A DUPLICATED LIFE: ON VIRTUALITY IN JOHN BANVILLE'S *MEFISTO*

Ruben Borg

From its title page, *Mefisto* announces itself as a parable about the limits of scientific knowledge. The book's Faustian premise takes up themes and materials already explored by John Banville in *Doctor Copernicus*, *Kepler*, and *The Newton Letter*. Common to all four volumes is a basic plot structure in which, as Brendan McNamee observes, "hubristic intellect [is] humbled by the ineluctable presence of the chaotic world" (209). Within this broad framework, *Mefisto*'s specific focus is on the struggles of Gabriel Swan, a young scientist attempting to bring contingency under the rule of mathematics. Gabriel's project betrays an obsession with the nature of truth—with a correct delineation of the concept of truth as against factual or empirical exactitude and the weight carried by this distinction in his endeavor to make sense of the dramatic changes taking place in his life. Deeply woven in the book's thematic fabric, this distinction opens a rift between life and mathematics, and sets up the co-ordinates for the unfolding of Banville's Faustian plot.[1] Gabriel's tragedy is precisely his inability to accept the separateness of life and mathematics despite his realization that the knowledge yielded by the latter and the understanding required by the former remain incommensurable.[2]

Accordingly Gabriel's Faustian quest is interwoven with another narrative strand, one that, though directly associated with the theme of scientific limits, has not received adequate critical attention. While

Gabriel's pursuit of an extraordinary knowledge is ostensibly fuelled by his dream of working out a formula in which the infinite variety of human experience can be brought to order, moments of true understanding in the novel follow a very different path to that of systematic mathematical thought. Genuine insight for Gabriel always comes in the form of a sudden intuition, an instantaneous glimpse into another world existing beyond or behind the actual world.

> More than once I was convinced I had seen a shadow of movement, the fading after-image of a figure darting into the doorway, or skipping behind the trunk of a tree. Then for an instant, before I had time to tell myself I had imagined it, I sensed with a shiver the outlines of another, darker, more dangerous world intermingled invisibly with this one of sky and green leaves and faded brick. (Banville186)

It is worth stressing here that the instantaneous, preconscious quality of Gabriel's insight tells us something about the structure of truth itself. There is, in other words, a clear, structural correspondence between moments of intuition—the very shape of truth, the logic by which it manifests itself—and this strange dual existence of things. Intuition happens before Gabriel has had time to realize it (or to tell himself he has imagined it) because truth is split between two realms: the living present and an invisible double intermingled with it—a double we may associate with a pre-conscious, pre-phenomenal past. A few pages later, a different epiphany confirms the pattern:

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

Each one of these episodes leaves Gabriel with an uncanny, unshakeable sense of a shadow world and a shadow life coexisting with the world and the life available to his experience. In this context the grand quest for truth, the overreaching investigation worthy of Gabriel's Faustian credentials, takes the form of a sustained engagement with the paradoxes of a duplicated life, of a world dually constituted. Indeed, whenever Gabriel is forced to confront the limits of his mathematical method, whenever he is made aware of the disjuncture between his knowledge of numbers and his understanding of life, the reader can intuit the need for a different manner of approaching truth, a trajectory of thought that is unavailable to mathematics.

This intuition is made possible by the novel's investment in dramatic irony—as for the trajectory onto which it opens, it is what I shall refer to as a science of the virtual. ³

The purpose of this essay, then, is to recast the novel's Faustian plot as a parable on virtuality and, consequently, to show how the notion of the virtual—understood not only as an ontological dimension, but also as an opening onto truth traced by a peculiar movement of thought—allows for an ironic reevaluation of the main paradoxes mobilized in Banville's discourse on the limits of scientific knowledge. As a first step in this direction, it will be necessary to map out a symbolic field—what might be best described as a network of motifs and narrative patterns peculiar to *Mefisto*—in which the question of ontological truth is most overtly encoded. To anticipate briefly, such a field contains and binds together *Mefisto*'s treatment of the theme of birth, the repetition of singular events in the narrative, Gabriel's interest in understanding what a unit is, and his untiring investigation of the unity, the impossible oneness, of being and non-being.

Among the novel's most recognizable features is the symmetry of its narrative design. The book is divided in two parts, the second an apparent restaging of the first, beginning with the protagonist's slow return to life after a near-fatal incident. The experience is presented as a rebirth—a rediscovery of the world in terms of pure sensation, of sheer light and pain. Past the story's halfway point, all is encountered for the first time:

> This was a place where I had never been before, which I had not known existed. It was inside me. I came back each time a little more enlightened. Now for the first time I saw the world around me radiant with pain, the glass in the window suffering the sun's harsh blade, the bed like a stricken ox kneeling on its stumps . . . The very air seemed to ache. (124–25)

Gabriel must learn to see anew, to walk again. For a brief moment, the cares of a hospital nurse allow him to relive the utterly unique sense of unity that is the infant's first relation with the mother. But before long, the feelings of self-alienation that had accompanied his childhood set in once more. Both formally and thematically, part two rehearses Gabriel's obsession with having been handed an incomplete existence. His first moments of self-awareness after the accident mark him as a "riven thing, incomplete . . . half here, half somewhere else" (130). This description recalls his wonderment and guilt on learning of his unborn twin brother: "I had something always beside me. It was not a presence but a momentous absence . . . No living double could have been so tenacious as this dead one.

