Banville's Other Ghost: Samuel Beckett's Presence in John Banville's *Eclipse*.

A writer's position in the literary hierarchy may be measured by the reputation of the authors to whom he or she is compared. Established writers may well be ambivalent about such comparisons — while flattered at their elevation to the rarefied atmosphere where the great and revered reside, they may nonetheless bristle at the implication that in their literary voices are still to be heard the voices of other writers, the canon-makers, without whom the contemporary writer could not have discovered and honed his or her distinctive voice. For the literary critics who make such comparisons, however, the tribute is unambiguous: it is a form of canonisation, a recognition that the contemporary writer's literary efforts are sufficiently original and sustained to bear comparison with the great individual voices of literature.

John Banville has long been accepted into the exalted company of the novelists' pantheon, and his allusive prose and intricate and elaborate style has already generated a good deal of critical commentary on the possible influences on Banville of some of the dominant figures of, in particular, twentieth-century literature. A survey of the major critical work on Banville, and a look at the reviews of his novel, *Eclipse*,[1] suggest that it is Nabokov and Proust, and particularly the former, whose writing most obviously resonates in Banville's work. Rüdiger Imhof finds that 'Banville's fictions have always possessed a Nabokovian side to them', by which designation he means, *inter alia*, 'an indefatigable interest in shape, in patterning' and 'a magnificent mastery in using words […] and in using them in a most precise and dense, poetic manner'.[2] In their press reviews of *Eclipse*, both James Wood and Terry Eagleton refer to Nabokov, the latter observing: 'Like Nabokov's, Banville's stylish, slyly self-conscious prose is more a way of fending off feeling than expressing it.'[3]

Reviewing *Eclipse* in the *TLS*, Christopher Tayler intriguingly refers to the text's 'Nabokovian lushness' and 'Beckettian asperity'.[4] The coupling of these writers seems odd, and the attributes contradictory: the haughtiness and sumptuousness of Nabokov's prose is not easily reconciled with the humility and spareness of middle and late Beckett. Yet Beckett, too, has frequently been invoked in the literary criticism on Banville. That they are both Irish is not without relevance, although, as writers, neither could be made to fit easily into something called

'Irish writing', nor would Banville wish, or Beckett have wished, to be categorised as an 'Irish writer'. Joseph McMinn specifically addresses the question of the traces of Beckett to be found in Banville's work, concluding: 'There are certainly many incontestable similarities between the two writers, formally and philosophically.' McMinn considers that 'Banville shares with Beckett that curiosity about the workings of the nostalgic mind, its grief over lost love, lost opportunity, lost self'. One might wish to contest part of this formulation with regard to Beckett ('nostalgic' and 'grief' seem too strong in this context, certainly where lost opportunity and lost self are concerned), but McMinn is quite right to point out that, on the critical measure of style, 'the two [writers] seem worlds apart'.[5] Specifically, McMinn and Imhof each nominate a Banville text where they find a strong Beckettian influence: McMinn proposes that Banville's television play, *Seachange*, 'may be seen as Banville's tribute to Beckett',[6] while Imhof finds that Banville allowed 'the imprint of Beckett'[7] to leave too strong an impression on his first novel, *Nightspawn*.

John Banville has long been aware of, and has readily and generously acknowledged, his debt to Beckett. In his tribute to Beckett in the *Irish Times* on the occasion of Beckett's death, Banville wrote: 'He was an example to us all — I wonder if he realised just *what* an example he was to my generation of writers?'[8] The younger Banville had been even more explicit, attributing to Beckett nothing less than the artistic credo that had guided his own fiction-writing: 'It is Beckett's supreme achievement to have shown us that the horror and cruelty of the world…can be redeemed through the beauty and power of language — language and nothing more, not progress, optimism or delusion, but words alone.'[9] The mature Banville is even more convinced of Beckett's uniqueness; it would be difficult to imagine a more respectful and unequivocal tribute paid by one artist to another than the one he paid to Beckett a few years ago: 'No one else in this century has, in my view, expressed so unflinchingly the world's anguish, or portrayed so movingly its tragic, fleeting beauty.'[10]

For artists apparently following the same guiding star, namely 'the beauty and power of language', the stylistic paths they took are remarkably different: Banville's prose has unfurled into a sensuous, imbricated, evocative weave, inviting the parallels with the lavish prose of Nabokov and Proust, while Beckett's texts, each more scarred than its predecessor with the

suffering and failure that attended its gestation, rasped out the diminishing and always-wrong words in the effort to thwart the enveloping silence. It will be necessary to say more about the opposing styles of these writers for whom, as with all great writers, the novel is essentially a matter of language and style. This will be accomplished more easily after the following discussion, to which I would now like to turn, which condiders the traces of Samuel Beckett to be found in John Banville's novel, *Eclipse*.

The Beckettian resonances in *Eclipse* may be placed — fairly crudely — into two categories: first, there are a number of tantalising local echoes and allusions, which, if encountered in isolation, might well pass unnoticed but which, in their accumulation, begin to suggest that their occurrence is more than simply coincidental; and then there are the deeper and more sustained affinities which go straight to the thematic and philosophical heart of the novel, bearing not only upon its central character, his crisis of identity, his conception of his existence, and his being in the world, but upon the very question of being itself. These latter analogies cause the reader familiar with Beckett's writing to reconsider the discrete, isolated textual details of the first category, and to regard them now as part of a pattern, as signs of the impression left by one writer upon another.

Within the first category, specific local details are of varying significance. Of lesser import, but nonetheless intriguing because of their precision, is the presence of certain, almost fetishistic, Beckettian objects in Banville's text. Quirke, the shadowy, shady occupant of the protagonist Alex Cleave's house, has in his room, or 'lair' (p. 174), a space not dissimilar to Malone's room in Beckett's *Malone Dies*, a chamber pot, as does Malone (who, in fact, has two of them); Alex's mother, too, used one — 'she even developed a knack of overturning her chamber pot' (p. 60), something Malone threatens to do if his are not emptied.[11] Then there is Quirke's bicycle, a means of locomotion much favoured in Beckett, particularly by Moran and Molloy in *Molloy*. That Banville is alert to the use of objects in Beckett's work, and notably to the bicycle, is revealed in his review of the two Beckett biographies (by James Knowlson and Anthony Cronin) in the *New York Review of Books*. Speaking of the way in which Beckett 'archaicized his material', he observes that 'the landscape and objects of his mature work are those of a stylized childhood world of country roads with donkeys and antique bicycles'.[12] As well as noting the

archaic chamber pot (in name, at least) in *Eclipse*, let us note too that Quirke's bicycle is 'a high, black, old-fashioned affair' (pp. 24-5).

