

**Ecstasis of Ekphrasis: Dialectically (De)framing Self in John
Banville's *The Book of Evidence***

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Freddie Montgomery's narrative confession in John Banville's *The Book of Evidence* frames the inability of language signifiers to fully explicate the evidence and convey the meaning of the murder entrapping Freddie in the jail cell, the space from which he dictates his "book" of evidence. In the earlier portion of his confession, for instance, Freddie muses upon language's ability, or lack thereof, to convey "badness" as the meaning behind the evidence of his murder:

I ask myself if perhaps the thing itself – *badness* – does not exist at all, if these strangely vague and imprecise words are only a kind of ruse, a kind of elaborate cover for the fact that nothing is there. Or perhaps the words are an attempt to make it there? Or, again, perhaps there is something, but the words invented it.¹

Freddie traces the signifying word-frame "badness" as the "thing itself" that is explicative of his motivation for murder. Yet he considers the possibility that the signifying vehicle through which the "thing itself" is conveyed frames an empty space, an absence, thereby rendering the impossibility of fully conveying meaning of one particular event or of denoting the exact moment in which the naming of the "thing" became the "thing" itself. Freddie suggests that "the words invented it," "it" referring to the thing itself, and thus that badness merely emerges conceptually through the vehicle of words and language rather than existing autonomously outside of language. Freddie struggles to acquire meaning, to locate the "thing" behind the word that falsely and insufficiently "cover[s] for the fact that nothing is there," and to ascertain the motivation behind the evidence of his recounted murder.

Freddie suggests that events comprising his narrative are interconnected and contingent upon one another, inseparable from the endless reality in which they fold upon themselves. Events are thus incapable of being contained or denoted in a single signifying moment: "Perhaps that was the moment in my life at which – but what am I saying, there are no moments, I've said that already. There is just the ceaseless, slow, demented drift of things" (135). Banville

¹ John Banville, *The Book of Evidence* (New York: Vintage International, 1989) 55.

similarly comments in an interview: “To speak of an *event* and a *cause* of that event is to pretend that individual things—*monads*, if you like—can be isolated from everything else... However, as we know very well if we think about it for a moment, there is no such thing as an event and no such thing as a cause: there is only, as Nietzsche points out, a continuum.”² As any particular event cannot be contained beyond the temporal moment of its occurrence, meaning relayed from the real and contemporaneous occurrence of that event is articulated through language but never fully embodies the thing itself, the event as it is in moment of its existence. Language, for Banville’s narrator, functions in this continuum emanating from an endless deferral and slippage of meaning that is unfixed and mobile. “Words so rarely mean what they mean,” Freddie remarks (169).

Paul de Man’s “The Rhetoric of Temporality” in *Interpretation Theory and Practice* (1969) parallels language’s incapacity for fully capturing the “thing itself” in his discussion of the division of the “I” in language. This division constitutes the ironic self in which, through language, one recognizes an empirical self immersed in the world as well as one’s own difference from the world around it. The irony revealed through language renders the inability for totality of self or totality of meaning. Plagued by the division of self in language, Freddie attempts to unify subjectivity and objectivity and to retrieve an understanding of self by turning first towards paintings and ultimately towards windows as alternative media of signification. Thus words, in this sense, fail to speak to the cause of his crime or explicate the meaning behind the events leading to the murder, the cause that his interrogators so emphatically attempt to contrive from Freddie.

² Rüdiger Imhof, “John Banville,” *Writing Irish: Selected Interviews with Irish Writers from the Irish Literary Supplement* James P. Myers, Jr., ed. (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1998) 69.

Indeed, words throughout the narrative cannot sustain the weight or fully capture the world surrounding Freddie. The smell of the air in the jail travels beneath the delineating boundaries of the cell walls that attempt to entrap Freddie in a fixed, contained state. Freddie's state is contained by both the literal cell of the jail as well as by the metaphorical cell of failing language that, ironically, cannot complete Freddie's description of the literal cell:

Then this place. ...The air stands motionless in the corridors, like stagnant water. It is laced with a faint stink of carbolic, which bespeaks the charnel-house. In the beginning I fancied it was me, I mean I thought this smell was mine, my contribution. Perhaps it is? ... My cell. My cell is. Why go on with this (4).

Despite the rigidity of the cell walls and the air that “stands motionless in the corridors,” Freddie's surroundings permeate him with smell, blurring the distinction between the ‘outside’ and ‘inside’ of the cell walls, conflating the smell emanating from the outer air with the smell stemming from his own corporal being. The pervading smell is analogous to uncontainable meaning demarcated through signification, to the “thing itself” behind the signifier that is perpetually in motion and undermining the defined boundaries of the containing word. The narrative's construction as a stream of consciousness, a consciousness syntactically lost and embedded within the boundaries of smell and the cell, consequently further amplifies the potential mutability of the prisoner's sense of identity contained within and defined by his cell. For Freddie's description of his jail cell, “this place,” gradually unravels, becoming incapable of depicting coherent thoughts and sentences as the weight and pressure of the air impedes upon his ability to utter his narrative: “My cell. My cell is. Why go on with this” (4). Language that attempts to denote through signification cannot capture the mutability of meaning that Freddie observes in the interchangeability of smell, a flow that deconstructs the very binaries of the outside and inside of the cell, of the outside and inside of Freddie's own bodily cell.

The events prefacing Freddie's ultimate entrapment in "this place" commences with a journey home to native Ireland in order to acquire money for a debt he has accrued while living abroad on a Mediterranean island. Much to his dismay, his hopes to retrieve funds from selling valuable family paintings are diminished when he discovers these paintings have been sold during his estranged life abroad. The narrative retrospectively posits Freddie's self-conscious murder of a young girl who has obtained one such painting, a murder without apparent motive. Freddie's homecoming in search of necessary funds to assuage his monetary debts literalizes his desire to inscribe himself into the boundaries of society: the painting functions initially as a commodity of exchange that will purchase Freddie's entrance back into acceptable human normality. Ironically, Freddie's homecoming is undermined by a disheveled family and house, both of which allegorize the uncertainty underlying Ireland's unstable national identity. Clare Carroll's and Patricia King's introduction to *Ireland and Postcolonial Theory* (2003) describes Ireland as a nation without a nation-state: "It is important to distinguish between nation and nation-state... If by nation we mean a self-conscious community with a common sense of history and a literature of its own, as well as claims to political identity and territorial sovereignty, then Ireland, like many other postcolonial nations, existed for most of its history as a nation without a nation-state."³ Thus the postcolonial Irish condition is inherently constructed as postmodern: its inhabitants' complex sense of self is traced to an untraceable historical and geographic origin rather than to a "place" that can be seemingly marked and transcribed. Freddie's cell ostensibly projects itself to be an origin of the narrative, a container of the murder's meaning and signification. Yet the cell, similar to the possibility of a stable Irish origin, collapses underneath the walls' unstable and fruitless fortification against the infiltrating, permeating air.

³ Clare Carroll and Patricia King, ed., *Ireland and Postcolonial Theory* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2003) 6.

