the novel. But the novel does just not just reflect the individual’s changing experience of reality, it also questions and *anticipates* it by giving the reader visions of experience that s/he may not yet be familiar with, cementing its role in life as not only a record of experience but also a critical commentator of it.⁴

Terry Eagleton in *The English Novel* echoes Watt’s explanation of the conditions surrounding the birth of the novel and its critical relationship to experience. In Eagleton’s discussion of the change in emphasis placed on poetry and prose in the modern age, he observes that:

As a form, [the novel] would grow in importance as poetry became increasingly privatized. As poetry gradually ceases to be a public genre somewhere between Shelley and Swinburne, its moral and social functions pass to the novel, in a new division of literary labour. ...

⁴ There are limits to Watt’s theory of the novel which looks at the tradition primarily from a socio-realist angle. See Neil Murphy’s assertion of the existence of another type of novelistic tradition in the section below: “The Manifold Faces of the Novel.”

The problem for poetry is that it seems increasingly remote from ‘life’ as an industrial capitalist society is coming to define it. There is no obvious place for the lyric in a world of insurance companies and mass-produced meat pies. (12)

This change comes primarily from poetry’s increasing distance from modern life and the experiences associated with an “industrial capitalist society.” The passing of poetry’s “public” function and appeal induces the shift of “literary labour” that makes the novel the principal mode for presenting, discussing and dissecting modern experience. The novel is particularly amenable to presenting the oftentimes diverse and conflicting experiences and viewpoints arising from modernity precisely because it is a genre concerned with the *now* and is “the mythology of a civilisation fascinated by its own every existence” (Eagleton 6). Due to the way in which it confronts and discusses the contemporary issues of its time, the “path of the novel,” as Milan Kundera puts it, “emerges as a parallel history of the Modern Era” (9). Thus, a study of the modern novel through the work of Woolf and Banville will allow us to understand why and how certain changes in the novel are exhibited, which will contribute to our picture of the contemporary novel and its relation to the genre.

The novel has undergone a variety of changes since its birth and these modifications take place on a number of levels, most noticeably on the level of narrative form and technique. These revisions to the novel form are enacted against a backdrop of history and culture that directly affect the conceptions artists hold with respect to the relationship of art to life, which then predicate the formal revisions readers witness. As such, to better understand the changing form of the modern novel, the shifting literary frameworks within which the novel developed need to first be briefly outlined.

Within the variegated history of this genre, what is most relevant to the present discussion is the transformation of the novel from the period of literary realism to the present. Changes in the novel form are not only responses to the current milieu when texts are written but are also reactions against what has come before. Thus, Woolf's novels participate in a direct conversation with literary realism and modernism while Banville's novels engage with realism, modernism and postmodernism; and both writers partake of the canon of English literature as a whole.

David Lodge writes that "a working definition of realism in literature might be: *the representation of experience in a manner which approximates closely to descriptions of similar experience in non-literary texts of the same culture*. Realistic fiction ... approximates to history" (*Modern Writing* 25, emphasis in original).

Similarly, Astradur Eysteinnsson also draws attention to this quality of sameness, describing realism as "implicitly present[ing] culture as a unified sphere ... a society in which meaning is evenly 'shared'" and stating that "[realism] is a mode of writing in which the subject 'comes to terms with' the object, where the individual 'makes sense' of a society in which there is a basis of common understanding" (195).

What these definitions foreground is the culture of "common understanding" and shared values within which literary realism operates. In such a situation, the veracity of fiction can be taken for granted since the similarity of experiences written in fiction and non-fiction texts would corroborate each other, accounting for the "underlying confidence in this fiction [Victorian fiction] that reality can be known, that the truth about human affairs can be told, and that such knowledge and truth can be shared collectively" (Lodge, *Consciousness* 49). In other words, literary realism was "a systematised and rationalised mimeticism" that engaged with the reader

because of its portrayal of “social reality as a ‘whole’ and ultimately as a common ground” (Eysteinnsson 196, 194).

This sense of wholeness which literary realism depended on was disrupted for a number of reasons⁵ at the end of the nineteenth century, culminating in the First World War, which paved the way for the modernist movement in art. Unlike realism, which was “based on the assumption that there is a common phenomenal world that may be reliably described by the methods of empirical history,” modernist art eschewed such a view (Lodge, *Modern Writing* 47). Seeing the representation of life in art as problematic, the modernists played down external cause and effect and a shared nexus of meanings and values in favour of “a general tendency to centre narrative in the consciousness of its characters, and to *create* those characters through the representation of their subjective thoughts and feelings rather than by describing them objectively” (Lodge, *Consciousness* 57).

This movement from the external to the internal can be observed in Woolf’s *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) and *To the Lighthouse* (1927), which are characteristically modernist in the way the subjective consciousnesses and thoughts of characters take precedence over external events. Violeta Sotirova sees this phenomenon as resulting from the “philosophical collapsing of the relation that predicates the independent existence of external reality outside the self,” a condition that brings into prominence the perceiving subject that “receives renewed attention as being itself a factor in construing reality” (Sotirova 23-4, 24).

The modernist novel thus “breaks from the nineteenth-century novel by laying the charge against its predecessor that it has falsely assumed that life and the self can

⁵ For an account of the historical, socio-political, cultural and economical reasons behind the rise of modernism, refer to Malcolm Bradbury and James Walter McFarlane’s *Modernism, 1890-1930* (Penguin, 1991).

be made transparent and coherently ordered by the authority of a narrator who organises the life experiences of characters into logically-ordered plot structures” (Sotirova 25). This break manifests itself not only in the way consciousness is presented, but also in the form and narrative structure that reflect the perceived disunity in life, a consequence that, as Terry Eagleton observes, is determined by the status of the novel as well as the cultural and historical situation of the early twentieth century: “If the novel is the modern epic, ... [it] must strive for sense and unity in an age when things no longer seem to harbour any inherent meaning or value. Meaning is no longer written into empirical experience” (16). Since external reality held no readily accessible meaning, modernist writers attempted to write meaning into their texts, which “forces language and narrative into a more elaborate self-consciousness” because of their focus on character and the individual consciousness rather than the external world (Eagleton 21). This “modern epic” was considered by modernists to be able to reflect life more accurately and with more depth than the ‘realistic’ texts that came before. ‘Hidden’ feelings, thoughts and motivations replaced external reality as ‘meaning-makers’, relocating the construction of meaning in the individual rather than in community.

But this relocation of meaning-making is not a complete break with realism but a change of emphasis:

... the Modernist novel is a novel which continues existing traditions in the genre, revolutionising it only through intensifying some – for instance, the verisimilitude in the transcription of character consciousness – and discarding others – for instance, the orientating narratorial discourse which forms the backbone of the narration.

(Sotirova 29)

It is essential that modernist innovation is not seen as happening in a vacuum; the reaction against realism was not a total rejection of narrative strategies and methods. As Lodge comments, “[both] the classic novel and the modernist novel took on the challenge of telling a story from several points of view, representing the consciousness of more than one character, and doing so in what was basically a third-person narrative discourse, even if it might contain some elements in the form of interior monologue” (Lodge, *Consciousness* 81). What Sotirova and Lodge both recognise is the continuity of the novel form even as changes were effected within it. Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse*, for example, may privilege the interior workings of the mind and may use interior monologue and free indirect speech as narrative strategies but she does not abandon the third-person narrative discourse. The narration may not be as straightforward or ‘traditional’, making it difficult at times for the reader to distinguish authorial voice from characters’ voices and thoughts, but an authorial presence can still be discerned.

Whatever the techniques and strategies favoured or discarded in the modernist novel, one thing remains clear: the modernists still believed ‘truth’ to be something accessible, albeit bethought with great difficulty; it was only *how* it was to be accessed that posed a challenge. The postmodernists, on the other hand, did not think likewise:

The modernists in general are much taken by the idea of something stable and eternal at the heart of our experience, of which we can only catch a passing glimpse. Art is one name for such glimpses. ... Postmodernism calls off this wistful hunt for the absolute, and contents itself instead with the unredeemed fragments of time. (Eagleton 324)

Postmodernist writers abandon the search for ‘truth’ in its absolute sense, relinquishing the thought of even catching a glimpse of the “stable and eternal” in experience, giving up the possibility of Joyce’s epiphanies and Woolf’s moments of being. Postmodernist art “continues the modernist critique of traditional mimetic art, and shares the modernist commitment to innovation, but pursues these aims by methods of its own ... and is often as critical of modernism as it is of antimodernism” because although the “falsity of the patterns imposed upon experience in the traditional realistic novel is common ground between the modernists and the postmodernists, ... to the latter it seems that the modernists, too, for all their experimentation, obliquity and complexity, oversimplified the world and held out a false hope of somehow making it at home in the human mind” (Lodge, *Modern Writing* 220, 220-1, 226).

The problem with modernist writing is essentially, for postmodernists, the refusal or failure to acknowledge the absurdity of experience. The modernists still wanted reality to cohere, even if it could only happen in the mind of the perceiving subject. For postmodernists, this desire was mistaken. Postmodernists were “[sceptical] of wholeness,” and the “subtler myth and structures” which modernists claimed were able to reassemble truth. Instead, they expressed themselves through “disassemblage rather than reassemblage,” rejecting the idea of order and the reclamation of self and vision (McHale and Stevenson 2). Although the modernists located meaning in the individual consciousness instead of external reality, there still exists the possibility of apprehending something greater and more enduring than the solipsistic self. For example, Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse* unites the different characters’ thoughts by weaving them together to offer a more cohesive picture of Mrs Ramsay, suggesting that in the absence of a community of shared values or

understanding, there could at least be a shared community of thoughts and feelings that could be united by innovations in form. This ‘vision’ is lacking among postmodernists; the absurdity of reality cannot be rescued by art, which focuses on “the problem of the word, the unstable nature of fictional worlds it creates, and the ‘autonomy’ of a language detached from long-established realist conventions of representation” (Stevenson 42).

In *The English Novel*, Terry Eagleton characterises the novel thus:

The novel is a sign of our freedom. In the modern world, the only rules which are binding are those which we invent for ourselves. ... It is we who give form and meaning to reality, and the novel is a model of this creative act. ... What [the novel] reflects most importantly is not the world, but the way in which the world comes into being by our bestowing form and value upon it. ... This is not unqualified good news. If the only world we know is one which we have created for ourselves, does not all knowledge become a pointless tautology? Aren't we simply knowing ourselves, rather than a reality independent of ourselves? Don't we only get back what we put in? Anyway, if form is what *we* impose, how can it have authority?" (17, emphasis in original)

What Eagleton describes is essentially the problem facing modernists and postmodernists. But the modernists, for all their epistemological doubt, did not doubt the ontological reality of truth or the individual; hence “bestowing form and value” upon reality, though difficult, was not considered impossible. The postmodernists, however, are plagued by self-doubt, which creates uncertainty precisely because “[they] only get what [they] put in.” As Jean-Francois Lyotard recognises, the

problem for the self was the non-replacement of “the old poles of attraction represented by nation-states, parties, professions, institutions and historical traditions” (14). Having none of these older frameworks and support pillars that maintained specific ways of life and understandings of the world, the self-doubt increases and everything begs questioning.

Calling attention to the ‘constructedness’ of the text and therefore its artificiality calls into doubt the very medium of writing: both epistemological and ontological doubt beset the postmodernist novel. These doubts translate into complicated language or textual games in which readers are as clueless as the characters themselves. Because external reality markers are downplayed and mistrusted, consciousness is suspect and language is dubious, the constructed worlds of postmodernist texts are ontologically unstable, which destabilises the meaning-making process for the reader. Whereas the reader might find it difficult but still possible to create meaning in a modernist text, meaning-making becomes inherently problematic in a postmodernist text, which foregrounds the ontological uncertainty of reality through the doubt registered in the narrative.

The Manifold Faces of the Novel

Although the brief historical survey above allows us to apprehend the changes we see in the novel as a ‘developmental’ process, it must be stressed that the modern themes of fragmentation and alienation and writers’ preoccupation with the difficulty of the representation of life in art is not something new. As Raymond Williams states, “It is important to emphasise how relatively old some of these apparently modern themes are. For that is the inherent history of themes at first contained within ‘pre-modern’ forms of art which then in certain conditions led to actual and radical

changes of form” (“Metropolis” 85). The “radical changes of form” readers witness in modernist and postmodernist novels are not a result of new themes but the *presentation* of them.

Williams’ comment is borne out if we look at examples of the novel form coming before modernism and postmodernism. One such example is Laurence Sterne’s *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (1759). Labelled an “anarchic work” by Cedric Watts (vii), and a “literary-historical aberration” by Neil Murphy (6), Sterne’s novel is closer to modernist and postmodernist novels in his problematization of the act of writing than to his contemporaries’, for example, Samuel Richardson’s *Clarissa* (1748) or Daniel Defoe’s *Moll Flanders* (1722). This quality of the text is foregrounded by Murphy who states that, “the fingerprints of his age were discernible but Sterne was also simultaneously writing in a less enclosed historically—and culturally—specific tradition” (8). Sterne’s problematization of writing could thus be seen not only as precedent to Woolf and Banville but also as contemporaneous. What *Tristram Shandy* foregrounds is the inadequacy of language to “[capture] the external world, or [to communicate] with others. It is also inadequate for articulating the truth of the human subject, which is what autobiography tries to do. All it succeeds in doing is splitting the subject in the very act of trying to gather it into a whole” (Eagleton 85). The impossibility of writing resulting from this inadequacy of language and the realist form of the novel is because “the novel ... aims at a linear representation of a reality which is not in itself linear at all. It is therefore bound to falsify its own materials.”

Wanting to tell his story but unable to do so, Tristram Shandy’s “masculine potency as author is repeatedly subverted” (Watts viii), a subversion that acts as a premise for the whole narrative enterprise as we see in the beginning of the novel

when Tristram describes the moment of his conception that gets interrupted by his mother making sure his father had not forgotten to “wind up the clock” (Sterne 3). The interrupted act of conception is representative of the interrupted conception of narrative and foretells the ‘abortive’ attempts Tristram repeatedly undergoes in his endeavour to tell his story. This beginning thus serves as a metafictional comment on the nature of writing itself, showing us the difficulties attending the telling of a story, the representation of life in art, which Murphy considers as standing against the characterisation and understanding of the realist novel put forward by Ian Watt: “Sterne was parodying those very aspects of particularization that Watt values so highly as an attribute of the socially-engaged novel” (9).

This novel, not following “any man’s rules that ever lived” tries to relate everything because “nothing which has touched [Tristram] will be thought trifling in its nature, or tedious in its telling,” attempting a compendium of details and events that go into making this particular individual (6, 8). Sterne’s manner of narration lays bare the process of construction and impetus behind decisions made on the author’s part. This Sterne achieves through comments directed at the reader: “It is about an hour and a half’s tolerable good reading since my Uncle Toby rang the bell;” or through digressions, for example one that overtly introduces the difference between ‘real’ time and the time within consciousness for which the answer is that, “the idea of duration ... is got merely from the train and secession of our ideas” (70); or statements that undercut the authority of the text like the last line of the novel: “A Cock and Bull ... And one of the best of its kind, I ever heard” (452).

As such, what the novel ultimately presents to the reader is the impossibility of realism because of the selection process that goes into the writing of any story. The *artifice* of the writing already separates it from life: “You cannot tell the truth, and

shape the truth, at the same time” (Eagleton 81). This separation between art and life is most obviously played out in the novel masquerading as autobiography. A present self narrating a past self, far from being unified, is split because of the act of narration that “interposes itself between his present and past selves” (86). Tristram never actually manages to write himself into existence because “[as] subjects, we cannot describe whatever it was that made our subjectivity possible in the first place. It is here that we bump our heads against the limits of representation. You can never break through language in order to discover what set it in motion, since you would need language to do so. Similarly, you can never leap out of the skin of your own subjectivity in order to find out where you came from, since you need to be a subject in order to do so” (88). The unified self—what autobiography supposedly presents to the reader—is exposed as a fantasy just like the fictional text the reader is holding which is imaginatively constructed.

This difficulty regarding representation is likewise foregrounded in an even older text, Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra’s *Don Quixote*. In the chapter narrating “the brave Don Quixote’s success in the dreadful and unimaginable adventure of the windmills,” Don Quixote goes up against the windmills which he perceives to be “monstrous giants ... with arms almost six miles long” (63). Don Quixote’s delusions about what he sees can be read as a comment on the relativization of ‘truth’ in a world of changing values and precepts, which Milan Kundera describes as follows:

As God slowly departed from the seat whence he had directed the universe and its order of values, distinguished good from evil, and endowed each thing with meaning, Don Quixote set forth from his house into a world he could no longer recognise. In the absence of the Supreme Judge, the world suddenly appeared in its fearsome

ambiguity; the single divine Truth decomposed into myriad relative truths parcelled out by men. Thus was born the world of the Modern Era, and with it the novel, the image and model of that world. (6)

The modern era is an era of change, of shifting values: it is ambiguous. Don Quixote's misrecognition of physical reality is thus a symptom of this change where the stability of meanings has been eroded. Quixote is now free from his 'shackles' of received notions—it is not coincidental that Frestón has stolen his library and books—and can make meaning as he chooses, fashion his truth of things, but this condition of freedom is hardly one without anxiety or uncertainty. It is for this reason that he chooses a framework of adventure and romance to interpret the world around him. He dismisses Sancho Panza as “a raw novice in this matter of adventures” because Sancho does not share the same worldview as he, showing again that the locus of meaning is located in the perceiving subject rather than in something external or eternal (64). This also accounts for Sancho's rebuke that Quixote is “someone with windmills on the brain,” which builds on this idea that the subject is the one who makes meaning. The interpreting framework dictates the categorisation and construing of reality rather than the other way round (64). Quixote and his (illusory) adventures thus stand as an exemplar of the modern subject who makes meaning rather than receives it yet suffers from the solipsism inherent in this process.

These relative truths “parcelled out by men” make up the “image and model” of the modern world but as the word “image” suggests, it is only one of many pictures that can coexist at any given point of time (Kundera 6). That Quixote himself is following an image of things is emphasised by Cervantes' novel when Quixote judges his actions by the “order of chivalry” he has read, and when he relates the experience of “a Spanish knight called Diego Pérez de Vargas” and expresses the wish to follow

in his footsteps and give Sancho the opportunity to “witness that which hardly can be believed” (65). These images Quixote lives by are the images by which he knows his world. Quixote is removed from reality by these images that interpose between him and the ‘real’. The reader, in turn, is even further removed: the images that govern Quixote’s actions, the images from the records that the author purports to consult—“the annals of La Mancha” for example (31)—the images others have of Quixote, the image one has of romance and adventure, and knights, and the image Quixote has of himself jostle for attention and clamour for authority, multiplying the layers of ‘reality’ within the novel.

Don Quixote and *Tristram Shandy* thus problematize the writing of a text by their narrative methods that work towards presenting a picture of things not by harmonisation but by the presentation of the overwhelming prolixity of images of things, people and events. They question whether one can really relate the real if it was not *real* (as the reality of the world in a text is not real) but manufactured through a process of selection or seen through a particular type of consciousness like Quixote’s which sees “white for black and black for white, as was seen when he said the windmills were giants, and the monks’ mules dromedaries, and the flocks of sheep armies of enemies, and much more to the same tune” (545-6). It is in this way that they act as direct predecessors to Virginia Woolf and John Banville who embrace the “spirit of complexity” in the novel that says, “Things are not as simple as you think” (Kundera 18). This particular tradition, according to Murphy, runs alongside the tradition Watt outlines in *Rise of the Novel*:

The multilayered philosophical and technical parallels between Sterne, and Cervantes, Diderot and Joyce are evident but when one considers Tristram Shandy beside the work of Machado de Assis, Flann O’Brien,

Beckett, Nabokov, John Barth, Gilberto Sorrentino, Thomas Pynchon, and Italo Calvino, and a host of contemporary authors like Alessandro Baricco, John Banville, Kevin Barry, and Alasdair Gray, among many others, the deferral or avoidance of meaning, the experiment with the effectively-nullified narrator, the incessant self-consciousness, overt intertextual play, the fragmentation of chronology, order and logical sequence of ideas, and the persistent subversion of logical argument, it becomes evident that a tradition that runs parallel to social realism has indeed a far longer history than is often suggested, although the principle of a linear historical trajectory may not be the most helpful literary-critical model, as we shall see. (11-2)

We can add Virginia Woolf to the list of writers Murphy names as inheritors of this parallel tradition. Woolf and Banville follow in Cervantes' footsteps when they examine the "difficulty of knowing and the elusiveness of truth" and in Sterne's (especially in Banville's case) when they listen to the "appeal of play" that allows writing to be *light*, that is not weighted down by the duty to verisimilitude, and hence to be able to explore the condition of life, of the individual, of being in a more unencumbered manner that recognises the rhythm of life rather than the march of chronological time (Kundera 18, 15). They also encompass the "spirit of continuity" in the novel through their exploration of the problem of writing, extending the parameters within which the issue is considered, and through their recognition that their work necessarily engages with other work in the genre, adding to the pictures of our world (Kundera 18).

A Note on the Selected Texts

Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse* and *Between the Acts* will be examined to gain insight about the relationship between art and life and to examine how the modernist writer perceives and deals with representation, especially with regards to the presentation of and use of consciousness as a structuring device. *Mrs Dalloway*'s problematization of the difficulty of making reality cohere through two artist figures—Mrs Dalloway and Septimus Smith—is a prime example of the way Woolf uses consciousness to bring disparate things and events together so that form becomes the scaffold urging meaning to fruition.

Likewise, *To the Lighthouse* examines, through another artist figure, Lily Briscoe, not only the difficult relationship between art and life, but more importantly, questions the ability of art to 'penetrate' life to offer truth. Lily's struggles with painting are paralleled by Woolf's struggles with writing and as such the text offers an argument about art that contributes to our understanding of the novel form.

Between the Acts has been chosen because it interrogates and reshapes the formal properties and thematic concerns of the novels coming before it. In this text, form, unlike in the other two texts selected, is shown to be under greater pressure to hold the narrative together. And unlike the previous two novels, it is more hesitant in offering art as the balm to life's meaninglessness and segues seamlessly into the ontological doubt that we see in Banville's novels.

The five John Banville novels examined in this thesis have been chosen for their focus on the relationship between art and life, their portrayal of artist figures and for the insights they provide with regards to the artist's struggle in trying to understand reality. As Banville's first mature piece of fiction, coming after the more overtly postmodernist exercises of *Long Lankin* (1970) and *Nightspawn* (1971), *Birchwood*

(1973) states the direction all Banville's novels would take thereafter. As such, the text is integral to a consideration of Banville's mature fiction and introduces many of the themes that would preoccupy his subsequent novels, one of which is the primary concern with the relationship between art and the world.

Similarly, the *Frames Trilogy*, consisting of *The Book of Evidence* (1989), *Ghosts* (1993) and *Athena* (1995), has been chosen for its direct consideration of the aforesaid relationship. Like *Birchwood*, the *Frames Trilogy* problematizes the art/life connection and considers the association between the artistic imagination and reality through the use of visual art. This is unlike the Science Tetralogy, which looks at the problem indirectly through the examination of scientific pursuits of truth. Though Banville does link, in the Science Tetralogy, the scientific imagination with the artistic imagination, the close study of visual art and its implications in the Art Trilogy is more amenable to considering similar problems of representation within the context of art. The selection of *The Sea* (2005) also follows the criteria above. Winner of the Man Booker Prize in 2005, *The Sea* contemplates the problems of representation, like the *Frames Trilogy*, through visual art. The narrative, mediated through the paintings of Pierre Bonnard, weaves the interconnecting threads between memory, loss, and grief, to offer a picture of the connection between art and life and is, in my opinion, a narrative that is a culmination of the themes explored up to that time in Banville's novels.

Critical Framework

The discussion of the modern novel in this thesis is framed by the following studies: David Lodge's *The Modes of Modern Writing: Metaphor, Metonymy, and the Typology of Modern Literature* and *Consciousness and the Novel*, Milan Kundera's

The Art of the Novel, Ian Watt's *The Rise of the Novel* and Terry Eagleton's *The English Novel*. These texts, which trace the development of the novel and characterise its changing form and its links with and reflection of modern society and thought form the background to this study. Seeing literary realism as the 'starting' point of the novel and pointing to its untenable position as the novel form develops, they theorise the subsequent changes in form and the corollary modifications and variations in the way consciousness, narrative voice and art are conceived and presented in the novel. These critics' recognition of the pervading uncertainty surrounding modern experience and the problematization of writing within the novel form are of particular importance to the discussion and I situate Virginia Woolf and John Banville's writing within this framework in order to understand how they respond to their predecessors as well as how they reflect upon the experience and mindset of their milieu.

To understand the evolving relationship between the artistic imagination and reality against the backdrop drawn up by the critics mentioned in the previous paragraph, Richard Kearney's work on the imagination is particularly useful. I refer to Richard Kearney's *The Wake of Imagination: Towards a Postmodern Culture* and his essay "A Crisis of Imagination: An Analysis of a Counter-Tradition in the Irish Novel" to elucidate the changing concept of the artistic imagination as tied to specific historical and cultural contexts. Kearney's explanation of the gradual rupture between imagination and reality is directly relevant to this study of Woolf's and Banville's work because it reflects the picture we see presented in these writers' texts and can therefore shed light on the connections and developments between Woolf and Banville.

Malcolm Bradbury and James Walter McFarlane's study of modernism, *Modernism, 1890-1930*, forms the larger context for the discussion of Virginia

Woolf's work in particular. I use this text to analyse the influence of modernism on Woolf and to position her writing within this particular historical and cultural context. Bradbury and McFarlane's account of the artistic experiments of modernism as precipitated by a cultural crisis that placed writers in a conflicting position between freedom from received modes of thought and the strain of that condition is especially applicable to Woolf as her own non-fiction work demonstrates, for example, in her essay "Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown" (1924).

Related to this is the characterisation of Woolf's writing as alienation in Hermione Lee's biography of Woolf, *Virginia Woolf*. Lee's publication situates Woolf's writing with respect to Woolf's interactions with family and literary circles, showing how her writing engaged with ideas about art—with respect to Roger Fry and Woolf's sister Vanessa Bell, for example—and how Woolf struggled to belong and stand apart, simultaneously, from existing 'traditions' of writing—male, formally educated, sane. Lee's conception is thus central to understanding Woolf's work and her problematization of writing as it provides crucial information that allows us to appreciate the unique issues she faced when writing and the choice of themes in her texts. The literary/historical and personal context provided by Bradbury and McFarlane, and Lee respectively work together to show how Woolf's ideas about art and the unique positioning of her writing translates into the formal experiments of her work.

In my discussion of John Banville's novels, Brian McHale's *Postmodernist Fiction* is the main text that provides the historical and cultural context of postmodernism. McHale's concept of the *shifting dominant*, which is developed from Roman Jakobson's concept of the 'dominant', is integral to understanding the development and differences between modernist and postmodernist fiction and

consequently, Woolf and Banville's work as they stand in relation to each other. Positing that the dominant of modernist and postmodernist texts are epistemological and ontological respectively, McHale contends that these two literary categories influence each other and dictate formal strategies within texts. His historicist view of modern texts elucidates the relationship between these literary categories and allows a consideration of Woolf and Banville's work within a continuum that highlights the relationship between postmodern texts and the realist and modernist texts coming before them. In addition, his concept of the *shifting dominant* is essential in defining what makes a text modernist or postmodernist and allows us to explain and understand the different formal structures witnessed in these different texts according to this concept.

However, since I do not consider Banville a postmodernist writer, Derek Hand's idea of Banville as a writer straddling the modernism/ postmodernism divide in *John Banville: Exploring Fictions*, and John Kenny's assertion, in *John Banville*, that the term postmodernism as applied to John Banville does not sufficiently explain his work will be important to my argument. In addition, Richard Kearney's characterisation of the "double vision" of many Irish writers in "The Irish Mind Debate" and Joseph McMinn's argument that Banville incorporates the idealism of Romanticism within a postmodern mythos of the imagination also adds to my argument that categorising Banville under postmodernist fails to account for what his art is trying to do (21). I base my argument on these critics' understandings of Banville and build on them to posit that Banville's novels, though exhibiting postmodernist narrative strategies, move beyond them, attesting to a different relationship between the artistic imagination and reality in the contemporary novel.

Neil Murphy's assertion, in *Irish Fiction and Postmodern Doubt: An Analysis of the Epistemological Crisis in Modern Fiction*, that the theme of Banville's art is art itself is also central to my discussion. His ideas that Banville's novels are "fiction[s] of process," and work towards creating an "original utterance" undergird my discussion of the relationship between art and reality as one that explores the possibility of birthing Being through the act of looking. Related to this process of birthing are Friedrich Nietzsche's concepts of the artist and the role art plays in life, and the main critical text I refer to elucidate Nietzsche's ideas is Joan Stambaugh's explanation in *Nietzsche's Thought on Eternal Return*.

The theoretical frameworks on which I base my argument in my combined analysis of Woolf and Banville are Brian Richardson's theory of unnatural narratives in *Unnatural Voices: Extreme Narration in Modern and Contemporary Fiction* and the concept of multivalent fiction in Alan Warren Friedman's "The Modern Multivalent Novel: Form and Function." They conceive modern and contemporary fiction as experimental and self-conscious, stressing that the narrative strategies and multiple perspectives in these works are modern not in temporal terms but in terms of the portrayal of the relationship between art and world and the way in which narratives are structured. As such, Richardson's and Friedman's ideas allow me to place Woolf and Banville in a continuum, locating them within a matrix of other writers who also exhibit the features of modern writing. Helping to flesh out their views is Richard Kearney's concepts of the changing definitions of the artist. His categories of craftsman, inventor and bricoleur parallel the evolving narratives Richardson and Friedman describe. Considering all three critics' views together draws an interconnected picture between artist, the artistic imagination and the real that

shows why and how the problematization of writing remains the central concern of the contemporary novel.

Dissertation Overview

The first chapter focuses on the intersections between Virginia Woolf's fiction and non-fiction to understand her process of writing and how it engages with the problem of articulation or the problematization of writing. This chapter situates her writing within the literary, aesthetic and historical contexts of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century in order to see how her experimentation in form and narrative developed within those circumstances and how her artistic method responds to her predecessors and contemporaries. The chapter will also study how the ideas Woolf holds about art are translated into her work. I see her writing as characteristically modernist in technique and vision and understand her attempts to rewrite her predecessors and institute more inclusive forms of consciousness as a reaction and answer to what she saw as unsatisfactory accounts of experience in literary art. The latter sections of this chapter examine *Mrs Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse*, and *Between the Acts* to illustrate how her artistic method is exhibited in her work.

Even though Banville makes use of postmodernist narrative devices and strategies, I argue in the second chapter that his work cannot fit in so narrow a description as postmodernist. In fact, through the study of his work, I posit that Banville's writing is caught in a unique position between postmodernist uncertainty and a nostalgia for the pre-modern stability and unity as evinced in the yoking together of contemporary experience with the characters' study of or obsession with the paintings of seventeenth and eighteenth century Dutch and Flemish painters or the paintings of Pierre Bonnard. Banville accepts that art can refer to life obliquely but

cannot represent life or to try to dissect it to find the meaning beneath the surface of events or things. The meaning *is* in the surface and the presentation of the surface—not the presentation of the inner life or the depths of experience—is the only way the artist may convey meaning.

In the last chapter, I will jointly consider Woolf's and Banville's work using Brian Richardson's theory of unnatural narratives, Alan Warren Friedman's concept of the multivalent modern novel, and Richard Kearney's concept of the changing definitions and roles of the artist. I explain the two writers' differences and similarities and situate them in relation to each other as well as to other writers to understand how the novel has evolved. I see the novel as moving through four phases—correspondence; representation; fabrication; relation—and posit that Woolf and Banville belong to the categories of *representation* and *relation* respectively. I argue that for both writers, the rejection of epistemological systems leads to different ends: Woolf institutes a different system in their place whereas Banville abandons the idea of a system altogether. This key difference between Woolf and Banville will dictate the different forms and narrative strategies readers observe in their novels. I analyse their use of ekphrasis, and the presentation of time and consciousness in their work and argue that these two categories, in particular, signal the change in the way artists view the relationship between art and reality.

Chapter One

Virginia Woolf: The Luminous Halo and Semi-transparent Envelope

And as we plunge deeper and deeper away from shore, we seem to be drawn on in the wake of some fast flying always disappearing black object ... We become aware of something that we could never see in the other world; something that we have been sent in search of. ... [I]f we could grasp it, we should be for ever illuminated ... we pass through a gorge, emerge into daylight ... The truth that was being drawn so fast ahead of us vanishes.

There they sit. ... They woke before they had seized it. ... But, of course, there are a few faces which look as if they had caught the thing that dashes through the water.

Virginia Woolf, "Gas" (*CDB* 200-201, 202)

To think about the relation between art⁶ and reality⁷ in Virginia Woolf's work is to tread a clear yet difficult path. On the one hand, she writes about this relationship extensively in her essays, personal literature (for example, her diaries), and fiction and thus erects many signposts that help us draw a map of sorts through this tricky terrain. On the other hand, what she writes frequently alludes to the difficulty of getting at the essence of life. "Gas" is one such example that exhibits those guiding signposts that help us map the relationship between art and reality and, at the same time, illustrates the difficulty of the chase for truth. Ruminating upon the subject of having a tooth out under gas, Woolf thinks about how one feels as one is under the effect of the vaporous drug: a feeling akin to being shown another world, as if one is submerged under a different consciousness. "With each breath one draws in confusion; one draws in

⁶ 'Art' in this dissertation will refer to all creative work by an artist, including fiction, painting, and music.

⁷ 'Reality', in this argument, is to be understood as the real world, or what the layman would term 'experience'. It is considered here as synonymous and is used interchangeably with world, life, and experience.

darkness” and the world becomes a different place (200). Leaving the stability of land, “one puts out to sea,” a place where “one flounders without support,” carrying only “strange relics of old memories ... [which] seem to parody the world from which one brought them” (200, 201). Cut off from one’s temporary moorings, one catches a glimpse of a “black object” that seems to be always out of reach and attempts to “fly on the trail of this truth,” the attainment of which should “for ever [illuminate]” us. But this “truth” is elusive; before one catches it, one emerges into the daylight of ordinary consciousness again and finds it has vanished.

Ostensibly writing about a rather common experience, Woolf uses this event to demonstrate certain points that are important in her own writing. First, that she believes in a commitment to lived experience: it is the ordinary that provides the surface she penetrates to access something more fundamental. The ‘vision’ of a different world, of truth, does not take place in a fantasy; it takes place within a familiar, even routine event. Filtering or viewing this ordinary event through a different consciousness enables different insights. Second, although the ordinary serves as the bedrock of discovery, a catalyst is necessary as an aid. In this case, it is gas; in her writing, it is narrative form and devices that perform this function. Her characters’ memories and thoughts, or the collision of certain events in the novel, or the coming together or moving apart of characters serve to crystallise these instances into “moments of being,” a term Woolf uses to indicate a significant, lived moment that may be able to offer truth and insight. Third, the search for truth is elusive (“always disappearing”) but necessary (“something we have been sent in search of”), and only a few can attest to having “caught the thing that dashes through the water,” a theme developed in her fiction and non-fiction. Reading “the other world” in this essay as an analogy for the world of (modernist) fiction, one sees that the artist is like

an explorer having to find her sea legs in a boat at sea while charting a course through waters that, though familiar once, have changed under the cloak of a cloudy night—landmarks have disappeared, the stars one uses for navigation are now obscured. The trials of navigation, analogous to the creative process, are central in this context.

In the same way, this thesis focuses on the struggles of the creative process in the discussion. Form and narrative in Woolf's fiction have been critiqued extensively and this thesis does not differ much in that regard—it will also look at form and content in a selection of Woolf's work, and offer an interpretation of the texts. But I redirect the spotlight by focusing on the struggles of the creative process, and will examine her fiction and non-fiction texts to see how the struggle and fatigue that accompany the act of expression (writing) are foregrounded and developed; the focus is on the process rather than the product.

In this chapter, the discussion will start from a consideration of Virginia Woolf's difference from the tradition, of her mode of writing as alienation, and will reflect on how this alienation acts as a catalyst for the change she wants to embody in her writing. Following that, the argument will situate Woolf in the literary and aesthetic contexts of her milieu, paying particular attention to how modernity and the literary environment, that is, modernism, and the spirit of experimentation characteristic to it, shaped her fiction and necessitated change. This second section also focuses on how she received, assimilated, and, at the same time, reworked and rewrote the literary and artistic tradition she had inherited, together with her concept of the common reader. The subsequent three sections focus on three different texts by Woolf: *Mrs Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse*, and *Between the Acts*. The discussions of the texts emphasise the process of artistic creation and look at the problems attending the creative endeavour to express experience through fiction. The last section will

bring texts and contexts together to explain Woolf's 'theory of fiction', and will establish a connection to the other writer considered in this thesis, John Banville.

The Awareness of Difference

Woolf's process of articulation in a work of art becomes clearer if we consider this passage from *To the Lighthouse*, which describes Mr Ramsay:

It was a splendid mind. For if thought is like the keyboard of a piano, divided into so many notes, or like the alphabet is ranged in twenty-six letters all in order, then his splendid mind had no sort of difficulty in running over those letters one by one, firmly and accurately, until it had reached, say, the letter Q. He reached Q. Very few people in the whole of England ever reached Q. [...] But after Q? What comes next? After Q there are a number of letters the last of which is scarcely visible to mortal eyes, but glimmers red in the distance. Z is only reached once by one man in a generation. Still if he could reach R it would be something. Here at least was Q. He dug his heels in at Q.

(39)

What strikes one most here is the way in which Mr Ramsay's mind is described as being very methodical, "running over those letters one by one, firmly and accurately." Mr Ramsay's mind or his tools possess a certain surgical precision but must follow a specific set order and must conform to a particular set of rules. These may empower but may also hamper the progress of this search for Z, for life is rarely always straight and tidy. This description of Mr Ramsay's mind stands in stark contrast to the form of the novel, which is composed of multifarious scenes, of parentheses, of the intertwining threads of different stories. If we imagine, for the sake of argument, that

the letter Z is the attainment of truth, then we see that Mr Ramsay's method cannot, for all its order, be the method, which will bring him to the letter Z. There is, in this passage, a certain admiration but also a turning away from the methodical instrument that is Mr Ramsay's mind; a feeling that is reinforced by the way Mr Ramsay is, in turn, described in heroic and comic terms within the novel. Mr Ramsay, modelled upon Leslie Stephen, may stand apart from the tradition he had been brought up in—something Woolf is also doing—and may be, Hermione Lee observes, “engaged in the pursuit of the true,” but the futility of the rationalist effort leaves something to be desired (*Novels* 6).

Suppose we try to imagine, then, the way Virginia Woolf might have attempted to make the journey to Z: she would probably first see that the letters are not letters in themselves but are related to all the other letters by virtue of belonging to the same alphabet. She might think that A might seem like a beginning but that beginning at P or Y will also be possible since that is only a matter of selection and that the selection of this arbitrary beginning will only depend on perhaps a mood or a particular need at the time. Or she might very well have thrown the letters up in the air, let them land in whatever haphazard way they chose to land on the table and begin from there, tracing their relations as a series of networks instead of a straight and narrow path from beginning to end. What I mean to say is this: that working systematically from A to Z is no longer the only way with which to work through the alphabet and that Virginia Woolf invariably and intuitively, even before she began to put her critical thoughts into words, was very aware of this fact. It could be that the lack of female predecessors precipitated this awareness; or it could be that her lack of a formal education made her conscious of ‘*their* methods versus *mine*’. Or perhaps her bouts of illness and the insights offered by her madness allowed her to apprehend life

differently. Or perhaps her milieu showed what a pitiful basket of tools she possessed as a writer. Whatever the factors are, however, Woolf recognises that though approaches to the alphabet can be different, the alphabet itself remains the same; hence the struggle and difficulty she faces as a writer: How can she rearrange (represent and re-present) the contents of experience to offer fresh insights while still working within its confines?

If the mode of her writing is ‘alienation’ (alienation from the mainstream ‘traditions’ (male, formally educated, sane), an assertion that Hermione Lee makes in her 1997 biography of Virginia Woolf, her struggles as a writer are not only struggles about how to write but also how to write within a community of writers with whom she felt rather out of place. Part of the group and yet not, she felt, simultaneously, the need to coexist within and stand apart, as this comment on the Bloomsbury group of men shows:

They wished for the truth and doubted if I could speak it or be it. I thought this courageous of them but unsympathetic. I admired the atmosphere – was it more? – and felt in some respects at ease in it. Yet why should the intellect and character be so barren? It seems as if the highest efforts of the most intelligent people produce a negative result; one cannot honestly be anything. (“Old Bloomsbury,” *MB* 54)

Woolf, though part of the ‘in’ group, hankered after something more, an idea that is manifested often in her work. She realised the constraints she was working under but she also believed that things could be changed within that already demarcated piece of territory.

Dissatisfied with the techniques of the generation of realist writers before her, whose novels, which were preoccupied with facts she termed “a very inferior form of

fiction,” she strove to find other ways to honestly (as honestly as she could envisage) capture life in her novels (“Read a Book,” *CR* 264). Her “pluralistic and experiential approach [that] marks a radical departure from dominant nineteenth-century views” (Cuddy-Keane 60) gives birth to a basket of new tools, which included: the interior monologue,⁸ manipulations of memory,⁹ negotiations, rearrangements and redefinitions of time and space,¹⁰ the use of parentheses and ellipses, and the mixing of genres. David Daiches describes Woolf’s experimentation as the creation of an “interpretative atmosphere” and discusses it in terms of how she structures experience in her novels so as to offer insights into “the subtler realms of human consciousness” (45, 19), a view that Doris Lessing shares in the foreword she writes for *Carlyle’s House and Other Sketches*:

What Virginia Woolf did for literature was to experiment all her life, trying to make her novels nets to catch what she saw as a subtler truth about life. Her ‘styles’ were attempts to use her sensibility to make of the living the ‘luminous envelope’ she insists our consciousness is, not the linear plod she perceived writing like Bennett’s to be. (ix)

⁸ To be distinguished from James Joyce’s stream of consciousness method which presents itself as an unadulterated form of narration of thought as compared to Virginia Woolf’s interior monologues, which usually retain a form of mediatory presence in the form of a rather ambiguous narrative voice.

⁹ cf. Marcel Proust’s concepts of voluntary and involuntary memory in *À la recherche du temps perdu*. (Published in seven parts between 1913 and 1927). See also Sigmund Freud’s exploration of the unconscious.

¹⁰ cf. Henri Bergson’s philosophy, which redefined ways of perceiving and understanding reality. See, for example, *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness* (1889). Bergson’s distinctions between time and ‘duration’ are exhibited in Woolf’s treatment of time and memory in, for example, *Mrs. Dalloway*.

Daiches' and Lessing's observations are right, of course. Woolf did create an "interpretative atmosphere" and she did "experiment all her life, trying to make her novels catch ... a subtler truth about life." And yes, Woolf also recognised that the human consciousness is not as straightforward as it seems. But this discussion wants to move beyond these observations. It wants to go behind the scenes to peek at exactly how difficult it might have been to find that one word, or phrase, or sentence; to not just consider the effects of the experimentation but the impetus for it; to sit the artist down and have her recount her struggles with translating life into art. This is not territory unfamiliar to Woolf. Her works of fiction are populated by characters whose struggles with expression are played out in the narratives: the figure of the artist labouring over the creation of a painting, like Lily Briscoe in *To the Lighthouse*; or the figure of the man in the margins, like Septimus Smith in *Mrs Dalloway*, trying to say things in plain speech so that others can understand him; or the playwright, like Miss La Trobe in *Between the Acts*, trying to bring the words on a page to life in performance; or like the aspiring writer Terence Hewet in *The Voyage Out*, trying to write a novel about "Silence, or the Things People don't say" (255-6). These characters, among the many other characters in Woolf's fiction exhibiting the same problem with expression, are direct comments on the difficulty of the artistic process.

This struggle becomes a lifelong search for a form that would be able to convey her content in the best way possible, to lay the foundations for a different reading experience that will "not [be] almost servile in the assiduity with which it helps us on our way, making only the standard charge on our attention and in return for that giving us the full measure, but not an ounce over or under our due" ("Reading," *CDB* 164). She does not want to simply engage the reader's attention, she wishes to push further and offer up her vision to the reader, to invite the reader to partake of it with

her and see what it may offer, a “prose style which required a collaboration between author and reader to render fully the life of her characters” (Childs 84). However, the admission of the lack and unsuitability of tools, and the willingness to follow the trail of Mrs Brown does not necessarily mean that one will reach Z. This admission and willingness gives a different route to Z but does not guarantee anything (Woolf already acknowledges the difficulty of the task when she states “Z is only reached once by one man in a generation”). But they do imply that meticulous care has been given to the planning of the journey and that if enough care and attention has been paid by the artist, that at least a momentary glimpse of Z may be possible.

Trying Something Harder

Virginia Woolf and T. S. Eliot went to watch William Congreve’s *Love for Love* on 20 March 1921, and having missed the train, they shared a cab. In her diary, Woolf records the conversation they had while on the road:

“Missing trains is awful,” I said. “Yes. But humiliation is the worst thing in life,” he replied. “Are you as full of vices as I am?” I demanded. “Full. Riddled with them.” “We’re not as good as Keats,” I said. “Yes we are,” he replied. “No: we don’t write classics straight off as magnanimous people do.” “*We’re trying something harder,*” he said. (*Diary 2*: 103-4, 22 March 1921, emphasis added)

A comedy of manners about the need for plain speech and saying what you mean, *Love for Love*, on hindsight, was a fortuitous opportunity to have had this conversation. Saying that writers of their generation cannot “write classics straight off as magnanimous people do,” Woolf reveals her anxiety about her ability to write, about her ability to be “sufficiently mistress of things” (*WD*, 26 January 1920, 22) .

