Language and the Thing in Itself in the Fiction of John Banville

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Abstract

This thesis consists of an exploration of the interaction between language and the thing in itself in the fiction of John Banville. The thing in itself is that which exceeds the text and to which it cannot refer, even as it is compelled to do so. In exploring this tension, the thesis focuses on how Banville's writing, in foregrounding the inadequacy of the literary text, makes the reader aware of the existence of what exceeds it. Each of the chapters in the study examines the various strategies through which Banville gestures beyond the text in spite of the limitations placed upon him by form and genre. The first chapter studies the tendency in this writer's texts to view death as an apotheosis of the soul in which the individual finally has access to the thing in itself, which they had previously encountered as infants before entering language. The second chapter examines how elements of Romantic thought, such as nostalgia, the seniority of the child over the adult and a particular impression of the natural world, contribute to Banville's attempt to gesture towards the thing in itself. In the third chapter, the role of language in distorting one's understanding of the other is examined. The final chapter of the thesis examines the narrative strategies (including *mise en abyme*, ekphrasis, metaphor and catachresis) Banville uses in order to present the reader with excess. Ultimately, this study suggests that Banville uses various narrative strategies to make his reader aware of that which exists outside of the text. By gesturing beyond the novel to the sublime, and by self-reflexively exposing the inner workings of the writing process to the reader, Banville's texts confront the reader with an intimation of ineluctable excess.

Contents

Introduction

> The simple notion that language passively reflects a coherent, meaningful and
> 'objective' world is no longer tenable. (Waugh 3)

In the opening pages of John Banville's *Doctor Copernicus*, the infant Nicolas Copernicus looks out from his window and sees a linden tree, which "at first […] had no name. It was the thing itself, the vivid thing. It was his friend" (3). The title of this thesis is drawn from a plethora of references in Banville's work to this elusive, mysterious 'thing itself' or 'thing in itself', and the study which follows is an attempt to explore and examine this intangible concept. In seeking a definition, Emmanuel Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* is useful, since Kant distinguishes between the noumenal and phenomenal realms in this text. The noumenal world consists of things as they really are, things insofar as they are "not an object of our sensuous intuition" (360). Kant's phenomena, on the other hand, are things as they appear to the individual: "appearances, to the extent that as objects they are thought" (Kant 347). The thing in itself is therefore an example of noumena, that which exists in the world but cannot be comprehended, or thought, by the individual.

Later, Nicolas learns the words 'tree' and 'linden', but notes that "they did not mean themselves, they were nothing in themselves, they meant the dancing singing thing outside" (*Doctor Copernicus* 3). In passages such as these, Banville connects the thing in itself, and in particular the adult individual's inability to access it, with language. An infant, as the etymology of the word suggests, is one without speech, one who sees the world as it is, without the interference of language or the cultural bias it carries. Thus the infant Nicolas perceives the linden tree in itself. The adult, however, has access only to phenomena, to things insofar as they are named. What the young boy articulates above may therefore be understood in terms of Ferdinand de Saussure's distinction between signifier and signified, his notion that "the linguistic sign unites not a thing and a name, but a concept and a sound image" (61). Words are not intrinsically connected to that to which they refer, but refer to it only by virtue of an agreement between the speakers of those words. Significantly, in this regard, Nicolas notes that the word for the thing does not change with the changing aspect of the tree, but rather that "in wind, in

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silence, at night, in the changing air, it changed and yet was changelessly the tree, the linden tree," and he finds that "strange" (Banville, *Copernicus* 3). And, indeed, it *is* strange, when one really thinks about it, that we use the signifier 'tree' to denote so many and such radically different objects, and that the word remains static while the real object changes day by day. It is strange, too, as the young Nicolas notes, that the signifier 'tree' is assigned completely arbitrarily to its referent, the arboreal object. In fact, as he notes, "although every name was nothing without the thing named, the thing cared nothing for its name, had no need of a name, and was itself only" (3). Thus, for the young boy who so recently enjoyed direct concourse with the world around him unsullied by the corrupting lens of language, the advent of speech is entirely baffling.

This section of the novel, in fact, stages the young boy's estrangement from the world as he grows older, and as language comes to serve as the lens through which he views the world. Language becomes an obstruction to the pure apprehension of the thing in itself which he experienced as an infant. Furthermore, his initial scepticism about language precipitates the crisis he will suffer later in life when he realises that the great book which is his life's work, and in which he set out to express the truth about the galaxy and the movements of the stars, has failed. The problem is not the universe itself, of course, but in his inability to express what he has observed of it in language, which can only fail to articulate the entirety of reality. The adult Nicolas is therefore forced to watch "in mute suspended panic his blundering pen pollute and maim those concepts that, unexpressed, had throbbed with limpid purity and beauty" (93). There is an essential connection missing, it seems, between the world and the expression of the world: "the universe of dancing planets was out there, and he was here, and between the two spheres mere words and figures on paper could not mediate" (93). This gap – more like an abyss – is the void in which resides the thing itself, which cannot be expressed in language. The thing itself is that which exceeds language and therefore remains unsaid, and always yet to be said – a remainder or excess always in need of supplementation, as Maurice Blanchot and Jacques Derrida have variously argued (see, for example, Blanchot, *Writing of the Disaster* 30, and Derrida, *Of Grammatology* 144-5). Language then, for Banville, is inadequate when it comes to portraying the thing in itself, which, accordingly, ceaselessly calls into question the essence of what has been said by positing a reality that exceeds it and which is still to be said – indeed, *must* be said.

Importantly, too, linguistic reference – for Banville, as for Saussure – is a product of the conventional nature of the relationship between signifier and signified. So, for instance, the young Copernicus is compelled to forget his earlier concerns regarding the strangeness of linguistic expression once he has "learned to talk as others talked, full of conviction, unquestioningly" (4). He discovers that language is not an individual mode of expression but a communal one, and that our every utterance has been uttered before and belongs not to us alone but to every speaker of that language who has come before and will come after. Words are not intrinsically connected to that to which they refer, but refer to it only by virtue of an agreement between the speakers of those words. Even the word 'I' (particularly the word I) cannot be said to be individual, and cannot be said really to refer to the true individual self. Rather, to say I estranges the self from the self insofar as it raises the question of who, if not I, says I. Samuel Beckett's narrator in *Malone Dies* perfectly expresses this scepticism about the ability of the individual to express himself in language in the following utterance: "I, say I. Unbelieving" (293).

The title of my study points to Banville's novels' similar scepticism about language and its ability to express the thing itself. What Shane Weller says of Beckett's writing is equally true of Banville's: that is, that his narratives cast into doubt their own "representational authenticity" and leave the reader not only "in no position to determine what is representationally reliable and what is not," but also with an awareness that "the narrative is itself in no small part *about* the act and reception of narration" (91, emphasis in original). My dissertation thus examines the narrative situations in Banville's novels as a means through which he attempts to gesture towards that which exceeds language and reveal to the reader not the thing in itself, but the fact that there *is* something to which language has no access – that there is indeed something "beyond words," but that our linguistically bounded existence cannot comprehend it (Weller 91). Other terms that have been used to describe that which exists outside of language include the sublime, the remainder or excess, all of which I explore in the body of the thesis. For now it suffices to say that the profound paradox – even crisis – that informs Banville's writing is how to write, given the inability of language to refer adequately.

To this end, I have identified four thematic patterns through which Banville attempts make the existence of the thing in itself apparent to his readers. Firstly, there is the ubiquitous obsession with death in his novels: death not as the morbid end of life, but as an apotheosis or

transcendence much to be desired in which the individual finally escapes the yoke of the uttered I and is able to apprehend their true self in its entirety. Hitherto this true self has been unavailable to the subject, who is estranged from themself by language. In other words, the true self which the individual apprehends on their death is another manifestation of the sublime which exists outside language, as Simon Critchley discusses in his book *Very Little… Almost Nothing*. For this reason, I preface my discussion of death in Banville's texts with an overview of theories of the sublime, which range from Kant's differentiation between the beautiful and the sublime, to Jacques Derrida's theory of *differánce* and Jean François Lyotard's definition of postmodernism. What these theories suggest, in my reading, is that it is both impossible to portray the thing in itself in literature and absolutely necessary to attempt to do so. As a result, writing must gesture towards the sublime which cannot be said in language – *and* express the fact that the inexpressible exists – paradoxically *in language*. The presentation of death in literature (and the inevitable failure thereof) provides a means of doing this: indeed, the theme of death is ubiquitous in Banville's novels – which, in John Kenny's words, are "half in love with death" (11). My study contends that death serves two important roles in Banville's writing: it provides a means through which the individual might be confronted with the sublime, thus enabling the novel to gesture towards excess or the thing in itself, and it presents a moment of stillness in which the individual's essential self might be apprehended. Death, in fact, is represented, in Banville's novels, as the ultimate opportunity to overcome the disharmony between self and world, and as a moment in which the self ceases becoming and is able simply to *be*. In death, the individual is finally – and ironically – able to apprehend their [1]self *and* the thing in itself. What makes this encounter additionally ironic, of course, is the fact that the individual is no longer present at the moment of death. Only from a position outside of self and language can the thing in itself be perceived as it really is. The further irony is that this position – which can only possibly be attained at the moment of one's death – requires the annihilation of the seeking self.

The second thematic pattern examined in this thesis is the presence of several Romantic themes in novels such as *Shroud*, *Eclipse*, *The Infinities*, the *Frames* Trilogy, and the Science Tetralogy. These include nostalgia, the eminence of the child over the adult, a particular impression of the natural world, as well as the presence of pathetic fallacy. A Romantic

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[1] A note on pronouns: after a great deal of reflection, it has been decided that this essay will use the pronouns they, them and their when the gender of the subject is not stated. These pronouns are deemed by the author to be more inclusive and less cumbersome than using he/she or just one of those pronouns.

sensibility also implies an obsession with infinitude and the limits of language in the expression of the thing in itself– an obsession which is reminiscent of a similar concern in Banville's novels. Joseph McMinn, writing on the Romantic sensibility evident in Banville's work, attributes to him a kind of "damaged Romanticism" (134), and describes him as something of a neo-Romantic writer. This position is, overall, supported in my thesis, which makes extensive use of Isaiah Berlin's *The Roots of Romanticism* in its attempt to define the movement.

One trend in Banville's writing which aligns with the Romantic sensibility is the tendency of his protagonists to experience something of an anti-*Bildung* in the course of the novel, in which they move not from ignorance to enlightenment, but rather from pure knowledge towards confusion, ignorance and forgetfulness. As a result of this regression, Romantic poetry and Banville's novels both stage a unique sort of nostalgia – an aporetic longing for home which can never be satisfied, because that home no longer exists or never did exist in the way they remember it. In experiencing this feeling of nostalgia, Banville's protagonists are in fact longing to return to a time before they were estranged from themselves by their implication in language. So, for example, the phenomenon of the anti-*Bildung* in the Science Tetralogy is largely a function of language. As already indicated, the pre-linguistic infant has unmediated access to the thing in itself, and is therefore in possession of pure knowledge. The adult, on the other hand, can only view reality through the lens of language, and thus finds himself frustratingly separate from his subject. Moreover, since the 'home' is located outside of language, its invocation as an object of nostalgia serves as another means through which these narrators gesture towards excess. Home, in Isaiah Berlin's words, is "in principle, by definition, something to which an approach can be made but which cannot be seized, because that is the nature of reality" (122). Nostalgia, then, is nothing less than a desire for the thing in itself, for that which is forever outside the text and which has both anteceded it and will supersede it.

The chapter goes on to identify further thematic patterns which are shared by Banville and Wordsworth, and discusses the differences between the two writers. I examine what consolations – if any – are offered to the Banvillean protagonist to make up for the loss of the thing in itself, as well as the different views Banville and Wordsworth project of the natural world. Finally, I attempt to answer the question of whether Banville is possessed of a Romantic sensibility, or whether the British Romantic poets in some way foreshadowed the advent of postmodernism. Through a definition of the Romantic sensibility and comparison of Banville's

work with Wordsworth's, the chapter sketches the differences and similarities between the two. Overall, it would seem that Banville is possessed of a 'damaged' or pessimistic version of Romanticism due to his language scepticism, and that the advent of Romanticism, rather than mirroring postmodernism, was in fact the distant root of the latter movement.

The third thematic pattern under consideration concerns the fraught relationships of Banvillean protagonists with others and themselves, and the inherent narcissism of Banville's work. While concerns about the status of the self are ubiquitous throughout Banville's fiction, this thesis deals with this issue in terms of the role language plays in causing the self to perceive itself as divided not only from itself, but also as fundamentally estranged from the body, from other minds and bodies, and from the world. The realisation of the disjunction between self and world causes the individual to perceive that "at its centre the world is out of harmony and indifferent to man's quest for truth and purpose" (Imhof 72). This general human search for meaning is reflected in Banville's various protagonists' efforts to articulate the essence of the world, which they invariably believe to be orderly rather than chaotic. A crisis occurs when they begin to realise that, in fact, the world is entirely chaotic and the orderly language they wished to use to portray it simply cannot stand up to the task.

Moreover, the use of language in an attempt to explain or display the self is doubly aporetic when one considers the estranging effect of language on the self. It is therefore not surprising that Banville's fiction has been widely considered to be solipsistic or narcissistic – according to definitions thereof from theorists such as Elke D'Hoker, Mark O'Connell and Patricia Waugh – because it typically features a first-person protagonist-narrator who is attempting, through narrative, to discover or reveal his true self. It is impossible to deny the narcissism of Banville's protagonists but, rather than seeing this self-absorption as a cause for indictment, I read it as a function of language, rather than a pathological condition. In Banville's writing, narcissism is an inevitable result of individual subjectivity and an inability to see beyond the self, both of which stem from the self's location in and mediation through language. Banville's characters generally believe that they are alone in this, and that others are somehow more substantial than themselves. The irony, of course, is that these others feel precisely the same way; and the paradox is that it is, in fact, impossible to express this element of selfhood. Selfhood, in other words, is excessive by definition.

My third chapter, in its treatment of the issue of narcissism, focuses largely on Banville's *Frames* Trilogy as an attempt at self-discovery on the part of its narrator, who simultaneously indulges and attempts to transcend his linguistically imposed narcissism. The ironic position of the narcissist, who is obsessed with self-discovery and yet prevented from achieving his goal byhis own self-absorption, reflects the position of the text, in which the narrating I attempts to express itself through language, but finds that an essential part of selfhood always eludes the text in which it is figured, and which can only be accessed in the absence of the experiencing self. In this way Banville uses his depiction of selfhood as a means by which the text reveals its own inadequacy and gestures towards that which cannot be expressed. As I then go on to indicate, the same may be said of his treatment of the self's ineffable experience of trauma and agony. The closing sections of this chapter then deal with the fraught relationships between individuals in Banville's work, as well as the issue of representation which is raised in any consideration of these relationships. Banville's narrator-protagonists lack the empathy with which to understand others. As a result, the selfhood of other characters in the novels is elided by the overweening ego of the narrator. Nevertheless, Banville's narratives often constitute an attempt on the part of the narrator to transcend the limitations of subjectivity and first-person narration in order to give secondary characters a voice. This attempt is, of course, doomed to failure since, rather than giving a voice to the other characters, the narrator tends to drown it out with his own.

My fourth chapter begins with an examination of the final thematic pattern under consideration: the narcissistic or metafictional elements of Banville's writing itself, in order to establish how novels such as *Ghosts*, *The Infinities* and *The Newton Letter* confront the reader with an intimation of excess. *Ghosts*, for example, presents us with various narrative levels: the extradiegetic level of Freddie himself, his 'creatures' who make up the diegetic level, and the fictional painting, *Le Monde d'Or*, which forms the hypodiegetic level. These are examined in the context of Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan's exposition on narrative levels. I demonstrate that Freddie, the narrator, constantly makes us aware of these levels through his obsession with his own status as a fictional construct, as well as his constant transgression of diegetic levels. I argue that his ironic awareness of his own fictionality forces the reader into a similar awareness of the novel as text, and a concomitant recognition of something which is forever missing from it: the remainder. I contend that the tendency of Banville's texts to become self-reflexive is a directly related to the narcissism of their central characters, who engage in the act of narration in an

attempt to access their true, authentic selves. The overall effect of Banville's novels' self-reflexivity is a sort of narcissistic self-reflection on the part of the reader, who is forced to examine their own reading as a creative and narcissistic act.

I then go on to examine the motifs of acting and memory in Banville's work, both of which are related to the individual's attempts to access, create or falsify their own identity in order to make it appear authentic to others and so as to encounter the thing in itself within themselves. This section is informed by Banville scholars such as Eoghan Smith and Joseph McMinn. Banville's narrators' identities are necessarily performative in nature because they are self-reflexively aware that their actions occur at all times before an 'audience' of readers. As a result, they constantly feel inauthentic and insubstantial and attempt, through narrative, to seek their original, authentic, excessive self which is, paradoxically, denied to them by their location in language. Nevertheless, their obsession with selfhood and simultaneous failure to access it once again foregrounds the inadequacy of language and the existence of that which exists beyond language: the thing in itself.

This chapter concludes with an examination, with the help of Mehdi Fiorato's *The Relationship between Literature and Science in John Banville's Scientific Tetralogy*, of how Banville destabilises the opposition between science and art, both of which try to locate the truth by entirely inadequate means. Banville's scientists and artists alike, in the end, suffer the same crisis of faith when they realise the absolute failure of language to represent reality. In staging this disillusionment, Banville presents the reader with the crisis of the postmodern author, who knows the inevitability of failure and yet must, at all costs, continue to write. A new order of truth is suggested, one which is the remainder of the search itself and which may only be apprehended in waiting, in searching, and in writing, but never in its own completion. A truth which comes close to excess. This is the ultimate, metafictional gesture that Banville makes towards the thing in itself. The very question to which this study seeks an answer – that of how one can write given the undeniable scepticism one feels towards language – is thus both asked and answered in Banville's texts, and this thesis is an attempt to explore both the question and the response.

CHAPTER 1: DEATH AS A GESTURE

Let us begin, then, with the end of it all. Death is a theme which is ubiquitous throughout Banville's work and which is treated there not with fear or dread but with a certain longing. Death, in Banville, is not so much an end as an apotheosis in which the tragically troubled and frustrated individual at last gains access to the thing in itself. That is, to the world as it is when it is not being observed, or as it is when the infant sees it but does not yet have the language to describe it. Access to that which is "more subtle, more certain, even, than the mere manner of its finding," be it found through science, art or even the death of the individual (Banville, *Mefisto* 185). Through a close reading of selected passages from Banville's oeuvre, alongside various theories of the sublime, I aim to examine the ways in which Banville suggests that death could perhaps confront the individual with the sublime thing in itself and enable the novel to gesture towards excess. Closely related to this is the relationship between death and selfhood in Banville's novels, since the latter tend to use death not only to gesture toward excess, but also as a moment of stillness in which the individual's essential self might be discovered.

1.1 Theories of the Sublime

According to Kant, the sublime is that which is found "in a formless object, so far as in it or by occasion of it *boundlessness* is represented" (97). The human mind is simultaneously attracted to and repelled by the sublime as it causes the subject to feel both pain and pleasure at the same time. The pain is caused by the inability of the subject to comprehend the sublime, and the pleasure is brought about by the same cause. Clearly, the idea of the sublime presents us with a situation in which language, which is binaric and differential, cannot express the entirety of reality, which is multifold and paradoxical. Lyotard, taking into account the fact that we live in a word-shaped world, builds upon Kant's definition of the sublime, adding that it occurs "when the imagination fails to present an object which might, if only in principle, match a concept" (245). He also defines the sublime as that which is an "intrinsic combination of pleasure and pain: the

pleasure that reason should exceed all presentation, the pain that imagination or sensibility should not be equal to the concept" (248). The sublime exists because of a paradox which is a result of a "conflict between the faculties of the subject," which deal with the ability to conceive of something, and that subject's ability to "present" something (244). The sublime exists in "ideas of which no presentation is possible" (245). In other words, the boundlessness of the sublime object – if we can call that which is boundless an object at all – cannot be conceived by the human mind, in which all thought is bounded by the language in which it is formed. The sublime is wholly other; it is neither present nor absent but haunts the individual precisely because it is unforgettable and unassimilable. Thus it cannot truly be called an object: it is rather an entity which exists in reality, but which the imagination – which is linguistically bounded – cannot conceive of in its totality.

If thought, which occurs in language, cannot access the sublime, then it follows that language is not an adequate medium for its depiction. The sublime is that which cannot be articulated in language, and which is variously called silence or the dark, excess, *differánce*, the supplement, the remainder by Beckett, Blanchot, Derrida and others. For Derrida, language only has meaning thanks to its appearance in a particular context, as well as the play of *differánce*(a portmanteau word which combines "distance, divergence, delay [and] deferral" between the author and the reader, or between the sign and the referent [Derrida *SEC* 376]). To put it simply, a word derivesits meaning because it negates and invokes every other word that was not used. Words create boundaries, but in so doing they also create a space where these boundaries can be crossed. Language, therefore, in negating the sublime by forming boundaries, also evokes everything which it leaves out, which is not said, and which cannot, in fact, be said. This is excess. The inarticulable remainder which always exists outside of the text creates a need for constant supplementation, due to the fact that what has been said is always incomplete. If speech is a representation of and a substitution for thought, then writing is a substitution for speech, and in the process of replacing thought with textcertain things are necessarily left out. Substitution is dangerous in this regard, for it attempts to replace something, to become "the sign of the thing itself," where in fact it is nothing of the sort but rather adds to a speech whose "deficiency and infirmity" it can only supplement; it is an exterior thing to speech, rather than a replacement or representation of it (Derrida *OG* 144-5). Speech "represents thought by conventional signs, and writing represents the same with regard to speech"(Derrida OG 144). Thus writing is thought

doubly mediated by language; first by the translation of thought – which is already linguistically bounded – into speech, and then by the translation of speech into text. As a result, our writing is in constant need of supplementation, which attempts to supply that which has been elided in the course of these translations. Moreover, because the supplement occurs once again in text, there is not a finite supplement that can make up for the inadequacy of language, but an entire sequence of supplements which are necessary: "an infinite chain, ineluctably multiplying the supplementary mediations that produce the sense of the very thing they defer: the mirage of the thing itself, or immediate presence, of originary perception" (Derrida *OG* 157). Thus the supplement is excessive or, to use Derrida's word, exorbitant (*OG* 163). It is an infinite void into which our attempts at supplementation fall but which they can never fill. The aporetic nature of this theory of writing does not, however, relieve us of the obligation to write and, in so doing, to supplement.

Modern and postmodern literature is often preoccupied with excess and attempts to make the reader aware of the remainder from which literature springs and towards which it gestures. The act of writing, according to James Longenbach, is "by nature an excess, a refusal of finitude, the transgression of a boundary that exists because the future does not yet exist" (362). Longenbach goes on to say that poetsconfront a dilemma: they want "to exceed the restraints without which they could never have existed in the first place" (366). Although he is talking primarily about poetic excess in his article, I would argue that what he says is true of literary language in general, which is constrained by conventions of form and similarly constitutes an attempt to express the inexpressible in language. The literary use of language, in any genre, can and must gesture towards excess. Writing, in SimonCritchley's reading of Blanchot, "is the experience of language unworking itself in an irreducible ambiguity that points towards an exteriority that would scatter meaning – a dizzying absence, the space of dying itself" (84). This space of dying mentioned by Critchley is Blanchot's dark, an infinite space in which the thing in itself may be apprehended, but from whence it cannot be taken into the light. Furthermore, it is necessary for language to do this – to gesture towards this absence – within the limitations of traditional forms and "in order to show the inadequacy of those [forms]" (Critchley91).

It is an ethical imperative in both modern and postmodern literature to use the form of the novel to gesture towards this excess and to push language to the point at which it fails in order to do so. Lyotard believes that it is the "aesthetic of the sublime" which gives modern literature its

impetus (77). That is to say, modern and postmodern literature comes into being as a result of the desire of authors to depict the sublime in art, to "present the fact that the unpresentable exists"(78). It is difficult to distinguish between modernism and postmodernism in literature, especially when one takes into account the considerable overlap between the two in a chronological sense. Postmodernist art can be traced back as far as 1916, for example, and modernist texts are still being written today (Lodge 50). David Lodge's definitions of modernism and postmodernism provide a useful distinction here. For Lodge, modernist fiction is marked by language which is "so highly and lovingly polished that it ceases to be transparent but calls attention to itself by the brilliant reflections glancing from its surfaces," as well as [by] a tendency to discard "the traditional narrative structures of chronological succession and logical cause-and-effect, as being false to the essentially chaotic and problematic nature of subjective experience" in favour of "literary strategies and devices that belong to poetry" (47). Postmodernism "continues the modernist critique of traditional realism, but it tries to go beyond or around or underneath modernism" in order to imply that "whatever meaningful patterns we discern […] are wholly illusory, comforting fictions" (50). It is the aim of postmodern writing to express the inexpressible not merely in textualcontent, but also in structures which deny the reader the "solace of good forms" and make use of experimental forms in order to impart to him or her a strong sense of the unattainable (Lyotard 81) – a stronger sense, that is, of excess. The depiction of the sublime becomes an ethical imperative when it is contrasted with its alternative – realism – which attempts to render invisible the medium of its representation and present itself as a mirror on reality. Realism cannot conceive of excess as it attempts to conceal the fact that language cannot adequately signify reality, it "regards literature as the communication of a reality that exists prior to and independent of the act of communication" (Lodge 48). Lyotard maintains that "it is our business not to supply reality but to invent allusions to the conceivable which cannot be presented" (81). Without excess, there would be nothing to say, but because of it we are compelled to write *ad infinitum* – and also to fail, because that which cannot be said will always remain unsaid. As Bakhtin writes, "nothing conclusive has yet taken place in the world, the ultimate word of the world and about the world has not yet been spoken" (166). This is also what makes it necessary to infinitely supplement the written word.

Critchley finds a similar sentiment in Blanchot's argument that "the possibility of literature is found in the radical impossibility of creating a complete work" (87). Literature, it

seems, must attempt *ad infinitum* to say what cannot be said. As Beckett famously said, "to be an artist is to fail, as no other dare fail, that failure is his world and the shrink from it desertion" (*Dialogues* 125). Banville's novels, no less than Beckett's, 'fail' in this regard; that is, they fail to depict the sublime but gesture towards it instead. As Beckett comments in his dialogues about the nature of modern art: the modern artwork expresses the fact that "there is nothing to express, nothing with which to express, nothing from which to express, no power to express, no desire to express, together with the obligation to express" (103). Thus literature, if it is to be art – and Banville strongly desires his work to be seen as art – needs to express the fact that the inexpressible exists. Banville does this through, on the one hand, suggesting that death might offer the individual an opportunity for unmediated access to his or her essential self, and, on the other, depicting the sea as a figure of both the sublime in nature and of excess in literature.

1.2 Banville's Sublime

Firstly, Banville's identification of excess with an essential self needs some justification. He is quoted in an article by Laura Izarra as having written that "the writer is not a priest, not a shaman, not a holy dreamer. Yet his work is dragged up out of that darksome well where the essential self cowers, in fear of the light" (183). Thus it is clear that Banville himself has posited a relationship between the true self and the dark, which is another figure for excess in literature. Like the true self, and like the dark, Blanchot's "other night" also refers to that which resists expression or control through language, and stands in for the inexpressible in literature. Moreover, the true self, or excess, exists beyond the day/night binary: it is "the profoundly dark point towards which art, desire, death and the night all seem to lead" (*Space* 227). In other words, it is the source of all literature: the remainder which constitutes the obligation to write. Just like excess, essential selfhood is elusive and cannot be expressed linguistically. In fact, the idea of the true self represents what the self would be in the absence of language – in the absence of the sundering effect language has on the self. This sundering occurs as a result of the necessity for the individual to experience his or her selfhood through language, which is communal rather than individual, and the distancing of the individual from the true self which is a result. To use Beckett's terms, the self is made a stranger when it is apprehended through language. Beckett's work often constitutes an aporetic search, in language, for this stranger who is estranged by

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language. Banville's characters, in a similar way to Beckett's, are on a quest to find this stranger who is the true self from whom they have been "estranged by the words of others" (Marais, "The Incurious Seeker" 12). Thevery existence of the 'true self' is simultaneously obsessed over and frequently cast into doubt by Banville's characters and narrators – notably Axel Vander in *Shroud*:

> there is no self: no ego, no precious individual spark breathed into each one of us by a bearded patriarch in the sky, who does not exist either. And yet . . . For all my insistence, and to my secret shame, I admit that even I cannot entirely rid myself of the conviction of an enduring core of selfhood amid the welter of the world, a kernel immune to any gale that might pluck the leaves from the almond tree and make the sustaining branches swing and shake. (27)

A very similar sentiment is expressed in Beckett's *The Unnamable* when the narrator comments on the implications of attempting to locate the true self – Beckett's stranger – through language. The unnamed narrator dwells on the displacement of the self caused by the necessity of using communal language, and in particular its pronouns: "they say they, speaking of them, to make me think it is I who am speaking. Or I say they, speaking of God knows what, to make me think it is not I who am speaking" (*Unnamable*363).It is clear that in the works of Beckett and Banville, like the sublime, the idea of a fixed self is not available to human perception through language. It is language which has sundered the character from their true self, just as it is language which sunders individuals from the 'thing in itself' which is the remainder or excess, that which exists outside of the text and which it gestures towards.

Furthermore, the connection between the essential self and death is not only evident in Banville's texts, but is also stated by the author himself: "I don't believe there is a kind of private self that we call soul … that we have any single coherence … there's never a point of rest … until the last moment arrives" (Izarra 185). All of Banville's novels feature death in some shape or form, even if – as is the case in *The Infinities* – it is only present in the form of its absence. Regardless of the fact that Adam Godley – in defiance of the expectations not only of the reader but also of the other characters – does not die in the novel, death is still evoked on every page,

as he exists "poised upon the point of oblivion" (*The Infinities* 17). The very absence of death, in the end, makes the novel's musings upon this subject all the more poignant. Eoghan Smith, writing about the preoccupation with death and self-annihilation in Banville's work, says that this is "not simply a theme, but potentially also an aesthetic aspiration" (139). That is, Banville's characters yearn for death insofar as it marks a place in which they can cease becoming and, at last, simply be. They feel, like Helen in *The Infinities*, that they are "pure potential, in a state of perpetual transformation, on the way steadily to becoming [themselves], [their] authentic [selves]," but never quite reaching that point until their final moment arrives (252).

