Desire, Pursuit and Loss: The Making of *Athena*

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Abstract

Taking a cue from the concept of return in myth—and seeing return as an inherent aspect of myth's structure—this paper considers the recurrence of myth in John Banville's *Athena* (1995). Several aspects of the novel clearly allude to the creative process as envisioned in ancient mythology with the birth of the goddess of wisdom and the arts from Zeus's head: the title *Athena*, the mention of a missing painting titled "The Birth of Athena," and persistent references throughout the text to the mind's efforts to imagine and describe A., the girl Morrow—a Dublin art critic—meets in the house where the paintings he has been asked to assess are stored. Yet, the initial A. that Morrow uses to refer to the girl both reinforces the allusion to the myth of Athena and functions as a multiple signifier. This indeterminacy denotes a type of writing that while striving to summon the other into existence expresses a point of crisis in the irreducible alterity of such a process within the context of Banville's *oeuvre* and of late twentieth-century writing. Morrow's musings on the thought of A. become indistinguishable from the writing process, both in relation to the main narrative and in the critiques of the paintings which depict scenes from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* centred on the cycle of desire, pursuit, and loss. The paper argues that Banville's use of a number of myths associated with the creative process serves to register a gradual loss of authorial control and a critique of epistemological discourse that characterised late twentieth-century writing. The writer's desire to possess the work of art (Pygmalion) is juxtaposed and pitched against a more problematic idea of the writing of the other into existence through the metamorphoses of Apollo via Banville's inheritance of a Romantic and Modernist aesthetics (Keats and Stevens's poetry), which all contribute to the making of *Athena*. In this way, the story of A. functions as a living canvas or tapestry (*tableau vivant*) for a range of mythical counterparts that revisit the Morrow-A. relationship in its many levels of significance.

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1. Introduction: The Enduring Appeal of Myth

In exploring the recurrence of myth in contemporary literature, it is useful to consider the process underlying the 'translation' of mythemes and their re-interpretation within varying contexts. If translation is understood in its wider sense, or as 'cultural translation', to highlight the varied and varying modes in which myths are carried over from one socio-cultural and historical context to another, we begin to understand how the enduring appeal of myth, and its eternal return in contemporary literature and culture, has its basis in "myth's malleability and capacity for movement across cultures and media [...] to express each society's specific concerns" (Pestell and Palazzolo, 3). George Steiner's formulation about communication in *After Babel* that "To understand is to decipher. To hear significance is to translate" (xii) can be applied to myth and to the necessity of translating it in order to communicate its significance in different contexts. The act of retelling, then, affects every aspect of communication and includes both literary and cultural translations. The tracing of these "journeys of cultural transmission" (Pestell and Palazzolo, 3) in the retellings of specific myths reveals not just the enduring appeal of myth, but also, most importantly, how the concept of return, and its eternal recurrence, is essential to mythic consciousness. The adaptation of the myth of Demeter and Persephone, for instance, takes us on a journey of exploration of the socio-cultural and political discourses underlying each retelling of the myth in the host society. The subtle shifts in the figuration of mythemes and mythscapes associated with Demeter and Persephone—from Ovid's recasting of the Eleusinian and the Nysian plains into a Sicilian setting (Enna) to Rita Dove's reimagining of the mother-daughter-lover interaction in a variety of locations (Paris, Arizona, Mexico, and Sicily) in *Mother's Love* (1995) to Louise Glück's unrelenting focus on Averno, a small crater lake in southern Italy, in her homonymous collection of poems (2006)—ensure the myth's continuing relevance to contemporary themes and concerns. At the same time, these adaptations, as shown in *Translating Myth* (2016) and in keeping with Hans Blumenberg's observation in *Work on Myth* (34), "reflect myth's versatility" and "its capacity to retain a constant core while showing a high margin of variation" (Palazzolo).

