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# Precarious subjectivity in the works of John Banville : a lacanian reading

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École Doctorale Sciences de l'Homme et de la Société

## THÈSE DE DOCTORAT

Spécialité : Langues et Littératures Anglaises et Anglo-saxonnes

Présentée par

Mehdi GHASSEMI

# Precarious Subjectivity in the Work of John Banville : A Lacanian Reading

*Thèse en vue de l'obtention du grade de docteur  
réalisée sous la direction de*

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# Introduction

## 1. John Banville's subject of narration

A defining aspect of John Banville's fiction is his narrators' preoccupation with epistemological as well as ontological concerns. These narrators strive to find a way in which they can explore and simultaneously enhance knowing and being. Gabriel Godkin in *Birchwood* grapples with the elusive nature of the "thing-in-itself" and Alexander Cleave in *Eclipse* and *Ancient Light* agonizes over his dislocated, split personal existence. These concerns turn their narratives into extended interrogations of the relation between reality, fiction, and imagination, on the one hand, and explorations of the (im)possibility of authentic subjective experience. Banville has created a fictional universe in which he stages his protagonist as a first-person male narrator who tells his story to an imagined audience. However, in his rendition, more often than not, he juxtaposes reality and fiction in such a way that it becomes difficult for the reader to distinguish between what is real and what is imaginary. The latter aspect of Banville's *oeuvre* has been examined by scholars ever since the publication of Rüdiger Imhof's *Critical Introduction* in which the critic characterizes the protagonists as being preoccupied with the way in which imagination "operates upon" reality (61). The juxtaposition of the real and the imaginary results in the narrators' "inability to tell apart fact from fiction," according to Elke D'hoker, for they "persistently [read] reality in terms of fiction or fantasy, and at the same time, [they] fully believe these fantastic interpretations to be real" (*Visions of Alterity* 185). In the absence of direct access to "reality" these narrators embark on a journey of subjectivity in search of reality and stable self through writing and reminiscence. In *Birchwood* and *Mefisto* the protagonist realizes that he is

incomplete and his narrative becomes a quest for self-completion. In addition, as D'hoker notes, the narrators' quests for the self are accompanied by the "problem of representation" which she sees as the site where "the relations between self and other, and self and self" are "negotiated" (*Visions* 11). Along with narcissistic self-centeredness, D'hoker adds, Banville's fiction offers "visions of alterity," moments during which the self is briefly exposed to a fundamental otherness that shakes the narrators' foundations (217). Brendan McNamee, in a different take, reads the narrators' unquenchable longing "for a sense of completion" from a spiritual framework and claims these novels are, in fact, "theological and mystical" and that characters are "searching for God" (*Quest for God* 2). Interesting as it is, seeing Banville as indulging in "spirituality" does not seem to be the most fruitful approach when one is dealing with narrators whose primary concern is the tension between reality and fiction accompanied by an intense suspicion towards any conception of solid truth and stable identity. Moreover, such a reading, I think, overlooks the playful and mostly ironic tone with which Banville treats spirituality and religiosity, especially in his later work. Rather than searching for God, these narrator-writers continually stumble upon the unreliability of the medium of their perception and representation which, in turn, proves to be the source of their philosophical musing on language:

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. Or perhaps the words are an attempt to make it be there? Or perhaps there is something, but the words invented it (*The Book of Evidence* 55).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> In an interview with *Libération*, Banville talked once again about his—and consequently that of his protagonists'—preoccupation with the nature of language describing his daily work as a "struggle" with language: "Le langage est difficile, si résistant. Quand on relit un article, une lettre d'amour ou à son banquier, on se fait souvent la réflexion que cela ressemble à ce qu'on voulait dire, mais pas

The Banvillian narrator is fully aware that there is no way out of language, that he is forever imprisoned by it, that language, as a system in its own right, imposes its rules, out of which there is no meaning. This linguistic preoccupation, Laura Izarra writes, has endowed Banville's fiction with a critical tone, rendering him a "critical writer" whose "literary discourse lies on the border between two genres, the novel and critical theory" (*Holographic Labyrinths* 159).<sup>2</sup> Alongside their linguistic preoccupations, the narratives are marked by metafictional self-reflexivity. They function as textual spaces in which, according to Françoise Canon-Roger, fact and fiction interplay (*Les œuvres de John Banville* 1). The latter, in turn, gives way to doubt, one that renders the narration unreliable. Canon-Roger reads Banville as a critical heir to the likes of James Joyce and Alain Robbe-Grillet in that he creates a "narrative and figurative" universe in which he "maintains the anti-ideological power of the novel" (*Les œuvres* 311).<sup>3</sup> However, far from indulging a "postmodern" sense of liberation following the deconstruction of truth and stable self, Banville's protagonists seem to demonstrate a feeling of disappointment, if not disillusionment. To put it in Joseph McMinn's words, although "Banville can deconstruct with the best of them," "the exposure of constructed myths about identity and nature" is never "a simple cause for celebration" (*Supreme Fictions* 7). Rather, as John Kenny has it, it is a "modernist nostalgia misplaced in a postmodernist chaotic world" (*John Banville* 15).

All the same, Banville's "postmodernism" seems to hold a significant place in the criticism of his work. For instance, in her *Les Romans irlandais contemporains*, Sylvie

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exactement. Qui parle alors ? Le langage lui-même. J'ai souvent pensé que nous ne parlions pas mais que nous étions parlés. La lutte avec le langage est mon travail quotidien." ("La Fiction Obéit à un Processus de Rêve" 2011).

<sup>2</sup> Like Izarra, Ingo Berensmeyer considers the linguistic crisis as one "of contemporary literature" where there is "no guarantee for a 'true' perception of reality" (*Fictions of Order* 13).

<sup>3</sup> Banville "fait le pari de la jouissance par la fiction figurative et narrative en maintenant vivace le pouvoir anti-idéologique du roman" (*Les œuvres* 311). My translation.



Mikowski describes the latter's work as a prime example of postmodern literature (239). Neil Murphy, in his turn, reads Banville's novels (as well as Aidan Higgins's) as a response to Modernism, a response that entails "a variety of Postmodern stylistic devices" such as extensive use of "parody" and "self-reflexivity" (*Postmodern Doubt* 105). Nevertheless, the label "postmodernism," although anchoring a certain understanding of Banville's work, has been, according to John Kenny, "applied to Banville more by way of repeated assertion than by convincing argument" (*Banville* 13).<sup>4</sup> Banville's ironic, self-reflexive, and self-questioning narratives fit Patricia Waugh's characterization of metafiction as an example of postmodern literature (*Metafiction* 2). For McMinn, Banville's fiction is postmodern insofar as it is "driven by a deep attraction towards the legacy of romanticism, mostly in how the imaginative faculty acts as a quasi-divine agent of knowledge and perception in a fallen world, one which is marked by a sense of loss and exile" (*Supreme* 1-2). Derek Hand, in his turn, understands Banville's work to be in a "radical inbetweenness" and as an "amalgamation" of Joycean modernism and Beckettian postmodernism. Banville, argues Hand, depicts narrators "desiring a word or words that can grasp the real," while showing them to be

despairing that such a language is possible; his many characters' relentless search for true authentic self [...] always ends with the pessimistic conclusion that aching hollowness is perhaps all there is (*Exploring Fictions* 18).

Thus, any clear-cut categorization of Banville's work as either modernist or postmodernist is not readily attainable. Banville's fiction, while borrowing from both traditions, has formed an aesthetic apparatus which stands beyond them. In this sense, McMinn states that Banville's

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<sup>4</sup> Moreover, Banville himself mockingly rejects "postmodernists" while showing interest in the poststructuralists. This is perhaps an indication of the term's inadequacy—at least in its application on Banville's work— in capturing a clear picture of the intellectual preoccupations of a writer such as Banville. See Hedwig Schwall, "An Interview with John Banville."

fiction “has created its own very distinctive mythology about postmodern consciousness” which consists of a mode of exploring subjectivity that lies in his persistence to tell stories (*Supreme* 2). That is to say, following the demise of metanarratives and linguistic breakdown, Banville’s narrator demonstrates an urge to find a mode of articulation in spite of this predicament. Aware of the limits caused by the medium of perception and representation, says Laura Izarra, “all of Banville’s protagonists are driven [...] to give words to [their] thoughts, no matter how imperfect they can be.” Their aim becomes one of a “hero” striving “to search for words, symbols and fictions adequate to our predicament” (*Holographic* 175-6).

Banville’s narrators are in constant search for an aesthetic expression that can adequately match their epistemological crisis. In this quest, as Hand states, they embark on a narrative journey that entails an “increasing movement ever inward” by writing and recounting their innermost feelings and minute observations (*Exploring Fictions* viii). The fact that these observations are fundamentally interwoven with the question of art is the subject of Eoghan Smith’s extensive study, *John Banville: Art and Authenticity*. In his reading, Smith argues that Banville’s achievement lies primarily in the rehabilitation of a modernist reviviscence of “art.” Art, Smith writes, provides the narrators with a means to attain authenticity, one that inherently acknowledges “failure” as its inherent component. In Smith’s own words, “The failure to achieve authenticity, is in the end, the enabling force that allows the endurance of art” (174). “The truth” that is ultimately revealed to the narrators involves the idea that “The truth of art is its untruth, and the success of this idea can only be demonstrated through carefully constructed narrative collapse” (11). At the same time, Smith likens Banville to Beckett in that his fiction is “attuned to the intellectual opportunities of philosophy” (2). In their quest for authenticity, the narrator-intellectuals entertain “the inwardness of philosophical idealism” (1), hoping to explore “the nature of subjectivity” (3).

Subjectivity and selfhood in Banville's work have also been examined by Mark O'Connell who views "narcissism as the key to understanding" Banville, "a thread that binds Banville's *oeuvre* together" (*Narcissistic Fictions* 14-15). The narrators, says O'Connell, "are, almost without exception, narcissists of one sort or another" driven by the "impulse" to "create their narratives in order to see themselves" (2). For him, Banville's protagonists "are overwhelmingly concerned with self-display, and yet they are tormented by anxieties about exposure, about being laid bare to the scrutiny of others" (208).

Key in the narrators' narcissistic quest for authentic selfhood is arguably the tension between surface and depth. By means of this inward movement, one can argue, they attempt to reach the "depth" of their "true" identity behind the façade of false self. In other words, the inward movement involves an excavation of the essential self hidden beneath the surface. In *Eclipse*, for instance, the narrator becomes "all inwardness" (15), seeking that lost essence of his being in his most intimate perceptions. Through self-excavation, one could say, he wishes to retrieve his authenticity. Depth, in this sense, becomes the locus of the narrators' quest as opposed to surface which harbours the falsehood of the mask. Such a break with the surface, claims David Prescott-Steed, necessitates "a degree of risk, danger, peril" for "to break the surface is to enter into a bargain with our own limitations" ("Surface and Depth" 77). Thus, the narrators' heroism, to complement Izarra's claim, resides also in their "breaking the surface" of phenomenal reality and their courage to face the peril of exposing themselves to uncanny perceptions as well as hazardous misconceptions that could blind them to the reality of their beloved ones. Indeed, Freddy is tried for murder in the *Book of Evidence* and Alex fails "to see" his daughter's demise and death in *Eclipse*.

Nevertheless, while exploring inward depth is an inherent part of narrator's quest as Kenny and Hand show us, Banville does not advocate characterization based on "psychological depth." On the one hand, he models his protagonists on the life of real

historical individuals such as Isaac Newton, Copernicus, Anthony Blunt, and Paul de Man. On the other hand, to put it in Hedwig Schwall's words, he "stresses they are no psychologically elaborate characters, they are types who could have been inserted in a handbook of psychiatry" ("Keys and Codes" 1). Banville elaborates his disregard for "psychology" once again in an interview with *The Elegant Variation*:

It's what I see ... it's surface. I can't know anything about anybody else. I can only know me. Not much of that either ... I can't even write from inside. I mean, it's the surface of things that interests me. I don't like psychology. When I hear the word "psychology" in terms of a novel, I reach for my revolver ("The Long Awaited").

In another interview, Banville considers himself a follower of Kafka precisely insofar as the latter rejects psychology: "Never again psychology!" He's [Kafka] right—artists are witnesses, we present the surface" (Stuart Jeffries, "John Banville"). That is to say, the authenticity deemed to be residing in the "depth" of a person is discarded in favor of surface manifestations of the characters' actions throughout their narratives. What interests Banville is not so much the creation of original characters with singular coherent selves, but the way in which any given self—be it historical or fictional—can be recreated through the fictional surface of his novels; hence his constant staging of real historical individuals as well as borrowing plot-lines based on historical facts. His fiction, in a nutshell, is more concerned with the creation of original surfaces. "All we can know is the surface of things," claims Banville in a playful, imaginary self-interview with his literary double Benjamin Black, "and things includes people. I know all about the resistance of the phenomena" ("Benjamin Black's World"). Challenged by Benjamin Black with regard to his lack of concern for "humans," Banville says in a manner so reminiscent of his later narrators: "For a moment I am baffled, then I see: Königsberg, home of Kant, hunter of the thing-in-itself" ("Black's World").

O'Connell reads Banville's latter piece as a "Borgesian publicity stunt" that demonstrates "an overwhelming tendency toward self-regard in his work," that "Banville is less than interested in his own characters as humans" (*Narcissistic* 17-18). This self-regard, O'Connell suggests, is reflected in the fact that Banville's entire fiction can be read as "a novel of many volumes. The names of the narrators change, as do particulars of their situations, but they speak of the same fixations and anxieties and they do so in a single voice," one that is but a reflection of the author's own anxieties (14). That may be true, but Banville's short piece can also be seen as his artistic proclamation, a sort of manifesto that outlines the divided nature of his art (between the denser, artistic novels and the more relaxed prose of crime novels under the pseudonym Black), on the one hand, and his project to articulate an artistic mode that can bridge the gap between the "thing in itself" and the apparent surface of things. It is precisely in this light that his lack of interest in depicting "humans" with personal "depth" makes sense. I would even go to such an extent as to say that Banville is not interested in the traditional notion of character as such insofar as the latter connotes fictional "person." Rather than seeing Banville's entire oeuvre as "one" multi-volume novel, I argue, it is more enlightening to read each of Banville's new novels as a repetition of the previous. The same concerns reappear in each narrative under the guise of new names and settings. However, in every act of repetition a new aspect of subjectivity is revealed, a new layer of experience is added, and a fresh perspective on reality is accentuated. This is Banville's "art" at its best. It is the art of surfaces, layers, and multi-dimensional experiences in which "characters" are stretched, sundered and "reality" is dissected to its most elementary components in order to reveal the very structures that underlie its construction. In the process, the "self" is exposed, not only to others in bouts of narcissistic display as O'Connell has it, but also to lack, silence, absence, the very holes and gaps that constantly threaten subjective experience with fragmentation if not disintegration,

rendering subjectivity precarious and reality feeble. In this sense, one can reformulate the idea of artistic “failure” that Smith understands as a primary concern in Banville’s work. In repeating the same preoccupations, each new novel is an attempt to paint a more adequate picture of the epistemological as well as ontological impasses with which the Banvillian narrator grapples, searching for a vantage point from which he can “see it all,” so to speak, to create a narrative mirror that can “completely” reflect the antagonisms at the heart of the human experience. But, of course, this attempt is doomed to failure from the outset since such a point cannot exist *outside*, at a meta-linguistic level. Every act of (verbal) articulation inevitably necessitates the adoption of a point defined by language, that is, already *inside* language. Therefore, the narrators can never see it all; there is always “something” left unseen, unsaid, forever eluding their narcissistic grasp.

## **2. The Lacanian subject**

The inexistence of “metalanguage” is a core idea in Jacques Lacan’s work. According to Lacan, “there is no metalanguage that can be spoken”: “No authoritative statement has any other guarantee here than its very enunciation, since it would be pointless for a statement to seek it in another signifier, which could in no way appear outside that locus” (*Ecrits* 688). Lacan’s name for that “locus” is the (big) Other, the ultimate guarantee for any meaningful discourse. It is “the locus of the signifier” (688), the place from which the subject borrows the very words with which she intends to express her desire. It is the Symbolic order that forever eludes the subject’s grasp as a totality while over-determining her desires and enunciations. That which lies beyond the Symbolic register is the Real, Lacan’s multifaceted notion that denotes, on the one hand, the realm of brute materiality that is not integrated in the Symbolic. In Lacan’s words, it is “that which resists symbolization absolutely” (*Freud’s Papers* 66). On

the other hand, the Real is the realm of “the impossible” (*Fundamental Concepts* 167), a traumatic kernel which involves the “object of anxiety”: “the essential object which isn’t an object any longer, but this something faced with which all words cease and all categories fail, the object of anxiety *par excellence*” (*The Ego* 164). The Imaginary is the third of the Lacanian triadic model for human perception. It is the register of images, ones that regulate one’s sense of self by mediating one’s interactions with the self as well as others. Out of these Imaginary interactions comes the ego, one’s self-image. However, it is a precarious image since it is marked by a fundamental otherness. There is a Hegelian logic at work: when “I” try to affirm certainty regarding “myself,” i.e. “my” existence, “I” am obliged to ask the other for the recognition of this existence. Consequently, the other becomes the master/guarantor of “my” own self.

The subject is introduced to the Imaginary order during what Lacan calls the “mirror stage” which designates the period during which the child perceives his own reflected image for the first time. Prior to this period the child has no coherent sense of “self” and his experience of his body is, according to Lacan, “fragmented,” “an inchoate collection of desires” (*Psychoses* 39). It is as a result of the exposure to his self-image as a “whole” that the infant is able to form an ego. What is particularly intriguing here with regards to Lacan’s mirror stage is his emphasis on the way in which a human individual differs from, say, a chimpanzee when exposed to mirror reflections. According to Dylan Evans, “the former becomes fascinated with its reflection in the mirror and jubilantly assumes it as its own image, whereas the chimpanzee quickly realizes that the image is illusory and loses interest in it” (*Dictionary* 118). While the animal immediately recognizes the virtual nature of the image and ignores it, the human child adopts this virtuality as a foundation for his ego with which he is to make sense of himself and the world. According to Lacan, “*imagos*” are that which “establish a relationship between an organism and its reality—or, as they say, between the

*Innenwelt* and the *Umwelt*” (*Ecrits* 78). In psychoanalysis, imagos designate the subjective process of internalizing images which contribute to the mental experience of “interiority” on the part of the subject. In this sense, writes André Nusselder, human consciousness can be defined as “an *effect* of reflection, of our relation to images, an effect that takes place at the surface” (*Surface Effect* 46). An individual can, therefore, be said to possess consciousness only insofar as he is exposed to a surface reflection: “I hope you’ll consider consciousness to occur each time [...] there’s a surface such that it can reproduce what is called *an image*” (Lacan, *The Ego* 49). Indeed, Lacan continues, “all sort of things can behave like mirrors. All that’s needed is that the conditions be such that to one point of a reality there should correspond an effect at another point, that a bi-univocal correspondence occurs between two points in real space” (*The Ego* 49). The mirroring surface then need not be necessarily actual but can equally be virtual. In addition, in his later seminars Lacan does not consider the mirror stage merely as an initial step for the subject’s acquisition of ego, but conceives of it as the structural framework which maintains the subject’s Imaginary dimension, the dimension that holds the otherwise fragmented body together (Lacan, *La relation d’objet* 17).<sup>5</sup>

The subject is initiated into the Symbolic, the register of linguistic (i.e. differential) and cultural determination via the Name-of-the-Father. The latter does not necessarily denote the physical father but implies primarily a (Symbolic) function. In fact, it can be fulfilled by any member of the family (mother, sibling, etc.) regardless of gender. In Lacanian terms, the father and the mother are structural functions that crucially need to be distinguished from biological mothers and fathers who, psychoanalytically speaking, largely belong to the

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<sup>5</sup> Malcolm Bowie eloquently highlights the pun in the original word for the mirror stage in French: *stade du mirror*. While *stade* can be translated as stage, it also means stadium, conjuring up both temporal as well as spatial connotations. Moreover, *miroir* is the producer of both sensory images and virtual “mirages.” Therefore, Lacan, argues Bowie, fuses the “specular” with the “spectacular” indicating the theatrical dimension of the mirror stage (Bowie, *Lacan* 35-6).



Imaginary. That is to say, the Lacanian father is but a “function” that can be fulfilled by any member of the family as much as it can be fulfilled by an abstract entity such as an institution. It installs the paternal law and mediates the so far symbiotic relationship between the primary caregiver—traditionally the mother—and child. By the same token, the mother is also a function who can be fulfilled by any member of the family regardless of gender.<sup>6</sup> Prior to the introduction of the child to this signifier (the Name-of-the-Father) she perceives the mother’s desire as an enigma. It is unclear to the child why the mother appears and disappears incessantly. She cannot account for this absence because, according to Stijn Vanheule, the child imagines herself to be “the central point around which the mother’s desire is turning” (*Subject of Psychosis* 60). The child is tormented by the fundamental question “*che vuoi?*,” that is, “what do you want?” (Lacan, *La relation* 169). This enigma functions as a primary signifier for the child. However, it is a signifier without a signified. More importantly, according to Vanheule, “the primordial establishment of a representation for the mother’s desire is an absolute condition for later metaphorization” (*Subject* 59). In other words, this preliminary signifier is the building block onto which the child’s subjectivity is going to be constructed because it is in relation to this signifier that the Name-of-the-Father acquires its significance. During this Imaginary interplay, Vanheule adds, the paternal function replaces the desire for the mother, resulting in “the creation of a completely new interpretation of maternal desire” (60). Consequently, “Through the paternal signifier, the signifier of maternal desire is integrated in a normative discourse on how people should interact” (60). This is why the French *le-Nom-du-Père* does Lacan’s concept more justice than

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<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, according to Bruce Fink, “a mother can undercut her husband’s position by constantly telling her child ‘we won’t tell your father about that will we?’ or ‘your father doesn’t know what he’s talking about!’, and by disobeying all of his orders as soon as he turns his back. Thus the paternal function may never become operative in cases where a child’s father is clearly present, yet it maybe instated where a child’s father is absent from birth” (*Clinical Introduction* 82).

its English translation as the former reveals a crucial pun: “Name” and “no” are homonyms in French. The Father as both a Name and a prohibition comes to install his law and mediates the so far symbiotic relationship between the primary caregiver and the child, thereby resulting in triangulation. This mediation introduces the child to the realm of difference, lack, and absence; in a word, castration. The latter refers to the subject’s acceptance of the paternal Law as a result of which the subject ends her dyadic relationship with the primary caregiver and realizes that she is not the mother’s sole object of desire. In parallel, she accepts a (Symbolic) identity as male, female, daughter, or son. In other words, she accepts the Symbolic space given to her by the Law, a space which guarantees her existence as a subject. Subjectivity is first and foremost the (by)product of the individual’s interaction with the Other. That is to say, subjectivity is the result of the articulation of signifiers by a speaker. Every time one speaks she is forced to choose from a set of signifiers that lie in the “treasure trove of signifiers” (*Ecrits* 682). In this articulation, a signifying chain is produced which necessarily connotes a subject/speaker. In this sense, the subject is the effect of articulated language and her existence as such relies on a specific Symbolic constellation. In other words, the subject exists insofar as she is properly installed in the Symbolic order, the order of signifiers.

Nevertheless, one can never be reduced to this “existence” for the Symbolic cannot overwrite the Real completely. From the moment of castration on, the subject will always be split, divided between his Symbolic existence, on the one hand, and the Real aspect of his being. The subject is required to make a sacrifice with regards to his (Real) “substance.”<sup>7</sup> He has to give away “something” so that he can have a place in/through the Other. This is why

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<sup>7</sup> By “substance” Lacan means something very specific: “ce qu’Aristote appelle une οὐσία [ousia], une substance, c’est-à-dire quelque chose, très précisément qui ne peut être [...] ni attribué à un sujet, ni mis dans aucun sujet. C’est quelque chose qui n’est pas susceptible de ‘plus ou de moins,’ qui ne s’introduit dans aucun comparatif, dans aucun signe ‘plus petit ou plus grand,’ voire ‘plus petit ou égal’” (*Logique du Fantasme*, 31st May 1967).

his (Symbolic) existence will always be marked by a lack, a negativity, which Lacan names the phallus. That “something” is *jouissance*, the Real aspect of the split subject. Far from being an idealist, Lacan situates *jouissance* at the corporeal level.<sup>8</sup> *Jouissance* is the other “pole” of desire and “beyond” pleasure. According to Néstor Braunstein, “If desire is fundamentally lack, lack in being, *jouissance* is positivity, it is a ‘something’ lived by a body when pleasure stops being pleasure. It is a plus, a sensation that is beyond pleasure” (“Desire and *Jouissance*” 104). In his seminar *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, Lacan links *jouissance* to the “drive” (209). The latter is differentiated from desire in that while desire is linked to Symbolic lack, drive is the never-ending force that stems from the body, “an unending requirement imposed on the psyche” (Braunstein 105). It cannot be satisfied since, in Lacan’s words, “no object of any [...] need can satisfy” it (*Fundamental Concepts* 167). The drive is impossible to satisfy because its true object is in the Real (the realm of impossibility): “The drive does not aim at a visible, sensitive goal, but at the effect produced in its return, after having missed and gone around the target, after confronting the [R]eal, that is, the impossibility of full satisfaction” (Braunstein 108). As Braunstein observes, one can trace three forms of *jouissance* in Lacan’s teachings. Firstly, there is the *jouissance* of being, “the ineffable, primary *jouissance*” that has to be sacrificed as such in order for the subject to emerge (109).<sup>9</sup> It is the “mythical” order of lost plenitude from which the subject feels herself to be eternally separated, the “unnamable” from which she is forever “sundered,” the

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<sup>8</sup> “Il n’y a de *jouissance* que du corps” (*Logique*, 31st May 1967). Elsewhere, Lacan clarifies what he means by this: “What I call *jouissance*—in the sense in which the body experiences itself—is always in the nature of tension, in the nature of a forcing, of a spending, even of an exploit. Unquestionably, there is *jouissance* at the level at which pain begins to appear, and we know that it is only at this level of pain that a whole dimension of the organism, which would otherwise remain veiled, can be experienced” (Lacan, as quoted in Néstor Braunstein 103).

<sup>9</sup> This, Braunstein explains, is none other than “the unnamed and the unnamable that Freud subsumed in the term [...] primal or original repression [...] and which is the bedrock of the unconscious” (109).

“jouissance before the word” (Braunstein 112). Secondly, writes Braunstein, one can speak of “phallic jouissance,” one that is possible to attain in bits. It is the “jouissance of the signifier,” of the peaking being. It is “jouissance in the word” (112). And thirdly, there is the jouissance of the Other: “jouissance beyond the word, beyond the regulation of the Law and of the phallus which [...] is equally impossible to objectify” (Braunstein 112).<sup>10</sup>

In its three variations, what the concept of jouissance primarily accentuates for our purpose here is the idea that there is a tension between the signifier and the Real, that the word cannot name the world as a whole. There will always persist a remainder that eludes the grasp of the signifier. Lacan’s name for this remainder is the object *a*. According to Vanheule, there is a “dialectical tension” between the being of jouissance and the Other, a relation out of which the subject and the object *a* are produced (*Subject* 129). “The object *a*,” he adds, “refers to the element of the living being that cannot be inserted into the order of the Symbolic; a component of flesh and blood that remains inert in relation to the signifier” (131). In fact, the object *a* is not so much an object as it is the object-cause of desire, the object that cannot be named as such but only be replaced by temporary objects from reality. The object-cause of desire, says Vanheule, enables the subject to entertain the illusion that she has direct, unmediated access to reality, that beyond the text she is “in touch” with the world of objects (132). It blinds her to the fact that she is a barred subject, fundamentally enmeshed in (Symbolic) fictions that mask the fact that beyond the Symbolic lie a core of unarticulable emotions and meaningless matter. The object *a* enabled Lacan to problematize the crude binary opposition between reality and illusion and led him, in his later work, to

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<sup>10</sup> In the psychoanalytic literature, this is sometimes referred to the “feminine jouissance” as opposed to “masculine [phallic] jouissance.” While the latter is limited by the Law (in the Symbolic), the former is “an ineffable mystery, beyond words, outside the [S]ymbolic, the supplement to phallic jouissance of which many women speak without being able to say exactly what it consists of” (Braunstein 111).

formulate a third component to the dichotomy, namely, “semblance.” For Lacan, semblance cannot merely refer to appearance as opposed to “reality” for semblance is precisely that which constitutes reality as such. Therefore, the subject’s object choice is not between a “real” or a virtual object, but, rather, between a virtual (Symbolically constructed) object and a disruptive object of the Real. In this sense, real and virtual are understood to belong to the same category in contrast to the traumatic category of the Real. In his seminar *D’un discours qui ne serait pas du semblant*, Lacan rejects the opposition between truth and appearance. Instead, he concludes, truth and appearance are, in fact, “two sides of a Moebius strip<sup>11</sup>, which are [sic] in fact only one side” (Evans 178).

Following Lacan, Slavoj Žižek argues that the very nature of objective reality is virtual, that if one subtracts the virtual dimension, reality itself “disintegrates” (*Organs without Bodies* 3-6). By the same token, he claims that “reality implies the surplus of a fantasy space filling out the black hole of the [R]eal” (*Looking Awry* 2). What is thought to be objective reality, according to Žižek, then, is no more than a staged virtual framework through which one is able to avoid the encounter with the traumatic Real. Similar to the way in which he transforms the truth/appearance opposition into a perpetual continuity of two sides of the Moebius surface, Lacan redefines subjectivity as “extimity” (*Ethics* 171). In developing his theory of the unconscious Lacan coins this term by applying the prefix *ex* from *exterieur* to *intimité*. That “the unconscious is the discourse of the Other” means that the unconscious as the most intimate dimension of an individual originates from the Other which, by definition, resides “outside” the subject. In Jacques-Alain Miller’s words, “The most interior [...] has, in the analytic experience, a quality of exteriority” (“Extimity” 76). Consequently, the unconscious is not to be viewed as hidden behind the façade of

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<sup>11</sup> The Moebius band is made of a strip of paper, twisted, and joined at each end, resulting in a peculiar shape which appears to have two sides while in fact it has one continual surface which alternates between inside and outside.

consciousness, but it is to be located precisely at the alternating surface of the Moebius strip. This is precisely why the psychoanalyst turns his attention from “meaning” to the “surface” of speech. The analyst, Lacan emphasizes, is to take the analysand’s text “literally” (Evans 103). Therefore, the surface for Lacan cannot be seen as equivalent to what is traditionally understood as superficial. In contrast, the surface of someone’s speech is precisely what is significant. Insofar as the unconscious is extimate, it can only be explored at the surface and not at some “depth.” Moreover, as Žižek points out, the subject’s sense of interior depth is the product of “surface-effect” played out by self-consciousness (*Organs* 118). Indeed, Žižek argues, if one attempts to “reach behind” the surface, one encounters “a set of meaningless processes that are neuronal, biochemical, and so forth” thereby one loses “the very effect of the ‘depth of a person’” (*Organs* 118). Thus, one can conclude with Žižek, “the subject [...] does not belong to the depths,” but “emerges from a topological twist of the surface itself” (*Less than Nothing* 665).

One can also delineate a Lacanian notion of the surface in relation to the concept of fantasy. As it was mentioned earlier, semblances envelop ordinary objects with a virtual dimension transforming them into objects of desire. In psychoanalysis, this mediation is referred to as fantasy.<sup>12</sup> Accordingly, direct access to the object is rejected because the

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<sup>12</sup> In the vast psychoanalytic literature on the subject, *fantasy* is sometimes distinguished from *phantasy*. This distinction was first elaborated in the work of Melanie Klein and her followers, especially, Susan Isaacs. In the Kleinian school of psychoanalysis, fantasies are considered one’s conscious imagining of a situation which expresses a desire. A good example of this would be daydreaming. In contrast, phantasies are situated in the unconscious. What they express is beyond the individual’s conscious desire. However, according to André Nusselder, this distinction is somewhat problematic. One reason is that both variations have been used in the English translation of Freud and Lacan’s work to refer to the multilayered term “Phantasie” (*Surface Effect* 33). However, both Nusselder and Žižek, whose readings of the concept I rely on here, use the term “fantasy” to refer to the complex subject and refrain from including the Kleinian distinction; hence the absence of the term

subject's access to the object is always already mediated by fantasmatic representation. To put it in Žižek's words:

when we look at a thing directly, in reality, we do not see 'it'—this 'it' only appears when we look at the thing's mirror image [visual representation], as if here there were something more than in reality, as if only the mirror image can bring out that mysterious ingredient for which we search in vain in the object's reality (*Less than Nothing* 16).

As it can already be deduced, the mediating representation has the properties of a mirroring surface. Nusselder formulates fantasy as a "screen"—a projecting surface. According to Nusselder, not only does fantasy enable the subject to perceive the object through representation, but the subject himself is represented to—perceived by—the other on the surface-screen. The fantasmatic surface houses the subject's "phenomenological constructions" which enable him to access the world (*Surface* 64). This is why Nusselder argues "At the psychical level, reality takes shape at the surface" (64). In addition, fantasy does not exclusively involve images. Rather, it is the product of the way images are modified by unconscious signifiers. The result of this process, according to Nusselder, can be seen as a scenario. To put it in his own words, "We shape the object of our desire by means of signifiers that we do not consciously choose. Thus we unconsciously 'write' a scenario, screenplay or script for the personage (character, role) we are in the 'other scene'" (49). Fantasy, thus, is the subject's visual as well as textual window to the world.

According to the psychoanalytic model, then, in every act of perception there is an irreducible dimension of representation, which is enacted on the screen of fantasy. What is more, fantasy and representation are doubly linked because in every act of representation—for instance, literary—there is a fantasmatic element. However, far from the traditional view

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"phantasy" in my discussion. Instead, here, I try to explain what I mean by the term. For a further discussion on the subject see André Nusselder's *The Surface Effect* (32-33).

in psychoanalytic criticism that aims at digging beneath the surface of the text in order to uncover the characters' deep unconscious fantasies, the Lacanian view is that fantasy *shapes* the literary work. Fantasy, thus, is related to form (surface) rather than content (depth). In fact, it was Freud himself who first emphasized the importance of form in the psychoanalytic interpretation of dreams: "The form of a dream or the form in which it is dreamt is used with quite surprising frequency for representing its concealed subject matter" (*Interpretation of Dreams* 446). The unconscious desire—"the concealed subject matter"—is articulated in the form of the dream, the way the dream's content is presented in the seemingly chaotic dream story. To put it in Žižek's words, "This desire attaches itself to the dream, it intercalates itself in the interspace between the latent thought and the manifest text; it is therefore not 'more concealed, deeper' in relation to the latent thought, it is decidedly more 'on the surface'" (*Sublime Object* 6).

### **3. Aim and scope of the thesis**

The initial section and the subsequent theoretical detour primarily attempted to demonstrate that both Banville and Lacan are concerned with structure, surface, and form rather than content and depth. The fact that Banville is not so interested in plot as he is in presenting narrative artistic forms (structures) that encapsulate (phenomenal) subjective experience resonates with Lacan's emphasis on subjective structures rather than "depth" psychology. Both writers, albeit each in his own way, understand the primacy of the signifier over the signified: for Banville, it is via the self-conscious obsession with the words' surface effects and, for Lacan, it is via the emphasis on the gaps and excess at the (formal) level of speech.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> "But what need can an analyst have for an extra ear, when it sometimes seems that two are already too many, since he runs headlong into the fundamental misunderstanding brought on by the



At the same time, using Lacan's concepts of the Real, extimity, and object *a*, one can, on the one hand, re-examine such dichotomies that underlie Banville's work as reality/fiction, surface/depth, subject/object and inside/outside, and, on the other hand, illuminate the way in which Banville creates split subjects of narration and uncanny narrative universes.

This dissertation is an attempt to complement the previous readings of the self, the question of representation, and the function of art in Banville's work. It examines the way in which he constantly manipulates various narrative elements and consequently creates new experiences. Lacan's understanding of the relation between the subject and the signifier, I argue, provides an excellent set of tools to address the way in which the notion of subjectivity is dissected, enhanced, and even extended, in Banville's philosophically imbued fiction. The central thesis is that Banville creates a narrative universe in which his protagonists are in oscillation between the Lacanian triad (the Symbolic, the Imaginary and the Real) where the power of the Real (and at times the Imaginary) wins over the Symbolic, resulting in a precarious sense of self and reality. Although other thinkers (especially the ones hinted at in the narrative, most notably, de Man, Kleist, and Nietzsche) are drawn upon, the theoretical backbone relies on Lacan's theory of subjectivity as well as recent Lacanian thinkers, most notably, Slavoj Žižek, Mladen Dollar, and Stijn Vanheule. Žižek's reading of Lacan is of special interest to this study as he theorizes virtuality as a concept using Lacan's triadic model. In addition, using Žižek's definition of postmodernism as "symbolic inefficacy" allows us to shed new light on the long debate over Banville's modernism versus his postmodernism.

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relationship of understanding? I repeatedly tell my students: 'Don't try to understand!' [...] May one of your ears become as deaf as the other one must be acute. And that is the one that you should lend to listen for sounds and phonemes, words, locutions, and sentences, not forgetting pauses, scansion, cuts, periods, and parallelisms, for it is in these that the word-for-word transcription can be prepared, without which analytic intuition has no basis or object" (*Ecrits* 471).

The dissertation consists of three parts, each presented in two chapters. The first part focuses on Banville's earlier work, namely, *Birchwood*, *Mefisto*, and *The Book of Evidence*. Here, I examine how the narrators' preoccupation with finding certainty and truth results in a psychotic universe in *Mefisto* and a hysteric one in *The Book of Evidence*. For my arguments, I use Lacan's understanding of psychosis as the "foreclosure" of the paternal function and his understanding of hysteria as a problematic relationship with Symbolic identities. Focusing on the latest trilogy, *Eclipse*, *Shroud*, and *Ancient Light* the second part examines the way in which the Banvillian narrator moves from the search for certainty to a universe characterized by undecidability and intellectual uncertainty. In this part, firstly, it is argued that Banville uses the category of the uncanny to create a Gothic narrative in *Eclipse*. In the following chapter, the concept of object *a* is used to demonstrate how the subject/object distinction collapses and gives rise to the Real dimension of the subject. The third and final part argues that the narrators seek to counter the undecidability generated in their uncanny narrations via the rehabilitation of the surface, one with which they hope to restore their precarious sense of self. Both chapters in this part address Banville's engagement with Paul de Man's deconstructive theory of language and representation and argue that Banville stages de Man's ideas as well as his life-story in order to advance his own conception of representation and selfhood. Friedrich Nietzsche, I claim in both chapters, provides the narrators with a way out of the predicament posited by de Man. *Birchwood* is included in the study as it is the author's first important published novel. It will also allow us to set the frame for our study by tracing the author's earlier representation of the self and his epistemological concerns to the beginning of his oeuvre. From the scientific tetralogy, *Mefisto* is chosen because, on the one hand, it allows us to examine psychotic perceptions in Banville's work, and, on the other hand, it represents the author's last step before delving into the Art Trilogy; hence, the end of a period. From the Art Trilogy *The Book of Evidence* is chosen as it enables us to look at the

way in which hysteric jouissance regulates Freddie Montgomery's playful narrative. Although the study of the narrator's hysteric structure can be extended to *Ghosts* and *Athena*, the latter two have been excluded from this study partly because many scholars have already elaborated on this period of Banville's work extensively. The latest trilogy is closely read in its entirety. Banville's crime fiction as well as his two Kleistian adaptations (*The Broken Jug* and *God's Gift*) are not examined as they lie beyond the scope of this dissertation. The selected novels allow us to look at the evolution of Banville's epistemological quest from his earlier works to the latest, while having the benefit of remaining feasible.

## **I. Psychotic Certainty, Hysterical Play**

## Chapter One: Psychotic Perceptions<sup>14</sup> in *Mefisto*

One of the defining characteristics of John Banville's oeuvre is his consistent engagement with matters epistemological. More often than not he stages his troubled protagonists as thinkers who deliberate on the nature of their knowledge, reality, and perception. This often leads to, on the one hand, self-reflexive narratives rife with metafictional gestures and, on the other hand, a narrative universe in which the boundary between reality and imagination is blurred to the extent that, at times, the narrator loses touch with reality. While this is a characteristic of all of Banville's work, epistemological preoccupation with the precarity of reality and self is nowhere better played out than in *Mefisto*. The latter is a central novel in Banville's work as it chronologically appears after *The Revolutions Trilogy* (*Doctor Copernicus*, *Kepler*, and *The Newton Letter*) and before *Frames* (*The Book of Evidence*, *Ghosts*, and *Athena*). Whereas the first trilogy deals with scientists grappling with the validity of their scientific worldview, the second focuses on a tormented art critic striving to replace the scientific model with art as a source of knowledge. *Mefisto* comes precisely at the point of shifting from science to art, depicting a mathematician, who unlike the precedent scientists of the *Revolutions Trilogy*, barely demonstrates any doubt with regard to his scientific system and, instead, focuses his quest on finding an alternative system of representation that can bridge the epistemological gap between the subjective experience and the objective world.

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<sup>14</sup> I am indebted to Hedwig Schwall for my Lacanian reading of psychotic perceptions in *Mefisto*. More specifically, I borrow the idea of the failure of the Name-of-the-Father from her article entitled "Keys and Codes: Psychotic Perception in Banville's *Mefisto*." This chapter, in fact, builds on Schwall's text by focusing the theoretical point of view on Lacan's third seminar (*Psychoses*) and reads it, in part, against the background of *Birchwood*. In addition, I try to focus my close readings of *Mefisto* on the passages not discussed (or only hinted at) by Schwall.

The belief in the validity and certainty of one's system, as it will be developed in this chapter, is a characteristic of psychosis. Central to my reading in this chapter is Jacques Lacan's formulation of the question of psychosis in terms of the subject's specific relation to the world in general and to the Symbolic aspect of language in particular. That is to say, by problematizing psychosis at the level of the signifier, Lacan distances himself from the traditional psychiatric model that views psychosis primarily as a set of unwanted symptoms. Instead, Lacan proposes an understanding of psychosis based on the (lack of) subjective position and thus reads it in terms of existence rather than experience. In other words, psychosis for Lacan is the name for a specific relation with the signifier.<sup>15</sup> Lacan's reading of psychosis thus allows us to study the elements which Banville manipulates, so to speak, in his fictive universe that result in a precarious sense of reality and self.

It would be especially fruitful to read the subject of narration in *Mefisto* against the background of Banville's first important novel *Birchwood*. Banville said of *Mefisto* that it "makes many overt and covert allusions to *Birchwood*" and that, in writing *Mefisto*, he returned to "the realm of pure imagination out of which *Birchwood* was produced." (Banville, Qtd in Derek Hand, *John Banville* 121). Both protagonists are called Gabriel and Hand rightly calls them "literary cousins" (122). They both live in a Big House, namely, Birchwood and Ashburn. There is a predominant focus on childhood in both novels and, as Joseph McMinn notes, they depict "tortured memoirs of childhood" (*The Supreme Fictions* 92), allowing us to trace the formation of the narrators' subjectivity. In *Birchwood* and *Mefisto* the protagonists realize that they are incomplete and their narrative turns into a quest

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<sup>15</sup> This view of psychosis was not present from the beginning in Lacan's work. In fact, according to Stijn Vanheule, in the early stages of developing his idea on the subject Lacan sought the triggering of psychosis in biology as well as psychology. In the later phases of his teaching, Lacan radically changed his conception of psychosis as he located it primarily in the subject's relationship with language. For an excellent survey of the development of psychosis in Lacan's extensive teachings see Stijn Vanheule's *The Subject of Psychosis: A Lacanian Perspective*.

for self-completion through the motif of twins as two halves which, by being reunified, would recreated a whole stable self.

Read as such *Mefisto* represents an important moment in Banville's fiction. That is to say, by using similar structures in *Birchwood* and *Mefisto*, Banville allows one to follow a certain line of development between the two and to see how his idea of self and reality develops before (*Birchwood*) and after (*Mefisto*) the subjection of his narrators to a scientific detour through the *Revolutions Trilogy*. The two novels provide excellent narratives to study the way in which the protagonists' identities are constructed in relation to the paternal metaphor as well as how different forms of Symbolic constellations lead to radically different subjective experiences in Banville's fiction. The present chapter starts by tracing the moments during which the narrator's reality and sense of self start to falter due to a fundamental lack. Subsequently, after a brief discussion of Lacan's language-based theory of psychosis, the latter will be used to read Banville's Faustian narrative in *Mefisto* with a detour through *Brichwood*. At the end of the chapter, I aim at relating my reading of the two narratives to the way in which *Mefisto* arguably presents Banville's postmodern moment, that is, a moment in which the narrator's radical incredulity towards the guarantee of meaning (the Symbolic order) fills his universe with paranoia and fragmentation. For my reading I primarily rely on Lacan's third seminar entitled *Psychoses* as well as Stijn Vanheule's recent reading of the subject in his *The Subject of Psychosis: A Lacanian Perspective*.

### **1. *Mefisto* or the struggle for being**

The first part of the novel introduces the reader to the narrator's troubled relationship with his family during his childhood together with his universe which is rife with numbers and formulae. Gabriel Swan is a mathematics genius whose brilliance is recognised by his

schoolmaster Father Barker as well as his subsequent math teacher Mr. Pender. Later, he meets the enigmatic, obscene, and profane Felix who becomes his mentor. Together they live with the ageing mathematician Mr Kasperl, who is involved in some risky mining business that ends up being a catastrophe for everyone. Sophie, a deaf girl whom Swan becomes infatuated with, turns out to be Kasperl's bed mate. The first part ends with an explosion in Ashburn killing Kasperl and Sophie, leaving Gabriel heavily injured and disfigured. The second part deals with Gabriel's nightmarish recovery in hospital, his subsequent struggle with severe disfigurement, pain, and drug addiction. Felix, the only character who accompanies Gabriel from the first part into the second, resurfaces and with his help, Gabriel becomes involved with some secret underground project run by another old mathematician, Kosok. Adele, Kosok's daughter and Gabriel's second infatuation, dies as a result of an overdose caused by a drug supply provided by Gabriel in return for sexual intercourse.

*Mefisto* is a narrative about the gap between numbers and things in external reality and the narrator's strife to explore the possibility of bridging this gap. As in other works by Banville, Gabriel realizes that he is "[a] riven thing, incomplete" (130). In *Mefisto*, the narrator's uneasy relation with his self is explored through the idea of twins. Wondering about a pair of twins at school, he is fascinated by "the thought of being able to escape effortlessly, as if by magic, into another name, another self [...] and the ease to with which they could assert their separate identities, simply by walking away from each other" (17). Yet, looking at other twins does not provide him with sufficient knowledge as to how to relate to his absent sibling. This is arguably why he introduces the idea of twins in the opening lines of the novel by evoking the myth of the Gemini brothers, Castor and Polydeuces. That is to say, unable to find the way in which he can make sense of his dual existence, he attempts to find it elsewhere, namely, mythology. According to the myth, Castor was the mortal of the pair while Polydeuces was conceived as a result of Leda's



sexual encounter with Zeus, who seduced Leda in the guise of a swan. Swan is also the narrator's last name, thus linking the narrator to a mythic and divine heritage. The myth, then, serves two functions in Gabriel's fantasmatic scene: on the one hand it is an answer to the child's primordial question regarding the origin of babies and, on the other, it provides him with a narrative to make sense of his relationship with the dead sibling. Like the demigod Polydeuces who asked Zeus to enable him to share his immortality with Castor, thereby resurrecting the dead twin, Gabriel sets upon himself the task of bringing his nameless dead twin brother back to life through mathematics. The latter's significance in Gabriel's narrative is evident in the first page of the novel in which he identifies the "mathematics of gemination" in the middle of life as a process of "chance" (3). He rejects the "random" (3) nature of the reality he is thrown into and in response to the ruthlessness of chaos he develops "my equations, my symmetries, and will insist on them" (4). Regarding the intensity of the way in which he relates to his brother's absence, he says:

I had something always beside me. It was not a presence but a momentous absence. From it there was no escape. A connecting cord remained, which parturition and even death had not broken, along which by subtle tugs and thrums I sensed what was not there. No living double could have been so tenacious as this dead one. Emptiness weighed on me. It seemed to me I was not all my own, that I was being shared (17-8).

This rather lengthy passage is chosen advisedly as it contains two elements which are crucial in the narrator's subjective existence. Firstly, the dead twin has left a peculiar, unnameable, inescapable absence that links Gabriel to an emptiness. Secondly, Gabriel speaks of a sensation of "being shared." The latter is expressive of an anxiety-provoking passivity that lies at the heart of his subjectivity. In order to link the two elements, a detour through Lacan's theory of psychosis is necessary. But for now, suffice it to say that the indestructibility of the "connecting cord" links the dichotomy absence/presence, forever

binding being and non-being, weight and emptiness. Thus, the twin motif also serves as a way for the narrator to problematize the binary opposition presence/absence and introduce into their relation a different dimension. He emphasizes that his subjective duality is not so much indicative of a multiplicity (i.e. two subjects) as it is characteristic of a lack of wholeness. That is to say, at the level of subjective experience there exists a hole, so to speak, a “tenacious” absence that is part and parcel of his sense of self, rendering self-identity and self-containment forever elusive. This intense absence accompanies the narrator all along the narrative and figures consistently under different guises in his interaction with the world. For instance, the house is plagued by an “airy emptiness” (63) as it is filled with “big empty rooms” (61).

Often, absence is intermingled with silence. The overwhelming presence of the latter of course has been viewed by numerous scholars as part of Banville’s narrative aesthetics. Most recently, John Kenny has tackled the question of silence in relation to the author’s overall artistic preoccupation with language in fiction. According to Kenny, Banville’s insistence on silence in his fiction has to do with the narrators’ “reduced faith in language” since they are thrown “in a world where consciousness cannot rely on the inherited assumptions of language” (*John Banville* 30). Their “retreat to silence,” argues Kenny, is “in keeping with [George] Steiner’s ideas in *Language and Silence*” whose influence on Banville Kenny rightly emphasizes. In this sense, Banville belongs to a group of writers advocated by Steiner who aim at creating “a new musical paradigm for literature whereby the form and sound of language would strive to achieve a silent meaning superior to the plain meaning of the *content* of language” (30).<sup>16</sup> From a stylistic point of view Kenny’s reading rightly situates Banville’s overall fascination with silence as a direct product of his emphasis on literary form rather than content. In my reading, to complement that of Kenny’s, the author’s emphasis on

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<sup>16</sup> Among these writers, Kenny names T.S. Eliot, Proust, Kafka, and Beckett (Kenny 30). The latter two have been often admired by Banville in numerous interviews.

silence is related to a general tendency in Banville's fiction, namely, his aesthetics of the surface. The latter point will be elaborated in more detail in the final chapters of the present dissertation. At this point, however, I argue that the question of silence is also related to the narrative subjectivity that Banville has created in *Mefisto*. That is to say, silence, insofar as it is read in relation to the signifiers that structure the narrator's identity, plays a crucial role if it is viewed at the background of absence. While Kenny and other critics tend to read the former as a synonym for the overarching aesthetics of silence in Banville's fiction, I aim at reading the latter as part of the former. That is to say, for my reading I take absence as the single most important experience that defines the narrator's relation with reality, to which emptiness and silence are related. At this point a detour via Lacan's theory of psychosis is illuminating.

Lacan says in *Psychoses*, the child has two options with regard to the paternal signifier, namely, affirmation or foreclosure. On the one hand, affirmation<sup>17</sup> implies the child's affirmation of the existence of the Name-of-the-Father and accepts its replacement for the desire of the mother. Consequently, Lacan says, "it is with what remains that the subject constructs himself a world and, above all, that he situates himself within it, that is, that he manages to be more or less what he has admitted that he was—a man when he finds himself to be of masculine sex, or, conversely, a woman" (*Psychoses* 83). On the other hand, foreclosure implies the lack of such affirmation on the part of the child. The failure to recognize the paternal metaphor is, according to Lacan, the source of psychotic structure

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<sup>17</sup> Lacan situates his concept of foreclosure in opposition to *Bejahung*, roughly translated into English as affirmation. According to Vanheule, the latter term "refers to the so-called judgment of existence," which is "a process whereby a young child makes a decision concerning whether something exists or not." In other words, it refers to judgments that determine whether the child's perceptions "correspond to external realities or not." Drawing on Jean Hyppolite's reading of Freud, Vanheule explains that "The effect of *Bejahung* is that the primitive perception is transformed into a representation, and more broadly, that a representation-based mental life is created" (*The Subject of Psychosis* 66).