We can see an example of this trend clearly in the first pages of *Doctor Copernicus*, where the young Nicolas's reaction to his mother's death is not horror or grief, but rather the sentiment that now, in death, "she was utterly, uniquely still, and seemed in this unique utter stillness to have arrived at last at a true and total definition of what she was, herself, her vivid self at last" (5). This observation makes it clear that death, for Nicolas (and, indeed, many other of Banville's protagonists), is closely related to – in fact, epitomises – a constant search for a true, authentic self. In contrast with the dead, who are complete in themselves and for once wholly present in their "stark thereness," the living appear "vague and unfinished" (*Doctor Copernicus* 6). In other words, access to one's own (or another's) true and authentic self is not possible due to the ever-changing nature of the self, and it is only in death that the individual is finally able to be, in stillness and silence, his or her authentic self. Similarly, Banville's Kepler, although his narrative ends with a defiant denial of death ("never die" [192]),speaks of death as "the perfecting medium" in a letter to Regina in which he meditates upon the death of his wife (134). For life contains not harmony, as he once thought, but chaos, and the source of this chaos is not the world but the individual itself, for "*we* are the flaw in the crystal" and only in death is the individual, the flaw, removed (*Kepler* 134, emphasis in original). Only in the instant when the individual ceases to exist do they "at last perceive the secret & essential form of all [they] have been" (134). Death both requires and constitutes the true self, but is fundamentally unavailable to the individual.

There is, of course, a paradox involved here, as it is only in the annihilation of the self that it becomes authentic. Here there is again a certain similarity to the works of Beckett, whose depiction of death enacts a similar contradiction in which the character who dies "is not present

at his death" (Marais, "The Incurious Seeker" 13), but whose death is necessary in order to bring an end to the aporetic waiting which constitutes his search for the stranger which is his true self.

1.3 Solutions (and Failures)

Adam Godley's vegetative state in *The Infinities* offers a possible solution to this paradox, in that he seems to have reached a state of stillness, of "pure mind"which, according to the narrator, was just the "apotheosis he always hankered after" (31). He is "stuck in the present" (32), which implies that he is no longer becoming but has reached a point of stasis in which he is now – in the eternal moment of the text, for he has lost track of the human concept of time – his own authentic self. He roams the past and present in his comatose state and, at times, "wakes, but what he wakes to is not waking" (62). Rather, it constitutes a continuation of his vision or dream or memory. In his reveries, however, the main themes seem to be time, death and selfhood. He remembers his childhood and recalls an episode, after his father's death, in which he is helping his mother to bake a cake. As he is mixing the ingredients together, he wonders how he would know "when that moment of perfect distribution had been achieved? – how would he know the instant to stop mixing in order not to upset the equilibrium and throw everything back into disorder?" (*The Infinities* 68). The question is not limited to baking ingredients, however, but is almost immediately related to the wider world, as he asks: "was everything in the world so intricately linked and yet resistantly disparate?" (68). The bowl of baking ingredients could be read as a figure for selfhood. In a constant state of becoming, all the elements of an individual are continually being mixed together by the movement of the world and, because the movement never ceases, the point of equilibrium is never reached for any longer than an instant. Later on, Adam realises the naivety of his childhood belief that a moment of equilibrium was possible at all, thinking "how foolish I had been to imagine that anything could be completed" when "everything endlessly extends and unravels, world upon world" in an infinity of worlds, the existence of which had been proven by his science (169). For Adam is also a scientist, like the protagonists of the tetralogy, although an imaginary rather than historical one.

Adam'sreflection on such issues, as well as the fact that, in the end, the mixing bowl of his selfhood is set back in motion when he wakes up from his coma, makes it clear that he has

not, in fact, reached his apotheosis but is rather enjoying a brief pause in his becoming which provides the novel with a moment in which to occur, and his becoming soon resumes upon his waking.However, the novel gestures towards moments in which Adam does, in fact, experience a sort of proximity to excess, although it cannot be said that it is he himself who is experiencing anything at this time:

> His mind wanders. There are gaps, short and sometimes longer
> periods of absence, when he is lost to himself, or no, not lost, but
> as if astray on some far, flat shore, at nightfall, with no moon, and
> the sea a fringe of soiled white foam off on the horizon, and the sea
> birds high up, calling and crying in the brumous air.(32)

It is clear that such moments cannot be articulated in their fullness, but the mention of the sea here is extremely relevant and marks this "absence" as a momentary departure of the self from itself to awordless realm in which it has contact with the sublime. Godley's position during the coma is like that of Banville's gods in this novel. These gods, who are taken from the Graeco-Roman pantheon, have an effect on the lives of the human characters, but they are not truly humancharacters themselves as they exist in a static state rather than in the human state of constant becoming. Hermes, who narrates the novel, describes his position thus:

> All this, of course, I cast in the language of humankind,
> necessarily. Were I to speak in my own voice, that is, the voice of
> a divinity, you would be baffled at the sound – in fact, you would
> not be able to hear me at all, so rarefied is our heavenly speech,
> compared to your barely articulate grunting. Why, the music of the
> spheres has nothing on us. And these names – Zeus, Prometheus,
> grey-eyed Athene, Hermes, even – these are your constructions.
> We address each other, as it were, only as air, as light, as
> something like the quality of that deep, transparent blue you see
> when you peer into the highest vault of the empyrean. And Heaven
> – what is that? For us, the deathless ones, there is no Heaven, or
> Hell, either, no up, no down, only the infinite here, which is a kind
> of not here. Think of that. (16)

Of course, his final instruction is heavily ironic – we cannot think 'of that,' for in our linguistically constructed reality such an existence is inconceivable. As in the case of Adam Godley's state and those moments in which his mind 'wanders,' the attempt to depict such

unsayable things in language is deeply ironic. These gods are like Derrida's transcendental signified, which "in and of itself, in its essence, would refer to no signifier, would exceed the chain of signs, and would no longer itself function as a signifier" (*Positions* 19). That is to say, it pre-exists language, is not subject to time and is not dependent on *differánce.* The transcendental signified collapses the binary between signifier and signified. In the same way, the gods of *The Infinities* exist not in human terms of life and death, time and language, but in an infinite moment of being. They represent the apotheosis of the search for authentic selfhood and excess.

However, when an attempt is made to present the self in language, this apotheosis is not without paradoxical outcomes of its own. From the above quotation it is clear that these gods share a language which does not labour under any of the same limitations that human language does.They do not suffer the violence of naming, or that of mortality. They exist in an infinite present, an "infinite here," but this presence is also a sort of absence – the "here" a sort of "not here" – because in the infinite space in which the gods exist, all things are simultaneous. The irony is that this existence is, in a sense, destroyed by Banville's attempt to represent it in language, an attempt which, according to Critchley's interpretation of Blanchot, "is murder". This is because the act of naming – of "substituting a name for the sensation" – gives us access to things, but at the same time "deprives those things of their being" (108). As Blanchot puts it, "when I speak death speaks in me" (*Orpheus* 326). Thus, it could be the case that we pay a heavy price for the ability to understand the existence of Banville's gods: their death. A more optimistic view than this does, however, present itself: that Banville's endeavour to articulate beings which transcend language does not so much negate or murder these beings, but rather constitutes a gesture towards that which is incomprehensible and which exceeds the limits of language. By writing these gods, Banville in fact requires his readers to conceive of more than language enables them to. In so doing, he is gesturing toward the sublime.

However, within this infinite excessive space, identity is forfeit. As it is with the mortal characters, Kepler and Copernicus, where death is both the "perfecting medium" of the self and the cause of the latter's ultimate demise, so too is it with Banville's gods and language. Hermes, narrating the novel, constantly struggles with the human language he is using, particularly when it comes to using pronouns – of which he says, "these denotations are so loose, in the context, so crude, as to be almost meaningless" (*The Infinities* 143) – and at times he identifies so completely with his characters that he uses the first person "I" to describe Adam Godley's

experiences. Not only does he struggle to distinguish himself from his characters, but also from the other gods. He explains the phenomenon, saying that he "should not speak of this or that personage when speaking of the immortal gods – we are all one even in our separateness" (143). Although he speaks of himself and Zeus as father and son, he admits that "in truth these terms can be only figurative for us, who are not born and do not die" and who "are not here sufficiently to ever be quite gone" (206). In this passage he returns to the idea that the gods are at once everything and nothing, here and not here. He compares their existence to the shapes made by the water in a "sea of eternal potential," shapes which are "at once eternal and evanescent" (206). We can be certain that the mention of the sea here, as a sublime object which exists as infinite possibility, is not accidental. The appearance of the sea at such moments, in fact, becomes something of a leitmotif in Banville's work.

Furthermore, with regard to the expression of language scepticism, Hermes frequently breaks the fourth wall to complain about the inadequacy of language, saying that "a darkling chasm there lies between that glimmer and the speck it would illuminate" (144). Here he iterates the instability of language and its inability to portray reality fully. This "darkling chasm" is another gesture towards that which cannot be said, that is, the realm of excess, and the narrator's frequent digressions on the frustrations caused by language foreground the novel's failure to present excess, although in its depictions of the gods it surely gestures towards it. The gods, perhaps, are yet another catachresis which attempts to signify that which cannot be signified.

Banville explores several other ways of 'freezing' existence and thus gaining access to the thing in itself, either in the form of the authentic self or as an object in the world, including the arts of photography and painting (which offer a frozen view of the individual), as well as anthropomorphic descriptions of objects in the world (which do not exist in a state of becoming but are complete in themselves).Other than in the moment of death, Banville's human characters enjoy only very brief moments of stillness, and these moments are overshadowed by the knowledge that they will not last. Gabriel Swan, in *Mefisto*, experiences such a moment at an unlikely time, as he is stealing morphine from the dispensary for Adele. He describes it as "like being underwater" (207): it is a moment where

> everything faltered somehow, like a carousel coming briefly to a
> stop, and I saw once again with weary eyes the thing that had been

there all the time. I pressed my forehead to the glass. To stay here,
to stay here forever, like this. To have it over, finally. (207)

In this brief moment of stillness, as life's busily turning carousel seems to pause, Gabriel catches once again a glimpse of the thing in itself which he has been labouring his whole life to find and define. He desires only for time to stop, for the carousel to cease turning and to remain in this place forever. He desires this not because he is content or happy at this time – indeed he is in a dangerous downward spiral which will end in his lover, Adele's suicide, which was made possible by his provision of drugs – but because he is not at all happy and does not desire for things to get any worse. He would like to cease becoming, to remain in one place in order to escape the decline that follows this scene. It would seem, too, that the narrating Gabriel knows that to remain the same would require his death, as he wishes to "have it over, finally." The reference to water at this moment is relevant, too, and recalls the leitmotif of the sea which is so often present in such moments of proximity to the sublime. Gabriel's position under the water is indicative of his state of mind and foreshadows the calamities which ensue in the pages that follow. Gabriel, who isa mathematician, aspires to use the science of mathematics to show that the world is orderly rather than chaotic. He sees numbers as a means of freezing the chaos of the world, "like frost falling on water, the seething particles tamed and sorted, the crystals locking, the frozen lattice spreading outwards in all directions" until things come to a complete standstill in the "creaking stillness" and "stunned white air" (*Mefisto*109). It is an aspiration doomed to be disappointed, because being never ceases and a pattern to existence can never be found.

Moreover, the novel returns to the image evoked here of a frozen sea. The sea is a metaphor for excess, and its freezing an attempt to bring excess within the grasp of human language and understanding which is emblematic of order and pattern. When Adele dies and Gabriel is driven, finally, to give up on the idea of order or pattern, "a frozen sea was breaking up" inside of him (232), a statement which illustrates the absolute collapse of his life's goal. The doomed image of the frozen sea is another example of Banville's ironic attempts to gesture toward the sublime which exists outside of language; attempts which he is fully aware can only everfail. The word "sea" repeatedly fails to encompass a vision of the sublime, and this very failure gives the reader the sense of the unpresentable in presentation – of excess – because of the vast distance – the infinite void, in fact – between the "word" sea and that which it seeks but

fails to stand for. The catachresis of the sea thus gives Banville's readers a sense of the limitlessness which exists beyond the limits of language. Gabriel's failed attempt to freeze reality and, in so doing, to grasp it in its entirety and describe it in numbers – another sort of language – constitutes a comment upon the impossibility of accessing the entirety of reality and the insanity of anyone who believes the attempt worth pursuing. This implies that each of Banville's scientist-protagonists is, in fact, insane and that Banville himself is fully aware of the inevitability of their failure, for each of these characters is caught up in a search for something, a search the entirely unavoidable result of which will be harsh disillusionment. The fact that the frozen sea eventually breaks apart and reverts to chaos shows that Gabriel's mathematics – his chosen method of expressing excess – must also fail to express the thing in itself.

In an epigraph to the novella *The Newton Letter*, Banville quotes Isaac Newton:

> I seem to have been only as a boy playing on the seashore, and diverting myself in now and then finding a smoother pebble or a prettier shell than ordinary, whilst the great ocean of truth lay all undiscovered before me.

The novella which follows charts the disillusionment of Banville's Newton, as viewed by a historian who hopes to write Newton's biography but, instead, finds himself growing similarly disillusioned as he comes to terms with the impossibility of accessing the thing in itself, let alone portraying it in writing. The irony of both Newton's and the narrator's quests is thus implicit in this epigraph, which is another example of Banville's awareness and expectation of failure. The child – here a figure for the man – allows his gaze to slide over the "great ocean of truth" because it is too large and incomprehensible for him to perceive fully. This constitutes a representation of the boundlessness of the infinite universe, a catachresis for incommunicable excess, before which Newton's discoveries are no more than pebbles or shells, insignificant in the grander scheme of things. The sea here, once again, in failing to encompass the entirety of that which the word "sea" is trying to stand for, allows the reader to think the unrepresentable excess which exists outside of language. Later in the novel, the narrator pictures a scene – "all rubbish, of course" (26) – in which Newton loses all his unpublished research in a fire. The loss is described as being "*nothing*" (27, emphasis in original). However, 'nothing' is described as

being "something terrible and lovely, like flame itself" due to the fact that "the nothing automatically signifies the everything" (27). It is possible that Banville is self-consciously referring to Derrida here, and the idea that words, in creating boundaries or borders, always and necessarily evoke that which they deny. Therefore, nothing evokes everything – and is therefore something, dark evokes light, and, most importantly, absence or nothingness evokes presence.

Newton's "great ocean of truth" not only symbolises excess, but also appears at the moment of death in many of Banville's novels – that is, as "the invisible ineluctable sea" which is the unperceivable, unspeakable place into which his characters disappear on their demise (*Copernicus* 225). This is consistent with Celtic traditions, in which it is believed that "the gods came to Ireland from the sea, and the sea is the way to reach the Other World" (Izarra 194). However, Nicolas Copernicus – on what he at first imagines is his deathbed – finds to his disappointment that, although he might look into this abyss, "wanting to go on," he is unable to do so and is turned back "toward the dark land" and the "waiting throng" (225). The effect of this on Nicolas is likened to that of a soldier who must turn away from a "heart-rending vision of home and love" only to face once more the horrors of war and the certainty of a violent death (225). Death, then is likened both to a journey into excess – the "invisible ineluctable sea" – as well as to a nostalgic return home. Moreover, this is not an isolated instance, as the sea often appears at the moment of death as a figure for that which cannot be said or experienced by the individual. Max Morden's death, in the final pages of *The Sea*, for example, is only obliquely mentioned in the following reference to the novel's namesake: it was "as if [he] were walking into the sea" (264). Thus his death is seen as a departure into excess; that which exists as "an absolute, a singularity, an end in itself" which the individual can neither "grasp" nor "absorb" through the faculties of reason or imagination (*The Sea* 99).

Death, in other words, provides an ironic sort of access (which the individual cannot, in fact, experience at all) which is not access at all to the thing in itself which the individual has only previously apprehended as a pre-linguistic infant. It is thus both an image of the remainder, that which cannot be articulated, and a kind of nostalgic homecoming, as the individual completes his life cycle by returning to the same state in which he started it – a state in which he has full access to the thing in itself and yet does not possess an subject position from which to view it. This irony is also articulated in Beckett's work, in which, in a similar way to Banville, death is present in a sense, but is more absent than present due to the fact that death constitutes

absence and can therefore never really be present to an experiencing subject. Death is not an action that the self can take, but is something that occurs to the self and which is characterised by the absence rather than the presence of the experiencing self. The aporetic nature of the quests of Banville's protagonists thus becomes clear, for they seek a moment in which they might apprehend their true, static self, while the ironic truth is that at such a moment the seeking self is annihilated and so cannot, in fact, experience anything at all. One is irresistibly reminded of Beckett's Murphy as he sits in his chair, bound and blindfolded in order to circumvent the murky glass of the body and communal language, and better see the self he loves – but ultimately frustrated to find that, in 'the dark', his seeking self is able to see nothing. There is something there – that is, nothing – but it is not available to his conscious mind. Murphy, like Newton and Max, seeks excess but finds that the price of finding it is the death of the self who seeks. The recurring image of the sea which appears at the moment of death in Banville's novels is a figure – or perhaps a catachresis again – for the death of selfhood which occurs in the presence of the sublime.

1.4 Beckett's Legacy

The necessity of some sort of acknowledgement, at the very least, of the similarities between Beckett and Banville (although perhaps Banville's debt to Beckett would be more appropriate here) has become abundantly clear in the preceding paragraphs. Beckett is not only one of the fathers of late modernism, a mode of writing that lies somewhere in between modern and postmodern writing, but is also a precursor to Banville, in particular, since not only are they both Irish writers, but Banville has also admitted he has a self-conscious tendency to follow Beckett as a literary antecedent rather than Joyce. For example, he acknowledges in an interview that, as an Irish writer, "you have to go into the Joycean direction or the Beckettian direction. And I go in a Beckettian direction" (d'Hoker, "Self-consciousness, Solipsism, and Storytelling" 68). There is evidence for this beyond Banville's own self-proclamation, however, since his first novel, *Nightspawn*, has been criticised – not only by academics but also by Banville himself – for being "much too much" influenced by Beckett and for struggling to deal with Beckett's "ambivalent authority" (d'Hoker 69). Nevertheless, his subsequent novels prove that he has successfully overcome any slavish indebtedness to Beckett and has created his "own singular voice", despite

a discernible Beckettian presence (d'Hoker 69). In what follows, I would like to explore this presence in Banville's work, in particular the ways in which his depictions of death and selfhood might overlap, in certain respects, with those of Beckett.

Above, I identified Banville's characters' yearning for death with a yearning for some kind of apprehension of their own essential selfhood. It is not so much death that they desire, but "a state of nothingness, non-existence" which is actually a "higher state of existence," a pure existence which is free of the effects of language and self-consciousness (d'Hoker 72). In a very similar way, Beckett's Malone and Murphy both strive for this state, which is closely associated with death. Malone, like Banville's Copernicus in the end, desires "to be dead," the "letting go, the fall, the gulf, the relapse to darkness, to nothingness, to earnestness, to home" (Beckett, *Malone Dies* 264, 194). The equation of death with home is echoed in Copernicus's "heart-rending vision of home and love" (225), which is an image of death as it passes him by, leaving him only gravely ill and in pain. Malone, furthermore, believes his death to be imminent, as is implied in the title of Beckett's novel. And he desires to die "natural […] tepid, without enthusiasm" (180). In a strikingly similar way, Adam Godley senior, in *The Infinities*, wants to "die into the light," a death that is "more or less a continuation of how things already are, a dimming, a contracting, a shrinkage so gradual that I would not register its coming to an end at last until the ending was done with" (158). In other words, both Malone and Adam desire that death should be a non-event, something akin to nothing, simply a descent into darkness or a retreat from light. Moreover, Malone states that he "shall not watch" (180) himself die, implying that in his death he will no longer be conscious of himself, just as Adam Godley does not wish to notice the coming of death. In this suggestion that intentional consciousness is lacking at the moment of death, they both acknowledge the aporia that is inherent in the desire for death as a moment in which the subject might apprehend his true self. Their desire becomes aporetic when it is made clear that the experiencing self is no longer able to be the object of its own gaze at the moment of death. Malone is aware from the outset, therefore, of that which many of Banville's protagonists tend to discover only in their final disillusionment, and his narrative is comprised of attempts to circumvent this aporia.

Malone's primary strategy for trying to "pay less heed to himself" (179) is through the narration of stories about fictional others. In this regard, he closely resembles the narrator of Banville's *Frames* Trilogy, Freddie Montgomery. However, this strategy is also doomed to fail,

as their stories, far from containing others, only become more and more about themselves. The characters they invent are mere "mechanisms of projection" or "*doppelgängers*" of themselves (d'Hoker, "Self-consciousness, Solipsism, and Storytelling" 76). Hermes, the divine narrator of *The Infinities*, also undergoes a process of identification with his inventions. This becomes clear in instances where he seems in conflict with himself regarding the use of pronouns, "I have – *he* has, *he*, I must stick to the third person" (33). Similarly, Malone begins to conflate the characters in his stories with himself, about whom he writes "with the same pencil and in the same exercise-book as about him[self]", and to whom he refers as "a little creature in my image, no matter what I say" – nor, indeed, what he has said to the contrary (208, 226).

Most of Banville's abovementioned characters pursue encounters with the sublime and the self through freezing – that is, attempting to stop the passage of time in order to reach a state of being rather than one of becoming – or death, hurtling toward their own disillusionment without a pause to reflect on their mission's inevitable failure. In a very similar way to Gabriel Swan in Banville's *Mefisto*, who wishes in a frozen moment to "stay here, to stay here forever, like this" (207), Beckett's Malone experiences a moment of stillness in which, as he puts it, "the search for myself is ended. I am buried in the world, I knew I would find my place there one day, the old world cloisters me, victorious. I am happy"(199). Like Gabriel, Malone is aware that this moment is merely "an instant of happiness" and that it would be wise to "let go" now, to be fixed in this moment forever by dying in it. Instead, however, as with Gabriel, Malone returns to "the race of men" in which "the last word" both has and hasnot yet been said (199). However, Freddie, the narrator of Banville's novel *Ghosts* – which is the second book in the *Frames* trilogy, just as *Malone Dies* is the second in Beckett's trilogy – employs a very similar tactic to Malone in that he begins to tell implausibly detailed stories about a host of imaginary characters who appear on the island on which he resides.

Thus, although both Freddie and Malone take an alternative path towards an attempt at escaping self-consciousness and coming into contact with the sublime, they too fail spectacularly, as their imaginary characters collapse further and further into identification with the narrator's self. The failure of imagination and storytelling occurs due to the fact that imagining the other does not "turn the I into an other", but rather turns "the other into an other I" (d'Hoker 78-9). Both novels, therefore, comprise "a testimony to the self's inability to transcend its boundaries and lose itself" (d'Hoker 77). In other words, in a similar way to Beckett's and

Banville's other novels, they present themselves as spectacular failures. However, despite this failure of storytelling to come anywhere near a true representation of the other (or that second other which is the essential self), the novels nevertheless "register the need to go on trying," that is, the ethical imperative in postmodern literature which both constitutes and arises from the existence of the remainder (d'Hoker 78). The narrator of Beckett's *The Unnamable* reminds us of this impossible imperative in his famous exclamation, "I can't go on in any case. But I must go on. So I'll go on" (397). Critchley calls the tendency in Beckett's work to move "between the inability to speak and the inability to be silent" and "between the impossibility of narration or representation and its necessity" a "double bind" (180, 189). Banville's work, too, participates in this double bind due to its constant self-referential questioning of "how [to] conceive of a reality sufficiently detailed, sufficiently incoherent, to accommodate all the things that are in the world", using a language in which "even the self-identity of the object is no more than a matter of insisting it is so" (*The Infinities* 207, 215). As the narrator of *The Infinities* wonders, faced with the chronic instability and self-referentiality of language, "where then may one set down a foot and say, 'here is solid ground'?" (215).

Rather like Hermes in *The Infinities*, Beckett's narrators struggle to describe their individual existence using the "words of others" (*The Unnamable* 308), which insert between the individual and the world, as well as between the subject and the self, a pane of glass "misted and smeared with the filth of years" (*Malone* 198). Also like Hermes, it is predominantly pronouns that Beckett's narrators find problematic. It is not only the conflation of the narrator with his imagined characters, as seen above, that causes difficulty for Banville's divine narrator, but also the act of referring to himself using the first-person pronoun. The pronoun I "distances and estranges" the narrator from himself, forcing him to see himself from "an external, third-person perspective" which effectively distances and "displaces the first-person perspective that it offers," so that his first-person account of himself is rendered strange and estranging and cannot ever truly be his own (Marais "A Step Towards Silence" 95). A similar scepticism towards the first-person pronoun is expressed in *The Unnamable* when the narrator meditates upon his own textuality: "I'm in words, made of words, others' words, what others" (390). Here, the narrator is iterating his displacement in language and the othering of the self which occurs when it uses the word "I." Banville's Hermes also expresses this scepticism about the reliability of pronouns – in his case, in terms of their inability to encompass the full reality of his divine experience, in which

the entire pantheon of gods "are all one even in our separateness" and about which gods "these denotations are so loose, in the context, so crude, as to be almost meaningless" (143).

Critchley writes that, in Beckett's *Trilogy*, "there is a relentless pursuit, across and by means of narrative, of that which narration cannot capture, namely the radical unrepresentability of death" (188). He goes on to quote Blanchot, speaking about the same text, who writes that "Perhaps we are not in the presence of a book, but perhaps it is a question of much more than a book: the pure approach of a movement from whence all books come" (189). Both of the above observations refer to intimations of the remainder in Beckett's work. In fact, Critchley suggests that Beckett's novels are "performative enactments" of excess, the understanding of which "would betray the idiom of Beckett's writing" because, as Adorno states, "understanding it can only mean understanding its unintelligibility, concretely reconstructing the meaning of the fact that it has no meaning" (195, qtd in Critchley 177). Meaning, therefore, in the work of Beckett (and, I argue, in the work of Banville), is the expression of the absence of meaning; an expression which, far from precluding us from further interpretation, works upon the critic as the remainder works upon the author, so that we are driven to further, even to infinite, interpretation of the work. We continue to speak about Beckett because it is the nature of his work to negate meaning. This is one of the ways in which Beckett's work enacts the idea of the remainder, in that its interpretation is never complete, and for that reason the work demands infinite interpretation. The remainder is embedded in the reader's experience of the work in such a way that the novel's form allows themto experience excess. Critchley argues that Beckett's exploration of death as inconceivable, as occurring in an "impossible time" (193), as being a space of emptiness into which the narrator must tell endless stories of others who are actually other selves, is one of the ways in which Beckett does more than merely gesture toward excess, but in fact gives the reader an experience of it while reading. Banville, too, depicts death as inconceivable and unutterable, as occurring out of time or in spite of time, and as an emptiness which the storyteller tries and fails to fill with tales which express something. Banville's narrator of *The Newton Letter* muses that meaning is perhaps found "not in the lines themselves [but] in the spaces between, where an extraordinary and pitiful tension throbs," and that "so much is unsayable: all the important things" (59, 95). Both writers attempt to present the unpresentable in presentation, and both writers fail – but spectacularly – in order to express the foolishness in

imagining " that anything could be completed" when "everything endlessly extends and unravels, world upon world" or, indeed, word upon word (Banville, *The Infinities* 169).

There is one phrase in particular that echoes through Beckett's work and Banville's, and which is utterly simple but gives a supreme intimation of the remainder, of the writer's imperative to write, and of the ultimate failure of the work to be sufficient. This is the phrase "and yet." The iterations and re-iterations of these two words are numerous in Banville. For example, in *The Infinities*, the narrator thinks to himself that:

> The eye, … the eye makes the horizon. It is a thing he has often
> heard his father say, cribbed from someone else, he supposes. The
> child on the train was a sort of horizon to him and he a sort of
> horizon to the child only because each considered himself to be the
> centre of something – to be, indeed, that centre itself – and that is
> the simple solution to the so-called mystery. And yet. (9)

And, in Beckett, "yes, it was an orange Pomeranian, the less I think of it the more certain I am. And yet" (*Molloy* 12). In both of the above examples, the words appear in connection with a story told within the story in order to show that the story, any story, is not – and cannot be – completed, for there is no way to express the entirety of its reality in language. Adam Godley's digression regarding the child whom he sees through the window of the trainoffers a "simple solution" to the great mystery of subjectivity. However, this impossibility is quickly qualified by that small utterance, "and yet," which intimates that this is not all there is to it. In fact, infinite supplementation is necessary because there exists a remainder which cannot be expressed in language. In Beckett's case, the phrase occurs in the middle of the story where, as is typical of Molloy's narration, the storyteller becomes suddenly unsure of the story's details and begins to offer alternatives for them which may or may not be more plausible. Both of these passages express the unknowability of other lives, and give the reader a sense of that which is unrepresentable – through silence in the case of Banville, where "and yet" occurs at the end of a section, and through the many alternative and inconclusive possibilities provided after the words in Molloy's narrative.

1.5 Conclusion

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This chapter, firstly, has established some of the theoretical context behind Banville's work. In particular, it has emphasised the writer's imperative to write and the simultaneous inevitability of their failure to present the thing in itself in narrative. One way in which Banville, cognisant of his limitations, responds to this imperative, is through an attempt to present death in his novels. Death, as a moment which occurs outside of language, is utterly unrepresentable, and yet the attempt to do so allows Banville's novels to gesture towards excess and confronts the reader with the fact that something exists which cannot be described in language. In the next chapter, I attempt to unpack the roots of the attempt to present excess in literature, and suggest that they lie in literary Romanticism.

