3.3 Art, Arcadia and *Athena*

[T]he future was no more than a replay of the past; a long suspended moment of stillness and circularity between the rackety end of the classical world and the first, fevered thrashings of the so-called Renaissance. I picture a kind of darksome northern Arcady, thick-forested, befogged and silent, lost in the glimmering, frost-bound deeps of immemorial night. – *Athena* 80

**A Search for Authenticity**

Freddie Montgomery is a cultured killer in search of an ethics of authenticity with which to find “[a]tonement. Redemption. That kind of thing” (*Athena* 67). In *The Book of Evidence*, Banville’s anti-hero shows us not only that he can think, but also that he can speak – “by golly, how he can speak”; in *Ghosts*, he shows us that he can write and imagine too, “but what is gone is coherence. Meaning has fallen out of [Freddie’s] life like the bottom falling out of a bucket” (Banville, “‘Thou Shalt Not Kill’” 136–7). Crucially, Freddie himself comes to this conclusion already in the beginning of *The Book of Evidence*:

A washed-blue dawn was breaking in Madrid. I stopped outside the station and watched a flock of birds wheeling and tumbling at an immense height, and, the strangest thing, a gust of euphoria, or something like euphoria, swept through me, making me tremble, and bringing tears to my eyes. It was from lack of sleep, I suppose, and the effect of the high thin air [...] I was at a turning point, you will tell me, just there the future forked for me and I took the wrong path without noticing – that’s what you’ll tell me, isn’t it, you who must have meaning in everything, who lust after meaning, your palms sticky and your faces on fire! But calm, Frederick, calm. Forgive me this outburst, your honour. It is just that I do not believe such moments mean anything – or any moments, for that matter. They have significance, apparently. They may even have value of some sort. But they do not mean anything. (*BoE* 23–24)

In the ‘Frames’ trilogy, Montgomery invites the reader to witness, through three self-involved narratives, his attempts at confession, atonement and re-identification, respectively. Solipsistic sojourns of the imagination, carried out within each narrative and characterized by the dynamic of retreat and return, become the constructs of this protracted process, yet in each novel they are shaped with
(un)conscious alterations on the part of the narrator, though their purpose remains the same: first, as a means of escape into the excommunicative exile of a confessional, if fictional narrative, then as a means of exploration and as an attempt to bring back to life the Ghosts of his past, and lastly, and perhaps most selfishly, for the sake of reincarnation in art and fiction. The resulting narrative, Athena, thus becomes Banville’s third foray into Freddie’s mind and imagination, a third attempt at a story that “never really ends, but simply enters another fictional landscape, one in which he is condemned, yet again, like Coleridge’s Ancient Mariner, to relive and retell his ghostly tale” (McMinn, John Banville: A Critical Study 129).

Unlike The Book of Evidence or Ghosts, both novels mired in the past, Athena’s narrative thrust is forward, towards “intimation[s] of the future” (A 178). Here is the old Freddie with a new identity: “Morrow: yes, that is my name, now. [...] I chose it for its faintly hopeful hint of futurity, and, of course, the Wellsian echo” (A 7). This time, Freddie is enlisted by Morden, a shady character who is part of a gang trading in stolen artworks, to authenticate a series of eight paintings. Almost simultaneously, and suspiciously, he falls in love with a woman on the street, a woman he henceforth refers to as A. Athena, accordingly, becomes a “love letter to a woman who is no more than a letter herself, no more than an indefinite article” (Thomson, “Powers of Misrecognition” 238). Indeed, the letter itself is “not even the initial of her name,” but Freddie chooses it because “of all the ways it can be uttered, from an exclamation of surprise to a moan of pleasure or of pure pain. It will be different every time I say it” (A 48).

Montgomery is undoubtedly seduced by the many erudite implications the letter A carries, as it (and by extension the woman) may embody the divine Athena or Aphrodite, and it may personify art, or simply language itself. Interestingly, her signifier also corresponds to the petit objet a Derrida writes of when he formulates the non-concept of différance, from which he puts forward that the structure of language, and identities within language, becomes apparent. This différance, for Derrida, is unheard, silent, and although his own neologism can make it visible, it cannot be willed into existence; the petit objet a is Derrida’s epitome of a present absence, an always already elsewhere: “The a of différance, thus, is not heard; it remains silent, secret and discreet as a tomb” (Margins of Philosophy 4).

