

A CLEARING IN INFERNO: BANVILLEAN CONSTRUCTIONS OF PRAGUE IN *PRAGUE PICTURES* AND *KEPLER*

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Augustine Martin, late Professor of Anglo-Irish literature at University College Dublin, once stated that Dublin is “the most famous city in literary history, with the possible exception of Troy” (qtd. in Smyth 14). Much speaks for the truth of that statement, but no doubt there are other worthy contestants in a competition for such a title. The contestant I will put forward here is Prague, which, according to one critic at least, “more than any other city in Europe seems to be a literary place” and which has given rise to a literature “so rich that it is possible to speak of it as a genre of its own” (Landmark 6).¹ Prague is not only the city of Franz Kafka and Jaroslav Hasek, whose heroes Josef K. and Josef Svejek have put their marks on the city, or of Jaroslav Seifert, Ivan Klima, or Milan Kundera for that matter, but it is also, as Irish novelist John Banville has put it, “the mysterious, jumbled, fantastical, absurd city on the Vltava, one of Europe’s three capitals of magic [the other two being Turin and Lyon]” (*PP* 9).² Of course, the Dublin Gus Martin had in mind in the quotation above was primarily the city of James Joyce’s *Ulysses* – that is, the Dublin of June 16, 1904. The Prague that will be considered below, as it appears in two texts by Banville, is of a double-layered temporality: the year 1600, as reinvented in the novel *Kepler* (1981), and an early 1980s moment, as outlined in the non-fictional *Prague Pictures* (2003).³ I will argue that in these texts the city of Prague emerges, in pre-modern and modern versions of itself, as a cramped space of entrapment, a stagnant and oppressive urban place. At times, however, it also appears as a place where spaces open up – for liberating action and flights of the imagination.

As for my material, it should be said that the potential problems of reading a work of non-fiction alongside a fictional one have not escaped me. The two texts selected, however, crucially concerned as they both are with Europe and Prague, speak to each other on several levels. My contention is that at the point where they intersect, a rich Banvillean construction of Prague comes into view.

The city, as a concept, tends to be problematic. A city, to Henri Lefebvre, is a centre of “social and political life” but it is also “itself ‘œuvre’ [a work of art, a monument], a feature which contrasts with the irreversible tendency towards money and commerce” (66). According to Burton Pike, it is “an artefact deeply rooted in our civilisa-

1 Landmark’s 2004 review juxtaposed *Prague Pictures* with two other books on Prague, one of them by Ivan Klima.

2 The following sigla will be used throughout: *PP* for *Prague Pictures* and *K* for *Kepler*.

3 A few other moments in time, in the respective century of each novel, also take on importance – the later 1600s and the 1990s.

tion and the Western mind; [...] the city always speaks, and with many voices" (ix). Furthermore, although a "powerful image in literature" from the start, it is nevertheless "too large and complex to be thought of as only a literary trope. It has a double reference, to the artefact in the outside world and to the spectrum of refractions it calls into being in the minds of author and reader" (ix). The city also, as James Donald suggests, designates a "diversity" to which we ascribe "coherence or integrity"; it is a representation and, as Donald argues, an "imagined environment" (422). Thus, without losing sight of the empirical reality of Prague, I will here consider that city as it emerges in John Banville's *Prague Pictures* and *Kepler*, as a literary construction – a "word-city" (Pike xii) and an imagined environment.

Although some have seen the choice of a life in the city as a sign of mental hygiene – the Irish writer Liam O'Flaherty comes to mind, who in his young seafaring days claimed that "man, when sane, needs to be in a crowd. [...] They always live in cities" (274) – others have seen such a choice as infernal. Italo Calvino, for one, does so in his *Invisible Cities*: the city is the "inferno where we live every day, that we form by being together" (qtd. in Smyth 13). Calvino also suggests two possible ways of escaping the suffering inflicted by this inferno: one is to accept the inferno and become part of it; the other is "to seek and learn to recognize who and what, in the midst of the inferno, are not inferno, then make them endure, give them space" (qtd. in Smyth 13). Focusing on the second of Calvino's possible paths, I posit that in Banville's two texts, Prague is constructed partly as infernal and partly as a city where spaces are cleared for that which is not inferno.

