

The Sea by John Banville (Picador) R134

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In Joseph Conrad's great novel *Nostramo*, one of the characters dies of indifference: alone on a desert island, the clever, cynical Don Martin Decoud rows out to sea, shoots himself, and rolls overboard into the sea "whose glittering surface remained untroubled by the fall of his body": "the brilliant Don Martin Decoud ... disappeared without a trace, swallowed up in the immense indifference of things."

The gloomy old Polish novelist comes to mind in reading *The Sea*, not because of any superficial similarity of plot, but because to Banville, as to Conrad, the sea would seem to represent the indifference of the universe to human aspirations and disappointments. Ultimately, as in Conrad, for the human being to immerse himself fully in that indifference is akin to death.

This is a bald and somewhat speculative summary of the significance of the eponymous sea in Banville's elegiac and elusive novel. The sea is in fact described in a dizzying variety of ways: its one constant seems to be changeability, its meaning residing, as it were, in its refusal to conform to any single meaning. And yet its many manifestations gradually cohere around a central mood of loss and vacancy.

Max Morden, the central character and narrator, is a middle-aged art historian mourning the recent death of his wife. For reasons as obscure to himself as to the reader, he returns to the Irish seaside town where he spent a holiday in childhood with his squabbling lower middle class parents, and met the exotic, superior Grace family, who condescended to share with him their privileged, irresponsible lives. In particular he was the playfellow and plaything of the moody, selfish Chloe, and her mute, malignant twin brother Myles. Humiliated yet fascinated, Max spies on the family and indulges his adolescent fantasies: first of the buxom, forthright Mrs Grace, then of the flighty Chloe.

The novel slowly unfolds the events of that summer in parallel with his recollections of his adult life, to suggest some connection between the two. Again there is no easy correspondence: his marriage, by and large happy, to the striking Anna, would seem to have little bearing on his tormented relationship with the Graces; and yet the narrative cuts ever more abruptly, even obsessively, between the events of that summer and the recent illness and death of Anna.

Little happens; but each sentence is in truth an event in itself, finely crafted, precisely observed and delicately poised: "My mother cooked on a paraffin stove, the tiny fuel-hole of which afforded me an obscurely furtive pleasure when [I was called on to clean it, employing for the task a delicate instrument made of a strip of pliant tin with a stiff filament of wire protruding at a right angle from its tip."

Such meticulous descriptions are offered as an end in themselves: they are relevant only in contributing to the clutter of the narrator's memory, which is obsessively visual. It seems to be part of Banville's point, in fact, that memory and for that matter identity are constituted of things, objects in relation to which we find our bearings and define ourselves, and which outlast us: "Yes, things endure, while the living lapse."

Morden's relation to things is, of course, intensified by the fact that he is an art historian, used to studying human relations in pictorial, objectified terms. "What are living beings," he asks, "compared to the enduring intensity of things?"

In a world of objects, which we negotiate at a visual remove, what about love, with its celebrated tendency to want to merge with the loved object? Morden experiences love, in fact, as a matter of individuation, of becoming aware of himself as an entity distinct from other entities: “in Chloe the world was first manifest for me as an objective entity ... She was I believe the true origin in me of self-consciousness. Before, there had been one thing and I was part of it, now there was me and all that was not me.”

But part of this process of self-awareness is also an estrangement from all that is not the self: “In severing me from the world and making me realise myself in being thus severed, she expelled me from that sense of the immanence of all things, the all things that had included me....”

It is this sense of estrangement that informs Morden’s notion of the indifference of the world to human joy and suffering alike. Describing the kettle imperturbably switching itself off as he and his wife come home, devastated, from a visit to the doctor, he talks of “the cruel complacency of ordinary things” and then corrects himself: “But no, not cruel, not complacent, only indifferent, as how could they be otherwise?”

On the last page of the novel, in a passage that at last links the death of his wife to his childhood experience, Morden recollects himself as a boy standing in the sea: a swell arises from nowhere, lifts him up and then sets him down again “as if nothing had happened”: “And indeed nothing had happened, a momentous nothing, just another of the great world’s shrugs of indifference.”

This is a brave theme for a novelist, the nothing that happens as a consequence of the world’s indifference. Conrad embeds his vision of nothingness in a tale of high adventure; Banville gives us a narrative almost as bereft of action as one of the Bonnard paintings he describes. But, of course, to the attentive eye no painting is bereft of action: it is just that its motion is traced in tiny brush-strokes rather than broad narrative sweeps. Banville is a master of the tiny brush stroke.

The Sea has been long-listed for the Booker Prize, up against the likes of Rushdie, McEwen, Coetzee and Barnes. In its purity of purpose and austerity of design it will certainly present the judges with a challenge: dare they reward “a momentous nothing”?