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#### **HISTORY AND BIOGRAPHY IN J. BANVILLE'S NOVEL *DR COPERNICUS***

**Abstract.** *The article discusses some peculiarities of J. Banville's novel Dr Copernicus, which is a mixture of historical, biographical and realistic genre varieties. It is revealed that through the narrative experimentation, the author manages to present history as the reflection of the mind, and the mind of a great scientist as part of intellectual history of the times of the Reformation.*

**Key words:** *Nicholas Copernicus; history; biography; mind; identity.*

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**Аннотация.** *В статье рассматриваются некоторые особенности романа Дж. Бенвилла «Доктор Коперник», представляющего собой смесь исторической, биографической и реалистической жанровых разновидностей. Выявлено, что посредством нарративного эксперимента автору удается представить историю как отражение сознания, а сознание великого ученого – как часть интеллектуальной истории времен Реформации.*

**Ключевые слова:** *Николай Коперник; история; биография; сознание; идентичность.*

William John Banville is a contemporary Irish writer, born in Wexford, Ireland, in 1945. He was educated at Christian Brothers schools and St Peter's College in Wexford. A good part of his life Banville worked as a journalist, occupying the post of a Literary Editor at *The Irish Times* from 1988 to 1999.

Nick Turner in his 2012 article on Banville for the British Council literature page writes: "*Regarded as the most stylistically elaborate Irish writer of his generation, John Banville is a philosophical novelist concerned with the nature*

of perception, the conflict between imagination and reality, and the existential isolation of the individual” [1].

Banville represents a rather trendy direction in contemporary fiction: a fictional (fictionalised) biography. This genre can be further viewed in two sub-varieties: 1) when the fictional biography concentrates predominantly on the personality of a real figure, while the historical background is of minor relevance, and 2) with history more in the foreground. The genre of fictional biography has become one of the leading varieties in contemporary literature. Precedents include Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando* (1928) and *Flush* (1933); Robert Graves’ two Claudius novels (*I, Claudius*, 1934; and *Claudius the God and his Wife Messalina*, 1934); *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* (1941) by Vladimir Nabokov; Antony Burgess’ *Nothing Like the Sun: A Story of Shakespeare’s Love Life* (1964); a whole range of Peter Ackroyd’s novels, including *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde* (1983) and *Milton in America* (1996); Julian Barnes’ *Flaubert’s Parrot* (1984); *The Master of St Petersburg* (1994) by J.M. Coetzee and his *Summertime* (2009); *Nat Tate: An American Artist 1928–1960* (1998) by William Boyd; Hilary Mantel’s Thomas Cromwell novels (*Wolf Hall*, 2009; *Bring Up the Bodies*, 2012; *The Mirror and the Light*, 2020). “Fictional biography is a genre wherein an author writes an account of a person’s life where that person is actually a fictional character” [2]. Ina Schabert points out that both fictional and non-fictional biographies “represent the lives of historical persons by organizing as much factual evidence as possible within an interpretive context” [3, p. 4].

While some of the novels listed are engaged in an intricate game with readers and follow the postmodernist principle of undecidability and relativism of all biographical narratives (*The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde*, *Milton in America*, *Flaubert’s Parrot*, *The Master of St Petersburg*), others quite self-consciously explore the meticulous facts from the historical figures’ lives. A remarkable tendency is the conspicuous presence of a historical celebrity who is also a protagonist in a novel, while the novel itself is not a fictional biography of the said character. Such are the cases of Pat Barker’s real-life characters in a fictional work – psychoanalyst W.H. Rivers (1864–1922), the war poets Siegfried Sassoon (1886–1967) and Robert Graves (1895–1985) – in her *Regeneration* trilogy (1991–1995). Helen Dunmore point out the following about her prize-winning novel *Zennor in Darkness* (1993): “This was also my first researched novel, set in the First World War and dealing with the period when D. H. Lawrence and his wife Frieda lived in Zennor in Cornwall, and came under suspicion as German spies” [4]. The new novel by Anabel Abbs *Frieda: The Original Lady Chatterley* (2018) is described by *The Guardian*: “A portrait of the novelist’s German wife explores the price paid for inspiring her man” [5]. One of the brightest examples of this subgenre is Joyce Carol Oates’ novel *Blonde* (2000), where she reimagines the inner life of Norma Jeane Baker – as a child, then a woman, and then the celebrity – who was that very idolized blonde the world came to know as Marilyn Monroe.