CHAPTER 2: A ROMANTIC SENSIBILITY

> The surface of the pond smoothed down its ruffled silks. Tiny
> translucent flies were weaving an invisible net among the reflected
> branches of the elm, and skimmers dashed out from the shallows
> on legs so delicate they did not more than dent the surface of the
> water. Myriad and profligate life! (Banville, *Kepler* 108)

Such passages as the one above abound in Banville and prompt inevitable comparisons with the Romantic poets, whose reverence for the natural and disillusionment with the human world strike a very similar note. A comparison between Banville and the Romantic poets leads to the question of whether Banville, as a postmodern writer, is possessed of a Romantic sensibility – or whether some Romantic poets might rather have been possessed of a postmodern sensibility. In the following pages, I will discuss these questions and offer a comparison of Banville's treatment of what I consider to be Romantic themes and their treatment in some of the British poetry of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, primarily as it is portrayed by William Wordsworth and Isaiah Berlin. These include a certain presentation of childhood and the natural world, an attitude towards memory and the sublime, as well as the presence or absence of pathetic fallacy. I will begin my comparison with a close reading of Wordsworth's *Ode* – as an exemplar of Romantic thought – alongside certain of Banville's novels, before moving on to compare pre-Romantic, Romantic and Banvillean views of the natural world.

2.1 Romantic Perspectives

> Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings – William
> Wordsworth (*Lyrical Ballads* 307)

It is necessary to define what is meant by a Romantic sensibility, and therefore a brief description follows of the major perspectives shared by the British Romantic poets of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Firstly, their attitude was one which "favoured innovation over traditionalism" in all aspects of their art (Abrams 177). Romantic poets attempted to find new means of expression due to what they perceived as the lack of scenes from

"common life" and language "really used by men" in the poetry of the preceding century (Wordsworth, *Lyrical Ballads* 289). Despite this declaration by Wordsworth, another predilection of – particularly – the later Romantic poets is the use of symbolism and mythology, as well as the introduction of elements of the supernatural (Abrams 177). Regardless of whether the subject of the text was mythological, supernatural, or found in everyday rural life, Wordsworth's famous injunction – that poetry should be "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" (*Lyrical Ballads* 307) and, in particular, should impart the emotion of the poet to the reader without the interference of artificial rules and conventions – is a common sentiment underpinning poetry written in the Romantic era. Perhaps as a result, the subject of Romantic poetry, with a few exceptions, tends to be the solitary or even solipsistic figure of the poet himself. A further important feature shared by most – if not all – of the poets under discussion, is their tendency to dwell upon the natural world as a subject for their poetry, a natural world described with an "accuracy and sensuous nuance unprecedented in earlier writers" (Abrams 178) and providing an important backdrop to human thought and feeling. Finally, there is a particular perspective on art and politics which sets the British Romantic poets apart from their predecessors: they saw the "infinite social promise" of the French Revolution as proof that they would live to see a better world full of possibility (Abrams 179). Their disillusionment with human affairs after the failure of the revolution, was an inevitable outcome of this idealistic hopefulness. Despite this disappointment, however, their view of the human subject was of a creature with limitless potential, particularly with regard to the faculty of the imagination; nothing less than "infinitude" can satisfy or limit humanity, according to the Romantic sensibility (Wordsworth, *The Prelude* 6.170). The problem, in Critchley's view, to which Romanticism attempts to find a solution, is that of "how to reconcile the values of the Enlightenment […] with the disenchantment of the world that those values seem to bring about" (100); how, in other words, to find meaning in a world becoming increasingly devoid of religious answers to philosophical questions. For the Romantics, the means to arrive at a solution to this problem is to be found in the form of art, and in particular in poetry. This optimistic, positive view of their artistic endeavour is, for Critchley, "the naïveté of romanticism" (100).

Despite their alleged philosophical naïveté, the Romantics had a remarkably clear view of their own limitations as writers, and, rebelling against the neoclassical tendency to produce highly formal, classically beautiful work, attempted instead to produce work "beyond finite

human possibility" which, in fact, was not only aware of but gloried in its imperfection so that the artist's inevitable failure "attests the grandeur of his aim" (Abrams 179). Their philosophy regarding the artistic endeavour is summarised by Isaiah Berlin: "I have to convey something which is inexpressible and I have to use expression […] I know in advance that I shall not succeed and cannot succeed, and therefore all I can do is to get nearer and nearer in some asymptotic approach" (118). This sense of the artist's awareness of the inevitable failure of the work to represent reality, coupled with the necessity of attempting to gesture toward that which cannot be said, strikes a very familiar note. In fact, it would seem as though the Romantic poets were possessed of an almost Beckettian attitude toward their art; an attitude which states, "no matter what I say I always have to leave three dots at the end" (Berlin 118).

2.2 Nostalgia

There was a time… – William Wordsworth ("Ode" 1)

The first similarity between Banville and Wordsworth that I would like to discuss is a brand of nostalgia in which childhood is viewed not simply as a time of innocence and purity, but as an "age of authenticity" (*Shroud* 69), as Banville's Axel Vander puts it, in which the subject (who cannot yet even truly be called an 'I') in its pre-linguistic state has unmediated access to excess. Nostalgia is a typically Romantic phenomenon which, as I will demonstrate below, results from excess. It is a desire to 'go home', a desire which is intensely ironic because it can never be satisfied due to the fact that the longed for 'home' no longer exists – or never really existed in the first place – and the 'I' who would return there is no longer the same individual as the 'I' who was there before. In other words, it is a desire to crawl back into the womb, into that pre-linguistic, prelapsarian state in which the individual last felt comfortable with their position in the universe. The irony, of course, exists in that "your relation to the universe is inexpressible, but you must nevertheless express it" (Berlin 122). Romantic nostalgia, then, is heavily ironic. As Berlin notes, if one with a Romantic sensibility were somehow granted the "home" they seek, the harmony and perfection of it, they would not take it because it is "in principle, by definition, something to which an approach can be made but which cannot be seized, because that is the

nature of reality" (122). This home, then, is very much akin to excess, insofar as it is that which is intangible and unattainable.

The different perspectives on nostalgia found in Banville and Wordsworth become clear in a comparison of a passage from *The Book of Evidence*, in which Freddie describes his return to his childhood home in Ireland, with Wordsworth's poems "Tintern Abbey" and the "Ode," both of which describe a similar revisiting. Wordsworth's visits are happy occasions in which he feels grateful for the memories which sustained him throughout his absence, despite his feeling of nostalgia. He does not find the place changed so much, as he has grown from a child for whom nature was "all in all" ("Tintern Abbey" 76) to a man who has felt a sense of "fallings from us, vanishings" ("Ode" 149). For Wordsworth, then, the scene remains the same, but his adult sensibility longs to return to that of a child for whom enjoyment of these scenes "had no need of a remoter charm, / by thought supplied, or any interest / unborrowed from the eye" ("Tintern Abbey" 82-4). The child, in other words, enjoyed the charms of the natural world directly, with unmediated immediacy, while the adult must be contented with a perception which is mediated not only by his memories, but also his linguistic conception of the world.

Banville's Freddie, on the other hand, finds the city itself – which is unnamed but resembles Dublin –much changed, so that he "hardly recognized" the scenes before him (*Evidence* 30). "Something dreadful had happened" to his city, in which "the very air itself seemed changed" (*Evidence* 30). He is bombarded by signs of industrialisation, such as large buildings of steel and glass and the replacement of parks by parking lots, and the presence of beggars, drunks and punks (30). When he reaches his childhood home itself, although he does feel an "involuntary spasm of recognition," it is overlaid by a feeling of profound strangeness, as though "everything around [him] had been whipped away and replaced instantly with an exact replica" to form a "substitute world" in which he simultaneously feels comfortably at home and profoundly out of place (*Evidence* 43). "Home," Freddie muses, "is always a surprise" – it is a place "strange, and yet known, too, like a place in […] a dream" (*Evidence* 45, 55). This confluence of the strange and the known is reminiscent of Freud's uncanny or *das Unheimliche*, which he defines as "something familiar or old-established in the mind that has been estranged by the process of repression" (qtd in Tatar 169). The uncanny provokes dread, moreover, because it is both "strange and familiar" (Tatar 169) at the same time. So it is that 'home,' in Banville, evokes a sense of dread due to its uncanny nature.

The above examples illustrate that both Banville and Wordsworth display an awareness of the ironic nature of nostalgia and of the fact that one can never really be 'at home,' for home is not really a place but an idea towards or away from which one is always moving, and at which one never arrives. This is illustrated, again, in Freddie's assertion that an "essential part" of himself is always absent from his familial home (*Evidence* 56). However, the two authors treat nostalgia in rather different ways. Wordsworth's return home is still joyous, even if it is not quite a retrieval, for he is no longer as he once was and thus perceives that which is before him as a landscape which has changed. Freddie's return, on the other hand, is ironic in the sense that it is not he who has changed so much as the city, which has suffered the effects of industrialisation, and insofar as home is a place in which he has, in fact, never been sufficiently present. We might conclude, therefore, that nostalgia is a desire for infinitude or excess, for that which is forever outside of the text and which has both anteceded it and will supersede it. Furthermore, the desire for excess is coupled with a craving for that which – finally and definitively – situates the self in an understandable universe: a home.

2.3 Anti-*Bildung*

The child is father of the man – William Wordsworth ("The Rainbow" 7)

Another trend in Banville's writing, which could be the result of a Romantic sensibility and nostalgia, is the tendency of his protagonists to undergo a kind of anti-*Bildung*over the course of their lives, in which they move not from ignorance to enlightenment, but from pure knowledge towards confusion, ignorance and forgetfulness. In RudigerImhof'swords, there is a shift"from the certainty of knowing the vivid thing to a loss of that certainty, when [they approach] reality through language" (71). Romantic poets, in a manner both similar and profoundly different, elevate the state of childhood into an idealised period of instinctive knowing which is lost to the adult; an idealised 'home' to which their fondest, impossible desire is to return.Wordsworth sums it up well when he writes that, "the child is father of the man," insofar as they have a more immediate perception of the world around them while the adult observes only "something that is gone" and mourns the loss of "the visionary gleam" ("The Rainbow" 7, "Ode" 53, 56).

In "Ode," Wordsworth's child sees the world "appareled in celestial light, / the glory and the freshness of a dream" (4-5) in much the same way as Banville's Nicolas sees "the thing itself, the vivid thing" when he beholds the linden tree outside his window (*Copernicus* 3).Wordsworth goes on to use a sustained metaphor in which the child's birth, life and death are compared to the rising and setting of the sun. The image is not entirely neutral, but also carries with it religious overtones which liken the soul's sojourn on earth to a brief hiatus from its eternal existence in heaven. We can see this in the poem's description of the child's birth in the fifth stanza:

> Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting:
> The Soul that rises with us, our life's star,
>   Hath had elsewhere its setting,
>   And cometh from afar
>   Not in entire forgetfulness,
>   And not in utter nakedness,
> But trailing clouds of glory do we come
>   From God, who is our home:
> Heaven lies about us in our infancy! (59-67)

Alas, however, the infant who must "daily travel further from the East" (72) on his journey through life, all too soon becomes a man and "perceives [the glory] die away, / and fade into the light of common day" (77-8). This brings us back to the speaker's melancholic injunction in the first stanzas, when he laments that "the things which I have seen I now can see no more" (9) and "that there hath passed away a glory from the earth" (19).

Nicolas, with rather less religious imagery, ceases to apprehend the world as it is and begins, instead, to feel more and more as though a part of his self has been sundered from him and, like a "severed limb", has left an imprint of itself which causes him to mourn nostalgically, like Wordsworth, for some indefinable lost thing without which he cannot feel at home in this world. Instead, he is continually misplaced and out of place, imagining his other "better self" existing in an idyllic "elsewhere" (*Copernicus* 16-17). Both Wordsworth's child and Banville's child soon lose the ability to perceive the thing in itself, the glory of the natural world. Furthermore, both writers figure the growing child and grown man as a mere actor.

Wordsworth's "little actor's … whole vocation" may be "endless imitation" ("Ode" 104-9), just as many of Banville's protagonists feel themselves to be mere actors on the world's stage. Axel Vander is just one example of this trend in Banville, that is, a character whose past and identity are, in fact, a fiction of his own devising as he struts "the world's stage, making, in all senses of the saying, a name for [himself]" (*Shroud* 242). This reference to the world as a stage may well be an allusion to Shakespeare's famous lines, but in fact Wordsworth's "little actor" is much closer in essence to Shakespeare's than is Banville's. This is simply because both Shakespeare and Wordsworth presuppose an authentic and true self existing behind the actor, whereas Banville – as I have shown in the previous chapter and will discuss further in the next – remains sceptical about the existence of any sort of essential self. Thus, although both Banville and Wordsworth employ the metaphor of man as actor, they do so with rather different aims and effects. Banville uses this metaphor to question the authenticity and indeed the very existence of the essential self, whereas Wordsworth describes the child as an actor who imitates the man he will all too soon become, as "the years … bring the inevitable yoke" of adulthood ("Ode" 130). In the process of growing up, the young Copernicus learns, as Wordsworth's Child does, that "everything had a name" (Banville 3). In a similar way, even in infancy the boy learns to "fit his tongue" to the dialogues of adult life (Wordsworth, "Ode"98). Dialogues, I must note, which have already been spoken by others. Wordsworth's child is a "mighty prophet! Seer blest!" who instinctively knows truths which "we are toiling all our lives to find" ("Ode" 116, 118). By contrast, the young Copernicus, having seen "the vivid thing … soon forgot about all these enigmatic matters, and learned to talk as others talked" (Banville 4). Having thus learned the language of others, the child is now subordinate to the burdens of language. Copernicus labours under Christian doctrine, while Wordsworth's Child feels the weight of custom "heavy as frost, and deep almost as life" ("Ode" 134).

Later, in moments of contact with the sublime in nature, the man – both Wordsworth's and Banville's – might be afforded "intimations" of infinity, that is, Wordsworth's 'Immortality' and Banville's "far finer place" (*Copernicus 17)*. It is significant to note that, in both cases, such intimations of the sublime – for I would argue that it is indeed the sublime or excess to which each author refers here – occur in the presence of nature and, in these specific examples, at the onset of spring. Nicolas has his near-apprehensions of sublimity in "green April weather, in the enormous wreckage of clouds" and, interestingly, in the "aetherialsplendours of High Mass"

(17), an occasion of religious worship in which humankind attempts to come close to that which is infinite and unknown. Wordsworth's "Ode," moreover, is also set in a springtime pastoral scene, complete with the singing of birds, bounding lambs, pipers and, in fact, all the "gladness of the May" (35). Nicolas, in his naïveté, still hopes that such moments might bring about a union of what he perceives to be his separated selves, and spends his time waiting for this happy moment, meanwhile enduring the indignities and tribulations of the world. Wordsworth's speaker, on the other hand, attempts to find "strength in what remains behind" (186), namely the consolations of memory, faith and philosophy.

In the above examples, we see that both Banville's and Wordsworth's characters had unmediated access to "the thing in itself" in their infancy, and were therefore in possession of pure knowledge at that time. However, as the subject grows older this certainty falls away, until the adult finds that he can only view reality through the imperfect lens of language, and, furthermore, cannot be certain of any knowledge in a world that is in constant flux and offers no stable referent upon which to base any certain knowledge. Thus the loss of Wordsworth's visionary gleam or Banville's thing in itself occurs as a result of the inability of the linguistic sign to establish a one-to-one correspondence between itself and its referent.

2.4 Problems and Consolations

Thoughts that lie too deep for tears – William Wordsworth
("Ode" 206)

Let us turn, now, from the problems caused by Banville's language scepticism and Wordsworth's valorisation of infancy – in which the child is shown to have a more intimate connection with the world than the adult– to examine what, if any, solutions or consolations are offered to the reader. In this regard, *The Infinities* provides another interesting parallel not merely with Wordsworth's "Ode," but also with "Lines Written a few Miles above Tintern Abbey," in a memory Ursula has of an episode from her childhood. Ursula's husband is the previously mentioned Adam Godley senior, who lies in a comatose state for the majority of the text. In typically Banvillean fashion, Ursula is trapped in her own subjectivity and is frustratingly unable to relate to the other characters in the novel. Furthermore, she has a drinking problem which results in impatience and dismissive attitude towards her from her family. Prior to her recounting

of the memory, Ursula and her daughter-in-law, Helen, are engaged in a typically Banvillean scene of sadly comic, covertly hostile mutual misunderstanding. The memory, however, prompts a seismic shift in the atmosphere, as Ursula suddenly begins to make an effort – not remotely successful – at behaving kindly towards Helen. This shift in attitude – although it is shrugged off by Helen as the ravings of a drunk – in itself shows a marked similarity to the attitude of the speaker in "Tintern Abbey," who ascribes to his memories of natural beauty a certain enrichment or education of his moral being, and who says that these memories cause him to perform "nameless, unremembered acts/ of kindness and of love" (5-6). Ursula's memory also returns her to a natural scene where,

> Once, when she was a girl, in some place, she cannot remember
> where exactly, a splendid park or the grounds of some grand
> house, [she] reached up on tiptoe at a little moss-covered wall and
> saw into an enclosed garden, with masses of flowers and flowering
> fruit trees, exotic shrubs, climbing vines, all crowding there
> together in the sun, profligate and gay. Now in rosy retrospect this
> seems one of the sweetest moments of her life, replete with all the
> promise of the future, and she keeps it stowed jealously at the back
> of her memory, like a jewel box in a secret drawer. If she were to
> return there today she is sure she would not be able to see over the
> wall, it would have grown higher, somehow, or she would have
> become smaller, although she would know the garden was there,
> abundant and glorious as ever, waiting for others to come and
> glimpse it, and be happy. (244-5)

Ursula's surety that the sight of the enclosed garden would not reveal itself in the same way to her adult gaze reminds us of Wordsworth's realisation that, even though he is now viewing the same scenes he had as a boy, "the things which I have seen I now can see no more" ("Ode" 9). Ursula's happiness at the projecteddelight of others at the sight of the enclosed garden is also echoed in Wordsworth's poem: "the fullness of your bliss, I feel – I feel it all" (42). Ursula's final musing in the quotation above might not, however, refer to the happiness of others, but to her own happiness in knowing that the garden exists, despite the fact that she cannot see it. Wordsworth, too, finds consolation in the thought that, although he has "relinquished" the delight of living beneath nature's "more habitual sway" – that is, he can no longer connect directly with the natural world as he did as a boy – he nevertheless loves all that he sees and,

rather than mere feelings, entertains "thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears" ("*Ode*" 196-7,209).

In "Tintern Abbey" this philosophical appreciation of the sublime in nature is developed further into a "presence that disturbs me with the joy / of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime / of something far more deeply interfused" (94-7). The speaker does, however, admit that it is not the pure thing in itself that his adult gaze perceives when looking upon the natural world, but that "all the mighty world of eye and ear" both perceive and "half-create" that which they behold (106-7). This implies that it is the palimpsest of present and remembered perception which bring joy. Things, in other words, "are as they are, not because they are so independent of me, but because I make them so" (Berlin 103). Consolation, therefore, is not only found in a vicarious enjoyment of the happiness of the next generation and in the philosophical mind of the adult, but also in the character's recourse to memory, those "shadowy recollections" provide "the fountain light of all our day" and "a master light of all our seeing" ("Ode" 155-8). This "master light"providesa perspective from which one is able to gain an intimation of the sublime. Through memory, too, one has a much-needed glimpse of "that immortal sea" (169) which is the infinite space, or heaven, from which the human soul comes at birth and to which it returns after death. This heaven, I would argue, is the infinite space of excess.

The consolation to be found in memory – Banville's "jewel box in a secret drawer" (*Infinities* 245)– and, in particular, memories pertaining to the natural world, is a theme which runs throughout much of Wordsworth's work, and is particularly prevalent in "Tintern Abbey."As we have already seen in the sections above dealing with nostalgia, there is a common trope here in which the speaker or character is looking back – or imagining the act of looking back – upon a scene last glimpsed in his or her younger days. Just as Ursula, in her imagination, cannot see over the garden wall on her return – cannot, that is, any longer perceive the thing in itself – the adult in Wordsworth's poem can no longer perceive the scene with the same immediacy as he did as a child. This despite the fact that, in a literal sense, Wordsworth's speaker can "hear these waters" and "behold these steep and lofty cliffs" ("Tintern Abbey" 2-3) which Ursula can only envisage "in her mind's eye." Wordsworth's speaker also boasts that he can enjoy the scene "not only with the sense of present pleasure", but also with a sort of triple pleasure encompassing the present, the memory of his happy childhood days when "like a roe [he] bounded o'er the mountains," and the thought that "in this moment there is life and food for

future years" (63-9). Even though Ursula cannot physically return to the garden in her memory, it is still something to be kept for future pleasure, moral instruction and consolation – just as Wordsworth's speaker has made use of his memories. He, too, admits to having relied on the memory of this place to provide "tranquil restoration" when he found himself "in lonely rooms" in towns and cities, as well as to enable him to engage in "nameless, unremembered, acts / of kindness and of love" ("Tintern Abbey" 31, 26, 35-6).

It is interesting to note that the sight of landscapes from his childhood have, for him, future value despite the fact that he is so changed that he "cannot paint what then [he] was" when he explored this place as a child and perceived the natural world as "an appetite: a feeling and a love, / that had no need of a remoter charm, / by thought supplied, or any interest / unborrowed from the eye" ("Tintern Abbey" 76-7, 81-4). That is, the child had an intimate experience of the thing in itself with no linguistic or socio-cultural concepts clouding his view, an experience which the adult cannot match, but the memory of which provides him with sustenance, consolation and a tendency to behave in a morally good manner. In a similar way, Ursula's memory encourages her to behave towards Helen in a kinder and more understanding way, and provides her with consolation in her later years.

2.5 Nature's Guest or Nature's prisoner?

Trailing clouds of glory –William Wordsworth ("Ode" 64)

One way in which the intimacy that the child experiences with nature might be explained or examined further is through Wordsworth's image of the child as having come to earth from a heaven which he is gradually made to forget as he grows older, but of which he is given small glimpses – or intimations – through the natural beauty of the world. To Wordsworth, the child does not belong to this world, but is rather its "foster-child" or, more disturbingly, an imprisoned "inmate man" ("Ode" 4). Overall, though, Wordsworth's natural world acts as a benevolent guide and friend, the typical "mistress nature […] from which we ought not detach ourselves" and which is found in Romantic poetry and prose (Berlin 88). Banville's protagonists share a feeling of being out of place in this world, as though they do not really belong but are interlopers. Freddie Montgomery goes so far as to imagine the presence of humanity on this planet as a

"cosmic blunder" by virtue of which humans were somehow delivered to earth by mistake and were "meant for another planet altogether, with other arrangements, and other laws, and other, grimmer skies" (*Evidence* 26-7). Wordsworth's child, in the "Ode", finds comfort in the "pleasures of her own" with which the foster-mother earth "with no unworthy aim" attempts to console her "foster-child" and help him to "forget the glories he hath known, and that imperial palace whence he came" ("Ode" 77-84). In a similar way, Nicolas Copernicus finds comfort in such "enduring things, brutish and bloody and warm" as a campfire, a mule and a rat; it is among such earthly things that Nicolas's "essential self assembles a makeshift home" upon this undoubtably "alien shore" (*Copernicus* 92). In *Shroud*, Axel Vander wonders if a certain pattern of thought is unique to him:

> I wonder if other people feel as I do, seeming never to be wholly
> present wherever I happen to be, seeming not so much a person as
> a contingency, misplaced and adrift in time. My true source and
> destination are always elsewhere, although where exactly that
> elsewhere might be I do not know; perhaps it is in childhood, that
> age of authenticity the scenes of which I can summon up more and
> more vividly the farther away from them I get. (69)

In these lines Axel provides a summary of what we might call Banville's perspective on the Wordsworthian idea of man as being not truly of this finite earth, but rather as part of something infinite and excessive, the ends of which he cannot see. Banville, as one might expect, has a rather darker perspective than Wordsworth's image of the glory of heaven and benign earthly nature. Where Wordsworth's natural world acts as a kind foster-parent to the growing man, Banville's seems indifferent (at its worrying best) or even hostile to his human characters.

Helen, in *The Infinities*, gives us a good example of this attitude toward nature that is commonly seen in Banville's characters. She finds herself with another character, Roddy, in a grove in a wood where there is some sort of Catholic holy site. The experience they have here is not, however, dominated by the Christian god, but rather by the Greek god Zeus, who possesses Roddy in an attempt to be closer to the beautiful Helen. Prior to this, Helen muses upon the natural world, noting "how impassive it is, how indifferent," but then she seems to change her mind as she realises that we cannot call natural things indifferent, as this "would mean that they could be otherwise" (254). Hermes, the narrator, then adds that nature "has no purpose, except

perhaps that of not being us" (254). In this introspective passage Banville seems to be using his characters to express what is perhaps his own scepticism regarding the linguistic medium. Firstly, Helen's observation that the signifier "indifferent" is insufficient to describe the attitude of inanimate things to human beings highlights not only the inability of language to describe real experiences, but also the play of *differánce* on the mechanics of language – that is, that every word only has meaning insofar as it has an opposite to negate. Furthermore, we only become aware of ourselves as individuals when we come up against something which we are compelled to designate 'other:' "you become aware of the self only when there is some kind of resistance […] as that which is obtruded upon by some kind of recalcitrant reality," that is, the natural world (Berlin 108). Therefore, if we call nature indifferent, we are implying that at certain times it might be something other than indifferent, that the trees might "turn and look at them, that the creepers could reach out like hands and clutch at their ankles, that the briars could sweep down and lash them across their backs like scourges" (Banville, *Infinities* 254). Of course, this is impossible, and so it is clear that the word "indifference", evoking, as it does, its antonyms "heeding" or "caring", and implying that nature might be either indifferent or heedful by turns, is incapable of describing this attitude. Moreover, Helen does not provide us with an alternate word, either because a more appropriate word does not exist or because it is at this point that Hermes resumes his narration, breaking into her thoughts. Hermes, however, does tell us – from nothing less than a godly perspective – that nature serves no purpose, has no initiative other than to provide something against which humans might define themselves. In other words, it is the inanimate world which acts as an opposite against which we might define ourselves as human objects by a similar play of *differánce*.

This concludes my reading of Wordsworth's "Ode" in comparison with the works of Banville. The discussion has revealed that the two writers share many similar attitudes, particularly towards art, the natural world and childhood or infancy. Both subscribe to a highly ironic form of nostalgia for something which can never be attained or returned to. In Wordsworth, however, this nostalgia functions as a sort of consolation for the losses suffered in attaining adulthood; while for Banville it serves as a gesture toward excess. Connected with nostalgia is a valorisation of childhood which places the child above the adult – insofar as the former is able to commune directly with the natural world in a way that the latter is no longer able to do since his acquisition of language and situation within culture and society. As a result,

both Wordsworth's poems and Banville's novels often constitute an anti-*Bildung* in which, instead of advancing from ignorance to knowledge, the characters start out enlightened and move slowly into the dark. Wordsworth's figures, however, find consolation in the form of memory and philosophical thought, whereas Banville tends to subscribe to a more pessimistic point of view in which consolation or resolution is conspicuously absent. In the sections that follow, I attempt to take a closer look at the differential relationship between the natural world and humankind, and the ways in which Banville's language scepticism results in a problematisation of this divide.

2.6 The Human as Opposed to the Natural

The tendency to define oneself as human in contrast to the natural world in fact predates the Romantics. Kant defined humankind as being different from nature insofar as individuals had the power to make choices, while other things merely followed the "law of causality" without taking any part in their own destiny or having any sort of free will (Berlin 81). Nature, whether that be "animal or inanimate or vegetable" (81), is insensate: it might strive, but it does not have any awareness of itself striving – as humankind does. In other words, it is the conscious will which "distinguishes human beings from other objects in nature," and this is a very important distinction for Kant, who posited free will as the ultimate good, as well as a necessary condition for the existence of morality (Berlin 81, 83). Banville's Helen, too, notices the will-lessness of nature in the passage quoted above. Like the trees and vines in Helen's experience – which cannot truly be called insensate when they do not have the option of being sensate, we cannot call moral 'good acts' which were carried out through no choice of the doer. A person can only be said to act morally, according to Kant, if he also has the option to behave immorally but instead chooses to perform the good action (Berlin 84).

The natural world, on the other hand, "is indifferent to man, nature herself is amoral [and] destroys us in the most ruthless and hideous fashion, and that is what makes us particularly aware of the fact that we are not part of her" (Berlin 93). Humans have will, and therefore the capacity to act either morally or immorally, whereas that which is not human on this earth is simply amoral by contrast. If there is no free will and human actions are determined by chains of events just as the natural world is, then we exist in a form of "slavery at the hands of nature" and

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it follows, therefore, that we can no longer distinguish ourselves from nature by saying that we have free will and it does not (Berlin 84). For this reason, the pre-Romantic Kant saw nature not as a nurse or guide, but "at worst an enemy, at best simply neutral stuff which one moulds" (Berlin 88). Banville, whose natural world certainly suffers a certain amount of 'moulding' at the hands (or rather, in the eyes) of his protagonists, holds a similar view.

Wordsworth's natural world, as we have seen, also suffers from a certain amount of perceptual bias on the part of the observer, but in other respects his portrayal of the natural world contradicts that of Kant. Where nature, for Kant, is amoral and will-less, in Wordsworth it acts as a sort of moral guide. So it is that Wordsworth's nature works to "frame / a favoured Being, from his earliest dawn," often employing "severer interventions" in order to form the growing child into an adult who is morally good ("The Prelude" 1:363-370). Wordsworth goes on to provide an example of an episode in which the natural world employed such an 'intervention' against him – the moment of boyish mischief in which the speaker of "The Prelude" steals a boat and rows out onto the lake. The act is one of "stealth / and troubled pleasure" ("The Prelude" 1:386-7), since the boy is well aware of the duplicity of his action, and, soon enough, the natural world is seen to chastise him thoroughly through the frightening appearance of a cliff between the boy and the sky which, "like a living thing, / strode after" him, so that he fled back to the bank (1:411-2). Wordsworth offers this episode as an example of the way nature acted as a loving parent to him, offering comfort but also chastisement in a manner which seems both willed and well-intentioned toward the human subject. He concludes by addressing the natural world with gratitude:

> By day or star-light thus from my first dawn
> Of Childhood didst Thou intertwine for me
> The passions that build up our human Soul,
> Not with the mean and vulgar works of Man,
> But with high objects, with enduring things
>   ("The Prelude" 1:432-6)

Such an optimistic, possibly naïve conception of the natural world – one typically found in Romantic thought – does not much resemble the indifferent or hostile natural world which we find in Banville. However, there is something similar in the passage quoted above in which Ursula's childhood memory prompts her to act more morally towards Helen. Moreover, I have

argued in this chapter that Banville and Wordsworth share a type of nostalgia, the glorification of the child, as well as a tendency to dwell on scenes from nature, but Banville's attitude proves to be of a more pessimistic bent.

