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"What Then Would Life Be but Despair?":
Skepticism and Romanticism in John Banville's
Doctor Copernicus

Human reason, in one sphere of its cognition, is called upon to consider questions, which it cannot decline, as they are presented by its own nature, but which it cannot answer, as they transcend every faculty of the mind.

Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, preface to the first edition

To chart the development of modern science in the form and content of the postmodern novel—this is the project John Banville boldly embarked upon with his 1979 novel *Doctor Copernicus*. The project entailed a stylistic as well as a thematic challenge, since Banville sought "to portray the men and their times" and "to illustrate something of their ideas by an orchestration of formal movement and rhythm in the prose" ("Physics" 42). The four books he envisaged, moreover, were to take the strict form of a classical Greek tetralogy, with *The Newton Letter* functioning as the satiric "interlude" ("My Readers" 12). Even though Banville did not stick to the historical aspect of his project—"the men and their times"—after this novella, the four novels that constitute the science tetralogy—*Doctor Copernicus*, *Kepler*, *The Newton Letter*, and *Mefisto*—do form a closely knit structure.¹

1. Disregarding the more purely fictional fourth novel *Mefisto*, some critics talk about a science trilogy—a tendency recently strengthened by the republication of *Doctor Copernicus*, *Kepler*, and *The Newton Letter* in a separate volume, *The Revolutions Trilogy*. Still, the similarities in theme, content, form, and characters among the four novels certainly warrant the notion of a tetralogy here. Although *Birchwood* also has a lot in common with the other novels, it does stand apart from them in its lack of explicit scientific content.

They not only share protagonists and thematic concerns, but are all built around a very similar line of development. This pattern of evolution, which can also be traced in the earlier novel *Birchwood*, is usually recognized as one of disappointment.² The protagonists gradually abandon their highly romantic quest for supreme beauty and true knowledge and lose faith in the power of language to render this beauty and knowledge. The development, in short, is taken to go from romantic idealism to skeptical despair. Drawing on the first and last words of *Birchwood*, respectively, Rüdiger Imhof writes: "His [Gabriel's] journey thus is from the Cartesian certainty of 'I am, therefore I think' to the Wittgensteinian despair of 'whereof I cannot speak, thereof I must be silent.' But that despair emerges at the end only" (*John Banville* 62). In the article "Swan's Way," he repeats this analysis for Gabriel Swan in *Mefisto*—"Both characters move from Cartesian certainty to Wittgensteinian despair" (116)—while his readings of *Doctor Copernicus* and *Kepler* arrive at much the same conclusion.

Although the protagonists of *Birchwood* and the science tetralogy do indeed move from an epistemological search for truth to an awareness of the limits of human knowledge and language, the philosophers referred to by Banville and appealed to by Imhof tend to destabilize this straightforward development in several ways. First, in modern philosophy, Descartes is remembered much more as the instigator of skeptical doubt than as a champion of certainty. After all, Descartes's entire philosophy is based on a radical doubt concerning our capacity as human knowers, given the fundamental division between self and world, or *cogito* and *res extensa*. Since Descartes's thinking self could only partly overcome this duality in rational representations, the actual correspondence between mind and matter had to be further guaranteed by a benevolent God, a kind of *deus ex machina* who miraculously established epistemological certainty. Later thinkers rejected this ultimate appeal to faith as the basis of all knowledge, so that Descartes's theory is now considered as the first in a long tradition of modern skepticism. It is interesting to note, moreover, that Descartes's very grounding of

2. See, for instance, McMinn 48, Berensmeyer 99, and Hand 80.

existence in knowledge, his famous "*cogito, ergo sum*" is inverted rather than directly quoted in the first lines of *Birchwood*: "I am, therefore I think. That seems inescapable" (11). While retaining the division between mind and matter, that unavoidable modern fact that haunts all of Banville's novels, Gabriel seems to argue—against Descartes—that the only certainty concerns existence, and that thinking comes only after that fact. Knowledge is always *a posteriori*, something hastily devised to explain existence, rather than the other way around.³ Gabriel's inversion thereby deals a blow to the Cartesian supremacy of the spiritual as well, suggesting instead that the human mind always pays tribute to material reality. Finally, while Wittgenstein's ordinary language philosophy—especially in his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*—is certainly concerned with the limits of language and knowledge, it cannot be associated exclusively with despair. In his *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein tries to counter skeptical doubt by analyzing what he calls our "ordinary language games," the way in which we commonly and successfully deal with the world. Moreover, precisely by confining certain knowledge to the limits of our language, Wittgenstein opens the door for other—more poetic—ways in which "*das Mystische*" may be felt or expressed.⁴ This is also implied by the immediate context of Gabriel Godkin's reference to Wittgenstein, where he talks about "Intimations" which "are felt only, and words fail to transfix them" (175).⁵

In short, the implications of Banville's philosophical references seem to compromise the straightforward development from scientific ideals to skeptical despair that critics have traced in the science tetralogy. If his novels do indeed chart a move from Cartesian

3. Joseph McMinn argues similarly: "The novel's opening line, 'I am, therefore I think,' by reversing the Cartesian principle of knowledge as intelligent command over experience, announces the futility of the enterprise in advance" (43).

4. "*Das Mystische*," or "the mystical," is Wittgenstein's term for that which falls outside the limits of language or knowledge. As he puts it in the *Tractatus*: "There is indeed the inexpressible. This *shows* itself; it is the mystical" (187).

5. The concept of "intimations" carries strong romantic overtones—witness Wordsworth's classic "Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood." This term recurs a few times in *Birchwood* and the science tetralogy in close connection to the (equally romantic) notion of epiphany.

metaphysics to Wittgenstein's ordinary language philosophy, it could also be interpreted as the protagonists' gradual rejection of a skeptical scientific project in favor of romantic notions of the "mystical" and the "ordinary." In short, the precise nature of the protagonists' scientific quest cannot be solved through an intertextual identification of Banville's philosophical allusions. Neither can the problem fully be decided through a reading of the historical dimension of the protagonists' careers.⁶ For although the tetralogy does indeed chart a chronological move from Copernicus and Kepler, to Newton, to Einstein and Heisenberg—thus tracing the birth of modern science—the protagonists remain beset by the same questions and provide highly similar solutions. This lack of straightforward progression suggests that the scientific tensions evoked in the tetralogy run much deeper than their historical instantiations, and that the opposite directions in which Banville's invariably move—so far only briefly identified as "skeptical" and "romantic," respectively—might bear witness to more fundamental philosophical problems concerning our capacities and limitations as human knowers. In what follows, I propose to analyze the way in which Banville stages these fundamental epistemological problems through an account of the life and work of Nicolas Copernicus. I have chosen to focus on *Doctor Copernicus* in particular, because this is the novel in which the clash between scientific ideals and realizations is most acutely felt. Yet as occasional references will make clear, the conclusions and insights arrived at can—with minor adjustments—be applied to the other science novels as well. In any case, the analysis should leave us somewhat better armed to decide whether the development charted in the science tetralogy is one from romanticism to skepticism, or the other way around.

