

# **OASES OF AIR**

A Phenomenological Study of John Banville's Science Tetralogy

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Cover image: Jacob van Ruisdael, *Die Bleichen von Haarlem*  
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## Abstract

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This phenomenological study of John Banville's fiction exhibits the way in which *Doctor Copernicus*, *Kepler*, *The Newton Letter*, and *Mefisto* persistently present air as a constituting factor. Irreducible to other phenomena, air occurs as a phenomenological oasis permitting constitution to effectuate disclosure *ex nihilo*. As a self-constituting field of forms rather than as a system or arrangement of signs, *Doctor Copernicus* promotes a vision of reality that bypasses a world of scientific or aesthetic representation where objective or subjective deciphering has precedence over immediate revelation as immanent showing. In *Kepler*, air's *aseity* marks a process of constitution intense enough to erase any sense of separation between the flight-paths of discovery and the thing discovered—thus producing the impression of an intriguing parity between the constituting and the constituted. Phenomena of aviation outline the experience of air's constituting capacity as a prehuman directedness with no source outside itself. The scientist is drawn into an airborne or airborn allure recasting his life in more profound ways than those made available in cosmological inquiry. By means of the slightness of its constituting touch, air is shown as giving birth to apparently insignificant phenomena highlighting an explorability that cannot be defined in terms of mathematical models or logical postulations. In *The Newton Letter* penurious phenomena gain ascendancy over the scientist through a process defined as *autochthonous substantiation*. As in *Mefisto*, the destructive power of accidental fire reduces material and immaterial worlds to an empirical nothing where air, almost indistinguishable from that emptiness, becomes a form of saying facilitating recovery, or the semblance thereof. Finally the study elucidates the phenomenon of *monozygotic gemination* in *Mefisto*, a constituting force that allows a phantom brother or phantom limb to function as a regenerating resource rather than as a missing entity. The entire text is drawn into air's substantiating and desubstantiating sway. The analysis shows that what is forcefully accentuated in *Mefisto*—as well as in the tetralogy as a whole—is constitution's perplexing autonomy.

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## Abbreviations

|            |   |
|------------|---|
| <i>AD</i>  | Gaston Bachelard, <i>Air and Dreams</i>   |
| <i>AFE</i> | Krystyna Wilkoszewska ed., <i>Aesthetics of the Four Elements</i>                 |
| <i>BT</i>  | Martin Heidegger, <i>Being and Time</i>   |
| <i>CI</i>  | Rüdiger Imhof, <i>John Banville: A Critical Introduction</i>                      |
| <i>DC</i>  | John Banville, <i>Doctor Copernicus</i>   |
| <i>EF</i>  | Derek Hand, <i>John Banville: Exploring Fictions</i>                              |
| <i>EM</i>  | Michel Henry, <i>The Essence of Manifestation</i>                                 |
| <i>FHC</i> | Robert Sokolowski, <i>The Formation of Husserl's Concept of Constitution</i>      |
| <i>FO</i>  | Ingo Berensmeyer, <i>John Banville: Fictions of Order</i>                         |
| <i>K</i>   | John Banville, <i>Kepler</i>  |
| <i>M</i>   | John Banville, <i>Mefisto</i>   |
| <i>MHL</i> | Laura P. Zuntini de Izarra, <i>Mirrors and Holographic Labyrinths</i>             |
| <i>MI</i>  | Vladimir Jankélévitch, <i>Music and the Ineffable</i>                             |
| <i>NL</i>  | John Banville, <i>The Newton Letter</i>   |
| <i>OWL</i> | Martin Heidegger, <i>On the Way to Language</i>                                   |
| <i>PCI</i> | Edmund Husserl, <i>On the Phenomenology of the Consciousness of Internal Time</i> |
| <i>PES</i> | Franz Brentano, <i>Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint</i>                    |
| <i>PM</i>  | Wolfgang Fasching, <i>Phänomenologische Reduktion und Mushin</i>                  |
| <i>RM</i>  | Paul Ricoeur, <i>The Rule of Metaphor</i>   |
| <i>SF</i>  | Joseph McMinn, <i>The Supreme Fictions of John Banville</i>                       |
| <i>SP</i>  | Alain Badiou, <i>Saint Paul</i>   |
| <i>VA</i>  | Elke D'hoker, <i>Visions of Alterity</i>  |

# Prologue

In her seventeenth century poem “The Four Elements,”<sup>1</sup> New England poet Anne Bradstreet finally allows air to speak, asserting its priority over fire, earth, and water:

Content (quoth Air) to speak the last of you,  
Yet am not ignorant first was my due

Invisibly, air is at the heart of articulation as such, whether discursive or musical.

Nay what are words which do reveal the mind?  
Speak who or what they will they are but wind.  
Your drums, your trumpets, and your organs sound,  
What is't but forced air which doth rebound,  
And such are echoes and report of th' gun  
That tells afar th'exploit which it hath done.  
Your songs and pleasant tunes, they are the same,  
And so's the notes which nightingales do frame.  
Ye forging smiths, if bellows once were gone,  
Your red hot work more coldly would go on.  
Ye mariners, 'tis I that fill your sails,  
And speed you to your port with wished gales.

The drum, trumpet, organ, nightingale, singer, smith, and sail seem to be the agents of production—but behind lies a deeply-embedded and more prolific origin, namely air itself as ultimate resource.

I help to ripe the corn, I turn the mill,  
And with myself I every vacuum fill.

In so far as air is a medium, it is typically this medium's source. In filling the vacuum with the medium that it itself is, air is also the agent behind that mediation. Such a sense of magic has something to do with air's lack of viscousness. Being slight, supple, transparent, and mobile, air can reach the remotest cracks and alcoves of reality—and do so without performing an act

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<sup>1</sup> *The Works of Anne Bradstreet* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1967), 18-32.

of transcendence, without undertaking a leap in which some self-rupture becomes necessary.

My moist hot nature is so purely thin,  
No place so subtly made, but I get in.

The poem goes on to highlight a further natural property of air, namely its ability to assume the life and shape of other realities by infusing itself into them as the constitutive but invisible element of their existences. Within the framework of Bradstreet's ironic medievalism, this agility is given a playfully alchemical touch:

I grow more pure and pure as I mount higher,  
And when I'm thoroughly rarefied turn Fire:  
So when I am condensed, I turn to Water,  
Which may be done by holding down my vapour.  
Thus I another body can assume,  
And in a trice my own nature resume.  
Some for this cause of late have been so bold  
Me for no element longer to hold.

The last line is poignant in the context of the present dissertation. The line sums up the drift of Bradstreet's entire poetic disquisition by adumbrating the notion that air, while being an element, is rather to be seen in terms of the phenomenon of constitution as such. Constituting all things, including all elements, air constitutes itself. Hence, like the power to assume "an other body," the tendency to become "rarefied" or "condensed" denotes air's capacity for constitution as auto-constitution.

The present study discusses such classic features of air as being whirled into far stranger shapes by John Banville's reality-uprooting fiction. Phenomenological rather than alchemical-symbolic, my study identifies air not only as a factor of constitution 'represented' in Banville's science tetralogy but as the imaginative nucleus of (this) constitution itself.

Throughout my exegesis, I refrain from the facile notion that air somehow primarily indicates that which is Platonic or otherworldly. In the text, as in the real world, air is a real-life phenomenon. It is at the heart of Banville's discourse rather than being some (airy) dimension of it. Back in the 1640s, Bradstreet was indeed herself aware of the fact that airborne and airborne things—such as plagues, hurricanes, and bird flu—are not forms of an airy irreality. Air is the real, as is (its) constitution.

As my fresh air preserves all things in life,  
So when corrupt, mortality is rife:  
Then fevers, purples, pox, and pestilence,  
With divers moe, work deadly consequence;



Whereof such multitudes have died and fled,  
The living scarce had power to bury the dead;  
Yea so contagious countries have me known  
That birds have not 'scaped death as they have flown,  
Of murrain, cattle numberless did fall,  
Men feared destruction epidemical.  
Then of my tempests felt at sea and land,  
Which neither ships nor houses could withstand,  
What woeful wracks I've made may well appear  
If nought were known but that before Algier,  
Where famous Charles the Fifth more loss sustained  
Than in his long hot war which Milan gained.  
Again what furious storms and hurricanoes  
Know western isles, as Christophers, Barbadoes,  
Where neither houses, trees, nor plants I spare;  
But some fall down, and some fly up with air.  
Earthquakes so hurtful, and so feared of all,  
Imprisoned I am the original.



# Introduction

This investigation is a phenomenological study of John Banville's science tetralogy—*Doctor Copernicus* (1976), *Kepler* (1981), *The Newton Letter* (1982), and *Mefisto* (1986). I approach these works in terms of the phenomenological concept of constitution. This methodological choice involves *intentionality*. In so far as intentionality is understood phenomenologically—as in Franz Brentano, Edmund Husserl, and Scholastic thinkers such as Jacob of Aesculo—it is the guiding principle of the present study.<sup>2</sup> I exploit the longstanding capacity of the concept of intentionality to highlight text-specific conjunctions of faith with knowledge.<sup>3</sup> A Scholastic-looking tension between *fides* and *scientia* is prominently in evidence throughout the science tetralogy.<sup>4</sup>

By emphasising the power of constitution, I question readings claiming that the tetralogy unequivocally moves from belief in a unifying truth to an acceptance of truth as necessarily being an impermanent human invention.<sup>5</sup> My primary contention is that below the epistemological level there is a textual stratum that remains attached to a quasi-medieval notion of primal directedness. On that basis I challenge the recurring 'problem of representation' commonly chosen as the point of departure in tetralogy criticism. As various phenomenologists have shown, the 'problem of representation' is created by representational thinking as such. Representationalists postulate ready-made entities such as 'world,' 'self,'

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<sup>2</sup> Brentano explicitly refers to the Scholastics in his development of the concept of intentionality: "Every mental phenomenon is characterised by what the Scholastics of the Middle Ages called the intentional (or mental) inexistence of an object, and what we might call...reference to a content, direction toward an object...or immanent objectivity" (*PES*, 88). By "inexistence" Brentano did not mean non-existence, but immanence. This notion is developed and refined by Husserl. Cf. *Ancient and Medieval Theories of Intentionality*, Dominik Perler ed., 23-48, 203. Brentano's theory of intentionality cleared the path for an adverbial construal of the intentional act. Relational gaps between act and object are no longer posited. Perler shows this outlook to be prefigured in Scholastics such as Jacob of Aesculo and William Alnwick. See *ibid.*, 211-25.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Josef Pieper, *Scholasticism*, 38.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. M. Keith Booker's discussion of *Kepler* and *Doctor Copernicus* in "Cultural Crisis Then and Now." He claims that "religion remains a powerful force in modern culture, despite the fact that the Copernican Revolution seemed thoroughly to discredit the official picture of the world put forth by both Catholic and Protestant churches in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries" (*ibid.*, 180).

<sup>5</sup> This position is held by Banville critics such as Ingo Berensmeyer, *FO*, 250, and Rüdiger Imhof, *CI*, 100-101.

‘reality,’ and ‘relation.’ In my view, such *a priori* hypostatization is highly problematical.

Criticism of the tetralogy to date has primarily pursued the language theme. The beginning of *Doctor Copernicus* is seen as a paradigmatic example of insight into linguistic arbitrariness. Such readings emphasise that the acquisition of language implies an activation of the divorce between signifier and signified. This rift has epistemological consequences and is concurrently supposed to open a chasm between self and reality. According to this outlook, the opaqueness of language severs Nicolas Koppernigk from the world. Using Fritz Mauthner’s language theory, Rüdiger Imhof posits the ‘language problem’ as a dilemma: “Only by transcending the limits of language...will we get to know things as they really are” (CI, 80). Imhof asserts that a critique of language “can only be articulated through language” so that the “critique’s success coincides with its own destruction” (CI, 80). In his view, the beginning of *Doctor Copernicus* performs this critique. The ontological consequence is that the human being (as *homo loquens*) is trapped in representations of the absolute alterity called ‘world.’ In the novel’s opening paragraph ideas about linguistic imprisonment centre on the phenomenon of a linden tree outside Nicolas’s childhood home.

At first it had no name. It was the thing itself, the vivid thing. It was his friend. On *windy* days it danced, demented, waving wild arms, or in the silence of evening drowsed and dreamed, swaying in the blue, the golden *air*. Even at night it did not go away. Wrapped in his truckle bed, he could hear it stirring darkly outside in the dark, all the long night long...it, steadfast and aloof, belonged to the mysterious outside, to the *wind* and the weather and the golden blue *air*. It was part of the world, and yet it was his friend. (DC, 3; emphasis added)

The tree is true as long as it remains a nameless reality, but when its name is introduced, it is supposedly deprived of its essence, or as Imhof puts it, of its “whatness” (CI, 80). It may be called either ‘linden’ or ‘tree,’ but ultimately the signified is indifferent to what it is called.

Imhof’s accentuation of the language theme in *Doctor Copernicus* involves the belief that language primarily is to be regarded as “an epistemological and communicative medium” (CI, 79). This statement indicates a commitment to representationalism. Imhof’s Nicolas–language–world configuration is at bottom a general subject–medium–object structure put in place by the critic before the analysis even starts. From this viewpoint, language is caught up in an *a priori* limitation, since it is seen as an epistemological and/or communicative medium. Any reading with a strong stress on the language theme tends to exclude the possibility of viewing language as immediacy (disclosure). Such a critical position is liable to rule out the phenomenon of immanence completely, not just in terms of the issue of language, but in general. Indeed a one-sided focus on the tree as a

linguistic problem veils the poignancy of its text-specific affectivity. It is evident from any close reading of the actual text that the ‘tree’ is not simply a quasi-linguistic problem but a phenomenon constituted by a work-specific rather than general milieu. ‘Tree’ stands not in the generality of language but in the specificity of air. In its stealthy mode of appearing, air is in fact the constituting phenomenon that surreptitiously underpins the work. It crops up no less than four times in the very first paragraph of *Doctor Copernicus*, completely defiant of the allegedly nascent chasm between Nicolas and the world. Indeed, as part of air’s constitutive movements, the tree is in a sense *already* air-constituted. The tree marks the beginning of Nicolas’s lifelong attunement to air as a constituting *archē*.<sup>6</sup>

From the viewpoint of my own methodological stance, language is not to be regarded as a ‘problem’ but as one of many features of constitution. As an alternative to the ‘representational’ starting point, I favour a theory of *presentations*, such as the one formulated in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century by Franz Brentano, Edmund Husserl’s mentor.<sup>7</sup> For me, the main advantage of Husserlian phenomenology as forestructured by Brentano is that it is precisely *not* a theory of re/presentation. To refrain from representivity as ground for literary analysis is by the same token to abstain from viewing works of literary art as systems of representation. I view the various acts or phenomena of a literary text as *presentations*. A text is primally something other than a collection of representations. Brentano points out that presentations are already *per se* conscious of themselves. A moment of consciousness, life, text, or experience in no way needs to re/present itself to itself in order to be reflexive.<sup>8</sup> Presentation is itself reflexive. It possesses reflexive depth without needing the insertion of any space or mediation between itself and itself. Every presentation is already presentation of presentation. Presentation and presentation of presentation are not two separate events. The “presentation” of a sound and the “presentation of the presentation of the sound” are one and the same presentation (*PES*, 127). No secondary re/presentation is normally involved here. Hearing and

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<sup>6</sup> Małgorzata Sacha-Piekło discusses air as *archē* in terms of its elusive qualities. She mentions Anaximenes—philosopher of the Ionian School—who believed that the basic cosmic principle necessarily escapes sensory perception. Since air is the element that has the capacity to appear as an almost-nothing it became Anaximenes’s *archē*. See *AFE*, 275.

<sup>7</sup> Brentano presented his philosophy as a form of psychology, but it was a purely ‘descriptive psychology,’ a ‘psychognosy,’ or ‘phenomenology.’ (See Dermot Moran, *Introduction to Phenomenology*, 30). In the preface to *Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint*, Brentano points out that his “psychological standpoint is empirical; experience alone is my teacher” (xxvii). It is to this dictum of experiential immediacy that Husserl remains faithful, although he strongly rejects any psychologism as a weakening and relativisation of givenness. Husserl retains Brentano’s general outlook, stating that out of the streaming experience it is possible to discover patterns that are given with apodictic ‘self-evidence’ [*Evidenz*].

<sup>8</sup> Thomas Aquinas points out that “mind itself is known to itself through its activity and that can’t be sensed” (*Selected Philosophical Writings*, 182). The concept of ‘mind’ is phenomenologically dubious, but Aquinas’s thinking nevertheless points in the direction of Brentano and Husserl. The existence of a preobjective life-zone is outlined.

apprehension of hearing belong to the same phase. The act contains its content but “has itself as content at the same time” (*PES*, 127). An “act of seeing and the presentation of this act do not differ from each other” (*PES*, 134). That the act *automatically* knows that it is occurring implies that the subject is not involved in the accomplishment of this immanence.

In John Banville’s science tetralogy, the issue of the autonomy of conscious presentations needs to be discussed in relation to *substance*, a concept with a complex philosophical and theological history.<sup>9</sup> I view substance as being inseparable from substantiation and constitution. Disregarding the Aristotelian distinction between *substantia* and *accidentia*, I do not separate substance as such from the features or properties of its materialisation. A substance such as a blue sky does not materialise as a celestial entity to which the property of blueness is mechanically added. The blue is not only co-given but co-substantial.

As I have indicated, an explication of a field of conscious phenomena needs to be driven by analyses of acts (presentations) rather than by analyses of ‘representations.’ I would like to argue that in *Doctor Copernicus* Nicolas Koppnigk is not primarily ‘represented’ but *presented*. An experiential tissue such as a life or a text is chiefly a field of passive presentations organised non-re/presentationally in terms of networks of directed beams. These do not require an active agent or representing source-point. Presentations derive from constitution itself, not from a constituting substance. Such a presumed substance would itself have to be constituted. It is (non-representational) directedness that ultimately constitutes, not some re/representing subject or re/presented world. The event of positing constituting substances leads to infinite regress, since any constituting substance must in turn have been constituted and so on *ad infinitum*. In experiencing a text it is not *we* who shape the reading-experience, but the primary directedness of the textual flow. The text’s basic directedness is neither subjective nor objective, but presubjective and preobjective. These presubstantial entities do not stand apart from each other in an epistemological divorce, and hence do not need the formal apparatus of ‘representation’ to close a gap between themselves.

Language can be viewed in two basically different ways: (1) as predicational mediation, i.e. representationally as a communicating bridge between the objective and the subjective, or (2) non-representationally as part of presubjective disclosure (immediacy). In the present study language is taken in this second sense, i.e. as part and parcel of what Husserl calls intentionality.<sup>10</sup> In the presubjective-preobjective funnel of constitution

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<sup>9</sup> The concept has its origin in Aristotle. His early definition in the *Categories* is modified by the hylomorphism of *Metaphysics*. See Montgomery Furth, *Substance, Form and Psyche: An Aristotelian Metaphysics*, 50.

<sup>10</sup> Directedness operative in acts of intentionality is not reducible to linguistic reference, as proposed by Dagfinn Føllesdal in his comparison of Husserl and Frege. In the introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Husserl*, Barry Smith and David Woodruff Smith highlight this

where new appearances are constantly turning up in the inexorable flow of largely passive presentations, no crevice has yet opened up between opposing realms of substances defined as either subjective or objective.<sup>11</sup> The oppositionality of ‘the world’ is not in place. At this early juncture, existence is not constituted but being-constituted. In the primal presubjective-preobjective zone, betweenness has not yet achieved the status of inbetweenness, of something *positioned* in between (firmly objective or firmly subjective) substances. Betweenness is not yet flanked by the two ‘worlds’ of the subjective and the objective. Preworldly betweenness precedes substance. Preworldly flow precedes substantiation.<sup>12</sup> No inner (psychological) or outer (natural) world has yet come to choreograph the spawning of appearances. Betweenness is not a middle substance negotiating ‘relationships’ between substantial exteriority and substantial interiority. The span maintaining the distinctness of the experiencing and the experienced is not yet a substance or substantial medium. Language is not yet a formal system but a preformal, risky openness without certainties. The span opening the sense of tension between the presubjective and preobjective has still not attained the status of what Michel Henry calls “universal mediation” (*EM*, 278). In the primal, presubjective-preobjective realm, the *law of mediation* does not rule. The presubjective-preobjective span marks distinctness without separateness. Here a sense of immediacy still rules. The structures of ‘representation’ do not count in the unrestrained, unsubstantiated appearances that constitute the condition of possibility for epistemological appropriation.

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common misconstrual: “Føllesdal’s...Fregean model of intentionality has misled some into thinking that linguistic reference is supposed...to be more fundamental than intentional reference. Philosophers such as the later Wittgenstein, Sellars, and Dummett have indeed argued that language is more fundamental in this sense...[For] Husserl in all the phases of his thinking, *the philosophy of language is subsumed under the philosophy of...intentionality*” (25; emphasis added). In his outline of Husserl’s development of the concept of constitution, Robert Sokolowski emphasises the generality of acts of meaning vis-à-vis the specificity of the formation of word meaning. In Husserlian phenomenology there “can be meaning without words” (*FHC*, 42).

<sup>11</sup> It is difficult to say whether the presubjective and preobjective are ‘distinct’ from each other. Husserl wavers on this point, sometimes separating-out the preobjective from the presubjective by means of reference to the so-called *hyletic*. This separation occurs in *Ideas* (1913) where he distinguishes between the “*hyletically phenomenological*” and the “*noetically phenomenological*” (251). In *Cartesian Meditations* (1929) there is no emphasis on this distinction.

<sup>12</sup> This flow is also time-constituting, since that which is presubstantial does not have either a spatial ‘place’ or temporal ‘position.’ Husserl: “Time-constituting phenomena...are evidently...fundamentally different from those constituted in time. They are neither individual objects nor individual processes, and the predicates of such objects or processes cannot be meaningfully ascribed to them. Hence it also can make no sense to say of them...that they exist in the now and did exist previously, that they succeed one another in time or are simultaneous with one another, and so on” (*PCI*, 79). This time-constituting ‘activity’ withdraws from language. Husserl moves on to remark that in “the actuality-experience we have the primal source-point and a continuity of moments of reverberation. *For all of this, we lack names*” (*PCI*, 79; emphasis added). The preobjective can only be discussed by means of imprecise terms such as “flow.”

The tension between the overall presentation of literary language as a formally perfected system and its savagely ongoing risk cannot itself materialise as tangible substance. Yet that strain is real as the decisive pulsation of the text. The strain's insubstantial non-presentability has nothing to do with some failure on the part of language. It is rather the case that it is precisely a *capacity* of language that brings this strain to givenness. Far from being absent or neutralised in the dip that sinks the flow of the text from the orderly worlds of subjective and objective substantiations into the presubjective-preobjective depths, language is that which lets that very undulation materialise. In the tetralogy, language is not horizontally projected as one 'side' of a horizontal-epistemological dialectic between the knower and the unknowable, but materialises perpendicularly as an omnipresent, regenerative force without vertical limits on the continuum that lifts presubjective-preobjective savagery into substantially recognisable phenomena.

Language works along the openesses of three different spans: on (1) the horizontal span between substantial subjects and substantial objects, on (2) the primal micro-span between presubstantial presubjects and presubstantial preobjects, and on (3) the vertical span between these two spans. Streaming co-constitutively, experience and language bring appearances to givenness fluidly and openly in their subjective-objective span.

In drawing attention to the relevance of immediacy, of presence, and of language as disclosure in the tetralogy, a few remarks on Jacques Derrida's critique of the notion of presence may be pertinent. Derrida's understanding of temporality facilitates postmodern representationalist outlooks as exemplified by Banville commentator Elke D'hoker.<sup>13</sup> In my view, Derrida's analysis of Husserl's time phenomenology harbours an obvious misconstrual.<sup>14</sup> For Derrida, the past that is always already in place creates an inevitable and primordial rift in the living present. Such an interpretation is what prompts Derrida to state that *re*-presentation "is not something that happens to presentation but rather conditions it by bifurcating it *a priori*" (*Speech and Phenomena*, 7). By means of this reading, Husserl's understanding of presence as something living is turned into a conveniently assailable 'metaphysics of presence.'

In my view, Derrida disregards the crucial distinction made by Husserl between *retention* and *past present*. Derrida declares that "the past present

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<sup>13</sup> See D'hoker, *VA*, 10. Joseph McMinn too refers to Derrida in his description of fictional imprisonment in the tetralogy. He argues that the "shared sense of a supreme fiction" in *Doctor Copernicus* and *Kepler* "is closest to that version of textuality associated with Derridean theory, whereby a text is merely a fictional structure, a discourse with no meaningful or knowable external reference" (*SF*, 14-15).

<sup>14</sup> Derrida claims that the passivity of the living present implies "the relationship to a past, to an always-already-there that no reactivation of the origin could fully master and awaken to presence" (*Of Grammatology*, 66). Cf. also Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena*, 67, 85.



and the future present constitute originally, by dividing it, the form of the living present” (*Of Grammatology*, 67). In point of fact, however, that which constitutes originally is precisely not past present and future present. As Wolfgang Fasching has remarked, Derrida does not pay attention to the autonomy and distinctive character of retentional intentionality [*Eigenwesen der retentionalen Intentionalität*] (*PM*, 178). Husserl’s point is that retention is not a past present. Retention and protention are distinguishable parts of the primary present, but the three aspects are not to be regarded as separate substances. The flow that retains and protends is a flux that *itself* makes possible the objective time-concepts of past present and future present. Retention is not representation at all [*keine Repräsentation*], nor is it something mediated by signs [*nicht etwas durch Zeichen Vermitteltes*], but an indispensable part of any unmediated givenness [*unmittelbare Gegebenheit*] as primordial source (*PM*, 178-79). Husserl explicitly states that we must “*distinguish the retentions and protentions from the recollections and expectations*, which are not numbered among the phases *constituting* the immanent content but instead re-present past or future immanent contents” (*PCI*, 89; emphasis added). The Derridean hypostatisation of an always already self-divided present involving a process of primordial re-representation is problematical.<sup>15</sup>

The science tetralogy dramatises the insufficiency of the notion of ‘representation.’ The circumstance that linguistic incarceration is thematised points to its secondariness rather than to its primacy. Re/presentationalism’s insistence on ready-made substances (self-versus-world) inadvertently conceals what is most dramatic and poignant in the tetralogy texts, namely the *constitution* (the materialisation) of substantiations. Criticism committed to the representation rationale has a tendency to deprive reading of the sense of the *arrival* of substances. In a world where substantiation has already run its course, no room is left for the materialisation of substances out of the more or less substanceless flow of the constituting stream.

I favour a phenomenology open to the radical ongoing materialisation of substances in the intricate effluences of the texts. I resist the prioritisation of expedient substances limiting reading beforehand. It is not a world of representing or represented substances that is at stake in the science tetralogy, but rather the enigmatically erratic becoming-substance of the

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<sup>15</sup> Richard Cobb-Stevens remarks that “Derrida seems to take it for granted that all phenomenological reflection is objectifying, and therefore that the phenomenology of phenomenology yields a zone of objective presence...Husserl makes it clear that the self-manifestation of the primal flux is necessarily oblique: the primal flux does not take itself as an object, but *experiences itself nonobjectively* in the process of making the appearance of objects possible” (“Derrida and Husserl on the Status of Retention,” in *Poetics of the Elements in the Human Condition: The Sea*, 374-75; emphasis added). In *Intentionality and Transcendence*, Damian Byers likewise pinpoints the untenability of Derrida’s critique (171-79).

primal flow. In its primal streaming, existence is not a sphere of realised substances, whether subjective or objective. It is the *arriving* of substances—notably of aerial ones—that is the topic of the present study. I do not believe that what is most interesting in the tetralogy is some fixed set of ‘concerns,’ but what—in compliance or defiance of these—materialises in the unleashed streamings underflowing them. This savage surging of unthematized forms of materialisation unsettles familiar ‘issues’ such as ‘the problem of language.’

Air, the substance foregrounded in my study of Banville’s science tetralogy, has the peculiar quality of calling attention to substantiation as well as to substantiation’s presubstantial underside or source. On the one hand air in the tetralogy is a substance materialising in terms of veritable substantiation. On the other hand, precisely as ‘airiness,’ Banvillean air is highly insubstantial in its very materiality. Even as substantiated substance, air quivers in substancelessness. Since, as I have already suggested, substances are constituted rather than constituting, air in its substantiality draws attention to the phenomenal zone of the constituted, while air in its irreducible substancelessness points to the *giving* region of constitution out of which every airy substance *comes* to givenness. In short, air as substance tells of its accomplished materiality but also of its source. It points to that which constitution is capable of, to the perplexing event of substantiation; but it also points to the mystery of constitution as such, which in itself is presubstantial. Resembling the substance-empty field of constituting directedness, air simulates a lack of substance in a simulation that ironically calls attention to substantiality. We tend to believe that the most nothing-like entities lack substantial existence. Yet, in so far as it materialises out of a process of substantiation, air *counts* as substance. It is on a par with any other outcome of substantiation. Despite its aspect of nothingness, air is no less substantial, qua materialisation, than the evident materiality of a tree, of a flower, or of a wave.<sup>16</sup>

In Banville’s science tetralogy, substantiation equivocates not only in terms of air but also in terms of language. Far from having the lower-order status of being a filter between outer and inner substances (between world and self), language here is *itself something that rises into substantiation* in the texts. The rise-into-substantiation of language, which is the very feel of the Banvillean text-flow, cannot be distinguished from the event of substantiation. Accordingly, in discussing Banvillean substantiation I am *automatically* discussing language—not as a ‘problem’ but as a resisting

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<sup>16</sup> This somewhat contradictory immanent capacity of air is discussed by Małgorzata Sacha-Piekło. She proposes that “air fascinates us with its vagueness, shapelessness, indispensability for life and variety of frequently violent forms of expression. Usually unnoticeable, it exists in the background fulfilling its crucial life-sustaining role, its presence perceived only when a change occurs, a movement of the air” (*AFE*, 271).

distension, indistinguishable from materialisation. Despite the fact that language is distinct from feeling or perception, these ought not to be held in separation from each other in a literary field of inquiry where language is a condition of possibility for phenomenalisation. That something is a condition of possibility for something else does not entail that it rules. Affectivity and perception too are conditions of possibility for literature. Different orders of constitution resist and advance each other. The tetralogy texts display intensifications of language that cannot be separated from amplifications of affects, of perceptions, of judgements, and of beliefs.

Having recognised such linguistic-affective intensifications in the texts, we might say with Martin Heidegger that in engaging with a literary work of art we undergo an experience *with* language—instead of confronting a ‘language problem.’<sup>17</sup> In literature it is not epistemological problems that prevent knowing, but a primal, affirmative dislocation of the knowing-attitude. The reader is this dislocation personified. As Heidegger shows, a literary text is not an object of knowledge. Drawing on Husserl’s phenomenology, Heidegger sees that radical engagement with living phenomena requires a shift from an epistemological attitude based on knowing-problems to a phenomenological attitude open to fortuitous disclosure.<sup>18</sup>

Heidegger rightly points out that entry into a literary text involves engagement with language in a unique way. Such entering is automatically also engagement with experience in a unique way and vice versa. The two cannot be separated, other than in pure theorising. When language becomes more primally poetic, as Banville’s rhythmically meandering prose quickly does, it becomes more deeply ‘expressive’ of experience while simultaneously asserting itself *as* experience. In the special experience of engagement with a literary text, “language brings itself to language” (*OWL*, 59)—but we might with equal poignancy say that in the powerful literary text experience brings itself to experience.

Such self-arriving occurs in an oscillating zone of confluence between the constituting and the constituted, a domain which by the same token is an

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<sup>17</sup> See Heidegger’s “The Nature of Language,” *OWL*, 57-108.

<sup>18</sup> I do not wish to establish some sort of identity between Heideggerian and Husserlian thought. Lilian Alweiss has recently shown that the Heidegger of *Being and Time* fails to take the phenomenon of the world adequately into account. Husserl’s “reduction makes visible that the transcendent world ‘is’ only *as* constituted”; while Heidegger concentrates on subjectivity qua “Dasein, Husserl ensures that the problem of the world, and not consciousness, remains the fundamental concern....The reduction brings us face to face with the problem of the world, while Dasein’s surrender to the world stifles and suffocates the problem of the world” (*The World Unclaimed*, 134). Husserl does not ‘wipe out’ the world, but turns the problem of the world into an infinite task. If either of the thinkers is a radical victim of immanentism, it is Heidegger. In him, the “world no longer lies beyond our grasp, for the world is always already ‘reached.’....Heidegger affirms an ‘immanentism’ that is far more stifling than Husserl’s. The primordial projection (the structure of possibilities) is *immanent* to Dasein, insofar as Dasein is always already coming toward itself—its ownmost possibility of choosing how it is in the world....Dasein can choose heroically” (*ibid.*, 138-40).

oscillating zone of confluence between the substantiating and the substantiated. The zone defies language without at all having to extricate itself from it. The textual-experiential inner arriving requires a powerful focus on the tetralogy texts themselves as aesthetically and experientially sufficient entities with distinctly work-specific traits. Each novel is a field where the text's bundles of meaning-rays bring new concatenations of primal affects into view.

The linguistic-experiential distensions of the flow save the text from what Husserl called 'the world'—by which he did not mean the evident presence of exterior reality, but the ready-made 'map' that naturalism typically unfolds before the first phenomenon has even begun to come under scrutiny.<sup>19</sup> In order to fit into the sort of 'world' always already hypostatized by naturalism, each phenomenon, whether projective-extensional or not, needs to become projective.<sup>20</sup> In naturalism, there simply is no other place for the individual phenomenon to go. In a naturalistic realm where all entities are beforehand projected as being re/presentations, the pre-representational entity too represents itself projectively. Each phenomenon is placed in a position of in-front-of, moved into the sphere of that which is available *vorhanden*.<sup>21</sup>

In defiance of this decree, I suggest that the main features of Banville's linguistic-affective energy-system are not to be instantly inserted into such an epistemological topography. That type of insertion automatically includes the assumption that the substantiations materialising in the text-flow have their source-points in fellow-substances that (unlike the substantiated newcomers) were ready-made substances at or even before the inception of the text's streaming.

In drawing attention to *air* as substance in Banville's science tetralogy, I show that it materialises out of a constituting field that is not itself a collection of substances. Phenomenologists have given various names to this presubstantial 'zone': intentionality (Husserl), Being (Heidegger), nothingness (Sartre), affectivity (Henry), etc. Since, like the passing of time, the presubstantial field is expressive of primal directedness (as a page is

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<sup>19</sup> Husserl: "All positing of a 'non-immanent reality,' a reality not contained in the phenomenon," needs to be provisionally put out of authority by the investigator (*The Idea of Phenomenology*, 34). The world-map of ready-made substances is what is suspended.

<sup>20</sup> I use the word 'projective' as meaning posited-in-front-of, i.e., as equivalent to Heidegger's concept of *vorhanden*. But I do not wish to shift emphasis towards the primordially of Heidegger's concept of *Zuhandenheit* (handiness). Cf. *BT*, 67. Substantiation precedes both of these options.

<sup>21</sup> Heidegger's distinction between presence-at-hand [*Vorhandenheit*] and handiness [*Zuhandenheit*] is a critique of abstraction: "When we just look at things 'theoretically,' we lack an understanding of handiness" (*BT*, 65). I recognise this distinction, yet constitution qua substantiation is even more basic than the Heideggerian view of things as *pragmata*, than *Dasein*'s primal directedness towards usefulness.

expressive of the direction of the flow of reading or writing), its substancelessness too is expressive of perspective (*PM*, 97). Yet as Wolfgang Fasching points out, such an archaic pre-perspectival directedness has no substantial source-point [*kein Ausgangsort*] (*PM*, 95). *Perspective is not automatically the psychological viewpoint of a self*. In so far as presubstantial constitution is to be named consciousness [*Bewusstsein*], it constitutes selfhood (*PM*, 94). Selfhood is secondary to primal perspective (intentionality). Constitution is not to be viewed as produced by an egoic substance. As soon as constitution is substantiated (congealed into a ‘self’), it is no longer constituting but constituted (*PM*, 96).

What deeply engineers the rippling discursive-affective intensifications of the Banvillean text is not some writer-substance, narrator-substance, character-substance, body-substance, or subject-substance. In its presubstantial urge, primal flow does not possess ‘I-ness’ (*PM*, 92). In its savagely archaic depth [*Urregion*] (*PM*, 89), primal consciousness [*Urbewußtsein*] (*PM*, 92)<sup>22</sup> may well be I-like [*ichlich*] (*PM*, 88) in its irreducible first person perspective (*PM*, 90), while at the same time remaining a source *without I-substance flowing through a milieu without world-substance*. The prefix [*Ur-*] does not designate an uncomplicated origin, having taken place once and for all, which would chart a linear passageway from here to there.<sup>23</sup> The primordially of the primal zone is known through the perpetuity of its being always already alive and kicking before anything else. That is why it is misleading to speak of the *constituting* first person realm of disclosure as subjectivity, and equally misleading to speak of the first person’s situatedness in terms of a knowable habitat. While experiences in the flowing moment of *their constitution* are not experiences of ‘no one’ [*Niemandes Erlebnisse*] (*PM*, 89), they are not the lived experiences of ‘someone’ either. While they do not occur in nowhere land [*Nirgendheim*] (*PM*, 89), they nevertheless lack a substantial homeland as long as they are *being* constituted, as long as they have not yet fully attained substantial constitutedness.

