DOUBLE CODING IN JOHN BANVILLE'S *MEFISTO* (1999)

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Abstract. The present paper examines how John Banville creates a peculiar version of the Faust legend in his novel *Mefisto* (1999) through the use of double coding. The term is frequently used in postmodern art, especially in literary theory and architecture. The idea consists of the possibility of sending two opposite or even multiple messages at once. *Mefisto* presents a fertile ground for the analysis of the way double coding might operate in a work of postmodernist fiction. Moreover, it has been one of the most challenging contemporary interpretations of the Faust legend for critics and, therefore, the present analysis has more specific relevance for those who are already taking interest in Banville's oeuvre and/or in the Faust legend. For those who are yet to discover Banville, the article may serve as a short introduction to his idiosyncratic artistic style and peculiar means of expression. The ensuing analysis of double coding in *Mefisto* has the task of demonstrating that both a metanarrative appeal and a quotation/irony combination are clearly detectable in the novel. The aspiration is also to stress that Eco's approach to a definition of double coding is more in-depth and more relevant for literary theory or postmodernism than Jencks's one.

Key words: double coding, John Banville, the Faust legend, *Mefisto*

INTRODUCTION

John Banville, an Irish author writing his novels in the language he describes as Hiberno-English, is one of those prolific, contemporary authors who do not contain themselves to writing exclusively within one particular genre. The list of his works includes short stories, drama and screen adaptations, crime fiction novels, written under the pen name of Benjamin Black, as well as the ones published under Banville's name. Even though Black's crime fiction has received positive acclaim and been adapted as a British–Irish TV series, it is Banville's novels written in a more experimental genre that gradually brought him fame, literary awards and worldwide recognition as an original prose writer.

Banville's first literary experiments did not draw any serious attention on the part of the critics or wider readership. However, already the first collection of short stories *Long Lankin* (1970), and the novels *Nightspawn* (1971) and *Birchwood*

(1973) announced what would later be known as his trademark style of writing and a tendency to ambiguity rather than a straightforward narration. These initial literary exploits were followed by three novels written in the biographical genre, which eventually brought Banville his first serious recognition. *Doctor Copernicus* (1976), *Kepler* (1976), and *The Newton Letter* (1982) comprise *The Revolutions Trilogy.*

Mefisto occupies a singular place in Banville's oeuvre since it was originally intended as a closing volume of *The Scientific Tetralogy*, which without *Mefisto* is published as *The Revolutions Trilogy*, but has eventually stood out as a very original and independent work of art. As Banville says in one of his interviews: 'It was then that I stopped trying to be in control and trusted myself to dream in my writing' (Online 1). The new signature style of writing, already developed in *Birchwood* and *Mefisto*, brought Banville universal recognition with The Booker Prize for *The Sea* published in 2015.

McMinn, one of the most thorough researchers of Banville, calls him 'essentially a poetic novelist, with little interest in realistic characters or logical plots' (McMinn, 1988: 26). Even if *Mefisto* features a strong character and may be described as a character-driven novel, it has a coherent plot that may be rendered on a couple of pages. Nevertheless, just focusing on the interpretation of the causal sequence of events would be of little help to a reader striving to grasp the philosophical ideas encrypted into this contemporary Faustian tale. Just like any other novel published under Banville's name, *Mefisto* cannot be subject to a rigorous interpretation without an attempt to decode the complicated symbolism of the novel's form and content.

The theory of double coding, as proposed and developed in postmodernist theory by Umberto Eco and Charles Jencks, will provide the framework for the task. The two codes proposed for the analysis will be those of intertextuality and metanarrative. This pair of codes was chosen by Eco for his definition of postmodernist double coding. The analysis of double coding will put specific stress on the element of irony, which is essential in Eco's definition and not an obligatory part of Jencks's theory. Both Eco and Jencks should be considered recognised experts in the field of double coding and coding in general.