Another resonant detail in *Eclipse* is the name of Banville's protagonist, Alexander Cleave. The verb 'to cleave' has two senses, one of which is 'to split', 'to fissure'. One of its past tense and past participle forms is 'clove', which calls to mind the character Clov (pronounced 'clove') in Beckett's play, *Endgame*. And the central drama for Cleave is indeed the fissure that has opened up within him — it is as if he has split off from the external world, from his wife and daughter, and from his own fragile sense of self. From this perspective, the choice of name seems carefully chosen. What encourages one to entertain the possibility of an intentional allusiveness on Banville's part is the presence throughout his work of a running allusion to Beckett by way of nomenclature, specifically through the 'M' of major characters' surnames. In Beckett's novel trilogy we have Moran and Molloy, and in Banville's 'Freddie' trilogy we have Montgomery and Morrow.[13] 'Montgomery' and 'Morrow' designate the same person, and it is likely that 'Moran' and 'Molloy' do so in *Molloy*. Beckett also has his Murphy, Mercier, Malone, Macmann and Mahood, while Banville gives us a Morden in *Athena* and a Maskell in *The Untouchable*. Knowing Beckett's work as well as he does, Banville has surely not been unconscious in his use of the 'M' initial in a number of his novels. In this light, it is plausible to suggest that the cleaved/cloven Alex might well be a conscious nod to the Beckettian Clov.

Within this first category of the Beckettian echoes present in *Eclipse*, one may also situate the striking parallels in the representation of the mother and of the mother-and-son relationship. The figure of the mother in Banville's novel is suffused with the melancholy and agitation of some of Beckett's female characters. As Alex wanders through his old family home he finds himself in his mother's room and notices the worn patch of linoleum, 'where my mother used to pace, unsubduably, night after long night, trying to die' (p. 18). Later, he describes how he 'would hear her in the night, pacing the floor by her bed, endlessly pacing' (p. 59). This metronomic back-and-forth pacing movement is, of course, a recurring Beckettian image, and the verb itself is also frequently met in Beckett, conveying, in the heavy push-pull of the feet, the trouble and burden of some inner distress. Pacing in Beckett is as emblematic as the bowed body, the lowered head, or the fall to earth, to the extent indeed that the movement inspired one of his

plays, *Footfalls*, which consists of the restless back-and-forth pacing of a woman 'revolving it all' in her 'poor mind'.[14]

It is with Molloy's visit to his mother (or, more precisely, his recollection of several previous visits to her) that a more extended comparison is possible in the representation of mother and son. In both *Eclipse* and *Molloy*, we have mother-and-son scenes. These are notable in their own right — in the context of the representation of the mother by Irish novelists — for their unsentimentality, even cruelty, and particularly so as they are both narrated to us by the son (although to fix and solidify Molloy in the role of 'son' is to draw upon narrative conventions and identities that are the object of a hearty contempt in *Molloy*). The points of resemblance between the scenes are many. Both mothers are bedridden, decrepit and helpless. Both are, in a manner, attended to by their only child — but not with affection: Alex, self-consciously noble in his filial gestures, does what he has to do for his mother after what appears to be her stroke, while Molloy is mainly concerned with taking his mother's money. Both sons speculate that their respective mothers' minds are so ravaged that they are probably incapable of understanding very much, with both narrators having recourse to the same descriptive term: we read of the 'ruin of [Alex's mother's] mind' (p. 60) and, in the case of Molloy's mother, of 'her ruined and frantic understanding' (p. 18). Both mothers, however, register the presence of their son, although mediated through the cruelly comic vision of the latter figure — Alex's mother jerks 'her head back on its wattled neck like a startled hen' (p. 60), and Molloy's jabbers away, hen-like, in 'a clattering gabble' (p. 18). The physical ravages on the face and head are pitilessly noted, and are not dissimilar: we are told of Alex's mother's 'puckered, whiskery lips' (p. 61) and 'raddled old head' (p. 62) and of Molloy's mother's 'shrunken, hairy old face' (p.18) and 'grey wizened pear' (p. 19). Precise details in both texts notably correspond: both sons bestow a reluctant filial kiss, and both respond in exactly the same way, registering merely the odour that wafts up from the decaying body beneath. Both mothers are portrayed in terms that deprive them of their dignity, and almost of their humanity: Alex's is likened to a 'dangerous machine that had seized up', is considered 'no longer human', and is described as being 'sprawled in the foul roost of her bed' (pp. 60, 61), while Molloy's is referred to as 'that old mess', 'that poor old uniparous whore', with whom he tries to communicate by knocking and thumping on her head (pp. 18, 19).

Distorted and parodied though it may be, this relationship does receive its due in a way, if only in the fact of the recognition in both texts of its fatalism and involuntary intimacy. Molloy accepts his filial condition, along with the unbreakable bonds and ontological mysteries it engenders (‘And if ever I’m reduced to looking for a meaning to my life, you never can tell, it’s in that old mess I’ll stick my nose to begin with’, p. 19), and even stoically accepts a certain geriatric kinship, in noting, ‘we were so old, she and I, […] that we were like a couple of old cronies […] with the same memories, the same rancours, the same expectations’ (p. 17), while Alex, embracing his enfeebled mother, sees the two of them ‘lapped in our noisome, ancient warmth’ (p. 62). Mother and son, then, in both texts, are shackled together, condemned to messy emotional entanglement by circumstance and time. In this conclusion, but also in the desacralising of the revered mother figure, in the contesting and subverting the mythology and iconography of the loving mother and devoted son (Alex observes that the emaciated frame of his mother leaning on his shoulder resembles ‘a deposition scene in reverse, the dying hunched old woman cradled in the arm of her living son’, p. 62), and in narrative tone and detail, these scenes in *Molloy* and *Eclipse* are remarkably similar. And there is also one very intriguing linguistic echo of the Molloy scene in *Eclipse*, occasioned by the confusion in the senile minds of the withered old women. Alex relates that his mother ‘grew confused, and mistook me for my father’ (p. 59), while Molloy, as if settling upon a mutually agreed working arrangement with his mother, declares that, ‘I took her for my mother and she took me for my father’ (p. 17).