(321). In Lacan's own words, "something primordial regarding the subject's being does not enter into symbolization, and is not repressed, but rejected" (81).

## **2. The narrator's exposure to the Real**

In *Mefisto*, the paternal signifier fulfils none of its Symbolic functions: Gabriel's father provides neither the prohibition nor the protection the Symbolic order is supposed to offer. In fact, the father remains nameless throughout the novel. Not only he is a scarce language-user, he does not make distinctions, he is colourless and indistinct himself. His epithet is "dull" (8). He is a poor and unconvincing representative of the Symbolic order. Other family members that could supply the Name-of-the-Father are equally absent from Gabriel's psychic scene. Potential father figures are often portrayed in terms of their appearance and remain largely Imaginary. They are depicted as ridiculous, evil, bewildering, and physically overwhelming. The school headmaster has "big feet" that "stuck out from under his desk" (22). A "large unhappy man," Father Barker, he has a "moon face" and is nicknamed "Hound" (23). Later in senior school, his math teacher, Mr Pender, far from being depicted as a figure that can represent the Law, is described in animal imagery, transformed in Gabriel's psychic scene into a sly, surreptitious animal: Pender has "a narrow wedge-shaped head and long, curved limbs, he moved with the stealth of some tree-climbing creature" (24). Insofar as the word "stealth" is associated with secrecy as well as hidden acts or agendas it points to the narrator's specific relation with potential father (Symbolic) figures that will be developed further on with regard to the latter's paranoid perceptions.

Since it is the Symbolic order that structures one's sexual, social, and linguistic identity, the failure of its proper installation leaves the psychotic with a problematic sense of individuality. One consequence, according to Vanheule, is that he "remains an outsider" with

regards to the social order (*Psychosis* 68). In the case of Gabriel, his problematic installation in the Symbolic order is manifest via his awkward relation to his proper name: when he is asked about his name, he refers to himself as “Nobody” and is mocked by Felix<sup>18</sup> for his last (paternal) name, Swan (17). His lack of belonging to the social order is further evident in his relation with language. As a child, he invents “a private language, a rapid aquatic burbling, which made people uneasy” (9). Besides, while he is able to carry out extremely complex calculations he does not feel at ease with everyday numerical concepts such as dates and age: “I could do all sorts of mental calculations, yet the simplest things baffled me. Dates I found especially slippery. I was never sure what age I was, not knowing exactly what to subtract from what” (21).

Gabriel’s trouble in grasping simple (everyday) numbers has to do with his peculiar relation with signification. That is to say, insofar as meaning and understanding are an effect of the Symbolic order, he is unable to relate to signifiers such as dates the way others do. This is because understanding as such requires a Symbolic mechanism which Lacan calls *points de capiton*—translated by Vanheule into English as “button ties” (*The Subject of Psychosis* 36). According to Lacan, the latter refers to points in the signifying chain (the flow of signifiers as in, for instance, a sentence) wherein “signified and signifier are knotted

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<sup>18</sup> Felix is one of Banville’s most fascinating characters. As Hedwig Schwall points out, in *Mefisto*, although he is called Felix (happy), the latter’s “main feat is to make people “infelix” (Latin for unhappy), to confuse them in links of cause, effect and especially in guilt (culpa)” (“Keys and Codes”). Felix’s multifarious figurations under different appearances depending on the narrator’s “mood,” Schwall adds, “leaves the reader in uncertainty as to the status of this figure.” Moreover, he “is the incarnation [...] of the fact that S[ymbolic] and R[eal] do not touch upon each other” (“Keys and Codes”). The enigmatic, playful, red-haired figure resurfaces time and again in Banville’s fiction. His roles in the narrators’ psychic representations will be further explored in chapters three and four in relation to the narrators’ uncanny encounters with the Real.

together” (*Psychoses* 268).<sup>19</sup> This knotting has the crucial function of punctuating the “incessant sliding of the signified under the signifier” (*Ecrits* 200), resulting in the (momentary) creation of meaning. In the case of our protagonist, his relation with the signifying chain is characterized by the lack of understanding and evasiveness. Due to the absence of Symbolic quilting, he is constantly “baffled” by the “slippery” flow of signifiers wherein he fails to retrieve a punctuating point onto which he can anchor signification:

I feel a tender, retrospective concern, mixed with a trace of contempt, it’s true, for this baffled little boy who moves through my memories of those first years in watchful solitude, warily. I clung to the house. My bedroom looked down through two tiny windows into the square, it was like hiding inside a head.

The image of the boy, that is the narrator himself as a child, moving in the narrator’s memories coincides with the metaphor of the house in which the boy sees himself trapped inside someone’s head, illustrating the narrator’s retrospective narration in order to revivify his subjectivity as a child. The function of the house is not only that of a residence in which the boy grows up, but provides the necessary coordinates that can reveal the child-subject as such. He “clung” to the house because it functions as his fantasmatic montage, his imaginary construction, that enables the reconstitution of the narrator’s subjectivity in a world devoid of Symbolic efficacy. In this sense, it is indispensable as far as the subject of narration is concerned. Ultimately, the physical house, Ashburn, is a metaphor for the novel itself in which the narrator writes his own subjectivity in words. The pages of the narrative are the walls of the textual house in which the narrator can re-enact his precarious self via textual retrospection.

Yet, the protagonist’s gradual destabilization of identity continues to the extent to

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<sup>19</sup> Lacan draws on an analogy with the profession of upholstery. As Bowie points out, *point de capiton* functions similar to the way in which ‘the mattress-maker's needle has worked hard to prevent a shapeless mass of stuffing from moving too freely about’ (*Lacan* 74).

which he is faced with fragmentation. He perceives himself in “bits and scraps,” “neither this nor that, half here, half somewhere else” (130). When he sees his reflection in the mirror he feels for “a second someone else looked out at [him], dazed and crazily grinning, from behind [his] own face” (83). His sense of self deteriorates even further after the accident: faced with his disfigured image he experiences an uncanny feeling of watching “someone else, someone I knew and didn’t know [...] I frightened myself” (132). According to Lacan, the function of the ego is primordial in psychoses. In Lacan’s words, for the psychotic, “the ego in its function of relating to the external world is what breaks down” (*Psychoses* 144). This is understood as the result of the lack of identification with an ego-ideal which, again, comes as a consequence of the inscription of the Symbolic order. As Bruce Fink points out, if the ego-ideal is not properly installed, the “Imaginary continues to predominate” the subject’s psychic reality and the Symbolic is perceived in fragments and not as a Symbolic totality governing the subject’s psyche (*The Clinical Lacan* 89). Indeed, for Gabriel, these two moments of identification—the mirror image and the ego-ideal—are not present. Instead of identifying with an image, he carries the everlasting absence of a dead twin brother of whom he has neither an image nor a name to identify with. One of the crucial functions of the ego-ideal is that it guarantees one a “center of intentionality” and “its absence leaves one with a precarious sense of self, a self-image that is liable to deflate or evaporate at certain critical moments” (Fink, *Clinical* 89). Therefore, the lack of Symbolic anchoring of the self-image not only renders the self fragmented but leaves reality entirely in tatters: “Everything was sway and flow and sudden lurch. Surfaces that had seemed solid began to give way under me. I could hold nothing in my hands. All slipped through my fingers helplessly” (109).<sup>20</sup> Gabriel’s lack of subjective anchoring is reinforced by the imagery of a weightless being:

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<sup>20</sup> Lacan observes a strikingly similar idea with regard to a female psychotic’s fragmented sense of self. He paraphrases her state as: “I am already disjointed, a fragmented body, membra dissecta, delusional, and my world is fragmentary, like me” (*Psychoses* 52).

“what have I ever done but drift?” (187). During the explosion he is thrown upwards flying (120) and, towards the end of the narrative, he observes that “everything tended skywards here, as if gravity had somehow lost its hold [...] There was nothing to hold onto” (225).

In addition to a problematic relation with linguistic and sexual identity, the lack of Symbolic inscription in the Other undermines Gabriel’s sense of existence as a subject. It is arguably as a result of this lack that, as was pointed out previously, his narrative is rife with absence, emptiness, and silence. This point can be illustrated by looking at the early pages of the novel when, after winning a prize for “mental arithmetic,” Gabriel is “summoned” to a meeting with the schoolmaster (22). Significantly, his mother is also present in the meeting to whom the headmaster announces his “high hopes” for Gabriel’s future. However, in lieu of approbation, he notices his mother’s “reproachful” gaze and perceives her as a “minor conspirator” (23). It is immediately after this encounter that an air of nothingness and silence starts to dominate his perception: he sees “far trees heaved in silence,” he says “nothing,” and “when [he] came home, a terrible silence reigned in the house” (23). Interestingly, a similar meeting takes place later with his math teacher, and after the latter leaves, “a thoughtful silence descended” (27). Gabriel’s summoning, the headmaster’s aspiration, and the mother’s subjectifying gaze function as a set of signifiers that address Gabriel’s place in the Symbolic order, his existence as a subject. Yet, since he is not properly (Symbolically) wired in the Other’s discourse, he lacks the framework where questions of subjectivity can be raised. Consequently, he is unable to produce an appropriate signifier that can signify his subjectivity. In other words, the discursive triangulation—father figure, mother, child—fails to produce a discourse from which a subject can spring. Instead, faced with the question of identity, all Gabriel’s psyche can muster are silence and absence.<sup>21</sup> The questions of

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<sup>21</sup> As Lacan has it, for the psychotic, ‘at the point at which the Name-of-the-Father is summoned [...] a pure and simple hole may thus answer in the Other; due to the lack of the metaphoric effect, this hole will give rise to a corresponding hole in the place of phallic signification’ (*Ecrits* 465-6).



existence that are “normally” articulated at the level of the Symbolic, when addressed to the psychotic, do not reveal a subject but reveal the Real, “the realm of the radically non-signified” (Vanheule, *Psychosis* 70). This is why Gabriel detests the prizes he receives at school. He would “tear up my report card and scatter the pieces on the surge” (22) because every time he is awarded a prize, his Symbolic subjectivity is addressed and the gaping hole of his subjective position is brought to the fore, exposing him to non-signifiable, “inscrutable absences” (54). According to Lacan, “At the heart of psychosis there is a dead end” (*Psychoses* 194) and “the subject has come to the edge of a hole” (202). These moments of absence and silence occur for a specific reason: words disappear when the psychotic is summoned “from where there is no signifier” (202), from where “an essential signifier [...] is unable to be received” (306).

His mother too is linked to incomprehensible silence: she is “silent and enigmatic” (4) and when her motherly role is solicited, she remains “mute” (23). He “picture[s]” his “version” of his pregnant mother before giving birth to him as

disconsolately smiling, like a dark madonna in the brownish sea-light of some old painting. The burden she carries under her heart weighs on her like a weight of sadness. She had not asked for this outlandish visitation. She begins to feel a secret revulsion. Blood, torn flesh, the gaping lips of a cut before the seepage starts, such things have always appalled her. In the butcher’s shop she cannot look at the strung-up waxen flanks of meat surreptitiously dripping pink syrup on the sawdust floor. She feels like a walking bruise, fevered and tumescent. Certain smells sicken her, of cooked cabbage, coal tar, leather. Images lodge in her head, anything will do, a cracked egg, a soiled dishrag, as if her mind is desperate for things with which to torment her. She cannot sleep (4-5).

She is depicted as “madonna” in a “painting” which goes along with the admittedly fictive

nature of his description. In this sense he is well aware of the fantasmatic functioning that structures his narrative. Yet, the intensity of the sensations the mother feels while carrying the foetus speaks of an immediacy that affects the narrator's reality in the sense that they will make up much of the way he will interact with the world once he is born. This is observable through the figuration of two sets of words: "burden," "weight," and "tumescence," on the one hand, and "fevered," "sicken," and "bruise" on the other. That is to say, in the narrator's imagination, his foetal presence inside his mother is perceived as a malignant, sickening substance. She cannot wait to be relieved of this "weight of sadness" through "seepage," the latter conjuring up the metaphor of a porous material out of the holes of which liquid is slowly escaping. In other words, the mother's pregnancy is likened to an illness with him being a tumour-like, anti-life entity. In this sense, his being is marred by a fundamental negativity, a negativity that functions as the signifier that regulates the way he relates to his mother.

For Gabriel, maternal desire has not been named by the paternal metaphor and thus remains largely in oscillation between the Imaginary and the Real. He is either unable to make sense of her intensions or perceives her as overwhelmingly close, associating her with unfathomable silence as well as unbearable absence. In his fourth seminar (*La relation d'objet*) Lacan defines the Symbolic order as the realm characterized by the fundamental binary opposition between absence and presence (67–8). Insofar as absence and presence are mutually implicated, they both *exist* at the Symbolic level. Absence is integrated in the Symbolic order as one pole of the opposition (absence/presence) and its existence is necessary for the existence of presence. In this sense, Lacan says, "the nothing" (*le rien*) is an object in its own right and he qualifies it in *Ecrits* as a "partial object." The latter is an object "that has no specular image," "a substance caught in the net of shadow, and which, robbed of its shadow-swelling volume, holds out once again the tired lure of the shadow as if it were

substance” (*Ecrits* 693). It is related to the Real as lack, a presence that can only manifest itself in nothingness. But it is this nothingness which is here, present, that keeps coming back, that which is here in its pure absence. However, in the case of Gabriel, nothingness does not seem to be partial, that is, not filtered by the Symbolic. Consequently, it invades the narrator’s world with a threatening intensity.

### **3. The neurotic subject of narration in *Birchwood***

It is interesting to trace the recurrence with which *Birchwood*’s narrator encounters absence and compare it with the way in which the latter functions in *Mefisto*. In the former, although silence occasionally figures, far from the intensity with which the narrator experiences it in the latter, the word “absence” is barely mentioned a few times throughout the narrative. Although *Birchwood* bears a striking resemblance in its dealing with the missing twin, for its narrator the absent twin sister fills him with enthusiasm and sets the narrative desire, so to say, in motion in the sense that it becomes the central object that drives the narrative forward. The moment he is told about a missing sister he immediately associates her to a picture he randomly sees in the house (48). Having made the discovery he says:

This discovery filled me with excitement [...] a sister! Half of me, somewhere, stolen by the circus, or spirited away by an evil aunt, or kidnapped by a jealous cousin—and why? A part of me stolen, yes, that was a thrilling notion. I was incomplete, and would remain so until I found her. All this was real to me, and perfectly reasonable (83).

His incompleteness is sought to be as a result of his sister being “spirited away” and “stolen.” Unlike *Mefisto*’s narrator, this idea brings “excitement” and renders his quest “thrilling.” The missing sibling, again unlike *Mefisto*, is linked to an image and a name (Rose), replacing her absence with both a signifier and an image. Therefore, she is not a Real absence, but is fit

into the Symbolic and functions as an object of desire. In an attempt to ward off Gabriel, the lawful heir to Birchwood, and bring about the possibility of her son's—Michael's—winning the battle of inheritance, Aunt Martha mischievously hints to Gabriel, while pretending to be reading him a story, the existence of a girl called Rose who is supposedly Gabriel's missing sister: "*Gabriel and Rose lived in a big house by the sea. One day, when she was very young, little Rose disappeared, and Gabriel went away in search of her* [italics in the original representing Aunt Martha's voice]" (47-48). He claims that a major transformation has taken place after Martha's story which he experiences as "all so very odd" and he realizes that it "felt like some vital and strange event had taken place without my noticing" (48). Immediately after Aunt Martha planted the idea of a sister in his mind Gabriel notices "a small framed photograph of a young girl in white standing among leaves in a garden, leaning out of the tree's shade into a mist of sunlight. In one hand she held a flower. A rose. Look!" (48). She is described by Gabriel as if she has literally come to the fore, as if she had been hitherto hidden in the shade and has decided to come to light. This significant discovery takes place while Martha's "voice followed me down" the stairs (48). The flower rose in picture takes on an aura of significance bringing about a series of associations with the Rose Aunt Martha mentioned earlier. In other words, an ordinary everyday object acquires a certain status in his psychic scene. The picture functions as a screen onto which he constructs the mechanism that will support his desire.

In *How to Read Lacan*, Žižek defines the object-cause of desire as "an entity that has no substantial consistency, which in itself is "nothing but confusion," and which acquires a definite shape only when looked at from a standpoint slanted by the subject's desire and fears as such, as a mere "shadow of what is not" (69). In this sense, the slanting of standpoint provided by Martha's revelation to the narrator enables the latter to fall into the virtual net of desire, so to speak. She provides the catalyst that sets the dialectic of his desire into motion.

The signifier *rose* is elevated to special dignity, permeating the entire network of signification: “Mama murmured, leaning over me, and a primrose slipped from the bunch choking in her fist and fell into my lap” (26), the “cabinet” is “rosewood” (35), he feels “lost” in the “roseate canthus” of Rosie’s—his first infatuation’s—eyes (71). This signifier insistently figures, albeit as other parts of speech, namely as a verb: the bird “rose and turned” (21), “Granny Godkin rose and brandished her stick” (24), “there rose also a vague fear” (39), “In the morning I rose early” (64) “A sulphurous glow rose and trembled above the dunes” (125) “no smoke rose from chimneys” (147), “Michael laughed, an odd noise, rose, dropped forward on all fours, gave a little kick, and stood on his hands” (43), to cite but a few examples. The consistency with which this signifier appears in *Birchwood* is comparable to the appearance of *absence* in *Mefisto*. Yet, as we saw earlier, while the latter produces anxiety, threatening the core of the narrator’s sense of self, *rose* is linked to the narrator’s Symbolic constellation as a desiring subject in *Birchwood*. This discrepancy between the two novels is arguably traceable in relation to the way in which the two narrators are differently installed in the Symbolic order.

The narrators’ different relation with the Symbolic function of the father is evident at the level of the proper name. In *Mefisto*, the narrator’s last name, Swan, immediately links him to the mythical deity in the absence of a paternal name—the father remains nameless throughout the novel—while his first name links him to the archangel—he literally flies after the explosion at Ashburn. In contrast, describing his relation with his paternal function, *Birchwood*’s narrator experiences the imposition of the Law by being forced to acknowledge his status as heir to the fatherly name passed down to him hierarchically from his grandfather: “I was made to sit with him, I suppose on the principle that an old man should want the youngest carrier of his name and seed near him at the end” (55). Gabriel is addressed as the “carrier” of his grandfather’s “name” whereas regarding his relationship

with his mother during his childhood he says that she treated him “as an extension of herself” portraying a whole to whom he belonged in a symbiotic relationship (46). In other words, the oedipal triangulation is, in effect, enacted between the father as a name, the mother as a dimension of the Real, and the emerging of the subject as the carrier of Symbolic name. Describing the arrival of his paternal family at the house, the narrator depicts the latter as a scene onto which his oedipal drama is enacted: “for generations the Lawlesses [his maternal family] were the masters of Birchwood and then my great-great-grandfather and namesake, Gabriel Godkin arrived [...] One day suddenly he was here, and nothing was the same again” (15).

In significant contrast to the father in *Mefisto* who is, for the most part, only alluded to in passing, in *Birchwood* the father not only receives a lot of characterization, but also gets numerous direct quotes, rendering his paternal voice in the narrator’s psyche all the more present. More importantly, he is depicted as a strong and overwhelming figure both physically and Symbolically. He walks with a “long stride” that “carried him far ahead of us” (33) and one his “favourite words,” remembers Gabriel, is “grip” (91). He demands that his son demonstrate strength: “*Keep a grip, boy, just keep a grip and you’ll be all right. One did not need to be strong, only strong enough to keep one’s weakness hidden, that was what he meant, I suppose [italics in the original representing the paternal voice]*” (91). The narrator depicts a significant scene in which his father exercises paternal authority:

On the feast of Saint Gabriel the Archangel my father laid an unsteady hand on my shoulder and steered me into the library for a little chat, as he called it. He bade me sit on the upright chair in front of his desk while with ponderous solemnity he locked the door and pocketed the key. Then he sat down opposite me with his fists clenched before him, grimaced over a stifled sour bench, and gave me briefly one of his awful icy grins (89-90).

The religious connotation evoked by the occasion the father chooses for the event adds yet a further level of lawfulness to his paternal act, almost transforming the entire scene into an initiation rite. What is more, although he insists that Gabriel should have a strong grip, his own hand is “unsteady,” as if he is losing his own strong paternal grip. His “fists” albeit “clenched,” do not hold any thing. That is to say, he is the father who is handing over the signifier of manhood—here, *grip*—to the son in a quasi-religious ritual. He is the physically fading father of whose fatherhood the narrator retains the Symbolic “ponderous solemnity” and the “icy grin.” The fact that the narrator emphasizes how the father locks the room in which the scene takes place is equally significant. The key here represents the Symbolic power, the authority under the auspices of which the father can exercise his paternal role. The fact that the father has the key means he is the one who decides who can go to that significant room and who cannot. It is his (Symbolic) sceptre, his insignia, that which symbolizes his (Symbolic) power in the narrator’s imagination. Furthermore, at the time of narrating his present account the narrator thinks of his father to be “grinning in his grave at the notion of his paltry son” (15). He is the incarnation of the paternal superego which incessantly bombards the neurotic subject with demanding imperatives and, at the same time, mocking his failures: “learn what life is about, the hard way [...] take it from me [...] you have to learn that lesson [...] because if you don’t [...] you’ll make a bullocks of it” (92). Similarly, his grandfather is a “wicked laughter” persisting even after death (78).

In his first seminar (*Freud’s Papers on Technique*) Lacan locates the superego in the Symbolic order in that it is related to both language and the Law (hence, the Father). However, according to Lacan, the superego has a “senseless, blind character, of pure imperativeness and simple tyranny” (102). In this sense, “the superego is,” simultaneously and paradoxically, “the law and its destruction” (102). Gabriel later finds out that he was born out of an incestuous relation between his father and aunt Martha. Thus, the father, while

being the authoritarian agent of Law who prohibits incest, is himself the figure of incestuous obscenity. As a neurotic subject, it is little surprise that Gabriel expresses an ambivalent feeling of guilt and enjoyment at the sight of his paternal grandmother's dead body.

Granny Godkin's two feet, all that was left of her, in their scorched button boots [...] I have no wish to make unseemly disclosures about myself, and I can never think of that ghastly day without that suspecting that somewhere inside me some cruel little brute, a manikin in my mirror, is bent double with laughter. Granny! Forgive me (77).

The "little brute" inside Gabriel is perversely enjoying—"bent double with laughter"—the horrible scene while making Gabriel feeling guilty—"Forgive me"—for that feeling. The oscillation between enjoyment and guilt presents us with a clear case of a neurotic subject of narration in *Birchwood*. Despite fearing saying too much, Gabriel contradicts himself and utters precisely the part where he had tried to conceal, that is, the secretly experienced feeling of satisfaction at his grandmother's death. These self-contradictory remarks together with the over-emphasis on details are indicative of a neurotic continuously solicited to enjoy by the same agency that represents higher, more noble, values.

By the end of the novel the reader finds out that Rose, the twin sister, was but a fantasy borne of his unwillingness to acknowledge the true traumatic incestuous nature of his family. His mother became mad and "died caged" after she failed to cope with the fact that she was barren and Gabriel and Michael—whom he had previously been led to believe to be his cousin—are twin incestuous brothers (168). The narrator realizes that the object-cause of his desire is but a fiction and he is, therefore, disillusioned. For him "the exotic once experienced becomes commonplace" (125). That is why he grows indifferent to Rosie to whom, in the first half of his narrative, he was utterly devoted. She now disgusts him to the point that he refers to her as "Rosie the bitch" (96). The object of desire constantly shifts and thus creates a chain of desires which rotates around the Real. The shifting of the object of desire is ascribed,



by Lacan, to the fact that, like the divided subject, the Other is also lacking. The object-cause of desire is nothing but the meeting of the two lacks. There always remains a dimension that cannot be signified. In the case of *Birchwood*, it is the incestuous bond between Joseph and Martha that cannot enter the Symbolic equilibrium of the house, and thus, disrupts it. The result is that reality, insofar as it is Symbolic, is always lacking and incomplete, just like the narrator. Its demise is portrayed by both the gradual degradation of the house itself accompanied by the consecutive deaths of the accomplices who are severely punished for allowing the act of incest to happen. Granny Godkin explodes, Aunt Martha burns up, the mother dies caged probably in an asylum, and finally, when Gabriel returns home he finds his father's lonely corpse.

Indeed, the narrator knew from the beginning that there was no missing sister. Nevertheless the virtual object of desire fulfilled its function: it made Gabriel undertake a journey in search of the fictitious missing sister, a journey which he describes as a "waking necessary fantasy." It is necessary in that it provides him with "a solid reason to be here," without which his "world threatened to collapse" (138). Gabriel makes the bitter discovery that the signifier is fundamentally barred from the signified. The illusive signified is, in fact, what he constantly loses his grip on. In the closing lines of the novel he admits that the aim of his writing was to "contain and order all my losses" (174). Yet, he realizes: "There is no form, no order, only echoes and coincidences, sleight of hand, dark laughter. I accept it" (174). His failure is that of the linguistic system. Insofar as he is a subject of language, he is eternally barred from the object. However, the seemingly gloomy acknowledgement is accompanied by the discovery that in lieu of *grip*

he is to welcome "sleight of hand," that is, magic, which is ultimately the magic of fiction. In the creative act of writing he attains the fictional nature of the Symbolic grip. It provides an alternative to the preoccupation of finding a means of attaining the thing in itself,

enabling him, instead, to expose the fictional nature of the grip itself.

*Mefisto's* universe lacks such signifiers as “loss”, “grip”, and “grin” that are the prominent signifiers that regulate the narrative in *Birchwood*. In other words, *Mefisto* lacks the lack that governs *Birchwood*. Instead, unsignifiable absence and emptiness reign in the latter's world, a world devoid of Symbolic efficacy. While *Birchwood's* narrator is haunted by the paternal grin, *Mefisto's* very identity is precarious under the constant threat of the grin and grip of the Real. *Grip* is predictably almost absent from *Mefisto*. *Grin*, however, appears often in relation to the manipulating and clownish figure Felix whose ontological status in the narrative remains ambiguous: we are not entirely sure that he is not but an imaginary alter ego of Gabriel's. He first meets him after hearing voices one day (34), appearing, almost out of nowhere, “watching me while I was watching the others” (35). In a scene where Felix is convincing Gabriel that “there is order in everything,” Felix invites Gabriel to see the “garden” beneath the “wilderness” (160-1). What captures Gabriel's attention is the fact that “he looked at me sidelong, smiling” meanwhile:

We walked along a weed-grown path, and came upon a dark pool overhung by a stunted, bare tree. Dim forms in the depths of the water. We stopped, and leaned to look, and slowly the fish floated up, like something in a dream, lifting weak, hopeful mouths, their pallid fins feebly beating the moss-brown water. Felix's face grinned up at me, with a fish-mouth for an eye (161).

Felix's grin seemingly appears mysteriously in the pool. What seems at first as “dim forms” surface and suddenly freeze at the surface, as if confirming Felix's previous pronouncement that behind the apparent chaos, there is an order. Although “the fish sank again slowly, into the deeps” (161), Gabriel's epistemological discovery of chaos and order is linked to Felix's grin that can separate from the latter's face and figure independently on other objects, namely the surface of the pool. In other words, the grin functions as the catalyst for Gabriel's

imaginary realization, and an affirmation of the validity of his search. This is, of course, unlike the father's grin in *Birchwood* that primarily mocks the narrator. Moreover, this scene can be seen in direct parallel to the one in *Birchwood* where the narrator's father invites the former for a talk during which, as we saw earlier, he shares his paternal advice about the grip (89-90). In *Mefisto*, the above cited passage takes place following a similar pattern in which the narrator says that something important is going to be said by Felix: "There was something he wanted to say to me, it was time we had a talk" (160). In contrast to the way in which the scene is depicted in *Birchwood*, in *Mefisto* the improbable sequence of events that lead to the quasi-epiphanic experience as well as the multiple intense images that start forming on the surface of the water render the entire scene dream-like, if not hallucinatory. *Mefisto's* narrator is not quite sure how "[a] door opened above us somewhere" when Felix "took my arm and drew me hastily behind him down a gloomy passageway beside the stairs" (160) and, while he is watching the pool, "[t]he bronze reflection of a cloud sailed on to the surface of the water, the arabian moon was there too, a horned silver, glimmering" (161). The reflected image of the clouds and the moon glimmers to Gabriel, as if calling his attention to how privileged he is. The surface of the pool functions as a door provided by Felix, a door through which the narrator can enter an ordered world, a world in which everything is connected. Unlike the door opened by the father in *Birchwood*, a door that leads the narrator to Symbolic initiation, Felix's door leads *Mefisto's* narrator to psychotic episteme, to an order behind the chaos, a world available for his glimpse alone.

In her reading of the question of representation in Banville's fiction, Elke D'hoker traces one important characteristic of the author's aesthetic apparatus to deal with epistemology. After briefly outlining the main functions of epiphany in religion and Modernist fiction, most notably in the work of Joyce, D'hoker argues: "The Modernist epiphany is the product of the creative imagination of the artist which the reader is invited to

recognize” (*Visions of Alterity* 53). Convincingly, she links the figuration of epiphanies in fiction to the question of representation in that both, “after all,” try to “make sense of the world” by mediating “mind and matter” (54). “In the case of *Doctor Copernicus* and *Kepler*,” writes D’hoker, “these ephiphanic discoveries reveal the true laws of the universe,” while “in *Birchwood* and *Mefisto* they provide insight into the true nature of life itself” (55). She concludes her argument by the observation that “[a]s in the religious epiphany, Banville’s protagonists are all presented as passive recipients of this transcendental truth” (D’hoker 56). Although her reading fits perfectly the narrator’s epiphanic experience in *Birchwood*, I argue that in *Mefisto*, the experience is accompanied by a characteristic that is lacking in, say, *Birchwood*, namely, the seemingly autonomous grin whose origin is most often Felix. The seemingly epiphanic experiences facilitated by Felix qualifies as what Lacan would have called an “autonomous” signifier (*Ecrits* 450). The latter is, according to Lacan, composed of a signifier that is assigned “a special emphasis, a density that sometimes manifest itself in the very form of the signifier” (*Psychoses* 32) Although Lacan originally referred to them as signifiers, as Vanheule notes, it is more accurate to consider them as “autonyms,” in that they “do not refer to existing signifiers and ideas, but open up a new, perplexing field of signification that might initially provoke anxiety” (*The Subject of Psychosis* 108-9). In this sense, they are distinguished from metaphors in the psychoanalytic sense of the term: whereas a metaphor, according to Lacan, “introduces us to a world other than our own and also makes it our own, making present a being, a certain fundamental relationship” (*Psychoses* 78), an autonym “doesn’t add a subtle meaning to discourse, but destabilizes it” (110).

Meeting Felix for the first time, Gabriel introduces himself by saying his last name, Swan. The scene is followed by Sophie’s smile and Felix’s grin while the latter is calling Gabriel “bird-boy” (37). Immediately following Felix’s remark:

I hurried down the tree-lined avenue, prey to a kind of brimming agitation. I could still see vividly Mr Kasperl's seagull eye, Felix's white, hairless wrists, the girl's sudden smile. Wind roared through the tops of the trees, like something plunging past on its way to wreak havoc elsewhere. I came to the main road, and did not look back. When I got home the house seemed altered, as if some small, familiar thing had been quietly removed (37).

By calling him "bird-boy" Felix introduces the possibility in Gabriel's universe that he is both a boy and a girl, rendering his sexual identity ambiguous. While the signifier for one's sexuation is "normally" provided by the Symbolic order, Gabriel's feeble Symbolic structure is supplemented by the intrusion of the Imaginary and the Real, destabilizing his sexual identity. In this sense, the apparition of Felix's grin functions as an autonym that replaces the signifier of his sexuality. The result is that Gabriel's world suddenly becomes shaky. Kasper's threatening eye, Felix's wrists in his pocket while grinning, as well as Sophie's "sudden smile" congeal into a destabilizing image, exposing him to the intense Real and reconfiguring the coordinates of his world. That "familiar thing," that suddenly is lacking, is ultimately his sense of self that has hitherto been glued up by feeble Imaginary structures linked to the house. The sudden apparition of the autonym functions like the roaring wind, rendering the structure bare and fragile. The apparition of the word seagull in relation to Kasper's eyes in particular adds a further destabilizing effect if one considers the other contexts in which the bird appears in *Mefisto*. Seagulls in the novel are generally a source of anguish for Gabriel. For instance, he perceives how "enormous seagulls settled in flocks" while screaming "furiously" (33); "an enormous seagull swooped down out of the mist on thrashing wings" (114); "A huge seagull alights on the road, fixing me warily with one round

eye” (141).<sup>22</sup> In all three instances, it is primarily the bird’s massive size that capture’s Gabriel’s attention, that is, threatening to descend upon him, engulf him. Insofar as mass and size are not relativized through the Symbolic, they return in the Real, become impregnated with intent, as the “huge” seagull perceived to be throwing malignant looks. Remarkably, the seagull, this source of anxiety, is altogether absent in *Birchwood*.

#### **4. From epistemological quest to paranoid perceptions: from signifiers to signs**

Contrary to the problematic way in which Gabriel relates to ordinary numbers, he feels “at ease” with “pure numbers”: “if a sum had solid things in it I balked, like a hamfisted juggler, bobbing and ducking frantically as half crowns and cabbages, dominos and sixpences, whizzed out of control around my head” (21). Gabriel’s uneasy relation with ordinary numbers has to do with the fact that they represent solidity. That is to say, they conjure up a sort of presence he fundamentally lacks as we saw earlier. The encounter with concrete presence throws him off balance insofar as it highlights his lack of positive (Symbolic) existence. On the other hand, insofar as they function at a purely formal level, pure numbers and complex “mental calculations” do not necessarily require *understanding* for their functioning.<sup>23</sup> Rather, what is vital for carrying out such abstract calculations is mathematical *knowledge*. In this sense, pure numbers offer a convenient, formal, substitute realm in which

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<sup>22</sup> This particular bird continues to surface in Banville’s later novels. In chapter three we will return to the figuration of the seagull in Alex Cleaves’s gothic universe in which the bird’s screeching cries imbue the narrator’s perceptions with anxiety.

<sup>23</sup> They function perfectly at a purely formal level yet do not necessarily always make sense in reality. Think of imaginary numbers such as the square root of minus one or the formulae constantly used in quantum mechanics and string theory.

Gabriel can pursue his quest despite his epistemological predicament at the Linguistic-Symbolic level (which is governed by meaning and understanding). In other words, his lack of access to the signifier leads him to pursue his epistemological quest at the level of the pure sign. This is why he is more at home when it comes to knowledge: “about mathematics I knew everything, but understood nothing” (233). Similarly, he claims “the more [he] knew, the less [he] seemed to understand” (187). However, Gabriel’s over-emphasis on his ability for mental abstraction increasingly isolates his psychic reality in an Imaginary shell. According to Lacan, for the psychotic, the function of the Imaginary becomes, not to balance one’s sense of self as a stable ego, but to patch the hole created by the lack of the Name-of-the-Father. It aims at the “reconstruction” of Symbolic reality by filling the void created by this lack. But, at the same time, it starts to construct a separate “field of signification” (*Psychoses* 121): “the subject moves into another mode of mediation [...] and substitutes for symbolic mediation a profusion, an imaginary proliferation, into which the central signal of a possible mediation is introduced in a deformed and profoundly asymbolic fashion” (87). It is this Imaginary proliferation which is sometimes called psychotic delusion, paranoia, etc. The paranoid delusion, in the Freudo-Lacanian sense, is understood as a “defence” against the return of what has been previously rejected, namely the Name-of-the-Father.<sup>24</sup> Therefore, paranoia is not an illness but a protection against the invasion of the Name-of-the-Father which, for the psychotic, returns menacingly from the Real. Thus paranoia, as Aline Fliieger remarks, becomes a “mode of perception and thought” (“Postmodern Perspective” 91). The

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<sup>24</sup> More precisely, projection, says Lacan, is “the mechanism that makes what has got caught up in the *Verwerfung*—that is, what has been placed outside the general symbolization structuring the subject—return from without” (*Psychoses* 47) Freud understood the fundamental difference between repression and foreclosure long before Lacan. Freud reformulated his understanding of psychosis and offered a new model: “It was incorrect to say that the perception which was suppressed internally is projected outwards; the truth is, as we now see, that what was abolished internally returns from without” (Freud, *Standard Edition, Volume 12* 71).

paranoiac supposes that behind the disorder of appearances, there is a hidden reality somewhere, a truth of which he is absolutely certain, that gives sense to whatever happens to him. This truth is usually a conspiracy prepared against him by what he conceives of as the Other of the Other, the ultimate Other that pulls the strings from beyond.

Gabriel does not believe in accidents (223). For him “everything is part of the pattern,” a secret order that he aspires to retrieve via the help of mathematics. He no longer trusts the immediate (Symbolic) reality and, instead, he is certain of an Other to this Symbolic reality, who pulls the “strings” of the apparent reality (114). It is little surprise that the first part of the novel is called “Marionettes” in which he muses upon the sight of the inanimate manipulated creatures “who are trying to escape” (114).<sup>25</sup> For him, “From the start the world has been for me an immense formula” (185) and his narrative journey becomes a quest for “the thing itself”: “I would find it, of that I had no doubt” (185). He is “convinced” that there is a second world behind the semblance of reality, “another, darker, more dangerous world intermingled invisibly with this one of sky and green leaves and faded brick” (186). According to Lacan, certainty is a fundamental characteristic of the psychotic delusion (*Psychoses* 87). The latter involves the psychotic person being the receptor of a series of signs communicated especially to him/her. In Lacan’s words: “certain elements become isolated, laden, take on a value, a particular force of inertia, become charged with a meaning” (54). Reacting to his math teacher’s departure Gabriel figures: “He had vanished, from school, from his digs, without a trace. Father Barker too was quickly removed [...] These things came to me like secret signals, indecipherable yet graphic” (30). A similar attitude is discernible when Gabriel muses on the number ten. He conceives of it, to put in Ruben Borg’s words, not as a “quantity but as a cipher” (769). As Brendan McNamee has it,

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<sup>25</sup> Interestingly, Lacan uses a similar example to describe the psychotic’s relation to language: “it is true, [the psychotic] speaks, but he speaks like those sophisticated dolls that open and close their eyes” (*Psychoses* 34).



“Gabriel’s fascination for the number clearly reflects his obsession with his dead twin” in as much as *IO* embodies “a one and a zero,” that is, “a presence and an absence.”<sup>26</sup> The absence that had hitherto caused him anguish can now be nullified by being brought into the realm of the mathematical sign system—his alternative *mode of perception*. “Why should I worry about the nature of irrational numbers,” says Gabriel, “or addle my brain any longer with the puzzle of what in reality a negative quantity could possibly be? Zero is absence” (186). To him, the discovery of the sign *IO* marks the success of his epistemological project, thanks to which, he believes, he is able to finally close his cognitive system: “Such definitions would suffice,” he contents himself (186). Yet, as a result of this enclosure, his entire reality undergoes a fundamental change: “Things shook and shimmered minutely, in a florescent glow. Details would detach themselves from their blurred backgrounds, as if a lens had been focused on them suddenly, and press forward eagerly, with mute insistence, urging on me some large, mysterious significance” (77). The words “insistence” and “urge” illustrate his relation with the world. Ordinary objects in reality lose their objective innocence, so to say, and are, now, imbued with intention. Symbolic *signification* is replaced by Imaginary *significance*. In short, for Gabriel, “every thing has become a sign,” as Lacan said of the psychotics (*Psychoses* 9). Gabriel “felt for a second I was being shown something, it flashed at me slyly and then was gone, like a coin disappearing in a conjuror’s palm” (198). The “something” appears as an ephemeral sign and the word “slyly” as well as the metaphor of the conjuror Gabriel deploys to depict the experience imply the existence of a source that deliberately discloses this sign to him. In an apparent attempt to decipher these signs he is recruited by a mathematician called Kosok, in the second part of the novel, for a secret project in some underground place where there is a mysterious machine called “Reizner 666”

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<sup>26</sup> McNamee goes on: “Just as the absence that is Gabriel’s dead twin is a huge presence in his life, so, too, the absence represented by the figure zero is absolutely vital to the entire edifice of mathematics” (*The Quest for God in the Novels of John Banville* 212).

(170). Their job is to “sift through [...] transmissions [coming] from abroad [...] searching out intricate patterns of correspondence and repetition” (170). It is sponsored by some mysterious organization, by “offices above” (170) In effect, we later understand that their project is to find no less than “the meaning of life” (171).

Lacan points out that the psychotic’s failed attempt at finding the Other of the Other results in her perception that this Other comes to hunt her, producing the feeling of being persecuted. When he is told about the guardian angel, a celestial protector that every child has, Gabriel immediately perceives it as a threatening entity: “I stared at the picture, struck by the thought of this creature hovering always behind me, with those wings those wide sleeves, and that look, that to me expressed not solitude, but a hooded, speculative malevolence” (31). Later he interprets the barking noise of a dog as an example of how “everything might be about to gather itself together and address me” (75). His delusion of persecution continues throughout the novel as he “began to think I was being followed, as if really some flickering presence had materialized behind me” (186). This is a feeling that permeates the narrative of which Gabriel is unable to rid himself.

## **5. Postmodern subject of narration?**

Drawing on psychoanalysis as well as William Kerrigan and Joseph Smith’s idea that postmodern literature is characterized by “the embrace of the uncertainties of discourse,” (ix) Aline Fleiger identifies a series of features that characterize what she calls the “post-text” (“Postmodern Perspective” 89). According to Fleiger, the latter is “iterative,” often “driven by a compulsion to repeat,” preoccupied with “remainders, excess, fragment,” deals with the crisis of authoritative reference, and “gravitates around the comic mode” (89). While repetition and the crisis of reference (especially linguistic) is present throughout Banville’s

work from the start, the other two features adumbrated by Flieger figure arguably more explicitly in his later novels. More importantly for our reading of *Mefisto*, Flieger adds a fifth characteristic present in any text that qualifies as postmodern: “free-floating paranoia” (89). According to Flieger, the reason why postmodern texts are rife with paranoia is linked to the postmodern writer’s adoption of discursive incertitude on the one hand, and, the disbelief in what François Lyotard famously calls “metanarratives” since a “metanarrative is quite simply, the consensual scheme of things writ large, the teleological versions of history that people cherish” (89).<sup>27</sup> Following Lacan, Flieger relates the postmodern incredulity in traditional systems to the disbelief demonstrated by the paranoid psychotic “concerning the guarantability of the Symbolic order” (90). While “normal people function by making a pact with the Symbolic order, the order which guarantees that experienced reality is meaningful,” and are “caught in the intersubjective web of the Other (as guarantor of meaning),” the paranoid psychotic “refutes the accepted authoritative or consensual version of reality” (90). In *The Ticklish Subject*, Žižek similarly defines postmodernism as characterized by “the demise of the big Other” (372). For Žižek, the big Other was of course always dead, in the sense that it never materially existed. Rather, it traditionally existed as the formal Symbolic order. It has been a world in which reality is constructed around “a minimum of idealization, disavowing the brute fact of the Real in favour of another Symbolic world behind it” (372). In *Looking Awry*, Žižek argues: “The only subject [...] whose relation to the big Other of the symbolic order is characterized by a fundamental disbelief, is the psychotic, a paranoiac, for example, who sees in the symbolic network of meaning around him a plot staged by some evil persecutor” (153). In this sense, the paranoid episteme upon which the psychotic stumbles as result of refuting “the accepted authoritative or consensual

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<sup>27</sup> Examples of such “cherished” beliefs vary from ideological systems like religion to other forms of established discourses such as the Enlightenment and the belief in Progress and even Science.

version of reality” is, Flieger concludes, “postmodern knowledge” (87).<sup>28</sup>

*Mefisto's* narrator, who does not believe in accidents and is convinced that he is capable of finding the entire truth behind the surface of reality, can in this sense, be viewed as a postmodern subject of narration. While *Birchwood* presents us with a subject of desire grappling with the paternal grip and striving to articulate his own subjectivity in the discourse of the Other, *Mefisto* presents us with a subject of psychosis, in which the paternal grip is exchanged for the grimace of the Real. In *Mefisto*, the narrator's obsession with finding the thing-in-itself, his uncompromising pursuit of pure knowledge, leads him to sacrifice reality itself. His closed system develops into a psychotic shell, exposing him even further to the Real. In the meantime his narrative of paranoia becomes a meta-epistemology that interrogates its own status. Moreover, according to Flieger, postmodern protagonists are constantly “menaced from without, haunted by cryptic characters, at once ubiquitous and maddeningly elusive, sinister shadows which the hero can't quite figure, or finger” (90). The epitome of this unfathomable character is, of course, Felix whose grins haunt Gabriel throughout the novel.

There remains an ambiguity with regard to the status of Gabriel's psyche at the moment of narration. The fact that he uses the past tense indicates that he is in a different state than the one in which he was previously, that is, at the moment he was experiencing delusions and fragmentation. There is an indication of a major psychic change in that everything is narrated in retrospect via a *present* centre of intentionality. What is more, following Adele's death, Gabriel demonstrates guilt, an emotion not characteristic of a psychotic: “I wept [...] A part

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<sup>28</sup> Flieger continues: “The paranoid does not Believe, he Knows, because he is the unconscious source of the knowledge to which he bears testimony, a truth impervious to the test of the Symbolic social reality of Others” (90). Belief in the sense that she understands it here is related to a belief in the Symbolic order as the guarantee of meaning, a belief in the objective validity of reality as it appears. In contrast, knowledge is understood as the immediate cognition available first hand to the paranoid psychotic, even at the expense of reality.

of me too had died. Something had given way, the ice had shattered. [...] Grief, of course, and guilt” (233). Whereas the deaths and misfortunes of his mother and family still seemed to fit his giant plan, Adele’s death plainly does not, and so Gabriel, for a moment it seems, gives up his master plan and the idea of his narcissistic “I” elected to find its divine co-ordinates: “Something has given way, the ice had shattered. Things crowded in, the mere things themselves” (233). The next chapter will continue the question of precarious subjectivity in Banville’s fiction through the analysis of the hysteric subjective structure in *The Book of Evidence*.

## Chapter Two: Hysteric Structures in *The Book of Evidence*

In *The Book of Evidence*, Banville stages his narrator as an existentialist in turmoil, cleft between his self-aggrandizing self-perceptions and a sense of self marked by alienation. The narrator, Freddie Montgomery, begins his narrative on an island where he is staying with his wife Daphne and his son. After failing to blackmail a drug dealer he finds himself indebted to a local gangster. In an attempt to raise the debt money, he leaves his family with no sign of obvious remorse or fear for the life of his family and returns to Ireland. On his arrival at his maternal home he learns that his mother had sold off the valuable paintings he had hoped to sell to acquire the money. He then visits the Big House which bought the collection and steals a painting he was captivated by, murdering the servant who interrupts the act of theft before being eventually captured by the police.

Freddie rejoices in his “elegant pose” (5) while he bemoans the fact that “other people” possess “a density, a thereness, which I lacked” (16). What alienates him from others, says Freddie, is the fact that “[t]hey understood matters [...]. They knew what they thought about things, they had opinions” (16-7). What he lacks is, on the one hand, linked to his inability to belong to a community who shares an epistemological paradigm based on knowing and understanding. On the other hand, what separates him from them is related to his lack of opinion—a relatively stable source of intentionality from which he can articulate his authentic thoughts and desires.

In this sense, Freddie resembles his psychotic predecessor, Gabriel Swan: both have a troubled relationship with the Symbolic order. However, what distinguishes the two is that while Gabriel’s psychotic proliferation leads to the creation of an entire epistemological system characterized by delusional certainty, Freddie’s element is doubt: “I stood uneasily, with a hand to my mouth, silent, envious, uncertain” (16). He feels “unhoused” (16), that is to

say, not contained within the framework that includes other people; he is an outsider. Yet, he is an outsider with style: he sees himself as an “exiled king” (10). His alienation seems self-imposed, stemming from his megalomaniacal self-perception constantly adorned by such self-characterizing words and phrases as “interesting figure” (4) and “a sort of celebrity” (56). The combination of Freddie’s self-alienation and self-aggrandizement hint at a hysteric constellation of subjectivity in *The Book of Evidence*. In addition, from the opening pages of the novel, the reader comes across the narrator-outlaw’s problematic relationship with the law—a hallmark of the hysteric structure.

The advantage of the Lacanian understanding of hysteria lies in the fact that the latter is not regarded merely as a set of symptoms, but as a psychic configuration. In fact, in Lacan’s psychoanalysis the etiological processes of hysteria as an illness and the different symptoms associated with the hysteric “patient” are considered only as a subset of a structural subjective position. In this sense, as Cormac Gallagher points out, hysteria is primarily “a discourse aimed at creating a particular social bond, one based on a display of frustration and dissatisfaction about one’s place in the social order, whether that order be the family or a wider social grouping” (“Hysteria” 112).<sup>29</sup> Like the psychotic and the perverse structure, the neurotic structure is one of the three basic ways in which the subject relates to the signifier. Therefore, far from any attempt at vulgar nosology, the Lacanian understanding of hysteria (as a variation of the neurotic structure) allows us to explore the literary elements Banville

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<sup>29</sup> Gallagher further illustrates Lacan’s redefinition of the relationship between hysteria as “illness” and hysteria as structure: “through their illness” hysterics “express a desire to find someone who can answer [...] vital existential questions about their existence and their sexual identity” (“Hysteria” 115). Insofar as *The Book of Evidence* is dubbed as Banville’s existential novel by critics and its narrator as heir to the legacies of figures such as Camus’s Mersault and Sartre’s Roquentin, considering hysteria as a fundamentally existential problematic further justifies the present reading. Regarding Banville’s affinities with French existentialist literature see for instance Eoghan Smith’s recent reading of authenticity in Banville’s Art Trilogy (*John Banville: Authenticity* 15-20).

manipulates in this narrative in order to explore a subjective constellation. Pure narratological theory would help us to identify a kind of unreliable narrator, but a Lacanian reading of *The Book of Evidence* as a hysterical testimony of unstable identity will enable us to look more deeply into the narrator's tactics. As I trace the narrator's relation to the signifiers I hope to reveal a psychic structure in its (in)authenticity, unreliable narration, and the aestheticization of reality. These are fundamental issues at the heart of Banville's work, but we will argue that in the art trilogy they are given a hysteric twist.

This chapter starts by a relevant discussion of the hysteric structure in order to set the backdrop against which many of the central arguments are made. For this, I predominantly rely on Joël Dor's *Clinical Lacan* and Paul Verhaeghe's *Does the Woman Exist?* as both offer a lucid explication of Lacan's multifaceted concept of hysteria. Next, the different levels in which Freddie engages with the Symbolic order will be explored, namely, on the level of his Symbolic identities, his sexuality, and his relationship with speech. The final sections of the chapter deal with the preponderant role as well as the failure of the Imaginary in Freddie's hysteric universe together with his attempt to reconstruct the Symbolic order relying on his creative, aesthetic narration.

## **1. The hysteric subject**

One can distinguish between pathological hysteria and something that can be called "healthy" hysteria. Since our aim here is not to attempt a pathological study of character, I will limit the discussion to the latter. According to the Lacanian model, the hysteric structure is the name for the way in which the subject is mired in the Symbolic order. Unlike the psychotic, the hysteric does not reject castration but he does not completely accept it either. The hysteric never abandons the position of being the object of the mother's desire. His desire is thus



primordially linked with the other's desire, resulting in his "subjective alienation" (Dor 76).<sup>30</sup> In order to exist as a desiring subject, he is in constant need of identifying with others whom he *imagines* to be desiring subjects. He is eternally doomed to mistake others' desires for his own. The hysteric's predicament thus lies in his inability to single out his authentic desire in the welter of desires. The other, for the hysteric, functions "as a privileged support for identificatory processes" (Dor 76). Indeed, such identifications are doomed to fail since they cannot yield a satisfactory result. Instead, says Dor, they only fuel his "neurotic ploy" (77), leading to a vicious circle of identification and failure. For the hysteric, identification with the phallus is "an attempt to evade the question of having" since the latter foregrounds "the inevitable confrontation with lack" (Dor 81) This results in his constant urge to "identification with the ideal object of the other's desire" (Dor 80). He is deeply attracted to situations "in which this imaginary identification can be brought onstage" (Dor 81). The hysteric's element is phallic narcissism and all of his acts are directed towards staging a performance since "his primary goal is to offer himself to the other's gaze as the embodiment of the ideal object of desire [...] to appear as a brilliant object that will fascinate the other" (Dor 81).

