

Science and the Spiritual Quest in John Banville's Tetralogy:

Doctor Copernicus, Kepler, The Newton Letter & Mefisto

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يقول الله تعالى:

(نَرْفَعُ دَرَجَاتٍ مَّن نَّشَاءُ وَفَوْقَ كُلِّ ذِي عِلْمٍ عَلِيمٌ)

صدق الله العظيم

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Chapter One

Introduction

Truth, harmony and beauty have always been the objects of Man's ardent pursuit. In his one-of-a-kind tetralogy: **Doctor Copernicus** (١٩٧٦), **Kepler** (١٩٨١), **The Newtown Letter** (١٩٨٦), and **Mefisto** (١٩٩٣), Ireland's great John Banville (١٩٤٥ -) offers a unique presentation of such an eternal pursuit, linking the past with the present, the personal with the universal, to emphasize the universal and timeless nature of the search. Reading the four books, one cannot help but feel the presence of the spirits of the world's most famous truth seekers from Bacon to Kant as if they were still amongst us. The tetralogy also echoes different schools of thought such psychoanalysis, deconstructionism and postmodernism, offering a unique blend that is hard to find in a single work of art.

Banville is a contemporary postmodernist Irish novelist, who made valuable contributions to Irish literature. He wrote many novels and short stories such as **Long Lankin** (١٩٧٠), **Nightspawn** (١٩٧٢), **Birchwood** (١٩٧٣), and **The Book of Evidence** (١٩٨٩), for which he was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize. He was shortlisted for the same prize in ٢٠٠٢ for **Shroud**, and he actually got it in ٢٠٠٥ for **The Sea**. He was nominated once again in ٢٠٠٧ for the same prize. Furthermore, he won many prestigious prizes among them are the Allied Irish Banks in ١٩٧٣, and the Guardian Fiction prize in ١٩٨١. It is also worthy of mention that Banville is the literary editor of *The Irish Times*. His latest work is **Infinites**, which was released in ٢٠٠٩.

In the tetralogy, Banville skillfully mixes the imaginary with the scientific, the fictional with the real, the scientific with the literary, the personal with the universal through a unified, logically sequenced

structure that allows the reader to predict and infer what is to come. He uses the giants of scientific investigation, namely Copernicus, Kepler and Newton, as representatives of everyman, which shows the magnitude of the mission Man has to perform in this vague world. In **Doctor Copernicus**, for example, there is the search for meaning, for the thing itself, for the core. He seeks the truth behind the phenomenon not how to preserve the phenomenon as explained by the ancients. Kepler, on the other hand, is a dreamer. He dreams of order in an irredeemably chaotic world; he passionately chases this elusive order and symmetry behind the creation. His search for order and symmetry is a reflection of a human need for peace and harmony. The historian in **The Newton Letter** is presented as a disillusioned academic, who finally discovers that the biography of Newton, on which is working, is only an autobiography, a documentation of his life which runs parallel to that of Newton. In the last book of the tetralogy, **Mefisto**, Banville explores the scientific mind by delving “into the realm of imagination, ‘with no more history, no more facts’” (Heaney ੩੬੦). Banville attempts through **Mefisto** to show the mysterious nature of genius, and even though the novel does not have a famous scientist or scholar like its predecessors, the scientific theme is upheld, for the main protagonist is an unknown genius mathematician who is fervently trying to understand the truth behind the world.

Contrary to the expectations of the readers of Irish literature, Banville does not locate himself within the Irish tradition. He likes to think of himself as an international writer. Brown describes him as being “so receptive to the rhythms of European literature company for the purposes of his own aesthetic” (1). However and despite Banville’s claims that he is completely detached from “national literature”; that is

the literature that speaks mainly about the Irish experience, it is obviously clear that Ireland is the background of the four novels: *Doctor Copernicus* and *Kepler*, which are, unlike *The Newton Letter* and *Mefisto*, not set in Ireland. Nevertheless, the connection between the political and religious background of these two novels and that of Ireland is obvious. The schism and the division, which Europe suffered from in both novels, actually echoes that of Ireland, which has always been plagued by the conflicts between the Catholics and the Protestants just as Europe was in the times of Copernicus and Kepler. As a matter of fact, Banville's Ireland itself can be seen as a symbol for the world at large: "The voices we hear in Banville originate in the interiorized worlds of Joyce and Proust which oppose themselves to a reality that seems brutal, irrational and philistine and dismiss the fictional illusions of realism that purports to reflect that order" (Brown ٣). The chaos, religious and political conflicts, ideological struggle, and economic conditions that Ireland is suffering from, represent the major problems the whole world is suffering from.

Banville himself sometimes falls into the trap of admitting the impact the Irish literary tradition on him. In an article entitled "*The Dead Father*", Banville admits that Joyce stands behind all Irish writers like "the ghost of the father" (٦٤). In spite of all the terms that ranked him among international postmodernists, his works, unintentionally as it seems, actually belong to "a tradition of Irish writers, such as Joyce, Beckett, Flann O'Brien, who "interrogate the very possibility of writing" and "explore fundamental tensions between imagination and memory, narration and history, self and language." The intertextuality, which is one of the major characteristics of postmodernism, of his fiction is rife with references to the works of his Irish predecessors (Butkute ١٧). The

concept of intertextuality is so compatible with Bakhtin's concept of dialogism. A dialogic work, as opposed to a monologic one, is the kind of work that is in continual dialogue with previous works or authors. It does not only answer, correct or extend a previous work of art, but it informs and is informed by that work.

