

Introduction

This Special Issue of *ABEI Journal*, **“Word Upon World: Half a Century of John Banville’s Universes”**, celebrates a writer’s life devoted to translating worlds into words. His novels reflect an interior journey in the search of being true to oneself. To reveal the many layers of human interaction Banville plays with different genres; in his narratives he manages all kinds of tricks with characters, time and space; painful memories are mixed with shrewd humour calling up worlds in which a whole range of emotions is beautifully presented. His prose is like Watteau’s: silken companies move in luminous landscapes where dark shadows lurk and loom.

Among the innumerable critical reviews and academic books that extol his fictions, as well as the various awards he received – including the 2005 Man Booker Prize for *The Sea*, the Franz Kafka Prize (2011), the Austrian State Prize for European Literature (2013) and the Prince of Asturias Award for Literature (2014) – John Banville has been recognized in his artistic creations by many academics in conferences and workshops all over the world, in at least fourteen monographs and in countless articles, as well as in two special issues of the *Irish University Review* (Spring 1981 and Spring 2006) and in a world-wide EFACIS translation Project (<https://www.johnbanville.eu/>). Also Banville’s seminal text “Fiction and the Dream” gave rise to an open-access online anthology of testimonials by fifty major Irish fiction authors about what fiction writing can do (<https://kaleidoscope.efacis.eu/>).

His first publication, *Long Lankin*, turns fifty years old in 2020, thus reaching the half-century of a master craftsman. It is Banville’s only collection of stories with vivid narratives of “a live synthesis as well as a synthesis of life”, as the Argentinean writer Julio Cortázar defined the essence of a short story. The young Irish writer decided to walk an unknown road where “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” (“Fiction and the Dream” 28).¹ Since then, he has carved universes in an endless interior journey to get in touch with the inner self, either as the author John Banville or his “dark twin” Benjamin Black – “This is the significance of fiction, its danger and its glory” (*ibid.*).

The two images of his manuscripts kindly sent by the writer for this Special Issue of *ABEI Journal* perfectly illustrate how Banville crafts his art as beautifully, cleanly and neatly as possible, and as he said in the interview to RTE One,² how he writes so passionately in order that the reader can find, feel and experience that same passion blueprinted in his narrative. Our cover also brings two important tools of the imagination – Banville’s handmade copybook and his pen. Like the worlds they make, the instruments are carefully selected. As he has developed his craft in the last half century, Banville has selected higher quality pens, ink, and copybooks. If *Long Lankin* marks his sophomore entry into the literary canon, these instruments are as good a measure of his deepening claim to be Ireland’s foremost author: as his influence has grown, so has his sophistication.

“The Crafting of Art – Translating Worlds” gathers the tributes of well-known writers focusing the master’s craft while reflecting on their own creative ways. Thus, Juan José Delaney, Alan Gilsenan, Neil Hegarty, Patrick Holloway, Rosemary Jenkinson, Colum McCann, Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin, Annemarie Ní Churreáin, Billy O’Callaghan, John

O'Donnell and Jessica Traynor share their responses as readers of Banville's work in autobiographical reflections. They either refer to the impact of his collection of short stories that help them discover the significance of its form (Delaney and Holloway), or to some of his novels in order to spot echoes and contacts with other writers (Jenkinson and Traynor), to unveil how science and art are part of his universe (Hegarty), or how his stylish narrative "conjures a dreamlike world" (Gilsenan), "shapes our reality with a thrilling poetic intensity" (McCann), (re)imagines a city as "a site of dreaming" (Ní Churreáin) through which he questions the making of a work of art with "elegance and sly black humour" (O'Donnell). As readers they feel the force of Banville's personality and writing and express his differences compared to themselves or other writers (O'Callaghan) or between the two cloned writers, Banville and Black (Ní Chuilleanáin).

In "Critical Dialogues", both experienced and young scholars discuss Banville's novels from different perspectives, highlighting his narrative technique and his struggle with words as he tries to create stylistically perfect transcendental universes. Memory and the past are tropes present in various of these essays that form a kaleidoscopic composition about the question of identity and the idea of the self as recurrent themes in Banville's work. Thus, Adel Cheong analyses the withdrawal to the past in *Eclipse* and *The Sea* comparing it with McCormack's *Solar Bones*, to affirm that the return to childhood spaces and places helps the protagonists "to confront their sense of identity", while Cody Jarman places *The Infinities* and Lawless's collection *Traits and Confidences* (1897) side by side to show Banville's engagement with memories of the history of the Irish Famine and the conventions of the Irish Gothic and Big House novel. Hedwig Schwall also focuses on *The Infinities*, bringing together Banville and Lacan in order to interpret how the uncanny object *a* reawakens the affects of the unconscious.

