

Revolutions of the Heart



Art by Agostino Arrivabene (with permission of the artist)

Revolutions of the Heart

Literary, Cultural, & Spiritual

YAHIA LABABIDI

foreword by David Lazar

preface by Sven Birkerts

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REVOLUTIONS OF THE HEART

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This book is dedicated to all who long for transformation.

Activism is the rent I pay for living on this planet.

—ALICE WALKER

Find a subject you care about and which you in your heart feel others should care about. It is this genuine caring, not your games with language, which will be the most compelling and seductive element in your style.

—KURT VONNEGUT

Make yourself a “capacity” and I will make myself a “torrent.”

—ST. CATHERINE OF SIENA

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Foreword

On Lababidi's *Revolutions*

YAHIA LABABIDI HAS A generous sense of the spiritual and a generous sense of the essay. He combines these two generosities in the reviews, essays, and meditations in *Revolutions*, a title that captures the multiple sides of his interests, politics and aesthetics. Lababidi is interested in change—new movements, new thought, new ideas, whether they're from symbolist poets or Christian mystics, the Koran or contemporary essayists. The “new” is what changes things, is revolutionary in some form, and its force can last for centuries.

Revolution also means to turn, and Lababidi turns repeatedly from the literary to the spiritual, from the intimacy of personal thought and experience (“I did not think that I, a recovering existentialist, would find myself one day slipping through the back door of Islam”) to the general notions of philosophy. The first person plural imprecations and questions of aphorism are sprinkled throughout his work (“What if we were to view our wounds as peepholes, through which to view the world and open us up to the wounds of others, and our planet, as an extension of our larger body?”) and which he also speaks to and about, eloquently.

Rilke, Heraclitus, Leonard Cohen, Rumi, Alaa Al Aswany . . . Lababidi is an internationalist in his literary tastes, but he returns again and again to the turmoil in Egypt, the promise and failures of the Arab Spring, and the poignancy which colors the work, his work as an expatriate viewing the literature and politics of homeland from a great distance. This hardly mutes his passion, engagement and self-aware positionality in considering the Middle East. As he writes, “Broadly speaking, I do this by best trying to represent my region through my person, offering an alternative to the simplistic and often negative portrayals of Arabs/Muslims in the US media. In that way, I believe Art is the best form of cultural exchange and diplomacy.”

To this we might add that Lababidi's art is the best form of cultural exchange and diplomacy.

This is a rich, complex, multifaceted volume of prose. Give yourself over to this supple and extraordinary writer.

DAVID LAZAR

Preface

MY FIRST CONTACT WITH Yahia Lababidi was some years ago—an over the transom meeting that happened when he submitted work to AGNI, the literary magazine I edit. Reading submissions, I look for work that freezes my reading attention and says “Here!” Which is exactly what happened with the generous sheaf of aphorisms that Lababidi had sent. Aphorisms—we never get aphorisms. But these were, further, aphorisms of a compelling spiritual sensibility, which we likewise never see. I made my way down the page with a feeling of imminent revelation. The little awakenings came, one after the other, and I had the reader’s hope that I might at any moment arrive at some unanticipated larger wakefulness.

That did not happen, quite. A series of aphorisms, however pointed or wise, can’t carry a reader the full distance. That is the work of devotion and discipline. What they did accomplish, however, was important. They reminded me—and these days we all need reminding—that it is not only possible, but necessary to find ways to speak freely of the mysteries and intimations that reveal our deep human need, a need that in our time has been sidelined by the cynical ethos of the media and our vast collective distract-edness, and which draws attention, when any attention is drawn, mainly in its wispiest spiritual find-your-inner self public offerings. The aspirations of the mystical, the applications of inwardness—these have little place in our culture nowadays, and finding a way to talk openly about the soul or the revelations of beauty is very difficult. We live in the age of the eye-roll.

Which is why it was so bracing to come upon Lababidi’s spiritual probes. They were not apologetic, or defensive, or shy. They addressed openly the search for meaning and a connection to forces or entities larger than the self, even as they promoted no particular faiths or sects. Keeping faith with the themes found in spiritual writings throughout history, they

not only legitimized the search for deeper integration, they modeled it in a literarily compelling way. Lababidi is at once an honest and graceful writer.

I stress these things because this is the spirit that moves and fluctuates throughout Lababidi's *sui generis* gathering of meditation, memoir, social commentary, poetry, and, of course, aphorism.