A secondary focus in this article concerns my view of John Banville's Prague – in addition to being constructed as word-city and inferno – as containing a Hibernicising element. This view draws on Patrick Sheeran's erstwhile (and notably pre-Celtic-Tiger) suggestion that an Irish sense of place is a "nominal" one and that a "verbal, funereal perception of place may be discerned all the way through the Irish tradition" (196). According to Sheeran, then, an Irish sense of place "relates to death rather than to life" (194) – an idea akin to the Joycean notion that "[t]he Irishman's house is his coffin" (Joyce 110) – and is marked by a predilection for words that includes the excessive naming of names. In what follows, I will leave aside the funereal aspects of this sense of place,⁴ and focus on the verbal and nominal aspects. Despite its relative datedness, Sheeran's view of an Irish sense of place, stemming, as it does, from the decade in which *Kepler* was written and *Prague Pictures* is partially set (i.e. the 1980s), strikes me as particularly useful for my investigation. Such a sense of place, Sheeran claims, stands "in sharp contrast to the general European" one, which, in a Heideggerian tradition, is connected to dwelling (196).⁵ According to Sheeran, an

4 Incidentally, the funereal sense of place also implies that cemeteries become "focal points" in the landscape, functioning as "inverse *omphali*, sacred places that link this world to the one above and below" (Sheeran 203).

5 The Heideggerian definition of dwelling "includes both *aedificare* 'to build' and *colere* 'to cultivate' – 'to cherish and protect, to preserve and care for'" (qtd. in Sheeran 197).

Irish sense of place is not Heideggerian, nor is it primarily a product of “colonialism and [...] the distortions wrought by historical circumstance” (195). Instead, in Irish culture, since it is one in which place is perceived in a primarily verbal way, “places are defined, not so much by erecting enclosures or buildings, as by being known and being talked about” (197). Furthermore, the storytellers of the Gaelic tradition suffered from “topomania,” and Irish literature “obsessively names the names” (192). To Sheeran, then, the Irish “nominal sense of place means [...] not only an obsessive resort to names, but also that it is sufficient to name a place in order to mark one’s attachment to it” (197). Moreover, perceived from the perspective of a nominal sense of place, the

thing itself is of subsidiary importance and it is not necessary to do anything about it to demonstrate affection or possession. Neither building nor cultivating is required. We encounter here a magical use of the word that harmonizes very well with other aspects of our predominantly verbal culture. (197)

Applying Sheeran’s ideas to Banville’s two texts, I posit, then, that to the focalisers of Banville’s *Prague Pictures* and *Kepler* the city of Prague emerges as an inferno, but that in this urban hell clearings are made, metaphorically speaking, for that which is not inferno. Moreover, I suggest that the literary construction of Prague in these texts contains elements of what might be termed an Irish sense of place; thus, Prague is partially constructed as a place in which it is not necessary for J.B. or Johannes Kepler to ‘dwell’ in order to mark an attachment. Through the two focalisers’ nominal perception of place, the clearings made for that which is not infernal in Prague are partially Hibernicised.

“Mysterious, jumbled, fantastical, absurd”: The Prague of *Prague Pictures*

When Banville wrote *Kepler*, he had not yet visited Prague. Writing *Prague Pictures*, he had. In the latter, he comments on the challenges of inventing the seventeenth-century city in which his Kepler figure moves:

some years previously I had written a novel partly set in Prague at the turn of the seventeenth century. When I was working on the book I did not regard the inventing of a city I had never seen as any more of a challenge than, for example, having to recreate the early 1600s – all fiction is invention, and all novels are historical novels – but I was interested to know what level of verisimilitude, or at least of convincingness, I had achieved. Many readers had complimented me on the accuracy with which my book had ‘caught the period,’ to which I was too grateful and too polite to respond by asking how they could possibly know; I understand that what they were praising was the imaginative feat they felt I had performed in persuading them that this was just how it had been then. (PP 7)⁶

The Prague of *Kepler*, then, is a literary construction, but so is the Prague of *Prague Pictures*. As one critic has suggested, “what makes *Prague Pictures* differ from other

6 Lene Yding Pedersen has discussed the construction of Prague in *Kepler* and *Prague Pictures* as a “nexus of memories” rather than a geographic place (264).

