

McNamee, Brendan

Sacred chaos: form and the immediate in John Banville's Mefisto.

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Hounded by government officials demanding results, Professor Kosok, the second Faust figure of John Banville's *Mefisto*, vents his spleen: "You want certainty, order, all that? Then invent it!" (193). (1) And that, one school of thought would contend, is exactly what the human race has done. Order, argues the hermit in Paul Valéry's Faust-play, *The Solitary*, is a result of human desire, "a bargain between the one who sees and wants, and that which he sees" (qtd. in Berensmeyer 198). Queried by Rudiger Imhof as to what he meant by "chance," Banville offered this reply:

[L]et's look briefly at the notion of causation. To speak of an "event" and a "cause" of that event, is to pretend that individual things--"monads," if you like--can be isolated from everything else, can be held aloft in a pure space, as it were, and scrutinized by philosopher-scientists. However, [...] there is no such thing as an event and no such thing as a cause; there is only, as Nietzsche points out, a continuum. Causation, then, is no more and no less than what the physicists would call a thought experiment; it is, like mathematics and theology, a thing invented by men in order to explain and therefore make habitable a chaotic, hostile and impassive world. ("Q. & A." 13)

According to this view, order is a human invention necessitated by the fear of the "chaotic, hostile and impassive world." This implies a fundamental discontinuity between consciousness within and phenomena without. This view of the universe took root in the West with the victory of dialectical argument, as practiced by Socrates and Plato, over the pre-Socratic Greeks, that is, the Sophists and figures such as Pythagoras, for whom all life, human consciousness included, formed a continuum. For such people, chaos and chance, far from being sources of fear to be excluded and shunned, were expressions of the divine and indicated a connection between humanity and "the gods." Roberto Calasso, in his book *Literature and the Gods*, throws an interesting light on the idea of chaos. Following Holderlin, a nineteenth-century German lyric poet, he associates the "divine" with the "immediate," which he defines as "the thing that imposes with maximum intensity the sensation of being alive" (39). This is an important idea to remember in any discussion of Banville's novels because his characters crave just such a sensation. Their tragedy is their belief--and this is what the protagonists of Banville's science tetralogy have in common--that this sensation, which they usually envisage in terms of harmony, order, and completion, can be attained through mathematical or scientific structures. They are not wholly mistaken in this. Order, structure, what Calasso calls "the law," cannot be dispensed with. The immediate is the divine, the completion that humanity instinctively craves--"im-mediate," meaning no mediation between subject and object, between consciousness within and phenomena without--a creation of the divine through the act or experience of immediacy. But, as Calasso says, "[P]ure intensity, as a continuous experience, is 'impossible,' overwhelming. To preserve its sovereignty, the immediate must come across to us through the law" (39). This sounds paradoxical. If the immediate is being mediated to us through the law, through language, how can it be immediate? It gets even more paradoxical. Calasso continues, "Chaos generates the law, but only the law will allow us to gain access to chaos" (39-40). Chaos is what Calasso calls "the unapproachable immediate," and Heidegger, discussing the same passages from Holderlin from which Calasso draws, adds, "[C]haos is the sacred itself" (qtd. in Calasso 40).

Some clarification of the phrase "chaos generates the law" might prove helpful here. I take Calasso to mean by "the law" the human need to put form on amorphous instincts so that those instincts should have expression. Music is perhaps the clearest example of the phenomenon: Dionysian passion (chaos) rendered powerful because focused by Apollonian form (the law). It is the passion that demands (generates) the form, and the form in its turn heightens and intensifies the passion (gives us access to chaos). Echoes of the idea can be found in such apparently disparate places as postmodernism and Eastern mysticism. Patricia Waugh, arguing for Nietzsche as a forerunner to postmodernism, writes: "Nietzsche recognises our longing for immediacy. He views the aesthetic as a mode of experience which in escaping the conceptual allows us the biological delight of experiencing the ultimate impulse of the will to power as chaos coming into form: Dionysian fragmentation of energy willing itself into coherence" (21). And Lama Govinda, a Tibetan Buddhist, writes: "Those who think that form is unimportant, will miss the spirit as well, while those who cling to form lose the very spirit which they tried to preserve. Form and movement are the secret of life, and the key to immortality" (qtd. in Weber 71).