Doctor Copernicus divides the story of Copernicus's life from childhood to death into four parts. "Orbitas Lumenque" focuses mainly

6. Most critical readings of the science tetralogy focus on the historical dimension of these novels (see the book-length studies of Imhof and Ingo Berensmeyer, and articles by Geert Lernout, Sean Lysacht and Wini Warren). While these readings are certainly valuable, an epistemological reading usefully complements their approach so as to create a more comprehensive picture of the thematic concerns of the novels.

on Copernicus's intellectual growth, culminating in his great astronomical discovery. In "Magister Ludi," we learn how Copernicus's scientific achievements are compromised by his worldly duties, his quarrels with his wastrel brother, Andreas, and his own growing doubts and despair. "Cantus Mundi" interrupts the omniscient, third-person narrative with the first-person account of Copernicus's disciple Rheticus, who comments—often rather negatively—on the astronomer's achievement. The final part, "Magnum Miraculum," restores the omniscient narration and describes Copernicus's physical and mental decline.

As this brief summary suggests, *Doctor Copernicus* is a novel intensely caught up with death and despair. It is therefore highly ironic that its opening scenes should be cast in the rosy glow of prelapsarian harmony. Nicolas's childhood, depicted in a manner and style reminiscent of Joyce's opening pages in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, is indeed a happy and harmonious one. The child Nicolas feels one with all beings and things around him—"[the tree] was a part of the world, and yet it was his friend" (3)—and is convinced of the essential nature of the self and the unity of mind and body. This feeling of oneness with the world is evident in the peaceful description of Nicolas's dropping off to sleep:

Their voices were like the voice of sleep itself, calling him away. There were other voices, of churchbells gravely tolling the hours, of dogs that barked afar, and of the river too, though that was not so much a voice as a huge dark liquidity, faintly frightening rushing in the darkness that was felt not heard. All called, called him to sleep. He slept.

(5)

As in all prelapsarian fairy tales, people, animals, rivers, and trees talk to the child and are felt and understood.

Contrary to what some critics have argued, this feeling of unity is not destroyed with Nicolas's introduction to language.⁷ For when the boy learns the name for "his friend," the linden tree, this name seems to express precisely the tree's unchanging essence as he had

7. I disagree with Imhof and Berensmeyer, who read the first page of *Doctor Copernicus* as depicting Nicolas's fall from grace at the introduction of language (Imhof, *John Banville* 78–81; Berensmeyer 133).

previously felt it: "In wind, in silence, at night, in the changing air, it changed and yet was changelessly the tree, the linden tree," even though these words "were nothing in themselves, they meant the dancing singing thing outside" (3). There is, in other words, a relation—more precisely one of mimetic dependence—between the word and "the vivid thing," between representation and reality, which Nicolas perceives as harmonious.⁸ The same holds true for the word "love." Although Nicolas does not at first know what it means, when "[his mother] spoke that name that named nothing, some impalpable but *real thing* within him responded as if to a summons, as if it had heard its name spoken" (3–4; emphasis added). Moreover, as in any mimetic view of representation, Nicolas recognizes that the world exists as such, totally independent of the words we attach to it: "although every name was nothing without the thing named, the thing cared nothing for its name, had no need of a name, and was itself only" (3). In short, language is dependent on reality, and words are subordinate to things. The representation and the thing represented can clearly be distinguished and the one merely—and temporarily—stands in for the other. A similar conception governs the idea of money, as Nicolas's father explains it to him: "Coins, you see, are only for poor people, simple people, and for little boys. They are only a kind of picture of the real thing, but the real thing itself you cannot see, nor put in your pocket, and it does not jingle" (6).

Nicolas's happy world is also a conveniently ordered one, whereby the order of reality is simply mirrored in language:

The sky is blue, the sun is gold, the linden tree is green. Day is light, it ends, night falls, and then it is dark. You sleep, and in the morning wake again. But a day will come when you will not wake. That is death. Death is sad. Sadness is what happiness is not. And so on. How simple it all was, after all! There was no need even to think about it. He had only to be, and life would do the rest. . . .

(4)

8. The notion of "the vivid thing" occurs time and again in *Doctor Copernicus*, together with such concepts as "the thing itself" and "the real thing." Although Banville does not explicitly refer to Kant's *Ding an sich* in *Doctor Copernicus* (in *Birchwood* he uses the translation "thing-in-itself" [13]), the idea of a transcendental essence of reality/life/other people is implied here. It is this ideational or noumenal aspect of reality that cannot really be known, but which Copernicus in his childhood both feels and understands.

As in the opening lines of *Birchwood*, existence (coinciding with essence) precedes representation, and being precedes thinking. The reference to death further suggests that acceptance is a cornerstone of the boy's universe. Nicolas accepts the place of death in his world unquestioningly, implicitly acknowledging the limitations of human existence. Even when his mother dies, his world-view is not disturbed. In death, he remarks, "[she] seemed . . . to have arrived at last at a true and total definition of what she was, herself, her vivid self itself" (5). And since she is, they tell him, no longer "his mother," the primacy of essence over language, of things over words, is once more confirmed. In a primal scene of prelapsarian harmony, in short, Nicolas's childhood depicts a romanticized version of the premodern faith in a basic unity of self and world, of mind and matter, or of words and things. Although no explicit reference to God is made, one can just imagine a bearded old man on a cloud drifting over the scene, deciding that all is well.

As is to be expected, this harmony cannot last, and Nicolas is abruptly thrown in to the ruptured, secular world of modernity at the sudden death of his father. "Life," the boy feels, "had gone horribly awry, and nothing they had told him could explain it, none of the names they had taught him could name the cause" (12). The words, he finds, no longer express real things but have become an obstacle; the "vivid thing" seems lost. Hence when Uncle Lucas talks to him, "Nicolas could distinguish only the meaning of the words and not the sense of what was being said" (14). At the destruction of his harmonious world-view, Nicolas experiences for the first time a feeling of loss, which he describes as "the small dull ache within him always, the ache that a severed limb leaves throbbing like an imprint of itself upon the emptiness dangling from the stump" (16–17). The loss of his father thus comes to symbolize the more profound loss of his childhood world of wholeness and unity. From now on, Nicolas's world will be divided by a fundamental gap which radically separates not only words from things, but also mind from matter within his very own self:

There were for him two selves, separate and irreconcilable, the one a mind among the stars, the other a worthless fork of flesh planted firmly in earthy excrement. In the writings of antiquity he glimpsed the blue and

gold of Greece, the blood-boltered majesty of Rome, and was allowed briefly to believe that there had been times when the world had known an almost divine unity of spirit and matter, of purpose and consequence. . . . Well, if such harmony had ever indeed existed, he feared deep down, deep beyond admitting, that it was not to be regained.

(27)

This fear, Copernicus realizes, puts him “out of step with the age which told him heaven and earth in his own self were conjoined” (27). His radical body-mind dualism makes him indeed an anachronistic representative of the modern condition and an intellectual soul mate of Descartes.