non-fictional books on the city is Banville's skills as a writer of fiction" (Pedersen 278). The book is not, as Banville emphatically states, "a guidebook," but rather a "handful of recollections, variations on a theme. An effort to conjure a place by a mingled effort of memory and imagination. [...] a peace token, a placatory gift tentatively proffered, or just a faithless lover's letter of apology" (*PP*, "Caveat Emptor"). Constructed from elements of fact and fiction gleaned from guidebooks, historical accounts, and pieces of poetry, Banville's Prague, word city as it is, is a web of intertextuality: throughout the book, Banville's narrating persona refers to the vast body of literature that has been written on Prague – the "mysterious" and "absurd" capital of magic (9). He repeatedly glances at Angelo Maria Ripellino, who, in his *Magic Prague (Praga Magica)* of 1973, represents the city as a "temptress, a wanton, a she-devil," who "slyly works her way into the soul with spells and enigmas to which she alone holds the key" (qtd. in *PP* 9-10). Ripellino's Prague is the old Prague, "the city of 'surreptitious passages and infernal alleys [...] still smelling of the Middle Ages'" (10). Ripellino, then, explicitly identifies an infernal element in the city. As Banville constructs Prague, he also draws on the guidebook *Blue Guide: Prague* (1999) and on sources relating to Franz Kafka, Tycho Brahe, and Emperor Rudolph; he frequently turns to Jaroslav Seifert's poetry and he hovers over the photography of Joseph Sudek. Moreover, Prague of *Prague Pictures* is constructed out of Banville's imagination and from recollections of the physical city as he encountered it on his visits. Here, I will focus primarily on his first visit "in the early 1980s" (1), as recalled in Part I of the book. With regard to the role memory plays in the literary construct, Banville reflects that "[m]emory is a vast, animated, time-ravaged mural" and goes on to puzzle over mnemonic selection processes: why does he recall particular "fragments and not others, far more significant?" (45-46). The answer is withheld, and it is in the intersection between pre-existing texts, authorial invention, and the fickle selection processes of memory that the Prague of *Prague Pictures* is conjured and constructed.

In an effort to pin down what he sees as the 'essence' of Prague, the question of how and where to locate the "'real' Prague" (82), Banville's persona – I will call him 'J.B.' from here on – points to the impossibility of ever knowing a city through its "sites and sights," especially "an entity as amorphously elusive as Prague" (11-12). Considering contemporary Prague, he asks himself where the essence of the city is to be found. Is it "in the pretty Old Town Square, with its cafés and its famous clock, or, on the far contrary, in the smouldering concrete suburbs, where the majority of Praguers live their decidedly unbohemian lives?" (12). It is certainly not in the post-1989 Americanisation process which, J.B. thinks, has succeeded in killing the ancient 'capital of magic.' He finds it ironic that "the old Prague, wistful, secretive, tormented, which survived the communist takeover of 1948, and even the Russian invasion twenty years later," has finally "succumbed to the blow delivered to it by a velvet fist in a velvet glove in the revolution of 1989. Now the dollar is everywhere, the young have all the blue jeans they could desire, and there is a McDonald's just off the Charles Bridge"

(10). Ripellino's "beloved temptress" has changed into a "tourist hive" (11). On second thoughts, though, J.B. graciously concedes that "Praguers have the same right to vulgar consumerism as the rest of us" (11). Despite such tight-jawed tolerance, however, J.B. makes no attempt to 'dwell' in the Prague of the 1990s – he neither 'builds,' nor 'cultivates' there. He does, however, to some extent, mark attachment to it, thereby in a sense Hibernicising it. For example, he introduces a "brief history of the Czech Lands" by way of making reference to the "Celts, that mysterious but ubiquitous people, which some specialists claim never existed" and that supposedly arrived in the area "in the fourth century BC" (72). In an attempt to further substantiate nominal Celtic claims to these old Czech Lands, J.B. then names one of the Celtic tribes, "the Boii" – a "race of redheads [...] displaced by Germanic tribes from the west, and by Romans from the south" – that presumably gave rise to the name "Boiohaemum, our Bohemia" (72).

