

## **John Banville's (Post)modern Reinvention of the Gothic Tale: Boundary, Extimacy, and Disparity in *Eclipse* (2000)**

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### **Introduction**

One of the most distinctive characteristics of John Banville's oeuvre, especially in his later fiction, is that the familiar frequently exceeds its ordinariness and is transformed into an 'other', or an 'othered' version of itself. In their attempt to represent the world, his narrators grapple with the unfathomability of things, even ordinary things. Their epistemological quests for 'authentic' knowledge often result in reality becoming ever more elusive. In this highly precarious universe, nothing is what it seems to be. Banville foregrounds this feature of his fiction *Eclipse* (2000) in particular, as a dreamlike logic underpins the entirety of the narrative, in which past and present are fluid and memories never stop pouring involuntarily into the present, thereby disrupting the unity of the narrators' perception of the here and now.

This is in line with Banville's definition of art as that which takes 'the commonplace, the quotidian, and transfigure[s] it into something else'.<sup>1</sup> This vision of art echoes that of Henry James, Banville's 'Master', who advocated for 'a close connotation, or close observation, of the real [...] the familiar, the inevitable', one that reveals the unfamiliar seated in the familiar, the sinister in everyday life.<sup>2</sup> James's famous ghostly tales, in this sense, are arguably the most conspicuous expression of this vision. Indeed, a defining aspect of James's ghost stories is that the spectral coexists alongside the quotidian and, at times, even converges with it. 'This *meeting* of the actual and the imaginary', writes Martin Scofield, 'is crucial in James's ghost stories' in that '[t]he supernatural always has a bearing on the world of human action, psychology and morality'.<sup>3</sup> What makes stories like 'The Turn of the Screw' (1898) and 'The Jolly Corner' (1908) particularly significant is the way James manages to make the spectral and the everyday reality interpenetrate. 'A good ghost-story', in

<sup>1</sup> John Banville, quoted in John Kenny, *John Banville* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2009), p. 100.

<sup>2</sup> Henry James, 'Letter to Vernon Lee', 27 April 1890, in *The Letters of Henry James, Volume III: 1883-1895*, ed. by Leon Edel (Cambridge: Harvard University Press), p. 277. Banville has often expressed his admiration for James and has recently written a sequel to James's *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881), entitled *Mrs Osmond* (2018). In a 1997 interview, Banville expressed his view on James's 'art of fiction', claiming that he is a follower of the Jamesian 'line' of fiction writing rather than the Joycean one (Hedwig Schwall, 'An Interview with John Banville', *The European English Messenger*, 6.1 (1997), 13-19).

<sup>3</sup> Martin Scofield, 'Introduction', *Ghost Stories of Henry James* (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions, 2001), pp.vii-xxii (p. ix).

James's own words, 'must be connected at a hundred points with the common objects of life'.<sup>4</sup>

Arguably following in the footsteps of the Master, Banville has also taken an interest in the gothic tale. Although various gothic elements do recur in many of Banville's novels in one way or another, it is arguably in *Eclipse* that a systematic effort to create a gothic effect is visible. Set primarily in a haunted house, the novel features the thespian Alexander Cleave, who grapples with the (in)authenticity of his self on the one hand, and with the unfathomability of the objects of his perception on the other. After experiencing an attack of stage fright that shatters the foundation of his unified sense of self, Cleave returns to his childhood house, hoping to repair his sundered identity. Instead, the haunted house threatens to dislocate his subjective perception further. Here, mirrors reveal uncanny reflections, and dark doorways, corridors, and staircases function as portals to a spectral otherworld. Boundaries prove to be constantly shaky, as everything seems to be linked; objects, places, people, and mythical figures permeate each other. In a word, unity and wholeness give way to porous and multi-layered duality.