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MCNAMEE, B.
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These ideas throw an entirely new light on "chaos" and "chance," those despised concepts that humanity, ever since the victory of dialectical reasoning, has been intent on protecting itself against. But neither are the two viewpoints--chaos as the sacred versus chaos as terror--diametrically opposed. Beauty and terror are closely aligned, as Rilke, a favorite of Banville's, realized: "For Beauty is nothing but the approach of a Terror we're only just able to bear" (qtd. in Gass 66). What connects beauty and terror, I suggest, is the unknown, which generates fear because it represents a threat, and longing because it promises what Calasso called "the sensation of being alive." To return to Calasso: "Suddenly the word 'chaos' gathers exhilarating connotations. Instead of being opposed to form, its enemy, it seems to suggest a higher form, of fragrant vividness, where finally nature and artifice mix together to be separated no more, in the 'beautiful muddle of the imagination'" (41-42). The phrase "beautiful muddle of the imagination" (which Calasso borrows from Friedrich Schlegel) calls to mind a remark Banville made in a review of John Bayley's *The Uses of Division*: "[L]iterature's real successes are scored not despite, but because of basic confusions and disunities in the mind of the artist, or, to put it the opposite way, that rigorous planning, rigorously adhered to, can destroy the essential gaiety [...] of the novel, poem or play" ("A Sweet Disorder" 25). "Essential gaiety" is the necessary element of chaos in the structure of the artifact. When Gabriel begins his story with the words "Chance was in the beginning" (3), he is admitting chaos into his tale, but the tale nonetheless remains one of supreme order and symmetry. Rudiger Imhof has detailed these symmetries: the careful structure of the opening paragraph, the two equal halves forming a mirror symmetry, the recurrence of characters and roles in each of the two parts (162-68). Imhof concludes that the reason for all this order and symmetry is "simply to prove that the Gabriel involved in the events is wrong in his ideas that chance was in the beginning and in the end as well" (168). This seems a strange remark to make because it is not the Gabriel involved in the events who holds these ideas, but the Gabriel narrating the story, the same Gabriel who proclaims, "I too have my equations, my symmetries, and will insist on them" (4), thereby, through the juxtaposition of these words with the opening sentence, marrying chance and order at the outset of his account. Imhof further claims that the binary patterns of Mefisto mirror the essential make-up of the world itself, which is "largely built on the principle of duality, symmetry and palindromic patterns" (168). These conclusions are based on the latest findings in mathematics and may well be true, but even if they are, they are still only part of the story. I make these points about Imhof not so much to refute them but to point out that his explanations of these matters are being made from within the modern scientific worldview, which holds that the unknown is simply the not-yet-discovered. Mefisto is certainly suffused with the kind of underlying order that Imhof highlights, but the idea of chaos that I want to put forward is not the random contingent nature of life that Imhof (along, he would claim, with Democritus, Nietzsche, and modern mathematics) holds to be only a cover for an underlying order, but an experience that momentarily dissolves the categories of subject and object that torment consciousness with a sense of incompleteness. Calasso provides another useful clue here. The Western rational mindset normally thinks of God as a being, separate and superior to life on the earth, but, as Calasso informs us, "In the Greek language the word *theos*, 'god,' has no vocative case [...]. *Theos* has a predicative function: it designates something that happens" (5, emphasis in original).

Is chaos, then, god? The two can certainly be seen as closely related (depending, of course, on what one means by "god"). In Goethe's version of the Faust legend, God admits that "of all those spirits that deny, the joker irks me least" ("Prologue in Heaven" 117-18)--and judging from his frequent appearances in the novels, Banville has an equally soft spot for him--and Mephistopheles, questioned by Faust as to his identity, replies: "I am part of a part which part at the first was All, / Part of the Darkness that gave birth to light; / Proud Light that now would from her rank displace / Maternal night" (Faust 1.1349-52). The "Proud Light" mentioned here reflects the modern, Hellenic view of God as an omnipotent being who will not admit chaos as part of his kingdom, whereas the idea of a god that can encompass chaos corresponds to an older conception, one espoused by Pythagoras and the pre-Socratic Greeks, to whom divine truth was as much a matter of "mystic intuition" and "aesthetic delight" as of "intellectual insight" (Koestler 37).

