

John Banville's Novels of the Early Twenties: Terminations and Turns

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Abstract: The article starts from the observation that Irish fiction has recently shown a diversification, which can be summarised as follows: on the one hand there are works addressing the history of Ireland, on the other hand we see novels focusing on post-national topics (cf. Haekel). John Banville, who under the pseudonym of Benjamin Black also wrote crime novels, is a renowned representative of narrative fiction informed by contemporary philosophy and aesthetics, exploring questions such as memory, cognition, and personal identity. My article reveals how in his latest (and allegedly last) literary novel *The Singularities* (2022) his highly sophisticated character narration reaches a terminal point, as self-reflexivity, textual referentiality, and abstraction become unsettling.

However, the complexity of placing his work in literary history has intensified by the appearance of three more novels published between 2020 and 2023 under Banville's own name despite the supposed finality of *The Singularities*. Surprisingly, *Snow* (2020), *April in Spain* (2021) and *The Lock-Up* (2023) revisit dismal topics from Irish national history. These thematically (trans)national fictions also enhance the propositions of realism in Banville's work. They present another hybrid form of narrative genres, blending crime fiction and historical novel, infused with philosophical reflection. The writer evades a categorisation. With *The Singularities*, Banville wishes to take his departure from the philosophical novel, as it seems with the intention to continue writing his new kind of murder mystery. *The Lock-Up* will be followed by another crime novel in October 2024.

The Singularities, I wish to show in my analysis, points at the exhaustion due to a self-reflexive probing of the subject, the unreliability of knowledge, and the impossibility of truthful representation. Reality appears gloomy, yet in the end art surfaces as a source of freedom and imaginativeness for the individual and prospering kinds of fellowship.

Keywords: referentiality, identity, historical crime fiction, hybridity, realism.

1. Introduction: Parallel Courses in Irish Fiction, and Banville's Postmillennial Novels

Criticism notices that Irish narrative literature has lately spread into two main directions under the influence of the socio-economic changes during the years 1990 to 2008 (Haekel 2020, 19). One development, continued from previous decades, exemplifies a national brand of the historical novel. It focuses on socio-political topics with a tradition in the Irish cultural imagination, above all the country's postcolonial struggles, renewed armed conflicts in Northern Ireland starting in the 1970s, the role and influence of the Catholic Church in the Republic, marriage, and the family with its dysfunctions (cf. 23). With specifications, I maintain that novels by Sebastian Barry, Anna Burns, and Anne Enright still evince such a commitment to traditional subject matters of Irish narrative fiction. Currently, the thematic scope includes former social taboos such as homosexuality, alcoholism, social divisions, or child abuse. Yet Colm Tóibín claims that Irish fiction should reach a post-national stage, a contention that Haekel tests (23), with the result that, especially in Sally Rooney's novels, the impact of Irish history is diminished. Instead, individual worries and concerns of global importance predominate. (31)

If one purpose of this article remains placing Banville's novels within the recent history of *Irish* fiction, I contend that the textual analysis of *The Singularities*, his swansong – or so he claims, elucidates this objective. My reading may disclose the reason for his turn from the postmodern novel in English to a preference for Irish historical (crime) fiction. A second and more general aim is to illuminate the significance of the author's latest step for current developments in post-postmodern narrative literature.

In his pre-millennial literary works Banville has long given priority to thematically post-national and philosophically poststructuralist fields; his novels did not reflect Irish issues but linked up with another literary tradition and canon. As the title of a critical article published in 2000 summarises his interests: "The Case of John Banville: Postmodern Love, Postmodern Death and God-Like Authors" (Wondrich 2000). Since the 1970s, his fiction has transcended borders and boundaries, addressed science and the figures of scientists as well as anthropological issues, among which personal identity receives a special emphasis. Phenomenological questions about the perception of reality are reflected in the characters' minds, while remembering and memory remain a primary concern,

so that one protagonist in Banville's latest 'highbrow' novel, the writer William Jaybey,¹ notices: "Mysterious are the ways in which memory works, I've often had cause to remark it, as you know" (Banville 2022, 156). Though occasionally considered congenial with Vladimir Nabokov, Banville himself mentioned two writers as the main inspirational sources of his artistic achievement: one, the Irishman W.B. Yeats, the second, Henry James, a Briton of American origin and unmistakably a model for Banville's stylistic perfection (Charney, interview).

However, among the author's novels published in the present decade under his 'real' name count three works marginally dealt with here that are rooted in the national-historical tradition. *Snow* (2020) fictionalises the reprocessing of the social split in and by an oppressive culture in the Irish Republic, telling the history of child abuse located in the narrative past with its present catastrophic outcome in an institution led by the Church. Under generic aspects, *Snow* epitomises the hybridisation between 'serious' art and the crime novel, the latter constituting a sub-genre to which Banville has contributed seven volumes after 2000 under the pseudonym of Benjamin Black. Only a year after *Snow*, the novel *April in Spain* (2021) again thematised a dilemma from the grim political and moral history of Ireland. It highlights leading figures in public life hushing up their trespasses by corruption and violence. In the story, the perpetrators presumably avoid their imminent fall thanks to the female protagonist's disappearance. Regarding its plot and character constellation, the book equally employs crime fiction templates. Like *Snow*, it adopts the detective figure Strafford and in addition the Dublin pathologist Quirke, characters familiar from the 'Benjamin Black novels' published by Macmillan. Finally, in 2023 there appeared John Banville's latest crime book, titled *The Lock-Up* and like *Snow* and *April in Spain* brought out by Faber & Faber, a superior literary publishing house. Episodes of the plot in *The Lock-Up* thematise the role of the Church and clerics in or immediately after WWII, widespread contemporary corruption in politics, and the elite's endeavour to suppress sensitive information. The general aim remains to protect institutions and men in powerful positions while hypocritically sacrificing less influential, predominantly female, individuals considered a danger to their reputation and status. Appearances are to be kept up at all costs and

1 Leo Robson (2022a) in *the New York times* and Alex Clark in *The Guardian* (2022) point at the barely veiled phonetic similarity of "Jaybey" with 'J.B.', the historical author's initials. The protagonist's first name 'William' is identical with Banville's second Christian name.

leaks or inspections stopped by assassination. Regarding authorities in Ireland and the experts for revealing lawbreaking offences, the inherited split between the Anglo-Irish descendants from a Big House and the 'native' Irish social climbers – joined by post-war immigrants – characterises the crew in *The Lock-Up*. Like *April in Spain*, the novel extends the spatial cosmos beyond Irish borders to other, mostly European, countries, while the temporal scope is enlarged to include also elements from Germany's grave history and a past which is not over. The impact of the historical-cultural background can curb a primarily aesthetic evaluation.

