that they are there. This is the fundamental fact of artistic creation, the putting in
place of something where otherwise there would be nothing. (The Untouchable 343)

In “the ever shifting myriad worlds” through which Morden, or for that matter
Maskell, Montgomery or Cleave move, death is the “singular, unchanging and
wholly authentic thing” (U 343). Max, moreover, sees in the two most traumatic
deaths he has encountered the paradigmatic chronotope of his own self. Like
death’s ego in Arcadia, his own self must cease trying to become, and simply
accept that it is. If The Sea, then, is centred around a coming to terms with the
inevitability of death, The Infinities closes the circle by arguing for the affirma-
tion of life in a narrative that curves asymptotically towards a death that never
happens. Indeed, the novel ends with a kind of rebirth in the pregnancy hinted
at in the lines of the novel – “She presses a hand to her womb. ‘Oh!’” – a twist
unexpected by all but the immortal gods, who have spent the entire narrative
seeking to understand what it is like to live, to be mortal. Thus, The Infinities
culminates in a beautiful piece of prose suffused with the divine equanimity of
the gods who, it would appear, have finally moved from witnessing the mortals,
and understanding their fragility, to a true appreciation of the human condition:

This is the mortal world. It is a world where nothing is lost, where all is accounted for
while yet the mystery of things is preserved; a world where they may live, however
briefly, however tenuously, in the failing evening of the self, solitary and at the same
time together somehow here in this place, dying as they may be and yet fixed for ever
in a luminous, unending instant. (I 272)

‘A Tune Beyond us, yet Ourselves’: John Banville’s Man with The Blue
Guitar

The Blue Guitar (2015) appears more than a quarter century after Banville pub-
lished The Book of Evidence (1989), the masterpiece that turned him into one of
Ireland’s most accomplished living novelists. And yet, his latest production
could, like so many of the previous, carry the title of his first critical success. Its
protagonist Oliver Otway Orme, embodies many of the characteristics of the
Banville men who have gone before him. Gabriel Godkin, Freddie Montgomery,
Axel Vander, Max Morden or Adam Godley: each of these solipsistic, narcissistic
narrators and their story reappears in some form or other as part and parcel of
Orme’s identity. Thus, The Blue Guitar closes the circle of many of Banville’s
earlier efforts, neatly fitting several of the author’s central concerns into its
tightly written narrative, and, in many ways, Banville’s latest novel amounts to
a retrospective of his narrative art, exhibiting his oeuvre in its entirety within
the gallery of its two-hundred-and-fifty pages.

Oliver Orme is a painter who can no longer paint. Middle-aged, “pushing
fifty” (BG 4), damaged and prone to musing, Orme is “owning up” to the various
petty crimes and crises that make up the patchwork of his life so far. The reader
is immediately ensnared into playing a kind of stand-in as Orme’s “inexistent
confessor” (BG 16). At the outset of the novel, we find Orme returned with wife
Gloria to Ireland, in the long wake of several tragedies. His ability to paint has
disappeared; the “embers of inspiration [have] become ashes, and cold ashes at
that” (BG 38). Previously, the affair with his friend’s wife was exposed, and like
Eclipse’s Axel Vander, Orme retreats to his childhood home not only to “weather
the storm,” but to survey the wreckage. “From now on,” he concludes, “all would
be aftermath” (BG 5, 74).

Banville’s latest narrator is a careful creation who, in his voice, manner, ap‐
ppearance, character and even origin story is very much an amalgam of previous
Banville protagonists. Indeed, much of what makes The Blue Guitar work is the
way in which the Irish author infuses it with the entirety of his oeuvre, turning
the novel into a retrospective on various levels. Firstly, and most visibly, Oliver’s
story can be read as a playfully postmodern, if nostalgic elegy that holds a ka‐
leidoscopic mirror up to the human condition. A second reading transforms The
Blue Guitar into a metafictional vehicle that enables a critical retrospective of
the “infinity of worlds” created by each of Banville’s previous novels itself, and
in which “all possibilities are fulfilled” (I 105). At the end of their professional
lives, both Banville and his narrator, Orme, appear to look back and find that
neither the author nor the artist as a young man could live up to the much-pro‐
fessed Arcadia of youth:

Childhood is supposed to be a radiant springtime but mine seems to have been always
autumn, the gales seething in the big beeches behind this old gate-lodge, as they’re
doing right now, and the rooks above them wheeling haphazard, like scraps of char
from a bonfire, and a custard-coloured gleam having its last go low down in the
western sky. Besides, I’m tired of the past, of the wish to be there and not here. (BG
4)

Throughout The Blue Guitar, Orme is marked by an involuntary obsession with
the past that he would prefer to suppress: “I’m tired of brooding,” he would have
his readers believe: “it availeth naught.” Yet soon it returns, “the past, the past”,
like a narrative incantation that guides the prose inevitably to a foregone con‐
clusion. The subtle phrases that took The Sea from past to present are gone,
however, and instead, bright announcements have taken their place: “Yes, here
it comes, the past again.” The past has been transformed, no longer a welcome
locus of respite from the present, but an intrusive, unwelcome guest, to whom
entry cannot be denied, nevertheless: “Damn it, here’s another digression” (BG
26, 67, 89).

Orme’s survey of his life begins as the staged confessional of a former painter
whose first-person voice is very reminiscent of Hermes, The Infinities’ playful
narrator, with his penchant for wordplay and the all-too-predictable antics of
narrative unreliability:

Call me Autolycus. Well, no, don’t. Although I am, like that unfunny clown, a picker-up
of unconsidered trifles. Which is a fancy way of saying I steal things. Always did, as
far back as I can remember. I may fairly claim to have been a child prodigy in the fine
art of thieving. This is my shameful secret, one of my shameful secrets, of which,
however, I am not as ashamed as I should be. (BG 1)

Orme even introduces himself as the son of Hermes, Autolycus. Clearly, Banville
could not resist establishing a proper literary (if fictional) heritage for his latest
protagonist, for Autolycus appears as a comic relief character and thief in
Shakespeare’s The Winter’s Tale, where his boast as “a snapper-up of unconsid-
ered trifles” (4. 3. 26). mirrors almost exactly Orme’s self-appraisal above. Indeed,
as a self-proclaimed prince of thieves, Autolycus has a pedigree of great cunning
and an even greater ego, which often leads him into undesirable, braggart sce-
narios. Thus, parallels between Autolycus and Orme are plentiful: both are crafty
tale-tellers, men of masks and clothes-changers who serve to advance a variety
of themes on art and nature, on appearance and reality. Additionally, it appears
that Banville has written The Blue Guitar as a kind of sequel to The Infinities;
Orme attests to this not only by proclaiming himself as the apparent son of
Hermes, but also in his repeated references to the theory of infinities posited by
Adam Godley Sr. in The Infinities:

The fact is, I’m not really here, or the here that I’m here in is not here, really. I might
be a creature from one of that multitude of universes we are assured exists, all of them
nested inside each other, like the skins of an infinitely vast onion, who by cosmic
accident made a misstep and broke through to this world, where I was once and have
become again what I am. (BG 65)

There is more behind the art of Banville’s allusions, nonetheless, because Orme’s
recurrent mention of the “multitude of universes” is designed to justify his klep-
tomania, desperately seeking a way to will it into art, to “transmute the object
stolen” into “something sacral” that shines beyond the “profane”:
I’m thinking of those Godley particles we hear so much about, these days, that at one moment are in one place and the next in another, even on the far side of the universe, with no trace whatever of how they got from here to there. That’s the way it always is with a theft. It’s as if a single thing by being stolen were on the instant made into two[. …] It’s a kind of [...] transubstantiation, if that’s not going too far. For it did give me a feeling almost of holy awe, on that first occasion, and does so still, every time. That’s the sacral side of the thing; the profane side is if anything even more numinous.

(BG 21)

Thus, Orme also strongly alludes to The Book of Evidence’s Freddie Montgomery, who emplots various works of art, be they real, counterfeit, or metafictional, into his storied self, thereby carefully crafting a Kunstwollen, an overly self-conscious and stylised discourse for his crisis of identity. In reverse process to Montgomery’s Kunstwollen, Orme steals in order to will the theft (arguably the most profane and base form of criminal activity) into a higher, sacral form of art: “Just as art uses up its materials by absorbing them wholly into the work, [...] so too the act, the art, of stealing transmutes the object stolen” (BG 16). Orme’s delusional, if cleverly argued justifications mirror Freddie Montgomery’s narcissistic, self-aggrandising explanations: “In this way, is not the thief doing a favour to things by dint of renewing them? Does he not enhance the world by buffing up its tarnished silver?” (BG 17).

