

Authentic Hero in the Book of Evidence by John Banville

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Literally meaning “the quality of being genuine, real or true”, “undisputed credibility”, the term “authenticity” in philosophy refers to “condition of significant, emotionally appropriate living”¹ and has sometimes, even in most cases, personal implications. The word “authentic” similarly has had connotations relating the life of a peculiar, and never ordinary, person(s). A word dating back to the 13th century and derived from French “authentique”, “authentic” denotes a person acting on his own authority. Although it was mentioned and used by Nietzsche earlier to refer to the conflict between man’s innermost life and his behaviour, “authenticity” has gained particular references especially with the emergence of existentialistic philosophy and in the work of Heidegger, who introduced the term “eigentlich” to denote the condition of gathering one’s existence from its dissipated immersion in the world of the they into one’s most proper way of being.² Heidegger focuses upon the authentic meaning of being and associates it with “something of its own”³, making it a feature of the being of Dasein. In Heideggerian terms, “the self of everyday Dasein is the *they-self*, which we distinguish from the *authentic Self*—that is, from the Self which has been taken hold of in its own way”.⁴

An authentic existence is, to Heidegger, one’s ownmost and uttermost potentiality for being.⁵ *Being and Time* discusses the situation of authentic being in the face of death. Authenticity is also associated with resoluteness in Heidegger’s work and has to do with conscience; that is, an authentic person is the one who feels the burden of his past and present actions. Nevertheless, temporality is another feature used to define anyone authentic in *Being and Time* and as Michael Inwood suggests, authentic Dasein is not wholly engrossed by the present and by the immediate past and future;⁶ in other words, authentic person transcends time and is able to make use of time at will. Heidegger’s Dasein is sometimes authentic, sometimes not and to be authentic is to be true to one’s *own* self, to be one’s *own* person and to do one’s *own* thing. It is also an attribute of being able to make up one’s *own* mind. An authentic person is also distinguished from inauthentic ones in that he is constantly aware of the possibility of his death; he even runs ahead to his death. In addition, he is also aware of his guilt, which is another feature gaining him a particular stance. An authentic choice is likely to offend against the rules established by *them*.⁷ An authentic Dasein frees himself from following what others consider right; he never acts upon the commands of other people or upon established moral codes.

Sartre mentions the term “authenticity” in his famous *Being and Nothingness*. Authenticity, to Sartre, is the same as having a true and clear consciousness of a situation. It also involves taking the risks a situation bears for granted and an authentic person in Sartre’s understanding is supposed to feel the responsibility for what he does or does not do whatever the result might be. Freedom is the first condition of action in Sartrean existentialism, and a person can behave authentically only in so far as he chooses freedom for all. Sartre’s *Notebooks* associates authenticity with abandonment of the category of appropriation in which we seek to possess our reflected identities⁸ and in this case an authentic person is the one who favours acting instead of being and/or having. Authenticity is closely connected with courage and one’s confidence in what he believes. An inauthentic person can be likened to one with bad faith in Sartre’s terms and in most cases he is destined to lead a life as an outsider. Camus evaluates authenticity in relation with his ideas on absurdity of man. Authenticity in Camus has much to do with the relation between the absurd authentic individual and society.⁹

¹ Blackburn, Simon, **Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy**, Oxford Uni. Press, 1994, p. 30

² Flynn, Thomas R., *Authenticity*, in **Dictionary of Existentialism**, Gordon, Haim, Greenwood Publishing Group, 1999, p. 24

³ Heidegger, Martin, **Being and Time**, Harper, 1962, p. 68

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 167

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 307

⁶ Inwood, Michael, **Heidegger: A Very Short Introduction**, Oxford University Press, 2000, p. 67

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 81

⁸ Flynn, Thomas R., *Authenticity*, in **Dictionary of Existentialism**, Haim, Gordon, Greenwood Publishing Group, 1999, p. 24

⁹ Golomb, Jacob J., **In Search of Authenticity: Existentialism from Kierkegaard to Camus**, Routledge, 1995, p. 179

In a world where it is difficult to determine to what extent someone is guilty, one can easily act according to the voice of his own as Daru does in Camus's *The Guest*, in which the hero Daru feels the dilemma of giving a suspect in. Ethics has lost its significance in the world of absurdity. Camus's authentic heroes are by nature rebellious and it is with their rebel that they find their true beings. Authentic heroes wish to transcend their social and ethical predicaments and achieve authentic modes of living.¹⁰ Transcending social and ethical boundaries may be linked with the crisis in modern philosophical thought in matters of religion and theology. Accordingly, a man cannot be held responsible for his actions that used to be regarded as sinful because it is argued there is no God that will punish the sinner. To Jacob Golomb, authenticity is "an incessant movement of becoming, self-transcendence and self-creation"¹¹ and a protest against the blind mechanical acceptance of an externally imposed code of values.¹² He also suggests that "writers create authentic heroes to shed light on their pathos."¹³ An authentic person lives impulsively and thus he can never get rid of the uncertainty of any possible future. Still, he avoids making the mistake of betraying himself and his own personality.