I have talked so much about this form, one of Lababidi's first chosen modes of expression, so let me cite a few aphorisms from the submission that so caught my attention, for these set a tone for all the work brought together here.

Where there are demons there is something precious worth fighting for.

The grades of love we are ashamed to confess: from the playground crush to Divine madness.

A poem arrives like a hand in the dark.

The lines, clean and unornamented, resonate in the mind and inevitably enlarge our apprehension of things.

I used the word "attention" above, and I note it again here because it is a central tenet of Lababidi's thinking. He himself cites Simone Weil's well-known assertion: "Absolute unmixed attention is prayer," and follows its implications throughout his writing. For attention, open and directed focus, is the endangered art of giving things their due, be they objects in the outer world, or the inward stirrings we feel when we consider larger frames of reference—when we ask about meaning and purpose, and when we confront the extraordinary unlikelihood of our being here at all. Lababidi transmits on this frequency. The work is full of inklings of what might lie just beyond.

Revolutions of the Heart offers a broad portfolio of Lababidi's exploration of this state of awareness. He brings together his ruminations on mysticism with compelling accounts of his own progress through stages of awareness; he searches the work of favorite writers in order to set out the connection between the literary and the transcendental; he pays heed to the aspiration and strife of contemporary Egypt, his culture of origin. He also assesses strains of popular culture and matters of the moment, looking at the singer Morrissey, and the paradoxes of Marianne Williamson's presidential candidacy.

In an essay called "Spiritual Tourism," Lababidi confronts what he considers his own spiritual fickleness, the fact that he can't confine himself to any one religion, but must instead keep on testing, sampling, taking from this and from that as he keeps looking for what he needs. I think he is being unnecessarily self-deprecating. I see him not as tourist, but pilgrim, and these diverse reflections show us the path of his progress.

SVEN BIRKERTS

Essays, Appreciations, Reflections

The Books We Were

Certain cherished books are like old loves. We didn't part on bad terms; but it's complicated, and would require too much effort to resume relations.

IF ONE'S FIRST LOVE is for Letters, people tend to come second (or possibly third). Yes, books are ink-and-paper relationships that can supplement and, at times, displace flesh-and-blood relations.

Such was my breathlessly intense, and evidently unhealthy, understanding of literature as an impressionable, voracious teenager. I read to get drunk and, to paraphrase Baudelaire, hoped to stay that way. A clutch of slim volumes altered my intellectual landscape and, at the risk of melodrama, saved my life. Past the intoxicating, escapist, aesthetic experience (style always mattered for me), these early loves knew me before I knew myself and confessed my secrets—speaking the yearnings of my still-inchoate soul far more eloquently than I could ever dream at that tender age. Sensing my desperation and need, I believed these books opened themselves up to me so that they were a more real and alive world than any other I inhabited.

The first, which made me suspect I might (want to) be a writer was Wilde's *Picture of Dorian Gray*. Its relentless cleverness made for a heady ride, and I might have underlined every other line while highlighting the rest. By donning a mask of brilliant wit, Wilde seemed to have split himself in two and outdistanced his pain. This was a trick worth learning, my sixteen-year-old self intuited wordlessly, as was his apparently effortless knack for pithy summary. "I summed up all things in a phrase, all existence in an epigram: whatever I touched I made beautiful," Wilde would go on to say in *De Profundis*

(which I devoured shortly afterward, along with all his immodest utterances, in various genres). Yet, fond as I am of this early crush, I cannot bear to return to Wilde's *Gray*. Past his glittering style, I find the cynicism suffocating. As Franz Kafka is supposed to have said to Gustav Janouch of Wilde's work: "It sparkles and seduces, as only a poison can. . . . It is dangerous, because it plays with truth. A game with truth is always a game with life." Then, there was Kafka, and his sublime self-loathing and life-recoil. He also came to me in my teens, when I was particularly susceptible to that volatile cocktail. Those hallucinatory short stories, especially his "A Hunger Artist," hit me like a dark epiphany: "I have to fast, I can't help it. It is just that I couldn't find the food I liked. If I had found it, I would have stuffed myself like you or anyone else." Afterwards, came the exquisite masochism of his diaries, which I inhaled like a guilty pleasure, and concluded with his choice aphorisms. Of all his work, actually, it is the aphorisms that I can return to, which are, somehow, greater than the sum of the man and his torment.

