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Transcending Mortality

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Abstract

In John Banville's *The Sea*, descriptions of characters and scenes are rife with art historical references. For example, Chloe's "handsome, high-domed, oddly convex forehead" is "like the forehead of that ghostly figure seen in profile hovering at the edge of Bonnard's *Table in Front of the Window*." This paper argues that the fictive presences in art and literature possess a personality and density that far exceeds that of any individual in, as Banville puts it, "what we call, because we must, the real world". The force with which the fictive and the imaginary exert upon reality is elucidated in Banville's novel in moments such as when Chloe's forehead is perceived – an example of the immanence of the imaginary, so that the boundaries between reality and the imaginary are dissolved. By analyzing the paintings of Bonnard and Rembrandt, I want to posit that it is through the loss of materiality, of specificity, of the figures in their paintings that lends them the timelessness of a work of art and allows them to take on a substantiality that is beyond the grasp of any living being, thus giving them the power to order our perceptions and possess our consciousness. What the realm of the aesthetic offers is the possibility of liberation from the linear causality of time. Literature too, does this by reordering time through language, and I will consider the novels of John Banville as literary forms of Art in this paper. Bonnard's paintings of Marthe even after she had died, and the paintings of Rembrandt after 1642, the year in which Saskia died, are constructions of an alternative temporality that exists outside of objective time. Art is the means by which the human beings may transcend their mortality.

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Indifference

In Brueghel's Icarus, for instance: how everything turns away
 Quite leisurely from the disaster; the ploughman may
 Have heard the splash, the forsaken cry,
 But for him it was not an important failure; the sun shone
 As it had to on the white legs disappearing into the green
 Water, and the expensive delicate ship that must have seen
 Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky,
 Had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on.
 (Auden, *Musée des Beaux Arts*, 14-21)

In 1938, Auden wrote the poem *Musée des Beaux Arts* after visiting the Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique in Brussels which contains the painting *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*. Auden noted in his poem how 'everything turns away / Quite leisurely from the disaster' (14-15). Indeed, the point of view of the painting is from the top of a hill, as though the viewer is pausing in his morning stroll to admire the expanse of sky and sea as the sun is just beginning to rise over the horizon, the entire composition of the painting quite literally 'turning away' from the tiny figure of Icarus, of whom only his flailing legs can be barely discerned from the feathery brushstrokes of white water, making hardly a dent in the landscape. In fact, the viewer might even miss him entirely if not for the title, but even so, the title, *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*, rather than *The Fall of Icarus*, similarly sidelines the disaster by having the effect of foregrounding the landscape and making the fall seem incidental. Auden marvelled at the calmness of things, how 'the sun shone/ As it had to on the white legs disappearing into the green/ Water...' (17-19). The resistance of things to human tragedies is also observed by Morden, in John Banville's novel, *The Sea*, when Anna, his wife, is dying:

The kettle came to a boil and switched itself off and the seething water inside it settled down grumpily. I marvelled, not for the first time, at the cruel complacency of ordinary things. But no, not cruel, not complacent, only indifferent, as how could they be otherwise (20)?

The kettle coming to a boil and switching itself off can be compared to the sun shining on the white legs disappearing into the green water in Auden's poem. Both kettle and sun continued in their separate existences, as though Icarus, as though Anna were not dying, as though their existences, their consciousness, were not about to be extinguished. Morden noted that human values like cruelty and complacency were totally alien when applied to material objects. Perhaps the paradigm of the material can be found in Kafka's short story, *The Worry of the Father of the Family*, in the form of the Odradek. According to Kafka, the Odradek:

[. . .] looks like a flat, star-shaped spool for thread, and in fact, it does seem to be wound with thread; although these appear to be only old, torn-off pieces of thread of the most varied kinds and colours knotted together but tangled up in one another. But it is not just a spool, for a little crossbar sticks out from the middle of the star, and another little strut is joined to it at a right angle (72).