Taking a cue from the concept of return in myth, as an inherent aspect of its structure, I consider how Banville's use of myth in *Athena* serves to accommodate a critique of science, history and critical theory and a concern with the limits of epistemological discourse that was of paramount relevance from the 1980s onwards. In doing so, I will consider a number of myths that are central to the novel both on a thematic level (the story of A., the girl Morrow, an art critic, meets in the house where the works he needs to assess are stored and who becomes the object of his desire) and in reference to the creative process (the making of *Athena*). In this way, the story of A. functions as a living canvas or tapestry (*tableau vivant*) for a range of mythical counterparts that revisit the Morrow-A. relationship in its many levels of significance: Zeus and Athena; Pygmalion and Galatea; Apollo and Daphne, but also the weaving contest between Athena and Arachne as a constant reminder of myth's elusive, transitional quality. The title *Athena*, the eighth (missing) painting,

"The Birth of Athena"—the only original in the series of paintings he has been asked to assess—and persistent references throughout the text to the mind's efforts to describe A., the girl that he meets/imagines in the Dublin house, clearly allude to the creative process as envisioned in ancient mythology with the birth of the goddess of wisdom and the arts from Zeus's head. Yet, the initial A. that Morrow uses to refer to the girl both reinforces this allusion to the myth of Athena and goes beyond it, functioning as a multiple signifier and web of connections to the aforementioned myths, all exploring the cycle of desire, pursuit, and loss underlying the creative process. This indeterminacy denotes a type of writing that while striving to summon the other into existence expresses a point of crisis in the irreducible alterity of such a process within the context of Banville's *oeuvre* and of late twentieth-century writing. Morrow's musings on the thought of A. become indistinguishable from the writing process, both in relation to the main narrative and in the critiques of the paintings which depict scenes from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, as the narrative displays a gradual loss of control over its subject(s). The reference to the creative act as stemming directly from the writer's desire to possess the work of art (Pygmalion) is juxtaposed and pitched against a range of other myths that introduce a more problematic idea of the writing the other into existence. In discussing Banville's re-interpretation of myth within the context of late-twentieth-century critique of epistemological discourse, I will also consider the influence of a late Romantic and Modernist aesthetics in his work through the genealogy of Apollo's metamorphoses via Keats and Stevens's poetry (in section 4), which adds a further layer of significance to the making of *Athena*.

In considering the eternal return of myth in *Athena* through a series of 'translations' across periods and genres (from Ovid to twentieth-century works via Romantic and Modernist aesthetics), this paper explores both the versatility of myth and its capacity to adhere to a constant core of significance. Myth, as I contend, provides a means to subvert fixed categories of knowledge and time by virtue of its focus on "the presence of its object" (Cassirer, 55). Cassirer has commented on the difference between scientific and mythical thought, stating that unlike "scientific thought" which attempts "to dissolve all reality into relations", "mythical thinking answers the question of origins by reducing even intricate complexes of relations […] to a pre-existing material substance. And because of this fundamental form of thought, all mere properties or attributes must for myth ultimately become bodies" (54-55). If the form, as Cassirer contends, "clings to bodies" (59), it is because of a different sense of time, one that is reflected in myth's adherence to the immediacy of the present. For Cassirer, "Myth lives entirely by […] the intensity with which it seizes and takes possession of consciousness in a specific moment. Myth lacks any means of extending the moment beyond itself, of looking ahead of it or behind it, of relating it as a particular to the elements as a whole" (122). Myth, then, relates to the here and now, to the always present moment of performative enactment. And this is so much so in the act of metamorphosis. In Ovid, the object of myth is one that constantly shapeshifts, eliciting a tension between desire and loss.

As in a number of late twentieth-century narratives, where real and imaginary realms intersect, Banville's *Athena* advances a mythical account of the past with its sense of

coexistence and interpenetration. In these works, narrating the past acquires a new sense of immediacy that is brought about by myth's emphasis on the here and now. In Swift's *Waterland* (1983), for example, Tom Crick, the teacher of history, needs to use the realm of the emotional and the experiential to bypass the limits of chronological time, weaving the events of his local history into his personal life. Tom's tales of history exist in the performative act, in the spontaneity of delivery in the classroom as well as in the direct address used throughout the novel: "Children…". His focus on the mode of delivery, on the structure and on the format of his stories, elicits a different apprehension of reality. Like Tom Crick's alternative tales of history, Morrow's story of A., in *Athena*, exists in the performative quality of his telling, the letter that marks the borders of the novel: "Write to me, she said. Write to me. I have written" (Banville 1998, 233). In its attempt to make sense of the past, of the pattern of desire, pursuit and loss that has unfolded in Morrow's relationship with A., *Athena* displays a "mythical intuition of time" (Cassirer, 108) and a crossing of realms that highlight the delicate construct of the writing process. The concept of metamorphosis acts as a flexible unit of change that denies appropriation of the work of art, and requires a focus on the transformed experience of the present moment. Discussing Orpheus's predicament, Blanchot states that writing begins at the moment of loss: "He loses Eurydice because he desires her beyond the measured limits of the song, and he loses himself, but this desire, and Eurydice lost, and Orpheus dispersed are necessary to the song, just as the ordeal of eternal inertia is necessary to the work" (173). Orpheus's journey to the underworld is played over and over again in the effort of composition, which comes from a sequence that—from desire and pursuit—leads to loss, absence and death. It is not the fixed and ultimate death, but part of a flow in mythical thinking that "considers birth as a return and death as a survival" (Cassirer, 37).