This allusion to Ireland refutes what Banville says about himself; that he does not try to represent it in any way and he does not believe in the necessity of "national literature". In **John Banville: A Critical Study**, Joseph McMinn:

Although Banville has spoken of his own sense of detachment from any idea of a 'national' literature, his Irish background plays a decisive, if unpredictable, role in the fiction. He belongs to what Richard Kearney calls the 'critical counter-tradition' in Irish writing, a radical resistance that includes those novelists – Joyce, Beckett, Flann O'Brien – who make narrative itself the subject of their fictions. This self-conscious narrative, which delights in formal, technical, gamesmanship, and which distances itself from realism through symbolism and parody, offers Banville the kind of imaginative freedom that allows him both to imitate and exploit the Irish tradition (9).

It is difficult to date when postmodernism started. According to Tonybee in his book, **A study of History**, postmodernism began in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. The modern, on the other hand, for him, is marked by the rise of humanism, which contends that Man is the basis of knowledge and action, and values the dignity and free will of Man. It is the period that witnessed the gradual emancipation from

superstition and mysticism and is, therefore, known as the Enlightenment. Postmodernism, in contrast, marks the decline of humanism and values of Enlightenment. Tonybee describes it as a “journey into unknown territories where the old cultural constraints no longer apply, and our collective security is potentially compromised” (qtd. in Maples ٢٤). Some critics date it to the sixties, which witnessed the rise of postmodern architecture. Others date it to World War Two. Those critics assert that postmodernism was the result of the horrors of Nazism and other modernist revolutions like Communism and Maoism, while other theorists argue that postmodernism that has emerged as an area of academic study since the mid-eighties.

Defining postmodernism is actually as hard as trying to date it, as it is a concept that appears in a wide variety of disciplines or areas of study, including art, architecture, music, film, literature and technology. Stanley Trachtenberg believes that:

The paradigm of postmodernity can be derived from culture as well as aesthetics where writers, artists, and critics alike have come to question not only our ontological condition or even the rational process by which we attempt to apprehend it, but, as though it were an entity independent of its origins, the condition of art itself (١).

It is a cultural condition that is totally independent, not only of art, but also of its very origins.

One of the problems of dealing with postmodernism lies in distinguishing it from modernism. As a matter of fact, it is commonly known that postmodernism came out of the womb of modernism. In many ways, postmodernist artists and writers continue the sorts of

experimentation, which we can find in modernist works, including fragmentation, generic mixing, ambiguity, irony and parody ...etc. Thus, postmodernist artistic forms can be seen as an extension of modernist experimentation.

Postmodernist works are also characterized by the same extreme-self reflexivity, which characterizes modernist works. Yet, postmodernists take self-reflexivity even further than modernists. In many of postmodernist works, a common feature is what is termed as metafiction. Metafiction is defined in Martin Gray's **Dictionary of Literary Terms** as a term that describes "fiction about fiction". Some novels, for example, examine the process of writing itself, breaking away from realism and the technique of the omniscient narrator, addressing the reader directly "thereby drawing the attention to the act of fiction making" (Gray ١٧٣). In fact, metafiction is not just about the writing of fiction, it is about the language and the process of signification it creates (Trachtenberg ٧). They may parody themselves and even their works in their very works. John Banville's works, as will be explained in the coming chapter, are highly metafictional. In his book, **John Banville: A Critical Introduction**, McMinn describes John Banville's fiction as being "largely about the recreation of fiction" (١).

A prominent feature of postmodernism is the questioning of grand narratives. The twentieth century witnessed this breakdown of the grand narratives that formerly legitimized the status quo. Modernists too questioned such traditional scientific, religious and ethical concepts. In addition, postmodernism is characterized by this general sense that the world has been taken over by the capitalist values and that there are no alternatives.

Knowledge, which is central to the tetralogy, is one of the favourite areas of the postmodernists. Postmodernist thinkers, foremost among them, Jean Francois Lyotard, never failed to express their dissatisfaction with history, theology and science as teleologies. That is due to the fact that the status of knowledge has changed and the way it is produced and transmitted has changed. In turn, a crisis of legitimacy arose. For Lyotard, knowledge has turned into an instrument in the hand of authority, which manipulates it in a way that ensures its stability. Therefore, he contends that the postmodern narrative “adopts a more open “antimethod” or “paralogy” that limits itself to local truth and at the same time entertains alternate possibilities or instability rather than working toward closure or consensus” (Trachtenberg ١١).