The question, to which I will come back towards the end of this essay, concerns the reason why the writer has abandoned one twentieth-century tradition and set up another type of fictional narrative in the short literary history of the twenty-first century. For his new venture, he adopts generic formats of the detective novel in works thematically imbued by historical curses or unmentionables, which are not exclusively Irish. This recent triad, launched by a publisher of decidedly 'highbrow' literature, presently runs parallel to the author's famous works of narrative art, which he claims to have conclusively abandoned with *The Singularities*. The study of this novel, I propose, will disclose the motive for his resolution and contribute to the argument about the directions of *Irish* fiction – and more generally of *narrative fiction in English*.

2. Cross-Linking and Digressions of *The Singularities*

With the announcement of the finality of his 2022 novel, Banville's imaginative explorations of memory, the nature and perception of reality, and the absorption in abstract thinking have come to an end, if we believe the writer (cf. Cummins, interview; Self 2022; Clark 2022). With the closing words of *The Singularities*, "to mark a full, and infinitely full, stop" (Banville 2022, 308), the author additionally raises speculations about a proposed discontinuity of his art. This makes a closer look at Banville's 'last' cerebral novel – which cannot yet profit from a distant evaluation – even more intriguing.

The types and strategies of referentialising employed in this narrative are of special significance for the proceeding of my argument. 'Reference' and 'referential' remain emotive words in post-structuralist criticism. The analysis wishes to point out the graded distinctions and different modes of reference and (self-) reflectedness in *The Singularities* – methods as diverse as poetic intertextuality, recapitulation of fictional characters and events, or the inclusion of current

philosophical and scientific discourse. Banville's narrative unfolds the figural representations of reflectivity counter to linear time and irrespective of the sequence of occurrences in the story. In this novel, characters especially from *The Infinities* (2009),² including the patriarch Adam Godley and his family, but also the winged and slightly malicious deity, reappear. *The Singularities* seasons the spatial setting familiar from the 2009 novel with suggestions of an alternative global history.³ From *The Blue Guitar* (2015) the narrative also carries on epistemological themes of the poststructuralist literary course. Only few topographical hints at the locations, such as the (ugly) Big House in an Irish landscape or the street name "Hunger Road" (Banville 2022, 23, 97), recalling the Great Famine, prompt rural Ireland as the setting of *The Singularities*.

The observation of extreme self-referentiality throughout Banville's *oeuvre* prompts a critic to investigate twentieth-century French theorists, especially Jean Baudrillard, about philosophical ideas that artistically emerge in the novels. His argument that 'reality' can only be comprehended as an exchange of models or simulacra, forming "an uninterrupted circuit without reference or circumference" (*Simulacra* 6; qtd. from Friberg-Harnesk 2018, 10, 173), matches features of Banville's fiction. In the writer's later literary narratives, the 'recycling' of characters and their preoccupations, of incidents or spatial elements is striking. Quoting Christopher Horrocks, Friberg-Harnesk locates the intellectual position of such an "infinite replay of all that happened before" (173) in Baudrillard's works and is certain that an examination of his philosophy can shed more light on Banville's fiction (9).⁴ In fact, the occupation with theories and abstraction proves central in *The Singularities* as well.

The chief activity of the main characters, including the super-human intradiegetic narrator, remains philosophising on various topics. Especially the narrative experiments with diverse ways of referentialising as a philosophical manner strike the eye. Apart from the self-referentiality in Banville's *oeuvre*, an encyclopaedic intertextuality gains prominence. Using manifold literary

2 The title *The Infinities* intertextually recalls "you numberless infinities/ Of souls" from Donne's *Holy Sonnets* 7, a poem from which *The Singularities* quotes "the round earth's imagin'd corners" (83).

3 Reduction of CO₂, the renaming of New York City as Nieuw Amsterdam following "the Dutch war against America" (192), or the utilisation of green hydrogen-driven cars or processed-seawater-fuelled vehicles are among the (un)believable changes.

4 Hedda Friberg-Harnesk's monograph analyses seven of Banville's novels and two plays from between 1997 and 2015 through Baudrillard's works. She traces the component of a 'reiteration of the same' in *The Blue Guitar* (2015) as a case study (2018, 173–192).

and non-literary allusions or citations, disparate textual fragments pervade this novel. Intertextual references reach from Pontius Pilate as quoted in the Bible (Banville 2022, 261) over Shakespeare's plays (cf. 25, 82, 307), Donne's *Holy Sonnets* (83), and Rilke's poems (308) to the libretto of *Fidelio's* choir of prisoners enjoying light and air in a brief, rapturous instant: "O welche Lust!" (88). In the first protagonist Felix Mordaunt, the experiencing consciousness of the novel's opening part and himself a released prisoner, the association with the opera triggers philosophical ruminations. He begins to realise – what is self-evident to the monitoring invisible consciousness behind his free indirect discourse – that human individuals living in 'freedom' and celebrating 'liberty' only "persist in dreaming themselves free" (88).

Examples of the impact of intertextual reminiscences also involve parodic paraphrases of Heisenberg's formula of the uncertainty relation, namely "that every increase in our knowledge of the nature of reality acts directly upon that reality", which renders all results of preliminary recognition relative and augurs a dead end to representation. Concerning the 'progress' of science, Mordaunt has learned in approximately twenty years in gaol how "Godley has shown that just by speculating about it in certain specialised ways we are steadily wearing out the world" (90). Evolution and regression apparently conflate if one follows "Godley's radical re-evaluation of all things", which caused despair in many scholars before it became a widely accepted theory:

Except that in those years such advance as there was had taken the form of recession, and showed our universe to be as a diminishing ball of fluff under an empty bed in an uninhabited mansion in a tangled wood on a frozen island on a dying planet floating in retrograde motion amid the illimitable darknesses of the multispace. No progress, then, only regress; no expansion, only shrinkage. (90)

The mundane imagery used in Mordaunt's reflection on the necessary epistemic revisions regarding man and evolution emphasises the shock of disenchantment, which the publication of Godley's Theorem meant for deterministic believers, creationists, intellectuals, and Darwinists alike. If we follow the argument of Godley the late scientist, an elating increase in knowledge means a reciprocal dispiriting emotional stirring caused by the insight into the diminutive role of the earth, its inhabitants and their expectations. In Mordaunt's, the

focaliser's, re-conceptualisation, the origins of the human 'We', whom he imagines as conscious and cerebral individuals, can by no means be pictured as apes on the savannah fashioning a flint into an axe-head. They must be conceived as the singularities manifest merely as "infinitesimal points of infinite mass" (90). The novel's paratextual title-definition, quoted from a dictionary, explains as the last of the meanings of "singularity": "a point in space-time at which matter is compressed to an infinitely great density" (2).