Focusing next on what might be considered the centre of the place that is Prague, J.B. turns to the Charles Bridge – "that statted stone span" (8). Doing so, he refers to Martin Heidegger's essay "Building Dwelling Thinking," which, pondering "the essential nature of the bridge" (76) – a building obviously erected by human beings dwelling in Prague – presents it as a structure that "vaults over glen and stream" (77) and that "gathers the earth as landscape around the stream" (76). Although Heidegger, to generalise grossly, can be said to emphasise safe-guarding "as the basic characteristic of dwelling" (Wrathall 107) and to stress the need for "learning to be rooted in our own particular place in the world" (117), J.B. – despite his evocation of Heidegger – seems to perceive the bridge as a place to be "known and talked about" rather than constructed and safe-guarded. In great numbers, visitors pass across this bridge which, as J.B. reflects, "must now be one of the world's most densely peopled spaces" (PP 8). They do so, "all day long, and throughout most of the night" (8) – never becoming rooted, but presumably forming attachments. Partially perceiving the Charles Bridge according to a nominal sense of place, J.B. names it, thus making it 'Irish' and marking attachment.

Having set out for Czechoslovakia in the early 1980s, "in the expectation that all [his] received ideas of what life was like in Eastern Europe would be overturned" (2), J.B. is disappointed. He is also thwarted in his search for the 'essence' of the city. It is not until he encounters the "reticent yet ravishing, dreamy yet precise and always particular" photographs of Josef Sudek, portrayer of the city, that he knows he has found his real Prague. Elaborating on Henry James's statement that "art 'makes life, makes interest, makes importance'" (58),⁷ Banville suggests that art shapes life by singling out "the essential matters, the essential moments, in the disordered flux that is actual, lived life" while still acknowledging that which is *not* art, "the unconsidered but sustaining dross left behind" (58-59). Such singling out and such acknowledgement

7 According to Banville, Henry James wrote this in a "famous letter of rebuke to the philistine H.G. Wells" (58).

is what J.B. finds in Sudek's photos, which, as he sees it, have "managed to capture," even more movingly than Kafka, Prague's "weary charm, its tragic beauty, its light and shadow, and that something in between, the peculiar, veiled radiance of this city on the Vltava" (69). J.B. reflects: "All day I had been walking about the city without seeing it, and suddenly now Sudek's photographs [...] showed it to me, in all its stony, luminous solidity and peculiar, wan, absent-minded beauty," and he knows that he has "finally arrived" (58-59). Constructing his Prague, here, through the mediation of photography, the shaped and ordered black-and-white artist's version of the city that emerges in Sudek's photos, Banville presents the city as an imagined environment – an image-city as well as a word-city. And he represents the art of Sudek as a sustaining space cleared for him in a potentially infernal urbanity.

Fully arrived or not, J.B. has to attend to a mission involving personal encounters, which here enter Banville's literary construction of Prague. He is in Czechoslovakia with two women, J. and G. They have, with some anxiety, undertaken to help a young Czech émigré in New York to get on his economic feet by smuggling valuable art works out of Prague. The art works, a number of photographs, "original contact prints by a Czech master" (16) that turns out to be Sudek, are in the possession of the young man's father, a professor of Fine Arts. The reader learns that the professor, who "knew Václav Havel of course, still in prison at the time," had been involved in drawing up the human rights manifesto Charter 77, a fact responsible for his dismissal from the university. He and his wife Marta now subsist on a small pension (19) in a Prague that is truly hellish at times. At one point, this professor visits the hotel of the Irish party. Here, the two women have been allotted a room of "mortuary stillness" and intimidating size, "so vast indeed, that a thin, chill mist seems to hang in the farther reaches of it" (6). Meeting the professor, it becomes clear that the city J.B. encounters on this visit is not only in the grip of winter and of silence – "Prague's silence is more a presence than an absence" (1) – but it is very much in the grip of the Cold War, too. Thus, as the professor enters the hotel room and G. begins to speak of the "mission that had brought the three of [them] to Prague," the professor makes a "Prague gesture" – silencing her "at once by putting a finger to his lips and pointing to the dusty light fixture in the middle of the ceiling" (15). This gesture, J.B. notes, was "always accompanied by a hapless apologetic smile" (16). In this Prague, then, "[t]here were, there really were, hidden microphones everywhere" (16). Prague is an inferno of control and surveillance entrapping its inhabitants.

