

A STUDY ON PHILOSOPHICAL BASE OF REASONING

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Banville analyzed in relation to Kierkegaard and Nietzsche Soren Kierkegaard wrote either / or in 1843, the year before Friedrich Nietzsche was born, and 29 years before Nietzsche wrote The Birth of Tragedy.

Kierkegaard, although well known in Germany in the latter part of the twentieth century, was not considered to be a major intellectual figure until the period, between the two world wars, with the emergence of existentialism. The themes Kierkegaard examined in his writing, particularly those emphasizing the importance of individual freedom and the burdens and responsibilities it brings with it, were found to be similar to those explored by Sartre and Heidegger. Kierkegaard is thus traditionally seen to be a precursor to this vein within philosophy. However, recent philosophers have paid little heed to his work. The main reason for this are most likely grounded in the question of religion, as Terry Eagleton has stated in his chapter about Kierkegaard in The ideology of the Aesthetic:

Kierkegaard combines his devotion to difference, sportive humour, play with pseudonyms and guerrilla-raids on the metaphysical with a passionately one-sided commitment, by which few of our modern ironists are likely to feel anything but unsettled (173).

During the last decades Kierkegaard's philosophy, with its religious vein running through it, has been seen as deeply unfashionable, while philosophers who see his ideas as being more in accordance with their individualist, secular views of the postmodern. However, it is my opinion that the fact of Kierkegaard's Christianity should not be held against him as a philosopher or in a discussion of an ethical approach to fiction. In the world of Mastustik and Westphal (1995):

The assumption that to be taken seriously a philosopher must either be secular or abstract from his or her religious identity (...) can be dismissed as a prejudice rooted in very dubious Enlightenment conceptions of the autonomy of human thought (Westphal and matustik, 1995, Introduction).

As Douglas Groothuis has put it; "Nietzsche has become a kind of a posthumous prophet to the

post-modernist movement with its suspicion sensibilities in general” I find that, as argued by Tom P.S. Angier in his recent book *Either Kierkegaard/ Or Nietzsche* (2006), Kierkegaard similarly Became a posthumous prophet to Nietzsche’s central arguments in moral philosophy, and through detailed critique exposed their weaknesses.

Kierkegaard therefore has relevance in our age that is as valid as Nietzsche’s, and his arguments, especially those concerning his views of the aesthetic, can be used effectively in an analysis of contemporary literary fiction. As Sylvia Walsh expresses it in *Living Poetically: Kierkegaard’s Existential Aesthetics* (1994):

In an age that suffers increasingly from a loss of poetic pathos and imagination, on the one hand, yet threatens to collapse into the practice of an ironic and hollow form of aestheticism, on the other, Kierkegaard’s aesthetics provides an important alternative to traditional aesthetics (...) (Walsh 1994, 21).

John Banville’s fiction, in particular the three novels constituting the *Frames* trilogy; *The Book Evidence* (1989), *Ghosts* (1993) and *Athena* (1995), all, in my opinion, can be said to illustrate and contain aspects of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche’s philosophies concerning morality and the aesthetic. Though the differences between the two philosophers, one a Christian, the other having declared the death of God, will be the most apparent, their similarities as existential philosophers have been pointed out by several writers like Kellenberger and most recently Tom P.S. Angier. They write in a similar style that combines literature with philosophy, and they each present a view on aesthetics that initially is rooted in the same foundation, the dread of modern society in the face of lost truths. They each find different solutions to this crisis, but it is my opinion that their views can be used fruitfully to illustrate the tension between Banville’s own competing views in the trilogy, as regards his own aesthetic and his discussion of existential matters.