Although the focaliser's struggle with Enlightenment principles is violent, Mordaunt's recollection of Godley's theories reflects contemporary research in mathematics and (astro)physics. Therefore, the literary narrative practices referentiality also with regard to fundamental knowledge about humanity and society (cf. Robson 2022a). Like several fictions of renowned British authors, Banville's novel refers to the sciences to inspire his literary narrative.

3. Modal and Structural Attributes of *The Singularities*

The construction of the narrative text intertwines two main storylines, which both deny the unities of time and of action but conflate in the place. The characters are brought together in the pastoral setting of a Country House that has been renamed "Arden" since the original name "Coolgrange House" was found somehow disturbing (Banville 2022, 18, 101). Generally, names of places or persons are often revealed as volatile, misleading, deceiving, or ambiguous, with New York, Arcady, Paris, and Helen as examples. The country estate Arden House is already familiar to readers of *The Infinities*, together with its dead owner, the celebrity Professor Adam Godley, who like his first wife Dorothy and his daughter Petra maintains a spectral presence in *The Singularities* after his demise at the end of *The Infinities*.

The focaliser of the opening narrative strand in Part I, Felix Mordaunt alias Fred(die) Montgomery, a convicted murderer, is known as the first-person narrator from *The Book of Evidence* (1989), *Ghosts* (1993), and *Athena* (1995). 'Later' he became the aging inmate of the "open prison" Hirnea House and is now released-on-license. From a regular Victorian gaol, he was transferred to the detention house "for the ordinarily insane" (Banville 2022, 5), where he served the remains of a life sentence for killing a young woman. The victim of the murder was a housemaid who had surprised him while robbing a precious painting from Whitewater House, the neighbouring stately home of his friend Anna Behrens (134, 137, cf. O'Connell 2013, 51-52). Mordaunt believes, and tries to make

other people believe, that Arden House alias Coolgrange is his birthplace and that he was an aspiring and promising mathematician himself, very much like Adam Godley Sr. To the (supposed) home of his youth Mordaunt returns as “a free man, or freeish” (Banville 2022, 90), furnished by his former cellmate with a new name, clothed in old-fashioned, respectable garments and driving an expensive if hired red Sprite sports car. Yet not only does he seek reminiscences of his former life – Mordaunt is also sought out or traced by figures from different stages of his past: his cellmate Billy who comes to collect the Sprite, Anna the lady-friend from his youth, and Rex the dog. At Arden manor, he will meet the (rather sloppy) second-generation Godleys, that is Adam Jr., whose sister Petra has committed suicide, and he meets Adam's wife the beautiful Helen, a former actress with an alcohol problem ever since she lost her children (205). At Arden, Mordaunt also encounters the decrepit widow (second wife) of Adam Sr. as well as the ancient servants – members of the erstwhile owner family Blount. Mordaunt's moves are closely observed and followed up by a generally invisible, seemingly nameless presence, the god of this universe. He converses with an addressee with whom the reader may identify or not, because s/he is supposed to see the invisible, like Rex the dog. Despite many details familiar to the reader of Banville's novels, the general volatility influences the recipient through the literally mercurial narrative presentation, which renders it almost impossible to form a coherent reading experience except for some frivolous amusement. Occasionally using first-person narrative, the god from Greek mythology reminds his audience of earlier encounters in *The Infinities*:

And I, where am I? Perched at ease as is my wont up here among the chimney pots, enjoying the panoptic view. We have met already, in one of the intervals of my faltering infinitude. Hello, yes, me again! See how my winged helm gleams in the morning radiance. (Banville 2022, 5)

If the portrayal of Mordaunt's chronotope and its actants already evinces vicissitudes as crucial for human life the opening of a second plotline, which puts the biographer Jaybey and his biographee Godley Sr. centre stage, enhances contingency and uncertainties as principal features of a postmodern novel. During his lifetime, the powerful intellect of the late Adam Godley Sr. revealed the fictionality of the world-concept we all held/hold to be true and updated.

Instead of the heliocentric *universe*, Adam Godley devised and claimed the verity of the *multiverse*, which is of infinitely multiple or parallel worlds. His so-called revised “Brahma theory” (4; *passim*) was published at the time in a “world-shaking paper” (178) that earned him a reputation of the same rank as Rheticus and Copernicus, Kepler, Newton, or Einstein (180). For Godley established radical uncertainty – a self-defeating doctrine – as a comprehensive principle effective to the point where he “puts even self-identity in doubt” (4). He also contended “radical egalitarianism”, by which he meant “equal significance, equal worth, or [...] equal insignificance, equal worthlessness” for “all phenomena, in which he included human beings” (173). Consequently, radical indifference was assumed to have been his persuasion.

To give posthumously due honour to this famed mathematician and scientist, Adam Godley Jr. realises his plan to engage a well-known writer to carry out research on his father’s life and compose the world-famous patriarch’s ‘true’ biography. That the proposed narrative genre is an especially unstable one, participating in and drawing from fact and fiction alike, makes Dr (or, alternatively, Professor) William Jaybey, already author of *The Invention of the Past*, the ideal choice. *The Invention of the Past* recalls Banville’s novel *Shroud* (2002), starring Axel Vander, a protagonist with a politically questionable history who re-invents himself (Banville 2022, 192–193), comparably to Wolfgang Kessler in *The Lock-Up*. The fictive monograph in *Shroud* created by Jaybey was his attempt to unmask the protagonist Vander, whom he now calls a mountebank (Banville 2022, 161). Thus, Jaybey positions himself as a writer who specialises in uncovering cases that illustrate inconstancy or simulation; yet *The Singularities* shows how a general unreliability and uncertainty, with the latter even suspending the first-mentioned, and vice versa, are also taking a toll on Jaybey [J.B.] himself.⁵ An unexpected erotic allure fatefully emerges as a certain, yet moot experience induced by the overwhelming visual appearance of the female protagonist.⁶ Upon his arrival at Arden, where to Mordaunt is commissioned to drive him in the “lipstick-coloured” (102) Sprite motorcar, Jaybey incurably falls in love at first sight with the Lady of the Manor, graced

5 In this context, Friberg-Harnesk’s statement that “Baudrillard’s engagement with his own theories and their implications seems to have affected him personally” (2018, 14) explains why he stopped working on simulation.

6 Anja Müller (2004) and Elke d’Hoker (2004) have studied the importance of visibility and visual perception as representational strategy in Banville’s earlier novels.

by the appearance of a goddess, who greets him as “the biographer bloke” (103).⁷ A former actress, Helen Godley can avail herself of different speech registers and accents as she was able to put on costumes, postures, or roles as she pleased or was asked to do (e.g. 31).