All this makes painfully clear Orme’s fundamental flaw as The Blue Guitar’s tragic anti-hero: as someone who fled to small-town Ireland “out of fear of the world” (BG 65), and as someone who has become in equal parts loquacious self-explainer and a chronic solipsist who desperately seeks to find meaning and acknowledgement in grandiose justifications, verbal charm and meta-observational self-flagellation, Orme is ultimately left stranded, having lost much of what he tried to thieve into possession – for how can we claim to truly possess something that was stolen? Whether it is his petty thievings as a child, his efforts to rob life of its reality in his paintings, or stealing Polly from his best friend, Orme leaves himself impotent, dispossessed of all that he once owned and used to justify his actions, or by which to measure his self-worth. Indeed, he admits this at an early point in the novel: “Painting, like stealing, was an endless effort at possession, and endlessly I failed. Stealing other people’s goods, daubing scenes, loving Polly: all the one, in the end” (BG 60). Finally, Orme even admits that “things” concern him “not [...] as they are, but as they offer themselves up to being expressed. The expressing is all” (BG 114).

Despite these flaws and the sorry state he finds himself in at the outset of The Blue Guitar, Orme’s self-deprecating humour and naïveté endear him to the reader. Although he surrenders to creative impotence, Orme never stops
thinking, wondering, musing. Nevertheless, our peripatetic, recidivistic “painster” is undone by the world’s refusal to sit still and be captured by him and his kleptomaniac will to steal things into art. We are told that he never paints people, only objects, in part because people are so mutable, but mostly because he is himself handicapped when it comes to seeing and understanding human comportment and interaction. As Polly astutely remarks when Oliver blurts out that he wants to paint her, “But you only paint things, [...] not people, and even when you do you make them look like things” (BG 114). Recalling his dead daughter, Orme writes, “How well I remember her face, which is a foolish claim to make, since any face, especially a child’s, is in a gradual but relentless process of change and development, so that what I carry in my memory can be only a version of her, a generalisation of her, that I have fashioned for myself, as an evanescent keepsake” (BG 169).

It can be argued that Orme’s wilfully ignorant desire to articulate things not as they are, but to constantly seek out their expressive potential instead, is an essential quality an artist should possess. Banville’s novel is a supreme cautionary tale of how extending this outlook to an understanding of human behaviour itself can be truly dangerous. To achieve this, he uses an extensive, carefully developed allusion to Wallace Stevens’ poem “The Man With the Blue Guitar.” Indeed, Stevens’ poem epitomises all at once both the central themes of the novel and the quintessential struggles of its protagonist. For Wallace Stevens, as for Banville and Orme, reality is an abstraction with many possible perspectives and perspective possibilities. Poet, author and artist alike struggle to create original perspectives of reality, and in their efforts to capture said reality, create new, modern, meta-realities. Each creation, in turn, is also always an act of de-creation or destruction of actual reality, or actuality, and herein lies the danger that haunts the trinity of ‘creators’ – Banville, Orme, and Stevens – behind The Blue Guitar.

In The Necessary Angel (1951), Stevens defines his modern reality as “a reality of decreation, in which our revelations are not the revelations of belief, but the precious portents of our own powers” (140). Through his long poem “The Man with the Blue Guitar,” Stevens relates the destruction of traditional reality to the epiphany that a poem is not the expression of truth, but the result of the poet’s desire to bring to life the potential any given reality has to be expressed. Thus, Stevens’ poetry, like Orme’s art and Banville’s novels, exists in a kind of purgatory state of non/existence, in a matrix characterised by the dynamic of retreat and return at the heart of post-/modern pastoral’s always already else‐where. A true achievement of The Blue Guitar, accordingly, lies in the way in which it neatly ties up these efforts on the part of Banville, by alluding to Stevens,
and in the postmodern tragedy of Orme’s narrative plight. Stevens’ poem “The Man with the Blue Guitar” begins by metaphorically comparing poets to musicians: the guitar is the man’s instrument of perception, and thus conceptualizes the artist’s problem of creation. Inspired by Picasso’s painting “The Old Guitarist” (see Appendix, Fig. 10), Stevens stages an imaginary conversation between the old man and his audience:

They said, ‘You have a blue guitar,
You do not play things as they are.’
The man replied, ‘Things as they are
Are changed upon the blue guitar.’

And they said then, ‘But play, you must,
A tune beyond us, yet ourselves,
A tune upon the blue guitar
Of things exactly as they are.’