Kierkegaard

Soren Kierkegaard’s view of the aesthetic is significant in the way he, contrary to Nietzsche, does not accept it as being a reason for living in itself. Kierkegaard is famous for his placing of existence into stages, with the aesthetic as the first, the ethical as the second and the religious as the third and final. His book *Either/ or* illustrates this division, where the first volume considers the aesthetic stage through the paper left behind by a young man, Johannes, and accidentally found by the judge

Wilhelm. In his diary the hedonistic Seducer indirectly shows his voyeuristic approach to life and other people by describing the course of his courtship with a young woman. The judge has read the diary, comments on it, and in *Either/ Or II* we are introduced to a letter written by the judge to Johannes, commending him to live ethically as opposed to his hitherto aesthetic attitude to life: "(...) you are sentimental, heartless, all according's to the circumstances; but during all this you are at all times only in the moment, and for that reason your life disintegrates" Banville and Nabokov's most apparent similarities as writers are perspective and narrative technique. John Banville, through his job in an airline that allowed him to travel extensively, spent years in the U.S.A. in the earlier part of his life before returning to Ireland and embarking on his literary career. Nabokov, who was forced to leave his country with his family as a consequence of the Bolshevik revolution in 1917, lived in several different European countries as a young man, before he ended up spending a large part of his life in the U.S.A. the experimental view this adds to his writing resembles the one expressed by Banville's main characters, as outsiders observing a world around them which they do not really belong to. Echoes of Nabokov's writing are easily found in Banville's fiction, specifically, one might say, in his style, with its emphasis on imagery and word play, (Nabokov himself described the process of his writing *Lolita* as "a love affair with the English Language" (Nabokov 1959) but also as regards his subject matter. Nabokov's father was a liberal statesman dedicated to creating a society for the common good, who died while protecting an influential politician from being assassinated. The author's renunciation, in my opinion, from a neo-humanist view, an inescapable fact that *Lolita* is a deeply moral book. The difficulty of interpretation inherent in *Lolita* as well as in frames arises from the nature of the novels' unreliable and self-deceiving narrators. One notices Nabokov's extensive abilities as a stylist, however, the poststructuralist approach of only 'registering that which is unique about the shaping of language, thought, and feeling in a particular work' (Levinas), would for most readers prove to be insufficient. The result is a successful union of purpose, whatever the author's professed (lack of) intention. I would argue that despite the protagonist's complexity and even the author's sole interest in producing aesthetic bliss through stylistic flamboyancy, the moral effect produced in the reader through his or her reading Humbert's and *Lolita's* story is nevertheless clear. This is caused by the insight the reader achieves into the mind of the criminal as well as the effects the crime has on the victim, effects not registered by the

perpetrator himself. The obliviousness of the protagonists' towards the pain of other characters stands as a contrast to the beauty of nature and art that Humbert Humbert and Freddie Montgomery perceives with such great sensitivity Humbert and Freddie Montgomery perceives with such great sensitivity.

The episode certainly adds to Humbert's complexity and postpones any rash conclusions within the reader as regards Humbert being the 'embodiment of evil' or just a man with a problem.

several occasions in the novel, Humbert's second-hand account of Lolita's life reveals to the reader her unhappiness (as demonstrated in her crying every night after presuming Humbert asleep), her longing for her mother, and the pain she suffered by losing her little brother. These are details that simple elude Humbert,s attention. Humbert is not interested in Lolita's mind of person, but in his own perception of her physical beauty that has the power to transport him onto another plane of being: Being a child, unmarked by any physical traces of age, Lolita is a clean slate and a suitable object for Humbert's obsession with Perfection. As such Lolita is enjoyed as an image much in the same way as Fredde's Dutch painting; his self-created version of the woman in the painting is what he enjoys, just as Humbert enjoys own obsession with the details of Lolita's twelve-year-old body, as the reincarnation of his childhood love:

It was the same child – the same frail, honey-hued shoulders, the same silky supple bare back, and the same chestnut head of hair. (...) I recognized the tiny dark-brown mole on her side. (...) I saw again (...) those puerile hips on which I had kissed the crenulated imprint left by the band of her shorts – that last mad immortal day behind the 'Roches Roses'.