Following this Husserlian rejection of substance-thinking, I subscribe to the method of phenomenological reduction—in so far as this *epoché*, as Fink and Fasching point out, is to be interpreted as a retreat to a position *on the hither side of man and his substantiations* (*PM*, 84). Lacking any constituted, ready-made substantiality, first person experience confronts (its) appearances as appearings *preceding* every substantial difference between consciousness and reality (*PM*, 84). Whether in the guise of ‘scientist’ or ‘reader,’ phenomenological consciousness does not set itself up as subject-versus-object ‘relation’ between interiority and exteriority. Lacking the self-fullness of self-substantiation, pre-psychological consciousness is not a

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<sup>22</sup> Fasching here quotes Iso Kern.

<sup>23</sup> See Anthony Steinbock, “Temporality and the Point,” in *Self-Awareness, Temporality, and Alterity*, 160.

substantially human figure about to enter or perceive a humanity-transcendent world,<sup>24</sup> but is that which beforehand fully dissolves into the pathways of appearances [*ganz im Erscheinungsvollzug aufgeht*] (*PM*, 84). This means that the phenomenological reduction involves a radical element of deanthropologisation [*einem radikalen Sichloslassen des Menschen*] (*PM*, 85).

What remains when compartmentalising objectifications and subjectifications have been methodologically put out of authority is the flowing that streams aboriginally ‘between’ the hypostatized realms of objective and subjective substances—as a primal stream earlier than them. This ‘between’ has no world-extension but is the absolute between [*absolute Zwischen*] that precedes substantiated subjecthood and objecthood as their constituting source (*PM*, 80). Phenomenological inquiry solicits the constituting prioritisation of betweenness [*Primatisierung des Zwischen*] in this sense (*PM*, 80). Instead of a universe of substances, opening up a liminal space between them, we confront a primal betweenness *constituting* substances. When in a re/representing attitude we start to ‘watch’ experience as an object admitting active taking-notice, we discover that consciousness was already there prior to the watching (*PM*, 129). Radical auto-witnessing of consciousness is not a self-witnessing. There is no re/representing self or witness-substance at hand in the primal experience-stream. *Primal witnessing and primal consciousness are one and the same thing*. There simply is no consciousness without automatic witnessing.

Primal pre-reflexive witnessing is not to be viewed as a relation, as a form of relatedness or being-related (*PM*, 128). This is the basic Husserlian insight that Michel Henry keeps returning to in his effort to rethink phenomenology on the ground of affectivity. Throughout *The Essence of Manifestation*, he stresses the intriguing synonymy of affectivity and auto-affectivity.<sup>25</sup> In so far as all life is feeling, it is *not* a representation of feeling, but feeling as being-alive or being-present. No feeling lacks feeling-consciousness. Feeling is *automatically* an auto-witnessing, a witnessing (without go-between) by feeling of itself. Life always affects itself in its instant, streaming through this instant as the flow of its own affect. The ways in which phenomena come to givenness, the trajectories of their various motilities, are not something other than the appearances. In reviewing *air* in Banville’s science tetralogy, one is therefore not faced with a constellation of data but with various modes of phenomenal arriving.

Appearing is more than a factual showing—namely *aletheia*, disclosure (*OWL*, 115). Hence, it is pointless to research givenness as if it were something that reason could simply get hold of by an effort of understanding quite to the side of our attunement to disclosure. I believe that what needs to

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<sup>24</sup> I use the term ‘transcendent’ much as Michel Henry does—to indicate the naturalist notion of a hypostatized ‘exteriority’ always already in place over and against the subject.

<sup>25</sup> See Henry, *EM*, 462-65.



be investigated in Banville's tetralogy is disclosure in its primal textual distension. Disclosure is an event in which opacity is a condition of possibility for revelation. If there were no veil, unveiling would be impossible.<sup>26</sup> If disclosure did not forcefully obstruct its own uncovering, unconcealing would not occur. Appearing would be an epistemological transfer of the knowable from reality to knower or from unknowledge to knowledge, complicated by sequences of distorting filters and 'deferred' by relays of deceptive constructs. If experience did not constitute the substantiation of its own happening, the light of unknowing would never be given as the path leading to insight. The allure of unknowing would merely be the frustrations of unknowledge.

Epistemological scepticism tends to hypostatise the literary work of art as a cognitive riddle, or as an instructive 'lesson' shedding light on our hopeless existential predicament as unhappy consciousnesses linguistically doomed to alienation from existence as presence, truth, and certainty. Banville's tetralogy does not forward such a bleak view. The weakness of the epistemological concepts of certainty and uncertainty is that they hinge on the understanding. The event of ending up in understanding's *cul-de-sac* is the outcome of the assumption that the literary work of art is to be understood.<sup>27</sup>

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Before engaging analytically with the four novels, I first turn to a critical survey of previous tetralogy criticism, focusing on full length studies of Banville's fiction. I begin by discussing matters that are central to my investigation.

Elke D'hoker's recent study highlights the issue of representivity. In *Visions of Alterity: Representation in the Works of John Banville* (2004), she investigates the problematisation of representation to be found in the tetralogy.<sup>28</sup> D'hoker argues that the reversal of the Cartesian dictum 'I think, therefore I am,' appearing in *Birchwood*, underlies the whole of the tetralogy. The reversal ('I am, therefore I think') is taken to be a prime example of the modern predicament as existential 'thrownness.' This

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<sup>26</sup> Heidegger maintains that truth is "to let beings be seen in their unconcealment (discoveredness), taking them out of their concealment" (*BT*, 202).

<sup>27</sup> Mikel Dufrenne emphasises that "aesthetic wonder has the peculiarity of provoking reflection only eventually to reject it. The object requires *not so much to be understood*...as to be *experienced* in its peculiar depth as an *unimpeachable witness*. For...we are unfaithful to the object to the extent that we remain insensitive to its '*outlaw*' quality and claim to tame it with explanation and reintegrate it within the universe of our habits" (*The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience*, 409; emphasis added).

<sup>28</sup> D'hoker discusses this issue in relation to *Birchwood*, to the arts trilogy, to *The Untouchable*, and to *Eclipse*. These texts are not under review here. I will also pass over her discussions on aesthetics and ethics in order to concentrate on the epistemological issues that are pertinent to the present thesis.

modern maxim implies that knowledge “is always *a posteriori*, something hastily devised to explain...existence” (VA, 19). Thus, language “is dependent on reality and words are subordinate to things” (VA, 21). In discussing *Doctor Copernicus*, D’hoker claims that the prelapsarian state of harmony that Nicolas Koppernigk experiences early on in his life is lost with the death of his father. Through this loss of innocence, “Nicolas is abruptly thrown in the ruptured, secular world of modernity” (VA, 22). She argues that from this moment on Nicolas “resolves to devote his life to an overcoming of *the gap between self and world*” (VA, 24; emphasis added). This is indeed an identification of an endeavour that D’hoker sees as paradigmatic for the whole tetralogy.

In the four novels under consideration, this overcoming takes the form of an epistemological quest. Gaining knowledge equals gaining or regaining harmony and denying death. These immodest aims already betray the sceptical thrust of this project, its desire...to *heal the gap between self and world* and to possess the world in its entirety. (VA, 42; emphasis added)

The protagonists in the science novels are supposedly engaged in a futile quest to overcome this unbridgeable chasm between world and self. D’hoker argues that the protagonists’ mistake consists in attempting to scientifically know the elusive, essential thing that they have glimpsed or felt. The transcendent<sup>29</sup> truth “can perhaps not be grasped or spoken, but merely be felt and shown” (VA, 59). The scientists’ efforts to impose truth and order upon the world is repelled and thrown back by its chaotic and unknowable otherness. In D’hoker’s reading, the protagonists are forced back into the ordinary—into that which they initially tried to deny. They are compelled to accept its ultimate alterity.

In all five novels [*Birchwood* included], this acceptance takes the form of a return to the ordinary, since it is in commonplace reality that human finitude is most intensely felt. Because of this opposition between the protagonists’ sceptical denial of the ordinary and their sudden confrontation with it, the ordinary in these novels is often described as the extraordinary. The commonplace is also the odd, the unexpected and the strange. This is especially clear in the many epiphanies, which punctuate Banville’s novels, and in which the ordinary gives way to a transcendent revelation. (VA, 47)

For D’hoker, epiphany is still a manifestation of a form of representation, since “it mediates between mind and matter in an attempt to make sense of

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<sup>29</sup> In D’hoker’s use, ‘transcendent’ is not a phenomenological term; hence, in this particular instantiation it denotes universality cutting through contingency and diversity.



the world” (VA, 54). In her view, revelation only serves to radicalise the self-versus-otherness dichotomy. In the early tetralogy texts (*Doctor Copernicus* and *Kepler*), scientific revelations do not have the power to reach full articulation; nor can the moments experienced in everyday life “fully recuperate significance into meaning” (VA, 65). In the later tetralogy narratives (*The Newton Letter* and *Mefisto*), postmodernly dysfunctional revelations strongly enforce the sense of an unbridgeable crevice between self and world. The “negative epiphanies become the most powerful visions of alterity in the science tetralogy” (VA, 67). In D’hoker’s view the mystery of things must remain as fleeting visions of otherness.

However, belief in alterity emanates from trust in an unyielding opposition between subject and object. The notions of subject and object continue to govern analysis. D’hoker maintains that “the most powerful epiphanies tend to reverse the hierarchy between subject and object rather than achieve a better balance between both” (VA, 71). For D’hoker’s representationalism, the equilibrium must tilt over either in the direction of the subjective or in the direction of the objective. In her introduction she declares that we may dismiss the “non-representational epistemology” we find in phenomenology and in the pre-Socratic Greek philosophers (VA, 9). D’hoker cursorily acknowledges that knowing may be reviewed in terms of “presencing rather than representation” (VA, 9). Yet she chooses to discard the phenomenological attitude “which allows for the uncanniness of a reality that eludes or disrupts our representations” (VA, 9). Instead of taking the possibility of “anti-representational thinking” seriously (VA, 10), D’hoker prefers to perform her analysis within “the tension between subject and object, mind and body” (VA, 4). In so doing she limits herself to a conflict that always gives initiative “either to the representing subject or the represented object” (VA, 4). Hence all we really are allowed to quarrel about is where to put the emphasis within this epistemological deadlock.

Our choice would seem to lie between theories of representation driven by “objective reality” and theories of representation in which the phenomenon is to be understood as “subjective construction of the human mind” (VA, 4). When all is said and done, anti-representational modes of inquiry are rejected. We are told that the postmodern “opposition between same and other...cannot simply be dismissed” (VA, 4). With the necessary cautions and restrictions, therefore, this paradigm becomes the focal point of D’hoker’s analysis of representation in Banville’s novels. In short, Banville is inserted into, and made indistinguishable from, the epistemological thinking-ways of representationalism, which automatically involves an element of mediation:

Representation always *mediates* between subjective thought on the one hand, and some form of reality on the other. It tries to install a relation between inner and outer world, mind and matter or, quite simply, self and world. Precisely because of this *mediating function*, whatever the

way in which it is subsequently conceived, the concept of representation is clearly crucial to problems of knowledge, truth and art that have always occupied mankind. (VA, 3; emphasis added)

D'hoker uses Jacques Derrida to legitimise her methodological choice. According to D'hoker, he “retains the *re* of representation, signalling repetition, return, and *renvoi*, while renouncing the notions of presence” (VA, 10).<sup>30</sup> D'hoker bases her reading on Derridean concepts. She claims that “any downright rejection of representation also runs the serious risk, according to Derrida, of substituting representation by presence” (VA, 10). By heeding Derrida's warning about the exceeding perils involved in any recuperation of immediacy, D'hoker misses the opportunity of discovering that the recovery of immediacy might precisely be what is at stake in Banville's fiction, and precisely *as risk*. Indeed I shall argue that the possibility of analytic discovery is adjoined to the risks involved in dealing with immediacy, presence, and truth.

In Rüdiger Imhof's Banville criticism, the impossibility of immediacy and presence has a slightly different theoretical coating, yet rifts and chasms figure prominently here too. *John Banville: A Critical Introduction* (1997) is to some extent a variation of D'hoker's representationalism. Imhof's analysis rehearses an (early) Wittgensteinian understanding of the shortcomings of language as an epistemological tool.

The categories of one's thinking and one's cognitive faculties are dictated by language as a categorical instrument and also by one's individual linguistic competence. In being able to comprehend reality only by dint of one's system of linguistic signs, one is bound to subjectivise reality. The act of cognition consists of a casting over what one perceives as constituents of the world in its objective as well as ideational manifestations, epistemological categories which are linguistic in kind. *These categories prestructure reality as an individualised, subjective reality*. As Wittgenstein knew: the limits of one's language are the limits of one's world, and whereof one cannot speak thereof one must be silent. (CI, 79; emphasis added)<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Derrida's view of representation surfaces in his discussion of Artaud in *Writing and Difference*: “Because it has always already begun, representation therefore has no end.... Closure is the circular limit within which the repetition of difference infinitely repeats itself. That is to say, closure is its *playing* space....To think the closure of representation is thus to think the cruel powers of death and play which permit presence to be born to itself, and pleasurably to consume itself through the representation in which it eludes itself in its deferral” (250). Self-repetition of difference and representation is primordial for Derrida.

<sup>31</sup> Imhof here paraphrases *Tractatus*, which also states: “There are, indeed, things that cannot be put into words. They *make themselves manifest*. They are what is mystical” (*Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, § 6.522, 73). Such an opening leaves room for pneumatic possibilities to the side of linguistic suffocation.

The assumption is that there is an unbridgeable chasm between the substances ‘subject’ and ‘world.’ In Imhof’s reading of *Doctor Copernicus*, there is a breakdown of that which possibly could have mediated across the chasm, namely language—which is construed as being cut up into signifiers that refer to other signifiers. The subject is compelled to remain in the linguistic realm’s deceitful play. The thesis put forth is that science is to be regarded as a theoretic prison house in the way that postmodern fiction posits itself as a self-referential confinement (CI, 82). Science is in essence about itself, not about the world. The Kantian ‘thing in itself’ does not exist since the world is fundamentally chaotic.<sup>32</sup> For Imhof, this would be the case regardless of the dysfunctionality of language. The cutting up of language, world, and of the possible link between them is expressive of a *chasmic* world-view.

Imhof claims that the tetralogy replaces the ‘thing in itself’ with human creativity. The knack of creating supreme fictions is “the thing” (CI, 95). Despite the chaos of the world and the deficiency of language, there is always the capacity to invent and create. This human faculty is shared by the scientist and the creative artist. Humanity is placed at the centre of the world as a producer of ontologies, possible realms of being, but the world remains what it is beyond the chasm: “*Doctor Copernicus* is a parable about the Creative Imagination, as are the subsequent novels in the tetralogy. All make the point that truth in fact does not exist, that there are only workable versions of the truth which we contract to believe in” (CI, 100-101). The relativisation of truth is in Imhof’s reading tied to the notion of ‘redemptive despair’ through which the protagonists are humbled into acceptance of their human and intellectual shortcomings. This is a process that makes them see the small things in life as what is truly important. Like Copernicus they are “drawn downward again and brought back to earth” (CI, 106). These are all ideas that conform to the underlying Faustian theme, but they are also Nietzschean in spirit. The excessively emotional life’s carnal upbraiding of the ascetic and idealist intellectual is a Nietzschean notion that clearly colours Imhof’s reading. With the exception of *Mefisto*, the novels of the tetralogy are in his view “about people who, by dint of an excessive idea, try to account for the quiddity of life; they seek to make reality, the world, correspond to a concept of order and harmony that they have thought up, but that in this form does not exist at all” (CI, 151). In *Mefisto*, Imhof sees an order that comes from the world in binary and palindromic patterns, but he concludes that this novel completes the tetralogy’s gradual process of epistemological disillusionment. Out of the shards, fragments, and splinters of major disenchantment, the human being emerges as an ontological source-

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<sup>32</sup> Imhof’s adoption of a Kantian epistemology is phenomenologically problematical. As Husserl has shown, it is a cardinal mistake to implement the Kantian dichotomy between ‘the thing in itself’ and ‘the thing known.’ Robert Sokolowski points out that the error stems from “the tendency to treat sensations or appearances as signs or symbols of real things” (FHC, 134).

point. The breakdown of language, world, and truth supposedly promotes the possibilities of human creativity.

In *The Supreme Fictions of John Banville* (1999), Joseph McMinn too speaks of the tetralogy's preoccupation with the "primacy of imagination in all forms of thought and narrative" (SF, 47). In contrast to Imhof, McMinn maintains that sensuous experience necessarily precedes language, which he regards as a latecomer quite insufficient to describe and contain the complexity of experience (SF, 48). In his discussion of *Doctor Copernicus*, McMinn claims that the "world comes first, as does the linden tree; what it is called remains of secondary and ambivalent value" (SF, 63). It is the crime of the attempt to transcend the immanence of this primitive and simple truth that gives the scientists and writers in the tetralogy an experiential counter-education. McMinn's appropriate insight concerning *the return of prelinguistic primitiveness* enables him to see a difference between *Kepler* and *Doctor Copernicus* in so far as the fictional Kepler has superior powers of receptivity, a more developed poetic imagination at work in the perception of scientific knowledge and in the lived experiences of the 'ordinary' world. Kepler preserves the receptivity that Copernicus tries to suppress. For McMinn the revenge of the prelinguistic is therefore less brutal in *Kepler* than in *Doctor Copernicus*. In *The Newton Letter* he sees the return of primitiveness in terms of a correlation between the scientific breakdown of the biographer's object of study (Newton) and the epistemological collapse of the biographer himself. Language is again in focus: "Like the great scientist, Banville's narrator experiences the revolt of language against his ego, and is left with a childlike sense of wonder at the mystery of ordinary experience and everyday phenomena" (SF, 84). In his reading of *Mefisto*, McMinn sums up his conception of prelinguistic revenge:

Like Copernicus, Kepler, and Newton, Swan realises that a certain kind of abstraction has prevented him from seeing something simple and obvious. Such a realisation must admit to itself, in hindsight, that this perception is based on a deceptive paradox 'the more I knew, the less I seemed to understand.' (SF, 97-98)

Epistemological breakdown emanates from the experience of the insufficiency of language. In spite of his insight into prelinguistic constitutions in Banville, McMinn mainly sticks to the thought-versus-experience dichotomy (which by the same token is an ideal-versus-real opposition), claiming that the protagonists must remain in a cocoon of subjective experience, which cannot be cut open with anything less than disastrous consequences. In living through this breakdown of ideas, the protagonists are bent back towards themselves, towards their experiences and lives: "Humanity, stripped of its original security, falls back on its own imaginative resources, and must cling to the beautiful and the concrete as the

new forms of knowledge” (*SF*, 62). McMinn’s reading comes close to Imhof’s here. Copernicus, Kepler, Newton, the unnamed biographer, and Gabriel Swan, are all turned towards ‘real experiences’ through the process of the collapse of their abstractions. The movement is from idea to real, from thought to body, from the Socratic to the Dionysian, from Plato to Nietzsche, from Kant to Heidegger.

Derek Hand discusses similar issues in *John Banville: Exploring Fictions* (2002). He focuses on the divisive drive towards endless rupture. He also recognises Banville’s ability to challenge natural science’s objectivity-claim. According to Hand, such a challenge is promoted by postmodern art, Banville’s tetralogy being a postmodernist exemplum. Banville’s science novels are said to take the questioning of science to its extreme limit. Logic and rationality are torn down in Banville’s texts, the difference

being that [he] never fully succumbs to the inevitable chaos that ensues when reason, logic, and stability are undermined, however mischievously. It is as if Banville is acutely aware of the very real consequences of a loss of faith in coherence and, thus, his work balances itself precariously between acknowledging the limits of logic on the one hand and desiring the comforting stability it offers on the other. It is here that Banville’s work raises itself beyond merely the realm of ideas and becomes engaged with the lived experience of the human condition. (*EF*, 69)

Hand’s recognition of this pivotal issue in the tetralogy is nevertheless submerged in a variety of more conventional observations. In general, he sticks to the basic subject–world dichotomy as governed by linguistic deficiency. In the manner of Imhof and McMinn, he identifies the leap of the creative imagination as having a momentary power to transcend the language–versus–world chasm. Derek Hand wants to see this leap as a parable of Michel Foucault’s notion of a shift of discourse (*EF*, 80).<sup>33</sup> By means of his revolutionary cosmology, Copernicus created a new, post-Ptolemaic discourse. In addition Hand sees the leap in terms of a synthesis that forces Copernicus to preserve a great deal of Ptolemaic ideas within his own system (*EF*, 81). This Copernican inability to completely break with

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<sup>33</sup> Hand follows Foucault’s notion of discourse as a “*system of signs* which conforms to certain rules underlying any given piece of thought or writing” (*EF*, 80; emphasis added). In *The Archaeology of Knowledge* Foucault states that “by discourse, then, I meant that which was produced (perhaps all that was produced) by the *groups of signs*. But I also meant a group of acts of formulation, a series of *sentences and propositions*” (107; emphasis added). In Foucault’s view, discourse orders signs, and the discursive order is the order of the world. In addition to the founding signs, a discursive outlook must “substitute for the enigmatic treasure of ‘things’ anterior to discourse, the regular formation of objects that emerge only in discourse” (*ibid.*, 47). Foucault conveniently overlooks the enigmatic anteriority that haunts discourse and its signs.

tradition is transferred to the literary field, where Hand reads Banville's art as oscillating between tradition and innovation. Typically, a creative leap is immediately drawn back into the tradition it changes. In Derek Hand's historicist world-view, art as well as science are to be seen as non-teleological anticipation of new beginnings.

Generally speaking, Hand, like others, stresses divisive discontinuity. As an analogy to Copernicus's failure to formulate his idea, Hand claims that the "same is true for Banville's art, which acknowledges the impossibility of his writing bridging the gap between itself and the reality it so desperately wants to connect with" (EF, 82). In his reading of *Kepler*, Hand contends that there is "a world outside language and art, but it will always remain out there, beyond any human attempt to connect with it and make it known" (EF, 111). Hand emphasises imprisonment in unreliable language when he declares that in "the end, the goal is not truth, or a tangible connection with the world; rather the goal is the writing itself" (EF, 87). He also acknowledges other Banvillean characteristics such as loss of truth and of master narrative (EF, 87, 117), as well as fragile order only within creative art (EF, 90). The intersection of these forces anthropologises existence and text. The scientist as well as the creative artist are felt to have their common ground in the subjective imagination. The hopefulness that Derek Hand finds in the tetralogy lies in our human ability to always imagine the world anew, either through art or science. As in Imhof's reading, the modern or postmodern human being is the ontological source-point.

In *Mirrors and Holographic Labyrinths: The Process of a "New" Aesthetic Synthesis in the Novels of John Banville* (1999), Laura P. Zuntini de Izarra argues that Banville tries to achieve 'new syntheses' out of which a 'new' aesthetics arises. She contends that the tetralogy deconstructs scientific discourse through a postmodern reconstruction of it. Thereby scientific discourse is pulled into an aesthetic discourse with which it shares several basic characteristics. "As an Irish writer [Banville] transforms the scientific, philosophic and socio-fictional narrative discourses into an aesthetic discourse and uses the narrative strategies and form of the scientists themselves in the construction of another fiction in the search for a signifying synthesis of his own: a literary synthesis" (MHL, 62). For Zuntini de Izarra, the fundamental human predicament explored in the tetralogy is the deficiency of language. Thus Copernicus "reaffirms the existence of a void between the word and what it defines in science as well as in fiction" (MHL, 65). Banville's fiction operates in this void. Through its fictionalisation of science and metafictionalisation of fiction, a 'new' literary aesthetics driven by invention is born. The void between signifier and signified provides room for a labyrinthine play of meaning (MHL, 91). In this void man still possesses the power to invent and reinvent a man-made order that does not in any way reach the world. "Science is a form of ritual or play-acting that tries to transform the chaos of the world into order. If, to attain this, a creative act is necessary, then science resembles art. According



to Banville, fiction invents order” (*MHL*, 68). The anthropocentric invention of order is seen as a positive force in protagonists and writer. In her reading of *The Newton Letter*, Zuntini de Izarra takes the notion of destabilised ontological ground even further, stating that also a possible fictional truth is at the mercy of the human being (writer) as creator-destroyer. “The scientific limits of historical truth are transposed to a fictional space, as was the case with scientific truth in the first two books of the tetralogy. However, this fictional ‘truth’ is also questioned, in the form of a satire” (*MHL*, 99).

In all, Zuntini de Izarra’s commentary fits nicely into the familiar emphasis on divisiveness. Her interpretative rationale is productionistic. The tetralogy synthesises different discourses to produce new discursive space. In a universe totalising and essentialising the production of discursive play, there can only be relativisation of truth. In her view the tetralogy texts automatically endorse such a postmodern ontology. Every fictional and scientific system is seen as self-reflecting, since it necessarily employs language, hypostatised as the self-reflecting mother of all self-reflection. Zuntini de Izarra’s constructivism reduces the science tetralogy to anthropocentricity, subjectivity, relativisation of truth, endless play, and linguistic incarceration.

In *John Banville: Fictions of Order; Authority, Authorship, Authenticity* (2000), Ingo Berensmeyer uses ideas from Foucault, Nietzsche, Derrida, Kuhn, Einstein, Heisenberg, Popper, Holton, Planck, Cassirer, and Wallace Stevens in order to map out the intellectual terrain in which the tetralogy needs to be placed. This particular academic topography is defined by the instability of scientific theories. In Berensmeyer’s compact summary, the chasm between language and world is wide and unbridgeable. Scientific theory and literature operate in a sphere of metaphors or discourses failing to cross into a ‘real’ world. We are told that the world can at best be seen in a new light through the different preliminary theories ‘about it.’ Berensmeyer contends that the tetralogy explores this predicament by placing scientific theory and literature on a par. These two different realms of human creativity are similar in their way of attempting to approach the world, i.e., in the way they try to impose order onto a chaotic and unknowable world. Berensmeyer quotes Harold Bloom’s claim that scientific theories are basically severe poems (*FO*, 120). The aesthetic aspects of science and literature create supreme fictions, metaphors of the indeterminable X that is called ‘the world.’ Berensmeyer proposes that if “cosmology documents the ‘rage for order’ as a major obsession of mankind, Banville’s tetralogy shows this rage at work” (*FO*, 122). The tetralogy “necessarily addresses the disadvantages and deficiencies of a life devoted to scientific endeavours” (*FO*, 123). The scientific quest creates a distance towards “the affective concreteness of lived experience” (*FO*, 123). The tetralogy thematises the lives and actions of the scientists in a distinctly literary fashion.

Therefore Banville's tetralogy cannot justly be called a series of 'novels of ideas'; rather, it explores ideas in their relation to life and to historical processes, emphasising the aspect of human agency behind scientific theories, and the tension between scientific systems and the disorder that surrounds them. Using narrative modes of 'concretisation' modelled on traditional forms of scientific biography, the novels further examine the functioning of traditional techniques of mediating the abstract with the concrete...and thus explore the possibilities of *literary* fiction in comparison to traditional biographical-historical narratives. (FO, 124)

The "human agency" behind ideas blurs the distinction between scientific theory and fiction. It also dissolves the opposition between fiction and the real into a Baudrillardian hyperreality without footing in the world. "Fiction and reality are not mutually exclusive: they interpenetrate, envelope or involve one another in various ways" (FO, 203). Berensmeyer sees the art-form of the novel as possessing the capacity to open up a unique space "of uncertain boundaries, where discourses can intersect, at times contest one another, at times be dislimned, but never brought to complete agreement" (FO, 203). Subjecting himself to the neo-normative authorisation of truthless free-play, Berensmeyer asserts that the unknowability of the world's essence is a fit subject for literature investigating the limits of language (FO, 203). Literature discloses human experience rather than truth.

What literary fiction can do, with historically unparalleled success, is enable communication of what is otherwise incommunicable. The multifarious realities we live in—allowing a plurality of aspects but not the recognition of an essence—cannot be contacted directly but may be addressed indirectly, in the mode of narrative. Thus, literature can insert itself in the interstices of 'reality' and 'fiction', and open up an 'interspace' (intermediary, intertextual and/or interdiscursive), a unique space of resonance in which an otherwise impossible interaction of different, heterogeneous communicative modes (or 'discourses')—social, scientific, technological, political, historical, etc.—can be enacted. For this, Banville's work can be taken as a paradigmatic contemporary example. (FO, 204)

Berensmeyer claims that the progression of the tetralogy performs a movement from science towards art (FO, 250). The world becomes manageable through the imposition of fiction. He wants to see this development as a movement from relative stability and possibility of truth (*Doctor Copernicus*), to glimpses of truth (*Kepler*), to an increasingly destabilised world where fiction replaces the correspondence between linguistic and extra-linguistic reality (*The Newton Letter, Mefisto*). "The



greatest failure of Banville's scientists is their tendency to posit their theories as absolutes; their greatest achievement is the insight into the relativity and anthropomorphous nature of all systematisation" (*FO*, 250). In Berensmeyer's view, the tetralogy shows us that science and fiction are "symbolic mediations" already operative when the chaotic alterity called 'world' is encountered (*FO*, 250).

Typically, an emphasis on mediation, human-creative agency, and disconnection from the world has been authorised and hypostatized as a filter through which Banville's science novels have been seen. The absence of truth has become the truth to which Banville critics subscribe. It is assumed that at the root of the impossibility of truth lies the insufficiency of language and of other sign-systems. Language and narrativity are viewed as prisons. Discourse deessentialises truth and world. In so far as there is a reversal of the Cartesian dictum underlying the tetralogy—as suggested by D'hoker—then there is as yet little research showing how this aspect of being is manifested in the four works. Critics seem to agree upon the idea that there is a Banville to the side of the postmodern Banville. This figure is aware of the fact that predication is a latecomer. In McMinn's words, this other Banville knows that "experience of the natural world comes before a language impatient to describe it" (*SF*, 48). Yet readings typically get tangled up in the familiar language-and-representation problematic. It is the aim of the present investigation to elucidate the texts differently by focusing on more powerfully elusive elements of the works.

In recognising air's constitutional force in the primary texts, I share Paul Ricoeur's view that "metaphor is a semantic event that takes place at the point where several semantic fields intersect" (*RM*, 114). In the tetralogy, metaphor (re)generates meaning so as to produce a "dynamic vision of reality" (*RM*, 351). As an intermittent feature of constitutive forces, metaphor is part and parcel of pre-predicative encounter.<sup>34</sup> Metaphor is endemic to the metamorphosis in which air's intriguing volatility cannot be separated from primal constitution. As experiential encounter, every "semantic shock" entails attunement to a life-zone where constitution itself is more flamboyant than the substances it is about to constitute (*RM*, 350).

Poetic discourse brings to language a pre-objective world in which we find ourselves already rooted, but in which we also project our innermost possibilities. We must thus dismantle the reign of objects in order to let be, and to allow to be uttered, our primordial belonging to a world which we inhabit, that is to say, which at once precedes us and receives the imprint of our works. In short, we must restore to the fine word *invent* its twofold sense of both discovery and creation. (*RM*, 362)

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<sup>34</sup> See Robert Sokolowski, *FHC*, 198.



Plate 1. Yves Klein, *IKB 79*, 1959. Paint on canvas on wood, 139,7x119,7 cm. Tate Gallery, London. © Tate, London 2006. Photo Credit: John Webb.

# SECTION I — *DOCTOR COPERNICUS*

## 1. The Aseity of Air

*Doctor Copernicus* (1976) is a fictionalised biography telling the story of how the Prussian-Polish astronomer Nicolas Koppernigk broke the paralysing spell of the old Ptolemaic paradigm. Viewed superficially, the text is a historical novel highlighting the epistemological limitations of language. We are given a fictional account of the Copernican theory's materialisation and tortuous publication-history. Copernicus's life is shaped by ecclesiastical, theological, political, and private intrigues. These circumstances conjointly delay the final publication of the complete theory of planetary configurations and motions. Parallel to the 'outer' turmoil there is an 'inner' struggle of convictions and doubts contributing to the deferral of the treatise's publication. The conflict apparently echoes Copernicus's strategic actions and career-building manoeuvres. But Copernican 'interiority' is also a private world of philosophical and religious contemplations. More importantly, I propose, we are introduced to an *autonomous* region of affects, defiant of inner–outer dichotomies. As we shall see, this zone contains elusive meanings and forces that disregard the text's overtly exhibited themes.

The zone of radical autonomy is intriguingly mobilised by the phenomenon of air. Air is not a structural device in any ordinary sense. In the textually strong sense it is not expressive of the scientific-philosophic sphere that Platonically foregrounds distance, ideality, truth, thought, abstraction, and perfection at the expense of their polar opposites. In its *autonomy*, air does not oppose the concrete and bodily nearness of earth. Air does not negate contingency, change, imperfection, or chaos. The fact that Copernicus shifts the centre of the universe from earth's sublunary materiality to the aeriality of the sun, appears to foreground some commonplace polarisation between mundane life and the ideal sphere of scientific thought. I propose that this is what the novel is *not* about. The polarity is certainly at hand. "There were for him two selves, separate and irreconcilable, the one a mind above the stars, the other a worthless fork of flesh planted firmly in earthy excrement" (*DC*, 27). Yet this polarisation is

far too simple to be taken as the decisive mechanism on which the text hinges.

In *Doctor Copernicus*, air materialises so complexly that it cannot be simplistically construed as the ideal pole in the battle between the Platonic and the materiality of everyday life.<sup>35</sup> In the text, air is on first inspection little more than an ubiquitous and elaborate web of diversity, something that negates ideal fixity by being almost indistinguishable from the concrete flux of everyday life. Regarded in this way air-phenomena would uphold a trite dichotomy between life as lived in mundane fullness and life as lived in an ideal sphere of scientific thought. In alignment with such a dichotomy many critics hold that Copernicus's austere asceticism in pursuit of a Platonic 'truth' comprises his cardinal mistake in life.<sup>36</sup> But as my analysis of the Copernican airscapes will show, it is not the case that the attunement to truth leads to anarchy and near-madness, while sublunary existence remains salubrious and natural. At the novel's affective and experiential heart something important resists every polarisation of the 'scientist as scientist' vis-à-vis the 'scientist as an ordinary man.' Primarily, Copernicus's renunciation of hedonistic excess does not reflect a triumph of theoretic coolness over the passions.

Instead of positing air as one side of a banal binary opposition, I highlight a dimension of radical textual autonomy where air possesses *aseity*. Air occurs *a se*—i.e., as and for itself—therefore utterly in defiance of the ontological and epistemological polarisation of quarrelling opposites. In *Doctor Copernicus* air is an *a se*. It veers towards a state of things where it is of itself, for itself, from itself, by itself. *Sui generis*, air is not compounded by causes explicating or producing it. In *Doctor Copernicus* air has a tendency *to be air*. Accordingly, it is in my view pointless to try to 'account' for air's elusive stratagems in the narrative. The challenge is to describe these analytically by shaping a phenomenological approach that does justice to the literary text as an entity sufficient unto itself—and not as an *exemplum* of philosophic problems governed by reiterated issues of language and epistemology.

The aseity of air is not a property of autonomy in *Doctor Copernicus* but this autonomy itself. Thus air is not an essence of the text, any more than light is a mere essence or property of the godhead in theology. As Amy Plantinga Pauw points out in her commentary on Francis Turretin's theological elucidations, "God is not only said to *have* Life, as one would affirm of a composite being; God is said in scripture to *be* Life, which can only be said of a simple being, for whom there is no distinction between

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<sup>35</sup> Like Platonism, the Neoplatonism with which Copernicus was familiar discovers "reality in a changeless world of spirit rather than in the transient affairs of everyday life" (Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Copernican Revolution*, 128).

<sup>36</sup> See Imhof, *CI*, 94; Hand, *EF*, 90; McMinn, *SF*, 48; Zuntini de Izarra, *MHL*, 73. The truth-versus-contingency reversal is regarded as an epistemological and moral lesson for the protagonist to learn.

essence and properties” (*The Supreme Harmony of All*, 62). Air in *Doctor Copernicus* is *simple* in this sense. Such simplicity does not denote a lack of complexity but of compositeness. The changing aspects of aseity are not parts. In the text, air is not *made*. It does not consist of components other than air. It is the being-air of air that is its aseity, its being nothing *but* air. The aseity of air in *Doctor Copernicus* is related to substantiation as something that releases a certain ultimate reality in the work (and in Copernicus himself) intensifying a sense of the purely self-existent. Substantiation and aseity go hand in hand in so far as *a substance’s reality is not a function of the relations in which it stands* (ibid., 60-61).