To better understand this difficulty lying in her way, why “writing is always difficult” (WD, 11 May 1920, 25), we need to focus on what exactly it is that Virginia Woolf and T. S. Eliot are doing when they are “trying something harder”, how the “difficult and adventurous work” they do differ from other writers and why (Lee, *Virginia* 438).¹¹

Understanding Virginia Woolf’s struggles with expression has to be conducted within a literary and an aesthetic context in order for it to be grasped fully. The period most significant for our purposes is the late nineteenth and early twentieth century during which literary modernism emerged. This period of upheaval witnessed the materialisation of the First World War, the advance of technology, the rise of the ‘modern’ and the shaking of many tenets held by Victorian society as permanent and sacred. The time in which Virginia Woolf was writing and formulating her theories of aesthetics was a period of upheaval. Doubts about the superiority of Western thought and the shifts in economics and social relations in the new modernity brought excitement and anticipation but also disruption and uncertainty (Armstrong). One result of this turmoil was the replacement of a stable worldview, which had previously provided the platform for the “comprehensive description and explanation of the world ... [by] the great Realist novels of the nineteenth century” by the “provisional [and] fragmentary” perceptions so familiar to us in modernist fiction (Fokkema and Ibsch 4).

¹¹ One of the reasons for their affinity also lies in their ‘outsider’ status. Both Eliot (a foreigner) and Woolf (a woman) wrote from a position of difference, that is, difference from the ‘mainstream’. The combination of being on the outside, and the difficulty and experimental nature of their work, was both a spur to and a source of anxiety in their writing.

Characterising modernism as “the one art that responds to the scenario of our chaos” (27), and locating it in the period spanning 1890–1930, Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane highlights its Janus-faced nature:

... Modernism might mean not only a new mode or mannerism in the arts, but a certain magnificent disaster for them. In short, experimentalism does not simply suggest the presence of sophistication, difficulty and novelty in art; it also suggests bleakness, darkness, alienation, disintegration. Indeed Modernism would seem to be the point at which the idea of the radical and innovating arts, the experimental, technical, aesthetic ideal that had been growing forward from Romanticism, reaches formal crisis – in which myth, structure and organisation in a traditional sense collapse, and not only for formal reasons. The crisis is a crisis of culture; it often involves an unhappy view of history – so that the Modernist writer is not simply the artist set free, but the artist under specific, apparently historical strain. If Modernism is the imaginative power in the chamber of consciousness, that, as James puts it, ‘converts the very pulses of the air into revelations’, it is also often an awareness of contingency as a disaster in the world of time: Yeats’ ‘Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold.’ (26)

This passage describes modernism but it can similarly be applied to Virginia Woolf’s own crisis in art.¹² The modern world with its possibilities of the new, the changing of

¹² See Hermione Lee’s introduction to *The Novels of Virginia Woolf* (2010) and her biography *Virginia Woolf* (1997) for more detailed discussions of the overlapping emphases between literary modernism and Virginia

reality via technology, and the arrival of the urban was something that both roused and disturbed Woolf because she knew that the modern novel would similarly be changed. The creative tension that one sees in modernism is a tension between the old and new, between established stable common grounds and experimental unstable exciting territories, between security and vulnerability. And what is more marked in Woolf's essay "Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown" than the mixture of exhilaration and anxiety that accompanies her repudiation of Edwardian narrative techniques and proclamations of the appropriate way forward? At the same time that she pronounces, "those conventions are ruin, those tools are death" (*CDB* 104), she also admits that, "the question [of creating character, reality] is an extremely difficult one. Think how little we know about character—think how little we know about art" (91). If predecessors are to be discarded, and art 'made new', the path ahead, though inspiring and intoxicating, is also treacherous: the explorer of a newfound land harbours hopes of promise but must also always be ready for disappointment and danger, or "bleakness, darkness, alienation and disintegration".

Virginia Woolf's pronouncement, in "Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown", that "on or about December 1910, human character changed" (*CDB* 96), signals explicitly the charged atmosphere of the early twentieth-century, and comes from an awareness that she was part of a larger movement of experimentation in literary modernism (Lee, *Virginia*). Rachel Bowlby describes this pronouncement as a "sensational headline or slogan" and sees it as a questioning of "the possibility of anything like the confident ordering, listing and chronicling" exemplified by the Edwardians (6). But the declaration was not an arbitrary one. It was in 1910 that King Edward VII died and

Woolf. See also Jane Goldman's *The Feminist Aesthetics of Virginia Woolf: Modernism, Post-Impressionism and the Politics of the Visual* (1998).

King George V took over the throne. It was also in 1910 that a prominent figure of realism, Leo Tolstoy, died. But more importantly, Roger Fry's Post-Impressionist exhibition, which Woolf attended, first opened in December 1910 with its call to arms for a different sort of reality (representation) in art. The uncertainty of hitherto stable categories of thought and ways (epistemological, ontological and metaphysical) of knowing the world impacted society and the self by emptying them of meaningful content, precipitating a change in the way certain artists viewed art, a change which is "exactly what the exhibition, and Roger Fry's influence, brought about in British art and, in part, in [Woolf's] own work" (Lee, *Virginia* 287). Eschewing the too-simplistic concept, in nineteenth-century realism, of art as an inert mirror reflecting the truths of the world (a concept that took for granted and needed a commonality of ideals, beliefs and social structures), both Fry and Woolf put forward the need for a different kind of representation that would "not [be] illusion, but reality; not imitation, but equivalence" (Lee, *Novels* 16). This new reality would not be found outside in an objective 'real life' but within the work itself, held together by its own logic and structure:¹³ "For a novel, after all, is a statement about a thousand different objects; ... it is an attempt to relate them to each other. ... [T]hese different elements are held in place by the force of the writer's vision" ("Women & Fiction," *GR* 81).

Bradbury and McFarlane reinforce this point when they discuss the art of Virginia Woolf:

Hence Virginia Woolf, holding that the modern stylistic revolution came from the historical opportunity for change in human relationships and human character, and that modern art therefore had a social and epistemological *cause*, nonetheless believed in the aesthetic nature of

¹³ An idea expressed by Roger Fry in a letter to P. J. Atkins in 1913.

the opportunity; ... [Art] was free to catch at the manifold – the atoms as they fall – and create significant harmony not in the universe but within itself The world, reality, is discontinuous till art comes along, which may be a modern crisis for the world; but within art all becomes vital, discontinuous, yes, but within an aesthetic system of positioning. (25-26)

Art, as an “aesthetic system of positioning” does not console but attempts to order and make sense of the varied experiences of life and people. Being seen as an “opportunity” puts it in a very different relation to life in comparison with realist novels and their ways of representation.¹⁴ However, the notion of art being “free to catch at the manifold” presents a too-simplistic picture of the modernist writer. At the same time that conventions were being broken, there also existed an uneasiness with the lack of models and the natural trepidation one feels when one charts new territory.

In “How Should One Read a Book”, Woolf gives her view on this topic by focusing the reader’s attention on how the novel is “an attempt to make something as formed and controlled as a building” but warns that “words are more impalpable than bricks”¹⁵ (*GR* 259); that is, the novelist is someone who tries to build a solid structure using material that is insubstantial and difficult to manipulate. However, should the reader “turn ... to the opening pages of some great novelist”, she will find that she is “living in a different world” (260). This “different world” is not (only) a reference to

¹⁴ This is of course a generalisation. There are exceptions to the rule and Virginia Woolf also recognised this. For instance, she praises Charles Dickens and Jane Austen for their powers in drawing characters and conveying moods of situations. Woolf’s questioning of realist writers and methods refer specifically to writers who forget the ‘real’ subject matter of novels (as she sees it), for example, human nature and character.

¹⁵ Note how the language echoes Henry James’ “house of fiction”, which also champions the idea of the work of art as a unified and complete entity and structure.

the fictional world in the sense of make-believe but to the unity of the created art object, its sound construction which displays a “consisten[cy] with itself” and where:

The maker of each is careful to observe the laws of his own perspective, and however great a strain they may put upon us they will never confuse us, as lesser writers so frequently do, by introducing two different kinds of reality into the same book. (*GR* 260)

The consistency of a great novel can offer truths precisely because it is a unified form. The harmony of truth and form establishes the platform from which insights may be gleaned: “The work of art must create, through form, its own terms for truth” (Lee, *Novels* 16). This must, however, not be confused with the theory of ‘art for art’s sake’. The commitment to life remains strong for Woolf, a fact that is clear when we read a diary entry dated 22 November 1917: “I’ve made out a little more about the thing which is essential to all art: you see, all art is representative” (*Diary* 1: 80). Henry James, in his essay “The Art of Fiction,” also stressed that the purpose of art was to represent life. It is precisely because there is still a commitment to representation that writing becomes difficult. Inherited forms of writing are reflective of their milieu and the early twentieth-century was a different age from those that had come before. The fragmentary and tenuous perceptions of modern reality had to be reflected and encapsulated in a form appropriate to it. According to Woolf,

The novelist—it is his distinction and his danger—is terribly exposed to life. ... Taste, sound, movement, a few words here, a gesture there, ... all the reds and blues and lights and shades of the scene claim his attention and rouse his curiosity.

But if this sensibility is one of the conditions of the novelist’s life, it is obvious that all writers whose books survive have known how to

master it and make it serve their purposes. ... [T]hey have mastered their perceptions, hardened them, and changed them into the fabric of their art” (“Life and the Novelist,” *GR* 41).

The novelist has to be true to life, to capture the “luminous halo, [and] semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end” (“Modern Fiction,” *CRII* 150). The novelist has to “master” experience, not to control it; but to perceive the subtleties within it, which are then woven into “the fabric of their art”. Woolf’s use of the word “perceptions” rather than ‘facts’ alerts us to the fact that these observations are not simply lists of things or actions but a consciousness of things and how they relate to one another, which she believes will more adequately enable an understanding of human nature. It is not ‘facts’ themselves that are detestable but the disproportionate attention the Edwardians lavished on them. The novelist should take into account more than just external facts, circumstances and details. Nothing is too great or small for the novelist because all instances of life are important; they weigh in on questions of significance because “from triviality, from commonplace, ... words [can] become suddenly full of meaning, and the moment ... one of the most memorable ... It fills itself; ... it hangs before us, deep, trembling, serene for a second; next ... this drop, ... gently subsides again to become part of the ebb and flow of ordinary existence” (“Austen,” *CRI* 142). Within the ordinary lies truth and insight; it is the special responsibility of the novelist to distil this “drop” from the stream of life.

The devaluing of facts that Woolf feels are an impediment to getting at human nature is also related to her concept of ‘impersonality’, which is similar to the concept T. S. Eliot also advocated. Impersonality, as envisioned by Eliot in “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” describes a process in which “the artist’s brain is a kind of petri

dish in which chemicals combine, leaving only the impersonal integrity of art, all trace of the artist having been sublimed in the white heat of creation” (Low 257). In “Women and Fiction,” Woolf celebrates the progress of women’s writing and states that,

The greater impersonality of women’s lives will encourage the poetic spirit ... It will lead them to be less absorbed in facts and no longer content to record with astonishing acuteness the minute details which fall under their own observation. They will look beyond the personal and political relationships to the wider questions which the poet tries to solve—of our destiny and the meaning of life.¹⁶ (*GR* 83)

The impersonality envisioned here is similar to Eliot’s in the way it conceives of the woman writer moving away from the personal to the “wider questions which the poet tries to solve” but it differs in one important aspect. The woman writer is especially susceptible to the seduction of facts because she, as a participant in patriarchal society, has been, in the past, side-lined to the personal sphere of things, a sphere that by virtue of the term ‘personal’ cannot encourage impersonality. But the change in her relations to “not only [the] emotional [, but] also the intellectual ... and political” has enabled her to stand apart from the too-small circle of interests she had up till then entertained. This is also a personal concern for Woolf who asks, in a diary entry dated June 19th, 1923, if she has “the power of conveying the true reality” or if she is really only “writ[ing] essays about [herself]” (*WD* 56). Woolf writes differently (as she acknowledges women do) but she wants to be able to use the details (even what may be considered superfluous) of life and look at them with an impersonal eye, to see and

¹⁶ This commitment to ‘impersonality’ is similarly shared by John Banville who repeatedly stresses in his essays and interviews that, like Franz Kafka, he is the man who has nothing to say. This connection between Woolf and Banville will be explored in more detail in a later chapter.

touch upon the bigger questions. Nothing should escape that gaze, nothing should be too insignificant, because “[t]he proper stuff of fiction’ does not exclude. Everything is the proper stuff of fiction, every feeling, every thought; every quality of brain and spirit is drawn upon; no perception comes amiss” (“Modern Fiction”, *CRII* 154). The revolution in writing is, for Virginia Woolf, also a revolution of women’s writing.

However, we must be careful not to over generalise or simplify the modernist (or female) ‘break’ with tradition. Though we hear the clarion call of ‘make it new’, we must also see the links between literary modernism and the tradition of art and the novel as a whole. Modernity and modernism were not only schisms, they were also the result of a long period of change and development that were set in motion as far back as the Renaissance (Armstrong; Bradbury & McFarlane; Childs). As such, Woolf may reject the Victorians and their methods but, as Gillian Beer emphasises, that did not mean they were written off:

One of the hopes of modernism is its insistence on its own novelty, its disconnection from the past ... But that assertion should not mislead us: Woolf did not simply reject the Victorians and their concerns, or renounce them. Instead she persistently *rewrote* them. (139-140, emphasis added)

We must pay attention to this idea of ‘rewriting’. Her attempts at rewriting are unique and, at the same time, shared by a number of modernist writers: think of James Joyce rewriting and revitalising Homer’s *Odyssey* in *Ulysses* or T. S. Eliot’s use of myth as a way to order experience in *The Waste Land*. These attempts respond critically to the “experience of fragmentation and disintegration, and the shattering of cultural symbols and norms” in modernity (S. Friedman 97). *Orlando*, where the conventions of biography and biological sex are overturned, is one such example of rewriting in

her texts. The earlier discussion of women writers also underscores this act of rewriting. Women's writing was utilising as well as 'reworking' dominant male perceptions of reality and narrative devices in order to offer a fuller vision of life. Woolf does not discard the past. She understands that life remains the subject matter of fiction. But change in life and perspective requires an accompanying change in method.

Woolf's discussion of convention in "Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown" offers refreshing insight into this change

A convention in writing is not much different from a convention in manners. Both in life and literature it is necessary to have some means of bridging the gulf between the hostess and her unknown guest on the one hand, the writer and his unknown reader on the other. ... The writer must get in touch with his reader by putting before him something which he recognises, which therefore stimulate his imagination, and makes him willing to co-operate in the far more difficult business of intimacy. (*CDB* 104)

At the present moment we are suffering, not from decay, but from having no code of manners which writers and readers accept as a prelude to the more exciting intercourse of friendship. (108)

Just as one does not throw convention out the window when it fails to establish a connection between two parties, Virginia Woolf is not throwing out the tradition she has inherited. Instead, recognising that conventions in writing are essentially male in character ("Women & Fiction" *GR*), she is positing a renewal and revitalisation of those conventions—to tweak them so they become relevant in a different age. Discussing convention in a particularly female way by using the metaphor of a

hostess entertaining, Woolf is already re-envisioning the writing process. By talking about the novel as a site where intimacy is cultivated rather than a transaction that takes place under the assumptions of an already-written contract, Woolf changes the perception and aims of a novel and novelist by changing the language used to discuss the subject. When she “jostles Victorian language into new patterns,” she is able to “[establish] her separation from them” and at the same time to “acknowledge them as kin” (Beer 156). She rejects and accepts the Victorians and their rhetoric at the same time, performing a sort of critical discourse of their philosophy, ideals and assumptions through her art. Also, the jostling of language reminds one, again, of the difficulty and struggle to create amidst established norms. It underlines the need to make a place among the traditions of the past: not to wipe the slate clean as if the proliferation of new art at the time she was writing was born out of nothing but to conduct a dialogue or debate with that inheritance so that it becomes a possible vehicle for the deliverance of the artist’s vision of life.

If we turn to some of her studies of other artists, the amalgamation as well as tension between the old and new will become more explicit. Describing the Elizabethan playwrights in “The Narrow Bridge of Art,” she says, that “They seem to have an attitude toward life, a position which allows them to move their limbs freely; a view which, though made up of all sorts of different things, falls into the right perspective for their purposes” (*GR* 14). This “attitude” is possible because of the shared values and ideals in society at that time, what Woolf terms “a presence of God” that “impos[es] not unity but some sort of stability” (“Elizabethan Play,” *GR* 55). There was no anxiety like those Woolf and some of her contemporaries were experiencing, what Bradbury and McFarlane in the quote above call a “crisis of culture.” The absence of anxiety enables a certain freedom when it comes to the

creation of art because one did not need to question the underlying assumptions of reality. Translating life into art was uncomplicated in the sense that it retained a certain 'directness' of representation. The artist could and was appealing to a common matrix of meanings that translated into an easy correspondence between form and content, an easy association between writer and reader.

This is unlike the modern artist who comes up against "some dissatisfaction, some difficulty, ... lying in [their] way", finding that "[on] all sides writers are attempting what they cannot achieve, are forcing the form they use to contain a meaning which is strange to it" ("Narrow Bridge," *GR* 11). Concerned with "the painful difference between reading contemporaries and 'old books,'" Woolf is aware of the gulf that lies between the present and past (Lee, *Virginia* 414). The need for a different direction and more suitable form is evident in the quote above but we must also see it as a process of evolution in the novel. In fact, the modern novel can be said to be readjusting the points of emphasis rather than discarding the work and efforts of previous generations of writers, a point Woolf herself recognises when she appraises and examines earlier writers of the novel or artists of an earlier age like Laurence Sterne, Jane Austen, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Ivan Turgenev, or the Elizabethan dramatists. Great literature should and can appeal and speak to its readers or audience no matter the time or place. For example, we may be amazed, when we read an Elizabethan play, "by the extraordinary discrepancy between the Elizabethan view of reality and our own" but one still appreciates the innovation in language: "the word-coining genius, as if thought plunged into a sea of words and came up dripping" ("Elizabethan," *CRI* 55).

The desire to learn from predecessors was as strong an impetus in Woolf's writing as the desire to break free of them. Virginia Woolf may have reacted against

the Edwardian novelists but she frequently finds, in other writers, methods that she admired and put into practice herself. Reviewing Turgenev's *The Two Friends and Other Stories* in "A Glance at Turgenev" in 1921, she observes that though the "English language is not the Russian," and one may miss the beauty in the writing because of this, Turgenev, in the painting of a scene, is able to convey to the reader the coming together of disparate objects by "fus[ing] them in one great moment of intensity" (*Books and Portraits* 108). This appraisal of Turgenev's writing reminds one of her own preoccupations with 'moments of being', with how an ordinary scene or event can create an intensity of perception and insight. Similarly, she extols the achievements of Proust and Dostoevsky in "Phases of Fiction" for their "power [to illuminate] the consciousness from its roots to the surface" (*GR* 126). In a further elaboration on Proust, she says that,

It is as though there were two faces to every situation; one full in the light so that it can be described as accurately and examined as minutely as possible; the other half in shadow so that it can be described only in a moment of faith and vision by the use of metaphor. The longer the novelist pores over his analysis, the more he becomes conscious of something that forever escapes. And it is this double vision that makes the work of Proust to us in our generation so spherical, so comprehensive. (*GR* 139)

Her observations about Proust's writing are also important when she thinks about her own writing. Recognising how difficult it is to structure life into fiction, Woolf often had to resort to both minute investigation and "moment[s] of faith and vision" in order to translate her vision to the reader. Her wish to write "something rich and deep and fluent, and hard as nails, while bright as diamonds" speaks of the same pull

between the light and darker areas of perception and life, the same pull she recognised in Proust and which made her describe him as a novelist that is “tough as catgut and as evanescent as a butterfly’s bloom” (*WD* 48, 71). Woolf wants, like Proust, to see the surface but also to penetrate the depths, even though it is acknowledged that the attempt might well fail, might well not be able to approach the “something that forever escapes.”

The difficulty of writing about life, people, and experience, for Virginia Woolf, lies in her apprehension of the complexity of her subject matter. Her responsibility to, and engagement with, the ordinary underlies all her writing and is salient because it forms the platform with which to consider her struggles with expression. Art and the novel, for Woolf, is not a site for make-believe; it is an arena where questions about life are thought about, and possibly answered because “[a]lthough everyday life can display routinized, static and unreflexive characteristics, it is also capable of a surprising dynamism and moments of penetrating insight and boundless creativity” (Gardiner 6). The ordinary settings and events that characters in Woolf’s novels find themselves in are not “static and unreflexive;” her manipulations of form connect these disparate and discrete situations so that they offer a larger picture of life, a more penetrating insight into reality. This is similarly argued by Lorraine Sim who says that, “Woolf resists the view that ordinary experience is an uncontested site and forces her readers to question their assumptions of experiential normality” (17). This questioning “promotes an engagement with the everyday that apprehends it at once familiar and unknown, mundane yet potentially extraordinary ... [and] this dual nature of the ordinary enables it to provide continuity and form to experience in a practical sense, but also allows it to be the source of personal value and meaning” (13). But ordinary experience is not in and of itself meaningful unless filtered through

consciousness, which embodies and endows it with significance. The artist, as a sensibility that *shapes and orders* this amorphous body of life, is the key to meaning and the road to truth and insight.

Shedding all pretence of possessing a ready set of behavioural and societal codes to refer to and fall back on, Woolf's texts do not possess epistemological or ontological certainty. As such, the collaboration between writer and reader in each text has to be defined and redefined every time the reader engages with the text. There is no preconceived formula to rely on that can make certain elements of the text fall neatly into pre-assigned categories. The difficulty of writing about life manifests in the difficulty of form, which translates into an altered reading experience. This difference in the reading experience is also what makes Woolf's 'common reader' an important figure for her.

Virginia Woolf's common reader, a term she borrows from Samuel Johnson, may not be 'common', exactly, but this imaginary being is a necessary one. Her texts require of her readers a certain tenacity, gumption, as well as an openness to fully appreciate and understand their experimentations with form. Her style of narration and the way she brings scenes, themes and characters together require a different form of attention than what readers are used to giving and Woolf herself stressed the importance of the collaboration between writer and reader in the experience of a text. The common reader thus serves as a starting point from which she could begin to write, knowing that she was writing for someone who "is guided by an instinct to create for himself, out of whatever odds and ends he can come by, some kind of whole—a portrait of a man, a sketch of an age, a theory of the art of writing" ("Common Reader," *CRI* 1).

Her description could very well be a description of herself, of her own process of reading. Always conscious of being ‘outside the tradition’ by virtue of being a woman and her lack of formal education, she imbues the common reader she envisions, not with academic strength and knowledge, but a mind alive to “whatever odds and ends he can come by;” in other words, a mind open and sensitive to nuances in a text, to intricacies of form and detail. Additionally, the use of “odds and ends” portrays an awareness of the often fragmented perspectives presented in a modernist—and also in her own—novels. This sensitive and attentive reader is able to build an intimacy with a writer such as Woolf because she will be able to discern the difficulties of construction, the struggles of expression, the efforts of rendering life and human nature into art. It is in this spirit that we, as readers, should approach Woolf’s texts to better perceive the nature of this problem of expression. As common readers, then, the path we will take will bring us first to the ‘ordinary’ layer of Woolf’s fiction before allowing us a peek into the ‘extraordinary’, and will enable us to see the struggle and fatigue that accompanies the process of shaping reality, and also the persistence and necessity of this act.

Writing Madness, or the Madness of Writing: *Mrs Dalloway*

Writing about Septimus Smith, a character who suffers from mental illness, is a subject close to Virginia Woolf’s personal life and also a subject important for her writing. Hermione Lee, in her biography of Woolf, states that “illness has become her language” and explains that her mental illness and the treatment of it “affected her personality, her behaviour, her writing and her politics” (*Virginia* 176). To Woolf, though illness may oftentimes be debilitating, it also has “creative and liberating effects” (Lee, *Being Ill* xvi). Illness changes one’s perception of reality and renders it

unfamiliar, opening new vistas of perception and insight. As such, “Woolf’s response to the “competing narratives of mental illness” of the time “was to create an original language of her own, in fiction and in autobiographical writing, which could explain her illness to her and give it value” (Lee, *Virginia* 191). But “illness requires a new language” and the chance that such a language would be misunderstood or incomprehensible was very high (Lee, *Being Ill* xxviii). This anxiety, as Lee observes, is explicitly demonstrated in this novel: “In *Mrs Dalloway*, her treatment of Septimus Warren Smith’s attempts at making people understand him and his different perspective on and of things mirrors this anxiety on the personal level. Also, the struggle and tension the reader feels in in the competing viewpoints between ‘sane’ narratives (Clarissa’s) and ‘insane’ narratives (Septimus’) are also reflective of this process of signification and belie Woolf’s own “fear of unintelligibility” (Lee, *Virginia* 195).

Woolf, writing in her diary about *Mrs Dalloway*, claims that, “In this book I have almost too many ideas. I want to give life & death, sanity & insanity; I want to criticise the social system, & to show it at work, at its most intense ...” (*Diary* 2: 248, 19 June 1923). The tension, conflict and pull of these different issues and viewpoints in the novel is partly what gives the narrative its breathless pace and atmosphere, and a lyrical quality that associates the disparate parts of life in a continuous, if not altogether harmonious whole. Clarissa’s and Septimus’ world, coexisting and acting as points of tension against each other in the novel, also contributes to this effect. The novel is like a fugue: separate parts and voices hold their own but also fuse into a whole under the pressure of a unifying theme: the difficulty of making meaning, of articulating life.

In *Mrs Dalloway*, Woolf juxtaposes two types of artists: the societal hostess, Clarissa Dalloway, and the soldier suffering from the aftereffects of war, Septimus Smith. Their attempts at expressing reality are developed throughout the book and culminate in the party (for Clarissa) and suicide (for Septimus). The struggle of the artistic process is foregrounded using Clarissa's and Septimus' perspectives and their endeavours to make sense of their worlds and the people in them. To get an idea of this struggle with form and the act of shaping experience, we first turn to the beginning of the novel, for the beginning is the "point at which ... the writer departs from all other works; a beginning immediately establishes relationships with works already existing, relationships of either continuity or antagonism or some mixture of both" (Said 1).

On the morning Clarissa Dalloway walks to buy flowers at Mulberry's in Bond Street, the reader becomes acquainted with more than just one of the central characters in the novel. The reader is introduced, by the use of parenthetical thoughts and by the associations of things to one another, to a whole slice of history, not only of Mrs Dalloway, but of England as well. The moment we start reading, we are immediately "plunged," like Clarissa is, into the world of the novel: a world of associations, a world where reality is not one reality but layers of it. The thought of opening the French windows to walk out into the "open air" conjures the image of Peter Walsh because she remembers him speaking to her on the terrace (1); the memory of Peter Walsh and his work in India then suggests to the reader the whole business of Empire and the context of a historical milieu starts to get outlined: "The War was over" (2) and times were changing. Later, after Clarissa arrives at Mulberry's, the sound of "a pistol shot" (14) becomes the cataclysmic event which links the narrative, at this point only concerned with Clarissa and her immediate

circle, to the other main character of the novel, Septimus Smith, who, as a soldier back home from the war and suffering from shellshock and mental illness, provides even more details about the present world of the novel when he sees it as a “world [that] wavered and quivered and threatened to burst into flames” (16). The comfortable easiness Clarissa moves within is disturbed by this other presence that acts as a critical commentary not only of the societal class to which Clarissa belongs, but also of the (dominant) narrative she constructs in the novel.

The heady rush at the beginning of the novel gives us a sense of the complexity of life and of the many textures of reality existing in one moment. The reader is confronted with the variety and complexity of memories, things, events, people, and society in a mishmash of images and thoughts that gives one an impression of chaos but also of a certain order of association. Already the reader realises that she is not in familiar territory. The demarcations between things, between people, are not solid but dissolve into a different whole. Time and space are conflated and rearranged so that life becomes no one thing or moment but a succession and amalgamation of many things at once. The reader cannot rest for she is thrown this way and that, flitting among characters, dropping in and out of scenes and thoughts. That breathless intensity of life pushes one along in impatience and it is not until we collide against the figure of Septimus Smith that the flow is abruptly checked. But what is it checked by? Septimus’ thoughts are chaotic and menacing and he frequently finds it a problem to make sense of things or speak to people so that they understand him. He cannot order experience meaningfully; there is a disconnection between the world and him. The aeroplane in the sky churns out letters that “lie still” “[o]nly for a moment” and which “moved and melted and were rubbed out in the sky.” The letters are shifty, just as words are. The magic code to expression, suggested by the “K,” “E,” and “Y”

written in the sky are followed by the word “perhaps,” which signals the unreliability of such a concept, of the dubiousness of a stable frame of reference or cipher with which to crack the code of expression (22). Septimus can see the words but he “could not read the language yet.” *But* “this exquisite beauty” of the words, of all they could promise, Septimus does appreciate (23).

Although Septimus may not seem ‘connected’ in the way Clarissa is, tied as she is by her (sane) inclusion by society and family (and even she has difficulty, when she thinks about her life and its trajectory, its history, to find a coherent meaning that will justify all actions, explain all events), he still possesses other ties to the world. His insanity and shell-shocked state which include and exclude at the same (he is defined in terms given weight through their application in society yet ostracised because of their meaning) may single him out but they also bathe him in the light of another kind of insight. He sees a different pattern as he feels himself connect, through the “millions of fibres” of the leaves around him, to a “pattern,” that “[a]ll taken together meant the birth of a new religion” (24). He is on the brink of something momentous but is unable to make the leap, as we understand later in the novel when he commits suicide.

Clarissa may move more confidently than Septimus does through the world but similar insecurities plague her. Clarissa is dissatisfied with the problem of “not knowing people; not being known” (167); only sometimes does life coalesce into something clearer:

It was a sudden revelation, a tinge like a blush which one tried to check and then, as it spread, one yielded to its expansion, and rushed to the farthest verge and there quivered and felt the world come closer, swollen with some astonishing significance, some pressure of rapture,

which split its thin skin and gushed and poured with an extraordinary alleviation over the cracks and sores! Then, for that moment, she had seen an illumination; a match burning in a crocus; an inner meaning almost expressed. But the close withdrew; the hard softened. It was over – the moment. (34-35)

Describing her relations with women, and the feelings she gets when spending time with them, the sensual language symbolises a different way of knowing the world; a way that allows her to step outside her self for a moment to “undoubtedly ... feel what men felt” (34). The trap of an individual consciousness is escaped through the language of the body, which literally and metaphorically takes Clarissa and the reader out of the cognitive realm of understanding into another mode of perception. The abstraction of knowledge is reclaimed by picturing it in the body, “like a blush which one tried to check,” in natural and ordinary physical reactions. It is within the quotidian, the everyday nitty-gritty details and moments of life that one accesses these moments of “sudden revelation”. The problem of articulation is not divorced from the lived experience but tied up with the efforts at perception, at heeding the advice to “Look” (a phrase repeated often in the novel, especially by Rezia), to look at “the unseen” (27), which Septimus cannot: “He had only to open his eyes; but a weight was on them; a fear” (75). But looking is not enough, unfortunately. One needs, also, to be able to communicate this vision or truth and that is precisely what Septimus Smith cannot do. He can only “[talk] to himself” (72) or dead people he conjures up through memory.

Amorphous life is threatening if one cannot find a means to order it or make it meaningful, a problem Septimus is facing:

Beauty, the world seemed to say. ... To watch a leaf quivering in the rush of air was an exquisite joy. Up in the sky swallows swooping, swerving, flinging themselves in and out, round and round, yet always with perfect control as if elastics held them; ... all of this, calm and reasonable as it was, made out of ordinary things as it was, was the truth now; beauty, that was the truth now. Beauty was everywhere.

(76)

The promise in this quote is made clear: the multitudinous ordinary events that seem so commonplace can be beautiful, if perceived, ordered and made sense of; and beauty can embody and convey truth. The fabric of life, if woven into an artistic whole—an act of expression, of *shaping*—does not need to fall blindly, obscuring meaning and truth. And Septimus, in this experience of the world is given intimations of this. But though “[h]e strained [and] he pushed,” and though “[t]he word ‘time’ split its husk [and] poured its riches over him” and words “fell like shells” “from his lips,” he is still unable to make himself understood by Rezia who laments that she is “so unhappy” (75, 76, 77). The disconnection in the marriage is a matter of communication: Septimus cannot make her understand his reality, the world and connections he sees in his mind. He is unable to shape the nebulous events that make up his life into a coherent form. He wants to tell people of “this relief, of this joy, of this astonishing revelation,” but his talk is not heeded, is deemed incoherent by Rezia who worries about passers-by staring at them because of Septimus’ chatter (77).

What is clear here is the inability to perceive, a lack that both Septimus and Rezia suffer from. While Rezia suffers from a blindness to the internal world and self of Septimus—a condition that also speaks of her inability to know the other, and hence an inability to connect, Septimus cannot see the external world, heeding only

the internal tumult of voices, perceptions and feelings within him. Life thus becomes unreal for him, and a possible connection to ontological certainty is severed. This lack of connectedness is also embodied in Clarissa who, though physically present at the party, is not actually participating fully in it, ruminating, instead, on the news of Septimus' death. However, the form of the novel, with its associative network of motifs and ideas becomes the link that ties all these disparate characters together. Art tries to achieve a unity, and write harmony and order into the inchoate quality of life.

Septimus' inability to communicate meaningfully and his tendency to recoil and withdrawal from the world strike both himself and the people who care for him with fear and frustration. He vacillates between happiness and creative energy, of seeing in Nature "Shakespeare's words, her meaning," and utter despondency and rage, of the cruelty of "Human nature" (153, 154). There would be periods of verbosity when he would "[wave] his hands and [cry] out that he knew the truth! He knew everything!", but "real things – real things were too exciting" and variegated, they needed to be ordered and pieced into coherence to make sense (153-4, 155). A pattern must be conceived or everything descends into disorder and confusion.

There is no doubt Septimus has the power to organise. When he takes up Mrs. Peters' hat and chooses accessories and decorations for it from Rezia's work-box, we are told that "though he had no fingers, could not even do up a parcel, he had a wonderful eye, and often he was right, sometimes absurd, of course, but sometimes wonderfully right" (157). The hat, as a work of collaboration, of art, between Rezia and Septimus "was wonderful. Never had [Septimus] done anything which made him feel so proud. It was so real, it was so substantial, Mrs. Peters' hat" (158). The faculty for ordering, for beauty, is not absent but hurt, under duress. However, disorder is always closing in and consciousness always has to make a great effort to keep it at

bay. Moments between sanity and insanity, between coherence and incoherence are merely a step away from each other; the line is very fine indeed.

Yet, Septimus' ramblings still harbour beauty and are attempts to say what cannot be said:

She brought him his papers, the things he had written, things she had written for him. She tumbled them out on to the sofa. They looked at them together. Diagrams, designs ... circles traced round shillings and sixpences – the suns and stars; zigzagging precipices with mountaineers ascending roped together, exactly like knives and forks; sea pieces with little faces laughing out of what might perhaps be waves: the map of the world. ... Now for his writings; how the dead sing behind rhododendron bushes; odes to Time; conversations with Shakespeare; Evans, Evans, Evans ... Universal love: the meaning of the world. Burn them! he cried.

But Rezia laid her hands on them. Some were very beautiful, she thought. She would tie them up ... with a piece of silk. (161-2)

The attempt at expression is here valued on its own terms—intelligible or not. The importance of the effort is hallowed by Rezia's act of tying all these different narratives, hers and his, sane and insane, together with silk, a piece of cloth which again reminds us of the weaving together of things in any narrative. Additionally, the comparison of the fingers on the "precipices" with "knives and forks" (tools of society) connects these narratives with Clarissa Dalloway's attempts at expression. Her organisation of the party is analogous to her organisation of her life, of her efforts to make sense of past and present. The party brings together significant characters from her past like Peter Walsh and Sally Seton, her familiar present, Richard and

Elizabeth Dalloway, the upper echelon of society, the figures of war and state, and Septimus himself, in the form of news given by Lady Bradshaw. These disparate figures come together, at the end of the novel, to show the necessary coexistence of these different narratives of life.

The fragility of harmony enacted at the party is underscored when Septimus' death is relayed to Clarissa during the night. The threat of death and dissolution of all meaning underlies all attempts to 'live.' The forced separation or denial of death can only bring disaster as Dr Holmes endeavours to 'treat' and segregate Septimus from his family show. The quote is also another example of the importance of writing, of the artistic endeavour and its commitment to expressing life. The natural world ("rhododendron"), the past and history ("odes to Time"), art and literary tradition ("conversations with Shakespeare"), and love and its role as a principle of unity ("Universal love ... meaning of the world") are all intertwined in Septimus' writing. These different strands of society and reality are held together by Rezia (another form of the artist, making, as she does, hats), for "the instinct to bring things together is not limited to painters and writers" (Rosenthal 147). The act of tying up, of putting these narratives together, parallels what Woolf, as author, is doing by bringing the different narratives and filaments (a word Woolf uses herself to talk about experience) into a coherent whole through form in the novel.

As Septimus waits for Dr. Holmes to get to the room he is in, he decides that he will kill himself. The decision, and description, is undertaken with the utmost clarity and lack of sentimentality:

There remained only the window ... the tiresome, the troublesome, and rather melodramatic business of opening the window and throwing himself out. It was their idea of tragedy, not his or Rezia's (for she was

with him). Holmes and Bradshaw liked that sort of thing. (He sat on the sill.) But he would wait till the very last moment. He did not want to die. Life was good. The sun hot. Only human beings? Coming down the staircase opposite an old man stopped and stared at him. Holmes was at the door. 'I'll give it you!' he cried, and flung himself vigorously, violently down on to Mrs. Filmer's area railings. (164-5)

The narrator makes it very clear that this act was not one of cowardice but defiance, a final attempt at saying exactly one's idea of the world, so that when Dr Holmes, in the very next sentence shouts, "The coward!" (165), the reader sees it as a demarcation between Septimus and the world of Dr Holmes, that world where "Human nature ... the repulsive brute, with the blood-red nostrils" (101), which is cruel and laughs at Shakespeare, and is apathetic, not as a just pronouncement on what has just happened. Rezia is not sad but says, with a smile, that, "He is dead"—not a lament but simply an observation of what is. Additionally, immediately after this incident, we read not narration, but another thought—Peter Walsh's thought: "One of the triumphs of civilisation" and can read it both as a scathing and sarcastic, ironic remark of "the efficiency, the organisation, the communal spirit of London," as well as an affirmation of Septimus' act (165). The reader understands that "the communal spirit of London" only exists on the surface. Community and order are hard-won facts that people, in a society where these terms are bandied about carelessly, have no true concept of, have not cared to think about thoroughly.

The significance of Septimus' death is only fully realised when the reader hears of it, second-hand, at Clarissa's party. Clarissa's feelings of entrapment and meaninglessness earlier in the day, when she thought that "[it was] all over ... [that] [t]he sheet was stretched and the bed narrow" (51), and at the party when she feels

that “it [is] too much of an effort” (187), take on new meaning and become more sharply outlined when she reflects on Septimus’ suicide:

She had once thrown a shilling into the Serpentine, never anything more. But he had flung it away. They went on living ... They ... would grow old. A thing there was that mattered; a thing, wreathed about with chatter, defaced, obscured in her own life, let drop every day in corruption, lies, chatter. This he had preserved. Death was defiance. Death was an attempt to communicate, people feeling the impossibility of reaching the centre which, mystically, evaded them; closeness drew apart; rapture faded; one was alone. There was an embrace in death.

But this young man who had killed himself – had he plunged holding his treasure? ...

Somehow it was her disaster – her disgrace. (202-3)

The coming together of Clarissa’s and Septimus’ narratives reaches a climax when both characters are here described as separate and yet conjoined. Even though the reader would have seen many links between both characters before this culminating incident—for example, the use of birds and bird imagery: “Clarissa displays a special interest in bird metaphors, Septimus in birds themselves” (P. Sheehan 132), as well as the chime of Big Ben that impinges on their thoughts—the connection is an external one. Here, the connection becomes internalised as Septimus’ death echoes Clarissa’s struggles with holding her self and her life up, of “rubbing stick to stick” till she “revive[s]”. The everyday and ordinary, with its film of “corruption, lies, [and] chatter,” may obscure but it is also in the ordinary where we find those sticks and things which she uses to sustain her. As much as death connotes ‘nothingness’, it is

also the ultimate act of choice in Septimus' case. Clarissa's acceptance of his act affirms life rather than negates it because it sanctions the attempt at articulation—the 'mark on the wall' has been made.

This quote speaks directly of the artist's fear of unintelligibility, a fear that Woolf also harboured (Lee, *Virginia*). The need for a different language to convey one's sense of the world may not be assured of an audience, may not always compel understanding, but the identification of Clarissa Dalloway with Septimus Smith, her ownership of this unfortunate incident as "her disaster" endows this different language of expression with gravitas and makes it stand alongside other more intelligible narratives in the novel. It also undermines but at the same time shores up Clarissa's own narratives because this passage exposes her vulnerability while linking it with a community of other vulnerable voices through Septimus. The questioning of reality, the apprehension that one needs daily to steel oneself to order experience, is the norm (a necessity) rather than the exception. However, the truth is still incommunicable—taken with Septimus to the grave—if we assume he has apprehended the truth. Septimus' final act is definitive but also private and individual; even Clarissa who partakes of his act posthumously is only able to conjecture, not pronounce with surety, if he has grasped the truth. What she is more certain of, however—something she actually feels in the moment, is the suppression of the need for expression, in its various forms, and how this impedes already fragile efforts at articulation.

The spectre of death looms over the novel and its characters constantly. Intimations of death and violence surface through the backdrop of a society ravaged by war; the narration of sights like Peter Walsh "always playing with [his] knife," an action linked to "his lack of the ghost of a notion what any one else was feeling," as

well as his associations with Empire (47, 50); sounds like the pistol shot and “violent explosion” heard while Clarissa is buying flowers and Septimus is walking with Rezia (14); the thought Septimus has following the “violent explosion” of “some horror [that] had come almost to the surface and was about to burst into flames” (16); the *mise-en-scène* that is evoked when Clarissa imagines her life as “over ... [with the] sheet ... stretched and the bed narrow,” relaying, perfectly, the sense of stifling constriction and death through the sheet and the bed, which evokes the coffin (51). These images of death, violence and destruction run through the novel like undercurrents and permeate the characters’ thoughts. Similarly, Woolf’s struggles with writing are also struggles with death: the death of obsolete tools; the death of an external, all-encompassing authority; the death of past conventions. Working within the space created by these absences and trying to grasp the ultimate absence, experience (absent because of the unreliability and difficulty of representation in the modernist text), through associations and intimations rather than a head-on confrontation, Woolf’s writing is committed to offering life: to making Mrs Brown live.

Although tenuous, the attempts to express by Woolf and her characters have been made. The form of the novel, which Jane Goldman calls a “vortex-like methodology,” brings together different lives and narratives, presenting them as facets of a multivalent and multi-layered reality (56). Although Woolf’s subjectivity may, as Paul Sheehan describes, be “form-defying,” and “unruly,” something that “resists the ordering process of narrative construction,” it is held together loosely yet firmly in Woolf’s vision of the interplay between the different threads of experience (135). The structure of *Mrs Dalloway* acknowledges the formlessness and chaos experience

presents, but is also able to meld the amorphous chaos in moments of vision that are a direct result of the pressure and intensity of the artist's gaze and vision.¹⁷

Woolf's narrative methods, moving away from traditional realist representations of life that are founded on a firm chronology and a disproportionate reliance on observable fact, "are subtle and elliptical ... using a number of the day's passing events held in common as points of transition between [Clarissa and Septimus]. Her free-indirect technique allows the narrative subtly to shift interior focus between characters, creating a collective discursive continuum" (Goldman 54). This continuum's "collective" nature becomes the temporary ordering and harmonising principle giving significance to the disparate events in the text. The "discursive" function is a result of 'collecting' these myriad experiences within a structured form; when fused in this way, the narratives bleed into one another, creating a sense of the textured complexity of experience. The discursive aspect of her fiction also necessitates discourses between different levels of experiences and different characters, suggesting to the reader obliquely, and persuasively, that reality is more than what it seems.

Raiders of Other Lands: *To the Lighthouse*

In *Walter Sickert: A Conversation* (1934), Virginia Woolf puts forth the idea of a "hybrid" artist:

¹⁷ This idea of the intensity of the artist's gaze is similarly held by John Banville, who, often quoting Rainer Maria Rilke, wishes to make life and objects *appear*, or *live*, through the strength of the artistic gaze that exerts pressure on the world in order to make it 'real'. Note that this idea is also bound up with a commitment to the ordinary subjects of life and how the extraordinary and strange are within, and part of, the ordinary are shared by Virginia Woolf and John Banville. Cf. the Russian Formalists and their idea of the familiar made strange by art.

I once read a letter from Walter Sickert in which he said, "I have always been a literary painter, thank goodness, like all the decent painters." Perhaps then he would not altogether despise us. When we talk of his biographies, his novels, and his poems we may not be so foolish as it seems. Among the many kinds of artists, it may be that there are some who are hybrid. Some, that is to say, bore deeper and deeper into the stuff of their own art; others are always making raids into the lands of others. Sickert it may be is among the hybrids, the raiders. ... That is why he draws so many different people to look at his pictures. (26-8)

If Walter Sickert is a "literary painter" then Woolf certainly fits the idea of 'painterly writer'. Diane Gillespie sees Woolf's interest in the arts as a way to "learn and to commune with an outlook she finds not only alien but also compatible" (2). As a 'raider', Woolf not only makes excursions into the lands of art and painting but also into other genres, finding in them ways to further supplement and reinforce her methods of artistic expression. Lee, when she considers the notebooks Woolf kept for taking notes while reading, observes that the notebooks contained not only reading notes but sketches, plans, quotations, and lists of things to be done around the house as well (*Virginia* 412-3). However, Lee points out that, "the blurring of compartments in her notebooks doesn't just suggest that she was messy and absent-minded. She *wanted* boundaries to overlap: it was a form of cross-fertilisation" (*Virginia* 413, emphasis in original).