An authentic person is a lost man, alone in the middle of the crowd. The public may be considered the "they" of Heidegger and it is necessary for the authentic person to distance himself from it since it is aberrant and devilish. Golomb claims that authenticity is the way which determines what we really are; that is, indeterminacy.¹⁴ John Banville's *The Book of Evidence* depicts an interesting example of the authentic hero. The novel tells the story, or rather the confession, of Freddie Montgomery, who is found guilty of killing a servant who sees him steal a painting from the house she works in. The book is designed as the statement of Montgomery he gives in court and has a first-person narrative point of view; therefore, it is typically authentic since most novels in which we encounter an authentic hero are narrated in the first person. Montgomery starts saying "My Lord, when you ask me to tell the court in my own words, this is what I shall say"¹⁵, implying from the beginning that he allows no authority apart from himself in matters directly interesting him, and that he has no fear whatsoever, as can be realised from the tone of his voice. Montgomery persistently asks why he is "kept locked up here like some exotic animal"¹⁶, which demonstrates clearly his own questioning about his own nature as a human being. Reality is "ever banal"¹⁷ for Freddie; a man with a monster-like image is what he seems to be and his own reality only makes him laugh. He reveals his distinguished sensitivity and different perceptive faculties in his descriptions of his present environment.

He believes the daylight to be "strange, as if something has been done to it, before it is allowed to reach us"¹⁸ and also exposes his sense of smell around. That is, even on the early pages of the novel Freddie manages to convince the readers that he is far from being an ordinary man. His employment of irony is also noteworthy; "somehow I pictured myself a sort of celebrity, kept apart from the other prisoners in a special wing, where I would receive parties of grave, important people and hold forth to them about the great issues of the day, impressing the men and charming the ladies"¹⁹ he says. "The irony", says Stephen Greenblatt, "sharp as it is, is less a sign of doubt than a principle of authentication, a mark of the narrator's honesty and independence of spirit"²⁰ and remains a true sign of authenticity. In addition, these very early pages also demonstrate Freddie's obsession with the grey colour. Freddie is far from being a familiar suspect in that he does not hesitate to criticise the conditions he is in. His view of the imprisoned men who try to start on a hobby is also ironical; these men are "not exactly men any more" and he "shall scream if I have to admire one more ship in a bottle".²¹ His wife, Daphne, whose name he barely remembers, is Freddie's first witness he wants to call. She "was not nice, she was not good. She suited"²² him. With the introduction of Daphne, the reader is invited to visit unfamiliar scenes from unfamiliar times during which they were together, which creates an image of a problematic relationship between a wife and a husband, and which, in turn, depicts a man of authentic attitudes in the personality of Freddie Montgomery, who perhaps even does not know why he is married at all and who describes their marriage in following terms:

¹⁰ Golomb, p. 3

¹¹ Golomb, p. 9

¹² Golomb, p. 11

¹³ Golomb, p. 19

¹⁴ Golomb, p. 56

¹⁵ Banville, John, *The Book of Evidence*, Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1989, p. 3

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 3

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 3

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 4

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 5

²⁰ Greenblatt, Stephen, *Marvelous Possessions*, The University of Chicago Press, 1991, p. 130

²¹ Banville, John, *The Book of Evidence*, Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1989, p. 6

²² *Ibid.*, p. 7

“We understood each other, yes, but that did not mean we knew each other, or wanted to. How would we have maintained that unselfconscious grace that was so important to us both, if we had not also maintained the essential secretness of our inner selves?”²³ He even delights in seeing people watch his wife walk with “their lizard eyes as she went past”²⁴, which is an indication that he has no respect for moral values established by the society. He believes that the jury members in the court openly envy his life on the island whose name can be Ibiza, Ischia or Mykonos. Freddie’s one of the earliest manifestations of his own authenticity as well as that of his wife makes itself appear on these early pages: “What was it in us –or rather, what was it *about* us- that impressed them? Oh, we are large, well-made, I am handsome, Daphne is beautiful, but that we cannot have been the whole of it. No, after much thought the conclusion I have come to is this, that they imagined they recognized in us a coherence and wholeness, an essential authenticity, which they lacked, and of which they felt they were not entirely worthy. We were –well, yes, we were heroes”²⁵. He likes behaving in the manner that ‘they’ do not appropriate by despising ‘them’; however, although he is well aware of his own situation, he sees himself “ennobled”²⁶ in *their* eyes with the whole irony of his state.