Order and chaos, then, like light and darkness, are, as Joseph Swann puts it, "inseparable and generative the one of the other" (157-58). To go back to Calasso's elegant equation, "Chaos generates the law, but only the law allows us to gain access to chaos." Put in terms of Mefisto, it might be said that chaos generates the story, but only the story (as constructed/recalled/invented by Gabriel) allows Gabriel access to the chaos, that is, to a realization and acceptance of an unknown element (unknown because unknowable, beyond the order of time and space). This can be further clarified, perhaps, by substituting the terms language and silence for order and chaos, a particularly apt substitution in Banville's case. Banville often makes the point that, as with Beckett and Joyce before him, his novels are not primarily "about" anything, but rather the work is to be thought of as "the thing

itself." Maurice Blanchot expresses a similar concept in the following extract from his essay "The Sirens' Song." Blanchot distinguishes between "narration" and the novel proper; he calls a "narration" an "encounter with the imaginary," something that he claims the novel resists. The distinction is, I think, analogous to that between chaos (the encounter with something beyond the rational) and order (the comforts of time and comprehension). He asserts that

[W]e shall miss the point of the narration if we see it only as the exact relation of an unusual event which has actually taken place and which we try to report. Narration is not the account of an event but the event itself, its imminence, the site where it will occur--it is a happening about to happen whose magnetic power may enable the narration to happen.

[...] Narration is movement towards a point which is not only unknown, ignored and strange but such that it seems to have no prior reality apart from this movement, yet is so compulsive that the narration's appeal depends on it to the extent that it cannot even "begin" before it has reached it, while it is only the narration and the unpredictable movement of the narration which provide the space where this point becomes real, powerful and appealing. (62)

This chimes closely with Calasso's "Chaos generates the law, but only the law will allow us to gain access to chaos." Both quotations point to a "place" that is beyond time and space but that can only be glimpsed through the phenomena of time and space--in the case of literature, the phenomena of time and space as mediated through Blanchot's idea of the "narration," which he defines in the following intensely mystical fashion: "Ever to come, ever past, ever present in a beginning so sudden that it leaves one breathless, and yet spread out like an eternal return and rebirth--[...]; such is the event the narration would describe" (65). This type of literature (what Calasso calls "absolute literature" [21]), although steeped in the material of real life, is not about real life, any more than a table is about the timber from which it is made.

Mefisto aspires to be that kind of fiction, and three dominant features of the book provide substantial evidence for the point. The first is the novel's enclosed, self-reflecting structure--two nearly identical halves that mirror each other and that, as Joseph Swann puts it, "seem to be there only in order to reflect each other" (157). The second is Gabriel's self-confessed and regularly alluded-to artifice. He may begin and end his tale by making obeisance to chance, but also bracketing his story are the declarations, "I too have my equations, my symmetries, and will insist on them" (4), and "Have I tied up all the ends? Even an invented world has its rules, tedious, absurd perhaps, but not to be gainsaid" (234).

A third feature that points in the same direction is the novel's suffusion with paradox and parody. The principal paradox has already been mentioned--a story concerned with chance yet structured with intense concern for form and symmetry. There is the character of Felix: at once an instrument of chaos (as befits his provenance as Mephistopheles) and a chief ordering element of Gabriel's story. There is a parodic inversion of the Faust story: in direct opposition to the legend, the two Faust figures of Mefisto, Kasperl and Kosok, who, far from wanting to know "what holds the world most inwardly together" (Faust 2.382-83), are determined to prove that nothing holds it together. (The existence of two Fausts instead of one hints at parody, recalling Marx's comment about history repeating itself, first as tragedy, then as farce). Mefisto repeats the basic pattern traced by the preceding novels of the tetralogy--hubristic intellect humbled by the ineluctable presence of the chaotic world and brought to a limited form of redemption through an acceptance, an internalization, of this experience--but has none of the same sense of inevitability. In contrast, Mefisto abounds in ironies and ambiguities and reveals a kind of Derridean self-erasure at work, whereby things are said and unsaid all in the same breath. The motif of drugs is an example. On the one hand, as Banville has remarked, "[T]he world of the drug addict is a kind of hell" ("Q. & A." 13); on the other, drugs have been associated down through the centuries and across many cultures with the spiritual yearning for completion, for a glimpse of heaven (sacred chaos). Adele is described as she prepares for her "fix" in the chapel as "transfigured, lost in her task, a votive priestess" (209). The sex in the chapel is equally ambiguous: distinctly blasphemous in the Christian tradition but, as Banville again has pointed out, "not in classical Greece" ("Q. & A." 13). Sex, like drugs, is often associated with an ecstatic escape from self-consciousness, an endeavor that lies at the root of most religious systems. As Adele injects herself, the description is couched in language redolent of sexual ecstasy: "[T]he tip went in, and the swollen skin slid up around it, like a tiny pouting mouth, drawing the fine steel shaft deep inside itself, [...] and at last she leaned her head