My reading of air as aseity in *Doctor Copernicus* challenges any exaggerated reliance on the ‘linguistic turn’ in criticism and philosophy. I recognise that the phenomenon of air is caught in a reticulation of linguistic relations from which it cannot disentangle itself, while I simultaneously deny that its impact is reducible to such networks. My reading might be mistaken for the centrism seemingly critiqued in *Doctor Copernicus*, voided by a decentred universe spinning in a frightening nothingness akin to the intrinsic emptiness of language. However, no such centre–margin dichotomy is forwarded by this study.

Air is of course related to nothingness. Thematically, the issue of nothingness is prominent in several ways,<sup>37</sup> reflecting the modern world’s loss of absolute centre. Yet the nothingness operative in the text is not reducible to the crestfallen pessimism of such an outlook. In *Doctor Copernicus*, that which appears as “airborne” (*DC*, 30), or which at least can be imagined as swimming in some huge cosmic ‘ether,’ includes the heavenly bodies that Copernicus subjects to cosmological revision. Formerly, the planets were ‘airborne’ in orbit around a fixed earth—and now earth itself is ‘airborne,’ and with it of course all its cities, citizens, oceans, armies, churches, etc. Earth and sun are now conjointly airborne in a reciprocation of airborneness with itself. The cosmos, in such an innovative scheme, is much like a “confluence of aetherial stresses” in which reality, “eventually,” is more or less “nothing” for someone “dreaming in a vacuum” (*DC*, 239). The vacuum qua cosmos, but also qua scientist enduring the discovery of it, dreams itself, reflects its void into the inner co-nothingness taking notice of it.

This ‘nothing’ is not dialectically given: it does not belong to the nothing–something axis as a polar end of a binary opposition. In *Doctor Copernicus* we are not in a something–nothing dichotomy, but at the very least in a something–nothing–nothing (or something–nothing–something) asymmetry. The text proposes that the Copernican insight is not even ‘heliocentric’—the new order being in fact *acentric*. It is not a question of

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<sup>37</sup> Imhof asserts that the “Copernican world revolves relentlessly around a void, a nothingness, and Banville’s fictional recreation of that world, most appropriate, also revolves around a hole, so to speak” (*CI*, 105).

some reversal, of some change from up–down to down–up, from earth–sun to sun–earth, from one centre to another.

You imagine that Koppernigk set the Sun at the centre of the universe, don't you? He did not. The centre of the universe according to his theory is not the Sun, *but the centre of the Earth's orbit*, which...is situated at a point in space some three times the Sun's diameter distant from the Sun! All the hypotheses, all the calculations...prove that at the centre of all there is nothing... (DC, 217-18)

The so-called heliocentricity that sets earth spinning in the void in fact sets the sun in that emptiness too. Yet to prematurely embrace the idea that the text thereby promotes the sense of reality as lacking essential presence is to impose foregone conclusions on the literary work's complexity. To say that there is a decisive 'nothing' at work in the text is not automatically to say that it is given over to a metaphysics of nothingness; and to say that the heliocentric displaces the geocentric is not automatically to say that we have slipped into a metaphysics of displacement. Not even the sharply defined motif of the crumbling of faith can be taken as indicating a lurch into a metaphysics of disbelief. In all these cases—metaphysics of nothingness, displacement, unbelief—one cannot grasp any significant state of affairs by taking motifs and themes at face value. Instead we need to look at the phenomena of the text in detail in order to discover how they are *given*. Are they given in terms of the overtly exhibited truths that they logically amount to? Or are they given in terms of something that is an evasion of established truthfulness?

Joseph McMinn reiterates the common, somewhat simplifying view that the "Copernican revolution is the start of a modern sense of an impassable gulf between the spiritual and the material worlds" (SF, 62). *Doctor Copernicus* problematizes this simplification—and does so by means of the seemingly Platonic quality of air. There are *two* dominant air-realms in the text: one that operates dialectically along the conventional earth–sky axis, and *another* that comes to givenness purely on its own terms. The text's enigmatic poignancy lies in the fact that the 'Copernican revolution' does not affect this latter air-zone.

## 2. Blueness

In *Doctor Copernicus* air is a 'thing' of *some substance*. During his early studies in mathematics, logic, and Latin verse, Nicolas sometimes finds that "blocks of glassy air" disclose "contours" of a "ravishing thing" that glistens

in the sky.<sup>38</sup> Yet the “thing,” being no less “unearthly” than the clear sky out of which it is “assembling itself,” is more or less these “blocks” themselves. The “glistening ravishing thing” is “the unearthly blue” cubistically solidified into tangible substance (*DC*, 19).<sup>39</sup>

On a psychological level, all we find is a young man reaching tentatively for fascinating ideas that are tantalisingly out of reach in the “unearthly” air of mathematico-logical thought; but on a deeper level, we are led into an encounter with air as self-subsistence. The drama of such substantiation does not unfold at the outer reaches of Nicolas’s cogitations but stirs in a site that is nearer to him than himself. Already, there is something slightly frightening about aerial-substantial unfoldings. They seem to have an absurd life of their own that is not strictly human, yet not otherworldly either.<sup>40</sup> The “unearthly” here is precisely not the beyond-earthly.

The “blocks of glassy air” assemble themselves “out of” the blue air, *within* it, *as* it (*DC*, 19). Air-substance is positionless—defying interiority as well as exteriority. Yet it is space, feeling, reality, the more real than the real.

Only now and then, in the grave cold music of mathematics, in the stately march of a Latin line, in logic’s hard bright lucid, faintly frightening certainties, did he dimly perceive the contours of some glistening ravishing thing assembling itself out of blocks of glassy air in a clear blue unearthly sky, and then there thrummed within him a coppery chord of perfect bliss. (*DC*, 19)

Copper (“coppery chord”) is itself substance here, the hidden, substantially embedded base-element of Kopper-nigk. The “glass blocks” are on the one

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<sup>38</sup> The sky’s blueness typically comes to givenness as affectivity without object. Gaston Bachelard: “The blue sky, meditated upon by the material imagination, is pure feeling; it is emotionality without object” (*AD*, 165). The objectlessness is nevertheless an immensity in which the blueness of the sky and the blueness of the sky-feeling are faintly distinguishable. An immanent experiential distinction is maintained. The air and the affect are distinct, but not separate.

<sup>39</sup> Elke D’hoker has referred to moments of such insight as having an epiphanic character. Discussing the science tetralogy and *Birchwood*, she claims that Banvillean epiphanies adhere “more closely to the earlier romantic and religious traditions” than to the modernist Joycean version (“Books of Revelation,” 38). In Banville “a spiritual truth can suddenly be ‘seen,’” albeit “in an indirect way” (*ibid.*, 38). She further asserts that “even if a markedly religious meaning is absent, the truth revealed transcends the material reality through which it manifests itself, in that it is concerned with the super-sensible—though rational—realm of order and harmony” (*ibid.*, 38-39). I would add that epiphanies may occur anywhere and anytime. Moreover, they do not involve a transcending of “material reality” into the “super-sensible.” They are rather innerworldly manifestations of constitution’s passive-active autonomy.

<sup>40</sup> I use the word ‘life’ in four basic senses: (1) as denoting ‘life in general,’ e.g. ‘Copernicus’s life’; (2) as experiential stream without substance-attunement; (3) as living attunement towards elusive substance; (4) as aseity. (1) and (2) are anthropological, whereas (3) and (4) are not reducible to anthropology.



hand units of logic that pleasingly “locked” as a solution to a logical conundrum in the “bright air” of a rationally crystalline mind (*DC*, 20), and on the other hand units of something elusive and nameless that the novel attempts to name. While attention primarily is drawn to the solidification of air, we simultaneously witness a movement in the opposite direction. The aeriality of the blocks points to a dynamic sense of dematerialisation. Bachelard speaks of this tendency as “an aerial *Einführung*” which is “the fusion of a dreamer with as undifferentiated a universe as possible, one that is blue and gentle, infinite and formless, with a *minimum of substance*” (*AD*, 163). It lies within the power of air as blue sky to unify “the opposite impressions of presence and distance” (*AD*, 166).

Moving into adulthood, Nicolas “became an insubstantial thing, a web of air rippling in red winds” (*DC*, 24). This affirmation of insubstantiality does not denote a loss of substance, a substancelessness, but a heightening of substance to a mode of elated distension. The insubstantial thing is not an absolute nothing but a web of air. Substance swells, explodes, drifts, charges, threatens. Substance is flesh, but flesh lifted and lifting into the materiality of air. To “fall upward, into the blue” is not to lose substance but to change into another substance, as when Cracow utterly disappears in snow after a heavy snowfall (*DC*, 25). The transmutation of the city into whiteness, of “something” into “nothing,” of “presence” into “absence,” is not a transformation of substances into their cancellation, for nothingness here is a *substance* (as white is a colour), a tangible wealth of infinitely pale crystals (*DC*, 25). Snow’s advent introduces “emptiness,” but as in Wallace Stevens’s poem “The Snow Man,” the emptiness is a nothingness *that is*, a “white emptiness” (*DC*, 25; emphasis added). The annulment of the world is not the annulment of substance. Nicolas is drawn into an intersection of annulment and its cancellation. In “frantic nights,” to the side of “ordinary flesh,” he seeks “something” which is a convergence of “flesh,” “light,” and “air” (*DC*, 25). Night unravels a reality without world, a substance-field without “things.”

Snow fell, and soothed the raw wound he had opened with his own hands. For three days it stormed in eerie silence, and then, on the fourth, dawn found the world transformed. It was in the absence of things that the change lay; the snow itself was hardly a presence, was rather a nothing where before there had been something, a pavement, a headstone, a green field... (*DC*, 25)

Snow is a blank that appears *out of* a nothing: out of emptiness, out of air. Snow appears out of the sky, out of the blue. Even air solidifies when the “sky” is momentarily given as “a dome of palest glass” (*DC*, 25). In general, the Baltic air, from which we are rarely very far in *Doctor Copernicus*, is reducible neither to a poetic backdrop, nor to some ‘tabula’ on which an overintellectualised cogito thinks out its otherworldly and scientifically



overdetermined thoughts. The “sense of air and space” serves to *buoy* the subject, to support and nourish, to keep afloat (*DC*, 26).

The “blinding blast of light” that strikes Nicolas “full tilt” in Bologna is obnoxious compared to the “still pale pearly, limpid northern” light of the Baltic domain, full of “silence and clouds” (*DC*, 45). Indoors, away from intense Mediterranean luminosity, a more pleasing light may be found in “a cool blue high-ceilinged lavish room” (*DC*, 53). Such blueness does not point to transcendence or otherworldly abstractness but is rather the field of reception for a sense of “unspeakable secrets” whose “intolerable” inner intensity almost requires “billows of pale pearly light” in order to half-materialise (*DC*, 54). In such southern aerial blueness, the breeze that “stirred the silken drapes of the windows” is analogous to a Baltic wind moving the sails of a ship (*DC*, 54)—a process in which air must not cleave but affirmatively fill. The divisive, harsh negativity of Nicolas’s disbelieving northern soul shies away from a blueness analogous to itself (equally negative, cruel, piercing, abstract, and deadly), preferring a substantial blueness whose manifestation does not negate, rend, differ, kill, or bury.

The “saving air” of such an elemental substance is first seriously intuited in Padua (*DC*, 66). Here Nicolas discovers the aerodynamics in which air is solidified into something more urgent than life. It waits for the moment in which its aeriality buoys itself up as release.

Those first months in Padua were strange. He was neither happy nor sad, *nor much of anything*: he was neutral. Life *flowed* over him, and *under the wave* he waited, for what he did not know, unless it was rescue....It was in the faculty of medicine...that he *surfaced* at last, like a spent swimmer *flying upward into light*, in whose aching lungs *the saving air* blossoms like a great dazzling yellow flower. (*DC*, 66; emphasis added)

Like a pocket of air, “nor much of anything” is a nothing that has life and inner momentum. Air’s directedness is an upwardness because of its lightness. The lifting might be seen as ascension (“flying upward into light”). Yet it does not mark transcendence from the worldly to the otherworldly. The upwardness terminates in and as life—not in heaven, but at the water’s surface. The element embedded in the “spent swimmer” is air moving upward towards air—but when these two meet, as air meeting air, we have not transcended life but rejoined it. The coinciding of upwardness with itself here points to a lightweight nothingness whose life-inside-life has to swim through the burden of existence in order to give life a chance of believable self-continuation. The lines hinge on the use of the word ‘flying’ instead of ‘swimming’: “*flying* upward into light” (*DC*, 66; emphasis added) rather than ‘swimming upward into light.’ The word “flying” accurately depicts the wing-like arm-motion that defines up-to-surface motion in deep water. More importantly the word “flying” deprives the lines of simplistic binaries such as: down–up, earth–sky, water–air, worldly–otherworldly. On the one hand,

it is air, and not water, that has the initiative; there is a “flying” and not a swimming. On the other hand the “flying” occurs beneath air. Beneath air, air flies. The beneath-air is not world but air. The “dazzling yellow flower” made possible by this arrangement blossoms in a non-celestial deworlding.

The reviewed phenomenon belongs to a bundle of affective intensities that leave Nicolas “suddenly beset out of the blue” (*DC*, 56), marooned in a disconcerting vacuity where ‘blue,’ ‘air,’ and ‘nothing’ configure something evasive but important at the core of the text. Nicolas professes himself to be one who believes in no mystical transcendence added to the realm of science; as a young man he asserts his faith “in mathematics...nothing more” (*DC*, 56); towards the end of the narrative he neither believes in science nor in truth (*DC*, 207, 209). Yet the nothing that constantly and elusively calls him in the pages of *Doctor Copernicus* is hardly the void posited by modern nihilism or postmodern relativism.

I have started to outline the difference between some stereotypically hypostatised ‘Copernican nihilism’ and the actual Koppernigkan nihilism that comes to givenness in the text. To be sure, Copernicus introduces the chilly terrains of collapsed faith. Yet the ‘nothing’ foregrounded by the text sketches an affirmatively *substantial* dimension of reality. *Doctor Copernicus* frequently communicates the sense of reality-renewal rather than—as might be expected—a mere sense of universal loss.<sup>41</sup>

### 3. Nameless Elation

*Doctor Copernicus* is not reducible to a simplistic binary that would polarise the old world of faith, redemption, and resurrection vis-à-vis the new, destitute world marked by a loss of presence. In the swimming-passage just reviewed, ecstatic upwardness was no ascent into the otherworldly. Nicolas is not primarily torn between visions of the ‘soul flying upward’ and visions of a cosmic emptiness. Instead there is a *tertium quid* in which these affects are part of a ‘nameless elation.’ The sense of “redemption” and the sense of loss do not contradict so much as reinforce each other (*DC*, 56). In *Doctor*

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<sup>41</sup> In “Science, Art and the Shipwreck of Knowledge,” Tony E. Jackson draws on Nietzschean nihilism, presenting a postmodernist posture as a possible way out of the maze of relativised and relativising truth. He claims that Nietzsche showed “the unsustainability of certain *kinds* of truth, namely those that present themselves as entirely self-consistent, eternal, changeless, outside of history and desire” (511). Jackson’s take is that *Doctor Copernicus* provides an escape from this paralysing situation through the failure of the Socratic epistemological quest, which is followed by a passive acceptance of art as protection and remedy (516). One would have to disagree with this account by acknowledging a move in Banville beyond postmodernism—a move that re-attaches itself to pre-Copernican insights that have to do with intentionality, substance, and truth of an *entirely* premodern kind. The secondary nihilism I am highlighting does not involve will or desire. It is nihilism taken to a point of paradox where it encounters its own void as “the unadorned, the stony thing” (*DC*, 110). This ‘thing’ is substance rather than object. *Doctor Copernicus* continuously makes manifest precisely the kind of truth that Jackson’s Nietzschean reading rejects.

*Copernicus*, air operates neither hierarchically–metaphysically nor horizontally–nihilistically. Felt air pulsates in a reality *which itself is felt air*. Air is in air rather than in cosmos or in play. Air does not belong to a system of coordinates and intersecting axes. It overthrows being-above, being-below, and being-within. *Under the wave* where the subject waits for surfacing, the gift of “saving air” is “light” (DC, 66). Down is air. Up is air. *Going up* is air. *Waiting* down-under is air. The familiar order of one-thing-atop-another is aerially disarranged by air’s ability to be the thing it tops.

Airborne, a cloud is “a ship in air” (DC, 38). Like many things *in* air, the cloud *is* air and has aerial substance. Being-airborne is a property of surface-transcending entities such as clouds but also of the surfaces below: “the city today seemed somehow *airborne*, an intricate aetherial thing of rods and glass *flying* in sunlight through pale blue space” (DC, 30; emphasis added). Even that which is not air is air. A cloud’s being-airborne points to the intriguing substantiality of air: that it has enough substance to keep vapour afloat, to be distinct from itself as air floated on air.

In the snow scene reviewed above, Nicolas felt that “the tower itself seemed on the point of flight” (DC, 25). The tending upwards is also a tending towards air. When he feels “the stinging air” as a momentary thickening of airy presence, he does not recoil into his mind but senses that he might continue to flow upwards “effortlessly,” so as to become the substantial almost-nothing that everywhere manifests its affective power (DC, 25).

This sense that air is at once thicker and thinner than itself is reinforced by the phenomenon of sound. In Bologna, the “bells of San Pietro began to ring, a great bronze booming high in the air, and flocks of pigeons blossomed into the blue above the golden domes” (DC, 49). The materialisation of *sounds* and the materialisation of substantially physical entities co-materialise a world of interlacing substances. The “booming” is a bronze substance alchemically close to the copperiness of the text’s equally metallic copper/nic motif. The booming-qua-blossoming (“blossomed into the blue”) anticipates the “great dazzling yellow flower” which, we saw, “blossoms” for the spent but flying swimmer whose simultaneously air-filled and air-deprived body ached for the “saving air” (DC, 66). The sounds of the evening piazzas “loud with birds” belong to an aerospace of “secret significances” (DC, 71), to a world where “weird cries filled the air” (DC, 60).

Lustrous bluenesses of aerial sun-gold express a “third something” (DC, 101), a *tertium quid* that defies the old centric cosmos as well as the new displaced void that seemingly has taken its place. The meteorology of *Doctor Copernicus* is not naturalistically comprehensible; it is the prime field on which something bright, unknown, and intriguing is constantly being at once unfolded and veiled, promised and withdrawn, intimated and kept secret. Towards the end, when Nicolas speaks to himself through the voice of his brother Andreas, this brightness is revealed to be

the thing itself, *the vivid thing*, which is not to be found in any book, nor in the firmament, nor in the absolute forms. *You know what I mean*, brother. It is that thing, passionate and yet calm, fierce and coming from far away, fabulous and yet ordinary, that thing which is all that matters, which is the great miracle. (*DC*, 241; emphasis added).

Not an absolute, this thing is not relative either, not the absolute's antithesis. The absolute–relative axis has been rendered dysfunctional. “The vivid thing” is not thinkable in terms of ‘either-or.’ It is not graspable from the perspective that a fundamentally dichotomous ontology implies; namely the viewpoint that reality can be bisected into two mechanically polarised hemispheres: the worldly and the otherworldly, the real and the imagined, matter and mind, the physical and the mental, the bodily and the intellectual. “I have lived” Andreas at one time cries to his brother, implying that Nicolas, in contrast, is “dead from the neck down” (*DC*, 101). But this apparent choice between the bodily joys of the pleasure-seeking man and the supposed pleasure-sacrifice of the devoted scientist is false, purely theoretic. In *Doctor Copernicus* there is no banal victory of the Dionysian over the Apollonian.<sup>42</sup> Such a schematisation is constantly belied by the “third something” that momentarily keeps flashing its perplexing light. The *tertium quid* breaks up the apparently unproblematic dialectical symmetry of perceiver and perceived, of “the object and the emotion” (*DC*, 101).

The “third something” is the stuff and mode of discovery—even when the *content* of discovery is reversal. Reversal of the earth/sun hierarchy occurs in a light that is not *itself* the luminosity of a heliocentric or geocentric order. Even metaphoric light is irreducible to the thing it metaphorises.

The wind was high. Rain beat upon the window. He rose in the dawning grey gloom and lifted aside the drapes. Clouds were breaking to the east over a sullen waterscape. Calmly then it came, the solution, like a magnificent great slow golden bird alighting in his head with a thrumming of vast wings. It was so simple, so ravishingly simple, that at first he did not recognise it for what it was. (*DC*, 84)

In *Doctor Copernicus* the clarity or simplicity of such ravishments is deceptive. The “ravishing thing assembling itself out of blocks of glassy air” (*DC*, 19) is “ravishingly simple” in its arrival (*DC*, 84), but being the witness of that arrival is not something simple. Witnessing implies discovery of a deeply embedded receptivity to that kind of arrival. The “thrumming of vast

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<sup>42</sup> Krystyna Wilkoszewska claims that the return to the elements in art is a reaction to “the destruction of matter by spiritual power” (*AFE*, 382). As *tertium quid*, air in the tetralogy obstructs such a one-sided reversal.

wings” (*DC*, 84) resuscitates the “coppery chord of perfect bliss” that “thrummed within” Nicolas as a young student (*DC*, 19). The coming of the “great slow golden bird” is phenomenologically analogous to the submerged breather previously seen moving into the “great dazzling yellow flower” of new air (*DC*, 66).

#### 4. Pneumatic Self

As indicated above, the possibility of truth-arrival is a phenomenon of crucial importance in *Doctor Copernicus*. In one way or another such arrivals are almost always choreographed by the intricate phenomenology of air. Discussing the Apostle Paul, Alain Badiou distinguishes between fundamental concepts structuring the subject’s basic possibilities: “*pistis* (faith) and *ergon* (work); *kharis* (grace) and *nomos* (law). The subjective path of the flesh (*sarx*), whose real is death, coordinates the pairing of law and works. While the path of the spirit (*pneuma*), whose real is life, coordinates that of grace and faith” (*SP*, 75).<sup>43</sup> In *Doctor Copernicus*, air as *pneuma* is not chosen but rather itself solicits the subject. As part and parcel of *evental* truth-arrival,<sup>44</sup> air stands apart from law (signs), wisdom (science), and works (good deeds). As a subject Nicolas is not ultimately defined by language, knowledge, or works, but by air. By coming to givenness to the side of the sign (of law) and to the side of the subject’s submission to it, *pneuma* furnishes grace. Epistemological failure opens up a pneumatic field rather than a chaos of frustrating mundanity. In the tetralogy, the recurring situations of linguistic inhibition do not merely indicate an exasperating inability, but also set themselves up as thresholds signalling the predetermined efficacy of release. As we shall see, that which resists the sign is still a form of disclosure, i.e. the disclosure of that very resistance.

Substance has always already materialised in *Doctor Copernicus*, yet as substance air constantly retains something of its elusively intangible nothingness. As we have seen, the novel’s opening paragraph, usually quoted to draw attention to the ‘problem’ of language, in fact establishes the presence of air.

At first it had no name. It was the thing itself, the vivid thing. It was his friend. On windy days it danced, demented, waving wild arms, or in the silence of evening drowsed and dreamed, swaying in the blue, the golden air. Even at night it did not go away. Wrapped in his truckle

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<sup>43</sup> *Pneuma* is spirit as well as air (wind, breath), *OED* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., s.v. “Pneuma.” For Badiou, the Pauline “opposition between spirit and flesh has nothing to do with the opposition between the soul and the body” (*SP*, 55-56).

<sup>44</sup> That which is “evental” has its source-point in an event strong enough to put subjectivity (the subject) out of authority as constituting source of the world (*SP*, 45). For Badiou, this state of affairs is not confined to religious life but is general.

bed, he could hear it stirring darkly outside in the dark, all the long night long...it, steadfast and aloof, belonged to the mysterious outside, to the wind and the weather and the golden blue air. It was part of the world, and yet it was his friend. (*DC*, 3)

The vivid thing is typically hypostatized as being the tree in pre-predicative innocence. Its waving reality is part of the world, yet it is close to Nicolas. Various critics have argued that language progressively divorces Nicolas from such intimacy. Allegedly, the introduction of the name 'tree' alongside its other name, 'the linden,' provides Nicolas with an insight into the referential arbitrariness of signifying systems.<sup>45</sup> Thereby he is supposed to sense the chasm between 'self' and 'world' for the first time. I prefer to read the lines in terms of air's intriguing efficacy. Phenomenologically speaking, air is not a cause behind that which is "stirring darkly." Air is the "mysterious outside" as such, the tree being the moving outline of *its* vivid substantiation. Gaston Bachelard speaks of trees as joining air in a "slow-moving, and invincible upthrust," an intimation of "a conquest of lightness and the creation of flying things—aerial, rustling leaves" (*AD*, 207). The tree adumbrates the radical, original aseity of air.

Contingency is a threat to epistemological man. While appearing as flow and change, air might seem to fall exclusively into that category. But the textual intricacy resists such a construal. Nicolas ponders the potential fixity that the sign 'tree' carries with it: "Tree. That was its name....In wind, in silence, at night, in *the changing air*, it changed and yet was changelessly the tree, the linden tree. That was strange" (*DC*, 3; emphasis added). What is even more perplexing is that air remains untouched by the divorce separating Nicolas from the world. It evades sign-fixity as well as linguistic free-play. While occurring in flux, air is nevertheless established as a *presence* to the side of the sign-versus-object structure. Air is too primitive, too penurious, and too much taken for granted to qualify as an epistemological object worthy of linguistic permutation. Yet it is surreptitiously 'known' or 'felt,' while retaining an irreducible aseity.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> See McMinn, *SF*, 49; Hand, *EF*, 75; Imhof, *CI*, 79; Berensmeyer, *FO*, 133.

<sup>46</sup> Aseity is not to be confused with complete alterity. The sense of irreducible individuation is related to the phenomenon of transcendence-in-immanence, i.e. of the fact that any object retains an excess of potential givenness. This excess is never fully exhausted. There is no phenomenological closure but structural openness. Yet this does not exclude an immediate and full givenness of any act-moment in the overall surge of the flux, i.e. the possibility of truth-arrival. As Damian Byers puts it, the "principle of the synthesis of identification does not reside or come from 'outside' the field of intentionality...it cannot be seen in any way to 'represent' the being or ruling power of a noumenal entity, existing in itself over against consciousness" (*Intentionality and Transcendence*, 118). Even the arrival of utter unknowing (concerning an entity's whatness) is a phenomenological disclosure. Regarding the issue of alterity see also *ibid.*, 164-65. The term 'intentionality' is of course used in a technical, phenomenological sense here, and does not refer to any human intent.



In the very first two paragraphs of the narrative, the reader and the protagonist are exposed to air's stealthy allure. Stealthiness is paradigmatic in *Doctor Copernicus*. As a child, Nicolas listens to the sound of the river, to "a huge dark liquidy, faintly frightening rushing in the darkness that was felt not heard" (*DC*, 5). Cognately, the primacy of "the golden blue air" flows through him as substance rather than as a sign received by the intellect (*DC*, 3). Its elusiveness calls as consolation. To the side of his own burgeoning intellectual detachment from the world of pragmatic action, Copernicus is drawn to "the consolation of...the great bundles of steely light above the river," of "brass clouds in a high blue sky" (*DC*, 7). Air appears as a confluence of metallic substances. Nicolas's attunement to such convergences is defiant of any sense of personal selfhood, disobedient to anyone's claim on his identity.

As auto-affectivity, aseity is not reducible to the polarity of intellect versus emotion, of rational discourse versus lived experience. Something else is taking place, manifest already during the school years in Włocławek.

[H]e felt that he was living only half his life here...and that the other, better half was elsewhere, mysteriously. How otherwise to explain the small dull ache within him always, the ache that a severed limb leaves throbbing like an imprint *of itself* upon the emptiness dangling from the stump? (*DC*, 16-17; emphasis added)

The analogy of phantom pain is apt, indicating an autonomous region that goes on being substantially real, known, and living in defiance of totality as well as loss. The imprint of emptiness is not left by a void. The "elsewhere" comes to "mysteriously" manifest itself as *thereness* in emptiness. Almost a self, emptiness's aseity materialises as a "phantom existence" which appears in moments as "intimations, in green April weather, in the enormous wreckage of clouds, or in the aetherial splendours of High Mass" (*DC*, 17). The felt aseity is not a Copernican alter ego, not some emotionally living Copernicus dialectically opposing the detached intellectual scientist. The auto-affectivity of the third nameless "mysterious self" that eludes him always (*DC*, 65) as "essential self" (*DC*, 92) is receptive to "white clouds and dusty golden light" (*DC*, 14), to "bluish gloom" (*DC*, 67), to "sunlight and stillness, those pencil-lines of blue smoke rising unruffled into the paler blue" (*DC*, 119). The felt void is *personal* enough to be substance. The golden blue aerosphere billows freely, yet its autonomy flows without obeying the protagonist's will. Auto-affectivity occurs in the text as a meandering of substance through substance, of golden light through golden blueness, and of this blueness through itself as air.

Nicolas's averse attitude towards the world is augmented by his scholarly activity, terminating in the alienation that predictably comes to be thematised as the scholar's presumed nihilism. But scholarly detachment

simultaneously opens up another distance materialising in terms of a peculiar nearness.

Scholarship transformed into docile order the hideous clamour and chaos of the world outside himself, *endistanced it and at the same time brought it palpably near*, so that, as he grappled with the terrors of the world, he was terrified and yet also miraculously tranquil. (*DC*, 28; emphasis added)

The reduction of world-chaos does not eliminate fear, yet objects of dread come to givenness as tranquillity. Here nihilism is not loss or absolute nothingness. The tranquil miracle indicates the intensification of a refined attunement to the world in which Nicolas inevitably is always already immersed. A certain part of him sharpens its receptivity to the possibility of an intraworldly arrival that in its affirmation is not incompatible with fear. Like tranquillity and fear, the near and the “endistanced” break up the conventional sense of space and feeling as governed by reassuring normality.<sup>47</sup> The breakup or reduction uncovers a profound emptiness, yet a singular “thin taut cord” is present in that void as a “steely” substance ensuring the victory or survival of something intrinsically and indestructibly substantial.

[T]here *was* something about Canon Koppernigk—all saw it...a certain lack, a transparency, as it were, that was more than the natural aloofness and other-worldliness of a brilliant scientist. It was as if, within the vigorous and able public man, there was a void, as if, behind the ritual, all was a hollow save for one thin taut cord of steely inexpressible anguish stretching across the emptiness. (*DC*, 132)

Notice that the special “something” does not belong to “other-worldliness.” Nor is it a simplistic instantiation of “aloofness,” compatible with a down-up axis, fixating Nicolas in the idealist realm.<sup>48</sup> Anguish is substance, steel. The “transparency,” “void,” or “lack” is not insubstantial but metallic. In its autonomy the cord spans and gathers “the steely light” and the “brass clouds” of the “high blue sky” (*DC*, 7). The cord has neither beginning nor end, yet is an elusive presence. It vibrates tautly in its aseity.

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<sup>47</sup> Cf. Heidegger’s concept of de-distancing [*Ent-fernung*] (*BT*, 97-105). In *Doctor Copernicus* de-distancing promotes a drift towards a reduction of the three-dimensional world-space of the natural attitude. But the directionality of Heideggerian de-distancing is grounded in being-in-the-world (*BT*, 101) as governed by the teleology of care (*BT*, 171). In *Doctor Copernicus*, de-distancing denotes a bringing-near of a substance always already present in its elusiveness. Attunement emanates from substantiation itself, regardless of the directedness of existential ‘care.’

<sup>48</sup> This is in fact suggested by Imhof, who contends that Copernicus “remains aloof in matters scientific as well as human” (*CI*, 106).



Together in Padua, Fracastoro and Nicolas suddenly find themselves overwhelmed by the morning light.

Cascades of bright mad music drenched *the dark air*. Coming out at the other end they found themselves abruptly in a deserted square. The sky was of a deep illyrian blue, lightening rapidly now to the east, and the towers of the city were tipped with gold. (*DC*, 68; emphasis added)

Air, light, and water converge in intersections of palpable substantiation. Air solidifies by means of transparent or opaque substances. “Greenish rainlight draped them about” (*DC*, 82). A candelabrum sheds “a brownish underwater light” (*DC*, 107). “[W]ashes of sunlight” sweep through the streets (*DC*, 26). The text plays with solids and solidifications. The twilight appears as “leaden” (*DC*, 167). The sky is “sulphurous” (*DC*, 42). Light is “furry” (*DC*, 102).

In the dawn witnessed by Nicolas and Fracastoro, air, blue, and gold materialise in a positionless substance-stratum. Abruptness maintains the moment in letting it pass. Such a momentary shimmer does not form a clearly objectified memory but is nevertheless retained as something worthwhile and intact. In Fracastoro’s temporary home the arched windows frame “a triptych of the *airy* architecture of St Anthony’s *soaring motionless* against an immaculate blue sky” (*DC*, 69; emphasis added). Deprived of motion, the soaring does not move vertically along a down–up axis, for it does not move at all. Lacking motion, the *motion* of an upwardness is airborne in a suspension of directedness directing us to that which is serene, immobile, and static. Soaring is a sufficiency, a certainty of air in itself.

Air’s self-sufficiency goes hand in hand with a strong sense of presence. This state of affairs is emphasised in textual loci where the subject encounters the elusive element with an aggressive and acquisitive attitude. When Bishop Lucas beats “the air with his fists” (*DC*, 38),<sup>49</sup> or sketches “a hasty blessing on the air” (*DC*, 96), air remains intact by means of a flexing passivity that renders it unassailable. The act of dividing air from itself is implicitly futile: “His cloak, flying out behind him, sliced the air ruthlessly” (*DC*, 13). Air closes around the vehement slashing, self-healing in its furtive motility. Violent corporeal movement is neutralised by a seemingly indifferent atmospheric nothingness: “The flurry of air he had left behind him in the hall subsided” (*DC*, 13).

Air’s self-enclosing propensity indicates its autonomy. It cannot position itself on any absence–presence continuum. When Nicolas and his brother visit Professor Brudzewski and his mysterious, supposedly mad daughter, they glimpse while passing through a door “a smiling girl in a

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<sup>49</sup> The biblical tone is striking here. Cf. 1 Cor. 9:26: “So I do not run aimlessly; I do not box as one beating the air” (English Standard Version). Bishop Lucas—primarily a man of power and politics—is rendered quite powerless vis-à-vis air as elemental ambience and force.

green gown going out by another, leaving behind her *trembling on the bright air* an image of blurred beauty” (DC, 31; emphasis added). That which air has given lingers in a penumbra of fleeting disclosure. The brief vision belongs to the realm of air itself rather than to the youngsters witnessing the bewildering phenomenon.

The penumbral, flexing-unflexing subsistence of air has its counterpart in Nicolas himself. His powerlessness too is a buoying rather than ineffectual passivity. Revisiting his childhood garden, he is attracted to something that, like the discoveries he makes, is airily internal to him, yet utterly foreign, self-enclosed, and strange: “A faint, sweetish, not altogether unpleasant tang of nightsoil *laced the air*....An extraordinary stealthy stillness reigned, as if an event of great significance were waiting for him to be gone so that it could occur in perfect solitude” (DC, 118-19; emphasis added). The substantiated stillness waits “for him to be *gone*,” but it also waits “for *him* to be gone.” In *Doctor Copernicus*, air always waits for Copernicus. It is when he is absent, “gone,” that his attunement is most alert and receptive. The “stealthy stillness” provides almost nothing, yet this nothing is seemingly on the verge of revealing something of “great significance.” Its “perfect solitude” amplifies a peculiar tenseness appearing as soothing tranquillity. The “event” is distinct from Nicolas, but also vital to him in some strange way. Reality is most intense in a ‘nowhere’ that, like air, is always hauntingly close without ever belonging to the subject as a possession.<sup>50</sup>

Nicolas’s syphilitic brother Andreas is real reality in precisely this haunting sense: “His coming had contaminated the castle, and some malign part of his presence persisted, a desolation, *a blackening of the air*” (DC, 104; emphasis added). The blackening of the air is an eclipsing of spatial position. Air is bruised, yet the bruise-mark itself is air. In Bishop Lucas’s library “[n]ervous petty officials summoned...over the years had left their mark *on the air*, a vague mute sense of distress and guilt and failure” (DC, 107; emphasis added). The “mark” marks a position—the very word ensures this, but the position occurs in a generalised positionlessness. Air is this positionlessness that makes manifest affective threads occurring in radical disobedience to naturalist spatio-temporality. Andreas is gone, yet his presence is felt as air. The officials are long gone, yet their presence is felt as

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<sup>50</sup> In Badiou’s reading of Pauline pneumatology, the pneumatic typically makes itself known in irrational ways. But this does not mean that the subject is exposed to a haphazard play of differences. It is rather the case that differences “carry” the one who is called by forces exceeding subjectivity (SP, 106). Copernicus is not primarily defined negatively in terms of what he is not. Instead he is affirmatively defined by the nothingness of air. Badiou also comments that what “founds a subject cannot be what is due to it” (SP, 77). It is in the lack of self-awareness and of control that the airy subject may be constituted. This possibility is not taken but given without a cause. “If a truth is to surge forth eventually, it must be nondenumerable, unpredictable, uncontrollable” (SP, 76). The situation that I am elucidating is causeless and uncontrollable. That which does not seem to reach full articulation is nevertheless disclosed to the subject in its inarticulateness.

air. The elusive element is both the nothing that facilitates the appearance of such strange affective patterns and the self-substantiating element that rules out the sense of meaningless nothingness.