Emptiness weighed on me. It seemed to me I was not all my own, that I was being shared" (17–18). The rest of the narrative follows Gabriel's attempt to come to grips with the fluke occurrence that is his own existence, his chance survival at the expense of his twin, redoubled by his survival of the explosion at Ashburn. Appropriately, the characters that people Gabriel's world in the latter half of the novel also duplicate, in their respective roles and distinctive features, those encountered in part one.[4]

The irony, as Rüdiger Imhof has argued, is in the way this symmetry subverts the protagonist's observations on the ascendancy of chance in nature (168). *Mefisto*'s studied construction belies the aleatory character of the events that matter most to Gabriel and that seem to retain for him some unbearable truth of human existence. The phrase that opens the narrative and sets the tone for all of Gabriel's epiphanies—"Chance was in the beginning" (Banville 3)—is inserted into a well-ordered whole, a carefully organized system of echoes and reverberations. Imhof speaks, to this effect, of "a principle of . . . palindromic patterns" (168). Within this framework there can be no singularity: things that happen out of the blue, that are by definition unpredictable, take on the form and logic of inevitable consequences.

Inevitable—and also, more importantly, iterable. Here we may begin to appreciate the complexity of Banville's structural ironies. On the face of it, the book's ending suggests that the narrator will finally be able to return to the source of his continuing distress (the accident that was his birth/his survival) with a sense of acceptance, perhaps even serenity. That, at any rate, is his resolve: "I have gone back to the very start, to the simplest things. Simple! I like that. It will be different this time, I think it will be different. I won't do as I used to in the old days. No. In future, I will leave things, I will try to leave things, to chance" (234). The assertion, if one is to take the narrator at his word, expresses both a sense of contentment ("I like that") and the idea of an acquired wisdom, of a lesson learned. However, it is far from clear that Gabriel's return to the simplest things (or to the very start) is in any way an index of progress or personal growth on his part. In effect, the repetitive character of Gabriel's narration—his insistence on mirror images and doubles and the perceptible presence, behind those doubles, of an unexorcized trauma—puts the optimistic note on which his final thoughts seem to settle in doubt.[5] Once again, a narrative pattern emerges in which Gabriel seems to toy with the impossibility of reliving an experience that is by definition unique (birth, death, or, more generally, any chance phenomenon). With regards to this motif, the book's structural symmetry fulfils a dual function: at the same time as it provides an ironic counterpoint

to *Mefisto*'s ending (to the hero's final position on chance), it also highlights the paradoxical design in which the hero's entire existence is configured.

This design is expressed mathematically in Gabriel's musings on "the number 10" (intended not as a quantity but as a cipher). As McNamee has noted, Gabriel instinctively associates this cipher with a sense of totality, of a perfect and peaceful completeness. It is as though all possible numerical relations, the very categories of "thing" and "nothing," could be brought together, summed up and reduced to their simplest form in the juxtaposition of a 1 and a 0. The inference is obvious: "Gabriel's fascination for the number clearly reflects his obsession with his dead twin. . . . A one and a zero, a presence and an absence: together they make up a whole. Just as the absence that is Gabriel's dead twin is a huge presence in his life, so, too, the absence represented by the figure zero is absolutely vital to the entire edifice of mathematics" (McNamee 212).

Banville's discourse on virtuality emerges in the folds of this peculiar relationship, which Gabriel describes as "the mystery of the unit" (18). The notion of an unborn twin, of "one" who is genetically the same as another, who duplicates the other, without ever acceding to the status of an actual being (in other words, without really possessing the status of "one"), resists logical understanding. Reduced to its simplest form, the paradox is adequately rendered by an equation in which 0 doubles 1, mirrors it, repeats it but without equivalence. This is where Gabriel's mathematical skills reach a first impasse, and a rigorous distinction becomes necessary between the truth yielded by numbers and any truth pertaining to life.

It is only much later in the novel that Gabriel manages to pinpoint the problem:

> One drop of water plus one drop of water will not make two drops, but one. Two oranges and two apples do not make four of some new synthesis, but remain stubbornly themselves. Oh, I don't say I had not thought of all this before, only that now I could not think of anything else. About numbers I had known everything and understood nothing. (233)

Gabriel's difficulty here is easily explained in terms of a confusion of logical categories: number and nature, the quantity of a thing and its essence, answer to different orders of predication. Yet Gabriel is compelled to think of the unit as an element of both quantitative and essential judgment. Indeed, we may construe what he calls the mystery of the unit as the impossibility of translating mathematical proof into ontological insight; or, equally well, as the problem of un-

derstanding the relation of absolute difference, and simultaneously of unquantifiable unity, obtaining between 0 and 1. How can 0 and 1 be said to duplicate each other? And in what sense do they combine to form a complete whole? A science of the virtual, as I reconstruct it here, provides the tools by which to address both questions.

