

JOHN BANVILLE'S HAUNTED JOURNEYS TO PRAGUE OF THE MIND PORTRAITS OF THE INVISIBLE SIDE OF A CITY*

Laura P. Z. Izarra

Universidade de São Paulo

Some critics affirm that travel writing has the legacy of imperial modes of vision and thoughts. However, not all individual travellers see themselves as nineteenth-century explorers of new exotic lands and see “other” cultures, peoples and places from a superior ethnocentric perspective. Contemporary travel writing is also seen as a transgressive instrument of self-critique. In *Tourists with Typewriters. Critical Reflections on Contemporary Travel Writing* (2000), Patrick Holland and Graham Huggan discuss various forms of narratives of travels and countertravels, and also point out that “travel to ‘other’ countries opens up, at least potentially, an opportunity for considered self-reflection – it offers a chance, that is, to interrogate and negotiate, if not eliminate, both the traveler’s cultural prejudices and those of the peoples he or she encounters” (201). Nevertheless, there are some books that go beyond the various categories of the genre and the stereotyped consumerism of the exotic. They can be placed in the liminal space between literary journalism and fiction; they cross the frontiers of the delimited space by travel writing reassessing discourses of

Ilha do Desterro	Florianópolis	nº 57	p. 117-128	jul./dez. 2009
------------------	---------------	-------	------------	----------------

displacement, metaphors of movement and representations of cultural differences from a new rhetorical viewpoint. Moreover, how are these other travel writings considered if they deal with the encounter of real and imaginary journeys?

Representations of real and imagined spaces are challenged by cultural myths and the existence of what David Spurr named “alternate frames of historical reference” (9). Literary journalism lacks the implied distance between the author and the first-person narrator, acquiring an autobiographical tone, while fiction with historical settings somewhat protects it from being read as a “true” historical representation. I would like to explore this liminal space using as an example *Prague Pictures. Portraits of a City* (2003), by the contemporary Irish novelist John Banville, who among his long list of award-winning novels has this precious text in which the geographical space is reconstructed at the intersection of memory and imagination: Prague as a city of the mind.

In the *caveat emptor* he warns that this is not a guidebook but “a handful of recollections, variations on a theme.” Prague is a city that “exerts a strong, strange fascination” upon the heart of the “homesick traveller – sick that is not for his native place, but for the city on the Vltava that he has left behind. Returning there, he feels he has never been away, and yet feels guilty, too of forgetfulness, neglect, infidelity” (n.p.).¹ What kind of nostalgia or countertravel does this statement foreshadow? This is not a theoretical essay on travel writing; it explores the poetics of space and how it is constructed, how affections, places and belongings assume a symbolic relational function with the identity of a city. What is in a city like Prague that attracts the traveller? Does Prague create a type of flâneur, as Paris did?² How much does Prague interrelate with the traveller’s place of origin? Does Banville’s narrative highlight the capacity for renewal inherent in travel?

Banville asks at the beginning of his account “What *is* Prague? Does its essence inhere in the pretty Old Town Square, with its cafés and its famous clock, or, on the far contrary, in the smouldering concrete suburbs, where the majority of Praguers live their decidedly

unbohemian lives?... When I was young I thought that to know a place authentically, to take it to one's heart, one must fall in love there" (12). However, he also affirms in the *caveat emptor* that *Prague Pictures* is "a sad song of love to a beloved that can never reciprocate." (n.p.) This intransitive form of love raises the issue of identity formation through the historical and cultural echoes of a city. For example, Joyce's fiction paradoxically mythologised Dublin which is historically disrupted by and amalgamated with the social and cultural practices of the city in the present time: the artist is presentified in many public places, such as bronze statues in North Earl Street just off O'Connell Street (by Marjorie Fitzgibbon), in St. Stephen's Green, and in Merrion Hotel (by Rowan Gillespie) while yearly Bloomsday celebrations leave in our minds an uncomfortable emptiness and cultural displacement engendered by Joyce's myth.