Invited to the professor's small apartment for dinner – sitting "in a small, neat, bright room with a lot of blond, fake-Scandinavian furniture" – the trio from Ireland attempt to move the conversation to the "frosty state of East-West relations," but the professor's wife, Marta, will not allow it. She wants news of America, where her son lives. And she wants – especially as she is getting flushed "on bad Moravian wine" – to take her visitors to task for speaking continually of "Eastern Europe." Could they not see that by "using that designation" they were "conniving with the Soviets and accepting the status quo?" Besides, she wants to know, "Where does Eastern Europe

begin? At Moscow? Budapest? Prague? *Vienna*? [...] No no, if there was an Eastern Europe, it began no further west than Istanbul!" (52). Marta's voice is one of the city's many voices, and it is one which refuses to accept the inferno of a Soviet-controlled Prague. Her husband, proudly and "wordlessly urging her on" (53), admits that "life in Prague was almost unbearable" at times, but that it was not necessarily the "times of active oppression" – the communist takeover in 1948 or the invasion of 1968 – that were the most difficult, but the "state of torpor" that seemed to follow each crisis (54). Here J.B. recalls Ripellino's observation that "'the joyless, eternally pouting'" Prague "'has the rhythm of slow, endless mastication'" (55). Yet, J.B. reflects, there is, especially among intellectuals, a strong affection for the city: "so many things that were precious had been taken from the lives of these artists, critics, scholars that they clung to the idea of their city, its history, its shabby magnificence, its unyielding mysteriousness, with the passion of exiles" (15). There is also, J.B. reflects, heroic work being done, quietly and invisibly, for the survival of culture and the arts in the city by – and here he cites a memorial tribute to Joseph Brodsky, written by Russian writer Tatyana Tolstaya – "the little old ladies of the intelligentsia" who work in libraries and museums and "who stand in the back rows at philharmonic concerts, next to the columns, where the tickets are cheaper" (108). Such women, on their meagre wages quietly supporting the arts in the city and presented as the guardians of the light of 'civilisation,' contribute to the Banvillean construction of Prague. They are certainly dwelling in the city, even building it, but not by bricks and mortar, but by words, solidarity, and feats of the imagination. The people of Prague are shown to be trapped in a suffocating inner exile in their city at this time; yet they are also shown to recognise, and quietly make space for, that which is not infernal in their city – its art, intellectual life, and beauty – and to make it endure. J.B., by contrast, never dwells in Prague. Through the act of naming, however, by inscribing on the pages of his book of Prague all that is not hellish in the city, he marks attachment.

To J.B., Prague emerges during this visit as a city that in quite concrete terms clears a space, or a passage, for the 'freeing' of the thirty valuable photographs by Josef Sudek that the professor owns. They are black-and-white Prague streetscapes and interiors (57), the quality of which deeply impresses J.B., and they become an emblem of resistance against that which is infernal in the city. These photos will ensure the survival in New York of the professor and Marta's son, and through his survival his parents will endure. In a sullen sleet shower, then, the Irish 'smugglers' begin their exit from Czechoslovakia by taking a train out of Prague. G. carries the Sudek photos "rolled up tightly and concealed in a cardboard tube" (70). The group is held up at the Austrian border, where "guards went through the carriages with implements like giant versions of dentist's mirrors, searching under the seats and on the luggage racks for anyone who might have hidden there in an attempt to flee the country" (71). In the end, the trio are allowed to cross. On the Austrian side, J.B. is cheered by the sight of a billboard showing "a half-naked woman advertising some degenerate Western luxury – Dior fashions or Mercedes motor cars"; the sight of "such happy, hope-

ful, life-affirming colours" (71) signals the success of the border-crossing. Doors have opened, the train takes them away from the city and the country, and a space has been cleared for a liberating action leading out of the inferno. "Ashamed," he thinks of "the Professor, and Marta," for whom no doors have opened yet.

In *Prague Pictures*, finally, there are "snapshots" from a later moment in history, too. Thus, Banville's narrating persona recalls a visit to Prague one summer in the middle of the 1990s, his first "since the Velvet Revolution – that journalist's formulation," which he has "never heard a Prager employ." At this time, the "city is hot and smoky, and seems to gasp" and J.B. assigns blame for the city's breathing difficulties not to its toxic air, but its "distressed relief at having survived the terrible decades" (196). During this visit, J.B. searches the city for evidence of change: in what ways is Prague visibly different since the fall of the Berlin Wall? He considers the floodlighting of Hradčany, the Castle on the hill, which "is a post-1989 innovation, surely? The communists would have regarded such a show of unashamed consumption of the city's electricity as a typical piece of Westernised decadence, and probably they would have been right" (196-197). As noted earlier, J.B. deplores the new Prague, destroyed by the omnipresent dollar and the presence of "a McDonald's just off the Charles Bridge" (10). But even in this new version of the urban inferno, he circumscribes – albeit ironically – a cleared space that is not inferno: "Freedom is freedom to eat cheap hamburgers as much as it is to publish subversive poetry" (11).