Upon visiting his mother for the first time in years, Freddie laments, “Home, yes, home is always a surprise. ...The house was rotting, in places so badly, and so rapidly, that even she was startled” (45). Freddie’s homecoming to a rotting house epitomizes his postmodern crisis of identity in which he is incapable of locating an origin or self through language. The rotting house further literalizes the deconstruction of binaries through the house’s decaying walls: the very notion of an outside and an inside is undermined by the destruction of the house. Furthermore, the rotting house it is also metaphorical for Freddie’s postcolonial crisis of Irish self: Ireland’s historical colonization by England complicates its inhabitants’ sense of origin and national identity and, subsequently, its inhabitants’ discrete identities. David Lloyd writes of the colonized Irish self in *Anomalous States: Irish Writing and the Post-Colonial Movement* (1993): “Such inauthenticity is equally the perpetual condition of the colonized: dominated, interpreted, mediated by another... These origins...are a fiction, and still the colonized subject is grasped as an object to be transformed quite inauthentically into subjectivity by way of an alien absent presence.”⁴ Within this framework, Freddie performs a self-conscious narration of his troubled, colonized self through the employment of linguistic play with postmodern tropes. He laments, “Other people seemed to have a density, a thereness, which I lacked” (16). He desires to articulate a self-presence which he implies is intrinsically lacking and absent.

A silent and yet integral presence of paintings throughout the narrative invokes Freddie’s appeal to traditional stability of meaning in paintings, thereby complicating his performance of postmodern narrative. Freddie initially constructs paintings as signifiers capable of conveying authentic meaning and self that language fails to reach and, subsequently, as signifiers able to explicate his displaced identity. As a media supposedly distinct from language, paintings serve

⁴ David Lloyd, *Anomalous States: Irish Writing and the Post-Colonial Moment* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993) 54.

as Freddie's initial resolution to the split between subjectivity and objectivity that hinders language's accuracy and totality of meaning. Thus, he implicates paintings and language to be differentiated signifiers. Freddie's suggested difference that he will later dismantle between visual paintings and verbal language resounds throughout his construal of the two media. For instance, in a comical construction of an American character in the narrative, Freddie comments: "He claimed he was a painter, until I put a few innocent questions to him on the subject, then he suddenly became a writer instead" (14). Freddie's sly and allegedly harmless remarks extenuate his constructed dichotomy of painting and writing as distinct signifiers, the former as a fixed, specified profession, the latter as a vast and mercurial profession.

While language fails to convey either concrete utterance of the murder or evidence of Freddie's integral presence, paintings in Freddie's falsely constructed binary convey meaning in silence, outside of symbolic language, and are thus uninhibited by the fallacy of language in fixating meaning to words. Yet the frame is merely another appendage of the painting, thereby implicating an endless deferral of presence that is inherently connected to the world around it. That is, paintings are both inside and outside, the frame only a temporizing gesture that seems to demarcate presence and its fixity. For while the frame indeed encloses the painting within its domain, suggesting a contained fixed presence, it also connects the painting to the physical space and social reality around it, implicating the painting signifier as residing outside of a traditional framework in which it is grounded, fixed, and immutable. Paintings, in this sense of (un)framed signification, mirror Freddie's postmodern conception of unfixed language.

Until he commits the murder, nonetheless, Freddie adheres desperately to his desire for a traditional framework of the painting as capable of locating himself. His offering of the painting as the motive for his murder is grounded in a desire for a fixing, painting, and framing of the self

in a medium outside of fallacious language. The visual medium, however, proves to be itself inherently ungrounded between the inside and the outside, between the here and there. In “Between Filiation and Affiliation: The Politics of Postcolonial Memory,” Kevin Whelan posits art and other forms of representation as occupying a space between concepts and articulation and, more literally, from a position of origin and a position of arrival: “A crucial feature of all forms of representation is the space from which we speak or – to put it another way – the appropriate distance between filiation (that to which we are born) and affiliation (that to which we aspire).”⁵ Whelan constructs representation in art as the interface of recalling traces of the past and reconstructing those traces for future remembrance. The interface at the painting strives to address the repercussions of colonization which dishevel and contest the origin of the colonized subject. Analogously, the painting functioning as a stabilizing medium through which a disparaged, colonized origin is contained and seemingly ordered for future recollection corresponds with Freddie’s framework of the painting as capable of thwarting the forward movement of modernity. This framework articulates the visual painting as a medium which will locate his displaced, colonized Irish origin, which is literalized by his return to his Irish home to obtain the painting. Freddie simultaneously utilizes the painting to locate his displaced postmodern self, inundated with and silenced by language’s inability to contrive and project meaning. The postcolonial condition as constituting an incomplete origin thus epitomizes the postmodern crisis of identity.

Freddie admits to the presence of absence in language (more so than in paintings) that constitutes his unattached, disjointed being: “Never wholly anywhere, never with anyone, either, that was me, always. Even as a child I seemed to myself a traveler who had been delayed in the middle of an urgent journey” (56). In a postmodern framework, then, art constructs a medium or

⁵ Carroll, 107.

rather is a construct of a medium permitting the conveyance of the same presence of absence from which Freddie desperately flees in language. Octavio Paz says of art's ability to convey absence: "Today the mask hides nothing. In our time it may well be impossible for the artist to invoke presence. But another way, cleared for him by Mallarmé, is still open to him: manifesting absence, incarnating emptiness."⁶ Paintings' masking of the emptiness behind the images they depict is uncovered in a postmodern framing of the frame: despite Freddie's efforts to acquire fixity and stability in the paintings of the text, paintings do not denote meaning or signification. Rather, they provide a medium differing from—though never quite distinct from—a postmodern framework of language, recognizing the same absence of and traces of meaning always present in words and utterance.

Indeed Freddie frequently intersperses his confession with comments on the fallibility of the narrative itself to convey meaning in words. If not plagued by silence, he is silenced by an excess of meaning that cannot be contained in signifiers or conveyed in language: "It is not that I am lost for words, but the opposite. There is so much to be said I do not know where to begin" (41). The narrativized medium of the paintings serves as a container for the excess of meaning that Freddie cannot bring fully to words, though the paintings are nonetheless narrated through language. Lloyd suggests that "artwork arouses a contemplative desire that reconciles subject and object."⁷ Freddie attempts to locate his "true" confession in the painting which allegedly reconciles subjectivity and objectivity. For he attributes the painting as unobstructed by this division that occurs in language, as according to De Man's notion of the ironic self. However in this desire to acquire unity of his subjectivity and objectivity, Freddie's oscillates throughout the text between a second binary: that of the traditional conception of paintings as fixed and

⁶ Lloyd, 55.

⁷ Lloyd, 47.

rendering meaning, and of a postmodern, unfixed construal of the painting's portrayed gaze. The latter conception of the gaze indicates its (in)ability to render meaning, an insufficiency mimicking his framework for fallible language.