Just to make it clear, qualifying *Mefisto* as a postmodernist novel is not an aim in itself, especially keeping in mind all the ambiguities of the postmodernist theory revealed in recent academic discussions. Nevertheless, it makes sense to consider the novel through the prism of postmodernist theory, in the first place, because of the notion of relativism and scepticism permeating the novel and, secondly, because double coding is essentially a postmodernist tool.

The specific research tasks of the present analysis are as follows to:

(a) present the theory of double coding as it has been developed in semiotics and literary theory (Lotman, 1990; Barthes, 1990; Jencks, 1997, 2002 and Eco, 1984, 1990, 2011);

(b) demonstrate double coding in action in *Mefisto*;

(c) provide support to the argument that Eco's definition of double coding is more specific and relevant in application to literature than Jencks's more vague and generic definition.

A Dictionary of Literary and Thematic Terms proposes the following definition of *the code*: 'In linguistics, the shared understandings that make communication possible. In literature, the term also refers to certain principles of behaviour—for example, the conduct of heroes in Ernest Hemingway's fiction. […]' (Quinn, 2006: 84). Even though this definition is an obvious oversimplification, it gives an idea that the term has not migrated to literary theory from linguistics without any change of meaning.

Roland Barthes's *S/Z*, originally published in 1970, is universally recognised as the most conspicuous application of the code theory in literary criticism. In the foreword to its Blackwell translation into English, Richard Howard precisely defines the function of Barthes's analysis in *S/Z* as a move against the instinctive enjoyment of literature. In fact, Howard claims that all of Barthes's ten books are committed to the exposure of the myth that literature should be enjoyed instinctively. For Barthes, an adequate, rigorous reading involves the knowledge of the mechanism of our interpretation. As Howard puts it: 'Only when we know—and it is a knowledge gained by taking pains, by renouncing what Freud calls instinctual gratification—what we are doing when we read, are we free to enjoy what we read' (Howard, 1990: vii).

The analysis of the codes in *Mefisto* will be made in the spirit of the following Barthes's definition. Barthes explains that his five chosen codes create

> a *topos* through which the entire text passes or rather, in passing, becomes a text. […] Hence, we use Code here not in the sense of a list, a paradigm that must be reconstituted. The code is a perspective of quotations, a mirage of structures; […] Or again: each code is one of the forces that can take over the text (of which the text is the network), one of the voices out of which the text is woven. (Barthes, 1990: 20-21)

DOUBLE CODING

Both Jencks and Eco have arrived at the discussion of double coding during their theoretical explorations of postmodernism: in Jencks's case mainly in architecture and in Eco's case in literary theory. The question of the original authorship of the concept is not crystal clear. While Jencks names Eco as his inspiration, Eco returns the favour and names Jencks as the idea's originator. The question of the authorship of the concept of double coding being a muddled affair, it would be better to consider both Eco and Jencks as equally important contributors to the theory.

Eco's exploration of the subject started from the same question that was asked by modernists already at the beginning of the twentieth century: how to tell a story 'when every story tells a story that has already been told?' (Eco, 1984: xxiv). If modernists responded with the experiments in stylistics, such as the stream of consciousness technique, Eco suggests that in the age of postmodernism the author should refer to a famous story by means of quotation and by ironical

acknowledgement of the fact of quotation. Even though the age of innocent storytelling is indeed over, the ironical acknowledgement of the fact of quotation introduces new possibilities.

In his later research, Eco distinguishes two typical techniques used in postmodernist storytelling: intertextual irony and metanarrative. Intertextual irony is defined as 'direct quotations from other famous texts, or more or less transparent references to them' and metanarrative as 'reflections that the text makes on its own nature, when the author speaks directly to the reader' (Eco, 2011: 30). Eventually, Eco defines double coding as follows: 'double coding is the concurrent use of intertextual irony and an implicit metanarrative appeal' (ibid.).