*Dr Copernicus* (1976) which won the James Tait Black Memorial Prize for fiction is rather the second type of historical-biographical fiction, in which, like in Hilary Mantel’s trilogy, history itself is as important as the person who carries it with them. This novel blurs the genre boundaries: it is simultaneously a biography of the fifteenth century Polish astronomer Nicolaus Copernicus (1473–1543) (it was the first in a series of books exploring the lives of eminent scientists Kepler and Newton and their scientific ideas), a scientific theory related through Banville’s thorough study of documents, and material history.

The words of T. Carlyle that “*The history of the world is but the biography of great men*” and R. W. Emerson’s echoing idea (“*There is properly no history; only biography*”) find proof in John Banville’s *Doctor Copernicus* as well. He presents the great astronomer’s childhood full of trials, the uneasy search for truth of a genius among the ignorance of the Dark Ages and the psychological make-up of a very reserved, stern, obstinate and enigmatic personality. Banville employs other characters’ perspective based on documentary evidence to elucidate the role of Nicolaus Copernicus in the evolution of human consciousness. History is the essence of this fictional biography. Derek Hand writes: “*More recently his novels have become increasingly enclosed and centred on men who meditate on lives lived and choices made and their consequences. However, it can be argued that, amidst this diversity, all of his writing focuses to a greater or lesser degree on characters who must struggle to articulate themselves as themselves. These characters do so against the backdrop of the issue of the past and history precisely as a grand narrative that challenges the individual as an*

*individual*” [6, p. 28].

Copernicus was born in 1473, in Toruń (Thorn) in Royal Prussia, a region that had been part of the Kingdom of Poland since 1466, and died in 1543 (aged 70) in Frauenburg, Warmia, Royal Prussia. The uneasy childhood – early loss of mother, the father’s pompous character of a typical provincial merchant, the father’s death and subsequent rivalry with a vicious and jealous brother Andreas, his Uncle Lucas’ no less vicious treatment of the children (apart from Nicolas and Andreas, there were also two girls) – all these emphasized even more Nicolas’ sullen, reflexive and withdrawn nature. “*Suddenly he was being called upon to question his very nationality! and he discovered that he did not know what it was. Bishop Lucas, however, resolved that difficulty straightway. ‘You are not German, nephew, no, nor are you a Pole, nor even a Prussian. You are an Ermlander; simple. Remember it.’ And so, meekly, he became what he was told to be. But it was only one more mask. Behind it he was that which no name nor nation could claim. He was Doctor Copernicus*” [7, p. 94]. There is no reliable documentary evidence as to the relationships in Copernicus’ family. Banville, however, managed to create a plausible and believable picture of possible circumstances given the general panorama of social life in the 15<sup>th</sup> – 16<sup>th</sup>-century Prussia.

While exploring the uneasy intellectual quest of the young Copernicus, Banville also interrogates the history, politics and the religious wars surrounding the would-be Canon and great scientist. History appears as a component of Copernicus’ self. When the narration in parts 1, 2 and 4 is third-person, it is still centered on his mind which digests, adapts to and reworks the troubling history of the time: “*He was appalled. Politics baffled him. The ceaseless warring of states and princes seemed to him insane. He wanted no part in that raucous public world, and yet, aghast, like one falling, he watched himself being drawn into the arena*” [7, p. 93–94].

The Northern Renaissance and spread of Lutheranism happened in the same period when Nicolas was struggling with the religious implications of his ideas. We also follow the complex history of Prussia, Ermland, Poland and the Baltic States – all through fragments of Copernicus’ life, the strategic errands he is sent on, the important negotiations with influential dignitaries, the decisions taken in his regard totally in line with the implications of the historical period.

