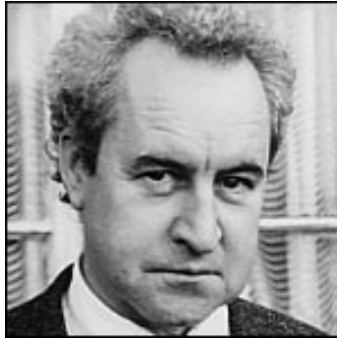


Beyond Imagination



The Moral Versus the Aesthetic: Philosophical and Literary
Influences in John Banville's *Frames* Trilogy

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Introduction

John Banville's *Frames* trilogy, consisting of *The Book of Evidence* (1989), *Ghosts* (1993) and *Athena* (1995), is often called the art trilogy because of its central preoccupation with art and its direct relation to human existence. The trilogy is pervaded by questions concerning selfhood, fragmentation, lack of truth, and the nature of reality. In a fragmented society it is difficult to profess an inclination towards any real base of thought, as Banville constantly reminds us. However, there is a vein of longing for such a base running through his fiction.

John Kenny, an Irish scholar who is currently preparing two books on Banville for the Irish Academic Press, has stated that Banville is so consistently preoccupied with existential and metaphysical quandaries, and the basic matter of moral regulation, that he can be called a religious writer (Kenny 2004). In spite of a professed disillusion with prior concepts of truth, the awareness of there being another possible plane of existence nonetheless always presents itself. This awareness is an important trait that adds to the complexity of Banville's protagonists, and will be included as one of the foci of my analysis. The main focus for my thesis, however, will be on Banville's rendering of the limitations and possibilities of the aesthetic individual. In order to show how the tension between the aesthetic and the moral existence is illustrated by Banville's protagonists, I have also included in my analysis certain literary and philosophical influences that I find relevant to my thesis.

Since the late 1980s, a new, ethical turn has manifested itself within philosophy and literature. This return to ethics as a significant approach in analysing

literature is represented by two different lines of thought that can be identified as the neo-humanists and the poststructuralists. Elke D'Hoker in her book *Visions of Alterity: Representation in the Novels of John Banville* (2004), places the neo-humanists' critical base in the Aristotelian moral theory, arguing for "the concrete embeddedness of moral judgements" (D'Hoker 2004,146). Representatives for this line are philosophers and critics such as the philosopher and literary professor, Richard Rorty, as well as Iris Murdoch and Martha Nussbaum. The poststructuralist ethical approach, on the other hand, is based in the philosophies of Kant and Levinas, with an emphasis on the ethical imperative, the 'ought' in philosophy. Among these critics can be counted people such as Derek Attridge and Geoffrey Harpham.

For my analysis I will draw upon Richard Rorty's book *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (1989). I will also include, as means of comparison with *Frames*, Vladimir Nabokov's novel *Lolita*, as well as Fyodor Dostoyevski's *Crime and Punishment*. These are works that in my opinion each represent the different intended purposes of their respective authors (the aesthetic and the moral), but that eventually produce the same effect of moral reflection. Seen as a master of the English language with regard to style and technique, Nabokov has been viewed by critics as the classic 'aesthete', with the goal of producing experiences of beauty through his use of form and word play. However, through writing books that produce a profound moral effect in their readers, Nabokov achieved the opposite of his own stated object:

Nabokov has often been read (...) in particular as someone whose work stems from, and illustrates, the (...) Barthian view that language works all by itself. Nabokov the theorist and generalizer encourages such a reading, but that reading ignores the point which I take to be illustrated by Nabokov's best practice: Only what is relevant to our sense of what we should do with ourselves, or for others, is aesthetically useful. (Rorty 1989, 167)

Vladimir Nabokov wrote about the 'aesthetic vibrancy of authentic literature'; 'the telltale tingle between the shoulder blades' (Rorty 147) as being the only goal with his writing:

Lolita has no moral in tow. For me a work of fiction exists only in so far as it affords me what I shall bluntly call aesthetic bliss, that is a sense of being somehow, somewhere, connected with other states of being where art (curiosity, tenderness, kindness, ecstasy) is the norm. There are not many such books. (Nabokov 1959)

In *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, Richard Rorty speaks of the traditional distinction that has separated books with a 'moral message' from books whose aims are aesthetic. His opinion is, however, that such a distinction is invalid, and that the two aims are possible to unite successfully; The question, for Rorty, should not be: 'Does this book aim at truth or at beauty?' but: 'What purposes does this book serve?' (Rorty 142). Rorty discusses Nabokov's fiction as an example of such a successful union of purposes, and Nabokov as a writer who 'wrote about cruelty from the inside, helping us to see the way in which the private pursuit of aesthetic bliss produces cruelty' (146). However, Nabokov himself insists that the effect produced by style as opposed to that produced by participative emotion is all that matters (147). Nabokov's literary influence on John Banville is a well-known fact. One asks, to what extent does Banville agree on this "aesthetic bliss" being the sole purpose with his writing?

Allusions to Dostojevskij's *Crime and Punishment* are also apparent in *The Book of Evidence*. Freddie Montgomery and Dostojevskij's Raskolnikov are two very different kinds of murderers, but the topic of moral guilt is central in both novels, though the conclusion is clearer in *Crime and Punishment*. Dostojevskij was himself influenced by Nietzsche and impressed Nietzsche in return. In my thesis I will examine these different literary and philosophical influences on Banville and see to

what extent they are felt in his writing.

The question of morality is present in the *Frames* trilogy as one of the central themes through the protagonist's musings on guilt and pity. In addition to employing Nabokov and Dostojevskij to my analysis to deepen the view on ethics and aesthetics, I will refer to the sometimes converging, but more often conflicting, philosophic ideas of Søren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche. The two are both discussed in Rorty's book and can, in my opinion, be said to represent the opposite philosophical tendencies in Banville's trilogy.

John Banville is regarded by some as "the most stylistically elaborate Irish writer of his generation" (Patten 2002), and also thematically the aesthetic has an important position in his fiction. Although he has claimed Friedrich Nietzsche as major philosophic influence, and the protagonist Freddie Montgomery seems to be personifying certain aspects of Nietzschean philosophy in its most extreme, the narrative is most unreliable. The protagonist dismisses what he thinks is conventional morality, but his is not an example the reader would like to follow. As McMinn has stated: "Freddie's script promises to be the ultimate self-indictment, wherein we may observe, from an intrigued but safe distance, the aesthetic dimension of the criminal mind." (McMinn 1999, 103) "Truth is ugly", Nietzsche writes in *The Will to Power*: "We possess art lest we perish of the truth". Banville can only agree on Nietzsche's values to a certain degree, since there in my opinion evidently is a morality in Banville's fiction. However, it is felt instinctively, the moral effect is in the revulsion the protagonist, his acts and values, creates in the reader.

In the critic Terry Eagleton's book *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (1990), Søren Kierkegaard's attitude to the aesthetic dimension is discussed:

One of Kierkegaard's many eccentricities is his attitude to the aesthetic. Of the major philosophers from Kant to Habermas, he is one of the few who refuse to assign it any predominant value or privileged status. He thus stands stubbornly askew to the aestheticizing currents of the modern European mind, which is not to say that the aesthetic is not from first to last one of his central preoccupations. (Eagleton 1990, 173)

In his book *Either/Or* Kierkegaard explores the "phases" or "stages" of existence. The first volume, the "Either", describes the aesthetic phase, where the Seducer Johannes' diary is presented. During the course of the diary it becomes clear that *the interesting situation* is Johannes' highest value, and as such the actual seduction is not what he is after, but the interesting possibility for seduction: "The seducer of *Either/Or* is preoccupied with his own erotic strategies, not with the hapless object of them; his reflectiveness, so to speak, has become his immediacy" (Eagleton 181).

The "voyeuristic reflections" of the aesthete in *Either/Or* resemble Freddie Montgomery, who prefers art over life, kills for a painting, and even seems to prefer to know his own wife more as a beautiful image in his memory than as a living human being at his side:

I do not know that I loved Daphne in the manner that the world understands by that word, but I do know that I loved her ways. Will it seem strange, cold perhaps even inhuman, if I say that I was only interested in what she was on the surface? Pah, what do I care how it seems. This is the only way another creature can be known: on the surface, that's where there is depth. (...) That time, years ago, I can't remember where, when I came upon her at the end of a party, standing by a window in a white dress in the half-light of an April dawn, lost in a dream - a dream from which I, tipsy and in a temper, unceremoniously woke her, when I could - dear Christ! - when I could have hung back in the shadows and painted her, down to the tiniest, tenderest detail, on the blank inner wall of my heart, where she would be still, vivid as in that dawn, my dark, mysterious darling. (*The Book of Evidence* 72)

Kierkegaard's second volume represents the ethical stage. With the help of his philosophy, it is my aim to show how Banville's fiction illustrates the hollowness of an aesthetic attitude to existence, how evil can arise out of a desire for experiences of exquisite beauty, and how the rendering of aesthetic state can function as the necessary harbinger to the ethical state. In my analysis, the concept of selfhood is central to the understanding of the aesthetic personality.

The *Frames* trilogy is a work of fiction marked by the period in which it is written, and is pervaded by existential questions and ponderings. The constant questioning by the narrator of his own motives, the lack of regard he shows for his own statements, and the easiness with which he abandons his beliefs, are expressions of a thoroughly postmodern consciousness in which any certainty seems impossible. Due to the unreliable nature of Banville's narrators, the difficulty for the reader lies in interpreting the actual basis of these philosophical representations and the purposes they are meant to serve. The three novels are interconnected in various ways, yet in the postmodern fashion they are without any certain connections or common threads in chronology and characters. The protagonist has a different name in each of the novels, connections are only subtly hinted at, and the reader is asked to refrain from making any conclusions about development within the protagonist's consciousness. Suggested development in one of the novels can be followed by regression in the next, and any seeming chronology is toyed with already on the front cover of the collected trilogy with showing *Athena* as the first novel, *The Book of Evidence* as the second and *Ghosts* as the last. However, all three novels contain many of the same themes that are explored by the implied author, whose meditations show that a thought development is taking place, and that lines of thought are expanding even if

conclusions are uncertain.

In *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, Richard Rorty raises several issues relevant to the approach to Banville's trilogy that have to do with the issue of moral consciousness in his fiction. In Chapter 2 Rorty discusses the subject the Contingency of Selfhood. In one paragraph he refers to the opposing views of romanticists and moralists generally, and Freud's specifically, of conscience as either a "common moral consciousness', the centre of the self", or as a historically conditioned and idiosyncratic world view (Rorty 30). The view of a common moral consciousness is inextricably tied up with the idea of the self as something constant, with a core that is unchanging. Freddie Montgomery, in the two novels *The Book of Evidence* and *Ghosts*, often professes to a sense of having a lack of self, of a sense of unreality that pervades his existence. This is exemplified in his description of how he relates to the villagers on the island in *Ghosts*:

I need these people (...). They had substance, which was precisely what I seemed to lack. I held on to them as if they were a handle by which I might hold on to things, to solid, simple (yes, simple!) things, and to myself among them. For I felt like something suspended in empty air, weightless, transparent, turning this way or that in every buffet of wind that blew. At least when I was locked away I had felt I was definitively there, but now that I was free (or at large, at any rate) I seemed hardly to be here at all. (223)

The sense of lacking a true self is not produced by his prison sentence, it has been there always. However, murdering Josie was the overstepping of a boundary, something that has caused a permanent change in Freddie's perception of his own place in the world. When he discovers after the murder that he is crying, he finds this physical reaction encouraging. It is something that he feels connects him to what he considers to be humanity, emotion caused by an unthinkable act, though he does not yet feel any regret:

My tears seemed not just as a fore-token of remorse, but the sign of some more common, simpler urge, an affect for which there was no name, but which might be my last link, the only one that would hold, with the world of ordinary things. For everything was changed, where I was now I had not been before. (*The Book of Evidence* 99)

His ten years in prison have also had an effect of change on Freddie, one that he describes as a sort of inclusion of the awareness of his sin. In comparing himself to a 'bloated' jellyfish, Freddie describes the sense of the consciousness of his crime having become a part of him as a consequence of his reflection over what he has done. This extended consciousness, however, exists separately from the rest of him. It is an awareness without any implications of moral acknowledgement or guilt:

I had evolved into an infinitely more complex organism (...) Everything had become more intricate, more dense and pensive. My crime had ramified it; it sat inside me now like a second, parasitic self, its tentacles coiled around my cells. I had grown fat on my sin; (...) like a mutated species of jellyfish stuffed full with poison. Soft, that is, formless, malignant still, yet not so fierce as once I had been, not so careless, or so cold. Puzzled, too, of course, still unable to believe that I had done what I did do. (*Ghosts* 209)

Freddie is changed by his crime, perhaps into something more substantial and conscious. Having achieved this consciousness, he is now in the process of extricating himself from what he feels is burdening him in order to create himself into a clean slate:

What I was striving to do was to simplify, to refine. I had shed everything I could save existence itself. (...) I was determined to make myself into a - what do you call it? - a monomorph: a monad. And then to start again, empty. That way, I felt, I might come to understand things, in however rudimentary a fashion. Small things, of course. Simple things. (*Ghosts* 213)

Freddie wants to rid himself of what has limited him. He has moved to this secluded island after ten years of imprisonment, in order to concentrate on only the essentials in the maintaining of life. He now has the freedom of movement but seeks solitude in order to cut his inner life down to its simplest form, so as to be born anew.

A seclusion, a place to re-create himself is what he seeks, and then to approach the world again as a different being. However, Freddie questions the whole idea of a self:

there are no simple things. I have said this before, I shall say it again. The object splits, flips, doubles back, becomes something else. Under the slightest pressure the seeming unit falls into a million pieces and every piece into a million more. I was myself no unitary thing (*Ghosts* 213).

This postmodern idea of having a fragmentary self is how Freddie explains his attitude to others, his perception of the world order that is also the reason for his crime:

My case, in short, was what it always had been, namely, that I did one thing while thinking another and in this welter of difference I did not know what I was. How then was I to be expected to know what others are, to imagine them so vividly as to make them quicken into a sort of life? Others? Other: they are all one. (*Ghosts* 213)

This idea of the illusoriness of selfhood is an important issue in explaining the murder. Because Freddie sees himself as having a fragmentary, illusory self, he claims that the platform of self necessary for perceiving others is not there. As such he cannot be expected to be able to imagine others or perceive their presence, and since it is impossible to perceive their presence, he cannot be expected to feel that eliminating them is wrong. His question is how it can be wrong to annihilate something you do not really sense is there.

Josie Bell's presence only became real to Freddie Montgomery in the moment before he was about to kill her, the fact that she was about to die made her temporarily singular to him. His contemplation during imprisonment has resulted in Freddie's realization of this fact, of his crime as being the result of a failure of imagination. In a "hypothetical" scenario, Freddie explains the background for his crime, and what he now feels is his duty, his obligation, is to imagine Josie, and as such to bring her back

to life:

And now, having done away with her, was he to bring her back? For that, he understood, was his task now. Prison, punishment, paying his debt to society, all that was nothing, was merely how he would pass the time while he got on with the real business of atonement, which was nothing less than the restitution of a life. (*Ghosts* 267)

This object of imagining in order to really see other people is in accordance with Richard Rorty's point, that novel-reading can increase empathy by introducing us to the viewpoints and backgrounds of very different individuals. Rorty feels that the general rules of philosophy or religion never can include every individual, every human being, every experience, as opposed to extensive novel-reading, which enables us to reach true solidarity by exposing us to the subjectivity of our Other.

In his essay "Redemption from Egotism" Rorty states:

what novels do for us is to let us know how people quite unlike ourselves think of themselves, how they contrive to put actions that appal us in a good light, how they give their lives meaning. The problem of how to live our own lives then becomes a problem of how to balance our needs against theirs, and their self-descriptions against ours. To have a more educated, developed and sophisticated moral outlook is to be able to grasp more of these needs, and to understand more of these self-descriptions. (Rorty 1999)

With his fiction, Banville achieves this object in a complex way. He has, in Freddie Montgomery, created a character whose narration of himself cannot be trusted. In the end of *The Book of Evidence*, after Freddie has been imprisoned, and has signed his official confession, it is evident to the reader that elements of his story are most likely not true, that his professed acquaintance with Anna Behrens and their sexual encounter in California was no more than a fantasy. Important elements in his narrative are swiftly brushed aside by the policeman who tells Freddie not to put in the "fanciful" parts about knowing the Behrens. The narrator has in the course of his

narration invented his own life story, included aesthetic elements of leading a luxurious life, having sex with beautiful, rich women and so forth, but the truth is most likely quite different. It is difficult to decide what in the story is "true". It might not even matter.

The main lesson the character of Freddie teaches us, what we can read from his narrative, is how he lives his life as Kierkegaard has described in *Either/Or*; as a voyeur, as an aesthete who in his own mind moulds the world around him into what he wants it to be, but remains indifferent to the reality of people, their individuality. He lives his life as in an illusion. Though he describes himself as being emotional, and continually has fits of crying, his emotions do not extend themselves to other human beings, his emotions exist only in relation to himself. Freddie gives his life meaning by creating his own narrative of his life that does not contribute to any happiness. He lives in his own world, disconnected from others, with a strong sense of estrangement and hollowness, that he only for a short time finds consolation for in the presence of the widowed Mrs Vanden:

what we achieved, what we began to achieve, Mrs V. and I, was a new or at least rare form of relation, one that, I realise, I had been aiming for for longer than I can remember. (...) Forgiveness, I suppose; it all seems to come down to that, in the end, though I hate these big words. Forgiveness not for the things I have done, but for the things that I am. That is the toughest one to absolve: what they used to call, if I remember rightly, a reserved sin. (*Ghosts* 261)

The insight the reader achieves into Freddie's way of thinking increases the understanding of an aesthetic, self-absorbed consciousness who finds the approach he hitherto has had towards life as futile. It can to a certain extent explain his actions, and it is a warning sign to any tendency to this kind of distanced approach to life and other human beings that may at any point arise in oneself. However, as Rorty points out,

acceptance does not automatically follow with understanding.

Novel-reading often increases tolerance for strange, and initially repellent, sorts of people. But the motto of the novel is not "to understand all is to forgive all." Rather, it is "Before you decide that an action was unforgivable, make sure that you know how it looked to the agent." You may well conclude that it was indeed unforgivable, but the knowledge of why it was done may help you avoid committing actions that you yourself will later find unforgivable.
(Rorty 1999)

With his characters, Banville is causing the same effect Rorty feels that one of Banville's influences, Michel Proust, did with his. It is a kind of reverse psychology that has its strong effect because the rendering of the inner life of a human being, in Rorty's view, is more powerful than a general reminder or rule:

By portraying dozens and dozens of self-centered people, and himself as the most self-centered of all, [Proust] helped his readers understand what they needed to watch out for, what they needed to be afraid of, as well as what they might hope for. (Rorty 1999)

In Rorty's words; to use self-centredness against itself by portraying it, is also what Banville achieves by introducing us to this complex, always self-reflecting character that is Freddie Montgomery. Its ethical effect is to show that even constant reflection and an intellectual awareness of psychology and the workings of one's own mind are not a hindrance for acts of severe cruelty.