Jencks claims that his initial concept of double coding was based on Eco's original definition of it as a combination of 'quotation & irony' (Jencks, 2002: 101). However, in his subsequent research of postmodernist architecture, Jencks advanced even further and claimed that double coding was not just about a combination of the particular codes named by Eco but about the possibility of sending any two or even multiple opposite messages at once. Jencks's examples of such possible combinations of codes in postmodern architecture are: new/old, professional/common, elite/populist, abstract/iconic and non-modern/modern.

However, as the key feature of the language of postmodernism Jencks names the simultaneous speaking in the codes of high and low cultures, in other words, 'a double coding of elite and contextual languages' (Jencks, 1997: 24). This idea chimes very well with Eco's thought that in the literary language of postmodernism a metanarrative appeal should produce 'a sort of silent complicity with the sophisticated reader'; however, the effect will be lost with the naïve reader who misses 'an additional wink' from the narrator' (Eco, 2011: 31). Eco clearly states that some extra competence is required from the reader to understand the high code as described by Jencks. Hence, Eco endorses Jencks's view that postmodern architecture addresses simultaneously both the specially educated minority of architects and a mass public, who might have no clue about the deeper meaning encoded in a certain work of architecture.

Notwithstanding all the similarities between Eco's and Jencks's approaches to double coding, there is one significant difference between Eco's original and Jencks's later definitions. Namely, the element of irony, being a crucial part of Eco's explanation, has been gradually phased out from Jencks's subsequent theory, especially when he claims that postmodernist double coding is about the possibility of sending *any* two or more opposite messages at once.

When Jencks talks about the combination of the codes of high and low or elite and populist culture, one may still count the authorial irony. Some authorial irony may certainly be presumed if an architect of a building realises that somebody will be able to understand only low culture code and somebody else will have a grasp of both low and high culture codes. However, it is hard to see where irony comes into play with the double coding of such oppositions as abstract/iconic and non-modern/modern.

Moreover, even admitting that an element of irony is present in Jencks's definition of double coding of high and low cultures, it is clearly not the same kind

of irony that Eco means in his approach. Obviously, for Eco the combination of quotation and metanarrative appeal represents the real source of authorial irony: the author quotes but does it ironically, not just to refer to the original source of his inspiration but also to roguishly acknowledge this reference with a whole array of metafictional tricks.

The ensuing textual analysis of double coding in *Mefisto* will demonstrate that both a metanarrative appeal and a quotation/irony combination are detectable in the novel. The aspiration is to demonstrate that Eco's approach is more in-depth and, therefore, more relevant for literary theory or postmodernism than Jencks's one.

DOUBLE CODING IN *MEFISTO*

The coexistence of the codes of intertextuality and metanarrative in *Mefisto* may serve as an example of asymmetrical binarity responsible for generating new meaning. The semantics of such a text is necessarily symbolic and multi-dimensional (Lotman, 1990: 74). Hence, the idea here is not just to spot the presence of double coding in the text but also to show the operation of both codes in their meaning-generative function. According to Lotman:

> When asymmetrical binarity is discovered in a semiotic object this always presupposes some form of intellectual activity. We cannot envisage the generation of a literary text as an automatic working of a single, set algorithm. The creative process is an irreversible process, and hence the passage from one stage to another must involve elements of randomness and unpredictability. (ibid.)

According to Silverman, 'The text is neither a work nor a series of words, neither a book nor the content of its pages. The text is off-center, located were the intratextual meets the extratextual and dedefines its borders' (Silverman, 1986: 58). The connections between the intratextual and extratextual in *Mefisto* are formed through the coexistence of the codes of metafiction and intertextuality. The stretch of intertextual links or allusions define the novel's depth, its connection and distance to other texts and the epoch of their creation, while metafiction constantly challenges the question of the borders between the *inside* of the narrated events and the *outside* introduced by the self-reflexive comments of the narrator. The interplay of the codes of intertextuality and metafiction is again a perfect means of expressing irony.