In the reinvented 1990s Prague that J.B. sees before him, he specifically ponders the fact that Václav Havel is now the President. The image of this respected man of letters turned statesman becomes a clearing for J.B. in the inferno of the new Prague:

The fact [that Havel is President] is hard to credit, even yet. It is as if Kafka's K. had suddenly been welcomed into the Castle by a smiling Kramm and told that with immediate effect he will [...] assume the leadership of the realm. I try to picture this playwright, admirer of Beckett and Ionesco, sitting in his neat blue suit at a desk in Rudolf's palace, poring over documents of state. (197)

J.B. points to Václav Havel's own speech, held in Jerusalem "shortly after his inauguration," in which he admits to having "feelings of incongruousness – of being, even, an imposter" (197):

I am the kind of person who would not be in the least surprised if, in the very middle of my Presidency, I were to be summoned and led off to stand trial before some shadowy tribunal, or taken straight to some quarry to break rocks. [...] The lower I am, the more proper my place seems; and the higher I am the stronger my suspicion is that there has been some mistake. (198)

In a Banvillean Prague – word-city of Europe – not only history, but the leaders of nations, too, become literary constructs. Here, reality manifests a fictionality which, in reverse as it were, seems akin to that "essential fraudulence" (9) which J.B. thinks adheres to fiction, as will be seen below.

“Silent city rising [in] freezing mist”: The Prague of *Kepler*

“Prague! A world away!” (*K* 340). Johannes Kepler is not enthusiastic about the prospect of leaving Graz for distant Prague as the year 1599 turns to 1600 and religious turmoil boils up again in Austria. Archduke Ferdinand persecutes Lutherans, issuing one severe edict after another. Lutheran worship is banned and Lutheran writings are burned: “Threats whirred in the air, and Kepler shivered” (338). Graz is becoming an inferno for the young astronomer, and his hope of escape lies with Danish astronomer Tycho Brahe⁸ in Prague.⁹ Thus, when kind Baron Johann Friedrich Hoffmann, the Emperor’s councillor and Kepler’s patron, visits Graz, Kepler accepts his invitation to accompany him back to Prague. Packed into a decrepit carriage with his bags, wife, and baby daughter, the astronomer undertakes the “frightful journey” to the distant destination. In February 1600, they arrive in Prague and are housed and fed by Baron Hoffmann. Kepler immediately detests the city: “The buildings were crooked and ill-kept, thrown together from mud and straw and undressed planks. The streets were awash with slops, the air putrid” (340). As one perceptive critic has noted, Prague in *Kepler* is “a wreckage waiting to be assembled in *Prague Pictures*” (Powell 46). In a squalid Prague, then, Kepler is trapped for a couple of weeks, forced to wait for Brahe, who fails to show up for a promised meeting. To Kepler, the pre-modern city of Prague with its neglected and poorly constructed buildings is an infernal trap of raw architecture, putrid air, sloppy streets, and enforced passivity. Considering Sheeran’s suggestion that the “Irish preoccupation with place [...] has little or nothing to do with tending, cultivating, enhancing, or otherwise materially affecting the immediate environment” (192), the untidy city that rises before Kepler in Banville’s novel can be seen as neatly conforming to Sheeran’s view of an Irish sense of place.

As Kepler and his family are allowed to leave Prague, to be finally conducted to Brahe’s castle of Benatky, an escape from inferno is offered and hesitantly accepted. However, the journey to the castle, “twenty miles to the north of Prague, in the midst of a flat flooded countryside” (*K* 340), seems a continued descent into a cold and snowy Hades – they are cramped and cold in the carriage – and the first impressions are daunting. Kepler is dismayed at the sight of the castle, “grand and impassive in the sunlit February air” (289). Meeting Brahe, he is discouraged, too, at first. He has expected the Danish astronomer – “the Great Dane,” as Banville calls him in *Prague Pictures* (130)¹⁰ – to be large and “lavish,” but what he finds is “a fat bald man ranting

8 In Chapter 4 of *Prague Pictures*, Banville elaborates on Tycho Brahe’s early life in Denmark and his observatory Uraniborg, on the island of Hven, in the sound of Öresund, which was Danish at the time (130-195).