Not even holes in the air indicate an overall loss of substance and meaning. When, overwhelmed by the intrusive world demanding action, Nicolas stands “paralyzed, staring aghast into a black hole in the air” (*DC*, 28), that cavity is not a pale zero but a *black* hole; not an anaemic nothingness lacking substance but a substantially murky negativity. Blackness fills the hole as a blackening of air, as pure dark aseity repelling the interference of light. Another hole in air appears in Rheticus’s account of his journey with Copernicus over the Prussian plain to Löbau Castle. The event is permeated by loss and nothingness.

Strange silence spread for miles about us, as if everything were somehow turned away, facing off into the limitless distance, and the muted clamour of our passage—creak of axles, monotonous thudding of hoofs—could not avail against that impassive quiet, that indifference. We met not a soul on the road, if road it could be called, but once far in the distance, a band of horsemen appeared, galloping laboriously away, soundlessly. Through the narrow slit opposite me I could see the driver’s broad back bouncing and rolling, but as the hours crawled past it ceased to be a human form, and became a stone, a pillar of dust, the wing of some great bird. We passed through deserted villages where the houses were charred shells and dust blew in the streets, and the absence of human concourse was like a hole in the air itself. (*DC*, 168-69)

Sounds are strangely sucked towards the impassively indifferent silence, into which horsemen disappear silently like nothingness into nothingness. Rheticus’s account has an eerie glow, an intimation of unknowing.

As almost palpable presence, a substantial unknowing in the emptiness endows the journey with an uncanny aura. The plain is hardly a representation of nothingness, for what is absent is present in its absence. Loss of human form substantiates itself as “a pillar of dust;” the loss of world is *dust* blowing in the streets. A “wing of some great bird” provides possible ascension into air. A substantial haunting seeps through the atmosphere, filling the hole in the air with “strange brittle sunlight,” the wind singing softly (*DC*, 169). The lurch into nothingness is a journey into a dust–light–wind substance. For Rheticus, this triunity seems to bring out the truth in Copernicus, his indwelling reality.

And for the first time then I saw him whole, no longer the image of him I had carried with me from Wittenberg, but Copernicus himself—*itself*—the true thing, a cold brilliant object like a diamond (not really like a diamond, but I am in a hurry), now all at once vividly familiar and yet untouchable still. It is not vouchsafed to many men to know another

thus, with that awful clarity; when it comes, the vision is fleeting, the experience lasts only an instant, but the knowledge gleaned thereby remains forever. (*DC*, 169)

The moment of lucidity is an “awful” clarity, resuscitating “the faintly frightening certainties” of Nicolas’s adolescent ruminations (*DC*, 19). The true thing is Copernicus himself, a thing in and of “*itself*.” What Rheticus momentarily and primarily perceives is neither an otherworldly Copernicus lost in contemplations of Platonic essences, nor the living man caught up in a manifestly corporeal life-stream. What is shown is an *it*, an autonomous “cold brilliant object.” Its indeterminacy (“not really like a diamond”) preserves it as neutrality—pure substance. The journey harbours secrecy. Vainly seeking transparency, Rheticus reaches for a closure: “I waited for the Canon to acknowledge all that had happened on the plain (whatever it was!), but he did not, would not, and I was disappointed” (*DC*, 169). The “fleeting” moment that is retained “forever” makes manifest a level whose elusive strangeness borders on absurdity.

Aseity, substance, and loss of world go affirmatively hand in hand. Nicolas’s detachment from mundane existence is not necessarily an escape into the ideal sphere of scientific thought, nor necessarily a retreat into an absolute nothingness of despair. Early in his life he sensed that “a part of him detached itself and floated free, out into the blue and golden air” (*DC*, 14). Verging on self-annihilation, world-reduction is an intensely felt attunement to air. Such obliteration does not indicate a transition to some otherworldly realm. Towards the end of his life, suffering from the aftermaths of a stroke, Nicolas wakes up into air.

Swiftly then he felt himself borne upwards, aching upwards *into the world*, and here was his cell, and dawnlight on the great arc of the Baltic....All round about him a vast chill stillness reigned, as if he were poised at an immense height, in *an infinity of air*. (*DC*, 230; emphasis added)

To be “borne” upwards here is to be given over to the power of something that is distinct from the world but not separate from it. The world is expanded—almost expelled—from itself, so that leaving it, even in an upward direction, is joining it more forcefully. As in the case of the suffocating swimmer discussed some time ago, ascension terminates in light and air. By the “steel-blue” Baltic Sea (*DC*, 237), a chilly stillness is strangely comforting. Air’s “infinity” is not its otherworldliness but its aseity. The chillness recalls Nicolas’s youthful ascension towards “rarer and rarer heights of chill bright air” (*DC*, 12), his urge as a student to “bathe his feverishly spinning brain in the chill dark air” (*DC*, 67).

## 5. Fear

I now finalise my remarks on *Doctor Copernicus* by turning to the questions of suffering, unbelief, void-affectivity, and truth-arrival. Joseph McMinn suggests that for Nicolas's brother Andreas "suffering has become a means of knowledge which [Nicolas] is looking for, but in the wrong places" (*SF*, 54). In *Doctor Copernicus*, Andreas's suffering materialises as a palpably physical agony in which his body quite literally falls apart in lumps of putrefying flesh. McMinn's statement implies that Nicolas does not suffer, at least not to the same degree, and thereby he is assumed to lack access to a more fundamental "knowledge" of life. This is not the case. Having witnessed rape and murder on his journey to Italy, Nicolas is acquainted with the horror of pain, as indeed with the horror of its absence.

At night he was plagued by dreams whose *sombre afterglow* contaminated his waking hours, hung about him like *a darkening of the air*. He began to detect in everything signs of secret life, in flowers, mountain grasses, the very stones underfoot, all living, all somehow in agony....It was not the suffering of the maimed and dead that pained him, but the very absence of that pain...remembering, he felt nothing, nothing, and this emptiness horrified him. (*DC*, 44; emphasis added)

The affective impact of the dream lingers as an "afterglow" enveloping the subject as "air." The experience of pain has given way to its absence, but this negativity is already consubstantial with an *other* agony, one that is indistinguishable from feeling as such.<sup>51</sup> Nicolas's ascetic nihilism makes manifest a clearing in which a primordial, causeless suffering comes to view. This root-pain is as inescapable as the overtly exhibited torment that Andreas lives through as his body progressively disintegrates.

The apparent lack of feeling is actually the felt "emptiness" of the void's *feeling*. Such an affective shift has theological overtones. Suddenly one day Copernicus senses that God abandons him: "The thing was distinguished by a lack of feeling, a numbness. And it was strange: his faith in the Church did not waver, only his faith in God...behind the ritual there was for him now only a silent *white void* that was everywhere and everything and eternal" (*DC*, 115; emphasis added). The lack of feeling and the lack of God converge to form a vast supervoid recalling the affective terrain of snow's "*white emptiness*" (*DC*, 25; emphasis added). As in the case of the snow-fall, absence taking the form of substance comes to givenness as the materialisation of presence. Nicolas may maintain or lose faith in God, yet the godhead's dissolution into insubstantiality does not

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<sup>51</sup> Michel Henry discusses suffering as root-affect. Feeling is "the gift which cannot be refused," "the arrival of that which cannot be sloughed off" (*EM*, 475). The phenomenality of suffering, as feeling arriving in feeling, is indistinguishable from affective intensity as such. Copernicus cannot not suffer, not even when he is numb.

interfere with a sense of divine substance, since emptiness itself takes that role. In *Doctor Copernicus*, fear of emptiness is not reducible to the general *horror vacui* of Aristotelian physics. Fear is instead consubstantial with the irreducibility of substance itself in its autonomy.

As life taken to its affective limit, the surging of primordial suffering is on a par with agony as negative elation. We have considered the “faintly frightening certainties” attending the “glassy blocks of air” appearing to Nicolas as a young pupil in Włocławek (*DC*, 19). That airy manifestation was accompanied by the co-affect of a “perfect bliss” (*DC*, 19).<sup>52</sup> At the school in Włocławek he also watches Canon Caspar Sturm’s falconry. Nicolas’s fear is strangely mingled with excitement.

The hawks, terrible and lovely, filled the *sunny air* with the clamour of tiny deaths. Nicolas looked on in a mixture of horror and *elation*. Such icy rage, such intentness frightened him, yet thrilled him too. The birds shot into the kill like bolts from a bow, driven it seemed by a seeled *steely anguish* that nothing would assuage. Compared with their vivid *presence* all else was vague and insubstantial. They were *absolutes*. (*DC*, 23; emphasis added)

The “sunny air” is a domain of substantial exaltation. It encompasses and encloses the winged, airborne deaths. Subsequently it follows Nicolas into the immediately succeeding nightmare in which a heron falls “out of the air” (*DC*, 24). The paragraph following the falconry scene begins without any indication of the fact that the text-flow slides into Nicolas’s dream. The textually smooth transition from wakefulness to dreaming is facilitated by air’s manifest presence in both dimensions of consciousness. From the viewpoint of air there is no chasm but only flow. What needs special attention here is the joint appearance of “vividness” and death. In *Doctor Copernicus*, truth is nothing abstract, but comes with a force that involves fear on the subject’s part. Death as an absolute intensifies the sense of life as an absolute. In terms of the carrying elation, being-towards-death is also a being-towards-life.<sup>53</sup> The poignancy of the falconry scene is reinforced if

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<sup>52</sup> Michel Henry points out that suffering and joy conjointly make up a primal coherence that is no “abstract unity” (*EM*, 662). Their proximity is not a causal relation, nor a mental analogy. “Joy...does not come...after the arrival of what comes, as a sort of amazement when confronted by it,” but is like suffering “an ontological structure,” a “mode” (*EM*, 661).

<sup>53</sup> In his dissertation, Bo Lundén investigates *Doctor Copernicus* in terms of its didactic aspects. In his view, Banville’s text teaches the reader that poststructuralist theory “tends to suppress mysticism” (“(Re)educating the Reader,” 58). According to Lundén, Copernicus undergoes an educative process through which he first learns that the postulation of a transcendental signified is untenable, but also that he subsequently is compelled to live through the devastating consequences of the loss of such a possibility. Lundén claims that there is a poststructuralist process of displacement going on in the narrative involving the binaries death–life and presence–absence. He stresses that Copernicus as a child regards his mother’s death as a vivid presence, but that he later in the novel perceives his uncle’s death as an absolute absence that “resists transcendence” (*ibid.*, 59). In Lundén’s view, Copernicus



contrasted with a previous episode featuring Canon Wodka's disquisition on the matter of Zeno's arrow. It "will never traverse the 100 ells that separate the target from the bow because first it must fly 50 ells, and before that 25, and before that 12½, and so on to infinity, where it comes to a disgruntled kind of halt" (*DC*, 21). Such mathematical prevarication is vividly refuted by the substantially evident trajectories of the birds of prey. They are "absolutes" and "bolts from a bow" that "shoot" into the targets with uncanny precision. Whether categorised as scientific or otherwise, the phenomenalisation of truth-arrival is in *Doctor Copernicus* an awesome redemption from every abyssal ontology.<sup>54</sup>

The nightmare succeeding the falconry scene is followed by a masturbation in which Nicolas's empty "inner sky" is "of a clear and immaculate blue" (*DC*, 24). As we have seen, this "immaculate blue" materialises in Padua as the seemingly external field illuminating St Anthony's motionless soaring (*DC*, 69). The ecstatic self-loss during orgasm—in which Nicolas's self shrinks "into a tiny throbbing point" (*DC*, 24)—does not take on the quality of nothingness but of an aerial blueness that is neither internal nor external. In *Doctor Copernicus*, blue air is a substance that holds sway.

Being the element that makes possible the overriding affectivity of soaring and floating, air is decisive also in the final phases of the novel. The solution to Copernicus's scientific concerns comes as "a magnificent great slow golden bird" (*DC*, 84). It arrives "without his help or *knowledge*" (*DC*, 85; emphasis added). The leap is made "in the silence and utter emptiness of the blue" (*DC*, 85). Elke D'hoker tends to view such arrivals (revelations) as encounters with alterity: "The revelation is described as welling up from some subconscious realm, or even descending from a super-conscious one. The transcendent truth comes from the outside and merely enters the inspired individual. The metaphors with which these visitations are most powerfully expressed in Banville's novels are those of bird and angel" (*VA*, 56). As we have seen, however, this view is problematised by an ever ongoing breakup of the oppositions here–there, near–distant, and inner–outer. Typically in *Doctor Copernicus*, air is an element facilitating arrival.

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acquires a poststructuralist attitude only to discover its utter emptiness and mystical poverty. He concludes that it is the "mystical capacity in human beings themselves" that Nicolas forgets in his academic quest for truth (*ibid.*, 65). In its aerial configurations, however, that which is most intriguing in *Doctor Copernicus* does not have its source in the human being.

<sup>54</sup> In "Versions of Banville: Versions of Modernism," Joseph McMinn claims that the main protagonists of the tetralogy "eventually must concede" that the search for truth is "a vain folly," that there "is no single, universal truth," and "that the old absolutes about the human and divine order have been destroyed" (86). He goes on to assert that in "the place of the old securities comes a new, *disturbing* relativity, an *unsettling* arbitrariness about knowledge and meaning" (*ibid.*, 86; emphasis added). However, that which is most fundamentally disturbing and unsettling in *Doctor Copernicus* is not reducible to the workings of relativism or arbitrariness.

In a dream near the end of Copernicus's life, a "soft golden radiance [holds] sway everywhere" (*DC*, 228). He can "see the Baltic, steel-blue and calm, bearing landward a ship with a black sail" (*DC*, 225). The sail is filled with wind, with air; the ship moves in the steel-blue water. Nicolas suddenly wishes that "this burdensome clarity, this awareness" should be taken away from him (*DC*, 225). Fittingly, however, this wish only accentuates his powerlessness vis-à-vis the substance whose affects have ruled his life. Towards the end of the narrative, it is as if that which he has sought, 'the thing itself,' is approaching; but it brings along a strange exaltation which is indistinguishable from fear. As substance the approaching thing is not really spatially mobile but has been there all the time, almost as a static thing. It has been clandestinely known or felt—yet not as an epistemologically accessible object. The "great slow golden bird" whose arrival was the solution to Nicolas's scientific endeavour is transmuted into an analogous appearance.<sup>55</sup>

He had drifted down into a dreadful dark where all was silent and utterly still. He was frightened. He waited. After a long time, what seemed a long time, he saw at an immense distance a minute something in the darkness, it could not be called light, it was barely more than nothing, the absolute minimum imaginable, and he heard afar, faintly, O, faintly, a tiny shrieking, a grain of sound that was hardly anything in itself, that served only to define the infinite silence surrounding it. And then, it was strange, it was as if time had split somehow in two, as if the *now* and the *not yet* were both occurring at once, for he was conscious of watching something approaching through the dark distance while yet it had arrived, a huge steely shining bird it was, soaring on motionless outstretched great wings, terrible, O, terrible beyond words, and yet magnificent, carrying in its fearsome beak a fragment of blinding fire, and he tried to cry out, to utter the word, but in vain, for down the long arc of its flight the creature wheeled, already upon him even as it came, and branded the burning seal upon his brow. (*DC*, 229)

As in the case of the moment of scientific breakthrough, revelation is at hand. Being neither subconscious nor supraconscious, the arriving entity has already arrived. The near-distant dichotomy is radically suspended, accomplishing a shift of focus to the arrival itself. While retaining alienness, truth-arrival is nevertheless *not* an encounter with complete alterity, with something residing beyond as in-itselfness. The revelation as such is

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<sup>55</sup> In "The Search for Truth: The Fiction of John Banville," Francis C. Molloy argues that "birds return to haunt Copernicus on his death bed, showing thereby that he had been deluded into thinking that he could reveal Truth" (50). But the point is precisely that the revelation itself, as an arrival in its own right, comes to Copernicus *as* truth. That Nicolas cannot reveal truth as an epistemological object does not automatically imply that truth cannot be revealed to him.



absolute (“the absolute minimum”) yet not otherworldly. What approaches *has* already approached, and what has approached is pregnant with approaching. What is revealed is a substance—the “absolute minimum,” “a huge steely shining bird.” The disclosure is airy, “soaring” on “great wings.” It is negative (“terrible,” “fearsome,” “blinding,” “burning”), yet its negativity is sublime (“outstretched,” “magnificent,” “beyond words”). Like air, it is “barely more than nothing”—yet precisely this near-totalisation of penuriousness allows the “long arc” of the ultimate to materialise as “distance” and “grain” bent into motionless approaching. In *Doctor Copernicus*, such arrivals release themselves out of “the wind, out of huge blue air, sighing in the leaves of the linden” (*DC*, 242).



Plate 2. Alberto Giacometti. *L'homme qui chavire* (*Man Staggering*), 1950. Bronze, 60x14x22 cm. Kunsthau Zürich.

## SECTION II — KEPLER

### 6. The Flaw, the Pearl

Like *Doctor Copernicus* (1976) *Kepler* (1981) relies on the phenomenon of air to set up a poignant equivocation between substantiation and desubstantiation. My procedure will again neutralise the positing of naturalist substances such as ‘the real world,’ ‘the real Kepler,’ or ‘the author’s intention,’ so as to sight primary text-strata that rely directly on immanent networks of directed forces uncovering or dissolving substantiation in the work. I strive towards an exposition of the manner in which constitution works in *Kepler*.

From a phenomenological perspective we cannot get at the basic forces of the text by viewing them as constituted by certain pre-given substances, but must look at these substances as continuously *being* constituted. Such phenomenological constitution does not have an agent. Phenomenological intentionality has no pre-given author or subject, for these too are in the process of *being* constituted. It is only constitution itself that constitutes.

In *Kepler* air comes to givenness as constitution, as the pre-substantial prerequisite for substances. On a thematic level, this sense of air as prime source for all that is constituted materialises in terms of the scientist’s expectation that the pure space *between* the major objects of the astronomical universe should yield itself up as containing the scientific clue to the ultimate nature of reality. It is the “intervallic quantities” between the planetary orbits that count for Kepler, not the planets or the orbits as such (*K*, 36). Neither planet-substance nor orbit-substance counts as primary. These are constituted, not constituting. What is constituting rather than constituted is not a substance or thing but airiness. It is the quasi-substantial nothingness that occurs between the orbits that is Kepler’s primary topic.

The airy nothing is not something that merely occurs. It is *given*. This means that for Kepler the aerial interval between one orbit and the next is not a meaningless void that happens to be constituted by the planet-substances or the orbit-substances, but a feature of originary constitution. From the Keplerian viewpoint, there lies at the source of the universe a constituting power that we may rationalise in terms of mathematics, or that we may absolutise in terms of theology. It is the workings of this originating factor that Kepler’s efforts aim to elucidate. Groping in

nothingness, the scientist is actually already in his element, “helplessly enfolding hoops of empty air” (*K*, 65). The act of fathoming something that cannot be grasped simply by the observation of phenomena is quite different from the act of gathering positional information, which is a task performed by propaedeutic, pragmatic investigators such as Tycho Brahe.<sup>56</sup> While the Danish astronomer produces the data, the Swabian mathematician thinks himself into the constituting, substanceless, dataless airiness that is the condition of possibility for their givenness. Whereas Tycho Brahe mainly studies the given, Johannes Kepler researches the way in which the given comes to givenness. His world is the domain of laws, of constituting power.

Banville’s *Kepler* does not dichotomise the difference between the constituting and the constituted as some Platonic opposition between the invisible and the visible, or between the ideal and the real. Nor does the work merely rewrite such dichotomising by presenting materialism’s well-known reversal of the idealist order. As the source-domain of *Kepler*,<sup>57</sup> air cannot be interpretatively accessed by means of an idealist, materialist, or deconstructive rationale. Air is not a lack, presence, displacement, or deconstruction of materiality. We shall see that air, while primarily being expressive of constitution, is in *Kepler* also a manifestation of the constituted. Air may appear as the substancelessness presupposed by substances, but may also appear *as* substance, as constituted rather than constituting. Since substance in *Kepler* comes to givenness both as an accomplishment performed by air and as air itself in its accomplishing, we need to elucidate aerial phenomena on various levels of the text—on strata that in fact reflect degrees and modes of substantiation.

Before making his breakthrough-discovery of the non-constancy of planetary velocity, with its concomitant insight into the non-circularity of orbits, Kepler had been obsessed by “the five intervals between the six planets of the world” (*K*, 35). The space that lies between two orbits is obviously an interval, an airy betweenness that has no material reality but structural-mathematical existence only. The gap between two orbits is a geometric void, an emptiness saved from vacuity by vitalising geometry. Kepler’s initial faith in the geometric existence of “five regular *solids*” between the various orbits solidifies air into a nothingness consolidated by the substantiating thrust of geometric insight (*K*, 35; emphasis added). It is as if Kepler’s mathematico-spatial brilliance has the power to endow the cosmic interval with meaning, truth, and harmony—as if he is the airy co-creator of the solar system by being intellectually and geometrically on a par with the Creator. Kepler uses a paper model to illustrate his theorem:

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<sup>56</sup> Cf. Imhof: “Tycho was the assiduous gatherer of information about the stars, Kepler the man of genius who revolutionised astronomy” (*CI*, 117).

<sup>57</sup> Discussing constitution in terms of an originary and originating domain [*Urregion*], Wolfgang Fasching points out that intentionality is neither in the human being nor in the world, neither internal nor external (*PM*, 21).

“And so, as may be seen,” he said *airily*, “between the orbits of Saturn and Jupiter *I have placed* the cube, between those of Jupiter and Mars the tetrahedron, Mars and earth the dodecahedron, earth and Venus the icosahedron, and, look, let me show you—” pulling the model asunder *like a fruit* to reveal its secret core: “between Venus and Mercury the octahedron. So!” (K, 36; emphasis added)

Kepler has not *observed* this limited set of equilateral and hence “perfect” figures (K, 35). He has not passively witnessed and registered them—but “placed” them where they belong. The Keplerian universe has been put into place by Kepler. In “airily” doing so, he has not only appropriated certain segments of cosmic space by filling them with his preferred geometric figures, but also segmented air itself—which now is no longer a meaningless nothing between one orbit and the next, but a quantifiable presence. Nothingness is air, air is a sequence of intervals, and the intervals are quantifiable in terms of “intervallic quantities” ensuring a geometric idealisation of the universe as divine harmony (K, 36).

We notice movements in opposite directions here. On the one hand, Kepler’s foregrounding of intervals at the expense of the planets and of their orbits presses the overall paradigm towards an airy desolidification. On the other hand, the filling-up of the intervals by means of figural solids solidifies the intervallic airiness into a figuration that is less substanceless than airy space as cosmic void. On the hither side of both of these movements, however, lies the intriguing circumstance that defies the interval as substantiation as well as the interval of desubstantiation: the circumstance that air has no intervals in the first place. As we shall see, this hidden power of air never to be properly divisible plays a crucial role in the work. To treat air as intervallic is to overlook the circumstance that there is something that does not obey the law of the interval (the authority of difference-thinking). Kepler’s ideation has access to the nature of that which is discovered but not to the nature of discovery. Difference-thinking *makes* discoveries but does not constitute them—constitution not being something that is ‘made’ (constituted) in the first place. There is an intriguing oscillation in the text between air as constituting base-force manifesting itself as the condition of possibility *for* phenomena, and air simply as a phenomenon among phenomena. An airscape in the text can *either* be suggestive of forces that are felt to be constituting existence, *or* be suggestive of random substances that simply exist.

I distinguish between *cosmic* air and *hypocosmic* air—between air as something that Kepler perceives to be in tune with the harmony of the universe, and air as something materialising on the hither side of that reassuring cosmos. Air can be stirring on two opposed levels of affect: it can move Kepler by pointing to the workings of the universe; but air can also move him by an abrupt cancellation of this very sense. Then the

ineffable is not that which corroborates the cosmos but that which wells up as the dizzy forcefield *breaking it up while constituting it*.

While there is a tension between constituting and constituted air, there is thus a *tertium quid* to the side of these. This third type of air is neither cosmic-mathematical nor hypocosmic, but fatal.<sup>58</sup> In fatal air there swims a furtive figure whose wings belong to an “answering angel” (*K*, 27). Its tangential presence is a condition of possibility for Keplerian insight. While scientific thinking is a property of intellectual subjectivity, the moment of decisive breakthrough is not. The fatal breakthrough has to *break through* Kepler’s subjectivity. Breakthrough’s intentionality is not one of man’s possessions but a property of fatal air. It crosses through Kepler. Air crosses itself. Directedness momentarily holds on to its act without subjective effort.<sup>59</sup> The flash of discovery is foreign to Kepler as a strangeness with which he is dangerously (fatally) intimate. The beside-himself of his thought is the almost-collision of winged pre-subjectivity with subjectivity—a fracas of air, a strange shift of flight-paths.

Spring came to Graz and, as always, took him by surprise. He looked out one day and *there it was in the flushed air*, a quickening, a sense of *vast sudden swooping*, as if the earth had hurtled into a *narrowing bend of space*....Late into the nights he laboured, and stumbled through his days in a trance. Summer came. He had been working without cease for six months, and all he had achieved, if achievement it could be called, was the conviction that it was not with the planets themselves, their positions and velocities, that he must chiefly deal, but with *the intervals between* their orbits. The values of these distances were those set out by Copernicus...Time and time over he combined and recombined them, searching for the relation which they hid. Why are there just six planets...why are there just these distances between them? He waited, *listening for the whirr of wings*. On that ordinary morning in July *came the answering angel*. He was in class. The day was warm and bright. *A fly buzzed* in the tall window, a rhomb of sunlight lay at his feet....[He] began to trace circles, one with the triangle touching it on its three sides, the second circumscribed and intersecting the vertices. He stepped back, into that box of dusty sunlight, and blinked, and suddenly something, his heart perhaps, dropped and bounced....Yes, O yes. The diagram, the easel, the very walls of the room *dissolved* to a shimmering liquid... (*K*, 26-27; emphasis added)

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<sup>58</sup> I use the word ‘fatal’ with emphasis on three of its connotations: (1) as marking certain events as decisive, (2) as marking sequences of events with a sense of necessity, and (3) as indicating a sense of foreboding. See *OED* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., s.v. “Fatal.”

<sup>59</sup> The wing is expressive of intentionality’s passivity rather than of the activity of an intent. What flies in air moves in what Fasching calls an *autosynthesis* (*PM*, 157) of originary passivity (*PM*, 142-43).

The narrator is configuring the lines of rhetorical pressure that combine to make the text an extended literary essay on the intriguing mechanisms of constitution. In the second part of the passage, an overly geometric conception of the solar system is subservient to the greater insight hinted at in the opening lines on the earth being “hurtled into a narrowing bend of space” (K, 26). The bend is the orbit-segment discovered by Kepler, the elliptic displacement of circularity betokening an acceleration of planetary velocity, and hence a disruption of all previous orbit-theory. His upcoming vision of the five Platonic solids inscribed in the planetary system anticipates the decisive breakthrough. The ingenuity of the textual fabric lies in the convergence of planet-flight with the flight of the “answering angel” whose “wings” promise to produce “the whirr” which, unlike the sound generated by the fly that “buzzed” in the sunlit window, signals the materialisation of discovery slightly outside the margins of labouring science-subjectivity (K, 27). What is poignant is not only the implicit collapse of the ontological difference between planetary and cognitive motion, but the breakdown of the difference between the substantiations provoked by these. Since the planet does not travel in a circle but in an ellipse, it itself and its flight-path are accentuated by the “narrowing” of space into a “bend.” The travelling body finds itself burdened by an increment of affective weight and substance. *The flight-path of that which is discovered* is affectively indistinguishable from *the flight-path of the discovery-act itself*. The planet itself is in a whirr of acceleration as it is bent by the non-circularity of its narrowing orbit. Its motion is on a par with the “whirr of wings” signalling the descent of the “answering angel” (K, 26, 27).

What has the initiative here is not subjectivity but discovery. Subjectivity is an onlooker witnessing a directedness that is not properly its own. The elation produced in Kepler by the arrival of the disclosure is analogous to the exhilaration produced in him by the arrival of a spring that “took him by surprise” (K, 26). The discovery of the nature of the interplanetary intervals is like these intervals themselves: a gap or space that is subjected to a “quickening” in the air itself: “he looked out one day and *there it was* in the *flushed air*, a sense of vast *sudden swooping*” (K, 26; emphasis added). Discovery, like the discovered, comes in one fell swoop. The “swooping” of the earth (which is spring) is *eo ipso* the hurtling of the planet bending through its narrowing ellipsis, but also the “whirr” of the arrival into givenness of the winged object of discovery. The planet hurtles into increased force during the flight-path of its narrowing ellipsis. Spring hurtles so as to enhance the “giving off” of light “from throbbing window panes and polished stone, from blue and gold pools of rain in the muddied streets” (K, 26). Discovery tightens its force in the manner of “an athlete performing a miraculous feat upon the trampoline,” amplifying the power of the impact with each acrobatic body-bounce (K, 27). Yet a counter-substantiation too is at work. The “rhomb of sunlight” in which the



discoverer is standing does not take part in the geometric substantiations of orbit-intervals but enters the generalised affect in which everything that is bright dissolves “to a shimmering liquid” (K, 27). Air as aqueous substance marks a stratum of discovery that keeps reappearing as something not actually posited in scientific discovery. As *substance*, discovery lies waiting in an intentional milieu that falls short of substantiality. Before its substantiation, the discovery is an absence, something missing. During and after its materialisation, discovery is pure substance—that *into which* the absence of substantiation has substantiated itself. “Troubled by an inelegance in the Ptolemaic system, Copernicus had erected his great monument to the sun, in which there was embedded *the flaw, the pearl*, for Johannes Kepler to find” (K, 25; emphasis added). The pearl does not replace or fill the flaw but is its substantiation.

Emphasising the prevailing sense of air—in the orbit-intervals, in the Grazian spring, and in the winged whirr of discovery’s “answering angel” (K, 27)—I also stress the substantiation-tendencies that materialise out of air. As air shifts across the cosmic, hypocosmic, and fatal air-strata, so too does substantiation. To cosmic air corresponds cosmic substantiation, to hypocosmic air hypocosmic substantiation, and to fatal air fatal substantiation. We only need to turn the page to see that the wings previously attributed to the “answering angel” now rematerialise as properties of Kepler’s own body, his rain-soaked shoulder-blades quivering “like nascent wings” (K, 28). Wingedness marks the substanceless impetus of directedness giving birth out of itself to substances.<sup>60</sup>

In substantiated form, *cosmic* air is this or that harmony, design, orbit, or geometric figuration. In substantiated form, *fatal* air is an angel or winged apparition. In substantiated form, *hypocosmic* air is *that which stirs aerially without making sense*, much to our fright or delight. As one who lies in his room with the answering angel’s wings grafted into his shoulder-blades, Johannes Kepler looks out onto a world which sports compressions of air that are not fatal but contingently meaningless, and therefore sources of additionally exhilarating substantiation. He himself becomes a substance of air, a function of something whose stir could be prefatal, blind, brutal as death. “The window above him boomed, buffeted by gales, and when he raised himself on an elbow he could see the trees shuddering in the college yard. He imagined washes of that *eminent exhilarated air* sweeping through him also” (K, 29; emphasis added). To be swept through by air is not to have it pass through oneself but to receive this sweeping and to be the shudder of its personal embodiment. We are once more in the company of the “sudden swooping” of spring in Graz, of the earth that “hurtled” through the bend of discovery’s angelic “whirr” (K, 26). In this way *substantiation*

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<sup>60</sup> Imhof states that “mind stands above matter, is of divine origin; and it is the mind which produces the harmonies...matter is dead without the mind of man” (CI, 128). This mind/matter approach is not particularly helpful, however, since constitution and substantiation have an urgency that is phenomenologically prior to that opposition.



*is a coordinating factor.* It brings together strata of manifestation that are structurally alien to each other by imposing on all of them a joint impress. While the fatal, cosmic, and hypocosmic substantiations go on substantiating the fatal, the cosmic, and the hypocosmic, the *substantiation* itself qua substantiation, is not multiple. It is recognisable as a singular factor that gives choreographic cohesion to the materialising aspects of the novel's immanent ontology. Substantiation varies, depending on what it substantiates, but while doing so its deed remains faithful to substantiation as such. In a sense nothing could be simpler, and that in itself is the source of a certain fright, of a certain creepy concern that runs amok in the text.

Bearing this in mind, we may consider the nature of the affective impact made by the beginning of a paragraph on the novel's first page, and then notice how it matches up with a paragraph appearing a few pages later, depicting a state of affairs just prior to Kepler's expulsion from Graz on theological grounds.

The castle of Benatek confronted him, grand and impassive in the sunlit February *air*, more vast even than the black *bulk* of woe that had lowered over him all the way from Graz. A bubble of gloom rose and broke in the mud of his fuddled wits. (*K*, 3; emphasis added)

At the beginning of May there came an ugly calm. For days the sky was a *dome* of queer pale cloud, at night there was a fog. Nothing stirred. It was as if *the very air had congealed*. The streets stank. Kepler feared the vampire weather, which affected the delicate balance of his constitution, making his brain ache and his veins to swell alarmingly. In Hungary, it was said, bloody stains were everywhere appearing on doors and walls and even in the fields. (*K*, 12; emphasis added)

The castle in Prague is given as an air-phenomenon. The impassivity with which Kepler is "confronted" is an entity of considerable bulk. There is a bulk in air, namely the castle, and a "bulk" in his heart, namely his "woe." The two bulks are comparable: one is in external air, the other in internal air. With Kepler we find ourselves facing two ponderous masses of impressive magnitude. The visible one ought to be the heavier of the two, but Kepler's invisible blackness is heavier than the castle, which is alleviated by an immensity of sunlit air.

While this sense that air can transform itself into solidity and substance ("bubble") is only a hint in the first-cited passage, it is much more than that in the second one. For here air as a whole and as such has entered a substantiation-process: "It was as if the very air had congealed." The "bloody stains" that are perceivable in neighbouring lands are discernible "everywhere," since the substantiation of air into something that is more substantial than itself is almost universal, a state of affairs underscored by the opening remark that "the sky was a dome." There is a thickening of the

air, a becoming-substance of substancelessness. The world is no longer open onto a transparent non-entity but is covered by a lid, by a “dome” effectuating substantial closure. The gaseousness of air has become liquid in the “bloody stains,” and become sensorial in the smell of streets that “stank.” Kepler’s body participates in the substantiation, his thought-apparatus becoming an “ache” in a disconcertingly material “brain.” There seems to be an advent of “blood stains” not only in Hungary but also in Kepler himself, his blood self-staining itself so that his veins “swell alarmingly.”

The general prominence given by the text to air is not coincidental but a function of the topic at hand, astronomy. Stars, the objects of astronomical acts, seem to float in air as fish float in water. But in being populated by stars, air is in the text also populated by affects. Astrology is (or was) the science studying these affects. More or less reluctant to participate in such charlatanism, Kepler is nevertheless sunk into its world, as is the text. Air is striated by astrologically significant affects—rendering it fatal in *Kepler*. Since stars have not only astronomical but astrological significance, and since the separation of the two ‘sciences’ still leaves Keplerian astronomy in a distinctly astrological affect-mode, air is subject to a comprehensive sense of fatalism. This feeling governs the protagonist’s life-experience but also our reading-experience. The seemingly casual remark that Kepler’s marriage to the widow Barbara Müller took place “on a windy day at the end of April” is surreptitiously charged with a sense of an always already completed transfer of occult energy from stellar to earthly air (*K*, 40). That the marriage took place “*sub calamitoso caelo*” refers *explicitly* to what is astrologically significant as a “calamitous disposition of the stars” (*K*, 40); yet it refers *implicitly* to the wind of that “windy day”—this casual meteorological datum adding itself to innumerable other such data that progressively build up into an ominous sense in astronomer and reader that weather itself is astrological. The motions of air are to be kept under the strictest possible surveillance. Weather is fatal.