Thesis Outline

In chapter one I will be going through central points in Kierkegaard's and Nietzsche's philosophy that I find relevant to my thesis. I will put the emphasis on Kierkegaard's *Either/Or* (1843), later referred to as *E/O I* and *II*, in order to apply his discussion of the three stages of existence, the aesthetic, ethical and religious, to my analysis of Banville's trilogy. In *Either/Or*, four pseudonyms are used: Victor Eremita, A, Judge Wilhelm, and Johannes. Judge Wilhelm is the fictional author of the second text (*Or*), while Johannes is the fictional author of a section of *Either*; "The Diary of a Seducer". I will illustrate the traits belonging to the aesthetic individual, as depicted in the character Johannes, and try to show that Kierkegaard's term of the aesthetic individual is transferable to Banville's protagonists in the trilogy. When analysing *The Book of Evidence*, the novel will at times be referred to as *BoE*.

In order to show the Nietzschean element so prominent in Banville's protagonists, especially in Freddie Montgomery, I am referring to Nietzsche's early book, *The Birth of Tragedy through the Spirit of Music* (1872). It is my aim to show how Nietzsche's essential world-view of the lack of purpose of existence, lies at the bottom of the postmodern consciousness of Banville's characters. I am also looking at Nietzsche's *Genealogy of Morals* (1887) (at times referred to as *GM*), in showing how Nietzsche's view on guilt and conscience as invalid concepts converge with the protagonists' in *Frames*. The last part of the chapter consists of a comparison between the converging concepts of the two philosophies, my point of departure being Tom P. S. Angier's recent book *Either Kierkegaard /Or Nietzsche* (2006), and an initial analysis of *Frames* based in these ideas.

In chapter two, in order to illustrate my points further, I am analysing parts of Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* (1957) and Fjodor Dostojevskij's *Crime and Punishment* (1866) to show how different aspects by these two classic novels can be compared to plot and characters in *Frames*. The emphasis here will be on the complexity of the protagonist in each of the novels, that resembles the mentality and character traits of the protagonist in *Frames*.

Chapter three contains the sustained analysis of the trilogy. The first part explores how Banville's protagonists' relate differently to their female other, while the second part of the analysis is concerned with the protagonist's quest for essence in a world where he finds no purpose.

Chapter 1:

A philosophical base of reasoning. Banville analysed in relation to Kierkegaard and Nietzsche

Søren Kierkegaard wrote *Either/Or* in 1843, the year before Friedrich Nietzsche was born, and 29 years before Nietzsche wrote *The Birth of Tragedy*. Kierkegaard, although well known in Germany in the latter part of the twentieth century, was not considered to be a major intellectual figure until the period between the two world wars, with the emergence of existentialism. The themes Kierkegaard examined in his writing, particularly those emphasising the importance of individual freedom and the burdens and responsibilities it brings with it, were found to be similar to those explored by Sartre and Heidegger. Kierkegaard is thus traditionally seen to be a precursor to this vein within philosophy. However, recent philosophers have paid little heed to his work. The main reasons for this are most likely grounded in the question of religion, as Terry Eagleton has stated in his chapter about Kierkegaard in *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*:

Kierkegaard combines his devotion to difference, sportive humour, play with pseudonyms and guerrilla-raids on the metaphysical with a passionately one-sided commitment, by which few of our modern ironists are likely to feel anything but unsettled (173).

During the last decades Kierkegaard's philosophy, with its religious vein running through it, has been seen as deeply unfashionable, while the work of Nietzsche has been taken to heart by contemporary philosophers who see his ideas as being more in accordance with their individualist, secular views of the postmodern. However, it is my opinion that the fact of Kierkegaard's Christianity should not be held against him as a philosopher or in a discussion of an ethical approach to fiction. In the words of

Matustik and Westphal (1995):

the assumption that to be taken seriously a philosopher must either be secular or abstract from his or her religious identity (...) can be dismissed as a prejudice rooted in very dubious Enlightenment conceptions of the autonomy of human thought (Westphal and Matustik, 1995, Introduction).

As Douglas Groothuis has put it; "Nietzsche has become a kind of a posthumous prophet to the post-modernist movement with its suspicion of universal rationality and morality, objectivity, and Western Christian sensibilities in general" (<http://www.ivpress.com/groothuis/doug/archives/000116.php>). I find that, as argued by Tom P.S. Angier in his recent book *Either Kierkegaard/ Or Nietzsche* (2006), Kierkegaard similarly became a posthumous prophet to Nietzsche's central arguments in moral philosophy, and through detailed critique exposed their weaknesses. Kierkegaard therefore has a relevance in our age that is as valid as Nietzsche's, and his arguments, especially those concerning his views of the aesthetic, can be used effectively in an analysis of contemporary literary fiction. As Sylvia Walsh expresses it in *Living Poetically: Kierkegaard's Existential Aesthetics* (1994):

In an age that suffers increasingly from a loss of poetic pathos and imagination, on the one hand, yet threatens to collapse into the practice of an ironic and hollow form of aestheticism, on the other, Kierkegaard's aesthetics provides an important alternative to traditional aesthetics (...) (Walsh 1994, 21).

John Banville's fiction, in particular the three novels constituting the *Frames* trilogy; *The Book of Evidence* (1989), *Ghosts* (1993) and *Athena* (1995), all, in my opinion, can be said to illustrate and contain aspects of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche's philosophies concerning morality and the aesthetic. Though the differences between the two philosophers, one a Christian, the other having declared the death of God, will be the most apparent, their similarities as existential philosophers have been pointed out by several writers like Kellenberger and most recently Tom P.S. Angier. They

write in a similar style that combines literature with philosophy, and they each present a view on aesthetics that initially is rooted in the same foundation, the dread of modern society in the face of lost truths. They each find different solutions to this crisis, but it is my opinion that their views can be used fruitfully to illustrate the tension between Banville's own competing views in the trilogy, as regards his own aesthetic and his discussion of existential matters.

Kierkegaard

Søren Kierkegaard's view of the aesthetic is significant in the way he, contrary to Nietzsche, does not accept it as being a reason for living in itself. Kierkegaard is famous for his placing of existence into stages, with the aesthetic as the first, the ethical as the second and the religious as the third and final. His book *Either/Or* illustrates this division, where the first volume considers the aesthetic stage through the papers left behind by a young man, Johannes, and accidentally found by the Judge Wilhelm. In his diary the hedonistic Seducer indirectly shows his voyeuristic approach to life and other people by describing the course of his courtship with a young woman. The Judge has read the diary, comments on it, and in *Either/Or II* we are introduced to a letter written by the Judge to Johannes, commending him to live ethically as opposed to his hitherto aesthetic attitude to life: "(...) you are sentimental, heartless, all according to the circumstances; but during all this you are at all times only in the moment, and for that reason your life disintegrates" (*EOII* 179).

His careful planning and staging of the development of the relationship, from its initiation, through the engagement and Johannes' own termination of it, his creation

and destruction of it as his private work of art, is used as an example of the distanced, constructed approach to life and other people that Kierkegaard argues against. Judge Wilhelm analyses Johannes' egotistical use of his aesthetic gifts thus:

the poetic was the plus he himself brought along. This plus was the poetic he enjoyed in the poetic situation of actuality; this he recaptured in the form of poetic reflection. This was the second enjoyment, and his whole life was intended for enjoyment. In the first case, he personally enjoyed the esthetic; in the second case, he esthetically enjoyed his personality (*EO I* 305)

Johannes is interested in actual situations that he can shape and create into the 'interesting', and subsequently enjoy in retrospect as beautiful images. Manipulation of circumstances is central in this process, and Johannes always knows the ideal context in which to stage his seduction, to produce the interesting: "In social life, every girl is armed; the situation is unsatisfactory and occurs again and again - she receives no sensuous jolt. In the street, she is on the open sea, and therefore everything affects her more, and likewise everything is more enigmatic." (*EO I* 326)

The accidental, the sudden, is required for this creation to take place, as well as Johannes himself and his own imagination:

he egotistically enjoyed personally that which in part actuality has given to him and which in part he himself had used to fertilize actuality, in the second case, his personality was volatilized, and he then enjoyed the situation and himself in the situation. In the first case, he continually needed actuality as the occasion, as an element; in the second case, actuality was drowned in the poetic (*ibid.*).

When the accidental occasion, actuality, has been moulded into Johannes' own image of it, it is no longer actuality but changed into an image by his poetic reflection of it. Other people represent the nourishment Johannes feeds on in order to have something to reflect on. In one of his letters to Cordelia, Johannes reveals his deeper motivations

for his relation to her:

My Cordelia.

You know that I very much like to talk with myself. I have found in myself the most interesting person among my acquaintances. At times, I have feared that I would come to lack material for these conversations; now I have no fear, for now I have you. I shall talk with myself about you now and for all eternity, about the most interesting subject with the most interesting person - ah, I am only an interesting person, you the most interesting subject.

Your Johannes (*EO I 401*).

What Johannes is in need of is an interesting subject or situation to spark his own pleasurable ruminations, the subject becomes an altered object in Johannes reproduction of the actual scene, its only function is to inspire.

However, in the moment of actuality, Johannes is aware of his own creative process, which somewhat diminishes the effect of the 'accidental'. Judge Wilhelm's analysis of Johannes' mind points to the latter's dependence on constant outer stimulation, and his awareness of its temporality: "As soon as actuality had lost its significance as stimulation, he was disarmed, and the evil in him lay in this. He was conscious of this at the very moment of stimulation, and the evil lay in this consciousness." (*EO I 306*).

Kierkegaard shares similarities with Banville in his extensive use of pseudonyms and unreliable narrators. Volume II of *Either/Or* contains letters from the Judge, Wilhelm, directed to the Seducer, Johannes. In these letters the Judge criticises Johannes' aesthetic attitude to other people, and advises him to accept the ethical commitment to existence itself that B himself finds is best realised in the marital state. The Judge unveils Johannes' narcissist motives behind his attentions to women, the staging of himself and others onto aesthetic scenes of his own creation, and his unashamed manipulation of other people's emotions for this specific purpose: his own

aesthetic enjoyment of the Image:

A pretty young girl, beside whom you quite by chance...were sitting at a table was too prim to bestow a glance on you...she sat opposite a mirror, in which you could see her. She cast a sly look at it, not foreseeing that your eye had already taken up its place there; she blushed when your eye met hers. Such things you register as accurately as a daguerreotype - and as quickly as one, which, as is known, needs only half-a-minute, even in the worst weather. (*EO I* 13)

This moment, their eyes meeting in the mirror where the Seducer can see himself as well as the effect he produces in the girl, is what he wants to obtain. It is the beauty of this image with himself as the central figure that he wants to freeze, as the Judge recognises, as a picture taken and kept for further enjoyment. This strategy is characteristic of what has been seen as being central in aesthetic existence: the desire for immediacy.

In *Kierkegaard: The Aesthetic and the Religious* (1992), George Pattison discusses this reluctance to give focus to anything but the detailed perceptions of the moment:

Throughout the metaphysical tradition time has been understood as the chief cause of the dispersal, fragmentation and corrosion of human existence, the decay of Being and the human subject alike. Art, however, has, as idealist aesthetics maintained, a unique power to take us out of time, to suspend its corroding effects (Pattison, 137).

What the aesthete fears the most is his own annihilation, and so he seeks to escape temporality by seeing the world solely in frozen images. There is a need for concentrating on the *Idea* of himself that will enable him to escape time, and to

[suffer] no change or alteration of the passing years. The peculiar stance of the aesthetic individual, who sees himself as just such a character, seeks to avoid such dissolution no less energetically than he seeks to avoid the threat of the Other to his self-created autonomy (Pattison 135).

The focus on art, Johannes thinks, will enable him to live forever in a

momentary state that will keep him as his own Idea. Any commitment to a state like marriage that will bring with it change through its inevitable involvement in another person's life and mind, is to be avoided. The Seducer makes sure that he is not trapped in a course of action that will enforce any awareness of temporality and development on him. This is a fundamental view that is illustrated in the first volume of *Either/Or* by a deliberate initiation and termination of a close personal relationship, but the outward banality of the story only exemplifies what Kierkegaard is attempting to show: The basic refusal of the aesthetic personality to accept any further relation to the world itself except as his own moulding of his immediate surroundings, to accept no other but the one that can be transformed, as discussed in Matustik and Westphal:

There is here a recognition of the other, but clearly only the other as other-for-me; as an objectified and faceless other; as an other who is subject to my domination and control; (...) Always a means toward an end, but never an end in itself, the other is a possession that is disposable at will (Matustik and Westphal 6)

It would seem that with a focus on immediacy follows a lack of reflective consciousness, as Eagleton elaborates:

In [an] unreflective sphere, akin in some sense to the Freudian stage of early infancy, the subject lives in a state of fragmented multiplicity, too diffuse to be called a unitary self, unable to differentiate itself from an environment of which it is little more than the determined reflex (Eagleton 173)

The immediate self 'dreams itself sensuously at one with the world' and remains unattached to the temporality of its surroundings. The Seducer, however, is anything but unreflective; rather, he represents a different aesthetic stage. It is his own continuous reflection during the course of his planned line of events that gives him the greatest pleasure, his own contemplating of the success of the determined cause and effect in the relationship to the girl that is his own creation. This kind of reflection,

however, leads nowhere, the Seducer reaches no conclusions, but revels in an endless self-satisfying irony, reflection as a circular aim in itself:

This 'higher' or reflective stage of the aesthetic represents a break with sensuous immediacy - not, however, as a movement upwards into determinate selfhood, but rather as a lapse into some abyssal specularity, where irony tumbles on the heels of irony with no more resolute centring of the subject than can be found in the 'imaginary' of bodily immediacy (Eagleton 174).

This kind of ironic reflection causes no deeper change in the Seducer's mind, it keeps him at a safe distance from the effects of his own actions, and as such only represents a different kind of immediacy than the unreflective, sensuous interaction with his own surroundings. Reflectiveness opposes immediacy, but the indeterminacy of its nature is what enables the reflective self to go on infinitely without any conclusion, just as free from temporality and a commitment to reality as the immediate self: "The self-reflective subject, as radically empty as the pseudo-self of aesthetic immediacy, erases temporality and ceaselessly reinvents itself from nothing, seeking to preserve an unbounded freedom which is in truth sheer self-consuming negativity(ibid). In the *Frames* trilogy, the protagonist yearns for immediacy and occasionally finds it in art. With his words "I was myself no unitary thing" (*Ghosts* 213), he illustrates the fragmented multiplicity that characterises his self and is associated with what Eagleton describes as the unreflective sphere. Most of the time, however, he proves himself as a self-reflective subject as he constantly reflects on his guilt, his world-view and his own selfhood without ever reaching a conclusion on any matter. The protagonist in each of the three novels contradicts himself continuously and consciously, and Banville's object as a postmodern writer is clearly to 'elude interpretation' (MacNamee 6) and never open up for answers as regards the character's composition. It is nevertheless the reader's impression that the protagonist revels in his reflection as he simultaneously suffers from the distance that his freedom from

decision creates between himself and his other who is not likewise liberated.

This ironic way of approaching the world is seen by Kierkegaard's Judge Wilhelm as essentially meaningless. His remedy is the act of choosing oneself, to make rational choices for the good, and to make a commitment to the world at large in the shape of marriage. This institution is what the Judge feels encapsulates a basically ethical attitude towards life. Judge Wilhelm points to the mental confusion that he thinks will be the ultimate result of Johannes' strategies:

Just as he has led others astray, so he, I think, will end by going astray himself. (...) Such a person is not always what could be called a criminal; he very often is himself frustrated by his own schemes, and yet he is stricken with a more terrible punishment than is the criminal, for what is even the pain of repentance compared with this conscious madness? (*EO I 308*)

The Judge seems to be certain of the prospect that Johannes one day will realise the futility of the aesthetic approach to life, that he has a conscience that ultimately must be awoken, and that will enlighten him to the horrible fact that he has wasted his life: "I can think of nothing more tormenting than a scheming mind that loses the thread and then directs all its keenness against itself as the conscience awakens and it becomes a matter of rescuing himself from this perplexity"(ibid). Judge Wilhelm, however, is aware that the ethical term of 'conscience' is not applicable in Johannes' case, that the punishment he will find necessary to give himself will never go farther than to a labyrinthian reflection:

His punishment has a purely esthetic character, for even the expression 'the conscience awakens' is too ethical to use about him; conscience takes shape in him merely as a higher consciousness that manifests itself as a restlessness that does not indict him even in the profounder sense (...) (*EO I 309*).

It becomes evident, however, that Kierkegaard himself does not view the

ethical as the ultimate basis for the right way of living. The Judge's ethical state will, through its claims to constitute a ready-made frame for right living through the act of self-choice, prove to be insufficient:

Wilhelm elevates the ethical above the aesthetic, yet his ethics are modelled on the very aesthetic notions they seek to transcend (...) The ethical life, as a symmetrical mediation of subject and object, inward and outward, individual and universal, is a splendidly conflict-free artefact of autonomously self-determining particulars. (Eagleton 182)

The Judge's self-choice does not encompass the tension resulting from an awareness of the realities of sin and guilt that is required for a human being to be able to continually question its own motives. Kierkegaard thus sees the necessity for reaching the religious state, in which one lives in a perpetual uncertainty, but nevertheless with commitment to faith:

an objective uncertainty, held fast in the most passionate appropriation of inwardness, is the truth, the highest truth there is for an existing individual (...). The truth is precisely the venture which chooses an objective uncertainty with the passion of the infinite.' (Kierkegaard in Eagleton 183)

It is a choice of truth that is done in spite of the awareness of its problematic sides.

"To see life truthfully is to see it neither steadily nor whole; the truth is loaded, tendentious, jealously exclusive in a way no liberal pluralism or aesthetic all-roundedness can comprehend." (Eagleton 180)

The Kierkegaardian view of the life stages applies to all life's situations. Angier believes that the three spheres inform all of Kierkegaard's work, and that given their fundamental place in his thought, all self-choice is meant to take place in light of them. One chooses oneself depending on one's base in being an aesthetic, ethical or religious individual. The Kierkegaardian choice is thereby totalising in character, and informs all one's relations, one's forms of behaviour and entire mode of life (Angier

35). The Kierkegaardian self-choice is contrasted to Nietzsche's self-creation. It involves deciding one's actions from alternatives already existing within oneself, as opposed to creating these alternatives oneself from nothing. Kierkegaard has been criticized for not basing this self-choice in any criteria, and as such making it as difficult to make choices from nothing as to create new values from nothing. Kierkegaard's use of pseudonyms makes it harder to trace the author's real opinion on the matters illustrated, but the effect on the reader is the same: It reveals to the reader the narrator's indifference to the lives and destinies of other human beings, a profound egocentricity and lack of depth in personal relationships that gives an impression of inner vacuity.