This need to combine and synthesise is something essential to Woolf's work: *Orlando*, "I am Christina Rossetti," "The Art of Biography," and "The New Biography" question not just the narrower field of biography but, on a larger scale,

the act of writing lives and characters, which is important to Woolf in fiction and biography. Similarly, Woolf's discussion of Sickert points to how his portraits not only make "us aware of beauty" (*CDB* 180), but also how they create a biography. The portraits do not only just depict what is on the canvas, that is, surface, but are able to access depth: "when he paints a portrait I read a life" (*CDB* 175). The achievement of his art lies in the fact that "Human nature is never exiled from his canvas" (*CDB* 181), something which Woolf also tries to capture in her art.

The relationship between writing and painting, and the exchange between different genres (art and biography, for instance) are elements that are useful for understanding Woolf's preoccupation with the problem of expression. Woolf acknowledges the connections between painting and writing and states that, "though they must part in the end, painting and writing have much to tell each other" (*CDB* 181). Language is symbolic, a fact which gives it both power and renders it questionable at the same time. At the same time that Woolf needs language to shape and give meaning to experience, she knows that language is loose and inexact, that "Literature employed 'impure' (in the sense of non-aesthetic) associations because of the very nature of its medium: language operates through a web of associations and significations" (Briggs, *Reading* 97), and that the novel is "an impure substance in which dust and twigs and flies find lodgement" ("De Quincey's Autobiography," *CRII* 132).

The 'piracy' of painting becomes a way to circumvent this problem and fix something more solid in its place, an act that enriches Woolf's writing but also causes a certain amount of self-doubt:

The view that literature was inferior as a medium to the plastic arts ... posed a special threat, not only because this was the art Woolf herself

practised, but also because it devalued her talent in relation to Vanessa's. At the same time, she felt unable to dismiss such views out of hand: she held Fry's opinions in the greatest respect and wanted to integrate them into her own artistic practice and adapt them to her own developing theories of aesthetics. (Briggs, *Reading* 96)¹⁸

Woolf's "developing theories of aesthetics" encompass different modes of representation and were part of her search for "new shapes" (*Letters*, 2: 167, 24 July 1917) that could suitably contain and structure life in art. Her desire to integrate painting into her writing was both a personal and artistic dilemma: the raider of other lands strengthens her arsenal but also admits the paucity of tools at her demand. Nevertheless, Woolf's fusion of painting and writing, and different genres, adds to her experiments in form and gives her a more nuanced language with which to portray life.

Linda Anderson, in her book on autobiography, speaks about "difference" in relation to Woolf's work and says, in her analysis of "The New Biography," that, "As so often in Woolf's imagining of difference, the tense points to the future, to an unrealised potential which cannot be defined or contained within traditional structures" (96-7). The "future" of biography, as envisioned by Woolf, is also the future of fiction, a fiction that sees the limitations of art and expression of life as new ground to be broken. The new ground that is being broken in *To the Lighthouse* is not only one between writing and painting, but also one of female presence, of "allow[ing] the mother's presence into a writing which has traditionally not permitted her a place" (Anderson 94). The problem of expression in this particular novel is a problem with the representation of life as well as the female figure in life. The enigma

¹⁸ See also Diane Filby Gillespie's *The Sisters' Arts: The Writing and Painting of Virginia Woolf and Vanessa Bell* (1988) for an examination of the relationship between writing and painting in Woolf's work.

of Mrs Ramsay and the unravelling of this central mysterious presence becomes the *raison d'être* of the text. In “Sketch of the Past,” she describes her “first memory” (78) and says that,

If I were a painter I should paint these first impressions in pale yellow, silver, and green. ... I should make a picture that was globular; semi-transparent. ... I should make curved shapes, showing the light through, but not giving a clear outline. Everything would be large and dim; and what would be seen would at the same time be heard; sounds would come through this petal or leaf – sounds indistinguishable from sights. Sound and sight seem to make equal parts of these first impressions. (*MB* 79-80)

This description of how she would portray her memories also serves as a description of her *modus operandi* in *To the Lighthouse*. In her depiction of Mrs Ramsay as enigma, she does achieve that effect of “showing the light through, but not giving a clear outline.” Mrs Ramsay, as the ‘bearer of life’ in the novel, is the vessel in which everything in the novel seems to coalesce. Also, Woolf’s use of interior monologues, and parentheses and ellipses, manages to integrate different modes of perceptions (sight, sound, thought, action) in an interwoven tapestry of scene that manages to say more, and more richly. Moreover, Lily Briscoe, the artist, is concerned, not with realistic renderings of her subjects but with the shapes and forms of things and their relation to one another, what would correspond, in this extract, to the “large and dim” images Woolf wishes to portray.

We have already become acquainted with the figure of the Victorian, rational male in the novel when we discussed the nature of the alphabet earlier. Taking that discussion as a point of departure, we will recognise that this novel, like many of her

others, embodies and deals with tension: the tension between form and content; between male and female; between the exterior and interior; between ways of knowing reality; between past and present ways of writing. To synthesise these tensions into a coherent whole, to give the novel its 'significant form', will not be an easy task. In order to do this, Woolf needed something more elastic, something that would be able to account for the multiplicity of views and positions so as to give a fuller picture of life. This need for elasticity, in *To the Lighthouse*, is manifested in the artist, Lily Briscoe, whose artistic credo is compared to Roger Fry's by Julia Briggs:

Lily ... is a post-impressionist, concerned with 'the shape', with form rather than with surface effect or realistic detail ... She closely echoes Roger Fry in her artistic ideals and her concern for underlying form and inner truth, and with composition and the problems of balance.
(*Inner Life* 181)

Lily's extended struggle, throughout the novel, with shape and form, becomes a protracted comment on the nature of the text itself. The mingling of writing and painting not only emerges in the descriptions of place and people, but also in the sustained argument about art the novel offers its readers. To follow Lily Briscoe's struggles with her painting will therefore also offer us new insight into the writing process, the process of articulation. The painting Lily undertakes to complete highlights the problematics of *vision*: "in straightforward optical terms, as seeing; and in creative terms, in the sense of artistic vision and the struggle to bring a work of art into being" (P. Sheehan 141). Vicki Mahaffey also echoes this view when she says that the novel "chronicles the emergence of a new kind of artist who simultaneously represents a new kind of observer or reader, one who is willing to wrestle with reality

over an extended period of time ... That reality, moreover, is not represented in the text. What is represented is the struggle to come to terms with it” (167).

Lily Briscoe struggles with her painting throughout the novel, finishing it only on the last page of the text, in the last section, “The Lighthouse.” When we first hear of Lily and her painting, it is through Mrs Ramsay, the very enigma Lily is trying to adequately represent on her canvas. Mrs Ramsay, as a secret code to be deciphered, is a presence that permeates the very fabric of life we read of and Lily’s attempt to adequately represent that enigma in her painting is an attempt to decipher this code, to see the ‘truth’ behind things. But it is not easy. Alice van Buren Kelley describes this difficulty as a juxtaposition between the male and female elements in the novel:

... unity, as Woolf perceives it, is not achieved solely by the wedding, literal and figurative, of a man and a woman. It is made possible also in the joining of other groups of people of various sorts in a wholeness that resembles, in its balance and harmony, a work of art. And because it is the men who insist on the fact of human separateness in Woolf’s world, it is up to the women to create, or to reveal, this underlying unity. (86-7)

Mr and Mrs Ramsay personify the tension between being separated and individualised, and being unified in an interweaving of relationships in the novel. Their marriage and love (union) is described and revered alongside the strain and pressure (tension) they exert against and on each other. Their relationship becomes the central body of knots Lily has to try to disentangle in order to “arrive at a completed picture and a moment of vision” (Lee, *Novels* 133). Although it may be “up to the women to create, or ... reveal, this underlying unity,” the figure of the male is not dismissed. The “wedding ... of a man and woman” recognises the

interdependence between them. Mrs Ramsay may orchestrate and weave her tapestry of relationships and connections but she does not do it in a vacuum. It is, in fact, in the tension and struggle between the ‘solidity’ and discreteness of Mr Ramsay’s male world and her more inclusive vision of things that gives experience—and the novel—its creative energy and form: “some combination of both forms would lead to the richest art” (Kelley 58). There is a need for synthesis and transformation because “[t]o pursue truth with such astonishing lack of consideration for other people’s feelings, to rend the thin veils of civilisation so wantonly, so brutally, was ... so horrible an outrage of human decency” (*TL* 37). The search for truth needs to be changed, the approach must be “filled with life” (*TL* 43). The integration of the feminine and masculine gives birth to a creative energy that can precipitate such a change.

But the achievement of this creative energy and unity is not easy. Lily’s struggles with painting suggest that though the principle of harmonisation is integral to life, and to an understanding of life through art, the possibility of achieving it is not as straightforward. Even though it may be “up to the women to create, or to reveal, this underlying unity,” Lily strains under the pressure of this task. The tension between form and content, the complications that arise when one needs to translate life into art, is more difficult to solve:

... did she lock up within her some secret which certainly Lily Briscoe believed people must have for the world to go on at all? ... Sitting on the floor with her arms round Mrs. Ramsay’s knees, close as she could get, ... she imagined how in the chambers of the mind and heart of the woman ... were stood, like the treasures in the tombs of kings, tablets bearing sacred inscriptions, which if one could spell them out would teach one everything, but they would never be offered openly, never

made public. What art was there, known to love or cunning, by which one pressed through into those secret chambers? ... What device for becoming, like waters poured into one jar, inextricably the same, one with the object one adored? ... for it was not knowledge but unity that she desired, not inscriptions on tablets, nothing that could be written in any language known to men, but intimacy itself, which is knowledge ... (57)

If the “mind and heart” of Mrs Ramsay are “like the treasures in the tombs of kings,” or like “tablets bearing sacred inscriptions,” Lily, then, is the figure of the priestess who is the legitimate heir to the secret keys to the code, and holds the as-yet-unleashed power to unlock these secrets. Her position of supplication at the feet of Mrs Ramsay shows her awe and love for this powerful bearer of truth and her need to be one with it. If Lily is indeed the priestess then art is the ritual she practises. But the question remains: “What art was there, known to love or cunning, by which one pressed through into those secret chambers?” The language used in this passage is the one of the lover. The language of love introduced here cements the connection between Lily’s love for, and desire for an intimacy with, Mrs Ramsay and her secrets, with art because “[l]ove is the perception of individuals. Love is the extremely difficult realisation that something other than oneself is real. Love, and so art ... is the discovery of reality” (Murdoch, “Sublime,” *Existentialists* 215). Lily’s desire to render Mrs Ramsay in her painting is intermingled with a need for intimacy; her desire to represent is thus, also, an act of love, “intimacy ... is knowledge.”

The desire to create, to find this “unwritten” language and to achieve “intimacy,” is imperative but the majority of the novel chronicles not Lily’s success but her despair; for example, in this passage:

... beneath the colour there was the shape. She could see it all so clearly, so commandingly, when she looked: it was when she took her brush in her hand that the whole thing changed. It was in that moment's flight between the picture and her canvas that the demons set on her who often brought her to the verge of tears and made this passage from conception to work as dreadful as any down a dark passage for a child. Such she often felt herself – struggling against terrific odds to maintain her courage; to say: 'But this is what I see; this is what I see', and so to clasp some miserable remnant of her vision to her breast ... It was absurd, it was impossible. One could not say what one meant. (23-4)

This extract is but one example of Lily's encounters with failure and doubt throughout the novel. Another instance sees her condemning her painting as "bad, it was infinitely bad!" (54). Lily's struggles with her art are struggles concerning the translation of vision. What she sees and understands in life is difficult to express in art. The artist's walk down the "dark passage" is perilous and defeating, not least because of her position as a woman. The difficulty of coming up against a man's vision or point of view—in this case Paunceforte and Mr Tansley—makes the attempt to find a new language for expression doubly hard. The difficulty of translating life into art is exacerbated by the expectations (or non-expectations) of her sex. Also, the concern with life and art is also one of "shape," that is, form. New experiences need new languages and new forms in which to articulate them but these remain elusive, just as Mrs Ramsay's secrets are elusive to Lily.

But Lily's difficulties, one must note, are 'public' difficulties. Art is difficult for her because it is an *outward* expression of an inward understanding. The tension

between outer and inner lives and realities appears because of the need to make intelligible to others what is private and sacred. When Mr Banks queries as to the significance of the “triangular purple shape”, asking what it is meant to “indicate” (58), the need to explain both distances and brings herself closer to her picture (“it had been seen; it had been taken away from her,” 60). However, the ensuing discussion of “the relation of masses, [and] of lights and shadows” (59) that continues between her and Mr Banks forces her to remove, for a moment, the force of personality impeding the continuation and completion of her picture:

She looked. ... She took up once more her old painting position ... *subduing all her impressions as a woman to something much more general*; becoming once more under the power of that vision which she had seen clearly once and must now grope for among hedges and houses and mothers and children – her picture. (59-60, emphasis added)

Her self-consciousness stands in the way of her attempts at articulation. It is only when she is able to distance herself from the spectre of womanhood and its expectations that she can contemplate the problem more clearly. The embodiment of too singular a perspective is detrimental to art. In this same way, though her yearning for intimacy with Mrs Ramsay is connected to her drive to create, is connected to knowledge, yet Lily must learn to consider Mrs Ramsay in aesthetic rather than personal terms. When Lily allows the presence of Mrs Ramsay to engulf her, she is unable to paint. As Paul Sheehan expresses, “personalising surrender of emotional attachment” runs counter to the “impersonality necessary for artistic creation” (146), a quality that Woolf recognised as imperative for the artist to possess.

At the same time that Lily is struggling with (public) expression, however, Mrs Ramsay obtains sustenance in the surety of her (private) being, “that wedge-shaped core of darkness [that was] invisible to others.” In Part II, “The Window,” she reflects on how important it is “[t]o be silent; to be alone,” and the sense of stability this state of being offers. By letting go of life and the ordering of it for a moment, Mrs Ramsay is able to retreat into her inner self, a place where “it is all dark,” and “unfathomably deep” (69). In these depths, she is able to experience a “summoning together” and it is at these times when “always some exclamation of triumph over life” occurs (69, 70). It is interesting that the “triumph over life” does not happen during periods of active participation in the world but during these moments of contemplation. In this state, the self roams freely and wide, suggesting an ability to take in and process life in a more organic, synthesised manner. This description directly explains the artistic process and stresses the importance of impersonality in an artist. It also emphasises the leap an artist has to make between private synthesis, observation, and vision, and the finished artwork.

Unlike Lily, Mrs Ramsay is able to retreat and to feel the “triumph over life,” something Lily is struggling to do in her art. As a symbol of Mrs Ramsay, the lighthouse and the strokes of light it sweeps over the terrain become the guiding principle with which the novel is structured. Though illuminating at times, the lighthouse, and Mrs Ramsay, are basically harbours in a sea of blackness and mystery. Their light illuminates, at intervals, bringing clarity and purpose to the random nature of things just as the novel orders and gives significance to life’s randomness through art, what Julia Briggs sees as the restorative function of the imagination and the arts (Briggs, *Inner Life*). But life does break in frequently, as Mrs Ramsay understands, and this undertaking to impose order, to shape experience, is

both necessary and exhausting: she is “continually stretched between her deep-sunk contemplative life and the external demands made on her in the scene” (Lee, *Novels* 133).

The union of things and people in Mrs Ramsay’s world (as orchestrated or encouraged by her), for example, through marriage, “struck everything into stability” and made it possible for her to appreciate and think of everything as “all one stream,” that in its steady flow connotes “a coherence in things, a stability;” something hard and tangible shining amidst the flux, “like a ruby” (P. Sheehan 146), sum up what Woolf tries to do when capturing the changing, complex faces of experience in a solid structure of form in the novel. She closes the distances between discrete characters, events, thoughts, and feelings, into art, the medium that would be able to imbue these separate entities with significance in a coherent narrative. We must remember that one of the impetuses for the creation of this novel was, after all, to work through and exorcise Woolf’s obsession with and memories of her mother. The release that Woolf felt and spoke of in her diaries and letters after the completion of the book is just one testimony to how form can organise experience in a more elucidating manner.

The message of unity the novel espouses, and as symbolised by Mrs Ramsay and the lighthouse, is, however, fragile. If harmony so much depends on Mrs Ramsay, if “directly she went a sort of disintegration set in [and people] wavered about, went different way” (*TL* 122), then when Mrs Ramsay dies, that tenuous stability is also shaken. Mrs Ramsay’s death prefigures not only the falling apart of the house, but the dissolution, too, of many other things: Paul’s and Minta’s marriage fails; Prue and Andrew die; and visits to the house cease until ten years later. But can the revival of the house, the finally completed journey to the lighthouse, and the completion of Lily’s painting really rescue the disintegration of connections and things that time has

wrecked? Although the house is cleaned up in preparation of the arrival of the family and their visitors, the change in atmosphere is palpable. And although James' and Mr Ramsay's animosity is soothed by Mr Ramsay's praise of his sailing skills, James' observation of his father standing "very straight and tall, for all the world, ... as if he were saying, "'There is no God'" (*TL* 224) casts a shadow over the reconciliation by reminding us that the ordering principle of experience, now that Mrs Ramsay is gone, is still missing, that one still has to plod courageously on in the face of chaos:

"Though the house may have triumphed over death, its inhabitants, returning, have yet to work out their salvation" (Lee, *Novels* 126). The various shapes of existence—the lighthouse, the dome, the knots, the triangle—still need to be put together in a visionary whole, a task that Lily continues to wrestle with after her return to the house.

Right after Mr Ramsay, Cam and James reach the lighthouse, we see Lily on the lawn:

'He must have reached it,' said Lily Briscoe aloud, feeling suddenly completely tired out. For the lighthouse had become almost invisible, had melted away into a blue haze, the effort of looking at it and the effort of thinking of him landing there, which both seemed to be one and the same effort, had stretched her body and mind to the utmost. ...

'He has landed,' she said aloud. 'It is finished.' (225)

This passage is especially ambiguous in its message. At the same time that Lily feels that the Ramsays must have reached the lighthouse, the lighthouse also becomes "almost invisible," suggesting that the realisation of this goal may not be all it has promised. If we think of the lighthouse and its connection to Mrs Ramsay and her efforts to connect the disparate shapes of life through her own means, to illuminate

truth and order within the chaotic nature of experience, the real possibility of connection and harmony is ultimately undermined. Is the lighthouse less visible now because all it stood for has been reached, therefore making it redundant? Or has it become less visible because what it stands for is now revealed, at the point it is reached, to be illusory? Lily's exhaustion at imagining the journey and the reaching of that final destination is necessary as prelude to her making sense of things, but has the energy been expended fruitfully? When she announces, "It is finished," it can both be a declaration of a destination reached (the task is finished, that is, completed) and as a negation of the effort (the attempt is finished, that is, it is doomed).

The finishing of her painting is equally inconclusive:

There it was – her picture. Yes, with all its greens and blues, its lines running up and across, its attempt at something. It would be hung in the attics, she thought; it would be destroyed. But what did that matter? she asked herself, taking up her brush again. She looked at the steps; they were empty; she looked at her canvas; it was blurred. With a sudden intensity, *as if she saw it clear for a second*, she drew a line there, in the centre. It was done; it was finished. Yes, she thought, laying down her brush in extreme fatigue, I have had my vision. (225-6, emphasis added)

The "vision" that Lily Briscoe has at the end of the novel may be real but it is also problematic. First, it is described as "*my vision*", underscoring the relativity of the vision and its highly individualised existence that cannot aim to speak for humanity in general. Second, the vision is arrived at "[w]ith a sudden intensity, as if she saw it clear for a second" emphasising that the vision cannot be sustained beyond the moment. Additionally, the "as if" puts in doubt any real insight Lily might have comprehended.

Her act of seeing is only “as if”, not *is*. The very ontological certainty of the vision is compromised by the use of that qualification. Third, Lily’s artistic effort, though sufficing for the moment, is not something full-fledged because it is not clear what the attempt is towards for we see the “attempt at *something*”, not at one thing that can be easily translatable to others. These observations weaken the power of Lily’s vision and render the “extreme fatigue” she feels as something that may ultimately be futile. The “blurred” surface of her canvas only comes together as something definite in a brief moment: a brief moment, that I argue, is significant only because it wishes to be seen as so. The “vision” that is reached, like Septimus Smith’s conscious act of committing suicide, is done so consciously and deliberately. Lily’s reiterations of finality (“It is finished”; “It was done; it was finished”) are not recognitions of the finished product, of the final vision that sees into the heart of things, but a proclamation of an end to the effort, of putting a necessary but arbitrary stop to what is an endless task. It is finality by fiat: “I have had my vision.”¹⁹

The tension of opposites in the novel inspires and demands synthesis but one sees, at the end, that synthesis can be achieved only by a conscious effort. Woolf and her surrogate, Lily, may “perpetually make an attempt to formulate and express a true reality, ... [b]ut the mirror which allows manner to reflect matter, form to reflect content, does not frame an aesthetic paradise. Her continual, self-conscious struggle for an accurate rendering of life as she perceived it is a struggle for mastery over the intractable and the chaotic, both inside and outside the mind” (Lee, *Novels* 23). The result of this “struggle for mastery,” in *To the Lighthouse*, is not an unequivocal

¹⁹ See Robert Lumsden’s essay “Virginia Woolf’s ‘As If’ in *To the Lighthouse*: The Modernist Philosophy of Meaning in Absentia” in *The Silent Word: Textual Meaning and the Unwritten*. Ed. Ban Kah Choon, Robbie B. H. Goh, and Robert J. C. Young. Singapore: Singapore UP (1998) pp. 119-33

victory over the “intractable and chaotic”, but neither is it a total submission to the formlessness that threatens. It is an admission of the difficulty of the task and an acknowledgement that any end, any shape that professes to contain and subdue the chaos can only do so in a fragile moment of clarity. This instant of ‘clarity’ is a consciously reached one: it is a decision to make of the moment something final and solid, it is not an inherent attribute of the process. This may not give the moment as much credibility and stability as one might like but it becomes, in this novel, the only ground of permanence possible considering the circumstances. The form of the novel, and its structuring device, the lighthouse, “provides a narrative envelope for three principal struggles: Lily Briscoe to realise her painting; Mrs Ramsay with ‘life’ and its wavering intensity; and Mr Ramsay ‘getting beyond Q’” (P. Sheehan 142).

Whatever one reads into the narrative, it cannot be refuted that, through sheer effort of vision on the part of Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* brings these elements together in a work of art. She has had her vision.

‘Scraps, orts and fragments’:²⁰ *Between the Acts*

Virginia Woolf’s last novel, *Between the Acts*, was conceptualised as something that would be “random & tentative, something [she] can blow of a morning” (WD 290, 26 April 1938), a description which suggests a light, and potentially amusing work, reminding the reader of her other tongue-in-cheek novel, *Orlando*. However, as Hermione Lee observes, “[although the novel] has the air of a delicate social comedy, it is more disturbing and more inclusive than that description implies” (*Novels* 203). One way in which the novel is inclusive is in the interplay of national, literary, and personal histories (even prehistory) within the narrative. The

²⁰ BA 169

notion of the collective is emphasised, as this comment from her diary testifies: “but “I” rejected: “We” substituted” (WD 290, 26 April 1938). Another way in which this inclusiveness comes across is in the incorporation of familiar elements from Woolf’s previous novels: “In ... *Between the Acts*, Woolf writes as though she were always looking over her shoulder” (Whittier-Ferguson, 236), a point other critics reading the work have also noticed. For example, Lee highlights the novel’s similarities to *Orlando* in its depiction of a “pageant of English history,” to *Mrs Dalloway* in the way the narrative is mainly made up of the events of a single day, and also to *To the Lighthouse* in its portrait of “the relationship between a family group and an artist” (Novels 206).

As the last in line in a series of novels, this narrative has much to contribute to the topic of artistic expression this thesis has been trying to trace in Woolf’s aesthetics. First published in 1941, more than a decade after *To the Lighthouse*, it offers a chronological perspective of Woolf’s thoughts regarding the artist and articulation. Formally and thematically, the novel also interrogates the novels that have come before it, reconsidering and reshaping the ideas Woolf’s previous novels have put forth regarding the relationship between art and life.

The first hints of the development and shift in perspective regarding the artist and expression in the novel present themselves when we consider the phrase “random and tentative” in Woolf’s diary entry. For the novel is indeed random in the way scenes and people come together. The gathering of the village folk, rather than presenting a cohesive picture of rural life, offers a disjunctive rendering of society. The backdrop of war, domestic scenes of strife, the pageant, the broken, discordant conversations and communication, the natural landscape, and the human participants, exercise their competing interests in the narrative. And unlike the lighthouse in *To the*

Lighthouse, Pointz Hall does not exert a comparable structural influence over the narrative events.

Similarly, a quality of tentativeness manifests itself in the vision Woolf proffers the reader. This novel, in comparison to the rest of Woolf's oeuvre, hesitates to resolutely affirm the redeeming and life-giving properties of art. Characters who attempt to and are able to order or synthesise experience into meaningful wholes are glaringly absent from the text. In fact, the artist figures the reader of Woolf has come to know—Clarissa, Septimus, Mrs Ramsay, and Lily—are jettisoned in favour of parodic and tragic doppelgängers in this narrative. Miss La Trobe and Isa, for example, stand in as poor substitutes for Lily, even given the ambiguity of Lily's final vision. It is its use of parody, questions, as well as irony, that makes this last novel a relative of the farcical exercises in postmodernism, and John Banville's self-reflexive strategies, a line of argument that will be developed later in the penultimate chapter.

The latter quality of tentativeness is especially salient to this argument. *Mrs Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse* offer the reader insights into the creative process, showing one the development from aborted attempts at expression, and tentative insights into life, to temporarily sustained 'moments of being' that illuminate reality and harmonise it, albeit tenuously and ambiguously. As such, the artist's struggles with articulation seem to be going in a positive direction, a direction that could potentially lead to a final synthesis of art and life. But *Between the Acts* subverts this expectation. Using familiar elements from her previous novels, Woolf instead shows the crumbling façade of the hard-won but short-lived unity achieved in the previous novels. Unlike Lily's work of art, for example, the pageant is a failure and its meaning is lost to the audience. It is also subject to vagaries of the weather,

interrupted by nature, for example, a cow's mooing and a shower, and marred by actors forgetting their lines.

However, there is, presented within the novel, another conclusion to the problem of art and representation. Woolf's aesthetic has been described by Michael Rosenthal as one that embraces change: "The impulse behind every work is to find a new method for rendering her sense of experience: once a form has been fully worked out, Woolf moves on to a different attempt" (146). The different forms that are showcased in her oeuvre are testaments to her commitment to finding ways in which art can express reality, and are tied up with Woolf's compulsion to do better, to find a more appropriate, elastic form that can better render experience. They also underscore the temporary nature of these forms; that a certain form will have to do *for now*, just as Lily's purple triangle is able to represent Mrs Ramsay only in that moment of vision. If each new form was meant to try to adequately represent experience and the artist's (in this case, Woolf) vision of that experience, then the formal elements, for example, parody, repetition, and discordance, used in *Between the Acts* can be read as Woolf's recognition of the limits of art. But this does not signal a denial of art's possibilities; it is, instead, a convincing rendition of Woolf's experience at a point in time when England was on the brink of war. The very real threat to stability is translated into the text.

This threat to life is also a threat to expression. Just as the solidity and unity of society are in peril, so, too, is the ability of the artist to articulate under duress. The effort of transforming experience into art is akin to the holding together of a society, a nation, a personal psyche; it is the need to maintain, or at least offer, a sense of cohesion. In the novel, art's ability to represent experience is tried to its limits in the face of the isolation and fragmentation felt by characters, and the disintegration of

culture and society intimated by the talk of war, images of violence and the inaccessibility of history.

The first scene in the novel is situated in Pointz Hall and functions as a preview of what is to follow in the rest of the novel. The reader is introduced to the scene midway into the conversation and learns that the Olivers and their guests, the Haines, are discussing the cesspool and how “the site that [had been] chosen for [it] was ... on the Roman road” (*BA* 3). This road is then described, by Bart Oliver, as still bearing the scars “made by the Britons; by the Romans; by the Elizabethan manor house; and by the plough when they ploughed the hill to grow wheat in the Napoleonic wars” (*BA* 3-4). In these seemingly quotidian utterances, the reader already gets intimations of the pervading sense of decay, which will be further developed later. History, and continuity, as represented by the “Roman road” may have made its mark on the land, but the decision, in the present time of the novel’s events, to situate the cesspool on this very road mocks the idea of continuity history embodies. In order to build a cesspool there, the road would have to be destroyed. That it is a road, not any other type of infrastructure, that will be replaced by the cesspool, also metaphorically cuts off the present from its historical past. The laying waste and discontinuation of history, literally and metaphorically, suggested by this conversation, prefigures the inaccessibility of history later exhibited in Miss La Trobe’s pageant. More than just an external issue, the problem of history, of the relation between past and present, is being presented to the reader within the confines of a house, thus making the issue an internal one as well, one that also affects the psyches of the characters.

After Isa enters the room, Mr Haines, the gentleman farmer in whose “ravaged face [Isa] always felt mystery; and in his silence, passion” (*BA* 4), starts talking about

his mother and the copy of Byron she gave him, then quotes from two of his poems, the words of which

made two rings, perfect rings, that floated them, herself and Haines, like two swans down stream. But his snow-white breast was circled with a tangle of dirty duckweed; and she too, in her webbed feet was entangled, by her husband the stockbroker. ...

Mrs Haines was aware of the emotion circling them, excluding her. ... Allowing ten seconds to intervene, she rose; paused; and then, as if she had heard the last strain die out, offered Mrs Giles Oliver her hand. (5)

The appearance of art right after the topic of the cesspool creates a disjuncture in the mood of the scene. At first bleak, the lines from Byron seem to saturate the atmosphere with expectation and emotion. However, Isa's vision of connection with Haines is complicated by the images of the duckweed and the thought of her husband. Moreover, Mrs Haines standing up intrudes upon the "emotion circling" the two. This second event precipitated by art within the first scene stresses the tension between art, with its focus on unity, and life, of which the chief emotion, here, is entrapment, and by extension, isolation and fragmentation. This tension, in addition to other tensions within the novel—for example, the tension between Bart (reason) and his sister, Lucy Swithin (religion; mysticism); the tension between private and public selves; and the tension between language and silence—is never resolved definitively. Either polarity is seen to triumph in different situations. In this one, life gets the upper hand for the moment.

Unlike the previous two Woolf novels this chapter looks at, *Between the Acts* is populated with a significantly higher number of conversations and speech. Snatches

of utterances run counter to characters' inner thoughts, the sound of music, or interjections by the narrator. Compare this with *To the Lighthouse*, for instance, and one can see how different this novel's construction is. In the earlier novel, spoken words are clearly demarcated from thoughts or interior monologues in the way they each have a distinct space and function within the novel. In this novel, the intermingling of spoken language, things that are unsaid, thought, music, and authorial comments results in a blurring of boundaries. The external and internal are caught up in the same dance. This is, of course, Woolf's formal display of her idea of the "we" she wanted to convey. It is, also, an intense awareness of the conflicting demands these competing interests make on the characters, as well as on art. Here, art (the novel, and the pageant within the novel) is mixed in with the ordinary, subsisting on the same level, for example, as the cesspool, or snide comments like "[t]he village idiot" uttered by Mrs Elmhurst during the play (79). Inklings of possible moments of insight are also undermined within the novel:

[Bartholomew] ... sauntered on, smoothing out the crumpled paper ... as he tried to find his line in the column ... But the breeze blew the great sheet out; and over the edge he surveyed the landscape—flowing fields, heath and woods. Framed, they became a picture. ... Then the breeze fell.

‘M. Daladier’, he read finding his place in the column, ‘has been successful in pegging down the franc ...’ (12)

The survey of landscape here is not even enough to enable a sustained moment of insight. The only thing Bartholomew, described as a man who “would carry the torch of reason till it went out in the darkness of the cave” (185), thinks of as he gazes at nature is the placement of his easel, had he been a painter, at that spot, because “the

country, barred by trees, looked like a picture” (12). Practical concerns dominate his thoughts even in that moment, and he returns to the world of politics and finance at a snap of a finger.

Art jostles alongside other commonplace interests, unable to extricate itself to take an impersonal stand. This image of art is reflected in Miss La Trobe’s practice and problems in expression. Like a “great stone” splashing into the “lily pool” (59), she is too heavy, too much laden with reality, to take an impersonal position from where she can exert her artistic gaze. However, as, Penny Farfan observes, “the marginal position of the lesbian artist La Trobe suggests that she was associated in Woolf’s mind with the Outsiders of *Three Guineas* and that her pageant is to be regarded as part of an Outsider-like project to undermine patriarchy and put an end to war” (208). Though this argument is not directly concerned with how the text undermines or subverts patriarchy, or the social effects of war, Farfan’s comment can add to our understanding of the potentialities embodied within the figure of La Trobe.

La Trobe is frustrated at her art’s failure to communicate (“Illusion had failed. ‘This is death,’ she murmured, ‘death,’” 126), and angry that she had buckled under the weight of reality (“she had agreed to cut the play here; a slave to her audience,” 85); but is redeemed when she realises that “Reality [is] too strong” when she attempts to “douche” her audience in “present-time reality” (161). This realisation sets the stage (literally and metaphorically) for that last segment of the play, when the “scraps, orts and fragments” that are displayed and worked into the fabric of the pageant, manage to bring that too-present reality under control for a moment so that “[l]ike quicksilver sliding, filings magnetized, the distracted united” (164, 169). This last image of the play synthesizes reality and art and puts forward, once again, the conviction that art can and should order reality: “[t]he workings of the creative

imagination shaping different visions of order ... is the single great theme which appears in Woolf's fiction" (Rosenthal, 147).

The imperatives of shape and order in this novel, as in the previous two novels examined, materialise through a difficult process of struggle. It is an undertaking that acknowledges "the horrid labour it needs to make an orderly and expressed work of art; where one thing follows another and all are swept into a whole" ("Sketch," *MB* 87). The "horrid labour" Woolf speaks of in "A Sketch of the Past"—a text that was written concurrently with *Between the Acts*—is translated into *Between the Acts* through tension arising from the two pictures hanging in the Olivers' dining room:

Two pictures hung opposite the window. In life they had never met, the long lady and the man holding his horse by the rein. The lady was a picture, bought by Oliver because he liked [it]; the man was an ancestor. He had a name. He held the rein in his hand. ...

He was a talk producer, that ancestor. But the lady was a picture. In her yellow robe, leaning, with a pillar to support her, a silver arrow in her hand, and a feather in her hair, she led the eye up, down, from the curve to the straight, through glades of greenery and shades of silver, dun and rose into silence. The room was empty.

Empty, empty, empty; silent, silent, silent. The room was a shell, singing of what was before time was; a vase stood in the heart of the house, alabaster, smooth, cold, holding the still, distilled essence of emptiness, silence. (33-4)

The strain between reality and art, between dispersal and unity, is symbolised by the ancestor, a "talk producer," a man of action, a man of the world, who is juxtaposed with the lady who, with a "silver arrow" and feather," leads us into silence. These two

figures are also aligned with the art of realism and Woolf's aesthetic respectively, and, also, reflective of the antagonism between the male and female principles seen in *To the Lighthouse*. Though they have "never met" in life, the two are brought together in art, through the novel. They are both a source of strain and inspiration that fuel the artist's efforts at expression through the recognition of division and the wish to transcend this division through the medium of art.

Metaphorically representing the artist's consciousness is the empty and silent dining room. This space, whose symbol is the vase that is cold (impersonal), acts like a filter, distilling the "essence of emptiness and silence." The emptiness and silence in the room is a direct comment on the need for impersonality in an artist, the quality that is needed to amalgamate discrete and "dispersed" slices of reality into a harmonious whole in a work of art. The refrain "Dispersed are we" (176), repeated by the gramophone during the play, is a reminder of the chaos that is constantly threatening to engulf the world we see in the text and, correspondingly, also, the world of art, and the efforts of the artist to unite through articulation. The vase, "a form which encloses nothing and which has 'no content'," also symbolises the "emptiness at the heart of life which must be given shape and form" (McLaurin 54). The arrangement of objects within the room, and the multi-layered meanings and symbolism attached to the objects, form a tableau of the artist's journey and trials in her struggle for form and expression. The scene acts like a record of history that reveals Woolf's entire artistic journey up to this point in time.

But *Between the Acts* does not show a linear, progressive moment from the past to the present. The novel shows stasis rather than movement, examples of which are many: quotes from literary ancestors recycle themselves in present situations; clichés are used to mediate reality; the conversations the Olivers have are repetitive:

“... for seven summers now, Isa had heard the same words” (20); the characters are described as being “neither one thing nor the other ... They were suspended, without being, in limbo” (159). But these moments of stasis are not without value. They are, Richard Lyon observes, “another version of Woolf’s exploration of the significant moment” (151). In this novel, these moments are where the collective and the individual meet, even if the meeting only highlights the common loss of stability. Although repetition seems to imbue the events and scenes in the text with a paralysing quality, meaningful repetition, that is, one that enhances the repetition (to ‘make it new!’), and includes variation, can suggest how the interaction between past and present, and other binaries within the novel, might potentially lead to significance. For example, the monotony of the Olivers’ conversations year in and year out are broken this time, “beneath the chime,” with the rupture of violence playing in Isa’s head: ““The girl screamed and hit him about the face with a hammer”” (20).

These static moments, in their ‘timelessness’, may contain beauty because of their ability to stand outside time, incorporating, as they do, disparate and disjointed elements from the past, present and future in one moment. The quotidian occurrences in the novel are hence given meaning within a wider nexus of meanings that arise from the interplay of different elements within that moment: “[t]he formal experiment Woolf attempted in the novel was to see how much diversity—how great a centrifugal pull—she could hold around a single centre, now not a character, ... but a place and time” (Lyons 150). The novel’s focus rests primarily on the event or scene rather than on a central character. Take, for instance, Isa writing poetry “in the book bound like an account book” in her bedroom (14). On the one hand, the reader can interpret this negatively: art, and beauty, has been subsumed and has buckled under the weight of reality. On the other hand, the reader can also construe it as being representative of

the necessary interaction between art and reality. Reality, the outer covering of the account book, is only what one sees on the surface. Art, the content inside the book, is the organising principle that gives reality its form. Moreover, if one were to open the book, thinking it would show the accounts of the household, one's expectations would not be met. The ordering of reality by art is not through imitation but through a filtering and selection process: the artistic consciousness organises reality in order for it to become meaningful. But one cannot deny the state of art that is suggested here. Isa's poetry is rudimentary and simple; it is also hidden, unexpressed. This is a strong indication of Woolf's hesitance about and loss of confidence in art in a time where dissolution seemed imminent. With the chaos of life heightened, art is under even more pressure and the artist's struggle rendered more difficult and intense, hence the description of Isa's attempts at expression as "abortive" (14). The significance is, here, contained in the event, which intermingles the private and public spheres: Isa, in the bedroom, a room that is both private (place of rest) and public (part of the house), writing poetry (private) in book that has the appearance of an account book (public).

The onerous task of the artist is also illustrated when Isa, nursing a toothache, browses the books in the Olivers' library:

'The mirror of the soul' books were. *The Faerie Queene* and Kinglake's *Crimea*; Keats and the *Kreutzer Sonata*. There they were, reflecting. What? What remedy was there for her at her age—the age of the century, thirty-nine—in books? ... Yet as a person with a raging tooth runs her eye in a chemist shop over green bottles with gilt scrolls on them lest one of them may contain a cure, she considered: Keats and Shelley; Yeats and Donne. Or perhaps not a poem; a life. ... Or

perhaps not a person's life; a county's. ... Or, not a life at all, but
science ... (18)

This scene acts as a gateway, leading the reader outwards towards the world. Starting from the self ("mirror of the soul"), the narrator moves on to expressions of the self in poetry, biography (a mix of the private and public), then the society one moves in, and finally to universal theories of the world, "science." The comment on the disconnection between art and life is made when the narrator pronounces that "[n]one of [the books] stopped [Isa's] toothache" (*BA* 18). The disruption of continuity from the past to the present presents itself as a lack of healing: the past (books) cannot soothe Isa's present pain (the toothache). This lack of healing, of harmonisation, is made clear when Isa, immediately after, picks up the newspaper ("For her generation the newspaper was a book," 18), reads of the rape of a girl. At first, just picking out discrete phrases like "A horse with a green tail," or "The guard at Whitehall," Isa thinks of the "fantastic" and the "romantic," but only after "building word upon word" does she fully absorb the violent incident being reported (18). Bringing separate things together—here words—only shows up the violence and destruction underlying life. This undercurrent of violence runs throughout the novel: as Isa envisions the rape, Lucy enters the room carrying a hammer; Giles, perpetually angry and discontented, stamps on the snake and toad locked in "a monstrous inversion" (89); and aeroplanes, symbols of war, fly overhead the party gathered for the pageant.

For Woolf, "building word upon word" is precisely what she does as an artist. Her novels rely on language to convey reality through meaningful form. As such, the library scene becomes an overt observation on the state of art and language. The ambiguities and unresolved tensions in this novel reflect the overwhelming ambiguity and chaos in experience. The threat of dissolution to culture, and its companion art, is

made more prominent with the impending menace of war. The violence coursing through the events in the text is a violence in and to life and art. Little wonder, then, that this work of art reflects rather than unites these discontinuities in the narrative. The violence in external events is translated into the novel in many ways, especially in the way La Trobe presents history on stage.

The (re)presentation of history in the pageant, as mentioned earlier, is plagued by interruptions and a restless audience. The maintenance of illusion is also destroyed by the present-day identities of the villagers who act parts from history. The perception of the pageant, by the audience, is thus disjointed and disharmonious. Comments about the play are mixed in with talk about their lives in the present: “‘Where did we leave off? ... The Elizabethans ... Perhaps she’ll reach the present, if she skips ... D’you think people change? Their clothes, of course ... But I meant ourselves ... Clearing out a cupboard, I found my father’s old top hat ... But ourselves—do we change?’” (108). The violence done to the play here not only rests on La Trobe’s parody of history, it also lies in the way the performance gets cut up by the audience. The language used to describe La Trobe and the audience during these moments of interruption or disjointedness are also violent: La Trobe, distressed at her lack of control, and at the audience’s restlessness “gnashed her teeth [and] crushed her manuscript” (BA 109); the audience was, at “[e]very moment” “slipp[ing] the noose [and splitting] up into scraps and fragments” (110). The gnashing, crushing, and the image of the noose ally the characters in the novel with the spirit of violence and chaos in the narrative.

In the absence of more regenerative language, Woolf turns to music, just as she turned to painting in *To the Lighthouse*, to hold the narrative together. Though the music played during the pageant is often discontinuous and frequently interrupted,

music acts as the regulating and ordering principle in this novel. So music brings the audience together: “The audience was assembling. The music was summoning them” (107). Or, in another example, “the sound of someone practising scales” moves from just discrete letters—“A.B.C. A.B.C. A.B.C.”—to the coming together of these letters to form something meaningful: “the separate letters formed one word ‘Dog’” that is part of a “simple tune.” This tune then “languished and lengthened, and became a waltz.” The waltz not only affects the human participants who are listening to it, but effects a moment’s seeming unity: “the trees tossing and the birds swirling seemed called out of their private lives, out of their separate avocations, and made to take part” (105). Whether it was La Trobe or someone else practising the scales makes no difference. The playing of music transforms the scene at the moment, holding the separate elements in the narrative together in one temporary moment of unity.

It is when the “ears are deaf and the heart is dry” that “disparity” reigns (107). For “[m]usic wakes us. Music makes us see the hidden, join the broken” (108). The latter quote echoes Woolf’s “A Sketch of the Past” in which she discusses her aesthetics. Music is linked, within the narrative of *Between the Acts*, and in Woolf’s discussion, with the violence that comes from experiencing a shock. The shock of the disjointed reality of the present that refuses to fit itself neatly into a form, or which refuses explanation at the moment it is experienced, thus presents an outright challenge to an artist, a challenge that Woolf finds welcoming, and which, in fact, provides sustenance and impetus:

And so I go on to suppose that the shock-receiving capacity is what makes me a writer. I hazard the explanation that a shock is at once in my case followed by the desire to explain it. ... *it is or will become a revelation of some order; it is a token of some real thing behind*

appearances; and I make it real by putting it into words. It is only by putting it into words that I make it whole ... Perhaps this is the strongest pleasure known to me. It is the rapture I get when in writing I seem to be discovering what belongs to what; making a scene come right; making a character come together. From this I reach what I might call a philosophy; at any rate it is a constant idea of mine; that behind the cotton wool is hidden a pattern; that we – I mean all human beings – are connected with this; that the whole is a work of art; that we are parts of the work of art. ... we are the words; we are the music; we are the thing itself. And I see this when I have a shock. (“Sketch,” MB 85, emphasis added)

The conviction that behind the chaos of reality lies some form of order that only needs artistic expression to bring it into the fore is compelling. The “real” made tangible by “putting it into words” is precisely what Woolf has been striving to accomplish throughout her oeuvre; the basis of artistic endeavour is the same: find the pattern “behind the cotton wool” of experience through art because “the whole is a work of art” and “we are parts of the work of art.” People (“we”) become akin to words. We act, we are active agents who order reality, like Mrs Dalloway, Mrs Ramsay, Lily, La Trobe. But not only are we words, “we are [also] the music, and consequently, “the thing itself.” This humanist conception of the art and reality makes the relationship a necessary one. Art is indispensable to life as long as it is processed and filtered through consciousness. Thus La Trobe’s compulsion to create in spite of failure is natural. The pageant, reflecting the “scraps, orts and fragments” of life, reflects truly (169). And the last words the reader sees, and the audience hears, are the words

churned out by the gramophone, “*Unity—Dispersity. ... Un ... dis ...*” sings the song Woolf has been playing throughout her fiction (181).