2. The Making of *Athena*

Coming at the end of John Banville's art trilogy—*The Book of Evidence* (1989), *Ghosts* (1993), and *Athena* (1995)—*Athena* lends itself to a variety of different interpretations and to an exploration of the creative process as a complex encounter with the Other. Published between 1989 and 1995, the trilogy can be conceived as a critique to the increased use of theory in literary studies that had characterised the 1970s and 1980s, and an exploration of the limits of the image-making process in writing and art. As Banville underscores in interview with Hedwig Schwall, the trilogy provides a fitting stage for Freddie's fiction-making mind in his attempt to make Josie live out of his creative imagination: "in a way all three books are about images, in Freddie's imagination" (14). At the end of the first book, Freddie is eager to compensate for what he calls his "failure of imagination" in killing Josie Bell, the museum guard who caught him red-handed while stealing the painting *Portrait of Woman with Gloves* (Banville 1989, 215). The trilogy traces Freddie's obsession with art, and follows his transformation from scientist to murderer (*The Book of Evidence*), to expert in Dutch painting (*Ghosts*), and to art critic (*Athena*). Set in Dublin, *Athena* recalls how, after changing his name to Morrow, Freddie is asked by a dubious character, Morden, to authenticate eight paintings. In the same house where the paintings are stored he meets A., a girl with whom he starts an unlikely relationship that ends with her departure,

both from Morrow's life and his mind. While in the first two books of the trilogy, the Other is imagined through the narrator's solipsistic musings (Josie and Flora are not sufficiently imagined to be real to him), *Athena* introduces a tension and a change in perspective on "the ineffable mystery of the Other" (Banville, 47). Imagination, then, is not depicted as a fixed tool for the appropriation of the real but is perceived in its metamorphic capacity.

Conceived and published at the point of climax of what has been defined as metafiction within postmodern literature, the trilogy displays some key features of reflexivity, with a sharp focus on the fiction-making process. In her lucid study of *Athena*, Petra Tournay has traced "the pursuit of mannerist traditions" in the novel, considering Banville's use of myth as "one of the dominant mannerist and postmodern themes" (1-2). After establishing the links between postmodernism and mannerism, and stressing Banville's awareness of this identification in his use of Baroque paintings in the descriptions that intercalate the narrative, and in his critique of postmodern aesthetics, Tournay argues that Banville's use of mannerist elements in the novel is to be understood as a "reaction to the petrification and deterioration of the postmodern discourse" (2). While agreeing with Tournay's findings, my analysis aims at enlarging the space of inquiry, to consider how myth is used in the novel and the trilogy, beyond the mannerist mode of appropriation of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and other mythemes in Greek mythology. I argue that Ovid's *Metamorphoses* provides *Athena* with a leitmotif of instability and indeterminacy in perpetual change which aptly fits Banville's exploration of the creative process in the trilogy and marks a significant juncture in his *oeuvre*.

The thematic concern of the trilogy—the act of parturition that links the three books—immediately establishes its structural connections with the fiction-making process *per se*, repeatedly returning to the delicate construct of make-believe and illusion that fiction engenders, and its ethical consequences. Alluding to the relation between the writer and his work, *Ghosts* and *Athena* refer to the difficulty of establishing jurisdiction over the work of art. More accurately, these books refer to the complexity of the act of creation and its relation with the Other, at once the production of something which is willed and the visitation of what is new and unpredictable. From this perspective, then, as Derek Attridge has effectively put it, "creation is both an act and an event, both something that is done and something that happens […]. Since there is no recipe, no program, for creation […] it cannot be purely a willed act; but since creation requires preparation and labour, it cannot be purely an event" (22). Flora and A., then, become present only when detaching themselves from the maker's frame, being present only in their absence. While in *Ghosts*, Freddie is in denial of the reality of Flora, and turns away from her speech in disgust: "stop! You are ruining everything…This is not what I would let myself see" (Banville 1993, 239), at the end of *Athena*, A. acquires a life of her own, splitting into two versions of herself, each of which escapes the narrator's jurisdiction: "there is the she who is gone, lost to me forever, and then there is this other, who steps out of my head and goes hurrying off along the sunlit pavements to do I don't know what. To live. If I can call it living; and I shall" (Banville 1998, 233).