A defining aspect of the hysteric's self-perception is his uneasy relation with the Symbolic order. This malaise stems from an ambiguous relation with castration. Lacan defines hysteria as a subjective configuration in which the subject is primordially concerned

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<sup>30</sup> The hysteric in this sense is the living testimony of Lacan's famous dictum: *le désir de l'homme est le désir de l'autre*. According to Lacan, "Man's desire is the desire of the Other" (*The Four Fundamental Concepts* 235). That is to say, our desire is inherently the desire for recognition from the Other. It is also the desire for what we suppose the Other desires, and hence, lacks. In this sense the desiring subject, according to Lacan, is a subject who is constantly questioning, always in search of that which the Other wants from us. This is why, as Žižek explains, "The hysterical subject is the subject whose very existence involves radical doubt and questioning, his entire being is sustained by the uncertainty as to what he is for the Other" ("Four Discourses" 81).

with the question of sexual position (*Psychoses* 170-5). What is crucial here is that sexuality as a Symbolic function is predetermined, always already situated. In other words, insofar as sexuality is subjected to the Symbolic law of castration, the sexes are but two aspects of subjectivity. One is *a priori* pushed to the feminine or masculine position within the dual structure (nowadays, thanks to echography, even before birth). In this sense, adopting an identity as such entails the adoption of an already sexualized identity: one becomes a subject only if s/he chooses the masculine or feminine side.<sup>31</sup> Consequently, Symbolic castration produces a rupture between one's immediate uncastrated being and the Symbolic capacity in which one speaks or exercises power. To quote Žižek, “[b]ecause of this gap, the subject cannot ever fully and immediately identify with his symbolic mask or title; the subject's questioning of his [S]ymbolic title is what hysteria is about: ‘Why am I what you are saying that I am?’” (*How to* 34-5). In this sense, the speaking subject as such is hysterical,<sup>32</sup> always split between semblance and jouissance.<sup>33</sup> As a result of this split, there is always an irreducible sense of incongruity between one's title, on the one hand, and the way one immediately perceives oneself. What is specific with regard to a person with a hysterical structure is that s/he is immersed in this malaise, constantly dwelling on the “discomfort in his or her [S]ymbolic identity” (*How to* 34). This is why the Lacanian understanding of

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<sup>31</sup> Like most of Lacan's concepts, masculinity and femininity are not so much biological entities as they are structural (Symbolic) functions. Insofar as femininity and masculinity are sexual structures, either male or female individuals can occupy any of the two structures.

<sup>32</sup> Hedwig Schwall aptly calls this “fundamental hysteria” (“Forms of Hysteria” 284) Any act of speech as such is a process of hystercization of the speaking subject. As Gérard Wajeman points out, this form of hysteria is “the most elementary mode of speech” (*Le maître et l'hystérique* 15).

<sup>33</sup> This is why Lacan in his later work speaks of the hysteric discourse. Mark Bracher explains: “The hysterical structure is in force whenever a discourse is dominated by the speaker's symptom—that is, his or her unique mode of experiencing jouissance, a uniqueness that is manifested [...] as a failure of the subject [...] to coincide with or be satisfied by society and embraced as the subject's ideals” (122).

hysteria challenges the traditional view of hysteria as an inherently feminine phenomenon and argues, instead, that it presents the same set of “problematics” for both sexes (Dor 81). As a result of the lack that the hysteric constantly faces in the Symbolic, the Imaginary takes the predominant role in the psyche. Paul Verhaeghe sees the origin of hysteria as rooted “at the junction between the Real and the Symbolic” (*Woman* 41). The Symbolic cannot completely overwrite the Real, consequently, the Symbolic is always lacking. The hysteric attempts to make up for this lack by relying on the Imaginary. However, Verhaeghe adds, since the Imaginary is itself “subjected” to the Symbolic, “a solution in terms of the Imaginary is doomed to failure” (*Woman* 42).

## **2. Discomfort in Symbolic identity**

Freddie does not manage to fulfil any of his socio-symbolic roles. As a father, he has a distant and disinterested relation with his son. The latter is barely mentioned in the novel. When he is, in effect, mentioned, it is only in passing while Freddie is engaging in one of his lengthy observations of Daphne: “[s]he neglected our son, not because she was not fond of him, in her way, but simply because his needs did not really interest her” (7). Several elements in the description point to Freddie’s unwillingness to be identified as a father. He complains about Daphne’s failure in fulfilling her maternal role while, ironically, Freddie himself is the true culprit of negligence and abandonment for leaving his family on the island. In this sense, in true narcissistic fashion, he projects all his own shortcomings on others. What is more, he cannot even bring himself to use the first person pronoun “my” in relation to his son, and instead uses the phrase “our son” as if he were in a constant effort to flee the verbal attribute that can pinpoint his Symbolic role as a father. As a student, he says, “I gave up my studies, the university, my academic career, everything, with hardly a second thought”

(72). As an employee, he holds one, sole temporary job that makes him feel “ridiculous” and “embarrassed” (136). As a husband, Freddie’s unease with Symbolic roles is even more discernible in his relationship with Daphne. The marriage ceremony is “quick and squalid” and he has “a headache all through it” (71). Back at the house where Daphne and Freddie are supposed to celebrate the occasion with friends and colleagues, a “swirling silence” reigns (71). In all awkwardness, one guest “made a limp excuse and departed after half an hour” leaving Freddie with “an absurd embarrassment” (71). And, finally, he is a criminal. In other words, he fails to be a law-abiding citizen subjected to the law. But even as an outlaw he is not entirely at home: “When later I read what those reporters wrote [...] I could not recognize myself in their depiction of me as a steely, ruthless character” (103). People’s descriptions of him, here the journalists’ comments, function for the most part as a mirror in which he pleases himself. Consequently, people never exist for themselves, but only as a mirror to the protagonist, underscoring his narcissism.

Freddy’s relationship with his parents is similarly uneasy. He abandons his mother and visits her after ten years only to ask for money. He later finds out he is disinherited by her (170), that is, he is literally ruled out of his Symbolic capacity as the heir. He demonstrates an equally troubled and ambiguous relation with his father. Freddie’s overall attitude towards his father is characterized by a combination of mockery and disgust:

he was so laughably earnest. He made the mistake of imagining that his possessions were a measure of his own worth, and strutted and crowed, parading his things like a schoolboy with a champion catapult. Indeed, there was something of the eternal boy about him, something tentative and pubertal (28).

The words “laughably” and “mistake” evoke a sense in which Freddie finds his father not as someone who offers a successful Symbolic model, someone who can be taken seriously in his role as the agent that represents law. Instead, he is “tentative,” that is, hesitant and

provisional, lacking a plausible (Symbolic) conviction. Moreover, the word “pubertal,” as well as depicting the father as immature, ties in with Freddie’s disgust at his father’s moustache which he describes as “indecent, like a bit of body fur, soft and downy, that had found its way inadvertently on to his face from some other, secret part of his person” (28). His disgust for his father’s moustache leads to his neurotic squeamishness about moustaches in general: “There is something lewd about them that repels me” (84). Not only does the father appear as ridiculous and repugnant, but Freddie’s descriptions of him at times displays a reversal of roles between the father and the son. In the passage cited above the father is remembered as behaving as a “schoolboy.” Furthermore, he remembers his father “as impossibly young and me already grown-up, weary, embittered” (28). The role reversal as a result of which the narrator conceives of himself as a father in relation to his own immature father, on the one hand, and his failure at fulfilling his actual fatherly role with regard to his son, on the other, underline the fact that being a father only interests Freddie as a *would-be* function, as a performance and not as an actual (i. e. Symbolic) role. This ties in with Freddie’s hysteric structure in that hysterics are excessively histrionic, always verging on the theatrical. This is because theatrical role-play enables the hysteric to conceal his/her lack of an effective, actual relationship.<sup>34</sup>

Insofar as the father traditionally embodies the rules, mocking the father allows Freddie to challenge the very source of familial law. By doing so, he attains the freedom to slip through one role to another. Symbolically regulated *rules*, then, are bent so as to give way to Imaginary *roles*. As succinctly put by Schwall, “a hysteric does not like a general law; he

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<sup>34</sup> According to Cormac Gallagher, “the source” of the hysteric’s fascination with histrionic acts lies in their incessant “attempts to evade [the] submission to the law” as well as the repression of “the normal mechanism of identification with their fellows.” Imaginary role-play, Gallagher adds, “fascinates because it seems in some way to express their own dilemma in confronting the law” (“Hysteria” 121).

only accepts self-imposed rules” (“Forms of Hysteria” 284). This is why Freddie looks to set up his own version of familial relations, ones not bound to the Symbolic in which he constantly finds himself alienated. In contrast to his depictions of his father, Freddie’s depictions of Charlie French, the “old family friend,” reveal a deep admiration: “he gave an impression of equilibrium [...] he had presence, it was almost an air of imperium” (34). The fact that Charlie is an art dealer arguably plays a crucial role in his being admired by Freddie in that in the figure of Charlie appeals to the aestheticist in Freddie. Moreover, the word “imperium,” in a sense, fills Freddie’s narcissistic need for magnificence. In fact, it is in relation to Charlie that he comfortably refers to himself as a son: “We might indeed have been a father and son—not *my* father, of course, and certainly not *this* son” (37). The modal “might” is crucial in Freddie’s hysteric reconfiguration of the paternal role: Charlie is accepted as a father figure only because he could fulfil the paternal role, that is, again, not an actual but a virtual, that is, potential but unlikely, father in relation to whom he can freely set up his imaginary scenario. This suits Freddie’s hysteric agenda perfectly: it allows him to defer castration, to indefinitely postpone being assigned a fixed Symbolic role. Not only does Charlie provide an alternative paternal figure for Freddie, but he also incarnates the maternal grace which Freddie finds lacking in his own mother: “[Charlie] seemed almost maternal, in his apron and his old felt slippers. He would take care of me” (140).<sup>35</sup> Charlie thus acquires a privileged status in Freddie’s hysteric scenario, enabling him to entirely reshuffle the familial relationship. The traditionally triangulated mother-father-child is transformed into a dual relationship between a son and a sexually undecidable figure, who can function as both parents depending on Freddie’s hysterical vagaries.

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<sup>35</sup> Freddie’s ambiguous sexuality in relation to Charlie can also be seen as Banville’s hint at the MacArthur case on which *The Book of Evidence* is partly modelled. Malcolm MacArthur, Dublin’s famous murderer was allegedly homosexual. See T. Ryle Dwyer’s *Charlie: The political biography of Charles Haughey*, chapter 12.

But his relationship with Charlie becomes even more complicated when Freddie stays at Charlie's house. The seagulls outside the window approach Freddie, thinking that he is "Mammy" (138), that is, Charlie's mother; hence, yet another role reversal of parent and child. When Charlie moves away from Freddie's imaginary version of the perfect parent and approaches being a "real" person, the role of the son in Freddie's psychic scene is deemed threatening since it introduces the possibility that he might *actually* be assigned the role of the son. Therefore, Freddie immediately strives to liberate himself from this role and adopts another, in an attempt to maintain the all-important freedom from imposed rules. He is comfortable in his identity only if he is the author of the psychic script. As soon as a rule is deemed imposed, his unconscious spares no effort in undermining the entire psychic scenario. This is also why, while he fails to be a fulfilling husband to his actual wife, he is assigned the imagined role of the husband in relation to the maid: "We were shouting at each other now, like a married couple having a fight" (113). He can accept to be a husband so long as the role is not fully actualized, enabling him to maintain the possibility of opting out of castration.

The other father figure in *The Book of Evidence* is Helmut Behrens who figures relatively briefly in the novel (within the space of two pages) in comparison to Charlie French whom Freddie periodically refers to throughout his narrative. In contrast to Charlie's depiction as extremely benign, Behrens's reveals a certain maleficence: "He took my hand and squeezed it slowly in his strangler's grip, looking deep into my eyes as if he were trying to catch a glimpse of someone else in there. Frederick, he said, in his breathy voice." (84). Like in *Birchwood*, the grip is linked to the paternal figure. However, unlike the paternal grip that functions as a signifier for Gabriel Godkin's official installation in the Symbolic (as his father's son) as we saw in the previous chapter, the paternal grip in Freddie's case is immediately threatening. Behrens's "strangler's grip" transforms the handshake into a

suffocating experience. In contrast to Behrens's firm grip, Freddie's grip is insecure, wobbly, and awkward: "My hands were trembling" (69); "I am not mechanically minded, or handed" (111). What is more, this is the only instance in the entire narrative in which Freddie is addressed by another character as Frederick, that is, his Christian (Symbolic) name. In a sense, Behrens's overwhelming figure both literally and metaphorically fixes him, that is, castrates him at the Symbolic level. This is why Behrens is perceived as a threatening figure to whose "raptor's gaze" (85) Freddie seems himself a prey.

### 3. Impossible sexuality

Freddie's hysteric horror of castration is specifically discernible in his relationship with the female others. He admires Daphne's "poise" (146) and expresses his infatuation with her abstract quality on no less than three occasions. Her "abstracted, mildly dissatisfied air" draws him to her; he sees her as an "abstracted *maya*" (9); and, he praises "usual air of faint abstraction" (146). Daphne merely functions as a mirror of Freddie's onto whom he projects his self. She is part of his abstracted world which exists for him only in as much as it functions as a reflection of his narcissistic whims. What is more, the very name Daphne harkens back to the mythological woman who turns into a tree. In this sense, Daphne has the density Freddie lacks, only he does not notice.<sup>36</sup> According to Dor, the hysteric's "relation to the feminine other is, from the outset, alienated in a representation of the woman as idealized and inaccessible" (101). This is rooted in the hysteric's unwillingness to come to terms with choosing a sexual identity. Rendering the feminine other abstract enables him to maintain a

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<sup>36</sup> The representation of the female other as an abstract figure is not limited to Freddie's narrative. Chapter six tackles the representation of the woman in detail the latter plays a crucial role in the narrators' aesthetic quest for authentic selfhood.



safe distance from the actual other that would otherwise enchain him in a Symbolic bond. Indeed, such abstraction of the other leads to the hysteric's failure in having a real relationship. The hysteric's troubled relationship with the other "leads to the development of conduct designed to avoid a direct personal confrontation with the woman in the area of sex" (Dor 101). While Freddie devotes a considerable amount of his narrative to detailed descriptions of his beloved others, he speaks of two occasions in which he engages in actual sexual relation. Firstly, his sexual encounter with Daphne:

I managed, I never understood exactly how, to press a secret nerve in her, and then she would turn to me heavily, quickly, with a groan, and cling to me as if she were falling, her mouth at my throat, her blind-man's fingertips on my back. She always kept her eye open, their dim soft grey gaze straying helplessly, flinching under the tender damage I was inflicting on her (9).

The passage primarily highlights Freddie's narcissistic over-estimation of his sexual prowess. Everything in the passage points to *his* ability in bringing about Daphne's sexual ecstasy, accentuating his active role in contrast to Daphne's helpless passivity. At the same time, the use of the phrase "I managed [...] to press" in the description evokes a sense in which Freddie is proud of successfully carrying out a task. Put differently, rather than being caught in a real sexual act, he self-consciously performs the sexual act. His emphasis on his virility, in this sense, seems to be no more than a sham to hide his horror at being Symbolically subjectivized as the masculine side of sexual relation. Freddie's sexual predicament is rooted in the fact that he confuses virility with desire. His relationship with Daphne is in fact a ploy through which he stages his fantasy of having the signifier of the other's desire.<sup>37</sup> Moreover,

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<sup>37</sup> According to Dor, the hysteric's sexual relation is based on an "imaginary mechanism in which the subject confuses desire and virility" (102). Virility here is a ploy on his part to try convincing the Other (and not merely the other as the sexual partner) that he does have what "the woman" desires (102).

as well as accentuating Daphne's helplessness, the word "blind-man" momentarily renders Daphne hermaphroditic. As Schwall points out, "hermaphroditic creatures" serve as privileged love objects for the hysteric since he perceives them as "complete in themselves"; hence, further abstraction.<sup>38</sup> Daphne thus is a perfect tool with which he can perform his virility without having to be castrated as a Symbolic masculine subject. It is then not surprising when Freddie says of her: "She suited me" (7).

The second sexual encounter discussed by Freddie is his troilism with Daphne and Anna. There is a stark difference in the way in which he depicts the two scenes. Firstly, the overly virile depictions are here replaced by remarkable delicacy: "with what attentiveness we handled each other's flesh" (69). Secondly, there is yet another reversal of roles: Freddie is "struck" by "the curious passiveness" of his role in the encounter (70); "I was the man among the three of us," he emphasizes, "yet I felt that it was I who was being softly, irresistibly penetrated" (70). Far from perceiving his passivity as threatening, he seems to find a certain equilibrium in the triangulated encounter: "how grave were, how pensive" (69). There is a sense in which Freddie has found the perfect sexual relation. Freddie describes a moment in which "for a second, as the blood welled up in my eyes," he sees the two women's "heads merge" (69). It is during this moment that he experiences his sexual climax: "the shudder started in my groin" (69). By momentarily merging the two women in his imagination, Freddie transforms the two women into an undecidable figure that is at once both and neither of the women. At the same time, the threesome is embellished with highly religious metaphors, transforming the sexual act into a ritual:

I could not rid myself of the feeling that a rite was being performed, in which Anna Behrens was the priestess and Daphne the sacrificial offering, while I was a mere prop.

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<sup>38</sup> This, Schwall explains, is related to the hysteric's attempt to "neutralize his libido in admiration of angel-like or hermaphroditic creatures" ("Forms of Hysteria" 283).

They wielded me like a stone phallus, bowing and writhing about me, with incantatory sighs (70).

Rid of the tyranny of the (Symbolically regulated) dual relationship that necessarily requires him to adopt a castrated role as either a man or a woman, he is no longer required to stage his exaggerated virility. He can happily adopt the passive role as long as he is the centre around which the relation revolves. The passivity is not deemed threatening by Freddie precisely because it does not situate him in a dual relation whereby his passive role would be defined against a an active other that reduces him to an object of desire. Therefore, being a “mere prop” suits him perfectly so long as he is the support that holds the triadic structure together, making the very relation possible. His narcissism is so fragile that he is ready to salvage it even though it means sacrificing his virility. His need to be universally loved leads to his literal identification with the “stone phallus.” By identifying with the signifier (or the ideal) of the other’s desire Freddie develops a means with which he can avoid confrontation with lack. That is to say, by being the phallus, he no longer needs to determine whether he has it or not, whether he is a man or a woman—a constant sore point for the hysteric. The religious embellishment of the *ménage à trois* has the additional advantage of sublimating the sexual act. The three are depicted “as if engaged in an archaic ceremonial of toil and worship, miming the fashioning and raising of something, a shrine, say, or a domed temple” (69). Sexual intimacy completely disappears in Freddie’s description. Penile erection is replaced by the erection of a sacred dome carried out by hard work (“toil”). This enables Freddie to distance himself from the immediacy and actuality of sex, thereby further securing his hysteric narcissism and rendering his sexual partners abstract.

Outside the threesome, Freddie’s depiction of Anna demonstrates a remarkable contrast to the depiction of Daphne’s. While Daphne is “myopic” (7) and has an “absent gaze” (8),

Freddie is fascinated by Anna's "amused, appraising glance" (63). Furthermore, on the one hand, his relationship with Daphne is characterized by mutual understanding:

There was a reticence, a tactfulness, which from the first we had silently agreed to preserve. We understood each other, yes, but 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 (9).

The words "reticence," "tactfulness," and "grace" evoke the sense of courtesy and respect between two parties that have "agreed" to a contract. It is an agreement, Freddie emphasizes, based on understanding, not knowledge. Understanding is a process of intellectual abstraction that leaves an irreducible room for doubt while knowing entails some degree of objectification, of pinning down.<sup>39</sup> Insofar as being the object of knowledge is a form of castration, Freddie's hysteric psychic structure perceives it as threatening. Therefore, his relation with Daphne suits him well so long as it is based on an agreement in which he is guaranteed the privilege to "maintain" his fantasy of a self-contained inner self. With Daphne, he is able to protect his fragile narcissism, to wall up his precarious self. On the other hand, Freddie feels excessive self-consciousness in Anna's presence: "I had a glimpse of myself as she would see me, my glimmering flanks and pale backside, my fish-mouth agape" (68). Far from "unselfconscious grace," Anna's presence results in the splitting of his subjectivity between perceiver and perceived. Overly exposed to the other's gaze, Freddie is no longer able to maintain his narcissistic demarcation of interiority. Moreover, Anna's

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<sup>39</sup> This distinction is observable between the words "understand" and "know" at the etymological level. According to the OED, etymologically the verb "to understand" is related to the German word for "presume" (*unterstehen*) whereas "to know" is related to the High German word for "recognize" (*in knäen*). The latter entails a process of identifying an object whereas the former implies supposition on the basis of probability.

“impenetrable smile” (63) elevates her to the status of the neighbour.<sup>40</sup> whose enigmatic desire hystericizes Freddie. Her mysterious gestures represent the enigma of the other’s desire that is forever inaccessible. Her attention is always directed elsewhere, always eluding Freddie’s grasp: “When I called her she had spoken hardly a dozen words, and twice she put a hand over the phone and talked to someone with her in the room” (63); “I invited her for lunch, but she shook her head” (63).

In effect, Freddie admits that it is Anna who has always been his true love, his true object of desire: “I loved her” (81) while all he can muster regarding Daphne is “She affected me” (9). His relationship with Daphne has all along been a pretence in order to keep Anna at arm’s length. Daphne’s function, in other words, is to triangulate Freddie’s relationship with his true beloved, Anna, so that he can remain a desiring subject. No wonder Freddie’s only sexual encounter with Anna takes place during the literally triangular threesome. It is important to note that Freddie renders both women abstract however for different reasons. On the one hand, Daphne’s portrayal as a mythical nymphomaniac reveals her double function in Freddie’s psychic scene: it allows him to maintain his masculine camouflage while simultaneously serving as an intermediary to keep Anna at arm’s length. On the other hand, Anna’s perception as a cold-blooded, heartless “Ice Queen” (62) allows Freddie to constantly portray her as inaccessible. In both cases, the aim is to keep his desire unsatisfied by continually deferring his access to the desired beloved. According to Dor, hysterics are “architects of their own misfortune” (98) since they systematically tend to fail or engage in “self-defeating behaviour” (98). If the hysteric “manages to obtain what he doesn’t have,”

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<sup>40</sup> In Lacanian theory, the neighbour represents a mysterious figure whose inscrutable gaze produces an enigma of the other’s desire. In this sense, the neighbour is related to the Real. According to Žižek, the other is transformed into the neighbour when “I encounter the other in her moment of jouissance. When I discern in her a tiny detail – a compulsive gesture, an excessive facial gesture—that signals the intensity of the [R]eal of jouissance” (“The Abyss of Freedom” 25)

Dor adds, the outcome is catastrophic (98). This is the crucial role that the painting, *The Woman with Gloves*, plays in Freddie's hysteric scenario becomes apparent. It is linked to Anna on different levels. It is stored in the gallery of Anna's father. Moreover, the encounter with the painting produces the very same effect of excessive self-awareness that he previously experiences in Anna's presence:

I stood there, staring, for what seemed a long time, and gradually a kind of embarrassment took hold of me, a hot, shamefaced awareness of myself as if somehow I [...] were the one who was being scrutinized, with careful, cold attention (79)

The painting's "cold attention" is reminiscent of Anna's disinterested attention, one of an "Ice Queen" (62). Again, the roles are reversed. He moves from the seer to the seen, from the scrutinizer to the scrutinized. In other words, he is reduced to being the object of the other's gaze. The experience predictably leaves him "faintly aghast," forcing him to run away (79). Freddie meets Anna "ten minutes later" (80) and it is immediately following the encounter with the painting for the first time that he confesses his love for Anna: "The thought came to me: I loved her! [...] My hands were trembling" (81). His self-purported reason for stealing the painting is his financial need. Yet, once he acquires it, he "dumped" the painting in a "ditch" (119). What is more, while stealing the painting, he murders the maid in all awkwardness and for no apparent reason: "I killed her because I could [...] what more can I say?" (198). In a sense, all the drama evoked by Freddie regarding his urgent financial need proves to be sheer pretence. It is arguably a pretence to cover up the fact that stealing from Anna's father as well as his predictable conviction would completely undermine any chance for a relation with Anna. The stealing of the painting as well as its subsequent ditching represent Freddie's hysteric strategy to simultaneously sabotage any possible relation with his object desire and to sustain himself as a failed, suffering subject. In effect, in prison, he is now able to bemoan his loss while prolonging his desire for Anna. The painting in this sense

is a stand-in for Anna. He first idealizes it then throws it away only to subsequently idealize its reproduction: “I have a reproduction of it on the wall above my table here [...] when I look at it my heart contracts” (104-5). The reproduction was “sent to me, of all people,” by Anna (104). The reproduction doubly defers his access to Anna by being a stand-in for the stand-in (the painting) for Anna, placing him in a comfortable position to lament, bemoan, and daydream about what he could have had and what he has lost.

#### 4. Hysteric speech

Freddie’s discomfort with regard to the Symbolic is also discernible in the way he relates to language: “What I said was never exactly what I felt, what I felt was never what it seemed I should feel, though the feelings were what felt genuine, and right, and inescapable” (124). There is a fundamental gap that separates his feelings from his speech. Speaking as such bifurcates him between his immediate, “genuine” mode of being and the Symbolic locus from which he enunciates. This rupture is most visible when he is confronted by a woman on the road while is fleeing with the maid’s half-dead body lying at the back of his car:

Madam! I said sternly (she would later describe my voice as *cultured* and *authoritative*), will you please get on about your business! She stepped back, staring in shock. I confess I was myself impressed, I would not have thought I could muster such a commanding tone (117).

The adjectives introduced in between brackets brings to the fore the split in Freddie’s discourse. Insofar as both adjectives are signifiers that represent his subjectivity, they do not seem to follow naturally with the rest of the enunciation. By bracketing them, thus, he demonstrates his inability to recognise himself in what his “tone” conveys.

Freddie's narrative is often punctuated by an address to the Other (of Law) such as "Your honour" (06) and "my lord [*sic*]" (11). His very status as a defendant hystericizes his position, requiring him to endlessly engage in articulate self-explication: "Please, do not imagine, my lord, I hasten to say it, do not imagine that you detect here the insinuation of an apologia, or even of a defence" (16). But the articulate explications soon reveal a troubled relation with speech:

I was at a turning point, you will tell me, just there the future forked for me, and I took the wrong path without noticing—that's what you'll tell me, isn't it, you, who must have meaning in everything, who lust after meaning, your palms sticky and your faces on fire! [...] Forgive me this outburst, your honor" (23-4).

What is clear from the passage is Freddie's excessive preoccupation with how his speech is perceived by the other, taking on both the enunciator and the interpreter of his enunciation. His speech moves from self-explication to an obsession to demonstrate the faulty nature of (Symbolic) language. Insofar as language based on conveying (constructing) meaning, Freddie deems it an inadequate means of representing his subjectivity. This can be clearly seen when interpellated by the officer to explain why he killed the maid. Faced with the interpellation, he stares at the officer while "startled, and at a loss" and then vomits (196). After vomiting, he says, "I wanted to talk and talk, to confide in him, to pour out all my poor secrets. But what could I say?" (197). Unable to produce an adequate, verbal (Symbolic) response, he musters up an answer from the Real. He literally pours out what cannot be expressed in words.

Freddie's uneasy relation with language seems, on the most part, to stem from the words' failure to correspond to what he wants to convey: "I took up the study of science in order to find certainty. No, that's not it. Better say, I took up science in order to make the lack of certainty more manageable" (18). He is never satisfied by his speech since there is



always a “better” way to “say.” Consequently, he continually paraphrases his utterances with an additional statement. Even when words do seem to correspond to what he wants to say, the correspondence is not straightforward: “I fled before them, and dived into Wally’s pub. Dived is the word” (30). His very attempt to affirm the correspondence between language and thought doubles his statement via a repetition. More than anything, the repetition evokes the sense in which he is not comfortable in his utterance since, if he were, he would not need the complementary statement (“Dived is the word”) in the first place. The latter’s inclusion, if anything, produces a discontinuity in his discourse and is, thus, counter productive. Freddie’s repetitive self-corrections as well as his malaise in his verbal utterances is related to the way in which the hysteric’s desire is mitigated by *jouissance*. In his sixth seminar (*Le désir*), Lacan speaks of *jouissance* as a defence against desire in hysteria. According to Lacan, for the hysteric *jouissance* is “strategic” in that it is used in order to “prevent” desire from being satisfied. This is because the hysteric’s very being is ultimately what is “at stake” in desire.<sup>41</sup> Freddie’s apparent discomfort in speech is in fact verbal (or linguistic) self-sabotage in the sense that his hysteric *jouissance* causes him not be fully at home in his speech. This precisely allows him to prolong his desire in speech since by prolonging speech he ensures his subjective existence as a desiring being. Remarkably, in parallel to his discomfort in speech, Freddie emphasizes “how easily one slips into the lingo!” (129). The verb “slip” describes his relation with language perfectly since it designates a temporary sliding into an Imaginary aspect of language. In other words, he is comfortable with that aspect of language

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<sup>41</sup> “sa *jouissance* est d'empêcher justement le désir dans les situations qu'elle trame elle-même. Car c'est là une des fonctions fondamentales du sujet hystérique dans les situations qu'elle trame: sa fonction est d'empêcher le désir de venir à terme pour en rester elle-même l'enjeu” (*Seminar VI*, 10th June 1959).

that entails identification with an Imaginary role rather than a Symbolic capacity that fixes him in a structural position as the speaker of a language.

Freddie often paraphrases his previous statements using the phrase “I mean”: “I fancied it was me, I mean I thought this smell was mine” (4); “The American, for instance, seemed no worse than I myself—I mean, than I imagined myself to be, for this, of course, was before I discovered what things I was capable of” (12); “I can’t believe that she’s gone, I mean the fact of has not sunk in yet” (101). His linguistic predicament lies in the fact that while he mocks the Other for his obsession with meaning, he is obliged to articulate his speech using the very system that alienates him, namely, Symbolic signification. As Jeanne Lorraine Shroeder puts it, the hysteric “is hyper articulate because she is fixated in the [S]ymbolic order that partially excludes her” (*The Four Lacanian Discourses* 152). Nevertheless, at times, the paraphrasing statement is not even available for Freddie, resulting in the statement’s open-endedness: “I thought how odd it was to be there, I mean just there and not somewhere else. Not that being somewhere else would have seemed any less odd. I mean—oh, I don’t know what I mean” (24). Far from providing an alternative verbal solution to his linguistic predicament, the phrase “I mean” disrupts the very train of thought and introduces a momentary loss in Freddie’s enunciation. His constant attempt at paraphrasing is another hysteric strategy devised by Freddie in order to maintain an evasive stance in relation to Symbolic speech. However, his fixation on using such evasive strategies results in a split psyche which is directly imported into the fabric of the text: “when I say *I did it*, I am not sure I know what I mean” (150). The statement on the one hand highlights how, as a hysteric, Freddie never commits fully. On the other hand, it is as if the italicized phrase, again, represents a locus of enunciation different from the one related to the non-italicized phrase. Faced with his discombobulated sense of self, he is “not sure” where his true agency lies. The rupture between “I say” and “I did” results in the incompatibility between “I say” and “I

mean,” between what he says and what he *wants* to say. Lacan speaks of the “incompatibility between desire and speech<sup>42</sup>” (*Ecrits* 275) in order to highlight the fundamental limit of the articulability of desire. Since desire is animated by the unconscious, there is a limit to the degree speech can express desire. The unconscious is only available in bits, therefore, it can neither be known nor expressed completely. Rather, “there is always a leftover, a surplus, which exceeds speech” (Dylan Evans 37). In Freddie’s case, his speech produces an unintended excess when he inadvertently makes a joke: “It was just nervousness and surprise that made me say it, I had not meant to attempt a joke. No one laughed” (199). This is why he is constantly worried about how his utterances may be interpreted: “Clerk, strike that last sentence, it will seem to mean too much” (8).

In addition to signifying something, the verb “to mean” figures in Freddie’s narrative in its other usage as “to intend”: “I killed her, I admit it freely [...] Nor can I say I did not mean to kill her—only, I am not clear as to when I began to mean it” (150). Though he openly admits to having carried out the murder, his problem lies in determining the source of intentionality behind it. In addition to the rupture between “I say” and “I did,” therefore, there is a schism between “I did” and “I want.” He is plighted with a fundamental uncertainty regarding the nature of his “true” desire. He is inhibited by a foreign desire the origin of which he is unable to find; yet it is a desire that animates what he does. This results in a shaky sense of intentionality that can provoke a permeable sense of self. Freddie complains that when he reads “an argument” he finds himself “agreeing with it enthusiastically” but then he “discovered” that he “had misunderstood [it] entirely,” that, “in fact,” he “got the whole thing arse-ways” (17). The fluctuation between drastically different opinions

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<sup>42</sup> It is crucial to note that Lacan here is not speaking of this incompatibility specifically with regard to the hysteric structure. Rather, he is outlining the overall relation between desire and speech. Since the hysteric is immersed in this split more than any other psychic structure, this rupture is more palpable in the hysterics.

“showed,” according to Freddie, “an open mind” that enables him “to switch back and forth between opinions without even noticing it (17). This is contrary to the way he marvels at other people’s ability in understanding and having opinions as we saw at the beginning of this chapter (16-7). His interiority is not self-contained, but permeable, always prone to other influences. At certain moments even his memories seem foreign to him: “it seemed to be not my own past I was remembering” (141).

## **5. Preponderance of the Imaginary: play**

What underlies Freddie’s hysteric universe is the incompatibility between the Symbolic and the Real. This is due to the fact that the Symbolic is unable to provide adequate signification for the Real. Consequently, different forms of lack figure in the Symbolic (e.g. in speech as we saw above). According to Paul Verhaeghe, “The hysteric appeals to the Imaginary in order to deal with the Real [...] to work out that aspect of the Real where the Symbolic lacks a definite signifier” (*Does The Woman Exist?* 41). For Freddie, reality is a locus in which the lack at the heart of the Symbolic order comes to the fore. In turn, he aims at patching these lacks with his overactive imagination. This results in the transformation of his narrative into an extended episode of daydreaming. In effect, many scenes in the novel are marked with phrases such as “I picture.” For instance, in his prison cell, says Freddie, “I pictured myself a sort of celebrity” (5) and “picture[s]” his father “on those Sunday afternoons with his mistress” (29). Not only his imagination provides a parallel scenario that supplements reality via picturing, reality itself becomes a locus in which he can stage his imagination. This goes to such extent that his perceptions become supplemented by, even, replaced by, his imaginary enactments. The American, for instance, is initially seen as “quite a young man” (12).

However, he is then reminded by Daphne of the man's old hands (12).<sup>43</sup> In fact, as Freddie admits, this character is referred to as "the American" "because I did not know, or cannot remember, his name, but I am not sure that he was American at all" (12). He is not so much a real person to Freddie as he is a prop by means of which Freddie can enact his imaginary version of reality. Freddie's imagination actively overrides reality, altering it and blinding him to *facts* (for instance, the American's old hands). The man "spoke with a twang that might have been learned from the pictures" and reminds Freddie "of some film star" (12). Freddie's insistence on the use of the word *picturing* with regard to his imagination is related to *the pictures*, that is, cinema. He uses the latter as an artistic metaphor for staging his imagination, a means with which he can transform reality into a dramatic performance. His recourse to such imaginary processes is rooted in his inability to deal with the Real on a Symbolic level. Therefore, he fails to grasp the gravity of the Symbolic repercussions of his murderous act and, instead, conceives of his "fix" as "one of those mad dreams that some ineffectual fat little man might turn into a third-rate film. I would dismiss it for long periods, as one dismisses a dream, no matter how awful" (20). He literally uses the adjective "unreal" to refer to his situation (20). By the same token, the officer who has come to arrest him is depicted as "a keen student of the cinema" (189). And, finally, in a bout of narcissism, he perceives himself as a film star while stealing the painting: "I see myself, like the villain in an old three-reeler, all twitches and scowls and wriggling eyebrows" (110). There is a systematic attempt on Freddie's part to delve into the realm of the fictive whenever he faces the imperative to sort out Symbolic inconsistencies. As Verhaeghe points out, for the hysteric, the "lack of a symbolic answer results in an ever-increasing series of Imaginary as-if answers" (*Does the Woman* 43). Indeed, the most recurrent phrase in the novel is "as if," that

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<sup>43</sup> "At first I thought he was quite a young man, but Daphne smiled and asked had I looked at his hands" (12).

is to say, not reality *as it is*, but reality *as it would be*, or *could be*, constantly creating virtual scenarios in parallel to actual situations.<sup>44</sup>

In addition to “as if” and “picturing,” the reader encounters many occasions during which Freddie uses the word “play” in order to depict his relationship with the other characters. At times *playing* is used to signify *pretending to be*, that is, playing a role: in relation to the American, he is “playing at being a blackmailer” (14), to Daphne and Anna, he is “playing at being relaxed” (64), and back at his hometown, he is “playing the returned expatriate” (76). At other times, *playing* is used in the sense of taking part in an amusing activity. For instance, meeting Anna back in Whitewater Freddie is given a drink by Anna:

I felt excited and bemused, and ridiculously pleased, like a child who has been given something precious to play with. I said it to myself again—I loved her!—trying it out for the sound of it. The thought, lofty, grand, and slightly mad, fitted well with the surroundings (82).

The enunciation of “I loved her” preceded by “I told myself” point to the performative aspect of his amorous confession. This is further emphasized if one considers the fact that “the thought” of Freddie’s love for Anna “fitted well” with the background, resulting in an image in which the entire episode is perceived as a staged performance. At the same time, there is an observable tension between the authenticity of a playing child and his inability to have first-hand, authentic relationship as an adult. In this sense, the word play, insofar as it can be used in both cases, provides Freddie with a linguistic tool in order to bridge the gap between authenticity and the lack thereof. This is why he also evokes the figure of the child in his depiction of his troilism with Daphne and Anna. During the sexual performance children are

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<sup>44</sup> To cite but a few examples: “The daylight too is strange, [...] as if something has happened to it” (4); Freddie perceives “a remote expression in Daphne’s eyes, as if she were trying to remember who or what precisely [the boy] was” (8); he finds “a peculiar pleasure” in treating “a fool and a liar as if I esteemed him the soul of probity” (13); “I felt as if I had ascended to some high, fabled plateau” (18).

“at play” outside (70) and the entire *ménage à trois* is described as “children’s not quite permissible game” (69). Freddie’s conception of the affaire in terms of an impermissible “game” illustrates his attempt at redefining his (hysterical) problematic relation with the law. The make-believe scenario of play allows him to tease the boundaries of what is permissible and what is not and enables him to provide a playful, alternative version in order to momentarily forget about the boundaries that delineate the lawfully acceptable and unacceptable. His work, too, is “hardly work at all” but “a form of play” (135). It is as if by perceiving actual encounters in terms of different forms of child-play he is simultaneously afforded both the minimal leeway by means of which he can define reality as a game, that is, to maintain his preferred mode of make-believe, as well as the possibility of staging the idealized form of authenticity he lacks. In an episode of stalking unknown people in the street, Freddie is “puzzled and happy, like a child who has been allowed to join in an adult’s game” (167). His *flânerie* enables him to observe the crowd, the people in relation to whom he has always felt an outsider: he wonders how he was never “a part” of “the community of men” (193). The word “part” illustrates the problem of belonging at the heart of Freddie’s narrative. On the one hand, he is unable to *be* part of the community defined by Symbolic interactions—even his money is “mostly foreign” (128). On the other hand, he can *play* a part in an imagined world based on Imaginary semblance.

Considered alongside his adamant self-referential and metafictional gestures<sup>45</sup> throughout the novel, Freddie’s insistent use of “play” indicates Banville’s attempt to render explicit the relation between reality and play in *The Book of Evidence*. According to Patricia Waugh in *Metafiction*, metafictional narratives aim at demonstrating

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<sup>45</sup> The most striking metafictional statement by Freddie comes near the end of the novel when he literally refers to his narrative as a fiction: “I thought of trying to publish this, my testimony. But no. I have asked Inspector Haslet to put it into my file, with the other, official fictions” (186).

that play is a relatively autonomous activity but has a definite value in the real world. Play is facilitated by rules and roles, and metafiction operates by exploring fictional rules to discover the role of fictions in life. It aims to discover how we each 'play' our own realities (35).

Fiction, says Waugh, is similar to play in that both construct "an alternative reality" via the manipulation of "the relation" between "a set of signs" (35). Since literary fiction deals primarily with language, and since language "does not have to refer to objects and situations immediately present at the act of utterance,"<sup>46</sup> it provides an excellent field in which the metafictional writer can introduce his vision of an alternative world (35-6). Following Gregory Bateson, Waugh argues, play provides a tool by means of which the writer explores "new communicative possibilities" since any form of play requires a "'meta' level," a level that transcends the immediacy of the play. It is a higher level at which the very rules of play are defined (36). Manipulating rules at this level is precisely what allows the writer to create new forms of "behavior and contexts" (Waugh 36). In Freddie's case, constant supplementation of reality by different forms of play allows him to discover new spatial experiences: "I found myself in places I had not known were there" (167). His purposeless "criss-crossing" lead to "crooked alleyways and sudden, broad, deserted spaces, and dead-end streets under railway bridges where parked cars basked fatly in the evening sun, their toy-colored roofs agleam" (167). It is a world that does not seem to be governed by traditional rules of reason shared by the community, but rather, an alternative world characterized by the "sudden," unforeseen emergence of objects, objects that are "toy-colored," fit for his play-world (167).

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<sup>46</sup> This is due to the fact that language "does not have to be directly indexical. A phrase uttered in a real-life context and referring to objects actually present can be transferred to many different contexts: everyday, literary, journalistic, philosophical, scientific" (Waugh 35-6).



## 6. The reconstruction of the Symbolic: the hammer

In Lacanian terms, play provides a means for creating a new set of relations that redefines the Symbolic order. This fits Freddie's hysteric agenda perfectly. As Shroeder points out, the hysteric discourse reveals different forms of knowledge. Initially, "the hysteric can learn what is *lacking* in the symbolic—to identify its flaws and decide whether to cope or seek to change them" (Shroeder 150). The next step is the realization "that the Big Other does not exist" (150). The hysteric finds out that the reason he is unable to get a satisfactory answer from the Symbolic order is that it "is not a pre-existing 'thing'" but a human construct, that it is not whole in itself but "a work in progress" (150). This moment of realization is accompanied by discovering that the answer for the subject's desire does not lie in the Symbolic Other. Rather, "only the subject herself can answer the question of how to follow her own desire and how to change the Big Other better to accomplish this" (150). There are two possible ways in which the hysteric can respond to this knowledge. On the one hand, since the Other does not exist and consequently the entire epistemological quest of the hysteric at the level of the Other is doomed to failure, the subject can be extremely disillusioned. On the other hand, this realization "gives the hysteric the courage to go on" (Shroeder 151). That is, once she realizes that completely filling the holes in the Symbolic is impossible, that the Symbolic is inherently lacking, never complete, the hysteric can aim at "building the Other," at creating her version of the Other. She "can express her creative freedom by furthering its progress" (151).

The second response seems precisely to be Freddie's. Being uncomfortable in his Symbolic roles as well as rules, unable to express his authentic desire through speech, and feeling excluded from the Symbolic community, he redirects his epistemological quest to the Imaginary level. Constantly faced with the lack at the core of the Symbolic order—even the

“traffic light” is “faulty” (193)—he sets out to mock the very agencies that represent Symbolic law. For instance, “The police station” is a “mock-Renaissance palace” (194). It is only as a criminal, that is, as the obverse side of law, that he literally feels comfortable: “my fate, I was convinced, awaited me all around, in the open arms of the law. Capture! I nursed the word in my heart. It comforted me” (129).<sup>47</sup> Paradoxically, he can be integrated into “the law” only by breaking it. It is only by negating the law that his “true” identity can be “captured,” fixed. He can finally be housed inside the outside of law, so to speak. Being a criminal allows him to be free from the law while being defined against it. This is the only way in which he can be both fixed (captured) and satisfied. Being defined as a criminal affords him the additional advantage of being the very centre of attention. He wonders how he is perceived as a “dangerous criminal” (140). “I saw myself,” says Freddie, “as they would see me, a blurred face floating behind glass, blear-eyed, unshaven, the very picture of a fugitive” (141). He does not mind enduring all the hardship of being a fugitive so long as it allows him to stage the “picture,” the aestheticized image, of a fugitive, hoping to attract the other’s gaze, the gaze that inherently bound up with his desire, transforming his every act into an act of display. Still, the image is “blurred,” not completely outlined and defined, not finished, but a work in progress. The word “blurred” is reiterated immediately afterwards: “How quaint it all seemed, the white tipped sea, and the white pink houses, and the blurred headland in the distance, quaint and happy” (141). The blurring then also adds to the beauty of the scene. This idea infuses him with happiness, a happiness linked with beauty. The repetition of the word “quaint” highlights the significance of the aesthetic project he is so adamantly seeking to accomplish. This is why, against his council’s advice, he is not at all

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<sup>47</sup> Incidentally, in Freddie’s description, it is the word “Capture!” which touches him and not so much the actual, present act of capture. This is in line with the fact that, as a hysteric, he lives at one remove from life. For him, the present is never as important as a quaint, blurry, and beautified version of the past and future.

reluctant to hastily sign the confession written by the clerk, a document that will surely incriminate him. To his council's warning Freddie replies: "But I'm guilty [...] I *am* guilty" (209). The repetition and the italicization of the verb indicate the significance of the role of the criminal in Freddie's aesthetic-hysteric self-reconstruction.

Vexed by "the poverty of language" (54) Freddie adopts a Nietzschean extra-moral stance:

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. Or perhaps the words are an attempt to make it be there? Or, again, perhaps there is something, but the words invented it (55).

As Eoghan Smith points out, Freddie in this passage seeks the "the truth of moral codes" from Nietzsche (*John Banville* 90). But it is not only in relation to ethical truth that language is problematic for Freddie. His linguistic predicament lies in the incompatibility of the Real and the signifier, that is, language's (in)ability to name things and people. This is specifically evident in his attitude towards proper names: "The charm I had felt in Kingstown, I mean Dun Laoghire, did not endure in the city" (30). The "stable-girl" is referred to by a variety of names: "Joan," "Jean" (46), "Jane" (49), and "Joanne" (56). His failure to mention her "real" name does not stem from his poor memory, but rather, because names do not correspond to the person-thing he has in mind: "Jane—no, I can't call her that, it doesn't fit" (50). At certain moments, the name does fit: "I found my way by mistake into Joanne's room. (Joanne: that's it!)" (52). This moment brings about what Lacan called *point de capiton*, a temporary halt in the slippage of the signifier over the signified. Again, the bracketed phrase is telling. As to why this particular name produces this effect, one can put forward the hypothesis that *Joanne* contains "Anne" that links her with the Freddie's object of desire, Anna Behrens. Therefore, choosing the name *Joanne* is related to his unconscious discourse

momentarily opening up in his conscious speech. In any case, the name Joanne is only satisfactory for a short while. Towards the closing pages of the novel Freddie refers to the girl, again, as the “stable-girl” (218). His return to the initial form of reference to the girl shows the impossibility of naming: the name and the thing remain forever incongruous. At the same time, one can argue, the circular movement around naming the thing/person, although ending in a non-name (stable girl), reveals the relationship between Freddie’s speech and desire. Freddie’s seeming inability to find the girl’s right name is but the play of his unconscious in order for the signifier *Anne* to appear. This is the other aspect of play that is at work in Freddie’s narrative. The proliferation of names as well as the circular movement of names around the thing reveals the way in which Freddie’s hysteric (strategic) jouissance wins from functionality, that is to say, from naming as a “social reference,” in order to prolong his unsatisfied desire.

The incongruity between names and people leads Freddie to resort to his imagination for creative naming. For instance, while in custody, he meets a “red-faced man” whose name he does not even try to remember: “His name will be—Barker” (198). He relegates the faculty of naming entirely to his creative imagination to choose the sort of naming that he sees fit independent from the person’s original (Symbolic) name. Realizing that language (and the Symbolic order in general) is insufficient, he takes it upon himself to fill the gaps, relying on his own creativity. The multiplication of names and qualifiers interests Freddie’s hysteric subjectivity in that it enables him to split the entities, others, as well as his self in multifarious facets. This allows him to create the world, not simply find it “as it is.” Likewise, considering the fact that his wife (who is abstract, not fully there, and hence, out of reach) is Daphne, he takes the role of Apollo, the God of art, the maker. Thus he names his creatures (e.g. Barker and the stable-girl), that is, he is the (meta)fictional father of all: in a word, he is above the law. It is in this light that one can read the metaphors of construction

and the hammer in Freddie's narrative. He sees himself "as a masterbuilder who would one day assemble a marvelous edifice around myself, a kind of grand pavilion, airy and light, which would contain me utterly and yet wherein I would be free" (16). What this statement by Freddie demonstrates is that narration as construction allows him to reconcile the paradox of containment and freedom: he can simultaneously be contained (within an artifice) and free. He seems to have found an answer to his hysteric ailment of lack of belonging. Through the stylization of the self he is no longer required to articulate his desire in the existing Symbolic terms. Instead, he can invent a paradigm in which he can craft a self: "I even invented a history for myself as I went along, I mean I—how shall I express it—I fell into a certain manner that was not my own and that yet seemed, even to me, no less authentic, or plausible, at least, than my real self. (My real self!)" (178). The fact that it is invented does not make the constructed self any less "real" than his "real" self, since, the "real" self is already the product of the metaphorical nature of the Symbolic. By inventing a self, then, Freddie deconstructs reality as such. He lays bare the metaphysical nature of the Symbolic itself: the big Other does not exist objectively (although it is Real). However, as a "masterbuilder," which can be read as another reference to Apollo, he knows well that before the assembling of the new comes the disassembling of the old. Hence, predictably the hammer becomes his favorite object, his "marvelous toy" (97).<sup>48</sup> However, things become complicated very quickly once Freddie encounters an actual hammer:

Then I spotted the hammer. One moulded, polished piece of stainless steel, like a bone from the thigh of some swift animal, with a velvety, black rubber grip and a blued head

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<sup>48</sup> The hammer is another reference to Nietzsche. The latter famously wrote a book entitled *Twilight of the Idols, or, How to Philosophize with a Hammer* in which he uses the metaphor of the hammer as a way to verify whether idols are hollow by tapping on their surface, that is, whether they deserve their status as idols.

and claw. I am utterly unhandy, I do not think I could drive a nail straight, but I confess I had always harboured a secret desire to have a hammer like that (97).