The Virtual

The concept of virtuality has only recently come into prominence in literary scholarship. A cursory glance at standard bibliographies shows an exponential increase in the number of new book and article titles containing the word "virtual" or one of its derivations (a search on the MLA database registers 47 hits in the period between 1989 and 1994, 253 between 1994 and 1999, and 368 between 2000 and 2005). The tendency is chiefly ascribable to the affinity of the virtual with digital and cybernetic culture; the impact of cybernetics on the humanities has brought a new ontology into sharp relief—and with it, new ways of conceiving the boundary between reality and fiction. In this context, the word "virtual" refers to a sort of parallel universe devised and materially sustained by purely techno-scientific means. Simply put, it names a reality constructed out of alphanumeric data rather than atoms, out of information bytes rather than physical laws. N. Katherine Hayles provides the following working definition: "*Virtuality is the cultural perception that material objects are inter-penetrated by information patterns*" (13–14).

At issue, then, in a science of the virtual is the overlapping of realms once thought to be separate. Hayles's prime example is that of DNA codes that introduce a technical element (inscription, program-ming) right at the origin of all things organic. But equally suggestive is the case of interactive computer games that function as alternative realities that a player constructs while experimenting with different identities. Such games, Hayles explains, are "*simulations* that put the body into a feedback loop with a computer-generated image" (14; emphasis added). They blur the line between the organic and the cybernetic by complicating any attempt to organize the two in a hierarchical relation of cause and effect, container and contained, whole and part, and so forth. Hayles's claim is that "Virtual reality technologies are fascinating because they make visually immediate the perception that a world of information exists parallel to the 'real' world, the former intersecting the latter at many points and in many ways" (14). Parallel to reality yet indistinguishable from it, a simula-crum conceived at the same time as its original, the virtual affirms the fictiveness of the real, its status as a construct.

This is, yet, a rather narrow definition—and still not the most useful for a reading of Banville's work. It does, however, provide an ideal starting point to our history of the concept of virtuality, if only because of its cultural currency and the efficiency with which it brings together several instantly recognizable associations. This far into the discussion we may abstract four distinctive features of the virtual: its constitutive fictionality, its dependence on technological invention for access or actualization, its co-extensiveness with the order of simulacra, and its paradoxical position vis-à-vis the "real" world (as a parallel yet intersecting dimension). It is possible to match each one of these features with a corresponding motif or an allegorical image from *Mefisto*. For instance, the interpenetration of separate realities is reflected in Gabriel's sense that his most intimate actions and sensations are uncannily completed by "an echo, a kind of chime . . . somewhere out of sight" (Banville 18). Repeated references to marionettes and to the character of Pinocchio, with whom Gabriel is associated, suggest a complex supplemental relation between nature and its simulacral counterpart.[6] By the same token, Gabriel's careful symmetries alert us to the constructedness of his life story, just as his repeated references to the limits of his memory draw attention to the mediated character of his narrative, signalling the strangely dual nature of his experience: "Spring came early that year—no I'm wrong, it came late" (96); or "The nun with the head-dress was gone, had winged away, leaving the ledger open on the desk. No, there was no nun, I invented her" (105); and, again, "It was one of those mornings with Felix that—no, he wasn't there, it was just a morning in April" (197).

Several such instances occur throughout the text, deserving, no doubt, of a more detailed analysis than is afforded here. I am, however, less interested in a discussion of the different manifestations of the virtual in Banville's novel than in a study of how the theme of virtuality translates, for Banville's reader, into a discourse on truth. Earlier I referred to virtuality as an opening onto truth. In order to fully comprehend this point it will be necessary to dig a little deeper into the concept's history—to situate the word at some remove, as it were, from its cybernetic connotations.

> The OED gives the following definitions:
> 1. **a.** The possession of force or power. *Obs*.
>   **b.** Something endowed with virtue or power.
> 2. Essential nature or being, apart from external form or embodiment.
> 3. A virtual (as opposed to an actual) thing, capacity, etc.; a potentiality.

At a very basic level, then, the concept of the virtual has to do with the essence of things. Before it comes to designate a computer-generated reality, it refers to a particular mode of existence, a category in which things exist abstractly, in principle rather than fact. Thus, for instance, when one claims to be virtually penniless, one means that one is penniless in a manner of speaking; though there may be truth to the statement, it is not the type of truth that corresponds to a factually accurate judgment. "Virtually" serves in this context to emphasise the difference between truth and fact, a difference that is ignored at great philosophical cost.

It would be reductive, however, to interpret virtuality as simply another word for non-factual truth, or even as a synonym of essence. As suggested by the first and third OED entries cited above, the kind of truth at stake in a science of the virtual is one that is predicated in terms of potentiality. This means that as an ontological category (and an opening onto truth) the virtual encompasses not the being that we actually are, but the being that we might possibly be. Consequently, a science of the virtual would ideally situate ontological truth not in a being's present state of affairs, but in the manifold projections—one might say, in the hypothetical lines of development—that comprise the being's potential.