Banville's approach to different temporalities in his oeuvre is discussed by Lianghui Li from the perspective of simultaneity of time and space in *The Sea* while Nicholas Taylor-Collins evokes Einstein's and Bergson's theories of time to affirm that the characters in *Birchwood*, *Doctor Copernicus* and *The Infinities* accept and are engaged with the ageing process. Neil Murphy analyses *Ghosts*, "a poetics of pure invention", to demonstrate Banville's comprehensive model of a multi-level ontological system in which intersections with other artistic forms give significance to his aesthetic model. Moreover, in Hedda Friberg-Harnesk's examination of Banville's play *Love in the Wars*, Banville's textual explorations of a Nietzschean "infinite nothing" are compared with Baudrillard's "envisioned universe in which simulation is a 'dominant mode of perception'".

Mrs Osmond is the object of two studies. Aurora Piñeiro departs from Banville's literary alter ego series and illustrates how the narrative of *Mrs Osmond* is a postmodern pastiche showing meaningful differences in its recontextualization of Henry James's *The Portrait of a Lady*. Catherine Toal approaches the novel from a different angle, highlighting how the only female protagonist in Banville's oeuvre is filtered through a 'misanthropy of form': throughout the narrative the dark aspects of all women characters are exacerbated..

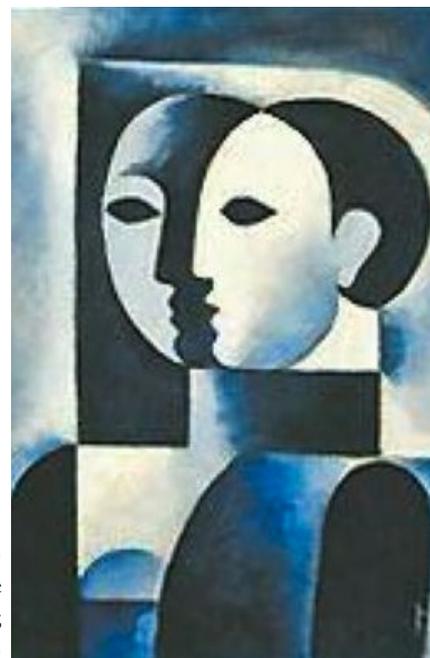
The textual and thematic evolutions of *Mefisto* are studied by Kersti Tarien Powell in a thorough analysis of Banville's manuscripts to show that this novel is the turning point of his career. The section ends with Joakim Wrethed's essay that links *Long Lankin* and *The Blue Guitar* to show how Banville's long career should be seen as a hermeneutic process of eternal recurrence of tropes in the form of a spiral as his works form a constant heightening of the stakes, both in an ethic and aesthetic dimension.

“Voices from South America” is the *ABEI Journal* space to introduce writers, thinkers and artists from the south-western hemisphere to interact with other scholars in the field of Comparative Studies and literary contacts. As Banville has made the choice of words his main concern, with painting as the object of many of his novels, Jorge Schwartz was invited to share his elucidating essay on Xul Solar, an Argentinian painter, linguist and friend of Jorge Luis Borges who wrote many lectures about his paintings and language project. Solar created a utopian Latin-American language (a mix of Portuguese and Spanish); his paintings deal with metaphysical symbols, kabbalah, and theosophical understandings of the world, somewhat recalling Yeats’s *A Vision*.

The “Book Reviews” contains David Clark’s reading of Benjamin Black’s *The Secret Guests* and the reviews of two important books on John Banville’s work: Adel Cheong critiques Neil Murphy’s *John Banville* and Mehdi Ghassemi discusses Hedda Friberg-Harnesk’s *Reading John Banville Through Jean Baudrillard*.

We hope this Special Issue on John Banville’s work will inspire the readers to follow the writer’s literary career and vocation to reveal the infinite quest of being human. In the fifty years since his first full-length publication, his writing has altered Irish letters – who knows what the next fifty years of reading Banville will bring?

Laura P.Z. Izarra
Hedwig Schwall
Nicholas Taylor-Collins



Ismael Nery (1900-1934) - *Figures in Blue* (1924)
Brazilian artist painting philosophical dualities (the self & the other; evil & good; body & spirit; masculine & feminine)

Notes

1 Banville. “Fiction and the Dream” in *Irish Studies in Brazil*. Ed. M.H. Mutran & L.P. Z. Izarra. São Paulo: Associação Editorial Humanitas, 2015. 21-28.

2 Arts Lives: Being John Banville. RTE One (2013). <http://www.john-banville.com/video/>