In Banville's travel memories, Prague is the city of Kafka, Sudek, the Emperor Rudolf, Tycho Brahe and Kepler, among others, and threads of historical, social and political facts are interwoven with the author's perception of the city and its people. He writes of his first visit to it during the Cold War, when he engaged in taking out of the country twenty valuable photographs by the Czech master, and of subsequent trips there when its people were eager to join the European Community as well as suspicious of it. He traces Prague's history explaining how it was made by important people (emperors, princes, scientists, writers, artists) as well as by ordinary people. He also wants to deconstruct the geographical space in ideological and mythical terms: "I had come to Czechoslovakia in the expectation that all my received ideas of what life was like in Eastern Europe would be overturned. I was to be disappointed – most of the clichés about communist rule would prove dispiritingly accurate – but also strangely exhilarated. Elsewhere is always a surprise" (2).

The traveller's curiosity on his first visit is perfectly understandable because some years previously Banville had written *Kepler* (1981), a novel partly set in Prague at the turn of the seventeenth century. He

justifies himself, "I was interested to know what level of verisimilitude, or at least of convincingness, I had achieved" (7). His imagination had recreated not only the period but the concrete space with great accuracy according to the readers. However, after having passed more than two decades since he published the novel on the scientist and having been complimented on how well his book had "caught the period," the author ironically questions how those readers could possibly know and affirms that he only succeeded in "persuading them that this was just how it had been then" (7).

The rhetorical method he uses to survey the place he was visiting for the first time combines a strategic and aesthetic valorization of the landscape and the situation. For example, when he walked alone to Charles Bridge on the morning of his arrival:

Frost glittered in the air over the river, just as it had that morning in sixteen-hundred-and-something when my protagonist, the astronomer Johannes Kepler, arrived here from Ulm on a barge, to present the first printed copies of the *Tabulae Rudolphine* to the Emperor after whom he had so hopefully named his almanac. There, looming above me now as it had loomed above my disembarking astronomer, was the great, blank fortress of Hradčany, and over there was Malá Strana, the Little Quarter, where Kepler would live when he took up his appointment as Rudolf's imperial mathematician. (8).

The concrete space described in this passage emphasizes its effect on the foreigner's mind at the intersection with the imaginary space created in his fiction. However, though the writer had got it right, "to a startling degree," he was not pleased at all. For everything that he had imagined, in "the space of a page or two an implied world comes to creaky life. It is all a sleight of the imagination, a vast synecdoche" (9). Thus the writer reflects upon the art of writing, how fancy sometimes "summon[s] up the concrete" as if it were in a prophetic dream, and

yet, he says, "one goes on doing it, spinning yarns, trying to emulate blind Fate herself" (9).

The beauty of Prague has always been praised, but the writer is not sure that beauty is the right word to apply to this "mysterious, jumbled, fantastical, absurd city on the Vltava" (9). He says there is loveliness, of course, but a "loveliness that is excitingly tainted." Trying to apprehend its soul he also recalls *Magica Praha*, the book by Angelo Maria Ripellino, who figures the city as "a temptress, a wanton, a she-devil" (9). Banville describes how he and his two friends visited various places in the company of the Professor who wanted them to smuggle the pictures out of the country and take them to his son who was studying in New York. They were valuable and he would be able to pay for his studies. While exploring the city and observing its crowd the Professor called attention to people's suffering and the political lethargy of the country. However, the traveller's perception of the city as an experiencing subject visually enframing reality was not enough. He was only able to grasp the meaning of Prague when he saw the art of Josef Sudek's (1896-1976) photography:

All day I was walking about the city without seeing it, and suddenly now Sudek's photographs, even the private, interior studies, showed it to me, in all its stony, luminous solidity and peculiar, wan, absent-minded beauty. Here, with this sheaf of pictures on my knees, I had finally arrived. (59)

Sudek's still lifes and landscapes reveal to Banville the inner meaning of life not only of the objects but also of the public and private spaces caught by his camera. Sudek called the still lifes *Memories* because they were related to the lives of departed friends. Moreover, the black-and-white photographs represent the interiors of dwelling places in their ambiguity, mystery, relations and associations; even empty rooms are pregnant with presence as "true works of art are a real presence, after all" (57). The window of Sudek's studio was one of his first private topics after 1940 and the reality of the outside was sometimes

suppressed when seen through the misted-up and opaque ever-present glass. This effect “causes the photographs to head towards the outer-limits of communicability” (Fárová 11). The garden was represented throughout fourteen years in different seasons and changes in the weather and the outer-limits of communicability are reached metonymically and metaphorically through Banville’s narrative transforming that decisive moment into something more lasting and more enduring in the mind of the traveller observing Sudek’s photographs.