Thus the painting, for Freddie, initially articulates a "true" nature of his existence constituted in the unity of his subjective and objective self. Yet painting's ability to acquire a unity of subjectivity and objectivity will ultimately collapse in the narrative, rendering a presence of absence or, likewise, absence of presence, neither of which are conveyed in denoting verbal or visual signification systems. Paintings, like language, unravel in their ability to sustain the weight of the falsehood of identity. Freddie laments this linguistic scission of identity that exists between the subjective "I" speaking of the acting, objective "me": "This process of distancing seems to have been an essential preliminary to action. ...For the person that was inside was also strange to me, stranger by far, indeed, than the familiar, physical creature. ...I have always felt – what is the word – bifurcate, that's it" (95). Kim Worthington likewise recognizes this linguistic paradox of self-recognition, "The post-Cartesian philosophical dilemma of 'misrecognition' in the reflexive act of self-conceptualization, the fundamental psychic split between the 'I' who experiences being ('the actual me') and the 'I' ('federman') who recognizes that experience by rewriting it as meaningful narrative in the temporal linear sequence of conceptualization: the split which is at once both the condition of self-identification and that which prohibits self-identity."⁸ Paintings offer Freddie an alternative signifying space, an extralinguistic space that seemingly absconds from the fallibility of language in unifying the "I". Paradoxically, nevertheless, paintings only further convey through this apparently extralinguistic space the inability to fully convey the ever-reforming self in crisis.

⁸ Kim L. Worthington, "Self as Text: The Political Agenda," *Self as Narrative: Subjectivity and Community in Contemporary Fiction* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996) 151.

And crisis adamantly pervades Freddie's struggle to strike a place for himself in the spatial, tangible world around him, whether through a strike of the hand in murder or through a strike of the paintbrush. However, he finds that such a "place" invariably deconstructs the binaries of unstable origin and indeterminable future, of a sense of filiation and affiliation: such a world is exposed by the postmodern crisis of temporal consciousness which is itself threatened by the inability to reconcile the current state of things with a concrete, conceivable origin. Such spaces do not resolve the split between subjectivity and objectivity, inside and outside, and other binaries constructing Freddie's world, but rather they expose and reveal such binaries. For instance, the spatial landscape of the jail cell from which Freddie dictates his narrative exploits his understanding that fixity, though ideal in theory, is unattainable by "painting" the scene through language. He marks the topography of the cell so as to stabilize his objective presence in the landscape around him: "I have a table and what they call an easy chair. There is even a television set, though I rarely watch it, now that my case is *sub judice* and there is nothing about me on the news" (4). Freddie emphasizes his connection to the physical instantiation of corporality, desiring to appropriate his being to the physical objects marked by his possession of them. As he incessantly suggests, there is a barrier in language that obstructs acquiring a genuine inner self without the use of exterior objects. The tangible objects physically surround and provide an exterior objectivity framing Freddie and the "I" who possesses, outside of itself, a table and an easy chair. His interest in the physical objects stems inherently from their relation to and possession by his objectivity in the social world, an objectivity yielding a sense of stability and reality in that realm. Likewise, his interest in the television set is grounded in its display of news about him, about how he is in fact perceived by and actualized by outside viewers. Actualization on the television news programs provides Freddie with a transformation

from the subjective, capricious “I” to a seemingly solidified, objective “me” recognized by exterior observation: “There is nothing about me on the news.” Worthington addresses this narrative gap between the “I” who tells and the “I” who is told, citing Derrida’s *Speech and Phenomenon*: “Selfhood...is always realized in terms whose social and temporal character construct it as an unoriginal representation... One’s sense of oneself can only ever be a retrospective re-cognition, a belated realization of something which is always already written in the structures of symbolic language, never a spontaneous apprehension of an original self.”⁹ Freddie’s objective selfhood in the first account is conveyed to him through the news stories on the television, a retrospective construction of his identity that is recognized and actualized after the fact, temporally and spatially. Contrarily, nonetheless, he aspires to instantaneously acquire the “thing [him]self” in a means devoid of temporal division.

Shortly thereafter, Freddie admits to the very notion of human physical topography and landscape as merely a construct, an artifice of edifice, unsuccessfully attempting to demarcate the inside as intrinsically distinct from and differentiated from the exterior world: “The fact is, in here is like out there, only more so. We are obsessed with physical comfort” (5). Significantly, Freddie’s narrative is here conveyed neither through the subjective “I” nor through the objective “me”. The narrative speaks through the “we” mode, a dialect that is not separated by the physical jail walls constructing an inside and an outside or attempting to fixate a self that is distinct from the world surrounding it. This “we” instead foregrounds the ambiguity of the boundary between Freddie and the bodies around him, embracing the slippage rather than the stabilized differentiation between his identity and the community outside. In recognition of the outside as indecipherable from the interiorized walls of humanity’s artifice (and edifice), Freddie resists the human desire to order its existence both spatially in the constructed walls that separate

⁹ Worthington, 26.

humanity from nature, as well as temporally in language, in the chronological ordering of its presence and identity in time.

Thus Freddie, though desiring to fixate himself in the physical jail cell and in the temporal ordering of his self-understanding through language and narration, recognizes a human—as well as his own—hypocrisy in attempting to separate the outside from the inside, to fixate the self spatially through artificial walls or temporally through ordering and comprehensible language when in reality, as he claims, “The fact is, in here is like out there, only more so.” The “we” to whom Freddie alludes is obsessed with physical comfort, that is, its physicality and grounded identity in the world around it. By relinquishing the desire to comfort the physical self, Freddie is now unconstrained by the desire to differentiate himself from others. He is no longer preoccupied with his physical state or his place in the temporal world. That is, a self unconcerned with its own physicality has opened its boundaries to the fluidity of the outside space that is indistinct from “in here.” He recognizes the hypocrisy of epistemological presumptions in language that fabricates human certainty of its existence and constructs a logical grounding upon which humankind rationalizes its own chronological and spatial presence:

I took up the study of science in order to find certainty. No, that’s not it. Better say, 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 (18).

Worthington writes of contemporary geographers’ postmodern sense of the collapsing wall between space, which has been traditionally conceived of as fixed and static, and time, which has been conceived of as mobile: “Spatiality and temporality, they argue, are existential and experiential dimensions that cannot be separated, permutable dimensions within which cultural and personal identity is constituted.”¹⁰ Though Freddie attempts to flee from the vast uncertainty

¹⁰ Worthington, 69.

of the postmodern terrain through the walls of the jail cell, through the words of his narrative confession, and through the alleged fixity of the paintings, he exploits his own deeper understanding of the inseparability of the self from the “we” community, of the space inside the walls from the outside air, and of the space in which he attempts to linguistically and physically differentiate his being from the greater temporal postmodern and Irish crisis of origin.

During interrogation regarding his crime, Freddie demonstrates an inability to maintain this fabricated inside-outside distinction between temporality and spatiality when he is incapable of feasibly and directly recounting his murder motivations in a logical and geographically mapped moment in or of time: “When Inspector Haslet asked if I had anything to say I shook my head. I would not have known where to begin” (195). The “unmappable” origin of his confession is as indecipherable, spatially and temporally, as the origin of the nation-state and of Freddie’s literal father, whose death is imagined spatially in Freddie’s narrative as well as anachronistically injected into the discourse of his primary tale: “He died at evening. ...His hand. The waxen feeling of. ...Stop this, stop it. I was not there. I have not been present at anyone’s death” (51). Through a feigned reconstruction of his father, of the Father, and of (Irish) origin, Freddie exposes the fabrication of his own narrative and the ease with which words and language deceive, claiming signification with meaning that is never fully revealed or uncovered.