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4 The plot is based somewhat on an art robbery that occurred in Ireland around 1986, “when a criminal gang stole eleven paintings from the collection of Sir Alfréd Beit, at his home in Russborough House, near Blessington in County Wicklow” (McMinn, John Banville: A Critical Study 130).
Two such “tomb-like” (A 2) rooms exist in Athena: the room in which Freddie works to authenticate the paintings, and the aesthetic space that is his own imagination, his own private Arcadia of the mind, in which, the petit objet a rings true as an Et in Arcadia Ego, the “discreet” tomb of the possibilities he celebrates through A: “[W]hat a thing we made there in that secret white room at the heart of the old house, what a marvellous edifice we erected. For this is what I see, you and me […] labouring wordlessly to fashion our private temple to the twin gods watching over us” (A 2). Freddie goes so far as to suggest he should view A. as a sign without a referent: “there is no real she, only a set of signs, a series of appearances, a grid of relations between swarming particles” (A 97). Thus A. might be viewed as an analogy for the postmodern idea of being without essence and identity, an anomaly amid an infinitely intricate world of signs and signifiers. Nonetheless, Freddie resists this view, certain that he sees an essential being during their love-making, that “she was there at those times, it was she who clutched me to her and cried out” (A 97). It thus becomes painfully clear that Freddie’s search for A. masks his search for authenticity. Athena becomes Morrow’s love-letter to his earlier fictional self, and writing this letter is his way of resurrecting and preserving his fantasy about A., and all she may signify, albeit without a referent.

Additionally, the surreptitious fantasy of A. is presented in the form of the ekphrases Freddie writes of the paintings he studies and means to authenticate. Here the astute reader will notice Banville’s carefully crafted final irony of Freddie’s interpretive efforts when the seven paintings he examined turn out to be fakes, but an eighth painting he did not, The Birth of Athena, proves to be authentic. When Mr Sharpe, “[a] second opinion” from England at first declares “They are all copies […] Every one of them,” Freddie is shocked into utter silence: “There was a beat of stillness, as if everything everywhere had halted suddenly and then slowly, painfully, started up again” (A 208). Sharpe further adds insult to injury when he glances over at Morrow in a “sly, almost flirtatious”

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5 Ekphrasis was first learned as a tool of rhetoric and then became a skilled way of describing art and other aesthetic objects. Using ekphrasis successfully was a means of demonstrating scholastic or authorial prowess, and eventually ekphrasis became “an art that described art” (Welsh, Ekphrasis 1). Ekphrasis occupies a curious place between the realms of the visual and the linguistic. As Peter Wagner writes in his Icons-Text-Icon-otexts: Essays on Ekphrasis and Intermediary, “Ekphrasis, then, has a Janus face: as a form of mimesis, it stages a paradoxical performance, promising to give voice to the allegedly silent image even while attempting to overcome the power of the image by transforming and inscribing it” (Wagner 13). Despite all of the changes the word has undergone and no matter the argument making use of the term, the apparent conflict between image and word is central to the concept (Welsh, Ekphrasis 1).
manner, only to declare: “I cannot imagine how anyone could have mistaken such daubs for the real thing.” It comes as no surprise, however, that “[t]here had been an odd, unidentifiably familiar ring to Sharpe’s announcement; it was like news so long awaited that when it came at last it was no longer news” (A 209).

Ultimately, *Athena* is itself a finely crafted work of *faux art*; Banville has infused the narrative, at the level of plot, character as well as underlying themes and motifs, with a postmodernist quest for authenticity. The mastermind behind the entire art heist, known as “the Da,” for example, uses the seven fake paintings to smuggle one authentic stolen painting out of the country. And for Freddie, the final irony reveals itself in that single painting’s undiscovered authenticity, because it epitomises the paradoxical nature of his own artistically masked if authentic love for A., despite his poor judgement (or purposeful misrepresentations). To emphasize this, Freddie’s failure to recognise the paintings as fakes resonates with the subject matter of the paintings themselves, which depict various scenes of pursuit, desire and transformation as inspired by Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*.

