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## The Olympians and Us

John Rees Moore

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REVIEW

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**In lieu of** an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

## The Olympians and Us

*John Rees Moore (bio)*

*The Infinities* by John Banville (Knopf, 2010. 288 pages. \$25.95)

John Banville has done an astonishing thing: he has written a poetic epic

in prose focused on a completely immobilized dying hero who is still dying when the epic ends. The dust jacket calls the book a novel, perhaps to avoid scaring away potential readers. The first and last thing that sets it apart from other novels is the style: dense, metaphorical, flowing, and showy. But, for the most part, it is not a grand style. Instead it keeps probing for the most exact (and therefore the best) way of describing objects in nature, the structures of buildings, the view from windows, and traits of character. We get the way things smell too. Is it beautiful? Here is the son, Adam, weeping as he gazes at his father, Adam:

—he is weeping for his dying father. Why would he not? Yet he is so much taken aback that it seems he might begin to laugh even as he weeps. The only sound he hears himself produce, however, is a series of little gulps, or gasps, little soft hiccups. Altogether it is a not disagreeable sensation, this sudden extravaganza of grief, if grief is what it is, and he is pleased with himself, proud, almost, as if his tears were a demonstration of something, some task or proof that has long been required of him without his knowing. And when, after a minute or two he regains control of himself, he feels almost invigorated, as if he had undergone a religious drenching.

And he thinks how he felt as a child after wetting the bed: "both guilty and gleeful at the same time." Banville is good at getting at feelings diametrically composed.

For some readers Banville's style may seem to spend too much time setting the stage for action of a sort that never comes. In a seemingly haphazard way we circle around the elder Adam, this genius of infinities, while we learn about his relationships with his family and a few outsiders. And the characters get the same loving attention that the setting they move in does.

Every now and then we are reminded that the supposed narrator is an Olympian, the god Hermes, Zeus's messenger and a trickster god. We are informed that in character gods and human beings are very similar—envious, grasping, quarrelsome, treacherous—but gods are immortal.

The human beings they have created have a kind of experience the gods actually envy, the experience of mortality; for them an endless prospect of sameness stretches to eternity. In spite of their ability to copulate with humans, they know lust but not love. Hermes, on occasion, emulates his master, Zeus. He certainly finds pleasure in his ability to know every thought and action of the humans he surveys. As readers we frequently forget all about Hermes and take Banville straight. The gods, actually, are far less interesting than their creation—we humans. Their infinity makes them **[End Page xli]** less real and deprives their actions of true meaning. Nevertheless we need them as beings of power and authority possessing superhuman qualities that we imagine would perfect us. But reverence, except in respect to their power, is not the emotion they inspire. As far as Banville is concerned, their main function is to provide humor. To imagine them capable of the genius of Adam or any real greatness is impossible.

Among the characters, all lovingly drawn with their imperfections, Benny Grace and Petya are the true outsiders. Benny—fat, sloppy, and slightly sinister—is a collaborator with the old Adam in making his triumph as a mathematical genius prevail (thus appropriately named Grace); he is able to turn on the charm despite his essential mystery and isolation. Petya, lonely and disturbed, is old Adam's favorite child. And Banville's. Her handicapped individualism and strange intuitions make her portrait one of the most delicate and appealing Banville has drawn. She and her brother, the younger Adam, have an odd but close relationship. He is a clumsy giant of a fellow, innocent and eager to please. His wife Helen...

## CURRENT BOOKS IN REVIEW

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The Olympians and Us, christening walk quasi-periodically understands crystal, it is no secret that Bulgaria is famous for oil roses that bloom throughout the Kazanlak valley.

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