(Stevens, “The Man With the Blue Guitar” 3–10)

The guitar does not, indeed it cannot express reality – just as Orme’s painting, and by extension his retrospective narrative – but instead it creates a new reality based upon a myriad of perceptions. “You see how for me everything is always like something else? – I’m sure that’s part of why I can’t paint any more, this shiftingness I see in all things” (BG 48). In one of his “Adagia” (1934–1940), Stevens describes the relation of reality and imagination: “The imagination consumes and exhausts some element of reality” (Opus Posthumous 198). This very process of consumption is paralleled by the many metaphors Orme uses to explain his theory of art’s transmutation of reality:

As the crisis deepened, it wasn’t long before I recognised and accepted what appeared to me a simple and self-evident truth, namely, that there was no such thing as the thing itself, only effects of things, the generative swirl of relation. [...M]y effort wasn’t to reproduce the world, or even to represent it. The pictures I painted were intended as autonomous things, things to match the world’s things, the unmanageable there-ness of which had somehow to be managed. (BG 59)

The first section of Stevens’ poem further articulates the artist’s pressures to recreate reality as at once “A tune beyond us, yet ourselves” and as a reflection of “things as they are.” Clearly, the listeners do not understand the dialectic impossibility that governs their own request, especially when the old man shows that his instrument allows him only to represent reality, not to create it. Banville’s Orme epitomises precisely this hubris in his firm belief that stealing things can elevate them from the profane to the numinous. Naturally, these parallels
can also be applied to what Banville tries to achieve in his entire oeuvre, artistically, and they can be taken as a mild rebuke of his readers’ expectations to transmute the mundane minutiae of human life to the profane dimensions of the gods of old.

Additionally, the first section of the poem provides Banville with a crucial metaphor that helps Orme expose the demands of realism on the artist – expectations that both author and his protagonist have fallen prey to: “I cannot bring a world quite round, / Although I patch it as I can. / [...] If to serenade almost to man / Is to miss, by that, things as they are” (Stevens, “The Man with the Blue Guitar” 7–10). Commenting on the parallel experience of writing “a Banville novel,” the Irish author expresses similar sentiments in an interview with The Paris Review: “The world is not real for me until it has been pushed through the mesh of language[... ] If I can catch the play of light on a wall, and catch it just so, that is enough for me” (McKeon, “The Art of Fiction” 133).

The crisis of representation played out by the artist on a tight-rope of the audience’s expectations, between actual reality and the interpretation of reality, throws Orme into a deep funk of artistic “impotence.” And, as in many Banville novels, this crisis triggers in Oliver a nostalgic return to the childhood home where a survey of adult life as pierced by untimely deaths and disappointments have made the once-painter into a “painster” in search of redemption, once finally “undone, a sack of sorrow, regret and guilt” (BG 65). Indeed, the typically Banvillean preliminary sketches that Oliver provides of himself as an irreparable narcissist are slowly but decidedly replaced by a protagonist who becomes progressively more honest about his own pain and the pain he has caused others. The verbal self-indulgence fades, and a powerful drama emerges: “What creature is it that returns to die in the place where it was born?” (BG 65) Oliver asks when he has arrived at his supposed locus amoenus, hinting at the sojourn’s true purpose, namely to reckon with various deaths – deaths of loved ones that have already occurred, as well as with the inevitability of his own demise.

Indeed, what keeps Oliver’s story from being just the random broodings of a frustrated middle-aged man is its grounding in loss and its repeated confrontations with mortality. At first Orme contemplates in typically narcissistic fashion how a fear of death justifies his kleptomania as an act of both literal and metaphorical duplicity, and again he hijacks (and to an extent repeatedly misappropriates) for this purpose the many-worlds theory posited by Adam Godley Sr. in The Infinities:

[O]ne of the more deplorable aspects of dying, aside from the terror, pain and filth, is the fact that when I’m gone there will be no one here to register the world in just the way that I do. [...] Others will register other versions of the world, countless billions
of them, a welter of worlds particular each to each, but the one that I shall have made merely by my brief presence in it will be lost for ever. That’s a harrowing thought, I find, more so in a way even than the prospect of the loss of self itself. (BG 11)