To complicate matters, humankind exists both within and outside the natural world, for the body is natural, but that indefinable and immortal soul – for want of a better word – of which humankind is possessed – and which is particularly noticeable in the child – is not of this earth, as we have seen in both Wordsworth and Banville. Kant's definition of sensate and willed man against insensate and unwilled nature is problematised in Banville's *Frames* Trilogy. In *The Book of Evidence*, Freddie commits the atrocious crime of killing a woman – not to mention of stealing a valuable artwork – but the language he uses to describe the act implies that he did so merely because he was determined by external factors, or naturally, rather than by any act of will. His attitude to his actions is summed up in a dream he has, in which he chews on the "ripped-out sternum" of a "possibly human creature" and feels, as he does so, "an underlying sensation of enforced yet horribly pleasurable transgression" (*Evidence* 54). One question is whether or not the fact that his actions were determined rather than willed exonerates him from blame, and whether, in forming a narrative which questions the existence of free will, Banville intends us to feel something other than censure toward Freddie's actions. Another question is whether this lack of free will destroys the Kantian distinction between man and the natural world, at least when it comes to this character. Is Freddie, in other words, something rather more than human, or less; is he a part of the natural world, which may be defined by its lack of will, agency and sentience?

Freddie narrates his own story in the first person, in the style of a confession in court. From the outset he likens himself in his prison cell to a rare beast in a cage, something to be ogled at and feared by humanity at large. Thus he separates himself from the general populace early on, and aligns himself rather with the natural world. However, immediately thereafter this separation is undermined, as he describes members of the public as "clawing each other" and "showing their teeth" in an animalistic display of aggression (*Evidence* 3). As for his descriptions of himself, they vary from the animal – "beast, cold blooded and cruel" – to a fantasy of a "cultured killer" who is elegant and civilised (*Evidence* 5). He and his fellow prisoners are, moreover, "not exactly men anymore," but neither are they beasts. They are much more tamely compared to the bleak "strip of stubbly grass and one tree" visible from Freddie's

cell – a scene at once natural, will-less and pathetic (*Evidence* 7). Man, in general, he supposes to be "a sick animal, an insane animal," whose occasional acts of kindness cannot be explained, since brutality is more aligned with man's animal nature (*Evidence* 49). Freddie himself does not attempt to mitigate his own guilt, and in fact refers to it repeatedly. Several times he alludes to his need for atonement or pardon through various means; not least of which is the testimony itself, despite his initial denial of its being any sort of "apologia, or even a defense" (16) of his actions. Nevertheless, and in a rather contradictory manner, he continually asserts his lack of agency and posits his reality as a deterministic one:

> I used to believe, like everyone else, that I was determining the
> course of my own life, according to my own decisions, but
> gradually, as I accumulated more and more past to look back on, I
> realised that I had done the things I did because I could do no
> other. (*Evidence* 15-16)

Regardless of the absence of free will, Freddie wishes "to claim full responsibility for [his] actions," but does at the same time question – along with Kant – "whether it is feasible to hold on to the principle of moral culpability once the notion of free will has been abandoned" (*Evidence* 16). This sort of vacillation is typical of *The Book of Evidence* and – as we so often find with Banville – there is little offered by way of consolation in the end, unless we are given to believe that it is the act of narration that which provides Freddie with absolution.

Moreover, the fact that this narration should occur in language renders its power to absolve Freddie problematic. This is a result of the inadequacy of language, which I have discussed earlier in this thesis: the fact that there is an essential element of reality which can never be present in text and is inescapably missing from it, because language is inherently insufficient to describe reality. Freddie himself laments the "poverty of the language," particularly when it comes to describing "badness" (*Evidence* 54):

> Evil, wickedness, mischief, these words imply an agency, the
> conscious or at least active doing of wrong. They do not signify the
> bad in its inert, neutral, self-sustaining state. Then there are the
> adjectives: dreadful, heinous, execrable, vile, and so on. They are
> not so much descriptive as judgmental. (54-5)

The language of evil, then, is not sufficient to describe a crime in which the perpetrator had no sense of conscious will. From this indefiniteness in language, Freddie derives an idea that perhaps this "thing itself – badness" actually does not exist at all, but that words such as badness, evil and the like are merely "a kind of elaborate cover for the fact that nothing is there" or "an attempt to make it there" – or even that there is some real thing that we might call 'badness,' but "the words invented it" (*Evidence* 55). There are a lot of different and contradictory ideas packed into this very short paragraph, and here – as usual – Banville does not offer a definite solution as to which answer is the 'right' one. Nor does he tell us what the implications are for our protagonist's guilt or absolution, and Freddie moves on to think about other topics, while the reader is left to draw their own conclusions about his culpability. In the end, when Freddie is asked how much of the narrative is true, he replies, "all of it. None of it. Only the shame" (186), at which point the book ends, leaving the reader not with any sense of absolution, but only with Freddie's shame and guilt.

It would seem that Freddie's position as a will-less human and the Romantic valorisation of the natural world pose problems in relation to Kant's easy distinction between man and nature, moral and immoral. It appears that here, just as in so many other areas, things are not simply black and white, and that which distinguishes the natural and human worlds is not, after all, quite as clear-cut as it seemed to Kant. Moreover, the fact remains that humans are a part of the natural world insofar as we are living and in possession of bodies, though it might be the case that we "are simply its most self conscious representatives," and that the purpose of a work of art is not to distinguish between that which is human and that which is natural, but to bring to light that which mankind is unconscious of, that which is within him but which is also a part of the natural world (Berlin 113). This is yet another reference to excess, since here we have excess as that which erupts out of the artist, who attempts to "convey the pulsations of a not wholly conscious life […] some kind of infinite spirit" (Berlin 113) out of the "darksome well" which is the unconscious – or natural – part of man (Banville, qtd in Izarra 183).

2.7 Confusions and Collusions: Pathetic Fallacy

In the above, we have seen that there is really no clear differentiation between humans and the natural world: in fact, the line can be – and more often than not is – impossibly blurred. Human characters can act naturally or unnaturally, can be bestial or all too human, and can, in fact, be possessed of a will-lessness which should be – at least according to Kant – the defining characteristic of the natural world. It is, moreover, this will-less, natural, unthinking part of man which it might be the ethical imperative of writers to seek, namely excess, sublimity or Wordsworth's "permanent objects" (*Lyrical Ballads* 294). There is, however, perhaps one trait that is unique to humanity and which is, moreover, an obstacle to the apprehension of the sublime. I am referring, of course, to language: indeed, Wordsworth refers to his sublime as "eternal silence" ("Ode" 158). I would argue, therefore, that the seminal differences between humanity and nature are the presence or absence of silence (as in wordlessness) versus language, and the human's ability (or curse) to be conscious of themselves and the world in a unique way. I have argued previously that literature tends toward excess; I would rephrase that to say that it tends toward silence, towards "truths that wake / to perish never" ("Ode" 158 – 9). In terms of the activity of the will, matters are further confused when it becomes apparent that the natural world is all too often perceived to be acting with intention or to possess emotions, in what is thought to be a uniquely human way. Pathetic fallacy, the "procedure in which human traits are ascribed to natural objects," is a technique perfected by the Romantic poets: it is nearly ubiquitous among them, and one for which they were often scorned by such critics as Ruskin, who coined the phrase as a derogatory term meaning false or "morbid" (Abrams 242). By way of illustrating the ubiquity of this method among the Romantics, Josephine Miles discovered that one finds an example of pathetic fallacy no less than "once in every six lines of Romantic poetry" (211). Despite Ruskin's criticism of the device as "simple falsehood, uttered by hypocrisy," the Romantic poets continued to use it as a method by which they might attribute to nature that which they found to be of the most value – "basic human feelings mixed in various complexities of affections and binding man to the great moral passion and spirit of the universe" (Miles 211). In other words, Romantic poets made use of pathetic fallacy in order to ascribe the highest possible praise and value to nature – that of human feelings – and so that nature might reflect the feelings of their human characters. It is, moreover, a technique employed extensively by Banville in several episodes in which nature by turns reflects or contradicts the sensibilities of his human characters, or foreshadows their future feelings. The question, however, is whether

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any similarities may be found between Banville's use of pathetic fallacy and that of the Romantics.

In order to illustrate Banville's use of pathetic fallacy, let us examine some examples of its presence in his work. Firstly, Nicolas Copernicus, feeling dejected and disillusioned because his pilgrimage to Italy has not met his expectations, beholds the natural world and begins

> To detect in everything secret signs of life, in flowers, mountain grasses, the very stones underfoot, all living, all somehow in agony. Thunderclouds flew low across the sky like roars of anguish on their way to being uttered elsewhere. (*Copernicus* 44)

Here, Nicolas attributes to nature his own agony. Alternatively, in the thunderclouds which will only experience their anguish "elsewhere," he is given an intimation of his future suffering. He suspects the natural world possesses more "life," that is, more will, than it had previously appeared to have. On the opposite side of the spectrum, Johannes Kepler, in a moment in which he wonders, "was it possible, was this, was *this* happiness" (108, emphasis in original), describes the scene in the following manner:

> The evening rested here, bronzed and quietly breathing, basking like an exhausted acrobat in the afterglow of marvelous exploits of light and weather. The elm tree hung intent above its own reflection in the pond, majestically listening. (107)

Johannes's fleeting feeling of happiness is brought about in this passage as he observes the joy his children find in being a part of this scene of natural beauty, and he senses "the great noisome burden of things [nudge] him, life itself tipping his elbow" (108). 'Life itself,' and the feeling of happiness which results from it, are, of course, one of those 'intimations' of the sublime to which, as I have argued above, characters in both Wordsworth and Banville are sometimes privy in the presence of the natural world. In this example, it seems as though it is Johannes's empathy or some form of sympathetic feeling with the natural world which brings about his brief moment of access to excess. In ascribing human sensibilities to the natural scene, it would seem that

Banville is attempting to portray Johannes as somehow finding himself in the world, rather than merely an interloper on its surface. He is enjoying a moment of communion with nature in which there was no sundering of self from self or self from universe, but rather a rare and simple harmony of being. His happiness ends that section of the novel, and ushers in the section fittingly titled "Harmonice Mundi" ("The Harmony of the World"), in which Johannes at first exalts in his success in completing his new "theory of Mars," which proves that the universe is orderly like "a kind of clockwork," but then slowly becomes disillusioned in the usual way of Banville's scientist-protagonists as he realises that he was merely 'saving the phenomena' rather than asserting any sort of objective truth (*Kepler* 111-12).

A third example comes from *Mefisto*, where it is in fact not the outdoor world which is given human characteristics, but the indoor one. An empty room in the crumbling old house at Ashburn "greeted the sudden glare with a soundless exclamation of surprise" as Sophie and Gabriel enter it (43). In this novel it is rather the voiceless, deaf-mute character of Sophie, described as being a "creature of the wild" (42), who perplexes Gabriel's mathematician's brain – like an equation that "would not solve" and that exists like "a sealed vessel, precarious, volatile, filled to bursting with all there was to say" but unable to say it (55). Sophie's muteness is less of a handicap, however, and more a state of animal bliss, so that she is not set apart from the world but exists within it, her movements a "swift, strong swimming in air:" this implies that this earth is her medium, her home, in a way that it is not to the other, voiced, characters (55). It is only in such rare moments as the one Johannes Kepler experiences above that Banville's 'normal' characters can enjoy feeling as though they belong in this world.

Such 'quasi-autistic' characters as Sophie crop up frequently in Banville's novels – other examples include Johannes Kepler's brother, Heinrich, and Victor Maskell's brother, Freddie, as well as Cass Cleave. Such characters are often described by means of oceanic metaphors. Joseph McMinn reads these references to the ocean as an "analogy for the experience of not really being in the world, but rather at a remote, distressing angle to it" (141). However, I would argue that it is not these minor characters – who for one reason or another are unable or unwilling to speak – who exist in a distressing state of disharmony with the world, but that it is Banville's protagonists who do so.

McMinn writes further that Banville's use of pathetic fallacy serves, ultimately, to reinforce his attempt to "raise important questions about knowledge and faith" (138). Firstly, it

creates a division between human characters and the natural world which is, in fact, quite the opposite of the division suggested by Kant regarding the will. McMinn suggests that, for Banville's protagonists, "everything outside them is animated, bewilderingly and beautifully alive and vital, all the while mocking the individual's effort to match this seeming intensity of being" (134). The 'intensity of being' that he mentions here is that feeling of being at home in the world which the deaf-mute Sophie has in *Mefisto*, but which none of Banville's other narrators or protagonists can reach. It is a state of being in which one is a part of the world, directly in contact with it, but their inability to gain this state causes that ironic and deeply melancholic nostalgia for a time of being at home in the world which I discussed earlier in this chapter, and which is to some extent shared by the Romantic poets. McMinn, in this regard, describes Banville's characters as possessing "a sense of a damaged romanticism in relation to nature" (135), as opposed to the purer, less pessimistic relationship to the natural world which is found in writers such as Wordsworth or Keats. Although the Romantic authors, in their optimism, escape the stark and hopeless alienation from nature felt by Banville, they do share in the linguistic limitation of only being able to praise nature "in anthropomorphic terms" (McMinn 136). On the one hand, in Wordsworth the natural world serves to validate the importance of the individual, attributing to nature "no unworthy aim" of accommodating the child "with something a Mother's mind," and certainly nature's attitude to the character is portrayed as benign ("Ode" 79-80). On the other hand, in Banville – as we have seen – the natural world is by turns hostile and indifferent and, is often felt to observe the protagonists with something of a judgmental gaze. In *Ghosts*, for example, the narrator feels as though the house is watching him with "a certain disdain" (25), while in *Athena* the trees seem embarrassed and are "looking away" from Freddie (46). In instances such as these, the natural world serves to "remind humankind of its inconsequence," or to alert Banville's characters to the fact that, no matter what they do in the realms of science or mathematics – or, in Freddie Montgomery's case, no matter how heinous a crime they commit – "nothing surprises nature; terrible deeds, the most appalling crimes, leave the world unmoved" (*Ghosts* 65).

I have mentioned previously a fascination in Banville's work with the sea, and in this quote from *Eclipse* Alexander Cleave meditates on the presence of the sea as an object of brute nature. It is a passage, moreover, which epitomises Banville's self-conscious, self-mocking version of pathetic fallacy:

> Why do I find the thought of the sea so alarming? We speak of its power and violence as if it were a species of wild animal, ravening and unappeasable, but the sea does nothing, it is simply there, its own reality, like night or the sky. Is it the heave and lurch and sudden suck of it that frightens? Or is it that it is so emphatically not our medium? I think of the world beneath the ocean, the obverse of ours, the negative of ours, with its sandy plains and silent valleys and great sunken mountain ranges, and something fails me in myself, something that is mine draws away from me in horror. (67)

Here Alexander acknowledges the irony implicit in our speaking of the sea as "ravening and unappeasable," when it is, in fact, a will-less natural object which "is simply there." This is the crux of the matter: the sea simply exists in an unconscious manner of which humankind is utterly incapable. Humankind is precluded from simply being by means of our adoption of a language by means of which we differentiate – and hence irrevocably separate – ourselves from the world. After we have made the fatal utterance which defines the 'I' as the 'not anything else,' we are irrevocably separate and self-conscious about our separation from the natural world, from other humans and from an essential part of our selves. Perhaps it is that very part of his self which Alexander feels draws away in horror when he beholds the sea; his essential self pulls back from the horror and violence of this irreversible separation. I will examine Banville's perceptions of selves and others in more detail in the next chapter, but suffice it to say here that his work certainly problematises the distinction between human self and natural other through such characters as Freddie Montgomery and Sophie, as well as through such literary devices as pathetic fallacy.

2.8 Concluding Remarks

By way of conclusion, and in an attempt to answer the questions posed at the beginning of this chapter, let me reiterate that Banville's protagonists certainly feel the effects of "fallings from us, vanishings" (Wordsworth, "Ode" 149). Furthermore, rather than undergoing a *Bildung* from ignorance to knowledge, they instead move from pure knowledge of 'the thing in itself' further and further into ignorance and forgetfulness. Wordsworth finds consolation in memory – which

Banville's characters mistrust – and "the eternal silence" of infinity ("Ode" 160). Although Wordsworth mourns the loss of the child's ability to "through [their] hearts […] feel the gladness of the May" (149-150), he optimistically finds consolation in memory, the natural world and "soothing thoughts" which spring from human suffering (189-90). On the other hand, it would seem that Banville is possessed of a rather pessimistic version of the universe as "a huge fathomless ocean of undirected will upon which we bob like a little boat with no direction, no possibility of really understanding the element in which we are, or directing our course upon it" – an element which we can neither resist nor come to terms with (Berlin 123). He nevertheless does exhibit some Romantic tendencies, as we have seen, and certainly engages with the legacy of the movement.

Having said this, it seems that to ascribe to the Romantic poets a postmodern sensibility is to warp our conception of chronology past endurance. Instead, I would surmise that the Romantics set literature on a revolutionary course of which postmodernist thought is an eventual trajectory, with modernism acting as a bridge between the two. Berlin argues that Romanticism is the "greatest single shift in the consciousness of the West that has occurred" and that any later shifts were deeply influenced by it (2). He goes even further to say that "the Romantic movement was … a gigantic and radical transformation, after which nothing was ever the same" (6). Another movement which radically changed our way of thinking was, of course, the linguistic turn of the twentieth century which precipitated the rise of modernism, postmodernism and language scepticism. Thus we have two seismic shifts in the way we think about language, literature and the artistic endeavour occurring almost two hundred years apart, but in a strange way mirroring one another. This chapter has explored several of these parallels, including a predilection towards new and innovative forms, and, more significantly, an attempt at gesturing toward the sublime. Furthermore, the Romantics showed an early awareness of the language scepticism which is so widespread in the post-Saussurean world, as well as an attitude toward the inevitable failure of their work which predates Beckett's views on the same. It has become clear that postmodern literature – at least as it is exemplified by Banville – takes many Romantic themes and carries them into a more postmodern place of disillusionment and pessimism. These parallels, as well as this maturation of the Romantic naïveté into postmodern nihilism, illustrate the possibility that the roots of postmodernism are, in fact, to be found in Romanticism.

CHAPTER 3: SELVES, OTHERS AND OTHER SELVES

In the previous chapter, there was some discussion of the question of what, if anything, divides humankind from the natural world. In this chapter, I propose to delve more deeply into the question of identity in Banville's writing. The chapter will focus on the effect of language on selfhood and, in particular, on the ways language separates the human subject not only from the natural world and non-human animals, but also from other individuals, their own selves and from the bodies they inhabit and the bodies of others. This will be followed by an examination of some issues surrounding the narrative representation of others in Banville's work. This chapter is informed by Banvillean scholars such as Mark O'Connell and Elke d'Hoker, as well as the philosophers Emmanuel Levinas and Maurice Blanchot.

3.1 Narcissistic Shame

To begin with, I would like to return to Freddie Montgomery, his final words in *The Book of Evidence* ("Only the shame" [186]), and the relationship between shame, selfhood and narcissism in this novel and in Banville's fiction in general. Mark O'Connell presents a compelling argument for the narcissistic nature of Banville's work in general, and his narrators especially, in his book *John Banville's Narcissistic Fictions*. O'Connell reads Banville's narratives as, "paradoxically, both a means by which the narrator's narcissism is indulged and […] a means by which an attempt is made to transcend it" (3). Narcissism, according to O'Connell, may be defined as "a catastrophic inability or unwillingness to see beyond" the self (4). In this regard, Freddie would definitely be guilty of narcissism. His crime is that he failed to "imagine [Josie] vividly enough" so that she, the other, never truly lived for him, and as a result he was able to kill her (*Evidence* 215). What made the murder possible, then, was Freddie's narcissistic personality. Narcissism, for Freud and later psychologists, O'Connell explains, is a pathological condition in which a childhood trauma causes the individual to remain stuck in a pre-linguistic narcissistic state. This stage – called "primary narcissism" – is one which all

infants go through before they learn to "differentiate between [self] and the world," and the argument is that a normal child will transcend this stage of development, while an unhealthy or traumatised child will develop "secondary narcissism," which endures into adulthood and is seen as a disease to be cured (O'Connell 5). Freud's narcissism, therefore, involves an inability to separate oneself from the world insofar as everything in the world only exists as an element of the self. Banville's narrators, however, struggle not with a feeling of being too much in the world, as the opposite. Except in occasional moments of transcendence, as we saw in the previous chapter, they feel distressingly cut off and separate from the world.

However, on closer inspection it becomes clear that there is more to narcissism than an inability to differentiate between self and world, or an overweening sense of self. The narcissistic individual, in fact, holds himself to an unrealistically high standard and, as a result, suffers from a "painful self-consciousness" when he fails to live up to this standard. As a result, the narcissist continually vacillates "between excessive self-aggrandisement and feelings of utter worthlessness and meaninglessness" (O'Connell 6). This vacillation is a feature shared by many of Banville's narrators, who one minute feel vastly superior to any and all others, and the next labour under mortified shame and embarrassment. In addition, all of Banville's protagonists most certainly suffer from an inability to see beyond themselves. Does this, however, mean that Banville writes predominantly about narcissists, or does it rather suggest that it is the portrayal of a self through language which lends his narrators an inherent narcissism?

With regard to Freddie, it is interesting, to say the least, that it is shame that he feels rather than guilt. Guilt refers to a negative feeling toward an action that the individual has taken, and does not implicate his or her community. Shame, on the other hand, has as its focus "not just the individual, but the individual as part of a collective," and therefore implicates a real or imagined other (Marais, "Holding and Confession" 9). Furthermore, where guilt comes from an action, shame implicates the self, and is therefore indeterminate and endless. The guilty party may confess and seek forgiveness for an action, but one who feels shame cannot find the same closure. Absolution for guilt involves the cessation of the negative action and confession, but absolution for shame would require the individual to cease being themselves – as it is oneself, in this case, who is somehow wrong. Thus Freddie's shame is interminable, and it is he who is "bad" in his "inert, neutral, self-sustaining state" (*Evidence* 54). The indictment on Freddie for

his crime, moreover, and the consequent shame, come about as a result of his perceived judgement at the hands of the community as well as his self-imposed shame.

O'Connell, in his chapter on shame, links it to the narcissism he argues is ubiquitous among Banville's protagonists, where shame is "the result of some shortfall between a person's idealised image of him- or herself and the reality" (114). Freddie describes this shortfall near the beginning of his narrative, explaining that as a young man he "saw [him]self as a masterbuilder who would one day assemble a marvellous edifice around [him]self […] which would contain [him] utterly and yet wherein [he] would be free," and which people would recognise as "the man himself" (*Evidence* 16). This "marvellous edifice" is Freddie's narcissistic, idealised self-image, but simultaneously the "man himself" – that is, the elusive core of Freddie's selfhood. Contrary to his expectations, however, Freddie finds that he is "unhoused," at once "exposed and invisible" among others who seemed to possess "a density, a thereness which [he] lacked" (*Evidence* 16). In other words, he has failed to live up to his own expectations of selfhood, and has remained "a child among adults" who can only act as though he is in possession of authentic individuality in the same way as others seem to be (*Evidence* 16). The result of this shortfall is, of course, shame. The irony is that others are just as inauthentic in their secret hearts as he feels himself to be, and he appears as authentic to them as they appear to him. Because of the narcissism inherent infirst-person narration, however, the impression given by the novel is of a protagonist who is more human, more 'self-like' than the secondary characters. This is a shortfall of all first-personfiction, but one to which Banville draws particular attention by exposing the inauthenticity of all narrated selves.

3.2 Narcissism and Banville's use of first-person narration

There is a link between the nostalgia found in Banville's characters, their tendency towards narcissism, and the shame that they inevitably feel about themselves later in life. The narcissistic individual is one who has failed to develop sufficiently beyond the self-love and self-absorption of the infant who has not yet comprehended the existence of others. In adulthood, the narcissistic individual projects before him an "ego ideal" – to use Freud's term –which acts as a "substitute for the lost narcissism of his childhood in which he was his own ideal" (qtd in O'Connell 115). The ego ideal is like a platonic form, the reality of which the adult individual cannot hope to live

up to. Since the perfection of the projected ego ideal is unattainable, the inevitable result of this failure is shame: a feeling of being fundamentally wrong in oneself. Thus the adult individual desires to return to a state of infant bliss in which their perception of themselves and the reality were identical: they feel nostalgia for this time. Moreover, the inevitable failure of their idealised self-image and the reality of self to correlate also results in shame.

In order to express their concern regarding the ego ideal and the inability of reality to match up to it, Banville's narrators refer to the recurring image of the statue and, in particular, to Diderot's statue theory, which crops up not only in Freddie's narrative but also in Viktor Maskell's in *The Untouchable*, as well as in other Banville novels. Freddie posits Diderot's ethic as follows: "if we would be good […] we must become sculptors of ourselves": we should erect "an idealised effigy of ourselves in our own minds" and live "according to its sublime example" (*Ghosts* 364). He admits a form of aesthetic admiration for this theory, but soon dismisses its relevance to his own life, jokingly saying that the statue he erected for himself "must have been a gargoyle," for when he once allowed himself the "luxury" of being true to himself he ended up killing someone (364). In the end he seems – most unconvincingly – to settle for "inauthenticity and bad faith" (366). The fact that Freddie's three narratives can be read as an extended quest for absolution not only for his crime but also for the wrongness of his very self lends this utterance a heavy irony.

Freddie's first narrative, *The Book of Evidence*, takes the form of a confession of his crime and constitutes the first of three attempts at finding absolution. The confession is an inevitable failure and is made ironic by virtue of the fact that his narration occurs in language, which renders the confession's power to absolve Freddie problematic. This is, firstly, a result of the inadequacy of language, which I have discussed earlier in this study and with which Freddie engages in his description of Diderot's statue theory – that is, the excess or remainder which cannot be linguistically expressed and thus is always absent from the text. This renders the whole idea of confession inherently problematic and ironic, since it can only occur in language and is thus always imperfect. Perhaps this is why Freddie goes on to narrate *Ghosts* and *Athena*, in order to explore other avenues of absolution. Secondly, Freddie's shame cannot be absolved unless he ceases to be himself, and so the confession is without *telos* but is rather a form of interminable waiting for a forgiveness that cannot be granted unless the self is first annihilated. In the other two narratives of the *Frames* trilogy, Freddie – having failed to receive absolution

from his confession in *The Book of Evidence* – attempts instead to change or erase his identity and thus escape the self of whom he is so deeply ashamed. In *Ghosts*, he creates the lives of imaginary others while attempting to keep his own identity as a narrator secret and, in *Athena*, he tries to adopt an entirely new identity for himself.

Freddie believes that his "essential sin" was that "he never imagined [Josie] vividly enough" (*Evidence* 215). To his mind she was never truly alive, which makes the act of murdering her a failure of the imagination rather than a maliciously homicidal act. Having killed Josie through a lapse of imagination, he admits at the end of *The Book of Evidence* that he now feels an "unavoidable imperative" to "bring her back to life" by imagining her "from the start, from infancy" (215-16). However, in *Ghosts* he delivers the imagined life, not of Josie Bell, but of "half a dozen or so" made-up characters who bear little or no resemblance to her (191). In this very Beckettian novel, he admits that by retreating to a distant island he is trying not only to escape the world, but also "to get away from [himself], too," but this effort has been "in vain" (216). This is an early admission of failure which is compounded by the fact that, even in his own imaginary world, there are echoes from the past which return and attempt to reveal his identity to the reader and to the other characters. The characters that populate this novel – Freddie's "foundered creatures" (193) – clearly exist only in his imagination, and in fact resemble the figures from a painting by the fictional artist Vaublin, whom he is studying. Clearly, therefore, the antagonistic element which is present in the novel in the form of Felix does not come from the outside, but rather from within Freddie himself. It comes about as a result of the shame he feels for having murdered Josie, a shame which exists "inside [him] now like a second, parasitic self, its tentacles coiled around [his] cells" (212). It is this self which he is trying to hide in the secretive narration of this novel, and also to absolve by imagining the lives of others more fully. However, ironically, it is this part of himself that takes partial control of the narrative in order to precipitate the second self's discovery. Through the introduction of the Mephistophelian figure of Felix, who threatens throughout the novel to expose Freddie's true identity, Freddie sabotages his own attempt at redemption. The novel ends with a typically anticlimactic confrontation between Freddie and Felix, in which it becomes clear that the latter is no less than Freddie's "externalized bad self" (d'Hoker, "Visions" 183-84) – that "parasitic self" of whose presence, as becomes clear in this final scene, he can have "no riddance" (*Ghosts* 409). Thus, Freddie's second attempt at absolution, at escaping his shameful self, fails. He also fails

sufficiently to imagine the others, who simply fade away at some point during the novel, leaving very little impression on the reader.

The events of *Athena* occur some time after those of *Ghosts*, and after Freddie has returned to an unspecified Irish city – which resembles Dublin – and taken on a new name: Morrow. He has, moreover, become embroiled in a shady plot involving the theft and/or falsification of valuable artworks, a plot the details of which he himself does not know in full. The style of narration is perhaps even more secretive than that of *Ghosts*, but Freddie/Morrow does make several narrative slips which reveal his identity to the reader. Indeed, it is not the reader, here, who is in the dark so much as Freddie himself, who seems woefully unaware of what is truly going on throughout the novel. The narrative situation – in which he tells the story in retrospective epistolary style, looking back from an unspecified future time and, for the most part, addressing an unidentified 'you' who mostly correlates with his scarcely identified lover – gives the reader some insight into the true nature of the plot and Freddie's identity, however. The other characters, it becomes clear, were probably also aware of Freddie/Morrow's true name and nature all along. His lover and the apparent addressee of the novel, known only as A., seems in particular to know all about him in a way that is reminiscent of Felix in *Ghosts*.

