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Down into the deep

John Kenny

The Sea

By John Banville

Picador, 264pp. £16.99

John Banville's work has always seemed half in love with the unease of death. Especially since *The Book of Evidence* (1989), Banville has become associated with transgressive subjects, and the relevant critical focus is generally on his topic of murder and evil in the trilogy completed by the two subsequent novels: *Ghosts* (1993) and *Athena* (1995). More recently, in *Shroud* (2002), Banville provided a litany of mournings haunted at its core by the spectre of the Holocaust. Violent death has been recurrent in the oeuvre from the very beginning; less frequently remarked is the perpetual presence in the books of what we usually call – in perhaps our subtlest of tautologies – scenes or recollections or images of 'natural death'. These can seem mere asides, but when seen in pattern from book to book they assume a lingering stature.

Banville's books are all, in a phrase that has recurred in the work itself, Books of the Dead. In *The Sea*, his thirteenth novel, the surpassing continuance of the theme is clear: "And yet people do go, do vanish. That is the greater mystery; the greatest."

While even adoring readers might carp at the immediate mention of "the gods" in the very first sentence of *The Sea*, thereby believing they are simply being returned to yet another figuration of the allusive classicism for which Banville is at this stage famous, any resistance beyond that first sentence is futile. By his own intent, Banville's prose reads more and more like absolute music, and once the long second sentence rolls in with its description of the "strange tide" of the titular sea, you are sunk, seduced even by sound alone.

In any case, the gods here turn out to be of a different order. They are, with the attendant classical echoes, the Graces, a family of twin children, Chloe and mute Myles, who, with their parents Carlo and Constance, are remembered into being by the monologue of Max Morden who spent a life-changing summer in their idealised presence at a southern Irish seaside town when he and the twins were aged somewhere around ten or eleven. Morden brings to mind his namesake, the proprietor of the suspect paintings in *Athena*, and he brings to his story certain established elements that Banville hasn't extensively used since *The Untouchable* (1997). Morden is a dilettantish "second-rater", a gentleman art critic (courtesy of the inherited wealth of his wife, Anna) who is trying to finish a seemingly interminable project on Pierre Bonnard.

As with Bonnard's work, the story that Morden tells is intimately domestic and is obliquely figured in parallel information provided on Bonnard's love for his wife, his favourite subject for his nude studies. Morden is writing exactly a year after he and Anna first visited the aptly named consultant, Mr Todd, the Dr Death who diagnoses Anna's cancer. Once Anna falls terminally ill, Morden sees "portents of mortality" on all sides and feels that his own remaining life is only a preparation "for the moment

when I must step into the black boat on the shadowed river with the coin of passage cold in my already coldening hand". Anna has now died, and he has run away from "that twelvemonth of her slow dying" to youthful memories and to The Cedars, the house where his befriended Graces summered, now a lodging house occupied by the mysterious spinster, Miss Vavasour, and by Colonel Blunden, one of Banville's best ever clownish creations ("A Belfast Catholic colonel? Rum: very"). Poking at his memories, insomniac and regularly anaesthetised by his hip flask, Morden sits "pushing the paragraphs about like the counters in a game I no longer know how to play", and is metaphorically writing against the tide: "Really, one might almost live one's life over, if only one could make a sufficient effort of recollection".

As a direct counterpoint to the experience of ageing and death, Morden's "private ceremony of remembering" celebrates the ethereal Chloe, his pubescent experiences with whom he associates with his birth to self-consciousness. While Chloe is to some extent a symbol, especially in her eventual hypnotic succumbing, along with her brother, to the sea, the memories Morden has of her are intensely tender ("Little animals we were, sniffing at each other"). Equal and almost tearstained feeling suffuses his memories of Anna, even though she is the vehicle for clinical descriptions of the horrors of decaying flesh. The moment when Morden curses her for leaving him alone and the passages where he describes the photographs she took, when dying, of other hospital patients contain some of Banville's most viciously arresting prose to date.

It is perhaps Banville's overarching achievement here to retain his uncompromising commitment to a technically perfected art while writing a meditation on childhood and age that is, especially in its closing scenes where Morden takes a tumble and a bad turn, plainly moving. While this new narrator comes with the comedy Banville always brilliantly attaches to his self-obsessives, Morden is perhaps his most kindly treated principal since the eponymous *Kepler* (1981), not least in his depicted relationship with his "bluestocking" daughter, Claire.

Banville's fiction has a reputation for difficulty, but it should never be forgotten that the formal, indeed classical, correctness of his style, with its supreme Beckett-like appreciation of the complex syncopations of the humble comma, is organically related to the kind of mentalities and feelings he wishes to evoke. Simply, no writer does wistful like Banville: "Yes, this is what I thought adulthood would be, a kind of long indian summer, a state of tranquillity, of calm incuriousness, with nothing left of the barely bearable raw immediacy of childhood, all the things solved that had puzzled me when I was small, all mysteries settled, all questions answered, and the moments dripping away, unnoticed almost, drip by golden drip, toward the final, almost unnoticed, quietus."

The estrangements and rearrangements of conventional perceptions - or, more precisely, descriptions of perceptions - performed by Banville's stylisations carry implied imperatives: you must smell more, you must hear more, you must touch more, you must, above all, see more. Whether or not we like to have the starkest of final realities mythicized for us, whether or not it is the siren's song that will finally drown us, we can hear in Banville's sensorily replete prose here an evidential fascination with life lived in face of the peculiar but certain knowledge that the element from whence we came will reclaim us. In the dying Anna's words: "Strange ... To be here, like that, and then not. ... To have been here".

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