

## FRAMING SIGNIFICANCE IN JOHN BANVILLE'S *THE BOOK OF EVIDENCE*

FLORE COULOUMA  
*Université de Paris Ouest*

### Introduction: searching for evidence

---

1. “My Lord, when you ask me to tell the court in my own words, this is what I shall say.” Freddie Montgomery has committed two crimes: he has stolen a painting from a rich family friend, and has killed the maid who caught him in the act. These are his first words as he embarks on the long, digressive account that is to be both his defence in court and the incriminating evidence against him. John Banville’s 1989 novel *The Book of Evidence* borrows its title from the Irish criminal justice system and sets up an initial ambiguity that will run through its first-person narrative:

In a case of trial on indictment the prosecution has a statutory duty to provide you, in advance of your trial, with certain materials which set out the evidence intended to be given in the trial against you. These documents are usually referred to as the Book of Evidence.<sup>1</sup>

2. In its title, *The Book of Evidence* creates a number of pragmatic expectations immediately contradicted in the incipit: this is no police report but a first-person testimony by the defendant himself. Freddie takes direct control of his indictment, assuming the voice of the prosecution and that of the defence to tell the story “in [his] own words”<sup>2</sup>. There is yet another twist to this unusual narrative setup: Freddie has no motive. Although he admits to his crimes, he recuses the very notion of free will and calls his actions – along with his words – “meaningless”. Actions are utterly divorced from intentionality, Freddie says somewhat disingenuously as he takes us through a meandering narrative in his search for some evidence of intent.
3. Banville’s murderer-without-a-cause is widely compared to Camus’s Meursault, Musil’s man without qualities, and Dostoyevsky’s Raskolnikov; he has been hailed as an avatar of the

---

1 “Disclosure in Criminal Cases,” *Citizens Information*, 27 August 2012, last consulted 26 June 2013, [http://www.citizensinformation.ie/en/justice/criminal\\_law/criminal\\_trial/disclosure\\_in\\_criminal\\_cases.html](http://www.citizensinformation.ie/en/justice/criminal_law/criminal_trial/disclosure_in_criminal_cases.html).

2 Incidentally, the novel was translated in French as *Le Livre des aveux*, which highlights its narrator’s assertive stance but misses the pragmatic flouting at work between the novel’s original title and its actual narrative structure.

existentialist anti-hero imbued with Nietzschean nihilism and a post-modern self-consciousness<sup>3</sup>. *The Book of Evidence* is a reflection on ethics through the questions of intentional action and moral responsibility, and Freddie's murder serves as the catalyst to Banville's philosophical endeavour. Yet Freddie's murder and theft are intrinsically connected to his discourses – if only because all we have is his testimony. The notion of illocutionary act (i.e. intentional meaning in language) is crucially instrumental in Banville's representation of intentional action at various narrative levels in the story. If Freddie is to be found guilty of the murder of hapless chamber-maid Josie Bell, he is also accountable for his version of the story, which brings us to the questions of authorship and subjective identity. In this context, Freddie's own Book of Evidence provides the literal structure to his quest for meaning, and this is where the frame metaphor comes into play.

4. Banville's *Frames* trilogy depicts Freddie Montgomery's journey of redemption and self-discovery through *The Book of Evidence* (1989), *Ghosts* (1993), and *Athena* (1995). It is often referred to as "the art trilogy", as opposed to Banville's previous "scientific" novels: *Doctor Copernicus* (1976), *Kepler* (1981), *The Newton Letter* (1982), also later re-published as *The Revolutions Trilogy*. The *Frames* trilogy develops its narratives against a background theme of art collectors and seventeenth century Dutch paintings. In *The Book of Evidence*, Freddie kills the maid who walks in on him as he is stealing a small Dutch master from a wealthy family friend. Later, from the confinement of his cell, he reflects on the overwhelming effect of the fateful painting. "You have not killed for her" (68), he tells the jury; the frame of the painting echoes that of Freddie's prison window, suggesting the rigid, inescapable structure of his crimes and punishment. In the novel, the frame metaphor reflects the unforgiving rules of society and the law, the constraints of narrative structure, and more generally, the structure of language itself.

5. The aim of my article will be to examine the frame metaphor and its relevance to the question of language, be it fictional narrative, manipulative discourse or the so-called "ordinary" language of everyday experience. Freddie's fascination with pictorial frames and his unhinged perception of reality raises the question of cognitive framing, first defined in sociology by Erving Goffman and later applied to linguistic analysis by Fillmore and the Frame Semantics theorists. Using Banville's pervading theme of the frame as a methodological tool provides us with new insights into the question of subjective agency and meaning; it also sheds light on the linguistic, social and cultural structures of expectation shaping Freddie's understanding of the world. Freddie's playful narrative also attests to his masterful use of manipulative discourse and thus frames the question of

---

3 N. Murphy, *Irish Fiction and Postmodern Doubt*, 156-71.

intentional meaning as a resolutely dialogic, intersubjective endeavour. Ultimately, Freddie's art of framing leads us through Banville's reflection on the status of fiction.