The nature and quantity of these allusions to and echoes of Beckett’s work in *Eclipse* are striking, and are sufficient in themselves to suggest a certain Beckettian influence. But the affinities between Beckett’s work and *Eclipse* extend well beyond mere local, and therefore limited, resonances. Thematically, epistemologically, as well as in its mood and evolution, *Eclipse* is profoundly imbued with a Beckettian spirit. For Banville’s themes here are the great Beckettian themes of being and identity. James Wood, in his *Irish Times* review of *Eclipse*, proposes that ‘the book’s subject is, really, consciousness’,[15] an acceptable conclusion as far as it goes. Consciousness for Alex is almost an affliction; he is relentlessly *self*-conscious, incapable of locating or constructing something like an authentic self free from the ‘hideous awareness’ (p. 88) of himself in the world. But it is precisely consciousness *of* something from which Alex

suffers; consciousness is not something passive or inert, a simple registering of phenomena. In Alex's case the object is, obsessively, himself, or, rather, his *self*, his self understood in terms of both its being and identity. The term 'consciousness', as a description of what ails Alex in *Eclipse*, is too benign a term in its assertion of human transcendence, centredness and coherence. Alex's malady of self-consciousness deprives him of any sensation of solidity of selfness, and leaves him stranded in an increasingly untenable space of near-non-being, a space of being marked as much by a sense of absence as of presence. In this malaise of being and disintegration of self, Alex *suffers* his existence in the manner of many a Beckettian decrepit. It remains now to draw in the contours and colorations of Alex's very Beckettian decline.

Alex is an actor of some renown — though he, as narrator, is our only witness to this, and his pompous, patrician pronouncements on his career allow us to be a little sceptical about his professional achievements and reputation — who has suffered a breakdown during a stage performance, from which he has been unable to recover. In the aftermath of his collapse he finds himself drawn back to his childhood family home in a small provincial coastal town. This return to the landscape — both physical and emotional, a landscape heavy with memories and associations — of his formative years, where the muddled, contingent process of self-construction took place, is a flight from everything that this self subsequently became and achieved; it is a flight, therefore, from his present life, his wife, his career, or what is left of it, but above all it is a flight from self, from everything, therefore, that he *is*, from the person that he understands himself to be. *Eclipse*, then, is deeply concerned with the question of identity. If, initially, Alex lets himself be drawn back by the force of the call from the house of his childhood, he soon comes to realise that he is actively seeking something there: he hopes 'to locate that singular essential self, the one I came here to find' (p. 51). There is, then, something of the quest about Alex's flight, just as Beckett's prose texts are full of wanderers, and full, too, of self-seekers, both in the world and in the mind: Moran's and Molloy's mythic peregrinations, for example, take the form of quest narratives,[16] and *The Unnamable*, too, enacts a quest, although entirely in the labyrinth of language. And in both *Eclipse* and in these Beckett novels the goal is the same — to discover, articulate, or construct a self. Molloy may appear to be seeking his

mother, Moran to be seeking Molloy, and the narrating voice in *The Unnamable* may be beyond any physical movement at all, but these trilogy texts (along with *Malone Dies*) all relentlessly probe the questions of self and identity, culminating in the quest by the narrating voice in *The Unnamable* to fix itself in language, to speak a self into existence.

That Alex's torpid return to his childhood home, to his past, resolves into a quest for self is a consequence of his no longer being able to play his essential role, the role he conceived and performed throughout his life. It was natural for Alex to end up as an actor: by his own admission his performances on stage were little more than an extension of his performances in his life, that of playing the part of being other than himself. It was comically apt, therefore, that the tensions engendered by such ceaseless self-avoidance should spill over on stage, culminating in the highly dramatic first-night spectacle of Alex corpsing, of being unable to get his lines out. Alex attributes his stage collapse to his 'malady of selfness' (p. 90), to an 'insupportable excess of self' (p. 88), which takes the form of an obsessive self-consciousness, born, paradoxically, of his acute sense that his identity consists of a surfeit of selves, of an untenable accumulation and juggling of identities. Alex's self is an empty space of role-playing, otherness and self-*absence*: 'At the site of what was supposed to be my self was only a vacancy, an ecstatic hollow' (p. 33). The literal, on-stage collapse ('I had not forgotten my lines […] only I could not speak them', p. 89) both mirrors and is the catalyst of his greater, off-stage disintegration ('the part I must play was myself, and I had no lines learned', p. 91). Alex is well able to recall the day in his boyhood when 'I became aware of myself' (p.32), but this process of coming-into-self stalled somehow, leaving only a potential, a promise of selfhood. Alex is capable, too, of saying what he has become, and can delineate the roles and false identities he has assumed, and these various impersonations could even be said to have constituted a self, which functioned for most of his adult life — for Alex himself to some degree, and for others to a quite convincing degree. But Alex now feels in himself 'this vacuum where the self should be' (p. 33), and, in the aftermath of the very public collapse of his facade, finds that all he can do is seek to find the 'essential self [that] has been pushed to the side' (p. 15). Old performer that he is, Alex has difficulty in breaking the habit of role-playing and in eschewing his theatrical metaphors, but he is lucid, and anguished, enough to understand where his life of performing has brought him ('I really am a stranger to myself',

p.135), and in sensing that all that is left for him to do now is to discover if there is an authentic self and identity to be found 'under the jumble of discarded masks' (p. 51).