Nietzsche

As Kierkegaard's extensive use of pseudonyms some times makes it difficult to make a summary of his ideas, Friedrich Nietzsche, who prided himself in being able to represent multiple points of view, leaves us with the same problem. As Dabney Townsend has pointed out, Nietzsche is never simplistic or dogmatic (Townsend 1996, 213). It is, however, more than clear that his view of aesthetics opposes Kierkegaard's in fundamental ways. Central to Nietzsche's philosophy is the idea of the world's essential meaninglessness. Once one has realized that the world we are living in is basically an illusion, that the life of human beings serves no higher purposes, that there is no common humanity and as such no shared values, life can have no value except the aesthetic. In the face of having lost the illusion of a creator, the individual must now create himself into a new, ungrounded, aesthetic being who carries his justification entirely himself. As Terry Eagleton has pointed out, this view is a reversal of Kierkegaard's, ethics has given way to aesthetics, and in the place of a fiction of a stable we have a more authentic fiction of eternal self-creation (243).

Nietzsche does seem to contradict himself in actually emphasizing self-creation of values as a fundamental value, in a world view where no fundamental values should exist. In Eagleton's words:

Nietzsche does indeed smuggle certain already assumed values into the concept of the will to power, in just the circular manner for which he scorns the dewy-eyed naturalists. In a mystificatory gesture quite as deluded as theirs, he naturalizes certain quite specific social values - domination, aggression, exploitation, appropriation - as the very essence of the universe. (Eagleton 251)

For Nietzsche, the aesthetic is not just an approach to life, it is all there is: "Life itself

is 'aesthetic' because it aims only at 'semblance, meaning, error, deception, simulation, delusion, self-delusion'; and art is true to this reality precisely in its falsity" (Eagleton 256). In this way Nietzsche values art because of its inherent illusoriness that mirrors the world's lack of truth. It is Art's form that, in spite of its inherent falseness, expresses significance, moves, and thereby entices us to believe that there is meaning in life after all. Art thereby contains a double falsity; by betraying the truth that there is no truth. The conception of Art as an aim in itself echoes the mentality of Kierkegaard's Seducer, though not expressed in such terms by "A" himself, it is exemplified by his approach to life.

In one of his earlier works, *The Birth of Tragedy through the Spirit of Music* (1872), Nietzsche explains his theory of the individual's creation of fundamental values. He argues that the foundations for Western democracy are rooted in one of the two important Greek cultural influences. Art is, according to Nietzsche, combined by the struggle between the exuberance and ecstasy of Dionysus and the controlled harmony of Apollo. The Apollonian represents what is cool and rational: "Apollo embodies the drive towards distinction, discreteness and individuality, toward the drawing and respecting of boundaries and limits; he teaches an ethic of moderation and self-control" (*The Birth of Tragedy*, Introduction xi). In opposition, the Dionysiac represents the instinctual and ecstatic: "The Dionysiac is the drive towards the transgression of limits, the dissolution of boundaries, the destruction of individuality, and excess" (Introduction xi). Nietzsche's argument is that since the turn in Greek culture towards the Apollonian vein, caused by Socrates and his rhetoric, the world has progressed in the wrong direction. Having approached the modern age, it now faces a fundamental crisis manifested in a lack of unity, coherence and

meaningfulness. Nietzsche's remedy to this crisis is the rebirth of the Greek tragedy, and the emphasis on the cultural influence of the Dionysiac, that will lead to a full realization of the human condition. The abandonment of earlier illusions and constraints such as traditional concepts of moral and guilt will give one the necessary strength to overcome oneself and "joyfully accept" the fact that as a human being one stands utterly alone.

In Banville's trilogy the Nietzschean influence is apparent in the character traits of his protagonists, who are individuals who question the base of traditional morality and are liberated from the constraints it exercises on others. They cross boundaries both mentally and in the material world, in engaging with the world of crime they cross the limits set by society, and in their minds they have experiences that transgress the boundaries set by consciousness. As such they can be seen as beings largely under a dionysiac influence. The protagonists are experiencing that crisis of modernity that has progressed to what is now known as the postmodern condition, and accept no certainties as regards the nature of reality. Their remedy against the lack of unity and coherence is the creative project of imagination, the effect of art at times eliminates the sense of void that repeatedly marks their existence.

In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche first delivers his clearly stated attack on what he deems as the conventional, Christian morality. In order to put forward his ideas on what should be the true purpose of existence, Nietzsche first has to remove what he sees as the psychological burden one must throw off one's shoulders, the old thought material hindering the development of the modern human being into a new and stronger creature. Nietzsche's calls his philosophy a pessimism that goes 'beyond

good and evil', and which dares to place morality within the phenomenal world. Morality is seen not just as a phenomenon among other phenomena, but as a deception, similar to the terms of semblance, delusion, error, interpretation, manipulation and art (*The Birth of Tragedy* 8). Conventional morality is in Nietzsche's view a human construction, aimed only at exercising (unjustified) power over others and restricting the natural drives towards greatness in individuals. His main enemy in this respect is Christianity, seen as the central constructor behind this scheme, a religion revealed by Nietzsche as containing and promoting a world-view that is essentially life-negating:

Perhaps the best indication of the depth of the *anti-moral* tendency in this book is its consistently cautious and hostile silence about Christianity (...) In truth there is no greater antithesis of the purely aesthetic exegesis and justification of the world, as taught in this book, than the Christian doctrine which is, and wants to be, *only* moral, and which, with its absolute criteria (...), banishes art, *all* art, to the realm of *lies*, and thus negates, damns and condemns it (*The Birth of Tragedy* 9).

According to Nietzsche, Christian morality excludes the possibility of appreciation of art, and therefore life itself. According to this morality "life *must* constantly and inevitably be proved wrong because life is essentially something amoral; life *must* eventually, crushed by the weight of contempt and the eternal 'no!', be felt to be inherently unworthy, undeserving of our desire" (*The Birth of Tragedy* 9). In Nietzsche's view, morality involves there being certain actions one should not commit because of their resulting harm, to others or oneself. Morality and its subsequent feeling of guilt for committing such actions, thus involves a limitation of possibilities that can only be hostile to life. Moreover, the Christian notion of there being a possibility for life after death, free of evil, depending on one's moral life in this existence, devaluates the actual life we are living:

The hatred of the "world," the curse against the emotions, the fear of beauty and sensuality, a world beyond created so that the world on this side might be more easily slandered, at bottom a longing for nothingness, for extinction, for rest, (...)a sign of the deepest illness, weariness, bad temper, exhaustion, and impoverishment in living (*The Birth of Tragedy* 9).

The Nietzschean object is absolute individual freedom. In such a freedom there is no room for limitation of actions. On the contrary, all actions are possible. To possess this ultimate freedom one must do what is necessary to achieve one's own goals. These are goals created by one's own individual values, not values imposed on one by a slave morality, an artificial construction based on an illusion of a God, a Creator, and an afterlife. People who need the consolation of such a notion are not free. Nietzsche announces the death of God to tell us that we should liberate ourselves from past constraints; to acknowledge our basic solitude and its implied freedom with joyful acceptance.

In view of its inherently life-negating character, Nietzsche altogether dismisses traditional morality, and with it the sense of guilt that follows when one breaks a norm established by this morality, such as trespassing against one's neighbour. Guilt, the emotion caused by an awareness of sin, is by Nietzsche seen to be a creation by Christianity serving to limit and inhibit life, an imposed constraint turning human beings into slaves by their own moral consciousness. In this view, the suffering caused by guilt can only be damaging to individuals, and as such weaken their character and limit their possibilities for growth. Douglas Groothuis, in his critique of Nietzsche's reasoning, sums up the Nietzschean view of moral guilt thus:

1. Christianity promotes guilt (we are ethically exposed before God's omniscience).
2. Guilt is life-negating.
3. What is life-negating is not desirable.
4. Therefore, Christianity should be denied ("this God must die") in order to:
 - a) extirpate guilt and thus
 - b) enhance life.

(Groothuis 2003)

Brian Leiter, in his book *Nietzsche on Morality* (2002), discusses Nietzsche's view on the origin of guilt as the result of the internalisation of the repressed tendencies towards cruelty that exist in every human being. According to Nietzsche, because traditional morality does not accept cruelty towards others, the 'natural' instincts towards cruelty are turned against oneself. This causes the 'bad conscience'. Nietzsche is interested in how this 'bad conscience', caused by internalised cruelty, was turned into a *guilty* conscience, and discussed this in his second essay in *Genealogy of Morals* (1887):

the major moral principle “guilt” [*Schuld*] derives its origin from the very materialistic idea “debt” [*Schulden*] or that punishment developed entirely as repayment, without reference to any assumption about the freedom or lack of freedom of the will—and did so to the point where it first required a high degree of human development so that the animal “man” began to make those much more primitive distinctions between “intentional,” “negligent,” “accidental,” “responsible,” and their opposites and bring them to bear when meting out punishment (...).
(*Genealogy of Morals* 1887, 4)

As central elements within traditional morality, Nietzsche points to the terms responsibility and guilt, directly connected to the notion of free will within humans, as being introduced at a late stage in human history. In his summary of the history of punishment and guilt, the initial cause for punishment was not an assumption that the instigator of evil had personal responsibility for his actions, but anger for a suffered harm that had to be vented; "as it still is now when parents punish their children" (*GM II: 4*). The anger of the harmed was however modified by the idea that every injury had some equivalent, and that a compensation could be paid by the perpetrator.

Nietzsche's view on the originating of the terms guilt and conscience seems to be that they were invented so as to give the Creditor in ancient Greece an opportunity to enjoy sadistic pleasure in seeing the Debtor suffer as a compensation for the

Creditor's material loss: "(...) the delight in (...) [*doing wrong for the pleasure of doing it*], the enjoyment of violation" (GM 5). In this principle from ancient Greece Nietzsche finds the origins of guilt and conscience, not only as an important base in traditional morality, but also as one of the core principles of the modern judicial system. He examines these origins of 'blood and torture' to be invalid foundations for a modern morality. He questions the whole validity of the concept of guilt, and the suffering it imposes on individuals. Nietzsche's view on the concept of guilt is pragmatic in the way he focuses on the perpetrator's suffering as being its original and only purpose: "to what extent can suffering be a compensation for 'debts'?" (GM 6). Nietzsche disregards the aspect of the Christian doctrine that does not see the suffering of guilt as end in itself, but as a means towards obtaining forgiveness and the restoration of character through divine grace. This aspect of guilt can thus be seen to offer a kind of creative self-overcoming that should be according to Nietzsche's tastes. In Banville's *Frames* trilogy, the protagonist almost literally echoes Nietzsche's view on the purposelessness of guilt, in view of its inability to erase the harm that is done: "I could have feigned regret and sorrow, guilt, all that, but to what end? Even if I had felt such things, truly, in the deepest depths of my heart, would it have altered anything?" (*The Book of Evidence* 129). Banville's protagonist thus does not either see the function of acknowledging guilt as a possible means towards mental change and restoration of character, and in view of his disbelief in himself as a freely erring moral agent, the concept in itself is found to be irrelevant.

Comparison of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche's theories

In *Either Kierkegaard/ Or Nietzsche* (2006), Tom P. S. Angier applies

Kierkegaard's criticism of 'the defiant self' to Nietzsche's concept of the sovereign individual. Angier's argument is informed largely by *The Sickness Unto Death*, a text by Anti-Climacus, another of Kierkegaard's many pseudonyms. By showing that Anti-Climacus' defiant self is commensurable with Nietzsche's character-ideal of the sovereign individual, Angier sets out to defend the prefigured Kierkegaardian critique of Nietzsche as regards the sovereign individual's ability to create itself from nothing. In *Genealogy of Morals* (1887), Nietzsche defines what he means by the sovereign individual:

Society and its morality of custom [will] finally bring to light that to which it was only the means: (...) the sovereign individual, that resembles only himself, that has got loose from the morality of custom, the autonomous, "supermoral" individual - in short, the man of the personal, long and independent will. (*GM 2: 2*)

Here, the sovereign individual is defined as someone who has freed him- or herself completely from society's norms, and who embodies an aim in itself. A goal for the sovereign individual is complete originality and independence from all influences. As Angier points out, in *Daybreak* Nietzsche states that 'individual happiness springs from one's own unknown laws, and prescriptions from without can only obstruct and hinder it' (*Daybreak* 108 in Angier 11).

Within the sovereign individual's creation of itself there is no room for considerations of good and evil. In *Genealogy of Morals* Nietzsche problematises the concepts of good and evil, tracing their linguistic origins and finding them to be terms transvaluated during the course of history, and thereby not entailing any real meaning. It was the Jews in their resentment towards their Roman rulers who turned the term 'good' from its previous aristocratic etymology of nobility and power, to the opposite definition of submission, obedience, patience and forgiveness:

the chronic and despotic esprit de corps and fundamental instinct of a higher dominant race coming into association with a meaner race, an 'under race,' this is the origin of the antithesis of good and bad. (...) it is on the occasion of the *decay* of aristocratic values, that the antitheses between 'egoistic' and 'altruistic' presses more and more heavily on the human conscience. (GM I:2)

Nietzsche dismisses the content behind the current understanding of good and evil, regarding its definition to be based in prejudice: "(...) to-day the prejudice is predominant, which, acting even now with the intensity of an obsession and brain disease, holds that 'moral', 'altruistic,' and 'desinteressé' are concepts of equal value" (ibid).

In Kierkegaard's *Either/Or II*, Assessor Wilhelm in his critique of the aesthetic attitude to life makes this distinction between the aesthetic and the ethical: "Rather than designating the choice between good and evil, my Either/Or designates the choice by which one chooses good and evil or rules them out" (*EOII* 169). As such, the distinction between the ethical and the aesthetic is not the same as the distinction between good and evil, in Angier's words: "(...) an ethical life is one in which the distinction between good and evil has force, and an aesthetic life is one in which it lacks force" (Angier 37). Angier points to the indifference within the aesthetic individual towards considerations of good and evil as involving an inability to make genuine choices: 'The person who lives aesthetically does not choose, (...) [for] the ethical (...) is essentially that which makes the choice a choice' (*EOII* 168); 'Your choice is an aesthetic choice, but an aesthetic choice is no choice' (*EOII* 166)

As we have seen, central to Nietzsche's sovereign individual is the value of self-creation. Angier shows that the defiant/aesthetic self's continuous re-creation of

other people as well as its own self, must inevitably prove to be unstable, in view of the instability of its core: "given the opacity of the defiant self's personal *telos* (...) the project of self-fashioning [is] indeed fundamentally incapable of subtending the goal of self-affirmation prized by the defiant self" (Angier 37). Angier here points to the futility of the Nietzschean self-creation or self-fashioning, in view of there being no platform within the self to make this self-fashioning from. Since the will of the defiant self is absolutely unconstrained, there is nothing that will turn one's choice in a specific direction, and this must result in the disunity over time.

In addition to the problem of making choices as a consequence of a lacking distinction between good and evil, the sovereign individual/defiant self, will, according to Kierkegaard, have other difficulties with the project of self-creation. Kierkegaard here actually foresees the postmodern problem of the fragmented self as being manifested in the aesthetic personality. According to Kierkegaard, the defiant self is also a disordered self, as Angier has pointed out:

[the Seducer] speaks of his experiences as constituting a 'worldly multiplicity', and at EO1 335 he describes his character as consisting in 'storms of moods'. (...) 'a person who wills [a multitude of things]' is said to be double-minded ... at odds with himself (PH 57); the aesthetic condition is described as 'manyness', as entailing a 'dispersed' or 'divided' mind, which thus precludes being 'at one with oneself.' (Angier 38)

The dispersion and division characteristic of the aesthetic mind, its is by Kierkegaard seen as incompatible with the unity of thoughts required to make choices and thereby being able to make oneself into a new and original being. The impression of wholeness can, according to Kierkegaard, only be superficial:

While Johannes claims that the 'fragments' of his self 'gather themselves into [a] unity, the parts into a whole' (EO1 361), Kierkegaard is sceptical about this claim to volitional unity. For although double-mindedness may 'ha[ve] about it a ... gloss of unity and inner coherence' (PH 119), (...) the aesthetic self - given the actual opacity of its *telos*, and the evaluative latitude

characteristic of its mode of action - cannot in the end impose coherence on its life. (...) (ibid.)

Angier's conclusion is that Kierkegaard's analysis of the aesthetic existence, the inability to make real choices, the lack of a base from which to create one's values from as well as the inherent dispersion of the aesthetic mind, makes the aesthetic life undesirable: "(...) not only because it threatens the intrinsic good of a coherent self-identity, but also because it precludes a life of real value and self-development" (Angier 39).

Initial Analysis of the Trilogy

In analysing the *Frames* trilogy, there are obvious resemblances between Freddie Montgomery and Kierkegaard's Johannes as well as with Nietzsche's character-ideal of the sovereign individual. Freddie in some ways is the prototype of the aesthetic individual, with the added sense of limitless space belonging to postmodernity that increases his need for what art can give in the provision of essence and erasing of temporality. In his confessional, Freddie Montgomery can be seen to embrace certain Nietzschean notions as regards morality and the dismissal of guilt as a valid concept or judicial base. In the trilogy, these are central themes that are continually touched upon by the three protagonists. Like Nietzsche, Freddie sees no purpose to existence, no meaning, no deliberation: "We shall dispense with the disquisition on fate and the forked paths that destiny sets us upon and all such claptrap. There are no moments, only the seamless drift; how many times do I have to tell myself this simple truth?" (*Athena* 422). The drift and lack of substance that Freddie feels pervades his life; "(...) flux and flow, unstoppable, that's all there is; it terrifies me to think of it" (*Athena* 475), leads to a constant search for that which can

release him from the drift and what Pattison calls 'the dispersal, fragmentation and corrosion of human existence'.