The pattern of desire, pursuit and loss is revisited in *Athena* at several interconnected levels, with specific mythemes from Greek mythology. Both the title Athena and recurrent references to the mind's efforts throughout the text clearly allude to the creative process as envisioned in ancient mythology with the birth of the goddess of wisdom and the arts from Zeus's head. A.'s direct reference to the myth of the birth of Athena is provided at the end of the novel when Morrow ponders on the thought of A. and mentions the eighth painting, "The Birth of Athena", the only original among the pictures he has been asked to assess. The painting eventually goes missing and only re-appears in the novel as a postcard reproduction in Inspector Hackett's office. Although it is not included among the painting descriptions that intercalate the main narrative, "The Birth of Athena" pervades the story in overt references to the ancient myth as well as crucial connections between the self-born Athena and the making of the work of art (the book).

In addition, the initial A. that Morrow uses to refer to the girl both reinforces this allusion to the myth of Athena and the creative process behind it, and functions as a multiple signifier. The text provides a list of words Morrow always associates with the letter A that represents her: "Abstract, abstracted, abstractedly, and then the variants, such as absently, and absent-minded, and now, of course, in this endless aftermath, with the clangour of a wholly new connotation, just: absent" (Banville 1998, 47). Punctuating Morrow's telling of his relationship with A., the sequence of words reflects a movement from the image of A. in his mind (abstractedness) to the experience of loss (absent). Stepping out of his mind's gaze, the object of Morrow's desire escapes his jurisdiction, re-establishing the sense of multiplicity inherent in the choice of the letter A: "it's only a letter, but it sounds right. Think of all the ways it can be uttered, from an exclamation of surprise to a moan of pleasure or pure pain. It will be different every time I say it. A. My alpha; my omega" (Banville 1998, 48). The emphasis on sound further reinforces the sense of A. as unformed and in the making: "it was as if she were trying out alternative images of herself", and as the "goddess of movement and transformation": "she seemed to… fluctuate…she flickered and shimmered in front of me" (Banville 1998, 48; 118).

Morrow's musings on the thought of A. become indistinguishable from the writing process, both in relation to the main narrative and in the critiques of the paintings. Each painting depicts a scene from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and is centred on the cycle of desire, pursuit, and loss: *Pursuit of Daphne*; *The Rape of Proserpine*; *Pygmalion*; *Syrinx Delivered*; *Capture of Ganymede*; *Revenge of Diana*; *Acis and Galatea*. The link between the scenes depicted in the paintings and the events of the main narrative is both thematic and structural, since in addition to mirroring Morrow's own pursuit of A. and subsequent loss, the art commentaries intercalate and disrupt the sequence of the main narrative, gradually merging Morrow's recollection of A. with their jargon. In the myth of Pygmalion who falls in love with his own creation, Banville finds an appropriate representation of the writer's dilemma and his/her relationship with the work of art. Yet the reference to the creative act as stemming directly from the writer's desire to possess it (Pygmalion) is juxtaposed and pitched against a more problematic idea of the writing of the other into existence (Freddie's 'invention' of the woman as well as the writing of the letter/book), which is epitomized in

the birth of Athena, and explored in the metamorphoses of Apollo discussed in the last section of this paper. The unique event of Athena's birth, bursting out of Zeus's head fully armoured, establishes, from the start, the ungraspable nature of the goddess, and, by extension, of the work of art. It is in the characteristics of Athena that the multi-layered nature of her functions is disclosed, inhabiting, as it were, different realms of signification without fully settling into a specific one.

This metamorphosis of meaning further buttresses the textual indeterminacy highlighted above, offering diverse, often contrasting readings of what is usually associated with Athena's cult. In Kerényi, one can find the best expression of such an indeterminacy of meaning, as captured in the title of his book: *Athene: Virgin and Mother* (1978). Kerényi links the paradox of Athena's condition to her special relationship with her father: she must remain virgin as a token of her devotion to Zeus, but she is, at the same time, responsible for ensuring the continuity of the father's laws in the future generations (Stein, 111ff). And this, in turn, alludes to her state of inbetweenness between independence (as virgin) and liability to the law of the father (as mother), enjoying, as she does, privileged status and larger latitude in her relationship with Zeus.