In *The Singularities*, the fictional writer's erotic agitation interacts with the pressure to create a supreme work of historiography. The combination of desire and unfulfilled love with artistic productivity resumes a traditional motif of literature and the arts. Jaybey's rapture is doomed, because Helen the beautiful but desperate almost ignores him and eventually sleeps with Mordaunt the murderer, the man least interested in having a love affair there and then. Until the end, she pursues Mordaunt even though he rejects her. Anna Behrens is similarly stalking Mordaunt, soliciting him with the wish to be killed by him to put an end to her life of illness (143). While at first it remains unclear whether he will fulfil her wish his demeanour repeatedly leaves no doubt that Mordaunt feels bothered by women and their mere presence.

In Jaybey, the already familiar superhuman figure who acts as controller of Mordaunt has taken shape: Hermes or Mercury, son of Zeus, the herald to deities and speedy guide for humans. Hermes, the god of merchants, thieves, and liars, assumes Jaybey's guise and voice to tell the biographer's experience in first-person narrative (see e.g. 95–109), while the divinity uses free indirect speech for the narration of Mordaunt's focalisation. Even though reluctant to reveal his 'true' name Hermes discloses his descent when struck by Cupid's arrow at the sight of Helen Godley, simultaneously with his impersonation Jaybey:

Even we, in our eternal home up there on Olympus, even we don't understand it, and so we never tire of trying to know how it feels to have the experience; think of all the disguises, from swans and bulls to showers of gold coin, that my father Zeus assumed to have his way with this or that earthly girl of the moment. It's all beyond reason, yes, but what does reason avail, in matters of the heart? I ask you. (Banville 2022, 102)

7 To express the sublime or eminent with metaphors that can be termed banal is a characteristic of Jaybey, the distinguished writer, as of Mordaunt the criminal. When passionately adoring Helen, Jaybey realises “I know that a moment will come, sooner rather than later, when a cold blast will blow and knock love's soufflé flat as a pancake” (149). And so, it happens.

Love and desire become a recurrent theme in the novel with varying actants at different points in time: The erotic adventures of the deceased philanthropist Adam Godley Sr. occupy the infatuated biographer's research as well as the angry retrospective of Adam's daughter-in-law (223). Jaybey, suffering from unrequited passion for Helen Godley, – who herself seeks sex without finding pleasure, remains desolate, attracting disgrace by his dejection. Yet with the discovery of Godley's secret "Venetian Testament" (252–259), he hopes to be in possession of the ultimate source for the biography project, which will crown his professional career! Jaybey, for whom reading the testament with the story of Adam's last love causes another emotional tumult, briefly rejoices – only to be later stupefied by the revelation that it is a "packet of untruths" (303). The fickleness of everything that seems certain leads Jaybey to an impasse.

The supreme divine perspective accounts for the comedy and at times for satirical digressions of the narrative (e.g. Banville 2022, 91, 179). In *The Infinities*, the antecedent of *The Singularities* regarding most of the *dramatis personae*, a comic perspectival hue softened Adam the scientist's upsetting brilliance as well as personal tragedies. The impact of human misfortunes and despondence continues with variations in the 2022 novel, where the display of dark comedy in the deadly serious asserts itself as a hallmark of Banville's works. His subversive irony causes some critics to compare him with another Irish writer: Samuel Beckett, who repeatedly addressed the impossibility to continue trying to capture reality in narrative.

Returning to Arden House as 'a free man', Mordaunt finds that he has to stay apart from the manor together with the servants and to share the housekeeper's cottage. His mind is extremely busy, since simple actions or trivial occurrences unstoppably trigger associations or cogitation, plaguing and haunting him. The figural narrative situation, distinct from, though fused with, the authorial divine, exhibits Felix Mordaunt alias Freddie Montgomery as experiencing compulsive self-reflexivity and reasoning about eventualities. A scene when he enters Ivy Blount's home reveals his mental disquiet:

Stepping over a threshold always marks, for him, a series of tiny but significant transitions: outdoors to indoors, light to shade, that-he to this-he. Nothing like the slammer to intensify the self's awareness of its self, inexistent or otherwise. (111)

For the reflector figure, a released prison inmate, the material doorstep acts as an important signifier. Crossing a "threshold" implies the concept of 'transition' or trespassing. On the story level, the signifier calls upon Mordaunt's volatile identity, his different masks and roles chosen according to situational demands. The conclusive sentence of the above quotation, however, addresses general problems of identity and cognition. To proclaim the self as "inexistent or otherwise" subverts and exhausts all certainties, foreshadowing also the finality of a canonised literary tradition.

The divine voice, greater than Mordaunt the human focaliser, implies that any member of the addressed community – the superior, enlightened "We" who profit from epistemic narration – is already lucid regarding his (her?) ultimate contingency: (wo)man's freedom is a dream, randomness the real condition. Left insecure, the reflective protagonist Mordaunt fears that he might be going insane, even though he contends, "it is a metamadness" (88), corresponding to Godley's so-called "super-phys" (89) or "meta-mathematics (183) of his Brahma theory. Mordaunt is convinced that his own precarious state of mind still excels the ordinary madness of the seemingly sane, who do not realise that each of the singularities that constitute the humankind knows only one of the infinite versions of 'reality', and nothing positively. With his fundamental scepticism, Mordaunt seems to approach the ancient philosophers, e.g. Socrates from Greek antiquity, or Michel de Montaigne in the sixteenth century. Yet Mordaunt's scepticism is not guided by certified moral categories such as humility because of the limitedness of the human mind. His haughtiness – led by the supercilious divinity behind him – reflects a disdain of certainties and those who believe in them. Consequently, human knowledge becomes completely unreliable or, at best, provisional, circumscribed, and perishable. Together with its communication, it may be surpassed or undermined any time and infinitely. To distinguish dissembling or simulating from verity seems impractical.

With the structural move from the first narrative strand to the second, a modal difference also occurs. Mordaunt's life history and thoughts are told in third-person or free indirect discourse, interspersed with direct speech in the scenic presentation of encounters at Arden, and with the pondering of other characters. When Jaybey enters the stage, a shift in narration and perspective takes place before the end of Part I. Henceforth, his confessional disclosures alternate with the murderer's focalisation. The biographer's first-person narrative about his settling-in after his upsetting erotic experience, which triggers

memories of his earliest infatuation, culminates in his strange confrontation with decline, mortality, and transience (144–164). Before he immerses himself in working on the biography of the illustrious Adam Godley Sr. in the famous Sky Room, he explores the house, whose materiality preserves the memories of its past. During his strolls, he faces a being he belatedly comes to identify as an old woman resting on a divan under a heap of covers and shawls. She is Ursula, Adam Sr.'s decrepit widow, suffering from dementia, a madwoman in the attic as from Victorian fiction, hidden as far away from the centre of the house as possible, and usually cared for by Miss Blount, the housekeeper and member of the former owner family.