## 7. Recasting the World

“Who was I, that I should contemplate recasting the world?” (*Kepler*, p. 150)

There are many Keplers in *Kepler*. One of them moves in the stratum comprising cosmic air and cosmic substantiation. This is the Kepler who listens in intellectual air for the “hum” of the music made by the spheres (*K*, 48), reading the rest of the world in terms of such ideal harmony. This Kepler feels a “fine silver string of excitement” tightening in his being as he

perceives everywhere in the common details of life those classic “proportions” and intricacies of “rhythm” that are experienceable in natural things such as smells, tastes, and colours, as well as in cultural phenomena such as poetic metre and the rules of architecture (K, 48). To the side of this reassuring person there is a less-than-cosmic Kepler who is easily bruised by “the splendid and exhilarating sordidness of real life” (K, 69). This hypocosmic figure is a being we might think of as the *bruised* Kepler, “a bag of slack flesh in a world drained of essence” (K, 99). He is not altogether displeased with the company of men and women who personify an anti-rational mode of existence, such as the Italian procurer Felix encountered at Tycho Brahe’s residence in Prague. We just saw that the “sordidness” of reality is “exhilarating,” indeed even “splendid” (K, 69). Mathematical harmonies, proportions, and constructional wonders are rivalled by an overall resplendence that is no less hypnotically seductive—but which has nothing whatever to do with the cosmos. The “music of the spheres” appears *in air* as a system of reverberations that give rise to Apollonian pleasure, but that is not the only aerially poignant concatenation of reverberations materialising for Kepler.

In contemplating the structural properties of music, Kepler is fascinated by the circumstance that the ratio 3:5 is expressive of harmony, while the ratio 5:7 is not. Here disharmony is still graspable within the Apollonian mode of apperception, lack of proportion being a logical complement to its presence. But when Kepler is exposed to the sound of his wife’s labour-pain as it crashes “through the house, wave upon wave,” he is confronted with a nexus of reverberations *in air* that cannot be fitted into his mathematico-cosmic experience-field (K, 43). There are certain recurring air-happenings (sounds, smells, changes of weather, of perceptual ray) that cannot find a place within the man he is or thinks he is. Kepler therefore is one who is not merely caught in the process of recasting the world, but caught in a process of recasting himself, rebuilding the very notion and sense of selfhood. In his wife’s screams, as well as in his reluctant perception of this onslaught of sound, disharmony is not the other side of harmony but *a living monstrosity in air* that has a cosmos-defiant aerial life of its own.

While air for Kepler is a mathematical slate on which he draws new equations and orbits, it is also a monster that draws irrational figures *on him*. This intromissive rather than extromissive state of affairs is what the innumerable weather-phenomena keep stressing: that *in air* something is constantly being revealed that no astronomer or mathematician can ever hope to keep pace with or fathom. Such aerial shifts of light, colour, or pressure are purely experiential and hence not reducible to any objectification, whether scientific or not. As affects they do not belong in the sphere of scientific calculations—and would lose all affective reality if transferred to the cosmological order of representations. In his Apollonian mood, Kepler may be seen explaining a mathematical solution by

“sketching a triumphantly gay figure eight on the air” (*K*, 84), but he cannot perform such an explanatory act with respect to those aerially discovered structures that press in on him physically without discovery-component. The sounds of his wife’s labour-pain *exist in air*, but they lead nowhere (the delivered child is about to almost instantly die). Nothing is discovered. No advance is made. Instead something is *un/covered*, namely pain itself in its raw, subcosmological nonsensicalness. It is as if Kepler is reaching out also for such air when on another occasion his hands fuss “helplessly above [his wife’s] shoulders, kneading an invisible projection of her grief” (*K*, 19). Grief is aerially substantiated while remaining epistemologically nonsensical.<sup>61</sup>

This nonsensicalness is not a unit that contributes to the completion of the cosmic jigsaw puzzle. It participates in a construction *other* than the cosmos. Parallel to Kepler’s fascination with a universe subjected to his analytic experiences, there runs a no less intense fascination with a *negative cosmos* unfolding on the hither side of analysis. Kepler fully experiences an alternative reality whose patternings do not form the type of order perceived by intellectual, affective, or perceptual hypostatization. He does not *posit* his wife’s cries. They posit him. But ‘him’ now is no longer Kepler. It is no longer a creature belonging to a framework defined by the solar system. This different being is no longer one whose experiential parameters are the heavenly spheres, someone whose fundamental attunement is aligned with their music. The house in which the sounds of Barbara’s pain reverberate is sealed off from the universe of cosmic reverberations “clouding the world without” (*K*, 43)—in the manner that the Italian renegade Felix’s sick-room in Prague is sealed off by the imperial physician from “the unwholesome influence of fresh air” (*K*, 67).

When the heavenly music of Kepler’s cosmic air is interrupted by the anguished cries of his wife mourning the infant that has just died, an interface is created between air and air, between air and itself as something that hesitates between the cosmic and the hypocosmic. This hesitation is not entirely unpleasant or uninteresting for Kepler. It is not necessary to psychologise this indecision as masochism. Psychologism only makes sense in a world of psyches, i.e., in a cosmos, in a cosmic field of relations where each phenomenon is believed to have an explanation, or even to arise out of its explanation. It is not masochism that progressively leads Kepler deeper and deeper into an almost ecstatic acceptance of cosmic incongruities but rather a power in these incongruities themselves—the co-presence of a co-reality lacking all sense. On a hypocosmic stratum of experience, cosmic

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<sup>61</sup> Brian McNamee has commented on this important dimension of the work, albeit not in terms of air. He argues that the truth Kepler vaguely senses all through his life comes out of “the no-thing” that gave birth to consciousness in the first place (“Dancing the Grave Dance,” 435). The “no-thing” is for McNamee “reality,” Heidegger’s “Being,” or “what mystics call the Ground” (*ibid.*).

incongruities are of course not affective incongruities but simply affects. The question is not what they mean but what they are.

The sounds made by Kepler's wife Barbara during and after the delivery of the doomed infant are noises that fill air with the semblance of its disintegration. A *new air* is created. A different air comes to view once a slit has been made in normal or normative reality. "The child's fall had torn a hole in the fabric of things" (K, 44). The fabric of things is the cosmos, a universe ordered by a creator who ought to have been able to set some reasonable limit to meaningless suffering. Yet what is shown by the cruel rift in the world's fabric is not fabricless. On the hither side of the universe, *in affectivity lacking universe*, there is another fabric. This is the texture of affects that are what they are whether there is a universe or not. This fabric, affectivity, is not a universe. Yet it is a structure. The text exhibits that fabric as an object of discovery sighted by someone whose being is trained for a quite different discovery-mode. The transition from one discovery-stratum to another entails a reassessment of what we mean by 'object.' The text monitors this reassessment by means of the element air.

Public sounds too fill the air so as to announce it as an element that shatters every cosmic conception or reality. Not only Barbara's cries rip across the surface of Kepler's world, but also the cries of soldiers battling in Prague and elsewhere, accentuating a chaos that makes of air something ugly, unmusical, grotesque, and pitiless. Other monstrosities are 'in the air': the persecution of excommunicated Lutherans and Calvinists, as well as the hunting of so-called witches. Faced with excommunication, the mathematician defies the authorities commanding him to convert to Catholicism. "Kepler snorted. I shall do nothing of the kind, sir; mine is the reformed Church, I recognise no other..." (K, 45). This scene, like almost all of those analogous to it, is heralded by *hypocosmic weather*, an atmospheric tableau in which air is so charged with conflicting affects of expectation and foreboding that the sense of pervasive theological and political conspiracy is present in the natural environment too, as if it were not a backdrop or spectator but part of a sinister scheme which is as far from a cosmic "fabric of things" as a traitor is from one who keeps faith. "Something was being surreptitiously arranged, he could sense it, the storm *assembling its ingredients* from breezes and little clouds and the thrush's song" (K, 45; emphasis added). This aerial accentuation of a cumulative aberration in nature is affectively indistinguishable from an equally aerial accentuation of cumulative aberration in the sociopolitical scenario.

The religious turmoil boiled up again, fiercer than ever. Edict followed edict, each one more severe than its predecessor. Lutheran worship in any form was banned. Children were to be baptised only by the Catholic rite and must attend only Jesuit schools. Then they moved on [to] the books. Lutheran writings were rooted out and burned. A pall of *smoke* hung over the city. Threats *whirred in the air*, and Kepler

shivered. After the burning of the books, what would there be for them but to burn the authors? (*K*, 50; emphasis added)

*Burning* is an air-event. That which is burnt goes up in air: “A pall of smoke hung over the city.” But the one who is burned to death also occurs in air, almost dissolves into the ideas or faith she refuses to relinquish—just as the desubstantiating burning of *many* books or of *many* people sooner or later creates an aerial substance (*smoke*) of suffering, loss, and forsakenness assembled into an explorable counter-world. This was already hinted at in the evocation of “the storm assembling its ingredients from breezes and little clouds” (*K*, 45). While Kepler cannot make a system out of hypocosmic affects, he can systematise their explorability. The universe of pain is no order obeying mathematical rules, yet its unfolding is not a haphazard phenomenon lacking precise lines of pressure. Without being able to subject it to cosmic systematisation, Kepler devotes *his life* to it, and in such a way that the excitement of discovery here too is pushed to the extreme limit.

In reviewing hypocosmic air in *Kepler*, we have added the socio-political arena to the intimate one of private emotions, but we also need to recognise the intermediary domain of family affairs. This sphere occupies a large part of the text. Much space is given to Johannes’s ambiguous relations to his wife, children, stepdaughter, mother, and brother. He seems to regard these ties as impediments to his work. They draw him inexorably into the hypocosmic sphere. The mathematician’s intuition that the hypocosmic domain might be a world in its own right starts when he comes to understand that there is a plot in the Grazian middle class for him to marry the widow Barbara Müller. For the duration of his life, the impression never leaves Kepler that woman—be it Barbara or his mother—personifies a disharmonious hypocosmos much as the perfectly geometric godhead personifies the harmonious cosmos. To this misogynist perspective there is added the sense that family matters are hypocosmic simply because they are inscrutable and unavoidable. This impression is acute at the point where the banished Protestant mathematician takes leave of his family. “Regina tentatively came to him, and, her face buried in his cloak, whispered something which he did not catch, which she would not repeat, which was to be forever, forever, a small gold link missing from his life” (*K*, 45). Hypocosmic, the whisper can be what an orbit-bound, cosmos-regulated planet never can be: something positioned in midair in the instant of its materialisation, as well as in an affective quantum disengaged from mathematical infinity. The instant is golden, yet missing—perhaps golden *because* missing.

Units that assemble themselves into a negative universe are accordingly not an accumulation of positive items with positive existence. The hypocosmos is constructed out of what the cosmos is not, but also out of that which it itself is not. When it is Barbara’s time to say farewell to



Johannes after the death of her father, there is again a ‘missing link’ constituted by air—this time not in the form of an inadequately perceived whisper but as an embrace that his mourning wife refuses Kepler, so that he stands inanely within stark pity, “his ape arms helplessly enfolding hoops of empty air” (*K*, 65). The idea of the speechlessness of his step-daughter’s indecipherable whisper and the idea of the speechlessness of the air-hoops enfolded by Kepler’s apish arms seem to combine in the “muffled cries” of two apes in the company of a hermaphrodite child noticed in Emperor Rudolph’s court in Prague. As the fatigued emperor ‘airily’ declines to take notice of the eccentric collection of creatures parading as his murmerously sycophantic courtiers, Kepler has the impression that there lingers behind the easy languor of the exotic company

a thread of muted pain...which out of each produced, as a stroked glass will produce, a *tiny note* that was one with the *tone* of the apes’ muffled cries and the androgynous child’s speechless stare. He listened closely then, and thought he heard from every corner of the palace all that royal sorcerer’s magicked captives faintly singing, all lamenting. (*K*, 81; emphasis added)

No music of the spheres is at hand, for no cosmos is perceivable. What is given is a contrary tonality lacking an articulate Logos stating that all is well in the universe, or even that all is unwell there. There is a ‘music’—without cosmos. There is an even greater sense of airiness here, the ‘music’ being even more prominent and revealing than the one made by the spheres. But at the same time, nothing more than a collective whisper is accomplished. It is all that there is. Everything has been reduced to an elaborately choreographed incomprehensibility. The “tiny note” is as cosmologically nonsensical as the “tiny tune deep in his gut” faintly noticed on a day characterised by “[w]aves of wind” washing against the house (*K*, 159).

## 8. Bruise

The *bruised* Kepler is victimised because the shape of things is not cosmic, or because things may have no discernible shape whatsoever. Both of these effects are negotiated by air. We have seen that various whispers and glassy microtones produce the sense of a dissipated pain too slight to be reckoned with in a world of rational computation. But there are also aerial orchestrations at large underscoring a forlornness that withdraws creatures from creation and creator. Kepler

idly noted a flock of sheep upon the common, their lugubriously noble heads, their calm eyes, how they champed the grass with such

fastidiousness, as if they were not merely feeding but performing a delicate and onerous labour: God's mute meaningless creatures, so many and various. Sometimes like this the world bore in upon him suddenly, all that which is without apparent pattern or shape, but is simply *there*. The wind tossed a handful of rooks out of the great trees. Faintly there came the sound of singing, and up over the slope of the common a ragged file of boys marched, wading against the gale. Their song, one of Luther's stolid hymns, quavered in the tumultuous air. (K, 31)

Emerging out of obliviousness Kepler's attention is drawn towards the immediate presence of the milieu, and to its special mode of givenness. He does not actively shape the pastoralness. There are no emotional outbursts concerning the beauty of the scene. He gravitates around it by means of some eerie affective force that allows the idleness of his gaze to passively perceive the sheep. The way their total givenness *bears in* upon the scientist accentuates his passivity. The general sense of shapelessness is expressive of the formlessness of air, which nevertheless possesses constitutive power through the strength of the wind. Its activity does not just scatter the birds in the trees; it tosses them, as if they were dust dispersed by its airy fingers. The gale carries the hymn, is the hymn, as a trembling in the turbulent air. The theological references do not counteract a permeating sense of godforsakenness but accentuate it. As in Emperor Rudolph's court, brutish life is ceremoniously esoteric, displaying a semblance of refinement. Lumps of air bang hither and thither, doing essentially what they want with man and his world. Existence is *there*, but little more.

The Lutheran boys *wade against air* in an attempt on the part of civilisation to give shape to something that is ultimately shapeless. One can feel the air bruising the boys, the hymns. Yet, paradoxically, a world which in this way is more deeply hypocosmic than ever is the condition of possibility for a fatality which affirmatively bends us over from lack to revelation. This sense is produced by lines that call attention to the capacity of air to bruise not only man and God but light. The bruising of light, a sign of hypocosmic negativity, seems to herald a fatal event of infinite promise.

A warm gale was blowing out of the sky, and the evening sunlight had an umber tinge, *as if the wind had bruised it*. The poplars shook. Suddenly everything seemed to him to tremble on the brink of *revelation*, as if these contingencies of light and weather and human doings had stumbled upon a form of almost speech. (K, 70; emphasis added).

What I call the *bruised* Kepler is thus no merely negative figure victimised by the tempests of a negative universe, but a being to whom the promise of revelation seems to be given. Revelation, which on the plane of academic



mundaneity is a purely cognitive event, runs significantly deeper on the stratum I have called fatal. Fatality occurs as astonishment between breaths as a breathlessness presencing air: “Cold it had been that morning, the sky like a *bruised* gland and *a taste of metal in the air*, and everything holding its breath under an astonishment of fallen snow” (K, 160; emphasis added). The sky is bruised. The airy gland tastes of air, as air tasting itself. Everything living breathes except air, the condition of possibility for breathing. In breathlessness air moves as a fatal energy. The to-and-fro of the battle between the cosmic and the hypocosmic is interrupted by a force that is experientially vertical—intersecting the cosmic as well as the hypocosmic at right angles (as one vertical line crossing two horizontal ones). In transforming Kepler into something other than a scientist—namely into a recipient—fatal verticality paradoxically gives birth to the Kepler who makes his final mark in the prosaic sphere of academic respectability where the vertical is given no role to play. Even on academically formal occasions requiring a maximum of decorum and hence a minimum of heresy vis-à-vis the cosmic code of academic behaviour, Kepler cannot but give way to his fatal self. His colleagues nudge him in order to mark how dissatisfied they are with each *faux pas* made in public; yet Kepler’s sense of guilt is limited, since *the one* performing what ought not to be performed (like the one discovering orbits that ought not to be discoverable) is not he.

Yet he could not be angry with himself, for *it was not he* had done the damage, but *that other Kepler* shambling at his heels, that demented other, whose prints upon his life were *the black bruises* that inevitably appeared in the places whereon Johannes the Mild had impressed no more than a faint thumb-print of protest. (K, 85; emphasis added)

There is evidence here of what I have called the *bruised* Kepler. There is a mild, unbruising, and unbruised Kepler; and then there is “that other Kepler.” These are not the same, for the one shambles at the “heels” of the other. One is rational, the other is not—*from the viewpoint of the rational*. The point I am currently making is that this bruised Kepler occurs simultaneously in the hypocosmic and fatal air-strata as an amphibious being negotiating the brink, fall, or leap-of-faith that leads from one stratum to the other. It is on account of this amphibiousness that Barbara, personification of anti-cosmic shapelessness, is viewable also as a fatal creature, indeed as someone intermittently belonging to fatal air. After their desperate lovemaking, following upon Kepler seeing her climbing naked out of a sunlit bathtub, he had found that her “shoulder-blades left a damp print of *wings* upon the sheet” (K, 42; emphasis added). Momentarily, she is on a par with those other aerial beings whose presence mark Johannes’s entry into fatal air.

That the bruised Kepler, as we just saw, shambles at the “heels” of the regular Kepler does not mean that he is a latecomer but simply that he is not Kepler in the sense of will-governed selfhood (*K*, 85). This becomes apparent in the description of his courtly behaviour prior to, rather than subsequent upon, his audience with the emperor. When, after an extended time of waiting, the little groom finally arrives to announce that the audience is imminent, “there was a hot constriction in Kepler’s breast, as if his *lungs*, getting wind *a fraction before he did* of the advent at last of the longed-for and dreaded moment, had snatched a quick gulp of *air* to cushion the shock” (*K*, 80; emphasis added). Here there is a disparity between *lungs* and Kepler, these *lungs* being that incarnation of (fatal) air which the other Kepler actually is. The Kepler who is not Kepler is to the side of Kepler—whichever way we look at it. The hypocosmic or fatal man replacing the cosmo-mathematical one may be fractionally at his heels or fractionally in advance of him. But whether Kepler is ahead or behind himself matters little; what matters is the non-coinciding. The fatal or hypocosmic does not inhabit a time-space identical with that of the cosmic. The “other Kepler” that is “not he” is not some shadow, which is why it can be in advance (*K*, 85). It is rather the case that ‘Kepler,’ the world-famous imperial mathematician, is the shadow. This acclaimed astronomer is the one who has discovered, and possibly also the one who discovers, but he is not the one to whom discovery *is given*. To be the fatal recipient of something towards which one has no intent, but whose intromission one fatally receives, is to be a ‘no one’ whose sole reason to exist is this act of reception. What the work makes clear is that in the life of Johannes Kepler such reception is by no means confined to matters of science but has to do with life itself in the broadest sense, taken not as an event that unfolds before an eye fixated on the heavens but before a ‘blind’ eye sensing the unfolding of the primal experiential flow.

## 9. Billowing Briefly

The primal flow harbouring the oscillation between cosmic and hypocosmic air in *Kepler* clears the way for an achronic layer that is consubstantial with fatal air.<sup>62</sup> While the whole of the work is composed as a non-chronological analeptic ‘movement’ of circularity,<sup>63</sup> achrony defies this structure. It may

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<sup>62</sup> An established definition of achrony is an event “in a narrative which cannot be located on a precise time scale” (Hawthorn, *A Glossary of Contemporary Literary Theory*, 3). I do not use the term achrony in relation to events, however. In *Kepler* the achronic is not really an event but an operative force. If the non-chronology of the novel is a typical postmodern chronotope, as has been argued by M. Keith Booker (“Cultural Crisis Then and Now,” 185), then the achronic streaming in *Kepler* does not fit into the presumed postmodern dechronologising of historical-linear narrative.

<sup>63</sup> If we place a historical-chronological time-scale ‘behind’ the narrative like a ruler, textual movements appear like graphs as the story advances. For instance, Part I consists of five

only be felt as a general flow of time conforming to a necessary structure of ‘before’ and ‘after,’ but without itself appearing *in time*. The constituting flow is always prior to any apprehension of it. The nexus of memories that make up the narrative is accompanied by non-objectified memory, by a process prior to subject-controlled recollections. I call this dynamics *dark memory*.<sup>64</sup> Kepler is powerless vis-à-vis this mnemonic tendency, since he cannot in any way be in command of it. It does not belong to him, but he belongs to its constituting darkness.<sup>65</sup> In *Kepler* this temporal arrangement involves air. During a walk with Professor Mästlin, Kepler is subjected to one of those moments when he seems to become one with the transparency of air. In airy limpidity the bruised subject is a purely affective self: “He felt transparent. There was a *whirring high in the air*, and suddenly a crash of bells that made his nerves vibrate” (*K*, 30; emphasis added). That which appears high in the air heralds the bell-sound. It is not explained or clearly defined, it is just a fierce vibration in air out of air. This “whirring” draws attention to “the whirr of wings” preceding the cosmological discovery of the five Platonic solids, marking the fatal stratum (*K*, 26). Kepler’s nerves vibrate with and as the sound of the bells. Nothing prevents the flutter from transforming itself into a palpitation that is neither the man’s heartbeat nor the sound-waves. The “whirring” is a phenomenon of air rather than of perception. Its materialisation indicates a slight temporal discrepancy vis-à-vis the bell-sound.

This incident points towards the difference between cosmic chronology and achronic, primal flow, a feature that is most prominent in Part III, *Dioptrice*. Revisiting his childhood village Kepler suddenly becomes attentive to a particular smell in the air.

Pausing in the midst of Weilderstadt’s familiar streets, he looked about him in mild amaze. It was still here, the narrow houses, the stucco and the spires and the shingled roofs, the weathervane, all of it by some means still intact, unaware that his memory had long ago reduced it all to a waxwork model. *The morning air was heavy with a mingled smell*

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chapters which emanate as analepses out of two hours in the year 1600. The analepses have the historical nodes of 1599, 1595, 1593, 1596, 1598, and then the text returns to 1600 to close the two hours. For a thorough description of this intricate compositional structure, see Imhof, *CI*, 134-41.

<sup>64</sup> Toine Kortooms discusses this Husserlian idea brought up in the late C-manuscripts: “[T]he point without differences into which retentions ultimately sink is an open infinite horizon...The secondary sensuous character of what is situated in the dark horizon of the past consists in the fact that *it can exercise a stimulus on the subject*” (*Phenomenology of Time*, 202; emphasis added). The dark horizon retains the subject through *dark memory*, which does not have anything to do with ordinary recollections. Through dark memory the lived past as such is preserved. “This preservation is not a mode of recollection...It is nothing other than the retention that links up with an original constitution process” (201).

<sup>65</sup> Writing to Mästlin, Kepler remarks: “I do not speak like I write, I do not write like I think, I do not think like I ought to think, and so everything goes on in deepest darkness” (*K*, 86). It is this presubstantial darkness that a certain part of Kepler is attuned to.

of bread and dung and smoke—that smell!—and everywhere a blurred clamour was trying and just failing to make an important announcement. (*K*, 89; emphasis added)

Here we encounter two versions of memory. The primal perception of the village is juxtaposed to the memory of it as “a waxwork model.” To the side of this objectification of an already objectified memory there is the co-givenness of a smell. Substantiated as smell, air *retains* Kepler’s past through affective threads resisting both the straightforward perception of the town and “the waxwork model” that has been constructed to replace it. This state of affairs is accentuated by the immediate link to the encircling clamour that almost speaks. The smell is recognised, but not interpreted or explained; it leads directly to the non-objectified lived past as such.<sup>66</sup> Inarticulate, achronic air is what truly requires Kepler’s attention by substantiating itself into the smell, which in turn calls attention to the substantiating activity. Furthermore, on the diegetic level of reordered chronology, the directionality of the recurring call of the past is fatal in the way it disrupts the perfect cosmic form of the elliptic chronotope.<sup>67</sup> On the next page there is “a yellowish smell of cat” that presently becomes “*concentrated* into an enormous ginger tom thrusting itself with a kind of truculent ardour against Kepler’s leg” (*K*, 90; emphasis added). It is not Kepler who conjures up the perception of the cat, but it itself emerges out of the yellowish smell by means of its chosen line of substantiation: air–smell–cat.

When air becomes substantial, so that the smell of “bread and dung and smoke” is indistinguishable from “the speechless uproar in his heart” (*K*, 89), speechlessness is not something moving towards speech. The heavy air is expressive of a prereflexive flow whose force lies in its ability to remain an intimation; it must speak as silence. While sharing a meal with his family in Weilderstadt

Kepler suddenly recalled a sunny Easter Sunday long ago, when his grandfather was still alive, one of those days that had lodged itself in his memory not because of any particular event, but because all the *aimless* parts of it, the brilliant light, the scratchy feel of a new coat, the sound of bells lofty and mad, had made together *an almost palpable shape, a great air sign*, like a cloud or a wind or a shower of rain, that was beyond interpreting and yet rich with significance and promise. (*K*, 92; emphasis added)

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<sup>66</sup> An ineffability is at work in the retentional process as such. As Fasching points out, the workings of retentional processes are inexpressive [*unausdrücklich*] and prethematic [*präthematisch*], i.e. non-objectifiable (*PM*, 165).

<sup>67</sup> The childhood memories discussed in this section all involve air, and all come from ‘outside’ the reordered chronology of the chronotope.

The “aimless” conjunction of sound, light, and feeling amounts to an “air sign” whose discursive power is zero (“air”) but whose prediscursive force is greatness itself, indeed the sign thereof. What has “significance” does not really signify—but makes its mark (on air) by not doing so. Air-signs precede the systems of signs as their condition of possibility. They are but the “promise.”

Air’s achronic reality is more real than life. Its network cannot be fully seen, yet materialises in distorted visions, or in moments of blindness outplaying the objectifying gaze. Still in Weilderstadt, Kepler watches his son through a window that has a flaw making the boy “a sudden swimmer” in the unexpected vision of watery air. The airy swimming is felt by “the eyepiece” of Kepler’s heart where “something stretched and billowed briefly” (*K*, 95).<sup>68</sup> The billowing calls attention to Kepler’s sense of being “a celestial swimmer” (*K*, 74). There is an airy circumference of passive tissue at the threshold of reflexive consciousness. Children coming in from the garden catch the affective repercussions of a quarrel as “pulsations in the air” (*K*, 96).

Such throbbings provide an uncanny sense of subjection to brutal contingency, yet billowings of watery and fatal air somehow seem to hold Kepler floating. In a dream he sinks into the “incarnadine darkness” where “a great slow pulse” begins to beat (*K*, 98). It marks the most profound lived time, emerging out of a sense of watery darkness. Generally speaking, the consubstantiality of water and air in *Kepler* indicates the priority of achrony. In another heterodiegetic analepsis Kepler reflects on his own contemplative activity as a child.

Early one summer morning when he was a boy he had watched from the kitchen a snail crawling up the window outside. The moment came back to him now, wonderfully clear, the washed sunlight in the garden, the dew, the rosebuds on the tumbledown privy, that snail. What had possessed it to climb so high, what impossible blue vision of flight reflected in the glass? The boy had trod on snails, savouring the crack and then the soft crunch, had collected them, had raced them and traded

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<sup>68</sup> Derek Hand points out that windows are a recurring phenomenon in *Kepler*. The re-appearance of “these barriers, transparent though they may be, is meant to alert the attentive reader to the fact that it is not nature or reality that Kepler is engaging with, but a distorted and refracted version of reality as perceived through imperfect glass” (*EF*, 106). Yet this reading maintains the fiction-versus-reality (or representation-versus-world) dichotomy. According to such a view there is a true world behind the experienced one. Hand is right in pointing out that it is not nature or mundane reality that Kepler is seeing, but he is surely wrong in claiming that what Kepler sees therefore must pertain to a false world of representivity. In that type of reading, Kepler is compelled to remain in an *a priori* fiction, contrasted with yet another even greater fiction comprising a world always situated in beyondness. However, what Kepler sees is actually more real than the posited fictitious ‘reality’ behind experience as well as more real than the *a priori* ideal world of representing signs. Flawed seeing is still seeing.

them, but never before now had he really looked at one. Pressed in a lavish embrace upon the pane, the creature gave up its frilled grey-green underparts to his gaze, while the head strained away from the glass, moving blindly from side to side, *the horns weaving as if feeling out enormous forms in air*. But what had held Johannes was its method of crawling. He would have expected some sort of awful convulsions, but instead there was a series of uniform small smooth waves flowing endlessly upward along its length, like a visible heartbeat. The economy, the heedless beauty of it, baffled him. (K, 99; emphasis added)

As frequently happens in *Kepler*, the emphasis is on the dark mnemonic level. Kepler does not himself possess the recollective initiative. The moment comes to him in its enigmatic clarity. The sunlight is washed, clearing the blue air that invites impossible flight. The snail, previously used as a piece of merchandise, here becomes an object of study. But the hermaphrodite's underside does not simply appear, but is *given up*—offered, as an inexorability of form, colour, and light. Its “lavish embrace” appears to soar in a reciprocation of blue sky and bluish reflection. The textual stress on blindness suggests that there is something to the side of seeing substantiated out of air.

The creature's loss of sight is analogous to the bruised Kepler's epistemological blindness. The process of “feeling out” forms in air contrasts with the scientist's act of gazing at objects in the sky. Like the animal, Kepler sometimes feels out constitution's peculiar ways before they become hypostatized as epistemological objects available to the mathematical mind. The darkness and the silence of such affective seeing must remain in its penumbral zone on the fringe of objectifying consciousness. As kinetically given, kinaesthetically airy forms are invisible and fragile, as is the moment when the snail is actually *seen* in the marvel of its astonishing appearance, and not just coldly observed. Its subtle movement as “a series of uniform small smooth waves” rhythmically flows as natural life-process but also as the changeless, underlying, achronic flow that is not itself temporal or living. The fluid heedlessness is a baffling phenomenon that cannot reassuringly materialise as an object under the scientific gaze.

The fluidity in question does not seem to obey the common distinction between wakefulness and dream. As the people assembled at Tycho Brahe's deathbed are “poised and silent like a gathering in the gloom on the fringes of a dream,” the bruised Kepler constantly moves in half-shadow (K, 78). Towards the end of his exile in Graz he

dreamed of the ocean. He had never seen it in waking life. It appeared an immense milky calm, silent, immutable and terrifying, the horizon a line of unearthly fineness, a hairline crack in the shell of the world. There was no sound, no movement, not a living creature in sight, unless the



ocean itself were living. The dread of that vision polluted his mind for weeks. On a July evening, *the air pale and still as that phantom sea*, he returned to the Stempfergasse after one of his rare ventures abroad in the frightened town, and paused before the house. There was a child playing in the street with a hoop, an old woman with a basket on her arm limping away from him on the other side, a dog in the gutter gnawing a knuckle of bone. Something in the scene chilled him, the careful innocence with which it was arranged in that limitless light, as if to give him a sly nudge. (*K*, 50; emphasis added)

Water and sky are only held apart by an ideal (unearthly) crack. This division is so weak that air and water are co-substantiated in fusion as a single element. The subsequent street scene appears to Kepler as “arranged,” which means that he apprehends it as something faintly familiar yet still alien since it does not reveal what it means or signifies. This indicates that the given phenomenon is no mere perception, but that he *receives it* as that which is not his own doing. The white dream-water seeps into a sky whose air substantiates “the phantom sea” as silent and passive witness. Immutability and limitlessness provoke a fear-affect that emanates from the dream. This fear is different from the one brought forth by hypocosmic contingency. In *Kepler*, a dread of nothing is fear of air’s inexorable power to transmute the givenness of the ‘innocent’ scene into force and substance. The circumstance that there is neither “sound” nor “movement” in sea or air accentuates the sense of a de-anthropologised, constituting base-force. The “sly nudge” of its intimation is out of proportion. Under the wings of this air, the bruised Kepler stumbles like a blind sleepwalker.

The blindness that occurs in *Kepler* heightens sensitivity towards substantiating and desubstantiating activities arising out of ultimate passivity. Blindness brings about a passivity in which air makes itself palpably felt in its emptiness. This is made evident when Kepler reunites with Tycho Brahe’s former jester Jeppe, noticing that the dwarf has been blinded.

He recognised him a long way off by his walk, that laborious stoop and swing, as if at each pace he were moulding *an intricate shape out of resistant air* before him and then stepping gingerly into it.... “Why, Sir Mathematicus, is it you?” *palping the air* with an outstretched hand. Second sight was all that was left him, his eye sockets were empty asterisks: he had been blinded. (*K*, 175; emphasis added)

Air resists being moulded. It is itself that which moulds. The hesitant palpating of the air is analogous to what goes on in the darkness of “second sight.” In Jeppe’s hypocosmic air, a “childlike attentiveness” operates, so that the dwarf seems “to be listening constantly past the immediate to



something far away” (*K*, 175). The emptiness of the “asterisks” is the emptiness of air.

Jeppe’s air-gropings may be compared to Kepler’s explorations of a preobjective world as a child. In these tentative investigations, he senses the presence of a primal force preceding substantiation, prior to any attempt at scientific appropriation. The burgeoning obsession with the world of fauna and flora soon grows into an epistemological enigma for the young Kepler. He is intrigued by a shift and flow in the world: “no sooner had he fixed a fragment of it than it became something else” (*K*, 100). Things literally take off and fly away through the air. The child’s myopia blurs the distinction between life and not-life.

His ailing eyesight increased the confusion. The limits of things became blurred, so that he was not sure where sentient life gave way to mere vegetable being. Sunflowers, with *their faces pressed to the light*, were they alive, and if not, what did it mean, being alive? Only the stars he knew for certain to be dead, yet it was they, in their luminous order, that gave him his most vivid sense of life. (*K*, 100; emphasis added)

Perceptual limits dissolve. Object and non-object merge in a liminal region whose indeterminacy defies a strictly binary order. The sunflowers with “their faces pressed to the light” show that there is no distance between light and flower. Sunflowers are literally *sunflowers*. They substantiate light. Existence contains a luminosity other than the one emitted by the stars.

## 10. Empty Air

In the previous section we have reviewed the prevailing sense of Kepler being given over to primal presencing. Intimations of fatal flow are accompanied by an elation that is neither expressive of cosmic order nor of experiential anarchy. Around him at Benatek “an ashen awfulness” opens “*in the swirling air*” (*K*, 57; emphasis added). In the substance of their swirl, dancing snowflakes permit air to become palpably substantial. In the same swift movement a feeling of unease is substantiated. Kepler is drawn into the swirl.

As negativity, air may be “sharp as needles” (*K*, 79). A “sudden chill blue air” attacks the protagonist and keeps him in a claustrophobic confinement of self-protective affects (*K*, 183). But air also furnishes release in moments of retreat into stillness and transparency: “A haze of silvery dust unfurled its sails to the breeze and drifted lazily gatewards, a woman leaned down from a balcony, laughing, and in the sky a panel slid open and spilled upon Benatek a wash of April sunlight that turned the drifting dust to gold” (*K*, 56). Silver becomes gold, yet the alchemical shift is not so important. It is rather the constituting process as such that is highlighted. The silvery

substance reappears in Regensburg, where a “fine rain drifted slantwise through the November dusk, settling in a silver fur on his cloak” (K, 155). It re-emerges as after-image to a dream of a “gilded statue” revealing his dead stepdaughter (K, 178). To Kepler, Regina’s face “never entirely faded. Its silvery glimmer was mysteriously present in every page of his book of the harmony of the world” (K, 179). Substantiated as silver or gold, air is no mere sweetness opposed to chaos, but an effervescence pointing back to air as constitutive force.

In an oval painting on the ceiling in Duke Frederick’s entrance hall, Kepler sees “an angry bearded god enthroned on dark air” (K, 34). Air’s darkness is tied to the impossibility of pictorially representing its emptiness. It eludes cosmic appropriation. The cosmic Kepler is terrified of this nothingness, while the bruised Kepler thrives on objectlessness as an almost ecstatic form of release. This is hinted at when he is caught up in mathematical and cosmological ruminations in Graz. “He traipsed the streets in a daze, and more than once was nearly run down by horses. He wondered if he were ill. Yet it was more as if he were...in love! *In love*, that is, *not with any individual object*, but generally” (K, 23; emphasis added). Being in love is being embraced by love. We find no cause for Kepler’s condition. Elation arises out of the discovery of receptivity *per se*. It has nothing to do with his geometrico-mathematical objects of thought. Objectlessness and empty air point back to constitution.

The supremacy of the emptiness of air is felt at Benatek just before the Italian procurer Felix arrives at the castle with a wounded arm.