The first intertextual allusion appears already in the novel's title. Apart from being a blunt reference to the Faust legend, a non-conventional spelling (*ph* is substituted for *f*) contains a subtle hint that the reader should be on the lookout for the allusions to and the distortions of the Faust legend as well as pay meticulous attention to the way the story is told. The chapter titles, *Marionettes* and *Angels* may also be considered as para-textual references to the Faust legend. When the French classical drama took over the stage in Germany, the Faust theme was staged by the travelling

showmen, 'who amused the young with their marionettes' (Rudwin, 1973: 192). *Angels*, apart from other allusions, may refer to Mephistopheles as a fallen angel.

From the very first pages, it becomes clear that the novel's setting creates a peculiar atmosphere of vagueness and indeterminacy. There are no direct indications of the time and place of action in the novel. It even makes sense to talk about a peculiar chronotope of *Mefisto*. According to Bakhtin's definition, chronotope determines 'a literary work's artistic unity in relationship to an actual reality' (Bakhtin, 1981: 243). In more specific terms, chronotope is about 'the nature of and relationship between represented temporal and spatial categories' (Prince, 1989: 13). What may be observed in *Mefisto* is that its chronotope consists of a rather unconventional mix and degrees of references to the contexts that are usually more pronounced in less experimental novels.

For example, the historical context is present in *Mefisto* only as a vague reference. The political context is practically non-existent. Even the cultural and social contexts, rarely avoided in a realistic genre, are almost completely absent. As a result, devoid of references to the most traditional and concrete contexts, the chronotope becomes more universal, philosophical and even mystical. One of the functions of such chronotope may be in constructing an original framework for retelling one of the most universal myths that has already been told hundreds and thousands of times. As the novel's title suggests, *Mefisto* is a Faustian tale, and telling it at the end of the twentieth century without tongue in cheek carries a serious risk of boring the reader. Banville seems to be conscious of this when he is depicting a parodic protagonist of Faustian ambitions so easily trapped in Mephistopheles's net. The irony, underlined in Eco's definition, transpires in *Mefisto* not only through the intertextual acknowledgement that the story being told is one of the oldest and most universal myths of humanity, but also through the general mood of narration.

The most direct reference to the country of action may be found in the following sentence: 'Giraldus Cambrensis knew that shore', which serves as an allusion to Ireland, at least for someone well-read in Irish or British history (Banville: 1999: 15). Cambrensis, also known as Gerald of Wales, was a Welsh clergyman who travelled to Ireland together with King Henry II of England. Following the trip, he completed two significant works: *Topographia Hibernica* (1188), which may be read as a historical book about Ireland, and *Expugnatio Hibernica* (1189), an account of the conquest of Ireland by King Henry II. The phrase 'Cambrensis knew that shore' might contain for Banville self-ironic overtones as the clergyman was notorious for portraying the Irish as idle louts.

Another hint to the place of action appears when Gabriel, again not without a tint of ironic self-deprecation, claims that his father had in him 'something of those stunted little warriors, the dark-haired ones, Pict or Firbolg, I don't know, who stalk the far borders of history' (ibid.: 14). According to Davies's *The Isles: a History*, the origin of the Picts, who lived on the territory of Scotland, is uncertain, whereas the Firbolg are known to have inhabited the territory of Ireland (Davies, 1999).

Gabriel describes his native place as the town of 'twelve thousand souls, three churches and a Methodist hall, a narrow main street, a disused anthracite mine,

a river and a silted harbour', without actually ever naming the place (Banville, 1999: 15). The description that continues in the same vein obviously does not have a task of specifying a concrete town, but rather aims at painting the image of a universal small town that could be one out of many in that part of the world.