The 'authenticity' of other characters is often contrasted to the protagonist's sense of lacking a defined self:

The first thing that struck me about him was how plausible he appeared, how authentic, at least when looked at from a decent distance; compared to him I seemed to myself a thing of rags and smoke, flapping helplessly this way and that at the mercy of every passing breeze. (*Ghosts* 375)

Freddie or M. is always looking for what he himself is lacking, as in the description of Professor Kreutznaer, as well as his relation to his fellow islanders:

I need these people (...). They had substance, which was precisely what I seemed to lack. I held on to them as if they were a handle by which I might hold on to things, to solid, simple (yes, simple!) things, and to myself among them. For I felt like something suspended in empty air, weightless, transparent, turning this way or that in every buffet of wind that blew. (*Ghosts* 222)

Freddie refers to a general estrangement to the rest of the world: 'Others? Other: they are all one' (*Ghosts* 213). Other people are however necessary in order to enable Freddie to hold on to what is left of the illusion of a solid, material world. Freddie's ambivalent relationship to other individuals, his estrangement and simultaneous vampire-like craving for the reality he thinks is to be found in the details of the common people's lives, is apparent in both the first and the third book of the trilogy:

sometimes when my attention is caught I will go to extraordinary lengths to make the most banal discoveries about total strangers. (...)I will get off a bus miles before my own stop so I can follow a secretary coming home from the office to see where she lives; I will traipse through shopping malls - ah, those happy hunting-grounds! - just to find out what kind of bread or cabbages or toilet rolls a burdened housewife with two snotty kids in tow will buy. (*Athena* 446)

As Johannes in *The Diary of a Seducer*, Banville's protagonists think they can find

essence in the everyday lives of the 'substantial' people, as if there is a secret key within their 'banalities' to solidity and thereness:

A tubercular young man in a black shortie overcoat came in and stood beside me, breathing and fidgeting. I could tell from the tension coming off him that he was working himself up to something, and for a moment I was pleurably alarmed. He might do anything, anything. (...) Then he turned and went out hurriedly, clutching his coat around him. I followed, leaving my drink half-finished. (...) I found a substitute, a tall fat girl with big shoulders and a big behind, and big, tubular legs ending in a pair of tiny feet, like a pig's front trotters, wedged into high-heeled white shoes. (...) She was so brave and sad, clumping along in her ugly shoes, and I could have followed her all day, I think, but after a while I lost her too. (*The Book of Evidence* 141)

The seeming unpredictability of the actions of people Freddie encounter on his way, appears to be a remedy to his sense of the terrifying flux and flow of things. The random individuals' choices of action gives an impression of free will and moments of decision, that can temporarily suspend the uncomfortable feeling of inevitability that Freddie usually suffers from.

Freddie's sense of the illusoriness of self, as well as his alienation from other people, produces in him a need of sensing reality, a sort of genuineness, in his drifting, ephemeral world. His motivations for stealing the portrait of "The Woman with Gloves" seemingly arise from mere economic necessity, and the subsequent murder is presented as accidental, as an arbitrary incident. In *Ghosts*, however, a deeper motivation for the theft is revealed; the desire for essence through aesthetic immediacy:

In her portrait she has presence, she is unignorably there, more real than the majority of her sisters out here in what we call real life. And our Monsieur Hypothesis is not used to seeing people whole, the rest of humanity being for him for the most part a kind of annoying fog obscuring his view of the darkened shop-window of the world and of himself reflected in it. (...) It is *being* that he has encountered here, the thing itself, the pure unmediated essence, in which, he thinks, he will at last find himself and his true home, his place in the world. (*Ghosts* 265)

For both the Seducer Johannes and Freddie, other people represent nothing but an

'annoying fog', unless they can be moulded into the interesting and take their part as requisites in the aesthetes' staged settings. The important connector, however, is the protagonist's own reflection in the window. Johannes is in need of actuality in order to fertilize his imagination. For Freddie, the moment when he sees the painting of the woman with gloves becomes the moment of actuality, the image of the woman needed in order for him to imagine her into life and envision a world for her. While looking at the painting he for a time finds what he has sought, the 'being' that he is not able to find in other, living people nor in himself.

I have stood in front of other, perhaps greater paintings, and not been moved as I am moved by this one. I have a reproduction of it on the wall above my table here - sent to me by, of all people, Anna Behrens - when I look at it my heart contracts. There is something in the way the woman regards me, the querulous, mute insistence of her eyes, which I can neither escape nor assuage. (*The Book of Evidence* 105)

Freddie's imagination is only applied to fictional scenes of his own creation. By looking at the painting, Freddie is able to invent a whole world in which to place the woman with gloves, he imagines surroundings, her feelings, her thoughts, and the sensation produced in her by being painted, in great detail. He is able to see her as a human being in the way he cannot see people that inhabit his immediate surroundings. Freddie is an amoral being as regards what Nietzsche calls 'conventional' morality. When Josie Bell gets in his way while he is reaching for his goal, to get hold of the painting that has given him the most exquisite aesthetic enjoyment, Freddie shows no pretence of moral reservations: "*Help me*, she whispered. *Help me*. A bubble of blood came out of her mouth and burst. *Tommy!* She said, or a word like that, and then: *Love*. What did I feel? Remorse, grief, a terrible - no, I won't lie." (*The Book of Evidence* 119).

The pain and harm he is causing another human being is of no direct relation to Freddie, it does not concern him. There is no dread or remorse, because Freddie questions the basis of the morality that deems this act as being wrong. This lack of emotion, painful remorse or guilt is in thread with Nietzsche's ideas of the Christian morality as something constructed, as not coming from within the core of the human soul, but as being imposed from without. Freddie is without these imposed notions, and as such he does not have the emotional reactions his act would have caused in others. He is not unaware of the existing concept of morality, but does not feel that it applies to him. There is a distinction here between Freddie's awareness of the current moral concept of guilt and his being judged by this principle by others, and the suffering of guilt caused by pity or identification with the Other. Freddie suffers from the consciousness of his estrangement from others and his lack of connection with 'the world of ordinary things', not from pain resulting from having harmed another human being. The capacity for identification demanded for such a feat is lacking.

In providing presence, however, life suddenly takes the place of art when Freddie looks into the eyes of Josie Bell the moment before he kills her and suddenly experiences not only being, but a human being to an extent that he has never encountered before. In *Ghosts* he contemplates the sensation of those essential moments:

He recalls with fascination and a kind of swooning wonderment the moments before he struck the first blow, when he looked into the victim's eyes and knew that he had never known another creature - not mother, wife, child, not anyone - so intimately, so invasively, to such indecent depths, as he did just then this woman whom he was about to bludgeon to death. (*Ghosts* 265)

This newfound knowledge causes him to symbolically throw away the painting, 'as if it were a page of yesterday's newspaper', it is of no use to him any more since he now

suspects that what he seeks is no longer to be found in art. In retrospect Freddie ponders what caused him to go through with the murder, after suddenly having realised the unprecedented significance of another person's life:

this sudden access to another's being, this astonished and appalled him. How, with such knowledge, could he have gone ahead and killed? How, having seen straight down those sky-blue, transparent eyes into the depths of what for want of a better word I shall call her soul, how could he destroy her? (ibid.)

The realization of the 'soul' to be found in other people, previously unimagined by Freddie, leads to his decision of what shall be his own punishment: To re-imagine Josie Bell, and in that way recover for himself the being he experienced but briefly through his reflection on her existence: "Prison, punishment, paying his debt to society, all that was nothing, was merely how he would pass the time while he got on with the real business of atonement, which was nothing less than the restitution of a life" (*Ghosts* p 267). As in the case of Johannes, Freddie constantly reflects on his actions as well as his guilt in a manner that resembles Eagleton's description of 'abyssal specularity'. The nature of his guilt is one of the central themes in the trilogy, but for Freddie as a character the reflection becomes an aim in itself and leads no farther than to his private 'vow of imagination'. Neither Johannes or Freddie seems to have any empathy with their respective victims, the reflections on guilt are purely theoretical. Freddie seems to see a link between guaranteed forgiveness and the admittance of remorse. Since he does not expect to be forgiven, remorse is unnecessary. He does not see the purpose of guilt, and as such he does not feel it:

Remorse implies the expectation of forgiveness, and I knew that what I had done was unforgivable. I could have feigned regret and sorrow, guilt, all that, but to what end? Even if I had felt such things, truly, in the deepest depths of my heart, would it have altered anything? The deed was done, and would not be cancelled by cries of anguish and repentance. (*The Book of Evidence* 129)

Freddie's reflections on guilt are analytical, he describes the sensation of it as having the nature of lightness, and indeed it does not seem to be the painful guilt caused by the empathy of feeling the pain of his victim that he professes to. Freddie's guilt is of another kind, and in *Athena* he speaks of the nature of the guilt he has come to know for the last years:

Guilt, I mean the permanent, inexpungible, lifetime variety, turns you into a kind of earnest clown. They speak of guilt as something heavy, they talk about the weight of it, the burden, but I know otherwise; guilt is lighter than air; it fills you up like a gas and would send you sailing into the sky, arms and legs flailing, an inflated Grock, if you did not keep a tight hold on things. (*Athena* 471)

Freddie's form of conscience, the punishment he has given himself, is reminiscent of Judge Wilhelm's words on Johannes' punishment being of a purely esthetic character: '(...)a higher consciousness that manifests itself as a restlessness that does not indict him even in the profounder sense but keeps him awake, allows him no rest in his sterile restlessness'(*EO II* 309). Freddie indeed has no rest, and words on art have been his solution to the unknown consequences letting go of the 'tight hold on things' would have for him:

For years now talk had been my tether and my bags of ballast. (...) Art history, the lives of the painters, the studio system in the seventeenth century, there was no end to the topics at my command. And all for no purpose other than to keep suppressed inside me that ever-surging bubble of appalled, excoriating, sulphurous laughter, the cackle of the damned (*ibid.*).

Words are both Freddie's escape as well as his warder, he is dependent on them in order to retain his superficial hold on existence, however, as in the case of the Seducer there seems to be no way out from this self-satisfying irony. Freddie professes to struggle with 'the big burdensome words' of atonement and redemption, but the outcome of his struggle continues to be obscure.

One of the reoccurring themes in Banville's fiction is the postmodern emphasis on the inability of language to encompass the full range of human experience. This insufficiency of language is in *The Book of Evidence* also seen to extend itself to the judicial system. In Freddie Montgomery's view the judicial system, with its basis in traditionally moral concepts, is completely inept at being able to fully grasp his motivations or the real nature of what is deemed as his 'evil' actions:

leafing through my dictionary I am struck by the poverty of the language when it comes to naming and describing badness. Evil, wickedness, mischief, these words imply an agency, the conscious or at least active doing of wrong. They do not signify the bad in its inert, neutral, self-sustaining state. Then there are the adjectives: dreadful, heinous, execrable, vile, and so on. They are not so much descriptive as judgmental. They carry a weight of censure mingled with fear. Is this not a queer state of affairs? It makes me wonder. I ask myself if perhaps the thing itself - *badness* - does not exist at all, if these strangely vague and imprecise words are only a kind of ruse, a kind of elaborate cover for the fact that nothing is there. Or perhaps the words are an attempt to make it be there? Or, again, perhaps there *is* something, but the words invented it. (*The Book of Evidence* 47)

Freddie finds that the word evil implies agency, and since determinism and 'drift' for him have removed any notion of will from these concepts, the actual content of evil as expressed within language is no longer clear. The Nietzschean questioning of the base of the concepts good and evil is echoed here, but where Nietzsche problematised those two central concepts by pointing to what he saw as their previous, opposite linguistic meaning, Freddie goes a step further in a complete relativism. Freddie not only suggests that the current vocabulary has trouble expressing the nature of evil in a precise way, he also questions the existence of evil or 'badness' altogether, in view of the 'vague and imprecise' attempts to express the essence of it. He suggests a possible desire within humanity to conjure up the existence of badness, and to 'cover up' the fact that it does not exist, without pointing to any eventual motive behind such an attempt. However, in the view of the impossibility of any real belief, the idea of the drift that is the basis for this thought experiment also defies certainty, as Banville

reminds us later in the trilogy.

In *The Book of Evidence*, Freddie's purpose with stealing the painting seems to be that he simply is in need of money, either in order to free his wife and son from captivity, or, more wickedly, to enable him to maintain his own lifestyle. However, Freddie refuses having had any conscious intentions or plans for the burglary:

What was I saying? My plan, yes. Your lordship, I am no mastermind. The newspapers (...) have portrayed me both as a reckless thug and a meticulous, ice-cool, iron-willed blond beast. But I swear, it was all just drift, like everything else. (*The Book of Evidence* 81)

Determinism and lack of free will are what Freddie feels defines his existence; the idea of the 'seamless flow' of things is central to his explanation of his actions.

Charlie's question to Freddie; "Freddie, what have you done to yourself?" (*The Book of Evidence* 33) at their meeting in the pub, triggers Freddie's ponderings on the (lack of) forces in his life leading up to the murder:

The question is wrong, that's the trouble. It assumes that actions are determined by volition, deliberate thought, a careful weighing-up of facts, all that puppet-show twitching which passes for consciousness. I was living like that because I was living like that, there is no other answer. When I look back, no matter how hard I try I can see no clear break between one phase and another. It is a seamless flow - although flow is too strong a word. More a sort of busy stasis, a sort of running on the spot. (*The Book of Evidence* 34)

This determinist view of existence is repeated in *Athena*: "We shall dispense with the disquisition on fate and the forked paths that destiny sets us upon and all such claptrap. There are no moments, only the seamless drift; how many times do I have to tell myself this simple truth?" (422). Freddie's actions are not intentional or planned, but inevitable:

I felt by now that I knew the village. I felt in fact that I had been here before, and even that I had

done all these things before, walked about aimlessly in the early morning, and sat on the bridge, and gone into a shop and purchased things. I have no explanation: I only felt it. It was as if I had dreamed a prophetic dream and then forgotten it, and this was the prophecy coming true. But then, something of that sense of inevitability infected everything I did that day - inevitable, mind you, does not mean inexcusable in my vocabulary. No indeed, a strong mixture of Catholic and Calvinist blood runs in my veins. (*The Book of Evidence* 84)

This reference to Freddie's 'Catholic and Calvinist blood' seems to be directed towards the vocabulary he has grown up with, the Christian tradition of morality in which he finds himself, and is aware that he is being judged from. He is aware that within this vocabulary, his actions are inexcusable. His point is that neither this vocabulary or the morality it stems from, is sufficient to encompass his experience. Forces outside him made him do what he did: "I killed her, I admit it freely. And I know that if I were back there today I would do it again, not because I would want to, but because I would have no choice" (*The Book of Evidence* 128). However, Freddie later discusses the possibility of free will:

Perhaps there is a kind of volition, after all (involuntary volition? - could there be such a thing?) and perhaps it is in intervals such as this one that, unknowingly, we make our judgements, arrive at decisions, commit ourselves. If so, everything that I have ever believed is wrong (belief in this sense is of course a negative quality). It is an intensely invigorating notion. I do not really credit it; I am just playing here, amusing myself in this brief intermission before everything starts up again. (*Athena* 426)

By opening up for the possibility of free will in a sentence, and abandoning it in the next, Banville fulfils the principle of postmodern relativism by toying with one of the most central underlying ideas of the trilogy. Banville seems to say that the proposition of determinism is, as every other human theory, not unassailable.

Chapter 2:

Two Russian Literary influences

Allusions to Vladimir Nabokov's great predecessor and fellow Russian, Fjodor Dostojevskij, are apparent in the former's writing both in the character traits of his protagonists as well as in his mockery of the romantic novelistic tradition that the latter belonged to. The two authors lived in two different centuries and had different purposes with their writing. What unites them is their nationality, both born in St.Petersburg but later forced into exile, the one to a labour camp in Siberia, the other to a continuous expatriate existence on the European continent and in the United States. They both have their position within the European literary canon, and their heritage is evident in modern- as well as postmodern literature, John Banville's art trilogy included. Their influence, however, is diversely manifested in Banville's fiction. Significant is their different view on the distinction between good and evil. Katherine Tiernan O'Connor in her essay on *Lolita* points out that Nabokov in his lecture on Dostojevskij professed to subscribe to Kropotkin's statement that "men like the examining magistrate and Svidrigajlov, the embodiment of evil, are purely romantic invention" (O'Connor 1989). Nabokov's view of evil within fiction appears to be the same that John Banville expressed in the seminar "All About Evil" at the London Book Fair in April 2007, where he spoke of "the post-religious fantasy of evil" (Monsen 2007). Both seem to say that the concept in itself has no place in art or literature. The reader may or may not agree with this statement; however, this sense of the relativity of evil is central to the authors' rendering of Humbert Humbert as well as Freddie Montgomery as characters, even if the reader's conclusions may differ from the author's intention.

Monsters of Incuriosity: Vladimir Nabokov

Among Banville and Nabokov's most apparent similarities as writers are perspective and narrative technique. John Banville, through his job in an airline that allowed him to travel extensively, spent years in the U.S.A. in the earlier part of his life before returning to Ireland and embarking on his literary career. Nabokov, who was forced to leave his country with his family as a consequence of the Bolshevik revolution in 1917, lived in several different European countries as a young man, before he ended up spending a large part of his life in the U.S.A. The expatriate view this adds to his writing resembles the one expressed by Banville's main characters, as outsiders observing a world around them which they do not really belong to. Echoes of Nabokov's writing are easily found in Banville's fiction, specifically, one might say, in his style, with its emphasis on imagery and word play, (Nabokov himself described the process of his writing *Lolita* as "a love affair with the English language" (Nabokov 1959) but also as regards his subject matter. This is particularly true in the case of the *Frames* trilogy. *Lolita* is Nabokov's most famous work, and contains many of the issues also explored in *The Book of Evidence*, *Ghosts*, and *Athena*. It is an alleged confessional, the first-person tale of a murderer, as is the case in all of the books in *Frames*. The narrator in *Lolita* also has important character traits in common with the protagonist in each of the novels in the Trilogy, and is as such a clear influence.

The charges made by some early readers of *Lolita* that it was anti-American pained Nabokov considerably more than what he called "the idiotic accusation of

immorality" (ibid.) As Douglas Fowler has expressed it in his book *Reading Nabokov* (1974), *Lolita* is Nabokov's most complex novel in terms of its moral scheme. Traditionally there has been thought to be a divide between the moral and the aesthetic purposes of literature, as Richard Rorty argues in *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*; "Books relevant to the avoidance of either social or individual cruelty are often contrasted - as books with a 'moral message' - with books whose aims are, instead, 'aesthetic'" (Rorty 142). Nabokov's father was a liberal statesman dedicated to creating a society for the common good, who died while protecting an influential politician from being assassinated. Richard Rorty points to this important event in Nabokov's life as a possible reason for the author's later repudiation of any political movement: "he (...) gave up on the modern liberal idea of working for a future in which cruelty will no longer be institutionalized" (Rorty 156). Resembling Judge Wilhelm's words on the aesthetic life, Nabokov's fictional universe seems to be one in which the distinction between good and evil lacks force. The author renounced "books with a moral message", and insisted on aesthetic bliss as the only real purpose of his fiction:

Lolita has no moral in tow. For me a work of fiction exists only in so far as it affords me what I shall bluntly call aesthetic bliss, that is a sense of being somehow, somewhere, connected with other states of being where art (curiosity, tenderness, kindness, ecstasy) is the norm. There are not many such books. (Nabokov 1959)

Nabokov insisted that the effect produced by style is the only true fictional purpose. He also tried to fit Dickens, one of his favourite authors, into that picture by stressing the latter's ability for technical finesse at the expense of his 'sociological side', an aspect of the author's writing that Nabokov found irrelevant:

(...) the study of the sociological or political impact of literature has to be devised mainly for

those who are by temperament or education immune to the aesthetic vibrancy of authentic literature, for those who do not experience the telltale tingle between the shoulder blades. (ibid.)