### Cognitive framing unhinged

---

6. Freddie Montgomery is a drifter. Before the murder, his roaming life has taken him from one sunny part of the world (the Californian Bay Area of the sixties) to another (an unidentified Mediterranean island off the Spanish coast). Indolence rather than conscious choice has led him to his current situation, he tells us: "I allowed myself to be lulled into believing I was inviolable. (...) That life, drifting from island to island, encouraged illusions. The sun, the salt air, leached the significance out of things, so that they lost their true weight" (12). Freddie is only a spectator of his own life. In his memory, the "pastel, sun-drenched western coast" (18) he still dreams about has taken on the glaze of fiction, and indeed, the Californian university of his early career is a dream come true for the young scientist who feels he has "ascended to some high, fabled plateau, a kind of Arcady" (18). Freddie mentions the political upheavals of the sixties only to note his utter imperviousness to their significance: "everyone was a protester, it seemed, except me – I would have no truck with their marches, their sit-downs, the ear-splitting echolalia that passed with them for argument" (19). His encounter with his future wife is imbued with the same foggy consciousness, like their subsequent life among the heavy-partying expat set and shady characters of the Spanish islands. Freddie then launches into an elaborate tale of gangster-debt and graphic violence – a human ear is sent to him in a tobacco tin – reminiscent of the moving picture he fantasises himself to be a part of: "I had seemed (...) to have stumbled into a supporting feature" (20). Despite his regular protests to the contrary – "I am under oath here, I must tell the truth" (11) – Freddie's story becomes more and more implausible as he gradually loses his grip on reality.
7. Freddie feels in no way involved with his own life: "I have always been prone to accidie" (38), he tells us. For him reality is a meaningless flow of events. "I used to believe", he says, "that I was determining the course of my own life, according to my own decisions, but (...) I realised that I had done the things I did because I could do no other" (15-16). While Freddie feels "without moorings, a floating phantom", others around him "talked of cause and effect, as if they believed it possible to isolate an event and hold it up to scrutiny in a pure, timeless space, outside the mad swirl of things" (16). Freddie's disillusionment with reality is an almost literal tribute to *The Gay Science*:

Cause and effect: such a duality probably never exists; in truth we are confronted with a continuum out of which we isolate a couple of pieces, just as we perceive motion only as isolated points and then infer it without ever actually seeing it. (...) An intellect that could see cause and effect as a continuum and a flux and not, as we do, in terms of an arbitrary division and dismemberment, would repudiate the concept of cause and effect and deny all conditionally.<sup>4</sup>

8. Critics unanimously read Freddie's nihilism as the "embodiment of Nietzsche's philosophy of the 'extra-moral'"<sup>5</sup>. Freddie's initial discovery is that modern science can no longer provide stability to our understanding of reality<sup>6</sup>. It is no coincidence that mathematician-cum-murderer Freddie specialises in probability theory:

I took up science in order to make the lack of certainty more manageable. Here was a way, I thought, of erecting a solid structure on the very sands that were everywhere, always, shifting under me. (...) I discovered in science a vision of an unpredictable, seething world that was eerily familiar to me, to whom matter had always seemed a swirl of chance collisions. Statistics, probability theory, that was my field. (17)

9. Freddie tries to make sense of the world by searching for order in the face of existential void and the nonsensical "swirl of things". His use of mathematical language to build sets of logical and causal expectations brings us to the notion of cognitive framing and its relevance in *The Book of Evidence*.
10. The methodological concept of "frame" was developed in the mid-twentieth century by anthropologists and sociologists concerned with understanding language and behaviour not solely in terms of their inner structure but in relation to their context. Erving Goffman's 1974 *Frame Analysis* refers to the frameworks of understanding underlying our everyday interpretation of – and reaction to – events and situations<sup>7</sup>. He isolates two primary frameworks of experience, which "allow its user to locate, perceive, identify, and label a seemingly infinite number of concrete occurrences defined in its terms"<sup>8</sup>. The "natural framework" underlies an understanding based on logical causality devoid of wilful agency and intentionality. The "social frameworks", on the other hand, "incorporate the will, aim, and controlling effort of an intelligence, a live agency, the chief one being the human being"<sup>9</sup>. Goffman therefore posits the distinction between intentionality and

4 F. Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 172-3.

5 N. Murphy, *Irish Fiction and Postmodern Doubt*, 158.

6 I. Berensmeyer, *John Banville: Fictions of Order*, 206.

7 From E. Goffman's sociological perspective, language is only one instance of human experience and is thus included in his broad definition of "events". *Frame Analysis*, 10.