The universality of the setting may be confirmed by the fact that if Ireland as a place of action was swapped for England, Germany or any other part of Europe for that matter, it would not have any critical influence on the development of the story and ideas expressed in it. The absence of direct references to the names of the country or town of action stresses the point that the novel is not about a story that could have taken place only in a particular setting; to the contrary, it is a universal and eternal story that could be told without losing its relevance even at the age of postmodern skepticism. However, it has to be told in a new way.

In this respect Banville's novel differs radically from what would be a typical classical nineteenth-century novel or, for example, from Goethe's *Faust* or Mann's *Dr Faustus.* Most of the nineteenth- and even twentieth-century classics would go into a very detailed description of the setting to stress the crucial role of the milieu in the development of the characters, as in the novels of Zola, Balzac or Dickens. The underlying irony of Banville's novel is that it is telling a very old story in a very original way. The interplay of the indications of the fictional time and space with the real-world context, to which they refer, is a fertile ground for expressing all sorts of ironic overtones.

Gabriel Swan, a first-person protagonist and narrator, begins his story with the tragic moment of his birth when his twin brother does not manage to survive. Mark O'Connell, one of Banville's researchers, believes that this loss is of crucial importance for the subsequent plot development as it represents the protagonist's trauma and his following actions are motivated 'by a desire to attain a state of wholeness, to become "real"' (O'Connell, 2013: 2).

Gabriel's traumatic experience of his twin brother's death triggered his lasting curiosity in parallelisms, symmetries, binary numbers and all sorts of polarities: 'From the beginning, I suppose, I was obsessed with the mystery of the unit, and everything else followed. Even yet I cannot see a one and a zero juxtaposed without feeling deep within me the vibration of a dark, answering note.' (Banville, 1999: 18). Obviously, one stands for the survivor and zero for the deceased. In senior school Gabriel is fascinated by what Mr Pender, the maths master, tells them about the binomial theorem, Boolean algebra (with 1 and 0 standing for the values of true and false), 'or of the mysterious affinity between the numbers of a Fibonacci sequence and the spiral pattern of seeds on the face of a sunflower' (ibid.: 24).

After that follows an elliptical description of Gabriel's childhood with several episodes standing out in the narrator's memory for various reasons. One of such episodes relates Mr Pender's visit, who comes to acknowledge to Gabriel's mother her son's special gift for mathematics. Indeed, Gabriel spends a lot of his free time pondering over various mathematical formulae rather than playing with other children. The episode of Mr Pender's visit is the one in which the first metafictional trick may be detected. Gabriel's mother dislikes the teacher and shows him the door. Having

described Mr Pender's conversation with his mother in his usual, limited point of view mode of homodiegetic narration, Gabriel rather unexpectedly shifts to the omniscient and self-conscious mode when he describes Mr Pender's reaction: 'Anger and frustration reared up in him like a wave and broke. Leaving a wash of sadness in their wake. How do I know these things? I just do. I am omniscient, sometimes' (ibid.: 27).

This shift in the narrative style is provocatively ironic since it is obvious that, instead of suspending disbelief, the narrator purposefully draws the reader's attention to the playfulness of his narration and, to the contrary, stimulates disbelief in the veracity of his account. Coleridge, following Aristotle's ideas on the poetic of Greek theatre, used to say that 'willing suspension of disbelief' is an integral part of the constitution of poetic faith (Coleridge, 2004). However, in *Mefisto* the narrator is clearly being ironic about such a straightforward, traditional way of telling a story. To be able for a reader to suspend his disbelief, the narrator needs to sustain a credible and logical style of narration, which, however, is not always the case with Gabriel. According to Roger Fowler, this sort of self-consciousness 'flaunts its own condition of artifice' and is very much in the mood of postmodernism (Fowler, 1997: 96). The ironic authorial attitude to the new ways of telling old stories simply cannot be overlooked here.