It is striking that there are as many funerals as there are picnics in the pages of The Blue Guitar – a fitting balancing act that pervades the entire novel. Two events appear to have precipitated Orme’s current state of perplexity, in particular: the first is the sudden death of his three-year-old daughter, Olivia, as well as its ramifications in his marriage. “Her death had a deadening effect in general on our lives [...] something of us died along with her” (BG 96). With great deliberation and care, as he is wont to, Banville discloses the circumstances that have shaped his protagonists’ lives. The tragic, shared loss of Olivia decisively shaped the aloof, at times prickly relationship between Oliver and Gloria. We come to understand how, by the end of Orme’s story, Polly has come to achieve her ambition, and we gain insight into just how much Oliver had deluded himself about his family, about his wife and even about Polly:

Yet oftentimes, too, I entertain the fancy that somewhere in that infinity of imbricated other creations there’s an entirely other me, a dashing fellow, insolent, devil-may-care and satanically handsome, whom all the men resent and all the women throw themselves at, who lives catch as catch can, getting by no one knows how, and who would scorn to fiddle with colouring-boxes and suchlike childish geegaws. Yes yes, I see him, that Other Oliver[ [...] Yet would I leave again and try to be him, or something like him, elsewhere? No: this is a fit place to be a failure in. (BG 65)

A quintessential desire to return to a simpler time engenders Orme’s nostalgic impulses, a desire that is mirrored in William Empson’s axiomatic description of the pastoral as a “process of putting the complex into the simple” (Some Versions of Pastoral 23). This desire is so strong in Orme that he manages to convince himself that he, and indeed his entire world, is in the middle of this very process of reversal from the complex, unbearable reality to a simpler, comforting and soothing past: “Everything is reverting to what it used to be[ [...] Retrograde progression, they call it – [...] The future, in other words, will be the past, as time turns on its fulcrum into another cycle of eternal recurrence” (BG 66).

Banville evokes this idea of regression by setting the novel in an otherworldly Ireland where present, past and future slowly meld into a multiverse that runs parallel to the readers’ own universe. At first, the world depicted in The Blue Guitar appears ordinary, a forlorn corner of the rain-sodden, windswept British Isles. Yet, soon enough, curiosities begin to appear. The sky is full of airships (BG 62, 63, 155), and although the narrative time seems to be the present, various aspects of Orme’s world recall late-Victorian or Edwardian society: the muddy

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airfield where Orme the itinerant art dealer lands his plane is manned by two farm lads, brothers, Orville and Wilbur Wright, for example. Scientists have confirmed the Godley particles, postulated by Adam Godley in The Infinities, as the raw material of all creations. The continent is beguiled by a country called Alpinia, painted by Oliver as a kind of otherworldly, postmodern Arcadia with “a Caspar David Friedrich sky”.\footnote{See Appendix, Fig. 11, showing one of Caspar David Friedrich’s most iconic paintings (and eponymous skies), \textit{Wanderer above the Sea of Fog}.}

It was as if I had set off heedlessly up a gentle grassy slope somewhere in old Alpinia itself, plucking edelweiss blossoms and delighting in the song of the lark, and presently had come to the crest and stopped open-mouthed before a terrifying vista of range upon range of flinty, snow-clad peaks, each one loftier than the last, stretching off into the misty distances of a Caspar David Friedrich sky.\footnote{BG 29}

Despite all the incessant dampness and murky weather, the sun, we are informed, is heaving with calamitously destructive activity. Interestingly, each and every regressive anomaly of this otherworldly Britain (and Ireland) is always paralleled by the wilful \textit{Kunstwollen} that colours Orme’s own efforts to return to a simpler time. The violence that is necessary for such a \textit{caesura} irrupts the narrative time-and-again with fitting imagery:

\[\text{[I]t seems to me something has changed in the decades since I was a boy. I am well aware how spurious can be the glow that plays over remembrances of childhood. All the same I recall afternoons of sun-struck stillness the like of which we don’t seem to have any more. […] I felt just now a sudden sweet rush of fondness for the little boy that I was then. […] There was a smell of sun-bleached timbers and creosote and dust that seemed the evocative whiff of an already lost past. (BG 34–35)}\]

So, recalling his sister’s grief when she was scorned by the pimply youth she adored, Oliver remembers that he thought of her weeping figure as a sacrificial victim on an altar, and came to understand, therefore, that out of “transgression and sacred terror the gods were born” (BG 220). Polly seems to think that Oliver is god-like, and sees herself as an Ariadne rescued by the great god Dionysus. Gloria tends lovingly to a sickly, potbound myrtle, a plant associated with death, rebirth and transformation in classical mythology. And the art dealer Perry in his aeroplane is, perhaps, a would-be \textit{deus-ex-machina}.