In spite of his recognition of the fallaciousness of language, Freddie is deeply enthralled and affected by the significance of the painting that motivates the murder. In “Ekphrasis and the Novel: The Presence of Paintings in John Banville’s Fiction,” Joseph McMinn writes of the ekphrastic desire in *The Book of Evidence*, claiming that the apparent stability of meaning in paintings is more real to Freddie than the characters themselves.¹¹ Despite his insistence that

¹¹ Joseph McMinn. “Ekphrasis and the Novel: The Presence of Paintings in John Banville’s Fiction.” Word & Image 18, no. 2 (April-June 2002).

“none of this means anything,” Freddie provides a detailed account of the historical background and significance of the piece of art motivating his murder (104). This tension between his desire to allocate paintings as a traditional and absolute signifier above and beyond “meaningless” language and his recognition of the inefficiency of attributing a painter, a master, a fixed and absolute meaning and identity to the painting, exploits Freddie’s suppressed recognition of the painting as nothing more than an extralinguistic space synonymous with postmodern language. The painting’s signifier as a commodity of exchange inherently structures its position and meaning in the social stratosphere as contingent upon its contextual usage. Thus it, too, is subjected to the whim of the world around it, thereby becoming not autonomous from and anachronistic in the spatial world, but rather, wholly and fully dependent upon its surroundings. Its signifying name is *Portrait of a Woman with Gloves* and its exterior frame is concrete and solidified, measuring “eighty-two centimeters by sixty-five” (104). However, “from internal evidence,” the painting’s very existence is slippery and fluid with an unclear date of origin between 1655 and 1660.

The portrait’s fixed meaning and identity is further obscured by an unidentified, elusive source: “The picture has been variously attributed to Rembrandt and Frans Hals, even to Vermeer. However, it is safest to regard it as the work of an anonymous master” (104). The painting of an “anonymous master” is as unfixed and ungrounded as Freddie’s own postmodern identity and grievance with language. The internal evidence points towards not a concrete rendering of the painting but rather the fluid, insecure interior within the boundaries of the frame. The frame, as Derrida suggests in *The Truth in Painting*, creates the space “*between* the outside and the inside, the framer and the framed, the figure and the ground, form and content, signifier and signified.”¹² It is this space created by the frame in which the slippage occurs, providing for

¹² Jacques Derrida, “The Truth in Painting,” *Art and its Significance: An Anthology of Aesthetic Theory, Third*

the transmutation and permeation of the painting's meaning in the relation between its interior and exterior. Freddie's inability to substantiate a master of the "anonymous" portrait mimics the uncontainable meaning or origin of the word in language. Moreover, it literalizes the problem with ekphrasis as a source for fixed meaning, for an authentic, genuine and coherent speaking picture whose own origin is inherently in question. Freddie's ironizing of the picture "as the work of an anonymous master" bears discrete semblance to his mockery of the postmodern crisis of self-identity and fixity in language: this parallel suggests Freddie's underlying epistemological consciousness, or lack thereof, regarding painting's postmodern inability to convey an absolute truth in contrast to its more traditional rendering. The painting that is so integral to Freddie's narrative is, likewise, never depicted in the narrative but is merely referred to through language: the portrait eludes the narrative much like its fixity escapes from Freddie. Analyzing twentieth-century ekphrastic poetry, James A. W. Heffernan's "Modern and Postmodern Ekphrasis: Entering the Museum of Art" characterizes the tension in painting between the meaning and the vehicle that is the ekphrastic work itself as "the conversion of fixed pose and gesture into the narrative, the prosopopeial envoicing of the silent image, the sense of representational friction between signifying medium and subject signified, and overall the struggle for power—the *paragone*—between the image and the word."¹³ Envoicing the silent image through ekphrasis requires a dialectical synthesizing of the outside and the inside, a process that is always unstable and thus never achieves full unity.

Freddie literalizes the collapse of binaries in his narrative and world by conflating the painted woman of artifice with the natural, tangible woman whom he murders to acquire the painting. Both women, nevertheless, gaze upon and acknowledge Freddie's presence. Lene

Edition, Stephen David Ross, ed. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994) 410.

¹³James A. W. Heffernan, "Modern and Postmodern Ekphrasis: Entering the Museum of Art," *Museum of Words: The Poetics of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashbery* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993) 136.

Yding Pederson suggests that the problem of speaking of oneself in narration may be addressed by a detour via the other: “The strategy of storytelling where the narrators tell their stories not as their own stories but as someone else’s may be a way of gaining *access* to their own subjectivity.”¹⁴ Freddie’s inauthentic self, as expressed in the narration, constructs the woman in the portrait (and, subsequently, the woman obstructing his access to the portrait), as the Other who can provide him access to subjectivity through the gazing upon and recognition of his absent presence. Freddie remarks upon the integral presence of paintings in his own narrative and the focal point such paintings occupy in his life as often connecting himself to other[s] even prior to the murder: “I am struck, for instance, by the frequent appearance which paintings make in this case. ...My father fancied himself a collector, did I mention that? ... It was through painting also that I met Anna Behrens, or met her again, I should say” (62). Moreover, Freddie encounters a “natural” woman prior to the murder who is rather similar to the described woman in the portrait. Contrary to the painted woman whom he attempts to naturalize, however, his narration constructs her body and presence as pictorial and painted: “It was not just the woman’s painted stare that watched me. Everything in the picture, that brooch, those gloves, the flocculent darkness at her back, every spot on the canvas was an eye fixed on me unblinkingly” (79). Freddie reverts to pictorial language, but language nonetheless, to perform a process that “un-animates” the living female body through murder. In the converse direction, the inanimate woman in the portrait emerges from her silenced captivity through Freddie’s performative ekphrasis. The murdered woman who stands in his way of acquiring the painting is reduced to a mere obstruction he overlooks to maintain a vision of the woman in the painting, an obstacle that ironically attracts far too much attention to Freddie’s presence in the world: “I was mortified. I

¹⁴ Lene Yding Pedersen, “A Subject After All – Rethinking the ‘personalized narrator’ of the self-reflexive first-person novels of O’Brien, Beckett, and Banville,” Morten Jojgaard, Lars Ole Sauerberg and Bengt Algot Sorensen, ed. *Orbis Litterarum*. Vol. 58, No. 3 (Denmark: Blackwell Munksgaard, 2003) 228.

had never been so exposed in all my life. People were looking at me – she in the back seat” (112). Despite his alleged desire to be observed and actualized, Freddie becomes entrenched in spectacle as the primary object of observation, thereby coercing him to a space outside of language and utterance devoid of subjectivity and control, a space overwhelmed by his ultimate recognition of the woman as a very much present human being. He digresses into a discourse of the sublime to literalize the collapse between his and the woman’s presence in much the same manner that he mockingly borrows from various other discursive methods: “I could not speak, I was filled with a kind of wonder. I had never felt another’s presence so immediately, and with such raw force. I saw her now, really saw her, for the first time” (113). However, Freddie undermines his alleged embracing of a transcendental moment of absolute knowledge in his very speaking of, and temporizing of, the unspeakable, ironizing the quest for truth and enlightened vision.

