

Time Pieces: A Dublin Memoir — *An Ode to the Act of Dreaming*

Time Pieces: A Dublin Memoir — *Uma Ode ao Ato de Sonhar*

Annemarie Ní Churreáin

When is a city no longer a city? When does a city become a site of dreaming? In this compelling portrait of Banville's long relationship with Dublin, he presents to us a suave landscape fondly haunted by the ghosts and echoes of literary giants, philosophers, architects, and historical change-makers. Enlisting the help of an enigmatic tour-guide, he artfully explores—in the form of memoir—the hidden and not-so-hidden nooks of the city he fell in love with as a boy during annual day-trips from Wexford. Returning home by train at day's end "I would have to turn my face away and press it up close against the window to hide my tears..." He remembers his heart "swollen by grief" and the sense that the city was "becoming, in short, the past".

As an adoptee of Dublin with roots elsewhere, I recognise the depths of this strange grief and the almost shame-faced longing for a place that is not yet, and may never fully be, my own. Carefully, and with a refined wit, Banville mines this tension that exists for the writer caught up in the liminal, often ruptured space, between worlds. As he digs, collects, signposts, compiles and constructs the city, I am reminded that we "outsider writers" come to Dublin city with a distinctly searching lens – seeking there, perhaps, what we have left behind in other homes. We bring to our new city the narrator's desire to (re)dream ourselves whole, through the portal of language, into this new fertile landscape. And yet, there is the thorny question of responsibility – to what extent must our retelling of the city bear witness? How does actuality sit alongside the necessary artistic pursuit of beauty and mystery? If memoir is a kind of record, what are the limits – if any – to how we can narrate and/or repurpose the city as a subject?

Elegant and stylish, Banville's Dublin is a deeply arresting weave of streets, monuments and histories. It is also, arguably, a city in which everyday realities, including those of poverty, addiction and violence seem, at various points, peripheral and very occasionally underexplored. For example, in a chapter titled "On the Street", Banville finds through the Mount Street sex trade of the 1960's a topic of extended curiosity in female sex workers whom he describes as "wraith-like" (83), "pitifully pretty" (85) and "sad creatures of the night". By his own admission, he is tantalised by the misfortune of these women and would "have liked to ask them about their lives, and how they had come to be on the streets" (83). Banville's candour is striking, and whilst it may not be true that memoir owes us what we think we are owed in terms of correctness, one wonders if a less moral tone might have achieved a more coherent and/or resonant cord. Instead, the women are glimpsed only through the naïve eye of a young observer, and not ever (meaningfully) as equals. Stephanie Delahaye – who is positioned as Banville's Dublin love-interest throughout – is subject to a much more nuanced and multi-dimensional portrayal of womanhood. So, it is ultimately disappointing to learn that

Stephanie is not based on any one real woman at all, but is, in fact, a dreamed-up “amalgam of many people”.¹

Time Pieces encounters an unforgettable Dublin. With great expertise Banville poses questions that, satisfyingly, remain unanswered and perhaps “care”, or real compassion, comes eventually in the form of craft itself. Banville’s mastery of the English sentence is both an act of repair and a language of progress. “The sentence is what makes us human.”² Banville has said in interviews. “We declare love in sentences.”³ It is, perhaps, this absolutely primal love that drives onward his (re)imagining of Dublin as a city of glamour over hunger, and of romance at any cost. Is there always a dream-cost to be paid in memoir? It seems likely. Banville leads us through the streets and alleys of Dublin filled with his shadow and, in his shadow, we gratefully follow. Towards the book’s closing, Banville reveals an essential and notable truth: the invisible baton which is passed on to “my eldest son, my firstborn, who is a man now...He is on his way home from work, and has stopped in for a pint, just like my father...”(200). In the end, the writer – both brilliant and brilliantly difficult – seeks out his own image in the making. Time as concept – political, personal and other – does, and does not, move on.

Notes

1 <https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/books/john-banville-i-have-not-been-a-good-father-no-writer-is-1.2837008>

2 <https://www.browndailyherald.com/2014/01/24/john-banville-sentence-makes-us-human/>

3 <https://radio.rte.ie/radio1highlights/struggle-language-lifes-torment-lifes-passion/>