Athena's privileged status is also reflected in the way she uses the aegis she takes from her father—the goat-skin breastplate which has been associated with her strength in war strategies and battle. Perseus's conquest of the Gorgon, for instance, and his addition of the Gorgon's head and snaky hair to the aegis is emblematic of the ever-renewing power of Athena's breastplate. From this perspective, the aegis can be conceived, as a symbol of the goddess's authority and strength that is enhanced and enriched with every passage from one figure to the other, "its power generalized and concentrated even as it is shared" (Connor, 32). It is a masterly interweaving of several motives that refer to different domains in *Athena*: the myth of the birth of Athena fully armed from Zeus's head; the title of the eighth painting that is eventually declared the only original among the paintings Morrow has to assess but which is not included in the art commentaries; Morrow's 'invention' of A. as an act of restitution to compensate for Josie's death in the first book of the trilogy; and finally, the making of *Athena* (the book) as a complex encounter with the otherness of writing and fiction-making. In its reference to the myth of the 'self-born' Athena as stepping out of Zeus's head (the writer's mind), *Athena* introduces a more intriguing relation between the writer and the work of art, and a tension between the desire to pursue and possess it (Pygmalion) and the necessity of loss, so that the writing registers the passage of what can neither be contained nor fulfilled.

3. Myth, Literature, and Art

It is especially in the critiques of the paintings that this tension is enacted, since the many references to the painters' "mannered, overwrought style" and "showiness" that stems from their deliberate "effort of transcendence" is repeatedly contrasted to the austerity of classical art (Banville 1998, 76). Among the characteristics of the mannerist style was the appropriation of Ovid's work as representative of the transfigurative power of art and the artist's ability to trigger surprise (*stupore*) in the viewer. Developed in contrast to Renaissance art, the mannerist style (1520-1600) proposed unbalanced and ambiguous

compositions, where forms could be exaggerated and twisted, or pitched against graceful postures. In this way, the portrayal of unusual associations triggered surprise and ambiguity in the viewer, placing emphasis on the particular rather than on the whole composition. Eugène Delacroix puts this effectively in his comment about Michelangelo's art and praise of his capacity to infuse "a sense of the grand and the terrible into even an isolated limb": "When he [Michelangelo] was making an arm or a leg, it seems as if he were thinking only of that arm or leg and was not giving the slightest consideration to the way it relates with the action of the figure to which it belongs, much less to the action of the picture as a whole" (in "Mannerism", *n.d.*). Banville's use of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, however, does not serve as an expression of controlled transformation, in keeping with the mannerists' perception of the function of the artist, but introduces the notion of the shifting force of poetic expression, at once strong and uncontrollable, more attuned to the experiential mode of much late twentieth-century fiction. *Athena* renders precisely this dilemma of the narrator-writer, something which is manifested as an increasing lack of control over the narrative. The book can be conceived as a work in progress that enacts and reveals its own writing procedure before the reader's eyes, both for the emphasis on its back-to-back arrangement (the book opens and ends with the same motif) and on the performative quality of language. As discussed above, this emphasis on the process underlying the act of writing is buttressed by Banville's use of the myth of Athena and the goddess's association with the arts and crafts, especially that of weaving. The latter is perhaps best expressed in Ovid's vivid rendering of the contest between Minerva (Athena) and Arachne, a mortal "whose skill in spinning […] was earning no less admiration than that of Minerva herself" (134) and who was transformed into a spider by the goddess.

Indeed the art of weaving provides further connections to the book's self-reflexivity, as Ovid's emphasis in the story of "Minerva and Arachne" is, once again, on the dexterity of their skill in spinning rather than on the finished product, on the weaving of "old stories [which] were pictured in the looms" (136) rather than on the tapestries as objects of the contest. After a passage describing the preliminary setting of their working space, Ovid lingers on their subtle embroidering:

> With their garments tucked up beneath their breasts, out of the way, the goddess and the girl worked with all speed, their hands moving skilfully over the looms. In their eagerness, they were not conscious of the labour involved. Into the cloth they wove threads dyed purple in Tyrian coppers, shades of colour differing so slightly that they could scarcely be distinguished: so, after a shower, when the sunlit rainbow paints heaven's vault with its long arc, though a thousand different colours shine there, the transition from one to another is so gradual that the eye of the beholder cannot perceive it. Where they meet the colours look the same, yet their outer bands are completely different. (135-36)