For Banville in *Beyond the Moment* (2008), photography is an evidence of the moment “as all art incorporates an element of the contingent. A fleeting play of light and shade across a landscape, a long-lost memory unexpectedly surfacing” have their instant of significance (5). In *Prague Pictures* the city is finally grasped by the traveller through Sudek’s art. Photography stills Time and portrays pastness; it is a static moment caught by the shutter’s click. Like Sudek who expressed the poetry of objects, plants, towns, parks and the countryside, Banville recalls his memories of the city when he visited it in the early 1980s, middle 1990s and after the torrential rains of the summer of 2002.

Banville, the traveller, is uncertain “how and where to locate the ‘real’ Prague, if, indeed, such a singular thing may be said to exist” (82). He wonders why he only remembers the dead leaves beside the path on the heights of Vyšehrad – “what is there about them that makes them particular to the place?” (82), or the snow under his feet rather than Kafka’s house in the Golden Lane, or the sound of his footsteps on the cobbles of the unexpectedly deserted Jiřská Street. He is overwhelmed by the thought: “was it that the fresh-cut white stone paving flags and bags of mortar stacked against the east wall of the cathedral reminded me of Sudek’s great series of photographs of St. Vitus’s under reconstruction in the 1920s?” (83). All he knows is that he “can see the silver-and-pearl light of afternoon, the gleam on the cobbles” (83). The writer is astounded to discover that all these impressions reveal his own state of mind in relation to the city arising

out of an awareness of the “uncanny” relationship between self, world, and otherness.

The doubly-bound construction/disruption of cultural identities occurs within specific contextual locations and social systems of values. Concepts of plurality and historical, geographical and psychological displacements are reconfigured in multi-dimensional images of representations of the past, attempts to answer his inner interrogations: “If Prague is not place, is it people, then? Not the great sights but the great figures?” (83). He focuses not only on the life of the Emperors Charles IV, Rudolph II, the astronomers Tycho Brahe and Johannes Kepler, but also the ordinary people in the streets, the customers in the Slavia, one of the leading literary cafés since the 1920s:

[the customers ...] that night did not look likely *litterateurs* to me. They were young, poorly dressed and bored, or middle-aged and dowdy; only in the elderly among them, I thought, was there discernible the still-surviving glow of an intellectual spark. (106-07)

Photographs of the mind are images that freeze a moment in time, portraying objects, people and places as they appeared within the view of the camera at that moment; they contribute to the dislocation of time and space, enlightening and enlivening history and geography. However, Banville realizes that to grasp the identity of a city “is as if we were to focus our cameras on the great sights and the snaps when developed all came out with nothing in them save undistinguished but maniacally detailed foregrounds” (83). These foreground details are metaphors of the snapshots caught by the author’s state of mind.

If Dublin is Joyce’s city and Prague is Sudek’s city, *what* is in a city’s name beyond the cultural resonance of the artist’s name and work? Going a step further, how does Banville rewrite the contemporary cultural debate about a city that is framing its identity in a continuum? Banville’s literary strategy is the construction of a symbolic cultural textuality through fictional memoirs because they reveal what Michael

Foucault defines as “aesthetics of existence,” “a deliberate stylisation of daily life” (47). Moreover, Banville adds a live stylisation of the protagonist’s state of mind. A moment of real time is caught and emulsified, “fixed” by the writer’s perception in his memory and translated into words with his pen.