In all fortuitousness the hammer is disclosed to him as a magical object, something that he has always wanted. The Real (the material “steel”), the Imaginary (the beautifully “molded” shape), the Symbolic (having it denotes the status of a “masterbuilder”) suddenly converge and reveal *the* object, the irresistible thing that can make his sundered self whole: “I could not resist it. I must have it” (97). What particularly catches Freddie’s attention about the hammer is its “velvety, black rubber grip,” while the sentence that immediately follows, describes Freddie as “unhandy.” This is related to the way in which Freddie sees himself previously in comparison to Helmut Behrens’ stifling grip (84). Regarding the latter Freddie notes: “Those enormous hands fascinated me. I was always convinced that at some time in the past he had killed someone” (84). And, indeed, Freddie kills the maid while he is “clutching the hammer” (114). In contrast to his overall manual clumsiness and wobbly handgrip, he clenches the hammer. At one level, *grip* and *kill* seem related. At the same time, while holding Freddie’s hand Helmut utters: “So like your mother” (84) and the word “hammer” figures previously when Freddie describes his mother’s aggressive attitude: “She rose magnificently to meet me. It was just like the old days. Hammer and tongs, oh, hammer and tongs!” (60). Thus at another level, there is a connection between *hammer* and *mother*, or rather, between the hammer and the mother’s difficult relation with Freddie. According to Dor, the hysteric is tormented by “the traces of an archaic lament based on a claim of love from the mother” and perceives a “devalued relation to the object of the mother’s desire” (80). In effect, Freddie is pained by the fact that “There was something unruly in her laughter, a sort of abandon” (45). He is “annoyed” by “the sight of her bunions and her big yellow toenails” (59) and considers her “unseemly” (45). The apparition of the hammer-object with its fascinating grip in Freddie’s psychic scene arguably functions as a catalyst, as

the hitherto missing link, in order for him to fulfil the (m)Other's desire, the desire that he mistakenly takes to be his own. While the hammer allows Freddie to finally acquire the tight grip, it shows in parallel that it is he who is all the more held by the Other's grip. Freddie's project of restructuring the Symbolic is thus complicated in the process. The tool with which he initially sets about to conduct his master-building becomes the very means with which he comes across a *cul de sac*. The result is the bitter realization that, albeit the big Other does not exist, there is no easy way out of its grasp. The impasse of desire, for Freddie, is accompanied by ethical destitution. *Play* does not lead to freedom from Symbolic castration but to failure to grasp real, human relations. He aims at breaking up the Symbolic in order to get to the bottom of things, so to say, to the-thing-in-itself. He does manage to break the (Symbolic) rules: "I went into the ladies—there were no more rules, after all" (125). But he simultaneously bashes the thing itself, namely, the maid's (Real) head: "When I struck her the first time I expected to feel the sharp, clean smack of steel on bone, but it was more like hitting clay, or hard putty. The word *fontanel* sprang into my mind" (113). His hammer does not allow him to get at a solid Real bone, but at vulnerable, shaky matter that easily scatters under his blow. What is more, "fontanel" denotes incomplete ossification, therefore, it can be taken as a metaphor for Freddie's realization that the Real, too, is not complete. The Imaginary takes on the full responsibility of filling the void created by the inadequacy of the Symbolic and the Real. Yet, insofar as the Imaginary is over-determined by the Symbolic, the same lack that is inherent in the Symbolic inevitably also figures in the Imaginary. For Freddie, though, his imagination is precisely what he does not in any way accept to be lacking. His hysteric fantasy is based on the preponderance of his Imaginary, rendering him unable to recognize its fundamental lack. Towards the end of his narrative, he realizes that his "essential sin" is that he "never imagined [the maid he murdered] vividly enough" (215). This is why

my task now is to bring her back to life. I am not sure what that means, but it strikes me with the force of an unavoidable imperative. How am I to make it come about, this act of parturition? Must I imagine her from the start, from infancy? (215-6).

His reliance on the Imaginary is to the extent that he seeks to redefine ethics as such. His (ethical) “imperative” requires him to give birth to an imaginary version of the real life he destroyed. Far from being remorseful, he is “strangely excited,” feeling “wonderfully serious” at the prospect of being able to finally set things right (216). In other words, he is never rid of the fantasy of wholeness, clinging to the very end to his imaginary prowess that he deems capable of bringing about the solidity he so fervently sought to uncover by knocking down the Symbolic: “I seem to have taken on a new weight and density” (216). It is not Real solidity, but one that comes as a result of his reconstruction of ethical signification through aesthetics. According to Schwall, the hysteric’s “predilection for all matters aesthetic” together with “his narcissism” leads him to “develop a system in which moral values will be tightly linked with an aesthetic sense” (“Forms” 283).

Waugh argues that through their playful fiction, metafictional writers bring to the fore “the process of recontextualization that occurs when language is used aesthetically” (36) and Eoghan Smith sees the central issue in *The Book of Evidence* is “the problem of how the concept of evil can be reconciled with the meaninglessness of existence in an amoral universe” (*John Banville* 90). Yet, Banville’s project in *The Book of Evidence* arguably surpasses both—what Waugh identifies as the function of playful fiction and Smith’s reading of Freddie’s narrative. While Banville’s narrator does lay bare the constructed nature of identity and reality, he simultaneously explores the predicament his narrator faces when he decides to challenge the Symbolic order. Narrative playfulness, in this sense, is a means for Banville to shed light on the limit of imagination, on the way in which blind reliance on imagination leads to the ethical destitution that turns his protagonist into a monster. The



narrator's insistence on maintaining a minimal form of evasive strategy with regard to his speech ultimately causes the failure of his testimony as a defence account in court. The fact that the title of his narrative, *The Book of Evidence*, contains the word "book," to some degree, points to the fictional status of the "evidence" it purports to demonstrate. That is to say, his fear of castration is so remarkable that he is even reluctant to minimally justify his murder, fearing his account might pin him down to one identity. In this sense, one can read the metafictional aspect of the novel as a hysteric tactic to nullify the effect of castration. Freddie's illusion of the self is maintained insofar as he constantly keeps speaking, revolving around "it" but never actually getting at it, and undermining anything that might help to get it. Language functions for Freddie as a field in which he can conduct his linguistic experiment in order to construct an aesthetic verbal form that can capture the uncapturable, the illusion of a whole self that is not bound to Symbolic over-determination.

By staging his narrator as a hysteric daydreamer who considers reality secondary to imagination, Banville self-consciously aims at providing a mirror of the real that shows its inconsistencies, inconsistencies that originate from the fundamental lack at the heart of the Real, the Symbolic, and the Imaginary. On the one hand, *The Book of Evidence* is a *mise en scene* for Nietzsche's (another highly creative hysteric)<sup>49</sup> idea that truths are but illusions morphed in such a way so we forget they are illusions, the idea that also informs, and is intricately engaged with in *Shroud* as we shall see in chapter five. On the other hand, Freddie's hysteric narrative is also an elaboration on the idea that there is no meta-language, no safe position from which one can *see it all*, not even based on highly creative imagination

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<sup>49</sup> In explaining the link between hysteria and aesthetics, Schwall argues that Nietzsche and Kafka are examples of the sort of the hysteric-creative thinkers who set up "a philosophical system" that allows them "to order the hysteric's manifold art-inspired observations of an always intriguing life. Examples from Irish life are to be found in W.B. Yeats, Maud Gonne, Florence Farr, and Lionel Johnson" ("Forms of Hysteria" 283).

such as Freddie's. It reveals how signifiers can over-determine the unconscious, trapping the narrator in a vicious circle facing him with the ultimate impasse of desire.

## **II. Uncertainty, Undecidability**

## Chapter Three: The (Post)modern Gothic in *Eclipse*

By now it is almost common sense that the lack of stable and unified identity is the defining feature of Banville's narrators-writers. They never stop lamenting the split nature of their self and the duality of their experience. At the same time, one of the most distinctive characteristics of Banville's oeuvre, especially in his later fiction, is that most often the familiar jumps out of its ordinariness, at times, starts glowing, and, at other times, is transformed into an abyss. In their attempt to represent the world, the protagonists grapple with the unfathomability of things. Their writing style mirrors their epistemological concerns—that reality is elusive and nothing is what it seems to be. The resulting dreamlike universe underpins the entirety of the narratives in which past and present are fluid as memories never stop to pour involuntarily into the present, thereby disrupting the unity of the narrators' perception of the here and now. Everything seems to be linked as boundaries increasingly become blurry: objects, places, people, and mythical figures permeate each other. In a word, unity and wholeness explode into porous and multi-layered multiplicity. This chapter argues that the uncanny can be studied as a force that makes *Eclipse* a modern Gothic novel. It does so by exploring the different aspects that constitute Gothic fiction, such as spectrality, sublimity, duality, and the doppelgänger.

### 1. From the uncanny to the Gothic

From the very first lines of *Eclipse* the reader is thrown into the realm of the uncanny: Alex is “haunted” by an other self who is nonetheless “familiar” (3). The uncanny, Freud tells us, centres on the sensation of simultaneously cosy familiarity and threatening foreignness. According to Freud in his famous essay, the uncanny is primarily linked to castration anxiety,

“to what arouses dread and horror” (“The Uncanny” 219), that which “has ought to have remained secret and hidden but has come to light” (245). Banville’s work is uncanny on a more general level in that, as Freud pointed out, the uncanny arises “when the distinction between imagination and reality is effaced” (244). In effect, one of the most important characteristics of Banville’s narrators is their failure to distinguish between reality and fiction, rendering the narratives highly unreliable.

In her paper on the subject of the uncanny in Banville’s fiction, Hedwig Schwall has demonstrated that the three main ways in which the uncanny is produced according to Freud are operational in Banville’s fiction. The self’s “narcissistic over-evaluation” is evident in the narrators’ “failure to assess their reality” and their relative blindness with regards to the mishaps of others (“Mirrors” 118); the return of repressed affects are embodied by the recurring red-headed figure throughout Banville’s fiction who “returns with a vengeance” (119); and, the narrators’ failure to clearly “distinguish between inner and outer worlds” as well as between “self and o/Other” is related to the uncanny perception of not being able to fully dichotomize space and time (120). In addition to these three “elementary” aspects of the uncanny according to Freud, Schwall remarks, Banville’s fiction is rife with other “components” of uncanny literature such as the double, “the epileptic or mad person, the ‘gettatore’, thrower of the evil eye, the haunted house,” and “the mirror which seems to show a stranger” (117). Banville’s highly self-conscious and sophisticated narrators are fully aware of the uncanny status of their narratives. Their multiple mention of the word “uncanny” in *Eclipse* (60, 67, 113), for instance, coupled with the tong-in-cheek remarks about Alex visiting his mother’s room (7), as Schwall points out, ridicule any facile pseudo-Freudian interpretations (Mirrors 117).

In so far as the uncanny is characterized by the “return of the dead,” says Freud, the uncanny is primordially related to the sensation of being haunted, so much so, that in “some

languages in use to-day” *Unheimliche* is synonymous with “haunted” (“The Uncanny” 244). The English word “haunted” itself is etymologically related to a presence that frequents a place, a foreign presence that parasites a container. At the same time, tracing the roots of the English word “uncanny,” Royle finds out, it is related to the supernatural and, considered with its antithesis, “canny,” they demonstrate paradoxical meanings: “cunning but innocent, sly but pleasant, knowing but perhaps *too* knowing” (*The Uncanny* 11). According to Ryle, “the uncanny seems to be bound up with a compulsion to tell, a compulsive storytelling” and “a pervasive linking of death, mourning and spectrality, especially in terms of storytelling, transgenerational inheritance and knowledge” (12). In so far as it is simultaneously linked with strangeness, excess, spectrality, the quest for knowledge, and compulsive storytelling, the uncanny in Royle’s sense of the term provides a perfect trope for Banville’s novels which are rife with such characteristics.

Furthermore, such a view of the uncanny immediately situates it within the realm of Gothic fiction. Banville arguably uses the uncanny as a modality in which he creates a (post)modern variation on the Gothic novel in *Eclipse*. Although various aspects of this type of fiction does recur in many of Banville’s novels, it is in *Eclipse* that a systematic effort is visible in order to create Gothic effect: the old spooky house haunted by ghosts, lingering dwelling in dark doorways and corridors, faint beams of light, shadows, the supernatural to name but a few. Looking at *Eclipse* as such also allows us to use Lacan’s notion of extimity as a post-structuralist reworking of the Freudian uncanny. The latter enables us to shed light on Banville’s (post)modern poetics of the uncanny. According to Anneleen Masschelein, the uncanny is first and foremost “an aesthetic rather than a clinical phenomenon” (*The Unconcept* 47) in that it “confronts Freud with the paradoxical fact that people can actually derive aesthetic pleasure from a sensation of anxiety” (42).

In what follows, Alex’s haunted universe will be looked at in relation to his spatial

representations. Then the different modalities of spectrality will be studied: firstly the way in which spectrality ties in with virtuality and, secondly, how the spectral becomes an aspect of liminality and duality. Finally, the figuration of the doppelganger will be explored in order to demonstrate how spectrality and reality coincide and produce a paradoxical sense of self.

## 2. Haunting, stillness, silence

I examined the gate. It is what I think used to be called a postern, a wooden affair, very old now, dark and rotted to crumbling stumps at top and bottom, set into the whitewashed wall on two big rusted rings and held fast with a rusted bolt. Often as a boy I would enter by this gate when coming home from school (112-3).

Thus Alex depicts the gate that leads to his childhood house. He does not simply enter but pauses, as if in hesitation, in order to “examine” the gate, studying its details with intensity. The past itself, his days as a schoolboy, congeals in front of him on the surface of the gate. The narrator, like the reader, gets an inkling of what lies behind it. It is not some cosy home, a “felicitous space” where Alex can “dream in peace,” the feeling Gaston Bachelard thought to accompany the homecomer.<sup>50</sup> The words “dark,” “rotted,” “crumbling” immediately conjure up a Gothic setting. The house is far from a neutral space in which the actions of the novel take place. In fact, it is the “house itself ” that “drew me back,” says Alex, by sending him “secret summoners to bid me come” (4). In this sense, the house verges on the animate, the living—a hallmark of the uncanny.<sup>51</sup> The house is treacherous, a source of anguish and

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<sup>50</sup> In *The Poetics of Space*, Bachelard defines the house as a place of peace, solitude, and tranquillity, a place where one can reminisce “in peace,” nurturing one’s memories (6, 47).

<sup>51</sup> Freud mentions Ernst Jentch’s idea that the uncanny is generated “when there is intellectual uncertainty whether an object is alive or not, and when an inanimate object becomes too much like an animate one” (“The Uncanny” 233).

“panic” (4). Outside the house, “The grass clutched at my ankles and there were holes in the clay, under the grass, made by the hoofs of immemorial cattle when this edge of town was still open country, that would trip me up” (3-4). The grass and the clay express malevolent intentionality and the holes are not simply traces of horses, but portals to an old past. In “the old place” (5) the very walls murmur “the sense of” his long dead mother and “under everything” lurks “all that potential” (60).

According to David Punter, in the Irish—as well as Scottish—context, the significance of the Gothic lies primarily in its connection with history. More specifically, it is “a history that is constantly under the threat of erasure” and the Gothic, “at a certain point became a way of articulating [...] suppressed histories” (105-6); hence the recurrence of “the monument” that “reveals itself as a ruin” as well as a fascination with “antiquarianism” (118). The writers’ obsession with the “inexplicable antediluvian past” (119) provides a modality with which they can cope with a difficult past (122). Since the past, and especially a difficult past, is a predominant theme of Banville’s fiction, it comes as little surprise that he makes use of the rich Gothic tradition. Banville, in this sense, belongs to a long tradition of Irish writers of the Gothic that includes the likes of J.S. Le Fanu, Bram Stoker, and Elizabeth Bowen. One defining feature of the narrator’s relationship with the past in *Eclipse* is the recurrent, almost violent, dislocation of his reality by the splitting of perceptual experience into the present and a parallel past:

Softly I stepped into the passageway leading out to the front hall. A gleam in the lino transported me on the instant, heart-shakingly, to a country road somewhere, in April, long ago, at evening [...] Here is the staircase, with a thick beam of sunlight hanging in suspended fall from a window on the landing above (115).

In this passage a number of the crucial aspects that characterize Alex’s Gothic representation

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are condensed. Firstly, Alex's sudden transposition into the past causes him an overwhelming sense of fright. It is as if "the beam of light" instantly *beams* him to another tempo-spatial reality. That is to say, the relationship between the present and the past is not one of evolutionary development but of sudden juxtaposition and violent conflict. The past erupts into the present and disjoins it. Secondly, the house itself is involved in this phantasmagoric experience at the structural level. Alex's tempo-social dislocation takes place while he is passing through the passageway. A similar incident is reported by Alex when he is going up the staircase: "I mounted the steps as if I were climbing into the past itself, the years pressing down on me, like a heavier atmosphere" (17). The passageway and the staircase are gateways to an otherworld in which temporality acquires a spatial dimension. That objects in the present—here, the passageway and the staircase—awaken the past in one is in line with Proust's "involuntary memory" in which he does something unwittingly and this action, unbeknownst to him, opens up the past, suddenly making it prolific in front of his eyes. One result of this is that Alex's consciousness is always fluctuating between past and present, hence, constantly dissociating from reality (more of this later on). Staircases and passageways in the house then function as thresholds, crossing points, liminal spaces in which the distinction between physical and psychic realities is blurry. The very fabric of outer space fuses with the narrator's innermost feelings and thoughts, becoming increasingly unstable. What is more, spatial instability is often accompanied by cognitive uncertainty: climbing "the unlit steep stairs" is accompanied by the a "decayed dry odour, stirring in me a tangle of indistinct rememberings." Suddenly, "something [...] a sort of tightening in the atmosphere of the room, made me turn my head" (44). The lack of light and the resulting darkness add yet another layer of Gothic to the depiction. It throws him in the world of the unknown where the sensation of uncertainty is evoked by such words and phrases as "indistinct," "something," and "a sort of."

The third aspect of the Gothic highlighted in the passage cited at the beginning of the discussion lies in the fact that Alex's lapse into the past memory is coupled with the suspension of the very fabric of time and space. The "beam of sunlight" stays "hanging in suspended fall" (115). Temporal fixity is especially foregrounded by the mention of the month of April. The latter occupies a particular position in Alex's temporal representations in that a substantial number of his lapses of memory take him back to this same month: he remembers being invaded by the mysterious "form" on a day in April (3); a memory of his daughter Cass falling into one of her sickly bouts of epilepsy takes place "on a day in April" (75); and, he "found [himself] one glassy April evening at the unmarked door of a nondescript red-brick house in a leafy suburb, feeling inexplicably nervous, my heart racing and palms wet" (91). What is striking is that, often, when a memory is said to have taken place in April, it entails a moment characterized by an inexplicable anxiety or is associated with an unpleasant, troubling experience. At the same time, one can argue, the successive conjuring up of April suggests a temporal fixity in which all the disturbing memories are grouped together. In this sense, Alex is fixed in an in-between temporospatial dimension. By the same token, faced with such indistinct susurrations at the house as "soft footsteps on the stair" and "distant murmuring down in the depths of the house" (54), Alex's attitude is one characterized by fixity: "now and then I have the sense of a general pausing and standing still, as when one stops on a country road at night and the imagined footsteps at one's back stop also on the instant" (54). The metaphor he uses to depict the sensation immediately relates it to Gothic horror: he is haunted by a presence discernible only via a faint sound. According to Mladen Dolar, sound has a structural relationship with space. The noise whose origin one is unable to ascertain "immediately" connects with enigmatic spatiality. It becomes "structurally mysterious," and represents "a rupture of causality that one has to reestablish, fill in the missing link" ("The Burrow" 116). Even when "hearing a sound

pertains to time,” Dolar adds, “it is the time which demands its translation into space. The enigma of sound has a temporality which can only find its solution in spatiality” (116). Sound, says Dolar, also has a spectral dimension that has to do with the supposition “that the sound is always alive, it comes from animation, a rustling movement of life, it’s the sign of a spectral life” (116).

But more than sound, it is the reign of eerie silence that gives *Eclipse* its Gothic aspect. Ghosts “always” appear to Alex “in a silence deeper than silence, a silence that is an unheard hum” (54). Stillness is spatial fixity as well as acoustic silence. While having a telephone conversation with Lydia, the ghosts reappear: “No sound at all, except for a faint, a very faint hissing, that might have been no more than the sound of my own self, blood, lymph, labouring organs, making its susurrus in my ears” (43). Whereas absence was the defining element of Gabriel’s universe in *Mefisto*, for Alex it is silence. The latter is the intense intrusion of the dimension of the death drive. It is a silence, Alex emphasizes, that is not simply the lack of sound, but an uncanny silence that gives rise to the terrifying dimension of sound. It is a haunting silence. In another scene, Alex sees a seagull standing “beyond the glass, doing nothing except opening wide its beak in what seemed a yawn or a soundless cry” (66). The mediating glass functions as a reification of his psychic/artistic mediation, literally framing the bird and transforming it into a painting that resonates with Munch’s *Scream*. In “The Ego and the Id” Freud postulates, “the death drives are by their nature mute” (387).<sup>52</sup> The death drive, says Dolar following Freud, is silent yet “omnipresent,” “keeps silent, invisible and inaudible, albeit omnipresent” (*Voice* 130). It is not merely still peacefulness, but, rather, “the other” of speech and sound, that which haunts them. It is “inscribed” in them

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<sup>52</sup> To the death drive (“Thanatos”) Freud opposes Eros, which brings about “the clamor of life” (“The Ego and the Id” 387). Both drives are always intertwined, inserted in each other; they always act together in various combinations, so that the silence of the death drive is the accompanying silent shadow of the clamour of life, its reverse” (Dolar, *Voice* 130)

(152). According to Dolar, one can discern at least two types of silence: Symbolic silence and Real silence. The former is the absence of phoneme, the “alteration of presences and absences” which is the “inner element of speech” (153). For instance it is the silence that can have a meaning because it is part of the signifying structure that functions on binary structures. On the other hand, there is Real silence: “it is not a silence which contributes to sense, and this is its most disturbing feature; it presents something we can call silence in the register of the [R]eal. It does not tell us anything, but it persists” (156).<sup>53</sup> The second is precisely the sort of silence Alex encounters in the house. While in the passageway, says Alex, “I stood listening, and seemed listened back to by the silence” (115). Silence is subjectivized and animate. That is to say, it is not limited to the lack of phoneme, it is not Symbolic. Rather it is a form of silence that listens back to the narrator with intent. It is a major element that produces the uncanny.

### 3. Spectrality, virtuality, duality

Alex meets two sets of ghosts. On the one hand he sees the ghost of his dead father who appears “as real as in life, dressed in striped pyjamas and shoes without laces and an old wheat-coloured cardigan, the same attire that he had worn every day in the long last months of his dying” (44). The experience is marked by the real-life depiction of minute details that enable Alex to immediately identify the phantom. On the other hand, there is the ghost of a

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<sup>53</sup> As Dolar points out, insistence and “constant pressure” is a feature of the Freudian *Trieb*. Indeed the silence of the drives does not lie in any natural relationship between the two. It is not the silence “of some natural life, it does not pertain to some organic or animal base; on the contrary, the drives present a nature denatured, they are not a regression to some originary unsurpassed animal past which would come to haunt us, but the consequence of the assumption of the [S]ymbolic order” (*Voice* 155).

mysterious woman whose “head was covered and I could make out no features.” It lacks a definite gender: “a woman, or womanish old man, or even a child” (26). In a second apparition, the woman ghost is accompanied by a child. The latter is “so vague and amorphous is its form; it is the mere idea of a child, no more” (47). The figures’ obscure form is reminiscent of the indistinct “form” he tells us he is invaded by at the beginning of the novel: “At first it was a form. Or not even that. A weight, an extra weight” (3). The words with which Alex describes the ghosts are reminiscent of a Platonic duality between Forms and appearances. Ideal forms are unchangeable and belong to the realm of transcendental Being whereas appearances belong to the alterable world of Becoming, the world we see and live in. The ghosts, Alex says, have a form of being that is “still growing into existence” (47). However, insofar as they *can* be seen by Alex, the phantoms are not pure Forms, which lie beyond human senses. They are neither pure Forms nor tangible matter. They appear to him in another “dimension” in which “nothing is definite” (46), a world that subsists in between the realm of Forms and the world of matter.

Spectral perceptions are not limited to seeing ghosts. Earlier, Alex “turned and looked back at the house and saw what I took to be my wife standing at the window of what was once my mother’s room” (3). But Lydia later says she was not physically present behind the window and his perception of Lydia behind the window turns out to be unreal. Albeit Alex acknowledges the factual inexactitude of his perception, he continues to insist on its primacy: “I had seen my not-wife not-standing, and looked out at what she had not-seen” (18). By refusing to negate the verb (e.g. “I *hadn’t* seen my wife”) and instead, performing a triple negation of the predicates, he redefines his relationship with reality. For him, ultimately, what is real resides not in what is out there, but what is inside his head. Psychic reality, in other words, abrogates “objective” reality, rendering the distinction between them unclear. The “over-accentuation of psychical reality in comparison with material reality” is, according

Freud, a feature of the uncanny (*The Uncanny* 244). This of course casts enormous doubt with regard to the ontological status of Alex's perceptions in general. Indeed, the obscure child-woman-ghost figure may very well be Lilly who is living in the house unbeknownst to Alex. At the same time, the ghost appears as "shrouded" (26) and seems related to the woman Alex had just been dreaming about, the young "impossibly pale" girl who was "hiding her face in abandonment and shame" (25). It remains unclear whether the ghost and the young woman are in fact the same. By the same token, Alex sees "a young boy on a little black-and-white horse trotting bareback toward me." Strangely, "Despite the downpour the boy seemed hardly to be wet at all, as if he were protected within a invisible shell of glass" (112). It is impossible to account for the factual validity of these incidents. It remains unclear how much of it is reality and how much imagination. These perceptions are uncanny precisely because their ontological status is unfixed. The lack of a discernible distinction between the dichotomy reality/imagination, according to Samuel Weber, is "constitutive for the uncanny." The result is an irreducible undecidability "which affects and infects representations, motifs, themes and situations, which [...] always mean something other than what they are" (*The Legend of Freud* 233-4).

Among Alex's spectral perceptions, the one in which Lydia figures seems especially helpful in understanding Alex's relation with reality and imagination. By affirming a non-predicate Alex's description adds a third element to the opposition real/imaginary, at least on a linguistic level. What Alex sees is neither real in the sense of objective reality, nor does he simply accept it as an imaginary unreal. It is a third element that superimposes itself at the very limit of real and imaginary. Although it lacks "objective" materiality, the *not*-thing ("not-wife," "not-standing," and "not-seen") exists in Alex's visual field (or, rather, it insists

on being seen).<sup>54</sup> Regarding these perceptions, Alex states: “I am not so deluded as to not know that these images are the product of my imagination but,” he adds, “I see them, as clear as anything I cannot touch, the sky, clouds, those far blue hills” (55). In contrast, Alex speaks of a world in which “everywhere around me there is substance, eminently tangible stuff, the common old world itself, hard and dense and warm to the touch” (124). Alex seems able to distinguish between two sets of perceptions, one that belongs to the intangible yet visual and one to the tangible material. The (unconventional) affirmation of the non-predicate together with the use of “see” and “touch” in order to distinguish between different sets of phenomena demonstrate Alex’s linguistic experiment (or struggle) to deal with his perceptual predicament. His attempt arguably introduces a third category that can correspond with his uncanny perceptions, perceptions that elude the standard reality/imagination binary opposition.

Alex’s problematization of reality and illusion resonates with Deleuze’s concept of the “virtual.” According to Deleuze, the virtual is not opposed to the “real” but to the “actual.” In turn, the “real” is opposed, not to the illusory, but to the “possible,” that which yet lacks existence (*Bergsonism* 96-8). According to this formulation, the virtual and the real can very well coincide. That is to say, albeit it lacks a material basis, the virtual can be interacted with on the level of reality. Rob Shields builds on Deleuze’s model of reality and derives different ontological modalities. According to this model, reality has two forms: ideal (virtual) real and actual real. The former includes “memories” and other “intangibles” whereas the latter designates “tangible objects” such as “material boundaries” (*Spatial Questions* xii).<sup>55</sup> Accordingly, says Shields, the virtual “is fully real.” It is “constitutive but ineffable. It is not

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<sup>54</sup> The importance of negation in the narrators’ self-perceptions will be further explored in Alex and Axel’s self-representations in chapter five.

<sup>55</sup> Shields derives two more possibilities: virtual possible (“abstract representations, maps, borders”) and actual possible (realm of statistics, “risks” “political economics of value”) (*Spatial Questions* xii).

opposed to the real and is therefore not realizable in the same way that the [...] possible is” (*The Virtual* 30). In this sense, the virtual challenges the traditional reality/illusion dichotomy and provides an additional way of conceiving the ontological status of reality, a mode in which the real no longer requires material support in order for it to be *real*. The virtual-ideal in the Deleuzian sense provides an apt category in which Alex’s uncanny perceptions can be grouped under. In so far as the virtual introduces the limit of reality and illusion, it suits Banville’s universe perfectly since it is the realm of the liminal in which reality and imagination are inseparable. Deleuze builds his concept of virtuality by taking as the starting point Proust’s definition of memory as “real but not actual, ideal but not abstract” (qtd in Shields, *Spatial Questions* xi). Memory, according to Deleuze,

is not an actual image which forms after the object has been perceived, but a virtual image coexisting with the actual perception of the object. Memory is a Virtual [sic] image contemporary with the actual object, its double, its “mirror image” (*Dialogues II* 150)

All of Banville’s novels are based on memories. As writers, the narrators rely on their unreliable memories for their narration. In *Eclipse*, memories are so central that they form that which haunts the narrator: “Memories crowd in on me, irresistibly, threatening to overwhelm my thoughts entirely” (55). At the same time, key in Proust’s dictum is the word “ideal”. Etymologically, “ideal” originates from the Greek words for seeing or beholding (*ἰδέειν*) and shape or form (*ἰδέα*). In effect, Alex’s specters appear to him as indistinct forms.

Although the apparitions lack materiality, says Alex, “they *are* a product; they are not in my head, they are outside” (55). Using the word “product” to describe his spectral visions endows them with a physical dimension since products are normally *material* products. Elsewhere, he observes: “The phantoms work their immanent magic on [Lily]. She reclines in the places where they appear, in their very midst, a grubby and all too actual odalisque”



(123). Immanence is usually used in order to speak of moments in which the metaphysical (or the divine) manifests itself in material reality, when transcendence permeates mundanity. In addition, the use of the word “grubby” considered along the emphatic phrase “*all too* actual” is particularly revelatory. Her overstated actuality is foregrounded by the spectral presence of the ghosts: she reclines where they appear, as if the spectral frames her material presence. As well as dirty—Lily is depicted on numerous occasions as someone who does not pay much attention to her appearance—*grubby* signifies being infected. In other words, the spectral frames the material as well as polluting it, permeating it. “The virtuals,” says Deleuze, “encircling the actual, perpetually renew themselves by emitting yet others, with which they are in turn surrounded and which go on in turn to react upon the actual” (*Dialogues II* 148). Deleuze emphasizes that the virtual is primarily characterized by its “brevity.” It “occur[s] in a period of time shorter than the shortest continuous period imaginable.” Consequently, the status of the virtual remains uncertain and indeterminate (*Dialogues II* 148). Indeed, Alex’s spectral apparitions are “momentary” (3) and “brief” (46).

In Alex’s narrative the spectres have “their own world,” a netherworld of which Alex is bestowed occasional glimpses:

When I speak of them being at the table, or the range, or standing on the stairs, it is not the actual stairs or range or table that I mean. They have their own furniture, [...] It looks like the solid stuff among which I move, but it is not the same, or it is the same at another stage of existence” (48).

Although at first sight Alex seems to differentiate between the “actual” and the spectral world, the narration reveals a more nuanced relationship between the two. The way in which the pieces of furniture figure in Alex’s description constitutes a chiasmic structure between the actual and the virtual—table, range, stairs, and then, stairs, range, table. The stairs of both sides are the closest in this chiasmic structure, as if linking the two realms. Indeed a staircase

is a liminal space of transition between two floors. Therefore, rather than a relation of contrast, the virtual and the actual minimally overlap.

If the ghostly scene has a chair in it, say, that the [phantom] woman is sitting on, and that occupies the same space as a real chair in the real kitchen, and is superimposed on it, however ill the fit, the result will be that when the scene vanishes the real chair will retain a sort of aura, will blush, almost, in the surprise of being singled out and fixed upon, of being lighted upon, in this fashion (48).

By referring to the spectral world as “the ghostly scene,” he seemingly renders it distinct from reality. Yet the distinction is quickly problematized as the superimposition of the spectral on the real produces an extra, an ephemeral addition which, while it lingers, it derails the unity of Alex’s experience. The imagery evoked in this passage resonates best with the central metaphor-title of the novel. An eclipse is the superimposition of a shadow on the sun with an aural ring persisting around the eclipsed object. Nicolas Royle calls the uncanny the realm of “the maddening logic of the supplement” (*The Uncanny* 8). The supplement disrupts the narrators’ unified experience, generating uncanny representations. After all, what haunts Alex, is first and foremost an “extra weight” (3). Therefore, the key word “extraordinary” (38) in Alex’s perceptions indicates out-of-ordinariness as well as something extra, added, to the ordinary. The banality of experience is transformed into strangeness via the inclusion, or, rather, intrusion of excess into perceptual experience, at times, revealing fresh layers of significance. In Alex’s uncanny world of supplements “everything was bathed in a faint glow of strangeness, an unearthly radiance” (45), “a passing spectral significance” (48). Although the specters are “insinuating,” it is not meaning that they produce, but an “air of inscrutable significance.” It is their “effect” that haunts Alex (48). They represent the limit of Alex’s epistemological quest.

In the passage cited above, the reiteration of the word “real” is significant. What seems

to be an attempt to emphasize the distinction between reality and spectrally results in the duplication of the very real. Its repetition, at least on the surface of the text, doubles it, dualizes it. Consequently people as well as objects are doubled: he speaks of “the chair, the real chair” (48); he is unsure whether things are “representations of themselves” (49); his mother appears as a “statue of herself” (59); speaking to Lydia on the phone, he believes “that it was not really she on the line, but a recording, or even a mechanically generated imitation of her voice” (106); he sees himself “doubly reflected” (89); and, Lily “is transformed, becomes a different child” (125). The latter’s very name too connotes duplication. The Gothic, Linda Dryden says, is a “literature of duality” (*The Modern Gothic* 41) and, according to Maria Beville, the Gothic achieves its effect in “presenting otherness,” that is to say, “othered versions” of what is familiar (*Gothic-postmodernism* 41-2).

In light of Alex’s relationship with virtuality, the use of the verb “touch” acquires a particular significance. Although, on one level, he distinguishes between the material objects and the virtual nature of the spectral apparitions, touch is almost never associated with touching matter. Alex touches not Lydia’s actual shoulder but “the air by Lydia’s shoulder” (20). Even as a noun, it is rather *touch* as a hint or trace that is emphasized: “The deserted square” has an “alien air, a touch almost of Transylvania” (25);<sup>56</sup> Cass has “a touch of the nun” (72); and, the tramp he encounters in the street has “a touch of umbrage” (105), with “umbrage” itself being already associated with shadow. The resulting imagery is a trace of a shadow, doubly deferring his perception of reality. Similarly, he boasts about his ability as an actor to “lend a touch of verisimilitude to whatever character” (100-1), that is, the trace of the appearance of being real. Otherwise, when it does figure in its original meaning of laying hand on matter, he either does not quite manage to touch but “*almost* touched his knees [my italics]” (41), or his kinesthetic access is barred by a negation: “I may observe, but not touch”

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<sup>56</sup> Indeed, Transylvania conjures up a Gothic atmosphere as it famously functions as the setting for Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*.

(103) and “I cannot touch” (55). “The interior” of the hotel in which he married Lydia is described as “many-layered and slightly gummy to the touch, like toffee” (38). What is conjured up is the way in which the place’s interiority is not directly accessible but mediated by a numbers of layers. Yet it is sticky, that is, attracting the touch, momentarily fixing the touch. This is arguably a metaphor for the way in which Alex relates to the search for his ever-elusive self. The latter is only accessible in an occasional fixity, yet each time his access is fixed, it is encountered by multi-layered complexity. Finally, when he effectively touches something, rather than using the verb *touch*, he speaks of the “banister rail under my hand” that does not reproduce the simple sensation of touching, but a “dubious intimacy” (115).

According to Mladen Dolar, “tactility, touching, the sense of touch, all appear to be the firmest thing there is. What one can touch is, tautologically, the most palpable and the most tangible” (“Touching Ground” 79). Among all the senses, “touching is singled out by its immediacy, while other senses are subject to a certain deferral in various ways” (79). What one can touch is perceived “closer,” “more real” than the object perceived by the other senses. In touching the “spatial distance” between the subject and object is demolished (79). Alex’s problematic sense of touch, in contrast, alienates him further from material reality. He is deprived of the proximity with the material object that constitutes one’s immediate experience of reality. In chapter one we saw how from *Birchwood* to *Mefisto* the narrators’ *grip* on their reality and sense of self is gradually undermined until it is lost in Gabriel Swan’s psychotic perceptions. In *Eclipse*, although Alex tries to “get a grip on things” (28), all he is left with is a faint touch of a shadow. In so far as the signifier *grip* relates to the question of control, one can define the succession of Banville’s novels following *Mefisto* as narratives in which control continues to be undermined. At the same time, the narratives figure highly narcissistic protagonists obsessed with the very control they constantly find themselves losing. Their paradoxical predicament, one can argue, lies in the fact that the

failure of their control is inscribed in the very nature of their epistemological enterprise. The more they strive to get to the bottom of things, so to speak, the less they seem to understand, the more out of touch they become. Their very fascination with the nature of things around them results in their very alienation from reality.

#### 4. Gothic sublimity, *extimity* as Gothic

For Alex, “the apparitions will never come at my bidding” (53). His control over them is limited, “weak or contingent,” similar to the sort of control one has “over the riotous tumble of happenings in a dream” (54). Moreover, the large majority of the phantom apparitions either take place in, or are seen through, liminal spaces such as doorways. For instance, he sees the paternal ghost “standing in the open doorway” (44) and the woman phantom “through the kitchen doorway” (46). Moreover, they take place during moments between sleep and wakefulness: “was I still dreaming, half asleep?” (26). These are moments during which the distinction between sleep and wakefulness is at its blurriest, when reality and dream are highly porous: “I opened my eyes and did not know where I was. The window was in the wrong place, the wardrobe too” (26). To put it in psychoanalytic terms, it is when the Symbolic coordinates are at their shakiest and not well (re)established. This is where Banville’s *Eclipse* extensively lingers, where Alex is depicted as constantly looking for “the co-ordinates of my world” (78). These moments function as thresholds marked by undecidability and lack of control. “Gothic in general,” David Punter claims, is related to the question of one’s power, or, rather the lack thereof: “it incarnates a set of stories within which human individuals are at the mercy of larger powers” (“Scottish and Irish Gothic” 122).

According to Žižek, the apparition of the spectral into reality has to do with a

fundamental gap in reality itself, a fissure brought about by the ontologically incomplete nature of the Symbolic order. Since the Symbolic order is unable to completely overwrite the Real, reality is never self-contained, self-evident, and whole. To put it in his words, reality “presents itself via its incomplete, failed symbolization” (*Mapping Ideology* 21). “Spectral apparitions,” in turn, “emerge in the very gap that forever separates reality from the [R]eal [...] The spectral gives body to that which escapes (the [S]ymbolically structured) reality” (21). In this sense, says Žižek, the spectral is the name for that which “conceals” that part of reality that is “primordially repressed,” “the irrepresentable [*sic*] X on whose ‘repression’ reality itself is founded” (21). In *Eclipse* Banville arguably creates a narrative in which his protagonist is constantly made to face reality’s enigmatic and horrifying unrepresentables. Besides formless ghosts he sees unknowable things: “I had stopped on instinct before I registered the thing and sat aghast [...] listening to my own blood hammering in my ears [...] What was it? [...] some wild unknown thing [...] seemingly legless [...] My heart was pounding yet” (5). The “thing” is unknowable, radically other. It is not of this world in that it does not resemble any animal the narrator has ever met. He is unable to situate it within his Symbolic universe; no signifier is available for him in order to situate it within the metonymic flow of meaning. It represents the limit of meaning and understanding, the point where the narrator’s narcissistically epistemological quest meets its failure. It provokes anxiety since the sole feasible response to this impossibility is horror. By the same token, faced with the phantom woman, he is struck dumb, unable to utter a word: “the mechanism of my voice could not be made to work” (27). In so far as the voice functions as a vessel for words, that is to say, insofar as the voice is the conveyor of meaning, it fails.

The disturbance in the relation between signifier and signified is related to the experience of the sublime. At its most elementary level, as Edmund Burke suggests, the sublime arises when one encounters a beyond. According to Burke, “the ruling principle of

the sublime” is terror, but a terror that is not entirely displeasing since it produces intense emotion. Burke specifically speaks of powerful nature as a source of sublimity which infuses the individual simultaneously with “astonishment,” “passion,” and “some degree of horror” because it “robs the mind of all its powers of acting and reasoning” (*A Philosophical Inquiry* 58). The sublimity of formidable nature is present in *Eclipse*: Alex speaks of the “vast sky, the glacial clouds in monumental progress” (3). The sky can be “growing steadily more threatening” (110), and “above” Alex, “the trees conferred among themselves in fateful whispers” (111). However, more than anything, it is his own perception, his own memories that overwhelm Alex the most (55). Horrifying sublimity, in other words, is primarily produced from within. In “Gothic sublimity,” David Morris argues that the Gothic novel revises the sublime as developed by Burke. According to Morris, Gothic fiction reveals the obverse side of sublimity, that is, terror not at that which is without the subject, but terror at that which inspires awe because it is hidden within (310). The Gothic produces the sublime devoid of “transcendence.” It is “a vertiginous and plunging—not a soaring—sublime, which takes us deep within rather than far beyond the human sphere.” It is terrorizing because it generates “the threat of loss of control” over one’s very intimate experience (306). In this sense, the sublime ties in with Freud’s uncanny. The “fundamental law of Gothic fiction,” says Morris, resonates with the ability of the uncanny in inspiring a “mixture of attraction and revulsion” (307). Alex’s dreamlike world, in turn, evokes in him not only feelings of horror and “sorrows,” but also “such exaltations” (3). His uncanny encounters generate a combination of thrill and dread. Although “Everything was askew” and “all the parts of it known” yet “not where they should be,” Alex emphasizes, “I was seized by a peculiar cold excitement, the sort that comes in dreams, at once irresistible and disabling” (114). What is more, just as the Freudian uncanny terrorizes the subject with the return of the repressed, the Gothic “confronts us with the repetition of what we prefer to keep hidden or covered by

denial” (Morris, “Gothic sublimity” 310). In both, trepidation does not arise from an encounter with exterior horror, but, rather, from within. In so far as the unconscious is radically other and, thus, cannot be known or represented as such, the uncanny functions as a momentary but persisting threshold through which the subject is confronted with the limit of direct representation. According to Žižek, the sublime is a paradoxical object “which, in the very field of representation, provides a view, in a negative way of the dimension of what is unrepresentable” (*The Sublime Object* 203). In Aline Flieger’s words, the “sublime might well be called the postmodern version of Freud’s uncanny” in that “the return of the repressed is” in fact “the return of a persisting element.” It is “the object that insists on being seen, and on captivating the seer in a field of reciprocal gazes that may not be reduced to his superior on-point perspective” (“The Paranoid Eye” 101). The sublime object defies the subject’s control in that it does not appear at one’s will, that is, when one is looking directly, head-on. It is elusive to any straightforward perception and can only be perceived when direct perception is absent.

## 5. Extimate encounters

The sublime is also related to what in psychoanalysis is referred to as the Thing (as the impossible object). According to Lacan, the unnamable *Thing* is distinguished from *things* which are “closely linked” with words, hence, they are nameable (*Ethics* 54). A thing is marked by language and related to “the transition to the [S]ymbolic of a conflict between men” (*Ethics* 52). In contrast, as Gary Farnell has it, the Thing “is the absolute otherness,” “a phantasmic reference to an unnamable void at the centre of the Real” that lies beyond the Symbolic order. It cannot be represented as such, but can only be “misrepresented as a series of effects” (“The Gothic and the Thing” 113). However, the relation between the Thing and a



thing is not of clear-cut separation. Rather, it is a relation of *extimity*. The latter is a neologism Lacan coined in order to explain the paradoxical status of the Thing as that which is both intimate and exterior (*Ethics* 171). The Thing is the impossible object at the heart of the Real. It has to be excluded, repressed, so that *a thing* can emerge in reality. For a thing to be representable by language, it has to be “defined against the impossible reality of the Thing” (Farnell 113). However, the fact that the thing is only representable when the Thing is excluded means that the Thing and a thing are primordially linked together.<sup>57</sup> That is to say, the (impossible) Thing is “at the very interior of the figure to which it is external” (Farnell 113). Extimity means that the negative exclusion marks the positive symbol, permeates it, becomes inseparable from it. In a word, it haunts it. Therefore, as Farnell points out, the Thing is located inside as well as outside of any Symbolic production such as art and culture. From a Lacanian perspective, then, Farnell adds, “Gothic is the name for the speaking subject’s confrontation with intimations of the Thing” (113). The extimate Thing explains how “such externalities” in Gothic art as “haunted spaces and decaying properties, with absences at their heart,” coincide with the “subject’s deepest and most imperceptible subjectivity” (113-4). Gothic fiction stages the subject’s encounter with the unrepresentable Thing and during these encounters activate “the key processes of *sublimation* and *abjection*” (115). Following Lacan, Farnell concludes that artistic objects are generally created “ex nihilo” in the sense that “they all begin with a hole in signification and thus encircle the emptiness at the heart of representation that is nothing other than the Thing” (115). In *Eclipse* objects are not merely things but “hidden portents,” always revealing an otherside, an echo

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<sup>57</sup> One can reformulate this claim using Lacan’s idea of the Real in his later work. Insofar as the Thing is an impossibility, it can be defined as Real. Therefore, in order for an object (a thing) to appear in reality (or the representation of reality), the Real must be excluded from representation since the Real is traumatic and meaningless and its inclusion disrupts meaning. However, as Lacan constantly insisted, the Real can never be completely excluded because that which is meant to cancel it, to tame it, namely, the Symbolic, is not complete, not a closed and self-contained system but barred.

from the past or a premonition of the future. They either demonstrate “shades of dried blood” or bear “traces of an intruder” (18). The “bentwood chair” is “resentful-looking” and “night table with wormholes,” functions as a tempo-spatial wormhole that instantly connects him to the past, thereby disrupting the unity of his experience (18). In this abyssal house:

Something would catch my attention, anything, a cobweb, a damp patch on a wall, a scrap of old newspaper lining a drawer, a discarded paperback, and I would stop and stand gazing at it for a long time, motionless, lost, unthinking (19).

The house represents a space in which the Real aspect of “anything” easily comes to the fore, transfixing—“motionless”—him. The use of “*unthinking*” is significant. It is the realm in which the prefix “un” is that of the *uncanny*, the undead, that which persists in its horrifying negative existence. It is familiar—it is still an object in reality—yet simultaneously bizarre. It is the obverse of thinking and knowing. Faced with these uncanny objects, Alex “seem[s] to be fading” (18). The Thing-objects envelope him, threatening to hollow out his very sense of self.

More specifically, there are a series of encounters with peculiar figures that produce in Alex’s narrative Gothic extimity. When Alex comes face to face with the tramp he had been following, he immediately depicts the encounter in terms of loss of control. He is “forced” into the experience and the tramp is perceived as “an opponent into whose power I had clumsily allowed myself to fall” (105). Furthermore,

Despite the fellow’s fierce appearance there had been something cloyingly intimate in the encounter, something from which my mind’s eye insisted on averting its gaze. Rules had been broken, a barrier had been transgressed, and interdiction breached (105)

In spite of the fact that the tramp and Alex do not seem to share any apparent physical trait, the tramp evokes in Alex something nauseatingly familiar, something his conscious self strives to avoid, to repress. The words “barrier” and “transgressed” evoke a boundary that is

no longer able to safeguard his self-containment. His most intimate, that which Alex expects to remain hidden within his own boundaries, coincides with an exteriority; in a word, it is extimate. Liminality is further emphasized by the fact Alex meets the tramp on a “bridge,” a transitory in-between space between two sides (105). Elsewhere, he compares the “intimate” and “momentous” sensation he experiences after meeting his father’s ghost to a moment during his school years when

one day passing by an empty classroom I had glimpsed a teacher, a youngish man with red hair—I can still see him, so clearly—standing by the blackboard with a letter in his hands, weeping lavishly, his shoulders shaking, with dark stains on his soutane where the tears were splashing (45).

A momentary, intense image intrudes. A few pieces of information are shared but, without any explanation as to the nature of what seems to be a significant letter or the reason the man was crying, Alex swiftly returns to his narration. The two dashes literally import the intrusion of the image in Alex’s mind into the fabric of the text, as if they represent a momentary opening and closing. The mysterious red-haired figure returns as a boy riding a horse while Alex is ridiculously led to his own house by Quirke whom he was following. Alex is unsure whether it is a smile or “a grimace” that he catches from the boy. What he highlights in the encounter, though, is the boy’s “belt, an old-fashioned one such as I used to wear myself when I was his age” (112). In other words, the encounter takes Alex, again, back to the past. This is emphasized by the fact that the boy, without saying a word, “went on again, into the lane whence I had come” (112). They take the opposite direction to Alex, where he had just been, that is to say, his past. Seemingly, the boy has to do with Alex’s first love at school, a boy with “thin, reddish hair” whom Alex takes to be the same age as he is (128). What is peculiar is that while Alex is in his forties, the boy does not seem to have aged at all. He is fixed in the past and the encounter, one is led to believe, is yet another visual intrusion

similar to the one Alex perceives previously. Later, the red-haired figure reappears with “a thin, foxy face” as a clown-magician in the circus Alex takes Lilly to (150). “He looked familiar,” reminding him of yet another similarly red-haired figure he used to meet in the street with “alarming frequency.” The latter figure Alex “seemed vaguely to know.” He displays a combination of mocking attitude and “amused knowingness” (150-1). Likewise, during the circus interval the clown-magician reappears with “that knowing smirk” (180).

As Schwall points out, the “leering, insinuating red-haired” figure is reminiscent of Felix in *Mefisto* who “returns with the same appearance in *Athena*, *Eclipse*, and *Shroud*” (“Mirrors” 119). This, according to Schwall, demonstrates the “irrepressible revenant part of the past throughout Banville’s oeuvre” (119). In *Eclipse*, specifically, the recurrence of the red-haired in the narrative reveals an aspect of the Gothic novel in that, due to its insistence and repetition, it generates eeriness. This is all the more so if one considers other repetitions such as the recurrent month of April. Furthermore, the word *red* is not merely reiterated with regard to mysterious characters. To cite a few examples, the mysterious animal Alex encounters on the road has “unreal neon-red” (4) and one of the words Alex unsurely uses to describe the animal is a “fox” (5), thereby connecting it to the foxy face of the red-haired magician; he speaks of being caught “red-handed” (46); and, he feels “inexplicably nervous” with his “heart racing and palms wet” while he is about to enter a “red-brick house” (91). According to Morris, one way Gothic fiction achieves its effect is via the encounter with repetition and “exact facsimiles” that reveals the chilling existence of a supernatural power that undermines the subject’s rational grasp over the world (“Gothic Sublimity” 303-4). In this sense, “red” functions as a signifier without a signified, a signifier dislocated from signification. He is unable to anchor it in his conscious discourse and thus incapable of relating it to any meaning. In every encounter with the red-haired figure, Alex evokes forbidden or secret knowledge (112, 150, 180). It is a knowledge that is unavailable to Alex

but that the red-haired figure seems to possess. The figure gives Alex an *intimation*, an intimate trepidation, via a smile, a look. But the figure does not speak. In other words, he represents a liminal extimity that, while barring Alex's access to the forbidden knowledge, occasionally pulsates and gives off a sign, a grimace of the Real, but never Symbolic meaning. *Red* appears when Alex least expects it, when he is not looking directly, when he is least in control. It is a window to the abyss of the extimate Thing that appears only when one is looking awry.

The red-haired figure partly serves as yet another aspect of the Gothic in *Eclipse*, namely, the double. According to Dolar, the double is a dimension of extimity since its intrusion into one's reality, it introduces the dimension of the extimate Thing, and thus threatens one's "accustomed reality" ("I Shall Be with You" 11). In what follows we shall look at the different aspects of the double and the function they serve in Banville's Gothic narrative of *Eclipse*.