Focusing on the role of the boundary in Cleave's perceptions of the spectral, this article examines the way in which Banville reimagines the gothic tradition in contemporary fiction, and assesses the degree to which James's art of the ghostly tale informs the Irish writer's rehabilitation of the gothic as a (post)modern form. To this end, after addressing the function of boundaries in Cleave's narrative, I move on to examine the way in which the breaching of boundaries results in encounters with what Jacques Lacan calls 'the Thing'. I then situate Banville's use of the ghostly tale in a wider context by mobilising 'disparity' as a concept that most aptly captures the writer's postmodern reworking of the traditional ghost story. I therefore argue that Banville reimagines a postmodern version of the gothic novel by emphasising the breaching of boundaries, uncanny encounters, and a subjective experience that lacks unity and stability.

### **Boundaries**

During his stay in the childhood house, Cleave sees two sets of ghosts. One is the ghost of his dead father, who appears 'as real as in life', and who is perceived in minute details that

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<sup>4</sup> James, 'Mary Elizabeth Braddon', *Literary Criticism (Vol. I): Essays on Literature, American Writers, English Writers*, ed. by Leon Edel and Mark Wilson (New York: The Modern Library of America, 1984), pp. 741-46 (p. 742).

enable Cleave to identify the phantom immediately.<sup>5</sup> The other is the ghost of a mysterious woman whose ‘head was covered’ and whose ‘features’ he is unable to ‘make out’ (p. 26). What characterises nearly all of the ghostly apparitions in the novel is that they are fundamentally linked to boundaries and the crossing of boundaries. This is evident on multiple levels. On more than one occasion, the spectral and the mundane seem to overlap as ghostly unreality touches living everyday reality. The narrator, for instance, observes how ‘[t]he phantoms work their immanent magic’ on one of the squatters of the house, Lily (p. 123). Moreover, he notes that ‘she reclines in the places where they appear, in their very midst, a grubby and all too actual odalisque’ (p. 123). The use of the word ‘grubby’, considered alongside the emphatic phrase ‘all too actual’, is particularly revelatory, implying that Lily’s overstated actuality is foregrounded by the spectral presence of the ghosts; she reclines where they appear, as if the spectral frames her material presence. At the same time, ‘grubby’ suggests infection. In other words, the spectral frames the material, while also polluting and permeating it.

Boundaries between the spectral and the actual are crossed further, in that spectral perceptions are not limited to seeing ghosts. Early in the novel, for instance, Cleave sees what he ‘takes to be’ his wife ‘standing at the window’ (p. 3). But his wife later says she was not physically present behind the window; what appears to him through the window is a ghostly version of his real-life wife. Although Cleave acknowledges the factual inexactitude of his perception, he continues to insist on its primacy, telling us, ‘I had seen my not-wife not-standing, and looked out at what she had not-seen’ (p. 18). By refusing to negate the verb (for example, by saying ‘I *hadn’t* seen my wife’) and instead, performing a triple negation of the predicate, Cleave redefines his relationship with reality. The hallucinatory nature of the apparition, in other words, does not render it insignificant. Instead, by affirming a non-predicate, Cleave’s description adds a third element to the opposition real/imaginary, at least on a linguistic level. What he sees is neither real in the sense of being an objective reality, nor does he simply accept it as an imaginary unreal. It is a third element that superimposes itself at the very limit of both real and imaginary. Although it lacks ‘objective’ materiality, the *not*-thing (‘not-wife’ that is ‘not-standing’ and ‘not-seen’) exists in Cleave’s visual field (or, rather, it insists on being seen). Regarding these perceptions, he states, ‘I am not so deluded as to not know that these images are the product of my imagination but’, he adds, ‘I see them, as clear as anything I cannot touch, the sky, clouds, those far blue hills’ (p. 55). ‘Yet’, Cleave

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<sup>5</sup> Banville, *Eclipse* (London: Picador, 2000), p. 44. Further references to this text are given in parentheses in the body of the essay.

says later in the novel, ‘everywhere around me there is substance, eminently tangible stuff, the common old world itself, hard and dense and warm to the touch’ (p. 124). He therefore seems able to distinguish between two sets of perceptions, one that belongs to the intangible yet visual and one to the tangible material. The (unconventional) affirmation of the non-predicate, together with the use of ‘see’ and ‘touch’ in order to distinguish between different sets of phenomena, demonstrates Cleave’s linguistic experimentation as he struggles to deal with his perceptual predicament. In this way, his attempt arguably introduces a third category that can correspond with his uncanny perceptions, perceptions that elude the standard boundary between reality and imagination.