In spite of the author's renunciation, it is nevertheless my opinion, from a neo-humanist view, an inescapable fact that *Lolita* is a deeply moral book. The difficulty of interpretation inherent in *Lolita* as well as in *Invitation of a Beheading* arises from the nature of the novels' unreliable and self-deceiving narrators. One notices Nabokov's extensive abilities as a stylist, however, the poststructuralist approach of only 'registering that which is unique about the shaping of language, thought, and feeling in a particular work' (Levinas), would for most readers prove to be insufficient. The result is a successful union of purposes, whatever the author's professed (lack of) intention. I would argue that despite the protagonist's complexity and even the author's sole interest in producing aesthetic bliss through stylistic flamboyancy, the moral effect produced in the reader through his or her reading Humbert's and Lolita's story is nevertheless clear. This is caused by the insight the reader achieves into the mind of the criminal as well as the effects the crime has on the victim, effects not registered by the perpetrator himself. The obliviousness of the protagonists' towards the pain of other characters stands as a contrast to the beauty of nature and art that Humbert Humbert and Freddie Montgomery perceives with such great sensitivity. As Richard Rorty expresses in his analysis of *Lolita* in *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*:

These two [Humbert Humbert and Charles Kinbote] are the central figures of Nabokov's books about cruelty - not the 'beastly farce' common to Lenin, Hitler, Gradus, and Paduk, but the special sort of cruelty of which those capable of bliss are also capable. These books are reflections on the possibility that there can be sensitive killers, cruel aesthetes, pitiless poets - masters of imagery who are content to turn the lives of other human beings into images on a screen, while simply not noticing that these other people are suffering. (157)

Humbert Humbert and Freddie Montgomery are both aesthetes, worldly, cultured men who have travelled extensively and who share a contempt for the Other

who has not reached their level of sophistication. With the exception of Lolita, Humbert Humbert finds few or no other people agreeable, Lolita is his one passion, his sole obsession for which he is ready to do everything to obtain. His unconsummated childhood love for the girl Annabel is what he explains as the origin for his inclination towards "nymphets" or young girls. Other women he has encountered in the years between Annabel and Lolita have been insignificant to him, providing dissatisfying sex and at times an image of middle class respectability, but altogether unimportant as individuals. His marriage to Valeria ends in Humbert considering murdering her, not because of her sexual betrayal, but because she has the audacity to show herself as an individual and break free from Humbert's absolute control over her:

A mounting fury was suffocating me - not because I had any particular fondness for that figure of fun, Mme Humbert, but because matters of legal and illegal conjunction were for me alone to decide, and here she was, Valeria, the comedy wife, brazenly preparing to dispose in her own way of my comfort and fate. (*Lolita* 29)

(...) Humbert the Terrible deliberated with Humbert the Small whether Humbert Humbert should kill her lover, or both, or neither. (...) I now wondered if Valechka (as the colonel called her) was really worth shooting, or strangling, or drowning. She had very vulnerable legs, and I decided I would limit myself to hurting her very horribly as soon as we were alone. (*Lolita* 30)

As a person Valeria has no significance, but as a threat to Humbert's self-image as all-powerful, in control of his existence, she could undoubtedly easily be eradicated. This episode anticipates Humbert's considering killing Charlotte in order to get access to Lolita's body, and echoes Freddie's lack of sentiment when killing Josie Bell that amounts to no more than annoyance caused by her mere existence:

Right, I said to her, here, take this, and I thrust the painting into her arms and turned about and marched her ahead of me across the lawn. She said nothing, or if she did I was not listening. (...) When she faltered I prodded her between the shoulder-blades. I really was very cross. (*The Book of Evidence* 111)

What Josie Bell is to Freddie Montgomery is what Valeria and Charlotte are to Humbert Humbert (and as we shall see, what Dostojevskij's pawnbroker is to Raskolnikov); an insignificant human being, a random obstacle that simply must be removed in order to achieve the desired object. When Freddie murders Josie Bell he does not have her innocence, her fear, her pain or the fact of his taking her life in mind, it is the simple details of the murder weapon and the associations produced by the merely physical sensation of the act itself:

You must let me go, she said, or you will be in trouble. It's not easy to wield a hammer in a motor car. When I struck her for the first time I expected to feel the sharp, clean smack of steel on bone, but it was more like hitting clay, or hard putty. The word *fontanel* sprang into my mind. (*The Book of Evidence* 113)

The difference between Freddie and Humbert Humbert is that Humbert does not actually kill Charlotte; 'fate' beats him to it. Humbert contemplates drowning Charlotte when the opportunity arises:

The setting was really perfect for a brisk bubbling murder, and here was the subtle point. The [retired policeman and retired plumber building a dock] were just near enough to witness an accident and just far enough not to observe a crime.... I knew that all I had to do was to drop back, take a deep breath, then grab her by the ankle and rapidly dive with my captive corpse.... And when some twenty minutes later the two puppets steadily growing arrived in a rowboat, one half newly painted, poor Mrs. Humbert.... the victim of a cramp or coronary occlusion, or both, would be standing on her head in the inky ooze, some thirty feet below the smiling surface of Hourglass Lake.
Simple, was it not? But what d'ye know, folks - I just could not make myself do it. (*Lolita* 89)

Whether it is pity for Lolita or a distaste within Humbert's cultivated personality to dirty his hands with such an act that keeps him from taking advantage of this opportunity is uncertain. Fowler points to the incident as 'a moral victory' securing Humbert's status as what the former calls a favourite of Nabokov's. The episode certainly adds to Humbert's complexity and postpones any rash conclusions within the reader as regards Humbert being the 'embodiment of evil' or just a man with a

problem.

Freddie and Humbert share other important traits as characters. Both Freddie's and Humbert's obsessions are with Beauty, though for Humbert Beauty is encompassed in Lolita's young body - his only object with driving cross-country America is to obtain continual sexual access to Lolita, whether it is voluntary or achieved with blackmail or bribery. In contrast, Freddie's temporary passion is connected to a work of art, a painting of a woman instead of her physical body, but the essence of the obsession is the same: An ultimate experience of beauty that goes further than just the purely physical and which is based in imagination. Even if Lolita is a living, thinking human being, Humbert creates his own image of her which is what is giving him the most exquisite pleasure. He has invented the term 'nymphet', and he also creates in his mind the whole origin from which this 'nymphetdom' has arisen, how Lolita the nymphet has come into being:

What drives me insane is the twofold nature of this nymphet - of every nymphet, perhaps; this mixture in my Lolita of tender dreamy childishness and a kind of eerie vulgarity, stemming from the snub-nosed cuteness of ads and magazine pictures, from the blurry pinkness of adolescent maidservants in the Old Country (smelling of crushed daisies and sweat); and from very young harlots disguised as children in provincial brothels (...). (*Lolita* 45)

Humbert's elaborate imagining of the duality inherent in a nymphet, his detailed ideas of the composition of 'childishness and vulgarity' and its origin, is what he revels in. This envisioning of a detailed universe resembles Freddie's imagining of the life of the Woman with Gloves, as he sees the portrait for the first time:

I try to make up a life for her. She is, I will say, thirty-five, thirty-six, though people without thinking still speak of her as a girl. She lives with her father, the merchant (...). She keeps house for him since her mother's death. She did not like her mother. (...) She keeps an inventory of the household linen in a little notebook attached to her belt by a fine gold chain (*The Book of Evidence* 90)

As Humbert, Freddie delights in conjuring up a whole world for the woman in the portrait, nourished by the actuality and essence he feels she provides him with, by her 'mute insistence' he is inspired to paint his own picture within his mind. In the same way Humbert projects his ideas and desires on Lolita. The "mixture (...) of childishness and (...) vulgarity" that Humbert thinks is the core of the nymphet, he now finds embodied in Lolita herself: "(...) what is most singular is that she, this Lolita, my Lolita, has individualized the writer's ancient lust, so that above and over everything there is - Lolita (45)". Lolita is now creatively moulded into the ultimate nymphet. Humbert's fondness for the "vulgarity", "harlots", "mud" and "dirt" that are necessary elements in the nymphet make-up, echoes Freddie's own confession of his inclination towards "the low life":

I have a lamentable weakness for the low life. There is something in me that cleaves to the ramshackle and the shady, a crack somewhere in my make-up that likes to fill itself up with dirt. I tell myself this vulgar predilection is to be found in all true connoisseurs of culture but I am not convinced. (*Athena* 465)

Indeed this is something that both Humbert and Freddie as "connoisseurs of culture" seem to revel in, the contrast of their own cultural sophistication to the less refined sides of life. In Freddie's case this is found in his dealings with the world of crime, and in Humbert's in the element of vulgarity in young female children.

At several occasions in the novel, Humbert's second-hand account of Lolita's life reveals to the reader her unhappiness (as demonstrated in her crying every night after presuming Humbert asleep), her longing for her mother, and the pain she suffered by losing her little brother. These are details that simply elude Humbert's attention. Humbert is not interested in Lolita's mind or person, but in his own

perception of her physical beauty that has the power to transport him onto another plane of being: Being a child, unmarked by any physical traces of age, Lolita is a clean slate and a suitable object for Humbert's obsession with Perfection. As such Lolita is enjoyed as an image much in the same way as Freddie's Dutch painting; his self-created version of the woman in the painting is what he enjoys, just as Humbert enjoys his own obsession with the details of Lolita's twelve-year-old body, as the reincarnation of his childhood love:

It was the same child - the same frail, honey-hued shoulders, the same silky supple bare back, the same chestnut head of hair. (...) I recognized the tiny dark-brown mole on her side. (...) I saw again (...) those puerile hips on which I had kissed the crenulated imprint left by the band of her shorts - that last mad immortal day behind the 'Roches Roses'. (*Lolita* 40)

Humbert indulges in the details of Lolita's body; her shoulders, her mole, that have the power to erase time and bring him back to the day twenty-five years before when he experienced a moment of pure perfection. Lolita as such has for Humbert the function of a traditional work of art, and we are reminded of George Pattison's words on the subject of aestheticism:

Throughout the metaphysical tradition time has been understood as the chief cause of the dispersal, fragmentation and corrosion of human existence, the decay of Being and the human subject alike. Art, however, has, as idealist aesthetics maintained, a unique power to take us out of time, to suspend its corroding effects. (Pattison 137)

Humbert's enjoyment of nymphets has up until his meeting with Lolita been strongly based in voyeurism, and his thrill has been for the greater part based in the acknowledgement of the desired object being out of reach:

I used to recollect, with anguished amusement, the times in my trustful, pre-dolorian past when I would be misled by a jewel-bright window opposite wherein my lurking eye (...) would make out from afar a half-naked nymphet stilled in the act of combing her Alice-in-Wonderland hair. There was in the fiery phantasm a perfection which made my wild delight also perfect, just because the vision was out of reach, with no possibility of attainment to spoil it by the

awareness of an appended taboo (...). (*Lolita* 257)

As Freddie, Humbert is aware of the current morality that would judge him and his 'shameful vice', and so at this earlier stage perfection is ensured by unattainability, Humbert is still at a safe distance from a possible realization of his desires. This focus on details and the freezing of time into small, perfect moments is echoed in Freddie Montgomery recollecting his wife. The complete, detailed image of her, captured in an instant, is what he has wanted to preserve, not the acknowledgement of her character as a human being:

That time, years ago, I can't remember where, when I came upon her at the end of a party, standing by a window in a white dress in the half-light of an April dawn, lost in a dream - a dream from which I, tipsy and in a temper, unceremoniously woke her, when I could - dear Christ! - when I could have hung back in the shadows and painted her, down to the tiniest, tenderest detail, on the blank inner wall of my heart, where she would be still, vivid as in that dawn, my dark, mysterious darling. (*The Book of Evidence* 72)

This notion is repeated later in the trilogy with Morrow's recollection of his lost love, A., as he himself realises: "She walked to the window and put her face to the glass and peered off sideways at something only she could see. That stillness, that feline concentration: where had I seen some other loved one stand in just that pose?" (*Athena* 486). As Morrow's recollection moves on he ponders his own subconscious motives for having kept this exact moment in his memory:

We must have talked, or at least exchanged remarks, we cannot have sat in silence all that while, but if so I don't remember. I recall only the look of things: her print dress, that hanging wing of hair, the triangular shadow lengthening and contracting along her inner thigh as she swung her leg, the polar blue in the window behind her and that ogreish cloud at her back still stealthily spreading its icy arms. Or is it just that I want to linger here in this moment when everything was still to come, to preserve it in the crystal of remembrance like one of those little scenes in glass globes that I used to play with as a child(...)? (*Athena* 487)

The image of 'Woman by a window' is a classic motif in art, echoing both James Joyce's Gretta being watched by her husband Gabriel in *The Dead* as well as some of

Vermeer's paintings such as 'Girl with a Pearl Earring'. The central aspect of the image seems to be the enigmatic, the female other who is 'lost in a dream', seeing 'something only she could see', thinking thoughts unknown to the one watching who does not really want to know them. His fascination lies with the enigmatic moment in itself. The distance is not an obstacle, it is desired.

Humbert Humbert and Freddie Montgomery want to recollect the way people looked, not who they were. The protagonists' emphasis on the outer look of things in Banville's as well as Nabokov's fiction has the effect of turning the other characters in the novels into elusive and incomplete figures. This moulding of their surroundings into their private works of art, their disinterestedness in the personalities of other people, is what makes the protagonists potentially dangerous characters. Nabokov himself saw a supremacy in detail over the general:

This capacity to wonder at trifles - no matter the imminent peril - these asides of the spirit, these footnotes in the volume of life are the highest forms of consciousness, and it is in this childishly speculative state of mind, so different from commonsense and its logic, that we know the world to be good. (Nabokov in Rorty 150)

As a matter of consequence, when only focusing on details it is difficult to see the whole. This seems to be the central problem for the characters of Freddie/M/Morrow and Humbert Humbert, who because of their obsession with the beauty in details and their wonderment at trifles, struggle with the ability to perceive the humanity of other individuals. The aestheticizing of female characters, echoing the Pygmalion myth of re-creation, is an important aspect of Freddie's and Humbert's aesthetic attitudes to life in general. In his own postscript to *Lolita*, "On a Book Called Lolita", Nabokov sums up the definition of art as entailing "curiosity, tenderness, kindness, ecstasy" (Nabokov 90). As characters, Humbert Humbert and Freddie Montgomery combine

these traits in a complex way. In Richard Rorty's words, Humbert Humbert is a monster of incuriosity (161) when it comes to other people, but extremely curious about culture, natural beauty and the work of art that Lolita was to him. The same can be said of Freddie Montgomery. Nabokov was able to create characters who are "both ecstatic and cruel, noticing and heartless, poets who are only selectively curious, obsessives who are as sensitive as they are callous" (Rorty 160). It is an example that Banville has benefited from to a high degree.

Human impediments and extraordinary men: Vladimir Dostojevskij

Crime and Punishment (1866) is one of Dostojevskij's major works and a classic in European literature. Allusions to the novel are apparent in Banville's *The Book of Evidence*, but rather than as an influence, the plot in *Crime and Punishment* works as a contrast to the development in the murderer's consciousness that we are introduced to in Banville's work. The common denominator of the two novels is the Nietzschean element, anticipated by Dostojevskij and alluded to by Banville. The philosophical ideas identified with Raskolnikov include many of the same issues that Nietzsche would later raise. As such much of the novel's thought material can be related to the themes of morality, free will, and guilt, that are discussed in Banville's *Frames*. *Crime and Punishment* was written a 120 years before the *Frames* trilogy, and each work is naturally marked by the differences in period and locality. The distance in time spans a century in which Christian morality was the standard from which all actions were judged, to the postmodern era of uncertainties, that John Banville himself has chosen to call the "post-religious age" (Monsen 2007). As a classic work, however, *Crime and Punishment* is still widely read, and in it

Dostojevskij delves into issues that make it, in the words of Harold Bloom: "a realistic nightmare, or an apocalyptic testament" (Bloom 1996, 5). It still shows the possible consequences of pursuing an Idea to its farthest limits, and the inevitable effects of this pursuit on the people inhabiting one's environment.

Fjodor Dostojevskij and Friedrich Nietzsche were contemporaries, both writers during the period where existential philosophy was on the rise. In both their cases, the disciplines of philosophy and literature often intermingled with each other. Their mutual influence is an intriguing subject, since it is the differences between them that initially seem apparent: The greater part of Dostojevskij's fiction bore witness of his Christian, Orthodox faith, while Nietzsche was an atheist who strove to find an alternative to Christian morality through the creation of new "private values". Nevertheless, Nietzsche professed Dostojevskij to be "the only psychological writer he could learn anything from" (Schubart 1947, 34), and Dostojevskij himself was deeply impressed by Nietzsche's writings. Dostojevskij had, with his radical political background, once embraced some of the same ideas that Nietzsche later put forward, especially on the subject of individual freedom and power, a principle of much importance to the character of Raskolnikov. As a young socialist, a part of the group of educated young people of the Petrashevsky Society (Ashimbeava/Biron 2006, 23) that in the late 1840s were inspired by the French Revolution, Dostojevskij initially was an atheist who put the human being in the place of God. As a consequence of the Petrashevsky group's revolutionary activities, Dostojevskij was arrested in 1849 and sent first to a labour camp, then to military service in Siberia, where he stayed for nine years. It was during this time that he found his way back to Orthodox Christianity, and abandoned his previous convictions of the way to a social revolution through a

necessarily violent overthrow of the government. Raskolnikov as a character represents these earlier views:

Raskolnikov is tempted by the same utilitarian ethics against which Dostoevsky's earlier 'paradoxalist' in *Notes from the Underground* had rebelled. According to these ethics, human behaviour is derived from the principle of 'rational egotism.' The Underground Man is convinced that the whole meaning of human existence lies in the assertion of irrational will, and he categorically resists the mathematical arguments of reason: '*The only thing man needs is independent will, whatever that independence costs and whatever it leads to.*' (Ashimbeava/Biron 42)

Similar words on the independent will would later be central to Nietzsche's arguments in several of his works, especially *Human, All-Too-Human* (1878) and *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883-85) that were written more than a decade later than *Crime and Punishment*. This correspondence between Dostojevskij's and Nietzsche's ideas is in *Crime and Punishment* clear in the presentation of Raskolnikov's philosophical basis for his crime. This is also expressed in the article "On Crime" published in a literary magazine, the main points of which are later explained by Raskolnikov to the lawyer Porphyrius Petrovitch. The idea expressed is the placing of people into subdivisions determined by a subjective value judgment, and is as such a denial of the notion of the individual's equal worth:

Nature divides men into two categories: the first, and inferior one, comprising ordinary men, the kind of material whose function is to reproduce specimens like themselves; the other, a superior one, comprising men who have the gift or power to make a new word, thought, or deed felt. (*Crime and Punishment* 194)

Certain people can, according to this idea, be sacrificed in the name of progress:

An extraordinary man has a right - not officially, be it understood, but from and by his very individuality - to permit his conscience to overstep certain bounds, only so far as the realisation of one of his ideas may require it. (Such an idea may from time to time be of advantage to humanity.) (*Crime and Punishment* 193)

Raskolnikov's thoughts about the extraordinary man almost literally echo

Nietzsche's idea of the Overman. It is the right that one person has to step over certain other people in order to achieve a personal goal, because the possibility within the person for such a higher achievement is seen to be proportional with his or her intrinsic worth as a human being. People incapable of "greatness", who are unable to reach such higher achievements may be seen only as "intervening human impediments" and should, if necessary, be sacrificed to promote the interests of those who are superior:

not only all great men, but all those who, by hook or by crook, have raised themselves above the common herd, men who are capable of evolving something new, must, in virtue of their innate power, be undoubtedly criminals, more or less, be it said. Otherwise they could not free themselves from trammels; and, as for being bound by them, that they cannot be - their very mission forbidding it. (*Crime and Punishment* 194)

Crime, and as such, murder, is according to Raskolnikov's theory seen as a necessary tool used in order to fulfil the higher mission. The freedom from 'trammels' is the ultimate goal. The terms "common herd", "power", and "men who are capable of evolving something new" almost literally echoes the ones Nietzsche later used when he put forward his ideas concerning "slave morality", "the strong poet", and the "maker of new words" (reference).