Thus, the biographer's initiation to Arden on behalf of his honourable project ostentatiously connects amorousness with mortality, a recurrent coupling among Banville's motifs. Jaybey's studies reveal the younger years of the dead genius Adam Godley as disappointing, if the writer believes the letters and reports. Godley, in his early thirties, found himself isolated and academically vague, desperate about making scientific progress in "Arcady" (180), situated on the other side of the Atlantic. While Anna Behrens can save his mental state, his companion Gabriel Swan achieves to have a short paper published in a specialised quarterly (183–184), obviously under his friend's name. This paper contains Godley's bizarre theorem, later referred to as "Brahma theory". With financial support from wealthy Anna, the publication in book form shortly follows, titled "*The Singularities Paper by Adam Godley*", with a dedication to Swan dropped in later editions. Apart from the theory of a 'multiverse' and radical uncertainty, it contains Godley's animistic ideas about the preponderance of *matter*, by which he proclaims the invalidity of classifying boundaries in Nature. Matter is not dead at all, "Matter, Godley insisted, is not mere, that is, is not nebulous or inert; on the contrary, it is alive, even at the lowest level, and therefore is immanent with an awareness of itself as existent: is, in other words, conscious" (172). "Legend-making" (187) immediately sets in after the publication, regarding the providence of the theory and diverse responses from the scientific community as well as commendations on Godley's personality, who himself fervently contributes to the mythmaking.

Jaybey's work, in contrast, strictly follows academic principles: he scrutinises other biographies or evaluates witnesses, discloses his sources, and adds deep-searching endnotes to Part II of the novel, containing the first draft of his biography. Jaybey faces tormenting problems of cognition during his enterprise,

because 'factual reality' recedes into an ever more ungraspable distance, a shaking experience that protagonists of fictions from Borges to Nabokov undergo. Banville's novelistic representation satirises the supposed value regarding human knowledge that Jaybey the writer still believes in.⁸

The decisive documentary evidence, the original manuscript of the "Singularities Paper", becomes the object of Jaybey's search in Part III, which resumes two central motifs especially of *The Blue Guitar*: the quest, and stealing. Mor-daunt is still a burglar and a thief, who also continuously steals objects from Arden House (231–234), but the famous manuscript is not to be found.

An assertive moment for Jaybey's research seems to proceed from the access gained through Godley's son to the late master's "vault", a room known as the Library (193). Yet "The papers themselves are not all that mysterious" (194), Jaybey gathers. During this guided historical discovery tour, he cannot stop thinking of his "carnal obsession" for Helen Godley – "It's her flesh I'm after, not her soul" (198). Pondering about a term for the finer distinctions her sensual appeal exerts on him he finds it not as simple, "lust is not the word; it's too, well, it's too lusty" (201). He utters his doubts about his gifts as a biographer to Adam Jr. and reflects about the "truth" that he wants to stick to when writing, comparing it to the nature of lies. Because to him an ethical dimension with an emphasis on responsibility and emotional values appears indivisible from the appreciation of scientific fame:

If Adam Godley was great, where did his greatness lie [...] beyond the confines of his work? He treated his wives abominably, did who knows what to who knows how many girls [...] and comprehensively mistreated his children, making a mess of this so needy, young-old fellow in front of me, and driving the other one to do away with herself. He exploited his friends, or those who aspired to be such, and struck down his rivals without mercy and with much dark delight. (199–200)

8 Robson's second review (2022b) on *The Singularities* was entitled "Things as They Aren't", an ambiguous definition of the novel, applicable to the subjects of the epistemic digressions as well as to the simulations adopted by a central character. A comment submitted on X (twitter) (accessed June 28, 2023), protests: "there is no greater horror, no greater threat to mental health, general sanity, life expectancy, than re-reading something you wrote 6+ months ago". Leo Robson's tweet response states that he does not agree.

“[A] practised and crafty dissembler” (170), as the biographer also realises, “Godley was not only a liar, he also had a genius for embellishing a falsehood” (171). The late patriarch carefully promoted an image of himself as a man of “simple pleasures and humble pastimes”, enjoying “those morality tales of our time” such as Western movies with good guys and bad guys and justice prevailing (187). Shocked by his discoveries, Jaybey, with his dignified notion of himself as a writer and diligent researcher, resolves, “what dirt remains still hidden I’ll make it my business to dish” (200), whatever the consequences. We expect more revelations about Godley Sr., which will even transgress “the confines of his work” and ruin his fame as a scientist who achieved a sea change. The final blow to Jaybey’s scholarly project will come at a presumptuous gathering: unhappy Helen Godley wants to celebrate her 40th birthday on a large scale, the date of her birthday coinciding with that of the death of her little son. In tune with a tradition of literary history, a big party is building up as the climax of William Jaybey’s and Felix Mordaunt’s stay at Arden.

With Mordaunt and Jaybey, the narrative also establishes two contrasting concepts of masculinity. The biographer’s self-reflexivity, his sensitivity combined with scrupulous introspection, and a nagging insecurity are juxtaposed to the determined callousness, which in the felon amalgamates with a sharp intellect. To the reader, the perspectival return to Mordaunt and his stratagems appears almost as a relief following Jaybey’s qualms, narrated as interior monologue, and a doleful scene with the Godleys. For Mordaunt and Anna Behrens are about to conspire together for a deal that is ‘real’, ‘factual’, and promising: Anna seriously wants him to kill her (215), ordering “Do!”, when he remembers “Don’t, the girl, the woman, the maid had said, that summer day long ago, in a strangely firm, clear voice” (231), before he killed her. In return for the ambiguous favour she is asking Mordaunt, Anna offers him the precious original manuscript of Godley’s *Singularities Paper*, since long ago in her possession. Mordaunt’s earlier statement that “human motivation is a mystery” (210) no longer seems valid. Abandoning his entanglement in elaborate musings about death and dying or imprisonment, from whose gloom the deity distances himself (244), Mordaunt realises that an undoubtable material opportunity lies beyond his impending departure from Arden. However, he cannot leave before Helen will surprisingly turn up to have sex with him in the housekeeper’s cottage.