Then comes Gabriel's fateful meeting with a weird trio consisting of Mr Kasperl, Sophie and Felix. The character of Felix is one of the key intertextual references to the Faust legend as throughout the novel he incarnates a Mephistophelean tempter for Gabriel and manages to draw him into a couple of dubious projects. There is only one direct quotation from Goethe's *Faustus* in *Mefisto*: 'Es war eine Ratt im Kellernest ...' [once there was a cellar rat], all other allusions being of a much more nuanced character (Banville, 1999: 164; trans. B. Taylor). Thus, it is not obviously stated who takes the role of Faust and Mephistopheles in the story. That Gabriel is, in fact, Faust is clear from the nature of his aspirations for a scientific explanation of the world. Moreover, he is tempted by the cunning and wicked, red-haired Felix. The way in which Banville establishes the intertextual links between the Faust legend, the Christian legends about the Devil and Felix as Mephistopheles is a brilliant example of the author's nuanced craftsmanship. Never referred to directly as a Mephistophelean character, Felix is affirmed in this role through the description of his attire, behaviour and the nature of his associations with Gabriel.

The first project is run by Mr Kasperl developing a disused anthracite mine. He is helped by Felix and Sophie, a young lady performing a role of an obscure housewife at Ashburn, a dilapidated estate. Gabriel's role is to assist Mr Kasperl with some mathematical calculations for the engineering works at the mine. Gabriel does not express his feelings explicitly in his evasive narration, but it is nonetheless evident that he falls in love with Sophie. An explosion at the mine breaks this connection. Two workmen get killed, dozens are maimed, and the deceived investors from the town are ruined. Felix is hinted at as the mastermind behind the explosion. The trio must leave the town because of potential retaliation from the locals.

Before the trio escapes, Gabriel's mother decides to take them to account and drives to Ashburn together with Gabriel's father and Uncle Ambrose. On

the way, they get into a road accident, caused by a 'big black dog' that 'ran right under the wheel', as a result of which Gabriel's mother dies and his father becomes demented (ibid.: 101). The black dog may serve as an intertextual reference to Goethe's *Faust*, in which Mephistopheles appears to Faust in the form of a dog. In *The Devil in Legend and Literature*, Rudwin (1973: 39) also claims that 'the dog has always been one of the Devil's favourite metamorphoses'. Although there is no direct mention of the fact in the text, several factors hint at Felix as the arranger of the accident, acting in his Mephistophelean capacity.

The worst is yet to come as in the final scene of Part 1 the floor of the Ashburn house collapses under a fire caused by an explosion or earthquake, which, characteristically of Gabriel's narration, is again not clearly explained in the text. As a result, Mr Kasperl and Sophie die, Gabriel is severely burnt, and his face is disfigured. Significantly, only Felix escapes unscathed from all these troubles. The episode of the explosion at Ashburn may serve as another intertextual allusion: according to German legends, Faust dies in a hotel after its sudden explosion. In its turn, the tragic end of Gabriel's relations with Sophie may serve as an intertextual link to Goethe's Faust and Gretchen.

Part 2 begins with Gabriel recovering in hospital where he is treated with strong drugs to alleviate his pain and suffering. Gabriel calls this period his 'season in hell' (Banville, 1999: 123). On leaving the hospital, he starts loitering about the streets of his town when, one day, Felix finds him sitting on a park bench. Although Gabriel's face is severely disfigured by fire, Felix, with his Mephistophelean clairvoyance, has no trouble recognising him.

For the second time, Felix tempts Gabriel into a project of dubious nature. Gabriel starts procuring drugs from the hospital for Felix to profit from the dealership. This is when Gabriel meets Adele, an addicted girl introduced to him by Felix. As in Part 1 with Sofie, now Gabriel falls in love with Adele. Just as Goethe's Faust had Helen as his love after Gretchen, Gabriel has Adele after Sophie. At the same time, Felix introduces Gabriel to professor Kosok, Adele's father, who is busy working on an obscure project with a computer Reizner 666. The number is clearly referring to the devilish nature of the machine and the project.