The division between self and world is reinforced in the novel by the opposite metaphorical schemes in which both poles are rendered. Thus the physical world is always evoked as both “glorious” and frightening, inspiring “terror and an awful glee” (7). It is invariably “chaotic and clamorous,” confusing and dark. As Imhof points out, the ordinary, physical world is also “tied to the motif of metaphorical shining birds and hawklike monsters” (*John Banville* 89). The connection is first established in the scene of Nicolas’s masturbating, which follows immediately on his reflections about the pristine purity of the heavens, a sequence that in itself exemplifies stylistically the mind-body opposition:

Monstrous hawklike creatures were flying on invisible struts and wires across a livid sky, and there was a great tumult far off, screams and roars, and howls of agony or of laughter. . . . It was as if he had tumbled headlong into some beastly black region of the firmament. . . . Dimly he sensed someone near him, a dark figure in the darkness, but he could not care, it was too late to stop, and he shut his eyes tight. The hawks bore down upon him, he could see their great black gleaming wings, their withered claws and metallic talons, their cruel beaks agape and shrieking without sound, and under that awful onslaught his self shrank together into a tiny throbbing point. For an instant everything stopped, and all was poised on the edge of darkness and a kind of exquisite dying, and then he arched his back like a bow and spattered the sheets with his seed.

(24)

In this scene, many elements of the physical world are brought together: the noise, the darkness, the terror and the glee and, of course, the dark figure, Andreas, who is throughout the novel

physicality incarnate. The same holds true, in fact, for women, whom the young Copernicus finds “hopelessly corporeal creatures” (24). It is added, by way of explanation, “What he sought was something other than ordinary flesh, was something made of light and air and marvellous grave gaiety” (25). Interesting, finally, is the reference to death or dying. It establishes the close connection between physical nature and mortality, which is one of the central *topoi* of Banville’s novels.⁹ The corporeal world is revealed as a finite, temporal, and essentially human one. And it is precisely this world that Copernicus strives to leave behind in his yearning for the intelligible purity of the sky.

This transcendent world of the “vivid things,” on the other hand, is usually “blue and golden,” “bright,” and “chill” or “icy” (12, 14). It is related to skies, clouds, and the sun as well as to mathematics and astronomy. Thus Nicolas finds the dull torpor of his school life interrupted once in a while by brief glimpses of the intelligible world of order and harmony: “Only now and then, in the grave cold music of mathematics, in the stately march of a Latin line, in the logic’s hard bright lucid, faintly frightening certainties, did he dimly perceive the contours of some glistening ravishing thing assembling itself out of blocks of glassy air in a clear blue unearthly sky, and then there thrummed within him a coppery chord of perfect bliss” (19). As the metaphorical schemes readily reveal, the dualistic opposition between mind and body is not quite an equal one. Like Descartes, Copernicus values the spiritual over the physical and attributes to the world of the mind qualities of perfect harmony and beauty that the physical world sadly lacks.

Again in Cartesian vein, Copernicus cannot rest at ease with this duality, nor with the threat of death concealed in it, and he resolves

9. In all of Banville’s novels, indeed, the enjoyment of ordinary reality leaves the protagonists with a bitter taste because of its connection with human limits, mortality, and death. In *Kepler*, for instance, the scientist’s happy reflection on the simple beauty of a pond, his children, some flowers is thwarted by “the thought of death,” like a “sudden drenching of icy water . . . with a stump of rusted sword in its grasp” (96). The female figures in Banville’s novels are often represented as both attractive and threatening because of their intensely physical nature (see Frehner 53). And it is the fate of many a Banville protagonist both to remain rooted within the commonplace and to do all that is possible to transcend it.

to devote his life to overcoming the gap between self and world that has suddenly sundered his Arcadian universe. It is his aim, as he puts it, to discover “the eternal truths of the universe” (81). He wants to grasp the physical world in absolute knowledge so as to lay bare the order he believes to exist underneath the chaos of the commonplace. The terms in which he frequently explains this scientific project, moreover, are highly reminiscent of the prelapsarian unity he has lost. In the encounter with his teacher, Professor Brudzewski, Copernicus formulates his bold endeavor in public for the first time:

It seems to me, *magister*, that we must revise our notions of the nature of things. For thirteen hundred years astronomers have been content to follow Ptolemy without question, *like credulous women*, as Regiomontanus says, but in all that time they have not been able to discern or deduce the principal thing, namely the shape of the universe and the unchanging symmetry of its parts.

(34)

This formulation is the first of many and contains some of the essential elements of Copernicus’s quest. His target is, as he puts it, “the principal thing.” The phrase, which is repeated regularly in the text, is reminiscent of “the vivid thing” of the opening paragraphs, signifying the essence of reality, or, in Copernicus’s words, “the deepest thing: the kernel, the essence, the true” (79). Just like the linden tree, the principal thing he seeks is “unchanging”; it is the changeless essence of a forever changing reality. In contrast to his childhood experiences, however, Copernicus is no longer content to have this “vivid thing” as a friend, to experience—hear, feel, see, sense—it. Instead, he wants to “discern” this changeless essence—to perceive, investigate, grasp, know it. Witness one of his favorite expressions: “Knowledge, *magister*, must become perception. The only acceptable theory is that one which *explains* the phenomena” (36). His scientific credo, as he formulates it to Brudzewski, reads: “I believe not in names, but in things. I believe that the physical world is amenable to physical investigation” (36). Faithful again to his childhood worldview, Copernicus believes in the superiority of things over words and the dependence of the latter on the former. Yet the specific things he seeks are no longer available at surface level but have to be unearthed by the creative powers of the human mind.

In the novel itself, Copernicus's scientific quest is incorporated into a historical context, the emergence of a modern and initially humanist scientific project in opposition to the more conventional methods of the Schoolmen.¹⁰ Still, as the historical references are often far from accurate, it may be more interesting to place Copernicus's ideals and disillusionments in a larger epistemological framework, where they can be seen to dramatize the age-old conflict between objective and subjective approaches to the problems of knowledge and representation. Considering the sudden breach in Copernicus's world-view, it can indeed be argued that he has traded an objective, mimetic theory of representation (whereby science merely mirrors reality) for a modern subjectivist epistemology which believes in the imaginative and perceptive powers of the mind to discover truth through representation.¹¹ Since this "truth" is not to be found on the surface of reality, as the standard objective approach believes it to be, Copernicus will try to discern the "Reality" behind "reality," to grasp the *Ding an sich* beyond the realm of the phenomena. Nietzsche would probably castigate Copernicus's quest as an instance of scientific hubris: through vanity, Nietzsche would argue, Copernicus fatally defies his position within physical nature and puts himself on a par with the lord of creation.¹² The American philosopher Stanley Cavell, on the other hand, might consider Copernicus's quest as a classic example of skepticism, expressive as it is of a desire to transcend the limits of

10. Imhof and Warren have investigated this historical context through a comparison of the novel with Banville's historical sources, especially Arthur Koestler's *The Sleepwalkers*. While illustrating the historical dimension of *Doctor Copernicus*, their work also—more or less implicitly—shows that Banville has to a large extent adapted the historical "facts" to suit his own purposes.