Contradictory revelations continue, regarding Adam Godley’s private affairs as well as his scientific career. To Jaybey, Helen delivers an account of her

father-in-law's lecherousness. Whereas the celebrity himself would be amused at the broad ignorance about his philandering, the biographer is appalled at "Adam Godley's multitudinous loves" (224) when mapping out a chapter about these episodes with conscientious accurateness. The rumours about Godley's 'last love', the nineteen-year-old girl in wintry Venice, seem little trustworthy to Jaybey, when Mordaunt surprises the younger Adam in the junk room, holding his retrieval. It is not the "Brahma" manuscript, but his father's "Venetian Testament" about his "final amour fou" some weeks after his first wife Dorothy had committed suicide (278), carefully stored by Petra before she also killed herself (253).

Jaybey the scholar exults at the indubitable proof of an authentic source for the biography and immediately revises his own pejorative judgement in having believed Adam Godley a scoundrel and "a base rascal, a straw man, a pack of lies" (256). Yet the biographer cannot be certain about the validity of this confessional manuscript the genius left behind. Jaybey ponders: "Is it a fiction, a fantasy, the record of a dream? Was it written for the writer's own diversion [...] or had he a darker purpose in mind? [...] Could it be a forgery? [...] Is it all a hoax, a booby trap?" set for future researchers? (263) Despite the late scientist's surprising passion for the girl and his emotional suffering, to which the document testifies, the biographer mistrusts it: "Her subject was art and artists" – is she herself imaginary? (278) Or "Was she [...] merely – merely! – a projection of Petra, his daughter?" (279) The polyvalence of the written text is exposed with Jaybey remaining doubtful. Uncertainty is affirmed.

When the party, symbol of incongruous gathering and hasty dissolution, starts with Helen Godley as host, the characters come together and meet the sundry guests, some of them apparently mysterious or dubious. Several times the divine commentator interferes in first-person narrative with remarks on the company. He also lets the addressee catch a glimpse of a future that will be enlightened globally by the reduced output of CO² or personally by Helen's "judicial separation reluctantly agreed to by Adam the Broken-Hearted", followed by her fabulous financial, mental and social climb (283). The intervention of the divinity even dissolves the bipolar use of narrative modes on behalf of the two male protagonists: towards the end, the omniscient Hermes presents Jaybey from an aloof point-of-view, a position he also takes to the addressee, from whom further information is wilfully withheld (295). Indisputably, a god is the director who orchestrates this performance – the party on the fictional and the

narrative on the metafictional level. Due to the divine reign, Jaybey finally encounters Benjamin Grace, a close friend of the deceased, the Emeritus Fellow of Poststructuralist Studies (79), or, alluding to the community's peculiar 'jargon', of "Burble Burble at the University of Babble Babble" (292), who is an unyielding deconstructionist. With "his neat little cloven hoofs" (299) and his table manners Benny's features as predatory animal are reinforced together with the exhibition of his bright intellect. The fear and aversion he evokes in Jaybey come close to *panic terror*.⁹ Already variously disenchanted, the biographer tries to evade further revelations as long as possible. He

really couldn't face facing Benny Grace, not just yet. He turned and retreated through the house, displacing air, fleet as a god, for of course he is a god, he is me, as I am he, as they are all me and mine, my made-up creatures, *entheos* briefly, for their brief moment on this patch of earth I've lent them, patches themselves, inspired mechanicals. (292, italics in original)¹⁰

In the story of *The Singularities*, nothing and nobody is what they were or seem to be at present: the novel tells of "Things as They Aren't" (Robson 2022b). This heading of an ephemeral review upturns a line from a Wallace Stevens-poem on art and the artist, quoted as an epitaph in *The Blue Guitar*. In the novel at hand, error, deceptiveness, and falsehood prevail where facts or authenticity are presumed. Even though the poststructuralist Grace appears as a monster to the ethically minded Jaybey, Baudrillard's ideas on simulation and simulacra triumph, transpiring the novel's adherence to the tradition of poststructuralist philosophy and aesthetics. The protagonist's uncertainty about voices, originals or identities mocks human understanding. *The Singularities* carries on epistemic elements known from *The Blue Guitar* and *The Infinities* where Friberg-Harnesk has traced several components of Jean Baudrillard's orders of simulation. Banville's notion of a dissolution of borderlines between the divine, the human, fauna and flora,

9 In *The Infinities*, the scientist Benny Grace impersonated the Greek god Pan, whose physical appearance was half-human and half-beast, with hoofs of a goat instead of feet (cf. Friberg-Harnesk 2018, 138).

10 The Greek word *entheos* means "a god within, possessed or inspired by a god, divine". The word 'enthusiasm' is derived from 'entheos'='divinely inspired' (Merriam-Webster). In antiquity, the term portrayed poets and artists.

and additionally between animate nature and the "mechanical" also correlates with the philosopher's theories (cf. Friberg-Harnesk 2018, 166–167).

Jaybey-the-man also presents an impersonation of Hermes the god. Amalgamation into an ambiguous nature, not a separate simulacrum ("copy") becomes the result in this case. Regarding the characters in *The Singularities* the god claims that "they are all me", even though he keeps an observing distance to Felix Mordaunt, a replacement of Freddie Montgomery. Mordaunt represents a faked identity or palimpsest, but physically he is still the same man. The above quote from *The Singularities* reaffirms that all are the god's similitudes and property, which conjures up the belief of creationists as well as the awareness of virtual reality and SF fans, or the cognizance of fiction writers.

A physically disagreeable and intellectually humiliating presence, Benjamin Grace, "with easy dismissiveness" metes out the final blow to the scholarly writer and his grand project (Banville 2022, 302). Grace has more disillusionment in store for the mortal Jaybey, which will incapacitate his professional ambitions that insinuated, "even the simulacrum of the life of such a man would be a thing of note, or so he had supposed" (304–305). Benjamin Grace destroys this assumption, because he claims that all is fiction or a lie (302) what Godley wrote in the Venetian Testament or elsewhere. Benjamin Grace refers to the famous mathematician as the Lord's "self-appointed rival" (301) as an omnipotent creator, who would have committed suicide had he found the strength. Considering the Brahma theory of animate matter, infinite multiverses, and boundless relativism, Adam Godley "filched it all from Gaby Swan" (304), formerly his friend, who died early in mental derangement attributed to Godley's maliciousness (178). Benjamin Grace contends, "no wonder he and Gabriel Swan were close, for both were arch tricksters" (304), a familiar epithet also of Hermes. Of the two mathematicians, Swan was the brilliant, imaginative one and Godley the imitator and profiteer, according to Grace. A cynic as deconstructionist, he assures Jaybey that he need not finish his laborious work, since nobody will want to publish his biography of Adam Godley containing the unbelievable (and unreliable) 'truth' about this great man (304) – readers would much rather believe the lies.