The house had a forlorn and puzzled air. Kepler wandered through the hugely empty rooms. They led him back, as if gently to tell him something, to the entrance hall. The summer evening hesitated in the doorway, and in a big mirror a parallelogram of sunlit wall leaned at a breathless tilt, with a paler patch in it where a picture had been removed. The sunset was a flourish of gold, and in the palace gardens an enraptured blackbird was singing. Outside on the step the child Regina stood at gaze like a gilded figure in a frieze. Kepler paused in shadow, listening to his own pulse beat. What could she see, that so engrossed her? She might have been a tiny bride watching from a window on her wedding morning. (K, 66)

The house is its forlornness and puzzledness. Its air is an arrangement of radiant affects, an emanating atmosphere. The rooms are hugely empty, devoid of objects but not of air. The vast vacuity accentuates air’s imperceptible presence. Kepler *is led* by the emptiness of the rooms, by their fatal air (they “led him back”). The hesitancy of the summer evening is atmospherically felt as a chastity. The mirror reflects the geometrical form of sunlight, perhaps a deterioration of its purity. Yet light is *breathlessly* there between breaths, momentarily halting the human circulation of air. A

picture has been removed, leaving a pale patch that enhances an unspoken presence on the tip of the tongue. The ineffability of the pallor speaks in silence of that which cannot be represented. The enraptured blackbird sings for no particular reason. Regina is framed as if to be held, yet appears in the flow that cancels out the harshness of holding. Kepler's pulse-beat marks the flow of time, of moments.

In all of this, air as empty nothingness facilitates a stepping-back permitting constitution to appear as such. Being committed to the emptiness requires a peculiar form of attention, one that does not emanate from the subject, but, as it were, from air. Kepler is drawn into this attention; he is led by the emptiness, as if pulled into a disclosure of that which cannot be told. He is exposed to a dimension of himself that is sensitive to the auto-affective allure of something resembling nothingness. While watching over the wounded Italian, Kepler experiences "a vivid and uncanny sense of his own presence, as if he had been given back for a brief moment a dimension of himself which daylight and other lives would not allow him" (*K*, 68). This other reality is not something that he can take back. It must be given back as a brief billowing in darkness, silence, and withdrawal.

Strangely enough we find that the strength of Kepler's regeneration is enhanced in such situations of lost agency. During his mother's trial, when they walk together towards the torture chamber behind the courthouse, a breeze moves "lazily over the grass, like a sweeping of invisible wings" (*K*, 172). Johannes thinks about the "*wind-tossed* sad singing of martyrs on their way to the stake" (*K*, 172; emphasis added). Inside the chamber the "air was stifling" (*K*, 172). When they leave after his mother's acquittal the "seraph's wings of the wind" sweep around them (*K*, 173). This series of air-governed events carries an overall affect of powerlessness.

In its withdrawal into tranquil transparency and nothingness, air calls attention to the constitutive flicker at the interface between animate life and its elusive source.

The surface of the pond smoothed down its ruffled silks. Tiny translucent flies were weaving an invisible net among the reflected branches of the elm, and skimmers dashed out from the shallows on legs so delicate they did no more than dent the surface of the water. (*K*, 108)

The wind-undulated waves of the pond have been smoothed down to a surface that does not suggest depth, in which things are reflections of themselves. Air has come to calmly rest in this seemingly irrelevant moment. In the recession, air allows the fragile hypostatizations of 'things' to appear as if they were more important than human life. The fragility of the moment is more pronounced than the brittleness of a scientific theorem.

Powerless frailty is evident in Kepler's declining health. The sense of physical decrepitude causes him to picture himself as "a thing of rags and straw dangling limply from a huge bulbous head, like the puppets he had

coveted as a child, strung up by their hair in the dollmaker's shop" (K, 179). On another occasion he feels as if he is being "worked by strings" (K, 101). The text intermittently gives the impression that an acceptance of being a marionette on airy strings is associated with the possibility of redemption. Towards the end of his life, Johannes is "aware of a curious feeling of lightness, of levity almost" (K, 183). This is more than relief at the cessation of scientific endeavour. It is an affirmative subordination to air. In the "sound of the wind," air speaks like "a deep silence...secret and inviolable" (K, 188). Kepler senses that it is "not death" that he has come to meet "but something altogether other" (K, 191). Suspended in air, epistemological aspirations finally mean nothing.

## 11. The Telltale Bulge

It is this intermittent accent on ontological levity in the text's affective complexity that makes poignant the narrator's comments on the Reformed conception of the Eucharist. By denying the material omnipresence of the natural body of Christ in communion, Kepler enters a domain of experience in which the limits of externalistic substantiation by the same token make possible an unlimited unleashing of substantiation in the heart (K, 166). The surprising efficacy of substantiation is a possibility whose affective reality presupposes release from the naiveté of magical materialism. "I hold it self-evident that matter is incapable of transmutation...God, sir, is not an alchemist" (K, 169). Kepler points out that he shares this doctrine with "the early Fathers" (K, 168), a standpoint that leads to his expulsion from Linz (K, 169).<sup>69</sup> Yet his eviction does not excommunicate him from substances and substantiations. If substantiations have an absolute, divine, or ultimate source, this source-point does not itself need to appear in the form of (a) substance. The prerequisite for constituted substances is the force of primal directedness, which is not itself a substance. To gauge how important the phenomenon of free substantiation is for the text, consider the lines depicting the affective aftermath to the news that the mathematician's step-daughter is about to get married.

O how, how strange: to be shocked at himself; horrified but not surprised. Where before was only tenderness—suspiciously weighty perhaps—and sometimes a mild *objectless* craving, there suddenly stood now *in his heart* a full-grown creature, *complete* in every detail

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<sup>69</sup> Joseph McMinn has pointed out that "Kepler's story is marked by constant exile. As a Lutheran, but a famed astronomer, he is just tolerated in Catholic Austria; in Lutheran Germany, he is suspected of Calvinism" (SF, 77).

and even possessed of a past, blinking in the light and tugging hesitantly at the still unbroken birthcord. It had been in him all those years, growing unnoticed towards this *sudden incarnation*. And what was he supposed to do with it now, this *unbidden* goddess come skimming up on her scallop shell out of an innocent sea? (K, 102; emphasis added).

Out of an “objectless” ground an object has emerged as the end-point of a cognitive ray. The object, whatever it is, is the terminus of an act—but the act has no agent, being a child of passivity. Without any intent or effort on some subject’s part, the object of cognition *is given*. No one has solicited its presence. It/she is “unbidden,” has like Venus simply materialised one day—not out of matter, or even into it, but out of affection, into the affective life. It is “in his heart” that Johannes discovers the substance. It is one of the discoveries of Johannes Kepler. As such it is wondrous. It makes him marvel—not at the cosmos, nor at himself, but at substantiation. It is the *object* that has the initiative. *It* has decided to arrive. *It* comes skimming up onto his shores, unsolicited and without any catalysing activity on Kepler’s part. Kepler can appreciate the incontrovertible manifestedness of the substance at hand, not despite his rejection of every theory of magical transmutation, but thanks to it. He takes the substantiation of affects seriously. Affects are indubitable and tangible presences possessing incontrovertible affective substance. Johannes is able to acknowledge this state of affairs because his heart, freed from idolatry and superstition, has been opened to its possibility. The unbidden goddess on her shell does not run the risk of being excommunicated. In the realm of affects, externalistic banishment is unlikely.

The exact ontological status of the substantiated cognitive object remains intriguingly undecided. Special cognizance is part of the deal surreptitiously made between Kepler and substances, or rather between a *certain* Kepler and *certain* substances. While contemplating Regina’s request to be allowed to marry, Johannes finds that a word in their conversation “swoop[s] out at her on...vibrating wings” (K, 102). He anxiously wonders if she had “felt that fevered wingbeat brush her cheek” (K, 103). We could be dealing with a particular affect (incestuous amorousness, jealous possessiveness), or we could be dealing with a personification of secret life. Such a mode of existence is not anything that a man called Kepler has willed or intended. For this reason it is surreptitiously dangerous. In fact the hidden life of secret feelings is so autonomous vis-à-vis any subject that might hypothetically be in psychological control over it that Kepler the man almost feels it to be a protrusion bulging the outline of his personhood, hence almost visible to bystanders. At home in Weilderstadt, even after a quarrel with his mother, or possible as an outcome of the reassuring domesticity of such an event, some part of him comes to a poise in which there is time to appreciate the

whole animate–inanimate bric-a-brac of the world as a “great noisome burden of things” that “nudged” him (K, 108). That which is transcendent, namely the world, is no longer so, but immanent, substantiated in the secrecy of the affective life.

All outside was immanent with a kind of stealthy knowingness. He stood for a while by the fountain in the market-place. The stone gargoyles had an air of suppressed glee, spouting fatly from pursed green lips...Familiarity rose up all round him like a snickering ghost. What did he know? *Was it possible for life to go on, his own life, without his active participation*, as the body’s engine continues to work while the mind sleeps? As he walked now he tried to weigh himself, squinting suspiciously at his own dimensions, looking for *the telltale bulge* where all that *secret life* might be stored. The murky emotions called forth by Regina’s betrothal were only part of it. (K, 107; emphasis added)

A stone or gargoyle is substance through and through. It has substantial self-coherence. But in so far as Kepler falls short of his secret life, he carries it around like a slightly protruding (because non-belonging) pouch or bulge. There is no locus in cosmological theory for the secret life. It is thus not only the Ptolemaic and Copernican universes that insufficiently account for affective excess, but the Keplerian cosmos too. It has no place for Johannes’s affective life understood non-anthropologically in terms of affectivity *per se*.

Intellectual consummation may arise in the manner of affective excess. When Kepler makes his chief scientific breakthrough, a “ragged fragment of a thought” *is given* while his mind is actually distracted by dance, drink, and a prostitute pawing him (K, 72). The explosive idea that the principle of uniform planet-velocity is false is not produced by the mind but is delivered to it. “[A]ll at once *out of nowhere*, out of everywhere, out of the fiddle music and flickering light and the pounding of heels, the circling dance and the Italian’s drunken eye, there *came to him* the ragged fragment of a thought” (K, 72; emphasis added). The idea, a substantiation of discovery out of nowhere, has for its agent not Kepler himself but fate as the “quivering tips of angelic wings” belonging to a “heaven-hurled angel” that, much like Regina, had “whispered in his ear” (K, 73). An “annunciation” had “been made to him” (K, 73). He had “ marvelled at the process” (K, 73). In its “tensed bright *air*,” he had been “a celestial swimmer” (K, 74; emphasis added).

An angel is an airborne presence. Here that presence is the condition of possibility for scientific solutions. When these come, they are not reducible to the psyche, or to the reality with which the psyche deals. A later account of Kepler’s epiphanies corroborates this impression.

When the solution came, it came, as always, through a back door of the mind, hesitating shyly, an announcing angel dazed by the immensity of its journey. One morning in the middle of May, while Europe was buckling on its sword, he felt the wing-tip touch him, and heard the mild voice say *I am here*. (K, 182)

The “immensity” of the journey is not an enormity in or of the mind, nor a greatness in or of the world. The one to whom the insight is given is touched by the wing-tip of destiny, of that which has arrived in a cloud of unknowing, yet “not by chance” (K, 73).

The old cosmos comes apart on account of this fatal substantiation. But the ‘new’ world does not stop falling apart on this account. The new cosmos, in so far as it remains a cosmos, goes on falling apart. Kepler falls through the old cosmos he has made obsolete but also through the new one he has discovered. “Rain spoke suddenly at the window: the sky was coming apart and falling on the city in undulant swathes....The rain was still coming down, but the clouds to the east had developed a luminous rip. There was a sudden beating of wings at the window” (K, 76).





## SECTION III — *THE NEWTON LETTER*

### 12. Drift

In *The Newton Letter* (1982) we encounter an anonymous historian who has lost his “faith in the primacy of the text” (*NL*, 1). Being both protagonist and narrator, he directs his letter/novella to Clio(na), possibly a friend but also the Muse of History—one of Mnemosyne’s nine daughters. The narrative recapitulates a recent summer during which the historian had planned to finish his biography on Sir Isaac Newton. The temporal perspective of both narrator and narrative in historical linear time is the present. Writing history has become impossible since real “people keep getting in the way now, objects, landscapes even” (*NL*, 1). The historian rents an Irish country lodge, Fern House, the Lawless family estate. Instead of writing the biography, he gets fatally drawn towards this mysterious house with its family affairs, secrets, and strange significances. The narrator becomes obsessed with “the *ordinary*, that strangest and most elusive of enigmas” (*NL*, 11). The proposed act of completing the Newton biography has turned into an autobiography with confessional traits.

Air in this novella is primarily felt as a lateral drift in which the sense of loss generates an affective intensification, and vice versa. The despatialising property of air goes hand in hand with a sense of privation and nothingness. The all-embracing thinness and translucency of air accentuate an almost-nothing that nevertheless is a palpable vividness defying objective representivity. Air is dangerously alive on the interface between exteriority and interiority, as when the narrator and Charlotte meet alone in the garden for the first time. The greenhouse’s interiority is “a dead and standing *pool of air*” while its exterior counterpart is a “*windy tumult* pressing against the glass all around,” turning the “summer breeze” on the outside into “a hurricane” (*NL*, 15; emphasis added). Air is cut off from itself by the glass, but the partition is not reducible to a sense of difference, negation, antithesis, or absence. As they walk in the greenhouse, the narrator is suddenly overwhelmed by an “excited apprehension” and is strangely affected by the place’s immanent ambience.

The heat, the sombre hush, the contrast between the stillness here and the windy tumult pressing against the glass all around us, provoked in

me a kind of excited apprehension, as if I were being led, firmly, but with infinite tact, into peril. Ranked colours thronged me round, crimson, purples, and everywhere green and more green, glabrous and rubbery and somehow ferocious. (*NL*, 15)

Excess of colour is simultaneously a hidden surplus of fear, a perilous excitation before a palpable but unknown presence. The “apprehension” has to do with air itself as its own provocation. The moment opens a receptivity to something unnamed that is not reducible to the ostentatious perceptual solicitations of the vivid plant-colours. The vibrantly nameless presence of the interior stillness is affectively, though not physically, analogous to the aerial vividness on the outside. The perceivable effects of air create a materially evident opposition between interiority and exteriority—yet by virtue of the uncanny, intrinsic power of its *aseity*, air plays affective havoc with the dichotomy it seems to accentuate. We feel the secret indifference of air to fixed spatio-temporal position. Progressively, this surreptitious evasiveness becomes structurally ironic vis-à-vis the reassuring sense of place established by means of the *genius loci* of Fern House and its environments. The standing pool of air in the greenhouse is a zone in which consciousness might become “a Dead Sea swimmer” lapped by directionless moments of mere drifting and lolling (*NL*, 49). A perverse complicity reigns between this interior air-domain and its invisible neighbour on the farther side of the glass. That more turbulent compactness is a cool version of the “soft slap in the face” given by the heat of the hothouse upon the intruder’s entry (*NL*, 14). On the inside–outside interface there is a becoming-substance of air in the inward movement that takes the visitor into the surprise of the greenhouse’s heat, but also a becoming-substance of air in the outward movement that takes him back from the lagoon of heat into the free-roving breeze on the outside.

Both of these movements are lateral, contrasting with the narrative’s scientific backdrop, i.e., the Newtonian discovery of gravity. Gravity belongs to nature, while air (in its Banvillean guise) does not. It belongs to nothing other than itself. To be in the hothouse is not to be ‘indoors,’ since enclosure here is no spatial event but primally indifferent to outside–inside distinction as antecedent to it. Air is this pure anteceding. The narrator feels that he is “being led,” not by Charlotte but by an airy force proper to the habitat (*NL*, 15). Finding himself at the rear end of Fern House, he senses that the garden itself has surreptitiously taken him in a circle (*NL*, 16). Geographical lostness marks a shift of attention and attunement. Earlier, sycamores stirred “faintly, almost surreptitiously in the bright air,” the faintness itself unleashing “something” that “pirouetted briefly” in the narrator too (*NL*, 10).

One is wrapped in air on all sides of every interface, so that leaving air is entering it. A change of milieu does not affect one’s exposure to air. At Ferns a prevailing sense of dispossession is in the air. Since air has no more

exteriority than it has interiority, the dispossession cannot be resolved by some shift of view, or through some process of detachment or higher involvement. The low long greenhouse helps define a surrounding openness that is not really open to anything other than what is already discovered inside, namely the “violent,” “ferocious,” almost oppressive intensification that for some reason puts everything else aside (*NL*, 15). Palpable, such affective forces are nevertheless not rationally intelligible, implying loss and unknowing. Retrospectively, experience at Ferns is air—a void whose materialisation is not itself an emptiness but an event or quasi-event. “There was *nothing*—but *something* had happened, all the same” (*NL*, 16; emphasis added).

As Charlotte and the narrator walk in the greenhouse, he sees “strange things, with strange pale stalks, and violent blossoms” (*NL*, 15). In *The Newton Letter* paleness indicates a reduction establishing the recurrence of an almost-nothing from which air cannot be distinguished. Paleness is analogous to a stillness “balanced on the brink of saying” (*NL*, 44). It materialises as “another version of silence” (*NL*, 44).

Michael, the boy at Fern House, is reticence personified. Completely mute, he has an “air of sullen autonomy” (*NL*, 19). Paleness, muteness, and silence have to do with distant, penurious sounds occurring on a perceptual threshold close to a zero-point of manifestation. The people of Ferns seem to be “facing away” from the narrator, “intent on something” that may turn out to be the almost-nothing of distant music (*NL*, 19). Spotted in the garden, Michael is caught up in a “rapt attention” directed towards “the tinny music of a carnival” (*NL*, 16). As Vladimir Jankélévitch has suggested, the object of musical attention is in such cases an airy emptiness, “impalpable and unattainable, nonexistent” (*MI*, 100). The pure givenness of music is “made of nothing, insisting upon nothing” (*MI*, 120). Its drift asymptotically approximates non-being, but falls short of nothingness in the reality of substance.<sup>70</sup> An asymptote denotes a curve that furtively comes closer to a straight line. The intersection occurs in infinity. Asymptotic drift adumbrates a poise between accomplishment and non-accomplishment. Paradoxically, the curve and the line will and will not meet.

The narrator-protagonist is drawn into the asymptote. He materialises to the side of himself. He does not consciously offer Charlotte a month’s rent in advance, but hears himself doing so (*NL*, 4). Almost an “interloper” (*NL*, 5), he begins to take himself and his behaviour as slightly unreal:

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<sup>70</sup> Vladimir Jankélévitch points out that in the Bible the aural often “trumps vision, and that God at certain moments reveals himself to man in the form of the spoken Word” (*MI*, 150). Such a Word is not the opposite of silence, but, as in music, silence as speech: “Without being pointlessly metaphorical, one could nonetheless say that silence is the desert where music blossoms and that music, a desert flower, is itself a sort of enigmatic silence” (*MI*, 154). In *The Newton Letter*, the muteness of the ordinary object has the capacity to appear as enigmatic silence in this sense.

I felt detached, as if I myself were an idea, a stylised and subtly inaccurate illustration of something that was *only real elsewhere*. Even the pages of my manuscript, when I sat worriedly turning them over, had an unfamiliar look, as if they had been written, not by someone else, but by *another version of myself*. (NL, 5; emphasis added)

Here disengaged subjectivity is not the world-oriented person writing biographies, nor is its “idea” something ideal, since it is “inaccurate.” What materialises is an intraworldly presence that eludes representation altogether, being always “only real elsewhere.” This presence draws the historian towards Ferns, but in succumbing to that process he is not really present there in a geographically positional sense. The “version” of existence he is becoming does not seem to belong to him at all, yet determines him fully. The detachment is not psychologically intelligible as that of a split personality, nor is it conceivable as a purely diasporatic selfhood. That which is “elsewhere” is not to be found in hypostatised exterior space but in the airy pre-world to which the subject has always already surrendered.<sup>71</sup> The event of being at Ferns strangely entails not being there, being-elsewhere. But being-elsewhere has a specific locus, namely Ferns. Ferns has a strange priority over space, as “elsewhere” in its substantiality has an intriguing precedence over being. “I wondered if the house knew what was going on” (NL, 28).

### 13. Autochthonous Substantiation

As there is an “autochthonous companion” to the narrator (NL, 49), there is also an autochthonous Charlotte to the side of Charlotte, an autochthonous Otilie to the side of Otilie, and an autochthonous temporality to the side of temporality. At Ferns there is a sense “of a time out of time, of this summer as a *self-contained unit* separate from the time of the ordinary world” (NL, 49; emphasis added).<sup>72</sup> Such temporal aseity has a spatial counterpart and has to do with reduction and renunciation, with the (passive) act of retreating to an esoteric domain on the hither side of a ‘represented’ or ‘self-represented’ world. What could be said in this respect about the historian at Ferns could be said of Newton in Cambridge, of “Canon Koppernigk at Frauenburg, of Nietzsche in the Engadine” (NL, 49). Ferns, Cambridge,

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<sup>71</sup> The event of being reducible to air is not the event of being reducible to nothingness, as in Jean-Paul Sartre’s existentialism. At the heart of being, in *The Newton Letter*, there is not nihilated being.

<sup>72</sup> Derek Hand points out that a “fern is a vascular cryptogam, a plant which possesses no stamens or pistils and therefore has no flowers or seeds (no organs of reproduction)” (EF, 51). This lack of means for reproduction nevertheless makes manifest the affective proliferation occurring there. The processes going on at Ferns are neither natural (biological), nor ideal; they are purely despatialised forces that do not need any organs or causes to persist.

Frauenburg, and Engadine are inhabited by figures “who renounced the world” (*NL*, 50). The renunciation is not limited to the human figures, but is a property of the loci themselves. In spatial autochthony, space itself has come to a “Dead Sea” halt. Time seems to be incapable of forwardness into the future, of flow, change, creativity, newness. With space it has withdrawn into an uncreative stasis, one that has already afflicted the historian. Yet the uncreative has its own quasi-creativity. Spatio-temporal inertia is unreal, but makes manifest a peculiar vividness. A curious sense of reversal is at hand:

Ferns...was strange beyond expressing, unreal, and yet hypnotically vivid in its unreality. There was no sense of life messily making itself from moment to moment. It had all been lived already, and we were merely tracing the set patterns, as if not living really, but remembering...I saw this summer as already a part of the past, immutable, crystalline and perfect. The future had ceased to exist. I drifted, lolling like a Dead Sea swimmer, lapped round by a warm blue soup of timelessness. (*NL*, 49)

The cessation of all accomplishing is itself an accomplishment—the accomplishment. In fact cessation is a substance (“crystalline”). Its autochthony, to be sure, may be seen in terms of a mere “spawning of multiple selves” within a diffusion through which we see, “all at Ferns dividing” in the manner of helpless “amoebas” afloat in a universe of nihilistic fragmentation (*NL*, 49). From such a viewpoint, personality-hybrids such as “Charlottie” (Charlotte-plus-Otilie) or “that other version of myself which stood apart,” watching its own “antics,” simply manifest a trite law of displacement (*NL*, 48). Yet read in the context of the process of *constituting substantiation*, decisive in the tetralogy, these phenomena are autochthons *coming to givenness out of nowhere*—intact, inexplicable, and terrifyingly substantial. Substantiation—the wondrous materialisation of *something* out of air, of substance out of nothing—sooner or later takes over everywhere. At first, the “presence” of Charlotte during the historian’s intercourse with Otilie is merely that of “a pure spirit” numinously observing the sexual act (*NL*, 48), but as time elapses this insubstantial entity *takes on substance*.<sup>73</sup> No longer just an onlooker, “full of tenderness for these sad mortals struggling among the sheets,” the autochthon comes alive as a substantial creature whose “delicate wings,” as *air substantiated*, come to fold the lovers’ affections into their own embracing materiality (*NL*, 48).

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<sup>73</sup> In her discussion of Heidegger’s forgetting of air, Luce Irigaray hypostatizes air as originally given by femininity: “She gives—first—air, and does so irrecoverably, with exception of the unfolding, from and within her, of whoever takes air from her” (*The Forgetting of Air*, 28). From this viewpoint, every forgetting of air is also a forgetting of the female life-giving support. This anthropologising of air makes it strangely subservient to human agency—as if air needed the human being to be air—whereas in fact the human being needs air in order to even think this thought, to even *be* in the first place.

I call this process of taking-on substance *autochthonous substantiation*. Its psychological milieu is that of displacement, loss, breakdown, disorientation, and dissemination, but it is itself none of these. One cannot say that external factors trigger autochthonous happenings, any more than one can say that Newton's, Copernicus's, Nietzsche's, or the protagonist's breakdowns unleash each other. Equally preposterous would be the proposition that the autochthonous zones of these defaults are each other's triggers: as if Frauenburg caused Engadine or Ferns. Autochthonous substantiation is thus not to be seen as a temporal phenomenon. Nor is it to be seen as a spatial reality, if by space we refer to territory, land, and world. The autochthons are *too intensely material* for 'space' and 'time.'

To fully understand this, consider the phenomenon of a flock of birds scattered over the great square in Venice. From a spatial or temporal viewpoint, the event is a part of space called Venice and a temporal slot in which birds scatter. From the viewpoint of autochthony, however, it is the very experience of witnessing *the scattering* that first gives a sense of what the great square in Venice is all about. That flutter is not added to the experience, to Venice, or to the square but is *originally constitutive* of a peculiar excitement involving an invigorating sense of airiness that is indistinguishable from the whole phenomenon's mode of idiosyncratic appearing. When birds disperse in a scattering of cries, the materiality of the great square in Venice does not itself scatter but comes to view as precisely that which is defined by such poetically swift and momentary ripples. Despite its airiness, or by virtue of it, scattering is a *substance*: the bird-flutter brings the great square to the point of full self-materialisation. The softly startled flight of birds does not signal a scattering of substance but impinges as the autochthon of scattering seen in its substance. When this phenomenon emerges as the sexual climax of Otilie's inaugural lovemaking with the narrator-historian, the "flock" of affects dispersing across Otilie's sexually aroused body cannot dissolve or disperse its substantiality but accentuate it as the habitat in which such ripples structurally and originally inhere. The ecstatic scattering belongs to the sexual body as its *constituting* feature.

I was not prepared for her gentleness....I could hear the rain's whispered exclamations at the window. In the city of the flesh I travel without maps, a worried tourist: and Otilie was a very Venice. I stumbled lost in the blue shade of her pavements. Here was a dreamy stillness, a swaying, the splash of an oar. Then when I least expected it, suddenly I stepped into the great square, the sunlight, and she was a flock of birds scattering with soft cries in my arms. (*NL*, 26)

As an orgasmic ripple may be felt to suddenly materialise out of nowhere—suggested by the words "when I least expected it"—*substance* in *The*

*Newton Letter* turns up in air (here the sunlight of the great square)<sup>74</sup> as a substantial version of air's self-appearing. Here "travel" takes place "without maps," occurring not as change of location or as transcendence but as entry ("suddenly stepped out into"). The entry is not the terminus of an act of willing, but is a gift no one has given. It itself materialises out of nothing, is a mere flutter in the "great" square. Yet while the surprised traveller recognises the originating role of air's constituting insubstantiality, the "scattering" does not introduce a feeling of dissolution but is tied to a sense of solids and substances ("pavements," "an oar"). The birds do not cease to be birds when they scatter; the scattered flock is still a flock. Without its scattering-potential it could not exhibit itself as just that—a *flock* of birds.

Venice, Engadine, Frauenburg, and Ferns: each is an autochthon, a world that can only be understood in terms of itself. The strange milieu of Ferns beckons from afar, even when the protagonist is bodily present to it within its physical parameters. This enchantment is there in the opening as well as in the concluding pages, where, remote from the place, the narrating historian feels that he may go back to Ferns and set up house. When physically there, he feels that Charlotte looks at him as if he is "transparent...translucent" (*NL*, 42).<sup>75</sup> On another occasion he senses that he turns "to glass," to something that "the world could shine through unimpeded" (*NL*, 57).

The lovemaking with Otilie is displaced by the surreptitious presence of Charlotte. But with her things are not any different. In subsequent recollection, the trace of Charlotte is intriguing, like a phenomenon that may or may not have been real. "Such are the pictures of Charlotte, in my mind. In the best of them she is *not present at all*...Only her *glow* remains" (*NL*, 44; emphasis added). This absence is not an empty displacement or nothingness. What occurs is not primarily an enactment of the postmodern sense of deferral and break-up but a manifestation of an entity *whose very substance comes aglow*. This brightness is no less real and material than a "blood-red glow" that is "swelling among the trees" in the Fern House garden (*NL*, 75). The bracketing of presence makes way for an alternative presence that cannot be negated. Long after the narrator's escapade with her, Charlotte's "glow" outdoes every presence by being an "afterglow" which in its existential peripherality indicates a pulse stronger than the heartbeat of natural life.

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<sup>74</sup> Cf. Irigaray: "Light presupposes air. No sun without air to welcome and transmit its rays. No speech without air to convey it. Day and night, voice and silence, appear and disappear in air" (*The Forgetting of Air*, 167).

<sup>75</sup> For some commentators, Charlotte's peculiar gaze is explained by her being under the influence of sedative drugs. In that type of reading, the decisive phenomenon is neutralised and sorted into the epistemological nothing-is-what-it-seems-theme. Cf. Hand, *EF*, 56; Imhof, *CI*, 144.



Only her glow remains. Here is an empty chair in rain-light, cut flowers on a work-bench, an open window with lightning flickering distantly in the dark. Her absence throbs in these views more powerfully, more poignantly than any presence...Her physical presence itself seemed overdone, a clumsy representation of the essential she. That essence was only to be glimpsed obliquely, on the outer edge of vision, an image always fleeting, like the afterglow of a bright light on the retina. (*NL*, 44)

## 14. Afterglow

In *The Newton Letter*, the autochthon has shown itself as a self-contained unit of a certain substance: as a shade no less substantial than the pavement that is its ground, as a heat no less solid than the glass which engenders it, as a house no less conscious than its inhabitants, and as a scattering of birds no less forcefully Venetian than the great square which is their open-air residence. I have spoken about these autochthons as pre-givens, as entities pre-existing the milieus in which they are given. But I have also spoken of a becoming, of a process through which the autochthons materialise. That which materialises may very well be nothing—yet its very materialisation is a substance, something substantial to be reckoned with. In a strange way, no process of materialisation calls more dramatically attention to the substantiality of materialisation *as such* than the materialisation of nothing. Here nothing extrinsic to materialisation distracts from *its* indubitable actuality. To be sure, the becoming of Otilie or Charlotte as autochthon is also the becoming-nothing of it or her. To be sure, the becoming-drama of the Ferns and of the individual fates embedded in its meshed strands of human life-intricacies is also simultaneously their becoming-nothing, becoming-irreal, becoming-air. To be sure, the becoming of time is the becoming-nothing of it, as is the case of self, psyche, history, language, consciousness, and location in exterior space. Yet this becoming-nothing is not itself a nothing. There is, then, a secret bond between substantiation and nothingness—and nothing exhibits this more clearly than penurious phenomena.

*The Newton Letter* foregrounds the “poor dumb things” that Sir Isaac is said to have become attentive to in his post-scientific period of creative decline: “a tree, a house,” things “that suffer their lives in silence” (*NL*, 80). The letter in which Newton is said to have perceived the mystery of ordinary things is supposed to “lie at the centre” of the protagonist’s writerly research on the scientist (*NL*, 50)—as if Sir Isaac’s breakdown, and not his great discoveries, had been the clue to the universe. Neither the absolutes of time and space, nor the relativisations of these through despair, doubt, or ennui, bring us to a clear vision of reality. Other entities effectuate this. Unlike his discovered laws, Sir Isaac’s ‘post-Newtonian’ phenomena do not point

beyond themselves to a transcendent reality of which they are signs. They do not say anything that they themselves are not, do not bespeak anything other than that which they themselves already are. They are immanent articulations of a sacred kind and the act of sighting them has possibly got to do with Isaac Newton's post-career immersion in holy writ (*NL*, 23).

But then suddenly he is talking about the excursions he makes nowadays along the banks of the Cam, and of his encounters, not with the great men of the college, but with tradesmen, the sellers and makers of things. *They would seem to have something to tell me; not of their trades, nor even of how they conduct their lives; nothing I believe, in words. They are, if you will understand it, themselves the things they might tell. They are all a form of saying...* (*NL*, 50-51)

No leap of faith is required for the act of shifting from the world of representivity monitored by the words of language to the sphere that brings the word of the 'commonplace' to light. This latter word is not a stranger to texts—which is why it is somehow present even in the linguistic reality that the narrator posits as a letter from Sir Isaac to John Locke. That which the early pages of *The Newton Letter* presents as possible only through the annihilating incandescence of a fire that accidentally reduces Newtonian writing to ashes is here at the end of the work consubstantial with that writing, "if not in the lines themselves then in the spaces between" (*NL*, 50).<sup>76</sup> Such spaces are parts of Newtonian space.

The pale space of silence is nothingness as well as life. It "throbs" between the lines, and is therefore animate—yet it pulsates in terms of the "nothing" that natural science has defined as an anomaly (*NL*, 50). That which the nothing shows, namely itself, cannot become manifest in loci other than the ones the narrator selects for special attention: Frauenburg, Ferns, Engadine, the room at Cambridge where Newton and his work are subjected to a fire that extinguishes representable reality. In the latter locus "the nothing automatically signifies the everything," but this "everything," being the new universe where the representing subject "no longer knows how to live," is itself a nothing, as is the signifying that might have made sense of it (*NL*, 23). Yet the nothing—that which "was already ashes"—is also substance, "something terrible and lovely, like flame itself. *Nothing*" (*NL*, 23). To have the capacity to be something terrible and lovely is not a nothing but a something. The nothing is aflame in an annihilating incineration of itself, but simultaneously it is a manifestation of the inflaming. The nothing tells of itself, having nothing to tell apart from the glow of its aseity. Such a flame is an instantiation of the things mentioned in

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<sup>76</sup> Jankélévitch speaks of the "unwritten page" as "silence, original nothingness" (*MI*, 130). As substance, "silence is not Nonbeing, but, rather, something other than Being" (*MI*, 154). This other than Being is distinct but not separate from Being. It is something that accompanies Being.

the last page, seen by Sir Isaac only furtively in the stretches of days when his science was ashes for him: the things that are that which they tell, and whose saying involves no addition of signs to the penuriousness that is given.

As soon as penurious substance is foregrounded in this way, new light is retrospectively cast on one of the opening lines of the narrative: “Shall I say, I’ve lost my faith in the primacy of the text” (*NL*, 1)? The narrator is speaking of himself, of the one who is in the process of abandoning the venture of writing a book on Newton, but the lines also shed light on one of the topics of that relinquished work, Sir Isaac’s own renunciation of discursive effort and textual commitment. The biographically conjectural episode in which Newton finds his recent pages reduced to ashes is one in which the primacy of the text suddenly no longer seems all that primary. What threatens to drive the old man crazy, we are told, is not the loss of the papers, but the fact that an even greater loss of textual material “wouldn’t mean a thing” (*NL*, 22). While this sensation might signal some impinging ailment, it might also betoken sanity—in the sense not only of insight and clarity but of health. Newton is not losing his hold on truth, but is sharpening his sense of reality defined in terms of “another kind of truth” (*NL*, 22). This alternative truth is based not on discovery of the macrocosmic workings of the laws of the universe—which become progressively representable—but on the discovery of phenomena whose slightness does not even deserve the name ‘microcosmic,’ and for which no epistemological laws can be worked out.

The unarticulated Logos of such “commonplace things” is not accessed by the author of the *Principia* and *Opticks*,<sup>77</sup> nor by the author of the abandoned Newton biography envisaged by the narrator visiting Ferns (*NL*, 51). The reason for this inaccessibility is the slightness of the phenomena in question—the glow of the page-cinders in Sir Isaac’s study, the “glow” and “afterglow” left by Charlotte as a trace in the life of the amorous protagonist (*NL*, 44). Here the affective flame is so close to nothingness that the issue of its very reality arises: “Is it possible to love someone of whom one has so little” (*NL*, 45). The deepest answer to such a question from the viewpoint of the work’s affective rationale might be that *only* the “so little” is a true love-object. Anything exceeding the almost-nothing of the *so-little* is dubious, and only the microsubstance of clandestine insignificance deserves unreserved trust and respect.

The love that is an affective penuriousness calls to mind the intersection of air and light that Sir Isaac momentarily perceived as the “*Nothing*” whose flame is so “terrible and lovely” (*NL*, 23). At times the narrator himself intuits the silent ineffability of air. Retrospecting while being immersed in an early Nordic spring, he senses the peculiar co-affection of beauty and

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<sup>77</sup> I use the concept ‘Logos’ with the Heideggerian emphasis on its primordial meaning, i.e. as *apophansis*. This involves the possibility of beings being “seen from themselves” (*BT*, 144).

penurious pallor. “The landscape, if it can be called that, has a peculiar *bleached beauty*, much to my present taste. Tiny flowers appear on the tundra, slender and *pale* as the souls of dead girls. And I have seen the auroras” (*NL*, 77; emphasis added).<sup>78</sup> Even the unwanted pregnancy revealed towards the end of the text is from such a penurious perspective part of the *so-little* that is enough to surprise the world. As a unit of living insignificance, the unborn child provisionally supplies the narrating protagonist with something whose birth he is part of, and which, unlike the grand work on Newton, makes a contribution to primacy as such, though not to that of the text. In *The Newton Letter*, textual primacy gives way to the pre-eminence of penurious substance. This shift requires a faith of sorts—faith in a Logos that is able to live without words, in the presence of an insignificance that may or may not be nothing.