Here attention is given to the invisible transitions of colour, imperceptible to the eye but imagined in the innumerable gradations that lead to the contrasting "outer bands", enacting a shift from fixed picture to the movement of the mind's gaze. It is in this sense that Ovid's pictorial style, as Mary M. Innes describes it, has to be understood, since his

"narrative skill […] was employed to weave his tales into one vast elaborate [transitional] tapestry" (13). Considered as Ovid's "essay in epic verse" (Innes, 11), *Metamorphoses* also represents a change in creative style, linking the many tales of transformation in the flux of narrative with a cohesion that is wholly made out of fragments. In this way the book also shows how the new is integrated into old patterns, and how myth is adapted and re-interpreted within the socio-cultural and political contexts of Ovid's own time as well as his creative purposes.

Banville's use of Ovid, then, can be said to deploy this dynamic sense of writing which is manifested at several interconnected levels. *Athena* registers a crucial intervention in the conception of the work of art in the way the various stories are intertwined. The narrator's increasing lack of control in the main narrative is conveyed not only through the constant shift between second (direct appellation) and third person narration, but also in the confusing merging of fact and fiction (memory and imagination) that characterises Morrow's attempt to write the letter-book: "and yet you, she—both of you!—must have been in something at least of the same elated state" (Banville 1998, 89). In addition, the spilling over of the jargon-like language of the critiques of the paintings in the events of the main narrative and in the figuration of A. hightens the sense of indeterminacy and fluidity that characterises *Athena*: "I paint you over them, like a boy scrawling his fantasies on the smirking model in an advertising hoarding" (Banville 1998, 168). The seven interlocking painting descriptions do not maintain the initial self-confident and detached tone as the book continues, so that from the third painting onwards a contamination with the main narrative is inevitable. Increasingly, they lack objectivity as the novel progresses to the extent that they become indistinguishable from Morrow's comments on his relationship with A. and also begin to take over the structure of the narrative, eventually merging with it. The last description, *7. Acis and Galatea 1677*, betrays this lack of control from the very incipit: "How calmly the lovers… I can't. How calmly the lovers lie. (As you lied to me)" (Banville 1998, 203). Whereas in the previous description, *6. The Revenge of Diana 1642*, language spills over the borders of the main narrative. The commentary is unfinished, with a last "when" that is syntactically connected to the resuming of the main narrative: "Just so the world must have looked at me and waited when. […] When she urged me to beat her I should have known the game was up, or at least that it soon would be" (Banville 1998, 169-71).

Displaying indeterminacy of poses and feelings—rage and desire, stillness and movement—the critiques of the paintings provide a space of inbetweenness and a subtext to Adorno's dictum, paraphrased at the end of Morrow's commentary of the fourth painting *Syrinx Delivered 1645*, that "[i]n their relation to empirical reality, artworks recall the theologumenon that in the redeemed world everything would be as it is and yet wholly other" (6). Presented as the "fulcrum between two states of being" (life and death, desire and loss), the Syrinx functions as a visual reminder of the writer's predicament, epitomising "what changes yet endures": "the witness that she [the Syrinx] offers is the possibility of transcendence, both of self and of the world, though world and self remain the same" (Banville 1998, 105). In *Athena*, where everything is the same "yet wholly different" (Banville

1998, 105), Banville can be said to enlarge the concept of instability and indeterminacy that is at play in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, using it to investigate the point of crisis in the dynamics of the working process.

4. The Metamorphoses of Apollo

It is the description of the first painting, *1. Pursuit of Daphne ca. 1680*, that introduces this point of crisis in the predicament of the narrator-artist-writer, as the portrayal of Apollo, in sharp contrast with the light-footed figure of classical mythology, immediately establishes its reference to the diminished condition of the mannerist artist. Ovid's "youthful god", speeding rapidly after Daphne (43), becomes "probably like the painter himself at the time, a male in his middle years, slack-limbed, thick-waisted, breathing hard, no longer fit for amorous pursuit" (Banville 1998, 18). Banville's rendering of Ovid's tales of transformation enhances the interaction between the pursuer (Apollo) and the object of desire (Daphne) and the game of perception that derives from it. While in Ovid, the transformed Daphne becomes glorious symbol of Apollo's skills and status as a god—"the never-fading foliage" (44) of the laurel tree—in *Athena*, the transformation affects both pursuer and pursued, changing the desiring god's swift chase into an occasion of imminent loss and self-reassessment:

> If Daphne is suffering a transformation so too is the god. We see in the expression of his eyes [...]the desperation and dawning anguish of one about to experience loss, not only of this ravishing girl who is the object of his desire but along with her an essential quality of selfhood, of what up to this he believed he was and now knows he will not be again. (Banville 1998, 18)

Here the Apollo-Daphne interaction echoes the spilling over of the main narrative (Morrow-A.) into the critiques (the artist-the work of art), setting in relief the writer's ambiguous relation with the evasive quality of the work of art (Banville-*Athena*). Banville's recasting of Apollo's steadfast power into the experience of loss both of "the object of his desire" and of "his selfhood" challenges the notion of a self-contained subjectivity (self versus object) to reveal the complexity of the relation of self and other(s). Opening the series of seven paintings introduced in the critiques, *Pursuit of Daphne* is essential to the novel, presenting the figure of Apollo as emblematic of the artist's dilemma in the making of the work of art. Indeed, Apollo's associations with the arts and sciences (music, poetry, philosophy and science) and with the energy of the sun (the golden boy, Phoebus, the sun-god) make him an appropriate figure for the exploration of the creative power, a highly evocative and multi-layered symbol which has been variously developed in different times and reimagined in a series of metamorphoses.

Banville's recasting of Apollo as a diminished god experiencing loss and anguish resonates with the metamorphoses registered in the poetry of Wallace Stevens, which in turn was influenced by John Keats's late Romantic rendition of the sun-god as suffused in the rosy tone of an autumnal world. While the influence of a late Romantic and Modernist aesthetics is a pervading trait of Banville's *ouevre*, in *Athena* it is combined with the multi-layered significance of myth, providing, as it does, access to mythemes that establish an immediate

link to the writer's predicament, both in his own journey as a writer and in response to writers that can be considered as his literary precursors (Keats and Stevens). In particular, it is in Stevens's decreative style that Apollo's transformation is best captured, in the canto that opens "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" (1942) and that introduces the first characteristic of the supreme fiction: *It Must Be Abstract*. The incitation to the ephebe to "see the sun again with an ignorant eye/ […] in the idea of it" (Stevens, 380) is central to Stevens's notion of the supreme fiction and, in turn, to Banville's own enquiry into, and exploration of, the nuances of the creative process. In order to see "the sun in the idea of it" one must rethink old images, rejecting them, in Stevens's words, as "soiled metaphors" (381) or reconsidering them within new paradigms, as in Copernicus's rupture with Ptolemy's system, for example, or in the secularism underlying Modernist aesthetics. Heaven's expulsion of "us and our images" is exemplified, quite appositely, in the metamorphoses of a "voluminous master folded in fire," Phoebus:

> Never suppose an inventing mind as source
> Of this idea nor for that mind compose
> A voluminous master folded in his fire.
> How clean the sun when seen in its idea,
> Washed in the remotest cleanliness of a heaven
> That has expelled us and our images…
> The death of one god is the death of all.
> Let purple Phoebus lie in umber harvest,
> Let Phoebus slumber and die in autumn umber,
> Phoebus is dead, ephebe. But Phoebus was
> A name for something that never could be named.
> There was a project for the sun and is.
> There is a project for the sun. The sun
> Must bear no name, gold flourisher, but be
> In the difficulty of what it is to be. (Stevens, 381)

Stevens's incantatory lines return Phoebus to the earth, lying and dying in the "umber harvest" of autumn. Yet, though "Phoebus is dead," part of him remains in words, recycled from the language of old images to form new meaning or, to keep the analogy with the seasonal cycle of harvest, to prepare fresh ground. Eleanor Cook comments precisely on this analogy between "plants and words" when she identifies the sequence as going from "plant to rot to compost to soil to new plant […] speaking to and through old writers" (219). Autumn, as George Lensing has remarked, is the season that starts Stevens's seasonal cycle (22), bespeaking a state of "ignorance" that is prelude to creation, as the speaker of "Notes" tells the ephebe. Although Phoebus's name is obliterated and the sun washed clean—"the sun must bear no name"—the golden sun-god is not totally absent but is absorbed and assimilated in the dark colours of harvest, metamorphosed in and by the word "umber" which refers at once to the dark brown of the earth (the colour umber) and to the shadow of the sun. The OED refers to the Latin word of "umbra" for both shadow and the colour of dark brown, and Cook also refers to its connection to the "classical *umbrae* (shades of the dead)" (219).