11. Although both the subjective and the objective conceptions of representations are contained in Platonic philosophy, the subjective approach (which prioritizes mind over matter in the duality at the heart of representation) has become especially dominant since Kant. The mimetic approach has continued to exist in Anglo-Saxon philosophy, having more recently been reconsidered in the work of Wittgenstein and Stanley Cavell, for example.

12. In *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche criticizes the modern project of science and argues instead for a perspectival knowledge which takes into account the inherently limited condition of human knowledge and existence (§109, §355).

human knowledge in its attempt to know the unknowable. Because Cavell's analysis of skepticism could help to further clarify the precise nature of Copernicus's hubristic quest, it may be worthwhile at this point to consider his arguments in detail.

Stanley Cavell is something of an outsider in recent debates about skepticism, as he neither defends nor rejects skepticism but instead wants to engage with what he calls "the truth of skepticism" as an essential aspect of the human condition. In *The Claim of Reason*, his first substantial analysis of skepticism and ordinary language philosophy, Cavell associates skepticism with the modern conception of knowledge as exact representation. In the absence of Descartes's divine guarantee of the correspondence between subject and object, he argues, representation can never provide absolute and certain knowledge of reality. Dissatisfied with the limits that the modern gap between self and world thus imposes, the skeptic, in a first move, tries to overcome that gap, to possess and know the world in its entirety. As Cavell's main interpreter, Stephen Mulhall puts it, "[T]he philosophical sceptic's quest for certainty about the world's existence does conceal a desire to overcome the world's separateness from him, to possess it utterly" (149). The scientific quest for absolute truth is thus in essence hubristic. For in order to reach the absolute truth about the world, it has to reject or transcend the traditional rules that govern our knowledge in the ordinary world. As Cavell puts it, the skeptical quest bears witness to an attempt to deny or reject "the human conditions of knowing" and, hence, the finite nature of the human condition (454).

For a more technical explanation of this denial, Cavell appeals to Wittgenstein's ordinary language philosophy and interprets the skeptic's *hubris* as the desire to speak outside our ordinary language games. A well-known skeptical argument constructs an artificial "best case for knowledge," which is emptied of all the particularities of subject, context, or circumstances and thereby disregards our common language *criteria*. These criteria, Cavell argues, determine what it is for anything to fall under a given concept. Hence they draw attention to "the astonishing fact of the astonishing extent to which we *do* agree in judgement; eliciting criteria goes to show therefore that our judgements *are* public, that is, shared" (31). Yet the mere existence of these language criteria does not negate

skepticism. After all, they can only determine *what* the thing is, but not, as the skeptic would like it, *that* it is. It is precisely because of these limits that the skeptic decides to reject the criteria and the larger framework of our ordinary language altogether. From a disappointment with the limits of knowledge, further, the skeptic proceeds to doubt the existence of the world in its entirety. Or more particularly, from the failure of the "best case for knowledge," which is bound to fail given its artificial and abstracted nature, the skeptic extrapolates to the impossibility of all knowledge and the uncertainty of all existence. By way of example, Cavell quotes Descartes's famous skeptical argument: "Everything which I have thus far accepted as entirely true [and assured] has been acquired from the senses or by means of the senses. But I have learned by experience that these senses sometimes mislead me, and it is prudent never to trust wholly those things which have once deceived us" (Cavell, *Claim* 130). That the skeptic infers from the limits of knowledge a fundamental doubt about the existence of the world is only possible because he conceives of his relation to the world solely in terms of knowledge. Cavell concludes therefore that skepticism is inherent "to any view which takes the existence of the world to be a problem of knowledge" (46).

The ultimate result of skepticism, moreover, is nothing more or less than "a death of the world." For in determining "what counts as some-thing," criteria also specify "what counts for human beings" (Cavell, *Claim* 483–96). Refusing to adhere to these criteria comes down to withdrawing all interest or value from the world. As Mulhall puts it, "[T]he sceptic's drive to strip words of their criteria strips the objects of the world of their variegated specificity and value. He annihilates the world by annihilating its capacity to elicit his interest; he is driven past caring for it, it goes dead for him and recedes from his grasp" (154). Put differently, speaking outside language games results in a freezing or fixing of the world, as it is deprived of all complexity, interaction, and value. The world's deadness, which the skeptic interprets as a lack in the world, is in fact caused by himself: "The world disappoints him precisely because he interprets his goal of achieving and maintaining certainty about the world's existence as a matter of achieving and maintaining an undispossessable possession of that world" (151).

Mulhall summarizes the “three senses of the world’s death at the hands of scepticism” as “the claims that scepticism constitutes a failure to acknowledge the world, that it freezes or fixes the world, and that it annihilates the specificity and value of the world” (154). Any antidote to skepticism, in this view, has to try to bring this stupefied world back to life.

As I hope to make clear in what follows, Copernicus’s quest reveals itself as essentially skeptical in several respects. First, in his hubristic endeavor to discern the truth of the universe—or, in Cavell’s terms, to possess the world in its entirety—Copernicus rejects all the previous dogmas, theories, and stipulations that have governed scientific knowledge. He boldly claims, “The closed system of the science must be broken, in order that it might transcend itself and its own sterile concerns, and thus become an instrument for verifying the real rather than merely postulating the possible” (83). This “new science,” he continues, evoking once again the modern notion of perception, must be “objective, open-minded, above all honest, a beam of stark cold light trained unflinchingly upon the world as it is and not as men . . . wished it to be” (83). His main reproach against his predecessors is indeed that they have not been concerned with “the nature of things”: “Ptolemaic astronomy is nothing so far as existence is concerned; it is only convenient for computing the nonexistent” (81). As an (almost anachronistically) early representative of a modern, positivist view of science, Copernicus finds himself in opposition to his teacher Brudzewski, who defends the old mimetic view of knowledge. If Copernicus’s bold desire is “to discern the principal thing,” Brudzewski’s modest aim is “to *save the phenomena*,” that is, “to devise a theory grounded firmly in the old reactionary dogmas that yet would account for the observed motion of the planets” (29). For Brudzewski, astronomy should restrict itself to the phenomenal surface level of reality and “save” or mirror it in representation. In addition, the theories of the ancients should be “saved,” as they are based on universal mathematical notions of harmony and divine truth. Brudzewski counters Copernicus’s yearning for the “principal thing” with the famous argument, “We are here and the

universe, so to speak, is there, and between the two there is no sensible connection" (34).¹³ Astronomy, therefore, "does not discern your principal thing, for that is not to be discerned" (35). It can mirror the phenomena, but it cannot explain them. Copernicus, however, refuses to accept this "metaphysical finitude" and construes it instead, as Cavell puts it, as an "intellectual lack" (*Quest* 51). In other words, he perceives the scientific failure to discern the essence as a lack of the reigning theories rather than the result of a fundamental human condition. As is to be expected, Copernicus's denial of the limits of knowledge and human existence further manifests itself in a negation of the commonplace, physical world at large.