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<sup>78</sup> From the viewpoint of the natural sciences, the auroras are electrons falling into the earth’s atmosphere, but the luminous emission is an intersection between light and air.

## SECTION IV — *MEFISTO*

### 15. Geminated Constitution

Seeming to be a tale about the victory of chaos over order, of accident over pattern, of non-signifying over signifying, and of randomness over science, *Mefisto* (1986) is actually a narrative emphasising the triumph of constitution. The protagonist Gabriel Swan declares that he has “gone back to the very start, to the simplest things” (*M*, 234). The very start as such is the zone of constitution. Understood objectively, “numbers are exact, and rigorous” (*M*, 194); in contrast, life as such, even the *life* of numbers (rather than the numbers), is “hazy” (*M*, 192). The narrative is about this *haze* that precedes all substances, about the presubstantial, unconstituted zone in which worlds have not yet crystallised. I intend to show that what is at stake in *Mefisto* is that which is prior to the substantiation of worlds and their contents—prior to substantiation in general.

When Gabriel has been persuaded to relinquish faith in the cosmos, and thus to accept a general randomness in which there are only “oases of order” (*M*, 170), these oases, precisely by not being reducible to systematicity, completely upset the neat distinction between order and chaos. The embedded “oases” are in fact not islands of order at all. The reality Gabriel constantly encounters contains “oases”—not of order but of air. The first word of *Mefisto* is also its last: “chance” (*M*, 3, 234)—but between these, right in the middle of the text at its divisive meridian, stands the concluding word of its first half: “air” (*M*, 120). Into and out of this element flow the two geminated parts of the narrative.

“Order, pattern, harmony” (*M*, 202) are like “certainty” (*M*, 193)—they fall away as soon as Gabriel Swan feels “that it was no longer numbers that lay at the heart of things” (*M*, 185). Yet in the text a thing is precisely not ‘a thing,’ nor is an event ‘an event,’ nor a moment ‘a moment.’ Accordingly, the protagonist is quite at odds with the text in which he is embedded when he asserts that some mighty progress has been made as soon as numbers give way to the thing-in-itself that they are presumed to ‘represent.’ The text subjects Gabriel to an irony that he does not himself fully recognise. “Numbers, I saw at last, were only a method, a way of doing. *The thing itself* would be more subtle, more certain, even, than the mere manner of its finding. And I would find it, of that I had no doubt, even if I did not as yet

know how. It would be a matter, I thought, of waiting” (*M*, 185; emphasis added).

As we shall see, *Mefisto* is not a commonplace ‘epistemological’ work on the so-called impossibility of true, absolute, certain knowledge. Gabriel *has* absolute knowledge and absolute certainty. His problem is that he remains in the epistemological attitude. *Mefisto* is not an epistemological novel about the impossibility of knowing, but an anti-epistemological work that derides the naturalistic attitude in general. Banville’s literary language is not epistemological but phenomenological. What is staged on virtually every page is not some knowledge-barrier between a knower and something needing to be known, but *life itself* as something in which appearances have the habit of manifesting themselves in certain utterly astonishing ways of phenomenalisation. These ways are not of the ‘epistemological’ kind thematised by Gabriel Swan as “a method, a way of doing,” or as the “manner of its finding” (*M*, 185). Banvillean ways are not bridges between consciousness and its objects but *the ways of constitution itself*. Such ways precede consciousness, constituting it.

Unlike the text in its primally living flow, the protagonist cannot touch the issue of constitution without instantly epistemologising it. Yet in the lapse, interlude, surprise, or hallucination that pre-experientially precedes this ‘epistemological instant’ there is given to Gabriel various pockets of air that his knowing-reflexes cannot keep up with. The recurrence of these oases is not reducible to mere imagery. Nor can they be explained away by reference to Gabriel’s unreliability as a narrator.<sup>79</sup> Air upsets epistemology, understood anthropologically as a fabrication of order,<sup>80</sup> but it also disqualifies chaos as implied opposition to this man-made order. The zone resisting the order-versus-disorder polarisation is constitution as such. Its power is fatal in *Mefisto*. It is to these aspects of the protagonist’s life that I now turn.

Gabriel Swan belongs qua winged *swan* to an entire array of airborne and airborne beings spreading their wings in the text. He is viewed as a “cygnet” (*M*, 36). He says that his “mother...made a nest” for him (*M*, 9). Felix keeps referring to him as “bird-boy” (*M*, 37, 57, 82, 112, 142). Part of Gabriel’s

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<sup>79</sup> See for instance Brian Stephen McIlroy, “Scientific Art: The Tetralogy of John Banville” (Ph.D., Diss.), 246-50, and Ingo Berensmeyer, *FO*, 188. The rational chain of thought would be: we cannot trust the narrator, therefore we cannot trust the narrative, and as a consequence of that we cannot trust air. The overload of metaphorical markers used by the narrator has the capacity to destabilise the dichotomisation between imagination and ‘the real,’ but air does not obey any such division in the first place. Berensmeyer suggests a possible reading of *Mefisto* in which the Gabriel of the second part is not identical with the Gabriel of the first part (*FO*, 193). If this reading is possible, then who is the narrator? Destabilisation on the level of the narrator does not affect the fact that the narrative is uncompromisingly there. Air evidently establishes its presence in all of the tetralogy novels, defiant of their different narrator-structures.

<sup>80</sup> Cf. Berensmeyer: “A theory of the cosmos is an imposition of order onto the inaccessible nature of things. This order is a fabricated order, a man-made, aesthetic product, time-bound and subject to change” (*FO*, 122).



existence is manifested as flight-patterns. He is shown ascending, floating, falling, and turning.

It is made clear already from the beginning of the text that the air-and-bird motif is linked to the concept of “gemination” (*M*, 4). As the wing of a bird has its exact twin on the farther side of the animal’s body, so at conception Gabriel has a twin brother who continues to live after post-natal death on his farther side as a perpetually present absence. What is given at birth, or within the point of genesis at “the very start” of conception qua constitution, is a gemination that will never be able to entirely free itself from the sense of irreducible internal co-presence (*M*, 234).

The annunciation of first constitution is winged: “When did my mother realize the nature of the cargo she was carrying? What *archangel* spoke?” (*M*, 4; emphasis added). Textually, a metaphysical-to-physical drift instantly gives way to the materialisation of a “pair of magpies” moving about in a cabbage field, in immediate textual adjacency to the substantiation of the “archangel” (*M*, 4). In the next paragraph Mrs Swan’s hair is shown to be “pulled back in two tight, gleaming *black wings*” (*M*, 4; emphasis added). It is clear that the winged gemination-phenomenon is not reducible to physical randomness.

A spookily metaphysical twinning keeps haunting the text as a chief perturbation in it: “She was herself undergoing a kind of gemination. Her condition did not so much change her as produce another person” (*M*, 4). The haunting that is everywhere present in *Mefisto* is made possible by the circumstance that gemination is always beforehand germination and vice versa. This gemination/germination structure is not itself a matter of chance. Nor is it something that works against chance—by being somehow on the side of order, cosmos, law, or science. Constitution (the germination of the ‘cells’ of experience) is gemination (the *a priori* passing of each experiential ‘cell’ beyond itself into its lost twin). Being geminated, the constitution of life constitutes ‘experience’ but also the darkness of inexperienceability. This, in the text, is the fatal. The dark, *inexperiential*, unknowable, invisible twin-component of life is ‘closer’ than its fully *experiential* counterpart to the source (to constitution as such)—as Gabriel’s instantly dead twin brother is closer than him to the mystery of nativity. Gabriel can thus only fully know himself by not doing so, by ‘entering’ the void non-consciousness or blank pre-consciousness of his brother. He can only vividly experience anything at the absolutely primitive threshold where experience is still constitution and where constitution is still gemination.

All of this complexity already involves air—“archangel,” “magpies,” “gleaming black wings” (*M*, 4). Air in the novel is neither physical nor metaphysical. It is not a blend, synergy, dialectic, or interaction between these but something *constitutionally primitive* that has always beforehand involved itself in the co-originality of constitution and gemination. The twins are “monovular” but in *Mefisto* that goes for ‘wings’ too (*M*, 3). All doubling—all splitting—in the novel is monozygotic. A pair of wings is not



a one-plus-one structure, any more than a monovular twin is an addition to (or division of) its identical sibling. This is why it is incorrect to speak of the dark or lost twin *as an other*. A twin is not an instantiation of otherness. The twin does not supplement its fellow. They are simply twins. Constitution as such is geminated.

The novel's conception of the conundrum of mathematics is based on the circumstance that *the monovular interbelonging of 'one' and 'zero'* is not to be understood transcendentally in terms of supplementarity and otherness but monozygotically in terms of geminated constitution. Monozygotic phenomenalisation is written into the various text-defining phenomena of *Mefisto*: substantiation, flying, falling, mathematics, love, suffering, and pain. Gabriel Swan's mathematical fixation on "the mystery of the unit" cannot be separated from his monozygotic awareness of the perpetual monovular co-presence of his "phantom brother" (*M*, 18)—for the ultimate monovular twins in *Mefisto* are not only human infants (one dead and one living), but the cipher *one* and its phantom brother *zero*. "I cannot see a one and a zero juxtaposed without feeling deep within me the vibration of a dark, answering note" (*M*, 18). *One* relates itself to *zero* precisely as Gabriel to his always already lost twin brother. Far from being simply "juxtaposed," the two are monozygotically implied in each other. As Gabriel's phantom brother is closer to the mystery of constitution by virtue of having prematurely ended his life in immediate proximity to its secret source-moment or source-locus, so the cipher *zero* is in *Mefisto* somehow closer than the cipher *one* to the constituting heart of mathematics.<sup>81</sup> There is something that is nearer to the world of numbers than number—namely zero. Analogously, something is nearer to life than the world of the living, namely phantom life. Gabriel's twin brother harbours life's monovular secret—an enigma that Gabriel can only intuit in so far as he monozygotically *becomes* this geminated form of himself, lacking all experiential capability. *Zero's* power is its numberlessness; the power of Gabriel's monovular brother is his experiencelessness—his power of abiding where experience no longer is, but also where experience comes to be. The sense of substantial oneness is accompanied by the sense of zeroness, of its airy possibility.

Emptiness weighed on me. It seemed to me I was not all my own, that I was being shared. If I fell, say, and cut my knee, I would be aware immediately of an echo, a kind of chime, as of a wine-glass shattering somewhere out of sight, and I would feel a soft shock like that when the dreamer on the brink of blackness puts a foot on a step which is not there. Perhaps the pain was lessened—how would I have known? (*M*, 18)

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<sup>81</sup> Cf. Brendan McNamee: "A one and a zero, a presence and an absence: together they make up a whole. Just as the absence that is Gabriel's dead twin is a huge presence in his life, so, too, the absence represented by the figure zero is absolutely vital to the entire edifice of mathematics" ("Sacred Chaos: Form and the Immediate in John Banville's *Mefisto*," 212).

To step on something that is not there is a step into air. Zeroness has precedence over oneness. Absence (the missing twin) is a magnet that attracts, a caller. Zero is empty and hollow. It is the mouth of constitution calling the constituted back into its prior nullity: “zero still gaped, voracious as ever” (*M*, 173). Gabriel and his little lost brother (also possibly a swan) are monovularly inseparable—the little infant twin brother is secretly always part and parcel of Gabriel Swan’s elations, constituted monozygotically by the monovular priority of *zero* over its twin brother *one*.

Pregnant with the gemination soon to yield the infant *One* (Gabriel) and the infant *Zero* (his brother), Mrs Swan is exposed to air as something that produces strange aviators out of itself—out of airy nothingness, *ex nihilo*. A bird seems inexplicably to materialise out of nowhere. “One day a crow falls down dead out of a tree” (*M*, 6). But air as this nothingness out of which dead aviators strangely emerge is also the element into which they first elapse, being an element of constitution as well as of its definitive cessation. At the moment of their birth the two cygnets “surfaced at last, gasping,” brother *One* arriving first, brother *Zero* being “a poor second. Spent swimmer, he *drowned in air*” (*M*, 8; emphasis added). Air appears as the necessary source and terminus of numerous possibilities: “We might have been siamese. One of us might have exsanguinated into the other’s circulation. Or we might simply have strangled each other. All this we escaped” (*M*, 8).<sup>82</sup> The phantom brother drowns in (the element of) constitution. Being more or less nothing, more or less zero, he may be said to drown in himself as air gasping in air.

Gabriel’s little phantom brother “drowned” in air because the text-specific swan-affect joins air to water so as to manifest a joint element in which the properties of air by the same token are those of water and vice versa. It is possible to go swanning or “*swimming in air*” in *Mefisto* (*M*, 55; emphasis added). It is also possible to take “a gulp of night air” (*M*, 165). When Gabriel’s beloved Sophie moves in her element, one perceives “the syncopated slow *wingbeat* of her shoulder-blades” (*M*, 55; emphasis added).<sup>83</sup> In the “waveless sea” of her silences, she communicates “in an *airy, insubstantial* language consisting not of words but of moving forms,

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<sup>82</sup> Laura P. Zuntini de Izarra argues that the movement from chaos to order is prominent in *Mefisto*. Her generalised understanding of maximum entropy adheres to the modern reinterpretation of the second law of thermodynamics, which states that any process necessarily selects the fastest path towards a minimum of possibilities. She declares that the narrative “represents the dark side of the human mind—the anxiety of uncertainty generated by the unpredictable, the void of loss in irreversible processes, where death is the result of maximum entropy” (*MHL*, 113). Death is here precisely maximum entropy, but it is concurrently air.

<sup>83</sup> The syncopation of the wingbeat is of importance since it makes manifest a shadow-rhythm to a more expected primary cadence. As a rhythmic shadow it is no less distinct. It fits with precision into the dominating beat. Analogously Sophie is part of the cosmic while belonging to aquatic air.

transparent, yet precise and sharp, like *glass shapes in air*" (M, 55; emphasis added). Air has such power that it can simultaneously assimilate and fuse the seemingly incompatible elements of water and fire. The last lines of Part One, the ones showing us the huge explosion that burns Gabriel into a shapelessness beyond recognition, render him as one who "flew on flaming wings," while less fortunate objects sink into the fiery abyss "as if into water instead of flame" (M, 120). The entire disaster nevertheless remains an air phenomenon since an explosion is precisely something in which air shows what it can do. As aquatic bird, Gabriel Swan is somehow ready for the air—knowing, once started, how to fly strongly. But he is also attuned to things that move gracefully in general. Creatures pass fluidly within wetness like birds swooping "through *the rinsed air*" (M, 58; emphasis added). As aquatic narrator, Gabriel is an aquarellist whose intensest raptures are triggered by bird-like "shrills and swoopings" in the "lambent, watercolour air" (M, 185, 186).

These aquatic-aerial affects constitute the life-element that replaces his former excitement-milieu, the world of numbers.

Now, as spring quickened all around me, the city came alive, like a garden indeed, flushed and rustling, impatient and panting, with vague shrills and swoopings on all sides in the lambent, watercolour air. I put aside the black notebook, it annoyed me now...Why should I worry about the nature of irrational numbers, or addle my brain any longer with the puzzle of what in reality a negative quantity could possibly be? Zero is absence....Such definitions would suffice. (M, 185-86)

Gabriel now senses "with a shiver the outlines of another, darker, more dangerous world" (M, 186). Earlier in life—before the epochal, all-transforming explosion—he had intuited this selfsame dimension of things, but without taking it seriously, without letting it disturb his cherished world of numbers. Those earlier manifestations too had been aerial: "Air of summer flowed over the sill, vague, silky, like *air from another world*" (M, 109; emphasis added). The place where he feels the possibility of complete ontological metamorphosis is aptly named Ashburn. Here air has itself changed so much that Gabriel Swan cannot at first believe that he is in his air-element. "I moved in a new medium there, a dense, silvery stuff that flushed and shimmered, *not like air at all*, but a *pure fluid* that held things fixed and trembling, like *water* in the brimming jet of a *fountain*" (M, 54; emphasis added). What has happened, however, is that air, rather than vanishing, has assumed the qualities of water: the one who is seen "swimming in air," and whose movements are "glass shapes in air" (M, 55), has endowed air with the qualities that a *winged* aquatic creature is attuned to.

Generally speaking, birds in *Mefisto* are *substantiations of air*. But since air is always beforehand attached to an insubstantiation-affect, the

*materialisation of birds* is highly ambiguous in the text. The appearing of a wing, bird, flight, or plume becomes an intriguing *substantiation of insubstantiation*. The narrative's birds simultaneously affirm and deny substantiation. In each sudden glimpse of this or that flight or fleeting plume, the entire aesthetic and existential vision hangs in the balance. At any moment the universe may tip either way. Birds therefore have to do with regeneration. There is an annunciation that does not materialise all at once. It occurs and disoccurs in a convoluted series of showings in which each tiny glimpse (always made in air) may or may not be the beginning or end of conversion.<sup>84</sup>

The accord between air and (in)substantiation often needs to be approached through the concept of gravity. A bird soaring freely into the upper streams of air seems to be no more substantial than them. In contrast, a bird seen falling in mid-air appears to have lost its air-magic, cutting through the insubstantiality of its element as a substance fallen from air's dematerialising aloofness. In *Mefisto*, the substantiation of air and entities tied to air is hazardous, dubiously fatal. An insignificant piece of clothing may suddenly turn into an intimation of the fatal by just being there. "One night I arrived and found a yellow cardigan draped on the back of a chair, where someone had forgotten it. We did not move it...and as the night wore on it became a more and more insistent, *numinous presence*, unsettling as a *pair of golden wings*" (*M*, 172; emphasis added). Equivocal, air invites these possibilities. As a thrill or elation, substantiation may kill off air but also redouble its allure and crystallise its insubstantiality into deity. The Icarus motif orchestrates this precarious nexus in which air and substantiation are drawn together into the (in)substantiating figure of flying/falling (*M*, 202, 232).

What is accentuated in the substantiation that brings a blackbird to givenness is not the bird as such but its shadowy, light-deprived, constituting source: the "glimmering dusk" uncovered by the light that has "retreated" (*M*, 110, 109). Like many a bird in the text, the blackbird *sings* of the pre-substantial. It is to the call of this wild, pre-substantial pre-world that Gabriel Swan gradually has to attend. "Everything was sway and flow and sudden lurch. Surfaces *that had seemed solid* began to give way under me. I could hold nothing in my hands, all slipped through my fingers helplessly...I grew dizzy" (*M*, 109; emphasis added).

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<sup>84</sup> With Gaston Bachelard we may say that the bird is both air and flying motion, hardly distinguishable from the element in which it occurs, since "the bird's body is made out of the air that surrounds it and...its life is made up of the motion that transports it" (*AD*, 69). It is quite clear that a "bird flies because it participates in light air" (*AD*, 72). To join air is to become part of air's substantiating-desubstantiating oscillation. Any instantiation of "flight is a warm wind before being a wing" (*AD*, 73). It is air before being an object. In *Mefisto* birds indicate the poise between materialisation and its reverse directionality. Like other aerial entities such as sylphs, clouds, and shadows, birds may appear as "a veil, an aerial form, enveloped and enveloping, happy to be undefined and to live at the edge of the visible and the invisible" (*AD*, 73).

Erupting substances emerge in a birdlike, startling, unpredictable, pointlike fashion, whether they are birds or not. “Now and then a tiny, high-pitched flute-note...*flew up* of its own accord” (*M*, 45; emphasis added). Substantiations tell of a zone on the hither side of the world, unexpectedly revealed in moments of experiential concentration. “The noise of the engine died away...and the heedless song of a thrush, that had been there all the time, *welled up* in the stillness” (*M*, 63; emphasis added). Birds are indicative of a preobjective zone of appearances. They are materialisations of something that ought not to be able to materialise at all in ‘the world.’ As they take shape out of nowhere, they in a sense manifest this nowhere, being its brief micro-revelations. Appearance occurs “of its own accord” (*M*, 45). The micro-appearance is not an epistemological object, something that ‘appears’ to the knower by means of some form of conscious knowing. “A huge gull *alights* on the road, *fixing me* warily with one round eye. I pause in a doorway, wait, eager and afraid....The gull flexes one wing, folds it again....Hush!” (*M*, 141; emphasis added). The micro-appearing of the animal is an air-phenomenon, an airborne form of disclosure—a type of phenomenon that at first strikes the mathematician as “dirty” because its “truth” is something “disclosed” rather than something numerical (*M*, 141). The textual choreographies accomplished by air cannot be distinguished from the materialisation of birds.

## 16. Poise

Much like Kepler, Gabriel is obsessed by his Pythagorean quest, feeling at home in a safe realm of arithmetic purity. His talent is initially discovered by the enigmatic mathematician Mr Pender, a teacher with high hopes for the boy’s future. But before the master’s great expectations bear fruit, he mysteriously disappears, and Gabriel’s talent remains a private issue.

Gabriel feels that there is someone else inside him performing calculations. As in *Kepler* the solutions to arithmetic quandaries come as sudden sparks out of nowhere, out of air.<sup>85</sup>

Half the time I hardly knew what I was doing, or how I was doing it, or what would come next. Things happened in a flash. One moment the question was there—an equation to be solved, say—the next it was answered, presto! In between I was aware only of a flicker, a kind of blink, as if a lid had been opened on a blinding immensity and instantly shut again. There might have been someone else inside me doing the calculating, who was surer than I, and infinitely quicker. Indeed, at

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<sup>85</sup> Cf. Berensmeyer: “Like Kepler in *Kepler*, Gabriel has sudden epiphanic visions of mathematical solutions” (*FO*, 189). These are not conjured up by the subject, they come to him.

times this other self seemed about to crack me open and step forth, pristine and pitiless as an imago. (*M*, 31).

This phenomenon reappears towards the end of Part One, consolidating the non-subjective aspect of *Mefisto*. “Part of my mind had been working away *by itself* all this time, suddenly now, as if *out of nowhere*, a solution to one of the equations in Mr Kasperl’s black notebook *came to me*, in three smooth transformational leaps, tumbling through the darkness in my head like a spangled acrobat executing a faultless triple somersault” (*M*, 104; emphasis added). Ultimately, Gabriel does not belong to mathematics but to air. Walking the fields with his Mephistophelian friend Felix, he sees Ashburn from a distance and is caught by an elation that has nothing to do with mathematics. “The house was handsome with the sun on it, the windows ablaze. Birds swooped through the rinsed air, the great trees stood as if listening. For a moment I experienced a pure, piercing happiness, unaccountable, fleeting, like a fall of light” (*M*, 57-58).<sup>86</sup> The intense piercing indicates a directedness that does not belong to Gabriel, but to the inexplicable elation as such. When entering the house for the first time, he gets the sense of an airy resistance vanishing like a translucently dissolving integument.

In the hall a rhomb of sunlight basked on the floor, like a reclining acrobat. The wallpaper hung down in strips, stirring now in the draught from the doorway like bleached palm-fronds. There was a dry, brownish smell, as of something that had finished rotting and turned to dust. On the threshold a barrier seemed to part before me, an invisible membrane. The air was cool and dry. (*M*, 43)

The intrusion resembles the desecration of a grave opening to reveal a time pocket where, in its slow process of disintegration, materiality has preserved another epoch as a lingering “brownish smell.” The dormant potential of the past is awakened by the living moment in the furtive stirring of the peeling wallpaper. We take note of the fact that air substantiates itself as a resisting and therefore dividing component possessing a constitutive potential that does not itself disintegrate.

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<sup>86</sup> Brendan McNamee discusses the possibility of this kind of arrival in *Mefisto* in terms of chaos: “The immediate is the divine, the completion that humanity instinctively craves—‘immediate,’ meaning no mediation between subject and object, between consciousness within and phenomena without—a *creation* of the divine through the act or experience of immediacy” (“Sacred Chaos,” 206). In McNamee’s understanding of this crucial possibility in *Mefisto*—as well as in the tetralogy as a whole—the immediate must nevertheless be articulated or mediated since it is part of narrativity. He argues that this paradoxical interdependence of chaos and order is the core of Banville’s novel. Drawing on Roberto Calasso, McNamee defines chaos as the immediate and order as always being involved in mediation. What frequently constitutes a sense of immediacy in *Mefisto*, however, is not chaos but air.



At Ashburn, a place where numerical-epistemological man burns to cinders, all is vacuousness. Here “airy emptiness” is not so much a lack of something but a new climate, zone, feel, or possibility so stunningly intense that it leaves Gabriel’s pure, scientific intensity behind.

There was a sense of *airy emptiness* in the house. I climbed the stairs as if ascending a rope *into the blue*. Sophie was above me on the landing, looking down at me, hands braced on the rail, her face *suspended in a vault of air*, like a *trapeze artist* poised to leap. We wandered through the attic. The floors were tense as trampolines under our feet. I thought of all those rooms below us with no one in them, the sky going about its enormous, stealthy business in the windows...(*M*, 63; emphasis added)

To be in poise is to be prepared, to hold oneself steady, to keep one’s balance, and to be in a state of fragile control as transitory motionlessness, hovering in uncertainty and indeterminacy supported by a force other than the subject’s will. Air holds Sophie suspended in poise providing the possibility of a leap. The floors are “tense as trampolines,” accentuating the general feel of a potential spring. Innocently, Gabriel believes that Sophie’s universe of air can be subjected to the world of numbers. Hypothetically, she would be unable to “resist” the elegant “simplicity” of his astonishing algebraic “tricks” (*M*, 63). Sophie would see how “patterns grew, like crystals assembling in clear, cold *air*” (*M*, 63; emphasis added). But if Sophie, high up in that airy attic, is indistinguishable from a sense of falling, this phenomenon is not reducible to “number falling on the chaos of things” (*M*, 109). What falls when she falls in and through air is already itself air: “When I made to rise she lost her balance for a moment, and fell against me in a *flurry* of hands and *breath* and tumbling hair” (*M*, 63; emphasis added).<sup>87</sup>

Air is indistinguishable from Sophie. The feeling of her “cool” skin (*M*, 63) is the coolness of the “cool” air at Ashburn (*M*, 43). It suggests neither the control sought by the mathematical prodigy, nor the mathematical frigidity of number, capable of descending on existence “like frost” to maintain patterns “frozen” (*M*, 109). As he follows Sophie through the rather derelict, empty rooms of Ashburn, Gabriel retains the “cool moist print of her hand” (*M*, 44).

I followed her from window to window. The hinged flap of a shutter came away in my grasp like a huge, grey, *petrified wing*, another collapsed in a soft explosion of rotten wood and paint flakes...Higher and higher we went, the house becoming a stylised outdoors around us, with all that light flooding in, and the high, shadowy ceilings the colour

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<sup>87</sup> Synonyms of ‘flurry’ are: *swirl*, *whirl*, *eddy*, *billow*, *shower*, and *gust*. All of these have aqueous and/or airy connotations.



of clouds, and the windows thronging with greenery and *sky*....It was hot and *airless* up here under the roof. Outside, *swifts* were shooting like *random arrows* in and out of the eaves. In what had been a schoolroom I put my hand to a globe of the world, and immediately, as if it had been biding its time, the lacquered ball fell off its stand and rolled across the floor with a tiny clatter....Under the bare lightbulb two flies were lazily *weaving the air*. This was her room. (*M*, 44; emphasis added).

The intensified heat in the upper parts of Ashburn materialises as airlessness, but that thickening of air's volatility only accentuates its presence. Air has precedence over the world (the fallen globe). The flies appear to be participating in an interlacing of air with itself, as tiny swimmers in an element they cannot escape. The swifts' flight-paths are "random arrows," but the condition of possibility for flight is not something random. Matter, a "petrified wing," flies away or explodes. Here things and creatures balance between the act of keeping afloat in air and the event of falling through it.

The sense of poise—prevalent at Ashburn as well as in the narrative as a whole—haunts Gabriel. He is poised between *one* and *zero*, between experience and the zone of inexperienceability indicated by the force of certain penurious phenomena. Sophie's appearance draws Gabriel closer to the zero-zone where mathematics, science, and world are strangely held in suspense.

She was a sealed vessel, precarious, volatile, filled to bursting with all there was to say. She might have been not mute but merely waiting, *holding her breath*. Her deafness was like vigilance. She would fix on the most trivial thing with rapt attention, as if anything, at any moment, might begin to speak to her, in a small voice, out of that huge, waveless sea of silence in which she was suspended. She communicated in *an airy, insubstantial language* consisting not of words but moving forms, transparent, yet precise and sharp, like *glass shapes in air*. (*M*, 55; emphasis added)

To be "suspended" is to be hanging without ground, to lose ground, to be supported only by air. Here it also means to be put out of effect, i.e. not to belong to the cosmic order of Gabriel's mathematical atomism. To be suspended is also to be arrested—here as a preciously airy entity lifted out of the relentless experiential flow. Suspension means waiting. Conversely, waiting is to be held in suspense. Waiting is not reducible to deferral in the sense of eternal postponement of meaning-closure. To the side of the epistemological quest there is no waiting-for-closure. There is simply waiting for air that has always already arrived.

Incarcerated in his epistemological attitude Gabriel persists in the belief that Sophie's airscapes can be subjected to the world of numbers. Stealing a

glance into Mr Kasperl's notebook, which is filled with years of calculations, Gabriel is reassured by a strong, clear, familiar voice fortifying his notion of a universal cosmic articulation (*M*, 69). At times he has the impression that existence might be about to assemble itself and speak to him, as in the case of the notebook (*M*, 76). This idealist delusion is initially strengthened by exposure to the equilibristic aspect of Mr Kasperl's more subversive mathematical world of paradoxes and tautologies. But simultaneously the seed of a counter-movement is sown. The mathematical ground gradually becomes unstable from within, since Mr Kasperl also broaches the issue of the limits of cosmic expression. To Gabriel, mathematico-logical paradoxes and tautologies that dissolve deductive chains into air make manifest a desolidification that releases a stronger sense of constituting processes in the ambient 'world.' Through Mr Kasperl he has acquired a taste for the *zero* generatively embedded in constitution's heart. Subsequently the mute insistence of ordinary things is seen in the light of their constitution. This shift of attention adumbrates a zero-point of genesis that is entirely presubstantial. As in the occurrence of Sophie's mute movements, things 'speak' when they are as remote as possible from articulation, i.e. when they impinge as primitive constitution. Gabriel comes away from exposures to Mr Kasperl's computations in a "fever," his head "humming" (*M*, 77).

Things shook and shimmered minutely, in a phosphorescent glow. Details would detach themselves from their blurred backgrounds, as if a lens had been focused on them suddenly, and press forward eagerly, with mute insistence, urging on me some large, mysterious significance. A wash of sunlight on a high white wall, rank weeds spilling out of the windows of a tumbledown house, a dog in the gutter nosing delicately at a soiled scrap of newspaper, such things would strike me with strange force. They were like memories, but of things that had not happened yet. (*M*, 77)

It is phenomenalisation as such that solicits the protagonist, imposing itself upon him. Things materialise with a mute and incessant force that surpasses their mere being-there.<sup>88</sup> Memories of things that have not yet happened indicate attunement to an experiential flow defying chronological order. The pressing-forward of constitution does not occupy a spatio-temporal position, but is the condition of possibility for every positioning.

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<sup>88</sup> Derek Hand uses the cited lines to claim that there is no master narrative that can give meaning to these strange moments when a sudden concentration of energy breaks through: "What finally emerges from the novel are individual scenes, infused with light and energy by Gabriel's act of memory. It is a common feature of all of Banville's work, but here, unfettered by having to conform to a storyline, these moments stand out clearly and lucidly. There is nothing to connect them with each other; they are, as can be guessed, random flashes of unity detached from any larger narrative that might have given them meaning" (*EF*, 128). Yet it is precisely a nothing that allows these appearances to shine forth. Nothingness is constitutional.

The final and crucial stroke of fate at the very end of the first part displays air's brutal potential. Gabriel returns to Ashburn after the departure of its residents. He looks at the marionette dolls that Sophie has left behind. Strangely, the Kasperl doll is "breathing" (*M*, 120). Everything is held in suspension on the brink of discovery, but instead of epistemological clarity concerning the secret order of things there is a sudden, unprecedented desubstantiation.

How silent everything was, suddenly, teetering there on the brink. Then a kind of thrumming began under my feet, faint at first, growing rapidly louder, a great drum-roll out of the earth. The floor sagged, groaning, and with a crash collapsed. The fat man and the girl sank slowly, as if into water instead of flame. His blue eye. Her smile. My hair was on fire. A red roar came up out of the hole, and *I flew on flaming wings*, clutching my black book, through smoke and dust and splintering glass, *into the huge, cold air.* (*M*, 120; emphasis added)

While the marionette dolls ('Kasperl' and 'Sophie') are consumed by the fire, Gabriel is saved. Like his twin brother, he is momentarily drawn into air. But as the work's second part shows, Gabriel is also reborn out of its constituting violence. Constitution's instigation is no less strongly felt on the farther side of the fatal rupture, being already present there as a "sharp breeze" fingering his excoriated back (*M*, 131).

## 17. Vehemence

Awakening on the farther side of the divide between "Marionettes" and "Angels," Gabriel finds himself engulfed by pain. Derek Hand suggests that this pain draws Gabriel closer to the 'world' as opposed to the 'ideal' realm of thought: "Now every step he takes brings pain and with this pain the knowledge that he is in and of the world" (*EF*, 126). But what happens is that Gabriel remains in the airy liquefactions of his element—and no less so than in Part One. From the hospital bed where he slowly recovers from his severe burn injuries, Gabriel watches "the liquid in the plastic tube, a fat tear trembling on its steadily thinning stalk. Then the stalk snapped, the drop fell. Pain pounced" (*M*, 124). The "drop" materialises as a substantiation of pain. Substantiated, it permeates and pierces things in the immediate surroundings. The "stalk" is a vegetative birthcord that breaks, and the aching seed grows into newness, much like the novel's second part. As we have seen the aquatic is simultaneously the aerial and vice versa, as when "a black wind scoured the streets" (*M*, 165; emphasis added).

The atmosphere of the hospital is "suspended," pervaded by a "neuralgic air of waiting" (*M*, 181). It keeps some decisive part of Gabriel pendent, floating as a duplication of himself. In a psychologically

articulated universe, pain would occur in the psyche as a mental phenomenon's materiality. It would have a cosmic position and be spatially determinable within a network of causal relations in which physiological and psychological states interact. But in *Mefisto* cosmic networking is disbanded. While conversing with the doctor at the hospital, Gabriel claims that he has feeling in places lacking positional existence.

- You were lucky, Dr Cranitch said in his jaded way. Full-thickness burns like that, they destroy the nerves.
  - But I can feel, I said.
  - What? Where, show me.
- He hitched up his glasses and peered where I pointed.
- No, no, he said. Impossible. That's phantom pain. (*M*, 130)

The doctor's judgement implies that phantom pain is not feeling as such. His ontological outlook requires psycho-physical correspondence.<sup>89</sup> If feeling lacks an observable physical platform, then the phenomenon must from this viewpoint be interpreted as an instantiation of something that is less real than a physically and spatially determined 'fact.' As *phantom*, however, pain is a unit of pure affectivity, and is as such defiant of the dichotomies used by representivity to establish polarised constructions such as objective-versus-subjective. The ultimate source of pain is impossible to differentiate from constitution's primacy, i.e. from air. As soon as Gabriel wakes up in the hospital he is immersed in suffering as something encompassing air: "Now for the first time I saw the world around me *radiant with pain*, the glass in the window *suffering* the sun's harsh blade...*The very air seemed to ache*" (*M*, 124-25; emphasis added). Pain is air's resistance to world (to space) as suffering. Recall Gabriel's sense of "being shared" by a phantom existence that possibly absorbs part of the agony (*M*, 18).

The swifts we have seen "shooting like random arrows" at Ashburn are beings but also *affects* (*M*, 44). Each air-movement in *Mefisto* belongs to the domain of affectivity. The work is constituted as an ensemble of air-feelings. As we saw a while ago, *affects fly*: "Now and then a tiny, high-pitched flute-note...*flew up* of its own accord" (*M*, 45; emphasis added). Gabriel finds himself horrified and hypnotised by punishing teachers who "would *fly* into terrible rages" (*M*, 21; emphasis added). When Gabriel and Felix leave the degenerating party outside the city towards the end of the novel, they feel

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<sup>89</sup> This fallacy derives from commitment to the systems of representivity. In *Psychology of Pain*, Suzanne M. Skevington writes about pain from the psycho-physical viewpoint of the patient's 'world': "Cognitive psychologists argue that people must hold internal representations of the world and how it works...[Representations] may also explain how those in pain are able to locate their physical discomfort and how it is possible for an amputee to describe the position and movements of a phantom limb in space" (*Psychology of Pain*, 118). In point of fact, however, pain-phantoms are phenomenological dissolutions of the opposite *representations* we call psyche and world.

that the wind drums above them, “*beating through* the hollows of the air” (*M*, 184; emphasis added). Not only does air in this instance interlace itself with itself, but it does so ferociously, sharply accentuating its hidden vehemence. These violent and potentially destructive affects strengthen the textual stratum in *Mefisto* on which suffering and pain materialise.