8 E. Goffman, *Frame Analysis*, 21.

9 E. Goffman, *Frame Analysis*, 22.

natural causality as the primary cognitive feature in our understanding of reality.

11. Freddie Montgomery challenges this very assumption when he claims to lack a stable cognitive framework enabling him to categorise the chaotic flow of experience. On the boat taking him back to Ireland after ten years abroad, Freddie experiences “the strangest thing, a gust of euphoria, or something like euphoria (...), making me tremble, and bringing tears to my eyes” (22). He immediately rejects any attempt at interpretation, however. His empathy-prone readers as well as his court audience, “who must have meaning in everything” (22), will be sent packing without their epiphany: “I do not believe such moments mean anything – or any other moments, for that matter. They have significance, apparently. They may even have value of some sort. But they do not mean anything” (22). Freddie disingenuously suggests that there can be significance and value without meaning, thus refusing to engage in the discursive act of interpretation. Freddie dramatically assumes the Wittgensteinian stance of non-committal silence (“Whereof one *cannot* speak, thereof one must be silent”<sup>10</sup>), yet his very testimony contradicts him. Freddie’s colourful tale is replete with digressions and minute details even as he deplores the inadequacy of language to make sense of human experience. Part of Freddie’s problem, then, lies in the structure of language itself, which brings us to the question of Frame Semantics.
12. American linguist Charles J. Fillmore originally developed his theory from the structuralist notion of syntagmatic frame, and indeed, Frame Semantics relies on the assumption that a given concept can only be understood in relation to an entire structured system. In Fillmore’s theory, “a word represents a category of experience” and its underlying frame is “a cognitive structuring device, parts of which are indexed by words associated with it and used in the service of understanding”<sup>11</sup>. In *The Book of Evidence*, Freddie’s claim to meaninglessness assumes that his words are like the rest of his actions, a chaotic flow disconnected from any coherent structure. This requires further analysis.
13. In cognitive and semantic framing, all concepts boil down to structures of expectations, as Deborah Tannen has shown: “on the basis of one’s experience of the world in a given culture, (...) one organizes knowledge about the world and uses this knowledge to predict interpretations and relationships regarding new information, events, and experiences”<sup>12</sup>. Making sense of the world, Tannen says, is also making connections between our present and past experiences, keeping in mind

---

10 L. Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, §7.

11 M. R. L. Petruck, “Frame Semantics”, 1.

12 D. Tannen, *Framing in Discourse*, 16.

that the past “operates as an organized mass”<sup>13</sup>. In *The Book of Evidence*, Freddie tells us he has no schema of interpretation for his actions because his past is a shapeless blur. Freddie’s killing and stealing tragically “break frame” – i.e. transgress a socially expected norm of behaviour – precisely because he lacks the cognitive tools to assess his current experience and surroundings. This explains not simply his crimes, but also his utter failure at carrying them out. Were it not for his gruesome killing of Josie Bell, Freddie Montgomery would be a comic character – a Buster Keaton type whose mechanical motions make us laugh because they are unexpected in a human<sup>14</sup>.

14. Freddie’s timing is wrong: he finds a group of tourists in the fateful exhibition room and sheepishly waits for them to leave, horrified as he hears from their guide that “the picture, *my* picture, was given two sentences, and a misattribution” (94). Then, he bungles his theft:

I would not have thought that paper would make so much noise, (...) the sheets of paper kept rolling back on themselves, and I had nothing to cut the twine with, and anyway the picture, with its thick, heavy frame, was much too big to be wrapped. I scampered about on my knees, talking to myself and uttering little squeaks of distress. (94-5)

15. Freddie’s utter incompetence veers on the farcical when the maid walks in on him as he clumsily prepares to make his exit, “grasp[ing] the picture in my arms and stagger[ing] with it blindly, nose to nose, in the direction of the french window” (95). Still, Freddie does not take stock of his failure, and turns his anger against the hapless maid: “this is the last straw. I was outraged. How dare the world strew these obstacles in my path. It was not fair, it was just not fair!” (95). This scene brings the frame metaphor to a poignant climax: Freddie’s failure to wrap the painting because the frame is “too big” reflects his inability to make sense of a world whose inner logic eludes him. Freddie’s scientific career was his first effort at circumscribing the meaninglessness of experience; his desperate dance with the wrapping paper is another attempt at encompassing an overwhelming reality (here, in the form of the painting’s powerful gaze), as is his final, murderous act when he silences the maid by blowing her head in with a hammer.