This notion goes some way toward explaining the association of virtuality with fiction and technology: if potentiality is the proper dimension of ontological truth, what better medium than fiction to think through the question of being? It is precisely fiction that allows for thought to proceed by way of conjecture and hypothesis, to reorganize philosophy's problems in the form of the question "what if?" And, inasmuch as it provides for the creation and testing of hypothetical scenarios, fiction also enables (that is to say, makes possible) a departure from what is already given, already known and accounted for in the fabric of factual reality.

Aristotle is quite possibly the first to test this line of argument when, in the ninth chapter of the *Poetics*, he famously contrasts poetry with history on the basis of their relation to truth.

> The poet and the historian differ not by writing in verse or in prose. The work of Herodotus might be put into verse, and it would still be a species of history, with metre no less than without it. The true difference is that one relates what has happened, the other what may happen. Poetry, therefore, is a more philosophical and a higher thing than history: for poetry tends to express the universal, history the particular. (35)

What is said of poetry in this context can be said of fiction at large, the notion of *poesis* invoked by Aristotle extending to the inventive impulse mobilised in any *technē*. Paradoxically, it is this impulse that approximates poetry to truth and gives fiction greater scientific credence than history. Truth here becomes a matter of creating a possible future rather than faithfully representing an idea (as in the Platonic paradigm) or accurately reconstructing a scene from the past (as in familiar models of detection and deduction). It is true that the art of telling what may happen, as Aristotle intends it, must be conducted according to a principle of probability. In this sense, Aristotelian thought remains fundamentally mimetic. Yet, to the extent that reckoning with probabilities always entails a foray into the future, that it is always a gamble no matter how safe one's guess, even the most mimetically accurate fiction must own up to an inventive element—an element that alone makes possible the transition from a knowledge of facts to an understanding of being.

The Whole that is One Plus Zero

Aristotle understood that the main constitutive paradox of potentiality is that it straddles both being and non-being. Every potentiality, he writes, "is at the same time a potentiality for the opposite. For whereas that thing which is incapable of happening cannot happen to anything, everything which is capable may fail to be actualized. Therefore that which is capable of being may both be and not be" (*Metaphysics* 461). Being able to be and not to be implies, here, a conjunction of two irreconcilable possibilities. Being is suspended, detached from itself as it were, and determined as a state in which being and non-being are still undifferentiated. That this conjunction is temporal in nature—that it rests on the logic of a cursorily stated "at the same time"—is of crucial importance to my argument, but I should like to save the point for later consideration. At this stage it will suffice to say that Aristotle's formula begins to describe a peculiar structure—the mystery of a unit that is able to divide into itself and simultaneously into its opposite. There is, to be sure, something incongruous about such a structure, a sense of uncanny doubling, of a totality that is somehow unequal to the sum of its parts. In any case, to all things potential belongs this totality, the practical implications of which are intuitively grasped when one reflects that the right (or power) to perform any given action is nothing if it does not also include the right (or power) not to perform it.

Giorgio Agamben develops this idea noting that, if we are to grasp the full implications of Aristotle's discourse on potentiality, we

must learn to situate all that is potential in an abyssal relation with its non-being. Such a relation defines potentiality irreducibly. To be potential, Agamben explains, means "to be one's own lack, *to be in relation to one's own incapacity*" (182). The genius of Aristotle's analysis lies in his having understood this relation not as an accessory feature of the concept of potentiality (a transformation that potentiality would be able to sustain, or a conjunction into which it might enter, should the context require it), but rather as the very condition by which a potentiality is originally constituted and in which it is preserved as such.

We return by this route to one of the two questions posed above in relation to Gabriel's musings on the number 10. What does Gabriel mean when he affirms that the juxtaposition of a 1 and a 0 evoked in him a feeling of harmony and completeness? The answer to which I have been leading (and which by now must be somewhat foregone), is that the type of completeness at stake here, the harmony promised to Gabriel through his mathematical manipulations, pertains to the order of potentialities. In other words, being is glimpsed in its completeness, as something whole, only in the sense that it is potentially so.

This correspondence between the realm of potentiality and the dream of ontological completeness is intuited by Gabriel early on in the narrative: "I walked under drowsing streets, through the dreamy silence of sunstruck afternoons, and was so acutely conscious of being there and at the same time almost elsewhere, in a present so fleeting it felt like pure potential, that I seemed to be not so much myself as a vivid memory of someone I had once been" (30). Once again, however, Gabriel finds it difficult to accept the fleetingness of the truth, its unavailability even to the most sophisticated systems of calculation. The impulse to dissect what can scarcely be experienced prevails, giving rise to a misunderstanding that will accompany Gabriel's intellectual career till the end. For the purpose of our argument we may ascribe this misunderstanding to an overextended application of the notion of purity. Gabriel's experience leads him to oppose the order of concrete things to that of pure forms. Once that opposition is established, Gabriel's fault is to associate pure numbers with pure—that is, potential—being. Soon after revealing his fascination with the mystery of the unit, and suggesting a link between his gift for numbers and his sense of having been handed an incomplete existence, Gabriel specifies that even at a young age his mathematical abilities were limited only to the most abstract calculations. The simplest of school exercises evaded him, as did calendars and dates: "I felt at ease only with pure numbers, if a sum had solid things in it I balked, like a hamfisted juggler, bobbing and ducking frantically

