Chapter 3

Narration as a Resurrection of the Dead: the Role of Storytelling in Banville’s *Ghosts*

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John Banville’s novel *Ghosts* is set on an island, which at first constitutes the whole of the characters’ world – ‘there is no elsewhere’, the narrator tells us.¹ The island seems less a geographical location than a place of the mind – an inner space, an imaginary construct, put together out of scraps and splinters of texts, operas, and, above all, paintings. The novel opens with a glimpse of seven ‘foundered’ characters, struggling ashore after their small ship hits the sandbank, almost capsizing. Their progress is watched by the three inhabitants of the island: the Professor, his restless and pathetic helper Licht and the – as yet unnamed – narrator. The situation is immediately reminiscent of *The Tempest*, with Professor seeming to fit the role of Prospero, and Licht playing restive Ariel, leaving the role of Caliban to the narrator. Yet, the narrator proclaims: ‘A little world is coming into being. Who speaks? I do. Little god,’² thus claiming for himself the role of Prospero and destabilizing the initial symmetry of the arrangement.

The island is located somewhere in the Irish Sea, but remains nameless, or, rather, is given too many names to take any seriously. To mention just a few: it is called Aeaea³ (the mythical island of the sorceress Circe in *Odyssey*, from which the hero has to leave by the way of the Underworld); the Land of Nod⁴ (the biblical location of Cain’s exile); Laputa⁵ (the flying island of *Gulliver’s Travels*); Cythera⁶ (the idyllic birthplace of Venus famously described as a desolate island of death in Baudelaire’s ‘A Voyage to Cythera’). The net of intertextual references is so dense that a reader attempting to follow the furtive leads and make some kind of assumptions about the current text is quickly lost. The impression, most uncanny, is of being troubled by the appearance of countless

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² Ibid., 4.
³ Ibid., 7.
⁴ Ibid., 67.
⁵ Ibid., 34.
⁶ Ibid., 32, 221.
familiar things, yet seen at a strange angle, as if in a tilted mirror – or, perhaps, as seen from the other side of the looking glass. All the characters experience some kind of *déjà vu* – ‘everyone feels they have been here before’; as if the island was at once a place out of their past, and an unknown and threateningly alien territory, a Shakespearian ‘undiscovered country’.

The narrator, describing the most intimate thoughts of the characters, seems to be moving in a parallel universe – as their creator and animator. Yet, the division between the worlds is provisional, indefinite:

> Without me there would be no moment, no separable event, only the brute, blind drift of things (...) And yet, though I am one of them, I am only a half figure, a figure half-seen, standing in the doorway, or sitting at a corner of the scrubbed pine table with a cracked mug at my elbow, and if they try to see me straight, or turn their heads too quickly, I am gone.8

The narrator appears as a ghost – suspended in-between the real world and imaginary world, and his spectral status is caused by the incessant guilt, which informs every scene of the novel, conditioning its air of suspension – everything ‘seems to hover on the point of vanishing’.9 The island is a purgatory in which the narrator is to do his penance, without any hope of salvation – he knows that he is damned, beyond help. Yet, note the vivid details of the material texture of his realm: ‘the scrubbed pine table with a cracked mug at my elbow’ – this is not some generalized territory in which the lost soul roams longing for a return to life, but a tangible, concrete space, furnished with flawed and damaged objects that seem to reflect aspects of the tarnished being they surround. To be still burdened with a physical body, with all its minor pains and major afflictions, with its lusts and aches, and yet to be pushed into unreality, made transparent, is clearly a form of a peculiarly cruel punishment. This ghost has all the longings of the body without even a chance of fulfilment.