Boundaries and the phantoms are also linked in Cleave’s spatial representations of the house. In addition to windows, the apparitions in *Eclipse* either take place in, or are seen through, liminal spaces such as doorways and staircases. For instance, he sees the female phantom ‘through the kitchen doorway’ (p. 46) and the paternal ghost ‘standing in the open doorway’ (p. 44). Elsewhere, he describes how the ‘ghostly figures’ that he used to see as a child appeared to him ‘on the stairs’ (p. 49). This is highly reminiscent of James’s ghost stories, in which windows and staircases similarly function as privileged loci for ghostly apparitions. In ‘The Turn of the Screw’, for example, Peter Quint’s ghost appears to the governess either through a window or at a staircase.<sup>6</sup> Themselves liminal sites where boundaries are crossed, the window and the staircase are, for Banville and James, architectural tropes that accentuate the significance of boundaries and liminality in their visions of the ghostly tale.

In his preface to ‘The Turn of the Screw’, James speaks of the ghostly as ‘an annexed but independent world’.<sup>7</sup> In *Eclipse*, the spectres similarly have ‘their own world’, but it is one that is subtly linked to the actual, and again, the stairway is a central locus:

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

The way in which the pieces of furniture figure in Alex’s description constitutes a chiastic structure between the actual and the virtual – table, range, stairs, and then, stairs, range, table.

<sup>6</sup> James, ‘The Turn of the Screw’, in *Ghost Stories*, pp. 175-266 (pp. 195, 216-19). In James’s ‘Sir Edmund Orme’ (1891), moreover, the narrator momentarily takes the figure of Mrs Marden standing behind the window for ‘an apparition’, and later describes her as a ‘flitting presence behind the pane’ (in *Ghost Stories*, pp. 67-91 (pp. 74-75)).

<sup>7</sup> James, ‘Preface to “The Turn of the Screw”’, *Ghost Stories*, pp. 3-10 (p. 5).

The stairs of both sides are the closest in this chiastic structure, as if linking the two realms. Therefore, rather than existing in a relation of contrast, the spectral and the everyday real overlap, albeit minimally. Moreover, this overlap has a direct effect on the actual:

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

The superimposition of the spectral on the real produces an extra, an ephemeral addition, which, while it lingers, derails the unity of the narrator's experience. The banality of everyday experience is transformed into strangeness via the inclusion, or, rather, intrusion of a ghostly supplement into perceptual experience. Consequently, the interpenetration of the spectral and the actual changes the fabric of the quotidian and leaves a persistent ghostly touch in Cleave's perception of the world; as he tells us, 'everything was bathed in a faint glow of strangeness, an unearthly radiance' (p. 45).

Within the context of Cleave's perceptions of the spectral supplement, the word 'touch' acquires a significant resonance; namely, he associates the spectral with 'touch' both literally and metaphorically. For instance, he observes that 'the deserted square' has an 'alien air, a touch almost of Transylvania' (p. 25), and the tramp who Cleave meets in the street has 'a touch of umbrage' (p. 105), with 'umbrage' itself being already linked with shadow.<sup>8</sup> More generally, touch is almost never associated with the act of touching matter. Cleave touches not Lydia's actual shoulder but 'the air by Lydia's shoulder' (p. 20). Elsewhere, when the word 'touch' does figure in its most standard meaning, 'laying hand on matter', he either does not quite manage to touch but '*almost* touched his knees' (p. 41, emphasis added), while his kinaesthetic access is barred by a negation: 'I may observe, but not touch' (p. 103) and 'I cannot touch' (p. 55). In a similar vein, 'the interior' of the hotel in which he married Lydia is described as 'many-layered and slightly gummy to the touch, like toffee' (p. 38). What is conjured up here is the way in which the place's interiority is not directly accessible but mediated by a number of layers. According to Mladen Dolar, '[t]actility, touching, the sense of touch, all appear to be the firmest thing there is. What one can touch is, tautologically, the most palpable and the most tangible'.<sup>9</sup> Among all the senses, 'touching is singled out by its

<sup>8</sup> Transylvania of course is yet another signifier that conjures up a gothic atmosphere, as it famously functions as the setting for Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897).

