



***The Sea*. John Banville. Knopf: New York, 2005. Paperback, 195 pages. ISBN 0-30726- 311-8. \$23.00.**

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To the surprise of many, John Banville's *The Sea* won the 2005 Booker prize for fiction, surprising because of all of Banville's dazzlingly sophisticated novels, *The Sea* seems something of an afterthought, a remainder of other and better books. Everything about *The Sea* rings familiar to readers of Banville's *oeuvre*, especially its narrator, who is enthusiastically learned and sardonic and who casts weighty meditations on knowledge, identity, and art through the murk of personal tragedy. This is Max Morden, who sounds very much like Alexander Cleave from *Eclipse* (2000), or Victor Maskell from *The Untouchable* (1997). Banville is an acknowledged master of this persona that in other novels has been wondrously animated by narrators who, like Max, winnow with great care through "the rubble of the past," the colossal heap of epistemological and ethical failures amassed by the author's damaged protagonists. *The Sea* further confirms something that we already know: this voice is Banville's signature disposition in the way that, say, Molloy is Beckett's or Humbert Humbert is Nabokov's, two writers whose thematic company Banville keeps. But unlike *Ghosts* (1993) or *The Untouchable*, novels that match philosophical depth to narrative pop, *The Sea* lacks for the most part any fresh air and so the book long smoulders, the cinders of previous, and by far, more intense conflagrations.

For readers unfamiliar with Banville's fiction, though, *The Sea* is a skilfully written primer. Suffused with nostalgia, the book appropriately opens in a moment of return: the elderly, not particularly wizened Max Morden retreats to a seaside town on Ireland's coast shortly after the death of his wife Anna from cancer. Max is in full flight from the world and from the grief-stricken role he is expected to play. He takes up residence at the Cedars, a summer house Max visited fifty years ago that, in the intervening decades, has been converted into a lodging house run under the dotting care of Miss Vavasour, whose private demons, we come to learn, are legion. Ensnared therein, Max dabbles in his book about the painter Bonnard—a "very great painter," Max admits, "about whom, as I long ago came to realise, I have nothing of any originality to say" (30)—and gets wonderfully drunk at night. He time-shares the attentions of Miss Vavasour with fellow lodger Colonel Blunden, a comic figure who may or may not be a retired colonel and whose phlegmatic daily rituals warrant a scrutiny born from Max's boredom: "Often at a loss myself to know what to do with my time, I have been compiling a schedule of the Colonel's

typical day" (139). Bearing witness to the activities of others appears to be Max's sole occupation in this self-enclosed, fallen world.

It comes as no surprise that time spent in the po-faced company of Colonel Blunden is window dressing for the novel's real stuff, which is nothing short of *apologia pro vita sua*, exquisitely, if excessively, told. Accounting for his life and his collisions with other lives compels Max to write; the present is of limited interest, and we very much believe his daughter Claire when she baits him, "You live in the past," and, more especially, when he engorges this hook: "To be concealed, protected, guarded, that is all I have ever truly wanted, to burrow down into a place of womby warmth and cower there, hidden from the sky's indifferent gaze and the harsh air's damagings. That is why the past is just such a retreat for me, I go there eagerly, rubbing my hands and shaking off the cold present and the colder future" (45). Be assured that Max is an exceedingly glum chum, living as he does with the past beating inside him "like a second heart" (10).

What happens in this novel happens in Max's memories. There are two sets of recollections that Max studies and intertwines, the first is plucked from childhood visits to this coastal village, spent in the numinous presence of the Grace family, the second is constituted by memories of his wife Anna and scenes from her final illness. The shared pivot for these recollections is mortality, though we do not realize the extent to which death impacts both narratives until the novel's final volte-face, a *dénouement* that confirms Max's tragic worldview, a perspective that Banville's stunning prose at every turn evokes: "What a little vessel of sadness we are, sailing in this muffled silence through the autumn dark," Max at one point remarks (53).

Max's youth plays out like a tragedy in three acts. Act one: he spends his holidays next to the sea within the confines of a small bungalow amidst quarrelling parents—"their unhappiness was one of the constants of my earliest years," he recalls (26). Act two: enter the Grace family, who play the incandescent counterpoint to Max's domestic meanness. Carlo and Connie Grace, their twin children Chloe and the deaf-mute Myles, their beleaguered governess, "poor Rosie," are "gods," "operatic," part of an "evanescent past." They are the glitterati, and he is immediately enamoured with the Graces, their insouciance attractive to a boy whose father's eventual abandonment intensifies his feelings of loss and social inferiority. And like most attractions, this one is ramped up by Max's budding libido, fertilized by images of Connie Grace in a sopping swimsuit or—and even better—Connie Grace *sans* swimsuit but hiding her "phosphorescent nudity" in the folds of a loosely wrapped beach towel. At the end of part one, Max's attentions shift from the imagined company of Connie Grace to the real company of Chloe Grace: they hold hands, awkwardly lip-lock in a movie theatre, and the like, which is to say that their affections awkwardly lurch about like most adolescent crushes, though their relationship obliquely precipitates the novel's final tragedy.