*Ghosts* is the second part of Banville’s *Frames* trilogy, and the readers familiar with the first part, *The Book of Evidence*, will recognize the voice and understand its burden of remorse: the narrator, Freddie Montgomery, is a murderer who has been sentenced to life imprisonment. According to Freddie’s story in *Ghosts*, he has been let out for ‘exemplary’ behaviour after serving ten years and settled on this island, helping the Professor to write a monograph on the painter Vaublin. Let us quickly note that this painter is a fictional figure, but his

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9 Ibid., 35.
life story and his paintings seem to resemble very closely the real-life painter Jean Antoine Watteau.\(^{10}\) Freddie is obsessed with art – it is the root of his original downfall in the previous novel, in which he fell in love with a painting, tried to steal it and killed a maid who interrupted him in the process. His life on the island, it seems, is a surprisingly mild conclusion to a violent tale: he spends his days pouring over reproductions of Vaublin's paintings, indulging in a little gardening and the sweetly mundane tasks of housekeeping. Quite an idyll, a life to be envied, by all accounts.

But the past refuses to release him, and he remains a tortured creature, self-loathing and keenly conscious of the unreality of his world. Most of all, Freddie is constantly aware of his own unreality, his own spectral status. In his understanding, the only way to return to the world of the living is to resurrect his victim: ‘there is an onus on us, the living, to conjure up our particular dead. I am certain there is no other form of afterlife for them than this’.\(^{11}\) Thus, Freddie employs the narrative as a way to negotiate with death and its minions. *Ghosts* becomes a story of storytelling through which the narrator teaches himself to believe in the reality of others in order to achieve atonement.

The path to expiation is already suggested at the end of *The Book of Evidence*, where Freddie admits to himself that he allowed the painting to be more real to him than a living person who stood in his way and became his victim:

> This is the worst, the essential sin, I think, the one for which there will be no forgiveness: that I never imagined her vividly enough, that I never made her be there sufficiently, that I did not make her live. Yes, that failure of imagination is my real crime, the one that made the others possible. (...) I could kill her because for me she was not alive. And so my task now is to bring her back to life. (...) I am puzzled, and not a little fearful, and yet there is something stirring in me, and I am strangely excited. I seem to have taken on a new weight and density. I feel gay and at the same time wonderfully serious. I am big with possibilities. I am living for two.\(^{12}\)

Curiously, it seems to take Freddie ten years to prepare for the task of resurrection, and only once he is on the island, he can begin his work of imagining ‘a little world’. He borrows characters from the painting by Vaublin that he is examining for Professor’s monograph, and transfers them to his own island. The

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11 Ibid., 83.

painting is a combination of two well-known pieces by Watteau: *Gilles* and *Pilgrimage to Cythera*, with some peculiar additions and modifications. The characters assume their roles somewhat unwillingly – there seems to be a degree of uncertainty and paleness about them; some of them appear interchangeable; some – executed hastily, incomplete. There is some attempt to create their private histories, but the narrator soon seems to grow weary of it and leaves it alone. In the final count, there are only two characters who interest him – the young and beautiful Flora and the dark and dangerous Felix, who seems to be a double of the narrator.

It appears that the narrator’s task is to exorcise the darkness and to enter into the light, symbolically: that is, to chase away Felix, making him abandon his dark designs on Flora, and to make himself believe in Flora as a real human being, rather than a projection of his desire or a spectral echo of his past. He observes her with the growing ‘hunger to have her live and to live in her, to conjugate in her the verb of being’.13 And, one bright morning, this miracle happens: Freddie experiences an epiphany by just listening to Flora – without even paying attention to what she says – and sees her come to life:

As she talked I found myself looking at her and seeing her as if for the first time, not as a gathering of details, but all of a piece, solid and singular and amazing (...). She was simply there, an incarnation of herself, no longer a nexus of adjectives but pure and present noun (...). And somehow by being suddenly herself like this she made the things around her be there too (...). It was as if she had dropped a condensed drop of colour into the water of the world and the colour had spread and the outlines of things had sprung into bright relief.14

This highly ethical epiphany – learning to recognize and revel in the otherness of a fellow human being – is, however, overshadowed by the strange way it echoes the moment immediately before Freddie becomes a murderer in *The Book of Evidence*:

I could not speak, I was filled with a kind of wonder. I had never felt another’s presence so immediately and with such raw force. I saw her now, really saw her, for the first time, her mousy hair and bad skin, that bruised

13 Banville, *Ghosts*, 70.
14 Ibid., 147.
look around her eyes. She was quite ordinary, and yet, somehow, I don’t know – somehow radiant.\textsuperscript{15}

There is the same vivid awareness of the other in all her ordinariness and radiance, the same intense emotion. This resemblance may signify that Freddie is, in fact, moving backwards in time, stepping over the threshold of his great transgression. But it also may be read as something much darker: in the earlier narrative, the intensified awareness of the other was caused by the feeling of unlimited power, by a realization of what is to come the next moment – the annihilation of the other. It is the epiphany of the murderer.