Hence it appears that postmodernism resembles modernism in many ways. As a matter of fact, they share most of the main characteristics, but what actually distinguishes postmodernism from modernism is mainly the attitude adopted by the followers of each movement. Modernists, for example, tended to present a fragmented view of life, as we can see in Eliot’s **Waste Land** (١٩٢٢) and Woolf’s **To the Light House** (١٩٢٧), but modernists presented that fragmentation as something tragic. They presented it as something to be lamented and mourned as a loss. Many modernists uphold the idea that works of art can provide the unity, coherence and meaning, which are lost in the modern world. In other words, they believed that “art can do what other human institutions failed to do” (Klages). On the other hand, postmodernists do not lament the idea of fragmentation and the absurdity of life like their modernist predecessors. The fact that the world is meaningless does not seem to bother them. On the contrary, they seem to rejoice in it, to celebrate it. Postmodernism is marked by the

acceptance of the fact that the world is meaningless and absurd. Thus, we can say that postmodernists are more realistic than modernists to some extent. For Lyotard, one of the primary roles of postmodernism is to provide a critique of the “day-to-day structures of realism”. That is why postmodern fiction is characterized by the use of puns, obscure allusions and quotations, which aim to give the reader the feeling that there is something “unpresentable” (Maples ۳۰). The postmodern writer, according to Lyotard, assumes the position of a philosopher whose works are not governed by traditional principles and laws, since they are the very subject of investigation.

According to Gray's *Dictionary of Literary Terms*, postmodernism shares with post-structuralism the idea that meaning is “neither inherent in language, nor in the world of things, but is “constructed” by conventional frameworks of thought and language. Even our most cherished concepts ... are subject to the dissolving perspective that far from being UNIVERSAL TRUTHS” (۲۲۸). Accordingly, most of the postmodern texts are organized to demonstrate the instability of language, the temporality of meaning and the difficulty of judgment between the different narrative possibilities. In other words, there is no such a thing as an absolute meaning or an absolute truth. Everything is relative. There can be different points of view and all of them can be correct. This may explain why postmodernist writers usually present in their works more than one narrator.

That brings us to Bakhtin's concept of heteroglossia, which is one of the main features of Banvillian fiction. Bakhtin argues that novelistic prose is mainly informed by the social contexts or heteroglossia, which refers to the existence of more than one voice or point of view or

discourse in the text. He takes against stylistic studies their focus on the idiosyncrasies of the writer's style. Instead, he believes that stylistics should take into consideration not only the ideological position of the writer but also the myriad of points of view or "heteroglot languages" in the text:

Cognizant of the dialogic dynamism of heteroglossia, the novelist deliberately creates an environment in which antagonistic or dialogic stances enjoy free reign and thrive at the expense of linguistic unitarism. In other words, Bakhtin apprehends the novel as a literary form that enables language's centrifugal character to emerge and embrace its historic destiny of challenging the centripetal forces of "verbal ideological life (Wanyama ١١٦).

In his definition of the novel, Bakhtin argues that it contains a variety of different ideologies, social speeches, individual voices arranged in an artistic way (Neubauer ٥٤٠).

In his "From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse", Bakhtin states that the diversity within language is very important for the novel but in order for it to achieve its creative objective, it must be governed by the rules of polyglossia, which is the coexistence of multiple languages in the same text (Wood and Nigel ٢٥٢). This diversity of speech within language is of prime importance for the novel but only under conditions of polyglossia and thus, the two myths perish simultaneously: "the myth of a language that presumes to be the only language, and the myth of a language that presumes to be completely unified."

Reading Banville, one cannot fail to realize that he is a deconstructionist to the core. The objective of deconstructionism as Dr. Essam Abdallah mentions in his book, **Jacques Derrida: A Revolution**

of Difference and Deconstruction (٢٠٠٣), is to understand the metaphysics, which sounds like an impossible mission. Derrida argues that although we cannot imagine the end or limit of metaphysics, we can deconstruct it from the inside so as to be able to conceive its hierarchy through turning it upside down (١٠). The metaphysics is the “study of the general nature of the world and of the first principles of philosophy. It examines both the basic assumptions behind common-sense view of the world, and those beyond systematic empirical forms of investigation . . . and it often does this by examining the most general categories in terms of which we find ourselves trying to describe the world” (Jackson ١٧٠). Derrida’s metaphysics of presence, on the other hand, refers to the concepts, signifiers, meanings and referents that have to be excluded for the sake of the presence of physics.

Abdallah further argues that deconstructionism is not based on analysis; as a matter of fact, deconstructionism and analysis are stark opposites. To analyze is to break the subject of analysis into its primary elements and refer to its reference or origin according to the standards of logic. To deconstruct, on the other hand, is based on denying the origin or the referent, which brings us to another feature that distinguishes postmodernism from modernism, namely the question of referentiality. Modernism lays emphasis on the autonomy of the text, whereas postmodernism attempts to place it in its social context. However, deconstructionism cannot be thought of as a logical critical method that is governed by the rational principles of reason that can be used to reach the truth. As a matter of fact, these very rules are the very subject of deconstructionism. Deconstructionism does not propose a set of rules as tools of literary criticism; it actually lacks methodology. It does not follow certain procedures to analyze a text: “There is no set of rules, no criteria,