## 6. Spectrality and duality revisited: doppelgängers

Banville has always been interested in the twin motif in fiction. Both Gabriel Godkin and Gabriel Swan in *Birchwood* and *Mefisto* yearn to find their missing twin. They can see themselves whole only if they succeed in finding their missing siblings, the other half that will heal the sundered self. In the Art Trilogy, the twin motif turns into the double motif. According to Elke D'hoker, in *The Book of Evidence*, the figuration of the double primarily stems from the narrator's contradictory images of himself. The double, says D'hoker, polarizes Freddie's sense of self between "a consistent pattern of superior versus inferior self-images," between the "inner self" as opposed to the "outer self" (*Visions* 176-7). Caught in between this duality, Freddie's "real self" is in constant oscillation, resulting in the alienation

of his “true” identity (178). D’hoker views the double’s function as the deconstruction of the binary of true and false self. Furthermore, while in *Mefisto*, the Felix figure is the narrator’s “split-off evil self,” in the case of *The Book of Evidence*, the Bunter figure eludes such a clear-cut differentiation. According to D’hoker, unlike Felix, “Bunter is no fully-fledged separate character. He remains firmly within the narrators control” (181). In *Ghosts*, Felix reappears, at times, as the narrator’s double. But, D’hoker adds, *Ghost*’s Felix is the double “in the tradition of fantastic literature” (184) in that he is characterized with “omniscience” and thus related to “fantastic hesitation” (183), what Tzvetan Todorov defines as the “hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event” (*The Fantastic* 25). In *Ghosts*, D’hoker observes, the double fails to produce an effective Gothic effect since “the gothic references to mirrors, ghosts, devils and haunted houses are often exaggerated to the point of self-deflating parody” (183). In *Eclipse*, these elements arguably do aim at creating a Gothic novel. The general atmosphere in Alex’s narrative is one constantly characterized by horror and speechless fixity. In addition, Alex’s self-referential comments on the factual invalidity of his uncanny perceptions seem either a mode of containing the horror via the attempt at rationalizing that which his senses fail to cope with, or a way to endow the narrative with an air of honesty that situates him at the level of a witness who is simply sharing what he sees. It is his very perception that is unreliable. This makes it all the more horrifying since he is unable to tell fact from fiction for himself, rather than playfully aiming to mislead the reader—which is the case with Freddie’s playful narrative in *The Book of Evidence*.

Linda Dryden views the double as a key aspect of the traditional Gothic novel in that it represents a “supernatural force” that threatens the very “integrity of the self” (*The Modern Gothic* 38). The double generates the Gothic effect in so far as it introduces the possibility that the protagonist constantly find herself in the grip of a force from which she is unable to

free herself. It dualises the heretofore seemingly unified sense of selfhood. Regarding the figuration of the double in “the modern Gothic,” Dryden observes, doubles “exemplify” the post-structuralist notion of the “slippage of identity” and the “fragmentation of the self” (40-1). In his study *The Double*, Otto Rank analyses the different figurations of the double mostly in German Romantic literature and distinguishes different types thereof. Firstly, there is “the uncanny double” who “is clearly an independent and visible cleavage of the ego (shadow, reflection)” (20). The latter is the “production of the working of the ego” (20). Secondly, there are “actual figures of the double who confront each other as real and physical persons of unusual external clarity” (12). The second group is related to “mistaken identities” (20). Thirdly, Rank speaks of the double as “the representation, by one and the same person, of two distinct beings separated by amnesia” (20).<sup>58</sup> According to Rank, three recurrent characteristics are shared by all three groups in the double: there is always a catastrophic outcome in which the protagonist kills himself in an attempt to rid himself of his haunting double; there is always a “reference to a woman” who at some point is involved in the protagonists’ predicament (31, 33); the “double-heroes” have a general tendency for a “defective capacity for love” (72).

In Banville’s fiction, while the first two sets of doubles appear continually, the third seems absent. As previous studies on Banville by Rudiger Imhof, Laura Izarra, and Elke D’hoker demonstrate, the narrators frequently encounter fully-fledged physical doubles as well as doubles cleft from the narrators’ egos. In *Eclipse*, while the red-haired double partly appears as a harbinger of a catastrophe or the reification of the mocking superego—a figure highly reminiscent of Felix in *Mefisto*—, the double appears arguably first and foremost as a non-person, as a shadow or a mirror reflection.<sup>59</sup> Alex “seemed to feel another rise up out of

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<sup>58</sup> The most well known example of this is Stevenson’s *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*.

<sup>59</sup> I will elaborate the question of the mirror in the next chapter. My reason for doing so is that the mirror reveals a fundamental aspect of the narrators’ subjectivity in the trilogy that is not limited to the

me into the room and hang there on the dark like smoke, like thought, like memory” (25). Earlier, when Alex sighs, “an ectoplasmic flaw of breath stood in front of me briefly like a second face” (5). In both descriptions, the metaphors, more than anything, emphasize the immaterial, holographic, and almost soul-like nature of the double projection. The mirror, in turn, reveals an uncanny otherself, immediately transforming the reflection into a threatening double (186).

One of the most recurrent variations of the double in the trilogy is autoscopic vision. The self as such splits into both subject—the seer—and object—the seen. Autoscopy is the experience during which the subject sees her other self suddenly separate from herself.<sup>60</sup> In *Eclipse*, the most distinctive instance of autoscopy occurs during Alex’s performance on stage, when

suddenly everything shifted on to another plane and I was at once there and not there. It was like the state that survivors of heart attacks describe, I seemed to be onstage and at the same time looking down on myself from somewhere up in the flies (89).<sup>61</sup>

It is a weird moment at which he is irreparably divided into the actor and the spectator, in the “here” of acting and at once in the “there” of being in reality. It is precisely at this point that

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Gothic. The mirror abounds in all three novels and, in this chapter, I only focus on the different aspects of the Gothic in *Eclipse*.

<sup>60</sup> D’hoker identifies several “autoscopic instances” in the Art Trilogy and rightly claims that it is “a familiar feature in all of Banville’s novels,” (*Visions* 177) demonstrating a clear-cut instance of the narrators’ split (178).

<sup>61</sup> Alex likens his supernatural duality to a near-death experience. This reveals yet another aspect of Gothic fiction. According to Morris, “death and supernaturalism are the two main themes to which the uncanny obsessively returns, and they are also clearly recurrent themes within the Gothic novel” (307). The two are uncanny because they are related to the “ultimate terror” of the return of the repressed. “The Gothic novel,” says Morris, “in its preoccupation with death shocks us with the return of something familiar and old-established in the mind but also estranged and unknowable. So, too, Gothic supernaturalism” (310).



his “I,” his conscious self, is separated from the body, leaving the latter on stage and weightlessly flying above it. This moment of self-separation creates in Alex an irremediable crack splitting him into a duality which he is unable to stitch back into oneness.

Traditionally, Samuel Weber claims, “the body [is] considered to be a self-contained vessel and as the vehicle of a no less self-contained soul” (*Theatricality* 317). Nonetheless, in the theatrical mode “the body no longer serves to demarcate the internal self-containment of the subject” (317). This he sees as a consequence of at least two characteristics of theatre. Firstly, the distinctive feature of theatre that makes it differ from other means of artistic expression is “the irreducibility of the addressee.” Unlike “the classical work of art” of which the addressee “is never an essential component,” the theatrical stage, argues Weber, inherently requires an “other” for its very existence (43). The theatrical act is thus always “an appeal to the other” qua audience. This constant appeal to the other creates an “opening” towards the other that undermines the self-containment of the self as well as that of place. To put it differently, it cracks open the supposedly enclosed space of the individual self. Through its address to the other who is in another place and another time, the actor’s act is no longer self-contained. As a result, “the ‘individual’ body is revealed to be a highly divisible container” (318). Secondly, Weber demonstrates that “the ambivalent dynamics of repetition” on stage “undercut[s]” and “hollow[s] out” self-containment (9). Through her entry into an “alien body and soul” the individual undergoes a transformation during which she “is no longer simply here, but here and there at once.” The simultaneous and paradoxical being “here” and “there” “splits the oneness” of the self-contained individual “by rendering (and rendering) it repeatable” (41). As Weber emphasizes, what results from this division should not be mistaken for “plurality.” That is to say, the individual is not divided between two self-contained “selves” but should be seen as in constant oscillation between a duality. The result is “the fracturing of the individual as such” (41). It is not that the individual has now two

selves, or masks, between which he is able to alternate. Rather, it is indicative of a fundamental rupturing of the self that destabilizes its coherence and self-identity. In this sense, the actor, says Weber, is caught in a peculiar mode of “self-abandonment” in which he does not “merely cease to exist” but “persist[s]” as a “dividual” “divided between life and death, spectator and actor, strange and familiar, entering an alien body and soul on the one hand, while on the other, remaining sufficiently detached to see [himself] taking leave of [his self].” Weber calls this an “impossible ‘situation’” which “splits the site itself, rendering it something like a ghost of itself, lacking an authentic place and a proper body” (42).

The experience of the double brought about by autoscopia in *Eclipse* arguably has two consequences in Banville’s aesthetics of the double in his later work. Firstly, the double is not related in the narrator’s dealing with contrasting images of the self as D’hoker identifies in Banville’s earlier work. Secondly, in addition to the double as the evil persecuting other in the traditional sense of the doppelgänger (for instance, the red-haired figure), the (autoscopic) double in *Eclipse* is a literal duplication of the self as such, resulting in the undecidability of the location of the narrator’s true self. It resonates most with what Derrida calls “duplicity without an original” (*The Postcard* 270). What is more, the duality leads to the speaking “I” itself, his immediate sense of self, becoming spectral. His self is stretched between two ends, creating an opening at the core of his self-perception. At one end there is the narrator’s acting body and, at the other, there is the disembodied “I” floating above it. In fact, spectral selfhood is not limited to the stage as it permeates Alex’s “acts” in “real” life. As long as he is in the presence of an “other [person],” he sees himself as “putting on [a] dumb show” and behaving “actorily” (20). He is unable to free himself from the other’s gaze, a presence that renders his act impure, breathing an air of theatricality into his every gesture, and transforming him into a ghost: the very house he inhabits functions as a theatrical scene where he sees himself “amid standing shadows” (20). He is always divided, always self-

conscious of his divisible self, always looking back on himself as a shadow, or a ghost abandoning his body (18). In *Ancient Light*, he recounts a similar experience of being “increasingly detached from myself, increasingly disembodied. At moments I seemed to have become a phantom” (189). His search for self has deprived him of his self-containment, reducing him to a weightless “shadow,” lacking the “substance” or “essence” which he takes to be his inward authenticity (*Eclipse* 18). His interiority, in other words, is no longer housed inside, but oscillates between his body and a spectral shadow, a supplement.<sup>62</sup> Banville in this sense creates a modern double staged in a modern Gothic novel. In addition to other spectral beings, Alex is haunted by the spectre of his own dual identity. “To be haunted by another, by a spectre, is uncanny enough,” says Dryden “but to be haunted by yourself strikes at the foundations of identity” (41).<sup>63</sup> Ultimately, what the haunting element, the spectral supplement, disrupts is Alex’s self-unity, his sense of wholeness and singularity as an individual. Alex’s sense of self is “assailed” (3), invaded by an other. As well as his self, his perceptual field is doubled.

What ultimately produces the Gothic in *Eclipse* is not so much the ghosts that he encounters in the haunted house as it is what the spectral apparitions reveal in Alex’s perception as a individual. That is to say, *Eclipse* is a (post)modern Gothic narrative that demonstrates the way in which reality itself and Alex’s subjectivity as such are never

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<sup>62</sup> Rendering the self spectral is also present in *Shroud*: when Alex recounts an incident of having been beaten by a couple of thugs he “curiously” recollects “the incident from outside, as if I had not been part of it, but a witness [...] hanging back in the bushes” (290).

<sup>63</sup> Autoscopic experience in Irish fiction is not news. As Nancy Jane Tyson demonstrates, a similar phenomenon can be identified in Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Tyson argues that Wilde’s narrative “exemplifies a subcategory of autoscopic vision sometimes called ‘portrait-imaging’ as Dorian’s second self manifests from within the painting, but his case is also one of divided personality because the second self is a fragmented part of his identity rather than a mere duplicate” (110).

independent from spectrality, that his sense of self, like his reality, is not whole, but constantly haunted by excess or lack, forever unable to coincide with itself. Through his extimate encounters with the Thing, his attempt to delineate his inner self from the outer world fails miserably and his hidden secrets coincide with the space in which he lives in. Though he is fixated on finding the frame that can enable him to see reality as it is, his narration always deranges that frame. His epistemological search leads him into uncanny territory in which the real becomes unreal and his familiar self foreign. *Eclipse* is an intensified elaboration of what Derrida calls “the virtual space of spectrality” which distinguishes literature from the discourse of the traditional “scholar.” In contrast to the latter, *Eclipse* is an example of how “theatrical fiction” and “literature” is not concerned with “the sharp distinction between “the real and the unreal, the actual and the inactual, the living and the non-living, being and non-being,” but with the undecidable, indeterminate, and the ephemeral spectral (*Spectres of Marx* 11).

Faced with this horror, Alex develops a set of strategies to maintain minimal control. For instance, the way he narrates moments in which reality is derailed by spectral apparitions is highly infused with visual metaphors. According to Alex, his experiences bring him “so close up to the very stuff of the world, even as the world itself shimmers and turns transparent before my eyes” (49). His spectral “sightings” are “like a series of photographs blown up to life-size and for a moment made wanly animate” (46). He wonders that he might be a “witness,” that “something is trying to exist *through me*, to find some being, *in me*” (47). He muses on the possibility that “the purpose” of the ghostly apparitions might be “to dislocate me and keep me off balance” (46). While the visual description evoke a certain sense of photographic precision—hence, his fascination with his own imaginative prowess—they situate the visions as staged scenes for his gaze. In other words, via the visual apparatus he is able to conjure up a place for his identity, albeit reduced to a mere gaze. Though he is

unable to control the apparitions, he aims at saving his sense of self by making them about himself in the hope of retaining a minimal form of agency. The next chapter explores this minimal subjectivity in *Eclipse* and *Shroud*.

## Chapter Four: Excess, Extension, and the Partial Object (*Eclipse*, *Shroud*, *Ancient Light*)

Banville's narrators are narcissists who insist on the power of their visual perception while suffering from a crisis of self-perception. On the one hand, they seek to subjugate everything around them to their over-empowered eye, and, on the other hand, their eye fails to perceive a coherent image of their self. Instead, their self-perceptions either split them in autoscopic experiences, as it was discussed in the previous chapter, or double them in their mirrored reflections. This chapter takes up the discussion of the uncanny where the previous left off. That is to say, aspects of the uncanny that are not immediately linked to the production of the Gothic in Banville's work will be addressed here. What is more, in this chapter I intend to read the different modalities of the uncanny that figure throughout the trilogy in relation to the object *a* (and its variation as partial object) in an attempt to demonstrate the key function of this Lacanian concept in the narrators' search for self. Central to this chapter will be the argument that the mirror and the voice function as tools by means of which the protagonists aim at rearranging the triadic (Real-Imaginary-Symbolic) configuration, an attempt that results in supplementing reality with an uncanny, magical dimension as well as a problematic sense of intentionality for the narrators. In doing so, their narcissistic narration seeks to rid the self of its dependence on the Other, to stand above the Symbolic, an endeavour that (inevitably) fails. Yet, it is one that simultaneously reveals a paradoxical form of subjectivity.

This chapter starts by examining the way in which mirror reflections result in uncanny encounters with the double in *Eclipse* and *Shroud*. Then, it will be argued that the source of the uncanny reflections lies in the figuration of different forms of excess, a supplement that can be understood as a dimension of the Real (as object *a*). Secondly, focusing on *Ancient*

*Light*, I demonstrate how the lack of Symbolic efficacy leads the narrator to encounter the gaze as object *a*, resulting in an uncanny narration reminiscent of E.T.A Hoffmann's "Sand Man." The way in which the narrators' epistemological quest for the self results in the fragmentation of the body will be examined in the third section. Here, the hand in particular will be read as a condensed metaphor for the narrators' relationship with magic and writing. Moreover, if read in relation to the psychoanalytic concept of partial objects, the hand, I argue, illuminates a specific aspect of the narrators' narcissistic, introspective journey. Finally, focusing mainly on *Shroud*, the function of the voice will be read in relation to a number of aspects of the uncanny, namely, magic, telepathy, and spectrality. Subsequently, the voice will be read as another figuration of the partial object in *Shroud*.

## 1. Uncanny reflections

The mirror functions as one of the primary sites of the uncanny in Banville's fiction. While they abound, mirror reflections constantly disrupt the narrators' sense of self. The narrators' problematic relation with their reflections, in turn, has a number of consequences in their perceptions and representations of reality. In *John Banville's Narcissistic Fictions*, Mark O'Connell devotes numerous pages to demonstrating the way in which Alexander Cleave is a narcissistic thespian around whose self-centeredness all of his relations with others revolve. Yet, O'Connell rightly states, Banville's narrators figure as vacant centres (25-35). According to O'Connell, "Cleave is the quintessential Banville character in that he cannot accept the shameful ordinariness of his origins, and feels he must expunge that background in order to fully foreground his own grandiose self-image" (31). O'Connell relates the abundance of the mirror reflections in Banville's fiction to the narrators' narcissistic narratives and claims, in passing, that the fact that the narrators constantly encounter their

reflections is in line with Lacan's—as well as Kohut's—theses that “the need for mirroring surfaces” is crucial “to reinstate a sense of self” (O'Connell 37). What O'Connell does not address, however, is the crucial way in which mirrored reflections generate the uncanny in Banville's work. While it is true that reflections are inherently linked to their narcissism, the narrators' reflections, either disrupt that which they are supposed to reinstate or, at times, add a magical dimension to it. More often than not, the narrators are horrified by their reflection as the latter reveals a scary otherself that threatens the core of their sense of selfhood. Moreover, while O'Connell rightly mentions Lacan's idea of the formative function of the mirror in generating selfhood, he overlooks a fundamental aspect of Lacan's later revision of the mirror stage in light of the object *a* and the Symbolic order. As O'Connell writes, Alex's narrative in *Eclipse* “is a mirroring surface” (38). I claim he resorts to writing—or creating a textual mirroring surface—because his sense of self cannot be affirmed at the level of visual surface. In what follows I will address the double dimension of the mirrors and then demonstrate the way in which the object *a* as excess animates the uncanny universe.

Brendan McNamee claims that the mirror motif provides a synthesis, if not an answer, to the narrator's preoccupation with the existence of the self. For McNamee, “the answer” for this dilemma “perhaps, is to look in a mirror” (*Quest for God* 234). He continues:

[The] twinning and mirroring does not so much mean anything specifically as serve to deepen the artistic resonance of the theme of the self as an entity that has no definitive face but that exists rather as an endlessly-deferred [sic] search for such definitiveness (237).

Although continual exposure to mirror reflections does in effect problematize the narrators' sense of unified self, it does so not merely by serving to illustrate the indefinite nature of the self. In the trilogy, mirrored reflections never seem to reflect the “real,” but instead, distort it. In *Eclipse*, faced with his reflection, Alex sees “someone else, a stranger lurking there, a



figure of momentous and inscrutable intent” (186). In *Ancient Light*, he recounts a similar experience: “When I moved, somehow my reflection in the glass did not move with me. Then my eyes adjusted and I saw that it was not my reflection I was seeing, but that there was someone out there, facing me” (161).<sup>64</sup> While the uncanny experience is alleviated immediately by the eye’s adjustment in the second instance, Alex’s encounter with his othered self in the example from *Eclipse* seems to linger on as there is no sign of immediate relief from the scary encounter. Yet, in both instances, the mirror discloses a figure that has intent independent from the narrators, thereby momentarily disrupting their singular intentionality as individuals.

The mirror that reveals an other is what Freud identifies as a significant source of uncanny experience. According to Freud, “reflection in mirrors” can be uncanny precisely because they can be the sites in which the double appears (“The Uncanny” 235).<sup>65</sup> In fact, Freud here borrows from Rank’s study on the double in which the latter traces the ancient conceptions according to which the mirror was regarded the site of the supernatural and claims that “the conviction that the mirror reveals concealed matters is based upon the belief in the double” (*The Double* 64). The reflection, like the shadow, Rank adds, is “related to the double-motif” in that it represents a magical domain that reveals reality’s other side (50, 58).

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<sup>64</sup> In *Ancient Light* mirrors are multiplied to the extent that they somehow transform the entire novel into a hall of mirrors. However, the multifarious figurations of mirrors in this novel are essentially related to the way the narrator perceives Mrs Gray. This is why I have decided to exclude it from my discussion here so I can address it in more details in the final chapter which is precisely focused on the representation of the woman in Banville’s work.

<sup>65</sup> In a footnote, Freud illustrates the uncanny encounter with the mirror with reference to his own personal experience: “I was sitting alone in my *wagon-lit* compartment when a more than usually violent jerk of the train swung back the door of the adjoining washing-cabinet, and an elderly gentleman in a dressing-gown and a traveling cap came in [...] Jumping up with the intention of putting him right, I at once realized to my dismay that the intruder was nothing but my own reflection in the looking-glass of the open door” (“The Uncanny” 248).

In the trilogy, the mirror as the site of magic is evident in one of Alex's encounters with his othered self. In *Eclipse*, the "shop window" reveals the figure of "a felon" (88). Remarkably, the actual felon in the trilogy, one can argue, is Axel who allegedly kills his wife Magda in *Shroud*, and not Alex. The mirror, therefore, magically links Alex's self-image to that of Axel's. Later, the mirror again reveals the image of killer:

as I passed by a movement flashed in the corner of my eye, a glossy start and flinch, so it seemed, knife-coloured, as of an assassin in there surprised at his surreptitious work. I stopped, my heart thudding, and took a wary step backward, and my reflection stepped with me again into the tilted mirror on the dressing table [...] and an almost pleasurable shiver of horror swarmed briefly across my shoulder blades (*Eclipse* 186)

The reflexive surface functions as a telepathic universe that breaches Alex's self-unity. It does not function so much as a mirror reflecting reality but more like a window through which the narrator is confronted with an alterity. What is more, the mirror in this passage is "tilted" and the image is perceived from the "corner" of his eye. That is to say, rather than direct access to his corporeal image, the latter is perceived through an angle that slopes his perception, so to speak, destabilizing it. Not only this sloping distorts his reality, but it also reveals a secret dimension of reality that is "lurking" and threatening to surge out and envelope his entire corporeality, almost electrifying him with horror. Yet, the horror is "almost pleasurable" as if he is not entirely discontented that he is given such a glimpse into this scary dimension of reality. In a sense, he aims at countering the threat of self-loss by imagining that what is taking place is staged for him, that he is offered a privileged place from which he can see the unseeable, the otherworld.

According to Rank, the experience of the double is intricately related to narcissism: "The erotic attitude toward one's own self is only possible because along with it the

defensive feelings can be discharged by way of the hated and feared double” (73).<sup>66</sup> He outlines two forms of “defence” against the threatening aspect of narcissism: either “in fear and revulsion before one’s own image” or “in the loss of the shadow-image or mirror-image” (73). However, the second, says Rank, is not so much a “loss” as “a becoming independent and superiorly strong, which in its turn only shows the exceedingly strong interest in one’s own self” (74). It is a strategy by means of which the narcissist can salvage his self-aggrandized image of self while being able to discard that aspect of the self-image that s/he deems problematic. In other words, the loss of the mirrored image is an affirmation for the narcissist that his sense of self does not even need a reflection, that is, his or her self is self-contained and whole. The problem arises however, according to Rank, when the discarded image turns into the figure of the pursuer (75) the manifestations of whom crystalize in the figure of the pursuing red-headed figure that haunts both Alex and Axel as we saw in the previous chapter. Yet, far from being lost, reflections in which the self-image appears abound in the narratives. Moreover, the narrators study their image, linger on it, trying to identify the very aspect of the reflection that renders it uncanny. For instance, in his encounter with the image of the self as a felon, Alex explains:

I would catch sight of my reflection [...], skulking along with head down and shoulders up and my elbows pressed into my sides, like a felon bearing a body away, and I would falter, and almost fall, breathless as if from a blow, overwhelmed by the inescapable predicament of being what I was. It was this at last that took me by the throat onstage that night and throttled the words as I was speaking them, this hideous awareness, this insupportable excess of self (88).

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<sup>66</sup> Rank borrows heavily from Freud’s theory of narcissism. According to Freud, the experience of the double has to do with the splitting of the ego. There are two aspects of the double, says Freud: a friendly and an unfriendly one. The former is linked to immortality and the latter to death (“The Uncanny” 234-5).

There is a doubling of the body, the narrator's body as well as the imagined body being carried by a felon. In this sense, the metaphor of the felon illustrates the way in which Alex sees his self-image supplemented by something extra, an extension. It is a hunting excess, one that catches him by his "throat." It is as if the corporeal image casts a spell, or like a parasite, afflicts his sense of self. The "excess" with which Alex finds himself unable to cope is his sense of self-awareness disclosed to him by the magical mirror. While self-awareness is supposedly linked to one's ability to recognize oneself as a singular individual distinct from the environment and other individuals, for Alex, the awareness is a malediction to which he attributes his professional as well as personal downfall. His "self-consciousness," Alex tells us, is "crippling" (88). The mirror introduces a rupture between the self and the body by triggering an excessive process of introspection. Conventionally, introspection deepens characterization by showing the character's inner life. Alex's introspection, however, does not so much deepen the sense of self as it supplements the sense of self with a magical dimension. It is magical in the sense that the Real and the Symbolic get a grip, an uncanny dovetail, as the Symbolic becomes momentarily overruled by an excess of the Real.

In *Shroud*, the narrator demonstrates a similarly peculiar relation with his reflection. Gazing at the mirror he has "the sensation then, as so often, of shifting slightly aside from myself, as if I were going out of focus and separating into two" (68). Elsewhere, "in the smoked-glass doors of the departure hall," the mirror functions as a locus where the narrator and his reflection "must meet in mutual annihilation" (28). The mirror never reflects a singular being, but either splits or obliterates his sense of self. At some occasions, the mirroring surface generates a weird reflection:

Wet still from the bath, I dripped on the floor, in the darkly gleaming surface of which I could see yet another, dim reflection of myself, in end-on perspective this time, like that bronzen portrait of the dead Christ by what's-his-name, first the feet and then the shins,

the knees, and dangling genitals, and belly and big chest, and topping it all the aura of wild hair and the featureless face looking down (38).

He perceives his reflection from an “end on perspective,” from bottom to top, resulting in a statue-like figure. Then he likens the figure to a “bronzen portrait” of Christ by Mantegna. While Christ’s portraits generally depict Christ’s face with somewhat detailed features, Axel’s reflection/portrait is “featureless.” Although a portrait is precisely supposed to produce one’s detailed image, it deprives the narrator of his very facial features. Nonetheless, the aura of light generally present around Christ’s face is retained in Axel’s portrait, though it is made not of light, but produced by the reflection of his dishevelled hair. Axel then ends up with a featureless face surrounded by a fake aura. Again, the mirror-surface generates not so much a reflection of the real, but problematizes the narrator’s relation with his body by distorting his face, marring his self-identification and simultaneously adding a new dimension to it. At the same time, by juxtaposing the religious reference to the “dangling genitals” as well as the mock aura, the mirror, similar to Alex’s case, introduces an excess, something more than the bodily reflection. Consequently, like Alex, Axel demonstrates a paralyzing sense of self-awareness: His “over-consciousness of self” results in “the sudden, ghastly awareness of being trapped inside this armature of flesh and bone like a pupa wedged in the hardened-over mastic of its cocoon” (41). The narrator’s sense of entrapment inside his corporeality is reinforced through the metaphor of an insect trapped inside its protective covering. At the same time, while “to wedge” means “to fix” in a narrow place, “a wedge” is a device is used for splitting wood. Therefore, fixity, entrapment, and splitting are simultaneously evoked in the narrator’s depiction of his body. Axel’s problematic relation with his body is further emphasized in that it is depicted as disintegrating, malfunctioning, and disproportionate. He is blind in one eye and has one “good” leg (138) and depicts his body as rotting (301), “wearing away” (105), “too big” (205), and horse-like (104).

As Lacan demonstrates in his early work, the mirror functions as the foundation for self-consciousness. Self-recognition is constituted during “the mirror stage” during which the “I” is “precipitated in a primordial form” (*Ecrits* 76). The perception of the body in an external reflexive surface serves as the basis for the constitution of the ego. The specular image generated by the mirror, according to Lacan, renders the perception of one’s body whole. This sense of unity structures self-experience and simultaneously perpetuates an eternal search for unity. Lacan demonstrates that identification with the specular image is in fact a defence against an otherwise chaotic and fragmented body. The crucial point that he stresses, however, is that the foundation of self-recognition is based on an image generated outside of the self. That is to say, identification is paradoxically based on a fundamental otherness: one can only acquire a self as long as one accepts an other to be oneself. One has to take to be one’s self that which does not immediately emanate from one’s immediate being within, but, rather that which is generated on a surface without. This moment of imaginary identification, says Lacan, is characterized by a rivalry between the subject and the other because “it is in the rival that the subject grasps himself as ego” (*Freud’s Papers* 176). The mirror, thus, both produces a self and simultaneously splits it, both gives one a self and simultaneously introduces an otherness at the heart of it.<sup>67</sup> The subject is able to overcome this alterity by (mis-)recognizing the other as oneself. This (mis-)recognition—*méconnaissance*—is facilitated by the signifier.<sup>68</sup> Therefore, one’s sense of self depends

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<sup>67</sup> Rivalry between the subject and his “other” plays a fundamental role in the construction of his ego precisely because “the uncoupling of his relation to the other causes the image of his ego to fluctuate, to shimmer, to oscillate, renders it complete and incomplete [...] Through the successive identifications and revivals, the subject must constitute the history of his ego” (*Freud’s Papers* 181-82).

<sup>68</sup> As Stijn Vanheule (“Double Mirror”) and Dany Nobus (“Life and Death”) explain, in his early work Lacan situates the ego construction as a predominantly imaginary function and, thus, based on the image. However, in his later work, when he introduces his theory of the two mirrors, he then

entirely on the perception of the body-whole. At the same time, corporeality as such, in this sense, is not self-evident. In order for one to even have a sense of corporal existence, one needs to overcome a series of complex events mediated by the image and the signifier. With regard to Banville's narrators in the trilogy, this otherness is predominantly present in their relation with what Lacan would have called their "specular self." They are stuck in a world tinted by the constant presence of the imaginary other—what Alex calls the "stranger" (*Eclipse* 186) and Axel calls "shadowy otherself" (*Shroud* 28) precisely because identification in the Lacanian sense is not functional. The mirrored image for them mirrors the Real excess rather than "reality" and the lack of the necessary identificatory processes results in the constant production of different versions of the self-image in their narratives, transforming them into uncanny sites of self-dislocation rather than reinforcing a sense of self. Alex remarks that Lydia "was regarding my reflection in her mirror with a sardonic eye" (*Eclipse* 153). He sees his reflection being seen by Lydia. The mirror, in other words, loses its function of showing Alex's self-image, and, instead, reveals an additional supplement materialized by Lydia's gaze. Axel, recounts a similar incident:

At my back I heard a flapping step, and saw in the sunstruck, bevelled glass panel of the door in front of me the reflection of a grinning face looming at my shoulder. It was the red-haired fellow, the one who had been watching me while I drank my coffee (*Shroud* 47).

The interplay of the visual and the auditory is key in producing the uncanny in this passage. Axel hears a noise, a step, and immediately seeks to identify its source by resorting to his visual faculty. He hopes to gain a sort of reassurance using his visual perception, a sense of reorientation. But he soon finds out what he sees is not what he was looking for. In so far as his visual field is disclosed by the mirroring surface, the visual is a field of danger, slightly modifies his theory and claims that the presence of the Symbolic Other, i. e. language as a web of signifiers, is indispensable for the construction of the ego.

threatening to overwhelm him. The threatening dimension, again, is introduced by the supplement. This time it is a grinning face that disrupts his mastery over his visual field. According to Nicolas Royle, “the uncanny is destined to elude mastery” (*The Uncanny* 15). The failure of the visual field in creating a comfortable position from which the narrator can master the malaise produced by other senses can be equally seen in an incident recounted by Alex at the beach: “A shimmer, a shiver in the air. Uncanny sensation, as of a chill presentiment. I peered about the beach. Still there was no one, yet I seemed not alone” (*Eclipse* 69). Like Axel, Alex’s visual perception fails to alleviate the “uncanny sensation” aroused by an unidentified agent. His inability to immediately identify the source of the eerie sensation renders the experience even more threatening. His other senses can register a sensation that is not available to his eye, disclosing a secret premonition.

According to Lacan, the image with which the narcissist is enamoured and to which he is libidinally attached can turn into a horrifying image precisely because it suddenly reveals a hidden object (*L’angoisse* 60-5). In the subject’s encounter with the mirror reflection:

un moment peut arriver où l’image que nous croyons y tenir se modifie. Si cette image spéculaire que nous avons en face de nous, qui est notre stature, notre visage, notre paire d’yeux, laisse surgir la dimension de notre propre regard, la valeur de l’image commence de changer (*L’angoisse* 104).

This modification of the reflected image, says Lacan, opens up the realm of anxiety since what is disclosed in “le champ phénoménal” (104) is the dimension of the Real that momentarily fails to be put into words since it cannot be reduced to the signifier. It lies at the limit of the signifier, eluding it. This is why all Alex can muster as a response to his uncanny reflection is being frozen with his “heart thudding” (*Eclipse* 186). As a result of the apparition of this object, according to Lacan, the specular image momentarily turns into the



engulfing image of the double (*L'angoisse* 116).<sup>69</sup> In Mladen Dolar's words, it implies the uncanny intrusion of the Real, an intrusion that "entails the loss of that uniqueness that one could enjoy in one's self-being" ("Lacan and the Uncanny" 13). It represents the moment during which the Symbolic and the Imaginary fail to contain reality and, consequently, the phenomenal experience reveals an unbearable excess that pluralizes the narrators' selves. The self becomes instantly permeable and the visual experience, far from reorienting the self, starts to accentuate doubt and undecidability with regards to the unity of its corporeal existence. The narrators' narcissism during their reflections, in a word, turns back on them. That is to say, what they so vehemently search to rectify, their uncastrated being of *jouissance*, as well as their yearning to coincide with themselves and be whole, is transformed into a nightmarish encounter with the Real. Rather than reinforcing their sense of self, the mirror introduces the possibility of the loss of the self, what Freud calls "depersonalization," but also "derealisation."<sup>70</sup>

Lacan's name for the uncanny addition to the specular image is the object *a* (*L'angoisse* 104). As a dimension of the Real, the object *a* has to be excluded as an object proper so that reality can emerge as such. This exclusion is the foundation, the condition of possibility, so to speak, for the dichotomous subject-object relation. But it has to remain anonymous and invisible so that the dichotomous relation can stand. "The object *a*," in Dolar's words, "is precisely that part of the loss that one cannot see in the mirror, that part of

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<sup>69</sup> "L'image spéculaire devient l'image étrange et envahissante du double" (*L'angoisse* 116).

<sup>70</sup> Freud speaks of "derealization" and "depersonalization" as products of the process during which part of the self becomes instantly foreign to the self. The self is faced with a threatening doubt as to whether what one perceives does or does not belong to the self, resulting in an immediate loss of the sense of reality as such ("A Disturbance of Memory on the Acropolis" 317). This is, of course, related to the experience of the double. According to Freud, the experience of the double "is marked by the fact that the subject identifies himself with someone else, so that he is in doubt as to which his self is, or substitutes the extraneous self for his own. In other words, there is doubling, dividing and interchanging of the self" ("The Uncanny" 234).

the subject that has no mirror reflection, the nonspecular” (“Lacan and the Uncanny” 13).<sup>71</sup> Insofar as it is the object-cause of desire, the object *a* creates the illusion for the subject that it can be named, be symbolized, an illusion that sustains the individual’s perpetual desire. This is why it has no consistency or form in itself. However, if it is not excluded from the specular image it figures as an uncanny addition that causes the Imaginary to “stumble on the Real,” as Dolar nicely puts it (13). A small gesture such as “a wink or a nod” is sufficient “in order for the mirror image to contain the object *a*” (Dolar 13). This inclusion leads to “the anxiety of gaining something too much” (13); in a word, an excess. In this sense, the “dangling” extension (*Shroud* 38), the added grin (*Shroud* 47), and the flinching “movement” (*Eclipse* 186) function as uncanny supplements that disclose the dimension of the object *a*. What is more, the absence of the object *a* from reality is, as Dolar explains, “the condition of any knowledge of ‘objective’ reality” (Dolar 13). Therefore, insofar as the mirror links Alex’s self image to Axel (via the image of the felon), one can argue, Alex encounters an excess of knowledge. That is to say, insofar as Alex does not know about the existence of Axel as well as the latter’s relation with Cass, the mirror reveals information of which Alex is “objectively” unaware. It is an extension of knowledge, a piece of Real knowledge that intrudes and momentarily produces a gap in objective reality. This is repeated at the end of *Eclipse* where the reader learns that Alex receives Cass’s notes, an account of her work on Axel’s scholarly work as well as his biography. In these notes Alex notices “an aura,” “a faint, flickering glow of almost-meaning” (211). The words “aura” and “glow” are highly reminiscent of the way in which Axel describes the “aura” he sees around his reflected face

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<sup>71</sup> “Lacan uses the gaze as the best presentation of that missing object; in the mirror, one can see one’s eyes, but not the gaze which is the part that is lost. But imagine that one could see one’s mirror image close its eyes: that would make the object as gaze appear in the mirror. This is what happens with the double, and the anxiety that the double produces is the surest sign of the appearance of the object” (Dolar 13).

(*Shroud* 38). Similarly, If one takes the apparition of the ghosts (mother and child) as a premonition for Cass's (as well as her unborn child's) eventual death, the phantom figurations may be seen as another extension of knowledge, only it is more ledge than know, as Alex does not know in what situation Cass is, nor does he "understand" as he emphasizes throughout his narrative. By the same token, as Schwall points out, Axel "senses" Alex's "presence in a magical way" ("Aspects of the Uncanny" 122). Indeed, says Axel, "by some form of sympathetic magic I must have been anticipating, [...] how it would be for [Cass's] father" (*Shroud* 396). Therefore, the figuration of supplements and extensions are not limited to mirror reflections as objects—for instance, the chair that produces the ghosts (*Eclipse* 48)—can exude excess too. In addition, Alex wonders how an actor "leaves the shadow of something behind him, an aspect of the character that only he could have conjured" (*Eclipse* 20). In their epistemological search for the coherent self, the narrators are exposed not to a form of knowledge that can lead them to their coherent selves, but to an excess of knowledge revealed as the dimension of object *a*. They learn that their epistemological search has met the cracks of reality, its fissures and inconsistencies.

Alex receives magical intimations, "the summons," even before arriving at the house (7). One can argue, in leaving his job, family, and parental responsibilities with regard to his daughter—all functions associated with the Symbolic—Alex seeks the very magical encounters. That is to say, he aims at finding a mirror that can reveal an alternate version of the self, one that strangifies reality and provides a glimpse into the Real dimension of subjectivity, that is, the image of the self supplemented by the object *a*. The maternal home, where excess abounds, precisely provides a space in which Alex can indulge in his uncanny, narcissistic self-explorations. In *Shroud*, the hotel where the narrator encounters his faceless, elongated self-image "in end-on perspective" (38) has a similar function: it is the locus in which Axel's narcissism is so far stretched toward self-induced alienation that he is a peeping

Tom of himself. In what follows we shall see how the narrators' peeping Tommery turns back on themselves, exposing their narration further to the Real.

## **2. The uncanny eye: the gaze as object *a***

In Banville's highly visual narratives optical gadgets function as a distinctive aspect of the uncanny. To cite a few examples, in *Mefisto*, Mr Kasperl is depicted as wearing "spectacles with thick lenses" (85) and the doctor by whom he is treated at the hospital is wearing "thick glasses" (101). In *Eclipse*, a girl's "sunglasses" transforms her into a "glimmering naiad" (68). Though one can find such references throughout Banville's entire oeuvre, it is in *Ancient Light* that optics reign with consistent figurations. The city is described as a "panopticon" (107). Mrs Gray's husband is an optician who gives his daughter, Kitty, a microscope for her birthday (104). The prominence of the optical gadget is stretched to the extent that it regulates the narrator's perception of other characters. Kitty's face is "blurred behind enormous horn-rimmed spectacles with circular lenses as thick as magnifying glasses" (13).

Optics in Banville's fiction bear a significant resemblance to E.T.A Hoffmann's tale "The Sandman," a story that became the hallmark of uncanny literature as a result of Freud's discussion of it in his famous essay. Freud links the uncanny with the visual in that the uncanny is primarily that which is "concealed and kept out of sight" ("The Uncanny" 224-5). He bases his analysis of the term on Hoffman's tale in which the protagonist constantly fears the loss of his eyes. Indeed, sight, and the loss thereof, is of primary concern to Hoffmann's protagonist. He meets an optician who reminds him of the terrifying Sandman whom he meets in his childhood. The optician's glasses and spectacles horrify the protagonist as he perceives them as staring eyes. After buying the lenses from the optician, he sees the moon's

light in the robot-figure of Olympia's eyes. The flash of moonlight animates the robot, rendering the protagonist obsessed and enamoured by it. According to Freud, the uncanny in this story "is directly attached" to "the idea of being robbed of one's eyes" (230).<sup>72</sup> "A study of dreams, phantasies and myths," Freud argues, "has taught us that anxiety about one's eyes, the fear of going blind, is often enough a substitute for the dread of being castrated" (231).<sup>73</sup>

In *Ancient Light*, Alex meets a man whose "features" he is unable to "make out," yet whose "spectacles" catch his attention because the spectacles' "thin frames and oval-shaped lenses" give the man "a scholarly appearance" (162). He meets the man a second time and he is unable to recognize him until "a chance dart light from the illuminated shelves behind me slid across the lenses of his spectacles and I recognized the man" (170). His encounters with these characters are characterized by the foregrounding of the spectacles without which they appear to him as blurred, unknown, and insignificant. Alex's fascination with optics is evident when he goes to Mr Gray's store:

There was a room at the front with a counter and a chair that customers could sit in to admire their new eyewear in a magnifying mirror in a circular silver frame set at a convenient angle on the counter. At the back was a consulting room, I knew, where the walls were fitted with stacks of shallow wooden drawers containing spectacle frames, and there was a machine with two big, round, startled-looking lenses, like the eyes of a robot, that Mr Gray tested his patients' vision with (182).

The mirror situated at the counter enables customers to try on spectacles and to see the way in which they appear wearing them. In other words, Mr Gray's store is a place where the two

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<sup>72</sup> Freud uses this instance to argue against Ernst Jentsch's idea that the uncanny is primarily produced by "intellectual uncertainty." Instead, Freud uses the story of the Sandman to demonstrate his claim that the uncanny is first and foremost linked to fear of castration ("The Uncanny" 230).

<sup>73</sup> Key in Freud's account of the story is the fact that Hofmann links "the anxiety about the eyes" to an "intimate connection with the father's death" ("The Uncanny" 231).

meanings of the word *spectacle* are played out: spectacles as “eyewear” and spectacle as a display, a performance. What specifically catches Alex’s attention is the robot-like machine with its lenses seeming almost human eyes. Like Hoffmann’s tale, the robot’s eyes generate a human-like expression as they appear “startled-looking,” momentarily transforming the inanimate object into a living being—a hallmark of the uncanny.

Samuel Weber agrees with Freud that, in “The Sandman”, the protagonist’s “compulsion to see the feared secret,” his “dread lest he himself be seen, with the consequence of losing his eyes,” and “the dismantling of his body by the Sandman” point to the protagonist’s acute castration complex and his ensuing uncanny narrative universe (*The Legend of Freud* 221). However, Weber adds, “the substitution or supplementation of the eyes by optical instruments” as well as “Olympia’s eyes” are not limited to Freud’s reading of castration anxiety (221). According to Weber, Freud neglects two aspects of the story: “the crisis of perception and of corporal unity” (225). The prominence of the “prosthetic supplement” in Hoffmann’s story adds a further element of the uncanny to the narrative, namely, that “[n]o point of view is proper and self contained” (18). Similarly, in Banville’s fiction, the proliferation of optical extensions result in the undecidability of the narrators’ visual perception. While the narrators perceive the living gaze in the optical supplement, actual human eyes appear as dim, myopic, and dysfunctional without them. In *Eclipse*, Alex remarks that when a fellow actress “took off her spectacles” her eyes immediately appear to him as “vague” (86).<sup>74</sup> Not only is there a remarkable interplay between the organic and the prosthetic, but what is evoked in the narrators’ descriptions is a sense of privileging the prosthetic over the organic. This privileging transforms his narratives into a world dominated by perceptual doubt, on the one hand, and results in blurring the distinction between the human and the non-human prosthetic extension, on the other. In *Mefisto* the doctor had “thick

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<sup>74</sup> Similarly, in *Mefisto* Father Polmer’s eyes are invisible behind the flashing lenses of his spectacles (128).

glasses with heavy rims that seemed a part of him, like a bony armature growing out of his skull” (101). The inorganic glasses are perceived as a protruding organ, an extension that pushes out. Kasperl’s spectacles, similarly, “made his eyes seem to start forward” (85). There is a sense in which the prosthetic supplement causes the eye to press out of the body-whole, thereby exposing it to the danger of being cut off. The eye, in other words, is precarious, threatened with separation and loss. In *Ancient Light*, Alex says:

In the deserted room all the tables are set, the gleaming cutlery and the sparkling napery laid out just so, like an operating theatre where multiple surgical procedures will presently be carried out. Upstairs, the corridor buzzes with a breathless, tight-lipped intent. I pass along it soundlessly, a disembodied eye, a moving lens (211).

In this autoscopic experience, the words “operating” and “surgical” foreground the physical separation of the eye from the body. Yet, faced with the horrifying experience of the separation, Alex attempts to remedy his self-division by equating his “I” with the “moving lens” in the last sentence of the passage. Insofar as it is depicted as a “lens” the separated eye which is robbed of its organic nature and functions as that which contains the “I.” Faced with fragmentation, he attempts to retain a minimal form of agency by equating his centre of intentionality with the eye. Therefore, the function of the prosthetic supplement is not limited to the problematization of the unity and self-containment of visual perception as Weber remarks a propos “The Sandman”. In Alex’s case, the lens rather functions as that which enables Alex to emphasize the primacy of his own visual perception. It is little surprise, then, that Alex self-allegedly engages in endless acts of “peeping-tommery” (123) despite his crisis of self-perception.

In parallel to the emphasis on his own act of seeing, a large part of Alex’s visual imagery involves being seen. It is the other’s gaze that acquires a significant role. In *Eclipse*, he speaks of “a single, avid eye fixed solely and always on him” (10), an eye that equally

haunts him in his dream (110). What is more, his therapist's "dark-brown, haunted eyes" (91) fascinate him. In *Ancient Light*, "many oily portraits" are seen as "staring figures" (234).

Lacan relates the gaze to the psychoanalytic concept of the "ego-ideal" which he defines as a Symbolic point wherefrom the subject "will feel himself both satisfactory and loved" (*Fundamental Concepts* 257). In his earlier work Lacan defines the ego-ideal as a "privileged signifier," a Symbolic function that "governs the interplay of relations on which all relations with others depend" (*Freud's Papers* 141). In this sense, ego-ideals, says Vanheule, "act as props" which hold the subject's self-image, producing the illusion that the subject is a coherent whole ("Lacan's Double-Mirror" 4). What is more, the ego-ideal represents the virtual locus<sup>75</sup> from which "the subjects sees himself as he is seen by others, and from where the Other sees the subject as the subject wants to be seen" (Vanheule 4). This Symbolic structuration of the self-image is absent in Alex's psychic drama. The way Alex depicts the potential figures who can perform the paternal function shows a striking resemblance to how the paternal function is depicted in Gabriel's psychotic world in *Mefisto* as, in both narratives, paternal figures are either irrelevant or inadequate. For instance, Alex's own father is virtually absent from "the thumbed and dog-eared photo album that passes for my past" (*Eclipse* 55-56). In his excessive visual reminiscence in *Ancient Light*, Alex is unable to see his father: "Where is my as yet undead father? I do not see him" (186). The other potential father figure, Mr. Gray—ironically an optician—is an almost quasi-comic figure who is ridiculed for his literal (105) as well as metaphorical short-sightedness: he fails "to see" that he is being cuckolded by a fifteen-year-old (185). He is also depicted as "unremarkable" (182), "washed-out," and characterized by "troubled inadequacy, seeming

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<sup>75</sup> To put it in Slavoj Žižek's words, it designates the virtual "place in the [Symbolic order] from which I see myself in the form in which I find myself likeable" ("I Hear You with My Eyes" 194). It is virtual insofar as it is based not on an actual image—the mirror image which constitutes the ego—but, rather, on an "*image virtuelle*" which accompanies the actual image during the mirror stage (194).



incompetent to deal with the practicalities of everyday life” (103). “His eye” is represented as passive, “registering nothing” (105). Alex’s mother, too, is remembered as “the poor, dim thing” (185), characterized as “foggy” and lacking decisiveness (183); nor does Alex seem to have siblings,<sup>76</sup> who might represent the Symbolic order for him.

In his later seminars, Lacan emphasized that the object *a* can be represented by the gaze as object. According to Lacan, though, the gaze as object *a* is not immediately related to an actual eye. In fact, it “is not a seen gaze, but a gaze imagined by me in the field of the Other.” (*Fundamental Concepts* 84). That is to say, it is related to the way in which one imagines to be seen by the Other. It represents a locus from which one sees oneself seen. In this sense, the gaze as object *a* is intricately linked to the ego-ideal. According to Vanheule, it is “the reflective dimension from which an individual is driven to create images of his own identity in relation to others, and from which ego-ideals are adopted” (“Lacan’s Double-Mirror” 7). Since the Symbolic function is not entirely effective in Alex’s narrative universe, his perception is not shielded from the constant intrusions of the Real dimension of the object *a*. Consequently, the gaze as the virtual locus for constructing self-images transforms in Alex’s narratives into openings into the Real. This is why the gaze materializes into an actual eye that stares threateningly. So long as his Symbolic ego-ideal fails to structure Alex’s fantasy, the object *a* qua Real, which is usually excluded from reality as such, passes through the ineffective Symbolic shield and enters reality qua “real” objects. The actual, staring eye becomes the agency that regulates Alex’s subjectivity. This is arguably why inanimate objects acquire their uncanny animate aspect, resulting in uncanny encounters. They become alive in Alex’s psychic scene in so far as they are perceived to possess a gazing eye. For instance, in *Eclipse*, the moon does not shine but “goggle[s]” (196), the sofa at his hotel room throws a gaze of “smouldering suspicion” (200), a suitcase looks at him “accusingly” (160),

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<sup>76</sup> This is true about all protagonists, which boosts their narcissism in that they are the one and only child.

the house is “monitoring” (53), and windows “stared at [him] disapprovingly” (77). Likewise, in *Ancient Light*, Dawn Davenport’s signature appears as “two bog, looped, opulent Ds like recumbent eyelids” (157). Antonio Quinet observes that while the gaze as object *a* “has no consistency, no substance,” it can be “represented” as “a beam of light, a glint in someone’s eye, a reflection in someone’s hair,” even “a jewel which shines can represent a gaze” (“The Gaze” 144-5). In *Ancient Light*, Alex says:

In the middle distance, among the chimney pots, the November sunlight had picked out something shiny, a sliver of window-glass or a steel cowling, and the thing kept glinting and winking at me with what seemed, in the circumstances, a callous levity (138).

The “glinting” of the object under the light is transformed into “winking,” endowing the object with the sort of intent that Alex perceives from other uncanny (animate) objects in *Eclipse*. Even the sunlight “picks out” its objects, chooses what to make shine. What distinguishes this passage from other similar encounters with animate objects, however, is the way in which the object acquires intentionality by returning the gaze in the form of shining. Crucial in Alex’s description is how the role of the seer and the seen is exchanged. It is as if his excessive reliance on his visual faculty exposes him to the Real gaze, to the Real dimension of seeing, an actualized version of that which is supposed to remain anonymous and virtual. The next section continues to address the figuration of the object *a* in the trilogy through the examination of the function of partial objects in the narrators’ quest for selfhood.