16. Freddie’s anger stems not so much from his failure to steal the painting as from the realisation that reality systematically contradicts his expectations: “I was dismayed. How could this be happening to me – it was all so *unfair*” (98). The very act of killing goes awry: “when I struck her the first time I expected to feel the sharp, clean smack of steel on bone, but it was more like hitting clay, or hard putty (...) I though one good bash would do it, but, as the autopsy would show, she had

---

13 D. Tannen, *Framing in Discourse*, 16.

14 H. Bergson, *Le Rire*, 26.

a remarkably strong skull” (97). Freddie claims his actions are not thought through but he does have expectations. These, however, are out of sync with reality, in keeping with his unhinged perception of the world around him. This brings us to the question of stereotype, another key concept of frame semantics and a crucial underlying theme in the novel’s depiction of Freddie’s worldview.

17. The semantic theory of prototypes posits that our understanding of a given concept relies on a prototypical representative of the concept. Making sense of the world and of discourse in everyday life consists in categorising our experience in terms of resemblance to a prototype. This analytical framework derives from Wittgenstein’s notion of family resemblance<sup>15</sup>, and is opposed to the so-called “checklist” definition of a concept based on essentialist properties.

The idea is that in order to perceive something or to attain a concept, what is at least sometimes necessary is to have in memory a repertory of prototypes, the act of perception or conception being that of recognizing in what ways an object can be seen as an instance of one or another of these prototypes. This “situating” process depends not only on the existence of individual prototypes, but also on the character of the whole available repertory of prototypes.<sup>16</sup>

18. The prototype-based analysis of cognitive understanding has been instrumental in psychologist Eleanor Rosch’s study on cognitive categorisation. Rosch argues that “the task of category systems is to provide maximum information with the least cognitive effort” and that “the perceived world comes as structured information rather than as arbitrary or unpredictable attributes”<sup>17</sup>. In *The Book of Evidence*, Freddie’s victim dies because he sees her through the wrong prototypical frame.

19. Freddie and Josie Bell meet twice. She first walks in as he is admiring the *Woman with Gloves* in his friend’s house.

A maid was standing in the open french window. She must have come in just then and seen me there and started back in alarm. Her eyes were wide, and one knee was flexed and one hand lifted, as if to ward off a blow. For a moment neither of us stirred. (...) Then slowly, with her hand still raised, she stepped backwards carefully through the window, teetering a little as her heels blindly sought the level of the paved pathway outside. (68)

20. Freddie does not see Josie as a girl but as a maid in a frame. Her movements (hands raised, retreating posture) recall the paintings of servant girls in the Dutch Golden Age; they also fit the romanticised nineteenth century stereotype of the bashful Catholic Irish girl serving in the

---

15 L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, § 65-71.

16 C. J. Fillmore, “Frame Semantics and the Nature of Language”, 24.

17 E. Rosch, *Cognition and Categorization*, 28.

landowner's Big House. On their second encounter, she is literally embedded in the painting, one still gaze beneath another: "I sensed, behind that stare, another presence, watching me. I stopped, and lowered the picture, and there she was, standing in the open window, just as she had stood the day before, wide-eyed, with one hand raised" (95). To Freddie the maid is no different from the picture. He contains her essential otherness within the mould of the stereotype, just as the physical frame contains the *Woman with Gloves*. The maid's initial lack of resistance confirms Freddie's assumptions: as he pushes her into his car, she becomes another still picture, "brassed between the door and the back of the seat, with her elbows stuck out and fingers splayed and her face thrust forward, like the cornered heroine in a melodrama" (96). Josie finally breaks the stereotype and fights back, "flailing and screaming" (98), prompting Freddie's utter dismay and his fatal blow with the hammer. After he learns about her name and past life from his prison cell, Freddie's confession is no longer about the murder itself, but about his inability to have seen Josie Bell for what she was, a flesh and blood human being with her own sense of volition, quite distinct from the girl in the painting. It is this "lack of imagination" that Freddie most wants to atone for in the end:

This is the worst, the essential sin, I think, the one for which there will be no forgiveness: that I never imagined her vividly enough, that I never made her be there sufficiently, that I did not make her live. Yes, that failure of imagination is my real crime, the one that made the others possible. What I told that policeman is true – I killed her because I could kill her, and I could kill her because for me she was not alive. (183).