Felix makes sure that Gabriel, with his talent for numbers, joins Kosok to advance him in this research. Gabriel's motivation is not clearly stated, but it seems that for him it is simply yet another chance to return to his mysterious mathematical equations. The machine is a part of a universal computer network, but the nature of the work is not explicitly stated. Gabriel observes that Kosok 'seemed to want only disconnected bits, oases of order in a desert of randomness' (ibid.: 170). Gabriel's moments of enlightenment are of a similar metaphysical nature: 'And all at once I saw again clearly the secret I had lost sight of for so long, that chaos is nothing but an infinite number of ordered things' (ibid.: 183).

One day after the government supervisor's visit, professor Kosok's project is closed due to the lack of any concrete, feasible results. As Felix ironically explains to Gabriel: 'They thought the old boy was doing something brilliant, until they found out he was using their precious machine to prove that nothing can be proved'

(ibid.: 226). His participation in the project has made Gabriel no wiser than Kosok in his understanding of the world and the laws behind it. Moreover, again repeating the pattern of the first part, Gabriel's relationship with Adele ends in a catastrophe. Sadly, Adele dies of an overdose of drugs supplied by Gabriel.

Greek mythology is a favourite source of intertextuality for Banville, and this novel is not an exception. Gabriel's surname Swan may be interpreted as an allusion to Zeus, who, according to Greek mythology, turned into a swan so that he could rape Leda. It may be argued that, in fact, Gabriel commits a sort of rape when he sleeps with Adele in return for supplying her with lethal drugs. Hence, the second encounter with Felix-Mefisto again brings only grief into Gabriel's life.

In the finale, Gabriel expresses a premonition that Felix would inevitably return but that for Gabriel it would be different next time, and he would try to leave things to chance. The finale is inconclusive, which perhaps serves to emphasise the protagonist's confused state of mind in the chaotic and absurdist world, of which he is desperately trying to make a meaning.

As a whole, Gabriel's character is very ambiguous. Thus, having a natural gift for maths, he abuses his talent by applying it to the wrong type of activities, which eventually leads to his and others' private catastrophes, whose destinies seemingly do not enter the area of Gabriel's concern. He constantly remains on the other side of morality and can indeed be impersonated as both Zeus and a vicious swan. As such, Gabriel may be even considered as an ironic reference to a Nietzschean Hyperborean (another intertextual motif), seriously bothered only by his higher mission of discovering nothing less than the formula of the Universe.

There is much more to the code of intertextuality in *Mefisto*, including references to Shakespeare, mythology or the Bible, but, for the sake of brevity, it would make sense now to focus a bit more on the code of metanarrative and give additional examples of its expression in the novel. According to *The Continuum Encyclopedia of Modern Criticism and Theory*, metafiction is defined as 'a fictional mode that takes fictionality, the conventions of writing fiction, as part of its own subject matter' (Wolfreys, 2002: 855).

An exciting perspective on metafiction is proposed by psychoanalytic criticism. Thus, one of the ways to explain the reason behind Gabriel's narrative whims may be found in the Lacanian outlook, which, according to Peter Barry, involves 'a preference for the kind of literary text in which there are constant irruptions of the Imaginary into the Symbolic' (Barry, 2002: 114). In this way, the texture of the novel reveals such Lacanian notions as 'the constructedness and instability of the subject (the self), or the subject as a linguistic construct, or language as a self-contained universe of discourse' (ibid.: 115).

From this perspective, Gabriel may be seen as a borderline character, whose ambivalence is masterfully emphasised by switching his narration from the seemingly realistic to anti-realistic text. By disrupting the general logic and grammar of his narrative, as in the already described episode of Mr Pender's visit, Gabriel vacillates between the seemingly reliable mode of narration to the unreliable one.