Before I turned twenty, I was to encounter the love of my life—the one that would set my world spinning and take me nearly two decades to recover from: Nietzsche. His *Zarathustra* combined everything I needed to hear at the time: rebellious philosophy, stylish nihilism, vicious humor, and something akin to prophecy. He spoke the soul-splitting contradictions I hardly had words for—"Body and soul, I am more of a *battlefield* than a human being"—and, in my intemperate enthusiasm, I can say that, for the next decade or so, he was nearer and dearer to me than any living soul. Incredible, now, to think it!

Nietzsche handed me over to that other hysterical prophet: Dostoevsky. And, if memory swerves correctly, I was so caught up in his *Notes from Underground* that I hardly noticed that the train I was riding had derailed. When I did (because everyone else was panicking and scrambling to get off the tram), I proceeded to disembark, in measured pace, without tearing my eyes off his delirious pages. And so it was: one Existentialist horror writer after another kicked me around for a bit then passed me, the besotted lover, off to their buddies to have some violent fun with.

Which is why when, belatedly, I recovered my senses and bearing, I had to set these seductive invalids aside for some time. For, just as they'd oxygenated my days, they'd also left me in a moral, spiritual daze. I felt I'd just barely managed to escape their clutches and could not afford to flirt with their frailties any longer—from fear I might be dragged to that treacherous space where they initially found me. They began to all seem like otherworldly, gilled creatures thrown upon the earth, gasping for a breath from their home atmosphere. I just couldn't bear to pity any more suffering—each one, forever, on the verge of nervous collapse. I'd combed their letters, I'd

inhabited their journals, I'd read between their lines. Quite simply, I had to keep these once too-dear books at a distance, as I was afraid of what echoing responses they might draw from me.

I was able to formally say good-bye to these formative influences in a book of conversations: *The Artist as Mystic*. In this love letter to my early masters (including Kierkegaard, Rimbaud, Baudelaire, and the usual suspects), I was finally able to see, with the 20/20 vision of hindsight, that what I was attracted to in these dark thinkers was an anguished yearning, a longing to utter what's ineffable: in short, the Light. It's just that with my night vision, at the time, I could only take so much glare, and could not find my sustenance in sunlit spaces . . . yet.

"At the end of my suffering / there was a door," writes Louise Glück in *The Wild Iris*. That door would lead me to poetry that was at the threshold of revelation. The sort of poetry that had set me alight in Eliot's *Four Quartets* and Rilke's *Duino Elegies* (two loves from my past that I *can* and *do* return to). And, past poetry, further along on the other side of that door, I made a somewhat destabilizing, liberating discovery: I found that not only did I care far less for the tyranny of the mind and its chew toys, which I previously cherished, but "literature" also seemed to matter much less. To quote Rumi, who spoke of the limitations of poetry when he had become a celebrated poet: "What, after all, is my concern with Poetry? In comparison with the true reality, I have no time for poetry. It is the only nutrition that my visitors can accept, so like a good host I provide it."

And, just like that, my early love for Western philosophical literature slowly came to be replaced by Eastern mysticism. First, through that little inexhaustible marvel of a book, the *Tao te Ching*, bursting with fruitful paradoxes and then, in quick succession, mystics of all stripes: Buddhist, Christian, Sufi. Maybe this sounds odd, but through the eyes of love (quietly gazing past the loud surface differences) I find that I can see the luminous spirit of Rumi in Nietzsche, only stunted. I recognize that I am drawn to the captivating contradictions in both, the serious play and their radical ecstasy. But I see the example of scholar-become-poet, who then goes on to make of his entire life a work of art, more beautifully and spiritually realized in the Persian master.

"What you are seeking is also seeking you," Rumi says. Certain cherished books, like old loves, find and transform us at decisive stages of our lives. Thus, they remain emblazoned on our minds and hearts, whether we like it or not. And when we must address these emissaries of the past (as I find that I am doing, now) we should try to speak of them with the respect and tenderness befitting a ghostly self. If I might be permitted one parting quote from another Sufi mystic, Al-Ghazali, "Only that which cannot be lost in a shipwreck is yours." The rest is flotsam.

Every Subject Chooses Its Author

HOW STRANGE THAT SOMEONE can be an authority on a life, other than their own. How odd, that in setting themselves aside—to better imagine another, *objectively*—a biographer often ends up producing a sort of veiled autobiography. Yet, perhaps, self is not meant to be sacrificed entirely, in the art of biography, but only long enough to return as another.