21. Freddie constantly misses the mark because he relies on the wrong stereotypes. His sinful lack of imagination is in fact his inability to understand reality as distinct from the categories and paradigms of fiction. This brings us back to his broken expectations throughout the story.
22. Nothing in Freddie's life is as he expects. He thinks Spanish gangsters will be "played by a comic cast of ruffians", but meets a courteous, "silver-haired hidalgo in a white suit" (20). The sun greets him on his arrival in the Dublin harbour, while he "had expected to arrive in rain" (24). Reuniting with his mother is a source of bitter disappointment: "I was surprised. I had thought that after ten years there would be at least a moment of grace between our meeting and the first attack of filial heartburn, but not a bit of it" (36). Not only has his Anglo-Irish mother sold the family paintings, but she has grown close to the stable-girl: "I thought it hardly appropriate for a woman in her position in society – her position! – in society! – to be so chummy with a stable-girl" (64). Freddie's expectations of prison life are equally off the mark:

I confess I had hopelessly romantic expectations of how things would be in there. Somehow I pictured myself a sort of celebrity, kept apart from the other prisoners in a special wing, where I would receive parties of grave, important people and hold forth to them about the great issues of the day, impressing the men and charming the ladies. [...] Not like that, not like that at all. But not like other clichés either. (6)

23. This is particularly relevant to our understanding of Freddie's psyche: he is a hopeless romantic and views the world as such. There is more: Freddie admits that things in reality are "not like that", but, he also adds, "not like other clichés either". This last remark is ironically made for our benefit: we readers (along with Freddie's court audience) are "hopelessly romantic" and make mistaken assumptions based on our own stereotypes. Freddie's incomprehension of the world reflects our own, and his story goes beyond the mere testimonial statement. It takes us in as complicit witnesses to his crimes, thus framing us within the dialogic and manipulative structure of his *Book of Evidence*.

## Manipulating frames

---

24. The goal of the prosecution in a criminal trial is to show some evidence of intent to account for the crime. By the end of Freddie's testimony, however, we are none the wiser. Despite the best efforts of his counsel, formidable lawyer Maolseachlainn Mac Giolla Gunna – a "large, lumbering" man and "a terror in court" (63) with a name and appearance reminiscent of mythical Irish heroes –, Freddie does not admit to a motivated (and potentially mitigating) reason behind his actions. He instead reminds the court that he is "no mastermind. (...) I swear, it was all just drift, like everything else" (81). Because Freddie's actions are determined by fate and not by "volition, deliberate thought, a careful weighing-up of facts, all that puppet-show twitching which passes for consciousness" (34), the murder is inevitable, and indeed, would happen again in the same circumstances:

[...] when I say *I did it*, I am not sure I know what I mean. Oh, do not mistake me. I have no wish to vacillate, to hum and haw and kick dead leaves over the evidence. I killed her, I admit it freely. And I know that if I were back there today I would do it again, not because I would want to, but because I would have no choice. It would be just as it was then (...). Nor can I say I did not mean to kill her – only, I am not clear as to when I began to mean it (...). I do not think it was a matter of deciding. I do not think it was a matter of thinking, even (128).

25. There is no why to Freddie's murder. "I killed her because I could, [...] what more can I say?" (169) is his final comment to the sceptical policemen after his arrest, but Freddie's elaborate non-explanations rightfully inspire suspicion. Action and volition may be utterly divorced in the case of his murder, but they clearly are not when it comes to writing about it – Freddie freely admits to the killing, just as he artfully tells us his story of it. The policemen's reaction to Freddie's tale is therefore relevant on several narrative levels: "You're a right joker, aren't you" (168). Evidence of intent is not to be found in the murder, but in Freddie's narrative of it, and in his constant manipulation of his audience's expectations.
26. Freddie's testimony is structured as a direct address to the court. It opens with a double statement made from his prison cell: "My lord, when you ask me to tell the court in my own words, this is what I shall say" (5). Freddie's preterition offers both his whole written testimony and the promise of his future speech in court. What follows is a hybrid narrative recounting the elaboration of the written testimony ("I must see if I can get a dictionary" 6) and staging the trial: "Stand up, please, place your hand here, state your name clearly. Frederick Charles St John Vanderveld Montgomery. Do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth? Don't make me laugh. I want straight away to call my first witness." (8). In this scene, Freddie voices all parties and blurs the distinction between prosecution and defence. He calls the witness ("My wife. Daphne"), and reminds himself regularly that "I am under oath here, I must tell the truth" (11), while periodically expressing disingenuous concern for his relationship with the court: "That is a question which no doubt the court also would like answered" (15), "Does the court realise, I wonder, what this confession is costing me?" (17). Freddie's tale is explicitly addressed to a judge and jury as his defence testimony. It sets up a pragmatic contract assigning us (fictional audience and reader alike) to the task of judging him. There is no avoiding jury duty for us once we've read past Freddie's first sentence, yet Freddie's ambiguous oath and his disclaimer that there is no such thing as meaning toy with his audience's expectation that the Book of Evidence will make sense of his crime. Freddie is an unreliable narrator on several counts. He is both the witness and the accused, he playfully admits to memory lapses and has no qualm in contradicting himself: "Mrs Reck was tall and thin. No, she was short and fat. I do not remember her clearly. I do not wish to remember her clearly" (79).
27. Freddie also makes his captive audience/reader the target of his occasional irony when he anticipates our psychoanalytic bias and derides us for it: "Of course, I know that whatever I say will be smirked at knowingly by the amateur psychologists packing the court. When it comes to the

subject of mothers, simplicity is not permitted” (36). Freddie does have a difficult relationship with his masculine-looking mother (“she had grown a little moustache”), and as if on cue, he hints at her responsibility in his demise:

I have only to stand before her and instantly the irritation and resentment begin to seethe in my breast. (...) I was thirty-eight, a man of parts, with a wife and a son and an impressive Mediterranean tan, I carried myself with gravitas and a certain air of menace, and she, what did she do? – she pinched my belly and laughed her phlegmy laugh. Is it any wonder I have ended up in jail? Is it? (37)

28. Freddie plays up to the stereotype he has set up for our benefit, and his farcical outrage makes us the butt of the joke as much as he is. His defensive claim to masculinity (the ironically suggestive “a man of parts”) obviously falls apart as he introduces us to a caricature of the emasculating mother. Adding insult to injury, his mother then declares her love for the stable-girl, who “is like a son to me, the son I never had” (64). Gender jokes aside, “The court will need to hear about my dreams” (46), Freddie later warns. The dream similarly fits the bill for Freddie’s Freudian-prone audience: “I used to believe that in the dream it was death I was rescuing [my father] from, but lately I have begun to think that it is, instead, the long calamity of his life I am undoing at a stroke” (77).

29. Time and again, Freddie reminds us that he feels cut off from the reality of everyday life, an outsider looking in – through a glass darkly: “Have I mentioned my bad moods, I wonder. Very black, very black. As if the world had grown suddenly dim, as if something had dirtied the air. Even when I was a child my depressions frightened people” (43). Freddie presents his unhinged perception of reality as a symptom of split identity: “I have always felt – what is the word – bifurcate, that’s it” (82). He naturally concludes to his own schizophrenia to convince us that the murderer is really someone else from inside his mind: “That fat monster inside me just saw his chance and leaped out, frothing and flailing. He had scores to settle with the world, and she, at that moment, was world enough for him. I could not stop him. Or could I?” (128).

30. However, in keeping with his own playful self-consciousness, storyteller Freddie systematically casts doubt on his own narrative (“is it?”; “could I?”). We are left with the feeling that this is all part of his elaborate language games. Freddie dreams himself the star of the show and does not want a solicitor: “I was fully intending to conduct my own defence, and already saw myself making brilliant and impassioned speeches from the dock” (171). Freddie’s final meta-narrative joke hits us as we reach the last page of the book: “I thought of trying to publish this, my

testimony. But no. I have asked Inspector Haslet to put it into my file, with the other, official fictions” (186). This leads me to my conclusive argument, namely that *The Book of Evidence* is a lesson in the art of framing.

31. Freddie Montgomery stages his Book of Evidence like a carefully choreographed play, by summoning the various actors of his story’s pragmatic structure. His audience is no passive witness but an accomplice of the tale, both within the story (Freddie v. the court) and at the meta-narrative level (“author” v. reader). Yet Freddie does not solely call on his audience; he also summons the overarching narrative voice that controls his own, the better to challenge it: “It is as if someone, the hidden arranger of all this intricate, amazing affair, who up to now never put a foot wrong, has suddenly gone that bit too far, has tried to be just a little too clever, and we are all disappointed, and somewhat sad” (52). Whether Freddie refers to a Great Clockmaker figure or, in a meta-fictional break of his own narrative frame, to the author of *The Book of Evidence*, his point remains the same: he has been framed. Of his killing plan, he says “it was like the work of someone else, which had been given me to measure and to test” (82). What can be taken for schizoid behaviour within the story takes on a new dimension when looked at from a meta-narrative perspective. Freddie uses his own story to frame himself, not as a murderer but as an author whose imagination is responsible for the life and death of his characters. Bringing the *Woman with Gloves* alive and killing Josie Bell are the work of Freddie’s authorial imagination, or lack thereof. Freddie calls his “failure of the imagination” a sin regarding Josie because, he feels, the task of an author is to bring his characters to life rather than discard them. This explains his elation when he finally decides “to plead guilty to murder in the first degree” (183), which legally means admitting to a deliberate and premeditated killing. Despite his earlier protests to the contrary, Freddy regards his final plea as his moral duty: “I think it is the right thing to do” (183). There is no contradiction here if we consider Freddie as a storyteller who must account for his story before it is filed with “the other, official fictions”. Freddie’s plea thus take him outside his character status of murderer and into that of authorial voice: in this respect, his indictment is of a meta-fictional nature.