In *Athena*, instead of attempting to absolve himself by confessing or narrating the stories of others, Freddie tries to enact or perform an entirely new identity. The novel is centered on his love affair with A., and it is in relation to her that he attempts to construct a new identity. Morrow and A. engage in an entirely performative affair, in which "lying becomes a kind of end in itself; it becomes a way of attempting to exist more authentically" (O'Connell 339). A. and Freddie present to one another almost completely false versions of themselves: in fact, both are seen to welcome this fictionalisation as part of the relationship's appeal. A. only tells Freddie what he is convinced are utterly fabricated stories about her life, and he dares to tell her the truth – but as though it is fabricated. Their sexual encounters, too, are elaborately staged affairs put on as though for an observer – and at times they are in actuality observed. Inevitably, though, this affair, as well as that of the stolen or forged paintings, comes to an abrupt end and Freddie, who up to now has "deluded [himself] that [he has] sloughed [his past deeds and identity] all off and that [he] can walk on naked and unashamed into a new name, a new life," is once again left to himself and his shame, having failed a third time to escape from it (*Athena* 318).

If one subscribes to the above reading of the *Frames* trilogy, O'Connell's argument that Banville's narratives act both as a means to indulge the narrator's narcissism and constitute an attempt to transcend it becomes even more compelling (3). Freddie, subject to acute narcissistic shame, makes three narrative attempts to transcend his narcissism, but the nature of first-person narrative is such that it indulges in self-centeredness and fails to adequately imagine the other (or the self, for that matter). Unfortunately for Freddie, the linguistic and narrative means through which he attempts to transcend his state in fact only serve to assert it more fully. Though O'Connell's entire argument for the narcissistic nature of Banville's characters is extremely compelling, where he reads narcissism from a psychological point of view, that is, as a pathological condition of the mind, I attempt to examine narcissism as a function of language. If narcissism is indeed a function of the acquisition of language, then it is not likely to be a mental illness possessed by some unlucky individuals, but an intrinsic part of what has been called the human condition.

3.3 Linguistic Narcissism

O'Connell further defines narcissism as an "exhaustive anxiety, or cluster of anxieties, about the self" in opposition to the common interpretation of narcissism as self-love (19). He goes on to describe the double bind of narcissism as "an affliction" in which the individual is "wholly consumed with finding some fundamental truth about himself and yet prevented from ever reaching such knowledge by his or her own self-absorption" (19). This is the irony of narcissism. It sounds markedly similar to the irony of the postmodern text, in which the narrating I attempts to express themself through language, but finds that an essential part of selfhood always eludes the text and can only be accessed in the absence of the experiencing self. I would argue that the difficulty Banville's characters – and, I might add, humankind in general – have with discovering the fundamental core of selfhood is not caused by a psychological illness, but is rather a function of their attempts to do so through the medium of language and narrative form, and therefore from a position which is situated in culture and history. As I have discussed previously in this study, language is insufficient to describe reality as it always leaves something out: a remainder or excess. Entire selfhood, I have argued, exists in this realm of excess and is therefore one of the things to which language cannot gain access but toward which fiction should nevertheless

gesture. John Banville's fiction constantly draws attention to its own insufficiency when it comes to the apprehension of any aspect of reality in its entirety.

In my previous chapter, I began to explore the idea, recurrent in Banville's oeuvre, that the human subject exists, in a way, separate from this world. This sense of separation is distressing to Banville's characters and they want instead to be "naked. Flayed. A howling babe, waving furious fists" (*Mefisto* 234) or otherwise "open to the world like a wound" (*Shroud* 333). They desire, in other words, to establish a more intimate and direct relationship with the world, themselves and others than that allowed to them when they see it – as they necessarily do – through the lens of language. They wish, it seems, to erase the dividing line that language sets up when we differentiate between the 'I' and the other and to escape from their linguistically imposed narcissism. It is interesting that this sort of direct access is referred to in terms, firstly, of childhood and, secondly, of trauma or pain. As I have noted, childhood to Banville represents a pre-linguistic state of "barely bearable raw immediacy" in which the individual has direct access to the thing in itself (*The Sea* 94). Trauma, similarly, exists as an a-linguistic state in which the linguistic faculty is overwhelmed, in a sense, by too much reality. Axel Vander offers us an example of this when, in a moment of trauma as his young lover Cass suffers a fit, his narration of the event is interrupted by the memory of something similarly awful which happened in the past and of which he says, "some things, real things, seem to happen not in the world itself but in the gap between actuality and the mind's apprehending; the eye registers the event but the understanding lags" (*Shroud* 352). His narration of the incident is fragmentary, unclear, and full of interruptions as though to illustrate the inability of the conscious mind to apprehend the full reality of such events. What is also illustrated, by extension, is the inability of the text adequately to portray the reality of a situation which cannot be fully described in language. In order to investigate the subject of trauma more closely, the next section comprises a close reading of a passage from *Mefisto* in which Gabriel suffers intense physical and mental agony.

3.3.1 Trauma and Agony in *Mephisto*

At the end of the first section of *Mephisto,* Gabriel Swan undergoes a traumatic near-death experience when he is caught up in the conflagration of the aptly named Ashburn House. The incident itself receives scant description, just a brief and slightly incoherent paragraph which describes Gabriel as flying "on flaming wings […] into the huge, cold air" (120). The next section details Gabriel's convalescence and his rebirth into the world. Like the phoenix suggested by the image of flaming wings, or the archangel who shares Gabriel's name, but also profoundly unlike those triumphant creatures, the man who emerges is both physically scarred – "my face. A wad of livid dough, blotched and bubbled, with clown's nose, no chin, two watery little eyes peering out in disbelief" (125) – and mentally handicapped by an addiction to opiate painkillers. These he refers to as his "angels," while the pain is "the beast": the former keep the latter at bay only for as long as he remains semi-conscious inside his "dome of numbness" (124).

At first the recovering Gabriel is "a mind only, spinning in the darkness like a dynamo," but as he returns to awareness of his body a new trauma grips him. His body "[rolls] up its sleeves and [spits] on its hands with the grim enthusiasm of a torturer," and he fears it. Once the pain hits him, he wonders "how to describe it," but realises that it cannot be described in words (124). He therefore does not attempt to represent the sensation of the pain, but rather talks about the fact that he is "alone" in "the difference, the strangeness," a place inside of him that he had previously not known existed. The pain takes such possession of him that, in moments of consciousness, he sees "the world around [him] radiant with pain, the glass in the window suffering the sun's harsh blade, the bed like a stricken ox kneeling on its stumps […] the very air seem[ing] to ache" (124-25). In these moments Banville uses a version of pathetic fallacy to illustrate the ineluctable and all-consuming nature of pain which causes the individual to be at once utterly isolated from the world, others and themself and, at the same time, unable to separate self from the world. The experience of agony, clearly, is a profoundly narcissistic one. Gabriel can only speak in fragments of "the loneliness. The being-beyond. Indescribable", and about being in a place to which "no one could follow" him (125). This isolation is, moreover, primarily narcissistic, as it is a result of a literal inability to see beyond the self. Trauma has rendered Gabriel unable to conceive of the outside world as anything other than an extension of himself. So his pain renders him utterly isolated and alone, but the signifier 'alone' is insufficient to describe a state in which he is separated from his very self as it is configured in language. The trauma places him in a position of openness to the world ("like a wound," as Axel Vander puts

it), but the speaking, thinking self is not present at this moment. Trauma, therefore, is excessive and constitutes another moment of access to the sublime or the thing in itself but, like other intimations of infinity, at the same time precludes the self from this access. The individual experiencing trauma is like the pre-linguistic infant in this sense, although the experience is, of course, horrifying rather than wonderful.

Gabriel's recovery is figured as a rebirth, as he is surgically removed from his "cocoon" of dressings (129). Like an infant he is unable to separate himself from the world until he becomes aware of the matron – a maternal figure who has brought him through the long gestation of his illness. However, it is not a fresh and innocent newborn who emerges, nor a victorious phoenix from the ashes, but "a riven thing, incomplete […] half there, half somewhere else. Miscarried" (130). The creature that emerges is more akin to the monster of Frankenstein, in fact, forced to "remake [him]self, build [him]self out of bits and scraps, of memories, sensations, guesses," all the while having, Lazarus-like, a vivid memory of "the other place" and a suspicion that it was, in fact, "better there than here" (130). Indeed, the first words to come from Gabriel's mouth after his rebirth are, "I want to die" (128).

Like Frankenstein's monster, though, he has little of his own volition at this time, as the doctor continues to rebuild his body, "day after day," observed by Gabriel's now quite conscious mind. This mind now begins to register more and more of the outside world, like a growing child, and thinks "in amazement of the people outside in the streets, going heedlessly about their business. So I too, before, while worlds thrashed in agony" (131). He is clearly both like and unlike a normal newborn, for he already has an idea of subjectivity and knowledge of the separateness and aloneness of human beings, but at the same time he has to learn once again from the matron, his surrogate mother, how to walk and manage other practical matters. His narcissism, too, which was so much a part of his life before the fire, and intensified during the time of his painful convalescence, has been somewhat diminished by the experience. He can now recognise the pain in others as "a sort of second, ghostly self", and he sits with his fellow sufferers in the hospital, "communing somehow, like participants in a séance" (136). On leaving the hospital, he stalks cripples, beggars and homeless people, seeking communion with a guild of which he was "an apprentice" only by virtue of his not entirely debilitating experience of othering through trauma (140).

The passage that follows the one about the guild of sufferers strongly evokes T.S. Eliot's "Preludes," and deals with a memory of Gabriel's which occurs just before he has found – or been found by – Felix. It takes place at "the exhausted end of evening", just as the "street lamps came on fitfully in the blued autumnal dusk" (*Mephisto* 140) – a description which is not unlike the "burnt-out ends of smoky days" which make up the backdrop of the first stanza of Eliot's poem – except that it is winter – and the "lighting of the lamps" ends that stanza (13). Banville's next paragraph opens on a "smoky sunlit morning, smell of washed pavements, fish, stale beer" (*Mephisto* 140), just as Eliot's second stanza begins with "the morning [coming] to consciousness / of faint stale smells of beer" (14-15). Both writers follow these lines with a description of sordid city life, complete with rain, mud and scenes from working-class existence. Eliot describes the latter as the "masquerades / that time resumes" (19-20). Eliot's poem brings to mind an endlessly repeated cycle of 'masquerades' – of countless individuals living out their similar but isolated lives. Banville's passage likewise evokes an impression of existence which "circle[s] slowly around" Gabriel and "halt[s] when [he] halt[s]," emphasising the subjectivity in which each separate individual is trapped by language (*Mephisto* 140).

Banville deviates from Eliot here, however, and speaks of a "sense of something impending," of something "waiting" to happen, which turns out to be "the slow ruin of things, the endless creeping collapse" (141). By contrast, Eliot focuses upon individuals caught up in this cycle. However, the two passages converge once more at their endings, as both authors are convinced of some great revelation or truth which is at work in the scene before them. Eliot's speaker is "moved by fancies that are curled / around these images, and cling: / the notion of some infinitely gentle / Infinitely suffering thing" (48-51), while Gabriel is – much less lyrically – convinced that "some dirty little truth is being wearily disclosed here" (141). Although precisely what it is that is at work neither can say. In this passage, it would seem, Banville pays homage to Eliot, and seems to be suggesting that he and Eliot share a similar intimation of inexpressible excess, as both passages constitute an infinitely suffering gesture toward that which cannot be captured in words.

However, I would argue that the Banville passage quoted above illustrates rather more than this, and suggests something quite intimate shared by the two writers. Earlier in the chapter, Gabriel hears another patient in the hospital "cr[y] out, a long, desolate wail that rose up and up" and feels the moment to be "the apogee" of his suffering. It assures him that he is "not alone," so

that he "howled too, making someone else's day, no doubt, bringing him a little solace, a sense of companionship" (126). It is this moment of mutual agony which assures Gabriel and the nurse that he will indeed survive, and his recovery now truly commences. This shared scream occurs in the fictional world of the novel, but something markedly similar can be seen in Banville's metafictional intertextual allusion to Eliot's poem: the shared scream of two writers who both suffer under the agony of being compelled to write, while being unable to express the thing in itself. In a broader sense, these passages suggest the possibility of transcending linguistically imposed narcissism in the recognition of a similar suffering in others. Fiction is important in this regard, as it provides a sort of window – however flawed – into the lives of others. Banville's double-layered scream – Freddie's with the other patient, and Banville's with Eliot – draws attention to its own significance and suggests that the cure for narcissism might lie in empathy with others, and one possible source of empathy lies in the acts of reading and writing which allow us imperfect access – or the illusion of access – into other lives.

3.4 Selves and Others

This brings us to the fraught and often disturbing matter of relationships between individuals in Banville. Banville's narrator-protagonists are generally characterised by a "bewildered scepticism about the inner lives of others" and a corresponding lack of empathy (O'Connell 181). Their relationships with others, including but not limited to wives, mothers and lovers, are constantly fraught with tension and misunderstanding. Freddie, as we have seen, is able to kill Josie Bell because of an extreme form of narcissism which results in "a complete denial of the independent reality of this other person" (181). As we have also seen, there is a profoundly paradoxical relationship between narcissism, empathy and the act of narration: narration – and in particular the first-person mode of narration which is most commonly found in Banville's work – is a fundamentally narcissistic act which elides the entire selfhood of the other in favour of that of the 'hero' of the tale. Nevertheless, it is only art – and in particular narrative art – which can "jolt us out of our selfish complacency and into a deeper sense of the actual experiences and suffering of others" (184). Narration, therefore, both constitutes and transcends the narcissistic individual. In the paragraphs that follow I will examine the relationships between characters in Banville's writing, focusing on the effects of language on the relationship between self and other,

as well as the presence or absence of empathy. I will also examine the connected issue of representation in some of Banville's texts.

3.4.1   Interiority in *Shroud*

To begin with, I shall examine the relationship between the mentally ill Cass Cleave and the solipsistic, literally self-made Axel Vander. Their relationship is grotesque: an affair between an ugly, malformed and aged man and a beautiful, innocent but mentally handicapped young girl. Cass is one of Banville's very other others, similar to the figure of Sophie in *Mephisto*. She is afflicted by a fictitious disease called "Mandelbaum's Syndrome," which in Axel's opinion seems to "occupy a redoubt three-quarters of the way toward the bad end of the scale between manic depression and full-blown dementia" (*Shroud* 317). In other words, like Sophie, Cass does not inhabit quite the same reality as those around her. She too suffers a tragic fate, but unlike Sophie she is – to some extent – verbal. She can speak, that is, but suffers acutely from an inability to say what she really means, and her talk is "disconnected" and "punctuated with profound silences" (318). For this reason, she does not possess Sophie's equanimity, nor the sense of comfort and ease with which the latter lives in the world. Axel says that, aside from her youth and beauty, it is the "chaos and violence of her mind" which attracted him to her. He describes her, moreover, as an animal who watches him with "savage surmise" (318), and as being profoundly narcissistic: "in her version of the world everything was connected […] with herself at the fulcrum of the process. All things attended her" (319). Later, he adds, "she had no detachment, could not divide herself from her subject – how should she, since she was the one, true subject" (319-20). The effect of this intensely inwardly-directed state of mind is that Cass considers the "force of her will, and all her considerable intellect" to be necessarily engaged in "keeping reality in order" (319).

What must be remembered, however, is that even though Cass can speak, the novel is narrated in the first person not by her but by Axel. This means that, from a narrative point of view, Cass does not have her own voice, but is described as she appears to Axel – himself "perhaps Banville's most supremely narcissistic protagonist […] an unrepentant misanthrope [who] cannot see past his own problematic identity to the world of others" (O'Connell 2). In fact,

when Axel describes Cass as lacking detachment and considering herself to be the only true subject among a world of objects, he might as well be describing himself. He attempts to excuse his treatment of her – from sexual exploitation, to the elision of her voice in favour of his idea of what her voice should sound like, to his profound ignorance of her true mental and emotional state and the depression which leads to her suicide – by declaring his love for her. The question we must ask ourselves, however, is whether it is indeed possible for the narcissist – and, by implication, for the human subject – to truly love another and to love them as an independent subject, rather than as a mere love object.

Just pages after declaring his love for Cass, Axel admits that "the object of my true regard was not her, the so-called loved one, but myself, the one who loved, so-called." He admits that love is merely "the mirror of burnished gold in which we contemplate our shining selves" (*Shroud* 329). In other words, Cass is merely a love object insofar as she provides Axel with a favourable reflection of himself, akin to the pool into which the mythical Narcissus gazes at his beloved reflection, although – unfortunately – in Banville's darkly comic version it is the beloved who drowns rather than the narcissistic lover. Axel's admission, here, also puts further into question the reliability of his earlier narration of Cass's thoughts and feelings. The eventual outcome of the novel, especially his attempt yet again to exonerate himself, leaves the reader without any doubt of Axel's profound lack of insight or empathy into Cass:

> I tried, I tried to know her. I tried to see her plain and clear. I tried
> to put myself into her inner world, but even at those moments, all
> too rare, when I managed to hack my way through the thickets of
> fantasy and illusion inside which she was trapped 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. (332)

With a characteristic lack of insight into the lives of others – or we might even say, with a characteristic disbelief in the inner lives of others – Axel places the blame for his inability to know Cass squarely onto her shoulders. It is as if it were her fantasies and illusions, rather than his own, and her lack of a unified identity which cause him to fail. He even likens this inability to be known to that of the other woman whom he has been close to in his life – his wife, Magda.

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Since it is incomprehensible to him that these women's inscrutability might be a failure on his own part, it must be something about them which renders them unknowable.

However, seemingly without any awareness of the fact, Axel does actually manage to articulate the true issue at hand when it comes to an attempt to know others. He describes Cass's interiority, when he manages to access it, as a place of childhood and a place which can only be described in the third person. This reference to childhood is interesting, insofar as it suggests that true knowledge of the other – as excessive – is possible only in an extra-linguistic, prelapsarian state. In his current state – narrating a story, constructing his identity, existing in culture and language, not to mention being written himself – he is incapable of knowing her as a child would, but can only describe her as he did earlier in the text: in the third person. Axel, here, articulates the problem faced by any experiencing subject when they encounter an other: the latter's interiority cannot be experienced in the same first-person manner as one's own. As a result, the interiority of the other can only be guessed at and can never truly be real to the experiencing self.

Edmund Husserl provides us with an apt representation of this conundrum in his theory of *appresentation*, which states that an experiencing subject, when looking at any object in the world, can only perceive one side or dimension of that object. However, they are still capable of intuiting the entire shape of the object or, at least, they are aware that the object exists in its entirety, even though they cannot see the wholeness of it at this time. The back of the object, however, which the subject cannot see, is not real in quite the same way as the front of the object, which is visible. Similarly, the 'I,' when it observes an other, sees it only as a body but might assume (depending on their level of narcissism) that that body contains an interior subjectivity comparable to their own. However, the subjectivity of the other, like the back of a perceived object, is not quite as real as that of the self (qtd in Dallmayr 223-6). Axel might be excused, then, for failing to articulate a fully realised version of Cass's interiority, because he is in a position in which he suspects that she has a fully developed subjectivity like his own, but cannot in his own linguistically determined mind properly conceive of it in its entirety. The problem is less one of presentation or perception, than it is a problem of language and representation in language.

Banville's novels are almost always written in the first person in an attempt to communicate the incommunicable core of the narrator's selfhood to himself. An attempt in

which Banville stages the narrator's disillusionment when the latter realises that the text will inevitably fail in this mission. According to O'Connell, the text "is a mirror – more often than not a distorted one – in which an image of the self is conjured" (2). Both the text and the beloved within the text serve merely as surfaces upon which the identity of the protagonist-narrator can be reflected and rarified. Furthermore, the selfhood of the narrator is void insofar as he is himself a creation of the author, an issue which will be dealt with in the next chapter. There are two things which the narcissist typically deems necessary for the preservation of their fragile self-image. The first is a place in which to make themself real, to "attain unity with [them]self" in a world where "each time [they try] to grasp [them]self, [they seem] to cease being there" and fear that they might "disappear completely", like Narcissus's reflection in the pool, or be subsumed into the other (9). This space is provided by the narrative which the protagonist narrates in order to more clearly show themself to themself. In this sense, Banville's narrators are inherently solipsistic. Secondly, the narcissist is one who "lacks independence – whose very sense of self must be sustained by the regard of others" (12), they require one or more intimate companions, so that their selfhood might be revealed and nourished. Cass, Magda, and others like them in Banville's other novels, exist at an even further leap from reality than the narrators. They are conceived of only in the third person, only through the imaginative lens of the protagonist, and never in their own right.

The question is whether or not Vander deserves censure for his act of relegating Cass to the position of a mere mirror, and whether the reader can or should empathise with either of these characters. Banville, in creating reprehensible creatures like Vander and Freddie and using the first-person confessional form to force his readers to inhabit his characters' minds in a far more intimate way than they would perhaps like – given the discomfort involved in being forced to see the world through the eyes of a character who one considers in some way morally wrong – prompts them to question the validity of the novelistic form and narrative techniques that he is using. Furthermore, by narrating in the first-person he challenges readers to imaginatively transcend themselves and relate to others in a first-person manner, rather than through the distancing lens of the third person. A reliable, comfortable, sympathetic narrator makes for a comfortable, sympathetic and susceptible reader who is likely to believe without question everything such a narrator says about the novel's events and secondary characters. On the other hand, having read the passage quoted earlier, most readers will not hear Vander's depictions of

Cass's inner world without some degree of scepticism. Banville, it seems, makes use of narrators like these to alienate his readers and cause them to question how reliable they are. In so doing, he creates an ironic distance between readers and narrators which does not allow the former to simply sympathise with the latter, but forces readers to question not only what they are being told but also how it is being told.

Vander says many things in his own defense. Aside from his declaration of love for Cass, he claims that he has tried to know her, and when he realises that he cannot know her in any linguistic sense and that his assumption of her voice and feelings has failed, he asserts that it is her very unknowability which he desires: "It was that very she, in all the impenetrable mysteriousness of her being entirely other, that I suddenly desired, with an intensity that made my heart constrict" (*Shroud* 335). This desire, moreover, is not sexual, although it does require that he "step out of [him]self and clamber bodily into someone else" (335). The problematic nature of Vander's desire is clear: he wishes to 'have' Cass in her state of otherness and unknowability, but at the same time he wishes to know her. He does not seem to realise the full irony of his position, which is that the very thing he claims to most value in Cass – her mystery – is the same thing he would destroy if he were to "clamber bodily" into her reality, to "possess" her as he desires to do (368). In Emmanuel Levinas's words, "if one could possess, grasp, and know the other, it would not be other. Possessing, knowing and grasping are synonyms of power" (qtd in Manning 136). The situation is laden with heavy irony, and undoubtedly open to censure if we subscribe to Levinsian ethics, which oppose "every attempt to name and to know the Other" (Manning 137).

In spite of this, the reader is inevitably not entirely unsympathetic toward Axel in the end, despite his failure to truly know Cass, and perhaps because of the honesty with which he admits his failure. Perhaps it is not sympathy but empathy one feels for Axel, whose heroic attempt and failure is not his alone but the inevitable result of one individual attempting to fully know another. The reader, in engaging with Banville's work, is required to imagine as Vander – and indeed Freddie – attempts to do, and must also fail, as they do, becoming incriminated in the process. Vander expresses interiority well when he says that "the human is all we have" (345), by which he means that all other life is remote from us because we inhabit only the reality of being human. In much the same way, being oneself is all one has and it is fundamentally impossible to understand the reality of any other being. It follows that to name another is at once

to possess them and to lose them or, as Blanchot puts it, "the word gives me the being, but it gives it to me deprived of being" (*Fire* 322).

3.5   The Problem of Representation

Shroud, *The Newton Letter* and the *Frames* trilogy are not, however, only concerned with narcissism. In these texts, a narcissistic narrator attempts to represent, in language, himself, the world around him, and, especially problematically, others. The question is how, if at all, a narcissistic individual who is bound by language to exist within an entirely subjective reality can represent another subjective individual. This is further complicated by the fact that the other's subjectivity is not entirely believable to the narrator. As Elke D'Hoker has argued, Banville's middle and later novels show a Modernist or even Post-Romantic concern with the representation of self and world through the "mediating role of language" (*Visions* 132). We can see a growing concern throughout his *oeuvre* with "the ethical consequences of representations", aligned with the general theoretical trend at the time involving a "turn to otherness" (132). Theorists like Derrida and Lévinas, in the twentieth century, were exploring otherness and its effect on ethics, and Banville's work also began to take a similar other-directed ethical turn during this period. Interestingly, *The Newton Letter*, published in 1982, critiques the behaviour toward others of the scientistsin the earlier novels of the tetralogy, though it is itself a part of this foursome. The scientists of *Doctor Copernicus* and *Kepler*, novels which are narrated in the third-person, show a marked difference to the unnamed first-person historian-narrator of *The Newton Letter*, who describes them as "high cold heroes who renounced the world and human happiness" in their quest for intellectual mastery over the former (49). Copernicus, in fact, reveals his profound narcissism, as well as a certain amount of scepticism about the lives of others, whom he describes as being "as real as anything can be that is not oneself" and "not known but invented", for "the world consists solely of oneself, while all else is phantom, necessarily" (229). The narrator of *The Newton Letter*, on the other hand, becomes intimately embroiled in the lives of his landlords, and makes a doomed attempt to articulate their stories. What follows, then, is a reading of this novella in terms of what it suggests about the ethics of otherness.

As we have seen, Banville in various ways repeatedly and effectively illustrates the paradox of otherness in his novels: Freddie's failure to imagine or perceive the inner life of Josie Bell, his performative relationship with A., his attempt at giving others a voice, in *Ghosts*; the interiority and narcissism inherent in the trauma experienced by Gabriel Swan; Axel Vander's misapprehension of Cass Cleave, and Cass's narcissistic disregard for what others might call the 'real' world. There is, furthermore, the constant blindness and confusion of his protagonists when it comes to other lives. I have discussed Vander's willful blindness to Cass's true state of mind and Morden's no less conscious blindness toward A. This blindness to the beloved is, in fact, mentioned by Lévinas, who explains that the otherness of the beloved, rather than becoming more familiar over time, is in fact intensified. Moreover, the essence of the relationship between a lover and their beloved, to Lévinas, "lies in the fact of being two" and that the "Other is absolutely Other" (qtd in Manning 135). For erotic love to be ethically sound, according to Lévinas, it should be "a love for an alterity that exceeds and contradicts any attempt at control, naming, or knowledge" (Manning 136).

However, there is a different sort of 'love' at work in *The Newton Letter*, in which the narrator constructs an elaborate – but entirely imaginary – story around the occupants of Fern House. This slender novel appears as a comic interlude between the final two tragic volumes of the science tetralogy– in keeping with the traditions of the ancient Greek theatre. The comedy consists almost entirely of a satirisation of the "narrator's received ideas about the Lawless family", and offers a commentary on his ability, as a historian, to chronicle the life of Isaac Newton (O'Connell 159). The latter's failure to accurately judge the Lawless family, whom he has before him as he writes, bodes ill for his attempt to realistically portray the life of Isaac Newton. In the same way that the other novels in the tetralogy question the status of the sciences of astronomy, physics and mathematics, *The Newton Letter* asks the reader to question the validity of historiography, particularly because it reaches us by way of narrative.

In fact, it is the conventions of narrative which cause the unnamed narrator of the novel to err so severely in his apprehension of his landlords at Ferns. He sees the Lawless family as definite literary 'types' within the Big House genre of Irish literature. As O'Connell points out, much of the satirical comedy of the novel arises from the narrator's "consistent misinterpretations of the Lawless family and the nature of the relationships between its members" and his "complacent belief that he knows exactly what they are like based on a few

hazy cultural signifiers" (161). Before he has even arrived on the scene, the name of the house has set up expectations for the narrator, expectations which ensure that, on arrival, he finds "much what [he had] expected" (*Newton* 3). On his first meeting with the ladies of the house, Charlotte and Ottilie, he already has a comic misapprehension of their identities and, although he soon realises that he had "got them nearly right, but the wrong way round" (4), this does not stop him from getting their entire story wrong throughout the remainder of the novel. This first mistake thus serves not as a warning to the historian, but rather as a foreshadowing to the reader of what is to come, and a warning not to trust the narrator in his assumptions about others. The narrator even admits to his fantasy of the place, which resembles Woolsthorpe, the birthplace of Isaac Newton, and represents an isolated space in which he will be able to finish his great work on that scientist. However, from the start of the novel it is clear that this is not the case, that he has already failed to complete the biography of Newton which he set out to write, and that Ferns is no Woolsthorpe Manor.

Despite all the evidence to the contrary, the narrator states that he "had them spotted for patricians from the start", and recognises in them "the unmistakable stamp of their class" (14-15). The class to which he imagines them belonging is the protestant Anglo-Irish aristocracy which typically populates the Irish Big House novel. The central part of the narrative is taken up with a description of the Lawless family as landed gentry fallen on hard times, despite a plethora of hints that this is not, in fact, the case. Nevertheless, the narrator blithely ignores even the most obvious evidence of the Lawless's profession, their Catholicism and republicanism, the illegitimate or at least irregular status of the child, Michael, together with countless other small hints which reveal to the reader, if not to the narrator, the fictionality of his perception. His representations, impervious as they are to the actual facts of the situation, reveal him to be as entirely narcissistic as any other of Banville's narrators. His "self-centeredness and indifference" – that is, his narcissism – "preclude any true understanding or just representation of the people around him" (d'Hoker, *Visions* 138). Thus, he represents the others in his story not as truly other, but tries instead to reduce them to something he can grasp, name and therefore control.