On the other hand, in the travel memoir, a political consciousness is also raised. The author recalls the night when he and his friends were having dinner at the Professor’s house in Prague, and he becomes aware that in describing Czechoslovakia they keep using the word Eastern Europe. Banville asks himself: “could we not see that even by using that designation we were, however unwittingly, conniving with the Soviets and accepting the status quo?” (52) He recalls that the Professor’s wife, glaring at each of them in turn, said very determinedly “Eastern Europe? ... – where was that? Where does Eastern Europe begin? At Moscow, Budapest? Prague? *Vienna*?” (52). But the snapshot here is the writer’s fascination observing the “furious magnificence” of the Professor’s wife, and the Professor’s response watching her “with brimming uxorious admiration, wordlessly urging her on” (52- 53) He considers the deals that married couples “tacitly make with each other, the silent arrangements of interdependence by which they apportion power between them” (53).

In *Prague Pictures*, everyday life and ideology are intertwined. Banville’s affections and attitudes towards the country, even people’s judgements about communist rule, are revealed at the very opening of the book. He describes old Prague sympathetically as “wistful, secretive, tormented” (10), a survivor of the communist take-over of 1948, and the Russian invasion twenty years later which,

irony of ironies, finally succumbed to the blow delivered to it by a velvet fist in a velvet glove in the revolution of 1989. Now the dollar is everywhere, the young have all the blue jeans they could desire, and there is a McDonald’s just off the Charles Bridge. Well, why not, Praguers have the same right

to vulgar consumption as the rest of us. Freedom is freedom to eat cheap hamburgers as much as it is to publish subversive poetry. (10-11)

When the author meets the Professor, he asks himself "what did I know of the difficulties of this man's life, of the stratagems he had been compelled to engage in over the years in order to preserve dignity and self-respect, or in order to feed and clothe himself and his wife and son" (43). The confrontation of two regimes becomes evident when the travellers leave the country crossing to the Austrian side, and see the first sign of Western capitalist society, "an advertisement of some degenerate Western luxury – Dior fashions or Mercedes motor cars – and something in me revelled instinctively, irresistibly, in the sight of what seemed such happy, hopeful, life-affirming colours, and I thought of the Professor, and Marta, and felt ashamed" (71).

What role then does history play in the construction of identities and an ideological critique from the traveller's point of view? There is a relationship of proximity in *difference* and *similarity* between the author's country and Prague in Banville's imagination. He says, "thinking historically, like giving a story a happy ending, is a matter of deciding where to stop.... Everything ramifies. Facts are susceptible to an infinite process of dismantlement" (80). After asking "Is history the big picture, or the minute details, the grand sweep or the dusty annals?" (81), he refers to debates among Irish historians and the way Czechs were seen by "the visiting Westerner" prior to the revolution of 1989 (Czechs were "captive people," "for that is what they were, captives, held in the prison of a vast, irresistible, wholly philistine system." [128]). These digressions address the question that historians, tourists and essayists alike "must grapple with: how and where to locate the 'real' Prague" (or Ireland) "if indeed, such a singular thing may be said to exist" (82).

Ideologies dangerously crystallise positive and negative judgements of the "Other." Czechs are seen as "damaged lives"; and

Banville adds, "I hope they are happier now, the ones who lived long enough to see the fell Calibans undone, yet always I hear the echo of my friend Zdeněk's sad complaint: 'Too late! Too late for me!'" (129). But statements of the Other's will also oblige the contemporary visitor to resignify his/her position. Banville recalls Professor Doctor Eduard Goldstücker's integrity, when, in the middle of the 1990s, at a British Council party after the Writers' Festival, he confirmed that he was still a socialist: "I never lost that faith. The people with the power were bad – more than bad – but the system was not" (p.227). As Borges writes in "Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*," "historical truth, for him, is not what has happened; it is what we judge to have happened" (43).

So why does a city/country exercise such a strong control that, in the case of the Professor whom Banville met on his first visit to Prague, he is unable to flee from it? His wife Marta laughs at the idea as presented in a poem by Viktor Dyk: "those who should dare to leave would die" (56). Banville understands Dyk's metaphor, and believes that the Professor "would have survived, but something in him would have died, for he would have lost an essential part of himself had he left Prague" (56).