Raskolnikov's reason for murdering Alena Ivanovna is based in this philosophy. According to his idea, her life is less important than other lives, because she gets her livelihood from lending money to poor people in exchange for their belongings. This is seen to be one of the lowest kinds of occupations possible, and the money-lender is thereby considered an inferior person, chosen carefully by Raskolnikov in order to prove his own point and enable him to go through with his philosophical murder. As Dostojevskij himself wrote from Wiesbaden to Mikhail

Katkov (the publisher of the journal *Russian Messenger*) about the character that would become Raskolnikov:

A young man, a petty bourgeois by birth (...) gives in, through his own carelessness and shaky beliefs, to certain strange, 'unfinished' ideas of the day. (...) He decides to kill a certain old woman of low social standing who lends money at interest. This old woman is stupid, unfeeling, diseased, greedy, and exacts outrageous interest; she is evil, oppresses others, and torments her younger sister, who works for her. 'She is not good for anything', 'Why is she alive?' 'Does she help anyone at all?', etc. - these questions confuse the man. He decides to kill her, to rob her. (Ashimbeava/Biron 39)

Once stamped an inferior person, Alena Ivanovna can be eradicated in order to gain resources that can be used progressively; in this case to promote Raskolnikov's own career and to save his sister from having to marry a man she does not love. 'As for the old woman, she is of no account!' he exclaimed by fits and starts. 'Let us grant that she has been a mistake all along! It was not a human being, it was a principle I destroyed!' (*Crime and Punishment* 208). Raskolnikov commits a murder for reasons that outwardly seem to be based on material gain. Contrary to Freddie Montgomery's, however, Raskolnikov's murder is most carefully planned and executed, it is not an accidental incident occurring during the course of a case of mere theft, as Freddie professes his "crime" to be. However, the philosophical reasoning that the murder is based on echoes the one illustrated in *The Book of Evidence* and its two sequels: The victim of the murder is seen by the murderer to be an unimportant human being, an insignificant person. In Raskolnikov's case this conclusion has been reached by a thorough reasoning, in Freddie's case it is an attitude that becomes apparent through his actions. In both novels, however, the base of this reasoning undergoes a change in the killer's mind during the course of the novels' development.

Both Raskolnikov and Freddie Montgomery are murderers who profess to feel

no guilt for their respective actions. They both question the word "crime" and its implications, and feel that the world around them cannot grasp the broad, moral perspective that, in their opinion, justifies their deeds:

'My crime? What Crime, say you?' he retorted in a sudden fit of frenzy. 'Is it a crime to have killed some vile and noisome vermin, an old usurer that was obnoxious to all, a vampire living on the life of the poor? Why, murders of that kind ought to make up for many a crime! I do not even give it a thought! As to atonement - bah! Why should every one hiss out to me the word, 'Crime, crime!' (*Crime and Punishment* 410)

Freddie's objection to the word Crime is also connected to his feeling that the word is used inappropriately, because it implies agency, and an acceptance of the notion of free will. Again we return to the idea of the futility of language in describing reality, and to a determinist reality wherein the terms of guilt and shame do not apply. Since Freddie thinks that he is placed in this situation by circumstances, determined to do this act not by his own will but by the different factors occurring in the world around him, the action in itself is devoid of direction. To Freddie, the murder is something that just happened, without involving any choice on his part:

I could not think directly about what I had done. It would have been like trying to stare steadily into a blinding light. It was too big, too bright to contemplate. It was incomprehensible. Even still, when I say *I did it*, I am not sure I know what I mean. (...) I know that if I were back there today I would do it again, not because I would want to, but because I would have no choice. It would be just as it was then, this spider, and this moonlight between the trees, and all, all the rest of it. (*The Book of Evidence* 128)

Freddie does not pretend to feel sorrow or regret, and questions the idea of remorse itself:

Remorse implies the expectation of forgiveness, and I knew that what I had done was unforgivable. I could have feigned regret and sorrow, guilt, all that, but to what end? Even if I had felt such things, truly, in the deepest depths of my heart, would it have altered anything? The deed was done, and would not be cancelled by cries of anguish and repentance. Done, yes, finished, as nothing ever before in my life had been finished and done - and yet there would be no end to it, I saw that straight away. I was, I told myself, responsible, with all the weight that

word implied. (*The Book of Evidence* 129)

These words parallel Nietzsche's on the same subject. Nietzsche emphasises the lack of a pragmatic purpose of remorse, since the deed cannot be undone, there is no point in troubling oneself with destructive feelings of shame or anguish. Nietzsche sees guilt only as a negative end in itself, as opposed to the Christian view on guilt as a means towards forgiveness and the restoration of character through divine grace:

Against remorse. - I do not like this kind of cowardice towards one's own deeds; one should not leave oneself in the lurch at the onset of unanticipated shame and embarrassment. An extreme pride, rather, is in order. After all, what is the good of it! No deed can be undone by being regretted; no more than being 'forgiven' or 'atoned for'. (...) we immoralists prefer not to believe in 'guilt'. We hold instead that every action is of identical value at root - (...) In any particular case we will allow that an act could easily have been spared us - but circumstances favored it. Which of us, if favored by circumstance, would not have gone through the entire gamut of crime? (*The Will to Power* 136)

Nietzsche here points to the forces of 'circumstances' and the irrationality of guilt in the face of a determinist world view. The nature of Freddie's crime puzzles him, since he cannot trace his own agency to the point where he made an actual choice, the moment where he *decided* to strike a hammer into Josie Bell's head. Since all things to him are "only seamless drift", he refers to the beast inside him that he calls "Bunter", that seems to incarnate the violent impulses that exist in Freddie but which until now have been kept under control by an illusory cover of civilization. Freddie sees the possible core of his crime as having freed Bunter from his earlier constraints, but does not connect this 'liberation' to any act of will:

Nor can I say I did not mean to kill her - only, I am not clear as to when I began to mean it. I was flustered, impatient, angry, she attacked me, I swiped at her, the swipe became a blow, which became the prelude to a second blow (...) and so on. There is no moment in this process of which I can confidently say, there, that is when I decided she should die. Decided? - I do not think it was a matter of deciding. I do not think it was a matter of thinking, even. That fat monster inside me just saw his chance and leaped out, frothing and flailing. He had scores to settle with the world, and she, at that moment, was world enough for him. I could not stop him. Or could I? He is me, after all, and I am he. (*The Book of Evidence* 128)

As always there is no certainty in Freddie's conclusions as to whether the concept of will has validity or not, if he is either identifying with or distancing himself from his actions by creating the idea of Bunter. Freddie seems to point to the deeper motivations for his act as lying somewhere in his past, where at some point things have happened that have caused 'scores to settle'. Brendan McNamee, in his book *The Quest for God in the Novels of John Banville 1973-2005: A Postmodern Spirituality* (2006), ascribes these unsettled scores to Freddie's failure to find order within the universe through his career in science:

I took up the study of science in order to find certainty. No, that's not it. Better say, I took up science in order to make the lack of certainty more manageable. Here was a way, I thought, of erecting a solid structure on the very sands that were everywhere, always, shifting under me. (*The Book of Evidence* 17)

In MacNamee's view, Freddie's desire to make the lack of certainty more manageable, to erect solid structures in an unstable world, derives from his being rooted in one of two different world-views; the Western rational mindset. This mindset, according to MacNamee, has its origins in Plato and Aristotle, was continued and consolidated through the period of Enlightenment in the eighteenth century, and holds the notion that there is a possibility for the world to be fully discovered, explained and dissected in all its constituents by human beings. The opposite and earlier world-view, deriving from the ancient Greeks, signifies no desire to make any deeper sense of the world, but represents the contentment of living in a kind of perpetual uncertainty. The essence of this view is presented in a quote by Gabriel Josipovici: "What is certain [for the ancient Greeks] is that the world will not yield itself fully to human enquiry. But this is not a matter for despair. It would only be that if we felt that it *should* so yield itself"(Josipovici in MacNamee 147). According to MacNamee, it is into the

latter belief that Freddie, through his Western rational upbringing, has been incorporated, with unfortunate consequences:

these two contrasting world-views: one originating in pre-Socratic Greece, long eclipsed in the West and now, arguably, in process of a re-birth, its prophets Nietzsche and Heidegger, its birth-pangs the despairing confusions of postmodernism; the other finding its source in Plato and Aristotle, its full flowering in the Enlightenment, and perhaps its death throes in those same postmodern confusions. Freddie Montgomery lives in the failure of this latter view, and his subsequent despair leads him to murder. Through the lens of this murder, and the way in which it affects Freddie, we see revealed, as a powerful absence, the former view. (MacNamee 147)

MacNamee holds that it is Freddie's disappointment with the lack of any real certainty to be found within science that leads to his despair and in turn his or Bunter's murder: "Freddie's despair is in inverse proportion to his initial faith in science. The life of endless drifting that he succumbs to, far from consisting from freedom from illusion, proves to be one of submerged rage and pain" (MacNamee 147). However, an awareness of these limitations to human enquiry seems to already exist in Freddie prior to his choice of career:

I was good at it, I had a flair. It helped to be without convictions as to the nature of reality, truth, ethics, all those big things - indeed, I discovered in science a vision of an unpredictable, seething world that was eerily familiar to me, to whom matter had always seemed a swirl of chance collisions. (*The Book of Evidence* 17)

Freddie seems already to be in accordance with the understanding that a full human enquiry of the world is impossible to obtain; unconvinced of the nature of reality and truth, he is conscious of the inherent unpredictability of the world. The delving into science only leads to a confirmation of this previously held view. As such any despair leading from this familiar vision seems less likely to constitute the force that releases Bunter and ends in murder. Freddie seems to come closer to an understanding of the nature of his crime in contemplating the possibility of having let go of his own self-control, which does imply an agency to a certain degree:

things were too far gone for stopping. Perhaps that is the essence of my crime, of my culpability, that I let things get to that stage, that I had not been vigilant enough, had not been enough of a dissembler, that I left Bunter to his own devices, and thus allowed him, fatally, to understand that he was free, that the cage door was open, that nothing was forbidden, that everything was possible. (*The Book of Evidence* 129)

In *Crime and Punishment*, Raskolnikov's reasons for murder are clear; the act is carefully planned and consciously based on a private principle, and his free will in the matter is not at issue. However, while committing this act he is forced, because of an accidental intrusion, to commit another murder which does not have the principal grounding of the first one. This complicates the case and causes Raskolnikov to suffer unexpected moral reflections. Freddie's reflections on the definition of crime come subsequently, as a result of his own observation that he feels no guilt for his act. In Raskolnikov's case the reflections on the concept of crime come as a mental preparation to the murder as well as a consequence of it. After having contemplated the possibility of the act for a month, he pays a visit to his chosen victim, after which he suffers severe doubts of his own resolution. However, it is not the mortal sin that the act signifies that torments Raskolnikov, the moral wrong of it, but pure physical revulsion:

'God! Am I to stand beating in her skull with a hatchet or something, wade in warm blood, break open the lock and rob and tremble, blood flowing all around, and hide myself with the hatchet? O God! is this indeed possible, and must it be?' He trembled like a leaf as he said this. 'What am I thinking of?' he cried in some astonishment. (...) Did I not say yesterday as I went up the stairs how disgusting and mean and low it all was, and did I not run away in terror? (...) 'Lord!' he prayed, 'show me my way, that I may renounce these horrid thoughts of mine!' (*Crime and Punishment* 48)

However, Raskolnikov soon regains his strength and resolve. The letter from his mother explaining his sister's situation, as well as the fatal incident of him overhearing Ivanova's sister mentioning the precise time at which she will be out of the house the next day, gives him the final push to go ahead with his plan. After having killed the

pawnbroker, and unexpectedly, her sister, Raskolnikov suffers from a strain that shows itself in physical illness and in his unusual behaviour toward those closest to him, as well as to the police, with which he engages in a sort of psychological cat-and-mouse chain of events. However, his suffering does not seem to be remorse caused by the consciousness of having sinned or done a moral wrong, but from the fear of his deed being discovered and his plan failing:

I, also, wished to benefit my kind, for hundreds, thousands of sensible deeds would amply have made up for this mad freak, or rather blunder, for my original purpose was not so mad as one may think; (...). I only wanted to make myself an independent position, to assure my entrance into life, to find the means, for then success would have been certain. But I have failed, and am a villain! Had I but carried my point, the victor's wreath would have been mine; whilst now I'm only good for the dogs!' (*Crime and Punishment* 410)

Freddie speaks of the feeling of power gripping him after his crime, originating in the awareness that no one knows the fact of him being a murderer, he has transgressed moral boundaries and defied the Law without yet having to suffer any consequences:

The feeling of power, for instance, how can I communicate that? It sprang not from what I had done, but from the fact that I had done it and no one knew. It was the secret, the secret itself, that was what set me above the dull-eyed ones among whom I moved as the long day died (...) (*The Book of Evidence* 147).

Freddie identifies a similar feeling to Raskolnikov's as to the nature of his shame, it is the same as the one he has in a recurring dream. In the dream he is questioned by the police about a crime, his relation to which he is uncertain of:

What is peculiarly awful in all this is not the prospect of being dragged before the courts and put in jail for a crime I am not even sure I have committed, but the simple, terrible fact of having been found out. This is what makes me sweat, what fills my mouth with ashes and my heart with shame. (*The Book of Evidence* 106)

In both novels, the murderer kills for material gain and is outwardly indifferent to the sufferings of his victim. Even after having confessed the murder, while being

imprisoned in Siberia and contemplating his act, Raskolnikov is still at a point where he claims to feel no remorse. He sees no difference between himself and a soldier at war, but adheres to the right of both of them to kill. Thus he remains convinced of the righteousness of his own philosophy,:

'I cannot conceive in how far it is more glorious to shell some besieged town, than to destroy by the blows of an axe! (...) Never have I felt the truth more strongly than now, and never have I so slightly realised the nature of my crime! Never have I felt more capable, more convinced than now!' (*Crime and Punishment* 410)

Raskolnikov's feelings of shame are only connected to Sonia, who, because of having sacrificed herself to prostitution for her family, is the only person who awakens in him a sense of humility. Resembling Freddie, Raskolnikov tries, but fails, to find a particular cause in his life, a particular moment, that has put him in the situation in which he now finds himself. It is chance, an accidental mistake, that is the cause of his misfortune:

He was ashamed before Sonia; he felt he had acted contemptibly towards her. Thus his shame arose not from his hair and chains: his pride was bitterly wounded - in fact, he was ill from wounded pride. How happy he would have been to reproach himself; then he could have endured everything - even the shame and dishonour. But, although he severely examined himself, he failed to find any specially dreadful cause in his past life, except a silly *error*, which might have happened to any man. (*Crime and Punishment* 428)

Also, like Freddie, Raskolnikov is oppressed by the lack of "ordinary" reactions within himself, the only regret he is tormented by is the sense of having made an unnecessary but essential mistake, and he wishes for the feelings of remorse that he seems to feel would give him a sensation of fullness and purpose:

had destiny only given him the faculty of repentance - the burning regret which crushes the heart and drives away sleep - repentance, whose torments drive to the noose or river - oh, he would have rejoiced. Sorrow, tears, that would be life. But he did not repent of his deeds. (...) 'How,' thought he, 'were my thoughts more stupid than other thoughts or ideas which have existed since the world was made? It is only necessary to look upon the deed from a broad view, without

prejudice, and free from all influences of the day' (ibid.)

In his opinion, it is the morality he is being judged from that has brought Raskolnikov to where he is. This broad moral perspective, free from all influences of the day, is also what Freddie feels is lacking in the judicial system of his day. As Joseph McMinn expresses it:

The law's understanding of motive never comes near the final imaginative understanding of his own animalism. The legal system and process of inquisition are a great source of entertainment to Freddie, because they will only state the obvious, and do so in a language that could never describe the ghastly irrational personality of most human behaviour (112)

Contrary to Freddie, Raskolnikov sees himself as a "benefactor of humanity". His deed was always meant to be for the ultimate good of society. With the money he would acquire from the robbery, he would give himself a starting point that would enable him to serve his fellow man in a way previously impossible. While explaining his act to his sister Dounia, he promises to "strive to the end for courage and what's good" (411). His only accusation towards himself is that he has not known how to "shape his steps" (429), and has thereby failed at his own purpose.

Raskolnikov's mental change happens suddenly over the novel's last four pages. He notices the other convicts' regard and affection towards Sonia, who has followed him to Siberia and who faithfully assists him and his fellow prisoners with small, practical favours. During an illness that causes him to fall into delirium, Raskolnikov has a dream of a great plague that spreads over the world:

Parasites of a new character, microscopical beings fixed their home in the human body. (...) these animaculae were breathing creatures, endowed with intellect and will. Persons affected became immediately mad. (...) They were incapable of understanding one another, because each believed himself the sole possessor of truth. (...) They could not agree upon any point, knew not what to consider evil, what good, and they fell upon one another in anger and killed, they

formed great armies, but, once in motion, they tore each other to pieces. (*Crime and Punishment* 431).

