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|---|---|
| Title | The Ideal Elegies |
| Author(s) | Kenny, John |
| Publication Date | 2001-01-06 |
| Publication Information | Kenny, J. (2001, 6 January) 'The Ideal Elegies.' Review of 'The Revolutions Trilogy', by John Banville. 'The Irish Times', 'Weekend': 15. |
| Publisher | The Irish Times |
| Item record | http://hdl.handle.net/10379/1051 |

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# The Ideal Elegies

**John Kenny**

**The Revolutions Trilogy: Doctor Copernicus, Kepler, The Newton Letter.**
By John Banville. Picador. 570pp, £18.99 in UK.

In an ambitious article for the *New York Times* in 1985, titled "Physics and Fiction: Order from Chaos", John Banville proposed a resolution of the "two cultures" debate. Working with a version of Heisenberg's uncertainty principle ("we cannot investigate darkness by bathing it in light"), he suggested that modern literature and science are in an identical quandary: "The dream of certainty, of arriving at a simple, elegant, and above all concrete answer, has had to be abandoned … as science moves away from the search for blank certainties it takes on more and more the character of poetic metaphor, and since fiction is moving, however sluggishly, in the same direction, perhaps a certain seepage between the two streams is inevitable."

While Banville's take on scientific theory elicited some corrective responses, the veracity of his manipulations is fundamentally unimportant; creativity, as he pointed out elsewhere, is often better served by an artist's passionate misreading of ideas than by clinically accurate interpretation. At the time, Banville was in the process of devising his own extended version of science as poetic metaphor: a quartet of novels which, projectively, would move from the imprecisions of Renaissance cosmology into the complexities of twentieth-century physics. The *Revolutions Trilogy* presents the first three books of this schema: *Copernicus* (1976), *Kepler* (1981) and *The Newton Letter* (1982) — the fourth novel, *Mefisto* (1986), though narrated by a contemporary mathematical genius, deviated somewhat from the original conception and its exclusion from this omnibus is thereby seemingly justified.

Those already familiar with this set of novels may question the new arrangement. New readers, whether recruited by Banville's more popular recent works or otherwise, can be encouraged by the fact that enjoyment is not dependent here on detailed background knowledge of science, history or individual biographies. Amid a handful of scholarly books, the single most important acknowledged source is Arthur Koestler's eminently accessible cosmological history, *The Sleepwalkers* (1959), and the constructed lives of the three scientists are primarily used, much in the way Joyce used *The Odyssey*, as a means of working towards other ends. All three novels are, as Banville's own qualification of postmodern self-reflexivity has it, "a way of writing about the creative process without writing about a man who is writing a book about a man who is writing a book about a man who is writing a book".

The only novels Banville has delivered principally in the third person, *Copernicus* and *Kepler* are best considered as a pair. The story of Polish astronomer Nicholas Copernicus (1473-1543), initiator of the change from a geocentric to a heliocentric view of the heavens, is one of Banville's most atmospheric. An unattractive personality in the history of Western thought, Copernicus is yet viewed sympathetically as he is taken from childhood through to death in a late-medieval world of intellectual blindness, stench and violence. Johannes Kepler (1571-1630), German astronomer at the Danish court, first appears at mid-life in a beautiful opening passage: "Johannes Kepler, asleep in his ruff, has dreamed the solution to the cosmic mystery. He holds it cupped in his mind as in his hands he would a precious something of unearthly frailty and splendour. O do not wake!" An adventurous

popularisер of the Copernican advances, Kepler progresses towards his own major discovery, that the planets move elliptically rather than circularly, and, in prose that is more compact than in *Copernicus*, he too moves towards death.

Comparatively, *The Newton Letter* is not framed by the life of its eponymous scientist, Sir Isaac Newton (1642-1727). The narrator is a contemporary Irish historian trying to finish a Newton biography over the course of a sojourn at the lodge of an Irish Big House, and the scientist hovers only intermittently in the background. At just seventy pages, this novella is arguably misplaced in this edition. It is still the most perfect of Banville's works, a taut sequence of sonnets in prose, and the aura it has as a single literary object that can be held whole in the mind as well as hand is sullied by amalgamation.

Nevertheless, this trilogy has a perceptible unity. Via poetic metaphor, scientific probings appear as analogues for all radical acts of creation, for all efforts to bridge the gap between the external world and the "mysterious firmament contained within the skull". Banville's treatment is grandly singular and sophisticated, yet the three principals are recognisably modern existential representatives; their inner lives take precedence, though their idealisations are ultimately seen to be a mere shoring of fragments against ruins in a post-Renaissance age of total suspicion and provisionality. Though realistically absurdist in places, this predicament, in Banville's figuration, is largely tragic. Far from being an enactment of postmodern intellectualism and its interminable irony, this trilogy is a controlled humanist lament for the death of absolutes, for the innocence lost and the commonplace life missed in the endless search for transcendent meaning. The light may be impossible to find, but rarely has the darkness been delivered with such thrilling pathos.

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