This commonplace world is not only too concrete and too chaotic for Copernicus, it is also changeable and thus intimately connected with the notion of human finitude, which he seeks to deny. Since in ordinary reality, as he puts it, "Nothing was stable: politics became war, law became slavery, life itself became death, sooner or later" (28), Copernicus withdraws all attention from it and focuses instead on the eternal laws of the universe. Copernicus's leave-taking of Fracastoro is highly revealing in this respect. The period with Fracastoro is depicted as Copernicus's first (and last) enjoyment of the physical world of the senses, and his farewell to Italy is definitely a final rejection of life. Incidentally, Fracastoro is a student of medicine, what he calls "a science of the tangible" in opposition to Copernicus's scientific quest for "eternal truths" (82). On this aspect of Fracastoro, too, Copernicus turns his back and "closed the door softly" (83). As a true skeptic, he will henceforth limit his relation with the world to that of knowledge only and flee the physical in the world of science, for scholarship "enddistanced" the world, and

13. According to Koestler's popular history of astronomy, *The Sleepwalkers*, Brudzewski's arguments should be read as representative of the older Ptolemaic belief that "[H]eavenly bodies, being of a divine nature, obey laws different from those to be found on earth. No common link exists between the two; therefore we can know nothing about the physics of the skies" (77–78). Although Banville tries to give these scholastic beliefs a postmodern flavor by emphasizing the limits of knowledge they try to observe, it should be pointed out that while (post)modern epistemology is inspired mainly by doubt, the Ptolemaic and Scholastic universe was firmly grounded in faith, in religious doctrine and dogma.

although “[t]he real world would not be gainsaid,” “he must gain-say it, or despair” (28).

Even before epistemological doubts set in, Copernicus’s scientific quest thus reveals itself as a skeptical quest at heart. The “death of the world” that is the inevitable result of this betrays itself first of all in the metaphorical language of fixing and freezing with which the effects of his quest are expressed. The noumenal world Copernicus seeks to grasp in its entirety is, as we have seen, often presented in terms of immutable glass or eternal ice.¹⁴ Upon finding the solution to a conundrum, for instance, Nicolas imagines that “the glass blocks sailed in silence through the bright air, and locked. Done! Harmonia” (20). Similarly, one of the only moments the physical world appears to interest the young boy is when it is covered by snow and ice. The world is “transformed” by the snow, everything is “lost in that white emptiness” (25). The attraction for Copernicus lies indeed in the fixity, the immutability, “the absence of things.” The physical world, for a moment at least, resembles the pure order of the transcendent universe: “The sky was a dome of palest glass, and the sun sparkled on the snow, and everywhere was a purity and brilliance almost beyond bearing His young soul swooned, and slowly, O, slowly, he seemed to fall upward, into the blue” (25).¹⁵ This image of a perfect, crystal-clear order prefigures Copernicus’s moment of greatest success at the end of part 1, when he finally finds “the solution” (85). At last, Copernicus has been able to cast off the burden of traditional astronomy; he has cleared away all the names and has come, finally, to “the vivid thing.” It was, the narrator writes, “as if the channels of his brain had been

14. Similar imagery can be found in the other novels of the science tetralogy. This is how Gabriel Swan describes the effect of his mathematical representations on the world: “Always I had thought of number falling on the chaos of things like frost falling on water, the seething particles tamed and sorted, the crystals locking, the frozen lattice spreading outwards in all directions. I could feel it in my mind . . . the creaking stillness, the stunned, white air” (*Mefisto* 109). When he resolves to give up science, he writes, “A frozen sea was breaking up inside me” (232).

15. This epiphanic vision is reminiscent of Gabriel’s final epiphany in Joyce’s short story “The Dead” (“His soul swooned slowly as he heard the snow falling faintly through the universe and faintly falling like the descent of their last end, upon all the living and the dead” [*Dubliners* 225]), although the implications are rather different in each instance.

sluiced with an icy drench of water," and our scientist could finally think with a "miraculous objectivity" (84). It is again expressive of his fundamental dualism that it "his brain" "had made that leap that he had not had the nerve to risk" (85). His mind has transcended the phenomenal and headed straight for the essence: the eternal position of the Sun in an expanded universe. Given the absolutes he has managed to uncover, the comparison of his theory to a jewel is certainly apt: "He turned the solution this way and that, admiring it, as if he were turning in his fingers a flawless ravishing jewel. It was the thing itself, the vivid thing" (85). One is reminded here of a similar image in Wallace Stevens's *Notes toward a Supreme Fiction*, a poem referred to repeatedly in *Doctor Copernicus*:

They will get it straight one day at the Sorbonne.
We shall return at twilight from the lecture
Pleased that the irrational is rational,
Until flicked by feeling, in a gilded street,
I call you by name, my green, my fluent mundo.
You will have stopped revolving except in crystal.

(3.10)

In both cases, the image of the precious stone is ambiguous. While capturing the stunning beauty of "the" solution, it also suggests the coldness, sterility, and even lifelessness of that solution in view of the rich variety of life as a whole. Copernicus's "Book of Revolutions" might have put a symbolic end to the earth's revolutions altogether. The suspicions that the imagery of ice and glass thus raise become gradually more explicit when Copernicus himself starts to cast skeptical doubt on the nature of his intellectual achievement.

Copernicus's doubt, I would argue, falls largely into two categories, which can be characterized as a weak doubt and a strong one. Early versions of this twofold despair can be found for instance in Nietzsche's characteristically ambivalent reaction to modern science. On the one hand, Nietzsche argues that the Truth cannot be known, since our position as natural, contextual, and physical beings is inevitably limited: "We see all things through the human

head and cannot cut this head off" (*Human* §9). Yet in a far more nihilistic doubt, Nietzsche also claims that truth and order simply do not exist, as the world is made up of blind force, chance, and chaos only: "The total character of the world . . . is for all eternity chaos, not in the sense of a lack of necessity but of a lack of order, organization, form, beauty, wisdom, and whatever else our aesthetic anthropomorphisms are called" (*Gay Science* §109). In a characteristic move, however, Nietzsche turns this negative conclusion into a positive challenge by arguing that truth does not have to exist, as we have no need of it: it does not help us to lead our lives. All we can (and have to) do, therefore, is to accept chance and affirm our fate in a heroic mode of "*Amor fati*" (*Gay Science* §276).