Lack of morality is also visible in that Freddie has “always derived satisfaction from the little wickedness of human beings”²⁷ although he can’t help questioning the way he is “living like this”²⁸. “I wish to claim full responsibility” he says and does so only because of the fact that “after all, they are the only things I can call my own”²⁹. Temporality and indifference to time are two main characteristics an authentic hero has. Freddie does not follow a linear line of narration while telling his confessional story; he easily changes the time and place of what has happened to him and prefers to give accounts of his disjointed memories. Moreover, he has a life of coincidences. Freddie lives accidentally and feels obliged to live in accordance with what the moment brings to him although he may not be pleased with it for he knows that “this was the real world, the world of fear and pain and retribution, a serious place”³⁰. Life is not only a struggle for him, but something that has to be experienced in all its terrible smells and sweat. Man has the right to choose as Freddie himself well knows; however, he does not believe that others have the right to tell him that he chose the “wrong path”³¹ only because of the fact that they feel they “must have meaning in everything”³². Moments have no meaning whatsoever for Freddie.

The Book of Evidence also provides information about his familial background. Freddie’s image of parents is different from that of other people; he defines his father as “a coward” behind the “bluster”³³ and likens his laughter to that of a horse. Freddie openly makes fun of his father and does so in full awareness of it. He even wants to kill him so that he “might marry his mother”, which is reminiscent of the famous Oedipus complex. Although we may never feel sure that Freddie really wants to marry his mother, the point here is that he can think about such a thing again in his sheer irony and sarcasm. Freddie’s account of his childhood and teenage years follows the same non-linear path as the reader has so far observed. Like a typical Sartrean hero, Freddie views life as scenes from hell; he cannot help seeing people around as aliens rather than familiar ones. Still, the strange draws his attention and he confesses his authenticity saying “I enjoy the inappropriate, the disreputable, I admit”³⁴. He never hesitates to humiliate his friend called Charlie French; it is doubtful whether he really enjoys his life, which seems to be an account of “gradual accumulation of all the things I had not done”³⁵ and in which he lives like an exile, or, in Raymond Williams’ terms, a self-exile; he prefers to do so. He “was living like that because he was living like that, there is no other answer”³⁶. His definition of his mother, Dorothy, as “so much, and at the same time, nothing”³⁷ is itself a proof of an essentially problematic relationship between a mother and her son. Freddie does not believe that his mother has done some favour to him and his memories relating her are sore ones.

²³ Ibid., p. 9

²⁴ Ibid., p. 10

²⁵ Ibid., p. 11

²⁶ Ibid., p. 11

²⁷ Ibid., p. 13

²⁸ Ibid., p. 15

²⁹ Ibid., p. 16

³⁰ Ibid., p. 22

³¹ Ibid., p. 24

³² Ibid., p. 24

³³ Ibid., p. 28

³⁴ Ibid., p. 32

³⁵ Ibid., p. 38

³⁶ Ibid., p. 38

³⁷ Ibid., p. 41

The Book of Evidence is far from being a confession of a convicted murderer; it is more a book of scenes collected together from Freddie's life. Freddie prefers to remember memories rather than people and these memories are grey reminiscent of the colour of the weather as Freddie observes it. The authentic hero of the book is well aware of what he calls "the poverty of language when it comes to naming or describing badness".³⁸ To him, "evil, wickedness, mischief, these words imply an agency, the conscious or at least active doing of wrong. They do not signify the bad in its inert, neutral, self-sustaining state. Then there are the adjectives: dreadful, heinous, execrable, vile, and so on. They are not so much descriptive as judgmental. They carry a weight of censure mingled with fear. Is this not a queer state of affairs? It makes me wonder. I ask myself if perhaps the thing itself —*badness*— does not exist at all, if these strangely vague and imprecise words are only a kind of ruse, a kind of elaborate cover for the fact that nothing is there".³⁹

While narrating his story, Freddie continually takes an ironic stance; what is going on in the court is essentially nonsensical for him because he believes what he narrates to be in fact a story of coincidences. That is why he even accuses his advocate, who claims to be a friend of Freddie's although Freddie himself does not believe it, of being obsessed with details and openly humiliates him who has had "a life spent poking in the crevices of other people's nasty little tragedies"⁴⁰. When he starts to tell about the picture, rather a portrait of a woman, he stole and because of which he killed the servant girl, he re-appears in all his authenticity: to him, the jury members just *seem* to know everything about the event Freddie is obliged to mention. "Even knowing all this you still know nothing, next to nothing" he says, "You do not know the fortitude and pathos of her presence. You have not come upon her suddenly in a golden room on a summer eve, as I have. You have not held her in your arms, you have not seen her asprawl in a ditch. You have not —ah no!— you have not killed for her".⁴¹ In a world where "a man with a decent accent can do almost anything"⁴², it is debatable what the jury in particular and the whole notion of justice in general work for.