In keeping with his stubborn insistence on situating the Lawless family within the Big House genre, the narrator paints the story of Charlotte as the landowner's daughter who marries beneath herself a man who turns out to be a "fortune hunter," a "sot" and a "waster" (39, 22). The narrator claims that he "saw" the whole story in their demeanour and actions. His 'seeing' is,

however, undermined constantly by his mistakes and revisions as, for example, when he assumes Michael to be the legitimate child of Charlotte and Edward, but on further reflection the idea "came" to him that he was, in fact, the unwed Otillie's child. This discovery – if we can call it that – does not give him pause, but merely sends his story off on another tangent. The awkwardness of his relationship with the Lawless's, their constant challenge to his idea of what they should – they must – be, frequently gives him reason to consider the mistake he made in coming to Ferns, but he is held there by the "insistent enigma of other people" (23). It is ironic that, although he is drawn to others insofar as they are inscrutable to him, just like Axel Vander is drawn to Cass's unknowability in *Shroud*, he, like Axel, feels the need to constantly make them known to him by imagining a complex but genre-bound story around them. Similarly to Axel, too, the narrator of *The Newton Letter* gives an entirely imaginary voice to his others and in so doing elides their actual, enigmatic voices and replaces them with a voice which sounds suspiciously like his own. These representations of others, rather than accepting them as other, instead reduce them to the same. As d'Hoker contends, they serve to keep "the strangeness, alterity and materiality of the world at bay" and, furthermore, protect the identity of the protagonist from any sort of dependence on or dangerous intrusions from others (*Visions* 138).

In other words, the representations work in much the same way as Copernicus's and Kepler's scientific theories – they are an attempt to master and order the chaotic world around them so that it can be understood and, through this understanding, subjugated to the narrator's will. Generic descriptions of others, the reduction of difference to similarity, and the denial of others as subjective individuals are all ways to 'save the phenomena' and protect the self from the intrusion of the unknown. In other words, again citing d'Hoker, the "split representation of female figures […] presents but another way of containing otherness and warding off mortality" (*Visions* 144).

It is not only the Lawless family as a whole who are inserted into a tale straight out of an Irish Big House novel, but also the two women of this family, who are type-cast into two roles which, to anyone acquainted with B's work, are painfully familiar. D'Hoker labels these two types of female figures "the virgin and the whore", and points out characters in *Doctor Copernicus*, *Kepler* and *Mefisto* who conform to the same pattern (*Visions* 138). The whore is marked by her corporeality, fleshiness, sexuality, noisiness, lack of intellectual depth and self-control, while the virgin appears light and insubstantial, silent and wise. The 'virginal' woman is

always out of the protagonist's grasp, ethereal and disembodied, while the 'whore' is physically all too available, so that her proximity confronts him with too much reality. In *The Newton Letter*, these two types are clearly illustrated in the figures of Charlotte and Ottilie Lawless, whose true otherness is elided in the process.

The narrator starts an affair with the younger Ottilie soon after his arrival at Ferns. He does not pursue her in any way, but describes the experience as one in which he is "offered, without conditions, a body [he] didn't really want," but it is Ottilie's body which is thereafter the focus of his attention (30). He admits the discomfort of being "inhabited" by her, as she "burrowed into [his] life at the lodge with stealthy determination" (31-32). He describes their affair as being "conducted through the intermediary of these neutral things, a story, a memory, a dream," articulating perhaps the necessary distance between two subjectivities who have only the poor lens of language through which to see and be seen (33). There is no complaint about this distance, however. Rather he feels that he "had not contracted to be known as she was trying to know me," hinting at a certain unwillingness to enter into an emotional relationship with her (35). Since it is under Ottilie's "passionate scrutiny" that he notes this, it is clearly her gaze which discomforts him, although he seems incapable of realising the disjunct between his discomfort and his own ongoing and vicarious study of the Lawless family (35). This is markedly similar to the way Vander complains about Cass's unknowability, while simultaneously precluding himself from the possibility of really knowing or being known by her. Moreover, the attitude of both Axel and the narrator of *The Newton Letter* fails to live up to the Levinasian standard of adoring the beloved for the sake of their alterity rather than reducing them to a name or type, which is, of course "an act of power and violence" against them (Manning 136).

The incident in which Ottilie redirects his gaze back at him reminds the narrator of his age and brings to mind thoughts of death as though, as d'Hoker suggests, "being known by or emotionally committed to other people […] would endanger [his] spiritual sanity, weaken [his] precious independence and, hence, confront [him] with the inevitable lack within [himself]" (*Visions* 136). Just like Banville's other scientists, the narrator of *The Newton Letter* fears that being known by another, or drawing close to them, would signify his own lack or incompleteness and, ultimately, his own death. Hypocritically, though, these figures themselves still attempt to know others in this same way and, in so doing, betray their inability to conceive of others as

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possessing subjectivities just like their own. The narcissistic narrator feels, similarly to Axel in *Shroud*, that "a name is hard to speak", because "to name another is somehow to unname oneself" (141). Banville's narrators, then, are intensely aware of the power of naming, most likely because they are for the most part writers themselves – either in the narration of their own stories, their theories about the world, or their stories of others –and wield this power against others. That is, they understand Blanchot's comment: "when I speak, death speaks in me" and when "I say my name […] it is as though I were chanting my own dirge" (*Fire* 323-4). Moreover, although they do not hesitate to name others, to attempt to know them and so wield power over them, they are reluctant themselves to be named or known. It is perhaps for this reason that the narrator of *The Newton Letter* remains unnamed: he would not commit that violence upon himself. Blanchot writes that the danger of naming oneself is that it results in a separation of self from self – from the I who is I and the I who says I – so that the name becomes "an objective, impersonal presence […] which goes beyond me and whose stone like immobility performs exactly the same function for me as a tombstone weighing on the void" (*Fire* 324). The narrator of this novel, then, fears that to identify himself would cause the same violence to be committed against him as he commits against the Lawless family.

Let us return, nevertheless, to the depiction of the Lawless family. While Ottilie, with her "insistent bodily presence" clearly takes the part of the 'whore' in this novella, her aunt Charlotte is the aloof 'virgin' figure, with whom the narrator later imagines himself to be in love, but who remains tantalisingly out of reach. It is Charlotte's very out-of-reach-ness which makes her so desirable, I would argue, since her absence means that the narrator is not required to deal with her alterity but is able instead to reduce her to the same by creating an entirely imaginative version of her. He sees Charlotte through the unreliable and distorted lens of memory, and admits that in his favourite recollections of her she was "not present at all" other than as an absence which "throbs in these views more powerfully, more poignantly than any presence" (*Newton* 51-2) Furthermore, although the narrator seems to have no problem describing the fleshy Ottilie, he says that the words to describe the ethereal Charlotte "don't exist," and if they did they would need to be "balanced on the brink of saying, another version of silence" (52). It is clear from even these few lines that the real Charlotte has been elided by the narrator's imagined version of her. Crucially, in this regard, he admits that, when she is present, her "physical presence itself seemed overdone, a clumsy representation of the essential she" (52). This means

that it is now the imaginary Charlotte who is real, and the real Charlotte who lacks authenticity. The narrator is determined to make the imaginary Charlotte "incarnate" by "the force of [his] unwavering, meticulous attention", so that she may rise "on her scallop shell through the waves and *be*" (53, emphasis in original). There is, of course, a transparent allusion here to Botticelli's *Birth of Venus* and – although there are several references in the novel to Cupid, Clio, the muse of history, and other mythological elements – I think that the main focus of this passage is not so much on the myth, or the fairly prosaic identification of Charlotte with Venus, but on the work of art and the artist. The narrator, here, is assuming the role of the artist who, Pygmalion-like, has created the object of his own desire. In turn, this prefigures the *Frames* Trilogy, which is more self-consciously about the links between art, identity and representation, and which I will discuss further later in this study.

The real Charlotte never enters into a relationship with the protagonist of *The Newton Letter*, but is present in all his dealings with Ottilie, with whom he is still having an affair of sorts. When he is with Ottilie, he suffers a sort of delusion in which the two women merge:"my human girl's blonde hair would turn black, her fingers pale, and she would become something new, neither herself nor the other, but a third – Charlottilie" (57). Alternatively, he imagines Charlotte to be present with them, watching. Nevertheless, after the narrator's obsession with Charlotte begins, he is unable to maintain his view of the Lawless's as characters from a Big House novel. His story begins to unravel in a series of small shocks as he realises that they are Catholics, that Michael is the adopted child of Charlotte and Edward, that Ottilie is not a 'soiled' unwed mother but a virgin, that Edward is not simply a sot but tragically afflicted with cancer and sure to die, and that his beloved Charlotte is, in fact, heavily sedated to control her depression and does not even hear his confession of love. His violent reaction to Ottilie when she says that he might think himself clever but really does not "know a thing", is simply more proof that the story – both the story of the Lawless family and that of the narrator – cannot hold up to scrutiny(68). It is a further shock to him, undoubtedly, when Ottilie articulates his own feelings about others back to him, musing that "sometimes [she] think[s] [he doesn't] exist at all […] just a voice, going on" (79). The novel ends with "a vast soft crash" which is as much a result of the shock of his creatures, his creations, coming alive in their own undeniable and subjective ways, as of the summer's end which sends the narrator away from Ferns (88). He maintains a relationship with Ottilie, though, and seems at last to have begun to appreciate her "essential

otherness," to listen to what she has to say about herself rather than telling her story for her (93). It seems that the act of narration has, in some measure, tempered his narcissism and allowed him to appreciate the sublimity of otherness *as* otherness, rather than constantly attempting to reduce otherness to something that is both understandable and able to be possessed.

3.6   Conclusion

What this chapter has primarily illustrated is the tendency of relationships in Banville's novels to be depicted as particularly fraught. At the very least, characters tend to utterly misunderstand one another, and at worst they commit both physical and linguistic atrocities against each other. On the surface, it might seem as though Banville's protagonists behave in this way due to a chronic and pathological narcissism, but on closer inspection it becomes clear that narcissism – that is, excessive self-consciousness coupled with an inability to see beyond the self – is, in fact, not a psychological condition but an inevitable result of being a human being. In other words, they must express themselves through language and necessarily experience the world through the narrow lens of their own subjective reality. Inevitably, this affects the individual's relationships not only with others, but also with non-human animals, objects in the world and themselves, and results in shame, misunderstanding and a frustrating inability to accurately portray the self or others in language. At the same time, however, there is an overriding impulse to make a failure-ridden attempt to do so.

CHAPTER 4: THE TRUTH AND THE PEN

In the final pages of *Shroud*, Cass gifts Axel with the pen which he has ostensibly been using to write his narrative. Inside the pen she has hidden a photo which proves that all along she was aware of the narrator's deepest secret – that he is not, in fact, Axel Vander, but has been impersonating the real Axel for his entire adult life. What seems to be suggested here is that truth is found not in the world, but rather inside the pen. Freddie Montgomery, too, highlights the power of the act of writing to reveal something of the writer when he says that his pen sometimes "goes prattling along all by itself and the strangest things come out, things I did not know I was aware of" (*Ghosts* 260). If we take the pen to stand for the text, then we could say that truth is found in the working out of the text. Medhi Ghassemi suggests that, by situating the incriminating photo of the narrator and the real Axel inside the pen, Banville asserts 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" (41). In the previous chapter I explored these movements toward the self or others as possible ways of discovering truth and accessing excess. However, it became clear that, insofar as language sunders the individual from themself and others, there is no deep or significant truth to be found in either. All that can be intimated, when one gazes into the void of the self, or the eyes of another, is the void itself: the irreducible remainder which is forever diminishing into the distance. Banville's protagonist-narrators tend to use the act of narration as a means of self-discovery. In this chapter, I aim to explore the narrative devices used by Banville in order to present the reader with these solipsistic, narcissistic narrators who, as we have seen, simultaneously disgust or distance the reader while also confronting them with a mirror of their own human reality. In so doing, I refer back to Mark O'Connell and Maurice Blanchot, look to literary theorists such as Patricia Waugh, Linda Hutcheon and Schlomith Rimmon-Kenan, and engage with Banvillean scholars Sidia Fiorato and Medhi Ghassemi.

4.1 A Chasm

While the previous chapter has explored the narcissism of Banville's characters, Mark O'Connell sees narcissism as an inherent feature of Banville's characters and texts. He quotes Linda Hutcheon's definition of narcissistic texts as being "explicitly aware of their status as literary artifacts, of their narrative and world-creating processes, and of the necessary presence of the reader" (O'Connell 154). Hutcheon goes on to explain that the reader, in these texts, "is made aware of the fact that he too, in reading, is actively creating a fictional universe" (28). Just like the narcissistic individual, then, the narcissistic text is self-conscious in the extreme – conscious of itself as text, of its reader as agent, and of its inevitable failure to represent reality. The upshot of this is that a narcissistic text inevitably becomes a metatextual narrative which constantly reveals to the reader its status as a fictional representation. Patricia Waugh defines metafiction as follows:

> *Metafiction* is a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artifact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality. In providing a critique of their own methods of construction, such writings not only examine the fundamental structures of narrative fiction, they also explore the possible fictionality of the world outside the literary fictional text. (2)

 Banville's texts are certainly metafictional insofar as they provide a commentary within the text on the process of making a text. His narrators, as we have seen, are often engaged in their own process of creation, and this process reflects and comments on the author's creative project in writing the text itself. In *Doctor Copernicus*, for example, when Nicolas comments on the writing process as one "of progressive failing" in which he has to watch "in mute suspended panic his blundering pen pollute and maim those concepts that, unexpressed, had throbbed with limpid purity and beauty," the text implicitly identifies the frustrated scientist with his similarly frustrated creator (93). Nicolas goes on to complain of a lack of some "essential connection" between "the universe of dancing planets" and himself, between the two of which "mere words and figures on paper could not mediate" (93). The same might be said of Banville and the distance between his imagination and what he actually manages to set down on paper. Nicolas is

repeatedly struck, in fact, by the "failure of things and times to connect" (114). Freddie too, in the mental voice of Professor Kreutzner in *Ghosts,* struggles with a feeling of incongruence:

> How can these disparate things – that wind, this fly, himself brooding there – how can they be together, continuous with each other, in the same reality? Incongruity: disorder and incongruity, the grotesqueries of the always-slipping mask, these were the only constants he had ever been able to discern. He closed his eyes for a moment, taking a tiny sip of darkness. (227)

Furthermore, Freddie observes another kind of incongruity among his imaginary castaways when they speak to one another,

> Thus they converse, haltingly, between long pauses. Behind the language that they speak other languages speak in silence, ones they know and yet avoid, the languages of childhood and of loss. This reticence seems imperative. Both [Felix and Sophie] are thinking how strange it is to be here and at the same time to be conscious of it, seeing themselves somehow reflected in each other. That must be how it is with humans, apart and yet together, in their world, their human world. (354)

What is expressed here – as in many other places in Banville's work – is a slippage of sorts, a vast and impassable gap between what can be seen between the world and what one can express in language – not to mention the giant slippage involved in the distance Freddie puts between himself and 'humans,' as though he is himself not one at all. There are incongruent elements to every part of our world: appearances do not show what is really going on; words cannot express life as it truly is; a book is no more a picture of the world than a map is. There is a chasm between that which is said and that which is, and this is revealed nowhere more clearly than in vocal interactions between humans. So much more happens beneath the surface than is said in the sparse, halting, fraught conversations which typically transpire between Banville's self-conscious, narcissistic characters. An animal or mute object is simply there, it merely exists, but humans are cursed with the power to "be here and at the same time to be conscious of it" – that is, they both exist on the material level of existence and are also aware of their own existence there, and between these two spheres there is at best only a very tenuous connection. Within the

metafictional literary text, as we will see, this disparity is further emphasised by the inclusion of narrators who are both text and aware of their existence as text. Furthermore, as discussed in the previous chapter, people are both aware and unaware of the subjectivity of others, so that they are simultaneously "apart and yet together" insofar as their experiences of the world are simultaneously similar and separate, subjective and uniform. We are used to this gap by now; it is of course, that infinite space in which resides the remainder or excess which cannot be expressed. In what follows, I aim to examine ways in which Banville expresses the inexpressible through the narrative strategies he employs in his work.

Banville has admitted that his writing process is accompanied primarily by "puzzlement, bafflement," a sensation he shares with his narrators, who "are always motivated by a kind of elemental confusion – about the world, about their own selves, and about the endlessly enigmatic relationship between the two" (O'Connell 145). It is a sensation that is also, to some extent, communicated to the reader, who must try to make sense of a multiplicity of allusions, illusions, correspondences and red herrings along the multiple planes of narrative which make up a Banville novel and which create "a kind of hall-of-mirrors effect, whereby the reader loses all sense of distinction between which surfaces are being reflected and which are doing the reflection" (O'Connell 167). Banville's language, then, might be described as a 'metalanguage' which "takes another language as its object" in order to display the novel's "conventionality […] its condition of artifice" and thereby explore "the problematic relationship between life and fiction" (Waugh 4). O'Connell's talk of reflections, furthermore, is certainly not accidental, but invokes the multitudes of references in Banville to the text as a mirror or – more often than not – as unlike a mirror or as the failure of a mirror, an image which is commonly used in Banville's work to express the disjunct between reality and text. Copernicus, for example, tells his disciple Rheticus off for imagining that his book is a "mirror in which the real world is reflected," when in fact it is beyond human endeavour to create such a mirror precisely because of what was mentioned above – a three-way dichotomy, a trichotomy – between the world as it is experienced by any given subjectivity, the world as it really is, and the world as it can be expressed in words on a page. Nicolas explains this paradox as follows:

> in order to build such a mirror, I should need to be able to perceive
> the world whole, in its entirety and in its essence. But our lives are
> lived in such a tiny, confined space, and in such disorder, that this

> perception is not possible. There is no contact, none worth
> mentioning, between the universe and the place in which we live.
>
> (206)

As we saw in the previous chapter, it is no coincidence that the image of the mirror is also used to describe romantic relationships between individuals in Banville's novels, notably *Shroud*. There is a curious conflation, in fact, of "the mysteries of artistic creation with those of interpersonal perception," between, that is, character narcissism and narrative narcissism (O'Connell 167). Just as Axel's or Freddie's or any other narrator's representation of others presents the reader with a problem, so too does Banville's representation of these narrators. The very process of fiction-making – which is foregrounded in Banville's texts – can be "seen as a kind of cipher for interpersonal relations" (O'Connell 168). Since interpersonal relations in Banville have been discussed at length in the previous chapter, I shall now examine some of the ways in which the writing process further foregrounds the issue of subjectivity.

4.2 God or Ghost?

Without actually using the same term to describe it, Blanchot outlines a kind of literature which, given the above discussion, sounds decidedly narcissistic:

> Literature professes to be important while at the same time
> considering itself an object of doubt. It confirms itself as it
> disparages itself. It seeks itself: this is more than it has a right to
> do, because literature may be one of those things which deserve to
> be found but not to be sought. (*Fire* 301)

Just like the narcissistic individual, therefore, literature which is worthy of the name is intensely self-reflective: it suffers from an overweening sense of its own importance even as it is preemptively aware of its own failure. Furthermore, its object is only itself insofar as the fictional text is an entire universe unto itself and, at the same time, a mere object in the world which constantly fails to represent that world adequately. The book, as Jorge Luis Borges's "illustrious Giambattista Marino" realises, is not "a mirror of the world, but rather one more thing added to the world" (38). I would argue that Banville's work adheres to Blanchot's definition of literature, "which is both poem and novel" (*Fire* 302). Blanchot goes on to describe

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the language of literature as "a search for this moment which precedes literature," in other words, a search for excess, which also serves to define Banville's fiction (*Fire* 327). With regard to Borges's "A Yellow Rose," the book is an attempt to see the rose "as Adam might have seen it in Paradise […] in its own eternity and not in […] words" (38).

In his allegorical essay, "The Gaze of Orpheus," Blanchot uses the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice to explain the process of creating a literature which "wants the cat as it exists" in the world, rather than as it is figured in language. A literature which seeks "Lazarus lost and not Lazarus saved" (*Fire* 327); desires Lazarus as he is in the dark before the tomb is opened, rather than brought back into life and light. Blanchot's explanation through parable, that is, by using the myth of Orpheus as an analogue for the artist's task, is much clearer than the enigmatic words of his more philosophical essays. Orpheus's *katabasis* is made possible by the power of his art, which "causes the night to open" and Hades to welcome him into the dark. Orpheus is the artist, and, to him, Eurydice symbolises "the limit of what art can attain […] the fundamentally dark point towards which art, desire, death and the night all seem to lead" (99). She is, furthermore, veiled, only dimly perceived but never truly seen. Eurydice is the thing in itself, that which cannot be brought by language into the light of knowledge, and she exists only in the dark. To reveal her to the light is impossible, for in the light of language and knowledge she would not exist in the same ghostly form as she does in the dark. Hades, knowing that Orpheus will fail, sets up the condition that he may bring Eurydice back into the light only if he never looks at her. In Hades' trick we have the conditions of writing literature: to attempt, in the face of inevitable failure, to say that which cannot be said. The reason this is impossible, according to Blanchot, is because "the depth does not surrender itself face to face; it only reveals itself by concealing itself in the work" (99). That is why Orpheus must look at Eurydice, who disappears at once into the dark, revealing "the essence of the night" to be "inessential" (100).

Orpheus, then, betrays his purpose in entering Hell, and betrays the work. However, at the same time he is loyal to his own impulse, which demands Eurydice be seen not in her "everyday charm" or in the "intimacy of familiar life," but "in her nocturnal darkness, in her distance," to be seen "not when she is visible, but when she is invisible […] as the strangeness of that which excludes all intimacy." His true desire is not to make her live, but "to have the fullness of her death living in her" (100). Orpheus, like other artists, truly wants to have his cake and eat it. He would have Eurydice in the fullness of what she now is, a creature of the dark, and

he would have her visible in this state in the light. Just as, in the previous chapter, we saw Vander's and Freddie's desire to both have their women and know them, Orpheus would grasp Eurydice in the fullness of herself. He fails to do so, as he attempts to bring her into the light, where she could not, in fact, be her full self. In other words, the aim of literature is to reveal that which cannot be revealed, which defies revelation and which, when examined directly, tends to immediately melt away into darkness and confusion. What the myth shows, of course, is that the thing itself defies revelation. It is a thing of the dark and will remain there. The searchlight of the gazing subject, or the focus of literary expression, can only catch a glimpse of Eurydice as she disintegrates in its regard. Only by not looking, by not existing as an individual defined by language, but by becoming a part of the dark can Orpheus apprehend his Eurydice. Only in an existence in which there is merely "*my* consciousness *without me*" can an artist enter the dark and there apprehend excess (Blanchot, *Fire* 328, emphasis in original). As in all Greek myth, there is a sense in the story of Orpheus that he was meant to try, and to fail as he did, for the sake of art or the work. In looking back at Eurydice, Orpheus betrays the work but, in Blanchot's retelling, this betrayal, or forgetting, of the work is what makes the work "the most certain masterpiece" even as the essence of the work fades away, becoming invisible again as it nostalgically "return[s] to the uncertainty of the origin" (103). Orpheus returns, alone, to the light and the world and there spends the rest of his days attempting to express what he has experienced; to bring something of the dark into the light. This is the role of the artist, the writer.

Uncertainty is, indeed, also the primary attribute of Banville's work. As mentioned earlier, his experience of writing is primarily one of confusion. He does not write from a sense of certainty, but rather uses the act of narration as a means by which he might (but never does) find certainty. In so doing he clearly identifies with his equally baffled narrators, who likewise use the act of writing as "an attempt at ordering experience" (O'Connell 145). He also, it would seem, identifies with Orpheus, who brought up from Hell some intimation of excess with which to imbue his work, just as Banville believes that his work is dragged up from that same "darksome well" in which lie dreams, selfhood and other instances of excess (qtd in Izarra 183). Both the author and his protagonists, then, are motivated to write by their ultimate puzzlement regarding themselves and the world around them, as well as a certain compulsion to attempt to say the impossible. Fiction, then, does not come into being in order to describe a self to its readers, but rather the self (that of the protagonist and that of the author) is created through the

act of fiction-making. The author, therefore, exists in a double bind in which he "has no talent until he has written, but he needs talent in order to write" (Blanchot, *Fire* 303). What Blanchot means here is that the author cannot identify as an author until he has written something, but he needs to be an author in order to write. He "needs the work he produces in order to be conscious of his talents and of himself." In fact, "before the work exists, not only does he not know who he is, but he is nothing" (Blanchot, *Fire* 303).

Moreover, as I have previously discussed at length, the work of fiction is often considered in postmodern fiction to be an inevitable failure, which raises questions about the identity of its creator. This paradox might indeed be one of the reasons for Banville's and his protagonists' elemental confusion. It is easy enough to say that the protagonist of a novel only comes into being in the novel and dies when it ends, but to suggest that the writer undergoes a similar process of creation and destruction with each book that he writes must result, at the very least, in bafflement. Since Banville's narrators, for the most part, are writers themselves, they might be said to mirror the author's experience of the writing process. Freddie, for example, stages a struggle between determination and free will in his narration of the *Frames* Trilogy, while at the same time his own fictionality is flaunted before the reader, so that "the author and the reader collude at the expense of the narrator," who experiences a burning anxiety about his own status as fiction (O'Connell 163). Banville's narrators are in fact constantly expressing their anxiety about the status of their own reality and agency in the world, and frequently worry that an outside agency is controlling them. Freddie worries that there is to the events of his narrative a "secret structure, held immovably in place by an unknown and unknowable force," something "so immense that [he] could not see it" which was a secret "everyone was in on, except [him]" (363). It is almost as though he senses that he is merely a character in a story.

In the world of the novel, the author, it would seem, is god. In the metafictional novel, though, the "traditional figure of the author" – that is, "as a transcendental imagination fabricating, through an ultimately monologic discourse, structures of order which will replace the forgotten material text of the world" – is rejected (Waugh 16). Banville's novels, moreover, often feature a god who is not merely dead but a bottomless black void. Even those protagonists, like Nicolas Copernicus, who lived in a profoundly religious, god-centred world, express simultaneously the abovementioned anxiety about being controlled, and a consciousness of the absolute absence of god. Nicolas begins his life religiously, but at some point "God abandoned

him" (115). Strangely enough – and perhaps luckily given his position as a canon of the church – Copernicus retains his faith in the rituals of the church, while recognising that "behind the ritual, there was for him now only a silent white void that was everywhere and everything and eternal" (*Copernicus* 115). At the same time, it bears noting, he also loses faith in his book and loses the certainty that "the thing itself could be said." The book careers "headlong into a loquacious silence" in which the truth cannot be said, but rather "all that could be said was the saying" (116). Copernicus realises here, like Borges, that his book is not about the world, but about itself, it has failed to describe the world, in other words, and is merely another object in the world. The implication of this realisation which Copernicus does not see, but which is relevant to our reading of the novel, is that it proves the inevitability of narcissism and frees him from diagnosis as a pathological narcissist. Despite this failure and disillusionment – which occur about halfway through the narrative – Copernicus is compelled to continue writing his book. He is, like Beckett, obliged to try to say what cannot be said in the full knowledge of his eventual failure. So God, according to Nicolas, does not exist, and in his place – at the very centre of things – there is only a void. Later, however, it is Nicolas himself – the author within the work – who is described as "a void, as if, behind the ritual, all was a hollow save for one thin taut cord of steely inexpressible anguish stretching across the nothingness" (132).

Freddie, in *Ghosts,* strangely comes to the same conclusion from a position close to atheism. He admits only to a "hazy sort of half belief in some general force, a supreme malignancy in operation behind the apparent chaos and contingency of the world," and goes on to describe this malignancy as "*dues ridens*," "he that laughs," a "rascally old boy" who treats humans as his playthings (361). Freddie then describes god as a phantom limb, a "vast and deep blackness" or void which frightened him not quite as much as "the fact of the need itself," a need that leads him to seek god in a moment of despair (362). God, in Freddie's analogy, is that which is simultaneously desperately needed and absolutely hidden, denied to humankind. Furthermore, the fact of his absence is less frightening – or at least less surprising – than the individual's simultaneous knowledge of it and the attendant knowledge that they need god. The author– and Nicolas and Freddie are just as much authors as Banville is – is also absent from the world of the book. Freddie knows, and resents, the fact that his free will as a character is curtailed by the determinism of the author. However, the writer is similarly determined, insofar as the limits of language and the existence of excess compromise any agency they might have. The author, then,

who is a god of his small world, is void to its inhabitants – just as god is void to the inhabitants of the 'real' world. After the death of God, it is indeed a bleak and baffling world into which we emerge, one in which the utter indifference of the universe or any higher power to human life is tangible. Copernicus asks Rheticus, "if a bottomless void never satiated lay hidden beneath it all, what then would life be but despair?," leaving us with little doubt that in his view of things a bottomless void does, indeed, exist behind the mirror of language which we erect to attempt to bring some order to our universe (208).

I have discussed *Ghosts* at some length, but I would like to return once more to this text in order to further tease out the congruencies – and incongruencies – between the author, the author-narrator and god in this novel. Freddie, as I have said previously, narrates the story of *Ghosts* in an attempt not only to discover himself, but also to resurrect other lives and, in doing so, atone for his heinous crime. The novel is, furthermore, an extended ekphrastic description of a painting by the fictional artist Vaublin, whom Freddie is studying – but more on that later. Furthermore, it relies heavily on Shakespeare's *The Tempest* and Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* as intertexts. On the very first page, the narrator both asks and answers a most pertinent question: "who speaks? I do. Little god" (191). Besides being a reference to Beckett's trilogy – which is similarly obsessed with this question – this comprises the novel's first attempt – and it is an early one indeed – at signalling to the reader that all is not as it seems. In other words, this utterance sets up the text as metafictional, as a text which is aware of its textuality. In two words, Banville engenders a resonating question in the mind of his reader which shapes their perception of his entire novel. Blanchot theorises that the author writes the question "which kept interrogating [him] while he was writing" into his text, so that it may similarly interrogate the reader while they are reading. For Blanchot, the question "lies silent" within the work; it is not clearly asked but rather implied. Furthermore, it is not addressed so much to the reader as "to language, behind the person who is writing and the person who is reading." The query is addressed "by language which has become literature," rather than by the author himself. It is a question, furthermore, that has no definitive answer and "seeks itself" only (*Fire* 301).The question of who, exactly, is speaking and on what authority is frequently embedded in Banville's novels, as it is in Beckett's, but *Ghosts* asks it outright, and it should remain at the forefront of our minds as we read this text. Blanchot's answer to the question of who speaks would probably be that it is not I who speak, but "it," as in literature itself, the space of literature where "a voice intones obscurely, drawn on

by a speaking that does not begin and does not finish, that cannot speak and cannot but speak" (Critchley, "Who Speaks" 128).

