

Beyond the Horizon:

A Review of

*The Quest for God in the Novels of John Banville 1973-2005:
A Postmodern Spirituality* by Brendan McNamee

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When I was first asked to write a review of a newly published book-length critical study of John Banville, I promptly said yes. When I heard the book's title, however, I thought twice. The title, *The Quest for God in the Novels of John Banville*, seemed to go against most of what I understood Banville's writing to be about: modern man's existential confusion in a meaningless and often hostile universe. *There is no centre, no god*, in Banville's world. What was this critic thinking? I next thought that perhaps I should write this review and gain some satisfaction by trampling on this academic's ideas and raise myself, a mere postgraduate, over the disparaged work of an older and more experienced scholar. And that was my attitude when I finally got my hands on the book and began reading it like a boxer continually positioning himself for the knockout punch.

'In this thesis, postmodernism is to be understood in its broadest Lyotardian sense of "an incredulity toward metanarratives.'"(19). At the core of Banville's fiction, McNamee discerns a continual conflict between this incredulity and its opposite, certainties. The protagonists, caught between the two, 'suffer in a limbo'. He continues with rather awkward syntax to outline the main focus of his study, which goes some way toward explaining its title:

'Since my readings will be stressing the spiritual, by postmodernism here will be understood a similar, if more specifically oriented, limbo: philosophical struggles to find a way to talk about God without positing God's existence. But why should anyone feel the need to talk about

something that one believes to be non-existent? Because, I would contend, of an extra-linguistic yearning for something that, since it must have a word, we may call the sacred.' (19)

Then why not call the book *The Quest for the Sacred*? And yet is the word 'sacred' any less raveled in traditional theology? With this question in mind McNamee's study began to pull into focus. If he denies 'presenting Banville as a covert Christian or believer of any stripe', as he does in the introduction, indeed he safely assumes that 'Banville is an atheist' (14), then his interest should be in dropping the weight of orthodox religion from concepts of the sacred. And if Banville's entire oeuvre can be understood in part through a sustained interest in the attempt at breaking free from culturally fixed forms of interpreting and expressing the world, then McNamee seems to follow this interest. Religion of all creeds, Nietzsche taught us, has been a lens through which man has viewed the world for centuries, and which has perhaps blinded us to perceptions closer at hand.

The Quest for God is in part a philosophical exploration through Banville's novels of what lies behind the confusing human desire for, and belief in, God. And it goes a good way in considering this, but, to my mind, doesn't quite reach, as William James described it, the worm at the core of our being: our terror of death.

McNamee's book, however, is an engaging and solid contribution to the study of one of the most challenging and finest prose stylists writing today. In fact, there is a quality to McNamee's writing that I place over and above other Banville criticism I have read: he writes with verve. One feels that McNamee receives tremendous pleasure from Banville's novels, and the reader is made party to that pleasure.

McNamee's *Quest for God* draws attention to the confusing human desire to express an ambiguous and often conflicting feeling of significance without meaning: a sensual and disconcerting affect that one feels continually thrumming in one's inner being, beyond the reductive confines

of language, science, and knowledge. This is not only a conflict between scientific and 'sacred' forms of expression, but between mind and matter. And here is the predicament that lies at the core of all of Banville's novels and, I would argue, at the heart of every human being: *the paradoxical nature of man*. As Ernest Becker so penetratingly explored in *The Denial of Death*¹, human beings are half animal and half symbolic. Man is a blood-pumping, breath-gasping, defecating creature that will one day be food for worms; and yet within this limited and limiting body there exists an inner symbolic self with an ability think through time and space. The human creature has the wonderful and powerful gift of imaginatively transcending nature. Yet how do we pitiable humans reconcile these two sides of our being?

'Between the two spheres of thought and action [Copernicus] could discern no workable connection. In this he was out of step with the age, which told him heaven and earth in his own self were conjoined. The notion was not seriously to be entertained, however stoutly he might defend it out of loyalty to the humanist cause. There were for him two selves, separate and irreconcilable, the one a mind among the stars, the other a worthless fork of flesh planted firmly in the earthly excrement.'²

Banville locates the first birth pangs of the modern existential crises of faith (and reason) in the sixteenth century, when Nicolaus Copernicus suggested through his studies of the planets and stars that the sun, and not the earth, was at the centre of the universe. Through the character of this great but troubled scientist Banville also explores the disharmony between what the mind can conceive and what earthly nature continually reveals. Copernicus is a man so utterly appalled by life on earth, with all its blood, shit and stench, that he desperately seeks a solution to the surrounding chaos in the harmony of the stars. Science becomes his god – his denial of death. Yet Copernicus is soon warned:

'Listen to me', says the professor, 'you are confusing astronomy with philosophy... You are asking our science to perform tasks which it is incapable of performing. Astronomy does not describe the universe as it

is, but only as we observe it. That theory is correct, therefore, which accounts for our observations.’ (45)

Brendan McNamee describes Banville’s writing as apophatic: a type of discourse that implies a sacred experience through negation. The strongest motif found in Banville’s fiction, observes McNamee, is ‘the magnetic north that pulls all his protagonists towards the unsayable, towards absence, towards nothingness. It is, however, a journey without a destination, because these (non)-states only exist (that is, to our consciousness) in the light of, and by virtue of, their opposites – the sayable, presence, *things*.’ Apophatic discourse, therefore, displays its own limitations: the limitations of language and representation, and through this negative mode ‘posits something beyond, even if that something is desire itself.’ (24) This conundrum can be heard as a refrain throughout the history of philosophical discourse; from Spinoza, who exclaimed, ‘An emotion which is a passion ceases to be a passion as soon as we form a clear and distinct idea thereof’; to Nietzsche’s more plaintive and enigmatic words: ‘That for which we find words is something already dead in our hearts. There is always a kind of contempt in the act of speaking.’ McNamee understands organised religion as identifying or speaking this sense of the sacred and thus destroying it:

‘The concept of God (God *as* a concept) is rendered necessary by the reifying mentality, the mentality of the metaphysics of presence. It is a way of excluding the unthinkable. But “the unthinkable is the limit that forever shadows thought’.

¹ Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death* (Simon & Schuster, New York 1997)

² John Banville, *Doctor Copernicus* in 'The Revolutions Trilogy: *Doctor Copernicus, Kepler, The Newton Letter*' (Picador, London 2001) page 36.