Banville produces scenes in which the historical figures meet. One of such scenes captures a banquet where both King Sigismund I and Nicolas Copernicus are present, and pictures the hard moment in Prussia’s history – threats of its security from the Teutonic order as well as from the Turks. It was King Sigismund I (Sigismund the Old, 1467–1548) who ruled Silesia, and in a short time his judicial and administrative reforms transformed the territories he governed into model states. “*You keep a merry table, Bishop!*” he cried. *His temper was greatly improved. He had cast off his sodden disguise of linsey cloak and jerkin (‘Who would mistake us for a peasant anyway!’), and was dressed now in the rough splendour of cowhide and ermine. That Jagellon head, however, lacking its crown, was still a rough-hewn undistinguished thing. Only the manner, overbearing, cruel and slightly mad, proclaimed him royal. He had made the long hard journey from Cracow to Prussia in wintertime, disguised, because he, like the Bishop, was alarmed by the resurgence of the Teutonic Knights*” [7, p. 97]. The character comes alive, with his very human outward appearance, betraying the emblematic violence and cruelty of the powerful figures of the day.

The analysis of the historical moment, however, is entrusted to Bishop Lucas, or his inner perspective: “*He was worried indeed. The Knights, once rulers of all Prussia and now banished to the East, were again, with the encouragement of Germany, pushing westward against Royal Prussia, whose allegiance to the Jagellon throne, however unenthusiastic, afforded Poland a vital foothold on the Baltic coast. At the centre of this turbulent triangle stood little Ermland, sore pressed on every side, her precarious independence gravely threatened, by Poland no less than by the Knights. Something would have to be done*” [7, p. 97].

On another level, there is an authentically reproduced atmosphere of the late Middle Ages. “*From his first exposure to the world at large*”, writes Lucia Boldrini in her 2007 article about the novel “– *which takes the form of a pilgrimage to Italy – Copernicus is surrounded by violence and the implications of violence. Great as his natural revulsion is from this means of imposing a meaning on man’s presence in the world, Copernicus is unable to remain immune from history*” [8].

In *The Copernican Revolution* (1957) written by the philosopher Thomas Kuhn, Copernicus, as well as his book *De Revolutionibus* (written between 1515–1530) is pictured as a man suspended between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, “at once ancient and modern, conservative and radical” [9, p. 134–135]. Boldrini also argues, that “the use of the proper name becomes a pivot of this ‘suspension’ between two worlds, two epochs, different artistic and scientific necessities, and focuses the ways in which the individual belongs to history and to different, shifting ‘historical paradigms’” [8]. Thus, the derivation of the name ‘Koppernigk’ may mean copper. However, “Copernicus himself varied the spelling of his name depending on the context and the nature of the documents: Copernic in official administration, Coppersnic when the area was German speaking, Copernicus in official correspondence and in literary and scientific manuscripts. The signature could further vary into Koppernieck, Kopperlingk, Kupernik, etc. The form historically ‘approved’ and used in most biographies, including the one by Arthur Koestler, which Banville has consulted extensively, and that written in the nineteenth century by Leopold Prowe and still considered the authoritative text, is Koppernigk” [8].

The name gives the character of Nicolas Copernicus his place in history and fixes his social identity. “To free himself from this net of pre-fixed identity [business family origin], Nicolas must perform a symbolic act of defiance and of rupture that will enable him to assert his individuality and make a new, independent name for himself, a name that would signify his true, essential, autonomous identity and which can become his own personal seal on the new world view coined by his revolutionary scientific theory” [8].