Returning to *Doctor Copernicus*, it can be noted that already at the time of his great discovery, Copernicus is aware of the fact that "[t]he verification of his theory would take weeks, months, years perhaps, to complete" (85). Yet he believes that it is "nothing," "mere hackwork"—an expression in words and figures of his imaginative perception. This task turns out to be more difficult than expected, and he watches in despair and "mute suspended panic his blundering pen pollute and maim those concepts that, unexpressed, had throbbed with limpid purity and beauty" (93). It is, he thinks wryly, "hacking indeed, bloody butchery." Searching for an explanation, he reflects, "It was not that the theory itself was faulty, but somehow it was being contaminated in the working out." Echoing his teacher's earlier advice, he adds: "There seemed to be lacking some essential connection. The universe of dancing planets was out there, and he was here, and between the two spheres mere words and figures on paper could not mediate." Since Copernicus had to discard all names—or in Wittgensteinian terms, all criteria of our ordinary understanding—in order to perceive the thing itself, it is hardly surprising that this perception cannot be communicated simply by finding new names. Having rejected the straightforward mimetic theory of "saving the phenomena," Copernicus is unable to mirror his discovery in words. It is Copernicus's peculiar predicament, therefore, to have invented a new science that he is incapable of passing on. His attempt to transcend the limits of language has been blown to pieces in the face of these limits themselves. "We *say* only those things that we have the words to

express: it is enough," Andreas argues in Wittgensteinian mode (240; emphasis added). And in a similar statement, to Rheticus this time, Copernicus takes the matter even further: "We *think* only those thoughts that we have the words to express" (207; emphasis added). If "the vivid thing" cannot be represented, it cannot really be known either. Representation, Copernicus is forced to acknowledge, cannot *mediate* between the human mind and "the universe of dancing planets." Hence Copernicus curbs Rheticus's youthful zeal as follows:

You imagine that my book is a kind of mirror in which the real world is reflected; but you are mistaken, you must realise that. In order to build such a mirror, I should need to be able to perceive the world whole, in its entirety and in its essence. But our lives are lived in such a tiny, confined space, and in such disorder, that this perception is not possible. There is no contact, none worth mentioning, between the universe and the place in which we live.

(206)

Although Copernicus seems to echo the Ptolemaic wisdom of his teachers, his argument is born not from faith but from skeptical doubt. As such, it resembles more strongly Nietzsche's perspectivism, what I have called his weak doubt. Reality, in that radically subjectivist conception, cannot "objectively" or "wholly" be mirrored in language, because our perception (and hence representation) of reality is determined by our own limited perspective, by our own categories of space and time, or, as Nietzsche puts it, by our status as natural beings. Kant's solution to this problem—limiting certain knowledge to phenomenal reality only—is thus in fact but an affirmation of this weak, skeptical doubt which all too easily allows for its blossoming into a more explicit skeptical despair.

Copernicus's doubts grow steadily more intense, encompassing not only our capacities as human knowers but also the existential conditions of the world itself. A first indication of this despair is his loss of religious faith, announced simply with "Suddenly one day God abandoned him" (115). His crisis, characterized only by "a lack of feeling, a numbness," is a strange one: "[H]is faith in the Church did not waver, only his faith in God. The Mass, transubstantiation, the forgiveness of sin, the virgin birth, the vivid truth of all *that* he did not for a moment doubt, but behind it, behind the ritual, there

was for him now only a silent white void that was everywhere and everything and eternal." If Copernicus had always been convinced that beyond the ritual lay the truth, beyond the names the vivid things, now he is no longer sure. Perhaps the form hides but a lack, an emptiness. The names are no longer subservient to an essential reality, as the very existence of reality has come to be doubted. This is the claim of the strong doubt: the truth, *das Ding an sich*, or Reality as such—which the weaker doubt considered beyond intellectual grasp—is now questioned in its very existence. Hence forms, rituals, and names are all that is left. As Canon von Lossainen puts it to Copernicus: "Perhaps, Nicolas, the outward forms are all that any of us can believe in. Are you not being too hard on yourself?" (116).

Interestingly, this pattern of emptiness at the core of things—an emptiness only covered by form or ritual—is repeated on several levels in the text. About the scientist himself, for instance, his fellow canons note "a certain lack, a transparency" at the heart of his impeccable behavior: "It was as if, within the vigorous and able public man, there was a void, as if, behind the ritual, all was hollow save for one thin taut cord of steely inexpressible anguish stretching across the nothingness" (132). Nor does the void at the heart of his book escape attention; Copernicus "ceased to believe also in his book," which, instead of approaching the truth, is "flying off in a wild eccentric orbit into emptiness" (116). His book is "not about the world, but about itself"; it is but words, mere "saying." Hence his conclusion: "The book is nothing, less than nothing" (209).¹⁶ As

16. This sense of an emptiness at the heart of Copernicus's theories echoes Nietzsche's and Wittgenstein's rejection of metaphysics as empty, as not worth the trouble. Thus Nietzsche famously called the "thing in itself" (*das Ding an sich*) "another very ridiculous thing" (*Gay Science* §335). About Wittgenstein's antimetaphysical statements, Cavell writes: "This is what Wittgenstein has against metaphysics, not just that it produces meaningless propositions—that, even in the sense in which it is true, would be only a derivative of its trouble. His diagnosis of it is rather that it is empty, empty of interest, as though philosophy were there motivated by a will to emptiness" (*Quest* 7). That science and knowledge lack true *significance* (a general sense of relevance and truth that Banville frequently opposes to the more concrete concept of *meaning*) in the face of human life and death is even more powerfully evoked in the other science novels. Thus Kepler, Newton, and Gabriel Swan all come to reject their theories at the end, convinced that, ultimately, "it simply doesn't matter" (*Kepler* 191, *Newton Letter* 22, *Mefisto* 187).

if to confirm this absence, Copernicus's initial "vivid thing," the linden tree, will be cut down (119). Rheticus, finally, never ceases to make explicit that "Copernicus did not believe in truth": "All that mattered to him was the saying, not what was said; words were the empty rituals with which he held the world at bay" (176). Whether in life, science, or religion, all that is left to the despairing Copernicus are empty names, forms, and rituals that hide but an emptiness. Since all names are just metaphors, there is no difference between the ancient philosophers who called the lights in the sky "torches borne by angels" or "pinpricks in the shroud of Heaven" and modern scientists who call them "stars and planets" (207). "[I]t is," Copernicus warns Rheticus, "all merely an exalted naming." Copernicus's nihilistic world-view is finally also illustrated in his solar system. As Rheticus expounds with great relish, the center of the Copernican universe is not the sun but "the centre of the earth's orbit," a point in empty space. The universe revolves on emptiness, and his book merely serves to hide this lack. Rheticus writes, "All the hypotheses, all the calculations, the star tables, charts and diagrams, the entire ragbag of lies and half truths and self-deceptions which is *De revolutionibus orbium mundi* (or *coelestium*, as I suppose I must call it now), was assembled simply in order to prove that at the centre of all there is nothing, that the world turns upon chaos" (217–18).