Aside from this purported epiphany of consciousness, Freddie resorts to his a priori framework in conceptualizing the obstacle woman’s absent presence. He proceeds to commit murder, dividing the woman’s body into separable, objectified, silenced parts to be destroyed. The scene and landscape in which Freddie drives away from the crime scene invokes the embedded physicality of a painting: “It was like a hastily painted backdrop, especially that smudged, shimmering distance, and the road winding innocently away” (114). The destruction of barriers and binaries in the murder of the “natural” woman in favor of the “artificial” woman coincides with this conflation of the natural and the artifice in the narrative, constructing the murder scene through an inversing process through which the real becomes the painted and the painted becomes the real. Like the glass of the window, Freddie’s conflation of real and artificial women exposes his desire to delete boundaries, such as the boundaries instituted between real

and artifice or between self and other.

Despite this recognized and striking similarity between language and pictorial signifiers in Freddie's narrative, he nevertheless oscillates between a postmodernist and a more traditional framework through which to frame the picture as a source of inspiration, meaning, and identity. This gaze, though still insufficient in achieving a subliminal unity of interior subjectivity and exterior subjectivity, does indeed progress towards the ecstatic moment in which self is interiorized by other, thereby dissolving the boundary demarcating space and distance between the two bodies. Freddie claims, "I have stood in front of other, perhaps greater paintings, and not been moved as I am moved by this one. ... There is something in the way the woman regards me, the querulous, mute insistence of her eyes, which I can neither escape nor assuage" (104-105). The painting, through the woman's gaze, recognizes and rearticulates Freddie's objective presence in the tangible world: he is framed by the space framed in the painting, solidifying his desire to exist in a concrete, pictorial space. Yet again, however, Freddie contradicts himself within the narrative shortly thereafter, articulating the means by which he writes meaning into the painting as much as the painting gazes upon and articulates his own presence: "She. There is no she, of course. There is only an organization of shapes and colours. Yet I try to make up a life for her" (105). Meaning is thus transmutable and unstable: the "she" is not existent since such an existence would signify a fixed, certain identity and there is, in fact, "no she, of course." It is only through the materials with which Freddie assembles a life for the painting's subject that the "she" exists through a life. McMinn writes of ekphrastic moments in Banville's fiction that use "the discourse and vocabulary of art appreciation to create a series of dramatic monologues that engage with major philosophical and intellectual ideas of a postmodern age."¹⁵ Such discourse is manipulated by Freddie to explore identity and subjectivity: the painting and Freddie

¹⁵ McMinn, 3.

emerge through and from the speaking picture, through the art of ekphrasis. Despite Freddie's resolve to create an autonomous pictorial signifier devoid of the fallacy of language, this mode of ekphrasis necessarily functions through language. Hence, the painting is merely an extralinguistic space of expression that is inherently embedded in its own linguistic transformation of meaning and origin. Moreover, the traditional conception of the portrait fails to speak to Freddie's uttermost desire for self: though the subject of the portrait gazes upon Freddie in the moment of the gaze, its own inanimate nature terminates the effect of the gaze after the moment and thus leaves Freddie as displaced as he is upon entering his disheveled Irish home and nation-state.

In *Picture Theory* (1994), W.J.T. Mitchell assays that both linguistic and pictorial systems function in different media but are intrinsically the same in terms of their signifying roles. Mitchell poses ekphrasis, the speaking picture, as a verbal representation of the visual: Freddie's recollection narrates its own failure to linguistically convey the book of evidence, and yet the very meaning contrived from the painting is imposed through his utterance and language. Certainly, Freddie recognizes that the painting's artist is of no significance since meaning is anachronistically attributed and perpetually reformed in spite of the alleged artist's initial intent. Mitchell's text addresses the paradox of the rise of the video and the visual in the postmodern era as simultaneous with the fear of the image overtaking its creator.¹⁶ This turn to the visual, the pictorial turn, is not a mere mimetic representation of the "real": "It is rather a postlinguistic, postsemiotic rediscovery of the picture... It is the realization that *spectatorship* (the look, the gaze, the glance, the practices of observation, surveillance, and visual pleasure) may be as deep a problem as various forms of *reading* (decipherment, decoding, interpretation, etc.) and that

¹⁶ W.J.T. Mitchell, "The Pictorial Turn," *Picture Theory* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994) 15.

visual experience or 'visual literacy' might not be fully explicable on the model of textuality."¹⁷

The visual thus provides the opportunity for a process inaccessible in textuality though it, nevertheless, continues to function as an extralinguistic space parallel and homogenous with language. Mitchell's "Ekphrasis and the Other" identifies the primary purpose of ekphrasis as the overcoming of otherness: "This figurative requirement puts a special sort of pressure on the genre of ekphrasis, for it means that the textual other must remain completely alien; it can never be present, but must be conjured up as a potent absence or a fictive, figural presence."¹⁸ While the painting itself is embedded in an extralinguistic space synonymous with linguistic signifiers, the gaze that is extracted from the painting paradoxically constructs a connection between the self and the other, between subjectivity and objectivity, that is so adamantly severed in the linguistic rhetoric of temporality. Painting (particularly portraits) and language are perhaps not entirely exchangeable: subjects in portraits gaze upon and signify. Freddie recognizes significance in the portrait's depicted gaze as a visual act that both gazes upon him as an object in the world and simultaneously receives his own subjective gaze. Mitchell recognizes the fallacy in distinguishing between the visual and the verbal and suggests that feminine subjects, such as the woman subject of the portrait, and colonized subjects, such as Freddie, become threatening visual subjects that are to be seen but not heard. Conceptually, then, anxiety about ekphrasis and the speech emanating from the silent, "gazed upon" objects stems from an anxiety about the Other, about merging with other people: the very process of ekphrasis itself is in fact "stationed between two 'othernesses,' and two forms of (apparently) impossible translation and exchange."¹⁹ These two objective othernesses, the colonized Freddie silenced by his frustration with language and the painted woman silenced by her inherent nature as a visual image, thus

¹⁷ Mitchell, 16.

¹⁸ Mitchell, 158.

¹⁹ Mitchell, 164.

partake in this ekphrastic exchange to attempt to write their subjectivities into existence through the mutual gaze. This mutual gaze explicitly and perhaps consciously foregoes any possibility of real unity due to the lifelessness of the painted gaze. For, the gaze in the portrait stems from an inanimate figure. While gazing may seem to bridge the gap between picture-text and living being, the inanimate source suggests a lifeless and futile attempt at unity quite like the failure of unity through the verbal medium. The paintings and portrait themselves are merely hypothesized linguistically in the narrative and thus intrinsically set for failure.