The Odradek looks like a spool, but Kafka clearly does not want the spool to be the Odradek's definitive form, for he immediately follows that description with 'But it is not just a spool'. The Odradek, with its varied pieces of thread, seemed more like an assemblage, like the cubist constructions of Pablo Picasso, which emphasizes the *thing-ness* of the object. To look at his metal *Violin*, 1915, for example, is to be drawn into the complex spatial relationships established between the forms. Carsen-Peter Warncke wrote:

Parts that should occupy a foreground position in the object supposedly represented, and others that would be further from us in a conventional three-dimensional treatment, have exchanged places. The two holes in the soundboard are not depressions or holes in the metal but added components. [...] Then there are the colours, white, black and blue areas alongside the brown ones suggesting the actual colour of a violin. Black areas seem suggestive of shadow, just as white ones imply light; yet this contrasts with the way things appear in reality (231).

By reversing the traditional relationships between foreground and background, negative and positive spaces, light and shadow, the shape of the violin is defamiliarized. We are forced to *look* at the violin, its form now made strange to us, its structure and properties highlighted. The more I look at Picasso's violin, the more its object-like qualities resist me. Likewise, everything concerning the Odradek, including its name, is kept as enigmatic as possible. The Odradek is thus the quintessence of a remote object which stands outside of any human system. The father of the family in Kafka's story expresses the absolute otherness of the Odradek as such:

I ask myself in vain what will become of him. Can he die? Everything that dies has previously had some sort of goal, some kind of activity, and that activity is what has worn it down; this does not apply to the Odradek. [...] the idea that, on top of everything else, he might outlive me, that idea I find almost painful (73).

'In vain', the father asks himself. The solipsistic nature of the questioning is the inevitable result when one encounters an absolute other that renders futile, all attempts at apprehension. The unbridgeable chasm, according to the father, is that of mortality. Mortality is what characterizes the human experience, and the Odradek, for whom death does not come, exists in an interminable present that is utterly inhuman. The narrator experiences the permanence of the object, in contrast to the transience of his own existence, as a kind of pain. Peter Schwenger, in *The Tears of Things: Melancholy and Physical Objects*, puts it this way:

Painful, perhaps, because Kafka's narrator senses the approach of an otherness represented by material debris. This debris is not, as one would usually think, ephemeral, but is a constant – an enduring parallel universe of matter indifferent to human existence (81).

This essay shall argue that Art is the means by which human beings are able to transcend the pain of mortality. Death, the common fate of the living, is experienced as a scandal, an affront, as if it was not supposed to be, as if it were not always so. By analyzing Bonnard's paintings of Marthe even after she had died, and the paintings of Rembrandt after 1642, the year in which Saskia, died, I want to posit that it is through the loss of flesh, of specificity, of

the figures in their paintings that lends them the timelessness of a work of art. I will also consider John Banville's novel, *The Sea*, in this essay as an example of Art in its literary form that, through the use of language, has the similar effect of liberating our consciousness from the linear causality of time. In addition, Banville specifically juxtaposed the death of Morden's wife in his novel with Marthe, aligning his concerns with Art and mortality with Bonnard and Rembrandt. The numerous citations from the visual arts, especially Bonnard, also points to a conscious engagement with the aesthetic in the novel.

Enduring Intensity

In John Banville's *The Sea*, characters like the Graces seem to have other beings, other lateral existences, that are beyond and yet somehow more real than their material counterparts. Carlo Grace is Poseidon, 'the one who appeared to be in command over us all'. (123) His wink is also 'satanic' (8) and in keeping with his persona of the hoofed and horned Satan, he is the 'old grinning goat god' (125), with a 'satyr's furred hind legs'. (79) The repeated emphasis on Carlo Grace's 'bulging crotch' (233) and 'the great balled lump in his khaki shorts' (121) is suggestive of Pan, the satyr god of fertility, famed for his sexual prowess. His children, Myles and Chloe are able to blow 'archaic' pipe-notes (117) with makeshift pipes fashioned from reeds, being the offspring of Pan, whose instrument is the pan flute. The 'meadow thronged with great tall ferns' (112) where the Graces have their picnics is reminiscent of Arcadia, the unspoilt wilderness where the nature god Pan makes his dwelling. At one point, Rose is being chased by Mrs Grace and Morden calls them 'barefoot maenads' (125), making them part of the ecstatic retinue of Dionysus like Pan. The Graces' picnics, their games of chase, might easily have sprung right out of the paintings of the bacchanalia, of nymphs and satyrs by painters such as Titian (*Jupiter and Antiope*, *Bacchanal of the Andrians*), Poussin (*Nymph Syrinx Pursued by Pan*, *Nymph and Satyr*, *Bacchanalia*) and Peter Paul Reubens (*Nymphs and Satyrs*, *Pan and Syrinx*). Even in the way in which Mrs Grace is stretched out upon the grass has uncanny resonances to the numerous fleshy, voluptuous and sleeping maenads that litter the ground in the history of art (two of which can be found in Titian's *Bacchanal of the Andrians* and *Jupiter and Antiope*): 'With a heaving sigh she turned and lay down supine on the bank with her head leaning back on the grass and flexed one leg [...]' (116) and 'After a timeless minute or two my sprawling maja drew in her leg and turned on her side again and fell asleep with shocking suddenness [...]' (117). Even more explicitly: 'Under my greedy gaze Mrs Grace had been transformed from woman into daemon and then in a moment was mere woman again' (118).