So, let us engage in the futile task of seeking the answer to the question Banville has put to himself and his reader right at the outset of this novel, and which he has ostensibly also answered. This distinguishes Banville from Beckett, who similarly begins *Molone Dies* with a series of questions – "where now? Who now? When now?" (293) – to which the narrative voice cannot give an answer except to utter the famous words, "I, say I. Unbelieving" (293). This phrase foregrounds the question of narrative voice in Beckett's novel. As I have intimated, Banville's text stages a version of the same question. Freddie, though, claims that he is a "little god," because he controls the world which appears on the pages he is narrating. It would indeed seem that he is a god, for he appears to have an omniscient view of the inner workings of each character in the novel, and in particular of the seven castaways who are more admittedly his own creation than Licht's and the professor's. The characters seem to exist on different ontological and narrative (or diegetic) levels. There is Freddie, the narrator, and then his co-inhabitants of the house, Licht and Professor Kreutzner – the natives of this place – and finally there are Freddie's "foundered creatures" – the outsiders (193).According to Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, there is always a "hierarchical structure" to narrative levels in which the highest level – the "extradiegetic level" – is "immediately superior" to the first narrative (94). This would be Freddie's narrative when he is telling his own story regarding his crime and how he came to the island, and includes the characters of Licht and Kreutzner. The "diegetic level," narrated by the extradiegetic level, is the next level down and constitutes the "events themselves" (94): that is, the arrival of the castaways and the action that follows, narrated by Freddie. Rimmon-Kenan mentions a third diegetic level, a "hypodiegetic level," which includes "the stories told by fictional characters" narrated by a narrator who exists on the diegetic level (94). In *Ghosts*, this is the painting, *Le Monde d'Or*, which is described in the novel and provides an intertextual commentary on the text. This will be discussed in more detail in the next section. I will now take a closer look at the ontological levels found in *Ghosts*.

Freddie not only drops constant hints about the status of his own fictionality, but also admits quite candidly that the castaways are creatures of his own imaginings. Licht and the Professor, on the other hand, maintain their 'real' status, though Freddie is slightly less confident about the inner workings of their respective minds. In fact, it turns out that he had the wrong idea

about the two of them from the outset, and that it is the servile Licht who owns the house and the seemingly authoritative, reclusive professor who is a sort of lodger there – as, indeed, is Freddie. Furthermore, it appears that two of the outsiders – the beautiful Flora and Machiavellian Felix – step out of their own reality and into that of the island. Moreover, Freddie appears so seldom to the characters in the novel, and takes so little part in the latter's action, that it seems at times as though he is an omniscient, god-like narrator. This impression is confirmed by the authoritative manner in which he narrates the thoughts and feelings of his castaways, who are utterly dependent on him, "the god of inspiration," for their every thought and action (195). At one point, he emerges in a gleeful display of power to say that he "could leave them there […] could walk away now and leave them there forever," and they would simply fade away – as most of them actually do during the course of the novel – because they are simply not real at all (203).In another instance, he worries that he might "die and leave them there, trapped, the tide halted, the boat stuck fast forever," for if he, the creator, were to die it would "end it all, space and time, one huge flash and then darkness and a blessed silence as the babble stops" (302). Here Freddie, in a postmodernist moment, realises that it is only his own ongoing voice which keeps this entire world in existence. In the world of the novel, he is the god who spoke and said, 'let there be light,' bringing the universe into awareness of itself and recordable existence. It is he, too, a "forked beast squatting on the midden of the world," who will be the hangman, the destroyer, "in the end" (302).

Everything is not always as it seems, however, and Freddie frequently hints at his fallibility as a narrator and surrogate author in moments of slippage in which the layered fictionality of his world is revealed – as, for instance, when he urges himself to "pile on" the details in his description of the house (195), revels gleefully in his power over those 'mere mortals' he directs, notices "holes in the backdrop, through which the bare sky twinkles" (370),or corrects himself on small elements of the castaways' dress or appearance that he "assembles […] gradually, with great care" (273). A case in point is the issue of Croke's hat: "Croke took off his boater; or do I mean panama, yes, Croke took off his panama" (196). Freddie acknowledges this slippage when he mentions "worlds within worlds" which "bleed into each other," while he exists "at once here and there, then and now, as if by magic" (239).The magic to which he refers is, no doubt, his own as, Prospero-like, he summons the castaways and manipulates their fates as he pleases. It is not only *The Tempest* which is alluded to in this novel,

but also Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*. The first hint of Banville's intertextual engagement with this narrative is in the name of Professor Kreutzner, an Anglicisation of Crusoe. The relationship between Kreutzner and the island, and between Kreutzner and Licht, also mirrors that of Crusoe with his island and his man Friday. In Defoe's novel, Crusoe arrives in an island wilderness and forcibly, imperialistically transforms it into a sort of "little England" which he can call home (Rogers 390). No less forcibly, he takes possession of Friday in the act of naming him and recreates him in his own image. There is an obvious parallel with Freddie's narrative here, in which the newcomer to the place who takes possession and control through the act of narration. Just as Crusoe recreates the island in line with his European conceptual paradigms, so too does Freddie recreate his island in line with his literary paradigms – part of which, of course, would include a knowledge of Defoe's text. The revelation that Licht, in fact, owns the land which Freddie possesses and colonises aligns him even more closely with the displaced Friday, who is likewise made a servant on his own native soil.

Freddie speaks of the worlds within the text – that is, the narrative levels – as mirrors which reflect "another place entirely" from that of the original, and which sometimes become permeable so that "the glass turns to air" and his characters "step through it without a sound" and walk into his "world" (239). This passage is followed by one in which Sophie, Croke and Felix, three of the castaways, enter a room in which Freddie is sitting but, somehow, carry on as though he is not there at all, or as though he is a ghost whose presence they detect only the slightest hint. Or, indeed, as though he is a god. There is an intensely ironic ambivalence at work here between the role of god as all-powerful father and creator, and god as liminal, ephemeral ghost. These frequent revisions or moments of self-doubt ensure that the reader never settles comfortably into the rhythm of the novel, but is constantly reminded of its layers of (meta)fictionality. Thus Rimmon-Kenan's diegetic levels are muddied by the simple fact that Freddie is the narrator at every level of the narrative and, even when the text is detailing the thoughts and memories of the castaways, it is important to remember that it is Freddie, the "little god," who speaks, and Banville through him.

Furthermore, characters constantly move between different narrative levels. This "transgression of [...] boundaries between narrative levels" is called metalepsis (Malina 1). Thus Banville constantly sets up oppositions and destroys them, blurring the distinctions between the ontological levels of the narrative strands of the novel so that his reader can never relax into a

settled idea of what is 'real' and is rather constantly reminded that language "*constructs* rather than merely *reflects* everyday life" (Waugh 54, emphasis in original). He makes use of metalepsis to dramatise "the problematisation of the boundary between fiction and reality" and disrupt "narrative hierarchy" in order to "undermine the ontological status of fictional subjects or selves" and the reader's "traditional modes of understanding" (Malina 2).

Freddie's assertion of divinity remains with us, but is constantly undermined by moments where he emerges from the text or fades back into it and exists, ghost-like, in the margins, a liminal figure in the sense both of being in a state of change and of existing on both sides of a border or boundary. The supporting characters who people the island, Freddie admits, are given "substance" – which was "precisely what [he] seemed to lack" – in order to provide the wraith-like narrator with something to hold onto when he begins to feel like a ghost existing as a "poor, pale [wraith] pegged out to shiver in the wind of the world like so much insubstantial laundry, yearning towards us, the heedless ones, as we walk blithely through them" (223). Freddie's use of the pronouns 'us' and 'we' here is hardly convincing, since it is clear that he feels just as insubstantial and provisional as these ghosts he is describing. The image of one who is somehow more substantial passing through another, moreover, is reminiscent of Orpheus, whose arms pass through Eurydice in Hades and who seeks to give her "form, figure and reality" through art (Blanchot, *Orpheus* 99). It is the artist's job not only to bring Eurydice to life, but also to invest himself with the form and substance of an identity through writing.

Freddie's status as a god, furthermore, is also made ambivalent, as Hermes's is in *The Infinities*, by his apparent desire to be a part of the same ontological level as Flora, his most beloved creation – his Eurydice. The novel's first section ends with a seeming apotheosis – the highest point of Freddie's existence – as Flora begins to talk to Freddie but, though she emerges "an incarnation of herself, no longer a nexus of adjectives but pure and present noun," she is still made up of words, as Freddie is, but in this moment she consists of them in the same way he does – that is, in the words of the 'large' rather than the 'little' god. Freddie, by his own assertion, is the little god as narrator and stand-in author, while the large god in this case is represented by the actual (or rather implied) author, Banville. At the same time, Freddie feels as though he might be "there amongst them, at last," which is to say he feels as though he might be approaching the same ontological level as his creatures – apparently a culmination much to be desired (321). In fact, Freddie is transgressing the boundary between the extradiegetic narrative

level and the diegetic one, becoming involved in the actual events of the story being told, rather than existing simply as their narrator. Flora's noticing Freddie is what brings him to life, and with him the entire "little world" of the island, the house, and the kitchen in which they sit. In this moment, for Freddie, "everything and everyone shiver[s] and shift[s], falling into vividest forms, detaching themselves from me and my conception of them and changing themselves instead into what they were, no longer figment, no longer mystery, no longer a part of my imagining" (321). This shift is the shift of metalepsis, as Freddie attempts to transgress the boundary between his own narrative level and that of his imaginary creatures. He has, moreover, reached his peak here, insofar as he has seemingly brought Flora to life or, at least, he has descended from his status as 'little god,' who must imagine and order the 'little world' of the novel, to a mere character in a novel written by the 'big god' who is the author.

As far as the events of the first section of the novel go, however, Freddie is until this moment thoroughly marginal. Interestingly, Blanchot, speaking of Beckett, mentions speech which "turns into a soft specter of speech" in the absence of the I who speaks (*Infinite Conversation* 331). Similarly, Critchley, writing about the narrative voice in Beckett, says that it is "not the 'I' of the author or a controlling consciousness" who speaks, but "rather the 'Not I' of the insomniac narrative voice" which is a spectre that "lingers in the background of our everyday identity" just as Freddie lingers in the background of his own narrative ("Who Speaks" 128-29). Freddie even says that he is "most at ease […] on the far, pale margin of things. If I can call it ease. If I can call it being" (207). In this statement, he reveals himself to be not only an agent and narrator, but also a created object whose existence can scarcely be called 'being' since it lacks agency and authenticity. There is an intense irony at work in a character who is aware of their own status as character and all the limitations that go along with being a character in a novel, but whose knowledge confers upon them a level of awareness and agency which a character cannot possess. Freddie is merely a "little god," and at times he becomes aware of his own creator – who must be the 'big god' – in moments where "worlds collide," and he is able to detect "laughter, distant, soft, sceptical" (198). I would go so far as to say that the laughter he hears, or, indeed, is imputed with hearing, is Banville's, who is laughing at his creation, at himself, and darkly at the inevitability of his own failure. Banville can no more create a mirror on the world than Freddie can redeem himself for his crime through the creation of imaginary characters. At times, Freddie even admits his own indispensability in the text, saying that he "is the pretext of

things" without which "there would be no moment, no separable event, only the brute, blind drift of things." But in the same breath, he undermines his authenticity, because he is only "a half figure, a figure half-seen" who is "gone" as soon as any other character tries to see him "straight" or turns "their heads too quickly" (225). The shipwrecked characters, for example, are somehow able to inhabit the same room as the narrator without fully acknowledging his presence.

Blanchot writes that "whoever sees god dies," and, in contrast, that which dies in speech is "what gives life to speech" (*Fire* 327). This would seem to imply that not only does the protagonist who truly perceives his creator the author immediately die, but also that the author has – as Roland Barthes puts it –entered "into his own death" (142). There is a sense, however, that just as the narrator needs the author as god, insofar as god provides meaning and structure to an otherwise meaningless and random existence, so too does the artist need god. Once again, we are presented with worlds within worlds. Friedrich Nietzsche, after making his grand pronouncement about the death of god, afterwards says that it is now up to us mortals to "become gods merely to appear worthy of" killing God (120). Banville's novels, I would suggest, stage the insecurity and doubt which occurs after the disappearance of God, and after the failure of the author and the narrator to become adequate substitutes. The act of creation, then, is a process in which a desperate, doomed attempt is made to bring that which exists in the dark – and if anything exists in the most profound and deepest dark it is god, the void –into the light. It is, moreover, caught in an ultimate paradox, for only that which exists within the dark – outside of language and selfhood, that is – can apprehend that which exists there. In death "all will be dark" for the one who has died (Banville *Infinities* 30). They will be without self, without language or perception, and in that state that entity which is no longer a self will apprehend that which is to be found in the dark. It would seem, then, that it is not whoever sees god that dies, but whoever dies that sees god!

Later in the novel, Freddie takes up gardening in order to feel "in touch with something, some authentic, fundamental thing," and in his garden he is indeed the little god who orders this small world and without whom there would be "only the madness of mere growth" (277). This may well be yet another allusion to Crusoe, who in a similar way farms the island as a form of domestication, so that he might create order from chaos and, in so doing, gain control of the place. In the garden, as in the novel, Freddie is "the agent of individuation: in me [the plants] find their singularity" (277). He goes so far as to liken himself to the God of the Christian bible

via a fragmented quotation that approximates Matthew 10:29-31, a verse usually interpreted to prove God's love and care for individuals: "Are not two sparrows sold for a copper coin? And not one of them falls to the ground apart from your Father's will. But the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Do not fear therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows" (NKJV). So Freddie – and Banville, we can assume – vacillates between hectic visions of his own power to control and direct other lives, to bring individuals into being and to kill them off, underpinned by the conviction that he is "required" in some way (212), and crippling moments of self-doubt, the assurance of failure and the feeling that his existence lacks authenticity and reality in some way. As O'Connell puts it, Freddie is "in a permanent state of fluctuation between the anxieties of determinism and the anxieties of free will, as though he were fully conscious of being both a character in a fiction and that fiction's author" (169). Like both gods and ghosts, Banville and Freddie have an omniscient view of the characters they narrate, as they not only "watch them" (289), but are also seemingly privy to their most private, inner thoughts and feelings in a way that should be utterly impossible for a character like Freddie, given that he ultimately exists on the same plane as the other characters. Banville, on the other hand, as the 'large god' of the text, is omniscient when it comes to his novel. Author and narrator vacillate, it would seem, between believing themselves "the god[s] unseen" and believing themselves ghosts; between trying to imbue themselves with substance and the inevitable failure of the attempt when it is made through language (296).

Another question raised by this novel is who exactly the eponymous ghosts might be, and how this affects Freddie's ontological status. It would seem from the above that Freddie is at least one of the ghosts, but in fact the possibilities are myriad. Firstly, there are the castaways, who are ghostly insofar as they exist, as we have seen, on a different ontological level to the other characters and are made up entirely of imagination, memory and fancy. O'Connell suggests that they "are the novel's titular ghosts, neither wholly present nor wholly absent, and under the apparent control of their quasi-divine narrator" (166). Felix, furthermore, is a kind of ghost of Christmas past who returns from another world with secrets, blackmail and a vengeful scheme. As already indicated, Freddie acknowledges that these characters are figments of his imagination, elements of the story of himself which his pen goes on writing, seemingly without his conscious intervention. However, he also hints at the ethereal nature of these visions he has brought into being as a result of "an onus on us, the living, to conjure up our particular dead"

(264). He feels it is his duty to bring the dead back to ghostly life in the pages of his narrative, as "there is no other form of afterlife for them than this" (264), and claims not to fear them, but to be

> grateful for any intercourse with the dead, no matter how baleful
> their stares or unavoidable their pale, pointing fingers. I feel I
> might be able, not to exonerate, but to explain myself, perhaps, to
> account for my neglectfulness, my failures, the things left unsaid,
> all those sins against the dead, both of omission and commission,
> of which I had been guilty while they were still in the land of the
> living. (264)

After this utterance, and with due regard to the duty he feels to the dead, Freddie goes on to give a summary of the plot of *The Book of Evidence*– Freddie's own tale, narrated in the first person and making up the diegetic level of the narrative. The events, as he tells them here, give us further clues as to the identity of the novel's titular ghosts. He describes itas a story in which a man is "surprised by love" for an image of a woman in a painting, and who must possess this object because what it represents to him is "the thing itself, the pure unmediated essence" in which he will find "himself and his true home" (264-66). In stealing this painting, as we later discover, he is surprised by a maid, and kills her "because she is there and he does not see her properly" (266). From that moment on, the painting is nothing to him, and it is the girl who occupies his every thought, as emerges when he wonders: "how, having seen straight down through those sky-blue, transparent eyes into the depths of what for want of a better word I shall call her soul, how could he destroy her?" (266). That essence, or thing in itself, which previously he apprehended in the painting of the woman, he now recognises in the girl he has killed, and afterwards all his efforts are directed towards somehow making restitution and bringing her back. We have previously established that the narratives which make up *Frames* [2] are a means to this end, an attempt to kindle Josie Bell back into being. In this retelling, though, Freddie claims that it is her ghost which "somehow he must conjure" (267). Flora, then, is easily enough identified as the ghost of the dead Josie who is being brought to life again in an attempt to truly know her, and Felix as the ghost of Freddie's bad self, but what of the other castaways, whose seemingly

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[2] A note on page numbers in the *Frames* references: when this chapter was first started, I unfortunately only had access to an e-book of this text. I later switched to a print version and made an attempt to switch all the page numbers so that they would align with that text. I apologise for any inconsistencies.

provisional existence really convinces no one and makes very little impression overall? To answer this question we need to examine the ekphrastic elements of the novel, but only after briefly mentioning another instance of godly narration in Banville's *The Infinities.*

Hermes, in *The Infinities*, is another narrator who is somewhere in the ambiguous space between god and ghost. In this novel, Banville takes matters a step further than he does in *Ghosts* and gives us a narrator who actually is a small god – Hermes is a minor god of the Greek pantheon. Hermes is not worried, as Freddie is, about the status of his own existence, but lives in an entirely different realm to that of the human characters of the novel, and speaks from a quasi-authoritative godly perspective. In other words, the narrative levels of *The Infinities* are slightly less fraught than those of *Ghosts*. Nevertheless, Hermes does address some of Freddie's concerns. For example, the narrator more or less admits that an "unknown and unknowable force" is behind the world depicted in the novel, which is made "plausible in every detail" thanks to the "great pains" and "lengths" to which he and his fellow divinities went in order to create it (16). He suggests that it is he and his fellow gods, on the diegetic level of narration, who are the force behind this creation. However, at times he also reveals some doubt and vulnerability about his own ontological status, as in the several moments in the novel where he confuses himself with his characters and must remind himself to "stick to the third person" and not to identify with old Adam, who exists on the extradiegetic level (33). Furthermore, he admits on several occasions that the existence of the gods is utterly unfathomable to the novel's human characters, and that if he were to speak in his own voice, "the voice of a divinity," the reader would be "baffled by the sound" or would fail to hear the "heavenly speech" of the gods, who exist not in time or space but "only the infinite here, which is also a kind of not-here" (16). These gods, Banville's version of the Greek pantheon, also exist in Blanchot's dark, and Hermes's narration of the events of the novel in human speech constitutes an attempt to bring into the light that which resists apprehension. Like Freddie, Hermes admits that it is he who has "contrived these things," that is, the events and people of the story (29). He goes on to suggest a noble purpose for himself, a god, and by extension for the author and narrator of any tale, and then admits that he can offer "no salvation of the soul," nor any other trappings of the Christian faith (91), but only "stories, comforting or at least comfortingly reasonable accounts of how and why things are as they are and by what means they may be maintained or on occasion, on rare occasion, altered" (92). Hermes, then, with no less authority than that of a small god, confirms the psychological

need for god which we have seen both in Nicolas Kopernicus and Freddie Montgomery, and which, by extension, we might attribute to Banville. Some form of god is necessary so that in life there should be more than mere drift and chaos. The existence of a god gives life – or whatever part of it is depicted in a novel – some form of purpose and unifying principle. However, and paradoxically, the I who seeks god in the dark will apprehend nothing but void and blackness: as I have said, it is only the individual who has abandoned his individuality – who has died – who might have some form of access to god. It is only he who dies that sees god.

4.3 Ekphrasis

Returning to the discussion of narrative levels, let us examine more closely the hypodiegetic level in *Ghosts*: the fictional painting which Freddie is ostensibly studying during his stay on the island. The castaways who interrupt Freddie's visit bear an unmistakable resemblance to figures in this painting by the artist Vaublin – another imaginary figure. The painting is called *Le Monde d'or* or "The Golden World," and depicts "a sort of clown dressed in white […] and people behind him walking off down a hill to where a ship was waiting, and at the left a smirking man astride a donkey" (230). The minor characters in the painting more or less equate to the minor castaways: there is a "blonde woman walking away on the arm of an old man" – Sophie and Croke, of course, "two boys" and a "little girl with braided hair," who represent the three children, as well as a young woman "at the window of that distant tower,"who must be Flora, remaining behind (275, 396). Besides these six, there are two more figures in the painting: the Pierrot and the Harlequin on the donkey, based on figures from the *Commedia Dell'arte*. Felix is identified with the Harlequin, who seems to be the orchestrator of the scene and is seen to be smiling in an amused and knowing fashion. In a nightmarish vision Flora has after viewing the painting, she even identifies the donkey Felix rides as the unfortunate Croke.

Who, then, is the clown that dominates the foreground of the painting? Freddie describes him as a liminal character who is "isolated from the rest of the figures ranged behind him, suspended between their world and ours, a man alone," and wonders whether he has "dropped from the sky" or "risen from the underworld" (391). It is unclear whether the creature is a god or a demon. Whichever it is, he is certainly not all-powerful: he is described as being "trapped, held fast by invisible constraints" and "bundled into his costume and thrust unceremoniously out of

the wings to stand up here all alone, dumbfounded, mortified, afraid to move lest an unseen audience break into a storm of laughter" (391). He is, furthermore, the "childish man, the mannish child," something in-between worlds (392), who is nevertheless possessed of some sort of "secret knowledge," both "victim" and "ineluctable judge" (393). Even Freddie, it seems, questions the clown's identity and he repeats the question, "who is this Pierrot" without finding an answer (393). He concludes that Pierrot's sole purpose"is to be painted; he is wholly pose" (393).

These clues, as well as Freddie's apparent obsession and sympathy with the clown-like figure, suggest some form of identification between them. We have previously seen Freddie's paranoia about his status as a figure of ridicule to some unseen god (a writer or a reader), his liminal existence, his lack of proper agency and his feeling of being trapped in a story of someone else's devising. He is also in possession of the arcane knowledge of his existence as text, and exists as both a victim of the author and an all-powerful author himself – both god, that is, and ghost. Furthermore, he, too, is described at times in terms of the demonic or bestial. All of this points to his identification with the central figure of the painting, who may be integral to the design but nevertheless appears, it is worth noting, "not centrally placed in the composition" but "set a little way to the left," just as Freddie places himself at a remove from the action of the novel (392). Like Freddie, the Pierrot is guilty of some sort of crime and is hiding from justice (394). Just as the latter's sole purpose is to be painted, so too is the former's sole purpose to be written. Both are brought into existence by artists in order to give coherence, meaning, structure and purpose to a work of art. They are little gods begot by slightly larger gods.The painting shows, furthermore, some evidence of the large god in the "fierce luminescence" which illuminates Pierrot as if "some radiant being were alighting behind us from out of the sky and shedding upon him the glare of its shining wings" (395). The use of ekphrasis in this novel seems to suggest that the artist's or author's purpose is contained within the work – that is, to shed light upon that which exists in the dark, or to attempt to give the viewer or reader an intimation of the infinite.

Section 3 of *Ghosts* comprises an extended ekphrastic description of the fictional *Le Monde d'Or* which, as well as identifying the main character of the painting with that of the novel, draws parallels between the text itself and the painting. In so doing, the novel grows even more narcissistic and introspective, as it makes use of a fictional work of art to comment on the

fictional text. There is, furthermore, a heavy irony implicit in the narrative description of a visual artwork – a description doomed to failure – particularly insofar as that artwork itself is fictional. The painting itself, then, remains unsaid and exists as yet another reminder of excess. Freddie says, of the painting, "there is no meaning, of course, only a profound and inexplicable significance […] as if the painter knows something that he will not divulge, whether to deprive us or to spare us is uncertain" (274). While Freddie finds this lack of meaning unsatisfying, it, in terms of the identification of the novel with the painting, implies that both are created by individuals who have apprehended more than they can express. Vaublin is described as "a master of darkness" and a "painter of absences, of endings," whose work contains "unfathomable spaces leading into night:" it is work in which "something is missing, something is deliberately not being said," as everything hovers "on the point of vanishing" (221). Furthermore, Vaublin is described as seeking, through his work, "something intangible, some pure distilled essence that perhaps is not human at all" (302). Here, he is identified almost explicitly with Banville, of whose novels one might say the exactly the same. Like Blanchot's Orpheus, both Vaublin and Banville are attempting to expose that which exists in the dark to the light. They fail, but the intimation of darkness is still there in their work. Freddie, too, who it seems must narcissistically insinuate himself into every facet of the novel, considers himself a creature of the dark. He imagines a moment in which he might "lose [him]self […] flow out of [him]self and be as a phantom" – ghosts again – "a patch of moving dark against the lighter darkness all around [him]" (223). He would, in other words, give up his individual sense of selfhood and die into the dark and the night, which seemed to be "something on the point of being spoken" thronged with "the dead ones, yearning to speak" (223). In a very similar way, the novel itself is teeming with the mute dead – to whom Freddie feels compelled to give voice – and is not so much something said with meaning, as something about to be said, or about a failed attempt at expressing that something.

Vaublin, it seems, shares some seminal characteristics not only with Freddie but also with the typical Banvillean protagonist. Firstly, he is a "manufactured man" insofar as he is literally self-made in the same way as Axel Vander, Freddie Morrow and Alexander Cleave, for example (221). Like many of Banville's protagonists, Vaublin's entire identity is performative and somehow lacking in the authenticity that others seem to possess. As Freddie notes, Vaublin was "no more than a copy, of his own self. As I am, of mine" (410). Secondly, it seems that Vaublin had a double, a mysterious other who stalked him through the streets of Paris and created

artworks in his name. Whereas many believe the double to be "a phantasm spawned by Vaublin's fever and exhaustion" as he suffered his final illness (302), Freddie himself does believe in the "shadowy counterpart" who stalked the artist in his last days. Indeed, he himself has his own double who, in this novel, largely takes the form of Felix – the evil, laughing Harlequin of whom Freddie cannot be rid – and, in the other novels, the form of Bunter, his brute self who is all too capable of violence and murder, as discussed in chapter two. Interestingly, Felix's nickname for Pound, one of the castaway children, is also Bunter (308). Perhaps the jealous Freddie identifies with every one of his creatures. It is common for Banvillean protagonists to be haunted by doubles, twins or phantom, other selves, as has also been discussed in the second chapter. Vaublin, again like Freddie, is haunted by shame and "wants to confess to something but cannot, something about a crime committed long ago; something about a woman" (304).

This device in which "the themes and preoccupations of a work are mirrored by a fictional work of art within it" is called *mise en abyme* (O'Connell144). Rimmon-Kenan describes the device as one in which the hypodiegetic level – that is, *Le Monde d'Or* – becomes "a mirror and reduplication of the diegetic" – that is, the events surrounding the castaways and Freddie himself (95). O'Connell goes on to describe the use of *mise en abyme* in Banville's fiction as yet another means by which he attempts to impose "order on experience" (144). He posits that Banville's obsession with the ability of art to create order is further evidence of the narcissism inherent in his fiction. This obsession is accompanied by what Hutcheon terms a "need, first to create fictions, then to admit their fictiveness, and then to examine critically such impulses" (19). In other words, according to Patricia Waugh, metafiction must "simultaneously create a fiction and […] make a statement about the creation of that fiction" (6). I have examined multiple ways in which Banville's novels are self-reflexive in this manner, and his use of *mise en abyme* is another means by which he attempts to examine the very act of creation that bringsthe novel into being. The art and artists at the centre not only of *Ghosts* but also *Athena* provide "a series of warped mirrors in which the author displays various creative distortions of his own image and of the narratives themselves" (O'Connell 164).

One of the results of this warped effect, of Freddie's worlds within worlds, is – as O'Connell puts it – that "Banville, Freddie and Vaublin become consubstantial, as though they formed a kind of three-personed godhead within the cosmos of the fiction," which adds another

dimension to the theory I have discussed regarding the small and the large god (171). If we take Banville to represent God, and the liminal Freddie, who is both god and ghost, to represent the Holy Spirit, then Vaublin must in some way represent Christ in this holy trinity of artistry. This analogy, if we subscribe to it, could be seen to answer many of the questions posed earlier about Freddie's identity as god or ghost. It provides a way for him to be both, as the Christian Holy Spirit is both, and to serve as a sort of bridging device between a divine God, the author, a semi-divine Jesus, the artist within the work, and their human subjects, the characters in the novel and its readers. Through all of these devices, which reflect and distort, allegorise and mythologise, Banville makes his readers acutely aware not only of the "nebulous distinction between author, the narrator and the object of his narrative," but also of the status of the novel as fiction and the "distinctions between the real and the invented," or lack thereof (O'Connell 170-71). The series of fraudulent paintings, which are described in interludes throughout *Athena*, make a similar statement about the fictionality of that novel and offer an appraisal of the trilogy as a whole, in the same way that the third section of *Ghosts* does of itself. Moreover, in what might be seen as a pattern commonly found in Banville's work, the boundary between the ekphrastic interludes and the main plot of *Athena* gradually blurs as the two worlds slowly collide.