In many ways, biography comes down to a question of temperament, a borderless affinity stretched across time and space. Something of a spiritual kinship must exist in order to be able to channel another's spirit. This is the mysticism of the biographer: one who knows without knowing, whose "facts" unearthed during the hard work of research only go on to confirm initial intimations. (And the work itself is a labor of love, or perhaps an exploration of unlive possibilities.)

"Every writer is a man given over to an obsession" writes Graham Greene. The biographer is no exception. The act of biography is a kind of possession and exorcism. The biographer who dedicates years of their life, sometimes decades, to explore another's must also experience all sorts of intensities, initiation rites, and illuminations. Somewhere along the way, a life is transformed into a work of art.

How much can actually be known for certain of another person cannot be said. Yet, in the hands of an inspired biographer, a figure may emerge from the mist, summoned from the dead, and made to walk and talk among the living. In this sense, a biographer must be seen as a creative artist in their own right. Whereas 'nothing alive can be calculated' as Kafka tells us, it can be approximated.

In *The Artist as Mystic*, a collection of ecstatic conversations I had with author and editor, Alex Stein, we attempted something of this literary séance, daring to summon the spirits of Nietzsche, Rilke, Kafka, Kierkegaard,

Baudelaire and others. In Stein, I'd found a serious playmate who had read, and (imaginatively) lived with, many of the same poets and thinkers that had shaped my intellectual landscape. Decades later, we were both ready to unburden ourselves of their influence, while acknowledging our debt. We did not have a name for this odd genre-bending form that we embarked on, I think we settled on lyrical interviews, but we did have a theme.

Broadly-speaking, we were sifting through the (sometimes dark) inheritance of these writers for the Light: the prophet in Nietzsche, the God-seeker in Kafka, the secret ascetic in Baudelaire. Always, we groped for the gold thread of the artist as mystic—high above their small, tortured self—as makers of beautiful things, seeking to harness that beauty to their great longing, in their life-long pursuit of transformation.

In the process, the lines often blurred between Stein's utterances and mine, or even the specificity of the artists under consideration. What remained was an inhabited intensity that each of our illustrious subjects vibrated with when we attempted to speak them from the inside out. In this joint attempt at creative biography writing, we found we were also sounding our own truths, more freely, by donning masks of our great dead friends.

Sometimes in writing poetry, for example, it is necessary to become the poem—one agonizing line, or liberating verse, at a time. Something of this living-through was also required of us in attempting to translate the inner lives of our literary masters. Modern American poet, Gregory Pardlo, in an extraordinary essay *Choosing a Twin* echoes this truth while discussing a different discipline: "Translation is a practice of empathy," he writes, "like choosing a twin, where affinity and kinship is a declarative act and not a passive discovery."

Rimbaud's Spiritual Battle

WHAT BECOMES A LEGEND most? Great talent, suffering, and mystery . . . three ingredients that French poet Arthur Rimbaud possessed in spades. General readers will be familiar with the broad lines of the Rimbaud legend: child prodigy and *enfant terrible* who, between the ages of fifteen and twenty, revolutionized modern poetry, only to abruptly stop writing at twenty-one, disappear in Africa, and die at thirty-seven. In *Arthur Rimbaud* (2018), part of Reaktion Books' Critical Lives series presenting the work of leading cultural figures, Seth Whidden seeks to fill in the blanks of this enigmatic life. Whidden, professor of French at the University of Oxford and co-editor of a scholarly journal of Rimbaud studies for a decade, loves his subject and knows well the milieu that produced him, demonstrating how the life and poetry of our precocious protagonist inform one another.

At the outset, Whidden emphasizes the importance of flight for Rimbaud's life and art: away from the provincial mind-set of his hometown, Charleville (which he fled and returned to frequently throughout his short, peripatetic life), as well as running away from what he viewed as the stifling restrictions of the pretty, stuffy poetry of his time: the Parnassians' "art for art's sake." Often quoting from Rimbaud's original French poetry (and translating it himself), Whidden sketches the development of the young poet's art from the pastoral, to the political (beginning with the Franco-Prussian War), onto the erotic and mystic. As a voracious reader and prodigious linguist (he would go on to learn/teach English, German, Spanish, Italian, Russian, Arabic, and Greek), Rimbaud was always familiar with the rules of language that he would gleefully break throughout his brief literary career.

Reading Whidden's study feels like sitting in on a poetry class, featuring close (at times, technical) readings and perceptive analysis, which deepen our appreciation of Rimbaud's art. The reader experiences the thrill

of being granted a front-row seat to the precocious becoming and premature undoing of our young hero. In addition, we are treated to facsimiles of Rimbaud's original manuscripts featuring his beautiful penmanship and the cast of characters whose influence he often quickly outgrew: family, teachers, artists, and friends. As a gifted teenager, Rimbaud does what many young poets do: writing to the poets he admires, introducing his work, and announcing himself with supreme confidence.