<sup>9</sup> Mladen Dolar, 'Touching Ground', *Filozofski vestnik*, 29.2 (2008), 79-100 (p. 79).

immediacy, while other senses are subject to a certain deferral in various ways'.<sup>10</sup> For Dolar, what one can touch is perceived as 'closer', 'more real' than objects perceived by the other senses. In touching, the 'spatial distance' between the subject and object is demolished.<sup>11</sup> Cleave's problematic sense of touch, by contrast, alienates him further from material reality. He is deprived of the proximity with the material object that constitutes one's immediate experience of reality. Even though he tries to 'get a grip on things' (p. 28), all he is left with is a faint touch of a shadow. In other words, usual rules do not apply in Cleave's world and are, in fact, turned on their heads.

Even when he does manage to touch something, rather than the simple sensation of touch, the experience yields a weird intimation. He writes, 'I set off up the stairs, feeling the faintly repulsive clamminess of the banister rail under my hand, offering me its dubious intimacy' (p. 115). Together with 'intimacy', the words 'repulsive' and 'dubious' suggest that what the experience discloses is linked with unpleasant, possibly even repressed, family history. This is especially the case given the fact that the house is where Cleave grew up as a child, witnessing all of the inner experiences of the familial. In other words, the experience has to do with the more 'unhomely' aspects of home – in a word, the *Unheimliche*; that is, Freud's famous uncanny.<sup>12</sup> Additionally, the fact that this sensation is experienced on the stairway is especially significant. Insofar as it functions as a privileged site for the ghostly apparition, as we saw earlier, the stairway subtly links the spectral with the uncanny return of the repressed in domestic space. At the same time, since the stairway is a liminal site, it suggests, yet again, (malleable) boundaries as well as the possibility of their breach. Early on in the novel, Cleave hints at the connection between the phantoms and repression: '[t]he suggestion of the familial the phantoms bring with them makes me wonder if they might be the form of a rejected life coming back to claim me' (p. 49). The spatial stairway stages the liminal locus in which the spectral strikes a chord with that repressed, 'rejected' element of his psyche that recurrently come back to haunt or 'claim' him.

### **Extimacy**

Slavoj Žižek elaborates on the relation between the ghostly and the repressed through recourse to Lacanian psychoanalysis. According to Žižek, the intrusion of the spectral into

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<sup>10</sup> Dolar, p. 79.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> See Sigmund Freud, 'The "Uncanny"', in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud: An Infantile Neurosis and Other Works*, trans. James Strachey, 24 vols (London: The Hogarth Press, 1953-74), XVII (1955), pp. 217-56.

reality has to do with a fundamental gap in reality itself, a fissure brought about by the ontologically incomplete nature of the Symbolic order.<sup>13</sup> Since the Symbolic order is unable completely to overwrite the Real, reality is never self-contained, self-evident, or whole. In his words, reality ‘presents itself via its incomplete, failed symbolization’.<sup>14</sup> ‘Spectral apparitions’, in turn, ‘emerge in the very gap that forever separates reality from the real [...]. The spectral gives body to that which escapes (the symbolically structured) reality.’<sup>15</sup> In this sense, Žižek adds, the spectral is the name for that which ‘conceals’ that part of reality that is ‘primordially repressed’, ‘the irrepresentable [sic] X on whose “repression” reality itself is founded’.<sup>16</sup> Lacan’s name for this impossible object is ‘the Thing’. According to Lacan, the unnamable *Thing* is to be distinguished from *things*, which are ‘closely linked’ with words; hence, they are nameable.<sup>17</sup> A thing is marked by language and related to ‘the transition to the symbolic’.<sup>18</sup> By contrast, Gary Farnell comments, the *Thing* ‘is the absolute otherness’, ‘a phantasmic reference to an unnamable void at the centre of the Real’ that lies beyond the Symbolic order. It cannot be represented as such, but can only be ‘misrepresented as a series of effects’.<sup>19</sup>