as half-crowns and cabbages, dominoes and sixpence, whizzed out of control around my head" (21). Already by this early stage, then, Gabriel's narrative posits an unbridgeable gap between numbers and things, and the contrast is conceived in terms of the purity of the former and the solidity of the latter. Once this distinction is in place, it is easy to understand what Gabriel means when he complains of life that it "all had too much of actuality sticking to it" (21). If actuality is the realm of solid things, virtuality pertains to unities and differences considered in their purest state—that is to say, according to their maximal transformative and regenerative power. It is in this sense that the virtual may be seen to encompass being and non-being, their difference as well as their unity, conceived at one and the same time. Juxtaposed, 1 and 0 form an allegorical representation of this odd conjunction: the being of being-and-non-being, the unity of unity-and-difference.

From the foregoing, it might be tempting to infer that *Mefisto* sets up virtuality and pure mathematics as interchangeable terms. Such a conclusion, however, only repeats the error to which Gabriel is prone throughout much of the text. We have seen that the narrator of Banville's novel regards numerical relations and solid things as opposites. And, since solid things are also contrasted with the virtual in the book's network of associations, an exact correspondence between virtuality and the realm of numbers would seem to follow logically. Yet this equation is precisely what gets undermined every time the fallibility of Gabriel's mathematical understanding is brought into relief. At a fairly late juncture in the novel, Gabriel reassesses the relation between the logic of numbers and the essence of things and admits to the error of having too often mistaken the one for the other:

> From the start the world had been for me an immense formula. Press hard upon anything, a cloud, a fall of light, a cry in the street, and it would unfurl its secret, intricate equations. But what was different now was that it was no longer numbers that lay at the heart of things. Numbers, I saw at last, were only a method, a way of doing. The thing itself would be more subtle. (185)

At stake in this passage is the correct determination of ontological truth, and of the proper place in which to seek it. What seemed to the younger Gabriel to be a simple dualism, an opposition of two mutually exclusive terms (pure mathematical truth against actual fact) shows itself, here, to be a three-part relation in which mathematics is still distinguished from actuality, but only as a middle term between it and a third, more significant concept—the thing itself. As he becomes aware of this second, hitherto overlooked distinction,

Gabriel sets his book of mathematical paradoxes aside and starts to look for the thing itself in the street: "It was here, in the big world, that I would meet what I was waiting for, that perfectly simple, ravishing, unchallengeable formula, in the light of which mere contingency would melt" (186). His intuition cuts both ways; truth, he understands, exceeds mathematics, yet it is still pliable, somehow, to mathematical expressions. It stands in contrast with actuality, yet not so sharply as to have no connection with the study of everyday life: "I went out into the streets, I walked and walked. . . . At times it felt as if the thing would burst out into being by its own force. And with it surely would come something else, that dead half of me I had hauled around always at my side would somehow tremble into life, and I would be made whole" (186). This epiphany is by no means Gabriel's last one. It does, however, have a special significance in the evolution of his mathematical career, coinciding with his greatest moment of mathematical disillusionment. Its pointedness lies in the clarity with which it gathers the different thematic strands discussed so far, bringing them into direct relation with each other. Not only is "the thing" identified, nowhere more explicitly, with the sense of wholeness Gabriel has been hankering after all his life. Not only is this wholeness still conceived as a "simple . . . unchallengeable formula." It is now also understood as a concealed truth, a secret but essential truth of being, ready to break "by its own force" into the fabric of everyday life.

By its own force: through this expression the virtual is invoked once again as a concept capable of negotiating the ontological paradoxes that shape Gabriel's sense of self-identity. For what is virtuality if not the unity, the self-possession as it were, of this force, by which ontological truth is given and preserved as such—potentiality of the thing itself considered as the thing itself? On this point Gabriel's wording is in fact more precise than any paraphrase will account for. The text refers to two potential actualizations of the thing itself, two prospected events set side by side in a parallel construction that indicates their equivalence: to burst out into being or to somehow tremble into life. This, indeed, is potentiality understood in the purest sense: not merely as the ability of something to become something else, but as the ability of being to come to life, to be born—in short, as the ability to be. Gabriel's epiphany thus leads to a conception of virtuality as an absolutely generative force. It tells us that the mystery of the unit is in fact the mystery of originary events, of moments of conception that bear within them, as an index of their structural unity, a memory of their own shadowlike double: the possibility of their own non-being.