There is a sense that it is the maenad that determines the actions, the speech, the consciousness, of Mrs Grace rather than the other way around. Consider Chloe's reaction to Myles' blown note, as though the characters seem to be acting according to some script that predetermines their actions:

And now from far off in the ferns there came a thin, shrill sound, an archaic pipe-note piercing through the lacquered air, and Chloe, up at

the tree, scowled as if called to duty and bent and plucked a blade of grass and pressing it between her thumbs blew an answering note out of the conch-shell of her cupped hands (117).

Observe how Chloe is ‘called to duty’, seeming to be unable to react to Myles in any way other than to answer him simply because she is a scion of Pan. There is a palpable *pressure* with which the other presences exert on the fabric of reality, to the extent that the very light, and time itself, seem to bend, take on a peculiar quality, as if in response to some invisible force-field; a solidifying, a pooling, an accumulation of time, as suggested by the ‘lacquered air’. Time is captured, rescued from perpetual trickle, from perpetual flight. Consider how reality alters after Mrs Grace lies down on the bank: ‘At once everything began to slow. Her emptied glass fell over in a swoon and a last drop of wine ran to the rim and hung an instant glittering and then fell’ (116). We enter into a moment of timelessness, of suspended time. This otherworldly temporality is what we encounter when we are faced with a work of art, literature or music, which will culminate in the description of Bonnard’s *Nude in the bath, with dog*:

The narrow room that is her refuge vibrates around her, throbbing in its colours. Her feet, the left one tensed at the end of its impossibly long leg, seem to have pushed the bath out of shape and made it bulge at the left end, and beneath the bath on that side, in the same force-field, the floor is pulled out of alignment too, and seems on the point of pouring away into the corner, not like a floor at all but a moving pool of dappled water. All moves here, moves in stillness, in aqueous silence (152).

In Bonnard’s painting, the pressure, the force-field, that affects the fabric of reality is expressed on the fabric of the canvas. Now, it is not just Mrs Grace who is ‘not absolutely persuaded of the world’s solidity’ (87), but space has literally become fluid – the floor is pouring away into the corner, the bathtub is pushed out of shape, à la Dali’s melting clocks. ‘All moves here,’ Banville writes, but ‘moves in stillness, in aqueous silence’. What is this moving and unmoving at the same time, that moves, and yet is unmoved? I propose that this is the movement of time in eternity. All progression, in the face of eternity, is so infinitesimal so as to be rendered meaningless. Beginnings and endings too, lose their meaning. Observe the meeting of cradle and grave in the way Marthe is lying in the bathtub, preserved in amniotic fluid, the opalescent sides of the bath entombing her in a womb. This is Bonnard’s *persistence of memory*.

Or *The Persistence of Memory of Marthe*. Both Bonnard and Dali have painted time, made time the subject of their paintings. George Steiner too, in *Grammars of Creation*, observed the capacity of certain paintings to exhibit time, notably in Giorgione and Watteau:

Certain paintings ‘temporize’, generate their own time within time, even beyond the powers of language. [...] Such paintings draw us into a time-grid integral wholly to themselves. [...] the sense of time’s presence, of its *Da-sein*, [...] is compelling. How this effect is achieved is a matter which, duly, defies words and analytic decomposition. It is as if, in the Giorgione landscape, time was somehow ‘spaced’. In the Watteau pastoral, the time-sense seems to emerge from the lit air. Even

the shadows in Watteau have a logic other than that of mundane sundials (59).