However, the relation between the *Thing* and a *thing* is not a clear-cut separation. Rather, the relation between the two is that of *extimacy* – a neologism that Lacan coined in order to explain the paradoxical status of the *Thing* as that which is both *exterior* and *intimate*.<sup>20</sup> The impossible *Thing* has to be excluded, repressed, so that a *thing* can emerge in reality. In other words, for a *thing* to be representable by language, it has to be ‘defined against the impossible reality of the *Thing*’.<sup>21</sup> However, the fact that the *thing* is only representable when the *Thing* is excluded means that the *Thing* and a *thing* are fundamentally

<sup>13</sup> Žižek here is building on Jacques Lacan’s famous triadic model, based on the concepts of the Symbolic, Real, and Imaginary. Roughly speaking, the Symbolic is the locus of the signifier, the register that guarantees the possibility of any meaningful signification. The Real, in turn, is that which subsists beyond symbolisation. It is the realm of the impossible, because it is impossible to signify, yet it paradoxically underlies all aspects of our reality. It is the unknown kernel of *jouissance* that needs to be repressed, excluded, so that ‘reality’ becomes possible. In this sense, in Lacan’s terminology, the Real is distinct from reality. The Imaginary, finally, consists of images, which regulate one’s sense of self by mediating one’s interactions with the self as well as others.

<sup>14</sup> Slavoj Žižek, ‘Introduction: The Spectre of Ideology’, in *Mapping Ideology* (London: Verso, 1994), pp. 1-33 (p. 21).

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Jacques Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book VII*, trans. by Denis Porter (London: Routledge, 2008), p. 54.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. p. 52.

<sup>19</sup> Gary Farnell, ‘The Gothic and the *Thing*’, *Gothic Studies*, 11.1 (2009), 113-23 (p. 113).

<sup>20</sup> Lacan, p. 171.

<sup>21</sup> Farnell, p. 113.

linked together.<sup>22</sup> That is to say, the (impossible) Thing is ‘at the very interior of the figure to which it is external’.<sup>23</sup> Extimacy means that negative exclusion marks (Symbolic) reality, permeates it, and becomes inseparable from it. In a word, it haunts it. Therefore, as Farnell points out, the Thing is located inside as well as outside of all Symbolic productions such as art and culture. From a Lacanian perspective, then, Farnell concludes, ‘Gothic is the name for the speaking subject’s confrontation with intimations of the Thing’.<sup>24</sup> The extimate Thing explains how ‘such externalities’ in gothic art as ‘haunted spaces and decaying properties, with absences at their heart’, coincide with the ‘subject’s deepest and most imperceptible subjectivity’.<sup>25</sup> Gothic fiction stages the subject’s encounters with the unrepresentable Thing, ones that activate ‘the key processes of *sublimation* and *abjection*’.<sup>26</sup>

In *Eclipse*, everyday objects function in the novel as ‘hidden portents’ (p. 18), always revealing an ‘otherside’, an echo from the past or a premonition of the future. They either display ‘shades of dried blood’ or bear ‘traces of an intruder’ (p. 18). The ‘bentwood chair’ is ‘resentful-looking’ and a ‘night table with wormholes’ functions as a tempo-spatial wormhole that instantly connects him to the past, thereby disrupting the unity of his experience (p. 18). In this abyssal house, ‘[s]omething would catch my attention, anything, a cobweb, a damp patch on a wall, a scrap of old newspaper lining a drawer, a discarded paperback, and I would stop and stand gazing at it for a long time, motionless, lost, unthinking’ (p. 18). The house functions as a space in which the Real aspect of ‘anything’ easily comes to the fore, transfixing him so that he is ‘motionless’. The use of the negating prefix ‘un’, especially considered alongside the narrator’s triple negation of the predicate discussed earlier, highlights the significance of the primordial negativity that underlies Cleave’s universe of the *uncanny*, the undead, that which persists in its horrifying negative existence. It is familiar – it is still an object in reality – yet simultaneously bizarre. It is the obverse of thinking and knowing.