In a world where words may not be enough, “for no words grow there” (187), music and silence takes its place to nudge the artist forward: “silence made its contribution to talk” (45). The tired clichés and recycled words from the literary past may no longer be adequate to help explain reality but the game is not yet up. George Steiner posits that,

music is the deeper, more numinous code, that language, when truly apprehended, aspires to the condition of music and is brought, by the genius of the poet, to the threshold of that condition. By a gradual loosening or transcendence of its own forms, the poem strives to escape from the linear, denotative, logically determined bonds of linguistic syntax into ... simultaneities, immediacies, and free play of musical form (43)

In this novel, Woolf masterfully constructs a form that not only uses music, but also arranges itself like music. The “simultaneities” and “immediacies” that are inherent in music are brought to life in the text in the way Woolf contains different levels of experience and different points of reference in one scene. Her ‘significant moments’ go against linear time and make language contain more than just denotative, logical meaning. The performative element embodied in this text, with the incorporation of the pageant, makes the narrative a “site of ideologically contested historical retrieval, consolidation, and projection which [seeks] to explain the present and uncover the future in the patterns of the past” (Harker 437). This simultaneous looking back and forward also undermines a linear perspective of experience, and locates meaning, in

the present, in life, in a network of connections, enlarging the solipsistic consciousness of an individual.

Lucy's preoccupation with prehistory is thus important, even if she is nicknamed Batty. Lucy, wanting to read the "*Outline of History*," has "lost her place," an indication of the primeval, timeless quality of the interactions in the text (196). When she eventually finds her place, she reads out a sentence: "'Prehistoric man,' she read, 'half-human, half-ape, roused himself from his semi-crouching position and raised great stones.'" (97). Lucy's reading is more than a distraction in the novel; it is a reminder that what one attempts now, has been attempted before, and will be attempted again. The raising of "great stones" alludes to the artist and her efforts at articulation (La Trobe is also compared to a "great stone" earlier in the novel). The individual consciousness, with its words blown away by the wind, is now not adequate for the task and needs to work to find a way of expressing experience through a consciousness of community and the world. The melodies present during the pageant, ranging from nursery rhymes, which are songs for children, to the sounds of nature like the cows mooing, transcend the narrow, petty world enclosed in the narrative to sound the music of life. La Trobe, when she hears the "first words" of her next play (191), is not alone but in a bar. In this last novel by Woolf, "the artist is no longer a daughter but a woman of the world. ... [T]he outsider artist La Trobe ... thinks not back through her mothers but forward with her community toward the future" (Froula 297).

This idea of history within the individual, and the sense of recurrence, is illustrated in the very last scene in the novel, where the narrative prepares the reader for a confrontation between Giles and Isa. When "[t]he old people had gone up to bed" and Giles and Isa are "[l]eft alone for the first time that day," they do not speak

but remain silent. In describing what is about to happen, a primeval, animalistic image is evoked, making them both animal and human, like prehistoric man: “But first they must fight, as the dog fox fights with the vixen, in the heart of darkness, in the fields of night.” The house is also described as having “lost its shelter” and the night becomes “the night that dwellers in caves had watched from some high place among rocks.” The language lifts the scene and its participants from the narrow present to an unknown location that is timeless, hence universal. Then amidst all the expectation, “the curtain rose. They spoke” (*BA* 197). Another play has begun. The process of articulation goes on. Perhaps “we haven’t the words” (50), but we have the vision, and a “vision imparted [is] relief from agony,” even if only for “one moment” (88). The novel, like the lady in the painting, leads us “down green glades into the heart of silence” (45). So we wait ...

Conclusion

The three novels examined in this chapter trace Virginia Woolf’s journey of artistic expression. As self-portraits, they chronicle the struggles and fatigue faced by Woolf. Language, the slippery medium with which the novelist constructs her art, may not be like music and the visual arts, which can allow an immediate, sensual appreciation of the whole, but it can, by aspiring to the condition of poetry, yet work to convey experience. Woolf’s difficult poetry captures the “horrid labour” that every artist undergoes in order to transform the material of everyday life into art. Her ‘raids’ into the lands of painting and music are rewarded with a more nuanced portrayal of life. In her work, the individual consciousness works hard and tirelessly to find a form that is able to best translate reality into art.

What the reader finds in *Mrs Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse* is the conscious, cognitive effort made to delineate an end. An end does not naturally assert itself to give resolution and significance to moments of being. An artist has to ‘call it’, to recognise the limits of their art. In *Between the Acts*, the increasing difficulty of expression forces an acknowledgement of the very paltry resources the artist possesses. Woolf’s last novel, in an effort to work its way out of this bind, anchors the individual consciousness to a consciousness of a social and literary past. The present moment thus gets woven into a larger, more-encompassing narrative that is able to link the disintegration of life into a larger picture. Though this may appear bleak, giving an appearance that chaos is a natural condition of reality that cannot be avoided, the continuity of history also suggests hope for the continuation of the artistic endeavour that seeks to order this chaos. But language and form, for Woolf, gets stretched to its very limits in this last novel. The discord and anarchy that Woolf tries to contain in the narrative are almost spilling out. The recourse to silence is thus a necessary one. In silence lies potentiality—a potentiality that does not betray itself by being expressed in words.

Woolf’s accounts of the artist and the process of expression are not new but her persistence at trying new forms and methods offer new insights to this problem. As a predecessor to postmodernism and contemporary art, her developments in form and difficulties with articulation are valuable for how they relate to contemporary writing. The struggles of the artist to shape reality and extract meaning remain problems that continue to have relevance in contemporary fiction. This is especially so in *Between the Acts* where many themes and elements act as forerunners to the problems encountered in the contemporary text, and give the attentive reader a preview of what is to come.

In the next chapter, the focus will centre on John Banville, a contemporary artist whose fictions demonstrate similar problems with articulation but differ in terms of the methods used to counter these problems, particularly in the way the role of the imagination in relation to reality is redefined. The struggling artists in Woolf's fiction are still struggling in Banville's fictional worlds, but the challenge is now even more arduous. Woolf's artist-figures deal with the relationship between art and life; Banville's artist-figures deal with the tripartite relationship of art, life and a literary past that instead of anchoring one to tradition, and offering stability, has become increasingly opaque, obscuring the artist's apprehension of the 'real'. Silence becomes an even stronger presence. The commitment to art and its possibilities remain constant, but the artist is about to embark on a different journey.

Chapter Two

John Banville: Speaking the Language of This Wild Country

It was one of those dreams that seem to take the entire night to be dreamt. All of him was involved in it, his unconscious, his subconscious, his memory, his imagination; even his physical self seemed thrown into the effort. ... And indeed, all of his life, all of the essentials of his life, were somehow there, in the dream ... Some great truth has been revealed to him, in a code he knows he will not be able to crack. But cracking the code is not important, is not necessary; in fact, as in a work of art, the code itself is the meaning.

The dream is infecting his waking world. Nothing will ever be quite the same again.

John Banville, "Fiction and the Dream" (365, 366)

John Banville, like Virginia Woolf, is a writer who is sensitive to the problems surrounding representation in art. In interview and essays, he frequently examines the nature of art and the relationship between art and life. The extract above from "Fiction and the Dream" bears a striking resemblance to Virginia Woolf's "Gas," which was discussed in the previous chapter, and offers us a point of departure with which to examine Banville's aesthetics in relation to Woolf's. Like Woolf's "Gas," Banville's "Fiction and the Dream" discusses the art of fiction using the metaphor of an 'otherworldly' experience. Also like Woolf, Banville emphasises how the persona's waking life is affected by the dream; the relationship between this other experience and the real world is made clear. In addition, both essays discuss apprehending something significant, which in both accounts are signalled by the word "truth."

More important, though, are the differences. In terms of language-use, most obvious is the use of different pronouns: Woolf uses the collective pronoun "we," while Banville uses the personal pronoun "him." The framing of the experience also differs. The application of gas by someone else is the catalyst that jumpstarts the

process for Woolf. Like Proust's madeleines, an external event or object triggers 'involuntary memory', and initiates a process that enables certain insights. For Banville, however, the catalyst is the artist himself—the artistic imagination propels and enables the seeking. Another difference is the effort expended in the experience: whereas Woolf's participants are mostly passive, "drawn on in the wake of some fast flying always disappearing object" (*CDB* 200), Banville's sole participant is actively and thoroughly "involved," and the "effort" of dreaming is highlighted. Another contrast is the words used in place of "truth." Woolf uses words like "object" and "thing" as synonyms of truth in her essay whereas Banville uses the word "code" to describe the truth he discusses, a difference which is representative of the differences between modernism and postmodernism which will be discussed later in the chapter.

The similarities and differences listed in the paragraphs above are salient to this discussion of the artist and his/her difficulties with expression because they allow a mapping of the problems that present themselves to the artist at different points of time. For Woolf, as illustrated in "Gas," truth is seen as something tangible, as a thing that can be grasped. As such, even though the coordinates of meaning have shifted, it is possible to 'refashion' the truth. The modernists accomplished this through the removal of what they saw as an inauthentic truth and order, and the institution of a new and, according to them, more authentic truth within their texts. Moreover, truth, in Woolf's account, need not be deciphered. "Gas" implies that once truth is caught, it illuminates. This illumination can be universal (hence the use of the collective pronoun) and the artist's journey is undertaken for the 'benefit' of all. For Banville and the contemporary artist, the search for truth, for order, is still necessary; however, truth is now envisioned as a code, which must be translated into art. But the

decipherment of truth is not important for Banville's artist. The artist is not meant to decipher but to *present* the code in art because "the code itself is the meaning."

Truth is contained, for Banville, in the *process* of articulation rather than in the explication of truth (product) received through expression because the possibility of explaining and reaching 'truth' is almost non-existent in Banville's fictional worlds. Moreover, the code and the representation of it in art is essentially a personal affair. The contemporary artist does not speak for the masses, nor is he able to. The individual consciousness is recognised as solipsistic and limited; it cannot function as the collective imagination. *But* the imagination, though solipsistic, can yet share the dream it dreams so that the reader is able, "not just to read about it, but actually to experience it; to have the dream, to write the novel," and through that experience "hear the dream voices telling you [the reader] your own most secret secrets" ("Fiction" 367). This is the agency embodied in the artist, and which he feels he must fulfil.

Ultimately, the points of the compass remain unchanged. Both Woolf and Banville still believe in the connection between art and life, and art's commitment to pursuing truth in its effort to endow reality with order and significance. But the different limitations they recognise and face are what makes their art different, and necessitate their own unique artistic methods. They traverse the same landscape, only in different ways. Both Woolf and Banville, caught in a situation where the 'tools' of the past are no longer fully adequate, find themselves becoming explorers, finding new ways of expressing reality.

If we think of Woolf as an archaeologist, unearthing insights into life, then Banville is the nomad, chancing upon moments of harmony in the barrenness of his travels. Freedom is sweet, but it has a price: the contemporary artist, freed from the

clutches of what Jean-Francois Lyotard, in *The Postmodern Condition*, calls “grand narratives,” has the liberty to do anything, yet finds himself adrift in a world without moorings. As Banville states, “we [artists] work in the dark, we do what we can, the rest is the madness of art” (“Fiction” 368). It is to this “madness of art” that we turn to in this chapter as we delve into the medium of “fabulous nonsense” through which Banville believes the novel speaks its truth (370).

This chapter will focus on Banville’s process of writing since the presentation of the code, as stated in “Fiction and the Dream” is what is uppermost for the artist. The discussion will start by outlining the main themes and issues that recur in Banville’s fiction. I will initially consider Banville’s artistic method in relation to the literary tradition, with emphasis on modernism and postmodernism, to ascertain and formulate a working hypothesis of the contemporary artist’s, and art’s, relationship with, and relation to, life, as well as the role the imagination plays in this relationship. Though often categorised as a postmodernist, Banville actually critiques postmodernism and its techniques and devices at the same time that he makes use of them in his texts.

It is in his identification of the limits of modernist and postmodernist narratives that Banville creates a unique artistic method to cope with the strange new world he writes about. It is in this way that Banville, like Woolf, is also ‘rewriting’ the tradition he inherits. As such, the novels chosen for discussion have been selected for their exemplification of Banville’s engagement with the problem of articulation and the insights they offer on the development of his artistic method, as well as the relationship between the creative imagination and experience. The selected novels are: *Birchwood*, the Art Trilogy, which is made up of *The Book of Evidence*, *Ghosts* and *Athena*, and *The Sea*. After examining the novels, the last section will then

summarise the points put across in the chapter before attempting to trace, briefly, the development of the novel from Woolf to Banville.

This Strange World

The difficulty surrounding the artist's desire to articulate life through art, to use it as "a way of mediating the world" (Friberg 200), is a pervasive one for Banville.

Discussing reading in an interview, Banville says,

I think it is important that people should continue to read to deal with this, this strange world, this strange... you see how I'm becoming inarticulate because I don't know really... I don't know why I do it [writing] for instance. I mean it's... it's... I certainly don't do it for the money.... umm... but it's an obsession and I have to do it.²¹

It is interesting that a writer should stammer and falter, should become "inarticulate" when trying to describe the world but that is precisely what John Banville does.

Banville's desire to represent, talk about and write about the world is depicted, in his own words, as an "obsession" and this "obsession" is closely related to the sense of "bafflement" he talks about in another interview with Derek Hand. In this interview with Hand, Banville speaks repeatedly of the strangeness of reality and of how "[he feels] always strange in the face of the world," and goes on to elaborate:

So the world is puzzling – I keep looking in the thesaurus for other words for 'puzzled'. All the narrators of my books talk about how baffled they are. Puzzlement, bafflement, this is my strongest sensation, my strongest artistic sensation. (Friberg 206)

²¹ Transcribed from "John Banville" [Video] (2008) Retrieved May 20, 2011, *YouTube*.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u2pOCJsUv-Q&list=PLF658FD26E40CA981>

This “artistic sensation” of “[p]uzzlement” and “bafflement” that he feels flows into his writing so that his protagonists, too, are baffled characters in a world that seems to them surreal. The world, or reality, because relatively unknowable or impenetrable, becomes strange and unreal to the protagonists who are trying to make sense of their situation: Freddie Montgomery in *The Book of Evidence* and Gabriel Swan in *Mefisto*, for example, although very different personalities, are both outcasts in their world metaphorically and literally. The use of reason and the intellect does not guarantee any insight that will make them more *of* this world or will make them feel more at home. However, like Banville, the artist, these protagonists also persist in, and are obsessed with telling their stories; and therein lies the problem: the strangeness of the world and the limitations of language impede the translation of the artist’s vision of reality.

The apprehension of a sense of strangeness and the embodiment of inadequacy in Banville’s protagonists pervade all the narratives. The individual artistic imagination is seen as both necessary and limiting, enabling but also obscuring insights. For example, Gabriel Godkin, in *Birchwood*, starts his narrative by inverting Rene Descartes’ dictum, changing it to: “I am, therefore I think” (3). Thought and perception is not given primacy in Gabriel’s revised version of this maxim, primarily because the conscious being’s authenticity is questioned. The being exists (“I am”), but this existence is called into question because of the inability to process and arrange experience into a meaningful whole, that is, “Being is privileged above conscious Being” (Hand 14).

Similarly, Max Morden starts his narrative in *The Sea* with the sentence, “They departed, the gods, on the day of the strange tide.” The beginning is an ending, a departure. The departed gods, an allusion to the exiting of a larger, external locus of

stability, only leaves relics like “the rusted hulk of the freighter that had run aground,” and impedes action: “I would not swim again, after that day” (3). The overwhelming sense of a truncated and aimless life that one does not fully own or believe in engulfs the protagonists, prompting them to find answers and give meaning to their present lives or situations. The imagination leads them on this search and is the faculty that empowers their efforts, but it also repeatedly confronts the protagonists with its all-too-human shortcomings.

The difficulty surrounding articulation for the contemporary artist can be further elucidated by considering John Banville’s *The Newton Letter*. The novel is written in the epistolary form and is a nameless historian’s letter to Clio, explaining to her, and himself, the reason for not continuing with his book on Isaac Newton. The narrator starts,

Words fail me, Clio. How did you track me down, did I leave bloodstains in the snow? I won’t try to apologise. Instead, I want simply to explain, so that we both might understand. Simply! I like that. No I’m not sick, I have not had a breakdown. I am, you might say, I might say, in retirement from life. Temporarily.

I have abandoned my book. ... How can I make you understand that such a project is now for me impossible, when I don’t really understand it myself? Shall I say, I’ve lost my faith in the primacy of text? Real people keep getting in the way now. Objects, landscapes even. Everything ramifies. I think for example of the first time I went down to Ferns. ... Out on Killiney bay a white sail was tilted at an angle to the world, a white cloud was slowly cruising the horizon. What has all this got to do with anything? Yet such remembered scraps

seem to me abounding in significance. They are at once commonplace and unique, like clues at the scene of a crime.

... I'm confused. I feel ridiculous and melodramatic, and comically exposed. I have shinned up to this high perch and can't see how to get down ... (3-4)

This extract has been quoted at length because it introduces the main issues that repeatedly surface throughout Banville's fiction. The artist, here a historian, is set up as a chronicler of lives, of the past. But this historian is unable to continue because "words fail." The disjuncture in reader's expectations, introduced by the phrase "words fail me" is all the more pronounced because it begins the narrative. The reader expects a story but is greeted, from the start, with an admission of a lack. It captures the predicament of the artist succinctly as this utterance conveys a struggle at the outset. Wanting to write, but unable to continue, the artist is caught in an impossible situation. The prism of language does not reflect, accurately, but distorts. The narrator's admission of inadequacy, and the problem language poses as a medium, is similarly echoed by Banville's other narrators who confess their inability to use language to convey experience.

But the need for articulation still persists and Banville's narrators continue to churn forth their 'books of evidence' for themselves and the reader. The strength of this need for articulation can be seen when the narrator utters a statement of action immediately following his declaration of failure: "I want ... to explain." The opposition between the need and want to create, and the difficulty of creation is an important facet of the struggle the contemporary artist faces. Banville's protagonists often find themselves in situations where they need to explain but find it difficult to do so. They want to make sense of things but cannot organise experience into a

coherence they can accept or understand. When the narrator says the word “Simply!” it acts as an injunction for what he wants to do but also contains ironic undertones because nothing is simple in Banville’s fictional worlds. The artist, far from being sure of himself, is “confused” and “ridiculous,” hardly a figure of authority for the reader. Wanting to articulate and represent things, events, or people, simply and truly is the aim, but Banville’s protagonists get lost in their maze of words and images, drawing and spinning more complex mazes around themselves, and consequently, the reader.

In spite of all this, the narrator still believes in the significance of experience. Even as he thinks of his lack of “faith in the primacy of text,” that is, a lack of belief that fiction can adequately represent life, and even as he thinks of life as “getting in the way,” yet he is still convinced that “such remembered scraps” continue to be significant, like “clues at the scene of a crime.” Like Woolf, art, for Banville, must ultimately retain its relationship to life. Art, and the imagination, without its connection to life, only results in monstrosities, like Freddie Montgomery’s brutal murder of Josie Bell—the writing of life, in life, must continue.

As John Kenny has observed, though the “effort at order is regularly admitted to be uncertain and provisional by Banville and by his narrators or protagonists,” this “does not detract from the simultaneous insistence that the effort is necessary” (15). Banville’s protagonists continue to narrate their stories even though they incessantly test the limits of their art and frustrate themselves in the telling. The necessity of the telling stems, according to Derek Hand, from their “attempts to conceive themselves in the world, and to make the world their own” (66). The “chaotic nature of their acts of writing” may reflect their epistemological and ontological uncertainties but it is through the process of narration that they can bring about being (Hand 65). The hope

of these “homeless figures” (66) that roam the “white landscapes[s]” of their fictional universes, filling it in with “other creatures” is to fill reality with imagination, becoming their own “Prospero[s]” and ours (*BW* 112, 168).

As Banville says, in the last paragraph of “Fiction and the Dream,” “The writing of fiction is far more than the telling of stories. It is an ancient, an elemental urge, which springs, like the dream, from a desperate imperative to encode and preserve things that are buried in us deep beyond words” (372-3). Through the struggle and fatigue of articulation, the will to create still stands out. Like Gabriel Swan in *Mefisto*, who echoes the narrator in *The Newton Letter* almost verbatim, each new beginning yet holds the promise of deliverance:

I have begun to work again, tentatively. I have gone back to the very start, to the simplest things. Simple! I like that. It will be different this time, I think it will be different. (233)

Clearing the Path for Banville’s Artistic Method

The categorisation of John Banville into a neat literary category has been problematic, with critics mostly vacillating between the categories of modernism and postmodernism, and occasionally, romanticism. In this argument, the discussion will centre mainly on the tension between the modernist and postmodernist ‘versions’ of Banville. Critics who see Banville as a postmodernist writer provide as justification Banville’s use of characteristically postmodernist narrative strategies and devices like parody, self-reflexive narration, and metafictional comments. However, the use of such devices cannot be taken at face value. Banville uses postmodernist techniques, but he also recognises the limits of these techniques.

The struggle of the artist, as demonstrated by Banville's protagonists and narratives, centres on the difficulty of writing. Like Woolf, there is a dissatisfaction with models from the past. Realism, with its blind faith in the mimetic qualities of a text, no longer works in the face of contemporary doubt; modernist techniques, though acknowledging the difficulty of writing, cannot embody the experience the contemporary writer is trying to formulate. At the same time, postmodernist techniques that emphasise the unreality of reality seem to write off the importance of the relationship between art and life. Reality may be strange and unfamiliar, and ontological certainty may be questioned, but life is still 'out there' and demands to be made sense of.

Art, for Banville, still has a responsibility to life but its commitment now takes on a different dimension: the aim is not to illuminate but to *present* because life, for Banville, "means life in its *appearance*, that is, both in the way it looks, and in the way it makes itself manifest in the world" ("Personae" 345, emphases in original). The commitment is to the *surface* of life rather than, as in Woolf's case, the depths.²² The commitment to the ordinary still continues, but the relationship between art and life has been redefined.

This redefinition of art, and Banville's rewriting of the tradition he inherits, like Woolf, comprises the 'building blocks' of his artistic method. The seeming dependence on modernist and postmodernist devices like the use of quotations, parody, and irony, are really ways in which Banville, as Joseph McMinin says,

²² Though seemingly different, Banville's 'surfaces' and Woolf's 'depths' are really two sides of the same coin. Both writers are still wrestling with the problem of *representation* and the implied relationship, in that word, between art and experience. The different focuses reflect the different modes of thought characteristic of the periods in which they write, introduced in the discussion of "Gas" and "Fiction and the Dream."

“engages with, and then rewrites, some of the myths of romanticism and modernism, a form of creative dependency which is structured and inspired by an imaginative and elaborate use of allusion and quotation” (*Supreme* 1). As such, though Banville’s fiction bears resemblance to much of postmodernist fiction, it has, actually, “created its own very distinctive mythology about the postmodern consciousness and its relation to the history of ideas about the imaginative faculty” (2). This new and transformed “postmodern myth of the imagination’s struggle with an estranged world and a diminished perception,” moving beyond the romanticism of Coleridge and its reincarnation in modernists like Wallace Stevens and Rainer Maria Rilke, still retains, according to McMinn, “sympathetic faith with their idealism and faith” (4).

Although the use of the term ‘postmodern’ to describe Banville’s new mythology is questionable, positing, as it does, a rather narrow frame of reference with which to consider Banville’s work,²³ McMinn captures, succinctly, the spirit in which Banville writes. In Banville’s portrayal of the importance of the artistic imagination, he does, indeed, remind the reader of the romantics. Moreover, the presentation of the obstacles and limits the artistic imagination faces, in Banville’s fiction, combines both modernist (epistemological) and postmodernist (ontological) perspectives. To understand Banville’s fusing of both perspectives, one must appreciate the relationship between modernism and postmodernism and understand how they influence each other.

Brian McHale, in *Postmodernist Fiction*, describes postmodernist poetics, and explains the relationship between modernism and postmodernism, using the Russian

²³ Besides *Long Lankin* (1970) and *Nightspawn* (1971), which are more clearly postmodern texts, the rest of Banville’s oeuvre cannot be so simply categorised. In fact, the nostalgia for order present in his later texts, beginning with *Birchwood*, shows a turning away from postmodernist writing.

formalists' concept of the 'dominant'. Observing that critics like Ihab Hassan and David Lodge have previously put forward catalogues of features which postmodernist texts display, what McHale proposes, by utilising the concept of the dominant, is a system that underlies these different catalogues, and accounts for postmodernism within a historical context. Utilising what Roman Jakobson calls 'the dominant', which Jakobson describes as "the focusing component of a work of art [which] rules, determines, and transforms the remaining components" (105), McHale puts forward the concept of the *shifting dominant* to explain the differences and relationship between modernism and postmodernism.

McHale's concept of the shifting dominant shows itself to be a very useful way in which modernism and postmodernism can be conceptualised and understood in relation to each other, and their concomitant effects on the art of their time. The evolution of art forms and of the perspectives and viewpoints that avail themselves to artists change when the dominant changes, thus, an understanding of the prevailing dominants at different periods of time can contribute much to the way readers understand the art of the period as well:

In the evolution of poetic form it is not so much a question of the disappearance of certain elements and the emergence of others as it is the question of shifts in the mutual relationship among the diverse components of the system, in other words, a question of the shifting dominant. Within a given complex of poetic norms in general, or especially within the set of poetic norms valid for a given poetic genre, elements which were originally secondary become essential and primary. On the other hand, the elements which were originally the dominant ones become subsidiary and optional. (Jakobson 108)

The extract from Jakobson, which is quoted by McHale in *Postmodernism* as well, describes the “shifts in the mutual relationship among the diverse components of the system” in verse, stressing that the difference between dominants is not a complete change in the elements of which they are composed but a change in the emphasis between different elements or “components”. This concept, McHale recognises, can elucidate not only changes within a particular art form but can also be used to explain the relations between art works within a historicist framework that takes into account the “*consequentiality*” of all “literary phenomena” (5, emphasis in original). By looking at modernism and postmodernism within this framework, McHale effectively considers their relation to each other while allowing for a sizeable range of texts within each literary category to be accounted for, including the plethora of techniques and features that manifest themselves within each category.

McHale formulates the dominant of modernist fiction as epistemological and explains that modernist fiction foregrounds questions regarding the world and how we know it, as well as our place in it. Modernist strategies also question how knowledge is transmitted and how reliable this transmission is. In short, modernist fiction is concerned with the limits of knowledge. McHale identifies the dominant of postmodernist fiction, on the other hand, as ontological. Postmodernist fiction foregrounds questions regarding the *status* of the world and of the self in it, that is, the focus is on *being*, not *knowing*, a focus that Banville emphasises, for example, in the reversal of Descartes’s dictum. Postmodernist fiction probes “the ontology of the literary text itself or ... the ontology of the world which it projects” (10), that is, it is concerned with the nature of existence.

More important than understanding the difference in the two dominants, however, is the appreciation of the link between the two: “Intractable epistemological

uncertainty becomes at a certain point ontological plurality or instability: push epistemological questions far enough and they ‘tip over’ into ontological questions. By the same token, push ontological questions far enough and they tip over into epistemological questions—the sequence is not linear and unidirectional, but directional and reversible” (McHale 11). Epistemological anxiety leads to ontological doubt and vice versa. Modernist poetics and fiction, in this sense, not only precedes, but also, in a more subtle and complex understanding of the situation, necessitates postmodernist poetics and its resultant art forms, and vice versa.

McHale’s definitions are particularly useful because they acknowledge the importance of influence and *confluence* between modernism and postmodernism. The different dominants of modernism and postmodernism are expressed in the different strategies, devices or techniques that are used in art typical of that particular dominant. So devices like the interior monologue and juxtaposition in perspectives, or the use of new and experimental art forms are typical of modernist poetics and reflect artists’ desires that art be able to adequately portray and penetrate life to offer truths and insights that were felt to be increasingly out of reach. Whatever the struggle artists faced, the belief that truth could be apprehended and approached was still widely held; the problem or challenge lay in the means.

One of these methods was advanced by Marcel Proust in *À la recherche du temps perdu*. Proust explores how involuntary memory (*mémoire involontaire*) can lead the individual to an understanding of the essential nature of the past, and of things and life, through recollections that are evoked by cues encountered in daily life. Proust terms these episodes *madeleines*, and they are, in a sense, like entry points into a direct and unmediated perception of life, truth and knowledge. Rüdiger Imhof explains that for Proust, “the realisation of *temps perdu* becomes the incentive to a

search for the essential nature of the past as well as of time; and memory ... becomes the vehicle of finding it” (*John Banville* 58).

A different approach is T.S. Eliot’s move to anchor texts in tradition and myth in a bid to transcend the solipsism that was threatening to engulf the individual sensibility and consciousness. By using myth in art, a good example of which is *The Waste Land*, the artist supplies meaning by linking the individual consciousness to history and time. Stressing that “[n]o poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone” (25), Eliot, in “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” explains that “the poet must develop or procure the consciousness of the past” (28).

As a corollary to this, it is necessary that the artist performs “a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality” to something “more valuable,” which is tradition itself (28). Eliot rescues the individual consciousness from its nightmare of meaninglessness by securing it to a tradition of writers and a history of art and thought, which puts it firmly in a matrix of meaning of which it is an integral part. The poet is more than just himself; he is the possessor of the “consciousness of the past” which lives in him and which flows through him. The effacement of his “personality” in favour of this consciousness is an act that will fill his art with meaning precisely because it can transcend the narrow limits of the individual perspective and consciousness.

On the other hand, the ontological dominant in postmodernism manifests itself in the text through the use of self-reflexive, and metafictional narrative strategies that foreground the ‘constructedness’ of the text. An example of this is Italo Calvino’s *If on a Winter’s Night a Traveller*. The novel draws attention to the fact that it is a fictional construction, and problematizes the act of narration and reading, and, consequently, the status of the text, and world. For example, the reader is repeatedly

addressed with comments like, “You have now read about thirty pages and you’ve become caught up in the story” (25); or “You would like to know more about this Sultana; your eyes nervously scour the page ...” (123). The fictional characterisation of the reader, and comments on the reading process, confuses the ‘separateness’ of the fictional and ‘real’ worlds.

The reader, a physical entity that starts out being apart from the text, is radically written into the text, demanding of the reader a certain critical stance while the act of reading is performed. The reader thus becomes complicit to the act of narration enfolding before his eyes. The implication of the reader is really a refusal, on the narrator’s part, to allow the reader to sustain the ‘suspension of disbelief’ necessary for the illusion of reality in a narrative—the reader becomes a full-fledged part of the narrative, his act of reading analysed and dissected within the text. The intermingling of the two ontological planes (the fictional and the real) “foregrounds the rejection of the claims of both ‘authentic’ representation and ‘inauthentic’ copy alike, and the very meaning of artistic originality is as forcefully challenged as is the transparency of historical referentiality” (Hutcheon 110).

The foregrounding of the statuses of text and reality, in postmodernist fiction, is enacted through the sustained comment on the on-going process of construction happening in front of the reader’s eyes. This problematizing of writing, that is, creation, is something that, according to Patricia Waugh, “nearly all contemporary writing display,” and this metafictional aspect of postmodernism, “problematizes ... the way in which narrative codes – whether literary or social – artificially construct apparently ‘real’ and imaginary worlds in the terms of particular ideologies while presenting these as transparently ‘natural’ and ‘eternal’” (22).

For example, Robert Coover's *A Night at the Movies, or, You Must Remember This: Fictions* foregrounds the incomplete and provisional nature of texts and challenges the notion of the autonomous and complete text by 'inserting' its narratives into the already completed narrations of the movies it parodies. "You Must Remember This," one of the fictions in *A Night at the Movies*, is a parody of Michael Curtiz's *Casablanca*. The short story 'deconstructs' the film by filling in the 'gaps' of the film, in a way laying bare the subliminal impulses behind the grand narratives of war and love. The epic romance between Rick Blaine and Ilsa Lund, in the film, descends into the farce and comedy of sex and physical passion in Coover's text as he 'supplements' scenes that in the film version were not developed, interposing dialogue and action of his own that transform the meaning and reception of the original film text, ripping apart the polished veneer of cinema to reveal the "spittle" underneath (Coover 162).

Displaying "the postmodern sensibility of complexity, discontinuity, [and] randomness" (Joris 224), Coover's compilation of text(s), as its title, with the word "Fictions" suggests, emphasises the multiplicity of texts and perspectives that serve as 'truths' in postmodernist fiction, in contrast to the 'truth' of the autotelic text in modernism. In addition, the performative aspect of the work, encapsulated in the idea of 'going to the movies', is, similar to Calvino's laying bare of the constructive processes of the fictional text, which is an implication of the reader in the textual world and a destabilising of the ontological stabilities of text(s) and reader alike.

The element of playfulness inherent in the postmodernist text, with the turning of narratives inside out, is homologous to the concept of irony that Umberto Eco discusses in an interview with Stefano Rosso. He identifies irony and metalinguistic play as characteristic of the postmodern, and believes that an ironic perspective is

necessary because “the past—since it may not be destroyed, for its destruction results in silence—must be revisited ironically, in a way which is not innocent” (Rosso and Springer 2). Eco goes on to illustrate his point regarding the “postmodern attitude” through an analogy:

For me the postmodern attitude is that of a man who loves a woman who is intelligent and well-read: he knows that he cannot tell her, "I love you desperately," because he knows that she knows (and she knows that he knows) that that is a line out of Barbara Cartland. Yet there is a solution. He can say, "As Barbara Cartland would say, I love you desperately." At this point, he has avoided the pretense of innocence, he has clearly affirmed that no one can speak in an innocent mode; but he has still told the woman what he wished to tell her—that he loves her, but in an age of lost innocence. If the woman is playing along, she has received a declaration of love just the same. In this case neither of the two interlocutors considers himself innocent; both have taken on the challenge of the past, of the "already-said," of the bracketed. Both are playing consciously and with pleasure at the game of irony . . . Yet both have managed once again to speak about love.

(2-3)

The conscious play explained in Eco’s elaboration is encapsulated in Calvino’s and Coover’s texts. The “‘already-said’ [is] not contradicted but reconsidered in an ironic way” (5). Articulation, within “an age of lost innocence,” takes account of the past by using ironic distance in its expression: “[t]he contemporary eye is no longer innocent” (Kearney, *Wake* 2). The continuance and validity of the game depends on the tacit agreement between parties taking part in it. As such, postmodernist texts require

readers who also possess this ironic perspective. Taking things literally, misconstruing the ironic utterances and allusions as ‘serious’, do not allow these texts to ‘perform’ their act of ‘deconstruction’. The effect falls flat; the reader will only end up confused and frustrated. The common reader Woolf envisions for the reading of her fiction will be out of place in such a context. Her wish that readers “create for [themselves] ... some kind of whole” is only possible when the work of art functions, or aims to function, as an autonomous entity (*CRI* 1), as modernist texts aim to be. The postmodernist text, as a destabilising force, rejects the idea of wholeness and completion, and thus needs a reader who will, in a sense, ‘complete the picture’ for them while admitting the provisional status of this picture which will always, ultimately, remain open-ended.

If postmodernism, as defined by Linda Hutcheon, is “a contradictory phenomenon ... that uses and abuses, installs and then subverts, the very concepts it challenges” (3) then John Banville would seem to fit this category. His use and subsequent subversion of systems of knowledge (for example, scientific and mathematical theories of the world in his tetralogy), his parody of narrative genres, adaptations of past literary work, and his overt use of self-reflexive strategies that destabilise the act of narration, are typical of the postmodernist texts just discussed. However, Banville’s method is only superficially similar. As John Kenny claims, “the theoretical term *postmodernism* ... has been applied to Banville more by way of repetition than by convincing argument,” and that even if we consider postmodernism “more as a stylistic phenomenon,” it can “account only for some surface aspects of Banville’s work ... [which] he might superficially have in common with the lineage of self-conscious fiction” (13).

Banville's desire for order and meaning outstrips the pleasure to be gained from linguistic and structural play. In his fiction, the ironic play Eco discusses, for instance, is not enjoyable but poignant and tragic. The need for irony only heightens the sense of loss his narrators and protagonists experience. Aware of their inability to speak 'simply', as the narrator of *The Newton Letter* is, exacerbates their feelings of alienation and strangeness. Instead of revelling in the multiplicity of truths they can tell through fictions, they mourn the loss of authenticity. As such, Kenny believes that Banville's work should be seen, "not as any kind of instance of postmodernism, but as a composite of some of the more quasi-religious or hermetic strands of historical modernism" (14). Consequently, Kenny believes that Banville's work exhibits a "modernist nostalgia misplaced in a chaotic postmodern world" (15).

However, the form of nostalgia Banville's works embody, I would argue, more appropriately belongs to a pre-modernist era. They go beyond modernism in their thirst for the reinstitution of the order that was rejected by modernist artists. It is also for this reason that Banville frequently incorporates the visual art of the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in his texts. Rather than reinventing order, Banville is actually trying to reinstitute order, which accounts for the obsession with the "thing-in-itself" (*BW* 5). It also explains the necessary failure of his artist figures who find that it is impossible to 'reanimate' that long-dead order, which the modernists effectively destroyed and reworked.

Quasi-religious or not, it would be more useful to consider John Banville as straddling the modernism-postmodernism divide. The dominants of modernism and postmodernism, in a perpetual dialogue with each other, as entities that affect and necessitate each other, are brought together in Banville's fiction, especially in his protagonists' and narrators' perspectives. Derek Hand, positioning Banville's art as

“oscillating between a modernist and postmodernist perspective,” characterises it as “wavering between desiring order and meaning while simultaneously recognising its absence, both looking forward and backward at the same time” (3, 10).

To understand this ‘conversation’ better, it will be good to consider Ihab Hassan’s list of “schematic differences” that he draws up in “Toward a Concept of Postmodernism” (*Postmodern Turn* 91). What one should pay attention to is the tension generated by these pairs of characteristics, the first of the pair always referring to modernism and the second to postmodernism: Finished work / Process; Depth / Surface; Reading / Misreading; Form / Antiform; Synthesis / Antithesis. Although the line drawn between modernism and postmodernism is too simplistic in this list, and it must be recognised that there are always exceptions, it offers a rough outline with which to consider Banville’s work in relation to the modernists who came before him, and allows us to situate his work within a tradition of writing.

The oppositions in Hassan’s list and the tension they generate become, in Banville’s fiction, the fecund ground upon which his aesthetics is built. His protagonists, rather than clearly belonging to the first or second group of characteristics, frequently vacillate between the two, torn between the knowledge of the impossibility of saying anything ‘new’ in a conclusive and all-encompassing narrative, and a need to synthesise their experience into a coherent whole. Their struggle to articulate across the divide is also Banville’s struggle with expression.

The double perspective Hand sees Banville as straddling is symbolised and enacted not only by Banville’s narrators’ and protagonists’ first-person narrations but also by the condition of ‘homelessness’ they share. Glancing back to the past and forward to the future acknowledges and interrogates, at the same time, the literary and intellectual history and tradition they are articulating out of. Neither here nor there,

Banville's protagonists and their perspectives are examples of what Richard Kearney terms "a more dialectical logic of *both / and*," a logic that he argues the Irish mind favours. Contrasting it with the "orthodox dualist logic of *either / or*," Kearney describes this dialectical logic as "an intellectual ability to hold the traditional oppositions of classical reason together in creative confluence" ("Irish Mind" 19, *emphases in original*).

Furthermore, Kearney observes that for many Irish writers, "the double vision assumed the focus of exile or estrangement, the unmistakable sentiment of residing on the outside or periphery, of being *other*" ("Irish Mind" 21, *emphasis in original*). This idea of exile has been articulated by Banville in interviews as well: "I must say I've never felt part of any movement or tradition, any culture even. ... I've always felt outside" (R. Sheehan 412). His narrators and protagonists are created similarly, being constantly under the duress of a linguistic exile. The 'homelessness' of the protagonists and narrators is caused, in part, by their problems with language. They churn out a profusion of words (the necessity and desire for creation) but repeatedly stress the inexact nature of those words that make it impossible for them to relate exactly what they want to say. Banville "stresses the futility of language to represent reality, and in one and the same movement goes a long way towards overcoming that limitation" (McNamee, "Self-sustaining Tension" 217); it is a balancing act that Banville and his protagonists perform on the tightrope between structure and anarchy in every novel.

This keen awareness of the slippery slope of language, of the possibility/impossibility of writing is very prominent in Banville's texts, and is demonstrated by the changes wrought on the novel's traditional quest structure. The traditional quest structure, Kearney explains, "takes the form of an individual's search for value in a

degraded world,” and “the conventional pattern ... is that of a journey from meaningless to meaning, from the insufficiency of the surrounding environment to some new vision or value.” Woolf, obeying the traditional quest structure of the novel, enacts this journey in her novels although the arrival at meaning is taken to be only provisional. Experimental techniques notwithstanding, movement, in the text, is still from a place of chaos to one where a certain coherence is apprehended, even if the coherence is only that which acknowledges the common disintegration faced by society, as *Between the Acts* shows. The quest retains that “experience of fundamental rupture between the creative imagination of the hero ... and the reality ... which he or she is trying to explore, cultivate and valorise” (Kearney, “Crisis of Imagination” 390).

Unlike Woolf, Banville transforms the traditional quest structure in his texts: narratives are now “narrative[s] of *question*” rather than narratives of quest (Kearney, “Crisis of Imagination” 393, emphasis in original), and “the very rapport between *imagination* and *reality* seems not only inverted but subverted altogether” (Kearney, *Wake* 3, emphasis in original). The interrogation found in Banville’s texts is not only an interrogation of previous literary, intellectual, and historical ‘models’, but is, more importantly, a form of “self-questioning in so far as it interrogates its own conditions of possibility.” The novel can no longer be considered in an uncritical manner, which gives rise to “a new ‘critical’ tradition,” or “counter-tradition” in the Irish novel, and writers who belong to this new tradition write self-critically, “worrying away self-consciously at the fundamental literary tensions, tensions between imagination and memory, narration and history” (Kearney, “Crisis of Imagination” 393).

But unlike the first generation of critical novelists, in which Kearney lists Samuel Beckett, who are “trapped in an inferno of self-generating fiction” and can

only “reach beyond speech to silence,” the second generation of critical novelists, in which Kearney places Banville, “indicate that the journey is still possible, that the writer can escape from the circularity of time and memory which turns the creative imagination back on itself” (“Crisis of Imagination” 395, 396-7). Regardless of the distinction, however, writers who belong to this counter-tradition of writing see the imagination as “fundamentally *problematic*, an imagination in crisis which no longer takes writing for granted but makes it the very theme for writing” (400).

The crisis of imagination is consequently also a “*crisis of narrative*”, and Banville has been observed to write of this crisis through the “international idioms of modernism over the demands of a national literature committed to matters of social and political relevance” (Kearney, “Crisis of Fiction” 215, emphasis in original). The two camps of ‘realist’ and ‘critical’ writers in Irish fiction, for Kearney, are seen as separate, and this division is construed as a lack of synthesis of the ‘realist’ and the ‘critical’ traditions. Banville, preferring to align himself with the larger European or American literary and intellectual tradition rather than the more narrow Irish one, corroborates what Rüdiger Imhof points out as the ‘international’ nature of the ‘critical’ novel: he observes that the critical tradition Kearney describes is really an “international event” and must be “assessed within an international context (*John Banville* 9, 10).

This is an idea that Banville himself encourages for the reading of his works when he states that, “To bring it down to a personal level, if I were to look about for a stream to be a part of I would certainly look to America or to Europe” (R. Sheehan 409). Though Kearney sees a distinction between the ‘realist’ and ‘critical’ traditions, Banville actually synthesises the two, stressing the importance of the relationship between art and the world in his narratives through the faculty of the imagination that

ultimately affirms the humanist impetus at the heart of his work: “The figures move, if they move, as in a moving scene, one that they define, by being there, its arbiters. Without them only the wilderness, green riot, tumult of wind and the crazy sun. They formulate the tale and people it and give it substance. They are the human moment” (G 222). Banville and his narrators may not employ ‘realist’ narrative devices, or believe in the simple mimetic representation of life in art, but the clear connection between life and art cannot be denied: “the art of fiction does deal with world ...but ... it deals with it in very special and specialised ways” (“Personae” 343).

The fusion of modernist and postmodernist perspectives in Banville’s work, unlike the multiple perspectives of the postmodernists, does not connote a happy multiplicity of meanings that seek to destabilise the ontological planes of the fictional and the real. In Banville’s fiction, the ontological instability is already a given: existence is frighteningly inauthentic, hence its strangeness. What Banville’s fiction foregrounds, rather, is what he calls, in “Thou Shalt Not Kill,” “*The Search for Authenticity*” (350, emphasis in original). He stresses that this question of authenticity concerns the work of art as well as life. In art, “the question of the authentic, of how to work authentically in a medium—art, that is—which at a certain level is necessarily fake, is one that obsesses the artist, consciously or otherwise” (350). In life, “the problem of authenticity is at the very centre of the human predicament, and perhaps never more centrally located than in our, now closing, century” (351).