back, her eyelids fluttering, and exhaled a long, shivering sigh" (209). Sex, drugs, and religion are all woven together here in a single rapturous experience, but one that leads only to Adele's sordid, untimely death. Gabriel tells us that he is devastated by this death, but he also tells us, "When I left I took her syringe with me, in its velvet case, as a keepsake" (233). In one sense, this is cancellation with a vengeance, but in another, it is the creation of a new space, a liminal space, hovering somewhere between existence and nonexistence, neither one thing nor the other, because, as William Kelly has pointed out in a review of the novel, "in fiction [...] nothing can ever be struck off the record" (12).

Further instances of the novel's parody: What many critics have taken to be the book's central insight-- Gabriel's revelation on the mountain that "chaos is nothing but an infinite number of ordered things" (183)--is undermined in a number of ways. First, the revelation is fairly meaningless for the reader. It is divorced from any tangible phenomena or struggle (unlike its counterpart scene in *Kepler*, which it seems to parody) and is simply a scientific statement that may or may not be true. Second, it is immediately followed by Felix's taking Gabriel to the crest of a hill, looking out over the city and intoning, "in a loud voice, as if addressing a multitude. Is it not meet, is it not worthy, this world" (184)-- a scene with distinct echoes of Satan's offering Christ the world during his forty days in the desert. It is as if Felix knows exactly what Gabriel is thinking and is quietly chuckling to himself about it. The revelation echoes similar experiences had by Kepler and Copernicus, but here, in contrast to the "marvellous grave gaiety" (Doctor Copernicus 22) felt by Copernicus and the angelic "whirr of wings" (*Kepler* 26) that heralded Kepler's insights, we have, "Something had opened up inside me on the mountain, some rapt, patient, infinitely attentive thing, like a dark flower opening its throat to the night" (185). The word liminal springs to mind again. This is an image that throbs with latent menace and evil as much as with anything joyous and wholesome. Of the revelation itself, Gabriel says, "Everything had brought me to this knowledge, there was no smallest event that had not been part of the plot" (185)--a sentence at which the reader can only stare in bafflement, trying desperately to recall any event, large or small, that seems even remotely connected to this particular "plot." The use of the word plot in this context is itself highly suspicious; the reader begins to feel a little like Gabriel in those moments when he suspects that the entire physical world is "smirking in derision" at him (150).

An enclosed, self-reflecting structure, a blurring of the boundaries between events and imagination, an excess of paradox and parody: all that has the effect of disrupting (but, importantly, not destroying) a reader's expectations of links between the words on the page and a real world elsewhere to which the words refer. It is the postmodern condition of language adrift from reality. Banville's opening sentence, "Chance was in the beginning," inverts not just the form, but also the content of the opening of St. John's gospel, "In the beginning was the Word." That gospel goes on, "and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. [...] All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made" (Authorised Version). Thus was established a hierarchy and a harmony that reigned until undermined first by Copernicus and then knocked over by Nietzsche, who declared the entire edifice a fiction, consisting solely of words without referents. (2) Nietzsche broke the intimate connection between language and reality that had held sway for more than two thousand years of Hellenic reason, but he did not destroy reality. By tumbling the structure that claimed to constitute reality, he revealed that what it really does, what all linguistic structures do, is merely enclose aspects of reality, just as the walls and roof of a house enclose the space that is the house. A hunger for reality drives all of Banville's protagonists, Gabriel Swan included, and this is what connects him with those post-Nietzschean writers I have quoted earlier, Calasso and Blanchot. Like them, Banville is trying to weave a shape around something that is both there and not there. By building a structure with words, and by doing it in a way that precludes the identification of those words with their traditional referents, Banville is attempting to create a space that--to use Calasso's terms--provides a dwelling place for the gods, for something that has no existence beyond the structure, yet is not that structure itself--a silence brought to our attention by language.