Whether it is Giorgione or Watteau, Dali or Bonnard, the experience of a painting, the effect that painting has on the viewer, has nothing to do with what is being painted; Dali's landscape is hermetically airless despite its vast expanse of sky and space, whereas Bonnard's enclosed interior breathes. Likewise, the distinct temporality, the persistence, the preservation of Marthe in the paintings of Bonnard – we are told that Bonnard painted Marthe in her baths, over and over, continuing the series even after her death, and always, always in his paintings, she is, the age that he thought she was when he first met her, getting off a Paris tram – has nothing to do with the figures of Marthe in these paintings. And how strange these figures that Bonnard painted. Featureless, shadowy, indistinct, but with an undeniable *thereness*. She is a force-field, or a gathering, a locus of thickened air, or a bulge, a pulling out of alignment of colour, or a wound appearing on the canvas. In *White Interior*, she is a hump arising from the mottled red of the floor. Is it even Marthe that he is painting?

A marked difference occurred in the paintings of Rembrandt before and after 1642, the year Saskia died, is what Jean Genet postulates in his essay *Rembrandt's Secret*. Before Saskia's death, Rembrandt's world – his portraits of Orientals for example, his biblical scenes – was sumptuous, extravagant, luxurious. Theatrically so. Rembrandt favoured richness, in settings, in costuming. He painted faces skillfully, tastefully, but the wrinkles, the crow's feet, the folds of skin, the warts, though meticulously rendered, exist on the level of pure ornamentation, of 'picturesque-ness'. Consider Rembrandt's painting of his mother reading in 1629. It is an exquisite study of a wizened face, note how the white neck and the black dress withdraws in order to give prominence to the face. Or *The Prodigal Son in the Brothel* from the year 1636: Rembrandt painted himself as the prodigal son with Saskia splendidly attired as the harlot on his lap. He wears a plumed hat, raises a tall glass and smiles unfocusedly out of his opulent world at the viewer. How sinuously the light plays on the golden handle of the sword that is hanging from his belt.

But beginning from 1642, it was as if a rent, a tear, had appeared, slowly draining out the pomp that had been there. Compare *The Prodigal Son in the Brothel* with *The Jewish Bride* of 1666. The left sleeve of the Jewish Bride, Genet notes, is an 'abstract painting' (89). Where light had glistened decoratively on the sword's golden handle, the ornate sleeve of the Jewish Bride retreats from recognition. Rembrandt seemed to have lost his interest in rendering finery when in 1639, he had defined every tracery in the white lace on the sleeves of Maria Trip. Rembrandt's world had begun to empty out, to lose its opacity, its anecdotal qualities. A change had occurred, especially in the way Rembrandt painted his faces. Genet notes:

The more I look at them, the less these portraits remind me of anyone. [...] the portraits made by Rembrandt (after his fifties) refer to no

identifiable person. No detail, no physiognomic trait refers to a particular characteristic or psychology (96).

In 1661, Rembrandt would paint another wizened woman: Margaretha de Geer, the wife of Jacob Trip, frontally enthroned with her gaze unwaveringly trained on the viewer and her right hand grasping a white handkerchief. But how differently he approached the two! The wrinkles on the face of Rembrandt's mother are presented for our scrutiny, but those on Margaretha's face elude our apprehension. And yet, it is in Margaretha's portraits that the full force of age is realized:

If one were to wash *His Mother Reading*, beneath the wrinkles, one would find the charming young woman she continues to be. We will not wash away the decrepitude of Mme. Trip, she is only that, which appears in all its force (Genet 85).

Mme. Trip had ceased to be just Mme. Trip. She has become the very image of Old Age herself. The visage of Mme. Trip is haunted by another presence. If Mortality has a face, it is approached in the face that is placed above a disc of white that is the laced collar of Mme. Trip's black dress. In the same way that Mrs Grace flickers back and forth between woman and daemon in *The Sea*, Mme. Trip oscillates between woman and Decrepitude.