Stevens's metamorphosis of Phoebus constitutes the preliminary stage of the process of decreation, a washing clean of old images which more than full erasure becomes a way of "speaking to and through old writers," Milton and Keats in particular. Indeed, Keats's development of the image of Apollo registers itself as a passage from Miltonic style to a personal remake, as epitomized in the lines of his last Ode, "To Autumn," where the poet's earlier explicit references to the god's associations with art are channelled into the subtler, tactile senses of a "maturing sun":

> Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness,
> Close bosom-friend of the maturing sun;
> Conspiring with him how to load and bless
> With fruit the vines that round the thatch-eves run;
> To bend with apples the moss'd cottage trees,
> And fill all fruit with ripeness to the core;
> To swell the gourd, and plump the hazel shells
> With a sweet kernel; to set budding more.
> And still more, later flowers for the bees,
> Until they think warm days will never cease.
> For Summer has o'er-brimm'd their clammy cells. (88)

The analogy between the act of writing and harvest, introduced in Stanza Two of this ode, is deployed in the figuration of autumn's plenitude and "mellow fruitfulness," symbolizing, as Helen Vendler reminds us, the mind's creative possibilities or "the teeming brain" (234). The reference to the sun-god, Phoebus-Apollo, is recast as the effect of "the maturing sun" on the fruits of the earth (apples, hazel shells, flowers, bees, honey), absorbed, as it were, into the ripeness that immediately precedes harvesting. After the harvest there is no image of the decay of vegetation but another veiled reference to the sun which, though unnamed, suffuses the "stubble-plains with rosy hue" through "barred clouds" (Keats 2004, 89). In this way, we can see how Stevens's "slumber[ing] and d[ying Phoebus] in autumn umber" speaks *to* Banville *through* Keats, in its many shifting forms and shades. Banville's recasting of Apollo into a diminished god reflects Banville's inheritance of a late Romantic and Modernist aesthetics, and his use of these writers' own rendition of the "harvest" of the act of writing as a platform for further explorations of the role of the writer in contemporary culture. Considered in dialogue with Keats and Stevens's grappling with the powers and limits of the creative mind across a genealogy of re-interpretations of the sun-god, *Athena*'s metamorphosis of Phoebus-Apollo within a wider range of related myths function as an echo chamber for the exploration of concerns that—while specific to Banville's own artistic project—afford a glimpse of myth's capacity to maintain a constant core of significance within variation.

5. Conclusion

Reading Banville's use of myth in *Athena* through a Blumenbergian lens, and in dialogue with a genealogy of mythical and literary metamorphoses, has highlighted the book's significance for the exploration of the writer's predicament within the context of the epistemological crisis that characterised late twentieth-century writing. Far from being

peripheral, the painting descriptions intercalating the narrative in *Athena* become emblematic of the predicament of the artist and his relationship with the work of art, epitomised in the departure and loss of A. at the end of the novel. The critique of mannerist appropriations of Ovid's tales of transformation provides Banville with a befitting platform for the investigation of the underlying concerns of the trilogy (*The Book of Evidence*, 1989 ; *Ghosts*, 1993 ; and *Athena*, 1995). Considered in its entirety, the art trilogy constitutes an important artistic juncture in Banville's career, a fertile site for the exploration of Romantic and Modernist influences and a pathway towards the elaboration of a higher degree of exposure to the other's singularity in the work of art within the context of contemporary writing and as explored in his later work (especially in *Eclipse*, 2000, *Shroud*, 2002, and *The Infinities*, 2009). Banville's use of myth in a book that functions as a liminal space—as the last book of the art trilogy—between current and future concerns about the act of imagining both self and other(s) recalls Ovid's visual rendition of Athena and Arachne's "[transitional] tapestry" of human and divine interaction, as the micro transitions of colour, imperceptible to the eye, need to be carried over in the mind's gaze and in the here and now of mythical thought. Described by Banville as "one book too many" (Schwall 1997, 13), *Athena* exceeds the borders of its narrative, resisting closure, endorsing the metamorphic quality of mythic consciousness, and reflecting myth's capacity to adhere to reality while gesturing toward a sense of the eternal.

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