Form and order are vital to this enterprise, but even more vital is the necessity for this form and order to be imperfect, somehow flawed. The unhitching of language from reality is such a flaw. It is what prevents the structure forming the enclosure from being taken for the entire reality, as, for instance, Christianity was for the best part of two thousand years, with what resulting horrors history has made us all too aware. Leonard Cohen captures the essence of the idea in this quatrain from his song "Anthem" (aptly used by Ingo Berensmeyer as an epigraph to his book on Banville):

Ring the bells that still can ring,
Forget your perfect offering.
There is a crack, a crack in everything,
That's how the light gets in.

Gabriel (the Gabriel who lives through the events of the story) is in search of completion, of the "perfect offering" and seems determined to seal up any cracks he might find. His search leads him to mathematics, and he evinces a particular fascination for the number ten. This brings to the surface another fascinating, unsettling ambiguity of Mefisto. Banville, in an interview, has concurred with Imhof's suggestion that Gabriel is a Pythagorean ("Q. & A." 13). The number ten had a special place in the Pythagoreans' philosophy; they regarded it "as the 'leader' and the 'queen' of all figures" (Imhof 157). Gabriel's fascination for the number clearly reflects his obsession with his dead twin: "Even yet I cannot see a one and a zero juxtaposed without feeling deep within me the vibration of a dark, answering note" (18). A one and a zero, a presence and an absence: together they make up a whole. Just as the absence that is Gabriel's dead twin is a huge presence in his life, so, too, the absence represented by the figure zero is absolutely vital to the entire edifice of mathematics. Yet Gabriel is determined to convert this momentous absence in his life into something tangible, something that it cannot be, something that, were he to succeed, would actually destroy the vibrant self (the chaos within him) that seeks it. This is the true folly of his insistence on the "perfect offering" of absolute order. He thinks that by finding "that perfectly simple, ravishing, unchallengeable formula," then the "dead half of me I had hauled around always at my side would somehow tremble into life, and I would be made whole [...]" (186). In fact, the opposite is the case. Only in the final acceptance of the folly of this enterprise does he find even a glimmer of the wholeness that, unknown even to himself, has been his true quest all along. Or, it might be more accurate to say, has been the quest of a force (chaos) that has its being only through human consciousness (order) but is in essence something more than that consciousness (which structures itself and, therefore, knows itself through language). Self-consciousness must have a crack in it, else how could the light get in? Banville plays on these ideas of order and chaos through veiled references to Kafka. Kafka wrote that "[a] book must be the ax for the frozen sea within us" (qtd. in Pawel 158). Gabriel's longing for order is expressed thus: "Always I had thought of number falling on the chaos of things like frost falling on water, the seething particles tamed and sorted, the crystals locking, the frozen lattice spreading outwards in all directions" (109). It is only with the death of Adele that the thaw sets in ("A frozen sea was breaking up inside me" [232]), and as a consequence, his facility for numbers deserts him: "I woke up one morning and found I could no longer add together two and two. Something had given way, the ice had shattered" (233).

There is a grave problem inherent in any attempt to interpret a novel that, like Mefisto, seems designed to be interpretation proof. In the face of any deeply puzzling linguistic artifact, the unavoidable human temptation is to translate it into terms that harmonize with existing and familiar concepts; in short, to ask, what does it mean? To come up with an answer to such a question, to feel, in the case of Mefisto, for instance, that one knew (in a way that could be transmitted) what it meant, would be one sure way of knowing that one had missed the point. And, strange paradox, this certainty can rest comfortably (but not too comfortably) alongside the equally strong conviction that what one believes to be the book's essence, that is, one's interpretation, is perfectly valid and valuable. Kafka said that "the artist is the man who has nothing to say" (often quoted by Banville, e.g., "Making Little Monsters" 108). That statement relates closely to Blanchot's idea of art as a movement that creates its own source and to Calasso's (and Heidegger's) view of chaos as the sacred or the "immediate." The "immediate" precludes mediation, and what is language if not mediation? Derrida recognized this as the central paradox of the poststructuralist critique of language. In his essay, "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," he uses the example of the term sign to illustrate the point:

[T]he metaphysics of presence is shaken with the help of the concept of sign. But [...] as soon as one seeks to demonstrate in this way that there is no transcendental or privileged signified and that the domain or play of signification henceforth has no limit, one must reject even the concept and word "sign" itself--which is precisely what cannot be done. (111)