Banville's use of *mise enabyme* has the overall effect of causing narcissistic self-reflection on the part of the reader. The device provides a way for "the fiction [to] narcissistically contemplate its own reflection" through the protagonist-narrator's reactions to a fictional work of art which mirrors or represents the novel itself (O'Connell 178). This hall of mirrors effect, in other words, does not only confuse and conflate the fictional artist, the narrator and the author, but also embroils the reader in its artful confusion, so that "the author's self-involved engagement with his own writing becomes, of necessity, the reader's narcissistic encounter with his or her own reading" (O'Connell 179).One of the effects of Banville's playful use of narrative embedding is to force the reader to examine their own act of reading, and to become aware of their agency in the process of fiction-making insofar as they bring to the text their own connotations, preconceptions and prejudices, just as Freddie does. The work of fiction, then, is made up of not only its words, but also the ideas which surround those words in the minds of the narrator, author *and* reader.

4.4 Acting and Memory: Further Falsehoods

Athena takes the idea of falsification one step further in that "nobody, least of all the narrator himself, is who they say they are" (O'Connell 172). Every character goes by a fake name, if they are named at all, and each one of them is performing an identity. That is, the ekphrastic descriptions of the fraudulent paintings not only foreground the problem of essence and authenticity, but also "at every turn, at the level of both its plot and its narration, *Athena* discredits any idea that reality and fiction might be mutually exclusive" (172). On the level of character, here, Banville attempts to foreground the fictionality of his narrative through a concern commonly seen in his work with the idea of the self as an actor. I established earlier in this chapter that the text, for Banville's narrators as well as for Banville himself, is a place where identity is created, refined and revealed. In much the same way, many of his characters feel, like Helen in *The Infinities*, as though the stage is also "a place of self-improvement, of self-fulfillment," and that "by an accumulation of influence the parts that she plays […] will gradually mould and transform her into someone else" (251). The makeup of the stage, furthermore, is "of a magically permanent kind, that she will not take off, only continue adding to, layer upon careful layer, until she has achieved her true look, her real face" (251). So, after the failureto find the true self through the paring down of existence until only essence is left, and when the act of narration ceases to provide a coherent version of the self, then one must turn to this final means of self-creation in which the individual is not found at all, but performed.

The last recourse of the narcissist who can no longer bear the distance between himself and his reflection is thus to become "a thing made up wholly of poses," something manufactured "from material filched from others" (Banville, *Shroud* 329). It is an existence which is only convincing on the exterior, to those on the outside looking in. The individual themself remains unconvinced throughout, which is torture to the narcissist who desires above all else to exist as an authentic individual. In their supreme self-consciousness, the narcissist imagines the world "possessed of a single, avid eye fixed solely and always on [them]," so that they must perform in response, so that acting becomes "inevitable" (*Eclipse* 10). Any action which is put under scrutiny becomes a performance, even the simple act of walking across a room. It follows, then, that any action which occurs in text, under the avid eye of the reader, is performative in nature. So is it any wonder that Banville's narrators, possessed as they are of the knowledge of their own textual existence, feel a self-conscious need to perform an appropriate identity for the benefit of

their ghostly, godly audience? These narcissistic protagonist-narrators constantly try to depict themselves authentically, to present an authentic self to their audience and, in so doing, to themselves apprehend their authentic selfhood. What the novels seem to imply is that there is no authentic base to selfhood, but rather that selfhood is in fact created through performance. The observation of this performance, furthermore, by both readers and characters, is a necessary confirmation of the substance of the narrator. This makes our definition of Banvillean characters as narcissistic problematic, as narcissism presupposes an ideal, authentic self which is there to be revealed or excavated. If there exists only a void where this ideal self dwells, then narcissism is as much an act as selfhood; something performed in order to cover up one's significant lack of authenticity. It is an act, furthermore, that is always incipient but never accomplished, because of the absence of a self to contemplate.

Another important element of identity is memory, which is another part of themselves with which Banville's narrators typically struggle. They are constantly remembering things which even they admit "had never happened" (*Shroud* 74), or asking themselves whether they are indeed "remembering anything rightly" or merely "embellishing, inventing" (*Eclipse* 56). In this way Banville's novels stage the impossibility of autobiography as an act in which the self invests itself with coherence and substance through writing. The autobiographical act necessarily blurs the boundary between past and present, and in so doing becomes simply another performance of self. Remembering is futile insofar as it fails to invest the ghostly self with substance and instead becomes the self's haunting of itself. Sometimes Banville's protagonists catch "memory at its work, scanning the details of the moment and storing them up for a future time" – or at least in retrospect that is what they claim to have been doing at moments which stand out for them from the misty past (*Eclipse* 84). More often than not, just as the boundaries between art and reality become blurred in novels such as *Athena*, remembered and present events blur increasingly as the narrative progresses. Alexander Cleave, for example, hears circus music in his memory which he then realises is playing "now, not then," but that, "nevertheless, all these things are running together, collapsing into each other, the present into the past, the past into the future" (*Eclipse* 167). "Futile remembering" brings the Banvillean protagonist comfort – as mentioned in the chapter on Romanticism – and provides something semi-solid onto which they might cling, some form of that substance which they lack (*Eclipse* 62). Memories stand like "a city on an ice floe caught in a current," visible but dwindling and "hopelessly beyond reach"

(62).They are unstable, but still more solid than the future of which Alexander, for one, says he can "see nothing except empty morning, and no day, only dusk thickening into night, and, far off, something that is not to be made out, something vague, patient, biding" (62).

All in all, when we consider their false and untrustworthy memories, their facades, their deliberate falsehoods and desperate creations, their ignorance of themselves and others, Banville's narrators might as a whole be termed utterly unreliable. However, is it fair to tar them all with this brush, when the purpose of each carefully written error is not to deceive the reader, but to reveal to them what is naturally amiss in the novel: absolute truth and the unspeakable remainder? After all, their very unreliability assumes the possibility of authenticity and reliability by a play of *differánce*. O'Connell says of Alexander Cleave in *Ancient Light* – in which, like Morrow in *Athena* and the unnamed protagonist in *The Newton Letter*, the narrator is largely ignorant of the crucial facts about the story he is narrating – that he is actually "the ironic inverse of an unreliable narrator" insofar as the reader, having supposedly already read *Shroud*, understands far more than the narrator does about what is going on in the novel (176). Thus the Banvillean narrator is not deliberately hiding something from the reader, but is in fact the party from whom important information has been hidden and whose honest search for the truth about their situation mirrors the act of reading in such a way that the reader is, in fact, forced to face facts regarding their own agency in that act. Banville's narcissistic narratives, as is typical of the genre, "turn in on the reader, forcing [them] to face [their] responsibility for the text [they are] reading," and for their active role in the generation of fiction (Hutcheon 138). By "disturbing the comfortable habits of the actual acts of reading," the narcissistic text unsettles the reader and forces them to "scrutinise [their] concepts of art as well as [their] life values" (139). The narcissism and inability to see beyond the self which are the hallmarks of Banville's narrators do not simply mean that they are terrible, selfish human beings, but rather confront the reader with the truth about their own narcissism, as well as that of the text. Banville's use of what might be considered unreliable narrators and his clever inclusion of devices such as *mise en abyme*, do not, therefore, aim to keep the reader in the dark or to pull the wool over their eyes in the way that a realist text might do, by concealing the workings of its creation, but rather aim to reveal the truth of its own created-ness to the reader in order to keep them aware of its status as fiction. By reminding the reader that what they are reading is artifice, the text "forces [them] to an awareness of [their] own role in creating the universe of fiction" (Hutcheon 139). In so doing, it

questions the very concepts of truth, authenticity and reliability which condition the reader's response to itself and its characters, and encourages them to approach any novel with a certain level of suspicion aimed not only at the narrator but also at their own preconceptions.

4.5 Career choices

In this chapter we have so far focused on those of Banville's characters who are artists, actors, writers or critics, but there is another group of his protagonists who pursue careers in, for example, mathematics, physics or astronomy. In this last section, I would like to explore the differences and similarities between Banville's artists and his scientists.

One of the problems with attempting to understand the world through scientific means is that there is "no way to measure a system without interacting with it, and no way to interact with it without disturbing it" (Fiorato 47). Another is that language, which is necessary to impart the discovered knowledge, "creates a field that encompasses the observer as well as the observation" (Fiorato 45). These are two important and insurmountable problems for those of Banville's protagonists who attempt to use science as a means of understanding and ordering the world around them, which is precisely what his artists attempt to do through art. The first problem is one of observation – that one cannot observe without changing that which is observed – and the second is one of positioning – that one cannot clearly perceive the world as it is because of one's position within it. According to Nicolas Copernicus, all that can be said is "the saying," and the text is "not about the world, but about itself" (116). Banville himself, in an introduction to Hofmannsthal's *Ein Brief*, writes that, "since our senses are entirely contingent" – contingent, that is, on our epistemological paradigms – "the evidence gathered by them must be contingent. Therefore there is no universal, timeless truth" (ix). He describes the Lord Chandos letter as a symptom of the realisation of this fact, and an articulation of a profound mistrust not only of the evidence of our senses but also of language which, "far from being a tool to unlock reality, was a gauze of illusion held up between us and the world of existing things" (x). Banville expresses this same distrust of language in all of his novels, and even engages intertextually with *Ein Brief* in *The Newton Letter*.

An impulse of Banvillean protagonists that corresponds with these anxieties is the unfulfillable desire to somehow freeze the world and examine it in a static state. His narrators

desire "to cease becoming and merely be, to stand as a statue in some forgotten dead-leafed square, released from destruction" (*Eclipse* 77). I discussed this briefly in chapter 2 and earlier in this chapter, but now I would like to consider it in the context of scientific study. In order for a scientist to observe an element of the world – an insect, for example, or a botanical sample – it is first necessary for them to immobilise the organism to prepare it for microscopic observation. It must, in simple terms, first be killed. Even if the scientist attempts to observe an element as it is in the world, moreover, the simple act of observation alters the behaviour of the subject. The scientist then observes the still, dead object and expects their observations to be relevant to the same type of organism when it is alive. However, stillness is not reality. Reality is movement, flux, and the observation of something in stillness necessarily leaves out an important element of existence. On the one hand, then, one cannot gain access to the thing in itself through the scientific observation of objects in stillness and death. On the other, however, we have the impossibility of perceiving the world in its (and our) state of rapid movement and change. There is, once again, a paradox at work here which is similar to the one mentioned regarding interpersonal relationships – where one wants to have and know another in their alterity, but fails to do so without reducing the other to another version of themself. The observer wants to perceive reality in its entirety but cannot, because the nature of reality is flux; they then desire that things pause, stop or die to give them a chance to have a closer look, but in that cessation of motion full and pure existence is interrupted and the entirety of the thing itself escapes anyway. Science, then, attempts to observe reality in isolation and stillness in order to find the real, just as art attempts to depict reality in a fixed state. At least, this is what Banville suggests in his writing. Freddie describes *Le Monde d'Or*, the fictional masterpiece that acts as a *mise en abyme* in *Ghosts*, as possessing "such stillness" that "the helpless tumbling of things through time has come to a halt." It is this stillness which allows the artist to illustrate the "fundamental paradox of art" (274-75). The art of narration, moreover, also "aspires to be a process of stabilising the undecidable, and fiction is set to function as *fixion*" (Ghassemi 34). Freddie, for example, would like to remain "poised between sea and sky […] observing the spring tides and the autumn auroras" in a static state of "pure existence, pure existence and nothing else" (*Ghosts* 369-70). However, it is only in fiction or art that one might find oneself still for longer than a mere moment, as in life things are in constant flux. Modern and postmodern art attempts, instead, to capture this movement but, like excess, it proves elusive.

Conventionally, art and science are viewed as conflicting, different, mutually exclusive ways of seeing the world. The artist sees the world in an individualistic, subjective way, and portrays it imaginatively, while the scientist sees the world in a logical, objective way, and portrays it factually. Sidia Fiorato, for example, suggests that the two are far more closely connected than these oppositions would allow, claiming that "culture revolves around science, as science revolves around culture in a mutual interchange and exchange" (55). In Banville, moreover, the dichotomy between art and science is broken down further. As illustrated above, both art and science make attempts in a similar way to fix the world into place in order to see it better. Moreover, rather than arriving at their epiphanies through rigorous logical thought and scientific experiment, the only breakthroughs Banville's scientists have are those of the imagination. Their scientific realisations are epiphanic and, in Banville, "both artist and scientist deal with […] the issues that arise out of dreams, intuitions, chance and inspiration" (Fiorato 138).Scientific laws do not represent the "neutral registration of eternal natural relationships" but are, rather, acts of "creation" (Fiorato 116). The "imaginative spark which leads to a discovery or the creation of a work, is similar in both literature and science," and both disciplines are involved in "trying to give a coherent shape to a chaotic reality" (Fiorato 118-19). Furthermore, Banville's scientists' epiphanies or dreams are "visual and pre-verbal," that is, they are a glimpse into the dark which can only be held in the mind briefly, after which "only scraps" of that vision can be converted into text – like Orpheus's music, which evokes but cannot fully represent the dark (Fiorato 138-39).

Kepler is a good illustration of this attempt at work. Johannes Kepler, at the start of the novel, "dreamed the solution to the cosmic mystery," but on waking he remembers only an elusive number, the significance of which only occurs to him much later, after rigorous and torturous research (3). Thus Kepler is in possession of two kinds of knowledge, one dreamlike, imaginary, artistic, and the other logical, scientific, or, in Fiorato's words, "the Dionysian spark and the Apollonian structure" (150). The novel *Kepler*'s rigid structure, which stands in juxtaposition to its linguistic artfulness, is itself an illustration of the relationship between the Dionysian, artistic and subjective, and the Apollonian, scientific and objective.

The Newton Letter is another novel which, in a very different way to *Kepler*, examines and synthesises the scientific and artistic endeavours. Its unnamed narrator is perhaps the protagonist who can be identified most successfully with Banville himself, and indeed his

problems with narration very clearly reflect "Banville's own predicament with the past and the ways in which it is mediated in the present, and also his investigation of what literary and scientific pursuits have in common" (Fiorato 156). This predicament, and also the common thread between literature and science, concerns the "gulf between the knowable and the unknowable," and is explored through the narrator's stubborn misunderstanding of the family at Ferns, the mirroring of Newton's loss of faith with that of the narrator, and the intertextual relationship between the novel and Hofmannsthal's *Ein Brief* (Fiorato 156). The main obstacle to scientific knowledge, which is illustrated by the narrator's inability to observe the Lawless family without becoming embroiled in their affairs, is that "the presence of the observer will always influence the outcome of the experiment" (Fiorato 171). Thus, even if the subject of a study manages to observe their object without in some way freezing it, the act of observation will still have an effect on the behaviour of the observed party. When the object under observation begins to look back at the observer, as Ottilie does in this novel, a blurring of the boundaries between subject and object occurs which renders the scientific project even more absurd.

Fiorato goes on to describe the Science Tetralogy as "an endeavour to eliminate the hard distinctions between the scientific and artistic modes of thinking," and thereby to regard "science as a constituent part of literature and history" (118). A post-Einsteinian scientist, like a postmodern artist, must have "an acceptance of uncertainty," must, in other words, have the negative capability discussed in chapter three, which allows an individual to dwell within uncertainties and seek answers without grasping at them. For this reason, in the tetralogy, scientific breakthroughs, in our relativist, ever-shifting reality, are presented in the same way as artistic ones, in which the elusive real is approached, presents itself in a dream-like epiphanic form, and then disappears once again into the dark as soon as the seeking eye pursues it. Copernicus states that his book "is not science – it is a dream," and wonders whether the sort of science which reveals truth is possible at all (207). Furthermore, scientific theories, like works of art, are "part of the conceptual map of reality, rather than of reality itself […] their status is that of interpretations of the natural world" (Fiorato 119). Science, like art, can only construct "a world which shall be symbolic of the world of commonplace experience" (Banville, *Copernicus* 208). Both science and art, therefore, merely serve to 'save the phenomena' and fail to describe things as they really are. Conceptual frameworks do not describe what exists in the world; rather the perceiving individual fits the reality they observe into the conceptual framework which exists

in their mind. Banville's 'unreliable' narrators, his multiple points of view, and the insecurity of his protagonists regarding the truths they are capable of imparting, testify to the "absence of a unified theory of the universe" (Fiorato 123).

The narrators of the Science Tetralogy tend to look outward; they are looking for a harmonious system at work in the world. On the other hand, the narrator of the *Frames* Trilogy looks inward, as we have seen, introspectively seeking the truth within and about himself. However, I would argue that Freddie, Copernicus, Kepler, Gabriel and the narrator of the *Newton Letter* are all seeking the same thing: truth. Moreover, they all hope to find it "through a creative act" which will "transcend the closed system of science" or, indeed, conventional art or literature (Fiorato 129). Copernicus, for example, seeks a "new and radical instauration" which will allow astronomy to "mean more than itself," that is, to speak of essence rather than merely speaking of itself. He desperately wants the science of astronomy to do more than merely "save the phenomena" and instead to "verify the real rather than merely postulating the possible" (83). What Copernicus desires, like Freddie (or, indeed, Axel Vander or Alexander Cleave), is to somehow cross the chasm between what is real and what is written, between names and things, for he believes, as they all do, that "theories are but names, but the world itself is a thing" (*Copernicus* 134). Like Freddie and the others, Copernicus and his fellow scientists tend to lose "faith in the ability and possibility of the connection between writing and the external world" (Fiorato 131). This is their crisis of faith, and the crisis – like the revelation – comes to the artist just as it comes to the scientist. Copernicus realises that "the language of astronomy, the language of science cannot fully explain what he perceives," just as Freddie realises that there are simply no words to describe the inner workings of a human psyche (Fiorato 131). In the *Frames* trilogy, as we have seen, Freddie's predicament regarding his agency and voice mirrors Banville's. We see a similar quandary played out in the narratives of the Science tetralogy, which represent "a paradigm of Banville's own artistic predicament" (Fiorato 137).

4.6 Conclusion

It is interesting to note that the *Frames* Trilogy was published some years after the completion of the Science Tetralogy, almost as though, after the failure of science to provide any sort of answer or access to truth, Banville moved on to art, to fiction which "turns out to be the surest road to

reality" (Fiorato 153). Fiorato argues that "art emerges dialectically out of the failed desire for science" (137). Having found that truth lies outside of the language of science, that is, that one must seek in art a means of expressing that which can be found only in the dark, Banville turns to art in an attempt to find truth by different means. The Science Tetralogy stages the failure of scientific and empirical ways of looking at the world. Moreover, Freddie's artistic attempt to explain himself to himself, to find redemption, and to bring the dead back to life also fails. The problem with the truth, as with excess, it seems, is in the attempt to find it. Not only do we lack the means to apprehend and transmit truth, but the assumption that truth is somehow 'out there' waiting to be found in a perfectly attainable form is in itself problematic. The conclusion, then, must be that, just as Kepler eventually reached some version of truth through both epiphany and scientific enquiry, one might find truth somewhere in-between the artistic and scientific disciplines. Fiorato goes on to provide a fitting description of Banville's novels as attempting "to forge a redeeming fiction which will be adequate to the commonplace without losing consciousness of itself as fiction" (138). That is, he creates art which 'saves the phenomena' by gesturing towards the 'commonplace' but unattainable thing itself, while at the same time narcissistically revealing its own status as fiction, as text, as art. Banville's work gestures towards the thing in itself and, in so doing, foregrounds for the reader the limitations of text as a means for seeking or revealing truth. It would seem, all things considered, that there is a form of truth which is revealed in the text, revealed for the first time as much to the reader as to the writer, and open to the infinitely variable interpretations of each. It is not the thing in itself which is exposed, as Banville's narrators hope, but rather an intimation of the infinite remainder or the dark which the writer – artist or scientist alike – has seen in a vision or a dream and now attempts to bring into the common light of day. The medium of the novel, therefore, is manifestly inadequate to the task of expressing truth. However, it may instead conceive of a different order of truth, of truth as that which is the remainder of the search itself. In a heavily ironic turn, it becomes clear that this sort of novelistic truth is vaguely apprehended in waiting, in searching, in writing, but certainly not in any final arrival of or to anything.

Conclusion

This study has examined the ways in which Banville's novels attempt to gesture towards excess and reveal to the reader not the thing in itself, but rather the reality that there is something to which language has no access. It has attempted to show how this author still manages to write meaningful fiction, given the inability of language to refer adequately, and thus his scepticism towards the very medium he is utilising. In order to do so, Banville has created narratives which reflexively draw attention to their own fictionality and, in the process, question their representational reliability; narratives which, in other words, are really about the act of narration. So, for instance, the scene in *Doctor Copernicus* in which the infant Nicolas Copernicus apprehends the linden tree as the nameless thing itself, is a self-conscious description *in language* of an a-linguistic state, through which the linguistic text, ironically, presents itself as that which precludes itself from describing what it describes. This thesis has, through a focus on many such moments, attempted to provide a thorough examination of the ways in which Banville's novels stage this central dilemma.

It may seem that, in beginning my thesis with death and ending it with an examination of narrative situation, I have worked backwards. However, the ascendance of the final moment makes more sense when we consider it not as an ending so much, but as an "apotheosis of the soul" in the same way it was viewed by Hugo von Hofmannsthal in the 19th century (viii). The moment of death, in Hofmannsthal and in Banville, is not so much the extinguishment of life but the ultimate purpose of it, a moment in which the individual may at last approach and make contact with that elusive thing in itself which they have sought their whole life long. I have examined the ubiquity of death in Banville's novels in an attempt to show the ways in which he uses it as a means of gesturing towards the sublime or that which is inexpressible in language. Banville's work seeks to draw the reader's attention to this elusive thing in itself by making them aware of the remainder which exists outside of every utterance. This study has shown that the

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presentation of death in this writer's work tries to confront the reader with the fact that the unpresentable exists and that access to it only occurs at the moment the individual ceases to be. I have demonstrated, too, that, while death is one instance of the sublime which is always out of human reach, another is selfhood. Banville's characters, like Beckett's, seek their true selves from whom they have been estranged by language. As argued in the first chapter of my study, the irony of this position is that the individual who seeks the thing in itself can only apprehend it in the moment of their own annihilation. It is only in death, in other words, that the seeking self, in finally coming to a state of stillness, but losing their individuality, might confront both their own selfhood and the thing in itself.

Banville's depiction of death is one of the many ways in which his ideas might be seen to align with those of Hofmannsthal. Another is in his evocation of Romantic themes, particularly the belief that "in some ideal preexistence man had been at one with all things, and that poetry could reawaken in us intimations of that prelapsarian state of perfection, a state which we would return to in death" (Hofmannsthal viii). This observation, in fact, makes clear the link between the first two chapters of this study. An apprehension of death as apotheosis aligns perfectly with the Romantic view of the individual as coming from a finer place to enjoy (or suffer through) a brief sojourn on earth before returning, in death, to an endless space of perfect knowledge and immediate perception. The second chapter, through a comparative examination of Romantic literature and Banville's writing, attempts to unpack the common threads at work in both.

The Romantic sensibility includes, largely, a rethinking of traditional forms in an attempt to find new means to express a more authentic human reality (such as that experienced by children), as well as a tendency to dwell on the natural world both as a backdrop to human emotion and a subject of poetry in its own right. It thus displays a particularly reverent attitude towards the child and the natural world. At the same time, however, the Romantics were acutely aware of the limitations of language, and even evinced their own brand of language scepticism as a result of an awareness of the inevitable failure of text to represent reality, as well as the necessity of the attempt to write. My discussion of Romanticism has demonstrated the similarities and differences between Romantic poetry – exemplified in selected works by William Wordsworth – and Banville's texts.

The first area of similarity between the two writers is the presence of a certain type of nostalgia in which childhood is seen as an idyllic time when the child had unmediated access to the thing in itself, and the advent of adulthood is seen as fraught, in so far as this close relationship with the world is lost. Nostalgia, as its etymology suggests, is literally a form of home-sickness. It is, however, made heavily ironic by the fact that the 'home' that the subject longs for does not actually exist. Thus the longed-for home is an expression of excess insofar as it is both intangible and unattainable. The second, but closely related, trend which can be detected in both Banville's and Wordsworth's writing is the phenomenon of the anti-*Bildung*. This is the tendency of the protagonists to undergo a sort of reverse growth over the course of their lives, in which they move not from ignorance to enlightenment, but rather from pure knowledge and access to the thing in itself towards confusion, ignorance and distance from the truth. Furthermore, the subject's dissolution is shown to occur as a result of the adult necessity to view the world through the imperfect lens of language and culture; it occurs as a result of the inability of the linguistic sign to establish a one-to-one correspondence between itself and its referent.

Literature's finest function, in an opinion shared not only by Banville but also by Hofmannsthal and the Romantic poets, is "to rouse the secret harmonies which sleep in us without our knowing" (Hofmannsthal viii). To connect, in other words, with the sublime within the self. My third chapter, on selfhood, reveals the inaccessibility of this self, and illustrates the aporetic search for self which takes place not only in fiction but in the lives of each one of us. Only death, again, can bring an end to this search, and it is only in dying that the individual – who is then no longer an individual – can apprehend their self. This chapter, then, examines the effect of language on selfhood, as well as the ways in which Banville problematises this effect in his fiction. Here I engage centrally with Mark O'Connell's claim that Banville's texts and characters are inherently narcissistic.While a reading of Banville's novels – and in particular the three volumes of the *Frames* Trilogy – does indeed suggest that his characters are narcissistic in the extreme, I argue that it is not that Banville writes predominantly about narcissists, but rather that it is the necessity of portraying the self through language which makes his protagonists seem narcissistic. Narcissism, therefore, can be seen as a result of the sundering effect of language upon the self, and is not a feature of Banville's protagonists so much as of humankind in general.

As my reading of the *Frames* Trilogy indicates, narcissism, as portrayed by Banville, is thus an ineluctable condition. Freddie's three narrative attempts to transcend his narcissism fail, inevitably, since the nature of first-person narrative is such that it necessarily indulges rather than overcomes self-centeredness – as a consequence of humankind's existence in language. Furthermore, the double-bind of the narcissist mirrors the condition of the postmodern text: just as the narcissist is simultaneously obsessed with finding his true self and yet prevented from accessing it due to his own self-absorption, so too does the postmodern text come into being as an attempt to expose the 'truth' about the inaccessibility of the thing in itself in the very language that precludes the individual from access to it. Like Banville's thing in itself, selfhood exceeds the text, which nevertheless attempts to give the reader some sort of intimation of the existence of this excess, and therefore of the insufficiency of mere words.

The third chapter also deals with instances in which Banville's protagonists suffer trauma or agony and, in these moments, briefly transcend their linguistically imposed separation from the world. In moments of absolute agony, Banville's characters are seen to be at once isolated from the world and unable to separate themselves from it. These are moments, in other words, of profound narcissism in which the individual is absolutely unable to see beyond itself. They are isolated by their trauma and yet exist in an a-linguistic state of openness and connection to the world around them. In other words, trauma is in itself excessive and constitutes a moment of access to the thing in itself in which, paradoxically, the self is precluded from this very access due to the absence of selfhood in the midst of the traumatic experience. At the same time, though, the experience of trauma enables the possibility of moments of empathy and connection with others. Gabriel Swan in *Mefisto*, for example, experiences such moments with other patients while he is in hospital. Furthermore, the narrative contains an intertextual allusion to T. S. Eliot's "Preludes" which implies that a similar trauma-born empathy could potentially be shared by real writers and readers alike. The failed attempt to narrate trauma might, therefore, provide a means through which both textual and real life narcissism might be cured or alleviated, as the acts of reading and writing – as attempts at expressing trauma – give us some form of access to other lives.

An examination of the role of language in the relationships between Banville's – almost exclusively male – protagonist-narrators and their – usually – female companions gives further

insight into the effects of their narcissism. As is indicated in my discussions of the interactions between, for example, Freddie Montgomery and his victim, Josie Bell; the narrator of the Newton letter and the Lawless family; and Axel Vander and his young lover Cass Cleave, we typically find a situation in which a male narrator is trying to represent the inner life of a woman, and failing miserably in the attempt. Instead, the subjectivity – or linguistically imposed narcissism – of the first-person narrator makes it inevitable that they elide the voice of the other and rather present their own idea of what the latter should be like. As demonstrated, though, Banville's texts frequently draw the reader's attention to the inadequacy of his narrator's descriptions of others and, in so doing, confront them with their own narcissistic subjectivity. That is, the reader is confronted with the utter unknowability of other lives through the failure of Banville's narrators, as well as the violence of naming, knowing and therefore possessing an other. Accordingly, the otherness of the other person is yet another way in which Banville's novels gesture towards excess insofar as the subjectivity of the other is just as unreachable as the thing in itself.

My argument has been that the problem lies not in the narcissism of the individual, but in language, which "is inadequate to such an exalted task" as that of presenting the thing in itself (Hofmannsthal ix). For this reason, in the final chapter, I examine the linguistic and narrative strategies which Banville uses in order to give his reader an intimation of infinity. These include metatextual or narcissistic narratives which draw attention to their own createdness, as well as narrators who are aware of their own textuality and who, once again, confront the reader with their own fictionality. However, for Banville, like Hofmannsthal, the "disjunction between the thing and the thing named, between signified and signifier, open[s] up a vertiginous prospect" before which void the paltry novel can only fail (ix). The knowledge of this failure, its necessity and inescapability, and therefore of the culpability of language, occasions the critique of language in Banville's work. Moreover, it is not only language which is challenged here, but also "the entire basis for epistemology" which is brought into question as an inevitable result of the realisation that there simply is no universal, timeless truth upon which to base any sort of conception of reality (ix). There is, furthermore, no language which might allow the thing in itself to be thought or expressed. In Banville, this insufficiency is foregrounded by the failure of his protagonists to express or approach the thing in itself, whether by artistic or scientific means.

The imperative, though, remains to try to give an intimation of that thing in language, and it cannot be denied that Banville makes an impressive attempt.

Finally, in this thesis I have sought to show some of the ways Banville responds to the postmodern imperative to write, despite – and because of – the radical insufficiency of text as medium. To this end, I have throughout examined the interaction of language and the thing in itself in this writer's work and the way that intimations of the latter result in the retreat of the former further into the dark. By various means, I have argued, Banville uses precisely the inadequacy of his medium to impart to his reader a sense of the unpresentable dark, an intuition of the thing itself, which is neither present nor absent.

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[3] A note regarding texts used: a perceptive reader might note the absence of certain important contemporary books on Banville in this bibliography. Unfortunately I did not have access through my library to the most up-to-date sources, and had to make-do with what I could get my hands on.

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