The tension between the inauthentic and authentic plays out, in Banville’s fiction, in the simultaneous play of words and images, and the desire that this play can ‘turn serious’, can actually convey a sense of the authentic. For example, Freddie Montgomery in *The Book of Evidence* was invented as “an emblematic figure who in his actions and meditations would swing between the poles of the authentic and

inauthentic” (“Thou” 351). Freddie has the gift of speech and a plenitude of words, but the profusion of language is seen as inauthentic because “what is gone is coherence. Meaning has fallen out of his life like the bottom falling out of a bucket” (352). For Freddie, the world confronts him in its ‘there-ness’, but remains shifty, eluding his grasp. Spurned, Freddie “regards this world with the anguished fearfulness of a lover constantly in danger of losing the beloved” (353).

This absence of coherence, of a connection between the world and the being who exists in the world, is described by Banville, when discussing Samuel Beckett in “Beckett’s Last Words,” as the “general ‘incommensurability’ of man’s predicament as a figure in a landscape—a mere figure in a hostile or at least an indifferent landscape” (379). This feeling of indifference felt by man is similarly echoed in the text Banville writes as accompaniment to John Blakemore’s photographs in *The Stilled Gaze*:

We stand before the abundance of the world in bafflement, unable to take it in. Our human eyes scan the *inhuman* spectacle, looking for a place to rest amidst the welter. *Looking for a home. Looking for ourselves.* And the world looks back at us, blank and baffled, like us, wanting to help, perhaps, but not knowing how. Now and then, and here and there, our gaze attaches itself to this thing or to that, in a rage of concentration, of desire, of demand. And the thing ... thus singled out, begins to glow, aquiver with the embarrassment of being looked at with such indecent need. For the thing, being a thing among things, never expected to be noticed, and certainly not like this.²⁴ (emphases added)

²⁴ No page numbers in text.

The condition of homelessness described in the passage is an ontological one. The apprehension of the world is one of “bafflement,” because of the limitations associated with the human imagination: it is “unable to take it in.” But this inability does not curtail the “desire” to want to bring about an “interiorisation of things” (“Survivors” 339). The gaze of the artist, concentrating on a thing, forces it to “transform itself into something else while yet remaining the same” (Banville, *Stilled Gaze*). And though the immenseness of the world cannot all be interiorised at the same time into a cohesive whole, yet the concentration on disparate things enables “a different order of understanding, which *allows* the thing its thereness, its outsideness, its absolute otherness” (“Survivors” 339, emphasis in original). This is the function Banville ascribes to the artist and the artistic imagination. The act of looking is paramount because “to look is to make. The imagination bears all before it. The stilled gaze conjures a world” (*Stilled Gaze*).

But the world the artist conjures is neither wholly illusory (in terms of fiction being ‘illusory’ or ‘fake’) nor real (in the sense of the real, lived experience of daily life). The world that exists between the pages of a novel, like Banville’s fictional worlds, belongs to a suspended realm that *is* at the same time that it *is not*: “art ... *makes things strange*. This it does by illuminating things ... the making of art is a process in which the artist concentrates on the object with such force, with such ferocity of attention, that the object takes on an unearthly—no, an *earthly* glow” (Banville, “Survivors” 338, emphases in original). The strangeness here is different from the strangeness Banville’s protagonists experience. The strangeness here makes things *more* earthly rather than less and enables an ‘enhanced’ perception of the world. Since the possibility of an overarching coherence is not possible, the desire for coherence is evinced, instead, in the intensity of the gaze that allows things to ‘live’,

to be ‘real’. This gaze is not the avant-garde gaze, like Joyce’s; it is, as Banville explains during an interview with Charlie Rose, the gaze of Henry James, the Jamesian gaze:

I mean people say I’m influenced by Beckett or Nabokov but it’s always been Henry James. I think that James was the great modernist. You know, there were two directions for modernism to go: there was the Jamesian way or there was the way of the avant-garde with Joyce and so forth. ... James was catching something, especially in those last three or four novels; he was catching actually what it feels like to be conscious, to be a conscious being in the world. And that seemed to be an extraordinary step, for when he took the big Victorian novel, the novel of manners, the novel of ideas, the novel of social awareness, and he turned it into an extraordinary, fine art form. So I would follow him; I would be a Jamesian. (Rose and Banville, “Web Exclusive”)

Going the “Jamesian way” is, for Banville, a matter of intention and belief. The artist sets out “to make a work of art,” believing, still, in the “artistic project” because the “artistic endeavour is still worthwhile, praiseworthy and ... should be followed” (Rose and Banville). The house of fiction must be built and maintained, even in the face of crumbling foundations. “Looking forward to a moment of earthly expression” as Max Morden does in *The Sea*, when all “shall be delivered ... [all] shall be ... *said*” (185, emphasis in original), is that vanishing point in the distance to which Banville, his protagonists, and his readers look toward.

Reviving the House of Fiction: *Birchwood*

It is said that John Banville's body of work stands out in its achievement in telling the same story in different and original ways (Hand). This story is the story of fiction, or art, and its place in, and relationship with, the world. *Birchwood* is one such example. Although ostensibly about a family saga involving the Godkins and Lawlesses, the text is really a powerful examination of how art and the creation of art can, and must, be sustained in the face of chaos and meaninglessness.

In the novel, Banville's conscious subversion of modernist forms and devices, in addition to other tenets of Enlightenment thought and rationality, puts the spotlight on the postmodern shift to ontological concerns and issues and is, as a consequence, a considered study of the act and possibility of writing in the face of such obstacles. *Birchwood* stands out within Banville's oeuvre because, as Neil Murphy posits, "[f]rom *Birchwood* onwards, [Banville's] work can arguably be viewed as a commentary on the limits of metafiction without ever fully returning to mimetic fiction" ("*Long Lankin* to *Birchwood*" 16). It is in this novel that the limits of postmodernist techniques are first explicitly acknowledged.

Gabriel Godkin, the protagonist and narrator, abandons the postmodernist stance to return to the big house, representative of the house of fiction, where he makes a decision to remain to write while at the same time embracing the necessity of the failure that accompanies his efforts. This decision to work from and within the house of fiction is a declaration of "Banville's reconstructed aesthetic, which revolves around a retreat from metafiction and a partial embrace of the formal characteristics of realism" (Murphy, "*Long Lankin* to *Birchwood*" 21).

For artists to continue creating meaningful art, there must be a reflection on the nature of their craft and how form can be made to carry the weight of all they want to convey. As Lyotard explains, the "postmodern artist or writer is in the position of a

philosopher” and must negotiate the grounds upon which s/he endeavours to create a work of art (81). The art work which is produced by these artists no longer has the luxury of being nestled comfortably in a tradition as T.S. Eliot envisions for his artist figure and therefore must seek other ways in which these works can mean. Art, in Lyotard’s conception of it, becomes that fecund space in which new rules and categories can be explored and in which the interrogation of “preestablished rules” and practices also takes place (81).

John Banville’s *Birchwood* is one such text that reflects upon the work of art itself as well as the philosophical climate in which it was created: the text is “a fiction about fiction itself” (Murphy, *Irish Fiction* 112). In a world in which nothing, including meaning, can be taken for granted, “a writer must account for this loss of certainty and stability by exploring the medium of narrative discourse for adequate formal means that make it possible for him to go on writing” (Imhof, *John Banville* 16). And explore is certainly what Gabriel Godkin, the protagonist of the novel, does. From Birchwoodn (the family estate) to a life with the circus and then back to Birchwood again, Gabriel takes a huge detour only to arrive back at the same place, albeit with a better acceptance and understanding of what he comes up against as an artist and philosopher grappling with the questions of art and creation. As such, we can think of the text as “pondering the delicate balance between the world and art’s connection with that world” (Hand 20–21). The novel becomes “a fiction of process” (Murphy, *Irish Fiction* 107) in which the outcome, though important, is not as important as the journey which the protagonist undertakes as *bildungsroman* and *kunstlerroman* and the insights that are arrived at as a result of such a journey.

The investigation of art and art’s relation to the world in the novel is brought about through the use of familiar genres and allusions to past literary or philosophical

work or concepts. This investigation works by the creation and then disappointment of reader's expectations so that the disparity between expectation and what actually happens in the text is made to bear upon the reader's understanding of the text and an extended examination into the nature of art. For example, the use of the genre of the Big House carries with it the familiar themes of decay and degeneracy but it is to this crumbling house that Gabriel returns in order to work again from the ruins, signalling the artist's necessary dedication to meaning-making even in the midst of chaos and also recognising that we cannot abandon form and depth for surface as tempting as that may be. It is in this way that Banville's aesthetic bears resemblance to Virginia Woolf's: both are dedicated, ultimately to life, to the ordinary.

The creation and subsequent disappointment of expectation is also present when allusion is used in the text. Beatrice, Gabriel's mother provides a good example. Alluding to the heroine in *The Divine Comedy* who leads Dante into the beatific vision, Beatrice is no such figure of revelation or guidance in Banville's novel. Not only does Gabriel never come into any direct apprehension of truth or the meaning of life, the figure of Beatrice Lawless, like the Lawlesses (note the name!) of whom she is a descendent, is mad and out of place, dressing up in different outfits out of history in her "economy drives" (81). Beatrice is like the demented and broken Miss Havisham from Dickens' *Great Expectations*, and the allusions implicit in her name do not connect it to some greater body of meaning by which it can hinge on and position itself. In this regard, the allusions seem to lead the reader up the garden path. However, the failure of the allusions really serve to drive home the point that such tried-and-tested modernist devices no longer function as they might have previously and that the need for a new form and new strategies is pressing.

Whereas Eliot's use of myth and allusion allows for more unified, powerful, and complex meanings to emerge from *The Waste Land*, Gabriel's use of quotations, myth and allusions only serves to make more obvious the severance from these touchstones and anchors of meaning. The use of these allusions does not build up to any crescendo but hangs mid-air, suspended in their trajectory to nowhere. This is the case for the names of certain characters in the novel, and is also manifested in the liberal use of quotations that he changes to suit his purposes. The inversion of René Descartes' *I think, therefore I am* in Gabriel's "I am, therefore I think" (3) shows us not a continuity in thought and philosophy but a break with tradition and history. Descartes' dictum displays an inevitable conclusion of ontological certainty but Gabriel's version of it foregrounds the ontological uncertainty instead.

These allusions, unlike T.S. Eliot's allusions, do not end up revealing some greater meaning or truth in reality. In fact, they bring us further from that elusive apprehension of harmony because they question, confuse and detract rather than anchor. Banville's focus on apparently epistemological concerns like the process of writing, the ability of knowing something or someone definitively, the ability of myth and allusion to sustain meaning and link the individual consciousness to something greater, and the validity and accuracy of memory all gesture, instead, towards ontological uncertainty and angst. The epistemological doubt spills over into ontological uncertainty.

Faced with such pervasive doubt, the artist has to try to find new and more fitting forms for conveying truth or at least allow, which allow the artist to approach truth. As a reworking of the traditional quest motif, Gabriel's narrative is really an exploration of the different poetic forms available to the artist, while his creative process becomes an interrogation of the different forms he employs. Although the

novel seems to end on a note of failure with Gabriel admitting that he has only managed to invent and has not been able to penetrate reality to get at the essence of things, in short, that the artist is engaged in “a never-ending process of failure” (Imhof, *John Banville* 22), yet the search for more appropriate mediums and forms by which to express himself is not forsaken.

Gabriel’s decision to remain at Birchwood even though everything is crumbling around him is poignant but also necessary, and, in a sense, inevitable. It may be harsh but this insight concerning the necessary failure of the artistic endeavour is perhaps most important because it reminds the reader and Gabriel that truth and meaning can only be fleetingly grasped, like the rare moments when Gabriel perceives beauty and harmony in the novel, and hence are all the more precious and worthy of pursuit.

This commitment to art and the belief in its necessity is reiterated in the novel even as it tears down and rejects the different narrative forms, methods or devices it tries on for size. A good example is the titles Banville gives for the different sections in the novel. The first section in the text is named “The Book of the Dead.” For the attentive reader, the allusion to the Egyptian original creates expectations about what is to come in the narrative that follows, and provides a prism with which to read the text. “The Book of the Dead” also translated, from the Egyptian, as the “Book of Coming Forth by Day” (Taylor 55), seduces the reader into thinking that this section might shed light on matters, might proffer answers to offer a safe passage into that other realm called the afterlife, or, in this case, the life after apparently rock solid pillars of truth, meaning and knowledge have been undermined. But this does not happen. Even though the protagonist of the novel is given the name of Gabriel Godkin, which confers upon him associations to do with omniscient knowledge and creationary powers, Gabriel is unable to deliver the reader, or himself.

The novel, unlike the “Book of the Dead,” does not have the necessary spells and incantations for safe passage. But it is not wholly a negative picture. If *Birchwood* is a contemporary version of the Egyptian text, then the function of the original text, as a ‘talisman’ to ensure safe passage and ‘deliverance’, still applies to Banville’s novel. The artist and the narrative he writes may fail to capture reality and provide order, as Gabriel and his narrative does, but it does not detract from the conviction that art must continue to endure. When Gabriel makes the decision to stay in Birchwood to continue making sense of his world, his action affirms the importance and necessity of art. The spells may have failed this time round, but they can be tweaked. The belief that art still possesses the power to *transform* through meaning making persists, a conviction that persists throughout the novel.

An examination of the portrayal of memory in *Birchwood* will flesh out some of the issues under discussion:

We imagine that we remember things as they were, while in fact all we carry into the future are fragments which reconstruct a wholly illusory past. [...] I had dreamed of the house so often on my travels that now it refused to be real, even while I stood among its ruins. It was not Birchwood of which I had dreamed, but a dream of Birchwood, woven out of bits and scraps. [...] These things, these madeleines, I gathered anew, compared them to my memories of them, added them to the mosaic, like an archaeologist mapping a buried empire. Still it eluded me, that thing-in-itself ... (4 – 5)

Gabriel’s description of his process of recollection alludes to Proust (“madeleines”) and Sigmund Freud (“archaeologist mapping a buried empire”). Like Proust, Freud also believed that hidden truths can be unearthed via memory (in this case

subconscious memory) and Banville's use of metaphor and language that so closely resembles both Proust and Freud would seem to indicate that he has learned his lesson well. However, in spite of his efforts, he cannot recreate the memory of his past: "In this lawless house I spend the nights poring over my old memories, fingering them, like an impotent casanova his old love letters, sniffing the dusty scent of violets" (3).

The old laws and beliefs have disappeared and Gabriel is only left a carcass of a "lawless house" in which he searches his memories for truth. But that truth is elusive and he finds that he is only recreating a "wholly illusory past". In fact, his memories seem to get in the way of his recreation of a past instead of aiding it and he finds that he cannot see what seems to be before his eyes, only seeing his memories of it. His line of sight to truth is obscured by these images that rush between his consciousness and the "thing-in-itself" and the reliance on a "Proustian-charged poetics [...] to reclaim fragments of the past [...] is not the final solution that Gabriel hopes it might be" (Murphy, *Irish Fiction* 110).

Here, Gabriel, as creator, as writer, as artist, seems to take on a postmodern mien, recognising that all reality turns out only to be fiction, that his memories are only fictions of and in his mind. But unlike other postmodern writers who seem to revel in this fictionality and run away with it, there is genuine nostalgia and sadness for the loss of truth and stability of meaning which is encapsulated by the evocative metaphor of "an impotent casanova [with] his old love letters, sniffing the dusty scent of violets."²⁵ The longing that is brought out in this image, though clichéd, shows us that the necessary abandonment of old forms of expression does not mean

²⁵ This intense longing and sadness for the loss of truth and stability is similarly manifested in Samuel Beckett's work and many critics have drawn parallels between John Banville and Beckett in this regard. Banville himself has commented on Beckett's portrayal of the modern man's predicament in essays, for example, "Beckett's Last Words" (2006), where he discusses how Beckett's "[i]magination at wit's end spreads its sad wings" (376, original quote from *Ill Seen Ill Said*).

emancipation or the freedom to play, and recklessly take chances, with language; it means that one must search earnestly for new forms that can stand up to the task of meeting the demands of depicting life as we experience it: “there is never the feeling in [Banville’s] work that the exposure of constructed myths about identity and nature is a simple cause for celebration. . . . There may no longer be any hope of a convincing master narrative, but most of Banville’s characters wish there were” (McMinn, *Supreme* 7).

And Gabriel Godkin does try to search for this “convincing master narrative,” which he hopes to latch onto in his quest for truth, though the quest has already been doomed from the start. At the end of the first part of the novel, Gabriel leaves and runs away from Birchwood, eventually joining “Prospero’s Magic Circus” (99). The life he leads with the circus is then narrated in the section “Air and Angels”, which alludes to John Donne’s poem of the same name. Invoking John Donne is not accidental, for the Metaphysical poets were known for their talent in wit and syllogism and we might be led to believe that it is in this section that some form of logic and reasoning would be employed to give us a coherent picture of the world. But postmodernism, as embodied in the figure of the circus, will fail miserably as a way of ordering existence. Additionally, the appeal to the ‘metaphysical’ already signals that issues of ontology and being will be foregrounded as Gabriel undertakes a quest to look for his missing sister. In addition, Gabriel Godkin is given the name Johann Livelb by Silas, which is an anagram of John Banville meaning that Johann Livelb’s problems can also be inferred to be the problems of the artist creating works of art in a postmodern climate.

Seeming at first appearance to be nothing like Birchwood, the circus is full of life and surprises, providing an answer to Gabriel's willing pursuit of the fantasy of a missing sister:

But a sister! Half of me, somewhere, stolen by the circus, or spirited away by an evil aunt, or kidnapped by a jealous cousin—and why? A part of me stolen, yes, that was a thrilling notion. I was incomplete, and would remain so until I found her. (79)

The decision to join the circus and the bogus search for a missing sister function as a metaphor for the artist's foray into postmodernism. Faced with the decay of his heritage of Enlightenment truths and modernist forms as symbolised by the image of Birchwood, Gabriel runs away to that postmodern haven, the circus, to complete himself. His utter faith, at this point of the narrative, in the salvation that would come when he finds his sister is symbolic of a writer's faith in the postmodern as a cure-all remedy. But as his cavorting with the circus continues, he begins to find that increasingly, he "was being made to undergo a test, or play in a game the rules of which [he] did not know" (101). The postmodern was not offering answers, only proffering more doubts and questions.

Gabriel's most insightful recognition of the shortcomings of postmodernism comes when he reflects upon the audience that comes to watch the circus performers. He notes that:

It was strange, that so easy deception of so many. I say deception, but that is not it, not exactly. They wished to be deceived, they conspired with us in our fantasies. Silas' act hardly varied all that week—except that Albert more or less behaved himself and I conquered my stagefright—yet those who returned night after night, and they formed

more than half of every audience, gazed at his antics with happy enthusiasm as though for the first time. Indeed, toward the end, there appeared in some of those faces a smug proprietary look—*they* knew what was coming next. It was a game we played, enchanters and enchanted, tossing a bright golden ball back and forth across the footlights, a game that meant nothing, was a wisp of smoke... (111)

This extract shows, very aptly, what criticism may be levelled at postmodernism. The revelling in surfaces may have its critical uses but it does not seem to be able to offer a sustained body of meaning to existence. It is not in the spirit, obviously, of postmodernism to offer meanings and unity, but if so, then what is its use and value? Postmodernism is thus depicted, and rightly so, I believe, as “deception” and faith in the credence of postmodernism only leads to further doubt and anxiety. It does not seem able to offer any answers to an individual or, even more importantly, to an artist who searches for a form that can adequately try to posit a meaning in the face of doubt and uncertainty. The postmodern may be a condition that we have to grapple with but to come to it, time and again, like the audience who goes to watch the circus performers, of which “more than half” “returned night after night”, cannot offer any route out of this “fantasy” in which they willingly believe and partake of. The audience already “knew what was coming next”; they are not fooled, they know that what they look at and experience is a fantasy yet they do not desist, just as Gabriel persists in his quest to find his missing sister. This “game” that is being played is played with a tacit agreement between parties and each knows the play leads to nothing yet willingly avail themselves of it anyway.

An even more scathing indictment of postmodernism comes later in the novel when the circus moves around the country during the potato famine. By then, their

presence in the face of overwhelmingly more important concerns like hunger is no longer welcome. It is no coincidence that their revels in the pub are accompanied by the Totentanz, a reference to Liszt, which is a dance of death. Postmodernism is here given a moribund quality and we realise, as readers, that running with the concept of postmodernism also means flirting with the idea of death—death of meaning, death of creation with regards to art. As Gabriel so eloquently expresses: “we played with exaggeration as a means of keeping reality at bay. It did not work. Reality was hunger and there was no gainsaying that” (140).

It is no surprise, thus, when Gabriel finally leaves the circus after its run in with the Molly Maguires. It is at this point also that he realises that he has nourished the fantasy of a missing sister for far too long:

The story of my sister, the stolen child, had been laughed at. That laughter woke me from a dream. No, not a dream precisely, but a waking, necessary fantasy. Necessary, yes. If I had not a solid reason to be here, travelling the roads with this preposterous band, then my world threatened to collapse, for I still believed then that life was at least reasonable. The future must have a locus! If not, what was the point? It was a cold bleak sea in which to be adrift. Still, for all the dangers it entailed, I admitted at last that this search for this doubtful sister could no longer sustain me. (132)

Although a fantasy, Gabriel admits that it was a “necessary fantasy” because it was what gave him a sense of purpose in that “cold bleak sea” of existence. But the fantasy of the sister and the life of the circus, just like postmodernism, can only be an interruption of sorts, a detour on the way to a more purposeful search for another way of life that may be in a better position to offer answers, for “[t]he future must have a

locus! If not, what was the point?” And that is the lesson Gabriel, and the reader, learns from his time with the circus. Postmodernism comes off looking like a short reprieve from the anxiety and uncertainty that plagues us. Play, parody, surface and laughter ultimately fail. It is not the answer to life’s questions and conundrums, and cannot sustain us indefinitely.

Rüdiger Imhof (1997, 2002) and Neil Murphy (2004) rightly recognise and point out that the novel, although it refers explicitly to real historical events that happened in Ireland like the Great Famine, the decline of the landed gentry and the existence of secret societies like the Molly Maguires, is not concerned, per se, with the actual events but uses them as structural devices to comment upon art. In my view, the profusion of historical events in the section of “Air and Angels” serves as counterpoint to the symbol of postmodernism as exemplified by the circus. The weight of history and historical events serve to weigh down on the ideological metaphor of the circus, which then pushes Gabriel to realise the emptiness of his quest and the futile nature of his life with the circus.

The return to Birchwood happens in the third section of the novel titled “Mercury.” With its allusion to the messenger god, readers might be tempted to infer that a certain truth about reality will finally be revealed, an answer given, but more discerning readers of the text will already be prepared to be disappointed. Gabriel’s re-entry into the world of Birchwood is not a typical homecoming. There is certainly no welcome awaiting him and moreover, the decay of Birchwood, and by implication, the old world with its attendant values, philosophy, outlook and faiths, is almost complete. The house is falling to pieces and the Molly Maguires have invaded the grounds and have killed family members. Gabriel has simply stood by, doing nothing, a moving figure for an artist who has no recourse but to sit and watch as his world

falls apart before preparing to pick up the pieces yet again in another futile attempt at creating another world.

But all is not lost. Although fresh from the realisation that there is no sister and that there is “[n]o Prospero either”, Gabriel now perceives a “white landscape” (168), which seems to invite him to inscribe his mark on it, to leave a trace. And though Gabriel’s ending of the novel with Ludwig Wittgenstein’s “whereof I cannot speak, thereof I must be silent” (171) is sad recognition of his “literary inheritance of [...] linguistic doubt” (Murphy 110), there is no indication that he has chosen, because of that recognition, to cease writing completely, for it is also at this juncture that Gabriel realises that he has “[become his] own Prospero, and [ours]” (*BW* 168) and that even though he “invent[s], necessarily,” yet he is still trying, against all odds, to make some sense of the world, of his world. He may no longer “speak the language of this wild country [yet he] shall stay here, alone, and live a life different from any the house has ever known” (170).

Ultimately, as Gabriel so often intimates throughout the novel, the search for beauty and harmony in art can be pursued to its very ends but there is no guarantee of success. Beauty and harmony can only be glimpsed, as if by accident, in rare moments of clarity and penetration, and these moments are not translatable easily, if they are at all, into words. Like the fitting in of the last piece of Gabriel’s jigsaw puzzle and like the suspended mid-air dance of Michael’s juggling act, these moments of beauty and harmony are fleeting and far and few between, but Gabriel has managed to convince us that they are present. It is this dedication to the pursuing of these precious moments, this realisation of that “empty place where [he] could put the most disparate things and they would hang together, not very elegantly, perhaps, or comfortably, but yet together, singing like seraphs” (25) that drives Gabriel’s

commitment to a life among the ruins of Birchwood. This decision is filled with tragedy and yet seems to be the only available route for any artist who is dedicated to the artistic process: “There is no form, no order, only echoes and coincidences, sleight of hand, dark laughter. I accept it.” (171)

Begetting the Other and the Self: the *Frames Trilogy*

In *Imagined Lives: Portraits of Unknown People*, John Banville, in addition to seven other writers, contributes “fictional biographies and imaginary character sketches” for “mysterious” portraits in the National Portrait Gallery of Britain, portraits in which the sitters’ identities are unknown or disputed (Cooper, “Introduction” 6). Described by Tarnya Cooper as “creative and playful response[s] to the challenge of re-imagining the lives of these unidentified sitters” (“Introduction” 7), these sketches really function as part of the “quest for immortality” sought after by the commissioning of these portraits (“Did my Hero” 83). The achievement of immortality, which rests on the successful identification of portraits, has been frustrated for these unknown sitters, and the sketches in the book provide a way for them to achieve ‘eternal life’ by the process of ‘fleshing out’, a way to turn a two-dimensional work of art into a three or four-dimensional appreciation of the living sitter behind the art; for what is the desire for immortality but a desire to *live*?

In intention—as a way to bring these sitters ‘to life’—the sketches Banville writes for *Imagined Lives* are akin to the fictions that make up the *Frames Trilogy*. Like Freddie Montgomery, he is ‘giving birth’ to these lost personalities through art. As Banville himself says, “The problem [in a work of art] is placing certain figures on a certain ground so that they shall seem to move, and breathe, and have their lives” (“Personae” 345). It is the ‘bringing to life’ of these figures, and himself, in art that

Freddie tries to effect in the three novels to be discussed. If *Birchwood* announces the artist's decision to remain in his house of fiction, a declaration against the silence of the word, then the *Frames Trilogy* chronicles the artist's attempts to perceive the world more intensely in an effort to animate Being.

The *Frames Trilogy*, comprising *The Book of Evidence*, *Ghosts*, and *Athena*, centres on Freddie Montgomery and the journey he undertakes to birth a new life in atonement for the one he took in *The Book of Evidence*, and are really ruminations on "the power of [the] imagination, about how life [and] reality is apprehended through a poetic, or artistic, consciousness" (Imhof, *John Banville* 188). Freddie's "failure of imagination" in *The Book of Evidence*, which he states is his "essential sin," the "real crime" he commits as opposed to the physical murder of the girl (215), is the reason for the books of evidence Freddie churns out not only to explain his crime, but his life, and are his attempts to "essentially [probe] the relationship between art and life" (Imhof, "Rosy Grail" 131). The development and change of the estranged imagination thus becomes the subject of the trilogy; the restitution of the artistic imagination is what consumes Freddie and his narratives.

This restitution of the imagination is closely linked to Friedrich Nietzsche's concept of art. Nietzsche's influence on *The Book of Evidence* has been recognised by both Imhof (1997) and Murphy (2004) and Nietzsche's ideas regarding the role art plays in life can be applied to the *Frames Trilogy* as a whole. "Art ... for Nietzsche," Joan Stambaugh explains,

... is ... the highest form of activity. In order to understand his treatment of the will to power as art, one must remember for him art is not restricted to a particular sphere of human life, is not a collection of aesthetic objects and works; rather it is the innermost nature of the

world itself: 'The world as a work of art that gives birth to itself'.

Nietzsche's aesthetic is based on the artist himself, not on the observer.

It thus illuminates the nature of the aesthetic activity rather than that of the aesthetic product. Art is understood in the broadest possible sense as a transfiguration and an affirmation of human existence. (82)

The importance Nietzsche ascribes to the "aesthetic activity" rather than the "aesthetic product" bears heavily on the attention Banville's narratives pay to the process of construction, not only of the text the reader reads, but also of the 'worldviews' or 'truths' his protagonists hold or create. Furthermore, Nietzsche's location of this aesthetic in the artist means that two parallel transfigurations are happening at the same time: "The artist shapes and transfigures not only his 'material', what is to become his work; above all, he shapes and transfigures himself" (83). In his attempt to envision reality, Freddie is also trying to envision himself.

As such, the novels ask if the imagination can fully connect to reality in a way that is *ethical*. But the ethical question here concerns not morality in the usual sense of the word, in the normally accepted understanding of morals in the sense of the law, but inspects it according to the ethics inherent in the relationship between art and the world, that is, the *responsibility* art has towards life: "Even the most abstract art is grounded in the mundane, composed, like us, of Eros and of dust" (Banville, "Personae" 345). In the absence of consolatory systems of order, like science and mathematics, Freddie is free in a terrifyingly absolute way. This is the reason why Freddie yearns for capture at the same time that he delights in the evasion of it. What the capture symbolises is "a kind of masochistic nostalgia for a regulatory system" (Kenny 142), which is something Freddie lacks, and which terrifies him.

Without the signposts others take for reference, Freddie needs to erect something else in their place. The faulty system of art Freddie lives by in *The Book of Evidence*, because of its lack of responsibility towards life, fails, and hence lacks ethics. Terence Brown elucidates this notion of ‘ethics’ by explaining that Freddie “admires the transformative power of art but ... pays scant attention to the stuff of life which must be its base material” (qtd. in Murphy, *Irish Fiction* 165).²⁶ Because Freddie’s imagination is “caged by art,” his perception of reality is “tainted by artistic precedents” (Imhof, *John Banville* 175) that obscure his perception of the real. Guided by an inauthentic art, Freddie’s imagination, and thus perception, causes “[e]verything [to be] mythologised, fictionalised or romanticised” (Imhof 189). Art, for Freddie, is more *real* than reality, hence his “sense of strangeness, of being in a place [he] knew but did not recognise;” thus too his pronouncement, “I am not human” (*BE* 119).

Freddie’s imagination may be flawed but the artistic imagination holds, within itself, the possibilities for change, and thus, also, the grounds for exoneration. If Freddie’s imagination, like Humbert Humbert’s in Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita*, represents “an inhuman kind of aesthetic attitude” (Imhof, *John Banville* 184), his realisation of this fact and the subsequent “act of parturition” that is he undertakes is his act of atonement that seeks to realign the imagination with reality. Freddie discovers the “redeeming power of the imaginative mind” through the “chaos of appearance” he perceives and acknowledges (Murphy, *Irish Fiction* 167). However, there are limitations, as Freddie discovers. His difficulty with the act of birthing, which is really an act of perception, and hence an act of knowing the world, ultimately still subscribes to the view that “life cannot be accurately represented in

²⁶ Original text: Brown, Terence. “Paying Attention.” *The New Nation* 6 (May-June 1989): 22-23

art” (Murphy 149). The author/ narrator’s “dependence on a synthetic system of rearranging experience” tells the reader as much.

Since the relationship between art and life cannot be absolutely mimetic, the effort to represent experience in art is made, Murphy observes, through an appeal to literary tradition: “All of Banville’s work relies to some extent on literary tradition” (*Irish Fiction* 151). The reliance on literary tradition in Banville’s work is not unlike what T.S. Eliot envisioned, although the motivations may be slightly different. Murphy sees the use of intertextuality as a “promise of revitalisation” that works through the “innovative advances” Banville’s texts make on the originals (Murphy 151, 152). It is not a simple rewriting of texts but, more importantly, an “[alteration of] their original perspective[s] in an effort to create an original utterance” (Murphy 152).

Freddie’s desire to ‘give birth’ to the girl, and himself, is actually a desire to create an original utterance through a more sensitive perception of reality via the imagination. Because the imagination suffers from solipsism, and is constrained by the inexact prism of language, which it needs for understanding as well as expression, the representation of life in art must necessarily be subjective and imperfect. However, an imagination that is sensitive can “be responsive to [life] in such a way that certain levels of significance can be preserved” (Murphy, *Irish Fiction* 138), and it is this level of responsiveness that Freddie aspires to. By using art (specifically paintings) to create art (his narratives) in an ethical manner, the promise of revitalisation can be brought to fruition.

In the creation of an original utterance, it is vital, according to Nietzsche, that the self be realised. This is the necessary precursor to the realisation of the world in art, the apprehension of the “ineffable mystery of the Other” (A 47). If the self cannot

be imagined into being, the world will not appear real. The animation of fictional figures is really the attempt to make the self and world ‘live’, to reanimate the world so that *Being* is in turn reanimated. The reanimation of the self, making it real, as Freddie realises, is the real project that will lead on to the reanimation of the world and others: he needs to animate the figures (himself included) that are “still and speechless, not dead and yet not alive either, waiting perhaps to be brought to some kind of life” (G 263). Freddie himself recognises this when he thinks about Diderot’s “*The man who wishes to move the crowd must be an actor who impersonates himself,*” and asks, “Is that it, is that really it? Have I cracked it?” (G 198, emphasis in original). To play a part is not inauthentic, it is a way of realising the self: “To act is to be, to rehearse is to become” (G 199).

Although Freddie dismisses this revelation as “a delusion,” it is an intimation of his impending transformation that will be fully realised in *Athena* (G 199). The creative power of the imagination may not be ‘real’ in the sense that everyday lived experiences are real, but art, which is ultimately about life, and draws upon life for its material, can illuminate experience and order it, albeit temporarily, through *appearances* that convey the thing itself: “To lie is to create” (G 191); or put another way, writing fiction is creating—the imagination creates the self, the world, and others in a way that can reveal. When Freddie speaks of “the many worlds theory,” he is really talking about the “myriad versions” of the world that the imagination creates (G 172), which is what he is doing in his narratives. He is creating, through art, reflections in a “mirror [that are] known yet strange” (G 225), a mirror that mediates between the world and art.

Freddie’s attempts to realise himself can be traced through the different guises he adopts in the trilogy. At first Freddie Montgomery in *The Book of Evidence*, he

exists without a name throughout *Ghosts* before reincarnating as Morrow in *Athena*, a name that he chooses for its “faintly hopeful hint of futurity, and, of course, its Wellsian echo” (A 7). This “Wellsian echo,” like all echoes in Banville’s books, is not incidental. The allusion to *The Island of Dr Moreau* is significant for the project that Morrow aims to complete is like Dr Moreau’s project, to create a being (himself and the other). The Freddie Montgomery of *The Book of Evidence*, who commits the crime of murder, is appropriately nameless in *Ghosts*. The leaving behind of his previous identity is vital if he is to be reborn. Thus, when we see Freddie again in *Athena*, the new self, Morrow, is on his way to a new beginning: he is creating himself. *Ghosts*, then, acts like a site of purgatory, where Freddie, arriving after serving ten years in prison for his crime in *The Book of Evidence*, expiates his sins before returning to the world in *Athena*.

When we first meet Freddie in *The Book of Evidence*, he is obscured by a plethora of clichés, and hidden from view by the many images he employs to describe himself. He is *unoriginal* because he lacks being, which is why he clings to images from art to give him substance. Thus, even though the narrative is supposedly composed “in [his] own words,” the sentences Freddie constructs are really just variations of clichés and a pastiche of common images that prey on the popular imagination:

My Lord, when you ask me to tell the court in my own words, this is what I shall say. I am kept locked up here like some extinct animal, *last survivor of a species* they had thought extinct. They should let in people to view me, *the girl-eater*, svelte and dangerous, padding to and fro in my cage, my terrible green glance flickering past the bars ... (3, emphasis added)

The irony is palpable to the reader, but one suspects that Freddie, who knows no reality other than art, is taking his descriptions seriously even as he makes jibes at his own process of construction later in the text. Though Freddie states that the experience of being gawked at is “unreal,” and imagines the onlookers as “film extras” (3), there is not yet a realisation that this psychological unreality is a result of his own perspective. Seeing Anna as “one of Klimt’s gem-encrusted lovers,” or the garden of the family home as a “chiaroscuro,” or his mother as “one of Lautrec’s ruined doxies” only exacerbates Freddie’s feeling of, being “in another country now, where the old rules did not apply” (85, 58, 59, 173). As such, all Freddie is doing is “amusing [himself], musing, losing himself in a welter of words” (38). But his imagination cannot order experience precisely because “[the] question is wrong” (38).

As with the characters of Kepler and Copernicus before him, the attempts to order such a magnitude of experience into neat systems of knowledge fail, as they necessarily will, because these man-made systems (language included), cannot account for the *essential* nature of reality, only what is processed by the individual consciousness. But the effort must still be made and Banville “aims to create an alternative way to say the world while using our epistemological systems. His difficulty is not with reality, it is with the invalid assumptions that we bring to bear on our systems of inquiry” (Murphy, *Irish Fiction* 136).

If the imagination is uppermost in apprehending life, then Freddie’s flawed imagination is the sole reason he is able to kill Josie Bell. Unlike the immensity of feeling he has when he looks at the woman in the painting he steals, where “[his] heart contracts,” and he feels he is being asked “to let her live” (105), Josie only exists on the margins of experience for him, merely an unwelcome glitch in his plan. For example, in the car, he sees Josie “crouched behind [him] as in a deep glass box,”

and can only imagine her through other images, comparing her to “the cornered heroine in a melodrama” (112). And when he finally grabs the hammer he would use to kill her, “the silence rose around [them] like water” (113). The lack of connection is obvious.

Encased in Freddie’s imagination, “as in a deep glass box,” Josie and Freddie, though physically together in the car, really ‘exist’ in different worlds. When he gets hold of the hammer, the silence that rises around them speaks of Freddie’s imagination’s divorce from reality—he cannot hear nor comprehend her because he cannot really see her. Even when he says, “I saw her now, really saw her, for the first time” and “I had never felt another’s presence so immediately and with such raw force,” he has not really *seen* her (113); the murder still happens; Freddie’s imagination still lacks that vital connection to life. The reader can appreciate this when Freddie continues to use the metaphors or jargon of art during and after the murder. For example, when he hits her head with the hammer, he says that, “it was more like hitting *clay*, or *hard putty*,” or he describes the landscape around him when he gets out of the car as “a hastily painted backdrop” (113, 114, emphasis added).

Towards the end of this first narrative, realising that his flawed imagination is the problem, Freddie finally discerns that he needs to perceive reality more responsibly and this thought “strikes [Freddie] with the force of an unavoidable imperative,” this “act of parturition” must be accomplished (215, 215-6). Now “big with possibilities” and “living for two” (216), Freddie acknowledges the changed direction his artistic imagination must take and attempts, in *Ghosts*, to walk his talk. Thus, *Ghosts*, a “surrealistic pastiche in which imagination is the only power,” continues “the process of inquiry into ... the imagination, and how it apprehends life” (Murphy, *Irish Fiction* 171). This process of inquiry, which has been Banville’s

singular obsession throughout his oeuvre, is, in *Ghosts*, finally coming close to articulating ‘the thing itself’.

In *Ghosts*, Freddie obeys, or at least tries to, the injunction to articulate simply, to go back to the simple things: “What I was striving to do was to simplify, to refine. I had shed everything I could save existence itself. ... I was determined to at least try to make myself into ... a monad. And then to start again, empty” (26). Although a “hopeless glossolalia” and the multiplicity of things and reality still threaten Freddie, a more pressing need presents itself: Freddie needs to know who he is before he can imagine others into being, for how is he “to imagine them so vividly as to make them quicken into a sort of life” if he cannot even imagine himself? (27). Having dismantled the consolatory systems of science, mathematics and morality in his previous novels, Freddie draws on the artistic imagination for power and life to animate himself and the “marionettes” which roam this fictional landscape (Murphy, *Irish Fiction* 171).

As amanuensis to Professor Kreutznaer, Freddie is studying the paintings of Jean Vaublin. There is, of course, no such painter, but the reference to Vaublin’s *fête galantes* directs the reader to the paintings of Antoine Watteau, especially *L’embarquement pour Cythère*. Naming the island setting of this novel Cythera thus also makes Watteau’s painting the backdrop to this text. The National Gallery (United Kingdom) states, on their website, that, “Watteau's mix of reality and fantasy in costume and setting, and the open-endedness of his subject matter, were original to him.” In *Ghosts*, Freddie is also trying to accomplish an original feat. The originality he seeks to attain is the originality of the utterance, of being able to say something in a new way, *outside* of the systems of knowledge previously explored. In order to do this, Freddie must perceive and accept the mystery of things.

In Vaublin's *Le monde d'or*, which is described as "that last and most enigmatic of his masterpieces, ... something is missing, something is deliberately not being said;" he is "the master of darkness," "the painter of absences, of endings" (35). These absences are part of reality, and what Vaublin, and Freddie, portrays is really "the human moment" (222), that fragile, but careful and deliberate, putting together of experience in a *stylized and structured* form of art, that through an integration of the "real and ... mere fancy" enables definition (221).

The artist orders the world, like the painter, by

[gathering] his little group and [setting] them down in this wind-tossed gale, in this delicate, artificial light, ... [painting] them as angels and clowns. It is a world where nothing is lost, where all is accounted for while yet the mystery of things is preserved; a world where they may live, however briefly, however tenuously, in the failing evening of the self, solitary and at the same time together somehow here in this place, dying as they may be and yet fixed forever in a luminous, unending instant. (231)

This passage suggests that the solipsism of the imagination can be transcended, if only briefly, by art. The bringing together of a fictional world enables this process of transcendence through its surfaces rather than the depths, a point that Banville stresses when he says that a work of art is concerned with "life in its *appearance*, ... both in the way it looks, and in the way it makes itself manifest in the world" (Banville, "Personae" 345). The depths can only be hinted at through the artful manipulation and ordering of the surface. Like Vaublin, the "master of darkness," Freddie is a "phantom, a patch of moving dark against the lighter darkness all around [him]," "a foreigner" in his world, subsisting "on the far, pale margin of things (*G* 38, 31, 20).

He is a creature of the night because it is the night, as darkness, that always seems “something on the point of being spoken,” and contains a “sense of immanence, of things biding their time, waiting to occur.” It is also the night that “always seems peopled to [Freddie]; they throng about [him], the dead ones, yearning to speak” (38). As Freddie speaks these ghosts, one of which is himself, he is like Vaublin’s double, who creates art from art, a master at reproductions, trying to articulate “something in between” the dead and the living, “some third thing,” which can be appropriately called art (29).

In order to create this “third thing,” Freddie’s presence, as the artistic imagination that orders, little god of his fictional universes, is essential: he is “required.” When Freddie quotes John Keats (“*I have a habitual feeling of my real life having passed, and that I am leading a posthumous existence*” 25, emphasis in original), the reader must see beyond the surface of these lines from Keats’ letter to recognise that the “posthumous existence” referred to not only speaks of Freddie’s marginality, but it also connotes the ‘real time’ of the novel where “posthumous existence” also refers to the passing away of previous systems of order. Freddie’s existence now is similar to the state of purgatory, a state of limbo between states of being. He is not yet born, but cannot die; he needs art to exist literally (he is after all, only a character in a novel) and metaphorically, as mouthpiece of Banville and his belief in the vital connection between the imagination and life.

As such, Freddie is like the statues he thinks about in the text. Like Diderot’s “theory of ethics based on the idea of the statue,” Freddie needs to “become [a sculptor] of the self” (196). Freddie needs to bring himself into being before he is able to bring someone else to life: “if he is not real then how does he make his peace and imagine the girl into existence” (Murphy, *Irish Fiction* 174). This observation is

similarly echoed by Imhof, who states that though Freddie is suspended between a past, “which is hazy and which he seeks to forget or undo,” and a future, which is “unpredictable [and] indeterminate, the present is also inaccessible to him, and “without a present, there is no being” (Imhof, *John Banville* 192). The aim for Freddie is thus to transform his present ‘ghostly’ existence into something real before he can make someone else real, and it is Diderot’s ethics, which Freddie approves of, which holds the key to Freddie’s rebirth. The artist needs to make himself and the world ‘real’ “through a kind of artistic striving, cutting and shaping the material of which we are made, the intransigent stone of self-hood, and erecting an idealised effigy of ourselves in our own minds and in the minds of those around us and living as best we can according to its sublime example” (*G* 196),

The artistic imagination may be limited, but through an intense perception of things, through a rigorous process of shaping, the “sublime example” can be apprehended. Banville’s artistic process, as a form of shaping, is trying to realise a “self-sustaining tension in space [that is] tangible yet wholly imaginary;” and the task, for the artist, is to “bring this figure out of the space of the potential and into the world, where it will be manifest yet hidden, like the skeleton beneath the skin” (Banville, “Personae” 345). Similarly, Freddie needs to first bring himself out of the realm of the potential before he can successfully see others.