Besides the formless ghosts and uncanny objects that appear inside the house, Cleave sees an unknowable animal-like figure on the road: ‘I had stopped on instinct before I

<sup>22</sup> One can reformulate this claim using Lacan’s idea of the Real as employed in his later work. Insofar as the Thing is an impossibility, it can be defined as Real. Therefore, in order for an object (a thing) to appear in reality (or the representation of reality), the Real must be excluded from representation, since the Real is traumatic and meaningless, and its inclusion disrupts meaning. However, as Lacan constantly insisted, the Real can never be completely excluded because that which is meant to cancel it, to tame it, namely, the Symbolic, is not complete, not a closed and self-contained system but barred, always lacking the signifier to name the Thing.

<sup>23</sup> Farnell, p. 113.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, pp. 113-14.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, p. 115, emphasis in original.

registered the thing and sat aghast [...] listening to my own blood hammering in my ears [...]. What was it? [...] some wild unknown thing [...] seemingly legless [...]. My heart was pounding yet' (p. 5). The 'thing' is unknowable, radically other. It is not of this world in that it does not resemble any animal the narrator has ever met. He is unable to situate it within his Symbolic universe. It represents the limit of meaning and understanding, the point where the narrator's epistemological quest meets its failure. It provokes anxiety since the sole feasible response to this impossibility is horror. The fact that unknowable, uncanny 'things' appear outside the house as well as inside it suggests that the extimate effect of the Thing spills beyond the house. Although domestic spaces are the privileged media for revealing the ghostly Thing, extimate encounters outside the house imply that extimacy is a more fundamental element of Cleave's subjective experience of which the (un)homely spectral apparitions are but one expression.

More specifically, a series of confrontations with peculiar figures outside the house produce Gothic extimacy in Cleave's narrative. Upon his return to the house, Cleave develops the habit of following strangers, including homeless tramps. When he finally comes face to face with one, he remarks that '[d]espite the fellow's fierce appearance there had been something cloyingly intimate in the encounter, something from which my mind's eye insisted on averting its gaze. Rules had been broken, a barrier had been transgressed, an interdiction breached' (p. 45). The tramp evokes for Cleave something nauseatingly familiar, something his conscious self strives to avoid, to repress. The words 'barrier' and 'transgressed' evoke a boundary that is no longer able to safeguard his self-containment. His most intimate sense of selfhood, that which Cleave expects to remain hidden within his own boundaries, coincides with an exteriority; in a word, it becomes extimate. Elsewhere, Cleave speaks of several red-haired figures in his narrative, who are all riddled with mysterious and unsettling gestures reminiscent of the red-haired Peter Quint from James's 'The Turn of the Screw'. During a heavy rainfall, for instance, Cleave sees a boy with red hair on a horse who, 'despite the downpour', appeared 'to be hardly wet at all, as if he were protected within an invisible shell of glass' (p. 112). In addition, Cleave is unsure whether it is a smile or 'a grimace' that he catches from the boy. What fascinates Cleave most about the boy, however, is that the latter is somehow linked to Cleave's past. The boy's 'old-fashioned' belt is similar to the one Cleave 'used to wear myself when I was his age' (p. 112). What is more, the boy, without saying a word, 'went on again, into the lane whence I had come' (p. 112) – that is, he literally heads to where Cleave was before. The narrator later meets a red-haired clown at a circus

who ‘looked familiar’ (p. 150). The latter reminds Cleave of yet another red-haired man who he used to meet in the street with ‘alarming frequency’, and who Cleave also ‘seemed vaguely to know’ (p. 150). As Hedwig Schwall points out, the ‘leering, insinuating red-haired’ figure is reminiscent of the mischievous red-haired Felix from Banville’s previous novel, *Mefisto*, who ‘returns with the same appearance’ in later novels like ‘*Athena*, *Eclipse*, and *Shroud*’.<sup>27</sup> This, according to Hedwig Schwall, demonstrates the ‘irrepressible revenant part of the past throughout Banville’s oeuvre’.<sup>28</sup> In *Eclipse* specifically, the red-haired figure is linked to some form of repressed knowledge from the past. This is highlighted most tellingly through the red-haired clown’s ‘knowing smirk’ (p. 180).