### **3. Partial bodies**

Despite the narrators’ problematic relation with their body, the latter figures with remarkable consistency in the trilogy. What is peculiar, though, is that the body is usually represented,

not as a whole, but rather as partial and fragmented. In *Shroud* Axel remembers the people he had met previously with reference to a part of their body. For instance, unable to remember the name, Axel refers to a person he meets on the train as “The Nose” (247) and all he remembers of a pickpocket is the “mouth” (250). When taking care of Axel during his physical breakdown, Cass notices how his “trunkless head” talks (192) as if the living head were separate from the half-dead body. The “separate body parts that take on a life of their own,” according to Masschelein, is related to the uncanny in that it generates the sort of intellectual uncertainty equally present in the figuration of the double (*The Unconcept* 67). In *Eclipse*, Alex says: “I would involuntarily fix on a bit of myself, a finger, a foot, and gape at it in a kind of horror, paralyzed, unable to understand how it made its movements, what force was guiding it” (*Eclipse* 88). The body does not function as a whole but in bits and fragments as his centre of intentionality over the body is overruled by a “force” that goes beyond his “I.” This is emphasized by the word “involuntarily” which accentuates the fact that Alex is no longer in control of his body. In Lacanian terms, it is the body when it is stripped from its Symbolic structuration. The introspection leads to what Lacan calls “*le corps morcelé*” (*Psychoses* 39), the pre-mirror stage body that lacks substantial unity enacted by the signifier. In this sense, in Alex’s narrative the Real dimension of the body is revealed. Alex’s narcissistic narrative, particularly in *Eclipse*, can be regarded as a systematic effort to attain a subjectivity independent from the Symbolic, an “I,” a sense of selfhood that does not require the big Other to guarantee its existence. However, this attempt is doomed to failure since, as we learn from Lacan, the very possibility of attaining an “I,” the subjective frame that guarantees a centre of intentionality is constructed by the (anonymous, Symbolic, big) Other, not the self-concocted (Imaginary) other that Alex narcissistically strives to make in his own image. All he gets is a further dislocation of his ego, a more heightened sense of division which is manifest in the split between “I would,” on the one hand, and the “guiding” power

that drives the body. Nevertheless, despite his failure to generate a singular sense of self, Alex's uncanny introspection succeeds in revealing the Real aspect of subjectivity, namely, *jouissance*: the unmediated being animated by the Drive.

In the narrators' depictions of the fragmented body, the hand in particular figures with remarkable frequency. Often one of the first things the narrators focus on when they discuss other characters is the shape of the latter's hands. For instance, in *Eclipse* the first thing Alex notices about Quirke, the squatter who has surreptitiously lived in Alex's childhood house, is the "unlikely hands" (21) and marvels at how "his virginal hands" are placed on the table (24). In *Shroud*, in turn, Axel strives to remember his dead wife's hands: "I am trying to remember her hands, to picture them; I know their shape, their feel, but I cannot see them" (156). Elsewhere, he is captivated by his own hand: "I look at my hand, catch sight of my old, my so old hand, and am halted" (347). The stark distinction between the hand and the body is further highlighted in the way in which the narrator's description of the hand endows the organ with a particular status. For instance, the description of Cass in *Shroud* changes immediately after the narrator notices her hands: "Cass Cleave had turned aside again to gaze at nothing, expressionless now [...] Her hard hand, bird-warm, beat softly in mine, as if it contained a tiny heart of its own" (104). While Cass is depicted as "expressionlessness" and lacking presence, her hands are seen as "warm" and lively, almost embodying an independent life from the rest of Cass's body. Cass's disorder too causes the hand to become autonomous from the person (393). Similarly in *Eclipse*, "at night, when I woke in the dark," says Alex, "the hand would seem a separate, living thing throbbing beside me" (52). Moreover, while Axel is talking about "the inexistence of the self":

He drew his hand from under the bedclothes and held it up for her to see. "With this I wrote those articles that you found," he said. "Not a single cell survives in it from that time. Then whose hand is it?" He, I, I saw again the empty bottle on its side, the

mauve pills in my palm [...] The girl rose and came forward and knelt beside the bed and took my hand in both of hers and brought it to her lips and kissed it. I (*Shroud* 193).

The multiplicity of the pronouns on the one hand, and the particular function the hand seems to fulfil, are particularly enlightening in the narrator's search for authentic self. The constant shifting of the pronouns between "he" and "I" evoke a sense in which he is unable to assume a stable subjective position. Although the narrative's overall point of view is the first-person subjective, several parts of Axel's narrative are narrated in the third person. However, at rare moments the two points of view converge. One moment of such convergence is the passage above. What is remarkable is that the merging of the two points of view takes place when the narrator discusses the hand. This organ is arguably that which enables Axel to assume his "I." The passage does in effect end in a final reiteration of the pronoun *I*. The hand, in a sense, enables him to reassume a first person subjective position, a centre of intentionality that has been hitherto fluctuating between other pronouns. The hand, in a word, momentarily allows the narrator to partly remedy his divided self.

One can view the hand as a powerful metaphor encapsulating at once multifarious aspects of the narrators' preoccupations. Firstly, the hand is a fabricating hand, the artist's hand that creates a work of art, a craftsman's hand: Axel boasts that he "could have been a great artist, a master of compelling inventiveness" (62) and unapologetically justifies having stolen an identity by likening it to the process of artistic creation (61). Secondly, in view of Alex's fascination with magic, it points to the sleight of hand: in *Eclipse* the narrator is manipulated by the circus magician (183-4) and in *Ancient Light* he thinks the "undoing" of his relationship with Mrs Gray was "presaged" by "some dark magic" (215). Thirdly, the recurring hand seems to counter the recurring, staring eyes that the narrators face. According to Amira El Azhary Sonbol, in the Abrahamic tradition (Judaism, Levantine Christianity, and

Islam) the figure of the open hand is used as a symbol for protection particularly to ward off the Evil Eye (*Beyond the Exotic* 355-359). Fourthly, with regard to the figuration of the narrator's own hand, if the hand is taken as a signifier of authorship (the writing hand), it represents the act of writing. In this sense, it can be viewed as a self-reflexive reference to the process of (fiction) writing. This is in line with the fact that the two narratives, according to Schwall, "form a diptych which hinges on writing," a dual space where the "two selves" are held "in suspense" ("Aspects of the Uncanny" 122). What is more, the figuration of the (writing) hand is a metafictional reference in that it self-consciously points to the process of (fiction) writing. The latter, as Schwall notes, is part and parcel of the uncanny (122). Here Schwall follows Masschelein's discussion of the way in which fiction generates the uncanny when writing self-reflexively turns back on itself.<sup>77</sup> Therefore, the hand in this sense provides another aspect of the uncanny in the narratives.

In addition to the hand, the narrators' perception of the eye as a bodily organ demonstrates an equally stark distinction to that of the rest of the body. For instance, with regards to the dying man Cass meets at the hospital in *Shroud*, the narrator points out: "Everything was white, his hair, his long, sharp, suffering face, the robe he wore [...] Nothing moved except his eyes, which fixed themselves upon her in what seemed a kind of anguished asking" (143-4). Everything is ghost-like and pale, that is, of course, except the eyes, which seem to have a life of their own—"fixed themselves"—independently from the rest of the body. Alex recounts one of his autoscopic experiences in *Ancient Light* while having sexual intercourse with Mrs Gray: "I saw us there, actually saw us, as if I were standing in the doorway looking into the room" (219). Alex's shadowy existence, his

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<sup>77</sup> In fact, Masschelein herself borrows this idea from Lloyd Smith: "the generation of the uncanny in fiction is often at the point when writing bends back upon itself, to observe its own processes, or to dislocate the narrative by the inclusion of another writing within it" (Smith as quoted in Masschelein, *The Unconcept* 129).

hollowed “I” is, in fact, a seeing eye. This is befittingly demonstrated when “I” converges with the homonym “eye,” becoming one and the same: “[a]nd I, where am I, or what?—an eye suspended in mid-air, a hovering witness only, there and not there?” (186). Although he claims to be split between his body on the one hand, and his “I,” on the other, an irreducible corporeal dimension, namely seeing, remains attached to the non-corporeal “I.” Like the hand, the eye, then, functions as a partial, but irreducible corporeal dimension that insists on being perceived and represented.

Taking into account the figuration of the hand and the eye as partial body parts, I argue, one can develop a reading of these persisting organs that can specifically illuminate the narrators’ obsession with finding their “authentic” self. Here, the psychoanalytical philosophy of Slavoy Žižek is particularly helpful. As Žižek argues in *Organs without Bodies*,<sup>78</sup> there is a fundamental distinction between “the person” and “the subject” in Lacanian psychoanalytic theory. “Person” denotes a set of Imaginary identifications as well as Symbolic constellations that make up what is generally referred to as an individual. What is usually intended by it is the experience of “the wealth of an inner life.” It is in fact related to the ego which is intricately linked to the way in which one’s coherent bodily image is constructed during the mirror stage (Lacan, *Ecrits* 75-81). The self-ego, in other words, is by definition an illusion. In contrast, the “subject” is a void that emerges from the interplay of signifiers. It is the excess that is produced as a result of the process of linguistic signification. The subject emerges momentarily in a verbal articulation. Outside signification, then, the subject cannot be said to exist as such. It is ephemeral, a pulsating opening and closing. Žižek points out that the “correlate” of the body is the person whereas the “correlate” of “the partial object” is “the subject” (*Organs* 155).

Lacan postulates that the signifier facilitates identification with the reflected image

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<sup>78</sup> For a more detailed discussion of the subject-person distinction see Žižek (*Organs* 170-176) and Žižek (*Less than Nothing* 30). In the latter, he specifically speaks of the hand as a “partial object.”

enabling the body to accommodate the libidinal drives—one’s immediate being of *jouissance*—like a vase containing a bouquet of flowers.<sup>79</sup> However, the Symbolic does not overwrite the totality of the Real and there is always an excess which remains outside the process of symbolization. Consequently, the drive, at times, extends, reaches outside. This extension, Lacan claims, appears as an organ, albeit as an “unreal” organ:

This organ is unreal. Unreal is not imaginary. The unreal is defined by articulating itself on the real in a way that eludes us, and it is precisely this that requires that its representation should be mythical, as I have made it. But the fact that is unreal does not prevent an organ from embodying itself (*Fundamental Concepts* 205).

Lacan emphasizes that by “unreal” he does not mean simply “imaginary,” but a third element to the dichotomy of real/imaginary. The “unreal” object for Lacan is something that has no textile existence, but at the same time, its presence is noticed. He continues: “But the fact that it is unreal does not prevent an organ from embodying itself” (205). It can thus function autonomously from the body. To put it in Žižek’s words, they are a “part of the body incommensurable with the Whole [sic] of the body, sticking out of it, resisting its integration into the body whole” (*Organs* 175). While the coherent body is primarily situated in the Imaginary, the partial object refers to the Real. Therefore, the body is invested with meaning whereas the partial object appears only in persistence and repetition. The crucial point is that while the signifier bars the person’s access to the drive, there remain partial objects that can sometimes represent the “subject.”

With regard to Banville’s trilogy, the significance attributed to the hand and, in part to the eye, as well as the sheer insistence with which the hand appears allows us to view these organs as partial objects: a partial corporeality which insists on being written. Therefore, one

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<sup>79</sup> I am here indebted to Stijn Vanheule’s paper “Lacan’s Construction and Deconstruction of the Double-Mirror Stage.” Vanheule lucidly traces the development of Lacan’s mirror stage from his earlier seminars to the latter’s later work in which the Real becomes paramount.



can reformulate the narrators' predicament as follows: they continually aim at finding their self by looking for it in their journey inward while the self (in the Lacanian sense) is but a cluster of illusory identifications and Symbolic production constructed outside. In other words, their predicament is twofold: on the one hand, their object of exploration is illusory and perpetually slipping out of their reach, while, on the other hand, the locus in which they conduct their search for it is erroneous. Yet, the byproduct of their incessant introspection is the apparition of the partial organ that, following Žižek, one can call the "pure" subject of narration, that is, not the "subject" as the possessor of a unique consciousness independent from the object, but the paradoxical "subject" that can be embodied by the very (partial) object. It is important to add that the partial object that appears in such a manner has a purely virtual status. To put it in Žižek's words, "[t]he status of 'the organ without the body' is that of the virtual—in other words, in the opposition between the virtual and the actual, the Lacanian Real is on the side of the virtual" (*Organs* 169).

#### **4. The uncanny voice**

In the previous chapter we saw how the interplay of sound and silence help generate the Gothic in *Eclipse*. This section aims at exploring a specific aspect of sonority, in the trilogy, namely, the voice. The latter arguably holds a crucial place in the narratives that ties in with the uncanny on multiple levels. In *Eclipse*, the voice transforms living people into "automata": Alex perceives the voice on the phone as not Lydia's "but a recording, or even a mechanically generated imitation of her voice" (*Eclipse* 106). It is a reversed version of the uncanny figure of the doll-automaton Hoffmann's protagonist encounters in "The Sandman." Moreover, the voice is related to magic. Goodfellow's has a "strange," "mellifluous," and "suggestive" voice, conjuring up the idea that the latter's voice is partly what enables him to

hypnotize Lilly on stage (185).<sup>80</sup> In *Ancient Light*, the magical dimension of the voice lies in the fact that enables the narrator to access an otherworld: “[v]oices behind a door always seem to me to be coming from another world, where other laws obtain” (233-4).

In *Eclipse*, one specific way in which the voice generates uncanny experience is the way in which it affects the narrator’s intentionality. Alex speaks of a moment during which “[a] myriad voices struggled within [him] for expression”: “I seemed to myself a multitude. I would utter them, that would be my task, to be them, the voiceless ones” (11). According to the OED, the voice is primarily a “property of a speaker.” It implies intentionality behind its production as it is normally attached to a centre of expression. It implies “an expression of choice or preference given by a person” (OED). Therefore, the voice is a right, a privilege by means of which one is able to articulate an agency. In contrast, in the abovementioned quotation, Alex sees himself as a receptacle of various voices that seek to be expressed *through* him rather than verbal content expressed *by* him. Expression, in a sense, becomes *ex*-pression. That is to say, the voice is a vehicle for pushing outside that which Alex does not perceive to be emanating from his own singularity.<sup>81</sup> The voice seems set to give birth to different forms of being, robbing him from a unified voice with which he can articulate a unique sense of self. There is a ventriloquist effect, as if Alex’s body were colonized by other voices. The price the narrator has to pay in order to sustain his narcissistic self-image, one that posits him as the privileged site for the articulation of multiplicity of voices, is that his agency as an individual is undermined. Consequently, his own voice is shaky: “‘Hello?’ I called out grandly, actorily, though my voice had a crack in it” (20). It also eludes his grasp:

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<sup>80</sup> “More and more slowly he paced, speaking all the while, and slowly she turned with him” (185),

<sup>81</sup> I borrow the idea of expression as *ex*-pression from Samuel Weber although he uses the term not in relation to the voice but to the eye. In his lecture on Hoffmann’s “The Sandman,” Weber argues that the narrative achieves its uncanny effect in part because it introduces the idea of expressivity at a non-linguistic level in that the protagonist’s fear of losing his eye renders his control over the organ highly precarious (“‘The Sandman’ and Lacan’s Narcissistic Ego”).

“I detected a sinister, oily smoothness in my voice” (81). His voice, Alex adds, is “athrob with insincerity” (140). Like the hand, his voice is throbbing, pulsating, a living thing that is not necessarily bound to his interiority. Often, rather than simply speaking, Alex *hears* himself speaking: “I heard myself” talking to Quirk (40); “I heard myself [...] answer her” (196). That is to say, the voice doubles him. Insofar as the voice eludes Alex’s mastery, it provides another example of the uncanny as defined by Royle (*The Uncanny* 15). “The moment we enter the [S]ymbolic order,” Žižek says,

an unbridgeable gap separates forever a human body from ‘its’ voice. The voice acquires a spectral autonomy, it never quite belongs to the body we see, so that even when we see a living person talking, there is always some degree of ventriloquism at work: it is as if the speaker's own voice hollows him out and in a sense speaks ‘by itself,’ through him (“I Hear You with My Eyes” 92).

In Alex’s depictions, the ventriloquist aspect of the voice is constantly highlighted through the way in which the voice does not quite coincide with his immediate self-perception. Far from a vehicle for personal expression, the voice functions as a vehicle for the expression of a certain foreignness, an excess that attaches itself to his voice. The split between the individual and the voice is equally manifest in the fact that Alex’s depictions of other characters. He pays a particular attention to the way in which the characters’ voice either does not seem to naturally belong to them or it supplements his perception of them with a new dimension. In *Eclipse*, for instance, Cass speaks “in a low, uninflected voice, the voice of an oracle. I could not make out what she was saying” (72). Not only does Cass’s voice not seem to express verbal content to Alex, but it momentarily transforms her into another version of herself. In *Ancient Light*, Dawn Davenport either speaks with a voice that is “huskier than it should be” (91) or “in a Cockney voice” (135). The voice, to put it differently, demultiplies the narrator’s perceptions of others by constantly adding new

perceptual layers to them.

According to Mladen Dolar, the voice “seems to present a counterweight to differentiality” because it involves “a non-signifying remainder resistant to the signifying operations” (*A Voice* 36). Initially, it functions as the sort of carrier by which the word—i.e. the signifier—takes the form of an audible sign and becomes transferred between the subject and the other. However, after the signifier is carried to the other through the voice, the process leaves a trace, a surplus, added to the signification process. In other words, the transference of signifiers produces a leftover that cannot be articulated by those very signifiers. It is a “something” which uncannily persists beyond signification. Moreover, “the voice appears as the link which ties the signifier to the body” (59). However, says Dolar, paradoxically “the voice does not belong to either” (72). In other words, it functions as a detached object that is simultaneously, and paradoxically, inside and outside body and language (73). Alex’s narration is fascinated by this excess, lingering on it, aiming at domesticating it by means of his creative representations. In *Eclipse*, regarding his mother Alex observes: “Her voice itself turned thin and papery, with a whining cadence” (31). With regard to his daughter, he says: “Cass’s voice when she spoke was scratchy and dry, a fall of dust in a parched place” (73). The haptic metaphor conjured up through the words “thin,” “papery,” “scratchy” and “dry” enable Alex to turn the excess generated as a result of the split between the individual and her voice into a tool for his creativity. He uses the excess as a potential to create new experiences through linking two senses, namely, the auditory and the tactile. At the same time, by linking the voice to touch, it is as if Alex were seeking to render the excess more tangible, to bring it under his grasp. This leads to the depiction of the voice as a material object, emphasizing the idea that it is not inherent to the body, that it can be detached. In other words, Alex’s encounters with the voice’s autonomy cause his perceptions of themselves as well as that of others to be threatened with an auditory spectral

apparition. The voice, in a word, discloses the Real aspect of reality, what is foreign to it, yet what lies at its core.<sup>82</sup>

Once detached, the voice starts to haunt as a partial-spectral object. In *Shroud*, the spectral aspect of the voice is emphasized more than any other work by Banville. “[A]ll that persists, in my ears,” says Axel, “is a sort of deep, hollow hum, the kind of hum that lingers for a time in an auditorium after the audience has left” (337). Once articulated, the voice stays in Axel’s perceptual field, always lingering, persisting in its partial presence. He realizes that “a voice was speaking in my ear, from the reception desk” (*Shroud* 88) and, it is not the person, but “[t]he voice that answered” (189). “The voice from the kitchen” speaks to him (189-90). Axel observes that the dead “have their voice” (405). Cass’s very “plight,” that which finally results in her suicide, is that she is haunted by voices: “[t]he voices in her head started up then [...] seizing their chance” (83). One of the voices that haunts her is Axel’s: what drives Cass to Axel, is not really his academic writing but, rather, his voice (121). At the same time, Axel claims that it is he who is haunted by Cass’s voice: “Who speaks? It is her voice in my head” (3). The voice, then, blurs individual boundaries.

Numerous parts of *Shroud* are narrated in the third person. What is peculiar is that they all deal with Cass’s inner experience. They provide a window into Cass’s interior and troubled world. O’Connell sees these variations of point of view as “Imaginative attempts” on Axel’s part, “to transcend” his “obsessive self-regard” (*Narcissistic Fictions* 180). The shifts to the third person, says O’Connell, are an “advance towards a more empathic, less self-centered position in relation to others” (181). He links this to his reading that “fiction

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<sup>82</sup> “I hear myself speaking, yet what I hear is never fully myself but a parasite, a foreign body in my very heart. This stranger in myself acquires positive existence in different guises, from the voice of conscience and the opaque voice of the hypnotist to the persecutor in paranoia. Voice is that which, in the signifier, resists meaning, it stands for the opaque inertia that cannot be recuperated by meaning” (Žižek, “I Hear You with My Eyes” 103).

writing, for Banville, is a way out of, or a way through, narcissism” (186) He sees “a crucial link between the process of third-person narration and the desire to atone for the sin of ‘inattention’” (193). Although O’Connell’s reading offers a sound reading of the third-person narration in Banville’s overall fictional universe of narcissistic narrators, in *Shroud* in particular, the shifts in narration to the third-person seems more in line with the production of the uncanny. It seems more the case that the opening caused by the shift in narrative voice, is not of the self *towards* the other, but an opening of the other herself. It functions as a window to Cass’s interiority *for* Axel. The narrative voice, in this sense, opens up a telepathic universe for Axel by means of which he gets a glimpse into Cass’s consciousness. “He had read her mind,” says Axel, “people always seemed to be able to read her mind” (138). Telepathy, according to Claudette Startiliot, is uncanny since it “breaches the discreteness and unity of the subject, as well as the systems of thought derived from it” (“Telepathy” 215). Nicolas Royle, in turn, speaks of telepathy in distinction from omniscience and links it to narrative point of view: “introduced in the late nineteenth century”, “the emergence of ‘telepathy’ figures an important moment in what we have called the disappearance of omniscience” (*The Uncanny* 261). It “opens up possibilities of a humbler, more precise, less religiously freighted conceptuality than does ‘omniscience,’ for thinking about the uncanniness of what is going on in narrative fiction” (261). The narrator’s entrance into another characters’ consciousness is, according to Royle, telepathic. “Together with ‘omniscience,’ ‘point of view’ has been a key critical term for the safekeeping of the unitariness of the figures of the ‘author,’ ‘narrator’ and ‘character’ alike” because “there is no single, unitary or unified point of view in a work of fiction” (263). By providing an oscillating narrative point of view between first and third-person in *Shroud*, Banville, then, highlights the telepathic nature of narrative point of view as such. The result for the narrator

is that he is unable to secure a unified narrative point of view by means of which he can express a unified subjective position.

In addition to robbing Axel of a unified self, the shifts of the narrative voice are, at least in part, related to the ability of the voice to be autonomous. Indeed, the very first occasion on which the narration shifts from first to third person takes place immediately after Axel meets his approaching reflection that threatens him with “annihilation” (28). It is reminiscent of Kafka’s short story “The Judgment” where the narrative voice continues in the third-person after the first-person narrator dies. As Lene Yiding Pederson remarks, it is discernible that “at character level and within the story-world of the novel, Vander ‘is’ not anyone anymore [...] and his writing does not guarantee an original voice” (“Revealing/Re-veiling” 151). However, though his ego (his mirror reflection) is annihilated, the narrative voice seems to insist on being heard. The shift in narration then reveals the voice’s ability to take an autonomous role. The undead voice “goes on,” to borrow Samuel Beckett’s famous phrase (*The Unnameable* 414). The annihilation of the self causes the voice to free-float, freely attaching itself to different pronouns. Detached from the self, it seems, it is now free to colonize others, to feed on them, haunt them.

According to Žižek, the autonomous voice represented in artistic productions is an instance of the apparition of “autonomous partial object” (*Organs* 168-9). Like the insistent partial hand, what appears in Axel’s narrative, then, is arguably the voice as a spectral partial object. “Ever since Descartes,” writes Weber,

the search for ‘certitude’ has been the force driving the project of constituting and securing an autonomous subject [...] Whereas for Descartes the essential condition for attaining certitude was the subject’s withdrawal from a world that *in its alterity* could no longer be relied on, it is precisely the discovery that such withdrawal is a *fata morgana*, an unsustainable construct, that informs the misrecognition that constitutes the uncanny

(*The Legend of Freud* 20).

In Banville's fiction, the narrators' inward movement à la Descartes reveals the "unsustainable" natures of their self and undermines their grasp over their innermost sense of self. Yet, as their inward journeys predictably fail in delivering an authentic self, not only the autonomous *subject* loses certitude, but he also encounters the autonomous *object*. They are faced with constant fragmentation and dislocation: the eye can be separated, the hand autonomous, and the voice no longer attached to the body. By staging his narrators as autobiographers, Banville makes the self their primary object of exploration forcing them to encounter the impossibility of authentic self-representation. Meanwhile, the narrators' journey of self-exploration becomes a journey of self-distillation, a gradual process of getting rid of selfhood, a process whose byproduct is a partial excess that uncannily problematizes the dichotomies of inside/outside and subject/object. In this sense, I claim, Banville retains a category of the subject and returns to the cogito, but the cogito not as coherent, self-evident wholeness, but as a void. This empty cogito is illustrated aptly towards the end of *Eclipse* where Alex encounter's Axel's paradoxically absent presence: "At the core of it all there is an absence, an empty space where once there was something, or someone, who has removed himself" (211). It is a persisting absence, a void that can at times be represented by the partial object: the voice, the hand, and the eye.



### **III. Frames, Surfaces, and Aesthetic Selves**

## Chapter Five: Framing the Elusive Self in *Shroud*

The life and work of the literary critic Paul de Man occupies a central place in Banville's trilogy *Eclipse*, *Shroud* and *Ancient Light*. This endows the narratives with highly theoretical overtones and arguably posits them, at least in part, as commentaries on the central issues in Man's work, namely, the possibility of representation. Focusing mainly on *Shroud*, this chapter uses de Man's ideas regarding autobiography and defacement as the starting point for the analysis of the processes of self-representation in Banville's latest trilogy while the next chapter examines the way in which de Man's conception of "aesthetic ideology" is given a twist in the trilogy. In addition to de Man, the other philosophical figure whose presence is particularly sensed in *Shroud* is Friedrich Nietzsche. In both chapters, I will argue that Nietzsche provides the narrators with the aesthetic solution to the deadlock represented by the impossibility of linguistic representation.

This chapter, on the one hand, examines the degree to which de Man's ideas regarding autobiography are assimilated by Axel Vander and, on the other hand, addresses the way in which Banville distances his narrator from de Man's ideas in an attempt to seek modes of narration that provide more immediate forms of representation. In what follows, I firstly explore how de Man's idea of autobiography as defacement is transformed in Axel's narrative to autobiography as effacement. Secondly, I examine the way in which surrogacy plays a crucial role in demonstrating the function of alterity, theatricality, and performativity in Axel's and, in part, Alex's autobiographical narratives. Thirdly, focusing on the interplay of textuality and materiality in Axel's narrative, I will demonstrate how the role of surrogacy in *Shroud* reveals the way in which Axel stumbles on the Real in his self-representation. And, finally, it will be argued that Nietzsche's conceptions of the self and the Overman provide

Axel with the necessary tool to capture (or frame) a sense of selfhood that lies outside the linguistic predicament posited by de Man.

### **1. Autobiography, defacement, effacement**

Philippe Lejeune distinguishes autobiography from fiction in that the former is predicated on a pact between the writer and her reader, a pact that requires the autobiographical narrative to be based on the writer's past events, her individual life, and her empirically lived experience (*On Autobiography*). In contradistinction to Lejeune, de Man blurs the supposed distinction between autobiography and fiction and claims that contrary to the assumption that "life produces the autobiography as an act produces consequences" it is "the autobiographical project" itself that produces and determines the life it is aiming to portray (*The Rhetoric of Romanticism* 69). De Man's idea is that the "life course" narrated by the autobiographical persona is not necessarily the same life led by the author himself. Rather, its narration is constantly undermined "by the technical demands of self-portraiture and thus determined, in all its aspects, by the resources of [the] medium" (69). In this sense, autobiography cannot be seen as a genre or a mode, but a figure of reading or of understanding that occurs, to some degree, in all texts. If this is the case, then autobiography as such does not exist and what remains is a body of textual representation whose authenticity one is never able to ascertain. Thus, far from mirroring empirically lived experience, according to de Man, the autobiographical discourse results in an undecidability that renders autobiography as such impossible.

De Man understands prosopopeia as the defining trope of autobiographical discourse. He sees it as "the fiction of an apostrophe to an absent, deceased or voiceless entity, which posits the possibility of the latter's reply and confers upon it the power of speech" (*Rhetoric*

76). Etymologically the word “prosopopeia” denotes “face-making.” According to de Man, insofar as autobiography aims at portraying past events, it gives them a “voice,” or rather a mouth, with which the past can tell its story. At the same time, to have a mouth implies having a face. Fabricating a mask, thus, becomes an inevitable process of self-representation. However, de Man argues, inasmuch as autobiography as prosopopeia confers a mask, it “defaces,” that is to say, it “deals with the giving and taking away of faces, with face and deface, figure, figuration and disfiguration” (*Rhetoric* 76). Autobiography disfigures the figure of prosopopeia and defaces the face it confers, disfiguring the very mask it aims to restore. De Man’s reading of autobiography as defacement stems from a form of deconstruction he developed over his career as a literary theorist. De Man posits language as such is figural, tropological since “the trope is not a derived, marginal or aberrant form of language but the linguistic paradigm par excellence. The figurative structure is not one linguistic mode among others but it characterizes language as such” (*Allegories of Reading* 105). Any linguistic production as such is bound to be figural because any such utterance is inevitably mired in rhetoric. This is why, says de Man, “any narrative is primarily the allegory of its own reading” (*Allegories* 76). In other words, insofar as figurality is inherently present in any linguistic utterance, the word and the thing the word refers to can never coincide because there is always an extra meaning that is produced along. As a result, no reading (or interpretation) can be a just a reading of the text<sup>83</sup>, but is also a reading of something added, something other than what the text intends to convey. Once a text is produced it is inevitably

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<sup>83</sup> Textuality for de Man implies “[t]he contradictory interface of the grammatical with the figural field” (*Allegories* 270). Therefore, a text is not merely a series of written words but “a generative, open-ended, non-referential grammatical system and as a figural system closed off by a transcendental signification that subverts the grammatical code to which the text owes its existence” (270). The text, in de Man’s understating, is first and foremost an impossibility in the sense that it can never be self-contained but radically open. It is playground for the interplay of grammar and rhetoric.

subjected to a misreading because the tropological dimension of language will be at work and, thus, constantly produces othered versions of the text. De Man illustrates his point by referring to Rousseau's novel *Julie ou la nouvelle Héloïse* and his philosophical book *La profession de foi du vicaire savoyard*. According to de Man,

no distinction can be made between both texts from the point of view of a genre theory based on rhetorical models. The fact that one narrates concepts whereas the other narrates something called characters is irrelevant from a rhetorical perspective (*Allegories* 247).

In de Man's sense, there can be no clear distinction between narration and denomination, between telling (a story for instance) and naming (a factual event), between the fictional and the natural because "all denominative discourse has to be narrative" (*Allegories* 160). There is an irreducible act of performativity in stating facts: naming has to go through the act of telling for it to be possible as such. "A narrative," says de Man, "endlessly tells the story of its own denominational aberration and it can only repeat this aberration on various levels of rhetorical complexity" (*Allegories* 162). As a result, language simultaneously undoes the very meaning it constructs. Since all language perpetually fails in its aim to bring sense and coherence to a life, autobiography can never be autobiographical because it constantly "fail[s] to produce a face incapable of disfigurement" (Martin McQuillan, *de Man* 74). The ultimate paradox of the autobiographical discourse is that, on the one hand, insofar as an autobiography is made of a text, and thus governed by the rhetorical dimension of language, it cannot possibly refer to any "real" life-story and any attempt at self-representation necessarily results in constructing a mask rather than representing a face. On the other hand, as long as the only means of attaining a self is through language, the self always already appears as none other than a mask. Mask-making as a fundamental characteristic of language precisely generates the desire to find the self through autobiography. It is, in other words, a vicious circle of masking, de-masking, and

yet further masking and so on. To put it in de Man's own words, autobiography "veils a defacement of the mind of which it is itself the cause" (*The Rhetoric* 81).

Already, as Elke D'hoker points out, de Man's ideas of "'face,' 'mask,' 'figuration' and restoration" are present in Banville's earlier novel, *The Untouchable*, wherein the narrator's "autobiographical project" is pursued "in terms of 'attribution, verification, restoration.'" However, claims D'hoker, "this similarity masks an underlying difference. For de Man, the autobiographical narrative fashions a speaking mask for the voiceless I of the narrator, whereas for the protagonist this mask-making is precisely what the writing of an autobiography should cure him from" (*Visions of Alterity* 204). D'hoker enumerates two reasons for the failure of the autobiographical discourse in serving the narrator's attempt to restore his authentic self: firstly, his narrative is but an attempt to "control his identity, to uniquely determine the image to be carried to posterity" and, secondly, "even if Maskell aims to restore his authentic self in his autobiographic narrative, the means for doing so are, as de Man has argued, precisely the mask-making tropological antics he sought to combat" (*Visions* 206). Five years later in *Shroud*, Banville returns to de Man with more interest. De Man's career as a renowned literary theorist is highly reminiscent of Axel's. Like de Man, he moves to the United States to pursue a career in literary studies that is primarily focused on Romantic literature. Axel fashions a reputation in the literary departments of his time, a reputation that, as in de Man's case, is scarred by the revelation of a rogue past.

Not only de Man's life is staged (in the figure of Axel) but also de Man's ideas. . Axel equates story with history (91), defining the latter as "a hotchpotch of anecdotes neither true nor false" (49), and thus, reaffirming its inherent textuality. Moreover, de Man's essays "Autobiography as Defacement" and "Shelley Disfigured" resonate with the titles of two of Axel's papers: "Effacement and Real Presence" (156) and "Shelley Defaced" (290). As if in direct commentary on de Man's essay on the subject of autobiography, Axel readily

confesses: “I have manufactured a voice, as once I manufactured a reputation [...] The accent you hear is not mine, for I have no accent. I cannot believe a word out of my own mouth” (329). The words “mouth,” “manufactured,” and “voice” harken back to de Man’s idea of autobiographical prosopopeia while the metafictional gesture by means of which Axel emphasizes the invalidity of his autobiography posits de Man’s idea of the impossibility of truthful self-representation as a central concern of his quest for selfhood. In other words, de Man’s idea serves as a part of his autobiographical project, something he needs to deal with in his writing of the self. In parallel, according to Axel, the aim of his confessional narrative is “to redeem something of myself [...] some small, precious thing that I can buy back” (6). Axel’s latter claim denotes that he nevertheless does believe in the existence of a self. In fact his enunciation resonates more with the opening lines of Rousseau’s *Confessions*<sup>84</sup>—a writer whose autobiographical narratives were extensively read and deconstructed by de Man<sup>85</sup>. One can read Axel’s two contradictory positions as such: since he is aware of the inevitable process of autobiographical defacement, in emphasizing that he has “no accent” he sets to develop a tactic that enables him to garner a minimal form of selfhood that is not caught up in the defacing discourse of autobiography. No accent means no claim to an authentic narrative voice. That is to say, there is no face to be defaced in the first place since Axel’s lack of “accent” denotes his lack of an authentic signature that posits his singularity.

This evasive tactic, if one were to call it so, is also visible in the narrator’s relation with his name. As Hedwig Schwall points out, the name Axel Vander “lacks an origin, as [van der] is Dutch for ‘of the’, thus indicating a belonging but no origin” (“Mirrors” 116). Moreover, phonetically, “Vander” conjures up the legend of the “wo/andering” Jew cursed to walk the

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<sup>84</sup> “Je forme une entreprise qui n’eut jamais d’exemple et dont l’exécution n’aura point d’imitateur. Je veux montrer à mes semblables un homme dans toute la vérité de la nature; et cet homme ce sera moi” (*Confessions* 33).

<sup>85</sup> See de Man’s essay “Excuses” in *Allegories of Reading* (278-301).

earth eternally for mocking Christ before Crucifixion<sup>86</sup>. The narrator's first name, too, is awkward: his wife Magda never called him Axel because she finds it "like the name of a guard dog" (59) and Cass thinks it sounds like "a metallic bark" (141), thereby emphasizing the incompatibility of the narrator and his name. The narrator's uneasy relationship with his name is a recurrent theme in Banville. What distinguishes *Shroud*'s narrator, however, is that after admitting to having stolen the name "Axel Vander," he never discloses his real name throughout the novel. Uri Margolin indicates that, in narrative fiction, proper names are distinguished from other "singular referring expressions" (e.g. personal pronouns and definite descriptions), in that while other expressions "may pick out different individuals on different occasions of use, proper names [...] are unique in being fixed points in a changing world" ("Naming and Believing" 109). This point of fixity allows the subject of narration a space in the narrative universe in which he can anchor himself as an entity to be distinguished from others. From a psychoanalytic viewpoint, the proper name functions as a signifier that guarantees the subject a unique space in the Symbolic order, a singular point, which defines his singularity as an individual. Derrida, in turn, conceives of naming as a process of dehumanization in that it "does not name anything which is human, which belongs to a human body, a human spirit, an essence of man." Paradoxically, Derrida adds, "this relation to the inhuman only befalls man, for him, to him, in the name of man. He alone gives himself this inhuman name" ("Aphorism Countertime" 427). Elsewhere, he distinguishes the name from its bearer since the former "is always and a priori a dead man's name, a name of death" (*The Ear of the Other* 7). Following Derrida, Nicolas Royle states: "A name is capable of outliving its bearer: that is what a name 'is'. The name itself becomes an 'uncanny harbinger'" (*Uncanny* 191). Naming, in this sense, is a process of doubling, dividing the subject between his immediate being and the nominal (and minimally incongruent) shadow that haunts him.

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<sup>86</sup> Anderson, George K. *The Legend of the Wandering Jew*. Providence: Brown University Press, 1965. xi.



Therefore, one can postulate, by not giving his “true” name, *Shroud*’s narrator aims at resisting the name’s Symbolic splitting. Insofar as he is unnamed, the narrator aims at positing himself as the *hors texte* (to use Derrida’s famous phrase), as that which is outside the process of symbolization. By doing so, he reverses the roles (of the name as the shadow-spectre and his immediate being), transforming his very self into a shadow, an unnamed entity that lacks positive existence so long as existence is only possible via the Symbolic. He seeks to achieve unmediated being but the price he has to pay is that he himself becomes the spectre, one of the manifestations of which is the disembodied voice as discussed in chapter four. Mark O’Connell observes a similar process in which the narrator’s autobiographical discourse transforms the narrator into a “phantom” in *Ghosts*. Freddie, says O’Connell, demonstrates “a strange insubstantiality as a narrator, as the speaking ‘I’ of the narrative” (*John Banville* 98). O’Connell is right in saying that “[t]his absence of any fixed presence behind the text, the ghostliness of the narrating subject” results in Freddie “being haunted” by “the sense of himself as ‘a mere function or phantom’” (98). However, this insubstantiality is not exclusive to the narrators of *Ghost, Eclipse, or The Sea* as O’Connell suggests. It is the condition of all of Banville’s narrators since they all at some point or another bemoan their weightlessness and lack of solidity<sup>87</sup>. Insofar as *Ghost*’s narrator “never once names himself in the novel,” that is, “never truly positions himself as the solid subject of his text” (98), I agree with O’Connell that the latter novel does provide a specific narrative that illustrates the narrator’s spectral self-representation. However, if one read *Ghosts* in the context of the entire trilogy, the narrator’s identity as Freddie is given in the other two novels anyway,

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<sup>87</sup>This is aptly demonstrated regarding Banville’s early work in Joakim Wrethed’s phenomenological reading of *The Science Tetralogy*. See *Oases of Air: A Phenomenological Study of John Banville’s Science Tetralogy*. Doctoral Thesis. Stockholm: ISBN 91-7155-233-2, 2006.

unlike the identity of *Shroud*'s narrator which remains a mystery through and through. Besides, the question of the narrator's (lack of) name is complicated further in *Shroud* in that while the narrator resists revealing his true identify, he assertively identifies himself as "Axel Vander." In this sense, the narrator-autobiographer forces the reader to refer to him with a name that the reader knows to be fake, forcing the reader to acknowledge that Axel is not really Axel but simultaneously someone else. In this sense, he resists being fixed in his discourse, in other words, resists defacement albeit at the cost of being reduced to a shadow.

## 2. Surrogacy, theatricality, performativity

Axel explains the aim of his narrative in the opening pages of his narrative: "I am going to explain myself, to myself" (5), echoing Nietzsche's announcement "And so I tell my life to myself" in the semi-autobiographical *Ecce Homo* (74). Derrida reads the latter in his *Otobiographies* according to which the autobiographer first and foremost "tells *himself* this life and he is the narration's first, if not its only, addressee and destination—within the text" (*The Ear of the Other* 13). As Robert Smith comments, autobiography is related to "auto-affection" as a process of solipsistic self-containment achieved in "hearing oneself speak" (*Derrida and Autobiography* 76). The latter entails a process via which the subject creates a close circuit between the mouth and the ear, resulting in a "solipsistic umbilicus of completion" (*Derrida* 76). The most "categorical" by-product of hearing oneself speak, says Smith, is the sense of self-presence (76). Nevertheless, for the process of *hearing oneself speak* to be effective in producing presence one must inevitably produce speech from the mouth to ear. In other words, utterances must be verbalized, expressed as well as ex-pressed (pushed outside), so they can be heard. The message has to be first "detached at large" for it

to be received by the ear. In this sense, the process cannot be an entirely closed circuit, but instead, always partly open and exposed<sup>88</sup> (78). It is exposed to what Derrida calls the “aleatory or chance elements at work in every kind of message” (*The Ear* 108). Without this exposure

there would be no message, no distance for it to cover, nothing to mediate, no consciousness, no need for anything at all, and the subject would vanish into itself or be merely an animal [...] a mere prosecution of its innate capacities without meaningful constitution, that is, subjectivity (Smith, *Derrida* 78).

For subjectivity to exist, a discourse of exchange must be established through verbalization, one that is never fully self-contained but irrevocably mediated. The self-unity of the speaking/writing “I” is marred precisely because by uttering, *I* exposes itself to the other, the *you*, the generic interlocutor. Consequently, the self can no longer be the sole proprietor of the message. Rather, by addressing oneself, the *I* also addresses “an antecedent you,” a “not yet anthropomorphized you,” an irreducible otherness whose existence provides the very condition of possibility of the *I*’s verbal auto-correspondence (*Derrida* 78). According to Derrida, in autobiography the “text is signed only much later by the other,” “it is the ear of the other that signs” (*Ear* 50-1). This is why autobiography is in fact “Otobiographie,” a text destined to be received and endorsed by the other’s ear (*Oto-*). The latter provides the ground on which the autobiographical signature takes hold, the agent for whom the process of

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<sup>88</sup> Smith emphasizes that speech in this sense does not entail an actual production of sound. It is not an actual voice but “an ideal and absolutely unique form in so far as it does not literally have to take place as sound and the reception of sound” (*Derrida* 76). It is a voice in Husserl’s sense of the term, that is, “not the physical voice, the sonorous substance, but the phenomenological, transcendental voice, which continues to speak and to be present to itself in the absence of the world” (Sarah Kofman, quoted and translated by Smith 76). It is to be distinguished from the way the voice was discussed in chapter four where its material, Real aspect was central in the production of the uncanny.

signing is performed. As Royle remarks, “the signature will take place on the addressee’s side, that is on the side of him or her whose ear will be keen enough to hear my name, for example, or to understand my signature, that with which I sign” (*The Uncanny* 66).

In *Shroud*, the narrator hears himself breathe rather than speak: “I heard myself breathing in the mouthpiece” (38); “I could hear myself breathe” (167). It is not so much his speech Axel hears, not a textual message, not even a voice, but a shadowy sound of air. The process of hearing-oneself-speak in Axel’s narrative does very little in creating a subjective loop, a closed circuit between mouth and ear as a result of which he can achieve self-presence. In fact, presence is precisely what he lacks. Like the air he breathes, he is transparent: Cass is depicted as “looking through me as though I were not there” (110) and his “presence did nothing to tone down the rabid talk” (211-12). Furthermore, in Axel’s autobiographical account, the “you” is not a generic, not-yet-anthropomorphized “you,” but it is Cass Cleave. In fact, when explaining the aim of his narrative as an explanation of “myself, to myself” he also adds: “and to you, my dear, for if you can talk to me then surely you can hear me” (5). The narrator situates his narrative as an address to the other in a manner reminiscent of the opening line in *The Book of Evidence*: “My lord, when you ask me to tell the court in my own words, this is what I shall say” (3). In this sense, the irreducible function of the other in signing the autobiographical discourse is precisely what is self-consciously staged by Banville. There seems a systematic attempt by Banville to demonstrate the performative nature of his narrators’ relationship with their identity. “The name,” says Axel, “my name, is Axel Vander, on that much I insist. That much, if no more” (7). The word “insist” marks that the whole exercise of Axel’s discourse is a performative act. In addition, Axel pleads with a mysterious character named Max Schaudaine that his name is Axel: “I cannot say when it was exactly that I became Axel Vander [...] I gave his name as mine to Max Schaudaine” (283). Insofar as “Max Schaudaine” is an anagram of *deus ex machina*,

that latter accentuates the fact that his narrator is caught in the context of theatricality anyway. The relationship between identity and the stage is further highlighted in that the sentence “My name is Axel Vander” (255), which the narrator utters in Schaudleine’s presence, mirrors Alex’s enunciation in *Eclipse* where he literally performs his identity on a theatrical stage: “My name is Alexander Cleave” (187).

A similar process of mirroring is visible between, on the one hand, Alex’s line—“*Who if not I, then, is Amphitryon?*” (*Eclipse* 20)—which is, again, performed on stage, and, on the other hand, the sentence “What was his name, if he was not Axel Vander?” (*Shroud* 147). There is however a discrepancy that differentiates the two statements. Whereas, in *Eclipse* the statement is stated (or performed, rather) by Alex himself, in *Shroud*, it is uttered by Cass when she inquires about Axel’s real identity from Schaudleine. The latter instance evokes a sense in which the narrator have no say in the entire affaire of identity, that his identity is searched for, defined, and staged elsewhere, where he is not even present. The role of the other, the autobiography’s addressee (Cass) is transformed from signing the autobiography as Derrida has it, to a more fundamental role of establishing the narrator’s very identity. At the end of *Eclipse* the reader finds out that Alex, Cass’s father, recuperates her “papers”, a series of notes she had written on Axel’s life and scholarly work (210), a form of biography. In this sense, the autobiographer’s addressee offers an alternative version, a second account of the narrator’s life-story, thereby dualising it. At the same time, insofar as Cass knows the “true” secret of Axel’s past, what is evoked is that her version contains the narrator’s truthful self-representation, that is, the representation of the narrator’s “true” self before he stole the identity of Axel Vander. Cass’s notes, in other words, represent a chance of providing an authentic portrayal of the narrator’s self. Cass’s version represents the possibility that the endless process of signification can halt, that the signifier and the signified can finally coincide and the thing itself, the narrator’s true self, be disclosed. One can assume that the

italicized passages narrated in the third person in *Shroud* are direct quotations from Cass's notes (312-13, 379-81). The inclusion of these notes under the guise of the third-person, omniscient perspective suggests the idea that the narrator is aiming at situating himself at a meta-narrative level, a level from which he can see the "whole" story. At the same time, it is suggested that Axel edits Cass's notes and removes parts of the text before leaving them for Alex in an attempt to conceal his rogue past (*Eclipse* 211).<sup>89</sup> Paradoxically, in editing Cass's notes, Axel only renders them more fragmented. His direct intervention results not in a more coherent self-(re)presentation but produces holes in his narrative identity, thereby further complicating his quest for true self. Axel's autobiography does not so much deface as efface, literally omitting him and reducing him to an absence. No wonder the title of his essay contains the word "effacement" rather than de Man's "defacement" (*Shroud* 156). While de Man denotes marring, spoiling, and disfigurement, the former consists of erasure and making something disappear.

In *Eclipse*, Alex sets upon himself the task of piecing together Cass's chaotic notes hoping to retrieve the secret identity behind Cass's study. In *Ancient Light*, ironically, Alex, himself an actor, plays the role of Axel in a biographical film based on the latter's life while still unaware of the fact that Axel is the object of his daughter's notes. Insofar as the narrator in *Shroud* purloins (and performs) the "identity" of Axel Vander, he is a stand-in for the "true" Axel. At the same time, in playing Axel in the film, Alex is a stand-in for Axel. Things are complicated further still if one considers the ambiguous hints given by the narrator regarding the disingenuity of the *real, original* Axel Vander. It is suggested that, like the narrator, he also forges an untruthful personal identity in that he was also Jewish and his parents had perished in the camps<sup>90</sup> (*Shroud* 404). Therefore, one is presented with a series of

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<sup>89</sup> "And at the core of it," Alex remarks regarding his daughters notes, "there is an absence, an empty space where once there was something, or someone, who has removed himself" (*Eclipse* 211).

<sup>90</sup> The family of the real Vander "kept out of sight as much as they could, as if fearing to risk

surrogates without an original for the surrogates to be a replacement of. Identity exists only in as much as it is performed via surrogacy.

This ties up with the central metaphor (and title) of the novel, namely, the Shroud of Turin—the linen cloth believed by many to bear the image of Christ following his crucifixion. The Shroud and the narrator’s identity are related in different aspects. Firstly, the Shroud evokes the idea of “shrouding,” that is to say, covering, concealing, or obscuring, as when Axel confesses that he has been hiding behind a “shrouded past” (338). In this sense, he takes to writing this confession as an attempt to reveal his “true” self, which has been concealed by the shroud/cover of a stolen identity. Secondly, when Cass insists on visiting the Shroud, Axel ironically tries to convince her that it is “a fake” (307). The authenticity of the Shroud as the representation of Christ’s face remains under dispute to date. There have been many claims that it is nothing but the fabrication of a medieval masterful forger. But, even if one accepts that the image on the Shroud is “real,” that is to say, that it depicts an actual person, solid evidence to demonstrate that it actually belongs to Christ is unlikely to be found as the cloth itself is much younger. When they fail to visit the “real” Shroud, Cass and Axel are told about “a reproduction of the Shroud” (311) being exhibited somewhere in Turin. This connotes a duplication of a yet another duplication of the “real” thing—in this case, Christ's face. Things become even more ambiguous if one does not believe Christ did actually exist. So, one ends up with a representation of a representation without a coherently

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expulsion” (203). In addition, the newspaper he used to write for (*Gazet*) avoided the narrator when he went to inquire about the former’s death (229). After his death, Vander’s family disappeared (230) and met Zoroaster before being transported “East” (404). At the same time, there were rumors about him having been in the resistance (232) in reaction to which the narrator wonders: “the man who takes the identity of a sinner all unaware that the one he is impersonating was a saint all along” (235). In any case it is not entirely clear who the real Axel was in reality as his true intentions and identity remain elusive as much for the reader as for Alex.

conceivable referent—a signifier, that is to say, without a signified. The thing itself, Christ's face, is only present to us through a representation whose authenticity is yet far from being fully ascertained. In parallel, the narrator steals the identity of a person called Axel Vander. In other words our narrator is not “really” Axel Vander while the “real” Vander is also fake. In as much as the narrator and the individual whose name the narrator has appropriated are both fakes, the name Axel Vander, like the Shroud, does not “really” refer to any original entity. Instead, like the Shroud, Axel Vander is a signifier without a signified. Moreover, the Shroud is a particular representation, one that bears the marks, the imprint, of its referent's face. It is referred to in the novel as “the first self-portrait” (156). Like the Shroud which leaves a mark, but not that of the original bearer, Jesus, Alex, in playing Axel in the biopic, will form a shroud for Axel, an imprint, in which he will only be a stand-in.

In addition to the Shroud of Turin, Axel's narrative briefly refers to another significant textile representation of Christ, namely, the Veil of Veronica—a veil given to Christ by Saint Veronica to wipe his blood prior to Crucifixion, a veil onto which Christ's image was miraculously imprinted<sup>91</sup> (157). Both the Shroud and the Veil are *acheiropoieta*, that is, icons made without a hand, without any human mediation. According to *The Catholic Encyclopaedia*, the name Veronica itself is a combination of the Latin *vera* and the Greek *icon*, therefore, meaning “the true image.” In *Shroud*, the Veil also figures implicitly when

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<sup>91</sup> It is important to note that compared to the Shroud, which remains a widely revered relic in the Catholic tradition, the Veil lacks this status. The reason seems to lie in the fact that while the Shroud exists in one remaining example, various images of the Veil have been claimed to be the original representation. In the novel, however, the two relics figure as one and the same relic. After a talk Axel delivers at a literary conference in Turin his former mistress, Kristina Kovacs, half-ironically expresses her surprise at the fact Axel did not mention the Shroud in his discussion of “Effacement and Real Presence.” She then mentions Veronica in relation to the Shroud as “the first self-portrait” (156-7). Moreover, Cass wonders how the Shroud “had been taken to France by St Veronica herself who had fled the Holy Land after the Crucifixion” (307). In this sense, the speaker seems to be mixing up Veronica with Mary Magdalene.