This promise of revitalisation makes itself manifest in *Ghosts*. The documentation of the articulation that enables a life to take shape results in an instant when Flora, encased in Freddie’s fictional exercise, suddenly *lives*:

And then without warning she [Flora] began to talk. ... What interested her was what interested me, namely ... namely what? How the present feeds on the past, or versions of the past. How pieces of

lost time surface suddenly in the murky sea of memory, bright and clear and fantastically detailed, complete little islands where it seems it might be possible to live, even if only for a moment. And as she talked 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. No, not amazing. That is the point. She was simply there, an incarnation of herself, no longer a nexus of adjectives but pure and present noun. ... And somehow by being suddenly herself like this she made the things around be there too. In her, and in what she spoke, the world, the little world in which we sat, found its grounding and was realised. ... As I sat ... and listened to her I felt everyone and everything shiver and shift, falling into vividest forms, detaching themselves instead into what they were, no longer figment, no longer mystery, no longer a part of my imagining. And I, was I there amongst them, at last? (146-7)

The artistic imagination, which attentively perceives reality, makes the situation described above possible. Such a moment comes unannounced, “without warning,” and makes the world, in that stretch of time, alive. But this passage does not merely refer to the importance of the act of looking; it is also an almost complete description of the artistic process. As in Banville’s novels, “content” is not important. What is more important is the way in which the past and the present interact and feed off each other in order to construct reality, something we will see later in *The Sea*. Through this conversation between the past and present, “the murky sea of memory” is illuminated to reveal “complete little islands,” like Freddie’s island of Cythera in *Ghosts*, where the possibility of authenticity is realised.

The fact that these islands are “complete” cannot be ignored, for it refers to the complete artwork that stands, in and of itself, within a nexus of other artworks, as a testament of a particular vision of the world as translated by the artistic imagination at that point of time. It is the structural unity of the artwork that enables the realisation of these moments of illumination. This structural unity, termed “style” by Banville, is what allows Flora to live, of her own accord, within the narrative, at this moment—the figure has been brought to life.

At this time, Freddie, surrogate of Banville, has managed to ‘speak the things themselves’ as opposed to only speaking *about* things. Flora is “no longer a nexus of adjectives but pure and present noun;” her ‘thereness’ confronts Freddie and the reader. This realisation of being, in that instant, is the necessary condition for the world to appear alive as well; Flora’s ‘thereness’ translates to her surroundings. There is no longer any “mystery;” things are not simply fictional; they now walk amongst the living.

In *Athena*, the ‘moment of living’ accomplished by Freddie through Flora is fully fleshed out in A. Through “the process of trying to imagine [A] into existence,” Freddie eventually “manages to realise himself” (Murphy, *Irish Fiction* 185). In the text, A is, Banville explains in an interview with Hedwig Schwall, purposefully depicted as “physically palpable ... but not present” (qtd. in Kenny 162).²⁷ This particular depiction of A is important because it reflects the process by which art animates being. Ultimately only an ‘imaginary’ realm, art is the conduit that enables the self to come to life (“physically palpable”) but cannot replace lived experience

²⁷ Original text: Schwall, Hedwig. “An Interview with John Banville.” *European English Messenger* 6.1 (1997): 13-19. The quote is from page 14.

itself.²⁸ That Morrow realises this is epitomised by both his rendering of A and the descriptions he gives of the paintings he is authenticating.²⁹

The only real painting is the eighth painting of which the reader does not get an analysis. This last painting is “*Birth of Athena: Jean Vaublin (1684-1731)*” (230). That the completed text itself is the last painting is definite, as indicated by the title of the painting. Also, the fact that it is painted by Vaublin and belongs to the Behrens are self-referential markers that tie *The Book of Evidence* and *Ghosts* firmly to *Athena* for the reader. Morrow’s dalliances with A, which function as an interrogation of art, always take place within the house on Rue Street. This house, recalling other Banvillean houses, symbolises the house of fiction Gabriel Godkin decides to work from and within in *Birchwood*, as Murphy (*Irish Fiction*) has also observed. This house thus becomes the site of the imaginative recalibration that will allow a being to ‘live’, if only “for an hour or two” (227).

The trilogy, considered together with *Birchwood*, comes full circle in *Athena* (both in terms of the last ‘true’ painting and A’s and Morrow’s relationship) to bring readers back to Gabriel’s initial decision but with a difference: the macabre reality Gabriel experienced is now transformed into an experience that begets Being through an intense and responsible scrutiny of life; the “marvellous edifice” has indeed been erected (2). However, the word “edifice” and Freddie’s divulgence in *Ghosts* that the Behrens bought a Vaublin (authenticated by Professor Kreutznaer) thinking it was real although it was actually fake hints at the fraud at the heart of the work of art *Athena*. This is a necessary hoax though. The work of art readers hold in their hands

²⁸ It is precisely because Freddie confuses the two (art and lived experience) in *The Book of Evidence* that his imagination is considered to be a failure.

²⁹ Banville’s use of ekphrasis will be explored in the following chapter.

is necessarily fake at the same time that it is real because art is not reality but only presents a reality made strange, a perspective that Banville has held from the very beginning in *Birchwood*.

But the “edifice” does not only come into being through Morrow’s interactions with A; we must also consider Aunt Corky’s “intimately dramatic relationship with the world at large” (29). Morrow does not, ostensibly, know what to make of Aunt Corky and her “many versions of her gaudy life” (22). When imagining her, he says that “unfed by experience, or, as yet, by art, [his] imagination faltered.” Aunt Corky, however, has no such hesitation. A master storyteller, she is “not content until narrative had been spun into yard” (23); the facts hardly concern her. She is the quintessential Nietzschean heroine: “She lied with such simplicity and sincere conviction that really it was not lying at all but a sort of continuing reinvention of the self,” a “solid apparition constantly stepping forth from its own aura” (22, 24).

But Morrow’s puzzlement seems only to be a posture; a “giveaway” as he puts it (24). When he admits to “inventing” within his narrative, he is surely spinning the same yarns Aunt Corky does for “when [does he] not use such locutions?” And it is precisely these “locutions” that are necessary because he needs to invent himself as thoroughly as Aunt Corky does. Thus at the end of *Athena*, when Morrow states that “[he has] written,” we see that A, and Morrow, does live. He shall “call it living” (233).

But Freddie’s question remains. Is he amongst the living or the dead? Has he managed to realise himself at last? The answer, necessarily, is no. For the failure of the artist is a necessary failure. The imagination is the ‘necessary angel’, to borrow Wallace Steven’s phrase, but it cannot illuminate all the mysteries. It can only illuminate selective moments, like Woolf’s ‘moments of being’, in a particular instant

because art, ultimately, is not life. As Brendan McNamee has observed, “[providing] a convincing analogue for the real world’ does not quite equate with ‘depicting the real world’” (*Quest* 5). Art can only render how life *appears* to be, which underscores the subjective and temporal vision of things and life it can offer. It can never be a definitive statement about the world.

Like Beckett’s, Banville’s vision is “neither pessimistic nor optimistic; like all true art, it simply *is*” (Banville, “Beckett’s Last Words” 383, emphasis in original). If Freddie struggles, it is because the struggle is the process, and the process is what contains meaning. As Banville has said in “Fiction and the Dream,” the code in the dream cannot be decoded, it can only be presented. What Banville, and Freddie, is trying to do is present that dream so that it can be made real, not so that it can be deciphered—the mystery of life, of things, must always remain inherent in the work of art, just like the fictional Vaublin’s paintings. The mystery is part of the reason for the incessant striving of the artistic imagination, and also why the figuring of Freddie, as phantom, is utterly appropriate.

‘A Pictured World’: *The Sea*

The Sea’s themes of memory, loss and the underlying search for meaning are no different from Banville’s previous novels. Max Morden, the narrator of *The Sea*, is similarly working through these problems as he comes to terms with his wife’s death. In “Fiction and the Dream,” Banville says that, “One of the strong themes of the book [*The Sea*] is the way in which the far past can seem far more present to us than the present itself, especially as one begins to get old” (370). In this novel, the recollections of the past mingle with the present as Morden tries to pick up the pieces of his life by returning to the Cedars and this merging of past and present becomes the

site where the artistic imagination tries to order reality. That the search for meaning belongs strictly to, and arises from, the aesthetic realm is signalled when Max declares the aesthetic nature of his experiences.

Describing the transfer of his affections from Mrs Grace to Chloe, Max says that, “There was that moment of insight and intensity at the picnic, with Chloe, under the pine tree, but that was an *aesthetic* rather than amorous or erotic crystallisation” (140, emphasis added). Specific experiences can engender powerful emotions like love that allow a certain apprehension of the other but do not, in themselves, offer meaning. The experience of those emotions only proffers “insight[s]” when it has been processed artistically through the imagination, a point Banville has stressed throughout his oeuvre. In *The Sea*, we see this happening through Max’s narrative (art), that processes past and present (experience) in order to deal with grief: “what I foresaw for the future was in fact, if fact comes into it, a picture of what could only be an imagined past” (96).

As with *Birchwood* and the *Frames Trilogy*, the house Max returns to in *The Sea*, the Cedars, is important. In comparison to the house in *Ghosts*, on Rue Street in *Athena* and Birchwood in *Birchwood*, the Cedars more clearly amalgamates the past and present, signalling a sort of synthesis and development of the themes examined in the previous novels, “a kind of summa of ideational preoccupations” we have seen in his earlier novels (Imhof, “*The Sea*” 169). Whereas the houses in which Freddie resides in *Ghosts* and *Athena* focus on the present moment and the act of birthing, the realisation of a figure in that moment, the Cedars is the location where Max fuses the past and present in order to examine how the imagination creates and intensifies reality: “[the] house in which Morden stays ... itself becomes an emblem of this

fusion of time and imagination in that it is the setting both of Morden's current limbo and of his recalled paradise" (McNamee, *Quest* 245).

Max's recollections of Anna and his childhood become the ground on which he thinks about the present; the processing of grief and memory adds to and affects his life as it is lived: "The truth is, it has all begun to run together, past and possible future and impossible present" (96). This presents, even in the midst of Max's grieving, a development on the absences which preoccupy Freddie in *Ghosts*. In that novel, Freddie hankers after the realisation of the absences he perceives in reality; he desires to make the absent present through the birth of the figures that roam the landscape of *Ghosts* and this eventually comes to fruition in Flora who becomes "pure and present noun" within his narrative (*G* 147). For Max, however, the merging of past and present point to a merging of presence and absence, which implies that the present is at least tangible in a way that it was not in *Birchwood* and the *Frames Trilogy*.

That the substance of the present is more palpable in *The Sea* can be seen through the 'realism' of the text.³⁰ Unlike *Birchwood* and the *Frames Trilogy*, which incorporate more elements of the fantastic within their narratives, *The Sea* remains firmly within the real. Anachronistic events like the appearance of the Molly Maguires or absurd incidents like the spontaneous combustion of the grandmother in *Birchwood*, or the questionable existence of A in *Athena*, are conspicuously missing in this text. Even as Max uses the paintings of Pierre Bonnard to process his feelings about Anna's death, and ultimately uses art to understand life, it is more nuanced and committed to the living, breathing people and world of his present. There is no divorce from reality of the kind we see happening in *The Book of Evidence*, nor is

³⁰ Here 'realism' is not to be understood as a literary category but refers to the way the narrative is grounded within quotidian reality, or what we may term the *real*.

there any attempt to make art the totality of the landscape one apprehends in the narrative of *Ghosts*.

In *The Sea*, the use of art has gone beyond its previous uses to blend successfully with the real world, indicating a more complete union between the two and demonstrating the commitment of the artistic imagination to the real world it is trying to grasp. However, even as the artistic imagination retains its relations with life, the yearning for the absent to be made present, which Max says, in the case of his absent father, “is like nostalgia, a nostalgia for somewhere I have never been,” is still strong (198). This points, ultimately, to the impossibility of a complete realisation of absence in art, just as Anna cannot be brought back to life completely through the narrative.

This also explains why even the more convincing melding together of presence and absence in the text does not imply a completely realised state of Being, what Max calls “the marvellously finished pavilion of the self.” Recalling Nietzsche’s concept of art, which posits that art is a transformation of the artist in his continual quest to realise himself, we understand that Max necessarily cannot have reached an apotheosis in this regard because that would also mean the end of art—the application of “polished tiles” to that “pavilion” of selfhood will and must continue (144). The artist is always in a state of becoming. As the artist creates works of art, life becomes real, taking on a substance that is more than mere living:

On occasions in the past, in moments of inexplicable transport, in my study, perhaps, at my desk, immersed in words, paltry as they may be, for even the second-rater is sometimes inspired, I had felt myself break through the membrane of mere consciousness into another state, one which had no name, where time moved differently if it moved at all,

where I was neither alive nor the other thing and yet more vividly present than ever I could be in what we call, because we must, the real world. (97-8)

Art solidifies Being in a way that daily life cannot; only when reality is filtered through art can it be made real as Banville has stated in an interview with *The Paris Review*: “[the] world is not real for me until it has been pushed through the mesh of language” (McKeon). Art makes the self and world “more vividly present” than “the real world” because it orders and imbues events with meaning retrospectively. This is also why Banville has repeatedly stressed that “all novels are historical. ... Things have to settle down before the novelist can address them” (Haughton and Radley 867). This comment on the historicity of novels is echoed in *The Sea* when Max states that, “The past beats inside me like a second heart” (13). “The past” is memory, and memory, or what Max terms “the real past,” really “matters less than we pretend” (157).

Far from effacing the importance of the past in the novel, what Max says emphasises how memory is not a faithful recollection of things but a creative imagining of them. Thus, when Max appeals to Memory to help him relate a true account of events, he is disappointed (“wait, this is wrong,” 162) and ends up chiding her: “Really Madam Memory, I take back all my praise, if it is Memory herself who is at work here and not some other, more fanciful muse” (163). But it is, indeed, “some other ... muse” at work in the novel rather than memory, which is overtly demonstrated by the recourse to art to make sense of reality. The past comes alive “like a second heart,” and hence also the self as the reference to the “heart” suggests, just as Flora does, not through the entreaty to immutable facts but through the creative imagination that gazes at the world with intensity.

That Max is constantly ‘travelling’ on this journey of self-realisation is most clearly seen in the dream he relates:

A dream it was that drew me here [the Cedars]. In it, I was walking along a country road, that was all. ... I was determinedly on my way somewhere, going home, it seemed, although I did not know what or where exactly home might be. ... Something had broken down, a car, no, a bicycle, a boy’s bicycle, for as well as being the age I am now I was a boy as well, a big awkward boy, yes, and on my way home, it must have been home, or somewhere that had been home, once, and that I would recognise again, when I got there. I had hours of walking to do but I did not mind that, for this was a journey of surpassing but inexplicable importance, one that I must make and was bound to complete. ... I was alone on the road. ... The snow ... was unmarked ... for no one had passed this way and no one would. ... I felt compassion for myself ... this poor lummoX going along dauntlessly ... with ... no promise of homecoming. (24-5)

In this passage, the allusion to Franz Kafka’s parable “Before the Law” is suggested by Max saying, “I was alone on the road ... for no one had passed this way and no one would.” In Kafka’s parable, “a man from the country” arrives and desires “admittance to the law” but is told by the doorkeeper that “he cannot grant admittance at the moment” (148). The man then proceeds to ask if he might be allowed to enter later to which the doorkeeper replies, “It is “possible.” The man thus decides to wait and the wait ends up being the wait of a lifetime. Nearing his end, the man becomes aware of “a radiance that streams inextinguishably from the gateway of the Law” and asks the doorkeeper one last question: “Everyone strives to reach the Law ... so how does it

happen that for all these many years no one but myself has ever begged for admittance?” (149). To this the doorkeeper replies, “No one else could ever be admitted here, since this gate was made only for you. I am now going to shut it” (150).

Like the man in the parable, Max’s journey can only be travelled by him. The journey is unique just as the search for meaning is unique. Bound up with the articulation of self, it is obvious why the journey can only be undertaken by the person who seeks meaning. No other person but Max can supply his life with meaning and define his being. And as the doorkeeper says, admittance to the Law, which in Max’s case can be understood as admittance to ‘being’, to the articulation of self and the endowment of meaning to life, is “possible” but that does not imply a natural realisation of it. The power of the parable comes from the process of waiting that the man undergoes, not what he achieves in the end. The process is the product, just as Max’s walking is “all.”

It is no surprise, therefore, that Max’s dream focuses on the process. He is “determinedly on [his] way somewhere,” a “home, it seemed” but we do not see that destination being reached. What we are given, instead, is the description of the journey home. That this journey involves the past and present is also seen in the way Max is both grown man and boy in the dream. He inhabits both positions at once in the same way his narrative inhabits presence and absence. In the dream, too, is nostalgia, a yearning for a place of belonging “that [he] would recognise again, when [he] got there.” Coming from the Greek *nostos* (home) and *algos* (pain), ‘nostalgia’ is the emotion appropriate to both Anna’s death and Max’s metaphorical and physical loss of home.

But within ‘nostalgia’ also lies a tension that is inherent in all five Banville novels examined here. The longing for home and, consequently, for presence, and the definition of self, coexists with the Nietzschean principle of art and the transfiguration of the artist. At the same time that Banville’s protagonists revel in the potentiality of an endless becoming, they also long for the stability of “an essential, singular self” (S 216). However, the longing is tempered as Max explains: “I was always a distinct no one, whose fiercest wish was to be an indistinct someone.” What can it mean to be “a distinct no one” or “an indistinct someone?” And how does this relate to the act of articulation and to Max’s recollections of Anna? To answer these questions, we will need to look at how the realisation of self—a prevalent concern within Banville’s novels—is presented in this text.

As we have already seen in the discussions above, the act of making the world real is intimately linked with the realisation of the self. Gabriel Godkin, Freddie Montgomery and Max Morden are arguably one and the same in their belief in the redemptive power of the artistic gaze that gives the world back to the perceiver anew, or as Banville would say, *made strange*, through the act of looking. Moreover, because the articulation of experience needs and implies an articulation of self, the work of art that we hold in our hands—the complete narrative—is ‘proof’ of the artist’s existence because “[a] work of art is an artist saying, ‘This is what one man saw, in his brief moment on earth;’” it is “a presentation of evidence” (Keeler). The “presentation of evidence” in every work of art is not only a presentation of the world but also a presentation of the self (just think of Freddie’s book of evidence) who beholds that world in his/her gaze, who presents in art the “interiorisation of things ... [that results in] a different order of understanding” (Banville, “Survivors” 339). The unequivocal association between the presentation of self and world is distinctly

stressed when Banville characterises himself as “a marionette you see before you, trying to represent” (Haughton and Radley 868). By inhabiting the figure of a marionette, Banville is ‘living’ Franz Kafka’s assertion, which he often quotes, that ‘the artist is the man with nothing to say’. As a puppet, Banville, as artist, does not claim to have volition in the way the man who is not an artist does. The ‘living’ done in the quotidian world of everyday life is clearly demarcated from the artist who exists in a different realm.

It is in this way that the artistic self can be continually ‘remade’ because there is no clear personality in the first place. But that an entity is present to be worked on is clear: the marionette may not possess volition in the same way that a ‘man of the world’ does but it inhabits an artistic space. The figure of the marionette is distinct but the roles it can play are not. Hence, it is always in the process of becoming. Understood in this way, it is no wonder then that Max would rather be “an indistinct someone” rather than “a distinct no one.” To be “indistinct” does not mean an absent being but merely that this being is awaiting definition; but to be a distinct nobody means a clear and already solidified absence of being.

The quality of indistinctiveness so valued in self-articulation is why the metaphors of painting and acting feature so prominently in *The Sea*. In fact, Max’s relationship with and subsequent marriage to Anna takes on meaning primarily as a vehicle with which to realise the self:

I had plunged into the louche world of Anna and her father as if into another medium, a fantastical one wherein the rules as I had known them up to then did not apply, where everything shimmered and nothing was real, or was real but looked fake, like that platter of perfect fruit in Charlie’s flat. Now I was being invited to become a

denizen of these excitingly alien deeps. What Anna proposed to me, there in the dusty summer dusk on the corner of Sloane Street, was not so much marriage as the chance to fulfil the fantasy of myself. (104-5)

When Max relates the world of Charlie and Anna Weiss as a “fantastical” reality that affords Max the opportunity to “fulfil the fantasy of [himself],” the language he uses is language that can be similarly applied to describe a work of art. Words like “medium,” “everything shimmered and nothing was real,” or “alien deeps” make it seem as if Max were appraising or analysing a painting or art object in terms of the materials used and the texture of its surfaces, or describing the effect it gives as a form of performance. In this respect, the illustration of Charlie and Anna’s world is doubling up as an illustration of the textual world of the novel itself. The liminal space within the pages of the text is replicated within the Weisses’ “alien deeps.” Being with Anna and gaining entry to her world allows Max to attempt to realise whatever version of himself he wishes. The “moment of earthly expression” Max is looking for cannot be attained in life as it entails a transformation of the “flesh” into “the gossamer of unsuffering spirit” (185); as something insubstantial, this “gossamer of unsuffering spirit” can only be achieved in a realm outside life: the realm of art³¹.

The “dramatic leap into the thick of the action” “Max envisions for himself “onstage” thus takes place within situations that are ‘artfully’ contrived, such as the situations Max finds himself in in the narrative. Art is the space and process that enables one to be “expressed” (185). But this space is not the realm where the apogee of selfhood can be reached; it is, instead, the space in which “the continuous rehearsal” of life takes place (184), only one of the many opportunities for Max to

³¹ Banville precludes the realm of death as a space in which the self may be realized when the rejection of “a posthumous transfiguration” is stated within the text (*S* 185). The “transfiguration” must take place within the realm of the living but in a different space from the *lived*, as in the living done in the real world of quotidian reality.

perfect his role-playing because it is in the “rehearsal” that one may attain ‘expression’, if it comes at all.

When Max says that he is “a parody of [himself],” and that “[he is] becoming [his] own ghost,” (128, 194), we should hence understand these observations to mean a continual rebirth of being rather than an effacement of the self. As John Keats expresses in a letter to Richard Woodhouse (27 October 1818), “A poet is the most unpoetical of anything in existence, because he has no Identity — he is continually in for and filling some other body. ... he has no self, ... [has] no nature” (184).

Although going back to the Cedars may seem to be a regressive move, Max’s movement ‘back in time’ is seamlessly woven with his present in such a way that enhances it: his imaginative recollections of the time spent with the Graces becomes part of his ruminations on Anna and serve to intensify both past and present experiences. This amalgamation of past and present conveys a sense of timelessness to the reader that should be understood as deliberate on the narrator’s part. The narration that stands outside of time emphasises the artistic space described earlier. The realm of art is beyond time because the descriptions of the Things it presents by the art of looking intensely should be an image “formed over generations” as Rainer Maria Rilke expresses in the *Duino Elegies* (385). The image transcends time when it undergoes the treatment of the artistic imagination that takes that thing into itself “to change them” “within” and “endlessly” (Rilke 387).

It is the endless looking, through the artistic imagination, that effects Being. The apparent stasis portrayed in the narrative through the timelessness of art is the repetitive pattern (again, another art term) that connects *Birchwood*, the novels of the art trilogy and *The Sea*. When we apprehend this, we come to understand Banville’s artistic method with more depth, realising why plot and the sequential ordering of

events or time is unimportant to the narrative. What his protagonists are doing is rehearsing themselves over and over again in the space of art by looking at things repetitiously. Consequently, it does not matter if anachronistic events or people ‘interrupt’ the narrative, or if past and present melt into each other. If one births being, and hence selfhood, by looking, then the act of looking at the world rises above the boundaries of time, especially since the desire is to escape from the confines of the flesh to turn it into “the gossamer of unsuffering spirit” (S 185).

Conclusion

The analysis in this chapter situates John Banville in relation to modernism and postmodernism and has shown that although Banville utilises postmodernist narrative strategies, he cannot be classified as postmodernist because of the desire for order and truth that his protagonists display. This desire, which cannot be fulfilled, drives the narratives we read and become the impetus for the search for being through art, in particular visual art. The image is of prime importance because it is through the act of looking intensely that one is able to take the world into the self and therefore exist for that moment. Gabriel Godkin’s decision to remain in Birchwood thus sets the wheels in motion for the narrators of the art trilogy and *The Sea*. Realising that a cavalier attitude about the world does not satisfy—and this is the overt rejection of postmodernist aesthetics—Freddie and Max arrive at the recognition that although their desire for order may never be fulfilled, the possibility of experiencing the real, that is being, still justifies their attempts at articulation. But unlike Woolf’s protagonists who institute a different order so as to endow their experience with meaning and wholeness, Banville’s narrators labour under no such delusion (as I

imagine Freddie would term it). Order has disappeared and they may have nostalgia for it but know that it cannot be recaptured.

Consequently, readers witness the jettisoning of plot and chronological structure as the narrators probe at imaginative recollections of their experience instead of trying to represent life as they see or experience it. The form of the novels therefore indicates that though the world remains the centre of the narratives, the impossibility of representation compels, in the words of Italo Calvino, an “indirect vision” of life (4). Like Calvino, Banville is trying to evade “the weight, the inertia, [and] the opacity of the world” that like Medusa will petrify the writer into stone if he should attempt to translate this “opacity” into his work (Calvino 4). This refusal to represent, in the sense of mimetic representation, becomes the first step towards being for Banville’s protagonists, and explains the use of visual art in Banville’s novels: the use of art in art becomes the “indirect vision” needed by the contemporary artist.

This chapter and the previous one discuss Woolf’s and Banville’s work separately so as to understand their artistic methods as they relate to the specific contexts in which they write. In the next chapter, I bring their work together to understand the changing form of the novel through the evolving relationship between the artistic imagination and experience. The imagination’s redefined engagement with the world reflects the aims of each of these writers and accounts for the change in form and methods they exhibit. I will address Woolf’s and Banville’s presentation of consciousness and self and their use of ekphrasis as ways by which to problematize the act of writing, focusing on the changing concept of the artist and the evolving role of the imagination. I will also locate both writers’ work in a continuum that accounts for the changing form of the novel through the theories and ideas of Brian Richardson

and Alan Warren Freidman, establishing an artistic genealogy from Woolf to Banville.

Chapter Three

The Changing Novel Form: Virginia Woolf and John Banville

... Are we, perhaps, *here* just for saying:
 House,
 Bridge, Fountain, Gate, Jug, Fruit tree, Window,—
 possibly: Pillar, Tower? ... but for *saying*,
 remember,
 oh, for such saying as never the things themselves
 hoped so intensely to be. ...

...
 Praise this world to the Angel, not the untellable: you
 can't impress him with the splendour you've felt; in
 the cosmos
 where he more feelingly feels you're only a novice. So
 show him
 some simple thing, refashioned by age after age,
 till it lives in our hands and eyes as a part of
 ourselves.
 Tell him *things*. ...

... These things that live
 on departure
 understand when you praise them: fleeting, they
 look for
 rescue through something in us, the most fleeting of
 all.
 Want us to change them entirely, within our
 invisible hearts,
 into—oh, endlessly—into ourselves! Whosoever we
 are.

...
 Look, I am living. On what? Neither childhood
 nor future
 are growing any less..... Supernumerous existence
 wells up in my heart.

Rainer Maria Rilke, *Duino Elegies*³² (90-2, emphasis in original)

In the previous two chapters, I analysed Virginia Woolf's and John Banville's texts in relation to modernism and postmodernism respectively, arguing that Woolf's

³² Taken from *The Possibility of Being: A Selection of Poems by Rainer Maria Rilke*. Published together with *Letters to a Young Poet*.

texts exhibit characteristic modernist traits while displaying her unique perspective and methods, whereas Banville's work moves beyond postmodernism even though he uses postmodernist strategies. I see the relationship between art and life in Woolf's writing as *representation* and in Banville's work as *relation*, which I will explain in the following sections. I will also show how their fiction demonstrates these relationships through the different ways in which the artistic imagination is seen to relate to external reality.

The focus in this chapter is on the contemporary novel as exemplified by Banville. As such, Woolf's work acts as a springboard with which to trace the development of the novel form. Her novels' presentation of consciousness, narration and record of the (modernist) artist's struggle with expression serves as a backdrop to Banville's narrative methods and helps us to look at the changing novel form historically, especially in terms of the evolving relationship between the artistic imagination and reality.

The different ways in which the artistic imagination works for Woolf and Banville will be explained and supported in two ways. First, by an examination of how they characterise the relationship between the self and world in their novels, particularly through the presentation of a subject's consciousness and memory; and second, through their use of ekphrasis. Through the discussion, I will locate Woolf and Banville as existing along a spectrum of 'unnatural narratives' to appreciate the continuities and discontinuities between the two to understand the changes the novel form has undergone. I argue that the problematization of writing continues to be the central concern of the critical contemporary novel but the techniques with which writers approach this problem have changed in response to beliefs that are distinctive to different periods of literary creation.

Unnatural Narratives

In *Unnatural Voices: Extreme Narration in Modern and Contemporary Fiction* (2006), Brian Richardson states that in the evolution of narrative there is a move “from the psychological novel to more impressionistic renderings of consciousness to the dissolution of consciousness into textuality, and a corresponding move from human-like narrators to quasi-human, non-human, and anti-human speakers,” and posits that these narrative manoeuvres, through experimental narrative techniques, which possess a “defamiliarising power,” “reject ... mimetic representation” (13, 14, 16).

What Richardson observes is salient to this study because what he describes can be applied to both Virginia Woolf’s and John Banville’s work. Although Richardson’s study is mainly concerned with postmodern texts as they most obviously exhibit the characteristics of ‘unnatural narratives’, he also discusses modernist texts as narrations that display incipient forms of the ‘unnatural’ and acknowledges that “there is a close connection between the daring though subtle practices of the modernists and the more obvious techniques of the postmodernists” (137). Richardson sees these different narratives not as occurring within clear categories of narratives like those put forward by theorists like Gérard Genette in *Narrative Discourse* (1972) but as existing along a spectrum that would allow for narratives “that cannot be reduced to a single narrative voice or position” and which takes into account the proliferation of multiple perspectives and techniques to be found in fiction (139).

Richardson is not alone in recognising the multiplicity of perspectives in ‘unnatural’ narratives. Alan Warren Friedman also acknowledges the multiplicity of perspectives presented by the modern novel and asserts that it is precisely this

multiplicity that makes a novel *modern* in comparison to what he calls ‘univalent art’, where “a single, unambivalent narrative stance dominates” (122). Friedman terms novels that exhibit this multiplicity of perspectives ‘multivalent art’ and states that these narratives are considered modern “not as a temporal designation but as a quality that has been called psychological, open, indeterminate, and that often manifests itself through self-consciousness in narration. Such an approach conceives of an artistic creation as process, still in motion even when complete, a finished edifice with all the scaffolding of its construction not only still in place but permanently so” (130).

More importantly, these novels can be seen as “psycho-aesthetic novels,” which are “fictions whose paradigm is the modern artist gamely struggling with the intractable materials bequeathed him: himself and the world about him” (Friedman 138). It is in this sense that I understand and classify Laurence Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy* and Miguel Cervantes’ *Don Quixote* to be modern and progenitors of the unnatural narratives that come after them, and it is through these perspectives above that I will trace the development of the novel from Woolf to Banville.

Considering both Richardson’s and Friedman’s theories allows us to chart the development of the novel in Woolf’s and Banville’s work through a focus on the problematization of writing. Both writers’ novels are modern and unnatural in the senses of the words that Friedman and Richardson use respectively, and their texts exhibit experimental techniques and narratives that align them with writers such as Cervantes and Sterne, who write critically about the artistic process and who continue and develop the narrative strategies of this particular tradition. But why should their narratives be considered unnatural? What are the markers that single them out as such?

The basis on which Woolf and Banville can be classified as unnatural is in their disillusionment with previous modes of thought or action. It is these that impel the change of form and writing that both writers exhibit in their work. Patricia Oudek Laurence states that Woolf “practices a deconstructive mode of writing” that “is criticizing the logocentrism of Western thought, and she unmasks, through certain kinds of silence, ... men’s claims to systematic knowledge, the expressive of the Western alphabet and language, in general” (216-7). According to Laurence, this criticism exhibits itself in Woolf’s texts particularly through the exploration and embodiment of “women’s ways of being and knowing” (217).

The focus on women signals Woolf’s departure from the ‘natural’ modes of understanding which includes what Laurence identifies as male “systematic knowledge” and language, and directs the reader’s attention to the unification of silence and language, the “twin houses of being” that are representative of Woolf’s major female characters’ sense of being (217). This ‘unnatural’ embodiment of “being and knowing” is reflected in the emphasis on the inner life in Woolf’s novels and the corresponding representation of the fluidity and permeability of consciousness embodied in characters like Mrs Ramsay in *To the Lighthouse*, which are juxtaposed against the “hard as a nut” male being (Woolf, *RO* 100).

But Woolf’s criticism of the “logocentrism of Western thought” does not just address nor only encompass male modes of knowing. Woolf also sets apart her unique method of understanding truth by juxtaposing it against other commonly accepted, ‘legitimate’ or ‘sane’ epistemologies. For example, when Woolf discusses the significance of illness in *On Being Ill* (1930), she starts by ruminating on the “tremendous ... spiritual change ... it brings” and sees the change in perspective illness initiates as being able to uncover “undiscovered countries” and “wastes and

deserts of the soul.” Illness, like art, becomes the catalyst that uproots “ancient and obdurate oaks ... in us” and causes people to “wake thinking to find [themselves] in the presence of angels and the harpers” (3). This vision of illness that Woolf paints is like the vision she allows Lily to glimpse when she completes her painting in *To the Lighthouse*. Like art, illness catalyses a different mode of knowing, and hence being.

In addition, illness and its links to the body are also contrasted with the importance that others attach to the mind:

... literature does its best to maintain that its concern is with the mind; that the body is a clear sheet of plain glass through which the soul looks straight and clear ... On the contrary, the very opposite is true. All day, all night the body intervenes ... But of all this daily drama of the body there is no record. People always write of the doings of the mind; the thoughts that come to it; its noble plans; *how the mind has civilised the universe*. ... Nor is the reason far to seek. To look these things squarely in the face would need the courage of a lion tamer; *a robust philosophy; a reason rooted in the bowels of the earth*. (4-5, emphasis added)

In this passage, the contrasts between male and female modes of knowing (as Laurence describes) are recast in the dichotomy between the mind and the body. Here, Woolf is advocating a different mode of understanding reality that takes into account the body and the “daily drama” that it undergoes. Ignoring the body, as Woolf sees it, becomes the severance of a vital life force, physically and metaphorically. The account borne out of the mind, which has “civilised the universe,” is a partial and incomplete explanation of and for experience because it has neglected the essential other half of the equation that daily “intervenes” but is disregarded. What is needed is

“courage” like the sort we see in Lily Briscoe who perseveres to finish her painting in the midst of self-doubt and death. But more than that, the artist needs “a robust philosophy” and “a reason rooted in the bowels of the earth.”

The need for courage and the unification between mind and body in the above passage is not an isolated example; it is also echoed in Woolf’s “The Narrow Bridge of Art.” In this essay, Woolf discusses the new novelists who want to portray the “modern mind” as needing “all of [their] courage” in order to write novels that “will show [themselves] capable of rising high from the ground, ... [but] keeping at the same time in touch with the amusements and idiosyncrasies of human character in daily life” (*GR* 20, 23, 22). Novels that encompass both mind and body will be able to rise (mind) yet remain tethered to “human character” (body), which is necessary if they are to “give the relation of the mind to general ideas” while at the same time expressing “its [the mind’s] soliloquy in solitude” (*GR* 19).

As the examples above indicate, Woolf’s unnaturalness stems from her appeal to a different system of knowledge: seeing male systems of knowledge as inadequate to account for human experience, Woolf institutes, in its place, a more inclusive system of knowledge, one that could be termed female but which also includes male modes of knowing. And this is where she most obviously differs from Banville. Although both Woolf and Banville reject certain systems of knowledge, Woolf does not reject the *idea* of a system whereas Banville clearly does.

In Woolf’s case, understanding human nature and experience arises from a readjustment, not abandonment, of a systematic form of knowing, what Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane term “an aesthetic system of positioning” (26). “The question of art ... becomes,” according to Terry Eagleton, “not one of imposing order on chaos, but of *transforming* one kind of order into another” (312). This

transformation of the aesthetic system is part of Woolf's "deconstructive" act and acts to incorporate different perspectives and voices so as to approach the real to adequately account for the external reality within which her characters move.

Banville's characters, however, have no such alternate system to fall back on. Discussing Banville's science tetralogy, Jackson states that "what we now see as postmodern understandings of knowledge [appear] individually to an array of Renaissance scientific thinkers" (512). Following that, Jackson observes that Banville's art trilogy tackle "the situation of living everyday life in the context of postmodern understandings of knowledge and truth" (510). Considering the science tetralogy and art trilogy chronologically, we see that Banville offers a historical picture of the changes in our understanding of knowledge and suggests that "the most intense thinking will naturally tend to press ever onward until it strikes the kinds of perimeters that postmodernism has taken as its centre of interest" (512). Jackson's view of the science tetralogy and his subsequent comment that the art trilogy investigates the spreading of "postmodern conceptuality ... into a wide array of intellectual arenas and even into everyday life" places Banville's novels into a continuum that traces the move from what Friedman calls the univalent mode of understanding and writing to the multivalent.

We can already see, at this point, the first signs of the change from Woolf to Banville. For Woolf, the idea of order cannot be abandoned. Lily's constant question—"What does it mean then, what can it all mean?"—expressed in different ways throughout *To the Lighthouse*, remains the centre of Woolf's art (159). If Eagleton's observation above is correct, then the presence of order is assumed: each novel Woolf writes attempts to answer Lily's question with different transformations of order. But Banville eschews such a notion. His protagonists may ask Lily's

question but they never hope to receive a satisfactory answer: “the whole damn thing is chance, pure chance;” order is a desire that always recedes from their grasp (*BE* 19). Daily life beset with “postmodern understandings of knowledge and truth” removes even the assumption that toil or effort can bring about transformed order.

Banville’s art trilogy thus chronicles a world where “the disillusionment with knowledge” is complete and taken for granted (Jackson 515). Freddie Montgomery, the protagonist of the trilogy, is a character that is not tethered to any system of knowledge when we meet him. Like the Renaissance scientists and Gabriel Swan of the science tetralogy, he has studied “statistics, probability theory ... [esoteric] stuff” in order to “[erect] a solid structure on the very sands that were everywhere, always, shifting under [him]” but upon recognising their ineffectualness has abandoned them and is “without convictions as to the nature of reality, truth, ethics, all those big things” (*BE* 18).

However, unlike his predecessors who despaired upon their realisation of the inadequacies of these different systems of knowledge, Freddie is cavalier about his situation. But it is this very insouciance that Banville does not allow readers to accept. Although Banville presents a character that seems to revel in the uncertain reality he lives in, he does not, like the postmodernists, accept this circumstance unequivocally. In fact, Banville rejects the indifference Freddie projects, which is most clearly shown in the violence and callousness of Freddie’s crime that signals his estrangement from reality.

It is this central problem of the art trilogy that sets Banville apart from postmodernist writing. The failure of imagination that sets in motion Freddie’s attempt to birth life clearly indicates a similar need to the modernists’ search for truth but with an important difference: Banville/ Freddie is not looking for a system to

replace others; the exiguous reach and power of particular epistemological systems does not need rescuing, it is a fact that is taken for granted. What Banville is trying to effect through art is a glimpse or illumination into the central mystery of reality. Gabriel Godkin in *Birchwood* does not—cannot—hope for more than “those rare moments when a little light breaks forth, and something is not explained, not forgiven, but merely illuminated” (33).

Different knowledge systems reflect the same randomness and the appeal to any one epistemological framework cannot be the solution to Freddie’s problem. Even science, which Freddie Montgomery turned to “in order to make the lack of certainty more manageable” reflects “a vision of an unpredictable, seething world which was eerily familiar to [him], to whom matter had always seemed a swirl of chance collisions” (*BE* 18). As such, Banville indicates that even systems of knowledge which we may take for granted as objective are not fool proof and cannot account for experience satisfactorily. This view aligns Banville with the postmodernists who perceive reality as absurd and mock attempts to understand it definitively or arrange it into meaningful units. However, what differentiates Banville from them are his attempts to speak the thing itself through art in order to effect glimpses into beauty or, in other words, truth.

Considering this, seeing Banville’s work as a whole as, according to Joseph McMinn, a form of “imaginative consolation” is possible, but reductive (“Exalted” 17). Banville’s protagonists are not trying to find consolation; their acceptance of their tragic situation is the starting point from which writing begins. This is clearly indicated when Gabriel Godkin ends his narrative by admitting art’s inability to encompass experience but accepts this fact:

I began to write, ... and thought that at last I had discovered a form which would contain and order all my losses. I was wrong. There is no form, no order, only echoes and coincidences, sleight of hand, dark laughter. I accept it.

... This world. I feel that if I could understand it I might then begin to understand the creatures who inhabit it. But I do not understand it. ...

Intimations abound, but they are felt only, and words fail to transfix them. (170-71)

Gabriel submits to the inexact nature of writing and confesses his inability to comprehend his world. However, he is not seeking consolation from art; what he seeks, as we see in the art trilogy with Freddie Montgomery, is a way to effect glimpses into the real. Although Banville's protagonists grieve for their loss of certainty, they do not hope to recapture it because that desire, being desire, is not attainable. They may, arguably, find momentary consolation—perhaps in Max Morden's case in *The Sea*—but that is not their aim. The strangeness of the world persists. Illumination may break forth at times, and usually unexpectedly, but there is never an indication that these brief 'sightings' of beauty will last.

Representation versus Relation

In light of the above, we may thus begin to locate Woolf and Banville along a continuum. The novel may be thought of as moving through four phases, which I term correspondence, representation, fabrication, and relation. These categories trace what Richardson observes and describes in *Unnatural Voices* and delineate the novel's move away from the traditional centre of mimetic writing.

The first phase, correspondence, correlates roughly with traditional realism and what Ian Watt calls “the impression of fidelity to human experience” (13). The Edwardian novelists that Woolf rejects fall into this first category and she questions the validity of their assumption of verisimilitude that presupposes the description of external objects and circumstances necessarily depicts human nature. This category broadly encompasses ‘traditional’ novels such as Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), which displays what Alan Friedman calls “univalence” (122). They purport to be representing reality *as it is* and adopt “a single, unambivalent narrative stance” (Friedman 122), exhibiting what David Lodge expresses as “a kind of underlying confidence ... that reality can be known, that the truth about human affairs can be told, and that such knowledge and truth can be shared collectively” (*Consciousness* 49).

The second phase, representation, is where Woolf belongs, together with other modernist writers like T.S. Eliot, Joseph Conrad and Gertrude Stein. They reject correspondence but believe that there are other methods more suited to the representation of reality. As such, they advocate different narrative methods and strategies that interweave external and internal realities, together with a sense of history, which includes myth, for a more accurate depiction of experience, what Richardson terms, as stated earlier, “more impressionistic renderings of consciousness.” This second category may be further fleshed out by considering Richard Kearney’s concept of the changing definitions of the artist in *The Wake of the Imagination* (1988). Generally speaking, the modernists, together with Woolf, straddle Kearney’s craftsman/ inventor categories.

Woolf emphasises the need for synthesis (male/ female; language/ silence; body/ mind; outer/ inner) and hence rejects previous narrative methods which she

deems too restrictive and unsuitable to the task of relaying the manifold impressions of experience. She firmly believes in the importance of external reality and one's experience of it but shifts the focus from external events to internal realities and rhythms and their relation to experience. As an 'inventor' of new ways of ordering experience in order to arrive at truth, Woolf "[replaces the] theocentric paradigm ... with the anthropocentric paradigm" and follows the "modern aesthetic [that] promotes the idea of the artist as one who not only emulates but replaces God" (Kearney, *Wake* 12). A world without order needs a new 'God' who can offer, perhaps impose, a different order to make things cohere and Woolf, as author, becomes this new ordering force.

It is this sustained search for order, or in other words truth, that most clearly 'aligns' Woolf with the craftsman category as well because, experimental techniques notwithstanding, Woolf and the modernists still yearn for the absolute and try to capture this absolute in and through art. What Kearney terms the "'original' activity" of the divine, which defines the craftsman, remains the (absent) centre of modernist art (*Wake* 12). The category of representation thus consists of writers, like Woolf, who still believe in the possibility of meaning and who appeal to or institute either a unique order of experience, or fuse different types of epistemologies in order to arrive at a more accurate picture of reality.

The third category, fabrication, refers to the group of writers—we may call them postmodernist—whose scepticism, according to Max F. Schulz, has resulted in the "rejection of the historical perspective" and its concomitant "explanatory systems." This causes them "to make of the resultant world a labyrinth—an exitless fun-house, hall of mirrors, or box-within-box." In other words, "[the] covertly organic

has been discarded in favour of the frankly artificial”³³ (142). Fidelity to external reality is discarded because that is an unattainable aim. The gulf between reality and art is deemed too wide to bridge and there is a breakdown and discarding of systems rather than, as in the case of the second category, a replacement.

Novels in this category exhibit ontological and epistemological instability but there is no attempt, unlike in modernist works, to offer readers alternative redeeming fictions. These “little narratives,” according to Francois Lyotard, work according to “rules ... agreed on by its present players and [are] subject to eventual cancellation (60, 66). They are not totalising accounts of order. The absurdity of experience is flaunted and ontological uncertainty is something to be played with and made obvious rather than assuaged. Examples of works belonging to this category include Vladimir Nabokov’s *Pale Fire* (1962) and Italo Calvino’s *If on a Winter’s Night a Traveller* (1979). These works undermine knowledge and being as we know it and readers are unable to derive closure from these texts. These qualities in postmodern texts, Daniel Jernigan suggests, makes them particularly suitable for the “[questioning of] the boundary between the real and the artificial, the constructed and the extant” (2).

The last category, relation, is where I locate Banville. Like the writers in the previous category, Banville rejects “explanatory systems” as inadequate and the artificial picture he paints of reality in his novels is flaunted conspicuously. Nonetheless, he does not put forward the same view of reality that the postmodernists do. Flaunting the artificiality of the work’s construction is not a gleeful parody or playful celebration of the lack of meaning and beauty in reality; it is the depiction of an inescapable condition that his protagonists experience. The crucial difference between the previous category and Banville’s writing is the spectre of failure that

³³ This comparison between the “organic” and the “artificial” is also a comparison between modernism with its emphasis on organic form and postmodernism, which rejects the notion of completion.

everywhere haunts his protagonists who try to find their way out of the labyrinthine narratives they construct for themselves. This failure is paramount because it both indicates the attempt to reach for beauty or truth and the deficiency of that attempt.