32. Freddie’s final statement of responsibility is particularly attuned to John Banville’s own view of a novelist’s creative process:

I am enough of a deconstructionist to acknowledge that the novelist’s intentions for his novel may in the end not count for as much as he imagined or desired that they would. (...) In saying this, however, I do not mean to agree with those critics (...) who look on the novelist as a dead hand which performs a kind of automatic writing. (...) Fictional characters are made of words, not flesh; they do not have

free will, they do not exercise volition. They are easily born, and as easily killed off. (...) They are at once less and more than what they seem.<sup>18</sup>

33. Freddie's victim is also easily killed off; surprisingly so, in fact, for authorial novice Freddie who always seems astonished by his own story even as he tells it. Freddie's last misgivings are about motive, but there is no motive to be had beyond the demands of his tale, so he must finally come to terms with his story in order to assert his identity as an author.
34. Once his authorial responsibility has been established, Freddie has a duty to tell his story properly: "I told my story again, trying to remember the details so as not to contradict myself. It sounded even more improbable this time" (169). The policemen do not understand him because they equate non-contradiction with truth-value, i.e. absolute concordance between the facts of reality and those of discourse. The inspector's natural reaction to Freddie's carefully wrought story is therefore that he should "Get your story straight, without the frills and fancy bits" (171). Freddie himself, on the other hand, is only concerned with the naturalistic attention to detail and structural consistency that make a good story. In this respect, his evidence attests to the complexity of fictional discourse and to its ambiguous relationship with reality.
35. Throughout the novel, Freddie reminds us that his story has no meaning, but he also celebrates the pleasure of literary creativity from his prison cell: "None of this means anything. Anything of significance, that is. I am just amusing myself, musing, losing myself in a welter of words. For words in here are a form of luxury, of sensuousness, they are all we have been allowed to keep of the rich, wasteful world from which we are shut away" (34). In the prison of reality, fiction does not "mean anything of significance". As John Searle would say, it consists of non-serious illocutionary acts and only represents a consciously shared game of make-believe<sup>19</sup>. However, Freddie only mentions this common view of fiction the better to debunk it by the end of his tale. Freddie shows us that the significance of fiction does not lie in its literal truth-value but in its truthfulness experienced as its powerful effect in real life – just as the *Woman with Gloves* entrances its viewer with its overwhelming stare: "You do not know the fortitude and pathos of her presence. You have not come upon her suddenly in a golden room on a summer eve (...) you have not killed for her" (68).
36. Rather than the evidence of an actual murder, Freddie's story offers inquisitive readers the

18 J. Banville, "The Personae of Summer", 118.

19 "the pretended performances of illocutionary acts which constitute the writing of a work of fiction consist in actually performing utterance acts with the intention of invoking the horizontal conventions that suspend the normal illocutionary commitments of the utterances", Searle, "The Logical Status of Fictional Discourse", 327.

evidence of fiction, and this, for him, cannot be divorced from intentional meaning; it bears the mark of its author. When the police bring Freddie his typed testimony, he cannot recognise himself in it:

I peered in bafflement at the ill-typed page. That's your confession, Hogg said. Feel like signing it? (...) What are you talking about? I said. These are not my words. (...) I sat down and examined this strange document. Oh, well-named Cunningham! Behind the mask of the bald old codger a fiendish artist had been at work, the kind of artist I could never be, direct but subtle, a master of the spare style, of the art that conceals art. I marvelled at how he had turned everything to his purpose, mis-spellings, clumsy syntax, even the atrocious typing. Such humility, such deference, such ruthless suppression of the ego for the sake of the text. He had taken my story, with all its – what was it Haslet said? – with all its frills and fancy bits, and pared it down to stark essentials. It was an account of my crime I hardly recognised, and yet I believed it. He had made a murderer of me. (173).

37. Cunningham, the police clerk, has deprived Freddie of his authorial voice and made him a character of his own story. Here Freddie directs his anger at the cunning author pulling his strings, in a scene of self-conscious meta-fiction reminiscent of Flann O'Brien's rebellious characters in *At Swim-Two-Birds*. This allows Banville to mock his own shortcomings as he praises the simplicity of the "pared down text" at the close of his baroque tale of tragicomic twists and turns – of frills and fancy bits. Like *At Swim*'s disgruntled characters, Freddie is caught between the demands from above and his desire to kill his father/author and write his story himself. The victim's name, Josie Bell, initials J. B., adds another ironic layer to the meta-narrative cake. Banville's first-person narrator ultimately makes peace with himself: "It's my story", Freddie says finally, "and I'm sticking to it" (186). He has now freed his imagination and can create anew: "I might wake up and see, coming forward from the darkened room into the frame of that doorway which is always in my mind now, a child, a girl, one whom I will recognise at once, without the shadow of a doubt" (186).