In Beckett's fiction, too, particularly in the texts from the trilogy onwards, the narrative dynamic (such as it is) is often that of a quest for, or a groping towards, a sense of identity. If Beckett's mature fiction seems to many to be difficult and rebarbative, it is surely because his uncompromising approach to his great themes of being and identity left him with no option but to dismantle the conventions of narrative fiction and the pieties surrounding personal identity. Beckett stripped his characters bare, left them naked in the confrontation with themselves. The first step in his fictional experiment was to remove the props and crutches, the very foundations, that buttressed traditional forms of identity. He deprived his characters of knowledge, possessions, status, ambition, of just about everything that the solidly rooted self draws upon to function and thrive in society. In so doing, he deprived them, most radically, of a sure sense of identity. The identity of the knower and the possessor was clearly abhorrent to Beckett, and was, for him, a lie. His fiction, via the dismantled identities of these characters abandoned to memory and language, became an excavation of consciousness and self in the tentative groping towards another form of identity, a truer, more authentic, and, he surely sensed, a profoundly other form. It could not be otherwise, such was his absolute rejection of the conventional forms on display. In so doing, of course, it was inevitable that there must emerge a new relation to being itself. The assured, solid self is full, present, centred, generally shielded from the nausea of being through the commotion and vigilance necessary to meet the responsibilities and expectations of one's personal and public identity The self-less have no such defences. The Beckettian character stares being in the face, and much of Beckett's fiction enacts this harsh confrontation. It is in his trilogy that Beckett conducts his most sustained exploration of identity and being. There, his *modus operandi*, and his essential motif of the fall, is most clearly on view. At the outset we are presented with the prissy, upright citizen that is Moran, before witnessing his collapse and emerging new identity ('I have been a man long enough, I shall not put up with it any more', p. 176). Chronologically, if not in the order of the narratives, the decline of Moran seems to represent the prehistory of the rootless, wandering Molloy, who is followed by the immobile Malone, who in turn anticipates the disembodied narrating voice of *The Unnamable*. What we

witness, in other words, is a process of dispossession, the gradual dissolution of a public, then private, self, culminating in the raw, bared, self-less being on display in *The Unnamable*. 'Where now? Who now? When now?' — the opening lines of *The Unnamable*: existence continues, but the old identities have been cast off. All that is left to the voice in the quest for self and in the confrontation with being is language. The narrating voice dispenses with its puppets and begins the quest with the only tools it has — words, these words: 'I, of whom I know nothing' (p. 306).

Alex's descent in *Eclipse*, in its structure, texture and effects, is very similar to the fall[17] of the Beckettian character. One might begin by noting a striking structural correspondence between *Eclipse* and Beckett's work. For in addressing the question of identity in *Eclipse*, not only does Banville explore one of the major themes in Beckett's fiction, he also elaborates and articulates it, and finds a solution to the artistic challenges it poses, in terms that resemble those deployed by Beckett half a century earlier in *The Unnamable*, the prose text in which Beckett most systematically and remorselessly pursues the themes of identity and being. The narrating voice in Beckett's novel sets itself up as *ur*-narrator, as the one responsible for the previous narratives in the trilogy (and indeed before). These narratives are now denounced as failed strategies and false accounts in the attempt to speak of self:

> All these Murphys, Molloys and Malones do not fool me. They have made me waste my time, suffer for nothing, speak of them when […] I should have spoken of me and of me alone. […] It is now I shall speak of me, for the first time. I thought I was right in enlisting these sufferers of my pains. I was wrong. They never suffered my pains, their pains are nothing, compared to mine, a mere tittle of mine, the tittle I thought I could put from me, in order to witness it. Let them be gone now, them and all the others, those I have used and those I have not used. (pp. 305-6)

In the overall structure and development of the plot within which the theme of identity is deployed, and indeed in some of the important details, *Eclipse* and *The Unnamable* closely resemble each other. Alex and the narrating voice seek to locate or articulate a self; both have lost themselves in assuming false selves; both now wish to cast off these false roles and protean identities (where Alex sees these as 'roles' or 'parts', Beckett's narrating voice describes its narrated characters as 'puppets' and as 'my delegates'); and both are excessively self-conscious, standing outside themselves, as it were, and observing themselves perform as other than themselves.

As Alex hides himself away in his childhood home, his disentanglement from his orthodox life is paralleled by an internal letting go, by a liberation from impositions and conventions, and by a slow turning towards a new relationship with self:

> Everything is strange now. The most humdrum phenomena fill me with slow astonishment. I feel at once newborn and immensely old. […] I have fallen into thrall with myself. I marvel at the matter my body produces, the stools, the crusts of snot, the infinitesimal creep of fingernails and hair. I have as good as given up shaving. (p.52)

In his languid metamorphosis, Alex resembles most *Molloy*'s Moran; it is in Moran's narrative that Beckett stages the definitive break with conventional existence and the turning away from the outer world and into the inner. Alex notes later that he has 'pretty well got out of the way of eating' (p. 156), taking after the great Beckettian fasters (the carrot-nibblers, sandwich-refusers, and stone-suckers). The fumbling quest for a new identity is not a simple matter of a *Godot*-esque swapping of hats, but is, rather, a profound transformation of self accompanied by a casting off of the carapace of good citizenship. The old order of being and identity is rejected, and, in the case of Alex and Beckett's characters, the consequence is a willed self-isolation. At one point Alex fantasises about the possibility that dispossession might indeed be the route to self-discovery. Leaving the beach to which he had wandered one day, he finds himself in front of a small hut:

> Perhaps, I thought, perhaps this is what I need to do, finally to give it all up, home, wife, possessions, renounce it all for good, rid myself of every last thing and come and live in some such unconsidered spot as this. What would I require for survival, except a cup, a dish, a blanket? Free then of all encumbrance, all distraction, I might be able at last to confront myself without shock or shrinking. For is this not what I am after, the pure conjunction, the union of self with sundered self? (p. 70)[18]