Transformation – a form of appropriation in Banville’s scheme of things – thus becomes the novel’s overarching concern. Art transforms reality, or at least
what we think of as everyday reality. Oliver is speaking for Banville, it would seem, when he declares:

But no, no, it was more than that I was about: it was nothing less than total transformation, the clay made spirit. Pleasure, delight, the raptures of the flesh, such things mean nothing, next to nothing, to a man like me. Trans-this and trans-that, all the transes, that’s what I was after, the making over of things, of everything, by the force of concentration, which is, and don’t mistake it, the force of forces. The world would be so thoroughly the object of my passionate regard that it would break out and blush madly in a blaze of self-awareness. (BG 174)

Indeed, a desire for the transformation of reality into art has driven John Banville’s entire oeuvre, and the author’s many efforts finds a culmination in the unimpeachably elegant tenets of *The Blue Guitar*. Inspired by Wallace Stevens’ poem, we can easily discern similarities between Banville’s efforts to write, Orme’s painstaking painting and the music played by ‘The Man with the Blue Guitar.’ In an interview with *The New Yorker*, Banville provides a rare glimpse into his own childhood efforts at painting: As Banville admits in *The New Yorker* interview, he too tried to play upon the blue guitar, and, in his various attempts to capture the past, has moved variously between painting and writing. “On weekends”, he explains in the interview, “his mother would take him into Dublin to go to Combridges, a bookstore that doubled as an art-supplies shop. Along with an easel and paints and brushes, he insisted on making her buy him large tubes of zinc white. Then, he would stand in front of his easel for hours trying to paint “mythological scenes of great meaning. But painting never quite clicked, and so Banville, the teenager, traded paintbrushes for pens. Half a century later, Banville thinks about what life may have been like as a painter:

I loved all the paint, that whole world, all that beautiful equipment one uses. That’s one thing I hate about being a novelist: I have a nice fountain pen and nice big books to write in, but it’s nothing compared to being a painter and all the wonderful brushes and all that paint and all that turpentine and those wonderful smells, all that muckiness – it’s like being a child again. (Delistraty, “John Banville on the Utter Mystery of Writing”)

The nostalgic qualities of this return to the clean-slate state of childhood throws into sharp relief the similarities between author and protagonist. Like Orme, Banville appears unable to dispossess himself from the relentless hold of the past upon what he is trying to put on paper in his fictions:

The past fascinates me obsessively, I suppose, because it’s such a strange phenomenon[. . .] The past was the present at some point, and it was just as boring as the
present. What makes it so important? What gives it that luminous, exalted quality where it becomes the past? When does the past become ‘the past’? Is yesterday ‘the past’? Is last week ‘the past’? How far do you have to go until the past becomes ‘the past’? These are things I’ve never found an answer to, and that’s why they fascinate me. (Delistraty “John Banville on the Utter Mystery of Writing”)

Unlike Orme, however, who sets out in *The Blue Guitar* on long verbal incantations to justify his petty crimes as well as his affair with Polly, Banville has by now abandoned all such pretensions about writing: “Writing,” he has said in an interview with *The New Yorker*, “is a mysterious process that I don’t pretend to understand” (Delistraty, “John Banville on the Utter Mystery of Writing”). What the Irish author provides in his seductively artistic and intellectual fictions, is “a tune beyond us, yet ourselves”; narratives, in other words, that are postmodern celebrations of the expressive qualities inherent to the art of writing, the potential of which is to be exalted rather than suppressed. This epiphany is quintessentially postmodern and counteracts the anti-modernist tendencies one may accuse Banville’s departure from Arcadia and its nostalgic allure. Indeed, perhaps the best way to summarize the actuality of this turn in the Irish author’s novels is to use P.K. Paige’s poetic response to Wallace Stevens’ poem, a reply that encapsulates the entirety of the postmodern condition:

*The man replied, ‘Things as they are*

are not the same as things that were
or will be in another year.
The literal is rarely true
for truth is old and truth is new
and faceted – a metaphor
for something higher than we are.
I play the truth of Everyman
I play the truth as best I can.
The things I play are better far
when changed upon the blue guitar.’

P.K. Page, “The Blue Guitar” 36