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Reintroducing Banville

The Supreme Fictions of John Banville

By Joseph McMinn

Manchester University Press

189pp, £40/£14.99 in UK

The first full-length study of John Banville, Rüdiger Imhof's *A Critical Introduction* (1989), was republished in 1997 to coincide with the renewed attention given to Banville following the publication of *The Untouchable* (1997). Other than Imhof's new chapters, which took the discussion up to *Athena* (1995), comparing his editions was mainly a matter of spotting some added introductory paragraphs, his premises having changed little over a decade. While the erasure of the vague subtitle of the second comprehensive book on Banville, Joe McMinn's *A Critical Study* (1991), is welcome, McMinn's promise that *The Supreme Fictions*, is a "completely revised version" of its earlier manifestation also requires some qualification.

This book is, as McMinn said of Imhof's reissue, "a reprint with bits added on" and the seven chapters through to *Mefisto* (1986) are largely reproduced verbatim with new material sometimes coming only in the form of perfunctory parenthetical remarks. The prefatory plug is that McMinn will "acknowledge and integrate" the "dramatic increase" in critical commentary on Banville, but, improvement as it is on his attenuated original listing, the new bibliography is still quite limited. While there are twenty-five new items relating to Banville (seven of which had already appeared in Imhof's reprint), there are only five secondary pieces by Banville himself mentioned, this despite the fact that he has written voluminous journalistic and occasional pieces.

Nevertheless, McMinn does add more bits than Imhof. Along with inserting some consequent information into his old chapters, he has carefully rethought his original text stylistically and structurally, to the extent that certain paragraphs are reformed and some phrases and even single words are changed. New or elongated quotations from Banville have been included and the assiduousness of the rereading is indicated by the fact that such things as a small misquote from Arthur Koestler in the original have been corrected.

As a discussion that will outline many of the ideas used in his new chapters on *Ghosts* (1993) and *Athena*, McMinn's original piece on *The Book of Evidence* (1989) has been usefully revamped and expanded and the lengthy chapter on *The Untouchable*, taking everything up to date, is especially helpful. While a mere three-page final chapter on Banville's dramas, *The Broken Jug* (1994) and *Seachange* (1994) is disappointing, and the short conclusion is somewhat disparate, McMinn has completely rewritten his introductory section and these first few pages constitute, now, the single best summation of the Banville *œuvre*.

Though McMinn's view that Banville is a "postmodernist" novelist remains more a persistently repeated assertion than a proven thesis, other arguments (that Banville's is a "humanistic aesthetic"; that his books are variations upon the theme of "the life of the imagination"; that he is preoccupied with the "gendered nature of fantasy") are more convincingly elaborated. Very often the most difficult thing to do with Banville is to see through to the story behind the style, but the best of McMinn's expositions,

particularly when accompanied by reproduced figures and paintings, penetrate the famed opacity of the recent novels.

McMinn's concluding advice is that "We can read Banville *à la carte*, but the most rewarding approach ... is to stay the full course." Lucid, newly focused, and courteous towards variant opinions, this reprint will invite the academic and general reader alike up to the top table.

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