This withdrawal from society comes as easily to Alex as it does to the Beckettian marginal figure: 'I do not find my fellow man particularly lovable' (p. 10), declares Alex, who, upon discovering that he is sharing his house with others, takes to shutting himself away in his 'little room, my hidey-hole and refuge' (p. 130), happier there than anywhere else, scribbling away 'in this sealed chamber' (p. 131).[19] Not only is this pattern the same in Banville and Beckett, but both writers, very strikingly, have recourse to the same image to present the new relation between

the isolated figure and spurned society. Alex's wife Lydia arrives at the house, crowding Alex even more:

> I am skulking in my hideout, hunched over my bamboo table, feeling cross and ill at ease. […] I did not ask her to come here, I did not invite her. All I wanted was to be left alone. They abhor a vacuum, other people. You find a quiet corner where you can hunker down in peace, and the next minute there they are, crowding around you in their party hats, tooting their paper whistles in your face and insisting you get up and join in the knees-up. (p. 145)

Here now is Malone recalling the unacceptability of his failure to participate in the dance of human celebration: 'I fled, to hiding. The grown-ups pursued me, the just, caught me, beat me, hounded me back into the round, the game, the jollity' (p. 195). These marginal figures can no longer tolerate the blandishments and injunctions of the great life party. In Beckett's trilogy, the desire to recuperate the straying figure gradually translates into a pursuit of the unacceptable other, and emerges as one of the trilogy's dominant themes. The accompanying imagery becomes correspondingly more brutal (Molloy hiding from the lynch mob, Worm being subject to various attacks in the attempt to flush him out of his lair), but the essential terms of the conflict do not change: the marginal, other figure can no longer function in the society of his fellows and seeks sanctuary and respite, while society strives to rehabilitate the apostate and return him to the fold. The latter dimension of this conflict emerges in *Eclipse* (as we see in the above quote) only in Alex's sense of being pursued and crowded, but the rupture with his former existence and identity, and the profound sense of alienation, are nonetheless deep and irrevocable, and are articulated by Alex in honourable Beckettian terms: 'Perhaps the living are not my kind, any more' (p. 120), no more than they are for Molloy, for example, who notes: 'I wither as the living can not' (p. 40).

If Beckett's investigation and representation in fiction of the themes of identity and being are convincing and unsettling, and if the texts themselves become increasingly difficult and sometimes almost impenetrable, it is because the effects of the interrogation of the concepts of identity and being are manifested most radically through the unravelling of language and its structures. The disintegration of the centred, unified, coherent self in Beckett is played out as the

disintegration of narrative structures and increasing semantic confusion, and, later, as the disturbance of syntax itself. The collapse of the self and the dispersal of being is the collapse of structure and the dispersal of meaning in language: ‘the words are everywhere, inside me, outside me […] I’m in words, made of words, others’ words […] I’m all these words, all these strangers, this dust of words, with no ground for their settling’ (p. 390), rasps the narrating voice of *The Unnamable* as the ceaseless torrent of words endlessly defers the seizing of self in language.

It is in their different responses to this relation of language to identity and being that one may go some way to understanding the thoroughly opposed prose styles of Banville and Beckett, mentioned earlier. Where language is indissociable from identity and being in Beckett, it remains, in Banville, if not unrelated, at least detached, or distanced, from the disintegration of identity and the gnawing of being that both writers explore. Where Beckett’s prose *enacts* undoing and erosion, Banville’s remains intact, and coolly and elegantly scrutinises and dissects his characters’ crises. Beckett’s prose manifests collapse, Banville’s describes it. Not only does this influence prose style, it also explains why, even with both writers exploring the same themes, Beckett’s texts are more tormented and disturbed, and why Banville’s are lavish and discursive, and why the themes of being and identity are more abstractions in Banville than they are in Beckett.[20] Nonetheless, Alex’s abandonment of the world he has known and the identities he has assumed is paralleled by an estrangement from language, as he observes early on in his account: ‘Lately I had been finding it hard to understand the simplest things people said to me, as if what they were speaking in were a form of language I did not recognise; I would know the words but could not assemble them into sense’ (p. 7). This is much the same affliction from which Molloy suffers, who has been ‘living so far from words so long’ that sound and sense have parted company, leaving him in a world of ‘nameless things’ and ‘thingless names’, where ‘the icy words hail down upon me, the icy meanings, and the world dies too, foully named’ (p. 31). But where this semantic sundering will be pursued in Beckett, most immediately in *The Unnamable*, where linguistic structures seems almost to shatter, Banville’s Alex continues to record his decline lucidly and precisely, unproblematically constructing ‘the well-built phrase’ (p. 31) mocked by Molloy. This, let it be said, is not a value judgement; it is simply to record that the two writers found different artistic solutions to different artistic problems, while all the time

dealing with the same general themes.

This article has frequently evoked the concept of being, identifying it as one of the powerful Beckettian themes and underlining its importance in understanding Alex's crisis in *Eclipse*. Left undefined, however, the concept is rather too broad and capacious. Moreover, while there are indeed important affinities in the treatment of being in *Eclipse* and in Beckett's work, there are, equally, sufficient differences to demand that the understanding of the concept in Beckett and in Banville be explored and elucidated.

Alex has come back to his childhood home 'to locate that singular essential self', and he has done so because, there, he hopes to be able to cast off the borrowed 'masks' behind which he has hidden, and behind which he has hidden the very absence of such a self. But merely inhabiting this almost-mythic space of his boyhood is not enough; the sought-after self will be realisable only by way of a new mode of existence: 'alone, without an audience of any kind, I would cease from performing and simply *be*' (p. 46; narrator's italics). It is here that one may register an important difference between *Eclipse* and Beckett's work. Being, for Alex, as he understands the concept at this moment, represents a purified, spontaneous and unselfconscious mode of existence, and is the means to discovering his essential self; it is, therefore, an uncontaminated condition — discharged from role-playing, stripped of masks — to which he aspires. In Beckett, by contrast, being is the inescapable condition, and is something of a burden, one to which the characters, at best, acquiesce. Little fits of enthusiasm or impatience might tilt them this way or that, but, mostly, being is something that is undergone, often stoically, although the burden of what Pozzo in *Godot* calls 'accursed time' sometimes has Beckett's characters yearn for the end. Being, from this perspective, is a condition to be suffered. In *Eclipse*, in this passage where Alex speaks of his longing to 'simply *be*', being is a lack, an absence; it is existence experienced as a 'vacancy' and a 'hollow', whereas in Beckett it is an excess, prompting Malone, for example, to speak of 'the blessedness of absence' (p. 223).