Despite Max's edenic reverie, we soon realize that all is not well in the Grace family. In part two, sounds of the fall rumble from somewhere in the middle distance, and the novel's real strength resides in the subtle ways Banville insinuates tragedy into Max's seaside idyll. Scenes of Max and the Grace family on the beach are marvellous for their evocation of a breezy, sun-swept landscape edged by faint airs of menace. Voices trilling across the hot sand sound to Max like "shotguns in the distance." Chloe is peevish with her mother, Myles leers and goggles at Max.

Gazing at Connie Grace presents problems as well and oft leads Max into self-revulsion, for he feels that, by setting Connie up as an erotic idol, "ancient and elemental," she transforms from "woman into demon and then in a moment was mere woman again" (86). Max is shamed by Mrs. Grace's travels through his imagination, shifting as she does from being a renaissance nude, full of lustre and, well, "Grace," to a middle aged woman, glistening in flop sweat. So begins part three, centred on a tragedy in the eponymous sea: Rosie walks in on Max, Myles and Chloe engaging in an odd afternoon tryst, after which Myles and Chloe run into the sea and swim out, "their two heads bobbing on the whitish swell, out, and out" until "a splash, a little white water, whiter than all around, then nothing, the indifferent world closing" (180). They drown—Rosie, Max, and a fledgling lifeguard are their hysterical and final witnesses.

If the Graces represent a ruined ideal world to the young Max, Anna provides Max the "chance to fulfil the fantasy of myself" in adulthood (77). Anna facilitates Max's re-formulation of his lost world, a commission familiar to Banville's protagonists. Banville is a writer fascinated by knowledge, by how we learn about the world and, in turn, how we attempt to know it or, nominally, to describe it. Books published earlier in his career like *Doctor Copernicus* (1976) and *The Newton Letter: An Interlude* (1982) dramatize the attempt to formulate the world through crystalline proofs that eventually shatter under the weight of linguistic instability. Each proof succumbs, as Tony Jackson perceptively writes, to "the situation of living everyday life in the context of postmodern understandings of knowledge and truth" (Jackson 1997: 510). Language, the mechanism we use to describe the world, stymies our ability to know the world or to depict it perfectly. From the personas of Copernicus, Newton, and Kepler, Banville details the limitations of science's truth claims about natural phenomena and implies that contesting views on meaning and meaning-making erupt from the language employed to write science, above and against each scientist's desire to locate those formidable truths so advertised by scientific discourse. "A new beginning, then, a new science, one that would be objective, open-minded, above all honest, a beam of stark cold light trained unflinchingly upon the world as it is..." is how the hero of Banville's *Doctor Copernicus* first characterizes his theory of planetary motion; this "new science" fails and pitches Copernicus into despair (*The Revolutions Trilogy: Doctor Copernicus*, 2001: 100). Absence of any scientific foundation leads the peripatetic Freddie Montgomery (from *The Book of Evidence*) into a series of violent substitutions between knowledge of the world and knowledge of the other or, as Max articulates it through Levinasian lingo in *The Sea*, "the absolute otherness of other people" (125). In many respects, Freddie's failure to recognize the other as other marked a major turning point in Banville's career, in that he shifted from describing the epistemological consequences of the failure to know the world to narrating the ethical effects of not being able to know, with any certainty, other people, "other lives, other lives" (*The Sea* 142).

Max Morden is not inoculated with epistemological anxiety and so suffers, like Copernicus and Freddie, its chock-a-block effects. Max's exceptional view of his marriage to Anna for example is clarified and punctured by her illness: "This was not supposed to have befallen her. It was not supposed to have befallen us, we were not that kind of people. Misfortune, illness, untimely death, these things happen to good folk, the humble ones, the salt of the earth, not to Anna, not to me" (15). Her sickness mocks their intimacy, it sabotages their "imperial progress that was [their] life together," it unravels Max's felt sense that he knows the world or, at the very least, can make sense of it by knowing another. Max presents Anna's sickness as a fundamental crisis in his

self-understanding; on this point he muses "I know so little of myself, how should I think to know another?" (159). To counter such apprehensive claims, Max briefly takes up a theory on the self that is performative and hypothetical, as do many of Banville's protagonists, to secure his wavering self-understanding and to claim that what Anna *actually* provided him was a way to escape the "paragons of authenticity" (*pace* poststructuralist theories on identity) (161).

But such a familiar move by novel's end strikes Max, and readers grown weary of novelists running for the shelter of narrative indeterminacy, as remarkably unsatisfying—his despair trumps any half-baked embrace of, say, performativity authorized by postmodern razzle-dazzle. Fixed by despair, Max grieves, though he is not the only character caught in tragedy's undertow, for we learn finally that Miss Vavasour is also Rose, "poor Rosie," who by Max's side watched the Grace children drown fifty years ago. Certainly Banville might ultimately suggest that tragedy makes us ever alive to a world that is indifferent, impenetrable and that loss sets us adrift from prior modes of self-understanding or epistemological order. Allowing Max to impart his grief to another, however, Banville also realizes in *The Sea*, as few other of his novels do, tragedy's shared dominions.

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