Axel imagines himself “clutching his legs like the shaft of a car, and him behind [Cass] on the ground, his arms thrown back in the shape of a V” (307). “V” here can be taken as the initial for both Vander and Veronica (true image). What is more, it is not conceived of as a letter but a “shape.” In other words, Axel aims at producing a true representation (Vera Icon) of his self via the enactment of the shape, that is, the physical attribute of the letter. Nonetheless, even the letter’s shape has to be enacted, performed. There is no way out of performativity no matter how desperately he aims at achieving unmediated representation.

The paradoxical structure of identity and surrogacy is equally problematic for Alex. In *Eclipse*, he conceives the ghost-child as a “surrogate daughter” (157) and of himself as Lily’s “surrogate father” (167) while he neglects his real paternal role towards his own ailing daughter, Cass. In *Ancient Light*, in performing the role of his daughter’s lover, enacting the very violent, sexual liaisons to which Axel subjects Cass, he learns to care for Dawn Devonport, the actress who plays Cass in the film. As if things were not complicated enough as they are, Devonport’s “real name,” we find out, is Stella Stebbings (135)—another Dutch name, therefore in some sense, suggesting her origins to be the same as that of Vander. What Banville achieves in creating in the trilogy is two-fold. Firstly, the three novels form an intricate labyrinth that mirrors the labyrinthine structure of identity and illustrate the irreducible function of mediation, performativity, and eternal deferment at the heart of any quest for selfhood. Secondly, the three texts present an instance in which the process of signification as such is not only staged but manipulated and stretched, its structure transformed into a cyclical web. On the one hand, the reader is immersed in the layered, multiple names that are always portent and partly related to each other (e.g. Stebbings and Vander being both of Dutch origins). On the other hand, the narrators’ “true identity” is expressed as an absence or negation. *Shroud*’s narrator is ultimately an absence in Cass’s notes, the real Axel’s unnamed shadow. Moreover, he is the real Axel Vander’s physical

opposite. In contrast to the narrator's displeasing appearance with a rotting, dysfunctional, and excessively massive body (105, 138, 205), the original Vander "was beautiful" whose "good looks" rendered him as dandy as "one of those French film actors of the day" (207). In this sense, it is not sufficient to simply say *the narrator is not Axel Vander*. It is more befitting to consider the narrator as Vander's negation, his obverse counterpart; in a word, a non-Axel. This negative subjectivity, if one were to call it so, is mirrored in *Eclipse* where Alex imagines how, no longer able to perform on stage as a result of his stage fright, he "would be missed": "The curtain would be going up and I not there" (20). A few moments further, he reiterates the line from Kleist's play, during the performance of which his subjectivity is dislocated: "*Who if not I, then, is Amphytrion?*" (20). There seems a movement from the phrase "I not" in the first sentence to "not I" in the second. Read together, they form *I not I* as if to mirror Alex's subjective duality with negation and/or absence at its core. At the same time *I not I* echoes *I am not me*, indicating the narrator's inability to be one with himself, to be one and the same, to be whole. The lack of self-identity as well as the irreducibility of alterity in Alex's subjective experience is further emphasized in the Kleistian line if one were to consider *I [...] is Amphytrion*, conjuring up Rimbaud's famous *Je est un autre*.

### **3. Surrogacy, textuality, materiality**

The question of surrogacy and identity receives an additional dimension in *Shroud*. "I pause in uncertainty, losing my way in this welter of personal, impersonal, impersonating, pronouns" bemoans *Shroud's* effaced narrator (285). Deprived of a proper name, he is left with the confusion of pronouns. This statement aptly illustrates the narrator's predicament. Firstly, he is dislocated at the "personal" level: he is deprived of the sense of individuality,

his inner self. Secondly, he becomes “impersonal”—an unspecified, nameless, subject. And, finally, the statement ends in “impersonating,” that is, pretending to be someone else. In other words, the sequence of personal, impersonal, and impersonation denotes the consecutive stages at which the narrator is gradually reduced to a pronoun. The word “pronoun” is portentous: the prefix *pro* in the Latin word *pronomem* originally means “in place of.” Therefore, rather than a name, the narrator has to make do with that which comes in its “stead,” a stand-in, a substitute. Impersonation—albeit in a more archaic use—signifies embodiment, personification, or representation in a material form (OED). Thus, the phrase “impersonating pronoun” can be read as a substitute that embodies, or a material replacement that incarnates. The significance of materiality in Axel’s narrative is further emphasized in his evocation of the function of the mask for the Athenian thespian:

He has his mask, he has had it for years; it is his talisman. The white clay from which it was fashioned has turned to the shade and texture of bone. The rough felt lining has been softened by years of sweat and friction so that it fits smoothly upon the contours of his face (*Shroud* 286).

The word “texture” is used in order to illustrate the process through which the mask and the actor’s facial bones gradually become indistinguishable (286). The texture’s “rough” feel reinforces the haptic metaphor, thereby highlighting the material dimension of the mask’s surface. What is more, the word “lining,” considered alongside “texture,” adds another layer of significance to the mask metaphor, namely, its textile dimension. This ties in with the way the narrator previously likens his relationship with his alias (Axel Vander) to “a new suit of clothes” (255). The very word *texture* is multilayered. As well as conjuring up material substance it contains the word *text* and, therefore, is related to textuality. According to the OED, *text* itself is etymologically related to textile as it means “woven” in Latin. Elsewhere, Axel claims to have “manufactured” his academic identity based on “material filched from

others” (329). Although what is meant by Axel is written (hence, textual) material, his reluctance to use a phrase such as *written material* together with his use of the word *manufacture* primarily evoke materiality. The narrator uses similar imagery to depict a letter he receives during his escape from the Nazi-occupied Europe: “The handwriting I did not recognize; it might have been that of a schoolchild, the big, square capitals pencilled hard into the paper, the grains of graphite glinting in the furrows” (243). The phrase “hard into the paper” illustrates the way the letter’s author has left his/her mark, or trace onto the material surface of the paper while the pencil’s graphite renders the letters shiny. The (textual) meaning of the words, their linguistic function so to speak, is completely neglected in favour of the way in which the text’s matter is shaped.

In *Resistance to Theory*, de Man speaks of “the materiality of the letter” by which he intends to explicate the gap between meaning and words insofar as words are primarily made of individual letters (89). Letters, in themselves, are “meaningless” and acquire meaning only when they “come together in the word” (89). However, de Man points out, “in each of the letters the word is not present<sup>92</sup>” (89). Therefore, a fundamental rupture lies between meaning and what de Man calls “grammar,” between the way in which words are materially constructed, on the one hand, and the way in which they become meaningful once taken together, on the other. As such “the materiality of the letter” is de Man’s name for

the independence, or the way in which the letter can disrupt the ostensibly stable meaning of a sentence and introduce in it a slippage by means of which that meaning disappears [...] and by means of which all control over that meaning is lost (89).

In other words, our ability to identify meaning in a word resides in an illusion of wholeness,

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<sup>92</sup> Martin McQuillan illustrates de Man’s point: “The meaning of the word ‘fish’ does not lie in any of its component letters—f, i, s, or h—but in its totality. For de Man the meaning of the letters and the meaning of the word are totally independent and incompatible.” This incompatibility results in a “disjunction between grammar and meaning” (*Paul de Man* 87).

an illusion that neglects the fact that words are made up of material elements (letters). At the same time, this illusion is constantly threatened with disruption precisely by the materiality (and meaninglessness) of individual letters. This is what de Man means by the tropological nature of language. In the case of Axel's narrative, the narration seems precisely fascinated by this materiality. There is a sense in which Axel aims at bypassing the tropological dimension of language via emphasis on language's surface (material) effect. In addition to the previously cited examples, this is evident in Cass's preoccupation with the word *body*: "Body: that was a word she did not like, the sound of it, the bubbled b, the d's soft thud, the nasal, whining y" (*Shroud* 131). The body-word is not only deconstructed but also exploded, reduced to shreds, to its elementary components. At the same time, what effectively takes place in both examples (the letter Axel receives and the word *body*) is not so much the disruption of meaning that leads to the text deconstructing itself—as de Man would have postulated—as it is a *deliberate* attempt by the narrator at subtracting meaning from language. Moreover, although the process of subtraction results in meaninglessness, it simultaneously produces a remainder, namely, the trace of the hard pressing of the pen on the paper and the glowing of graphite in the first example, as well as the sonorous sensations the pronunciation of each letter produces in the second. Here Lacan's conception of the letter is illuminating.

Lacan too was concerned about the materiality of language. He differentiates between the Symbolic and the Real aspects of the signifier. On the one hand, he associates the former to the metaphoric function of language, that is, the way in which the succession of signifiers results in meaning (signification). On the other hand, the founding block of signifier is what Lacan names *the letter*: "the material medium [*support*] that concrete discourse borrows from

language<sup>93</sup>” (*Ecrits* 413). By materiality of the letter Lacan means “the essentially localized structure of the signifier” (*Ecrits* 418), the material place that gives body to the signifier, that is, the place it is designated in order to be meaningful<sup>94</sup>. In this sense, the letter is the Real aspect of the signifier. It is Real because it is the indivisible substance that grounds the possibility of language, the materiality which is meaningless in itself yet one that underlies the structure of language. Lacan’s idea of the materiality of language differs from de Man’s in that the former defines materiality against the backdrop of the Real. In a sense, one can argue that by staging de Man’s idea of the materiality of language in his narrative, Axel stumbles on its materiality as Real. Lacan’s conception of the letter (the material aspect of language) enables us to argue that Axel’s autobiographical narrative offers another instance in which the Real wins over the Symbolic in Banville’s fiction. The fact that the letter (the piece of paper carrying a message) Axel receives has “no signature” (243) is remarkable. It can be taken as Banville’s metaphor for the structure of the sign. Devoid of a signature, that is, a name or a mark that situates its singularity in the Symbolic, the letter’s unanchored content reveals not meaning but glowing significance, forcing the narrator to face the underside of signification: the materiality of language manifested here by the pencil’s trace

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<sup>93</sup> It is evident Lacan differentiates between language and “concrete discourse.” Lacan, emphasizes, “language is not to be confused with the various psychical and somatic functions that serve it in the speaking subject. The primary reason for this is that language, with its structure, exists prior to each subject’s entry into it at a certain moment in his mental development” (*Ecrits* 314).

<sup>94</sup> Bruce Fink clarifies Lacan’s point by defining the letter as “the micro- or nanostructure of the signifier” (*Lacan to the Letter*, 79). This microstructure, says Fink, can be materialized by type, or printing surfaces used before. That is to say, in this example, it is not the ink but the space each letter is designated in the signifiers for it to be meaningful (Fink 79). Lacan himself illustrates what he means by the materiality of the letter when he refers to the ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics, which, until they were deciphered using the Rosetta Stone, were illegible and meaningless to Western scholars. Nevertheless, despite their indecipherability, they obviously pertained to an organized system of signification (Lacan, *Freud’s Papers on Technique* 244–5).

on the paper, the physical mark that lays bare the spatial dimension of language.

#### 4. From de Man to Nietzsche: the self at the edge

Banville's *mise en scene* of Paul de Man's life in *Shroud* is at best very loose. Unlike de Man, Axel's past is not revealed posthumously. In fact, not only does Axel meet his exposé, but he also engages in a sexual relationship with her. Moreover, Axel and de Man do not entirely share the same secret. While de Man's reputation has been tarnished by his anti-Semitic articles written at a young age under Nazi occupation, Axel's ultimate secret is that he had purloined the identity of the person who wrote the problematic articles. Most significantly, perhaps, Axel does confess his secret in his narrative, something de Man never did in his lifetime. The relationship between the narrator and de Man is complicated yet further when, in *Ancient Light*, de Man's name is mentioned as one of a group of famous scholars associated with post-structuralism—"Deleuze, Baudrillard, Ingeray [*sic*, probably meaning Irigaray]"—who had taken "violent issue with the work and opinions of Axel Vander" (54). By mentioning de Man's name, especially as a thinker opposed to his narrator's ideas, Banville seems to hint to his reader that not only is Axel's life-story not merely a fictionalized version of de Man's life-history, but he also delineates his narrator's different attitude towards the relationship between textuality and reality from that advocated by de Man. Irigaray's misspelt name could be interpreted as yet another gesture that indicates the narrator's mocking attitude towards post-structuralist theories in general.

According to Eoghan Smith, Banville's "interest" in de Man lies not only in "the controversies surrounding his life as a young critic in Belgium, but also" in the fact that "his criticism touches on many of the inherent anxieties about the artwork found in Banville's writing" and in the way "the reconfiguring of de Man as [Axel] can be used to explore the

ideologies of aesthetics and interpretation of literary texts, rather than with a psychological reconstruction of a controversial life” (*John Banville* 126). In *Shroud*, in parallel to Smith’s observation, I argue Banville distances his narrator from de Man’s deconstruction in that the latter does not seem to provide an adequate account of the degree to which “reality” is accessible to his narrator. Firstly, in contrast to de Man’s idea that language is unable to produce a purely denominative representation of reality, Axel precisely thinks such an undertaking is possible: “let me try, once more, a last time, while the mood is on me, to describe how it *really* was between Cass Cleave and me [emphasis added]” (339). While he acknowledges that he has not been able so far to deliver such a representation, he thinks by trying harder, he can linguistically reproduce the reality of his relationship with Cass. That is to say, he does acknowledge deconstruction’s premise concerning the impossibility of representation to some extent while his belief in his ability to challenge this impossibility drives him on in his attempt. Similarly, he distinguishes between his “real” life in contrast to the fake life he has been leading so far: “The message it carried was one I had been waiting for and dreading all my life, what I think of as my life, my real life” (7). Secondly, Axel does believe in his ability in finding an essential form of selfhood:

I have begun to feel that I am falling off myself, that my suety old flesh is melting off my skeleton and soon will all be gone. I shall not mind; I shall be glad; I shall rise up then, bared of inessentials, all gleaming bone and sinew smooth as candle wax, new, unknown, my real self at last (8).

The passage presents a web of intertextual references to a number of writers. On the one hand, the imagery Axel uses in depicting his aging body, his melting, “suety old flesh,” is arguably a variation of Coleridge’s depiction of his dead fellow ancient travellers: “The cold sweat melted from their limbs” (“The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” 20). On the other hand, it illustrates how his quest for a stable core of selfhood independent from his incompatible



body leads to a dualism of body and mind reminiscent of Descartes's cogito. In contrast to the depiction of the body as a troublesome extension, the "I" is emphatically reiterated several times, rendering the dualism all the more explicit. For Descartes, while the nature of corporeal substance is constituted by material extension, the mind is made of non-physical substance.<sup>95</sup> However, while Descartes famously uses the example of wax to demonstrate the necessity for an independent mind to ascertain its "nature," Axel takes wax as an analogy for both his body as well as his self. On the one hand, his disintegrating body, his flesh, is "melting" like candle wax. By melting the wax of corporeality, then, Axel hopes to rid himself of the inessentiality that it represents in an attempt to attain the true essence of his self beyond (or beneath the cover of) the body. On the other hand, he considers the formlessness of melted wax as a metaphor for the self he is hoping to find, the original "smooth" self that has not been yet hardened into a shape. In this sense, although Axel distances himself from deconstruction by assuming the existence of the essential self, he does not fully subscribe to a fully-fledged Cartesian dualism in order to ascertain its nature. Instead, by using the same metaphor for both (the self and the body) he arguably seeks to redefine the relationship between the two, to find a relationship that is not based on a binary opposition (mind/body) but, rather, based on the inter-relatability of the two. This adds a new dimension to Axel's perception of his body as it is no longer viewed as merely dysfunctional and incompatible, but, instead, it reveals a potential for the disclosure of the self.

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<sup>95</sup> To illustrate his point, Descartes uses the analogy of the melting wax: "the residual taste is eliminated, the smell goes away, the color changes, the shape is lost, the size increases; it becomes liquid and hot; you can hardly touch it, and if you strike it, it no longer makes a sound. But does the same wax remain? It must be admitted that it does; no one denies it, no one thinks otherwise. So what was it in the wax that I understood with such distinctness? Evidently none of the features which I arrived at by means of the senses; for whatever came under taste, smell, sight, touch or hearing has now altered—yet the wax remains" (*Meditations* 152).

This is arguably a Nietzschean move on Axel's part. In *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, Nietzsche's prophet defines the self as "a mighty commander, an unknown wise man," an entity stemming from the body and not an abstract consciousness above it: "'I,' you say, and are proud of this word. But the greater thing [...] is your body and its big reason: it does not say 'I,' it does 'I'" (25). The self for Nietzsche has the capacity to transcend the ego precisely because it does not discard the body, but embraces it. The form of selfhood Nietzsche vouches for is not a metaphysical "I" or a transcendental subject. In other words, it is not a True self that can be excavated from underneath false appearances. In fact, the "I" and the self for Nietzsche do not constitute the same thing. The former is an illusion, which comes to be created as an effect of the processes of perception and interpretation (which are not mutually exclusive for Nietzsche). The "I," says Nietzsche, "only contains an *interpretation* of the event and does not belong to the event itself" (*Beyond Good and Evil* 48). The self, in contrast, is constituted as a result of one's acknowledgement and exploration of a potential creativity. It is, for Nietzsche, not the equivalent of the mind but rather a conglomeration of one's physiological perceptions that are constantly subject to change not to say transformation. It is not solely based on a set of mental activity that produce consciousness, nor is it an essential, unique core of selfhood, but "is, rather, a multiplicity," "an assemblage of heterogeneous elements for which the word 'body' must stand as a rather attenuated and insufficient summary" (Sedgwick, *Nietzsche* 140). Axel, on the one hand, "believe[s]," "insist[s]" that "there is no essential, singular self" (286). On the other hand, he is unable to "rid myself of the conviction of an enduring core of selfhood" (27). In this sense, Nietzsche's idea (that relying on one's ability of creativity, the self can be formed, made, by incorporating the bodily dimension) provides Axel with a way out of the deadlock. Smith remarks that "[b]ehind the pose, Vander truly yearns for the restoration of the essential value," and his narrative is the "fetishization of the 'Idea' that is asserted in *Shroud*, as the

assertion of the ideal over the corporal” (*John Banville* 128). Yet, in parallel to his idealization of the self over the body, I argue, in likening his “real self” as well as his “bone and sinew” to the smoothness (i.e. malleability) of “candle wax” (8) Axel effectuates a transition from the quest for the ideal self to an exploration of selfhood accessible only through corporeality: Cass observes how Axel smells of “candle wax” (185), evoking the idea that his body is literally transformed into it.

Axel uses a similar set of adjectives to describe the “enduring” resilience of his self (27), on the one hand, and the resilience of the eye as a bodily organ: “It is not commonly known that the eyeball is one of the toughest, most resilient muscles in the human body?” (292). In this light one can discern the interrelation of the body and the self in a rereading of the actor’s mask in Attic drama:

The white clay from which [the mask] was fashioned has turned to the shade and texture of bone [...] He takes to wearing the mask at home, when no one is there. It is a comfort, it sustains him; he finds it wonderfully restful, it is like being asleep and yet conscious. Then one day he comes to the table wearing it. His wife makes no remark, his children stare for a moment, then shrug and go back to their accustomed bickering. He has achieved his apotheosis. Man and mask are one (286-7).

The white colour of clay merges with the similar colour of bone and the mask acquires the contours, the shape of the face, becoming indistinguishable from it. Traditionally, the function of a mask is to conceal a discrepancy, a difference that, albeit temporarily hidden, remains. Yet, what is evoked in the imagery above is a sense in which the mask and the face (the body) merge. That is to say, insofar as one takes the mask as Axel’s metaphor for his identity, this means he is aiming at bridging the gap between the Symbolic (identity) and the Real (of the body), hoping to resolve the incongruence between the two. In fact, this passage in part stages the way Nietzsche relates mask and truth:

there is not only deceit behind a mask—there is so much goodness in craft [...] A man who has depths in his shame meets his destiny and his delicate decisions upon paths which few ever reach, and with regard to the existence of which his nearest and most intimate friends may be ignorant [...] [He] insists that a mask of himself shall occupy his place in the hearts and heads of his friends [...] Every profound spirit needs a mask (*Beyond Good and Evil* 34-5).

Nietzsche's seemingly paradoxical claim—that the mask does not so much hide a truthful self as offers the possibility of creating a profoundness of self through simulation—is part of his overall toppling the traditional privileging of truthful reality over apparent superficiality. In Nietzsche's terms, there is no truth to be discovered by unveiling the shroud, or the mask, but rather, all one can peer through it is another mask, another shroud. Truth is but the effect of the masking act, posited as a result of it. Profundity of selfhood, then, is not to be sought in removing the mask but, on the contrary, in elaborating it: “around every profound spirit there continually grows a mask, owing to the constantly false, that is to say, SUPERFICIAL [*sic*] interpretation of every word he utters, every step he takes, every sign of life he manifests” (*Beyond* 35). Axel admittedly engages in the Nietzschean celebration of the façade: “I had made myself adept at appearing deeply learned” (60). In his writing as a literary critic he always demonstrates an elaborate “prose style” rather than “grasp of theory” and “scholarship” (61). His reluctance in disclosing his real name is to be read as his attempt to make his mask, that is, his artistic poses and articulate style, his signature.

According to John Kenny, by evoking the Shroud on multiple occasions Axel seeks to “identif[y] himself directly with Christ and Nietzsche” “through the Shroud” (*John Banville* 174). I claim it is not so much Christ that Axel wants to identify with as it is with the Shroud itself. This is emphasized when a mysterious “red-haired fellow” (47) repeatedly says to him something that “sounded like *signore*” (48). He later refigures, again calling him “*signore*”

(287). At the same time, reminded by Kristina that the Shroud's other name is *sindone*, Axel's memory readjusts and he realizes that what the red-haired man had actually said was "*sindone*, not *signore*" (156). Axel refers to the man as "the punster" (287), emphasizing the way in which *signore* (mister) becomes a pun for *sindone* (the shroud). The equation of the two in Axel's perception evokes a sense in which he is one and the same as the shroud (mask). In other words, like the Attic thespian, he too achieves his "apotheosis," the culmination of his aesthetic self-recreation. Elsewhere, Axel admits: "There is not a sincere bone in the entire body of my text" (329). The metaphor of the text as a body underlines two points. Firstly, it illustrates the textuality of the body, that is, just as the text can be likened to a body, the body itself is constructed textually (linguistically, metaphorically). Secondly, the text as a body (and the body as a text) highlights Axel's own role as the writer of the body-text. That is to say, insofar as he is the writer of his self-representation, his function is irreducible in the type of body-text that is represented in his account. He is its creator.

Under the Nietzschean imperative, Axel heeds his bodily calls: "Headaches, stomach cramps, a constant churning in the gut, these were the body's protests at the insupportable strain of living always in fear" (224-5). The word "protests" indicates Axel's view of his body as an entity to be reckoned with, as a force that exerts a power on him that he cannot neglect. What is more, Axel's immediate relationship with the world is regulated by sensory feelings rather than intellectual reasoning. He speaks of experiencing "the sense of being sealed off from the world" (36), he has "the sense of [Cass] spinning on her toes" (52), and feels "a sense of splendour and communion" (73). He further emphasizes the physical, sensory nature of his experience when he links the word "sense" to smell: "I have a sense of something torpid, brownish, exhausted; the smell is the smell of re-breathed air" (205). Axel's emphasis on the senses (as the faculty by which the body perceives an external stimulus and not the faculty of meaning and understanding) resonates with Nietzsche's attack

of the ascetic ideal. The latter, says Nietzsche, is opposed to the world of becoming governed by bodily senses that should be favoured over “reason” since the senses “do not lie at all.” That which lies is what one “make[s] of their testimony,” a “falsification” that could lead “the lie of unity, the lie of thinghood, of substance, of permanence<sup>96</sup>” (*Twilight of the Idols* 2).

The Nietzschean overtones of Axel’s enunciations are in congruence with the philosopher’s presence throughout the novel. For instance, Turin, where much of *Shroud* takes place is also the city where Nietzsche lived and finally went mad. In fact, Axel and Cass visit the philosopher’s house during their stay in Turin. Pier Paolo Piciucco gives a detailed account of the relationship between Axel’s narrative and the city of Turin where “the figure of Frederick Nietzsche” presents a “powerful picture that contributes to both the making of Axel Vander and to his strong connection with the city of Turin” and sees *Shroud* as “a fertile soil where allusions, references and connections with the German philosopher mushroom” (“Thus Spoke Axel Vander” 63-4). Kenny, in his turn, proposes that the fact Axel is “one-eyed” “may be a partial reference to ‘the Cyclops of culture,’ the frightful energies that Friedrich Nietzsche, the ghost that haunts the novel, argued were the innovators for humanity” (*John Banville* 163). Piciucco convincingly links Kenny’s observation to the way Axel represents his uncommonly large “size and stature” that at times transforms him into “a gigantic creature of mythical dimensions” (Piciucco 66). Indeed, says Axel, “[a]mong them I was too big, in all ways; I was the giant whose head threatened to knock a hole in their ceiling” (205-6). Axel’s unusually large mass, Piciucco notes, is reminiscent of, or a variation

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<sup>96</sup> “‘Reason’,” says Nietzsche, “is the cause of our falsification of the testimony of the senses” (*Twilight of the Idols*, 2). Nietzsche, here, is making a case for his idea that “The ‘apparent’ world is the only one; the ‘true’ world is merely added by a lie” By emphasizing sensuality over reason Nietzsche directs his attack on Platonic metaphysics that fundamentally distinguishes between appearance and reality (2).

on, Nietzsche's famous *Übermensch*. Yet, despite his sound analyses, Piciucco's emphasis on other aspects of the relationship between *Shroud* and Turin limits his analysis of the significance of Nietzsche's Overman in Banville's novel.

Axel meets a "doctor" in Turin whose name "sounded like Zoroaster" (288), a reference to Nietzsche's text, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, in which the philosopher introduces and discusses in detail the idea of the Overman as the culmination of his life-affirmative philosophy, a being free from reactive beliefs and *ressentiment*<sup>97</sup>. As Lee Spinks remarks, *Übermensch*, on the one hand, signifies Overman "in the sense of height and self-transformation," that is, "the elevation of mankind's highest self into an experience of being that has no trace of moralism or the fiction of free will" (*Friedrich Nietzsche* 120). On the other hand, Over- "can also suggest 'across' or 'beyond' and Nietzsche employs this second resonance to characterize 'man' as a bridge we must pass across toward a life free of *ressentiment* and negativity" (120). This is why the Overman's key feature, according to Nietzsche, lies in crossing, "going over":

Man is a rope suspended between animal and Superman—a rope over an abyss. A dangerous going-over, a dangerous on-the-way, a dangerous looking-back, a dangerous shuddering and standing still. What is great about man is that he is a bridge, not an end: what can be loved about man is that he is a *going-over* and a *going-under* (*Zarathustra* 9).

Nietzsche's idea of the self's crossing over is evident in Axel's narrative on multiple occasions. At the beginning of his narrative, on the day he receives Cass's premonitory letter,

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<sup>97</sup> *Ressentiment* is Nietzsche's term for the nihilistic, rancorous attitude manifested by the weak as a result of their incapability to punish the strong. The weak (or the slave, as Nietzsche liked to put it), in turn, engages in "imaginary revenge" in order to make up for their incompetence (*On the Genealogy of Morality* 21). For Nietzsche, the figure of the priest is the ultimate manifestation of *ressentiment* that incessantly propagates *Sklavenmoral* (slave morality).

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had the certain sense of having crossed, of having been forced to cross, an invisible frontier, and of being in a state that forever more would be post-something, would be forever an afterwards. The letter, of course, was the crossing point (12-13).

Though the words “afterwards” and “post-something” conjure up the Nietzschean transformation in which man moves forward, advances to the Overman, the fact that it is the content of Cass’s letter threatening to reveal his rogue past that causes the crossing over, the movement is rather backwards. That is to say, he crosses over to the realm of the spectral past in which his old demons come back to haunt him. As a result of this passage, he is “cloven” between what “I had been before the letter arrived” and “this new *I*, a singular capital standing at a tilt to all the known things that had suddenly become unfamiliar” (13). The transformation results, not only in his uncanny bifurcation, but in the tilting, sloping, hence, a destabilized sense of self emphasized by the italicization (i.e. the literal tilt) of the second “I.” Elsewhere, “[t]he corner of the square with the plane trees,” Axel’s says, “was the crossing point from my world into” the world of the real Vander (201). What is emphasized in the description is not so much the process of the self’s crossing over, nor is it the other side, as it is the very site where the crossing takes place: “When I think of that *spot* the weather in it is always grey, the luminous, quicksilver grey of an early northern spring, the colour for me of the past itself [emphasis added]” (201).

In the description above, the passage from the narrator’s identity to that of Vander takes place “on the corner.” The word “corner” intriguingly figures repetitively throughout the narrative. To cite a few examples, Axel sees someone “sitting hunched at the corner of a table” (42); he goes to a “flower seller” located “at the sunlit corner” (43); he “had to stop at a street corner to consult the crumpled map” while he “registered the girl, on the corner opposite, looking in my direction” (52); and in his youth, he used to live a “corner basement



room” (55). Even Cass is depicted as “hiding in the corner of a couch” (93) and “sitting at a table in a cramped corner by the window” (144). Insofar as a corner is an angle where two sides or edges meet, it connotes a spatial border, a crossing point from one space into another. Therefore, by systematically representing himself—as well as his perceptual field—taking place at a corner, Axel shows how he is liminally stuck between two spaces, at the very edge of two worlds without quite pertaining to either. “For the most part,” Axel says, “I was kept firmly off at the outer edge of things” (211). The passive voice Axel uses in his enunciation evokes the sense of him being forced into the marginal position, as if a force was keeping him “firmly” at bay, away from accessing “things.” The sense of being forced is further emphasized when Axel uses the word *edge* as a verb again in the passive voice when he remembers his late wife Magda: “I felt I was being edged around by a large, wary ruminant” (18). Indeed, the very word *corner* can evoke such a sense as in *to be cornered*, that is, to be pushed into a position by force. In a sense, one can argue, Axel’s metaphors of liminality primarily highlight his lack of direct access to the “real” thing, indicating that his access to truth is barred by a force beyond him. Being cornered to the edge, so to speak, illustrates his perceptual (and representational) predicament. In this sense, Axel transforms Nietzsche’s metaphors for man as “rope” and “bridge” into man in corners and edges. Banville arguably provides a variation on the philosopher’s idea of Overman, presenting an in-between-man. As to what this move on Banville’s part represents in terms of his overall aesthetics, a brief detour through Alenka Zupančič’s Lacanian reading of Nietzsche is illuminating.

In *The Shortest Shadow*, Zupančič identifies two fundamental, philosophical positions with regards to the Real. On the one hand, there is “the classical or metaphysical position,” according to which, the Real is posited as “the material basis or a touchstone” for speech (12). On the other hand, there is “the so-called ‘sophistic’ position” that aims at dismissing

“the very notion of the Real,” advocating the idea that “‘speech is all,’ that the Real does not exist, that it all comes down to a question of conventions, different language games, different perspectives and interpretations” (12). Nietzsche’s writing, says Zupančič, offers a third stance that surpasses the aforementioned “couple”; it is based on “a specific duality,<sup>98</sup>” one that is “perhaps best articulated in the topology of the edge as the thing whose sole substantiality consists in its simultaneously separating and linking two surfaces” (12). Zupančič claims that Nietzsche’s specific articulation of duality as edge distinguishes his thinking from both the “realist” and “nominalist” positions in that it proposes a fresh position regarding the relationship between representation and reality since it brings to the equation the role of the (Lacanian) Real. Insofar as the Real is not reducible to reality, and insofar as reality itself is constituted through a fantasmatic scenario, as a specific configuration of the RSI, the traditional binary opposition between reality and illusion no longer presents a sufficient framework to distinguish truth from untruth. At the same time, insofar as the Real does exist, or, rather, subsist (though as an impossibility, as a limit), total dismissal of anything beyond textuality (and linguistic construction) misses the role of the Real. Nietzsche’s conception of duality as edge, according to Zupančič, “suggests that the Real exists as the internal fracture or split of representation, as its intrinsic edge on account of which representation never fully coincides, not simply with its object, but with itself” (28). Ultimately, from a Lacanian point of view, “what is designated as ‘beyond good and evil’” is located at this edge. It is “a beyond that is not really a realm, and is thus not a ‘beyond’ in the common sense of this term, but rather, has the structure of an edge” (17).

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<sup>98</sup> She emphasizes, it is “a duality that has nothing to do with the dichotomies between complementary oppositional terms (which are ultimately always two sides of the One): this duality is not (yet) multiplicity either” (*Shadow* 12).

If one agrees with Zupančič's reading, one can postulate that Banville's Nietzschean turn in *Shroud* does not so much lie in his multifarious, anecdotal references to the philosopher throughout the novel (and throughout his oeuvre since *The Book of Evidence* at least) as identified by other critics of Banville's work, but it arguably lies in constantly situating his narrator on edge, at an edge, that is, within a specific distance from the Real where he periodically comes across the impossibility of a truthful self-representation while simultaneously insisting on the existence of truth. Axel's narration grapples with de Man's ideas rather than simply assimilate them. *Shroud* is a sophisticated dialogue with the deadlock outlined by deconstruction, a dialogue supplemented by a Nietzschean subtext in order to locate, to lay bare, the inherent points of impossibility at the heart of representation rather than a mere illustration of that impossibility. The edges and corners at which Axel constantly finds himself are, in a way, the contours of his subjective frame. They are the spatial tropes for Banville's *mise en scene* of his perceptual as well as representational crisis. Faced with these edges, Axel lingers on them, plays with them, uses them as potential tools of his aesthetic self-creation. Like his counterpart in *Eclipse* who is constantly stuck in doorways and other passageways, Axel is also in between. Though, while Alex's liminal experience incessantly leads to the encounter with the Real as spectral apparitions, Axel's mostly results in the encounter with the Real as the limit of self-representation in his autobiography.

*Shroud* is the story of the self at/as the surface. Throughout the novel the self is likened to the Shroud, to the mask, and then situated at the edge as the meeting point of two surfaces. Indeed, as an autobiographer, Axel writes his self on the surface of paper. Ultimately, the book containing a multiplicity of paper sheets, that is, written surfaces, provides the metaphor that most aptly captures how Banville conceives of the self, namely, the self as a multiplicity of surfaces. Self-creating in writing is an attempt, on Axel's part, to live beyond the pathetic

circumstances that designate the tragedy of a single human life. The final chapter will address the importance of the surface with regards to framing the other.

## **Chapter Six: Framing the Other, the Other as a Frame for the Self (*Eclipse, Shroud, Ancient Light*)**

Many of Banville's novels can be read as accounts of the fascination of a male's tormented psyche with women. The female characters are simultaneously treated as objects of desire as well as objects of epistemological quest, figures that seem to encapsulate a crucial aspect of the narrators' journey of self-discovery. Several readings of Banville have identified the way in which female characters are reduced to abstract figures, and at times, even tools for the narrators' artistic aspirations. In the Art Trilogy, D'hoker observes, the artistic metaphors the narrators use to depict women "serve the dual purpose of both containing [...] and stripping" them of their agency (*Visions* 145-70). "These dehumanized women," Eoghan Smith claims, "are transformed into feminized objects of art, symbols of totalized presence subject to masculine gaze, touch and occasional violence" (*Banville* 110). Anja Müller, in turn, examines the role of women in the narrators' visual narratives and argues that the narrators' ekphrastic representations of the female other produces a "multi-layered discursive matrix for the materialization of the female body" ("You Have been Framed" 187).

Focusing on *Eclipse, Shroud, and Ancient Light*, this chapter aims at addressing the representation of the female characters and their role in Banville's aesthetic project in his latest trilogy. The central idea elaborated in this chapter is that the narrators "use" the figure of "the woman" to heal the rift between them and the natural world and to reconstitute their precarious sense of self. The discussion is presented in four sections. In the first section, I examine the way in which the woman's body is posited as the site for "truth." This leads the female characters to be subjected to the narrator's phallic vision. In the second section, I address the way in which the narrator's preoccupation with finding truth gradually transforms

into a fascination with the visual medium exemplified by the mirror, the window, and the microscope. Here, Banville's affinities with Heinrich von Kleist's visual aesthetics are explored in order to examine how the visual medium is dissected to its material components and how the narrators consequently attempt to enhance it via synesthetic perceptions. In the third section, I argue that the narrators' preoccupation with attaining pure aesthetic vision posit the female characters as artistic (re)creations. Here, Paul de Man is revisited to address how the latter's idea of "ontological crisis" is given a new dimension in the trilogy, one that presents fundamental ethical concerns in Banville's aestheticism. Finally, in the fourth section, I argue that Nietzsche's aesthetic of the surface provides the narrators with a way out of the "ontological crisis" posited by de Man.

## 1. Framing "the woman"

In a bout of narcissism typical of Banville's narrators, Alex unapologetically describes the women he has frequented in his life as having been "drawn into the orbit of my life" (*Eclipse* 8). According to Ruth Frehner, in Banville's fiction, women are either "variants of each other," constructed through visual constructs and stereotypical representations, or appear as opposites that compliment one other ("Gender Stereotypes" 51). In *Ancient Light*, this opposition is manifest in the description of Mrs Gray's "buxom" built (7) on the one hand, and Dawn Devonport's "lithe and seemingly weightless body" (91), on the other. In *Shroud*, in particular, women are depicted as extremely fragile. Lady Laura, says Axel, is "really [...] tiny": when she "lay down before me on the bed I was nervous of putting my hands on her for fear of breaking something" (*Shroud* 269). What is more, the female characters in the trilogy often function as surrogates for one another: Lily in *Eclipse* and Dawn Davenport in *Ancient Light* function as surrogates for Cass and Cass stands in for Magda in *Shroud*. At

times, they appear as shadowy or insubstantial figures. For instance, Lydia is not so much a woman as she is “just a shadow, woman-shaped” (*Eclipse* 3), Mrs Gray’s “dimming figure waver away through the twilight, over the bridge, and disappear, slipping like a shadow” (*Ancient Light* 195), and “At the end of the corridor [...] the figure of Cass Cleave appeared and came forward, elongated and rippling in the blazing light” (*Shroud* 155).

In a sense, that from which Banville’s narrators are radically barred, the ultimate “truth,” is somehow synonymous with womanhood: “I do not understand women, I mean I understand them less than the rest of my sex seems to do. There are times when I think this failure of comprehension is the prime underlying fact of my life” (*Athena* 46). This can be easily generalized over all of Banville’s narrators. In *Eclipse*, Lily “is an animate riddle that I have been set to solve” (123). Lydia’s “black hair” (34) confers upon her “an exotic” (34) feel and her “physical opulence” (35) fascinates Alex. The radical unfathomability Axel associates with Magda and Cass in *Shroud* results in their depiction as uncanny “creatures,” ones “who exist on a median plane between the inanimate and the super-animate, between clay and angels” (332). In *Ancient Light*, the narrator claims: “All women for me have an aura” (96). Harkening to the famous Freudian question—“what does the woman want?”—both Alex and Axel encounter the enigma of the woman’s desire. The former expresses his inability to “solve the riddle” of Lydia’s demand (*Eclipse* 31), and the latter literally reiterates the Freudian question in relation to Cass: “What did she want from him? She did not know” (*Shroud* 32). At the same time, the protagonists’ obsession with finding the true nature of their self and reality is seemingly intertwined with the mystery of femininity. As Frehner notes, women in Banville’s fiction embody the “essential other” as they appear to possess what the narrators “lack” (“Gender Stereotypes” 53, 61). In the trilogy, the “essential” woman is fully exemplified by Lily and Cass in *Eclipse*. Even though Alex complains that Lily has intruded in his “solitude,” she immensely captivates him: “At those

moments of stillness and self-forgetting” when she “takes on an unearthly aura, exudes a kind of negative radiance, a dark light” (96). Having abandoned his family, he chooses to confine himself in his childhood house thinking that it is only via solitude that he is able to retrieve his true self. Nevertheless, it is through Lily that he can see what constitutes authenticity. Magda is Axel’s “silent guarantor of authenticity” (*Shroud* 400) and Lydia is the constant “audience” for Alex’s constant theatrical act, maintaining the coordinates of his narcissistic sense of self-presence (*Eclipse* 140). He laments the lack of “solid ground” and claims to have arrived at some sort of “centre” “through Lydia” (*Eclipse* 37).<sup>99</sup>

In *Body Work*, Peter Brooks identifies a tendency in the history of Western thought which implicitly designates the female body as a receptacle for truth. This, says Brooks, is coupled with the fact that the visual faculty as such has traditionally been regarded as the favourite means of knowledge-seeking:<sup>100</sup> “sight has always been both a central faculty and a central metaphor in the search for truth” in that it “is conceived to be the most objective and objectivizing of the senses, that which best allows an inspection of reality that produces truth”(96).<sup>101</sup> However, Brooks emphasizes, since access to truth is not straightforward, “it often is represented as veiled, latent, or covered, so that the discovery of truth becomes a process of unveiling, laying bare, or denuding” (96). On the one hand, the search for truth is

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<sup>99</sup>“I had come from nowhere, and now at last, through Lydia, I had arrived at the centre of what seemed to be somewhere” (37).

<sup>100</sup> In her feminist reading of Banville, Patricia Coughlan mentions Brook’s book in passing (“Scenes of Eros” 86). Although she notes the significance of the relation between visibility, feminine nudity and truth in Banville, she opts for the reading of his representation of feminine eroticism. I think, however, the question of visibility and its relation to the representation of women deserves to be read in more detail since both the epistemological quest for truth and the visual paradigm are important, if not paramount, elements in Banville’s narrative apparatus.

<sup>101</sup> Fredric Jameson makes a similar claim regarding the “the imagery of the eye” that “has often seemed to furnish a privileged language for the description of epistemological disorders” (*The Prison house of Language* 206).



intricately related to the female body, and on the other hand, “the point from which [epistemological] vision is directed at the world, has largely throughout the Western tradition been assumed to be male” (96). The “convergence of the erotic with the epistemic,” thus, produces a “nexus” of “sight, knowledge, truth, and woman’s body” in which “man as knowing subject postulates woman’s body as the object to be known, by way of an act of visual inspection which claims to reveal the truth—or else makes the object into the ultimate enigma” (96-7). In her seminal text on the subject, Laura Mulvey, in turn, identifies “two contradictory aspects” of pleasurable looking. One “arises from pleasure in using another person as an object of sexual stimulation through sight” while the other is the pleasure derived from “identification with the image seen” (“Visual Pleasure” 836). The first involves the “separation” of the subject’s “erotic identity” from the image and the second implies the subject’s identification with the image during what Freud calls primary narcissism (836-7). Since the second aspect is not immediately relevant for our discussion here, I will only address the first. To paraphrase Mulvey, since the socio-normative Symbolic order traditionally attributes an active role to masculine identity, “the male figure cannot bear the burden of sexual objectification” (838). He is required to resist objectifying “his exhibitionist [male] like” because his own subjective position as male will also be threatened. As a result, his role, which is de facto designated “as the active one,” must posit a woman as the object of his scopophilic vision for him to have a subjective position within the Symbolic order governed by phallic sexual difference (838). As a result, says Mulvey, women are assigned the “exhibitionist role” wherein their appearance becomes “coded for strong visual and erotic impact” so that “they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness” (837). This, of course, has to do with the asymmetrical nature of human sexualization. Whereas men identify with the masculine signifier (which Lacan calls the phallus), an equivalent signifier that could represent femininity does not exist at the Symbolic level. Instead, women should identify

with a signifier representing the lack of the phallus. This is not because women lack the penis due to biological reasons but, rather, it is because the socio-symbolic system that regulates human reality lacks a signifier that could posit them on a par with masculinity. Due to the traditional domination of women by men as well as the ensuing historical, ideological privileging of masculinity over femininity, the penis takes the form of an insignia of power, while the female genitalia is forced into a more passive position by not being identified with a signifier which can rival the phallus. Sexuality—and human reality as such, for that matter—, becomes phallic, that is, based on the phallus as the only signifier available for acquiring a sexual identity. In her phallicized position, “the woman” comes to represent castration, hence she is perceived as threatening to man.<sup>102</sup> Psychoanalytically speaking, the fear of castration paves the way for what can be called that phallogocentric ideology that governs sexual identity. The figure of the castrated woman, the woman insofar as she lacks the phallus, constitutes the presence of the phallus as a “symbolic” presence (Mulvey, 883). Therefore, says Mulvey, by objectifying her, the male gaze “circumvent[s] her threat,” transforming her image into “raw material” for his active gaze (843). In a word, she is transformed into a “spectacle” (838).

The definitive characteristic of the representation of the woman, especially in *Ancient Light*, is that they are carried out predominantly using visual imagery. Alex literally refers to the scene of his encounter with a woman riding a bike, whom he had probably mistaken for

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<sup>102</sup> Elizabeth Grosz nicely paraphrases Lacan’s idea of phallus as a signifier. According to Grosz, the problem lies in the fact that the biological difference between male and female genital organs “becomes expressed in terms of the presence or absence of a single (male) term” (*Jacque Lacan* 117). This, in turn, results in the penis to be “removed from its merely anatomical and functional role within (‘natural’) need [...] to the role of object” (116-7). As a result of the “misappropriation of the penis by the phallus” men have a positive signifier to identify with whereas women have to situate themselves in a position related to the absence of a signifier rather than a signifier of their own (117). Castration in the psychoanalytic sense, means being stripped from the phallus as the signifier and, thus, being objectified.

Mrs Gray, as a “spectacle” (*Ancient Light* 5). Later, he believes Mrs Gray’s image offers him a “representation of woman in the raw” (29). His “goggling” eyes perfectly posit him as the male gazer into the scene of the passive woman offering herself as the image (5). Castration anxiety,<sup>103</sup>—the sort of anxiety so reminiscent of Freddie’s hysteric universe in *The Book of Evidence*, permeates Alex’s perception of Mrs Gray to the extent that the instant her sexual desire acquires an active form it is perceived as threatening: she is described as shameless and “the spectacle of such raw desire threatened to have a deflating effect on me” (175). In the scene where he meets the woman on the bike, Alex is “fortuitously” given a “glimpse” into her “exposed” underwear (4-5). The word “fortuitously” portrays the scene as a lucky apparition of “a woman’s nakedness” for the voyeuristic narrator, as if the disclosure of the “silken scantlings” (5) were the manifestation of a world that has hitherto been denied to him. He describes the sensation of accessing this world as “the sense I had of having been granted a glimpse into the world of womanhood itself, of having been let in, if only for a second or two, on the great secret” (6). The “secret” of “the world of womanhood,” therefore, is linked to sight. He later attempts to salvage his account of the scene from being perceived as a vulgar episode of voyeuristic gratification:

What thrilled and charmed me was not just the sight I got of the woman’s shapely legs and fascinatingly complicated underthings, but the simple, amused and generous way that she looked down at me, doing that throaty laugh, and the negligent, backhanded grace with which she subdued her ballooning skirt (6).

Nevertheless, in this very attempt at redemption he reveals that what fascinates him most is the mysterious combinatory gesture of gaze and laugh, which, to Alex, signifies the feminine “grace,” the essential characteristic with which he describes Mrs Gray (6). A sublimated version of his bout of voyeurism, the latter functions as the embodiment of the feminine

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<sup>103</sup> Hedwig Schwall points out that all of Banville’s narrators demonstrate excessive fear of castration (“Mirrors” 118).

“secret.” Womanly grace becomes the signifier by means of which he aims at fending off his fear of castration while, simultaneously, positing her body as a target for his visual avidity.

Brooks outlines different narrative strategies in representing the female body. In realist fiction, says Brooks, “Stories will very often, both in narrative structure and theme, concern curiosity directed at the concealed, clothed, hidden body” and “the very motive of representation” is the attempt at “seeing and knowing” which are ultimately attempts at “mastering” the female form. In modernist fiction, however, “the frustration of knowing produces a questioning of the epistemophilic project itself [...] and the very principle of knowing—or of possessing—another body comes to appear hopeless” (*Body Work* 105-6). With regard to Alex’s depiction of Mrs Gray, it is safe to say that the representation of the female form fits into both categories. On the one hand, as we saw earlier, what sets Alex’s narrative into motion in the early pages of the narrative is the “secret” world of femininity, and, on the other hand, he despairingly admits that Mrs Gray’s entirety, “the total she,” never stops eluding him (46). Brooks singles out one “exercis[es] of vision” which can grasp the totality of the female form, namely, still photography. Precisely by virtue of holding her “motionless,” says Brooks, the artist is able to frame her wholeness. But, he points out, it is a murdering gaze: “the photographic gaze can see the body whole only by killing it” (102). Brooks convincingly gives examples of such “photographic gaze” from nineteenth-century fiction. For instance, says Brooks, “we recall the ultimate coherence of Emma Bovary’s body only when it has become inanimate” (102). This mode of narration, too, corresponds with the narrators’ representations.<sup>104</sup> In *Shroud*, Magda is a ghost, fixed, and “planted” (15). In *Ancient Light*, Dawn Devonport “was lying on her back with her hands folded” (166), Mrs Gray is “sitting tailor-fashion with her ankles crossed” (60). More importantly, Alex admits

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<sup>104</sup> Kenny: “Banville has reviewed and commented upon far more books to do with photography than any other of the visual arts, and with increasing frequency in his later periods” (“Banville’s Pictorial Paradigm” 57).

that since his first encounter with Mrs Gray, he has been constantly trying to “fix her fully in my mind and make her of a piece” (47). Even at the level of narration the pronoun “she” at times seems a means for him to represent his fixed image of the woman rather than referring to an individual character: while talking to Billie, the latter asks him about the reason why Dawn Devonport might have tried to commit suicide, the word “she,” seems simultaneously to stand for Mrs Gray, Cass, and Dawn Devonport: “I was confused for a moment, my mind having been off doing bold things with Mrs Gray, and thought she was referring to Cass [...] I realized it was Dawn Devonport she meant” (149). Insofar as Magda, Cass, Kristina Kovac, and, of course, Mrs Gray all die. Narration, then, aspires to be a process of stabilizing the undecidable, and fiction is set to function as *fixion*.

Indeed, the process inevitably fails. According to Brooks, the phallic body—the image of the woman “fixed” by the phallic signifier—“can never be wholly grasped as an understandable, representable object” because “the epistemophilic project is always inherently frustrated.”<sup>105</sup> As a result, “the investigatory gaze becomes fixated on an imaginary body” (99), the phallic woman. This imaginary body, says Brooks, is knowable “only partially, metonymically, and fetishistically” (100). The totality of the body fails to yield itself to the epistemological gaze.<sup>106</sup> The latter must content itself with “accessory

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<sup>105</sup> Here, Brooks draws heavily on Freud’s theory regarding the child’s psycho-sexual development. Freud postulates that the scopophilic drive is inherently linked to the desire for knowledge. Brooks nicely paraphrases Freud’s idea: “the drive to know originates in the child’s perception of the anatomical distinction between the sexes, and in the overwhelming question addressed to the world, and to its parents: Where do babies come from?” Since the child’s question never receives a satisfactory answer from the parents, his/her epistemological quest only becomes “displaced” engendering a permanent feeling of frustration that is to say with the individual’s later development. It also defines one’s sexuality as such (99).

<sup>106</sup> This, Brooks explains, is due to the intrusion of an excess in the field of vision: “the perception of an unrationalizable sexual difference, the insistence that the missing object of the investigatory glance

details, metonymies of bodies,” and “parts instead of wholes.” This, says Brooks, leads to “metonymization within the field of vision” which is, in turn, translated into “the linear nature of the signifier.” In other words, the bodily image must inevitably “unfold in sentences,” whereby continually delaying “the final object of sight” (101-3). That is why Mrs Gray’s body appears to Alex “only as a series of disparate and dispersed parts” (46). In the bathroom, the mirror presents a peculiar image of her body:

What was presented to me was a triptych of her, a body as it were dismembered, or I should say disassembled. The mirror’s central panel, that is, the central panel of the mirror on the dressing-table, if that is what it was, framed her torso, breasts and belly and that smudge of darkness lower down, while the panels at either side showed her arms and her elbows, oddly flexed (30).