There is a moment in *Eclipse*, when Alex becomes agitated at the obstacles to achieving the simple condition of being, which neatly encapsulates, and devolops, this difference in the understanding of the concept in certain passages in *Eclipse* and in Beckett (and which also, in its

formulation, provokes a sting of recognition in the reader familiar with Beckett). Alex is seeking to cultivate a sense of strangeness, a form of alienation from himself and his surroundings, and tries to resist the seductions of habituation, familiarity and a sense of belonging as he wanders through his old home. These, he senses, are the obstacles to spontaneous being: 'how was I to make strange now, and not stop making strange? How was I to fight the deadening force of custom?' (p. 46). In this formulation, do we not hear Vladimir's search for consolation in *Godot* in the face of insuperable, accursed time?: 'We have time to grow old. The air is full of our cries. [*He listens*.] But habit is a great deadener.'[21] For Alex, habit is a barrier to being; in Beckett, it is an anaesthetic *against* being. But these contrasting responses to being must also take account of differences in the understanding, and indeed the use, of the term that emerge here. Alex understands being as the necessary condition of unselfconscious, performance-free existence ('simply *be*') which will allow an authentic form of selfhood to emerge; being, as Alex conceives it at this moment, is a mode of existence that he has not yet been capable of discovering. For the Beckettian character, on the other hand, being is the unique, unavoidable, immutable condition of existence — the only choice here is between being and non-being.

But elsewhere in *Eclipse*, and indeed for the greater part of the text, Alex's experience of being remarkably resembles that of the Beckettian character. As in Beckett, being in *Eclipse* is articulated as being-in-time. Alex seems to associate his attempt to locate his essential self as an attempt finally to inhabit the present: 'To have no past, no foreseeable future, only the steady pulse of a changeless present — how would that feel? There's being for you' (p. 15). Although this passage is, in context, ambiguous, Alex's sense of absence and displacement has partly been temporal in nature: his role-playing was inevitably a flight from the present, a refusal to face up to the here-and-nowness of his reality and identity. But his childhood home does not allow him to experience 'the steady pulse of a changeless present' — the present, indeed, is the temporal dimension he now finds the least accessible, as his imagination is visited by the memories of his childhood and of his life with his father and mother, and as it conjures up ghosts and visions from what may or may not be the past. At times, Alex loses his sense of spatial and temporal demarcation and even the sense of his own materiality and nature. 'Everything here is twilight and half dream' (p. 48), he notes, as the spectral figures from another time shimmer and fade

around him:

> I am convinced they are making the effort not only out of an unavoidable compulsion — these creatures are struggling somehow to *come to being* — but that it is for my benefit, too. I believe these phenomena are in some way concentrated on me and my state, intricately involved in the problem of whatever it is that has gone wrong with me. […] [I]s it, I ask myself, is it that something is trying to exist *through me*, to find some form of being, *in me*? For although I speak of them appearing outside of me, a moving spectacle, […] I am amongst them, I am of them, and they are of me, my familiars. (pp. 47-8; narrator's italics)[22]

The opening words of *The Unnamable*'s narrating voice could well be those of Alex — 'Where now? Who now? When now?' For the temporal and spatial disturbance is also, most profoundly, an ontological disturbance. 'The actual has taken on a tense, trembling quality. Everything is poised for dissolution' (p. 49), observes Alex, and it is a measure of the vacancy and absence in his sense of existing in the real, material world that he finds that, in this spectral, evanescent order, he has never felt 'so close up to the very stuff of the world' (p. 49). In *Eclipse*, being can no longer be located unproblematically in the reality of the material world; the taste and texture of being is that created by ghosts, visions, hallucinations, dreams, memories, fleeting appearances, almost-encounters, silent passings. The actual trembles, but being trembles too, as it does also, for example, in Beckett's *Ill Seen Ill Said*, where we cannot be sure what ontological status we should accord the ghostly figure of the old woman ('All this in the present as had she the misfortune to be still of this world'[23]). Being in *Eclipse*, and in much of Beckett, is unstable, disconnected and tremulous; it is, above all, experienced by the characters as groundless, and as a deferred state of in-betweenness. For Alex, the disturbance of being is at the level of both the material world and the sensation of his own existence: 'I have come to distrust even the solidest objects […]. The line between delusion and whatever is its opposite has for me grown faint to the point of vanishing. I am neither sleeping nor awake, but in some fuddled middle state between the two' (pp. 48-9). Beckett's Malone, referring to the dematerialisation of his being, speaks of 'the times when I go liquid and become like mud' (p. 225), whereas the acute sensation of being as an interjacent condition is rendered by the narrating voice of *The Unnamable* in the frenzied latter part of the text: 'perhaps that's what I feel, an outside and an inside and me in the middle, perhaps that's what I am, the thing that divides the world in two […] I'm neither one side nor the

other, I'm in the middle, I'm the partition, I've two surfaces and no thickness' (p. 386). Being is strained to breaking-point and beyond in Beckett; it seems pointless even to evoke the term when confronted with, for example, the later passages of *The Unnamable*, where being is represented as a voice panting out words about the very impossibility of its own being. If, in *Eclipse*, ontological decomposition is rendered less brutally than in Beckett, the extent to which Banvillean and Beckettian versions of being accord, both philosophically and in terms of language and imagery, is nonetheless remarkable.