Richard Kearney's concepts of the artist as inventor and bricoleur can also further extend our understanding of this last category. The artist as inventor, as described above, plays God. However, the bricoleur does not engage in original 'creative' activity but "plays around with fragments of meaning which he himself has not created" (13). Banville spans the inventor/bricoleur divide and these two categories correspond to his artist-protagonists desires and actions respectively.

On the one hand, his protagonists (Gabriel Godkin; Freddie Montgomery) desire to be little gods of their fictional universes, as Freddie puts it, but they are unable to control their narratives in the manner that traditional mimetic fiction or modernist texts do. They are not omniscient narrators who dictate their created worlds and characters definitively nor are they able to instate order that will allow disparate people and events to fall in place as a whole. They instead frequently misinterpret people or events in the text and find their reality surreal. They want to be Kearney's inventors but are unable to achieve the wished for coherence and mastery of their experience.

Moreover, their solipsistic first-person narrations underscore the limited knowledge they have about their world and their relations with it. Although they yearn for the absolute, they are unable, unlike the modernists, to accept the fiction that stands in for it. Finding a naïve belief in truth to be untenable—indeed, harmful—their actions/ narrations fall into the category of the bricoleur and we see form and narrative reflecting and revolving around the piecing together of "fragments of meaning" which do not originate from the protagonists themselves (13). It is,

however, the artful play and manipulation of these fragments that enable glimpses of truth and beauty in rare moments within Banville's texts. But, as will be explained below, these moments of illumination are unlike Woolf's moments of being, and do not suggest that truth always lurks behind appearances and is waiting to be discovered.

The difference between Woolf's and Banville's beliefs about the relationship between art and reality is thus reflected in their characters' attitudes towards art in their novels. For Woolf, the artistic imagination orders reality in an organic and synthesised manner that can make experience cohere by providing different perspectives with which to view it—Friedman's "multifarious narration" (133)—whereas Banville's concept of the artistic imagination entails the intense looking at things—the creating of what Alain Robbe-Grillet calls "presence"³⁴—to bring the world, and hence the subject, into being.

In *To the Lighthouse*, Lily Briscoe struggles with her painting and with understanding the enigma that is Mrs Ramsay because she is seeking a different, seemingly more authentic, system with which to understand external reality, demonstrating the direction Woolf's artistic imagination follows. Lily hankers after a system that can encompass reality beyond the solipsistic and subjective self, the 'I' that Charles Tansley exemplifies. She wants to capture Mrs Ramsay's apprehension of reality in her painting, an apprehension that rejects the "logocentrism" Patricia Oudek Laurence mentions and that can encompass difference. She wants to be able to portray in art what Mrs Ramsay, in the passage below, intuitively:

³⁴ This concept of presence should be understood in the sense that Alain Robbe-Grillet uses it in "A Future for the Novel," in *For a New Novel: Essays on Fiction* (1963): "Instead of this universe of 'signification' ... we must try ... to construct a world both more solid and more immediate. Let it be first of all by their *presence* that objects and gestures establish themselves ..." (21).

It could not last [Mrs Ramsay] knew, but at that moment her eyes were so clear that they seemed to go round the table unveiling each of these people, and their thoughts and feelings, without effort like a light stealing under water so that its ripples and the reeds in it and the minnows balancing themselves, and the sudden silent trout are all lit up hanging, trembling. ... whatever they said had also this quality, as if what they said was like the movement of a trout when, at the same time, one can see the ripple and the gravel, something to the right, something to the left; and the whole is held together;" (116)

Mrs Ramsay's understanding of reality in this instance stands apart from the "active life" she participates in which is characterised by the doing and saying of daily life. Instead of "netting and separating one thing from another" or "urging herself forward," Mrs Ramsay "[says] nothing" (116), personifying what Laurence calls Woolf's "twin houses of being" that is manifested particularly through silence. In this state of interaction between silence and language, which we may here also term stasis and movement, Mrs Ramsay is able to rise above the 'I' to unveil the people around her "without effort" and to see the "whole" that escapes most other people. But this moment cannot last; it is no coincidence that the paragraph immediately following Mrs Ramsay's revelation starts with, "Ah, but how long do you think it'll last?" (116). Woolf may desire the absolute but she cannot dismiss the fragility of this contact with truth and Mrs Ramsay poignantly acknowledges this fact even before her experience is described. Woolf's system of knowing and knowledge is not secure and needs to be continually remade.

In fact, this passage is reminiscent of Woolf's description of her writing process in "A Sketch of the Past" and *To the Lighthouse* is the artistic product that most

obviously reflects the tenets Woolf describes in that work. When Woolf writes that “one is living all the time in relation to certain background rods or conceptions” and that the recognition and subsequent artful manipulation of these are necessary precursors to the foregrounded truths that then realise themselves in the text, she is describing what we see happening to Mrs Ramsay in the passage above (*MB* 85).

Like Woolf’s, Mrs Ramsay’s foray into truth is based upon an understanding of the people around her that extends to their circumstances: “the ripple and the gravel” are just as important as the particular event, person or moment. Being able to “analyse [the] invisible presences” that influence a person and that go into ‘making’ a life enables the writer to know his/her subject: only by “[describing] the stream” within which the individual moves can one describe the person (Woolf, “Sketch,” *MB* 92). Mrs Ramsay, and Clarissa Dalloway in *Mrs Dalloway*, is the artist of daily life that arranges and rearranges the elements of life and people around her. Her artful organisation of dinner parties or gatherings is the catalyst that brings the disparate and discrete elements around her into a focused centre, much like how Woolf brings together different and separate elements into a coherent work of art.

This explains Lily’s difficulty with the arrangement of her painting, the pains she takes to select colours and decide on placement of shapes on the canvas, and the interwoven narratives of her painting’s progress and process with the journey to the lighthouse. The process of creation is where the difficult work is done so as to create a visible coherence, even if it is a temporary—or according to the postmodernists, an illusory—one. Lily’s struggles reflect Woolf’s struggles as a writer and become a record of the modernist artistic method and process that seeks to arrange reality in a way that facilitates and shapes understanding, which I will explain in greater detail when Woolf’s use of ekphrasis is discussed.

Freddie Montgomery, on the other hand, is ostensibly not concerned with coherence or meaning. He is not searching for an all-encompassing system with which to explain the world or experience; he has long renounced that desire. However, even though Freddie appears to be cavalier about his uncertainty and the strangeness of the world he moves in, he stresses repeatedly, through different means, his lack of concern, which serves to emphasise rather than dismiss his distress at having to live with disillusionment. For instance, he finds reality “irresistibly funny,” thinks that it is pointless to go on writing his book of evidence and has “a great distaste for the world generally” (*BE* 3, 29). But denouncing the reality that he lives in is the reason he feels like a phantom that only goes through the motions of the “puppet-show twitching which passes for consciousness,” why he finds life meaningless and can do nothing more than amuse himself, “losing [himself] in a welter of words” (*BE* 38).

The tragic overtones of Freddie’s callous responses and ripostes are made plain especially when he returns home to ask his mother for money:

I was thinking how strange it was to stand here glooming out at the day like this, bored and irritable, my hands in my pockets, while all the time, deep inside me somewhere, hardly acknowledged, grief dripped and dripped, a kind of silvery ichor, pure, and strangely precious.

Home, yes, home is always a surprise.

[Mother] insisted that I come look the place over, as she put it. ... The house was rotting, in places so badly, and so rapidly, that even she was startled. (*BE* 44-5)

Returning home or to a familiar house is conceived very differently in *To the Lighthouse* and *The Book of Evidence*. Whereas Lily’s return ten years later allows

her to finish her painting and find resolution amidst the familiar ghosts of her past, Freddie finds home a “surprise.” He does not, unlike Lily, locate familiar markers with which to anchor himself and his reality. Everything is new and strange precisely because everything is illusory to him. Stepping into his childhood home is like “[stepping] soundlessly through the membrane of time” but entering the ‘past’ is not entering familiar territory: “I felt vaguely as if something momentous had happened, as if in the blink of an eye everything around me had been whipped away and replaced instantly with an exact replica, perfect in every detail, down to the last dust-mote ... [a] substitute world.” Freddie views his surroundings with suspicion and considers it inauthentic, merely a “replica.” And though he pretends that everything is all right, and is relieved that “the difficult trick” of feigning adeptness in the face of his bafflement has worked, the passage above highlights the bewilderment behind his pretence (43).

The grief inside Freddie that is “hardly unacknowledged” is the grief of disillusionment and the lack of meaning; his nonchalance is the denial of the loss of certainty he everyday experiences: Freddie is a man “who in the face of a manifestly chaotic world has lost his faith in the possibility of order” (*G* 84). Seeing reality as “a random pattern thrown down by an unknown and insensate authority,” Freddie is unable to subscribe to any one kind of explanatory system that would help him comprehend his experience (*BE* 16). His lack of beliefs is a bulwark against the tide of what he sees as unadulterated and senseless events thrown at him. Because of this, Freddie has no clear ontological basis on which to articulate himself and hence his recourse to clichés. The poignancy of Freddie’s situation is hence twofold: reality is not only a stranger to him; he is also a stranger to himself.

The problem of the “replica” is important in the case of Banville’s novels because of its associations with postmodernism or the contemporary experience of reality. When Richard Kearney states that there is “a fundamental difference between the image of today and of former times” and that “now the image *precedes* the reality it is supposed to represent,” he is describing the experience Freddie is confronting (*Wake 2*, emphasis in original). Freddie does not see reality because his imagination is estranged from it. He sees only images: “Freddie is willing and able to summon up the world behind the work of art, an image of distant repose, but he cannot see Josie Bell’s ‘commonplace world’” (McMinn, *John Banville* 117). His estrangement stems from his lack of comprehension and his inability to bridge the distance and discrepancy between imagination and external reality: Freddie finds himself “at an impasse where the very rapport between *imagination* and *reality* seems not only inverted but subverted altogether” (Kearney, *Wake 3*).

However, the problem of the “replica” also holds within it the solution. Freddie may stress the inauthenticity of the images he sees and conjures up in his narratives, but he also recognises, particularly in *Ghosts* and *Athena*, that it is the image that holds and transfigures reality in order to realise beauty. In particular, it is the way one looks at the image that makes the difference. This explains the seeming repetitiveness of Banville’s novels that replicate the experience of looking through art so as to bring about a moment of clarity that illuminates. But this illumination is unlike Woolf’s moments of being; it does not make the rest of reality cohere. The illumination simply *is*. There is no accompanying consolation or order that emanates to the rest of experience. The moment is restricted locally and spatially, only coming into being at a specific moment. This is the reason for Freddie’s continued attempts at trying to ‘birth’ first Flora and then A. Even though Flora becomes ‘flesh and blood’ for him in

Ghosts, it still does not provide him with a permanent ontological basis on which to cement his being.

That art is born out of this estrangement with being, with the world, is the beauty that lives amidst all the loss Banville's protagonists' experience. *Dasein*, the "thereness of the world" both affirms being and mocks the protagonists' lack of being (Banville, "A Talk" 15). But it is this duality of the desire for being, as Banville stresses when discussing Rainer Maria Rilke, that creates art:

It is out of the tension between the desire to take things into ourselves by *saying* them, by praising them to the Angel, and the impossibility finally of making the world our own, that poetry springs ... Hence the note of solitude, of stoic despair, which great art always sounds. (16, emphasis in original)

This is why, as I previously mentioned, McMinn's idea of Banville's art as consolation is reductive. Banville states explicitly in "A Talk" that it is impossible to "[make] the world our own." This impossibility is what drives the narratives of Freddie Montgomery and Max Morden. It is also why Elke D'hoker's statement that Banville's protagonists "are ... in the process of placing the world, others and themselves in coherent pictures and meaningful frames" does not fully address the situation his protagonists are wrestling with (1). Banville's narrators do not console themselves through "coherent pictures;" the incoherence is taken as a given. The narratives they create do not dispel their estrangement from their world; that is asking too much of them. Rather, the narratives are, as Rilke expresses in the *Duino Elegies*, trying to "refashion" "some simple thing... age after age" so as to bring the world into the self for a moment and give birth to being (91). Through expression in art, the world enters the self and in that moment, gives the self back to itself. This moment of

being, however, is fleeting and is why art tolls the bell of stoicism rather than solace. Failure is the distinction of art and the great artist recognises this.

Rilke's explanation of art as the desire for Being can also be understood in terms of Simon Weil's idea of art as the desire for the infinite: "Man cannot get over regretting that he has not been given the infinite, and he has more than one way of fabricating, with the finite, an equivalent of the infinite for himself—which is perhaps the definition of art" (284-5). The infinite in the finite world of experience is precisely what Woolf and Banville strive to perceive, or as Freddie would say, 'birth'. The careful fabrication of form and content in Woolf's novels seeks to reveal the pattern behind experience, what one might see as the absolute, while Banville's protagonists search for the moment when "supernumerous existence" shall well up in their hearts (Rilke 92).

Self and World

The significant difference between both writers' portrayal of the relationship between the self and the world is overtly presented in the ways they understand and portray memory and consciousness in their novels. Woolf sees consciousness and memory as organising forces that bring isolated and solitary events, subjects, feelings, and thoughts together to give a more inclusive and complete picture of life. For Banville, consciousness is essentially solipsistic and memory unreliable. But he accepts these facts and takes them as points of departure, exerting the artistic imagination so as to take the world into consciousness through the scrutiny of objects and things, recreating them—and this is where memory comes in as a form of creative energy rather than just a tool for recollection—to beget being.

In *Consciousness and the Novel*, David Lodge discusses the concept put forward by various scientific thinkers that the nature of human consciousness is “essentially *narrative*” but observes that though this may be true, this narrative is also one that is “full of lacunae” (31, emphasis in original). In order to fill these gaps, Lodge proposes literature, which “allows us to vicariously *possess* the continuum of experience in a way we are never able to in reality” (32). Although we can take Lodge’s statement—especially in his use of the word “vicariously”—to mean that literature allows readers to, very simply, ‘live other lives’ and ‘experience other worlds’, we can also understand his proposition as describing art that can make reality cohere through the power of the sensitive artistic imagination that is able to go beyond the limited consciousness of a single human subject to perceive and draw wider connections among isolated and quotidian events. Understood in the latter sense, Lodge’s account is illustrative of Woolf’s writing because her narratives act as fillers: the narration does not adopt one viewpoint but many; readers do not just see the external events but also the internal workings of the mind. The gaps that appear when perspective is only limited to the ‘I’ disappear when this ‘I’ dissolves in her texts.

Woolf’s analysis of the “invisible presences” in life in “A Sketch of the Past” indicates clearly that, for her, the subject does not exist alone and cannot be understood in isolation: circumstances, experiences, memories all go into constructing the subject. This explains why she offers the ‘larger picture’ in her novels, often supplying the reader with not just one description of the person, thing, or place being narrated but many descriptions from various angles. It is also why external objects and locations are important to an understanding of the subject. If, according to Brian McHale, the dominant of modernism is epistemological, we can understand the

importance of the context in Woolf's novels since influences are paramount to an inspection of the processes of knowing. This is also why Woolf says that, "In certain favourable moods, memories – what one has forgotten – come to the top" (*MB* 81). Like Proust's *madeleines*, the external (reality, objects) reacts with the internal (consciousness) to create the conditions necessary for the apprehension of something deeper and more eternal about the subject and life.

Woolf, as critics like Lorraine Sim in *Virginia Woolf: The Patterns of Ordinary Experience* (2010) has recognised, is committed to external reality and its events because she privileges the interaction between the external and internal and sees the understanding of this interaction as crucial to apprehending the pattern behind the apparently haphazard occurrences of life. By emphasising the interaction between external experience and consciousness, Woolf, as Eagleton states, gives readers a "sense of the fundamental communality of human life" by tracing the "invisible presences," which include "anonymous forces, the life of the masses, the determining power of circumstance, [and] the moulding effects of inheritance and of specific places and times" (318).

Through the attentive description of the 'stream' of life, meaning can be inscribed on experience retroactively. The moments of being that string together the "nondescript cotton wool" of daily life happen through the processing of experience and "[the] real novelist can somehow convey both sorts of being" (Woolf, "Sketch," *MB* 84). The artistic representation of non-being can enable moments of being to reveal themselves. What Woolf is trying to do is to enable the emergence of a perceived absolute reality lying behind ordinary experience. The relationship between art and life, for Woolf, entails an ordered expression (the art work) that organises, perhaps even forces, experience to mean: "And then there it was, suddenly entire

shaped in her hands, beautiful and reasonable, clear and complete, the essence sucked out of life and held rounded here” (*TL* 131).

That one of the aims of Woolf’s novels is to eliminate gaps in her characters’—even her readers’—understanding of the world is obvious when we consider her use of free indirect speech, which Violeta Sotirova characterises as a “new form of consciousness presentation that ... radically disrupts the grammatical coherence of the novel of consciousness” (39). The disembodied narrative voice of *Mrs Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse* and *Between the Acts* is a floating entity, entering the consciousness of different characters at different times, moving from one location to the other effortlessly, offering readers the sense of fluidity and connection that transcend the finite selves of her characters. In this way, this narrative voice does allow readers to grasp the “continuum of experience” that in its appearance seems fragmented and random.

Consider the following example, taken from *Mrs Dalloway*, of Woolf’s use of free indirect speech to give readers the sense of a “continuum of experience:

But the branches parted. A man in grey was actually walking towards them. It was Evans! But no mud was on him; no wounds; he was not changed. I must tell the whole world, Septimus cried, raising his hand (as the dead man in the grey suit came nearer) ...

The millions lamented; for ages they had sorrowed. He would turn round, he would tell them in a few moments, ... of this relief, of this joy, of this astonishing revelation –

‘The time, Septimus,’ Rezia repeated. ‘What is the time?’

He [Septimus] was talking, he was starting, this man must notice him.

He was looking at them.

‘I will tell you the time,’ said Septimus, very slowly, very drowsily, smiling mysteriously at the dead man in the grey suit. As he sat smiling, the quarter struck – the quarter to twelve.

And that is being young, Peter Walsh thought as he passed them. (76-7)

Readers unfamiliar with Woolf’s work will probably be struck by the fluidity of this piece of writing. Starting with what reads like third-person narration, the perspective quickly changes and the narrative voice seems to be that of Septimus himself instead. When Septimus says “I must tell the whole world,” who says this? Is may be Septimus but there are no quotation marks as for Rezia’s later utterance. If it is uttered by the narrator, s/he does not function like traditional omniscient narrators; this narrator traverses all ontological levels in the text and moves freely through consciousness, history, or external reality.

As many critics have recognised, David Lodge and Violeta Sotirova, for example, Jane Austen was mistress of free indirect speech before Woolf came along and adapted it for her own purposes, refining the technique and making it more complex in its ability to convey not only states of mind but also the variety of concordances and discordances in a particular moment. Complexity, in the above example, translates into multiplicity. The reader gets a sense, in each and every moment of narration, of a world beyond the immediate subject/ object that is described. A single entity, in Woolf’s fiction, is never really solitary.

Peter Walsh, Rezia, Septimus and the anonymous other “millions” are all caught up in the same narrative tempo and scene as if they really were connected. Action, speech and thought—the mundane and the ‘fantastic’—are also conjoined, giving readers a three-dimensional image on the page. Even history, colonialism and

war are enmeshed, making the immediacy of this particular moment reverberate with the ripples of global events. The connection of Peter Walsh to the “dead man in the grey suit,” although expressed in so few words, invokes war and its casualties (Evans), makes connections between war, empire (as exemplified in the figure of Peter) and destruction, links the past (Septimus’ memory) to the present (Peter walking), the mad (Septimus) and the sane (Rezia; Peter), Peter’s and Clarissa’s love affair to Rezia’s and Septimus’, and the foreign and familiar (Peter’s related musings on London’s “civilisation” as compared to India, 78).

So much is said in this passage that it is a wonder the narrative does not crumble under the weight of impressions thrust upon it, which attests to Woolf’s mastery of this technique. Her ability to knit different impressions together expands the context exponentially, allowing readers to appreciate the relationships among different people and events in the text and discern the “invisible presences” that affect a conscious subject. Thus when the clock strikes “the quarter to twelve,” this becomes an explicit signal that accomplishes two things. One, it demarcates and juxtaposes external and internal time, contrasting the inner unbroken rhythm of experience with the public logical and compartmentalised understanding of experience; and two, it overtly communicates Woolf’s different aesthetics that lays claim to registering life more completely in its inclusiveness of difference.

The desire to encompass the range of experience in art is also stated in *Orlando* when the narrator ruminates on memory:

Memory is the seamstress, and a capricious one at that. Memory runs her needle in and out, up and down, hither and thither. We know not what comes next, or what follows after. Thus, the most ordinary movement in the world, such as sitting down at a table and pulling the

inkstand towards one, may agitate a thousand odd, disconnected fragments, now bright, now dim, hanging and bobbing and dipping and flaunting, like the underlinen of a family of fourteen on a line in a gale of wind. (48)

Understanding memory as a surrogate of imagination (and thus an illustration of consciousness) in Woolf's novels, my assertion that Woolf sees the imagination as a synthesiser of reality is corroborated in this passage. Memory puts things together: as a seamstress, she "runs her needle" through experience to stitch them together.

Random events and occurrences are brought together in the imagination to offer a more complete picture of the world. This is the reason "the most ordinary movement in the world" can "agitate a thousand odd, disconnected fragments," and is an instance of what Woolf means when she says that moments of being arise from the non-being people daily experience. The word "agitate" in this extract is precisely what Woolf is doing in her narratives. The agitation of memories, impressions, feelings, and thoughts cause different and more inclusive understandings to surface in her texts. The self's solitary existence and comprehension is supported by the multitudinous fragments that come together in the artwork.

The marriage of seeming opposites and the commingling of impressions in *Mrs Dalloway* and *Orlando* is just one example of what appears in all the texts examined thus far. Consider Mrs Ramsay's private and public persona in *To the Lighthouse* and the way in which a variety of perspectives from the present and the past work to create our sense of who Mrs Ramsay is and what she does; or the counterpointing of the pictures in the Olivers' dining room and the invocation of history, music and poetry with characters' dialogue and the pageant in *Between the Acts*. In all three texts examined in this thesis, the presentation of internal and external time and different

events or senses of reality appear to be in conflict but are also complementary in the way they work towards giving the reader a more ‘complete’ picture of the fictional universe and characters presented.

But a qualification remains. Even as the reader absorbs all the different elements hanging together in the passage from *Mrs Dalloway* above, for example, s/he cannot shake off the spectre of isolation lurking behind the apparent continuity of impressions that attempt to construct a community of feelings and thoughts. While thoughts, speech and actions from different characters might mix, they do not *connect*. Septimus, for the most part, ignores Rezia; What Peter Walsh speculates about the couple is grossly different from what the reader knows is happening; the shadow of death and loss—loss of life; loss of sanity—is the backdrop to the exchange that we witness. We thus see precisely how tenuous the construction of community is. If art gives us wholeness, it is at the expense of omission, or the act of keeping something at bay.

The beauty and unity that Woolf creates gives readers, in the words of Walter Pater, “a sort of cloistral refuge, from a certain vulgarity in the actual world” (67). The artist, offering the reader her “peculiar intuition of a world, ... discerned below the faulty conditions of the present” ‘heals’ the cracks she perceives but this does not so much present an accurate picture of reality as expose the writer’s desire. If style is the reflection of a writer’s “peculiar intuition of a world ... discerned below the faulty conditions of the present,” then Woolf’s style, in her presentation of consciousness, lays bare not only her vision of a connected reality, but her desire for it, implying its absence (63).

That art is keeping a divisive, potentially destructive, force at bay is unequivocally expressed in *To the Lighthouse*. The tripartite structure of the novel

with its three sections and the three strokes of light from the lighthouse, the last of which Mrs Ramsay claims as her own, is a reflection of this. In the first section, “The Window,” the tone and mood is established, together with an understanding of the different characters. The events and people that are described are brought together in the person of Mrs Ramsay who is the principal ordering force in this section. She attempts to harmonise all the “[s]trife, divisions, difference of opinion, prejudices twisted into the very fibre of being” that she sees before her (12).

The second section, “Time Passes,” gives readers a darker picture. Mrs Ramsay passes away, the house threatens to fall into ruins, and the forces of nature take over. The second section is filled with loss, characterised by disarray and a loss of direction. The punctuation of lyrical paragraphs with accounts of death and war in parentheses make for uneasy reading, aware, as readers are, of the menacing forces threatening without. The house is “robbed of meaning” and declarations that would “render the possessor secure” like “happiness prevails, [or] order rules” are “questioned at once” even as they form in the mind (142, 144).

The last section, however, resurrects the order from the first. Lily, like the female artists who “think[s] back through [their] mothers,” becomes the person to whom the baton is passed (*RO* 76). She does not hold the household and characters together like Mrs Ramsay did but the act of painting transfers that order into the realm of art. The parallel narrations of painting and sailing to the lighthouse unite the two activities. The tense journey is also Lily’s struggle with painting; the moment James steers the boat to land is also the “second” Lily sees her vision “[w]ith a sudden intensity” (226). Past and present are brought together, Mrs Ramsay and Lily fall in step, and the trough into which the characters, house, and the readers fell into in “Time Passes” has now, like the surge of the waves, borne them up again.

This cyclical structure of the novel attests to Lodge's statement that Woolf's novels "are all about sensitive people living from one privileged moment to the next, passing through periods of dissatisfaction, depression and doubt" (*Modern Writing* 180). But more importantly,

Virginia Woolf closes each book on an affirmative up-beat ... but the cut-off point is essentially arbitrary and it is clear that if the text were to continue another down-beat must inevitably follow. ... Arguably, this oscillating psychological rhythm makes ... Woolf's work ultimately unsatisfying because the affirmation of the value of life so often uttered is never really made to stick. (180)

Mrs Ramsay's apprehension—"there is no reason, order, justice: but suffering, death the poor. There was no treachery too base for the world to commit"—plays out in the novel when we see the forces that threaten to overwhelm the fragile order Mrs Ramsay, Lily, and Woolf establish (71). That there will inevitably be a "down-beat" must not have been lost on Woolf. She knew that the order she erected in her art would hold off the inevitable for only so long.

Whereas Woolf's presentation of consciousness displays a more inclusive apprehension of the world that, as Erich Auerbach states, demonstrates "the wealth of reality and the depth of life in every moment" and makes what is "common" in life "shine forth," Banville's organisation of consciousness takes away commonality, assuming solipsism to be complete (552). The inadequacy of previous narrative presentations of consciousness strikes both writers but their responses are different due to their perceptions of the role the artistic imagination plays. Woolf creates communities of feeling and thought and gives the 'invisible' picture to answer her need for a more inclusive and complete rendering of life, showing that the

imagination's role is to synthesise reality and instate wholeness. Banville tries to realise the world—things—within the imagination in order to reconcile the estranged, solipsistic imagination of his protagonists. For Banville, wholeness is not possible but there may be illumination if the imagination is sufficiently engaged and invested in the reality it seeks to transform.

In Banville's novels, the absurdity of experience and its essentially opaque workings plague the individual with self-doubt because he is unable to fathom the logic of external reality. Inexplicable experience is mirrored in the subject's consciousness, effectively ruling out the possibility of meaning-making in the modernist sense of the individual consciousness ordering reality and thus bestowing meaning on it. This directly translates into a discarding of recognisable or specific contexts of action in the narratives. Since the individual is unable to organise reality meaningfully, it scarcely matters if the action were to take place in Fleet Street or Dublin. Because contextual clues and markers are no longer significant for meaning-making, naming the places of action Ballymore and Ballyless in *The Sea*, for example, contributes to the logic within the artwork itself rather than to external reality. In other words, art refers back to itself and not to lived experience.

For Banville, the artistic imagination relinquishes a direct relationship with external reality. It substitutes, instead, an indirect vision of experience through art. This indirect vision accounts for the focus on surfaces in Banville's texts, which he believes is the method by which some form of illumination about experience can be attained. The surfaces Banville primarily concentrates his artistic gaze on are not the surfaces of the present, lived moment but the surfaces of art, which includes memory³⁵. If, as Thomas Hobbes expresses, "*Imagination and Memory*, are but one

³⁵ Banville characterises memory—most clearly in *The Sea*—as analogous to art, seeing them as creative 'visions' of experience rather than faithful accounts of what actually happens in 'real' life.

thing, which for divers considerations hath divers names,” the consideration of one implies the other (I, ii) .

Banville is thus less interested in how the imagination represents than how it *re-presents* the already-lived moment, which explains the ‘timelessness’ of his texts that do not adhere to chronological time. The fictional worlds presented in Banville’s novels are internal worlds because what his protagonists are trying to do, as mentioned earlier, is to take the world into themselves so that they and the world may be *expressed*. Unlike Woolf who brings together public and private time and realms to offer readers a more inclusive sense of reality, as well as to set her ways of understanding apart from the writers coming before her, Banville sees the distance between the public and private realms to be too wide to bridge. Relinquishing the possibility of merging external and internal experience, his protagonists’ solution is to bring the external *into* the internal through specific objects or the other.

As Ishmael expresses in *Moby Dick*, “true places” are “not down in any map,” they are places found within consciousness (Melville 48). These “true places” are like Freddie’s island of Cythera in *Ghosts*, an island that is engendered out of the imagination, like fiction, rather than referring to an identifiable location outside the text. What the artistic imagination sees becomes the means towards understanding the real. This seems to be similar to Woolf’s portrayal of the power of the artistic imagination but Banville’s novels show that imagination does not, as in Woolf’s case, bring external and internal together to order them, but sees the external as internal (all is solipsistic), admitting its inability to reconcile the two while at the same time creating the conditions for an understanding of the real to take place.

One of the instances where the intention to look intensely with and within the artistic imagination is explicitly signalled is at the beginning of *Athena*:

My love. If words can reach you whatever world you may be suffering in, then listen. I have things to tell you. At this muffled end of another year I prowl the sombre streets of our quarter holding you in my head. I would not have thought it possible to fix a single object so steadily for so long in the mind's violent gaze. ... what a thing we made there in that secret white room at the heart of the old house, what a marvellous edifice we erected. ... I remember Morden telling me the story of a builder ... demolishing a folly down the country somewhere and finding a centuries-old chapel concealed inside the walls. *Tight as an egg*, he said. *Amazing*. And laughed his laugh. I thought of us. ... There are moments ... when I think I might die of the loss of you ... And yet at the same time I feel I have never been so vividly alive, so quick with the sense of things, so exposed in the midst of the world's seething play of particles, as if I had been flayed of an exquisitely fine protective skin. (1-3)

A is a figure that exists in the internal. Freddie holds her in his head and the “edifice” they erect is not public but constructed inside a “secret white room.” Readers get no indication of a specific time or place. Freddie may name the street where the house stands Rue Street but it is only because it “sounds right,” not because this is a fact he recalls. Additionally, the intention to look is signalled overtly when Freddie says that A is held in the “mind's violent gaze.” In fact, we can surmise that A does not exist anywhere except inside his head, just as Flora and the woman in the painting. A is never seen outside the house on Rue Street. There are women who remind Freddie of her, or who look like her, but they never turn out to actually be her.

The act to realise A (and all the other women) is thus enacted and can only be accomplished within the imagination itself. If we interpret the “folly” of a building that conceals a “centuries-old chapel inside the walls” as a metaphor for the imagination, Freddie’s “act of parturition” takes on religious connotations but in an unexpected way (*BE* 216). The ‘fleshing-out’ of the other transfigures the self in turn and the rebirth of one implies the other. This, interestingly, inverts the traditional Christian understanding of Christ who died for the sins of man so that man may live. Instead of relying on an external entity for ‘salvation’, Freddie here takes matters into his own hands—or mind, actually—to give himself ‘life’ as the “egg” indicates.

This inversion of the Christian understanding of Christ’s sacrifice is a clear rejection of familiar systems of knowledge but there is no attempt to replace them with a different logical framework. If there is any sort of replacement, it is the replacement of knowledge systems with the more amorphous quality of the imagination. Understanding through the imagination does not presume any clear or systematic method. There is only the *hope* that seeing through the artistic imagination may illuminate presence—that is, being.

What Freddie and Max Morden in *The Sea* are doing, therefore, is *filling reality with imagination*. By doing so, they make it possible to be “vividly alive” by stripping away the “exquisitely fine protective skin,” which we may understand to mean the familiar frameworks of understandings humans use to understand the world and construct meaning. The stripping of skin also connotes the abolishing of the barrier between external and internal realities in a particular instant that allows presence to come into being, thereby transfiguring, and illustrating Nietzsche’s view of art, the artist in that moment.

The consciousness that interprets experience in the example from *Athena* is solipsistic, but certainly not limited. Even though Banville's protagonists utilise first-person narration, the issue of reliability is not seen as a problem because it is already assumed. Gabriel, Freddie and Max make no pretensions about their abilities to 'accurately' paint reality. Unlike Woolf's narrators, they are not trying to "represent subjective consciousness as faithfully as possible" to proffer explanations about the world (Lodge, *Consciousness* 64). Subjective consciousness is instead the site where the transfiguration of the artist can take place through the birthing of presence.

If when we first meet Freddie in *The Book of Evidence* his imagination was encaged by art, by the end of *Athena* we see that his imagination is enriched by it. The link that enables this change in relationship between the artistic imagination and the real is the ethical dimension that was previously missing in the first novel of the art trilogy. Because Freddie's imagination maintained no links with reality in that novel, transforming reality through art was a lifeless affair. Art did nothing to make reality palpable because Freddie's imagination could not *see* reality. It is only after Freddie realises and admits to his "failure of imagination" that he can bring the other "back to life" (215). When he does, the language he uses to describe his thoughts and feelings at that moment link it directly to the above extract from *Athena*:

... I pored for long hours over the newspaper files in the prison library. I read every word devoted to my case, read and re-read them ... until they turned to flavourless mush in my mind. I read of Josie Bell's childhood, of her schooldays of her family and friends [*sic*]. ... she was a chambermaid in the Southern Star Hotel. ... I could have gone there ... I laughed at myself. What would I have learned? There would have been no more of her there, for me, than there was in the

newspaper stories, than there had been that day when I turned and saw her for the first time, standing in the open French window with the blue and gold of summer at her back, than there was when she crouched in the car and I hit her again and again and her blood spattered the window. This is the worst, the essential sin, ... the one for which there will be no forgiveness: that I never imagined her vividly enough, that I never made her be there sufficiently, that I did not make her live. (215)

The differences between the two passages are significant because they indicate the change Freddie undergoes in the art trilogy. At first, the appeal to traditional sources of information like the newspapers is thought to be able to sufficiently 'bring Josie to life' for Freddie. But historical details do nothing except accumulate into "flavourless mush." Thereafter, the idea of personal contact is suggested. But as readers already know, and as Freddie admits, personal contact did nothing for Freddie who merely saw through Josie, fitting her into his soulless imagination that notices the "blue and gold of summer" in the background rather than the living breathing being in the foreground, which results in his ability to "hit her again and again" without remorse.

However, it is the confession at the end of the passage that he did not imagine her "vividly enough" that changes everything. Realising this, he then goes on, in *Ghosts*, to create an imaginary landscape that tries to create presence in the character of Flora. By the time we are reacquainted with Freddie in *Athena*, the change is remarkable: he expresses how he is "so vividly alive," "so quick with the sense of things" and "so exposed" signalling that his attempt to fill reality with an ethical imagination has been realised. The barrier has, as implied in his use of "expose," been negated. In his acts of imagining Flora and A, he has, in turn, come to realise himself

in rare moments of illumination. So the direction has been set. Freddie's imagination now understands the steps it needs to take for him to really live. But these steps have to be retraced daily, in each new work of art. The "marvellous edifice" that is erected in *Athena* has crumbled by the time we meet Max Morden in *The Sea*. Here, the death of Anna haunts the entire novel, suffusing it with an elegiac tone and Max attempts to rebuild his self after losing the other in which he could realise it.

For Max, like Freddie before him, meaning has fallen out from under his feet. His ontological base (Anna) is absent and he looks to the scattered fragments of memory in order to recreate a new reality, a new presence, so that he may continue living. One of the figures on which he concentrates his gaze is Chloe, a girl from his past:

[Chloe's] hands, Her eyes, Her bitten fingernails. All this I remember, intensely remember, yet it is all disparate, I cannot assemble it into a unity. ... I cannot, in short, see her. She wavers before my memory's eye at a fixed distance, always just beyond focus ... why can I not catch up with her? ... This is the mystery that baffled me then, and that baffles me yet. ... Once out of my presence she should by right become pure figment, a memory of mine, a dream of mine, but all the evidence told me that even away from me she remained solidly, stubbornly, incomprehensibly herself. (139-40)

Memory, as described here, is unable to bring things together. The other refuses to be integrated; Chloe continues to stand apart and baffle the narrator. Although the desire for "unity" is present, memory cannot, unlike in *Orlando*, complete the job. Memory, here, seems to be as "capricious" as Woolf's, but does not function as seamstress to the "disconnected fragments" it throws up. This inability thus drives Max Morden's

narration, the aim of which is to make the memory his own. Only by making it his own, by taking it into himself, will Chloe be herself and yet part of the narrator, a condition that has to be fulfilled if being is to exist.

If we compare Woolf's and Banville's presentation of memory in *Orlando* and *The Sea*, we see that the imagination functions primarily to apprehend an absence. In Terry Eagleton's discussion of Henry James' art, he observes that fiction "as a discourse about things that never happened and people who never existed, ... represents a kind of void or absence despite its richness and plenitude. It signifies a paucity of life as well as a wealth of it" (225-6). This understanding of James can also be applied to Woolf and Banville in this study. Although both writers characterise memory differently, we see that memory's role hinges on absence: the absence of order and meaning, and the absence of presence. The desire to eliminate these absences thus catalyses the artistic imagination to work its magic on experience. But the art of the imagination is hardly magical; it is an art that is predicated on loss and the restitution of that loss.

For Woolf, the perceived unity comes about through an act of will: the narrator/artist wills it to be present. This need to institute a "sense of communality" arises from its ability to offer "refuge" from the "sharply separated selfhood" of the characters in her novels (Eagleton 321, 320). The self, whose alienation is embodied in a (public) language that goes against the essentially private nature of a subject's experience of reality, is connected to a wider nexus of significances to provide a refuge, much like the refuge Mrs Ramsay and Lily offer—against death, against the anonymous larger forces like nature and war—in *To the Lighthouse*. For Banville, however, the "mystery [of the other, of reality] that baffled [him] then, and that baffles [him] yet" is repeatedly emphasised in every text. The mystery of the world is

where beauty lies and it is in the understanding of this mystery that being may be birthed; but as the use of ‘mystery’ indicates, complete understanding is not possible. The protagonists’ attempts to describe the mystery of reality thus uncover the inherent tension surrounding the recovery of being in art that appears in every text.

This paradox—recovery and its impossibility—that lies at the heart of Gabriel’s, Freddie’s, and Max’s narratives pivots around the idea of loss—loss of order, unity, being. Loss fuels the protagonists’ writing and, as George O’Brien observes, it simultaneously creates and disappoints desire: “while narrating contains an irresistible sense of recuperation, it cannot overlook the flaws in the project ... The text, then, is the bridge across the chasm, a structure intended to keep lines of communication open and to create a sense of marvel about the difficulty and success of doing so” (166). The irrecoverable absence gives rise to what Neil Murphy calls the “dislocated reality” the protagonists experience. But the dislocation is permanent; there is no other more reassuring reality to escape to. As Murphy states, “it is always the same question with Banville’s heroes, ... a question long accepted as unresolvable” but “[t]he spectacular house of fiction which Banville has erected more than compensates for his heroes’ artistic failure” (“Angels and Gods”196).

The limitations of literary art that both O’Brien and Murphy recognise explain Banville’s use of ekphrasis within his texts, which is the subject of the next section. Visual art and painting intensify the artistic gaze by multiplying the planes on which the artistic gaze may fix its gaze on the object. Banville’s “spectacular house of fiction,” which brings to mind Henry James’ uses ekphrasis like the many windows of James’ house. The multiple lenses through which the object is viewed makes the seeing multi-layered and dense, and art itself becomes the prism through which art is reflected upon.

Ekphrasis

In *Fragments of a Journal*, Eugene Ionesco reflects that,

When the philosopher philosophises, when the painter paints, the one is philosophising about philosophy, the other questioning himself about painting. To philosophise or paint involves asking questions about these forms of thought. (129)

Similarly, when a writer writes, he is interrogating himself about writing. And this is what Woolf and Banville do, particularly when they incorporate the other arts into their narrative. For both writers, this incorporation is not a superficial decision or act. The other arts are integrated into the form and content of the novel thoroughly, allowing an examination into the capabilities and role of art, and prompting a deeper apprehension of how art engages with reality.

Rüdiger Imhof observes that in Banville's novels, particularly in the art trilogy and *The Sea*, protagonists look at the world "as if they were animated extant pictures and paintings" ("Rosy Grail" 134). This specific kind of artistic gaze is at first inauthentic because Freddie, in *The Book of Evidence*, has not yet realised "the disjunction that exists between the artistic" reality he subscribes to and the real world in which he exists (Imhof 136). This results in an irresponsible artist that deforms external experience to fit his frames of understanding. This type of art cannot contain being because it is false by virtue of the missing relationship between art and life.

For Freddie, art is more important than life, much like how we assume the totalising systems of knowledge can explain experience definitively and completely. A responsible artist, however, acknowledges the limitations of art. Art can recapture

presence but it cannot explain nor clarify the mystery of existence. An ethical art must allow the world to maintain its mystery whilst attempting to take that world into itself. The ekphrastic impulse in Banville, therefore, tries to address the gap between world and art by moving beyond discourse—the de facto mode in literary art—in order to call forth a more engaged sort of seeing, which as in Woolf, also alludes to silence as a way of being:

...we should not assume a verbal matrix is the only one in which the articulations and conduct of the mind are conceivable. There are modes of intellectual and sensuous reality founded not on language, but on other communicative energies such as the icon or the musical note. And there are actions of the spirit rooted in silence. It is difficult to *speak* of these, for how should speech justly convey the shape and vitality of silence? (Steiner, *Language* 12)

George Steiner proposes that other “modes of intellectual and sensuous reality founded ... on other communicative energies such as the icon or the musical note” are able, perhaps better able, to apprehend reality more deeply. This is the understanding underlying the use of ekphrasis in Banville’s novels. In addition, the “actions of the spirit rooted in silence” are also alluded to at the end of *Birchwood* when Gabriel Godkin acknowledges the partial account of reality in his texts and states that, “Intimations abound, but they are felt only, and words fail to transfix them. Anyway some secrets are not to be disclosed under pain of who knows what retribution, and whereof I cannot speak, thereof I must be silent” (171). Because words “fail to transfix” so many aspects of reality that can only be “felt,” and “some secrets” cannot “be disclosed,” ekphrasis and silence become alternative ways of apprehending reality. Although silence will not be explicitly examined in this thesis, its presence is

always behind the visual art and text we see in the novels because they constantly allude to the mystery within experience that cannot be explicated.

Ekphrasis, for Banville, is thus a way to bring the world into consciousness whilst acknowledging its essential foreignness, opacity and mystery. The silent significances that can only be felt and not expressed are presented to the reader not through explanation in the form of language but through layering in the form of art. The multiplied significances brought about by the fusing of literary and visual art, and the intimacy between the two in his novels transfigure reality by intensifying the artist's gaze on the world.

But it is not only the reverberations of significances that the reader grasps. It is also the indirect gaze that is important for Banville. The artistic imagination, for Banville, looks not upon the tangible person, thing or place in order to make it *live*, but an image of it. The artist's gaze is once, even twice, removed from physical reality. As Banville expresses in "Fiction and the Dream," it is not reality understood as tangible, lived reality that he wants to describe but the dream he has. It is only the description of the dream, that imagined reality, that an artist can describe. The artist cannot describe unmediated reality because his aim, as Pierre Bonnard eloquently puts it—a painter whose work Banville incorporates in *The Sea*—is not to portray life: "It's not a matter of painting life. It's a matter of giving life to painting" (qtd. in Ananth, "Deferrals" 283). If "[u]ntruth is cutting out a piece of nature and copying it," as Bonnard says, then by the indirect gaze, Banville transforms reality to give truth back to the reader (qtd. in Hyman, *Bonnard* 193).

To understand Banville's use of ekphrasis, I will first look at Woolf's portrayal of visual art and music in *To the Lighthouse* and *Between the Acts* respectively. By doing so, I hope to trace the line of inquiry I see as common to both writers, namely

the problematization of writing, and to expound on the differences between Woolf's and Banville's understanding of the artistic imagination to argue for an artistic genealogy linking these two writers.

David Kennedy defines ekphrasis as "the portrayal of works of art in language," and the discussion here mainly adheres to this definition. However, although Kennedy's definition only refers to visual art, I would like to expand his definition by including the portrayal of music as well. As another form of art, music also interrogates the conditions of literary art, just as visual art does. The discussion of ekphrasis, which is fundamentally art talking about art, will cover both visual art and music in this section.

That art, particularly painting, is especially important in *To the Lighthouse* is reflected not only in Lily's attempts to paint but also in the way the narration uses colours to dramatise consciousness and thought, making the novel's form resemble paintings inside paintings. For example, when Mrs Ramsay is knitting and thinking about utterances the other visitors to the house have made, these phrases are described as "washing from side to side of her mind rhythmically, and as they washed, words like little shaded lights, one red, one blue, one yellow, lit up in the dark of her mind" (129). The use of the word "wash" connects the reverie with visual art as it is a technical term referring to a specific watercolour technique. The varied colour washes paint her thoughts to give the reader a sense of how these disparate phrases work to create a holistic mental picture in her mind. The rhythm of the colours not only links her thoughts to art but also to music, making the utterances sing a combined tune.