Far from a coherent image, Alex’s visual apparatus at best yields an oddly fragmented form reminiscent of the female nudes à la Picasso. Moreover, his access to the female form is not direct, but mediated through a tripartite mirror. It is a “mirrored mirror” (29). Not only is his visual experience mediated through a mirror, but also the double mirroring reduplicates the image, resulting in a *mise en abyme*, thereby destabilizing the image and ceaselessly deferring the narrator’s visual apprehension. The numerous punctuations—nine commas— together with the multiple use of phrases such as “that is” and “as it were” transcribe the deferral and lack of immediacy into the very fabric of the passage.

## **2. From the woman to the medium: framing vision**

Preoccupied by the lack of immediate visual access to Mrs Gray’s body, Alex concocts the

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is present everywhere.” As a result, “the object [of representation] in itself undergoes a repression that then charges substitute objects with a greatly increased affect” (101-2).

idea that the multiplicity of the mirror reflections produces a “crystalline maze” (29). Just prior to realizing that the image belongs to Mrs Gray’s body, “what caught my gaze,” he says, involved a “kind of looking-glass” (28). Then he engages in giving a detailed description of the mirrors and the effects they have on his visual experience:

More confusingly still, there was another mirror, a full-length one, fixed to what would have been the outwards-facing side of the inwards-opening door, and it was in this mirror that I saw the room reflected, with at its centre the dressing table, or whatever it was, with its own mirror, or I should say mirrors (28-9).

The mirror mirroring another mirror dominates his field of vision, creating a hall of mirrors and the surface mediating his perception of Mrs Gray comes to the fore as the primary object of representation. His representation here is not so much concerned with capturing the form of Mrs Gray’s body as it is with the process in which his visual perception is mediated, never direct. Moreover, the fact that it is not a singular mirror but a multiplicity of “mirrors” highlights how Alex’s perception is plural rather than a (stable) singular one. In positing Mrs Gray as his “essential” woman, the “woman in the raw” (29), the figure of the “woman” functions in Alex’s narrative as the site of truth, the ultimate reality to be unveiled. This is of course in line with Brooks’s and Mullvey’s understanding of the phallogentric structure of visual representation. What is equally revealed in Alex’s depictions, though, is the fact that the narrator can never frame this site of truth as it is since his (visual) access to it is always barred by a medium, a surface that multiplies and modifies perception.

In *Eclipse*, it is the window that frames the woman. At the beginning of his narrative, Alex sees the “motionless” image of Lydia “standing at the window of what was once my mother’s room” (3). He later realizes that she was not physically there at the time, that what

he had seen was but a hallucinatory image (18).<sup>107</sup> Through this very window he sees a “tilted” image of the world (18).<sup>108</sup> In this sense, the window is not limited to the representation of woman but also functions as the frame that isolates his visual perception, thereby, one can argue, staging his visual frame as such.<sup>109</sup> Moreover, Lydia’s image at the window, says Alex, was “gazing steadily in my direction but not directly at me. What did she see? What was it she was seeing? I felt diminished briefly, an incidental in that gaze, dealt, as it were, a glancing blow or blown a derisive kiss” (3). At first glance, what is immediately evoked in the description is that it is Lydia who is posited as the seeing agent, not the narrator. In this sense, the roles of the seer and seen are reversed as Alex seeming loses the privileged position of the male gazer, and instead, is reduced to the object that embodies what Mullvey calls “to-be-looked-at-ness.” However, on a closer look, one can argue that the depiction is really about him, about his own elusive self. The reiteration of the question regarding the object of Lydia’s gaze evokes the sense in which her gaze holds the key, the answer to the narrator’s quest for selfhood. Positing Lydia as the seeing agent is in fact a ploy on Alex’s part in order to maintain the other’s function as a spectacle, or a mirror, for his own narcissism. Nevertheless, the repetition of the words “gaze,” “see,” and “glancing” on the one hand, and the fact that the gaze is described a “blow” before which Alex feels “diminished,” on the other hand, result in the representation, not to say dramatization, of the very act of seeing.

In *Shroud*, in turn, “the windows are so narrow and dirty,” exclaims Axel, that “I have

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<sup>107</sup> This is the experience elaborated in chapter three where he says: “I had seen my not-wife” (*Eclipse* 18).

<sup>108</sup> “the garden straggling off into nondescript fields, then a huddle of trees, and beyond that, where the world tilted, an upland meadow with motionless miniature cattle” (*Eclipse* 18)

<sup>109</sup> Elsewhere, “The deserted square at dusk, with its low, humped roofs and windows sullenly aglow, has a slightly sinister, alien air, a touch almost of Transylvania” (*Eclipse* 25). The “sinister,” shining windows, in other words, emphasize the Gothic aspect of his narrative universe.



to keep a table lamp burning all day for fear of falling over something in the half dark” (4). Elsewhere, he speaks of “blinded windows” (8). In being “narrow,” “dirty,”<sup>110</sup> and “blinded,” the window then emphasizes obscurity and lack of clear vision. The dirty window equally resonates with Axel’s blind eye which appears to him in the mirror as “clouded” (8).<sup>111</sup> In other words, the window is further associated with the lack of sight. Even when it is “large and long,” the window gives “on to a narrow walkway and the siding of the next-door house” (16-17), thereby highlighting Axel’s claustrophobic experience, an experience that is accentuated further still when Axel “went into the windowless bathroom” (68). Therefore, whereas in *Eclipse* windows serve to stage sight, in *Shroud*, they serve to stage blindness.<sup>112</sup> In both cases it functions as a metaphor for the eye and its (in)ability to see. That is to say, it is as if the window were a metaphor for the open as well as the closed eye. In *Ancient Light*, in contrast, windows are very often related to light: “The metal-framed oblong windows here, all shine and sky, were too bright to sustain my gaze” (27); “Above the bed and halfway up the wall there was a single window of frosted glass, and the rain-light coming through was soft and grey and steady” (40-1); and, Alex is depicted “standing there under that tall, light-filled window” (97). At times, the light that passes through the window illuminates particular objects in Alex’s surroundings, isolating them and transforming them into human-like figures: he sees a “toaster with a seething gleam of sunlight from the window reflected high on its shoulder (13). Previous criticism up to the Art Trilogy attests to the abundance of windows throughout Banville’s fiction. In *Doctor Copernicus*, Kersti Tarian Powell points out, windows provide the protagonist with “a threshold between the outside world and the

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<sup>110</sup> The dirty window refigures when a driver, says Axel, “spat a stringy green gobbet that landed with a smack in the corner of the rear window by my face, making me start back in disgust” (*Shroud* 26).

<sup>111</sup> “the sightless eye that glares at me unmoving from the morning mirror, clouded and colourless” (*Shroud* 8).

<sup>112</sup> Incidentally, windows in this sense can also be read as Banville’s metaphor for, or a playful *mise en scene* of, the title of de Man’s book *Blindness and Insight*.

interior space” by means of which he acquires agency and function “as sites for self-projection” (“The Lighted Windows” 39). They reinforce the narrator’s sense of self-presence, Powell adds, as they frame his “realization” (42).<sup>113</sup> In the Art Trilogy, according to Françoise Canon-Roger, an important function of the window involves the isolation of “the description that follows from the surrounding text and” the creation of “a stasis between the described actions and movements” (“Imagines” 27).<sup>114</sup> While these readings are pertinent considering Banville’s entire oeuvre in one way or another, in the trilogy the multifarious figurations of the window, I argue, specifically serves Banville as a tool to self-consciously stage the act of seeing, and thereby exploring, or rather, framing the medium of sight. This is most explicitly evident in *Ancient Light*, where, the window functions as part of Banville’s examination of visual experience in a manner reminiscent of an important precursor of his, namely, Heinrich von Kleist.

Kleist’s work has figured in Banville’s oeuvre on numerous occasions. For instance, *God’s Gift* is an adaptation of Kleist’s play *Amphitryon*, which is also heavily drawn upon in Banville’s *Infinites*. In addition, the narrator experiences his stage fright in *Eclipse* while playing the role of general Amphitryon in Kleist’s play. Banville’s special affinity with Kleist’s work,<sup>115</sup> one can argue, can be traced to what Heinrich C. Seeba calls Kleist’s “epistemological disorder” (“The Eye” 3). Kleist perceived the Kantian turn as a “crisis” as a result of which the subject is barred from accessing the thing-in-itself. Therefore, he centred

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<sup>113</sup> At other times, Powell adds, for the narrator, Nicolas Copernicus, they act “as a border that limits his view but also as a safeguard” (43). In *Kepler*, unlike *Doctor Copernicus*, the window does not shield the narrator from “clamor and chaos” but is that which “brings disorder into a sharper focus” (46).

<sup>114</sup> The window is also related to ekphrasis, says Canon-Roger, as it involves the framing of landscape and transforming it into “a muffled echo of the painted portrait towards which the whole narrative converges” (“Imagines” 27). Ekphrasis is addressed in the final section of this chapter.

<sup>115</sup> John Kenny calls him Banville’s “beloved German dramatist” (*John Banville* 62).

his artistic project on the articulation of a way that can enable him to bridge the epistemological gap. The Kantian preoccupation has equally plagued Banville's narrators, at least, since *Birchwood* in which Gabriel Godkin yearns for "the-thing-in-itself" which constantly "eluded" him (13). A number of reasons can be traced for this affinity. Firstly, Kleist's version of Romanticism<sup>116</sup> characterized by existential doubt and crises finds its echo in Banville's narratives of self-dislocation and intellectual uncertainty. Secondly, Banville's fascination with finding a way to address philosophical ideas in his fiction narrated by self-conscious aesthetes is a (post)modern counterpart to Kleist's concern with "blurring the borderline between philosophy and aesthetics," a concern that "has opened up the question of truth to the possibility of its aesthetic construction" (Seeba, "The Eye" 113). More importantly for our discussion here, Kleist immensely interests Banville in his later work specifically because, in Kleist, he finds a way to address the Kantian predicament that resonates with a predominant aspect of his own aesthetic project: *visuality*.

Kleist's frequent use of the image of "the creative despair of an inadequate truth seeker," Seeba says, led him to stage "the paradigm shift from the mind to the eye, from the cognitive to the physiological aspect of perception" (103-4). By making the eye his "central motif" Kleist aimed at "from the cognitive to the sensual, from noumena to phenomena" (Seeba 107). In doing so, according to Seeba, he effected a "semantic switch [...] between the literal and the metaphorical meaning of a given word, specifically between the physical and the abstract connotations of insight, understanding, and knowledge" (113). In other words, he aimed at a "paradigm shift" from truth to the medium (113). Kleist's work became

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<sup>116</sup> Whereas the Kantian shift "proved central to the poetological program of Romantics such as Novalis and Friedrich Schlegel," to Kleist, says Seeba, it brought about "an existential challenge" since he was "less theoretically inclined and not prepared to develop a new philosophical design for what Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy defined as 'l'absolu littéraire,' the literary precursor of abstract painting" ("The Eye" 107).

a laboratory for the eye's capacity to produce "a creative sensory medium" in order to add "something to what in the Enlightenment [...] the mind was expected to point out, to represent, and to reproduce without any subjective—that is, aesthetic—interference" (113).

Kleistian visuality is particularly manifest in *Ancient Light* where the entire city is described as a "panopticon" (107). In addition to the abundance of mirrors, windows, and optics (as we saw in chapter four), the act of remembering converges with the act of seeing, turning memories into graphic images: "How clearly I see her! I must be making her up, I mean I must be making up these details" (3); "I have a picture in my mind of the two of us sitting very properly in two armchairs" (208). The self-reflexive gesture—"I must be making her up"—is quite paradoxical. On the one hand, it casts doubt on the validity of the narrative and, consequently, renders his narration unreliable. On the other hand, the self-conscious reference to the fictional nature of his memory confers upon his narrative an air of honesty. That is to say, although the validity of the narrative is questionable, that of the images is seemingly real. These are not so much memories as "pictures" which crystallize in his mind's eye.

One reason for Kleist's recourse to visuality, according to Seeba, is that "the surge of perspectivism in the late eighteenth century generated an abundance of visual metaphors" where "the significance of the individualized point of view is emphasized in references to the eye as well as to glasses, binoculars, microscopes, camera obscura, and other optical devices to adjust and enhance the limiting personal view" (108). Regarding the use of the latter in the eighteenth century, that is Kleist's time, Martin Listar et al explain:

the main use of the camera *obscura* was not instrumental, it was not for making images. More frequently, it was an object which was possessed by people [...] in order to stimulate philosophical reflection and speculation on the nature of visual perception and knowledge. It provided a model for, and raised questions about, the relationships of the

external world, the eye and the brain (*New Media* 111).

As if in direct commentary on this passage, the window functions as a fully fully-fledged projector:

I saw forming above me a brightly shimmering image that spread itself until it stretched over almost the entire ceiling [...] What was happening was that a pinhole-sized opening between the curtains was letting in a narrow beam of light that had turned the room into a camera obscura, and the image above us was an inverted, dawn-fresh picture of the world (22).

The entire scene can be taken as a metaphor for the interior of the eye (the organ). The “opening between the curtains” functions like the lens that takes in the light from the outside and the “inverted” image created in the scene reminds one of the upside-down image on the retina. The fact that Alex witnesses this operation evokes a sense in which he *sees seeing*, he observes the very mechanism or the process of the construction of visual experience. Alex’s narrative in *Ancient Light*, therefore takes the representation of visuality to another level in that it dissects vision, breaking it up and isolating its components, demonstrating the way in which sight is constructed. “The way in which I was seeing her,” Alex wonders, “snatching a moving series of images by repeatedly turning my head quickly to the side, was a clumsy version of the process going on inside the clackety projector up in its little room behind us” (122-3). He is interested “in the way” and “the process” in which Mrs Gray appears to him rather than the woman herself. Along with the camera obscura, the “projector” provides him with analogies to make better sense of the act of seeing. The very title of the novel provides a hint to Alex’s preoccupation with seeing: “Ancient light” ties in with the fact that the process of seeing an image necessitates a minimum of time before it can transform light into images. The enigmatic character, Fedrigo Sorrán, directly comments on this: “Even here,’ he said, ‘at this table, the light that is the image of my eyes takes time, a tiny time, infinitesimal, yet

time, to reach your eyes, and so it is that everywhere we look, everywhere, we are looking into the past” (172). In this sense, in addition to being mediated (exemplified through Mrs Gray’s image in the mirror and Lydia’s in the window), Alex’s visual perceptions are temporally deferred. In a word, he can never see the present: “I did not register at once what it was I was seeing” (29).

In *Romanticism and Visuality*, Sophie Thomas explains that during the Romantic period there was a “drive toward specularity” among English writers (3), a self-reflexive shift that came as a reaction to “mimetic representationalism” (4). A major concern of the writers of the period, says Thomas, is “how seeing itself should be seen [...] and shown” (3). Self-reflexive seeing, Thomas argues, not only enables the Romantic poet to intensify the visual experience but also to use visual projections as a means of self-exploration, of self-conscious examination the seeing subject herself (6). It function as “a formative dialogue between the media and the material” and illustrates how “seeing, or vision, is culturally constructed, and therefore caught up in the history of the mediation of the visual” (7). Moreover, “The actual act of seeing” was not merely represented but “readily metamorphosed, and metaphorised, into an act of imaginative and ideological significance” (8). Diorama, the representation of objects either in miniature or as large-scale, Thomas adds, is a paramount example of such metamorphosis (8). As for the Alex, faced with the constructed, mediated nature of his visuality, his sight metamorphoses into dioramic representations: he sees (visually remembers) the episode that leads to his professional downfall in a “scaled-down” representation (89)<sup>117</sup> and, elsewhere, the window shows a “motionless miniature cattle” (18). In *Ancient Light*, in turn, at Mr Gray’s “glasses shop,” he is fascinated by the “magnifying mirror” (182). Among the magnifying objects, Kitty’s telescope interests him in particular:

A sumptuous instrument it was, though, matt-black and solid where it stood on its

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<sup>117</sup> “I see the scene in scaled-down form, everything tiny and maniacally detailed, as in one of those maquettes that stage designers love to play with” (*Eclipse* 89)

single, semi-circular foot, the barrel silky and cold to the touch, the little winding-nut so smooth in action, the lens so small yet giving on to so magnified a version of the world (*Ancient Light* 105).

In parallel to its ability to magnify, the instrument is described as standing solidly. Insofar as solidity is precisely what Alex lacks, the telescope is perceived as that which can enable him to attain the firm centre he constantly seeks. What is evoked in the parallel between the magnifying ability of the lens, on the one hand, and its solid aspect, on the other, then, is the idea that through metamorphosing his visual perceptions, Alex is able to achieve a more “solid” aspect of reality. What is more, the word “touch,” while emphasizing further the solid aspect of the object, suggests that the narrator can bring the visual experience under his grasp. The juxtaposition of the visual with the haptic also connotes an attempt on Alex’s part to foreground the material aspect of visuality. Elsewhere, Alex hopes that his “two encounters with Mrs Gray”<sup>118</sup> would lead him to “an entirely new order of experience” (37). However, he adds, “there lingered an odd sense of disengagement, of not registering fully, of being there and not being there, as if everything were still taking place in the depths of a mirror, while I remained outside, gazing in, untouched” (37). Likewise, the gap that bars his visual access to the form of experience he seeks to attain via Mrs Gray is translated in terms of lack of touch. In *Eclipse*, touch and vision are linked in a peculiar way. The narrator speaks of a moment during which he closes his eyes and senses “the rims of the inflamed lids hotly touch” (42). Considered along the fact that his lack of self-presence is marked by his overall inability to touch (emphasized by the fact that the verb “touch” is often marked by a negation as we saw in chapter three), using the word touch (affirmatively) in relation to the eyes (the lids touching each other) suggests two paradoxical points: firstly, haptic experience is only feasible in relation to the eye, and, secondly, since the touching of the lids means the

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<sup>118</sup> That is, “the one on the far side of that nexus of looking-glasses and the one on this side, in the station wagon under the trees” (37).

closing of the eye, it is necessarily the lack of sight that leads to the sense of touch. In other words, the narrator cannot have it both ways. In *Shroud*, in turn, “Everything around me was intensely sharp and clarified and almost painful to the touch,” Axel complains, “even to the sight” (333). Here, the roles are reversed in that the visual is used to accentuate the intensity of touch. In this sense, the intense sense of touch is used to compensate for Axel’s lack of sight (i.e. his literally blind eye and the windows that obfuscates vision). As we saw in chapter three, touch is traditionally viewed as the most immediate of the senses. Therefore, considered alongside Alex’s discovery that sight is inherently deferred, never direct or immediate, the systematic fusion of sight and touch in the narratives is indicative of an attempt to redefine visual experience, to enhance sight by imbuing it with the immediacy of touch. At the same time, the conversion of the haptic and the visual emphasizes the latter’s corporeal aspect as if to restore the alienated vision, denaturalized by the experience of the mechanical camera obscura, to the natural body. This echoes another of Kleist’s concerns in that the German dramatist constantly tried to involve the material body in his epistemological quest. In a letter, Kleist speaks of mailing his heart, the very organ itself, in order to be able to express his “unspeakability.”<sup>119</sup> Kleist, says Seeba, “shared with the Romantics the belief in the cognitive value of metaphors. He differed from them, however, by insisting on the sensual materiality of metaphors and by often carrying their creative power to a violent extreme” (115). As we shall see in the next section, violent extremes are precisely what the other is subjected to in Banville’s narratives of impossible representation.

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<sup>119</sup>“Ich weiß nicht, was ich dir über mich *unaussprechlichen* Menschen sagen soll. — Ich wollte ich könnte mir das Herz aus dem Leibe reißen, in diesen Brief packen, und Dir zuschicken. — Dummer Gedanke!” (Kleist as quoted in Seeba 114).



### 3. From the medium back to the woman: materiality and de Man revisited

In “The Inward Generation,” Paul de Man, another of Banville’s crucial precursors, speaks of an “ontological crisis” that pushes the writer “back upon himself, in total inwardness, since any existence within the framework of accepted reality can no longer satisfy him” (*Critical Writings* 15). This, de Man explains, is due to the artist’s “awareness of a deep separation” between one’s “inner consciousness and the totality of what is not himself” (*Critical* 15), a gap that separates the subject from the object. This awareness results in a disquietude that forces the artist to turn inwards, so to speak, to seek solace in his or her own internal, imaginative capabilities in an attempt to attain “more primitive levels of experience” (*Critical* 142). According to de Man, this process of inwardness is mainly observed during Romanticism:

The specific cluster of ideas that leads from the concept of separation to that of inwardness, and from inwardness to history, is the pattern of that period [Rousseau and Hölderlin] as it is of ours—with the difference that for us, it is more directly experienced, even to the point where it is often difficult to perceive the motion in which we are caught (*Critical* 15).

De Man goes to such extent as to define Romanticism as a retreat from nature accompanied by “inwardness,” “always” starting “as a negative movement” (*Critical* 167-8). In the case of Banville’s trilogy, the rift between the subject and object is at the heart of the narrators’ representations, arguably rendering these narratives Banville’s most explicit expression of the ontological impasse. Faced with the inscrutability of what de Man calls the natural world, the narrators obsessively resort to the power of their imagination, rendering their narratives highly narcissistic if not solipsistic. “I am all inwardness,” says Alex in *Eclipse*, “gazing out in ever intensifying perplexity upon a world in which nothing is exactly plausible, nothing is

exactly what it is” (15). In *Ancient Light*, he wonders about his relation with Mrs Gray “with a sort of inward undulation” (188). Axel, in turn, “remarked inwardly again how uninsistent was the sunlight in this part of the world” (*Shroud* 17) and the smell of “ink paper dust provoked in [him] an inward sob of nostalgia” (227-8).

Yet, it is not merely their own inwardness the narrators are interested in for their epistemological quest equally targets that of the female other. In *Shroud*, the narrative especially highlights Axel’s fascination with Cass’s interiority: “A faint, fast vibration came off her, as if there were something inside her spinning without cease at terrible, soundless speed” (95); “There was something wrong inside her” (312); “There was something to be desired, certainly, she felt it inside her” (32). The depictions conjure up the idea that Cass’s “inside” contains a substance, an essence that will ultimately provide an answer to the narrator’s epistemological predicament. That “something,” it is further added, involves “the feeling [...] of being newly pregnant” (32). The pregnancy metaphor, on the one hand, situates the essence the narrator seeks at the level of Cass’s body, and, on the other hand, suggests that Cass is capable of giving birth to that essence. In effect, Axel does impregnate Cass and, by doing so, he literally reaches her “inside”: “Even her nakedness would not be enough,” says Axel, “I would open up her flesh itself like a coat, unzip her from instep to sternum and climb bodily into her, feel her shocked heart gulp and skip, her lungs shuddering, clasp her blood-wet bones in my hands (107). Insofar as his narrative is concerned with shrouds, veils and hidden truths, the extremely violent imagery Axel deploys conjures up the idea that her “essence” lies beneath her skin, her last veil, one behind which there is no more masks, illusions, and slippery selves but sheer, raw matter. It is the Real of Cass’s body Axel is after, her “lungs” and “bones,”<sup>120</sup> hoping to attain the access to reality from which he is barred at the Symbolic (deferred and mediated) level. In addition to

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<sup>120</sup> He uses a similar language regarding Kristina: he can feel “her meagre flesh and the soft-seeming rib-cage beneath” (155).

penetrating her body, he penetrates, colonizes her mind:

What was not clear was whether the signs were really signs, and meant especially for her, or if they were parts of the thing itself, the thing for which she had no name, yet; those parts, that is, that she was to be allowed to see, to notice, to register (194).

The fact that the passage is narrated through the third person suggests a direct access into Cass's interior thoughts, one that provides a perspective into "the thing in itself," that which Axel precisely lacks. Through Cass's eyes he glimpse at "The pattern she had suddenly discerned," one that reveals "an infinitely more intricate order" (194-5).

Alex uses similar, albeit less violent, imagery with regard to Mrs Gray: "I could only get into her from the outside, but [Billy], he had sprung from a seed and grown inside her, and even after he had shouldered his brute way out of her he was still flesh of her flesh, blood of her blood" (101). Alex links the Real ("flesh" and "blood") of Mrs Gray's body to the natural, "unmediated," relation her son, Billy, has with her, a relation Alex lacks because, unlike Billie, Alex did not spring from her "inside." This is why he "put[s]" himself "inside her" (49):<sup>121</sup> "how accommodatingly she would spread herself on that filthy mattress and take inside her all my engorged fury, need and bafflement" (66). The word "bafflement" connotes Alex's confusion, lack of understanding and puzzlement with regards to reality while the fact that Mrs Gray welcomes that confusion "inside" her suggests that Mrs Gray's material interior holds the key for the narrator's epistemological predicament, thereby equating the sexual, bodily act with the intellectual quest for knowledge. In this sense, the narrators do not merely resort to their own inwardness, that is, their interiority and imagination, to find a way out of their epistemological crisis. They equally seek to bridge the gap between their subjectivity and the world by positing the female (material) body as the site for truth and simultaneously and physically reaching inside that body in an attempt to retrieve it. The fact

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<sup>121</sup> "'Did you put yourself inside her?' [the priest] asked. 'I did, Father,' I answered" (*Ancient Light* 49).

that the narrator's search leads them to an encounter with the Real—here, the Real of the other's body—shows how de Man's idea of inwardness is given a nasty twist in the trilogy. This provides another example of the way in which Banville uses de Man's ideas in order to advance his own epistemo-aesthetic concerns.

Nevertheless, towards the end of his narrative, Axel admits:

I tried to put myself into her inner world, but [...] I came only to an immemorial, childhood place, a region of accentless and unemphatic prose, exclusive haunt of the third person. She would not be known; there was not a unified, singular presence there to know (*Shroud* 332).

He realizes that beneath the surface there is no essence but the confusion and incomprehensibility of the Real. Far from attaining a “singular presence,” his penetration of Cass (her body and mind) renders his own self spectral, transforming him into an insubstantial ghost. Speaking of Mrs Gray, Alex, in turn, says: “I had never been so sharply conscious of the presence of another human being, this separate entity, this incommensurate not-I; a volume displacing air, a soft weight pressing down on the other side of the bench seat; a mind working; a heart beating” (*Ancient Light* 35). The words “weight” and “pressing down” suggest a substantial materiality while “volume” suggests that this substance is enclosed within a container. At the same time, it is as if his access to the interior of this container is barred, transforming Mrs Gray into a radically “separate entity,” one whose interiority is forever out of the narrator's reach.

According to Kant, insofar as the thing-in-itself cannot be accessible to the senses, one's phenomenal perception of the object acquires primary importance in aesthetic experience. This is why Kant considers the subjective apprehension of “the sublime” superior to the cognitive faculty of reason in dealing with matters artistic. This experience, says Kant, requires one to avoid “teleological judgements” in favour of a vision akin to poet's: “one

must consider the ocean merely as the poets do, in accordance with what its appearance shows” (*Critique of the Power of Judgement* 152). Commenting on Kant’s idea, de Man postulates:

In this mode of seeing, the eye is its own agent and not the specular echo of the sun. The sea is called a mirror, not because it is supposed to reflect anything, but to stress a flatness devoid of any suggestion of depth. In the same way and to the same extent that this vision is purely material, devoid of any reflexive or intellectual complication, it is also purely formal, devoid of any semantic depth and reducible to the formal mathematization or geometrization of pure optics (*Aesthetic Ideology* 83).

In other words, the aesthetic (poetic) seeing advocated by Kant requires one to resist the hermeneutic temptation to dig beneath and, instead, to stop at the surface. This, according to de Man, constitutes “*material* vision,” “a pure aesthetic vision” in that it intends to be neither a “trope” nor a “symbol” (*Aesthetic* 82). In *Ancient Light*, in a scene of lovemaking between Alex and Mrs Gray, the latter suddenly metamorphoses into a photographic image the moment “her shoulder-blades were against the wall”:

The belted gown agape at the top where I had been fumbling at it, and the skirts of it too were parted, bearing her bare legs to their tops, so that for a moment she was the Kayser Bondor to the life, as provocatively disheveled as the original was composed (219).

He explains earlier that his “ideal” woman, “the Kayser Bondor lady,” is in fact a poster, “a foot-high, cut-out cardboard beauty,” which he sees set up in a female undergarment store (29). In a sense, the wall’s flat surface in the depiction of Mrs Gray merges with the flat “cardboard” onto which the image of the Bondor lady is imprinted, transforming the visual perception of Mrs Gray into a two-dimensional surface figure. What is particularly highlighted in the description is the way Alex’s teenage infatuation with the poster’s “svelte”

and “impossibly long legs” (29) is projected onto Mrs Gray’s image and glosses over the reality of Mrs Gray’s heftier built. The primacy of the poster’s surface image over Mrs Gray’s reality is accentuated in that the former is referred to as “the original,” rendering Mrs Gray but a means for the enactment of his superficial, two-dimensional vision. The (probably rectangular) poster functions as a frame that enables Alex to fuse word and image and stage his aesthetic, superficial vision.

According to de Man, the Romantic poets tried to counter the nostalgia for the natural object by creating poetic images that differ from the natural world in an attempt to produce a representational (poetic) reality that is independent from the (inaccessible) world of natural objects. This is why in Romanticism, de Man writes, there is a simultaneous, systematic reverence of figurative language, on the one hand, and “a return to a greater concreteness, a proliferation of natural objects that restores to the language the material substantiality which had been partially lost” during the seventeenth century (*Rhetoric* 2). The poetic reality based on the image for the Romantic writer acquires an ontological status similar to the way in which the natural world is said to possess an ontological authority. In de Man’s words, “Poets know of the act of naming—as implying a return to the source, to the pure motion of experience at its beginning” (*Rhetoric* 3). As for Banville’s trilogy, Axel calls himself “an alchemist of word and image” (*Shroud* 62). Furthermore, the title of his book, “After Words” (77), is suggestive of the idea that Axel has theorized a new medium of representation, one which is not bound to linguistic referentiality and the epistemological predicament it entails. This is also true about Alex whose “method of learning off lines was to fix the text itself, I mean the very pages, as a series of images in my head, to be read and recited from” (*Ancient Light* 163). The depiction entails the literal transformation of text into an image, redefining the narrator’s relationship with language: the Symbolic aspect of language (the metonymic flow of words in the signifying chain) is sacrificed in order to give way to a new experience

of the text, one based on a purely Imaginary aspect.

Alex's ultimate attempt to engage in pure aesthetic vision and to bridge the gap between his self and the natural world, I claim, lies in his ekphrastic representations. The woman in Alex's world is either extremely colourful or "pale." On the one hand, in Mrs Gray he sees "umber," "rose," (127) "tiny splinters of gold," and "a turbid shade of bronze" (157). At times, the colours unite into producing a fully-fledged painting: "her body displayed, disconcertingly, a range of muted tints from magnesium white to silver and tin, a scumbled sort of yellow, pale ochre, and even in places a faint greenishness and, in the hollows, a shadowing of mossy mauve" (30). On the other hand, Alex is fascinated by the "exposed pale back" of Mrs Gray's "neck" (165). In *Eclipse*, Cass is Alex's "stark pale and tousled" daughter (126); Lily has a "pale long neck" (81) as well as thighs "pale as a fish's belly" (136); and Lydia has "delicate pale long feet" (16). What is evoked is the idea that the narrator imposes his colours on the woman as a clean slate, so to speak, the woman as a "pale," uncoloured canvas. He is not so much interested in representing her as much as he is obsessed with presenting his own—painted—versions of her. The act of painting Mrs Gray literally takes place for Alex when he administers lipstick to her lips (166). Earlier, he explains that as a teenager he "used to entertain" the thought "in which I was required to attend to certain cosmetic requirements of a grown-up woman. That woman was never specific but generic, woman in the abstract, I suppose, the celebrated *Ewig-Weibliche*" (166). Alex's claim that his interest in "the woman" lies primarily in her being "generic" and "abstract," that is, not a person but a mere figure for his aesthetic operation, equally sheds light on his metafictional and self-conscious references. They remind the reader that the descriptions are the makings of his mind's artistic eye, and they should be considered as

such.<sup>122</sup> Far from the sexual imagery with which Alex depicts her elsewhere, her subjectivity as an other (person) is completely eclipsed by her ability to contain Alex's visual, poetic aspirations, reducing her to a magical object whose surface emits a panoply of colours. In a word, more than anything, the narrator's primary interest in Mrs Gray is in recreating her surface effects.

Of Lydia, in turn, Alex says:

She turned, her head swathed in a swirl of ash-blue cigarette smoke, the garden's menacing greenery crowding in the window behind her, and, between the green, a patch of the sky's delicate summer azure. In this light the shock of silver in her hair was stark, undulate, ashine (*Eclipse* 16-7).

While the colours bring the visual surface to fore, the alliterative "s" highlights the auditory (thus, surface sensation) aspect of the image. What is more, the word "delicate" in the sense of fine texture intricately suggests touch. As T. J. Clark points out, "Painting has always prided itself on being, next to sculpture, the most object-oriented of the arts. A brushy surface is supposed to put the viewer directly in touch with things" ("Phenomenality and Materiality" 93). Alex's verbal painting of Lydia, in this sense, functions as a poetic image that aims at recreating the woman as a new object, one that is not only seen, but heard and touched as well. It is a pure aesthetic vision in Kant's sense in that the three senses "merely" (to use Kant's word) emphasize the phenomenal (surface). In fact, Alex's verbal painting embodies Clark's aesthetic object *par excellence* insofar as the aesthetic involves the moment when

the materiality of the sign is grasped again, and grandly played with, but precisely as "phenomenal substance," as part of a world of stuffs and perceptions. It is this

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<sup>122</sup> Along these lines one can also consider how Mrs Gray often appears as a receptacle for the narrator's elaborate metaphors. Mrs Gray's simple departure from home to meet Alex is described as "skimming towards me on her half-shell, wafted by the full-cheeked zephyrs of spring" (12) and her figure as "a moving silhouette outlined in burning gold" (191), to give but a few examples.



tourniquet of the world's substance and the sign's substance, or better still, of the texture and structure of sentences, say, or metaphors, or passages of paint, and the texture and structure of experience ("Phenomenality" 100-101).

"Phenomenal substance" marks the narrators' dialectical attitude *vis à vis* appearance and reality. First they conceive of "substance" inside the woman to be reached via (physical and mental) penetration. Then, they realize that there is nothing inside but the chaos of the Real. And, thirdly, they rehabilitate her surface, hoping the latter will eventually yield ("display") the elusive substance they so vehemently strive to grasp.

#### **4. From the woman to the self: Nietzsche revisited**

Insofar as Alex's ekphrastic representations of the woman aim at creating aesthetic objects, (verbal) paintings, they posit him as an artist in a manner reminiscent of Pygmalion—the mythological sculptor who fell in love with his sculpted woman, an inanimate object that was subsequently brought to life by divine intervention. In the case of Alex, however, the logic is reversed: the very living woman herself is turned into an artistic object, therefore, one can argue, mortified (frozen as a painting), rendered inanimate. In his reading of Rousseau's dramatization of Pygmalion, de Man argues that the statue is, in fact, a figure of "autobiography" (*Allegories* 175). That is to say, Rousseau's *mise en scene* of the myth is not so much about the representation of the magical power of art as it is an attempt by the artist to grasp a certain conception of the self. It is, to use de Man's words, "the teleology of a selfhood" in that it functions as a "symbiosis of the problems of understanding," on the one hand, and the questions "of selfhood," on the other (175). De Man's argument is in part based

on the fact that, when Pygmalion touches the statue, the he is “seized by terror.”<sup>123</sup> The “feeling of awe” that befalls the artist, de Man’s write, is “transferred, by an act of the mind (sometimes called imagination) into the constitution of an entity, a subject, capable of reflecting upon the threatening power because it partakes of that power without however coinciding with it” (177). In this sense, the threatening feeling “actively involves the self ” (177). This is where the words “menacing” (*Eclipse* 16) and “disconcertingly” (*Ancient Light* 30) in Alex’s ekphrastic descriptions cited above become significant: in projecting feelings of threatening disquietude onto the painted image of the woman, he is, after all, aiming at involving his own self in the process, finding the way in which an aspect of his self reverberates through the surface of the verbal painting. Rather than, or, in parallel to knowing the *other*, in positing women as paintings the narrator seeks *self*-knowledge. The way in which the quest for self is inherently linked to the representation of the female other is evident early in *Ancient Light* where Alex speaks of the difficulty in remembering Mrs Gray’s image as a whole:

I could remember her, certainly I could, but only as a series of disparate and dispersed parts [...] I could hear her enraptured cries and smell her slightly eggy breath. But the woman herself, the total she, that was what I could not have over again, in my mind. And I, too, even I, there with her, was beyond my own recall, was no more than a pair of clutching arms and spasming legs and a backside frenziedly pumping (46).

The word “too” is arguably the most revealing of the role of Alex’s visual exercise in this narrative. The juxtaposition of Mrs Gray’s fragmented image to the narrator’s splintered self-image suggests a correlation, an interdependence between the two images. By reproducing the “total” image of Mrs Gray Alex hopes to reproduce his own “total” image, to glue the

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<sup>123</sup> “I don’t know what I feel in touching this veil; I am seized by terror” (*Rousseau* quoted in de Man 176)

sundered self back together using the other as a mirror for the self.<sup>124</sup>

“Painting,” Banville says in an interview, “is the supreme art of the surface, and, as Nietzsche says, in the surface is where the depth is, and I believe that” (Banville quoted in Kenny, “Paradigm” 53). As for Nietzsche, he famously championed the Greeks precisely because they knew how “to stop bravely at the surface, the fold, the skin; to worship appearance, to believe in shapes, tones, words—in the whole Olympus of appearance!” (*Gay Science* 8). “Those Greeks” Nietzsche says, “were superficial—out of profundity!” (9). In his rehabilitation of the surface, Nietzsche develops an aesthetic theory based on art as “good will to appearance,” one that renders life tolerable in the aftermath of our “realization that delusion and error are conditions of human knowledge and sensation”:

Honesty would lead to nausea and suicide. But now there is a counterforce against our honesty that helps us to avoid such consequences: art as the good will to appearance.

We do not always keep our eyes from rounding off something and, as it were, finishing the poem (*Gay* 107).

Through art, then, one can restore a sense of order from the chaos, one that would otherwise lead to destruction. At the same time, for Nietzsche, the structure of perception is doubly metaphoric in that it is based on the creation of images: “The stimulation of a nerve is first translated into an image: first metaphor! The image is then imitated by a sound: second metaphor!” (“On Truth and Lying” 144). Based on this, he stresses the importance of artistic creation. Insofar as perception is metaphoric, changeable, therefore, malleable, it offers a great potential for aestheticization. The aestheticization of experience, in turn, offers a way out of the deadlock that separates the subject and the object:

between two absolutely different spheres, such as subject and object are, there is no causality, no correctness, no expression, but at most an aesthetic way of relating, by

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<sup>124</sup> Elsewhere, he literally speaks of looking at Dawn Devonport as “gazing into a mirror” (213).

which I mean an allusive transference, a stammering translation into a quite different language (“On Truth and Lying” 148)

This “different language” advocated by Nietzsche is precisely what Alex’s ekphrastic representation is about. In fact, Ekphrasis has two functions for Alex’s philosophical preoccupation: firstly, it enables him to bridge the gap that bars his access to the inscrutable other through the aesthetization of his visual perception. Secondly, it functions as a means for the narrator to restore his own problematic sense of self. In this sense, he sacrifices “the woman” as a human being with an interiority in order to find a Nietzschean solution to the Kantian problem. By means of framing the woman, he strives to frame a sense of order in the orderless world. He counters the *mise en abyme* produced by his unreliable perception by a *mise en cadre* of the aesthetic surface, a surface that can posit him as its creator.

This view of the relationship between the artistic self and the female other inevitably raises serious concerns with regard to the ethical catastrophe propagated in the narratives, a concern that has already been voiced by critics such as Eoghan Smith and Patricia Coughlan. For the former, there is a “concern about the degree to which the Banvillian motif of the artwork’s ‘presence’ reinforces gender binaries rather than disturbs them” (*John Banville* 112). Smith here arguably touches upon the most problematic issue in the trilogy, one that seemingly cannot exonerate Banville’s highly self-reflexive and self-conscious narratives. “Despite the irony, satiric representation of solipsism, and postmodern de-substantiating,” Coughlan, suggests, in turn, Banville’s fiction ““leaves some foundations undisturbed,” they “project the [feminine] other as an outside, as a space of ideological escape from Western rationality”” (“Scenes of Eros” 97-8).<sup>125</sup> Nevertheless, at least two points are to be considered before reducing Banville to an ideologue of male chauvinist hegemony. Firstly, in addition to the abstraction of women into receptacles for the narrator-artist’s quest for authenticity, what

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<sup>125</sup> Coughlan here is quoting Hal Foster.

these narratives foreground is the crucial dependence of the self on the other. If the self as such is to be grasped as a positive entity, it needs to be articulated in relation to an other. That is to say, if the other is excluded from the equation, no self can be found no matter how creative the narrators are. This is why their narcissistic quest inward ultimately fails to yield any conceivable sense of self; they are bound to turn to the other, their narcissistic shell has to be opened. In this sense, Banville's fiction is an exploration of the alterity at the heart of any subjectivity, of the fact that the self is never self-contained. Secondly, insofar as sexual difference is based on the asymmetric way in which masculinity and femininity are phallicized through the Symbolic, Banville's narratives can be regarded as an examination of how masculine-feminine intersubjectivity functions, how it is constructed, rather than a promotion of the phallic structure of male and female identities. This is precisely in line with his own claim that "art is always the world itself, the description of the world, the description of the surface of the world, and this is one of the reasons I started to be interested in painting, as a way of writing, as something to write about. (Banville quoted in Kenny, "Paradigm" 53). The narrators' ethical disaster is to be considered along the idea that Banville's narrative art is an elaboration on the way in which reality is constructed (here the reality of male chauvinistic ideology) rather than the advocating of moral responsibility. Specifically, if art functions as a mirror-surface of the world, it lays bare its inherent ideological premises. This is one function of de Man's "aesthetic ideology": art as the locus in which the very textual apparatus of perceptions and representations are rendered palpable (McQuillan, *Paul de Man* 88).

Axel writes his autobiography using the symbolic pen given to him by Cass (*Shroud* 396).<sup>126</sup> This is the pen into which Cass had meticulously hidden a photo of the narrator and the original Axel, showing, to the narrator's awe, that she had known his deepest secret all

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<sup>126</sup> "One day at the card table in Franco Bartoli's garden room I was writing the opening pages of this record, using the fountain pen that she [Cass] had sent to me, when the thing ran dry" (*Shroud* 396).

along. The pen in *Shroud* can be viewed as Banville's central, multi-layered metaphor in his tripartite narrative of representation. Insofar as the pen represents writing, it is related to the *text*. But it is a pen that contains Axel's photo, his *image*. It is, one can claim, the artist's magical sceptre, the brush with which he can fuse writing and painting, word and image. The pen can equally stand for language, textuality, the very medium via which he seeks to recapture his self. In situating the photo that reveal Axel's truthful past *inside* the pen, Banville accentuates the idea that, if there is "truth" to be found, it is in the medium itself, that truth can neither be attained via the movement inwards nor in the penetration of the other. Rather, it is the *penetration* of the *pen* itself that can reveal the truth: the unified self is but an illusion and one's access to it is always barred by the very medium that constructs it. Nevertheless, the medium, the pen, can be used to recreate the self as an artist and the fact that the pen is not Axel's own but Cass's illustrates the crucial role of the other in the process of self-aestheticization.

## Conclusion

Banville's epistemological project can be summed up as an attempt to find a mode of articulation independent from the Symbolic order. Most of his narrators, in one way or another, express a fundamental incredulity towards the Symbolic Other. The psychotic scientist, Gabriel Swan, categorically rejects the paternal function. His discourse transforms the signifier into a sign, a message originated from beyond the Other, from a place that communicates to him only. The hysteric Freddie Montgomery constantly seeks to lay bare the gaps in the Symbolic, the very lack at the heart of the big Other. His relentless daydreaming creates an Imaginary structure to which he can resort when Symbolic reality proves inadequate. The imposter, Axel Vander, turns the epistemological quest from "the thing in itself" to the very medium of representation, pushing language to its extremes in the hope of ridding it from Symbolic determination. His autobiographic discourse dissects the linguistic medium and reveals its Real, material components. And, dissatisfied by the Symbolically structured reality, the actor-impersonator, Alexander Cleave, goes so deep in his inward journey that he stumbles upon the Real aspects of the perceptual field. His narcissistic "I" seeks to replace the big Other with self-concocted others, ones he creates in his own narcissistic image.

It was claimed in the Introduction that using Lacan's view of man in order to read Banville's representations of the self enables us to examine the way in which the Real wins over the Symbolic in Banville's fiction. The title of this dissertation, "precarious subjectivity," is fundamentally based on this claim. Insofar as the self, reality, and perceptions are all mediated, conditioned, structured and held together by the Symbolic order, the narrators' systematic attempt at playing down the role of the Symbolic Other inevitably leads to a shaky subjectivity. This can be examined in more concrete terms via

looking at the way in which certain recurring motifs are given a new dimension in each narrative. By way of a conclusion, I claim that these motifs function as elements by means of which Banville succeeds in revealing the Real aspect of subjectivity. These include the voice, visuality, and the hand.

The consistent attempt on the part of the narrators to describe the voice as an extension of the body rather than something that belongs to it, an excess that goes beyond individual agency, is already present in *Birchwood*. Aunt Martha's voice, says the narrator, "followed me down two flights of stairs before it faded" (48). Rather than a mere vehicle for expressing words, the voice's physical aspect is brought to the fore: "The voice caressed me," says Gabriel, "it was almost a physical sensation" (143). What is more, he is troubled by the discrepancy between the characters and their voices (82).<sup>127</sup> It is an incongruity that later leads to the voice being detached from the body (96).<sup>128</sup> In *Mefisto*, the voice does not even need a mouth, a physical body to be articulated (126-7).<sup>129</sup> Finally, in the trilogy, as it was argued in the fourth chapter, the detached voice functions as a spectral, partial object.

John Kenny identifies three aspects of the visual that regulate the figuration of pictorial metaphors in Banville's earlier work: "the function of the imagination as revealed in art, the potential religious aura of the superior visual image, and the determination that the word should 'paint' observable physical life" ("Well Said Well Seen" 53). Two more aspects can be added to Kenny's list. Firstly, the visual field is a tool that enables the narrators to rearrange their RSI. The mirror, in particular, serves this function in that it reveals an excess, an extension of the self that breaches the narrators' self-contained interiority and exposes them to uncanny, magical encounters with the Real. Secondly, the narrators' visual

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<sup>127</sup> "There is a troubling dichotomy between their frenetic activity and their voices" (*Birchwood* 82).

<sup>128</sup> "a voice [...] seemed to be in the room with me" (*Birchwood* 96)

<sup>129</sup> the nurse caring for the narrator at the hospital is described as "headless in the lamplight" while "all hands were her hand and all voices her voice" (126-7).



perceptions self-reflexively interrogate the visual medium, revealing its constructed, mediated nature. It is an exploration of the visual that leads them to the underlying structures of visual experience, its material (Real) foundation. Banville's ekphrastic fiction, in turn, seeks to enhance the visual via synesthetic representations that aim at fusing touch, sound, and image. In this sense, the role of ekphrasis in Banville cannot be reduced to what Anja Müller calls the "multi-layered discursive matrix for the materialization of the female body" ("You Have been Framed" 187). Nor can it be limited to what Kenny identifies as Banville's project to produce an effect of defamiliarization in Shklovsky's sense of the term ("Pictorial Paradigm" 56) and the author's "confident authorial plea, an argument for the perseverance of a life-seeing literature" (64). Rather, ekphrasis seeks no less than the rehabilitation of the fragmented self, one that has been exposed to the intruding Real beyond the Symbolic.

Finally, the hand, as the third important element, figures in *Birchwood* as the embodiment of the paternal "grip," *the* signifier for the narrator's initiation into the Symbolic order. In *Mefisto*, as the (Name of the) Father is almost inexistent, Symbolic "grip" gives way to the Imaginary grip, one in which the narrator finds himself engulfed. It is intertwined with the other's mocking "grin": "Put him in my hands, Mr Pender had urged her, smiling his tense, toothed smile" (28). In this case, Mr Pender, the school teacher who can normally represent Symbolic law, functions as the agent representing the Other of the Other, the ultimate puller of strings. In *The Book of Evidence*, the Symbolic "grip" (represented by Behrens's firm hand) is suffocating. In response, the narrator takes things in his own hand, a hand that attempts to counter the Other's castrating grip by means of a hammer. At the same time, it is a hand that errs, murders, smashing the Real of the other's body rather than restructuring the Symbolic. In the trilogy, on the one hand, it is the hand that cannot touch, a hand that cannot feel solid matter. On the other hand, it is a hand that writes, rewrites, one

that persists in trying to create narrative surfaces that can mirror the lack at the core of the Symbolic. It is the hand as an aspect of the drive, the force that relentlessly pushes on.

A major source of agony for Alex in *Eclipse* is his lack of solid “being.” He describes himself as “I being I and also not” (8), someone who has “no past, no foreseeable future, only the steady pulse of changeless present” (15). Even the characters he plays on stage all displayed “being at a loss” (9). In parallel, his use of the verb “think” is often supplemented with a negation: “I cannot think how Lily fills her day” (96); “I could not think what I might say” (112); “I remained for a long moment, listening to the faint sounds of the day, [...] not thinking, exactly, but touching the thought of thought” (115).<sup>130</sup> The juxtaposition of the “not being” and “not thinking” conjures up the obverse side of the Cartesian cogito: “I do not think, therefore, I am not.” Arguably, the narrator’s problematic “being” is at the level of the Symbolic. It is a form of “being” guaranteed by the Other, the agent whose authority is constantly challenged in Banville’s work. In this sense, it is not so much “being” that he lacks as it is stable “existence” insofar as the latter is guaranteed by the Symbolic Other.<sup>131</sup> The “being” Alex complains he does not possess is synonymous with “identity,” his capacity to fulfil a role in society. This is why, like Freddie, he is an outcast, a solitary, failed, impersonator. Nevertheless, he is aware of the intricate relationship between “thinking” and “existence.” He knows that the form of existence he can attain through “thinking” is always Symbolic “existence” since thinking is inevitably thinking “in” language. Therefore, in negating thinking, one can assume, he hopes to achieve another layer of existence, one not bound to the Other. Through (the Real aspect of) the hand, the eye, and the voice, the

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<sup>130</sup> A similar pattern is manifest in *Shroud* where the phrase “I could not think” is repeated five times. For instance, “I could not think in what terms exactly to protest” (18); “all this was intensely strange to me, and yet familiar, too, I could not think why” (56); “I could not think how last night I had got Magda up the stairs and into bed” (115).

<sup>131</sup> Here, I rely on Stijn Vanheule’s distinction between (Real) “being” and (Symbolic) “existence” (*Subject of Psychosis* 126).

Banvillian narrator, I claim, *does* achieve “being.” In fact, these partial objects encapsulate “pure” being, the narrator’s subjective “essence,” his ultimate “substance” beyond Symbolic semblances. Far from a stable “essence” in the traditional sense, however, the narrator’s found “essence” is the ephemeral substance of *jouissance*. The price he has to pay to attain this “being” involves sacrificing his intentionality, his very sense of self. This is the ultimate predicament that plagues the Banvillian narrator.

By stripping reality of its Symbolic underpinnings, the protagonist allows the Real to emerge and then domesticates it as magic. He does so using the surface of the written pages of his narrative, a surface onto which he can fuse word and image. Banville’s later work, especially his latest trilogy, is not only a literary feat but also a philosophical *tour de force*. It is the story of a creative narrator discontented with the gap that separates him from the natural world. His quest predictably fails to yield “the thing in itself” yet his narration produces a universe in which certainty and playfulness give way to uncanny encounters, ones that shake the foundation of his subjective existence. It is a world in which dichotomies collapse, where reality and imagination fuse and become inseparable, interiority strikes a chord with exteriority, subjects coincide with (partial) objects, absence weighs more than presence, the inanimate becomes animate and the animate inanimate. In this drama of the sundered self, subjectivity is rendered precarious but is nevertheless enhanced through layers after layers of significance. Faced with the fact that no ultimate guarantee can be found with regards to the validity of his perceptions and representations, the narrator heroically pushes on, continues to come back, sometimes under a different name. Each time he sets upon himself the task of taking on the chaos and imposing on it a totalizing order, yet he fails every single time. In the process, however, with every return he reveals a new aspect of the fragmented self.

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