This apocalyptic, highly symbolic dream, seems to illustrate the prospects of a world populated by people of Raskolnikov's kind, and the catastrophic consequences following this prospect. A world populated by people "believing themselves the sole possessor[s] of truth", devoid of any common morality in "knowing not what to consider evil, what good", will, in Dostojevskij's view, lead to violence, and violence can only lead to destruction. In spite of this dream lingering strongly in Raskolnikov's recollection, no final admittance of moral guilt is clearly stated. The novel ends with his possible resurrection, like a Lazarus, through Sonia's love, and also, through her, the turn towards Christianity:

Under his pillow lay the New Testament. He took it up mechanically. The book belonged to Sonia; it was that same from which she had read to him of the raising of Lazarus. (...) He himself asked for it during his illness, and she silently laid the book by his side. It had remained unopened. He did not open it now, but one thought burned within him: Her faith, her feelings, may not mine become like them? (*Crime and Punishment* 434)

The novel as such is open when it comes to the protagonist's realization of moral guilt, as stated by Ashimbeava and Biron:

Raskolnikov's calculated crime is not only an assertion of his own individuality; his concern for the poor and destitute reveals his desire to precipitate an era of harmony. According to Dostoevsky, however, forced good, and especially good brought about 'by bloodshed', turns into terrible evil, bringing suffering and death. Dostoevsky's characters are simultaneously guilty and not guilty - their questions always remain open. (N. Ashimbeava, V. Biron: 43)

However, Dostojevskij's apocalyptic vision shows his attitude towards the means he earlier had seen as the only ones possible: the use of revolutionary violence as the necessary tool to achieve the greater good for society. His views on the loss of a common morality and a society populated by people "believing themselves the sole

possessors of truth", may also be seen as his judgement of the Nietzschean overman, who can only believe in and act out from his own private values, without considering the "truth" of his or her neighbour.

Freddie's first tale ends with resurrection of another kind, the commencement of which will continue to be a theme for the next two parts of the trilogy. It is the resurrection of the victim, the dead Josie Bell, and the admittance of guilt Freddie makes is of a failure of imagination. It is not a crime for which he expects to be forgiven:

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. What I told the policeman is true - I killed her because I could kill her, and I could kill her because for me she was not alive. (*The Book of Evidence* 183)

On a realistic level, the object Freddie has set for himself may seem less than sufficient to the reader, as Brendan MacNamee expresses it: "(...) the idea that one could atone for a murder by an act of imagination is questionable, to say the least" (reference). Freddie's world, however, has never been commensurable with the world of the people around him; "What I said was never exactly what I felt, what I felt was never what it seemed I should feel" (*The Book of Evidence* 106), and as a consequence the punishment he gives himself must be of another kind. It is a private atonement made for a different kind of guilt, while serving the time forced on him by an unsuited authority.

Chapter 3:

Sustained analysis of Banville's trilogy

'Our Lady of the Enigmas': Freddie's Engagement with the Other

"Company, that was what we wanted, the brute warmth of the presence of others to tell us we were alive after all, despite appearances." (*Ghosts* 224)

As previously described, the important characteristics Freddie Montgomery shares both with Humbert Humbert as well as A., the Seducer in Kierkegaard's *Either/Or I*, are especially apparent in the way each character regards the other in the novels. It is largely as theatrical requisites and setpieces that other people are useful to Freddie, Humbert and A., necessities in order to enable the protagonists to paint their desired images for recollection, but unheeded and uninteresting as complicated human beings. This is especially the case for the women in the different novels. Throughout the trilogy, the protagonist in Banville's *Frames* reflects on the insurmountable distance he experiences between himself and the people in his immediate surroundings. It is a distance that extends itself to humanity as the protagonist experiences it; however, it is most closely portrayed in Freddie/M./Morrow's relation to his female other, his wife, mother or lover. Nabokov's and Banville's aestheticizing of woman tends to fall in under the romantic novelistic tradition belonging to Dostojevskij's and Kierkegaard's age, its view of woman captured in a quote from the Seducer's diary:

She was an enigma that enigmatically possessed its own solution, a secret, and what are all the secrets of the diplomats compared with this, a riddle, and what in all the world is as beautiful as the word that solves it? (...) Just as the soul's wealth is a riddle as long as the cord of the tongue is not loosened and thereby the riddle is solved, so also a young girl is a riddle. (*EO I* 330)

As we have seen, Judge Wilhelm's words about Johannes could be applied to a characterisation of Freddie Montgomery: "For him, individuals were merely for stimulation; he discarded them as trees shake off their leaves - he was rejuvenated, the foliage withered" (*EO I* 308). Natural surroundings and surrounding individuals serve the same purpose for the protagonists, as stimulation for their imagination. It is, however, difficult for all of them to engage fully with the world around them; without the lens of their imagination, without the rearrangement into the aesthetic, the world is inaccessible to them. As expressed in Judge Wilhelm's words: "He did not belong to the world of actuality, and yet he had very much to do with it. He continually ran lightly over it, but even when he most abandoned himself to it, he was beyond it." (*EO I* 306). This kind of superficial engagement with actuality causes unfortunate consequences for the protagonist as well as, in some cases, the people he engages with.

In the portrayal of Freddie Montgomery, Banville takes the question of the difficulties of relating to the other to a new level. Freddie/M./Morrow professes to a continual sense of living in a parallel world, perceiving and reacting to his surroundings in quite different ways from other people. This is a state experienced since childhood, with the classic Shakespearean cliché of being an actor on life's stage. This always entails a different reality for Freddie. In *Ghosts*, M. refers to Diderot as he describes his own disconnectedness to the rest of the world; his suspicion that he has always belonged elsewhere:

What have I ever been but an actor, even if a bad one, too much involved in my role, not detached enough, not sufficiently cold. (...) I stumble among my fellow players, stammering out my implausible lines and corpsing at all the big moments. This is why I have never learned to

live properly among others. People find me strange. Well, I find myself strange. I am not convincing, somehow, even to myself. (*Ghosts* 366)

Feeling that he has been 'too much involved in his role' as a human being in delving too far into the questions of the purpose of his existence, Freddie speaks of his own sensitivity towards 'the vastness of the world' (*Athena* 475) and the complete gap he experiences between him and his 'fellow players' who do not perceive "the strangeness (...) of being anywhere" (*Ghosts* 375) as he does: "I watched them, wide-eyed, wondering at their calm assurance in the face of a baffling and preposterous world" (*The Book of Evidence* 16). Freddie is the embodiment of the postmodern consciousness and finds himself bereft of the natural assurance other people seem to exhibit: "They took the broad view, as if they did not realise that everything is infinitely divisible. (...) Oh, they knew no bounds" (*The Book of Evidence* 17). Freddie not only has difficulties with understanding other people and their different situations and points of view, he simply does not see them, they are spectres to him, an "annoying fog obscuring the (...) world" (*Ghosts* 265), cardboard figures that occupy space.

In *The Book of Evidence*, Freddie's relations with other people, with women in particular, are characterised by complete breakdown as he first leaves his wife Daphne behind along with his son in the captivity of criminals, and later commits the murder of Josie Bell. Freddie himself sets out for his return to Ireland, and one cannot be sure whether he actually intends to return to the island with any ransom money to free his family. On the train out of Madrid he has a sort of presentiment of later events, and it would also seem that he is simply leaving his problems, and thereby his wife and child, behind:

At that instant it came to me that I was on my way to do something very bad, something really appalling, something for which there would be no forgiveness. It was not a premonition, that is too tentative a word. I knew. (...) I was shocked at myself (...) but as well as shock there was a sort of antic glee, it surged in my throat and made me choke. (...) I knew very well, of course, that I was running away. (*The Book of Evidence* 23)

Even in relation to his wife, Freddie has felt like an actor, playing the part of husband in the staging of marriage, something he realises while talking to Daphne on the phone while in prison: "Amazing how we had fallen straight away into the old routine, the deadpan patter that used to seem so sophisticated, so worldly, in the days when we had a world in which to perform it (*Ghosts* 333)". Freddie has not really known his wife as 'the world understands by that word': "will it seem strange, cold perhaps even inhuman, if I say that I was only interested in what she was on the surface?" (*BoE* 72). However, he does enjoy making mental images of her, as the goddess in a mythic setting fitting her name: "my lady of the laurels, reclining in a sun-dazed glade, (...) some minor god (...) playing his heart out for her" (*BoE* 8), or as an immigrant adventuress "out of the last century, (...) arrived in New York the previous winter" (*BoE* 56). Another aspect of Daphne is that she is described as Freddie's proper mate, possessing a 'moral laziness' (*BoE* 9), and Freddie ponders if he subconsciously chose her because she would be the one person able to pardon Freddie's later actions: "She was not nice, she was not good. She suited me." (*BoE* 8) Following the journey back to Ireland, Daphne and the child are rarely mentioned in Freddie's confessional. Daphne remains within her frame, a well-suited companion on the world's stage, but no more vital to Freddie in his 'helpless flapping' than any other character he encounters along the way.

His inability to perceive the other is eventually the reason why Freddie is able

to commit the murder of Josie Bell without any hesitation, he is incapable of seeing her humanity and thereby the inviolability of her life, until the very last moments before the first strike. In the scenes leading up to the murder Josie is continually referred to condescendingly as 'the maid', she has mousy eyes and bad skin, she 'scrabbles' at the window like a captured animal, and Freddie's superiority over her seems unquestioned by himself. The girl is but a random obstacle getting in the way, the prominent atmosphere is Freddie's dismay, embarrassment and mortification at having been placed by circumstances in this situation: "I was outraged. How dare the world strew these obstacles in my path." (*BoE* 95). At one point Freddie revealingly describes himself as seeing through Josie: "She had the most extraordinary pale, violet eyes, they seemed transparent, when I looked into them I felt I was seeing clear through her head" (*BoE* 96). It is only at the moment when Freddie is about to kill Josie that he realises the fact of her existence: "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" (*BoE* 97). It is this moment that becomes the basis for Freddie's credo for the next two novels, his next quest for essence and subsequent attempt to imagine women into life as he has not been able to imagine neither Daphne or Josie.

In *Ghosts*, after the years in prison that were the official world's superficial punishment, the protagonist moves on to trying to serve the sentence of imagination that he has meted out to himself under the name of M. Bunter, M's dark other, who is for the time being kept under control: "I have a gratifying sense of myself as a sentinel, a guardian, a protector against that prowler (...) whom I imagine stalking back and forth out there in the dark" (*Ghosts* 219). M. is determined not to let history repeat itself: "If he is here it is the girl he is after. He shall not have her, I will see to

that" (220). The group of people which the plot revolves around, who are stranded on the island where M. has settled with Professor Kreutznaer and his assistant Licht, eventually all seem to be figures in a painting by Vaublin, the painter whose work M. and Professor Kreutznaer are there to examine. The characters in the group thus all seem to have been conjured into life by M., initially ghosts, now having their own stories, and as such they constitute a part in the process of M.'s feat of imagination. They are not only characters invented by the author, but characters invented by the main character, another contribution of Banville's to the reader's state of uncertainty as regards space and plot. This state of affairs is hinted at already on the first page: "Here they are. There are seven of them. Or better say, half a dozen or so, that gives more leeway" (...) Who speaks? I do. Little god" (*Ghosts* 191).

Also on the island is the character of Mrs Vanden, a widow with whom M. establishes a relationship of some significance prior to the arrival of the shipwrecked. Mrs Vanden, however, is not a substitute for Josie Bell, and as for the effort of imagining that M. professes to have committed himself to, the relationship with Mrs Vanden cannot be seen to constitute any progression in that respect. Mrs Vanden is, like the other female characters in Freddie's life have been, an 'other-for-me', not an aim in herself. M. ridicules the idea of any filial/maternal aspects of this relationship; however, M. is a narrator one does not automatically trust. The relation does undeniably seem to fulfil such purposes with Freddie feeling "protected and shielded" in Mrs Vanden's presence, and him always having wanted someone "strong and mute and unknowable behind whose skirts I could hide" (*Ghosts* 260). M. is conscious of the occasional cracks in his own account: "Sometimes my pen goes prattling along all by itself and the strangest things come out, things I did not know I was aware of, or of

which I would prefer not to be made aware" (ibid).

The rather imbalanced nature of his connection to Mrs Vanden is clear in M's description of contentment in being "adrift in Mrs Vanden's company (...), incurious as to the nature of her inner life, her thoughts, her opinions, if she had any" (*Ghosts* 261). M. reflects on his egotism in this respect, but as before reflection does not lead to mental change or development. M's thoughts on his motives for seeking the company of Mrs Vanden echo the ones on his relationship to his wife, which was characterised by a "reticence, a tactfulness, which from the first we had silently agreed to preserve" (*BoE* 10). M. describes his relation to Mrs Vanden as "*reticent, respectful, calm*" (*Ghosts* 261), and as such it seems to be a continuation of his marriage to Daphne, which offers no challenge or change but serves as the source of absence the character of Freddie/M. is in need of: Woman as a void, woman as an outlet: "a being made up of stillnesses (...), a pale pool in a shaded glade in which I might bathe my poor throbbing brow" (ibid).

As MacNamee has pointed out, each of the characters in the group who arrived at the island seem to embody certain traits of M.'s own character, as in the case of Sophie, the photographer, who can only perceive reality through art: "Things for her were not real any longer until they had been filtered through a lens" (*The Book of Evidence* 56). In the course of the novel, M. makes an important breakthrough in his purpose of imagination. During a conversation with Flora, one of the female characters of the group who is seemingly the incarnation of Josie Bell, M. is suddenly able to perceive the girl with a totality never before experienced:

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. No, not amazing. That is the point. She was simply there, an incarnation of herself, no longer a nexus of adjectives but pure and present noun. (...) No longer Our Lady of the Enigmas, but a girl, just a girl. (*Ghosts* 321)

For the first time M. can refrain from re-creating the person in front of him into an ideal image fitting his own purposes. He sees Flora no longer as the enigmatic image of woman, but as a unique individual, 'an incarnation of herself', a whole instead of a fragmented duplicity. The reality that Flora emits also changes M.'s sense of the reality of the world around him, and his disconnectedness is for a time postponed, he senses a possible reconnection to the world and humanity:

As I sat with my mouth open and listened to her I felt everyone and everything shiver and shift, falling into vividest forms, detaching themselves from me and my conception of them and changing themselves instead into what they were, no longer mystery, no longer a part of my imagining. And I, was I there amongst them, at last? (ibid.)

At this point M. is closer than he has ever been to independence from imagination as a necessary lens to perceive the world. As usual, the paragraph ends with a question mark, but the sense of having reached an important culmination is there. In spite of Freddie's lack of belief in 'decisive moments', this particular scene in *Ghosts* is where Freddie seems to make the largest progress in his attempt to relate to other people. In this respect, the moment with Flora in the kitchen can be said to constitute a climax if not a turning point in the novel as well as in the trilogy.

In *Athena*, Morrow seems to, for the first time, go out of his way to physically help another human being. Although the act is initially involuntary, in bringing his aunt Corky, who is suffering from an obscure ailment, from the old people's home to his own house, he thereby commits himself to something that will impose on his privacy and limit his personal freedom:

Sticking with her through all those long, last weeks of her dying was, I see now, the one unalloyed good deed I could point to in my life, the thing I thought might go some way towards balancing my account in the recording angel's big black book. (*Athena* 418)

Aunt Corky is the most realistically portrayed of all the female characters in the trilogy, she is not elusive or enigmatic, but childlike and uncomplicated in a way that allows Morrow for the first time to try out a responsible side: "Aunt Corky might have been a daughter whose cries in the night had summoned me to her bedside, so softly solicitous was my manner" (*Athena* 494). She is "given to franknesses" (418), Morrow's descriptions of her physicality border on the grotesque; however, she "carrie[s] off her ugliness with a grand hauteur" (432). As a continuation of a familiar theme, aunt Corky also lies "with such simplicity and sincere conviction that really it was not lying at all but a sort of continuing reinvention of the self" (433). His aunt is the one person Morrow is able to relate to in a way characterised by basic human affection unrelated to physical beauty: "I was not unfond of her" (434).

Morrow ascribes this sudden commitment and involvement in another person's life to his 'infatuation' with A., however, the newfound sense of responsibility does not run deep: Morrow does not deceive himself in thinking the act to be complete in its altruism. It is still the image of Morrow in his new role that is of interest, him seeing himself at his aunt's bedside, impersonating the comforter:

I squeezed her hand, I smiled at her soothingly and nodded, letting my eyelids gravely fall and pursing up my lips, in a travesty of sympathy, full of self-regard. Yes, self-regard, for as usual it was I who was the real object of all this attentiveness, the new-made, sticky-winged I who had stepped forth from the cocoon that A's kiss had cracked. (*Athena* 495)

When, following his aunt's death, Morrow finds out that her dramatic life story was all invented, "What an actress! Such dedication!" (604), it only fits in with the revelation

of Morrow's work with authenticating Morden's pictures which was nothing but a sham, a part of an elaborate game played between the criminal milieu he again had involved himself with, and the police. As all the paintings he has been working with but one, prove to be copies, his affair with A similarly has been nothing but a deliberate part of the plot. As readers we have thereby returned to our original point of departure. In the words of Joseph McMinn: "Morrow eventually realises that he never understood anything or anyone and, like that narrator, he addresses his memoir to a mythical woman who robbed him of old certainties" (McMinn 1999, 131).

As the last book in the trilogy, one would perhaps expect *Athena* to contain the culmination of Freddie's efforts in imagining women into life, and indeed the character of A. seems wholly imagined by Morrow to the extent that the reader is not certain of her ever having existed outside the protagonist's mind. Certain clues to this effect are strewn throughout the novel, as in the case of Morrow pointing to his solitary existence, delving deep into art studies, a situation well-suited for a lapse into illusion, the imagining of sirens: "It's a wonder I did not go off my head in that first period of solitude and unremitting concentration (perhaps I did?)" (*Athena* 481). The protagonist is always aware of the illusoriness of reality, he is nonetheless content with this particular phantom that inhabits his world: "Please, do not deprive me of my delusions, they are all I have." (*Athena* 490) A.'s sudden appearances and disappearances also contribute to the impression of her evaporish character; "You appear out of silence. That is how I think of it, as if the silence in the room had somehow materialised you and given you form" (*Athena* 485); "(...) when I looked again she was gone" (*Athena* 488). A. is the female character that seems to have made the profoundest impression on the protagonist in the course of the trilogy. *Athena* is

pervaded by Morrow's expressions of mourning the loss of her, and yet she is by far the most one-dimensional character of them all. Her fishnet stockings and high heels give the impression of a figure taken out of a *noir* comic book, the classic 'male fantasy'. That A. rarely ever speaks directly adds to the impression, though Morrow often mentions her talking, he only remembers 'the look of things'. All of this adds to A's significance as the female materialisation of Morrow's most prominent guiding star: imagination.