What Rembrandt lost in materiality, he gained in substance. It is as though he had shed the weight in his painting in order for them to attain to ethereality. The loss of specificity, of particularity, gave his work a timelessness that is the lifeblood of any work of art:

It's beginning with the time that he depersonalizes his models and that he removes all identifiable characteristics from objects that he gives the most weight, the greatest reality, to both. [...] Rembrandt no longer distorts the painting by trying to confuse it with the object or face it is charged with representing: he presents it as distinct substance, not ashamed of being what it is (98).

In other words, Rembrandt's people had lost their referentiality to specific persons, but in the process, gained a personality that far exceeds that of any individual, a presence that is more real than what is in, as Banville puts it, 'what we call, because we must, the real world' (98). These are the presences that crowd our consciousness, the presences that hover behind the personalities of the Graces, that pierce the fabric of *The Sea*. Observe how the fictive can have the power to take over, to possess, to overrun our consciousness; how our perceptions, our daily lives, can be conditioned, anticipated and imagined by them. When Morden considers his face in the looking glass, Van Gogh's self-portrait, 'done in Paris in 1887, in which he is bare-headed in a high collar and Provence-blue necktie with all ears intact' (131) interrupts his image of himself. Chloe's 'handsome, high-domed, oddly convex forehead' (137) is 'like forehead of that ghostly figure seen in profile hovering at the edge of

Bonnard's *Table in Front of the Window*' (137). Claire's 'spindly legs and big bum, that hair, the long neck especially' (44) made him think of 'Tenniel's drawing of Alice when she has taken a nibble from the magic mushroom' [44]. Miss Vavasour sits 'in the very pose of Whistler's mother' (256) and the entire scene, Morden notes, 'might have been a nocturnal study by Gericault, or de la Tour' (256). Mrs Grace, too, 'stands in the very pose of Vermeer's maid with the milk jug' (222) when she helps Rose to wash her hair in the garden.

Thus, Bonnard's Marthe gradually dissolves behind daubs of paint. Rembrandt's figures too, lose their connections with the material world that anchor them to time. The very loss of flesh and blood allows them to take on a materiality that is beyond the grasp of any living being, the *materiality of the material*. 'Yes, things endure, while the living lapse' (Banville 9). 'What are living beings, compared to the enduring intensity of mere things' (Banville 232)? This is how art and literature can be *persistences of memory*. Genet observed this of Rembrandt when he dies:

Legally, he has nothing. By juggling with the books, everything is in the hands of Hendriijke the Admirable and Titus. Rembrandt will not even own the canvases he paints. A man has just passed entirely into his work (90).

Nothing belongs to Rembrandt. By owning nothing, no physical trace of Rembrandt remains after the passing of his flesh. Nothing too, remained of the Graces after their demise:

The Cedars has retained hardly anything of the past, of the part of the past that I knew here. I had hoped for something definite of the Graces, no matter how small or seemingly insignificant, a faded photo, say, forgotten in a drawer, a lock of hair, or even a hair-pin, lodged between the floorboards, but there was nothing, nothing like that. No remembered atmosphere, either, to speak of. I suppose so many of the living passing through – it is a lodging house, after all – have worn away all traces of the dead (39).

The result is that the Graces exist solely as a figment of language for Morden, devoid of their corporeality. This is also the effect of language, which will be dealt with in the next section.

Language

According to Maurice Blanchot, the use of language removes the subject from its being: 'For me to be able to say, "This woman" I must somehow take her flesh and blood reality away from her, cause her to be absent, annihilate her. The word gives me the being, but it gives it to me deprived of being' (42). Language allows me to conjure the being of the woman, but only as a revenant in language. The nomination of the woman cleaves the woman from herself, from her flesh and blood entity. This is also

