Morality and Identity in The Book of Evidence

Frederick Charles St John Vanderveld Montgomery is a man of many names and a polyvalent character. Convicted of the senseless murder of a young woman, he is writing a Book of Evidence from a dank, damp, Dublin prison cell. Maolseachlainn, his attorney, has negotiated a plea of guilty to the lesser charge of manslaughter, in exchange for a shortened sentence. But, by preventing a prolonged trial, Maolseachlainn has shortened Freddie’s ‘sentences,’ too, thereby inadvertently pre-empting Montgomery’s wish to have his say in the courtroom, and to indulge in a moment of self-affirming, narcissistic tribunal histrionics:

I’ll plead guilty, of course – haven’t I done so all along? – but I do not like it that I may not give evidence, no, that I don’t like. It’s not fair. Even a dog such as I must have his day. I have always been myself in the witness box, gazing straight ahead, quite calm, and wearing casual clothes, as the newspapers will have it. And then that authoritative voice, telling my side of things, in my own words. Now I am to be denied this moment of drama. (BoE 182)

Freddie’s testimonial is never intended as an “apologia” or “defence” (BoE 16), however, but as a means of self-reification, a coming to terms with his deeds, desires, and defects. The result is a solipsistic narrative that hovers between facts and fictions. In the beginning, Montgomery professes to recount truthfully and accurately the circumstances of the murder: “I wish to claim full responsibility for my actions – after all, they are the only thing I can call my own” (BoE 16). By the end of the novel, however, Freddie wants nothing to do with his Book; he orders to have it put away “with the other, official fictions” (BoE 220). He is not interested in an authoritative account of the murder, but through the act of writing, desires to re-discover an authentic sense of self: “I saw myself as a masterbuilder who would one day assemble a marvellous edifice around myself, a kind of grand pavilion, airy and light, which would contain me utterly and yet wherein I would be free” (16).

His identity, he claims, is in ruins, a ghost of its former self. He feels “unhoused” and “at once exposed and invisible [...] as something without weight, without moorings, a floating phantom” (BoE 16). Freddie, it appears, has enormous difficulty with asserting himself as an individual and his project of identification seems always already deferred: “I was always a little behind, trotting in the rear of my own life. [...] Stuck in the past, I was always peering beyond the present towards a limitless future. Now, I suppose the future may be said to have arrived” (BoE 38). Only in the act of murder itself do the past, present and future finally come together: violently, suddenly, but completely and compre-
hensively: “To do the worst thing, the very worst thing, that’s the way to be free. I would never again need to pretend to myself to be what I was not” (BoE 125).

Prison provides Freddie with temporary shelter, even if it also robs him of “something essential,” as if “the stuffing has been knocked out” (BoE 6). There he is given “a space and a distance to reflect upon himself in an attempt to discard all masks and discover authenticity” (Berensmeyer, John Banville: Fictions of Order 207). This is altogether too simple, however. Freddie is a man of deviance – masks are his métier. He is “a quick-change artist” who “place[s] all faith in the mask [...] the true stamp of refined humanity. Did I say that or someone else?” (BoE 191). In this reference to Yeats, Freddie confesses an informed understanding of the art of masking and unmasking. He revels in such fantasies, moreover, as he adopts and discards a large number of make-shift identities at will. His masks are taken mostly from literature; he is at once an “exotic animal, last survivor of a species they had thought extinct” (BoE 1), “Jean-Jacques the cultured killer (BoE 5), then Gilles de Rais (BoE 32), Raskolnikov (BoE 91), and finally, Moosbrugger (BoE 163). According to Freddie, masks offer a veneer of veracity; paradoxically, they are “the only way another creature can be known,” because they remain on “the surface [...] where there is depth” (BoE 72).

The ambiguities of acting and actions and of masking and unmasking are a recurring theme in many of Banville’s novels. Freddie comments on the subject in length in Ghosts, even quoting Diderot on acting:

He [Diderot] knew how much of life is a part that we play. He conceived of living as a form of necessary hypocrisy, each man acting out his part, posing as himself. It is true. 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. [...] 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. (G 198)

Right from the start, Freddie places himself on the periphery as an outsider, cut off from the rest of humanity. “Other people,” he says, “seemed to have a density, a thereness, which I lacked” (BoE 16). He has done nothing but assume a series of roles in his life, and he has treated each and every one of them with penchant triviality, as a joke. They enabled him to establish an ironic distance from which to observe and present himself with a mixture of self-loathing and sardonic pride, conscious of the equally prefigured perceptions of others and thus progressively integrating the subjective and objective perspectives (Berensmeyer, John Banville: Fictions of Order 207).