Echoing Kierkegaard's Seducer Morrow admits the need for actuality inspiring imagination with subsequent reflection as the ultimate goal: "(...) A. herself was almost incidental to these swoony ruminations, which at their most concentrated became entirely self-sustaining. After all, what did I know of her?" (489). Morrow's ruminations are the real content of *Athena*, with A's brief performance on the stage Morrow is provided with the necessary inspiration. The materialisation of A. was Morrow's reflection, his proper mate, a woman with as much inclination towards the low-life as himself, as flickering and ephemeral as his own self, as he briefly realises: "(...) that is how it was, at the start: as if in an empty house, at darkest midnight, I had stopped shocked before a gleaming apparition only to discover it was my own reflection springing up out of a shadowy, life-sized mirror" (489). As a final irony and another of a numerous analogies to the continuous tension between art and life, A's origin of existence eventually proves to be in the one painting of the collection Morrow was 'authenticating' that was not a copy: *The Birth of Athena*.

If A. was the woman Morrow first managed to imagine into life, this narcissist feat of imagination that was his goal all along has left him no more in touch with

humanity than before, except for a sort of brotherhood he professes to feel with other solitaires in their intense loneliness: "Children of the dark, we make diurnal night for ourselves in the bare back rooms of pubs, in the echoing gloom of public libraries and picture galleries" (611). Morrow has now reached "another kind of isolation, one I have not experienced before"(ibid.). In the last novel of the trilogy the protagonist finds himself where he was at the beginning, and Banville as such characteristically creates his own version of traditional quest narratives. Morrow seems to face an existence that was already anticipated in *Ghosts*: "Eternal recurrence! That is what I realised that night, (...) there was to be no end of it, for me; my term was just beginning"(363).

Morrow's waking up from his own created illusion is expressed in his description of one of the few places left for comfort, the solitaires' "happiest home", the picture house. Morrow's thoughts on what happens in the cinema can be seen as a summary of the evanescence of his whole experience as well as the novel *Athena*:

it is ourselves reflected that we behold, the mad dream of ourselves, of what we might have been as well as what we have become, the familiar story that has gone strange, the plot that at first seemed so promising and now has fascinatingly unravelled. Out of these images we manufacture selves wholly improbable that yet sustain us for an hour or two, then we stumble out blinking into the light and are again what we always were, and weep inwardly for all that we never had yet feel convinced we have lost. (*Athena* 612)

Requiring absence: Freddie's quest for the real

Largely unsuccessful in his attempt to relate to the others sharing his space, in the face of an 'objectless liberty', and in spite of his belief in the seamless drift of things, Freddie is in need of that which will give him a sense of essence or fullness. The contradiction within Banville's fiction is apparent in his protagonists' claims of

there being no truth or purpose inherent in this world, as apparent in M.'s description of himself: "He is, or at least has been, let us say, a man of some learning, trained to reason and compute, who in the face of a manifestly chaotic world has lost his faith in the possibility of order. He drifts. He has no moral base." (*Ghosts* 265). These are claims that exist beside the author's Wittgensteinian view of language as not being able to encompass - the whole truth. In short, there must be something behind appearances that is beyond expression. Language is contingent and as human beings we cannot grasp what is behind the surfaces of this world because we are limited by our own selves and our individual outlook, which arranges an order to make existence bearable. As expressed by M. in *Ghosts*: "there is no getting away from the passionate attachment to self, that I-beam set down in the dead centre of the world and holding the whole rickety edifice in place" (213). As discussed in the previous chapter, Freddie is aware of the limitations to human enquiry, but is simultaneously not able to stop searching for a possible truth. Banville has M. trying to simplify himself in order to reach a new understanding: "I was determined to create myself into(...) a monomorph: a monad. And then to start again, empty. That way, I felt, I might come to understand things, in however rudimentary a fashion" (*ibid.*). Having left the path of science, Freddie continues to search for essence within art, and at one point, in the presence of other human beings.

As his protagonists are unable to stop their quest for meaning, Banville's attempt is always to express what cannot be expressed. In the words of MacNamee: "What he seeks is the silence that lets the world stand in its own mystery: the thing itself, and not words about the thing; analogues, not depictions" (MacNamee 6). John Banville writes about the essence, the innermost secret of things, by writing about it

indirectly. His fiction remains enigmatic in its postmodern traits, however, an attempt at interpretation on the reader's part will likewise nevertheless be unavoidable:

it may be said that the ultimate aim of Banville's fiction is to elude interpretation. In this endeavour it can only ever be partially successful, (...) the mystery of significance forever calls to the explication of meaning, only to find the significance drained away in the journey (MacNamee 6).

The central theme of Banville's fiction is this problem of knowing that one cannot reach full understanding, but simultaneously not being able to stop trying. Freddie is not able to live within the pre-Socratic suspension that MacNamee prescribes. His awareness of there being something real and complete that he is not able to reach torments him. He tries to reach this reality by immersing himself in art, but fails. In the words of Rüdiger Imhof: "Freddie's redemption lies in an acknowledgement of the disjunction that lies between the artistic and the commonplace world and the impossibility of ever closing the gap" (235).

MacNamee brings the subject of mysticism to the discussion by delving into the question of "how art can be an aesthetic bridge between the apparently disparate phenomena of mysticism and postmodernism"(19). He points to the possibility that through the centuries opportunities have been given to certain individuals to reach direct insight into the secrets of the world. People from different world religions as well as people without religious views, have had experiences that differ in nature according to belief, but that are characterised by unity, as experiences that presents the world through a different lens than in ordinary experience. In a wide sense, mystical experience can be described as "a (purportedly) super-sense perceptual or sub-sense perceptual experience granting acquaintance of realities or states of affairs that are of a kind not accessible by way of sense perception, somatosensory modalities, or

standard introspection." (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2004). Central to mystical experience, however, is that it cannot be sought or found, but is given, the vision is involuntary. As such this kind of direct insight into the nature of reality cannot be set up as a lasting solution to Freddie's problem of "intellect struggling for definition and knowledge [and] imagination yearning for wholeness of being" (McMinn 16).

Freddie senses that the wholeness of being that he seeks is to be found in what may be called absence, something he professes to when referring to the story of the satyr Silenus, also referred to by Nietzsche in *The Birth of Tragedy*, who revealed to king Midas "the best and most desirable of all things for man" (BT:3 [Sophocles, Oedipus at Colonus, 1224ff]):

Not to be. Not to be at all. Deep down, deep beyond dreaming, have I ever desired anything other than consummation? Sometimes I think that satyr, what's-his-name, was right: better not to have been born, and once born to have done with the whole business as quick as you can.
(*Ghosts* 352)

According to Nietzsche, a central aspect of the Dionysiac cultural influence is the dissolution of the self, the *principium individuationis* that Apollo represents.

Nietzsche's idea is that the pleasure one gets from watching tragedy unfold, the inevitable self-destruction that it illustrates, is from knowing that this is ultimately the fate of all human beings. In our self-destruction we return to the state that we come from. The knowledge acquired through science will inevitably prove futile, and the art of tragedy is to give simultaneous pleasure and dread in reminding us of the coming dissolution of our identity. As expressed by Dabney Townsend: "Science and logic, reason, and knowledge are all the enemies of art because they limit and control the urgent Dionysian need for losing self-awareness by becoming a single awareness of

the world" (Townsend 217). In *Ghosts*, M. speaks of the sensation of this fading of self: "I thought sometimes at moments such as this that I might simply drift away and become a part of all that out there, drift and dissolve, be a shimmer of light slowly fading into nothing." (*Ghosts* 223)

Athena is the novel in which the protagonist most thoroughly absorbs himself in art. Morrow's assignment to authenticate a group of paintings is a continued musing of Banville's on the theme of reality and authenticity. While examining the paintings, Morrow experiences something close to the 'single awareness of the world' that he has been in search for:

"In the first days in that secret room I was happier than I can remember ever having been before, astray in the familiar otherwhere of art. Astray, yes, and yet somehow at the same time more keenly aware, of things and of myself, than in any other of the periods of my life (...)." (*Athena* 483)

This increased awareness and simultaneous loss of self is to be found in Morrow's imagination, spurred by the ancient images on canvas that he is working with and the essence they entail. What affects Morrow the most strongly in a work of art is the quality of its persuasive silence: "(...) not colour or form or the sense of movement they suggest[...] but the way each one suddenly amplifie[s] the quiet." (*Athena* 481). The sensation that Morden's pictures awake in Morrow echoes the effect the Woman with Gloves has on Freddie in *The Book of Evidence*, what he perceives as her 'mute insistence': "This silence is more than the absence of sound, it is an active force, expressive and coercive"(ibid.).

Throughout the trilogy the protagonist experiences moments of dissolution of self. However, as Nietzsche pointed to, such experience is not purely pleasurable, and

especially in *Ghosts* there are moments where M.'s loss of self-awareness is also characterised by fear:

There came over me that sense of dislocation I experience with increasing frequency these days, and which frightens me. It is as if mind and body had pulled loose from each other, or as if the absolute, essential *I* had shrunk to the size of a dot, leaving the rest of me hanging in enormous suspension, massive and yet weightless, like a sawn tree before its topples. (*Ghosts* 347)

M. is constantly aware that though his 'sense of dislocation' only lasts for an instant, the illusion of the world's coherence may at any time be lost, despite the appearance that everything is in its place: "as though that fissure had not opened up in the deceptively smooth surface of things. But I know that look of innocence the world puts on; I know it for what it is" (ibid). Morrow, in his great sensitivity, having always been a little afraid of the sky, reveals his own fragility in echoing Blaise Pascal's words on the eternal silence of the infinite spaces that terrified him:

A cloud covered the sun and a rippling shadow raced across the field towards me and all at once I was frightened, I don't know why, exactly; it was just the look of things, I think, the vastness of the world, that depthless sky and the cloud-shadow running towards me, intangible, unavoidable, like fate itself. (*Athena* 475)

The sensitive, artistic minds of Banville's protagonists make them prone to sudden sufferings caused by occurrences and details unheeded by others, however, they are also affected by their surroundings in ways that occasionally lead to a small sense of optimism.

The atmosphere in *Ghosts* is contemplative and somewhat different from the sense of brutishness and loss of *The Book of Evidence* and *Athena*. The experience with Flora turns M's view on existence away from his imaginative re-creation of it to its essential reality, and enables him to see the-world-as-it-is, unobscured by his own ideals. In addition to this important event, M. has moments when he senses some

purpose to his existence, that his presence actually is necessary in order to give meaning to what is there surrounding him:

wherever I went, even when I walked into an empty room, I had an uncanny sense of things having fallen silent at my approach. I know, of course, that this was all foolishness, that the place did not care a damn about me, really, that I could have vanished into the air with a *ping!* and everything would have gone on in its own sweet way as if nothing had happened. Yet I could not rid myself of the feeling that somehow I was - how shall I put it? - required. (*Ghosts* 212)

This sense of being required is one of the few instances in which the protagonists are aware of a force 'holding things together' that is not characterised by ill will, as in *Athena* when Morrow has a sense of "some vast presence, vigilant and malign"(564), or when M., never at ease in the open, expects "some malignity of earth or air to strike me down, or worse, send me up dizzily into the sky" (*Ghosts* 349). As an opposite to this sense of foreboding, M. at certain times feels that he himself as an individual is what will repeal that seamless drift of things that so often terrifies him:

Nothing happens, nothing will happen, yet everything is poised, waiting, a chair in the corner crouching with its arms braced, the coiled fronds of a fern, that copper pot with the streaming sunspot on its rim. This is what holds it all together and yet apart, this sense of expectancy (...) I am the pretext of things (...) Without me there would be no moment, no separable event, only the brute, blind drift of things, That seems true; important, too. (*Ghosts* 225)

The protagonist's sense of there being an underlying system behind the surface of things, held together by an unknown and unknowable force, stands strongly opposed to the purposelessness and belief in chance that otherwise is the prominent atmosphere of the trilogy. Mocking the idea of a future entailing something other than solitary and aimless drift, M. also admits to the awareness of a possibility of there being a *raison d'etre* also for him:

Was it that in a way I was already dead, or was I waiting for some new access of life and hope?

Life! Hope! And yet it must have been something like that that kept me going. Unfinished business, a debt not paid - yes, that too, of course, of course, we all know about that. But beyond even that there was something more, I did not know what. I felt that whatever it was - is! - it must be simple but so immense I cannot see it, as immense as air: that secret everyone is in on, except me. (*Ghosts* 363)

As a part of the author's purpose, the complexity of his protagonists in their constant contradictions of their own statements, belies most attempts on the part of the reader to draw conclusions from the plot as it is developed throughout the Trilogy. Banville's fiction appears to question the realistic novel's claim to represent a fixed and given reality, and instead puts forward art as the way to capture small parts of the great whole, which can only be experienced in instants. The protagonist lives with the tension between the moments where he experiences existence as hollowness and purposelessness, and the moments where he senses some meaning to his place in the world, of being required to fulfil a larger but unknown purpose. Through his protagonists, Banville expresses an extra-linguistic yearning for something that, in lack of a possibly more appropriate, secular word, may be called the sacred.

Conclusion

John Banville spoke in April, 2007 at a seminar at the London Book Fair (Monsen 2007), "All About Evil", of the nature of evil in modern fiction. According to the author, evil has no place in art or literature, and the people who commit evil deeds are usually "ordinary people with a problem" that they need to get rid of. Banville claimed the idea of "pure evil" among secular thinkers to be "a hangover from Christianity". Banville spoke of the "post-religious fantasy of evil", and seemed to contrast his own idea of the majority of humanity being 'monsters of selfishness' by seeing a sort of idealist motivation behind most acts of cruelty: "Most evil done in the world is done by people who think they are doing good, the right thing". Recognizable from his fiction, Banville returned to the statement that "the idea of evil presupposes agency", which he himself clearly does not believe exists, a notion shared by his protagonists in the trilogy. Banville's view seems to be, as illustrated in his fiction, that there is always some force in people's lives that eliminates agency. People as such are not evil in themselves but forced by circumstances into committing acts of evil. John Grey, who agreed with Banville, pointed to how the moral personality under certain circumstances could be "amazingly easily destroyed".

The protagonists in *Frames* are, just as Raskolnikov and Humbert Humbert, complicated characters who illustrate the mistake of using the phrase 'pure evil' in connection with people. Nor are they characters who think they are doing evil for the sake of good. In their relations to other people we see the portrayal of persons who are self-absorbed to the point of madness, and how this absorption of self is what makes them potentially dangerous to the other who shares their world. Only occasionally do

they succeed in perceiving the other and her relevance as a human being, however, the experience is temporary and repeatedly has to give way to the protagonist's only living through his imagination and what he can create with art as his provider of inspiration. It is in the rendering of the inner life of his characters that Banville, as well as Nabokov and Proust, teaches us what we should look out for.

In failing for the greater part to relate to others, Banville's protagonists are in search for what will give their lives that which can be called significance or meaning. The longing towards the silence found in art causes Freddie Montgomery to steal a painting, an act that in turn leads him to murder because he has let go of that within himself which senses such an act to be a wrongdoing. Freddie opens up for the forces within that make him capable of murder, but discovers in the course of the act that the initial motive for the theft is no longer a driving force. The essence he temporarily found in the painting is much stronger in the eyes of the maid Josie Bell in the moments before he kills her. Freddie as such is compelled to continue his search for the absence, the consummation that he has been searching for, and after having spent his time in prison, he partly succeeds in this purpose during encounters with characters possibly invented by himself at the island in *Ghosts*.

Elke D'Hoker refers to poststructuralists such as Derek Attridge who see the work of art, and thereby the novel, as "a stranger to whom one owes respect" (148). The inspiration for this idea which arises from the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas, describes reading as involving "(...) working against the mind's tendency to assimilate the other to the same, attending to that which can barely be heard, registering that which is unique about the shaping of language, thought, and feeling in

a particular work" (Levinas in D'Hoker, 148). In the course of my work of analysing Banville's trilogy, I have found a poststructuralist approach to fiction to be futile. As Richard Rorty expresses:

This idea that somehow language can be separated from authors, that literary technique is a godlike power operating independently of mortal contingencies, and in particular from the author's contingent notion of what goodness is, is the root of 'aestheticism' in the bad sense of the term, the sense in which the aesthetic is a matter of form and language rather than of content and life. (Rorty, 166)

It is my opinion that a moral effect produced in the reader is unavoidable, that the reader's response to a novel will not limit itself to an observation and possible admiration of the author's technical abilities. The mental processes fired by the reader's response will eventually lead to a moral judgement to some extent.

Jean Piaget, the developmental psychologist and theorist, developed his theory of schemata in saying that, in order to reach understanding, new input has to be assimilated into already established mental schemas, in short, to be 'placed' within the frames of one's mind that are already created. Similarly, it is my opinion that a poststructuralist approach to fiction would prove insufficient, considering the human faculties that are always searching for new understanding, and that must at least attempt to 'assimilate the other to the same' in order to reach conclusions. This is the experience of the reader as well as the protagonists in *Frames*, who are unable to stop this search for knowledge of the underlying secrets of the world, for "the thing itself". As John Banville has expressed in an interview: "They all know they're not going to find it" (The Elegant Variation, 2005). Brendan MacNamee initially speaks of the 'suspension' that could be Freddie's salvation if he himself could be satisfied to live in the world without examining it, but acknowledges the impossibility of such

satisfaction: "this unexamined state is one that can be attained to only through intense examination, the futility of which must be fully lived to be fully realised" (MacNamee 169). In such a way one might agree with Laura Izarra who sees John Banville as foreseeing the end of postmodernism. through the experience of his protagonists in *Frames* Banville acknowledges the need for examination of existence. With this acknowledgement there is an implied awareness that there is some pure and distilled essence to examine, though the attempt will prove to be futile. As the neo-humanist vein of ethical criticism has stated, it will not be sufficient to accept a lack of certainties and to let the other remain an other.

In *Ghosts* the protagonist finds in small instants the reconnection to the world that he has been looking for, in the occasions of sensing the true reality of existence: "I felt everyone and everything shiver and shift, falling into vividest forms, detaching themselves from me and my conception of them and changing themselves instead into what they were" (321). In the moments of sensing himself as a being required to give meaning to the world, the assumption would appear to be that other human beings are similarly required and therefore entailing the same essence. However, after the temporary meeting with the other in the character of Flora, in *Athena*, the protagonist finds himself once again at the start of his exploration, after having examined the ultimate possibilities of imagination in reaching essence, by conjuring the character of A. into life. With the disappearance of A. and perhaps the strength of his imaginative faculties, Morrow at the end of the trilogy has arrived where he started from and now must know the place for the first time. Bereft of his conjured companion that sprang out from the sources of art, he is again the solitary traveller. As such the plot of the trilogy echoes the view Banville seems to illustrate with his fiction, that which

compels one to go to the farthest lengths with one's questioning, only to see what was there in front of you all the while: "the brute presence of others to tell us we were alive after all, despite appearances" (*Ghosts* 224).

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