In his final discussion with Rheticus, Copernicus himself explains in terms of chaos the emptiness at the heart of religion, the world, his book, himself, and the universe: "When you have once seen the chaos, you must make some thing to set between yourself and that terrible sight; and so you make a mirror, thinking that in it shall be reflected the reality of the world; but then you understand that the mirror reflects only appearances, and that reality is somewhere else, off behind the mirror; and then you remember that behind the mirror there is only the chaos" (209). This sentence cleverly charts the epistemological development of Copernicus in full. Out of an initial lack—the death of his father, the ruin of his harmonious world—Copernicus sought to find a theory that expressed the eternal order of the world. Failure and frustration subsequently led to the awareness that language and understanding could never reach this essence, that his theory was limited to appearances and that truth

was beyond reach. Carrying this line of thinking to its radical conclusion, finally, Copernicus is forced to admit that there is no truth, no essence, no order—only chaos, nothingness, and despair. That despair is inevitable is confirmed when Copernicus anachronistically quotes Kierkegaard: “*If at the foundation of all there lay only a wildly seething power which, writhing with obscure passions, produced everything that is great and everything that is insignificant, if a bottomless void never satiated lay hidden beneath all, what then would life be but despair?*” (208). This despair, this “nihilism,” as Rheticus calls it, will ultimately lead to death. When “the people” learn of his theory, Copernicus fears, “they will begin to despise the world, and something will die, and out of that death will come *death*” (207). An oddly similar reflection on the devastating consequences of the Copernican revolution can be found in Nietzsche’s *Gay Science*:

What were we doing when we unchained this earth from its sun? Where is it moving to now? Where are we moving to? Away from all suns? Are we not continually falling? And backwards, sideways, forwards, in all directions? Is there still an up and a down? Aren’t we straying as though through an infinite nothing? Isn’t empty space breathing at us? Hasn’t it got colder? Isn’t night and more night coming again and again? . . . God is dead! God remains dead! And we have killed him!

(§125)

In this form of nihilistic despair, the skeptical thrust behind Copernicus’s scientific quest has finally become fully explicit. Quite literally exemplifying the outcome of the skeptical quest, the world has “died” for Copernicus; it has become nothingness, chaos or mere emptiness. Copernicus’s despair is indeed what Thoreau would call “quiet desperation,” Coleridge and Wordsworth “despondency or dejection,” and Cavell, quite simply, “skepticism” (*Quest* 9). Copernicus’s hubristic refusal to accept the limits of human knowledge and the finitude of the human condition has led to a skeptical negation of the world instead. For, as Cavell would argue, it is only when the world is conceived of exclusively in terms of knowledge that failure of that knowledge leads to loss of the world. Similarly, it is only when truth is identified with absolute order that the absence of such order leads to a rejection of the possibility of truth in general. Although despair seems the inevitable conclusion of Copernicus’s skeptical quest, some alternatives are

tentatively suggested, especially in the last chapter, where Copernicus is taught “[h]ow to die” (225).

A first alternative is realized by Rheticus. Initially he is infected by Copernicus’s despair, exclaiming, “Frauenburg killed the best in me, my youth and my enthusiasm, my happiness, my faith, yes, faith. From that time on I believed in nothing, neither God nor Man” (210). Like Copernicus, moreover, Rheticus links this skepticism with death: “Frauenburg had been a kind of death, for death is the absence of faith” (216). Yet upon the arrival of his own disciple, Lucius Valentine Otho (a historical figure), Rheticus regains his faith. He has high hopes again for the future—for fame and for truth—and exclaims, “God, I believe: resurrection, redemption, the whole thing, I believe it all” (219). Although the change is sudden and the scene hilarious, Rheticus’s newly found belief is none the less real, and it transforms his attitude toward the commonplace world into one of affirmation:

I am doctor Rheticus! I am a believer. Lift your head, then, strange new glorious creature, incandescent angel, and gaze upon the world. It is not diminished! Even in that he failed. The sky is blue, and shall be forever blue, and the earth shall blossom forever in spring, and this planet shall forever be the centre of all we know. I believe it, I think. *Vale*.

(219–20)

This form of simple faith is no longer a possibility for Copernicus. When the last rites are being administered at his deathbed, the Andreas figure tells him: “Do not heed it, brother . . . All that is a myth, your faith in which you relinquished long ago. There is no comfort there for you” (238).¹⁷ And when Copernicus listens to the voice of the priest intoning, “*Only after death shall we be united with the All, when the body dissolves . . . and the spiritual man, the soul free and*

17. Although the imaginary dialogue between Andreas and Copernicus at the end of the novel is in fact a kind of interior dialogue within Copernicus—evidenced by the disappearance of quotation marks—I will for simplicity’s sake refer to the voice defending the scientific quest as “Copernicus” and the voice propagating an alternative of acceptance as “Andreas.”

ablaze, ascends through the seven crystal spheres of the firmament, shedding at each stage a part of his mortal nature," Andreas interrupts him with, "Redemption is not to be found in the Empyrean" (241). For Andreas, as for Cavell, redemption from skeptical despair lies not within a transcendent, purely spiritual realm after death but rather within our earthly life. It is not to be achieved by a rejection of "mortal nature" but by an acceptance of the physical body and its commonplace existence. It is indeed Andreas's mission as the "angel of death" to teach Copernicus "[h]ow to die" (225). He wants to make him accept, as Cavell would have it, the inevitable finitude of the human condition, which Copernicus has always sought to deny. Moreover, the precise form of the alternative taught by Andreas is highly reminiscent of Cavell's notion of "acknowledgment."

Seeking to rekindle the skeptic's interest in the world, Cavell proposes in *The Claim of Reason* a "recounting" of criteria, a return to our ordinary ways of dealing with the world, an "acknowledging" of the world. Mulhall summarizes this alternative as follows:

[T]he philosopher should acknowledge the world—acknowledge it as his necessary other whose existence is thus both separate from and essential to his own. Acknowledging that it is essential to him would presumably mean acknowledging his interest in and need for it, which means accepting the fact that it attracts him—that he is drawn to and by it; and acknowledging its separateness would mean accepting the independence of what attracts him, not imposing his interests and needs upon it but rather allowing it to elicit the responses it requires and requests from him in its own way and according to its own nature.

(158)

Replacing scrutiny with acknowledgment and transcendence with acceptance, the skeptic has to acquiesce to the limits of our human condition and be open to the irreparable strangeness of the commonplace as something that is "other" to us. This stance in fact entails a respect for the gap between self and world as something inherent in human existence. Cavell's *In Quest of the Ordinary*, further explores the romantic undercurrent of this notion of acknowledgment: Cavell argues, "the sense of the ordinary that my work derives from the practice of the later Wittgenstein and from J. L. Austin, in their attention to the language of ordinary or everyday life, is underwritten by Emerson and Thoreau in their devotion

to the thing they call the common, the familiar, the near, the low" (*Quest* 4). In response to the skeptical destruction of the world, romantic literature—of the British Romantics and the American Transcendentalists—can be read as an attempt to bring "the world back, as to life," which presents itself as "a return to the ordinary" (53). The ordinary becomes the object of a quest, of an aspiration: "The everyday is what we cannot but aspire to, since it appears to us as lost to us" (171).