Despite the differences, then, in register and representation in *Eclipse* and in Beckett in the treatment of the theme of being, it is not surprising that a kind of consensus emerges, an affinity, with both authors moving towards the same governing metaphor, that of being as a form of death. Alex continues physically to inhabit the world of people and things (though poorly, to the distress of his wife Lydia), but deep in his being he now experiences himself as 'no more real than the phantoms that appear to me, a shadow among insubstantial shadows' (p. 50). Alex's decomposition disengages him more and more from the modes of being of 'the living', and the inevitable occurs: 'For I have died, that is what has happened to me, I have just this moment realised it' (p. 167). Banville, philosophically, is utterly in accord with Beckett here, particularly as he allows Alex to generalise: 'The living are only a species of the dead, someone has written somewhere, and a rare species, at that. I believe it' (p. 167). In his trilogy and later texts, Beckett relentlessly undermined the notion of being, tearing it away from its stable moorings in the concepts of character, narrator, voice, self, reality, time and place. Here is Malone who, in the manner of Alex, is alive, but who has reached the same conclusion as the latter about the experience of the condition of being: 'There is naturally another possibility that does not escape me, […] and that is that I am dead already' (p. 220). The aftermath of the death enacted at the end of *Malone Dies* produces the eviscerated state of being of the nether world of *The Unnamable*, and in many of the later Beckett texts the state of being oscillates between a minimal form of existence and non-existence. Beckettian being, we might say, is defined by death as much as by life. And although the imagery of moribund being and lost identity are less harsh in *Eclipse* than in Beckett, an atmosphere of loss and perdition pervades Banville's novel as much as it does Beckett's work. Alex, 'in bewilderment and inexplicable distress', wonders 'when exactly the

moment of catastrophic inattention had occurred and I had dropped the gilded bowl of my life and let it shatter' (p. 39).

Evoking the atmosphere of *Eclipse* allows a final comparison with Beckett to be made. To read Banville's novel is to be drawn into a fully realised other world of slowness, stillness and silence. The thickness of the atmosphere in the novel is due in part to Banville's extraordinary talent for description of light and air, of their movements and textures, but it has to do as well with his rendering of the narrative time of his characters as the burdensome time of being. It is being rendered as temporal dispersal, as the slow unfolding and disposal of being across time. In Beckett, too, time is the element of the characters, decentring them and dispersing their being and identity away from the present and across the vastness of their irretrievable pasts.[24] In quite different circumstances Alex is equally the victim of time, finding himself pulled away from the present, back to the past of his childhood and out into the mysterious temporality of his ghosts, which seem to come from the past but which turn out, tragically, to inhabit his future. Alex's version of the sensation of temporal dispersal has him recall the 'melancholy sweetness' of 'timeless time' (p. 169) that he used to experience while waiting in the anteroom of the music academy where his daughter Cass was taking piano lessons; there, he seemed to step outside the disposal of his being within a temporal order, leaving him with the impression that, in these moments, his 'true life has been most authentically lived' (p. 169). It is this insistence on the part of Banville and Beckett that time is the element of being that underlies the heaviness of being in their work. Banville and Beckett carry out explorations of, and experiments on, this time of being. Both turn away from the excessively manipulated temporality of the traditional representation in fiction of the external world, with its distractions and denouements, its accumulating events and convoluted plots, and deal with the more muted and less configured rhythms of the internal experience of time. It is time unalloyed, time experienced as a slow metronomic throb, a time, very often, of silence and aloneness-in-the-world, textures so familiar to the Beckettian character, but to the Banvillean character, too. The younger Krapp in *Krapp's Last Tape* (to take one of many possible examples from Beckett) was familiar with this time: 'Past midnight. Never knew such silence. The earth might be uninhabited'.[25] Alex, too, knows this time and conceives of it in terms remarkably similar to Krapp's: 'The day was without

human sound, as if everyone else in the world had gone away' (p. 17). In a sense, both Krapp and Alex, in this silence and existential aloneness, bring us back to the image and connotations of the ghost: Krapp is listening to his own disembodied voice from the past, while Alex's formulation here of his experience of this elemental silence of being reminds us that his ghostly visitors from another time are his true companions, his 'familiars'. Both Beckett and Banville are fond of the image of the ghost,[26] perhaps because it allows them to render, philosophically and artistically, a shared conception of being as an experience inhabited by death and unravelled by time. Nor is the image and metaphor of the ghost, particularly in the context of a comparative study, an inappropriate one for highlighting the Beckettian presence that hovers around and shimmers through Banville's novel. John Banville's reading past is full of Samuel Beckett, and although Banville has gone on to become an original voice in literature, the Beckettian traces in *Eclipse* suggest that he has not been immune from, nor insensitive to, his own visitations from the past.

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[1] John Banville, *Eclipse* (London: Picador, 2000). In this article, quotations from *Eclipse* will be followed by a page-number reference in parentheses.

[2] Rüdiger Imhof, *John Banville: A Critical Introduction*, rev. edn (Dublin: Wolfhound, 1997), p. 155.

[3] Terry Eagleton, 'International books of the year', *Times Literary Supplement*, 1 December 2000, p. 8.

[4] Christopher Tayler, 'The circus comes to town', *Times Literary Supplement*, 29 September 2000, p. 23.

[5] Joseph McMinn, *The Supreme Fictions of John Banville* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), p. 162.

[6] McMinn, p. 159.

[7] Imhof, p. 55.

[8] John Banville, 'Samuel Beckett dies in Paris aged 83', *Irish Times*, 27 December 1989, p. 19.

[9] Quoted in Imhof, p. 17. These remarks originally appeared in *Hibernia* in January 1977.

[10] John Banville, 'The Painful Comedy of Samuel Beckett', *New York Review of Books*, 14 November 1996, p. 29.

[11] *Molloy*, *Malone Dies*, *The Unnamable* (London: Calder, 1994, p. 253). All further quotations from the novels that constitute Beckett's trilogy will refer to this single-volume edition and will be noted as a page-number reference in parentheses.

[12] 'The Painful Comedy of Samuel Beckett', p. 28.

[13] The three novels of Banville's trilogy, published in London by Secker & Warburg, are: *The Book of Evidence* (1989), *Ghosts* (1993), and *Athena* (1995).