This notion is repeated later in the trilogy with Marrow's recollection of his lost love, A., as he himself realizes: "she walked to the window and put her face to the glass and peered off sideways at something only she could see. That stillness, that feline concentration: where had I seen some other loved one stand in just that pose?"

The aestheticizing of female characters, echoing the Pygmalion myth of re-creation, is an import aspect of Freddie's and Humbert's aesthetic attitudes to life in general. In his own postscript to Lolita, "On a Book Called Lolita", Nabokov sums up the definition of art as entailing "curiosity, tenderness, kindness, ecstasy" As characters, Humbert Humbert and Freddie Montgomery combine these traits in a complex way. In Richard Rorty's words, Humbert Humbert is a monster of incuriosity (161) when it

comes to other people, but extremely curious about culture, nature beauty and the work of art that Lolita was to him. The same can be said of Freddie Montgomery.

Johannes is interested in actual situation that he can shape and create into the ‘interesting’, and subsequently enjoy in retrospect as beautiful image. Manipulation of circumstance is central in this process, and Johannes always knows the ideal context in which to stage his seduction, to produce the interesting: “In social life, every girl is armed; the situation is unsatisfactory and occurs again and again – she receives no sensuous jolt. In the street, she is on the open sea, and therefore everything affects her more, and likewise everything is more enigmatic.”

The accidental, the sudden, is required for this creation to take place, as well as Johannes himself and his own imagination:

He egotistically enjoyed personally that which in part actuality has given to him and which in part he himself had used to fertilize actuality, in the second case, his personality was volatilized, and he then enjoyed the situation and himself in the occasion, as an element; in the second case, actuality was drowned in the poetic (ibid.).

When the accidental occasion, actuality, has been moulded into Johannes’ own image of it, it is no longer actuality but changed into an image by his poetic reflection of it.

When people represent the nourishment Johannes feeds on in order to have something to reflect on.

In one of his letters to Cordelia, Johannes reveals his deeper motivations for his relation to her:

My Cordelia. You know that I very much like to talk with myself. I have found in myself the most interesting person among my acquaintances. At times, I have feared that I would come to lack material for these conversations; now I have no fear, for now I have you. I shall talk with myself about you now and for all eternity, about the most interesting subject with the most interesting person –ah, I am only an interesting person, you the most interesting subject.

YOUR JOHANNES

What Johannes is in need of is an interesting subject or situation to spark his own pleasurable of the actual scene, its only function is to inspire.

However, in the moment of actuality, Johannes is aware of his own creative process, which somewhat diminishes the effect of the ‘accidental’. Judge Wilhelm’s analysis of Johannes’ mind point to the latter’s dependence on constant outer stimulation, and his awareness of its temporality: “as soon as

actuality had lost its significance as stimulation, he was disarmed, and the evil in him lay in this. He was conscious of this at the very moment of stimulation, and the evil lay in this consciousness.”

Kierkegaard shares similarities with Banville in his extensive use of pseudonyms and unreliable narrators. Volume II of either/or Contains letters from the judge, Wilhelm, directed to the Seducer, Johannes. In these letters the Judge criticizes Johannes’ aesthetic attitude to other people, and advises him to accept the ethical commitment to existence itself that B himself finds is best realised in the marital status.

The Judge unveils Johannes’ narcissist motives behind his attentions to women, the staging of himself and other onto aesthetic scenes of his own creation, and his unashamed manipulation of other people’s emotions for this specific purpose: his own **aesthetic enjoyment of the Image:**

A pretty young girl, beside whom you quite by chance... were sitting at a table was too prim to bestow a glance on you... she sat opposite a mirror, in which you could see her. She cast a sly look at it, not foreseeing that your eyes had already taken up its place there; she blushed when your eye met hers. Such things you register as accurately as a daguerreotype –and as quickly as one, which, as known, needs only half-a- minute, even in the worst weather. (EO I 13)

CONCLUSION

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