Freddie's focus on the personal aspect of experience is reminiscent of existentialists' views relating man's actions and the characters of the novel are those whom we are invited to assess in relation with Freddie's memories, often sorrowful, with them. Freddie adds to these the story of the painting he stole; he considers inanimate objects alive and is continually suspicious of being watched by not only people but things around like trees. When he looks at the painting, he "sensed another presence watching me" for "those eyes were staring into mine"⁴³. However, his narrative of the murder he commits —the killing of the maid— is peculiar enough; he kills the maid with a hammer in his car and tells it in full details although he never believes in the meaning and utility of details as he frequently suggests throughout the book. "What did I feel?" Remorse, grief, a terrible —no no no, I won't lie. I can't remember feeling anything, except that sense of strangeness, of being in a place I knew but did not recognise."⁴⁴ It is easy for Freddie to have no sense of grief because an authentic person is free to choose and his choice is his *own*; "to do the worst thing, the very worst thing" is "the way to be free."⁴⁵ Freddie can never assume the role of a person who he is not.

After murder he visits Charlie French and on the way to his pub, he continues to observe people around and in a way experiences them. His vision of his body as a working factory is also remarkable. However, what is more remarkable is his continual manifestation of his authenticity even after the murder. He does not seem to be disturbed by what others might think about his action. "Even still, when I say *I did it*, I am not sure I know what I mean. Oh, do not mistake me. I have no wish to vacillate, to hum and haw and kick dead leaves over the evidence. I killed her, I admit it freely. And I know that if I were back there today I would do it again, not because I would want to, but because I would have no choice. ..Nor can I say I did not mean to kill her."⁴⁶ He simply cannot understand why people should expect him to behave regretfully; he cannot play the role of the seemingly-remorseful murderer and he cannot pretend to do so because he is well aware of the fact that the deed is done. He wishes to get rid of the mask he has worn in some cases; to be authentic necessitates this. He deliberately distances himself from the rest of the people and does not behave artificially only in order to be himself finally and be real. He has no other alternative but accept the punishment he is given because he has made his own authentic choice.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 54

³⁹ Ibid., p. 55

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 73

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 79

⁴² Ibid., p. 98

⁴³ Ibid., p. 110

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 119

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 125

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 150

What he does in a state of authenticity in his grey-coloured life gains him a “feeling of power...[that] sprang not from what I had done, but from the fact that I had done it and *no one knew*.”⁴⁷ In a world where he feels he has been abandoned by God, he has nothing to respect including the whole community of mankind with which he can never associate himself. His body is the centre of the world. He kills the maid because he could, “what more can I say?”⁴⁸ After he is carried to his cell, he no longer feels himself a human because he can no longer act like an authentic human being and he has no opportunity to choose. He is no longer himself because he is not free. The feeling of nausea, which becomes some inevitable feature of his being throughout his life, does not leave him in prison as well. He insists on giving no other reason for the murder of the maid but his instant wish to kill her and to have the strength to do so. The days he spends in prison provide him with the chance to meditate upon what he has done till his arrest. He has himself been convinced of the fact that he has lived authentically. “That is how I seem to have spent my life, walking by open, noisy doorways, and passing on, into the darkness”⁴⁹ he says. He is aware that he eats time like a grub, yet he must be “careful not to give in to despair, to that aboulia which has been a threat always to everything I tried to do”.⁵⁰ As can be seen, Freddie, as an authentic being, simply fears that he might lose his will to act and he knows well that he must not be defeated by that probable loss.

John Banville’s **The Book of Evidence** exemplifies an authentic hero in the personality of Freddie Montgomery. The hero of the book is typically an authentic one since he never hesitates to do what he wants and desires; he never gives up being his *own* and always disregards what other people might say about his actions and/or behaviour. It is his own understanding and vision of the world that matter; values, beliefs, customs, ways of living are acceptable only in so far as he himself activates them. Freddie finds his real personality in his authentic actions and when he cannot have an opportunity to choose he is no longer himself. The ironic stance with which he views himself and the whole world is not related to his self only; the whole of humanity deserves to be looked at ironically. The novel’s frequent use of irony and a narrative in the first person using the present tense is also illustrative of authentic mode.

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⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 173

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 198

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 217

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 219