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 Alfred Beit, at his home in Russborough House, near Blessington in County Wicklow” (McMinn, *John Banville: A Critical Study* 130).
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-Iconotexts: 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).

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”