This quest for the ordinary is also part of what Andreas proposes to his brother—or, put differently, what Copernicus begins to realize—at the end of *Doctor Copernicus*. Following Cavell's notion of acknowledgment, Andreas argues that what is required is not so much a rejection of all knowledge as a different manner of knowing. Aptly summarizing his brother's skeptical quest, Andreas claims, "We know the meaning of the singular thing only so long as we content ourselves with knowing it in the midst of other meanings: isolate it, and all meaning drains away" (239). In rejecting the traditional "names"—which govern science and astronomy as well as our relations to other people—Copernicus effectively let "all meaning drain away," which resulted in a meaningless, empty world, unable to sustain his interest. In opposition to this artificial isolation—the favorite argument of the skeptic—Andreas proposes an estimation of meaning "in the midst of other meanings," or as Cavell puts it, a "recounting" of our accepted criteria for knowledge within our ordinary language games. Andreas further echoes Cavell by repeating to his brother that a relation to the world solely in terms of scrutiny and mastery ultimately leads to nothingness or death:

The world will not bear anything other than acceptance. Look at this chair: there is the wood, the splinters, then the fibres, then the particles into which the fibres may be broken, and then the smaller particles of these particles, and then, eventually, *nothing*, a confluence of aetherial stresses, a kind of vivid involuntary dreaming in a vacuum. You see? the world simply will not bear it, this impassioned scrutiny.

(239; emphasis added)

The alternative to scrutiny is once again acceptance, both of our mortal nature and of the material world in which it is embedded.

Like the Romantic poets, moreover, Andreas draws attention to the specific significance, or “truth,” of the ordinary. Instead of Copernicus’s nihilistic conclusions about the absence of truth “behind” the world, Andreas proposes a truth that is “within” the world, and within ourselves. Countering Nicolas’s retort, “how are we to perceive the truth if we do not attempt to discover it, and to understand our discoveries?” Andreas maintains: “There is no need to search for the truth. We know it already, before ever we think of setting out on our quests. . . . we *are* the truth. The world, and ourselves, this is the truth.” And this truth, Andreas claims, may be “shown” (rather than “spoken”), “[b]y accepting what there is.” If this decidedly romantic notion of a mysterious significance remains rather vague in *Doctor Copernicus*, it is further developed in the other science novels and realized specifically in the epiphanies pervading these novels with increasing insistence.¹⁸ In these rare moments, indeed, the ordinary suddenly and momentarily blossoms into a revelation registered by the bemused observer as something that exceeds all conventional knowledge and scientific truth. It is this sense of secret significance that Gabriel Godkin refers to as “intimations” (174), Kepler calls “[t]he mystery of simple things” (61), and the narrator in *The Newton Letter* terms “the innocence of things” (2). It is also, albeit briefly, suggested in the mysterious harmony Copernicus seems to regain at the end of his life, a near replica of his childhood experience of unity: “something immensely far and faint, a music out of earth and air, water and fire, that was everywhere, and everything, and eternal” (241–42).

Although *Doctor Copernicus* ends beautifully on this romantic image of happy acceptance and childlike innocence, it is not an image strong enough to dispel the earlier feeling—again more strongly realized in the other novels—that this is not enough. While Cavell tries to counter the potentially conservative passivity implied in acknowledgment with his emphasis on an active revisiting of the ordinary, Banville’s protagonists seek a more active alternative in the realm of aesthetics. Denouncing again Copernicus’s

18. For a detailed investigation of the nature and function of these sudden revelations in *Birchwood* and the science tetralogy, see D’hoker, “Books.”

quest for “transcendent knowledge,” Andreas asserts that it stems from “vanity” and “the cowardice that comes from the refusal to accept that the names are all there is that matter, the cowardice that is true and irredeemable despair” (240). He refers of course to Copernicus’s childhood belief that “every name was nothing without the thing named” and his skeptical attempts to discard the names in order to get at the vivid thing. As we have seen, Copernicus himself increasingly came to realize that names, forms, rituals are all we have—and sorely need. Whereas Copernicus considered the importance of names and the “necessity for ritual” as something negative, however, as a measure of our failure, Andreas proposes to turn it into something positive—the creation of *supreme fictions*: “With great courage and great effort you might have succeeded in the only way it is possible to succeed, by disposing the commonplace, the names, in a beautiful and orderly pattern that would show, by its very beauty and order, the action in our poor world of the otherworldly truths” (240). If no order “underneath” the world can be found, it will have to be created. And what better way to create order than in supreme fictions, which—following Stevens—one knows to be fictional but nevertheless wholeheartedly believes in.¹⁹ What matters is the “exalted naming” as well as the creativity and beauty of that brave attempt (207). Cavell’s notions of acceptance and acknowledgment have made way here for affirmation. This artistic ideal of creating fictions, myths, forms in which we can believe is not only a reference to Wallace Stevens but also to Nietzsche. For Nietzsche recognized as no other our human need for illusions, confronted as we are with a chaotic and meaningless world. Or as Andreas puts it once again: “[W]e are the truth There is no other, or, if there is, it is of use to us only as an ideal, that brings us a little comfort, a little consolation, now and then” (239).

Still, these references to “otherworldly” or “other” truths in Andreas’s affirmative ideal are slightly unsettling. Is this belief in a

19. In *Notes toward a Supreme Fiction*, Stevens is concerned with the difficult balance of reality and imagination in art. The artistic synthesis he proposes, a “supreme fiction,” is something artists have to strive for but can never achieve.

transcendent truth, however hesitant, not what Cavell's notion of acknowledgment seeks to cure us from? Is the construction of beautiful, but reductive, theories not what has to be avoided at all cost? Is there then no other difference between the romantic and the skeptic than a measure of lucid self-awareness? It seems, in short, that our quest for the truth of the science novels itself has failed to reach a beautiful and simple answer. For rather than affirming either of the two readings concerning the epistemological development in the science tetralogy, my analysis has merely shown how the texts themselves subvert their straightforward opposition of romantic idealism and skeptical despair. Indeed, returning to (a manner of) truth and representation at the end of the narratives, Banville seems to compromise the development from Descartes to Wittgenstein, from knowledge to acknowledgment, or from skepticism to romanticism, which the nature of Copernicus's quest all too easily predicted. Although they have been confronted with the failure of their epistemological quests and the destructive quality of their scientific representation, the protagonists are not long satisfied with a resigned acceptance of limitations or a mere acknowledgment of the ordinary. Or as the protagonist of *The Newton Letter* aptly puts it: "such a renunciation is not of this world" (80). Instead, they will continue to search for new patterns and more beautiful forms, for a better balance between mind and matter, or a more perfect link between self and world.²⁰ In this they bear out what Cavell calls "the truth of skepticism," the wish to deny the human condition that is essential to what we think of as human. If anything, it is not so much a move from skepticism to romanticism that Banville's novels poignantly illustrate, but rather humankind's constant wavering between the two.

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20. In the other novels of the science tetralogy, too, the protagonists' quests for a new and better synthesis between self and world, between imagination and reality, is presented in aesthetic terms and developed through intertextual references to other authors, including Goethe, Rilke, and Hugo von Hofmannsthal. For more detailed discussions of the aesthetic ideals proposed and criticized in the science tetralogy, see Izarra; D'hoker, "Negative Aesthetics"; and D'hoker, "German Connection."

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