Harold Bloom observes that "as an artist Woolf was obsessed with what we can call formal rather than thematic concerns" (144). This obsession with form is reflected in *To the Lighthouse*'s overt use of visual art to problematize this aspect of the

creative process. It is played out in Lily's struggle with and relationship to her painting and its composition. What Lily attempts to do, basically, is create "a form which makes comprehensible the way the various impressions and colours and darkness together constitute the texture of human life" (Bloom 145).

I have already discussed Lily and the difficulties of painting in the first chapter on Woolf but I would like to focus, here, on the way ekphrasis acts as the structural principle of the novel. When we first see Lily with her painting in section 4 of "The Window," her struggle to translate vision to art is manifest. Firstly, it is not Lily who is the focus of the first sentence but Mr Ramsay: "Indeed, he almost knocked her easel over, coming down upon her with his arms waving." The name Lily is not even mentioned until the fourth sentence where her reaction to Mr Ramsay's intrusion is described: "that was what Lily Briscoe could not have endured." This tension between Mr Ramsay and Lily marks the tension surrounding her construction. It is a tension between the male mind and female apprehension of reality; between solitary and more encompassing modes of thought; between logic and feeling; between mind and body. Lily's constant awareness of her difference and of the fragile order she is trying to construct makes her keep "a feeler on her surroundings lest someone should creep up" (22).

Secondly, the importance of form and the difficulty of finding the right form to embody her sense of experience is emphasised when she looks at colours around her. The vision of reality Lily sees when she looks at "the jacmanna [which] was bright violet" and "the wall [which was] staring white" is primarily apprehended through *shape*: "beneath the colour there was the shape." But it is this shape that is monstrously arduous to depict; the defence of "the miserable remnant of her vision" to preserve shape is necessary but draining (23). If Lily is trying to render "the texture

of human life” in her painting, then we can see that Lily’s act of painting directly dramatizes Woolf’s artistic process. The very process that creates the novel is itself the subject of the novel. Moreover, it is important to note the *perceived* correspondence between art and life.

The creation of art may be difficult but the completion of Lily’s painting is meant to assert that representation is possible. Art is seen as able to portray “the texture of human life” and the artist may struggle with translating her vision in the artwork but the effort has been made, the line drawn. However, the affirmation of representation at the end is an action of marked defiance. The impossibility of representation is hinted at even when Lily declares her vision as being had. Thus, when Lily claims that her vision has been apprehended, it is implied that the artistic imagination has somewhat successfully ‘synthesised’ experience and has managed to depict its varied feelings, thoughts and impressions. But rather than an unqualified success, it is more likely that what Robert Lumsden observes about Lily’s painting is the case:

There is ... for Lily Briscoe — and, perhaps, in the few moments of this single novel, for Virginia Woolf herself — an affirmation of the impossibility of representation and also of the need to continue representing in a world constructed of languages, which demands accuracy as the price of admission. There is a new realism present, a mood of cooperation with the intractable and a reluctance to accept it, joined in a kind of desperate ecstasy. (120)

The “reluctance to accept” the impossibility of representation is the driving force behind Lily’s determination to finish her painting, even if it does take ten years before the attempt is picked up again. The “desperate ecstasy” that readers see embodied in

Lily's final declaration of visionary insight is tempered by the presence of "the intractable" that is ever present within the narrative in the form of strife, opposition, death, and the enigma of Mrs Ramsay and reality itself. It is also the existence of "the intractable" that necessitates the continual remaking of form that we see demonstrated in Woolf's different novels: "Woolf offers through Lily an experience of the compromised pleasure of closures achieved in the understanding that they must be done again differently for as long as one lives if they are to hold even a momentary power to invite re-connections with the real" (Lumsden 121).

This explains Lily's view that perhaps her painting's vision will not see the light of day and might "be hung in the attic" or even "destroyed" (225). That momentary vision, Lily understands, will not be enough. It must be renewed in a different form so that "re-connections with the real" can take place again. The completion of Lily's painting, like the creation of community in *Mrs Dalloway*, exemplifies the same reluctance to bow to intractable reality. Even if the implication of the impossibility of order and representation is always threatening to overwhelm the narrative, the artist, in an intransigent gesture, denies that possibility.

In *Between the Acts*, the need to keep the dissolution of form at bay becomes more onerous. The threat of war and the fragmentation of society is felt more keenly in this novel, and the cacophony of sounds that connect as well as disrupt the characters' speech or thought makes the reading experience discontinuous. Whereas the aftermath of war in *Mrs Dalloway* is one of the main threads running through the narrative, it is not so much disruption as a picking up of the pieces. Society and people may have suffered psychically, emotionally and physically, but the novel, and Clarissa's party, manages to hold the centre of stability intact. The tragic death of Septimus may remind the reader of the fragility of life and order but its incorporation

into the party and Clarissa's identification with Septimus manage to rescue the tragedy from meaninglessness.

In Woolf's last novel, however, the sense of stability is more dubious. In this novel, Woolf uses music to maintain unity and it at first seems effective:

For I hear music, they were saying. Music wakes us. Music makes us see the hidden, join the broken. Look and listen. See the flowers, how they ray their redness, whiteness, silverness and blue. And the trees with their many-tongued syllabbling, their green and yellow leaves hustle us and shuffle us, and bid us, like the starlings, and the rooks, come together, crowd together ... (108)

The 'I' Woolf abhors is replaced by "they" in this passage, emphasising the commonality of thought rather than the individuals. Music, like art, is described as the principle of unity that makes visible "the hidden," and provides the connection to "join the broken." Additionally, the connection between music and visual art, in their ability to unify reality, is stressed when the narrator then continues by describing the colours of nature, especially in the way the trees both embody music ("many-tongued syllabbling") and visual art ("green and yellow leaves"). These qualities entreat individuals to "hustle ... and shuffle" to "come together, crowd together." This passage presents a picture of unity and discord by using diction that connotes both like "join" versus "broken." And it seems that harmony has emerged victorious in the battle between the two. However, like Lily's vision in *To the Lighthouse*, the triumph is an act of defiance rather than a conclusion one naturally arrives at.

Discussing the above passage, Elicia Clements states that,

Music evokes the tension and the empathy between the singular subject and community. The sounds engage the perceiver in both

listening and looking and in understanding the hidden mechanisms that break apart and then repair the community. Aurality, then, beckons to the many, even as the novel questions whether or not the community hears this call. (64)

I agree, with Clements, that Woolf's use of music successfully conveys the sense of both the individual and community and that she offers aurality as a way to harmonise the discordant strains within society. Additionally, the passage from *Between the Acts*, as Clements rightly observes, "provides no consistent order issued from an authoritative narrator. The perspective continually shifts as does the subject-matter it is discussing, which destabilizes the notion of easy and direct communication by performing its limits" (64).

However, I disagree with Clements' conclusion that, "Ultimately, despite socially undesirable behaviour, La Trobe performs the most significant function in the novel: like music, she somehow holds the rambling, capricious whole together" (69). The lack of "consistent order issued from an authoritative narrator" makes it seem like order is the result from the organic whole that is the text. But the force of music comes from without rather than within. This does not invalidate its ability to provide order certainly, but it does question the artistic vision of a harmonious whole. La Trobe provides order extrinsically and music performs the same function.

For example, when La Trobe is distressed because of the actors' delay, this stems from her worry that the too-long interval is making her lose her audience: "Every moment the audience slipped the noose; split up into scraps and fragments." Her solution, then is to cue the music—"Music!' she signalled. 'Music!'"—which has the desired effect of calming the audience, making them "sink peacefully into the nursery rhyme" (110). The sense of a disaster averted in this example thus highlights

rather than downplays the discordance in the text. If music does bring things and people together, it is only a fragile and artificial concordance.

Melba Cuddy-Keane articulates a similar view to Clements and sees the incorporation of music and sound in this novel as being able to recognise plurality and proposes that readers “do not so much retrieve meaning from fragmentation as discover how fragmentation is beautiful.” While this may be true, Cuddy-Keane’s statement that music does not *impose* unity is doubtful:

What I’m suggesting is that for Woolf conventional meaning, because it attempts to *impose* unity, becomes exclusive and partial; only meaning that, like music, lacks definite articulation is fully inclusive and therefore truly unifying. (282, emphasis in original)

Although music does “lack definite articulation,” I think that it, like “conventional meaning,” does impose unity in the text. We cannot ignore the fact that the artist—Woolf and La Trobe alike—uses music to harmonise the discordant strains within the text. As the previous example showing La Trobe cuing the music shows, the artist utilises music to prevent distraction and disintegration. Music may be “inclusive” but its presence in the text reflects the *desire* for harmony rather than harmony itself. Like the threat of dissolution menacing Lily’s vision, Mrs Ramsay’s gatherings, and Clarissa’s party, the fragmentation standing just beyond the threshold of the Olivers’ estate has to be warded off constantly. Music and sound act as talismans but their efficacy is based on belief rather than fact and reflects the desire for harmony that is absent in the narrated world of *Between the Acts*. We may say that desire triumphs, in this text, but to declare the “truly unifying” quality of music as a given is mistaken.

Woolf’s ekphrastic texts thus reflect the artist’s desire for unity. They problematize the act of writing as a writing of desire, emphasising absence—of the

absolute; of harmony; of meaning—rather than presence. But this emphasis on desire is unacknowledged within the texts themselves, which is a crucial difference between Woolf and Banville. Although desire is the pivot upon which both writers' texts turn, in Woolf's texts the proffered unity hides that desire within the ostensible success of the artistic vision that synthesises reality. This makes meaning seemingly attainable and possible, reflecting Woolf's beliefs that a change of form and methods will lead to a more accurate portrayal of life. Hidden desire does not admit the possibility that the vision offered may not be what it claims to be.

For Banville's protagonists, desire for meaning and unity is also operating within their narratives. However, desire is only one part of the equation; how their actions part with desire is more important. Moreover, desire in Banville's text is made plain. Readers are informed of what Gabriel, Freddie and Max want but cannot have. And their acceptance of art's inability to fulfil their desires is paramount for them to continue writing. Relinquishing the desire for unity and order enables them to focus on birthing presence in more localised and specific contexts. Meaning is a foregone conclusion but "pure and present" being is not (*G* 147). This is the thread linking Woolf and Banville. Both writers reject the 'I' that prevents the otherness of the world from being apprehended. The self bars full 'communion' with reality because its description of it paradoxically alienates it. It has to other itself in order to become a subject.

Woolf answers this need by building community and using indirect free speech to lift the narrative beyond a defined subject so as to recognise the other as the other, not as an entity subjected to an authoritarian consciousness. Banville uses the imagination to fill reality so that in moments of illumination, the other, the world may "detach themselves" from [the artist] and [his] conception of them and [change]

themselves instead into what they were, no longer figment, no longer mystery, no longer a part of [the artist's] imagining" (G 147).

Woolf's democratic and pluralistic sense of order is thus akin to Banville's ethical imagination. Both writers recognise the inauthenticity of an art borne out of a consciousness that is only cognizant of itself. Both attempt to rise above this sort of consciousness via different methods and their use of ekphrasis demonstrates this endeavour. Woolf's use of music and visual art evinces the artistic imagination's apprehension of its task to synthesise reality beyond an individual's consciousness and becomes the structural principle that brings about that synthesis.

Banville's ekphrastic texts show how the artistic imagination moves beyond the unethical limits of solipsism by filling reality with an imagination that recognises otherness and respects difference. Though the imagination cannot offer the reader any form of vision, much less the promise of unity, the understanding of these limitations paves the way for an indirect vision effected through art. Banville's artists find it impossible to ignore or make the intractability they witness cohere. Understanding the limitations of their artistic 'powers', Gabriel, Freddie and Max choose, instead, to focus their imaginations on the discrete things in reality that Lily, Mrs Ramsay, Clarissa, and Woolf herself, try to bring together in a unified picture. In the rest of this section, I will concentrate on *The Book of Evidence*, *Athena* and *The Sea* to elucidate how ekphrasis in Banville's texts reconfigures and presents the artistic imagination's relationship to reality.

The disjuncture between art and reality in a world in which the coordinates have shifted beyond recognition is the problem in Banville's texts. This break is the reason the novels' protagonists narrate the interiority rather than the exteriority of their experience. Discussing *Birchwood*, Terence Brown describes it as

... a book of views (of interiors, landscapes, vistas) in which a contemplative intelligence is constantly struck by the mysterious otherness of the world in itself in passages of speculative lyricism. Banville's narrator addresses the paradoxical condition of art itself, apparently free to create as it wills in its own dimension, but in actuality only a dream of consciousness, which at last must bow to the unsayable, knowing the world to be everything that is the case ... (167)

The artist's acknowledgement of the "mysterious otherness of the world" makes him resort to depicting interiors because the world is essentially opaque. But turning to interiors also serves to retain the mystery inherent in reality, an essential component of the ethical imagination, which recognises the stubborn otherness of the world. Knowing that their narrations are ultimately only "dream[s] of consciousness," Banville's narrators do not promise any unified picture or explanation of experience. They can only try to make presence visible through art in moments of illumination.

When Freddie imagines an existence for the woman in the painting in *The Book of Evidence*, he has not yet realised the essential relationship the artistic imagination must maintain with life. His disillusionment with interpreting systems has led to an imagination that does not see reality:

I have stood in front of other, perhaps greater paintings, and have not been moved as I am moved by this one. ... when I look at it my heart contracts. There is something in the way the woman regards me, the querulous, mute insistence of her eyes, which I can neither escape nor assuage. I squirm in the grasp of her gaze. She requires of me some great effort, some tremendous feat of scrutiny and attention,

of which I do not think I am capable. It is as if she were asking me to let her live.

She. There is no she, of course. There is only an organisation of shapes and colours. Yet I try to make up a life for her. ... Her father comes to visit her at evening, walking on tiptoe. ... She cannot understand this notion he has got into his head: he wants her to have her portrait painted. ... The painter ... fixes his little wet eyes on her, briefly, with a kind of impersonal intensity, and she flinches, as if caught in a burst of strong light. No one has ever looked at her like this before. So this is what it is to be known! (104-8)

Although the “mute insistence of [the woman’s] eyes” beseeches Freddie to let her live, the life he imagines for her does not actually ‘see’ her. His wilful illustration of a life reeks only of his solipsistic consciousness. He pretends he can know her, denying the presence of mystery and otherness by imposing his vision of her on the reader.

Although I mentioned earlier that Banville’s protagonists take the world into themselves in order to birth presence, and what Freddie is doing here seems similar, the difference is apparent when Freddie ends this section with “Do not be fooled: none of this means anything either,” which could be interpreted in a number of ways (108). Freddie may either be explicitly signalling that his imaginings hold no significance, in terms of explicating something of the essence of reality, or he may be flaunting his apparent nonchalance with regards to the strangeness of reality, which reflects his disillusionment and his grief respectively.

But intimations of what Freddie has to accomplish in order to imagine the other in an ethical manner have already been articulated by the time he tries to imagine the woman in the painting. He muses that the result of the painter looking at the woman

with “impersonal intensity” leads to the completion of a painting that makes the woman feel as if the portrait is “someone she does not recognise, and yet knows,” “as if somehow she had walked out of herself” (108). Expecting that “it would be like looking in a mirror,” the woman is instead greeted by a transfigured version of herself, a transfiguration that takes place within the artistic imagination of the painter. That Freddie even imagines this is significant because it is a prefiguring of what he will attempt to do later in *Ghosts* and *Athena*.

Unfortunately, Freddie has not yet realised the importance of this imperative and his caveat at the end dismisses his as yet ill-defined awareness summarily. Later in the narrative, however, the attempt to create a life for an other becomes an acknowledgement of his failing, signalling Freddie’s development in his understanding of the relationship between the imagination and the world. When Freddie “pore[s] ... over the newspaper files” in order to imagine Josie Bell more vividly, his actions echo what he does above but with a difference: he registers that the mere regurgitation of details does nothing to enhance Josie’s presence for him; even physical contact will not be adequate. He perceives that without an imagination that is fully and ethically engaged with reality, presence will not be apprehensible no matter what the conditions under which one interacts with the other.

Art occupies a central place throughout the art trilogy and problematizes the issue of how art should relate to reality, commenting directly upon literary art and its relationship to the world. Freddie’s imagination fails to see the world because he at first assumes it can have a direct link to reality; he presumes that looking at art is equivalent to looking at the world. He may be disillusioned about other systems of knowledge but he, ironically, maintains a naïve frame of mind with regards to art. But art, according to Banville’s novels, does not attempt to *explain* reality. It tries to

illuminate the presence within to create presence, not to interpret or explicate presence. When Freddie does understand this, he moves from trying to make the world fit his artistic vision and instead acknowledges the mystery of the world, its essential otherness. This is his first step towards developing an ethical imagination that does not deform reality to fit its precepts. And this step makes it possible for him to continue creating art (his narratives) that creates the conditions necessary for presence to take shape.

The authentication of paintings is the main plot—if we can call it a plot—in *Athena*. Freddie, armed with his knowledge of painting and the reproduction of copies after his stint with Professor Kreutznaer in *Ghosts*, is of course the best candidate for the job. But it is not just his work with the paintings that is important but also his relationship with A. These two threads of the narrative multiply the associations paintings hold in the narrative and demonstrate what Italo Calvino terms the “indirect vision” of art:

At certain moments I felt that the entire world was turning into stone: a slow petrification, more or less advanced depending on people and places but one that spared no aspect of life. It was as if no one could escape the inexorable stare of Medusa. The only hero able to cut off Medusa’s head is Perseus, who ... does not turn his gaze upon the face of the Gorgon but only upon her image reflected in his bronze shield. ...

To cut off Medusa’s head without being turned to stone, Perseus supports himself on the very lightest of things, the winds and the clouds, and fixes his gaze upon what can be revealed only by indirect vision, an image caught in a mirror. I am immediately tempted

to see this myth as an allegory on the poet's relationship to the world, a lesson in the method to follow when writing. ...

The relationship between Perseus and the Gorgon is a complex one and does not end with the beheading of the monster. Medusa's blood gives birth to a winged horse, Pegasus—the heaviness of stone is transformed into its opposite. ... As for the severed head, Perseus does not abandon it but carries it concealed in a bag. ... It is a weapon he uses only in cases of dire necessity; ... Perseus succeeds in mastering that horrendous face by keeping it hidden, just as in the first place he vanquished it by viewing it in a mirror. Perseus's strength always lies in a refusal to look directly, but not in a refusal of the reality in which he is fated to live; he carries the reality with him and accepts it as his particular burden. (4-5)

The importance of the myth of Perseus lies in the way Perseus masters his reality through the indirect gaze, which is also the method Freddie and Max use to master their realities. The language used in this passage is also similar to Freddie's descriptions of the painting he steals in *The Book of Evidence* and phrases like “viewing it in a mirror,” “keeping it hidden” and “particular burden” are echoed in the thoughts and ideas circulating in Freddie's and Max's narratives. Like Calvino, Freddie, particularly in *The Book of Evidence* is confronted by the petrification of reality. The gaze he directs at experience does not explain but transfixes reality into a stasis that cannot convey the vitality of the other. When he realises this, he attempts to redirect his gaze on the world, recognising, like Calvino, that one cannot look directly at experience in order to grasp it. The world must be kept hidden even as one tries to

illuminate it. To accomplish this, art becomes Perseus' shield, which reflects not captures.

This accounts for the multiple surfaces through which the reader and Morrow are invited to view A. Even though Morrow enjoys an intimate relationship with A, the most intense moments in the narrative are not those where physical intimacy is featured but those where Morrow is viewing A through the spyhole in the wall, or through the paintings he describes. That all the paintings are revealed at the end to be reproductions is thus no accident. They are reproductions because art does not correlate simply with the world, the implied 'original' painting. All art is only a reproduction of the world, an indirect vision of experience. The one genuine painting, "The Birth of Athena," is not analysed in the text—its description is only one short paragraph near the end of the narrative—because it cannot be explicated directly.

The inexplicable murders that take place throughout Morrow's relationship with A are not random occurrences but tied to the need for indirect vision. For example, the day when A initiates the game of spying is also "the day that the third body was found, strung up by the heels on the park railings with throat cut so deeply the head was almost severed" (154-55). Morrow's interruption of his account of the game with this information is jarring, a not-so-subtle reminder of Josie Bell's murder. Additionally, the fact that the "head was almost severed" and the naming of the murderer "the Vampire" are indicators of the rejection of not only the solipsistic imagination (unethical in manner) but also of an artist that sucks the vitality out of the world it tries to depict rather than giving it being (155).

The spying game is juxtaposed against this horrific account to remind the reader of what Morrow is constantly trying to avoid, and what he is trying to achieve with his renewed vision. That the imagination could just as easily slip back into a

complacent contemplation of the world is hinted at when A switches between benign and sinister tableaux while Morrow is spying on her:

This is how I always found her, sitting motionless and agaze, like tiny Alice waiting for the magic potion to take effect. Then slowly she would begin to stir, with odd spasmic jerks and twitches. ... her movements were at once stiff and graceful, and touched with a strange, unhuman pathos, like those of a skilfully manipulated marionette. ... Always the tableau began with these elaborate politenesses; gradually, however, ... an atmosphere of menace would develop; she would frown and shrink back and shake her head, pressing splayed fingers to her throat and lifting one knee. (156-7)

Alice's innocence becomes disfigured by A's latter actions, suggesting that the imagination that looks is susceptible to deforming the objects it holds within its gaze if it is not being watchful. Comparing her to a marionette, however, is hopeful and points towards Max's later characterisation of himself as marionette. But what is most significant in this passage is the sense it gives the reader of looking at a painting, a portrait even. When Morrow spies on A through the spyhole, it mimics his actions of examining the paintings up close. His careful scrutiny of the surfaces of the paintings to determine authenticity is paralleled in the way he peers at her through the "brass barrel" in the wall (155). Moreover, whenever he first starts looking at A, she is always "motionless and agaze," a captured figure of a woman on a canvas rather than a living breathing human. And like the type of art Morrow aspires to create through the intensity of the gaze, "the magic potion [does] take effect." A begins to move and act as if like a marionette "manipulated" with skill.

A's performance as marionette invokes Heinrich von Kleist's "On the Marionette Theatre," which Banville claims as an important influence on his art. What is important for our purposes is the relationship Herr C. proposes as existing between the puppeteer and the marionette in his conversation with an unnamed 'I':

I asked him if he thought that the puppeteer who controlled these figures was himself a dancer, or at least if he did not have to possess an understanding of the aesthetic of the dance.

He replied that though such a task might be simple from a purely mechanical viewpoint, it did not necessarily follow that it could be managed entirely without some feeling.

The line that the centre of gravity must describe was, to be sure, very simple, and was, he felt, in most cases a straight line. In cases where that line is not straight, it appears that the law of the curvature is at least of the first or, at best, of the second rank, and additionally in this latter case only elliptical. This form of movement of the human body's extremities is natural, because of the joints, and therefore would require no great skill on the part of the puppeteer to approximate it.

But viewed in another way, this line is something very mysterious. For it is nothing other than the path to the soul of the dancer, and Herr C. doubted that it could be proven otherwise that through this line the puppeteer placed himself in the centre of gravity of the marionette; that is to say, in other words, that the puppeteer danced. (23)

The “centre of gravity” mentioned in this extract indicates the “crucial point ... inside ... the figure” where the puppeteer directs his movements to control all the limbs of the marionette during a dance (22). This point is the link between the puppeteer and marionette, becoming “the path to the soul of the dancer,” and unites both in the dance. This idea is important to the discussion because, as I have already mentioned, Banville’s artist figures are trying to take the world into them in order to be expressed. The puppeteer who is not seen and therefore has no presence can only be made present when the marionette dances. The “centre of gravity” connecting them both involves the puppeteer in the marionette’s dance. In the same way, Freddie and Max are not present unless the object they are looking at becomes present. The “centre of gravity” is located in the art object. When they manage to take that object into themselves through the creating of art, the “centre of gravity” belongs both to art and the creator of that art, and presence becomes manifest in both.

When Morrow is observing A through the spyglass, this is just one of the many attempts in the novel that tries to bring about presence. As Joseph McMinn observes, the use of metaphor, which includes visual art, makes everything more than what it is: “Nothing is simply itself, but always suggestive of something else which helps to reveal the nature of the original” (“Plethora” 148). The multiple ways in which Morrow looks at A are suggestive precisely because of their indirect nature. Morrow is able to “reveal the nature of the original” by allusion because this sort of revelation does not deform the object to fit his conceptions but maintains the otherness and essential mystery of its being. Because there is no way to directly apprehend the object, Morrow uses various methods to circle closer and closer to its centre of being.

The concentrated gaze Morrow directs on A in the game is also exhibited in his formal analysis of the paintings. Recast in mythic frameworks, A takes on even more

significations, fleshing out her self in ways not possible simply by physical contact. The mythical figures on the landscape of the canvas are reflections of the characters in the novel, figures seen as playing out “their little drama of desire of loss.” And the mythical “Olympians,” like Freddie in his bewilderment at the world, “sit in silent contemplation of the mortal sphere that fascinates and baffles them” (104). And A, who sits among them all, is

... the pivot of the picture, the fulcrum between two states of being, the representation of life-in-death and death-in-life, of what changes and yet endures; the witness that she offers is the possibility of transcendence, both of the self and of the world, though world and self remain the same. She is the perfect illustration of Adorno’s dictum that ‘In their relation to empirical reality works of art recall the theologumenon that in a state of redemption everything will be just as it is and yet wholly different.’ (105)

The divine and the infinite are invoked in the person of A through the incorporation of Adorno’s dictum that lends A an ethereal quality that is fitting for a figure born out of an imagination that aspires to make the world *be*. Not of this world and yet within the world, A becomes the portal through which art and the world, life and death, and self and world come together. She is the surrogate of art who revitalises being so that though everything may appear the same, everything is inherently different—all is filled with imagination and hence being. The state of redemption A promises is the rescue of presence, the promise of, as Morrow calls it, “living” (233).

Max Morden in *The Sea* is chasing the same promise of redemption A offers in *Athena*. Having lost the means for expression after his wife Anna’s death, he returns to the Cedars in order to search for a way in which he may once more be said. And

like Morrow, he uses visual art—in particular the paintings of Pierre Bonnard and Anna’s photographs—to turn the indirect gaze towards memory to birth presence. Due to this, *The Sea* is strikingly ‘still.’ There is hardly any movement in the narrative. Housed in the Cedars, what Max actually does in his daily routine matters less than the narrative that fixates on Max’s memories of the past and the paintings he uses to illuminate presence contributes to this stillness through their timelessness.

The quality of stillness in this novel is essential because of the aesthetics it implies and its reference to another artist Banville is much influenced by: Rainer Maria Rilke. Like Banville, Rilke was influenced by visual art and he describes in a diary entry dated September 11, 1900 his thoughts while at the German artists’ colony at Worpswede where being in nature and interacting with other artists, including painters, offered a new sense of seeing:

I am slowly beginning to understand this life. ... This daily attentiveness, alertness and readiness of the senses, directed outward, this thousandfold seeing and constant seeing beyond oneself ... this being only eye ... How large the eyes become here. (qtd. in Augst)³⁶

This “being only eye” exhibits the same aesthetics Banville demonstrates in the novels of the art trilogy and *The Sea*, which Therese Ahern Augst explains as the “intense receptivity of the subject, the openness of each sense organ to the external world and simultaneously to the interiority of the self” (619). An artist who is attentive to external reality is like Kleist’s puppeteer. By enlarging vision, the artist becomes conscious of his interiority, emphasising the essential link between the act of seeing done by the artistic imagination and the awareness of the presence of the self: “everything goes more deeply into me [the artist] and doesn’t stop at the place where

³⁶ All quotes from Rilke indicated as quoted from Therese Ahern Augst’s article have been translated by her from the original German.

it always used to end. I have an interiority. There is a place I knew nothing about. Everything goes there now” (Rilke, qtd. in Augst 621). Taking the world into the self engenders being. The artist is transfigured as he transfigures his world by looking at the world “with [his] whole being” (Rilke, qtd. in Augst 619).

Being an eye is possible not only when the artist is removed from city life, as Rilke was trying to do when he was at Worpswede but also when he is confronted by absence. Augst recounts that Rilke later leaves Worpswede and the painters Paula Becker and Clare Westoff to return to “a more monastic life in Schmargendorf near Berlin” where “writing *to* the other [the female painters] begins to function in the *place* of the other” (624). This is remarkably similar to Banville’s protagonists who write to the other—also female—in the face of absence. The recapturing of presence in absence is the motivator of both Rilke’s and Banville’s art.

The recapturing of presence in absence is a crucial point as Augst’s analysis of Rilke’s poem “Requiem for a Friend” shows:³⁷ “What is external [to the self] must be recognised, and once it has been absorbed by the self in its separateness, its physical presence is no longer necessary. Neither is the nostalgia that links us to such lost objects” (633). In *The Sea*, a similar loss provides the motivation for Max’s narrative. His nostalgia for the past is at first present in the text because he has not yet “absorbed” his external reality, the death of Anna. When he does, it is significant that it is at that moment that his art work and his person become one: “A nurse came out then to fetch me, and I turned and followed her inside, and it was as if I were walking into the sea” (264). Max’s “walking into the sea” gives the reader the sense of his grief and loss but also implies the unification of his self and art (the pun on the phrase “the sea” which refers to both the feeling of loss and the title of the novel is not

³⁷ This poem was written after Paula Modersohn-Becker’s death. She had married hence the double-barrelled surname.

accidental), the presence of interiority Rilke mentions. When this happens, the novel ends because it is the moment when Max becomes his narrative, suggesting that the “external” “in its separateness” has finally been taken into the self.

The danger of appropriation by the gaze, which is what Banville illustrates in Freddie’s failure of imagination, is a preoccupation Rilke also had. The “ongoing tension between the recognition that Rilke wishes to grant [Paula] and the possessive, even destructive force of understanding” as grasping is played out in the poem mentioned above. Allowing Paula to stand as an entity that is not possessed but to respect her otherness becomes the difficult task of the artist, a complication that Freddie also has to deal with in his narrative.

This is the reason Pierre Bonnard is important to the narrative of *The Sea*. Bonnard’s use of mirrors in his paintings is intended to achieve the same thing Banville’s protagonists are trying to do, which Timothy Hyman describes as follows: “The mirror made explicit the contradiction in all of [Bonnard’s] treatments of pictorial space, ... simultaneously extension and closure, deep and flat. As a hinge between the self and the world the mirror makes both a rift, and a relationship” (91).

This relationship between self and world constructed by the mirror is seen when Max “[considers his] face in the glass” (130). Looking at the mirror in the bathroom makes Max think of “those last studies Bonnard made of himself in the bathroom mirror at Le Bosquet” and the “Van-Gogh self-portrait ... from an earlier series, done in Paris in 1887” (130, 130-1). Like these self-portraits, Max’s reflection in the mirror contains both depth and surface. For example, Max at first describes what he sees in the glass by concentrating on surfaces like the “pink-tinged pallor” of his cheeks or the walls’ “parched, brittle texture of cuttlefish bone” (131, 132). However, the consideration of these surfaces turns into an experience of depth:

Standing there in that white box of light I was transported for a moment to some far shore, real or imagined, I do not know which, although the details had a remarkable dreamlike definition, where I sat in the sun on a hard ridge of shaly sand holding in my hands a big flat smooth blue stone. (132)

The transformation of reality into the surfaces of art makes a palpable presence possible. Not only are Max and his environment transformed by the mirror and his description, this transformation brings about the apprehension of depth. In this passage, time and location collapse into one moment, enshrined in the mirror in Max's bathroom. The presence of the mirror in Bonnard's paintings and Max's narrative embodies the tension inherent in the relationship between the imagination and the world. Like the mirror, the imagination tries to maintain the tension between subject and object, a duality that ensures the object is seen as separate and taken into the self at the same time. There is a maintenance of both distance and closeness. Art, therefore, is like a mirror strange. It takes the world into itself (the reflection in the glass) without actually possessing it. The world still stands apart, very much a separate entity. Taking the world in and giving it back to itself becomes a transformative action that does not reflect but transfigures. The reflection in the mirror is the thing and yet not.

Furthermore, Bonnard's paintings depicting his wife Marthe in the bath are also significant when considered in light of what Max is trying to accomplish in his narrative. Like Bonnard who "painted [Marthe], over and over [in the bath], continuing the series even after she had died," Max paints—resurrects—Anna in his narrative repeatedly even after her death. And just like Marthe who "lies [in the bath] ... [like] a goddess of the floating world, attenuated, ageless, as much dead as alive,"

Anna too is floating within the world of *The Sea*, a timeless presence that suffuses the present reality Max subsists in, providing in death, as she did in life, the means for presence to be articulated.

For Max and Bonnard, as it was for Rilke, absence is the condition in which art is created. As Susanne Pagé observes, Bonnard “marked his difference by never painting from life,” making all his paintings “reconstructions” rather than representations (24). This point is vital because it relinquishes his—and Banville’s—art from the need for representation, which is possessive (in Rilke’s understanding of that term) and thus cannot allow for an ethical understanding of the other to take place. Therefore, instead of representing the other, Banville’s and Bonnard’s art problematize the artistic imagination’s process of apprehending the other as presence:

The 1925 *Bath* had been very much a portrait of Marthe. By 1936, when Bonnard embarked on the new version, she was almost seventy, and yet the figure floating here is ageless. Perhaps the true theme of all these pictures is not Marthe and her long days in the water so much as the suspension of physicality and of time, and the dissolving of all into reflection. (Hyman 190)

The “suspension of physicality and of time, and the dissolving of all into reflection” is Bonnard’s, and Max’s, way of achieving presence in and through the work of art.

Like Bonnard, the subject of Max’s narrative is not so much the people or objects he concentrates in his gaze but these people and objects as art. He is not trying to possess them as people but to focalise life so as to distil presence from it. As Georges Roque expresses, “In Bonnard’s paintings, the image is finally eliminated. ... The figure loses its structure, loses its individual presence to become part of the overall structure, it becomes the painting” (274). The concentrated gaze of the artist paradoxically

eliminates the figure so that painting and figure become one and the work of art becomes saturated with presence. The stilled centre of art wraps self and other in being, making the marionette dance and Anna's memory live.

The dissolving of self and world is replicated in Anna's obsession with photography. When Anna is "behind a camera," Max describes her as "a blind person," whose "eyes went dead, an essential light ... extinguished." This does not indicate that she does not see but shows her renouncing the type of sight that like Freddie's estranged imagination tries to possess the other. Instead, she "sightlessly" apprehends the object and in doing so, "peer[s] inward, into herself, in search of some defining perspective, some essential point of view." As such, the taking of the photograph, the pressing of the shutter is not as important as the process of recognising the object "sightlessly." "when [Anna] pressed the shutter it seemed the least important thing, no more than a gesture to placate the apparatus" (173).

That Anna's "special gift [of] the disenchanted, disenchanting, eye" also invokes loss and absence is explicitly demonstrated in her photographs of the hospital patients (174). When she "spread[s] the photographs around her on the bed and pore[s] over them avidly," it should come as no surprise that it is also at this moment that her eyes seem to Max to have become "enormous, starting out from the armature of the skull" (180). Like Rilke, she has become all eye, taking the world into herself voraciously as she confronts the spectre of death. Her subjects, all confronting some form of loss themselves, become in her photographs figures of art as this description of one photograph demonstrates:

I [Max] recall in particular a large and at first sight formal study, in hard-edged shades of plastic pinks and puce and glossy greys, taken from low down at the foot of her bed, of a fat old wild-haired woman

with her slack, blue-veined legs lifted and knees splayed, showing off what I presumed was a prolapsed womb. The arrangement was as striking and as carefully composed as a frontispiece from one of Blake's prophetic books. The central space, an inverted triangle bounded on two sides by the woman's cocked legs and along the top of the hem by her white gown stretched tight across from knee to knee, might have been a blank patch of parchment in wait of a fiery inscription, heralding perhaps the mock-birth of the pink and darkly purple thing already protruding from her lap. Above this triangle the woman's Medusa-head seemed by a subtle trick of perspective to have been severed and lifted forward and set down squarely in the same plane as her knees, the clean-cut stump of the neck appearing to be balanced on the straight line of the gown's hem that formed the upturned base of the triangle. (182)

It is not coincidental that Max's description of Anna's picture speaks like an analysis of a painting. Like Freddie's formal analysis of the paintings in Athena, Max directs his gaze at art to illuminate presence in reality, specifically Anna's and as a result, his. The layering of art within art in the passage reminds us of Calvino's indirect vision, as does the mention of Medusa. The combination of the depth and the flat surface also recalls Bonnard's paintings and his play of planes and perspectives in art. This passage thus acts like a distillation of the artistic method we see in Max's narrative, showing us how absence and presence, depth and surface, life and death, and world and self merge under the attentive gaze of the imagination. The "mock-birth of the pink and darkly purple thing already protruding from [the woman's] lap" is an

indication of the impending birth of presence that will finally take place at the end when the narrative and Max, the figure in this work of art, coalesce into one.

In the end, the question Freddie asks himself in *Ghosts* resurfaces yet again in the reader's mind: Can Max finally count himself among the living? I would have to say, yes, for now he can.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued for a genealogy of art from Virginia Woolf to John Banville by looking at how they present consciousness and the self, and their use of ekphrasis. Returning to Brian Richardson's theory of "unnatural narratives" and Alan Warren Friedman's concept of "multifarious narration," we can see that both Woolf and Banville exhibit such characteristics in their texts and stand apart from more traditional texts that exhibit a univalent narrative voice or perspective. Additionally, I have located Woolf and Banville along a continuum of narratives, seeing Woolf's artistic methods as demonstrating features of what I term the category of *representation*, and locating Banville, with his focus on textuality and the surfaces of art rather than the direct apprehension of life, in the category of *relation*. Their membership in these respective categories corroborates Richardson's idea that narratives move from portrayals of consciousness to the focus on textuality, making the focus on the perceiving subject move outwards from the self to encompass the objects in the world.

The role of the artistic imagination and its relationship to reality is seen as evolving through the analysis of both writers' novels. Moving from a more direct apprehension of reality, it becomes, in Woolf's fiction, a way to harmonise the subjective consciousness with disparate entities around it and tries to account for the

individual more fully by taking account of the unseen forces acting upon the self.

Thereafter, it changes even further in Banville's fiction, redefining its role to become an eye that takes in external experience attentively in order to transfigure the self, making the relationship between the imagination and reality indirect but no less authentic.

Although both writers espouse different artistic methods and hold differing ideas about what art and the imagination can do or accomplish, they never lose sight of the reality before their eyes: seeing absence in reality, both writers attempt to bring about presence through various methods. More importantly, the novel continues to be the form that constantly interrogates itself, problematizing the act of writing even as it is in the process of being written. And until Banville's protagonists can retain presence permanently, can be expressed, as Banville would say, the questioning will never end.

Conclusion: Looking Towards a New Novel

Art is life. Nothing, in art, is ever won *for good*. Art cannot exist without this permanent condition of being *put in question*. But the movement of these evolutions and revolutions constitutes its perpetual renaissance.

Alain Robbe-Grillet, "From Realism to Reality"
(159, emphases in original)

The novel form has always been associated with the modern, a period characterised by change, upheaval and plurality. Its ability to encompass a wide range of experience, and its focus on the individual may be qualities shared with classical works of art like Homer's *Odyssey* and Virgil's *Iliad* but its propensity to keep up with change is unprecedented. The ever-changing form of the novel reflects and also anticipates the changes in artistic visions, methods, and narrative voice, demonstrating the bounteous possibilities available to it and implying the as yet unseen varieties of novel forms we may encounter in the future. In the many transformations of the novel, one thing remains clear: in the critical tradition of writing identified in this thesis, the problematization of writing has remained the focus of literary art. Artists chronologically separated by centuries like Laurence Sterne and John Banville, or writers set apart by their membership to different cultural frameworks or literary movements like Virginia Woolf and Miguel de Cervantes, all evince the same need to interrogate the writing they perform. This interrogation entails not only the need to define the artistic imagination's role in art and its relationship to reality but also the recognition of the limits of their art.

Their visions of life and the limitations of the material in which they translate their visions pose a gap that they need to bridge. And it is in this desire to bridge this

gap and the difficulty of actually accomplishing it that engenders a tension from which writing springs. The centrality of loss and absence in both Woolf's and Banville's texts attests to this. Art, for Woolf and Banville, may offer some insight or illumination about reality but its real subject is the relationship between art and life. Through their formal experimentations, both writers engage fully with the problem of writing as they variously understand it, offering readers not only their vision of life but also their ideas about art and life, about writing, and lay bare their processes of construction, commenting and reflecting on their work within the text itself.

Their need to interrogate their work in the process of construction and the value they ascribe to its inclusion within the finished art work speak of the ethical dimension of their art. Understood in terms of its application to the art trilogy, the ethical artistic imagination accepts the otherness of the world and does not try to deform it according to its own interpreting systems. Whether the sense of order and harmony is imposed from without, as Woolf's texts demonstrate, or illumination is enabled through the taking of the world into the self in Banville's texts, these different strategies which the imagination uses to form a relationship to experience maintain the plurality and mystery in life and turn away from totalising fictions that espouse a hegemonic vision rather than what I will call a loving one.

This relationship of love preserves the reciprocity between the imagination and the world. It is analogous to a conversation rather than a lecture, much like the conversation that Freddie has with Flora in *Ghosts*, which transforms the merely palpable to presence, and encompassed in Lily's painting and La Trobe's music. It is also alluded to in the enlargement and transformation of sight in Banville's novels that develop an indirect vision that does not try to appropriate but maintains the essential otherness of the world. The philosophy that Simon Weil expresses when she

says that, “real art [is] ... a method of establishing a certain relationship between the world and self, between oneself and the self” is espoused in the novels examined in this argument. Although it may be reductive to think of art as philosophy—for art is more than that—Weil’s statement recognises the transformative power of an ethical art that is founded on reciprocity.

Perhaps the experience of real art is what Eugene Ionesco describes in his journal:

Once, when I was an adolescent, and even a little later, astonishment gave rise to euphoria. Let me try once again to describe this state of mind, this happening. I was in a small provincial town and I must have been about eighteen. It was shortly before noon on a luminous day in early June. I was walking about in front of the low white houses of the little town. What happened was quite unexpected. The whole town was suddenly transformed. Everything became at once profoundly real and profoundly unreal. That was exactly what happened: unreality mingled with reality, the two becoming closely and indissolubly interconnected. The houses grew still whiter, utterly clean. There was something quite new and unsullied about the light, this was an unfamiliar world which I seemed to have known from all eternity. A world that the light dissolved and yet reconstituted. An overflowing joy rose up from deep within me, warm and luminous itself, an absolute presence, a presentness. I said to myself that this was ‘truth’, without knowing how to define this truth. No doubt had I tried to define it it would have vanished. I said to myself, too, that since this experience had happened, since I had lived through it, since I knew everything,

although I did not know what it was that I knew, I could never be unhappy again, for I had learnt that man does not die. ... I had the essential revealed to me ... It's true that for some years the recollection of this moment often comforted me. Then it comforted me less and less. Then not at all. When I try to recall that joy I can only see images detached from myself, impenetrable, not quite incomprehensible but impossible to live through again. (68-9)

The way Ionesco relates his experience bears striking similarities to the art of both writers examined in this thesis, but particularly Banville's: the departure point of the ordinary, the sudden unexpected illumination that takes place, the transformation of reality, the mingling of unreality and reality, and the use of painterly language. It is as if the transformation of reality as experienced by Ionesco can be made intelligible only if he suffuses his narration with some sort of artistic language because only it can translate the experience without trying to ratiocinate it which would reduce the experience to mere explanation. Ionesco echoes Banville's belief that truth cannot be explicated. He does not know "how to define this truth" but is aware of the danger of that endeavour since truth would have "vanished" had he tried to process the experience with the logical mind instead of the imagination. The relationship between the imagination and reality is thus emphasised, in Ionesco's experience, as a relationship that does not question to seek answers. It is the experience, not explication, of the moment that is valuable, like those moments of illumination in Banville's novels. The strangeness within the ordinary, what Ionesco calls the "unreal" and the "real" or "unreality" and "reality" are always present but it is only in moments of heightened, concentrated sight that one apprehends the mysterious quality of the world. The revelation of the "essential" at that unexpected moment is a

euphoric moment for him but like the experiences of Freddie and Max, the moment passes too soon and one is once more left bereaved and mourning the loss.

But therein lies the difference. Where Ionesco despairs and stops his account is the point Freddie and Max begin their narratives. If, as Alain Robbe-Grillet expresses in the epigraph, “Art is life,” then to stop creating art also means certain death.

Moreover, like life, any victory won in art is impermanent: “Nothing ... is ever won *for good*.” However, Robbe-Grillet, like Banville, does not see this as defeat but locates within this impermanence the revitalising power of transformation. By being perpetually questioned, art is never allowed to ossify, implying that its spirit will always be renewed and animated by the power of questioning. This explains the longevity and pliancy of the novel form. Because of writers like Sterne, Woolf and Banville who feel compelled to question art, to bring about “evolutions and revolutions,” the novel continues to experience a “perpetual renaissance,” and whatever the shape of the novels to come, those that will transform reality and themselves will be those in which the questioning is made apparent, where nothing is taken for granted, where unreality and reality mingle so that the world we see becomes

... a world where nothing is lost, where all is accounted for while yet the mystery of things is preserved; a world where [we] may live, however briefly, however tenuously, in the failing evening of the self, solitary and at the same time together somehow here in this place, dying as [we] may be and yet fixed for ever in a luminous, unending instant. (Banville, *The Infinities* 300)

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