In Banville's own historiographic version of the past and present of Prague and its people, the art of photography and of writing travel memoirs (fictional or not) are ways of comprehending the identity of a city and the relationships between self and world, and self and otherness. Banville's technical strategy of writing fictional memoirs allows him to equip his characters with an ethical framework, congruent with efficient functioning in primordial interpersonal settings – in face-to-face situations, in families and in small systems. In the travel memoir, the frontiers between remembering, forgetting and inventing are blurred. Quoting Susan Sontag's statement, when she meditates "on the poignancy of remembering and the necessity, sometimes, to forget" – " 'Memory is, achingly, the only relation we can have with the dead,'" – Banville argues that "remembering is an 'ethical act.'"³ In *Prague*

Pictures the city is remembered by fragments – “Why these fragments and no others, far more significant? Why these?” (46).

His self-referential work is like a haunted journey to a Prague of the mind. It explores the presence of a multiple and fragmented “imagined” essence of a city, producing the effect of Sudek’s negative pictures, in which objects or persons in the middle ground are illuminated. Thus, the reflection of an object or a person is seen in many fragmented and sometimes distorted images which are re-presented through word-pictures in Banville’s narrative. His portrayal of the states of the mind of the traveller in his cultural encounter with Prague and its people are “still lifes” that show the same object seen from infinite angles and perceived in its multiplicity. However, the traveller’s eyes caught a snapshot of a “unity” in its changing form.

Banville constructs landscapes of memories that metaphorically represent the topography of the mind resembling Sudek’s new realism and technical transitions between light and dark surfaces. Images of the present are aligned with feelings and perceptions of the past in a contrapuntal way. People in interior spaces and still lifes of Banville’s narratives are simultaneously illuminated and darkened in half tones to give intimacy to his own pictures of the mind. The metaphorical transformation of the mindscapes in the liminal spaces of the concrete world of literary-travel journalism makes Banville’s foreign eyes keep wide open and his ear ready looking for something different from what the ordinary traveller or tourist generally sees.

Notes

- * This text is based on part of my article “Disrupting Social and Cultural Identities: A Critique of the Ever-Changing Self,” published in the special issue *Irish University Review: John Banville* 36.1 (2006): 182-99.
- 1. John Banville. *Prague Pictures. Portraits of a City* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2003). All further references are to this edition and will be included in the text.
- 2. Cf. Walter Benjamin’s “Exposé of 1939” in *The Arcades Project*.

3. John Banville. "Pictures, Pain and Perception" in *The Irish Times* (16 August 2003): 10. (A review of Sontag's *Regarding the Pain of Others*).

References

- Banville, John. *Beyond the Moment. Irish Photojournalism in Our Time*. Ed. Colin Jacobson. Dublin: The Press Photographer Association of Ireland, 2008.
- _____. "Pictures, Pain and Perception." *The Irish Times* (16 August 2003): 10.
- _____. *Prague Pictures. Portraits of a City*. New York & London: Bloomsbury, 2003.
- Benjamin, Walter. *The Arcades Project*. Trans. Howard Eiland & Kevin McLaughlin. Cambridge, Mass. & London: The Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 1999.
- Borges, Jorge Luis. *Labyrinths. Selected Stories and Other Writings*. New York: New Directions Books, 1964.
- Fárová, Anna. *Josef Sudek*. Prague: Torst, 2002.
- Foucault, Michel. *Politics, Philosophy, Culture; Interviews and Other Writings 1977-1984*. Ed. by Lawrence D. Kritzman. New York & London: Routledge, 1988.
- Holland, Patrick, and Graham Huggan. *Tourists with Typewriters. Critical Reflections on Contemporary Travel Writing*. Minneapolis: U of Michigan P, 1998.
- Spurr, David. *The Rhetoric of Empire. Colonial Discourse in Journalism, Travel Writing, and Imperial Administration*. Durham & London: Duke UP, 1993.