To Burst Out Into Being

To clarify the exact sense in which the quest for truth in *Mefisto* must be deemed anti-mimetic, it will be necessary to reread the image of "burst[ing] out into being" in light of what the book tells us about the phenomenality of truth-bearing events. Not long after he decides to go out "in the big world" and look for "that perfectly simple . . . formula" by which reality may be reduced to order, Gabriel turns his attention to the structure of events that, as is his custom, he proceeds to analyse mathematically. He thus observes that life is made up of an infinite number of moments that are in fact not unities but infinitely divisible pluralities: "For the world is like numbers, the things in it are never so small that they cannot be resolved into smaller things . . . I rummaged through the recent past, looking for patterns that I must have missed. But as once with numbers, so now with events, when I dismantled them they became not simplified, but scattered, and the more I knew, the less I seemed to understand" (187). This argument leads Gabriel to a new impasse. Events, he realizes, cannot be understood as discrete units because any attempt to analyze them as such opens them up, causing them to lose clarity and focus. The implication is that within the scope of Gabriel's mathematical method, there can be no such thing as an individual truth-bearing moment, much less a singular event that would formally indicate the birth of a being or an idea. Viewed as a minimal point in an autobiographical continuum, the epiphanic moment offers no clear-cut evidence of a beginning, no fixed signpost marking out an elemental relation of cause and effect. The very notion of epiphany thus comes under fire at the same time that the correspondence between the generative power of epiphanic moments and the nature of truth is most intensely felt. How, then, can the event in which truth is produced, in which "the thing" bursts out into being, be construed as originary or causative?

I wish to argue that the solution to this impasse lies in a reinterpretation of the concept of *poesis* through that of virtuality. *Poesis*, as mentioned above, refers to a hermeneutic procedure (a discourse, a movement of thought) in which truth is produced not through logical deduction but through some kind of poetic inspiration. Since Plato's *Republic* this idea has been at the centre of recurring philosophical debates about the difference between philosophy and literature. Often misunderstood, it is taken to imply, at worst, that truth is arbitrary or utterly subjective and, therefore, may as well be invented, and, at best, that a work of fiction may ring true at a deep emotional level, where abstract thinking cannot quite reach. The problem with both interpretations is not only that they tend to trivialize artistic truth, but also that the idea of truth they call into play

fails to measure up to Aristotle's standards of universality.[7] We recall that for Aristotle poetry is more philosophical than history precisely because it "tends to express the universal" (35). It cannot, then, be a matter of personal impressions, much less of an arbitrary decision, however inspired it may be.

In the context of what I am calling "a science of the virtual," the relation between *poetic* invention and truth takes on an altogether less casual significance. As I mentioned above, a science of the virtual examines ontological truths according to the potential nature of a being; in so doing, it seeks to comprehend truth in its dual aspect: as constituted at the same time in the present and in an absolute, pre-conscious past. It is the paradox of this "at the same time" that allows us to grasp truth as an event that is both unique and repeatable, commanding its own unity, its own index of universal communicability, without needing to be reduced to an abstract symbol or a representation of some timeless idea. Here the pertinent philosophical precedent is set by Gilles Deleuze, for whom the concept of virtuality corresponds not to a range of possibilities that already exist (if only as possibilities), but to an evolutionary force that engenders possibilities that were previously unthought—even, one might say, impossible. Typically, when a force is said to generate a possibility, it is understood as merely bringing that possibility to fruition. It is a matter of fulfilling a promise or fleshing out a pre-existing plan. In its Deleuzian acceptation, the generative power of the virtual is far more radical; it does not consist in selecting one potential future from a predetermined range, but in partaking of a creative process that is immanent to memory, to time and life. It is in this sense that the virtual comes to be associated, first in Deleuze's book on Bergson and then in *Difference and Repetition*, with an open and untotalizable whole: whole, because, as the realm of pure potentiality, virtuality lacks nothing of reality. It is not a being manqué but an element of being that is capable of dividing into both being and non-being—untotalizable, because the future onto which it opens is of the order of unforeseeable events.

Among the many concepts employed by Deleuze to explain this issue, two stand out as particularly important: the first, "differenciation," refers to the process by which being-as-a-whole (therefore, being considered in its virtuality) becomes an actual being. The term is used specifically to convey the non-mimetic character of the conversion, which Deleuze is keen to distinguish from the paradigm of Platonic idealism:

> Actualisation breaks with resemblance as a process no less than it does with identity as a principle. Actual terms never resemble the singularities they incarnate. In this sense,

> actualisation or differenciation is always a genuine creation. It does not result from any limitation of pre-existing possibility. . . . For a potential or virtual object, to be actualised is to create divergent lines which correspond to—without resembling—a virtual multiplicity. (*Difference* 212)

Deleuze's labelling of *differenciation* as "always a genuine creation" gives us a sense of the proximity between his theory of virtuality and the notion of *poesis*. To genuinely create, in this context, is to evolve according to a principle of internal change. Divergence replaces resemblance (that is, mimetic exactitude) as the condition by which "the thing" comes into being. In other words, it becomes the criterion by which ontological truth is produced, and, in fulfilling this role, it not only invests *poesis* with a creative-evolutionary charge, but it also places the emphasis of philosophical thinking on the event of a being's actualization.