A classical historical novel, made according to the model concocted by W. Scott, intends to romanticize history, make it a chronotope of a wondrous seat of national and global myths. Besides, handling of the proportion of fact versus fiction may vary substantially. In Banville’s novel, it seems, that aspect is well-negotiated. The “Acknowledgements” page (as well as Banville’s interviews where he explained the make-up of the novel) carefully documents the resources to which the author tried to be as faithful as possible: the standard biography of Ludwig Prowe’s *Nicolaus Copernicus* (1883–4); Angus Armitage’s *Copernicus, Founder of Modern Astronomy* (1938), and *Sun, Stand Thou Still* (1947), Thomas S. Kuhn’s *The Copernican Revolution* (1957), and Arthur Koestler’s *The Sleepwalkers: A History of Man’s Changing Vision of the Universe* (1959). F. L. Carsten’s *The Origins of Prussia* (1954), Frances A. Yates’ *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (1964), W. P. D. Wightman’s *Science in a Renaissance Society* (1972), and M. E. Mallett’s *The Borgias* (1969), as well as “the numerous extracts from Copernicus’s own writings” incorporated in the text.

One more important aspect of this historical novel is its propensity to speak to the present day, in addition to speaking on behalf of the past. The essential aspect of the time period coinciding with Copernicus’ life – second half of the 15<sup>th</sup> – first half of the 16<sup>th</sup> centuries – is the incessant war campaigns. “Albrecht von Hohenzollern Ansbach, last Grand Master of the brotherhood of the Order of St Mary’s Hospital of the Germans at Jerusalem, otherwise called the Teutonic Knights. Once again they were pushing westward, determined finally to break the Polish hold on Royal Prussia and unite the three principedoms of the southern Baltic under Albrecht’s rule; once again the vice closed on little Ermland. In 1516 the Knights, backed up by gangs of German mercenaries, made their first incursions across the eastern frontier. They plundered the countryside, burnt the farms and looted the monasteries, raped and slaughtered, all with the inimitable fervent enthusiasm of an army that has had its bellyful of peace. It was not yet a fully fledged war, but a kind of sport, a mere tuning up for the real battle with Poland that was to come, and hence the bigger Ermland towns were left unmolested, for the present” [7, p. 129].

Copernicus comes with an official visit to Königsberg, to Albrecht: “‘We have come to Königsberg to ask you to consider the suffering that you are visiting upon the people, the greater suffering that war with Poland will bring.’ ‘Ah. The common people. But they have suffered always, and always will. It is in a way what they are for. You flinch. Herr Doctor, I am disappointed in you. The common people? – pah. What are they to us? You and I, mein Freund, we are lords of the earth, the great ones, the major men, the makers of supreme fictions. Look here at these poor dull brutes –’ His thin dark hand took in the silent crowd behind him, the flunkeys, Precentor Giese, the painted army. ‘–They do not even

*understand what we are talking about. But you understand, yes, yes. The people will suffer as they have always suffered, meanly, mewling for pity and mercy, but only you and I know what true suffering is, the lofty suffering of the hero. Do not speak to me of the people! They are the brutish mask of war, but war itself is that which they in the ritual of their suffering express but can never comprehend, for their eyes are ever on the ground, while you and I look up, ever upward, into the blue! The people – peasants, soldiers, generals – they are my tool, as mathematics is yours, by which I come directly at the true, the eternal, the real. Ah yes, Doctor Copernicus, you and I – you and I! The generations may execrate us for what we do to their world, but we and those rare ones like us shall have made them what they are!”* [7, p. 136].

This conversation strikes home to us the humanist values, generalizes all war machines that had ever worked before and have been since set in motion. Banville, in an antimilitarist discourse, proclaims a position that sounds like an enlightening revelation: “*Georg, poor dreamer that he was, had imagined war as a kind of stately dance in which two gorgeously (and expensively!) caparisoned armies made ritual feints at each other on crisp mornings before breakfast. The reality – grotesque, absurd, and hideously cruel – was a terrible shock*” [7, p. 141].

In the words of M. Springer, “*Beauty and the perception of it are among the most prominent and striking aspects of Banville’s work*” [10, p. 134]. In conclusion, Banville’s book can be referred to a historical, realistic and biographical novel in which history has become part of the consciousness of the protagonist. Historical events are often summarized and analyzed by other characters, while maintaining the universalism of humanistic values that sound relevant even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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