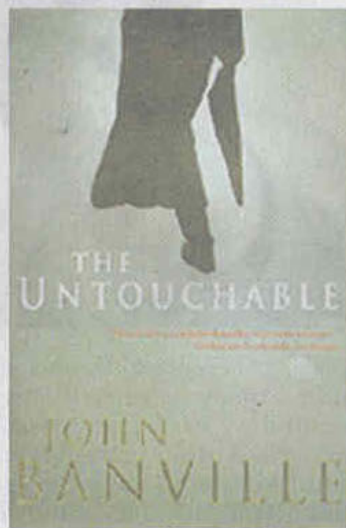


Style and substance

JOHN MULLAN



The Untouchable
John Banville

John Banville has a liking for first-person narration and for narrators who feel compelled to go back to things, to go back over things. This is often made literal in his novels: in *The Sea*, Max Morden revisits the scene of a childhood holiday; in *Eclipse*, Alexander Cleave returns to live in what was once the family home. *The Untouchable* has this double movement too: back in time, and back to a particular place. Victor Maskell's narrative reviews his past, and includes in his story a journey back to his former home in Northern Ireland. "The home returned to is a concatenation of sadnesses," he observes. In the inappropriate company of his glamorous, bohemian friend Nick, it all looks so dingy and smells "tired, brownish, intimate, awful". Only the last of these words normally characterises a smell, but the unlikely pressing of these adjectives conveys the narrator's distaste. No wonder he should want to escape for something else - he tells himself - equal reason that he should become a famous art historian and a Soviet agent.

Should we call Victor Maskell an "unreliable narrator"? In one sense not. The novel is a confession, the bits of truth that have been kept back from all the other characters in the book. Maskell's MI5 interrogator offers him the analogy of religious confession in an unavailing effort to prompt him to reveal more. "I still remember how it used to feel, when I was a lad, to come out of the confession box, that feeling of... lightness." But the novel is the narrator's "last testament", the only place where everything is told. Maskell may offer his fellow spook a "delicate tissue of lies", but we are allowed to see just what the lies are. It is a literary convention. Confession is where the English novel began, with the earnest self-inspection of Daniel Defoe's thieves and deceivers - the likes of Moll Flanders and Roxana. And like Victor Maskell, they have so many dirty things to tell us that we must trust them to tell the truth.

He is certainly contemptuous of others' dishonesty. When he is outed as a former Soviet agent in the press, Querell (the character is modelled on Graham Greene) phones from Antibes to commiserate - or is it to gloat? "Was it sex they got you on?" How disingenuous." We know that he is reliable because he doubts his reliability. Early on in the novel he catches himself using the picture restorer's metaphor of stripping away "layer after layer of

grime" until he comes to "the very thing itself" - and laughs aloud. One of the uses of the journal form is the parenthesis, where Maskell mocks or dismisses what he has just written: "(you can't beat a spy for smugness)".

Do we need to believe that the book is a journal? The business of recollection draws the narrator to descriptive details that seem more than spontaneous. "A thick drop of sunlight seethed in a glass paperweight on a low table"; "Light from the fire lay along his jaw like a polished, dark-pink scar". The convention of recollection is, of course, just that. Can you remember a single sentence that someone said yesterday? Maskell gives us, in direct speech, whole conversations that took place 50 years earlier. Yet some of those details about which the narrative is most precise are just what one might remember - as above, they are tricks of the light, mostly. No episode seems without its special illumination. Recalling the news of Stalin's pact with Hitler,

he remembers being on holiday in southern France. "Purple shadows under the plane trees, and shimmering lozenges of water-light on the grey-green undersides of their big, torpid leaves." When he recalls taking his mentally handicapped brother to be abandoned in a "home", he remembers the light, "great pale meshes of it falling down from a long row of tall, many-arched windows". "The real things, the true things", as Maskell puts it with unembarrassed directness, are the painterly particularities, caught in the memory.

This is a skill of the author's made properly a habit of his narrator. Banville is a stylist, and has invented a narrator who is credibly one too. *The Untouchable* begins with Maskell's public confession and mea culpa, and some will recall Anthony Blunt's embarrassing self-condemnation at a press conference. In fact Maskell is unabashed, and his unabashedness is there in the curlicues of his prose - the artful similes, the camp diction. Banville has always enjoyed out-of-the-way words, but Maskell's pleasure in rare words - brumous, autoctons, plumbeous - is the appropriate irony of a fastidious aesthete. A fat man he meets in a café has "oedemic thighs"; fellow communist sympathisers are disdained as "psoriatic City clerks". However confessional, he really is above it all.

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