Furthermore, the very word ‘red’ seems to occupy a central place in Cleave’s psychic scene. The mysterious animal-like figure that Cleave comes across at the beginning of his narrative, for instance, has eyes that are ‘unreal neon-red’ (p. 4) and he feels ‘inexplicably nervous’, with his ‘heart racing and palms wet’ while he is about to enter a ‘red-brick house’ (p. 91). According to David B. Morris, one way that gothic fiction achieves its effect is via instances of repetition and ‘exact facsimiles’, which undermine the subject’s rational grasp over the world.<sup>29</sup> In every instance in which Cleave meets a red-haired figure, they evoke forbidden or secret knowledge through smirks, smiles, and other insinuating gestures.<sup>30</sup> The figures give the narrator an *intimation*, an intimate trepidation, but they do not speak. In other words, they represent a liminal extimacy that, while obstructing Cleave’s access to the forbidden knowledge that they both represent and possess, occasionally pulsates and gives off a sign, a grimace of the Real, but never (Symbolic) meaning. *Red* appears when Cleave least expects it, when he is not looking directly, when he is least in control. It is a window to the abyss of the extimate Thing that appears only when one is looking awry.

### **Disparity**

Using key signifiers such as ‘red’, Banville crafts an intricate web of signification that links elements from Cleave’s unconscious to objects and persons in everyday reality, thereby situating his fictional universe at the intersection of reality and imagination. At the same time, by subjecting his narrator to constant experiences of gothic extimacy and exposing him to the more invisible (repressed) underpinnings of subjective experience, he creates a world marked

<sup>27</sup> Hedwig Schwall, “‘Mirror on Mirror Mirrored is all the Show’: Aspects of the Uncanny in Banville’s Work with a Focus on *Eclipse*”, *Irish University Review*, 36.1 (2006), 116-33 (p. 119).

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> David B. Morris, ‘Gothic Sublimity’, *New Literary History* 16.2 (1985), 299-319 (pp. 303-04),

<sup>30</sup> Banville, *Eclipse*, pp. 112, 150, 180.

by undecidability and intellectual uncertainty. Consequently, objects and people fail to coincide with themselves. Everything is, in other words, marked by a disparity. This is why Cleave wonders whether things are ‘representations of themselves’ (p. 49), and his mother appears as a ‘statue of herself’ (p. 59). The gothic, Linda Dryden says, is a ‘literature of duality’ and, according to Maria Beville, the gothic achieves its effect in ‘presenting otherness’ – that is to say, ‘othered versions’ of what is familiar.<sup>31</sup> Cleave himself lacks a unified sense of self. His mirror reflections always reveal ‘othered’, disparate versions of the self-image, transforming the mirrors into windows opening onto uncanny sites of self-dislocation. Faced with his reflection, for instance, Cleave sees ‘someone else, a stranger lurking there, a figure of momentous and inscrutable intent’ (p. 186). Elsewhere, the ‘shop window’ reveals the figure of ‘a felon’ (p. 88).

The narrator’s self is dislocated further still during his autoscopic experiences, to the extent that the self as such splits (is ‘cleft’, as Banville’s telling choice of name for his narrator implies), into both subject – the seer – and object – the seen. As he puts it, ‘suddenly everything shifted on to another plane and I was at once there and not there. It was like the state that survivors of heart attacks describe, I seemed to be onstage and at the same time looking down on myself from somewhere up in the flies’ (p. 89). It is precisely at this point that the chamber of his consciousness, to borrow James’s famous metaphor,<sup>32</sup> is cracked open; his ‘I’, his conscious self, is separated from the body, leaving the latter on stage, as it were, and weightlessly flying above it. More significantly for our reading, the duality leads to the speaking ‘I’ itself, his immediate sense of self, becoming spectral. This is arguably where Banville takes the Jamesean tradition of the ghostly tale to a more radical level. A case in example is James’s ‘The Jolly Corner’, which parallels Banville’s *Eclipse* in terms of its plot to some extent, in that the narrator returns to his childhood house and confronts his ghostly alter ego. Though the confrontation proves calamitous enough for James’s protagonist as the latter temporarily loses consciousness, it is in Banville’s *Eclipse* that the very self becomes disjointed, neither here nor there, and is reduced to a ghostly ‘I’/eye.