The same happens when Gabriel starts narrating an episode with the sentence 'Spring came early that year – no, I'm wrong, it came late' (ibid.: 96). Or in another fragment: 'It was one of those mornings with Felix that – no, he wasn't there, it was just a morning, in April' (ibid.: 197). Or when at the end of the novel Adele dies and Gabriel, passing by professor Kosok, casually drops: 'She was his daughter, did I mention that?' (ibid.: 233). From the point of view of psychoanalytic literary criticism such instances of instability and self-reflexivity, again, could be seen as the irruptions of the Imaginary into the Symbolic in Gabriel's representation of his story. As Barry explains, the realm of the Imaginary is 'a world in which the language gestures beyond itself, beyond logic and grammar, rather in the way that poetic language often does' (Barry, 2002: 114).

Metafictional references gesture beyond the language of the text also to hint at the elements of parody in it. Thus, the scene opening with the phrase about spring certainly bears intertextual connotations referring to the hackneyed style of writing. As soon as the phrase is automatically pronounced by Gabriel, he realises that he needs to correct it if he wishes to convey the real state of affairs, i.e. that the spring came actually late and not early that year. By correcting himself Gabriel seems to be saying that sometimes authors get carried away writing in clichés and employing some well-established but also well-beaten metaphors instead of pursuing their own style. His self-correction is again a parodic one as he just changes one cliché phrase for another. Thus, cliché phrases and truisms become the objects of parody, and fictionality is critically taken as its own subject matter to serve the purpose of irony.

Masterfully emphasised by metafictional elements in *Mefisto*, the notions of the instability of the subject and the subject as a linguistic construct may be considered as serving yet a greater purpose in the novel. Obviously, there is a place for a language gesturing beyond itself when in its conventional use it fails to deal with something ungraspable and inexplicable. When the subject matter is transparent and unambiguous, it surely can be expressed in a clearer and less ambivalent style of writing. The subject matter of *Mefisto*, however, is infinitely more complicated as it deals with irresolvable philosophical questions.

The vagueness of the novel's chronotope and the unreliability of memory serve to express the indeterminacy of the narrator's orientation in the world. In fact, metafictional references serve the same purpose as a narrative tool conditioned by the subjectivism of Gabriel's unreliable memory and fanciful imagination. Analysing the question of imagination and time in Banville's *Birchwood*, whose hero's name is also Gabriel, Brendan McNamee aptly points out the key feature of this kind of narration:

> Phenomenal facts belong to the world of time, and time vanishes, to be retained only in the memory, which is governed by the imagination. But since, as Gabriel realises, 'all thinking is in a sense remembering', the imagination, the 'I am' cannot be divorced from the clutter and chaos that make up a life in time. (McNamee, 2003: 67)

This could be a valid reason for all the reservations, self-corrections, self-references and other twists and turns on the part of the uncertain and unreliable narrator. Gabriel Swan's condition is that of someone constantly trying to solve an aporia or trying to find a way out of an impasse. His story, therefore, is the result of an attempt at overcoming his condition through language (logocentrism), and metafictional elements fit in here very well to underline the impossibility of a straightforward representation.

Hopefully, the foregoing examples have managed to provide a sufficient demonstration of the presence of double coding in *Mefisto* and to justify the use of the codes of intertextuality and metanarrative in their meaning-generative function. Moreover, an attempt has been made to show that both codes in their coexistence contain massive potential for the expression of irony, which is a vital element in Eco's definition of postmodernist double coding. Without belittling Jencks's overall contribution to this notion, it seems that the omission of irony from his definition of double coding leads to the loss of the crucial idea behind Eco's approach.

Neither intertextuality nor metanarrative appeal belongs to the realm of straightforward narration. The implied reader of any novel containing both elements will have to be sufficiently competent to be able to decipher the function of both codes and to detect the presence of the authorial irony assisting the author in an extremely challenging undertaking of telling an old story in a new, sufficiently entertaining way. Fortunately for lovers of stylish fiction, Banville is one of the authors capable of pulling the trick with excellence.

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