Freddie is also aware of this dark underbelly of his brilliant moment of being. This is, perhaps, why the narrative from its very beginning, is conducted in a menacing, mocking tone. What he seeks, then, is not expiation but denial: Freddie is creating others who can suffer for him, trying to escape from self-loathing through fabulation. Flora – with her name promising the renewal of life – is at every instant entirely at the mercy of the malicious ‘little god’, who gloats over her fragile beauty. Throughout the narrative, Freddie projects himself as Nosferatu,\textsuperscript{16} Frankenstein’s Monster,\textsuperscript{17} and sentimental flesh-eating giant, tenderly savoring the cries of his victims.\textsuperscript{18} His attempt to exorcise his ‘evil twin’ Felix is unsuccessful – after the ship leaves, a ghost of Felix seems to remain hovering on the shore, and this vision closes the novel.

If Freddie tries to bring to life his characters through the narrative, we must note how peculiarly unstable is the story he constructs. As Anja Müller writes, the narrator may be read as ‘a caricature of the postmodern storyteller’.\textsuperscript{19} The story is told out of chronological order, it incorporates – to the point of excess – scenes and phrases borrowed from other texts, as if attempting to hide behind the mirror of intertextuality. And it lacks any real plot of its own. Everything is static, everything is without consequence, every promise of development is left unfulfilled. Perhaps, after all, the spectral status is more than a metaphor of transgression?

In fact, there are many hints in the narrative that the island itself is a work of imagination and that the narrator still remains in prison, trying to metaphorize

\textsuperscript{15} Banville, \textit{The Book of Evidence}, 113.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 242.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 238.
the isolation of his confinement into a vision of the beautiful yet secluded island. ‘Life means life’, everyone is keen to remind Freddie, and this echoes strangely with his cry in the night: ‘life, life: being outside’. Describing his supposed release from prison, Freddie admits: ‘Everything looked like an elaborate stage-set, plausible but not real’. His long meditation on desirability of communing with ghosts may contain echoes of his actual reality: ‘the prisoner held in solitary confinement (...) would be grateful surely to wake up some fevered night and find a troupe of his predecessors come walking through the walls’. The long list of the island names that Freddie toys with, includes Devil’s Island – a notorious French prison of the 19th century, and Château d’If, another French prison made legendary by Alexander Dumas. When Freddie narrates his arrival to the island, the involuted description of the Professor’s house denotes an inward journey: ‘I experienced a mysterious shock of recognition: it was as if I had stepped inside myself, into the shadowed vault of my own skull’.

If the narration is conducted from inside the prison, the jumbled chronology would indeed make sense: Freddie imagines the characters first, along with the rudiments of the story, consisting of his childhood memories, half-forgotten texts and images from half-remembered paintings. Then, he tries to tunnel into his fictive creatures’ pasts, thus seeking to materialize them, but quickly abandons the attempt. Instead, he tries to imagine the consummation of his story – the future moment the characters would make their departure, with Flora, the chosen victim/object of desire, staying behind to produce the marvelous instant of reality for him. Only when he feels secure in his constructed world, Freddie goes back to imagine how he might be transferred to the ‘set’ of his story. After this is accomplished, he shuttles back and forth between the past, present and future, filling the gaps, solving the inconspicuous mysteries. The story is there to facilitate his escape. His epiphany ends with a tremulous question:

I felt everyone and everything shiver and shift, falling into the vividest forms, detaching themselves from me and my conception of them and changing themselves into what they were, no longer figment, no longer