**Art as Arcadia**

Banville’s use of *ekphrasis* in *Athena* is intimately linked to Mannerism in art as well as to a postmodern playfulness that pervades the entire novel and with which he deconstructs any notions of reality or authenticity behind the text.\(^6\) Literary criticism has long identified striking analogies between postmodern fiction and metahistorical, mannerist traditions. In his *Postscript to ‘The Name of the Rose,’* for example, Umberto Eco postulates this comparison by declaring that “postmodernism is not a trend to be chronologically defined, but rather an ideal category – or, better still, a *Kunstwollen,* a mode of operating.” Indeed, Eco goes on to postulate postmodernism as a self-conscious stylization adopted by the author, and places it as the most important criterion for defining mannerist works of art: “We could say that every period has its own postmodernism, just

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\(^6\) Mannerism denotes a stylistic phase of European art covering the period from ca. 1520 to ca. 1590, the transitional phase between the High Renaissance and the Baroque. As applied to an artistic movement, Mannerism implies overt stylization and an obsession with artificial conventions. Virtuosity was equated with great facility of execution in the sixteenth century, as well as with the overcoming of difficult problems, and was regarded very highly in the arts, in literature, as well as in human decorum. An obsession with virtuosity and elegance, then, was the guiding force of Mannerism, essentially an artificial, anti-naturalistic style. As it transgressed moderation, Mannerism appealed to an elite class of connoisseurs, not to the general populace.
as every period would have its own mannerism” (Postscript to ‘The Name of the Rose’ 66).

Beyond its functionality as a modus operandi, the mannerist-postmodernist approach is also characterised by an ironic, even at times sardonic disposition towards literary traditions. Elke Pacholek-Brandt argues that mannerist and postmodernist authors share an unmistakably anti-classical attitude (Imagination (Un)limited 35–36), one corroborated by the grand-father of postmodernism, Lyotard himself:

[R]ealistic representations can no longer evoke reality except as nostalgia or mockery, as an occasion for suffering rather than satisfaction. Classicism seems to be ruled out in a world in which reality is so destabilized that it offers no occasion for experience but one for ratings and experimentation. (Lyotard et al., The Lyotard Reader and Guide 125)

This anti-mimetic, anti-classical Kunstwollen manifests itself in the mannerist-postmodernist text in a number of additional stylistic choices: a desire to create and to surprise, a self-deprecating ostentation, an excessive use of metaphor, a propensity for rhetorical stylization, and a curious affinity for mythological themes and mythemes, Ovid’s Metamorphoses in particular. As Petra Tournay has illustrated in her seminal study of Athena (2001), all these mannerist-postmodernist analogies are evident in Banville’s novel, more consciously on behalf of the author than in any other postmodernist text. Banville, she argues, knowingly employs

mannerist themes and stylistic devices in the text. He functionalizes them by laying bare their operations, by producing an ‘inside-out novel, which wears its skeleton and its nerves on the outside’ (Brown, The Literature of Ireland 230) and thereby undermines and ironically deconstructs this relation. [...] he deliberate foregrounding of mannerist elements is a reaction to the petrification and deterioration of the postmodern discourse and highlights Banville’s awareness that postmodernism too has ‘run its course’ (The Literature of Ireland 17) and has become obsolete. (Tournay, “Into the Heart of the Labyrinth” 109–110)

Banville’s mannerist-postmodernist Kunstwollen is nowhere more pronounced than in the seven ekphrases disseminated throughout the novel, which function as spoofs of art criticism that also hold up a mirror to the novel’s plot and to Freddie’s inner turmoils. Tournay goes a step further to suggest that, “if cryptically attributed to Banville himself, those passages can (almost inevitably) only be read as ironic self-references to his own approach to art and writing and are as such a parody of aesthetic criticism” (“Into the Heart of the Labyrinth” 110).
Already in his first ekphrasis, Morrow criticizes Johann Livelb (read: John Banville) and his “Pursuit of Daphne” for anti-classical ostentations:

Here as in so much of Livelb’s work the loftiness of the classical theme is sacrificed for the sake of showiness and vulgar effects[...]. To quote the critic Eric Auerbach writing in a different context, what we have here is ’a highly rhetorical style in which the gruesomely sensory has gained a large place; a sombre and highly rhetorical realism which is totally alien to classical antiquity.’ (A 19)

Freddie’s ekphrases overflow with such and similar comments about the execution of the paintings, and as Tournay conclusively argues, they thus become “self-ironic mannerist manifestos” that are “immediately programmatic for the novel” (“Into the Heart of the Labyrinth” 110).