## Conclusion

---

38. *The Book of Evidence* is as much an experiment as a testimony as it depicts the gradual self-assertion of authorial voice through the tragicomic character of its "cultured killer" (6). Setting up authorial intent against the autonomous work of art, Banville brings the figure of the author to trial the better to suspend his judgement: at the end of the novel Freddie is still awaiting his sentencing. Freddie's dreamy perception of the outside world and simultaneously artful manipulation of his

audience's expectations remind us of the complex relationship between reality and fiction. Yet as Banville insists, fiction does deal with reality:

As a writer I have little or no interest in character, plot, motivation, manners, politics, morality, social issues. The word *psychology* when it is applied to art makes me want to reach for my revolver. (...) this is not an anti-humanist attitude I am striking, nor even, really, a postmodernist one. I do believe that the art of fiction does deal with the world, that world which in our arrogance we call 'ordinary', but that it deals with it in very special and specialised ways.<sup>20</sup>

39. Banville's early inspiration for *The Book of Evidence* was an actual event which took place in Ireland in the summer of 1982. An eccentric figure in the Dublin social-circles, Malcolm Edward MacArthur, bludgeoned a nurse to death with a hammer while stealing her car, leaving her dying in the back seat. He later killed a farmer with the gun he had just purchased from him. MacArthur was finally arrested in the house of the Attorney General where he had been staying for several days after the murders. Every effort was made to avoid the scandal becoming public, and Taoiseach Charles Haughey declared at the time that "It was a bizarre happening, an unprecedented situation, a grotesque situation, an almost unbelievable mischance"<sup>21</sup>. This extraordinary statement has since been made into the popular acronym GUBU<sup>22</sup> and is still used in reference to political scandals. Those are the improbable facts of reality, but they only form a loose background to Banville's fictional framework, since, as Banville and Freddie tell us, the plot itself is unimportant: "Oh, by the way, the plot: it almost slipped my mind" (185). Beyond its picaresque narrative, *The Book of Evidence* shows us that the relevance of fiction lies its life-changing effect – in achieving the painting's powerful gaze and its demand to the viewer that he may "let her live". "There is only an organisation of shapes and colours", Freddie says of the girl in the painting. "Yet I try to make up a life for her" (90). Like the painting, Freddie's book of evidence exerts its powerful gaze through its mysterious entrapment of reality within the frames of fiction.

---

20 J. Banville, "The Personae of Summer", 118.

21 *Concise Oxford Dictionary of Quotes*, 179.

22 GUBU was coined by author Conor Cruise O'Brien, and stands for "Grotesque, Unbelievable, Bizarre and Unprecedented".

## Works cited

---

- BANVILLE, JOHN. *The Book of Evidence*. 1989. Picador: London, 2001.
- BANVILLE, JOHN. "The Personae of Summer". *Irish Writers and Their Creative Process*. Ed. JACQUELINE GENET, Wynne Hellegouarc'h. Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1996, 118-122.
- BERGSON, HENRI. *Le Rire. Essai sur la signification du comique*. 1900. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1964.
- BERENSMEYER, INGO. *John Banville, Fictions of Order: Authority, Authorship, Authenticity*. Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag C. Winter, 2000.
- FILLMORE, CHARLES J. "Frame Semantics and the Nature of Language". *Origins and Evolution of Language and Speech*. Eds S. R. HARNAD et al. New York: New York Academy of Sciences, 1976. 20-32.
- GOFFMAN, ERVING. *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience*. 1974. Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1986.
- MURPHY, NEIL. *Irish Fiction and Postmodern Doubt: An Analysis of the Epistemological Crisis in Modern Fiction*. Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2004.
- NIETZSCHE, FRIEDRICH. *The Gay Science*. 1887. Vintage Books. New York: Random House, 1974.
- PETRUCK, MIRIAM R. L. "Frame Semantics". *Handbook of Pragmatics*. Eds J. VERSCHUEREN, et al. Amsterdam and Philadelphia: Benjamins, 1996. 1-13.
- ROSCH, ELEANOR. *Cognition and Categorization*. Hillsdale: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1978.
- SEARLE, JOHN. "The Logical Status of Fictional Discourse". *New Literary History* 6. 2 (1975): 319-332.
- TANNEN, DEBORAH. *Framing in Discourse*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992.
- WITTGENSTEIN, LUDWIG. *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. 1922. Routledge Classics. London: Routledge, 2001.
- WITTGENSTEIN, LUDWIG. *Philosophical Investigations*. 1953. Oxford: Blackwell, 2001.