Paintings and windows function similarly throughout the narrative as occupants of a subliminal state straddling inside and outside, and the window for Freddie suggests a progression towards, though not a finite point for, capturing a presence of self. Windows speak to the problems of paintings, framed in a similar delineated fashion in which outside is distinguished from the inside. Thus the frame of both the painting and of the window marks an interior space constructed by the frame and a negative space constituting all that is not enclosed within the boundary of the frame. The window, however, also produces a second fluid space that is created by the permeable window: both the interior of the edifice (containing the window) and the exterior of that edifice. These less stable fluid interior and exterior spaces perpetually permeate one another through the light of the transparent window, revealing the very artificial nature in which the edifice attempts to distinguish an inside from an outside. To address the architectural positioning of glass in buildings, Jacques Derrida channels Walter Benjamin's 1933 essay, *Erfahrung und Armut (Experience and Poverty)*, which allots architecture and the rise of modernity as a marker of conflicting historical social relations: "It is not for nothing that glass is such a hard and smooth material upon which nothing attaches itself. Also a cold and concise material. Things made of glass have no 'aura'."²⁰ The window's glass constitutes a space in

²⁰ Walter Benjamin, *Erfahrung und Armut (Experience and Poverty)*, 1933, as quoted by Jacques Derrida "Letter to

which no “thing” is stable or attached, in which meaning is never fixed onto the surface since, intrinsically, the images and thus signification beyond both sides of the transparent window distort and evolve the vision depicted in the glass surface. The window’s glass is thus a space devoid of fixed signification, thereby mirroring the perpetual evolution and transformation in its own constitution as signifier of Freddie’s (un)signifying, (de)framed self in the window. Thus the window, though it frames a space quite like a painting frames a picture, is itself a piece of a building that is both inside and outside of the building, both integral to and detachable from the greater structure of the edifice frame. Derrida’s *Truth in Painting* further coincides with this interrogation regarding the window’s positioning inside (or outside) of buildings: “And does a window form part of the inside of a building or not?”²¹ Windows occupy a position in the narrative situated between the inside and outside worlds, occupying the liminal space through which light passes both inwards and outwards. When he first returns to the old Irish house that was once his home, Freddie claims:

It seemed to me the garden was watching me, in its stealthy, tightlipped way, or that it was at least somehow aware of me, framed here in the window, wringing my hands, a stricken starrer-out – how many other such there must have been, down the years! – with the room’s weightless dark pressing at my back (54).

Similar to his ekphrastic writing of life onto the lady in the portrait, Freddie personifies the exterior garden in his narrative as watching him, acknowledging his presence and a seemingly fixed, genuine self. The gaze of the living garden progresses further away from the painted gaze towards animate existence, but it nevertheless falls short of a human presence. Kersti Tarien Powell notes in “The Lighted Windows: Place in John Banville’s Novels” that windows frame the outside world, allowing it to be contained. Framing, she further suggests, is an integral part

Peter Eisenman,” *Art and its Significance: An Anthology of Aesthetic Theory: Third Edition*, Stephen David Ross, Ed. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994) 432.

²¹ Derrida, as quoted in Ross, 413.

of the formation of self-identity.²² Freddie is not constricted by the mere containment of the outside world: sitting at the threshold between inside and outside, he recognizes his own framed containment by that very same outside world being simultaneously framed and gazed upon. Freddie's desired self is "painted" in the window, a space in which he is both subject and object and thus, dialectically, unified in his disunity. Windows, like paintings, seemingly demarcate a presence against the absence beyond the frame. The window frames Freddie's body in contradistinction to the outside world. Nevertheless, the interior "weightless dark" of the room simultaneously presses at his back. "Windows," according to Powell, "constitute a threshold between the outside world and the interior space, connecting the two and allowing the perceiving agent to frame the world. ...Spatial relations extend to encompass the self, that is, place and window essentially function as sites for self-projection."²³ The window becomes the site for Freddie's self-projection. The opposing forces of nature that both "watch" Freddie from the outside while pushing him inwards and, simultaneously, press Freddie from the inside towards that exterior space, collaborate to posit Freddie in the subliminal space of the window that is neither outside nor inside. For while Freddie is fixated in between the landscape of the garden that watches him from the outside and the interior "room's weightless dark pressing at [his] back," he is situated at the threshold of the interior and exterior spaces, in between the gaze of the garden and the gaze of the room. The appropriation of subject and the object is unclear, quite similar to the gaze of and by the painting, as Freddie is both observing and being observed. Binaries collapse as Freddie is situated at the interface of subjectivity and objectivity, of inside and outside, of the "natural" world or the exterior garden, which is constructed and built

²² Kersti Tarien Powell, "The Lighted Windows: Place in John Banville's Novels," *Irish University Review: A Journal of Irish Studies, Special Issue: John Banville*, Vol. 36, No. 1, Anne Fogarty, ed. (Dublin: Spring-Summer 2006) 44.

²³ Powell, 39.

similarly to the house, and the intimate, domesticated and “natural” world of the constructed room. McMinn suggests that Freddie, in his ekphrastic desire to bring the painting to life through his imposed narration of the woman’s life, demonstrates “confusion between the natural and the artificial, and the loss of certainty about the real difference.”²⁴ Like the gaze between Freddie and the woman in which each self potentially emerges from recognition of the other, the binary between the inside and the outside collapses at the threshold of the window: the natural is no longer distinguishable from artifice. Even in the framing of the windows, Freddie continues to be gazed upon by inanimate objects, thus deferring and delaying a solution to his split identity.

Though he tries to unify subjectivity and objectivity variously through temporalised murder and the portrait’s apparent claim to meaning, the narrative still demonstrates how signifying systems of both linguistic and imagistic forms necessarily obstruct a fixated state of unity. Departing from the scene of the crime, Freddie claims: “I see myself moving, all right, as if in a crystal bubble, flying soundlessly through a strange, sunlit, glittering landscape” (115). Freddie strives towards this visual state of articulated and adamantly present identity, but the “I” who sees and the self who is seen are fluid and contingent upon one another. They are separated by the temporal disjunction of the self existent in the tangible world and the self articulating that presence after the fact. Freddie’s desire for the fixity and identity of a self lies in stark contradiction to the fluidity of meaning behind signifiers, the potential fluidity between binaries such as natural and artifice, and the fluid dependency of the present object “I” and the speaking “I” upon one another. As Freddie sees himself moving, meaning is likewise moving and thus insufficiently unstable. This linguistic process flowing between the subject and object “I”’s parallels the dependency of the two other(s): two silenced, colonized other(s) exist in the mutual gaze between the painted woman and Freddie, as well as in the interaction between Freddie and

²⁴ McMinn, 8.

the living woman in the murder scene. Simon Gaunt references *The Gift of Death* (*Donner la Mort*), in which Derrida claims that death is a gift, for dying is the only thing that one can do for oneself, and thus the only true moment of pure signification. “For Derrida, the ‘gift of death’ is that which allows an individual to be truly responsible and therefore that which enables a subject’s definition as an individual. . . . One’s death is the only thing one truly owns, the only thing that is truly one’s own to give, and it is therefore that which confers individuality on the subject.”²⁵ Derrida’s gift of death, nonetheless, is the gift of death given by and of oneself, a moment of self-sacrifice in which one’s individuality is concretized in that particular moment or instance of dying. This is the absolute moment for Derrida of pure signification: self-sacrifice is a mode of interpreting that self, as that moment of death posits an endpoint and hence a fixated mode of signification for the life that is being terminated. The gift of death, in this moment of self-sacrifice, is both given and received by the same body, and thus the union between the “I” that sees and the “I” that is seen is no longer deferred. Yet it is only in this moment that unity occurs: Freddie’s desperate need for subjectivity is distorted by his misreading of the potentiality for murder to acquire permanent unity of exterior and interior self.