The reason this type of truth production ought not to be confused with a merely arbitrary superimposition of order on chaos, or with a purely subjective act, is intimated in the last sentence from the Deleuzian passage quoted above. The reference to "a virtual multiplicity" provides the all-important clue. Deleuze borrows the concept from Henri Bergson and uses it to designate complex structures that he examines in light of their divisibility. A sequence of emotions, an event, an organism, a mathematical formula, and the very categories of time and space are all examples of multiplicity. They are complete in and of themselves, and they can all be reduced to a series of differential relations. To recycle the terms Gabriel uses in speaking of events, they are both unities and pluralities. Crucially, however, they do not all pertain to the same type of multiplicity.

Following Bergson, Deleuze distinguishes between two senses of the concept of multiplicity that correspond to two types of differential relation, two different ways of being divisible.

> One is represented by space. . . . It is a multiplicity of exteriority, of simultaneity, of juxtaposition, of order, of quantitative differentiation, of *difference in degree*; it is a numerical multiplicity, *discontinuous and actual*. The other type of multiplicity appears in pure duration: It is an internal multiplicity of succession, of fusion, of organization, of heterogeneity, of qualitative discrimination, or of *difference in kind*; it is a *virtual* and *continuous* multiplicity that cannot be reduced to numbers. (*Bergsonism* 38)

It goes without saying that the truth-bearing event Gabriel pursues belongs to the latter kind of multiplicity. Not only is it virtual in the

simple sense that it is conjectured or fantasised ("At times it felt as if the thing *would* burst out . . . and I *would* be made whole" [186, emphasis added]). It is also virtual in that its reality has the consistency of phantom impressions, of forces of change that cannot themselves be mapped out or measured. If we are willing to extend Deleuze's model, the chief implication of this issue is that the unity of the event is temporally determined. This means that the heterogeneous parts of which it is composed, the differential relations that it encompasses, are distributed in time. They unfold, interpenetrate, differ, and pass into one another in an uninterrupted sequence. As Gabriel realizes, when analyzed mathematically, these relations become hopelessly scattered. What he fails to understand is that, precisely because they correspond to a *virtual* and *continuous* multiplicity, they want to be analyzed in a different way than mathematical quantities: they contain number, but they do so only potentially.[8]

What this means is that the event of bursting out into being is indeed sustained by a process of internal change, a process that is change at its purest; yet in effecting change it remains unbroken, uninterrupted—different but whole at every prospective count. To the extent that it corresponds to the creation of a series of divergent lines, it allows for the sense that something has come into being for the first time. There is invention, newness, but also continuity: a continuity that answers to that aspect of reality that is secret, pre-phenomenal, still to be actualized—in short, virtual. It is through a *poetic* affirmation of this process that the event of "bursting out into being" can be repeated in its singularity, in its nonreproducible first-timeness. By taking stock of the virtually divisible status of truth-bearing events, thinking follows the path of invention and makes possible a performative return to that fateful first time that is the moment of birth. In the last analysis, it is the possibility of this return that lends truth to Gabriel's narrative: it is what justifies his memory of being born again and again—of "coming back each time" to a place where he has never been before (124).

Truth and Virtuality

The model of *poetic* thinking outlined above allows us to reconcile two conflicting aspects of *Mefisto* and to place these in relation with a third, somewhat disregarded, theme. First, the repetitive character of Gabriel's narrative may be seen to reinforce, rather than simply counterpoint, his obsession with the notion of chance. From the moment Gabriel affirms that "Chance was in the beginning" (3), his investigation into chance phenomena becomes part and parcel of his interest in originary events. Within this interpretative framework,

repetition functions as a correlative of the narrator's impulse to return, time and again, to the traumatic moment of his birth. By writing his life as a series of echoes and reduplicated scenes, Gabriel not only superimposes an arbitrary order onto an otherwise totally casual sequence of incidents; but he also tries to repeat chance, and in doing so, to *come back* to the event each time as a moment of origin. This goes some way toward explaining why his narrative contains so many short-lived epiphanies. Time and again, Gabriel glimpses the truth as a fleeting impression. His life story unfolds as a series of abrupt realizations that yield no lasting lesson.[9] In light of this peculiar narrative design, the conceptual equivalence of chance phenomena and moments of origin may be seen to tally with another important theme of the novel: the insight, repeatedly alluded to by Gabriel but never fully understood, that ontological truth is to be sought in the singular event in which a being originally bursts out—and that this event is in turn conceivable in its singularity only to the extent that it is analyzed as a multiplicity that divides potentially into a fleeting present and a pre-phenomenal past.[10] A direct consequence of this last point is that a rigorous thinking of (the unity of) being must reckon with the paradox of truth's original virtuality—which is to say, truth's original co-implication with the order of fictive things.