The counterweight to uncertainty-without-prospect surfaces in the second narrative strand at another spot of the dissolving birthday party, where Mordaunt takes a resolute departure from Arden, rumination, and intoxicated Helen Godley, who suspects him of being about to "seeing to [his] floozie". "In a manner of speaking, yes" (306), he soberly answers. With his exit from the unifying place,

he envisages a new (or renewed) daring enterprise at the neighbouring Country House. Mordaunt leaves enriched “by cunning and stealth” (305) and the premonition that much more will come in shortly when he, “her designated executioner” (235), takes care of Anna Behrens in her stately home. He intends to subsequently sell his reward, the manuscript of the Brahma theory, to the shady son of an Italian arts dealer of doubtful reputation (306, see 266) – an ironical hint at the connectivity of imaginative creativity which both art and science need and display.

The closing scene of this drama about the male protagonists’ bifurcating paths, however, alludes to *The Tempest*. Like Shakespeare’s last (?) play, Banville’s novel promotes a “thing of darkness”, acknowledged by its/his master. But this narrative equally advocates a miraculous epiphany, chasing gloom, tragedy, and despair with a show and music: the return of “Prospero’s Magic Circus”, which the clinking, rattling, and the flying colours announce from far away (307). The circus appears as a fleeting counterpoint to the Gothic of crime as well as to the joyless birthday party where food, drink, and dismaying gossip predominated instead of revelry. With the entrance of the circus, the fictional narrative also delves into yet another layer of the ‘as if’ or the ‘make-believe world’, which acting, simulation, and simulacra present. The symbolic order comes into sight and within one’s reach when through the magician a marvel materialises.

On the historical level, this appearance of the wonderful in the drive to the mansion that bears the name of Shakespeare’s wonderland bridges the past decades back to Banville’s novels *Birchwood* (1973) and *Ghosts* (1993), where references to Prospero and *The Tempest* are numerous (cf. O’Connell 2013, 94). The first-mentioned still shows the author’s early affiliation with the ‘Irish canon’, because it addresses the afflictions of Ireland with themes and motifs, some of which *The Singularities* seizes again: the Big House, madness, crime, failure, loss and grief, at times represented with farcical traits. In *Birchwood*, the protagonist Gabriel Godkin meets a travelling troupe of performers who call themselves “Prospero’s Circus”, a name closing the gap between the theatre and the fair-ground – a comparison which in Shakespeare’s time was still a more common view. In Banville’s fictions, the appearance of the entertainers presents a polyvalent, ambiguous signifier. Gabriel Godkin in *Birchwood* joins the travelling artists in his quest for his missing twin and shares their needy wandering life. To Helen Godley, the former actress, ‘Prospero’s Circus’ promises the craved-for relief and enchantment in a disheartening world replete with saddening experiences – the Sprite with Mordaunt having vanished in a dust cloud on the road.

It was, yes it was. Prospero's Magic Circus had returned, after all this time, and just for her. She thought of the juggler, his hip bones and exquisite wrists. She set off running down the slope of the garden, barefoot through the warm damp grass. Despite the wine, despite the years, she felt suddenly light and airy, as if a pair of little wings had sprouted at her ankles. (Banville 2022, 307)

Sensuous experiences, past and present, affirm her individuality and the self, with a comic element in the playful. The clown, who usually travels with the circus, appears as a grotesque figure but nonetheless relates to the actor and the artist. The painter Oliver Orme in *The Blue Guitar* describes himself as a clown (cf. Friberg-Harnesk 2018, 180–182), and William Jaybey contemplates the possibility that he is making a fool of himself with this biography and the biographee's Venetian Testament, which might be a practical joke (Banville 2022, 263). Helen's buoyancy in greeting Prospero's Circus almost keeps her flying like an unearthly creature. It was Dionysus, in whose service the theatre performances in ancient Greece took place, of whom the audience believed that he was inspiring humans with *entheos*, 'the god inside'. The outlook on Helen's 'third course' that proves neither a dead end nor a grave trespass thus marks the novel's closure.

4. Cornerstones of *The Singularities* in the Context of Contemporary Irish Fiction

Banville's 2022 novel stands out with a network of references on different levels, from the 'revival' of characters and their biographies from his earlier narratives via intertextual citations from diverse works to topical non-literary and nonfictional issues of contemporary society. A close look at *The Singularities* eventually requires a broad definition of 'referentiality', extending from represented self-reflexiveness to the thematisation of scientific subject matters. This 'web of references', as I would like to call it, reaches beyond the "Universe for His Past Creations" (Robson 2022a) in taking reflectiveness of the main characters on anthropological and epistemological notions to the end of the road. I submit that *The Singularities* states the "used-upness of certain forms", which in *The Literature of Exhaustion* (1967) John Barth famously claimed for a traditional, canonised form of novelistic production. Following *The Blue Guitar*, Banville's 'last' novel demonstrates an exhaustion of the possibilities and a departure from the propositions of the postmodern novel. Deconstruction

entails entropy with regard to human cognition and reaffirms its aspect of tragi-comedy. The tragic element materialises in an overwhelming futility experienced by the first-person narrator Jaybey, while entropy as the favourite idea of Professor Adam Godley's 'last love' does not waive the comical hue (Banville 2022, 268). The effect of tragi-comedy also spreads from the resoluteness of the offender's promising progress in 'real life'.

The different stations of awareness and reflectiveness, also exhausting Jaybey as the narrative subject, receive pride of place in this novel. They eclipse the story and the importance of its episodes and social events. The arduous substance manifests itself not in the plot – if it may be called that – but in the characters' wandering thoughts, sense perceptions, and emotions. They revolve around personal questions, intimate feelings and hardships, brushing issues of public and global importance, such as the whence and whereto of humankind, the origin of the universe, scientific progress or success vs. ethics, and epistemological problems. The novelist's representational strategies produce a textual network of high complexity without a linear time concept or the unity of action. Alternating narrative threads and narrators with the ensuing change between third-person and first-person or figural narrative situation allow an insight into the corresponding perspectives. Jaybey-the-man indulges in self-exposure, which often seems eccentric, adding to his vulnerability expressed with the immediacy of the narrative 'subject' – itself a questionable entity. The focaliser Mordaunt eventually realises the problem of personal identity, one of the recurring dilemmas of Banville's protagonists, in an un-philosophical, rationalistic way. Deliberately obfuscating his identity on record, Mordaunt claims the authority over the visibilisation of his self. Because of his reinvention, he can appear cool, determined, and vigorous, as long as the omniscient consciousness behind him does not show him reflecting on his near-death experience (240–241) or the strain of dissembling.¹¹ In contrast to Jaybey's sensitivity and defencelessness, the perpetrator released-on-license and ready to commit offence and homicide again if it is to his advantage strikes with his present robust lack of empathy and morality. The supernatural mediator as a distancing omniscient consciousness, however,