In one of his two letters referred to as the *Lettres du voyant* (letters of the seer), Rimbaud famously declares, at the tender age of sixteen:.

. . . I am working to make myself a *Seer* . . . It's a question of reaching the unknown by the derangement of *all the senses*. The sufferings are enormous, but one has to be strong, one has to be born a poet, and I know that I am a poet. This is not all my fault. It is wrong to say: I think. One ought to say: I am thought . . . I is another. Too bad for the wood that finds itself a violin.

Precisely this reckless daring, of one embarking on a tremendous adventure of the Spirit with sublime indifference to its personal cost, is the larger-than-life heroism of Rimbaud that continues to capture our imagination today.

It does not take long for the young visionary with his promise of a "new literature" to secure the attentions of Paris's literary elite, but, as the saying goes, familiarity breeds contempt. Just as Rimbaud's radical art gains the respect of literary giants of his time, his gross misbehavior (which Whidden carefully catalogs) proves our boy hero can be quite ugly up close, using and abusing those he encounters like a spoiled brat. Nowhere is this more apparent than in Rimbaud's disastrous relationship with poet Paul Verlaine, over a decade his senior. "Come, great dear soul, we call you, we are waiting for you" is Verlaine's fateful invitation to Rimbaud to visit him in Paris, at the start of a violent romantic relationship that would last for two years—leaving the older poet's marriage in shambles, culminating with Verlaine shooting Rimbaud and receiving a two-year prison sentence for it.

At this point in the horror story, we encounter a more sober, chastened Rimbaud taking stock in the only book he published himself, the influential *A Season in Hell* (1873). Tellingly, this "notebook of the damned," as he calls it, is addressed to the devil and makes this mystic pronouncement:

We are moving toward the *Spirit*. I tell you it is very certain, it is prophecy. I understand it, and not knowing how to explain it without using pagan words, I prefer to be silent.

After the torturous, unconscious living we have been privy to in his life so far, with its litany of monstrosities, one can't help but wonder: *Who speaks here?* It is the Other that Rimbaud alluded to earlier, the Wood-That-Finds-Itself-a-Violin, striking a much-needed note of self-knowledge and, beyond that, recognizing the necessity for transcendence

The mysterious poet continues his confession from the depths, in "Hell," addressing the incorruptibility of the soul and his spiritual longing, in this way:

Yes, my eyes are closed to your light. I am a beast, a savage. But I can be saved . . . Do I know nature yet? Do I know myself?—*No more words* . . . My innocence would make me weep. Life is the farce we all play . . . So trust in me, faith relieves, guides, and cures.

A Season in Hell is a hallucinatory, remarkable repudiation of his past life and, with its new clarity, carries a suggestion of transformation and redemption:

. . . the gnashing of teeth, the hissing of fire, the reeking sighs abate. All filthy memories fade out. My last regrets scamper off . . . A spiritual battle is as brutal as a battle of men.

As Whidden sums it up in his reading of this fascinating text, Rimbaud "arrives at an optimism: 'Adieu' is an offering to God ('à Dieu'), leaving behind Satan and hell, and with them there is at least a suggestion of leaving the West."

By twenty-one, the "man with soles of wind" had stopped writing poetry and would apply his restless, desperate energy elsewhere, traveling outside Europe and taking odd jobs—including manual labor at docks and quarries, selling everything from coffee to guns and just stopping short of trading in slaves. Asked by a friend around this time if he still thought of literature, an amused Rimbaud replies that he no longer bothers with such things, regarding it as "dregs" from a past life of general drunkenness. Whidden is keen to emphasize, however, that Rimbaud still wrote but that it was far from literary, more of an explorer's means to describe other worlds. For the same reason, the ex-poet takes up photography in Africa a decade later; a few evocative pictures from this inscrutable period of Rimbaud's life are reproduced in Whidden's stylish, slim volume.

Ironically, just as he has definitively turned his back on literature (after desperately yearning to make a name for himself as a feverish youth), Rimbaud's work was beginning to appear in print and his name circulating with mounting appreciation. In an anthology entitled *The Damned Poets*,

Verlaine generously introduces his long-lost friend (declared dead several times) to a new and sympathetic audience, including in the book a number of poems by the child-genius, which would prove influential—even inspiring the symbolist movement.