9 In a companion piece to this text, I have briefly touched on Kepler’s association with Brahe in the Prague of *Kepler* (Friberg-Harnesk 243-265).

10 To dwell on dog imagery, the historical Kepler described himself, in a third-person perspective, as having “in every way a dog-like nature. His appearance is that of a little house dog. [...] He was constantly on the move, digging among the sciences, politics, and private affairs” (*PP* 171n).

about, of all things, his tame elk" (K 292), a much loved animal. The problem seems to be that the moose has consumed a pot of beer, fallen down the stairs of Wandsbeck Castle, where it "broke a leg, and died" (341). Brahe can think of little else and ignores Kepler. Despite misgivings, though, Kepler thinks in the end that he has done right to come to Benatky and that he will do important work here. It is, of course, Brahe's carefully collected astronomical data to which he eventually gains access that will allow him to do so, especially once he is back in Prague.¹¹ Under the patronage of Tycho Brahe, Kepler recognises that which is not inferno: not only does Kepler in the end get access to the crucial data, but through his connection with Brahe he also gains a new patron after Brahe's death in 1601: Rudolph II, the Holy Roman Emperor. In a Prague that Kepler seems to find hellish, a free space for the pursuit of his scientific work is nevertheless created for him – the new "Imperial Mathematician" – under Rudolph's melancholic and paranoid protection (PP 94). Naming the city as his place of scientific endeavour, he marks his attachment.

Notwithstanding Kepler's unease about Prague, the city is not altogether infernal to him. Having returned there in the summer of 1601 with Tycho Brahe, he lives in the Curtius House on the Hradčany. Arriving at this house, which on a hot summer evening has "a forlorn and puzzled air," Kepler "wanders through the hugely empty rooms" and finally seems to arrive in Prague (K 356). Naming in his mind the parts of the house – the entrance hall, the doorway, "a parallelogram of sunlit wall" leaning "at a breathless tilt" in a big mirror, and the "palace gardens" in which "an enraptured blackbird was singing" (356) – he marks his attachment to the place.

When Kepler returns to Prague some thirty years later, he has travelled from Ulm, bringing with him the first printed copies of his monumental work, the *Tabulae Rudolphinae*.¹² To these he has devoted twenty years. Stopping at Regensburg (Ratisbon) on the way, he reluctantly allows his second wife Susanna and their children to join him. According to the logic of the novel, they arrive in Prague by barge. The river that carries him there is shown as anything but a flow of happy expectations. Rather, it is a curiously congested waterway which, in the dead of winter, delivers Kepler to the docks of Prague:

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. Soiled white boulders of ice lolled on the river. In the dark before dawn he had lain awake, listening in fright to the floes breaking before the bow, the squeaking and the groans and the sudden flurries of cracks like distant musket-fire. They docked at first light. (466)

11 In *Prague Pictures*, Banville comments on the historical Kepler's decision to move to Prague in the first place: "It was the purity and dependability of Brahe's data which made Kepler lick his chops and brought him trotting up to Prague in the notable year 1600" (137).

12 This work provided the data necessary for the computation of the positions of the planets.

While the dirty icebergs floating on the river, seemingly congesting it, become manifestations of the lethargy and near-paralysis of Prague, the sharp sounds of the ice cracking, breaking before the barge, ring like warnings of a battle ahead.

Banville has remarked that he links his invention of Prague – a city unknown to him when he wrote *Kepler* – of this particular seventeenth-century moment to what he sees as “the essential fraudulence of fiction” (*PP* 9). He elaborates: “Conjure a winter morning, a river and a castle and a traveller disembarking with a book under his arm, and for the space of a page or two an implied world comes to creaky life. It is all a sleight of the imagination, a vast synecdoche” (9). In the novel, the harbour that receives *Kepler* and his family seems paralysed by the cold, the “quayside was deserted save for a mongrel with a swollen belly chasing the slithering hawser” – and the skipper of the barge is scornful: “The bargemaster scowled at *Kepler*, his oniony breath defeating even the stink seeping up from the cargo of pelts in the hold. ‘Prague,’ he said, with a contemptuous wave, as if he had that moment manufactured the silent city rising behind him in the freezing mist” (*K* 466). The bargemaster’s introduction of the city, frozen as if under an “astonishment” of snow, as if it were his own creation, sharpens the focus on the Prague of *Kepler* as an artefact, man-made and frozen in time. Yet, the reeking, cold inferno, formed by people living together in imposed coherence, is also a trap threatening to snap shut around the newcomer.