11 Mark O'Connell (2013, 91–99) interprets Montgomery in *The Book of Evidence* and *Ghosts* on the background of psychoanalytic theories as a narcissistic character, who tries in vain to overcome in prison the division between his 'true self' and his 'false self'. Similarly split up are the 'internal' and 'external' self.

renders Mordaunt's calculating reflectiveness and acute observation plainly interesting without raising indignation about the lack of moral standards.¹²

Paradoxical traits or *aporia* conspicuously mark the central characters. Compared to the male protagonists, Helen Godley is seldom seen from inside, a rare view made feasible by the help of a benevolent (male) deity. Regardless of the power she sways over her ineffectual husband and the cultivated but shaky biographer the discrepant variants of the male gaze proffered by her unhappy admirer on the one hand and the released convict's indifference on the other hand discern her as wanting and melancholic. Jaybey's and Mordaunt's perceptions of Helen in the narrative present – foregrounding liquor, tearfulness, and sexual harassment (passive and active, past and present) – spark off heteronormative or at least traditional concepts. In quoting criticism about Banville's early works, Friberg-Harnesk agrees that his portrayals of women “leave the ‘gender system untouched’” (6), which I wish to confirm with regard to *The Singularities*. The masculinities incorporated by Mordaunt and Jaybey are more differentiated, emphasising cognitive and spiritual performance, despite the dissimilitude of the men.¹³ Intellect and a high complexity also mark the spectral Adam Godley Sr. and his academic friend (or fiend) Grace.

Whereas mourning and depression, because of her experiences of loss and want, have left Helen downcast and disconnected, it is physical invalidity that weakens the minor female characters, namely old Mrs Ursula Godley, Anna Behrens, and Ivy Blount. The status of Cissy the art historian of the Testament remains unconfirmed. Hopelessness afflicted two women of the Godley family, who committed suicide: Adam Godley's proficient daughter Petra and his first wife Dorothy. The death of a woman – often by her own hand or a man's – recurs as a motif from Banville's earlier novels but is an event banned from the present action and relegated to the meta-narrative layer of *The Singularities*. Congruous with the paradigm of a *tragi-comedy* the saddening demise of several female characters lies in the past or the time to come. Especially representations

12 Abeel's 1990 review of *The Book of Evidence* offers a perspicacious portrayal of this character: “Still, Freddie [as autobiographical first-person narrator] is very much his own man. In fact, he comes across with such immediacy, we almost empathize with him, even when he is most depraved. Acutely self-conscious and observant [...]” he seems to have barely changed ‘in the meantime’. In *The Singularities*, his mediator Hermes compensates for Montgomery's/Mordaunt's sinister and menacing features.

13 See Zwierlein (2014, 184) about gendered melancholia, and her discussion of Juliana Schiesari's 1992 research.

of violent or induced death stay beyond the limits of this book's interests. The author relocates neutralisation or the killing of an individual to the 'crime novel' with its unshakable concept of reality.

Regarding *The Singularities*, the term 'characters' also invites a redefinition, since the hybridity of creatures and beings is manifest, rendering hybridity a trope. The narrative does not separate humanity from the divine sphere, as pictured in Jaybey or Helen. Nor is human divorced from animal nature, as shown in Rex the dog at the beginning and Professor Benjamin Grace at the end.¹⁴ According to Godley, we may not even identify the material sphere as lacking life or consciousness (Banville 2022, 172). The expanding of hybridity as the post-humanist ontological state in beings of different kinds becomes comprehensive here. It is reflected in the generic hybridity of the three Quirke-and-Strafford crime books published by a highbrow house between 2020 and 2023.

With a terminal swerve, the end of *The Singularities* elicits the metafictional level. Surprisingly, with regard to the author's general predilection for the visual as for the invisible and spectral, this shifting is attained by a representation of auditory perceptions: the last sentence replaces the "tinny music" (307) of the approaching troupers with the scratching sound of the writer's steel pen, which definitively concludes this story with a final full stop (308). The rather inharmonious sound produced by the instruments of the writer and those of the travelling entertainers becomes apparent. The signifier and the signified, the producing and production of art, imperfect and disquieting, symbolically create the experience of life through magic.

To conclude, I return to my initial citation concerning different directions taken by the contemporary Irish novel, distinguishing the socio-political historical novel from the post-national type. The question arose where to place John Banville's literary narratives. He has long adhered to the aesthetics of postmodern fiction. Nonetheless, I would like to inscribe *The Singularities* with the motto: yet it is referential, in many ways. The author invokes philosophical and scientific knowledge, to revert with his recent "crime books" published under his own name to national-historical topics. *Snow*, *April in Spain*, and *The Lock-Up* also show the restitution of another (older?) aesthetic principle, namely of certainty

14 The hybrid nature of the dog and the professor already revealed itself in *The Infinities*, which also uses the archetype of metamorphosis in the *Amphitryon* myth. Cf. Friberg-Harnesk on the similitude with "Baudrillard's notion that the demarcation lines of the human are becoming blurred" (2018, 146).

and realism, while they reveal that reflectiveness in character narration does not vanish when dealing with sensitive socio-political issues.

Banville personally announces the termination of the novel form he excels in. My reading of *The Singularities* demonstrates that we can attribute its extinction to the exhausted fountain of post-structuralism, which his new turn – it might be deemed a *return* – additionally confirms. The relinquishing of postmodernist criteria of fiction partakes in a current flow. In *Snow*, *April in Spain*, and *The Lock-Up*, philosophy takes second place behind the events and the solution of a riddle by the agents involved in uncovering the criminal deed. Figural auto-reflexivity, cogitation, and intertextuality, dominating *The Singularities*, lose their preponderance over plot and characters. A linear time sequence and teleological composition directed towards problem-solution reveal principles of a construction guided by logic and discipline – like the systematic investigation of a crime. The detective and the pathologist, complicated and thoughtful individuals with a biography that reflects the difficult history of Ireland, recur in Banville's new trilogy resonant with national-cultural and political topics of the past decades. Therefore, Banville comes to comply eventually with Tóibín's statement: "The purpose of much Irish fiction, it seems, is to become involved in the Irish argument" (Haekel 2020, 23) by what resembles a relapse into an older, familiar form. Yet Banville's new publishing house, proud of its list of the most eminent fiction writers, indicates a serious literary ambition. The new Quirke-trilogy reinstates the principles of *mimesis* and realism in narrative fiction parallel to the "full stop" concluding *The Singularities*. Banville's shift matches a literary development mainly remarked by recent criticism of contemporary *British* fiction.

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