In this sense, Cleave is first and foremost haunted by the spectre of his own dual identity. ‘To be haunted by another, by a spectre, is uncanny enough’, says Dryden, ‘but to be

<sup>31</sup> Linda Dryden, *The Modern Gothic and Literary Doubles: Stevenson, Wilde, and Wells* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), p. 41; and Maria Beville, *Gothic-Postmodernism: Voicing the Terrors of Postmodernity* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009), pp. 41-42.

<sup>32</sup> James likens subjective experience to a ‘kind of huge spider-web of the finest silken threads suspended in the chamber of consciousness’ (James, ‘The Art of Fiction’, in *Partial Portraits* (London: Macmillan & Co., 1888), pp. 386-404 (p. 394)).

haunted by yourself strikes at the foundations of identity'.<sup>33</sup> What ultimately produces the gothic in *Eclipse* is not so much the ghosts that he meets in the haunted house as it is what the spectral apparitions reveal in Cleave's perception as an individual. That is to say, *Eclipse* is a (post)modern gothic narrative that demonstrates the way in which reality itself and Cleave's subjectivity are never independent from spectrality; his sense of self, like his reality, is not whole, but constantly haunted by a ghostly excess, forever unable to coincide with itself. In a recent book, Žižek introduces 'disparity' as a concept in its own right:

At its most radical, disparity does not refer just to the gap between parts or spheres of reality, it has to be brought to self-relating and include the disparity of a thing with regard to itself – or to put in another way, the disparity between part of a thing and nothing. A is not just not-B, it is also and primarily not fully A, and B emerges to fill in this gap. It is at this level that we should locate ontological difference: reality is partial, incomplete, inconsistent, and the Supreme Being is the illusion imagined in order to fill in (obfuscate) this lack, this void that makes reality non-all.<sup>34</sup>

James also claimed in his 'Art of Fiction' (1884) that '[e]xperience is never limited, and it is never complete'.<sup>35</sup> But whereas James emphasises the role of imagination (the writer's as well as the reader's) to supplement the missing components of experience, Banville exploits reality's ontological incompleteness in order to articulate the already inherent supplement, the unfathomable, unnamable X that never fully ceases to haunt the very foundation of reality, marking it forever by fissures and inconsistencies. Banville's 'art of fiction', so to speak, constantly exploits these fissures, articulates them, and uses them to produce othered versions of the real.

Schwall demonstrates how, in Banville's *The Infinites* (2009), the elements of the fantastic function as 'the perfect glove for Banville's neo-Symbolist hand', insofar as both fantasy and Symbolist literatures combine 'dream and reality to create effects of the marvelous' and produce allegoric versions of 'emotions, moods and spiritual states'.<sup>36</sup> Schwall calls Banville a 'neo-Symbolist', however, in the sense that, whereas 'Symbolists like Yeats and Rilke still had their moments of belief in unity', for Banville, 'even things which seem one or identical, never really are'.<sup>37</sup> Following Schwall, we can claim that Banville's *Eclipse* is an example of the *neo-gothic*, as he takes the Master's project a step further and postmodernises it. Insofar as the ghostly tale, especially in its Jamesian variation,

<sup>33</sup> Dryden, p. 41.

<sup>34</sup> Žižek, *Disparities* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), p. 21.

<sup>35</sup> James, 'The Art of Fiction', p. 393.

<sup>36</sup> Schwall, 'An Iridescent Surplus of Style: Features of The Fantastic in Banville's *The Infinites*', *Nordic Irish Studies*, 9 (2010), 89-107 (pp. 89, 98).

<sup>37</sup> Schwall, 'Iridescent', p. 101.

examines the sense of uncertainty between the knowable and the unknowable, the gothic genre is a fruitful medium for Banville's epistemological fiction. Yet he simultaneously enriches the gothic tradition by situating the Jamesian variation of the gothic in a postmodern critical setting.