After the murder, he still “see(s) himself moving,” a self that cannot be absolutely conveyed through language, portraits, or murder. Freddie’s desire for subjectivity and stability is as futile as acquiring a fixed meaning from pictorial signifiers which, ultimately, still function in the same linguistic processes that cause Freddie to repeatedly claim, “None of this means anything” (108). Rather than finding solitude and complacency after committing the murder of the Other, he continues on a wandering journey without an endpoint or an absolute moment of signification: “I did not know where I was going, I mean I was not going anywhere, just driving”

²⁵ Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, as quoted in Simon Gaunt, “Love’s Martyrdom and the Ethical Subject,” *Love and Death in Medieval Death and Occitan Courtly Literature: Martyrs to Love* (Oxford University Press: 2006) 25.

(116). The narrative of mobility and movement depicts and emphasizes the linguistic separation between the subjective and objective “I” in his recounting of his departure from the crime scene. Nor does the painting which previously held so much significance sustain its significance beyond the performance of murder. The portrait is discarded alongside its failed attempt to reveal an inner truth or meaning to Freddie. Rather than feeling remorse or any other mark bearing a presence in the world around him, Freddie resorts to the postmodern lament of the crisis of an estranged self: “I can’t remember feeling anything, except that sense of strangeness, of being in a place I knew but did not recognize. ... Then I lifted out the picture and walked it to where there was a sagging barbed-wire fence and a ditch with a trickle of water at the bottom, and there I dumped it” (119).

Freddie’s radical reevaluation of the merit of the portrait, and symbolically, of the merit of pictorial signifiers, marks a crucial moment of the narrative in which he retrospectively challenges and undermines the previous construal of linguistic and visual signifiers as fundamentally disparate modes of conveying meaning. Despite the perpetual defaming of language as meaningless in the narrative, Freddie’s consciously inauthentic, mocking narrative plays with the conventions of confession in a multitude of ways such as by invoking Freudian-inspired memories of his parents and by conveying, as the “unreliable narrator,” stereotypical postmodern tropes of identity crises. Jennifer M. Jeffers writes, “Freddie, the selfish, pompous, and sophisticated world traveler turned drifter, should not fool the reader... Freddie does not lack knowledge... what Freddie lacks is an ability to operate on a plane of organization—his statement that he cannot ‘speak of an individual with any show of certainty (17)’ has to do with his behavior rather than with knowledge.”²⁶ This manipulation of language to construct an

²⁶ Jennifer M. Jeffers, “Discourse and the Body: Velocity and Power,” *The Irish Novel at the End of the Twentieth Century: Gender, Bodies, and Power* (New York, Palgrave: 2002) 143.

inauthentic narrative, a confession that admits to lacking a concretized motive or explanation for the “causeless” events strung together to constitute the evidence that is his narrative, perhaps prefaces his similar play with ekphrasis and paintings in the novel as an attempt to acquire a stability of self and identity that is seemingly unattainable outside of death.

If Mitchell’s theory holds, namely that paintings and language are identical modes of signification that merely function through different media, and if Freddie’s narrative performs a manipulation of linguistic (and pictorial) tropes and signifiers to mimic and thereby use language to undermine its own shortcomings of rendering meaning and stability, Freddie nevertheless continues to locate what Jeffers calls this “plane of organization” to convey his “knowledge” that it is impossible to fully know, or at least convey, meaning and identity in pictorial or linguistic signifiers. Jeffers continues, “Freddie cannot exist on the plane of rational organization and sensible action—Freddie flies apart, stutters, breaks down, and begins again with an erratic velocity. If he could operate in a rational way or could have operated in a sensible manner according to common sense and tradition, then we would not have a book of confessional evidence” (143). Such a disjointed narrative that perpetually enfolds upon itself, often resolving to anachronistic disparagement and disorderly syntax, emphasizes this frustration with language and in general with unsuccessful signification media. For instance, while speaking of his parents, the narrative interrupts its own utterance: “His hands. The rapid beat of his breathing. His – Enough. I was speaking of my mother” (48). The interrupted and entangled construction of the narrative utilizes language to depict syntactically Freddie’s own entangled and inherently in question filial origin. The confession perpetually struggles to map his identity in the narrative linguistically and pictorially on a “plane of rational organization.” Revisiting windows, these subliminal spaces occupying neither the inside nor outside permit Freddie’s “inevitable” flux and

oscillation between an origin and a destination, between subjectivity and objectivity, never quite placated in either moment. Windows, nevertheless, repeatedly and discretely provide Freddie with a subliminal space in which self is both the observer and the observed at the interface of the exterior “garden” space and the interior “house” space. Windows in the narrative occupy a space that is not a space, thereby embodying a plane that cannot be contained or organized through a rational severance of subjectivity and objectivity. Windows often project Freddie as neither here nor there, neither fully subject nor fully object. While exploring his childhood house that is unrecognizable as a home, Freddie acknowledges his own physicality on account of the shattered window, which literalizes the broken boundary between the house and the garden: “In the drawing-room the carpet had been taken up, and a pane of glass in one of the windows was broken, and there was glass on the floor. I noticed I had no shoes on. I opened the garden door and stepped outside in my socks.” (57). Freddie transgresses the boundary between the space of the enclosed house and the “outside” space of the garden, relying upon his own gaze, rather than a secondary gaze, to articulate his presence in the narrative: “I noticed I had no shoes on.” The shattered glass functions as the disordered plane through which Freddie perceives the world and his own identity. The window marks the space in which Freddie is both outside and inside himself: an “I” that is viewed and an “I” that views. The window is, therefore, yet another signifier like language and paintings, but it is inherently and unashamedly a threshold space that is a fluid, uncontainable space, itself framed by its tangential interior and exterior worlds. Freddie muses in another window scene, “The low window and the sagging bed gave me a vertiginous sense of disproportion, I seemed too tall, my feet too big. I sat on the side of the bed. A faint radiance lingered in the window. If I leaned down sideways I could see a crooked chimney pot and a silhouette of trees” (90). The window here literally distorts Freddie’s own

sense of physical presence as a disproportionate, skewed corporeal form, thereby framing Freddie's objectivity in the room as inflated. Yet it also serves as a plane for peering out into the world upon the crooked chimney and silhouette of trees.

Window and painting signifiers often contend with one another for Freddie's attention even following Freddie's climactic discarding of the failed portrait signifier. Freddie steps out into the garden without shoes or humanly-created barriers solidifying the boundary between Freddie's framing, encapsulating body and the "natural" world upon which he walks. He soon thereafter regresses to the enclosed space of the house to search for his family's portraits, reentering a space of division and boundaries. Likewise, while recounting the "natural" and animate women in his life near a window, he ultimately returns to his thoughts of the woman in the portrait:

As the hours went on, and stars flared in the little window and then slowly faded again, Anna Behrens merged in my mind with the other women who were in some way in my care – Daphne, of course, and even my mother, even the stable-girl, too – but in the end, when the dawn came, it was that Dutch figure in the picture in the garden room who hovered over the bed and gazed at me, sceptical, inquisitive and calm. I got up and dressed, and sat on the chair by the window and watched the ashen light of day descend upon the rooftops and seep into the trees. ...I wanted to be out, out, being and doing (92).