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20 Banville, Ghosts, 73.
21 Ibid., 151.
22 Ibid., 83.
23 Ibid., 39.
24 Ibid., 48.
25 Ibid., 205.
mystery, no longer part of my imagining. And I, was I there amongst them, at last?²⁶

Whether or not this longing for reality is satisfied remains an open question. Most critics seem to agree that the text is concerned with ‘narrative failure’.²⁷ Yet, Freddie does not dissolve in the uncertain waters of his narrative, but resurfaces in the next segment of the *Frames* trilogy, *Athena*, where he appears as an entirely different creature. In *Ghosts* he is a pale reflection of the larger-than-life narrator of *The Book of Evidence*, and that self is also left behind when he enters the next narrative. Nameless in *Ghosts* and renamed Morrow in *Athena*, the narrating hero appears to possess surprising resilience, remaking himself over and over again. Yet, he is also cursed with a relentless memory that provides a continuity to his string of selves, anchoring it in Freddie’s crime bound to his obsession with art. In *Athena* he still struggles with the question of authenticity, taken in by the counterfeit works of art, fraudulent dealings, duplicitous policemen, deceitful lovers.

We are quite certain, however, that Freddie’s struggle with his dark double – who may, after all, be no other than the novel’s author – is ineffectual. This may also be read as that familiar metafictional struggle of a character with his author – a struggle to exit the limits of fiction which never quite achieves its object. Prison itself is also a metaphor – the hero is locked within his guilt, the narrator is confined within his story. At some point in the text, Freddie formulates a desperate prayer: ‘If you are really there, bright brother, in your more real reality, think of me, turn all your stern attentions on me, even for an instant, and make me real, too’, which is followed by an afterthought: ‘of course, at times I think of that other self not as my better half, but my worse’.²⁸ This is a direct appeal to the author, and from Banville’s interviews we know his answer to this plea:

> I wish I could say that I love my characters and that frequently they take over the book and run away with the plot and so on. But they don’t exist. They’re manikins made of words and they carry my rhythms. They have no autonomous life – surely that’s obvious? I distrust those writers who claim to have feeling for their characters. They’re liars or fools.²⁹

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²⁸ Banville, *Ghosts*, 181.
We may, however, note, that Banville’s tone is suspiciously close to that of another writer he mentions with admiration earlier in the same interview – Vladimir Nabokov, who, asked if he ever had a character attempting to wrench control from him, answered: ‘What a preposterous experience! Writers who have had it must be very minor or insane’. The echo is distinct and might suggest that Banville – just like Nabokov – is impersonating here a certain ‘anthropomorphic deity’.

Critics have called Ghosts ‘the story of the postmodern conundrum of aesthetic truth’. Freddie’s struggle with reality, his blundering search of authenticity through the maze of the stories created by others is doubtful, and his own narrative is haunted by the theme of forgery and imitation. The tale breeds doubles, producing a doppelganger for every character; evil which has been exorcised, returns; the story refuses to end. And, if Jean Vaublin represents an imperfect anagram of John Banville, so does Freddie’s middle name, St. John Vanderveld. Everything seems to be a reflection leading back to the author.

Freddie’s desire to make the world real through the act of storytelling is fully shared by his author: ‘The world is not real for me until it has been pushed through the mesh of language’. Ghosts asks the question of how the world may be made real through imagination in the era of disenchantment with narrative, in the age of postmodern proliferation of interconnected texts, in the times when any belief in the singularity of the self is irrevocably lost. This is why this story is plotless, non-linear and, above all, inconclusive. Freddie is building a world out of fragments and introducing a human moment into it – with the deeply human desire for coherent narrative, which is left unfulfilled, though not quite frustrated. Flora is made real not through the act of traditional storytelling, but through a few momentary flashes, and radiant, vivid detail. But, once she is real, the narrator has to release her back into the unknown, otherwise he would be usurping her freedom. Ghosts invokes a momentary glimpse of the other, without solving the mystery of otherness, celebrates an illusion and then – with a swift sweep of the paintbrush – obliterates it once again, thus at once cancelling and perpetuating the story.

31 Ibid., 72.
32 Smith, John Banville, 84.
34 McKeon, ‘John Banville’: 137.
Bibliography


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