Here, however, the true value of art--in this case, fiction--asserts itself. Ingo Berensmeyer puts it thus: Fiction is that which will not be defined by or confined in any particular discourse or medium; it can engage with any other discourse without allowing itself to be completely delimited by it. [...] What literary fiction can do, with historically unparalleled success, is enable communication of what is otherwise incommunicable. (203-04) (3)

Mefisto is a prime instance of this saying the unsayable. In being so packed with ambiguity, irony, paradox, and parody, the novel makes a fitting conclusion to the science tetralogy. Therein, indeed, lies its final, sly paradox. On the one hand, by demonstrating the futility of the search for absolutes, it

repeats the main thrust of the earlier novels; on the other, by the extensive use of paradox and parody, it simultaneously undercuts this idea. But, given the nature of the idea being presented--that absolute truth is unattainable--its undercutting is also its enhancement (thus adding yet another sprinkling of paradox to the stew). Subjecting the idea to parody prevents it from becoming something of an absolute in itself. (4) The final effect is to leave the reader not with any certainties, but with a sense of openness and anticipation and with a heightened awareness of the inseparability, the interdependence, of form and chaos. Thus can aesthetics, by "escaping the conceptual" (Waugh 21) perform the paradoxical feat of both saying and unsaying. "Chance was in the beginning," says Gabriel, fusing chaos and form with the opening sentence of his narrative. Goethe's Faust, too, engages in a rewriting of the opening of St. John's gospel. Rejecting first Word, then Thought, then Power, he settles finally on Deed. "In the beginning was the Deed" (Faust 1.1237). Joseph Swann points out that the German word for deed--"Tat"--is also act and action (159). The word act chimes well with Gabriel's chance. Seen as before word, before even thought and power, act is simply there. Pure spontaneity. One moment nothing, the next something. (5) Even to speak here of moments is misleading, because to do so encloses everything in the framework of time, and chance is an eruption into time, a rupture in time, the crack that lets in the light.

Looking at the relationship between chaos and time may throw more light on the subject. Time (I mean here linear time, whose iron grip rules the Western mind), I argue, is a function of consciousness and memory. Consciousness and memory, if they are to be anything other than vague, amorphous instincts, if they are to have form, are at the behest of language. If language is wholly referential (despite the ravaging--or liberating--ambiguities of postmodernism, this is still, largely, the world we inhabit), then consciousness can be seen to have both a medium (the words being spoken) and an object (that to which the words refer). If language has fixed referents, then the words referring to these referents must take their place in a sequence, a sequence made conceivable to consciousness by time (the words perhaps creating time by their sequentiality). (6) Referential language and linear time go hand in hand, and this holds true whether one is dealing with objects in the physical world or concepts or even psychological states. If language is reference, then time is all encompassing. There is no place here for "sacred chaos" or experience of the "immediate" because there is no language for it. We are firmly in the world of Banville's "causation," spoken of at the beginning of this essay. If this view of time, or this element of time, were the absolute and whole truth, then the definition of chance given by the mathematicians Kasner and Newman would be indisputable. Chance, they say, is "merely a euphemism for ignorance. To say an event is determined by chance is to say we do not know how it is determined" (qtd. in Imhof 159). This is the world that Gabriel Swan believes he inhabits, the modern world of rational science, where the unknown is simply the not-yet-discovered. The sense of division and incompleteness experienced by Gabriel echoes the even more pervasive divisions created by time. Every event that happens in time splits immediately to form a duality: the event itself and the memory of the event (another echo here of Mefisto's binary structure). There is the event in time and the event in imagination. For Gabriel, the event in imagination is invariably the "real" event (as it was, too, for Proust, another shadowy presence behind this novel). By lifting the event clear of the rigid track of time, Gabriel invests it with a power that gives it an immediacy that life as he experiences it fails to give. (7) In life, he is a marionette--"I thought of the marionettes, twitching on their strings, striving to be human [...]. I understood them, I, poor Pinocchio, counting and capering, trying to be real" (Mefisto 118)--but when imagination takes over, he comes closest to realizing the value of the undefined, comes closest to experiencing the "immediate." This is the case, for instance, in the world he envisages through looking at old photographs ("I would not have been surprised, I think, if that face had been my own, so real did that world seem, and so fleeting, somehow, this one" [81]), or in the way the memory of Sophie's kiss opens out like a flower under the sun of his imagination, relegating the event itself to being merely the bud:

I relived that moment on Sophie's bed so often in my mind that the details wore out, became hollow, leached of solidity. I alone was always real there, always intensely present. Suddenly I had a vivid sense of myself. I held myself poised, balanced in air, as if I were some precious, polished thing that had been put with ceremonial care into my hands. It was not the kiss that mattered so much, but what it seemed to signify. A world had opened up before me, disordered, perilous and strange, and for the first time in my life I felt almost at home. (68)

The point is reinforced when Gabriel next encounters the "real" Sophie: "She had so throbbed in my imagination that now, when I confronted the real she, it was as if I had just parted from her more dazzling double" (68). And his sessions at Ashburn induce in him a state where the solid walls of time

seem to tremble: "Details would detach themselves from their blurred backgrounds, as if a lens had been focused on them suddenly, and press forward eagerly, with mute insistence, urging on me some large, mysterious significance. [...] They were like memories, but of things that had not happened yet" (77).

Imagination is the crack in Gabriel's time-bound world that allows him a glimpse of the "sacred chaos" beyond, which he dimly envisages, with a "shiver of anticipation," as a "vast, perilous sea [...], agleam and vaguely shifting, in the dim distance" (77). This is the completion he really craves, and his Faustian sin is to believe it can be codified, fixed in a formula, and held in the prison of time. Looked at in this light, the revelatory scene on the mountain can be seen in its full parodic glory. Some aspects of this have already been mentioned. In addition, there is the scene in which Gabriel tries to explain his insight to Adele, who does not even hear him. More to the point, he fails to hear her. "Help me," is her only response, "Help me" (211)--a human plight to which Gabriel, off in his arid fantasy world of perfect order, is oblivious, even though the scene echoes his own earlier re-encounter with Felix after his accident, when his only response to Felix's overtures is, like Adele's, a reiterated "Help me" (142). (It can be assumed, however, that the Gabriel writing the account, the Gabriel who has achieved some measure of wisdom and self-knowledge, is aware of this symmetry, may indeed have invented it.) In the same scene, he says, apropos of his revelation, "A kind of rapture thickened in my throat, I gagged on it as if on grief" (211). This echoes Doctor Copernicus, where Copernicus described the creative agonies of his work as "rapturous grief" (93). Gabriel's phrase, however, has the effect of turning the concept from one of vigorous, life-enhancing pain to one that smacks of dangerous illness. He uses other oxymoronic phrases to describe his enraptured state of mind--"grim elation" and "joyless hilarity" (202)--phrases behind which can be faintly heard the cackle of incipient madness.

Adele's death finally frees Gabriel from his unhealthy obsession with total order and proves to be the fulcrum around which his tale revolves. It is the crossroads where the order that is intrinsic to time meets the chaos that must infuse that order if it is not to ossify. It allows him to find the order in his life through telling his story and, within that story, to admit the healing power of chaos. The final lines blend the two elements in a tentative anticipation of the future. Gabriel declares that he has begun to work again, but that "[i]t will be different this time, I think it will be different. I won't do as I used to, in the old days. No. In future, I will leave things, I will try to leave things, to chance" (234). (8)

In an essay entitled "The Cognitive and Mimetic Function of Absence in Art, Music and Literature," Timothy Walsh, quoting Philip Wheelwright's *The Burning Fountain*, expresses a view of life that puts a modern, secular gloss on a concept familiar to mystics and artists throughout the ages and that seems an apt description of Gabriel Swan (for clarity, I have italicized Wheelwright's words): "[T]he human condition can best be described as fundamentally liminal in nature, as a suspended state of radical incompleteness where we are always on the borderland of a something more" (77). This "something more," however, is not something that can ever be brought into the fold of human comprehension and knowledge. (9) Gabriel's anguish arises from his attempt to do this, and the breaking up of his internal "frozen sea" is his acceptance that it cannot be done, that the mysterious other, the "something more," must always remain just that, something more than time-bound consciousness, beyond transmittable knowledge, beyond laws, beyond language--unsayable. As Paul Valéry's hermit has it:

Everything that can be said is null. [...] Nothing pure, nothing substantial, nothing precious and real is translatable. Reality is absolutely incommunicable. It is that which resembles nothing, which nothing can represent, nothing explain, which means nothing, which has neither duration nor place in a world or in any order whatsoever--for duration and place are given to a thing by others which are foreign to it [...]. (qtd. in Berensmeyer 198) (10)