To clarify: the reader will recall that in the course of my analysis I distinguished three different uses of the term virtuality: I began by referring to the idea of virtuality as a duplicate of the sensible world, a parallel yet intersecting reality created, accessed, and sustained by technoscientific means. *This is the virtual as the realm of simulacra*. I then proceeded to define virtuality as the ontological category in which being may be grasped in its completeness, this completeness amounting to a potential and paradoxical unity of being with the possibility of its own non-being. *This is virtuality as a state of total possibility*, a fund of alternative versions of reality from which actuality is selected. Finally, I discussed the virtual as the space of potentiality-as-such: a purely generative force by which being is able to burst out into being. *This is virtuality as the fictive unity of the (pre-phenomenal) past and the (phenomenal) present*, at once the condition for the emergence of ontological truth and the dimension in which the truth is properly preserved—as a whole and in its singularity.

Gabriel's investigation of the mystery of the unit mobilizes all of these definitions. Indeed, his narrative performatively traces the history out of which they emerge. As a mathematician his instinct is to rummage through the past looking for patterns, thus reconstructing the truth out of the pure mathematical relations in which events are distributed. The project fails because, as Deleuze would put it, even the purest mathematical relations can only render reality as a

homogeneous whole, a symbolic system in which there is no room for the intrusion of hitherto impossible elements. As a narrator Gabriel is more successful. His acts of memory, though highly personal, are curiously pitched at a remove from what we might call his actual experience. Emphasizing the inventive element at work in his narration, Gabriel speaks of "memories . . , of things that had not happened yet" (77). These memories, mediated by the impulse to fictionalize, still set stock in singular events as the proper locus of truth. But in returning to the past via the future, Gabriel's narrative technique also signals a need to conceive of the truth as something more than a correct recollection of what actually happened. Far exceeding the realm of actual events, truth in *Mefisto* corresponds to an attempt to conceive of being as a whole—a quest that is made possible by a (fictional) return to a pre-phenomenal past in which being coincides with the possibility of its own non-being.

Notes

1. There is some disagreement, amongst commentators, as to which of the characters in *Mefisto* may be seen to fill Faust's position. The prevailing opinion is that the role is taken up by Kasperl and Kosok, who manage the vaguely specified research project with which Gabriel is called on to assist. Most pertinently, McNamee observes that the Kasperl/Kosok-Faust parallel constitutes an example of *Mefisto*'s taste for parodic inversion: "in direct opposition to the legend, the two Faust figures of *Mefisto* . . . far from wanting to know 'what holds the world most inwardly together' (*Faust* 2.382–83), are determined to prove that nothing holds it together" (209). Yet there is no question that the book's true Faustian plotline—the quest for an epistemological breakthrough that will solve life's deepest mysteries—has Gabriel at its center, not only as a witness but also as an agent. Gabriel, in fact, is the only character responsible for pushing knowledge to the point of failure. Numerous intertextual parallels in support of this reading are reconstructed in Elke D'hoker's *Visions of Alterity* (117–25).

2. On the tension between knowledge and understanding, and its emergence as a recurring motif in Banville's works, see D'hoker (44–46).

3. What I mean by irony, here, is the set of rhetorical and narrative devices used to create an incongruity between what the first-person narrator asserts and what the reader can see. Gabriel's intuition also functions in this way. Often, the relation between epiphanic moments and plot-development in *Mefisto* is such that Gabriel understands something, shares his insight with the reader, but, because of his commitment to a mathematical view of the world, fails to draw any consequential lesson from his epiphany.

4. For a list of correspondences between parts one and two of the novel, see Imhof's *Critical Introduction* (162–68).

5. Notably, the promise to do things differently, to yield control and open up to chance, is undermined by Gabriel's use of parallel constructions as well as by the statement's own programmatic quality.

6. For Banville's connection of Gabriel to marionettes or Pinocchio, see pages 118, 142, and 176.

7. A case in point is D'Hoker's otherwise brilliant discussion of different conceptions of art in Banville's poetics. The section dedicated to *poesis* opens with the following definition: "Of a kind with the subjectivist paradigms of representation, the theory of art as *poesis* emphasises the role of the creative imagination in the construction of an artistic reality. Meaning, order and truth are not to be searched for underneath the surface of reality, but are rather arbitrarily imposed on an indifferent reality" (82). Applied to the narrative structure of *Mefisto*, the assumption leads to the observation that "However brave and creative [Gabriel's] attempt may be, the reader cannot but wonder at the truthfulness . . . of this aesthetic project" (124). For D'hoker, this is of course the ironic lesson of the novel, its intimation of the protagonist's inevitable failure.

8. Acknowledging the Aristotelian source of his phrase, Bergson speaks of duration as a multiplicity that "contains number only potentially" in *Time and Free Will* (121).

9. For instance, the distinction between ontology and mathematical truth is set up as early as page 21, hinted at again on page 109, but only explicitly formulated on pages 185–86. As I have shown, on page 187 Gabriel is already resorting to mathematical metaphors and finally, on page 233, toward the very end of the book, he rehearses the claim that "One drop of water plus one drop of water will not make two drops, but one."

10. Deleuze's discussion of Bergson's concept of *durée* strongly informs my description of the dual temporality in which the event is split. See *Bergsonism*, especially chapter 3.

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