Morden's state of being, who is 'there and not there, [himself] and revenant, immured in the moment and yet hovering somehow on the point of departure' (97). Note the simultaneity of presence and absence. Indeed, Blanchot compares words to 'monsters with two faces, one being reality, physical presence, and the other meaning, ideal absence' (Blanchot 59). Morden's presence in language comes at the expense of his absence in the world. Transposition into the realm of language allows Morden to separate himself from his physical being, to be other than himself, creating a ghost-like double existence. In this state of being in language, he is 'neither alive nor the other thing and yet more vividly present than ever [he] could be in what we call, because we must, the real world' (98). Banville eschews the word *alive*, preferring the terminology of *vivid presence* instead. It is precisely through the death of his living, breathing counterpart, the emptying of his physical existence, that he is able to attain a life that is beyond that of any living being, a life that is not really life but rather an endurance that belongs to the inanimate, such as Kafka's Odradek.

The yearning to endure, lamentation at the corruptibility of flesh, makes us long for incorporeality, which Morden discovers in language:

'No, what I am looking forward to is a moment of earthly expression. That is it, that is it exactly: I shall be expressed, totally. I shall be delivered, like a noble closing speech. I shall be, in a word, *said*. Has this not always been my aim, is this not, indeed, the secret aim of all of us, to be no longer flesh but transformed utterly into the gossamer of unsuffering spirit (185)?

Morden equates being gossamer to the casting away of flesh. To experience freedom from the confines of time, Morden suggests that flesh is a hindrance, flesh must be shed. Anna's body might have expired, but his reenactment of her through language made it possible for the past to co-exist with the present. Through language, through poetics, Morden is able to transcend time in a way that the material never can. George Steiner puts it this way: 'Even more than in philosophy, it is through poetics that human consciousness experiences free time' (*Grammars of Creation* 59). Without the freedom afforded by grammar and syntax to construct and manipulate temporalities, Morden's narrative would never have been possible. Consider how the rules of chronology were circumvented in the following:

[...] what I foresaw for the future was in fact, if fact comes into it, a picture of what could only be an imagined past. I was, one might say, not so much anticipating the future as nostalgic for it, since what in my imaginings was to come was in reality already gone. [...] The truth is, it has all begun to run together, past and possible future and impossible present (96).

Only through re-enactment in language can the past and the present overlap and one be nostalgic for the future; time can be rescinded – the present made

impossible – and time can be created – the future made possible. It is through the aesthetic that we are able to transcend psychically, the linear causality of time and approach freedom, even freedom from the mortality that is inevitable to all the living. But the negation of time in language is not really a negation at all, for language ‘negates the negation of time, it negates the negation of limits’ (Blanchot 35). In the end, what is really realized is the ‘inability to negate anything, the refusal to take part in the world’ (Blanchot 35). The fullness of the reality of language stems from its emptiness. Words do not belong to the realm of matter, it stands separate from matter, a universe unto itself.

Total freedom becomes possible only in the void. But we can only partake of this freedom if it is made manifest in matter anchored in time. That is why for Blanchot, language transforms this freedom instead into ‘an ideal above time, empty and inaccessible’ (Blanchot 35). In the same instant, the possibility of our transcendence becomes impossible. Our freedom stems precisely from this impossibility. Only when we realize that literature is made up of words and paintings are nothing but spatially relational colours, can Art be set free from the constraints of the world:

It is within the language system alone that we possess liberties of construction and deconstruction, of remembrance and of futurity, so boundless, so dynamic, so proper to the evident uniqueness of human thought and imagining that, in comparison, external reality, whatever that might or might not be, is little more than brute intractability and deprivation (Steiner, *Real Presences* 97).

Thus, Rembrandt’s models, Bonnard’s Marthe, began to take on faceless, ghostly presences. No, it is not essential that every physiognomic trait of Margaretha Trip or Marthe is realized. In fact, it is the ghost-like Marthe - disappearing off the picture plane, shimmering in baths, or emerging as a lit line from the paintwork – disinvested of any earthly form or quality, that haunts the imagination of the viewer in a way that she could not have otherwise. The spectral, peripheral presence of Marthe in Bonnard’s interiors can be just as keenly felt as other carefully modeled, centrally placed Madames, if not even more so. Art is not Life, but better, and Marthe is free to be always sixteen. It is through the aesthetic that our hope of transcendence can be realized and we may be granted reprieve from our mortality.

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