It is in this sense that the reflecting hall of mirrors that is *Mefisto* can be said to be a novel that "has nothing to say," or at least tries to hint at such a state. In so being, it suggests a tentative bridge across the divide separating the silence of the mystics from the state of modern science, "which has had to abandon its 'dream of certainty, of arriving at a simple, elegant and above all concrete answer [and whose] experiments now produce not "yes" or "no," but a sort of drift of probabilities" (Berensmeyer 186, quoting Banville). A "drift of probabilities" might be a suitable description of *Mefisto*. Asked once in an interview if Heisenberg's "uncertainty principle" had any bearing on the book, Banville replied, "Yes, I have always been fascinated by that principle, which is very beautiful, very simple, very elegant, and very anarchic. Just like *Mefisto*, eh?" ("Q. & A." 13).

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NOTES

- (1.) I take the Faust parallels in *Mefisto* to be Kasperl and Kosok. At first glance, Gabriel might seem the obvious candidate, given that he is the principal target of Felix, the Mephistopheles figure, in both parts of the novel. But Gabriel, it should be noted, never actually sells his soul, although he is invited to, whereas it would seem that both Kasperl and Kosok have. In general, I follow Banville's lead: "I would not want the Faust analogy to be taken too literally. [...] It should be noted that Gabriel is not Faust, but merely an attendant lord" ("Q. & A." 13, emphasis in original).
- (2.) See particularly the essay "On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense" in Nietzsche 42-46.
- (3.) Tzvetan Todorov makes a similar point with regard to the "truth" status of fiction: "[L]iterature is [...] a discourse that, precisely, cannot be subjected to the test of truth; it is neither true nor false, to raise this question has no meaning: this is what defines its very status as 'fiction'" (qtd. in Hutcheon 109).
- (4.) The trap Banville avoids through parody is one that Nietzsche, in Tony Jackson's reading, was occasionally guilty of falling into: "[T]his nihilistic conclusion [that there is absolutely no absolute truth] is in fact the same kind of absolute truth claim that Nietzsche's arguments disallow. Only in relation to some absolutely true truth could you judge the truth in general to be a lie; [...]" (Jackson 511, emphasis added).
- (5.) Given the science element of *Mefisto*, it is interesting to note that many cosmologists, in theorizing about the Big Bang, claim to have traced the sequence of events back to within the most infinitesimal fraction of time after the Big Bang itself, but they admit to an inability, as yet, to bridge that final gap, to link the logical sequence of time with the actual beginning itself, the Act of Creation, as it were: "Of this infinitesimally small fraction of a second after the Big Bang, Stephen Hawking says that the answer to all the questions about the universe--and that includes life itself--lies here" (Weber 205).
- (6.) This idea recalls Lessing's *Laokoon*, wherein it is argued that poetry, because of the sequential nature of language, is the natural medium for expressing action, which, of course, can only occur in the medium of time. By contrast, Lessing argues, painting, through its necessary concentration on a single moment, is the perfect medium for conveying a timeless aesthetic beauty. The contrast is especially interesting in Banville's case, given that the four novels succeeding *Mefisto*--*The Book of Evidence*, *Ghosts*, *Athena*, and *The Untouchable*--concentrate heavily on the mysterious qualities of certain paintings, thereby, as it were, combining the two media that Lessing sets apart.
- (7.) Compare Beckett's point about Proust's "involuntary memory," which, he declares, "in its brightness revealed what the mock reality of experience never can and never will reveal--the real" (33).
- (8.) Gabriel's determination to embrace "chance" echoes the end of Hermann Hesse's *Steppenwolf* where Harry is enjoined by Mozart to inject some humor into his life: "One day I would be a better hand at the game. One day I would learn how to laugh" (253). "Essential gaiety," a phrase I use earlier in this essay, connects these two novels; it is what both Harry and Gabriel most lack.
- (9.) In terms of art, this idea bears comparison with Jean-Francois Lyotard's definition of the postmodern as "the unrepresentable in presentation itself; that which denies itself the solace of good forms, the consensus of a taste which would make it possible to share collectively the nostalgia for the unattainable; that which searches for new presentations, not in order to enjoy them but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unrepresentable" (81).
- (10.) A similar point is made in Hugo von Hofmannsthal's "Ein Brief des Philipp Lord Chandos an Francis Bacon," from which Banville actually quotes in *The Newton Letter*, using the words to express Newton's despair at ever capturing reality through language or science.

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