Although Rimbaud was outliving himself in a sense, he was also dying in another and wracked with regrets. In a letter from Africa sent to his mother (a relationship that grew less embattled as he matured), he makes this plaintive confession:

I regret having never gotten married or had a family . . . I'm condemned to wander . . . What's the point of all these comings and goings, this exhaustion, these adventures with people of strange races, these languages that fill up my memory, and these nameless difficulties?

To add insult to injury, the mute poet now learns he is to become an amputated wanderer. Here he is again, wailing:

. . . how tiring and how sad when I think of my old travels . . .
And, now, I'm a one-legged cripple . . . I who had just decided to return to France this summer to get married! Goodbye marriage, goodbye family, goodbye future!

And before he can fully process this major life change, his cancer spreads and he rapidly deteriorates. Rimbaud's final weeks before his death, at thirty-seven, are heart-rending: he weeps, is in a daze, and still dreams of future plans.

The last chapter of Whidden's gripping study is entitled "Afterlives" and considers the many posthumous lives of an unfathomable character who died and was reborn while still alive. We learn of forgeries, influences, and his undying connection to artists and readers alike (apparently, he continues to receive enough mail for authorities to place a mailbox in his cemetery at Charleville-Mézières).

Despite his uncommon achievements, it is difficult not to regard the life of Rimbaud as a kind of cautionary tale or moral fable. Claimed by the surrealists, he was pronounced by their leader, *André Breton*, as "a god of puberty." Perhaps this blasphemous epitaph gets at the pitiable heart of it all: that such an immense gift should have been entrusted to rebellious, destructive adolescence and emotional immaturity—in short, one inadequately suited to it. As we see in his abbreviated life example, debauchery, eventually, ushers in virtue; but there are less vicious paths, such as patience. Also, might it be that the difference between diabolical and divine inspiration is the duration of pleasure afforded?

Contemplating this almost mythological life leaves us meditating on larger questions, spiritual and existential. *Who was Rimbaud? What is the nature of inspiration? Were the sacrifices his vocation entailed worth it?* (By this I mean the protracted torment inflicted upon Rimbaud and those in his inner circle). Could it be that, from the start, the thing he sought, this demon-angel, was always just *outside* the page? That, after swimming the length of the alphabet, with fine gills and deranging senses, he created an opening for others but a trap for himself? If so, then slipping through those watery bars was imperative, a chastened mysticism—and freedom to write in the air, to be . . . human.

To his credit, Whidden offers no easy answers, honoring the fundamental mystery at the core of Rimbaud's fate and suggesting that the answer to these riddles, and others raised by his extraordinary life, are to be found in his art.

That Particular Intense Gaze

An Appreciation of John Banville

THE IRISH WRITER JOHN Banville is a novelist of ideas whose prose aspires to the condition of poetry. Whether meditating on the truths of art or science, investigating the nature of reality or mortality, or forever trying to pinpoint the elusive self, this modern master demands to be read slowly and thoughtfully. Of course, Banville is hardly unknown, but until he won the UK's Man Booker Prize in 2005, for *The Sea*, Banville labored in relative obscurity for around three decades, his finely-wrought thirteen previous novels selling fewer than 5,000 copies in hardback. To be sure, this has something to do with his uncommercial concerns and purportedly "difficult" style.

Like his professed mentor, Samuel Beckett, whom he has written about perceptibly and whose shadow is never far, Banville, too, for all his arsenal of jeweled words, seems always to be straining at the limits of the sayable. ("So much is unsayable: all the important things," he writes in *The Newton Letter*.) Also, as with Beckett, it is not an ethical truth (moral, value judgment) that can be trusted, but an aesthetic one (form, language) that we return to time and again. *Only describe* might be the mantra here, as faithfully and truly as you possibly can. This is, at most, what the artist is capable of. "You cannot even speak about truth. That's what's so distressful. Paradoxically, it is through form that the artist may find some kind of a way out. By giving form to formlessness. It is only in that way, perhaps, that some underlying affirmation may be found." This is Beckett in conversation, but it might as well be Banville.

Besides describing, there's imagination: perhaps, the artist's version of compassion. In Banville's morally ambivalent universe, it is failure of imagination that permits one of his sympathetic monsters, Freddie Montgomery, to take a life in *The Book of Evidence*. Passionate as Banville is about the life of the mind, the drama to be found in his work is, generally speaking,