Although Tournay’s analysis of Athena’s mannerist-postmodernist analogies is exemplary, it focuses somewhat heavily on Banville’s ironic and self-referential involvement with the text, ignoring how a postmodernist-mannerist modus operandi also helps Freddie resolve, at least in part, his dilemma of atonement and restitution. Though we can accept Banville’s conscious attempt to deconstruct the postmodernistendeavour by making the appropriately mocking mannerist analogies, and thereby turn it into a Kunstwollen devoid of meaning or purpose, we cannot ignore the crucial role the paintings play in helping Morrow achieve atonement and as an aid for the self-preservation of his own naïve ideals.

Banville’s mannerist-postmodernist ekphrases also function as a mode of artistic suspension which Freddie uses as a kind of aesthetic Arcadia in which he can wax nostalgic about the past without giving up or otherwise betraying the character he has so meticulously constructed for himself in The Book of Evidence and Ghosts: a narcissistic, mock-heroic art lover suspended between multiple self-authored narrative identities. Whenever and wherever Morrow encounters A., partial recollections of a gilted past follow suit: “I basked in this time out of time as in one of those long Saturday mornings of childhood. She would come. We would be there together. Everything would happen” (A 90). Morrow experiences seemingly unconscious moments of memory upon which he nevertheless confers a carefully crafted sense of being in a pastoral otherwhile and elsewhere:

It was a surprise when I stepped out into the world again, how bright and gay everything seemed, the sun, the gleaming grass, those Van Gogh trees, and the big, light sky with its fringe of coppery clouds; I felt as if I had been away on a long journey

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7 Eric Auerbach is the author of the classical study Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature (2013 [1946]).
and now all at once had arrived back home again. [...] What paradisal longings are these that assail me at unconsidered moments when my mind is looking elsewhere? (A 35–36)

Regardless of how often Freddie’s unconscious wills into existence artistically gilded memories, and regardless of how much he wants “to preserve [them] in the crystal of remembrance like one of those little scenes in glass globes” (A 86), he cannot escape the wills of his own narrative art, the ever present machinations of his (and Banville’s) postmodernist-mannerist *Kunstwollen*: “Is it hindsight that has conferred on the place a pent-up, mocking air?” (55). Aptly, he concludes: “I could weep up a blizzard once I got started” (86).

Morrow’s ekphrasis of the fictional Job van Hellin’s ‘Syrinx Delivered’ is particularly telling of an irrepressible desire to use the paintings as a means of suspending belief in reality. To do so, the paintings are described as ambiguous mock-pastorals that do not quite match the classical, Ovidian depictions of the golden world that inspired them:

The landscape depicted here is not the Arcady of rock and olive tree and harsh, noonday light, but the peaceable northern plain untouched by the riotous passions of gods and heroes yet over which there hangs an atmosphere of indefinable unease. [...] Placed in the middle distance, the figures of god and nymph, caught in their little drama of desire and loss, seem almost incidental to the composition, which could easily stand without them as self-contained landscape. Here, in this green and golden world, on this tawny afternoon, their black sheep Pan disports himself: with what skill the artist has depicted this figure, making it at once numinous, comic and terrifying. (A 104)

The paintings and their descriptions are also Banville’s most powerful tools for mirroring, in Freddie’s character and love interest A., the novel’s recurrent motifs of absence, loss and the attenuation of reality. Petra Tournay’s own analysis of the purpose of A. falls somewhat short in this regard, especially in its conclusion: “if A. is absent, so also is Athena, it is deconstructed into a no-thing. It becomes therefore, another instance illustrative of art-as-failure or language-as-failure” (“Into the Heart of the Labyrinth” 115 [original emphasis]). Yet it is precisely due to the failure of Morrow’s narrative art, and his failure to make A. into something tangible, especially as expressed through his failure to correctly assess the paintings, that he preserves something of his own ideals. Accordingly, Freddie neither deconstructs A., nor Banville Athena, into the “no-thing” of an irretrievable absence.

In a rare moment of honesty and self-affirmation, Freddie acknowledges that “it is not the anima lost in me that I am after, but the ineffable mystery of the