Freddie desires to "be" and to "do": to simultaneously exist as both the "I" that is seen and the "I" that sees. The window provokes this desire to be unified in both objectivity and subjectivity, thereby dissipating the boundary that governs the structure of the window. The figure in the painting, nevertheless, offers an illusory pathway for a fixed objectivity as "me" and presence in contrast to the window, whose reciprocal positioning between two points offers a fluid interchange of gazes between the "I" and the "me." The two signifiers contend for the primary space of self-expression and meaning yet again when Freddie's female acquaintance is painted for a portrait: "She cannot understand this notion he has got into his head: he wants to have her

portrait painted. ...No one has ever looked at her like this before. So this is what it is to be known! It is almost indecent. First he puts her standing by the window, but it does not suit, the light is wrong, he says" (106-107). The portrait is constructed as the medium in which the object is "known," "looked at," and fixated, whereas the window contradicts this ability to "see" the subject fully and clearly with its unclear, improper light. The mobile light permeating the window's medium prefaces the framing of a postmodern identity that, similarly, cannot be contained or fixated. Such fixation and revelation of identity ultimately uncovers itself to Freddie as potentially being the deepest threat of all during the moments of his trial and interrogation of his crime: "An appalling silence descends, it stretches on and on, until at last my sleeping self makes a bolt for it and I start awake, aghast and sweating. What is peculiarly awful in all this is not the prospect of being dragged before the courts and put in jail for a crime I am not even sure I have committed, but the simple, terrible fact of having been found out" (124). To "be found out" is the now most abhorrent punishment of all: the window of endless deferral and instability contrarily provides a medium of unorganized, irrational consciousness and, in a sense, lack of epistemological solidity, a lack of concrete and alleged confidence in Freddie's own presence that he previously construes as articulated through the portrait's gaze.

Freddie unrelentingly then retracts his desire to remain undetected, conversely promulgating a desire to be discovered. When he is ultimately taken into custody for his crime, he projects: "I gave a great gasp of relief, as if I had been holding my breath all this time, and slumped against the window-frame" (186). His body clings to the window-frame, imploring discovery. The transition from evading to embracing detection occurs during his moments of reflection upon binaries and boundaries demarcating spaces as inside and outside rather than as endless continuums. Freddie (re)cognizes the world as unfixed: "Terrible, yes, but exciting too.

Never had the world appeared so unstable, or my place in it so thrillingly precarious. I had a raw, lascivious awareness of myself, a big warm damp thing parceled up in someone else's clothes" (161). The world becomes unstable in this more desirable state: Freddie, in this framework (or lack of frame), is neither here nor there as he is both "out of place" (160) and yet completely in unity with the beings around him: "What I felt was, how shall I say, a kind of brotherly regard, a strong, sustaining, almost cheerful sense of oneness with him" (165). Freddie recognizes himself in various people's selves within a crowd, thus further articulating a self that is both ubiquitous and, simultaneously, absent in its inability to be marked or contained. Such a self is thus constructed in a dialectic process that incorporates the outside into the inside, thereby inherently deconstructing the boundary within the binary itself. The murder literalizes this attempt at unity and, at the same time, disunity of identity. For upon reflection in his cell, Freddie muses, "I seem to have taken on a new weight and density. ...I am living for two" (216). The incorporation of the outside into the interior fascinates Freddie during the final pages of his confession. He muses upon plants' extrapolation of exterior, nourishing light from the window to their own bodies and thereafter returning the nourishment to the air in a dialectical synthesis of the inside and the outside similar to his own dialectical self at the window: "It is spring. Even in here we feel it, the quickening in the air. I have some plants in my window. I like to watch them, feeding on the light" (219). The subliminal space of the window, for both Freddie and the plants, permits an endless deferral and evolution of meaning in a dialectic reverberation between the outside and the inside. Likewise, Freddie understands that to know is, simply put, comprehension that knowledge cannot be contained since meaning is always unfixed at the transparent "window" signifier: "How could mere facts compare with the amazing knowledge that had flared out at me as I stood and stared at the painting lying on its edge in the ditch where

I dropped it that last time? That knowledge, that knowingness. I could not have lived with” (214-215). The painting signifier emblemizes denoted knowledge, while the fluid window space suggests the inability for total and stabilized knowledge.

Freddie’s confession, in its disjointed and anachronistic narrative form, literalizes the linguistic plane of chaos and irrationality in which an absolute truth and knowledge is both unattainable and uncontainable. Yet while both pictorial and linguistic signifiers fail to serve Freddie in conveying absolute truth or meaning behind the signification system, they nevertheless provide access to the penultimate revelation of his own dialectical self that incorporates the outside with the inside. This dialectic construction of identity and meaning blurs the distinction between such linguistically and pictorially inside-outside spaces at the permeable window-medium, thus creating an indefinite gaze that perpetually turns upon itself. In this plane of irrational (dis)organization, the very authenticity of the confession is itself challenged by one of Freddie’s interrogators in the final lines of the narrative: “Come on, Freddie, he said, how much of it is true? It was the first time he had called me by my name. True, Inspector? I said. All of it. None of it. Only the shame” (220). Freddie’s narrative obliterates the enclosure of speech through quotation marks, augmenting the dramatic effect of an inauthentic narrative and of a collapsing wall distinguishing Freddie’s presence from his interrogator’s presence. Freddie’s own name has become abstracted and foreign, uncomfortably imposed upon him as a repressive signifier. He has thus, towards the end of the narrative, become rather detached from closure and signification, preferring to close his confession with the fluctuation of meaning that is both true and false. That is, he evasively answers the interrogative question with an affirmation of his endlessly absent confession. Henry James once commented on this perpetual and infinite framing of narrative as that which inherently conceals

the absence of meaning through the constructed presence of a narrative frame: “‘The art of seeing ‘through’ one thing to the next, and to the next, is an art of endless vistas inserted each within the following, guiding the gaze toward a center which, if empty, has as its own substance that of being framed.’”²⁷ Freddie abandons his desire to contrive a fixed meaning from language, or even art, in lieu of his “knowledge” of the process by which meaning is framed to conceal the absence of fixed identity, whether through signifying words or through the boundaries of the pictorial borders. The linguistic process employed in the narrative of framing presence to conceal absence mirrors the indirect and dialectic acquiring of self-identity from the Other, from the outside gaze, that articulates a unified sense of self but fails to fully repress the absence of text, meaning, and evidence. The quintessential Irish self, dual victim of both colonization and modernity which enslave and repress through their immobilizing weaponries, is unfixed and unframed in its very nature. The window frame demarcates the lack of demarcation in which Freddie is presently absent, an endlessly deferred signified self that is neither here nor there much as the textual evidence of the narrative is holistically “true” in its fictitious, unverifiable, and uncontainable account.

²⁷ Henry James, as quoted in “Re-Framing,” Carol Shloss, *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction*, Vol. 19, No. 3 (Spring, 1986) 267-269.

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