[14] Samuel Beckett, *The Complete Dramatic Works*, London: Faber, 1990, p. 400. Beckett's extremely precise stage directions regarding the movement of the protagonist in *Footfalls* all refer specifically to 'pacing' (p. 399). For a discussion of the genesis of *Footfalls*, see James Knowlson, *Damned To Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett*, London: Bloomsbury, 1996, pp. 614-6. Knowlson reports the suggestion that the essential movement of the play may have been inspired by 'a distant memory of his mother, unable to sleep, pacing in the bedroom at Cooldrinagh' [the Beckett family home] (p. 614). Knowlson notes that Beckett sometimes referred to *Footfalls* as his 'pacing play'. One is also reminded of the old woman 'pacing to and fro in the gloom' in *Ill Seen Ill Said* (in *Nohow On*: *Company*; *Ill Seen Ill Said*; *Worstward Ho*. London: Calder, 1992, p.87).

[15] James Wood, 'Dark themes in a sunlit stillness', *Irish Times*, 16 September 2000.

[16] At one point in the story Alex spots Quirke in the town and begins to follow him. Quirke eventually leads him

back to Alex's own house. Alex relates this return to his home as a narrative of 'a hero out of some old saga […] at the end of his quest' (p. 113). More specifically, this account resembles the return of Moran to his house at the end of his quest for Molloy, narrated in precisely the same mythic-quest mode. Both Alex and Moran approach their houses by climbing a steep lane; Moran had previously been speaking at length about his shirt and about getting wet in the rain, and Alex notes how his shirt is sticking to his back from the rain that has fallen; both enter their property via the back garden and through a gate that both have difficulty in opening; and both return to gardens where everything indicates abandonment and symbolises the passing of time.

[17] These spatial metaphors ('descent', 'fall') used to describe the ontological transitions undergone by the characters are those preferred by the two authors themselves. Alex: 'I have lived amid surfaces too long, skated too well upon them; I require the shock of the icy water now, the icy deeps' (p. 23). Molloy tells us that 'deep down is my dwelling, oh not deepest down, somewhere between the mud and the scum' (p. 14). The most startling of Beckett's subterranean inhabitants is surely *The Unnamable*'s Worm, buried 'in the depths of the pit' (p. 361).

[18] There are strong Beckettian echoes in Alex's fantasy of an ascetic existence: Molloy lives for some time in a cave beside a beach; Malone spends his last days in a room, alone with his few possessions; Moran, at the end of his quest, abandons his house ('All there was to sell I have sold', p. 176) and lives in his garden.

[19] One thinks immediately of Beckett's Murphy in his garret, and of Molloy and Malone, scribblers both, in their rooms. The enclosed space, often representing a sanctuary, is a recurring setting in Beckett (mostly, but not exclusively, in his fiction): along with the conventional rooms noted above, there are ditches, lairs, pits, dungeons, and enveloping darkness. These spaces of the earlier fiction gave way to the reduced and more sinister enclosed spaces of the suffocating Beckettian texts of the 1960s.

[20] Notwithstanding the essential differences in prose styles between Banville and Beckett, one recognises in Banville from time to time a typically Beckettian cadence, alliteration, term, image, mood, or tone. The following are a few examples from *Eclipse* that the seasoned Beckett reader might like to savour: 'blackly brown against the last faint radiance of the dying day' (p. 5); (Alex speaking of his parents:) 'both of them slowly turning to grey stone as the days rose and fell, each new day indistinguishable from the one that had gone before, slow grains accumulating, becoming the years' (p. 50); 'a stooped figure flickering from sunlight into shadow, fading with no footfall' (p. 57). To these, one may add a shared affection for the almost-archaic 'a-' prefix, the following examples of which occur in *Eclipse*: 'aslant', 'athrob', 'athwart', 'aglisten', 'agleam', 'atremble', 'ahang', 'abulge'. A random dip into just one Beckett text, *Ill Seen Ill Said*, found 'aslant' (twice), 'ashiver', and 'agaze', to which one may add *Godot*'s familiar 'astride (of a grave)'.

[21] *The Complete Dramatic Works*, p. 84.

[22] The first ghosts apprehended by Alex are those of a woman and child together. Increasingly prey to a sensation of insubstantiality, he refers to a 'ghost trio', namely himself, the woman and child. This could well be a reference to Beckett's television play, *Ghost Trio*, also featuring a man, a woman and a child.

[23] *Nohow On*, p. 58.

[24] It is precisely in reaction to this that there is so much story-telling in Beckett. Malone, one of the more self-conscious Beckettian story-tellers, remarks that he has 'been nothing but a series or rather a succession of local phenomena all my life, without any result' (p. 235). Telling stories, despite his disavowals, is Malone's way of countering this sense of disconnectedness. The temporal reconfiguration of experience in narrative is the attempt to overcome the sensation of being as a mere succession of discrete temporal events and experiences, all lost to the present as soon as they occur. Narrative discourse rescues events and experiences from incoherence, transforming mere succession into an intelligible whole, into a story with a plot, a theme, and a discernible temporal movement uniting past, present and future.

Reflecting on this theme of narrativisation allows us to highlight another tantalising Beckettian echo in *Eclipse*, both in content and formulation. Alex is nothing like the self-conscious narrator one meets in Beckett, but, pulled back into the past by his memories and ghosts, he is no less ensnarled in narrative, in its conventions, selections and dissimulations. After recounting a particular episode, he is given to wondering: 'But am I rightly remembering that night? Am I remembering anything rightly? I may be embellishing, inventing, I may be mixing everything up. Perhaps it was another night entirely that he brought me home on the bar of his bicycle' (pp. 56-7). Among the more shameless confabulators in Beckett is Molloy, who, when relating the A and C episode at the beginning of his account, admits: 'Perhaps I'm inventing a little, perhaps embellishing, but on the whole that's the way it was' (p. 9). And, like Alex, Molloy revels in time's susceptibility to narrative manipulation and reconfiguration: 'And I am perhaps confusing several different occasions, and different times […]. And perhaps it was A one day at one place, then C another at another, then a third the rock and I, and so on for the other components' (pp. 14-15).

[25] *The Complete Dramatic Works*, p. 221.

[26] Apart from the presence of ghosts in *Eclipse*, one of Banville's novels is actually entitled *Ghosts* (see note 11); as

for Beckett, ghostly presences feature heavily in three of his later plays, *Footfalls*, *Ghost Trio*, and *... but the clouds...* .