In the last analysis the airborne affect-violence is no human affair but something internal to the basic affect-repertoire of *air* itself, taken as constitution. In Part One we encounter “the *hurt* blue of a bare September sky” (*M*, 20; emphasis added). In Part Two, Gabriel has “a sense of longing and *vague hurt* in the dense, luminous air” (*M*, 139; emphasis added). Things shake and shimmer in air, and often with an undertone of violence. As we have seen, “a wash of sunlight...would *strike* [Gabriel] with strange force” (*M*, 77; emphasis added). When the “wash of sunlight” appears much later in the text (*M*, 178), it is succeeded by blasts “of wind...*smacking* the steel-blue water, and pedestrians on the bridge” find themselves walking “at an angle, their coat-tails *whipping*” (*M*, 179; emphasis added). In the heated air of a much earlier weather-event, “trees *thrashed* in the wind, each leaf madly aquiver” (*M*, 34; emphasis added). The aerial flogging does not simply cause the leaves to shiver in air but enables the individual leaf to be electrified in an intensity that is internal to the flailing peculiarity of air. Birds such as the seagull shown swooping on “thrashing wings” in “midair” seem almost to be substantiations of that intensity, to be embodied intensifications of a vehemence endemic to air (*M*, 114). As soon as Felix has named him “cygnet” (*M*, 36) and “bird-boy” (*M*, 37), Gabriel Swan recollects Mr Kasperl’s “seagull eye” as the wind roars through the treetops “plunging past on its way to wreak *havoc* elsewhere” (*M*, 37; emphasis added).

Even in feebler modes of manifestation, air’s indwelling violence remains tangible, and its substantiations continue to take the form of birds. Meeting Sophie at Ashburn on a day “with a listless breeze,” Gabriel notices that everything “seemed to quiver faintly, the air, the grass, the very trunks of the trees, as if all had been struck a *huge, soft blow*” (*M*, 42-43; emphasis added). As a soft substantiation out of the supple breeze, Sophie is felt to be “a large, delicate, fearless bird” (*M*, 42). The quarrels between Gabriel’s parents, accompanied by sparks of “flying fat” flashing up from his mother’s fryingpan, resemble “a knife-throwing act” that is over in a flicker as a brief “glitter *in air*” (*M*, 28; emphasis added).

After the fire at Ashburn, Gabriel’s scars remain excruciatingly painful. When his flame-torn flesh has to be radically reassembled by means of surgery, pain in the operating theatre materialises not just in his body but also in the room. The air too needs relief. In the high, clinical room, space is anaesthetised “as if the air itself had been treated with a mollifying gas” (*M*, 131). As air (gas, ether), the intersection of anaesthesia and pain may also be temporal. “There were moments” when for no reason a calm would “spread like *ether*” (*M*, 200; emphasis added). Fittingly, the one apparently governing this intersection between pain and painkilling, namely his

physiotherapist Miss Barr, is one day pictured by Gabriel as “a sort of centaur, *flying* over the greenswards” (*M*, 134; emphasis added). People suffer from illnesses in *Mefisto*, and in one way or another air is drawn into the interface between pain and its alleviation. When “the air whirred and clicked” in his father’s chest (*M*, 108), it cannot be affectively distinguished from Gabriel’s experience of night gathering into a “breathless” airy glow (*M*, 109). The substantiation of air is almost itself painful, almost itself *pain*. During a sunny spell after a rain-shower “a solitary white bird soared against a *bruise-coloured* wall of cloud” (*M*, 213; emphasis added).

## 18. Falling

The escalation of pain marking the abrupt transition between Part One and Part Two of *Mefisto* does not only involve Gabriel’s physical agonies but also a more fundamental suffering saturating the second part (called “Angels”). The transition may be seen as an initiation: from innocence to experience; from a rural, idyllic environment into agonised alienation in a world of depraved urbanity. The general feeling of decay in “Angels” unfolds like a black flower of profound loss. In a stylised metropolitan world, scattered pieces of existence float and whirl as “dust and bits of paper” swirling in eddies (*M*, 140). Elemental life-pain is typically anaesthetised by the use of various drugs. People who presumably are involved in Felix’s drug trafficking appear with “an air of tension and vague torment” (*M*, 212). In this lurid atmosphere of withheld pain, Gabriel senses the presence of a “sudden dark wind” (*M*, 140). He detects “the slow ruin of things, the endless, creeping collapse” (*M*, 141). The world seems to fall apart, but material disintegration works as a catalyst for the growing sense of the presubstantial as primal source.

Even if a great number of characters are tangled up in air, not all of them are attuned to it. Gabriel and Felix are not identical in this sense. As a flock of starlings fly over their heads “in a rush of wings, briefly darkening the air” (*M*, 53), the short-lived dimness momentarily affects air’s luminosity, but air itself is not affected. It persists as the supportive factor also for that which is darkly fatal. When Gabriel and Felix reunite in Part Two, the latter appears out of nowhere, settling “the wings of his old coat” as a bat flutters above their heads “in the violet air” (*M*, 142). Felix occurs aerially—but in terms of egoity rather than air.<sup>90</sup> In his self-centredness he is

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<sup>90</sup> Felix is a sinister, nihilistic perpetrator of directionless acts lacking *archē* as well as *telos*: “He never seemed to finish anything, or to have started anywhere, but was always just doing” (*M*, 56). In his reading of *Mefisto*, Rüdiger Imhof draws heavily on an intertextual contrast with Goethe’s *Faust*: “Attempting to render the words of the Bible ‘in the loved accent of [his] native land’, Faust wonders what may be ‘inferred’ by the statement ‘In the beginning was the Word’. Dissatisfied with the translation he substitutes for it first ‘In the beginning was the Thought,’ then ‘In the beginning was the Power’ only to end up with the decision to write



diabolical.<sup>91</sup> As drug dealer Felix upholds belief in a subject-controlled, fallen ‘world.’ He is mundanity and negativity personified. But while Gabriel to some extent is guided by Felix,<sup>92</sup> he does not belong to Mephisto, but to the larger powerfulness of air. The fall towards meaninglessness in the work’s dystopian part is counterbalanced by airy constitution-forces, defiant of the gravitational laws that ought to determine patterns of ascending and descending.

Unsurprisingly, in a work entitled *Mefisto*, air is black (*M*, 219), “phosphorescent” (*M*, 77), and “sulphurous” (*M*, 70). It is aglow with alchemically evil substances, or thickened by sinister smells. Smell occurs as a solidification of air into a dense reek (*M*, 37), into a colour (*M*, 43), into an almost tangible stench (*M*, 50), or into a “feral breath” (*M*, 59). To lose one’s footing in this element is to fall in and through something that is already fallen, that itself falls. Generally speaking, it is of course not particularly difficult to fall; on account of gravitation, falling is perfectly natural. But in *Mefisto* falling is multiple, complex. The text is crisscrossed by trajectories of pure and impure descent. “I had a dream of D’Arcy, a huge figure descending slowly through a hole in the roof at Ashburn...Rain fell after him through the gaping hole, and dead songbirds and twigs and bits of paper” (*M*, 90). Air is the mother of falling. As we shall now see, it *constitutes* the inward and upward forms of a falling that actually mark no fall at all.

Certain substances in *Mefisto* seem to defy or be indifferent to gravity. “The spire of the Church of the Assumption beetled over the rooftops, seeming somehow *in flight*” (*M*, 50; emphasis added). When “the town drifted in the mist,” the fog does not drift through the town (*M*, 119), but vice versa. Upon leaving hospital after his accident, Gabriel is released into the ambient environment but is overwhelmed by a strange affect: “A high gold autumn evening was sinking over the rooftops....I felt that if I fell I would *fall upwards*, into *the limitless air*” (*M*, 139; emphasis added). In one of the very last scenes of the text, the victory of air over world is almost complete. Gravity is vanquished and Gabriel himself is hardly more than “a little puff of pale cloud floating in midair” (*M*, 225). He is with Felix on a long walk through hills and bogs.

The weather was *windy* and bright, the last of spring, the flushed *air* rife with the singing of larks. It made me giddy, to be for so long up so high. Everything *tended skywards here*, as if *gravity had somehow lost its hold*. White clouds would fly up from behind a granite peak, *billowing*

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‘In the beginning was the Deed’...Felix is like Mephistopheles, ‘the spirit...that endlessly denies’” (*CI*, 164). What is interesting in Imhof’s comparison is that Felix is insensitive to the Word in the sense that he denies the possibility of there being something that does not entirely belong to himself.

<sup>91</sup> See McMinn, *SF*, 94.

<sup>92</sup> See Hand, *EF*, 125.



*upwards* into the zenith. There was nothing to hold on to... (*M*, 225; emphasis added)

Gabriel falls upwards in air as insubstantiality falling/ascending through insubstantiality. There is no significant difference between falling and ascending, between rising and descending, between *being* and *becoming* insubstantial, between the airborne and the airborne. “The wind swirled, the stars trembled. I seemed to *fall upwards*, into the night” (*M*, 184; emphasis added).

After the car-crash that kills Mrs Swan, Gabriel identifies her body. In the aftermaths of this bewildering event he has a sense of unreal self-presence. “My sobs were a kind of helpless, *inward falling*, as if a huge hollow had opened up inside me and I were plunging headlong into it” (*M*, 104; emphasis added). Air and presence go hand in hand. Even the slightest reference to a wash of sunlight, shift of atmosphere, or change of wind *intensifies* presence. Gabriel may certainly lose *some* form of presence in this or that crisis sending him (back) into air; but such an event tends automatically to be accession to a deeper form of presence.

I relived that moment on Sophie’s bed so often in my mind that the details wore out, became hollow, *leached of solidity*.... Suddenly I had a vivid sense of myself. I held myself poised, balanced in air, as if I were some precious, polished thing that had been put with ceremonial care into my hands. (*M*, 68; emphasis added)

The loss of solidity does not terminate as deprivation but rather as a discovery of a vibrantly intimate reality sustained by air. In *Mefisto*, the event of falling upwards, downwards, or inwards highlights a poise in the element that makes all these trajectories possible in the first place.

Gabriel cannot arrive at scientific closure. The lack of such an accomplishment further accentuates air’s power. But the triumph of air over science is not some banal victory of chance over necessity, or of chaos over order. Chance is operative from beginning to end—yet through air it is always more than itself. In the room where Gabriel’s mother goes into labour, a “lace curtain billows lazily in the wide-open window” (*M*, 6). The idle movement shows air substantiating motion. The billowing will go on regardless of whether anyone takes notice of it. It is not communicative. The undulation does not reach out, but appears as a meaningless and chance-like phenomenon. The billowing lacks justification, other than the rationale carried within itself. When Gabriel coincidentally meets Mr Kasperl in the vicinity of the old mine, the lay mathematician wears a “dustcoat that billow[s] behind him” (*M*, 33). To Gabriel the phenomenon seems to convey some secret significance in its very incongruity. But the hidden meaning lies in the fact that what appears is not significant. It can only signify prior to being posited as significant. Thus it cannot be significant, it can only be air.

A couple of pages later Sophie's feet peep out "from under the billowing hem" of her skirt like little tongues, as if suggesting speech—but nothing will be spoken (*M*, 35). There will just be the swelling surge. In the undulation, air works. As the heart of the billowing, air is that which compels to the limit: the excess of chance suffocates chance.<sup>93</sup> After the terrible car crash, Gabriel walks behind the doctor through the interior of the hospital where the physician's "white coat [is] billowing" (*M*, 101). In the midst of meaningless chance, epitomised by the car accident and its horrid repercussions, air surges—but it does not materialise as a represented, already-constituted object. The billowing surges in Gabriel whether he recognises it or not, whether he affirms it or denies it. Here the act of leaving things to chance is actually to leave them to air—and that entails unconditional submission to its power. The fatal element's motility may seem to substantiate perfect chance, but the fact *that it substantiates* is not a matter of chance. To belong to air is not to belong to chance, but to constitution.

## 19. Breath

In *Mefisto*, constitution involves the phenomenon of breath. At night the silence is a "suspension, as if things...were holding their breath, appalled, speechless" (*M*, 125-26). Objects are on the verge of bursting forth—not as something other than themselves, but *as themselves*. Conjointly self-destructive, Adele and Gabriel feel that the "silence of the night arrange[s] itself" around them (*M*, 150). The initiative is with the substantiating activities in which the night "like a dark gas" flows down on the degenerate urban world "*out of* a luminous, mauve sky" (*M*, 156; emphasis added). The air is inhabited by creatures materialising out of the dark.

Gradually the dim shapes of the room came forward *out of* the darkness, *like creatures gathering silently around us*. She clasped me tightly in her arms, yet at the same time seemed to hold me off from her, as if part of her attention were elsewhere, concentrating on something beyond me....I was thinking of a moment from long ago, when I was a child, there was nothing in it, I don't know why I remembered it, just a moment on a bend on a hill road somewhere, at night, in winter, the wet

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<sup>93</sup> Zuntini de Izarra asserts that it is chance that ultimately produces existence. She distinguishes between two different forms of chance. "'Angels' is a narrative that moves from the *constituted* chance (where there is a primary nature that brings it into existence, either luck or contingency) to *constituent* chance (which is the original producer of all forms of existence)" (*MHL*, 119). Zuntini de Izarra argues that order grows out of chance, i.e. out of constituting, original chance. The point, however, is that constitution is fatal in *Mefisto*. What constitutes throughout the novel is not a function of chance. This fact does not exclude the possibility of chance-like appearances, but constitution itself is not chance. In the philosophy of the Stoics, *fatum* denotes Logos. Cf. Imhof's discussion, *CI*, 160.

road gleaming, and dead leaves spinning, and the light from a street lamp shivering in the wind. (*M*, 157-58; emphasis added)

The creatures that materialise out of the darkness do so of their own accord. Even memory arrives by a force of its own. It is not explained but retains Gabriel with a weightless nothingness intrinsic to its givenness. Emptiness emerges as an alternative gravity, as a monozygotic zero, as a source towards which he is drawn. It is not primarily the things—the wet road, the dead leaves, or the lamp shivering in the wind—that are revealed, but the nothing of the pre-temporal and causeless force of constitution that makes them appear in the first place, and which allows them to reappear as memory. An almost identical wording occurs towards the end outside the city: “The hill road gleamed, the pines sighed, the light from the lamp over the pub shivered in the wind” (*M*, 230). Something that was earlier posited as a memory reappears as a direct intuition later in the narrative.<sup>94</sup>

After the cataclysmic fire at Ashburn, Gabriel contemplates the death of a fellow patient at the hospital where he recovers. He realises that this individual

was not anywhere anymore....That was death. No cowed dark stranger, no kindly friend, not even empty space, with all the potential that implies, but absence, absence only. The nothing, the nowhere, the not-being-here. But how then this something, wafting me onwards irresistibly, as if all around me a great, slow breath were being indrawn? (*M*, 136-37)

Breath—presence—has priority over absence. This concerns the inanimate too. Mr Kasperl’s marionette doll hangs “breathing” (*M*, 120). Yet air itself does not respire. A prerequisite even for a “great, slow breath” is the unbreathing but animating element out of which substantiation and desubstantiation emanate. The tension that haunts the narrative is the threat that this deeper, originating source might cease. It is as if epistemological debris and other second-order realities might spread into air, arresting constitution itself. After the car-crash that kills his mother, Gabriel withdraws into his room to resume his calculations. He feels “the night gathering intently” around him, “breathless and still aglow” (*M*, 109). Here breathlessness seems to indicate a situation where everything grinds to a halt under “the stunned, white air” (*M*, 109). After his mathematical breakdown Gabriel senses that even “the weather turned strange, mists all day and *not a breath of wind*, the sun a small pale disc stuck in the middle of a milky sky” (*M*, 110; emphasis added).

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<sup>94</sup> Imhof claims that the phenomena accomplishing order in *Mefisto* “are symmetries, mirror-symmetries, and the Zarathustrian principle of ‘eternal recurrence’” (*CI*, 171). Eternal recurrence presupposes provisional absence in order to be able to return. Air cannot participate in recurrence, since it lacks awayness, any interval separating it from itself.

In *Mefisto* there is a prevailing sense that that which is disclosed might equally well remain in the primal zone that called Gabriel's brother back into its placeless domain. When Gabriel explores the places around Ashburn House he has the feeling that things are not just there before him, but that they continuously materialise and dematerialise. There is a tension in the air around him that does not go away.

In the midst of wind-shivered foliage a deer would *silently materialise*—a glossy eye and a glistening tear-track, a stump of tail, a unicorn's dainty hoof....I picked my way through the *mute* forge, the *empty* stables, where *the air* was still hung with the smell of horses. I stood amid the ruins of the cottage where my mother was born. A *rapt, intent silence* surrounded me, as if everything were watching me, shocked at my intruding in these deserted places. (*M*, 34; emphasis added)

Flashes of appearing components (eye, tear-track, tail) draw attention to the adumbrational aspect of swift perception. But the rapidity of materialising parts does not cancel out the phenomenon (deer, unicorn). On the contrary, it is *there* in its indubitability. The uncertainty involved does not concern the materialisation itself. It only has bearing on the level of subjective engagement. Whether the materialisation is 'real' in the form of a deer or 'ideal' in the form of a unicorn does not matter. The focus is on disclosure as such. The muteness and silence permeating the scene point to the fact that constitution is discursively inarticulate. Gabriel's sense of being seen rather than seeing places the initiative in primal constitution, not in himself. Air's palpable presence through saturation by smell is no mere coincidence but an indication of its capacity to retain the presence of absent horses. *Air cancels absence in the name of its own presence.*

The threat of constitution's cessation remains an impending peril throughout the text. But breath is ceaseless. This in itself confounds epistemological man. Generally in *Mefisto*, things are not just there. Something makes their being-there possible.<sup>95</sup> The sense of the material world being "insubstantial" like a "stage-set" points to an operative force on the hither side of their givenness (*M*, 186), to air as something enabling. Objectivity is always more than itself, being simultaneously a becoming of that which it is. While visiting Adele and finding her drugged unconscious, Gabriel carries her but loses his balance and gets trapped, still holding her with "one foot in the air" (*M*, 198). Transfixed in the bodily position of his overall predicament, he regards the things around him. A hazy thickening of

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<sup>95</sup> The autonomy of primal constitution is to be found in all sorts of places. Inanimate objects seem to materialise regardless of any human presence: "She crushes the key into the lock. Dank air in the hall, and a sullen silence as of things interrupted at furtive play" (*M*, 6). A similar affect appears at Ashburn: "There was a hushed, watchful atmosphere, as if something had been going on, and had stopped when we came in" (*M*, 69).

textures makes their forms swell as half-belonging to the ambient air that ought to mark them off as clear-cut individual objects. This affect induces Gabriel to feel that he is shown something that is not properly the objects themselves but their actual substantiation before him.

I looked at things around me, that tap, an old razor, a mug with a toothbrush standing in it, their textures blurred and thickened in the ivory light of morning, and I felt for a second I was being shown something, it flashed out at me slyly and then was gone, like a coin disappearing in a conjuror's palm. (*M*, 198)

In its obvious brevity this insight cannot be made rationally evident. Gabriel is not capable of uncovering inherent patterns, but must remain subjected to their force. Adele in all the sordidness of her drug addiction is also tangled up in air. As she recovers in hospital, she changes “her slip for a satin tea-gown with roses and birds,” making “the room seem more than ever like an aviary” (*M*, 203). Her hysterical laughter gradually escalates into the “first startled screeches of something that had blundered on *widespread wings* into a net” (*M*, 204; emphasis added). Earlier in their dispiriting relationship—in which Gabriel exploits her insatiable need for drugs and destruction in exchange for sex—Adele's coat is taken off so that slivers “of the cold air of outdoors” tacitly descend “like silverfish from its folds” (*M*, 175). When she prepares to take her drug in the hospital chapel, she appears as a “votive priestess” fully absorbed in a ritual endowed with both religious and sexual connotations (*M*, 209).<sup>96</sup>

This continuous oscillation between breath and breathlessness, between disclosure and concealment, marks the poise between *one* and *zero* introduced at the beginning of the narrative. Recall Sophie's suspension in attunement to the surrounding silence.

She was a sealed vessel, precarious, volatile, filled to bursting with all there was to say. She might have been not mute but merely waiting, *holding her breath*. Her deafness was like vigilance. She would fix on the most trivial thing with rapt attention, as if anything, at any moment, might begin to speak to her, in a small voice, out of that huge, waveless sea of silence in which she was suspended. (*M*, 55; emphasis added)

But the point is that nothing will be spoken. The air that provides the constitutive process does not reach discursive articulation, but remains in secrecy and silence. To be suspended between breaths is to await the constituting breath that itself is neither shown nor seen. The promise of articulation is an expression of Gabriel's futile desire for the constitutive itself to become epistemologically accessible. The pneumatic promise

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<sup>96</sup> Cf. McNamee, “Sacred Chaos,” 210.

belongs to a regenerative process at work alongside “desire’s moribund autonomy” (*SP*, 89).<sup>97</sup>

## 20. Surge

I now draw towards the end of this investigation by elucidating the phenomenon of *surging*. To surge is to *rise* or *arise* (from Latin *surgere*).<sup>98</sup> To surge is to rise-and-fall, to rise-and-move, to rise suddenly so as to dramatically accentuate a voltage, to billow or roll forward, or to be part of a transient jolt. I proceed to discuss the overall surging in *Mefisto* in order to exhibit its radically airborne and airborn phenomenality.

The phenomenon of falling, discussed above, is an instantiation of surging. The fall typically emerges out of nowhere, out of itself. Recall the falling of birds: “One day a crow falls down dead out of a tree” on Mrs Swan’s head (*M*, 6). The bird has all at once just materialised out of air. The phenomenon of surging displays the normally invisible constitution-surge that lies at the productive core of existence as its auto-affective source. “Water was bubbling out of a crack in the paving where a pipe had *burst*. For an instant suddenly I saw into the dark heart of things, and a *surge* of mad glee *rose* in my gullet like a waterbrash” (*M*, 162; emphasis added). We have already seen that, through the name *Swan*, the airy is beforehand the aquatic—every surge of water being implicitly an aerial one too. The ground opens itself to show a surge of water—not just because a pipe has burst but because being itself bursts as an overall surge or flush:

Something was happening underground. Tar melted in the streets, fine cracks *appeared* in the pavements. Gardeners turned up smoking clods of earth *seething* with grubs and fat slugs and ganglia of thick, pink worms. Vegetation ran riot. Huge mushrooms *appeared* everywhere, on lawns, under hedges, in the troughs between potato drills, *pushing their way blindly up* through the tepid clay like silvery, soft skulls. A rank smell clung *in the air*....When the tides were high the pitmouth *spouted* geysers of blackened steam. Rumours went around of *sudden* fires, mysterious subsidences. A child playing in his grandmother’s garden fell into a flaming hole that *opened* in the ground beneath him... (*M*, 110; emphasis added)

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<sup>97</sup> If the immanent ontology of *Mefisto* is primarily “a world in chaos,” as Felix exclaims, and if it consists of a blind, distinctly Nietzschean “energy spinning in the void” (*M*, 226), then regeneration would be made up of a subject’s empowerment by will to power in the gradual process of becoming the *overman*. The subject as *overman* would itself become the creator of all meaning and values. But the superabundance of air (*pneuma*) in the narrative provides the possibility of a life-affirmation that comes to the subject without will to power. This force comes to light as the subject’s powerlessness.

<sup>98</sup> *OED* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., s.v. “Surge.”

These lines are paradigmatic for *Mefisto* as well as for the tetralogy in general. What is shown is the power of constitution. Every constituted substance seems inexplicably to lack its creator, to come *directly* out of the furnace of constitution. No creator is behind the slugs, grubs, and worms; no gardener behind the mushrooms, no arsonist behind the fires, no digger behind the holes. These surgings are not simply felt to be manifestations of nature—they are too demonically purposeful or consciously impetuous to seem to be mere expressions of the natural world. The surging surges “blindly” not because nature is blind but because constitution precedes the workings of a rational cosmos. Constitution is pre-natural and pre-human, constituting the natural and the human in an effluence that is so different from both of them that it brings on a fright.

Nature, like human subjectivity, is *overwhelmed* by the headlong surge of constitution. The natural world is almost choked by constitution, by the surge of the partly deathlike, skull-formed force constituting it. The “skulls” of the “huge” mushrooms push their way “up” *into air* like the cloud of an atom bomb surging into an incomprehensible overstating that seems to exceed the limits of natural force. The “something” which “had opened up inside [Gabriel] like a dark flower” (*M*, 185), that “*surged* within” him (*M*, 183; emphasis added), belongs to this constituting force that is not reducible to nature, and which permits sudden outbreaks to occur quite to the side of natural life: “Traffic lights blossomed from green to red and back again, silent as flowers” (*M*, 173). As we have seen, the pressing-forward is expressive of the overall surge of an aerial pressing-upon. “The air vibrated with a dense, soundless din that *pressed upon* the eardrums” (*M*, 167; emphasis added).

Because constitution is not itself a substance, it cannot be appropriated as a concrete thing or ‘object of perception.’ Accustomed as he is to the priority of the itemising world of numbers, Gabriel Swan at all costs wishes to lay hold of constitution’s surge, not as burst but as *thing* given in or as that burst. He would prefer to turn around and see the burst *as thing rather than as burst*, the surge as subservient to mathematics or to acts rather than as a force that makes substances possible in the first place. The lines exhibiting this state of affairs belong to one of the most poignant sections of the text. Gabriel has translated the surge of constitution into a (hypothetical) thing. This awaited thing is in a sense his dead twin brother, the missing other half of his life. Yet what Gabriel misses is not reducible to *missing life* but is rather the missing link of his scientific outlook:

I would meet what I was waiting for...At times I felt as if *the thing* would *burst out* into being by its own force. And with it surely would come something else...I wanted to believe it. The feeling was so strong I began to think I was being followed, as if really some flickering presence had materialised behind me. I would stop in the street and turn



quickly, and at once everything would assume a studied air of innocence, the shopfronts and façades of houses looking suspiciously flat and *insubstantial*...(*M*, 186; emphasis added)

The attempt to catch constitution's surge *as an objectifiable substance* is vain. The burst is always there, it continues to happen, to surge; but it can only do so in terms of its own presubstantial insubstantiality—in terms of air. In a scientifically idealisable universe, the surge of constitution would be able to speak directly to us by means of the latest apparatus invented by science. “The thing itself spoke to me. I touched its core and it quivered under my hand” (*M*, 168). That presumptuous fallacy is chastised by *the revenge of constitution*, by air heated and heightened to its most perilous and uninhibited mode of headlong surging, by the insubstantiality that leaves all substances where they started, i.e. in air. “Then a kind of thrumming began under my feet....A red roar came up...and I flew on flaming wings...into the huge, cold air” (*M*, 120).

## Concluding Remarks

While investigating *Doctor Copernicus*, *Kepler*, *The Newton Letter*, and *Mefisto* phenomenologically, I have been able to exploit the possibilities given to researchers by the basic methodological concepts of reduction and intentionality. Phenomenological reduction has permitted me to bracket the already-constituted substances that typically limit flexibility in naturalistic undertakings: world, self, reality, indeed even 'language.' Intentionality, understood phenomenologically as prehuman directedness, is a factor that has allowed the primacy of the text to be fathomed in terms of the primordially of constitution. We have seen that constitution in Banville's science tetralogy is not to be understood anthropologically. The study's prioritisation of air reflects the ever ongoing accentuation of that phenomenon in the texts.

Having set aside 'the problem of language,' I have argued that the tetralogy problematises, rather than corroborates, the dominating ontology left to posterity by the 'linguistic turn' in criticism. A close reading of Banville's science novels reveals that they do not unequivocally forward the familiar view that language is some sort of barrier denying access to the world, or that life is to be understood as lived within the 'limits of language.' In so far as characters are trapped in representations of the world, unable to live in it on account of this or that intellectual-linguistic set of determinations, this is a mere starting-point for the literary event, not its limit. We move *from* that type of trite framework to something more captivating.

The chasm between self and world is a stereotype from which the texts retreat in order to delve into matters that are more elusive, text-specific, and intellectually challenging. Close readings have uncovered the presubjective-preobjective zone of constitution that is given in terms of disclosure to protagonist, narrator, and reader. We have seen that this intriguing domain does not reduce experience to some commonplace insight concerning the language-imposed limits of cognition. In the primary texts, language is not a distinct entity or medium negotiating a gulf between knower and universe, but is part of the constantly ongoing undulation in which constitution engenders, elevates, erases, and regenerates.

As we have followed various patterns of phenomenalisation in the novels, it has become evident that the operative discourse is not a rhetoric of scepticism but a language of disclosure. In so far as a perspective of general disbelief is activated, it ironically comes to givenness as disclosure. We have

seen that Banville's poetic prose has the knack of showing language rise to substantiation in the metaphoric effluences of a process that is indistinguishable from the metamorphosis of life itself as something self-generating. In this overall genesis, perceptual, affective, linguistic, and doxic orders of constitution mesh in a complexity where nothing can claim ontological priority—except constitution itself.

*Doctor Copernicus*, our first field of inquiry, turned out to be a text that did not produce a second-order idealisation of history by focusing on some banal cosmological reversal that would have taken us from a geocentric to a heliocentric or acentric reality. Furthermore, in so far as the emergent reality was acentric rather than heliocentric, its acentricity was not reducible to modern nihilism or postmodern relativism. The text resists every facile desire to read postmodernity back into Copernicus the person, or into the Copernican discovery-zone. We began to identify here what was to become all the more evident in the later works of the science tetralogy: the unrelenting textual preoccupation with air as a phenomenon coming to givenness as constitution and as aseity.

Phenomenologically prior, air in *Doctor Copernicus* was the *tertium quid* that in its aseity remained indifferent to the dichotomies it dissolved or constituted. This indifference was not ideal; it did not surpass the world and its binary oppositions as something transcendent to these, but made itself felt on the hither side of them as their constituting anteriority. This surreptitious source, rather than being some ontological origin, some great substance greater than other substances, was the least of all things—in a sense mere nothingness. The text's tendency to give air the form of an oasis is expressive of the aseity that makes it something other than a foundation, ground, or ontotheological origin. Although they constitute, the oases of air in *Doctor Copernicus* are not a sovereign omnipresence. No elemental pantheism or deism is implied.

As oasis the aseity of air is only felt intermittently. Irreducible to being or to nothingness, the *tertium quid* chooses its moment, appears when unexpected, unsolicited, and undesired. While it gives access to the intense presence that it is, it does not totalise that which exceeds its provisional locus. The pockets of air in *Doctor Copernicus* remain oases. They have unlimited power, but the force's intensity is confined to its appearing. This is what permits recurrence, the sense that air goes on being equally astonishing no matter how many times it appears.

The combination of unpredictable stealthiness and affective efficacy makes any sign-versus-object or sign-versus-concept structure look (and feel) trivial. If air is a system of signs in *Doctor Copernicus*, this is not so in any rationalistic or Saussurean-semiotic sense. As a discursive system, the text introduces us to pulsations that mock the very concepts of systematicity and discursiveness. Unlike the sign, air in *Doctor Copernicus* does not

depend on position. Its palpable presence is not part of a universe where deciphering has precedence over immediate revelation as immanent showing. Paradigmatically, the moment of lucidity does not materialise for Copernicus as the outcome of lucid reflections, but is a release configured to the side of every knowing. Even the suffering that typically is its herald is not primarily an intellectual or existential affair. In the text, discoveries fall out of air as birds do—for no reason at all.

As we turned to *Kepler* in the next phase of the investigation, we saw that the long arc made in *Doctor Copernicus* by discovery's arrival had become synonymous with the arc of the planet's orbit in the scientist's first attempt at cosmological recasting. The flight-path of discovery had become phenomenologically indistinguishable from the flight-path of the thing discovered. Here again it became evident that the Banvillean text contains a momentum that works towards an intriguing parity between the constituting and the constituted. We saw that the phenomenon of air, as the very nexus of this meshing, does not establish a textual world dominated by forces of displacement or deconstruction but by degrees and modes of aerially constituted substantiation. The scientific idealisation of the universe promoted by Kepler's geometrico-mathematical genius was shown to be ontologically subservient to an affective dimension that he is vastly sensitive to, and which defies the spatialised cosmology that he professionally constructs. What ultimately catches Kepler's attention is neither the planet as cosmological solid set in perfect mathematical orbit, nor the idealised interval between one planet and another, but inexplicable substantiations at the penumbral fringes of experience. The investigation shows that these substances materialise out of nothing, i.e., out of the 'air' of constitution itself. The phenomenon of the bird gives expression to such an event understood as directedness. Wings, falls, and other phenomena of aviation call attention to intentionality as a prehuman directedness with no source outside itself. Constitution's direction is itself capable of giving birth.

In the *Kepler* section we also saw that the very primordially of constitution qua directedness makes the *event* of substantiation a constant that persists during the course of its multiple figurations. Substances vary, but substantiation *per se* does not. As feeling is always feeling, no matter what we feel, substantiation is always substantiation, no matter what gets pushed from insubstantiality to substantiality. From an organisational viewpoint, this means that the various novels, and the various parts within them, are brought into some sense of aesthetic coherence by means of the ever ongoing constitution of substances.

Johannes Kepler is drawn into an aesthetic allure that is not to be confused with the beauty of a cosmologically hypostatized universe. He comes to witness a recasting of the world that is quite different from his scientific refashioning of the cosmos. As he himself gets drawn into both

recastings, he cannot fail to notice the superior intensity and beauty of the aesthetic energy that is *not* tied to the heavens, to the world, to the scientist, or to the private individual. What ultimately comes to matter is the tiniest shift in air, light, and colour—the event of noticing constitution at work in the insignificant margins of existence where no laws mean or function. The explorability of the world can no longer be defined in terms of logical investigations or mathematical models. Nor is it reducible to the carnal pleasures of the world venerated by Kepler’s sensualistic opposites among men.

We saw that *The Newton Letter* picked up this outlook at the point where *Kepler* began to unravel something peculiarly poignant: the role of memory in all of this. At Ferns, the narrator attempted to recast his life in the light of inexplicable incidents that had materialised there. Here memory linked up with a sense of loss and disorientation—but such melancholic affects were overshadowed by the far more important cognizance of the place itself as an aseity, indeed as an aerial one. Ironically, it was the very sense of space that the place-affectivity dissolved, Ferns not having its place in space but in the autochthon of the event it had come to be.

In *The Newton Letter*, autochthons grew out of nothingness, out of air. Their very act of constituting themselves was terrifying in its inexplicable intensity. It was established that the phenomenon of autochthonous substantiation occurred in a world of displacement; yet precisely because the autochthon does not come to givenness as a feature of the world, displacement does not account for it, constitute it, or explain it.

The text enables Sir Isaac to enter a late-life phase of post-Newtonian experience by means of such autochthonous substantiation: as his scientific energy falls away, he becomes open to the smaller things of life—to those that seemingly bypass the laws of gravity, and indeed all other cosmic principles. As forms of saying, such penurious phenomena finally reduced themselves to an empirical nothing, as the scientist saw various papers of his shrink to ashes in an accidentally caused fire. Here a new form of truth was furtively disclosed to the weary eye of mathematical logic and scientific representation.

In a corresponding accident in *Mefisto*, it is not the scientist’s papers that go up in fire but the scientist himself. The mathematician Gabriel Swan almost burns to death when Ashburn explodes under his feet. His partial recovery is a form of rebirth (as in the case of the fictive Newton), but it is also a recasting of the originating riddle that binds him to the twin brother he lost immediately after birth. The investigation showed that constitution itself is affected by these phenomena. It is apparently at risk, being geminated at its root. However, the implication of constitution and gemination in each other does not promote the sense of a world of divisions. In a reality that is driven by forms rather than by signs, the lost twin is not primarily a token of

otherness or even of loss, but of monovular interbelonging. The monozygotic world of *Mefisto* presences a phantom brother or phantom limb as a latent, invisible power rather than as a missing entity. Here birds, like more or less everything else, are amphibious. In a twilight zone where drugs are never far away, experience is hallucinatory. That which speaks is mute, yet substances keep emerging without warning as annunciations of nothing but themselves.

Here we saw what is perhaps the climax of metaphoric art in the science tetralogy: the constituting violence that allowed affects to be seen as winged animals, affective invention to be seen as phenomena literally surging out of pavements, gardens, houses, trees, etc. In a final victory of air over the world, nature is the near-demonic stage upon which constitution works its overwhelming deeds.

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