The *Keplers* lodge “at The Whale by the bridge” where even the “children are too cold to cry” (467). *Kepler* has been afraid of coming to Prague and he is unpleasantly reminded of “how, thirty years before, Ferdinand had hounded the Protestant heretics out of Styria” (468) and of how, now, the war is once more going well for the Catholic parties. Once he moves into the streets, though, the Prague he encounters is new and startling: there is a “new spirit” in the city. At first, he is charmed by the “bustle and an almost gay confusion” at the court, newly returned from Vienna for the coronation of Ferdinand’s son as King of Bohemia (467). In this city “where he had expected stillness and stealth,” a clearing opens in which there is a polyphony of voices, a rainbow of colours, and a surprising richness of clothing: “The yellow capes and scarlet stockings, the brocades and the frogging and the purple ribbons; he had never seen such stuffs, even in Rudolph’s time. He might have been among a spawn of Frenchmen” (468). The hope of significant change dies, however, as it dawns on him that there “was no new spirit, it was all show, a frantic paying of homage not to greatness, but to mere might. These reds and purples were the bloody badge of the counter-reformation. And Ferdinand had not changed at all” (468). Thus, the flickering image of a Prague bustling with life and colourful diversity fades, the cleared space closes again, and *Kepler* sees, emerging behind it, the well-known inferno of sectarian strife and religious persecution. It is as if the city had become a node of communication between the living and the dead – a place more likely to be “famous and named” for “those who died” in it than for those who dwelt in it (Sheeran 204).

In this infernal Prague, however, the older Kepler discovers sustaining spaces that are not inferno, much as the younger one had done. As Emperor Ferdinand introduces him to his chief commander, General von Wallenstein, the general admits to being an old admirer of Kepler's work. A "brief and turbulent," but beneficial, connection is established. Kepler is pleased: he had come to Prague "to seek the Emperor's patronage, and was given instead a general. He was not ungrateful to the arranging fates. He was in need of refuge" (470). Thus, although Johannes Kepler does not tend to dwell in Prague, in the sense of being "at peace in a protected place" (Sheeran 197), he does repeatedly recognise spaces, within the inferno that the city is for him, that are not infernal and he tries to make them endure.

Conclusion

John Banville's literary construction of Prague – the word-city of Europe, to evoke Burton Pike – in *Kepler* and *Prague Pictures* takes place at two temporal levels – the year 1600 and an early 1980s moment. In the above, I have considered this Banvillian construction from the angle of Italo Calvino's suggestion that the city is an "inferno," the suffering of which can best be escaped by trying to "learn to recognize who and what, in the midst of the inferno, are not inferno" and to "make them endure, give them space" (qtd. in Smyth 13). In *Kepler*, seventeenth-century Prague is constructed as a ramshackle and putrid inferno of pre-modern urbanity. It is a frozen place that Kepler reaches with effort – by "decrepit carriage" or by barge on congested waters. It is a place that tends to force passivity on him and from which he escapes with difficulty. Yet, at crucial moments, it opens up sheltered and empowering spaces for the astronomer's professional success. In *Prague Pictures*, moreover, the Prague of the early 1980s is constructed as a sullen, lethargic city under constant surveillance by the authorities; it emerges as a grinding inferno of little vitality and less hope, moving to the "rhythm of slow, endless mastication," while entrapping its immobilised citizens. Yet, it is a city which clears spaces for the love it inspires in its resilient citizens and for culture and the arts – notably the art of Joseph Sudek. In the end, this city, with a little help from its Irish friends, also clears a passage for the escape of those Sudek photographs, which, going West, will support a child of Prague in his American exile. By sustaining that young émigré, the photos will also help the parents in Prague, for whom escape is impossible, endure. In the Prague of a later moment in this book (i.e. the mid-1990s), not only fiction, but history and leaders of nations, more specifically Václav Havel, become literary constructs. Finally, viewing the Prague encountered in these texts in terms of Patrick Sheeran's definition of an Irish sense of place as a nominal one, the city appears as a place in which it is not necessary for the focalisers J.B. and Johannes Kepler to dwell in order to mark attachment. Through their "Irish" perception of place, the Prague of *Kepler* and, especially, of *Prague Pictures* becomes partially Hibernicised.

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